

The Aesthetics of Control, The Step of the Masses: The Processing of Folk Dances and Its Social Impact in Communist Albania (1945–1990) _____

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Abstract

Purpose: *This paper aims to analyze the profound transformation of Albanian folk dances during the communist regime (1945–1990), focusing on artistic-aesthetic changes and the social impact of this phenomenon.*

Design/methodology/approach: *The research is based on a qualitative analysis of primary and secondary sources, including archival materials from the Central State Archive (Fonds of the Ministry of Culture and the Ensemble of Folk Songs and Dances, 1957–1990), contemporary press (Zëri i Popullit, Drita, 1976–1980), festival reports (National Festival of Vlora 1971), scholarly works on Albanian folk dance*

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and music (Sokoli, Kongo, Tole, Koço, Skendi, Logoreci), and journalistic sources on key choreographers and dancers (Elshani, Vox News, Panorama, KultPlus).

Findings: The study reveals that institutionalization severed folk dances from their original ritual and village context, transforming them into a powerful tool of propaganda and socialist identity construction. Thematic changes replaced traditional motifs with praise for the Party, while structural interventions introduced «greeting dances» and standardized steps, creating the so-called «step of the masses.» Choreographers such as Panajot Kanaçi, Agron Aliaj, Gëzim Kaceli, and Besim Jazexhiu managed, under ideological pressure, to preserve authentic movement elements. The National Festival of Vlora (1971) established crucial criteria for dance processing. The 1976 performance marked the culmination of these efforts.

Originality/value: This paper provides a nuanced analysis of the dialectic between creative freedom and ideological obligation in Albanian communist-era choreography, highlighting the undeniable contribution of Albanian artists in preserving authentic folk movement while developing a new national stage language. It contributes to the under-researched field of dance studies in Albanian socialist historiography.

Keywords: Folk dance, communism, aesthetics, artistic processing, choreographers, social impact, Ensemble of Folk Songs and Dances, Festival of Vlora 1971

Introduction

The period of socialist realism in Albania represents a complex and often contradictory chapter in the history of Albanian art and culture. On the one hand, it was marked by strict state control and ideological censorship; on the other hand, it fostered an unprecedented institutionalization of the arts, creating new structures and opportunities for professional artists. Folklore, and particularly folk dance, became one of the main terrains where these two forces collided. Transformed from a spontaneous expression of the community into a codified stage art, dance was charged with the mission of illustrating the “happy life” under the light of the Party. This transformation was not merely an aesthetic process but a total intervention in how Albanian society understood and practiced its body in public space. Folk dance, which for centuries had been an organic expression of the rhythms of work, life cycles, and community rituals, was converted into a new, unified language serving the new political narrative.

This paper analyzes three main points of this transformation: (1) thematic influences – the shift from themes of work, family, and ritual to the glorification of the Party and its leaders; (2) influences on processing – the new methods of standardization and staging of folklore; (3) structural changes – the evolution

of the form, choreography, and music of dances to fit the stage and the new narrative. At the center of this study lies the effort of the major choreographers of the Ensemble of Folk Songs and Dances (EFSD) to navigate this new reality, finding ways to adapt traditional movements from all regions without distorting their authentic essence. The 1976 performance and the National Festival of Vlora (1971) are analyzed as key moments that best reflected this dialectic, through a review of the criticisms, polemics, and praises of the time.

Literature Review

Historical and Ideological Context of Folklore Institutionalization

Folklore before 1945: Authenticity and Communal Function

Before the establishment of the communist regime, Albanian folk dances were closely linked to the cycle of life and work. They accompanied weddings (such as the dances of the wedding guests and the bride), agricultural work (grape harvesting, wheat harvesting, oil pressing), calendar festivals (spring awakenings, saints' days), and expressed epic bravery or the sorrow of exile and emigration (Sokoli, 1965; Skendi, 1954). These dances had a dual function: on the one hand, they created and strengthened social cohesion within the community; on the other hand, they served as a means of communication with the forces of nature and the sacred world. Their structure was organic and free: circular, semicircular, or parallel line formations did not have a fixed number of participants, and the dance could last as long as the community wished (Kongo, 1997). The rhythm was dictated by the dancers' song or by simple instruments such as the *lodra*, *fyelli*, *gajdja*, or *çiftelia*, and the steps were not strictly predetermined but followed an internal code that each community member naturally acquired from childhood.

The Rise of the Communist Party and the Transformation of Folklore into Propaganda

After 1944, with the establishment of the proletarian dictatorship, this rich repertoire was placed at the service of a new mythology. The new regime quickly understood the great potential of folklore as a means to create a new national, "popular," and anti-fascist identity (Sulstarova, 2005). In a country with a weak tradition of an independent state and a largely illiterate population, dances and songs were among the most effective ways to communicate ideological messages. However, folklore in its original form could not be used directly. It was "raw," often fatalistic, filled with religious and patriarchal references, and contained no reference to the Party, the proletariat, or the construction of socialism (Tole,

2017). Therefore, it had to be “processed,” “stylized,” and “cleansed” of elements the regime considered harmful or inappropriate. This process, known as the “artistic processing of folklore,” became one of the main tasks of the new cultural institutions. As Logoreci (1977) noted, the regime sought to create a “new socialist culture” that would both appropriate and transcend the traditional past.

Theoretical Frameworks for Understanding Folklore Transformation

To fully grasp this process, it is useful to draw on broader theoretical frameworks. The concept of “invented tradition” (Hobsbawm & Ranger, 1983) helps explain how the communist regime constructed a new, ideologically purified version of folklore to legitimize its rule and create a sense of national unity. Similarly, the notion of “cultural hegemony” (Gramsci, 1971) illuminates the mechanisms through which the state, through institutions like the EFSD, shaped not only artistic production but also popular taste and collective consciousness. These theoretical lenses allow us to see the processing of folk dances not just as an aesthetic or political act, but as a fundamental part of the regime’s project of social engineering.

Thematic Transformation: From Ritual to Hymn

Systematic Replacement of Traditional Icons

Traditional motifs began to be systematically replaced. Instead of songs dedicated to the beauty of nature, longing for a beloved who had gone into exile, or honoring patron saints, dances now had to sing of the joy of collectivization, the mechanization of agriculture, the glory of the partisan army, and the happiness brought by the “light of the Party” (Arkivi Qendror i Shtetit, 1957–1990). Dance was no longer a conversation among people or a prayer of the body directed toward the invisible world, but a monologue of the masses directed to power.

FIGURE 1: Dance “We Sing and Dance for the Party”



Choreography: Agron Aliaj, 1970. *The Birth of “Greeting Dances” and “Heroic Dances”*

A new genre of dance emerged, which can be termed “greeting dances” or “hymn-dances.” The most typical example is the dance *Festë të madhe ka sot Shqipëria* (choreography: Panajot Kanaçi, 1974), performed with mastery by the icon of Albanian dance, Liliana Cingu (Elshani, 2024; Vox News Albania, 2024).

FIGURE 2: Dance “Albania Has a Great Celebration Today”



Choreography: Panajot Kanaçi, 1974

These dances had an open, optimistic character, with wide movements symbolizing the embrace of the masses with the Party and the leader. The stage space was transformed into a parade square, where the bodies of all dancers moved as a single organism, illustrating the power and unity of the people under the leadership of the Party (KultPlus, 2024). In parallel, dances with epic and combative character also developed, glorifying the battles of the partisans, the heroic efforts in building the railway or irrigation canals. In these dances, the strong male movements, jumps, and foot stomps no longer expressed the individual bravery of the highlander but the collective power of the working class and its determination to build socialism. The dance *Komitët* (choreography: Engjëll Tërshana, 1966) is an excellent example of this category.

FIGURE 3: Dance “The Comitët” (or «The Committees» / «The Partisans»)



Choreography: Engjëll Tërshana, 1966. *Changes in Costume and Visual Aesthetics*

Another essential aspect of the thematic transformation was the change in costume. Traditional costumes, which were very diverse and often decorated with religious or clan symbols, were standardized and “cleansed.” Stage costumes were created that retained some distinctive elements of the regions (such as the white cap of the north or the felt cap of the south), but were sewn with brighter, smoother, and more uniform fabrics (Sokoli, 1981). The colors red and black, national symbols, became dominant, visually linking the dance to the flag and the new ideology.

Artistic Processing: Between Standardization and Authenticity

Methodology of Processing: From the Field to the Stage

The processing of folk dances was not merely a political act; it was also a complex artistic process involving some of the biggest names in Albanian choreography and music. This process followed a specific methodology, beginning with field expeditions. Ethnomusicologists and choreographers such as Ramadan Sokoli, Piro Duka, Panajot Kanaçi, and others traveled to the deepest areas of Albania to collect, transcribe, and film authentic dances and songs (Koço, 2004). The collected material was then analyzed and classified. Choreographers had to isolate the basic movements of a given dance, understand their rhythmic structure, and the space in which they were performed. Subsequently, they began the process of “stylization”: movements were cleansed of the “imperfections” of village performance, synchronized with the music (often re-orchestrated), and organized into a symmetrized and predictable stage formation.

Choreographers: Architects of the Golden Compromise

The choreographers of the EFSD found themselves on the front line of this artistic front. They had the task of realizing works that glorified the system, but on the other hand, as artists and folklore scholars, they felt the responsibility to preserve the purity of the movement. They “did the impossible” to find in the treasure of traditional movements of different regions those elements that could be “adapted to these themes without distorting the authentic popular movement” (Bogdani, 1998).

Panajot Kanaçi is considered a central figure in the codification of Albanian dance on stage. He was the one who entrusted Liliana Cingu with the first major roles, creating for her the “pearls of Albanian choreography” (Elshani, 2024). His style was characterized by a constant effort to preserve the “spirit” of the region of origin while giving it stage form. His work with Çam motifs – where he

intertwined *Vallja e sofrës*, *Vallja kaçake*, and *Vallja e Osman Takës* into a single macro-dance – demonstrates his ability to create a coherent artistic whole without losing the distinctive elements of each sub-tradition. Among his notable creations are *Valle nga rrethi i Kuksit* (1961) and *Valle me motive të Tropojës* (1961).

FIGURE 4: Dance “Dance from the Kukës District”



Choreography: Panajot Kanaçi, 1961

FIGURE 5: Dance “Dance with Motifs from Tropoja”



Choreography: Panajot Kanaçi, 1961

Gëzim Kaceli, as the first director of the four-year course at the EFSD where Lili Cingu began, had a great influence on the formation of the golden generation of dancers. His responsibility was not only artistic but also pedagogical: he had to create a new Albanian dance school that would combine the high technique of classical ballet (which he mastered) with the authentic spirit of folk movement. His creations include *Barinjtë e Korabit* (1967) and *Mbjellja e Patates* (1968).

FIGURE 6: Dance “The Shepherds of Korab”



Choreography: Gëzim Kaceli, 1968

FIGURE 7: Dance “The Planting of Potatoes”



Choreography: Gëzim Kaceli, 1967

Agron Aliaj, another major name who entrusted his creations to Liliana Cingu, gave her the opportunity to express herself across a wide spectrum of dances, from lyrical southern dances (with their flowing and melancholic quality) to epic northern dances (with their brute force and energy) (Vox News Albania, 2024). His works include *Festë në Devoll* (1974), *Rapsodi Bregdetare* (1966), and *I këndojmë dhe i kërcejmë Partisë* (1970).

FIGURE 8: Dance “Celebration in Devoll”



Choreography: Agron Aliaj, 1966

FIGURE 9: Dance “Coastal Rhapsody”



Choreography: Agron Aliaj, 1974

Besim Jazexhiu, with a long career as a soloist and choreographer, realized about 20 creations, including dances with motifs from Dibra, Tirana, Lezha, the North, and Kosovo, such as *Nusja e Fajes*, *Kurrë se ulëm kokën*, and *Valle e*

Tiranës (Shqiperia.com, 2022; Panorama, 2022). His work shows the constant effort to cover the entire Albanian regional area, giving each tradition its own place on the national stage.

FIGURE 10: Dance “Dance of Tirana”



Choreography: Besim Jazexhiu

Composers: Orchestrating a New Sound

The contribution of composers, who had an equally great impact on musical creativity, whether dances of folk origin or lyrical creations, cannot be omitted. They faced the challenge of orchestrating folk melodies for large orchestras, giving them a harmonization according to the canons of Western classical music (which did not exist in original folklore), but without losing the autochthonous coloring and specific way of singing. One figure illustrating this versatile profile is Agim Velaj, who together with Aleksandër Banushi and Loro Gjeçi was a pioneer in the creation of the first national folk ensemble “Çiftelia” in 1966 (Wikipedia, 2024). He was a tireless collector of folklore, transcribing over 500 songs, and simultaneously a composer of operettas and ballets. This dualism between the collector of authentic material and the new creator is characteristic of all artists of this period (Koço, 2004).

The National Festival of Vlora 1971: Defining the Criteria of Processing

A key moment in the theorization and practice of folk dance processing was the National Festival of Processed Folk Songs and Dances, held in Vlora in April 1971. This festival was crowned with success and was rightly called a “festival of work,” as composers, choreographers, and all creative and executive forces exchanged work experiences, discussing various opinions (Që vallja të ruajë vlagën..., 1971).

Conceptualization of Processed Dance

At the festival, alongside song, processed folk dance occupied an equally important place. Ten amateur artistic ensembles presented 21 processed folk dances, creations of professional and amateur choreographers. According to the festival's conclusions, processed folk dance is understood as a unit where the folkloric element constitutes the basis, but which is further elevated artistically and takes the form of a complete stage creation with choreographic weaving and development that suits its nature.

Two Aspects of Processing

The processing of folk dance was seen in two main aspects: first, in the enrichment and elevation to a higher ideo-artistic level of the folk choreographic motif; second, in the creation of new choreographic means, always based on the initiating executive motifs. Realization of achieved creations based on these two starting points was conditioned by the ability, work, and dedication of the choreographer to folk dance. Choreographers were required to conduct more in-depth work to know certain scientifically necessary data, such as the geographical and ethnographic environment, the historical-social relations of a given area, and the character and inner spiritual world of the peasant who performs the folk dance (Që vallja të ruajë vlagën..., 1971).

Positive Achievements and Problems Raised

The festival revealed that some processed folk dances of the groups of Vlora, Kukës, Elbasan, and Korça were realized very well, indicating that choreographers no longer worked only intuitively but had adopted several sound professional criteria regarding the selection, appropriation, and treatment of folk dance. Among the choreographers who stood out were professionals such as G. Kaceli, E. Tërshana, D. Suli, N. Agolli, B. Aliaj, R. Bogdani, but also amateurs such as J. Kosta, F. Domi, S. Vëlçani, Xh. Fani, Xh. Lishi, Gj. Pema, R. Gjeçi, B. Toto, and B. Doka.

The positive achievements of choreographic realizations were numerous. The essential characteristic feature was the preservation of national character, which, besides interpretation, was embodied in the plastic structure, where body, foot, hand, and head movements operated in unity, thus giving Albanian dances a specific, Albanian physiognomy (Bogdani, 1998). However, several problems were also identified: the degree of processing was not uniform; some highly crystallized traditional creations (e.g., *Presja me tagana* of Malësia e Madhe) should not be touched at all, while others crossed the boundary of processing; dynamics were

discussed as an important specificity of Albanian choreographic folklore; and issues of dance titles, lack of humorous and soloistic dances, excessive length, and contradictions between choreographic and musical processing were noted.

Evolution of Form and Structure of Dance

From Organic Formations to Symmetrized Choreography

In authentic folklore, dance formations were organic and flexible. Dancers stood in a circle, semicircle, or free lines, holding hands or belts. The number of participants was not fixed; one could join or leave at will. Space was not limited by the stage. In stage processing, this changed radically. Choreography was symmetrized: the number of dancers was fixed (usually even, to create symmetry), positions were precisely predetermined, and movements were perfectly synchronized. Dancers no longer moved as individuals within an organic collective but as parts of a well-calibrated machine. This visual symmetry aimed to create the impression of order, discipline, and perfect harmony that the regime claimed to have achieved in society.

Standardization of Steps and the “Step of the Masses”

One of the most important changes was the standardization of steps. In authentic folklore, steps varied from village to village, even from dancer to dancer. In stage processing, a kind of “common dialect” of steps was created, which could be used in dances from different regions. Steps were simplified, cleansed, and codified into a system taught in ballet schools and at the EFSD courses. The term “step of the masses” (or “coordinated step”) best describes the new phenomenon: the step of all dancers was performed at the same time, with the same amplitude, creating a powerful visual effect symbolizing the unity and discipline of the people under the leadership of the Party. This coordinated step became a metaphor for the “collective mind” required in society.

Changes in Duration and Rhythm

In authentic folklore, a dance could last for hours, following the rhythm of the celebration and the endurance of the participants. On stage, dances were shortened to 3–7 minutes, becoming more compressed and dynamic. The rhythm was accelerated, pauses were eliminated, and the structure became clearer: introduction, development, climax, finale. This Aristotelian structure did not exist in authentic folklore, but it was necessary to adapt to the expectations of the urban audience and the logic of spectacle (Sokoli, 1981).

The 1976 Performance: The Culmination of an Era

All these efforts, experiments, and artistic compromises found their fullest expression in the 1976 performance of the EFSD. This performance marked a culmination, bringing together in a single tableau the hard work of all creators and performers for nearly three decades. The 1976 performance was evaluated as demonstrating “with considerable skill the work of all creators” (Zëri i Popullit, 1976–1980). It was a summary of the achievements in folklore processing to date, presenting a rich panorama of dances from all Albanian regions, filtered through the lens of the new stage aesthetic. In this performance, the dances of the South (with their lyrical flow), of Çamëria (with their special elegance), of Dropull (with their vocal polyphony), and of the epic North (with their brute force and energy) stood side by side, creating the narrative of national and cultural unity under the umbrella of the socialist state.

Social Impact: Shaping Taste and Collective Identity

Beyond the stage and internal artistic polemics, the social impact of these processed dances was extraordinary and profound. They did not remain only in the performances of the EFSD professionals. Through television broadcasts (Albanian television was founded in 1960), the numerous participations of amateur groups in folklore festivals (such as the Gjirokastra Festival, founded in 1968, and the Vlora Festival in 1971), and the organization of the “May Decades” in every city and village, this new aesthetic penetrated every corner of the country (Drita, 1976–1980).

FIGURE 11: Photo: “Choreography and Cultivated Art”



Author: Prof. Ramazan H. Bogdani, 1998

People learned to see dance not as a spontaneous circle dance, as a spontaneous expression of joy or ritual, but as a spectacle requiring discipline, precision, and

prior preparation. Amateur dancers began to imitate the steps of professionals, their costumes, even their makeup. This shaped the artistic taste of the masses for decades, creating a certain expectation of what a folk dance “should be”: something polished, grand, colorful, and with a positive message. At the same time, the “coordinated step” of the dancers on stage became a metaphor for the “collective mind” required in society (Sulstarova, 2005). The dancer’s body, disciplined and controlled, was a powerful image of the social body under the totalitarian regime. Dance was no longer an act of individual freedom but an exercise in collective obedience. Yet, paradoxically, precisely within this strict control, great artists such as Liliana Cingu found space to express their artistic individuality, becoming icons of an entire era.

Comparison with Other Folk Ensembles

Examining historical facts regarding other ensembles of the time, which were working hard to realize a rich repertoire, some similarities can be found regarding musical and choreographic creations with those of the Albanian Folk Ensemble. The Ensemble of the Republic of China, when it came to Tirana in 1964, had a repertoire of dances and themes of the type of joy about work, pure love, nature, and defense against the enemy – somewhat similar to the themes of the Albanian folk dance repertoire. Their dance *Ecni në shi* (1964) is an example of this aesthetic. The Romanian Ensemble, upon its arrival in Albania in 1972, highlighted its high artistic values. The themes of its dances were generally optimistic with very agile movements. Doina was one of the most used instruments of their orchestra, conveying truly felt music and comparable in originality to the Albanian *lahuta*.

FIGURE 12: Dance “Walk in the Rain” 1964.
Artistic Ensemble of the People’s Republic of China



FIGURE 13: Dance scene from the Romanian “Doina Ensemble Gorjului” (Tiranë, 1972)



The Ensemble “Shota” of Kosovo, formed in 1961 in Prishtina, with its dignified concerts created a respected name. In one of its performances in Tirana, *Vallja e Rugovës* (with a patriotic message) and the dance *Prerja me Jatagana* (which treats the fable of the girl) stood out (Tole, 2017). These comparisons show that Albania was not isolated in its artistic experience. The same dialectic between preserving tradition and modern processing was occurring in other socialist countries as well. However, Albania’s extreme isolation after the Sino-Albanian split intensified both the ideological demands and, paradoxically, the protective function of folklore as a repository of national identity distinct from both Western capitalism and Soviet revisionism (Frasheri, 1964).

FIGURE 14: The “Shota” Ensemble of Kosovo



In the foreground, the singer Nexhmije Pagarusha (Tirana, 1973)

Methodology

This study employs a qualitative research design based on the analysis of primary and secondary sources. The primary sources include archival materials from the Central State Archive of Albania (Fondi i Ministrisë së Kulturës dhe Ansamblit të Këngëve dhe Valleve Popullore, 1957–1990), which contain unpublished reports, festival documents, and internal communications of the Ministry of Culture. Contemporary press sources, specifically the newspaper *Zëri i Popullit* (1976–1980) and the cultural magazine *Drita* (1976–1980), were systematically reviewed

for articles, critiques, and polemics related to folk dance performances and festivals. The report of the National Festival of Vlora 1971 (*Që vallja të ruajë vlagën e tokës shqiptare*) was analyzed as a key document defining the official criteria for dance processing.

Secondary sources consist of scholarly works on Albanian folk dance and music, including foundational texts by Sokoli (1965, 1981), Kongo (1997), Tole (2017), Koço (2004), Skendi (1954), and Logoreci (1977). Journalistic sources (Elshani, 2024; Vox News Albania, 2024; Shqiperia.com, 2022; Panorama, 2022; KultPlus, 2024) were used for biographical information on choreographers and dancers. Wikipedia (2024) provided supplementary information on Agim Velaj.

The analysis focuses on three main dimensions: thematic transformation (from ritual to propaganda), structural changes in choreography and music (standardization of steps, symmetrization, changes in duration and rhythm), and social impact (formation of taste, collective identity, and the metaphor of the disciplined body). The study also examines the dialectic between ideological obligation and creative freedom as manifested in the work of choreographers and composers.

To ensure transparency and replicability, the following table summarizes the key sources and their specific contributions to the analysis:

TABLE 1: Sources and Their Contribution to the Analysis

Source Type	Specific Sources	Contribution to Analysis
Primary - Archival	Arkivi Qendror i Shtetit (1957-1990) - Fondi i Ministrisë së Kulturës	Unpublished reports, internal communications, official decisions on folklore policy.
Primary - Festival Documents	Që vallja të ruajë vlagën... (1971) - National Festival of Vlora	Official criteria for dance processing; evaluation of choreographic achievements and problems.
Primary - Contemporary Press	Zëri i Popullit (1976-1980); Drita (1976-1980)	Public reception, critical reviews, ideological framing of dance performances.
Secondary - Foundational Scholarship	Sokoli (1965, 1981); Kongo (1997); Tole (2017); Koço (2004); Skendi (1954); Logoreci (1977)	Theoretical frameworks, historical context, classification of dance types, musical analysis.
Secondary - Journalistic/Biographical	Elshani (2024); Vox News (2024); Panorama (2022); KultPlus (2024); Shqiperia.com (2022)	Biographical details of choreographers and dancers; contemporary reflections on their legacy.
Secondary - Theoretical	Hobsbawm & Ranger (1983); Gramsci (1971)	Conceptual tools (invented tradition, Cultural hegemony) for understanding state intervention in culture.

Results

The analysis reveals several key findings regarding the transformation of Albanian folk dances during the communist period.

Thematic Transformation

Traditional motifs related to work, family, ritual, and epic bravery were systematically replaced by themes glorifying the Party, the leader, collectivization, mechanization, and the partisan struggle. A new genre of “greeting dances” or “hymn-dances” emerged, exemplified by *Festë të madhe ka sot Shqipëria* (Kanaçi, 1974), characterized by open, optimistic movements symbolizing the unity of the masses with the Party. Parallel to these, “heroic dances” such as *Komitët* (Tërshana, 1966) expressed the collective power of the working class through strong male movements, jumps, and foot stomps. Costumes were standardized, cleansed of religious and clan symbols, and dominated by the colors red and black.

Structural Changes in Choreography and Music

Authentic organic formations (circles, semicircles, free lines) were replaced by symmetrized, fixed-number formations with perfectly synchronized movements. Steps were standardized into a “common dialect” across regions, creating the so-called “step of the masses” (coordinated step) performed simultaneously by all dancers. Dances were shortened from hours to 3–7 minutes, with accelerated rhythm and clear Aristotelian structure (introduction, development, climax, finale). Music was re-orchestrated for large ensembles, blending traditional instruments (lodra, fyelli, çiftelia) with Western classical instruments (clarinet, violin, accordion), creating a polished, powerful sound suited to large theater halls. The following table summarizes the key structural changes identified in the analysis:

TABLE 2: Summary of Structural Changes in Folk Dance Processing

Feature	Authentic Folklore (Pre-1945)	Processed Stage Dance (1945-1990)
Formation	Organic, flexible (circles, semicircles, free lines); number of participants not fixed	Symmetrized, fixed number of dancers; precisely positions
Movement	Individual variation; steps follow internal, regionally specific codes	Perfectly synchronized; standardized “step of the masses”
Duration	Can last for hours; follows rhythm of celebration	Compressed (3–7 minutes); clear structure (intro, evelopment, climax, finale)

Feature	Authentic Folklore (Pre-1945)	Processed Stage Dance (1945-1990)
Rhythm	Dictated by dancers' song or simple instruments; variable tempo	Accelerated, dynamic; pauses eliminated
Music	Simple instruments (lodra, fyelli, gajdja, çiftelia); monophonic or heterophonic	Re-orchestrated for large ensembles; blended with Western classical instruments;
Costume	Diverse, region-specific; religious and clan symbols	Standardized; cleansed of religious/clan symbols; dominated by red and black

The Role of Choreographers and Composers

Key choreographers – Panajot Kanaçi, Gëzim Kaceli, Agron Aliaj, and Besim Jazexhiu – managed to preserve authentic movement elements while adapting them to ideological requirements. Kanaçi excelled in creating coherent wholes from diverse regional motifs (e.g., Çam dances). Kaceli founded a new Albanian dance school combining ballet technique with folk spirit. Aliaj enabled dancers like Liliana Cingu to express across lyrical and epic registers. Jazexhiu covered the entire Albanian regional area in his approximately 20 creations. Composers such as Agim Velaj, alongside collecting over 500 folk songs, orchestrated folk melodies according to Western harmony without losing autochthonous coloring.

The National Festival of Vlora 1971

The festival established crucial criteria for dance processing: the folkloric element must constitute the basis; processing must preserve national character and specific Albanian physiognomy; processing has two aspects (enrichment of the folk motif and creation of new choreographic means based on executive motifs). Positive achievements included professional selection and treatment of material, successful creations from Vlora, Kukës, Elbasan, and Korça, and the emergence of both professional and amateur choreographers. Problems identified included uneven processing degrees, inappropriate symbolic titles, lack of humorous and soloistic dances, excessive length, and contradictions between choreographic and musical processing.

The 1976 Performance

This performance marked the culmination of nearly three decades of work, presenting a rich panorama of dances from all Albanian regions – South (lyrical), Çamëria (elegant), Dropull (vocal polyphony), North (epic) – united under the

narrative of national and cultural unity within the socialist state. Contemporary press praised its balance between artistic quality and ideological mission.

Social Impact

Processed dances penetrated every corner of Albania through television, amateur festivals, and the “May Decades.” The new aesthetic shaped public taste for decades, creating expectations of folk dance as polished, grand, colorful, and positive. The “coordinated step” became a metaphor for the disciplined social body under totalitarianism, transforming dance from individual freedom to collective obedience. Paradoxically, within this strict control, artists like Liliana Cingu emerged as iconic individual figures.

Discussion

The findings reveal a complex dialectic between artistic creation and ideological control in communist Albania. On the one hand, the institutionalization of folklore led to undeniable distortions: the replacement of authentic ritual meanings with propaganda messages, the standardization of diverse regional traditions into a uniform stage language, and the transformation of dance from spontaneous community expression to disciplined spectacle. The “step of the masses” served as a powerful metaphor for the totalitarian regime’s demand for collective obedience and the erasure of individual difference.

On the other hand, the results show that choreographers and composers were not mere puppets of the regime. Figures like Kanaçi, Kaceli, Aliaj, Jazexhiu, and Velaj, working under constant ideological pressure, developed sophisticated strategies to preserve authentic movement elements. They conducted field research, documented traditional dances, and made selective choices about which motifs could be adapted without complete distortion. The very criteria established at the Vlora 1971 festival – requiring the preservation of national character and specific Albanian physiognomy – provided a discursive framework within which artists could argue for authenticity against excessive ideological intervention.

The 1976 performance represents the successful negotiation of this difficult terrain: a product that satisfied both ideological gatekeepers (through its glorification of unity and the Party) and artistic standards (through its preservation of regional diversity and movement authenticity). This achievement was possible only because of the exceptional talent and dedication of choreographers, composers, and performers – most notably Liliana Cingu, whose artistry transcended the propagandistic framework and gave lasting aesthetic value to these creations.

Comparison with other socialist countries' folk ensembles (China, Romania, Kosovo) reveals that Albania was not unique in this experience. Similar processes of institutionalization, standardization, and ideological appropriation of folklore occurred across the Eastern Bloc. However, Albania's extreme isolation after the Sino-Albanian split and the particularly harsh nature of its regime intensified both the ideological demands and, paradoxically, the protective function of folklore as a repository of national identity distinct from both Western capitalism and Soviet revisionism.

The social impact of this transformation was profound and lasting. Generations of Albanians grew up with the expectation that folk dance should be polished, synchronized, and spectacular – a perception that persists in post-communist Albania. Yet this same process also preserved and transmitted a vast treasure of authentic movements that might otherwise have been lost due to urbanization, internal migration, and the erosion of traditional village life. The challenge for contemporary scholarship is to acknowledge both the ideological violence of the processing and the genuine artistic achievements it enabled.

Implications for Research, Practice, and Society

This study has several implications for research, practice, and society. For research, it contributes to the under-researched field of dance studies in Albanian socialist historiography, providing a nuanced analysis of the dialectic between creative freedom and ideological obligation. It also offers a methodological framework for analyzing state intervention in cultural production that can be applied to other post-socialist contexts.

For practice, the findings highlight the importance of preserving the authentic movement vocabulary documented by choreographers during this period. The archival materials and choreographic scores represent an invaluable resource for contemporary dance practitioners seeking to reconstruct and reinterpret traditional dances. In teaching, this study can be used to illustrate the complex relationship between art and politics, and to foster critical thinking about the role of culture in nation-building and social engineering.

For society, understanding this period is crucial for grappling with the legacy of communism in Albanian culture. The paper encourages a balanced assessment that neither romanticizes the artistic achievements nor dismisses them as mere propaganda. It invites reflection on how the “step of the masses” – as a metaphor for collective obedience – continues to resonate in contemporary Albanian society, and how the tension between individual expression and collective identity remains relevant today.

Limitations

This study has several limitations. First, access to archival materials remains incomplete; some documents from the Ministry of Culture fonds (1957–1990) are still restricted or poorly cataloged. Second, oral history interviews with surviving choreographers, dancers, and composers from the period were not conducted for this study, which could have provided valuable firsthand perspectives on the creative process under ideological pressure. Third, the analysis focuses primarily on the Ensemble of Folk Songs and Dances in Tirana, with less attention to regional amateur ensembles that also played a significant role in disseminating processed folk dances. Fourth, reception history – how ordinary Albanians actually experienced and interpreted these dances – remains difficult to reconstruct due to the lack of audience surveys or personal testimonies from the period. Fifth, the study does not include comparative analysis with non-socialist countries' folk dance processing (e.g., Western European folk revivals), which could provide broader theoretical perspective. Future research should address these gaps through archival expansion, oral history collection, and comparative international study.

Conclusions

The processing of folk dances in communist Albania was a complex phenomenon in which art became both a hostage and a tool of politics, yet also a living laboratory of creativity. The change of themes – from ritual to hymn for the Party and the leader – was a direct ideological intervention that risked emptying folklore of its original meaning, turning it into a purely propagandistic product. However, this was not the entire reality.

Thanks to the dedication, mastery, and creative courage of choreographers such as Panajot Kanaçi, Agron Aliaj, Gëzim Kaceli, and Besim Jazexhiu, and composers such as Agim Velaj, this process did not become a total destruction of heritage. On the contrary, they managed to create a new stage language that, while responding to the demands of the time, preserved and transmitted a great treasure of authentic movements from all Albanian regions. They did the painstaking work of selecting from the rich folk material those elements that could be adapted to the new themes without distorting their authentic essence.

The National Festival of Vlora 1971 established important criteria for the processing of dances, emphasizing that the folkloric element constitutes the basis and that processing must be done while preserving the national character and the specific Albanian physiognomy of movements. The 1976 performance remained

the most prominent testimony of the difficult balance between preservation and processing.

The performers, and above all Liliana Cingu – called the “Queen of Albanian Dance” – were the ones who, with their talent, charisma, and hard work, gave spirit to these choreographies and elevated them to the biggest stages in the world, showing another Albania, with rich culture and folklore (Elshani, 2024; KultPlus, 2024; Vox News Albania, 2024).

The social impact of this process was dual and lasting. On the one hand, it uniformized artistic taste, created an expectation of folklore as something grand and polished, and linked dance to discipline and collective obedience. The “coordinated step” became a metaphor for the controlled social body. On the other hand, it gave folklore a national and international platform it had never had before, saving it from oblivion and regional isolation.

Today, when reflecting on this period, the challenge is not simply to condemn the ideological deformations or idealize the artistic achievements. The challenge is to understand the complex dialectic between art, power, and national identity, and to learn how to inherit what is valuable – the treasure of authentic movements preserved in these choreographies, the dedication of the artists, and the memory of a period that inevitably shaped contemporary Albanian culture – without denying its complexity.

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