

Etchmiadzin Dance: “The Sun hiding in the very folds of the skirt”

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The word and name “Etchmiadzin” for Armenians evokes a number of significant national and religious references. The Holy See of Etchmiadzin is the ecclesiastical centre of the Armenian Apostolic Church, the equivalent of The Vatican for the Armenians, and one of the holiest places for worldwide Armenians. Central to the Holy See is the famous Cathedral of Etchmiadzin, which is considered to be the oldest cathedral in the world, a UNESCO World Heritage site, built in the early 4th century over the remnants of an earlier pagan temple.

In Armenian, “Etchmiadzin” literally means “the only begotten [son of God] descended” (*etch*=descend, *Miadzin*=only begotten). This is a reference to a vision of the patron saint of the Armenians, St. Gregory the Illuminator. According to tradition, St. Gregory saw Christ in a vision, who indicated to him where to build His Church, the first Armenian Church. St. Gregory established the Church in the royal city of Vagharshapt, when King Tiridates III was baptized and declared Christianity as the state religion.”⁽¹⁾ Since then, the Armenians have been known as the first nation to have formally adopted Christianity as state religion in 301 A.D.

This history and references are reflected in the “Etchmiadzin Dance”, which has reached us through the generations. Armenian folk dance expert Gagik Ginosyan learned this dance from an elderly woman, fondly referred to as “Arus tat” (Arus grandmother) in the Javakhk region of Georgia, where there is a sizeable community for many centuries.

Ginosyan explains that it took him some time to persuade the old woman to show him this ancient dance. “It was as if the Sun was hiding in the very folds of her skirt,” he adds. According to him, this dance is rooted in ancient pre-Christian practice of fire and Sun worship. This dance, however, is particular, not only in its complexity of pattern, but also in the multiple layers of sacred and symbolic meaning ascribed to it.

“Etchmiadzin Dance” belongs to the group of dances known as “het ou araj” (“back and forth”). Dances in the “het ou araj” category are classified as ‘simple’ or ‘complex’. “Etchmiadzin” belongs to the latter group. There are various examples of these “het ou araj” dances that have been preserved in the Armenian communities in Akhaltsikhe in Georgia's Samtskhe-Javakheti region.

While this dance is performed in various pattern formations on stage (or on Youtube these days), it is typically danced in a closed circle — ‘klor’ (literally round) ‘bar’ (dance).

The hand/arm holds extending upwards (skywards) are likened to the dome of a church. The dance consists of three parts: 1) ‘het ou araj’, 2) ‘to the right and equal’, 3) ‘in place’ (i.e., no progression along the line of the dance). Similarly, the melody can be divided into three parts which correlate with the dance steps, which is rare in Armenian dances. The dance tempo is classified as *moderate* rather than *slow* or *fast*.

“Etchmiadzin” is danced by men and women together (‘mixed dances’). The hand hold consists of palms connecting with one another rather than a pinkie-hold. The elbows are bent in front of the chest at a right angle (90 degrees more or less) with the hands at the level of the head. Often in Armenian dances, while the elbows are bent they drop lower so the wrists are at the level of the chest.

In the first section, the ‘het ou araj’ (the back and forth) is conducted along a diagonal forward and to the right with deep head ‘bowing’ (a respectful gesture). This gesture symbolises bowing of the head in front of the “mother” altar (Մայր խորան) of the Cathedral of

Etchmiadzin, which is named “Sourp Astvatsacin” (Holy Birthgiver of God, Theotokos, the Virgin Mary).

In the second section, there are six ‘equal steps’ travelling first to the right and then to the left in a straight horizontal line/trajectory. These 12 ‘dance steps’ (in total) and the relative bowing of the head and body are said to resemble the respectful bowing in front of the 12 images of the apostles. The mural of the images are at the foot of the mother altar: at the centre is the Virgin Mary with baby Jesus, flanked by the apostles, six on either side. Within this layered symbolism and the references to the ancient practice of fire and sun worship, the arm movements, posture and bowing are also said to be symbolic of worshipping the sun, the source of light and life. The arm movements in the second part are likened to the flames of fire from the sun, when viewed from above. Another popular suggestion is that the 12 steps represent the 12 constellations.

In the third, final section, the 8 steps danced ‘in place’ (‘sur place’) side-to-side, are also said to be linked to the practice of sun worship. The raised arms are said to simultaneously resemble the worship of the sun. The gentle sideways ‘flicks’ of the hand are linked to the flames of the fire — again viewed from above the closed circle.

“Etchmiadzin” is frequently danced to the instrumental recording by Karin Song & Dance Ensemble. Occasionally, it would be danced while singing words to the same melody — what [Hasmik Harutunyan](#) calls ‘pieces’ from different folk song words or a collage of words. The all women Noubar Ensemble also has a beautiful recording of their singing available on [Youtube](#). A word of caution, however, the dance fragments in the video clip are out of synch with the melody.

Indeed, this gem of a dance is “the Sun hiding in the very folds of the skirt,” which awaits to be revealed and to shine through.

(June 2021)

(1) Hratch Tchilingian, [The Armenian Church. A Brief Introduction](#). Burbank, CA, 2008.