

TRANSFORMATION OF TRADITIONAL DANCE IN THE WORK OF AKRAM KHAN AND THE PRESERVATION OF NATIONAL DANCE IN KAZAKH SOCIETY

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Abstract. This article examines the transformation of traditional dance culture through the choreographic practice of Akram Khan, focusing on the mechanisms by which the Indian classical dance form Kathak is integrated into contemporary choreography. Drawing on comparative-analytical, historical-cultural, and intercultural approaches, the study analyzes how Khan's artistic language works at the intersection of tradition and modernity, producing a dynamic synthesis rather than a decorative adaptation of folk forms. *The aim* of this study is to examine how folk dance has been adapted into Akram Khan's choreographic language. *The objectives* of the study are to demonstrate how Kathak is reimagined in contemporary choreography; to explore the dialectical relationship between tradition and modernity in Khan's artistic language; to develop an analytical model for studying the transformation and preservation of national dance traditions in the context of globalization; and to assess its applicability to the realities of Kazakhstani choreographic culture. Particular attention is paid to the role of postcolonial subjectivity and embodied cultural memory in shaping this synthesis. Through the case of Akram Khan, the article proposes an analytical framework for understanding how national dance traditions can be preserved through creative transformation under conditions of globalization. *The findings* are discussed in relation to Kazakhstani choreographic culture and highlight opportunities to develop and adapt national dance within contemporary artistic practice. The results of the study contribute to dance studies and cultural research by offering a transferable model for analyzing intercultural choreography and provide practical insights for choreographers working with national dance heritage.

Keywords: Akram Khan; Kathak; contemporary choreography; Kazakh national dance; postcolonial subjectivity; interculturalism; dance transformation.

Introduction

Akram Khan is widely regarded as one of the leading choreographers of contemporary dance. Born in London to parents who migrated from Bangladesh, he grew up in a complex cultural environment marked by questions of identity and belonging. Although holding British citizenship, Khan has repeatedly described experiences of cultural ambivalence, which later became a central theme of his artistic practice. These biographical circumstances played a significant role in shaping his engagement with tradition and contemporary choreography.

From an early age, Akram Khan received systematic training in the Indian classical dance form Kathak, which later became the foundation of his choreographic language. This early engagement with traditional dance shaped not only his technical skills but also his understanding of rhythm, discipline, and embodied cultural memory. Kathak later functioned as a core structural element in Khan's creative work, informing his approach to movement and becoming a key resource for the development of his contemporary choreographic practice.

Researcher Olga Ryzhankova, in her analysis of Akram Khan's work, states that a conscious engagement with tradition enables choreographers to rethink both traditional and contemporary forms. She argues that tradition possesses an inherent depth and structural complexity that provides the artist with creative freedom grounded in

discipline rather than liberation from it. As Ryzhankova notes, "this freedom through discipline allows the dancer to transcend stylistic boundaries while remaining rooted in cultural form" (Ryzhankova 122).

This theoretical position is particularly relevant to Akram Khan's choreographic practice, in which traditional Kathak principles are not abandoned but reshaped within contemporary movement structures. Rather than functioning as a fixed canon, tradition operates as a guiding system that supports creative transformation.

The significance of Akram Khan's experience extends beyond the Indian and British cultural contexts in which his artistic language was formed. For post-Soviet societies such as Kazakhstan, where national dance traditions coexist with strong academic and inherited choreographic systems, similar questions of preservation, transformation, and cultural representation remain highly important. The Kazakh choreographic tradition, shaped by nomadic culture, Soviet cultural policy, and post-independence identity formation, faces the challenge of integrating national dance into contemporary artistic practice without reducing it to folkloric reconstruction.

In this case, Akram Khan's approach offers an important analytical perspective for Kazakh dance studies. His model of creative synthesis grounded in deep knowledge of tradition while remaining open to contemporary forms provides a framework for reconsidering how national dance can evolve with-

in global cultural processes while keeping its cultural specificity.

Methods

This study uses art-historical analysis to examine Akram Khan's creative practice and his role in contemporary choreography. The research applies comparative and historical-cultural methods to examine the transformation of traditional dance within the conditions of modernity and evolving sociocultural demands. These approaches allow for the analysis of how traditional dance forms are modified and transformed in response to contemporary sociocultural conditions (Butterworth 249).

An intercultural approach is used to identify the synthesis of dance elements originating from different cultural traditions within contemporary choreography. This methodological perspective makes it possible to analyze the interaction between national dance systems and contemporary styles, a process that has been widely discussed in studies of hybridity and interculturalism in dance (Mitra; Rofli). Within this framework, the synthesis of traditional and contemporary movement vocabularies is examined not as a stylistic comparison but as a structured artistic process.

Elements of sociological analysis are employed to demonstrate the creative profile of Akram Khan in relation to the transformation of traditional dance culture. In this study, sociological analysis is applied as an interpretative tool rather than as an empirical method, examines how sociocultural conditions shaped the choreographer's artistic style. Khan's philosophical and artistic positions are considered in relation to social conditions, cultural values, and postcolonial experience, which have been identified as significant factors shaping contemporary choreographic practice (Kolb).

In particular, Akram Khan's training in Indian classical dance within a Western cultural environment, and his education at dance institutions in London are analyzed as

a key factor contributing to the emergence of a distinctive choreographic language. This perspective corresponds with scholarly approaches that interpret dance as a form of embodied cultural knowledge shaped by historical and social contexts (Chakravorty).

The research material is based on published interviews, essays, and analytical texts available on the official website of Akram Khan's dance company, as well as academic studies devoted to Indian traditional and contemporary dance. Foundational sources include Pallabi Chakravorty's *Bells of Change: Kathak Dance, Women, and Modernity in India* (2008), Royona Mitra's monograph *Akram Khan: Dancing Interculturalism* (2015), and interviews conducted by Sunil Kothari (2009), all of which directly examine the transformation of Kathak within contemporary choreography.

Additional analytical perspectives are drawn from Alexander Kolb's study *Akram Khan, Lloyd Newson, and the Challenges of British Multiculturalism* (2018), which offers a comparative analysis of decolonial cultural strategies in British and post-Soviet contexts. Russian-language scholarship by Olga Ryzhankova—*Akram Khan and the Discovery of a New Identity in Contemporary Indian Dance* (2017) and *Indian Dance in the Context of Cultural Modernization* (2016)—provides further insight into the subject through the prism of post-Soviet theoretical interpretation.

Discussion

Akram Khan's work represents a key phenomenon for this study, as it constitutes one of the most striking examples of the transformation of folk dance in modern society and its adaptation to the demands of contemporary choreographic art. Through his individual artistic language and sustained engagement with techniques derived from traditional Indian culture, Khan has contributed to the renewal of folk dance, positioning it as a dynamic and evolving artistic form rather than a static cultural artifact.

Born in Britain, Akram Khan was raised within a family that actively transmitted the cultural values of The territory of present-day Bangladesh, which formed part of British India until 1947. Historical experience demonstrates that imperial systems exert a profound influence on the sociocultural life of colonized societies, shaping language, culture, and mechanisms of identity formation. In this context, Khan's early immersion in the culture and language of his ancestral homeland reflects a broader postcolonial strategy of cultural preservation. A comparable process can be observed in Kazakhstan, which experienced prolonged imperial domination first within the Russian Empire and later the Soviet Union, where national culture often functioned as a primary means of maintaining collective identity despite political and economic restrictions.

Colonial conditions, paradoxically, have frequently intensified the role of culture as a mechanism of self-identification. Even in societies facing economic hardship or limited institutional support, artistic traditions often continue to develop as carriers of historical memory. Akram Khan has noted in interviews that dance provided a space of personal freedom, where difference became a source of originality rather than marginalization. This perspective resonates with the experience of Kazakh national dance, which similarly preserved cultural continuity through embodied practices during periods of political repression and ideological regulation.

The ideas of the German philosopher and cultural historian Johann Gottfried Herder are particularly relevant in this context. Herder argued that "cultural practices are linked to the customs and traditions of specific places, which reflect the unique identity of their people," emphasizing that artistic forms such as dance and literature convey the enduring spirit of a nation, even as they undergo historical transformation (Herder 227). As a British-born artist with family roots in Bangladesh, Akram Khan exemplifies this principle by maintaining cultural continuity through dance. A similar dynamic charac-

terizes Kazakh folk choreography, which has functioned as an archive of national memory across changing historical epochs.

Kazakh folk dance, like flamenco in Spain, tarantella in Italy, or mazurka in Poland, represents a distinctive marker of national identity. Embedded within its movement vocabulary are traces of nomadic life, climatic adaptation, territorial mobility, and the collective experience of colonialism, famine, repression, industrialization, socialism, and independence. At the same time, contemporary Kazakh dance faces the challenge of articulating new developmental trajectories that move beyond folkloric reconstruction. In this respect, Akram Khan's artistic practice provides an instructive model, demonstrating how deep engagement with tradition, combined with professional academic training, can generate innovative choreographic languages capable of global resonance.

One of the central objectives of this study is to identify common sociocultural patterns in the historical development of Bangladesh and Kazakhstan as former colonial territories. Despite differences in historical chronology and imperial structures, both contexts reveal similar processes of cultural negotiation, decolonization, and controlled representation of minority cultures. Such patterns often involved the selective promotion of national art forms in ways that served imperial interests rather than genuine cultural autonomy.

As Ariella Azoulay notes in her discussion of "imperial curation," cultural representation within imperial frameworks frequently functioned as a regulated display of difference rather than an acknowledgment of artistic equality. This phenomenon is evident in events such as the Decade of Arts of the Kazakh SSR in Moscow (1936) and the British Empire Exhibition (1925), where the cultures of colonized regions were presented according to predominantly European aesthetic standards. Although these exhibitions apparently celebrated cultural diversity, they often positioned non-Western artistic practices as exotic, secondary, or backward (Denby 65).

Such representational strategies contributed to the marginalization of non-Western artistic depth and reinforced hierarchical distinctions between “universal” Western rationality and culturally specific traditions. As Denby observes, Western cultural frameworks frequently regard local traditions as primitive or outdated, overlooking their complexity and internal logic (Denby 228). Nevertheless, it was precisely under these conditions that many national art forms survived, preserving embodied histories across generations.

Against this background, Akram Khan’s creative trajectory stands as an exceptional case. Entering a global choreographic field largely shaped by Western aesthetics, he succeeded in maintaining cultural specificity while achieving international recognition. This achievement underscores the possibility of participating in global contemporary dance without abandoning national identity, a challenge that remains highly relevant for Kazakh choreographic culture today.

Results

The analysis of Akram Khan’s choreographic practice demonstrates that the transformation of traditional dance within contemporary art does not occur through the rejection or stylization of folk forms, but through their structural and conceptual reconfiguration. Khan’s work reveals a model in which tradition functions as a generative system embedded in the dancer’s body, rhythmic organization, and cultural memory rather than as a fixed canon requiring preservation through reconstruction.

From the perspective of postcolonial subjectivity, Akram Khan’s choreography operates within what Homi K. Bhabha defines as a “third space,” where cultural meanings are formed through hybridity and ambivalence. In this space, Eastern and Western movement systems do not exist in opposition but interact dynamically, producing a contemporary choreographic language grounded in personal and historical experience. The re-

sults of the study confirm that such hybridity in dance should be understood not as a loss of national identity, but as a mode of its contemporary articulation.

The findings further indicate that interculturalism, understood as an active and critical dialogue between cultures, offers a more productive framework for contemporary choreography than multicultural co-existence. Akram Khan’s work exemplifies how intercultural practice allows dance to transcend ethnic categorization and become emotionally accessible to diverse audiences, while still preserving cultural specificity. In this regard, embodied expression emerges as a key mechanism through which collective memory and historical experience are transmitted in contemporary performance.

Applied to the Kazakhstani context, this model draws attention to several structural challenges in the development of national choreography. Despite the richness of Kazakh folk dance and its capacity to preserve historical experience, from nomadic culture to colonial trauma and post-independence identity, contemporary practice often relies on external interpretative frameworks, including the invitation of foreign choreographers to stage national themes. The results suggest that such approaches may unintentionally reproduce colonial patterns of cultural mediation, rather than fostering internal processes of creative transformation.

At the same time, the practical experience of Akram Khan’s the reported 2024 collaboration with the Abay Kazakh National Opera and Ballet Theatre offers an illustrative example of the proposed model. Khan’s masterclasses and workshops demonstrated that even within an academic ballet institution, dancers’ bodies retain culturally specific movement memory that can be activated through intercultural dialogue rather than imposed methodology. His recognition of the “spirit of national dance” in Kazakh performers underscores the role of embodied knowledge as a foundation for contemporary choreographic innovation.

The results of the study indicate that the preservation of national dance in modern society is most effective when approached through creative authorship grounded in tradition, professional training, and reflective engagement with historical experience. Akram Khan's choreographic strategy illustrates a transferable model for national dance cultures, particularly in post-Soviet contexts, seeking to integrate global contemporary practices without sacrificing cultural identity. This model positions transformation not as a threat to tradition, but as a necessary condition for its continued relevance within contemporary artistic discourse.

Key findings

The study examines the transformation of traditional dance culture in Akram Khan's choreographic practice. The aim of the study is to analyze how Kathak is recontextualized in contemporary choreography and explore the dynamic relationship between tradition and modernity in the language of Kathak used by Khan. The study examines the structural and conceptual adaptation of traditional forms in contemporary performance and analyzes the role of postcolonial subjectivity and embodied cultural memory in the formation of a creative synthesis, and to develop an analytical model for examining the transformation and preservation of national dance traditions under globalization, moreover, to apply this practice to the example of Kazakh choreographic culture.

The comparative, historical-cultural, and intercultural methodologies used in the study help explain how traditional and contemporary elements interact to produce an integrated artistic synthesis instead of a stylistic opposition. The results have shown that the process of national dance preservation is most effective when handled in the form of creative transformation, professional training, and critical reflection on historical experience. Moreover, the model underlines the possibility of intercultural dialogue as a framework for contemporary choreography

in which cultural specificity can be preserved and be involved in the international artistic processes.

Conclusion

The creative path of this outstanding contemporary choreographer is a striking example of the preservation of national culture and folk dance in modern society. From a contemporary perspective, it can be concluded that national culture, art, and origins are important spiritual values for the future of any state. A study of Akram Khan's creative biography has made it possible to identify directions for the development of national choreography and its adaptation in modern society.

Dance can provide a means of expression for experiences that have remained marginalized. Akram Khan's works are life stories told by those who were not heard and who could not speak, which is why they are valuable and understandable to millions of viewers. The 21st century is a time when national and global artistic practices increasingly interact, and just as in history, it is important to balance the preservation of cultural identity with participation in global artistic processes.

The present study has examined the transformation of traditional dance culture through the choreographic practice of Akram Khan, focusing on the mechanisms by which national dance forms are integrated into contemporary artistic language. The analysis demonstrates that Khan's work represents a model of creative transformation in which tradition functions not as a static heritage but as a dynamic and generative system rooted in bodily cultural memory.

By applying the theoretical framework of postcolonial subjectivity, hybridity, and interculturalism, the study has shown that contemporary choreography can serve as a space for negotiating historical experience, cultural identity, and artistic innovation. Akram Khan's practice illustrates how the synthesis of traditional and contemporary

movement vocabularies enables national dance to remain culturally specific while engaging with global artistic processes.

The relevance of this model for Kazakh choreographic culture lies in its emphasis on internal creative authorship grounded in tradition, professional training, and reflective engagement with historical memory. The example of Akram Khan's collaboration with the Kazakh National Opera and Ballet Theatre in Almaty confirms that intercultural dialogue can function as a productive framework for contemporary dance development

without reproducing folkloric reduction or external cultural mediation.

Overall, the findings suggest that the preservation of national dance in modern society is most effective when approached through creative transformation rather than reconstruction. The findings contribute to dance studies and cultural research by offering an analytical perspective applicable to post-Soviet and postcolonial contexts, where national dance traditions continue to seek balanced integration between historical legacy and contemporary artistic practice.

Authors' contributions:

Anel Murzagulova – formulation of the research problem and drafting of the theoretical section, work with sources and interpretation of the data obtained.

Aigul Kulbekova – development of the research concept; scholarly editing of the manuscript; academic supervision..

Авторлардың үлесі:

Анель Мурзагулова – зерттеу мәселесін тұжырымдау және мәтіннің теориялық бөлімін әзірлеу, дереккөздермен жұмыс және алынған мәліметтерді тұжырымдау.

Айгүл Кулбекова – зерттеу тұжырымдамасын әзірлеу. Негізгі мәтінді редакциялау, ғылыми кеңес беру.

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АКРАМ ХАН ШЫҒАРМАШЫЛЫҒЫНДАҒЫ ДӘСТҮРЛІ БИДІҢ ТРАНСФОРМАЦИЯСЫ ЖӘНЕ ҚАЗАҚ ҚОҒАМЫНДА ҰЛТТЫҚ БИДІҢ САҚТАЛУЫ

Аңдатпа. Мақалада дәстүрлі би мәдениетінің заманауи хореография жағдайындағы трансформациясы Акрам Ханның хореографиялық тәжірибесі негізінде қарастырылады. Зерттеу классикалық үнді биі катхактың заманауи хореографияға интеграциялану тетіктеріне назар аударады. Салыстырмалы-талдамалық, тарихи-мәдени және мәдениетаралық әдістерге сүйене отырып, Акрам Ханның көркемдік тілі дәстүр мен қазіргі заманның тоғысында қалай жұмыс істейтіні, фольклорлық формалардың декоративтік бейімделуінен гөрі динамикалық синтез қалыптастыратыны талданады. *Зерттеу мақсаты* - халық биінің Акрам Ханның хореографиялық тіліне қалай бейімделгенін зерттеу. *Зерттеудің міндеттері* - Катхактың қазіргі заманғы хореографияда қалай қайта пайымдалатынын көрсету; Ханның көркем тіліндегі дәстүр мен қазіргі заман арасындағы диалектикалық байланысты зерттеу; жаһандану жағдайында ұлттық би дәстүрлерінің өзгерістері мен сақталуын зерттеудің аналитикалық моделін әзірлеу; және оның қазақстандық хореографиялық мәдениеттің шындығына қолданылуын бағалау. Мақалада бұл синтездің қалыптасуындағы постколониялық субъективтілік пен денелік мәдени жадының рөліне ерекше мән беріледі. *Зерттеу нәтижелері* қазақстандық хореографиялық мәдениет контекстінде қарастырылып, ұлттық биді заманауи көркемдік тәжірибеге бейімдеу мен дамыту мүмкіндіктерін айқындайды. Зерттеу нәтижелері мәдениет аралық хореографияны талдауға арналған әмбебап модель ұсына отырып, би зерттеулері мен мәдениеттануға үлес қосады, сондай-ақ ұлттық би мұрасымен жұмыс істейтін хореографтар үшін практикалық бағдар береді.

Түйін сөздер: Акрам Хан; катхак; заманауи хореография; қазақ ұлттық биі; постколониялық субъективтілік; интеркультурализм; бидің трансформациясы.

Дәйексөз үшін: Анель Мурзагулова, Айгуль Кульбекова «Акрам Хан шығармашылығындағы дәстүрлі би мәдениетінің трансформациясы және қазақ қоғамында ұлттық бидің сақталуы». *Central Asian Journal of Art Studies*, т. 11, №3, 2026, 188–199 б., DOI: 10.47940/cajas.v11i3.1104

Авторлар қолжазбаның соңғы нұсқасын оқып, мақұлдады және мүдделер қайшылығы жоқ екендігін мәлімдейді.

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ТРАНСФОРМАЦИЯ ТРАДИЦИОННОГО ТАНЦА В ТВОРЧЕСТВЕ АКРАМ ХАНА И СОХРАНЕНИЕ НАЦИОНАЛЬНОГО ТАНЦА В КАЗАХСКОМ ОБЩЕСТВЕ

Аннотация. В статье рассматривается трансформация традиционной танцевальной культуры в хореографической практике Акрама Хана с акцентом на механизмы интеграции классического индийского танца катхак в современную хореографию. На основе сравнительно-аналитического, историко-культурного и межкультурного подходов анализируется, каким образом художественный язык Акрама Хана функционирует на пересечении традиции и современности, формируя динамичный синтез, а не декоративную адаптацию фольклорных форм. *Цель исследования* - изучить, как народный танец адаптировался в хореографический язык Акрама Хана. *Задачи исследования:* показать, каким образом катхак переосмысливается в современной хореографии; исследовать диалектическую связь между традицией и современностью в художественном языке, используемом Ханом; разработать аналитическую модель, позволяющую изучать изменение и сохранение национальных танцевальных традиций в условиях глобализации; и оценить ее применимость к реалиям казахстанской хореографической культуры. Особое внимание уделяется роли постколониальной субъективности и воплощённой культурной памяти в формировании данного синтеза. На примере творчества Акрама Хана в статье предлагается аналитическая модель понимания того, каким образом национальные танцевальные традиции могут сохраняться через творческую трансформацию в условиях глобализации. Полученные результаты соотносятся с казахстанской хореографической культурой и обозначают перспективы развития и адаптации национального танца в контексте современной художественной практики. *Результаты* исследования вносят вклад в танцевальные исследования и культурологию, предлагая универсальную модель анализа межкультурного диалога в хореографии, а также практические ориентиры для хореографов, работающих с национальным танцевальным наследием.

Ключевые слова: Акрам Хан; катхак; современная хореография; казахский национальный танец; постколониальная субъективность; интеркультурализм; трансформация танца.

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