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Review

# The Evolution of Azerbaijani Dance in the Study of Afag Husseinova: A Practical Guide for a Quick Immersion in the Subject



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**Keywords:** Azerbaijani dance, Azerbaijani ballet, Afag Husseinova, ethnochoreology, historiography of Azerbaijani dance.

**Abstract.** This article analyses Afag Husseinova's book "The Evolution of Azerbaijani Dance," which represents a substantial contribution to the field of study. The research encompasses the origins, historical evolution, and contemporary practices of Azerbaijani dance art. Assessing the impact of this work on the choreology of Azerbaijan necessitated not only a content analysis of the book but also an examination of the context, including a review of scholarly sources on this and related topics accessible to contemporary researchers. An expeditious examination of the historiography of Azerbaijani dance disclosed a lack of comprehensive research in this domain, thereby highlighting the significance of A. Husseinova's contributions.

The book delineates the history of Azerbaijani dance into three distinct periods: prehistoric, mediaeval, and modern. The analytical sources comprise petroglyphs, medieval manuscripts, miniatures, and contemporary ethnochoreological data. The author delineates the relationship between traditional dance forms and contemporary Azerbaijani ballet. A. Husseinova meticulously analyses the origins of Azerbaijani dance, encompassing folklore traditions, mugham, the art of ashugs, and the impact of Russian and Western ballet schools. She examines the progression of the yalli circle dance from the Paleolithic Gobustan petroglyphs to contemporary ballet performances. Special emphasis is placed on the impact of medieval miniatures as a source for understanding the evolution of dance traditions. The study categorizes folk dances and emphasizes their ritualistic, matrimonial, quotidian, and additional roles.

The primary benefit of the book is its linguistic accessibility and concise presentation, enabling rapid immersion in the subject matter. Critical comments and suggestions include the lack of appendices containing a glossary of terms, a bibliography of Azerbaijani dance, and a list of the most significant figures. Furthermore, should the author intend to produce an expanded edition, the book could be supplemented with multimedia materials under contemporary circumstances. A. Husseinova's book makes a substantial contribution to Azerbaijani choreology by revealing the principal facets of country's choreography and dance art.

The publication will serve as a pedagogical resource for student choreographers and musicians, as well as for scholars engaged in cross-cultural and interdisciplinary research. It facilitates the dissemination and comprehensive examination of Azerbaijani dance as a distinctive phenomenon within global art.

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## Нигяр Оқтай қызы Шахмурадова

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Ревью

# Афаг Гусейнованың зерттеуіндегі әзірбайжан биінің эволюциясы: тақырыпты жылдам меңгеруге арналған практикалық құрал

**Тірек сөздер:** әзірбайжан биі, әзірбайжандық балет, Афаг Гусейнова, этнохореология, әзірбайжан биінің тарихнамасы.

**Аңдатпа.** Мақала әзірбайжан биін зерттеуге елеулі үлес қосқан Афаг Гусейнованың «Әзірбайжан биінің эволюциясы» кітабын талдауға арналған. Автордың жұмысы Әзірбайжан би өнерінің шығу тегі, тарихи дамуы және қазіргі тәжірибесін зерттеуді қамтиды. Осы еңбектің Әзірбайжан хореологиясына қосқан үлесін бағалау тек кітаптың мазмұндық талдауын ғана емес, сонымен қатар осы және оған қатысты мәселелер бойынша қазіргі зерттеушілерге қолжетімді ғылыми еңбектердің дереккөздік шолуын зерттеуді де талап етті. Әзірбайжан биінің тарихнамасына жүргізілген шолу бұл саланың жеткілікті зерттелмегенін көрсетті, бұл дегеніміз А. Гусейнованың еңбегінің маңыздылығын ерекше атап өтуге мүмкіндік береді.

Кітапта әзірбайжан биі тарихының кезеңдері үшке бөлінеді: ежелгі дәуір, орта ғасыр және қазіргі заман. Талдау дереккөздері ретінде петроглифтер, ортағасырлық трактаттар, миниатюралар және заманауи этнохореологиялық мәліметтер қарастырылған. Автор дәстүрлі би формаларының қазіргі Әзірбайжан балетімен байланысын да қарастырады. А. Гусейнова әзірбайжан биінің бастауларын терең зерттейді, сонымен қатар фольклорлық дәстүрлерді, муғамды, ашуғ өнерін, орыс және батыс балет мектептерінің ықпалын да қарастырады. Ол Гобустан петроглифтеріндегі шеңберлі яллы биінің қазіргі заманғы балет қойылымдарына дейінгі эволюциясын талдайды. Ортағасырлық миниатюраның би дәстүрлерінің қалыптасуы мен дамуына тигізген ықпалына ерекше назар аударылады. Зерттеуде халық билерінің жіктемесі ұсынылып, олардың рәсімдік, үйлену тойға арналған, тұрмыстық және басқа да функциялары айқындалған.

Кітаптың басты артықшылығы – тілінің қарапайымдылығы мен мазмұнының ықшамдылығы, бұл оқырманға зерттеліп отырған тақырыпты тезірек түсінуге мүмкіндік береді. Сын-пікірлер мен ұсыныстар ретінде кітапқа терминдер сөздігі, әзірбайжан биінің библиографиясы және өнер саласының ең танымал қайраткерлерінің тізімі сияқты қосымшалардың болмауы атап өтіледі. Сонымен қатар, егер автор кеңейтілген басылымды жоспарласа, қазіргі заманғы жағдайда кітапты мультимедиялық материалдармен толықтыруға мүмкіндік бар. А. Гусейнованың кітабының Әзірбайжан хореологиясына қосқан маңызды үлесі – ол оқырманды Әзірбайжан хореографиясы мен би өнерінің негізгі аспектілерімен таныстыруында.

Бұл басылым хореограф-студенттер мен музыканттарға арналған оқу құралы ретінде, сондай-ақ мәдениетаралық және пәнаралық жобалар саласындағы зерттеушілер үшін пайдалы болады. Ол әзірбайжан биін әлемдік өнердің бірегей феномені ретінде насихаттауға және тереңірек зерттеуге ықпал етеді.

**Алғыс.** Автор А. Гусейнова кітабының бір данасын ұсынған және пайдалы пікірлер айтқан өнертану кандидаты, Құрманғазы атындағы Қазақ ұлттық консерваториясының доценті Валерия Недлинаға алғысын білдіреді.

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Ревью

# Эволюция азербайджанского танца в исследовании Афаг Гусейновой: практическое руководство для быстрого погружения в предмет

**Ключевые слова:** азербайджанский танец, балет Азербайджана, Афаг Гусейнова, этнохореология, историография азербайджанского танца.

**Аннотация.** Статья посвящена анализу книги Афаг Гусейновой «Эволюция азербайджанского танца», которая является значимым вкладом в исследование предмета. Работа автора включает изучение происхождения, исторического развития и современной практики танцевального искусства Азербайджана. Оценка вклада данного труда в хореологию Азербайджана потребовала не только контент-анализа самой книги, но также и изучения контекста – источниковедческого обзора доступных для современного исследователя научных трудов по этой и смежным проблемам. Беглый анализ историографии азербайджанского танца выявил недостаточную изученность этой области, что позволяет высоко оценить роль труда А. Гусейновой.

В книге предложены три этапа периодизации истории азербайджанского танца: доисторический, средневековый и современный. Источниками анализа выступают петроглифы, средневековые трактаты, миниатюры и современные этнохореологические данные. Автор также прослеживает связь традиционных форм танцев с современным азербайджанским балетом. А. Гусейнова подробно исследует истоки азербайджанского танца, включая фольклорные традиции, мугам, искусство ашугов, а также влияние русской и западной балетных школ. Она анализирует эволюцию кругового танца яллы от петроглифов Гобустана до современных балетных постановок. Особое внимание уделяется влиянию средневековой миниатюры как источника о становлении и развитии танцевальных традиций. В работе приведена классификация народных танцев, выделены их ритуальные, свадебные, бытовые и другие функции.

Главным достоинством книги является доступность языка и лаконичность изложения, что позволяет быстро погрузиться в изучаемый предмет. В качестве критических замечаний и пожеланий отмечены отсутствие в книге приложений со словарём терминов, библиографией азербайджанского танца и перечня наиболее значимых деятелей искусства. Кроме того, если автор планирует расширенное издание, в современных условиях возможно оснастить книгу мультимедийными материалами. Существенным вкладом книги А. Гусейновой в азербайджанскую хореологию является то, что она вводит читателя в основные аспекты азербайджанской хореографии и танцевального искусства.

Издание найдёт применение как учебное пособие для студентов-хореографов и музыкантов, а также для исследователей в области кросс-культурных и междисциплинарных проектов. Она способствует популяризации и углублённому изучению азербайджанского танца как уникального феномена мирового искусства.

**Благодарности.** Автор выражает благодарность Валерии Недлиной, кандидату искусствоведения, доценту Казахской национальной консерватории имени Курмангазы, за предоставленный экземпляр книги А. Гусейновой и дельные комментарии.

I was prompted to study Azerbaijani dance by an urgent need – to conduct a comparative study of the history of ballet of the Turkic peoples. The book “Evolution of Azeri Dance” by Dr. Afag Husseinova serves as an excellent resource for a rapid immersion in the subject. An author is known as a choreographer, senior researcher at the Institute of Architecture and Art of ANAS, artist, and chairperson of the “Association of Creative Women”. This modest work substantially contributes to the establishment of a repository of knowledge on Azerbaijani dance, available to the global professional community.

The examination of Azerbaijani dance by external scholars and choreographers, who lack proficiency in the Azerbaijani language and are not integrated into the local dance community, inevitably faces a significant deficiency in accessible informational resources that can promptly orient the researcher. In general, the bibliography of Azerbaijani dance is not extensive. The initial knowledge can be obtained from open encyclopedias, such as Wikipedia, where the most extensive Russian-language article explains the variety of folk-dance traditions in detail (“Azerbaijani Dance”). Moreover, there are quite a few journalistic articles of a general informative nature available on the internet.

Among the earliest scholarly sources on folk dance and ballet one can find studies that do not directly relate to choreology. The most cited work in the literature that provides an overview of dance genres, is the classical musicological study by the eminent Azerbaijani composer and scholar Uzeyir Hajibeyli (Hajibekov). At present, research on folk dances, particularly the round dance yally, is the most extensively published (refer to the works of Bakhmanli, Mammadli, Ibrakhimov, Alekperov, Babayev, Nabiye). The monograph on the history and practice of Azerbaijani dance written by Kamran Hassanov, and published during the Soviet era, has now attained bibliographic rarity. Over the past decade, the necessity to examine the modern practice of Azerbaijani dance has been augmented by scholarly articles on ethnochoreology (refer to Jafarova, Muradova, Pazicheva). The few English-language publications on Azerbaijani dance primarily focus on ethnochoreological topics (e.g., Aktas).

Researcher and choreographer Leila Shikhliinskaya made a substantial contribution to the study of Azerbaijani ballet during the Soviet era. Currently, a significant quantity of journalistic articles has been collected, documenting the premieres of Azerbaijani ballet. Galina Mikheladze made an important impact to ballet criticism in Azerbaijan with her monograph, which chronicles the history of national ballet through news articles, interviews, and analytical essays. In this context, the scholarly contributions of Afag Husseinova introduce a new phase in the study of Azerbaijani ballet.

In 2020, she presented her comprehensive work “Azerbaijani Ballet Performance: Genesis and Synthesis of Arts.” This monograph primarily focuses on academic ballet. The 2019 publication that we are analyzing on the evolution of Azerbaijani dance, serves as an introduction to its historical context.

The author categorizes the history of Azerbaijani dance art into **three distinct periods**: prehistoric, medieval, and modern. This division arises from the accessibility of sources and objective factors. The petroglyphs of Gobustan and other rock art in Azerbaijan contain information regarding prehistoric dances and rituals. Knowledge of medieval dance is derived from verbal references in epics, descriptions in ancient treatises, widely acknowledged iconography in miniatures, and contemporary dance ethnography.

A. Husseinova traces the connection between ancient dance traditions and the surviving evidence of them with modern ballet.

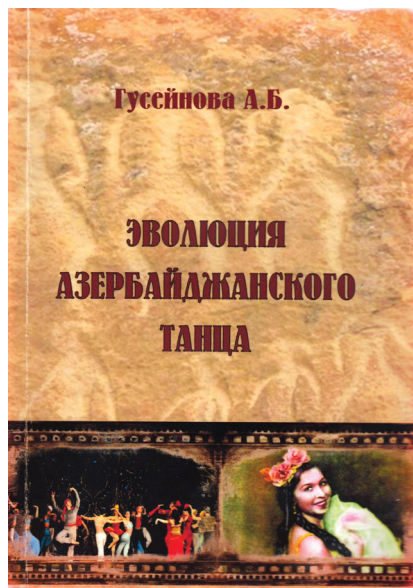


Figure 1. The cover of the Afag Husseinova's book "Evolution of the Azerbaijani Dance"

In work called "Evolution of the Azerbaijani Dance" (see Fig. 1), the author identifies various origins of Azerbaijani dance, including ritual folklore, *mugham*, the art of *ashugs*, and visual arts, while noting that since the early 20th century, intercultural exchange with Russian and foreign ballet schools has also influenced its development. The researcher delineates the relationship between ancient sources and modern practices. The origin of the circular dance of yally may be traced to primitive hunting magic, as indicated by the circular motifs found in Upper Palaeolithic petroglyphs (Husseinova 8). The compositions and plasticity of various petroglyphs from Gobustan and Gyamigai are embodied in Faraj Karayev's contemporary ballet "Shadows of Gobustan" from 1969, and are also utilized by contemporary choreographers.

The mediaeval miniature significantly influences contemporary interpretations of mediaeval Azerbaijani dance. In the images of the Tabriz miniature school, A. Husseinova discerns two types of dances: dances of girls and dances of dervishes (12). A considerable segment of modern folk dances originates from the mediaeval period. The author presents a comprehensive list of dance names referenced in mediaeval treatises that continue to be embodied by contemporary traditions. The proposed coincidental classification of traditional dances into categories such as ritual and ceremonial, wedding, labor, domestic, heroic, sports, and roundelay-play dances holds significant value. Furthermore, the author delineates gender disparities in dance traditions, differentiating between women's dances (predominantly in triple meter), men's dances (predominantly in duple meter), and communal dances. She discusses various regional characteristics and details the naming system of specific dances that imitate natural phenomena (Husseinova 13–14).

A. Husseinova associates the emergence of Azerbaijani ballet with the works of such masters of academic music in the country as Uzeyir Hajibeyli, Abdul-Muslim Magomayev, Huseynqulu Sarabski, and others, whose pioneering activities contributed to the birth of the national theater and the fast adaptation of European musical-theatrical genres on a national basis.

The author presents a periodization of Azerbaijani ballet's development. She regards the 1940s-50s as a formative period, the 1960s-80s as a flourishing era, and the 1990s as a time of crisis (Husseinova 26). Since the 2000s, the dance art of Azerbaijan has exhibited indications of a creative resurgence. A. Husseinova asserts that significant developments in the history of ballet during the Soviet era are linked to the establishment of choreographic ensembles and the production of distinguished ballet performances.



Here are the main milestones:

- 1908** – Uzeyir Hajibeyli’s opera “Leyli and Majnun” premieres with the first dance scenes.
- 1920** – establishment of the Azerbaijan State Opera and Ballet Theater and the inaugural choreographic miniatures by U. Hajibeyli and A.-M. Magomayev;
- 1938** – formation of a song and dance ensemble at the Baku Philharmonic initiated by U. Hajibeyli;
- 1940** – the first national ballet “Giz Galasy” (“Maiden Tower”) by Afrasiyab Badalbeyli, synthesizing folk dance, mugham melodies, and classical ballet;
- 1952** – the ballet “Seven Beauties” by Kara Karayev, inspired by diverse *mugham* and the artistry of *ashugs*;
- 1961** – the ballet “Legend of Love” by Arif Melikov, initially performed in Leningrad and incorporated into the repertoires of numerous global theaters;
- 1979** – the ballet “Thousand and One Nights” by Fikret Amirov, which synthesizes Azerbaijani and Arab musical traditions.

The researcher concisely includes the directors and soloists in the descriptions of each ballet performance, emphasizing essential musical and choreographic elements. The work features a list of the most notable “grand” ballets, while also highlighting the one-act ballet genre as a distinct phenomenon, particularly through various works written by Azerbaijani composers in the 1960s and 1970s (Husseinova 24). The author accentuates the primary shared characteristic of each performance, despite their uniqueness: the experimental spirit of the creative exploration. Due to their brevity and contemporary format, these performances frequently showcased Azerbaijani choreographic art internationally.

The revival of national art after the 1990s crisis commenced with the restoration of classical works on the theatrical stage. Consequently, in 2004, the premiere performance of the choreographic adaptation of the symphonic mugham “Rast Niyazi” (1949) occurred. A. Husseinova highlights significant accomplishments in contemporary theater, including Polad Bul-Buloglu’s ballet “Love and Death” (2005) and the international premieres of Fargana Alizade’s ballets “Frame of View,” “In Two Mind,” “Une,” and “Empty Cradle.” The latest period is marked by a wider representation of Azerbaijani ballet on global stages and increased interest from international choreographers.

The book’s merits encompass the inclusion of an appendix containing color illustrations depicting significant milestones in the history of Azerbaijani dance. The primary advantage resides in the conciseness and clarity of the writing style: within an hour, any Russian-speaking reader can acquaint themselves with the essential characteristics and history of this complex phenomenon.

Reading A. Husseinova's monograph inevitably caused some discomfort. The wealth of terminology associated with national traditions and mugham necessitates frequent consultation of dictionaries and encyclopedias, hindering content comprehension. The reading experience would be enhanced by the inclusion of a terminological dictionary. This work could be strengthened by including appendices featuring a list of folk dances, a chronology of Azerbaijani ballet, the names of distinguished choreographers and performers, and a bibliography of Azerbaijani dance. Nevertheless, this deficiency is addressed in the author's comprehensive monograph published in 2020. Furthermore, the author entirely neglects to employ contemporary technological capabilities. To exemplify the primary content, links to multimedia in accessible online sources, particularly videos of Azerbaijani dances, may be included. It is possible that the second extended edition with all mentioned improvements will follow.

The book "The Evolution of Azerbaijani Dance" serves multiple purposes: as a textbook for choreographic and musical education, and for cross-cultural and interdisciplinary research projects focused on dance art issues. Given the current scarcity of scholarly literature on the history of Azerbaijani dance, it would be advantageous to publish an enhanced and updated edition, particularly in the user-friendly and readily accessible format of an e-book. And it would be intriguing for international readers to have A. Husseinova's work translated into English.

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