

A SHORT INTRODUCTORY NOTE TO UNDERSTAND THE CONTEXT BEHIND THE CREATION OF RITUALS

Until recently, Turkmenistan has remained one of the Central Asian countries relatively unaffected by cultural influences from Western Europe, particularly in the realm of contemporary art, despite efforts by organizations such as the French Institute in Ashgabat and other diplomatic bodies from Spain, Italy, Germany, the United Kingdom, and the European Union.

It was within this context that the French Institute of Turkmenistan extended an invitation to me in 2023 to spend time in the country and explore the possibility of creating a performance with local artists. That same year, K. Danse had the opportunity to present the dance and digital arts piece **Myself** in Ashgabat, leaving a lasting impression thanks to both the quality of the performance and the enthusiastic reception by a large audience.

My response to the proposal was immediately positive, as I have a longstanding passion for international cultural exchanges and a deep commitment to dialogue and collaboration. Central Asian civilizations were, until then, relatively unfamiliar to me.

From that point, a full-scale production process was initiated: application submissions to EUNIC and the French Institute in Paris, joint efforts with the Italian Embassy, negotiations with various governmental entities, and more. This led to a 10-day exploratory trip in October 2024 to meet with elderly women (aged between 86 and 92), dancers and singers from the Akjayar Folkloric Ensemble, in the Balkan region along the Caspian Sea. This stay allowed me to discover the origins and motifs of the Kushdepdi dance.

Kushdepdi is a traditional Turkmen dance characterized by energetic movements, jumps, and rhythmic clapping of hands and feet, symbolizing strength, joy, and communal celebration. Since 2017, it has been inscribed on UNESCO's Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity. The Akjayar Ensemble preserves its most traditional form, relatively untouched by the adaptations seen in urban or socially diverse contexts.

This is a ritual dance, originally from the shores of the Caspian Sea, bearing traces of multiple influences: northern shamanism, Sufi mysticism stemming from Islam, Balkan energy, and more. It is practiced by people across Turkmenistan during weddings, celebrations, birthdays—both public and private—and in highly variable ways, sometimes even set to techno or house music. It is, across the country, a deep source of cultural identity, with some perceiving it as almost spiritual in nature.

The challenge, then, was to imagine a contemporary transposition of this dance, without distorting its essence or falling into exoticized post-colonial tropes—and more broadly, to imagine a 21st-century ritual that pays tribute to this practice.

Thus was born the idea for RITUALS, a hybrid choreographic work that envisions a contemporary form of folk dance for men and women alike, inspired by the themes and movements of Kushdepdi.

This creation was preceded by in-depth research into traditional dances from around the world (Philippines, Mexico, Mongolia, Maghreb, Western Europe, East Africa, etc.), with the goal of integrating the underlying themes of Kushdepdi into a contemporary framework. The piece explores a rich emotional journey, reflecting both cultural heritage and a modern interpretation.

It is a contemporary reinterpretation of Kushdepdi, where collective energy and ritual encounter evolve into a dynamic choreographic language—an exploration of the tension between tradition and the future. Drawing inspiration from Kushdepdi, the focus was placed on the emotional transformation of a modern-day ritual, offering a rich palette of expression that honors tradition while embracing innovation. The piece reflects a community's emotional voyage, navigating between heritage and modernity, culminating in a renewed collective celebration.

RITUALS is hybrid on multiple levels, blending traditional and contemporary dance and integrating an interactive digital device on stage.

Italian dancer Margherita Bergamo (involved as both assistant and performer, through a diplomatic arrangement co-signed with the Italian Embassy) opens the piece by introducing the interactive camera, before joining the other performers in the choreographed scenes.

To implement the project in its entirety, a period of preparation in France enabled the development of a relatively precise scenario and breakdown, along with numerous scores for sound design and video projection content.

On-site, only three weeks were available to complete the work.

The first week was dedicated to overcoming administrative hurdles and ensuring all conditions for feasibility were in place: availability of dancers, a suitable rehearsal space, necessary technical equipment, logistics, communication planning, etc.

Following a one-day audition for 54 dancers, all members of the national State Dance Ensemble “Mengli” and the Turkmen State Dance Ensemble, eight performers (four women and four men) were selected based on technical skill, mastery of traditional motifs, and stage presence. They come from a background of classical and neo-classical training (a legacy of the USSR) and are mostly unaccustomed to improvisation or contemporary dance research.

Ten days of rehearsals were used to both introduce key principles of contemporary dance and collaboratively build the piece. Given the performers' differing levels of comfort with non-traditional instructions, we decided to rely on their perfect mastery of *Kushdepdi* motifs, integrating these into a very precisely structured choreographic score.

The dancers are Ogulshat Ahmedova, Aygul Kakayeva, Selbi Muhammedova, and Evgeniya Titova (State Dance Ensemble “Mengli”), and Islam Abdylnebiyev, Ovezdurdy Charyyarov, Bezirgen Saryyev, and Dayanch Yazgylyje (Turkmen State Dance Ensemble).

Rehearsals took place over 10 days on the stage of the Mukam Theater, National Cultural Center of Ashgabat.

Constructive discussions with Mukam Theater management helped define certain limits concerning the women's movements (in line with social and cultural conventions), refine costume design (in compliance with specific traditions), enrich the soundtrack with new recordings of traditional music better suited to the piece, and influence the selection of projected visuals—all to strike a balance between contemporary innovation and respect for cultural norms.

RITUALS is conceived as an artistic and cultural dialogue between Europe and Turkmenistan, offering a vibrant tribute to Turkmen Kushdepdi.

In the first part of the show, a traditional Kushdepdi is performed by the Akjaya Folkloric Ensemble from the Balkan region, with the singing and dancing presence of the women encountered on the shores of the Caspian Sea. In the final part, these same women return to the stage to dance together with the nine contemporary performers.

The premiere was met with great enthusiasm from an audience of 1,200 people—mostly Turkmens from Ashgabat—along with representatives of international delegations (Institut français, Embassies of France, Italy, Germany, the European Union, and others). RITUALS was received with sustained applause and heartfelt reactions—combining joy, discovery, and warm gratitude toward all participants.

As Romain Gouvernet, Director of the French Institute of Turkmenistan, expressed it:
*"We went from the unthinkable to the unforgettable."

Having had many remarkable co-creation experiences in intercultural collaborations with Germany, Guatemala, Pakistan, Senegal, India, Spain, Burkina Faso, Morocco, and more, the RITUALS project will remain one of the most extraordinary.

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