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“Saks in Movement” Contemporary Movement Research Methodology

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Abstract

This paper introduces "Saks in Movement," a contemporary movement research methodology that translates the embodied physical culture of Central Asian nomadic civilizations, particularly the Saka (Scythian) tribes, into a structured framework for contemporary choreography. While classical ballet, Western contemporary dance, and codified Central Asian national dance traditions each possess established movement vocabularies, the embodied logic of steppe nomadic life-shaped by horseback mobility, migration, and ritual practice-has rarely been systematized into a contemporary dance methodology. Drawing on archaeological, ethnographic, and cultural-historical sources, this study identifies six core movement principles: grounded mobility, circular spatial orientation, continuous travel, animal-inspired dynamics, a mobile postural base, and a structured hand and arm vocabulary comprising five foundational gestures. Rather than reproducing traditional folk choreography or staged national dance repertoire, the methodology extracts underlying spatial, postural, and symbolic principles from nomadic cultural memory and reformulates them as an adaptable pedagogical and choreographic system. The paper situates this methodology relative to classical ballet, Western contemporary dance, Kazakh folk dance, and Soviet-era national stage dance, clarifying its distinct analytical approach. It further connects this work to broader precedents of cultural heritage informing contemporary movement research, such as the practices of Isadora Duncan and Martha Graham. The methodology contributes a new framework to dance studies by offering a systematic, teachable model for engaging Central Asian nomadic movement philosophy within contemporary performance and dance education contexts, positioned as a movement research tool rather than a fixed repertoire.

Keywords: Saks in Movement, Contemporary choreography, Nomadic embodiment, and Central Asian dance.

1. Introduction

Throughout my career as a dancer trained in both classical and contemporary movement systems, I have continuously searched for a physical language capable of expressing the cultural memory of the Central Asian steppe while remaining adaptable to contemporary choreography. Many dance systems in the world-such as classical ballet, modern dance techniques, and

codified national dance repertoires-possess highly structured vocabularies. However, I observed that the embodied movement logic of Central Asian nomadic cultures has rarely been translated into a systematic contemporary dance methodology (Zahra *et al.*, 2024).

The traditions of the Eurasian steppe, particularly those connected to the Saka (Scythian) civilizations;

reflect a unique physical culture shaped by migration, horseback mobility, communal rituals, and a deep interaction with landscape. These cultures produced forms of embodied expression that were dynamic, grounded, and circular in their spatial orientation. Yet much of this movement knowledge has been preserved primarily in folkloric traditions or symbolic gesture rather than developed into a contemporary choreographic framework.

As a performer and choreographer working between cultural heritage and modern performance practice, I began developing what I call “Saks in Movement,” a methodology that interprets nomadic embodied principles and translates them into a contemporary dance system. My intention is not to reproduce traditional folk dances, nor to imitate historical rituals. Rather, my goal is to extract structural movement principles from Central Asian cultural memory and rearticulate them within the context of contemporary choreography and dance education. This methodology is therefore both culturally rooted and creatively open, allowing dancers to engage with Central Asian movement philosophy while developing original contemporary performance work.

Historical Movement Traditions of the Steppe

The nomadic civilizations that inhabited the Eurasian steppe—including the Saka tribes of the first millennium BCE - lived within an environment defined by constant mobility. Their lives were shaped by horseback travel, migration across vast landscapes, hunting practices, and communal ceremonial gatherings.



Archaeological findings, including the famous Golden Man from Issyk, as well as numerous examples of Scythian animal-style art, reveal a symbolic world strongly connected to animals, nature, and warrior culture (Bunker *et al.*, 2002). While direct choreographic records do not survive from these early periods, ethnographic continuity suggests that Central Asian movement traditions reflect similar physical principles: balance, agility, circular spatial awareness, and expressive gestures used in storytelling and ritual.

Central Asian national dance traditions were codified for stage performance during the twentieth century, reflecting broader processes of cultural institutionalization in the region (Adams, 2010). Performers such as Shara Zhienkulova in Kazakhstan and other prominent figures across the region. These artists preserved many expressive gestures, particularly intricate hand movements and wrist articulations, which remain central to Kazakh and broader Central Asian dance aesthetics.

However, national dance forms often function within fixed choreographic structures designed for stage presentation. My work seeks to move beyond fixed repertoire by identifying the underlying physical logic of steppe movement and transforming it into a flexible contemporary methodology (Zhienkulova, n.d.; Fairouz *et al.*, 2024).

Shara Zhienkulova

Positioning the Methodology within Global Dance Systems, my approach has been shaped by my training in classical and contemporary dance. These traditions offer valuable technical foundations but reflect very different cultural philosophies of movement. Classical ballet, for example, emphasizes vertical alignment, geometric arm positions, and precise linear pathways across the stage. The body is lifted upward, striving for lightness and elevation. Contemporary dance, particularly Western modern traditions, often prioritizes individual expression, abstract improvisation, and experimentation with gravity.

Central Asian dance traditions share certain similarities with these systems—particularly the use of expressive arms and musical interpretation—but they differ in important ways. In many Central Asian

dances, the hands carry narrative and symbolic meaning, while the body maintains a grounded relationship to space. Movement frequently unfolds through circular pathways rather than straight lines, reflecting the spatial logic of nomadic life.



The Saks in Movement methodology therefore sits at an intersection between these systems. It borrows the structural discipline of classical training and the creative openness of contemporary dance while remaining rooted in the cultural movement principles of the Eurasian steppe.

Principles of the Saks in Movement Methodology and pedagogical application

The methodology is structured around 6 primary principles derived from nomadic embodied culture.

- **Grounded Mobility**

Mobility within nomadic societies required a high degree of physical adaptability. Daily activities such as horseback riding, long-distance travel across open landscapes, and movement over uneven terrain demanded a body capable of maintaining balance, responsiveness, and endurance.

Within the Saks in Movement methodology, this physical logic is translated into a foundational movement principle described as grounded mobility. Rather than emphasizing vertical elevation or rigid posture, the dancer maintains a body alignment designed for continuous motion and stability.

This alignment includes:

- 1) a slightly lowered center of gravity
- 2) soft and responsive knees that absorb and release movement
- 3) an engaged pelvic center that supports

directional change and balance

Together, these elements create a body posture that allows dancers to travel fluidly through space while remaining physically connected to the ground. The result is a movement quality that combines stability with mobility, reflecting the dynamic physical environment of nomadic life.

- **Circular Spatial Orientation**

The open landscape of the steppe encourages circular patterns of movement rather than rigid linear paths.

Choreography within this system therefore prioritizes: 1) spiral turns 2) curved traveling pathways 3) rotating ensemble formations

Circular spatial orientation allows dancers to maintain continuous awareness of their environment and other performers.

- **Continuous Travel**

Nomadic cultures are defined by migration and movement across landscapes. In choreography inspired by this philosophy, dancers rarely remain static.

Instead, movement flows through: 1) traveling sequences across the stage 2) diagonal pathways 3) shifting directions. This constant motion creates choreography that reflects the dynamic energy of migration.

- **Animal-Inspired Dynamics**

The visual culture of the Eurasian steppe frequently depicts animals such as eagles, deer, wolves, and snow leopards. These figures appear prominently in archaeological artifacts, including the well-known Scythian animal-style motifs found in Central Asia. Within steppe cosmology, animals were not only symbolic but also represented admired physical qualities such as agility, strength, vigilance, and instinctive responsiveness.

In the **Saks in Movement** methodology, dancers explore these qualities through what may be described as *animal-inspired movement dynamics*. Rather than imitating specific animals literally, dancers embody kinetic characteristics associated with these creatures, translating them into contemporary choreographic movement.

This principle encourages the development of physical

responsiveness through elements such as:

- 1) rapid directional changes that reflect heightened environmental awareness
- 2) explosive jumps and grounded power shifts that suggest animal strength and readiness
- 3) instinctive, reactive movement impulses that interrupt continuous flow

These dynamic variations introduce a contrast between controlled traveling movement and sudden energetic accents. The resulting physical language expands the expressive range of the dancer while maintaining a connection to symbolic elements present in Central Asian steppe culture.

- **Postural Base**

Unlike vertical ballet alignment, the Saks method uses a mobile, adaptive posture. The foundational body alignment is based on principles of mobility and stability associated with steppe cultures. alignment focuses on adaptability and grounded balance,

allowing the dancer to move fluidly through changing spatial directions. The posture is defined by several key characteristics:

- 1) a slightly lowered center of gravity that supports stability and controlled movement
- 2) soft, responsive knees that allow continuous mobility and shock absorption a centered and active pelvic core that facilitates directional shifts and balance
- 3) a flexible spinal alignment that allows the torso to remain mobile rather than rigidly vertical

Within this structure, the torso maintains stability while remaining responsive to changes in momentum and spatial orientation. This postural organization enables efficient traveling movement, quick directional transitions, and sustained physical endurance across extended choreographic sequences.

Hand and Arm Vocabulary



In Central Asian dance traditions, the hands function as one of the most expressive elements of the dancer's body. Gesture is not merely decorative but carries directional, symbolic, and emotional meaning. Within this movement system, hand positions are integrated with the orientation of the head, the alignment of the torso, and the support of the lower body.

Each gesture therefore operates as a full-body configuration rather than an isolated arm movement. The following positions establish a foundational vocabulary that can be expanded within choreographic practice. The system defines five fundamental hand positions.

Hand Position 1 - Steppe Horizon

Description: Represents the open landscape of the steppe and the dancer's connection to expansive space. In this position the arms extend outward from the shoulders at approximately shoulder height, forming a broad horizontal line across the body. The elbows remain slightly softened so the arms appear alive rather than rigid. The palms angle gently downward while the fingers lengthen naturally without tension. The head remains lifted and directed forward or toward the dancer's pathway of travel, allowing the gaze to project beyond the fingertips into space.

The torso maintains an open and balanced alignment with the chest released and the shoulders relaxed downward. The spine remains flexible, supporting the sense of breadth created by the arms. The legs sustain a grounded base, with weight distributed evenly and the knees softly bent to allow immediate mobility. This configuration produces a visual impression of openness and spatial expansion, evoking the wide horizons of the steppe landscape. Movement emerging from this position typically develops through smooth traveling sequences in which the arms maintain continuity while the body advances across space.

Hand Position 2 - Eagle Wing

Description: The Eagle Wing position introduces an asymmetrical relationship between the arms that generates a strong diagonal line through the body. One arm rises above shoulder level along a diagonal trajectory while the opposite arm extends outward to the side. The lifted arm maintains length through the fingers, which open slightly to create a sense of energetic reach. The supporting arm remains elongated but relaxed, maintaining structural balance.

The head turns toward the elevated arm so that the gaze follows the diagonal line upward. This orientation produces an expanded visual pathway from the grounded leg through the torso and into the lifted arm. The torso responds with a subtle rotational shift toward the raised arm, creating a gentle spiral through the spine. The lower body stabilizes the movement through a grounded stance in which the weight settles primarily over one leg while the opposite leg remains ready for directional change or turning action. This configuration generates a sense of alertness and upward energy, often used during moments of transition, turning phrases, or directional reorientation within choreography.

Hand Position 3 - Nomadic Gesture

Description: Hands move close to the chest or torso, wrists flexible, fingers articulate individually.

Symbolism: Reflects storytelling gestures found in traditional dance and cultural rituals.

The Nomadic Gesture brings the expressive focus inward toward the center of the body. Both hands move closer to the upper torso, usually within the

space between the chest and shoulders. The elbows remain softly lifted away from the ribs so the arms maintain freedom of articulation. The wrists remain highly mobile, allowing small circular motions and subtle shifts in angle. Fingers articulate individually through delicate isolations that produce intricate visual textures.

The head may remain directed forward or incline slightly toward the active hand, depending on the expressive intention of the phrase. The torso remains stable yet responsive, allowing small shifts of breath and weight to influence the gesture. In the lower body the dancer maintains a grounded stance supported by softly bent knees and small traveling steps that keep the movement fluid. This configuration emphasizes detail and nuance. Rather than projecting outward into large spatial gestures, the movement concentrates energy near the body's center, allowing expressive storytelling or musical interpretation to emerge through subtle hand articulation.

Hand Position 4 - Spiral Path

Description: Arms rotate through circular patterns while wrists articulate fluidly, creating spiral shapes in space.

Symbolism: Represents movement cycles and nomadic travel patterns.

The Spiral Path position develops through circular arm trajectories that travel continuously around the body. The movement is initiated through the wrists, which guide the hands along curved pathways in space. As the arms rotate outward and inward, the fingers maintain length while remaining relaxed enough to follow the natural momentum of the spiral motion. The head follows the directional flow of the arms, allowing the gaze to travel along the circular pathway.

This relationship between arms and gaze produces a coordinated turning sensation throughout the upper body. The torso participates through gentle rotation along the spine, creating a kinetic spiral that travels from the shoulders through the center of the body. The lower body supports this motion through turning steps or curved traveling pathways across the floor. Weight shifts fluidly from one leg to the other as the dancer advances along circular trajectories. The resulting

movement appears continuous and fluid, with the arms, torso, and legs unified within a single spiral motion that travels through space.

Hand Position 5 — Warrior Signal

Description: One hand extends forward with strong fingers while the other retracts toward the body.

Symbolism: Inspired by Saka warrior iconography and gestures indicating direction or command.

The Warrior Signal position establishes a strong directional gesture that projects energy forward. One arm extends directly outward from the shoulder with the fingers elongated and firmly energized, creating a clear vector through space. The opposite arm bends at the elbow and retracts toward the torso, positioning the hand near the ribs or waist.

This opposition between extension and retraction generates a dynamic tension across the upper body. The head aligns with the extended arm so the gaze follows the forward-reaching direction. The torso rotates slightly toward the projecting arm, reinforcing the directional clarity of the gesture. In the lower body the weight settles primarily over the front leg, which remains grounded and stable, while the back leg supports balance and prepares for potential propulsion or movement. This position introduces a decisive and assertive quality within choreography. The forward gesture punctuates musical accents and often marks moments of spatial orientation, signaling a shift in direction or emphasis within the larger movement phrase.

Difference from Kazakh Folk Dance

Kazakh folk dance traditions developed through oral transmission and later stage codification during the twentieth century. These dances emphasize expressive gesture, rhythmic musicality, and cultural storytelling. Many choreographies follow established patterns that represent daily life, celebrations, or symbolic narratives connected to Kazakh heritage. The Saks in Movement methodology differs from traditional Kazakh folk dance in several important ways.

First, folk dances typically preserve fixed choreographic sequences that are repeated in performance. In contrast, Saks in Movement does not function as a

repertoire of predetermined dances. Instead, it identifies movement principles derived from nomadic culture and allows choreographers to create new works using those principles.

Second, while Kazakh folk dance includes expressive hand gestures, these gestures are usually embedded within specific choreographic traditions. In Saks in Movement, hand articulation becomes a structured vocabulary system that can be used independently of traditional choreography.

Third, folk dance performance often focuses on cultural preservation and representation. Saks in Movement instead focuses on contemporary reinterpretation, allowing dancers to explore Central Asian movement philosophy within modern choreographic environments.

Thus, rather than replacing folk dance traditions, the methodology operates as a contemporary analytical framework inspired by them.

Contemporary dance in Kazakhstan has developed primarily through exposure to global modern dance traditions, including Western contemporary techniques and experimental choreography. Many contemporary choreographers working in Kazakhstan combine modern dance vocabulary with elements of national dance. However, these combinations are often intuitive or stylistic rather than based on a defined movement system. Saks in Movement differs from this approach because it establishes a clearly articulated methodology that systematically interprets Central Asian movement principles. While contemporary Kazakh choreographers may integrate national dance elements visually, Saks in Movement attempts to analyze spatial orientation, body alignment, gesture symbolism, and movement pathways derived from nomadic culture. This analytical approach transforms cultural inspiration into a structured pedagogical framework, allowing the system to be taught, studied, and

Difference from National Stage Dance

National stage dance traditions in Central Asia were largely institutionalized during the Soviet period. Professional choreographers developed stylized versions of traditional movement that could be

performed on theatrical stages. These works often emphasize theatrical presentation, elaborate costumes, synchronized ensemble choreography, and fixed artistic repertoire (Karlímová 1973; Thachenko 1954). Although these stage works are visually impressive, they frequently prioritize spectacle over movement analysis. *Saks in Movement* approaches Central Asian movement culture differently. Instead of reproducing stylized national choreography, it seeks to identify underlying physical principles of steppe movement and reinterpret them within contemporary dance practice. The methodology therefore functions not as a staged national dance form but as a movement research framework.

Related Artistic and Choreographic Work

Various artists and scholars have explored the intersection between cultural heritage and contemporary dance. For example, modern dance pioneers such as Isadora Duncan looked to ancient cultures and natural movement as inspiration for new dance forms. Later, choreographers including Martha Graham developed codified movement techniques that transformed personal artistic research into formal pedagogical systems.

In Central Asia, national dance traditions were preserved and staged by influential figures such as Shara Zhienkulova, who played a foundational role in establishing Kazakh dance performance traditions. However, while these artists contributed significantly to their respective fields, the *Saks in Movement* methodology differs in its specific focus on nomadic movement philosophy as the structural foundation of contemporary choreography. Rather than drawing inspiration from cultural imagery alone, the methodology attempts to translate historical embodied practices of steppe societies into a contemporary choreographic system. This focus on nomadic spatial orientation, mobility, and symbolic gesture distinguishes the methodology from both Western contemporary dance techniques and traditional national dance frameworks.

2. Conclusion

The *Saks in Movement* methodology proposes a structured approach to interpreting Central Asian

steppe-based movement within contemporary dance practice. By identifying core principles such as grounded mobility, circular spatial orientation, and symbolic gesture, the system translates cultural movement logic into a flexible choreographic and pedagogical framework. Rather than reproducing traditional dance forms, this methodology enables dancers and choreographers to engage with Central Asian movement philosophy in a contemporary context. In doing so, it contributes to the broader field of dance studies by offering a new model for integrating cultural heritage with analytical movement systems.

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4. Conflicts Interest

The author declares that there are no competing interests.

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