

CHERKESSIA (chair-keh-SEE-ah) = dance of the *Cherkess* peoples

CHERKESSIA KFULA (chair-keh-SEE-ah k'foo-LAH) = double *Cherkessia*

CROSS-INDEX TERMS:

Cherkessia titled 27 of 64 dance notations and Web sites.

Cherkassiya, with the 'y', occurred 14 times.

Tscherkessia, a German spelling, occurred 12 times.

Cherkessiya - occurred 5 times.

Tcherkesiya - occurred 3 times.

Cherkassia - occurred 2 times.

Chekassia - possibly a misprint, although Michael Herman gave the pronunciation as "chek-kiz-eeya, with no accented syllables" in the December 1946 issue of *The Folk Dancer*, p. 10.

Cheikessia, Cherkesya, Chicosia, Tcherkesia, Tcherkessia, Terkesia - various spellings

Tsjerkessia - the Dutch spelling

"**Single**" preceded some names.

"**Double**" preceded some names, or **Kfula** (K'fulah, Kefula, Kfulla, Kefulah) followed them.

BACKGROUND:

Two types of Israeli dances share these names: a non-partner dance to the 8-bar melody of A1 and A2, and a partner dance to the 16 bar melody of B1 and B2. Here are the first few bars of each melody.



Melody A1

Melody A2



Melody B1



Melody B2

Christian since the sixth century, Circassians (*Cherkess* in Russian) adopted Islam in the 18th century to unite with other Islamic states of the Persian and Ottoman Empires against the Russian Czar. During the ensuing Circassian War (1763-1864), over half died, and another quarter or more were deported. In 1943, Stalin again vanished a vast majority (Shenfield, in Levene & Roberts, *The Massacre in History*, 1999). "Twelve years ago [~1958] young Cherkess girls fought the Red Army with daggers." (Anne Shammout, in *Viltis*, January 1970, p. 5) More recently, the related Abkhazians and Chechnyans have resisted assimilation. A tragic tale, repeated time and again in world history, but this particular tale introduced dances of Circassia (*Cherkessy*) to Palestine. Not that anyone cared:

The children of the youth movements did not think of Bedrich Smetana when they sang Ha-Tikvah, nor recall a Polish dance when they danced the Krakoviak or the polka, or the Circassians when they danced the Cherkassia; in all these they perceived the independent legacy of a new culture that was entirely their own. (Gershon Shaked. *The New Tradition*. 2006, p. 54)

But how did this *Cherkessia* transfer from Circassians to early Israelis? During the exterminations, many Circassians immigrated to nearby Eastern Anatolia, and the Ottoman Empire re-settled them in the Middle East. (Thus, the renowned Palestinian /Israeli Circassian warriors fought against the renowned Syrian, Jordanian, and Lebanese Circassian warriors during the 1947 Israeli War of Independence. Sigh.) According to Israeli dance scholar Dr. Zvi Fridhaber,

The Cherkesskia [Circassians] and the Jewish immigrant groups from the Caucasus area, before and during the first waves of pioneering immigrants had a common background for their dances and music. The different Cherkessia and Kozachok dances provide evidence of this. (*The Israeli Folk Dance Grapevine*, 8:5, February 1991, p. 1)

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Cherkessia (continued)

So at some point, Jews immigrating from south Russia and Ukraine (where the Tsar had relocated the Circassians) and Circassian immigrants (resettled in Palestine by the Ottomans) inspired Jews living in Palestine to adapt Circassian motifs to one or more dances called *Cherkessia*.

The pioneers did not have so many dances as today. We danced the Hora, Kuma Echa, Cherkessia, Krakoviak, Polka ... People would dance these again and again with different songs. Sometimes one guy would stand in the middle playing the harmonica or accordion, or we would sing. It didn't bother us to do the same dances over and over. (Joan Marler. Interview With Aviva Uri, in *The Israeli Folk Dance Grapevine*, 2:1, August 1984, p. 2)

I suspect that American Zionists then learned the dances in Palestine (later Israel), and popularized them in North America, where dance leaders such as Vyts Beliajus, Fred Berk, and Katya Delakova learned and taught them.

"We [Delakova & Berk] thought when we started dancing the Tcherkessia—a simple four steps back and front which was a common folk motif in Eastern European dance—that we could awaken people to Jewish things. But we were also interested in folk dances of many peoples and wanted to create a program that would show the strength of the common man." As the duo worked they realized there was nothing innately Jewish in the Tcherkessia steps. They needed something more special and identifiable in their quest for Jewish expression. (Judith Brin Ingber. *Victory Dances*. 1985, p. 46)

Vyts Beliajus, in his 1940 *Dance and Be Merry, Vol. 1*, published the earliest description of *Cherkessia* that I have found. In his book and in his January 1970 *Viltis* (p. 18) he called it a Circassian dance but gave no source, whether from Circassians or from American Zionist youth. I suspect for two reasons that his source was Zionist. First, Beliajus's biography (L. DeWayne Young. *Vytautas (Vyts) F. Beliajus: "Mr. Folk Dance, USA."* 2008) mentions no contact with Circassians but a great deal of involvement with Zionist youth from the late 1920s to the late 1930s. Further, Beliajus did not discuss Circassians in his magazine until 1970 (L. DeWayne Young. *Index to Viltis 1944-1994*. 2000). Second, in my experience, dance names bearing a country's name seldom come from that country (e.g., *La Russe*), or they seldom bear a name used in the country of origin (e.g., *Russian Two-Step*). In other words, I doubt that the Circassians EVER called ANY dance *Cherkessia*. Beliajus described a non-partner dance consisting of one chorus and one verse, each starting onto the LEFT foot, where Zionist and Israeli instructions uniformly describe the non-partner dance with multiple verses and the simpler couple dance, each starting onto RIGHT foot. Therefore, I do not rule out the possibility that Beliajus learned the dance from a left-footed Circassian source. He said: "At that time [1940] no one ever heard (at least among folk dancers) of Circassians. The dance then was a simple two-figure line showing a marked Asia Minor influence. The Israelis developed it into a funfull recreational dance." (*Viltis*. January 1970)

Folklore (or fakelore) about the dance abounded. In 1940, Beliajus said:

The Circassians are a warrior people found throughout Asia Minor. Their women are noted for their great beauty, and in the slave market brought to their sellers an excellent profit. Generally Circassian dances are highly spirited, but in its simplicity this dance reveals a strong Oriental influence and has become a favorite with the Circassians. (*Dance and Be Merry*. 1940, p. 12)

Corinne Chochem and **Muriel Roth** (*Palestine Dances*, 1941) published an undoubtedly Zionist *Tscherkessia*. **Katya Delakova** and **Fred Berk** (*Dances of Palestine*) published a *Tscherkessia* in 1947 very similar to Chochem and Roth's, and then, in 1948 (*The Jewish Folk Dance Book*), added a *Double Tcherkessia* for couples. Meanwhile, **Dvora Lapson** was teaching a "Single Cherkassiya" and a "Double Cherkassiya." In 1953, she wrote:

"Cherkassiya", both single and double, is a pair of Israeli "square" dances complete with caller, who uses English and Hebrew in "calling the turns". These dances were brought to Palestine at the beginning of the 19th century by the Cherkassians from the steppes of southeastern Russia, a group of persecuted Christians who settled in Northern Palestine. Their descendants were loyal and valiant fighters in the Israeli Army during the recent war of liberation. (Israel Music Foundation LP 5 dance notes. 1953).

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Cherkessia (continued)

By 1954, Lapson had updated her description to reflect the 18th century Circassian conversion from Christianity to Islam:

Tscherkessia is a dance for men, which originated with the Tscherkessian people. These followers of the Mohammedan religion, seeking religious freedom, went to Palestine and Syria from the southeastern part of Russia at the end of the 19th century. The Tscherkessians excel in horseback riding. The action of this dance suggests either horses or riders. Dancer at each end waves a brightly colored handkerchief." (*Dances of the Jewish People*. 1954, p. 34).

Prior to the introduction of the automobile, virtually ALL peoples were equestrian (or pedestrian)! The Circassians were Caucasian mountain folk before the exterminations and displacements. People noted for horsemanship, however, generally come from the plains. Nonetheless, subsequent authors seized upon Beliajus's slavery and Oriental references and Lapson's equestrian, male, Christian, and Mohammedan references, using them selectively to impart a spurious air of antiquity to this dance of hidden origins.

In the 1960s, **English folk dancers** discovered or created a dainty and slightly more complicated non-partner Israeli circle dance called *Cherkessia Kfula* ("double cherkessia"), danced to Melody B. This dance contained none of the high-spirited, exuberant leg lifts and body bending of the early Zionist *Cherkessia*. Recent performances of this English *Cherkessia Kfula* appear on the Internet as done by groups across Europe. Interestingly, although the English descriptions start the dance onto the right foot (moving to left), these performances start the dance onto the left foot (moving to the left), as did Beliajus in 1940. Variants of the Single and Double *Cherkessia* also appear in Sacred Circle dances, in Irish public schools (as a Ukrainian dance), in the Orff Schulwerk Certification Program, and among Davidic dancers.

MUSIC and RECORDINGS:

Many recordings exist, and all except for those marked *Double Cherkassiya* or *Cherkessiah Kfula* use the Melody A. In approximate order of issuance, they are:

Kismet Album K3, *Russian Folk Dances*; Record 130b (K-105b), *Cherkessia* (Palestinian Dance),
K. Poliansky & Balalaika Orch.

Sonart Album M8, *Community Folk Dances*; Record M-303 (M-214), *Cherkessia*,
Michael Herman and his Folk Orchestra

RCA LPM 1623, *All Purpose Folk Dances*; B-4 (= RCA EPA 1440, A-2), *Cherkassiya*,
Michael Herman's Folk Dance Orchestra

Vox Album 101, *Palestine Dances & Songs*, Record 16038

Israel Music Foundation IMF 116b = IMF LP-5 = IMF LP-7, *Israeli Folk Dances*; B-5,
Single Cherkassiya and *Double Cherkassiya* = Israel 2003-b-2, *Cherkessia (Single)*

Tikva T-106, *Israeli Dance Medley*; A-5, *Tcherkessia*

(= Tikva T-138, *Rikuday-Am*; A-7, *Tcherkessia* = Worldtone 10043b, *Cherkessia*)

Hed-Arzi AN 48-56, *Nirkoda* Vol. 2; B-7, *Cherkessia Kefula*

Collectors Guild CG 638, *Folk Dance in Israel Today*; A-7, *Cherkessiah K'fulah*

(= Hataklit HI-30010, *Hava Nirkodah*; A-7, *Chercessiah K'fulah (Double Circassian)*)

Worldtone 10040 (vocal)

Educational Recordings of America FD-3, *Folk Dance Festival*; B-1, *Cherkessia*

Dancecraft DC 74627

High/Scope RM 2

Merit AV LP

FDCD 056

Wagonwheel records

Walter Kögler (= Tanz) 23033, 23034, and 58709

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Cherkessia (continued)

CHERKESSIA - Beliajus's 1940 Circassian dance

FORMATION: Dancers stand in a semi-circle with arms outstretched behind neighbors' backs to grasp the hands of the people standing on the other side of the neighbors (back basket hold). The people at each end of the line would reach behind their own back to grasp the hand of their neighbor.

BARS ACTION

4/4 Introduction. (Depends on your recording.)

A1. Leftward Cherkessia chorus motif. Dance this motif to melody A1.

1 Step in place onto L foot (ct 1), stamp in front of L foot onto R foot, bending body forward (ct 2), step in place onto L foot, straightening body (ct 3), step behind L foot onto R foot (ct 4).

2-4 = 1, 4 times in all.

A2. Leftward step-behind verse. Dance this motif to melody A2. Beliajus noted that this motif sometimes would be danced a bit faster than the first motif.

5 Step to L onto L foot (ct 1), step behind L foot onto R foot (ct 2). Repeat (cts 3,4).

6-8 = 5, 8 step-behinds in all.

Dance 1-8 to the end of the music.

End of **CHERKESSIA**, as presented by Vyts Beliajus.

TSCHERKESSIA - Chochem and Roth, *Palestine Dances!*, 1941, and subsequent additions.

FORMATION: Dancers stand in two lines, each line facing the other, the same number of dancers in each line. Reach behind your neighbors to place your hands on your neighbors' waists. Illustrations are modeled after those in Michael Herman's December 1946 issue of *The Folk Dancer*.

A1. Cherkessia chorus motif. (Danced to the A1 music.)

1 Leap forward onto R foot, bending R knee a bit and bending forward (ct 1), step in place onto L foot, straightening up (ct 2), step back onto R foot, leaning back as far as possible (ct 3), step in place onto L foot (ct 4).

2-4 = 1, 4 times in all.

Note: By 1948, this motif had changed from a stationary *Cherkessia* motif to a grapevine motif traveling to the L.

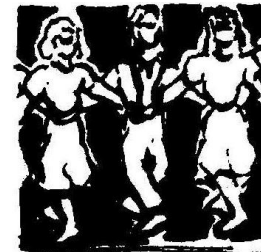


A2. "Step and shuffle." (Danced to the A2 music.)

5 Step to R onto R foot with knees straight and L toe extended to L (ct 1), step behind R foot onto L foot with knees bent a bit (ct 2). Repeat (cts 3-4).

6-8 = 5, 4 times in all.

NOTE: The lines circle **around** each other during this figure to end in each other's place, rather than moving away from each other. At the end of this figure, turn to face the other line again.



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Cherkessia (continued)

Dance 1-8 to the end of the music. The dance begins slowly but steadily, with each repetition becoming a bit faster "until a climax of great excitement is reached." Motifs A3-A9 may substitute for Motif A2, in any order the leader /caller desires (yes, you will need to select a leader for the dance).

A3. Scissors forward.

- 5 Leap in place (beside L foot) onto R foot, kicking L foot forward with L knee straight and L foot pointed (ct 1), leap in place (beside R foot) onto L foot, kicking R foot forward with R knee straight and R toe pointed (ct 2). Repeat (cts 3,4).

6-8 = 1, 4 times in all, for a total of 16 kicks.



A4. Scissors in reverse /backward.

- 5 Bending forward, leap in place (beside L foot) onto R foot, kicking L foot backward with L knee straight (ct 1), leap in place (beside R foot) onto L foot, kicking R foot backward with R knee straight (ct 2). Repeat (cts 3,4).

6-8 = 1, 4 times in all, for a total of 16 kicks.



A5. Scissors forward and backward.

- 5-8 Alternate the motifs of Figures 3 and 4, kicking forward twice and backward twice, or forward 4 times and backward 4 times, or forward 8 times and backward 8 times.

A6. "The waves" or "Slow skipping." Turn to face to right.

- 5 Step forward onto R foot (ct 1), hop forward on R foot with L foot extended back (ct 2), step forward onto L foot (ct 3), hop forward on L foot with R foot extended back (ct 4).

6-8 = 5, 4 times and 8 skipping steps in all.

NOTE: The lines circle **around** each other during this figure to end in each other's place, rather than moving away from each other. At the end of this figure, turn to face the other line again.



A7. "Suzie Q." Delakova and Berk (1947) documented this motif.

- 5 Jump a bit to R onto both feet with knees bent a bit and feet together, twisting body to face to R with knees and toes facing to R (ct 1), jump a bit to R onto both feet with knees bent a bit and feet together, twisting body to face the other line with knees and toes facing the other line (ct 2). Repeat (cts 3,4).

6-8 = 5, 4 times and 16 jumps in all.

A8. The horse trot. This motif appears in Lapson's *Dances of the Jewish People*, 1954.

- 5 Turn to face to R and run forward onto R foot (ct 1), hop forward on R foot, lifting L knee high (ct 2), run forward onto L foot (ct 3), hop forward on L foot, lifting R knee high (ct 4).

6-8 = 5, 4 times and 8 run-hops in all.

A9. The locomotive. Michael Herman documented this motif in 1946.

- 5-8 Turn to face to R. Bend knees into a semi-crouch position (but keep your back straight and erect) and shuffle forward 14 steps, 4 steps per bar. During the last two beats, throw joined hands overhead (if you used a simple handhold) and jump high into the air. This is usually an ending movement, but difficult to time because the prevalent IMF recording fades out toward the end of the phrase.



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Cherkessia (continued)

Sequences:

In 1946, Michael Herman published the sequence of 2 (step and shuffle), 6 (the waves), 7 (Suzie Q), 3 (scissors forward), 4 (scissors in reverse), and 9 (the locomotive). Many people copied his sequence, and it reappeared at workshops at least until 1964.

In 1953, the IMF record instructions presented the sequence of 6 (the waves), 3 (scissors forward), 2 (step and shuffle), 4 (scissors in reverse), 8 (the horse trot), and 9 (the locomotive), called by Eli Gamliel. Various sources printed and reprinted that sequence at least until 1980.

Other variations for the A2 music:

10. Hops on both feet. (in Henry Morris. *Balkan and Israeli Folk Dances*. London, 1966; Tikva T-106 and T-138 record instructions, undated.)

5-8 Hop 16 times on both feet, 4 hops per bar.

11. Hops on one foot. (in Morris, 1966; Tikva T-106; Tikva T-138.)

5-8 Hop 16 times on one foot, 4 hops per bar.

12. Bending knees and hopping. (in Morris, 1966.)

5-8 Bend knees to a squat and hop 16 times on both feet, 4 hops per bar.

End of **CHERKESSIA**, as presented by Corinne Chochem and Muriel Roth, and others.

DOUBLE TCHERKESSIA - Delakova and Berk, *Jewish Folk Dance Book*, 1948.

CHERKESSIA KEFULA - Dvora Lapson, IMF recordings, ~1946.

FORMATION:

Eli Gamliel announces at the beginning of the IMF recording:

Boys, here's your chance to choose your girl. Form your couples, everybody! Ready? Come on now for the Double Cherkessia!

Couples facing CCW around a circle, woman to man's right. Join L hands behind man's back; join R hands behind woman's back (back-basket hold). Donaghey (1969) notes the dance in varsouvienne position (L hands joined in front of woman's L shoulder; R hands joined over woman's R shoulder), but I much prefer the Delakova and Berk position. Further, that back-basket hold and Delakova and Berk's statement "may also be danced in groups of threes and fours" indicate to me the derivation of the "double" *Cherkessia* from the "single" *Cherkessia*.

4/4 Introduction. The IMF recordings have 4 bars of introduction.

1-4 No action.

B1. Run forward. (Danced to the B1 music)

1 Leap diagonally forward to L onto R foot (ct 1), leap forward behind R foot onto L foot, bending R knee a bit to allow L foot to displace R foot (ct 2), run forward onto R foot, kicking L foot forward (ct 3), run forward onto L foot, kicking R foot forward (ct 4).

2-8 =1, 8 times in all, progressing CCW around the room.

Note: Delakova and Berk imply that this figure should be danced with light running steps, but I remember a good bit of exuberance to match Chochem and Roth's "single" *Cherkessia*.

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Cherkessia (concluded)

- B2. The motif most commonly called the "Cherkessia" motif. (Danced to the B2 music)
- 9 Step in front of L foot onto R foot (ct 1), step in place onto L foot (ct 2), step beside L foot onto R foot (ct 3). That's one motif. Now, step in front of R foot onto L foot (ct 4).
- 10-16 Step in place onto R foot (ct 1), step beside R foot onto L foot (ct 2). That's the second motif. Now, repeat those 2 motifs (6 movements) 5 times completely in all (10 "Cherkessia" motifs), and add the first 2 movements again to fill out the music. End with weight on L foot and R foot free. Prance on the balls of the balls of the feet during this figure, lifting knees. Turn in place CW or CCW as a couple, if you wish.

Dance 1-16 to the end of the music, progressing CCW around the room.

End of **DOUBLE TCHERKESSIA**, or **CHERKESSIA KEFULA**.

CHERKESSIA KEFULA - as danced in England and Europe

FORMATION: Circle of dancers, all facing center and holding neighbors' hands at sides.

- 4/4 Introduction. All *Cherkessia Kfula* recordings that I have heard start with 4 bars of introduction.
1-4 No action.

- B1. Grapevine motif and rocking. (Danced to the B1 music)
- 1 Step in front of L foot onto R foot (ct 1), step to L onto L foot (ct 2), step behind L foot onto R foot (ct 3), step to L onto L foot (ct 4).
- 2-3 = 1, 3 times in all.
- 4 Step in front of L foot onto R foot (ct 1), rock back onto L foot (ct 2), repeat (cts 3-4).
- 5-8 = 1-4.

- B2. Cherkessia motif and rocking. (Danced to the B2 music)
- 9-11 Step in front of L foot onto R foot (ct 1), step in place onto L foot (ct 2), step beside L foot onto R foot (ct 3). That's one motif. Now, step in front of R foot onto L foot (ct 4). Step in place onto R foot (ct 1), step beside R foot onto L foot (ct 2). That's the second motif. Now, repeat those 2 motifs (6 movements) once again completely (cts 3,4,1,2,3,4).
- 12 Step in front of L foot onto R foot (ct 1), rock back onto L foot (ct 2), repeat rocking (cts 3-4).
- 13-16 = 9-12 (4 *cherkessia* motifs and rocking). End with weight on L foot and R foot free.

Dance 1-16 to the end of the music, progressing to L (CW) around the circle.

Note: Some people call the motif of Figure B1 a *Cherkessia* motif because it starts by stepping **across** the other foot. They reserve "grapevine" for the similar motif that starts with a step **to the side**. They then must call the motif of Figure B2 a "double *Cherkessia* motif." This problem of nomenclature may account for the practice in some groups of starting each figure with a step to L onto L foot, rather than stepping in front of L foot onto R foot.

Note: I have noticed that people who start the dance by stepping to L onto L foot also swing the joined hands forward (cts 1) and backward (cts 3) during each bar of the grapevine motif and end the rocking motif with a stamp (ct 4 of bars 4, 8, 12, and 16).

Note: Most recently, I have read of claps during the B2 motif, a sad trend toward solo dancing and away from the spirit of community that made early Israeli dancing such a joy. Sigh.

End of **CHERKESSIA** and **CHERKESSIA KEFULA**.