DANCE in IRAN

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The complete and original version appears below.

Note: This article was titled by me "Dance in Iran" -- as appears above -- when I wrote it. I wrote this piece in response to a request by the editorial staff of the "Encyclopedia Iranica" to write an entry for use in that work called "Dance in Iran". The term "Iran" has many potential interpretations; the one I used in the article (as is clear from the content of the article) is "the set of people and cultures who reside in or near the current political entity known as 'Iran' ".

During the review process, the editor-in-chief of that publication, Dr. Ehsan Yarshater, made the interesting decision to start substituting the terms "Persia" and "Persian" for "Iran" and "Iranian"; much argument by me and many other contributors was to no avail. Those of you who write a lot know that, in the end, the editor will get his way! So the article appears in the encyclopedia as "Modern Persian Dance", as a sub-heading under "dance". This is not what I wanted!

I do not completely understand Dr. Yashater's motivation for this change; in general, I think it was an unfortunate decision. It is true that the term "Persia" has been used for political entities whose geographic boundaries were approximately co-terminus with the boundaries of modern Iran, and therefore in some sense the term is interchangeable with "Iran". But from a cultural-linguistic point of view -- one that I favor -- the terms "Persian" and "Iranian" signify very different things; the former, the inhabitants of Fars province and their language (Farsi), the latter, the people who speak Iranian languages (which includes Farsi, but also includes many other languages, such as Kurdish and Baluchi). In this sense, "Iranian" is a superset of "Persian". There are lots of "political" overtones in this discussion, which are of no interest to me.

Note that neither "Persian" nor "Iranian" is sufficient, in a cultural-linguistic sense, to encompass everything that I discuss in the article; Turkic, Armenian, and Arabic cultures and languages exist within the political boundaries of modern Iran, but all are clearly not either "Persian" or "Iranian" . . . except that they exist within Iran.

1. Introduction

The term dance has been defined as "a transient mode of expression, performed by the human body moving in space ... through purposefully selected and controlled rhythmic movements..." (Kealiinohomoku, p. 28); this article will describe dance found within the current political borders of Iran.

Any meaningful discussion of dance in Iran must begin with an understanding of Iran's multi-cultural history, multi-ethnic population, and the resultant plethora of dance contexts. In Iran, dance is a cultural identifier; like other cultural identifiers, such as dress and language, dance is a means for each of these ethnic groups to define itself, and to differentiate its culture from that of other groups. At the same time, influences are felt from neighboring ethnic groups, as well as from climate and geography; thus the ethnography and dance of the areas near the Iranian borders may show more in common with non-Iranian neighbors than with other groups within Iran. There can be, therefore, no notion of an "Iranian national dance", but only "specific dance events within specific dance cultures" (Hamada, p. 6).

This article describes the contexts in which dance occurs in Iran, the importance of dance as a cultural identifier in Iran, and some typical dance styles. The purpose of the last is not to present even a partial catalog of Iranian dance, but to show the variety of, and the multiple influences on, the dance styles of Iran. This article will restrict itself to traditional dance in 20th century Iran, prior to the 1979 revolution, without attempting either to discuss Western dance forms found in Iran, or to reconstruct ancient and unknowable dance forms. Readers interested in the speculative reconstruction of extinct Iranian dances may refer to Rezvani.

2. Ethno-Geography of Iran

The ethno-geography of Iran is complex, with many different ethnic groups living together in close geographic proximity. While these groups all influence each other's culture, each group also maintains its own unique cultural identity. The major ethno-geographic regions of Iran are the following:

- **Northwest Iran**: Azerîs, Armenians, Kurds, Assyrians
- **The Caspian area**: Gîlakîs, Mâzandâranîs, Tâleshîs.
- **Northeast Iran**: Khorasani Kurds, Turkomans, and other Turkic speakers.
- **Southeast Iran**: e.g., Baluchis (it is interesting to note that although the Baluchis are linked culturally and geographically to eastern Iran, the Baluchi language is most closely related to the languages of northwest Iran; see Stilo, p. 174).
- **The Persian Gulf littoral**: Bandaris.
- **Southwest Iran**: the Lor, Bakhtiari, Kamsa, and Qashqâ'î tribes.
- **The Central Plateau**.

In addition to these ethno-geographic groups, there are groups whose members can be found all over Iran, most notably Gypsies, Jews, Bahais, Zoroastrians, and the many different Turkic-speaking groups. Influences on Iranian dance are evident from all the surrounding geographic areas: Anatolia, the Caucasus, Central Asia, Afghanistan, Pakistan, the Persian Gulf, Africa, and the Arab world. For example, the dancing of the Kurds of northwestern Iran shows more in common with that of the Kurds in Iraq and Turkey than with that of the Khorasani Kurds.

3. Dance Contexts

Dancing in Iranian society does not occur on a daily basis. It is not viewed as a casual activity, and

occurs only within appropriate physical and social parameters. While such occasions may involve ceremonial activities, such as circumcisions or weddings, dancing is usually not an integral part of any overt orthodox Islamic religious practice. An excpetion is the *samâ'* (chanting) rituals of some Sufi orders, both in Iran and elsewhere (see below).

Dance in Iran can occur in a variety of contexts, including social events, performances, rites of passage, exorcisms, and ceremonial events. These can be associated with both calendar-cycle events, and with non-calendrical, irregularly-scheduled events. The following are typical calendrical events: national and political holidays, religious festival days, and pre-Islamic calendar-cycle/agricultural events such as those associated with solstices, equinoxes, harvests, and tribal migrations. The following are some typical non-calendrical events: rites of passage (e.g., circumcisions and weddings), performances by dance groups, and ceremonial events such as the *guati le`b* (described in section 4E, below). With the exception of some of the ceremonial contexts, these are not rigid categories, however; no dance form is limited to a single context, and no single context necessarily excludes another context; i.e., a gathering to observe a rite of passage might become a social event.

Because town-dwellers are usually more conservative and overtly religious than village or tribal people, dancing in towns is usually more restricted in frequency or variety. For example, in more restrictive social contexts, urban men and women may not dance in mixed couples or groups. The anonymity of town and city life, however, facilitates behavior outside of these restraints; while some spurn dance altogether, others attend nightclubs where professionals dance.

Participation versus Non-Participation

Dance events and dance types can be classed according to whether or not the attendees at an event participate in the dancing, or witness others dancing. For example, all social dancing connected with rites-of-passage and social events can be classed as participatory dance. Performances by dance groups or by professional soloists are non-participatory dancing; i.e., those who gather for the event do not participate in the dancing. Types of ceremonial dance, such as zurkane, can be considered to be participatory, as the dancers dance for their own benefit, and not for the benefit of those who may observe them. Healing dances, such as the guati le`b, fall in an in-between category; the movement by the afflicted is done for his own benefit, yet the majority of those present are observers.

4. Major Iranian Dance Types

A. Improvisation.

In improvisational dance, the dancer, whether part of a group or dancing alone, creates the dance on the spot by choosing movements from a well-defined movement vocabulary. This vocabulary and the limits of dance style, within the social mores, human relationships, and contexts of the dance culture, are understood by the participants; within these limits, a dancer may make innovations. There is no other structure to the dance.

Improvisational dance is one of the most common types of dance found in Iran. It can involve a single dancer, couples, or groups. It can occur in the performance context, or be part of a social event. One of the most common features among all the various improvisational dances of Iran is that the dancers do not usually touch, are not joined to one another by any type of handhold, and, even when dancing in a circle, do not follow pre-arranged patterns.

Solo Improvisation. Probably the most ubiquitous style of dance in Iran is the solo improvisation. This type of dance has been part of professional and family home entertainment from Central Asia to the Mediterranean for centuries.

The most common dance form found among urban Iranians today is often referred to as "Tehrani" (*raqs-e tehrânî*). This dance form is related to social dance of the Uighurs, Tajiks, Uzbeks, Anatolian Turks, Armenians, and the peoples of the eastern Mediterranean and the Balkans (e.g., Bulgarian ruçenica). This dance can be performed as entertainment for others, or can be done as a social dance by individuals, couples, or groups. It is important to note that regardless of how many dancers participate, each one is essentially dancing solo. Depending on how restrictive the social situation is, groups or couples can be mixed or same-sex. In *raqs-e tehrânî*, the arms are held at approximately shoulder level; the emphasis is on delicate hand turns, coy facial expressions, and gentle hip and foot movements. All movements are improvised to dance music in a 6/8 rhythm called *reng*. In its most elaborate form, this dance style forms the basis for much of professional Iranian dance. This is the current major Iranian dance form for Iranians living outside Iran, and can be seen at all Iranian emigrant events where dancing by guests forms part of the entertainment.

Solo improvisational dances can be found throughout Iran in villages and tribes. For example, in Baluchi women's dances, women improvise while dancing to (usually) a 6/8 rhythm. In addition to their delicate hand movements, they keep time to the music by hitting their heavy metal bracelets together.

Group Improvisation. When done in groups, the "Tehrani" style can evolve into a dance game. In the game, all the participants stand in a circle, moving slightly to the rhythm, clapping or snapping fingers. One person is propelled into the center of the circle to dance, until this dancer chooses someone else to dance alone in the center. This continues until all participants have danced, or until the group breaks up into smaller groups or couples. This dance game can also be found in Turkey and the Balkans.

The group dancing of the tribes of the Southwest (discussed in Section D) can also be considered a type of group improvisation, in that each dancer, though following in a line, is free to choose her own movement patterns.

Couple Improvisation. Couple dances, especially mixed couples, are more common among Christians than Muslims. Many of these dances are found in the areas of heaviest Caucasian influence, where the Christian Georgians have developed these dances into a refined style. Dances done in the Caucasus are often in a 6/8 rhythm, and have strong movements for men, and graceful movements for women.

Armenian couple and solo dances show their origins in the Caucasus mountains, and are similar to Georgian, Lezghian, and other Kavkaz dances. In some of these dances, men and women dance together in couples. The basic position for both men and women is with the arms held at shoulder level, with one arm in front of the body and the other to the side. The man's dancing is very strong, and can be done on half-toe, or, as in Georgian dance, on the tops of the toes, with the toes curled under. The woman's styling is softer than the man's, with more delicate arm and hand gestures.

B. **Professional/Performance**

Professional/performance dance must be examined as a separate category, as it involves both a dance context (i.e., performance) and a dance style. Professional/performance dance can be further divided into traditional and non-traditional.

The traditional performance dance style is based on the *raqs-e tehrânî* solo improvisation style, elaborated into an art for viewing by others. The movements involve extreme upper body flexibility and grace, a variety of facial expressions, including moving the eyebrows independently. In professional dance, the dancer may also manipulate objects such as tea glasses or finger cymbals; these may also be used to mark the rhythm. These professional dancers were known as *motrebi* or *lûtî*. Throughout Iran, particularly in urban areas, groups of these *motrebi* or *lûtî* included musicians,

singers, dancers, actors, and others. One person might fill several of these roles (a musician might also act a role in a play, and sing; see Blum, p. 165). Dance also forms an integral part of traditional *rû-hawzî* theater pieces, and each role has its characteristic dance style; e.g., Hajji Firuz, roles played by men dressed as women, and so forth. These groups performed on the street and were available for hire at weddings and other parties. These entertainments could be highly vulgar, and involved suggestive lyrics and movements.

Motrebi-style dance flourished as popular and court entertainment throughout the Qajar period, until the early part of the 20th century, when Westernization (*garb-zadegi*) and the strict attitudes of Shah Rezâ Pahlavî caused Iranian arts to fall out of public favor. Professional dance became the province mainly of low-class nightclub performers, prostitutes, and non-Muslims (Nazemi, personal communication, 1993; for a discussion of *Motrebi* groups in Mashad, see Blum, pages 155 to 162).

Professional dance began to enjoy a return to respectability and fashion when Mohammad Reza Shah (reigned 1320 to 1357 / 1941 to 1978) married Sorayya; musicians and dancers were again invited into the court. This gave rise to the non-traditional dance performance, based on the European model of set choreographies, scenery, and concert-hall venues. In 1346 / 1967, a government-subsidized dance group, *Sâzmân-e foklor-e Irân* (which performed in the United States as "The Mahalli Dancers of Iran"), was founded, which performed both Iranian folk dance choreographed for the stage, and balletic presentations of Iranian epic tales (e.g., "Haft Peykar"). Another professional dance group, *Bâla-ye mellî-e Pârs*, was founded by 'Abd-Allâh Nâzemî, who researched and set choreographies of Iranian village and tribal dance, and brought outstanding performers from tribes and villages to Tehran to appear on television. Traditional performance dance also began to make a come-back with the revival of traditional *rû-hawzî* theater.

C. Line or Open-Circle Dances, Holding Hands.

Line or open-circle dances with the dancers holding hands form one of the most common dance types in the Near and Middle East, and in Europe. One feature common in all dances where hands are held is that improvisation is limited. The emphasis is placed on footwork and body positions, rather than on facial expressions, emotions, or upper-body movements.

This type of dance is also found in Iran, particularly in the west. One of the most common of these dances, found in Azerbaijan, is the basic "6-count" dance, where the dancers, holding hands at waist level, move in the line-of-direction as follows: (1) step-right, (2) step-left, (3) step-right, (4) kick-left, (5) step-left, (6) kick-right. This is the basic step for the Israeli *hora*, the Bulgarian *horo*, and many other similar dances found in Europe and elsewhere in the Middle East.

In Western Kurdish dances, the dancers stand very close to one-another, almost hip-to-hip. The fingers are locked, elbows bent so that the arms are at right angles, resting at the waist; the arms can also be straight, and held behind the body. The main movement of these dances is from the hip down, with the legs moving very vigorously. The upper body, meanwhile, forms a solid mass, all along the line of dancers. The body may bend at the hips, moving forward and back, with all the dancers moving en masse. The general effect is similar to the Arabic *debka*, and shows more influence from the Arab world than from Central Asia.

One of the most popular dances among the Assyrian Christians is *sheykhânî*, which starts with a hand-hold similar to that described above for western Kurdish dance. The *sheykhânî* begins with the dancers facing the center of the circle. The dancers move a few steps in, very close to each other, arms at their sides, kick into the center and step back out. As the dancers reach the original circle, they turn to the right; the hands are hooked together at the fingers, the right arm is bent in front of the body, and the left arm is bent in the back. The dancers move a few steps along the line-of-direction, until they face the center, ready to begin the pattern again. There are, of course, many variations of the basic step, and each village may have its own special set of variations.

D. **Open-Circle Dances, Not Holding Hands**.

When the hands are not held, a greater variety of dance forms, including improvisation and dancing with objects, is possible, both because the hands are free, and because the dancer is free of the immediate influence of others.

The dances of Khorasan and Baluchistan are examples of this type. Each dancer performs the same steps in unison, but they are able to accomplish a variety of positions, such as squats, turns, and changes in direction that are not possible when holding hands. The Turkoman men's dances of this area include rhythmic vocalizations by the dancers as an accompaniment to the dance. An excellent description of the dances of the eastern Kurds in Bojnurd can be found in Hamada.

Another area of Iran where open-circle, non-hand-holding dances are found is in the Persian Gulf. The folklore of this area shows the strong influence of the neighboring Arab cultures, such as from Qatar, Kuwait, Bahrain, and also from Africa (probably through slaves brought from Africa to the Gulf) (personal observations; A. Jihad Racy, personal communications, 1982 - 1983; Aisha Ali, personal communication, 1992). The standard musical rhythm to which these dancers are performed is 6/8, but various patterns of accenting the measure can be employed. When the accent comes on beats 1, 5, and 6, there is a characteristic rolling feeling which carries the movement from measure to measure. The poly-rhythmic drumming patterns, which can vary during any one piece of music, show an African influence. The basic dance movements are improvised, and can be done either solo or in a line. The steps are a simple step-together-step, facing and moving along the line of direction. The emphasis is on the tiny, sharp, swift and strong shaking of the shoulders, which is actually accomplished by moving the torso, rather than the shoulders. Hands are at shoulder level, with palms facing out. The dancers may also clap with the rhythm, and may employ poly-rhythmic clapping patterns (personal observations).

Dancing with Objects. When dancers are not physically linked (e.g., by holding hands), their hands are free to move in a variety of ways, including manipulating objects, such as sticks and scarves. Stick dances (*çûb-bâzî*) are discussed elsewhere in this publication (c.f., *Çûb-bâzî*). There are numerous examples of women's scarf dances in southwest Iran, among the *Qashqai, Lori,* and *Bakhtiari* tribes. In these dances a scarf is held in each hand. These dances are said to have originated in miming the actions the women carry out in their daily lives, such as weaving and spinning. While progressing slowly in the line-of-direction, each woman chooses patterns to dance, or makes up patterns as she pleases. The *Qashqai* define two types of women's dances: the *âqor haley,* the slow and heavy dances, in which the emphasis is on a heavy, falling step, and on downward movements of the arms; and the *lakke haley,* the light and fast dances, which are faster and have lighter arm gestures and an upward emphasis (M. Gorguinpour, personal communication, 1989). The *lakke haley* can also involve a repeating musical pattern when the dancers remain in place for a few measures (for example, turning in place, dropping to the knees, and coming up slowly while shaking the shoulders). After the repeated pattern, the dance continues.

Even daily objects, such as trays, can be used. An example from northern Iran is the "rice dance", done by women in Gîlân. In this dance, the women dance with flat trays held in front of the body, or on the head, and mime the actions associated with preparing rice for cooking: winnowing out chaff, checking for and removing stones, and so forth.

E. **Ceremonial**

The following dances are loosely categorized under the term "ceremonial". These dances are so closely linked to their contexts that they cannot be separated from them. The forms of these dances are less important than their contexts and purposes.

Calender-Cycle Rituals. Beneath the layers of Islamic and Central Asian influence, Iran may be

seen as inhabited largely by Indo-Europeans. Many of the Indo-European (and therefore, pre-Islamic) calendar-cycle events are still observed in Iran. Some examples of these are the *Nowrûz* (new year, vernal equinox) and *shab-e yaldâ* (winter solstice) celebrations. There is documentation of events in northwest Iran, some of which involve dance, associated with winter, fertility, and the bringing about of the end of winter. These events are directly related to European rituals such as the *Kukeri* and *Lazaruvane* of Bulgaria (personal observation; c.f. Katzarova-Kukudova and Djenev, pages 53 to 57), the Morris Dancing of England, and similar rituals in Anatolia (see, for example, And). In these events, groups of men go from house to house dressed as various characters (including women), singing, reciting poetry, dancing, and collecting money or food. The intent is to bring good luck and fertility, and to ensure the end of winter and the advent of spring (see Enjavi).

Zurkhane. The *zurkhane*, literally "house of strength", can be considered a part-ceremonial, part-performance context for dance. The building consists of a court, around which the men who will perform arrange themselves, and a gallery for the *ostad* ("master") or *morshed* (spiritual leader) and the musicians. Nowadays, the musical accompaniment consists of a drum and recitation of portions of Ferdowsi's *Shahname*. There are various rhythms employed, and a variety of movements associated with them, including displays of strength in manipulating heavy objects (such as weights and chains) and acrobatics (Rezwani, p. 212-214).

Samâ`. Part of the religious ceremonies, *samâ'*, of the dervish sects of Iran (e.g., the *Nematullahi*, *Oveysi*, and *Aliollahi* orders) involves a type of dancing. The members gather in the *khaneqâ*, and listen as the *morshed* rhythmically recites the mystical poetry of Hafez and Rumi. The members begin to move, and then repeat certain words, such as "Allah" or "Ali", rhythmically. The members then stand up and begin to dance in place, until some collapse into trance or exhaustion. They believe that by moving in this way they exorcise evil from their bodies and join in union with God (Varzi, personal communications).

Trance or Healing Dances. In parts of Iran, musical exorcisms are performed to relieve those afflicted with evil spirits. These exorcisms involve playing music and guiding the afflicted to a trance, in which state the afflicted dances and eventually throws off his particular evil spirit. In these dances the form of the dance has little significance; each dancer moves as he or she is compelled to by the music. Rather, it is the healing intent of the dance which is most important. The *guati le`b* is one such exorcism, described in detail in During, which is performed by the Baluchî. One of the practitioners of such exorcisms has bemoaned the decline of music and dance in Iran, as the lack of regular doses of music and dance make fertile ground for the *guat* spirit to invade (During, p. 45).

5. Rhythms for Dance Music

The most common rhythm used for dance in Iran is 6/8, referred to onomatopoetically as *shir-e mâdar* (personal observation; the onomatopoetic character of the name was first suggested to the author by Mortezâ Varzî, personal communication, 1980). This rhythm, and variations on it, can be found in dance music all over Iran. The 6/8 meter is subdivided in a variety of ways throughout Iran. The subdivision of the meter always follows the accent of the musical melody.

Some interesting rhythmic variations occur in solo improvisational dance. For example, the first beat of the measure can be prolonged, almost to the point of being held for two beats (thus creating a 7/8). This lopsided rhythmic change occurs between the musician, the dancer and the audience, according to the mood of the gathering. The more emotive the performers or responsive the audience, the longer the first beat is held. This variation is often associated with the *Motrebi*-style of dancing, as is sometimes referred to as *Motrebi*.

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