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Iran

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IRAN. As the locale for one of the oldest continuing cultural, linguistic, and ethnic entities, Iran provides archaeological evidence for dance portrayed on Mesopotamian pottery dated to 5000 BCE (Zoka', 1978). Evidence for continuing choreographic activity is documented in the historical writings of foreigners, from biblical times to ancient Greece to the Persian and Ottoman empires. Iconographic artworks showing dance also exist, such as silver objects from the Sasanian period (224–650 CE) and Persian miniatures from the twelfth century. Iran is, and most likely has always been, a place of immense ethnic and linguistic diversity, a continental crossroad open to influences from a wide variety of cultural sources. Its dance traditions reflect this diversity.

Two basic types of dance are performed throughout the Iranian cultural sphere and, indeed, throughout the Middle East generally. The first type is regional folk dancing, which is most often performed, but not exclusively so, in groups; the second is solo improvised dancing.

Regional Folk Dances. In the folk dances of the northern and western regions of this vast cultural region—which includes Georgia, Armenia, Daghestan, Azerbaijan, Kurdistan, and Luristan—the dancers are often linked by various hand holds. The performance of these dances in line, semicircular and/or circle formations forms the eastern terminus of the “belt” whose western terminus is in Europe. In the northwestern region of the Iranian cultural sphere, such patterned line and circle dances constitute the most common form of choreographic expression (Hasanov, 1988; Lisitsian, 1958, 1972). By contrast, in the eastern and southern districts—such as Khorasan, Fars, the Persian Gulf region, Baluchistan, Afghanistan, and Turkmenia—the regional dances are performed in groups. The dancers do not touch one another and often carry scarfs or other objects with which to embellish their movements. In the southern area, some scope for impro-

visitation is possible because of the relative freedom of the body; however, the dancers conceive of themselves as part of a group that moves together. These dances are most often associated with the countryside, even though they may sometimes be seen in urban areas, particularly the line and circle dances. Because of the many participants associated with these dances, the dances are commonly associated with outdoor performances. Briefly, these dances are characterized by regional specificity of style and short, patterned, choreographic phrases repeated and embellished with variations—in contrast to the solo improvised dance, which is based entirely on improvisation and solo performance.

Some of these Iranian regional dances, particularly those performed in lines and circles, can be seen at various communal events in Europe and the United States, where communities of Azerbaijanis, Kurds, Assyrians (Aramaic-speaking Chaldeans), and Armenians now live.

Solo Improvised Dance. The second type of dance, solo improvised dancing, is more often associated with urban life than the regional dances performed in rural village and tribal areas. Solos are performed in a strikingly

uniform manner, demonstrating the aesthetic and creative impulses that pervade this vast region. Such dancing can be seen from Tiflis in Georgia east to the border-region of China, from Khiva in Uzbekistan to Shiraz in southwestern Iran—as well as in the Iranian diaspora, especially southern California. The solo dancing is potentially limitless in its improvisational creativity, but it remains within its own stylistic framework. Solo improvisational dancing, although rarely performed by more than one at a time, often reached great technical and physical mastery; in Iran, the professional performer (Per., *moṭreb*) also often acted, sang, played an instrument, and executed feats of athletic dexterity. Such acrobatics included handstands, cartwheels, balancing the body in the air while holding onto a dagger planted in the floor, writing someone's name with flour on the floor, or balancing lighted candles or tea glasses filled with hot tea. Sometimes a dancer would become associated with a particular skill and bear a nickname derived from it. Commonly, the dancers performed with such objects as clappers or finger cymbals, with which they accented the musical rhythms. In Iranian dance, the performance of beautiful and intricate hand and arm gestures is highly prized and forms the major focus of interest in this dance tradition. An unusual feature of this dance is the manipulation of eyebrows, lips, and other facial features in witty or sensual gestures, which makes this dance tradition unique in the Middle East.

Historically, from 1796 to 1925, there existed male and female troupes of entertainers; in the male troupes, young boys often donned female garb. These troupes toured both urban and rural settings. Comic elements and sexually suggestive movements by the dancers, particularly the males, were described by many European visitors who were shocked by them. While the best-known and most beautiful and skillful performers might reach the shah's court or the homes of the wealthy, small itinerant troupes could be seen in villages and poor urban districts throughout the country, particularly during celebrations for the Iranian new year (Per., *Nawrūz*), beginning on the first day of spring, as late as the mid-twentieth century.

The solo dance forms the basis of the movement practices of the indigenous men's and women's improvised comic theater (Beza'i, 1965; Safa-Isfahani, 1980; Shay, 1995b). In the cities this dance is the major form of choreographic expression, with some individuals attaining the technical ability of professional performers. However, the fear of being labeled *moṭreb*, or worse, can still serve as a deterrent to many from performing in any but the most intimate social surroundings.

As in much of the Asian world, the historical association of professional dancers with prostitution is probably the major cause of the opprobrium expressed by conservative Islamic authorities. Since the Iranian Revolution of

IRAN. With his arms and head hidden, this modern-day street entertainer performs a belly dance, manipulating the face painted on his abdomen to the delight of his young audience and a cameraman, at left. (Photograph from the collection of Metin And.)



IRAN. A posed portrait of two Persian sword dancers and a referee (center) that was used for promotional material at the Columbian Exposition held in 1893 in Chicago. This martial arts-related entertainment was performed to the accompaniment of drum and pipe music. A contemporary report indicates that this sword dance was not a popular event at the exposition. Some visitors appreciated the colorful costumes of these performers but considered their music and dance unpleasant and monotonous. (Photograph courtesy of Elizabeth Artemis Mourat.)



1979, this type of dance has been banned in the Islamic Republic of Iran; its performance can result in severe punishment.

Patterned Movement Practices. Performed in Iran on a large scale are certain purposeful patterned rhythmic activities. These occur in religious or spiritual contexts, on the one hand, and largely as martial arts on the other—as well as a blend of the two, such as the *zūrkhānah*. These movement activities cannot—in strict spiritual Islamic contexts—be labeled “dance.” (For further discussion of these practices, see Shay, 1995a).

[See also *Islam and Dance*; and *Kurdish Dance*.]

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