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# Afghanistan

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**AFGHANISTAN.** A very conservative Islamic country, Afghanistan lies on the eastern edge of the Middle East, to the west of Pakistan and India. Afghanistan is at the confluence of Iranian, Central Asian, and Indian cultural currents, and most groups within Afghanistan have ethnic ties across the borders. Indian elements are the least felt, but the rhythmic footwork of some solo dancing is highly reminiscent of classical Indian traditions. A variety of ethnic and linguistic groups, each with its own choreographic tradition, reflects Afghanistan's enormous cultural diversity. Its dance traditions, however, are scarcely documented. As in most Islamic countries, dancers are paid performers who are often regarded askance. According to Mark Slobin (1980) "both male and female dancing is often associated with potential or actual moral laxity. Dancing boys have long been a feature of Afghan entertainment."

Because of Islamic mores, dancing, like most socializing, is sexually segregated, except in a few urban situations. It is currently being banned by the Mujahidin (the

political faction sometimes called "freedom fighters" in the U.S. press) and the government (St. John, 1995). The music for female dancing is generally played by women on instruments that are particularly associated with women. The *chang* (a jaw harp) and hand-held frame drums, such as the *dairreh*, are the most widely used. Men's dancing is accompanied by a wide range of stringed and percussion instruments: the ubiquitous *sorna* (a regional oboelike double-reed instrument) and *dohol* (large double-headed drum) are used especially for large outdoor dance gatherings. The most popular dance rhythm is 7/8 (shading into 6/8), although 4/4 and 6/8 are also common.

There are two types of Afghan dances: solo improvised dances and group dances. Solo dances are related to those found in Iran and central Asia, particularly Tajikistan and Uzbekistan; these are performed by dancing boys. Performances run from informal to professional, and the range of performance style, skills, and ability is wide. As in Iranian solo dancing, particular emphasis is given to expressive articulation of the head, shoulders, hands, fingers, and facial features. Indian elements, such as rapid whirling and rhythmic stamping, may also be present. The dance style of the Afghan province of Logar, near Kabul, is particularly esteemed. The Tajik dancers of Badakhshan in extreme eastern Afghanistan use masks and tell stories; similar theatrical dances are also performed across the border in Tajikistan.

The largest ethnic group in Afghanistan, comprising about half the population, is the Pashtun, who speak the Pashto (Pashtu) language. They are concentrated in the south and are both nomadic and sedentary. The group extends well across the eastern border into Pakistan, where the people are known as the Pathan. The most popular Pashtun group dance is the *attan* or *attan melli*, which has both male and female versions. The male's *attan*, considered by many Afghans to be the national dance, can have one hundred or more participants. It begins quietly but works into a frenzy as the dancers remove their turbans and whip their hair around with head gyrations. The performers often carry scarfs and do not hold on to one another. The dance can take on an ecstatic trancelike character, and variations of it can be seen throughout much of Afghanistan.

The Tajik, primarily sedentary Persian-speaking groups living in the region from the border with Iran and the city of Herat in the west to the border of China in the east, comprise about 30 percent of Afghanistan's population. Solo dance is their favorite form of expression. Women dance separate from men, primarily at weddings and other family gatherings. Professional female soloists began to appear in government-sponsored performances in Kabul in the 1960s.

The Turkic-speaking groups in Afghanistan (Uzbek, Turkoman, and a few Kirghiz) live principally in the north

and have ethnic ties in the former Soviet republics and in Iran. The Uzbek are (culturally related to the Tajik and share musical and choreographic elements with them. As with the Tajik, solo dancing is the most popular dance form. Professional dancing boys are most often Uzbek. The Turkoman are largely nomadic and have few dances. The men perform a round dance with staves, and the women perform both a round and a solo dance.

The Nuristani (also known as the Kafir) live in a remote mountainous region north of Jalalabad. Little is known of their dances, but a women's round dance and male and female solo dancing have been observed. While it cannot be considered dance, the Baluchi in southwestern Afghanistan and in Iran perform the *gwat* (wind) to mediate among evil spirits and afflicted individuals; it is similar to the Egyptian *zār*.

[See also Islam and Dance.]

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