

1-1-1998

# Lebanon

Anthony Shay  
*Pomona College*

---

## Recommended Citation

Shay, Anthony. "Lebanon." In Selma Jeanne Cohen, Ed., *International Encyclopedia of Dance*, Vol. 4. New York: Oxford University Press, 1998, 135-136.

This Book Chapter is brought to you for free and open access by the Pomona Faculty Scholarship at Scholarship @ Claremont. It has been accepted for inclusion in Pomona Faculty Publications and Research by an authorized administrator of Scholarship @ Claremont. For more information, please contact [scholarship@cuc.claremont.edu](mailto:scholarship@cuc.claremont.edu).

**LEBANON.** In many respects, Lebanon is unique among the Arab states of the Middle East, and this uniqueness is reflected in its dance traditions, particularly in the number of professional performances given. Lebanon is a country more urban than rural, although most residents of Beirut, its capital, have some village relations or associations. Because the nation is small, no village is more than a few miles from Beirut or from such other urban centers as Sidon or Tripoli. Lebanon's population is highly educated, and nomads (bedouins) account for only a minuscule percentage. The country's many religious groups and sects—mainly Christian and Islamic—seem to have had little effect on the dance traditions that are common to all Lebanese.

There are three basic dance forms in Lebanon and throughout the rest of the Levant (the eastern Mediterranean region of Syria, Jordan, Israel, Palestine, and

northern Egypt): solo improvisational dancing, group dances, and combat dances.

**Solo Improvisational Dancing.** In the Levant, nearly everyone performs solo improvisational dances, which range from unimposing displays at informal domestic gatherings to highly professional performances, principally in the Egyptian style (*danse du ventre*, the belly dance), as was offered in the many nightclubs and cabarets of pre-civil war (pre-1975) Beirut and in other urban centers and resorts. Both men and women perform solo at informal festivities, sometimes in a very versatile and skilled fashion. The men often inject comically erotic or satiric movements in their dancing or display agility in balancing jugs or other objects on their heads, while isolating and shaking their shoulders, hips, or other parts of the body. Whether men and women dance in each other's presence depends on their or their family's religious convictions and/or their social conservatism, as well as the relationships and the number of participants in the dance.

Virtually all people in the Levant recognize the *danse du ventre* as non-Levantine. They call it *raqş al-sharq* ("Oriental dance") or *raqş al-mişri* ("Egyptian dance"), indicating its foreign origins.

Virtually all professional performers of the *danse du ventre* are women, often famous in the Arab world, and non-Lebanese. Their performances, depending on their skill and the milieu, are virtually the same in all particulars as those seen in Cairo or in Middle Eastern nightclubs and cabarets in large Western cities.

**Group Dances.** The most popular group dance is the *dabkah*, a line dance known to all Lebanese, of whatever

LEBANON. *Dabkah* is a popular line dance, often performed at weddings and other gatherings. The leader of the group waves a handkerchief to rouse and direct the dancers. There are different methods of linking, including clasping hands, resting an arm on the shoulder of the adjacent dancer, or gripping his belt. Here, a line of men and women (mostly out of view) dances to the accompaniment of a musician playing a *zurna* (also called *zamr* and *ghaytah*). (Photograph from the collection of Metin And.)



background. It has many steps and patterns, several of which are usually known in each village; they offer the leader, who also sets the patterns for the entire line, a scope for improvisation. The line is usually joined by arms on shoulders (less often by holding hands), and the leader signals changes of dance patterns and the tempo for the musicians by means of a handkerchief or scarf. *Dabkahs* may be sexually segregated, or mixed, depending on the (religious and/or geographic) setting.

So beloved and indigenous are *dabkah* dances that urban professional performers (especially the Lebanese) invent increasingly intricate steps, patterns, and movements—not disdaining the incorporation of such foreign elements as Russian-style squats and kicks. The costumes and the music, too, are constantly changed and updated. The performers of the traditional *dabkah* refer to these glossy stage performances as the “new” folk dances. As modern and slick as these stage performances can be, they are still an extension of traditional dance expression. No stage presentation, musical concert of a major Lebanese singing star, Lebanese film, festival, or social gathering—such as a *hafla* or wedding—would be considered complete without a group performance of the *dabkah*.

**Combat Dance.** Represented by sword and shield dancing (*ṣeif wa ters*), the combat dance is today performed less and less often. It probably originated as a pyrrhic dance and is related to the sword and shield dances of Bursa, Turkey. The performers hold real swords and dance with only one partner, most often a brother, cousin, or lifelong friend. The dance is accompanied by instrumental music (unlike the Bursa version, which is unaccompanied), with the musicians following the performers’ movements. The first part of the dance is a slow, formal salute and circling, followed by combat gestures, often improvised. Minor wounds may be inflicted, but because the performers are so close to each other, they can usually anticipate each other’s movements. If one partner leaves the village or dies, the remaining partner generally no longer performs.

As a result of the political situation in the Middle East, the Levant’s major folkloric festival, an annual event at Baalbek in northeastern Lebanon was held from 1955 to 1975. It has been replaced by an annual festival in Jarash, Jordan, which began in 1982. The Jarash festival features artists from the Arab world and international groups. The Beit al-Din festival began in the 1980s and features Lebanese folklore as well as Western performing arts. Other regional festivals also showcase local dancing.

[See also Bedouin Dance. For general discussion, see Middle East.]

#### BIBLIOGRAPHY

Shay, Anthony V. “Traditional Music and Dances of Lebanon.” *Viltis* 35 (December 1976): 6-10.

ANTHONY V. SHAY