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DANCE III. MODERN PERSIAN DANCE
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iii. Modern Persian Dance

In Persia, dance, like dress and language, is a cultural identifier, a means by which each ethnic group defines itself and its culture as distinct from the cultures of other groups. Nevertheless, influences from neighboring ethnic groups make themselves felt, and climate and geography also play a role in determining the specific features of dance and the culture in which it thrives. The ethnographic character, including the dances, of areas near the borders of Persia may have more in common with those of non-Persian neighbors than with those of other groups within Persia; for example, the dancing of the Kurds of northwestern Persia has more in common with that of the Kurds in Iraq and Turkey than with that of the Kurds in Khorasan. It is thus impossible to discuss “Persian national dance”; there are only “specific dance events within specific dance cultures” (Hamada, p. 6).

In this article only traditional dance of the 20th century, before the Revolution of 1357 Š./1978, will be considered, with no effort to assess the influence of Western dance forms or to reconstruct ancient traditions (for a speculative attempt at the latter, see Rezwani).

The ethnogeography of Persia is complex, with many different ethnic groups living together in close geographical proximity. Although there are mutual cul-

tural influences among these groups, each also maintains a unique identity. The major ethnogeographic regions are the northwest (Azerīs, Armenians, Kurds, Assyrians), the Caspian area (Gīlakīs, Māzandarānīs, Ṭālešīs), the northeast (Kurds, Turkmen, and other Turkic speakers), the southeast (Baluch), the Persian Gulf littoral, the southwest (Lor, Ḵamsa, and Qašqāʾī tribes), and the central plateau.

In Persian society dancing is an occasional activity, limited to appropriate physical and social settings. Although occasions like circumcisions and weddings (see ʿarūsī) may involve ceremonial activities, dancing is usually not an integral part of formal Islamic religious ceremonies. An exception is the *samāʿ* (chanting) rituals of some Sufi orders, both in Persia and elsewhere (see below).

Dancing occurs at celebrations of calendar holidays, national, political, religious, and agricultural, and tribal migrations, as well as at such irregularly scheduled events as circumcisions, weddings, professional performances, and even exorcisms (see below). No dance form is limited to a single context, and no single context necessarily excludes another; for example, a gathering to observe a rite of passage is also a social event. In the cities of Persia Islam has a stronger presence than in tribes and villages, and urban dwellers thus tend to be more conservative in religious matters; for example, the requirements of daily agricultural activity and animal husbandry make it impossible for rural and nomadic women to remain as strictly veiled as in cities. It is therefore not surprising that in prerevolutionary Persia dancing was less frequent and less varied in urban settings than in villages and among tribes. Urban men and women usually do not dance in mixed couples or groups. The anonymity of urban life, however, facilitates behavior outside these constraints; whereas some spurned dance altogether, before the Revolution others attended nightclubs where professionals performed.

Dance events and types can be classed according to whether or not those attending an event participate in them or only watch. Social dancing connected with rites of passage and social events can be classed as participatory dance, whereas performances are not. Healing dances fall between; the afflicted dances for his or her own benefit, yet the majority of those present are merely observers.

In improvisational dance the participant, whether part of a group or dancing alone, composes the dance on the spot, using a well-defined vocabulary of

movement. This vocabulary, as well as the social and contextual limits on dancing style, are well understood by the participants. No other structure is imposed on the dance. This type is one of the most common in Persia and may involve single dancers, couples, or groups. It can occur in performance or as part of a social event. One feature common to all varieties of improvisational dance in Persia is that the dancers do not usually touch, and, even when dancing in a circle, do not follow prearranged patterns.

Solo improvisation. Probably the most ubiquitous style of dance in Persia is solo improvisation, which has for centuries formed part of professional and home entertainment from Central Asia to the Mediterranean. Among urban Persians today the most common variety is often called *raqṣ-e tehrānī* (Tehran dance), which is similar to social dance of the Uighurs, Tajiks, Uzbeks, Anatolian Turks, Armenians (personal observation; cf. Tkachenko, pp. 153-72, 271-93, 433-52, 477-90), and peoples of the eastern Mediterranean and the Balkans (personal observation; cf. the description of the Bulgarian *ručenica* in Katzarova-Kukudova and Djenev, pp. 30-32). It can be performed as entertainment or socially. It is important to note that, regardless of the number of participants in this type of dance, each is essentially dancing solo; depending on the specific social situation, groups or couples may be either of the same gender or mixed.

In *raqṣ-e tehrānī* the arms are held at approximately shoulder level, and the emphasis is on delicate turns of the hands, coy facial expressions, and gentle movements of hips and feet. All movements are improvised to music in a 6/8 rhythm called *reng*. This style in its more elaborate forms is the basis for much of Persian professional dance and is also the current favorite among Persians living abroad; it can be observed at all Persian emigrant events at which dancing by guests forms part of the entertainment.

Versions of solo improvisational dance are known in villages and tribes throughout Persia. For example, Baluch women improvise while dancing, usually to a 6/8 rhythm. In addition to their delicate hand movements, they keep time by clashing their heavy metal bracelets together.

Group improvisation. When a number of people are dancing together in *tehrānī* style, usually at a party or other social gathering, at some point the basic format, in which many soloists dance simultaneously, can evolve into a dance game, with one or two people dancing alone in the center of the circle. Participants take turns dancing in the center, each selecting a replacement

from the circle. Meanwhile the dancers forming the circle continue to improvise, without necessarily following the soloists. The point of the game is to highlight particularly gifted dancers while affording the rest of the group the opportunity to dance in more relaxed fashion. The process continues until all the participants have danced in the center or until the group breaks up into smaller groups or couples. This type can also be found in Turkey and the Balkans (personal observation). The women's group dancing of the tribes of southwestern Persia (see below) can be considered a type of group improvisation, in that each dancer, though following in a line, is free to choose her own movement patterns.

Improvisation in couples. In Persia dances for couples, especially mixed couples, are more common among Christians than among Muslims. Many of these dances are found in areas heavily influenced by the Caucasus, where Georgian Christians have developed such dances into a refined style. In the Caucasus dances are often in a 6/8 rhythm. Armenian paired and solo dances also had their origin in the mountains of the Caucasus and resemble Georgian, Lezgian, and other Caucasian dances. In some of them men and women dance together in couples; the basic position for both men and women is with the arms held at shoulder level, one in front of the body, the other to the side. The man's dancing consists of very strong movements and can be done on half-toe or, as in Georgian dance, in special soft-soled, unpadded boots on the tops of the toes, which are curled under. The woman's style is softer, with more delicate arm and hand gestures (personal observation; cf. Dzhavrishvili).

Performance

Professional and performance dance can be divided into traditional and nontraditional types. The traditional performance style is basically the solo *tehrānī* style elaborated into an art form. The movements require extreme flexibility and grace of the upper body and varied facial expressions, including moving both eyebrows independently. Professional dancers may also manipulate such objects as tea glasses or finger cymbals, often to mark the rhythm. Particularly in urban areas professional dancers traditionally performed with *moṭreb*s or *lūṭī*s, troops of musicians, singers, comedians, actors, and other entertainers. In particular dance formed an integral part of *rū-ḥawżī* (lit., "covered pool") theater pieces performed in the courtyards of private houses, in which young men danced dressed as women. These itinerant groups performed on the street and could be hired for weddings and other festivities. Their performances could be vulgar, involving suggestive

lyrics and movements. In the late Qajar period *moṭrebī*-style dance flourished at court, as well as in the streets, but, owing to its banishment from the court of Reżā Shah Pahlavī (1304-20 Š./1925-41) and the progressive westernization of the wealthier classes, it underwent degradation. Professional dance became the province mainly of nightclub performers, prostitutes, and non-Muslims (Nāẓemī, personal communication, 1993; for a discussion of *moṭrebī* groups in Mašhad, see Blum, pp. 155-62).

Professional dance began to regain respectability and popularity during the reign of Moḥammad-Reżā Shah (1320-57 Š./1941-78). Nontraditional dance performances based on European models began to be presented in theaters; they included elaborate choreography and scenery, elements that were not part of older dance forms in Persia. In 1346 Š./1967 a government subsidized dance group, Sāzmān-e foklor-e Īrān (which performed in the United States as the Mahalli Dancers of Iran), was founded to perform both Persian folk dance choreographed for the stage and balletic versions of Persian epic tales and poetry (e.g., *Haft peykar*). At about the same time a privately funded professional dance group, Bāla-ye mellī-e Pārs, was founded by ʿAbd-Allāh Nāẓemī, who choreographed pieces based on his research in Persian villages and tribal areas; he also produced more than 200 television programs featuring tribal or village dancers and musicians (personal observation; Nāẓemī, personal communications, 1991-93; cf. Nazemi, forthcoming). Traditional performance dance was also revitalized as part of the revival of *rūḥawżī* theater.

Line and open-circle dances

One of the most common types of dance in the Near and Middle East and in Europe is based on a line or open circle of dancers holding hands. In this type the scope for improvisation is limited, and the emphasis is on footwork and posture, rather than on facial expression, emotion, or movement of the upper body. It is particularly characteristic of western Persia. One of the most common of these dances, found in Azarbaijan, is the basic “six-count” dance, in which the line of dancers, holding hands at waist level, moves as follows: step right, step left, step right, kick left, step left, kick right. This basic sequence also characterizes the Israeli *hora*, the Bulgarian *pravo xoro*, and many other similar dances in Europe and the Middle East (personal observation).

In western Kurdish versions the dancers stand in line almost hip to hip, with fingers locked; the arms can be bent at right angles, with elbows pressed

against the waist, or held straight behind the body (see *EIr.* V, p. 838 pl. CXLIX). The upper bodies of the dancers appear to form a single mass, bending at the hips and moving forward and back, while the legs move more vigorously. The general effect is similar to that of the Arab *debka*. One of the most popular dances among Assyrian Christians is the *šeyḵānī*, which is similar to western Kurdish dance.

There are also line and circle dances in which the participants do not hold hands, which permits greater variation, including improvisation and dancing with objects. The dances of Khorasan and Baluchistan are examples of this type. Although the dancers perform the same steps in unison, they are free to execute a variety of movements (e.g., squats, turns, and changes in direction) that are not possible while holding hands. The Turkman men's dances in these provinces include rhythmic vocalizations by dancers as accompaniment. An excellent description of the dances of the eastern Kurds in Bojnūrd has been provided by G. M. Hamada. The Persian Gulf is another area of Persia where such dances are found. The folklore of this area reveals the strong influence of Arab cultures in neighboring Qatar, Kuwait, and Bahrain, as well as elements from Africa, probably brought by slaves (personal observation; A. Jihad Racy, personal communications, 1982-83; Aisha Ali, personal communications, 1992). The standard rhythm is 6/8, but various patterns of accents within the measure can be employed. When the accent comes on beats 1, 5, and 6 there is a characteristic rolling sense that carries the movement from measure to measure. Polyrhythmic drumming patterns are one example of African influence. The basic dance movements are improvised and can be executed either solo or in a line. The pattern of steps is simple: step-together—step in the line of direction. The emphasis is on tiny shakes of the shoulders, sharp, swift, and strong, which are actually accomplished by movements of the torso, rather than the shoulders. The hands are at shoulder level, the palms facing outward. The dancers may also clap with the rhythm, often in polyrhythmic patterns (personal observation).

Dancers sometimes manipulate such objects as sticks (see čūb-bāzī) or scarves while dancing (see *EIr.* V, p. 844 pl. CLV). Among the tribes of southwestern Persia there are many examples of women's dances in which a scarf is held in each hand. They may have originated in mime of women's daily activities, for example, weaving and spinning. Each participant, while progressing slowly in a counterclockwise direction, chooses her own patterns of movement. The Qašqāʾīs define two types of women's dances: the *āqor haley*, which are slow

and heavy dances, with emphasis on a kind of falling step and downward movements of the arms, and the *lakke haley*, faster and lighter dances, with upward arm gestures (personal observation; M. Gorguinpour, personal communication, 1989). The *lakke haley* can also involve a repeating musical pattern during which the dancers remain in place for a few measures, turning, dropping to their knees, and rising slowly while shaking the shoulders. After each repeat of the pattern the dance continues (personal observation). In the "rice dance" of Gīlān the women hold flat trays in front of their bodies or on their heads while miming the preparation of rice for cooking: winnowing, removing stones, and so on.

Ceremonial dances

These dances, loosely categorized, are inseparably linked to their contexts, which are more important than their forms.

Calendar rituals. Some events from the pre-Islamic calendar, like Nowrūz (the new year at the vernal equinox) and Šab-e yaldā (the winter solstice), are still celebrated in Persia. There are documented events in northwestern Persia that involve dance associated with fertility and bringing the end of winter. They parallel such European rituals as the Kukeri of Bulgaria (personal observation; cf. Katzarova-Kukudova and Djenev, pp. 53-57) and Morris dancing in England, as well as similar rituals in Anatolia (see 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 advent of spring (see Enjavī).

Samāʿ. Part of the *samāʿ* ritual of the Sufis involves dancing and chanting mystical formulas to instrumental accompaniment. Dancers move to the rhythm of the music, repeating the formulas or simply the name Allāh or ʿAlī, often continuing until they fall into a trance or collapse from exhaustion.

Trance or healing dances. In some parts of Persia musical exorcisms are performed to relieve those thought to be afflicted with evil spirits. They include music and guidance of the afflicted person into a trance, in which state he or she dances and eventually throws off the evil spirit. The form of the dance has little significance; each dancer moves as compelled by the music. Rather, it is the healing intent of the dance that is most important. The *guātī leʾb* (lit., "spirit ritual"), described in detail by Jean During, is one such dance of exorcism performed by the Baluchīs. One practitioner of such exorcisms

bemoaned the general decline of music and dance in Persia, as their absence offers fertile ground for the *guāt* spirit (During, p. 45).

Dance rhythms

As already suggested, the most common dance rhythm in Persia is 6/8, referred to onomatopoeically as *šīr-e mādar* (personal observation; the onomatopoeic character of the name was first suggested to the author by Mortażā Varzī, personal communication, 1980). It is subdivided in various ways, always following the accent of the melody. Some interesting variations occur in solo improvisational dance. For example, the first beat can be prolonged almost to the length of two beats (thus creating a 7/8 rhythm), according to the moods of the musician, the dancer, and the audience: The more emotive the performer or the more responsive the audience, the longer the beat is held.

For a music sample, see Āqor haley.

For a music sample, see Čub-bāzi.

For a music sample, see Šeyḵāni-Asuri.

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Figure 38. Drawing of Chalcolithic potsherd from Tepe Mūsīān, in Ḵūzestān. After Contenau, p. 177 fig. 27a.

Plate LX. Detail of stucco column relief from Qaḷʿa-ye Yazdegerd, Kurdistan, Parthian period. Photograph courtesy of the Royal Ontario Museum, Toronto, Canada, no. QY76.A40.

Plate LXI. Detail of female dancer, silver jug, Sasanian period, Iran Bastan Museum, Tehran. Photograph A. Sh. Shahbazi.