

INTERNATIONAL ENCYCLOPEDIA OF

# DANCE

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[See also Music for Dance, article on Oceanic Music; and Oceanic Dance Traditions.]

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ADRIENNE L. KAEPLER

**MIDDLE EAST.** [This entry surveys dance in the Islamic countries of Southwest Asia and North Africa. It comprises two articles. The first article provides a general overview of traditions; the second focuses on dance research and publication. For related discussion, see North Africa and entries on specific countries mentioned herein. See also Israel.]

### An Overview

Dancing in the countries of the Middle East is a favorite form of entertainment. It is considered indispensable at weddings and is frequently performed to celebrate circumcision, the harvest, and religious and national holidays; to honor important guests; and to welcome Muslim pilgrims returning from Mecca. This is a folk, rather than a classical, dance tradition. Although dances and appropriate contexts for dancing differ among communities, most people in a particular community can usually perform its dances. A large number of dances are performed throughout the region. At least thirty can be identified in the Gulf region (Kuwait, Bahrain, Qatar, United Arab Emirates); the small country of Yemen boasts at least twenty-five named dances; twenty Egyptian dances were documented by Magda Saleh (1979), who also mentions many more not included in her project. Some of these dances are associated with a particular country or community, while others are performed in several countries.

Among Muslims, religious dancing is confined to the mystical orders, such as the whirling dervishes, the Qādirī order and other Sufi sects, dissident groups such as the

'Anṣārī Shī'ah of Syria and Iran, or the Yazīdī of northern Iraq. Dancing may be performed during visits to saints' shrines, although such visits are unorthodox in Islam and condemned by most religious scholars. Before the Islamic conquest of Egypt in the seventh century, religious dancing among Coptic Christians in Egypt was widespread, especially for a saint's day festival; afterward, dancers portrayed in Coptic inscriptions were less active and more modestly dressed than in earlier inscriptions. In general, dancing at funerals is rare, except among some rural groups in the Levant, Upper Egypt, and southern Yemen. Dancing also plays an important role in *zār*, a healing ceremony involving the exorcism of malevolent spirits.

**Conflicting Attitudes toward Dance.** The rich folk dance tradition in the Middle East has not been well documented because many of the urban elite consider dancing to be a frivolous activity, undignified and unworthy of scholarly attention. Paralleling this attitude is a lively debate in Islamic circles as to the permissibility of dancing and the playing of musical instruments. Some religious scholars maintain that these are permitted in Islam, and mystics often laud dancing and music as the ultimate expressions of divine ecstasy. Other, more conservative scholars, however, argue that dancing and music are forbidden. (See Islam and Dance.)

Singled out for condemnation are love songs, flirtatious dancing, and musical instruments that excite the emotions. Among these is a double-reed, oboelike instrument popular in rural areas; known as *mizmār*, *sorna*, *ghayṭa*, *sumnāy*, or *zumṣāra*, depending on the country, it provides a favorite accompaniment to dancing. The instrument itself may have sexual connotations in the folk tradition. For example, in parts of Yemen, the *mizmār* is known as the "cock of Paradise," with an intended sexual pun. To the extent that dancing is associated with overt sexuality, it is frowned on by scholars and religious leaders.

Another factor that leads to ambivalence toward dancing is that many Middle Eastern dances focus attention on individual pleasures in a culture where cooperation and group cohesion are considered the most essential and noble values. Thus, dancing often highlights a tension found in the culture between the positive valuation of responsibility to one's group and a coexisting value on autonomy and individual expression (cf. Adra, 1982).

The major issue in the criticism of dancing, however, is that of context. Contexts defined as public are not considered appropriate for most dancing activity; yet gender-segregated contexts or those defined as informal and intimate are. In these informal contexts, Middle Eastern dancing flourishes. When a particular context appears to straddle the line between the public and the informal (e.g., a wedding celebration to which the whole commu-

MIDDLE EAST: An Overview. The *ghawāzī*, itinerant performers in Egypt, were a common subject of Orientalist art. This nineteenth-century French print shows two *ghawāzī* women in a typical dance with finger cymbals. Characterized by rapid vibrations of the hips, this genre is a distinct tradition within the female *danse du ventre*. (Courtesy of Elizabeth Artemis Mourat.)



nity is invited), euphemisms may be used to refer to dancing. It may be glossed as *ghinā'* ("song"), *'urs* ("wedding") or, in Yemen, *nafs* ("breath" or "freedom"). North African euphemisms for dancing include *bdd* ("to stand erect") and *hus* ("to turn") (Lortat-Jacob, 1980). It can be argued that dancing is an activity that almost everyone in the Middle East enjoys but does not advertise.

**Urban-Rural Differences.** Urban-rural differences in dance practice correspond to a general urban-rural split found throughout the Middle East. In rural areas, where men and women traditionally mixed freely, dancing may be performed by men and women together in the open air. The rule is that all those present be defined as members of the same community. Rarely will Middle Eastern women who are not professional dancers perform publicly in the presence of men defined as strangers. In urban areas, however, where the seclusion of women was traditionally a cultural ideal, dancing tends to be confined to intimate family gatherings or to gender-segregated contexts (i.e., parties of all men or all women). Dancing is not permitted at all in a small number of very conservative households. In those homes professional singers are hired to entertain guests at weddings and at other celebrations. Singers may be male or female, but women usually perform at women's parties.

In towns and cities only professional male and/or female dancers perform in contexts defined as public. Everywhere in the region, however, professional dancers (paid for their services) are considered to be of low social status. Some traditionally low-status groups, such as the Sulayb of central and southern Arabia, the *ghawāzī* of

Egypt, and the Akhdam of Yemen, specialize in professional dancing as well as in other low-status service occupations. Historically, slave girls and concubines danced at royal courts; these were usually women captured in war, and their status was somewhat higher than that of other professional dancers. Some professional dancers are boys dressed as women. Dances performed by professionals may differ significantly in their movements from those performed by nonprofessionals in the same area, but not all. Nonprofessionals often learn dances by watching professionals and then practicing in intimate family contexts.

**Location and Context.** Dancing is performed in courtyards or other clear areas outdoors, or in small spaces indoors. The proscenium stage is an innovation used primarily by professional dancers in nightclubs, in large theatrical productions, or on televised programs. When dancing at a large gathering, dancers typically perform in their best clothes. Traditionally, they maintained serious facial expressions while performing; women were expected to keep their eyes lowered modestly or, in some cases, to veil their faces, thus conforming to culturally accepted standards of presentation. This is changing with regional access to television and videotapes. Dancers have begun to smile while performing, following the example of performers in Western films, television, and music videos.

At men's or at women's functions, members of the audience clap loudly or click their fingers, keeping time with the beat; make a rhythmic "sh, sh" sound meant to support the dancers; heap loud blessings on the dancers; and ululate and/or comment on the dancers' performances. It

is usual for conversation to continue during dancing, but a true compliment to a dancer would be for the room to quiet down.

**Identifying Characteristics.** Characteristics of Middle Eastern dancing include lack of narrative content, the importance of improvisation, typical ways of shaping space, pelvic and shoulder isolations, and the division of dances into three segments. The vast majority of Middle Eastern dances are not mimetic, nor do they enact a story. Notable exceptions are *zār*, in which stereotypical figures are imitated, and the hobby-horse dance, once widespread but currently performed only in the Gulf region. Some but not all combat dances mimic duels. [See *Zār*.]

While Middle Eastern dances are characterized by a given range of movement or steps, improvisation is very important. Consequently, new steps are readily incorporated into traditional dances, and significant variation is found in steps or rhythm, even in neighboring communities. The major exception to the improvised nature of Middle Eastern dancing is found in theatrical and televised productions, which are carefully choreographed. These relative newcomers are appreciated for being well organized but are thought to lack the spontaneity and humor that characterize dancing in the region.

Space is shaped geometrically. Many dances are performed in lines, which may be either straight or curved. Often, two lines of dancers face each other, reciting poetry while they move. Solo and couple dances are performed between two lines of dancers or singers, facing a single line of dancers or singers (in the curve formed by a line of dancers or singers), or in a small space surrounded by spectators. Turns around the dancer's axis or in circles are very common in this tradition.

Feet are used for locomotion forward, backward, and sideways or to delineate shapes on the ground: figure eights, semicircles, and squares. Typical steps include walking, variations of the grapevine, skips, hops, jumping on two feet, and, for men, high leaps. Hands and arms may shape spirals, circles, and figure eights; be engaged in clapping; or hang loosely at the sides. They often hold a scarf, handkerchief, castanets, or a weapon. Pelvic, shoulder, and head isolations are common. The pelvis may be tilted, swayed, or shimmied, as may the shoulders. In some dances, however, the torso is held erect.

Lightness is a characteristic of almost all Middle Eastern dancing. Even when the dance calls for foot stamping, contact with the ground is not sustained. A step widespread in the region has the dancer propelling herself or himself forward and back by pressing the floor with the ball of one foot. This is sometimes done staccato and combined with a torso ripple, sambalike; in a different rhythm it can give the impression that the dancer is skimming the earth's surface. This step is frequently the basis of turning or whirling in place.

Although rapid level shifts are not normally associated with Middle Eastern dances, they are not uncommon. High vertical jumps and high leaps characterize many acrobatic and combat dances performed by men; dancing in a deep knee bend with rapid level shifts characterizes dancing in Yemen.

Dances are commonly divided into three segments, each with a different rhythm. There is usually a progressive increase in tempo with each segment. Yet, segments do not develop into each other; each stands on its own. As a rule, the dancers cue the musicians with respect to beginning and ending each segment. This may be done with a hand signal or by stopping or leaving the dance space.

**Musical Accompaniment.** Poetry is highly developed in the Middle East; traditionally, most men and women could compose rhymed couplets at the very least. Thus, song is an important accompaniment to dancing. The lyrics are important and appreciated as much as the dancers' movements. They may be love songs or have religious themes (although conservative Islamic and Christian religious scholars often lament the association of religion with dancing); they may relate to particular events in the life of the dancer; or they may contain political commentary. Singing is so closely related to dancing that the term *ghinā'*, which denotes singing, also implies dancing.

Musical instruments that accompany dancing include varieties of lute, violin, single- and double-headed drums, single- and double-reed flutes, tambourines, cymbals, finger cymbals, and bagpipes. Currently, much informal dancing is accompanied by the radio or by audiotapes. [See *Music for Dance*, *article on Arab Music*.]

**Classification.** A number of classification systems have been suggested for Middle Eastern dances. The most commonly cited is that of Lois Lamya' al-Faruqi (1976-1977). Louis Mercier (1927) distinguishes three categories: women's dances, mixed dances, and men's dances, with the last subdivided into profane and religious. A classification more compatible with indigenous concepts of dancing would distinguish the following categories: combat dances, dances performed purely for entertainment, dances related to work activities (e.g., seafaring, hunting, and agriculture), and religious ecstatic dancing. Recently developed theatrical dances may form a fifth category. In each community, however, dances may be further classified and contrasted. Urban dances may be distinguished from rural dances. Professional cabaret dancing is classified differently from the more "respectable" dancing of nonprofessionals. In the Gulf region, dances associated with immigrant groups are distinguished from seafaring and agricultural dances.

**Combat dances.** The stigma generally attached to dancing is not shared by men performing combat dances because the dances are seen as demonstrations of skill, not frivolity. They represent the cooperation and unity of





MIDDLE EAST: An Overview. *Tahqib* is the oldest extant Egyptian martial art. As seen here, a pair of opponents wield thick bamboo sticks, five to six feet long, with which they slash, feint, and parry, often to the accompaniment of *tabl baladi* (a large drum), *naqrazan* (a small kettledrum), and *mizmār* (a double-reed pipe). (Photograph from the collection of Metin And.)

the community or tribe—and, hence, its strength—and are associated with honor and chivalry. It is perfectly respectable even for heads of state to perform these dances in public. The close coordination of performers is very important in these dances, and there is an element of competition as well. Performers are judged on their agility, coordination, skill in wielding their weapons, and on how well they avoid injuring their partners. Spectators watch

carefully, ready to separate the dancers if the mock combat threatens to become serious.

The *sharḥ al-sūr* of Oman involves two performers who sing while standing in front of a line of men carrying sticks (Stark, 1941). At the end of the song, the two men engage in a mock battle in which each attempts to trip the other by sweeping his sword (or stick) along the ground. His partner avoids injury by leaping away. The two partners may kneel opposite each other and fence. If they get too close to each other, a spectator carrying a stick leaps in between them. This also occurs when, at the end of the dance, the “victor” brandishes his dagger over his fallen victim. The *tahqib*, an Egyptian stick dance described and filmed by Saleh (1979b, pp. 240–266) is a virtuoso performance of defensive and offensive moves by two men carrying large sticks. They are accompanied by drum and *mizmār*, with the drummer acting as a referee, ready to enter between the two dancers if their performance becomes too violent.

This pattern of mock battles, with built-in interference if the battle begins to get serious, reflects the traditional patterns of dealing with personal and community conflicts in the Middle East. In real life, arguments may get heated, with much shouting and brandishing of weapons, but outside mediators always step in before actual bloodshed occurs (Adra, 1982).

Combat dances may also be performed in lines, where strength in battle is implied rather than demonstrated. The emphasis in these dances is on the coordination and skill of the dancers and musicians. They represent the strength of the group through the ability of its members to work together. Among these is the Yemeni *bar‘ah*, which is performed in an open circle.



MIDDLE EAST: An Overview. This print depicts a row of well-armed Ansari men of northern Syria, clapping hands in a pyrrhic dance. (Collection of Metin And.)



MIDDLE EAST: An Overview. An Iranian hobby-horse dance depicting a mock combat. (Photograph from the collection of Metin And.)

The *'ardah*, *'ayyālah*, and *harbīyah* (all variations of a combat dance popular in Saudi Arabia and in the Gulf countries) are similarly considered noble dances and are performed by men at official ceremonies and public festivities. Performing the *'ardah* the men hold swords and stand in two or more lines, shifting their weight sideways, forward, and backward, while chanting poetry that deals with warfare, courage, and honor. This dance is accompanied by the beat of several drums. Small groups of men break off from the line to improvise their own movements, returning to the line when they wish. In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, Western travelers (e.g., Burton, 1964; Doughty, 1921) observed dances in central Arabia in which a line of male dancers carried small weapons and executed small jumps with their arms raised overhead that may have been early versions of *'ardah*.

A North African rifle dance consists of two lines of men facing each other and brandishing rifles or sticks (Brulard, 1958). Initially, these two lines advance toward each other and retreat. They then form a circle around the musicians in which they perform fast turns. The combat dances of Kurds are among the few Kurdish dances performed by men only (Kendal, 1979).

The *bayādīyah* of Yemen is considered a combat dance although no weapons are used in performing it. While spectators stand in a line, two men leave the line to dance. As one leads, the other must match his steps. Each tries to perform steps his partner cannot match. They weigh each others' movements, trying to trick one another. The two signal the end of their dance by dancing in unison before

joining the spectators, to be replaced by two other dancers.

The hobby-horse dance is sometimes classified as a combat dance. In it, dancers simulate combat while "riding" a stick dressed to resemble a horse. This dance is called *cirit* (Kendal, 1979) when it is performed by Kurds. One variation of this is performed by women in the Gulf countries and another in Turkey. It appears to have been widespread in historical times (Gaudefroy-Demombynes, 1950; Shiloah, 1962).

**Dances for entertainment.** The broadest category of dances in the Middle East is those performed for entertainment. It includes weapons dances performed by women; varieties of line dances, such as the Levantine and Iraqi *dabkah* and the Yemeni *bālah*; solo and couple dances performed before a seated audience, like the Yemeni *lu'bah*, or a line of clapping dancers, such as the Egyptian *hajjalah*. It also includes numerous variations of the celebrated *danse du ventre* (belly dance). Women play important roles in these dances because they control the dancing, the music, and the event itself. The obvious exceptions are in the entertainment dances performed only by men.

Weapon dances performed by women have been observed in the Arabian Peninsula, the Levant, and in Egypt. The pattern is that of a woman dancing with sword or stick in her hand in the middle of a circle of men. The men will stretch their arms in attempts to touch her or impede her movements, while she keeps them at bay with her weapon. This dance is largely play, yet there is an element of danger: a man who actually touches the dancer is likely to be slashed with her sword, because he will have overstepped the bounds of decorum.

A variation of this genre of dancing has been observed among the Sulayb, professional dancers of central and northern Arabia (Dickson, 1951). They perform a couple dance in which the woman carries a stick. If the man approaches her too closely, she will tap him with her stick. A dance in which a dancer juggled a sword while her feet moved to music was observed by Philip Baldensperger (1913) in Palestine. When women carry a sword or stick while dancing, the combat portrayed is a teasing one between dancer and male spectators. Because of this playful quality, these dances are not classified as combat dances in the region. Other dances that imply competition between women and men include those in which a woman wears a veil while dancing that the men try to snatch away and dances in which a woman dancer provocatively takes an item of clothing, a turban or shawl, from male dancers or spectators.

**Line dances.** The best-known line dance in the Middle East is the *dabkah* (often pronounced *debkah*), performed in the Levant and parts of Iraq. *Dabkahs* vary with the region and village. The most common form involves a line

of dancers moving to the right. A leader at the head of the line directs the movement and improvises variations on the basic steps. He or she may twirl a handkerchief in his/her right hand. Participants may be as few as four or five or as many as space will permit. A variation observed in Syria early in the century involved two facing lines of three dancers each. The two lines approached each other and retreated rather than follow each other in linear fashion (Mercier, 1927). Both men and women perform the *dabkah*. Originally associated with rural regions, the *dabkah* is now a favorite at the weddings and other parties of Middle Eastern immigrant groups in the United States.

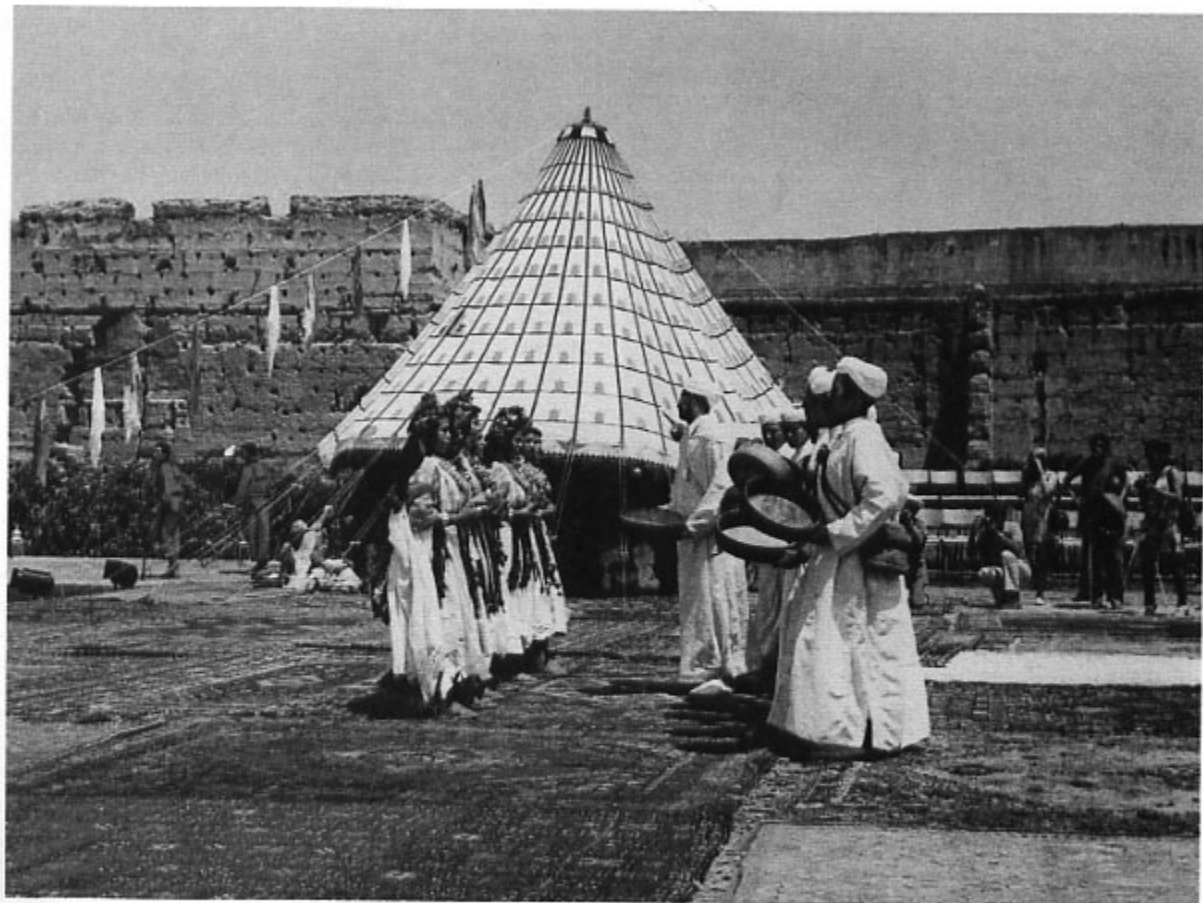
Many Kurdish dances are similar to *dabkahs*. These are usually performed by men and women together. Typical of Kurdish dancing is the lifting of the shoulders straight up and down while the feet perform small locomotive steps.

MIDDLE EAST: An Overview. Performers at the Marrakesh Festival, an event sponsored by the Moroccan government to promote folkloric music and dance, presenting a Berber *ahwash*. (Photograph courtesy of Ibrahim Farnah, *Arabesque Magazine*, New York.)

Another line dance observed earlier in this century in Palestine by Baldensperger (1913) is the *sa'hji*, performed by men only and involving responsorial poetry. In it the leader faced the dancers, singing a verse and directing the movement. The dancers repeated the verse as they moved to the right and left.

The *muradah* was originally performed by women in the Gulf while the men of the community were away on extended fishing and pearling expeditions. It involves two lines of dancers who move toward each other with small steps and then retreat while singing rhymed couplets. These couplets were largely laments for absent loved ones. Although seafaring is no longer economically important in the region, women continue to perform this dance at social gatherings.

The *ahwash* (Fr., *ahouache*) performed by Berber tribes of the Moroccan High Atlas Mountains, includes one or several curved lines of men and one or several curved lines of women, the whole forming a circle or ellipse around male drummers (Jouad and Lortat-Jacob, 1978;





Lortat-Jacob, 1980). One line recites a poem that the other line responds to with another poem; then all move to the beat of the drums. Customarily, the whole community participates. While performing, women dancers hold themselves very straight and move with staccato steps, holding onto the weaving rod of the house. Women as well as men compose the poetry that is recited. A similar dance reported for Morocco is the *dukkala*. In one variation a man and woman facing each other compete to see which one can dance the longest (Mercier, 1927).

The institution of *ay-aralla-buya* traditionally provided a context for unmarried women of the Moroccan Rif to voice their opinions about prospective husbands. While one woman recites a verse of her own composition that expresses her feelings, she and three others perform a slow walk in a circular path or a sideways shuffle. The women play small drums and tambourines to keep time. The tempo quickens after the verse has been recited to announce the second phase of the dance, which involves circular movements and shimmying of the hips, waist, and bust. Then the tempo slows again, and the first phase is repeated while a second woman sings her song. Men and

married women of the community watch (Hart, 1976; Joseph, 1980).

Elsewhere in the region, young unmarried girls perform the celebrated *nakhkh*, the *danse des cheveux* ("hair dance"). In Morocco it is performed to the sung poetry of male spectators. The unveiled dancers twirl their heads and upper bodies to swing their hair around. Dancers perform on their knees or standing, keeping their arms and bodies below the waist immobile. Older women ululate as they watch the dancing. They may also stop the dance when they decide that it has gone on long enough. This dance was performed traditionally by nomads of Tripolitania, southern Tunisia, and westward as far as the Algerian Souf. It was criticized by town dwellers of these regions, who disapprove of women dancing unveiled in the presence of men.

Women swinging their hair while dancing is fairly common elsewhere in the Middle East as well. It forms part of the Sulayb dance of the Arabian Peninsula and is the primary movement of a dance performed in the Hadramawt, in Yemen (where it is called *risht*), and in the Gulf countries, where it is known as *al-na'ish*. It forms an optional part of the North Yemeni *lu'bah*, is important to the Pigeon Dance of Sudan, and has been observed in Syria as part of a sword dance.

Mauritania is known for its *guedra*, in which a solo female dancer is seated on her knees with her body bent forward and her head touching the floor. Slowly she begins to raise her head, gesturing gracefully with her hands and arms, progressing to her shoulders and upper torso. Her movements accelerate and expand until she collapses in a trance. The dancer does not rise to her feet during her performance. Members of the audience clap their hands to the beat of a large drum, also called a *guedra* (Ferry, 1950). Saleh (1979, pp. 151-155) recorded a similar phenomenon in which a professional dancer performed while seated on a divan.

The *lu'bah* or *raqs* of North Yemen is performed by two men at all-male gatherings, by two women at parties attended only by women, or, within intimate family contexts (two women, two men, or a man and woman together). Traditionally, the rural version of this dance involved bending the knees and rising while shifting weight from one foot to another, while the torso was held more or less erect. In the urban version, weight shifts were tied to footwork in which designs were outlined on the floor. With the passage of time, the steps became progressively more elaborate, and men added shoulder and head movements. Until the late 1970s there was a certain lag between urban and rural versions of this dance, with the rural population tending to perform earlier versions of the urban dance. As transportation to cities improved and television provided instant access to what was going on elsewhere in the country, rural dances tended to match

MIDDLE EAST: An Overview. Men performing *lu'bah* at a wedding in 1978 in Al-Ahjur, Yemen. Musicians playing the *mizmar* (a double-reed pipe) and drum can be seen seated at right. (Photograph by Daniel Martin Varisco; courtesy of Najwa Adra.)





urban dances more closely. Today at social gatherings where *lu'bah* is performed by men, it is accompanied by song and the *oud* in towns and the *mizmār* in villages. Performances of women's *lu'bah* are accompanied by song, a brass cymbal hit by a metal ring, and a kettledrum in both urban and rural contexts. Rural villagers say that, in the past, male professional musicians would play the *mizmār* at women's wedding celebrations.

The Pigeon Dance is performed for guests at celebrations in northern Sudan by veiled young girls. The dancers, shoulders held back, thrust their breasts forward, bob their heads slowly up and down, and move forward with mincing steps, in imitation of courting pigeons (Cloudsley, 1983).

Perhaps the best-known Middle Eastern dance is the *danse du ventre* ("belly dance"), a flirtatious dance performed primarily by women, in which the pelvis, shoulders, and breasts are isolated and moved. This dance is probably of great antiquity, with some possible evidence for its performance both in pharaonic inscriptions in Egypt and on central Asian miniatures. It is performed today in most of the Middle East at gatherings of women for each other and by professional dancers for men in cabarets. [See *Danse du Ventre*.]

Pelvic and shoulder isolations are also important in many of the dances of the countries of Northwest Africa (the Maghreb). Professional dancers of the Ouled Nail tribe have commanded a great deal of attention from travelers in the region, yet such movements are not limited to their dances. [See *Ouled Nail, Dances of the*.] Differences between the *danse du ventre* performed in the Maghreb and in Egypt, the Levant, and Turkey include the way in which the pelvic area is moved. In the Maghreb, the pelvis is turned from side to side; to the east, it is tilted up and around in a motion initiated in the legs. With access to each other's dances through television, however, such differences are decreasing, as dancers incorporate steps and movements they see on television.

Throughout the Middle East, the bride entertains guests at her wedding by dancing. In northern Sudan, she performs the Pigeon Dance unveiled, while the groom plays an important supporting role (Cloudsley, 1983). *Tamghra*, performed in the Moroccan High Atlas Mountains, is danced by the veiled bride within a large circle formed by the men of her community (Jouad and Lortat-Jacob, 1978). She carries a long pole while dancing and covers the entire space in her movement.

Brides of al-Mukalla in southern Yemen traditionally danced in the procession that led from their house to that of the bridegroom. Now brides dance only from inside the front door of the bridegroom's house to the women's quarters on the upper stories of the house (Serjeant, 1961). Dancing in bridal processions between the house of the bride and that of the groom is very common in the Middle



MIDDLE EAST: An Overview. An international style of belly dance, or *danse du ventre*, related to Egyptian forms, has gained popularity throughout the Middle East. Here, a belly dancer from Morocco is surrounded by male musicians. Although a similar kneeling posture can be seen in the *guedra* of the Berber tribes in Morocco, this professional entertainer, wearing the conventional brassiere and low-slung skirt, is clearly costumed for an international Oriental-style dance. (Photograph from the collection of Metin And.)

East. In some communities the bride dances; in others, relatives and friends do so; and in still others, professional dancers perform.

At northern Yemeni weddings the bride dances with her sister or a close friend in the presence of the assembled women guests. The dance is similar to that performed by the guests, but special songs accompany it. In one traditional Palestinian bridal dance, the bride brandishes a sword; in another she moves slowly, holding a lighted candle in each hand. Both candles and swords are seen as symbols of protection from malignant forces. It is traditional in many parts of the Middle East for the bride's mother to dance at her daughter's wedding carrying a tray of lit candles on her head. Other items designed to bring the bride good luck and keep away malevolent spirits—incense, eggs, or rue—may also be placed on the tray.

**Work-related dances.** A number of dances in the region are performed in conjunction with subsistence activities or other work. The seafaring and pearl-diving traditions of the Gulf region are associated with numerous



MIDDLE EAST: An Overview. A whirling dance is characteristic of the devotional rituals of the Mevlevi order of Sufis. With arms outstretched and heads tilted to the right, these Muslim mystics revolve at steady pace to achieve a higher plane of consciousness. Pictured here is a group from Turkey in a performance at the Cathedral Church of Saint John the Divine, New York. (Photograph © 1994 by Jack Vartoogian; used by permission.)

dances. Each stage of pearling activity was punctuated by song and movement. Although women did not fish or dive for pearls, a ship's maiden voyage always included young girls who sang and danced. This practice was thought to bring good fortune to the ship and its crew.

Customarily, the crew of pearling ships was divided in half: while one half worked, the other sang and danced. The dancing provided the crew with rest and served to encourage the workers. The two halves switched roles at regular intervals. Distinct songs and dances were performed when the anchor was lowered; others when fish were brought on board; and still others when the ship was on its way home. A song-dance leader, called *nahhām* was the only member of the crew who did not work; he spent his entire time on the ship singing and leading dances. This was considered an important position, and ships competed with each other for the best *nahhāms*. Drumming and clapping in cross rhythms were also important in these dances. Currently, these dances are performed during holidays by those who still remember them.

The Yemeni *baraʿ*, which is classified as a combat dance, was also performed during communal work projects to encourage workers. While one half of the workers applied themselves to the project at hand (building a mosque or cleaning a cistern), the other half performed the equally strenuous *baraʿ*. The rhythmic step pattern used to tamp down newly sown seed in rural Yemen is considered a dance, as is the rhythmic grinding of grain in the Gulf region.

**Religious dancing.** In the Middle East, religious dancing is performed primarily among the mystical orders and the less orthodox sects of Islam; it is frowned on by conservative religious leaders. The dancing of mystics ranges from a mild side-to-side movement of the head and upper torso while reciting the name of God (*dhikr*) to the well-known whirling of dervishes. Some religious dancing is accompanied by feats of self-immolation, such as stabbing oneself with a dagger or walking on burning coals. The rituals of some women's mystical orders in Tunisia includes dancing and trance, while male mystics in the same orders do not dance (Ferchiou, 1972). The Yazidi of northern Iraq traditionally performed a dance that appears to be an ecstatic version of the *dabkah*. Kurdish theological students, who consider themselves to be of elevated social status, perform a dance called *behete*, which serves to distinguish them from the common people (Kendal, 1979).

There is also religious dancing among Christians and Jews in the Middle East. For example, Christian pilgrims dance ecstatically before the Church of the Holy Sepulcher in Jerusalem, and Jews in Yemen and Israel participate in a variety of dances whose significance is religious.

**New Influences.** Although the Middle Eastern dance tradition is ancient, and many currently performed genres are portrayed in pre-Islamic inscriptions, it is a flexible tradition in which new steps, costumes, and musical instruments are easily incorporated. There is a keen interest in learning the dances of others. When a person returns

from a trip, he or she is expected to teach the dances learned abroad to those at home. Dances seen on television and in films are watched closely and imitated. Eventually, these dances are added to the repertory of dances performed in a region, or aspects of new dances become incorporated into traditional dances.

For example, there is a lively trade in dances in Yemen, with dances from the south being performed in the north and vice versa. Meanwhile, urban dances are continually evolving to include more intricate rhythms and complicated steps. The development of cinema and the theater in Egypt did much to enhance the status of professional "belly dancers," and the *danse du ventre* has spread to all parts of the Middle East. It continues to spread to rural areas at the same rate as television transmission reaches those areas. Professional dancers are frequently hired to perform *danse du ventre* at weddings, even in localities where this form of dancing is not traditional. Performances seen in night clubs and on television tend to be more choreographed, with greater correspondence between specific movements and musical phrases than was the case traditionally.

In the colonized areas of the Middle East in the early twentieth century, ballroom dancing was adopted by Western-educated Middle Easterners and became a favorite form of at-home and evening entertainment. At times, traditional folk dances have been incorporated into ballroom-dance events (e.g., the performance of a *dabkah* between performances of the fox trot; see Mercier, 1927).

This trend has continued in urban contexts. Currently, the latest Western dances are performed regularly in conjunction with, and sometimes instead of, local dances.

To accommodate mixed-gender parties and the fact that respectable women attend nightclubs, a new dance has evolved in urban areas. This dance combines footwork reminiscent of the *dabkah* with the arm and hand movements of the *danse du ventre*. Pelvic movement is, however, restrained. Women and men may perform this dance in semipublic contexts without risking their reputations.

A fascinating case of adoption and adaptation of the Charleston has been described and documented by Saleh (1979, pp. 87-93). This dance, called *bambūṭiyah*, is performed along the Suez Canal. It combines Charleston-like movements of the legs with arm movements related to boating.

In the twentieth century there has also been a growing interest in adapting folk dances to the proscenium stage. The *raqs al-samāh*, originally a religious dance, was adapted to the stage and accompanied by a popular genre of song called *muwashshahāt* (Ibn Dhurayl, 1970). The mystical dancing of the Mevlevi dervishes has also been adapted to the stage and commercialized.

A number of women residing in Casablanca perform a staged version of the Moroccan *ahwash*, accompanied by men playing musical instruments. In this version one man will sing verses while the dancers respond in chorus. The performers are all immigrants from the town of Sous. In 1950 the dancers were veiled and kept their backs to the

MIDDLE EAST: An Overview. The *raqs al-sham 'eddan* (candelabrum dance) is a traditional solo genre, in which a dancer balances a heavy, lighted candelabrum on her head as she performs a variety of tricks. Here, women of the Reda troupe, founded in Egypt by Mahmoud Reda in 1958, wear candelabrum headdresses in a choreographed ensemble interpretation of the genre. (Photograph courtesy of Ibrahim Farrah, *Arabesque Magazine*, New York.)



men and other members of the audience, but by the early 1970s the dance was performed on stage in Casablanca by unveiled, bare-armed women, before audiences of mixed gender. It has come to symbolize the Sous migrant community in Casablanca, helping Sousis maintain a consciousness of their community and presenting the community to others in the city (Waterbury, 1972). The Iraqi *darjah* has also changed since the 1960s. Once exclusively a women's dance, it is currently performed by men, women, or mixed groups (Ahmad, 1978). *Şawt*, one of the most popular dance forms currently performed in the Gulf, has roots in traditional Yemeni music and dance forms (al-Qāsimī, 1988).

In Egypt in 1958, Mahmoud Reda formed a folk dance company that performed choreographed dances inspired by Egyptian folk dances (Saleh, 1979b). His example has been followed by several of the ministries of culture that have formed folk dance troupes in their respective countries to perform on stage and television.

Staged and televised dance and musical performances by the Reda troupe and those at the annual Lebanese Baalbek Festival (held in Jordan since the Lebanese civil war) have renewed urban interest in traditional dances. Usually, improvisation is sacrificed for highly choreographed, often mimetic presentations, and control of the dance events is in the hands of professionals. Because Russian or western European consultants are employed to help develop large pagants, European themes are often incorporated into the dances of national folk dance troupes. The degree of audience appreciation of these changes depends largely on the background of the spectators. Urban audiences tend to consider these to be improvements and signs of the "evolution" of folk genres, while more traditional rural folk may be heard to complain about the inauthenticity of the changes.

Whether the dances are old or new, however, Middle Easterners tend to perceive their dances as essential to life, as the following Yemeni proverbs attest: "Al-sha'b lā yughannī li-yamūt" (A population that does not sing/dance would die) and "Li-kull ḥalāh maqālah wa li-kull daqqa bar'ah" (There is a proverb for every situation and a dance for every beat).

[For related discussion, see Aesthetics, article on Islamic Dance Aesthetics; and Bedouin Dance.]

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