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Because much of the Arabian Peninsula is covered by desert, most people live along the coasts and in the fertile mountains of Yemen, Oman, and the Hijaz in Saudi Arabia. Economically, the population can be divided into coastal fishing communities, farming communities, and nomadic herders. Although folklore polarizes the nomadic and settled populations, historically they have depended on each other economically and culturally. Besides supplying the sedentary populations with livestock products, the nomadic populations traditionally provided military protection as well. Their self-reliance, courage, strength, and generosity were admired by the urban population, and both segments valued what was defined as a tribal code of honor.

The mountains of Yemen, which extend into Asir in southwestern Saudi Arabia, are very fertile and extensively cultivated with small, individually owned terraces. Here, the population is predominantly sedentary, although it defines itself as tribal and shares in the tribal honor code. The combination of rivalry and mutual dependence between urban and rural populations that is traditional in the communities farther north is also found here. Along the eastern coasts that border the Arabian Gulf, the majority of the population was traditionally engaged in pearl diving, fishing, and overseas trade. The development of cultured pearls in the 1930s and the discovery of major oil reserves on the coasts and offshore put an end to these activities.

In the past, immigrants into the region came largely from the east coast of Africa, the Indian subcontinent, and Iran. These immigrant communities date back centuries and have had an important influence on the dance and music traditions of the region.

GENERAL CHARACTERISTICS OF DANCE IN THE PENINSULA

Dancing has long been considered indispensable at Arabian weddings and other social celebrations. Dancing forms part of religious and national holidays, harvest celebrations in agricultural areas, and rituals connected with fishing and, in the past, with pearling. Small social gatherings of friends and family often include some dancing. Each district, and sometimes each village, has its own dances, and there are more than a hundred named dances in the region. These constitute an important folk tradition in which people dance for pleasure. Professional dancers, recruited from low-status social groups, may be hired to perform at weddings and other celebrations.



FIGURES 1 AND 2 Men performing *al-shabwānī* in a wedding procession in Hadramawt, Yemen, 1991. Photo by Daniel Varisco, 1991.

Dancing is most commonly referred to in Arabic as *raqs*, a generic term that denotes dancing for entertainment. It is also called *ghinā* 'song' or *lu'b* 'play'. Particular genres of dance may be named after the genre of poetry that they accompany, their meter, or the major musical instrument used.

Dances may be performed outdoors or indoors, depending on the dance and the occasion. A public square, a threshing floor, or any open area may be considered a suitable space for outdoor dancing. At weddings and other festive events, dancing is most frequently performed in large reception rooms in private houses or in enclosed garden or patio areas. A large room or patio may be filled with guests seated on mattresses or carpets on the floor, with a space kept clear in the middle or at one end for dancing. Dancing may also take place in smaller rooms where family members and close friends congregate in the evenings. At weddings, dancing is also part of the processions (figures 1 and 2). During national holidays, choreographed dances are sometimes performed on a proscenium stage in large public halls. Both folkdancing and choreographed dancing are often shown on local television. With the possible exception of televised productions and staged performances, the audience actively supports the dancers by ululating, sounding out the rhythm, clapping, or expressing loud praise. However, the audience is not expected to concentrate totally on the dancing. Members of the audience may talk among themselves or walk around during any particular dance.

Gender

Although a few genres of dance are specifically identified as "men's" or "women's," most dances in the Arabian Peninsula are performed by men and women. At large festive gatherings, separate spaces are usually reserved for men and women. Women dance together for female audiences while men dance together for male audiences. Even in these gender-segregated contexts, however, female professional dancers may perform for women or men. Whether a dance is segregated or mixed depends on the particular dance, the context of performance, and local attitudes. In general, urban social settings are more likely than rural settings to be gender-segregated. Dances are also likely to be gender-segregated in religiously conservative communities and families. In some contexts women perform unveiled, with their hair loose; in others they are fully veiled. This also may vary with the dance, the community, and individual whim. Many women in the peninsula cover their hair and sometimes parts of the face when they appear in public. The practice of veiling may range from a towel quickly thrown over the head to an elaborate scarf or mask. Veiling is an expression of modesty;

but because it focuses attention on the eyes, it is also considered beautiful and seductive.

Line dances

In the Arabian Peninsula, most dancing involve lines of dancers that define the performance space. Parallel lines are common, but sometimes the dancers are arranged in a square, horseshoe, or circle. Shoulders touching, dancers may sway to the music, step sideways or backward and forward, move toward each other and away from each other, or turn in unison. They may brandish weapons, clap, or play drums or tambourines. The dancers in a line usually perform in a standing position, but in some dances of fishing and pearling communities in the Gulf and on the southern coasts, they perform kneeling or sitting as they might on board a boat or ship. Line dancers are usually judged on their coordination with each other. When a dance event also includes poets or solo or couple dancers, their performance space is delimited by the line dancers, who also support them by singing or maintaining the beat.

Improvisation

As in other parts of the Middle East, this dance tradition is characterized by improvisation. Consequently, there is a wide variety of steps and movements. Elements of dance that are shared in the peninsula region include running steps, step-hops, step-together-step-hops, and step-together-step-steps, with the last step or hop often initiating a turn. Dancers may propel themselves forward and up by pressing down on the ball of one foot (samba-fashion), as is commonly done in other Arab dancing. Shifts of level, such as knee bends, leaps, and straight vertical jumping on flat feet, are common. Variations of the grapevine (a pattern in which one foot steps sideways while the other alternates stepping forward and back) are typical of Yemeni dancing, as is shaping a space with one's steps. In all parts of the peninsula, when line dancers move forward, they may do so with a scooping movement of the arms and torso.

Women commonly swing the head and loose tresses while holding the right hand lightly on the upper chest. This movement is called *na'ash*, *tanawush*, *nuwwāsh* (in Yemen), or *rishī* (in parts of southern Yemen) and is similar to the *danse des cheveux*, described by French travelers in North Africa. In Saudi Arabia and the Gulf countries, it is usually performed by young girls, although in the Yemeni highlands it is more often performed by older women to imply suffering. A woman may go into *nuwwāsh* at the end of a dance, moving out of the dance space and into the audience area. As she passes women in the audience, they ululate or verbally express their support and empathy.

The dancing of seafaring communities is characterized by large arm movements that mimic rowing. The line dancers often perform in a kneeling position. With the arm leading, the upper torso is propelled forward to the floor; then it is raised to an upright position, with the back straight; then it moves forward and down again.

Poetry

In most cases, dancing accompanies sung or chanted poetry, and the lyrics are an important element of the performance. Some of these dances involve responsorial poetry, and some, like the Yemeni *bālah* or the Saudi *mzayyan*, include poetic competition. In a competition, one poet improvises a verse to a set rhyme or meter; then, using the same structure, another poet tries to improvise a better verse. Poets who create the best or wittiest verses gain social esteem.

Musical instruments

Musical instruments associated with dancing include the 'ūd 'lute' in towns and cities and wind instruments—such as the *mizmār* 'single- or double-reed pipe' and the *surnāy* 'flute'—in rural areas. The *ṭanbūra* 'bowl lyre' lends its name to a number of dances performed in the Gulf countries. When such instrumentalists are involved in

professional

a dance event, the dancers give them small gifts of money at the conclusion of the performance.

A number of dance genres are accompanied by drumming alone or by drumming and rhythmic hand clapping. Clapping along with drums, in double time or in poly-rhythms, produces an effect that has been likened to the sound of castanets. Rhythmic foot stamping marks time in some dances. Frequently, objects that jingle with the movements of the dancers are worn to intensify the percussive effects; examples include ankle bracelets and small metal bells worn on the dancers' belts. In healing dances (*zār*) along the coasts, dancers tie goats' hooves to their belts for this purpose.

Clothing and accessories

Typically, performers wear their best clothing (except in devotional dancing, as noted below). Dancers often hold daggers, swords, or bamboo poles that they wave while dancing.

CLASSIFICATION OF DANCES

Dances of the Arabian Peninsula are classified locally as exhibition dances, dances related to work, dances purely for entertainment, *zār* 'healing dances', and dances performed during mystical (*ṣūfī*) rituals. A few are described in this section. Each of these dances has a number of variations, involving differences in movements and steps, musical and percussive accompaniment, the presence or absence of poetry, and the identity of the performers. Whereas one dance may be performed in mixed groups in a certain community or at a particular time, it may be performed only by men or by women in another context. Sometimes, also, a particular social group may be associated with a dance.

Exhibition dances

Some of the most highly esteemed dances in the Arabian Peninsula are exhibition dances performed by men only. These dances are often associated with warfare. In the past, some were performed in conjunction with raiding, or with agreements establishing peace between warring groups. When poetry is included, its subjects are valor, heroism, and chivalry. These dances are performed on religious and national holidays as well as at weddings and on other festive occasions. In the Hadramaut of southern Yemen, men traditionally celebrated an ibex hunt with dancing.

For both performers and spectators, exhibition dances represent the chivalry, strength, and courage associated with Arab tribes. These dances are a source of pride, whereas many other dances of the region are derided as frivolous. Even heads of state openly participate in exhibition dances with no loss of prestige. What is admired most is the cohesion and interconnectedness of the performers: these dances manifest a sense of social solidarity.

Allowing for regional variations, the exhibition dances of the peninsula can be loosely divided into *al-'arḍa*, performed in Saudi Arabia and the Gulf countries, and the Yemeni *bara'*. The term *al-'arḍa* is derived from a verb meaning to present, exhibit, or expose and also connotes width and expansion, which is metaphorically represented by the long lines of men facing in the same direction as they dance. The term *bara'* connotes skill or excellence.

Al-'arḍa

Al-'arḍa is also known as *razīf* or *galāṭa* in Saudi Arabia; *al-'arḍa al-ḥarbiyya* 'war 'arḍa' in Kuwait, Bahrain, and Qatar; *al-'ayyāla* in the United Arab Emirates; and *al-razha* in Oman. Most commonly, this dance involves two lines of men, touching shoulders, who chant responsorial poetry while carrying swords, rifles, or thin bamboo canes. The dancers step gracefully and lightly sideways or backward and forward to the beat of the drum while waving their swords or sticks. In Oman, the two lines approach each other slowly and bow low before retreating.

A few dancers at a time leave the line to improvise duets or solos. This improvisation is more expressive than the line dance and often includes shimmying the shoulders and torso. When the dance is well under way, young girls enter the space between the lines, swinging the hair, head, shoulders, and upper torso in *na'ash*. In some cases, a man holding a sword or pole will dance facing a girl, matching his arm movements to her swinging.

The poetry of *al-'arḍa* consists of traditional verses that were once used to goad men into participating in raiding forays. These verses address tribal honor and its ideals and eulogize heroes and courageous women of the tribe. A lead poet dictates a verse or hemistich to one line of dancers, who repeat the verse. He listens to and encourages the recitation, much like a conductor of a chorus, then moves to the other line of dancers. The fervor of this poetry is said to intensify the dancers' emotion.

Al-'arḍa is performed during religious and national holidays. Class and other status distinctions are erased in this dance, for political leaders perform alongside the poorest members of the population. While performing, the dancers leave off their outer cloaks, which indicate their status or relative wealth. Large, public dances are advertised in newspapers; smaller groups perform at weddings and other family celebrations.



FIGURE 3 Men performing *bara'* in al-Mahjar, al-Ahjur, Yemen. One of the two drummers can be seen on the left. Photo by Daniel Varisco, 1979.

Bara'

Bara' (figures 3 and 4) is the signature dance of the highland Yemeni tribes, and each tribal region is associated with a particular beat, style of dancing, and steps. Like *al-'arḍa*, *bara'* represents chivalry and tribal honor.

Bara' is a lively dance performed to drums and sometimes to the chanting of tribal poetry. It involves anywhere from two to a hundred dancers in a circle. Dancers step-hop or move in grapevine fashion to the right and left; they close in to the middle with a flourish, scooping the space before them, then turn back to their original places. Dancers hold daggers, which they wave above their heads. As in *al-'arḍa*, the steps are not complicated, but coordination with the other performers and with the music takes considerable skill. Also like *al-'arḍa*, this is an egalitarian dance in which dignitaries and heads of state participate.

Work-related dances

Seafaring

A number of dances in the Arabian Peninsula were traditionally related to subsistence activities. Perhaps the most dramatic were the sea dances of pearling and merchant boats and ships, performed nowadays purely as entertainment. Some sea dances have

FIGURE 4 Men learning a new *bara'*. The drummers are seen on the right. Knives are held in the right hand; a shawl is held in the left. Photo by Daniel Varisco, 1979.



Every phase of the pearling process was associated with a genre of poetry, and most phases were also occasions for dancing.

the same names as land dances but differ in movements and poetry; most sea dances are variations on the dancing already described. The songs for these dances are almost always mournful, and the dances are slow and emotive. Most involve a solo dancer and a chorus of men, kneeling on the ground and making large circular movements with their arms in imitation of rowing. These arm movements lead the upper body forward, up, and sideways.

Every phase of the pearling process was associated with a genre of poetry, and most phases were also occasions for dancing. At the beginning of each pearling season, it took three to four days for the boats to be readied for the sea. During these days, a dance called *al-sinkini* was performed to mournful poetry. This dance was accompanied by hand clapping and the *ṣurnāy*, a reed instrument. On board their boats, pearl divers would dance variations of the *ḥjiri* in the evenings. Dancers kneeling in a line strike the floor rhythmically with their hands. Then, with elaborate hand and arm movements, they come up to a sitting position. After some time, they repeat the process, again lowering the upper body and striking the floor with their hands. Meanwhile, a soloist may stand and improvise; sometimes he dances while holding the anchor. Pulling up anchor also occasioned dancing. When the pearling vessels were ready to return to shore, a dance called *al-'arḍa al-bahriyya* 'the sea *'arḍa*' was performed. They would meet in a designated area to await the arrival of the prince's vessel, then celebrate for two or three days. Two lines of men chanted poetry while lines of drummers stood behind them and sword carriers stood behind the drummers. Local leaders (*shaykhs*) and sometimes the prince himself would participate in a sea *'arḍa*.

Large merchant ships, which had more space and afforded more leisure time, would sometimes take along a professional singer and master of ceremonies (*nahām*) who would organize nightly music and dancing events.

Agriculture

In Bahrain, farm workers thresh wheat using rhythmic work-related movements that are locally classified as agricultural dances. Men, carrying a palm frond in the right hand, circle a large pile of wheat. To a musical rhythm, they take turns beating the wheat until it is all threshed. The process of cracking wheat to make a special dish, *harīsa*, is an occasion for another of these dances in Bahrain and Qatar. The wheat is placed in a long wooden container and crushed by being pounded with a large, heavy stick. Dancers—men and women—take turns rhythmically pounding the wheat while moving their bodies backward and forward. Lightly stepping on sorghum seeds in the process of sowing constitutes a dance in the northern highlands of Yemen. The evenings after harvests also provide an occasion for dancing in parts of the Arabian Peninsula.

Entertainment dances

The vast majority of dances in this region—only a few of which can be described here—are performed purely for entertainment.

The traditional dance of Ṣan'ā', the capital of Yemen, and its surrounding communities is a couple dance called *dasa'*. The two dancers perform three parts, each part characterized by a slightly faster beat than the preceding one. In the first part, the dancers, side by side, outline a square on the floor through a series of weight shifts punctuated by small, quick circles drawn by the left foot, held slightly above floor level. Dancers, remaining side by side, may turn and perform with their backs to the seated audience. (By the 1980s, the more accomplished performers were omitting this first part of the dance, considering it to be too slow.) The second part has a faster beat and more complicated footwork. Again, a square is outlined on the floor, but now this is done with considerably more flourish and with faster turns, and the orientation of the body remains forward. A good dancer barely touches the floor during this second segment. The last part is also fast, but the step is a simple sideways weight shift. When two men perform *dasa'*, they face each other and move around each other instead of dancing side by side. They hold daggers in their right hands and hold each other's left hand. Some men also shimmy the upper body.

This dance is usually performed in gender-segregated contexts but may be performed by a man and a woman in the intimacy of the home. In both women's and men's dancing, partners are chosen from close friends and relatives. The dance accompanies sung poetry and *'ūd* music in towns and cities, and *mizmār* in rural areas. [See SONG POETRY IN THE ARABIAN PENINSULA and *AL-GHINĀ' AL-ṢAN'ĀNĪ: POETRY AND MUSIC IN ṢAN'Ā'*].

The dancing performed to *ṣawt*, a genre of music that has become popular in Kuwait, Bahrain, and Qatar, is reminiscent of the *dasa'* of Ṣan'ā' in its rhythm, forward focus, and weight shifts.

Sharḥ, a dance from southern Yemen, currently competes with *dasa'* in popularity. Also a couple dance, it is more expansive and more flowing than *dasa'*. The dancers begin at opposite ends of the performance space and appear to glide toward and then past each other, turning 180 degrees when they reach the far end of the space. They step forward with one foot, then press downward on the ball of the other foot (again, as in the samba) to propel themselves up and forward before stamping the forward foot lightly; then they repeat this step starting on the other foot. Their hips and shoulders may sway with the movement. This dance is fast and light. Depending on the context and the community, it may be performed by a man and woman, two men, or two women. In one variation, a man leads a woman by the hand in and around a space formed by a curved line of men. The men in the line take turns dancing with her.

Several dances accompany a genre of poetry known as *al-sāmīrī*. In Saudi Arabia, two lines of kneeling men face each other. A poet stands between them and dictates verses, which are then repeated by each line in turn, much in the manner of *al-'arḍa*, although the poetry used is of a different genre. In *al-sāmīrī*, poet and drummers remain in their lines. The lines of dancers move their backs in undulating movements. In *sāmīr*, also called *masāmīr*, two or three veiled women dance between two lines of men. The songs, composed extemporaneously, praise the beauty and artistry of dancers. Dancers may teasingly snatch an article of clothing from the lines of men, to be redeemed with a token gift.

In Saudi Arabia and Yemen, the mother of the bride or the groom dances with a tray on her head. On the tray are lit candles, arranged in a circle around incense, spices, flowers, and eggs. It is considered bad luck if the candles do not remain lit for the duration of the dance.

An appealing traditional dance performed by women in coastal towns along the Gulf is the *farīsa* 'hobbyhorse dance'. The chorus is made up of a circle of women playing tambourines. A dancer wearing a cardboard "horse" performs in the middle of this circle. Sometimes another dancer, dressed as a man, leads the "horse" around.

Al-murādā is performed by women in Qatar and Bahrain. In this dance, no musical or percussive instruments are used; the beat is maintained by fast stamping. Two lines of women stand shoulder to shoulder and hand in hand. The two lines alternate singing, while the women lift a foot to step forward and back. After two or three verses, the first line moves forward to meet the second, then retreats while the second line comes to meet it.

Dances imported to the peninsula by immigrant communities include *al-līwa*, a genre performed on the Red Sea coast as well as in the Gulf countries. This dance, which consists of a slow walk in an open circle, has no leaps or deep knee bends. The dancers step forward with a slight turn, step back, and sometimes execute a complete turn. *Al-līwa* dances, performed by men and women to pentatonic music, are emotive. The songs speak of separation and sorrow, and the musical instruments are the *ṣurnāy* and drums. Some of the lyrics contain Swahili expressions, indicating an East African origin.

Another import is *al-hubbān*, which is performed in Kuwait and the United Arab Emirates by Iranian immigrants. This dance is named after the bagpipe, its signature instrument, and is so popular that professional groups are hired to perform it at weddings and other celebrations. A line of women faces a line of men, with a large number of musicians in the middle. Men begin the dance by singing (the women in this dance do not sing). The *hubbān* follows the singers, playing the melody associated with the song, and then the drumming begins. The movement begins with the line of men retreating two steps while the line of women advances two steps. Then the women retreat while the men advance. This pattern is repeated for the duration of the song. The lines then take two steps sideways. The player of the largest drum begins to dance between the two lines. After this, a woman holding handkerchiefs in her hands goes into the middle and begins to twirl. A man joins her, moving with bent knees, shifting his weight forward and back while pressing on his insteps.

New dances are continually being added to individual repertoires. Those who are exposed to Western dances or Egyptian belly dancing through television or travel often teach these dances to their friends. Thus contemporary urban celebrations may include the latest Western popular dances as well as traditional dances.

Dancing at healing ceremonies, *zār*

Zār is a healing ceremony intended to exorcise *jinn* (spirits) from people who are believed to be possessed. *Zār* dancing frequently ends in a trance. Variations of *zār* are widespread throughout the region. In Saudi Arabia, *zār* dancing is linked with *sāmīrī* poetry. On the Gulf, this dancing is named after the *ṭanbūra* or *nūbān* 'bowl lyre' because of the importance of this instrument to it. There are a number of variations, some of which are performed only at healing ceremonies whereas others may also be performed at celebrations. A defining characteristic of *ṭanbūra* is that (as noted above) the dancers wear belts hung with goats' hooves, which rattle when they stamp their feet.

Religious dancing

Devotional dancing, when combined with praise of God and the ritualistic repetition of the names of God, is thought to lead to inner harmony and oneness with God. It is performed during Sufi mystic rituals. On these occasions (in contrast with occasions when dancing is performed for entertainment), the clothing worn is plain and simple. Devotional dances vary according to the Sufi order. Movements may involve a simple swaying back and forth, small sideways steps, or shimmying and leaping. Leaps may be accompanied by sensational feats such as piercing the body with a sword or some other sharp object. If no blood flows or if the wound heals quickly during the ceremony itself, that is taken as a sign of the devotee's deep faith. Religious orthodoxy frowns

on Sufi rituals, and they have declined or gone underground in recent years because of increased religious conservatism in this region.

DANCE AS A SOCIAL ISSUE

Traditions related to dancing in the Arabian Peninsula are relatively unknown in the West, for a number of reasons. For one thing, the peninsula—unlike Southeast Asia or Europe—has no established tradition of classical theater that would have interested early historians of dance. Second, belly dancing, which has captured the imagination of people in Europe and the United States, was not traditionally performed in the peninsula. Third, most dancing in the peninsula is informal entertainment and takes place in or near the home and at traditional evening celebrations, which foreign visitors are not likely to attend. Fourth, in some parts of the peninsula dancing is important at festivals associated with visits to saints' shrines, and such visits are not widely publicized, because religious leaders tend to disapprove of them. Finally, Arab scholars rarely write about dancing, which is considered secondary to poetry and music and indeed is often regarded as frivolous play unworthy of scholarly attention. When Arabic treatises on science, mathematics, and medicine were translated into European languages, there were no comparable works on dancing.

Prohibitions against dancing are a significant social issue. In the late 1940s, for example, *lu'b* dancing was banned by the ruling imam of North Yemen, ostensibly for religious reasons but most likely because some of the poetry sung at dance events was critical of the imamate. The ban did not stop dancing; a small *'ud* was developed that could be carried unseen under loose clothing; people stuffed their windows with cushions to muffle the sound of music or danced in windowless storage rooms that had been transformed into reception rooms; and the ban was not enforceable in rural areas. Ironically, Imam Ahmad, who ruled North Yemen from 1948 to 1967 and maintained the official ban, is rumored to have been an excellent dancer, and fond of *lu'b*. Nevertheless, as a consequence of this ban, a number of musicians left San'a' to form music schools in the southern Yemeni towns of Hadramaut and Aden.

In the recent past, negative influences on dance have included a spreading religious conservatism that disapproves of dancing, especially mixed-gender dancing. This ties into a larger debate on the legality of dancing in Islam. Some religious scholars argue that dance, like music, can excite the emotions and lead people to improper behavior. Others believe that dancing in itself is permitted. In practice, one finds a range of interpretations, with most families in the region permitting dancing in prescribed contexts.

Political and economic changes have resulted in a decline of some dance traditions. Television has also influenced practices. On the one hand, watching television means that people have less time available for dance: instead of dancing during afternoon and evening visits, people are now likely watch televised serials. On the other hand, choreographed versions of traditional dances are often presented on television as "folk" dances. In some cases, such presentations have expanded dance repertoires by enabling people to learn and perform dances of other communities. In the final analysis, dancing in the Arabian Peninsula remains alive and well.

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