

Status and Preservation of Iranian Dance: Cultural Factors Influencing the Iranian Attitude Concerning Dance

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Introduction

Dance is an interesting topic for the Iranist and the dance researcher because of the peculiar position dance holds in Iranian culture. Iranians have something of a split personality when it comes to dance; most Iranians express interest and delight in dance, and most Iranian women have been taught to dance by their mothers, and in turn teach their children to dance. Yet, when at a gathering where dance music is played, these same women will insist they don't know how to dance, don't want to dance, and so forth, until literally forced onto the dance floor. Once there, their passion for and expertise in dancing are then amply displayed.

How can we account for this attitude concerning dance? I will discuss some of the factors that lead to the prevailing attitudes towards Iranian dance among Iranians. Using both historical and contemporary evidence, I will show that, though Islam and some of the political events of the 20th century have had some formative effect on these attitudes, the primary cause is found in traditional patterns of cultural behavior. Furthermore, these causes appear to be independent of Islam and the political events of the 20th century.

I first present data, both historical and contemporary, that bear upon Iranian attitudes about dance. I will focus primarily on attitudes about participatory dancing in private settings, but will also present data on attitudes about public and professional dance. I then draw some conclusions about the underlying causes of these attitudes.

Dancing in Private Settings

As mentioned above, behavior relating to dancing in private would appear to be at variance with real attitudes about dance. In my opinion, the root of this dichotomy lies in deep-seated social rules. Iranian rules of social behavior are very formal and prescribed. These rules form an elaborate system of polite behavior, called *taarof*, which consists of two aspects: firstly, formulaic phrases uttered during the usual human interactions of greeting, leave-taking, giving and receiving compliments, and so on; and secondly, prescribed behavior, such as rising when

someone enters the room, greeting by kissing cheeks while shaking hands, etc. Not to follow the rules of *taarof* marks a person as boorish, without culture or manners. Even when Iranians, in expressing their sincerity, say "*Taarof nemikonam*" ("I am not just being polite"), they are, of course, following the rules of *taarof*.

One of the behaviors prescribed by *taarof* is *hojb*, which is related to the word for veil, *hejab*. *Hojb* is a temporary, metaphorical veiling of one's desires, and is used on occasions where an immediate direct expression of emotion would be offensive or inappropriate. Examples of such occasions would be when being offered food or drink, or when having to deliver bad news or decline a request. When invited to partake, to be polite, one must refuse several times before finally accepting. Another occasion when *hojb* must be followed is when bad news must be conveyed or a request declined. The bad news or the decline of the request is never blurted out, but is first expressed as good news, perhaps emphasizing the positive aspects of the situation, before gently, perhaps obliquely, leading up to the full expression of the bad news or the decline of the request.

This behavior is manifest in attitudes towards dancing during the traditional evening entertainment at home. As Morteza Varzi expressed it:

Persians love dance and song. But, although some of them are very good at these performing arts, customarily they deny their skill, or even their knowledge of these things. They must be pushed into performance. But soon, they would get carried away with the dance music, and it would become difficult to stop them. At this stage everybody, skillful or clumsy, would be dragged into the dancing. This dancing would help them release the emotional tension built up by the music ... [Varzi:1988]

When dance music begins, to respond to it immediately by dancing would be considered, amongst Iranians, a breach of good taste and proper behavior. It shows a lack of subtlety, and too great an eagerness, that clash with the requirements of *hojb*. One must be forced a bit into doing what one wishes to do. Otherwise, one appears brazen and lacking in proper social sensibilities.

Some have interpreted this reluctance to dance as rooted in Islam. After all, the same behavior does appear to occur in some other Muslim countries, and some have interpreted *hadith* (the "traditions", or sayings, of the Prophet Mohammad) to be against dancing.

I do not, however, agree. The same pattern of behavior occurs in a wide variety of circumstances in traditional Iranian society, including those that are certainly not forbidden by Islam, such as accepting offered food. In fact *hadith* and

Qordn

both state that when the Muslim is invited to a meal, he must not refuse [Ali]. Therefore, I do not believe that *hojb* is rooted in Islam, but instead is rooted in Iranian norms of social behavior. It appears that this pattern of behavior may have been spread, along with other elements of Iranian culture, by the various conquerors of Iran, including the Arabs and Timur-i-Lang. But this pattern is *not* co-terminous with the spread of Islam.

Public Dancing and Professional Dancers

I will now present some data regarding attitudes towards professional dancers and public dancing, beginning with historical periods, and concluding with contemporary Iran.

Pre-20th Century Professional Dance

We know from period sources (such as travellers' accounts and court records) that professional

dancers were supported in the past by the royal and the wealthy. Accounts by westerners during the time of the Safavid Shah Abbas the Great describe a dancing school in Esfahan, the skill and beauty of the dancers, their ubiquity at evening parties, and so forth. [Sasani]

The situation was similar during the Qajar dynasty (1780-1905). Fath 'Ali Shah (1798-1834) in particular devoted a great deal of the royal treasury to all forms of art, and to dance. He was said to have "maintained a stately court and a large harem or *anderun* full of ladies groomed to the perfection of Persian taste for the amusement and pleasure of the Shah" [Falk:1972], including dancers. His successor, his grandson Muhammad Shah, furthered the support of dance, and "the dancing girls, those lavishly decorated women who typified the luxurious living of the monarchy" [Falk:1972].

Early 20th Century Decline: The Constitutional Revolution of 1905

The Qajar era was seen by many, especially towards the end, as a time of great political corruption. Many Iranians wished to become more like the Europeans they had seen, and wished to institute a more democratic form of government, modeled on the democracies of the West. Early and mid-twentieth-century Iran can be characterized as "a society in which traditional ideas and behavior are being indiscriminately discarded in the rush to adopt patterns of Western life which are equated with prestige and largess through association." [Hamada:1978]

The first major step came with the Constitutional Revolution of 1905, following which the Qajars were overthrown and Reza Khan crowned as Reza Shah Pahlavi in 1925. The Constitutional Revolution began a time of great cultural change in Iran. Iran became increasingly influenced by the West, largely as a result of political intrigues with Russia, Great Britain, and Germany. The decline in the Qajar monarchy was paralleled by a decline in the support and status of Iranian arts including dancers. Reform-minded Iranians were most eager to create democratic institutions to replace the monarchy. In their zeal, they seemed to feel that democracy could be brought about more quickly by imitating Western cultural institutions as well as political institutions. This began a period of generalized Iranian cultural self-hatred that to some degree still persists; anything Iranian was considered by some to be corrupt and degenerate. A reform of Iranian music along Western lines began, using Western instrumentation, notation, and musical forms. Instead of being performed in the traditional setting of a private home, a comfortable and private environment where dance formed an integral part of the entertainment, music began to be performed in concert halls, without dancers.

Along with other cultural changes, Iranian professional dance, and particularly the solo dancing that had been so heavily supported by the Qajars, fell out of favor with many Iranians. It became the province of prostitutes in low-class nightclubs.

Mid-20th Century Revival: The Era of Shah Mohammad Reza Pahlavi

The situation began to change somewhat during the time of Mohammad Reza Shah, the son of Reza Shah. His wife, the Empress Farah supported "the arts", and in 1968 provided funding for the establishment of an Iranian dance company, *Sazman-e Folklor-e Iran*. This company, called the "Mahalli Dancers" when they toured outside Iran, performed folkloric dances and dramatizations in dance of traditional poetry.

The Mahalli Dancers and other government-funded research and performing groups, however, had reformed dance along politically-correct lines. According to dancer Medea Mahdavi, "The political climate at the time raised hatred for anything Arabic, so in grant-assisted projects dancers lost any movements similar to Arabs, and the [Arab] influence was totally denied" [Mahdavi:1997]. As Abdollah Nazemi said to me, "They took all the *qer* out of the

dance; what is Persian dance without *ger?*" [Nazemi:1993]. Another fantasy that led to an alteration in Iranian dance was the harkening to some nationalistic pre-Islamic past, promoting "'pure' Persian dances, half of which [were] invented by government-funded projects [that sent] dancers to neighboring Russian [Soviet] states" [Mahdavi:1997].

Slowly, professional dancers became a more socially-acceptable part of at-home entertainment. In the 1970s dancers who were not prostitutes became available for parties and special events. These dancers performed traditional Iranian-style solo dancing, and began to be fashionable additions at the best parties.

The 1979 Islamic (Counter-) Revolution

Immediately following the Islamic (counter-)revolution of 1979, public performances of dance and music ceased; indeed, dance was banned [Shay:1996; Varzi and others, personal communications].

Dancers became targets of Islamic revolutionary fervor, leading to their arrest, imprisonment, and beatings [Morocco:1997]. Iranians visiting Iran who were known dancers were also harassed and detained when attempting to leave the country. [Nazemi:1991].

Even in the villages, which were culturally unaffected by the 1905 Constitutional Revolution, dance became socially undesirable after the 1979 Islamic (counter-)revolution. One American woman anthropologist who lived in an Iranian village both prior to and during the revolution told the story of one young Iranian villager who, two months after the Islamic revolution, forbade his sister to have dance and music at her wedding. It is worth noting, however, that several months later revolutionary zeal had relaxed to the point that when this young man got married, he did have music and dance at his wedding.

Attitudes about dance in Iran even had an effect on Iranians of the Diaspora. In 1983 an Iranian dance teacher in Los Angeles, who had never performed in public before was persuaded to dance on a Los Angeles-based Iranian television program using a shadow-projection so that her face would not be seen. When the shadow projection could not be made to work, she reluctantly agreed to dance in front of the camera. Two days after this program was aired in Los Angeles, she received a phone call from her parents in Iran. They had heard of this performance, and despite having themselves formerly owned a successful nightclub in Iran, were distressed that she had danced in public.

Contemporary Iran

The current situation in Iran is murky, and contains many inconsistencies that cannot be resolved until more disciplined field investigations are done.

Certain village and tribal folkloric dances may be headed towards extinction. The tendencies of previous governments to urbanize and settle trans-humant tribes, which already created serious obstacles to preservation of folk dances, have been supplemented by Islamic revolutionary and other forces. The result has been an effective ban on certain traditional music and dance forms, and the separation of what remains from the social context which developed and preserved them. In addition, the fear of losing employment and respectability prevents those who still know the dances from wishing any public exposure in connection with dance. For example, I recently began to think of making a video of my 1975 field research of Qashqai dance, which included some film from a tribal wedding, but also some footage of one woman who consented to be filmed in Tehran. I asked through the family if she would permit me to use this footage in a commercial video on Qashqai dance. I got word back via her relatives that she was very sorry,

but she had a good job in Shiraz now and feared that her job would be jeopardized if such a video were seen in Iran.

Urban music and dance forms are in some cases faring better. Traditional notions of the ultimate privacy of the home permit an environment for preservation of traditional forms behind closed doors. While public performance opportunities have been limited, the home-and-family setting continues to function. A recent new report about teenagers arrested for dancing at a private party in a home, while distressing, indicates that from the point of view of the average Iranian, dance in private is still, at least for now, a going concern.

Reports of government-sponsored performances of folkloric dance by men only, for foreign male visitors (a group of university lecturers from Bristol, England, returned from a tour of Iran with a tale of being entertained, in a former slaughterhouse, in an evening of traditional Iranian food, music, and a troop of male dancers. All the audience were men, and all were foreigners.), and of dance teachers working in isolation, without an official school or government support are unconfirmed, yet intriguing. [Mahdavi:1997]

Current Situation in the Diaspora

It is interesting to contrast the attitudes of Iranians in the Diaspora about dance with those now living in Iran. Public and professional dancing are appreciated by Iranian audiences in the Diaspora, but few Iranians are willing to perform [Shay:1996].

Whatever may be the real situation of dance in Iran today, we can take heart that Iranian dance is at least alive, if not entirely well, in the Iranian Diaspora. Several notable dancers and dance companies exist to preserve the traditions. There is more Iranian dance music available on CD and cassette tape than ever before, and videotapes of dance, from old Iranian television programs to instructional videos and slickly-produced video of some of the Los Angeles-based dance companies, are also available.

Conclusions

To conclude, *hojb* appears to be a more significant factor than Islam in the reluctance of Iranians to participate in dance in private settings, and may have an influence on attitudes towards professional dancers who, after all, display no *hojb*, no reluctance to dance, and are therefore somewhat beyond the pale of polite society.

Any Iranian who wishes to dance in a private setting may do so, provided that *hojb* and the rules of *taarof* are followed. Thus these social rules control the *process* of *beginning* to dance, but do not *prevent* dancing. It is therefore not because of any law of Islam that Iranians are reluctant to dance; rather, they do not wish to appear to be *eager* to dance. In addition, this attitude about dancing prevails amongst *all* Iranians, regardless of religion: Jewish and Bahai Iranians also show the same initial reluctance to dance. This attitude persists among Iranians of the Diaspora, even among those for whom Islam is not a dominant factor in their lives, and in locations where dancing is a perfectly legal and acceptable activity.

This is not to say that Islam and the political events of the 20th century have been without their effect on dancing in Iran and on Iranians of the Diaspora. I simply assert that *hojb* is the dominant factor determining behavior concerning participatory dance in private settings.

In closing I would like to acknowledge the various people whom I have used as sources for this paper, including Margaret Caton, Morocco, Haleh Farjah, Geoff Hamada, Kahena, Medea Mahdavi, Abdollah Nazemi, Anthony Shay, and Morteza Varzi.

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