

## The state of dancing traditions in the Arabian Peninsula

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*Al-sha‘b illī lā yirquṣ yīmūt*

“A people (or nation) that does not dance will die” is a Yemeni proverb that expresses the importance attached to dancing on the Arabian Peninsula. Although very little has been written about its vibrant dance traditions, dancing has long been considered indispensable at weddings and social gatherings on the Peninsula. Even today, when most people spend more time watching television than dancing, literally hundreds of distinct named dances are performed in the region (Adra 2002). Dancing marks religious and national holidays, harvest celebrations, major fishing, and in the past, pearling, activities. Small social gatherings of friends and family often include some dancing. Each district, and sometimes each village, has its own dances. With a few exceptions, this is a folk tradition in which people dance for pleasure, although in some places and contexts dancing is relegated to professional dancers who, unfortunately, continue to suffer from low social status.

Some dances are performed only by men, some only by women, and others by men and women together. Whether a dance is gender-segregated or mixed depends on the particular dance, its context of performance, and local attitudes. In different locations, a dance may be associated with different social groups or rules of performance. This flexibility extends to other variables as well. In some communities, only married women dance at social gatherings, and in others only young unmarried girls do so. Sometimes community leaders, such as *shaykhs*, perform, and in other contexts only professional dancers do so. Each dance has a number of variations. Sometimes the same dance performed in several communities may be given a different name in each. Or, the same name, e.g., *li‘ba*, may refer to different dances (Jean Lambert 2002 makes a similar observation with regard to music in Yemen.) Dancing is accompanied by sung poetry, drumming, instrumental music played either by amateurs or professionals, clapping, foot stamping, and/or a vocal marking of the rhythm by spectators. Dancing in this region is thus inseparable from poetry and music.

Improvisation characterizes this dance tradition and leads to wide variety in steps and movements. Level shifts, such as knee bends, leaps, and straight jumping on flat feet are common, as are running steps, step-hops, and shaping space with one’s feet or arms. Women commonly swing their hair while holding the right hand lightly on the upper chest. The dancing of seafaring communities is characterized by large arm movements that mimic rowing activity often in a kneeling position. With the arm leading, the upper torso is propelled forward to the floor, up to a straight back, then forward and down again.

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Many dances on the Peninsula involve lines of dancers. Parallel lines are common, but dancers may be arranged into a square, horseshoe, or a circle. Shoulders touching, dancers in a line may sway to the music, step sideways or back and forth, move toward each other and back, and/or turn in unison. They may brandish weapons, clap, or play drums or tambourines, according to the particular dance. One or two dancers may improvise in the space articulated by the line. When poets or musicians are involved, they also perform in this space or at one end of the line.



*Figure 1. Al-Shabwānī performed in celebration of a wedding.  
Seyun, Hadramawt, Yemen. Photo: Daniel Varisco.*

### **A General Classification of Dances in the Peninsula**

Dances of the Peninsula can be classified broadly as exhibition dances, religious dancing and play. In some communities, rhythmic activities related to work are considered dancing:

#### ***Exhibition Dances***

In line with local understandings of these genres, I classify as “exhibition” dances, men’s dances that were formerly associated with warfare but are now performed during religious and national holidays and other festive occasions. These dances represent the chivalry, strength, courage, generosity and hospitality associated with Arab tribes, their *‘ird* and their *barā’a*. Although many other dances of the region are deemed frivolous, these dances are a source of pride. Even heads of state openly participate in exhibition dances without loss of esteem. Class and other status distinctions are erased in these dances, and political leaders perform along with the poorest members of the population,

thus embodying the formal equality of the members of a tribe. Exhibition dances include the *'arḍa* (literally, exhibit, display), also known as *razīf* or *galāṭa* in Saudi Arabia, *al-'arḍa al-ḥarbiyya* (literally, war *'arḍa*) in Kuwait, Bahrain, and Qatar, and *al-'ayyāla* in the United Arab Emirates (UAE), as well as the Yemeni *bar'a*.



Figure 2. *Bar'a* in al-Maḥjar, al-Ahjur, Yemen. Photo: Najwa Adra.



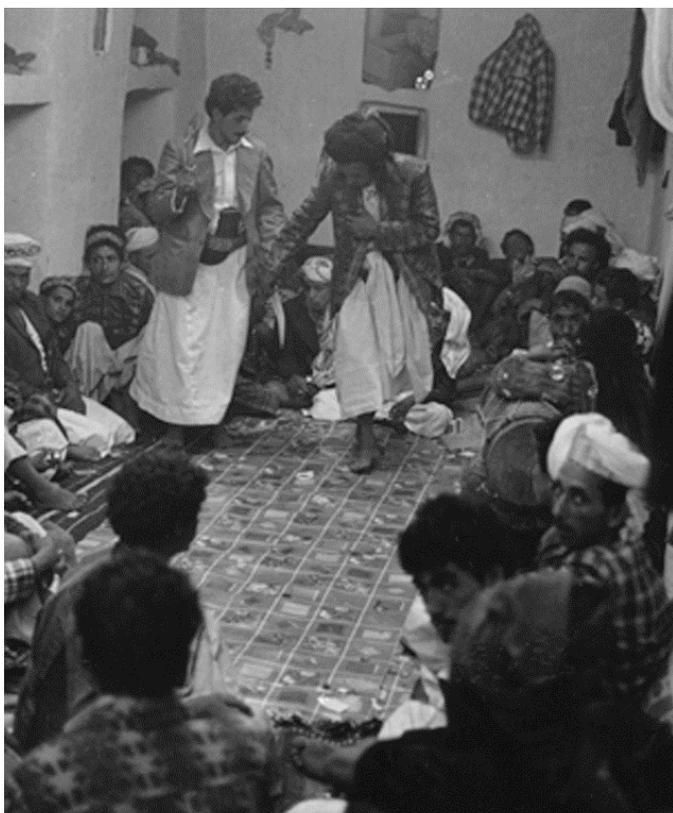
Figure 3. *Bar'a* in al-Ḥuṣn, al-Ahjur, Yemen. Photo: Najwa Adra.

### **Religious Dancing**

*Dhikr*, the dancing or rhythmic movements associated with mystic Sufi ritual appears to have varied widely by region and community. These have been so suppressed in the past 30 years that little reliable information is available on their current practice. Exhibition dances, which carry a heavy symbolic load, and dances related to Sufi ceremonies are not defined as *raqs* (the generic term usually translated into the English and French “dance”). They are referred to locally simply by their names.

### **Play**

Most other dances, including those associated with *zār* healing ceremonies, are classified as *raqs* or *lu‘b* (literally, play) without the exalted tribal connotations of exhibition dances or the religious connotations of *dhikr*. Perhaps the most dramatic of these were the dances of pearling and merchant ships, which are still performed but not in connection with cycles of seafaring. Other examples of *raqs* include the intricate Sanaani *das‘a* and the slow and sensuous traditional *al-lā‘ibiyya* (or *al-qabīliyya*) that



was performed in rural Yemen until it was overtaken by faster urban dances. *Sharḥ*, a genre that includes several dances from southern Yemen, currently competes with *das‘a* in popularity. Also a couple dance, it is more expansive and flowing and much easier to perform. Several dances are performed to the genre of poetry known as *al-sāmīrī*. In coastal towns along the Gulf, the *farīsa*, or hobby horse dance, is performed by women. *Al-murādāh* is also performed by women in Qatar and Bahrain with no musical or percussive instruments. Fast stamping of the feet maintains the beat. Along the coasts, *ṭanbūra* or *nūbān* (bowl lyre) dances are associated with *zār* ceremonies.

Figure 4. *Li‘ba* in *al-‘Irra*, *al-Ahjur*, Yemen. Photo: Daniel Varisco.

Dances imported to the Peninsula by immigrant communities include *al-līwa*, performed both on the Red Sea coast and Gulf countries and *al-hubbān*, which is performed to the bagpipe in Kuwait and the UAE. New dances are constantly added to individual repertoires. Those who are exposed to Western dances or Egyptian *baladī* dancing through television or travel often teach these dances to their friends on their return. Thus, contemporary urban celebrations may include the latest hip hop as well as local dances.

### ***Rhythmic Movements***

Rhythmic movements often considered a form of dancing include the threshing of wheat in Bahrain and cracking wheat to make *harīsa* in Bahrain and Qatar. In Yemen's northern highlands, the rhythmic step used when sowing sorghum is called *das'a*, like the local dance. Also likened to dancing are the steps of people in public baths to encourage perspiration.

### **Cultural Significance**

As an anthropologist, I am primarily interested in how culture influences dancing behavior, and what dancing tells us about culture. As I have argued elsewhere (Adra 1983, 1998a,b) exhibition dances are metaphors of the dominant values that stress social responsibility, restraint, courage and hospitality. These values generate public behavior on the Peninsula. But what about the very popular dances classified as *raqs* and play? They have historically been ignored or derided by most scholars and are rarely performed around strangers; elites do not perform them in the presence of members of lower status groups or may refrain from dancing entirely. The performance of these dances is bound by myriad rules. *Raqṣ* and *lu'b* are associated with times of leisure, but only certain contexts are considered appropriate. Periodically, these dances have been condemned in the name of religion. Nonetheless, they are integral to the social life of the Peninsula, as they are to the Arab region. I suggest that these genres of dancing (*raqṣ*, *lu'b*) also enact an important aspect of Arab culture, but one that is not considered appropriate to exhibit. I believe that they represent contexts of intimacy rather than exhibition. For this reason they are classified as frivolous among the urban elite, and dancing events may be referred to by a euphemism, such as “wedding” (*urs*) or “song” (*ghinā*).

There is a potential conflict in Arab societies between the cultural valuation of social responsibility and an equally strong valuation of autonomy and self-expression. Culturally, this is resolved by limiting the contexts in which autonomy is allowed and separating these contexts as much as possible from public life. Within the intimacy of home, among close friends, in gender-segregated gatherings and in a few other venues, social rules are relaxed and people are expected to express themselves, assert their autonomy, and “let their hair down,” so long as this behavior does not spill into spaces defined as public (Adra 1983, 1998a, 2005). Dancing, along with other forms of play, such as joking behavior, is thus relegated to contexts defined as intimate. This explains why large gatherings that include dancing tend to be gender-segregated. They are public contexts, but gender segregation mitigates the cultural implications of playing and dancing in public.

With its focus on improvisation, individual virtuosity and sensuality, although not usually overt sexuality, dancing expresses freedom from social restraints. This is one reason that one finds considerable variation among families and communities in terms of when and where to dance and with whom. It also explains the ambivalence of elites toward dancing. For them, the public presentation of self is paramount. In this manner dancing, like some forms of music, provides a cultural counterpoint or corrective to what would otherwise be overly restrictive cultural tendencies.



Figure 5. Al-Shabwānī. *Seyun*, Hadramawt, Yemen.  
Photo: Daniel Varisco.

## Change

Recent exposure to dances from other communities through television and travel have expanded some local dance repertoires and/or replaced local dances with imported varieties. This by itself is not new. Given the value on improvisation, dancing on the Peninsula has changed continuously over time. The constant interaction and exchange with other parts of the world through trade and migration have provided an atmosphere in which new dances are continuously incorporated into local repertoires. (Local dances have also impacted dancing elsewhere. As we heard earlier, the Malaysian *zapin* is said to have originated in the Hadramawt.)

Other changes in the past 30-40 years, however, appear to threaten the very survival of dancing on the Peninsula. Although in some cases, dances learned on television have expanded local dance repertoires, other impacts of television are less positive. Greater access to television severely limits the time available for dancing. In the past, leisure time was spent in storytelling, poetic composition, making music and dancing. Watching television serials now fills up these time slots. Choreographed televised dancing has led people to question the value of improvisation. Many appreciate the orderly appearance of the choreographed dances they see. Yet improvisation has always been a foundational principle of dancing and music in the region. Likewise, State appropriation of men's exhibition dances has led to a homogenization of what were once diverse practices. A great deal of televised choreography imitates a model established by Russian folk dance troupes in the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century. Steps are simplified to the point of banality. Men and women's roles are stereotyped. Women are portrayed as silly accessories rather than essential dancing partners, thus diminishing and sexualizing their roles. The message is that indigenous forms are unworthy of portrayal on television, that only imported choreographies are "modern" or "evolved".

Conservative religious influences have been responsible for the reduction of dancing at weddings and other festivities and for nearly eliminating mixed gender dancing, once common in rural areas. In communities where women traditionally danced until dawn

during weddings, their dancing is now limited to daylight hours. Particularly endangered are Sufi dances, *zār* ceremonies, and dancing at Saints' shrines.

Socio-economic changes, including a decline in the economic and political importance of tribes, have, in some cases, led to a decline in exhibition dances. Ironically, the availability of education and new economic options to professional dancers and musicians has also negatively impacted the frequency and quality of dancing on the Peninsula. Dances once performed by professionals are now forgotten. Prices currently charged by professional musicians are no longer affordable to many urban and rural families. In one community in which I conducted fieldwork, dancing at weddings was banned for six to seven years because of the very high prices of weddings. Dancing was resumed in 2005, but limits were set for the length of wedding celebrations. While no one would recommend a return to the low status and poverty suffered by professional musicians and dancers in the past, this development threatens the survival of several local dance traditions.

This kind of change is not inevitable. Research on indigenous dances and efforts to document them could, and should, be encouraged. To better understand changes in the dancing, there is a need to analyze the aspects of form, structure and body attitude that have changed and to learn which of these have remained the same. When local dances are adapted for the stage or media, the choreography should represent and elaborate their complexity instead of the current tendency to simplify these dances or replace them with imported forms. Improvisation can be maintained even in a choreographed dance. (Ironically, dance companies in the West have been experimenting with improvisation just as dance companies in the Peninsula are shunning it.) And surely religious conservatives would prefer to see indigenous dances than the new highly sexualized dances currently being aired through the media.

The region is still in flux, so it is difficult to predict the directions in which changes are headed. In the long run, how will changes impact these rich and diverse dancing traditions? Further, how will changes in dancing behavior impact the culture of the Peninsula? Will a decline in improvisation lead to a greater rigidity in social rules, which are currently understood as situational? What will the impact be on women's roles, given that both religious conservatism and televised dances tend to portray women as mindless sexual objects? How will such changes impact rural women who have traditionally enjoyed high degrees of economic participation and mobility? These and other questions about dancing on the Peninsula beg to be examined.

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