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# Dance and Human Rights in the Middle East, North Africa, and Central Asia

ANTHONY SHAY

While presently dance, in many western eyes, generally constitutes a refined art form, a stage entertainment, or a social pastime, in the Middle East dance is widely perceived as a negative, ambiguous, and sometimes disreputable symbol of behavior that contains within it, in the view of large segments of the population, the potential for social disruption (*fitnah*).<sup>1</sup> At the same time, dance is also enjoyed as a social activity and an important means of expressing joy and happiness in socially approved contexts. Individuals in various regions of the Middle East sometimes put themselves at considerable risk of severe punishment and fines, and even death, to dance, since expressing joy at weddings, for example, constitutes an important societal value.

Given these radically differing perceptions, dance in some Middle Eastern societies intersects, sometimes violently, with issues of politics, ethnicity and gender, and thus can constitute a space for political resistance. The term *choreophobia*, which I coined to describe this ambiguity, helps us to understand this phenomenon. Any social action that can raise such powerful negative reactions that periodic attempts are made to ban it in its various forms can be viewed as an activity that is also saturated with potential subversive power.<sup>2</sup> In this context, dance provides a unique lens through which to analyze the dynamics of societal values and attitudes.

In order to understand the relationship of dance and human rights in the Middle East, North Africa, and Central Asia, the first step is to recognize that it is both complex and many-layered. Dance and its relation to human rights, especially regarding women, manifests itself in multivalent forms and does not lend itself to easy explanations. This essay therefore addresses complex issues

of the local and the transnational, Islam and fundamentalism, and the myriad forms in which dance is manifest in both public and private presentation and representation, ultimately attempting a fuller understanding of how dance forms a lightning rod for fundamentalist attacks in some Muslim regions.

The forms that these attacks take and the targets that they focus on vary from Algeria to Egypt, Turkey to Iran, Afghanistan to Pakistan and into Central Asia to the borders of China. Not only do government officials and organs such as the Taliban in Afghanistan, until their defeat in October 2001, and the Islamic Republic of Iran mount attacks against dance as a public performance activity, but they also often launch assaults against dance as a private social activity that happens behind closed doors. This is most frequently done through the use of zealous vigilantes. Consequently, these attacks constitute an assault against the rights of individuals to freely perform dancing and express their joy; in fact, to freely use their bodies. In Egypt, Iran, and previously in Afghanistan, official and quasi-official goon squads, known as the *pasdaran* and *basij*, would regularly patrol the streets listening for the sounds of dance music, native or western, not hesitating to break into people's homes to arrest and physically assault people whom they would find dancing. These attacks assume different guises and, moreover, have had different goals in different places. For example, in Egypt, individual members of Muslim brotherhoods, who are not associated with the government, attempt to threaten and intimidate individual targets, such as merchants who sell videos with dance scenes, or families who are planning to hold a wedding.<sup>3</sup> The government officials in Egypt fear the potential power of these groups and through passive behavior encourage Islamists to attempt to curtail other people's rights.<sup>4</sup>

Newspapers and other news media continue to offer evidence of the phenomenon of banning dance or punishing those who perform it in the Middle East; but ultimately, because the individual western writer/reporter often does not possess a comprehensive overview of how dance intersects with existing and historical perceptions of dancing, and other societal activities, such as feminist struggles in its myriad contexts, their accounts remain partial, and ultimately unsatisfying. Nor do these brief news accounts interrogate the specific interdictions against dancing, or the underlying reasons given by the authorities who enforce them in a particular city or country; rather, the popular media provide only specific, discrete instances of the clash of human rights and dancing, omitting the necessary historical and contextual information to elucidate its causes.<sup>5</sup>

This lack of understanding was displayed in the many conflicting accounts of the arrest, detention, and trial of an Iranian American male dancer, Mohammad Khordadian, which was widely reported and commented on in the American press throughout the summer and fall of 2002. While in Iran,

Khordadian was formally charged with corrupting the morals of youth for teaching dance classes in the United States in the Iranian American community. After spending a short time in prison, he was given a stiff fine of \$25,000 and "a suspended ten-year jail term. He was also barred from leaving Iran for a decade and from giving dance classes for the rest of his life. He will be jailed if he violates the ban."<sup>6</sup> He subsequently escaped to the West and is reported to be performing for the large Iranian community in Dubai.<sup>7</sup>

In this essay, Islam itself is first examined in order to determine how individual Muslims justify to themselves and to others the banning of dancing in various contexts. Following a brief discussion of Islam as it relates to dance, some of the myriad dance genres and contexts found in the Middle East, North Africa, and Central Asia are discussed. Finally, I consider the many ways in which many Muslims perceive dance, and then describe and analyze the local reactions to dancing in its complexity. This approach elucidates multiple meanings that create a pattern of behavior within specific cultural contexts.

## ESSENTIALIZATION

I use the term *essentialization* as a stereotyping and characterizing of all the individuals of a culture or society as thinking and acting alike, and holding the same views and attitudes. There is a strong tendency among some western scholars, as well as the general public, to essentialize the Middle East and Islam, to portray the *Dar-al-Islam* (House of Islam, i.e., the Islamic world) as a place of unity. Several negative symbols of the Middle East still loom large in various western media and in the popular imagination—the wild-eyed religious fanatic, the bomb-carrying terrorist, the sexy belly dancer, the dangerous and over-sexed sheik of Arabia, along with mosques, minarets, and oil fields.

Another aspect of essentializing is the belief that the entire population behaves in a lock-step fashion in regard to its belief in Islam, that all Muslims think and act alike. Just as in the West, the gamut of religious observance and belief varies widely; so, too, among Muslims one can find a wide variety of beliefs and commitments to Islam ranging from intensely fervent belief to atheism. It is important to grasp that in countries with large Muslim majorities, everyone who is not a member of a religious minority is considered a Muslim, whether or not that person is a practicing Muslim.

Contributing to this essentializing tendency is the way in which historians present the history of Islam and Muslim civilization in both the East and the West. For example, both in Iran and in the West, books and essays about Iranian history and art, as well as university courses on Iranian history,

are invariably divided into two parts: “Before Islam” and “After Islam.” This artificial division creates the notion that in AD 610 Islam arrived when the first verses of the Qur’an were revealed to the Prophet Muhammad, the lights went out, and the next day everyone awoke to an “Islamic” world. In fact, the formation of a specific Islamic civilization and art took three to four centuries to develop and it was not uniform throughout the Islamic world. The westerner must also put aside his or her often-cherished idea of wild-eyed fanatic Muslim hordes spreading Islam through fire and massacre, so beloved of Hollywood filmmakers:

The Muslim takeover largely occurred without physical destruction and without massacres, and one can point out only a small number of instances of major population movements within the conquered area. As a result the sum total of the art and the material culture of the pre-Islamic world remained as such with the functions, purposes, and associations it had before. But there is more to it than simply forms and meanings attached to forms. Islam also inherited an immensely complex set of collective memories, legends, and myths. This all means that the point of departure of Islamic art does not lie merely in a physical or aesthetic reaction to another art—but in the actual utilization by the Muslim world of the material, aesthetic, and emotional order of the conquered territories.<sup>8</sup>

In order to understand the ambiguous symbol that dance constitutes in many Middle Eastern societies, and how political attacks against dance are constituted, one must look at the basic tenets of Islam and the other Islamic sources upon which such attacks are often based. Issues regarding the propriety of and attitudes toward performing dance and music are considerably different in the Islamic Far East than they are in the Middle East. In Java, for example, dance is a highly esteemed form of cultural expression with a classical dance tradition associated with court culture. Thus, this essay does not deal with dance and human rights in a pan-Islamic context, but rather with that large contiguous geographic area comprising the Middle East, North Africa, and Central Asia.<sup>9</sup>

Many negative and ambiguous attitudes toward dance, as they are widely held in the Middle East, are in all likelihood not originally Islamic in origin, but were widely held in pre-Islamic times. C. E. Bosworth, a scholar of the Medieval Islamic period, includes entertainers, a class of individuals who danced, as among those who were considered by their contemporaries as members of the *Banu Sasan*, the name for associates of the underworld.<sup>10</sup>

It is important to note that dance and reactions to it are dynamic and contingent, as I hope to make clear with examples from Iran, which, due to the fascination of the western press with the Islamic Republic, is better

documented than other areas. In addition, the private and public attitudes and reactions to various genres of dance stand in sharp contrast to one another. For example, Attaollah Mohajerani, the minister of culture of Iran from 1997 to 2000, "plainly stated that 'dance is neither futile nor frivolous.' In fact, he praises Iran's folk-dance tradition and hopes to see it revived," a far cry from Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini's edict, issued twenty years earlier, against all dance as "frivolous."<sup>11</sup>

## ISLAM

Members of the Muslim clergy are the individuals whose pronouncements most often incite governments and populations to prevent or ban dance activities. However, they by no means form a unified body. Since the start of the Iraq War in 2003, many individuals in the West now realize that there exist at least two major divisions of Islam: Shi'ism and Sunnism. There are actually many more.<sup>12</sup>

Within all divisions of Islam there is little hierarchy such as that found in Christianity in which positions suggest a formal order of decision-making. Rather, for the most part, local religious leaders, whose opinions and pronouncements are known as *fatwas* when formally promulgated, gain local prominence because of their perceived scholarship. As an individual cleric achieves fame, his (never her) attitudes assume greater importance, while also coming into competition with other rising or established clergy who create diverse, often mutually hostile, groups of followers. I cannot emphasize enough that these legal opinions are not lightly considered; most Islamic scholars issue *fatwas* only after intensive study and deep consideration of the topic, weighing through all the evidence.<sup>13</sup>

Religion and religious differences and opinions garner the same heat, financial backing, and intense emotions that both politics and entertainment evoke for many westerners. "From top to bottom, Islam provided the central drama of urban social life."<sup>14</sup> This contentious environment remains a feature of Islam in contemporary Iranian life and constitutes one of the reasons why attitudes toward music and dance may be seen as potentially dynamic.<sup>15</sup>

Along with this diversity come certain basic tenets held in common by Muslims. All Muslims who are true believers consider that the Qur'an is the divinely revealed book of God, as revealed to the Prophet Muhammad in Arabic. Also, devout Muslims follow the five basic actions, sometimes known as the five pillars of Islam: 1) *shahada*, the profession of faith; 2) *namaz*, prayer five times a day; 3) *zakat*, the giving of alms to the needy; 4) *sawm* or *ruzeh*,

fasting during the month of Ramadan; and 5) undertaking the *hajj*, the pilgrimage to Mecca.<sup>16</sup>

In searching for the sources that members of the Muslim clergy use for their edicts, including those related to dance, one must look at the hierarchy of sources for law in the Islamic world. First, there is the Qur'an. The Qur'an remains silent on the topics of music or dance, as well as the visual arts. Had the Qur'an openly opposed dance and music, quite simply, dance and music would not exist in Islamic societies. This fact is important for those writers and scholars who make the problematic claim that Islam is hostile to dance and music.<sup>17</sup>

Having established that the Qur'an is silent on this topic, I rehearse the other basic elements individuals and governments frequently invoke to justify their attacks. First, apart from such violent crimes as murder, rape, and theft, for all believing Muslims, the Qur'an mentions three prohibitions: 1) Surah 31, verse 6 prohibits the telling of frivolous tales or jokes; 2) Surah 5, verses 1–4 prohibit the consuming of animals that are already dead (as opposed to after the proper ritual slaughter); and 3) Surah 5, verse 92 prohibits the drinking of wine, games of chance, and idolatry.<sup>18</sup> When Khomeini issued a *fatwa* prohibiting dancing, he called on Surah 31.<sup>19</sup>

Second in importance to the Qur'an in providing guidance for the proper conduct of life to Islamic communities are the *hadith*. The *hadith* constitute a body of observations devoted to the sayings and actions, personally witnessed by individuals, of the Prophet Muhammad. These sayings and actions of the prophet serve as a model of proper behavior for a Muslim.<sup>20</sup>

Finally, in addition to the Qur'an and the *hadith*, respected scholars utilize the precedent of existing laws and judgments, which are extended to new situations. Thus, Khomeini and his government immediately banned dance and most music after the Islamic Revolution on the basis that it was "frivolous." This was a term that he likely took from the precedent of the prohibition against "frivolous tales" or jokes and extended the meaning of the verse to include dance and other forms of entertainment such as theatre. Khomeini stated plainly that "there is no fun in Islam."<sup>21</sup>

In general, music, dance, and entertainment have created an enormous and heated discourse in the Islamic world, each cleric weighing in on this issue:

In the interminable debate about the *sama'* [musical and movement practices of the dervishes], legalists, theologians, spiritual leaders, custodians of morality in the cities, the *literati* and Sufi leaders all participated. The debate elicited views that varied from complete negation to full admittance of all musical forms and means, even dance. Between these two extremes we can find all possible nuances—some, for instance, tolerate a rudimentary form of cantillation and functional song, but ban all instruments; others permit

cantillation and add the frame-drum but without discs, of course forbidding all other instruments and all forms of dance, and so on. The mystic orders, for whom music and dance were an essential part of their spiritual and ecstatic exercises, were seriously concerned with the debate and participated ardently in the polemics. As a result, the controversy touches on a wide range of musical topics sometimes with a view to refuting them and at other times attempting to justify their adoption.<sup>22</sup>

A century ago, when cities were smaller and communications primitive and limited, the locally produced *fatwas* carried considerably less impact than edicts pronounced in this transnational age. The modern edicts carry influence across wide swaths of territory in North Africa, the Middle East, and Central Asia where millions can hear them on cassettes, the Internet, and other electronic media.<sup>23</sup>

Movement away from the local to the transnational, or “deterritorialization,” as cultural studies scholar Arjun Appadurai stresses, “whether of Hindus, Sikhs, Palestinians, or Ukrainians, is now at the core of a variety of global fundamentalisms, including Islamic and Hindu fundamentalism.”<sup>24</sup> I predict that we will see more prominent individuals pronounce against dance and that their words will be transnational, spoken across many borders, no longer affecting only the local contexts.

## THE IMPORTANCE OF CONTEXT

In many cases the crux of the issue is not so much dance, per se, as dancing in the wrong context. For example, a woman dancing in a social event attended by other women occurs frequently in Saudi Arabia,<sup>25</sup> but dancing at a private party in which men are present can result in severe punishment. While rarely ending in death, public floggings and imprisonment are common.<sup>26</sup> Islam regards the human body, both male and female, as the site of intense sexual emotions and longings. This is seen as natural and right, but because these emotions are so powerful it is regarded as necessary to maintain sexual relations within the proper legal context of marriage. All other sexual acts have the potential of *fitnah*, which I translate as the tearing apart of the social fabric or social chaos.<sup>27</sup>

For this reason, Muslim society attempts to contain these emotions by the segregation of the sexes so that women do not appear in improper garb in front of men who are not in close kinship with them (father, husband, brother, uncle, cousin, son, etc.). Professional female dancers are regarded as invading male space and raising unlawful passions through their dancing. However,



domestic dancing, while forbidden in Iran and Afghanistan, is both legal and popular in Saudi Arabia. Professional female dancers do not exist in Saudi Arabia. That is why in conservative Muslim states such as Saudi Arabia and Yemen, dancing is often a principal and approved entertainment and activity in women's quarters and also among men in segregated settings in which women dance for women and men perform for men, although as Adra notes, dance was banned for a period in Yemen by a hard-line cleric.<sup>28</sup>

## DANCE

Every investigator of dance in the Middle East is soon confronted with the ambiguous and negative attitudes toward dance that I have described above. In an earlier essay<sup>29</sup> I stressed the importance for scholars and students of dance in the Middle East to exercise care in labeling movement activities as "dance" that are, in fact, forms of martial arts, such as sword and shield displays in Turkey, Lebanon, Iran, and the Arabian peninsula and the *zurkhaneh* exercises of Iran, Afghanistan, and Azerbaijan; or of a spiritual nature such as the patterned movements of the Mevlevi dervishes in Konya, Turkey, or the Shi'i religious processions of *ashura* and *tasu'a* in Iran. There is a word for dance, *raqs*, which is found throughout the region, and I follow native usage in determining which activities constitute dance and which constitute non-dance. This is crucial in a Middle Eastern context because whereas dance may be a disreputable or unlawful activity, other forms of patterned movement activity are not illegal and may even be highly regarded by significant elements of the population.<sup>30</sup>

There are two main types of dance in the Middle East: regional folk dances, associated largely with the countryside and performed in villages and by tribal groups, and solo improvised dance, which is performed by the urban population. That having been said, one can see solo improvised dances in the Egyptian countryside where a domestic form of belly dancing constitutes one of the main dance genres for young and old, male and female, and one may see group folk dances in the towns. In some cities such as Tehran and Cairo, solo improvised dance is the only genre that is, or was, widely performed in domestic spaces, as well as in public.

### *Solo Improvised Dance in Context*

Dance scholars have subjected the topic of solo improvised dance in the Middle East to much misinterpretation and neglect. The overt perceived sexuality,

its frequent association with striptease dance, and its status as a form of popular culture are among the reasons for the scholarly avoidance. The *Oxford Encyclopedia of Dance* omitted the term *belly dance*, the best known form of solo improvised dance in the West, in favor of the presumably more polite French term *danse du ventre*.<sup>31</sup> This dance genre might be best conceptualized as a complex of movement practices that extends from the Atlantic Ocean in North Africa and the Balkans in the west to the western areas of China, Central Asia, and the western portions of the Indian subcontinent in the east. In each of these areas, the dance is characterized by improvised articulations of the torso, hands, arms, head, and facial features such as the eyebrows and mouth. In domestic settings dance skills range from professional levels of performance to individuals who are only able to sketch one or two movements.

The professional dancer of the highest level is able to perform technically dazzling articulations of the body.<sup>32</sup> Thus, throughout many of these regions of the Islamic world there are always both professional dancers and the general urban population for whom this genre is their principal expressive form of dance. It constitutes at once a social, folk, professional, and, more recently, classicized dance.

Performances of belly dance in the Egyptian cinema from the 1930s to the present and solo improvised dance in the Iranian cinema from the 1950s to the 1970s reinforced the negative attitudes toward solo improvised dance by frequently depicting professional dancers as fallen women who inhabit male-centered night clubs and improperly display their bodies by performing sexually suggestive movements in revealing costumes. The negative attitudes toward dance are more often directed at solo improvised dancing as performed by professional dancers, both male and female, who are widely viewed as sexually available, than people dancing in domestic contexts. And, many individuals who decry the lax morals of professional dancers happily perform the domestic version of this dance at weddings and parties as an appropriate sign of joy.

In addition to the complexity of traditional performance contexts and environments, several new genres of dance have been created and performed under the impact of westernization. Turkey, Iran, and Egypt have all had professional classical western ballet companies, and, except for Iran, still maintain them. Turkey boasts several modern dance companies. Western dance traditions do not arouse feelings of choreophobia among the majority of Middle Easterners as their own solo improvised dance forms do, because dance genres such as classical ballet carry the cachet of an elite western form of art. However, couple dances, such as tango and waltz, shock the vast majority of Middle Easterners because of the physical proximity and intimacy between the partners. In addition, several of these nation-states, such as Iran, Egypt,

Tunisia, and Saudi Arabia, created national dance companies to perform theatricalized “traditional” regional folk dances and/or solo improvised dance in the framework of highly sophisticated western choreographic strategies.<sup>33</sup>

## DANCE AND HUMAN RIGHTS

### *Bans and Punishments*

In Iran, as soon as the Islamic Republic was established in 1979, as one of his first acts, Khomeini banished all forms of dance. The classical ballet company, the national folk dance ensemble (known as the Mahalli Dancers in the West), and all other forms of dance (traditional and westernized, ballet, regional folk dances and domestic and professional solo improvised dance) were banned as “frivolous” and a sin. The professional dance concerts and rehearsals constituted performances in which unrelated men and women danced together and for mixed audiences. In my opinion, however, this ban was more a result of the ubiquitous sleazy cinematic portrayals of dance and its popularity in the red-light district and working-class nightclubs, where prostitutes entertained customers by performing solo improvised dancing.

The Iranian press widely publicizes each infraction of the law against dancing in an attempt to intimidate the populace. The free use of one’s body comes with a high price in these societies, and the power of dance and its bodily discourse are shown in the regime’s desperate attempts to stamp it out in all its manifestations. “The Islamic Republic routinely violates private spaces if there are suspicions of drinking, dancing, or gatherings of unrelated men and women.”<sup>34</sup> Conservatives in Iran find the concept of dance so threatening that images of Degas’ famous depictions of ballerinas in his painting *Dancers Practicing at the Bar* were airbrushed out of an art book, and scenes of dance in the film *Mary Poppins* were cut out by Iranian censors.<sup>35</sup> In such an environment of rampant choreophobia, it is a wonder that people still find the fortitude to dance.

I have interviewed dozens of Iranians and western scholars who return to visit Iran on a regular basis, and all of them, as well as several media reports, comment that people pay heavy bribes to guards in order to dance at weddings and parties. As *New York Times* reporter Stephen Kinzer observes, “Squads of policemen and religious vigilantes patrol the streets at night listening for the forbidden sound of Western music.”<sup>36</sup> In fact, according to informants, the goon squads listen for westernized popular music recorded in the United States in the thriving Iranian music business in Los Angeles, and Persian dance music as well.

“‘We live a double life in this country,’ said a middle-aged mother who voted for then-president Mr. Khatami. ‘My children know that when their schoolteachers ask whether we drink at home, they have to say no. If they are asked whether we dance or play cards, they have to say no. But the fact is that we do drink, dance and play cards, and the kids know it. So they are growing up as liars. . . . That’s a terrible thing, and I want it to change.’”<sup>37</sup>

After the death of Ayatollah Khomeini in 1989, reports began to circulate in the Iranian American community that dance was once again permitted in public space in Iran. However, these reports were the results of oversimplification. Only one form of dance has been permitted, in carefully segregated contexts, and that is regional folk dances. Men are now permitted to dance regional folk dances in front of all-male audiences. The government even permitted, if not encouraged, the video recording of these dances (*raqs-ha-ye mahalli-ye Iran*). While the minister of culture cited above stated that dance is not a frivolity and that he would like to see folk dancing revived, he remained silent on the topic of solo improvised dance. He clearly did not feel obligated to follow Khomeini’s blanket *fatwa*.

This governmental policy, or perhaps attitude, closely followed the way in which the performance of traditional folk music was first permitted in public performance a few years after the revolution, before public performances of western and Iranian classical music, and even some types of Iranian popular music, which now occur regularly. One of the principal reasons for the permission given for public performances of folk music, after an initial ban on all music and dance, was a result of the performers’ ability to legitimize the new Islamic regime through altering their song texts to praise the regime. In the same way, folk dances that were associated with this music, and the native male performers of these dances with their emphasis on athletic prowess and displays of masculine strength, were not viewed as potentially transgressive in their performances, in contrast to the way that solo improvised dance is perceived by many devout Muslims to contain the potential for *fitnah*, societal disruption.<sup>38</sup>

Permission to perform solo improvised dance still does not exist. Although regularly performed by men, urban solo improvised dance is largely viewed as a primary site of female performance. By way of contrast, reports have been circulating that women can openly learn solo improvised dancing in classes.<sup>39</sup> However, other reports indicate that these classes might be better characterized as quasi-open secrets.<sup>40</sup> These classes used to be held underground in strict secrecy, and there was always the fear that either the police or *basij* militia and the *pasdaran*, the quasi-official local goon squads, would break in and arrest and/or beat the participants.<sup>41</sup>

Journalist Camelia Entekhabi-Fard reports that Farzaneh Kaboli, one of the lead dancers with the former state folk ensemble, the Mahalli Dancers, gave a concert in the summer of 1998. According to the article it was the “first public performance of contemporary dance to be performed in Iran in two decades.”<sup>42</sup> Nevertheless, the concert was called “A Performance of Harmonious Motions”; the dreaded name *dance* could not be used. A later concert in December 2003 was closed down, and twenty-four dancers and Kaboli were jailed and shortly thereafter released.<sup>43</sup>

In Afghanistan, a total ban on all music and dance existed from 1996 under Taliban rule, until the United States and its allies overthrew the Taliban regime in the autumn of 2001. So strict was the surveillance that

although women are the main victims of the “virtue and vice” teams, men are not immune. In an incident this summer, Mr. Qalamuddin’s men hid on the roof of a house in the center of Kabul, waiting until men in an adjoining house began watching a video of an Indian dance movie, a popular genre in this part of Asia. According to a neighbor, one of the men seized by the Taliban, a 25-year-old welder who had been deaf since birth, died in custody within 48 hours.<sup>44</sup>

Attempts to ban dancing are not only contemporary phenomena, but have deep historical roots. In Egypt, Iran, Yemen, Turkey, and other areas, historical attempts to ban dance performances are well attested.<sup>45</sup>

In the present, increasingly over the past three decades in Egypt, the pressure of private fundamentalists to prevent dance has been intense. The government sometimes bows to the pressure, for example, banning belly dance performances to be shown on television, except in old films. Islamic brotherhoods attempt to bring pressure to bear on whole neighborhoods as well as individuals, and they are not hesitant to use violence to gain their ends:

In Cairo, a few neighborhoods are effectively controlled by Islamic fundamentalists. They manage to keep unwanted female entertainers out of their areas. Islamic fundamentalists occasionally disturb weddings, break the musicians’ instruments, and chase the female performers from the stage. This sometimes leads to fights with party goers, who defend the entertainers’ and their right to merriment.<sup>46</sup>

As if in league with the Islamists, Hosni Mubarak, the Egyptian president, blamed civil unrest in Cairo neighborhoods in the 1990s not on the Islamic fundamentalists, but on “Bellydancers [sic], (and) drummers from the slums.”<sup>47</sup>

Dancers also face social pressure to leave their profession. In Egypt, as Van Nieuwkerk and personal interviews have pointed out, the very term *dancer* or *entertainer* constitutes a deadly insult. One dancer in Egypt told me that she

left dancing, a profession she enjoyed, because she could not bear the taunts of “son of a dancer” that her son endured.<sup>48</sup>

In Turkey, the government ban on the Mevlevi dervish order practicing its patterned movement rituals is still largely in effect except as a theatrical tourist attraction. This ban was passed in 1926 when Atatürk was consolidating his political control over Turkey and felt the need to suppress the dervish groups because of their powerful hold on the people that he perceived the dervish orders had.<sup>49</sup> Unlike many of the other groups I have surveyed here, the Turks have a passionate love of their traditional regional folk dances that has been abetted by the Turkish government, which regards regional group folk dances as a visual icon of Turkish identity.<sup>50</sup>

### *Dance as a Space of Resistance*

At the same time, these laws and prohibitions, which attempt to banish dance from public discourse, and the disbanding of these dance companies, have also had the unintended effect of creating a space for resistance to regimes. Radio Seda-ye Iran (September 5, 1995) reported that a group of Iranian women exiles performed solo improvised dance at the International Women’s Conference in



In the security of a family basement in Afghanistan, relatives of a couple to be married dance, men and women together, with the women uncovered—behavior that would be punished on the street. This photo was taken just before the fall of the Taliban. Photo by Lynsey Addaro.

Beijing to taunt the official Islamic Republic's delegation. In another example, during a highly publicized soccer game held in Tehran between Iran and Australia in 1997, from which women were banned, a large number of women burst into the stadium and danced in the bleachers, while thousands more danced in the streets. The footage was shown on local Iranian television stations.<sup>51</sup> The YouTube Internet site is filled with many examples of Iranians dancing in public and private spaces, in defiance of the ban on dance.

Quiet and small rebellious acts of dancing also exist throughout the country:

"I'm tired of high prices. I'm tired of all of this unemployment. I'm tired of someone telling me I can't dance or can't read this book or watch that movie. It's gone too far and I'm ready to fight back," said Ali, a defiant 18-year-old with long, meticulously coifed black hair and blazing blue eyes. Ali, it should be noted, is from South Tehran, site of Iran's teeming slums and the *mostazafin* (the oppressed), in whose name the revolution was fought. But today, Ali and his South Tehran friends just want the right to dance . . . and invited giggling girls to dance with them.

Finally, one brave young girl, her brown scarf displaying dangerously large amounts of her chestnut-colored hair, accepted Ali's exhortations and joined the circle of boys dancing. It was a defiant moment, its importance not underestimated by the crowd, who gave the girl a rousing cheer for her courage. After all, Iran's morals police, the *komiteh*, could punish the offending dancers harshly for the sin of dancing in public and mixing with members of the opposite sex.<sup>52</sup>

Individuals, like the pseudonymous Ali above, who are frustrated with the restrictions, continue to defy the law against dance.<sup>53</sup> People throughout the vast region of the Middle East, Central Asia, and North Africa dance in the face of severe punishments and even death and continue to exercise their human rights, to own their own bodies and dance if, where, and when they choose. Dance will not only remain a negative symbol for some inhabitants of the Middle East, but increasingly it will constitute a symbol of joy and political resistance to repressive regimes like the Islamic Republic of Iran and the former Taliban regime in Afghanistan (1996–2001). Newspaper accounts of the fall of the Taliban were accompanied by numerous photographs of men dancing for joy and exercising the human right to dance after a long dark night of political and religious repression.<sup>54</sup> Dance, after frequent bans by zealous clerics and Islamist elements of the population, always manages to return, as it did in Afghanistan, and somewhat in Iran, where serious articles on dance are beginning to appear in Persian scholarly journals.<sup>55</sup> Hopefully these small steps provide potential proof of yet another renaissance of dance in the Islamic

Middle East. And with it, the right for human beings to possess the legitimate use of their own (dancing) bodies.

## NOTES

1. For brevity, in this essay the entire region of the Middle East, North Africa, and Central Asia is referred to as the "Middle East."

2. Anthony Shay, *Choreophobia: Solo Improvised Dance in the Iranian World* (Costa Mesa, Calif.: Mazda Publishers, 1999).

3. Personal interviews in Cairo, January 19–20, 2000.

4. Anthony Shay, "Dance and Jurisprudence in the Islamic Middle East" in *Belly Dance: Orientalism, Transnationalism and Harem Fantasy*, ed. Anthony Shay and Barbara Sellers-Young (Costa Mesa, Calif.: Mazda Publishers, 2005), 110.

5. A *New York Times* story demonstrates this problem: "With their [Taliban] rule comes their rules: no music, no dancing, no mingling between unrelated men and women, according to their stern version of Islam," "An Afghan City Where Taliban Keep Grip Loose to Keep Power," International Section, July 1, 2001, 7. The (unnamed) reporter, while alluding to ethnicity, like most casual reports, failed to note that under the veneer of the Taliban as a fundamentalist Islamic movement, much more importantly, there exists a titanic ethnic struggle between the Pashtun majority on the one hand, and the large Persian (known as Dari in Afghanistan) and Turkic-speaking minorities in the north and west on the other. Because the media has focused on issues of Islam, they have largely failed to fathom the ethnic divide, which has resulted in terrible massacres.

6. Sandra Marquez, "Dancer's Detention Alarming to Emigres," *Los Angeles Times*, July 26, 2002, D4. This news was not, however, widely or extensively reported in Iran. The reluctance to publish this story may have been occasioned by the fact that Khordadian holds American citizenship and there is much behind-the-scenes diplomatic activity occurring between Iran and the United States. His sentence, compared to others who have been charged with dancing, was extremely light. Generally, those people found dancing are publicly flogged. The entire affair was widely discussed and commented on through the media in the Iranian American community.

7. Jamal, personal interview, June 19, 2007.

8. Oleg Grabar, *Formation of Islamic Art*, revised and enlarged ed. (New Haven: Yale University Press [1973], 1987), 41.

9. I do not wish to create the notion that the Middle East is the only region of the world in which dance is attacked and attempts made to ban its performances. Fundamentalist Christian groups in the United States have attempted to ban dancing activity since the sixteenth century, and many still rail against it. The emphasis in the United States, however, as Ann Wagner points out in her study, *Adversaries of Dance: From the Puritans to the Present* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1997), was to prevent men and women from dancing together on a social basis. In the Middle East, dancing was already segregated and dances do not exist in which a man takes a woman



into his arms, such as the waltz or fox trot. (See also Elizabeth Aldrich's essay, "Plunge Not into the Mire of Worldly Folly: Nineteenth-Century and Early Twentieth-Century Religious Objections to Social Dance in the United States" in this volume.) In the Middle East the attacks are made upon dancers and/or dance events in which there is an improper presence of specific individuals, such as females dancing in front of males who are not in proper kinship relationship to them.

10. Clifford Edmond Bosworth, *Mediaeval Islamic Underworld: The Banu Sasan in Arabic Society and Literature* (Leiden, The Netherlands: E. J. Brill, 1976), 1.

11. Canadian Broadcast Company, "Dance Isn't Frivolous, Says Iran's Culture Minister," *CBC Infoculture*, August 23, 1999.

12. "It would also be misleading to assume a uniformity of Muslim identity. The Shi'a, the Alevis, the Muwahhidun (the Wahhabiyya) of Saudi Arabia, the Ibadiyya, the Isma'iliyya, the Zaydis, the Sunnis, and so on, all possess—at least on the basis of self-assertion—a Muslim identity." Dale F. Eickelman and James Piscatori, "Social Theory in the Study of Muslim Societies," in *Muslim Travellers: Pilgrimage, Migration, and the Religious Imagination*, ed. Dale F. Eickelman and James Piscatori (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1990), 16.

13. It is crucial to grasp that all Muslims are not bound to follow edicts promulgated by a specific clerical figure (such as Ayatollah Khomeini's famous *fatwa* against Salman Rushdie). Rather, individual Muslims have the choice of which individual cleric he or she most esteems and chooses to follow. Indeed, it should be pointed out that much of the travel that occurred in the Islamic world before the twentieth century was religiously and spiritually motivated through the visiting of shrines and seeking audiences with learned clerics and religious scholars whose fame had spread beyond the local.

14. Richard W. Bulliet, *Islam: The View from the Edge* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994), 98.

15. "Iran is still engaged in a battle over interpretations of Islam. The struggle is not only between Shiites and Sunnis but within Shiism itself. Contrary to perception outside Iran that religious truth is monolithic and that dissent is not tolerated, one of the defining traits of Shiism is its emphasis on argument. Clerics are encouraged and expected to challenge interpretations of the Koran, even those of the most learned ayatollahs, in the hope that new and better interpretations may emerge. It is a concept little grasped in the West." Elaine Sciolino, *Persian Mirrors: The Elusive Face of Iran* (New York: Free Press, 2000), 39.

16. In addition, the believing "true" Muslim should also participate in *jihad*, a concept that is poorly understood in the West. Jihad can take several forms in an Islamic context, ranging from an individual's single struggle not to eat during the fasting period (Ramadan), fighting local oppression, or participating in wide holy wars, such as the Crusades, for the protection of Islam.

17. See for example: Metin And, *Dances of Anatolian Turkey* (Brooklyn: Dance Perspectives 3, 1959); Hormoz Farhat, "Dastgah Concept in Persian Music," (PhD dissertation, UCLA, 1965); La Meri (Russel Merriweather Hughes), "Learning the Danse Du Ventre," in *Curious and Wonderful Gymnastic* (Brooklyn: Dance Perspectives 10, 1961), 43–44.

18. M. L. Roy Choudhury, "Music in Islam," *Journal of the Asiatic Society* 23, no. 2, Letters (1957): 43–102.
19. *Glorious Qur'an*, text and explanatory translation by Mohammad M. Pickthall (Des Plaines, Ill.: Library of Islam, 1994).
20. The study of hadith, each accompanied by *esnad*, a list of the chain of individuals who passed the observation of the saying and/or action of the prophet to others, has constituted a major area of study in the field of *fiqh*, Islamic jurisprudence. Because the hadith were passed down in chains of oral communications through the centuries, numerous scholars devoted their lives to separating the correct (*sahih*) hadith, from the weak or outright false (*da'if*) ones. Schools (Maleki, Shafii, Ash'ari, Ja'fari, Hanbali, Hanafi to name some of the most famous) formed around those scholars who were deemed as the most knowledgeable individuals to discern the true from the false hadith upon which the Muslim community depended for authoritative legal decisions. Clearly, there are many false hadith, and the different schools of interpretation differ as to which ones are accurate. For the interested reader, Choudhury's essay (*Music in Islam*, 1957) provides an excellent in-depth study of how the Qur'an, the hadith, and other sources have been interpreted in regard to music, and by extension dance, by Muslim scholars over the centuries. Unfortunately, terms such as *singing girls* and *dancing girls* are used interchangeably, but as I explained above, until well into the twentieth century, entertainers danced, sang, played instruments, acted, and performed acrobatic feats. This has resulted in confusion in modern terminology.
21. Sciolino, *Persian Mirrors*, 1; see also, Corporal Punishment Archive, "Flogging Sentences in Iran," *Reuters*, March 18, 1999.
22. Amnon Shiloah, *Music in the World of Islam: A Socio-Cultural Study* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1995), 31.
23. These religious figures do not, as is widely thought, turn their back on everything western. Without western technology their programs would not be possible. It was precisely through the manipulation of modern western technology that Ayatollah Khomeini triumphed over the Pahlavi regime and established the Islamic Republic. Advanced spying technology also enables the governments of Iran and Afghanistan to ferret out and punish those individuals who would defy their bans on dancing.
24. Arjun Appurda, "Global Ethnoscapes: Notes and Queries for a Transnational Anthropology," in *Recapturing Anthropology: Working in the Present*, ed. Richard G. Fox (Santa Fe, N.M.: School of American Research Press, 1991), 193.
25. Sherri Deaver, "Concealment vs. Display: The Modern Saudi Woman," *Dance Research Journal*, Summer 1978: 14–18; Saleem, personal interview, July 14, 2007.
26. "20 Sentenced for Attending Party," *Los Angeles Times*, February 5, 2007, A7.
27. Fatimah Mernissi, *Beyond the Veil: Male-Female Dynamics in a Modern Muslim Society* (New York: John Wiley & Sons, 1975).
28. Najwa Adra, "Tribal Dancing and Yemeni Nationalism," *Revue du Monde Musulman et de la Méditerranée* 67, no. 1 (1993): 161–68; Deaver, "Concealment vs. Display," 1978.
29. Anthony Shay, "Dance and Non-Dance: Patterned Movement in Iran and Islam," *Iranian Studies* 28, no. 1–2 (Winter/Spring 1995): 61–78.

30. Middle East dance scholar Najwa Adra points out that in Yemen the *bar'a*, which she calls a dance, is, through its naming and conception in the popular Yemeni mind, not considered *raqs* or *li'ba* (game). "When *li'ba* and the playing of musical instruments were banned on religious grounds by the Hamid al-Din Imams (who ruled Yemen in the first half of the twentieth century), *bar'a* was not included in the ban." Adra, "Concept of Tribe in Rural Yemen," in *Arab Society: Social Science Perspectives*, ed. Saad Eddin Ibrahim and Nicholas S. Hopkins (Cairo: American University in Cairo Press, 1985), 282.
31. Anthony Shay, "Danse du Ventre," *International Encyclopedia of Dance*, vol. 2 (New York [u.a.]: Oxford University Press, 1998), 344.
32. Anthony Shay and Barbara Sellers-Young, "Introduction," in *Belly Dance: Orientalism, Transnationalism and Harem Fantasy*, ed. Anthony Shay and Barbara Sellers-Young (Costa Mesa, Calif.: Mazda Publishers, 2005), 1–27.
33. Anthony Shay, *Choreographic Politics: State Folk Dance Ensembles, Representation and Power* (Middletown, Conn.: Wesleyan University Press, 2002).
34. Sciolino, *Persian Mirrors*, 98.
35. Azar Nafisi, "Veiled Threat," *Nation*, TNR Online, February 22, 1999, 1–2.
36. Stephen Kinzer, "Beating the System, with Bribes and the Big Lie," *New York Times*, May 27, 1997.
37. Kinzer, "Beating the System."
38. Shay, *Choreophobia*; and "Dance and Jurisprudence."
39. Mohammad Nejad, musician, personal interview, July 19, 2001.
40. Azardokht Ameri, dance and music scholar who lives in Iran, personal interview, June 23, 2006.
41. Farzaneh Kaboli, former soloist with and member of the Mahalli Dancers, personal interview, September 4, 1994.
42. Camelia Entekhabi-Fard, "Behind the Veil," *Mother Jones*, July/August 2001, 69. In the article Entekhabi-Fard quotes Kaboli as saying, "Next time we will see you in Roudaki Hall." The reference to the old prerevolution name of the main Tehran concert hall, which is now called Vahdat (unity) Hall, was possibly more revolutionary than the dance performance itself, and perhaps caused the concert to be closed.
43. *New York Times*, December 26, 2003, A4.
44. John F. Burns, "Sex and the Afghan Woman: Islam's Straitjacket," *New York Times*, August 29, 1997. Nevertheless, as in Iran, people risked the Taliban's goon squads to dance at weddings; see: "An Afghan City Where Taliban Keep Grip Loose to Keep Power," *New York Times*, July 1, 2001, 7; Naim Majrooh, "Talibans have Banned All Music in Afghanistan" (paper presented at the 1st World Conference on Music and Censorship, Copenhagen, November 20–22, 1998).
45. Adra, "Concept of Tribe in Rural Yemen," 282; And, *Dances of Anatolian Turkey*, 30–31; and Karen Van Nieuw Kirk, *Trade Like Any Other: Female Singers and Dancers in Egypt* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1995), 32.
46. Van Nieuw Kirk, *Trade Like Any Other*, 64.
47. *Egyptian Gazette*, 115th issue, no. 35,519, January 25, 1995, 1.
48. Personal interview, January 20, 2000.

49. In all likelihood the Sufis did not refer to their movement practices as dance, sometimes joining the hard-line Muslims in the condemnation of dance as entertainment (See And, *Dances of Anatolian Turkey*, 13–14.) Orthodox Muslims, however, called the Sufis' movements dance and often persecuted them for it.

50. Melissa Cefkin, "Choreographing Culture: Dance, Folklore and the Politics of Identity in Turkey," (PhD dissertation, Rice University, 1993).

51. Nafisi, "Veiled Threat," 12.

52. Afshin Molavi, "Letter from Iran," *Nation*, July 19, 1999.

53. *Kayhan*, a Tehran daily, reported that forty-two men and women received thirty-five lashes in the City of Shiraz for dancing at a party (March 1, 2001). Reuters reported that six Iranians celebrating *chahrshanbeh suri*, an evening celebration before the advent of Now Ruz, the Persian New year, were seized on the outskirts of the holy city of Mashhad for dancing and "goading passers-by to dance." They each received 228 lashes and eighteen months in jail. According to Amnesty International, the ultimate sentence of death was meted to Sheyda Khoramzadeh Esfahani after being convicted of "organizing 'corrupt gatherings' with prostitutes, alcohol, drugs, music and dance." Amnesty International: *Iran Bulletin*, Sheyda Khoramzadeh Esfahani (f), January 29, 1997.

54. John Hendren, "Night of Firsts for Afghans and Their U.S. Party Guests," *Los Angeles Times*, August 23, 2002, A1, 8.

55. Azardokht 'Ameri, "*Raqs-e 'amianehe-ye shahri va raqs-e mowsum be klasik: bar-rasi-ye tatbiqi dar howze-ye Tehran*," *Mahoor Music Quarterly*, no. 20 (Summer 2003): 24–28. This article, "Iranian Urban Popular Social Dance and So-Called Classical Dance: A Comparative Investigation in the District of Tehran," is translated in *Dance Research Journal*, 38 (Summer & Winter 2006): 163–79. Anthony Shay, "*Raqs-e Irani: moruri daneshvaraneh bar mas'ael-e pazhuhesi*," [Iranian Dance: A Scholarly Overview of Research Issues], *Mahoor Music Quarterly* 7, no. 28 (Summer 2005): 9–26; and Anthony Shay, "*Tarahi-ye raqs-e 'persha': Baznama'i va sharqimo'bi dar sahneh'i kardan va tarahi-ye raqs-e Irani*" [Choreographing Persia: Representation and Orientalism in Staging and Choreographing Iranian Dance], *Mahoor Music Quarterly* 8, no. 30 (Winter 2006): 11–34.