Introduction

I can openly state at the outset of this essay that my involvement with Iranian dance, as a performer, choreographer, and researcher spans over a period of more than half a century. Clearly my views reflect this involvement and my love for this genre of Iranian cultural expression. The aesthetic excitement that the improvisation and the geometric underpinnings of the artistry of Iranian solo improvised dance continues to fill my heart with a special joy. Research into the topic of Iranian dance contains all of the excitement of solving a mystery novel.

Thus, I want to take special care to present for the interested student of Iranian arts the most recent results of the finest research in this topic, which is beginning to grow at a slow but encouraging rate. From the beginning I understood that Iranians have a love/hate relationship with dance, particularly solo improvised dance, and because I saw its essential aesthetic beauty, I wanted to know why. Dance does not exist in a vacuum, it is related to all other forms of aesthetic and cultural expression, and to understand dance, I had to investigate music, calligraphy, architecture, theater, and, above all, literature.

From the beginning I sensed this deep connection between the movements and techniques of Iranian solo improvised dance and all of the other forms of visual and performance expression, and I have spent a lifetime proving those connections. (Shay 1997, 1999)

Simply put, to know Iranian dance, I had to know Hafez. And living among all of these forms of artistic expression, I knew that I was firmly planted in one of the richest civilizations in the world.

Iranian female folk dancers from the Kurdish tribe

Iranian dance as a scholarly topic lags far behind the research and research that characterize of Iranian arts and other forms of cultural expression such as poetry and music. Due to the ambiguous, often negative attitudes toward dance among many, if not the majority of, Iranians, even including scholars, I coined the term "choreophobia" to describe this antipathy (Shay 1999).

Over the past half century, a limited amount of serious writing has appeared on the topic of Iranian dance, but much of this writing has, to a greater or less degree, been severely marred by rampant speculation and romanticizing about Iranian dance and dancers and the creation of orientalist scenarios for its performance. Much of this speculation resides in misinterpretations of the limited historical data that we possess, generally in the form of the often hostile descriptions of dance and dancers by foreign writers who frequently published their journals and travel descriptions for wide readership in Europe, and indigenous art.

Unfortunately these writings, and a few drawings by Western travelers and journalists, along with the considerable output of indigenous artists through the long course of Iranian history remain our major source of information on the topic of dance and dancers.

Since most of the writers of these recent serious articles and books write with the best of intentions, I think that criticizing specific authors is generally counterproductive, especially since several of the misinterpretations are repeated in various books and essays, it is more profitable to address specific issues rather than the specific articles or books in which they appear. That having been said, it will be necessary to cite a few examples, particularly some of the earlier writers, in order to demonstrate some of the major problems that arise from their writings. Many of the issues that I will address in this essay, such as what constitutes dance in an Iranian context, or was dance a part of religious observance in ancient historical periods, appear in several of those previous writings on dance and frequently a writer of an essay will repeat the misinterpretations or errors of his or her predecessors and take those misinterpretations or speculative opinions as fact.

In addition, I think that it is not enough for scholars to describe and analyze a dance only from the point of viewpoint of its movements and techniques, however interesting that may be to some readers. Movement description constitutes only the first basic step in the research process. The researcher can enrich their research and their findings, whenever possible, by providing the context of the performance, information about the performers, individual and group attitudes toward the performance, and other data that can reveal fascinating social and aesthetic information about Iranian society, both historically and now. The development of theory and concept around the topic of Iranian dance, provides researchers outside of the field with useful parameters in which to view this topic, ways to analyze its avoidance in Iranian scholarship, and a means of comparison with other dance traditions. This essay is designed as a guide with suggestions for future research. This presentation attempts to provide the current evidence that we have of Iranian dance in a clear and factual manner, and the bibliography that accompanies this essay is intended to serve as a resource for further research.

In addition to the serious writings that I referred to in the previous paragraph, several highly romantic and orientalist writings have appeared through the years making several false claims such as 1. the notion that historically there existed a classical dance tradition that had a system for teaching or 2. that solo improvised dance has hand movements that have "meaning" in the sense that the mudras in Indian classical dance forms such as bharata natyam and kathak have.

1. As to the notion of a classical dance form such as Western classical ballet or the Indian classical dance traditions, there must exist: a named vocabulary of movements and techniques, a systematic way of teaching, and an academy that teaches a dance tradition in a systematic fashion. Iranian classical (sonnati) music has had these requirements for well over a century, thus we can say that a classical Iranian music traditions exists, but dance has none of these basic requirements as Ameri (2003) and I (1999) have both pointed out. Thus, when Medjid Rezvani writes: "… they are guarded, right up to our own times, the rules of the classical dance, even if a few old dancers are the only repositories of them (1962, 159), the serious scholar must beware of accepting Rezvani's fantasy that a classical dance tradition was practiced in secret from pre-Islamic times.

While all researchers are certainly aware that a professional class of entertainers existed, among them those who danced, there is no evidence for a classical tradition for any period of Iranian history. The only classical tradition, in the sense of a named vocabulary, an academy, and a systematic way of teaching, exists only in Uzbekistan, and that was

established through Soviet artistic policies that decreed national dance companies be established throughout the former Soviet Union and its satellites. (Doi, 2002; Karimova 1973, 1975, 1977; Shay 2002)

A second part of the idea that a classical dance tradition existed, is the accompanying, and equally questionable premise that dancers were honored in pre-Islamic Iran. There is absolutely no proof of this, and in fact, when one looks at the history of the social position of professional entertainers in the Ancient world in general, one can find abundant evidence that professional entertainers constituted a despised class. Both in Byzantium and in Rome members of the upper classes were legally prohibited from marrying them. Special legislation had to be passed to enable the notorious Empress Theodora (wife of Justinian I), a former public entertainer, to be legally made a patrician, so that Justinian could marry her. But, all of the machinery of the Byzantine government could not erase her shady past. (Bridge 1978; Herrin 2001) There is no reason, and certainly no proof, that dancers held a privileged social position in pre-Islamic Iran.

2. No evidence exists that each gesture and shape of the hands and fingers and facial features has a codified meaning, as is the case with the newly reconstituted Indian classical dance forms such as bharata natyam and kathak. This does not mean that mimetic elements are absent in certain Iranian dance genres. S. Abolqasem Enjavi-Shirazi describes miming in several of the bazi-ha-ye namayeshi, Iranian women's theatrical games (1972), but the miming in these contexts is performed idiosyncratically not in the codified manner that characterizes classical Indian dance forms. As Lois Ibsen Al-Faruqi observes generally of solo improvised dance throughout the Middle East, Iranian dance is an abstract art "not a descriptive or delineative art" (1987, 7).

Iranian dance writing shares with other genres of Middle Eastern dance, such as Egyptian solo improvised dance, a host of writings that are auto-exoticizing, that is the writers, often dancers, wish to make themselves appear more interesting and exotic to their viewers and so they write about non-existent dances such as the "Zoroastrian Fire Dance" or the "Slave Dance," or they tell audiences of gullible Westerners that Iranian solo improvised dance traditionally tells a story. One such an example written by an Iranian woman, a student in the United States, in a widely read book:

"In our dancing the movement of the hands tells special things. There is a language of motion, and people who know this language can interpret the story as well as if it were in spoken words. People in America who have seen me dance say, 'Your hands are so graceful!' Hands must be graceful in order to be talking hands. . . Maybe one of our traditional dances will explain this. It is the story of a dancer who was loved by a prince. He could not marry her because she was a dancer, so she went away with a broken heart. Without her he could not be happy so he found her and told her that he would give up being a prince in order to marry her. If there were choice between the kingdom and her, he had made that choice. But she knew that he must be a prince and later a king for the good of his people, so she told him that her broken heart had been healed by another and she no longer loved him." (Najafi 1953, 28-29).

I cannot think of any other area of research in Iranian studies where one must encounter such mendacious and orientalist statements and address such topics in order to steer readers and students away from believing such writings. It is vital in this period of the internet, in which any individual may establish a website and make outrageous claims regarding any topic, that clear, dispassionate data be provided for the interested reader about what we know about Iranian dance, and perhaps more importantly, what we do not

know. This may make our essays and books shorter, but they will be more accurate, and ultimately, more interesting and fulfilling.

Another problem exists. Examples of recent writings that come from Iran that I have read have been hampered by the fact that, from the evidence found in the opinions that they express and the bibliographic sources that they cite, these Iranian writers have not been connected to the most recent international research on dance in general, and the many new theoretical and conceptual viewpoints that may be found in such journals as Dance Research Journal and Dance Chronicle, and Iranian dance scholars do not appear at the annual scholarly conferences sponsored by such reputable organizations as CORD (Congress on Research in Dance) or Dance History Scholars. This lack of contact with colleagues in the field frequently renders their writings and their conclusions dated and old-fashioned. For this reason this article will proceed from the most basic discussion of movement and dance, to describing and analyzing the historical and contemporary information that we have.

Greater Iran

Even more crucial, dance in the contemporary nation state of Iran constitutes only a portion of the dance genres and dance activities in the larger Iranian world. While the current borders of Iran define a current political reality, the cultural borders of Greater Iran are far more extensive, and increasingly these cultural borders, rather than the political borders, define and form the parameters for important research sources such as the extensive Encyclopedia Iranica and other important scholarship. In the same way that important literary figures in Persian literature, or schools of miniature painters, resided in Herat, Samarqand, Bukhara, Balkh and other locations not located in contemporary Iran, so too, Iranian dance is found in these locations as well. In order to describe and analyze Iranian dance it is absolutely vital to include Iranian dance in its widest historical and geographical context.

Thus, it is important that any investigator of dance in an Iranian context needs to familiarize him or herself with the activities, dance events and performances, and the publications on dance that come from Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, Azerbaijan, Armenia, Georgia, and other related areas that form part of the larger Iranian cultural world. The nation state of Iran does not exist in a vacuum; it is surrounded by other societies and nation states with whom Iran shares linguistic, cultural, literary, and historical traditions. In addition, in order to provide a context for Iranian dance it becomes very important to investigate the dance traditions of neighboring areas outside of the greater Iranian cultural world as well. In this way, the researcher can discover what is unique to Iranian dance and what characteristics does this tradition share with the traditions of the Arab world, Turkey, the Caucasus, and Europe to the west, and India and Pakistan to the east, all of which have had intense relations, both hostile and amicable, with Iran.

Movement

First, in any study of dance, we must look at movements, the building blocks of dance. Movement is always a movement from one location to another, or to move something from one location to another. Movements can be voluntary or involuntary. For example, involuntary movement occurs with the digestive tract that operates even as an individual sleeps, or a person reacts to something that frightens him or her that creates involuntary physical reactions such as perspiration or a rush of adrenaline. Voluntary movement occurs when an individual moves, as in dance, through volition. Movement is an object or a body moving through time and space. In dance the movement is performed by the human body. Second, in regard to dance, in general dance movements are patterned and rhythmic. Third,

and most crucial, but frequently forgotten by those describing dance, is that the person performing the movements, must have the intention to dance. The intention to dance is especially crucial in those societies in which other patterned, rhythmic movements occur. At this point it is important to caution the reader that insects, birds, and animals, some species of which perform patterned, rhythmic movements, do not dance. This hoary notion appeared frequently in earlier, romantic histories of dance, such as the well-known World History of the Dance by Curt Sachs (1937), an outdated source that is still cited by some writers who remain largely out of the mainstream of current dance scholarship. But the notion that creatures in the wild dance has been discounted by current dance scholarship. The creatures performing these movements, like bees for example, are sending signals of other kinds: courtship display, or indicating the location of food sources. These creatures respond to natural instincts. There is no intention to dance. (Royce 1977, 3-7) Thus, while we can say that movement, whether among insects or humans, communicates meaning, it is only humans who dance.

I wish also to add that there are some societies, in the South Pacific or among certain aboriginal Australians, for example, in which no specific word exists for dance. Dance in some societies is so intimately bound to the social or spiritual context in which it is performed, as well as constituting an indivisible aspect of the music and poetry, clothing and masks, that forms part of its performance. Thus, we must acknowledge that dance is conceptualized and organized differently in different societies, and the careful researcher must make clear what the parameters of dance are in the specific society that she or he describes and analyzes. (Kaeppler, 1972,173; Royce 1977, 9-16)

In the Iranian world, many forms of rhythmic patterned movements other than dance exist that include such work activities as harvesting, carpet weaving, fashioning metal objects, it includes martial arts movements such as exercises in the zurkhaneh, and also subsumes movements in spiritual and religious contexts such as 'azadari and patterned, rhythmic movements used in certain Sufi ceremonies. Thus, in an Iranian context, the intention to perform dance is one of the basic requirements to define dance as opposed to other patterned and rhythmic activities. I state this because some of the writings about Iranian dance have included the zurkhaneh, and even activities like 'azadari and zar and the guati la'ab ceremonies of Baluchistan under the rubric of dance. However much any of these activities may resemble the structure of dance in a formal movement description, the researcher must determine if an individual intends to dance or, rather, to perform some other kind of spiritual, work, or martial arts movements.

Regional Folk Dances

I will only make a few observations concerning the specific movements of Iranian dance in this presentation, because a number of fine, detailed descriptions of the movements of Iranian dance exist elsewhere (for example: Ameri, 2003, Hamada 1978, Hasanov, 1988; Karimova, 1973, 1975, 1977; Karomatov and Nurdzhanov 1986; Nurdzhanov, 1965; Shay 1999).

As in the Middle East in general, two major types of dance exist: solo improvised dance, the most common form of urban dance, and regional folk dances, which are characterized by regional specificity. The regional folk dances that characterize much of the rural Iranian world are frequently group dances, although solo improvised dance also exists in rural areas as far apart as Gilan and the Persian Gulf. That having been said, the northwest and central west (Luristan, Kurdistan, Azerbaijan) of the contemporary nation state of Iran lies at the far eastern end of a geographic belt of a choreographic genre of line dances characterized

by generally short, repetitive dance patterns that are frequently highly elaborated and embellished with stamps and other movements.

These dances frequently have a leader at one end of the line, often an individual who is highly skilled in the performance of a specific dance, and whom the other dancers follow. He or she frequently signals any changes in the steps and movements, often using a kerchief for this purpose. These line dances were once performed throughout Europe and the Middle East as far north and west as Iceland during the Middle Ages, but now line dances primarily characterize the dances of the Balkan states, Armenia, Turkey, Azerbaijan, Iraq, Lebanon, Jordan, and Syria, such as the dabkah, bar, and halay found in many of these areas. Thus, a knowledge of the dances of these other areas provides the researcher with a context for Iranian dance, in this case to demonstrate how these dances are related to other regions and are not unique to Iran, but constitute a part of a large genre of dance, with specific regional characteristics, that covers a large geographical region of the world.

The large group dances in the eastern and southern regions of Iran, in such regions as Fars, Baluchistan and Khorasan, like those in Afghanistan, such as the atan, and the many dances in which sticks or kerchiefs are carried by both male and female dancers, such as those of Pakistan and India, are also characterized by short choreographic phrases, but the dancers in these regions do not employ handholds in the dance. Generally, each dancer performs without touching his or her neighbor, although the dancers perform in unison for the most part. Thus, many Iranian regional folk dances are connected to, or the same as, the dances found in many neighboring regions.

In some regions of the greater Iranian cultural world, such as Tajikistan, folk plays, frequently with animal characters, and using masks, also exist. Dance and miming frequently form part of these theatrical activities. (Karomatov 1986; Nurdzhanov 1965)

Manners and customs also occur in specific regions, or even single villages, and no one knows the origins of these unusual events. For example, in the village of Afus, located outside the town of Daran in Isfahan province in central Iran, the women have a special day, hukumat-e zan (the government of women) in which the male and female village elders select a hakem (governor) from among the women. She must be well-spoken, commanding, and popular; her selection as hakem confers great honor on her family. On a prearranged day in late spring the women eject the men and boys from the village and the men go camping overnight in the nearby mountains. The women hire a group of professional female musicians, invite women from neighboring villages and towns, and sing and dance and serve their guests tea and sweets throughout the entire day. The first dances are performed by the older women, considered as masters of the local dance techniques and then the "governor" invites the younger women to participate. (Sarmadi 1971; Zendehdel, 1998).

In conclusion, the field of Iranian dance studies needs many more researchers to contribute to our full understanding. First, field work in the vast rural areas throughout the greater Iranian world must be carried out. To be blunt the scant information available in printed sources that we have of the movement practices of villagers' and tribes people's dances remains next to nothing. In this overwhelmingly Moslem area, both male and female researchers are needed to obtain a clear picture of dancing that occurs in separate female and male environments. Available video recordings can certainly be analyzed as a first step. These, however, are scattered in different locations and not available to many willing researchers. The fate of those film recordings that were housed in the former seda-khaneh remains unknown to me. In addition, the study of special customs found in single regions or villages will greatly add to our knowledge.

Solo Improvised Dance

The movements of solo improvised dance, the most common urban choreographic genre in the Iranian world, in all of its fascinating variety of movement when performed on a professional level, provide us with a link to other forms of cultural expression in the larger Iranian world. The two major characteristics of this genre are improvisation, which aesthetically and culturally link dance to music and indigenous Iranian theater performances such as ru-howzi and siyah-bazi, and geometry, which links dance to calligraphy and architectural decoration. I have written about this phenomenon in some detail (Shay 1999, 1997). These aesthetic characteristics also characterize solo improvised dance in the Arab world and Turkey, and Iranian dance, to some degree served as a basis for classical Indian forms such as kathak, which developed in the Mogul courts. Throughout the Middle East and Central Asia, solo improvised dance has both professional and social forms, the former a highly elaborate form of the latter. The professional dance tradition was an integral part of indigenous Iranian theater, whereas the social form could be performed in social contexts such as wedding celebrations. The social form constituted part of the women's domestic theatrical games, bazi-ha-ye namayeshi. (Enjavi-Shirazi, 1972)

At least one scholar (Ameri 2003) has noted certain correspondences between solo improvised dance and classical Western ballet, by observing the movements as these dances are taught in contemporary dance classes, filmed recordings of the former national company, and also through the poses found in iconographic sources such as the murals from the Chehelsotun Palace in Isfahan. As far as the iconographic evidence, the visual correspondences are superficial and coincidental, that is a gracefully curved arm or a leg position are characteristic of many dance traditions, and their existence in a static dance scene cannot prove a connection. The Chehelsotun murals were composed in 1647 (Diba 1998, 280), well before or contemporaneously with the development of noble court dance, the predecessor of ballet at the court of Louis XIV (1650-1715). Western classical ballet did not reach its present form until the 19th century, especially the decades of the 1830s and 1840s. Thus, classical Western ballet followed, by a long period, the development of solo improvised dance as described by European travelers and indigenous miniatures and murals of the Safavid period (1501-1722). (See Cohen 1992, 38-70; Garafola 1997, 1). In addition, the performers of the early forms of ballet were members of the French nobility, including Louis XIV, while the Iranian courtiers did not dance but hired professional dancers who were public women and young men to perform in celebratory events, which has been well attested by European travelers as well as recent scholarship. (Fatemi, 2001; Matthee 2000) It is highly unlikely that these two groups of people would ever have met.

As to the movements taught in formal settings such as dance classes, often organized for preparing public performances, it is important to remember that many of the teachers of choreographed solo improvised dancing, such as the choreographies performed by the former national company of folk and "national" dances, known in the West as the Mahalli Dancers, were begun in the late 1920s by Iranian Armenian teachers, and subsequently taught in government sponsored institutions such as the former Department of Fine Arts (later the Ministry of Fine Arts), by more than three generations of teachers. These teachers were almost without exception ballet dancers and instructors. Many of them liberally introduced elements of classical Western ballet into their choreographies, as Ameri correctly observed in her important study.

Historical Issues

There is an old Persian saying "agar avvalin khesht kaj gozashteh bashad, divar ta binahayat kaj ast." (If the first brick is laid crookedly, the wall will be forever crooked). Serious dance research in the West began to develop in the late 1960s and early 1970s, and blossomed in the 1980s until the present with the development of doctoral programs in the field of dance. This intellectual development has greatly aided the questioning and deconstruction of past romantic concepts put forward as fact by Curt Sachs and those who continue to use him as a source, and to provide new theoretical and conceptual models for describing and analyzing dance.

The example that I described above demonstrates the difficulty of tracing dance in relatively recent periods. As Ameri very correctly pointed out, the tracing of dance movements through static iconography is fraught with difficulties. (Ameri 2003; Shay 1999, 2002) Lillian Lawler, in her book on the dances of Ancient Greece, enters in detail the myriad problems of using the highly stylized, and "realistic" art of the Greeks to reconstruct dance movements and contexts (1964), while Sharon Fermor makes a similar critique of using art of the fifteenth century for purposes of movement reconstruction for dance techniques of the period (1987). These latter two periods are far better documented with written documents as well as iconographic evidence than Iran, and more crucially, dance was a positive social activity in Ancient Greece and Fifteenth Century Italy.

Anthropologist Clifford Geertz reminds us that, in historian David Lowenthal's phrase: "The Past is a Foreign Country." (1985) Some current scholars and the public at large seem to conceive of the past as populated with people like themselves wearing different clothes. However, almost everything was different and foreign, especially the way in which art was produced and perceived. To approach the artistic output of past periods, one must have what Geertz, borrowing from art historian Michael Baxandall the concept of the "period eye," that is the ability to perceive art works in the same way as people of the period were able to do. Painters in different time periods left gaps, often deliberate, in their works, relying on knowledgeable individuals in their own time period to supply the missing pieces. A few of the more knowledgeable art historians have managed to acquire this specialized knowledge, to some degree. Before the researcher of dance attempts to conduct research through the use of iconographic evidence, she or he must steep themselves in the knowledge that permits her or him to “read” the artistic evidence correctly.

Fermor observes of Fifteenth-century paintings of dance: "For the most part, in representing dance, painters relied on a set of established formulas, formulas that they knew their audience would recognize and which they themselves could draw on without reference to real dance practice. These formulas probably bore only a loose relationship to actual contemporary dance" (1987, 18).

Imagine, then, the difficulty in attempting to reconstruct dances that were performed in prehistoric Iran from a scattering of potsherds, frequently so crudely drawn that the observer cannot truthfully identify the figures as dancing, and almost entirely without contextual meaning. In the case of Ancient Iran, prior to, and following the arrival of the Iranian population, for which scant written information exists (primarily brief notations in Mesopotamian sources), interpreting the archeological evidence as dancing figure, much less what type of dance, and in what context it was performed is a perilous task for the careful scholar.

As historian John Curtis suggests:

Modern Iran is composed of many diverse ethnic elements. In addition to the Persians, who form the largest group, there are Turks, Kurds, Lurs, Baluchis, and Arabs, as well as a

number of ethnic minorities. This must also have been the situation in antiquity, with the country occupied by different groups with different backgrounds and speaking different languages (1989, 6)

And yet, Yahya Zoka wrote a series of articles in 1978, among the first ever serious essays written about dance in Persian, attempting to reconstruct ancient dances based solely on comparing the scanty archeological evidence with contemporary practices, or more dubiously, attempting to "interpret" the crudely executed, sometimes poorly preserved, iconographic forms. His conclusions, as I will demonstrate, are questionable and must be regarded as suppositions and speculation by scholars. Among many other assertions, which I will pass by here, the most important claim that he makes is that the dances are largely, if not wholly religious dances, or dances used in religious rites: the raised hands somehow indicate praying or gesturing toward their deities. But Zoka never delineates the ethnic group or religious practices featured in the decontextualized pot shards and vessels. How could he? As Curtis suggests there were many ethnic groups, with many religious practices. We know little, frequently nothing, of the various ethnic, linguistic, and religious identities and practices of these people. Sources, such as the vessel figures and pot shards are unable to provide convincing details of specific religious practices, or even if dance formed part of religious rituals.

Unfortunately, archeologist Yosef Garfinkel (2003) attempts the same project on an even larger geographic scale and time period with the same dubious results. His use of Curt Sachs and other discredited and dated sources as the basis for his arguments considerably weaken his claims. Garfinkel even admits that several of his colleagues interpreted the works he describes differently than he did (2003, 15-16). He even sites dance historian R. Kraus and states that: "Kraus noted that is a mistake to assume that all forms of dance have a common core or purpose of meaning. Instead dance may have many functions, but these vary according to the society, the class, the age or sex, the religious structure, and the characteristics of those dance" (2003, 65). Nevertheless, Garfinkel ignores this warning and concludes "the dance experience is therefore a religious experience…" (2003, 59)

I can name three activities in contemporary times that feature upraised arms. 1. The dancers in the discotheques of the 1970s and beyond frequently all raised their arms in the excitement of dancing. 2. Winners in soccer and other Olympic events, upon winning, run a lap around the field with their hands upraised, often carrying their national flag, and 3. Male dancers performing the horon, a regional folk dance performed for celebratory events, in a non-religious context on the Black Sea Coast of Turkey frequently raise their arms together as they dance. None of these activities is religious.

I do not wish to suggest that the activities were that Zoka and Garfinkel describe are not religious; they may well have been. What I do suggest is that we cannot know with any degree of certainty or precision if the dances were religious or merely part of non sacred activities such as wedding celebrations, harvest celebrations or other village pastimes. Or, even perhaps, the "dancing" figures merely formed a design motif with no meaning beyond the potter's desire to create an aesthetic object. As Sasan Fatemi observes in his important essays on motrebs:

"Without a doubt, this essay does not attempt to investigate the sources of music in celebratory occasions from the era of the Medes, something that is neither possible nor all that useful. Because the lack of sufficient documents and relying on a few bas-reliefs and some literary examples as witness bring only the clichéd conclusion that we, too, 'from the beginning' had dance and song and celebrations and joy." (2001, vol.12, 29)

A wise decision researchers in dance would be prudent to follow. I cannot emphasize strongly enough that current dance scholarship avoids attempting to trace ancient origins of dance as unverifiable and unprofitable.

National (melli) dance

The last issue that I wish to raise in this essay is the issue of the use of the term "national" or "melli" to indicate the solo improvised dance for purposes of stage performances. This usage is found only among Iranian writers (Ameri 2003; Sabetzadeh 2004) because the term "national dance" has two very different meanings in the West. [1]

In the nineteenth century, the time of the rise of nationalism in Europe, one of the features of Western classical ballet, and dances created by dance masters and ballet choreographers, were called "national dances." They were those dances that were based or inspired, more, and often less, on rural dance traditions. Because the peasant in that period, and in some places today, was widely regarded as the repository of national values and authenticity, steps and movements were borrowed from the peasant repertory, or the dance master was "inspired" by such dances. However, few members of the urban upper class wanted to actually perform the dances of real peasants, whom they despised, in their elegant ballrooms, and so the dance masters created dances that were thought to have a "national" character. These dances were very popular both on the stage and in the ballroom, and they occupied a larger portion of the nineteenth-century Western classical ballet repertoire than is the case today. However, today these dances still constitute significant portions of nineteenth century ballets like The Nutcracker, Giselle, and Sleeping Beauty and they are called "national" or "character" dances. (Arkin and Smith 1997; Garafola 1997)

The second meaning of "national dance" in the West comes closer to the meaning used by Iranian writers, but this term as it applies to solo improvised dance created for the stage, needs to be rethought by those writing about Iranian dance because it does not fully qualify for such use as the term "national" dance implies. In several nations, such as Mexico, Greece, and the Philippines, a specific dance, or dance genre, has been officially designated by the government as the "national dance."

In Mexico, for example, following the success of the 1905 Revolution, the "jarabe tapatio," (a dance that is one of many jarabes, a formerly improvised dance genre), which had been banned by both church and state in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, and thus had become an icon of the revolution. It was choreographed for a group of three hundred couples that performed it in Mexico City to celebrate the successful end of the Revolution. It was this choreographed version of the jarabe tapatio that was officially designated by the Ministry of Education as Mexico's national dance, and most teachers were trained to teach the dance in the public school system throughout Mexico, a practice that still occurs. The dance is frequently performed by students at school and civic ceremonies. To emphasize the preeminence of the jarabe tapatio, it always constitutes the finale of the performances of the Mexican state supported company, Ballet Folklorico de Mexico. The dance tinikiling in the Philippines has followed a similar trajectory. (Shay 2002). In nation states where many ethnic groups coexist, there is frequently a move to identify a "national" dance to serve as an icon of national identity that will unify the entire population through teaching of the official "national dance" in public schools and arranging for public performances of it.

Solo improvised dance in Iran does not fit this profile. This genre as it was taught in the late Pahlavi period, especially after the founding of the State Ensemble of Folk and "National" Dances (known as the Mahalli Dancers in the West), was never standardized. The government, or any of its ministries to my knowledge, never declared solo improvised dance

as a "raqs-e melli," that is a dance to represent the entire nation state of Iran, to be taught in classes in the public school system, and performed on public holidays, or any of the other trappings that the official "national dances" found in Greece, Mexico, or the Philippines possess. It is clear that there was an attempt by some of the performers and directors of the short-lived state sponsored dance academy to designate solo improvised dance that was performed by the state dance company as "national dance." But this attempt failed to attract the attention of the government to officially declare this dance genre as "national," much less to teach it in all of the public schools. I strongly suggest that dance researchers refrain from using this term because of the misunderstandings that using this term will create, both among Iranians, who think of "national" as "official" as in the national football team or the national wrestling team, or among Western scholars for whom the term national dance has the very specific meanings I detailed above. 2

I would suggest to my Iranian colleagues that "choreographed solo improvised dance" or "staged solo improvised dance" might be a better, more accurate description of this dance genre.

Notes

1. The use of the term "national dance" (raqs-e melli) appeared in a number of articles written in such publications as the Majeleh-ye muzik and the popular press describing the performance and artistic activities of the Folk and National Dance Company of the Department of Fine Arts. I am indebted to Azardokht Ameri for calling my attention to them and providing me copies.

2. There was more than one attempt in the United States to have the Congress declare the square dance as the official national dance. The opposition from regional interests from Hawaii, Alaska, Puerto Rico, and Native American groups, among others, was so strong that such a move to create a national dance failed.

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