

# I. REGIONAL DANCES OF IRAN

*Robyn Friend*

## Abstract

Dance is a ubiquitous and important cultural phenomenon and ethnic identifier, along with other cultural phenomena such as language. The nation of Irān is composed of many ethnicities, each with their own culture and language, that are yet part of the general Irānian cultural sphere, and which also have been affected by neighboring cultures across political and ethnic boundaries. There are few written sources of documentation for the regional dances of Irān; one hopes that ethnologists will be inspired to document dance in Irān before these dances disappear. This article describes some of the regional dances and dance cultures in Irān, including northeastern Irān (Khorāssān), southeastern Irān (Baluchistan), southern Irān (Persian Gulf), southwestern Irān (Fars, etc.), middle western Irān (Kurdistan), northwestern Irān (Āzerbāijān), and northern Irān (Caspian area).

## I. Introduction

Dance has been an important part of human existence from time immemorial.

The fact that dance is found in every society but has no common cultural rationale for its existence, and no common institutions with which it is universally associated, makes it seem logical to infer some imperative that causes dance to appear in all human societies (Kealiinohomoku 1976:44).

Dance performs crucial social and ritual functions, providing emotional release in times of joy and grief, and is part of the glue that holds a people together and gives them a communal identity. Dance should not be seen as an isolated phenomenon. It is part of a large spectrum of behaviors and beliefs that create an ethos that includes spirituality, food, human relations, clothing, language, and many other phenomena.

Such cultural phenomena also ought not to be analyzed without due attention paid to similar phenomena in surrounding areas. The existing political boundaries are meaningless when it comes to such ethnic cultural features. The physical geography of an area has a greater influence on culture than political boundaries, in that it helps to define opportunities for economic and social interaction, as well as fostering a sense of shared experience. In addition, political boundaries are often arbitrary with regard to distinct ethnic communities, dividing ethnic groups, tribes, and families.



Fig. 1. Regions of Irān, by ethnicity.

Irān is a vast mosaic of regions and ethnicities (see Fig. 1), identifiable by geography, climate, language (see Fig. 2), and culture. The primary cultural identifier is language, but each region and each ethnic group also has its own way of life, religious beliefs, traditions, cuisine, clothing, dance, and music. The people in each region do not, however, live in an isolated bubble, but have frequent contact with the people in nearby areas, both within the modern nation of Irān, and across the current political borders. Some of the most identifiable ethnic groups, e.g., the Baluchis, are divided by borders; there are Baluchis living in Eastern Irān, in Pākistān, and in Afghānistān. Also, ethnic groups do not confine themselves to within a single governmental administrative province or region, and within a single region there may be several different ethnic groups. But even such groups of people do not live in isolation from their neighbors, and the frequent contact between peoples affects the culture and language of both.

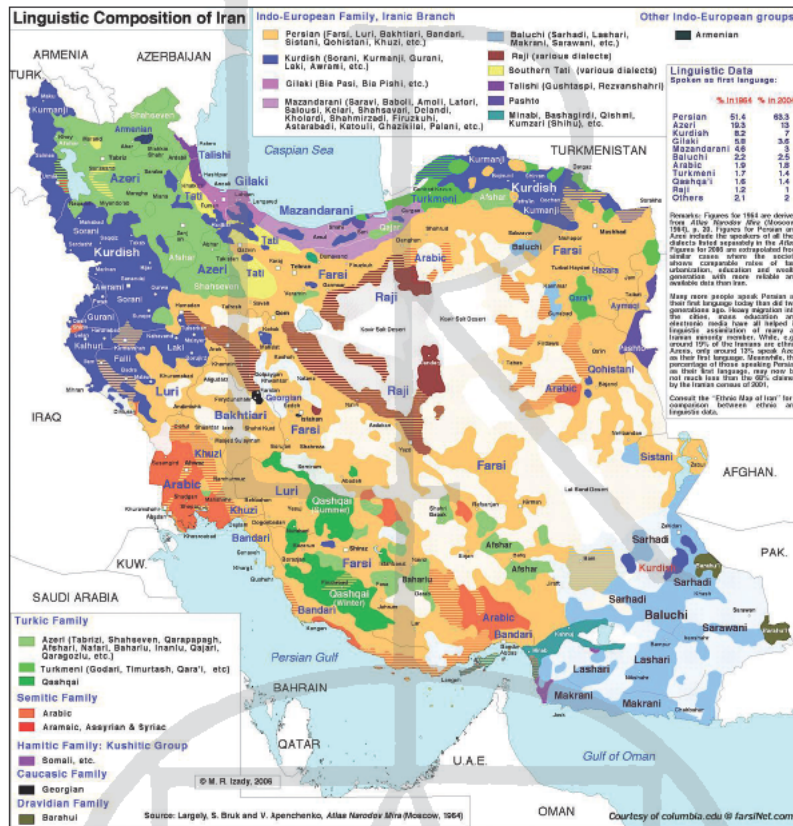


Fig. 2. Linguistic composition of Iran.

This article describes some of the regional dances and dance cultures in Iran, including northeastern Iran (Khorāssān), southeastern Iran (Baluchistān), southern Iran (Persian Gulf), southwestern Iran (Fārs, etc.), middle western Iran (Kurdistān), northwestern Iran (Āzerbāijān), and northern Iran (Caspian area). There have been sadly few written sources for Irānian dance, and most have been remarks in passing in the midst of discussions of music or travel narratives by Europeans uninformed about, and unsympathetic to, dance. The information presented herein includes citations from such written sources as are available, and also the results of my experiences and studies of Irānian dance in Iran, and among Irānians in the Diaspora, over four decades. Most of my personal research and experience has been with women's dances; therefore I do not have complete descriptions of men's and women's dances for all areas discussed herein.

It should also be understood that the dances and dance events described in this article are mostly drawn from sources and observations of dance prior to the political events of 1979.



## II. Survey of traditional dance in Irān by region

The one excellent written source for Irānian regional dance is “Dance and Islam: The Bojnurdi Kurds of Northeastern Irān” (Hamada, 1978). Hamada not only documents a substantial portion of the dance movements using *labanotation*<sup>1</sup> and illustrations; he also provides historical and cultural context for the Kurds of Khorāssān, and discusses how dance fits into their society. Though certainly every village and ethnicity throughout Irān has their own unique customs and circumstances, the contexts for dance as described by Hamada for the Kurds of Bojnurd are generally the same for most of the rest of Irān: who dances; on what occasions people dance; and when and where dancing takes place. Therefore I will begin my survey of Irānian regional dance with Bojnurd and Khorāssān.

### 1. Northeast Irān: Khorāssān and Golestān

The northeastern Irānian provinces of Khorāssān (now North Khorāssān, Razavi Khorāssān, and South Khorāssān), which at one time also included parts of Afghānistān, and the recently created province of Golestān, has an ethnically diverse population of Turkmen, Turks, Persians, and Kurds, the latter the result of a forced population movement in the 17<sup>th</sup> century by Shah Abbas I (Minorsky 1927: 1143). The close cultural relationship between Afghānistān and Irānian Khorāssān can be seen especially in the form of the dances of the Kurds of Bojnurd, and of the Persians of Torbat-e Jām. Dances for both men and women take the shape of a circle. The dancers do not hold hands, and each dancer, though following the figures of the dance, moves independently. Each dance has a name, associated melodies, and a set of steps within which a small amount of improvised variation is possible. While there are dances specifically for men, involving sticks *chub bāzi*<sup>2</sup> and squats, most of the dances are done by both men and women, whether in mixed groups, or separated by sex.

#### Kurds of Bojnurd

For the Kurds of Bojnurd, dance is not an everyday activity, but is associated with specific events, including weddings, circumcisions, Fridays, national and political holidays, family celebrations, presentations by dance performance groups, and religious festivals. In the latter case, dance is not a formal part of the religious observance, but may occur as part of the celebration afterwards (Hamada 1978: 45, 47, 50, 58).

1 Labanotation, original name Kinetography Laban, system of recording human movement, originated by the Hungarian-born dance theorist Rudolf Laban (Encyclopædia Britannica Online, s. v. “labanotation”, accessed January 27, 2016, <http://www.britannica.com/topic/labanotation>).

2 According to Bustān and Darvishi (1992) at one time in Northern Khorāssān, there were *neyze bāzi* (javelin dance) and *shamshir bāzi* (sword dance), both replaced by *chub bāzi*.

Kurds in the city of Bojnurd are more conservative about dance and other social activities than are people in the Kurdish villages of Khorāssān (Hamada 1978: 46). This is generally true throughout the Muslim Middle East: Villagers whose livelihood depends on their work in the fields or with animals haven't the time or energy to follow all the religious strictures on dress, social activities, the segregation of sexes, and the schedule of prayers as are followed by city-dwellers. In the villages, dance is more a part of life than in the city, where fewer occasions include dance (Hamada 1978:46–47). The enjoyment of and participation in dancing is based largely on the attitude of the family head. Not everyone dances (Hamada 1978: 45–46, 60).

Dance among the Kurds of Bojnurd and the surrounding areas occurs in the context of controlled space and circumstances. It is restricted to specific areas in the family's walled compound, either the courtyard, or indoors. In the case where there are men present who are not part of the immediate family, the women may dance indoors, while the men dance outside (Hamada 1978:47).<sup>3</sup>

The heavy skirt depicted in Fig. 3 is an important part of Bojnurdi women's dancing; the movements of the woman's dance described below combine with the clothing to create a specific look. This will be a repeating theme: These regional dances in Irān did not develop within a vacuum; other factors, such as climate, clothing, and ritual practices, influenced the development and use of dance. The role of clothing is particularly important; climate, availability of materials, and the methods used to make a living all influence what clothing is practical and available in a region, in fact, to such an extent that one can feasibly speak of a traditional costume of a region or of a people in an area. But such traditional clothing and dance affect one another, too, determining what kinds of dance movements are both attractive and possible. I therefore include some descriptions and illustrations of regional clothing.

The dances are performed in a closed circle formation, in a predominantly anti-clockwise direction. The circle may consist of all male, all female, or mixed, dancers, but there is no physical contact between the dancers (Hamada 1978: 72). The dancers face one another and then change their facing direction:

Each repetition of a given movement pattern is performed alternately facing the dancer on one side, then the dancer on the other side as the circle progresses continually counter-clockwise (Hamada 1978: 73).

It is in the transition from facing one dancer to facing another that the women's skirts fly out and create a beautiful movement that enhances the motion of the dance.

Some of the dances share sequences of steps.

3 In a 1999 video (Murer, personal communication) of a small-town wedding, four men dressed in local "costume" dance while the groom is being got ready for the wedding; they then lead the groom and his family and friends in an outdoor procession towards the bride's house. This contrasts with Hamada's descriptions of behind-the-walls dance events within the city of Bojnurd.



Fig. 3. The author in Bojnurdi dress.

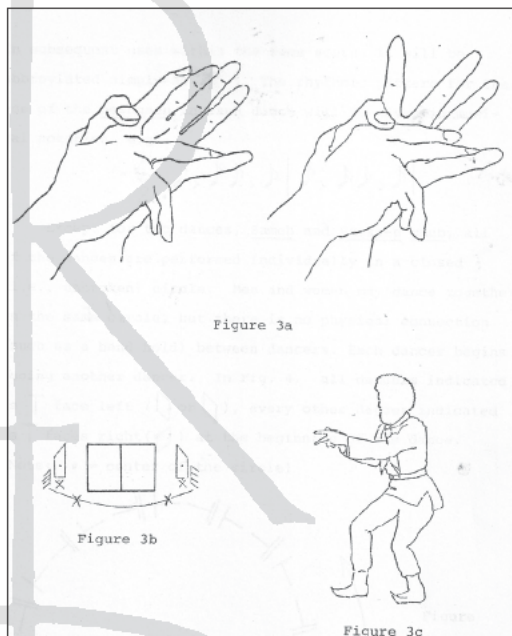


Fig. 4. Beshkan.

The footwork is sharp, clear and rhythmically precise. Arm movements are sustained and often led by the elbow. The hands and individually articulated fingers perform a variety of sustained and bursting movements. The head moves freely (*ad. lib.*) and quickly from side to side in a shaking manner – a characteristic Irānian gesture of enjoyment and involvement (Hamada 1978: 73–74).

A feature of many of these dances, and indeed a part of dance elsewhere in Irān, is the two-handed finger-snap, called *beshkan*.<sup>4</sup> Hamada includes an illustration that shows the start and end positions for the *beshkan* (Hamada 1978: 71), (Fig. 4).

The footwork for Bojnurdi dance can be as simple as the basic SQS,<sup>5</sup> or can consist of a complex sequence of movements. Many of the steps have an airborne quality, especially as executed by men: the step-close-step can be done as a leap from one foot to the other, causing the dancer to have both feet off the ground for a very short period of time. The hand movements are quite delicate and intricate, and the combinations of footwork and hand gestures become complex. For example, in the Kurdish Bojnurdi dance Hāji

<sup>4</sup> In Persian, *beshkan* means “snapping the fingers”. Hamada transcribes it as *beshgaen*.

<sup>5</sup> Slow-Quick-Slow. The pattern of stepping on beats 1, 3, and 4 of a 6-beat measure is ubiquitous throughout the Irānian dance culture sphere.

Nāranji, the hand movements consist of a sequence of three measures, and the footwork consists of a 3-measure pattern of SQS; thus every repetition of the sequence starts on a different foot, though the hand movements remain the same.

Some of the hand gestures for Bojnurdi Kurdish dance are unique to this area. For example, in the dance Sādeh, the fingertips meet, pull back to the palms, meet again, then pull away with fingers trailing (Hamada 1978: 79); see Fig. 5. In another dance, Hāji Nāranji, the sequences of hand gestures begin with the middle finger of the R hand touching the L palm, and then the middle finger of the L hand touching the R palm (Hamada 1978:95); see Fig. 6. These gestures may relate to movements that occur during daily activities, such as weaving, or they may have some other significance.<sup>6</sup>

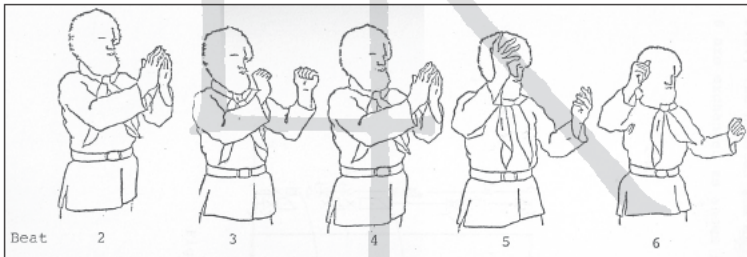


Fig. 5. Hand movements for the dance Sādeh.

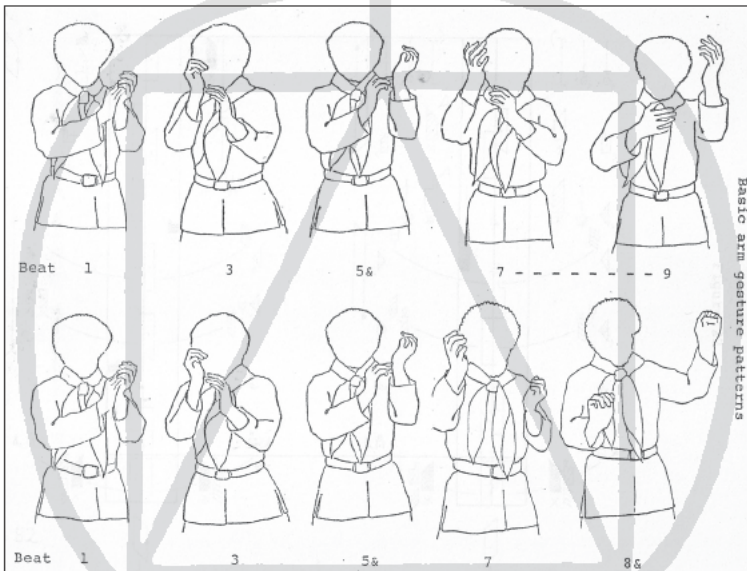


Fig. 6. Hand movements for the dance Hāji Nāranji.

<sup>6</sup> Farima Berenji (personal communication, 2012) posits that hand gestures of Irānian classical and folkloric dance, such as these herein described, relate to ancient pre-Islamic and possibly pre-Zoroastrian religious worship.



Bustān and Darvishi (1992) note that the Bojnurdi dance *doqarseh* was at one time danced in the town square, around the bodies of their dead who had been killed fighting against raiding Turkmen.

In addition to the group dances described above, Hamada's Bojnurdi informant mentions a type of dance found all over Central Asia, in which

...there was a wooden horse – I've seen them elsewhere too – it's a horse you kind of wear around your waist with a long cloth hanging down to cover your legs. That horse was very famous and popular. People followed the horse all along the street... (Hamada 1978: 65).<sup>7</sup>



Fig. 7. Men's clothes of Torbat-e Jām.

### The men's dances of Eastern and Central Khorāssān: Torbat-e Jām and Khāf

Whereas Northern Khorāssān is inhabited mostly by Kurds and Turks, Central and Eastern Khorāssān is predominantly Persian (Bustān and Darvishi). An Iranian film of Khorāssāni dance, now available on YouTube,<sup>8</sup> features men's dances from Torbat-e Jām and Khāf, wearing clothes similar to that shown in Fig. 7. It shows groups of men dancing in a closed circle, executing some quite athletic moves. They mostly face the center of the circle, moving in toward the center and back out, while moving along the

<sup>7</sup> I have seen examples of similar "horses" used as part of a dance in Tajikistan and in videos of Uyghur dance.

<sup>8</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oVsnTVqRgXs>



perimeter of the circle in a generally anti-clockwise motion. Their clothing consists of a long, very full shirt, contained by a vest, over loose trousers, and a turban. As they dance, their clothing enhances the movement of the body with its own motion; in some sequences the dancers hold the hems of their shirts and move them in coordination with the footwork. In other dances the men each carry two short sticks, one in each hand. As part of the dance, they hit the sticks of the man next to them on the right, then hit their own, and then those of the man on their left. The hits are rhythmic, sometimes with both sticks, sometimes with just one. In addition to progressing around the line of direction of the dance, the men also engage one another in pairs in the center of the circle, adding squats and spins to the hits. Dances of this type are also found among men of Pākistān [Maswan], Central Asia and Afghānistān [Schuyler], and India [Banwari].

### Turkmen Dance of Golestān

Golestān is a recently created province of Northeastern Irān, formerly part of Khorāssān province. In this area there is a concentration of Turkmen, a Turkic people that speak the Turkmen language, one of the Western (Oghuz) Turkic languages, but there are Turkmen all over northern and northeastern Irān, as well as in other areas of the Middle East.

According to Bustān and Darvishi (1992), the only dance of the Turkmen is the men's dagger dance.<sup>9</sup> The men's dances, like those of Bojnurd and elsewhere in Khorāssān, are done in a closed circle, with the dancers facing the center, or proceeding around the circle facing the clockwise LOD.<sup>10</sup> A feature of Turkmen men's dances is the rhythmic vocalizations they make deep in the throat, along with recitation of religious texts.

## 2. Southeast Irān: Sistān and Baluchistān

The province of Sistān and Baluchistān (southeast Irān) is largely inhabited by the Baluchis, a single ethnic group, divided among multiple nations, in this case Irān, Afghānistān, and Pākistān.

**Baluchi Women's Dance:** Women's clothing consists of *shalvār* under a large shirt with embroidery on the front and cuffs of the shirt, and on the bottom portion of the *shalvār* (Fig. 8). The front of the shirt or overdress is of a unique pattern, a square yoke above a rectangle topped by a triangle. This front piece includes a pocket. The fullness of the Baluchi women's dress hides the body, but accents the movements of the dance. The footwork is mostly SQS or flat-ball,<sup>11</sup> with turns. The arms and hands are similar

9 Some examples can be found on YouTube: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=g6z2jSZdljw>; <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uIcsA1UDhhM>

10 Line of direction, i.e., the direction in which the dance generally progresses.

11 Step on a flat foot, then on the ball of the other foot.



Fig. 8. Baluchi women's dress.

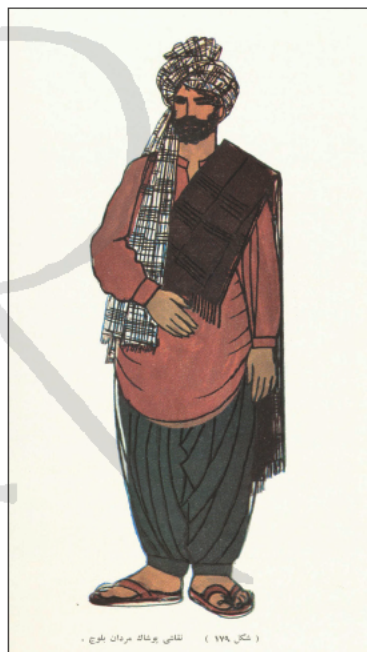


Fig. 9. Baluchi man's dress.

to other Irānian women's dance styles, featuring wrist turns,<sup>12</sup> but also claps. A dance style unique to Baluchis is the women's bracelet dance, in which the hands are shaken strongly in time to the rhythm of the music, and wrists are hit together, the heavy bracelets making a ringing, clacking sound that complements the instrumental music. Music for the dance is typically in 6/8 or 7/8 rhythm.

**Baluchi Men's Dance:** Men's clothing consists of a long straight cotton shirt over very large pants and a large turban (Fig. 9). Baluchi men's dance shares in common with other dances of Eastern Irān the feature of dancing in a circle, in unison, but without touching. Men's dances also include use of sticks.

Bustān and Darvishi (1992) mention several Baluchi dances, *dochāpi*, *sechāpi*, *latto-ki* and *kopago*, that are danced mostly at weddings. They also mention other ceremonies for dances called *lewā*, group dancing that is similar to dances of Africa.<sup>13</sup>

<sup>12</sup> The hand rotates at the wrist.

<sup>13</sup> On YouTube, you can find interesting videos of "Baluchi Lewa". From the appearance of the men dancing, they all have some African origins. This is also apparent in the polyrhythmic percussion of the music. The dancing shares many characteristics with Bandari dance, but also shows African influence as well.