

## DANCES OF THE MUSLIM PEOPLES

Muslims comprise numerically dominant portions of the population in a wide geographic area. On the African continent, the northern tier of Arab countries as well as twenty other Saharan and sub-Saharan states have Muslim majority populations. Of the countries of the Middle East, Turkey, the Arab states, Iran and Afghanistan are predominantly Muslim. Muslims also constitute the majority population in Pakistan and Bangladesh in the Indian subcontinent and a significant minority (50-60 millions) in India. Muslims are numerically dominant in Malaysia and Indonesia, and they constitute a sizeable minority in the Philippines (3-4 millions), China (30-40 millions) and the U.S.S.R. (50-60 millions). Even in Europe and America Muslim immigrants and native-born converts now number in the millions. With this wide geographic presence, one would expect to encounter many elements of the dance culture which differ according to local practices. Despite such local differences, it can be shown that there are dance types and characteristics of form and style which make it possible to speak of features of unity in Muslim dance.

### A. Dance Types of the Muslim Peoples

There is a consistent significance of four types of dance among the Muslim peoples, wherever they have lived. These are 1) combat dances; 2) solo improvisational dances; 3) chain dances; and 4) religious dances of mystical religious brotherhoods. The combat dances are exemplified in sword and stick dances, of which at least one variation can be found in almost every Muslim land. Performed by paired "combatants" carrying pseudo or real weapons and sometimes shields as well, these dances involve advancing and retreating movements by the participants as well

as graceful and skillful weapon maneuvers coordinated with the musical accompaniment. They take place at weddings or other festive gatherings celebrating national or religious occasions and are performed by either professional or amateur dancers.

The solo improvisation category includes all those variations of the dance usually labeled derogatorily in the West as the "belly dance" or "danse du ventre," but known in Asia and Africa as the "Oriental dance." This dance may be done in a night club setting by a scantily clad professional performer, but is more often enjoyed by Muslim spectators in family groups celebrating circumcisions, weddings, harvest and national holidays. In such settings, fully-clothed male or female dancers, whether professional or amateur, participate in this dance which emphasizes "torso" rather than "appendage" movements (see supra, p. 6). This solo improvisational dance focuses attention on the rhythmic movements of individual segments or muscles of the torso or upper portions of the body as they are called into play in a successive manner.

Chain dances involve a group of people joined together with clasped hands or arms linked at the elbows. Sometimes the two or more dancers form a single line; other examples involve performers arranged in two lines facing each other or moving in a circle.

The fourth type of dance used by Muslims includes the dances performed by members of mystical (Ṣūfī) orders. Such dances never are performed at the Muslim prayer (ṣalāt) service. Instead they form an element in Ṣūfī dhikr ("remembrance" of God) meetings at which passages from the Qur'ān (the Holy Book of the Muslims) and religious poetry in praise of God and/or the Prophet Muḥammad are chanted or sung. Such dances are looked upon with immense skepticism, apprehension and even antagonism by the main stream of Muslims. See Haqq (1944) and Molé (1936)

unit providing its own build up of tension and subsequent aesthetic release. This causes the dance performance to convey little awareness of definite beginning and end. An arabesque in dance implies that another unit, another pattern, lies beyond the art creation's boundaries of time and space if the performer or the imagination of the spectator wishes to continue.

It is hoped that the knowledge of these general features will act as a dance "vocabulary" for Muslim culture which would help the student penetrate beneath the surface complexities which might be encountered when confronted with the vastness of the Muslim World. It is also hoped that this basic knowledge would serve as a stimulus to further interest in the aesthetic expression through dance of the Muslim peoples. This increased interest can only lead to increased aesthetic perception and to better understanding of a religio-cultural group of people with whom Americans are experiencing ever-increasing contact, on the international scene as well as in their local North American life.

Temple University  
Philadelphia, Pa.

Dr. Lois Ibsen al Faruqi

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