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Ethnic Dance in Israel

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The dances of the ethnic communities within Israel may be divided into three main categories:

1. Those created by particular Jewish communities in the Diaspora and brought with them to Israel (e.g., European Hasidim; Yemenites);
2. Those adopted and preserved by Jewish communities from the peoples among whom they dwelt in the Diaspora (e.g., the Circassian dances from Russia; those of Bukhara and Georgia; the dances of Kurdistan; those of North Africa and Ethiopia);
3. Those of the Palestinian Arabs of Israel.

The dominant ethnic dances in Israel are those of the first category. Except at weddings, the public place to see Hasidic dancing in Israel is on the holiday of Lag ba'Omer at Meiron in the Galilee, when Hasidim gather to celebrate.

The dances of the Yemenite Jews differ greatly from those of the Hasidim. The presence of Jews in Yemen may date back to the destruction of the First Jerusalem Temple in 587 BCE, when Jews fled the conquering Babylonians.

They lived in Yemen for centuries, establishing there several different communities. They began their return to Israel in the 1880s by caravan, which corresponds with the First 'Aliyyah, or wave of emigrants, from Europe. From 1948 to 1950, when the new State of Israel began to rescue beleaguered Jews worldwide, the remaining Yemenite community was airlifted almost in its entirety to Israel.

Yemenite Jewish dance is always accompanied by song and percussion on domestic vessels (e.g., metal cans, brass plates) but never by musical instruments. It is said that because Yemenite Jews are still mourning the destruction of the Temple, they will not play on instruments. Nevertheless, their drumming and singing are skillful and developed.

In communities of Jews from the northern Yemenite district of Haidan, men and women dance together in lines, both sexes wearing almost identical dress. In

communities from Habban and Hadramawt in southern Yemen, the men wear tight-fitting skirts and perform a turbulent dance.

Curiously, Yemenite Jews are ambivalent in their attitude toward dancers. On the one hand, dancers are regarded with affection, even admiration, if they perform skillfully and give their audiences good entertainment. On the other, dancing itself is not considered the most honorable of occupations, and the rabbis tend to view dancers as somewhat frivolous members of society. It is also, however, a **mitsvah** ("commandment") that all Jews dance at weddings in order to entertain the groom and bride, and even the rabbis take part in a restrained and decorous manner.

The main dance in the Yemenite repertory comes from central Yemen, from the region of the capital city, San'a. In that region men and women dance separately, performing chamber dances confined to a limited area in the main room of an ordinary house. The space is referred to as the **diwan**; this is also the term used for the collection of paraliturgical poetry written in Hebrew, Arabic, and Aramaic that is sung by men.

Yemenite men's dances are accompanied by the songs preserved in the **diwan**. Singers, seated near the dancers, accompany themselves by beating the rhythms on metal cans. There are no professional dancers among the Yemenite Jews, but there are dancers whose special talents are recognized and upon whom audiences call to perform. Yemenite Jews learn these dances from childhood by watching and imitating their elders. Little boys are often seen trying out the steps and body movements alongside the older men.

The number of male dancers is two or four, and their short dance steps are taken over short distances – they usually dance in pairs, one of them leading the other by means of eye or hand signals. Their feet perform a regular dance pattern, while the upper part of the body affects a more improvisatory series of movements. The dance follows the text of the song, particularly its form and meter.

The musical meter is alternately binary and ternary – the transition from one to the other depending on the song's text. The beat is varied, usually proceeding from slow to fast (**accelerando**). Musical and poetic meter are related in a somewhat complex manner.

Some of the hand and torso movements are connected with the chironomic motions that go with the study of the biblical cantillation symbols: the right hand is especially entrusted with a complete system of agreed-upon signs and gestures, to aid in

memorizing the melodic fragments and their combination in the traditional change. Yemenite boys begin at age three to read books of the Torah; so all these gestures become part of male body vocabulary.

The dance is incorporated, then, in a three-part event that is also poetic and musical; it serves, with the poetry it accompanies, as the centerpiece. The first part is the **nashid**, a slow introduction in free meter, with neither percussion nor dancing – a formalized invitation to dance is enacted and the dancer, first rejecting the invitation, finally "succumbs" and agrees to perform. The second part is the **shira**, a poetic piece sung and accompanied by the dancers drumming on a large metal can. Finally comes the **hallel**, an anticlimactic piece, in which the dancers join the singers and with them sing a hymn of praise to God, to the guest of honor, and to all those present.

Yemenite women accompany their dancing with songs in their own gender-specific Yemeni-Arabic vernacular. The songs relate to the women's life in the community and in the family – to the pleasures and hardships that are their lot – and they are handed down orally. The women accompany their singing and dancing by tapping their fingertips on the **sahn**, a brass plate held vertically. One of the best known of the Yemenite women's dances is the sedate **da'asa**, which has a 7/8 meter and consists of swaying the torso and hips gently forward and backward. The women dance together at weddings, especially at the henna ceremony – before and after the bride's hands are smeared with the red pigment (symbolizing life and health).

Yemenite dance has strongly influenced the theatrical art dance of Israel, mainly by choreographers with a Yemenite background, like Sara Levi-Tanai and her world-renowned **Inbal** Dance Theater and her disciple Margalit Oved, but also by non-Yemenite artists. Yemenite dance has strongly influenced the newly developing folk dance of Israel as well.

Another category of ethnic dance comes from the Muslim countries of the Middle East and Africa, in which some Jews lived for centuries. As executed today in Israel, some of these are not straightforward folk dances but are instead stage-managed presentations that demand considerable physical prowess and professional dance training. Included in this category are the lyrical Bukharan dance and that of the Kurdish Jews, and the very vigorous dance of the Caucasians (non-Jews from the Caucasus Mountains who live in Israel). In Kurdish dance, responsive singing alternates between two soloists or a soloist and a group of dancers, typically accompanied by a drum (**dohla**) and a reed instrument (**zurna**). The dances are

performed in an open circle; the arms of the dancers are tightly linked while their legs move in energetic stamping patterns.

An emerging trend in Israel is for reviving some traditional customs and celebrations that immigrants abandoned when they first assimilated into Israeli culture. Kurdish Jews, for example, have revived the **Seheraneh** celebration that includes much of their dance tradition. Moroccan Jews have revived their spring festival, following Passover, called the **Mimunah**, which includes dance. Also being revived are the **hillulot**, the Hasidic pilgrimages, to the graves of renowned rabbis, where dancing is an important part of the celebration.

Instrumental in this change has been the Israel Ethnic Dance Project, begun in 1971 by Gurit Kadman. It combines the efforts of the Folk Dance Department of the Histadrut (trades union), of Hebrew University, and of Israel's Ministry' of Education and Culture, The project revived the Mimunah, which it documented with information from the Moroccan community's elderly and published its research. It also created folk dance troupes based on the authentic dances of Kurdistan Jews, as well as those from India, Yemen, and other countries – all with distinctive dance repertories.

The **lehaka**, the ethnic performing ensemble, is an innovative ethnic dance development that reflects Israel's pride in its cultural diversity. Ensembles demonstrate the dance traditions of the various ethnic communities, both Jewish and non-Jewish, frequently ensuring a dance presence at local, national and even international ethnic festivals and events. Ensembles also allow the young people of a particular ethnic community the opportunity to learn and perform the dances of their elders, a natural progression that had ceased. Young dancers and the **lehaka** directors are aided by the **lehaka** network, frequently sponsored by government agencies.

Another important category of ethnic dance is performed by Palestinians, Israel's Arab population. While their dances differ slightly from place to place and from group to group (villagers, townsfolk, nomadic Bedouin, Druze), they are basically the same throughout the country, and in most respects they are similar to the dances of Arab societies in neighboring countries. They are performed as part of family and communal celebrations, and men and women usually dance separately.

There are two main types of Arab men's dances: the **dabkah** and the **saff** or **sahge**. The **dabka** is a lively affair whose outstanding feature is the often complex rhythmic movement of the feet. A group of eight to twelve young men arrange themselves in an open circle and hold on to each other in any of three characteristic ways: by holding

hands, by gripping each other's belts, or by resting their hands on their neighbors' shoulders. The group has a leader who may either take first place in the line, waving a kerchief (tradition has it that he once brandished a sword), or take up a position opposite the line, rousing his companions' enthusiasm by calling to them, by singing, or by his own emphatic dance movements. The musical accompaniment is provided by a **nay** (a Persian and Aral flute), which improvises on set melodic phrases, by a **durbakka** (a pitcher-type drum), and by the rhythmic shout and singing of a soloist or of the entire group. The energetic foot stamping serves as a counterpoint to the musical accompaniment. The dancers move in a circle around the musicians, and the audience participates by clapping hands, shouting cries of encouragement, and, on some more excited occasions, firing rifles into the air. There at several versions of the **dabkah** but all share these characteristics.

The **saff**, or **sahge**, is a procession dance that advances slowly in a long line. Most of the Arab men present at celebration take part, whether young or old – sometimes numbering dozens. The **saff** is a far simpler dance the **dabkah** and is often performed as part of nuptials, to conduct the bridegroom on his wedding day from the home of his family to that of his bride or to the house, which the newlyweds are to settle. On such an occasion the dancers may traverse several miles and dance for several hours with occasional rest breaks. The dance, however, may be performed for its own sake; the dancers, in a long, arc-shaped line, will move around the village square, following a circular route that repeats itself endlessly. Within the line, the many dancers arrange themselves by village or neighborhood. Each group has its own leader, who spurs his group on to greater efforts. In doing so, he improvises his steps more freely than those of the rest of his group. The dance movements are simple: the legs execute walking steps forward, while the hands move rhythmically and clap at regular intervals. The musical accompaniment is vocal and provided by a soloist (the **sha'er**), to whom the dancers respond in song. The dance is divided into two periods: in the first, the soloist improvises in free rhythm and the dancers, standing still, sing their responses to him; in the second, the solo singing is more measured and the dancers move forward in line, continuing their responses.

Arab women have simpler dances than the men have. For example, they form a circle to surround a bride on the eve of her wedding; then executing a plain walking-step, they accompany themselves by repeatedly singing a short refrain.

Different types of ethnic dance are important in contemporary Israel. There is dance that is an integral part of family and community life, based on the traditional precepts of the specific ethnic group (even if some change have taken place in the new, more modern environment ; urban folk dancing is based on original models (e.g., on the **hora** or on Yemenite "pop") or on ideas assembled from several original models (e.g., modem Hasidic dances and new dances or artworks created by Israeli choreographers and/or dance instructors are usually for a performance program or an event, which then may become part of the Israeli folk dance tradition.

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