

DANCE AND THE EXPRESSION OF BAKHTIARI IDENTITY

David H.M. Brooks

University of Durham, England

The paper deals with some of the problems of understanding and interpreting dance forms among the Bakhtiari.

It is argued that dancing is the cultural form which expresses most completely the Bakhtiari experience of the world. As such dancing is here seen as a crucial, though usually ignored, key to an understanding of the nomadic life style.

By focusing on the central ecological fact of nomadic life -- movement, it is suggested that dancing -- that most mobile and dynamic of all cultural forms, expresses at least some of the most essential and uniquely characteristic aspects of Bakhtiari identity.

Dancing uses the body as its medium of expression. It thus presents us with a particularly illuminating view of how the body, and by extension the social self, is conceptualised and comes to be known.

An analysis of Bakhtiari dances shows a processual structure or a set of ordering principles in terms of which, it is argued, the Bakhtiari orient themselves to and operate on the world.

This set of principles, experienced through participation in the dance, in a very stylised and concentrated form, can be seen to permeate much of the life style of the nomadic Bakhtiari, as well as being consonant with the form of other "inanimate" cultural artifacts such as textiles, costume, carpets and so on.

The paper thus interprets dancing as a social event, structured in its dynamic mode, in such a way that the Bakhtiari dancer comes to an awareness of how to live effectively in his world, how to move in a world dominated by movement and how to express his own individuality as a social being. It is argued that no other cultural form induces this sort of knowledge to the same degree. As such it is concluded that dancing is an important way whereby traditional modes of knowledge may be retained in a world increasingly dominated by urban growth:

"Dance and the expression of Bakhtiari identity".

David H.M. Brooks
Dept. of Anthropology,
University of Durham,
England.

Paper presented at the Festival of Popular Traditions in Isfahan
October 12-18 1977

Preliminary draft only. Not to be used for reference or quotation
without the author's permission.

Leap, leap! for the rhyme
Of the soul is afoot
The sweet drum keeps time
With the soft reed's note

Why art thou slumber bound
Like clay the earth caressing
In movement shall be found
The key to every blessing.

Rumi.

Movement is one of the most characteristic features of the nomadic life style. The freedom to move and the ability to move are essential for prime practical reasons, sometimes for survival. This freedom, ability and knowledge of how to move are core values which find expression and realisation in many ways in the rich cultural traditions of the many different pastoral nomadic peoples living and moving in the Zagros mountain ranges. For the Bakhtiari, probably one of the best known of these nomadic peoples, movement, freedom and a vigilant self assertiveness underlie and animate their view of the world and their own sense of self, to an extreme degree.

As nomadic pastoralists the Bakhtiari experience and come to know their mountain world through the constant movement of their annual spring and autumn migrations. Many Bakhtiari are born on these migrations, as babies, are carried on their mother's backs, are tied on to the backs of pack animals, until they are old enough to walk and clamber over the very steep and dangerous mountains which have to be negotiated every year. Movement is thus a fact of life instilled from birth. It is not then surprising that this world is perceived, structured and imaged by the Bakhtiari in idioms of movement and mobility. Many of the central values find expression in vibrant, fluid even energetic metaphors and symbols through which and by means of which the world is interpreted and charged with significance and meaning. Movement, motion itself, thus comes to be charged with social, psychological and symbolic importance, which for the Bakhtiari amounts to a total preoccupation if not obsession with the control and ordering of movement. Style and quality of movement are key elements in Bakhtiari thought, permeating how Bakhtiari interact with the physical and social world. It is with the stylistic quality of movement that this paper is concerned, seen in its most complete and integrated form - the dance. Dance is pure movement, the most mobile and dynamic form of cultural expression whose medium of expression is the body. Through dancing, both the body and how to move it are experienced directly, both are encountered experientially.

In so far as both are defined in terms of movement , the nomadic migrations and dancing image each other. I am here arguing that there is a dialectical, relationship, a rhythmic continuous interaction through time between the dance and the migrations, between cultural form and social experience. In the dance the principles of ordering motion are exposed, are danced out, are literally embodied by the dancers and these same structuring principles are experienced in the migrations. Crucially both have to be experienced. To understand nomadic life , to become an effective person capable of surviving in these mountains the accumulation of experience is essential. To understand the dance one also must experience it, one must dance. I am suggesting here that as an Anthropologist migrating and dancing can be better understood from the perspective of the other, a double perspective. The migrations illuminate dancing and dancing illuminates the migrations. Put in more sociological terms the cultural activity of dancing can only be understood in its social context. I am adding the reverse perspective to this and saying that the social context can be better understood if seen through the experience of dancing, the dialectical interaction mentioned above.

The significance of movement in each case is differently expressed . In migrations the significance is fiercely pragmatic concerned as it must be with moving people and animals over mountains and rivers, in variable climatic conditions. The dance is entirely concerned with style, with constructing abstract patterns of movement, with the quality of bodily movement, with the construction of rigorously controlled movement. The dancing IS rhythm, the migrations are rhythmic and the experiencing body, the self mediates the two. The dancer is controlled by the musical dictates of the rhythm, the migrating nomadic Bakhtiari is controlled by the physical conditions, the ecology of the environment. Both are subject to different sorts of constraint. The freedom to move has limits. In abstract form, the dancer comes to experience the nature of these limits through the way in which his body movements become constrained and increasingly stylised through the progression of the dance. As shall be shown the control of movement is heavily overtermined in the repetitive dances of the

Bakhtiari. The patterned motion is constructed and reconstructed, created and recreated throughout the dance, having the effect of imprinting the pattern actually in the body. This is not at all a cognitive process. It is not the mind and its conscious processes which are integrated and orchestrated by the dance, but the body. The body comes to experience the pattern from within as it were.

This becomes readily apparent when trying to learn the dances. The more one thinks about the specific movements the more this externalising process interferes with the fluid production of the body movements. By careful and prolonged observation and imitation at least the external forms of the dance can be mastered. However dancing is much more than mere technique. My own early clumsy efforts at the dance gradually gave way to a more meaningful stylistic competence through this process of imprinting. I was not so much dancing as being danced by the repetitive rhythms. The manner in which I was helped by the Bakhtiari to achieve this tells much about how to dance. Being a non verbal form, linguistic explanations were not helpful and the Bakhtiari did not try. They brusquely informed me that no amount of watching would tell me how to dance, I had to dance. Doing it, I was told is the only way to learn. I was repeatedly instructed not to listen to the music but to feel it, to allow my body to move. With a great deal of laughter I was told I thought too much about it and that is not what dancing is for. The musicians help the learning process both for myself and for young Bakhtiaris by pointing their instruments directly at the less competent, buffetting them with rhythmic soundwaves. The music can literally be "felt". In this way the body is moved by the music. Before mastering the rhythm one must first be mastered by the rhythm. Style belongs to those who master the rhythm, who find the free-est, most fluid expression within the defined limits of the rhythm. It is instantly recognisable and much admired by the Bakhtiari. In its broadest terms it indicates someone who defines themselves from within, who is not dominated by the rhythm but who achieves an individuality within the rhythmic framework of the dance. We have here a mode in which personal as well as Bakhtiari identity is expressed.

To fully explicate the above remarks would require a detailed account of the entire physical, social, and cultural world of the Bakhtiari, beyond the scope of this paper. I shall confine myself to the main features of the dances and their specific social contexts. This requires a somewhat lengthy description of the way in which the body is orchestrated in the dance. Describing movement linguistically is difficult, and no matter how subtly done any verbal description of a dance is less than the dance itself, the quality and grace of movement requires to be seen, or with the Bakhtiari the ferocity and speed of attack are what lends style to the movement. The linguistic mode by its very form is discontinuous and not the best tool to describe continuous movement. It is also analytic whereas dance is holistic, synesthetic and integrated. The dancers experiences, encounters himself as a whole being, emersed and involved in the activity of the dance. At the time of dancing the participants are distanced from the "real" world, subjectively involved and for this very reason for the anthropologist to dance is perhaps crucial in order to come to understand at least some of what this central experience means for the Bakhtiari.

Bakhtiari Dances

Dancing for the Bakhtiari is not an art, it is a practical social activity. Everyone dances at some time in their lives. Dancing is not a specialist activity, although it takes place on special occasions.

The "Chub bazi" or "Tarki bazi" - stick dance, is generally danced at most festive occasions such as Now Ruz, betrothal ceremonies, visits from important government officials and weddings.

This dance is found among many of the nomadic groups of the mountains, it is by no means exclusive to the Bakhtiari, suggesting it is expressive of nomadic experience generally. It is not indiginous to the peasant population who very ineffectively imitate it, much to the derision of the Bakhtiari. As far as the Bakhtiari are concerned, "rayati", peasants can not dance.

Rather like their migrations to dance the "chub bazi" is an exciting but often uncomfortable and painful experience.

The dance as the term "bazi" suggests is a game, a contest between men in public view. Reputation is at stake and the dance often leads to disagreements and genuine fighting. This form of dance is exclusively male and on the whole older men do not dance, nor do local chiefs -"Kalantars". It would be considered undignified and somewhat demeaning. The dance is dramatic and accompanied by yells of encouragement or derision from the spectators, by ululations from the women when they are particularly impressed with the style of any particular dancer. The larger the social occasion the more volatile the dancing becomes. Dancers, spectators and musicians all interact in the production of an increasingly emotional event. A good bout of dancing is in itself considered the mark of a successful event.

The dance consists of two protagonists, one with a long stick or pole several meters long and the other a shorter pliable stick. The dance is an aggressive attacking dance where the dancer holding the short stick has to strike his defending opponent below the level of the knee and preferably on the ankle. The only permissible defence against the attack is to use the long rigid stick firmly planted on the ground, as a lever. Once the stick is planted the defender is not supposed to lift it from the ground. He defends himself by leaping in the air, backwards or sideways using the pole as support. He can retreat before his attacking opponent dragging the pole along the ground in front of him. When this happens the retreat quickly brings him to the surrounding spectators and the attack is abandoned. Such a strategy is greeted with roars of laughter. No dancer can afford to use this strategy often or he runs the risk of losing face.

The dance starts with the two dancers dancing in a wide circle, round each other, each holding their respective sticks. The movements consist of hopping steps in a duple rhythm with the leg lifted high at the back, bent at the knee. The ankles are flexed producing a distinct double movement of the ankles.

It is this double flexing of the ankle that lends the dance its distinctive style. The effect gradually becomes apparent, and is especially noticeable when peasants dance, because they do not produce this double flexing, and I am inclined to think can not produce it. Through this double flexing, the Bakhtiari dance against the rhythm, in a sense they fight against the rhythm and in so doing control it. The clear, sometimes leaping hopping movement as the dancers circle round each other is a fraction off the beat. The almost invisible flexing of the ankle is the movement on the beat. It is, and is meant to be a very deceptive movement. It is this "invisible" , barely perceptible movement that produces the distinctive appearance. The same stylistic appearance can not be achieved with out. Only very occasionally did I ever manage to produce this with any facility. The style which is visible to all is thus produced imperceptibly, deceptively. Appearance and reality, like so much of nomadic life are very different things. This is one of the reasons why participation is crucial to the dance. If the production of movement is not perceptible, it is quite literally not available for observation. In this tiny movement the whole deceptive point of the stick dance is manifest.

While circling each other the dancers twirl their respective sticks in variable ways. Some have very showy styles waving their stick wildly, others hold long or short sticks across their shoulders engrossed in their dance, and a particularly admired style is to weave a sort of spiral pattern, holding the pliable stick with one hand at either end. To do this the arms and hands move in a fluid continuous movement of considerable grace while the leg and feet movements continue the staccato flexed hops. The very best dancers can add to this a slight forward and backward movement done by flexing the knees. It requires real mastery of the different parts of the body to integrate these different movements into the end product of fluid motion. When any dancer exhibits such skill, the women in particular let loose shrill ululations and sighs of enjoyment. They throw dust in the air to try and hide such perfection from the gaze of strangers.

After circling for some time the dancer with the short pliable stick gives a yell, and for the first time in the dance the dancers turn and face each other.

Up to this point the dancers have been totally independent of each other, they pointedly ignore each other. On the yelled signal from the attacker, the two dancers enter into a mutually defined relationship of attack and defense. The dancer with the long stick, independent and isolated, in his own world of movement up to this point, plants his stick on the ground and turns to face his opponent. Between them is held the rigid "Chub". The space now takes on a definite structure with the planted pole as the centre. Significantly the pole is not supposed to be lifted from the ground. The defender faces the aggressive other - stranger or outsider. The relationship is one of separation of two social beings interacting.

The attacker's dance is not finished. The defender's movements are now defined only by leaving away from the attack. The attacker dances and hops backwards and forwards in front of the defender, making mock attacks, trying to deceive his opponent. He may proceed to dance round his opponent again, and the defender turns on the axis of the pole to keep facing him. The attacker also makes much use of grimacing, looking as fierce and intimidating as possible. On the several occasions when I indulged in such grimacing my opponent and most of those watching fell about with amusement.

There are three main styles of holding the pliable stick when about to attack. Holding the stick horizontally on the forehead, the crown of the head or behind the back. In the first the attacking stick is wholly visible, but is very difficult to attack successfully from this position. The dancer has to be able to strike very quickly for this attack to succeed. Holding the stick on the crown of the head is a mid way compromise between the first and the last in which the stick is almost totally hidden from view by the attacker's body. This position is the most deceptive of all. The defender and attacker scrutinise each other's faces and body posture to try to figure out each other's strategies. The object is basically to deceive the opponent while not being deceived by him. Again the theme of seeing through the appearance of things is stressed.

The actual strike is accompanied by a tremendous yell which further serves to distract the opponent's attention from which direction the actual attack is launched. Success is judged by whether the opponent is stuck below the knee. As mentioned earlier the object is to hit the ankle. When this happens the result can be exceedingly painful. Bruising and maiming to the extent of laming one's opponent is very common. When struck no reaction should be shown, the pain is not supposed to register. When it does there is an immediate response from the crowd. Hiding, deception, keeping hidden are the key themes; and one's reputation and prestige are finely judged by everyone present. To appear cowardly - "tarsu" in public is a social disaster. Not to acknowledge pain, when it is obvious to everyone that a severe blow has been inflicted gains one respect.

After the attack is completed, the dance begins again whether or not the attack has been successful and the process begins again. Each attacker gets at least three chances to attack and then the roles are reversed, the attacker thus becoming the defender. The dance is done several more times, depending on whether any onlooker wants to break it up and dance himself. Particularly good dancers will be encouraged to continue dancing as long as they can. The fact that the style is important is seen in the way good dancers are urged to display their talents and poor dancers will be prevented from taking over. The dancing can go on for many hours.

The final feature of the dancing has now been added. To dance the stick dance one must both attack AND defend. Literally learn a double perspective, which is nothing other than an inside and an outside perspective. The dance teaches both, it enacts both positions enabling the experiencing Bakhtiari to shift perspectives, to move between self and other, insider and stranger, thus leading to a greater awareness of self. The structure of the dance forces this double perspective on the dancer. To know is to be able to dance better as attacker and defender. It is in effect self awareness of the social nature of man that is so graphically danced out.

The dance is not a metaphor for social experience, it is a graphic representation of it. It enacts the particular social experience of the Bakhtiari. It embodies the rules of the game. By aiming to hit the ankle, which as explained above is the scarcely perceptible means whereby the style of the dance is carried, the message is clear. To damage the capacity of the opponent to move, by aiming at the reality behind the appearance. For a people for whom movement is the defining characteristic of their livelihood this then is no game. The game itself is only an "appearance". Something absolutely fundamental and basic to life is being enacted in what "appears" to be merely a dance, a game. The way things appear is not the way things are. This statement about the nature of reality is camouflaged in the guise of a dance. The dance does not communicate this message to the dancers. The "meaning" of the dance is not that it enacts the game of life. For the dancers, they are dancing and they do this because they have always danced like this. The fact that under this illusion is a fundamental structring of how to operate in the world, of how to know the world suggests that dancing is one of the cultural ways of transmitting and storing knowledge of the social world. The dance replicates the processes and the structure of the world thus making the world more knowable, using a mobile experiential mode to express how Bakhtiari need to see the world. By dancing one becomes potentially more aware as a person. Dancing is then a means of realising, of becoming Bakhtiari. It is a means of expressing identity precisely because it enacts and embodies the experience of living and moving in this particular environment.

The dance can be interpreted in terms of the physical environment, which must be known before it can be successfully lived in. Here nature, which is notoriously capricious and unpredictable as analogous to the attacker. The Bakhtiari is controlled, constained and limited by his natural environment. His method of contolling it is to move through it, like the wind. The Bakhtiari identify themselves, image themselves as "badi" - people of the wind, again a mobile, in fact immaterial metaphor that is particularly apt.

This stick dance can also be seen in social and political terms. Bakhtiari social life is one in which all outsiders are regarded with suspicion. Only one's closest kin are accorded a measure of trust. However in this ecological system of pastoralism one's major competitors for resources such as pastures, and water are one's closest neighbours and one's kin, so there are often severe tensions with one's closest kin and neighbours. The Bakhtiari have to defend themselves from both within and from without, from inside and outside. This is the social experience of the Bakhtiari then, the necessity of balancing opposed tension coming from outside and from inside. This tension is constantly changing through time, but is the prime way in which the world is structured. The outside and the inside require balancing. The fundamental structuring principle whereby the world, the way the Bakhtiari see their world is in the opposition between centripetal and centrifugal movement. A world under constant construction, by being lived in. A static structuring of the world would be harmful if not destructive in the Bakhtiari context, because mobility lies at the heart of their ecological survival, and the world can only be known, through participation. The world and the Bakhtiari interact within a mutually defining set of principles, manifested always in movement, the movement of opposed directions, the shift of orientation, from attacker to defender and back embodied in the dance. This tension of opposed forces is what is constant. The particular balancing will change through time, historical circumstances, demographic factors, climatic disasters such as drought, but the act of balancing in this particular way stays always constant. It is not so much the variations in nomadic response that require explanation but their variability. This variability is the constant trick of balancing the centripetal and centrifugal forces, and pre-eminently dancing is an act of balance par excellence. Movement requires orientation and the orientation of the Bakhtiari dance so far described is to the "real" world. This stick dance is a practical experience which orients the dancer firmly and clearly IN the world of the mountains.

Although detailed descriptions of dancing are rare in the literature, there is suggestive evidence for a change in the style of this stick dance since 1925. In the film GRASS, which is concerned with the Bakhtiari migration, there is a scene in which the stick dancing takes place. Both dancers have two small pliable sticks in their hands. The same circling is evident and the object of the dance is the same. Precise details of movement are not possible because of the jerkiness of the film, but there is no sign of a long stick. Independent of this information I had been told by the Bakhtiari that they used to dance with two small sticks. Their explanation for changing to the long stick was that you could hit harder with only one stick, and that you could defend better. What is interesting and revealing here, in the light of what has been said above, is that both attributes were mentioned - defense and attack.

As is well known it was after 1925 that the National policy towards the tribes of Iran became markedly more antagonistic. Within ten years much of the Bakhtiari had been disarmed, movement was forbidden, and they were settled in large numbers with disastrous effects. The world of the Bakhtiari had shifted balance, and their interaction with the State had to become increasingly defensive. The balance of power between tribe and state had irrevocably shifted.

It is interesting that it is during this period the present day style of dancing appeared,; the theme is still defense and attack and the experience of both, but the stress, through the contrast between a long stick contrasted with the shorter one, and the planting of the stick on the ground, is different. It is tempting to see the planting of the long stick, and the stick itself as symbolising the physical and cultural survival of the Bakhtiari as a distinct and unique group. A more extensive discussion of the Bakhtiari would be necessary to sustain this contention, but it is one of which I am fairly confident.