



## Çûb-Bâzî -- The stick-dances of Iran

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*Çûb-Bâzî* ("stick game"; or *raqs-e çûb*, "stick dance") is a form of folk dance found all over Iran (Hamada), distinguished from other Iranian folk dances in that the dancers carry, and dance with, sticks of wood (Dehkhoda, page 322). Some consider that these dances may all be seen to have their origin in stylized combat (Al-Faruqi); they may also be related to the sword (*jengi*) dances described by Rezvani (pages 189-190).

There are two types of *çûb-bâzî* in Iran. The first type is more directly related to stylized combat; while some of the movements are rhythmic, no particular patterns are followed in hitting the sticks. In this type, done only by men, two men dance together while the rest of those present watch. This form of *çûb-bâzî* is found primarily among the tribes of Southwest Iran: the *Lor*, *Bahktiari*, and *Qashqai* (Mobbashsheri, page 71; Beck; Friend; Gorguinpour). It is competitive, aggressive, and dangerous, and only the experienced participate. In the *Qashqai* version, the two men dance in time with the musical accompaniment (usually the *karnâ* and *naqqâra*). Each dancer assumes a distinct role: one plays the role of the attacker; the other acts as the defender. The attacker wields a short, thin stick while dancing around the defender; the defender holds a long pole upright. After circling his opponent for some time, the attacker suddenly strikes at the defender with his stick, aiming for the legs. The defender tries to ward off the blow with his pole. If the attacker hits the defender, someone from the audience takes the defender's place. If the attacker misses, he must quit (Beck, pages 23-24), or change places with the defender (personal observation). In this latter form, once each of the pair has had the chance to play both roles, a new attacker comes in, or both players leave, permitting a new pair to enter the game together. A *khan* may be the attacker, but usually does not defend, except against one of equal rank; a servante or other lower-ranking man would replace the *khan* in the role of defender. The game can become fairly heated when it is played at a large gathering, or between members of different tribes (Gorguinpour, personal communication, 1993). This form of the *çûb-bâzî* is thus both a dance and a show of skill and bravery; participants are judged by their abilities in the combat aspects, as well as by their grace in executing the dance movements (Gorguinpour, personal communication, 1987).

The practice is similar among the *Bahktiari*, where it is also called *tarka-bâzî*, "twig dance" (Mobbashsheri, page 71; Kelkî, pages 39-40). These dances are typically done as part of the wedding celebration. In some regions, they are also performed as part of calendar-cycle rituals. For example, in Arâk, southwest of Qom, *çûb-bâzî* is part of the *nâqâlî* ritual that is performed on the fortieth day of winter (10 Bahman / 30 January). This ritual is performed by groups of men who go from house to house and enact certain rituals believed to bring about fertility and good luck. As they enter the courtyard of a home, they begin the ritual with *çûb-bâzî*, to the musical accompaniment of the *sornâ* and *dohol*. This dance is described as dangerous enough that only skilled dancers participate, as the unskilled are likely to receive broken hands and legs (Enjavî, 1352/1973, page 73 to 77).

The second type of *çûb-bâzî* is not so much an improvised competition as a social dance recreation, and the movements of dancers and the hitting of the sticks follow definite rhythmic patterns. It is done either in pairs (as in Bojnûrd; Hamada) or in a circle (as among the Baluch; Allen, unpublished field notes, 1974, and personal communication, 1987), and may be performed by women as well as by men. In this type, each dancer has a short (approximately 18" long) stick, and executes a basic dance step, striking the sticks of the other dancers as well as his own, while moving to the rhythm of the music. While definite patterns of movement and rhythm are followed, there is room for individual improvisation within the framework of the pattern (Hamada, pages 111-112; Allen, 1974). Similar dances form part of calendar cycle rituals, such as the *qîshdân çîkdîm* ("I have come out of winter") ritual of Marand in Azerbaijan. This ritual takes place in the month of Esfand (late February to early March), just as the weather begins to warm, in order to herald or bring about the end of winter. As part of this ritual, one man dances with two sticks, hitting them together, to the rhythmic accompaniment of the *daf* (Enjavî, 1353 / 1974, pages 20 to 22).

The first type of *çûb-bâzî* has an analogous form in the *tahtîb* dance of Upper Egypt (Ali). The *çûb-bâzî* dances of the second type have analogous forms in Central Asia and Afghanistan (Schuyler), Pakistan (Maswan), and India (Banwari, Wood). In fact, similar dances can be found all over the world (Sachs, pages 122-123; though his two basic types of stick dance are defined rather differently, i.e., one stick per dancer versus two sticks per dancer, the latter type being considered the older).

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