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## Thought Short Report

# Body as a means of non-verbal communication in Iran

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## Abstract

Bodies move, and they express. There is a body language, and there is a language employed to refer to body, its parts and the states of its being in all cultures. Consciously and unconsciously people judge each other according to body and clothing behavior. What one thinks one expresses, is not necessarily how one is seen and judged. The meaning of self, body, gesture and behavior are culture specific. The limits of culture are time dependent and its borders are more and more porous. In my paper on the Iranian body, I shall concentrate on the non-verbal communication through the body. First various meanings of the self are considered and then gender specific behavior in the public domain is discussed. I shall argue that in the nonverbal public domain, the most "eloquent" expressions are not those of clothing, gesture or behavior, but those of the eyes, the doors toward one's inner self and feelings. As we pass the threshold from the public into the private domain, from the street into the house, we first encounter the formal private domain, and then the dance world. Although this world requires some degree of informality and intimacy, it nonetheless has its specific

regulations and boundaries, preventing it from becoming totally informal or chaotic. In a country where many layers of culture lie in every word and act, it is definitely not sufficient to attend to the words, it is essential to search in the non-verbal to get a more holistic view of intended meaning.

## Introduction

The meaning of self, body, gesture and behavior are culture specific. The limits of culture are time dependent and its borders are more and more porous. In this brief consideration of the Iranian body, we shall concentrate on the non-verbal communication through the body. First various meanings of the self are considered and then gender specific behavior in the public domain is discussed. I will argue that in the nonverbal public domain, the most 'eloquent' expressions are not those of clothing, gesture or behavior, but those" of the eyes, the doors toward one's inner self and feelings. As we pass the threshold from the public into the private domain, from the street into the house, we first encounter the formal private domain, and then the dance world. Although this world requires some degree of informality and intimacy, it nonetheless has its specific regulations and boundaries, preventing it from becoming totally informal or chaotic.

In another paper (Shahshahani 2003) I have shown the difference between the meaning of self in Iran and Geertz's definition of the 'individual' (1983: 417). In the Iranian context, 'I,' the self, is *bandeh, the* modest servitor of God or a landlord, full of irresponsibility like the' they' defined by Heidegger (1962: 164-5). Another "I" is the self-gloried' I' who is the master. Thirdly, there is I as a being among others ***(jan, nafs****]* and finally, *del,* the heart, the reflection of the cosmos, where truth can be perceived.
This very complicated body-self definition can be further supplemented by the three states of being, i.e. gas, liquid and matter (see Lutz1988). Thus, for instance, heights of emotion are described as a gaseous, fuming state. The following expressions illustrate this: 'Smoke rose from my head' *[dud az saram barxast]*. 'He blew out of oven' *[az kureh darraft]* meaning there was so much pressure on him that he lost patience and blew up. 'The bowl of his patience poured out' *[kaseye sabresh labriz shod],* which refers to both a gaseous and liquid state where a bowl filled with hot liquid becomes so

full that it pours out. Finally, there is 'He evacuated his complexes' *[taxlieh shod]* and again one imagines lots of fume leaving a person.

This brings us to body as a liquid such as in 'I melted of shame' *(az xejalat ab shodam),* pronouncing a transition from a solid to a liquid state, and then there is also the term 'liquid emotions' *[ehsasate raqiq]*.In cases of extreme adoration of another person, such as a mother expressing her love for her child, one shows a physical understanding of the body, distinct from liquid or gas, with some connotation to an animal state: 'May I be sacrificed for you' *[qorbunet beram).* Just as animals are beheaded in front of a person in honor, such as a bride, a newly born child or a person returning from Mecca, this expression places the self in a lower position in comparison to the other. This is also the state of *bandeh* [slave] referred to above, as opposed to the self as the master. Finally, there are references to the self as an object such as in 'His heart is like a stone' *[sang del ast]*, which connotes cruelty.

## The body

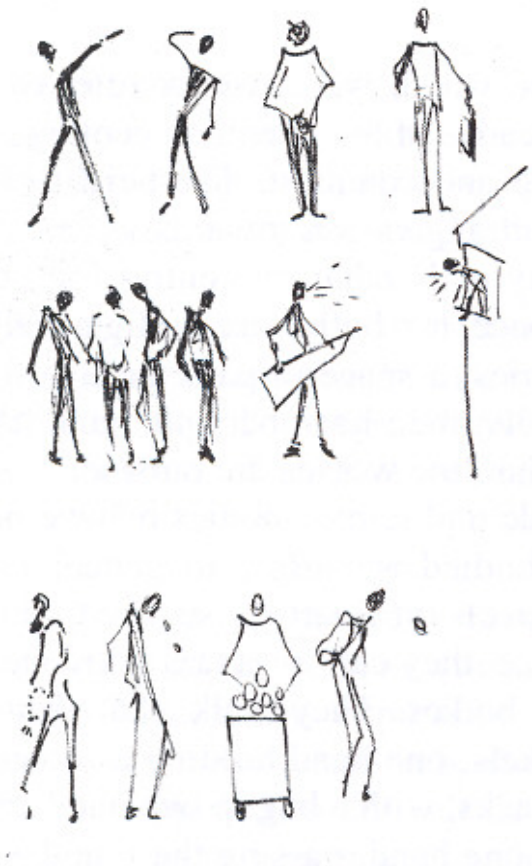
So, how does this complex self behave in the public space? By the public space we here mean the streets of urban areas, not enclosed public spaces such as the work place. From early childhood, boys are told to leave the house on errands. In case of misbehavior, they are also told to go outside the house. The public space, that is one's alley or street, becomes a place where boys join to play or do some work for the household. Thus outside the house *[birun, outside; kucheh, alley; xiyaban, street]* are the open spaces with malleable, porous boundaries where boys and men pass a considerable amount of their time. Girls, on the contrary, are never banished to this space and they are not sent out on errands, unless there is no other choice of household personnel.

It should be noted though, that this is also a very class dependent matter: the higher one's status and class, the less the possibility of going outside the household for errands. The rationale behind this is an historical matter, one which we can only refer to synoptically here. Up until the first two decades of the twentieth century, Iranian cities had been subjugated to raiding and conquest. The height of such humiliation had been the arrest of and aggression towards women. The streets of Iranian cities, except the city

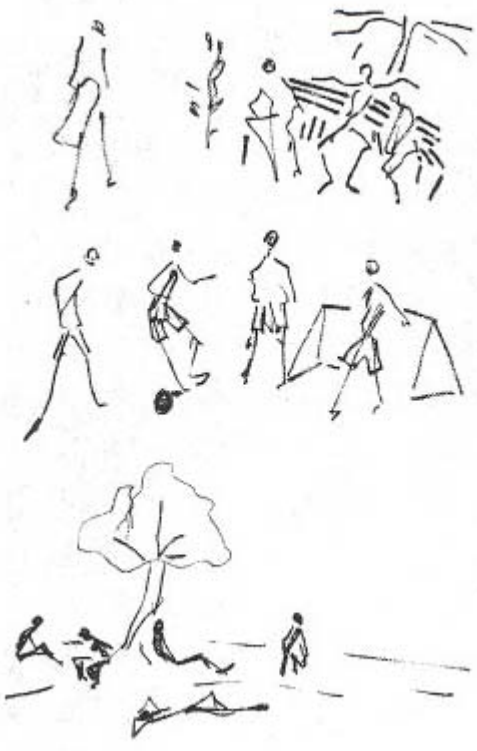
of Esfahan in central Iran, do not offer citizens a relaxed, strolling space for both sexes. High walls and curving streets characterise these cities, a space to pass through from one enclosed area to another. Historically, men have been the guardians of the quarters and it is still said today that 'the wolves are outside.'

Now, how do male and female bodies behave in this public space and how are people embodied according to gender in this area? Observing male bodies in the streets on a daily basis, we find them in many different positions. For instance, they call for a taxi with one arm extended up or at an angle from their bodies. They walk with their hands on both sides, hand(s) in their pockets, one hand holding a jacket over a shoulder, both hands behind their backs, with a bag in one hand and the other free. Some hold worry beads in one hand, passing the round, soft beads one after the other, while busily thinking or calming themselves or repeating a religious phrase. They scratch all parts of their body without apprehension, even their most private organs. Relaxed they wait at a street corner, rest on a tree, a wall or a lamp-post with one arm or the entire body. A group of men may sit on the stairs of a building, workers may line up in a popular street waiting for an employer to come and hire them. Some may sit under the shade of a tree. They may stand by a car door talking for a while, in a friendly manner or, after a car accident, in an excited manner, 'fuming,' yelling and threatening each other. Calling someone loudly is not unusual, as taxis declare the direction of their trajectory, peddlers announce their merchandise or prices, or friends callout to each other. It is also not rare for men to spit in the street. To all this we can add the spectacle of male bodies of all ages playing football in the streets.

How are females embodied in the public space? In the overwhelming majority of cases they are seen with one hand holding their shoulder bags, crossed over their chests whilst the other hand hangs by their sides. In residential areas, they may have shopping bags or a child holding their hand. If they are accompanied, they keep physically close to one another. Other than that, they walk seriously, as though being in an alien place and in a rush getting from one place to another. Window-shopping usually is done accompanied by others.



3.1.: Male postures in the public area



3.2.: Other male postures

So, as a single person, the street is a place of passage, through which a female body passes in a very monotonous form with little variation to the description provided above. Once in a while a woman puts her headdress in order, or with one hand protects her eyes from the shining sun. Only elderly women, who generally have aching legs, may sit on a house step or the low window sill of a shop for a little while. Beggars and prostitutes are exceptions and linger on in the public space. Moreover, it is very rare to hear women's voices in the streets, or to see them in a relaxed manner talking to each other. In old neighborhoods, where people have known each other for a long time, or in apartment houses with open green spaces, chatting in groups may be an evening past-time though.

## Clothing

The human body is not only expressive in its possibilities of gesture and body movement, it is also expressive in the way it is seen in the face, particularly the eyes, and in clothing. Let us now consider these two areas beginning with clothing in the public area.

Ever since *The Persian Letters* of Montesquieu, written in the eighteenth century, there have been black conical images of Iranian women, also referred to as black crows. Travelers and orientalists have paid little attention to details of clothing which distinguish women and their attempts to communicate through external garments. However, we want to stay in the present time and the urban space we have been considering above, and examine the variations in women's outer garment and particularly that of the headdress.

The most conservative outer garment is the semicircular black cloth *[tchador]* worn over a shoulder size black headdress *[maqna'eh]*. The dress underneath is called *rupush*, which looks like a long raincoat with buttons at the front. Pants are worn and thick black knee-high stockings so that the skin cannot be seen. Shoes are with low heels or totally flat. Usually only one eye of the woman is seen in a triangle across her face which is otherwise covered. A small minority of women appears in this attire and offers a very distinct message of politico-religious adherence. By far the more prevalent female clothing is *manto rusari* [coat with headscarf] which at times comes to designate

a particular type of life style. The attire is the same as above, except for the absence of the black veil. The shoes have higher heels or are sports shoes and the stockings become lighter. These are the government employees, university students and school children, all looking very similar, just in different sizes. As we pass beyond the working hours, female bodies express themselves without the fears of job and school regulations. The color of the outer garment changes, it becomes tighter and every season it changes in style and color. Pants also vary according to fashion in color, width and length. Feet can be bare in summer wearing sandals and nail polish. Through these varieties, the body expresses its politico-religious opinion and its ethical views as well as its adherence to different cultural styles.

3.3.: Female clothing in the public area

The headdress also takes many different forms, textures, colors and styles of tying every season. Such attraction towards change shows distance from the status quo. I already mentioned the *maqna 'eh* above. A scarf pinned under the chin is also very traditional as a headdress. Knotting, however, is the most prevalent practice. Moreover, it is also possible to take one end of a scarf from one side and throw it over the opposite shoulder letting it hang down behind. This is not an officially accepted form because the

neck may be seen, and the scarf is subject to loosen easily. Although it is not forbidden, it is seen only occasionally. Smaller scarves of light texture and different colors have been worn during the past few years. The liberal tendency present ever since the presidency of Mr. Khatami has allowed for these practices. The scarves are knotted around the neck, at times revealing the bare neck and a little necklace underneath. Two years ago white cotton scarves were the fashion for young women, last year the color was blue and this year it is deep red or, for the more daring young girls, scarlet red. To wear scarves inside the coat was the latest summer fashion in 2002 and the coat itself has become very tight, showing the moving hips while walking. It has slits on the side and back and has a light waist-band tied loosely behind.

Figure 3.4.: Various headdresses 2002

We can thus see that whereas men are physically more relaxed in the public space expressing themselves through a variety of bodily postures and gestures, women are much more restricted in their embodiment and use clothing as a means of self-expression. Although men's clothing can also be analyzed in terms of a differential

range of thought, this is much more pronounced with women. Men's collars have basically two varieties, besides the possibility of wearing T-shirts. Sleeves may be long or short; officially short sleeves are prohibited, but they are tolerated. Pants may be tight blue jeans or loose cloth pants. The latter worn with a white shirt over it has a definite political message, namely adherence to the status quo. Facial hair may be formed into a variety of beards with the entirely unshaven face belonging to the conservative youth.

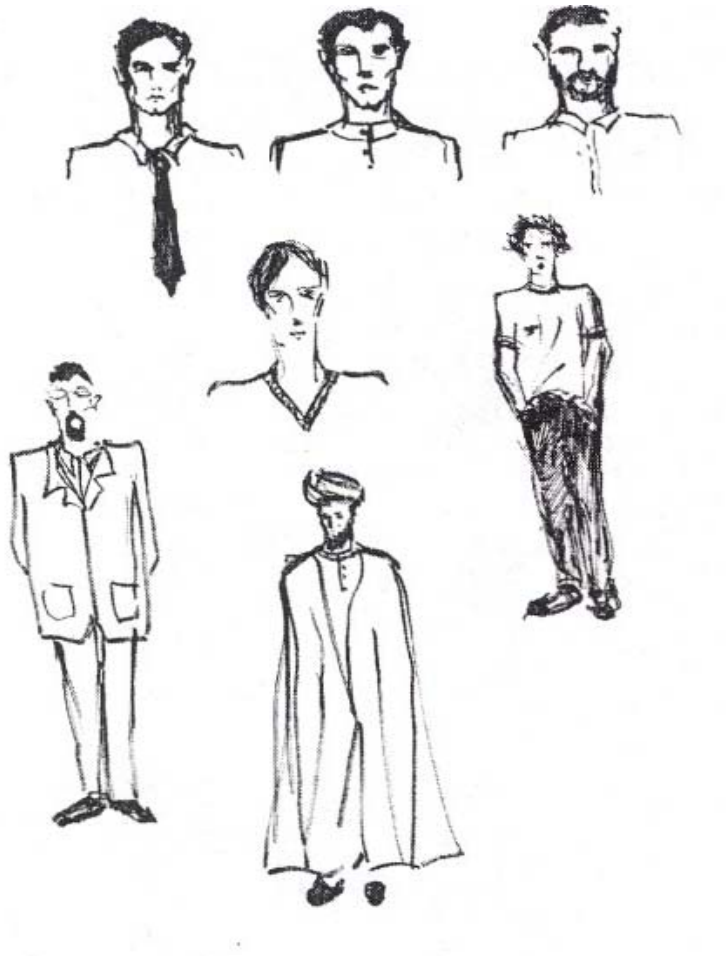


Figure 3.5.: Various male clothing

## The eyes

Limitations on self-expression through body movement and verbal expression have made women become particularly creative in another area which takes us to the topic of expressive Persian eyes. Persian poetry vouches for this claim and, for instance, in the *Loghat-nama,* an Iranian encyclopedia, we find many terms, expressions and

poetry regarding the eyes (1969: 190-206). The eyes are the doors towards one's inner self and they are also the windows towards the outer world. Closing the eyes of a dead person is accepting and showing to others that he or she is dead. Eyes can hide or betray one's inner feelings. They can become full of anger, envy, violence, desire or lust. They may show innocence or vice. The worst eyes are those which are harmful and can be destructive upon a glance, i.e. the 'evil eyes.' Turquoise blue color in beads or jewelry is worn to keep away the effect of such eyes. One's child is 'the light of one's eyes' *[nure chashm],* hope for the future, joy for life. Eyes may be compared to the flower narcissus which has a large round centre with an askance position, clear and innocent. One's eyes show the horizon of one's knowledge. Eyes portray sadness and the depth of sorrow can be judged through the eyes. Shame is also portrayed through the eyes. A bashful person as opposed to a shameless person can be distinguished by the way she looks away or looks down. Black eyes are simple and straightforward, colored eyes, blue and particularly green eyes are mistrusted. Thus as E. T. Hall (1959) has well observed, when somebody is faraway, he is scrutinized to be understood, but as he approaches, one looks inadvertently as though not interested, but also to hide one's own eyes. To 'steal the other's eyes' is to catch somebody looking at oneself. Thus, one should try to avoid looking into the other's eyes in order to avoid being betrayed or seeing the winking of the other, or hearing 'She was eating me with her eyes.' So there is a great trust in our comprehension of other people through their eyes which implies a belief in the eyes being very expressive. Hence, a considerable responsibility of communication befalls the eyes, as the culmination of non-verbal communication.

Given this expressiveness of the eyes, they are very well taken care of. Eye make-up has always been very popular in Iran. Kohl *[sormeh],* made of burned almonds or hazelnuts, has been used as a nutrient to the eyes and as a means of making them more marked. Today, besides consumer make-up, contact lenses of all colours are being used by women to make this important means of rapid communication even more effective. Moreover, tattooing eyebrows or eye lines as well as plastic surgery to reduce wrinkles around the eyes or frown lines are being used prevalently.

## Dance

Now we may move into the domain in which non-verbal communication is at its height: the domain of dance. I consider dance in urban areas of central Iran (Shiite Fars population) to be a cathartic ritual. Scheff defines catharsis "as the discharge of one or more of four distressful emotions: grief, fear, embarrassment or anger" (1977: 485) and ritual "as the distanced reenactment of situations of emotional distress that are virtually universal in a given culture. [ ... ] There are three central elements in this definition: recurring shared emotional distress, a distancing device, and discharge. Ritual usually develops around recurring sources of collective distress" (p. 488). About this distress he writes: "Distress which is unbearable is depressed. How can one bear unbearable pain? By experiencing it within a dramatic frame. [ ... ] At aesthetic distance, there is a balance of thought and feeling. There is deep emotional resonance, but the person is in control" (p. 486).

The dance we are concerned with here is not the group folk dance of ethnic groups of Iran (e.g. Lor and Kurd populations) who dance together in separate male/female dances and occasionally together. In these group dances the feet move, the hands make repeated movements with a kerchief or without. Body movement is generally at a minimum. The Azari dance requires great dexterity of the feet and individuals show their great capacities in group. The Gilak dance is performed in a group too, there is repeated body movement and the hip movement is accentuated by long skirts; these movements are repetitions of women's daily activity in northern Iran, i.e. tasks related to rice plantation.

I I would like to express my gratitude to Dr. M. Sabetzadeh for having provided me with the proper setting for my observations in the city of Tehran.

The dance I am concerned with here is performed in private houses in urban areas around the central desert of Iran. I argue that this kind of dance is a cathartic ritual because it releases the distress of fear and embarrassment related to the female body. As shown above, this body is hidden in a meticulous manner in daily public life by layers of clothing and strict behavior. This body is accentuated, even celebrated, within the limits of self-control, in this dance genre. Today young women may practice for hours in front of mirrors scrutinizing their movements. Their models are family and friends observed at private parties as well as what they have seen in videotapes particularly

coming from Los Angeles? In this private domain, there is a distinct difference in women's attire, make-up and behavior in comparison to how they are seen and behave in public. The uniformity and seriousness is gone and individual personality is observable through clothing, make-up and social behavior. At an evening party that lasts between four to six hours a late dinner is served. Such parties are expected for weeks and cherished for even longer. Music may be by real performers and/or tapes. If the latter is the case, they are carefully selected to fit dances and rhythms that are in demand. In his book *Choreophoebia* (1999) Anthony Shay considers Iranian dance in relation to other art forms, and within the social context in which it is performed. He talks about the warm atmosphere the hostess has to create in order to induce everyone to dance. Everybody denies at the beginning the know-how of dancing, but later all engage in performance. It is difficult to get people started, but once they start, it is difficult for them to stop. I have personally observed that verbal communication in this context is very positive, i.e. everyone uses very encouraging, flowery terms and descriptions to induce others to relaxation, self-confidence and performance. The first performances break the ice, and through music and clapping an atmosphere of gaiety is built up.

Although no two dancers perform in the same manner and there is no teaching of dance performance, as in Hughes-Freeland's example of Indonesian dance, yet there is, just as in the Indonesian dance training, a "form of socialization which promotes socially approved behavior by developing the self-control which is necessary for harmonious social

[2] The Iranian show business in Los Angeles has been very active in performing and sending television broadcasts and videotapes to Iran.

interaction" (1998: 148). Anthony Shay, however, emphasizes the other side of the coin, namely transgression: "[ ... ] this dance tradition contains highly transgressive possibilities of expression, yet transgression operates on a continuum contingent on context" (1999: 34). To engage in self control and not to transgress the boundaries that are not clearly drawn and highly context specific, demands that the person be very alert to what he or she does. Given that the dance form is cathartic and a means of release, this also makes the actual performance an object of gossip. Fear of gossip makes people very conscious of their acts and that is one reason why everybody is forced to dance. In

my notes about one of these performances I wrote: "The atmosphere is very electrifying."

Let us describe this dance form with the words of Anthony Shay, who is a foreign scholar to the Iranian cultural world, and then see if it is an effective cathartic, non-verbal means of self-expression and communication. Shay describes this dance world as "a surreal world of geometry and movement, design and pattern: a world of lines and curves, webs and intersecting points, jeweled and brilliant, beckoning the dancer to stretch, reach and touch the sources of jeweled light at their points of intersection"(p. 16). He further speaks of this world as an "aesthetic spell [... ]a new world I could reach and stretch when I wanted; I was able to create new patterns in a never-ending quest for creating new designs. [ ... ] The freedom of expression [... ] seems endless, at first frightening, and finally liberating in the vast possibilities the dance offers [ ... ]" (p. 17).

In this connection Shay also mentions alternation, opposition and simultaneity, to which I would add harmony, concentration, pointing and distant caressing (p. 31). Alternation here refers to alternating feet and arm or hand movement, i.e. if there is a movement towards the left, there is afterwards one to the right; if there is an upwards one, there follows a downwards one. By opposition is meant what one side of the body does, the other one does too. In my opinion, this revolves around or in view of a centre and thus one aims at harmony, something prevalent in all Iranian art. Then there is simultaneity which means the dancer decides what to do next; there is no predetermined order of movement from one to the other. Thus there is the element of surprise and occasional sharp movements or stops which separate different sets of movements. All movements demand/concentration and a dance form requires a span of time to develop before the dancer feels it has been exhausted or the meaning has been conveyed. Although the feet, arms and hands move, the central point of Iranian dance is the hips and to a lesser degree the chest. The horizontal movement of the hips, which is the only movement to which a term is allocated *[qer],* has to be present at a measured degree. Self-control is crucial in relation to this movement. An expression says that to dance and engage in *qer* is to release the *qer* which had become 'stiff in the waist.' The term dry or stiff as opposed to soft and lubricated, is ascribed to a waist which has not

danced for a while; of course this is also sexually connotative. Distant caressing is done by one hand in relation to the other, or by both hands in relation to the face, the chest or hips. When two people dance together, they try to complement each other, that is if one has the hands up above the shoulders, the other dancer keeps them low, and if one person turns the face one side, the other turns it the opposite side. If a man and a woman dance together, the woman is the center and the male dancer goes slowly around her, sometimes bending his feet in order to be lower than her, thus showing his respect, appreciation, if not infatuation. At the same time, he protects her from others in an ambiguous circle. Incase their arms go up in the air, in a gesture which could culminate in a hug (which they would never do), they artfully pull the observers' attention towards it and then engage in inadvertent movements. This is why the tension rises in a dance gathering: that which is avoided on a daily basis through covering the body, namely those body parts which are particularly attractive to the opposite sex, is now allowed to become the center of attention, movement and ultimately identity formation.

This movement, however, also has its own limits and it is through self control that each dancer has to show she or he has understood them. The boundaries between art and vulgarity are set very distinctly in this art form, and, as mentioned before, they are contingent to context. While there is an opposition between public cover and private concentrated movement and attention towards certain parts of the body, there are also limits to this expression. Although catharsis is attained and the fear and embarrassment in relation to catharsis are overcome, i.e. one's body is seen in movement and the taboo parts become expressive, yet self-control must be present in order not to go beyond certain unwritten limits.

Although the body performs in divergent ways in public and private, as illustrated by the above examples of uniform clothing as opposed to personal dance movements, dancing has been a practice in Iran for a very long time. This suggests the persistence of an older cultural form within a relatively new politico-ideological system. Moreover, dance shows very well the relation of "power and protest, resistance and complicity" and the "cultural ideologies of gender" (Reed p.998: 505, 516). As a ritual it can be an enactment "in the service of conservative and even oppressive institutions [..... ] but the experience of performing the non-verbal movements and sounds may

ultimately liberate the actors. [ ... ] Performances of dance and music frequently reflect and reinforce existing ideas and institutions, but they also stimulate the imagination and help to bring coherence to the sensuous life" (Blacking 1985: 65).

## Conclusion

We have not only seen the Iranian human body, through its attire and behavior, being a means of non-verbal communication (i.e. clothing is apolitical, ethical and legal issue), but we have also shown that public and private domains may be formal or informal, depending upon class and gender. Whilst the open public space is a formal place for all, men of lower classes nonetheless behave informally in this domain: they engage in bodily pranks, they sit on the ground, make noise, eat and smoke without any sense of embarrassment about behaving beyond norm. This makes the public space a comfortable place for them. By contrast, women behave very monotonously and formally in this domain, having choices only in details and the possibility of self-expression through the eyes.

In the private space of the home, in case there are guests, formal behavior is expected. The formal atmosphere of a gathering may become a dance space which is a very specific time and space domain. Totally different movements and attention to certain bodily parts are expressed here. However, this opposition between bodily behavior in public and private does not mean that there is a transgression of all rules in the dance space and, as we have seen above, it has its own definitions of accepted behavior, understood non-verbally. Thus formality and regulation are also penetrating this very informal domain to allow for a release of tensions due to formally expected behavior without creating or allowing chaotic actions. Thus a very fine boundary, recognized often informally and nonverbally, separates creativity and release from formality and norm.

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