



MUSIC AND DANCE IN OMAN

OMAN CENTRE FOR TRADITIONAL MUSIC

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All of Oman's traditional music is sustained by oral transmission between generations, and each region has its own unique forms. Songs and dances are performed during festivals and ceremonies throughout the country. Songs vary from region to region, north to south, from one environment to another. Songs of desert, oasis, and sea differ in purpose, content, and instrumentation.

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Desert songs often praise the sturdiness of the camel. *Al-taghrud*, sung while riding camels, encourages both animal and rider. It is a group song with words that do not change from place to place. *Al-tariq* is a Bedouin song sung either while riding a camel or seated on the ground. Two singers perform it in alternating verses. This song praises the she-camel and reflects a slower pace of the camel in contrast to *al-taghrud*, which mimics the camel traveling at a faster pace. Much of Bedouin song is unaccompanied.

In many ways a dance of the oasis, although performed in most areas, *al-razhah* is characterized by its use of the sword and its exchange of poetry between men. Men leap into the air, carrying a heavy sword, and must not falter upon landing. The men also throw the sword into the air and catch it as it comes down—a show of strength and prowess. Years ago, *al-razhah* was used to announce the onset of war or victory, to muster troops, or to mediate between warring factions. Today it is used as a welcome to and celebration of His Majesty Sultan Qaboos bin Said. The dance has three slow rhythms, but upon a call from the drum, the men perform sword displays, the aim of which is to hit one's opponent on the left thumb. If no side is a clear winner, then an elder of the tribe cuts the air between them, terminating the fight.

Sea songs reflect sailors' duties during preparation of the ship for departure, during the voyage, and upon its return. There are many types of sea songs. One, *shilat al-hamul* (The Song of the Porters), is performed when loading goods onto

Dancers rehearse for an *'id al-adha* celebration in the Saham district.

THE OMAN CENTRE FOR TRADITIONAL MUSIC

Traditional Omani songs and dances are woven together with modern Omani music into a rich tapestry of the country's musical heritage. Recognizing that Oman's present-day cultural achievements are rooted in a past with ancient beginnings, His Majesty Sultan Qaboos bin Said directed that the country's musical heritage be collected and documented to ensure its preservation for future generations. The Oman Centre for Traditional Music (OCTM) was established in 1984 with this purpose.

Since its inception, the Centre has documented more than 80 percent of Oman's musical traditions. It includes more than 24,000 photographs, 725 audiovisual recordings, a large number of sound recordings, and a digitized database of these materials. The Centre's approach is comprehensive because, in Oman, music is part of a traditional lifestyle in which healing, fishing, planting, and other kinds of work play prominent roles. The Centre has identified more than 130 different forms of traditional music in Oman, grouping them into four main types: sea shanties and fishing songs, celebration songs, Bedouin music, and mountain music. In 2002 the Centre was given an award by UNESCO's International Music Council in recognition of its role in the preservation of Omani music.



Al-tariq is performed by Bedouins who sing to each other while they ride camels and when they are seated on the ground.

the ship and also to pray to God for safe passage during their journey. Other songs include *naza al-sharat* (Raising the Sails), in which each sail has its own part, differing from the others in tempo and text. *Al-hambal* is a song performed by sailors on their way to the *al-razhah* dance. Two drummers lead the procession walking backward to face the marching participants, encouraging them to show their bravery and courage.

Many dances are performed only in certain regions or at specific celebrations. The Musandam region in the north, for example, has very distinctive songs. *Al-ruwah* is unique to mountain-dwelling Bedouins in this region and involves eight to ten drummers who move forward, backward, and then in a circle. Its verses pertain to different times of the day. The first, *al-sirah*, is performed in the morning; *al-sadar* is performed mid-morning; *al-rawah* at noon; and *al-siriya* in the evening. This song is heard mainly at weddings, religious festivals, and on official holidays. *Wayliyah al-nisa* is a dance performed by women in Ibri, in the central Dhahira region. Groups of women, each placing her right hand on her neighbor's shoulders, move around in unison. Each woman shakes a silver rattle, which she holds in her free hand, to mark the simple rhythm. When the leader of a group gives her rattle a long shake, the women change places and form circles. Singing and drumming accompany the dancing. *Al-tayminah* is a traditional song of the central Dakhliyah, sung as a child learns the Koran (Qur'an) by heart. The children of the local school gather in a procession behind the teacher who reads a passage from the Koran. At the end of each verse the children reply "Amin" (Amen) in unison.

In the southern Dhufar region, *al-bar'a* is performed as a celebration of youth by two dancers, each holding a dagger in his right hand and his *shal* (waist wrap) in his left hand. The characteristic movement of *al-bar'a* is a powerful one-footed leap into the air. The two dancers move in a synchronized series of steps, advancing and retreating as they make full circles. At a particular moment, both dancers bow down before the musicians to allow soloists to come forward and sing.

Al-mawlid is a song of celebration performed on the Prophet's birthday, at weddings, when moving to a new house, or curing the sick. This dance has a leader (*khalifah*), a second in command (*shawush*), and a reciter (*qari*). The *khalifah*'s succession is hereditary, and the *qari* is usually a scholar. *Al-dan* song and dance involves two parallel rows of participants. Drummers continually approach the rows, until a dancer steps out from his row to perform a solo. Beating their drums, the drummers then chase him through the dance until he returns to

his original position. A stipulation of performing *al-dan* is that all men must go barefoot. Anyone found wearing sandals is punished with a fine.

Raqs al-nisa (Women's Dance) is one of the most frequently performed dances in its home region. Bedecked in gold, women move in pairs among the seated participants with small, measured steps. When they have circled the area, they sit down to allow the next pair to dance.

Music in Omani society plays a role at every stage of a person's life. From birth, to coming of age and marriage, during professional life, and finally in death, an Omani is accompanied by traditional arts that express joy or pain or simply help with everyday work.

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SUGGESTED READING/LISTENING

El-Mallah, Issam. 1998. *Omani Traditional Music*. Tutzing: H. Schneider.

The Music of an Ancient Civilization: The Sultanate of Oman, (CD). 1994. Muscat: Ministry of Information.

The traditional *al-razhah* dance displays a performer's courage, swordsmanship, and poetic skills. *Al-razhah* used to announce war or victory. It also would provide a way for men to express their demands to their leaders. Today *al-razah* is performed at weddings, holidays, and to welcome an honored visitor.



