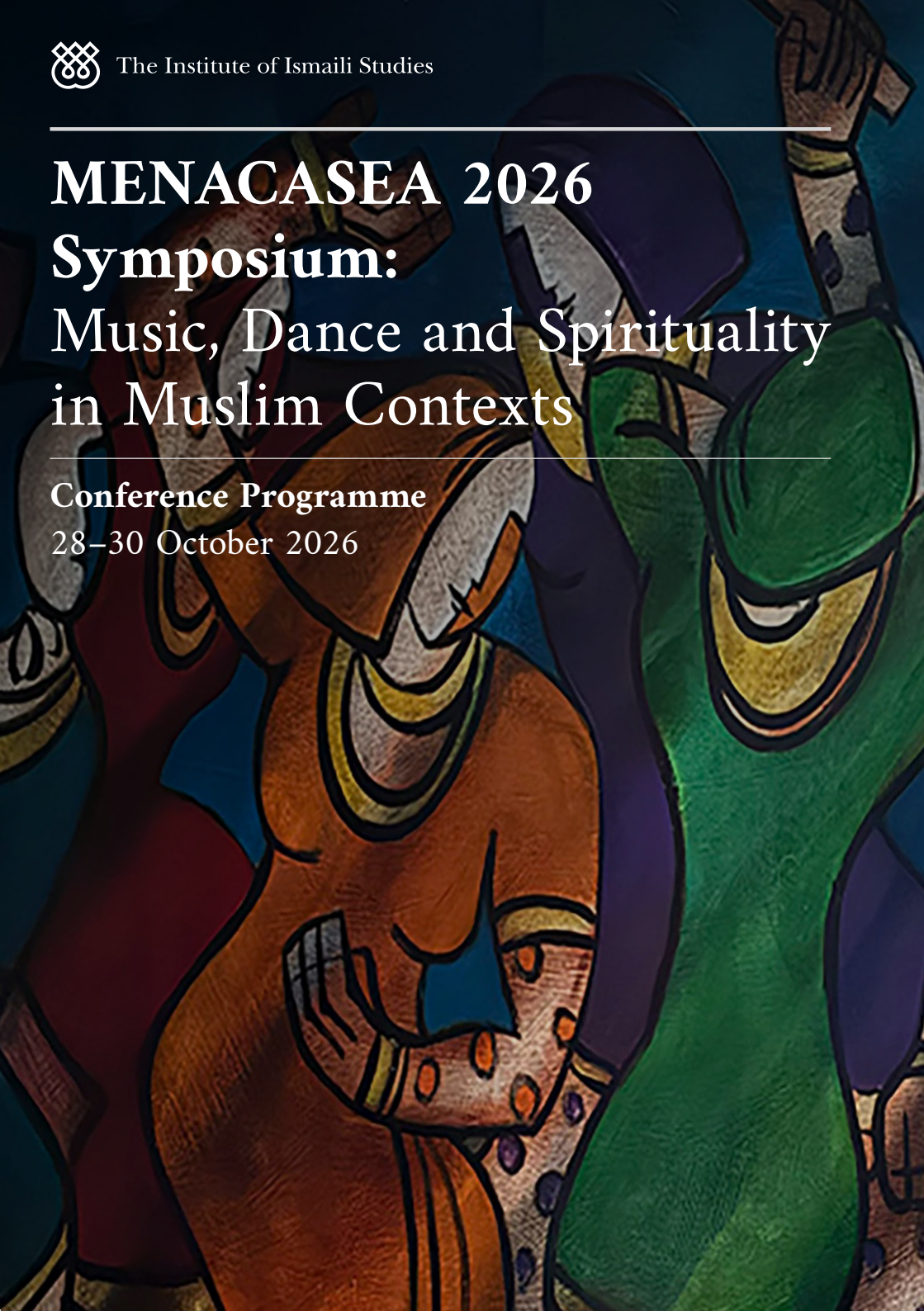
The Institute of Ismaili Studies

MENACASEA 2026 Symposium: Music, Dance and Spirituality in Muslim Contexts

Conference Programme

28–30 October 2026





Organising Committee

Name of organising IIS DAR Unit
Central Asian Studies Unit,
The Institute of Ismaili Studies

Organisers
Dr Hakim Elnazarov
Dr Riaz Rhemtulla
Dr William Rees Hofmann
Mr Muzaffar Zoolshoev
Mr Hasan Shah

Name of partner institution
MENACASEA

Names of organisers from the partner institution
Prof. Anthony Shay
Mrs. Roberta L. Dougherty
Mrs. Shahrzad Khorsandi
Dr Katia Chaterji
Dr María Faidi

MENACASEA 2026 Symposium:
Music, Dance and Spirituality in Muslim Contexts

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The Institute of Ismaili Studies

AGA KHAN CENTRE

10 Handyside Street, London N1C 4DN
www.iis.ac.uk

Welcome

Across diverse Muslim societies, music and movement have long played important roles in spiritual and cultural practice. From devotional rituals and religious theatre to folk performance traditions and contemporary artistic works, dance and music offer valuable insights into questions of meaning, belonging, memory and transcendence.

Through music and dance people express and negotiate their national, ethnic, gender, sexual and professional identities. Whether playing a reed flute, singing or performing cantillation, enacting the movements of prayer and *sama*, dancing the *halay* and *dabke*, practising the ritualised exercises of the *zurkhaneh*, or performing *maddoh* and *qasida*, individuals and communities articulate their identities and affirm their sense of belonging. Across millennia, societies have regarded these activities as significant expressions of human experience, worthy of documentation and artistic representation.

Music also occupies an important place within Muslim rich intellectual and literary heritage. Scholars such as Abu Nasr al-Farabi and Ibn Sina regarded music as a science to be studied through theory and mastered through practice. The Ikhwan al-Safa (Brethren of Purity) conceived music as a cosmological system through which the soul ascends towards divine harmony. Within Sufi traditions, music, poetry, and movement have offered pathways towards spiritual insight and transformation. Movement, dance and rhythmic bodily practices have been integral to the devotional practices of Sufi orders associated with figures such as Ahmad Yasavi, Shah Ni'matullah Wali, and Khwaja Muiniddin Chisti. These Islamic traditions have inspired generations of practitioners and communities, nurturing spiritual aspirations and sustaining hope through artistic and devotional expression.

Across the MENACASEA region and the wider Muslim world, traditional music and dance have also been mobilised to articulate narratives of nationhood, sacrifice and patriotism, as well as ideals of beauty, elegance and cultural distinction.



In different societies and historical periods, song, dance, and patterned movement have served as powerful means of expressing collective identity, pride, and historical memory. Their meanings and social functions have varied according to cultural contexts, religious interpretations, and changing political circumstances.

The Institute of Ismaili Studies (IIS) and the Dance, Music and Performing Arts of the Middle East, North Africa, Central Asia and Islamic Southeast Asia (MENACASEA) research network are pleased to welcome you to the fourth MENACASEA Symposium.

This international conference brings together scholars, artists and practitioners from a range of disciplines, including musicology, dance studies, anthropology, religious studies, history and performance studies. The papers explore musical, choreographic and performative traditions across the Middle East, North Africa, Central and South Asia, as well as Muslim communities in Southeast Asia. Contributions address a wide range of themes, including the relationship between performance and religious experience, embodied forms of knowledge and devotion, theories of music and dance, the therapeutic dimensions of sound and movement, and the artistic interpretation of spiritual traditions.

Particular attention is given to the intersections of music, dance, movement and spirituality in Muslim contexts. By bringing together diverse historical, ethnographic and interdisciplinary perspectives, the conference seeks to illuminate how musical and embodied practices shape religious experience, artistic expression, cultural identity and communal life. It also provides an opportunity to reflect on the ways in which these traditions are transmitted, reinterpreted and transformed across generations and in changing social and cultural environments.

Anthony Shay & Hakim Elnazarov

Chairs of the conference

Schedule

Day 1: Wednesday 28 October 2026

08:30 – 09:40

Registration

09:40 – 10:00

Welcome and Opening Remarks — Prof. Zayn Kassam, Prof. Anthony Shay, Dr. Hakim Elnazarov

10:00 – 11:00

Keynote Address

Chair: William Hofmann

Multilayered Transcendence: How Religious Music Upends Narratives of Dominance in the Contemporary Middle East

Tala Jarjour

11:00 – 11:30

Health Break

11:30 – 13:00

Panel 1. Rhythmic Non-Dance Movement in Spiritual Contexts

Chair: Riaz Rhemtulla

When Patterned Movement is Not Dance: The Alevi *Semah* as Non-Dance, Devotion and Commemoration

Sinibaldo De Rosa

Veiled Sensualities: The Aesthetics of Concealment, Desire, and Sacred Movement in Moroccan Sufi Performance

Suchismita Ghoshal

Layered Devotions: Sound, Movement, and the Transformation of Ritual Practices in Yazd

Narciss Sohrabi

13:00 – 14:00

Lunch break

14:00 – 15:30

Panel 2. Movement, Mourning and Spiritual Experience

Chair: Daryoush Mohammad Poor

The *Poyamal* Funeral Dance and its Spiritual Meanings among the People of the Pamir Mountains

Hakim Elnazarov

Dancing Through Loss: Mourning, Memory, and Resistance in Contemporary Iran

Maryam Rezaee

The Body Remembers First: Sound, Movement, and Lived Spirituality in Contemporary Iran

Banafshe Amiri

15:30 – 16:00

Health break

16:00 – 17:30

Panel 3. States of Transformation in Classical and Contemporary Performance Traditions

Chair: Maria Faidi

Hal, Improvisation and the Spiritual Conceptualisation of Time

Shahrzad Khorsandi

Staging Spirituality, Innocent Sexualities and Glorious Histories: Choreographic Strategies of State Folk Dance Ensembles to Create Idealised National Identities

Anthony Shay

From the Elite to the People: The Choreographic Evolution of Meshkatian and Shajarian's Masterpieces in Post-Revolutionary Iran

Daryoush Mohammad Poor

18:00 – 20:00

Opening of exhibition at the Aga Khan Centre

Performing Arts of Central Asia

Music, Dance and Cultural Expressions of Central Asia

Schedule

Day 2: Thursday, 29 October 2026

09:30 – 11:00

Panel 4. Performance Culture and Theatrical Arts

Chair: Shahrzad Khorsandi

From *Zawiya* to Stage: The Performance of Devotion in Egypt
Walid Ghali

The Emergence of 'New Dance' in Iran: From Underrating 'Old' Dance and Movement Forms to Borrowing from Them
Afshin Derakh'shesh

Sacralising the Stage: Spirituality and Respectability in Belly Dance
Suhaila Salimpour

11:00 – 11:30

Health Break

11:30 – 13:00

Panel 5. Transmission of Knowledge about Performance Traditions

Chair: Sinibaldo De Rosa

The Performing Arts and Education About Muslims: 'Kathak Dance' as a Case Study for Narrative Storytelling and Audience Engagement.
Riaz Rhemtulla

A Step Towards Contextualising the IIS Secondary Curriculum: Integrating Performative Central Asian *Qasida-khani* Tradition into Teaching and Learning Practices in the Region
Sayed Munir Shah

Living the *Qasida*: Music, Faith, and Everyday Devotion in Wakhan, Tajikistan
Chorshanbe Goibnazarov

13:00 – 14:00

Lunch

14:00 – 15:30

Panel 6. Staging the Spiritual and Golden Eras in Egypt
Chair: Walid Ghali

"O Honoured and Esteemed Isis": Imagining Ancient Spectacle for Egypt's Modern State
Roberta L. Dougherty

Stars, Dreams and *Djinns* in Egyptian Golden Age Cinema (1940s–1960s)
Maria Faidi

From Samia Gamal to Farida Fahmy: Dance and National Representation in Nasser's Egypt
Naiara Müssnich Rotta Gomes de Assunção

15:30 – 16:00

Health break

16:00 – 17:30

Panel 7. Traditional Performance and Musical Transformation
Chair: Hakim Elnazarov

Breaking the Silence: Women, Religion and Musical Transformation in the Hunza Valley
Qudsia Naunehal Shah

The 'Mongol Play' (*Mughul-bozi*): A Traditional Musical of Wakhan
Abdulmamad Iloliev

***Raqs-i Aspak* (The Horse Dance): An Endangered Expression of Ancestral Memory and Pamiri Cultural Identity**
Maruf Noyoft and Aliah Najmabadi

20:00 – 22:00

Musical event at the Ismaili Centre

The Ismaili Centre, London | The Ismaili
7 Cromwell Gardens, London SW7 2SL

Schedule

Day 3: Friday, 30 October 2026

09:30 – 11:00

Panel 8. Devotional Music and Dance, and Sacrality of Space
Chair: Roberta L. Dougherty

When Movement Ascends towards Divine Harmony: Music, the Body and Devotion in the Ikhwan al-Safa' and the Chishti Sufi Order
Nida Fatima Sheikh

***Dhamaal* – Rhythmic *Dhikr* at the Shrine of Lal Shahbaz Qalandar**
Shafaat Saleem

Sounding Lineage: Qawwali, *Sama*, and the Ritual Assemblage of Devotional Sound
Wajiha Naqvi

11:00 – 11:30

Health Break

11:30 – 13:00

Panel 9. Comparative Perspectives in Dance and Music Studies
Chair: Anthony Shay

Ethnochoreohistory: A Critical Reframing
İdris Ersan Küçük

The Relationship between African Sufism and Candomblé through Dance
Carolina Grandela Tortuero

To 'Move like Water': Narrating the Past and Performing the Future through Malay Muslim *Zapin* Dance
Katia Chaterji

13:00 – 14:00

Lunch

14:00 – 15:30

Panel 10. Publishing Roundtable

Eileen Srebernik, Roberta L. Dougherty, Anthony Shay

The publishing roundtable includes a writer/scholar, a librarian from a major university (Yale), and an editor from a scholarly press. They will present the process through which a scholarly book is published and provide advice for scholars about how to approach the publishing of a scholarly book. This roundtable is designed especially for new scholars to begin the publishing process.

15:30 – 16:00

Closing remarks

Prof. Oliver Scharbrodt.
Anthony Shay and Hakim Elnazarov

Abstracts and Bios



Multilayered Transcendence: How Religious Music Upends Narratives of Dominance in the Contemporary Middle East

Tala Jarjour

TALA JARJOUR is a scholar of music, religion and anthropology in the Middle East. Her work focuses on the wider Middle East, especially its Arabic-speaking cultures in the region and around the globe. Her book *Sense and Sadness, Syriac Chant in Aleppo* (Oxford University Press 2018) captures the story of an oral tradition of Christian chant that was passed down the generations since late antiquity, surviving centuries of instability and continually threatening conflicts. Dr Jarjour's current research delves into cognitive neuroscience and how it helps us understand our musical selves. Her focus on meaning and human connection finds expression in the programming she designs and implements through the nonprofit organization Magenta Mind, of which she is the founding director. Dr Jarjour held Assistant Professor positions in music at NYU Abu Dhabi, in music and anthropology at the University of Notre Dame, and was Visiting Assistant Professor at Yale University. She earned her PhD in Cambridge as a Gates Scholar. Numerous research awards include the Chevening scholarship, the American Musicological Society Publication Subvention and the AAUW American Postdoctoral Research Leave Fellowship. She was an Excellence Initiative fellow at Tübingen University, and a Senior Fellow at the Yale Institute of Sacred Music.



The Body Remembers First: Sound, Movement and Lived Spirituality in Contemporary Iran

Banafsheh Amiri

This paper examines the body as a site where sound, memory and spirituality re-emerge in contemporary Iran, especially where public movement remains restricted. Drawing on phenomenology and practice-based research, I approach movement not primarily as representation or symbolism, but as lived experience in which body, sound, memory and environment are inseparable.

Grounded in personal and choreographic experience, the paper traces how sound becomes embodied memory. Songs associated with collective crises, such as the Bam earthquake, can be internalised over time and later return through the body in moments of renewed loss. The paper also considers intimate mourning spaces in Iran, where singing, clapping, laughter and shared memory have begun to shift the atmosphere of grief beyond strictly solemn or Qur'anic-centred forms of mourning. In such contexts, it has historically been difficult to imagine dance as an expression of grief, yet recent social movements and public acts of embodied expression reveal changing relationships between mourning, sound and movement. Through examples from my choreographic work on mourning and memory, alongside recent collective expressions in Iranian society, I argue that embodied experience often precedes social meaning. Spirituality, in this frame, is not treated as a fixed belief system, but as something that emerges through lived bodily experience, shared sound and the collective processing of loss. The paper contributes to broader conversations on music, dance and spirituality in Muslim contexts by showing how restricted movement in Iranian society can return as memory, presence and embodied continuity.

BANAFSHEH AMIRI is an Iranian choreographer and researcher with an MFA in Dance from the University of Illinois. A lifelong dancer and vocalist trained in Iranian *radif*, her work explores embodiment, sound and memory. A former director of the Miniature Dance Institute in Tehran, she continues her artistic and pedagogical practice at the University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign (UIUC).



To 'Move like Water': Narrating the Past and Performing the Future through Malay Muslim Zapin Dance

Katia Chaterji

In maritime Southeast Asia, a coastal entrepôt that has been actively involved in cross-cultural exchange since the late mediaeval and early modern periods, collective memory recalls the popularity of *zapin* Arab (Arab *zapin* dance). A vibrant improvisational music and dance performed by sojourning West Asian merchants, *zapin* Arab served to entertain local Malay audiences and to deliver Islamic *dakwah*. This presentation traces the oral histories of *zapin* as the tradition evolved in Sumatra, which had adopted Islam by the 13th century, one of the earliest regions of maritime Southeast Asia to do so. Music and dance become meaningful sites
to explore the localisation of Islam, both as it is remembered (collective memory) and as it is experienced (identity performance). Sonic resonances with other Muslim musical cultures—witnessed through the *gambus* (lute), *marwas* (hand drums) and poetic prayers in honour of the Prophet Muhammad—combine with pre-existing Malay constructs of language, dress and body control.

This work, developed through oral history and ethnographic research, positions *zapin* as a site of Islamic cultural knowledge production in Sumatra. I argue that the performing arts (and specifically *zapin*) represent an embodied archive. In this sense, they are a repository of knowledge about Islam and the development of Malay Islamic culture that is stored within the body and passed down over generations through rehearsal and performance. In learning to 'move like water', dancers take part in the transmission of historical knowledge about Islam's arrival from across the waters of the Indian Ocean and embody the fluidity of identity formation as individual performers internalise the past and express desired futures.

KATIA CHATERJI has a PhD in history from the University of Washington. An interdisciplinary scholar of maritime Southeast Asia, she researches the shared histories between Islam and the arts in Sumatra, Indonesia. Her work has appeared in Asian Music and is forthcoming in *Monsoon: Journal of the Indian Ocean Rim.*



When Patterned Movement is Not Dance: The Alevi Semah as Non-Dance, Devotion and Commemoration

Sinibaldo De Rosa

This paper engages with the central question of the MENACASEA 2026 conference: when is patterned movement 'dance' and when is it not? I explore this by looking at *semah*, a ritual movement practice performed by the Alevis in Turkey and throughout their diasporas. While recognising it as a *hareket sistemi* (movement system), many within this non-Sunni community contest the labelling of the *semah as dans* (dance) or *oyun* (performance) and insist that the practice is better understood as *ibadet* (devotion). Drawing on over a decade of ethnographic fieldwork (2009–2024), including embodied participation in *âyin-i cem* rituals, I argue that dismissing this emic distinction perpetuates forms of cultural imperialism and epistemic violence.

The paper elaborates on these distinctions by proposing three interconnected claims that place the moving body and its own categories of knowing at the core of analysis. First, refusing to label the *semah* as 'dance' is a deliberate political act of cultural resistance against Turkish state policies that folklorised Alevi practices within a 'fundamentalist' and 'choreophobic' national environment. Second, the kinetic structures of the semah, such as the anti-clockwise circular paths, mixed-gender formations and characteristic arm gestures, are all vehicles for a corporeal theology. As Alevi poet Aşık Hüdai declaimed, *Bütün evren semah döner* ("All the universe turns the *semah*"): turning enacts a reconciliation with the cosmos mediated by the devotee's body. Finally, turning the *semah* has become an embodied act of mourning and resistance since the 1993 Sivas massacre, where 37 Alevi intellectuals, musicians and semahcıs died in a hotel fire. Every year, public enactments of the practice in commemoration of this episode highlight how bodily movement functions as a kinesthetic archive to remember, celebrate and heal sectarian divisions and diasporic survival.

SINIBALDO DE ROSA holds a PhD (University of Exeter) and an advanced diploma in movement notation: Laban (CNSMDP). His recent publications have appeared in *Dance Research* (2025), *Studies in Ethnicity and Nationalism* (2026) and *Middle Eastern Dance* (2026). Since 2025 he has served as co-chair of the Society for Dance Research.



The Emergence of 'New Dance' in Iran: From Underrating 'Old' Dance and Movement Forms to Borrowing from Them

Afshin Derakh'shesh

Since dance, a taboo subject, has suffered severe restrictions due to the dominant religious and societal beliefs in Iran, it is often seen in a negative light, resulting in a lack of attention. As a result, the history of Iranian dance has been overlooked, and, despite being a strong component of Iranian culture, its growth has been stymied and it has seldom been the subject of scholarly research.

This was particularly true in Iran during the era of modernism (after the Constitutional Revolution), despite the presence of a number of pioneers in this period who created various styles of 'New Dance'. Through changing movement forms and resisting societal restrictions, these dancers offered dance classes and performed on stage and in public spaces. However, following the prohibition of dance after the 1979 revolution, these pioneers became historical missing links.

This prompted me to research the dancers I consider the pioneers of 'New Dance' in Iran, spanning the period 1906–1953. This presentation is based on the research for my book project, which includes structural, sociological and statistical analyses, as well as a review of selected dancers, dance performances and locations during this period.

This presentation will cover a range of topics, including the definition of dance; modernism in Iran; the emergence of nationalist and Euro-American aspects in the performing and dramatic arts; and the gradual change in 'New Dance' from underrating 'Old' dances and movements to borrowing from them.

AFSHIN DERAKH'SHESH is an Iranian dancer, performer and scholar based in Iran. Co-founder of the 'Dance Center of Iran' and the DSA (Dance Studies Association) award winner for this center (2023), he has moderated two roundtables on the 'Ambiguities of Dance Terminology'. His current book project is named *Pioneers of New Dance in Iran.*



"O Honoured and Esteemed Isis": Inventing Ancient Spectacle for Egypt's Modern State

Roberta L. Dougherty

This paper will examine the use of an imagined Egyptian antiquity in the dance, music and spectacle accompanying the inaugurations of official sites of national memory and heritage in Egypt, the most recent being the opening ceremony of the Grand Egyptian Museum (GEM) in early 2025. Such 'Neo-Pharaonism' (legitimising the state by claiming its unbroken link to the ancient past) has been part of Egyptian nationalism since the 1920s. The spectacles were designed to legitimise the modern Egyptian state and particularly the current Sisi regime. Their logistical complexity validated the regime's right to lead the modern country, while their artistic merit proved the regime's efficacy as guardian of, and advocate for, the country's ancient past.

These events also legitimized a 'correct' expression of Egyptian creativity and national pride, under state patronage. They required hundreds of convincingly 'Pharaonic' costumes, mass choreographies inspired by the ancient iconography of pagan ritual and newly composed 'ancient' music. While legions of unseen Egyptian artists and craftsmen contributed to their design and execution, further cohorts of dancers and musicians provided the public performance, fronted by well-known contemporary Egyptian singers and actors, and accompanied by orchestras whose personnel was international. These elaborate spectacles, impeccably executed, were streamed live to the entire world, showcasing logistical expertise and artistry that might compare favourably with those of the ancients who built the monumental antiquities they celebrated. The resulting theatrical performances, bearing the stamp of historical authenticity inspired by a dead pagan society, were intended both for local and international consumption.

ROBERTA L. DOUGHERTY is the Librarian for Middle East Studies at the Yale University Library. Her research includes the history of printing in Arabic script, the history of U.S. collections of manuscripts in Middle Eastern languages, American Orientalism and the social construction of performance in Egyptian musical cinema.



The Poyamal Funeral Dance and its Spiritual Meaning among the People of the Pamir Mountains

Hakim Elnazarov

Music and dance have long been integral to expressions of faith and spirituality among the Ismaili Muslims in Central Asia, serving as important markers of their cultural and religious identity. Historically residing in the mountainous regions of the Pamirs and the Hindu Kush, Central-Asian Ismaili communities have integrated diverse Islamic and pre-Islamic beliefs and practices. These are most profoundly expressed through performing arts, particularly music and dance.

Spiritual expression is embodied through movement and dance on various occasions. One such form of dance is *Poyamal* (literally, 'the action of the legs'), performed during funeral ceremonies in certain parts of the Pamir Mountains, although its practice is becoming increasingly rare. *Poyamal* appears to be an ancient tradition that has survived in some communities as a funerary dance. Traditionally, it is referred to as *charkh*, which encompasses several interrelated meanings embedded in the practice, including 'movement', 'universe' and 'whirling' (*charkh zadan*).

Although the original meaning of this movement may have faded from collective memory, community members continue to interpret its significance in various terms. These interpretations are often associated with lamentation, the passage of time, and the fragility and transience of worldly life.

Drawing on qualitative interviews and analysis of visual recordings, this paper examines the evolving meanings attributed to *Poyamal* and situates the practice within broader frameworks of ritual, memory and embodied spirituality. It argues that, despite its declining occurrence, *Poyamal* remains a significant lens to gain insight into the interplay between movement, mourning and metaphysical reflections in the spiritual life of Pamiri Ismaili communities.

DR HAKIM ELNAZAROV is Head of the Central Asian Studies Unit at the Institute of Ismaili Studies (IIS). He completed his graduate studies at the Faculty of Oriental Studies of the Tajik State University in Dushanbe, Tajikistan, where he received qualifications in Islamic and Oriental Studies. He then obtained a Master of Education from the Institute for Educational Development (IED) at the Aga Khan University (AKU), Karachi, Pakistan.

He received his PhD from King's College, London, in the history of empires. As an interdisciplinary scholar of Central Asia, he researches history, intellectual traditions, Islamic education, endangered languages and the cultural practices of the mountain societies of Central Asia. He leads various research projects at the IIS, including the Living Traditions of the Central Asian Ismailis.



Stars, Dreams and Djinns in Egyptian Golden Age Cinema (1940s–1960s)

Maria Faidi

In this paper I debate how Egyptian traditions and festive occasions paved the way for an empathic reception of Egyptian Golden Age cinema among the popular classes, here broadly labelled as *baladi*. This type of cinema was produced during the mid-decades of the 20th century, a moment politically defined by both colonialism and the spirit of nationalism that wished to portray Egypt as a modern and civilised country. With this goal in mind, Egyptian nationalist leaders and the middle classes financed Egyptian cinema as a modern industry to educate and civilise the popular classes in modern manners and tastes, as well as to counteract Western technological power. In this sense, cinema became a modern ritual that channelled both popular tastes as well as middle-class nationalist utopias. Using a sociological perspective, the paper will discuss how the presence of female performers and djinns, and the portrayal of dreams in Golden Age dance sequences, helped to connect with popular beliefs and ordinary rites represented on screen. Therefore, it can be asked up to which point cinema sustained the same traditional values nationalist forces aimed to reform. In my analysis, I argue that this type of cinema triggers an emotional response among popular audiences, which became involuntary accomplices of their own re-education in colonial/modern tastes and values.

MARIA FAIDI is a dancer and researcher specialising in postcolonial sociology. In her dissertation on belly dance in Egyptian Golden Age cinema (1940s–1960s) she has debated this film production from a Bourdieusian perspective, arguing that it reproduces a colonial modern gender system (Lugones, 2007). She holds an MA in Political Science (Universidad Complutense de Madrid) and a PhD in Dance Studies (University of Chichester, UK).



From Zawiya to Stage: The Performance of Devotion in Egypt

Walid Ghali

This paper examines the contemporary transformation of Egyptian Sufi expressive culture through a focused study of a new musical band, known as al-Hadra al-Misriyya (The Egyptian Hadra). This band is a prominent ensemble at the forefront of shifting *dhikr* and *inshad* (devotional singing) from the traditional confines of mosques and *zawiyas* to public stages and open-air theatres. Traditionally, Sufi rituals were defined by their situation within specific sacred locations. However, al-Hadra al-Misriyya has pioneered a transition towards public accessibility, aiming to document and revive Egypt's spiritual heritage by presenting it as a shared cultural resource for a broader, often secular or elite, audience.

This is an in-progress research project based on ethnographic engagement and field interviews; the research explores the group's dual identity as both spiritual practitioners and professional performers. Despite their presence in commercial and social spaces, many members maintain deep affiliations with established Sufi orders (*turuq*), with several holding the title of Shaykh. This study highlights how the ensemble's mission—to create an inclusive platform for interaction with Sufi lyrics and melodies—relies on a strategic blending of religious repertoires with folklore and urban pop elements.

The analysis further investigates how the group's seasonal presence at *mawlids* (saint festivals) across Egypt is now augmented by a robust digital footprint on platforms like Spotify and YouTube. The paper argues that al-Hadra al-Misriyya's work represents a 'mediatisation' of the sacred, where digital circulation and theatrical staging do not necessarily dilute spiritual authenticity but rather create a new, hybrid space for identity and devotion. Ultimately, the paper suggests that al-Hadra al-Misriyya serves as a critical case study for understanding how Sufism adapts to the demands of modern performance culture (singing and dancing) while maintaining its foundational ritual essence.

WALID GHALI is Professor of Arabic and Islamic Studies at the Institute for the Study of Muslim Civilisations, Aga Khan University (AKU). He is also the Head of the Aga Khan Library, London. He received his PhD in 2012 from the Faculty of Arts, Cairo University, Egypt. Prior to joining AKU, Dr Ghali worked in various academic and librarian roles at the American University in Cairo.



Veiled Sensualities: *The Aesthetics of Concealment, Desire and Sacred Movement in Moroccan Sufi Performance*

Suchismita Ghoshal

This paper investigates how practices of concealment, veiling, rhythmic restraint and controlled bodily gesture, produce rather than suppress sensuality within Moroccan Sufi performance traditions. Focusing on ritual contexts such as the *Gnawa lila* and women's *hadra* ceremonies associated with the Aissawa, it asks: how does concealment function as an aesthetic and affective strategy that intensifies, rather than obscures, embodied desire? And in what ways do movement, sound and repetition transform sensual experience into a modality of divine intimacy?

Drawing on performance analysis and sensory anthropology, the paper examines how rhythm, breath and gesture generate altered states in which distinctions between corporeal pleasure and spiritual ecstasy become increasingly porous. Rather than reproducing binaries of repression and expression, I argue that concealment operates as a generative structure of affect, cultivating what within Sufism may be understood as *ʿishq*, an embodied longing oriented towards the divine.

A further question guiding this inquiry is how gendered ritual spaces, particularly women's *hadra* gatherings, negotiate visibility, modesty and collective intimacy through movement and sonic intensity. How do such spaces enable forms of sensual-spiritual experience that remain socially legible yet affectively expansive?

By situating Moroccan Sufi performance within broader debates on embodiment and religious aesthetics, this paper reframes sensuality not as transgression, but as a disciplined and mediated pathway to experiencing divine proximity.

SUCHISMITA GHOSHAL is an independent scholar working at the intersections of philosophy, folklore, heritage studies and religious thought, with particular emphasis on sacred landscapes, literary imagination and cultural memory. She holds a Master's degree in Philosophy from Indira Gandhi National Open University (IGNOU) and a Master's degree in Folklore, Heritage, and Culture Studies. Her research engages mythology, religious symbolism, consciousness studies and religio-theological traditions, with a focus on the philosophical dimensions of ritual practice, material culture and environmental imagination. She is also interested in sexuality studies, women's studies and feminist philosophy, particularly in relation to embodiment, agency and gendered spiritual experience. Her interdisciplinary approach examines how contemplative traditions and symbolic systems shape ethical life and selfhood in modern contexts. She has presented research at international academic forums including Pennsylvania State University, the University of Leeds, the University of Oxford, the University of Hawai'i at Mānoa, Durham University's MEMSA Conference, the University of Massachusetts, Danubius International University and IIT (Banaras Hindu University).



Living the Qasida: Music, Faith and Everyday Devotion in Wakhan, Tajikistan

Chorshanbe Goibnazarov

This paper focuses on the musical and spiritual life of Azizkhon Karimov, a *qasida-khon* from the Wakhan region of Badakhshan, Tajikistan, to discuss broader questions about the role of music in devotional experience. Drawing on ethnographic fieldwork, it traces his journey from childhood, captivated by the sound of the *rabob*, to a respected figure within his community. Karimov's early learning began at home with his uncle and later continued through the *ustod–shogird* (master–disciple) tradition, where he memorised poetic texts, absorbed melodies by ear and learned patience, humility and respect for the practice.

For Karimov, *qasida-khoni* is not simply something he performs, but it is how he understands himself and his place in the world. He describes singing and playing the *rabob* as a way to calm the heart, endure hardship, and feel closer to God. His performances take place in small, often ritual, gatherings, where music is shared slowly and attentively, where listening matters as much as sound, and music becomes a moment of shared presence rather than public display. In this sense, Karimov's practice resonates with Charles Hirschkind's idea of ethical soundscapes, where listening shapes how people feel, reflect and relate to one another.

The paper also considers Karimov as a bearer of tradition. By teaching his son and grandson, he works to keep *qasida-khoni* alive within his family. However, he faces growing challenges and concerns, including declining interest among young people, restrictions on religious gatherings, and the pull of modern musical styles. Viewed through Arjun Appadurai's lens of global cultural flows, this paper examines how these pressures reshape, contest and sustain local traditions over time.

CHORSHANBE GOIBNAZAROV is an Assistant Professor and Research Fellow at the School of Arts and Sciences and the Graduate School of Development at the University of Central Asia (UCA), where he teaches Cultural Landscapes at the Naryn and Khorog Campuses. He holds a PhD in Central Asian and Cultural Studies from the Institute of Asian and African Studies at the Humboldt University in Berlin, Germany, and an MA in Muslim Cultures from the Institute for the Study of Muslim Civilisations at the Aga Khan University in London, UK. Goibnazarov was on the Fulbright Visiting Scholar fellowship for the 2019–2020 academic year at the Music Department of Harvard University.



The Relationship between African Sufism and Candomblé through Dance

Carolina Grandela Tortuero

This research focuses on dance as witness to a confluence of kinetic, semantic and binding codes in the configuration, function and preservation of religious syncretisms born from African diasporas: North African Sufism and Brazilian Candomblé. Thanks to its own language (movement), dance manages to preserve part of a lost oral legacy. Using a theoretical framework reinforced by material from fieldwork, this study will attempt to explain how dance in acts of possession, whether in *hadra* or *festa de* Santo, reveals an interference between these two syncretic systems or even the presence of a possible shared cultural substrate. By applying a semiotic and anthropological approach to the transmission through movement—and its subsequent exegesis—dance assumes a primary role. In practice (whether ritual or performative), the dancer experiences a mimesis with the energy of the *anima* or element of nature from which the entity in question is composed or which it dominates.

If there is discordant evidence in the composition, use and ritual function of possession dances within the religious systems in which they are configured, any attempt at investigation or clarification requires a multidisciplinary perspective drawing upon Islamic, African, historical and artistic studies.

CAROLINA GRANDELA is a dancer, researcher, teacher and PhD candidate in Religious Studies, Universidad Complutense de Madrid (UCM), she has a Master's in Advanced Studies of Islam in Contemporary European Society (UCM), a degree in Semitic and Islamic Studies (UCM), and a Master's in the Culture and Thought of Black Peoples (CIDAF-UCM), where she is a professor of Dance Studies.



The 'Mongol Play' (Mughul-bozi): A Traditional Musical of Wakhan

Abdulmamad Iloliev

In the mountainous regions of Badakhshan, diverse forms of traditional theatrical expression integrate song, dance, acting and spoken dialogue, particularly during weddings and communal celebrations. This paper examines a distinctive musical performance traditionally known as the 'Mongol Play' (*Mughul-bozi*) or 'Mongol Girl' (*Mughul-dukhtar*), which is practised primarily in the Wakhan region spanning Tajikistan and Afghanistan, as well as in northern Pakistan and the Sarikul area of China.

Centred on the narrative of love, struggle and eventual union between an Arab youth (Arab bacha) and a Mongol girl (*Mughul-dukhtar*), the performance brings together a cast of characters, each with distinct roles, costumes and choreographed movements. Beyond its narrative structure, *Mughul-bozi* operates as a dynamic form of embodied expression in which music and dance mediate emotional and symbolic meanings within a shared cultural and religious framework.

This study explores how *Mughul-bozi* reflects localised expressions of love and devotion in Muslim contexts, where artistic performance becomes a vehicle for conveying moral values, reinforcing social bonds and evoking collective emotional experiences. By focusing on the integration of sound, movement and storytelling, the paper argues that such vernacular theatrical forms offer insight into how spirituality is lived, performed and experienced in everyday community life. Ultimately, *Mughul-bozi* demonstrates how non-institutional artistic practices can generate spaces of joy, healing, and devotional resonance within Wakhan society.

DR ABDULMAMAD ILOLIEV is Director of the Aga Khan Humanities Project at the University of Central Asia. He previously worked at the IIS and has held research and teaching posts at SOAS and Sussex University. He has degrees from Cambridge University (MPhil and PhD) and Dushanbe State Pedagogical Institute. His research focuses on Central-Asian Ismaili history and culture.



Hal, Improvisation and the Spiritual Conceptualization of Time

Shahrzad Khorsandi

The word *hal* is similar to *tarab*, a commonly used term in Arab musical culture that roughly translates as 'rapture' or 'ecstasy'. It describes an experience of intense emotion shared between a performer and an audience, usually generated by music and poetry. The term *hal*, on the other hand, is heavily used in Iranian culture, and is not restricted to the context of music.

Traditional music and dance practice in the South-West Asia/North Africa (SWANA) region rely heavily on improvisation as a foundational element. The tendency to improvise, however, extends beyond the arts and is reflected in daily decision-making and social negotiations. It implies the possible existence of a collective cultural consciousness underlying improvisational practice. In examining the concept of improvisation and its relationship with *hal*, I found that temporal perception may be a connecting factor. This cultural relationship with time may play a significant role in the propensity for improvised rather than planned actions.

In this paper, I use Iranian culture as an example of the SWANA region to examine spiritual factors shaping the cultural conceptualisation of time. I explore how a perception of non-linear time can serve as a foundational element in improvisational expression. I then posit that this conceptualisation of time, while rooted in spiritual awareness, may facilitate experiences of *hal* regardless of an individual's spiritual or secular beliefs and orientations.

SHAHRZAD KHORSANDI is an Iranian-American dance artist and scholar with an MA in Creative Arts. She performs and teaches globally and has published on dance and its neuropsychological impact. Her choreographic work is recognized as conceptual, innovative and emotive. Beyond performance, Shahrzad uses dance to drive social change and healing.



Ethnochoreohistory: A Critical Reframing

İdris Ersan Küçük

The term 'ethnochoreohistory' emerges as a terminological innovation in dance studies, situated within the broader landscape of social science terminology that navigates the fine line between a 'paradise of terms' and a 'garbage dump of terms'. Unlike approaches rooted in folklore traditions, ethnochoreohistory aims to examine dance through the principles of historiography, focusing not on describing a particular dance form but on analysing its historical process and transformation over time. While the concept may initially appear to carry a political stance, its foundation is fundamentally empirical. For example, a survey of over 600 dance-related books in the library of the University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA) revealed that dance historiography representing perspectives beyond Western frameworks constitutes less than 20% of the existing literature. This statistical finding substantiates the need for the proposed research methodology.

Language plays a central role in historiography. The narrative one constructs cannot be detached from one's cultural context, and the academic conventions of the language in which scholarly knowledge is produced exert considerable influence over its content. In some academic writing on dance, for instance, the predominant use of the passive voice tends to obscure the researcher's own experiential knowledge. Taking into account the inseparable nature of language and culture, ethnochoreohistory as a methodology has been revisited within the context of UCLA. This ongoing inquiry aims to generate new and alternative questions concerning world dance history, while sharing reflections from the research process itself.

İDRIS ERSAN KÜÇÜK was educated in Turkey, Norway and France. He is a dancer, musician and choreographer. He was a visiting scholar at Roehampton University and UCLA and is now an Assistant Professor at the Turkish Folk Dance Department at Ege University, Türkiye.



From the Elite to the People: The Choreographic Evolution of Meshkatian and Shajarian's Masterpieces in Post-Revolutionary Iran

Daryoush Mohammad Poor

This paper explores the transformative journey of contemporary classical Persian music from an elite, contemplative art form to a vibrant catalyst for embodied expression and dance in the post-1979 revolutionary context. Specifically, it examines how the collaborations between the composer Parviz Meshkatian and vocalist Mohammad Reza Shajarian—most notably the *tasnif* 'Jan-i Jahan' (set to Rumi's poetry) and the instrumental introductions to the albums *Bidad* and *Dastan*—have transitioned from the concert stage to the choreographic floor over the past two decades.

Despite the stringent socio-political restrictions on dance and musical performance in Iran, these compositions have inspired a phenomenal rise in 'vernacular' musicality among ordinary citizens. By analyzing recent documentary evidence from *Baz-e Razm* and *Chavoush* (dir. Hana Kamkar et al.), this study contextualises the democratisation of Persian music, arguing that the music's transcendence of its 'elite' origins allowed it to become a vessel for collective identity and spiritual resilience.

The presentation further investigates the 'why and how' of this transition, focusing on the dialogue between traditional *radif*-based structures and contemporary movement. I will highlight the pivotal role of women in reclaiming embodied space and the professional choreographic interpretations of artists such as Shahrokh Moshkin-Ghalam. Ultimately, this paper argues that the marriage of Meshkatian's rhythmic complexity with Shajarian's spiritual depth has created a new 'patterned movement' that blurs the lines between classical devotion and contemporary resistance, offering a profound sense of healing and belonging to the global Iranian diaspora and those within the country alike.

DR. DARYOUSH MOHAMMAD POOR is an Associate Professor in the Department of Academic Research at the Institute of Ismaili Studies (IIS), London. A specialist in Ismaili philosophy, Shiʿi cosmology and contemporary political theory, he has authored, edited and translated several works that bridge medieval thought with modern governance. His recent scholarship includes an English translation of Mehdi Haʾiri Yazdi's *A Philosophical Treatise on Muslim Politics*: *Wisdom and Governance* (2022) and *Command and Creation*: *A Shiʿi Cosmological Treatise* (2021). Dr. Mohammad Poor also serves as series editor of the Ismaili Heritage Series and is a member of the Advisory Board for *Encyclopædia Iranica*. He holds a PhD in Political and Social Studies from the University of Westminster and is a Fellow of the UK Higher Education Academy.



From Samia Gamal to Farida Fahmy: Dance and National Representation in Nasser's Egypt

Naiara Müssnich Rotta Gomes de Assunção

This presentation investigates how female dancing bodies became sites for negotiating Egyptian nationalism and modernity throughout the mid-twentieth century. Focusing on the transition from the monarchy of King Farouk to the nationalist regime of Gamal Abdel Nasser, the paper examines how state discourses and cultural policies transformed the symbolic role of dance in Egypt. Under Farouk, the *raqs sharqi* performer Samia Gamal was celebrated as 'Egypt's National Dancer' in 1949, despite the persistent moral ambiguities surrounding professional dancers in the country. Following the 1952 Revolution, however, Nasserist cultural politics increasingly associated the cabaret dancer with the moral and political decadence of the old regime in its relation to foreign and imperial powers. In this context, folkloric dance emerged as a politically acceptable and nationally representative alternative. Through the figure of Farida Fahmy and the activities of the Reda Troupe, the female dancer was reformulated as the embodiment of a disciplined, respectable, and patriotic Egyptian femininity. Drawing on film, dance history, and cultural studies, this presentation argues that the transition from Samia Gamal to Farida Fahmy reflects broader transformations in the construction of Egyptian national identity, revealing how movement, gender, and morality became central to competing visions of the nation.

Keywords: Egyptian dance; politics; nationalism; representation.

NAIARA MÜSSNICH ROTTA GOMES DE ASSUNÇÃO is a historian and PhD candidate in Social History at the Federal University of Rio de Janeiro. Her research focuses on dance, orientalism, and nationalism in modern Egypt, with particular emphasis on the political uses of folkloric dance during the Nasser era.



Sounding Lineage: *Qawwali, Sama, and the Ritual Assemblage of Devotional Sound*

Wajiha Naqvi

Sama, often translated as 'spiritual audition,' is a highly structured and ethically regulated Sufi-Islamic practice of listening oriented toward remembrance (*dhikr*) and experiential proximity to the Divine. In South Asia, it is closely associated with *qawwali*, the musical form most commonly performed within Chishti Sufi contexts. Yet despite *qawwali's* 'suficised' popularity and global circulation, its performance within *sama* unfolds within a tightly controlled ritual framework governed by norms of etiquette (*adab*), spiritual authority, and lineage-based Sufi networks (*silsilas*).

Drawing on ethnographic fieldwork across Chishti Sufi orders in contemporary Pakistan, this paper examines how *qawwali* is activated within such ritual settings for a select community of Sufi disciples. I analyze how *qawwali* sound is structured through the careful selection and hierarchical sequencing of poetic repertoires, and how the ritual setting is shaped by the authority of a presiding Sufi shaykh. Within this context, devotional poetry, rendered through repetition, intensification, and controlled improvisation, functions not merely as aesthetic expression but as a medium for activating Sufi lineage (*silsila*) and transmitting divine grace (*faiz*).

I argue that the efficacy of *qawwali* lies not in sound alone but in its embedding within a broader ritual assemblage that brings together sound, text, bodies, and authority. This paper reframes *qawwali* as ritualised listening, offering a more particularised account of its role as devotional sound and in spiritual transformation.

WAJIHA ATHER NAQVI is a vocalist and ethnomusicologist from Karachi, Pakistan, currently a PhD candidate in Music at King's College London where her research examines qawwali practices in contemporary urban Pakistan. As a performer she has been trained in Hindustani music and has been featured in Coke Studio Pakistan.



Breaking the Silence: *Women, Religion and Musical Transformation in the Hunza Valley*

Qudsia Naunehal Shah

Music in the mountainous Hunza Valley, in Pakistan's Gilgit-Baltistan region, has historically played a central role in social and cultural life, marking lifecycle rituals, village-level celebrations and seasonal festivities. Traditionally, music-making was the exclusive domain of a hereditary tribe known as the Bericho, a marginalised artisan community based in the village of Bairishul (renamed Mominabad). The Bericho preserved an instrumental repertoire performed on specific occasions and associated with various tribal groups. While dancing to the tunes played by the Bericho was seen as part of elite culture, with ceremonial dance performances often led by the most senior or notable male family figures, playing instruments was considered taboo for other social groups in Hunza (referred to collectively as Brusho), further reinforcing caste hierarchies around musical labour.

In the Hunza Valley, music has long been defined as much by silence as by sound, particularly the gendered absence of women from musical practice. Much is said about the taboo against other tribes playing musical instruments, but women did not participate in music-making in either the Bericho or the Brusho tribes. However, a shift came with the arrival of the Ismaili faith in this region and, much later, with the establishment of Jamatkhanas, where religious hymns called *qasida*s were performed as part of religious practice, with women also participating.

This paper will explore how organised religion, in this case the Ismaili faith, has provided women with spaces and opportunities to express themselves through music, whether religiously or, more recently, culturally.

QUDSIA SHAH is a Senior Research Officer at the Institute of Ismaili Studies. She joined the Unit in 2013 and has worked on and coordinated research projects on a wide array of themes. She has a keen interest in gender and climate change research. She is currently working on a book entitled *Ismailis of Gilgit-Baltistan and Chitral* (forthcoming, 2027).

Before joining the IIS she worked in the development sector in Pakistan. She has two postgraduate degrees: an MSc in Economics and an MA in Anthropology, and is a PhD candidate in Music at SOAS.

Raqs-i Aspak (The Horse Dance): *An Endangered Expression of Ancestral Memory and Pamiri Cultural Identity*



Maruf Noyoft
Aliah Najmabadi

This presentation examines *raqs-i aspak*, or the horse dance, an endangered anthropomorphic storytelling tradition indigenous to the Badakhshan region of Tajikistan, also known as the Pamirs. Historically performed during spring rites and weddings, *raqs-i aspak* also appeared in public festivities, amateur arts showcases, and, during the Soviet period, election-day concerts. The dance brings together movement, music, poetry, costume construction, and narrative performance, reflecting the integrated nature of Pamiri expressive culture, in which music, dance, ritual, and storytelling remain deeply interconnected.

Central to the performance is the construction and animation of a handmade horse figure. Traditionally, the horse's head was carved from apricot wood, painted, and adorned with leather ears and glass eyes, while the body and costume completed the illusion of a mounted dancer.

When carefully preserved, such objects could serve several generations of performers. The horse is not merely a theatrical device; within Pamiri legend, it is sacred, symbolising knowledge gained through journeys, and the continuity of culture across generations.

The dance is accompanied by traditional music performed on instruments including the *rubob, daf, ghijak*, *setor*, and nay, and is almost always accompanied by sung poetic verses in varied regional dialects. It is most recognisable by its relationship to the rhythmic pattern known as *rapo*. Today, *raqs-i aspak* faces urgent threats of disappearance as one of the few remaining animistic dance traditions of the region. Many practitioners have emigrated for economic reasons, illustrating the broader loss of culture bearers across Badakhshan. As practitioners leave or pass away, knowledge of movement vocabulary, costume-making, poetic texts, performance narratives, and ritual meanings are increasingly at risk. This presentation encourages the documentation and revitalisation of *raqs-i aspak* as a vital expression of ancestral memory, and Pamiri cultural identity.

MARUF NOYOFTOV is a musician, filmmaker, cultural organizer, and advocate from Tajikistan whose work is dedicated to preserving and promoting the cultural heritage of Greater Badakhshan. He holds a BA in Music from Tajikistan's University of Art and Culture, where he developed his practice on the Badakhshani *setor* and *rubab*.

His film *Raqs-i Aspak* was filmed in Badakhshan during his participation in the Tajik Dance Initiative, a project of the Christensen Fund. His broader creative practice explores music, dance, spirituality, memory, identity, and cultural resilience in Pamiri communities. His 2018 documentary *A Door to God*, which examines the rubab as a vehicle for religious and cultural expression during the Soviet period.

Maruf has also contributed to academic and community dialogue on Pamiri culture. Grounded in the Pamiri experience, his work engages urgent questions of memory, displacement, and representation that resonate far beyond Central Asia.

ALIAH NAJMABADI is a dance artist, ethnographer, and arts administrator whose work centers the performance traditions of the Greater Khorasan region, with a particular focus on ritual practice, embodied knowledge, and cultural transmission. Based in the San Francisco Bay Area, her research and practice examine how living cultural expression sustains community, memory, and belonging.

As Programme Manager of the Tajik Dance Initiative, she conducted extensive fieldwork in Tajikistan and Afghanistan's Badakhshan regions between 2006-2010, leading biocultural stewardship initiatives and collaborating with traditional artists and culture bearers in support of the documentation, transmission, and revitalisation of performing arts practices including *Raks Aspak*. She currently serves as Program Manager at the Alliance for California Traditional Arts (ACTA), where she oversees initiatives advancing cultural equity and supporting living cultural traditions across the United States and territories.

She holds an M.A. in Ethnomusicology from University of London's School of Oriental & African Studies (SOAS), and dual B.A. degrees in World Arts & Cultures and Near Eastern Languages & Cultures from the University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA).



Dancing Through Loss: Mourning, Memory, and Resistance in Contemporary Iran

Maryam Rezaee

In the wake of the protests following the New Year (in January 2026) in Iran, widely circulated videos have captured a striking and unsettling phenomenon: grieving families, particularly parents of young victims, engaging in rhythmic movement and dance-like gestures at funeral ceremonies and gravesites. To external observers, such acts may appear incongruous with mourning; however, within Iranian cultural and spiritual frameworks, these embodied expressions of grief demand deeper interpretation.

This paper examines these practices as forms of 'threshold movement,' situated between mourning, resistance, and spiritual endurance. Drawing on ethnographic media analysis and historical perspectives on Iranian ritual performance, the study situates these graveyard dances within a broader continuum that includes *taʿzīya* mourning theatre, regional funeral rites, and Sufi-influenced understandings of ecstatic movement. I argue that these gestures are not celebrations of death but culturally encoded responses to trauma—mechanisms through which grief is externalised, collectivised, and transformed into a form of moral and political witness.

The paper further explores how the bodies of mourners become sites of both vulnerability and defiance under conditions of state violence. In this context, movement operates simultaneously as lamentation and as a quiet form of resistance, challenging dominant narratives that seek to suppress or sanitise public grief. By linking contemporary visual evidence with longstanding traditions of embodied spirituality in Iranian culture, this study contributes to broader discussions on how music, rhythm, and movement function as vehicles of healing, meaning-making, and socio-political expression in Muslim contexts.

DR MARYAM REZAEE is a lecturer and researched at the Institute of Ismaili Studies. She holds a PhD in Politics from the University of York. Her research explores gender, education, Islam, and ritual studies, focusing on Iran. She has presented widely at international conferences and produced documentary work on education and society.



The Performing Arts and Education About Muslims: 'Kathak Dance' as a Case Study for Narrative Storytelling and Audience Engagement.

Riaz Rhemtulla

In all the various approaches to the education in and about Muslim peoples (e.g civilisational, multi-disciplinary, Muslim majority countries approach to Religious Education etc.) there is hardly anything "to create a sense of identification with Muslims as... people with rich and multi-faceted lives and... struggles, aspirations, and feelings....". Except for a few communities within the Sufi traditions there appears to be a vacuum in Muslim education of the role of the body and in particular the performing arts as part of the lived and diverse traditions of the Muslim world.

As a Muslim, whose ancestors were converted from Hinduism to the Ismaili Muslim faith tradition Riaz, investigates how Kathak dance,[1] which also has its roots in both Hindu and Muslim traditions as well as storytelling could be drawn upon to elucidate the narrative of Hayy ibn Yaqzan by Ibn Tufayl, a 12th-century Andalusian Muslim narrative as part of the education in and about Muslims to audiences in Vancouver.

My research is undertaken in two distinct parts: an embodied inquiry of the researcher, dancer, and educator as he constructs the performance of this Muslim narrative using the aesthetics of Indian Music and Kathak dance, and a phenomenological hermeneutic approach to investigate the perceptions, reactions, and experiences via interviews from audience members that witness the performance.

[1]Kathak dance, with its roots in the Sanskrit word, *katha* meaning to narrate stories originates from North India and is believed to be a dance style that syncretised the Hindu and Muslim culture, movement and ideology (Massey, 1999 and Roy, 2002).

RIAZ RHEMTULLA is one of the Co-Head of the Department of Education at The Institute of Ismaili Studies responsible for Teacher Education and Curriculum Development. In this role, Riaz is responsible for working with the Ismaili Tariqa and Religious Education Boards (ITREBs) globally to facilitate the sharing of knowledge and expertise across ITREBs to ensure the effective implementation of the IIS Primary, Secondary and Early Childhood Curricula according to the best academic, educational and practice driven standards. He is also a classical Indian Kathak dancer in the Lucknow *gharana* style whose journey of training and performance under the tutelage of Padmashri Pratap Pawar has continued over the past two decades.

With a diverse background in drama/theatre, genetics, social work and education, Riaz joined IIS as an Education Officer in 2000 to manage the teacher education programmes for the Ta'lim primary education curriculum. He then transitioned into the role of the STEP Liaison Manager with the primary focus to work alongside the ITREBs to develop sustainable and intentional programming to support the professional development of all STEP teachers globally.

Prior to joining IIS, he worked for the Toronto District School Board in Canada for several years as a teacher and a teacher-educator at ECD, primary and secondary levels. He is currently pursuing a Doctoral programme in Art-Education at Simon Fraser University in Vancouver on the role of the performing arts and specifically Kathak dance in Islamic-based religious education.



Dhamaal – Rhythmic Dhikr at the Shrine of Lal Shahbaz Qalandar

Shafaat Saleem

"When Lal's love comes over my head then I don't know anything...
why should I care about other people when I am at Lal's place".

Dhamaal is ecstatic devotional dance performed at the shrine of the Sufi saint Lal Shahbaz Qalandar in Sehwan, Sindh. This paper examines *dhamaal* as a form of *dhikr* i.e. the remembrance of God through rhythmic and patterned movement. Drawing on secondary research, this paper highlights how devotees describe *dhamaal* as an act of worship, that embodies spiritual and heavenly experiences, incomprehensible in worldly forms or language. Through these repeated movements of *dhikr*, devotees enter a stage of liminality where the world starts to fade away.

Ample literature has focused on the material culture of shrines in Sindh, such as the repertoire of traditional artefacts and practices in shrines. However, *dhamaal* – a dance – remains an ambiguous area due to also being at risk of fundamentalist attacks by religious extremists in Pakistan. The paper argues that *dhamaal* unsettles the conventional boundary between dance and spirituality, whilst redefining them both. As devotees put it, *dhamaal* reproduces spiritual elevation, ecstatic intoxication, and emotional healing, unachievable through prescriptive religion. By contextualising it in theoretical framework of engagement performance and ritual studies, the paper positions *dhamaal* as a creative bodily movement through which devotees transition to a liminal stage of spirituality and embrace an unworldly identity.

SHAFAAT SALEEM is a PhD student at Nova University of Lisbon, specialising in anthropology of religion and development. She holds a BSc in Social Development and Policy from Habib University, Pakistan and completed the Graduate Programme in Islamic Studies and Humanities (GPISH) at The Institute of Ismaili Studies (IIS), London, followed by MSc in International Social and Public Policy at the London School of Economics (LSE). Shafaat has previously worked with several non-governmental and development organizations in Pakistan and globally, including IIS, to support several resource development and education programmes. Her research interests include anthropology of religion, Islam and development, and Muslims in Europe.



Sacralising the Stage: *Spirituality and Respectability in Belly Dance*

Suhaila Salimpour

This presentation examines how contemporary belly dance has increasingly embraced spiritual frameworks as a means of negotiating respectability, legitimacy, and cultural value. While often framed as an 'ancient sacred feminine practice', such narratives frequently rely on selective historical references, including invocations of pre-Islamic goddesses, fertility rituals and trance-based practices such as *zar*. This talk critically interrogates these claims, asking what is at stake in positioning belly dance as spiritual heritage.

Drawing on both scholarly research and embodied practice, I argue that the sacralisation of belly dance is a modern phenomenon shaped by Orientalist histories, diaspora identity formation and the desire to counter longstanding stigmas associated with female performance in public. In particular, I examine how references to ancient goddess traditions and ritual practices are mobilised in contemporary choreography and pedagogy to construct a lineage of meaning, often without direct historical continuity.

Through analysis of performance examples—including staged interpretations of *zar*—and reflections from my own work as a choreographer and educator, this presentation explores how spirituality functions as both an aesthetic and political strategy. Rather than dismissing these practices, I situate them within broader efforts to reclaim agency, cultural dignity and embodied knowledge in the face of marginalisation.

Ultimately, this talk invites a more nuanced understanding of how belly dance operates at the intersection of history, identity and imagination, and how claims of the sacred reveal as much about present needs as they do about the past.

SUHAILA SALIMPOUR is a dancer, choreographer, and director of the Salimpour School of Dance. A pioneer in systematizing belly dance pedagogy, she has performed internationally and created multiple productions. She is currently completing an MFA in Dance at Saint Mary's College of California (May 2026), researching lineage, representation and embodied knowledge in SWANA (Southwest Asia and North Africa) dance forms.



A Step Towards Contextualising the IIS Secondary Curriculum: Integrating Performative Central-Asian Qasida-khoni Tradition into Teaching and Learning Practices in the Region

Sayed Munir Shah

This research investigates the integration of the performative Central-Asian tradition of *qasida-khoni* into the Institute of Ismaili Studies' Secondary Curriculum (IIS-SC) to enhance the religious education of students in the Badakhshan region. Recognising the limitations of standardised curricula that lack contextual relevance, this study explores how the lived experiences of Ismailis in Badakhshan, expressed through devotional music, can enrich teaching and learning practices there. By examining the embodiment of learning through music, the research challenges the mind-body dichotomy prevalent in Western educational theories and highlights the importance of multisensory experiences in religious education.

The study employs qualitative content analysis and a phenomenological approach to assess the potential of *qasida-khoni* as a medium for contextualising the IIS-SC. It argues that integrating this musical tradition into the curriculum can strengthen students' emotional connection to their faith and foster loyalty to their Imam and the global Ismaili community. The findings suggest that *qasida-khoni* not only serves as a tool for the preservation of religious identity but also offers a pathway to a more holistic and meaningful religious education.

This study contributes to the broader discourse on contextual and sensorial learning, and presents practical recommendations for educators in the region, advocating for a curriculum that resonates with the lived experiences of its learners.

A teacher and community educator from Badakhshan, Afghanistan, **SAYED MUNIR** graduated from the Secondary Teacher Education Programme (STEP) at IIS in 2024 and currently teaches in Kabul. He is passionate about the arts and music as powerful educational tools that make learning contextual, engaging, embodied and meaningful for students.



Staging Spirituality, Innocent Sexualities, and Glorious Histories: Choreographic Strategies of State Folk Dance Ensembles to Create Idealized National Identities

Anthony Shay

Professional state folk dance ensembles, and the many amateur and touristic groups that emulate them, are established and designed to create idealised images of the sponsoring nation state that supports them. They always turn to traditional ethnic and recognisable symbols of dance, music and costume that refer to the nation and its inhabitants and are easily identifiable as 'ours' by them. These ensembles are extremely expensive to maintain and thus it is important that they fulfil this mission of portraying the sponsoring nation state successfully and positively through the use of spectacle, artistically compelling choreographies, lively music, and colourful costumes that arouse powerful feelings of nostalgia and nationalism in the domestic and diasporic viewers and awe in international audiences.

The choreographers of these ensembles heighten certain positive aspects of 'national character', through such motifs and themes as spirituality, innocent sexualities and myths or events of historical periods that the nation and its people regard as 'golden' or glorious. They do this through carefully crafted choreographies that emphasize the positive qualities of youthfulness, national unity and strength that the elites of each nation state see as embodying the ideal citizen of the state and that they wish to project both domestically and abroad. For example, Igor Moiseyev, inspired by the feats and sacrifices of the guerrilla troops of World War II, a fondly remembered time in Russia, created *The Partisans* (*Partizani*) with great success. It remains one of the most popular choreographies in the repertoire of the Moiseyev Dance Company. However, these motifs are problematic and difficult to choreographically conceive, and the results rarely garner the success of Moiseyev's original masterpiece.

ANTHONY SHAY is Professor Emeritus of Dance and Cultural Studies at Pomona College in California. He is also an author, editor and co-author of 15 books about dance , and has published over 75 peer-reviewed articles in the *International Encyclopaedia of Dance*, journals such as *Iranian Studies*, *Visual Anthropology* and the *Dance Research Journal*, and multiple collected volumes. In 2007 the Association of Scholars and Professor of Iranian Heritage named him a Distinguished Fellow, and in 2024 he was named honored fellow in the Iranian Studies Association. He has also received several grants and fellowships from the National Endowment for the Humanities, the National Endowment for the Arts, the Social Science Research Council, the California Arts Council, and Pomona College to conduct research.

As a choreographer and artistic director, Shay has created and directed several dance groups: *Village Dancers* (1960–1963), *AMAN Folk Ensemble* (AMAN International Music and Dance Company), Los Angeles, California (1963–1977), and *AVAZ International Dance Theatre* (1977–2007).

This experience enabled him to become a leading scholar in the field of traditional and folk dance and how it is staged. As a musician, Shay held the position of principal flute in the Tehran Symphony Orchestra and appeared as a vocalist in traditional Persian music on Radio Tehran. He was awarded a James Irvine Fellowship in Dance for 1998 as one of the eight top choreographers in California with a fellowship for research in Iranian art. In 2002, the California Arts Council awarded him the Lifetime Achievement Award for his 'incomparable service to the art of dance'.



When Movement Ascends towards Divine Harmony: Music, the Body and Devotion in the Ikhwan al-Safaʾ and the Chishti Sufi Order

Nida Fatima Sheikh

Despite the depth of musical and movement traditions in Muslim contexts, their scholarly representation remains marginalised by legalistic and scriptural frameworks. This paper addresses that gap through a comparative analysis of two pro-music traditions: the 10th-century Ikhwan al-Safaʾ (Brethren of Purity) and the Chishti Sufi Order, which emerged from Central Asia before flourishing across the Persianate and South Asian worlds. Drawing on the *Epistles of the Brethren of Purity* and Hazrat Inayat Khan's *The Music of Life*, it examines how music functions as a vehicle for spiritual elevation, healing and devotion across two epistemologically distinct traditions.

The Ikhwan al-Safaʾ employed a Neoplatonic, mathematical framework, conceiving music as a cosmological system through which the soul ascends towards divine harmony by contemplating the rhythmic ratios of the celestial spheres. The Chishtiyya, shaped by Indic and Persianate mystical worldviews, instead reclaimed the body as the primary site of spiritual knowledge, through devotional practices of audition, remembrance and rhythmic movement, including *samaʿ*, *dhikr* and *dhamaal*.

Central to this analysis is the question of movement's ontology. This paper examines how the Ikhwan's understanding of rhythm as celestial mimicry and patterned human movement as echoing the *harakat* of the spheres, speaks to the embodied devotional gestures of Chishti ritual. Read together, both traditions interrogate the boundary between dance and non-dance patterned movement from converging, if distinct, vantage points.

Ultimately, both traditions, in their respective historical and cultural contexts, challenge modern secularised and Wahhabi-influenced dismissals of embodied practice, repositioning music and movement as enduring pathways to healing, consolation and belonging across MENACASEA regions and their diasporas.

NIDA FATIMA is an educator and teacher trainer based in Pakistan, with nearly three years of experience in adolescent, youth and community education. She holds an MA from SOAS and a PGDip from UCL Institute of Education, both on full scholarship. Her work spans inclusive pedagogy and teacher professional development.



Layered Devotions: Sound, Movement, and the Transformation of Ritual Practices in Yazd

Narciss Sohrabi

This paper explores the entanglement of sound, movement, and spirituality in the ritual landscape of Yazd, a city often described as a palimpsest of layered cultural and religious histories. Focusing on practices such as *taʿziyeh* and *zurkhaneh*, the paper examines how embodied and sonic forms have evolved over time while continuing to generate powerful spiritual experiences.

Rather than treating these practices as static traditions, I argue that they should be understood as dynamic, adaptive forms in which rhythm, vocalisation and patterned movement produce affective states of devotion and collective belonging. In *taʿziyeh*, vocal lamentation and musical structures guide emotional immersion, while in *zurkhaneh*, synchronised movement and percussive sound create a disciplined yet spiritually charged environment. These practices demonstrate how spirituality is not only articulated through doctrine but also enacted through the sensory and corporeal. By situating Yazd as a site of layered ritual transformation, this paper contributes to broader discussions on how music and movement mediate spiritual experience in Muslim contexts. It further asks how shifts in social, political, and urban conditions have reshaped these practices, while preserving their capacity to evoke transcendence, healing and communal identity.

NARCISS SOHRABI is a researcher working at the intersection of urban studies, sound studies and performance in Middle Eastern contexts. Their work explores how spatial practices, sensory experience and cultural production shape forms of collective memory, identity and belonging. With a particular focus on Iran, they examine sites such as cafés, ritual spaces and urban environments as dynamic arenas where everyday life, artistic expression and subtle forms of resistance intersect. Their research engages interdisciplinary approaches, drawing on cultural theory, anthropology and architectural analysis to investigate how sound, movement and space mediate social and political experience.

Publishing Roundtable

Eileen Srebernik, Roberta L. Dougherty, Anthony Shay

The publishing roundtable includes a writer/scholar, a librarian from a major university (Yale), and an editor from a scholarly press. They will present the process through which a scholarly book is published and provide advice for scholars about how to approach the publishing of an academic book. This roundtable is designed especially for new scholars to begin the publishing process.

EILEEN SREBERNIK is Senior Editor for Literature, Theatre and Performance at Palgrave Macmillan. She commissions in Shakespeare studies, early modern literature, modern and contemporary poetry, book history and Gothic literature, as well as theatre and performance studies. Eileen is keen to receive proposals for projects in any of these areas. Flagship series include Early Modern Literature in History, Palgrave Shakespeare Studies, Reproducing Shakespeare, Palgrave Gothic, Modern and Contemporary Poetry and Poetics, Palgrave Studies in Music and Literature and Palgrave Studies in Theatre and Performance History.

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