

# THE MEANING OF HANDS



## Hand Movements in Arabic Dance FAQ - Do they mean anything at all?

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# The Meaning of Hands

Western students often ask if there are any stylised hand movements and gestures in Arabic dance that have specific meanings, after the manner of Indian dance. I have usually found that the answer given by Western teachers is “No”, but that Arabs will sometimes answer “Yes”. I don’t yet know the reason for this apparent discrepancy of understanding, but since I long ago resolved to chronicle any snippet of dance-related folklore I came across, it’s about time I shared some of the explanations I’ve received!

For nearly four years now, I have been frequenting a number of almost exclusively Arabic bars and cafes, from Leeds’ glorious Sahara to the Byblos, Middlesborough’s best-kept secret (*Note*), sometimes as a dancer, and sometimes just to sit in a corner, and wait for the story that will be that night’s gift. Stories need not be true for there to be magic in them. See what you make of these:

**Weaving arms** – When a dancer weaves her arms across the front of her body, she is imitating the movement of snakes. She is telling the watcher that although her beauty is on display whilst she dances, it is nevertheless guarded by the power and danger of the serpent and should only be approached with caution. A case of “none but the brave deserve the fair”?

A Lebanese friend explains that according to traditions, as he understands them, the original and pre-Islamic dance always included the snake-weaving arms. A modestly-dressed dancer who danced with snake-weaving arms was, however sensuous her movements, not considered to be displaying her body. He continues to explain that Egyptian cinema brought balletic arm movements into the dance, causing Lebanese dancers to abandon the snake-weaving for more fashionable gestures, and that this has therefore caused the more religiously-minded to consider even modestly-dressed dancing lewd, when this was not previously the case.

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*Note:* At the time of this revised edition, both the Byblos and Sahara are no longer with us, victims of the smoking ban which their respective local councils interpreted to include shishas. Those of us who knew and loved these wonderfully eccentric places will forever miss them.

**Pointing fingers** – When a dancer, usually male, dances with both arms held straight above his head in a slight V-shape, and extends the index finger of both hands upright, he is saying: “I believe in one god”. When a dancer lifts his or her arms above the head, lifts both the index fingers, and dances whilst pointing these alternatively upwards in a slight, or exaggerated push-pull manner, this is a sign of celebration. It can equally be religious or secular celebration. It means: “God has blessed us”.

When a dancer dances with both hands stretched out in front of the body with both fingers raised, this indicates – “this is me dancing, this is how I feel.” In other words, the dancer is as happy as the song suggests, and she is not feigning it. (Not usually used with sad, emotional music.)

Similarly, a Saiidi stick dancer can raise both fingers whilst dancing, and this also indicates: “This is me dancing. This is how we dance where I come from.” Usually the stick is balanced across the back of the wrists when the fingers are pointed upwards – this also helps to stop spillage when bouncing and jumping the stick!

**Cupped hands above the head** - When a dancer dances with both arms held above his head with slightly-cupped palms and alternatively wafts his arms, seeming to stroke or pull something soft and invisible towards him, he is saying: “I rejoice in God’s blessing”. He is also saying: “Look at me! Shower me with your applause! Bring it on!” He may also bob and weave his head in appreciation.

It reminds me of all those New Kingdom Egyptian tomb-paintings where successful generals and officials are shown being showered with garlands and gold necklaces. Their hands are held in exactly the same way!

**Hand placed to centre of chest** – During Khaleegy dance, if the dancer holds her hand flat to her chest or in a fist shape, this can signify “I am proud” or “I am sincere”. It could also be the most convenient way of keeping her long sleeves out of the way!

**Hands held in front of the body, palms facing each other** – In North African dance, when the dancer holds her arms like this and flutters her hands up and down or to the sides, elbows out, after the manner of bird wings, she is imitating the mating dance of the partridge. Moroccan and Algerian acquaintances have alluded to old proverbs which advise a young suitor to seek out a girl who dances like a partridge, and one of more mature years to settle upon the one who dances like a duck!

**Flicking hands and fingers** – Sometimes North African dancers flick out their hands and fingers towards their audience. They seem to curl either the index or middle fingers into the thumb, and then flick the finger out, opening up the hand like a flower. I have come across a number of explanations for this – some have said this represents flicking out energy, or flicking out droplets of water. Others have said that this is conferring “baraka” – or blessings – onto their audience, but have admitted that in a desert culture the dividing line between the concepts of water and blessings is very fine indeed! Not least because of the well-known brand name of bottled water.

I remember Emma, an English dancer, telling me that her gypsy grandmother always told her not to flick out her fingers for no reason – such actions could mistakenly kill good fairies. If she wanted to kill *bad* fairies – and particularly ones that she thought might be bringing bad luck to herself or her friends – then she could flick her fingers at them. But only if she knew where they were, and *really meant it* when she flicked out her fingers!

**Love and thanks** – Touching or indicating the left side of chest signifies “my heart”. Love for an individual, however, is felt lower down – in the side, below the left breast (!). The dancer is not saying she’s got a stitch!

Love, respect, or thanks towards one’s audience is expressed from the region of the solar plexus – the dancer will gather in her hands to the breastbone, and mime giving something out.

For a cheeky touch, a dancer will kiss her hands, hold them to her hips, and mime throwing them to her audience.

**You are in my eye** - Touching the length of the little finger or forefinger just below the eye, perhaps mimicking the application of kohl with a fine brush or stick. This means: “I have seen you looking”, or “my eyes sparkle brighter because you are looking.” It may also mean: “I remember you”, or “I have seen you before”.



## Khaleegy dance moves

Gulf dancers perform a lot of hand-movements which seem to be unique to the flowing lines of their dance. No one seems to be able to fully explain why they do what they do, and most of the explanations seem to be the individual choice of the dancer in question.

Last year I met a Qatari student, Mahmoud, who, unprompted, passed on his understanding of various Gulfie moves. He claimed the explanations came to him from his mother who was a well-known dancer often called upon to dance “for the government”.

This is his take on matters Khaleegy:

**Shaking hands** - When a female dancer holds her hand up to one side of her face, with the palm forward and either shakes her hand or rotates the wrist from left to right, she is mimicking holding a mirror to catch the flash of the sun. In times past, dancers would hold a piece of mirror, or shiny metal, but these days they just mimic the action. The looking glass is a symbol of female beauty, and similar looking glass mimes are found in Persian dance. Mahmoud’s explanation was that the glass was either to draw attention to the beauty of the dancer, or to dazzle those who looked at her face, thus avoiding the Evil Eye. His second explanation was that the women were also satirising the male sword dance, where a sword is shaken in one hand, by contrasting feminine with masculine artefacts.

**Hand to nose** – Mahmoud says that when a dancer puts one finger to the side of her nose, she is saying: “imagine what I would look like, wearing a nose-ring as a bride”. (I would have thought that, if a dancer was wearing a nose-ring, which used to be far more prevalent in times past, then she would put her hand to her nose to hold her ring in place. This would cause a lot less pain and fewer entanglements during hair-and-head tossing moves!)

**Hand to forehead** – Mahmoud says that when a dancer puts first her palm, and then the back of her hand to her forehead she is miming pressing a coin to her forehead so that her sweat will make it stick. (This is a traditional way of thanking dancers and public entertainers, which has been recorded across the Middle East for hundreds of years. There is also the suggestion in these accounts that where other services were being offered by street dancers, the act of singling out a dancer by pressing a coin to her forehead also signified an inclination by the audience member to enter into further negotiations. This is

perhaps the reasoning behind Mahmoud's further assertion that when a dancer alternates between pressing her finger to her nose and pressing her hand to her forehead she is saying: "Am I a street entertainer/prostitute or am I a potential bride? For the duration of my dance, that is something I know, but you are compelled to find out.")

**Shaking wrists and forearms** – Sometimes dancers bend their arms at the elbows and hold them up in front of the body; their hands are held open like flowers and they twist their hands and forearms backwards and forward at the wrist. Sometimes just one arm will be held up like this, the other will be bent at the elbow, and held horizontally across the front of the body to almost touch the elbow of the uplifted arm. And sometimes, both bent arms will be held horizontally across the front of the body. The same twisting and shaking movements will be performed throughout. Mahmoud's take on this is that the dancer is causing her bracelets to shake, inviting her audience to admire her bracelets, or miming having bracelets that could be admired by both herself and her audience.

Many women across the Middle East and North Africa wear elaborate sheath-like metal jewellery on their forearms. Sometimes these "wrist-guard bracelets" are embellished with studs and spikes. I have elsewhere heard that twisting-arm dance movements are – like the snake-weaving arms described above – designed to warn off audience members who may wish to take advantage of the dancer, or to get at the wealth of coinage and other jewellery she wears about her person.

**Hand across the nose** – I'm told that when a dancer puts the side of her flat hand, palm-down hand across the bridge of her nose she is saying: "I am shy." This is particularly the case if the dancer also looks down, looks away, or lowers her eyelids. I'm also told that this is likely to be a down-right lie – the dancer will be anything but shy! And you will also often see a dancer performing this gesture, either consciously or unconsciously, as she is edged out of a group dance to perform a solo or to dance with a male partner. It's part of the universal Arabic sign-language, not just a dance gesture, but, in Khaleegy dance, it's become a part of the flirtatious interaction between a dancer and her audience.

When watching male dancers "hamming it up" at the Sahara, I have certainly seen this gesture used. When one won't get up to dance, the "class clown" seems to suggest that, instead of getting up and "dancing like a man", he's being shy and retiring "like a girl". This is often accompanied by a pantomime of hiding one's face and giggling.

**Rippling hand movements** - A line of dancers approach: each one moves one hand across her body, up and down in a rippling movement. She is inviting the audience to admire the beautiful hair of the dancer beside her. "Look! See how it flows and ripples like water!"

## Conclusion

Even when we receive explanations for certain hand movements and gestures, we must remember that we are only dealing with folklore as understood by that particular dancer. This may, in truth, be derived from long generations of family belief and culture, but may equally derive from something they've been told, or read, or seen on TV.

The stylised hand gestures of many Indian dance forms derive from its early association with ritual, with sacred and secular drama, and with expressing philosophical ideas about music, poetry, and the plastic arts. There is no suggestion of this in Arabic dance. Rather, the hand and arm gestures of Arabic dance are a part of the language of that dance. In many ways, these refer back to old social customs, no longer observed, but still remembered. In much the same way, we in the West will mime tugging at forelocks, or sketching a courtly bow. These gestures remember social situations, hundreds of years old, but which still speak to us today.

Learning Arabic dance in the West, we have to admit that there is not time enough to absorb whole centuries of culture, language, and custom, nor yet to understand the subtle nuances that exist between town, and city, and country. There is, however, something that speaks to us in the music, the costume, and every magical movement.

Although we seldom realise it, we say so much with every expression. A dancer's hands, so I'm told, reveal the secrets of her soul. If her fingers are strong enough to perform the *buscaan*, the so-called Persian Snap that is by no means exclusive to Iran, then that reveals a skilful woman, a wise woman, with a passionate nature. Watch closely, they say, and you will find the dancer who reveals whether she is better suited to comfort her child or caress her lover. Watch for the dancer who gives, and also for she who takes, and watch out for the woman with eyes in the palms of her hands...

When we dance, if we let our hands simply speak for us, naturally and without artifice, then maybe we tell our own stories and we might pass, albeit briefly, for a modern day Almah, a dancer and a story-teller, a woman wise in lore and learning.

This is, after all, the most eloquent of dances, and the purpose of eloquence has always been persuasion.