

Editorial Commentary

Reviews of books normally occupy the last pages of a Journal. This issue of *JASHM* departs from the norm by putting Marjorie Franken's review of "*A Trade Like Any Other*": *Female Singers and Dancers in Egypt* by Karin van Nieuwkerk first. We do so because of the issues Franken raises about status, gender and income which apply not only to Egyptian dancing but to other dance forms elsewhere in the world.

About status and Bharatanatyam (one of the classical dance forms of India), Rajika Puri tells us that

The *devadasis* (literally 'servants of god') were women who were dedicated to temple service who performed dances as part of the many rituals connected with a temple. Their dedication included the performance of a marriage ceremony with the deity of a particular temple and incorporation into temple society.¹ Apart from their temple services, on special occasions such as weddings they would be invited to perform at the houses of leading citizens. Some were also attached to the courts of *rajās* (hereditary rulers) and were expected to dance at the palaces for which they received salaries.

To the British colonizers, many of whom were entertained by these dancers when they visited a local ruler, the name 'devadasi' became synonymous with 'dancing girl'. They disapproved of the custom, and in the nineteenth century an anti-*nautch* (anti-dance) movement was launched by a group of English social reformers who sought to prohibit the institution. A specific example of [such] social reformers ... was a "Miss Tenant, who came all the way from England to persuade cultured and highly placed Indians in Madras and elsewhere not to have anything to do with this art and collected signed promises from them to this effect" (E. Krishna Iyer - reference unavailable).

As patronage was withdrawn many *devadasis* became impoverished and some turned to prostitution, bringing further disapprobation on these women. By the early part of this century the few *devadasis* who pursued their profession were ostracized by society and their dances were similarly regarded as immoral. ... (*infra*, p. 173).

Should anyone wish to compare the *devadasis* with Middle Eastern dancers, a useful reference is Singer's *When a Great Tradition Modernizes* (1972).

Like many countries in the world, India has experienced Western education, modernism, industrialism, export agriculture, feminism and the end of slavery. These instruments of change "transformed Egypt over a period of one hundred years" (Franken, *infra*, p. 168), but they are not alone characteristic of Egypt -- or of India. One wonders how the *geisha* tradition in contemporary Japan would contrast in broad outline with India and/or Egypt in this regard? It would be interesting to know how sub-groups of female Japanese dancers are presently situated with reference to gender, marginality, honor and shame.

The modernization process in Egypt has been at work for the better part of one century. In India, it has been at work for at least a century or more. We cannot claim much knowledge of the effects of Egyptian and Indian versions of modernity upon dances, dancing and dancers in these nations. It would seem from the evidence presented in this issue that, in spite of industrial development, for instance, the ways in which dances, dancing and dancers are classified by majority groups in their host societies undergoes precious little change.

As van Nieuwkerk and Franken both point out, with the notable exception of the group of theatrical dancers, Egypt's female dancers are still reviled by many, and even theatrical dancers pay for their high status and respectability with low salaries. In Egypt, female dancers can either make lots of money as nightclub 'belly-dancers' -- sacrificing respectability and status -- or, as theatrical dancers, they have high status and respectability but do not make decent incomes. There are few alternatives. Presumably, they can identify themselves with the Muhammad Ali street dancers who want to achieve professional status in "a trade like any other" but this option may not be open to them for other reasons -- class, residence, etc. The situation is complex:

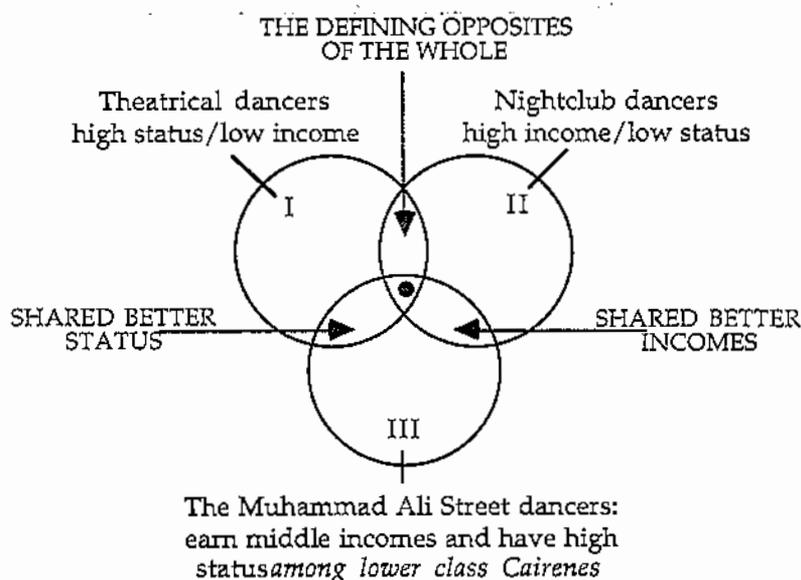


Figure 1. Elements of the Whole Situation

The only thing that all three groups of Egyptian dancers really share is an activity called 'dancing', indicated by the black dot [•] in the center overlap of the diagram.

As Franken points out, "The 'shame' of professional dancing is not distributed equally, either upon all types of dancers, or by all segments of the public. ... The responses [are] not at all uniform" (*infra*, p. 169), i.e.

1. Members of the upper and upper middle class feel that 'theatrical' or 'folkloristic' dancers and those who dance on television are the *only* socially acceptable types of dancers.
2. Working class and lower middle class majority of Cairenes seem to be tolerant towards *all* dancers, except, perhaps, 'nightclub' dancers.
3. Middle class Cairenes tend to condemn all dancers for religious reasons regardless of the performing circuit they occupy.

Some of the religious reasons for condemnation are not unfamiliar. There are strong similarities in conservative Christianity and Islam. For example, the Christian theological concept of "proximate occasions of sin" was (and may still be) responsible for widespread vilification of dancers in Euro-centered societies, just as it is in Islamic societies.

"Proximate occasions of sin" means that it is not the dancing, *per se*, that is considered evil,² but the fact that *some types* of dancing take place in contexts where other undesirable acts such as drinking, drug-use and prostitution occur. Dancing thus becomes sinful because of its proximity with other actions. Not all dancing, of course, takes place in contexts where drinking, drug-use and prostitution flourish. Nevertheless, the tendency to condemn all dancing regardless of context seems to persist.

What is especially interesting in this regard is "...Wikan's work among the working classes of Cairo. She found that '*eb* (shame) adheres to acts, but not the actor. *Actions* can be shameful, but *people have honor*'". (p. 119 of van Nieuwkerk's book, and p. 170 in Franken's review - italics added). But this is just the point: is it the *dancer* who is evil or the *dancing*? Is it the *musician* (or composer) who is evil or the *music*?

Regardless of how these questions may be answered, dancers are frequently saddled with negatively-charged, entrenched classifications of evil and shame that linger whether the situations that initiated their use have changed or not. Moreover, negatively charged classifications tend to cover much larger areas of activity and groups of people than those to which they were originally applied. To groups of people or to individuals who are convinced that dancing is evil, it makes little difference whether concert dancing or strip-tease is the dance form that is concerned.

The *devadasis* were originally targeted in India by British colonists, but the reputation thus gained attached itself to all dancers and dance forms.

In Madras a group of dance and music scholars fought the anti-*nautch* movement attempting to demonstrate that far from being immoral, the dance was an intrinsic part of Indian aesthetic, philosophical and religious beliefs and practices. In the early nineteen-thirties this group created a furor among the educated upper classes by presenting *Sadir Nac* on the urban secular stage. In spite of initial resistance these scholars were eventually successful. After about twenty years young girls from respected families began to study *Sadir Nac* and to present it to more receptive audiences in Madras (Puri, *infra*, p. 173 - Endnote deleted).

Although Bharatanatyam is now (and has been for some time) respectable among upper and middle class Indians, it is decidedly *not* "a trade, like any other." Most well-known performers of Bharatanatyam and other classical forms have other sources of income, or their families are sufficiently wealthy to permit the pursuit of the dance as an avocation. Not only that, Bharatanatyam is associated with the classical theatrical tradition, where other, lesser, dance forms are not (see *infra*, pp. 180-81).

In the United States, modern concert dancing, about which Hart-Johnson writes, has developed into a reputable profession, although the first performances of modern dance (then called 'Greek' or 'interpretive' dancing) by the woman who originated it at the turn of the century were unsuccessful. Isadora Duncan left America for Europe after a failed performance in Chicago in 1897, very quickly becoming a celebrity in England, France, Greece and Russia, first appearing in the latter country in 1905. After the first World War, she was invited to establish a school of her own in the Soviet Union.

Duncan's second -- and final -- visit to the United States ended when she was labeled a 'Bolshevik agent'. During and after a concert at Symphony Hall, Boston, in 1922 (where she tried to introduce her Russian-born husband), members of the audience shouted abuse and the affair ended in disaster. Leaving her native country, she told news reporters, "Goodbye, America. I shall never see you again" and she never did. She was too much of a rebel, flying in the face of too many conventions to be accepted in the country where she was born, but she paved the way for the titans of modern concert dancing who were to follow -- among them, Martha Graham.

Graham dominated the American modern dance scene for at least fifty years and her technique still survives. Diana Hart-Johnson, who was a company-member for several years, provides many insights into what a professional modern dancer's life is really like towards the end of the same century that saw American modern dance forms begin. In the section, 'Commitment' (see *infra*, p. 199), she remarks,

The ultimate goal, or external 'good', towards which the professional concert dancer strives is association with a company, where he or she enjoys a certain amount of prestige, status, power and money.

However, it should be remembered that most American dance companies do not have paid work for fifty-two or even forty-eight weeks out of any given year. When I was a member of Graham's company, a *good* year included slightly more than six months of paid rehearsals and performances. Even though wages are based on a union scale, the weeks and months spent on unemployment lines offset this otherwise decent salary. Dancers often supplement their incomes by teaching, free-lancing or taking part time jobs in restaurants or bars. The point here is that although money can be seen to be an 'external good' for the professional dancer, it is hardly the main drawing card. Commitment in the concert dance world doesn't include high priority ambitions for a steady high salary.

The defining opposition of high income-low status as against high status-low income appears to hold for Egyptian dancing, Bharatanatyam and Martha Graham's company-members alike (see Fig. 1). The opposition points to a pattern that is repeated in many other parts of the world -- including the 'developed' world -- although few, if any, inquiries have been made into such matters in the latter context.

It would be interesting, indeed, to have contributions to the literature on American dance forms that examined the status of dancing and dancers among the early colonizers. Do we know what are the "effects of nationalism and government sponsorship on performers and performance" (Franken, *infra*, p. 171) in the United States? Are there significant similarities and/or differences in the growth and development of the dance arts in France and the United States -- both republics -- in contrast to countries ruled by monarchies?

Finally, although we easily talk about "class formation in the developing world" and how it "shapes public attitudes about performance [dividing] it into 'high' and 'low' art forms" (Franken, *infra*, p. 171), can we not see correlative divisions in democracies, even though they presumably do not possess the same kind of class structure?

These questions in no way detract from the value of van Nieuwkerk's book. On the contrary, we feel that, if anything, the fact that "*A Trade Like Any Other*" evokes such questions adds luster to the importance of her work. Her book not only provides an intimate view of the contemporary circumstances surrounding Egypt's dancers, it provides a viewpoint with which other traditions in the world can be contrasted and compared. The author's work encourages further understanding of the complex social forces that impinge upon danced idioms of human movement, and this is desirable. At the same time, an understanding of the kinds of internally generated forces of dedication and devotion in spite of external circumstances is also important to understand. What is it that enables professional dancers to withstand seemingly impossible odds? What inspires theatrical dancers to sacrifice high -- or steady -- incomes?

Originally the opening chapter of her Master's thesis (1983), Puri's essay gives a brief overview of the kinds of knowledge and discipline necessary to enable a Bharatanatyam dancer to perform. In describing a typical recital, she also provides readers with the context for using *hasta mudras* in what is, perhaps, the best-known form of south Indian dancing outside of India. An accomplished dancer herself, Puri draws attention to the importance of an ancient tradition of aesthetic ideals, including *rasa* (taste or 'flavor') and *bhava* (mood) found in classical Indian dramaturgical theory (see *infra*, pp. 180-81).

Both classical Indian dancing and acting utilize the *hasta mudras* (hand gestures - see Appendix, p. 208), the analysis of which comprised the central theme of Puri's thesis, however, readers unfamiliar with the idiom and Indian culture needed to know what role the hand gestures played in the context of Bharatanatyam performances -- the aspect of her work that is reproduced here.

Unlike Puri, Hart-Johnson focuses, not on public performance, but on the technique classes and the apparatus of learning that Martha Graham dancers go through as they strive to achieve the minimum required level for performing. Her essay provides valuable, intimate insights into the daily practices of company members -- a feature of professional dancing that often remains entirely unknown to the majority of their audiences. Alien to lay persons though it may be, the technique class is of paramount importance. As Hart-Johnson puts it:

It is in class that students actually learn the idiom of body language, its rule-structures and basic vocabulary of actions. The process is as difficult and time-consuming as learning a spoken or signed language. Anything less than daily attendance greatly impairs the speed with which learning is accomplished (infra, p. 200 - italics added).

Professional dancers spend far more time in studios and classrooms than they do on stage in public performances, and this is true regardless of the dance form or where it is found in the world.

Juxtaposing three entirely different kinds of dancing as we have in this commentary is, for some, confusing, yet, we are left with feelings of intense dissatisfaction because of our awareness of all the dance traditions that have been left out of the discussion. The rule-structures and basic vocabulary of actions contained in, for example, Irish step-dancing (see Hall 1996), are of equal

interest, as are those in Haitian dancing (Martin 1996), Hawaiian dancing (Kaepler 1995), 'Break' dancing in Philadelphia (Friedland 1995), and so many others.

Along with Hart-Johnson and Puri, I am convinced that "laypeople must familiarize themselves with [the idiom's] 'code' -- with its rules and meta-rules and the ...practices that constitute the kind of body language that it is" (*infra*, pp. 208 and 183 respectively). Why?

Like any other game, the body language games of specific danced idioms of human movement are incomprehensible if their spectators and advocates don't know and understand the rules.

The Editors

Notes

¹ [Puri's note]: Although discussion of the societal role, kinship organization, duties and rituals of *devadasis* affected the development of *Sadir Nac*, it is beyond the scope of this essay. For detailed treatment see Marglin (1980) who deals with the ritual role of the *devadasis* at the temple of Jagannatha in Puri (Orissa).

² One is reminded of Martin Luther's observation that the evil which might take place in relation to dancing was not the fault of dancing alone since the same might happen at table or in church. In other words, he held that the sin of gluttony couldn't be attributed to the existence of food, but to the person(s) who ate food in excess [The Editors].

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