

## Review Essay

*"A Trade Like Any Other": Female Singers and Dancers in Egypt* by Karin van Nieuwkerk. University of Texas Press [Austin], 1995. xi + 226 pp. including photographs, bibliography (pp. 211-19), appendix, glossary, subject index (pp. 221-26) and bibliographical references. Hardback Edition \$35.00; Paperback \$15.95. ISBN 0-292-78723-5. Reviewer: Marjorie A. Franken.

This book puts forward a wealth of data in a unique comparative case study that will interest several audiences. As a book about the traditional dancer and singer class of urban Egypt, it offers dance scholars and performers an intimate view into a little-known portion of the "belly-dance" world. I have addressed a review to that audience elsewhere and will not repeat those remarks here.<sup>1</sup> Suffice it to say that Middle Eastern dances (a.k.a. 'Oriental dance', *raqs al sharqi*, *dans du ventre*, or 'belly-dance') are more varied and have more nuances than is often assumed or described by Western dancers and authors.

For Middle East scholars who specialize in history, women's studies, political science, economics, etc., the book provides details about a special sub-group of women who, through their stories, illuminate the more humble corners of Egyptian society. The stories include contradictions, a few reiterations and several interesting twists on current themes and theories within these disciplines. For an anthropological audience these same variations and nuances are described, not in terms of movement, music or costume, but in terms of class, gender and post-colonial society.

### The Anthropological Perspective

The anthropological essentials are as follows: van Nieuwkerk, a Dutch anthropologist, carried out fieldwork for two periods of about eight months each between 1988 and 1990 in the traditional entertainment quarter of Cairo. She calls her study-group the "Muhammad Ali Street Entertainers."<sup>2</sup> The name derives from a large European-style boulevard of arcaded shops and coffeehouses built in the nineteenth century, named after a Turkish/Albanian military leader who made Egypt his autonomous fiefdom within the Ottoman Empire after 1805. Many of the shops are music stores and the coffeehouses serve as informal hiring halls for musicians who wait there for employment. Party agencies have offices fronting the street and in the narrow back alleys are the homes of the entertainers, agents and shop-keepers.

Until recently, entertainment was primarily a family business. Although musicians, singers, jugglers, clowns and such had been loosely organized into guilds in the eighteenth century, these organizations have disintegrated leaving a quasi caste-like group of families residing on Muhammad Ali Street. In 1990, when van Nieuwkerk arrived, even this tradition was disappearing. Families were leaving the "trade" and moving to other parts of Cairo. Even the entertainer's *argot* called '*sim*' was falling into disuse.

The author's research focuses on questions of gender, marginality, honor and shame. A novice belly-dancer herself, van Nieuwkerk says that her aim is to "de-

exoticize" the entertainment trade (p. 1). That is, she wants to show that the practitioners regard themselves as professionals in "a trade like any other" of the title. Aware of the large literature in the West that attempts to describe Middle Eastern dance, she turns her back on the 'Orientalist' and romanticized approaches generally found there, focusing on "a more specifically anthropological issue: the relation between the social and cultural construction of gender and the status of the performers" (p. 14).

If a tendency to exoticize and romanticize belly-dancing exists among Western *aficionados*, authors and observers, in the Middle East itself there is a tendency to demonize, vilify and ostracize the women who make a living at this profession. An enlightening summary of the official statements and policies of religious and government authorities on the subject of the evils of the dance and dancers is provided by van Nieuwkerk.

In a climate where even music can be regarded as a possibly corrupting influence, dancing and dancers come off very much as "evil influences" which lead the unwary into other vices strictly prohibited by Islamic religious law.<sup>3</sup> Recent shifts of government policies to accommodate Islamic reformers have put still more pressure and blame on dancers.

### The Performing Circuits in Egypt

As van Nieuwkerk listened to her informants' life stories (Ch. Four), she realized that historical and economic changes have divided female entertainers in Egypt into three groups, which she calls "performing circuits."<sup>4</sup> She compares each group to the others but focuses more closely on the lowest status group -- the Muhammad Ali Street dancers, who work in what is called the "popular circuit." It is here that the fascinating twists and unexpected consequences within this "trade like any other" appear.

The singers/dancers of Muhammad Ali Street are the nearest inheritors of public dancing traditions of previous centuries.<sup>5</sup> These dancers were described in detail by European travelers who, not surprisingly, were mostly men. However, they are seldom mentioned by Egyptian authors for the simple reason that they were lower class women who worked in public places. Although many sources, e.g. Halsband (1965) claim that the best performers were slaves reared in wealthy harems and trained for that express purpose, van Nieuwkerk leaves all discussion of slavery out of her book. Public entertainment and public dancing girls were low-class spectacles for poor people.

Comparisons to slave singers/dancers aside, van Nieuwkerk does a masterly and insightful job of sifting through and evaluating these eighteenth and nineteenth century accounts. In particular she points out the victimization, exploitation and persecution that female entertainers suffered under Napoleon, Muhammad Ali, Egyptian religious authorities, petty bureaucrats, policemen and pimps.

The nineteenth century brought with it a ubiquitous, unremitting colonialism and profound social and economic changes. Western education, Islamic modernism, industrialism and export agriculture, feminism and the end of slavery all transformed Egypt over a period of one hundred years. The second and third of

the "performing circuits" arose after the original class of female public entertainers was exiled to the provinces and stigmatized as prostitutes. When they returned to Cairo they finally became the Muhammad Ali Street dancers of van Nieuwkerk's study. These women continue to be the lowest common denominator of entertainment: they dance in tents at lower class weddings and also at provincial festivals on saints-day celebrations. Although they are the *least* respected in artistic terms, they occupy the *middle* position of the three 'circuits' with reference to income and social propriety.

The most lucrative, but the most stigmatized performing circuit is that of the nightclub belly-dancer -- the most familiar to Western audiences. The best of these performers working in five-star hotels make over one thousand dollars per week. Because this tradition developed with the introduction of watering-holes for Europeans, where alcohol consumption and prostitution flourished, these dancers reap maximum blame and castigation from the wider public. They have a kind of notoriety based on their wealth and audacity, but they are respected by no one. Nevertheless, many women now come to this occupation from Egypt's middle-class -- economics drives their ambition and over-rides their shame.

The least stigmatized, most respectable, but poorest-paid performing circuit is that of theatrical dancing. This tradition also developed in response to the colonial introduction of Western theaters and traveling European companies of opera-singers, ballet and other dancers. Fine arts academies were established in the twentieth century, but a new era and a new genre of dances and dancing was promoted when Nasser led Egypt into full independence after 1952. The indigenous dance forms -- the 'folk' dances -- were promoted as never before in an effort to boost nationalism and Arab socialism, and, as a counter-force to Western arts influences. Both the Reda Troupe and the National Troupe are folkloric dance troupes begun *circa* 1960. They continue as government sponsored schools of performing dancers. The relatively high esteem that folkloric dancers enjoy is largely due to the respectability and upper middle class origins of Farida Fahmy, a principal dancer for over twenty years and a founding member of the Reda Troupe.<sup>6</sup>

But these dancers, as civil servants, are so poorly paid that they moonlight in commercial troupes, or -- abandoning all claims of respectability -- they become belly-dancers in nightclubs. Here, we see how colonialism had both positive and negative effects: it led to the professionalization of female dancing by establishing an academic system that turns out 'certificated' dancers on the one hand. On the other, it led to another sort of professional advancement in the expansion and glamourization of nightclub dancing.

### Honor and Shame

The 'shame' of professional dancing is not distributed equally, either upon all types of dancers, or by all segments of the public. The author conducted a 'card-sort' exercise in which she asked fifty informants across a broad range of social classes to order occupations for both men and women on a scale ranging from "very good" to "very bad."<sup>7</sup>

The responses were interesting and not at all uniform: upper and upper-middle class people felt that theatrical or television performers are socially acceptable, while all others are not because they are "ignorant" or "lower class" (p. 108). This attitude can be seen as a combination of class loyalty to Faridah Fahmy and her pioneering upper-middle class family and sheer ignorance about lower classes of Cairenes.

Middle class people, many of them petty bureaucrats, are the most severe in condemning dancers, often citing religious reasons for doing so.

The friends, neighbors and employers of the popular-circuit dancers -- the lower middle class and working class majority of Cairo -- have a tolerant attitude; one that reflects the viewpoint of the dancers themselves. They regard entertainment as "a trade like any other" and female dancers as women who work to feed their families.

It is in terms of marriage and family that people reveal their moral scruples about female dancers: nightclub dancers are more marginalized by society and their husbands more frequently divorce them. Their natal families almost always reject them. Both theatrical and popular dancers find acceptance among their own class largely and are usually stable married mothers.

The theoretical heart of van Nieuwkerk's book focuses on honor and shame. There is a large anthropological literature on these subjects, but much of it, as the author points out, deals with a pecking order among men. *À propos* the Egyptian dancers' case is Wikan's work among the working classes of Cairo.<sup>8</sup> She found that 'eb (shame) adheres to acts, but not the actor. *Actions* can be shameful, but *people have honor* (p. 119). The author found that these definitions fit Geertz's concepts of "experience near" knowledge for shameful acts and "experience distant" knowledge for the honor of persons.<sup>9</sup>

To me, this seems like excess theoretical baggage, for it seems clear that such pragmatism about the 'shameful' act of public dancing allows the lower classes to regard their neighbors (the dancers) as working women like any others. On the "experience distant" scale, van Nieuwkerk's informants agree that "although entertainment is not generally viewed as dishonorable, it is a dishonorable profession for women" (p. 139).

### Dancers and Gender

In the last two chapters, van Nieuwkerk gets to the point that many of her readers have expected all along, i.e. the condemned female dancer is merely a special case of the broadly condemned female gender in an overtly misogynous culture. The shameful elements of dancing are considered to be shameful acts for any woman anywhere. The shameful elements of dancing include freedom of mobility away from home, familiarity with non-kin males, revealing the body in public and inspiring erotic thoughts in men's minds.

In addition, dancers are exposed to types of sin (consumption of alcohol and drugs, prostitution and fornication) that are forbidden to *both* genders in this society. These are familiar themes from many works on Middle Eastern women (see Mernissi 1975; Sabbah 1984, and Saadawi 1980).<sup>10</sup> Adding the threat of real injury to the latent attitudinal insults are police inspectors, thieves, fundamental-

ist hecklers and kidnapers. "How then", the reader may ask, "do these women cope with such hostile working conditions?"

Many of them try to behave "as a man among men" exhibiting personalities that are strong and fierce (p. 177). "They can be coarse, tough and rude, occasionally beating someone up and cursing" (p. 184). This denial of what is considered to be typical feminine characteristics offers protection in two ways: 1. the pretense makes them feel and appear too tough for thieves and kidnapers to molest and 2. the *persona* also reduces, neutralizes and re-defines their sexuality (their stock in trade) and the "shame" of their occupation.

How ironic it is that in order to continue in an occupation that displays and celebrates female sexuality through dancing, the dancers find it easier to adopt a masculine professional *persona*! According to van Nieuwkerk, this manipulation of gender roles indicates that Egyptian dancers are challenging the "ideological construction of the female body as sexual, seductive, shameful and one-dimensional." I think the evidence van Nieuwkerk provides calls for further research into this aspect of gender roles.

### Conclusion

This book offers no revolutionizing theoretical breakthroughs within the anthropological study of human movement in general or of dances in particular, which isn't a shortcoming of the work because it was never intended as such. On the other hand, van Nieuwkerk has successfully and completely achieved what she intended. She set out to examine a stigmatized occupational sub-group within the context of Egyptian gender ideology and conservative religious codes. There is no doubt that she raises some provocative issues about the study of dances and dancers that will mark the book as a significant, very important work for future contrast and comparison.

These issues include, 1. the effects of colonialism and colonial regimes upon indigenous art forms; 2. the effects of nationalism and government sponsorship on performers and performance in newly independent countries, and 3. how class formation in the developing world shapes public attitudes about performance and divides it into 'high' and 'low' art forms.

I congratulate van Nieuwkerk on a very fine work. Her book is an invaluable contribution to the study of Middle Eastern dancing and it is an intriguing case study of class and gender ideology.

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### Notes

<sup>1</sup> See my review of this same book in *Dance Research Journal* 28(2): 77-80, Fall, 1996.

<sup>2</sup> We retain the spelling of 'Muhammad Ali' used by the author.

<sup>3</sup> See Franken (1991) for a discussion of the Islamic cultural codes to which I refer.

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<sup>4</sup> These are 1. theatrical dancing - the most poorly paid and highest status group; 2. the Muhammad Ali Street dancer-singers, and 3. nightclub belly-dancers, the highest paid, but lowest status 'circuit' of the three.

<sup>5</sup> The combined form 'singers/dancers' is used because in the past most women entertainers were trained to do both. To some extent, van Nieuwkerk's study group were trained this way.

<sup>6</sup> There is currently a book in preparation about this, i.e. *Revolutionary Images: Farida Fahmy and the Reda Troupe of Egypt* by Marjorie Franken. There is important information about this group available in Franken (1996: 267-286) [The Editors].

<sup>7</sup> See van Nieuwkerk's Appendix, 'Methodological Notes', pp. 187-192.

<sup>8</sup> See Wikan (1980 and 1984).

<sup>9</sup> See Geertz (1983).

<sup>10</sup> Lest anyone misconstrue my remarks on Egyptian society, I do not mean to imply that it is any more misogynous than Western cultures. In my opinion, the difference is that Egyptian society is *overtly* misogynous. Western societies are *covertly* so, but to no greater or lesser degree.

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