

Social Dance in Egypt
Elizabeth Hopkins
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Firstly, I wish to thank The Lisa Ullmann Travelling Scholarship Fund for giving me this opportunity. I felt that the trip was highly successful, and I was able to come to some conclusions about social dance in Egypt. I was also so inspired whilst in Egypt that I completed two choreographies, which I will teach to my groups in the autumn.

I am also grateful for the psychological boost and encouragement. Egyptian dance is so often considered little more than a joke. So many people think it takes no skill or technique. The interest and support of The Lisa Ullmann Travelling Scholarship Fund helps to raise the profile of this beautiful, graceful and ancient dance. Thank-you!

The purpose of this visit was to consolidate my research into a coherent work/s. I wanted to witness social dance and customs and to find out what Egyptians think about dance and its place in Egyptian culture. As a dancer/choreographer/teacher in the UK, I believe that it is important to understand social dance in Egypt in order to understand professional dance. The roots of professional dance are firmly grounded in social dance. Social dance is the heart and soul of Egyptian dance. This is why, over the past few years I have been increasingly drawn to ordinary women to learn from them - leaving aside the tricky technique of the professionals which can often be so superficial. Most studies concentrate on professional dance, however I have experienced a wide variety of dance and seen exceptional dancing among women in their own homes and for their own entertainment. As society rapidly changes, I hope to record a little of this neglected area of dance, before things move on again.

The project focused on the wedding I attended and conversations with Egyptians. This was an amazing opportunity to observe and dance with ordinary women who rarely dance outside of the home. Dance was a central part of the celebrations, and the discussions I had answered many of my questions.

I intend to submit this project to MOSAIC. I have two further articles in progress as a result of my travels and discussions. I danced for a women's group the day after my return to the UK. The confidence the travel experience gives cannot be measured. I know that my dancing is more assured and I can talk and teach with authority because of this research opportunity. I will help promote The Lisa Ullmann Travelling Scholarship Fund whenever I can, to encourage others in dance.

Social Dance in Cairo; June 2004 by Elizabeth Hopkins.

1. The Wedding Party

The Wedding Party in Cairo requires stamina! This is not a one day event and can last for six days. Today, it is Thursday, day six of the wedding celebrations and this evening is the evening of the family party. I have also been invited.

I make my way towards the famous tower of Cairo, "El Borg", on the Nile Island of Gezira. It glows prettily in the night sky. The wedding party is being held in a building close by. I have arrived early, and am invited to sit with some of the groom's family. I am looked after very well by Hoda and her beautiful twelve year old daughter, Donya. Their dark eyes are sparkling, warm and friendly.

We are sitting in a huge room, the size of a gymnasium. The walls are hung with many metres of the cheerful red, yellow and blue abstract "applique" prints from the Tentmakers bazaar at Babzuweila. The room gradually fills with guests who sit at large round tables. The musicians and disco arrive, and set up at the end of the hall, beside the little raised platform where the bride and groom will sit on gilded thrones.

By the time three or four hundred people have arrived, the party has really got going and I hear excited cries of "aroussa-aroussa...!". The bride and groom arrive with zagareet and blessings. The bride and groom walk slowly, the focus of the zaffa or wedding procession, surrounded by family. Young women carry the slender, long wedding candles. Men play up-beat rhythms on drums and the distinctive sound of the mizmar welcomes the special couple. The groom's uncle, a senior relative in this family, walks in front of the bride and groom, at the head of the zaffa. He holds his arms above his head and makes finger snaps - that snapping of the fingers, depicted in Pharonic wall-paintings. A senior female relative dances in front of him, her arms lifted in the Middle-Eastern way. The musicians play lively sa'idi and boys dance with walking sticks. The writer Salwa Bakr describes a wedding in her book "The Wives of Men and Other Stories"; "The wedding ceremony was jam-packed - perhaps this city had never seen the like before. It is enough to say that the celebrations continued uninterrupted for forty days.....her father....being well-off, he sold a lot of his possessions for the sake of this marriage. Thus he spent, for the occasion, on the dancers, drummers and pipers and the providers of flowers and aromatic plants approximately the price of a house. Bells were rung.... while fire-eaters and jugglers, and men performing shadow plays, and clowns, preceded them, as was the custom with the people of old times, until she entered her husband's house...."

I was delighted to see that the zaffa of modern day Cairo, upholds the traditions of "old times"! The modern day procession guides the bride and groom through the excited crowd to the platform where they are seated on the thrones. Family photographs are taken and everyone has a chance to admire the couple. The many days of the wedding celebrations reflects the importance of presenting the couple to the community. The bride and groom are dressed in fine clothing. The elaborate white wedding dress is covered with lace and decorated with embroidery and beadwork. The bride's hair has been hennaed deep red and her heavy make-up is exquisite. She looks like a movie star. The bride and groom make a fine couple and look happy although rather phased out by the occasion and when I remember that this celebration has been going on for six days, I am not surprised!

The bride and groom dance together briefly, holding each other's lifted hands. The family circle around them, clapping and happy. The musicians play on, and people dance. The dancing is informal. Men dance with men, women with women or in small family groups near to where their family are seated. Young girls dance standing on the tables, turning their hands and twitching their hips in time with the music. The entire room is a pulsating, lively, joyous throng.

2. Dancing at The Wedding Party

At the Wedding party, after admiring the newly weds, music and dance are the main focus. There was plenty of time and opportunity to watch the dancing among the women guests, and of course I was invited to join in! As I was the only Westerner among the 400 or so guests at the wedding party, I decided to follow closely the lead of the women I was seated with. If they danced, I danced too, if they sat, I sat! I noticed how Hoda kept respectful watch towards the wishes of her husband.

In the crowd of people, there was very little space for dancing. There was no room for big movements, expansive arms or travelling steps. We danced on the spot with small movements and held our arms close to our bodies. It was easy to see how the contained urban style of dance called Balady was developed in the city where there was less space to dance. The movements are repetitive, small and internalised. The style is supple, and is centred around the spine which seems to be constantly moving, the movements beginning from the spine and returning, ebbing and flowing.

The most senior female relative, Sakina, the mother of the groom, wore loose flowing black garments with her hair wrapped in lengths of black cotton. Her only adornment, her gold jewellery of necklace and large hoop earrings, were striking against the black. Sakina is a large woman. Her size and the striking simplicity of her clothing gave her a majestic strength as she danced, proud and joyful. This was the wedding of her fourth son, and her youngest child. Sakina was the matriach of a large and strong family. There was no doubting her status as she danced.

Most of the married women are big, rounded by pregnancy and a good life. Dieting does not usually feature in Egyptian lifestyle! The women dance with grounded movements which look totally at ease with their bodies. The movements flow into each other, myas and little hip-lifts and pushes. The dancing is relaxed, repetitive and fun. Nadia dances with more of an edge to her movements. Her percussive movements are sharp and clearly defined. She dances very well. I watch her balancing a small glass bottle on her head as she dances. When she is thirsty, and to amuse the crowd around her, she takes a swig from the bottle, then replaces it on her head to continue dancing. I am so impressed! I am able to dance balancing a stick on my head, but a bottle is a much more difficult shape to keep stable!

There is a fuss at the back of the hall as two women arrive. They are wearing bright satin dresses with chiffon sleeves. One of the women is in yellow and the other in blue. They make a striking pair and stand out like spotlights in the crowd. Their make-up is heavy and their dark glossy hair tumbles in loose curls onto their shoulders. They make a slow procession, towards the front, stopping to greet people. They are guided towards the bride and groom, and led onto the platform to dance in front of the couple. I wonder if they are paid dancers as they are dressed so differently to everyone else in their bright eye-catching satin dresses and uncovered hair, but I am told that they are relatives.

I notice another striking dancer among the guests. She is a young woman, perhaps still in her teens, and she is wearing western jeans and a close-fitting white tee-shirt. Her hair is covered with a long, white headscarf, which prettily frames her lovely face. This creates an unusual contrast of tight western clothing and headscarf! She is very slender and her dancing movements are small. Her shimmies are delightful and delicate, and she is pulled onto the platform to dance. Little girls in frilly party frocks dance standing on the tables, turning their hands and shaking their shoulders. Women wanted to show me their moves, and encouraged me to share mine. There was always a sense of fun and togetherness, the party creating, encouraging and emphasising a strong social bonding.

3. Tea with Ali

The next day, I took a favourite walk across El-Tahrir Bridge, dodging across the crazy lines of traffic, and stopping for a short chat with the street salesmen at their regular spots, past the leafy grounds of Cairo Opera and Gezira Island Sports Club, turning right at Sheraton and towards Helal's small papyrus gallery. I wanted to find out more about the wedding. Helal was not there, so I went for tea with Helal's cousin, Ali.

Ali was very happy to talk to me about the wedding, life and the universe, while trying to persuade me that what I "really" needed, was to have an affair with him! If not an affair then maybe a small kiss? He will settle for a tee-shirt!

Ali: "Everyone likes dance."

Me: "But dancing is not always allowed. Why is this?"

Ali: "In front of the family it's ok, but not in front of anyone."

Me: "What makes a good dancer?"

Ali: "A good figure - boobs and stomach!"

Predictable Ali! He is laughing at his answer. It was obvious, and I walked straight into that! It is true that to become a top professional in Cairo, there are expectations about a "good figure", although what constitutes a "good figure" is not part of this study! Ali told me that the two dancers in the yellow and blue dresses were "too fat" to be professional. Actually, they were delightfully curvaceous, and this dance looks magnificent on women of their build.

Ali thought further about my question - "What makes a good dancer?", and continued "But seriously, a dancer who does not show everything and who does not dress in very little so that you can see everything. In her way of dancing, she must not look "easy"." "

Ali then referred to the reputation which seems to follow most professional dancers in The Middle East, and which reflects general attitudes and their lowly status in society. Dancing as a profession is open to very few Egyptian women, and a woman who takes up dancing is either from a family of dancers, or is viewed as a "fallen woman". It is true that some dancers are also prostitutes and dancing can be their way of advertising their other attributes, but this is not true of all dancers, most of whom are appalled by this connection. "

Ali: "Some dancers have become very wealthy, and they wear expensive clothes, but they are cheap. Many dancers are very rich. How? Just from dancing?"

Because of these attitudes towards dance, I was surprised to see so many ordinary women, women who are not dancers, dancing at the wedding celebration, publicly, in such a large mixed gathering. "

Me: "Last night, at the wedding party, many people were dancing - men and women together. I was surprised as I did not expect everyone to dance together."

Ali: "We are a big family! Men dance with men and women dance with women or with family. It's ok. Everyone there is the same family!"

So, the entire roomful of people were all "family", a whole village of one extended family. And although women could dance among their relatives, there were still unspoken "rules" to keep. For example, Hoda was watchful towards her husband, and only danced briefly, and with his permission. The younger women and girls had more freedom - and the occasion would be a good opportunity for young men and their relatives to be keeping an eye out for a suitable bride!

4. Dancing with Esme

I decided that I should speak with Esme to ask her about attitudes to dance. Esme helps Helal and Ali in the papyrus gallery. Esme and I have danced together. We hid at the back of the papyrus gallery, out of view. Esme is a very good dancer, fluid and mobile and she dances with fun and humour. She uses some of the movements made famous by the top professionals.

Me: "You are a very good dancer. Did you learn at home from your mother?"

Esme laughing: "No! My mother dances like this...." She holds up her arms in the Middle Eastern manner and twitches her shoulders. She is still laughing.

"I learnt by watching films" she goes on to explain.

Me: "Who is your favourite dancer?"

Esme: "Suhair Zaki."

Me: "Who else have you learnt from?"

Esme: "Samia Gamal, Dina, Fifi. I like Fifi - she is strong.....Now I also look on the computer."

Me: "What makes a good dancer?"

Helal: "The Tabla (drum). The dancer must hear the rhythm."

Esme: "But someone who hears the music may not be able to dance. She must like the music and her body will be able to respond. This is called 'tawayzun'. Her ear needs to be sensitive to the music and her body will help to translate the music. Her body needs to be flexible, not fat or thin and she needs to make actions with simple movement.

Her face should be nice and open. She needs to make eye contact and see the reaction in the faces of those who watch her dance. This will encourage her to dance well and give her confidence. She also needs to be clever, and change with the fashion, keep up-to-date, and look to the future."

Me: "Professional dancers are not always respected. Why is this?"

Esme: "In Egyptian culture, our religion asks us to dress modestly. Professional dancers wear clothing which attracts attention and is not modest. Some people see professional dancing as an art form and that this is up to the individual. But others see dancing as disrespectful."

Me: "I notice that at weddings, women often dance and this is ok?"

Esme: "Women dance to show happiness. This is for fun and not for money. They are wearing their usual clothes. The bride's mother, aunts, sisters and friends may dance. This is to show joy, an expression of happiness."

Me: "I have been to weddings when the women did not dance. And some weddings are totally segregated."

Esme: "This depends on the wishes of the family."

Me: "It must be difficult to become a dancer. Who becomes a professional dancer?"

Esme: "Some dancers learn as children and come from families of dancers and musicians. Some are from very poor families. Fifi Abdou came from a very poor family. As a child, she danced at wedding parties and eventually became the best and richest dancer in Egypt. Fifi had a poor education and is illiterate, however her daughter is well educated and is an engineer. Fifi always said that she would support her daughter whatever choice of career she wanted.... Samia Gamal came from Upper Egypt where people have special customs and are very strict. In Upper Egypt it is very shameful for a girl or woman even to make eye-contact with a man who is not from her family. Family ties are very strong. Samia had to leave her family to become a dancer, and because of this, she was disgraced. She had very little money and took many jobs to pay for dance classes, including ballet lessons, because she did not learn to dance as a child."

Esme could never become a professional dancer as dancing would not be considered acceptable for her. Esme is hoping to be married soon, and would like to work part-time as a teacher. I'm sure that even this would be considered very progressive and may cause some problems. Men in the family are expected to provide and roles are clearly defined. A man's status is connected to his ability to provide. For some people, a woman who works reflects badly on her husband. Codes of expected behaviour apply as rigorously to men as to women. How you and your relatives are viewed in the community is crucial to your acceptance and status. Respect and status in the community is everything - hence the importance of being aware of and respecting the traditions and taboos regarding women dancing in public, both socially and professionally.

