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YEMENITE DANCES AND THEIR INFLUENCE ON THE NEW ISRAELI FOLK DANCES

by

GURIT KADMAN (Tel-Aviv)

With music and dance illustrations

ISRAEL has just celebrated its third national folk dance festival at Dalia, a tiny collective settlement in the Hills of Ephraim near Haifa. Over 600 folk dancers from all over the country gathered for three days, bringing their tents and food with them, and erected the "dance village" on an empty field near Dalia. They danced, learned, studied, discussed, rehearsed together; two coloured films and many photographs were made by the national folk dance committee; a jury picked out the best dances for the public performance. The last evening brought a huge crowd from all over the country, estimated at 60,000, to the large natural amphitheatre. The enthusiastic response of the whole country to our young folk dance movement indicates beyond doubt that we are a dance-loving nation. We always have been.

In the Bible and Talmud many dance events are mentioned, and we find over thirty different expressions for dance movements. No doubt we have had a rich dance tradition, but alas! it was lost in the tragic course of our nation's dispersal. Our unique historic fate brought about that our nation, with one of the most ancient traditions in the world, has been deprived of the continuity of folk tradition. Now, with the re-establishment of the State, the process of dispersal has been reversed, and its greatest achievement, the Ingathering of the Exiles, brings a steady, numerically overwhelming influx of diverse communities with different backgrounds, cultural heritage and folk traditions of many lands. The population has doubled in three years. Impossible to tell what will be the outcome of this—again—unique process. Will it remain a conglomerate of different varying elements, irreconcilable—or shall we bring about the miracle, the synthesis, the rise of a new unified Jewish culture? We have precious elements among those returning exiles, and human and cultural treasures are streaming into our tiny country.

The Yemenites are one of our most gifted communities in many respects, and especially in all kinds of folk arts. Their ingathering was completed in 1950 with the so-called operation "Magic Carpet," which brought the remaining 50,000 of them by planes straight from a medieval feudal theocratic land to our modern democratic country. Yemen is the south-western part of the peninsula of Arabia, near Aden, at the juncture of the Red Sea and the Arabian Sea. In biblical times this was approximately the place of Saba, known by the Queen of Saba. The Yemenite Jews are the oldest Jewish community in the world. Living on the same spot longer than any other community, their intense religious life and their poor social status have hardly changed in the course of centuries; small wonder, since the majority Moslem population of Yemen are living unto this day under a severe theocratic rule. The Yemenite Jews themselves trace their settlement in Yemen back to the time before the destruction of the First Temple (587 B.C.), when their forefathers emigrated from Palestine, following the advice of Jeremias to save their souls. But we have sure knowledge about a Jewish community in Yemen not much earlier than 500 A.D. At that time the Himjarite king and his family took the Jewish faith and the Jews were held in high esteem because of their spiritual qualities and as mighty warriors.

But with Mahomet and the spreading of Islam their situation deteriorated, and ever since they lived under greatest oppression, even as bondsmen. The fanatical Islamic sects which are abundant in Yemen, contrary to the traditional religious tolerance of Islam, indulged in persecutions of the Jews. They were kept as personal property of the Imam, or of some Shah or Emir, living under the poorest conditions and toiling heavily. But never has their spirit been broken. Isolated as they were, they always managed to remain in contact with the spiritual and religious development of the Jewish people and to keep their cultural heritage alive. They never lost their human dignity and their ardent faith in God and in their final redemption and return to Zion. And when fulfilment came, they found it quite natural; they had always believed and waited; now they were taken "on eagles' wings" to Zion, their land.

Yemenites had been coming to Zion, in smaller numbers, long before the "Magic Carpet," actually since before 1900. They were good workers, skilful artisans, unassuming and modest, amiable and cheerful. They kept to themselves, did not intermingle very much with the European-born Jews; their social status was mostly low and poor. But slowly, steadily and unobtrusively their outstanding talents made themselves felt and started to influence our cultural life. It started with arts and crafts; their ancient traditional patterns of fine silver jewellery and beautiful embroidery conquered the hearts of the population. Then we discovered their astonishing talents in the field of motion, song and dramatic expression; we admired them, but we did not see how to make use of them, how to integrate their outstanding abilities in our developing cultural life. The time was not yet ripe for it.

Last year, when they came in their thousands with the "Magic Carpet," their economic integration went more smoothly than that of the other returning exiles; they were accustomed to every kind of work. So they are gladly building up their agricultural workers' villages; they settle down as craftsmen, diligently, humbly and contentedly; productive, positive forces wherever they are.

In 1944, with the first folk dance festival at Dalia, there started an ardent development in the field of folk dancing and singing, a fostering of indigenous dance-forms of all kinds. As our traditional sources turned out to be very scarce—no biblical ones left, Chassidic dances too ecstatically religious, Yemenite ones too oriental (as we then thought)—we had to create our own expression, our own new folk dances. And so they sprang up, out of necessity, out of the work on the soil, out of the joy of the harvest festivals and the shepherds' gatherings, an expression of the new life of a reborn nation in its ancient land. But new as they are, our dances have roots. The earlier ones were mostly influenced by European dance-forms, by the lands we had lived in. Soon we started searching for forms and patterns of our own, traditional and indigenous ones. Naturally, we turned to our richest source: the Yemenites. We felt we could not just "take over" and imitate them, but some of their basic elements gained an ever increasing influence on our developing dances and songs.

Let me explain the character and trends of the traditional Yemenite dance. First of all: it has a vital function in their lives, far beyond mere entertainment; it is, especially for the men, basically a religious function, even when executed on worldly occasions. This may be proved by the fact that every dance-song for men starts with a religious preamble, sung without drum; with an evocation to God—probably out of fear of evil spirits which have to be banished. The occasions for dancing are numerous. There are religious festivals like Passover and the Feast of Tabernacles, especially the week of half-holy days between the starting and closing

day, when even the poorest Yemenites do not work, but consider it their religious duty to celebrate every day. The greatest religious day for dancing is the "Rejoicing of the Law" at the end of the Feast of Tabernacles, when all the men dance in the Synagogue, with the Scrolls in their arms, for hours and hours, circling round the altar. There is the eve at the end of the Sabbath set aside for dancing. No Yemenite would dance at daytime on the Sabbath, which is devoted to rest and contemplation, prayer and concentration. There are family celebrations such as weddings and circumcision, which are festive events for the whole community. A wedding is celebrated during a whole week and dancing goes on every evening until after midnight.

The sexes are always separated in these celebrations, even relegated to different houses. The setting is oriental: all the guests sitting on mats on the floor around the place at the walls, refreshments and *narghilee* (waterpipes) are offered and enjoyed, music and dances start and go on for hours, and the festive meal closes the celebration. The musical accompaniment is somewhat different for the men and for the women. The men keep more to the traditional ancient Hebrew cantilations or to half-religious, half-national songs of their outstanding poets full of the praise of God or the yearning for redemption in Zion. These are sung mostly by two alternating voices and only sometimes accompanied by drums. Women's dances are accompanied by drums and sometimes by small cymbals, the drums being often just gasoline tins or tin plates. They do not use other instruments.

The men's dances are far more interesting, varied, creative, temperamental and, at the same time, more tradition-bound than those of the women. The women have been analphabets and have no active share in the religious life; their dance songs have not necessarily to be traditional and religious ones, they may even have picked up some traits in dance and song from the Moslem neighbours in the village, and thus their dance-forms are less authentic and more influenced from outside, their songs more worldly and reflecting more sides of daily life; they have love songs, work songs, cradle songs, etc. Their dances are graceful, quiet and restrained, without exciting crescendos and climaxes. At a wedding generally after some time they break off their own dances and go over to the men's quarters, watching, from outside, their spirited dances. All ages, except children, take part in the dances. The best Yemenite dancers I have seen were 70 years old and more.

The general character of their dances is, naturally, what we call oriental, being somewhat of a link between Mediterranean and Indian dance style. Their dances are mostly restrained, in contrast—as they themselves point out—to their Moslem neighbours in Yemen, who dance far more wildly. The basic movement is a vibration in the ankle and knee joints. They do not have a great variety of basic steps. Their movements are very light and supple. So are the hand movements, which are extremely expressive, but far from the elaborate systematic gesture-language of the Far Eastern dances. They have many different styles of joining hands for couples and trios dancing together. Movements and group formations differ according to the various districts in Yemen, the most widespread form being the couple—of two men or of two women. But they dance also in trios and in larger groups, in loose lines and circles which form themselves in the course of the dance and are broken up again into smaller units. Special trends in their dances, according to special occasions or outstandingly talented dancers, are to be found in the direction of ecstatic religious expression or of acrobatics and a sort of shuttlers' dances or convulsion dances. Acrobatic features are well liked (e.g. the dancer in straddle position bends down, catches with the mouth a small glass of cognac and drinks it without spilling a drop

and without using the hands; or he jumps up and grasps his partner's hips with his legs, then bends down backwards as he goes on dancing, with his burden). Convulsion dances sometimes reach exciting climaxes; they are entirely individual inventions and improvisations of one soloist or a couple. Most dancers are serious, but occasionally you may see exceedingly humorous little pantomimes, improvised by one or two specially gifted joker-dancers. Thus, in the framework of traditional rules, there are ample possibilities for individual and creative deviations and variations. There is no fixed choreography (except a certain form of alternating encircling in threes), no fixed figures and floor patterns as the space used for the dance is very confined; no rules for timing, duration, structure of the dance. As typically oriental dancers, they need a long time for "warming up," getting into a trance and coming to a climax of excitement. Then follows a restful period of quietly vibrating walking-steps, again rising to another climax. You can start, but not stop them, if they are really excited.

The pioneer character of the new generation in Israel found, until recently, its expression in European-influenced dances only, and among them some of the simplest, most vigorous and animated prevailed in the beginning like the *Hora* of Roumanian origin, the *Krakoviak*, considerably simplified, *Tscherkassia*, etc. Then, with our rising selfconsciousness as a nation, we started creating our own new dances, but still the European impact prevailed and their mood was vigorous, energetic and somewhat bustling and noisy. But in contrast to all these more occidental trends the oriental influence made itself felt: the quietness in the contours of the landscape, the vibrating monotony in the endless *Debkahs* of our Arab neighbours, and, finally, the rich and elaborate world of motions of our long lost brothers, the Yemenites.

Our national folk dances will probably forever reflect these different trends and roots, since our land is situated on the crossroads between Orient and Occident, and since our nation in the twenty centuries of its dispersal, has drunk from so many sources. But they will have, nevertheless, a style and flavour of their own, they will be the expression of our nation and—we hope—an enrichment in the family of folk dances of the world.

LES FORMES POLYPHONIQUES DANS LA MUSIQUE POPULAIRE DE BOSNIE ET D'HERZEGOVINE *

par

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Avec illustrations musicales

Le problème de la polyphonie dans notre musique populaire avait perdu de son intérêt depuis qu'un grand nombre de nos musicologues s'étaient rangés à l'opinion de Monsieur Guido Adler qui prétendait que dans la musique populaire il ne s'agissait pas de polyphonie mais d'hétérophonie. D'après la définition qu'il en a donnée dans l'article: "Ueber Heterophonie" (*Jahrbuch der Musikbibliothek*, Peters, 1908, p. 17 et s.) les caractères essentiels de l'hétérophonie seraient les suivants: (1) les voix commencent toujours à l'unisson et terminent à l'unisson ou bien dans un

* This paper was read in Serbo-Croat.