

JUST AN ECHO ?

by Shalom Staub

An aspect of Yemenite culture which has received little attention over the years is the traditional dance of the women.*) In Israel, the trend has been to utilize various ethnic traditions in the creation of new Israeli folk dances. These folk forms were also brought to the public eye through staged performances. This kind of relationship between the traditional folk culture and modern Israeli culture implies that compatible elements from the folk cultures are lifted out of their contexts and placed into these new ones of choreographed folk dances and staged festivals; upon close inspection this is indeed the case.

In general, it can be said that Yemenites have contributed much in this regard, and for this reason they are well-known, but I must point out that the traditional dance of the elders, and of the elder women in particular, have not been popularized, and consequently are little known. The elders themselves have not entered the mainstream of Israeli life, and likewise, their dances are not compatible with the necessary requisites for popularizations. The women's dances, for instance, are slow, modest, delicate, repetitive, and rarely move out of an imaginary 2 square meter floor space.

Years ago, the women's dances were dismissed as an undeveloped echo of the men's dance. It is true that the men's movements are larger, but size is not the only factor to consider. The women's dance must not be examined according to the criteria of the men's dance, simply because the women have their own criteria for evaluation. Considering that the men and women in Yemen virtually lived in two separate cultures, the fact that there is some overlap in the movement repertoire must inspire intriguing speculation as to the origins of these forms.

*) This article is based on anthropological fieldwork carried out between June, 1975 and July, 1976. It is focused on the Israeli Yemenite farming community of Moshav Midrach Oz. My work followed a dual approach: field research including on-location residence and extensive interviewing, and formal tools of analysis - films, dance notation, and sound recordings. These Yemenites of

One begins to see the cultural differences between the men and women in examining the musical accompaniment to their dances. Men's dance songs are a form of religious poetry, collected in the book called the *Diwan*. Recurring themes of this poetry are the love between God and Israel, and the longing for Zion. These clearly reflect the men's preoccupation with the study of Torah and other religious pursuits. The women, on the other hand, sing songs in the vernacular Yemenite-Arabic (as opposed to the Holy Language - Hebrew, which is what the men use). The women were illiterate, and their songs were never written down. They sing about everyday events, about love and jealousy, and in praise of bride or mother. A good woman singer can improvise these rhymed verses while she is actually singing.

A clear example of this quality occurred at a village wedding in July, 1976 at the time of the Israeli Army's "Entebbe Raid" operation. Among the soldiers who participated was one from this village. On the afternoon of his return, when he passed by the wedding party, the woman who was singing interpolated into her song praising the bride one verse thanking God for the soldier's safe return.

The male dancer does not need to sing at all; there are two other men whose sole task is to provide the rhythm and the words. The words may never be varied, but a good singer will switch melodies and rhythms a number of times during the same song. At the same time, the dancer improvises his dance within the limits of the accepted movement vocabulary. In contrast, the woman who plays the drums does not vary her melody or rhythm for the duration of the entire song. I have witnessed a woman drummer continuing the same melody and rhythm for as long as half an hour;

Midrach Oz come from a small concentration of villages south and south-east of San'a, Yemen's capital. Regional differences are plentiful, as well as differences between the cities and the surrounding villages. My remarks in this article are limited to these villages around San'a. (See "ISRAEL DANCE '75").

this is not unusual. For as long as the singer continues this way, the dancer will continue with the same movement phrases.

The women dancers are themselves the singers, and as mentioned earlier, they constantly improvise on the words. Certain women are considered to be good dancers precisely because they know to sing words that everyone will enjoy. Conversely, a woman who cannot sing while she dances is not considered a competent dancer. These factors illustrate the different criteria by which men's and women's dancing must be judged: the men's melodies, rhythms, and movements constantly change, while the song text is fixed and permanent; the women have fixed melodies, rhythms, and movements, while it is their song texts which constantly change and provide the variation in the dance.

The women's songs and dances are antiphonally structured; there is always some element of interplay between the two sets of singers or dancers. The elder women rarely dance with more than one or two others in a line; they stand so close that their shoulders touch, and they maintain a position directly opposite a similar second line. While executing the individual step, they slowly, almost imperceptibly, rotate the lines in either a clockwise or counter-clockwise direction, depending on which step they are doing.

The women's dances can be divided into two groups: one in which the step does not change while the dancer is singing, and the other in which it does. In the latter case, the dancer dances in place while she is singing, and when the other group of singers takes over, she continues the same step, moving forward and backward. In the song, the singers often elongate the last word of their verse, and the second group of singers join in on that syllable, then continue their own verse. This overlap is also present in the dance, so that the singing group makes its transition into the moving section at the same time the non-singing group resumes its dancing in place.

The women tend to follow a specific order of dances; this is corroborated by observation, though the women themselves cannot offer any explanation for it. They start with **Sir'a**, a dance of the type that changes depending on who

is singing. In this dance, either the right or the left foot can lead; this does not change the size, shape or direction of the movement.

Sir'a is followed by two dances, **Yemaniya** and **Shenya**, both of which are the type that do not change. Additionally, these dances require a stricter adherence to specific steps and directions. To test this I purposely demonstrated a step for the women without crossing my right foot in front of the left; they corrected me - unless the right foot crossed in front of the left, it would not be the same step.

Since the dances take their names from the songs, it is clear that there exists some sequence in the songs that are sung in the course of a celebration. Following the three songs and dances already mentioned, there are others that are done at the desire of the singers or dancers. These include such songs as **Dal'al**, **Beduwiya**, (so called because the song's opening words describe a girl longing to go off with a bedouin) **Lali Lali**, and **Wazayno**. These dances are delicate, with restrained movements and a quiet upper body. An exception is **Abshaliya**, a song and dance which comes from a large town closer to San'a. The song is about a girl named Abshaliya who sang and danced beautifully. The dance reaches its climax when one woman dances with twisting movements in the upper body. Two women support her by her arms, and finally she squats to the floor, still twisting her body from side to side.

To the extent that it was possible, I began to explore the dance of the Arab women of Yemen. Only field-research in Yemen can establish complete documentation; nevertheless, the elder women of the Moshav can still recall and reconstruct the songs and dances of their Arab neighbours. It seems that the Arab women also danced in an antiphonal structure, and that some of their dances are the same as those of the Jewish Yemenite women.

There are a few occasions in which the women of the Moshav do not dance in lines. One is during the **Zafe**, the wedding procession. As they accompany the bride from her house to the location of the celebration, certain women who are holding candles or the special flower arrangement called **Mazhare** may dance to honor the bride. On the evening of the **Hinne** ceremony (in which henna dye is applied

to the bride's hands), one of the women takes the henna and dances with it as the bridal entourage reaches the room. All the women form a large circle around her, and continue to dance in this formation.

The circle formation appears again when the women arrive at the groom's house in their procession with the bride after the marriage ceremony has taken place.

It must be understood that many of these dances are only rarely danced today. They are only done by the elder women, those born and raised in Yemen. At a typical **Hinne** they will dance for only 15 minutes. After that, the middle-aged men and women dance together, along with the young people. Occasionally, at a Saturday night wedding party when the old women are in a separate room the women will continue to dance for an hour or more.

This repertoire has not passed on to the middle generation women. In general, their dance is faster and larger, though

some of the same elements of the singing are sometimes present. These middle-aged women are greatly influenced by the men's dance; from the time that they arrived in Israel, they started dancing together with the men. This would have been inconceivable in any traditional context. From the 1950's on the younger women preferred the more enthusiastic, spirited dances of the men over the slow, modest dances of their mothers. Many of these women, who have grown up in Israel, say that they don't care if the old style dies out, because they prefer dancing with the men.

The traditional dance of the women has remained largely unknown and has received far less attention than the men's, and it should be apparent that there is a wealth of material waiting to be investigated.* It is a well-developed tradition in its own right, certainly not an "echo" of anything, and yet it is only now, after 25 years, that it is beginning to be explored.

*) Nevertheless there exist publications on the subject, such as "THE YEMENITE DANCE" published by the Movement Notation

Society and the publications of Idelson, Gerson-Kiwi, Spector, etc. which deal with the Yemenite women's dance.

