

ETHNIC DANCE IN ISRAEL TODAY

By Ruth Ashkenazy

Bet-Yossef — a co-operative village (moshav) in the Bet Shean Valley, 4:00 p.m. Monday. In the "Bet Ha'am" (a building which serves as social and cultural center of the village) the younger generation is learning Kurdish folk dances. A tape recorder plays the tune and a line of dancers forms, at its head Eli, the best dancer of the lot. David Menachem starts the tape and the youngsters stamp around in something reminiscent of the Israeli Hora.

"They are gifted kids", says David, "they dance all the dances I've taught them better than I do. Now I have to teach the infants..." The elementary school kids envy their older brothers, they don't want to be left out.

A man in his forties joins the dancers and fits in perfectly. He is followed by Adina, a girl from America, who has been staying at the moshav for eight months now and knows all there is to know about Kurdish folk dance and its stylistic niceties. I too join the dance. The steps are easy, but I still don't have the style in my blood. That putting down of the foot at a certain angle, the way of stepping while the back is straight and the torso slightly bent forward.

I am trying hard to look and copy exactly what I see. But it's still not right — Eli has a different way of moving. "To know Kurdish dance is not only to memorise the steps," says David, "you have to do it right." But what is "right"? Only long hours of practice while dancing at weddings and other family or community festivities will tell you. And there is no lack of opportunities.

At the first sound of the **zurna** an oboe-like wind instrument, the youngsters form a line and the dance is on.

Lassa the best zurna-player in Israel, arrived at Moshav Bet-Yossef from the south and with him came Djum'a, the drummer with his large, deep-toned **dohola**, a drum which is beaten with sticks from both its sides. Right from their arrival the festivity is on. The musicians move along with the dancers in a semi-circle. When someone is tired he does not leave the line, but just takes it easy to catch his breath while moving along. The musicians, seeing the dancers lagging behind, step up the rhythm and the dance again gathers momentum. Such is Kurdish dance. Perhaps only five or six dances but they go on and on.

The rhythm is vigorous and catching, and everybody wants to learn the dance and join. To join the dance means to belong, to be part of the family, a member of the community.

Some learn at the frequent festivities, weddings, Births, etc.; others ask David Menachem to teach them privately. And you don't have to ask him twice.

When the dance is over we sit down with David and his disciples to talk.

"Well, it is hard to dance to recorded music. So we'll have to teach the younger generation how to play the **zurna** and the **dohola**. And there is the problem of getting new instruments." The oboe one may, perhaps, buy in Turkey or some other country. Or should one attempt to build the instruments here, in Israel? And there is the problem of teachers: will Lassa be able to come each fortnight to give lessons? Without good musicians there will be no Kurdish dance.

Yinnon, a moshav in the southern part of Israel, is mostly populated by immigrants from the Barat region in Yemen. The Barat folk dance is rather different from the "classical" Jewish-Yemenite dance. The people of Yinnon are known in Israel as the experts on the Haidan style of dance, which is typical of the northern part of Yemen. Their dances, traditional garb, tunes and rituals are distinctly different from those of other regions of Yemen.

Yossi Ze'evi celebrates the completion of his new house. The housewarming party is done in pure Yemenite style. "The soup and the chicken have all the right spices in them. The atmosphere is getting warmer, and already two, three people get up to dance. At first there is "Israeli-Yemenite" music from a record-player. As things heat up, the local singers take over and the style changes to the Haidan specialities. Special thimbles made of copper play on the **tashit**, a copper tray. The dancers form lines which face each other. From time to time the lines change direction in right angles, but always parallel to each other.

I join the dance and feel quite at home. I am not of Yemenite extraction, but the Yemenite rhythms and steps have been popular in Israel since the '40s and '50s, and I

am familiar with them.

The line caresses one and dictates the movement, which repeats itself endlessly like waves.

The singer changes the tune and the rhythm. The new dance is the *Mathluta*, a dance for three, in which two form a sort of gate through which the third has to pass. It is a competitive dance, about who will get there first. The steps are light, quick, the body erect.

Foreheads are glistening with sweat. But the eyes are smiling. When the dancers become weary, we sit down for a talk. At Moshav Yinnon there are problems too, though different from those we met at Bet-Yossef. There is no lack of young dancers and musicians.

When the older people got tired, the younger generation took over. But the perennial problem of folkart, tradition versus staging, is an acute one here.

The Yinnon group perform their traditional dances and songs on stage in many places. The stage is governed by laws of its own. One can't present life on stage without staging. The spontaneity is lost when the choreographer takes over and everything is fixed. Amateurs are unable to sustain the feeling of freshness when asked to repeat the performance again and again. The dancers of Yinnon are frustrated by the demands of the stage. How to convey the right feeling of festivity while performing on stage? How to stage a wedding or another ceremony without destroying the authenticity?

We are a nation gathered together from all parts of the world. We have to make sure that each tribe and ethnic group will be aware of its tradition. But not only that, one has also to know the folklore treasures of the other ethnic groups, to enrich the cultural fabric of the state as a whole. So there has to be exchange and mutual recognition, therefore one has to face the problem of staging folklore.

A really hot hamssin evening in the town of Dimona. The two tiny rooms in the cellar of an apartment building are stiflingly hot and humid. There is a concrete column in the middle of one of the rooms. How on earth can one dance under these circumstances? But Yehezkiel Samson, a Jew from India makes the impossible possible.

"We don't have any other place." As simple as that.

The cellar is right in the middle of a neighbourhood in which many immigrants from Bombay live. They white-washed the cellar and decorated it. On the walls there are pictures of dancers and musical instruments from different regions of India.

"What instrument is this?" I ask. I am taken to a corner, where the musical instruments are stored, and shown the treasures. Most of these are original pieces from India, but some were built right here, in Dimona. In the other room a lad of seventeen or so practices the ancient instrument with four strings, the *bulbul tara*. His mentor is, of course, Samson. He has a group of eight musicians who accompany the dancers. The musicians also help him in the instruction of the youngsters.

The cellar is also the meeting place of the local drama group. Such love and care have been lavished on these tiny, hot rooms which have become the center of local culture and tradition. My query about how they organise all this activity makes them look up with astonishment. The music, the dance, the drama are all part and parcel of their lives. It seems only natural to them to foster the traditions they inherited from their fathers.

I was invited to Bakka el Garbieh, an Arab village not far from Hadera, to attend the wedding of Nimr Kaddan, the director of the local youth center. Two groups of Debka dancers rehearse here, one for the teenagers and another for those in their twenties. Men only, as tradition dictates.

Here tradition has never stopped. There is a wedding, there is some philanthropic activity, and dancers are needed. The old, the middle-aged, the young all dance. Everybody has donned colourful garb for the wedding, and the dancers are as dressed up like the rest. Here in Bakka el Garbieh, the question of staging has not yet arisen. Life, ceremony, dance are still one.

All the scenes I have described are but examples. Ethnic groups in towns and villages are busy trying to rejuvenate the traditions of their communities.

The interest in folk tradition is a fairly new phenomenon. In the '50s everybody believed in the melting pot theory. The solution to the problems of immigrants seemed to lie in integration and equalisation.

What ever was brought over from "the old country" was to be discarded and replaced by the culture created by immigrants from Europe who came to settle in Israel 50–60 years ago. The great waves of immigration in the years following the creation of the State of Israel created a majority of people born and raised in Asia and Africa. But the older generation among these new immigrants developed an inferiority complex and were regarded as a lost generation, whose traditional values were no longer relevant. This ideology of weaning the younger generation from the ethnic traditions soon brought about the disintegration of the patriarchic family. The old values were discredited without new ones replacing them. The new immigrants themselves accepted the negative evaluation of their culture and discarded the "absolute" forms; even beautiful ceremonial objects were thrown literally into the garbage can.

The sheer practical hardships of getting settled into the patterns of their new existence pushed the problems of culture and the social life of the community into the background. Only when the second and third generations grew up and the physical problems of integration were solved, did the quest for identity become urgent.

In those early years only a few people were aware of the dangers of the melting pot ideology. Among these few was Gurit Kadman, who encouraged the new immigrants to cherish and preserve the traditional dances and record them. Only in private would the old people continue to sing and dance as they had done for generations. Their sons regarded them as primitive and the ceremonies as obsolete and best forgotten as soon as possible.

The grandchildren of the immigrants were the ones who felt the need for an identity. In the '60s, the Oriental communities began to assert themselves and this unrest brought about a revived interest in tradition and inherited folklore. Today there is much talk about cultural and social pluralism.

Thus we are witnessing today a renaissance of ethnic culture. Nowadays members of the Kurdish, Yemenite or North African ethnic communities are not ashamed of their origin. "I'm a Kurd" once a slang expression for "what can I do, I'm just a simpleton" — is now the proud affirmation of Kurds gathering together to celebrate the Saharan-neh festival, which the President of Israel found important enough to attend and address.

In instituting the annual gathering, the Kurds were following the lead of their peers from North Africa, who had begun to celebrate the Mimuna festival each spring.

The Yemenite Jews also found ways to get together and dance and sing their traditional tunes, which were originally a part of intimate family gatherings only.

Israel, encompassing as it does such a rich mixture of traditions, is an ideal place for ethnic research. And indeed there are several institutions whose aim is the preservation and recording of ethnic culture. Among these there is the "Ethnic Dance Project", which is active both in the preservation and teaching and in the recording on film, tape and other means of folklore, together with the Folk Dance Dept. of the Histadrut and the Dept. of Ethnic Studies of the Hebrew University in Jerusalem.

Activities such as the above mentioned festivals are encouraged, frequent visits to dance groups keep the researchers in contact with the propagators of folk dance. Films are shot, texts recorded and published. Instructors of folk dancing are taught the ethnic dances of the different communities. "Let us know the ethnic groups through our feet..."

The basic steps of ethnic dances are simple and the instructors learn them quickly. But modern youth is accustomed to constant change and innovation, while ethnic dance is based on repetition and monotoneity. Therefore there is need for re-education and tolerance. When the dancers learn to enjoy the rhythmic repetition, a new dimension is added to their appreciation.

The success in teaching adults the dances of ethnic communities has paved the way for experiments carried out in schools by the "Center for the Integration of Jewish Tradition in the Schools", a body until now concerned mainly with literature, history, art and handicrafts.

This project is based mainly on the instruction in folk dance (emphasizing Israeli folk dances influenced by or based on ethnic dances) and ethnic dance, lectures and lecture-demonstrations as well as visits to communities and museums.

I have often been asked whether it is at all possible consciously to revive and spread ethnic dance, by artificial

means, apart from the natural process of traditional learning. There seems to be no simple answer. But if we wish to develop folk dancing, we have to base it on ethnic dance.

As early as 1944 Leah Goldberg, the well-known poet, wrote that "authentic folklore is retained only in the tradition of Oriental Jews. There it is connected to real life and the celebration of festivities." She believed that the Yemenite tradition could become the base of Israeli folklore.

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This seems to be the answer. Several dances created on the basis of Yemenite dance have become real popular folk dances, such as "Iti Milevanon", "El Ginat Egoz" or "Debka Rafiah" (based on the Debka tradition). We have to learn all there is in ethnic tradition. This, together with innovation, will create our folk dance. ■



Photo: Vicki Cohen