

BY DAN RONEN

An official survey taken in 1990 revealed that 8% of Israeli's from the age of 14 and older takes part in folk dance meetings which are scheduled at regular times in the evenings and is called in Hebrew "harkadot". All comers are welcomed and may participate in the dancing which is lead by a professional dance instructor, after paying a small fee at the door. In other words: around-about 200 thousand men and women actively take part.

Another survey in the same year analyzed the leisure habits of the Israeli's, functions involving Israeli songs and folk dancing represents about 40% of all the cultural activities offered to the public. The survey also states that this activity is the most prevalent one in the land.

It might strike one as astonishing that the Israeli folk dancing which is now celebrating its 50th birthday, is so popular in the 1990s.

The first Dalia meeting, that took place in the summer of 1944, can be regarded as the birthday of "the folk dance movement" in Israel. It was an expression on the renaissance of the Hebrew culture in Eretz Israel.

Like so many other forms of creativity based on ideology in the era before the establishment of state independence, it was to be expected that the Israeli folk dancing would gradually lose its popularity, but in reality, in recent years its popularity has grown perceptibly, and it has not become like a fossil form, belonging in museums.

When one asks a dancer what attracts him or her to Israeli folk dance, the answer usually is a shrug. Perhaps the query is really irrelevant and the attraction is being felt by the participants as something natural, not demanding any theoretical explanation.

Perhaps more important questions to be asked is, what does the future hold in store for Israeli folk dance and what forms it will take?

Birthdays are not important, but jubilees provides convenient opportunities to pause and take stock. In 1944, during the Second

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FIFTY YEARS 1944 — 1994 OF ISRAELI FOLK DANCE

IMPORTANT EXPRESSION IN THE SEARCH FOR AN ISRAELI STYLE / IDENTITY. A SEARCH FRAUGHT WITH DIFFICULTIES AND COMPLEXITIES

World War, at the Festival of Shavouot, the first gathering of dancers took place at kibbutz Dalia in the Meggido region. The opening session took place inside the kibbutz, in the small open-air theatre between the reading room/music room and library of the kibbutz.

The program consisted of a dance pageant based on the biblical "Story of Ruth". Later that night, 14 dance groups comprizing 200 dancers performed 22 folk dances, of which just 8 were original Israeli ones, the rest were from many other lands. There were about 3,500 spectators.

Today, there exists more than a thousand Israeli folk dances, hundreds of thousands of dancers and about 120 dance companies specializing in staged Israeli folk dancing as well as dozens of companies devoted to ethnic dance traditions, such as Yemenite or Arab folk dance. For the past six years in summer the folk dance festival at Karmiel takes place. More than 3,000 dancers take part actively and perform before about a quarter of a million spectators.

By any definition, folk dances belong to what is generally called folklore. As such, they constitute an expression of a cultural or social ethnic group. And they are transferred from one generation to the next as part of a common heritage.

Folk dance is a reaction of a community to its environment. But also an artistic creation of sorts. A movement language in which the old and the contemporary mingle, and the influence of the scenic beauty of the land, the people's dreams and their way of life is reflected.

In other nations, folk dance evolve mainly from ancient religious ceremonies and social group interactions. It is impossible to separate them from centuries of traditions, historical, social and ethnic backgrounds. These nation's main efforts are that of preserving folk dance traditions and, if necessary, to revive them.

In Israel the situation is radically different, as Israeli folk dance is quite a recent

phenomenon. The creations stem from ideals and ideas.

Characteristics of the Development of Israeli Folk Dance

Just as the rejuvenation of the Hebrew tongue and the development of a Hebrew literature was a conscious effort to create - or rather re-invent - a national culture, the invention of modern folk dancing was a deliberate act.

This act of creation of a quasi folk-art was based on a rather naive belief by its founding fathers and mothers that such a thing is possible and that "a nation which does not possess folk dances, isn't a nation at all". Among the founders and creators were Gurit Kadman (Gert Kaufmann), Lea Bergstein, Ze'ev Chavatzet, Shalom Hermon, Yardena Cohen, Rivka Sturman, Sara Levi-Tanai and many others.

Israeli folk dance was influenced by the romantic nationalistic folklore ideas of the 19th century Europe, which also exerted influence on the Zionist movement. In the early Israeli folk dances there was a tendency to emphasize the return to nature, simple rural life as opposed to the modern hectic city life and the frequent use of symbols gleaned from the Bible.

Israeli folk dance is a naive, perhaps even a subconscious effort to tackle the dilemmas posed by Zionism. To solve the dichotomy of religion and nationhood, tradition versus innovation, the negation of the diaspora and the creation of a "new Jew". It has to do with the will to forge a common national identification, while not obliterating the marked ethnic differences between the traditions and styles of various Jewish communities, such as the Yemenites, the Ashkenazi and the Sephardic.

Israeli folk dance tries to deal with the deep schisms of life in the country, between religious and secular sections of the populace, the rich and the poor and

bridging the generation gap by including everyone in the circle of dancers.

Biblical Influences

Apparently the use of Bible texts was an attempt at creating a common basis for a national - Israeli - identity. To bridge the gap of two thousand years and connect the present to ancient roots, without depending on Jewish religious rites, which developed



in two millenia of diaspora. Biblical lore served as a common ground shared by religious and non-religious Jews alike. And it also emphasized the basic Zionist claim on the ancient Land of Israel. Paradoxically, Arab, Druze as well as Yemenite dances served as models for creating biblical images.

Jewish festive occasions were one of the main reasons for the creation of Israeli folk dances, by commemorating important historical events, celebrating holidays, this was the way of expressing feelings not usually voiced.

Rehearsals and the performances of these festivities provided annual occasions and the feeling that one belongs to a national entity, with which one can identify with.

Israeli folk dances were stylistically influenced by European romantic orientalism, prevalent at the beginning of the 20th century. The travellers who arrived

in the Middle East saw the Beduin and other traditions as something unspoiled and pure. Hence, the influence of oriental music and movement in Israeli folk dance.

Influences of Socialist and Collectivist Ideas

The creation of folk dances was influenced by the ideal of a just, egalitarian society to be established in the country. The ideal figures of the new worker, farmer, "chalutz" (pioneers) served as models for a new, progressive and productive Jew. The wish for good relationships between the Arabs, Druzes and the Jewish settlers served as an additional incentive, by utilizing indigenous motifs in the newly created folk dances.

It surely is by no accident that we have hardly any battle and victory dances. The folk dance movement flourished first of all in the kibbutzim and moshavim, where the new forms of celebrating holidays were developed. The "Histadrut" (trade union federation) and its cultural department were at the helm right from the beginning of Israeli folk dance activities. These socialistic tendencies acted as a counterbalance to nationalistic trends. This

international attitude made the use of folk dances from the Balkans and the Slav countries acceptable. Likewise, Jewish and especially Chassidic dances were also incorporated along with the Arab and Druze Debka.

Today, a period in which the young identify with anything American, Israeli youngsters still dance the dances created by their greatparents fifty years ago, with the ideals of equality and brotherhood in mind. In the age of rock and pop music they still enjoy Chassidic as well as oriental dances, which bridge the gaps dividing the Israeli population.

The Influence of German Expressionism

In Israeli folk dance one may observe traces of influence, theories of free and close-to-nature physical education propagated in Germany at the beginning of the 20th century. Most of the early creators of Israeli