

ELKE KASCHL

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**Dance and  
Authenticity  
in Israel  
and Palestine**

*Performing the Nation*

BRILL

DANCE AND AUTHENTICITY IN ISRAEL AND PALESTINE

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AND PALESTINE

*Performing the Nation*

BY

ELKE KASCHL



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## NOTE ON FORMALIA AND TRANSCRIPTION

A few remarks are in order concerning some basic categories and names used throughout this study as well as my system of transcribing Arabic and Hebrew terms. Before 1948, I refer to the region that today encompasses the state of Israel and the autonomous Palestinian territories as historic Palestine or, depending on the date, as Ottoman or mandatory Palestine. After 1948, I use the terms 'the State of Israel' or 'Israel' as well as the 'West Bank' and the 'occupied territories,' respectively after 1993 the 'autonomous territories' or 'Palestine under the Palestinian Authority,' to refer to geopolitical entities. The terms 'Israeli nation,' respectively 'Palestine' or 'Palestinian nation' are used when referring to nation in the sense of an ideational construct, that is, an imagined community constituted through cultural practices. When used in this context, these terms do not necessarily have geopolitical implications.

Furthermore, the term 'Israeli' is used in a geopolitical sense and refers to all inhabitants of the State of Israel, regardless of ethnic or religious origin. For purposes of specification, I use the terms 'Israeli Jews' and 'Israeli Arabs.' When referring to inhabitants of West Bank and Gaza, I use the term 'Palestinian.' The identification label 'Israeli Arab' is not an unproblematic one, as the term, like any other of the various identification and self-identification labels used for and by Palestinian citizens of the Israeli state, is extremely loaded with political content. For the purposes of this study, I thus employ the term 'Israeli Arab' merely as a means to distinguish between Palestinians living in the Galilee who are also Israeli citizens and Palestinians in West Bank and Gaza who are not. By using this term, I do not imply any statement whatsoever from my side concerning the political identity of Israeli Arabs.

With the artists' permission, I use the real names of the dance groups and their leaders. By using their real names, I want to pay tribute to their artistic achievements and public status. For reasons of personal privacy, however, I am using first names or pseudonyms when referring to individual dancers. I indicate the use of pseudonyms in the text.

I use two transcription systems, one for Standard Arabic when referring to written and one for Palestinian Arabic when referring to oral sources. For terms transcribed in Standard Arabic, I employ a transcription system based on the *International Journal of Middle Eastern Studies* (*IJMES*). My transcription of spoken Palestinian is based on the system developed by Moin Halloun in his teaching material for standard Palestinian dialect (Halloun 1996; Halloun 1997). My transcription of Hebrew follows the system of transcription conventionally used in Israel.

In a Palestinian context, I generally use the dialect version *dabkeh* (*plural dabkāt*) instead of the Standard Arabic transcription *dabkah* (*plural dabakāt*). I transcribe *dabkah/dabakāt* in Standard Arabic only when directly citing from written sources. In a Hebrew context, I transcribe *debkah*, not *davkah*, in accordance with oral pronunciation as well as Israeli folk dance literature written in English.<sup>1</sup>

I do not transcribe proper names that have a commonly used English version. This is the case in particular with *El-Funoun* and *Karmeil Makhol* dancers. For *Al-Asayyel* members, in contrast, I use transcription. Also, I do not transcribe the names of the dance groups, but choose the form that the groups themselves use when writing English. Similarly, I use the accepted English version of place names. For villages and towns inside Israel as well as Jewish settlements inside West Bank and Gaza, I refer to the English spelling as used in the Israeli MAP road atlas (Kartin 1994). For Arabic place names inside West Bank and Gaza I refer to the *Map of Palestine* as published in English by the *Palestinian Central Bureau of Statistics* on the internet.

When citing from field notes and interviews with members of the three dance groups under investigation in this study I identify the speaker in the text. I do not separately indicate the source in a footnote as I do with citations from other oral sources.

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<sup>1</sup> See for example (Bahat-Razon 1978/79; Goren 1986; Eshkol 1974; Hodes 1971).

## STAGE SETTINGS

At the time of writing, it has been almost two years that the second intifada started. Relations between Israelis and Palestinians have once again deteriorated. The Oslo process has been proclaimed dead, Israel has moved back into the autonomous territories and the violence is escalating. Daily, the news are filled with reports of suicide bombings, the suffocating Israeli curfew on once autonomous Palestinian towns and villages, the rising death toll on both sides, unspeakable fear. Just recently, a promising attempt at resuming political negotiations was buried in the scrubble of the building block which the Israeli army left after its deadly operation against Hamas leader Salah Shehadeh on the night of 22 July 2002, an operation which killed 14 Palestinian civilians and left some 150 injured. In response, Hamas launched a new series of attacks and exploded a bomb at Hebrew University, killing 7, wounding 85 and adding fuel to the fire of Israeli retaliation. There seems no end in sight. 'Us' versus 'them' once again rules the rhetoric in the Near East. 'Israeli' and 'Palestinian' have reemerged as two mutually exclusive categories, a dichotomy, where fear and hatred of the 'Other' have turned essential and differences seem unbridgeable.

Yet despite the rhetoric that has come to rule official discourse, the current escalation in Israel and Palestine is not about clashing cultures or civilizations. On the contrary. As this study sets out to show, the seemingly essential difference between Israelis and Palestinians is constructed. And it is constructed through processes that define the exclusivity of Israeli and Palestinian collective identities not through opposition, but through the multiple and complex ways in which these identities are inter-related.

Take *dabkeh/debkah* as an example of the interconnectedness of Israeli and Palestinian identity constructions. *Dabkeh* is an Arab dance event that historically formed part of village festivities throughout the Levant. Its performance is easily distinguished from other kinds of Arab dancing. A line of men moves counter-clockwise in a circle to the melody of a single flute and the rhythm of a drum. Their style of moving is forceful, with leg stomping and jumps characterizing the various step patterns that the leader of the line indicates to the



rest. They move in unison, closely linked to one another, with only the leader every now and then separating from the group to show off his special skill by improvising in their midst.

Zionist leaders in mandatory Palestine in the 1920s and 30s showed themselves to be fascinated by *dabkeh* as performed at Arab weddings and social gatherings. They cherished what they perceived as the simplicity and rootedness of the Arab *dabkeh* as a village dance, the strength inherent in its movements and the ideals of group solidarity expressed through the line of bodies moving as one. Searching for cultural practices that would serve to bestow senses of cohesiveness and belonging on the Jewish national community emerging at the time, the Zionist leaders thus turned to *dabkeh* as a stylistic model for creating their own, new folk dances. The Arab *dabkeh* became an Israeli *debkaha*, a defining element of the newly constituting Israeli folk dance tradition after 1948 and means of national identification for Israeli Jewish citizens in the newly founded state.

The Israeli turning of *dabkeh* into *debkaha* did not go unchallenged. Also in an Arab context, *dabkeh* turned into folk dance and national symbol with the emergence of folklore movements in the surrounding Arab countries and, in particular, among Palestinians in the context of reconstituting their nationalist movement after 1967. No more simply a shared Arab Levantine cultural practice, *dabkeh* now came to be performed as specifically Palestinian.<sup>1</sup> Distinguished by its specific songs, movement patterns and style of dress, *dabkeh* thus turned into a means of establishing and defending an independent Palestinian presence *vis-à-vis* the surrounding Arab states and, in particular, in relation to Israel.

This study zooms in on *dabkeh/debkaha* as a contested cultural essence of both Israeli and Palestinian nationalism. Tracing the ways in which both sides differently staged the same dance form, I show how the performance of Israeli and Palestinian nationalism is not informed by an unbridgeable difference of clashing cultures, as nationalist discourses maintain. Rather, I argue that it is various and complex relationships of unequal power that set the tone for the specific ways of staging the Palestinian *dabkeh*, respectively the Israeli *debkaha* within

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<sup>1</sup> Processes of turning *dabkeh* into a national folklore also occurred in Lebanon, Syria and Jordan. Yet, for the purpose of my study, I solely focus on *dabkeh* in a Palestinian context. For *dabkeh* in other national contexts, see for instance (Dharīl 1992; Traboulsi 1996; Ladkani 2000). For a *dabkeh* line dance in Iraq performed under the name of *al-jūbī* see (al-Sāmarrā'ī 1990).

their different contexts of presentation: It is the ways in which Zionism not only functioned as an emancipatory movement of European Jews, but simultaneously worked to establish new forms of domination between Jewish immigrants/Israelis and the indigenous Palestinian population that shaped the performance of both the Palestinian *dabkeh* and the Israeli *debkah*, not any essentially inherent cultural trait.

In this study, *dabkeh/debkah* performs the nation both in theory and in actual practice. The concept of performance as used here thus carries a double meaning. For one thing, as I elaborate in the first chapter, performance describes a discursive approach to studying nationalism that is derived from current scholarship on performance as permeated by Judith Butler's critical perspective.<sup>2</sup> Yet, performance as used here not only connotes the 'theoretical lens' through which the meanings of *dabkeh/debkah* as a national symbol can be accessed, but also refers to the 'artistic stage presentations' as the actual production site of these meanings. This tension between performance as a key concept of discourse theory, on the one hand, and, on the other, as a commonly used term of everyday speech runs through this study and is intended. It is as a result of this tension that theory meets empirical data in this study and the material remains connected to the discursive: As *dabkeh/debkah* performs the nation on stage, it is from within this tension-filled space that cultural meanings emerge, are consolidated and challenged.

So far, this space in between *dabkeh/debkah* performances alluded to here by the slash has not received much attention. Little has been written on *dabkeh/debkah*, especially concerning its meanings as a contemporary stage presentation in both Israel and Palestine. Outside the circle of its practitioners, information on the doing of *dabkeh/debkah* is thus sparse, with little known on its practice leave alone its meanings as a performance site of the nation. Seeking to close this gap, this study presents to the reader the 'thick description' of its performance, delving into the material as well as the discursive details of *dabkeh/debkah* as presented by three contemporary dance groups on stage: the Palestinian *El-Funoun Palestinian Popular Dance Troupe*

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<sup>2</sup> It is beyond the scope of this study to delve into a discussion about the ways in which Judith Butler's concept of performance as used here relates to performance as theorized by scholars such as John L. Austin, Ludwig J. W. Wittgenstein and John R. Searle in the context of psycholinguism, speech act theory and ordinary language philosophy. Considering the surge of attention bestowed on performance in contemporary theoretical discourse, this issue, however, would merit closer investigation.

(*Firqat al-funūn al-shaʿbiyyah al-filastīniyyah*)<sup>3</sup> from Ramallah/al-Bireh, West Bank, the Israeli Jewish folk dance troupe *Karmeī Makhol* from Karmiʿel in the Galilee and the Israeli Arab *dabkeh* troupe *Al-Asayyel* (*al-aṣāʿil*) from the Galilean village Dayr al-Asad.

Concentrating my analysis on the activities of these three ensembles, I do not mean to suggest that their work is representative of contemporary *dabkeh/debkah* activities in general. In both Israel and the occupied, respectively the autonomous territories, numerous folk dance groups have performed and continue to perform *dabkeh/debkah* in ever different and interesting ways during the past two decades. Besides, the performance of *dabkeh/debkah* throughout the 1980s and 90s was not limited to stage presentations of organized troupes, but continued to take place in various forms and contexts, such as in the traditional social context of Arab weddings as well as in the context of the Israeli Jewish *harkadot*, that is, weekly gatherings of Israeli folk dancing. Yet at the time of my research, all three ensembles, *El-Funoun*, *Karmeī Makhol* and *Al-Asayyel*, counted as prominent dance groups in their respective national contexts and an analysis of their activities well illustrates some of the major issues at play in staging *dabkeh/debkah* as a contested performance of nationalism in between Israel and Palestine.

Starting out in 1979 as only one among numerous *dabkeh* troupes that sprouted in the occupied territories in the seventies and eighties, *El-Funoun* soon emerged as a major driving force behind the institutionalization of Palestinian folklore. Managing to establish its place as a prominent Palestinian cultural institution in the West Bank, the ensemble's activities demonstrated great stylistic changes throughout the more than twenty years of its existence. Starting out by presenting 'authentic' *dabkeh*, *El-Funoun* with the early 90s became increasingly oriented towards the international dance scene, seeking new stylistic inspiration from ballet and modern dance.

The Israeli Jewish group *Karmeī Makhol* was founded as an average, low profile Israeli folk dance group in the new Jewish development town Karmiʿel in the Galilee in 1982. Reflecting Karmiʿel's transition in the eighties from a 'pioneer's periphery' to a bustling center of high tech and tourism, *Karmeī Makhol* was revamped in

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<sup>3</sup> In the following referred to as *El-Funoun*, a short form commonly used by the dancers and audience of the troupe.

1988 and emerged in the early 90s as one of Israel's leading folk dance ensembles. Until today, the group continues to stage *debkah* as one of its trademark choreographies among the mix of ethnic dances that make up its standard repertoire.

In the same year in which Karmi'el's officials launched the reorganisation of *Karme'i Makhol*, the Israeli Arab *dabkeh* group *Al-Asayyel* was founded in Dayr al-Asad, an urbanized Arab 'village' just across the street whose olive grooves had been expropriated for the establishment of the Jewish settlement. Overcoming initial difficulties, *Al-Asayyel* during the early 90s succeeded in establishing its position and gaining recognition among Israeli Jewish, Israeli Arab as well as Palestinian audiences. Not straying too far from the conventional, *Al-Asayyel* throughout the nineties continued to stage choreographies that closely resembled *dabkeh* as performed in the traditional context of Palestinian village weddings.

My analysis of the activities of these three groups is divided into six chapters. Setting the frame for my analysis, the first chapter discusses issues of theory, method and data acquisition. I outline my theoretical framework for examining the performance of nationalism as a relational process between Israel and Palestine through folk dance. I locate this approach within current theorizing on the nation as well as contemporary research on Israel and Palestine. I address issues of method, showing what my analysis of staged *dabkeh/debkah* presentations concretely entailed. Finally, I describe how I proceeded in gathering the data for my study.

The second chapter establishes the historic context of staged *dabkeh/debkah* performances in Israel and Palestine, tracing the relationality of Israeli and Palestinian nationalism through the double invention of the Arab *dabkeh* as an authentic tradition that performed modern nationhood twice behind the backdrop of an unfolding Israeli-Palestinian conflict. I first show how Zionist cultural leaders in mandatory Palestine during the late 1930s and early 40s used the Arab *dabkeh* as a stylistic model for the folk dances which they had set out to newly create as a performance of the *Sabra*, the emancipated, modern Jew in Palestine/Israel. I then turn to the Palestinian context. I investigate how, in opposition to Israeli occupational policies, *dabkeh* was made into folk dance in the context of the reconstitution of the Palestinian national movement during the late sixties and early seventies, and thus gained new meanings as a performance of modern Palestinianness.

The third, fourth and fifth chapters are each devoted to a detailed analysis of one of the dance groups under investigation in this study. I first explore the performance of Palestinian identity through the work of the dance ensemble *El-Funoun*. I trace *El-Funoun's* artistic activities from the group's foundation in 1979 until the end of my fieldwork in 1999. I highlight the changes that the group underwent during this time in terms of movement styles on stage and show how, against the background of an ongoing Israeli occupation of the West Bank, these changes continued to occur only within the parameters staked out by Israeli-Palestinian relations.

I then turn to analyzing the performance of contemporary Israeli Jewishness through the work of *Karnei Makhol*. I show how the foundation, development and artistic activity of this dance group and especially also its performance of *debkah* were intimately connected to official Israeli strategies of turning 'hostile' Arab 'spaces' into Israeli Jewish 'place' within the context of a large-scale settlement program known as 'Judaizing the Galilee.'

Examining the performance of contemporary Israeli Arabness through the ensemble *Al-Asayyel*, the fifth chapter seeks to complicate any simple dichotomy of Israeli Jewish and Palestinian performances of national identity. Operating inside Israel as a non-Jewish Arab dance group that identified with the Palestinian nation and performed for Jewish, Arab and Palestinian audiences alike, *Al-Asayyel's* activities were subject to various, often conflicting relationships. Outlining the ways in which these relationships impacted on the ensemble's work, I show how the group responded by adapting its performance to context, thus improvising identity in between.

Finally, the closing sixth chapter again shortly summarizes how *dabkeh/debkah* in both Israeli and Palestinian contexts performed relational nationalism in Israel and Palestine.

As a contested performance of nationalism, *dabkeh/debkah* so far has mostly served to separate, lay claim and defend one's own presence against the Other. Maybe one day in the not all too distant future, *dabkeh/debkah* will perform an identity that is not exclusively one or the Other, but can actually be both in a context of just peace.

## CHAPTER ONE

# INVESTIGATING THE PERFORMANCE OF NATIONALISM AS A RELATIONAL PROCESS BETWEEN ISRAEL AND PALESTINE

### ISSUES OF THEORY AND METHOD

#### *Investigating nationalism as a relational process*

*Not only 'within' or 'beyond' the nation-state, but always also 'in between'*  
Linguistically, the difference between *dabkeh* and *debkah* is only a fleeting one established through 'movement,' that is, a shifting of the diacritics added to the root consonants in Arabic and Hebrew. *Al-ḥarakāt*, the 'movements,' as these diacritics are referred to in Arabic, dance on top of the consonants to distinguish the Arabic *dabkeh* from the Hebrew *debkah* in sound. In my study, I go beyond this linguistic closeness. Arguing that the connection between *dabkeh* and *debkah* is not only one of orthography, I show how *dabkeh/debkah* actually functions as a cultural practice that performs the difference between the Israeli and the Palestinian nations through their interconnection.

To this end, I develop a theoretical approach that posits the performance of Israeli and Palestinian nationalism through *dabkeh/debkah* as a 'relational process,' with the term 'relational' referring to something as existing only in relation to something else, and not essentially by itself. That is, I show how cultural processes of collective identification for Israelis and Palestinians are not negotiated merely within the territorial boundaries of the nation-state or beyond these boundaries in global space, but always also as a relational process between a nation and its Other. What exactly does that mean? Following the publication of Benedict Anderson's ground-breaking *Imagined Communities* (Anderson 1991), early constructivist studies during the eighties concentrated on examining cultural processes that brought the nation into being from within the territorial borders of the nation-state.<sup>1</sup> Based on Anderson's assertion that the nation as

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<sup>1</sup> The works developing Anderson's conceptualization of the nation as a 'modern

an imagined construct is inherently “limited” (Anderson 1991: 7), these studies examined the various ways in which the nation is brought into being from ‘within’ its clearly demarcated, spatially bounded frame. For one thing, these works traced the different ways in which political and intellectual elites compete over the power to define the terms in which to culturally imagine the nation. For another, these studies zoomed in on struggles occurring between elites and subordinate groups and classes. They exposed how elites variously impose their cultural imaginings on subordinate groups or, in turn, appropriate specific practices from such groups for purposes of national unification, homogenization and consolidation of sociopolitical hierarchies.<sup>2</sup> Finally, these studies called attention to the ways in which subordinate groups challenge the dominant images of the nation disseminated by political and intellectual elites, and circulate alternative visions.<sup>3</sup> Bringing to light this range of different construction processes, the focus of these early studies, however, remained directed at the *within*: the imagining of the nation occurred inside its clearly bounded territorial frame.

In the nineties then, a growing number of works started to examine processes that occur not only within, but also beyond the territorial borders of the nation-state. Behind the backdrop of a changing global environment, scholars began to conceptualize the spatio-temporal boundaries of the world’s national mosaic as coming undone. According to Arjun Appadurai in his recent *Modernity at Large*, “global flows of people and media” hereby increasingly work to undermine the nation-state and connect people across the world irrespective of territorial boundaries (Appadurai 1997: 169). As a result, the nation-state loses its exclusive grip over people’s imagination. No longer

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construct’ are numerous. For a good overview of the literature which proliferated during the eighties and early nineties see (Alonso 1994; Foster 1991). Here I want to mention only three classics which proved influential for conceptualizing the nation as a modern construct. These are Eric Hobsbawm’s *Nations and Nationalism Since 1780* (Hobsbawm 1990), Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger’s volume on *The Invention of Tradition* (Hobsbawm and Ranger 1983) and Ernest Gellner’s *Nations and Nationalism* (Gellner 1983). For an opposing view see the work of Anthony Smith who argues that nations should not, in fact, be regarded as recent constructs, but as originating from a sense of pre-existing ethnic identity, an *ethnie*, that extends way into the past (Smith 1986; Smith 1989).

<sup>2</sup> See in particular (Hall 1986; Gilroy 1987). See also (Alonso 1994) for a good overview of studies addressing the role of the state in construction processes of the nation as an imagined community, drawing mostly on Antonio Gramsci’s concept of hegemony as developed in his *Prison Notebooks* (Gramsci 1971).

<sup>3</sup> For a thorough review of this literature see (Williams 1989).

confined to the bounded space of the nation-state, imagination reaches beyond and circulates the globe with the help of the new communication technologies.

The literature traces various ways in which a changing global environment works to free collective identification from the territorial boundedness of the nation-state. For one thing, scholars point to the ways in which the nation as a territorialized image of collective identification is undermined by global flows and gives way to completely new, post-national communities. For another, scholars reconceptualize the concept of nationalism to fit the changing global circumstances.<sup>4</sup> They free nationalism of its territorial shackles and posit it as a deterritorialized force. Tracing its imaginative power across the boundaries of the nation-state, they investigate how nationalism serves to gather people in new ways into “transnational communities” (Gupta 1992) now perceived as “deterritorialized” (Appadurai 1999) and “diasporic” (Clifford 1994). Finally, the literature also draws attention to processes of reinforcing the ‘old’ boundaries of the nation-state, showing how states and neo-nationalist movements defend sovereignty against transgressive global flows. Thus, against the background of a globalizing world, the territorially bound nation-state emerges as only one possible way of imagining community, and processes of collective identification, although continuing to occur within its borders, increasingly reach beyond.

A relational perspective shifts the focus somewhat. This perspective is less concerned with tracing the ways in which neatly segregated, bounded spaces of identification come into being, then dissolve and rebind under the pressures of a changing global environment. Instead, this perspective focuses on the ways in which collective identities were never bound in the first place in the sense of being segregated, isolated or closed off, but were always constructed in relation to an Other. In contrast to conventional constructivist approaches, a relational perspective therefore concentrates on processes occurring between spaces of collective identification, not merely on processes within or beyond such spaces. Such a perspective highlights the ways in which identities are never naturally autonomous but always interconnected and mutually formative of each other, and posits the

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<sup>4</sup> See (Wicker 1997) for a critical appraisal of the shift in current social science theorizing away from the seemingly ‘static’ nation to the conceptually more dynamic concept of nationalism.



difference between identities as a product of their interconnectedness. According to Stuart Hall, identities are thus constructed “through, not outside difference,” and in fact “it is only through the relation to the Other, to the relation to what it is not, to precisely what it lacks, to what has been called its *constitutive outside* that the ‘positive’ meaning of any term—and thus its ‘identity’—can be constructed” (Hall 1996: 4–5).

*A relational perspective in scholarship on Israel and Palestine*

Analyzing the performance of Israeli and Palestinian nationalism as a process occurring in between and not merely within or beyond, my study seeks to contribute to the growing body of contemporary scholarship that employs a relational perspective. In the recent past, such a perspective has gained currency among scholars working on Israel and Palestine. This holds true especially for current works written from a critical Israeli perspective on Zionism and the development of Israeli society, the so-called post-Zionist scholarship.<sup>5</sup> Up until the seventies, Israeli scholars generally tended to investigate Zionism and Israeli history through the lens of what Zachary Lockman calls “a dual society paradigm,” that posited Jewish/Israeli and Palestinian societies against each other as two isolated, unconnected entities (Lockman 1996). In the works of this first generation of Israeli scholars, Palestinian Arabs did not figure much for the development of the *yishuv*, the Jewish community in historic Palestine, nor later for Israeli society. Israeli scholars either ignored Palestinians in their research or posited them as ‘hostile Others’ who remained external to Israeli society and were not connected to its history and development.

A first change towards a more inclusive perspective occurred with the debate around the war of 1948 that was launched by a new generation of young Israeli scholars in the 1980s. Working their way through archives that had been newly opened under the thirty-year declassification rule in Israel, the United States and England, the “New Historians”<sup>6</sup> as they came to be known, set out to critically reexamine the events of the 1948 war.<sup>7</sup> No longer simply ignoring or outrightly demonizing Palestinians, they sought to establish a more

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<sup>5</sup> See (Pappé 1997a) for an excellent short review of the post-Zionist debate in Israeli scholarship.

<sup>6</sup> The term was coined by Benny Morris, one of the most prominent members of the ‘New Historians.’

<sup>7</sup> The four major works referred to under the name of the scholarship of the ‘New Historians’ are (Flapan 1987; Morris 1987; Pappé 1988; Shlaim 1988). Further,

balanced interpretation of the history of 1948 by taking both Jewish and Arab issues into account as well as exploring the relations between the two parties on the basis of what they saw as impartial, objective historical work.

Although the New Historians contributed to debunking Zionist myths on 1948 and introducing the Palestinian side to the official story, their work remained limited to a positivist debate about what had or had not taken place at the time. Drawing upon the work of the New Historians, a second group of Israeli scholars began formulating a perspective that was more essentially critical of Zionism itself and that paved the way for the emergence of a relational approach in the nineties. Known as the New Sociologists, these young Israeli academics tried to come to terms with the inter-ethnic tensions and social protests that had begun to erupt in Israeli society after the 1973 war. Young Jewish activists, mostly of North African background, had started to voice their protest against what they saw as the economic, political and social deprivation of the *Sephardi* community within Israeli society.<sup>8</sup> They called for a fairer distribution of resources as well as a greater say in defining the country's cultural identity (Massad 1996). In addition, increasing public protests launched by Israeli Arabs at the time added fuel to the fire of those feeling excluded from the official Zionist narrative. Inspired by theoretical developments within the humanities, the New Sociologists took to analyzing the social unrest of the seventies by formulating a new approach based on postmodern and relativist thinking. This new perspective was generally more sceptical about 'scientific truth' and 'data' than the positivist approach taken by the New Historians. It proposed to examine the history of Zionism and the development of Israeli society through a 'colonialist paradigm' (Ram 1993), which focused scholarly attention on questions of power, domination and inequality within the Israeli Jewish community as well as concerning Jewish-Arab relations.<sup>9</sup>

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one should include (Cohen 1982; Segev 1986; Bar-Joseph 1987). On critical, rather than merely polemic reactions to the work of the New Historians see (Shapira 1995).

<sup>8</sup> The term *Sephardi*, pl. *Sephardim* originally referred to Jews living in Spain. With the expulsion of the Spanish Jews in 1492, the term came to refer to Jews living in Levantine countries to where the Spanish Jews had immigrated. Today, the terms *Sephardi* and *Mizrahi* are often used interchangeably, connoting Jews from Levantine and Middle Eastern countries.

<sup>9</sup> On early Zionism as a 'colonialist settler movement' see in particular (Shafir 1993; Shafir 1996). See also (Kimmerling 1983).

Critical scholarship in the nineties developed the colonialist perspective as staked out by the New Sociologists and introduced a new relational focus to the study of Zionism and Israeli history. Drawing on the insights of postcolonial theorists like Edward Said, Stuart Hall and Homi Bhabha, these contemporary works started to focus their analysis on ways in which the Jewish, respectively the Israeli society was never constituted merely from within, but was always also shaped by their interaction with a ‘Palestinian Other.’ In this vein, Zachary Lockman set out to write a “relational history” of Arab and Jewish workers from the last decade of Ottoman Palestine through the time of the British mandate, trying to show how both communities developed in many complex and not always obvious ways as interconnected and mutually formative of each other (Lockman 1996). Similarly, Deborah Bernstein highlights “Jewish-Arab interrelations” in her study of the labor market at the time of the British mandate, going beyond Lockman by emphasizing that these interrelations were not limited to direct interaction, but also entailed the construction of boundaries between the two communities and processes of segregation (Bernstein 2000).<sup>10</sup>

Contemporary Israeli scholarship not only rewrites the history of the *yishuv* with a relational focus. Taking up the colonialist perspective formulated by the New Sociologists, a group of scholars developed a perspective to the study of contemporary social reality in Israel that focuses on critically tracing relations of unequal power. Positing a dominant *Ashkenazi* elite<sup>11</sup> against subordinate groups feeling excluded from the Zionist narrative, these works set out to expose and trace inter-connections across the ethnic, religious and national dividing lines which official Zionist discourse had established as seemingly unbridgeable. Most notable in this body of critical scholarship is Ella Shohat’s work. Theoretically indebted to contemporary postcolonial theory, Shohat develops a relational approach to the study of Zionism and Israeli society from the perspective of postmodern multicultural studies. Tracing relations between communities through

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<sup>10</sup> Various recent studies take up Lockman’s and Bernstein’s argument and add to the growing body of current research seeking to rewrite the history of mandatory Palestine through the lens of Arab-Jewish inter-relations. See for instance Herbert Glazer’s study of picketing campaigns to remove Arab workers from Jewish-owned sites in Kfar Saba in the 1930s steered by the *Histadrut*, the federation of Jewish workers in Palestine (Glazer 2001).

<sup>11</sup> European Jews.

time and space, she seeks to expose how nationalist discourse in Israel and elsewhere has worked to construct senses of coherent identities and used these seemingly 'natural' identities for political ends. Instead of accepting the borders drawn by nationalist discourse, Shohat sets out to unsettle such borders by uncovering the "temporal," "spatial," "disciplinary," "intertextual" and "contextual" inter-connections that nationalist discourse had sought to erase.<sup>12</sup>

Other contemporary Israeli scholars follow a similar approach. Like Ella Shohat, Yehouda Shenhav seeks to relate the position of *Sephardim* in Israeli society to the question of the status of Palestinians and Israeli Arabs. Forming theoretical alliances across the borders he sees drawn by *Ashkenazi* Zionist discourse, Shenhav highlights the inter-connections, relations and links running in between the categories (Shenhav 1999).<sup>13</sup> Similarly, Ammiel Alcalay in his fascinating study *After Jews and Arabs* seeks to expose and overcome the dichotomy constructed between Jews and Arabs in the context of an unfolding Israeli-Arab conflict. Examining Hebrew, Arabic and Romance literature from the tenth century to the present, he traces various complex ways of inter-relation between Arabs and Jews to draw a different 'cultural map' of the contemporary Levante. Most interesting is his discussion of Israeli Jewish writers from Arab (mostly Iraqi) origin like Shime'on Ballas, Sami Mikhael and Samir Naqqash, and the ways they cross nationalist borders by writing and publishing in Arabic.<sup>14</sup> In studies on gender in Israeli society as well, a trend towards a relational approach has emerged in recent years (Katz 1996; Sharoni 1995; Sharoni 1996). Seeking to highlight the ways in which the Israeli-Palestinian conflict not merely impacted on gender relations within each national frame, but was always also shaped through relations both "within and between," Simona Sharoni,

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<sup>12</sup> For the formulation of a relational approach in Ella Shohat's work, see (Shohat and Stam 1994; Shohat 1997b). Among her other numerous publications on Zionism and Israel/Palestine, see in particular (Shohat 1989; Shohat 1993; Shohat 1996; Shohat 1997a).

<sup>13</sup> See also (Shenhav 1997; Shenhav 1997; Shenhav 1998; Shenhav 1998)

<sup>14</sup> In contrast to his colleagues, Samir Naqqash never made the transition from Arabic to Hebrew and even today continues to work in his mother tongue and to publish in Arab countries. As Alcalay notes: "Naqqash not only continues to work in Arabic and have his books published in the Arab world, but he sometimes blends the standard literary language of narrative with dialogue written in the peculiar Jewish dialect of Baghdad, making his work even more demanding to an audience less and less familiar with the context that vanished world provided." (Alcalay 1993: 237).

for example, is not primarily concerned with “the effects of the conflict on Palestinian and Israeli-Jewish women,” but instead with the ways in which “the very peculiarities of gender relations both within and between Palestinian and Israeli communities have played a major role in shaping the conflict” (Sharoni 1995: 6). Increasingly also, scholars employ deconstructionist methodology to show how the cultural contents of Zionism and Israeli nationalism was not constituted in a vacuum, but through Arab-Jewish relations. While Carol Bardenstein traces the meanings of national symbols such as ‘trees/forests,’ ‘oranges’ and the ‘*Sabra*-cactus’ through both their Israeli and their Palestinian contexts (Bardenstein 1998; Bardenstein 1999), Tamar Katriel analyzes how representational styles in Israeli settlement museums geared to performing Zionist history are received by different groups of Israeli Jewish and Israeli Arab visitors (Katriel 1997).

In contrast to the burgeoning of relational approaches within contemporary Israeli research, Palestinian scholars studying the origin and development of Palestinian nationalism up until now do not characterize their own work by this term. Interestingly, the absence of Palestinian research labeled ‘relational’ is not primarily a question of methodology. Much like Israeli scholars, contemporary Palestinian research on the history and development of Palestinian nationalism has profited from current postmodern deconstructionist thinking that favors a relational focus (Bisharat 1992; Boullata 2001; Hasso 2000; Khalidi 1997; Massad 1995; Massad 2000a; Massad 2000b). In addition, recent studies by foreign scholars on Palestinian nationalism contribute to this growing body of deconstructionist writings (Fleischmann 2000; Parmenter 1994; Swedenburg 1995). Drawing on much the same theoretical background as their post-Zionist Israeli colleagues, these researchers, however, refrain from categorizing their work as ‘relational.’

Although the reasons underlying this phenomenon are certainly various, one reason for the hesitancy of Palestinian scholars to define their methodology in terms of relationality may lie in the fact that the relational focus of current post-Zionist scholarship had emerged from within an academic debate that constituted throughout, as Palestinian scholar Musa Budeiri holds, a “purely internal Israeli debate” (Budeiri 1999: 96). It was a debate that emerged within the Israeli academy and that remained focused on an internal critique of Zionism and the writing of Israeli history. Apart from a few Anglo-American scholars specializing in these topics, very few researchers

from the outside, and especially very few Palestinian scholars, actively contributed to the debate.<sup>15</sup>

Perhaps more importantly than the fact that a post-Zionist relational focus formed part of a mostly exclusive Israeli debate, however, are the different agendas that post-Zionist scholars, on the one hand, and Palestinian scholars, on the other, set for their work. So far, post-Zionist scholarship has tended to use a relational approach primarily as a contribution to the rewriting of Zionist and Israeli history. Newly highlighting the investigation of Arab-Jewish relations during mandatory Palestine, the historiographic works of Zachary Lockman and Deborah Bernstein, for instance, primarily serve to refine our understanding of the development of the *yishuv*. Only in secondary terms do they serve to deepen our knowledge about the development of the Palestinian Arab population at the time. Despite their declared commitment to a relational approach, the analytical lens of their studies remains focused on the Jewish community, not the Palestinian one. Similarly, the work of postmodern multiculturalists like Ella Shohat and Ammiel Alcalay remains primarily a contribution to Zionist and Israeli history. Aiming at deconstructing Zionism as a colonial project of *Ashkenazi* Jews, these scholars draw new connections and enable alliances with Palestinians across national, ethnic and religious borders. Yet in the end, their scholarly lens remains focused on a critical reassessment of Israeli, not per se Palestinian history. Palestine figures in their work through their critical engagement with Zionism, yet does not constitute their primary research interest.

The aim Palestinian scholars set for themselves when writing about the origin and the development of Palestinian nationalism is different. In contrast to post-Zionist scholars who launched their self-reflective

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<sup>15</sup> Ilan Pappé, for instance, in his discussion of the post-Zionist debate only cites Israeli Jewish researchers, respectively Anglo-American researchers writing on Zionism and Israeli history through an Israeli perspective, as contributing to the debate (Pappé 1997a), see also (Pappé 1997b; Pappé 1997c). Yet, as Pappé himself points out, in the recent past a growing number of Israeli Arab scholars working in the Israeli academy like Asad Ghanem, Majid al-Haj and Nadim Rouhana have shown increasing willingness to critically address and reassess issues of Israeli historiography as well as the status of Palestinians in Israel. Although their number remains small in the present Israeli academic scene, amounting to only twenty out of approximately nine hundred staff members employed in the Israeli academy (Pappé 1997: 38), it can be hoped that their teaching and research activities will contribute to opening up the post-Zionist debate and transform it from an internal Israeli Jewish debate to one that deconstructs ideological boundaries not only in terms of its research subject, but also in terms of the participating researchers.

deconstructionist project from the privileged position of an institutionalized university system within a recognized state, Palestinian scholars until today continue to experience their national identity as precarious and constantly in defense (Khalidi 1997). From the beginning, their efforts to investigate the history of Palestinian nationalism took place within the context of having to assert this identity and counter allegations that Palestinians did not exist, that Palestinian nationalism had emerged only in response to Zionism, that it was thus of very recent origin and ‘fake.’<sup>16</sup> Confronted with political and scholarly polemics that tried to refute Palestinian existence in the consciousness of the world and academia, Palestinian scholars made it their aim to free their national narrative of Zionist domination and write Palestinian existence into history. Trying to untangle from Zionism and assert identity, their focus was directed at reconstructing their national narrative *independently of* and not always, even if connections were obvious, *in relation to* Zionism. In 1981, Palestinian political scientist Ibrahim Abu-Lughod thus criticized scholars writing on Palestine for thinking it impossible to “study the historical development of the Palestinian Arab community at any particular point in modern times without taking immediate cognizance of the presence—effective or fictitious—of the Jewish community as represented by the Zionist movement.” Declaring that “the Palestine of 1948 was a very different Palestine from that of 1917 and the difference is not solely the result of the impact of either imperialism or Zionism,” he urged scholars to write the history of Palestinian nationalism without letting the conflict subsume Palestinian identity. The task should be to investigate Palestinian history and nationalism as historical phenomena in their own right, not as a mere reaction to events determined by imperialist and Zionist agents (Abu-Lughod 1981: 403–405).<sup>17</sup>

<sup>16</sup> One of the most infamous political polemics about Palestinian non-existence is Golda Meir’s much cited claim that, before the sixties, “(t)here was no such thing as Palestinians. . . . They did not exist.” Meir’s statement, printed in *The Sunday Times* on 15 June 1969 on p. 12 is cited in (Khalidi 1997: 147, 181). Among academic works, Joan Peters’ *From Time Immemorial* epitomizes scholarship written with the agenda to disprove the existence of the Palestinian people (Peters 1988).

<sup>17</sup> Among the various Palestinian works taking up Abu Lughod’s cue, Muhammad Muslih’s *The Origins of Palestinian Nationalism* constitutes one of the best and most carefully researched studies. Investigating the emergence of the Palestinian national movement within the context of the formulation of Arab nationalism, Muslih convincingly reconstructs how Palestinian nationalism emerged as a response to inner Arab debates and developments, and not primarily as a response to Zionist immigration and settlement (Muslih 1988).

Remaining committed to disentangling Palestinian national identity from Zionism, more recent Palestinian scholarship, however, does not per se scorn a relational focus. In contrast to post-Zionist research, this scholarship does not explicitly declare its approach as relational. Yet drawing on general postcolonial theory, contemporary Palestinian scholars implicitly use a perspective that relates Palestinian nationalism to Zionism and Israeli history. Seeking to account for Zionism's impact on the formulation of Palestinian identity without compromising their political project of 'disentangling' and reconstructing a Palestinian narrative, Palestinian scholars do relational work, yet refrain from using the label. Referring to Stuart Hall's definition of identity as always occurring in relation to an Other as a truism, Rashid Khalidi admits that the construction of Palestinian identity cannot be seen as completely separate from Zionism. Emphasizing that other relations as well played an important role for shaping modern Palestinianness such as the negotiation of Palestinian identity in relation to Arabism, Islam and other regional and local identities, he nevertheless concedes that Zionist/Israeli and Palestinian historic narratives are "intertwined" and thus cannot be studied as separate. In his words, Palestinian national identity developed "in spite of, and in the same cases because of" its confrontation with Zionism (Khalidi 1997: 5–6). Khalidi thus leaves space for exploring the formulation of Palestinian identity in relation to Zionism, yet does not explicitly label his approach as such. Similarly, Kamal Boullata and Joseph Massad do not define their work as 'relational,' although their recent studies clearly explore Palestinian nationalism in relation to Zionism and Israeli history (Massad 2000a; Massad 2000b; Boullata 2001). Like Ella Shohat, they use a multiculturalist deconstructionist perspective focusing on tracing connections and links between Zionist/Israeli and Palestinian narratives. Yet unlike Shohat, Boullata and Massad they do not explicitly categorize their work in terms of relationality.

### *The performance of nationalism*

#### *A doing and a thing done*

As an analytical framework for my study, I adopt Elin Diamond's performance concept as simultaneously a "doing" and a "thing done" (Diamond 1996). Performance as a doing and a thing done offers an ideal theoretical tool for studying relational nationalism as it sensitizes the scholarly perspective to processes of identification that harbor



both transgressive as well as normative potential, thus allowing to trace the changing meanings of a single act through the different spatiotemporal contexts of its execution. In general, conventional approaches as developed within US American departments of anthropology and theater studies defined performance primarily in terms of 'liminality,' a concept developed by anthropologist Victor Turner in order to draw attention to the transgressive potential of ritual acts (Turner 1982). According to Turner, ritual performances in tribal societies such as the Ndembu are characterized by states of temporal, spatial and symbolic betweenness that allow dominant norms to be challenged, suspended and transformed. Richard Schechner, stage director and first performance studies chair at *New York University*, adopted Turner's concept of liminality as a state of transgressive betweenness and generalized it beyond a strictly ritualistic and theatrical context (Schechner 1985; Schechner 1998). According to Schechner, "any event, action, item or behavior" should be investigated as performance, thereby drawing attention to its liminal character (Schechner 1998: 361).

In contrast to the focus which conventional American performance studies literature places on transgressive liminality, Diamond's performance as a doing and a thing done not only provides space for transgressing the norm, but first and foremost functions as a means for its consolidation. Diamond hereby draws on Judith Butler's concept of the performativity of performance, which Butler developed over the course of several studies on the performance of gender identities (Butler 1990a; Butler 1990b; Butler 1993a; Butler 1993b). According to Butler, performativity refers to the ways in which performance constitutes a function of the normative power of discourse. Every performance entails performativity as a discursive constraint to reenact social norms and conventions. For Butler, nothing exists outside its performance. There is no extra-linguistic reality or unmediated presence beyond the power of discourse to bring about that what it names. One is because one acts, and one acts first and foremost in ways prescribed by the norm. Drawing on Butler's concept of performativity, Diamond in contrast to Turner thus posits performance not only as a "doing," that is, an embodied act which takes place in a specific time and space and holds the possibility of change. Instead, as simultaneously a "thing done," she emphasizes that performance always also alludes to the event which is past, finished, completed, yet which nevertheless influences and shapes the present:

In every doing, the thing done is “remembered, misremembered, interpreted and passionately revisited across a pre-existing discursive field.” Collapsing temporal and spatial boundaries, performance thus refers to the specific event bounded in time and space, which, as part of a discursive system, allows not only for the transgression of the norm, but also for its consolidation. As a doing, every embodied act harbors the possibility of challenging, playing with and transgressing the norm. At the same time, however, every act is always also normative, a conservative reiteration, which through its enactment reinscribes its own discursive conventions (Diamond 1996: 1–2).

*Between the discursive and the material: Nationalism as performance*

Investigating nationalism as performance in Diamond’s sens, the approach adopted in this study goes beyond contemporary realist perspectives on the nation.<sup>18</sup> Positing the nation as a constructed reality that becomes manifest in tangible historical circumstances, realists practice historical analysis in order to get at the content of the nation, at what the nation essentially *is*. In contrast, the performance approach of this study does not presume the existence of any such essential identity expressed in material conditions. National identity performed on stage is not about who or what one essentially *is*, but rather about what one *does*. Identity viewed through the lens of performance is not the essence of a presentation, but its “effect”: It results from the act and not the act from identity (Bell 1999: 3).<sup>19</sup> Such a deessentialized identity concept also informs contemporary postmodern semiotic perspectives which, in contrast to realist approaches, do not posit the nation as a product of socioeconomic conditions and material interests, but as an ongoing discourse about such conditions and interests. Conceptualizing the nation as a “form of narrative” (Bhabha 1990: 2), postmodern semioticians posit the nation as a discursive construct that has no essentially existing essence outside of discourse and which can only be grasped through textual analysis

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<sup>18</sup> My categorization of realist and postmodern semiotic approaches to the nation is based on the distinction made by James Jankowski and Israel Gershoni in their edited volume on nationalism in the Middle East (Jankowski and Gershoni 1997).

<sup>19</sup> As Judith Butler radically maintains, even identities such as gender and sex are not the expression of a prior form of belonging. Instead, identities are produced through a continuous repetition of performative acts: “In this sense, gender is in no way a stable identity or locus of agency from which various acts proceed; rather, it is an identity tenuously constituted in time—an identity instituted through a *stylized repetition of acts*.” (Butler 1990: 270).

and hermeneutics. In this regard, the performance approach used in this study mirrors contemporary postmodern semiotic perspectives.

However, more than postmodern semiotics, the approach of this study draws attention to the material dimension. Of course, postmodern semiotics always also refer back to a material reality existing outside the discursive. Yet not merely referring back to material reality, the performance perspective of this study grounds discursive compulsiveness in the materiality of the embodied act. As Diamond argues, cultural meanings can only be grasped through the concrete, physical event. It is only when discourse ‘materializes’ that meanings are made and become accessible to interpretation:

When performativity materializes as performance in that risky and dangerous negotiation between a doing (a reiteration of norms) and a thing done (discursive conventions that frame our interpretation), between someone’s body and the conventions of embodiment, we have access to cultural meanings and critique. (Diamond 1996: 5)

Investigating nationalism as both a doing and a thing done highlights this material dimension of the discursive. Not only concentrating on analyzing discourses about stage presentations, the approach developed in this study considers how the discursive is made tangibly real through specific, historically located *dabkeh/debkah* stage events. Analyzing how, within a certain space and time, hands are touching on stage and knees are bending provides interpretive access to the discursive norms framing these events as well as the ways in which these norms are challenged and transgressed over time. Complementing a postmodern semiotic perspective, nationalism as a doing and a thing done thus accentuates how identity performed through *dabkeh/debkah* is not only discursively, but also physically present. The moving *dabkeh/debkah* line ‘stomps’ identity into existence between Israel and Palestine: The nation materializes on stage.

### *Folk dance as a performance of nationalism*

#### *Folk dance as a nationalizing force*

Bodily practices like folk dancing constitute a powerful means of collective identification (Connerton 1989). Simple and repetitive, folk dance steps and movement patterns are easily learned. They are in no time at all incorporated through repetition and can be executed

in a routinized, automated manner. It is this ease with which folk dance movements and steps can be incorporated and turned into “bodily automatisms” that makes them such powerful sources of collective identification. In contrast to discursive practices, which in the act of articulation are prone to processes of rethinking and reformulation, bodily practices such as folk dance steps, once turned automatic, are more likely to endure over time and sediment the ‘social memory’ of community through their shared, unreflective and spontaneous execution, as Paul Connerton writes: “Every group, then, will entrust to bodily automatisms the values and categories which they are most anxious to conserve. They will know how well the past can be kept in mind by a habitual memory sedimented in the body.” (ibid.: 102)

This powerful collectivizing force is maintained even when the doing of folk dancing is ‘professionalized’ and put on stage. In the case of staged folk dance presentations, the dynamic shifts. In this context, a majority of the people no longer actively joins the dancing. Although they may be clapping and singing along, they do not share in the execution of the movements. However, the collectivizing force of folk dance presentations continues to work through presenting and watching a familiar canon of shared movements patterns and steps that are executed to well-known rhythms and that feature commonly shared symbols in the costumes and props. In this sense, staged folk dance ‘cites’ the norms that evoke feelings of belonging and identity (Bell 1999; Fortier 1999) and keeps a similar power as conventional folk dancing to produce community through cultural practices that are well-known and commonly shared.

*Folk dance as a unit of analysis in the context of dabkeh/debkah*

Using ‘folk dance’ as my unit of analysis in a Middle Eastern context calls for a critical comment. The concept of folk dance as developed in Western dance scholarship is intimately tied to the idea of the “Volk” as first conceptualized by the German philosopher Johann Gottfried von Herder in the middle of the 18th century. To Herder, *das Volk*—the folk—referred to a certain segment of society, the “common man,” whom he identified as the natural, uncorrupted safe-keeper of the nation’s authenticity and soul (Friedland 1998: 29). Herder’s ideas about the folk greatly influenced nationalism as formulated in Europe at the time as a general philosophy and gained

special currency during the 19th century with the spread of Romantic nationalism. The term ‘folk dance’ reverberates these 19th century ideas of romantic nationalism, as LeeEllen Friedland writes:

The term *folk dance* [. . .] is inextricably tied to the nineteenth-century view of the folk as guardians of the pure national soul and folk culture as the repository of customs descended from ancient religious ritual. The term *folk dance* is valuable only when this historical connection is maintained. Folk dance is that subset of dance forms and customs that can be traced to folk communities and repertoires so defined by nineteenth-century concepts; it is a historical term that refers to a particular interpretation of the history of human culture and expression. (Friedland 1998: 32)

Applying a concept developed within the historic trajectory of Western dance scholarship to a Middle Eastern context is not unproblematic. Much conventional dance scholarship has been reproached for blanketly applying Western categories to non-Western contexts, and thus developing ethnocentric systems of classification. As Joann Kealiinohomoku showed, such scholarship based its system of classification on an evolutionary paradigm, which ranked the categories of ‘folk,’ ‘ethnic’ or ‘primitive dance’ at the bottom end of a civilizational hierarchy in which Western theatrical dance and in particular ballet came to stand for “the one great divinely ordained apogee of the performing arts” (Kealiinohomoku 1983: 536). Furthermore, in the context of Middle Eastern dance, the issue of categorization is an important one. Classical Arabic has no single word which corresponds exactly to the Western concept of ‘dance’ in its function as a neutral generic term. Instead, Arabic speakers employ a number of terms to specify different kinds of “patterned movement activities” (Shay 1994). This conceptual specification holds great importance in a Muslim context, as different kinds of movement patterns are differently judged in terms of their moral, social and religious value.<sup>20</sup> In this vein, Arab speakers usually differentiate *dabkeh* as performed in the traditional context of social festivities from ‘raqs.’ Although generally translated as ‘dance,’ *raqs* in this context is not used as a generic term, but as a specific type of movement in contrast to *dabkeh*.

In the course of the emergence of an Israeli folklore movement in the early 1940s, respectively with the emergence of a Palestinian

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<sup>20</sup> See for instance (al-Faruqi 1985; Kapchan 1994; Henni-Chebra and Poché 1996; Nieuwerk 1996).

folklore movement in the late 1960s and early 70s, *dabkeh* underwent a process of change. This change was marked by the translation of a locally derived tradition into Western concepts and the introduction of *dabkeh* as 'folk dance' into the global discourse of nationalism, both within the Israeli as well as the Palestinian context. Translating the Arab *dabkeh* into an Israeli *debkah* in the forties not only involved the appropriation of dance steps and styles, but also encompassed turning *dabkeh* into '*rikud 'am israeli*,' an Israeli 'folk dance.' In the Palestinian context in the late sixties and early seventies, *dabkeh* again turned into 'folk dance,' this time as a Palestinian '*raqs sha'bī*.'

The shift in meaning accompanying the translation of *dabkeh* as an Arab social event into *dabkeh* as 'Palestinian folk dance' is in particular brought to the fore by the discursive change in the meaning of the terms *dabkeh* and *raqs*. *Dabkeh* presented on stage by ensembles of trained Palestinian performers during the late nineties was increasingly associated or even equated with *raqs*, whereby *raqs* acquired the meaning of 'dance' in a Western sense. The names of the ensembles staging *dabkeh* reflected this shift in meaning. They used the terms *dabkeh* group (*firqat dabkeh*) and folk dance group (*firqat al-raqs al-sha'bī*) interchangeably, whereby the term *raqs sha'bī* attained the meaning of the concept of 'folk dance' as developed within the European context of the 18th and 19th century. My use of the term 'folk dance' when referring to *dabkeh/debkah* as presented on stage is motivated by this translation of local dance traditions and their reconceptualization in terms of Western terminology and systems of classification both within the Israeli as well as the Palestinian context.<sup>21</sup> I do not imply any sort of valorization of the dance practices by choosing this term.

#### *State of the art in research on folk dance in the Middle East*

The number of works investigating the cultural dimensions of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict have steadily increased over the recent past. Yet so far this literature has neglected stage presentations, or more specifically, folk dance, as a site for the cultural reproduction of the nation between Israel and Palestine. While dance research in general has received somewhat of a 'boom' since the mid-1980s (Reed

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<sup>21</sup> For a further reading about Arab reception of European concepts of performance art see Reinhard Schulze's stimulating investigation into the reception of the European concept of theater by 19th century Arab travelers (Schulze 1994).

1998), research on dance in the Middle East remains limited and mostly non-academic in its orientation.<sup>22</sup> As Anthony Shay has pointed out, one reason for the relative neglect of Middle Eastern dance as an object of scholarly investigation may lie with the ambiguous status that dance generally holds in Arab Muslim societies. Due to the morally doubtful status of dance among Arab Muslims, these societies are often stigmatized as “choreophobic” and are avoided by dance scholars, while societies considered ‘rich’ in dance traditions and where dance is seen as a central element of religious, ritual and social life receive distinctly more attention (Shay 1994; Shay 1999).

The handful of studies which do exist for Arab societies mostly concentrate on investigating the ambiguous status of dance. These studies focus broadly on two areas. For one thing, scholars investigate dance from the viewpoint of religion, exploring Muslim discourse on the acceptability, respectively the reprehensibility, of dance practices (al-Faruqi 1985; Gribetz 1991; Michot 1991; Meier 1992; Shehadi 1995). For another, the existing studies examine dance in relation to society, in particular to issues of gender and female performance (Buonaventura 1989; Henni-Chebra and Poché 1996; Nieuwerk 1996; Nieuwerk 1998; Young 1998; Zuhur 1998). Within this field of study, a recent focus on dance in relation to gender and the nation has emerged, with ‘folk dance’ in Middle Eastern societies increasingly becoming an object of scholarly interest (Kapchan 1994; Campbell 1998; Franken 1998).

Against the background of this small, but increasing number of works devoted to the study of dance, and especially also folk dance, in Middle Eastern societies, some work is done specifically on *dabkeh*, respectively, *debkah*. The bulk of these writings published in Arabic, Hebrew and English, however, is written with a strong, nationalist

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<sup>22</sup> Up until the 1980s, dance ethnology was a neglected field, not only in Middle Eastern Studies, but in general. The social anthropologist Paul Spencer thus described the position of dance ethnology within the discipline of anthropology in 1985 as follows: “The popular appeal of dance has barely touched the imagination of most anthropologists. [. . .] It is generally excluded from our curricula, and so we tend to assume that it lies beyond our immediate concern. And there in general it remains, an obscure rather than a challenging phenomenon, unwanted and dispersed as fragments in the anthropological literature.” (Spencer 1985: ix) Since then, however, an increasing number of well researched and theoretically grounded monographs, especially from within the field Performance Studies, have directed attention to dance as a medium of social and political action. See for instance (Cowan 1990; Ness 1992; Browning 1995; Savigliano 1995).

agenda and is mostly descriptive and celebratory. Yet a few exceptions concerning folk dance both in a Palestinian as well as an Israeli context should be mentioned. Jennifer Ladkani recently finished an interesting research project on the dancing of *dabkeh* among Palestinian refugees in Jordan, which she handed in as a doctoral thesis at *Florida State University* (Ladkani 2001). Adnān bin Dharīl published a voluminous and informative study on *dabkeh* and religious dancing in Syria (Dharīl 1992).

On the history, development and meaning of Israeli folk dancing, the articles published in the year 2000 special issue of the *Jewish Folklore and Ethnology Review* are particularly informative. Also, the work done by Judith Brin Ingber on the history of Israeli folk dancing and especially her oral histories provide valuable documentation (Ingber 2000; Ingber 1974). Similarly, the historic work by Nina Spiegel on dancing in the Jewish *yishuv* (Spiegel 2000) as well as Naomi Jackson's work on the development of Israeli folk dancing in the United States are well-researched and theoretically grounded (Jackson 1997; Jackson 2000).

Despite the growing number of works investigating folk dance in the Middle East and, in particular, in an Israeli, respectively a Palestinian context, no study so far has traced the development and contemporary practice of *dabkeh/debkah* from a comparative perspective. It is from this perspective that my investigation of *dabkeh/debkah* seeks to contribute not only to contemporary theorizing on the nation, but also to scholarship concerned with issues of performance and dance in the Middle East.

### *Dabkeh/debkah on stage in Israel and Palestine*

#### *The folk dance groups*

In the late nineties, *dabkeh/debkah* constituted a common activity throughout Israel and Palestine and could be found in various performance venues including social events, extracurricular activities, tourist productions, schools, clubs, political gatherings, festivals and the like. Aware of the various ways in which *dabkeh/debkah* at the time of my fieldwork was practiced throughout Israel and Palestine, I focused for the purpose of this study exclusively on staged dance presentations. In the time from July 1998 to September 1999, I conducted a close ethnographic study of the activities of the following



three folk dance groups: the Palestinian troupe *El-Funoun Palestinian Popular Dance Troupe* from Ramallah/al-Bireh, the Israeli Jewish folk dance group *Karmeï Makhol* from Karmi'el as well as the Israeli Arab *dabkeh* group *Al-Asayyel* from Deir el-Asad. At the time of my research, each group respectively was considered a leading ensemble within its national context. It was this factor that was decisive for me in selecting the groups for my study. As the collectivizing force of folk dance hinges on a community's familiarity with and acceptance of its dance practices, I sought to work with ensembles whose activities were recognized and liked by their audiences.

Apart from the similar status that each ensemble held within its community, the three groups under investigation in this study were very different in terms of how they staged *dabkeh*, respectively *debkah*, as well as in terms of their performance contexts, their general outlook, organization, and the like. Yet despite these fundamental differences, all three ensembles displayed a number of formal similarities, which made their inclusion in this study particularly useful. Founded within the past ten to twenty years of the time of my fieldwork, each of the three folk dance groups had been working continuously since the time of its foundation and had thereby acquired a solid standing within its community. Furthermore, all three ensembles were similarly organized as amateur groups based on voluntary participation with some of the leaders earning their living through the group. Since 1996, *El-Funoun* had been paying two full-time positions, employing an artistic as well as an administrative director with money given by international donors or earned through the group's artistic work. *Karmeï Makhol's* choreographer had been paid by the municipality since the foundation of the group in 1982. With the group's restructuring in the late eighties, another paid position, that of the general manager, was added, covered by the municipality, participants' fees as well as money earned through presentations. As the most commercial of the three ensembles, the salary of *Al-Asayyel's* director, in turn, to some degree directly depended on his group's earnings. Thus, while leaders of all three groups made their living off folk dancing, the ensembles, in general, remained amateur, with the groups' members participating without receiving money and, as in the case of *Karmeï Makhol*, even paying for their involvement at younger ages.

In addition, the profile of participants in all three groups showed similarities. All of the ensembles were co-educative, including both

male and female dancers. In addition, the age of the participants was comparable, ranging from the mid- and late teens to the mid- and late twenties.<sup>23</sup> In terms of class, a difference was noticeable between the two Arab groups, on the one hand, and the Israeli Jewish group, on the other. In the two Arab groups, most of the female members were students in high school or college, while many of the male participants held blue-collar jobs.<sup>24</sup> In the Israeli Jewish group, no class difference was visible among male and female participants, with most participants being high school students or striving for a white-collar job.<sup>25</sup> As I will later elaborate in the context of each individual group, the class difference between male and female members in the Arab groups was most likely connected to the generally ambiguous status of public dancing in Arab societies, especially for women. The staunch middle class presence in *Karmeï Makhol*, in turn, was connected to the social makeup of the city of Karmi'el, a well-off middle class community with a large *Ashkenazi* constituency. Also, the fairly high monthly payments demanded by the group during the members' first years of participation worked to prevent the entrance of children from lower class families (Milner and Gal 1999).<sup>26</sup>

*Discourses of tradition, cultural authenticity and gender*

I focus my analysis of the artistic activities of all three folk dance groups on their significance as a nationalizing force. Analyzing the groups' activities through the lens of national identity, I do not mean to disregard the variety of meanings that the presentation of *dabkeh/debkah* on stage held for each ensemble and their audience, as well as the multiplicity of motivational forces that prompted people's engagement.<sup>27</sup> Yet within the context of all three ensembles, both leaders and dancers indicated that they considered their artistic activities also

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<sup>23</sup> See tables 1, 2, 3 and 4 in the appendix on the age of the dancers.

<sup>24</sup> See tables 6 and 8 in the appendix on the occupational background of *El-Funoun* and *Al-Asayyel* dancers.

<sup>25</sup> See table 7 in the appendix on the occupational background of *Karmeï Makhol* dancers.

<sup>26</sup> The monthly payment amounted to NIS 120 per dancer (ca. \$ 35), a rather high amount for families in Israel, especially when having to pay not only for one, but more children. Only when reaching the level of the *Representative Group*, starting with ages 16–17, did dancers in *Karmeï Makhol* participate for free.

<sup>27</sup> See tables 9, 10 and 11 in the appendix on the different motivational forces for group members to participate.

as an important means of national identification. For the purpose of this study, I concentrate on this significance of *dabkeh/debkah*.<sup>28</sup>

Analyzing the three groups' activities, I focus on discourses of tradition, cultural authenticity and gender, as well as the materialization of these discourses in the work of each group on stage. Recent literature has identified tradition, authenticity and gender as important elements within any nationalist discourse. Any nationalism entails processes through which clearly defined practices are constructed as natural, old and shared by all members of a nation. Such "invented traditions" serve to fill the nation with content, providing the cultural uniqueness desired for distinguishing and legitimizing its existence both within and outside its borders (Hobsbawm and Ranger 1983).<sup>29</sup> The literature stresses that traditions are not invented at random. Rather, in order to fulfill their purpose as a nation's cultural mainstay, they are invented as 'authentic,' that is, as deriving from a nation's inner essence, its essentially pure cultural core.<sup>30</sup> Within this context, the issue of gender usually receives special attention in the literature, exposing how nationalist movements tie the cultural authenticity of a nation to gender roles, especially as regards to women.<sup>31</sup>

Running as a common theme through current works on nationalism, issues of tradition, cultural authenticity and gender, however, gained particular salience in the context of the three folk dance groups under investigation in my study. As mentioned earlier, the context in which each group performed was very different. Besides, all three ensembles were moving primarily within their own national context and had little, if no direct contact amongst each other. Yet as my fieldwork showed, all three groups not only presented the same dance form on stage, but also constructed their discourses around the same issues. In all three contexts, tradition, cultural authenticity and gender constituted central elements within the group's

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<sup>28</sup> See table 12 in the appendix on the importance of national identity as a motivational force for members in all three groups.

<sup>29</sup> The argument first proposed by Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger that cultural practices which seem natural and old are actually of recent origin and 'invented' has been widely taken up and developed among current scholarship. See for instance (Linnekin 1983; Handler 1984; Handler and Linnekin 1984; Handler 1985; Herzfeld 1986; Handler 1988; Keesing 1989; Jackson 1995; Kirshenblatt-Gimblett 1995).

<sup>30</sup> Literature investigating the construction of the nation in relation to issues of cultural authenticity is numerous. See for instance (Handler 1986; Linnekin 1991; Kirshenblatt-Gimblett and Bruner 1992; Chatterjee 1993; Williams 1996).

<sup>31</sup> See for instance (Baron 1997; Chatterjee 1993; Petecet 1993; Shakry 1998).

discourse and served to lay nationalist claims as well as to variously establish, challenge or consolidate power hierarchies. What constituted authentic *dabkeh/debkah*, how could *dabkeh/debkah* be presented on stage according to tradition as well as who should—or should not—present *dabkeh/debkah* where, when, how and why were central questions which shaped the creative work of all three groups and determined the ways in which they sought to establish national presence and assert identity.

Conceptualizing *dabkeh/debkah* as an ‘invented tradition’ is not unproblematic. In a lucid critique of scholarship operating with an ‘invention of tradition’ approach, Charles Briggs draws attention to the ways in which scholars writing from the privileged position of Western academia perpetuate political economic hierarchies of textual production when using their discursive authority to categorize cultural practices as ‘inventions’ (Briggs 1996). According to Briggs, scholarly representation of such practices as ‘invented’ and thus historically discontinuous serve to undermine the truth claims of cultural practitioners and perpetuate hierarchies of discursive power in favor of Western scholars. Acknowledging these problematic implications, I want to emphasize that by referring to *dabkeh/debkah* as an invented tradition, I do not intend to disregard the very real and concrete meanings which *dabkeh/debkah* holds for all of its practitioners. Also, I do not aim at using the discursive authority of my own text in order to give credit to one or the other staged presentation of *dabkeh/debkah* as more ‘truthful’ or more ‘authentic.’ Most importantly, I do not mean to privilege my conceptualization of *dabkeh/debkah* as an ‘invention’ over the realness of the historic origins of *dabkeh* as an Arab cultural practice, and its continuing importance today as a central part of Palestinian social life.

Rather, I want to draw attention to the various ways in which cultural practices, pre-existing or newly made, are turned into symbols of the nation. ‘Invention’ as used in this study does not distinguish between ‘genuine’ and ‘fake,’ or ‘old’ and ‘new’ traditions, but sees all practices identified with the nation as brought into being through processes of construction, transformation, interpretation and reinterpretation. The concept thus does not pass a value judgement on the realness of the meanings that *dabkeh/debkah* holds for Israelis and Palestinians, nor on the historic existence of an Arab dance practice called *dabkeh*. In fact, I consider all presentations of *dabkeh/debkah* as ‘genuine’ in their significance as a nationalizing force, as long as

the practitioners themselves see them as such. Instead, ‘invention’ refers to the various processes through which a locally derived Arab practice was translated into the global discourse of nationalism and came to be represented and accepted as an authentic cultural performance of both the Israeli as well as the Palestinian nation. The crucial question for my analysis is thus *how* both sides performed *dabkeh/debkah* as authentically Palestinian, respectively Israeli, how successful they were in their attempts to make their specific version known and accepted, and why or why not they were successful, not *whether* these presentations were indeed authentic. ‘Invention’ in this study is a question of power, not of truthfulness, or, in the words of Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett and Edward Bruner, it is “less [a question] of authenticity and more one of authentication: who has the power to represent whom and to determine which representation is authentic?” (Kirshenblatt-Gimblett and Bruner 1992: 304).

#### *Analyzing dabkeh/debkah presentations*

My analysis traces the ways in which all three groups articulated discourses of tradition, cultural authenticity and gender, as well as the ways in which these discourses materialized on stage in form of artistic presentations of *dabkeh/debkah*. Hereby, I not only pay attention to how the formulation of these discourses worked to both consolidate and challenge the artistic norms of the presentation of each dance group. More importantly, I show how the discourses that materialized on stage always also came about as a product of the relationship between Israelis and Palestinians: Tracing the ways in which discourses about tradition, authenticity and gender materialized on stage and served to lay nationalist claims as well as establish, consolidate and challenge power hierarchies, I illustrate how the performance of Israeli and Palestinian nationalism occurred as a relational process between the nations.

## DATA ACQUISITION

### *Defining the field?*

Investigating *dabkeh/debkah* as a relational process of identification between Israel and Palestine, I employed a method of data acquisition inspired by a “multi-sited ethnography” approach (Marcus 1998). Conventionally, ethnographers conduct their field work within one

particular, spatially delimited site, in which they engage in in-depth, long-term research with one particular target group. The increasing interconnectedness of the world, however, and the changing ways in which group identities are defined and reproduced across the globe have challenged the notion of the ‘ethnographic field’ as necessarily constituting one particular, territorially bounded site in which ethnographers “dwell intensively” (Clifford 1992). Seeking to develop methods of data gathering which reflect the spatial fuzziness of contemporary processes of identification, ethnographers thus no longer necessarily stay put within one single location. Instead, they posit the field as constituted by the ways in which an object of investigation moves within and in between various, spatially disconnected sites and travel to “follow the thing” (Marcus 1998: 106).

As a method of research that allowed tracing an object through various sites and spaces, I found a multi-sited ethnography approach particularly inspiring for organizing my investigation. Academically based at the University of Berne, Switzerland, my fieldwork took place in two different locations:<sup>32</sup> the Galilee and the West Bank. Within these two locations, I followed *dabkeh/debkah* through its various performance sites and traced the links, that is, the “connections, associations, and putative relationships” between them (Marcus 1998: 97). ‘Following’ *dabkeh/debkah*, my ethnographic field thus came to comprise a multiplicity of different localities, which were not necessarily spatially connected and, in fact, sometimes truly appeared to be “worlds apart” (Marcus 1998: 102).

Moving between the two locations of my research, I changed my actual place of residence three times, first living in Jerusalem, then the Galilee and finally in Ramallah/al-Bireh in the West Bank. Relocating three times during a research period of fifteen months, however, was not the only way in which I attempted to account for the ways in which *dabkeh/debkah* functioned as a relational performance of identity in between. Not only changing my place of residence, I also kept moving within the ethnographic field that I had delimited between the Galilee and the West Bank. Metaphorically “taking the subway to the field” (Passaro 1997: 152), I drove around

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<sup>32</sup> I use the term ‘location’ simply in its geographic sense referring to a certain region. The specific research sites within the two locations of the Galilee and Ramallah/al-Bireh in which I conducted my fieldwork combined to constitute my ethnographic field. On ‘location,’ in contrast, as a way of reconceptualizing the ethnographic field see (Gupta and Ferguson 1997).

Israel and the autonomous territories to follow *dabkeh/debkah* to its various performance sites throughout the country, attending festivals, folk dance gatherings and social events, digging up archival material and oral histories, as well as tracing interview partners, videotapes, music and books.

My moving between the sites hereby was not limited to my physical dislocation from one place to another. In addition, technology helped bridge the distance between the two locations of my fieldwork without any physical displacement on my part. I stayed in touch with informants via email, telephone and fax, and in more than one case met up in Israel or Palestine with performers that I had first got to know in Manhattan.<sup>33</sup> Even at the point of writing up, comfortably settled back into the academic setting in Bern, I remained in touch with some of my informants, receiving gossip, photographs, videotapes of dance performances and up-dates about current activities.

*'Deep hanging out' with folk dance groups in Israel and Palestine*

Refraining from pitching a "tent in the village" in favor of "travel encounters" and "deep hanging out" within the multiple sites of my ethnographic field, I focused on tracing the activities of the three folk dance groups under investigation in this study within and between the two locations of my research.<sup>34</sup> To gain initial access to these

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<sup>33</sup> In preparation for my fieldwork in Israel and Palestine I spent one academic year at *New York University* in Manhattan. During that time, I connected with Israeli folk dance practitioners as well as Palestinians performing *dabkeh* in the New York area. In particular, I got in touch with dancers from the Palestinian group *Al-Watan (al-waṭan)*, a dance ensemble that during the time of its operation had been closely connected with *El-Funoun* from Ramallah/al-Bireh, the group I was planning on working with in the West Bank. Slowly falling apart since the beginning of the nineties, *Al-Watan* had officially dissolved in 1995 and by the time I started my research in Manhattan, its members were definite about not getting back together to restart the group. My interaction with *Al-Watan* thus primarily consisted of trying to undig and reconstruct the group's history, activities and connection with *El-Funoun* through people's memory, not current activities. With the help of Majida Rimawi, one of the group's choreographers whom I had met by chance at the *Festival of Arab Arts* in Brooklyn in 1996, I located other members when I came to Manhattan in 1997. Of the originally twelve *Al-Watan* members I managed to contact and meet another four who had stayed in the area. Two more I had a chance of meeting later in Palestine, where they had immigrated to and become dedicated members of *El-Funoun*. The rest had left the New York area and were not in touch anymore.

<sup>34</sup> James Clifford sees 'travel encounters' in contrast to a conventional 'tent-in-the-village' approach as an adequate new form of thinking about ethnographic research, as to him the concept better accounts for the changing realities of con-

groups, *Karme'i Makhol* and *Al-Asayyel* in Israel and *El-Funoun* in the West Bank, I had intended to ask the group leaders for permission to join the rehearsals as a participant observer, first only watching and later actively joining the training. Personal contact, everyday interaction and semi-structured interviewing was to complement close observation and the active participation in each group. In this way, I thought I could closely experience three different, yet formally comparable performance sites of *dabkeh/debkah*. I soon realized, however, that not only the actualities on the ground, but my positioning in and interaction with the different sites and people prevented any attempt at such a neatly structured comparative approach. Constantly aware of and renegotiating my identity as a foreign researcher in the changing contexts of the various sites led to very different research situations. These, in turn, differently shaped the specific ethnographic strategies and techniques employed in each context, as well as the intensity of my interaction with performers and audiences.

At the same time, not only working with three different dance groups, but sometimes working simultaneously with two of the groups within the general context of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict necessarily raised the issue of field work ethics. As Marcus has pointed out, multi-sited fieldwork turns the question of ethics into an important, yet extremely ambiguous issue. As long as ethnographers worked in a single site, ethical questioning of ethnographic work had a clear target, focusing on critically investigating the dynamics of an assumed power hierarchy between the researcher, implicated in Western colonialism, and his/her subjects (Marcus 1998). In contrast, moving between multiple sites and meeting people from a wide range of different classes, national affiliations and positions of power, the power relationship between myself as a middle class white German female and my informants could not automatically be assumed simply in terms of an inequality weighted in my favor, but was much more complicated and shifting.<sup>35</sup>

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temporary life worlds (Clifford 1997: 198, 217). Similarly, Renato Rosaldo proposed 'deep hanging out' as a new way of doing ethnography at the conference *Anthropology and 'the Field'* in April 1994. Rosaldo's comment is cited in (Clifford 1997: 188, 219).

<sup>35</sup> For a further reading on the ways in which a changing global environment impacts the relationship between the ethnographer and his/her subjects of investigation, shifting power in favor of the later, see (Lee and Ackerman 1994).



### Al-Asayyel

Living in Deir el-Asad, Northern Galilee, for half a year with relatives of Yaḥyā Abū Jum‘ah, the organizer and leader of *Al-Asayyel*, taking part in everyday life and establishing close face-to-face relationships was probably the nearest I came to doing field work in the “Malinowskian tradition”<sup>36</sup> of extended co-residence and participant observation in a single site. Yet instead of ‘pitching my ethnographic tent’ I tried to avoid to prematurely delimit the space within which I would investigate *dabkeh* as performed by *Al-Asayyel*. I thus kept on the move, following *dabkeh* around the village and beyond. Three times a week, I attended rehearsals and tagged along to *Al-Asayyel*’s presentations taking place throughout Israel, the West Bank and Gaza. From the first evening on, I was invited to actively participate in the rehearsals, taking my place at the very end of the *ṣaff*, the circling line of dancers. As an unmarried female student I became automatically grouped with the girls and ended up spending most of my time with them, especially the daughters of my host family, following them around, visiting them in their homes and moving within their social circles. My car, which I had offered for transportation, became labelled “the girls’ car (*ṣayyārat il-banāt*)” and, since I was older and seemingly to be trusted, people quickly accepted my offer for safely transporting the girls to and from rehearsals, performances and social calls, especially at night. Several times, I also accompanied Abū Jum‘ah to rehearsals of other *dabkeh* groups with whom he worked in the area, spending hours traveling together through the Galilee and discussing his activities as a trainer and performer. Regularly, the house I lived in turned into a training site. I had asked Muḥammad, *Al-Asayyel*’s leading male performer, to teach me some of the main choreographies of the group. Twice or three times a week, after the official group rehearsals, he came to the house, demonstrating the essential steps and explaining how the choreographies of *Al-Asayyel* were constructed. Under Muḥammad’s watchful eyes, I circled the room with the daughters of my host family, trying to pick up the various rhythms and intricate steps.

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<sup>36</sup> A term coined by Akhil Gupta and James Ferguson (Gupta and Ferguson 1997: 5–11).

### Karmeï Makhol

In January 1999, having lived in Deir el-Asad for almost three months, I started working with the Israeli Jewish group *Karmeï Makhol* from Karmi'el. Continuing to live with my Arab host family in Deir el-Asad throughout the period of working with *Karmeï Makhol* profoundly shaped my interaction with the Israeli Jewish group. Karmi'el was only a five-minute drive from the village, and people from Deir el-Asad regularly went back and forth, for work, business, shopping, leisure time or just hanging out. I had been to Karmi'el many times, driving around with the daughters of my host family, accompanying my host mother or running some errands. While technically moving between the two spaces did not pose any problem, in practice, however, it often seemed to me like an act of tightrope walking. Behind the backdrop of a generally precarious political situation as well as the particular tensions and grievances governing the relationship between the Jewish town Karmi'el and the Palestinian Arab villages across the street, I needed to declare my loyalties. Although ideally ethnographic research should always be guided by ethical considerations, I felt that in this context, moving back and forth between the Jewish town and the Palestinian Arab village, ethical considerations took center-stage, more so maybe than in another, less politically charged situation. Among other things, this implied that from the beginning, I was absolutely frank about my research design, telling Israeli Arab as well as Israeli Jewish dancers openly that I was studying *dabkeh/debkah* in both its Arab as well as its Israeli Jewish contexts. In addition, I had to live up to the social norms expected of me as an unmarried woman living inside an Arab family's house and interacting with their unmarried daughters. From the beginning, I thus also took great care to be completely open about my whereabouts and interactions, informing my host family of every move that I made. People knew me, and even if for some reason I had wanted to, it would have been impossible to conceal my movements around Karmi'el or elsewhere.

Living in Deir el-Asad while working with *Karmeï Makhol* obviously affected the intensity of my interaction with the Jewish dance troupe. While in principle it was no problem to live in Deir el-Asad and regularly drive to Karmi'el for meeting people, interviewing and attending rehearsals, I consciously kept a distance. The rehearsals which I regularly attended twice a week from February to April started at 5pm

and often, especially before performances, continued way past midnight. I had no official curfew, but trading off personal freedom for maintaining moral standing, I left many times before the end of the rehearsal, not wanting to stay out too late. Also, dancers of *Karmeï Makhol* as well as Dado Kraus, the choreographer of the group, several times invited me to actively join the training. I refrained from doing so. Watching the rehearsals was one thing, but I felt that actually joining in would have compromised my standing among the dancers of *Al-Asayyel*, especially among the girls, in terms of group loyalty as well as the complex issue of the female body in dance involving questions of dress, movement and gender interactions. Similarly, I consciously kept social contact with *Karmeï Makhol* dancers outside the official setting of rehearsals and performances within certain boundaries, turning down invitations for private parties, weekend trips, or staying overnight at people's houses.

Living in Deir el-Asad while working with *Karmeï Makhol*, however, not merely served to close doors for me. In fact, in certain ways it actually added an interesting dimension to my research. Telling *Karmeï Makhol* dancers that I was living with an Arab family always provoked a reaction, ranging from surprised interest to pronounced indifference and even rejection. This mostly worked to provide a good entry point into discussing the issues I was interested in for my research. With dancers from *Al-Asayyel*, reactions were similar, ranging from genuine interest in my interaction with *Karmeï Makhol* to hardly concealed scepticism. In addition, moving around Karmi'el in the company of friends from the village provided an excellent opportunity to get feed back on my work and observations. Upon hearing that I would attend rehearsals in Karmi'el, the daughters of my host family expressed vivid interest in coming along. They knew some of the dancers from joint performances and a trip to Mexico in 1994. Also, they were curious about the ways *Karmeï Makhol* dancers were training and what exactly I was doing there. Although the girls never actually did accompany me to the training sessions, they came along quite frequently to the performances, commenting on the presentations as well as meeting the dancers I was working with from *Karmeï Makhol*.

### El-Funoun

Having danced with Muhammad Ata, *El-Funoun's* artistic director and choreographer, during my first stay in the West Bank in summer

1995, entering *El-Funoun* was easier than I had thought.<sup>37</sup> Generally, the group's policy about new dancers entering was restrictive, submitting them to an entrance test administered only once a year and a subsequent three month-trial period, before accepting them as full-fledged members to the group. In addition, the group leaders tried to keep the rehearsals private, strongly discouraging outside visitors. My request to work with *El-Funoun*—entering the rehearsals and participating in their activities—thus could not be approved by Ata alone as the group's artistic director, but had to undergo an official process of approval by all of the group's administrative board.

Once the official permission was granted, however, I found that access to the group was fairly easy. After the first two weeks of coming to rehearsals and merely sitting on a chair watching the proceedings, I was invited to actively join the training. Two weeks later, Muhammad Ata asked me to take part in the choreography that *El-Funoun* was preparing for the opening and closing night of the *International Palestine Festival '99*. The period of intense rehearsing on four to five days per week for the entire month of June and finally performing at the festival in Birzeit in front of thousands of spectators provided a good opportunity to establish social ties not only with *El-Funoun* members, but also with dancers of other local groups cooperating in the production. Again, offering my car for transportation to and from the training sites, especially at night, volunteering to help with the logistics of the festival and writing reviews for the festival newspaper published alongside the nine-day event helped to consolidate my social ties with the group and allowed me to trace the workings of *El-Funoun* through different contexts.

### *Working with the groups*

Confronted with three very different research situations and adjusting my general approach in each site to account for these differences, I nevertheless used a few key methods which, in modified forms, were employed in all five contexts. Participant observation during the rehearsals, whether I was just watching or whether I was actively joining the dancers, consisted of carefully taking notes on the sessions,

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<sup>37</sup> Enrolled in a course to study Palestinian dialect at *Birzeit University* during the summer of 1995, I started training with the university's *dabkeh* group *El-Judhur (al-judhūr)* which was led by *El-Funoun* artistic director Muhammad Ata.

focusing on issues such as general organization, group dynamics, group members, interaction between dancers and teachers, male and female members, training activities, the ways *dabkeh/debkah* figured in the training, music, choreographies, etc. At the same time, the rehearsals were an excellent opportunity to closely get to know each group's current artistic program. I watched the process of learning new choreographies and in the cases of *El-Funoun* and *Al-Asayyel* actively took part in this process. I listened to people's spontaneous comments on the pieces they were rehearsing and asked about their symbolism, purpose and meanings for the dancers. During performances, I usually first stayed backstage with the group, helping with costumes and makeup. With the beginning of the presentation, I sat down among the audience, watching, videotaping and noting people's comments and reactions to the presentations. In addition, I tried to 'hang out' as much as possible with dancers and leaders of the groups, meeting at folk dance gatherings, festivals, social events, parties or in private, for informal interviewing or just to talk.

Tracing *dabkeh/debkah* through the work of the three folk dance ensembles, as well as tracing connections linking these three, at first glance more or less seemingly discontinuous spaces of performing *dabkeh/debkah*, I conducted open-ended, unstructured interviews with various officials in Israel and the West Bank from the fields of cultural policy making as well as NGOs, cultural centers, international and government agencies. In addition, I collected written material from city archives, libraries and the dance groups themselves. Videotaping the presentations I attended myself, I also bought or copied older audiovisual material from the groups. Additional research strategies included gossiping, flipping through the daily newspapers, and trips to the local music stores and cultural institutions.

#### *Semi-structured interviews*

Using the data gathered through informal conversations, participant observation and unstructured interviewing to develop interview guides, I conducted semi-structured interviews with each group. In general, these interviews were easier to administer than I had initially thought. Conducting the interviews at the end of my stay with each group, I had established personal relationships with the dancers and leaders, thus reducing difficulties of access or selection of appropriate interview partners. In addition, the dancers usually met my request for official interviewing with positive openness and willingness to talk.

Considering that most of the interviewees were long-time performers, used to appearing on stage and even TV, the agility and often almost eagerness of the dancers to discuss their artistic involvement in the formal setting of an interview is maybe not surprising. Besides, many dancers were used to the types of questions that I posed, as the groups themselves engaged in vivid internal discussions around the meanings, purposes and aims of their activities. In the case of *El-Funoun*, such reflections on the group's artistic engagement to a large degree were even formulated in writing.

While in general I met little resistance to formal interviewing, there were several factors that influenced the way in which I could actually conduct these interviews in the context of each individual group. I had designed all interviews to broadly focus around the same four topics: first, the personal motivation of the dancers to participate in the group as well as his/her specific activities and role; second, the significance of *dabkeh/debkah* presentations both on and off stage as a means of collective identification for the dancer; third, issues of authenticity and tradition in the context of the artistic presentations of each group; and fourth, the importance of gender for staged presentations of *dabkeh/debkah* as well as gender roles within the group. All interviews also included a 'game,' for which I asked the respondents to rank cards listing five different possible motives for participating in the group in the order of their importance.<sup>38</sup> Yet, while all interviews were structured around the same key topics, I had developed a different interview guide for each group informed by the specificities of its individual context.<sup>39</sup> In addition, I mainly used open-ended questions, giving each interviewee the room to determine content and direction of the conversation and in a dialogic manner adjusting my own questions to the answers received.

Furthermore, although not coming to bear as much in my interaction with members of *Karnei Makhol*, issues of gender to a large degree influenced the ways in which I was able to have access to and conduct interviews with male in contrast to female dancers in the context of *El-Funoun* and especially *Al-Asayyel*. Although in both groups I had contact to both male and female members, the rapport that I was able to establish with the women was much closer than with the men. This affected in particular my research in Deir

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<sup>38</sup> See the appendix for details.

<sup>39</sup> See the appendix for the interview guide used with each group.

el-Asad. As a woman, I was automatically grouped with the group's female members, rehearsing with the women and spending most of my free time with them. Outside of rehearsals, performances and other official social gatherings, I found myself having little contact with male members. Here, the only male dancer that I maintained regular contact with outside the official framework of the troupe was lead dancer Muḥammad. While conducting interviews among the female members *Al-Asayyel* was thus easy, arranging to meet with the group's male members was much more complicated and could only take place in presence of a 'chaperon,' either one of the daughters of my host family, or Muḥammad, the lead dancer. At first, I felt somewhat uneasy about having a third party present during the interviews, as I did not know how this would affect the course of the conversation in contrast to the interviews I had done alone. Yet, I eventually came to see the company as adding an interesting angle, as especially Muḥammad's interaction with the interviewee often provoked interesting comments, differing opinions and feedback.

To have a quantitative basis for comparison, I had initially planned to speak with ten male and ten female members of each group. Yet practical issues such as lack of time and availability of the performers prevented the gathering of such a neatly quantifiable data pool. In the end, I managed to formally interview eleven male and ten female members of *El-Funoun*, seven male and ten female dancers of *Karme'i Makhhol*, as well as nine male and nine female dancers of *Al-Asayyel*. My choice of interview partners hereby focused on the groups' leaders and current members, selecting long-standing performers that stood out because of their involvement in and identification with the group. I also tried to speak with former members in order to get a sense of each group's historic development.

With *Al-Asayyel* and *El-Funoun* dancers, I generally spoke Palestinian dialect during our everyday contact as well as for the interviews. There were some native English speakers in the group with whom I used English. In Karmi'el, I used English for the semi-structured interviews. For day-to-day interaction with the group, I spoke English and, as much as possible, Hebrew. As most *Karme'i Makhhol* dancers in the oldest age level from which I selected the interviewees spoke English fluently, sometimes even as a native language, my limited knowledge of Hebrew did not constitute a problem. I conducted the interviews in people's houses, or, in some cases, in the training center of the dance groups. All interviews were tape-recorded, varying usually from thirty minutes to one and a half hours.

*Data analysis*

For the qualitative data analysis of my source material I used ethnographic methods as employed in Performance Studies. I listened to all interview recordings and wrote them out in English, thereby translating interviews conducted in Arabic or Hebrew into English and transcribing key passages and concepts.<sup>40</sup> I qualitatively analyzed interviews and fieldnotes designing a coding system for key words.<sup>41</sup> Audiovisual material in form of videos, audiotapes, CDs, posters and photos was analyzed according to its semiotic contents, focusing on factors such as costumes, dancers, steps, choreography, style, music, instruments, songs, performance site, advertisement, audience reaction, etc. I worked through written sources such as newspaper clippings, programs and archival material in Arabic, Hebrew and English, concentrating on information about the dance groups as well as the history of the Israeli and Palestinian folk dance movements. I quantitatively analyzed the game included in the interviews with *El-Funoun*, *Karmeî Makhhol* and *Al-Asayyel*. I scaled the responses, using percentages to calculate the relative value of each cards. The results are presented in tables included in the appendix.

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<sup>40</sup> The extensive amount of interview material available on tape (ca. 110 hours of tape) rendered a complete transcription of the text impractical.

<sup>41</sup> For methods of qualitative data analysis refer to (Bernard 1995: 360–392).



## CHAPTER TWO

# STRUGGLING FOR MODERN STATEHOOD: AUTHENTICITY, GENDER AND A TWICE INVENTED TRADITION

### INTRODUCTION

*Dabkeh*, an Arab dance event forming part of the shared sociocultural landscape of the Eastern Levant, underwent two processes of inventing tradition. Twice, *dabkeh* was made into a fixed canon of movement patterns and steps which, through repeated execution, served to consolidate behavioral norms and cultural meanings in the name of both the Israeli as well as the Palestinian nation. First, invented as an Israeli *debkah*, *dabkeh* emerged in the forties as a defining part of *riku-dai ‘am israeli* (Israeli folk dance), a newly created set of choreographies which, after the foundation of the state of Israel in 1948, quickly took hold as a wide-spread, popular activity. In the late 1960s and early 70s, *dabkeh* was invented as tradition for the second time. Newly categorized as *al-turāth al-sha‘bī al-filasṭīnī* (Palestinian heritage), the Arab *dabkeh* was nationalized and became inscribed onto Palestinian bodies in terms of a fixed set of specifically ‘Palestinian’ movement patterns and styles.

Inventing *dabkeh* as a performance of modern national identity, both Zionist as well as Palestinian cultural leaders showed a heightened concern for the issue of cultural authenticity. Behind the backdrop of the unfolding Israeli-Arab conflict, both took great care to stage *dabkeh/debkah* as a national practice which was culturally authentic and thus, unique. A proliferating number of works have explored the various ways in which cultural practices constructed as authentic traditions serve to legitimize nationalist claims.<sup>1</sup> In particular, as Partha Chatterjee argues in his seminal work *The Nation and its Fragments*, issues of cultural authenticity gain salience in the context of emancipatory nationalisms, i.e. national liberation movements for-

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<sup>1</sup> See (Foster 1991; Alonso 1994) for a good overview of this literature.

mulating their claim to modern statehood from within a context of hierarchical power relationships (Chatterjee 1993).<sup>2</sup>

Drawing on the example of 19th century colonial India/Bengal, Chatterjee highlights the challenge that Indian Bengali nationalists faced in constructing their own, post-colonial modernity in opposition to Western domination. How could an independent, post-colonial Indian Bengali nation possibly be imagined as modern and 'original' at the same time? According to Chatterjee, Indian Bengali nationalists solved this dilemma by conceptualizing the nation-state as divided into two spheres, an "outer, material domain" as well as an "inner, spiritual domain." The outer domain, consisting of areas such as economy, technology, science and statecraft, became organized according to parameters staked out in the West and the colonial state. The inner domain, in contrast, was supposed to remain shielded by all means from outside, especially Western influences, as it was considered to harbor the nation's authentic character and essential originality. While embracing Western modernity in the material domain, Chatterjee argues that Indian/Bengali nationalists displayed outmost concern for keeping the West out of its spiritual realm: "The greater one's success in imitating Western skills in the material domain, therefore, the greater the need to preserve the distinctness of one's spiritual culture" (Chatterjee 1993: 6). Shielding their spiritual domain from colonial interference, Indian Bengali nationalists, however, did not leave this domain unchanged. Like the public and the political spheres, the spiritual domain was modernized. Yet as Chatterjee emphasizes, it was modernized with a cultural difference. A modern national culture was brought into being, which was not Western, but authentically unique.

While speaking about 19th century colonial India/Bengal in particular, Chatterjee's argument is extremely useful for understanding *why* cultural authenticity emerges as such an urgent issue for any nationalism within the context of political subjugation: Invented traditions constructed as authentic serve to foster a nation's aspirations for liberation and modern statehood against the claims of a dominating power. The particular emphasis which emancipatory nationalisms place on 'authentic tradition' has thus less to do with an 'inherent

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<sup>2</sup> See also (Petee 1993) on the central importance which issues of cultural authenticity gain in contexts of unequal power relationships.

backwardness' and 'traditionality' as Western discourse often maintains in the context of Eastern societies<sup>3</sup> and more with their attempt at shaping modern existence independently of the influence of dominant powers, notably the West. If a nation's material sphere must be organized according to a global (Western) discourse of nationalism, at least its cultural essence should remain independently untouched.

Drawing attention to the fact that power and one's position within the global hierarchy profoundly impact the ways in which nationalisms are culturally articulated, Chatterjee, however, does not investigate in more detail *how* these cultural essences are in fact constructed. Nationalist movements do not simply take recourse to pre-existing practices, nor do they randomly make up the essences serving to legitimate their claims. As the example of the Arab *dabkeh* suggests, the invention of tradition is an active and complex process, involving processes of creation, recreation and sometimes even outright appropriation in the context of shifting power relationships. Investigating *dabkeh* as a twice-invented tradition which two competing nationalisms claim as authentically theirs, I trace the different ways in which cultural essences are constructed and employed. Examining how one cultural practice was differently used by Zionist/Israeli and Palestinian cultural leaders for purposes of cultural authentication, I highlight the ways in which the making of a nation's cultural essence is determined through relationality: I show how the performance of Zionism, once made into modern Israeli nationalism in the Middle East, was shaped by its location and, in turn, fundamentally shaped the performance of modern Palestinian nationhood.

Referring to *dabkeh/debkah* as an 'invented tradition' and 'authenticated practice' I do not mean to overemphasize processes of rupture and discontinuity. Until today, *dabkeh* continues to be performed within its historic context of Palestinian social festivities and maintains a variety of different, also 'old' meanings alongside its 'new' significance as a nationalizing force. Instead of emphasizing historic discontinuity and rupture, I thus posit the invention of *dabkeh/debkah* as a double process of resignification, in which the dance acquired new meanings even while old ones continued to remain valid. That means, I examine the invention of *dabkeh/debkah* as a process, in

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<sup>3</sup> For a very insightful and convincing demontage of the modernity-tradition dichotomy which Western public discourse generally imposes on Muslim societies see (Schulze 2000).

which creative initiative in both the Israeli and the Palestinian context impacted on the discursive norms and thus also the meanings of the performance of the historic *dabkeh*. Nationalizing *dabkeh* twice thus constituted a process in which repetition very clearly occurred with a difference, a difference that did not abrogate prior meanings to produce something entirely new, but rather shifted meanings to allow change always in relation to what had been before.

PERFORMING MODERN ISRAELI JEWISHNESS:  
THE CASE OF THE ISRAELI *DEBKAH*

Amidst the turmoil in mandatory Palestine in the summer of 1947 defined by clashes between British forces, Jewish underground organizations and Palestinian Arabs, a Jewish folk dance festival was organized in Kibbutz Dalia. It was the second of its kind, the first one having taken place three years before. Yet in contrast to the first, the second Dalia festival came to stand for the emergence of a new cultural tradition among the Jewish population in mandatory Palestine to be widely known after 1948 under the name of *rikudai 'am israeli*.<sup>4</sup> Gurit Kadman, organizer of the Dalia festival and generally regarded as the most energetic driving force behind the invention of the new Israeli folk dance tradition, described the event in retrospect as follows:

The second folk dance festival in Dalia in the summer of 1947 was like a demonstration of the *Yishuv* (Jewish population) against oppression and in favor of its rising indigenous folk culture. Five-hundred dancers took part in the *kinus* (gathering) which lasted two days and nights, and at the concluding evening, for the public performance, 25,000 people came from all over the country in spite of the night curfew which the British mandatory government at that time had imposed upon the country. The onlookers sat all through the night on the ploughed furrows (instead of benches), in the large natural amphitheater near Kibbutz Dalia, watching the performances on the open

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<sup>4</sup> It is not clear when exactly the choreographers and dancers started referring to their practices as 'Israeli' folk dances. Most of the sources on the history of the Israeli folk dance movement were written later, and their authors use the term 'Israeli' simply in order to distinguish these 'new folk dances' from the European folk dances performed in the *kibbutzim* during the twenties and thirties. The shift from describing the new choreographies simply as 'new dances,' 'Hebrew dances' or 'Palestinian dances' to calling them 'Israeli folk dances' probably occurred around the time of the second Dalia Festival in 1947 and the establishment of the state in 1948. Yet, the issue of when exactly and why this name change occurred would merit closer historic analysis.

stage down in the *wadi* (valley). The program contained only Israeli dances—folk dances and festive holiday dances alternating, nearly all of them newly created, the fruits of three years of creation. The hope for a miracle had happened—the indigenous Israeli folk dance was born . . . (Kadman 1975: 29–30).

The Israeli appropriation of the Arab *dabkeh* and its reinvention as an Israeli *debkah* played a crucial role in the establishment of the Israeli folk dance tradition, which, as Kadman emphasized in her recalling of the Dalya event, was considered both newly created as well as essentially authentic. How did this new tradition of Israeli folk dancing emerge, and which role did *debkah* play in this process?

### *Early beginnings of Jewish dancing in Ottoman Palestine, 1882–1914*

In general, research on Jewish dancing in Ottoman Palestine is sparse for the time between the beginning of the first wave of Zionist immigration in 1882, later known as the first *aliyah* and the end of the second in 1914.<sup>5</sup> So far, no serious academic study exists on this early history of Jewish dance activities.<sup>6</sup> Only sporadically, references to such activities are found in articles written mostly in retrospect by Israeli folk dance leaders on the history of their movement.<sup>7</sup> Little is known in particular on dancing in the old *yishuv*, i.e. the community of Jews living in Ottoman Palestine before the advent of the first *aliyah*. Numbering an estimated 24,000 before 1882, the old *yishuv* was small (Tessler 1994: 43). Mostly concentrated in the four cities of religious importance, that is, Jerusalem, Hebron, Tsefat and Tiberias, it was made up of religious Jews of both *Sephardi* as well as *Ashkenazi* background.<sup>8</sup> According to Shalom Hermon, one of the leading

<sup>5</sup> The Hebrew word '*aliyah*' literally translates as 'ascent' and is generally used when referring to the immigration of Jews to historic Palestine/Israel. In line with research on the topic, the five major immigration waves which occurred between 1882 and 1948 are referred to in the following as the first (1882–1903), the second (1904–1914), the third (1919–1923), the fourth (1924–1931) and the fifth *aliyah* (1932–1948).

<sup>6</sup> Jehoash Hirshberg recently published an important work on the social history of music in the Jewish community of Ottoman Palestine (Hirshberg 1995). Except for the brief mentioning of expressionist dancer Yardena Cohen, this book, however, makes no reference to dancing. A historic work on the early beginnings of Jewish dancing in Palestine comparable to Hirschberg's study on music remains to be done.

<sup>7</sup> See for instance (Kadman 1968; Kadman 1969; Hermon 1981; Hermon 1986; Friedhaber 1995/96).

<sup>8</sup> Historically, the origins of the old *yishuv* are said to go back to early antiquity. In the 13th century with the decline of the Franks, immigrants inspired by Jewish mysticism came to settle in Ottoman Palestine prompted by what they considered

figures of the Israeli folk dance movement emerging in the forties and later assistant chief supervisor of physical education in the *Israeli Ministry of Education and Culture*, dancing was practiced within these various *Sephardi* and *Ashkenazi* communities as part of family occasions such as birthdays, weddings, *brit mila* and *bar-mitzvah* celebrations as well as religious holidays such as *Simchat-Torah* and *Lag B'Omer* (Hermon 1981; Hermon 1986).<sup>9</sup> While mentioning dance activities as part of the sociocultural life in the old *yishuv*, Hermon, however, gives no further details as to their nature, such as style, steps or music.

Similarly, Israeli folk dance literature is quiet on the issue of Jewish dancing during the first two waves of Zionist immigration, the first *aliyah* from 1882 to 1903 in the course of which 20,000 to 30,000 new immigrants arrived, and the second from 1904 to 1914 bringing between 35,000 to 40,000 new settlers. The only time that Hermon directly alludes to the character of Jewish dance activities during the time of the first *aliyah* occurs in the context of the agricultural settlements established by *Hibbat Tzzyon*, the 'Love of Zion' movement. Emerging in Russia and Rumania largely as a result of the pogroms of 1881, *Hibbat Tzzyon* constituted the first organized manifestation of the new, specifically Jewish nationalism growing among Jews in Eastern Europe at the time. Managing at first to establish agricultural settlements in Ottoman Palestine, such as Petakh Tikva, Rishon Le-Tsion, Rosh Pina, Zikhron Ya'akov and Khadera, *Hibbat Tzzyon* soon faced serious economic difficulties. Taking pity on the plight of the persecuted Eastern European Jews, Baron Rothschild, an assimilated wealthy French Jew sought to help their resettlement in Ottoman Palestine by providing generous financial

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their religious duty. These immigrants, together with *Sephardi* Jews expelled from Spain in 1492 bestowed upon the Jewish population in Ottoman Palestine its particular, religiously-oriented character which characterized the *old yishuv* throughout the centuries. At the end of the 18th century, *Ashkenazi* immigrants from Russia and Poland reached Ottoman Palestine driven by similar religious motivations, a streak of immigration which continued through the 19th and the early 20th century. On the social fabric as well as the history of the *old yishuv* see (Eisenstadt 1973).

<sup>9</sup> *brit mila* is the Jewish circumcision ceremony for male children and *bar-mitzvah* the Jewish initiation ceremony for boys aged thirteen. *Simchat-Torah* is the Saturday marking the end of *Sucloth* (the Feast of the Tabernacle), the Jewish autumn harvest and thanksgiving festival commemorating the sheltering of the Israelites in the wilderness. *Lag B'Omer* is the thirty-third day of *Omer*, the time period between the Jewish holidays of *Pesach* (*Passover*) and *Shavuoth* (*Pentecost*) in spring, a holiday said to commemorate the end of a plague in the 2nd century A.D. For further information on Jewish religious holidays and ritual see (De Vries 1994; Ouaknin 1995).

as well as administrative support to the *Hibbat Tziyon* settlements. French Jewish officials, who had been brought to Ottoman Palestine specifically for that purpose, implemented the rescue plan devised by Rothschild. The only time when Hermon directly alludes to the character of Jewish dancing during that time is in reference to the presence of these officials, crediting them with introducing French style ballroom dancing in the settlements: “Most of the Jewish landowners who came with the First Alija, worked their fields and orchards with Arab labourers and acquired under the social system of the Baron Rothschild the French cultural habits, probably danced ballroom dances as danced by the bourgeois of Western Europe.” (Hermon 1981: 110) However, Hermon’s observation is given merely as an assumption, providing no reference as to its basis or the validity of his claim.

References made to dancing among the immigrants of the second *aliyah* are equally vague. While the first *aliyah* eventually stagnated as a sociopolitical movement, the second wave of immigration which started in 1904 and consisted mostly of members of various Zionist workers groups in Russia laid the basis for the sociopolitical structure of the new *yishuv*. Although small, consisting at first of barely 10,000 people, many of whom soon left the country, its members successfully cooperated with the Zionist world leadership to design the ideology of a new sociopolitical reality to be realized on the grounds in Ottoman Palestine (Eisenstadt 1973: 32–33). Zvi Friedhaber, a private researcher and archivist, considers the second *aliyah* as the historic basis for the later emergence of folk dancing as an organized movement in the new *yishuv*. According to him,

The longing for the creation of an original Israeli dance style, to express the new way of life then coming into being in the land of Israel, was already expressed by workers in the second Aliyah period—the early 1900s—and also thereafter. The subject was raised on different occasions in periodicals of the time. (Friedhaber 1995/96: 13)

Other than this reference which implies that dance activities had already emerged as a past-time among the immigrants of the second *aliyah*, the literature is extremely vague about dancing during this early period of Jewish immigration to Ottoman Palestine.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> See also (Hermon 1981: 110) who emphasizes the fact that very little research has been carried out on this early period.

*New Jews as dancing pioneers, 1920s–30s*

Israeli folk dance discourse transmitted via the various articles, biographies and oral histories published in Hebrew and English by the leaders of the movement squarely place the origins of Israeli folk dancing in the time from the third to the fifth *aliyah*. The third *aliyah*, taking place from 1919 to 1923, was similar to the second in terms of background and ideological orientation of the immigrants. Most of them were young, unmarried and ideologically driven Eastern European Jews with a socialist perspective, who set out to increase the new types of agricultural collectives already introduced during the time of the second *aliyah*, the *kibbutzim* and *moshavim* (Eisenstadt 1973: 43).<sup>11</sup> According to the dance leaders' narrative, the large-scale establishment of these communal settlements prompted the institutionalization of folk dancing as a favorite past-time among their members, a trend which continued through the time of the fourth and the fifth *aliyah*.

*The circle*

The early dances in the *kibbutzim* consisted of a set of European dance practices which the immigrants of the third, fourth and fifth *aliyah* had brought with them from their countries of origin. In contrast to Shalom Hermon's assumption that the earlier dance practices in the Rothschild settlements had consisted of French-style ballroom dancing, the highly socialist oriented immigrants of the third *aliyah* spurned anything perceived as bourgeois entertainment. According to Hermon, "boys did not wear neckties; girls did not wear silk stockings or makeup; ballroom dances were taboo." In line with their ideological orientation, the activities instituted by these immigrants in the agricultural settlements consisted of dance activities labeled 'European folk,' such as the *horah* from Rumania, the *krakoviak* from Poland, and the *polka*, the *sherele* and the *rondo* from Central Europe (Hermon 1986: 110).

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<sup>11</sup> *moshav* refers to a cooperative settlement, in which marketing and large parts of the production are carried out on a collective basis, but plots of land are privately owned by the workers. In a *kibbutz*, in contrast, not only marketing and production, but also the ownership of the land is collective. The first *kibbutz*, Degania, was established south of Lake Tiberias in 1909. For a close study of the origin and development of different types of agricultural settlements during the second and third *aliyah* refer to (Shafir 1996).



Folk dancing in the agricultural settlements at the time of the 1920s and early 30s served several functions. By instituting European folk dance traditions in the *kibbutzim*, the immigrants could relive well-known cultural practices in an environment that seemed foreign and often hostile. It was a way of dealing with the changes that immigration had brought as well as the new communal life-style of the *kibbutz*. As Israeli musicologist Jehoash Hirshberg points out, European music and dances often were a last resort for young people living through periods of alienation, traumas of immigration as well as adaptation to the radically different social system in the collective settlements. Hirshberg thus cites one European woman as anonymously commenting in the chronicle of her *kibbutz*: “It feels that during a concert the separation between people falls down, the hard crust which covers the hearts is removed.” (Hirshberg 1995: 205)

These early dance activities, however, did not merely serve as nostalgic reminders of a life-style left behind. More importantly, they were instituted on an everyday level as a means of fostering senses of community and social cohesiveness among the newly arriving immigrants in the agricultural settlements. European folk dances and especially the *horah*, a kind of circle dance said to have been introduced by Rumanian immigrants, hereby came to stand for the new type of life envisioned by socialist Zionism to be realized in the new agricultural settlements in historic Palestine. These dances constituted a means to acquaint newcomers with the ideologies of egalitarianism and communalism determining life in these collectives. New immigrants were habituated to the daily routine and integrated into the community. The dancing circle of the *horah*, where “no one is first and no one is last” was turned into a romanticized symbol of the socialist community, of togetherness and pursuing a common goal (Berk and Reimer 1978: 24). Gurit Kadman, who had come to Mandatory Palestine in 1920 and co-founded Kibbutz Heftziba, in retrospect described the importance which dancing the *horah* held in her *kibbutz* as follows:

It [the *horah*] fitted perfectly the pioneering character of those settlers and the social set up of the *kibbutz* especially. The tightly closed circle, with linked arms and hands on the shoulders of the neighbors, was the exact expression of the close human relationship between all the members of the community; all of them with equal rights and equal values, regardless of sex or dancing ability. [. . .] They sing and dance, circling and abandoning themselves to the togetherness of the group movement; the enthusiasm rises almost to ecstasy, quieting down

for a time and rising again; some leave and others join in, but the circle, the closely knit chain remains and goes on like a magic ring. (Kadman 1972: 26)

### *The foot*

The idea of folk dancing as a performance of the Jewish immigrants' new life in mandatory Palestine did not originate in the agricultural settlements. Rather, the importance of folk dance activities in the daily lives of the *kibbutznikim*<sup>12</sup> was intimately tied to Zionism as formulated at the turn of the century within the context of a European scientific discourse of race, masculinity and the body. This new scientific discourse on the rise in Europe during the 19th century posited men and women no longer as individuals, but as types classifiable according to outer appearance (Mosse 1997). Within the context of this discourse, anti-Semitism gained impetus, as anti-Semitic arguments started to be articulated no longer primarily in religious terms, but in terms of 'pathology' (Gilman 1991).<sup>13</sup> Jews were excluded from full membership in modern European society because of their perceived physical difference, considered as the outer expression of their essential inner difference. Due to its specific pathological qualities, the Jewish body was considered inferior to the masculine Aryan ideal type. It was his "foot," the alleged degenerate physical stature of the Jewish body manifested in a flat-footed, limping gait, which symbolized this inherent difference and prevented the Jews from becoming full-fledged members of modern European society (Gilman 1991: 38–59).

Zionism as formulated at the turn of the century as an emancipatory movement for European Jews reflected this anti-Semitic rhetoric. Believing that European Jewish life had become corrupted and degenerate, Zionists formulated the idea of the 'New Jew.' First introduced during the Second Zionist Congress in Basel, Switzerland, in 1898, the idea of the New Jew called for a Jewish rejuvenation: Jews had to free themselves of their corrupt characteristics, which were largely blamed for the anti-Semitic propaganda and persecution on the rise at the time. By overcoming their alleged negative attributes, Zionist leaders argued that Jews could emancipate themselves from the image of the 'Ghetto Jew,' the passive, subjugated victim of anti-Semitism, and be transformed into a New Man, a masculine, proud and worthy member of European society (Berkowitz 1993: 99–109).

<sup>12</sup> Inhabitants of a *kibbutz*. Singular *kibbutznik*.

<sup>13</sup> For additional information see also (Gilman, Jütte et al. 1998).

Zionist leaders considered education as the primary means for achieving the transformation of the Ghetto Jew into his masculine counterimage, the New Man. Yet according to the postulate that ‘a healthy mind lives in a healthy body,’ Zionist leaders such as Max Nordau also advanced the idea that the moral regeneration offered through education should be accompanied by a change in physical appearance as well. To overcome the ‘Jewish foot,’ Nordau formulated his vision of the *Muskeljudentum*, the ‘Jewry of muscle,’ arguing that the Jewish individual had to discipline his body through sports, gymnastics and hygiene (Nordau 1995 (1903)). A body thus disciplined would become healthy, strong and muscular, reflecting the inner transformation of the New Jews in their outer appearance. Physical exercise would regenerate the Jewish body “destroyed” through centuries of ghettoization and persecution, and rid it of its negative characteristics (ibid.: 574). Urging European Jewry to take advantage of the chance for physical transformation, Nordau reasoned that

[i]n the narrow Jewish street our poor limbs soon forgot their gay movements; in the dimness of sunless houses our eyes began to blink shyly; the fear of constant persecution turned our powerful voices into frightened whispers [. . .] But now, all coercion has become a memory of the past, and at least we are allowed space enough for our bodies to live again. Let us take up our oldest traditions; let us once more become deep-chested, sturdy, sharp-eyed men. (ibid.)

Nordau’s idea of a muscular Jewry quickly found supporters among Jews living in Europe. Existing Jewish athletic societies affiliated themselves with the Zionist movement and propagated the new Zionist ideal of the muscular Jewry in their training session and publications. Their membership counts increased considerably and through pageants and public displays Jewish gymnastics, as the athletic endeavors came to be called, emerged as a visible part of the Zionist public sphere. According to Michael Berkowitz, the most spectacular tribute to the spreading belief in *Muskeljudentum* in pre-war Europe was paid at the *11th Zionist Congress* in 1913. On the occasion of commemorating the founder of the Zionist movement, Theodor Herzl, over 2,000 Jewish gymnasts performed in front of 25,000 spectators and the chairman of the *Committee for Jewish Gymnasts* from Berlin proudly voiced “his pleasure at being able to afford the Jewish and non-Jewish world a demonstration of gymnastic and athletic skills.”<sup>14</sup>

<sup>14</sup> Cited in (Berkowitz 1993: 109).

*The chalutz*

Early Zionist leaders such as Max Nordau had formulated the idea of the New Muscular Jew to bestow pride in European Jewry and evoke senses of shared Jewish community. Given the deep divisions among Jews in Europe at the time in terms of religion, geography, politics, language, economics and social standards, Zionist gymnastics provided a means for uniting European Jews around a set of commonly shared athletic practices and held out the promise of full equal membership in modern European society. Yet according to Michael Berkowitz, even before World War I, European Zionism provided room for thinking about alternative ways in which to imagine the New Jews. Already at that time, Zionism implied the possibility that “Israel might live again as a nation,” not only in the minds of assimilated Jews in Europe, but as a concrete sociopolitical reality. While Jewish gymnastics had—at least officially—been instituted as a means for modernizing the Jews in Europe, the idea took hold that the ultimate transformation of the Jews into a modern nation could only take place in Ottoman, and later in mandatory, Palestine itself. The real New Jew became identified with the *chalutz*, the immigrant-pioneer in Ottoman Palestine, who was active, self-sufficient and physically strong (Berkowitz 1993: 7).<sup>15</sup> This thinking is reflected in an editorial in the *Jewish Chronicle* from London at the time of the last *Zionist Congress* before World War I, which directly linked Zionist gymnastics in Europe to the construction of a Jewish settler community in Ottoman Palestine:

When we think about the gymnastics display on the one hand, and the determination to found a university on the other, and remember all else that is going forward—the serious development of colonization work in Palestine, for instance—it seems that the ‘three Ms’ demanded at one time—Mind, Muscle, and Men—are now forthcoming by the Jews in their effort to become a nation.<sup>16</sup>

Starting with the second *aliyah* and increasingly during the 1920s and 30s, Central European Jews involved with Zionist gymnastic societies and socialist youth movements such as *Hashomer Hatzá’ir*, *Maccabi* and *Gordonia*, followed the call to immigration.<sup>17</sup> Arriving in

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<sup>15</sup> For a characterization of the *chalutz* as the ideal type New Jew in Ottoman Palestine see also (Eisenstadt 1973: 35–36).

<sup>16</sup> Cited in (Berkowitz 1993: 7).

<sup>17</sup> *Hashomer Hatzá’ir* was founded in Poland and Russia after WWI, promoting

Palestine, these immigrants initiated folk dance activities in their *kibbutzim* and *moshavim* as a regular past-time. Among these immigrants were five German Jews, who quickly became known for their dedication to institutionalize folk dancing in the Jewish settlements and who later emerged as the most prominent leaders of the Israeli folk dance movement in the forties, Rivka Sturman, Tirza Hodes, Shalom Hermon, Leah Bergstein and, most importantly, Gurit Kadman.<sup>18</sup>

Gurit Kadman, born Gertrud Löwenstein<sup>19</sup> in Leipzig, Germany, in 1897 to a prominent, assimilated attorney's family, grew up deeply influenced by the ideals of the Jewish Gymnasts' movement and Nordau's postulate of the muscular Jewry.<sup>20</sup> Kadman later recalled about her childhood and youth that she had "always loved movement and participated in all aspects of sports, especially ice-skating and all aspects of dance." As a member of the German youth movement *Wandervogel* as well as of its Jewish counterpart, the *Blau Weiss Bund*, she recounted striving through the countryside, with a guitar 'slung on her back,' 'sleeping in villages' and 'collecting folklore.'<sup>21</sup> Similarly, Shalom Hermon was known for his athletic achievements as a member of Zionist gymnastics.<sup>22</sup> Born Fritz Weisskopf in Upper Silesia in 1920, he joined the local German athletics association in 1930 and emerged as one of the best performers of his age group. Becoming involved in the Jewish sports association *Maccabi* a few years later, his athletic engagement gained a specifically Zionist meaning for him (Ruskin and Meroz 1997). Like Kadman and Hermon, many of the immigrants who initiated folk dance activities in the *kibbutzim* had been involved in Jewish Gymnastics and the Zionist youth movements, or more generally had been influenced by the

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pioneering work in historic Palestine and the founding of *kibbutzim*. *Maccabi*, in contrast, focused on athletic and scouting activities. *Gordonia* was founded in Eastern Europe in 1925 and in historic Palestine became strongly affiliated with *Mapai*, the socialist party later developing into the *Labor Party*. For details on the different ideological orientations and activities of the Zionist youth movements see (Eisenstadt 1973: 241–247).

<sup>18</sup> When referring to Jewish immigrants who adopted a new Hebrew name after their immigration, I am using the Hebrew version of their names throughout my study.

<sup>19</sup> Upon marriage, Gertrud Löwenstein became Gertrud Kaufman. After the establishment of the State of Israel, she changed her name to its Hebrew version Gurit Kadman.

<sup>20</sup> For biographical information on Kadman, see (Kadman 1969; Ingber 1974; Ingber 1981; Ingber 1987; Ingber 2000).

<sup>21</sup> Gurit Kadman as cited in (Ingber 2000: 7).

<sup>22</sup> For biographical information on Hermon, see (Ruskin and Meroz 1997).

ideology of the muscular Jewish body as postulated by these movements.<sup>23</sup> Arriving in Mandatory Palestine, they instituted dance activities as a physical work out and a show of Zionist strength, vigor and energy. To them, dancing was a means of training the body through repetitive drills that were, in Kadman's words, "simple and energetic," such as "stamping, jumping, and leg swinging, the main thing being to go on for hours and hours." (Kadman 1972: 27)

In conjunction with Jewish dancing in the *kibbutzim*, a new image of life in mandatory Palestine emerged. In contrast to the old *yishuv*, the newly arriving immigrants were idealized as the embodiment of the *chalutzim*, the New Pioneering Jews. These *chalutzim* were characterized as workers—productive, active and self-sufficient. In addition, however, these workers were also dancers. As Hermon noted in an article written later for the *Division of Folk Dancing* in the *Histadrut*, the general union of Jewish workers in historic Palestine/Israel,<sup>24</sup> dancing had emerged as an integral part of the life of the new immigrants during the 1920s: "They called themselves 'Eretz Israel Haovedet' (working Eretz Israel), they lived mostly in communal settlements, worked hard manual labor, led a frugal life, and danced folk dances." (Hermon 1986: 1–2)

In tune with official Zionist ideology, Israeli folk dance discourse thus describes the emergence of folk dancing in the *kibbutzim* in the 1920s and 30s as proof for the fact that the pioneers in Mandatory Palestine were indeed leading the lives of the transformed New Jews. This discourse represented the immigrants as dynamic, active and physically fit, the ideal *chalutzim*. As the living manifestation of a transformed Jewry, the pioneer-workers danced "barefoot on the soil,

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<sup>23</sup> On Rivka Sturman's involvement in the Jewish youth group *Blau Weiss Bund* see for instance (Beliajus 1991; Meishar 2001). See also (Eshel 2001) on the influence of the German dance scene on the development of Israeli folk dancing in mandatory Palestine in the 1930s and 1940s. I do not have detailed biographic information on all of the leaders involved in instituting folk dance as a regular activity in the *kibbutzim*. Yet, as most of them originally came from Germany or Eastern Europe, one can assume that in one way or another they had been involved with Zionist organizations promoting Jewish gymnastics and the rejuvenation of the Jewish nation through exercising their bodies.

<sup>24</sup> Formally known as the *General Federation of Hebrew Workers on the Land of Israel*, the *Histadrut* was established as the general union of Jewish workers in 1920. Its declared aim was to set up a Jewish worker's society in mandatory Palestine, as well as provide a series of services ranging from health care and education to the management of consumer unions and employment exchanges. After the establishment of Israel in 1948, the *Histadrut* became the national trade union of the country's workers. See (Tessler 1994: 186–187).

free and unencumbered” (Beliajus 1991: 6). Having obviously shed their ‘Jewish feet,’ they considered themselves a proud, agile and healthy community. Even after a hard day of toiling in the fields, these New Men, bursting with energy and strength, celebrated their new life and community in the dancing circle, a picture vividly evoked by the following text taken from a booklet published by a Zionist organization in the United States in 1941:

Against the setting sun, in the fields near a kevtzah (a cooperative colony) in Palestine, a group of young halutzim are dancing. All day long they have worked hard on the land. The morrow brings another day of toil. Still, their zest for life is undaunted and their spirit undimmed.

The dancers move joyously round in a circle—strong, sure and impassioned. Their voices are raised in a vibrant song. Their rhythm quickens. Their tempo becomes more staccato. Now the circle breaks and another halutz joins in. The circle closes and the dance goes round, faster and faster.

Another group of workers returns from the fields, tired and begrimed. Suddenly they see the dancers. They hail them with a shout, throw down their tools, dash to the pump, wash their faces and fling themselves into the now swift moving circle. This is the Horah—the dance of a new Palestine, happy, young and full of hope! (Chochem and Roth 1941: 5)

### *Authenticating Jewish dancing through dabkeh, 1930s–1940s*

In the 1920s and 30s, the *horah* had emerged as the folk dance style considered representative of life in the agricultural settlements of the new *yishuv*. As Corinne Chochem and Muriel Roth noted in 1941, it had come to be seen as the “dance of affirmation” of the Jewish *kibbutz* dwellers at the time (Chochem and Roth 1941: 6). The *horah* circle which could smoothly expand its size to include newcomers while continuing to turn faster and faster was considered to be symbolic of the growth which the Jewish community aspired to, as well as its socialist ideals of equality, solidarity and collectivity. As a show of stamina, agility and strength, the *horah* also fit Zionist discourse about masculinity and the transformation of the Jewish body. Its very name reflected the masculine characteristics attributed to the New Men in Mandatory Palestine, translating from Serbo-Croatian as ‘tempo’ or ‘movement’ (ibid.: 5). In addition, the *horah* suited the gender dynamics in the early agricultural settlements. The New Jews in Mandatory Palestine did not merely see themselves as characterized by masculinity, but they actually were to a large part men. This

imbalance between the number of male and female *kibbutznikim* in the early settlements called for adequate recreational activities. Dancing in couples, for example, was looked down upon, while circular dancing emerged as highly popular. Thus, the *horah* not merely symbolized the new Jewish life in Mandatory Palestine emerging in the 1920s and 1930s, but helped to make it work: It provided “pleasurable mixed recreation for men and women” which did not threaten the ideals of communality and collectivity in the settlements, but was adapted to the existing realities (Ronen 1997: 54).

*Searching for a new folk dance style*

Increasingly, though, a feeling of unease with performing the ‘old’ European folk dances was spreading in the settlements. While a minority of German-born *kibbutzniks* defended the cultural orientation of their practices against change,<sup>25</sup> a majority of dance leaders and practitioners were beginning to feel that the Jewish community in Mandatory Palestine not only needed a shared culture, but also one which would be distinctly unique. The presence of the new Jewish community in ‘the beautiful homeland Israel (*Eretz Israel ha-yafah*)’ should be appropriately performed through its own, distinctly unique folk dance tradition.<sup>26</sup>

From the very beginning of the Zionist movement, its leaders had shown concern for the issue of cultural authenticity and had placed the creation of a shared Zionist culture, distinct from its European surroundings, at the top of their agenda. In this spirit, the Jewish gymnastic societies in Europe had sought to distinguish themselves from regular nationalist youth groups by adopting Judaic symbols and using Hebrew in their exercise drills and songs (Berkowitz 1993). Nevertheless, the Zionist gymnastic societies had remained fundamentally influenced by their cultural and intellectual environments, in particular the German *Jugendbewegung* with its romantic-nationalist orientation.<sup>27</sup> The very image of the New Jew propagated by

<sup>25</sup> See (Hirshberg 1995: 207) on the ways in which German Jewish immigrants more than immigrants from other European countries sought to maintain their cultural practices after immigrating to historic Palestine.

<sup>26</sup> *Eretz Israel ha-yafah* is a commonly used expression in Zionist discourse. In Israeli folk dance discourse, the term gained additional meaning as the title of the folk dance choreography *Eretz Israel yafah* (*The homeland Israel is beautiful*), choreographed by Yankele Levi in 1980 and still popular in the late nineties.

<sup>27</sup> *Jugendbewegung* refers to a movement among German youth from approximately 1900 to 1930 that was influenced by romantic nationalism and aimed at realizing



Nordau as “deep-chested, sturdy, and sharp-eyed” (Nordau 1995 (1903): 547) reflected an ideal of manliness directly taken from *Jugendbewegung* ideology (Berkowitz 1993; Mosse 1996). Thus, despite the conscious attempts of early Zionists to formulate a Jewish nationalism that would be modern, but culturally distinct, Jewish gymnasts in Europe and their pioneering counterparts in mandatory Palestine like Kadman, Hermon and Sturman, continued to frame their activities in terms of European, especially German, thought and practices.

In the late thirties and early forties, the Zionist dance leaders in Mandatory Palestine began to rethink the issue of cultural authentication. They felt that Zionist dancing should no longer merely continue in the trajectory of European dance traditions. Instead, a new, distinctly unique style should be created in order to provide the emerging Jewish nation-state with an authentic national culture. The New Men in Palestine/Israel and especially their Palestinian-born children should no longer indulge in dance practices that were linked to a European past associated with anti-Semitism, persecution and increasingly the horrors of Nazi Germany and World War II, but reflect their new life as a transformed people. Sturman, who arrived from Leipzig in 1929 and moved to live in Kibbutz Ein Kharod with her husband, for example emphasizes her strongly negative reaction to children singing and dancing to German music in *Eretz Israel* in the early forties. Referring to a dance presentation arranged by Dr. Lehman, a German pedagogue who had immigrated with a group of orphaned children to live in the agricultural settlement of Ben Shemen, she recalled feeling that these children should no longer experience community in terms of cultural practices associated with a European past:

Their dances were very well received by our youngsters. But I realized that his work was not really Israeli. For example, he used mostly German songs. This was in the early 1940s and I was, frankly, outraged, that Israeli youth should be bringing German songs and dances to others, for we were beginning to understand what the Germans were doing to us and grasping the whole tragedy of the Jewish people brought on by Hitler.

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a new life style in particular through connecting with nature, hiking, strengthening the body, the singing of folk songs and the like. For German Jewish involvement in the *Jugendbewegung*, see (Mosse 1996). For the influence of *Jugendbewegung* ideology on Zionist pioneering movements in historic Palestine, see (Eisenstadt 1973).

My feelings became yet stronger when my two children started kindergarten in the kibbutz. They began learning German songs. I knew that what a child learns first he cherishes and remembers above all else and I did not want my children treasuring the same songs I had sung in Germany.<sup>28</sup>

Developments in Nazi Germany and the outbreak of World War II exacerbated the need felt by Zionist dance leaders for new dance practices different from the European dances which the immigrants had brought with them from their home countries. This concern had been voiced before. In 1929, for example, a member of Kibbutz Ein Kharod remarked that “[b]ecause we have no dances of our own, we have stopped dancing.”<sup>29</sup> Yet attempts of dealing with the demand for a truly new, culturally authentic dance repertoire were not put into practice until the later thirties and early forties. Adamant about the need for new folk dance activities, Sturman recalled the difficulties that Zionist dance leaders were facing at the time in creatively coming up with a new, uniquely different dance style:

My idea was to create our own folk dance material that didn’t come from Europe or any other place. I thought we would make our own for our children. I realized that I’d have to find the basic steps and material that would be appropriate and comprehensible to them. I didn’t know where to begin really, so I went to Paula Padani. She introduced me to international folk dance steps, but these didn’t fit my idea. I remember also how I came to Gurit Kadman in Tel Aviv to show her my early endeavors. We had come from the same German city and I knew she was the most respected person in Israel regarding folk dance. I spoke to her about my experience, how I was trying to create something new.<sup>30</sup>

Mirali Chen Sharon, a child in Kibbutz Ein Kharod when Sturman was teaching dance there in the late thirties and early forties, recalled the efforts of her teacher in similar terms. Emphasizing the disdain which the younger generation in the *kibbutz* were educated to feel for anything reminiscent of life in the European ‘exile,’ the *galut*, Sharon fully identified with the need to search for new cultural forms as authentic expressions of the new generation growing up in the *yishuv*:

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<sup>28</sup> Rivka Sturman as cited in (Ingber 1974: 17).

<sup>29</sup> Cited in (Friedhaber 1995/96: 13).

<sup>30</sup> Rivka Sturman as cited in (Ingber 1974: 17).

Our German teachers (it seemed so many of our teachers on the kibbutz were German) developed us either for art or for gymnastics. But we were against all European traditions so we needed new things, new steps, new music. Rivka Sturman was one of the German teachers who took me in the dance direction. She was constantly creating things for us. [. . .] Rivka said, ‘We have a necessity to express our life, to express the renewal of who we are as Israelis and who we are as Jews.’ Even at fourteen, this is what we were educated to think about. The simple steps were a real expression of our solidarity. Every little thing was actually a big accomplishment when Rivka would find a new step. She wanted us to be free of the *galut*. We did things simply with our friends and we grew up believing we were free and brave.<sup>31</sup>

The new style which Zionist dance leaders aimed to create was neither supposed to merely reflect the European folk dances, nor to be randomly invented. It was supposed to be a style that would connect the emerging nation-state to its cultural and geographic environment and link it to an ancient past. First successful efforts to create such a style were noticeable during the first folk dance festival organized by Gurit Kadman at Kibbutz Dalya in the summer of 1944. Seeking to institute Jewish dancing as a “communal endeavor,”<sup>32</sup> a truly collective activity of the Jewish community which would not be confined to the borders of the individual *kibbutz*, Kadman had managed to mobilize a number of dance teachers who were willing to present their choreographies and introduce others to their individual dancing projects and styles. For two days and a night, about 200 dancers and 3,5000 spectators from various parts of the country gathered at Kibbutz Dalya.<sup>33</sup> Among the usual repertoire of European dances performed in the *kibbutzim*, a small number of dances were presented at the festival that were distinctly different. These dances—such as Yardena Cohen’s *Hallel* dance and Rivka Sturman’s *Debkah*—did not constitute simple reproductions of the European folk dances.<sup>34</sup> They were new choreographies, artistic creations taking their inspiration from Middle Eastern dance traditions: the Yemenite Jewish dance styles and, in particular, the Arab *dabkeh*.

The issue of whether these new creations presented at Dalya in 1944 could rightfully be categorized as folk dances representative of

<sup>31</sup> Mirali Chen Sharon as cited in (Ingber 2000: 43).

<sup>32</sup> Gurit Kadman as cited in (Ingber 1974: 15).

<sup>33</sup> See (Goren-Kadman 1995) on the first Dalya festival.

<sup>34</sup> Hebrew names of Jewish and Israeli dances are spelled according to (Goldfein-Perry 1998).

the Jewish community in Mandatory Palestine sparked a heated discussion. Indeed, the very project of purposefully setting out to create folk dance was questioned by folk dance practitioners who believed that folklore should have a touch of naturalness and antiquity.<sup>35</sup> According to Kadman, folk dances should “grow slowly” and anonymously over the course of many generations, instead of being made “artificially” by an act of will on the part of a known choreographer. Main driving force behind the idea that the emergence of the new Jewish nation-state should go hand in glove with the creation of an appropriate folk dance tradition, Kadman admitted that such a project ran counter to the general understanding of what constitutes folklore. Yet equating the creation of the new dances under the label of folklore with the “miracle” of the foundation of the state of Israel, fears about the artificiality of such an endeavor were soon put aside. As the dance leaders saw it, it was only natural that the new Israeli nation-state, emerging as a result of the activism of the New Jew, should be expressed through a folklore which represented a productive effort on the part of the emancipated Jewish community:

For us people who fervently wished to have dances of our own and in our lifetime, there was no choice; one had to create dances, and it happened starting in 1944. It was clear that this was against all the laws of the development of folk culture the world over. How can one create purposely, that is, artificially, folk dances which usually grow slowly like trees out of deep roots! How is it possible to accelerate a process of hundreds of years into a few years? Only a miracle can bring this about. But, after all, the same is true for the rebirth of the Jewish nation in its ancient long lost homeland when immigrants from all over the world, unaccustomed to productive work, endeavored to build agriculture, industry, a state with a national culture and economy in contradiction to all the laws of historical and economical logic and tradition—a constant miracle is needed. (Kadman 1975: 28)

Thus, by the time of the second Dalya Festival in 1947, and even more so by the time of the third in 1951, the Arab *dabkeh* and the Yemenite Jewish dances had become generally accepted as the essential models after which choreographers invented dances in the ‘new Israeli folk dance style,’ as the repertoire of the new choreographies came to be called with the foundation of the state in May 1948. According to Kadman, “what was added to the enthusiasm and to

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<sup>35</sup> Author’s interview with Ayalah Goren who recalled the controversy which her mother’s endeavor had sparked among folk dance practitioners at the time.

the dances that we brought with us from Europe was the Oriental influence and a certain uniqueness of the land. At first, we learned the Arab *debkah*, a line dance, and then we learned the Yemenite dances.”<sup>36</sup> When the State of Israel was proclaimed in May 1948, Zionist leaders thus had not only realized their project of establishing an independent, modern state. Also, they had succeeded in laying the basis for a modern national culture characterized by its own, distinctly unique dance tradition known as the ‘new Israeli folk dances.’ Authenticated by their characteristic style, Jewish folk dance activities had turned ‘Israeli,’ a collectively shared cultural practice that performed the new Jewish nation as realized within the borders of the state of Israel.

*Reinventing the Arab dabkeh as an Israeli debkah*

Searching for models after which to create their own authentic dance style, why did the Zionist dance leaders turn to the Arab *dabkeh*? For one thing, the dance leaders perceived the Arab *dabkeh* as a ‘men’s dance.’ To them, it was a dance event presented by men in a style which reflected the masculine qualities idealized by Zionist discourse. Women hardly figured in this dance event. *Dabkeh*—at least in the eyes of the Zionist dance leaders in the 1940s—was done by men, reflecting the strength, energy and vigor which, in their mind, only a circle of men moving in unison could exude. Presenting the Arab *dabkeh* as a men’s dance, Jewish sources on the history of the Israeli folk dance movement in general hardly mention the dancing of Arab women. In the rare case that women’s dancing is alluded to, it is usually not described as *dabkeh*, but in terms of different, more ‘feminine’ ways of moving. Leah Bergstein’s account of an Arab village festivity provides a case in point. A professional dancer from Vienna who immigrated in 1925 to live in Kibbutz Ramat Yokhanan, Bergstein described her encounter with Arab dancing by clearly distinguishing between the rare presentation of a female dancer and the *dabkeh*-dancing men: “Once I remember a girl entered the circle to dance and she didn’t do anything but walk in the kind of way ballerinas try to achieve—an incredible fragile flight that was simplicity itself. The men danced the *debkah*. All these celebrations influenced me.”<sup>37</sup>

<sup>36</sup> Gurit Kadman as cited in (Ingber 1974: 10).

<sup>37</sup> Leah Bergstein as cited in (Ingber 1974: 37).

At the same time, the appropriation of an Arab dance form as a model for the new style imagined by the Zionist leaders functioned as a strategic ploy in the fight over the land. In general, Zionist ideology did not envision the participation of the native Palestinian population in their project of state building, but postulated the establishment of a Jewish presence in Mandatory Palestine independently of the local people.<sup>38</sup> In line with general Zionist ideology, choreographers appropriated local cultural practices for purposes of culturally authenticating their own Jewish presence in the land without integrating the local population. They constructed a folklore that was grounded in the history and landscape of historic Palestine, and culturally legitimized the Zionist presence by simultaneously passing over the existence of the native people. As the creation of Rivka Sturman's *Debkah Gilboa* shows, the Zionist dance leaders were very well aware of the strategic advantage that they could gain from appropriating a local cultural practice and presenting it as their own. During violent clashes with the Palestinian population near her *kibbutz* in 1947, Sturman felt prompted to create a folk dance choreography in memory of a battle at the Gilboa mountain from which the members of her *kibbutz* had emerged victorious. To express Zionist victory through dance, Sturman turned to the Arab *dabkeh*, the dance style of the enemies, as a model of artistic inspiration. Reinventing *dabkeh* as a *Debkah Gilboa*, Sturman thus not only celebrated a one time military victory, but staged the general defeat and ultimate erasure of the Palestinian presence around the area of the Gilboa Mountain:

In 1947, we at Ein Harod were thrust into fighting on the Gilboa, the mountain opposite our settlement. Our sons were involved in this battle and I felt an urgency to express their fight in a folk dance. I went to Amiran<sup>39</sup> [. . .] He was in a soldier's uniform. I told him that I wanted new music for a debkah and that I would call it Debkah Gilboa. [. . .] I showed him my ideas about advancing and retreating and then again advancing as if running to the peak of the Gilboa hills. The last section was a joyful victory. I had studied the Biblical Story

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<sup>38</sup> See (Peretz 1958; Said, 1980) for a discussion of how mainstream Zionism during the early period of immigration staked out the relationship with the local Palestinian population by generally ignoring their existence. For a detailed discussion about the ways in which different minority strands of Labor Zionism formulated the relationship between Jewish immigrants and the local Arab population, see also (Lockman 1996; Shafir 1996).

<sup>39</sup> Amiran, born Emanuel Pugachov, was a folk musician of Russian origin, who created many of the songs Rivka Sturman used for her choreographies.

about the Gilboa which was cursed with no dew or rain. But we adapted the Biblical words in a positive way to show what exactly happened on the mountain—not a curse, but a triumph. Today there is an agricultural settlement atop the mountain and I find great joy looking up to the green on the Gilboa.<sup>40</sup>

A similar way of thinking underlies Kadman's *Ken Yovdu*, a choreography celebrating Israeli military prowess through adopting the dance style of the Arab *dabkeh*. The title of the dance is a citation from the Bible (Judge 5, v. 31) and translates as "So let all Thine Enemies Perish" (Eshkol and Seidel 1974: 114). Kadman choreographed the dance as a mass spectacle in honor of the Israeli victory in the 1948 War and the establishment of the State of Israel. It was presented by the Israeli army on the first Independence Day celebration in June 1949. Hundreds of soldiers from various army bases came together, performing the dance in two rows opposite each other, mimicking acts of attack and final triumphant victory (Cohen 1984: 11).

However, the appropriation of the Arab *dabkeh* was more complicated than a mere 'stealing' of tradition would suggest. Appropriating *dabkeh* and reinventing it as an Israeli *debkah* also constituted an intricate process of Self-Orientalization as a strategy of Jewish emancipation. Constructing an essential difference between European Jews and their fellow Aryan countrywomen and men, 19th century European scientific discourse of race had located this essential difference in the Oriental origins of the Jews. The very term 'anti-Semitism,' coined by Wilhelm Marr in 1879, alluded to the alleged Oriental, non-Aryan origins of European Jewry. Thus, despite attempts at cultural assimilation and ready adoption of modern Western culture, Jews continued to be categorized as 'Oriental Others,' essentially inferior to their European counterparts and easily identifiable by their Oriental characteristics (Mendes-Flohr 1991). By adopting Arab dance practices and making them their own, Zionist dance leaders in historic Palestine sought to emancipate themselves from Europe in two ways. By creating a new, Israeli folk dance style, the choreographers first of all emphasized that Israeli Jewish modernity was to be culturally distinct from European modernity. While the 19th century Jewish reform movement in Western Europe had sought by all means to

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<sup>40</sup> Rivka Sturman as cited in (Ingber 1974: 18).

overcome the Oriental qualities of Jewish religious practices, getting rid of the “oriental trills and melodies of the *hazan* (cantor)” as well as adopting Western aesthetics in the prayer service (Mendes-Flohr 1991: 82), dance leaders in Mandatory Palestine/Israel now consciously re-orientalized their cultural practices. By defining Israeli cultural authenticity in terms of Middle Eastern dance styles, they put emphasis on the essential difference of their culture from the West. Israeliness was not to be defined as a copy of Western modernity, but as unique and culturally distinct.

But why in particular turn to non-Jewish, Palestinian traditions? By adopting Arab dance styles, Jewish dance leaders secondly believed that they could recover their own, long-lost authentic traditions from the time of the Bible and ‘re-enchant’ Jewish practices. As Kadman pointed out, there is “ample proof in the Bible and the Talmud of vivid folk dancing in those olden times. [. . .] It was obvious that Jews were a dance loving, dance rich nation in biblical times. But how did they dance? Could we revive those dances?” (Kadman 1972: 28) Seeking to reconstruct, or at least come as close as possible to reconstructing ancient Jewish practices, Zionist dance leaders turned to the indigenous population of Palestine. To them, the Arab peasant, perceived in an Orientalist manner as timeless, unchanging and primitive, represented an authentic image of the biblical, pre-exile Jew. As a pristine Other, the Arab villager came to serve as a stand-in for Jews searching for their authentic cultural roots. Ayalah Goren for instance explained:

You come to a land that is occupied mainly by Arabs. Sporadically and sparse, but still. You look around and what do you see? The Arabs get up early in the morning. They go to their field, they have their oxens and donkeys, they plow their fields, and suddenly the imagination starts to work. This was like Abraham plowed his land, four, three, two thousand years ago. This was a living relic of what our culture, our people looked like in biblical times.<sup>41</sup>

Accordingly, choreographers like Sturman are reported to have spent hours observing Palestinian Arabs. Fascinated by what she perceived as the innocence and pureness of Palestinian Arab village life, Sturman tried to capture this ancient simplicity in her own work: “At Ein

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<sup>41</sup> Author’s interview with Ayalah Goren. For similar observations see in particular (Sorell 1949; Myers 1959; Ingber 1974).



Harod I could watch the Arabs as they lead their sheep down into the valley where the well lay. As they danced down the path, playing their *hallil* (simple wind pipe) their steps and behavior were of intense interest to me."<sup>42</sup>

*Performing the Sabra: dabkeh as debkah*

Through choreographers like Sturman, the movements executed by Palestinian villagers doing *dabkeh* came to be representative of *Sabra*<sup>43</sup> movement, the movement of the New Jew who was born in Mandatory Palestine/Israel and thus was seen as culturally and territorially rooted in the region. Stylistically, the Arab *dabkeh* conveyed the strength, vigor, energy and manliness idealized by Zionist dance leaders.<sup>44</sup> At the same time, the Arab *dabkeh*, associated with rural life, peasantry and a biblical past, provided a meaningful connection to the landscape which the Zionist pioneer-dancers were settling. Seeking to capture these qualities, the dance leaders appropriated Arab movement and styles in their new choreographies and turned them into the defining characteristics of *Sabra* dancing.<sup>45</sup> As Sturman recalled, her attentive observing of Arab villagers "gave an Arabic color to my earliest dances, especially in the step-bend, the restrained, erect bearing, and the special abrupt rhythm."<sup>46</sup> Dancer Yardena Cohen similarly turned to Palestinian Arabs in search for creative input, using their "colorful trays, shepherd sticks and pitchers" as well as their "ancient instruments" such as the *ūd*, the *qānūn* and the flute in her stagings of biblical nature festivals in the *kibbutzim*.<sup>47</sup>

<sup>42</sup> Rivka Sturman as cited in (Ingber 1974: 17).

<sup>43</sup> *Sabra* refers to all Jews who are not immigrants, but who are born in historic Palestine/Israel. It is originally the name of the fruit of a local cactus, whose prickly outside and sweet, edible inside prompts Israelis to use the term as a national allegory. See (Doleve-Gandelman 1987; Among 1997). The Sabra-cactus has also emerged among Palestinians as a national symbol standing for the endurance and perseverance of the Palestinian people. *ṣubbār*, the stubborn, steadfast cactus marking the former site of Palestinian villages inside Israel is thus the title of a novel by Palestinian writer Sahar Khalifeh (Khalifeh 1976). See also (Boullata 2001) for a discussion of the Palestinian reappropriation of the *ṣubbār*-cactus in the work of Israeli Arab artist 'Aṣim Abū Shaqrah.

<sup>44</sup> On the Zionist ideal of manliness see Uta Klein's *Militär und Geschlecht in Israel* (Klein 2001).

<sup>45</sup> Israeli folk dance discourse, both in its written as well as in its oral form, is surprisingly quiet about any possible problematic implications which the appropriation of the *dabkeh* as a stylistic model for the new Israeli folk dances might have entailed behind the backdrop of Jewish/Arab tensions on the rise at the time.

<sup>46</sup> Rivka Sturman as cited in (Ingber 1974: 17).

<sup>47</sup> Yardena Cohen as cited in (Berk and Reimer 1978: 49).

Appropriating *dabkeh* as a performance of *Sabra* identity resulted in a change of content: an Arab social practice associated with village festivities was emerging as a signifier for the ‘new Israeli nation-in-the-making.’ Yet appropriating *dabkeh* not merely resulted in a change in content, but also in form. The Arab *dabkeh* was culturally ‘translated.’<sup>48</sup> Taken out of its original environment and introduced into a new context, *dabkeh* became *debkah*. No longer an Arab village practice based on improvisation in music and steps, *dabkeh* as *debkah* constituted strictly choreographed dance routines executed to set pieces of music. Leaving no room for improvisation, every step, arm move and bodily expression of the newly choreographed *debkot* was pre-determined and had to be executed accordingly.

The influence of the Arab *dabkeh* did not only find expression in pieces specifically choreographed as *debkot*.<sup>48</sup> Even if not specifically called *debkah*, many new dances made at the time reflected its masculine, strong style expressed through an emphasis on the legs, an upright bearing and “a kind of sudden, aggressive thrusting back of the shoulder.”<sup>50</sup> In addition, a variety of newly invented movements modeled on the Arab *dabkeh* became part of the basic step vocabulary at the disposal of the choreographers for their creative efforts. Carefully labeled according to a new terminology worked out by Kadman and others, this repertoire of new steps bearing the imprint of the Arab *dabkeh* constituted the essence of *Sabra* movement as expressed in the new dances. As part of this basic step vocabulary, the “*debkah* step” was coined, described as: “Jump with feet together and turn knees to left side. Jump again and bring knees to original position” (Berk 1977: n.p.) Other such steps included the “*debkah* hops” as in the *Horra Agadati* by Baruch Agadati, the “jump hops with a 180 degree turn” as in *Hagoren* by Rivka Sturman, the so-called “movement step,” the “tapping,” the “staccato 2/4-rhythm,” the “line formation,” the “abrupt kicks,” the “heel work” and various ways of holding the hands in the dancing circle or line.<sup>51</sup>

The new dance style modeled on the Arab *dabkeh* not only characterized the dances newly choreographed at the time. It also more and more influenced the ways in which some of the ‘old’ European

<sup>48</sup> See (Prakash 1996) on the issue of cultural translation.

<sup>49</sup> *debkot* is the Hebrew plural of *debkah*.

<sup>50</sup> Gurit Kadman as cited in (Ingber 1974: 15).

<sup>51</sup> For general stylistic influences of the Arab *dabkeh* on Israeli folk dancing, see in particular (Ashkenazi 1977; Goren-Kadman 1986). See also (Hodes and Kaplan 1971) for ten different ways of holding the hands inspired by the Arab *dabkeh*.

folk dances continued to be performed in the *kibbutzim* alongside the new dances. The *horah*, symbol of the community of the pioneers, changed character and turned ‘Oriental,’ as Kadman commented in retrospect: “The shoulder-chain was abandoned in favor of simple holding hands, giving more freedom of movement. The energetic stamps and leg-swinging disappeared and made room for small, light, elastic steps, with accentuated body turns. All the movements are narrower and more restrained, in short, more Oriental.” (Kadman 1975: 27)

The perceived simplicity of the Arab *dabkeh* as a simple peasants’ dance equally rubbed off onto the European dances, providing a much sought after touch of peasantry, villages and the ‘real folk’ for dances perceived as too stylish and elaborate to serve as authentic expressions of the *chalutzim* in *Eretz Israel ha-yafah*:

Of its long and complex tune only two parts remained, and nothing reminds you of the varied, complicated and colorful figures of the Polish Krakoviak. Here, it is danced simply and primitively—stephops forward and then turning in a kind of Polka step, which is also reduced to utter simplicity. A complicated and refined dance became a simple peasants’ dance. (Kadman 1975: 27)

In addition, Arab instruments, first employed by expressionist dancer Yardena Cohen in the biblical pageants staged in her *kibbutz*, started to be used on a more general scale for musical accompaniment, as Fred Berk, a Jewish dancer in New York commented in a publication by an American Zionist organization in 1947:

When originated, these dances (like the hora) were performed spontaneously in places and occasions when no musical instruments were on hand. The dancers were motivated by their desire to express their feelings. [. . .] Recently, little wind instruments have been developed which can be carried along into the fields, to the camp fire, on picnics, to make music for the dance. The simplest of these instruments is a little flute called ‘challil,’ which the youngsters take pride in making themselves. (Berk and Delakova 1947: 6)

*Institutionalizing rikudai ‘am israeli as a new tradition  
for a new country, 1948–1968*

davka!

Translating *dabkeh* into *debkah* marked the invention of *rikudai ‘am israeli*. By the time of the second Dalya festival in 1947, the new style, steps and choreographies modeled on the Arab *dabkeh* had

come to be regarded as an accepted set of norms determining what *rikudai 'am israeli* as the new Israeli folk dance tradition should actually look like. In the time between the establishment of the State of Israel in 1948 until the June War of 1967, *debkah*, as a show of masculine prowess and Biblical peasantry, remained central to the newly invented folk dance tradition as a truly authentic expression of *Sabra* dancing. The *Sabra*, the anti-thesis of the persecuted Ghetto Jew, danced to express joy of life, pride, hope and, in particular, defiance, no matter what the struggles, problems and difficulties. *Davka!*, that is, 'in spite of the situation,' he/she danced.

The theme of *davka!* as a centrally defining attitude of the *debkah*-dancing *Sabra* had first been emphasized during the Dalya Festival in 1944. Busy with preparations for the festival, Kadman later recounted how shortly before the event she met Avraham Levinson, then director of the *Histadrut*, who accosted her for organizing a dance festival at a time of war and Jewish persecution. Kadman, however, stood her ground, thinking that especially because of what was happening in Nazi Germany the festival should go on. As a title for the festival she then purposefully chose *davka!*<sup>52</sup> *Davka!* as an expression of defiance was taken up by the dance leaders as a centrally defining theme of *Sabra* identity and was given expression in a number of new folk dance choreographies created in the time between the forties and the sixties in the style of the Arab *dabkeh*. The creation of *Debkah Rafiah* constituted a case in point. The dance is said to have been choreographed by a group of young Jewish men in 1947, whom British mandate officials had imprisoned for anti-British activism. As Ingber notes, "these young men, *davka* (in spite of the situation), created a dance using the Arab *debkah* line formation with rhythmic stepping and sharp shoulder action which they felt expressed defiance. The dance was taken up from there and became a favorite in the new folk dance movement" (Ingber 2000: 52).

As a performance of *Sabra* defiance and ultimate triumph of the 'muscular Jewry program,' *Debkah Rafiah* was staged throughout Poland, the Czeck Republic and Germany in 1947 as part of a presentation of folk dances given by a delegation of eight young couples under the direction of Kadman and Sturman. Sponsored by the *Jewish*

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<sup>52</sup> The theme *davka!* was originally used in dance by modern dancer Gertrud Kraus, who choreographed a piece in Tel Aviv in response to the news that her parents and family had died in an extermination camp in the early forties. Kadman took up the theme and developed it for the first Dalya event (Ingber 2000).

*Agency*,<sup>53</sup> the delegation first started out in Prague and went on to perform in various displaced people's camps and sanatoria, that housed Jewish survivors of the Holocaust. Stunned by the discrepancy in appearance between the members of the troupe and the Jewish survivors, Vera Goldman, one of the dancers who had been born in Vienna but had immigrated to mandatory Palestine as a teenager before the outbreak of the war, described the encounter in the following words: "They were so beaten down, in such extreme situations. And there we were, beautiful young people with curly hair, the young men especially with their dynamic strength. I could hear them asking one another in Yiddish, 'Are these Jews?' They would come up to us and kiss the hems of our garments."<sup>54</sup>

Throughout the fifties and sixties, *debkah* as a performance of *Sabra* identity remained central to *rikudai 'am isra'eli*. Strong, beautiful and energetic, the *debkah*-dancing *Sabra* defied the weakness of the *Yehudi galuti*, the Diaspora Jew. Tellingly, the fifth Dalya Festival in summer 1968, which constituted the last in the series of folk dance events organized at the *kibbutz*, ended its prestigious evening program with a staging of the *Debkah Rafiah*, the dance of defiance, as it had come to be characterized. It was performed by soldiers in uniform dancing jointly on five different stages for an audience of several ten thousand people. Coming to a virtuous finale, the soldiers ended up standing in two lines facing each other. A tractor pulled to a stop in front of the stage. Children climbed out to run between the soldiers showering them in flowers and releasing a flock of white doves to fly up into the sky. A year after the June War of 1967, this staging of the *Debkah Rafiah* captured the feeling of exhilaration and self-confidence which the show of Israeli military superiority and the devastating defeat of the Arab armies had left reigning in society. Dancing the *debkah* as a dance of defiance celebrated Israeli victory and the fulfillment of the Zionist dream: Here they were, to the Israeli public, the emancipated, masculine *Sabras*—victorious soldiers who had defied two-thousand years of exile as well as the Arab armies, the New Men who were 'strong', 'beautiful' and 'authentically rooted' in their homeland.

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<sup>53</sup> An international Zionist institution created in 1929 by the 16th Zionist Congress to support the establishment of a Jewish homeland in historic Palestine. See (Tessler 1994: 193–194).

<sup>54</sup> Vera Goldman as cited in (Ingber 2000: 51).

*Institutionalizing rikudai 'am israeli as a new tradition*

Israeli folk dance discourse locates the beginning of *rikudai 'am israeli* as a wide-spread, popular practice in the time between the first and the second *Dalya Festival*. While the first festival is portrayed as an initial, modest manifestation of the new dance repertoire, the second festival is identified as definitely marking the beginning of folk dancing as a mass movement. In 1944, merely 200 dancers performed mostly 'old' European dances for an audience of 3,000. Three years later, 600 dancers performed for over 20,000 spectators dances all of which had been newly choreographed (Kadman 1975). Mirroring the proliferating number of spectators at the *Dalya* events, the increasing number of new dance creations spread quickly and, as Israeli folk dance narrative emphasizes, 'naturally' among the Jewish population. According to Kadman, the new choreographies "grew like mushrooms after the rain" (Kadman 1972: 29).

Just like folklore in other nationalist discourses, Israeli folk dance discourse portrays the newly created Israeli folk dances as disseminating from the 'kibbutz-village' as the true locus of a nation's authenticity to the cities. Kadman described this process in the following words:

From then on the new dances spread to the towns and cities as well and conquered the youth, helped to integrate new immigrants in the life of the country, shaped the character of big celebrations like Independence Day, etc. and were also received enthusiastically by Jews all over the world who quickly took to them as a means of identification with the new Israeli culture. (Kadman 1972: 30)

Yet what is portrayed here as a natural, automatic process, in fact very much occurred as a conscious, orchestrated effort on the part of the leaders of the movement who worked from the centers of the newly established state to spread the dances to its peripheries.<sup>55</sup> Since the late thirties, Kadman had held meetings of physical education teachers in her house in Tel Aviv to discuss ways of bringing together and coordinating the various individual efforts undertaken in the fields of physical education and dance. Working to spread the new dances and enlarge the folk dance circle beyond the limits of each

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<sup>55</sup> See (Eshel 2001) on the discussion raging among Zionist dance leaders in mandate Palestine during the thirties and forties about the issue of creating folk dances in *kibbutzim* and *moshavim* only, a perspective maintained by modern dancer Leah Bergstein, or, as Rivka Sturman and Gurit Kadman pragmatically argued, whether it was legitimate to create in the urban centers as well, as most professional dancers were urban residents anyway.

individual *kibbutz*, folk dancing was included in 1945 as part of the physical education curriculum in schools worked out by the sports' teachers. Around the same time, Kadman put together a first leadership course for folk dance teachers at the *Kibbutz Seminar* in Tel Aviv, in which forty people participated. At the end of the course, the *Kibbutz Folk Dance Committee* was founded, later renamed as the *Israeli Folk Dance Committee* and affiliated with the *Cultural Department* of the *Histadrut*. Among others, the activities of the committee included the training of folk dance teachers, organizing performance groups, encouraging the creation of new folk dance choreographies as well as publishing folk dance materials in form of dance manuals, dance notations and music.

A year later, in November 1946, Hermon organized a first *Evening of Community Folk Dancing* at *Bet Hapoel* in Tel Aviv, an event which marked the beginning of folk dancing as a popular activity also in the urban centers of the Jewish community. Organized according to the example of dance sessions in Great Britain, which Hermon had experienced during his stay in London as an officer in the British army, these evenings of community folk dancing were tremendously successful, and under the name of *harkadot* continue to the present day as a popular, recreational activity for the masses.<sup>56</sup> By the time the War of 1948 started, folk dancing had become so popular and wide-spread that, as Israeli folk dance discourse has it, people continued to dance throughout the time of conflict as a means of encouragement, solidarity and celebration. Hermon organized evenings of folk dancing at his artillery regime, while dance leaders such as Kadman and Tirza Hodes taught at army camps. Thus, when the United Nations proclaimed the partition plan of mandatory Palestine on 29 November 1947, the event was celebrated by wide-spread folk dancing, linking the newly emerging repertoire directly to the foundation of a Jewish nation-state now perceived to be imminent:

The decision of the United Nations to establish a Jewish state is greeted in Eretz-Israel with dancing in all the settlements, the villages and in the streets of the cities. The State of Israel is born and accompanied by folkdances. The day after the War of Independence started. The

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<sup>56</sup> Contemporary popular *harkadot* like Gadi Biton's weekly session held on the beach in Tel Aviv throughout the late nineties counted hundreds, if not thousands of participants.

new Israeli folkdance is on its way to become one of the cornerstones of Israeli culture and one of the best known ambassadors of the spirit of the new State of Israel and its people. (Hermon 1981: 114)

With the establishment of Israel in May 1948, folk dancing had definitely taken hold as a wide-spread activity among the Jewish population of the newly founded state. Now officially performed under the name of 'Israeli folk dancing' and distinguished by its 'new Israeli style,' *Sabra* dancing turned Israeli, a mass activity bestowing upon the new state its authentically new, Israeli Jewish culture.<sup>57</sup> The emergence of Israeli folk dancing as an important element of national celebrations and holidays paid tribute to this development. From the very beginning, dance activities in the *kibbutzim* had served to lend color to community celebrations. With the establishment of the state, however, folk dance presentations staged as huge mass events became an indispensable part of any national event. In 1954, Hermon started to organize annual folk dance parades in Haifa under the direction of the *Sports and Youth Department* of the Haifa municipality to celebrate Israel's Independence Day. These parades were organized as grandiose mass spectacles, in which a majority of the population ended up "dancing in the streets" (Hermon 1986: 3). Furthermore, folk dance programs started to be transmitted via radio broadcasts. *harkadot* in the style of Hermon's initial evenings in Tel Aviv were set up across the country. In 1952, the folk dance department was established at the *Histadrut* under the supervision of Tirza Hodes, and in 1954, a first *ulpan*, a leadership course for training folk dance teachers was carried through.

### *Of mothers and men*

Both women and men took part in the Zionist project as an emancipatory movement of European Jews. Yet it was men who formulated the Zionist agenda in terms of the "achievement of manhood," as

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<sup>57</sup> The emergence of Israeli folk dancing as a mass movement is dramatically illustrated by the increase in numbers of people attending and participating in the Dalya festivals. At the third Dalya festival in 1951, the number of spectators had doubled in comparison to the festival staged in 1947. 50,000 people are reported to have come to watch about 800 dancers perform. A fourth festival was organized in 1958, where over 2,000 performers are said to have taken part in front of 60,000 spectators. Again 10 years later at the fifth Dalya festival, the number of dancers had climbed to 3,000, again dancing before an audience of 60,000 (Berk 1968; Ingber 1994; Goren-Kadman 1995).



Sheila Katz puts it. The New Jews were men: strong, muscular, defiant, the qualities associated with the Arab *dabkeh* as a ‘men’s dance.’ As such, *dabkeh-as-debkah* symbolized the emancipation of the masculine New Jew from the image of his emasculated counterpart, the Ghetto Jews of the *galut*, passive and vulnerable victims of anti-Semitism who, as “symbolic women” had been subject to constant humiliation by the ‘true’ Aryan men of European society (Katz 1996: 87). Dancing *debkah*, the New Jewish Man in Mandatory Palestine and later in Israel shed his effeminate image. He was a worker, a builder and a soldier. A leader of folk dancing, an officer in the British army during World War II, and a decorated fighter in the Jewish, respectively Israeli troupes during the wars of 1948, 1967 and 1973, Shalom Hermon embodied this ideal. Even his outer appearance with his “open-necked shirts, sandals and bushy eye-brows” qualified him as the New Jewish dancer, athlete and fighter, who had shed the effeminate characteristics of the *yehudi galuti* (Ingber 1992: 3).

In contrast to the active role which they envisioned for men, Zionist thinkers defined the role of women mostly in terms of supporting the men in realizing their nationalist aims.<sup>58</sup> In line with other emancipatory nationalisms in which women served as the “barometer of ‘civilization,’” Zionism pushed for the participation of Jewish girls and women alongside their male counterparts in the nation-building project (Katz 1996: 92).<sup>59</sup> The transformed New Men needed adequate New Women on their side to implement the Zionist dream. Thus, the folk dance circle aiming to shape up the subjects of the new Jewish nation was set up to not only include men, but also women. Making women and men join hands together in the dancing circle, Zionism as a masculine nationalist discourse, however, allocated different roles to both. While men were building the institutions of the new nation-state and fought for its territory, women in the role of the supporting wives and mothers were busy ‘giving birth’ to its culture. It was women such as Gurit Kadman alongside Rivka Sturman, Tirza Hodes, Yardena Cohen and Leah Bergstein who “mothered” the early folk dance activities in the *kibbutzim*, invented its new style and laid the foundations for the emergence of folk dancing as an authentically Israeli cultural tradition (Ingber

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<sup>58</sup> See for instance (Bernstein 1987; Bernstein 1992; Katz 1996; Klein 1997; Klein 1998).

<sup>59</sup> See also (Shakry 1998; Klein 2001).

1974: 5). Working on the sidelines, they ‘decorated’ the newly emerging state founded by their men.

According to Israeli folk dance discourse, the women dance leaders generally did not criticize the Zionist allocation of gender roles, but willingly worked to support their nation-building husbands and sons. If at all, criticism occurred implicitly, as in the following account made by Leah Bergstein, where she hints at how she as a dancer and a woman experienced *kibbutz* life as a double burden. Discussing the everyday difficulty of combining her profession as a trained modern dancer with life in Kibbutz Ramat Yokhanan, Bergstein remarked: “I didn’t come to Israel to be a dancer, I came as a worker. To be a worker was a hallowed thing, and within this framework to make art was also a great thing.”<sup>60</sup> Yet sneaked into her account are implicit references to the disappointment which the dancer felt with her new life as a pioneering woman. Not allowed to take time off from work in the *kibbutz* laundry, she tried to rehearse after the working hours. Soon, she said that she had to stop dancing altogether. When attending a lesson with her former dance teacher Gertrud Kraus on a visit home to her parents in Vienna, Bergstein recalled that she “started crying” because of the beauty of Kraus’ choreography as well as her “personal tragedy of giving up dance.”<sup>61</sup> Returning to the *kibbutz* after half a year, she tried to take up dancing once more. Yet again, the realities of everyday *kibbutz* life prevented her from doing so:

I came back to Kibbutz Beit Alpha and almost immediately I was asked to make a dance for a holiday celebration. I, in turn, asked to be let off from the laundry work in something else so that my hands would not be bleached out for the performance. I was told, no, that we must first build the land and then we would dance, there was no time to think otherwise. We accepted this and so I created no dances that time (ibid.).

In Bergstein’s account the tensions shine through which women faced in living Zionism as a masculine discourse of nationalism formulated by men. As Deborah Bernstein argues in her research on Jewish women in the *yishuv*, the figure of the pioneering women who “drained the swamps, constructed roads, tilled the land, and fought the foe” was a “myth,” as the essential imbalance between men and women was generally maintained in pre-state Jewish society with women

<sup>60</sup> Leah Bergstein as cited in (Ingber 1974: 37).

<sup>61</sup> Ibid.

continuing to “occupy the lower positions in all spheres of social life” (Bernstein 1987: 2). Especially in the new agricultural settlements, women experienced the discrepancy between their socialist aspirations to gender equality and the everyday reality of *kibbutz* life. The allocation of work as well as the social worth attached to the different tasks performed in the *kibbutz* very much occurred along gender lines. Tasks perceived as crucial to the implementation of the Zionist project such as agricultural production, road construction and swamp draining constituted men’s work, while women were often relegated to doing the “dirty work,” less esteemed household chores in the kitchen and laundry (Fogiel-Bijaoui 1992: 214).<sup>62</sup> In the gendered work hierarchy of the *kibbutz*, dancing, although a cherished pastime, thus ranked secondary, to be done after hours if time permitted when the ‘real’ tasks had been achieved. It was supplementary, a women’s occupation, while the focus of *kibbutz* life and social prestige concentrated on the men’s task of actually ‘building’ the state.

Israeli folk dance discourse usually does not speak to these contradictions between women’s aspirations and the realities of everyday life alluded to in Bergstein’s account. Assigned to the role of the supportive mothers, wives and daughters, the women initiators of Israeli folk dancing instead are portrayed as having fully cooperated to implement Zionism as a masculinizing project. It was women who created the new Israeli style in its masculine form, putting Zionist discourse about the emancipation of the ‘effeminate’ Jewish body into practice. Working from the sidelines of cultural activities, the women dancers did not question the masculine penchant of Zionist discourse, but participated in the state-building project within the spaces allotted to them.

Contributing to the Zionist project from the sidelines, the women dance leaders at the same time played their part in establishing and consolidating the new forms of domination and power hierarchies coming to define the relationship between Zionist immigrants and the local Palestinian population. Their stagings of *debkha* not merely performed New Jewish identity as different from the image of the European Ghetto Jew, but also as fundamentally different from its Arab ‘Other.’ The Zionist women choreographers such as Kadman, Sturman, Cohen and Bergstein admired the Arab presentations of

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<sup>62</sup> On women’s roles in pre-state *kibbutz* life see also the other essays in Bernstein’s edited volume (Bernstein 1992).

*dabkeh* as a men's dance exuding strength, maleness and brotherhood. Adopting the Arab *dabkeh* as a model for their own creations, however, they stressed that in line with ideals of modern Israeli Jewishness there should be no difference between women and men in dance. In contrast to their perception of the Arab peasants who excluded women in their public presentations of *dabkeh* as part of their 'backward,' 'traditional' outlook on gender relations, the Zionist female dance leaders stressed gender equality. As modern, 'enlightened' New Jews, women and men joined hands in dancing *debkah* together.

Delimiting the boundaries of modern Jewish identity by defining its 'Arab Other' in terms of a 'noble,' yet 'backward' and 'unenlightened peasantry,' the women folk dance leaders participated in legitimizing Zionist hierarchies of domination along lines of gender, nation and class. However, using *dabkeh/debkah* as a means of establishing a hierarchy of domination over the 'Arab Other,' the women leaders of Israeli folk dancing, at the same time, contributed to maintaining hierarchies of difference and gender inequality within their own society. Women were busy choreographing *debkot* as well as participating in *debkah* dancing in the *harkadot*. Indeed, it was mostly the female choreographers who became known in this initial period of the Israeli folk dance movement for their *debkah* choreographies and enthusiastic dancing. Staged presentations of *debkah*, however, featured men. This was the case, for example, in the presentation of Kadman's *Ken Yovdu* in 1949, Sturman's *Debka Gilboa* of 1947 and the *Debka Rafiah* of 1968, all of which were choreographed by women, but were presented by large groups of soldier-men. *Debka*, the epitome of the *Sabra* style, excluded women in the public presentations that mattered. The most perfect performance of New Jewish identity could only be given by men.

PERFORMING MODERN PALESTINIANNES:  
THE CASE OF THE PALESTINIAN *DABKEH*

In the sixties and early seventies, *dabkeh* was reinvented as tradition for the second time in the context of the Arab and, in particular, the Palestinian nationalist movement. *Dabkeh* was appropriated by urban middle class folklorists and dance practitioners, transformed and turned from a social practice associated with Arab peasantry into performances of modern national identity. Historically part of

the shared cultural landscape of the Eastern Levant, *dabkeh* as an invented tradition thus became nationalized. The Arab *dabkeh* was refashioned as a specifically Palestinian, Lebanese, Syrian or Jordanian practice, distinguished by specific national dance styles and imbued with the authentic spirit of the ‘people.’

*Changing discourse: From an Arab Levantine social practice to authentic Palestinian heritage*

The invention of *dabkeh* as a symbol of modern Palestinianness in the late sixties and early seventies is manifested in the proliferation of written material after the war of 1967 which refers to *dabkeh* as a specifically Palestinian practice. Before 1967, sources mentioning *dabkeh* are extremely sparse.<sup>63</sup> Scattered references can be found in European Orientalist writings and travel accounts on the ‘Holy Land’ from the turn of the century, which attest to the practice of *dabkeh* as part of social festivities in rural areas throughout the Arab Levant.<sup>64</sup> Picturing *dabkeh* as part of a shared social landscape of Levantine Arabs, these sources generally do not link *dabkeh* to specific local or regional identities. Describing *dabkeh* simply as a “men’s dance” performed at weddings and other village festivities these sources present *dabkeh* in social, not political terms (Granquist 1931: 37). The same can be said for Tawfiq Canaan and Stephan H. Stephan, two Palestinian scholars writing in English in the *Journal of the Palestine Oriental Society*, a publication of the British mandate, during the 1920s and 30s.<sup>65</sup> While Canaan mentions *dabkeh* as part of various types of male dance practices performed at weddings and other festivities, Stephan describes *dabkeh* simply as a “native trotting dance,” an important element of social events in the region (Canaan 1929: 24; Stephan 1922: 260). All in all, there is no work specifically devoted to *dabkeh* as an object of study. Allusions made to *dabkeh* are sparse and unspecific, rarely delving into details beyond a mere reference to the practice of *dabkeh* as part of festivities and social events. In

<sup>63</sup> As of now, no serious historic study exists on Arab dance activities in the Eastern Levant at the time of the turn-of-the-century. For female entertainment in nineteenth century Egypt, see (Nieuwerk 1996). See also (Buonaventura 1989).

<sup>64</sup> See for instance (de Damas 1866; Dalman 1901: 267, 273; Littman 1902: 139; Mülingen 1907: 194–201; Graf 1917; Granquist 1931: 36–39).

<sup>65</sup> On the work of Palestinians done under the label of ‘folklore research’ before 1948 see (Kanaana 1998).

the time from the Palestinian *nakbah*<sup>66</sup> in 1948 until the sixties, finally, *dabkeh* hardly finds mentioning in the literature at all.

In contrast, after the 1967 war, a noticeable change occurs. Starting with the late sixties and even more so in the seventies, written material referring to *dabkeh* proliferated. More significant than the sheer increase in quantity, however, is the qualitative change attested to in these writings. As outlined above, the occasional reference to *dabkeh* in the literature before the sixties was found mostly in turn-of-the-century European writings on the 'Holy Land,' supplemented by a handful of Arab Palestinian works conducted under European supervision and published in English or German journals. Writings on *dabkeh* in Arabic were conspicuously absent. With the late sixties, however, and even more so in the seventies, the bulk of material on *dabkeh* came to be published by Arab authors in Arabic, and in particular, by Palestinians. In addition to this shift in who wrote on *dabkeh*, a discursive change looms large in publications after 1967. While earlier sources simply mentioned the dance practice as a ritual part of social festivities in the Eastern Levant, *dabkeh* in Palestinian writings after 1967 gained attention as an object of study in its own right. *Dabkeh* was newly categorized as *al-turāth al-shaʿbī al-filasṭīnī*, Palestinian heritage, and as such was observed, scientifically studied and written about.<sup>67</sup> As *al-turāth al-shaʿbī al-filasṭīnī*, *dabkeh* thus emerged as a specifically Palestinian practice and became part of a discourse of nationalism which linked the existence of a people to territory and culture: *dabkeh* newly came to stand for the idea of a people, *al-shaʿb*,<sup>68</sup> whose collective identity was inextricably tied to the boundaries

<sup>66</sup> The term *al-nakbah* stems from Syrian scholar Constantin Zurayk and was coined in the time immediately after 1948 to describe the utter loss and failure experienced by Palestinians as a result of the war and the creation of the State of Israel. In his book titled in Arabic *Maʿnā al-nakbah*, he wrote: "The defeat of the Arabs in Palestine is no simple setback or light, passing evil. It is a disaster in every sense of the word and one of the harshest trials and tribulations with which Arabs have been afflicted throughout their long history—a history marked by numerous trials and tribulations." (Zurayk 1956: 2)

<sup>67</sup> See for instance (ʿAlqām 1977; ʿAlqām 1978; ʿAbd al-Salām 1980; Abū Ḥadba 1994; Muḥsin 1987; Sirḥān 1989).

<sup>68</sup> As A. Ayalon shows, the meaning of the Arabic term *shaʿb* underwent a variety of changes during the last century. In classical Arabic, *shaʿb* was largely used to refer to "a tribal confederacy, an ethnic group, or a people." (151) After World War I, the term became associated with the political discourse of nationalism newly emerging in Arab countries at the time. By the time of the mid-century, as most Arab states had successfully achieved independence from Western colonialism, *shaʿb* acquired a new meaning. No longer used merely in terms of liberating a nation, a

of a specific territory, *filasṭīn*, and was characterized by its authentic national heritage, *al-turāth*.<sup>69</sup>

### *Reconstituting Palestinian nationalism*

Arguing that the Arab *dabkeh* was reinvented as a specifically Palestinian national practice in the late sixties and early seventies calls for a word of caution. Pointing to the reinvention of *dabkeh* as a Palestinian practice, I do not intend to link the discursive resignification of *dabkeh* taking place in the time after the 1967 war to the emergence of Palestinian nationalism as a territorially defined political force. It is a widely held assumption that Palestinian nationalism is a rather recent phenomenon which emerged only in the sixties. This assumption constitutes, in Rashid Khalidi's words, "[o]ne of the most common tropes in treatments of issues related to Palestine" (Khalidi 1997: 177). Seeking to debunk such assumptions, Muhammad Muslih in a seminal study convincingly showed how the origins of Palestinian nationalism indeed can be traced back to the time after World War I (Muslih 1988).<sup>70</sup>

Thus, the reinvention of *dabkeh* in the late sixties and early seventies was not indicative of the emergence of a Palestinian national movement. Instead, *dabkeh* as *turāth* marked the reconstitution of this movement after its "lost years," the time between the *nabkha* in 1948 until the institutionalization of a Palestinian resistance under the auspices of *Fatah* in the sixties.<sup>71</sup> Having fought "a desperate losing struggle" against imperial Britain and Zionism during the mandate

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*sha'b*, from Western domination, the term took on an additional sociopolitical dimension. A range of new leaders came to power, notably Gamal Abdul Nasser in Egypt in 1952, who asserted their political legitimacy by claiming to act on behalf of the disprivileged classes: "In the revolutionary ideologies which they preached, leftist ideas, hitherto marginal, came to play a major role, and the "people" were given a prominence unprecedented in their societies' tradition. The *sha'b* was now identified with the common masses, primarily workers and peasants [. . .] those who had previously been outside the circle of power, and were now hailed as the mainstay of reform." (152) Ayalon points out that the lines between the two different meanings which the term *sha'b* carries today as nation or as the lower classes, cannot always be clearly drawn. Often, this blurring of meanings is deliberately employed by Arab leaders. Addressing the *sha'b*, they can simultaneously appeal to the whole nation, as well as to the disprivileged in particular (Ayalon 1997).

<sup>69</sup> On *turāth* in relation to issues of modernity and artistic expression see (Naef 1996; Pannewick 2000). On *turāth* in an Islamic context see (Salvatore 1997).

<sup>70</sup> See also (Porath 1974; Porath 1977).

<sup>71</sup> Initialized at a meeting in Kuwait in 1957 and taking shape in 1962, *Fatah* under the leadership of Yasser Arafat emerged as the most important among the Palestinian guerrilla groups entering the political arena in the sixties. For the development and ideological development of *Fatah* see (Cobban 1984).

years, the Palestinians as a political force had vanished from the stage of international politics in the aftermath of the 1948 war (Khalidi 1997: 178). Dispersed, dispossessed and traumatized, Palestinians did not figure as a people on the international scene. Instead, Palestinian resistance became couched in pan-Arab terms and was taken over by Arab state leaders. Indeed, as Baruch Kimmerling states, pan-Arabism as formulated under Gamal Abdul Nasser in the fifties and sixties held a great appeal for Palestinians as it promised a potent alliance against the overpowering force of Zionism (Kimmerling and Migdal 1993: 195).

Until the sixties, pan-Arab politics dominated the formulation of Palestinian resistance, working against the reemergence of an independent Palestinian national movement. According to Rashid Khalidi, first stirrings of such an independent Palestinian movement already occurred in the immediate aftermath of the 1948 war. Although barely noticeable from the outside, these first signs of a reconstitution of Palestinian nationhood after the *nakbah* formed the basis for the institutionalization of Palestinian resistance in the sixties and were fashioned around the shared Palestinian experience of trauma, loss and dispossession as a result of 1948 (Khalidi 1997: 179–80).<sup>72</sup> Yet while the first signs of Palestinian nationhood can be traced back to the early fifties, a mass-based independent Palestinian resistance movement emerged only after the June war of 1967, a date which came to stand for the devastating loss of the Arab armies and the end of pan-Arabism as a viable political option for Palestinians. As pan-Arabism had ostensibly failed to turn the tables in favor of Palestinian national aspirations, groups like *Fatah*, who since its inception in the early sixties had promoted a path of Palestinian particularism, quickly took over the lead of the Palestinian national movement. Only a year after the Arab debacle of 1967, *Fatah* achieved dominance over the Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO), which had originally been founded under Gamal Abdul Nasser in 1964 to keep a lid on independent Palestinian activism. The *Battle of Karamah*, which *Fatah* fought in March 1968 against Israeli forces attacking its headquarters in the Jordan valley, worked to rally the support of the Palestinian masses and marked the beginning of a mass-based, independent Palestinian resistance.<sup>73</sup>

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<sup>72</sup> See also (Brand 1988; Cobban 1984; Kazzuha 1975; Quentsch 2000) on the reconstitution of the Palestinian national movement during this time.

<sup>73</sup> See (Kimmerling and Migdal 1993: 209–39; Khalidi 1997: 181–83).



*dabkeh as a performance of shared Arab Jordanianess*

The connection between *dabkeh* as an invented Palestinian tradition and the reconstitution of the Palestinian resistance after 1967 shows clearly when comparing the different ways in which *dabkeh* was staged in Ramallah, West Bank, before and after the war. In the early sixties, the Ramallah municipality started to organize an annual summer festival under the auspices of the Jordanian King Hussein. Formally a part of Jordan since the annexation of the West Bank by King Abdallah in April 1950, the sedate town of Ramallah, beautifully located in the hills at about an hour's drive from Amman and characterized by its mild, refreshing summer climate, had emerged as a favorite vacation spa for Jordanians as well as other rich Arab clientele. To better market Ramallah as "Jordan's pride and joy and its first summer resort (*ʿarūs al-urdunn wa-masyafuhu al-awwal*)"<sup>74</sup> the Ramallah municipality did not only seek to provide modern amenities for the vacationers such as an additional fresh water supply (1951), a hospital (1963), a public library and numerous "first class hotels."<sup>75</sup> Also, to offer adequate entertainment for the summer guests, the municipality decided in 1961 to organize a series of annual festivals under the name of *Layālī Rāmallāh (Ramallah Nights)*, featuring among other things stage presentations of *dabkeh*.<sup>76</sup>

The stagings of *dabkeh* in the context of the *Layālī Rāmallāh* events very much resembled the presentations rendered by *dabkeh* troupes springing up in the West Bank after the 1967 war. In both cases, *dabkeh* was categorized as *shaʿbī*, a 'popular' practice.<sup>77</sup> It was taken out of its original context and put on stage, thereby changing its form so as to suit the requirements of its new setting. In its tradi-

<sup>74</sup> *ʿarūs al-urdunn* literally translates as 'Jordan's bride,' referring to something that is valued, cherished, beautiful.

<sup>75</sup> Translated from (Baladiyyat Rāmallāh 1965: 10–11). For Ramallah in the fifties and sixties see also (Shaheen 1982; Shaheen 1992; Zarour 1953).

<sup>76</sup> The first festival was staged in 1962, with others following in 1963, 1964 and 1965. In 1966, there was no festival and the one planned for 1967 did not take place because of the war. The Ramallah municipality took up the custom of organizing summer festivals in Ramallah thirty years later in the summer of 1996 under the Palestinian authority.

<sup>77</sup> In the context of folklore movements emerging in Arab countries in the late 1950s and sixties, the term *shaʿbī* is usually translated as 'popular,' while 'folkloric' finds its expression in the neologism *fūklūrī*. Often, these two terms are used interchangeably, although there is a tendency to use *shaʿbī* when referring to specific practices such as *dabkeh*, whereas *fūklūrī* is used more in a scientific context. See (Hamdān 1996)

tional context, *dabkeh* had been practiced by villagers lining up according to their age as well as social standing in the community. There was no separation between audience and performers. The *dabīkeh*, the people involved in the *dabkeh*, were free to join or leave the line of performers as they pleased, while the *dabkeh* continued to circle for an hour or more in the midst of people eating, drinking and celebrating.<sup>78</sup> In the context of the *Layālī Rāmallāh* events, in contrast, a group of teenagers presented a fixed set of choreographies within an urban context that did not leave room for the improvisation and flexibility characteristic of *dabkeh* as practised in its former rural setting. In addition, the separation between performers and audience was emphasized, with the teenagers dancing on a stage and the spectators seated below.

Such stage presentations of *dabkeh* constituted a first in the Ramallah of the sixties, newly emerging as part of a general trend within Arab countries at the time to promote the *sha'bi*.<sup>79</sup> As 'Ayyūb Rabāḥ, a teenage performer during the festivals in the sixties and head of the Ramallah municipality in the late nineties, recalled in an interview conducted with the author, the troupe presenting *dabkeh* at the festivals, *Firqat Rāmallāh al-ūlā*, constituted the first official *dabkeh* ensemble in the region and was founded expressly for the festival. Besides, as Rabāḥ explained, in Ramallah no one could be found who had the necessary stage and choreographic experience to be charged with the task of putting *dabkeh* on stage. The municipality resorted to hiring teachers from Jordan and Lebanon where *dabkeh* ensembles had already been existing for a while and people had gathered experience in staging *dabkeh* as a dance event.<sup>80</sup>

Taking *dabkeh* out of its former context and putting it on stage during the *Layālī Rāmallāh* events signified an important change both in the form and content of *dabkeh*. For the first time, *dabkeh* not merely constituted a social practice, but explicitly functioned as a

<sup>78</sup> Author's conversations with older people in the Galilee and the Ramallah area about *dabkeh* before 1967. See (Ḥamdān 1996) for changes in the presentation of *dabkeh* over the past fifty years. See (Sbait 1982) for a vivid description of *dabkeh* as a social event at Galilee weddings during the seventies.

<sup>79</sup> Efforts to encourage practices labeled *sha'bi* in the surrounding Arab countries can be traced back to the 1950s, notably to Egypt after Nasser had come to power in 1952. In this vein, a folk archive was set up in the Ministry of Culture in Cairo and a first so-called *Folklore Conference* was organized by the *Arab League* in 1964. See (Bushnaq 1994; Kanaana 1994).

<sup>80</sup> Author's interview with 'Ayyūb Rabbāḥ. See also (Abū Ḥadbā 1980: 26).

performance of national identity. Comparing performances of identity through *dabkeh* in the time before and after the war of 1967, however, a crucial difference springs to mind. At the time of the Ramallah summer festivals in the early sixties, *dabkeh* performed an explicitly Arab Jordanian identity, not an independent Palestinian one. Organized under the auspices of the Jordanian king, the festival was praised for encouraging the presentation of “the popular arts (*al-funūn al-shaʿbiyyah*)” as a means of presenting and developing their “magic Arab Jordanian nature.”<sup>81</sup> *Dabkeh* thus was not seen as a specifically Palestinian practice. The term *al-turāth al-shaʿbī al-filasṭīnī*, omnipresent in the discourse on *dabkeh* after 1967, did not figure in the description of the *Layālī Rāmallāh*. Here, *dabkeh* was presented as “art (*fann*)”, it was praised in terms of its “splendid progress (*al-taqaddum al-bāhir*)” and the “special supremacy (*tafawwuq makḥṣūs*)” of the “artistic talents (*al-mawāhib al-fanniyyah al-qādirah*).”<sup>82</sup> *Aṣālah* (originality) and *basāṭah* (simplicity), two of the most prominent features defining *dabkeh* as *turāth filasṭīnī* after 1967 as will be shown later, are not mentioned at all in the discourse around *dabkeh* during the Ramallah festivals of the sixties. Instead, as a pleasurable tourist attraction boasting artistic finesse, *dabkeh* constituted a means of performing a joint Arab Jordanian identity that bridged the Jordan and encompassed both the East and the West Bank alike.

According to Baruch Kimmerling, such a shared Jordanian identity encompassing both East and West Bankers and eradicating any independent Palestinian identity may have been envisioned by Jordan’s leaders, but was never actually achieved (Kimmerling and Migdal 1993: 189).<sup>83</sup> While Palestinians did not actually consider themselves as primarily Jordanians, official discourse, however, highlighted the shared Arab Jordanian identity of the East and West Bank.<sup>84</sup> In this vein, the program of the summer festival of 1965 referred to the Jordanian kingdom as “the beloved homeland (*al-waṭan al-ḥabīb*),” just

<sup>81</sup> Translated from (Baladiyyat Rāmallāh 1965: 10).

<sup>82</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>83</sup> On the precarious relationship between Jordanians and West Bank Palestinians see also (Brand 1995).

<sup>84</sup> Considering the strong censorship exerted by Jordanian officials, the emphasis on a shared Jordanian versus an independent Palestinian identity and the lack of any independent cultural production under the label ‘Palestinian heritage’ during the sixties comes as no surprise. On issues of censorship and the absence of Palestinian literary production in the West Bank under Jordanian rule see for instance (Sylvia Ortlieb 1995).

as Ramallah was described as the “pride and joy of Jordan (*‘arūs al-urdunn*)” and *dabkeh* as a performance of the “Arabness (*al-‘urūbah*)” and the “Jordanian nationness (*al-qawmiyyah al-urdunniyyah*)” of the Ramallah inhabitants.<sup>85</sup> As an expression of Arab Jordanian identity, *dabkeh* was even performed abroad by groups of Ramallah teenagers, as Ṣalībā Ṭūṭaḥ, one of the performers in the *Layālī Rāmallāh* who emerged as a leading figure in promoting *dabkeh* as a specifically Palestinian practice after 1967, explained: “We took part in presentations of *dabkeh* in various towns like Zarqa and a festival in Aqaba on the sea shore. We also represented Jordan in terms of *dabkeh* in the folkloric competition at the University of Beirut, where *dabkeh* groups from countries around the Mediterranean took place.”<sup>86</sup>

#### *dabkeh as specifically Palestinian*

As the West Bank was occupied by Israel and pan-Arabism gave way to Palestinian particularism after the June war of 1967, staged presentations of *dabkeh* in Ramallah no longer served as performances of a shared Arab Jordanian identity. Instead, a discursive shift occurred. *dabkeh* on stage, presented by dance troupes springing up all over the West Bank during the seventies, now explicitly came to be performed in terms of *al-turāth al-sha‘bī al-filasṭīnī*. The difference between *dabkeh* in the context of the Ramallah festivals and *dabkeh* staged as Palestinian *turāth* after 1967 is brought to the point in a comment made by Palestinian folklorist Abdul-Aziz Abu-Hadba, who had personally attended the summer festivals in the sixties and emerged as a leading figure in the Palestinian folklore movement in the seventies. Conceding that the Ramallah festivals constituted a pleasurable past-time and welcome tourist attraction, he argues that they were devoid of meaning as they lacked the essential Palestinian content which characterized *dabkeh* after 1967: “The things that were brought to the stage were done so in the framework of the festivals which were determined by the atmosphere of the touristic summer spas. They did not present our popular *turāth* (*turāthunā al-sha‘bī*), which culturally expresses our national identity.”<sup>87</sup>

After 1967, the concept of *al-turāth al-sha‘bī al-filasṭīnī* quickly became anchored as a new element in Palestinian cultural discourse. Before

<sup>85</sup> Translated from (Baladiyyat Rāmallāh 1965: 10–11).

<sup>86</sup> Translated from (Abū Ḥadbā 1980: 26).

<sup>87</sup> Translated from (Abū Ḥadbā 1994a: 56).

the war, no institution explicitly dealing with Palestinian *turāth* had existed in the occupied territories (Abū-Ḥadbā 1992; Kanaana 1994; Abū Ḥadbā 1994a). There had been a few cultural activities such as the *Layālī Rāmallāh* or the boy scouts, but none was explicitly concerned with Palestinian *turāth*. After 1967 and especially with the early seventies, the situation quickly changed. A Palestinian folklore movement emerged, lead by a number of trained scholars such as Abdul-Latif Barghouthi, Sharif Kanaana, Abdul-Aziz Abu-Hadba, Mun'im Haddad and Nabil Alqam, who busily set up research centers and cultural institutions across the West Bank. Thus, in 1972, the welfare society *In'ash El-Usra* (*Jam'iyyat in'ash al-usrah*) located in al-Bireh, West Bank, established a *Committee for Social Research and Popular Heritage*.<sup>88</sup> The committee was the first Palestinian institution concerned with the study of *turāth* in "an organized and scientific manner," conducting research, administering an extensive folklore archive, setting up museums as well as arranging lectures, festivals and exhibitions.<sup>89</sup> In 1974, it published the first volume of its journal *al-Turāth wa-'l-mujtama'*, a publication continuing to appear until today and constituting the most serious scholarly effort in the field. Smaller institutions with research facilities and archives such as the *Center for the Revival of Arab Heritage* in Taibe soon followed in other parts of the West Bank. In addition, the issue of *turāth* became a focus of study in the newly founded universities of Birzeit, Nablus and Bethlehem. As Nabil Alqam states, by the late seventies, research on Palestinian *turāth* had emerged as a well-institutionalized field enjoying broad-based popular interest:

National universities became interested in folklore, and introduced some folklore courses. Student councils at Birzeit, An-Najah and Bethlehem Universities, as well as in several other institutions, have become interested in Palestinian folklore. They often organized festivals of folk songs and dances and held contests between competing dance groups. No student celebration lacks such items as traditional folk singing and dancing. At Bethlehem University there is a special club for folklore sponsored by the student council. [. . .] There are also many groups dedicated to folk arts which are either independent or connected with some establishment. Rarely will one find a village or a town or a refugee camp that does not have one or two such groups. (Alqam 1994: 181–82)

<sup>88</sup> The name in Arabic is *Lajnat al-abḥāth al-ijtimā'iyyah wa-'l-turāth al-sha'bī*. The name changed later to *Center for the Popular Palestinian Heritage, Markaz al-turāth al-sha'bī al-filasṭīnī* (Abū Ḥadbā 1994a: 58).

<sup>89</sup> Citation translated from (Abū Ḥadbā 1994a: 58). For activities organized by the Committee see for instance ('Alqām 1977; 'Alqām 1978).

Thus, within the context of a changed political landscape in the Middle East in which Palestinian resistance had reemerged as an independent national movement, the concept of *dabkeh* as Palestinian *turāth* quickly spread. This process was not always smooth, as the remark made by the leader of a *dabkeh* troupe in the seventies certifies. Musing about the difficulties in setting up and leading a *dabkeh* troupe, Qunbar blames Palestinian families for a lack of awareness concerning the meaning of *turāth*, a national heritage which should be revived and preserved by all means: “One of the problems is that the families of the members do not realize the importance of the work which the art troupe is doing in terms of preserving our *turāth sha‘bī* and developing it. The troupe and its leader have to spread the consciousness for this work.”<sup>90</sup> Yet in general, attempts at spreading the idea of *dabkeh* as *turāth* among Palestinians were greatly successful. Newly formulated in the late sixties and early seventies, the concept of *turāth* acquired center-stage in Palestinian cultural discourse in the seventies and eighties, leading one folklorist to exclaim that by the eighties, “[t]he number of museums of folklore has increased, the folk dancing groups have multiplied and the word *turāth* is current and part of the vocabulary of your taxi driver and shopkeeper as it certainly was not in the past” (Bushnaq 1994: 172).

#### *dabkeh on stage as al-turāth al-sha‘bī al-filasṭīnī*

With the reemergence of the Palestinian national movement and its institutionalization under a *Fatah*-dominated PLO after 1967, Palestinian cultural leaders invented *dabkeh* as the modern version of an ancient peasant dance grounded in the history and landscape of Palestine (Barghouthi 1994). Invented as ‘simple,’ ‘rustic’ and ‘earthen,’ *dabkeh* for one thing served to highlight Palestinian cultural uniqueness in contrast to the surrounding Arab states. Although *dabkeh* in all Arab countries is generally associated with village life, folklore troupes in the surrounding states, notably in Lebanon, staged their presentations not as ‘simple’ or ‘rustic,’ but rather as sophisticated and highly refined art.<sup>91</sup> Foregrounding simplicity, Palestinian *dabkeh* was thus easily distinguished and served to emphasize Palestinian particularity and independence.

<sup>90</sup> Translated from (Qunbar 1979: 83).

<sup>91</sup> Author’s conversations with Palestinian dance practitioners in Ramallah/al-Bireh. According to Sherifa Zuhur, the “newly adopted symmetry and athleticism”

More importantly, however, the staging of *dabkeh* as an age-old rural practice occurred as a marker of difference from Israel. In contrast to the Israeli *debkot*, which were newly invented and typically associated with the name of a choreographer and a date of creation, Palestinian nationalists stressed that their *dabkeh* was ‘real *turāth*,’ which is old, has no fixed beginning in time and no known choreographer (al-‘Awwād 1983: 100–104; Barghouthi 1994). Likewise, Palestinian folklorists emphasized that in contrast to Israeli dancing, *dabkeh* was clearly grounded in the Palestinian landscape. While the names of Israeli *debkot* were more or less randomly chosen according to the choreographer’s artistic inspiration, a majority of the *dabkeh* styles identified in Palestinian folklore discourse as ancient are named according to places or geographic regions in Palestine. There is, for example, a *dabkah filastīniyyah*, a Palestinian *dabkeh* which the literature describes as one of the oldest *dabakāt*<sup>92</sup> performed by Bedouins in the north. In addition, folklorists mention *al-sha’rāwiyyah* named in reference to a Palestinian village, *al-khalīliyyah* referring to the city of Hebron (al-Khalīl), *al-shimālīyyah*, the ‘northern *dabkeh*’ done in the northern regions of Palestine as well as *dabakāt ahl al-jūlān* named in reference to the Golan region.<sup>93</sup>

In addition, Palestinian folklorists stressed that the Palestinian *dabkeh* remained essentially stable in form and content over time. While *rikudai ‘am israeli* became characterized by ever new choreographies and innovations in dance steps and styles, they argued that the basic step patterns of the *dabkeh*, representing its timeless cultural core, remained essentially unchanged. According to Abdul-Latif Barghouthi, “continuity, simplicity and stability” define the distinctive characteristics of the Palestinian *dabkeh* and link contemporary movements and step patterns to ancient rural symbology (Barghouthi 1994: 43). ‘Awwād Sa‘ūd al-‘Awwād similarly argued that the *dabkeh* jumps have their origins in age-old Canaanite fertility rites and reflect the increasing growth of plants. They were used to scare away evil forces and protect the security and growth of seedlings (al-‘Awwād 1983: 33). Simple,

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starting to characterize the Lebanese *dabkeh* in the sixties and seventies were due to the influence of Eastern European dance teachers, who brought ballet movements and training styles as well as the “complex foot patterns, kicks, leaps, and jumps” found in Eastern European folk dances to bear on the way Lebanese *dabkeh* was brought to the stage (Zuhur 1998: 5). See also (Barghouthi 1994).

<sup>92</sup> Plural in Standard Arabic for *dabkeh*. In Palestinian dialect *dabkāt*.

<sup>93</sup> See for example (al-‘Awwād 1983; Muhsin 1987; Sirhān 1989).



age-old and unchanging, Palestinian *dabkeh*, staged in contrast to the Israeli *debkah*, thus came to stand for ancient rural life and agricultural practices. It symbolized the ‘peasant body in action’ tilling the soil of Palestine, as Fawaz Traboulsi somewhat nostalgically holds:

This is the first thing that one sees in *dabkeh*: the peasant body in action. When one closely observes the movements of the dancers, one finds there gestures of agricultural work that are almost not stylized: the balancing from left to right and from right to left which is the way of walking of the peasant in his daily life, the left foot generally placed in front as if working, the encouraging “Ahas!” which one utters when exerting a strong physical effort.<sup>94</sup>

### *Peasant bodies in militant action*

Allusions to rural life and peasantry are common elements in any nationalist discourse and also inform the folklorization of *dabkeh* in the neighboring Arab countries. Yet, in Palestinian nationalist discourse, rural symbology and the figure of the peasant hold an unusually great significance (Swedenburg 1990). The emergence of rural symbology and its special place in Palestinian nationalist discourse date back to the fifties and sixties and was intimately linked to Zionist settlement policies. Prior to 1948, the peasant, perceived as lowly, backward and uneducated, had been excluded from official cultural discourse. After the 1948 war, however, literature, and in particular, Israeli Arab poetry, played a major role in elevating the peasant to a symbol of national unity and shared Palestinian identity.<sup>95</sup> In a context of land appropriations, expulsions and the Zionist policy of “dissolution-preservation” of the Palestinian village aiming at simultaneously obstructing and perpetuating Palestinian agricultural life, the peasant gained tremendous symbolic value as a person loyal to his/her land and stubbornly defending its possession (Swedenburg 1990: 22–24). Emptied of its class-connotation, the figure of the peasant along with a set of symbols taken from Palestinian rural life such as the *kūfyiyah*,<sup>96</sup> the olive tree, the embroidered dress and the *dabkeh* were taken up by the PLO and Palestinians in the West Bank in the late sixties and early seventies, and became the central means

<sup>94</sup> Translated from (Traboulsi 1996: 46).

<sup>95</sup> In particular, this development was spurred by Israeli Arab poets living under military rule in the Galilee such as Samih al-Qasim, Mahmoud Darwish, Salim Jubran, Tawfiq Zayyad and others.

<sup>96</sup> A diagonally folded scarf worn as a male headdress under the *‘aqāl*, a black cord.



around which Palestinian national culture was refashioned. As Swedenburg explains:

Through identification with the figure of the peasant, a scattered population acquired a sense of itself as a community with roots in a specific place. [...] Everyone who consumes national dishes which come from the village, eats *za'tar* (thyme) for breakfast, dances the dabka, and savors the subtle flavors of olive oil, is endowed with the peasant's symbolic power and comes to regard him or herself as part of the people. (Swedenburg 1990: 24)

Elevated to a national symbol, the figure of the peasant in Palestinian nationalist discourse was masculinized. Shed of its negative characteristics as lowly, backwards and uneducated, the peasant came to embody the masculine ideal of a fighter, strong, active and prepared to do battle. In popular memory, it was the peasant who had mounted the rebellion of 1936–39 (Swedenburg 1995). Now, as a symbol of the newly constituting Palestinian resistance, he held out the promise of redemption. In opposition to images of Palestinians as dispossessed refugees and helpless victims, the figure of the peasant newly came to stand for, in Rosemary Sayigh's words, the "notion of the entire Palestinian people as a fighting mass ready to heed the call of the nation" (Sayigh 1979).

Staged as a peasant's dance, *dabkeh* after 1967 reflected this new nationalist discourse of masculinity, resistance and militancy. The image of 'peasant bodies in action,' so vividly evoked by Traboulsi's description of *dabkeh* dancing, acquired an additional meaning. Not merely conjuring up rural everyday-life with peasants peacefully working the soil, *dabkeh* invented as a performance of modern Palestinian identity came to stand for military action and readiness to fight. *dabkeh* turned into a show of strength of the *shabāb*, young, unmarried men, bursting with nationalist fervor and desire for action. Just as the old families such as the family of the Hussaynis, the Nashashibis or the Khalidis who had determined Palestinian politics from the twenties to the forties were replaced by the new generation of young, militarized PLO leaders, the older village dignitaries who had hitherto lead the circling *dabkeh* line gave way to the young. *Shabāb* had also historically been involved in performing *dabkeh*. However, as Ḥusām ʿIzz al-Dīn Ḥamdān argues, the historic *dabkeh* reflected the social hierarchy of the Arab extended family or community, as people usually lined up according to social prestige as well as age, with children tagging along at the very end. In this context, the role of

the *lawīh* constituted an honor reserved for a dominant male leading figure who, by displaying his extraordinary dancing skills, constructed himself as worthy of the leading role which he held within the family or community (Ḥamdān 1996). After 1967, the ‘teenage *lawīh*’ thus emerged as a new phenomenon with *shabāb* taking over the lead of the *dabkeh* and newly determined its pace, style and meaning in terms of rising up in armed, militant struggle.<sup>97</sup> To them, there was no land anymore which could be tilled in peace. What was left was *turāth*, which was mobilized for resistance, as Abu-Hadba recalled about that time: “After having lost the homeland (*waṭan*), our people stood up to strengthen what they still owned, and that was their popular *turāth*.”<sup>98</sup>

Associated with the mythical image of the *fidāʿī*,<sup>99</sup> the freedom fighter mounting armed resistance against Israel, *dabkeh* after 1967 for many constituted a means of identification with the Palestinian struggle without actually having to join the fighting. Especially in West Bank and Gaza, where the emphasis of resistance activities lay on holding out rather than staging independent military action, *dabkeh* was a means of identifying with and supporting the armed struggle coordinated by the PLO from the outside.<sup>100</sup> Apprehensive about the stigma attached to the Palestinians who had stayed inside Israel in 1948 and, by many, were suspected of collaboration, Palestinians in the occupied territories were eager to demonstrate their support of PLO activism. *Dabkeh* constituted a welcome means of doing so, reflecting the new national discourse of masculinity, militancy and resistance in its steps and choreographies. As a symbol of this new discourse, *dabkeh* started to be performed in military clothing, directly linking its presentation to the armed struggle of the glorified *fidāʿīyyīn*.<sup>101</sup>

<sup>97</sup> Ḥamdān actually criticizes this phenomenon, deploring the loss of the hierarchically arranged social order symbolized by the traditional *dabkeh* line. To him, the teenage *lawīh* stands for unruliness, youth taking over the places hitherto reserved for the elders (Ḥamdān 1996).

<sup>98</sup> Translated from (Abū Ḥadba 1994a: 57).

<sup>99</sup> Kimmerling describes the cultural image of the heroic *fidāʿī* emerging in Palestinian nationalist discourse in the late sixties and seventies as “a modern metamorphosis of the holy warrior” who would “sacrifice himself in the battle against Zionism” (Kimmerling and Migdal 1993: 212, 225).

<sup>100</sup> While guerrilla groups waged armed struggle against Israel from neighboring Arab countries during the sixties and seventies, Palestinians inside the occupied territories were supposed to hold out and maintain a presence on the ground (Kimmerling and Migdal 1993: 247).

<sup>101</sup> Palestinian dialect plural of *fidāʿī*, ‘Palestinian freedom fighter.’

In addition, this new assertive masculinity was expressed through changes in the songs accompanying the *dabkeh*. Substituting militancy for romance, *shabāb* in the Ramallah area after 1967 thus exclaimed to the well-known melody of ‘*Alā ’l-daʿūnah*, a traditional *dabkeh* song: “We have stopped singing to the girls. We now sing for the revolution and machine guns (*baṭṭalnā nghanmī li-’l-banāt. binghammī li’l-thawrah wa-’l-rashshāshāt*).”<sup>102</sup>

*dabkeh as a men’s dance*

Staging *dabkeh* as a performance of modern Palestinian identity in terms of militancy and resistance entailed a reconfiguration of what it actually meant to be Palestinian. This reconfiguration did not only take place across the generations as pointed out above, between the revolutionary generation newly emerging in the late sixties—the *jīl al-thawrah*—and the generation of their parents who had ‘lost Palestine’—the hapless *jīl al-nabkha*.<sup>103</sup> More importantly, it encompassed a gender dimension. Palestinian cultural leaders after 1967 expressly staged *dabkeh* in terms of ‘masculinity.’ On stage, *dabkeh* was supposed to be a men’s dance, a show of male power, militancy and a willingness to fight defined by high jumps, intricate steps and a proud, ‘masculine’ bearing. Abu-Hadba, one of the most well-known Palestinian folklorists concerned with the study of *dabkeh* thus differentiates between *dabkeh* as a male practice and other, more ‘feminine’ ways of moving, writing that “it is known that *dabkeh* is done by men and *raqs* by women.”<sup>104</sup> Similarly, Nādyā al-Buṭmah clearly differentiates between *dabkeh* as a men’s practice and *daḥrajah*, which she describes as a “women’s *dabkah* (*al-dabkah al-nisā’iyyah*)”, executed to the same songs, yet moving in a very different, much more quiet and subdued ‘feminine’ way.<sup>105</sup>

While defining *dabkeh* as a men’s dance, many cultural leaders, however, conceded that women, or rather, girls, should have a role in contemporary stagings of *dabkeh* as Palestinian *turāth*. The question of women in relation to the nation had emerged as a crucial one in Palestinian nationalist discourse after 1967. Believing that Arab ‘backwardness’ especially as relating to women had played a major role

<sup>102</sup> Translated from (Hamdān 1996: 54).

<sup>103</sup> For the identification labels of Palestinian generations see (Sayigh 1979: 58).

<sup>104</sup> Translated from (Abū Ḥadbā 1994a: 70).

<sup>105</sup> Translated from (al-Buṭmah 1996).

in the Palestinian defeats of 1948 and 1967, most Palestinian nationalists and especially those from the radical left saw the modernization of women's roles as a crucial step in their struggle to regain Palestine (Hasso 2000). Women were supposed to enter the public sphere alongside the men, participating in the fields of politics, education, work, military mobilization, etc. Adopting such a modernist viewpoint, many Palestinian cultural leaders regarded the exclusion of girls from public dance presentations as a sign of the very 'backwardness' that they set out to overcome. In their minds, it was essential that women be included in such public events, bearing witness to the progressiveness of the Palestinian nation. While in the past, women usually had not performed in public, they argued that women should now dance on stage alongside men, performing a Palestinian identity that was modern and freed of the 'shackles of tradition.'<sup>106</sup>

By the early 1980s, these efforts to include girls on stage had born fruit.<sup>107</sup> Alongside the new male national subjectivity of the *shabāb*, a new female national subjectivity emerged, the *ṣabāyā*, referring to young, unmarried women who publicly presented *dabkeh* in the service of the nation and stood next to the men on stage in their symbolic fight against the Israeli occupation. Like the *shabāb*, the subjectivity of the *ṣabāyā* was defined in terms of 'masculinity.' Performing *dabkeh* on stage, Palestinian cultural leaders stressed that the public appearance of the *ṣabāyā* should be devoid of explicitly 'feminine' movements and overt allusions to the female body. Under no circumstances should the girls' public presentation be associated with socially unacceptable forms of Arab female dancing connoting sexuality and immoral behavior. Thus, *dabkeh* performed by the *ṣabāyā* as Palestinian *turāth* was clearly distinguished from other forms of female dancing disdainfully referred to as "Eastern dance (*raqṣ sharqī*)," "Egyptian dance (*raqṣ miṣrī*)" or "Turkish dance (*raqṣ turkī*)," and considered

<sup>106</sup> Author's interviews with *dabkeh* teacher Ṣalībā Tūṭaḥ and folklorist Sharif Kanaana. See also chapter 3 on the issue of gender, modernity and *dabkeh* as debated within *El-Funoun*. On Palestinian *turāth* as a modern practice see (Kanaana 1994), especially (Barghouthi 1994).

<sup>107</sup> In 1983, al-ʿAwwād for instance commented: "Fortunately, it has become a common perception that dancing in *dabkeh* groups is nothing shameful or reprehensible for girls. Most of the Palestinian families hold the *turāth* in high esteem." Translated from (al-ʿAwwād 1983: 27). Similarly, Abū Ḥadbā writes that with the seventies "some *ṣabāyā* started to participate in the *dabakāt*" and Ḥamdān observed that at the time, "there were some troupes that included women." Translated from (Abū Ḥadbā 1994a: 71; Ḥamdān 1996: 56).

suggestive and improper.<sup>108</sup> Avoiding the “trite and sexually alluring steps” typically associated with such forms of dance, *ṣabāyā* movement as propagated by the cultural leaders featured a ‘masculinized’ style characterized by an upright bearing and frontal orientation.<sup>109</sup> Staged in the service of the nation and not as a ‘sleezy cabaret show,’ their presentation was to be serious, socially acceptable and should not leave room for misleading associations.<sup>110</sup> ‘Masculinized,’ the public presentation of *dabkeh* by girls was regarded as a permissible, and even praiseworthy activity.<sup>111</sup>

Encouraging girls to participate in public dance events as a symbol of the modern Palestinian nation, cultural leaders, however, very carefully circumscribed the ways in which female participation was to occur. The issue of women’s mobilization, in general, constituted an ambiguous one for Palestinian nationalists. Calling for the mobilization of women into the public realm in support of the national cause, nationalist leaders across the bank left issues of structural subordination and of gender imbalances within the private sphere largely unaddressed (Hasso 2000).<sup>112</sup> While positing women’s public presence as a yardstick for the nation’s modernity and progressiveness, the nationalist movement neglected to tackle issues of structural change and real gender equality (Petee 1991). *Dabkeh* presentations reflected this general situation. Mobilized to join the men on stage, the *ṣabāyā* maintained a supportive role. The ‘real’ *dabkeh* was done by the *shabāb*, presented as a show of manly energy, vigor and strength. Appearing alongside the *shabāb*, the *ṣabāyā* remained secondary as clearly demarcated gender roles defined their place on stage. “Measured, quiet movements” seen as “appropriate to the

<sup>108</sup> Author’s interview with Ṣalībā Tūṭaḥ.

<sup>109</sup> Translated from (al-Buṭmah 1996: 67). See also (Ḥamdān 1996: 44) for a discussion of the terms *dabkeh* and *raqs*.

<sup>110</sup> In conversations with Palestinian cultural leaders engaged in staging *dabkeh* after 1967, the notion of a ‘sleezy cabaret’ was often evoked as a means of emphasizing the difference between *dabkeh* as a permissible presentation of girls’ dancing and other, socially not acceptable forms of public dancing.

<sup>111</sup> Emphasizing the difference between *dabkeh* as Palestinian *ṭurāth* and forms of dancing considered reprehensible because of their overtly feminine expression, al-‘Awwād for instance strongly encourages the participation of *ṣabāyā* in the public presentation of *dabkeh*: “It is culturally legitimate and even desirable that girls should participate in *dabkeh* groups. The activities of singing girls are reprehensible because they are associated with nakedness and shameful movements.” Translated from (‘Awwād 1983: 27).

<sup>112</sup> See also (Massad 1995; Katz 1996; Klein 1997).

body of the woman” were supposed to characterize their presentation.<sup>113</sup> In particular, *ṣabāyā* movement should be devoid of the “high jumping,” the “violence” and “strength” typically defining the men’s *dabkeh*.<sup>114</sup> While the *shabāb* took center-stage with their energetic performance, the *ṣabāyā* thus stood on the sidelines, ‘gracefully’ cheering on the men and ‘politely’ acting with restraint.

### *Inventing tradition*

Staging *dabkeh* as a ‘militant men’s dance’ after 1967 constituted a process of inscribing *dabkeh* as a masculine practice onto Palestinian bodies. It was a process of canonization, in which Palestinian cultural leaders in the occupied territories set gendered guidelines of what *dabkeh* as *turāth* should actually look like. Hereby, the presentation of *dabkeh* as a ‘militant men’s dance’ after 1967 stood off against the ways in which *dabkeh* had been practiced in the context of social events before 1948. Due to a lack of sources, the issue of gender in the context of the historic *dabkeh*, especially concerning the role of women, is ambiguous. Yet in general, it can be said that gendered norms concerning *dabkeh* in the past were far more complex than the idea of a ‘men’s dance’ propagated by Palestinian nationalist discourse after 1967 suggests. As anthropologist Sharif Kanaana, a respected authority in the field of Palestinian folklore, points out, *dabkeh* in the past was not reserved to men, but had been a common activity among women as well. The main difference between men and women engaging in *dabkeh* was the context. While men performed publicly, women usually danced in private, removed from the eyes of the public inside the houses.<sup>115</sup>

According to Kanaana, however, even this general segregation of the sexes in the past was not a strict one. There were situations in which men and women actually joined hands in doing *dabkeh* together, rendering the question of gender norms more flexible than nationalist discourse after 1967 would lead one to assume. In contrast to younger, especially unmarried girls, older women, for instance, were accepted to join the public *dabkeh* with men “sort of like equals.” Beyond the reproductive age, they were no longer perceived as sexual beings and thus, their presence among men in public was considered

<sup>113</sup> Translated from (al-Buṭmah 1996: 79).

<sup>114</sup> Ibid.

<sup>115</sup> Author’s interview with Sharif Kanaana.

socially acceptable. Likewise, close relatives who were not considered marriage partners, did *dabkeh* together: “Late at night, after the main celebration had already broken up, members of the family and close relatives would stay together. These usually were not marriageable partners. They were sisters and brothers, brothers who were already married or guys that were younger. They quite often formed a circle with men and women dancing together.” In addition, Kanaana mentioned the example of a certain kind of *dabkeh* performed in public where boys and girls who were potential marriage partners would be allowed to dance together:

There used to be, in particular among Bedouins, permission for boys and girls to mix for a short time. These were boys and girls that were considered potential sexual partners. They would stop the separation and allow them to have fun, letting them dance together, girls next to boys. They used the word *ḥabl muwaddaʿ* for that. *Wadaʿ* are small shells which were used for ornamentation. You put beads and among them *wadaʿ*. You can still see that on the chest of horses sometimes. So *ḥabl muwaddaʿ* is a known style.<sup>116</sup> It is seen as a break of the rules, but within the rules. Usually, it would only take place when the participants are only from the same community, the same *ḥamūleh*. I don’t think you have that when invitees from other villages or tribes were there, but rather later at night, or during the first days of the celebration, when outsiders do not come.<sup>117</sup>

As Kanaana’s statement implies, the question of gender roles in the past had been more flexible than Palestinian folklore discourse after 1967 suggests. The historic *dabkeh* did not constitute a ‘men’s only’ activity. Instead, practiced by both sexes, the question of whether men and women actually did *dabkeh* together was dependent on the context, constituting a complex process of negotiating when, where, how and with whom the event would take place. As *dabkeh* was invented as *turāth* after 1967, clearly circumscribed gender norms for-

<sup>116</sup> *Ḥabl* is a cord or string, and *ḥabl muwaddaʿ* thus translates roughly as a ‘cord ornamented with shells.’ On the *dabkeh* style called *ḥabl muwaddaʿ* see also (al-ʿAwwād 1983: 102; Sirhan 1989).

<sup>117</sup> All quotes are from author’s interview with Sharif Kanaana. Asking older people in the Galilee and the Ramallah area during my field work about the role of women in *dabkeh* before 1948, I got similar answers. Usually, people answered that both women and men engaged in *dabkeh*, yet separately, and women did not join the men’s public performance. When prompted, however, they qualified their statements, conceding that there indeed were situations, in which women and men, or unmarried girls or boys, did *dabkeh* together. The line of social permissibility was thus not drawn strictly between the sexes, but depended on the context. Also, as they explained, brothers and sisters would have no problem engaging in *dabkeh* together.

mulated by Palestinian cultural leaders came to replace this flexibility. *dabkeh* was turned into tradition, a formalized canon of gendered movement patterns whose guidelines and rules were inscribed onto the Palestinian body through the activities of the newly founded performance troupes.

*Ancient, unchanging and rooted: Resisting Israel through dabkeh*

Passing over the changes involved in inventing *dabkeh* as a contemporary performance of the nation, Palestinian leaders posited the Palestinian *dabkeh* as ‘ancient.’ In nationalist discourse after 1967, *dabkeh* was constructed as an age-old peasants’ practice, which had endured essentially unchanged since time immemorial, and, by all means, should continue to be preserved in this very style. In order to preserve *dabkeh* in its pure, original manner, Palestinian cultural leaders demanded that any artistic engagement with *dabkeh* should adhere to the principles of *aṣālah*, the purity of origin.<sup>118</sup> Attempts at *taṭwīr*, the development of new steps and movement styles, should only take place in accordance with *aṣālah*, thus maintaining the pure, original patterns: “First is always the *aṣālah* and second the *taṭwīr*, and the *taṭwīr* never at the cost of the *aṣālah*.”<sup>119</sup>

In particular, the call of the folklorists for preserving the age-old was directed at women. Putting them on stage as the yardstick of modernity, Palestinian cultural leaders, at the same time, identified women as the guardians of the nation’s cultural authenticity. Women’s presentations on stage had to be in step with the set of norms defined by Palestinian cultural leaders in terms of *aṣālah*. Although generally conceding that girls should participate in presentations of *dabkeh*, Abu-Hadba, for example, rejects the idea of having women do *dabkeh* alongside the men as equal partners: “Some girls have started to participate in the men’s *dabakāt* and just like the usage of different choreographic patterns, I must say that here we cross the line which the understanding of *aṣālah* has drawn.” At the same time, he condones female presence on stage as long as they adhere to the role staked out for them. Choreographies, for example, in which the girls of the troupes perform with water jugs, pretending to be “returning from the well,” are legitimate, as the way women move on stage in these presentations “has something of *aṣālah*.”<sup>120</sup>

<sup>118</sup> See for example (Abū Ḥadbā 1994a).

<sup>119</sup> Translated from (Abū Ḥadbā 1994a: 70).

<sup>120</sup> Ibid.: 71.



As Swedenburg points out, the emphasis placed by Palestinian cultural leaders on the ‘rescue’ and preservation of cultural practices such as *dabkeh* had little to do with the naive romanticism of what James Clifford termed the Western “salvage paradigm” that is, the efforts launched by Western folklorists and ethnographers to safeguard traditions perceived as threatened by the onslaught of modernity (Clifford 1987). Rather, the Palestinian call for rescuing and preserving *turāth* occurred in direct reaction to Israeli settlement policies, constituting part of a concerted attempt at asserting a Palestinian national presence in light of perpetual Zionist erasure (Swedenburg 1990: 21). Positing *dabkeh* as an age-old practice was seen as effectively countering Zionist rhetoric which held that Palestinian identity was ‘ephemeral,’ ‘artificial’ and had emerged only as a response in the sixties (Khalidi 1997: 177). As a consequence, in the highly politicized context of military occupation, any changes or innovations were perceived as a threat to the very existence of the Palestinian people. Palestinian cultural leaders urged the *shabāb* and *ṣabāyā* to perform *dabkeh* in its pre-scribed, unchanging form, maintaining the essential step patterns as well as assigned gender roles. Once canonized, *dabkeh* should continue to be performed in ways prescribed by tradition and deviations from this norm were sanctioned. Preserving *dabkeh* in its essential form as age-old *turāth* was a matter of survival:

The Palestinian response to the Zionist practices against our heritage [...] was that of the defender of his own existence. The Palestinian considered any danger that threatened his heritage to be a threat to his survival. Tolerance towards these practices was not possible since it meant contributing to self-destruction, which in turn meant slow suicide. (Abu-Hadba 1994b: 79)<sup>121</sup>

Imbued with new values, yet staged as an age-old tradition, *dabkeh* served a dual function. Inscribed onto Palestinian bodies as a ‘militant men’s dance,’ *dabkeh* constituted an active means of resistance. The circling *dabkeh* line, feet stomping the ground, asserted the Palestinian claim to their homeland. Performing *dabkeh* in its pre-scribed manner, the *shabāb* and *ṣabāyā* declared their loyalty to the land and readiness to stay put, to stubbornly resist appropriation and expulsion, and, if necessary, mount armed resistance to liberate the homeland. Serving as a means to challenge existing power hierar-

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<sup>121</sup> Misspellings in original.

chiefs between Israelis and Palestinians, *dabkeh*, at the same time, however, functioned as a means of inscribing gendered hierarchies within Palestinian society itself. Canonizing *dabkeh* as tradition, which should be revived and preserved in terms of its age-old essential character, Palestinian cultural leaders inscribed a set of hierarchical gender norms onto Palestinian bodies. Replacing former flexibility with a canon of fixed rules, cultural leaders consolidated a system of patriarchal hierarchy through *dabkeh* that relegated women in the name of national struggle to a secondary role.

### Conclusion

Tracing the ways in which *dabkeh* was reinvented twice, once as a specifically Israeli dance tradition and a second time as a specifically Palestinian one, illustrates the relationality of Israeli and Palestinian nationalism as it played out in the field of cultural performance in the time from the forties to the seventies. For one thing, the case of the double invention of the *dabkeh/debkah* aptly illustrates how two competing nationalisms used the same cultural practice for purposes of collective identification. By appropriating an indigenous dance form, Zionism, once installed in the Middle East, was authenticated as Israeli nationalism. *Dabkeh* as *debkah* turned into *Sabra* performance, culturally and territorially rooting the New Jew in his/her new Middle Eastern surroundings. Consolidated in form of a victorious nation-state, the Israeli national presence, in turn, directly served to shape the performance of Palestinian nationalism through *dabkeh* after 1967. As a performance of Palestinian *shabāb* and *ṣabāyā*, *dabkeh* as Palestinian *turāth* turned into an active means of resistance asserting national presence on the land with every stomp of the circling line.

For another, the double invention of the *dabkeh/debkah* highlights the ways in which the discourse around the Israeli *debkah*, respectively the Palestinian *dabkeh*, as well as the practice of *dabkeh/debkah* in both contexts were directly shaped through the relationship of the Israeli, respectively the Palestinian nation to its Other. The ways in which Zionist/Israeli cultural leaders translated *dabkeh* into *debkah*, in fact, the very reasons why these leaders identified *dabkeh* as a defining model of the new Israeli folk dance tradition, occurred in relation to an Other: a dominant Europe from which Jewish immigrants to historic Palestine/Israel sought emancipation, on the one hand, and on the other, the presence of an indigenous population, whom Zionism

had first ignored, but then increasingly posited as a threat to the establishment and consolidation of a Jewish nation-state. Similarly, the invention of *dabkeh* as a performance of modern Palestinianness occurred in relation to the Palestinian nation's Other: on the one hand, the Arab states in opposition to whom Palestinians sought to assert their national particularity and independence, and, on the other, a dominant Israel that in 1967 had occupied the last remnants of what had counted as historic Palestine and through its policies of land appropriation and annexation was seen as attempting to definitely wipe out any aspirations towards an independent Palestinian national existence.

Relationality also defined the strategies used by Israelis and Palestinians to culturally authenticate their practices. Emancipatory nationalisms generally place particular emphasis on the issue of cultural authenticity: While organizing collective identity in terms staked out by a universal discourse of nationalism, emancipatory movements highlight their authentic originality as the very argument which legitimizes their national existence and independence from a dominant power in the first place. In this context, the double invention of *dabkeh/debkah* is especially interesting as it draws attention to the ways in which the cultural essences so cherished by emancipatory movements for purposes of authentication are not simply there, but come into existence through relationality. Zionist/Israeli cultural leaders appropriated an Arab dance practice to culturally authenticate modern *Sabra*/Israeliness and lay claim to a territory hitherto foreign to them. Palestinians, in turn, newly invented *dabkeh* as specifically Palestinian in response to a dominant Israeli national presence and policies aimed at delegitimizing Palestinian national aspirations to the same territory.

The authentication strategies used by Zionists/Israelis, on the one hand, and Palestinians, on the other, display a great degree of similarity. Both staged *dabkeh/debkah* as an authentic tradition, a performance of national identity. Of course, the processes involved in inventing *dabkeh/debkah* as authentic tradition in both cases were very different. Defining authenticity in terms of novelty and artistic creation, Zionist cultural leaders appropriated, translated and innovated an Arab cultural practice that was foreign to them. *Dabkeh* was turned into an Israeli *debkah*, a 'new tradition' for a 'new country.' Palestinians, in contrast, strategically passed over the processes of invention, transformation and innovation involved in staging *dabkeh* as a Palestinian

practice. Locked in anti-colonial struggle, Palestinian leaders defined authenticity in terms of an ability to resist change and posited *dabkeh* as an ancient and timeless tradition of Palestine. However, whether as a creatively new Israeli tradition or as an 'age-old practice of Palestinian villagers,' *dabkeh/debkah* in both cases served the same purpose of legitimizing the nation by highlighting its cultural originality. Similarly, both parties differently invented *dabkeh* as a 'peasant's dance,' thus culturally 'rooting' identity in the country as well as glossing over class differences. In the Israeli context, middle-class immigrants used *debkah* to blend into the landscape and make it their home. In the Palestinian context, the peasant as a national symbol served to emphasize Palestinian unity in the face of Israeli dominance. By elevating rural symbology to the national level, class-differences between a middle-class leadership operating from the outside and people within the occupied territories under Israeli rule were purposefully glossed over. Finally, *dabkeh* in both the Israeli as well as the Palestinian context performed identity in terms of 'masculinity.' As a means of empowerment and resistance, both the Israeli *debkah* and the Palestinian *dabkeh* were staged as a 'men's dance.'

Despite these similarities in discourse and dance practice, however, *dabkeh/debkah* from the forties to the seventies clearly constituted a practice that separated, rather than connected. Israeli folk dance discourse stresses the personal relationships which many of the movement's leaders had established with Palestinian practitioners of *dabkeh* at the time. Ayalah Goren recalls that her mother maintained friendly ties with a Palestinian family from Jaffa.<sup>122</sup> Similarly, Yardena Cohen emphasizes the relations which she entertained with quite a number of Palestinian dance practitioners.<sup>123</sup> Besides, folk dance leaders Rivka Sturman, Vicky Cohen and Moshe Halevi are reported to have had personal contacts with Palestinian *dabkeh* dancers.<sup>124</sup> Yet as Israeli folk dance discourse reveals, these personal encounters always took place within the parameters staked out by a hierarchical relationship of unequal power. Zionist/Israeli dance leaders turned to Arab dance practices because they appreciated them as the eternally Oriental, timeless and unchanging ways of a primitive Other.

<sup>122</sup> Author's interview with Ayalah Goren.

<sup>123</sup> Author's interview with Yardena Cohen See also Cohen's autobiographic account as cited in (Ingber 1974).

<sup>124</sup> Author's interview with Ayalah Goren. See also (Sorell 1949; Myers 1959; Ingber 1974).

In the accounts of Zionist/Israeli folk dance choreographers about the emergence of an Israeli folk dance movement, urban Palestinians did not exist, only villagers, 'living relics' of a Biblical past long gone. Israeli folk dance discourse thus portrays Palestinians as 'playing the pipe' and 'dancing down paths,' but not as active, equal members of possibly the same community. Appropriating *dabkeh* to authenticate modern Israeli Jewishness, the folk dance leaders excluded the native population from participating in their nation-building project. In Israeli folk dance discourse, like in other Zionist accounts, Palestine was an 'empty land,' waiting to be appropriated by the 'awakening touch' of European Zionists (Said 1996; Shohat 1997a). In reaction to Zionist policies, Palestinian cultural leaders, in turn, invented *dabkeh* as an active means of resistance against the unequal power hierarchy defining Israeli-Palestinian relations. Strategically staging *dabkeh* as an ancient, unchanging Palestinian practice, they sought to reclaim the land and history appropriated by the Zionist intervention and re-establish their national presence on the ground. Palestinian identity performed through *dabkeh* in the late sixties and early seventies thus again was an exclusive one, aiming to assert an independent identity in the face of Arab, as well as in particular Israeli domineering claims.

## CHAPTER THREE

### CHANGING WAYS OF MOVEMENT: THE PALESTINIAN POPULAR DANCE TROUPE *EL-FUNOUN*, 1979–1999

#### INTRODUCTION

Moving from the seventies to the late nineties, this chapter examines how Israeli-Palestinian relations influenced the ways in which *dabkeh* performed collective identity in contemporary, globalizing Palestine. My analytical focus hereby shifts from the level of official nationalist discourse as articulated through written publications after 1967 to the level of one particular dance troupe, *El-Funoun* from Ramallah/al-Bireh, West Bank, and its particular ways of dealing with *dabkeh* as *al-turāth al-sha‘bī al-filasṭīnī*. Founded in 1979, *El-Funoun* at the time of my research in 1998–1999 was generally considered the most prominent Palestinian dance troupe in the West Bank. *El-Funoun* members as well as its audience hereby linked the group’s prestige to its success in establishing itself as a permanent cultural institution. During the twenty years of its existence from 1979 to the time of my fieldwork, *El-Funoun* had never stopped operating, not even during times of crisis such as the intifada years when the Israeli authorities had taken over the group’s rehearsal site and many of its male members were imprisoned or wanted by the Israeli army. From its initial days of rehearsing in the house of someone’s grandmother, the unfinished premises of the later-day *Sareyyet Ramallah* (*Sariyyat Rāmallāh*)<sup>1</sup> swimming pool or simply in the streets at night, *El-Funoun* by the late nineties had evolved into a full-fledged cultural institution with an elaborate formal administration, a budget, two fully paid positions, a professional dancing studio and a steady corps of about twenty-five dancers.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> A scouts organization in Ramallah involved in various cultural, athletic and social activities.

<sup>2</sup> At the time of my research, *El-Funoun* was the only dance group in the West Bank that could boast of such an uninterrupted, successful working history. Many of the groups which had sprung up spontaneously during the seventies and eighties did not exist anymore in the late nineties. Even well-known, popular groups

Investigating *El-Funoun's* activities as a performance of national identity, I seek to expose the ways in which Israeli-Palestinian relations impacted on the changing styles of movement displayed by the group in its stage activities in the time from 1979 to 1999. In general, Palestinian nationalist discourse as formulated after 1967 employed cultural practices such as the *dabkeh* to evoke senses of shared Palestinianness and mobilize resistance against the Israeli occupational force. Setting out to perform the Palestinian nation through *dabkeh* on stage, *El-Funoun* from the very beginning, however, held its own vision about what kind of nation that should be. The group's founders and leading members were strong supporters of the left, in particular of the *Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine* (PFLP).<sup>3</sup> Although the group itself was never directly affiliated with a political party, leftist ideas very much influenced its foundation and shaped its artistic activities through the late nineties.<sup>4</sup> More than the official cultural discourse formulated by the *Fatah* dominated PLO and other nationalist institutions in the West Bank, *El-Funoun's* activities from the beginning thus comprised an explicit class component. Distancing themselves from the idea of an elite cultural institution, the group

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such as *Sareyyet Ramallah Group* (*Firgat Sariyyat Rāmallāh*) from Ramallah, Birzeit University's *El-Judhur*, *Sharaf* from the Ramallah area and others underwent great difficulties in maintaining a continuous existence. In this vein, the group *El-Judhur* which had been founded in the early eighties dissolved in the mid-nineties as a result of administrative problems. *Sharaf*, which throughout the late nineties still occasionally managed to gather people from the Ramallah/al-Bireh area to perform, definitely did not exist anymore at the time of my research in summer 1999. Most successful in maintaining a permanent presence was *Sareyyet Ramallah Group*. First established in the early sixties for performing in the *Layālī Rāmallāh Festivals* under King Hussein and reorganized in 1985, the group had stopped operating in 1997. Managing to reconstitute itself in 1999, however, *Sareyyet Ramallah* worked to consolidate its cultural presence during 2000 and at the time of writing in 2001 is still active under its director Khaled Elyan.

<sup>3</sup> A Marxist faction established by George Habash in 1967 with headquarters in Syria. On PFLP ideology as well as other ideological orientations within the Palestinian national movement see for instance (Cobban 1984; Cubert 1997; Hoekman 1999).

<sup>4</sup> While people in Ramallah/al-Bireh generally continued to associate *El-Funoun* with the left, the group's political affiliation had lost its importance during the nineties to the point that the group at the time of my research also included members from other political orientations. While having openly renounced any direct affiliation with the PFLP in the mid-eighties, *El-Funoun* continued to put its political viewpoint into practice, however, by for example engaging in community projects to support the underprivileged. Within the framework of the program *Art for Everybody* administered by the *Popular Art Center* since the early nineties, long-time members such as Muhammad Ata and Khaled Qatamesh, for instance, continued teaching *dabkeh* to children in lower class neighborhoods in the Ramallah/al-Bireh area and near-by refugee camps through the late nineties.

aimed to address the “popular masses (*al-jumhūr*).” *El-Funoun* was to be a group from and for the *shaʿb*, that is, in their words, the lower classes, workers and peasants, the underdogs of the refugee camps and the poor neighborhoods of the city, all of those whom they saw carrying the double burden of class status, on the one hand, and occupation and dispersal, on the other.

Seeking to speak to the popular masses, *El-Funoun*’s stylistic negotiations from the very beginning constituted careful balancing acts. For one thing, the group sought to reach the people through culture and make them identify. To this end, *El-Funoun* attempted to stage presentations in ways that would be known and shared by the audience. Not straying too far from the familiar, the group meant to evoke and consolidate feelings of national community and togetherness. For another, *El-Funoun* aimed at promoting its own socio-political vision informed by leftist ideology. As an agent of social and intellectual change, the group sought to imbue the Palestinian nation with new meanings by developing new ways of staging *dabkeh* that would challenge conventional movement patterns and social norms. In the nineties, *El-Funoun*’s stylistic negotiations between the expectations of its audiences as well as its own political and artistic aspirations gained an additional global dimension. Working within the context of a protracted Israeli occupation, *El-Funoun* had remained more or less isolated from developments in the international dance scene during the early years of its existence, and, in particular, at the time of the intifada. With the early nineties, however, international dance discourse and styles became freely accessible to the group via internet, fax, email, videos and people traveling. Not having to physically dislocate themselves, *El-Funoun* members started taking part in the global dance scene with the help of the new technologies, drawing inspiration from these newly available artistic models to experiment with their own style of moving on stage. Analyzing how the ensemble negotiated to perform the nation from 1979–1999 through changing styles of movement, I argue that Palestinian relations with their Israeli Other throughout determined the general framework within which these stylistic changes in the globally mediated locality took place. Even while the details of *El-Funoun*’s changing style were locally negotiated under the increasing impact of global flows, I will show how Israeli-Palestinian relations continued to stake out the general parameters within which the group’s stylistic negotiations beyond the familiar could acceptably occur.



CHANGING STYLES: FROM *DABKEH* TO *RAQS FILASTIN*

On 5 July 1999, the entry in my field diary read: “The stage is black. Then, a small beam of lights falls onto the body of a woman, cowering on a bench in the background. With the opening notes of *Sabreen’s* well-known song *Risālat mub’ad* sounding out across the crowd,<sup>5</sup> the woman starts moving. She gets up, pauses, looks across the audience. The slight evening breeze typical for summer nights in the hills of Birzeit fans her hair and makes the dress, a bright orange and yellow piece, open at the front and flow around her legs. The dancer starts moving, drawing attention with her vivid turns and, it seems, almost exaggerated hip gyrations. The crowd cheers, obviously enjoying the solo. Quite abruptly, it ends with the dancer dramatically falling to the floor, getting up again, then regaining her posture on the bench. ‘I don’t like the piece,’ one of *El-Funoun’s* group leaders, mutters into my ear. ‘Still, our artistic committee approved the choreography as part of the group’s repertoire to be shown publicly, and it does actually show the diversity that we have reached in our work today.’” I could not but agree with this appraisal of the choreography performed during the closing night of the *International Palestine Festival* of 1999. The woman’s solo really was a far cry from what one would have imagined to be performed under the label of Palestinian *dabkeh*. But then again, *El-Funoun* had not claimed to present *dabkeh* for the past ten years. Rather, since its foundation in 1979, the group had been undergoing a process of continuous stylistic transformation.

*Steadfast Resistance, 1979–1987**Founding El-Funoun*

Asked about their initial motivation for setting up a *dabkeh* group in 1979, Muhammad Ata, Wasim Al-Kurdi and Muhammad Yaakub agreed that founding *El-Funoun* had more or less come about by chance. According to Ata: “The idea to start a group was a random idea. I cannot say that there was a clear plan. No, we were a group of *shabāb*. We liked *dabkeh*. We saw what they [the Israelis] were doing

<sup>5</sup> *Sabreen* is well-known band from East Jerusalem founded in the early eighties. They give the English title of their song as *A Letter from an Exiled*. On *Sabreen* see also (Boullata and Hiltermann 1993).

to our heritage. So the idea came up to found a group.” Although not set up with an elaborate plan in mind, *El-Funoun*’s foundation in 1979 nevertheless was directly linked to the general situation in the West Bank at the time. By the late seventies, a sense of heightened urgency was spreading in the territories. Over ten years had passed since the beginning of the Israeli occupation of West Bank and Gaza as a result of the 1967 war, and what at first may have seemed to be only provisional, in fact turned out to be quite permanent.

The sense of alarm emerging among Palestinians in the late seventies was heightened by Israeli settlement activities in the territories, which had started after the 1973 war with the emergence of the *Block of the Faithful (Gush Emunim)* as a new sociopolitical movement in Israel propagating the Jewish settlement of West Bank and Gaza.<sup>6</sup> By 1977, about 11,000 Israelis had invested in 84 new Jewish settlements in the territories, a trend strongly supported by the Likud party after its accession to power under Menachem Begin in 1977 (Kimmerling and Migdal 1993: 252).<sup>7</sup> Publicly calling for the disappearance of the Green Line marking the border between the Israeli heartland and West Bank and Gaza, Begin initiated a process known as ‘creeping annexation,’ marked by the expropriation of Palestinian lands, intensified settlement activities and the progressive integration of the Palestinian economy as well as Palestinian electricity, road and water supplies into the Israeli system.<sup>8</sup>

With an increasing number of settlers moving to live into West Bank and Gaza, Palestinians in their daily lives started to feel the reality of the second-class status allotted to them by the Israeli occupation. Feelings of discrimination and second-class treatment had already been an integral part of the experience of Palestinian labor migrants who had begun commuting to Israel after the war of 1967.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> For good overviews over the development and politics of *Gush Emunim* see (Newman 1985; Lustick 1988).

<sup>7</sup> For figures of Jewish settlement in the West Bank after Likud’s accession to power in 1977 see also (Benvenisti 1987).

<sup>8</sup> The literature differs as to the extent to which an Israeli annexation of the territories was actually achieved during the eighties. While Benvenisti argues that an Israeli annexation of West Bank and Gaza had indeed taken place (Benvenisti 1987), others, such as Ian Lustick, for example, reject the notion that an annexation had been carried through. In his eyes, Israel had merely taken steps into that direction (Lustick 1993).

<sup>9</sup> Starting on a small scale after the war of 1967, the number of Palestinians migrating to Israel as cheap day laborers skyrocketed in the seventies. By 1974, in spite of the war a year before, more than one third of the total work force in the West Bank was regularly commuting to Israel for work (Heller 1980: 191).

Yet with increasing Jewish settlement in the territories in the seventies, such experiences were not limited anymore to trips into Israel, but were brought home to Palestinian daily life in West Bank and Gaza. While Israeli settlers enjoyed exclusive and preferential rights such as preferred access to water, land, financial support, security services and the like, Palestinians saw their rights subordinated to Israeli occupational interests, with severe restrictions in water supply as well as large-scale land appropriations for military reasons and settlements. In addition, Israeli occupational policies were toughening. What had started out as an “occupation-with-a-smile” evolved into a firm military rule under the Likud government (Kimmerling and Migdal 1993: 252–254).

Confronted with the reality of a prolonged Israeli occupation, Palestinians in the West Bank in the late seventies did not resort to taking up arms. Instead of armed struggle, the West Bank population opted for mounting resistance to Israeli occupation in terms of *ṣumūd*, steadfastness. As Kimmerling specifies, *ṣumūd* hereby encompassed two concrete ways of reacting. For one thing, Palestinians practiced *ṣumūd* in terms of endurance, that is, they aimed at maintaining a presence in the West Bank. Steadfastly holding out, they sought to prevent a Palestinian exodus from the territories as well as avoid giving the Israeli army any pretext for deportation. Yet *ṣumūd* did not only stand for maintaining presence, but for actively marking Palestinian existence in the face of the Israeli occupation. During the seventies, Palestinians thus invested a lot of energy in institution building, setting up a vibrant sphere of civil society institutions like social organizations, labor unions, political initiatives and universities as a means of strengthening the Palestinian presence (Kimmerling and Migdal 1993: 247).

Cultural activities constituted an important element for mounting resistance in terms of *ṣumūd*, especially among highschool and college students affiliated with leftist political groups such as the founders of *El-Funoun* (see Taraki 1990). In line with the new nationalist discourse articulated after 1967, Ata, Al-Kurdi and Yaakub posited *ihyāʾ al-turāth*, the revival and preservation of the Palestinian cultural heritage, as an essential means for struggling against the Israeli occupation. Especially so, as the Israeli encroachment upon Palestinian lives in the West Bank was not merely felt in military, political and economic terms, but also in terms of culture. In the seventies, stories about Israelis cheaply buying Palestinian cultural artifacts in the

territories and marketing them as Israeli products had started to make the rounds. Maha Saqqa, for instance, a Palestinian private collector, explained her long-standing engagement in collecting *twāb*, Palestinian embroidered dresses, in terms of the need she had started to feel after 1967 to protect Palestinian *turāth* from Israeli appropriation: “Israeli collectors pay top dollars to collect Palestinian dresses from villages. They want to erase out children’s memories. Israeli airlines have dressed their stewardesses in Palestinian garb and claimed it to be Israeli. Israeli collectors have used Arabs to empty houses of artifacts like old jewelry.” (‘Anānī [no date])

Similarly, folklorist Abdul-Aziz Abu-Hadba accused the Israeli government of trying to obliterate the Palestinian cultural presence by starting to sponsor Israeli Arab *dabkeh* troupes in the seventies for traveling abroad and for presenting their performances in the name of Israeli, not Palestinian folklore. Not only presenting Palestinian *dabkeh* to the world as part of Israeli culture, Abu-Hadba critically observed that the Israeli government also influenced Israeli Arab ensembles to change their style, thus causing the presentations to lose their authenticity and wipe out the Palestinian cultural presence. Thus, he notes about a *dabkeh* dancing festival held in the Israeli Arab village of Tamreh in the early eighties, the choreographies presented there had little to do any more with ‘authentic’ *dabkeh* as defined by Palestinian folklorists at the time. According to Abu-Hadba, eleven of the twelve dances presented were “devoid of any Palestinian element, whether in the movement, the music or the costumes” and thus prompted the “obliteration and abuse of the heritage of our fathers and forefathers” (Abu-Hadba 1994b: 59).

Set up on the spur of the moment, *El-Funoun* adopted the official nationalist discourse of preserving and reviving Palestinian *turāth* as a means of staging resistance by steadfastly marking cultural presence. As Muhammad Ata emphasized, the group did not just want to work for the sake of presenting “nice artistic pieces,” but consciously sought to stage *dabkeh* as a means of resisting the Israeli occupation: “Students are activists. So we thought that we have a responsibility. We have to sing nationalist songs and do our traditional Palestinian *dabkeh*.” Khaled al-Ghoul, *El-Funoun* member since the early eighties, described the initial motivation of the group in similar terms as emerging from the need to defend Palestinian cultural, and, by extension, Palestinian national existence against an Israeli occupation which had turned out to be there to stay:

Our aim was to preserve and protect our folklore from being forgotten, that is, from the consequences which the occupation had for our culture and our *turāth*. We felt that we needed to protect our *turāth*, preserve it. Preserving *turāth* was one of the important means to preserve our national identity and to resist the occupation. This was the initial aim of the troupe in performing our Palestinian songs and *dabkāt*.<sup>10</sup>

The aim of the group to stage steadfast national resistance through *dabkeh* was also expressed in the group's name, adopted before its first presentation in 1980. The very name of the group alluded to the motivation of its members to bring *dabkeh* to the stage in a context in which Palestinian *turāth* much like the Palestinian nation was seen to be under threat of extinction. Muhammad Ata recalled the significance of *El-Funoun*'s name as follows:

We were thinking about a name for the group. Many funny names were brought forth. One *shābb* suggested *Candles* (*al-Shumūʿ*), something giving light. Then Wasim Al-Kurdi suggested *Firqat al-funūn al-shaʿabiyyah al-filasṭīniyyah*, because *dabkeh* is part of our popular arts, our *turāth*. It was a big name for a group that was just starting. Always the national group in a country would be called like this, but we agreed on the name as it fit our vision.

*Doing it correctly: "Kull il-ḥarakāt maʿrūfeh, bidnāsh wa-la-khaṭa!"*<sup>11</sup>

Staging *dabkeh* as a means of steadfastly resisting Israeli occupation, *El-Funoun* aimed to present *dabkeh* according to the authentic, historic norms of *al-turāth al-shaʿbī al-filasṭīnī* as defined by Palestinian scholars of folklore after the 1967 war. When first starting to rehearse as a group, Muhammad Ata, Muhammad Yaakub and Wasim Al-Kurdi, the three founding members of *El-Funoun*, admitted to knowing little about the 'authentic' conventions of doing *dabkeh*. They had learned some steps by participating in a *dabkeh* group organized by the boy scouts in the *Nādī al-bīrah*.<sup>12</sup> For the first presentations with *El-Funoun*, the group thus presented what they had gathered from these trainings, which were a couple of well-known steps to the popular songs of *ʿAlā ʿl-dalʿūnah* and *al-ṭayyārah*.<sup>13</sup> As Muhammad Ata recounted about the very first performance in 1980 at *Birzeit University*,

<sup>10</sup> Plural in Palestinian dialect for *dabkeh*. In Standard Arabic *dabakāt*.

<sup>11</sup> Translates as "All movements are known, we do not want to make a mistake."

<sup>12</sup> The *al-Bireh Club*, a boys scouts organization in al-Bireh.

<sup>13</sup> *ʿAlā ʿl-dalʿūnah* is a popular song historically accompanying the *shimālīyyeh*. *Ṭayyārah* refers to a certain style of *dabkeh* distinguished by its fast rhythm exigit especially quick movements and jumps.

the group's short rendition of these familiar *dabkeh* steps enjoyed great success and consolidated its existence:

Students from the university came to us, telling us that there would be a celebration at the university. They had heard that we were meeting and practicing and they wanted to invite us to that event. We told them that we would like to attend, but that we didn't really have anything to present, just *dal'ūnah* and *ṭayyārah*. They said that's fine. We performed for five minutes. We saw the positive reaction from the audience, the feelings and the yearning among the people for *dabkeh* and *turāth* and such things. There were many who said that they had seen us and that they would like to be with us. We sat down and organized the group.

One year later in 1981, the group decided to enter a competition organized at *Birzeit University* for local *dabkeh* groups. Again, *El-Funoun* presented familiar *dabkeh* steps and movement patterns. As Ata explained, all their movements were well-known, and they were extremely careful not to make any mistake in their rendition. Dressed in *tōb* and *sirwāl*, embroidered robes and wide trousers, borrowed from parents and grandparents, the group performed to win the competition. The jury, consisting of some of the leading figures in the field of *dabkeh* and folklore studies at the time, hailed *El-Funoun's* effort at presenting the 'authentic.'<sup>14</sup>

Winning the Birzeit competition in 1981 encouraged the founders of *El-Funoun* to continue their endeavor. In particular, it confirmed to them that they were doing the right thing when presenting *dabkeh* on stage. As the Birzeit jury had assured them, their style was perceived as 'authentic,' and steps and movements had been done according to the familiar norm. When preparing for the *Birzeit University* competition organized a year later in 1982, however, the group was faced with the question of what to present next. They already had staged the *dabkeh* movements which they knew and felt that they had to think of something new. Yet, in order to change their routine without just randomly making something up, the group thought that they needed to know more about Palestinian *turāth* and, in particular, *dabkeh*. Entering into a dialogue with people engaged in the study of folklore, *El-Funoun's* members sought to broaden their knowledge about what constituted 'authentic' Palestinian *turāth* and acquire a greater variety of steps, figures and movements. According to Ata:

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<sup>14</sup> Author's interview with Abdul-Aziz Abu Hadba who had served as jury member in the Birzeit competition.

We started to have lectures and meetings with Palestinian scholars of folklore like Abdul-Aziz Abu-Hadba and Dr. Sharif Kanaana on the issue of what is Palestinian *turāth*. We told them that we wanted to present Palestinian *turāth*, and show them what we were doing. Were we on the right track, or not? Working with Dr. Sharif Kanaana opened horizons before us.

Supported by folklorists like Kanaana, *El-Funoun* members set out to choreograph their first longer work, performed under the title of *Folkloric Scenes (Lawḥāt fūlkūrīyyah)* at the Birzeit competition in 1982. In preparation for the presentation, members of the group had conducted field research in Palestinian villages to collect songs and melodies. Going beyond their initial, rather limited repertoire, *El-Funoun* thus managed to put together a number of new choreographies, based on well-known, ‘authentic’ styles of movement as well as popular *dabkeh* songs such as *Layā wa-layā*, ‘*a-l-Simsim*, *Jafrā* and *Ẓarīf al-ṭūl*. Again, their efforts were rewarded with a first prize at the competition (El-Funoun 1997).

#### *Holding hands*

*El-Funoun*’s active engagement with the folklorists continued until the late eighties. Seeking to collaborate in terms of preserving and reviving the ‘authentic’ in steadfast resistance to Israeli occupational policies, the group participated in various activities launched by Abu-Hadba, Kanaana and others to research and collect Palestinian *turāth*. To this end, a cooperation was called into being under the name of the *Movement of Heritage Research (Ḥarakat al-baḥṭh al-turāthī)*. As an outcome of this cooperation, several seminars and workshops were held during the mid- and late eighties. In addition, various publications concerned with Palestinian *turāth* were put together, such as the journal *Jafrā*, which *El-Funoun* published in 1986, as well as the booklet *al-Funūn al-sha‘biyyah*, brought out in 1987 with the help of Abu-Hadba, Kanaana and others to discuss issues of preserving and staging authentic *turāth*.<sup>15</sup> In addition, *El-Funoun* with the support of the folklorists initiated the first *Palestinian Heritage Day (Yaum al-turāth al-filasṭīnī)* on 1 July 1986, aiming to counter the “Zionist stealing and defamation of our characteristics and our national personality.”<sup>16</sup>

<sup>15</sup> Copies of these publications are available in the archive of the *Popular Arts Center (Markaz al-fann al-sha‘bī)* in al-Bireh.

<sup>16</sup> Translated from a leaflet announcing the festival (Markaz al-fann al-sha‘bī 1990).

*El-Funoun*, however, not merely sought to present *dabkeh* in ways generally accepted as ‘authentic.’ Rather, *El-Funoun* members emphasized that from the very beginning, they had also aimed at actively shaping their presentations in terms of their own sociopolitical convictions, thus changing the style of presenting *dabkeh* to put the group’s ideals of gender equality and democracy into practice. Originally set up as a group of *shabāb*, *El-Funoun*’s founding members very quickly decided to include women. Asked about their motivation to include female members within the first few months of the group’s existence, Muhammad Ata responded:

Entering female members into the group expressed the ideas that we had. I was in the leftist student union in high school. The union consisted of both guys and girls. Also, since we were young, we had been working with girls in voluntary work. Both Wasim and I, we were used to it. It was normal. So we spoke to some girls that we knew and we started to train them.<sup>17</sup>

*El-Funoun* was not the first group to include women in their stage presentations. Younger girls had already been on stage during the *Layālī Rāmallāh* events in the sixties<sup>18</sup> and appeared in the groups set up in the area after 1967,<sup>19</sup> especially in the context of the leftist atmosphere of *Birzeit University*. Yet as Muhammad Yaakub emphasized, these groups only worked on a very small scale and were not known other than in their immediate surroundings. In addition, none of these groups actually managed to exist continuously. They got together for a few months, maybe a year, then stopped again. Thus, according to Wasim Al-Kurdi, “the only place where you could see young men and women dance together continuously was in *El-Funoun*.”

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<sup>17</sup> The voluntary work movement was founded in the Jerusalem-Ramallah area in 1972 and became a major tool for mobilizing and politicizing Palestinian youth during the seventies and eighties. Crossing conventional gender barriers, young women and men worked alongside each other, engaging in community work, manual labor, farm work, etc. On the foundation, development and meaning of the voluntary work movement as a form of cultural-political resistance to the occupation see (Taraki 1990).

<sup>18</sup> See (Baladiyyat Rāmallāh 1965) listing the names of male and female dancers separately in two columns.

<sup>19</sup> Abū Ḥadbā quotes Ṣalībā Ṭūṭaḥ about his engagement in training girls in *dabkeh* as follows: “[In the seventies], some teachers whom I had taught allowed the training of their female students. *dabkeh* [as an activity for girls] thus started to be spread in school celebrations, festivals and general celebrations, be it through troupes that I was training myself, or troupes that were led by the female teachers whom I had trained.” Translated from (Abū Ḥadbā 1980: 29).



More importantly, however, *El-Funoun* not only included women, but in contrast to most other groups sought to include them as equal members. As mentioned before, the role of women in *dabkeh* groups springing up in the West Bank during the seventies had been ambiguous. On the one hand, *dabkeh* as Palestinian *turāth* was staged as a masculine men's dance, in which women, if included, were usually relegated to the backstage. Either performing separately as women-only groups, or taking a secondary role on stage, women usually were not included in *dabkeh* as equal members. Promoting ideals of gender equality, *El-Funoun*, in turn, emphasized the role of women in their presentations of *dabkeh*. While gender roles remained clearly allocated with men performing as men and women as women, *El-Funoun* paid attention to well balancing the amount of time as well as the presence of male versus female members on stage. In addition, *El-Funoun* sought to cross conventional gender boundaries by having male and female members perform next to each other on stage, holding hands and executing the same steps and movement routines. As Rim, one of the female members performing with *El-Funoun* in the early eighties, recounted, holding hands was not something usually done by other groups, even if they did include women in their stage presentations: "We got up on stage and performed holding hands with the guys. This in a sense had been taboo. Imagine, you are in public, with guys, holding hands, on a stage, performing. It was completely against the norm."

#### *Lines and circles*

Not merely seeking to cross conventional gender boundaries by having men and women perform next to each other holding hands, *El-Funoun* generally aimed at promoting a democratic, anti-authoritarian attitude through its artistic work. Putting their political ideals into practice, *El-Funoun* sought to set up the group's internal organization in ways that would allow for transparency, participation and gender-balance. Yet, hoping to also give expression to these ideas when presenting on stage, *El-Funoun* members thought about ways of staging *dabkeh* that would account for their political ideals and overcome the strong hierarchical element which they generally attributed to *dabkeh* in its historic version. As they explained, historic *dabkeh* was usually associated with a leader, the *lawīh*, who commanded the line by indicating steps, tempo, and rhythm. According to Khaled Qatamesh, *El-Funoun* member since the early eighties and since 1996

the group's administrative director, the group rejected this concept of the one strong, male leader commanding the others:

We rejected the idea of there being one leader and then those who are lead. Like the head of a tribe and the people of the tribe or the president of a state versus the people. This image of the one person who is always the venerated one, the higher one. This is one of the things that we want to bring across to people, that there is not one person, but that there are people. That there is not one leader, but that there are leaders. That there is not one person who is always the king.

Attempting to realize their ideals of grass-roots democracy and equality, *El-Funoun* changed the role of the male leader in its *dabkeh* presentations, increasingly reducing his significance in favor of the group. Thus, while initial choreographies still included a male member as *lawīh*, this role soon disappeared in the group's subsequent presentations in the early and mid-eighties. The group also broke up the long *dabkeh* line into pairs of two, three or more people who no longer followed one leader, but moved separately across the stage. In addition, experimenting with different geometric patterns, *El-Funoun* started using formations that did not have a specific beginning or end, such as for instance the complete circle or the figure of the four-armed star (*al-nijmeh*). Yet, even when using linear formations with a clear beginning and end, the role of the leader was not limited to a specific person, but changed throughout the choreography. In later productions that included specific roles such as the bride or the bridegroom, this principle was enforced even more, splitting these roles between different members so as to prevent the singling out of anyone in particular. As Khaled Qatamesh emphasized: "There is not one who always has a certain position and the rest is in the back. No, everyone of us is a leader."

*From Folkloric Scenes to Lantern*

In the time from 1979 to 1987, stylistic changes in the work of *El-Funoun* were not merely negotiated in terms of gender roles and democratic ideals, but also in terms of the group's artistic aspirations. Having staged *Folkloric Scenes* as their first major production in 1982, *El-Funoun* quickly realized that simply arranging familiar step routines to popular tunes ended up being repetitive. Staged *dabkeh* presentations were nothing new anymore in the West Bank in the eighties. Groups had sprung up all over the West Bank, and constituted part of any school, social institution and even political faction. In

order to continue capturing the people's attention and live up to their own ambition of staying "Palestine's no. 1," *El-Funoun's* members started to debate new possibilities of staging Palestinian *dabkeh* in its function as a means of resisting Israeli occupation.

In 1984, *El-Funoun* presented its second major production, titled *The Valley of Apples* (*Wādī al-tuffāh*). In contrast to the group's first production *Folkloric Scenes* from 1982, this new piece was based on a specific topic. While *Folkloric Scenes* had simply consisted of an assemblage of various *dabkeh* choreographies without thematic link, the choreographic scenes of *The Valley of Apples* combined to talk about life in a Palestinian village, alluding to the different seasons, social events such as weddings and death, as well as war and emigration under the Israeli occupation of the West Bank in 1967. Taking on the role of a story-teller, Wasim Al-Kurdi thematically linked the different choreographies by introducing each scene with poetic verses especially written for the production. In addition, the songs accompanying the *dabkāt* for the first time were not rendered as usually sung by the people in a social context. In order to fit the thematic content of the various scenes, changes in the words of the songs were made by adding or leaving out a few lines. Again, *El-Funoun's* production was received with enthusiasm by the general audience as well as the folklorist jurors, winning first prize in the *Layālī bīr zayt*, a festival organized by *Birzeit University* for the first time that summer.

Two years later, *El-Funoun* came up with its third major production *Lantern* (*Mish'al*) which carried the stylistic changes a bit further. In contrast to *The Valley of Apples*, which had consisted of a number of *dabkāt* thematically linked together by a story-teller, the production of *Lantern* newly introduced the concept of actually telling the story through *dabkeh*. Drawing on a popular folk tale, the production staged the story of Mish'al, a young Palestinian villager who had been forced into the Ottoman army to fight against the British in World War I, but then underwent a process of political emancipation and joined the Palestinian resistance against the British mandatory forces. In staging *Lantern*, *El-Funoun* further explored the possibilities of taking commonly familiar material and reproducing it in new ways. Under the label of "drawing inspiration from folklore (*istilhām al-fülklūr*)," as Wasim Al-Kurdi put it, the group based their production on familiar materials such as popular songs and *dabkeh* steps, yet adapted this material to fit the plot told on stage (Al-Kurdi 1994). In this vein,

the group for the first time had its music especially arranged for the production, entrusting the East Jerusalem band *Sabreen* with this task. Basing their musical arrangement on known, popular tunes, *Sabreen* adapted the songs to the plot by employing a variety of different Eastern instruments such as the *‘ūd*,<sup>20</sup> the *nāy*<sup>21</sup> and the *buzuq*,<sup>22</sup> which were not usually used in Palestinian popular music. Also, the music was arranged so as to change rhythm between different pieces, adding diversity and drama. In addition, a musical choir was included alongside the narrator, again allowing for greater artistic variety and suspense in the unfolding of the story. Wasim Al-Kurdi wrote a script for a narrator plus choir, using familiar song texts only for the musical pieces accompanying the *dabkāt* and recounting the story's plot via newly composed poetry in between the dance pieces.

The changes *El-Funoun* made in their presentations, especially concerning the role of women on stage were not all appreciated by the folklorists who worked with the group. As one of the founding members recalled, the folklorists challenged them on their innovations, asking the group to refrain from changing the norms of presenting *dabkeh*: “When we did the *dal‘ūnah* with guys and girls holding hands, people who were specialists in folklore confronted us, saying, how can you do this, guys and girls together in the *dal‘ūnah*. They said to us: ‘Go back to our *turāth*, and be more careful about these things. See how they were actually singing!’” Yet in general, the relationship between the folklorists and the group remained close, both sides generally approving of the other. While the scholars functioned as consultants for the group, providing them with background knowledge and constructive criticism, *El-Funoun* put the folklorists’ theory on stage into practice. Staging *dabkeh* as authentic Palestinian *turāth* according to the accepted norm, the group’s productions thus gained wide recognition within West Bank society during the early and mid-eighties as successful examples of how to preserve and at the same time artistically develop *dabkeh* without losing its essential authenticity. Accordingly, in 1984, the Palestinian journalist Sami Aboudi, for instance, hailed *El-Funoun*’s efforts in preserving “authentic Palestinian *turāth*,” “pioneering in retrieving forgotten songs,” as well

<sup>20</sup> An Arabic lute. For further information on the use of the *‘ūd* in a Palestinian context see (Lama 1982; Sbait 1982).

<sup>21</sup> A reed-pipe (*mizmār*). See (Bearman, Bianquis et al. 2000).

<sup>22</sup> An Arabic string instrument similar to the Greek bouzouki. On its use in a Palestinian context see (Sbait 1982).

as “developing folklore to make it relevant to current issues and contribute to the Palestinian people’s struggle for independence” (Aboudi 1984: 11). Staging the authentic with a welcome touch of artistic variety and sociopolitical message, *El-Funoun* thus presented *dabkeh* during the early and mid-eighties as a means of resisting Israel in terms of *ṣumūd*, with which many West Bankers readily identified.

### *Rising Up, 1987–1989*

With the outbreak of the intifada in the occupied territories on 9 December 1987, a clear change occurred in *El-Funoun*’s artistic work. As creeping annexation gave way to the Palestinian attempt at ‘shaking off’<sup>23</sup> as the defining parameter for Israeli-Palestinian relations, *El-Funoun* no longer staged *dabkeh* as a means of resisting Israel in terms of *ṣumūd*. Instead, the group designed a new way of moving on stage that reflected the ways in which Palestinians in the territories for the first time actively revolted against Israeli occupation by rising up.

“*Min hayātī sharafī aghlā wa-min il-damm illī sāl—ṣawṭ il-intifādah a’lā min il-iḥtīlāl*”<sup>24</sup>

The outbreak of the intifada had come about spontaneously with the fatal event of an Israeli tank transport vehicle running into a row of cars and buses filled with Palestinian day-time laborers returning home from Israel to Gaza. Yet the structural conditions leading to the outbreak in 1987 had been a long time in the making, resulting from twenty years of military occupation without any prospect of change. The economic situation in the territories was eroding. The stagnation of Israel’s economy beginning in the late 1970s had caused inflation and finally hyperinflation. As a result, the wages of Palestinian labor migrants who commuted to Israel for employment were sharply decreasing in the 1980s. The troubled economies of neighboring Arab states further exacerbated the economic plight of West Bank Palestinians. Jordan, whose economy after an initial boom in the 1970s had dramatically declined in the 1980s, no longer offered

<sup>23</sup> Intifada literally translates as ‘shaking off.’

<sup>24</sup> Translates as: “My honor is worth more than my life and the blood that has been shed. The voice of the intifada is stronger than the occupation.” The lines are taken from one of the songs on a tape produced by *El-Funoun* during the intifada.

a feasible choice for Palestinian migrants looking for work elsewhere. Moreover, low oil prices in the Gulf noticeably decreased the remittances sent home by migrant workers.<sup>25</sup>

The difficult economic circumstances went hand in glove with a desperate political situation. Israel's policy of the 'iron fist,' instituted by the Likud party after its rise to power in 1977, had become increasingly arbitrary and brutal, trying to suppress any form of Palestinian political expression and assertion of identity with beatings, imprisonments, and deportations. Meanwhile, prospects for an end to military occupation were nowhere in sight. On the contrary, Israeli settlement activities had reached a hey-day with more than 100,000 settlers moving to live in the territories during the late 1980s. In addition, the probability of an outside force intervening on behalf of the Palestinians had dwindled, as the years of "futile diplomacy" of PLO and Arab leaders in the mid-eighties showed and the Arab summit held in Amman a month before the intifada exemplified (Tessler 1994: 600–676). Although paying lip service to the plight of the Palestinians, the Arab delegates showed themselves to be far more concerned about developments in Iran than in the territories, pushing the Palestinian issue to the very end of the summit's communiqué. In Edward Said's words, a feeling of "embattled loneliness, even abandonment" thus prevailed in the territories, finally exploding in the mass demonstrations marking the beginning of the popular uprising against the Israeli occupation in December 1987 (Said 1989: 5).<sup>26</sup>

Starting with spontaneous mass demonstrations and acts of civil protests in the wake of the 9 December event, the intifada, at least during its initial period, was not orchestrated from above, but unfolded as an uprising of the people on the street. Rising up in popular protest, Palestinians in West Bank and Gaza no longer steadfastly held out for things to change, but took matters into their own hand. As Swedenburg comments on this initial period: "Ownership of the concept of struggle has been partially transferred from the armed vanguard and the PLO leadership outside to the popular organizations of the Occupied Territories inside. The masses, formerly led, now

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<sup>25</sup> For analyses of the eroding economic conditions in the territories preceding the uprising see (Farsoun and Landis 1990; Saleh 1990; Roy 1991).

<sup>26</sup> For a general discussion of events and conditions underlying the outbreak of the intifada see (Lockman and Beinin 1989; Farsoun and Landis 1990; Nassar and Heacock 1990; Taraki 1990; Kimmerling and Migdal 1993).

precede the leadership.” (Swedenburg 1990: 28) The whole body of Palestinian society in the West Bank seemed to be moving to rise up in public protest, seeking to ‘shake off’ the occupation. Among the people taking to the streets, *El-Funoun* members were protesting in the front lines, not in the name of the group, but as politicized individuals and members of labor unions, political parties, committees and organizations. Acquiring credentials as a ‘street hero’ of the intifada, Muhammad Ata described the involvement of the group members as follows: “All of us were actively participating. [. . .] The intifada was a change in the life of people. It was a time of struggle, a call to everyone.”

In addition to joining the demonstrating masses, *El-Funoun* members thought about ways to rise up against the Israeli occupation in artistic ways. Generally, cultural and social engagements during the intifada constituted an ambiguous issue. Both local leaders as well as the general public enforced an atmosphere during the intifada that resembled a state of pro-longed mourning, banning any commercial, or regular social and cultural happenings. Yet while commercial music and lavish social events remained strictly sanctioned, cultural and artistic activities undertaken in the name of the intifada and the nationalist struggle were generally approved of. As Ata explained, *El-Funoun* faced no problem in continuing its artistic engagement throughout the intifada, as their activities highlighted nationalist contents in support of the uprising:

We discovered that the intifada is not just one or two days. The intifada is years, a whole lifetime. I did not see it as a crime to have weddings, but when we did, they had to be Palestinian weddings, with nationalist songs, not commercial, meaningless songs, so that even through this wedding we can establish a tradition among the people. There were actually lots of debates concerning this issue inside the organizations. But whenever we had a performance, the people came. They did not think of these performances as simple pleasurable past-times. Everyone understood that it was nationalistic. So it was okay.

To artistically demonstrate their support, *El-Funoun* produced a tape with songs for the intifada. As one of the leading group members recounted, the tape was received with enthusiasm by the people and became widely distributed:

This tape caused a furor here. We were the first troupe to produce a tape with intifada songs and it really stirred up the people. I was imprisoned while we were working on the tape, and so was the per-

son writing the texts. Other guys from the group who were outside finished it. Then the tape was taken up by the occupational forces and they wanted our musical director for it. They imprisoned him for six months. Of course, everybody copied the tape for their friends. Our songs entered every house. We did not put *El-Funoun* on the tape, because our name was known and we did not want the Israelis to get us on this. We put another name, but it was our *shabāb* and our *ṣabāyā* who sang the songs.

Although the group had been successful in producing the song tape, the comment cited above exemplifies how difficult artistic production had become in the time during the intifada. Israeli authorities strictly forbade any display of nationalist symbols and lyrics. Operating without an Israeli permit and not submitting the scripts of their performances to the authorities beforehand as they were supposed to, the group's members, especially the men, were under constant threat of beatings and arrest. Moreover, as *El-Funoun* members recounted, the Israeli occupational forces did their outmost to prevent the troupe from performing, closing or raiding the places where the troupe was scheduled to appear or arresting members the night before an event. Meeting for rehearsals also became difficult. *El-Funoun's* training site, since the mid-eighties located in the building of the *al-Bireh Friends of the Community Society* (*Jam'īyyat aṣḍiqā' al-mujtama'*) was known to the Israeli army. It was placed directly on a major road leading to an Israeli settlement and thus, from the very beginning of the intifada, the Israeli army kept a special eye on the place, at some point even converting the building into a military post to guard the street leading to the settlement.<sup>27</sup>

*“Kull il-jism lāzim yiḥarrak—The whole body needs to move!”*

As a time of major upheaval and political uprising against Israel, the intifada provoked social transformations within Palestinian society. Instead of students and political activists usually involved in protest activities, it was children and especially also women “of all ages and of all sectors of society” who went onto the street to confront the Israeli soldiers and protect their sons and brothers from beatings and arrests (Hiltermann 1998: 42). Turning into the backbone of the intifada, women transgressed gender norms and social conventions that had hitherto defined their lives in the patriarchal

<sup>27</sup> Author's interview with leaders of *El-Funoun*. On the take over of the *al-Bireh Friends of the Community Society* by the Israeli army see also (Turjman 1992).



structure of Palestinian family life. Thus, as Palestinian society rose up against Israeli occupation, a “new Palestinian woman emerged,” characterized by her “greater defiance, increased self-esteem, and a newly acquired political consciousness.” (Sabbagh 1998: 173) These social transformations taking place in Palestinian society during the early stage of the intifada, especially the increased possibilities for women to challenge their conventional position within Palestinian society, encouraged the development and acceptance of new ways of movement on stage. *El-Funoun*’s fourth major production *The Plains of Ibn ‘Amer (Marj ibn ‘āmir)*, conceptualized during the initial years of the intifada and first brought to stage in 1989, reflected this changing attitude. Seeking to resist Israeli occupation, *El-Funoun* during its initial years had changed *dabkeh* in its presentations, yet only within the limits defined by the folklorists. *The Plains of Ibn ‘Amer*, in contrast, went beyond these limits. Instead of familiar norms of moving, a new artistic principle came to underlie the work of the group. Proclaiming in the mood of the intifada that “the whole body needed to move (*kull il-jism lāzim yitharrak!*),” *El-Funoun* started to no longer present ‘authentic’ *dabkeh* on stage, but *raqs*, dance.

*dabkeh* as hitherto staged by *El-Funoun* had emphasized leg and foot movements, with the upper body remaining stiff. It was the rigid, upright bearing in combination with swift leg work that was generally seen as characterizing the good *dabīkeh*, the good performers of *dabkeh*. Shifting from *dabkeh* to *raqs* in *The Plains of Ibn ‘Amer*, *El-Funoun* sought to go beyond this focus on legs and feet. Making the whole body move, the group developed new ways of dancing, including the arms, hands, shoulders and the head. In addition, *El-Funoun* started to use space differently. Its earlier *dabkeh* choreographies had privileged geometric patterns, using mostly line formations or geometric patterns, sometimes forming a circle or breaking up into pairs of two or three. The new production, in contrast, used space much more freely. The strict line patterns were broken up in favor of letting the dancers move separately across the stage, filling the whole space and enabling the dancers to turn and move in a more liberal fashion. More variety in movement was also gained by including solos, a choreographic ploy introduced by *El-Funoun* already in its production *Lantern* in 1986, yet further developed and accepted as a standard composition technique only with *The Plains of Ibn ‘Amer*. As Khaled Qatamesh explained, the motivation behind the production was an attempt to

show that it was possible to “tell an entire story through body movement,” a concept which hitherto had not been employed.

To match these new, less restricted ways of moving, the group also changed its style of costuming. Until that time, *El-Funoun* had only performed in garb generally categorized as ‘typically’ Palestinian, that is, the *tōb*, the black, embroidered dress for women with a white headscarf, and the *sirwāl* (wide pants) and boots for the men. During the initial years of its existence, the dresses worn for the group’s stage presentations had not even been costumes, but clothes normally worn by family members that were simply borrowed for the presentations. For *The Valley of Apples* in 1984, the group for the first time had used costumes, that is, clothes especially designed and made for the production. Yet also these first regular costumes had been made according to what generally counted as ‘authentic’ Palestinian dress, the *tōb* and *sirwāl*. In contrast, seeking to widen their range of movement on stage, *El-Funoun* in *The Plains of Ibn ‘Amer* designed their costumes according to a different style that enabled the freedom of full-body movement demanded by the new choreographies. Rim explained: “As we now started to use the whole body, the *tōb* was hindering us. We developed these costumes so that it would be easy to move in and that they would be appropriate for our steps.” Using cloth from the north of the country, the costumes were designed to look generally Middle Eastern with scarfs, long dresses and pants, but not as specifically Palestinian. There was no embroidery, and the colors were less chosen according to what were perceived as typical Palestinian colors, such as the black and red of Ramallah dresses, but according to the mood which a certain scene was supposed to transmit, that is, dark during the scenes of mourning and battle, bright and colorful for the beginning and the happy end.

Changing ways of moving on stage, *El-Funoun* also set out to rethink the gender roles portrayed in its choreographies. From the very beginning, ideals of gender equality and democracy had prompted *El-Funoun* to have women and men perform on stage together. Yet roles of male and female dancers had remained divided according to conventional norms, featuring scenes in which the female performers engaged in activities generally associated with women such as carrying water jugs or bread baskets, while male performers, in turn, engaged in battle and resistance. With women and children taking to the streets in protest of Israeli occupational policies, thus

effectively entering the domain of public politics formerly dominated by men, *El-Funoun* reconsidered the allocation of gender roles on stage. Prompted by demands from the audience as well as an internal debate, the group changed the choreography of the battle scene to include women, as one of the female dancers recounted:

In more than one choreography, we actually changed the way in which we deal with the issue of gender roles. For example, the scene of the fight in *Marj ibn ‘amir*. In the beginning, there were only *shabāb* in this dance. Then we changed. We asked ourselves, why don’t we also include *ṣabāyā*. We thought that this fight is not only a fight of men, it is a fight in which all of society participates. Also, there were reactions from the audience, especially women, who were asking why that scene did not include women. We were very interested in that opinion. We saw ourselves that we had not really paid attention to this issue. We considered it and then, having performed more than once with only *shabāb*, we changed the scene.

Seeking to highlight the idea that national resistance was something to be done by society as a whole, not only by men, *El-Funoun* included women in the dance. To drive the point home which they were trying to make, the group also had the women wear the same costuming as the men: *sirwāl*, a male headdress and a patrol belt.

Changing ways of movement on stage in accordance with changing sociopolitical circumstances in the context of the intifada, *El-Funoun* did not essentially reorient its artistic activities. The group continued to see themselves as a Palestinian group working in the service of the nation in opposition to Israeli occupational policies. As their continuing participation and engagement in the organization of heritage days and festivals showed, they had not abandoned *turāth* as the general basis of their work.<sup>28</sup> Rather, they were concerned with reinterpreting its form. The audience reacted enthusiastically to this reinterpretation. Newly attempting to make the whole body move in dance, *The Plains of Ibn ‘Amer* well reflected the mood of upheaval and ‘shaking off’ prevalent during the initial years of the intifada. Telling of successful resistance against a dominant force not only in terms of the plot but also in terms of overcoming conven-

<sup>28</sup> In this vein, *El-Funoun* helped organize the *‘Uyūn Qāra Festival* on 1 July 1990. Declaring that the aim of the festival was to “present our popular *turāth*,” *El-Funoun* joined hands with the folklorists to arrange the festival in honor of eight Palestinian workers who had been killed by the Israeli army in the area referred to by Palestinians as *‘Uyūn Qāra* ten days before (Markaz al-fann al-sha‘bī 1990). On the festival in memory of the incident see also (Abū Ḥadbā 1994a).

tional norms of moving on stage, the piece captured the imagination of the audience. To a certain degree, the production even gained approval among the scholars of folklore who grudgingly conceded that the norms of *turāth* were not set in stone, but were subject to change and reinterpretation.

### 2.3 *Stalemate, 1989–1993*

#### *Impasse*

Catalyzed by the euphoria of the initial phase of the uprising, the group's efforts to design a new style of movement soon lost impetus behind the backdrop of a stalling political situation. After the first six months of rising up against Israel, the intifada had started to lose vigor and spontaneity. Worse, at the end of the eighties, it was emerging as a fact that over two years of "frenzied rioting" and "back-breaking hardship" had neither amounted to an end of the Israeli occupation nor in any way had brought nearer the fulfillment of the nationalist dream (Kimmerling and Migdal 1993: 266). A growing depression began to characterize life in the occupied territories under Israel's iron fist and the uprising against the occupation was coming to a stalemate.<sup>29</sup> By the time the Gulf crisis started in 1990, the situation in West Bank and Gaza had turned desolate.<sup>30</sup> Unemployment rates in certain communities lay between 30–40% and outside economic possibilities had dwindled close to zero (Kimmerling and Migdal 1993: 267). The unfolding Gulf crisis did little to alleviate the situation. On the contrary, as Philip Mattar comments, the crisis itself constituted "one of the worst setbacks for Palestinians in modern times" and further contributed to the despair felt by Palestinians in West Bank and Gaza (Mattar 1994: 31). Arafat's support of Saddam Hussayn, or what had been interpreted in the international arena as such, backfired.<sup>31</sup> As a result, the flourishing

<sup>29</sup> The third year of the intifada brought somewhat of a relief to the population of the territories, as Israeli loosened the grip it was trying to get on the territories, concentrating on controlling strategic areas rather than every square inch. Nevertheless, in general, the situation was deteriorating.

<sup>30</sup> See (Abed 1991; Heacock 1991; Roy 1991; Mattar 1994) for the effects of the gulf crisis on living conditions in West Bank and Gaza.

<sup>31</sup> In an insightful article, Philip Mattar examines PLO policy during the Gulf crisis, arguing that although the PLO officially took a neutral position, its actions and statements at the time justify the impression reflected in the media and public opinion that the Palestinian leadership had actually sided with Saddam Hussein:

Palestinian community in Kuwait was crushed (Lesch 1991). The Gulf states stopped the financial and diplomatic support which had backed the PLO for the past twenty years. International support for the Palestinian cause eroded and Palestinians became unwelcome in most parts of the Arab world. Sara Roy describes the situation in the territories after the war as follows: "Palestinians feel totally abandoned, increasingly helpless, and very fearful. They are harassed by the army on a daily basis and have no institutional recourse or form of appeal. Daily life is impossibly oppressive and people genuinely despair of protection." (Roy 1991: 67)

The international peace conference in Madrid launched under American auspices in 1991 and designed to bring Israeli and Palestinian negotiators face to face to the table, in the longer run did little to abate the stagnation and depression experienced by Palestinians in the territories. Although the talks continued through the spring of 1993, no agreements were reached. On the contrary, in May, Haydar Abd al-Shafi, leader of the Palestinian delegation, demanded a Palestinian withdrawal from the negotiations. Besides, a poll taken in August showed 50% of the population in the territories in favor of a suspension of the talks (Tessler 1994: 754). Until August 1993 when Israel and the PLO suddenly admitted to having led secret talks, the relations between Israel and the Palestinians thus continued to be characterized by the double stalemate of an intifada that was slowly petering out as well as official negotiations in Madrid that were going nowhere.

The stalling political relations between Israelis and Palestinians reflected on social conditions in West Bank and Gaza during the late eighties and early nineties. Generally, the sense of being able to move more freely which had characterized the initial stage of the intifada was giving way to processes of retraditionalization and reinstitution of patriarchal and religious authority and "what had seemed to be a permanent alteration in the status of women had begun to crumble" (Strum 1998: 65).<sup>32</sup> Aiming to compensate for the loss of

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"The PLO's voting record, the symbolic significance of Arafat embracing and kissing Saddam on Iraqi television, the perceptions of most Palestinians as to where the PLO stood, and messages of solidarity with Saddam—in contrast to the absence of a clear and categorical official rejection and condemnation of the occupation of Kuwait and support for withdrawal—all indicate that the media and public perception about PLO support for Saddam were generally accurate" (Mattar 1994: 36).

<sup>32</sup> On the consolidation of an Islamist movement in West Bank and Gaza in the context of the intifada see (Qureshi 1989; Taraki 1989; Legrain 1990; Flores 1993; Schulze 2000), for its effect on Palestinian society see (Hammami 1990; El-Mancie 1997; Hammami 1999).

patriarchal authority experienced with the Israeli occupation and, in particular, with the intifada, men tried to expand their control over the family. Reverting to fundamentalist values and restricting women's movement to the home seemed a "perfect answer" to the anxieties of men who, in the context of an ongoing Israeli occupation, felt stripped of any means to take their destiny into their own hands (Sabbagh 1998: 180). In addition, the prolonged shutting down of public spaces during the intifada contributed to restoring patriarchal authority and restraining women's movement, as Islah Jad observes:

The closing down of universities and schools over long periods of time reinstated the authority of the family as the sole higher institution and increased its authority over its members, especially women, for whom schools and universities were the only alternative to home. Men also came to be confined to the home because of curfews or because their sports club and other male gathering places were partially or totally shut down. The atmosphere of constant mourning, in addition to frequent strikes all led to the presence of men and children inside the house for longer periods of time, which burdened women with new housework and limited their movement. (Jad 1998: 60–61)

*Lacking a new script*—"ghiyāb naṣṣ jdīd"

As the initial activism of the intifada gave way to the standstill of the early nineties, *El-Funoun* found itself in a period of disorientation. Having distanced itself from presenting 'authentic' *dabkeh*, the group felt it was lacking a new script to define the nature of their future activities. Seeking to go beyond the stylistic norms of Palestinian heritage as set out by the folklorists, they felt unsure about what then should be the new guidelines and norms informing the authenticity of their practices. On the one hand, *El-Funoun* felt the need for coming up with a new style of movement based on different steps, choreographic designs as well as technical innovations. After *The Plains of Ibn 'Amer*, the group felt that the possibilities of *dabkeh* as a basis for their creative work had been exhausted and they needed something new. On the other hand, seeking new stylistic inspirations, *El-Funoun* felt a heightened concern to not randomly come up with just anything. Against the background of stalling Israeli-Palestinian negotiations, an intifada slowly petering out and no end in sight to the occupation, the new dance style had to be distinctly Palestinian. Although innovative, the style should present something familiar. People should still be able to recognize the style as an expression of their own, essential Palestinian identity and identify. *raqs* should be Palestinian *raqs*.

Going beyond *dabkeh* to perform Palestinianness through *raqs*, where should *El-Funoun* turn? How to go about defining guidelines for the new style? Especially, how to develop new styles of movement in the context of retraditionalization and the reinstatement of social norms at times of an ongoing Israeli occupation? Caught between the rock of trying to innovate and the hard place of staying within the boundaries of the familiar, *El-Funoun* produced nothing. The “lack of a new script (*ghiyāb naṣṣ jādīd*),” as Khaled Qatamesh explained, prevented the group from getting a new production together and discussions about the new style led nowhere. It was a time of artistic deadlock, and the group, as Wasim Al-Kurdi recounted, reached its crisis, its “dead end.”

### *Separate Lives, 1993–1999*

#### *Restricting movement in the wake of Oslo*

Throughout the nineties, *El-Funoun* continued struggling for a new style behind the backdrop of a dramatically changing political landscape. In August 1993, news about secret negotiations between the Israeli government and high-ranking PLO leaders broke to an unbelieving world. A month later, Israeli Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin and PLO leader Yassir Arafat signed the *Oslo Agreement of Principles* on the White House Lawn. Yet the wide-spread enthusiasm which had initially greeted the signing of the agreement in the West Bank soon turned sour.<sup>33</sup> Instead of a phased devolution of Israeli control over the West Bank as stipulated in the Oslo accords, the interim phase led to a situation which, in the words of Palestinian scholars Rema Hammami and Salim Tamari was “untenable for most Palestinians, and unbearable for hundreds of thousands” (Hammami and Tamari 2000: 8).

Instead of gradually withdrawing, Israel in the years after Oslo managed to effectively consolidate its presence in the West Bank,

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<sup>33</sup> Already in the wake of the agreement a few critical voices strongly spoke out against the Oslo accords, see in particular (Said 1993). However, public support in favor of the agreement was generally strong, especially in the occupied territories where despair and hopelessness characterized everyday life. According to a poll conducted by CNN and French Television in 1993, 66.4% in West Bank and Gaza supported the agreement in 1993, versus only 29.3% who opposed it (Tessler 1994: 754).

'eating' its way into the landscape by expanding strategic settlements and bypass roads, confiscating land and demolishing Palestinian houses. With Israelis in control of the entries into the territories, West Bank and Gaza became effectively bifurcated. Except for a privileged few in possession of the necessary papers, moving between the territories was rendered impossible for Palestinians without a VIP pass or special permit. Finally opened in 1999, the 'safe passage,' which had long been promised to be set up between Gaza and the West Bank, did little to enhance Palestinian freedom of movement. With Israel maintaining control over roads and large tracts of land (zone C), even commuting between West Bank villages and towns was rendered increasingly difficult. The so-called autonomous Palestinian municipalities (zone A) became separated from each other by military security zones as well as by-pass roads reserved for the exclusive use of Israeli settlers. The ring of fortress-like Israeli settlements not only began to cut East Jerusalem off from the rest of the Palestinian towns and villages, but also came to effectively divide the West Bank into a northern and a southern half. The outbreak of the second intifada in September 2000 with its prolonged Israeli closures and heightened military control still aggravated the impossibility for Palestinians to move in between and within the territories (Hammami and Tamari 2000).

Used to perform throughout the West Bank, Gaza and inside Israel even during times of the intifada, *El-Funoun* strongly felt the restrictions in movement imposed in the wake of the Oslo accords. As Muhammad Ata stated in 1999, the group had not been able to enter Gaza since 1993. By avoiding Israeli checkpoints, the group still managed to sneak into Israel for performing in Israeli Arab communities. Yet lacking the necessary permits, such trips meant taking into account long, uncomfortable detours and occurred under the constant threat of being arrested, a situation severed by the fact that most male members of *El-Funoun* held prison records. Yet, with the mid-nineties, even performing around the West Bank turned into a painstaking enterprise that involved exhausting detouring to avoid checkpoints, if traveling was at all possible and not prevented altogether during times of political tension. Restrictions for the group were not limited to moving around in the region, however, but extended to the group's trips abroad, with travel permits being withheld until hours before a scheduled trip, and sometimes not issued at all.



*Going global*

With Israel's grip on the West Bank tightening after Oslo, Palestinians turned elsewhere to avoid strangulation. Unable to prevent Israel's physical encroachment on their daily lives, Palestinians separated themselves psychologically. They turned to the world. That is, rarely able to physically dislocate themselves, they let the world come to the West Bank with the help of the new technologies. Internet, satellite dishes, fax machines, videos and returnees<sup>34</sup> did their part during the nineties in hooking up the West Bank to the international scene. Locally manufactured cheap satellite dishes became part of the West Bank landscape, with Arab stations such as *Al-Jazeera* from Qatar, MBC from London, ANN from Spain and *al-Mustaqbal* and LBC from Beirut turning into "household names" (Hammami and Tamari 2000: 11). This trend was most notably in the streets of Ramallah, with fitness centers, internet cafés, and international-style restaurants, bars and clubs springing up in the mid-nineties. With Radio Ramallah calling to tune into the *Voice of Love and Peace* sending hip hop, oldies and American style call-ins around the clock, live jazz began to be offered every Thursday in a bar in the city's center and aerobics classes started getting the masses into shape.

As an early artistic manifestation of this move towards the global, the *Popular Art Center* (*Markaz al-fann al-sha'bi*), a cultural institution established by *El-Funoun* members in 1987, started to organize the *International Palestine Festival* (*Mahrajān filastīn al-duwalī li-'l-mūsīqā wa-'l-raqs*). In contrast to the festivals arranged in the West Bank since 1967, the *International Palestine Festival* not merely featured local Palestinian groups, but made an effort to invite artists from abroad. For the first time, the "cultural exchange between the nations" provided the framework for a festival held in the West Bank with the aim of putting "Palestine on the political, geographic, and cultural map of the world."<sup>35</sup> Not only involved in organizing the *International Palestine Festival*, *El-Funoun* itself became increasingly oriented towards the global in its search for innovating its dance style despite the ongoing Israeli presence in West Bank and Gaza. Having gone to the United States in 1986 and 1991, traveling became a common feature of the group's artistic engagement in 1994, with trips abroad organized regularly every year.

<sup>34</sup> Palestinians who 'returned' back to West Bank and Gaza from abroad after 1993.

<sup>35</sup> Quotations are translated from Arabic (Elyyan 1999; Popular Art Center 1993).

In addition, the group increasingly connected to the international art and dance scene in its office, by now well-furnished with internet, fax and telephone. Rehearsing in the building of the *al-Bireh Friends of the Community Society* since the mid-eighties, *El-Funoun* had established an administration during the early days of its existence. Yet until the mid-nineties, its administrative infrastructure had remained limited. Without a financial budget, the group had continued to work on a minimal cost basis. Depending entirely on voluntary work and not paying rent to the *Friends of the Community Society*, the group managed to cover its running expenses entirely through ticket sales, donations by local supporters as well as contributions made by members. There was no surplus money, however, to invest in an administrative infrastructure. After the Palestinian Authority (PA) under Yasser Arafat's *Fatah* movement took over Ramallah in 1995, *El-Funoun* reoriented itself in terms of its financial affairs. As a group sympathizing with the leftist opposition of Arafat's *Fatah*, *El-Funoun* saw little chance of receiving financial support from the PA and, as the members repeatedly emphasized, would not have accepted money even if offered. Besides, a competition between the PA and independent NGOs emerged with the PA trying to gain control over the money allocated to NGOs.<sup>36</sup> In order to remain politically and financially independent as well as be able to balance their increasing expenses, the group decided to turn to international donors.

Receiving international funding for the first time in 1996, *El-Funoun's* financial situation changed noticeably. The money allocated to the group by the United Nations Development Project (UNDP) in East Jerusalem as well as the *Mu'assasat al-Ta'awun*, an organization of Arabs living abroad, provided the group with a steady budget that served to cover in advance all production costs of their new piece. Additional funding came through from international donors such as the Swedish association SIDA, the *Canada Fund* as well as the private *A.M. Qattan Foundation* set up by the Palestinian millionaire 'Abdel Muhsin Qattan living in England, providing *El-Funoun* with the means to not only cover their permanent running expenses, but securing finances for future artistic productions. Instead of paying off debts, money earned through performances thus served to add a financial

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<sup>36</sup> Author's interview with Ross Young, a professional in the field of international development with long-time experience in the region by working for UNDP and other international agencies. See also (Sullivan 1996).

surplus to the budget, which was used by the group to expand its administrative infrastructure, set up a public relations & marketing committee as well as establish two fully paid positions for *El-Funoun's* administration and artistic direction.

Setting up a professional administration and technical infrastructure, *El-Funoun* in the nineties managed to establish its artistic presence in the international dance scene. The group set up a website on the internet, started to distribute its video advertisement via CD-ROM and freely communicated with artists and donors anywhere across Israeli check points and full-time closures in the West Bank. This move towards the global was not lost on *El-Funoun's* stylistic development. Struggling to define new guidelines for its artistic activities, *El-Funoun* turned to the international dance scene for choreographic inspiration, variety in steps and dancing technique. Embarking on a series of workshops in ballet and modern dance, the group hoped to develop its physical abilities as well as get creative input. Early attempts to gain access to the international dance scene reached back to 1991, when Melinda Hazboun, a Bethlehem-born Palestinian training in classical ballet in a school in West Jerusalem, had started to give ballet classes at the *Popular Art Center*. Participation in these classes was obligatory for *El-Funoun* members, who thus received a first training in classical ballet steps, working on things like flexibility, lightness as well as techniques of jumping, turning and positioning.<sup>37</sup>

This initial experience was short-lived, as Hazboun left for Germany to embark on a career as a professional dancer. Yet it paved the way for the series of workshops guiding *El-Funoun's* artistic activities from the mid-nineties onwards, led by internationally acclaimed dancers of ballet and modern dance such as the Moroccan dancer Fāyzaḥ Ṭalbāwī, the New Yorker Robert Wood and the Australian Nicholas Rowe. In addition, Palestinian physiotherapist Samir Qatamesh developed a special training routine for *El-Funoun* in 1996 that continued to be exercised in rehearsals twice a week. Based on a course called *Dance to Stretch* which Qatamesh had taken in West Jerusalem, the routine combined elements of aerobics, modern dance and stretching.<sup>38</sup> Members of *El-Funoun* also started to go abroad to participate in dance workshops elsewhere, such as a trip of two members to Tunis in 1998, and of one member to Germany in 1998.

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<sup>37</sup> Author's interview with Melinda Hazboun.

<sup>38</sup> Author's interview with Samir Qatamesh.

With Melinda Hazboun returning from Germany, the *Popular Art Center* reopened the ballet training courses in fall 1999. Besides workshops and active exposure to ballet and modern dance, *El-Funoun* sought to extend its knowledge about international dance and choreographic activities through videos and tapes acquired through embassies, festivals and other dance groups. In the summer of 1999, the idea of organizing an international dance conference in Palestine was repeatedly voiced. The public relations committee of *El-Funoun* also came up with the idea of starting an internet newsletter among Arab dancers and groups, providing a forum in which to discuss contemporary issues related to dance in Arab countries, such as gender, women's rights and democratization.<sup>39</sup>

*Developing style because of and despite the occupation*

Turning to international dance styles in order to develop their own, *El-Funoun* discursively legitimized the international styling of their work as a way of coming to terms with the increasing Israeli encroachment onto West Bank lives. In opposition to official PA policy geared towards cooperation with Israel, *El-Funoun* rejected the establishment of cultural contacts with Israel under the framework of Oslo. Refusing anything resembling such a, in their words, "cultural normalization (*al-taṭbī' al-thaqāfī*)" of relations before political realities had not fundamentally changed, the group sought to avoid contact with Israelis and cooperation of any sorts.<sup>40</sup> Instead of trying to 'normalize' cultural contacts with Israel, *El-Funoun* chose another way of dealing with the post-Oslo situation. If Israeli occupation could not physically be 'shaken off,' *El-Funoun* members argued that Palestinians at least psychologically needed to turn elsewhere. Palestinians needed to separate themselves and thus break the suffocating grip of the Israeli presence in their everyday. As Muhammad Ata explained, turning to the international dance scene was an ideal means to, "at least in our artistic activities, break through the strangulation and isolation which the Israeli occupation has imposed on us." The group's access to the new media and technological advances provided a welcome means for doing so, ensuring a connection to the

<sup>39</sup> Author's conversation with Nicholas Rowe and *El-Funoun* dancers.

<sup>40</sup> *El-Funoun*, for example, disinvited a Spanish flamenco group two days before their scheduled appearance in the *International Palestine Festival '99* upon hearing that two of their members held Israeli citizenship.

outside world even while physical dislocation for the group, at least for some members, remained difficult, if not impossible.

Negotiating its post-Oslo relationship with Israel by turning to international dance styles, *El-Funoun*, at the same time, maintained that its performances continued to be essentially Palestinian, despite the group's active exposure to different styles through workshops held by international dance professionals, videos and festivals. According to Muhammad Ata, instead of 'diluting' the group's identity, such exposure actually helped to bring out its own, essentially Palestinian dance style: "The workshops are very important for us. We benefit by seeing how dance has developed in general. I see that this person's technique has developed up to this point. I am here, at this point, so I tell him: 'Help me reach that point where you are at.'" Drawing artistic inspiration and technique from a global dance scene, Ata thus emphasized that the group throughout was careful to maintain its Palestinian identity. They wanted to acquire new dancing techniques, yet continue to work with their own, culturally authentic style.

#### *The Al-Watan Connection*

*El-Funoun's* close relationship with *Al-Watan* (*al-waṭan*), a Palestinian-American dance group founded in New York in 1984, decisively influenced the group's attempts to "fish its own fish," as Muhammad Ata put it, in the sea of international dance experience. *Al-Watan* was set up by a group of politically active Palestinian college students in New York in the early eighties.<sup>41</sup> Adopting a name translating as 'homeland,' the group sought to perform *dabkeh* as a means of collective identification in the diaspora. Most of the eight students undertaking to perform their 'homeland' in New York, however, did not actually know *dabkeh* and approached a former *El-Funoun* dancer who had left the West Bank for the States to teach them the basics in terms of steps, rhythms and songs. Learning *El-Funoun* steps, *Al-Watan's* style thus initially reflected 'authentic' *dabkeh* as performed by the West Bank group during its period of cooperating with the folklorists in the early and mid-eighties.<sup>42</sup>

<sup>41</sup> They were engaged in the *General Union of Palestine Students*, a leftist movement of students rallying support for the Palestinian nationalist movement and connected to the *Association of Arab American University Graduates*. On the activities of the *General Union of Palestine* as well as the *Association of Arab American University Graduates* see (Abu-Laban and Suleiman 1989; Suleiman 1999).

<sup>42</sup> Author's interview with Nasser Barghouthi and Sanaa Odeh, two of *Al-Watan's* founding members.

*Al-Watan*, however, soon moved from staging authentic *dabkeh* to creating their own style. Majida Rimawi, one of the group's leading choreographers and a trained ballerina, brought her dance background to bear on the group. Other members contributed their creativeness and athletic capacities. No longer referring to their activities as *dabkeh*, the style presented by *Al-Watan* on stage became "Palestinian dance" with the group's own creative touch. This stylistic direction was not solely received with enthusiasm. Not being able to deal with the changing style and lack of concern for the authentic, the *El-Funoun* dancer left the group. Likewise, *Al-Watan's* audience not always agreed with the group's performance style, especially not with the group's disregard for conventional gender roles. Not only did *Al-Watan's* female members perform roles hitherto reserved for men in *dabkeh*, such as the role of the *lawīh*. In its later years, the group went beyond this 'masculinization' of female dancing towards a 're-feminizing' of the dancing female body, a development that was even more controversial than having women perform the role of men on stage. Going beyond the role of the "militant woman" functioning according to guidelines okayed by men, *Al-Watan* female dancers claimed their right to "move as women on stage," deliberately using movements they defined as 'feminine' such as emphasizing the hips and upper body.<sup>43</sup>

In general, however, tensions between group members, and between the group and its audience remained low. Performing on the East coast and not in Palestine, the group generally felt that they enjoyed a considerable range of freedom in determining its own style, with social sanctioning of their activities keeping itself at a minimum, as founding member Sanaa Odeh explained: "We were basically free to do whatever movement we wanted to do. And we would do it. We were not restricted. We did not feel pressure or any obligation to do things in a certain way." In addition, often performing before an audience which was not exclusively made up of Palestinians or Arabs, but of non-Middle Eastern Americans, ways of movement that went beyond the 'traditionally authentic' were not perceived by the audience as problematic. It was that what *Al-Watan* presented which the audience newly identified as the 'authentic.'<sup>44</sup>

Going beyond informal, personal contacts, *Al-Watan* and *El-Funoun* officially established a working cooperation at the time of *El-Funoun's*

<sup>43</sup> Author's interview with Nasser Barghouthi and Sanaa Odeh.

<sup>44</sup> Author's interview with Sanaa Odeh.

first trip to the United States in 1986 as *Al-Watan* member Naser Barghouthi recounted: "In 1986, we created a twining between the two groups. We decided that we would remain in touch through people, to see what they are doing and to show what we are doing."<sup>45</sup> Contact between the groups was kept up through people traveling back and forth and the exchange of dance videos. In addition, although *Al-Watan* actually never made it as a group to the West Bank, individual members like Sanaa Odeh occasionally joined *El-Funoun* in its activities while visiting Ramallah/al-Bireh.<sup>46</sup>

While *El-Funoun* had directly influenced *Al-Watan's* style during its founding period, the New York group in turn became a source of inspiration for the West Bank troupe from the late eighties onwards. As a Palestinian group dealing with the same cultural material and confronted with a similar experience of seeking to perform Palestinian-ness through dance, *Al-Watan* greatly impacted *El-Funoun* in its own stylistic development. Commenting on *El-Funoun's* reaction to seeing *Al-Watan* perform during its second visit to the United States in 1991, Naser Barghouthi recalled:

We performed for them, and I remember that they were like, wow, this is very different from what we do. It was a great thing. Even for this number one group from Palestine, we had something new to offer. They valued that because they could see another dimension to dance that they had not explored. [. . .] We were much freer in our movements, much stronger in some ways in terms of what we performed.<sup>47</sup>

As Omar Barghouthi, who together with Majida Rimawi had been *Al-Watan's* lead trainer and choreographer, moved to live in the West Bank in 1994 and became *El-Funoun's* trainer, *Al-Watan's* influence on the West Bank ensemble emerged as tangible. Joining *El-Funoun*, Barghouthi set out to transmit the experience which *Al-Watan* had gone through in terms of stylistic development, the blending of different dance styles and musical arrangements, the courage to go beyond given patterns and forms as well as a certain 'feminization'

<sup>45</sup> Author's interview with Naser Barghouthi.

<sup>46</sup> Even before that date, personal links between individual members had existed. As pointed out above, a former *El-Funoun* dancer initially taught *Al-Watan* the basics of *dabkeh*. Besides, Sanaa Odeh, who had grown up in al-Bireh, had executed her first *dabkeh* steps as a ten year old under the guidance of an *El-Funoun* member. One of her brothers and two of her sisters were members of the West Bank group. Personal contact also existed between *El-Funoun* members and *Al-Watan* founders Naser and Omar Barghouthi since the early eighties, as the Barghouthis had originally come from the Ramallah/al-Bireh areas and regularly went back for visits.

<sup>47</sup> Author's interview with Naser Barghouthi.



of the 'masculine' *dabkeh* style. As one of the younger *El-Funoun* members recalled, Barghouthi's impact on the group was immediately noticeable. Hand in glove with the different movement style introduced by Barghouthi went a different training method, ways of dressing and an attitude towards the rehearsals which was newly defined by discipline and seriousness:

Before, we had been training in jeans, in our normal clothes, the clothes we had come in from home. Omar came and told us that we had to wear different things for rehearsals. At the beginning when we were told to take off our shoes, we started to laugh. Why should we take off our shoes! What is that?! We were saying, especially the *shabāb*, that we are not rehearsing without shoes. [. . .] Omar also emphasized discipline. He said to us: 'You come into the hall and you are ready to dance. Without changing clothes and stretching beforehand, you cannot dance.'

The new emphasis on flexibility, freedom in body movement and improvisation that emerged with Barghouthi's entry into the group was also noticeable in the test which *El-Funoun* introduced in the mid-nineties to regulate the entry of new members. As Lana Abu Hijleh, one of *El-Funoun*'s choreographers and member of the admission committee explained, creativity and the ability to improvise became increasingly important criteria in the mid- and late nineties for evaluating someone's performance: "Recently, we started to test their creativity. That's the most difficult part. We give them a free piece of music, where they can do whatever they want. We see how they deal with their bodies, how they can express an idea. That is the most shocking part for people, they don't expect it. It is the most difficult piece."

*Ups and Downs*—"Talla wara talla"

The new stylistic direction which Omar Barghouthi as a trainer and choreographer brought to *El-Funoun* was not only received with enthusiasm. The new piece *Talla Wara Talla*<sup>48</sup> put together under Barghouthi's direction and presented at the *International Palestine Festival* in summer 1994 "fell through," as Wasim Al-Kurdi bluntly stated. Not entirely a new production, *Talla Wara Talla* featured a collection of older choreographies interspersed with a few new ones. The connection between the different pieces was created through slides projected onto the stage, as well as a variety of musical pieces ranging

<sup>48</sup> *El-Funoun* does not provide a translation of the title of this piece. Roughly translated, the title corresponds to something like *Going Up and Up* or *Rise after Rise*.



from classical music to Arab and Palestinian songs. According to Al-Kurdi, who by that time was no longer directly involved with the group, “putting Beethoven next to ‘*Alā ’l-dal’ūnah* and *Yā zārīf al-tūl* simply did not fly.” Similarly, *El-Funoun’s* opening performance for the *International Palestine Festival* in 1996 was not too well received by the general public. Using elements categorized by the group as ‘Arab dancing,’ that is, movements with an emphasis on the hips and shoulders, Barghouthi designed a choreography that presented the theme of a phoenix rising from the ashes. In addition, the music used for the choreography was a mix of North African sounds and Turkish Sufi rhythms, again something that came across as unfamiliar, as Barghouthi recalled:

Audience reaction was very negative. They did not clap, it was really bad. People were sitting with their mouths open. If this is the reaction you get from people rather than excitement as you expect it for the opening ceremony of the *Palestine International Festival* . . . [pause]. That’s how I realized I had gone too far. I was just far off. Also the dancers could not cope with the choreography well. They did it very much half-heartedly. [. . .] The audience saw this hesitation. They could not relate, they hated the whole show, or at least did not appreciate it.

As was to be expected, not only the general audience, but in particular also the scholars of folklore who had guided *El-Funoun* during its initial stage very much rejected the direction which they saw *El-Funoun’s* work taking during the mid-nineties. Arguing that *El-Funoun’s* stylistic experiments alienated the people and prevented identification, Sharif Kanaana voiced his criticism as follows: “*El-Funoun’s* credit is that they are trying to present a national image and identity to the outside world through *dabkeh* and dance. But what they do is not really Palestinian anymore. Their movements now are improvised and very few people can identify with it.” In particular, Kanaana criticized the costumes worn by *El-Funoun*, which to him seemed ‘inauthentic’ as they crossed the conventions upheld in society between male and female dress: “The clothes are not Palestinian, silly enough they should know better. Sometimes they make the women wear something that are specifically men’s clothes, such as the tie on the scarf, a black rope of sort, that looks like an ‘*aqāl*.”<sup>49</sup> Now women historically never did that. Why are they doing that?”<sup>50</sup>

<sup>49</sup> A black rope attaching the headscarf worn by men.

<sup>50</sup> Author’s interview with Sharif Kanaana.

In particular, however, Kanaana's criticism was directed at what he perceived as the commercialization of Palestinian heritage, which in his eyes turned heritage into something fake, cheap and even reprehensible. For Kanaana, this commercialization of heritage was especially noticeable in the group's changing ways of dressing on stage. Palestinian society generally attaches great value to the wearing of the *tōb*, the extravagantly ornamented robe (Weir 1989). In a dance context, wearing a handmade *tōb* thus serves to underscore the permissibility of the dance activity (Young 1998: 38). With the *tōb*, *El-Funoun* dancers were not seen primarily as displaying their bodies—something socially questionable—but rather the valued skills of embroidery, sewing and clothing design, in addition to making a nationalist statement. As *El-Funoun* abandoned the heavy *tōb* in favor of costumes that were lighter, shorter and, in the eyes of the group, “generally more appropriate for dancing,” attention shifted from socially sanctioned skills and nationalist symbols such as embroidery and ornamentation to the dancing body. While the relatively ‘conservative’ costuming of *The Plains of Ibn ‘Amer* had been generally accepted by the audience, some, like Kanaana, interpreted the group's clothing in the early and mid-nineties as an abandoning of authenticity, as well as a dangerous step towards the illicit and the cheap:

These colorful clothes, that do not come from any tradition. It is just a mix of clothes and they start to look silly and ridiculous. They make them too skimpy. And too short. They make them out of cheap material to make the outfit cheaper and that makes it look bad, at least to the Palestinian people. The people who design them don't actually know the tradition. They come out looking like things that are prepared to be sold to tourists.<sup>51</sup>

The criticism was not lost on *El-Funoun*. Not only voiced by the folklorists, but by people in general, the group discussed its stylistic direction in order to reconnect with the general public. Even though *El-Funoun* strongly felt the need to come up with something artistically innovative, they did not want to do so on the expense of losing their audience and thus decided to tread a more careful road, as one of the older female members explained:

People asked us: Where are you going? Why are you doing this? It gave a lot of our members a moment of thought. We want to do

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<sup>51</sup> Ibid.

things that are new, different, exciting for us as dancers, you cannot do the same type of dance forever, you need some new input especially in our situation. But you also want to do it in a way that goes along with society's development and the development of ideas, not lose them on the way.

Similarly, Omar Barghouthi, major driving force behind the much criticized innovations, admitted the need to tone down the stylistic changes. Not wanting the group to lose its popularity among the general public and be perceived as elitist and avantgarde, he backstepped on his initial artistic aspirations: "Clearly—changes that go this fast do not get an audience. To us getting a big audience is essential. You cannot compromise that. You have to get a big audience. We have to reach a compromise in what we do. We cannot go too fast, but have to go step by step."

*Bringing heritage back in: Ululations, 1997*

After the debacle of the opening performance of 1996, the issue of how to come up with a new dance style that would still be perceived and accepted by the general public as Palestinian remained a central and much discussed issue among the members of *El-Funoun*. If anything, this issue gained importance for the group during the late nineties, as *El-Funoun* saw itself confronted with what it perceived as the increasing commercialization and selling out of Palestinian culture. In the words of one *El-Funoun* member, a worrisome disinterest had spread among Palestinians concerning their cultural heritage in favor of mass produced cultural 'trash' such as pirate copies of Arab pop songs that were flooding the market.<sup>52</sup> In the context

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<sup>52</sup> *El-Funoun* at least partly blamed the PA for this development, criticizing the Authority's support of cultural activities they considered low-level and commercial. The group hereby cited the summer festivals as an example. The *Palestine International Festival* staged by the *Popular Art Center* every July since 1993 had constituted the first large-scale festival taking place after the intifada. Organized at a time when pronouncing the word 'Palestine' as well as raising the Palestinian flag were still punishable deeds, the festival drew huge crowds with its presentations of, as the *Popular Art Center* saw it, 'high culture' arts performances. Under the PA, however, the number of festivals in the West Bank dramatically increased. From 1995 to 1996, within merely a year's time of the PA taking office in Ramallah, the summer festivals exploded from six to fifteen. With the economic situation once again deteriorating in the territories during the post-Oslo years and the number of cultural events sky-rocketing within the summer months, *El-Funoun* identified an unhealthy competition, in which independent NGOs concerned with 'high-level art' such as the *Popular Art Center* presented no match for the resourceful PA supporting 'low-level' commercial festivals such as the *Layālī Rāmāllāh*, newly taken up again in

of a stalling peace process, increasing Israeli-Palestinian tensions and dwindling hopes of achieving statehood, the group bemoaned the disinterest of especially younger Palestinians in their heritage. In one of their programs from 1997, the group openly voiced its concern that “the youth are increasingly shunning Palestinian music and dance, further eroding their esteem and appreciation for their own cultural roots and identity” (El-Funoun 1997).<sup>53</sup> This disinterest which the “generation of the tape (*jīl al-kasīl*)” displayed towards their own heritage did not bode well, as Khaled al-Ghoul, one of *El-Funoun*’s long-standing members and PR manager, explained. During the intifada in the late eighties, the whole society had stood together drawing strength from sharing the same cultural values and nationalist ideals. In contrast, according to al-Ghoul, the popularity of the “fast food culture (*thaqāfit il-akl il-sarī*)” now *en vogue* among Palestinian youth exemplified the ways in which the Palestinian struggle no longer constituted the joint effort of a united people, but rather the struggle of individuals for their own personal good. As al-Ghoul and other *El-Funoun* members maintained, Palestinians no longer took personal deprivation into account for advancing the common national good. Instead of old Palestinian songs such as ‘*Alā ’l-dal’ūnah*, they cherished low-level pop culture, and instead of standing together, they were individually fighting for getting permits to travel, to leave or to do business. It was, as al-Ghoul held, a period marked by the selling out of Palestinian identity for Israel’s benefit.

Confronted with this, as *El-Funoun* members described it, “cultural regression of Palestinian society (*al-tarāju’ al-thaqāfi li-’l-mujtama’ al-filasṭīnī*)” the group in 1997 presented its new production *Ululations* (*Ḥagharīd*) as a means of bringing Palestinian *turāth* back in. Staging a wedding celebration, *Ululations* presented the customary stages of a betrothal Palestinian style, from the official asking for the bride

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1996 in the tradition of the summer festivals that had started under King Hussein during the 1960s. According to the group, the results of this competition were clearly evident in the declining numbers of spectators at the *Palestine International Festival* during the summer of 1999 and its huge budget deficit. As a result, no festival took place in Birzeit in the following summer. Meanwhile, *Layālī Rāmallāh* was packed, as “*Fatah* only has to give order and the *shabāb* fill up the place,” as one *El-Funoun* member stated.

<sup>53</sup> *El-Funoun* members hereby posited the decrease in local dance and *dabkeh* groups concerned with presenting ‘serious art’ as a disconcerting indication of this trend. As they repeatedly emphasized to me, from five major groups operating at the time of the intifada, only one, *El-Funoun* itself, was still active in 1997.

(*il-tulbeh*) until the wedding night. By going back to again presenting *turāth* on stage, *El-Funoun* carefully emphasized that it was not interested in ‘guarding the authentically pure.’ Instead, the group sought to “free the riches” of *turāth* “from monotony, ‘museumness,’ and literal projections.”<sup>54</sup> By presenting Palestinian heritage in a new, critical light through the lens of its leftist sociopolitical perspective, *El-Funoun* aimed at countering the decreasing interest which it perceived among Palestinians in the post-Oslo period and make *turāth* newly appealing to the masses. The ensemble sought to offer the ‘old’ values of Palestinian heritage in a new guise as a means of uniting the people and restoring senses of shared community. In contrast to the cheap pop culture flooding the market, *Ululations* sought to present “a folklore-based production that would impress and motivate the young, the older, the women, the men, and even the children” (El-Funoun 1997).

Attempting to stage heritage in a new, appealing way, *Ululations*, however, was extremely careful to avoid conflict. Trying to bring back old values without alienating society, *El-Funoun* presented its critical new perspective in a cautiously conventional way. As one of the female dancers recalled, discussions occurred inside the group concerning the length of their dress: “How short could the dress be? We had it to the ankles, it did not work. It really hid the movements of the girls. We wanted to have it up to the knee. Finally we were able to get it to the calf—the mid calf.” Like the length of the women’s costumes, the piece carefully sought to navigate between the artistically and intellectually desirable, on the one hand, and, on the other, the boundaries of the socially acceptable. Instead of radical sociopolitical statements, the work’s explicit goal was to reconnect Palestinian society, especially the younger generation, with their ‘old’ heritage.

Overall reaction to *Ululations* was positive, at least during the initial year of its performance. In particular, the folklorists who had worked with *El-Funoun* before were satisfied. As Abu-Hadba declared: “Sometimes *El-Funoun* and I have different views. But with *Ululations* I was very pleased. [. . .] This is our folklore.” Ṣalībā Ṭūṭaḥ, one of the main driving forces behind the foundation of *dabkeh* groups in

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<sup>54</sup> In the program, *El-Funoun* writes about its choice of topic for *Ululations*: “Surprisingly enough, the theme chosen for this production was a folkloric-inspired one. This was not done to submit to popular pressure to guard the ‘purity’ of our folklore, but quite the opposite, to free the riches of our folklore from monotony, ‘museumness,’ and literal projections.” (El-Funoun 1997)

the West Bank after 1967 similarly remarked: "After *The Plains of Ibn 'Amer*, *El-Funoun* tried to go into the direction of *raqs*. It stopped being *turāth*. But that is not the right way. People didn't like them anymore. [. . .] In *Ululations*, however, they came back to the real *turāth* and *in shā' allāh*, they will continue like this." Others, in particular Palestinian intellectuals working in the field of arts and literature, however, criticized the piece for not being radical enough, both in the sense of style as well as in terms of its social message. According to Wasim Al-Kurdi: "Okay, the costumes and the decoration were wonderful. But that's it. *Ululations* is a nice piece of work, but if you take everything that's in it, you can summarize it in five minutes. It is all repetition. It is monotonous and repetitive." A questionnaire conducted by *El-Funoun* among its spectators to gauge audience reception gave a similar picture. Overall, people liked *Ululations*. Notably, however, university students, especially women, as well as some female teachers criticized the piece for not taking a more radical stance on gender relations as well as movement style.<sup>55</sup>

#### CHANGING STYLE, NOT MEANING

*Ululations* was a 'safe' work. According to Muhammad Ata, it constituted the "easiest piece" that *El-Funoun* had presented so far and the group had managed to prepare it for the stage within a very short time. In contrast to the ease with which *Ululations* reached the stage, another project that the group was working on at the time of my fieldwork proved much harder to realize. Since 1993, the group had been discussing ideas for a new production entitled *Haiḡa, Beirut & Beyond* (*Ḥaiḡā, Bayrūt wa-ba'd*). The piece was designed to constitute a clear break with what the group had hitherto done. The Arab musician Marcel Khalifeh agreed to writing a music composition inspired by selected poems of Mahmoud Darwish and came up with

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<sup>55</sup> *El-Funoun* conducted the questionnaire within the framework of a UNDP-sponsored project on gender in 1996. Originally planned to be carried out on four different occasions, *El-Funoun* had conducted the questionnaire within three contexts by the time of my research in 1999: with school teachers from various regions in the West Bank, with university students at Birzeit University and with a regular audience in the *Hakawati Theatre* (*al-ḥakawātī*) in East Jerusalem. A fourth sample was meant to be taken in Gaza. Due to the political situation, however, this was postponed.

an arrangement of dramatic classical music with no text. In addition to using a new musical style, *El-Funoun* choreographers more than before wanted to draw on the group's newly acquired experience in international dance styles, mostly the modern. Instead of explaining the plot by including singing or speaking parts as they had usually done, Ata explained that they wanted to stage a "new experience" by creating "a language for the body." Furthermore, the topic chosen for the piece was a lot more abstract than any of *El-Funoun's* former productions. Instead of drawing on familiar Palestinian social life and folk tales, the group wanted to stage issues of "love and hate, exile and homeland, death and life, vengefulness and peacefulness" (El-Funoun 1997).

Throughout the nineties, *El-Funoun* struggled with the project, yet to no avail. In 1996, Marcel Khalifeh had presented his music to the group. After trying in vain to come up with a choreography that suited the music, the capabilities of the group as well as the ideas to be expressed, *El-Funoun* asked Khalifeh to rework his compositions. By the time my fieldwork with the group was nearing its end in fall 1999, Khalifeh had rearranged the music, and *El-Funoun's* artistic committee was setting out to again tackle the piece. Since then, some progress was made. In particular, Australian dancer Nicholas Rowe spent six months in Palestine through fall and winter 2000 to cooperate with *El-Funoun* in developing the choreography. However, despite these various attempts at coming to terms with the production and the various people involved from the outside to make it work, *Haiifa, Beirut & Beyond* until the moment of my writing up in 2001 had not yet made it to the stage. As *El-Funoun's* members explained, their difficulties lay in trying to stage a piece that would present a clear break with its familiar ways of moving on stage. The music and the style of movement demanded by the music did not evoke any senses of Palestinianness, neither to them nor to their audience. Music and style remained foreign, they were not their own.

*The social acceptability of raqs in the late nineties*

*A group for and by the masses*

*El-Funoun's* difficulties in staging *Haiifa, Beirut & Beyond* highlights the ways in which the group, despite its attempts at stylistic negotiation, self-sanctioned its activities in the late nineties to remain within the

boundaries of the familiar. Stylistically turning from *dabkeh* to *raqs filastīnī*, *El-Funoun* had not changed its outlook. As ever, it aimed to be a group for and by ‘the masses.’ As Khaled Qatamesh put it: “Even today, *El-Funoun* works with the people ‘below’ (*nās taht*). It is about the women in the refugee camps, in the houses, not the doctors. Not the female doctor is repressed, but the traditional women in the houses. And that’s exactly where we want to start working.” In contrast, other performance groups who were active at the time of my fieldwork such as *Sareyyet Ramallah Group* were less concerned with pleasing ‘the masses.’ Indeed, as Khaled Elyaan, *Sareyyet*’s director, ventured, sociopolitical change as envisioned by leftist artists could be much better achieved by going beyond the social norms and conventions of the popular base, and developing an artistic avant-garde. As he saw it, the people’s artistic appreciation only changed through exposure to the unfamiliar. Contemporary Palestinian artists should thus be less concerned with what the general public wanted to see, but instead follow their own, artistic vision even if it involved losing a broad-based, popular following.<sup>56</sup> As one of *Sareyyet*’s lead dancers put it:

In its artistic activities, *Sareyyet* is much more daring than *El-Funoun*. That’s why we have often gotten a negative response from the people. But why should you always go with the masses? Because if you go with the masses, then you don’t go anywhere. I rather perform something new for ten people, than always do the same with one thousand.<sup>57</sup>

While *Sareyyet Ramallah Group* opted for more controversial avant-garde-style presentations, *El-Funoun*, in contrast, maintained its popular approach through the late nineties. Changing movement by drawing on international dance styles, it would have been a lot easier for the troupe to follow the example of *Sareyyet Ramallah* and settle for the avantgarde, performing for a smaller, selected circle with members from mostly intellectual, upper middle or upper class families who would see nothing wrong with their sons and daughters engaging in unfamiliar, socially controversial dance activities.<sup>58</sup> Yet, trying to be

<sup>56</sup> Author’s interview with Khaled Elyaan.

<sup>57</sup> Author’s interview with one of *Sareyyeh*’s male lead dancers.

<sup>58</sup> *Sareyyet Ramallah* did not exactly constitute an avantgarde group in the sense of performing ‘cutting edge pieces’ for only a selected circle of art lovers. Yet, people in Ramallah/al-Bireh generally agreed that *Sareyyeh*’s activities were artistically more daring than *El-Funoun*’s. As even *El-Funoun* members emphasized, *Sareyyeh* was



a troupe for and by the *jumhūr*, the deprived lower classes and the ‘underdogs,’ *El-Funoun* during the nineties invested great energy to avoid any such isolation from its popular base, thereby consciously self-sanctioning its activities to stay within the accepted norm.

“For a girl, it is always trouble to go and dance”<sup>59</sup>

Not wanting to lose its popular base, the issue of social acceptability became even more central to *El-Funoun*’s work in the mid- and late nineties than it had been before. Already the public performance of men and women joining hands in *dabkeh* during the eighties had constituted a bone of contention. This was especially so as the group was founded in al-Bireh, a town generally perceived as conservative in comparison to near-by Ramallah.<sup>60</sup> Yet by the time that *El-Funoun* was founded in the late seventies, *dabkeh* had been firmly established in nationalist discourse as an essential part of Palestinian *turāth* and anybody engaging in it was seen as supporting the national struggle, even *ṣabāyā* holding hands with *shabāb*. Going beyond *dabkeh* as a socially approved way for men and women to appear together on stage and turning to *raqs*, complicated the issue of social acceptability for the group’s artistic engagement. Linked to notions of sexuality and solo female dancers performing to seduce, *raqs* carried the negative connotation of an immoral, unchaste activity in Palestinian discourse. During its early working history, the group and, in particular, its female members, thus adamantly rejected the notion of having anything to do with *raqs*. Their style of dancing mirrored that of the men, masculine, erect and upright, with more subtle or feminine movements lost in the folds of their heavy *tōb*. Anything faintly alluding to *raqs* was banned from the stage as well as from discourse inside the group, as Khaled al-Ghoul recalled: “At that time, *raqs* was a forbidden word inside the troupe. The *ṣabāyā* would say: What

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less concerned with ‘speaking to the masses.’ While *El-Funoun* carefully tailored its activities to addressing a broad-range of people, *Sareyyeh* generally cared much less about audience reaction, featuring a wide range of different pieces and styles in step with their own artistic inspiration and liking. As a result, *Sareyyeh* had a smaller audience than *El-Funoun* and their work at times even had “offended” the general audience, as people involved in the cultural scene in Ramallah/al-Bireh mentioned in conversations with me.

<sup>59</sup> Quotation from an interview conducted with one of *El-Funoun*’s female dancers. As she was a native speaker, the interview was conducted in English.

<sup>60</sup> On the social makeup of Ramallah and al-Bireh see for instance (al-Farḥān 1990).

do you mean, I am a dancer (*raʿqāṣah*)?! Shame on you, I do *dabkeh*!” Similarly, long-time *El-Funoun* member and now choreographer Lana Abu Hijleh recalled the social stigma attached to the term *raqs*:

When I used the word ‘I dance’ (*anā barʿaqṣ*), my mother used to say: ‘Say: ‘I do *dabkeh*!’ (*ʿūlī badbik!*).’ Because of the negative connotations of the word *raqs*, *dabkeh* showed that you were doing something nationalistic. Dance was more of an art and something that they didn’t want their children to be doing.

Going beyond the stylistic norms of *dabkeh* and trying out new styles of performing the nation by turning to the international dance scene in the nineties, *El-Funoun* left the safe haven of a socially approved activity. Especially for its female members, the stylistic shift from *dabkeh* to *raqs filasṭīnī* added to the precariousness that people attached to their engagement in the performance group. Spending long hours in rehearsals, having physical contact with *shabāb*, going away on trips and, if necessary, sleeping outside the house had made a woman’s involvement in *El-Funoun* dubious, even when only performing *dabkeh*. Yet these things in combination with performing new styles of movement beyond the ‘socially safe’ *dabkeh* increased the social risk a woman was taking as a member of *El-Funoun*. Also, the professionalization and internationalization of *El-Funoun*’s activities in the nineties that were manifested in long trips abroad, more rehearsal time, the changing dress code for rehearsals and performances, etc., added to the ways in which dancing in *El-Funoun* was perceived as highly precarious. Thus, both male and female members emphasized that dancing in *El-Funoun* at the time of my fieldwork took a lot of courage to confront social norms and conventions, especially from the women dancers. According to one of the female dancers: “For a girl, it is always trouble to go and dance.” Similarly, another commented: “Just to be in *El-Funoun* you need to have courage. As a dancer, as a female dancer, I needed the courage to decide and it took me actually time to say whether I would be prepared to take up the struggle with society.”

Given the social stigma attached to dancing, the female members of *El-Funoun* agreed that without the support of one’s family, participating in the group was not possible. As *El-Funoun*’s administrative director explained, it was only his intervention that enabled his wife to continue appearing on stage as part of the musical choir against the will of her father: “If I didn’t want my wife to sing, it

would be over for her. She could not insist. If her family is against her *and* her husband is against her, it is unheard of that she loses her family and her husband so that she can go and sing." Yet even if a girl's immediate family personally had no problems with her engagement in *El-Funoun*, fear of talk and social pressure from the neighborhood often negatively influenced the family's stance on the issue. As one of the younger female dancers related:

Here, they don't like seeing a girl get out of the car at one at night. Like tomorrow, when we go to the performance in Shfar'am and we come back late, oh my God. My father is afraid of that. He cares about what they say here in the neighborhood. They talk. And that's the dangerous thing. You are not doing anything and you are convinced of yourself, but they make a story from nothing.

Another woman explained that although in principle, her father and brothers had nothing against her dancing, they feared the effect of people talking:

My involvement with *El-Funoun* is a big problem for my brothers. They are guys and walk in the streets and they don't want to hear that their sister dances in front of people. People who think that dancing is really not good, they talk and make an issue out of it. So we actually argue a lot whether I should be in the troupe or not. My father has both sides. He wants me to do what I want to do. At the same time he feels that it sometimes hurts other people in the family. So he is ambivalent.

During my fieldwork, one of *El-Funoun's* members actually had to leave the group. Coming home late one night after a performance in the Galilee, the parents raised a fuzz and forbade her to continue dancing.

Directly connected to their fear of gossip, *El-Funoun* female members mentioned the fear of severing their chances for marriage as another major factor explaining why participating in a dancing group constituted such a precarious issue for women. "Who wants to marry a girl who dances in public," was a statement I often heard in my interviews indicating the social stigma of the activity. *El-Funoun* administrative director Khaled Qatamesh put it likewise: "The girl who dances, goes places with *shabāb* and travels is not going to marry." Reaching a marriagable age, families thus increased pressure on their daughters to quit dancing. Similarly, once engaged, the fiancé often made the girl leave. In addition, a girl could only refuse potential husbands so many times before gaining a bad reputation of being difficult, strong-willed and choosy. Also, if a girl waited too long,

her family feared her getting too old, thus putting pressure on her to quit dancing and accept a proposal before it would be too late. As the administrative director pointed out, many of the older women involved in *El-Funoun* indeed did not get married:

When they were young, they rejected to get married in the traditional way, that someone comes and asks for their hand. They were living for the future. After a while, however, when they got older, it was over. There was no chance anymore. [...] A lot of our female members do not get married and we don't have a problem with that. It is up to the girl to decide, if she has come into this world just to get married. If that's the case, okay, she sits at home and waits for the husband.

In addition to the social stigma attached to the practice of *raqs*, female members mentioned that the impact which dancing with *El-Funoun* had on their bodies and minds worked as deterrents for any potential marriage partner. Discussing the ways in which she experienced her involvement with the group, one of the dancers flexed her arm muscle and responded: "To be a woman here means to have a nice, smooth body. But to have muscles, means like, [laughs] means like you are tough, maybe." Not only a changing physique, however, but the strength and self-confidence gained through the experience of performing on stage worked to scare off the men, as she continued to explain: "Men look at such women as if they are masculine. They decide they don't want to marry these women." Yet even if the family did not object to a woman continuing her involvement in the group after marriage, pregnancies, children, household chores and family obligations effectively prevented her from doing so. "Once they get married, that's it," as one female member stated.

"So, my daughter's husband is a dancer?—*Ya'nī, zawj bintī ra'qāš?*"

Dancing in *El-Funoun* not only constituted a socially risky activity for female, but also male members. In general, young, unmarried men in Palestine in the late nineties had much less trouble engaging in extracurricular activities outside the home than young, unmarried women.<sup>61</sup> Issues that families did raise in objection with a guy's involvement in doing *dabkeh* had to do with maintaining a good grade

<sup>61</sup> This view is supported by a study conducted by the *Palestine Economic Policy Research Institute* in Jerusalem in 1998, which shows a noticeable gender gap concerning the issue of visiting sports and cultural clubs. In contrast to activities taking place at home, where no distinct gap could be discerned, 21.2% of male respondents indicated that they engaged in sports and cultural activities outside the home, versus no more than 4% among female respondents (Hilal et al. 1998).

report in school, not neglecting one's job as well as adhering to one's duties towards the family and/or wives and children. When the troupe's style turned from *dabkeh* to *raqs*, however, the involvement of male members in *El-Funoun* became more problematic. The masculine style in which *dabkeh* was usually rendered on stage fit general social expectations. Going beyond the strict *dabkeh* style characterized by its strong leg movements and stiff upper body and moving towards *raqs*, the group started to use the whole body in dance as well as improve flexibility and gracefulness, even for male members. To some, *El-Funoun's* new stylistic direction and especially its workshops offered in ballet and modern dance thus acquired an almost negative taste of effeminacy, something a girl would do, but not something suitable for a young man. As one of the female dancers stated: "They think that the girl should study dance, and a guy who studies dance becomes like a girl [laughs] . . . you know, they are crazy. They don't know what they want. The girl has the problems because of her dancing. They don't want the girl to dance. Yet also when a guy dances, he gets problems."

In general, arts are "devalued" in Palestinian society as a women's activity, as Mona Ghali observed in her status report on education in the territories (Ghali 1997: 22). Accordingly, dancing is considered as something that girls can engage in in their free-time. In contrast, *shabāb* and men, the 'bread-winners' of the Palestinian family, should not waste their time on something as unprofitable and unserious as a dance group, especially not when striving for higher education or a good professional position. Khaled al-Ghoul, a university graduate from Birzeit and at the same time *El-Funoun's* *ṭabbāl*,<sup>62</sup> thus explained:

It is a problem if someone educated who has graduated from university, is known to play the *ṭablah*, or goes to play with a troupe. Here, in this region, especially in the Jerusalem area, the *ṭabbāl* is known in our society as someone who plays in wedding troupes, who smokes grass and gets drunk. If there is a university graduate, someone educated, who at the same time is a *ṭabbāl*, who is always seen carrying a *ṭablah* with him, plays for people and they are singing and dancing, that really does not fit. Until today, the people say to me that it is enough. You have now become a university graduate, and your social status does not allow for that.

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<sup>62</sup> The person playing the *ṭablah*, a small drum.

In addition, the social stigma attached to *raqs* in Arab societies as an illicit, reprehensible activity came to bear on *El-Funoun's* male members. As one of the founding male members recounted, his in-laws used to challenge him on the grounds of his dancing activity, using the negatively connotated word *raʿʿāṣ* instead of the more neutral *rāqīṣ* when referring to his activity: “My family never had a problem. They were very leftist and liberal. But my wife’s family [. . .] Her father would say: ‘What does that mean, you are dancing! So that means my daughter’s husband is a dancer?! (*Shū, bturʿuṣ! Yaʿnī, zawj bintī raʿʿāṣ?!*)’.”

### *Making raqṣ acceptable*

Aware that moving from *dabkeh* to *raqs* raised the stakes for both female and male members, *El-Funoun* employed various strategies to maintain social respectability and make its changing style acceptable among its broad-based, popular audience. To begin with, *El-Funoun* during its long working history had established an immaculate reputation for itself. On the one hand, the group had boosted its reputation through what was generally acknowledged as its long-standing dedication to the Palestinian national struggle. Not only involved in ‘safeguarding’ Palestinian heritage, *El-Funoun* members had also earned their “street credentials” during the intifada, leading demonstrations and, especially the male members, doing prison time. On the other hand, people were connected to the group, either through family or friendship ties. If not personally, people knew the families of the group members, thus guaranteeing social control. As one older female member of the group’s board of trustees confirmed: “The families know the group. They trust them.”

### *Social ties*

Having succeeded in establishing a solid reputation for the group, *El-Funoun* showed great concern for maintaining a close, trustful relationship with the families of its members. Jointly going to visit the families in honor of special occasions such as weddings or graduations, as well as paying visits of condolence at times of sickness or death consolidated trust, making it easier for some to let their children join the troupe, as one long-time member observed: “*El-Funoun* really has established itself among the community and the families

of members. For certain members like Maḥmūd, Saʿīda and Ibtisām,<sup>63</sup> the existence of these kinds of social links allowed them to stay in *El-Funoun* even if they come from a traditional background.” Likewise, *El-Funoun* intervened whenever a problem would arise for a member with his or her family, such as in the case of receiving permission to travel with the group. *El-Funoun* also got involved in terms of ensuring the safety of its members as well as giving financial support for families who wanted their children to join, yet could not afford to do so, as one female member recounted about Ḥayāt:<sup>64</sup>

She was a very promising dancer, she was supposed to be the lead. She was fifteen, I guess. Her parents, I think, were high school teachers. They were living a little bit out of Ramallah in one of the suburbs on the way to al-Tireh. For their daughter to go to *dabkeh* rehearsals would have meant to take a private taxi home in the early evening. They had financial constraints and they could not afford that. So they wanted to pull their daughter out. But *El-Funoun* intervened and said: ‘No, if that’s the problem, we will cover the expense or we will make sure that one of us will drive her home.’ When it comes to things that they can work out, *El-Funoun* gets involved.

Also, returning back from longer trips abroad, *El-Funoun* made it a habit of inviting the families to a reception in order to thank them for having entrusted their sons, daughters and husbands to the group.<sup>65</sup> To show transparency about what happened during such trips, photos, videos and newspaper articles about the group’s activities abroad were displayed on such occasions and the families were given the chance to mingle, talk, exchange information and see what their sons, daughters and husbands had been doing during their time away from home. Inviting the families to performances as well as showing off the group’s activities during its travels abroad served to make the families feel proud. Seeing the respect paid to the group during trips abroad, reading the dancers’ names in newspaper articles and hearing the audience cheer for their sons and daughters helped win over the families and ensured their support, as Muhammad Ata conceded even for his own parents:

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<sup>63</sup> All names are pseudonyms.

<sup>64</sup> Name changed.

<sup>65</sup> I do not include ‘wives’ here, as except for Lana I did not meet any married women still actively involved with the troupe. Even Lana, however, had never been abroad with the group. There were some married women in the choir, such as Nidā’, Khāled Qatāmesh’s wife as well as Ṣafā’ married to choreographer Omar Barghouthi. Yet, they did not travel alone with the group, but went together with their husbands.

For every performance, I brought my parents so they could watch. Not just me, also Khaled, Wasim and the others did that. To make our families see how the people applaud and how the people like it. That makes them happy, you know, to see their son and the people cheer. My mother was ululating and raised her voice in the *tahiyeh*.<sup>66</sup>

The professionalism that *El-Funoun* displayed in its work also served to establish its reputation as a serious, trustworthy institution with control over its activities. Encompassing a board of trustees as well as an artistic and a PR committee, *El-Funoun's* administration during the nineties had emerged as well-organized and strictly regulated. The way in which the group conducted its activities mirrored its professional structure. Starting on time, rehearsals, conducted twice a week for two hours, were characterized by discipline with late-comers prevented from participating. In addition, entry to the group was strictly regulated, with every prospective applicant having to pass a test and a three-month trial period before becoming a full-fledged member. *El-Funoun* also carefully chose its performance sites, emphasizing its status as a 'high-level' artistic group. Using decoration as well as light and sound effects, the group insisted on performing on a stage with the necessary technical equipment, thus limiting their appearances to festivals, theaters and large-scale events. Never, as *El-Funoun's* leaders emphasized, had the troupe accepted invitations to perform at weddings. In their minds, performing at weddings was not art, but had the negative connotation of the commercial and illicit usually attached to the concept of *raqs*. In contrast, *El-Funoun* emphasized that they were not dependent on 'schmoozing' people for getting paid, but proudly implementing their own artistic vision in the service of the nation. In Omar Barghouthi's words:

There is a certain stigma about groups performig at weddings. They are mostly lower standard. It means that you get paid and you have to do what the wedding people tell you to do. It is too much interference with the artistic work. We don't work for wedding people, the bride and the groom. We do something for the whole people.

Professionalism also characterized the personal relationships inside the group. Maintaining a co-ed troupe, where men and women traveled together for extended periods and slept outside their own houses, *El-Funoun* leaders were extremely careful about keeping the relations between women and men above all doubts. "We are all like one

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<sup>66</sup> A certain kind of salutation and praise.



family, brothers and sisters, of one hand (*min id wahdeh*),” was an expression commonly used by members of the group to describe the relationship between each other, emphasizing closeness, trust and control while strongly repudiating the suspicion of any reprehensible ongoings inside the group. Relationships inside the group were “*rāqī*,” of high standard. As one younger male member assured: “There is not one who comes for the benefit that there are girls. When I do *dabkeh* next to a girl, she is my sister. Of course, nothing else goes on between us. This is essential.” In order to keep the relationships inside the group “just like in one’s own home,” the group leaders were extremely watchful about anything going on, carefully monitoring the relationships, and, if necessary, taking action. The stakes, as people repeatedly assured me, were high and everybody knew the limit. “They are always watching,” one of the girls explained when asked about the seemingly relaxed atmosphere between male and female members inside the group. “If any of the guys get any question mark on them concerning their ethics, they are out of the group. *El-Funoun* would lose all the girls, their reputation would go down and they cannot afford that. Just because of one stupid mistake.”

#### *Secluded space*

Given their precarious status as a co-ed group, *El-Funoun* turned their dancing studio into a secluded space. Located on the second floor of the *Popular Art Center*, entry to the studio during rehearsal time was limited to members of the troupe. Usually, not even family members were welcome to attend rehearsals, leave alone outside visitors. Shutting the windows and drawing the curtains, the studio was closed off from the outside world. An air conditioning worked to prevent stuffiness, while the windows remained shut even during waves of summer heat.

Within the protected intimacy of their closed off training space, the group encouraged creativity and exploration, embarking on formerly unheard of movement experiments in Palestine such as improvisational dance, free-style choreographing, partner dancing and lifting exercises. Gendered norms of movements started to be crossed, in the sense that a ‘feminization’ of movement for both sexes became possible. Female members started to feel free to explore a ‘feminine’ style of dancing, leaving behind the ‘masculine’ steps and routines which had formerly dominated their activities. Increasingly, also male members dared to cross the line, explicitly ‘feminizing’ their move-

ment by starting to move their hips and shoulders. As the group's aerobics and stretching trainer assured, this was a hesitant, yet in large parts successful process. Introducing a training routine that included strong hip gyrations, he recalled that especially the girls had first burst out laughing at the sight of him moving his hips. Yet as he explained, both *shabāb* and *ṣabāyā* soon stopped laughing, concentrating on the technical aspect of the movement, less the gender one, and overcoming their inhibition of trying it out for themselves, as the trainer recalled one female member telling him later: "When I saw the hip movements for the first time, I was thinking that my father would say that this is improper. If he saw this, he would reject my coming here to watch a guy dance like this. Today, this is simply not a topic anymore." Similarly, the female members of the troupe applauded Ṣāliḥ,<sup>67</sup> one of the younger male members, who came up with a choreography in which he took on the role of a girl waiting for her lover. "It was pffff [pause] it was amazing," one of the girls stated,

He made himself a woman waiting for her lover, and the lover did not show up. So she was frustrated, sad. It was so good. That was the first time ever that someone from the guys did something like that. He proved so many points. Even though he was only a beginner. But he said that I am a boy and I can dance like girl, move like a girl, forget about my hair. He moved a little bit more like a female, he used his hips, he tried to care about the way he looks in the dance. And it worked.

However, these experiments did not make it to the stage, but remained closed off from the eyes of the general public behind the doors of the studio. Overcoming gender conventions and movement norms inside the protected space of the studio, there was a clear limit to what individual dancers were ready to present to the public on stage. According to Barghouthi, *El-Funoun* members suffered from "a collective schizophrenia: Inside the studio, we improvise, discover, experiment, go freely beyond what is expected of you, what's wanted and dictated upon you. But, they won't do this on stage. Those same dancers won't do this type of movement on stage under the banner of *El-Funoun*. Because they think that it is inappropriate." In addition to this self-monitoring of each individual dancer, the leaders of *El-Funoun* carefully sanctioned what was officially done outside the

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<sup>67</sup> Name changed.

studio under the name of the group. Much like the length of the girls' costumes, anything presented outside first had to be approved by all five members of the group's artistic committee, ensuring that the group at large could identify with the presentation and be ready to be held accountable for it. Quite a few ideas thus never made it to the stage, and more than once heated debates erupted around the suitability of a certain work or idea to be shown in public.

In 1999, for instance, the *Popular Art Center* for the first time organized a modern dance festival alongside its annual international event, inviting international and Arab modern dancers to perform in Palestine. The participation of local dancers was encouraged by the center, especially also of dancers from *El-Funoun*. As a result, a discussion erupted inside the group around the question of whether these dances should be presented in the name of the group or rather as pieces staged by individuals on their own account. Arguing that the modern dance style of these choreographies differed from *El-Funoun's* regular activities, the group leaders agreed in the end that they would be presented as "experiments" and not officially as an *El-Funoun* project. In the privacy of the *Kamal Naser Auditorium of Birzeit University*, the first Palestinian attempts at modern dance thus took place as private endeavors, not in the name of the group. After the festival, Barghouthi tried to have one of the three choreographies presented by *El-Funoun* members included in the group's normal repertoire. His bid was rejected in a session of the artistic committee, as one long-time female member pointed out: "The solo could not be part of *El-Funoun's* regular program. It was more than what we thought our audience, the audience that *El-Funoun* has built for itself, would accept." The dance, choreographed to include hip and shoulder gyrations, fell through as too dangerously close to the stigmatized 'belly dancing.'

#### *Changing discourse from dabkeh to raqs*

The changing semiotics of the term *raqs* not only inside the group but also among the group's audience paid tribute to *El-Funoun's* success in negotiating its artistic presence as a grass-roots group despite the stylistic changes taking place in its work. Increasingly during the nineties, members of the group started to refer to their activities as *raqs*, not *dabkeh*, and themselves as *rāqīṣ* or *rāqīṣah*, rather than *dabīk* or *dabīkeh*. The revalorization of the term *raqs*, however, was not limited to the discourse inside *El-Funoun*. In its programs and written

publications, *El-Funoun* started to employ the terms *raqs*, *rāqīs* and *rāqīṣah* in the mid-nineties (El-Funoun 1997). Equally, the younger women in the group generally referred to themselves in public as *rāqīṣāt firqat al-funūn*, dancers in *El-Funoun*, paying tribute to the public acceptance of the term. Even male members generally used the terms *raqs* and *rāqīs*.<sup>68</sup> Depending on context, some negotiated their discourse, tending to use *adbuk* (I do *dabkeh*) in situations where *ar<sup>q</sup>uṣ* (I dance) seemed too ambiguous a term and might be misunderstood. One of the younger female dancers thus explained when asked about the way she presented her involvement in the group to the outside: “With simple people (*nās basīṭīn*), I usually deal with them in a way that they don’t know what I am really doing inside the group. They would not understand. In such a situation, I would say *adbuk*.” Yet in general, both male and female members had little problem with using *raqs* in public.

Positively promoted by the group as an expression of its new performance style, the general public, at least partially, fathomed the new, positive meaning of the term. As one long-time female member assured me: “I stopped doing *dabkeh* years ago. At least my family accepted that.” Likewise, at the time of my research, one of the younger male dancers was seriously considering to study dance in the United States. He and his sisters had been involved with *El-Funoun* for years. From a conservative background in al-Bireh, his father’s permission for him to do so bore witness to the changing meaning which the concept of *raqs*, as well as *rāqīs* or *rāqīṣah* had acquired not only inside the troupe, but also within the general public. A few years before, as Omar Barghouthi assured me, it would have been unthinkable for a “regular al-Bireh family” to let their only son study abroad to become a dancer.<sup>69</sup> Even now studying to become a dancer constituted an extremely ambiguous issue. Yet the very fact that this issue could be seriously discussed hinted at the changing attitude within general public towards the issue.

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<sup>68</sup> Only a few younger male members from rural, more conservative backgrounds used ‘*adbuk*,’ I do *dabkeh*, instead of ‘*ar<sup>q</sup>uṣ*,’ I dance.

<sup>69</sup> At the time of my fieldwork, Melinda Hazboun was the only professional Palestinian dancer living in the West Bank. Her decision to study ballet as a profession was an unusual one to make, yet was fully supported by her family, which was Christian with a strong international orientation.

*Performing the nation behind the backdrop of a globalizing environment*

*Changing style, not meaning*

*Raqṣ* as staged by *El-Funoun* did not signify a turn away from Palestinian heritage and the staging of something new. On the contrary, as *El-Funoun* members maintained, *raqṣ* was heritage, merely presented in a new style. The emphasis placed on maintaining meaning despite stylistic changes was evident in the group's discourse about its activities. Highlighting that their activities were grounded in *turāth*, *El-Funoun* clearly distinguished between *raqṣ* as staged by the group and other forms of *raqṣ*. The group hereby specified its own activities variously as "heritage dance (*raqṣ turāthī*)," "modern folkloric dance (*raqṣ fūlk-lūrī ḥadīth*)," "modern popular dance (*raqṣ sha'bī ḥadīth*)" or "Palestinian dance (*raqṣ filastīnī*)," thus discursively maintaining the connection with heritage and distancing itself from other forms of local Arab dancing such as, for example, the negatively connotated "Eastern dance (*raqṣ sharqī*)".

Not only discursively drawing the line between *El-Funoun's* activities and other, more socially ambiguous ways of Arab dancing, the group also strictly distanced itself from dance styles perceived as 'Western' such as "modern dance (*raqṣ ḥadīth, raqṣ modern*)" as well as "ballet (*raqṣ ballet*)." Although influenced by ballet and modern, the group held that its style always maintained something uniquely Palestinian. Admitting to changes in their work under the impact of global dance discourse, the group emphasized that these changes occurred only as long as the essential meaning of their activities as a nationalizing force remained unchallenged. As Muhammad Ata explained: "We cannot do something that does not belong to us." Rather than simply adopting Western dancing techniques, styles and rhetoric and, in their words, 'lose their Palestinian specificity,' *El-Funoun* members thus pointed to the ways in which they tried to use global dance discourse for developing their own Palestinian style. As one long-time female group member put it: "There always has to be something in the dancing that makes and keeps it Palestinian, the music, the words, the dress, the movement itself, little things that give it a spirit of Palestinian dance."

*Staging identity as nation in a context of protracted conflict*

Why was it so important for *El-Funoun* to maintain the meaning of their activities, even while struggling with changing their style?

*El-Funoun* members explained that in the context of a protracted Israeli-Palestinian conflict, it was essential that their activities continued to function as a means of nationalization. The group itself sanctioned its stage activities with the argument that the relationship between Israelis and Palestinians still occurred in form of a struggle of national liberation. This precluded any too radical changes in the group's familiar way of appearing on stage, and called for safeguarding the meaning of their activities as a nationalizing force. As one of *El-Funoun's* choreographers emphasized:

We are still an occupied people. How can we in this state suddenly do something on stage that the people no longer recognize as ours, as Palestinian. We as artists speak for the nation and we fight with our art against the occupation. We cannot suddenly do couple dancing like Nicholas.<sup>70</sup> That's okay for the workshops, inside the studio, but not on stage, where we perform for the people.

In addition, *El-Funoun* members stressed that continuing to present their activities on stage as specifically Palestinian and not just as any modern dance or ballet served as a means of empowerment in the face of ongoing Israeli-Palestinian tensions. As they saw it, *El-Funoun* did not continue to perform the nation *despite* changing ways of movement. The group's stylistic changes, on the contrary, helped consolidate the nation thus performed in opposition to a dominant Israeli occupying force. Staging *raqs* in terms of heritage, they argued that the group successfully tread a fine line between "keeping what is ours" and "at the same time, improving it." Distinguishing between "old heritage (*turāth qadīm*)" and "heritage of the young generations (*turāth il-ajyāl il-jdīdeh*)," *El-Funoun* members argued that its aim was not to overcome heritage, but adapt it to contemporary living conditions and thus strengthen it. *El-Funoun* thus not merely continued to perform identity in terms of the nation, but performed this nation as strengthened and renewed—a nation, that, as one of the longer-standing members explained, was fit to counter the Israeli occupation by staging 'up-to-date' performances of modern Palestinianness on the basis of input gained from elsewhere:

The *raqs*, the workshops of ballet, modern and jazz, they gave me the confidence that we, the Palestinians, are not defeated. Having gone

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<sup>70</sup> Nicholas Rowe, the modern dancer from Australia who had done workshops with the group during the time of my fieldwork.

through the process of learning such styles and using them for producing our own way of dancing makes one feel that one can still do something. Okay, we are not professionals, but the experience of trying and overcoming this obstacle of fear, that we may not be able to do it, that this modern dance is very difficult and we may not be able to learn and use it, this experience gave me strength and self-confidence, even in my own way of walking. If we can achieve to successfully deal with modern dance, what else can we achieve!

Finally, appearing on stage to perform the Palestinian nation in ways known and shared by the audience instead of staging unfamiliar pieces of modern dance or ballet served as a means to socially legitimize *El-Funoun's* activities. *El-Funoun* members, especially those whose participation in the group was precarious, argued that as Israeli-Palestinian relations continued to be framed in terms of ongoing conflict, doing *raqs filastīnī* was socially more acceptable than doing *raqs modern*. Behind the backdrop of Israeli-Palestinian tensions, they argued that the public approved activities done in the name of the nation, yet did not approve of abandoning heritage in favor of unfamiliar, foreign styles. Thus, it was the younger female dancers of *El-Funoun*, the ones enthusiastically seizing any opportunity to participate in the modern dance workshops behind closed doors who stood in for the compromise middle road when performing in public.<sup>71</sup> Not pushing for faster change, they remained within the dis-

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<sup>71</sup> Nationalist discourse as a powerful legitimizing tool was mostly employed by younger female members. Male members, in particular younger male members, also reverted to nationalist discourse to defend their engagement in the dance group. Yet I found that male members more easily than female members could abandon such rhetoric. There was less at stake for them, as the example of Maḥmūd showed. In contrast to his sister Ibtisām, Maḥmūd was an outspoken critic of the group leaders' refusal to take more radical stylistic steps. Frustrated with the discrepancy between what the group *could* do on stage, and what it was actually doing, he complained: "They close their eyes in the group before discussion. We want to develop. We bring dancers from abroad, have workshops, learn movements from modern dance, ballet, etc. But we have some in the group, who say no—we only want *twāth*, *dabkeh*. We don't want modern dance. So, we only take parts from these workshops, some experience, skills, some movements. We put our conventional movements together with these movements from the modern. We mix it, make new, different movements. That's it." Having received permission from his family to pursue dance studies in the United States, Maḥmūd had more resources than his sister to realize his ideas outside the group. A committed performer engaged in teaching and choreographing activities, Ibtisām faced daily trouble trying to avoid family pressure on her to get married and quit dancing. Dance studies abroad was something their father had conceded to Maḥmūd, but which she did not even dream of asking. Thus, while for Ibtisām and her female friends it was generally either *El-Funoun* or nothing, there was less at stake for Maḥmūd, who had options to realize his interest elsewhere.

cursive framework of nationalism as well as the stylistic framework of *turāth* when presenting their activities to the outside. According to Maryam,<sup>72</sup> maintaining the connection to the people and performing in the name of Palestinian *turāth* was extremely important for her in order to legitimize her activity: “It is difficult for me as a dancer (*rāqīṣah*) that I do something that the people (*jumhūr*) do not agree with. In the end, I am Palestinian and I cannot go far from society. Especially because we are still an occupied people, we have to stand together.” Coming from families known for their political engagement and active in leftist politics at university, nationalist discourse was meaningful to female members like Maryam. Yet at the same time, using this discourse also constituted a means of socially legitimizing their activities in a context in which an ongoing Israeli-Palestinian conflict contributed to bestowing high value on anything done in terms of the nation and *turāth*. Just as metaphors used in Palestinian poetry during the nineties remained ‘frozen’ in nationalist discourse, *El-Funoun* allowed changes in style only as long as they did not affect meaning.<sup>73</sup>

## CONCLUSION

In the course of its twenty-year long working history, *El-Funoun*’s style remained subject to an ongoing negotiation process determined by the group’s attempt at reconciling its various, often conflicting aims of artistic aspirations and sociopolitical message on the one hand, and connecting to a broad, mass-based audience, on the other. Seeking to innovate movement on stage, *El-Funoun* at the same time always carefully attempted to stay within the boundaries of the familiar and socially acceptable. Lending an attentive ear to the input of Palestinian folklorists, their audience as well as local intellectuals and artists, the group assessed its reception by the crowd and adapted its style accordingly. During the nineties, *El-Funoun*’s stylistic negotiations gained an additional dimension. Tapping into the international dance scene with the help of new communication technologies, the group’s local activities increasingly reflected global dance discourse. Yet

<sup>72</sup> Name changed.

<sup>73</sup> In an essay published in 1994, Hanan Ashrawi bemoaned the ‘frozenness’ of metaphors in Palestinian poetry as the result of a dominant nationalist discourse which did not allow for artistic change and innovation (Ashrawi 1994).



throughout, *El-Funoun* did not radically change style. Rather, its activities remained circumscribed by a protracted conflict in which Israeli-Palestinian relations continued to determine the ways in which *El-Funoun* appeared on stage.

During the initial period from 1979 to 1987, the group performed to steadfastly resist the Israeli occupation. Confronted with what they perceived as the colonial erasure of the Palestinian nation by 'stealing its cultural heritage,' *El-Funoun* with the help of a first generation of Palestinian folklorists set out to resist such obliteration by means of staging cultural practices identified as authentically Palestinian. The emphasis in doing so lay on reproducing these practices as close as possible to the ways in which they had been done within their original historic contexts, thus 'preserving' and 'reviving' a Palestinian cultural presence in the face of an Israeli occupation turning creeping annexation in the late seventies and eighties.

Then, during the initial stage of the intifada from 1987 to 1989, rising up against the Israeli occupation determined *El-Funoun's* artistic engagement. Mirroring the ways in which Palestinian society in the territories for the first time actively revolted to shake off the occupation, the group emphasized the need to overcome norms of movement and social conventions on stage. Based on the idea that the 'whole body needed to move' instead of just the legs, *El-Funoun* started to think about new movement styles. Women and children, formerly secondary to the political military process of national liberation led by men, at least initially had taken on a major role in the intifada. Likewise, *El-Funoun* started to focus on including the upper body in movement—head, shoulders and arms—body parts that hitherto had remained stiff.

The stalemate which characterized relations between Israel and the Palestinians after the initial fervor of the intifada had petered out again found expression in *El-Funoun's* artistic activities. From 1989 to 1993, the group produced no new work. Feeling generally disoriented and unsure about how to approach the issue of stylistic change, the group saw its activities as deadlocked and standing still.

In the aftermath of the Oslo accords signed in 1993, Palestinians increasingly experienced their relationship with Israel in terms of wanting to psychologically separate from the occupying force despite and because of becoming more and more physically interlocked. As the Israeli grip on the territories tightened in the wake of a stalling Israeli-Palestinian peace process, *El-Funoun* sought to break out of

the isolation, restrictions and constant control imposed on Palestinians in West Bank and Gaza. Rejecting any artistic cooperation with Israeli artists under the label of 'cultural normalization,' the group consciously turned away from Israel towards the international dance scene and with the help of the new technologies began to negotiate its movements on stage in terms of international dance styles like ballet and modern.

Israeli-Palestinian relations not merely shaped the ways in which *El-Funoun* staged its activities, however, but also staked out the parameters within which such changes beyond the familiar could acceptably occur. Behind the backdrop of an ongoing Palestinian national struggle, *El-Funoun* allowed stylistic changes in its public presentations only as long as they did not affect meaning. Rehearsing various dance styles ranging from ballet to modern and contemporary behind the closed doors of its studio, the ensemble took care to strictly sanction its stage presentations, eliminating any too radical change in the group's familiar way of appearing in public. No matter what happened behind closed doors, the group emphasized that on stage it presented *raqs filasṭīnī* as a means of strengthening the national community seen under threat. *Haifa, Beirut & Beyond*, a piece that was set up to present something radically new, thus never made it to the stage. At the same time, the high status which nationalist symbolism maintained in the Palestinian public behind the context of a protracted Israeli-Palestinian struggle made it a welcome means for *El-Funoun* members, especially younger female members, to legitimize their involvement in the group. Staying out at night to perform the nation was controversial, but still somewhat acceptable in the West Bank in the late nineties. Staying out to do modern dance was not.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### MAKING PLACE: *KARMEI MAKHOL*, 1982–1999

#### INTRODUCTION

Relocating from Ramallah/al-Bireh to Karmi'el in the Galilee, this chapter investigates how Israeli Jewish relations with their Palestinian Other shaped the performance of contemporary Israeli Jewish identity through the work of the *Karmeï Makhhol* folk dance ensemble. At the time of my research, *Karmeï Makhhol* was identified in Israeli folk dance circles as one of Israel's foremost amateur groups. Originally set up in 1982 as the *Karmi'el Folk Dancing Group (Lahakat ha-Makhhol Karmi'el)*, the ensemble resembled the countless other amateur groups presenting sets of Israeli folk dance choreographies on stage. In the early nineties, however, following a process of major reorganization, the group was renamed *Karmeï Makhhol* and emerged as one of the country's most acclaimed ensembles. In 1994, for instance, the group was chosen to present Israel at the annual *Folk Dance Olympics* in Dijon, France, and won the silver medal, an outstanding achievement for an Israeli folk dance group as the group's manager Yoav Tavor proudly related to me. The reputation of trainer and choreographer Dado Kraus as one of the most promising young talents in the realm of staged Israeli folk dance added to *Karmeï Makhhol's* prestige in the folk dance scene.<sup>1</sup> This prestige was firmly secured at the *Karmi'el Dance Festival* of 1998 when the group won first prize in the national choreographic competition. The company's winning dance *The Fall of '73 (Khorev Shiv'im Ve Shalosh)* continued to be presented at official functions throughout the country for Israel's 50th anniversary. Equally, *Karmeï Makhhol* appeared at summer events organized with much ado by the *Ministry of Defense*, the *Ministry of Foreign Affairs* and the army.

As one of about 120 Israeli folk dance ensembles operating inside the country, *Karmeï Makhhol's* leaders and dancers explicitly placed

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<sup>1</sup> An opinion repeatedly expressed by leading figures in the contemporary scene of Israeli folk dancing like Yonatan Karmon, Bari Avi Dan and Shlomo Maman.

their activities in the tradition of *rikudai 'am israeli*, Israeli folk dancing, as invented half a century ago. As Dado emphasized, the guiding motive for his creative work with the group was to “express Israeli culture,” within the boundaries of the state as well as when traveling abroad. Sponsored by the government when traveling abroad, the group officially functioned as a representative of the Israeli state and performed in its name. Similarly, dancers in *Karmeï Makhol* indicated that they saw their involvement in the group directly linked to feelings of national identification. They stressed that inside Israel, they danced to represent Karmi‘el, and outside, the Israeli state. To them, this connection became tangible in the fact that the group carried the city’s name in its own, that they performed certain dances wearing state or city colors, and that the members of the *Yitzugit*, the *Representative Group* of the city, did not pay membership fees. As one of the dancers from the *Representative Group* explained:

In the group we feel that we are connected to Karmi‘el, the city and the people, and to Israel, when we are abroad. We feel this connection. Everywhere we go we go with the flag of Israel and the flag of Karmi‘el. We always sing: ‘El el Israel, el el Karmi‘el.’<sup>2</sup> Everywhere. I also know that when I am in a show, I represent something else, not just myself. When someone sees me, I don’t represent myself, but someone sees me and says oh, you are with the group of Karmi‘el, they are good. Also, when you get feedback from people, you hear ‘the group of Karmi‘el was,’ not, ‘You were.’ This is how I feel that we represent Karmi‘el and Israel.

Placing themselves within the tradition of Israeli folk dancing, *Karmeï Makhol*’s work reflected the changes that this tradition had undergone since the time of its creation. Changes occurring in Israeli society after the sweeping Israeli victory over the Arab armies in 1967 coupled with a changing global environment defined by advances in technology and communication prompted the increasing professionalization and proliferation of new dance choreographies and styles. Resourceful folk dance leaders began earning a living from producing ever new dance choreographies and introducing them in special dance camps, training sessions, festivals and *harkadot*, the numerous weekly folk dance circles open to anyone willing to pay the entrance

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<sup>2</sup> Here, the word ‘el’ solely has onomatopoeic function, as *Karmeï Makhol* dancers explained to me. Generally also translating as ‘god,’ ‘el’ in the group’s jingle was only used for purposes of rhyming and sound.

fee and dance through the night. As a result, the number of available new Israeli folk dance choreographies skyrocketed.<sup>3</sup>

With the constant production of new folk dance choreographies, the definition of what made a folk dance authentically Israeli shifted and became blurred. In contrast to the forties when the new Israeli folk dances had been characterized by their distinctly unique Israeli Oriental style, inspired in particular by *dabkeh*, authenticity since the seventies was no longer defined in terms of a specific dance style. Any dance created by an Israeli choreographer or performed to Hebrew music began to qualify as authentically Israeli, turning Israeli folk dancing, in the words of one folk dance practitioner, into a “hodgepodge of styles” encompassing anything from samba to waltz, rock and Middle Eastern pop. In the context of this ever diversifying stylistic amalgam, the Israeli *debkha* lost its importance as a defining feature of Israeli folk dancing. In the late nineties, new dances were still choreographed under the name of *debkha*.<sup>4</sup> Likewise, *debkha* steps endured as a common choreographic element in newly created dances and the *debkha*-inspired style exuding strength, energy and ‘masculinity’ continued to characterize at least some of the new dances. Yet in general, new stylistic diversity had replaced the now newly old ‘new Israeli Orientalness.’ Instead of *debkha* strength and energy, novelty, creativity and the ability to incorporate ever new dance styles, movements and steps came to define the ‘authentic’ nature of Israeli folk dancing (Ronen 1994; Ronen 1997; Siman Tov 2000).<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> In contrast to the three hundred dances which had made up the initial repertoire of Israeli folk dancing from the 1940s to the late 1960s, more than three thousand choreographies existed in 1998 (*Kesher Lemakhol* 1998), a number increasing by the rate of ninety to one hundred new dances each year.

<sup>4</sup> Among current Israeli folk dance choreographers known for their *debkot*, Moshe (Moshiko) Halevi, Vicky Cohen and Shlomo Maman, for instance, feature prominently.

<sup>5</sup> At the time of my research, the issue of how to define the authenticity of Israeli folk dancing constituted a bone of contention among some Israeli folk dance leaders and practitioners. Were the newly created ‘new Israeli folk dances’ proliferating in numbers and diverse in style truly authentic expression of the Israeli nation? Or were the *old* ‘new Israeli folk dances’ choreographed in the time between the 1940s and 60s more authentic expressions of Israeli culture? A majority of Israeli folk dance practitioners with whom I spoke in the course of my field work in New York and Israel argued that it was exactly the novelty, creative character and ability to incorporate ever new dances elements which made Israeli folk dancing authentic (Kaschl 2000). This view was also expressed by Dr. Dan Ronen, former Israeli Minister of Culture and Education and enthusiastic supporter of the folk dance movemet in Israel in an interview with me as well as in his various publications

Behind this backdrop of proliferating and stylistically diversifying Israeli folk dances, how did *Karmeï Makhol* perform contemporary Israeli Jewish identity in the late nineties? In particular, if *debkah* has generally lost its meaning as a defining style in Israeli folk dancing, did relations with the Israeli Jews' Palestinian Other continue to influence *Karmeï Makhol's* performance, and if so, in which ways? Tracing the group's foundation and development, I argue that Israeli folk dancing through the nineties maintained its significance as a site of negotiating Jewish-Arab relations by showing how *Karmeï Makhol's* performance served as a strategic means of making "place" in competition with a Palestinian Other. I hereby use Vivian Patraka's concept of place as a "pre-scripted performance of interpretation." Place is thus a site that is "pre-narrativized" and allows its spectator only one interpretation of its meaning, hiding all other possible readings. "Space," in contrast, is not pre-determined in its meanings. Open to interpretation, space invites the spectator to improvise, thus enabling multiple ways of reading, viewing and experiencing a specific site (Patraka 1996). Arguing that *Karmeï Makhol* 'made place' in the Galilee, I illustrate how folk dancing and, in particular, the group's *debkah* activities contributed to transforming 'hostile' Palestinian spaces into the Israeli Jewish place Karmi'el and put the town on the map by establishing and consolidating a position of dominant power.

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on the subject (Ronen 1994; Ronen 1997) as well as by Roni Simhan Tov, chairman of the *Folk Dance Teachers' Organization* in Israel (Siman Tov 2000).

Others showed themselves to be critical of the development of the past three decades and deplored what they saw as the commercialization of Israeli folk dancing in terms of a loss of authenticity and cultural fragmentation in a globalizing world (Kaufman 1988; Kaufman 1999; Meishar 2000; Hillman 2001). Zvi Friedhaber, a private archivist in Tel Aviv, thus criticizes the proliferation of the new folk dance choreographies as follows: "There occurred a total inversion of the creative process. While at the beginning the creation of new folk dances was needed to turn Israelis into a 'dancing nation' and to lay the foundations of a folk dance culture, as the endeavor succeeded beyond what its originators dreamt of, the popular demand called for entertainment and 'hits.' The result was a populist, shallow style. Every new song which became a hit was used quickly for creating a new dance. Not only Israeli songs, but also international pop songs were used by 'dance creators' for their purposes." (Friedhaber 1993: 60)

A minority of folk dance practitioners trying to resist the globalizing trend in Israeli folk dancing thus relocated authenticity back to the early beginnings of Israeli folk dancing in the forties, fifties, and sixties (Kaschl 2000). Organizing folk dance sessions where only the 'old' dances choreographed during the early period are performed, these folk dance practitioners seek to restore what they perceived as the lost cultural authenticity of Israel's modernity (Kaufman 1988; Kaufman 1999).

FROM SPACE TO PLACE: PUTTING KARMİ'EL ON THE MAP—  
 "SAMNU ET KARMİ'EL 'AL HA-MAPAHI!"

*Founding Karmeï Makhol*

In contrast to the Palestinian groups under observation in this study, the foundation and development of the Israeli Jewish group *Karmeï Makhol* did not constitute a private endeavor. Instead, the ensemble resulted from a conscious, well-orchestrated effort undertaken by Karmi'el's local council<sup>6</sup> in cooperation with the town's community center to initiate, institutionalize and develop Israeli folk dancing as an extracurricular activity. In fact, it was council officials who first brought up the very idea that Karmi'el needed its own folk dance ensemble and organized the necessary steps towards its realization. In 1980, Pnina Shitrit, then coordinator of the *Arts & Crafts Department* at Karmi'el's community center launched a first attempt at putting this idea into practice. Due to budgetary reasons, however, nothing came of it, and after operating for nearly a year, the effort died down.<sup>7</sup> In 1982, Adi Eldar, then head of Karmi'el's *Education Department* and the community center's substitute director, gave new impetus to the idea of setting up a folk dance ensemble. As a result of Eldar's efforts, the *Karmi'el Folk Dancing Group* was officially called into being, provided with a small, but steady budget, a working concept and rehearsal space in the community center. The local council hired Daphne Brill, a professional folk dancer and choreographer working with Israeli folk dance groups around the Galilee at the time, to train the twelve or so couples which made up Karmi'el's new dance ensemble and prepare them for the stage. Within a year and a half, as Brill recalled, the group had mastered a repertoire of seven choreographies, and started to perform in venues in Karmi'el and around the Galilee, mostly in tourist events.<sup>8</sup>

In the late eighties, officials responsible for the cultural policy in Karmi'el began to rethink the issue of the *Karmi'el Folk Dancing Group*. To them, it no longer seemed enough to merely have a folk dance ensemble. Increasingly, they felt that this group should be restructured in order to better meet their expectations of what this group

<sup>6</sup> In 1985, the *Ministry of Interior* recognized Karmi'el officially as a city and its local council turned into a municipal council.

<sup>7</sup> Author's interview with Pnina Shitrit.

<sup>8</sup> Author's interview with Daphne Brill.

should actually be. Considering it as over-aged and lacking in charisma, these officials envisioned a bigger, more glamorous group made up of the town's children and teenagers. As Avi Markovitch, director of the community center in Karmi'el since 1988 and one of the major driving forces behind the idea of restructuring the dance group, explained: "It was a dance troupe with old people. Dancers between the age of thirty-five and forty. We did not have a new generation for the troupe. Here and there some people joined, but one could see that some of the faces of the dancers were not exactly what one would assume a dancer to look like."<sup>9</sup>

In addition, in 1988, Karmi'el's mayor Baruch Venger<sup>10</sup> for the first time organized the *Karmi'el Dance Festival*, a three-day-dance-extravaganza that quickly gained an international reputation. Arguing that the host of "the world's largest dance festival"<sup>11</sup> needed an adequately representative dance troupe, Avi Markovitch along with Yoav Tavor, new director of the *Culture & Events Department* since 1988, and two other board members pushed for the reorganization of the Karmi'el ensemble. Adi Eldar, driving force behind the group's initial foundation and the city's mayor after Baruch Venger had passed away in 1989, gave green light to the restructuring. Markovitch and Tavor worked out a five-year-plan to set up a new, re-organized "first-class" ensemble, that would be divided into different age groups and consist entirely of children, teenagers and young adults. As Markovitch recounted, they were aware of the difficulties that their plan entailed:

We went to Adi. I told him, that we could not continue with the dance troupe as it was. We showed him our plan, saying that within five years, we would have about 200 young dancers. We also told him that we needed his blessing for this, because it meant that we were going to close the existing dance troupe and create something new. For a while, there would not be anything. Adi Eldar told us: 'I created this dance troupe. I made it happen. Now that I am the mayor,

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<sup>9</sup> Author's interview with Avi Markovitch.

<sup>10</sup> Baruch Venger, a Rumanian Jewish immigrant to Israel in 1949, started working for the *Ministry of Housing* in 1958. In the sixties, he was appointed as head of the steering committee for planning and building Karmi'el. In 1971, the *Ministry of Interior* appointed Venger as president of Karmi'el's local council, a post in which he was confirmed in local elections by 73% of the town's inhabitants. As Karmi'el was officially recognized as a city, Venger was elected its first mayor, a position in which he remained until his death in 1989 (Municipality of Karmi'el 1992).

<sup>11</sup> Author's interview with Hanah Koval.



I don't want to find myself without a troupe.' So I was scared, petrified. I had this vision on paper, but I had no guarantee that it would work. It was a big risk. I had to fire the current choreographer. There would be quite a few people upset because they would realize that they would not be able to dance anymore. There was the mayor in the background who told us he would chop off our head if we messed up. And there was nothing on the other side.<sup>12</sup>

Yet despite the risks that they perceived, Markovitch and Tavor went ahead with their project. In 1990, they replaced Daphne Brill, the group's trainer since 1982, with Dado Kraus, a young, still rather unknown folk dance choreographer whom Tavor had come across in his search for an adequate new trainer. In October 1990, they organized a mass recruiting. Advertising the event in the local media and schools, they screened 350 children and teenagers, choosing about seventy to form two new groups. Alongside the regular adult group now entering its ninth year, a *Youth Group (Noarim)*, with teenagers aged 14 to 16 was set up, as well as a *Chicks Group (Efrokhim)*, aged 10 to 13 (Tavor 1991). In order to prove their project's success, Tavor and Markovitch insisted that the new children and teenage groups should appear as fast as possible on stage. To this end, they hired an additional choreographer, Sefi Aviv, on a short-term basis, who was known for his aptitude in working with children and staging simple, but effective presentations within minimal periods of time. As Markovitch explained: "For that [first performance], the artistic standard did not really matter. You see a mass of children on stage, dancing, a lot of colors and sound. You don't really look if they do the right steps or not."

On Independence Day in April 1991, the groups were ready to perform. As expected, the colorful show designed by Kraus and Aviv won over the residents of Karmi'el and convinced the mayor that his support of the group's restructuring had been worth its price. Backed by the mayor and supported by public opinion, Markovitch and Tavor enlarged the ensemble, holding a second audition in 1992 that added yet another group with even younger children and increased the overall number of participants to over 125 (Tavor 1992). Out of 300 children competing in the age group of 9 to 11, fifty were taken to form the new group of the *Buds (Nitzanim)*, alongside a few more to fill the ranks of the already existing *Chicks* and *Youth* groups (Tavor 1992). Aviv left the ensemble, and Kraus took over the choreographic

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<sup>12</sup> Author's interview with Avi Markovitch.

responsibilities for all of the newly established groups. To lend outward expression to the reorganization process undertaken during the last three years, the group's leaders also searched for a new name. Instead of simply *Karmi'el Folk Dancing Group*, it was officially renamed *Karmeï Makhol*, a neologism created from the name of the city Karmi'el (Groves of God),<sup>13</sup> and the Hebrew word for dance, *makhol*.

By the mid-nineties, the restructuring of *Karmeï Makhol* had born fruit, as Tavor proudly noted in a report written in 1994 (Tavor 1994). Recognized as one of Israel's leading groups, *Karmeï Makhol* at the time of my research had expanded to over three hundred participants divided into 6 groups: the *Buds (Nitzanim)* as the youngest group with children under the age of nine, the *Chicks (Efrukhim)* for children between 9 to 12, the *Youngsters (Alumim)* for ages 12 to 15, the *Youth Group (Noarim)* for ages 16 to 17, the *Representative Group (Nitzugit)* as the performing group consisting of participants aged 18 and up, and finally the *Veterans (Vatikim)*, made up of senior dancers from the initial group founded in the eighties who continued to meet for their own pleasure rather than to actually perform on stage. Rehearsals, much like the group's organizational structure, were strict, taking place on Tuesdays from 4:30 to 9:45 pm and on Thursdays from 5:00 until midnight. In addition to the group's main choreographer Dado Kraus, two choreographic assistants trained with the younger groups. Two managers completed the team, coaching the dancers through rehearsals, taking attendance, accompanying trips, dealing with costumes and generally offering a shoulder to cry on. The group's budget was equally well organized. Financially backed since its foundation, *Karmeï Makhol* emerged as quite well endowed in the nineties. As noted by Tavor in a drawing up from 1996, the municipality covered 45% of the group's budget, monthly contributions by participants accounted for 35% and presentations earned about 5%, providing the ensemble with a steady, rather generous financial flow. The allowances paid by *Iscar*, a Galilean company producing small metal tools, for the group performing a special choreography as an advertisement for its products, further added to *Karmeï Makhol*'s financial well-being in the late nineties. Thus, as Karmi'el became known as the "City of Dance," hosting one of the world's biggest and most diverse dance festivals, *Karmeï Makhol* emerged as one of the country's most acclaimed folk dance troupe.

<sup>13</sup> The name Karmi'el is a compound noun consisting of the plural form of the Hebrew term *kerem*, *kramim* (grove), and *el*, (God).

*Judaizing the Galilee*

Karmi'el municipal officials devoted a considerable amount of financial resources, energy and time to setting up a performance group. Other activities, some of which much less expensive than the maintenance of a high-standard folk dance troupe could have been developed at the community center to fill the free time of Karmi'el's youth.<sup>14</sup> Yet folk dancing had not only constituted a central concern for the town's officials since the early eighties, but the municipality was willing to support the 'rags-to-riches' transformation of the 'mediocre' *Karmi'el Folk Dance Troupe* into 'glamorous' *Karmeï Makhol*. In Israel, the public support and the promotion of folk dance activities are nothing unusual. In the pre-state period as well as during the initial decades of statehood, the *Histadrut* had played a major role in supporting the Israeli folk dance movement in terms of logistics, administration as well as finances. As responsibilities shifted from the *Histadrut* to the *Culture Administration* in the *Ministry of Education* after the establishment of the state, Israeli folk dancing remained on the list of activities to be promoted through public resources.<sup>15</sup> At the time of my research in the late nineties, community-based folk dance ensembles like the Karmi'el group were thus usually maintained by the local community center which, if it was part of the *Association of Community Centers (Khevat ha-Matnasim)* received government support.<sup>16</sup> Government programs such as *Art for the People (Omanut La'am)* further supported Israeli folk dance ensembles by providing financial as well as organizational help (Katz and Sella 1999: 36–40). Besides, at the beginning of the nineties, the *Ministry of Education* launched a special effort to institu-

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<sup>14</sup> According to the Beracha Report put together by Elihu Katz in 1999, dance is the most demanding of the arts in Israel in terms of public financing with an average of 70% public support versus 30% of self-generated income in 1996. In contrast, the average level of public money going to all the performing arts in Israel in 1996 was 55%. As Katz points out, these figures match the data in other Western countries such as England, where the *Arts Council* reported that some dance companies received as much as 91% and 94% in public support. Katz explains the high maintenance of dance companies in terms of a smaller audience, the long and exigent training period for dancers as well as their short careers. See (Katz and Sella 1999: 91).

<sup>15</sup> At the end of the nineties, the *Histadrut* still maintained a bureau for Israeli folk dancing staffed by Rina Meir. Yet, its budget was limited, with most of the financial responsibilities having been transferred to the *Culture Administration* in the *Ministry of Education*.

<sup>16</sup> In the late nineties, about 20% of a community center's budget was usually provided for by the *Association of Community Centers* (Katz and Sella 1999: 38–39).

tionalize the teaching of dance, in particular, of folk dancing, in kindergardens and schools throughout the country.<sup>17</sup>

While public support for folk dance activities in Israel in and of itself constituted nothing unusual, the case of *Karmeï Makhol* stands out in that it brings to the fore the ways in which folk dancing in Israel was officially used for ‘place-making’ in relation to a Palestinian Other. That is, it shows how folk dancing served to establish and consolidate an Israeli Jewish presence in the Galilee in opposition to a ‘hostile’ Palestinian Other by appropriating Arab space and performing it as an exclusively Jewish place. The Israeli Jewish town Karmi’el, known as the “newest development town within the green line” (Carmel 1991), was founded in 1964 as part of an official Israeli settlement policy propagandistically known as ‘Judaizing the Galilee.’<sup>18</sup> At the time of Israel’s foundation in 1948, the Galilee was almost exclusively populated by Palestinian Arabs and thus, in the eyes of the Israeli Jewish public, generally counted as a ‘hostile frontier region’ inside the newly founded state (Hasson 1998; Yiftachel 1998).<sup>19</sup> During the early period of Jewish immigration, only two new settlements, Rosh Pina in 1882 and Ein Zeitim in 1891, had been set up in the hills of the Central Galilee, of which the later was deserted again 20 years later. In the late thirties and forties, four additional *kibbutzim*, Khanita, Eylon, Matsuva and Yekhi’am were established in the region. According to Oren Yiftachel, the building of these agricultural settlements constituted “the first Jewish attempt to penetrate into the hills of Galilee, an area which was avoided earlier due to the pragmatic settlement strategy of the Zionist movement which attempted to create territorial continuity, mainly away from dense Arab populations” (Yiftachel 1992: 103). By the time that Israel was established, the Jewish presence in the Galilee was thus negligible.<sup>20</sup>

<sup>17</sup> As Nurit Ron, the person in charge for the development of this program explained, this program was meant to build on *Beit Sefer HaRoked, The Dancing School*, a project implemented by the *Chief Supervisor of Physical Education* Shalom Hermon in 1983 in honor of the 35th anniversary of Israel. Author’s interview with Nurit Ron.

<sup>18</sup> Prime Minister Levi Eshkol who took office in 1963 coined the term ‘Judaizing the Galilee’ in the mid-sixties.

<sup>19</sup> In the time from the beginning of Zionist immigration to historic Palestine until the establishment of the Israeli state in 1948, the Galilee constituted an almost exclusively Arab region, which the UN Partition Plan of 1947 envisioned as part of the Arab state with only the area east of Tsefat around Lake Tiberias and the border region with Syria and Jordan allocated to the Jewish state (Tessler 1994: 258–262).

<sup>20</sup> In 1948, for instance, only 180 Jews versus 17,680 Palestinian Arabs lived in the region of *Yekhi’am*, a subregion of the Upper Galilee stretching north of Karmi’el (Yiftachel 1992: 119).

In contrast to the lack of settlement activities in the Galilee during the pre-state period, Israeli state officials after 1948 started to promote the region as a primary target area for Jewish settlement in order to ‘tame’ this hostile internal frontier region. Two military operations carried out by Zionist forces on 11 May 1948 and 29 October 1948 had resulted in the occupation of all of the Galilee and a reduction of its Palestinian Arab population by over 50% (Falah 1991: 72). Yet despite the fact that over half of the Galilean Palestinian population had left the region during the war, Israeli officials continued to view the region with suspicion. Considering the high concentration of Palestinians in the north as a thorn in the side of the newly established state, Israeli officials sought to tip the population balance in favor of a greater percentage of Jewish residents. For one thing, Israeli Jewish officials hereby started to direct the influx of new Jewish immigrants from abroad to the Galilee, seeking to raise the rate of Jews living in the region in absolute numbers. Using the Galilee to absorb Jewish immigrants from abroad, Israeli officials, at the same time, also sought to create, in Ghazi Falah’s words, a “*fait accompli*,” that would effectively forestall the return of Palestinian refugees to their homes, who at the end of the war either found themselves expelled<sup>21</sup> from newly founded Israel or were “homeland refugees” within the borders of the armistice borders (Falah 1991: 72). Thus, while Palestinians still remaining in the region were placed under a military rule that controlled their everyday lives and strictly curtailed freedom of movement, efforts to settle this ‘hostile frontier region’ started to run high (Yiftachel 1992; Yiftachel and Meir 1998).

*From Wādī al-sajūr to Beit ha-Kerem*

The planning and foundation of Karmi‘el in the middle of the Galilean hills in 1964 was part of the flurry of settlement activities setting in after 1948. In the seven years between the end of the war and 1955, thirty new settlements were erected in the area, including the Jewish development towns Shlomi, Nazareth Illit and Ma’alot

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<sup>21</sup> On the debate around the question of whether Palestinians in 1948 had been expelled or whether they had left on their own account, see (Morris 1986; Morris 1987; Palumbo 1987; Khalidi 1988; Finkelstein 1991; Masalha 1991; Morris 1991; Masalha 1992; Masalha 1995).

(Yiftachel 1992). In addition, new Jewish neighborhoods were joined to already existing urban centers such as Tsefat and Tiberias (Law Yone and Lipshitz 1991: 4). In the mid-sixties, Prime Minister Levi Eshkol, who had taken office after Ben Gurion's resignation in June 1963 launched a plan called SUS, an acronym for the Hebrew term 'at last' (Yiftachel 1992: 121). The direct outcome of this plan was the new development town Karmi'el as well as four other *moshavim*, aiming to create Jewish presence by "disrupting the territorial continuity of the Arab villages" and "acting as barriers to their physical expansion" (Falah 1991: 76). Established on the south side of the road dividing the *Sajour Valley* (*wādī 'l-sajūr*) just opposite the Arab villages of Majd el-Krum, Bi'na and Deir el-Asad whose olive grooves had been appropriated for the town's foundation, the growing presence of Karmi'el paid tribute to these aims.

Providing homes for an initial ninety families, Karmi'el's growth in the beginning was slow. The aspiring development town remained small in relation to the expanding Arab villages on the other side of the street. Jewish influx to the Galilee had dwindled, not only to Karmi'el, but to the Galilee in general. The economic recession spreading in Israel in the sixties, as well as the eruption of the 1967 war had caused the settlement efforts in the Galilee to lose its thrust. As Israel occupied West Bank and Gaza, these efforts were definitely put onto the backburner. Energies were directed towards security and political issues in the occupied territories and little attention went to the north. Out-migration from the Galilee to the country's central regions reinforced this trend. As a consequence, in the late seventies, very few Jewish communities in the north could show for any considerable growth in their population, with Karmi'el constituting no exception (Kipnis 1983; Lipshitz 1986; Yiftachel 1992).

A little over ten years after its establishment, Karmi'el received a major building and populational boost, as a 'New Development Plan for the Galilee' was approved by the Israeli government under Yitzhak Rabin in 1976. The renewed effort to increase Jewish settlement activities in the north was prompted by a feeling of alarm at the declining Jewish population rates in the region which was spreading in government circles and the Israeli public. State officials worried about a demographic shift in the Galilee in favor of the Arab population (Lipshitz 1986). Increasingly also, a growing fear of "Arab encroachment over state land" made the rounds in official circles (Law Yone and Lipshitz 1991: 21). Although the actual 'encroachment'

by Arabs on state land was found to be less than 1,5% (ibid.), the government started to draw up a number of measures aiming at reversing the negative trend of Jewish population numbers in the region and “save the Galilee” (Yiftachel 1992: 123).<sup>22</sup>

As a necessary first step, the ‘New Settlement Plan of the Galilee’ in the time from 1975 to 1978 paid special attention to developing the region’s urban centers. Most of the Galilee including Karmi’el was declared a ‘Development Region A,’ granting a range of benefits such as low interest loans and tax breaks. In addition, the *Ministry of Industry and Commerce* drew up a plan for industrial development around the region’s urban centers. Four new industrial parks were set up, Karmi’el, Ma’alot, Tefen and Kabri, providing employment opportunities as well as incentives for investments for the newly arriving immigrants in the development towns (Yiftachel 1992). The rise to power of Likud under Menachem Begin in the 1977 elections further spurred the efforts put into making the Galilee Jewish by expanding its urban centers. The “accelerated urban strategy” for the Galilee proposed under the new government in 1977 foresaw that “all possible resources were to be mobilized for the massive development of Karmi’el, Upper Nazareth and Tsefad” (Falah 1991: 76). Despite large-scale protests staged by Arab villagers against the appropriation of land ear-marked by Israeli planning policy for accommodating the expansion of the urban centers, Karmi’el thus grew rapidly over the course of the next years (Yiftachel 1992: 140).

By the time that Adi Eldar pushed through the establishment of the *Karmi’el Folk Dancing Group* in 1982, Israeli Jewish presence in the Karmi’el region had been ensured. Growing clusters of new neighborhoods speedily set up to accommodate the growing influx of newcomers paid tribute to the success of Karmi’el as a new center of

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<sup>22</sup> Officially, the goals of the ‘New Settlement Project in the Galilee’ were never clearly formulated in order to avoid tensions and open confrontation with the Arab population in the region over this delicate subject, especially as Arab protest activities had been increasing since the late seventies. According to Hubert Law Yone and Gabriel Lipshitz, however, a review of documents by the various state and non-state bodies involved in its implementation clearly shows its aims to be directed at obliterating the Galilee as an Arab space and make it Israeli Jewish. Thus, the plan sought to “increase [the] area under control of the Jewish population,” “thwart the Arab encroachment over national land,” “disperse Jewish settlements and prevent Arab territorial consolidation,” and “increase the Jewish population of the Galilee so as to increase its relative weight in the total population.” Socioeconomic development of the region was meant to support these territorial and demographic aims of the development plan (Law Yone and Lipshitz 1991).



Israeli Jewishness in the north. In addition, the New Settlement Program had not merely sought to strengthen already existing urban centers, but enforced the establishment of tiny Jewish settlements, so-called outposts (*mitspim*), on hills and strategic points all around the area. In the time between 1978 and 1982, forty-four such outposts were erected, purposefully “expanding the Jewish territorial base into areas densely populated by Arabs” (Yiftachel 1992: 102). In 1982, the very year that marked the foundation of Karmi‘el’s dance group, Israeli Jewish control of the area climaxed with the establishment of the *Misgav Regional Council*, a regional network combining the Jewish settlements in the Segev area around Karmi‘el into one administrative unit. Placing all Arab-owned lands under its formal jurisdiction, the Council reserved for itself the control over all natural resources as well as all matters of agricultural development within its juridical boundaries.<sup>23</sup> By 1982, Israeli Judaization policy had thus not merely succeeded in increasing the Jewish presence in the Galilean hills in and around Karmi‘el, but also in providing incentives for Jewish settlers to stay and make their living in the region. As the Arab population increasingly tried to alleviate the effects of their eroding economic infrastructure by taking up wage-labor in Jewish centers and towns outside the Galilee, Jewish settlers successfully made use of their privileged access to the region’s natural resources, strengthening their economic basis for permanent settlement in the region and reducing their need to go and look elsewhere for work (Falah 1991: 80). The formerly Arabic *Wādī al-sajūr* had turned into a Hebrew *Beit ha-Kerem*.

### *Making place through folk dancing*

The *Karmi‘el Folk Dancing Group* came into being at a time when Karmi‘el’s presence as an Israeli Jewish development town in the Galilean hills had been ensured by increasing population growth, economic opportunity and a network of Jewish settlements dotting the hilltops throughout the region. As a continuous influx of new immigrants turned Karmi‘el from a small, close-knit settlers’ community

<sup>23</sup> The establishment of the *Misgav Regional Council* removed Arab-owned lands from the “‘sphere of influence’ of the Arab villages.” Although the Arab villagers could still till their lands, they found their options for developing them extremely limited, as the authority to grant permits for any such plans was reserved to Misgav officials (Falah 1991: 80).



into a town, municipal officials implemented folk dancing as a means of fostering senses of community and shared identity among the town's newly arriving residents. In general, Israeli policy makers considered extracurricular activities as crucial for the success of Jewish development towns and settlements newly established throughout the country. 'Development towns' were not only seen to be in need of socioeconomic incentives, but cultural ones as well:

It was feared that the lack of cultural centers might create a cultural vacuum which would either lead to the desertion of these settlements, in which so much work and money had been invested, or turn them into slums and hotbeds of crime and trouble. The government recognized that its policy of dispersing the population created an obligation not only to provide appropriate health and educational services, but cultural services as well. (Michman 1973: 53)

Karmi'el's first community center opened in 1973 as part of a government plan formulated in the early seventies to provide development towns and settlements throughout the country with community centers for athletic and cultural activities (Michman 1973: 52–54).<sup>24</sup> During its early years, Karmi'el's community center had little to offer, merely organizing some arts and crafts classes like ceramics, painting and knitting. When Avi Markovitch took over as program coordinator in 1977, he started to develop the arts program, organizing small theater shows and setting up a cinema.<sup>25</sup> His efforts at diversification were successful. In a brochure aiming to convince South African Jews to immigrate to the Galilee in 1978, for example, the *Israeli Ministry of Immigrant Absorption* advertised Karmi'el's community center as housing "a meeting hall, rooms for courses, a members' club, a gymnastics room, tennis courts, a swimming pool, basketball courts, a stadium, tracks and lawns," as well as a whole variety of different cultural and athletic activities such as

various hobbies, arts, educational courses, an adult drama club, an adult chess club, a bridge club, lectures, a Talmud club, a crafts club for adults, theater plays, concerts; a movie theater, as well as performances of guest artists during the summer, a library, various activities organized by the immigrant associations as well as a golden age club and a religious council. (Israeli Ministry of Immigrant Absorption, et al. 1978: 14)

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<sup>24</sup> At the time of my research in 1998–99, Karmi'el housed nine community centers dispersed throughout the various neighborhoods of the town and housing different activities.

<sup>25</sup> Interview with Avi Markovitch.

Despite this large range of different activities existing by the late seventies, Karmi'el's municipal officials put an extra effort into setting up and sponsoring a folk dance troupe. Certainly a number of different motivational forces played a role in the institutionalization of Karmi'el's folk dancing group. However, the collectivizing quality of Israeli folk dancing clearly held major importance for Karmi'el's political leaders. As Karmi'el expanded to become a town, folk dancing to them seemed an ideal means of integration and community-building among the growing number of its residents. Not requiring any special skills, not even mastery of the Hebrew language, the municipal officials saw it as an activity that anyone could join. "With folk dancing, you don't have barriers. It creates community without having to speak," as Avi Markovitch explained to me, a statement which I often heard during my fieldwork in the city.

Folk dancing in Karmi'el, however, was not merely seen as a means of internal integration by making the members of the community fall into step and move in unison. In the minds of Karmi'el's officials, it also constituted a powerful means of community-building towards the outside. Indicative of this is the emphasis, which the town's officials placed on founding and developing the *Karmi'el Folk Dancing Group* as an organized performance group with a specific, limited membership versus the *harkadah*, the weekly folk dance session in the community center open to anybody. Not merely appearing at local events organized in Karmi'el itself, the group within one and a half years' of its inception started to perform as a representative of the growing development town at various venues throughout the country and at times even abroad.<sup>26</sup> While Karmi'el's new immigrants inculcated national values through stage presentations of Israel's folk dance tradition, the *Karmi'el Folk Dancing Group*, in turn, served to establish and consolidate the presence of the young development town in Israeli society, and thus contributed to turning the 'hostile frontier region' into the new, ever-growing, bustling development town of Karmi'el. In 1982, Karmi'el was emerging as the new Israeli Jewish urban center in the Galilee, and its folk dancing group was there to ensure that this development would not pass unnoticed, neither within Israel nor in Jewish communities around the world targeted for immigration.

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<sup>26</sup> For instance, the group under Daphne Brill took part in the *Festival Mirabelle* in France in 1986, in the *Festival Berlin* in Germany in 1987 and again in Germany in Ausbach in 1988. Author's interview with Daphne Brill.

*Settling the frontier*

Israeli folk dancing as staged by Karmi'el's group during the eighties, however, not merely sought to assure that both the Israeli public and Jewish communities abroad took notice of the expanding Jewish urban center in the Galilee. More specifically, the group performed Karmi'el's identity in ways that conveyed a certain image about the town in order to shore up public support for its development and increase the numbers of its immigrants. Judaizing the Galilee constituted a very costly enterprise. Huge sums of public funds went to constructing the settlements, in particular the erecting of the outposts, in addition to the various financial incentives granted to people settling the region.<sup>27</sup> In order to defend their massive allocation of resources to the north and rally public support, Israeli policy-makers heavily drew on the Zionist ethos of frontier settlement. Settling the north constituted a project of highest national priority and was sold to the public as a heroic pioneering act in the legacy of the first *chalutzim*, exuding altruism and sacrifice (Kipnis 1987; Kellerman 1993; Yiftachel and Meir 1998).

The activities of the *Karmi'el Folk Dancing Group* during the eighties underscored the image of Karmi'el as a pioneers' enterprise within a hostile frontier region. Under the guidance of choreographer Daphne Brill, the group "made do."<sup>28</sup> Its performance was amateurish, improvised, and fit the general spirit of altruistic dedication and bustling enterprise characterizing the initial decades of the town. Like Karmi'el, the group was built up "from nothing,"<sup>29</sup> and dedicated members made it survive on their shared enthusiasm, not their artistic skill. Not 'elf-like' ballerinas, the dancers were sturdy, rough-and-ready "veterans (*vatikim*)."<sup>30</sup> Busy making ends meet in their new pioneer-

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<sup>27</sup> Law Yone estimates that each of the fifty-two outposts erected in the ten years between 1978 and 1988 cost ca. 5 million dollars in public money, in addition to the money allocated for developing the region's new urban centers like Karmi'el as well as its infrastructure to accommodate the rising numbers of Jewish settlers (Law Yone and Lipshitz 1991). For benefits granted to people settling in Karmi'el specifically see for instance (Ministry of Immigrant Absorption, Ministry of Housing et al. 1969; Carmel 1991). Also, in interviews with me, *Karme'i Makhol* dancers indicated low-cost housing combined with high-quality living standards as two a primary motivational forces for their parents to have come to live in Karmi'el.

<sup>28</sup> Expression used by people in Karmi'el describing the activities of the *Karmi'el Folk Dancing Group* in conversations with the author.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid.

<sup>30</sup> Author's interview with Avi Markovitch.

ing lives during the day, they patrolled the streets of Karmi'el at night on compulsory civil guard duty against any sort of unforeseen event, "because in this remote frontier region, you know, one could never know," as long-time Karmi'el residents related to me.<sup>31</sup> Their repertoire was basic, consisting of approximately fourteen choreographies that featured the usual mix of Israeli folk dance themes. As a special tribute to the town it sought to represent, the repertoire of the *Karmi'el Folk Dancing Group* also included a choreography named *The Flowers of the Galilee*, a theme that Daphne Brill had developed especially for the group to give it something characteristic and unique. Yet as residents of Karmi'el, officials in the municipality as well as former dancers stressed in their conversations with me, these dances, although nicely presented, did not constitute anything extraordinary. In the words of Oren, the youngest male member in the group during the eighties and star dancer with *Karme'i Makhol* during the nineties, everything was kind of bungled and improvised: "Then we were dancing in this little room, not like now. The floor was very cheap, not from wood. It was in the community center but downstairs, in the basement. The group was very lousy. It sucked. We did not know how to dance, what was left, what was right."<sup>32</sup>

*From a pioneers' periphery to a center of high-tech and tourism*

Performing Karmi'el's identity as a pioneers' experience in the duty of the Israeli Jewish nation during the eighties, the *Karmi'el Folk Dancing Group* was well-loved by the residents of the city. The dancing group was *their* group. They identified with its makeshift, amateur appearance and cherished its trailblazing dedication. In the late eighties, however, some of the people responsible for cultural policy in Karmi'el started to feel a growing unease about the way the group represented the city in local, national as well as international venues. For one thing, the nature of Israeli folk dancing, in general, had changed. Reflecting the changes taking place in Israel society after

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<sup>31</sup> Conversation about the civil guard duty with residents of Karmi'el in the *Kinyon*, the local shopping mall, on 15 March 1999. See also ([anon.] 1982; Municipality of Karmi'el 1992) on descriptions of the everyday life of Karmi'el's residents during the early decades of the town's existence.

<sup>32</sup> Author's interview with Oren. At the time of my research, he had just started his professional career as a dancer, training with the *Kibbutz Dance Company* as well as taking over teaching and choreographing responsibilities in *Karme'i Makhol* for the younger groups.

the 1967 war, Israeli folk dancing had evolved from its initial association with pioneering adventures, campfire romanticism and Zionist youth movements. As “khaki shorts and ankle socks” lost out to “gabardine pants, nylon stockings and padded bras” in the sixties and seventies (Livneh 1999: 17) and Israelis discovered the pleasures of French red wine and cappuccino in the eighties and nineties (Hockstader 1999), dancing folk in Israel was turning flashy.<sup>33</sup> Incorporating ever new international rhythms and styles, folk dancing became a showy, artistically demanding leisure-time affair, whose ever growing repertoire of new dance choreographies had little in common with the simple repetitiveness of the early dances. Compared with other contemporary ensembles in Israel, the *Karmi'el Folk Dancing Group*, an endearing, committed troupe of old-time folk dance lovers, did not cut it in the eyes of the municipal officials. Especially not during the Karmi'el festival, when the artistic short-comings of the troupe were all too plainly visible.

Similarly, the image of Karmi'el had evolved. In Israeli public discourses, Karmi'el in the late eighties no longer constituted a precarious pioneering enterprise in Israel's hostile periphery. The pioneers' settlement had turned into the “development town that works” with over 25,000 inhabitants comfortably living in a surrounding that was no longer posited as threatening and hostile, but instead as thoroughly ‘Judaized’ and safe, the epitome of the ‘beautiful Israeli homeland (*Eretz Israel ha-yafah*)’ (Keinon 1985). This new public image of Karmi'el pictured the development town as a success story of modern city planning, distancing itself from the image of the precarious frontier settlement in favor of that of a full-grown city that was green, clean and peacefully beautiful. Safety instead of pioneering adventure emerged as Karmi'el's new trademark and the city's outward appearance paid tribute to this image. As “the city planer's model town,” Karmi'el had been carefully designed in accordance with the physical characteristics of its surroundings, favoring architectural forms such as small, two-storied houses with red tile roofs that blended in with the surroundings and exuded coziness and tranquility (ORT Israel 1985: 2). Carefully designed parks, greenery and a forest planted to separate the living quarters from the city's industrial area underscored this impression of natural peacefulness. Not only a ‘green

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<sup>33</sup> See also (Lewy-Yanowitz 1999) for changing attitudes in Israeli society towards work and leisure time.

city,' Karmi'el in the late eighties also became known as a model city in terms of cleanliness, winning various national prizes for its above-average life-quality and health standards.<sup>34</sup>

'Green, clean and peacefully beautiful,' Karmi'el in the late eighties had emerged in Israeli public discourse as the antithesis to crowded and polluted urban centers like Tel Aviv and Haifa.<sup>35</sup> Advertised as offering a high-quality of life amidst the beauty of the Galilean hills and its mild, pleasant climate, Karmi'el, at the same time, was promoted as a modern city with all the necessary amenities and services as well as a job situation which was better than in most other regions throughout Israel during the economic recess of the late eighties. In addition, the Israeli government under President Efraim Katzir had chosen the city as the center of the *Region 2000*.<sup>36</sup> Promising to turn "one of Israel's least developed regions" into a center of high-tech and industry, *Region 2000* envisioned Karmi'el at the center of a project that would provide much needed high-level jobs in the region, encourage Jewish immigration rates from abroad which had been declining during recent years as well as prevent out-migration of skilled personnel in search of better jobs (ORT Israel 1985). In the course of this project, various industrial sites as well as educational institutions were established within the immediate vicinity of Karmi'el, such as *Tefen Industrial Park* and the *Braude ORT International Technological College*, in addition to various high technology firms that set up production sites in the region.<sup>37</sup> In addition to promoting

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<sup>34</sup> In 1993, Karmi'el began to take part in an international system of evaluation administered in Israel by the *Bureau of Standards*, aiming at improving the provision of services rendered by the municipality to the public. In this program, Karmi'el throughout has been receiving very high grades. Also, the city had been awarded "the first prize for quality of living, the Kaplan Prize for management, the prize for road safety, the Kaplan prize for immigrant absorption" as well as the "five stars of beauty" in the nation-wide competition *A Beautiful City in a Beautiful Israel*. In 1998, Karmi'el even received the "gold star," a special prize awarded for receiving the five stars of beauty during five consecutive years. Author's interview with Esther Menashe. See also (Municipality of Karmi'el 1999a; Municipality of Karmi'el 1999b).

<sup>35</sup> In interviews with me, both municipal officials as well as *Karme'i Makhol* dancers explained the advantages of living in Karmi'el usually in terms of a dichotomy between 'sedate' and 'peaceful' Karmi'el in contrast to the country's 'hectic,' 'overcrowded' city centers.

<sup>36</sup> Other towns included in the project were Ma'alot, Kfar Vradim and the Segev region north of Karmi'el. See (Commission for the Development of Region 2000 in the Galilee 1985).

<sup>37</sup> Such firms included *Elscint* for designing and manufacturing diagnostic imaging equipment, *Iscar* for tungsten carbide and titanium carbide cutting tools, the software house *Me'ad*, *Liad Electronics* for industrial control systems, *Lambda* as an

industry and science, the municipality began discussing ideas of how to market Karmi'el as a tourist site in the center of the Galilee, thus creating additional jobs and income for its residents and providing incentives for new immigrants.

As “rugged hilltops” transformed into “a polished town” (Libai 1987) and pioneering myths gave way to urban living, Mayor Baruch Venger initiated the *Karmi'el Dance Festival* as an innovative means for promoting his city's new image as a peaceful, high-quality urban refuge as well as an up-to-date international center of high-tech and tourism. To him, dancing, and especially Israeli folk dancing constituted the ideal gap in the market for realizing his ambitious development plans. As Markovitch explained the mayor's incentives for instituting the Karmi'el Dance Festival in 1988:

Akko had the theater festival, Haifa had the movie festival, one place had the wine, the other the beer festival, then the olive festival, and so on. Most places had something that brought the people to the area. [. . .] Karmi'el needed to find an anchor, something really unique that would bring people here. [. . .] We have no tourist resort here, no sea, lake, nothing historical that will attract tourists—so how could we draw the people?

A dance festival seemed an excellent idea to make up for Karmi'el's lack of natural and historic sites. In addition, Karmi'el policy-makers considered folk dancing an adequate cultural expression for the city. It fit the image they wanted the city to represent as the “pearl of the Galilee” and “not just another city, but a good place to live in” (Municipality of Karmiel 1999). Hanah Koval, responsible for the development of cultural activities in the municipality and living in Karmi'el since 1977, thus explained Venger's enthusiasm about folk dancing as a trademark for the city and the dedication of Karmi'el's municipality to continuing the festival ever since: “We looked for activities that would communicate cleanness. The nice Israel. Thus, we did not go for rock music, but folk dance. We tried to convey this impression of the area as an area of health and cleanliness, the good life.”<sup>38</sup> Already three years after the first *Karmi'el Dance Festival*, Mayor Adi Eldar proudly stated that: “Many people associate the name Karmi'el with its dance festival.” (Carmel 1991) Similarly,

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international manufacturer of standard power supplies, the computer house *Elbit, Rafael*, the Israeli armament development authority as well as *Galram Industrial Park*, a government owned company with the aim of commercially exploiting *Rafael's* products.

<sup>38</sup> Author's interview with Hanah Koval.

Pnina Shitrit, manager of Karmi'el's first folk dance ensemble during the eighties and now working in the city's cultural hall, confirmed that the festival had lost none of its attractive force for Karmi'el, turning the city into a center of national and international attention: "For three days during the festival, it is like we are in the middle of Tel Aviv. Everybody takes part in the festival. [. . .] I was in Italy, I wore a T-shirt from the festival and people recognized it. Karmi'el is definitely on the map. As we say in Hebrew, 'Karmi'el 'al-ha-mapah!'"<sup>39</sup>

*Karmeï Makhol*, as it emerged after 1992 as the new, restructured folk dancing group of Karmi'el, matched the city's new image as the host of a world-famous dance festival, a beautiful tourist spot in the 'heart of the Galilee' as well as a state-of-the-art high-tech center. Lying in the experienced hands of former air force commander Yoav Tavor as well as the promising young artist Dado Kraus, the group's professionalized structure, rehearsals, musical arrangements, costumes and choreographies left nothing to be desired. A far cry from the amateurish, makeshift character of its predecessor group, *Karmeï Makhol* performed the city's identity as thriving, successful and consolidated. Instead of pioneering veterans, masses of children, teenagers and young adults were now filling the stage and presented the latest in Israeli folk dance styles. Performing community with strength, youth and energy, *Karmeï Makhol* thus confirmed that Karmi'el had made it, that Karmi'el had definitely established its place on the Israeli map as a favorite tourist resort and high-quality city to live in. Too far from the restless Lebanese border to still count as the 'frontier' and evoke myths of pioneering and adventure, the city had become known as a place where one could bring one's family to grow up in peace, offering employment and modern quality of life for adults as well as beautiful, safe enjoyments for the children like dancing folk with *Karmeï Makhol*. The dance group's advertising gig for *Iscar* launched in 1998 underscored this image: not campfires, but aesthetic high-tech.<sup>40</sup> And as one dancer of the group put it: "We dance to show to the world how beautiful the city has become!"

<sup>39</sup> Author's interview with Pnina Shitrit.

<sup>40</sup> To market *Iscar*, an internationally renown producer of state-of-the-art small metal tools, Dado Kraus had developed a jazz dance choreography to the beat of Boy George's hit *Chameleon*. The dance bore little resemblance to what one would expect under the title of 'folk dance.' It featured four female dancers clad in colorful tights that changed colors during the performance, thus matching the title of the song as well as *Iscar*'s advertising slogan to have the right fitting product for any changing size.



CONSOLIDATING HIERARCHIES:  
MULTICULTURALISM IN THE HEART OF THE GALILEE

Turning Arab space into Israeli Jewish Karmi'el, *Karmeï Makhol* staged a colorful repertoire that not only consisted of a variety of different ethnic Jewish dances, but also included *debkah*. Karmi'el's history as a Jewish development town that had been established on Arab land with the aim of settling the country's 'internal frontier' and controlling its 'hostile Arab population' calls for a closer investigation of the group's presentation of *debkah*.

*A city of integration*

When Dado Kraus started working with Karmi'el's dance group in 1990, he completely changed the group's repertoire. Taking over none of Daphne Brill's choreographies, Kraus created his own, new set of dances, to be learned and performed by *Karmeï Makhol* as the city's remodeled representative. This new repertoire gave a very different stage impression than the group's first one during the eighties. In particular, it demonstrated greater artistic sophistication, choreographic variety and dancing skills, especially during recent years, as Kraus increasingly went beyond the stylistic canon of regular Israeli folk dancing towards a style based more on global standards of modern dance. Despite these obvious differences, however, the underlying theme of the group's artistic activities essentially remained the same. Both the *Karmi'el Folk Dance Group* as well as its successor *Karmeï Makhol* performed Israeli Jewish identity on stage as pluralistically multicultural. That is, both choreographers, Brill and Kraus, created a repertoire for their respective group that performed contemporary Israeliness in terms of cultural diversity by drawing on the range of different ethnic dance styles usually attributed to the various Jewish immigrant communities in Israel. In this vein, Brill's set of dances had included amongst others an *Oriental Dance*, a *debkah*, a *Mediterranean Dance*, a Chassidic choreography and a Russian theme. Similarly, Kraus explained to me that in the beginning, one of his main choreographic guideline had been to ensure that "the culture of the immigrants," as he expressed it, was adequately represented. Among the first dances he choreographed, Kraus thus included various ethnic styles like Ladino, Russian, Bulgarian, Turkish, Caucasian and Yemeni. Even more recent choreographies clearly marked by a

turn towards the modern continued to feature multiculturalism as a prominent theme, like *Stripes (Pasim)*, a piece first performed at the Karmi'el Festival in 1999 to interpret the theme of brotherhood among the different Jewish immigrant communities in Israel despite their diverse backgrounds.

The emphasis placed by Karmi'el's dance group on performing Israeli Jewishness in the Galilee as culturally diverse, but unified mirrored the city's official immigration policy. Not only the city's architectural appearance had been a matter of detailed planning, but also the structure of its population. Its founders envisioned Karmi'el as a harmonious, multicultural city of integration, whose population should carefully match the city's image as beautiful, quiet and clean. According to them, Karmi'el should not suffer the fate of other Israeli development towns which had gained the negative reputation of being socioeconomically neglected, conflictual and marginalized. Israeli immigration policy during the fifties had sent many newly immigrated *Mizrahim*, Jews from Africa and Asia, who held a low socio-economic status in Israeli society, to the new development towns located in the country's northern and southern peripheries. The dispersal of these immigrants to the Galilee and the Negev aggravated the existing socioeconomic gap between the privileged *Ashkenazi*-dominated center regions and the *Mizrahi* settlements in the peripheries, which became negatively known for being depreciated and underprivileged (Shohat 1996; Shohat 1997a; Gonen 1998; Yiftachel and Meir 1998). In order to prevent Karmi'el's turning peripheral and ensure its importance as an urban center of the north, the city's planners and immigration officials had insisted that the city's population should be made up in equal parts of Israeli-born *Sabras* and of *olim*, new immigrants.<sup>41</sup> Maintaining approximately a 1:1 ration between born Israelis and new immigrants, Karmi'el's officials thus sought to avoid any such stigmatization and instead posited their city as "a great example of full integration" of new immigrants into Israeli society (Libai 1987).<sup>42</sup>

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<sup>41</sup> During the nineties, the wave of Russian immigrants coming to Israel tipped Karmi'el's population ratio in favor of immigrants, as the city absorbed over 10,000 Russian immigrants within a matter of ten years. For Karmi'el's immigration policy see (Ministry of Immigrant Absorption, Ministry of Housing et al. 1969; Ministry of Immigrant Absorption, Agency et al. 1978; Municipality of Karmi'el 1999a).

<sup>42</sup> Not only for Israeli Arabs but also for Jewish immigrants, Karmi'el as 'the model city of intergration' worked to exclude, as the city's planners strictly staked

*Performing multiculturalism through debkah*

Among the various ethnic dance styles making up *Karmeï Makhol's* 'unification-in-spite-of-diversity'<sup>43</sup> performance of Karmi'el's Israeli Jewishness, *debkah* featured prominently. Having generally lost its importance as a defining style of Israeli folk dancing and ranging merely as one among many different influences in the late nineties, *debkah* nevertheless maintained an important place in *Karmeï Makhol's* activities. Thus, when I first met Kraus to introduce my research topic, he asked me if the reason I had chosen his group was because other choreographers usually teased him for his 'Oriental penchant' and taste for *debkah*. As he put it:

Everybody is joking about me that I am so 'Oriental.' Everyone expects me to have a taste of Europe because my parents came from Europe. I am not from Morocco, but I have a lot of Oriental influence in my choreographies. I like the rhythm. All the other choreographers are all the time joking about this.

Directing his choreographing energy beyond the regular Israeli folk dance repertoire towards the modern, Kraus confirmed that while getting somewhat bored with his older, ethnic-based choreographies, he still enjoyed the *debkot*. Similarly, Kraus emphasized that *debkah* was the favorite dance style of his group's male members, a view which the dancers in their interviews with me confirmed. According to one of the leading male dancers in the *Yitzugit* group, doing the *debkah* was "fun" as one could shout and "dance really hard."

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out the terms of 'integration' into Karmi'el's society for new immigrants. Karmi'el should not be any Israeli Jewish development town, but one whose success was ensured by its *Ashkenazi* middle-class character. Karmi'el's officials thus not merely sought to maintain an approximately 1:1 ratio between Israeli born "veterans" and *olim*. In order to ensure the city's "stability and social unity" (Ministry of Immigrant Absorption, Ministry of Housing et al. 1969), the city's planners also paid careful attention as to the place of origin as well as the social status of Karmi'el's prospective new residents, with young, middle-class *Ashkenazim* given preference. According to Simha Ya'acobi, director of the *Rakefet Absorption Center* in Karmi'el and among the city's first inhabitants, it was this discriminatory scrutiny of the absorption process which accounted for Karmi'el's success: "'It wasn't easy to get in,'" she recalled, "'(t)here was an absorption committee and they weeded out any potential welfare cases.'" (Carmel 1991). Thus, although boasting of a population made up of 74 different nationalities in 1999 (Municipality of Karmi'el 1999a), Karmi'el throughout carefully maintained its "definite middle-class Askenazi slant" ([anon.] 1982: S3).

<sup>43</sup> I am borrowing this term from Naomi Jackson, who used it to describe the performance of similar multicultural bliss in Fred Berk's choreography *Holiday in Israel*, staged in the 1950s by the *Merry Go Rounders* at the 92nd Street Y, a Jewish cultural institution on the Upper East Side of Manhattan. (Jackson 1997).

Choreographic assistant Oren similarly admitted to liking *debkah*, pointing out that to him, *debkah* was not just “running,” as in many other Israeli choreographies, but the steps carried meaning: “The *debkah* for the boys is exciting, more than the other Israeli dances. In Israeli dance, you have to run from this point of the stage to that, jump one time and that’s it. I don’t want to run all the time, I want to stay in one place and jump, be specific in my steps.” A female member in the *Representative Group* commented that even *Karmeit Makhol’s* female dancers liked doing *debkah*, although only the male members actually performed it on stage. As she explained, “Most of the girls know the *debkah* and we really like it. We are sometimes doing it in the back with the boys, behind the scenes where nobody sees us.” In addition, as a younger male dancer with the *Youth Group* confirmed, the *debkah* always constituted a favorite with the audience: “In all the shows, we do the *debkah* at the end. Israelis like it. It is so full of energy.”

Asking *Karmeit Makhol* dancers what it meant to them to perform *debkah*, a non-Jewish ethnic dance tradition, as part of their Israeli folk dance repertoire, I mostly first met irritation. To dancers in *Karmeit Makhol*, dancing *debkah* seemed such a natural part of their repertoire that it was hard for them to think of reasons why they shouldn’t include it, or why anyone would consider this issue problematic. Mulling over the question, dancers eventually came up with two lines of argument explaining why they considered *debkah* an important element of the group’s repertoire. For one thing, they considered *debkah* as an authentic expression of *Sabra* identity. According to choreographer Kraus, doing the *debkah* formed “part of the view of Israel, our identity.” Besides, as Kraus further explained, when looking at a Kurdish Jewish *debkah* versus an Arab one, one really could not discern a great difference, so *debkah*, one could actually argue, was also, in a way, Jewish. The greater majority of dancers, however, explained the meaning which *debkah* held for them in terms of Israel’s multicultural character. Israeli folklore should reflect all of the state’s citizens, and as Arabs were part of the Israeli state, their dance should be included in the repertoire. As Dov,<sup>44</sup> a male dancer in the *Representative Group* explained: “I think we are not talking about Jewish folklore here, but Israeli folklore. In Israel, we have Arabs, Rumanians, French, Germans, some even from South America, like

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<sup>44</sup> Name changed.

my family. We are dancing everything, Spanish, Rumanian, Russian. Israeli folklore takes something from here and there. From everywhere.” A few dancers also argued that dancing *debkah* in front of people who knew little about Israel would illustrate to them that Israel was a multicultural society which also, among many other communities, included Arabs. According to one male dancer:

When we are doing a show for tourists, we try to make them feel all the ‘*edot* (communities) in Israel. We have Arabs, Chassidim, we have just Israelis, regular Israelis. [. . .] When tourists see us dancing *debkah*, that is, dancing like Arabs, they understand that we have Arabs in Israel, for example.

In particular, however, *Karmeit Makhol* dancers stressed that *debkah* constituted an important element of the group’s show when performing abroad. Tamar,<sup>45</sup> a dancer with the *Representative Group*, explained that the group usually presented different repertoires inside and outside the country. Leaving its more recent, modern dance pieces for performances inside Israel, the group’s presentation abroad was usually made up of what she called ‘Israeli dances,’ that is, ethnic dances like the *debkah*, that better met the expectations and limited knowledge of their foreign audience:

Out of the state we do dances that are very Israeli. We have a dance, an amazing one, it is called *Uf Guza*. I love that dance, out of Israel, we don’t do it. Because people outside won’t understand the meaning of the words. If you show them *debkah*, however, they will say, oh, Israel. We know that one. I met a few people from Sweden, Europe. They were asking us, oh, yes, we know Israel—camels. People still think that way. They are kind of expecting us to do it.

### *Everyday realities*

#### *Structural inequalities*

Just as Karmi’el’s founders could afford to simply overlook the existence of Palestinian Arabs living in the region, the interaction between Jews and Arabs throughout Karmi’el’s short history was shaped by a structural inequality, in which Israeli Jewish residents in the region were clearly privileged over their Arabs neighbors. This structural inequality was inherent in Israeli public policy and grounded in the

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<sup>45</sup> Name changed.

fact that Israeli policy-makers subordinated the principle of democracy on which the Israeli state had been founded under the state's other two stated goals: the preservation of Israel's Jewish character as well as national security. As a result, Israeli public policy, in general, and planning policy, in particular, had worked to openly disprivilege Israel's Arab citizens in comparison to their Jewish counterparts since the foundation of the state (Rouhana 1997; Smootha 1982; Yiftachel 1992).<sup>46</sup> In particular, this Arab-Jewish inequality found expression in Israeli policies of land control with the state being able to appropriate Arab land and allocate it to exclusively Jewish use. Although Israeli Arabs in the *Sajour/Beit ha-Kerem Valley* were not passive victims to such policies, the power disparities between Jewish and Arab citizens in terms of who controlled the land remained essentially intact through the nineties.<sup>47</sup>

In addition to maintaining Jewish-Arab power disparities in terms of land control, Israeli planning policies in the Karmi'el region also served to consolidate the existing economic gap between Arab and Jewish residents. Karmi'el's officials usually argued that measures like improving the region's infrastructure as well as creating new employment opportunities by building industrial parks benefited not merely the area's Jewish, but also its Arab population. As Mayor Eldar stated in an interview printed in 1991: "Karmi'el has been a blessing for the surrounding Arab villages. More than 2,500 workers in the industrial zone are Arabs and hundreds more work in

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<sup>46</sup> Israeli public policy towards the Arab population was not unidimensional, but differentiated between different religious groups, with the Druse treated most favorably and Muslims the least (Yiftachel 1992: 78).

<sup>47</sup> With residents of Majd el-Krum, Bi'na, Deir el-Asad and Nakhef still living under Israeli military rule and their communities weak, fragmented and dependent on Israeli Jewish authorities, the appropriation of their agricultural lands for the establishment of Karmi'el in 1964 had gone ahead with little resistance. In 1975, however, residents of the four villages responded with large-scale protests to the planned expansion of Karmi'el on 1,900 *dunums* of their private land. These protests climaxed in a general strike called 'Land Day,' in the course of which six Israeli Arabs died, and which was subsequently instituted as an annual day of protest. In the time between 1975 and 1988, Arab resistance to Israeli land policies in the region consistently increased their intensity (Yiftachel 1992). Similarly, in the nineties, protests against land appropriations for accommodating the expansion of Karmi'el's industrial zone on land owned by residents of the Arab village Rama made headlines (Rudge 1992). Despite these protest activities, however, Israeli Arab impact on land policies in the *Sajour/Beit HaKerem Valley* remained limited. Analyzing the impact of Arab protest activities in the region on Israeli settlement activities, Yiftachel concludes that the status-quo of Arab-Jewish disparities more or less remained stable through the nineties (Yiftachel 1992; Yiftachel 1998).

construction.” (Carmel 1991) According to Yiftachel, Israeli planning policies in the region did indeed bring about *absolute* benefits for the Arab population such as increased employment opportunities in the industrial sector and, to a lesser extent, spillover benefits from Karmi‘el industries and provision of services. Yet overall, these policies served to maintain and even somewhat widen the Arab-Jewish economic gap, as notably more benefits (per capita) went to the Jewish population (Yiftachel 1992: 206–209). In addition, occupational gaps between Arab and Jewish residents of the *Sajour/Beit ha-Kerem Valley* were maintained, with Arabs to a large degree staffing blue-collar positions in the region’s industrial estates and Jews dominant in white-collar jobs.<sup>48</sup> As unemployment numbers rose in the region during the early nineties, Arab unemployment also ranked higher than Jewish. Mayor Eldar admitted that Arab employees were more likely to lose their jobs in the Karmi‘el industrial estate than Jewish in times of economic slow down, stating that “[w]hen an Arab leaves a city job, a Jew is hired to fill the place” (Rudge 1992). Above that, infrastructural developments in the region, in particular new road construction, was largely undertaken by “ignoring the existence of Arab villages,” as the roads were planned to establish direct links between Jewish, not Arab settlements (Yiftachel 1992: 215).

### *Different and unequal*

Reflecting Arab-Jewish power inequalities in the *Sajour/Beit ha-Kerem Valley*, Karmi‘el’s municipal officials constructed the relationship between the city and the neighboring Arab villages in terms of difference. Instead of integrating the city into the Arab Galilee, they emphasized Karmi‘el’s difference as an Israeli Jewish settlement and posited it against its Arab surroundings, whereby the simple designation of Karmi‘el as a ‘town’ or ‘city’ versus the Arab ‘villages’ pointed to the hierarchy of power framing this relationship. In reality, the borders between Israeli Jewish Karmi‘el and the Arab villages were not so clearly drawn. Legally, Karmi‘el counted as a “mixed city” (Kaveh 1999). Unlike smaller Jewish community settlements in the region, whose admission’s committees maintained the

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<sup>48</sup> As Yiftachel notes, “compared with more than 38 percent of total jobs in the three estates, Arabs hold only 9 percent of managerial and 12 percent of professional and technical positions. At the other end of the occupational scale, Arabs hold 60 percent of the unskilled jobs in the three estates—nearly twice their proportion in the workforce.” (Yiftachel 1992: 210)

lid on Arab migration,<sup>49</sup> Karmi'el had no official restrictions against Arabs taking up residency in the city and at the time of my fieldwork, a few Arab families were indeed living in Karmi'el.<sup>50</sup>

Yet towards the outside, all but nothing in the city pointed to the existence of its Arab residents. Karmi'el presented itself as an Israeli Jewish city, and if Arabs wanted to live there, they legally could, but only on the terms staked out by the city's majority population. Mayor Eldar's comment on the 1992 Arab protests against land expropriations in Rama for the expansion of Karmi'el exemplified the ways in which the city's municipality safeguarded these Arab-Jewish power hierarchies by emphasizing the essential difference of the Arab Other.<sup>51</sup> Protesting their eviction, Rama residents argued that it was "unjust that as citizens with equal rights, they should be evicted from their homes and land to make way for housing for other citizens, primarily new immigrants" (Rudge 1992). In response, Mayor Eldar stated that anybody who adequately met the life-style expected of Karmi'el residents would be free to come and live in

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<sup>49</sup> The issue of whether Israeli Jewish settlements could refuse an application to live in the community simply on grounds that the applicant was Arab became a hotly debated issue in the Israeli public during the late nineties as the case of Fat'hi Mahamid made headlines. Mahamid, a wealthy Israeli Arab from Um el-Fahm, had sued Katzir, a small Jewish community settlement located in Wadi Ara, for refusing to let him and his family move into the settlement. Looking for a better life quality than the densely populated Um el-Fahm offered, Mahamid had applied for living in Katzir at the local admissions committee in 1995 via Israeli Jewish activist Uri Davis. When it came out in 1999 that the Arab Mahamid instead of Davis planned to move into the community, protests ensued. Mahamid took the case before the Israeli High Court. In an exemplary ruling in May 2000, the High Court decided in Mahamid's favor and proclaimed the exclusion of Israeli Arabs from Jewish communities on the basis of their ethnicity as illegal. However, despite their legal victory, the Mahamid family could not move to live in Katzir due to bureaucratic obstacles. Even at the point of writing, the Mahamids are still waiting for a positive notice. See (Kaveh 1999; anon. 2002).

<sup>50</sup> During the first years of Karmi'el's existence, the issue of whether Karmi'el should remain an exclusively Jewish town had been heatedly debated, with activists like Uri Davis risking prison in their fight for a pluralistic settlement policy. Today, as Davis proudly noted in an interview with me in 1999, "Karmi'el is a mixed town." Author's interview with Uri Davis. See also (Davis 1995: 87; Kaveh 1999). Also, one *Karme'i Makhol* dancer told me in my interview with him that he had an Arab boy in his class. Yet, he knew little more about him than that he was an Arab living in Karmi'el.

<sup>51</sup> The land in question had already been expropriated in the 1970s for the future expansion of Karmi'el. Upon the influx of an increasing number of new immigrants in the early nineties, most of whom had come from Russia, the city decided it actually needed the land and demanded the resettlement of the Rama families who had continued to live there (Rudge 1992).



the city. The Bedouin families of Rama according to him, however, did not meet these requirements and thus should better resettle in nearby Arab villages: “[T]he residents of Ramiye would be welcome to live in Karmi‘el, if they accepted modern norms of residential accommodations. But their present life-style does not accord with these norms: ‘This is not a matter of racism, but a question of the quality of life based on planned development.’” (Rudge 1992: 9A)<sup>52</sup>

The essential difference which Karmi‘el’s population policy constructed between Israeli Jewish *Karmi‘elim*,<sup>53</sup> on the one hand, and Israeli Arabs from the villages, on the other, was reflected in the day-to-day interaction of *Karmeï Makhol* dancers with the Arab villagers. Officially, as Mayor Eldar assured, the relationship between Karmi‘el and the surrounding villages was “harmonious” (Rudge 1992). Under this outside cover of harmony, however, the daily meetings between members of *Karmeï Makhol* and Arab residents of the villages occurred more in terms of living next to each other, rather than *with* each other. Referring to the Arabs living across the street as “our neighbors,” Karmi‘el dancers did not actually consider “ourselves” as “like them,” nor “them” as “one of us.”<sup>54</sup> Although the very presence of Arabs living in Karmi‘el disproved any easy dichotomy between ‘us’ and ‘them,’ the daily interactions of *Karmeï Makhol* dancers with Israeli Arabs from the villages usually occurred within this framework of essential difference, in which ‘they’ took on the meaning of a Palestinian Other who alternately became ‘exotically fascinating,’ ‘hostile,’ or simply someone they did not really have any interest in and could well do without. Explaining that during the course of my fieldwork I was living with an Arab family in Deir al-Asad, I thus received surprised, puzzled, even somewhat antagonistic looks. “Aren’t you afraid?” one girl asked me, not wanting to further elaborate, but implying that I as a Western, unmarried woman should be wary of living in an Arab village. “How can you live there, isn’t it dangerous?” another one similarly commented. Some also displayed more positive reactions, asking me surprisedly why I had chosen an Arab village to live in. Yet also these less openly negative responses revealed a disbelieving interest at my choice of residence with the ‘Other.’

<sup>52</sup> The conflict ended with an agreement between the city and the Bedouin families, involving monetary compensation and resettlement.

<sup>53</sup> Hebrew for ‘people living in Karmi‘el.’ Singular for *Karmi‘eli*.

<sup>54</sup> Quotes from conversations with *Karmeï Makhol* dancers.

Reflecting the idea of Israeli Arabs as an Other one lived next to but not with, Karmi'el officially provided few institutionalized activities for *Karme'i Makhol* dancers and Israeli Arabs from the villages to meet. Two male members stated that they were involved in political activities aimed at Jewish-Arab reconciliation. As Dov<sup>55</sup> stated: "I was the president of the *Youth of Karmi'el* of the *Labor Party* and I was the student president of my school. I thought that we have to go to them, to work together with the Palestinians and the Arabs. Here, in Majd el-Krum and in Rama we do it sometimes, to feel and know what is my problem and what is yours." In addition, schools occasionally organized joint activities, like the *darbūkah* playing group recently initiated between teenagers of Majd al-Krum and a high school in Karmi'el. Yet in general, very little took place in terms of organized Jewish-Arab activities. As Hanah Koval from the Karmi'el municipality somewhat defensively explained to me, there were not even shared activities with the Jewish settlements from the *Misgav* as the school system was separate and each municipality was responsible for their own activities, so why expect cultural interaction with the Arab villages.<sup>56</sup>

Baruch Soltschiner, the manager of the *Nerken Cultural Center* in Karmi'el, painted a similarly bleak picture when asked about joint Jewish-Arab activities. So far, he confirmed, nothing much had happened in this regard, even though it should:

Here in Karmi'el, there is no real connection with the Arabs. This is the problem. Here, I need to break walls to get out there. For myself, I very often meet with Arab groups and artists. But there is nothing official. It is not that the mayor or the public management of Karmi'el says, Baruch, go and ask them what they want. Or, Baruch, invite them to make a committee and ask them what they want and what they dream about. [. . .] We have lived here forty years and nothing has happened between us and the Arabs in the Galilee.<sup>57</sup>

Deploring the lack of any such joint activities, Soltschiner, at the time of my fieldwork, was actually thinking through ideas for constructing a *Cultural Hall* in Karmi'el, a new cultural space envisioned to function

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<sup>55</sup> Name changed.

<sup>56</sup> Author's interviews with Hanah Koval. See also (Mar'i 1988) who notes that Israeli society is divided over the issue of Arab-Jewish contacts, with some segments vehemently, sometimes even violently opposed to any such contacts for fear of intermarriage and the assimilation of Jews.

<sup>57</sup> Author's interview with Baruch Soltschiner.

as a center for all of the Galilee and specifically also for the Arab population. By the time I was leaving the Galilee, however, he was still trying to raise the funds for his plan, a plan to which other officials in the municipality somewhat smilingly referred to as “a dreamer’s project.”<sup>58</sup> The director of the Karmi’el community centers Avi Markovitch confirmed the absence of continuously organized, joint Jewish-Arab activities. Expressing his regret at this obvious lack of communication between Karmi’el and its Arab ‘neighbors,’ Markovitch admitted to his own shortcomings in this regard:

This is the name and phone number of a neighbor, the director of the community center in Majd el-Krum. Majd el-Krum is less than five minutes from here. Just yesterday he told me, what kind of neighbors are we. We are not meeting, we are not talking, and he is right. But he did not make any effort, and I did not, and we always have 1000 good excuses. [. . .] I think it is our fault. It is something we should consider more seriously.<sup>59</sup>

In contrast to the lack of institutionalized Arab-Jewish activities, day-to-day contacts between *Karmeï Makhol* dancers and Arabs from the villages were quite numerous. Yet also these contacts mostly took place within the framework of Arab-Jewish power inequalities and perceptions of Israeli Arabs as Other. Most dancers told me that they knew Arabs from the villages, often through summer jobs working in Karmi’el’s industrial park. Similarly, *Karmeï Makhol* dancers indicated that they liked to use the shopping centers in the Arab villages during *shabbat* when all the Jewish shops were closed. They said they profited from the cheaper services in the gas stations on the outskirts of the villages and enjoyed the occasional ‘real’ Arab shawimah and hummus in one of the small snack bars. Also, they stated that their paths invariably crossed in Karmi’el’s commercial centers, its parks, coffee shops and the cinema, where Arab youth from the villages came to spend their time for lack of comparable services in their own communities. Working together and frequenting at least some of the same public places in their free time, *Karmeï Makhol* dancers emphasized, however, that they usually stayed within their own community and did not mingle with Arab teenagers and young adults. Thus, while a few dancers indicated that they had personal contacts with Arab youth from the villages, occasionally visiting each other or talking on the phone, the majority of the dancers

<sup>58</sup> Author’s interview with Hanah Koval.

<sup>59</sup> Author’s interview with Avi Markovitch.

I spoke to, especially female dancers, rejected the idea of maintaining any such personal relationships. To them, Arabs were different. They were “neighbors,” but not part of the Karmi‘el community. In the words of one female dancer: “Yes, I often see them. They work in the *Kinyon*.<sup>60</sup> But we have little to do with them. We are in different schools, and don’t really do anything with each other.”

*Meeting the Other: Nice, problematic and no lasting impact*

On a number of occasions, *Karmeï Makhhol* dancers actually had the chance of directly meeting and working with Israeli Arab dancers. As choreographer Dado Kraus told me, the Israeli foreign ministry tended to sponsor joint dance activities, and thus he had worked with Arab *dabkeh* groups quite a few times already: “When the government sends groups abroad to festivals all over the world, they send a Jewish group together with an Arab group. I think I had about ten times the chance to travel with an Arab group.” Similarly, Yoav Tavor stated that money given to the group for trips and activities from the Israeli government would often be coupled with the demand for shared Arab-Jewish activities, especially when coming from international donors such as the European Union. At various times, Karmi‘el’s group had thus participated in joint performances with Israeli Arab groups, or danced in shows at festivals in which Israeli Arab groups also performed. In particular, *Karmeï Makhhol* had been involved in shared projects with *Al-Asayyel*, the Israeli Arab *dabkeh* group of Deir el-Asad across the street. Together with them, Karmi‘el dancers had gone on joint trips twice during the early nineties, once to France and Spain, and once to Mexico.

*Karmeï Makhhol*’s dancers generally held positive memories of these joint trips with *Al-Asayyel*. Despite initial difficulties and uneasiness, they stated that overall, they had gotten along well with the Arab dancers and would again participate in such an activity. As one of *Karmeï Makhhol*’s leading female dancer explained, at first, the two groups had traveled together without speaking to each other. They had shared the same bus, stayed in the same hotels and appeared in the same festivals, yet there had not been any connection between them, and the perception of the Other as different had prevailed. After some time, however, a party staged by the Arab dancers broke the ice, as she recounted:

<sup>60</sup> The brand name of a shopping mall chain in Israel.

We were in Mexico and at the beginning it was very hard. We used to do certain things. They did not do them. Then the performance . . . [pause]. No, first we did not get along. Then, at some point, there was the *sulkha*, a reconciliation party. They invited us, our group, to their rooms at the hotel. They played the drums, they had a water-pipe. We sat together, sung together, they taught us some songs, we sang in Arabic. After the *sulkha*, it was very good. We always sat together. It was very nice after that. But it takes time to get along.

The group's manager Yoav Tavor similarly commented on the trip as initially difficult, yet eventually relaxed and nice, as the problems between the groups had been solvable and initial barriers were crossed:

We had to travel a lot on a bus. Everybody in our group and their group very much likes music. But it is very different music. So we had to decide what we are going to do about the loudspeaker and the tape recorder on the bus. Until I got a solution. We did one hour with their music and one hour with international music, what the Israelis like, the Israeli Jewish young people.

As Tavor maintained, not all of the two group's differences, however, were solved that easily. Serving for young *Karmi'elim* and young Arab dancers as a chance to meet each other and get along, the trips also brought up deeper rooted cleavages between the two groups, which could not be solved as easily as compromising on the tape recorder. At some point during the Mexico trip, the group met with anti-Israel protests and someone threw a dead chicken on the stage during a performance. The leaders of *Karme'i Makhol* were concerned, discussing what to do about the incident and stepped up security. Discussing the issue with Yaḥyā Abū Jum'ah, *Al-Asayyel's* group leader, Tavor said the rift between them as Israeli Jews, on the one hand, and Israeli Arabs, on the other, had again been sharply felt:

I asked Yaḥyā a very tough question. The Arab groups don't get any security when they go abroad. Even as representatives of Israel, they never take security with them, because they have never been a target abroad for terrorists. We always have to do it. It is one of the things that I have to arrange before we go. So I told them: Look, we are a mixed delegation. What's going to happen if in one of our appearances, something happens. What are you going to do? Are you going to give your life for us or not? He could not answer. I knew why he did not answer, because I am sure he would not throw his body in to save us. I would say the same. I was a soldier for many years. It will take many years, a few generations, to get over it, from both sides.

Although *Karme'i Makhol* dancers generally remembered the joint trips in pleasant terms, they agreed that this experience, although nice

while it lasted, held no particular impact for their everyday lives. Crossing boundaries while abroad was one thing. Back in their usual setting, the cleavages reemerged to determine the relationship between themselves and Arab youth. There was little room within the context of their everyday lives to carry any of this joint experience of border crossing beyond holding the trip dear in their memories.<sup>61</sup> As one participant put it:

When we went abroad with the Arabs, I cannot tell you that we became friends afterwards, or that we continued talking on the phone. We had fun together, the atmosphere was great, we had a good time together, we had parties together. What do you want to hear . . . [pause]. Such things, of course they are good. They make for more good things than bad things, that's for sure. We connected when we went abroad, but no, I don't meet them anywhere anymore.

Karmi'el and Deir al-Asad are only five minutes driving away from each other, yet contacts were not kept up. When seeing each other by chance, mostly during the annual dance festivals, the dancers said that they exchanged hellos, yet that was mostly it. "It was nice to get to know them," as one dancer said, "yet the contacts didn't really last after the trip." Yoav Tavor assessed the trip in similar terms as nice, but without any tangible, lasting results:

From person to person, there were some friendships established. Like with me and Yahyā. But he is busy with his job, and I am with mine. We were meeting quite a lot in the two, three years after the trip. Then he went his way, I went on with my job. But if we have opportunity to meet, we meet and are friends. [. . .] Sometimes I now get a phone call from him, or the opposite. That's all. Asking questions, getting some information. That's all.

Avi Markovitch similarly emphasized the good relations they had established with the Arab groups during their joint projects, especially with *Al-Asayyel* from Deir al-Asad, yet admitted to not doing enough to actively maintain these contacts:

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<sup>61</sup> Reactions of *Al-Asayyel* members to the joint trips were similar. Generally, *Al-Asayyel* dancers agreed that after an initial period of 'non-communication' between the two groups, relations became actually very nice. Yet, after the trip, they indicated that everybody quickly fell back into their normal everyday routine, leaving little chance for a continuing interaction. Apart from random meetings at festivals or in Karmi'el itself, contacts were not kept up, and the dancers maintained that although they had been nice, the trips generally had little impact. As one dancer put it, "You know, afterwards, they go to the army, we go to study, we don't see each other anymore."

I will be honest with you. It is not something that I am happy to talk about, because there really is almost nothing in terms of a relationship with the Arab groups. I think that as neighbors we should be much more cooperative, much more trying to find ways to do things together, rather than leaving the field to the radicals on both sides. It is not politics, it is only dancing. Everybody comes with a package, but I don't think that we put enough, almost no effort into. We did it once, we got a nice certificate from *Beit Hagefen*<sup>62</sup> in Haifa, for contributing to the coexistence, but . . . [pause]. This trip to Mexico was something that started and finished and that's all. I don't remember that anything happened after this trip to Mexico, I don't see any cooperation. Here and there we need to record some music. We take the guy from Majd al-Krum with the *darbūkah*, but I cannot say anything about something that we are creating together.<sup>63</sup>

During the joint trips, *Karmeī Makhol* dancers felt that they actually had had the chance to personally interact with Arab teenagers from the surrounding villages for an extended period of time. In general, however, the dancers saw little chances of connecting to Arabs through their dancing. During the Karmi'el festival, officially lauded and advertised as a place in which "the very factions that are seemingly at odds, dance together—Arabs with Jews, Christians with Muslims," the dancers felt they had no real possibility to get in touch with any of the Arab participants (Ingber 1991: 14). As Tamar<sup>64</sup> explained: "The problem is that behind the scenes at the festival you don't have the time to speak with other groups. Everyone is very worried about where is my costume, when do we go off, and so on. [. . .] There is no real connection." And another dancer added: "It is not that I think communication between Arabs and Jews is not important. It just does not happen in the context of dancing. We hardly meet any Arab groups during our activities."

Quite a few admitted to never having thought about dancing as a way of meeting Arab teenagers and young adults. Others came up with several ways in which Arabs and Jews could meet, yet denied that dancing was the appropriate venue. Dani,<sup>65</sup> for instance, a member of the younger *Youth Group*, argued that he was familiar with such kinds of organized exchange activities through his school, but

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<sup>62</sup> *Beit Hagefen* in Haifa is a joint Arab-Jewish center existing since 1963 for the purpose of "creat[ing] a meeting place for social and cultural encounters between Jews and Arabs and to encourage and promote understanding and coexistence," as a flyer printed 1997 reads.

<sup>63</sup> Author's interview with Avi Markovitch.

<sup>64</sup> Name changed.

<sup>65</sup> Name changed.

did not see it happening in *Karmeï Makhol*. Even when taking part in joint Jewish-Arab dancing activities, to him these usually had more to do with staging a show, rather than actually taking the time to sit down and get to know each other. Rather than really doing something for the dancers themselves, these shows were for the outside, the media and politics:

Once, we went to perform with an Arab group in the *Binyanat ha-Ummah*, the National Building in Jerusalem. We made our show together. The journalists followed us. They wrote about us. We showed that we danced together. [. . .] I felt that it was a show and that's it. We did not get really close to them. It was more like 'do the show and go home.' It is not that I hate them or something, but it was like a business. Do it and go home. Like a business.

The extent to which *Karmeï Makhol* dancers framed their relationship with Arab youth in terms of a difference that allowed for superficial, spontaneous day-to-day contacts but prevented any deeper or personal involvement, was especially brought to the fore by their negative response to the idea of founding a joint Arab-Jewish dance group in the region. As Yoav Tavor recounted, the *Israeli Ministry of Education* in the wake of the Oslo agreement in the mid-nineties had offered him a budget for setting up a joint group in Karmi'el. Recounting that he for himself had not been disinclined towards the idea of a joint group, especially as the project was well funded, Tavor described the reactions of his dancers as negative:

I invited here one of my best girl dancers and told them that I am going to try to establish a joint Arab-Jewish dance group, that we are getting good money from the Ministry of Education and we could do nice things, like establish a mixed team. I told them that you are going to dance with the Arab guys. They told me, no way. They are not going to do that. [. . .] They were my best dancers. I just wanted to find out if I have a chance with a project like that. They told me no way.

Tavor recounted the reaction of the dancers' parents in similarly negative terms: "I was talking to the parents. They also told me, no way." Although the project was repropounded several times during the mid-nineties, Tavor could gather no support for any such joint project: "I told the ministry, you can try and look somewhere else. But nobody actually tried to do it."<sup>66</sup> Reactions of *Karmeï Makhol* dancers

<sup>66</sup> The only joint Arab-Jewish dance troupe officially existing in Israel was the one organized in *Beit Hagefen* in Haifa. Founded by Yossi Ben Israel in the seventies, the group died down in 1995.



at the time of my research were similarly negative. Seven out of thirteen group members with whom I discussed the issue rejected the idea of a joint group altogether, only four indicated yes, and two remained undecided.

Rejecting the idea of any closer artistic interaction with Arab teenagers and young adults engaging in dance activities in the villages, *Karmeï Makhol* dancers pointed to the ‘Otherness’ of these dancers and their activities. On the one hand, the dancers framed this ‘Otherness’ in terms of dancing ability and background. As one stated:

When we went abroad, we had one Israeli dance and one Arab dance alternatively, *Karmeï Makhol* and *Deir al-Asad*. Dado at the very end put everybody together on stage, when you thank the audience for the claps. But they couldn’t do it. They can’t hear the music right. They cannot hold their hands. Even very simple movements typical of Israeli dance, all these shoulder movements, they couldn’t do.

Yet *Karmeï Makhol* dancers not only defined Arab Otherness in terms of dancing skills, but also in terms of sociocultural differences. As one dancer said: “I am not sure that it [a joint group] could happen because of mentality.” Another argued similarly: “They have a different tradition. It would not work.” Likewise, another dancer stated: “To perform together, the differences are so big. Not only in steps. I told you that if an Arab choreographer from Deir el-Asad would come to us, we could dance their dances, but they would not be able to dance ours. Because of their religion. They would not be allowed to.” Or, as still another dancer put it: “They have their dance and we have ours. We can share with them sometimes, but not all the times. All the time, it is difficult for them and difficult for us.”

Reflecting the idea of Israeli Arabs as essentially Other running through these statements, two out of the four dancers who had indicated interest in participating in such a joint troupe project qualified their positive response by stating that they would only do so if the group was organized according to *Karmeï Makhol* standards. That is, they would only participate if the Arab side adhered to the standards set by *Karmeï Makhol* in terms of artistic orientation, dancing skills as well as social norms. In order for the troupe to work, Arab dancers thus had to overcome their perceived ‘Otherness.’ As one female dancers stated: “As long as I dance, I don’t care who is dancing with me. I don’t care if there are fifteen, or twenty or eighty, whether he or she is Muslim, or whatever, as long as they can dance, I like what they are doing and we get along.” Another male dancer

explained likewise: "I would take Arab dancers into my group if they do modern and classical dance. It depends on their dancing and movement skills. They have to fit in." Although conceding that the differences between Jews and Arabs could be bridged, these dancers thus raised the stakes for any such joint enterprise in a way as to make its implementation effectively impossible. Insisting that their participation in such a group would hinge on Arab dancers adhering to *Karme'i Makhol* standards, any Arab dancer who was not trained in ballet or modern dance and unskilled in the ways of social interaction of Karmi'eli youth was automatically excluded. Given the lack of Arab institutions offering training in ballet or modern dance in the Galilee, a joint troupe project based on the premise of an already existing shared Jewish-Arab dancing background stood little chances. Instead of crossing the dividing line, the two dancers who had conceded to participate in the joint troupe project thus answered to indirectly reinstate the difference perceived between Jews and Arabs.

Explaining the ways in which they perceived the Otherness of Israeli Arab dancers, most *Karme'i Makhol* dancers used gendered arguments, arguing that the roles of women in Arab groups, the ways of male-female interaction, as well as the role of dancing female bodies on stage were too different as that any such attempt at forming a joint group could be successful. The dancers hereby posited the image of a modern Israeli society characterized by the equality of men and women against the image of a traditional Arab society in which male-female relations were restricted and unequal. As one dancer maintained: "They have a problem with girls and boys touching. [. . .] You feel that there is a problem, they never dance in couples, they never hug, the girls never wear skirts like ours, costumes like ours." Another female dancer argued similarly that few Arab groups included female dancers, and in those that did, female members held a subordinate status, unlike women participating in *Karme'i Makhol*. Interaction between women dancers from the two groups was thus complicated, and in the past had never really taken place: "The Arabs are not really . . . [pause] like, during the festivals, the girls are not allowed to talk with us. There is only one dance group, which has girls in it. I saw them in the last festival. They just sit among themselves, they don't have any time for social life. So there really is no connection between us." A third dancer argued that because of the traditionality and restrictions of Arab society, Arab guys often came to Karmi'el to let out their feelings of sexual repression and harrass

girls. Behind this backdrop of a strained, uneasy relationship between Jewish girls of Karmi'el and Arab guys from the villages, she stated that she would definitely not join any such group:

How can I dance with a guy today if I am not sure that he is the one that harrassed me last night? When I go out on Friday night only for a walk here in Karmi'el with my friends and the Arab cars are coming in looking for girls, they hassle us. When we go to the *Kinyon* and I walk down this alley in the *Kinyon* and they look at me from down and up, they check my body. They are staring, they are giving you an awful feeling.

The director of the community center, Avi Markovitch, advanced a similar argument when explaining why the interaction between the Israeli Jewish youth of Karmi'el and the Arab youth of the villages was difficult, and prevented any larger-scale, continuous project like a joint dance group:

I believe in coexistence, yes. I believe that we need to learn more about each other. I am sure that you know more about the Arabs here, much more than I do. I don't know what they feel about us. [. . .] But there is a problem. I hate generalizing. I can only talk about specific people, people going to the shopping mall. There are always young girls going there and—not being attacked, but feeling uncomfortable with all these Arab neighbors coming over, looking at the girls who are a bit more exposed than they are used to at the village and they feel uncomfortable. The impression that we are getting is that oh, these Arabs are coming here to bother our girls. What if it were the other way around, if we are going to their village and look at their girls, how would they react.<sup>67</sup>

### *Consolidating hierarchies through debkah*

The perception of Palestinian Arabs as Other which shaped the everyday interaction between *Karmi'elim* and the Arab residents of the surrounding villages clearly influenced *Karme'i Makhol's* activities. The group's activities hereby reflected early Israeli folk dance discourse which had constructed Palestinians as a 'noble, but unmodern Arab Other,' whose alleged civilizatory backwardness legitimized his/her disprivileged position *vis-à-vis* modern Israeli Jewish society. Thus, while the perception of Palestinian Arabs as Other shaped the group's presentations of *debkah*, these presentations, in turn, served

<sup>67</sup> Author's interview with Avi Markovitch.

to maintain and consolidate the hierarchies of power underlying Jewish-Palestinian relations in the Galilee. A closer look at *Karmeï Makhol's* discourse about authenticity, tradition and gender roles as well as the materialization of this discourse on stage in form of the group's *debkah* choreographies exposes the paradoxical workings of a politics of difference, in which the discourse of the dominant power served to reproduce the very dichotomies that were used to legitimize its dominant position in the first place.<sup>68</sup> *debkah*, on stage in Karmi'el, did not challenge the "flexible positional superiority" which the group held in relation to Palestinians in Israel and the territories (Said 1979a). On the contrary, *Karmeï Makhol's debkah* performed the nation by relating to a Palestinian Other in ways that never questioned this relative superiority of the Israeli Jewish Self.

*Authentic tradition: Twice defined*

*Karmeï Makhol* group leaders and dancers employed two different ways of defining the authenticity of *debkah* which served to discursively establish and maintain Arab-Jewish hierarchies of power. For one thing, they defined the authenticity of *dabkeh/debkah* in terms of its ancient Arabness. They clearly categorized the Israeli *debkah* as deriving from an Arab dance practice performed in the region, which they considered authentic because it seemed the unchanging, age-old practice of the villagers, the 'true folk.' Kraus thus prided himself of having learned "the right steps" from the "authentic Arab sources" during the *ulpan*, the course for Israeli folk dance teachers he had taken in Haifa in the late eighties. He recalled that "they showed us movies and brought in Arab instructors. They brought Arab groups to our class and Arab choreographers." Also, Kraus explained, he had since then often seen Arabs perform in festivals throughout the region, thus giving him the chance of deepening his knowledge and exposure to, as he described it, the "real Arab *debkah*." Besides, as Kraus elaborated, he had personally worked with Arab dance groups during recent years in Karmi'el, exchanging steps and learning new movement routines. *Karmeï Makhol* members similarly described the *dabkeh* as the authentic, natural way of Arab dancing.

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<sup>68</sup> Gwendolyn Wright develops a similar argument for French urban planning in Morocco, highlighting the ways in which French colonial politics had the effect of 'freezing' the Moroccan Other in time and space, while the French used the perceived frozenness and pre-modernity of indigenous culture as the very argument to legitimize their colonial intervention in the first place (Wright 1997).

As one female dancer explained, “the Arabs are born with this.” Recalling her inability to pick up the various steps and jumps behind the scene at the Karmi‘el festival, another explained that “it is their dance. They try to teach us, but we don’t really get it. It is different. It is theirs.” In contrast to the ‘authentic’ Arab *dabkeh*, *Karmeï Makhhol* dancers and leaders often referred to their own presentations of Israeli *debkah* as ‘inauthentic.’ As one dancer stated, “I don’t like our *debkah* because it does not look like the real thing. It is very disappointing after you have seen the real thing that the Arabs have.” Another argued similarly: “It is not really ours. You can tell. There is no real enthusiasm. When the Arabs do it, it is different. It is theirs and you can see it.” To them, as Kraus put it, Arab dancing was the “source” and the Israeli *debkah* the “copy.”

Defining the authenticity of the Arab *dabkeh* in terms of its unchanging oldness, *Karmeï Makhhol* dancers, at the same time, identified ever changing innovativeness as the major characteristic of the Israeli *debkah*. Authenticity was thus twice defined in relation to *dabkeh/debkah*. Characterized as authentically old on the one hand, *Karmeï Makhhol* dancers also described the Arab *dabkeh* as “boring,” “repetitive,” “monotonous” and “simple” with “always the same kind of steps.” In contrast, they saw the Israeli *debkah* as “developed,” “changing,” “interesting,” “always new,” “difficult” and “challenging.” As Kraus explained, ever new innovative gimmicks formed the backbone of his choreographies. Although emphasizing his knowledge of the “right steps” of the Arabs, he deliberately varied these in order to meet the expectations of his audience, the requirements of the modern stage setting as well as his own artistic standards. Otherwise, as he stressed, the presentation would become boring and tedious both to his dancers as well as the audience: “If you want to make an authentic dance, you have to stay as close as possible to the source. But if you take an original *debkah* dance and teach it to my dancers it will bore them after one minute, because it is the same step over and over and over.” Thus, although using the ‘authentic’ Arab steps as a base, Kraus emphasized the ever new, creative element of his choreographies, stating that “in my choreographies, I thus try to keep as close as possible to the source, but I change things in order to make it interesting for the audience and also for us.” Thus, while *Karmeï Makhhol* dancers characterized the Arab dancing as authentically old and boring, they saw Israeli *debkah* as a new dance tradition which was authentically inauthentic, that is, acceptably ever new, inventive and different.

*Fake traditions, noble farmers and subjugated women*

Positively connoting change in the presentation of the Israeli *debkah* as artistic creativeness, *Karmeï Makhol* dancers tended to see change in the context of presenting Arab dancing as a loss of authentic tradition. The age-old *dabkeh* was supposed to be preserved, not innovated. Members of *Karmeï Makhol* thus rather negatively commented on attempts by Arab groups to present their dancing in different forms. In their eyes, these attempts mostly resulted in making Arab *dabkeh* ‘fake.’ In the context of Arab dancing, such innovations were seen as “imitations,” and did not fit the image of the ancient peasant dance appreciated by the group’s leaders and dancers. While Palestinian Arabs across the street had undergone major processes of urbanization since the sixties with farmers turning into wage-laborers and villages expanding into densely populated urban spaces, *Karmeï Makhol* continued to adhere to the image of the ‘noble Arab peasant’ as formulated by early Israeli folk dance discourse. To *Karmeï Makhol* dancers, Arab *dabkeh* was “a dance of pride and strength.” It was “close to the ground,” “danced by farmers and people in agriculture” and characterized by “movements of working in the fields.”<sup>69</sup> Disregarding the changing everyday realities of life in the urbanized Arab villages across the street, Arabs for them generally remained peasants, with *dabkeh* as their authentic expression. When choreographing to express agricultural themes, Dado Kraus thus emphasized that he usually used *debkah*: “When I was thinking of making a harvest dance, I would make a *debkah*, to describe the way the men were working in the fields. It was so natural for me, now that I am thinking about it. It was so natural to use *debkah* for this theme.”

Likewise, *Karmeï Makhol*’s discourse about gender roles in *dabkeh/debkah* served to establish and consolidate Arab-Jewish hierarchies of power by performing Israeli Jewishness as the modern antonym of Palestinian Arab ‘traditionality,’ thus again taking up an argument already formulated during the forties. Dominant within the group’s discourse about who should dance *debkah* ran the theme that traditionally, it was a men’s dance. “Usually, only men dance it,” was a common statement I heard when asking the dancers to explain to me who performed the Arab *dabkeh*. Conceding that in Palestinian society women sometimes danced as well, they emphasized that essentially, it was a male dance form. In their opinion, women in Palestinian Arab society “held a subjugated status” and “were not allowed to

<sup>69</sup> Quotes from conversations with *Karmeï Makhol* dancers.

dance with the men.” When Arab women did appear on stage with men, the dancers attributed it to the Israeli Jewish influence which the groups had been exposed to during the past decades and which had worked to implement positive social change in the Arab communities. As one male member maintained: “There are some groups, like in Deir al-Asad, where they dance together. I think this is our influence on them. Because in the beginning, Arab groups only had men.” Another remarked likewise: “They have a different way of mixing boys and girls. They are changing now because they are living in a modern country. So their tradition, I don’t know if it is dying, but it is becoming softer. We are much more open, more Western. They are not the same, yet.”

In contrast, when asked about *Karmeï Makhol’s* presentation of the *debkah*, which featured a first part performed by male, then a second part by female dancers, the group members answered that usually, they always danced together in their choreographies, as male and female dancers held equal status in the group. Yet in *debkah*, boys and girls danced separately, “because this is how the Arabs do it.” Pointing to the concluding scene of the group’s *Debkah Mizrahit* in which boys and girls actually appeared together, group members explained that in contrast to Arab dance groups, male and female dancers in *Karmeï Makhol* were equal, and so they also should dance together in the end. *Karmeï Makhol’s* dancers and leaders thus posited the equal visibility of male and female dancers on stage as indicative of the more advanced, modern outlook of Israeli Jewish society, in contrast to ‘traditional’ Palestinian Arabness and the supposed invisibility of its ‘subjugated women.’ As one dancer explained: “In most of the Arab groups, they don’t dance together, Arab women and Arab men. When we do *debkah*, we dance together. So when we do their dance, it is not exactly the same thing as when they do it. We put a little bit of the Jewish thing.”

*Karmeï Makhol’s* performance of *debkah* constructed Arab-Jewish power hierarchies not only by emphasizing the mere presence of male and female dancers together on stage, but also in terms of the dance style in which male and, in particular, female dancers presented *debkah* as a performance of ‘modern’ Israeli Jewishness in contrast to Palestinian Arab ‘traditionalism.’ In general, Israeli folk dance style since the seventies had undergone a process of ‘feminization.’ Under the male gaze of *Mizrahi* men who replaced the *Ashkenazi* ‘mothers’ of Israeli folk dancing in the seventies, movement patterns

and musical rhythms that Israeli folk dance discourse perceived as more 'feminine' found their way into the choreographies, standing in stark contrast to the strong, 'masculine' *Sabra* style first introduced by Gurit Kadman and others during the forties, fifties and sixties.<sup>70</sup> Yet while Israeli folk dancing in the late nineties, in general, and *Karmeï Makhhol's* activities, in particular, were characterized by this 'feminization' in dancing style, the *debkah* performed by *Karmeï Makhhol* stood out by maintaining its distinctly 'masculine' dance style. Hereby, the 'masculine' style of *Karmeï Makhhol's debkah* was not limited to male dancers only but, in particular, also informed the women's performance. Although using movements reminiscent of belly-dancing, the women's part did not feature any of the sexually alluring, softer, 'feminine' movement style usually associated by Israeli folk dance practitioners with such Eastern dance forms. Instead, their dancing was characterized by *debkah* 'strength' and 'energy' expressed in exaggerated hip movements and a forceful bearing. Thus, while performing so-called Oriental movements, *Karmeï Makhhol* female bodies in dance emphasized masculinity, keeping in line with official nationalist discourse that posited the masculine public appearance of Israeli Jewish women as a symbol of the state's modern democratic character in contrast to the allegedly powerless Arab women, a gendered image generally used to justify hierarchies of power between Israeli Jews, on the one hand, and both Israeli Arabs and Palestinians in the occupied territories, on the other (Sharoni 1994; Sharoni 1995; Klein 1997).

#### CONCLUSION

Positing Israeli Arabs living in the Galilee as 'hostile Others,' Israeli Jewish policy-makers founded and developed the Israeli folk dance ensemble *Karmeï Makhhol* as a means of place-making in the Galilee. Once Israeli Jewish presence in the region had been assured and Karmi'el had turned from a settlers' periphery into a center of high-tech and tourism, public Israeli Jewish perception of Israeli Arabs as 'hostile Others' shifted to that of 'neighbors whom one lived next to, but not with.' Both perceptions directly shaped *Karmeï Makhhol's* discourse as well as the materialization of this discourse on stage. Yet *debkah* as presented by Karmi'el's folk dance group not merely

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<sup>70</sup> Author's interview with Judith Brin Ingber.



reflected the power inequalities underlying Jewish-Arab relations in the Galilee. Instead, performing the 'modern' Israeli Jewish Self through its 'unmodern' Palestinian Other, *Karmeï Makhol* contributed to consolidating the very hierarchies of power which informed its Orientalist view of Palestinians as Other in the first place.

Staging *debbak* to perform the Palestinian Other as an 'ever noble, traditional peasant,' the group's activities obscured the ways in which structural inequalities lay at the heart of Jewish-Palestinian relations, not unbridgeable cultural or national differences. As the attempts at artistic cooperation showed, however, it was exactly these structural disparities rather than essential differences which shaped Jewish-Palestinian interaction and maintained their relationship of inequality. Put in a situation where border crossings were possible, *Karmeï Makhol* dancers during the joint trips found that the differences between themselves and the Arab teenagers and young adults from *Al-Asayyel* were much smaller than initially thought. Back in their everyday contexts in Karni'el, however, little was left of this experience, as the existing structural inequalities mostly prevented any such attempts at crossing over with Israeli Arabs from the villages and even more so with Palestinians in West Bank and Gaza, whom *Karmeï Makhol* dancers usually only encountered during military service in the territories.

*Karmeï Makhol's* stagings of *debbak* strengthened the perception that Jewish-Palestinian inequalities were a result of the 'traditional backwardness' of Arab society, rather than the outcome of an unequal distribution of power within Israeli society in favor of its Jewish population. In this way, the group's activities actually served to maintain the hierarchies of power, rather than, as envisioned by the joint group projects, overcome Jewish-Arab differences. As these attempts at border crossing showed, it was not enough to personally meet the Other and start talking. Arranging such meetings without tackling or at least stating one's awareness of the general framework of Jewish-Arab power disparities had little effect, as the group's comments about the lack of any longer-lasting results from the joint trips project as well as their negative response to the plan of setting up a joint Arab-Jewish dance group demonstrated.<sup>71</sup> In particular, the com-

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<sup>71</sup> Investigating the impact of the post-Zionist critique on Israeli popular culture, Ilan Pappé comments in a similarly negative way, that the large-scale Israeli Jewish consumption of Arab popular music does not result in any tangible sociopolitical

ment about letting Arab dancers join the group if they possessed the necessary dancing skills in modern and classical ballet exposed the ways in which *Karmeï Makhol* undertook such joint activities without accounting for the general context of Jewish-Arab inequalities. If a joint group was to be set up seriously with the aim of crossing over existing cleavages, the condition for Arab dancers to join such a group could not be the demonstration of the very abilities which systemic inequalities prevented them from acquiring in the first place. Instead of positively contributing to sociopolitical change, the ways in which *Karmeï Makhol* negotiated its relationship with Palestinians on and off stage thus served to maintain and consolidate the status quo of inequality generally shaping Jewish-Palestinian interaction. The place made by *Karmeï Makhol* through *debkah* was exclusively Israeli Jewish, not inclusively multicultural.

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change in the relationship between Jews and Palestinians: “Music from all over the Arab world, ranging from Umm Kulthum to ra’i with many local versions, is extremely popular in Israel. Unfortunately, music, like food and folklore, cannot be said to be a bridge between Jewish society and the Arab world. The popularity of Arabic music demonstrates a process of appropriation by the political elite of Arab cultural artifacts appealing to a large segment of the population—i.e. *Sephardi* Jews. The music has no political or substantial cultural implication for the identity and behavior of the society or state, and the most right-wing parties play it at the very rallies where they preach anti-Arabi rhetoric. Even the Gush Emunim radio station energetically broadcast Arabic music.” (Pappé 1997: 61).

## CHAPTER FIVE

### IMPROVISING IN BETWEEN: *AL-ASAYYEL*, 1988–1999

#### INTRODUCTION

Having shown how Israeli-Palestinian relations influenced stage presentations of both the Palestinian *dabkeh* as well as the Israeli Jewish *debbah*, my ethnographic focus shifts to the dance group *Al-Asayyel* to complicate the simple dichotomy between Palestinian and Israeli Jewish performances of identity which my analysis has so far evoked. Investigating Israeli Arab *Al-Asayyel* as a group that bridges the gap between these two opposing factions, I seek to go beyond a binary positioning of Israeli Jews against Palestinians and throw a more refined light on the various processes involved in shaping *dabkeh/debbah* as a performance of identity on stage. Among the numerous Israeli Arab *dabkeh* groups operating throughout the Galilee in the late nineties, the *Al-Asayyel* ensemble stood out for two reasons, making its investigation particularly useful for my analysis. First, both Israeli Arab as well as Israeli Jewish officials involved in Arab folk dance activities in Israel at the time of my fieldwork identified Yahyā Abū Jum‘ah, *Al-Asayyel*’s founder and trainer, as the currently most sought after Israeli Arab coach of *dabkeh* groups.<sup>1</sup> The recognition Abū Jum‘ah received for his work hereby found expression in a series of official posts. Besides being an official member of the *Culture Council* within the *Arabic Culture Section* in the Israeli cultural ministry, he had been nominated the representative of Arab culture in MAATAF, an Israeli semi-governmental institution dedicated to ethnic arts, as well as the Arab Israeli representative at the Israeli branch of C.I.O.F.F.,

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<sup>1</sup> Muwafaq Khoury, director of the *Arabic Culture Section* founded inside the *Culture Administration (Minhal ha-Tarbut)* of the *Israeli Ministry of Education* in 1988, for example, referred to Abū Jum‘ah as currently “the top” among Israeli Arab group leaders. He identified their working relationship as “very close,” stating that Abū Jum‘ah served advisory function for the *Arabic Culture Section* in matters concerning *dabkeh*. Similarly, Rina Meir from the *Folk Dance Department* of the *Histadrut*, described Abū Jum‘ah as “the main person today” among Israeli Arab group leaders and choreographers and the one to whom she primarily referred. Author’s interviews with Muwafaq Khoury and Rina Meir.

an international suborganization of UNESCO. In addition, Abū Jum‘ah had been appointed the general coordinator of the Israeli Arab ensembles at the *Karmi‘el Dance Festival*.

Second, Abū Jum‘ah’s group *Al-Asayyel* counted as one of the leading Israeli Arab *dabkeh* ensembles. Abū Jum‘ah himself identified *Al-Asayyel* as the most prestigious ensemble among the various groups he was rehearsing with. While his other groups had been set up by local councils, community centers or schools who hired him as a trainer, Abū Jum‘ah emphasized that *Al-Asayyel* was truly his own. It was his first group, which he himself had founded in his home village Deir el-Asad in 1988 and had managed to successfully build up during the years. As his “original troupe (*firqatī ‘l-aṣliyyeh*),” *Al-Asayyel* counted as his flagship: “The troupe belongs to me, I built it. It is my official troupe, the one that represents me. If you say Yaḥyā Abū Jum‘ah, you say *Al-Asayyel*, if you say *Al-Asayyel*, you say Yaḥyā Abū Jum‘ah. There are people, who don’t know me, but when they see me in the street, they say, ‘Hello *Asayyel!*’” In addition to Abū Jum‘ah’s own appraisal of *Al-Asayyel*, the group at various times had received official recognition as one of Israel’s leading Arab *dabkeh* ensembles and it was popular with Israeli Arab, Israeli Jewish as well as Palestinian audiences.

Similar to my investigation of the Palestinian group *El-Funoun* and Israeli Jewish *Karnei Makhol*, I am using national identity as the analytical lens through which to examine *Al-Asayyel*’s activities. Indicating that their activities held various meanings, both Abū Jum‘ah as well as the group members, however, particularly emphasized the meaning of *dabkeh* as a means of identification. As Abū Jum‘ah, who since the mid-nineties had started making a living from teaching and performing *dabkeh*, repeatedly assured: “It is not important for me to earn money. During the first years I earned nothing, but only paid for the *dabkeh*. The important thing is the folklore (*fūklūr*). *Dabkeh* is my identity (*huwiyyatī*). It is my heritage (*turāth*).” According to Abū Jum‘ah, also his group’s members, all of whom were volunteers, performed *dabkeh* as a symbol of togetherness and shared identity:

They all have one goal, to advance the troupe and preserve the folklore (*fūklūr*). If another troupe comes from abroad, they teach them our *dabkeh*. To show that we also have a folklore (*fūklūr*), like any other people (*sha‘b*). *Al-Asayyel* does not preserve the *dabkeh* simply for the fun of it, but for our heritage (*turāthnā*). To show our heritage to the world. *dabkeh*, that is something nationalistic (*hāda ishī waṭanī*).

*Al-Asayyel* dancers themselves stated that to them, *dabkeh* was an important means of identification. As one female dancer said: “We do *dabkeh* to show the people who we are. What we have, what makes us happy, what makes us sad. That is the most important thing.” Another long time female member put it similarly: “For us, *dabkeh* epitomizes our existence (*id-dabkeh ikhtisār li-kawninā*). [. . .] We don’t just do nonsense (*stam*).”<sup>2</sup> The survey which I conducted among *Al-Asayyel* dancers underlines the importance which the dancers placed in these conversations upon the meaning of *dabkeh* as a collectivizing force.<sup>3</sup>

Although naming *dabkeh* as a means to perform identity, *Al-Asayyel*, in contrast to both *El-Funoun* and *Karmeī Makhhol*, did not actually define what kind of identity this should be. *El-Funoun* dancers insisted on performing contemporary Palestinianness and *Karmeī Makhhol* staged the Israeli Jewish nation. Both groups neither hesitated to unambiguously label the identity thus performed on stage. Nor did they refrain from exactly determining its artistic form. In fact, much of their discourses were concentrated on minutely defining the norms that performed their Palestinian, respectively Israeli Jewish identity, on stage. *Al-Asayyel*, however, did not use any such fixed label for describing its collective identity. On the contrary, different members used different names. Similarly, when I asked them to indicate their preferred self-identification label from a choice of eight possible names, no consensus emerged.<sup>4</sup> Although some names were clearly chosen more often than others, *Al-Asayyel* members by no means agreed on one shared denomination. Moreover, they themselves continuously varied the ways in which they referred to their collective identity, using different labels of self-identification in different contexts.

Refraining from using a fixed term of self-identification, *Al-Asayyel* members also did not strictly define their artistic norms for performing identity on stage. Both Abū Jum‘ah and his group’s members continuously stressed their commitment to staging *dabkeh* as it was performed ‘authentically’: they wanted to stage *dabkeh* as “orig-

<sup>2</sup> She uses the Hebrew word *stam*, a term commonly used by Israeli Arabs in everyday speech translating as ‘nonsense, rubbish.’ An equivalent in Palestinian dialect would be *kalām jāḏī* or *kalām fāriḡh*.

<sup>3</sup> Asked to rank prescribed cards listing five different motivations for participating in the group, ‘identity’ took clear precedence over ‘social life,’ ‘love of art,’ ‘exercise’ and ‘trips’. See table 11 in the appendix.

<sup>4</sup> See the list in the appendix for the different choices of self-identification labels.

inal heritage (*al-turāth al-aṣṭī*),” not as something randomly made up. Yet trying to fathom how *Al-Asayyel* actually defined the authenticity of their practices, I found myself more and more at a loss. In their discourse, both Abū Jum‘ah and his group’s members filled the term with varying, often contradictory meanings. In its stage presentations as well, I could not discern any unambiguous ‘essential’ trait accounting for the authenticity of the group’s *dabkeh*. Within different performance contexts, *Al-Asayyel*’s *dabkeh* always looked different. What had seemed to function as a marker of authenticity in one event was missing in another. In turn, what had hitherto seemed to be scorned as ‘inauthentic’ was suddenly highlighted as a source of the ‘original.’

Investigating *Al-Asayyel*’s activities as a performance of collective identity, I will show that the group’s flexibility in matters of self-identification as well as performative norms had nothing to do with a lack of awareness or being inconsistent. Instead, this flexibility was provoked by *Al-Asayyel*’s special position of truly being in between: As a non-Jewish, Arab group in Israel that emotionally identified with the Palestinian nation, its discourse and artistic work were shaped by various, mostly conflicting relationships. For one thing, the ambiguous relationship between Israeli Arabs and a state that defined itself as ethnically Jewish shaped *Al-Asayyel*’s performance. For another, the changing relations between Israeli Arabs and the Palestinian national movement influenced the group’s activities. Finally, also changes in the relations between the Israeli state and the Palestinian national movement determined its work. Examining how these various relationships came to bear on *Al-Asayyel*’s discourse and the materialization of this discourse on stage, I illustrate how the group performed identity by improvising in between the nations.

#### ESTABLISHING A TRADITION OF ‘AUTHENTIC’

##### *DABKEH* DANCING IN THE GALILEE

In contrast to *El-Funoun*, whose foundation resulted from the collective effort of a group of politicized leftist teenagers, and in contrast to *Karmeī Makhol*, which was established by city officials as part of a carefully orchestrated development policy, Abū Jum‘ah’s attempt at founding a *dabkeh* group was his own private enterprise. It had

not been motivated by affiliation with party politics<sup>5</sup> and initially neither met with acceptance within the Deir el-Asad community nor received any official support. For the first three years from 1988 to 1990, Abū Jum‘ah’s plan of setting up a Deir el-Asad *dabkeh* ensemble remained a local effort and was actually abandoned after a few initial negative experiences. Despite this initial frustration, Abū Jum‘ah, however, relaunched his attempt in 1990. Networking his way into the folk dance scene in Israel by establishing connections with both Israeli Jewish authorities as well as officials within the newly institutionalizing Israeli Arab cultural scene, Abū Jum‘ah managed to slowly make his name known in the relevant circles. By the early nineties, the tide had turned for him and his group. Increasingly traveling abroad and receiving favorable reviews in the Israeli Hebrew and Arab press, Abū Jum‘ah and his *dabkeh* group had established their name, not only within their own village community, but within Israel, Palestine and increasingly also abroad.

### *Founding Al-Asayyel*

According to Yaḥyā Abū Jum‘ah, his idea of founding a *dabkeh* group had come about more by accident than by design. Born in Deir el-Asad, Abū Jum‘ah had left the village as a teenager to live and work in the supermarket of Ein Ayala, a *moshav* near Zikhron Ya‘akov for eight years. After marrying his cousin who had grown up in southern Lebanon, he changed to a job in Haifa, trying to raise money for his brothers’ education as well as for building a house in his home village. From early on, however, Abū Jum‘ah recounted having felt a propensity for the performing arts: “Even when I was in school, I had a talent for acting. For a while I thought about studying theater, but the circumstances did not allow me to. I entered a few school plays and I was successful. The people wanted to see me.” Having moved to Haifa, Abū Jum‘ah occasionally participated in theater plays in the joint Arab-Jewish cultural center *Bayt al-karmah*, known in Hebrew as *Beit Hagefen*. Returning back to Deir el-Asad in the mid-eighties, he started teaching theater in the village and staged a play for which he choreographed a *dabkeh* based on steps

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<sup>5</sup> Although some of the male members told me that they had been supporters of the Israeli Communist Party during the early nineties, they emphasized that party politics had had no connection with their involvement in *Al-Asayyel*.

he knew from weddings as well as talking with “older people (*il-khit-yāriyyeh*)” in the Galilee. As Abū Jum‘ah maintained, it was this experience that prompted him to think about concentrating on *dabkeh* and starting a performance group:

I had written a play that talks about a doctor who studies abroad. The Israeli Arab young men, when they leave the country, they go abroad, marry a foreigner and stay there. This young man, however, comes back in the end. So the people of the village organize a big celebration for him. For this scene, I choreographed a *dabkeh*. It was a *dabkeh karādiyyeh*, something that they normally don’t do here in our village.<sup>6</sup> It had different music and different movements. The people started doing this *karādiyyeh* at the weddings. I taught them how to do it at the weddings. [. . .] And from there I got the idea that I wanted to start a *dabkeh* group.

Having convinced his nephews Rabāḥ and Muḥammad to support his project, Abū Jum‘ah started putting his ideas into practice. As Muḥammad recalled: “We were sitting at home and just by talking, this idea emerged. Yaḥyā took the idea seriously, because he loved *dabkeh*. It did not exist yet in the village. He took that idea and developed it and then presented it to us. We took part and from then on, the group started.” Recruiting a couple more *shabāb* from the village and starting to rehearse in the unfinished upper floor of his brother’s house, Abū Jum‘ah implemented his idea of founding Deir el-Asad’s first performance group under the name of *The Popular Dance Troupe of Deir el-Asad (Firqat dayr al-asad li-’l-raḡṣ al-sha’bī)*.

Initially, people in Deir el-Asad did not receive Abū Jum‘ah’s idea of setting up a local *dabkeh* group with enthusiasm. Quite on the contrary, his first presentations were met with amused bewilderment and even rejection. As Abū Jum‘ah recounted, “in the beginning, when we went to weddings, the people rejected us. They laughed about us: ‘What are they doing?! Fools!’ They insulted us. Because there had been nothing like that before in Deir el-Asad, there had never been anything like this. When you do something for the first time, that’s what happens. We went to weddings and the people rejected us.” The concept of setting up an organized group to present fixed sets of *dabkeh* choreographies in front of an audience was

<sup>6</sup> *Al-Asayyel* members explained the meaning of *il-karādiyyeh* as the “Kurdish *dabkeh*” and maintained that it was a *dabkeh* style usually not done in the region. I found no reference to *il-karādiyyeh* in encyclopedia of Palestinian folklore listing different *dabkeh* styles (‘Awwād 1983; Muḥsin 1987; Sirḥān 1989).



nothing new for Israeli Arabs in the Galilee in the late eighties. Early accounts of organized Israeli Arab performance groups go back as far as the fifties.<sup>7</sup> Yet no such group had ever been set up in Deir el-Asad before Abū Jum‘ah’s attempt in 1988. Organized cultural activities generally had been limited in the village. For the first time, a cultural center was set up in Deir el-Asad in 1986 and operated until the end of 1990, featuring various activities such as a karate school, sewing courses, computer lessons, music courses, ‘ūd playing as well as a lecture series.<sup>8</sup> *Dabkeh*, however, was not part of these activities. In fact, several attempts during that time to start teaching *dabkeh* and establish a group for stage presentations came to naught<sup>9</sup> and Ra’if Ḍabbāḥ, who coordinated the activities of Deir el-Asad’s cultural center at the time of its operation from 1986 to 1990 assured me: “When you are talking about a *dabkeh* group in terms of a real group with a certain organizational structure, with certain dancers, as well as a special trainer, then the first group that was ever founded in Deir el-Asad was the group of Yaḥyā Abū Jum‘ah.”<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> A Druze from Daliyat el-Karmel told me that in 1951 he had set up a *dabkeh* ensemble in his village. He had performed with other boys and men at the *Dalya Festivals* in 1944 and 1947, and inspired by this experience had continued as a *dabkeh* group leader throughout the fifties and sixties. Besides, for the 1986 *Dalya Festival*, Gurit Kadman listed the names of four participating *dabkeh* groups coming from the Galilean villages of Kafr Kana, Kafr Kama and Isfiya as well as East Jerusalem (Kadman 1969). In addition, a study undertaken by Shalom Hermon and Hagar Salomon at the Hebrew University in 1984 lists twelve Israeli Arab performance groups from the Galilee which gathered for a *dabkeh* competition in Tamra (Hermon and Salomon 1984).

<sup>8</sup> The cultural center of Deir el-Asad was established under the leadership of Yaḥyā Ḍabbāḥ, Nāṣir Ṣun‘allāḥ and Ḥassan Amūn, three prominent local political leaders. Uri Davis, the Jewish activist who had lived in Deir el-Asad during the sixties, supported the establishment of the center by helping to raise funds from European donor organizations. The center closed in 1991 due to political differences emerging between the local leaders. At the time of my fieldwork, it had not yet been reopened, although efforts were made to this end at the time of my stay in Deir el-Asad. Author’s interviews with Uri Davis and Ra’if Ḍabbāḥ.

<sup>9</sup> During the mid-eighties, Shafīqah Abū Ghāzī, a cousin of the well-known Israeli Arab poet Sa‘ūd al-Asadī, tried her hand at organizing a *dabkeh* presentation for the stage, but soon quit. Similarly, a trainer called Jamāl Faṭūm taught *dabkeh* in the *bayt al-shabībah*, the local branch of the boys scouts organization in Deir el-Asad, in the late eighties. Yet, these courses were directed largely at younger children and did not receive much recognition among the people of the village. Author’s conversations with a young man from Deir el-Asad who recounted having danced with Shafīqah Abu Ghāzī during the mid-eighties as well as with *Al-Asayyel* members who had danced with Jamāl Faṭūm.

<sup>10</sup> Author’s interview with Ra’if Ḍabbāḥ.

Ḍabbāḥ explained people's negative response to Abū Jum'ah's initial presentations in terms of the fact that *dabkeh* constituted a regular part of their everyday life and thus to them, an organized group seemed superfluous and strange: "People were not interested in having a *dabkeh* group. Because the *dabkāt* were done at the weddings. There was no need. They were doing *dabkeh* in the village, the *dabkeh* that is danced for one or two hours. That's why they were not interested in founding a group."<sup>11</sup> One founding member similarly recalled the reaction of the people as saying: "Why do they bring a *dabkeh* group, we have *shabāb* here that do the *dabkeh*, that do it actually much better than them!" Negatively received in his home village, Abū Jum'ah decided to perform outside, and "there," he recounted, "it worked." Slowly, *Firqat dayr al-asad* started to establish a reputation for itself by appearing at various festivities and social events around the Galilee. Seeing how positively the group was received outside, people from Deir al-Asad warmed up to the idea of having a local *dabkeh* ensemble. They began to feel proud of *Firqat dayr al-asad*, their own, home-grown *dabkeh* group, which carried the name of their village into the region and even abroad. The local council of Deir el-Asad started to officially back the ensemble, designating it as an artistic representative of the village and providing financial support (al-Majlis al-maḥalī li-dayr al-asad 1998). Thus, while during its initial years from 1988 to 1990, the group had more or less improvised to make ends meet, performing without costumes and chipping in from personal money just to be able to appear at events and make themselves known, the tide turned after 1990. Equipped with specially designed costumes, a small budget, the support of the local council as well as the people, *Firqat dayr al-asad* started to make it. Despite its initially rather bumpy start, the group had become accepted within its local context and, with the help of this local support, started to successfully work on consolidating its place within the larger Israeli Arab, Israeli Jewish and Palestinian dancing scene.

### *Staging the authentic*

Yaḥyā Abū Jum'ah and his group's participants explained *Al-Asayyel's* success during the nineties in terms of its emphasis on staging 'authentic heritage.' Insisting that their presentations on stage featured the

<sup>11</sup> Author's interview with Ra'if Ḍabbāḥ.

‘authentic,’ they proudly referred to their group as “the original,” “the best,” “the real thing” as well as “the group that does *dabkeh* as it should be done” (*il-aṣlī, il-aḥsan, il-ishī ‘l-haqīqī, il-firqah illati bītqaddīm il-ishī keyf lāzim*). Indeed, as Abū Jum‘ah maintained, it was *Al-Asayyel*’s concern with the authentic that differentiated it from other Israeli Arab groups and made it special. Comparing it to the other ensembles he was teaching in the Galilee, he maintained that none of them had as keen an interest in staging ‘original’ *dabkeh*: “*Al-Asayyel* members like *fūklūr*. Other groups are embarrassed. [. . .] Like Majd el-Krum. They always want the new, the modern.” Like Abū Jum‘ah, *Al-Asayyel* members defined the difference between themselves and other *dabkeh* groups in the Galilee in terms of their heightened concern with the authentic. As one female member explained: “We are not like the others. We are interested in the origin (*al-aṣl*), in the original (*al-aṣlī*).” According to *Al-Asayyel* members, this self-perception was generally shared by their audience, as the story behind the name of their group showed. During the early years of the group’s existence as the group was still called *Firqat dayr al-asad li-‘l-raqṣ al-sha‘bī*, a feeling had spread among the group members that their growing success should be reflected in a more colorful name. Not wanting to choose a new name for themselves, as this would have been unduly boastful, the group insisted that it should be given to them in accordance with people’s general perception of their activities. A local from Deir el-Asad suggested the name ‘*Al-Asayyel*,’ a label that emphasized the group’s propensity for the authentic, as Abū Jum‘ah explained, and it stuck:

There was one who has a printing shop who liked the troupe a lot. He said: ‘When I see you on stage and you do *dabkeh*, I see you like the noble horses (*il-khayl il-aṣīleh*), the original, the thoroughbred. In my opinion, that’s what you should call yourselves.’ We thought, that it is right what he was saying. *il-aṣīl*, that is the horse of noble descendency (*il-ḥṣān il-aṣīl*). So we called the troupe *Al-Asayyel*.<sup>12</sup>

When I asked Yaḥyā Abū Jum‘ah from where this concern with the authentic stemmed, he maintained that it was neither something imposed from the outside nor by himself, but it naturally arose from within the members of the ensemble itself. Coming from a village known in the popular culture of the Galilee as “*qaryit il-famānīn* (the

<sup>12</sup> *Al-Asayyel* is the Palestinian colloquial plural of *al-aṣīl* and thus translates as ‘the noble horses’ or ‘those of noble origin/descendency.’

village of the artists),” he maintained that *Al-Asayyel* members had imbibed their love for authentic heritage automatically through their descentance.<sup>13</sup> Growing up in an environment which had produced some of the most well-known popular poets (*shu‘arā’ sha‘biyyīn*) in the Galilee, Abū Jum‘ah argued that it was completely logical for *Al-Asayyel* members to cherish their authentic heritage.<sup>14</sup> As he explained to me: “Deir el-Asad is known in all of Palestine, even in the neighboring Arab countries. It is known that this is a village of art, a village of voices, a village of music (*balad fann, balad aṣwāt, balad ṭarab*). They love musical entertainment here, original music (*il-ṭarab il-aṣlī*), the original thing (*il-ishī il-aṣlī*), the strong thing (*il-ishī il-qawī*).” *Al-Asayyel* members confirmed Abū Jum‘ah’s claim. As one of the leading male members assured me: “In every house in Deir el-Asad you will find someone who either sings or does *dabkeh*. These are the characteristics of Deir el-Asad, the songs, the music, the rhythm and the *dabkeh*. This is how God made us.”

Yet trying to pinpoint what exactly made *Al-Asayyel*’s *dabkeh* ‘authentic’ proved a frustrating endeavor as *Al-Asayyel* members in their discourse about their activities constantly filled the term ‘authenticity’ with different, often contradictory meanings. Locating authenticity in steps, Abū Jum‘ah at times claimed that the group distinguished itself from other groups because it presented only the originally old movement patterns. His other groups preferred the so-called “Lebanese dances (*raqṣāt lubnāniyyeh*)”<sup>15</sup> which featured steps newly choreographed by Abū Jum‘ah on the basis of varying familiar leg and arm movements and were executed to Lebanese popular music. *Al-Asayyel*, in contrast, exclusively performed *dabkeh* rhythms and steps that were historically rooted in the region. The group indicated they mostly performed the *shimāliyyeh*, a certain kind of *dabkeh* commonly known in the Galilee.<sup>16</sup> In addition to the *shimāliyyeh*, they also presented

<sup>13</sup> During my stay in Deir el-Asad, I often heard people self-identify their village as “village of art (*balad il-fann*),” “village of the artists (*qaryet il-fannānīn*)” or “village of the poets (*qaryet il-shu‘arā*)”. Similarly, the neighboring village of Bi‘na was known for having excellent drum players. See also (Asadī 1998).

<sup>14</sup> Among popular poets known beyond their home village Deir el-Asad were, for instance, Abū Ghāzī, Abū Rif‘at, Abū Sa‘ūd, Abū Shākir and Aḥmad Ṣun‘al-lāh. On popular poets and their improvised song-poetry in Deir el-Asad see (Sbait 1982; Asadī 1998).

<sup>15</sup> *raqṣāt* is the plural in Palestinian dialect for *raqṣ*, translating as ‘dances’ in the sense of different choreographies.

<sup>16</sup> *Al-Asayyel* members differed in their explanation of the term ‘*shimāliyyeh*,’ with some deriving it from the word ‘the north (*al-shamāl*)’ and translating it as ‘the

styles of *dabkeh* in their choreographies which were less known in the region of Deir el-Asad. Yet as Abū Jum‘ah and the dancers assured me, all of these different *dabkeh* styles had historic roots in other parts of Palestine such as the *karādiyyeh*, the *sha‘rawiyyeh*, the *ghazāliyyeh*, the *badawiyyeh* and the *‘irāqīyyeh*.<sup>17</sup> According to Abū Jum‘ah, the steps had to be authentic, otherwise they were not for *Al-Asayyel*: “*Al-Asayyel* is a strange phenomenon. They have their head in folklore. Even if I want to give them Lebanese songs, they don’t really like it. They don’t do *dabkeh* with that. They love the land. Their fathers and grandfathers were peasants, they live in the mountains and they love the original heritage (*al-turāth al-aṣlī*).”

Yet again, just as often, I heard Abū Jum‘ah explain that the secret of *Al-Asayyel*’s success was its ability to present all sorts of different steps and styles, its ability to change and always come up with something new. He prided himself on his choreographic abilities to change steps, movement patterns and formations. Similarly, Abū Jum‘ah highlighted the experience that he had acquired during the recent years in different dance styles such as international folk dance, as well as some ballet and modern, and took pride in the fact that he had absolved a course for folk dance teachers at a prestigious Israeli Jewish institution. Pointing to the ways in which these various experiences and exposures had influenced and changed his work, Abū Jum‘ah explained: “I go with the time. The new generation wants new things. I have to give them the things that interest them. I know how to change. I choreograph a lot and I make it interesting.” Like Abū Jum‘ah, the members of his group interpreted the authenticity of their practices in terms of both ‘old’ and ‘new.’ Various, both male and female members highlighted the group’s propensity for keeping steps and movement patterns exactly as they had been done

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northern *dabkeh*,’ or ‘the *dabkeh* done in the northern part of Palestine’. Others maintained that the name derived from the word ‘left (*al-shimāl*),’ explaining that the *shimāliyyeh* has its name as it starts with the left foot. The literature gives both explanations (e.g. Muḥsin 1987; Sirhan 1989)

<sup>17</sup> According to *Al-Asayyel* members, *il-karādiyyeh* was the ‘Kurdish *dabkeh*,’ *il-sha‘rawiyyeh* a *dabkeh* named in reference to a specific locality in Palestine and *il-ghazāliyyeh* a special kind of *dabkeh* characterized by its pattern of three strong stomps executed with the right foot on the ground, see also (Muḥsin 1987: 108). They described *il-badawiyyeh* as the ‘Bedouin’s *dabkeh*’ distinguished in terms of its special rhythm, and *il-‘irāqīyyeh* as a style of *dabkeh* usually done in Iraq that was distinguished by an additional step in the usual *shimāliyyeh* pattern. I did not find a reference to either of the last two *dabkeh* styles in the literature on Palestinian folklore (‘Awwād 1983; Muḥsin 1987; Sirhān 1989).

in the past. At other times, however, they praised its ability to develop and do “new things,” better than any other group in the Galilee.

Contradiction also reigned *Al-Asayyel*'s statements about its music. On the one hand, Abū Jum‘ah and his group emphasized their love for the old familiar songs accompanied by traditional instruments such as the *mijwiz*<sup>18</sup> and the *arghūl*.<sup>19</sup> As Abū Jum‘ah stated: “When I am in Majd el-Krum and I say that I will bring the *mijwiz*, no, they want the electric organ. *Al-Asayyel*, in contrast, they start dancing alone before the rehearsal, like drunkards, when they hear the sound of the *mijwiz*.” Then again, *Al-Asayyel*'s leader highlighted the changes the group made in terms of its musical accompaniment in order to keep it interesting for both the audience as well as themselves. Abū Jum‘ah admitted to changing the rhythm of popular songs, to making them faster and adapting them for stage. Besides, he mentioned not without pride that he even composed completely new songs for *Al-Asayyel*'s presentations: “We used to sing *Yā zarīf al-tūl* and *‘Alā ‘l-dal‘ūnah* and that was it. Then I started writing new songs, changing the rhythm, putting new words to familiar songs, developing things to make it more interesting. That’s important.”

Most importantly, however, Abū Jum‘ah formulated contradictory statements about the way in which he saw authenticity linked to gender. As he pointed out on several occasions, to him, authentic *dabkeh* was the one presented by men alone. In this sense, *Al-Asayyel* distinguished itself because in contrast to other groups, its *dabkeh* was presented by *shabāb*: “*Al-Asayyel* is distinguished because its *dabkeh* is done by *shabāb* who are older and stand tall. When they do *dabkeh*, the *shabāb* alone, this is the original *dabkeh*.” On other occasions, however, Abū Jum‘ah highlighted the essential role of the group’s female members, arguing that without the women, no authentic *dabkeh* was possible. As he variously stressed at the time of my fieldwork, he had included girls in the troupe because also in real life, women and men were always together. *Dabkeh* on stage as authentic heritage was supposed to give a realistic picture of society and thus, both women and men were needed to appear together on stage. As Abū Jum‘ah put it: “You cannot just show one half of society. There were always women and men together. So, our *dabkeh* includes both.”

<sup>18</sup> A wind instrument made from a double reed (Lama 1982: 45; Sbait 1982).

<sup>19</sup> Like a *mijwiz*, yet one reed is longer than the other and does not have any openings (Lama 1982: 45).

BEHIND THE SCENES:  
WHAT SHAPED *AL-ASAYYEL'S DABKEH*

Trying to understand how *Al-Asayyel* members actually defined the authenticity of their *dabkeh*, I found myself increasingly at a loss. The more I tried to fill the term ‘authenticity’ with meaning, the more confusing and contradictory the answers seemed that I received from the group and my own attempts at pinpointing any such ‘essential’ trait in *Al-Asayyel’s* stage presentations went nowhere. In the following, I delve deeper into the issue of what determined *Al-Asayyel’s* presentations of *dabkeh*. I show how the ambiguities outlined above were less the product of an actual inconsistency in the group’s approach, but instead resulted from its special position as an Israeli Arab group that operated in between the nations and thus was subject to various, often conflicting relationships. Before proceeding, I want to emphasize that the three relational processes analyzed below cannot clearly be separated from each other, but should always be regarded as very much interrelated. Also, I want to clarify that when distinguishing between *Al-Asayyel’s* presentations in Israeli Jewish, Palestinian or Israeli Arab contexts, I am basing my distinction on the ethnic affiliation of the people who hosted the event and thus determined its overall framework.<sup>20</sup>

“*Do the Right Thing!*”—*The Israeli Jewish discourse of authenticity*

In the same year that Karmi‘el set out to establish its place as the ‘city of dance’ by inaugurating its annual festival, Yaḥyā Abū Jum‘ah in Deir el-Asad across the street founded *Al-Asayyel*. The relationship

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<sup>20</sup> In the context of *Al-Asayyel’s* presentations, a direct relation was noticeable between the ethnic affiliation of the organizers of an artistic venue and the makeup of the audience. This was most evident in West Bank and Gaza, where both organizers and audiences were to a large part, if not exclusively, Palestinian. Yet, also concerning *Al-Asayyel’s* presentations in Israel proper, audience makeup and structure of a specific event clearly differed between occasions hosted by Israeli Jewish folk dance officials with their specific requirements for *dabkeh* presentations and predominantly Israeli Jewish audiences as compared to events taking place by and for Israeli Arabs. The latter were mostly local festivities organized by village and town councils or privately arranged events such as weddings or firm celebrations. This is not to say that audiences were always neatly separated and that no overlap occurred. In fact, *Al-Asayyel* variously performed at events which featured a mixed Israeli Jewish—Israeli Arab spectatorship. Yet, for the purpose of my analysis, I am focusing on events that could be categorized unambiguously according to the ethnic affiliation of the host, the overall structure of the event as well as its audience makeup.



Abū Jum‘ah developed with Israeli Jewish folk dance officials in subsequent years not only influenced the ways in which he and his group established and consolidated their reputation, but also profoundly shaped *Al-Asayyel*'s stage presentations of *dabkeh* before Israeli Jewish audiences.

*The relationship between the Israeli state and its Arab minority*

As a non-Jewish, Arab *dabkeh* ensemble in Israel, *Al-Asayyel*'s stage activities were to a great extent influenced by the status that the Israeli state accorded its Arab minority population *vis-à-vis* the Jewish majority. Two trends can be taken as indicative of the way in which the Israeli state defined its relationship with its Arab citizens. First, upon its foundation, the Israeli state lacked any clearly formulated vision about the status of non-Jewish citizens in a Jewish state. This absence of vision was rooted in the tendency displayed by most Zionist schools of thought to ignore the existence of an indigenous non-Jewish population in Palestine as well as any serious debate about the status it should or could have within a Jewish state.<sup>21</sup> Secondly, the Israeli state considered relations with its Arab minority and their position within society as ranking low among its national and ideological priorities. In particular, the democratic principle on which the Israeli state was founded was subordinated to the state's two other guiding principles, that of Israel as a Jewish state as well as that of Israel as a state with major security concerns.<sup>22</sup> As a result, the state implemented a public policy that continued to exclude

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<sup>21</sup> As Ian Lustick notes in his study *Arabs in the Jewish state: Israel's Control of a National Minority*, mainstream Zionism regarded status parity between Jews and non-Jews more as a tactical ploy than a viable political option. Although various Zionist groupings at the beginning of the twentieth century had actually contemplated the parity option, this option was put aside with the emergence of a Jewish majority in Palestine (Lustick 1980). See also (Peretz 1958; Said 1979b).

<sup>22</sup> The Israeli state and general public have generally associated Israeli Arabs with the state's external Arab enemy, thus leaving ample room for curtailing their legal rights on grounds of state security. Similarly, as non-Jews within a state defined as Jewish, Israeli Arabs remain deprived of benefits and resources allocated on grounds of belonging to the Jewish community. Such inequalities find expression in Israel's exclusive immigration laws that posit Jewishness as the basis for obtaining citizenship. These inequalities also figure in the administration of state land in Israel that provides for a situation in which land owned by Arabs can be appropriated for exclusively Israeli Jewish use. Finally, these inequalities are revealed by the ways in which exclusively Jewish quasi-governmental institutions such as the *Jewish Agency* and the *World Zionist Organization* operate in Israel to provide a wide range of developmental, social and cultural services for the Israeli Jewish community only (Rouhana 1997: 44–64).



Israeli Arabs as equal members of Israeli society through the nineties (Rouhana 1997).<sup>23</sup> Throughout, the interaction between the Israeli state and its Arab minority was thus characterized by neglect and disinterest, on the one hand, as well as a strongly felt need to control the state's 'internal enemy' as which the Arab minority was perceived, on the other.<sup>24</sup>

*Official policy in the cultural field*

Neglect, disinterest and an urgently felt need to control the state's Arab minority not only determined the general interaction between the Israeli state and its Arab citizens, but also shaped the conditions under which *Al-Asayyel* developed. At the time of Israel's foundation in 1948, the roughly 17% of Palestine's pre-war population who had remained inside the territory of the newly founded state generally had little to show for in terms of educational or cultural institutions. The Palestinians who had remained consisted mostly of rural peasants, the poorest and most unprivileged of the pre-war population, while urban, middle-class Palestinians together with their social, economic, political and cultural leaders had either been forced to leave in 1948 or had left and were prevented from coming back. The fraction of Palestinian society inside Israel after 1948 consequently were bereft of secular educational and cultural structures and remained as a "periphery for a center that existed no more," as Rouhana elaborates:

Educationally, these Arabs suffered from a low level of literacy, poor infrastructure, and limited human resources, including a shortage of elementary school teachers. Only one Arab high school, and no institutions of higher education, remained intact. Culturally, owing to the departure of the cultural and intellectual elite and the resulting col-

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<sup>23</sup> Nadim Rouhana emphasizes that the lack of a clearly defined vision towards the status of non-Jewish, Arab citizens as well as their absence within the list of Israel's national and ideological priorities does not equal a total lack of policies. On various levels and through various measures, the Israeli state since its foundations had given possible indicators about its policy towards the Arab population, such as measures put into practice by local officials as well as documents and recommendations which never went through an official process of approval but nevertheless speak to the state's policy approach, in addition to statements variously made by state officials, especially after strikes and demonstrations. Thus, although occurring in complex, diverse and often contradictory ways, Rouhana argues that one can nevertheless clearly characterize Israeli public policy towards the Arab minority (Rouhana 1997: 28).

<sup>24</sup> See in particular (Lustick 1980; Rouhana 1997), but also (Jiryis 1976; Zureik 1979; Smooha 1980; Smooha 1982; al-Haj 1995).

lapse of cultural institutions, this community was left almost without institutions, resources, or personnel to organize cultural activities. There was a dearth of literature, theater, publication, periodicals and newspapers, museums, and public libraries. (Rouhana 1997: 81)<sup>25</sup>

Although the development of educational and cultural structures in the Arab sector since 1948 was enormous, a conspicuous gap remained between the Jewish and the Arab communities through the late nineties in terms of cultural infrastructure as well as the distribution of funds (al-Haj 1995; Rouhana 1997). According to the *Beracha Report* published in 1999, the *Israeli Cultural Administration* allotted 16 million new Israeli shekel (NIS) per annum to the Arab sector from 1993 to 1999 (Katz and Sella 1999). This sum presented a noticeable increase in funds dealt out to Israeli Arabs for cultural activities, as before 1993 their annual support had never stretched beyond a “pitiful” NIS 3 million (Kaye 1996: 7).<sup>26</sup> Yet considering that 16 million NIS still made up only 5% of the overall budget of the *Cultural Administration* and given the fact that Israeli Arabs constitute roughly 18% of the population, the *Beracha Report* emphasizes that despite this absolute increase in funding for Arab cultural activities, the relative inequality of financial support allotted to the Arab versus the Jewish community continued to stare one in the face.<sup>27</sup> Within the Israeli cultural scene, the report thus concludes that the “Arabs are seriously undersupported and feel underrepresented—not only in their own arts, but in all of the arts” (Katz and Sella 1999: 97). Haim Adler from the *Jerusalem’s School for Educational Leadership* and Avi Ben-Bassat from the *Israeli Democracy Institute* describe the difference between the Jewish and the Arab sector in even more dramatic terms. Pointing

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<sup>25</sup> Nadim Rouhana’s observation should be read as primarily concerning secular institutions, as religious institutions such as, for example, the confessional schools of Nazareth continued to exist.

<sup>26</sup> The increase in funds allotted to Arab cultural activities sprang from a new policy introduced by Shulamit Aloni who served under Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin as *Minister of Education and Culture* from 1992–94 and as *Minister of Communication, Science and the Arts* from 1995–96. As the *Beracha Report* notes, Aloni pushed for a new policy guideline in the cultural field, which aimed, in particular, at providing more support for minority groups in Israel (Katz and Sella 1999: 17–20).

<sup>27</sup> This relative inequality in terms of financial support stands out particularly when considering that the *Arabic Culture Section*, the official organ inside the *Israeli Cultural Administration* responsible for the coordination and support of cultural activities in the Arab sector since 1988, actually received only NIS 4 million, that is, about 1,3% of the Administration’s overall budget. The rest was dealt out directly to Arab arts organizations like the Arab theater in Haifa and the Arab orchestra (Katz and Sella 1999: 76–77).

to the glaring gap in the Jewish and Arab educational infrastructure, they maintain that the Arab community through the late nineties was badly lacking in terms of any institutions or facilities that provided more than the conventional minimum of classroom teaching, leave alone have a capacity for the extracurricular:

According to researchers, Arab education suffers from the lack of a suitable infrastructure: There are not enough schools, classrooms, laboratories, workshops or sports facilities. While the Jewish schools enjoy the services of educational counselors and psychologist, only 10% of the Arab students have access to such services. Apart from rare exceptions, the Arab educational system has at its disposal no libraries, support programs for weak students, computer courses, cultural activities and other services.<sup>28</sup>

Similarly, Rouhana points out that public libraries in Israeli Arab towns and villages were established only recently. There was no Arab theater until 1995, when the first was founded in Haifa. Compared with the thriving Hebrew literary scene, an Israeli Arab literary movement developed only slowly and received much less official backing (Rouhana 1997: 81).<sup>29</sup>

#### *Promoting dabkeh in the Galilee*

While the support and development of cultural activities in the Arab sector did not constitute a priority of Israeli policy, *dabkeh* nevertheless from the very beginning had received a surprising amount of interest from Israeli Jewish officials in the field of cultural policy.<sup>30</sup> Although at times controversies arose over the question whether *dabkeh* as a non-Jewish dance activities actually merited Israeli Jewish attention and official support, *dabkeh* remained an object of interest for Israeli cultural officials.<sup>31</sup> Even before the establishment of the state, Arab *dabkeh* activities had spurred the interest of Jewish cultural

<sup>28</sup> Haim Adler and Avi Ben-Bassat as cited in a *Ha'aretz* newspaper article from July 1999 ([anon.] 1999: 5).

<sup>29</sup> See also (Regev 1995) for a critical analysis of the ways in which the Arab cultural production that did take place through the nineties remained marginalized within the general Israeli cultural scene.

<sup>30</sup> Here, I am referring to Jewish cultural leaders holding official positions in the *Histadrut* in the pre-state period, as well as later in governmental institutions. I am leaving aside the various private contacts which have taken place since the twenties between Jewish dance practitioners involved in creating a new Hebrew folklore and Palestinian Arabs doing *dabkeh*.

<sup>31</sup> Author's interviews with Ayalah Goren, as well as with Rina Meir, head of the folk dance department in the *Histadrut* at the time of my research and Rina Scharet, former director of the *Center for Ethnic Dance* in the *Histadrut* from 1988 to 1991.

leaders involved in the promotion and institutionalization of the Hebrew folk dance movement known after 1948 as Israeli folk dancing. Within the framework of doing research on dance practices of Jewish immigrants categorized as ‘ethnic dancing’ (*rikudai ‘edot*), the folk dance committee set up in the *Histadrut* in 1945 and, in particular, its director Gurit Kadman, from the very beginning also demonstrated a keen interest in observing, documenting, researching and promoting *dabkeh* as a non-Jewish, indigenous Arab dance practice of Palestine. Already in 1944, Arab and Druze *dabkeh* practitioners had been invited to the first *Dalya Festival* (Sorell 1949). Even more so than during the first festival, the presence of Arab *dabkeh* performers was highlighted at the second *Dalya* event in 1947, where groups of Druze and Arab dancers are said to have entertained their Jewish audience through a whole long night of curfew imposed under the British army.<sup>32</sup>

In the fifties, Israeli Jewish officials and in particular Gurit Kadman sought to initiate a more structured and scientifically grounded interaction with Arab *dabkeh*. Backed by the *Histadrut*’s Israeli folk dance department, an office and a budget, Kadman started going to Arab communities to document their dancing. Similar to her documentation of the ethnic dancing (*rikudai ‘edot*) of Jewish immigrant communities, Kadman started to note *dabkeh* in Laban notation,<sup>33</sup> take pictures and videos as well as tape-record the presentations, as her daughter Ayalah Goren commented:

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<sup>32</sup> As Therese Myers writes about the *Dalya* festival of 1947, a time characterized according to her by “the height of the war with the English and the Arabs”: “To add to the drama of the situation, there were Arab groups participating in the Festival. The splendid ovation which they received was not only a tribute to their dancing, it was also an expression of friendship. The people were not at war with each other—only some of the leaders were.” (Myers 1959: 92)

From the available sources, it is not clear exactly who the *dabkeh* dancing ‘Arabs’ at the *Dalya Festivals* were. It is certain that in all of the festivals, Druze groups performed. I personally met a Druze *dabkeh* practitioner, who said that he had participated in all of the festivals, first as a performer and then as one of the first leaders of a Druze *dabkeh* performance group. Israeli folk dance discourse claims, that in addition to the Druze, there also had been “Arab performers,” that is, Arab Muslim or Arab Christian practitioners of *dabkeh* (Sorell 1949; Myers 1959; Ingber 1974). Behind the backdrop of rising clashes between Jewish and Arab forces during the forties as well as the war of 1948, this claim would merit closer investigation. Who exactly were the performers doing *dabkeh* in *Dalya* in 1944, 1947 and 1951? Were there indeed Arab Muslim and Christian performers, and if so, where did they come from and what were their motivational forces to participate in these festivals staged as a show of the new Jewish folk dances in the context of rising Arab-Jewish clashes?

<sup>33</sup> An elaborate system of notating movement devised by Rudolf Laban at the beginning of the 20th century.

She truly was a woman with a vision. She understood from early on how important it was to document the dances of the ethnic groups (*rikudai 'edot*). She started going from place to place. When the Yemenites first came she went to the airport and after they had kissed, she told them to dance. [. . .] She had a photographer and took pictures of things nobody had ever seen. She did this with the Kurds as well. And with the Arabs.<sup>34</sup>

In addition to simply collecting knowledge about *dabkeh* through ethnographic documentation, Israeli Jewish officials also more and more came to actively influence the ways in which *dabkeh* was performed in Arab villages of the Galilee. In the late fifties and early sixties, Kadman, as her daughter recounted, started to not only document the dancing of the Arab *dabkeh*, but to support the founding of organized performance groups. She provided support mostly in terms of artistic know-how, in terms of giving access to the by now established Israeli folk dance scene and performance venues, as well as occasionally small financial subsidies. She brought academics as well as people involved in Israeli folk dancing to the villages, who “trained them, documented, learned, and analyzed.” As a result of Kadman’s efforts during the fifties and early sixties, Goren remembered organized *dabkeh* groups to have been set up in Baqa el-Gharbiya and Pardes Khana. Later, a group followed in Tuba-Zangeriya.<sup>35</sup> Likewise, an Israeli folk dance practitioner, teacher and choreograph of Yemenite Jewish descent, Moshe Halevi<sup>36</sup> was employed by the Arabic department in the *Histadrut* for five years to research *dabkeh* in Galilean villages as well as help set up organized performance groups for presenting *dabkeh* on stage. Working in Druze villages on the Karmel mountain as well as in the Arab villages of Isfiya, Taibe and Tira, Halevi described his task in the following words: “I was in charge of creating and developing performance groups in the villages, so that one day they would be able to perform. [. . .] I was traveling from village to village and worked with them. In order to help them and enrich their own background, which was so poor.”<sup>37</sup>

The early efforts undertaken by Kadman, Halevi and others during the fifties and sixties to research *dabkeh* as well as support the

<sup>34</sup> Author’s interview with Ayalah Goren.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid.

<sup>36</sup> See (Berk and Reimer 1978; [anon.] 1998) for information on Moshe Halevi’s biography and involvement in Israeli folk dancing.

<sup>37</sup> Author’s interview with Moshe Halevi.

establishment of performance groups gained impetus in 1971, as the *Center for the Promotion of Ethnic Dance* (*ha-Mithal le-Tipuakh le-Rikudai 'Edot*) was set up in the *Histadrut* under the directorship of Gurit Kadman (Ingber 1977–78; Ingber 1987).<sup>38</sup> The establishment of a center for ethnic dancing gave institutional backing to the various efforts undertaken in the field of researching *dabkeh* and founding performance groups. It also received a budget earmarked solely for the purpose of supporting ethnic groups, thus making it possible on a larger scale than before to hire instructors for advising on how performance groups should be organized as well as finance the acquisition of costumes, instruments and transportation. In addition to financial and ideational support for the development of the groups, the center also provided information about festivals and performance venues, inside Israel as well as abroad.

#### *Promoting Al-Asayyel*

At the time of my research, the Israeli folk dance department of the *Histadrut* under Rina Meir had been much cut down in terms of budget and activities, and its ethnic dance center had ceased to exist.<sup>39</sup> Yet within the framework of institutions and agencies involved in folk dance activities in Israel, the *Histadrut* department maintained its function as an Israeli folk dance network and place of overall coordination. Its activities included passing on information about festivals and performance venues inside Israel, arranging workshops of folk dancing and teachers' seminars as well as providing logistical support for selected folk dance ensembles. Among the Arab contacts Rina Meir maintained at the time of my research, Yaḥyā Abū Jum'ah held a prominent place. As Meir assured me, "I have steady contact with him. He is the main person from the Arab sector today who is very well known." She regularly invited him to perform with

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<sup>38</sup> At the end of the 1970s, after Kadman stopped her engagement at the center, *LeTipuakh* was taken out of the name, changing *ha-Mithal LeTipuakh LeRikudai 'Edot* (*Center for the Promotion of Ethnic Dance*) to *ha-Mithal LeRikudai 'Edot* (*Center for Ethnic Dance*), as the term *tipuakh* (*promotion*) had gained a negative connotation in public usage.

<sup>39</sup> As Kadman retired from the center's directorship in the late seventies, the ethnic dance center in the *Histadrut* died down. An effort to relaunch its activities was made in 1988 by Rina Scharet. After three years, however, Scharet for her part quit the project due to personal reasons, and the center's activities officially came to a halt. Author's interview with Rina Sharett.

his group, to teach *dabkeh* at seminars organized by the folk dance department as well as to coordinate the presentation of Arab groups at events and festivals.<sup>40</sup>

Working his way into the Israeli Jewish support system for *dabkeh* in the early nineties, Yahyā Abū Jum‘ah not only relied on the support of the *Histadrut*, but started to be backed by various other Israeli Jewish officials. One of these was Ayalah Goren who had made a name for herself in researching the field of ethnic dancing in Israel and held a teaching position at the *Rubin Academy of Dance and Music* at *Hebrew University*. As Gurit Kadman’s daughter, as well as due to her personal involvement in the folk dancing scene and official position at the *Rubin Academy*, Goren had acquired an enormous network within the Israeli folk dance scene, not only in Israel, but also abroad.<sup>41</sup> Using her personal contacts as well as institutional resources, she organized performance venues and trips abroad for Arab groups as well as arranged for interested people to watch *dabkeh* performed in the Galilee.<sup>42</sup>

Ayalah Goren did not exactly remember when and how she first met Yahyā Abū Jum‘ah and his group *Al-Asayyel*. She recalled, however, that she had been very impressed: “I thought that they were very good and that he [Abū Jum‘ah] needed to be encouraged, pushed to the front to be more exposed. I remember the feeling of good potential in him as well as in the group. They had a good attitude.”<sup>43</sup> Having hitherto maintained close connections with a group in Baqa el-Gharbiya as well as in Qalansuwa, Goren from the early nineties onwards started using Abū Jum‘ah as her contact person and his group *Al-Asayyel* as her main Arab show group in workshops and presentations.<sup>44</sup> As she put it: “It became so natural and clear that I work with him and he became so central for the treatment of Arab dance.” Goren also paved the way for Abū Jum‘ah to be

<sup>40</sup> Author’s interview with Rina Meir.

<sup>41</sup> At the time of my research, Ayalah Goren’s husband held a teaching position at *Columbia University*. Commuting between Jerusalem and New York, Goren thus maintained close personal connections with people involved in Israeli folk dancing in New York.

<sup>42</sup> See for instance Haim Kaufman’s report of the trip which Ayalah Goren arranged for him and his group of ca. ten Americans to see various presentations of *rikudai ‘edot*. Among the groups that Goren took Kaufmann and his group to see was *Al-Asayyel* in Deir el-Asad (Kaufman 1996).

<sup>43</sup> Author’s interview with Ayalah Goren.

<sup>44</sup> See (Sowden 1993; Sowden 1996) on evenings of *dabkeh* dancing that Ayalah Goren arranged at the *Rubin Academy* in Jerusalem.

accepted for a two-year course for teachers of Israeli folk dancing at the *Wingate Institute*, a prestigious Israeli teachers' college for physical education. Abū Jum'ah was the first Arab ever to take it. Yet as Goren emphasized, the course was crucial for him, not only in terms of deepening his knowledge about his own dance practices and receiving official recognition as someone who had been professionally trained, but also in terms of receiving a higher salary for his teaching activities in schools and local councils.<sup>45</sup>

Another Israeli Jewish official supporting Yaḥyā Abū Jum'ah and his group *Al-Asayyel* was Yossi Ben Israel. In the nineties, Ben Israel counted as the main responsible in Israel for organizing the international exchange of folk dance groups. For one thing, he was director of MAATAF, the *Center for the Encouragement of Cultural Exchange and Folklore in Israel*, which he had founded in 1985 to promote performance groups of 'ethnic dancing' in Israel as well as organize their trips abroad. For another, Ben Israel served as the Israeli secretary of C.I.O.F.F., the *International Organization for Folklore and Folk-Arts Festivals*, which had been established in 1970 within the framework of the UNESCO.<sup>46</sup> Thus, Ben Israel was not only closely connected to the scene of folk dance groups in Israel, keeping lists of the existing ensembles, assessing their artistic work and organizing dance competitions. He also was closely tuned into a global network of people and institutions, which he could tap into for organizing trips abroad. For any Israeli folk dance group wanting to go abroad, Yossi Ben Israel was the person to know. He received information from around the world about folk dance events and festivals. He closely worked with the Israeli government, specifically with the ministries of education, tourism and foreign relations who forwarded requests for dance troupes to him and allocated funding. In addition, he possessed the organizational structure and personal contacts for successfully lobbying foreign embassies, governments and institutions for supporting the exchange activities.

Ben Israel recounted being impressed when first meeting Abū Jum'ah and his group: "In preparing for the *Festival of Ethnic Arts*,<sup>47</sup> I usually visit all the villages in the Galilee, see what groups they have and

<sup>45</sup> Author's interview with Ayalah Goren.

<sup>46</sup> See (Ronen 1999) on the general role of C.I.O.F.F. as well as Israel's membership in the organization.

<sup>47</sup> Yossi Ben Israel started the *Festival of Ethnic Arts (Festival Omanut ha-Etniot)* in 1994 as a nation-wide competition for ethnic dance groups in Israel.



what they do. I found Yahyā Abū Jum‘ah. I came to see the group and to see how he works. I liked it. I thought that he was very good.” Ever since, Abū Jum‘ah maintained close relations with Ben Israel, who supported and, as he put it, “pushed Yahyā.” Three times, the group carried home a first prize in the *Festival of Ethnic Arts (Festival Omanut ha-Etniot)* organized annually by Ben Israel. Yet these awards not only bestowed honor and money on Abū Jum‘ah. More importantly, it opened the door for traveling abroad with the support of MAATAF. When asking Ben Israel how many times he had arranged a trip for Abū Jum‘ah, he couldn’t exactly answer: It had been too many.<sup>48</sup>

### *Imperial nostalgia and control*

The interaction between Israeli Jewish officials on the one hand, and Abū Jum‘ah and his group *Al-Asayyel* on the other, did not take place on equal grounds. From the very beginning, the relationship between Israeli Jewish officials and Arab *dabkeh* practitioners had been staked out in terms of a power inequality in which Israeli Jewish officials held the power to define and control the terms of the interaction. Two inter-related factors hereby shaped this relationship. For one thing, Israeli Jewish dance leaders defined their relationship with Arab *dabkeh* in terms of what Renato Rosaldo aptly describes as “imperial nostalgia,” a feeling of loss experienced by people who deplore the vanishing of cultural practices and life-styles which they themselves actually caused to change (Rosaldo 1989). Confronted with the changing sociocultural realities of Israeli Arab life inside the newly established state, Israeli Jewish officials saw it as their task to document, safe, preserve or, as James Clifford would put it, “salvage” the Arab *dabkeh* by acts of ethnographic and folklorist interventions (Clifford 1987). As Ayalah Goren for instance described the motivation driving her mother’s engagement:

From early on, my mother felt a desire to include the Arabs in her activities. Being very pro-Arab, leftist, socialist, of course, that was the idea. You don’t leave the Arabs behind when you know and see in front of you how the Arab dance influences our dance. So she said that there has to be research and documentation in order to teach it to the people from the ethnic groups and other people. It has to be kept alive and has to be developed so that the groups themselves do not lose interest in their own culture.<sup>49</sup>

<sup>48</sup> Author’s interview with Yossi Ben Israel.

<sup>49</sup> Author’s interview with Ayalah Goren.

The interest displayed by Israeli Jewish officials in Arab dance practices, however, not merely served to appease sentimental attachment to things considered in danger of being 'forever lost.' Instead, it also constituted a means of exerting control over the cultural expression of Israel's Arabs, who, categorized as a 'hostile minority' were generally seen to be in need of careful observation and surveillance. I do not mean to suggest that controlling the cultural expression of Israeli Arabs necessarily constituted a conscious motivational force for dance leaders to engage with *dabkeh*. Indeed, Israeli folk dance discourse generally denies any direct alliance between folk dance activities and politics, and instead describes Israeli Jewish engagement with *dabkeh* as a means of 'bridging gaps' and 'crossing borders.' Yet with the roles clearly distributed between Israeli Jewish officials who studied *dabkeh* and held defintory power, on the one hand, and Arab *dabkeh* practitioners whom they treated as their silent objects of study, on the other, Israeli Jewish officials consciously or unconsciously acquired control over the terms which defined *dabkeh* as a cultural expression of Israeli Arabness. Indeed, funded partly by a state whose policy directly aimed at controlling its Arab minority, the officials' involvement with *dabkeh* conspicuously mirrored the close intertwining of political interests and ethnographic endeavors variously exposed in recent anthropological studies.<sup>50</sup> This is especially evident when considering that the early activities of Israeli Jewish officials in the fifties and sixties took place behind the backdrop of a military government imposed on Israel's Arabs in 1948 and that public perception of them as Other endured long past the lifting of the military rule in 1966.

*Doing it right—the authentic dabkeh according to Israeli Jewish officials*

Staked out in terms of an unequal power relationship, the interaction between Israeli Jewish officials and Arab *dabkeh* practitioners directly influenced the ways in which *Al-Asayyel* presented *dabkeh* on stage. In general, Israeli Jewish officials envisioned that Israeli Arab groups should perform *dabkeh* 'right,' that is, they should present *dabkeh* in ways which the folk dance officials considered 'authentic.' In a letter sent to folk dance ensembles in Israel in 1994 inviting

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<sup>50</sup> Among such recent critical investigations into the link between ethnography and the colonial project, Nicholas Dirks' work on the 'policing of tradition' in Southern India and Nicholas Thomas' *Colonialism's Culture* constitute two particularly interesting studies (Thomas 1994; Dirks 1997).

them to participate in the first *Festival of Ethnic Arts*, Yossi Ben Israel, for instance, listed the criteria according to which the groups would be judged as follows: The participating groups should have “authentic instruments,” play “authentic tunes, or such based on authentic tunes,” their costumes should be “as authentic as possible,” and the choreography should be “authentic,” or at least “based on the authentic.”<sup>51</sup> Asked what this concretely implied, Israeli Jewish officials working with *Al-Asayyel* defined the authenticity of *dabkeh* in straightforward terms, referring to the body of research done mostly by Israeli Jews on *dabkeh*.<sup>52</sup> They explained that in terms of music, ‘authentic’ referred to the different flutes and drums historically used in the region. They stressed that they tried to influence the Arab groups to stick to these, as they categorized them, ‘traditional’ instruments, versus modern electric ones such as the popular synthesizer. Ben Israel, in particular, rejected the use of any such modern instrumentation in the presentations of *dabkeh* groups at his festival: “I don’t like the music with the electric organ. I want the *arghūl*. When they come to the festival, they don’t come with the synthesizer, they only come with flutes and drums.”<sup>53</sup> Rina Meir similarly stated that: “When I first started, we never allowed Arabic groups to have an organ in the orchestra. They could only use the original instruments.” Yet Meir recounted that she increasingly felt the need to compromise. Except at events like the *Ethnic Dance Festival* in which she as a jury member continued to push for strictly maintaining the principle of the ‘authentic,’ she gave in and allowed more leeway in the choice of instrumentation.<sup>54</sup> Similarly, Ayalah Goren showed herself to be somewhat flexible with Arab groups using ‘inauthentic’ electric instruments. Although trying to exert her influence to push the use of instruments she considered authentic, Goren admitted that musicians who actually still played the historic instruments were rare in the Arab communities and thus, out of necessity, she at times consented to using the keyboard:

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<sup>51</sup> Citation translated by author from a letter sent by Yossi Ben Israel to dance groups throughout Israel to encourage them to participate in the first *Festival of Ethnic Arts* organized by MAATAF in 1994. I found a copy of the letter in the archive of *Karnei Makhol* from Karmi’el.

<sup>52</sup> For Israeli Jewish studies on Arab *dabkeh* dancing see in particular (Eshkol and Seidel 1974; Ashkenazi 1977; Bahat-Razon 1978/79).

<sup>53</sup> Author’s interview with Yossi Ben Israel.

<sup>54</sup> Author’s interview with Rina Meir.

I invite Arab groups and give lectures about the use of instruments. I tell them that they should stick to the original instruments which are so beautiful, the different flutes and drums. But they love the synthesizer and electronics. They love it. Sometimes I say, you know, if you come with this, you can't come to the *Rubin Academy* or, you cannot perform in this and that event. But they adjusted the scales of the keyboard and the imitation is so good that sometimes I broke down and said, if that's what you have it's okay.<sup>55</sup>

Similarly, Israeli Jewish officials defined a certain style of presenting *dabkeh* on stage as 'right' in contrast to styles they considered inauthentic and 'kitschy.' For one thing, the folk dance officials hereby rejected what they saw as a 'random invention of steps.' As Ayalah Goren explained, she severely sanctioned any such innovations in the groups she worked with. Conceding that certain variations of the known patterns and steps were acceptable just so as to prevent boring repetition, she insisted, however, that any such creative innovations should clearly remain within the limits of the familiar. As she related to me:

Some groups invent steps. When they don't know me well, they are very proud and tell me, 'I invented this step.' 'Shame on you,' I say. I am not against invention. I am just saying that they have to be careful. They have to know what remains within the scope of the important elements of their particular style of dance. You don't always have to do the same thing, but don't fly all the way out.

In order to give guidance to the groups in terms of what constituted acceptable innovation and what implied going overboard, Goren recounted having set up workshops for Arab trainers of *dabkeh* during the early nineties: "In order to give them the chance to be more knowledgeable about their background, their culture, their music."<sup>56</sup> Likewise, Scharet explained that throughout her activity as the head of the *Center for Ethnic Dance* as well as her current function as a jury member at the *Ethnic Dance Festival*, she tried to influence Arab *dabkeh* groups to stick to the presentation of their known canon of steps and movement patterns, thus maintaining the 'right' style versus diluting and faking the *dabkeh*: "Especially also the little remarks help to keep the style right. You cannot dictate, but you can exert some influence, you can help that people have the knowledge and the

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<sup>55</sup> Author's interview with Ayalah Goren.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*

right professional information to choose the right material and the right form for their presentations.”<sup>57</sup>

Israeli Jewish officials also put a special effort into keeping the costumes ‘right.’ According to Goren, Arab *dabkeh* ensembles displayed the tendency to improvise on their costuming in ways that, in her opinion, went way beyond anything acceptable or even recognizable as ‘Arab’ anymore. To her, the “cheap shininess” of these costumes had nothing to do with the “real Arab” wear for the *dabkeh* consisting of *‘abāyah*, *‘sirwāl* and *‘kūfīyyeh*. Groups abandoning the ‘right’ dress in favor of such “phantasy” clothing found little favor in Goren’s eyes:

I love the real costumes with the *‘abāyah* and the *‘sirwāl* and the *‘kūfīyyeh*, with the boots. But they start hanging on all kinds of horrible costumes. There is no end to how ugly they are. And when there is a competition, down they go, with such a costume. No group can get a first place with such a costume. We can tell them, the dance is not bad, but with such a costume, we can’t do it. It is a *‘mischmasch*, no style, nothing.<sup>58</sup>

According to Goren, the groups that she worked with were well aware of her expectations in this matter. Even if they used such costuming for other venues, at her events, the groups knew how to dress: “The people that I use don’t come to me with new shiny costumes. Although they like it, they think it is more attractive and it attracts people, they know I don’t accept it.”<sup>59</sup> Like Goren, Ben Israel stated that the ‘shiny’ costumes preferred by some stood no chance in his *Ethnic Dance Festival*. Costumes had to be ‘authentic’ or at least based on the ‘authentic.’ Shiny new materials or innovative cuts did not fall under this category.<sup>60</sup>

In addition to music, steps and costuming, Israeli Jewish officials defined the authenticity of *dabkeh* in terms of gender roles on stage. To them, ‘authentic’ *dabkeh* was the one done by men—or boys—only. Conceding that many contemporary Israeli Arab ensembles were co-ed groups made up of both men and women—or boys and girls—they insisted that for the sake of authenticity, men and women should perform separately, as Ben Israel insisted: “If you talk about authentic ethnic dancing, you cannot mix the sexes. You cannot say that the Bedouins danced together, ever. Girls and boys dancing together on stage is *kitsch*. Don’t tell me that it is Bedouin dance. If

<sup>57</sup> Author’s interview with Rina Scharet.

<sup>58</sup> Author’s interview with Ayalah Goren.

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>60</sup> Author’s interview with Yossi Ben Israel.

I want to see Bedouin dance, I want to see Bedouin dance and that is done separately.”<sup>61</sup> Pointing to the social changes within the contemporary Israeli Arab community, Ayalah Goren did not judge the changes in gender roles occurring in Arab *dabkeh* presentations as harshly as Ben Israel. Yet also to her, the *dabkeh* presentation that featured men and women separately generally constituted the better presentation:

I think there is a major change in Arab society. Not only are the teenage girls and even the younger ones, married women a) ready to dance on stage and b) ready to dance with boys. Also their environment is ready to allow this, it does not prevent or prohibit it. [...] Yet the good groups are careful. If they want to be authentic, they don't put women and men together on stage.<sup>62</sup>

Rina Meir from the *Histadrut* argued similarly. Welcoming the new visibility of Israeli Arab women and girls on stage as a sign of female empowerment, Meir, at the same time, bemoaned it as a loss of authenticity. While not seeking to ban women and girls from the stage, she insisted that ‘authentic’ *dabkeh* was done by men:

Look, the *debkah* lost a little bit of its speciality. It used to be done by men only, that was the nature of the dance. The dance had to do with the ground, with the land, with working the land. It had a special value, and it lost some of it. But we gained the women. So, we always want . . . [pause] if we send groups to represent us in other countries, we do not say that they cannot go because they have girls. But we insist that at least one *debkah* will be danced by men only.<sup>63</sup>

#### *Israeli Jewish influence on Al-Asayyel's dabkeh*

Claiming the power to define what made *dabkeh* on stage authentic, Israeli Jewish officials held means to enforce their point of view. Yossi Ben Israel openly stated that he refused to send groups abroad which did not comply with his artistic expectations.<sup>64</sup> Goren likewise

<sup>61</sup> Ibid.

<sup>62</sup> Author's interview with Ayalah Goren.

<sup>63</sup> Author's interview with Rina Meir.

<sup>64</sup> Referring to a Druze *dabkeh* group using costumes modeled on the dress style used normally by Israeli folk dance groups, Ben Israel said that he had not sent this group abroad for years. In his mind, their costumes were impossible, a far cry from what he counted as ‘authentic’ Druze dress: “There is this group from Daliyat el-Karmel. Druze. They wear Israeli dress and dance the *debkah*. It is *kitsch*. I never send them anywhere. I told them: This is not for me. It is very good, they want to be Israeli. But if you want to dance the *debkah*, with the *arghül* and the *shabābah*, use the right dress.” Author's interview with Yossi Ben Israel.

stated that she refrained from inviting groups to her workshops and performance venues that did not meet her artistic expectations. On the contrary, the Israeli Jewish folk dance officials emphasized that they supported the work of cooperative Arab *dabkeh* leaders like Yaḥyā Abū Jum‘ah. As Goren described her working relationship with Abū Jum‘ah and his group: “There are now a few excellent groups in the Galilee. But Yaḥyā Abū Jum‘ah is the easiest to work with. [. . .] There is a Yiddish saying, *verbrannt*, he is burning with desire, deeply enthusiastic about it, like fire. He will jump around, do this or that.”<sup>65</sup> Ben Israel similarly highlighted Abū Jum‘ah’s willingness to cooperate: “You can work with Yaḥyā. You can speak with him. He understands you, you understand him. I found quite a lot of folk dance leaders with whom you cannot speak. I don’t like this. But Yaḥyā, I like. He grew up, he got very good.”<sup>66</sup>

Abū Jum‘ah’s interaction with Israeli Jewish officials not only served to secure support for his activities and provide access to performance venues and trips, but also directly influenced the ways in which *Al-Asayyel* presented *dabkeh* on stage. *Al-Asayyel*’s appearance at the *Festival of Ethnic Arts* in Tel Aviv in December 1998 epitomizes the ways in which Israeli Jewish officials directly influenced the group’s presentation. In the weeks before the festival, Abū Jum‘ah had prepared *Al-Asayyel*’s presentation in accordance with the guidelines of the Israeli Jewish jury which expected the groups’ presentations to be ‘authentic,’ but at the same time well-adapted to the stage setting. Thus, the presentations should be based as much as possible on the familiar style, movement patterns and steps of the individual dance forms, feature ‘authentic’ costuming as well as ‘traditional’ music. Yet also they were supposed to be capturing to watch and short, featuring within a maximum of five minutes the highlights of dance forms known to be able to go on for hours.

*Al-Asayyel*’s presentation at the festival, however, was not merely informed by these general guidelines, but also directly by Yossi Ben Israel as the festival’s director. First of all, *Al-Asayyel*’s very participation in the festival in 1998 was prompted by Ben Israel. Generally, the jury did not allow first prize winners of the previous year to take part in the competition. Having obtained first place at the festival in 1995, *Al-Asayyel* accordingly did not participate in 1996. Awarded

<sup>65</sup> Author’s interview with Ayalah Goren.

<sup>66</sup> Author’s interview with Yossi Ben Israel.

a first prize again in 1997, Abū Jum‘ah and, in particular also the group’s members, first had not wanted to participate at all in the competition in 1998 and asked the festival’s organization to be invited as guests of honor. However, as general participation of ethnic groups was low during that year and Ben Israel felt short of attractive presentations which would capture the audience and maintain the artistic quality of the competition, he intervened and personally asked Abū Jum‘ah to take part with *Al-Asayyel*. The issue of whether *Al-Asayyel* should or should not participate was hotly debated inside the group. Even a week before the final round in Tel Aviv, it was not clear whether the group would indeed participate, or whether they would simply put in an honorary appearance. Arguing that the jury would certainly not allot the first prize two years in a row to the same ensemble, the group’s members wanted to appear simply as guests of honor. To them, receiving anything less than first place was out of the question and they would rather not be in Tel Aviv at all than face somebody else beating them to it. Yet, if *Al-Asayyel* participated solely as a guest of honor, they would forfeit their chance of receiving a prize, as Ben Israel told Abū Jum‘ah.<sup>67</sup> Abū Jum‘ah gave in and during the remaining days put a last, concerted effort into preparing the group for its appearance.

Ben Israel not merely pushed for *Al-Asayyel*’s participation in the competition, but also exerted direct influence on the ways in which the group staged *dabkeh* in the final round in Tel Aviv. The degree to which *Al-Asayyel*’s *dabkeh* was directly influenced by Ben Israel becomes clear when comparing the group’s presentation during the first round of the competition held in Majd el-Krum on 27 November 1998 with its second presentation in the final round in Tel Aviv two weeks later. For the first round in Majd el-Krum where three Arabs ensembles participated, Abū Jum‘ah had prepared a five-minute choreography for *Al-Asayyel*. In accordance with what Abū Jum‘ah knew the jury’s expectations to be, he had designed the choreography like in the years before to include only the male members of the group. He had also refrained from using the electric keyboard usually accompanying the group’s performances and limited the musical accompaniment to the rhythm of a single *darbūkah*. The choreography itself consisted of two parts. During the first part, the performers presented a skillful routine using canes (*‘akākīz*), a new

<sup>67</sup> Author’s conversation with Abū Jum‘ah and interview with Yossi Ben Israel.



element in the group's usual repertoire. During the second, the focus of the presentation shifted from the novel element of dancing with canes to the familiar sight of the *shimālīyyeh*, the kind of *dabkeh* known to be performed in the Galilee at social events and usually rendered as part of *Al-Asayyel's* regular program. Here, only minor changes in handholds and footwork were added.

Compared to its first appearance in Majd el-Krum, *Al-Asayyel's* presentation in the final round of Tel Aviv was noticeably changed: Its choreography was cut by half. Allotting first place to *Al-Asayyel* in the local round against its fellow competitors, first *Al-Majd* from Majd el-Krum also under Abū Jum'ah's direction, and second a group from Kabul, the jury had pointed out a few details which they liked to be improved for the presentation in the final round. In particular, Ben Israel told Abū Jum'ah to combine *Al-Asayyel's* presentation with the one of *Al-Majd*. As Ben Israel explained to me a week after the Tel Aviv event: "I wanted to mix it. One group had girls and boys, the other was only boys. I didn't want them to be two different groups, because they do the same dance. If each group does it for two minutes, it is good. If each does it for five, you kill it, because there are not so many different movements. I told Yaḥyā this."<sup>68</sup> Abū Jum'ah followed Ben Israel's instructions. He cut *Al-Asayyel's* presentation by half, presenting in Tel Aviv only the first part of the choreography with the canes. His efforts paid off. Both of the groups that Abū Jum'ah had brought to the festival were awarded a prize. Out of the twelve participating ensembles, *Al-Asayyel* obtained second place together with the Israeli folk dance group *Horah Ashkelon*. *Al-Majd* placed first.

#### *Crisis—The limits of Israeli Jewish influence*

Returning home with two medals and the prize money for both the first and second place, Abū Jum'ah had actually received more than he had bargained for. Besides, as he explained to me afterwards, it was clear that the jury could not have awarded the first prize to *Al-Asayyel*. As Ben Israel had assured him after the festival, the Deir el-Asad group with its older male members was generally considered as the more interesting group. However, it was clear that the jury could not nominate the same ensemble every year. Already the Israeli Jewish groups were complaining about the fact that only Arab groups

<sup>68</sup> Author's interview with Yossi Ben Israel.

seemed to stand a chance of placing first. Thus, they had sought out a compromise, honoring *Al-Asayyel's* accomplishments while at the same time preventing discontent and tensions among the other participants.<sup>69</sup>

Obviously satisfied with the result himself, Abū Jum'ah, however, had not reckoned with the anger of his group. *Al-Asayyel* members had participated in Tel Aviv to win. As the group members had repeatedly stated before the competition, anything less than first prize seemed a personal failure to them. Aware that their position as last year's winner was a difficult one, the group had trained doubly hard in the time before the event, meeting up to four times per week to perfect their presentation. In fact, quite a few of *Al-Asayyel's* participants, including some of the longer-standing members, had refused outrightly to take part in the competition. Convinced that the jurors were unlikely to nominate the same ensemble for two consecutive years no matter how good the ensemble was, they declared that they rather not take part at all than not place first. As a consequence, *Al-Asayyel* had appeared on the Tel Aviv stage with only six performers, as compared to the ten participating during the first round in Majd el-Krum. Thus, as the group achieved only second place, and worse, second place behind the only other Arab group participating and, still worse, the Arab group coming from the neighboring village whom *Al-Asayyel* members knew well and considered way below their own artistic level, emotions ran high.

Directly holding Abū Jum'ah responsible for their 'failure' in Tel Aviv, *Al-Asayyel* members advanced various reasons explaining what had lead to their demise. They blamed their leader for cutting down their program too much. They argued that the choreography as they had first performed it in Majd el-Krum had been more complete, balancing an innovative part where they had used the canes with a conventional part featuring the *shimāliyyeh*. The shortened choreography performed in Tel Aviv, in contrast, which only presented the part with the canes had little resemblance with a conventional *dabkeh* and therefore it was no surprise that the jurors had preferred *Al-Majd's* presentation. Besides, *Al-Asayyel's* members argued that in contrast to their own group, all the other groups had had five minutes, which was the time needed to present a full, well-rounded program. Even *Al-Majd* had had more time than *Al-Asayyel*. It should have

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<sup>69</sup> Author's conversation with Abū Jum'ah and interview with Yossi Ben Israel.

been Abū Jum‘ah’s responsibility to ensure that they had equal conditions or refrain from participating in the competition at all. In particular, however, the group’s female members argued that it was their absence on the Tel Aviv stage that had led to the group’s ‘disastrous’ second place. Having come along as a spectator to support and cheer on *Al-Asayyel*’s male members, Amīrah<sup>70</sup> afterwards angrily questioned the unspoken dictum that in the *Ethnic Dance Festival*, *Al-Asayyel* staged *dabkeh* as a men’s only activity. She argued that *Al-Majd* had won first prize not despite, but *because* the group had performed with girls. *Al-Majd* girls and boys dancing together on stage had rendered a much more beautiful scene than *Al-Asayyel*, who had seemed somewhat forlorn with its six male dancers spread across the stage. According to Amīrah, the group could have easily won against *Majd el-Krum*, if Abū Jum‘ah had included girls in the competition. As she insisted, including the girls would not even have caused changes in the choreography of the guys’ cane dance. The girls could have been simply included on the sides and in the background, just to fill the stage and make the scene look more beautiful and complete.

The frustration which winning the second place at the festival caused among *Al-Asayyel*’s members reverberated within the group for weeks to come. Some of its long-standing members threatened to quit the group and the male lead dancer actually left for a month. As long as they had judged Abū Jum‘ah capable of leading the group to success, they had willingly complied with his way of staging *dabkeh*. Yet after Tel Aviv, where Abū Jum‘ah in their eyes had failed to deliver the promised success, they revolted. Although Abū Jum‘ah eventually managed to smoothe over the crisis, its negative vibes remained tangible for weeks.

Most pronouncedly, this was felt in relation to the way that the group’s female members started to redefine their position. After the Tel Aviv competition, I heard the women for the first time since my arrival two months earlier openly voice criticism at the role allotted to them on stage as well as within the group itself. When I had started my fieldwork with *Al-Asayyel* at the end of October 1998, only three women were regularly attending the rehearsals. The space allotted to them in the rehearsals was minor, with mostly the *shabāb* called upon to practice the choreographies they usually performed alone and the *banāt* improvising for themselves during the breaks or

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<sup>70</sup> Name changed.

included at the very end. In particular during the weeks leading up to the festival, the women had not actively been included in the rehearsals, but mostly came to socialize and watch the guys' preparations. Although the girls were thus excluded from the active participation in these rehearsals for at least three weeks, I did not hear a loud complaint at that time. During the breaks, they simply got up, took the canes used for the guys' choreography and, almost like a silent rebellion to prove that they were capable of doing it just like the *shabāb*, rehearsed the piece on their own. Spurred by *Al-Asayyel*'s 'failure' at the festival which the girls at least partly attributed to their absence in Tel Aviv, the question of their position both on stage as well as generally within the group emerged as a much discussed issue. The girls pressed the group leader to increase the number of female participants as well as grant them a bigger role on stage. As they saw it, their dwindling number of three compared to a majority of ten to fifteen guys, naturally lent support to their marginalization in the group. The fewer the number of female participants, the more Abū Jum'ah tended to concentrate on the *shabāb* and practice those pieces which only required a limited number of girls, if any at all. In contrast, during the mid-nineties, when *Al-Asayyel* had counted a fairly equal number of male and female participants, the girls' presence both within the group as well as on stage had been a lot more pronounced, as two of the former female dancers assured me.

The girls' complaints in the aftermath of the festival did not go unnoticed. First of all, Abū Jum'ah indeed started to put an effort into increasing the number of female participants. He started bringing his own daughter to the rehearsals who was only fourteen and hitherto had participated only sporadically in the group's activities. In addition, he prompted the other female dancers to bring their friends. Also, Abū Jum'ah lobbied former women members like the two elder daughters of my host family to come back, not for rehearsals, but for the performances. As the repertoire had not changed much, both had no problem joining the group's presentations at various times during the winter and spring of 1998–99. Together with a few other girls from the village who started showing up more or less regularly for the rehearsals, the number of female members thus considerably increased in the months after the Tel Aviv festival.

Yet the girls' complaints not merely lead to an effort to increase their number. At the same time, the girls actively pushed for gaining a greater presence in the group's activities. Seeing that their

marginalized position on stage was often justified by referring to their lacking artistic skills, they demanded to be trained. One of them went to the lead male dancer, asking him to teach the girls: "I asked him: 'Why don't you let the girls do *dabkeh*.' He answered me: 'They don't know *dabkeh*.' I asked him: 'Why don't you teach them?' He said: 'The girls are not going to be able to do it.' I told him: 'Just try!'" Another, who had joined the group three years ago and still hardly knew more than the basic steps, similarly challenged the male lead dancer on teaching her more: "I told him: 'Teach me the *shimāliyyeh*.' He said: 'You are not going to be able to do it.' I said: 'Why do you talk like that. You do not give me a chance. Teach me.' He then finally agreed and showed me the steps." Similarly, in the months after the festival, Abū Jum'ah's training routine changed. He started taking up again some of the older pieces that included specific parts for female performers. In addition, he also started rehearsing some new choreographic arrangements that maintained a greater balance of male versus female roles on stage. Various, he even designed scenes just for female dancers. *Al-Asayyel*'s women members met this development with enthusiasm. As they repeatedly assured me, it was a lot more fun for them to actively take part in the group's activities rather than just sit and watch. Self-confidently rejecting the notion that the *dabkeh* with *shabāb* alone was the better *dabkeh*, they enthusiastically set out to prove their ability of living up to the artistic demands of their newly regained stage presence. As one of the women related to me in February, about two months after the festival in Tel Aviv: "Now we have arrangements just for *shabāb* and some for *shabāb* and *banāt*. I prefer that. That we, the *banāt*, have a greater role. That's it. A *dabkeh* group is a *dabkeh* group, it is for *shabāb* and *banāt*. Not just for *shabāb*."

### *Talking back*

The aftermath of the 'failure' of Tel Aviv impressively illustrated ways in which Israeli Jewish influence on *Al-Asayyel*'s staging of *dabkeh* had limits. Against a general background of Arab-Jewish inequality where Israeli Jews maintained definitory power over *dabkeh* and controlled the distribution of funds, the group members, in turn, themselves had ways and means to shape their group's activities. How *Al-Asayyel* presented *dabkeh* on stage was not only imposed from above. Rather, within the general framework of an unequal Arab-Jewish

power relationship, the group's presentation simultaneously was subject to processes of negotiation among the group members as well as between the group and its leader. As a most drastic means, the group members could withdraw their support for Abū Jum'ah and threaten to bring the group to fall, as it had happened in the aftermath of the Tel Aviv festival.

Refusal to cooperate was not the only means through which *Al-Asayyel* was able to 'talk back' to Israeli Jewish officials. Learning to 'speak their language,' Abū Jum'ah and his group also came to directly influence the ways in which Israeli Jewish officials defined *dabkeh* as an 'authentic' cultural expression of Israeli Arabs in the first place. Starting to work with Israeli Jewish officials in the early nineties, Abū Jum'ah stated that he and his group underwent a learning process which taught them what exactly was important to Israeli Jewish officials in stage presentations of *dabkeh*. Participating in various performance venues, festivals and competitive events organized under Israeli Jewish auspices during this time, Abū Jum'ah recalled that when first taking part in the *Festival of Ethnic Arts* in 1995, "I started to understand what the jurors were looking for. I used to go on stage and do one hour, half an hour of a performance. But the trick is to do five minutes, ten minutes, but a strong program, that includes a lot." Likewise, starting to appear at the Karmi'el festival in the early nineties, Abū Jum'ah indicated that he and the group, "we learned from our mistakes." Recounting how they had first appeared on the big stage in Karmi'el with only twenty-five dancers, he said that the group had looked like "the poor ones." The next year, consequently, Abū Jum'ah mobilized over one hundred Arab *dabkeh* performers, filling the stage of the Karmi'el amphitheater and receiving thunderous applause.

Learning to adjust their presentations to meet Israeli Jewish approval, Abū Jum'ah and his group, at the same time, shaped the presentation of *dabkeh* according to their own vision. Playing into the folklorist notion that each region is characterized by its own specific cultural traits, Abū Jum'ah claimed that he was careful to lend individual character to each of the fifteen *dabkeh* groups which he had been teaching throughout the Galilee since the early nineties. As he proudly stated, "I gave this troupe this image and the other another image." *Al-Asayyel*, for instance, was characterized by the special way the group left the stage with a step called *ʿirāqiyyeh* as well as a star

formation called *al-nijmeh*. For the group he was training in the village of Mi'iliya, in contrast, Abū Jum'ah designed an additional small jump in the walking pattern of the *shimālīyyeh*.

Likewise, while staging *dabkeh* in ways that were acceptable to his Israeli Jewish sponsors, Abū Jum'ah and his group simultaneously added their own artistic vision. Presenting a "disciplined" and "orderly" choreography which was performed with "ironed costumes" and "our heads held high," Abū Jum'ah carefully met the jury's expectations of staged folk dance at the *Festival of Ethnic Dance* in Netanya in 1995. Yet the piece which was awarded a first prize clearly bore Abū Jum'ah's individual mark as a choreographer and artist. As Abū Jum'ah explained: "Normally in *dabkeh*, there is only one at the beginning with prayer beads (*masbahah*) and that is the leader (*rawīs*). For Netanya, I gave all of the performers the prayer beads and made all of them leaders. That was new. The jurors liked the way they used the prayer beads a lot and we got the first prize." Similarly, aware of the importance that costuming held for the folk dance officials, Abū Jum'ah ordered costumes to be made. Having first used just any dress available from parents and grandparents for his presentations, he became concerned with making the performers look alike. Yet again, wearing the 'authentic' *'abāyah* and *twāb* so well liked by the Israeli Jewish audience, Abū Jum'ah introduced careful changes. Making his group wear boots, he explained that he knew that this was not really 'authentic.' Yet as the boots so nicely rounded off the guys' costumes and the jurors appreciated them, he preferred them to regular shoes.

The more successfully *Al-Asayyel* cooperated with Israeli Jewish officials, the more leeway the group actually gained to self-determine its presentation. Meeting Israeli Jewish expectations about 'authentic' *dabkeh*, *Al-Asayyel* increasingly was invited to perform before Israeli Jewish audiences in workshops, seminars and festivals. The more often the group appeared at such events, the more it managed to establish its reputation in Israeli Jewish circles as an authority concerning the 'authentic' presentation of *dabkeh*. As long as its presentation generally stayed within the guidelines staked out by Israeli Jewish officials, the group could thus shape 'authentic' *dabkeh* in terms of its own creativity. As the group's wearing of boots illustrated, they could weave their own artistic vision into the presentations even while playing up to Israeli Jewish expectations and maintaining access to official resources. Not a passive ploy in the hands of Israeli Jewish

officials, *Al-Asayyel's dabkeh* resulted from a complex negotiation process between folk dance officials, Abū Jum‘ah and the dancers, a process which distinctly shaped the group’s performance in an Israeli Jewish context in contrast to its presentations before Palestinian or Israeli Arab audiences.

*“Don’t Sell Out!”—The Palestinian discourse of preservation*

The year in which Abū Jum‘ah founded *Al-Asayyel*, also marked the height of the intifada and Israeli Arab identification with Palestinians rising up in Israeli occupied West Bank and Gaza was running high. Going beyond the interaction between Israeli Arabs and Israeli Jews, I concentrate on how *Al-Asayyel's* stage activities were profoundly influenced by the relationship between Israeli Arabs, on the one hand, and, on the other, Palestinians in West Bank and Gaza.

*Re-Palestinizing Israeli Arabs, 1967–1987*

From the time that Israel occupied West Bank and Gaza in 1967 until the outbreak of the intifada twenty years later, the literature defines the relationship between Israeli Arabs and the Palestinian national movement in terms of an increasing “Re-Palestinization” of Israeli Arabs (Rouhana 1997: 67–73). Before the Israeli occupation of West Bank and Gaza, the Palestinian identity of the Arabs who had stayed in Israel after the war of 1948 had remained more or less “submerged” (ibid.: 66–67). The war of 1948 had swallowed Palestinian nationalism as first constituted in the time of the late Ottoman Empire and British mandate and removed Palestinians from the world scene as political actors. Thus, like other Palestinians who had been dispersed throughout the neighboring Arab states, Israeli Arabs from the time after 1948 up until the sixties did not primarily define collective identity in terms of a shared Palestinianness. Instead, they turned to pan-Arabism as a means of collective identification and empowerment (ibid.).

Increasingly during the sixties and, in particular, after the disastrous defeat of the Arab armies against Israel in the June war of 1967, Israeli Arabs, however, came to re-identify as Palestinians. For one thing, Israeli Arabs were not unsusceptible to the generally changing political climate in the region during the sixties marked by the reconstitution of an independent Palestinian national movement. In addition, the Israeli occupation of West Bank and Gaza in 1967



broke the isolation under which they had been living since the establishment of the Israeli state in 1948. Physically integrated into Israel and placed under military regime, they had remained cut off from the Arab world and, in particular, from fellow Palestinians, leaving radio and in the sixties more and more also TV as the only means for communicating with the outside. As Israel occupied West Bank and Gaza in 1967 and in the seventies increasingly implemented its policy of practical annexation, Israeli Arabs personally reconnected with Palestinians in the occupied territories. Israeli Arabs started arranging business contacts with traders in the West Bank. They commuted to work on the same Israeli Jewish construction sites and agricultural plants as Palestinians from the territories. They used services in West Bank cities and studied or worked in West Bank educational facilities. As a result of such daily interaction, Israeli Arabs regained a sense of community with Palestinians in the territories, especially through sharing an experience of suffering under Israeli policies. Seeing Palestinians in the territories treated in much the same way as themselves spurred their feelings of togetherness (Rouhana 1997: 67–73).

Furthermore, changes in the relationship between Palestinians and the frontier Arab states contributed to the re-Palestinization of Israeli Arabs. Embroiled in the politics of the Arab states, the Palestinian national movement suffered severe blows at the hands of their Arab host states, notably during the Black September in Jordan in 1970, under Syrian fire during the outbreak of the civil war in Lebanon in 1976 as well as during the Israeli invasion of Lebanon in 1982. The opening of a political process between Egypt and Israel that culminated in the *Camp David Accords* in 1979 also was negatively experienced by Palestinians, as they felt betrayed by Egypt whom they saw as putting its own national interest over the aims of the Palestinian national movement.<sup>71</sup> Spurring feelings of victimization and shared national tragedy, these events generally heightened the sense of belonging to a shared nation among Palestinians, especially also among Israeli Arabs (Rouhana 1997: 70).

These feelings were heightened during the eighties as the focus of the Israeli-Palestinian confrontation turned ‘inward,’ that is, away from the PLO in exile directly to the occupied territories. Israel’s

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<sup>71</sup> On the impact of Arab politics on the Palestinian national movement during the seventies see (Kazzuha 1979; Franji 1983).

war against its military basis in Lebanon had left the PLO extremely weakened and dispersed throughout the Arab countries after 1982. Behind the backdrop of Israel's creeping annexation and the deterioration of living conditions in West Bank and Gaza, Palestinians inside the occupied territories realized that they would have to take matters into their own hands and Palestinian resistance organized from inside the territories began to intensify in the mid-eighties (Baumgarten 1990). As the focus of Israeli-Palestinian tensions shifted from the PLO in exile to the territories, the conflict was brought home to Israeli Arabs. Israeli-Palestinian confrontation did not take place anymore somewhere far away, but in front of their door steps. As an open manifestation of their intensified identification, Israeli Arabs took to publicly voicing their support of the Palestinian nationalist movement. While before Israeli Arabs had generally refrained from any such public manifestation, they started to openly declare their support of the Palestinian political cause in the early 1980s.<sup>72</sup>

*Reemerging borders: Identification, not action*

The outbreak of the intifada constituted a turning point in the relationship between Israeli Arabs and the Palestinian nationalist movement. While from 1967 to 1987 Israeli Arabs had progressively intensified their identification with the Palestinian nation, the intifada marked the re-drawing of borders between Israeli Arabs and Palestinians in West Bank and Gaza. When the intifada started in 1987 and especially also during its initial phase until 1989, Israeli Arabs across the political board were quick to express their strong emotional identification with the Palestinian uprising. As one of the first Palestinian

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<sup>72</sup> In 1981, for instance, Israeli Arabs organized a national strike on *Land Day* to show "solidarity with the Palestinians in West Bank and Gaza" and "to protest oppressive Israeli policies." Quotations taken from Black Book 1981 as cited in (Rouhana 1997: 69). Similarly, they launched a national strike in September 1982 in protest against the Sabra and Shatila massacres in Lebanon in the aftermath of the Israeli invasion. A third protest was organized in September 1983 in commemoration of the massacre (Rouhana 1997: 72-73). Heightened identification of Israeli Arabs with the Palestinian movement was not limited to public demonstrations, however. In addition, Israeli Arab political activities came under the direct influence of Palestinian politics as Israeli Arabs intensified contacts with political groupings in the territories and the PLO. Although an Israeli law officially banned any such contacts, the PLO nevertheless managed to significantly increase its influence among Israeli Arabs during that time. This increasing influence was brought to the fore in the parliamentary election campaigns in the Arab sector which, starting in 1984, became strongly influenced by candidates vying for PLO support (Rouhana 1986).

communities to react to the unfolding events in the territories, they began staging organized public protests against Israeli policies in the territories within two weeks of the beginning of the uprising. In addition to mass protests, demonstrations and national strikes, Israeli Arabs also expressed their support of the uprising by sending material assistance. Moreover, the Israeli Arab press provided wide coverage of the unfolding events. Without mincing their words, the press clearly towed a Palestinian line in their coverage and openly criticized Israeli policies against Palestinians in the territories (Rouhana 1991).

Despite their strong show of sympathy, however, Israeli Arabs did not actively get involved. They demonstrated support, but did not try to carry the uprising beyond the Green Line into Israel. As Rouhana argues, their situation in Israel was too different from the conditions Palestinians were living in under Israeli military occupation. They were a separate community, with their own specific goals, legal status and political future, and the intifada brought this to the fore. Before the intifada, the Israeli policy of creeping annexation had served to blur these divisions between Israeli Arabs and Palestinians in the occupied territories. The more Jewish settlements had been built inside the territories, the more the divisions between the two communities had tended to dissolve. With the uprising, however, the line dividing Israeli Arabs from Palestinians in the territories re-emerged. Palestinians in the territories shored up active resistance while Israeli Arabs remained sympathizing, yet passive bystanders. In short, as Rouhana states, the intifada did not merely stop at the Green Line, but actually served to “resurrect” it in the minds of Israeli Arabs and Palestinians in West Bank and Gaza (Rouhana 1990).

The role of the sympathetic, but marginalized observer became symptomatic for the position that Israeli Arabs continued to occupy throughout the nineties as any more direct pro-Palestinian military engagement was inconceivable to them and even their direct political interventions remained minimal. Israeli Arabs thus strongly supported the Palestinian delegation and their political agenda at the *Madrid Peace Conference* set up in October 1991 after the Gulf War, yet did not have any active share in the negotiations.<sup>73</sup> Similarly, Israeli Arabs did not play a role in the Oslo peace talks after 1993.

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<sup>73</sup> See (Ozacky-Lazar and Ghanem 1991) for reactions of the Israeli Arab press concerning the Madrid Peace conference.

Throughout, their involvement with the Palestinian movement remained limited to emotional identification.<sup>74</sup>

*Between selling out and preserving the authentic*

Refraining from any direct military or political intervention in the Palestinian uprising, Israeli Arabs turned to cultural practices like *dabkeh* as a welcome means for displaying the strong identification they felt with Palestinians in West Bank and Gaza. *Dabkeh* symbolized involvement and solidarity, without actually having to go out in the streets and join the fight. *Al-Asayyel* members confirmed that to them, it was important to perform in the territories in order to stress Palestinian unity and show they cared. As one member stated: "Of course we go to Gaza and the West Bank to perform. Why shouldn't we? We are one people, and we need to show that." Another emphasized that especially in the time after Oslo, when Israeli Arabs and Palestinians in the territories had become politically and geographically separate and the establishment of a Palestinian state seemed imminent, performing in West Bank and Gaza was important to show that the two communities maintained at least a cultural connection. Especially during times of closure, when Palestinians could not leave the territories, *Al-Asayyel* members indicated that it was important for the group to go there and contribute to keeping the connection. Furthermore, one female member stated that the precarious position of Arabs in Israel prevented them from too directly or actively showing their affiliation with the Palestinian national movement. *Dabkeh* was an excellent means to demonstrate support, while at the same time avoiding open confrontation. As she explained: "We express things through our dancing (*min khilāl raqṣitnā*) that we cannot express otherwise. There are many things that one is not allowed to talk about, but you can express them through other things. They [the Palestinians] understand that, it [*dabkeh*] is like a means of communication between us."

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<sup>74</sup> With the outbreak of the second intifada in September 2000, Israeli Arabs staged massive protest activities. Seen as the most forceful and large-scale Israeli Arab demonstrations to date, these protests have already been judged as constituting a turning point in Israeli Arab-Israeli Jewish relations (Bishara 2000). At this point, however, it is still too early to venture any long-term predictions about the impact that the escalations in Israeli-Palestinian relations during the first year of the second intifada have on Israeli Arab-Palestinian interaction.

The way in which *Al-Asayyel* staged *dabkeh* when appearing before Palestinian audiences in West Bank and Gaza was shaped by the ways in which Israeli Arabs and Palestinians negotiated their relationship. Palestinian cultural discourse described the relationship with Israeli Arabs in two different, but inter-related ways that were closely linked to the Israeli Arab position of identifying with, but not actively joining the Palestinian struggle. For one thing, Palestinian cultural discourse posited Israeli Arabs as ‘sell outs,’ who had comfortably adapted to their Jewish surroundings and thus, in a sense, ‘betrayed’ their Palestinian origin.<sup>75</sup> Sharif Kanaana thus described the relationship between Israeli Arabs and Palestinians in West Bank and Gaza in the following words: “The Palestinians inside [Israel] have been convinced by Israelis to look down upon Palestinians here and consider them backwards. They have been brainwashed to think that they are more civilized, more advanced, because they have contact with the Israelis.”<sup>76</sup> During my fieldwork with the Palestinian group *El-Funoun*, I heard similar claims. As one of *El-Funoun*’s younger female dancers explained: “We don’t know much about them. I always had this idea, especially in the time of the intifada, that they are a lot like the Jews. That they really are Israelis. There is a feeling of uneasiness with these people.” Referring to a recent presentation which *El-Funoun* had given in an Arab town inside Israel, she continued by saying that unfortunately, she had found her negative expectations confirmed during this trip: “When we went to Shfar‘am to perform, I was surprised that even though the price of the tickets was so low, not a lot of people came. Also, the Arabs there were speaking in Hebrew. I did not like that. I always think that as Palestinians, we should not have anything between us. I was surprised to see so many differences.”

Positing Israeli Arabs as ‘sell outs,’ Palestinian cultural discourse, at the same time, also described Israeli Arabs as the ‘guardians of the authentic.’ Sharif Kanaana thus stated that while in certain ways he saw Israeli Arabs adapting to their Jewish surroundings and ‘losing’ their distinct Arab traits, he also saw them continuing to enter-

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<sup>75</sup> On the ambivalent position of Israeli Arabs as Palestinians living inside Israel, see also the following quote by an Israeli Arab from the seventies cited in (Kimmerling and Migdal 1993: 183): “I sometimes think that we are neither real Arabs nor real Israelis, because in Arab countries they call us traitors and in Israel, spies.” The quote was originally cited in (Zureik 1979).

<sup>76</sup> Author’s interview with Sharif Kanaana.

tain certain cultural practices in ways that he thought to be more ‘authentic’ than such practices in the territories. As Israeli Arabs had been cut off from the Palestinian majority and lived isolated from the general sociocultural transformations underway in the surrounding Arab countries, they had actually kept some of the ‘old ways.’ That is, they were still practicing certain cultural forms as Palestinians had done them in the time before the *nakbah* in 1948:

When you attend weddings there, the songs they sing were songs sung by the Palestinians in the forties. The style of the weddings looks old-fashioned to people who go there from here. There are still very big celebrations with very traditional forms. Like the line with the two folk poets in front. You don’t find that a lot here. Although they change and imitate the Jews, they have some things that are much more conservative than here.<sup>77</sup>

In accordance with Kanaana’s observation, I often heard Palestinians laud Israeli Arabs for keeping cultural practices in their ‘authentic’ way when moving around the West Bank. Last not least, this was a judgement *El-Funoun* members volunteered. As one of the lead male members of the ensemble stated: “In the region of forty-eight,<sup>78</sup> despite all the changes that occurred there, they have a greater interest than us in the old songs, like *al-mawāwīl*,<sup>79</sup> *al-‘atabah*,<sup>80</sup> *al-muwashshahāt*.”<sup>81</sup> Another male member stated similarly: “They care

<sup>77</sup> Ibid.

<sup>78</sup> Palestinians in the West Bank usually refer to Arabs living inside Israel either as those ‘living inside’ (*il-filasṭīniyyīn dākhl isrā’īl*) or the Palestinians of forty-eight, those that had stayed inside Israel in 1948, (*filasṭīniyyīn thamāniyeh wa-arba’in*).

<sup>79</sup> The EI defines *mawāliyyā*, also *mawāliyyā*, *mawālī* and *muwālayāt*, in spoken Arabic *mawwāl*, as a non-classical Arabic verse form that was commonly known by the time of the 12th century. It is a favorite form of folk poetry. In music, *mawwāl* refers to an ‘interpretive free song’ that does not have a fixed tune (Cachia 1991; Bearman, Bianquis et al. 2000). On *mawwāl* in the context of Galilean folk poetry see (Sbait 1982).

<sup>80</sup> According to the EI, *‘atabah*, which literally translates as ‘doorstep,’ in folk poetry refers to the opening three lines of a monorhyme quatrain (a a a a), or each of the three lines if an additional line has been inserted between the third and the last like in (a a a x a) (Bearman, Bianquis et al. 2000). In modern Arabic, *‘atābah* refers to a four line verse which is used throughout Syria, Palestine, Mesopotamia and Iraq and maintains a meter similar to *wāfir*, the fourth Arabic meter (Bearman, Bianquis et al. 2000). See also (Ritter 1960). For *‘atabah* in the context of folk poetry in the Galilee, see (Sbait 1982). According to Sbait, “[t]he genre of ‘atābā in the improvised-sung folk poetry of the Palestinians is based on an impromptu improvisation of ‘atābā sung solo by a folk poet, and consists of four to eight lines of poetry.” (Sbait 1982: 59)

<sup>81</sup> The EI defines *muwashshah*, also *muwashshahah*, as a “genre of stanzaic poetry” (Bearman, Bianquis et al. 2000) supposedly developed in Andalusia around the late

more than us about folklore (*fūklūr*), because their confrontation with the Israelis is stronger there. [. . .] They say, ‘we want to preserve our distinct Arab cultural identity, as Arabs living inside Israel.’ And they organize a lot more activities, festivals for culture than we do here.”

*Al-Asayyel*’s discourse about its activities in West Bank and Gaza showed the group’s awareness of such views. Asking one younger male member about the relationship between Israeli Arabs and Palestinians, he stated that Israeli Arabs were often confronted with the allegation of adapting too much to Israeli Jewish sociocultural practices: “You know how the situation is between Israel and Palestine. In Palestine, they don’t really know how we have our weddings here and how we do artistic presentations. They often think that we are influenced by the Jews, that our dance (*raqs*) resembles the dance of the Jews (*raqs il-yahūd*).” Recounting a meeting between Israeli Arab students and Palestinian students from the territories in which he had participated, the dancer stressed that dealing with such allegations of selling out was not always easy:

There was a conference of peace organized by schools. We were there and a group from Gaza and one from Bethlehem, to meet and speak with each other. [. . .] We told them that we were feeling with them and that we know that they suffer a lot. There were a few students who were a little racist and they said that we are having fun in Israel, that we are comfortable here, and that we don’t ask about the Arabs in Palestine, that we are not interested in them. There was a big discussion, one girl cried.

One of the older female dancers similarly described the ways in which she had negatively experienced Palestinian reactions to the group in West Bank and Gaza. She recalled that Palestinians perceived the group as different, with clothing style and language giving them away. In the eyes of the Palestinians, they no longer counted as ‘Palestinian Arab’ and did not belong: “I went once to Gaza and the West Bank. They thought that we, the Arabs of forty-eight, the Arabs who live inside Israel, that we were Jews. [. . .] We met many problems, they talked with us in Hebrew, they thought we did not know Arabic, our clothes, they thought that . . . [pause]. I did not like the way they looked at us.”

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9th century. It is counted among the seven post-classical genres of Arab poetry, distinguished by its arrangement in strophes and the inclusion of a concluding part, the *kharjah* (Schoeler 1993; Bearman, Bianquis et al. 2000). On *muwashshah* in the context of Galilean folk poetry see (Sbait 1982).

Trying to ward off any such allegations of selling out, *Al-Asayyel* emphasized that they staged *dabkeh* as ‘authentically Arab’ when performing in West Bank and Gaza. As one of the female dancers emphasized, she considered the group’s presentations of *dabkeh* in the territories as a good way to demonstrate to the Palestinian audience that Israeli Arabs had maintained their ‘Arabness’ and thus, at least ideationally, continued to form part of the Palestinian community: “The Palestinians who are outside Israel know that we are Palestinian, but sometimes it seems like they are thinking that we have forgotten that we are Arab. No, we have not forgotten that we are Arab. We are Arab and we will always stay Arab. And we express this through our authentic dancing (*min khilāl raqsitnā ’l-aṣīleh*).” The ways in which *Al-Asayyel* hereby defined the ‘authentic Arabness’ of their *dabkeh* played into Palestinian assumptions of Israeli Arabs as guardians of the ‘old ways,’ that is, cultural practices as done in the time before the Palestinian ‘catastrophe’ of 1948. Abū Jum‘ah thus prided himself of bringing to the territories the ‘authentic *dabkeh*’ as Arabs had preserved it in the Galilee. Likewise, one dancer argued that compared with what she had so far seen of *dabkeh* in West Bank and Gaza, she found that Israeli Arabs generally were more committed to preserving the old Arab *dabkeh* than Palestinians in the territories. As a *dabkeh* ensemble dedicated to the authentic, *Al-Asayyel* thus staged *dabkeh* in West Bank and Gaza as a demonstration of the way in which Israeli Arabs preserved their Arabness: “Compared to how they do *dabkeh* inside the territories, we in forty-eight, we have preserved our heritage even more than them. We have not forgotten our nature, nor our heritage and customs (*turāthnā wa-’l-taqālid*) as Arabs. We show this with our *dabkeh*.”

#### *Arab dabkeh on stage in Palestine*

Committed to performing ‘authentically preserved’ Arab *dabkeh* before Palestinian audiences in West Bank and Gaza, *Al-Asayyel* staged their presentations in a way that reflected the historic performance tradition of *dabkeh*. When appearing before Israeli Jewish audiences, *Al-Asayyel*’s *dabkeh* closely corresponded to Israeli Jewish expectations of staged folk dance performances. The group’s presentations were short and strictly choreographed. In particular, they were based on the principle of a division between the performers and the audience. The group performed its presentation with the audience watching and, at the end, people applauded. Sometimes, as with workshops



and seminars organized by Ayalah Goren in Jerusalem, the presentation ended with the group drawing audience members into the *dabkeh* line. Yet during the presentation itself, there was little interaction between the group and the spectators. Even if interaction occurred, it had little influence on the overall course of the program, as it was carried through by the Israeli Jewish organizers as planned beforehand. In West Bank and Gaza, *Al-Asayyel's* presentations were structured very differently. Instead of short, precisely choreographed pieces, the group staged *dabkeh* according to its historic tradition as a means of social interaction.<sup>82</sup> That is, although *Al-Asayyel* had a general outline for its presentations, the actual performance functioned as an interactive process between the performers and the audience, reflecting the way *dabkeh* had been done historically and through the late nineties continued to be done at social festivities like weddings.<sup>83</sup> The flow of *Al-Asayyel's* performance was thus not precisely fixed, but was shaped by the interaction between the group and its audience.

The group's discourse about its activities reflected this structural difference. Performing in an Israeli Jewish context, the group referred to its activities as *'ard*, a stage presentation or show. In a Palestinian context, however, the group tended to use the terms *ḥaflah*, a formally organized party, or *sahrah*, an evening gathering.<sup>84</sup> In contrast to *'ard*, both these terms were not limited in their meaning to the actual act of performing on stage. Rather, they alluded to the larger context in which the stage presentation took place: the context of Arab social gatherings and festivities that normally extended over a longer period of time and included food, drinks, entertainment and active participation of the audience. Occasionally, the group also used *'ard* in reference to its activities in the territories. Yet it did not refer to presentations in an Israeli Jewish context as *ḥaflah* or *sahrah*,

<sup>82</sup> On a fascinating account of artistic performance as social interaction see Dwight Reynolds's study of the oral epic tradition in Egypt (Reynolds 1995). See also (Slyomovics 1987; Kapchan 1994; Nieuwerk 1996).

<sup>83</sup> On *dabkeh* performed as a social interaction in the Galilee in the seventies and eighties see (Sbait 1982).

<sup>84</sup> See (Reynolds 1995) for a description of *sahrah* as privately organized social gathering in the context of poetry performances in northern Egypt. In the context of female entertainers in Egypt at the beginning of the 20th century, Nieuwerk notes that the term *sahrah* is used in particular in reference to the men's, in opposition to the women's gatherings (Nieuwerk 1996: 53). In the context of *Al-Asayyel* presentations, I could not detect any such gendered bias in the meaning of *sahrah*.

thus discursively making a distinction between the short, precisely choreographed programs usually rendered before an Israeli Jewish audience, and the flexible, interactive presentations given before Palestinian audiences.

This difference between *ʿard* and *sahrah* or *ḥaflah* is brought to the fore when comparing *Al-Asayyel*'s discourse about its artistic engagement with the discourse of the Palestinian group *El-Funoun*. In contrast to *Al-Asayyel*, members of *El-Funoun* generally did not refer to their performances as *sahrah* or *ḥaflah*, but used the term *ʿard*. This difference in the discourse of the two groups was mirrored by a difference in the group's performance activities which highlights the different meanings of *ʿard* and *sahrah* or *ḥaflah* in the context of contemporary *dabkeh* presentations. Unlike *Al-Asayyel*, *El-Funoun* only presented strictly choreographed pieces with little, if nothing, left open to change. Accordingly, the group refused to appear at private venues such as weddings, graduations or business celebrations that took place in people's homes, restaurants or rented halls and where an interaction between the performers and the audience would be expected. Instead, *El-Funoun* limited its shows to official festivals and theaters, that is, any context in which the group could render its strictly choreographed routines on stage without being expected to respond to audience reaction.<sup>85</sup>

In contrast, *Al-Asayyel* on stage in West Bank and Gaza designed their presentations to be open to change in accordance with audience reaction. Instead of arriving with a strictly planned program, *Al-Asayyel* members prior to a performance usually had little idea what exactly the group would present that evening, even if they had rehearsed specific choreographies beforehand. When arriving at a performance site, Abū Jum'ah usually first talked to the host. Then,

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<sup>85</sup> The extent to which *El-Funoun* actually refused to adjust its presentation to the individual performance context became clear during its appearance at a festival in Shfar'am, an Israeli Arab town in the Galilee, in August 1999. *El-Funoun*'s presentation had started late due to organizational problems of the festival host. As two other groups were still expected to appear after *El-Funoun*, the festival organizer asked the group to shorten its presentation and cut the last two, three choreographies. Angrily, *El-Funoun* leaders told their dancers to quit the stage. They packed up their things and left the festival site in a fury, with the organizer literally running behind the bus, trying to explain and apologize. Asking *El-Funoun* dancers later why they had been so angry, they replied that they were not used to being told to shorten their presentation, especially not for 'some no-name rock group': They had come all the way from al-Bireh to present "a serious show (*ʿard jaddī*)" in the way that they had prepared it and they would not allow for interference.

according to the theme of the occasion, the expectations of the organizer as well as his own resources at a particular venue in terms of group members, musicians and the repertoire he knew these people to master, Abū Jum‘ah informed his group about the general outline of their presentation. Thus, even the overall topic of a presentation was often determined only on the spot shortly before going on stage. Even if certain agreements about the program had been made beforehand, they could without a problem be turned over at the last minute.

In order to be able to adjust their presentation to each individual performance situation, *Al-Asayyel*’s repertoire at the time of my research consisted of three basic ‘programs,’ so called *barāmij*, which were the *Shimāliyyeh* of the *shabāb* (*il-Dabkeh ’l-shimāliyyeh li-’l-shabāb*), *The Arab Wedding* (*il-’Urs il-’arabī*), as well as *The Harvest* (*il-Ḥasād*). Each of the three programs was made up of a variety of songs, to which the dancers had rehearsed movement patterns and steps. Yet which songs of a program would be chosen for a particular presentation depended on context. The program *The Arab Wedding*, for instance, had a maximum of eleven songs to which the group had learned choreographies and which were usually rendered in the following order:

1. *il-Ḥimmā*—entrance of the group and henna ceremony for the bride and groom
2. *il-Ḥilāqah*—the shaving of the groom
3. *Yā ḥalālī yā mālī*—song for the *saḥjeh*<sup>86</sup>
4. *il-Tījlay*—procession for bride and bridegroom
5. *Yā nā’na’ yā nā’na’*—*dabkeh* choreography
6. *Habbit il-nār wa-’l-burūdeh habbit*—*dabkeh* choreography
7. *Shaddī tillak*—*dabkeh* choreography
8. *Shimāliyyeh*—*dabkeh* choreography
9. *Bilādī ‘arabiyyeh*—*dabkeh* choreography
10. *Karādīyyeh*—*dabkeh* choreography
11. *‘Irāqīyyeh*—exit of the group

<sup>86</sup> Sbait translates *Yā ḥalālī yā mālī* as “Oh, how fortunate I am!” or “I am delighted with my money or wealth!” It is the refrain of the *ḥidā*, a genre of improvised-sung poetry accompanying the *saḥjeh*, which is a certain type of dance performed outdoors during weddings in a line of fifty to over two-hundred people clapping hands. See (Sbait 1982: 147–204).

As Muḥammad, the group's lead dancer explained to me, choreography no. 1, 2, 3, 4, 8 and 11 were the essential parts rendered in any presentation of *The Arab Wedding*. Depending on context, choreography no. 5 and 7 were performed often, choreography no. 6 and 9 less often and choreography no. 10 almost never. Which choreographies would be performed at which occasion was not necessarily agreed upon beforehand. Gauging audience reaction, Abū Jum'ah during a presentation signaled to the singers or the *rawīs*, the lead dancer, which song to play next, to repeat a song or parts of a song or to skip one, thus maintaining the flexibility to change any previously agreed upon order. At a presentation in Ramallah on 22 April 1999, where *Al-Asayyel* performed at an insurance company's celebration in honor of the end of the pilgrim's month, Abū Jum'ah extended *The Wedding* by almost an hour as he inserted into the program long parts of *zajal*, vernacular poetry, which he himself plus lead singer Iyād and substitute Ḥasan rendered in between the choreographies. As Abū Jum'ah, Iyād and Ḥasan engaged in *zajal*, the rest of the group stood in the back. Similar to village weddings, they underscored the *zajal* by clapping and stomping, with the lead dancer during the refrains or pauses moving to center stage improvising *dabkeh* with his cane. Despite the changed program, the group always knew what to do next. Either Abū Jum'ah indicated to them what would follow, or they knew from the song or rhythm, as the lead dancer explained to me: "We have special music. When I hear the music, I know what we have to do."

*Al-Asayyel* not only improvised in terms of choosing which choreographies would make up the group's program at a particular night. Also the way in which each choreography was rendered depended on the individual performance context. For one thing, the choreographies included space for improvisation, when the *rawīs* or certain members of the group went to the middle of the stage to improvise before the audience. These solos were not choreographed, but were done according to the dancers' individual abilities and preferences. As long as steps were executed in accordance to the rhythm, the dancers could do whatever they liked. The more enthusiastic the reaction of the audience, the longer and more intensive these solos became. As Muḥammad explained to me. "When the people love the performance, it reflects on the *dabīk*, the person doing *dabkeh*. When the people don't like it, the *dabīk* also will feel bored. He then performs as if he is absolving a duty and soon quits." Furthermore,

the *rawīs* also guided the group through the choreographies, indicating how long the group should continue doing a certain step, when they should change the step, when certain parts of a choreography were finished as well as when others should begin. Hereby, it was not the music that prompted these changes. It was either the decision of the *rawīs* himself or Abū Jum‘ah indicated the changes to the *rawīs* who then lead the group accordingly. As one of the female dancers explicated to me in response to my puzzlement about the ways that the group’s presentation always looked somewhat different even though they claimed to be doing the same program: “Everybody in the group looks to the *rawīs*. He indicates the movements with his hands to the group and also to the singer. When Iyād sings, he does not sing what he wants. He sings what is demanded of him. When Muḥammad raises his hand to indicate the *thallith*,<sup>87</sup> Iyād knows that we will stop on the third step. And so he stops singing on the third.”

Throughout, audience reaction was essential to the ways in which *Al-Asayyel* rendered its presentation. The people were expected to participate, expressing their enjoyment through clapping, cheering, singing and even joining the dancing. *Al-Asayyel* hereby used various means to provoke such reactions from the audience and draw them into the performance. For one thing, the group chose songs that they knew were familiar to the audience and well-liked. As one woman dancer proudly stated, *Al-Asayyel* knew which songs to play in West Bank and Gaza to create rapport between the group and the audience and make them join. According to her, the performance in Ramallah on 22 April 1999 had been such a success, because it had allowed the people to participate. “The audience interacted with us. We sang songs of the wedding and all the people joined in. We made them participate, so they liked it, they were not bored.” Iyād commented similarly on that particular occasion: “I like it when I sing and the crowd goes along with me, then I am happy. When I say *ōf*<sup>88</sup> and they answer me. Or when I say *yā halālī yā māli* and they respond. The program that we did in Ramallah, *The Wedding*, had many such interactions with the crowd. You saw how the people responded and the show was successful.”

<sup>87</sup> A step used by *Al-Asayyel* for ending a step pattern on the third step. Other endings could be done on the first step or the fifth.

<sup>88</sup> *ōf* is a vocal flourish introducing the beginning of improvised song-poetry.

Not only prompting the audience to join in the singing and respond using the familiar poetic refrains, *Al-Asayyel* also aimed at making the audience join the dancing, thus overcoming the separation between performers and audience. At times, the group even included people from the audience as bride or groom in their choreography. Again, emphasizing that the group used well-known, authentic steps to familiar songs, *Al-Asayyel* prided itself in being able to get Palestinian audiences in West Bank and Gaza to their feet. Even Yasir Arafat had joined in their presentation in Gaza on 1–2 January 1999 and that, even though Arafat claimed not to have participated in *dabkeh* since the debacle of the Palestinian national movement in Lebanon seventeen years before, as Amīrah<sup>89</sup> excitedly reported when coming back from Gaza:

Abu ‘Amār did *dabkeh* with us on stage. He said that for seventeen years he had not been on a stage to do *dabkeh*. That was not just an important moment in my life, but in the life of the whole state of Palestine. They talked about it in the newspapers and on Palestinian and Jordanian TV. And they said that this festivity (*haflah*) had a ‘real Arab atmosphere.’ It was a big honor for us. It was like a dream. I will never forget this performance, ever.

Furthermore, *Al-Asayyel* not only presented *dabkeh* songs and steps. Rather, the group staged a complete show of ‘Arab heritage,’ including the performance of *zajal* and such well-liked popular poetic genres as *hidā*, *atabah* and *mayjanah* in their performance.<sup>90</sup> The oldest daughter of my host family, who had taken the role of the bride at the presentation in Ramallah in April, explained the group’s success precisely in terms of its ability to fulfill this need of the Palestinian audience for ‘Arab heritage’: “The people there were enthusiastic because for years, they haven’t heard any real *zajal*. You know, they were not able to celebrate any big festivities because of the intifada and the occupation. They are really starved for Arab heritage.”

*Al-Asayyel*’s interaction with its Palestinian audience in West Bank and Gaza did not merely determine the group’s choice of songs and ways of presenting. Also, the length of its performances was determined in reaction to audience response. Coming about through interaction rather than being fixed ahead of time, *Al-Asayyel*’s presentations in

<sup>89</sup> Name changed.

<sup>90</sup> Three kinds of popular poetic genres distinguished by their opening lines, refrains and rhyme scheme. See (Sbait 1982) on the reception of these folk genres in the Arab Galilee.

West Bank and Gaza greatly varied in length. In an Israeli Jewish context, folk dance officials like Ayalah Goren, Rina Meir and Yossi Ben Israel demanded short, structured choreographies. The shorter and more concise a presentation, the better it was in their eyes. Accordingly, Abū Jum‘ah had prepared his group for Tel Aviv with a stop watch in his hand to keep the time down. Performing before Palestinian audiences, in contrast, *Al-Asayyel* kept the length of their presentation flexible. The more intense the group’s interaction with the audience, the more successful they judged the presentation and thus the longer it turned out to be in the end. Measuring success in terms of the presentation’s length, one younger dancer exclaimed: “I will never forget the performance in Gaza. Our program lasted for over two and a half hours. The atmosphere was hot. It was so good. We did not sit, we performed for two and a half hours without taking a break.” Making *Al-Asayyel* extend its presentation, the audience, however, could also prompt the group to stop. As audience members at the insurance company’s celebration in April 1999 started getting up to say good-bye to the host and leave, Abū Jum‘ah brought the program to an end. Before people got up, nothing on stage had indicated that the presentation was about to end. As soon as Abū Jum‘ah became aware that people were leaving, however, he indicated the musicians to stop the song and start the *‘irāqiyyeh*, the usual exit for the group.

*Changing realities between Israel and Palestine: Performing Israeli Arabness in the Galilee*

The year in which Abū Jum‘ah founded *Al-Asayyel* also marked a turning point in the position of Arabs in Israel. For the first time in the forty-year existence of the state, the Israeli government in 1988 provided for the foundation of an *Arabic Culture Section* in the *Culture Administration* of the *Ministry of Education* and installed an Israeli Arab as its director. Although its budget remained small in comparison to the state’s allocation for Jewish cultural activities, the establishment of this department officially highlighted the process of empowerment which Israeli Arabs had undergone during the preceding decades, a development spurred by changes in the relations between Israel and the Palestinians.<sup>91</sup>

<sup>91</sup> As mentioned above, the grants allotted to the *Arabic Culture Section* accounted for only 1,3% of the overall budget of the *Culture Administration* (Katz and Sella 1999: 76–77).

*Changing Israeli-Palestinian relations: The two-state solution*

In the late eighties, Israeli-Palestinian relations were reformulated. Against the background of the ongoing intifada, Palestinian officials started to openly convey the message that they favored a peaceful, political alternative based on a two-state solution and mutual Israeli-Palestinian recognition over continued military confrontation. Indications that PLO officials were willing to recognize Israel within its pre-1967 borders in exchange for the establishment of a Palestinian state in West Bank and Gaza had actually been given before. The Palestinian National Council (PNC) had sent signals of their gradual, yet unmistakable acceptance of a two-state solution since the mid-1970s (Muslih 1990). This message was reinforced at the 1982 Arab summit in Fez, where the PLO mainstream declared its commitment to such a political option.<sup>92</sup> Yet neither Israeli government officials nor the general public had reacted to these early overtures, but showed themselves unconvinced about Palestinian readiness to compromise and recognize the state of Israel. In fact, the Israeli right interpreted the very outbreak of the intifada as a clear sign of continuing Palestinian commitment to the state's destruction (Tessler 1994: 718–719).<sup>93</sup>

As Israelis had failed to react to earlier Palestinian signals, Palestinian leaders in the late eighties thought it necessary to advance a stronger, more clearly stated message about their willingness to accept a two-state solution and recognize Israel's existence.<sup>94</sup> Senior PLO officials in Tunis as well as Palestinians in West Bank and Gaza variously formulated such a position during the early stage of the intifada.<sup>95</sup> These endeavors climaxed at the PNC emergency meeting in Algiers

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<sup>92</sup> On the issue of changing attitudes in the PLO see (Hassassian 1997; Muslih 1997).

<sup>93</sup> As Mark Tessler points out, the Israeli right wing argued that given the improvement of living conditions that the Israeli occupation had brought about in the occupied territories, the uprising could only be ideologically motivated. Although some critically challenged any such assertion, a majority of Israelis who were little informed about living conditions in the territories identified with the right wing perspective at the time (Tessler 1994: 718–719). According to Peretz, some Israeli and American Jewish leaders hereby went as far as maintaining inaccurately that the outbreak of the uprising had been steered by PLO officials in Tunis and thus could not have anything directly to do with conditions in the territories (Peretz 1990).

<sup>94</sup> According to Mark Tessler, this change in Palestinian political strategy was also caused by the changing position of the Soviet Union, which had long supported the PLO but warmed its relations with Israel in the late eighties (Tessler 1994: 719–720).

<sup>95</sup> In June 1988, Bassam Abu Sharif, one of Arafat's close advisors, advanced a first concrete statement in this regard. A second statement, the Husayni Document, followed in early August 1988, shortly after the Jordanian disengagement from the West Bank.



in mid-November 1988, where Yasir Arafat issued a 'Declaration of Independence' that described the state of Palestine as a "peace-loving state" that sought the peaceful settlement of conflicts in accordance with the UN charter and resolutions. On the same day, the PNC formally passed a political communiqué which laid out a peace program based on a two-state solution, the recognition of Israel within its pre-1967 borders and a Palestinian state in West Bank and Gaza.<sup>96</sup> In addition, the PLO launched a campaign seeking to drive home its sincerity about a two-state solution, mutual recognition and territorial compromise to the Israeli people (Tessler 1994: 717–724).<sup>97</sup>

Officially, Israel did not noticeably waiver from its refusal to negotiate with the PLO.<sup>98</sup> US-PLO contacts, which had been taken up after the PNC meeting in Algiers and continued through 1990, were of little avail and disappointed Palestinian hopes to serve as a road to talks with Israel (Khalidi 1990). Yet although officially the Israeli position did not change much, the diplomatic efforts launched by the PLO gave impetus to internal criticism in Israel against the status quo which had begun to be formulated with the outbreak of the intifada.<sup>99</sup> By late 1988 and early 1989, observers of the conflict discerned a shift in Israeli public opinion on the topic of contacts with the PLO.<sup>100</sup>

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<sup>96</sup> The text of Arafat's *Declaration of Independence* given before the PNC in Algiers on 15 November 1988 is reprinted in the *Journal of Palestine Studies*, Winter 1989 (Arafat 1989). Also reprinted in (Peretz 1990: 211–214). The text of the political communiqué of the PNC issued on 15 November 1988 is reprinted in the *Journal of Palestine Studies*, Winter 1989 (Palestine National Council 1989). Also reprinted in (Peretz 1990: 215–219). For additional information on the PNC meeting in Algiers see (Khalidi 1990).

<sup>97</sup> PLO official Salah Khalaf, for instance, gave a video-taped speech at a Jerusalem conference on Middle East politics in February 1989, in which he urged Israel to enter into a dialogue with the PLO. Also at that time, Yasir Arafat addressed Israeli journalists at a press conference in Cairo, a hitherto unparalleled action on the side of a PLO leader. In the following weeks, Arafat and other PLO officials repeatedly called upon Israel to respond to their political overtures (Tessler 1994: 724).

<sup>98</sup> On a convincing study of Israel's refusal to negotiate with the PLO see (Sela and Ma'oz 1997).

<sup>99</sup> Both Israeli and Palestinian scholars highlight the importance of the intifada for causing the Israeli attitude towards direct contacts with the PLO to change e.g. (Mattar 1989; Schiff 1989). Whereas Palestinian overtures challenging Israel to enter into direct talks helped convey to Israel that the PLO might indeed be a partner for peace negotiations, the intifada, in fact, made such an option seem desirable to Israelis. Many felt that the prize was just too high which they saw themselves paying daily during the uprising in terms of reputation loss in the international scene, hostility from the Arab world and threat to their vision of Israel as a Jewish and democratic state (Tessler 1994).

<sup>100</sup> As opinion polls taken during that time showed, many Israelis critically reassessed

Increasingly, Israeli politicians as well publicly hinted at their changing attitude towards the PLO as a negotiating partner.<sup>101</sup> In addition, several much publicized meetings between Israeli and PLO officials which took place during that time as well as the positive public reception of these meetings indicated the general change in attitude.<sup>102</sup>

*Marginalized, but self-empowered: Israeli Arabs since the late 1980s*

The changes occurring in Israeli-Palestinian relations directly reflected on the way that Israeli Arabs perceived their status as an Arab minority living inside an ethnic Jewish state. Until that time, they had not “psychologically finalized” the permanency of their minority status as non-Jewish Israeli citizens (Rouhana 1997: 202). As long as the Israeli-Palestinian conflict had continued unpredictably with no settlement between the two opposing parties in sight, Israeli Arabs had tended to see their status inside Israel as temporary, lasting only until a permanent settlement between Israel and the Arab states, respectively the Palestinians, would be reached. While they had perceived the devastating loss of the Arab armies against Israel in 1967 as a first indicator that their future might actually permanently lie within the state of Israel, the defeat had not completely shattered hopes for a different fate. Since the mid-1970s when PLO officials

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the situation. They started to identify the Palestinian question as the essential problem of the Israeli-Arab conflict and conceded that talks with the PLO might not be desirable, but would be necessary to reach a peaceful settlement (Bar-On 1988: 52–53; Tessler 1994: 719–726). For a discussion of opinion polls taken in Israel in May 1990 as an indicator of a changing Israeli public opinion see (Barzilai, Goldberg et al. 1991).

<sup>101</sup> Such signals mostly came from the left-wing, in somewhat veiled form for instance from Defense Minister Yitzhak Rabin and Minister of Finance Shimon Peres, and more pronouncedly from Yossi Beilin, Peres’ confidant and deputy finance minister at the time. Yet, surprisingly, also a few politicians associated with the right conceded the need for such contacts (Tessler 1994: 724–725).

<sup>102</sup> Such a meeting took place in January 1989, for instance, as four Israeli politicians met PLO officials to discuss peace options for the Middle East in Paris. In February, seven Israeli politicians and academics took part in a conference in the Netherlands alongside PLO representatives and other Palestinians. At both meetings, the Israeli delegates did not address their remarks directly to the PLO officials but to the general audience in order to respect an Israeli law banning any such direct contacts. Yet, as Mark Tessler argues, the increasing criticism of this law inside Israel at the time in and of itself pointed to the change in attitude underway in the Israeli public on the issue of direct Israeli-PLO contacts (Tessler 1994: 726). A report published by the prominent *Israeli Jaffee Center for Strategic Studies* in March 1989 similarly attested to changing Israeli attitudes as it urged the government to enter talks with the PLO as the only way to end the uprising and reach a peaceful settlement (Jaffee Center for Strategic Studies 1989).

started hinting at the viability of a two-state solution, Israeli Arabs began grappling with the thought that their status as an Arab minority living inside Israel was there to stay (Rouhana 1989). Yet it was only at the time of the intifada when the PNC officially advanced its peace program based on a two-state solution that Israeli Arabs fully confronted the fact that their future indeed lay in Israel (Rouhana 1990). As both Israeli-Palestinian negotiations in Madrid after the Gulf War as well as the Oslo peace talks completely omitted any discussion of their situation, Israeli Arabs knew for a fact that their status as a non-Jewish Arab minority inside Israel had acquired “an indirect Palestinian legitimacy” as well as a “deep sense of finality” (Rouhana 1997: 202).

The realization that they had been marginalized from Palestinian politics and indeed were there to stay prompted Israeli Arabs to reconsider their political destiny as an Arab minority inside Israel. Likewise, the hope that Israel would reconsider its preoccupation with security issues once a permanent settlement was reached with the Palestinians motivated Israeli Arabs to more actively renegotiate their position. With a changing security focus that was no longer primarily formulated in terms of Israeli Arabs as an internal enemy in need of control but more in terms of cooperative political agreement, they believed to stand better chances for advancing their case (Rouhana 1997: 100–101). Thus, after the PNC had formulated its peace program of 1988, Israeli Arabs started to advance new ideas about their position inside Israel which were based on the political platform of civic equality. As pointed out before, Israeli Arabs had started to publicly raise calls for equality and a fairer distribution of resources already in the seventies by staging protests mostly in response to land appropriations.<sup>103</sup> Yet after 1988 and in particular during the early and mid-nineties in the aftermath of Oslo, Israeli Arab calls for equality in a democratic state gained a different quality. Not primarily directed at protesting land expropriations, these efforts tackled issues of perceived injustice and inequality on a more gen-

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<sup>103</sup> Under the military government during the first two decades of Israel's existence there had been few protest activities with the demonstration staged in 1957 on the first anniversary of the killing of 47 Israeli Arab civilians by the Israeli army in Kafr Qasem in 1956 constituting the first such activity. Large-scale protests, however, did not emerge until the seventies (Rouhana 1989; Yiftachel 1992). On the massacre at Kafr Qasem itself, see (Kimmerling and Migdal 1993: 164–65). See also (Yiftachel 1992) for a detailed analysis of increasing Israeli Arab protest activities during the seventies.

eral scale. More forcefully than before, Israeli Arabs started using Israeli institutions and the legal system to claim their rights as citizens. Internal demographic and social developments within the Israeli Arab community added weight and political clout to their demands.<sup>104</sup>

As a political manifestation of this new self-assured Israeli Arab activism, a coalition party of various organizations called *National Democratic Alliance* (NDA) formed in 1996 and supported Azmi Bishara, a prominent Israeli Arab politician, in his run for the Israeli prime ministry in 1999.<sup>105</sup> Increasing activities of public protest and civil unrest also displayed the newly gained assertiveness and self-confidence of Israeli Arabs. Especially during the late nineties with the stalling of the Oslo peace process, Israeli Arabs repeatedly staged large-scale public resistance to land confiscations and home demolitions, challenging the state to live up to its claim of being a democratic civic state for all its citizens.<sup>106</sup> The process of Israeli Arab political emancipation climaxed in a week of mass demonstrations in October 2000 in solidarity with the outbreak of the second intifada. The protests highlighted the strength and resolution of Israeli Arabs to continue fighting for what they had come to understand to be their legal rights, as Azmi Bishara states: "Arabs [in the year 2000] are much more aware of their rights, not only to eat and have a home and teach their children, but also their right to express their political views and not get shot for that, as citizens of the state of Israel, not only as Palestinians." (Bishara 2000: 28)

#### *Gaining access to means of cultural self-representation*

Israeli Arab activism during the nineties did not result in any considerable change of the status quo. Israeli Arabs became more and

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<sup>104</sup> As Rouhana asserts, Israeli Arabs since 1948 had evolved from constituting a "poor periphery" that had literally been left behind in the turmoil of the Palestinian 'catastrophe,' to acquiring a "position of potential influence" in contemporary Israeli society and politics (Rouhana 1997: 82).

<sup>105</sup> On more detailed information concerning the political orientation of the NDA as well as its development in the years leading up to the second intifada see (Bishara 2000; Jabareen 2000). For a further reading on Azmi Bishara's attempted run for presidency in 1999 and his tactical withdrawal before the elections see (Adiv 1999; Algazy 1999; Simon 1999; Bishara 2000).

<sup>106</sup> Such activities included demonstrations in the villages of Umm Sahali, el-Roha and Lyd in 1998 and 1999 which until that date had not yet been recognized by the state of Israel and thus remained excluded from receiving public services. Similarly, Palestinian students organized protest activities on Israeli university campuses throughout the year 2000. See (Bishara 2000; Jabareen 2000).

more skilled in playing the game of Israeli party politics and actually succeeded to a certain degree in influencing government decisions.<sup>107</sup> However, they did not manage to essentially challenge the ambiguity inherent in Israel's simultaneous claims to be a Jewish state, on the one hand, and, on the other, a democracy. The brutality with which Israeli police took action against Israeli Arab demonstrators in October 2000 dramatically exposed how clearly the state continued to distinguish between its Arab and its Jewish citizens.<sup>108</sup> Although open tensions between Arabs and Jews calmed during subsequent months, the events of October 2000 and subsequent anti-Arab sentiments publicly voiced inside Israeli Jewish society highlighted how little had actually changed in the status quo of Arab-Jewish relations.<sup>109</sup>

Nevertheless, Israeli Arabs could show for various small achievements, most notably in the cultural field. In response to protests of Israeli Arab writers in 1987–88 against the uneven allocation of government subsidies for cultural activities, an *Arabic Culture Section* was set up in the *Culture Administration* of the *Ministry of Education* in late 1988.<sup>110</sup> For the first time in the history of the state, Israeli Arabs received a small, but steady budget for organizing cultural events in the Arab sector. The establishment of the *Arabic Culture Section* also officially institutionalized the promotion and sponsoring of Arabic culture within the state's structure, a status that had previously been denied to Arab cultural activities. As Wadī'ā Dāwūd, project manager in the folklore section of the newly founded department, explained: "Before the department's establishment, chaos reigned in terms of a cultural policy for Israeli Arabs. No one was responsible, no one really cared for Arab culture."<sup>111</sup> Most importantly, however, the establishment of the department provided Israeli Arabs with greater access to the means of cultural production. For the first time since 1948, it was Israeli Arabs themselves who were in charge. Up until

<sup>107</sup> In 1992, for instance, Israeli Arab local government officials staged a strike before the Israeli Ministry of Finance lasting eight days to push for higher development budgets for their communities. Although the strike dissolved without any immediate tangible results, the Israeli Finance Minister had taken notice of the strikers' concerns, especially since those threatened to expand the protest to the whole Arab community. Two years later, a similar protest continued for thirty-seven days and resulted in an agreement to increase the budgets (Rouhana 1997: 264).

<sup>108</sup> During the demonstrations, Israeli police killed thirteen Israeli Arabs and injured hundreds (Bishara 2000; Jabareen 2000).

<sup>109</sup> For details on Arab-Jewish relations during summer 2001 see (Seeboldt 2001).

<sup>110</sup> The department's official title in Arabic is *Qism al-thaqāfah al-ʿarabiyyah fī wizārat al-maʿārif*.

<sup>111</sup> Author's interview with Wadī'ā Dāwūd.

then, the few activities that had taken place had occurred under the guidance of Israeli Jewish officials from the *Histadrut* or the *Department for Arabs and Druze* in the *Culture Administration*. Especially the *Histadrut* officials, however, were known among Israeli Arabs for their patronizing attitudes (Katz and Sella 1999: 76–77) as well as sponsoring activities before elections and afterwards letting their engagement subside.<sup>112</sup> In contrast, in the new department, Israeli Arab officials themselves were responsible for defining activities for the Arabic sector as well as allocating resources.<sup>113</sup>

The establishment of the *Arabic Culture Section* was not the only way in which Israeli Arabs felt they were gaining control over the means of cultural production and self-representation. In 1996, the *Israeli Association of Community Centers* decided that they had to improve working cooperation with the Arab community centers that were part of the association. Creating the new position of an art and culture director for the Arab sector, they employed Ayman Ajbariyyah, an Israeli Arab who brought along previous work experience in cultural management. Providing him with an office and a budget, the association gave Ajbariyyah *carte blanche* for his activities. According to Ajbariyyah, both the very creation of his position as well as the success of his involvement with the Arab community centers indicated the degree to which Israeli Arabs in the mid-nineties had managed to assert their presence in Israeli society:

The managers of the *Israeli Association of Community Centers* realized that they had to work with the Arab community centers. They asked me to come and push things. When I started, there were thirty community centers in the Arab sector, but they only had four local cultural arts directors. Imagine, there were only four jobs in thirty community center. Now after I have been in this position for two and a half years, we have seventeen.<sup>114</sup>

<sup>112</sup> Author's interviews with Wadī'a Dāwūd and Muwafaq Khoury.

<sup>113</sup> In his interview with me, Muwafaq Khoury stressed that he had only taken the position on the written assurance that the department could operate independently and that there would be no direct interference with or censorship of his activities by Israeli Jewish officials. To this end, Khoury set up an advisory council for the department made up of thirty-two members all of whom were Israeli Arabs working in the arts or in the cultural departments of local community centers. In addition, Khoury set up various artistic committees devoted to coordinating activities in specific cultural fields, again including only Arabs. The *Arabic Culture Section*, as Khoury maintained, should be run by Israeli Arabs as well as be directly connected to the Arab community, corresponding to their cultural needs and expectations.

<sup>114</sup> Author's interview with Ayman Ajbariyyah.

At the same time, Ajbariyyah emphasized that Israeli Arabs themselves had undergone a process of change. At the beginning, he had to explain his involvement and convince the people in the Arab community centers that his engagement for the promotion of cultural activities was important. By the time of my research, however, he stated that local Israeli Arab officials now themselves approached him with their ideas and needs:

Within their communities, they came to realize that they need someone locally to work on the cultural and arts activities. Three years ago, they had not realized the necessity of employing someone locally to work with me. But if they don't do that, they are not eligible to receive funds and support from the Association. Now, many more activities take place and they are more coordinated. [. . .] And these are activities that they can choose and organize for themselves, no one from the outside interferes.<sup>115</sup>

Considering the ways in which the political, economic and social status quo in Israel had gone principally unchallenged during the nineties, it seems logical to dismiss Israeli Arab achievements in the cultural field as a sort of cosmetic surgery with no concrete consequences for their overall status. In fact, one could argue that the state sponsored limited cultural autonomy precisely in order to avoid any more profound changes in other realms.<sup>116</sup> Sponsoring the public performance of *dabkeh* obviously seemed less challenging to the status quo than to make further reaching political concessions. Yet at the same time Israeli Arab achievements in the cultural field cannot simply be dismissed. Gaining access to means of self-representation and cultural production constituted an important step in the process of Israeli Arab political emancipation.<sup>117</sup> Successfully claiming their rights within the cultural field, they gained greater self-confidence as well as an increasing public presence within Israeli

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<sup>115</sup> Ibid.

<sup>116</sup> Recent literature has pointed to the ways in which states use the field of cultural activities as a means of coopting marginalized groups. Granting such groups access to official means of cultural production, the state includes them in its structure, without changing existing power hierarchies. In fact, as marginalized groups acknowledge the system by taking over responsibilities within the state's institutions, such power hierarchies are actually consolidated. See for instance (Williams 1991).

<sup>117</sup> With the publication of Edward Said's seminal *Orientalism*, works investigating the connection between cultural representations and power greatly proliferated (Said 1979a). For a discussion of these issues in an Israeli context see in particular (Hasson 1998; Katriel 1997; Shohat 1989; Shohat and Stam 1994; Zerubavel 1995).



Jewish society, a trend that held the potential of positively reflecting onto other realms as well. In a sense, Israeli Arab achievement in the cultural field helped them gain the ‘soft skills,’ the experience and the self-confidence necessary for more generally claiming their rights. The positive reactions I received when discussing with Israeli Arabs the establishment of the *Arabic Culture Section* as well as the growing cultural Arab presence within Israeli society confirmed this view. In particular Ayman Ajbariyyah assessed Israeli Arab achievements in the cultural field in very positive terms, referring to them as “a symbol of our empowerment within Israeli society” that held an incredibly collectivizing and emancipating potential.<sup>118</sup>

### *Using the System*

Abū Jum‘ah successfully learned to use the resources that increasingly became available to Israeli Arabs in the cultural field from the eighties onwards. After a trip abroad to Poland in 1991, where *Al-Asayyel* had been very favorably received, Muwafaq Khoury took notice of the group and promised his support. He involved Abū Jum‘ah in the conceptualization and organization of a first Israeli Arab nation-wide *dabkeh* competition. Hosted by the community center in the Israeli Arab village Majd el-Krum and supported by the *Arabic Culture Section*, this competition first took place in 1991 under the name of *The National Festival of Arab Dabkeh Groups (Mahrajān dawli li-firaq al-dabkah al-‘arabiyyah)*. For the festival, Khoury asked Abū Jum‘ah to function as an artistic advisor to the organizing team and involved him in networking as well as selecting the participating groups. As Abū Jum‘ah proudly stated, the event quickly increased in popularity and he found himself at the center of a newly emerging trend which was steered by Israeli Arabs and aimed at promoting their doing of *dabkeh*: “At our first festival, there were only eleven groups. Yet we took care to invite all the presidents from the local councils, whether or not they had troupes. Like this, we gave them the idea to set up troupes in their villages. The next year, there were twenty-three troupes. The people were taking up the idea and the number of troupes in the villages increased.”

Appointed as a member of the *Popular Council for Education and Arab Arts (al-Majlis al-sha‘bī li-’l-thaqāfah wa-’l-funūn al-‘arabiyyah)* inside the *Arabic Culture Council*, Abū Jum‘ah also served as Muwafaq Khoury’s

<sup>118</sup> Author’s interview with Ayman Ajbariyyah.



general advisor on issues related to *dabkeh*. In addition, he became involved in setting up and leading Israeli Arab *dabkeh* ensembles, proudly counting fifteen groups under his tutelage in the mid-nineties with whom he toured the festivals and performance venues of the Galilee. Paid by the *Israeli Ministry of Education* as well as local councils for his teaching engagements, he started earning enough money to be able to quit his day-time job as a decorateur and make a living entirely from *dabkeh*. Furthermore, he started to work at various events as artistic director, such as at *The Arab Bedouin Heritage Festival* in Isfiya as well as for the street parade in Haifa as part of the *Month of Arabic Culture and the Arabic Book* (*Shahr al-thaqāfah al-ʿarabiyyah wa-ʿl-kitāb al-ʿarabī*), two events that started to be organized annually in the early nineties.

Likewise, Abū Jumʿah was contacted by Ayman Ajbariyyah in winter 1998 to serve as advisor for a course called ‘*Debkah Dancers’ Training*,’ held every Friday afternoon from March to April 1998. Cultural directors of Israeli Arab community centers had approached Ajbariyyah stating their wish to see the teaching and choreographic skills of *dabkeh* group trainers improved. According to them, *dabkeh* groups in the Galilee were starting to look very much the same, with new ideas, concepts and dancing skills lacking. Ajbariyyah got in touch with two Israeli Jewish modern dancers and choreographers, who agreed to teach ballet and modern dance basics as well as improve the dancers’ sense of space, movement and choreography. In addition, Ajbariyyah hired Abū Jumʿah to show how these technical improvements could be practically used for choreographing *dabkeh*. Sponsored by the *Israeli Association of Community Centers*, this course was unprecedented. It had come about in response to the stated needs of Israeli Arabs themselves, and was planned and organized by an Israeli Arab. That Abū Jumʿah was hired as a teacher for this course paid tribute to his reputation as an Israeli Arab *dabkeh* choreographer and trainer.<sup>119</sup>

*Al-Asayyel’s dabkeh in the Galilee: distinctly their own*

In the context of staging *dabkeh* in front of local audiences in the Galilee, *Al-Asayyel* highlighted the function of their practices as a means of self-empowerment. Asked why teaching *dabkeh* throughout

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<sup>119</sup> Author’s interviews with Ayman Ajbariyyah as well as Diti Tor, one of the Israeli Jewish modern dancers hired for the course.

the Galilee was so important to him, Abū Jum‘ah explained that Israeli Arabs always found themselves in between a rock and a hard place. Neither really belonging to Israeli Jewish society nor fully to Palestinians in West Bank and Gaza. *dabkeh* was a means to emphasize a collective identity which was distinctly their own: “In Israel, the Jews call us Arab. They say: ‘You are terrorists and so on.’ Then we got to the Arabs and they tell us: ‘You are Jews, Arab Jews, etc.’ We don’t know where to go. To the Arabs or the Jews. [. . .] My heritage shows me that we exist. I do the *dabkeh*, to deepen our heritage and customs (*al-turāth wa-’l-taqālīd*). This is our identity.” His group’s members agreed with Abū Jum‘ah. Ḥanān,<sup>120</sup> for instance, maintained that doing *dabkeh* before local audiences fostered Israeli Arab self-confidence and togetherness: “For me, *dabkeh* is a means to revolutionize the Arabs in Israel. That they change their situation. It is like me saying to them that there is something that we have, why are you giving up. I stir them up. That’s why we do *dabkeh*, to show that we have good things.”

Describing their activities as distinctly their own, *Al-Asayyel* members stressed their independence from Israeli Jewish influence and asserted their freedom to define the content and shape of their cultural practices. As Ḥanān emphasized, her engagement with the group resembled a process, in which she had gradually come to understand *dabkeh* as something that specifically belonged to her and where she would not tolerate outside interference:

When I began with *dabkeh*, I did not understand politics. I did not know what is Arab, what is Jew. We are living together, *yallah*, it’s okay like that. [. . .] Then I developed. I thought that I have something special, distinguished for myself. I became older, learned about the Jews, about us, about our situation. I was thinking: ‘Stop, there is something here that’s not okay (*lo beseder*).’<sup>121</sup> I want to live, but how, why, with whom? I felt that I needed to sit back and think a little. That the *dabkeh* is not just dance (*raqs*), but there is something deeper, here, something which is mine, that belongs to me, and that I have to show.

Her sister, who had been listening to us, joined the conversation and similarly described the meaning of *dabkeh* to her as something distinctly Israeli Arab in contrast to contemporary Israeli Jewish society: “I am an Arab girl from Deir el-Asad. I am obliged to speak

<sup>120</sup> Name changed.

<sup>121</sup> She uses the Hebrew expression ‘*lo beseder*,’ an expression commonly used by Israeli Arabs in everyday language and translating as something that is ‘not okay.’

Hebrew. My school belongs to the state, my clothes are bought in Jewish stores. [. . .] My heritage is the only thing that stays with me and that the Israeli state cannot take from me. Maybe I started talking like them, cut my hair like them, but my heritage, that I will not let them change.”

Likewise, Ajbariyyah described the role that he saw *Al-Asayyel* holding within its own community as an ‘ambassador’ of Israeli Arabness within contemporary Israeli Jewish society. Alluding to his efforts in making Israeli Arab cultural leaders like Abū Jum‘ah follow their own path, he praised the group for staging shows that emphasized an Israeli Arab counternarrative in contrast to dominant Israeli historic discourse shaped by Zionism. He emphasized that presentations like the theater play that *Al-Asayyel* had presented in Jaffa in 1998 as their own way of remembering 1948 in contrast to the 50th anniversary jubilees staged by Israeli Jews, constituted an important step in the emancipation process of Israeli Arabs. Written by a professional Egyptian playwright living in the Galilee with the help of Abū Jum‘ah, the play recounted a story of resistance which the inhabitants of Deir el-Asad had staged against the British mandate forces after those had killed a village notable. While the play contained no allusion to the relationship between Arabs and Jews at that time, its general message of resisting domination and belief in the collective strength of Israeli Arabs were plainly obvious. To Ajbariyyah such distinctly Israeli Arab interpretations of history were essential for challenging the dominant Zionist narrative still governing public discourse and Israeli Arab school education.<sup>122</sup>

When speaking about *dabkeh* within an Israeli Arab performance context, *Al-Asayyel* members not only pointed to the ways in which their activities constituted a means of asserting a newly self-assured Israeli Arabness independently of Israeli Jewish influence. At the same time, they posited their activities as a means of performing identity independently of contemporary Palestinianness. Within the

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<sup>122</sup> Author’s interview with Ayman Ajbariyyah. According to Al-Haj, the school curricula which the Israeli Ministry traditionally required to be taught in Israeli Arab schools, was strongly Zionist flavored with little if no reference to Palestinian history, literature and social issues (al-Haj 1995). Behind the backdrop of the emergence of a post-Zionist discourse that challenged the Zionist master narrative within Israeli society, efforts to reorganize school books for both Israeli Arab as well as Israeli Jewish students to include a more balanced view of Israeli-Palestinian history were made (al-Haj 1995; Sa’ar 1999). As Israeli-Palestinian relations deteriorated in the late nineties, many of these critical engagements with Israeli history and society stalled. See (Bishara 2000; Bishara 2000; Seeboldt 2001).

local context of the Galilee, *Al-Asayyel* described *dabkeh* as a means of coming to terms with issues and problems that were specific to contemporary Israeli Arab society and had little to do with the situation of Palestinians in West Bank and Gaza. Referring to his activities within his local environment, Abū Jum‘ah stressed that *dabkeh* constituted an educational tool which Israeli Arabs used to shape community according to their own vision. To him, *dabkeh* was an ideal means to teach his group members how to construct their everyday reality as modern Israeli Arab citizens. In particular, he considered the doing of *dabkeh* in Galilean villages as helping in “fighting the use of drugs” which he saw spreading among Arab teenagers and young adults.<sup>123</sup> By “strengthening the suppressed folkloric identity (*huwīyyah fūklūrīyyah*),” Abū Jum‘ah counted on taking Arab village youth away from such destructive activities.

In addition, Abū Jum‘ah stated that he considered *dabkeh* as an ideal way of educating his group members, of opening their minds and refining their behavior as representatives of modern Israeli Arabness. Through *dabkeh*, they should gain confidence and self-esteem. Knowing that justice was on their side, they could use the system to claim their rights without staging open confrontation: “When I teach *dabkeh*, I teach them how to speak with people, how to interact, how to behave. They have to learn how to behave in every situation, not just in *dabkeh*. They have to learn how to stand tall and speak with a soft voice.” In particular, Abū Jum‘ah saw such transformations happening during trips. In his eyes, *Al-Asayyel*’s trips abroad very much contributed to educating his groups’ members and make them emerge as ‘developed members of society’: “The guys who do *dabkeh*, who have traveled abroad, and especially the guys of *Al-Asayyel* who traveled a lot, they are different. They come back, and they are understanding (*fāhimīn*), very intelligent (*ktīr inteliġentim*)<sup>124</sup> and disciplined, orderly (*mrattabīn*). They are Arab in their folklore and customs, but a developed Arab (*‘arabī mutaṭawwar*).”

#### *dabkeh on stage in the Galilee*

Performing before local audiences, *Al-Asayyel*’s presentations mirrored Abū Jum‘ah’s ideal of a modern Israeli Arab community: its presentations, as the group emphasized, were authentic, yet ‘developed.’

<sup>123</sup> For details on the increase in drug abuse among Galilean Arab youth see (Izenberg 1989).

<sup>124</sup> He says ‘intelligent’ in Hebrew.

According to Abū Jum‘ah, contemporary Israeli Arab communities, especially the youth, demanded to see new things in order to maintain interest. As Abū Jum‘ah put it, “this generation of Israeli Arabs loves the new things (*al-ḥadīth*). In my work, I thus need to go with the flow, with the style, with what people like, with the time.” Abū Jum‘ah maintained that his choreographies, especially the ones he did for *Al-Asayyel*, always broadly remained within the framework of the familiar. He did not randomly invent or essentially change styles: “In my work, I definitely stay within the framework of *dabkeh*. *Dabkeh* means to stomp your legs on the ground. Quick, strong movements. That’s the *dabkeh*. And that’s the framework I am always staying in even when I develop the presentation. We don’t do ballet or dance (*raqs*), we do *dabkeh*.” Within this framework of the ‘authentic,’ however, Abū Jum‘ah stressed that he changed his presentations in order to avoid monotony and boredom, both among his group members as well as his Israeli Arab audience. As he pointed out: “We renew *dabkeh*. We write new songs. We interpret ideas on stage and we use new steps, so that our presentation develops.” Varying *dabkeh* to keep it attractive within the community, Abū Jum‘ah, in fact, prided himself on his involvement in what he saw as a process of redefining heritage. To him, *Al-Asayyel*’s *dabkeh* should be an expression of contemporary Israeli Arabness, a *dabkeh* in step with the lived reality of Israeli Arab communities at the end of the twentieth century. As he put it, it was a “heritage of our present (lit. new) day (*turāth yōmnā ‘l-jād*).” Israeli Arab officials who sponsored *Al-Asayyel* praised the group’s concern with going beyond the familiar and developing new ways of staging *dabkeh* in line with present-day Israeli Arab realities. As Muwafaq Khoury explained, it was important to him that *dabkeh* ensembles based their staged choreographies on the historic model, well-known steps, movements and songs. Equally as important, Israeli Arab ensembles working in the late nineties, however, should maintain a contemporary outlook. They should not give the impression of always presenting the same. The groups should know their heritage, the different kinds of *dabkeh*, but they should develop as well.<sup>125</sup>

Thus, *Al-Asayyel*’s *dabkeh* before an Israeli Arab audience looked different than its *dabkeh* in an Israeli Jewish or a Palestinian context. Complying with Israeli Jewish ideas about ‘authentic’ *dabkeh*, *Al-Asayyel* girls wore the *tōb*, left its synthesizer at home and performed the

<sup>125</sup> Author’s interview with Muwafaq Khoury.

*shimāliyyeh*. Appearing before an Israeli Arab audience, the girls also wore the *tōb*. Yet to vary the group's appearance, they often put on colorfully different costumes, which they decried as the "dress of the Galilean peasant (*tōb il-fallāḥah il-jalīliyyeh*)" and which they very much enjoyed wearing. Moreover, in the context of Israeli Arab audiences, Abū Jum'ah did not sanction the creative recombination of the group's costumes as he would do when performing for Ayalah Goren or Yossi Ben Israel. In fact, when appearing before their own community, it constituted a pleasant amusement for the girls to think of different ways of tying their scarfs to embellish their appearance or using different cloth for the headdress altogether. Similarly, in the context of Israeli Arab festivals, weddings and celebrations where *Al-Asayyel* appeared, the group's musical accompaniment usually consisted of a *darbūkah* plus the synthesizer. Banned from the Israeli Jewish stage, the synthesizer was a favorite in an Arab context. The crowd appreciated its electric sound. Besides, it served well for producing the trendy sounds called for at Arab festivities, not only the familiar *dabkeh* rhythms. Finally, in contrast to presentations in an Israeli Jewish context, the group demonstrated more leeway in terms of choreography. Whereas its program for Israeli Jewish events mostly consisted of variations of the *shimāliyyeh*, the group in the context of its own community did not hesitate to perform the "Lebanese dances (*raqṣāt lubnāniyyeh*)." Performed to popular Lebanese music, notably the well-loved singer Fayrūz, these choreographies were much less restricted in terms of inventing new movements, steps and formations on stage than the group's rather strictly predefined *shimāliyyeh* choreographies.

Similar to its appearances at events in West Bank and Gaza, *Al-Asayyel* staged *dabkeh* as a social interaction when performing before Israeli Arabs. Yet in the Galilee, the group did not describe its activities in terms of showing how Israeli Arabs had preserved the 'old ways' as it did in the territories. On the contrary, as outlined above, *Al-Asayyel* was particularly concerned with demonstrating the modern actuality of its *dabkeh*. Thus, its Lebanese dances were performed in the Galilee, but not in West Bank or Gaza. Also in terms of costuming, the group was more careful about its appearance when performing in the territories. In West Bank and Gaza, *Al-Asayyel* took heed to display commonly shared symbols of Palestinian nationhood in order to foster senses of community and togetherness. The girls, for example, used the *kūfiyyeh* for attaching their head scarves when appearing in Ramallah in May 1999. They also usually wore the *tōb*. In

the Galilee, the group was more creatively lenient in such matters, arranging their costumes according to their artistic liking. Thus, in Haifa on 23 May 1999 for the street parade of the *Month of Arabic Culture and the Arabic Book*, the girls, for example, wore no headdress whatsoever. At other occasions, they used brightly colored scarfs.

*Women's strength in dabkeh*

Most obviously, however, the difference between *Al-Asayyel's* performance in an Israeli Arab context versus its appearances in both an Israeli Jewish and a Palestinian context was marked by a difference in gender roles. Appearing before their own community, *Al-Asayyel's* female members maintained a noticeably greater presence on stage than in the other two performance contexts. The issue of girls dancing in *Al-Asayyel* generally was not an easy one due to the moral ambiguity that the issue of female public dancing generally holds in Arab Muslim societies. Confronted with people's reservations about the very idea of founding a *dabkeh* group in the village, Abū Jum'ah thus initially avoided the issue of including girls, afraid that it would add fuel to the fire of people's rejection: "There are people who are very sensitive to the issue of girls in the group. At the beginning, I thus only included guys. I did not think that it would be possible to have girls in the group." Yet as soon as the group was gaining a reputation for itself and became accepted in the village in the early nineties, Abū Jum'ah started putting a concerted effort into encouraging girls to participate. He recounted lobbying for girls from his own extended family to join and hoping for a snowball effect to then be able to include others as well: "I went from house to house, from my family, who knew me. I started with the *banāt* from my family, so that people would gain confidence, that they would see that my own daughter is in the troupe and my brother's daughter."

Apart from increasing artistic possibilities as well as giving a more 'authentic' picture of *turāth*, Abū Jum'ah maintained that the girls' presence in the group was desirable to underscore the progressiveness and modern outlook of contemporary Israeli Arab society. During the recent decades, the social reality of Israeli Arabs had changed, especially concerning the role of women. Women now went to university, worked outside their communities and traveled (Españoli 1994). Against this background, it was only appropriate that an ensemble which claimed to represent the community should include girls to pay tribute to these changes and counter any negative stereo-



typing about Israeli Arabs as backwards or patriarchal. As Abū Jum‘ah proudly told me, the presence of girls in the group, as well as the openness and equality with which *Al-Asayyel*'s *shabāb* and *banāt* interacted often caught outsiders by surprise, especially when traveling abroad. During one of their first trips to Poland in the early nineties, for instance the organizers could not believe that indeed, they were the Arab group. *Al-Asayyel*'s appearance was so different from what they had expected an Arab group to look like, as Abū Jum‘ah proudly recalled:

When we were in Poland, when we were getting off the bus, the Polish were very surprised, they had had an idea about the Arabs that they would wear veils. They asked us, ‘Where is the Arab group?’ We said: ‘We are the Arab group.’ They asked us: ‘No, seriously, where is the Arab group?!’ They thought that we were Israelis, that a Jewish group had come with the Arab group. They would not believe it, they were surprised about our dress, which was elegantly sportive, and that we had *shabāb* and *ṣabāyā*.

Like in *El-Funoun*'s case, the issue of girls dancing in *Al-Asayyel* was not undisputed. On the one hand, the Deir el-Asad branch of the Islamist movement kept a critical eye on the group. Founded in the village in the late eighties, the movement had managed to consolidate its political presence by winning two local councils seats in the elections of 1998. In an interview with me, Nimr Abū Lawz, a member of the Islamist movement, however, assured that his organization did not seek to sanction *Al-Asayyel*. In principle they were not against the existence of a *dabkeh* ensemble, although they preferred having a group that was not co-educative, but segregated by sexes.<sup>126</sup> Similarly, Shaykh Aḥmad from the movement stated that they would prefer splitting the group and organize one *dabkeh* group for guys and one for girls. According to him:

(*Al-Asayyel*) is a phenomenon that needs a guide (*rashīd*). The group should not be destroyed. It has a good idea behind it, but one should fight the things that are evil (*sharr*) in it. [. . .] There does not have to be a girl who holds the hand of a guy. There can be a group for girls and one for boys with appropriate dress (*ḥayy shar‘ī*) and with religious topics.<sup>127</sup>

Resistance to women dancing in *Al-Asayyel* not only came from the Islamist camp. Even the families of the female participants occasionally

<sup>126</sup> Author's interview with Nimr Abū Lawz.

<sup>127</sup> Author's interview with Shaykh Aḥmad.



challenged their daughters' involvement, especially when the group had repeatedly come back late at night from performances. One girl participated without her father knowing and the youngest daughter of my host family permanently fought with her elder brother about her right to continue appearing on stage.

Against the background of the general changes that had taken place within Israeli Arab society, however, and the status that *dabkeh* maintained as an expression of a newly self-empowered Israeli Arabness, opposition in Deir el-Asad to *Al-Asayyel*'s activities was not very pronounced. In contrast to *El-Funoun*, whose shift from *dabkeh* to *raqs* had raised the stakes for both female and male members and where much of the group's discourse turned around the issue of acceptability, *Al-Asayyel* was seen as staging *turāth*, an activity generally considered above suspicion as one of the female members explained: "Of course there are many who don't want their daughters to go and do *dabkeh*. The Islamist movement here in the village says that they don't want girls in the group. But we reject this, because the girls in our group, we don't go there to dance (*nurquṣ*) and fool around. We are going there to do our heritage (*turāth*)." Another female participant similarly maintained that people in Deir el-Asad accepted the importance of *dabkeh* as a means of Israeli Arab empowerment. Thus, although the issue of staying out at night and traveling was a difficult one for some, no essential resistance against girls doing *dabkeh* on stage existed in the community: "The people in the village realized that nothing will happen to the girl who does *dabkeh*. On the contrary, they see that *dabkeh* expresses a lot."<sup>128</sup>

While encouraging girls to participate, Abū Jum'ah, however, did not envision a major role for them. As one of the first girls to enter *Al-Asayyel* stated: "When we, the *banāt*, first entered the group, we did not have a big role. We did not even take part in all the presentations. Even when we came along, we would not take part, but stand on the side and watch." As she explained, the girls initially were embarrassed to dance in front of the *shabāb*, and felt that those did not really welcome their presence. After a while, she noticed, however, that their importance inside the group increased, as both

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<sup>128</sup> In contrast to *El-Funoun*, where not only female, but male members as well faced major difficulties in participating in a group staging *raqs*, *Al-Asayyel*'s men encountered little social sanctioning of their activities as they were seen to engage in an acceptable, even honorable cultural tradition.

Abū Jum‘ah and the *shabāb* actively made an effort to include them more: “They started to encourage us and give us a role. The interest among the guys increased to have girls with them. We started to experience some encouragement from the guys and they helped us, even with some movements.” One of the group’s male members similarly recalled this initial period of making girls join: “At the beginning, the girls felt embarrassed to take the hands of the *shabāb*. Then Yaḥyā started shouting: ‘For heaven’s sake, take each other’s hand like normal human beings—why are you embarrassed. What’s the problem?!’ Then, after four times that Yaḥyā shouted like this, it changed.” Encouraged to take a more active part, the girls felt increasingly included in the group’s activities.

Although the female members saw their importance increasing over time, the roles inside the group remained clearly gendered, with the male performers taking center stage and the female performers remaining on the sidelines. As Abū Jum‘ah maintained, the presence of *banāt* was important for the group, Yet the authentic *dabkeh* remained the one performed by the *shabāb*. *Al-Asayyel*’s pride was its line of tall, handsome young men who moved together in unison like ‘the noble horses,’ exuding strength and ‘masculinity.’ Including girls in the moving *shimālīyyeh* circle worked to disrupt the homogeneity and strength of the presentation, as Abū Jum‘ah explained: “When you have *banāt* participating in the *dabkeh*, the strength of the *dabkeh* (*quwwit il-dabkeh*) is not like it is when the *shabāb* do it alone.”<sup>129</sup> *Al-Asayyel*’s male members agreed with this observation. According to one long-time participant, who had been well-liked by the girls of the ensemble but had quit the group upon my arrival due to lack of time, the presence of girls disrupted the intensity of the performance: “In my opinion, a complete *dabkeh* is the one done by *shabāb* alone. You see that the strength of the girls does not reach the strength of the *shabāb*. It is less. If the *dabkeh* includes *banāt*, it is not *dabkeh* anymore, it becomes a dance (*raqṣah*).” Another argued similarly that *dabkeh* done by guys alone had a different feeling to it, as its performance was not restricted by the social norms usually governing the interaction between the sexes:

<sup>129</sup> Referring to the ensemble of the neighboring village Majd el-Krum with its large number of female participants who were, as Abū Jum‘ah as well as *Al-Asayyel* members repeatedly assured me, exceptionally good performers, Abū Jum‘ah said: “You can see that with Majd el-Krum. When the *shabāb* do *dabkeh* with the *banāt*, their strength becomes like the strength of the *banāt*. Somewhat weak. It is not the same.”

When *shabāb* do *dabkeh* alone, it has a different strength. We take our freedom, we are free to do *dabkeh* as we want. With girls, there are a lot of things that are forbidden to do, like we never put our arms on the shoulders of the girls (*nishbik*). It is not because the girls cannot do the *shabkeh*, no, anybody can do the *shabkeh*.<sup>130</sup> But we want to give the impression to people that we take care. It is not appropriate.

Similar to the group's male members, its female participants maintained that there were clear gender roles that should be kept when doing *dabkeh*. Guys and girls had different functions on stage that were expressed through different steps as well as ways of moving, as one girl explained: "The girls should not be like the guys. The girl needs to show that she knows how to do *dabkeh*, but also she needs to have a beauty that is different from the beauty of a guy. [. . .] There is a clear difference between them. She is like this and he is like that. This is not negative." Ḥanān<sup>131</sup> stressed that the difference between male and female roles in the *dabkeh* was particularly made clear when considering the role of the leader of the *dabkeh*, the *lawīḥ*:

In *dabkeh*, the *shabāb* lead. They are doing the main things. The *lawīḥ* is a guy. He leads the troupe, he does what needs to be done. The guy is always the leader, and behind him is the girl. Not because she cannot do it, but because her role in the *dabkeh* is like that, the guy leads. If it were her, the people would say, what is this, who is this *shab*, he is not good. Like as they say in the proverb: 'His wife is his ruler (*mrātuh ḥākīmtuh*). She does whatever she wants. It means that she is strong, but her strength is something negative, she uses it in a negative way.

While accepting an essential difference between male and female roles, the girls in the group at the time of my research openly challenged the notion that their presence would disrupt the performance of *dabkeh* on stage. Behind the backdrop of changing gender relations in Arab villages over the past decades and encouraged by events such as the Tel Aviv festival, they self-confidently claimed their place in the *dabkeh* line. As Munā<sup>132</sup> stressed: "The girl has a role and the guy has a role and it is not okay for the girl to take the role of the guy. But that does not prevent them from performing together and doing movements together, sometimes even the same movements."

<sup>130</sup> 'Do the *shabkeh*' translates as to 'do the net,' referring to a specific way of forming a line by putting one's arms on the shoulders of the next person.

<sup>131</sup> Name changed.

<sup>132</sup> Name changed.

Similarly, Ḥanān<sup>133</sup> emphasized that in certain contexts, it could even be good for a female performer to be strong, active and take a role normally reserved for a guy. While girls usually took their place on the sidelines, she argued that under certain conditions, it was socially accepted, in fact, it was even desired that a girl's performance on stage displayed 'masculine' characteristics:

When a girl makes strong movements and behaves in a strong way, they say that this is a *bint zalameh* (the 'daughter of a man'). But that is good. It means that she is not just nice and sweet (*latīfeh, ḥilweh*), but she is strong (*qawwiyyeh*), she can do things. When a girl goes with a guy to the center of the stage to improvise, like myself with Muḥammad or Rabāḥ, they say that this is a *bint zalameh*, she can do *dabkeh* with them.

As the positive image of an assertive young woman who mastered the socially valued performance of a strong, skillful *dabkeh*, the concept of the *bint zalameh* stood in contrast to the negatively connoted 'woman-dictator' mentioned above who would shame the men by unduly taking their place.<sup>134</sup> If a girl possessed the physical capacity and if she stayed within the boundaries of the permissible, she could very well take a prominent role on stage like the men, as Ḥanān explained:

Yaḥyā did not let another girl go to the middle of the stage with the *shābb* to improvise. He would say, no, she is a girl. But with me, he said that this girl, she knows *dabkeh*, she can do it. And the people liked it, they accepted it and said: 'Oh, this is very nice, look at her.' They did not say: 'What is this, this girl who goes to the middle like that. Her mother and father should not let her do this.' Instead they said: 'It is great that she can do *dabkeh* like this. Good for her!'

### *Gendering Israeli Arabness*

In an Israeli Jewish folk dance context, Arab cultural concepts like the *bint zalameh* found little consideration. Similarly, Israeli Jewish folk dance officials did not show themselves much concerned with contemporary Israeli Arab efforts at women's emancipation and struggle for

<sup>133</sup> Name changed.

<sup>134</sup> In her study of the Awlād 'Alī Bedouins in the Egyptian Western Desert, Lila Abu Lughod highlights a similar seemingly ambivalent phenomenon. Arguing that Awlād 'Alī women were generally expected to live up to the social ideal of female deference, Abu Lughod expertly shows how, within certain contexts, it was socially acceptable for these women to demonstrate values normally attributed to men such as strength, autonomy and assertiveness. In fact, in certain contexts, this display of 'masculine' characteristics was even demanded of them in order to maintain an honorable self (Abu Lughod 1986).

equality within their own communities. In fact, the ways in which Israeli Jewish officials defined the authenticity of *dabkeh* in terms of gender roles that privileged men directly played into patriarchal ways of thinking among Israeli Arabs and thus, in a sense, undermined the efforts launched by women to demand greater equality on stage. Wanting to see the “real thing,” Israeli Jewish officials helped to perpetuate gender segregation and hierarchies in *Al-Asayyel*’s presentations, and kept female stage presence limited.

In a Palestinian context, *Al-Asayyel*’s female members were welcomed on stage as an expression of Israeli Arab identification with their Palestinian brethren. The group argued that they raised the level of emotional attachment displayed in their presentations in the territories by bringing women along to perform. It demonstrated trust and emphasized togetherness: West Bank and Gaza were secure, familiar places to go and thus, the women could safely come along.<sup>135</sup> While welcome on stage in Palestine, the group’s female members, however, maintained a limited role. As going to the territories involved long-distance travel and, in the case of Gaza, overnight stays, Abū Jum‘ah took the women along only when necessary. As long as Abū Jum‘ah could get together a group of *shabāb* and some musicians, he could go anywhere to perform and it mattered little at what time they returned. Taking girls along, however, Abū Jum‘ah was more restricted in terms of staying out at night. Besides, traveling long-distance with a co-ed group usually raised eyebrows among members of the local community, in particular with Deir el-Asad’s Islamist movement. Even when Abū Jum‘ah took the female dancers along, however, the group’s emphasis on staging *dabkeh* as the ‘preserved heritage’ of Arabs from the Galilee left little room for a more prominent female presence on stage. The spotlights focused on the *shabāb*’s *shimālīyyeh* in addition to the group’s male musicians, singers and poets (*zajjālīn*). With the male *dabkeh* performers lining up across the stage to accompany the poetic improvisations of Abū Jum‘ah, Iyād and Ḥasan, the female performers usually crowded on the side and remained hardly noticeable.

<sup>135</sup> The group’s discussion about the ways in which the performance of their female members in West Bank and Gaza served to highlight the level of their identification reflects issues of gender and public/private space as well as debates around honor/shame in Middle Eastern societies extensively examined in the literature. See for instance (Mernissi 1975; Abu Lughod 1986). About issues of honor and land (*al-‘ird wa-l-ard*) in a Palestinian context see (Peteet 1993).

When appearing before local audiences, the role that *Al-Asayyel's* women played on stage was noticeably greater than both in Israeli Jewish or Palestinian performance contexts. For one thing, performing in the Galilee avoided the complications involved in long-distance travel and overnight stays. Performance venues were close and one could easily go back and forth in little time. For another, as the group's female members were mostly highschool students, the girls were actually more available to go and perform than the group's male members. Those were mostly older and worked. It was thus difficult for them to spontaneously fit performances into their schedule.<sup>136</sup> Moreover, *Al-Asayyel* in the Galilee was specifically invited to perform as a co-ed group. The audience requested to see both men and women on stage. In an Israeli Arab context, however, the group's female members were allotted a greater role not only in terms of numbers, but also in terms of stage presence. The Lebanese dances which were included in the group's program when performing in the Galilee put more emphasis on the women. In these choreographies, male and female members performed alongside each other, executing the same steps and movement patterns. In fact, some parts were done by the women alone, thus highlighting their presence on stage.

#### CONCLUSION

Various, mostly conflicting relations came to bear on *Al-Asayyel's* performance. Relations between Israeli Arabs and Israeli Jews, between Israeli Arabs and Palestinians, as well as between Israelis and Palestinians impacted *Al-Asayyel's* discourse as well as the materialization of this discourse through *dabkeh* on stage. In the different contexts of its performance, *Al-Asayyel* thus presented 'authentic' *dabkeh* differently. In an Israeli Jewish context, the group negotiated the presentation of *dabkeh* between the expectations of Israeli Jewish folk dance officials and its own artistic aspirations and means to counter these expectations. In a Palestinian context, *Al-Asayyel* performed to show cultural identification in absence of any direct political involvement. In order to ward off any claims of selling out, the group hereby

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<sup>136</sup> For the street parade in Haifa on 23 May 1999, Abū Jum'ah, for example, appeared with ten women and only four men. The parade took place during the afternoon and the men had not been able to take time off from work.

adapted its presentation to West Bank and Gaza stereotypes of Israeli Arabs as ‘guardians of the authentic.’ Finally, in an Israeli Arab context, *Al-Asayyel* performed *dabkeh* to express Israeli Arab self-confidence and emancipation, both from Israeli Jews as well as Palestinians.

The performative flexibility demonstrated by *Al-Asayyel* within the different contexts of its presentations did not result from artistic inconsistency, but was due to the group’s special status as a non-Jewish Arab dance group in Israel that identified with the Palestinian nation. Truly ‘in between’ the nations, *Al-Asayyel* performed for all three conflicting parties. As Abū Jum‘ah stressed, the group did not differentiate in this regard:

We believe that in art, there are no borders. We have done *dabkeh* before Netanyahu. We have done *dabkeh* before Arafat. We have done *dabkeh* in all the TV stations, the Palestinian, the Israeli, the Arab. In our troupe, we don’t have racism, regionalism or politics (*lā ‘uṣuriyyeh, lā baladiyyeh, wa-lā siyāseh*). We are *shabāb*, human beings (*beni adam*)<sup>137</sup> like all the others. And we do the *dabkeh* for everybody.

Yet appearing on stage in front of all three conflicting parties, *Al-Asayyel* adapted *dabkeh* according to each performance context. As one of the group’s female dancers emphasized, *Al-Asayyel*’s *dabkeh* was nothing “stable” (*thābit*). A good *dabkeh* dancer knew how to “adapt to different performance situations.” He or she knew how to “live the *dabkeh*.” Within each context of its performance, *Al-Asayyel*’s *dabkeh* thus looked different on stage: The group improvised its performance between Israel and Palestine.

Yet *Al-Asayyel* not only varied its presentations according to context. Most notably, the ways in which the group improvised its activities in between the nations reflected its understanding of Israeli Arab identity as a performance that was always contextual. As the following exchange between Yaḥyā Abū Jum‘ah and his wife shows, Israeli Arab identity performed through *dabkeh* was nothing fixed or pre-determined, but gained meaning only within specific contexts. Asking them to indicate their preferred label of identification for the group from a choice of eight, Abū Jum‘ah and his wife Laylā<sup>138</sup> did not point to one single name. Instead, they indicated preference for different names according to the context in which they would be

<sup>137</sup> Abū Jum‘ah says this in Hebrew.

<sup>138</sup> Name changed.

used, ranging from ‘Arab group in Israel,’ ‘Palestinian group in Israel,’ ‘Arab Israeli group,’ ‘Palestinian Arab group in Israel,’ ‘Palestinian Arab group’ and ‘Palestinian group’:

[Laylā had silently listened to the interview I was conducting with her husband in the living room. As he took his time in choosing his preferred label of self-identification for the group, she suddenly joined the conversation.]

Laylā: “Arab group in Israel (*firqah ‘arabiyyeh fi isrā’īl*).”

Yaḥyā [correcting her]: “Palestinian group in Israel. (*firqah filastīniyyeh fi isrā’īl*).”

Laylā protested.

Yaḥyā: “‘Arab group’ or ‘Palestinian group’—it’s the same.”

Laylā: “No. *Here* we are an ‘Arab group’.”

[She hesitated, read the choices again, then said]: “Here, we are an ‘Israeli Arab group’ (*firqah ‘arabiyyeh isrā’īliyyeh*).”

Yaḥyā: “No.”

Laylā [with emphasis]: “An ‘Arab group in Israel’ (*firqah ‘arabiyyeh fi isrā’īl*).”

Yaḥyā [equally with emphasis]: “A Palestinian Arab group in Israel’ (*firqah ‘arabiyyeh filastīniyyeh fi isrā’īl*).”

Laylā: “That’s when you are outside the country. But here in Israel, they know you as ‘Arabs in Israel’ (*‘arab fi isrā’īl*). They don’t refer to you as ‘a Palestinian group in Israel’ (*firqah filastīniyyeh fi isrā’īl*). You understand. The right name is ‘Arab group in Israel’ (*firqah ‘arabiyyeh fi isrā’īl*).”

Yaḥyā: “Arab what! Lebanese Arab? Or Syrian? Or what?”

Laylā: “They know that here we are Arabs in Israel.”

Yaḥyā: “Palestinian. Palestinian. Right?!”

Laylā: “We are Palestinians, right. But when you go abroad . . .”

Yaḥyā: “She is not asking me what they call me here in Israel, but she asks me what I want the name of the troupe to be.”



Laylā [to me]: “Are you asking him what he wants the name of the troupe *to be*, or what the name of the troupe *is*?”

Elke: “Both.”

Laylā: “What he wants is ‘Palestinian Arab’ (*‘arabiyyeh filastīniyyeh*) . . .”

Yaḥyā [interrupting]: “I want it to be ‘Palestinian Arab in Israel (*filastīniyyeh ‘arabiyyeh fī isrā’īl*).”

Laylā: “But in reality, it is that: ‘Arab in Israel’ (*‘arabiyyeh fī isrā’īl*).”

Yaḥyā [with emphasis]: “No, it is reality that we are Palestinian Arabs in Israel. That is the reality. If they, the Israelis, don’t want to refer to me as a Palestinian troupe (*firqah filastīniyyeh*), that is their problem.”

Laylā: “Wait, the state, a state . . .”

Yaḥyā: “It is okay. The state says to us that we are Palestinians of 48 living inside Israel (*filastīniyyeh min thamāniyyeh wa-arba’in ‘ā’ishīn fī isrā’īl*).”

Laylā: “Arab! They don’t say ‘Palestinians!’”

Yaḥyā: “They say ‘Arab.’ Whatever.”

Laylā: “Arabs of Israel (*‘arab isrā’īl*).”

Yaḥyā [agreeing]: “They say ‘Arabs of Israel.’”

Laylā: “We are here ‘Arabs of Israel.’”

Yaḥyā: “I want the name of the troupe to be ‘Palestinian Arab in Israel’ (*filastīniyyeh ‘arabiyyeh fī isrā’īl*).”

Laylā: “That’s right, that’s what we want. We want ‘Palestinian group’. We are not forgetting our nationality (*qawmiyyitnā*), you understand. But the reality, how the state refers to us, we are ‘Arabs in Israel’ (*‘arab fī isrā’īl*). That’s what they call us.”

Elke: “And when you go abroad?”

Laylā: “Then we say ‘Palestinian group.’”

Elke: “Only Palestinian?”

Yaḥyā: “Palestinian in Israel.”

Laylā: “In the Israeli state, that’s understood. Refugees in Israel, that’s the reality. It was been put upon us that it is like this. We have not asked for this reality. They tell us we are Arabs in Israel. I came from Lebanon. We did not ask for that. But we have to . . . [pause]. They say Arabs in Israel . . . [pause]. We are Palestinians, we are not changing that. Not Israelis. But this is the issue, this is our situation. We cannot change this. This is the reality. But what we would like, we would like to be Palestinians in a state . . . [she stopped].”

[Silence. Yaḥyā moved the paper away as if to indicate that this question is closed.]

Like *dabkeh*, Israeli Arab identity was not fixed, but depended on context. Both Abū Jum‘ah and his wife did not indicate one label of self-identification. Instead, they made the label dependent on context. Specific situations indicated by phrases like “here they say to us,” “when we go abroad,” “what we would like to be is” determined their choice of name. *Al-Asayyel* members similarly chose their preferred label of self-identification according to context. One of the girls, for instance, rejected the choice ‘Palestinian Arab group’ by saying that with a name like that, “they are going to give you problems here.” Similarly, she rejected the label ‘Israeli Palestinian group’ by saying “Imagine you are in Gaza, and you say ‘Israeli Palestinian group,’ that would be a big problem there.” Eventually, she chose ‘Palestinian Arab group in Israel,’ not because it was the name that she spontaneously could identify with most, but because to her it seemed the best compromise, a name that she saw as both acceptable to Israeli Jews as well as Palestinians in the territories and that would thus best serve to avoid problems: “‘Palestinian Arab group in Israel’—thank God, with that you can live happily, without problems. You are going to stay happy with your life here and everybody is okay with it.” A leading male member equally settled for ‘Palestinian Arab group in Israel,’ yet immediately qualified that when traveling abroad, the name should be ‘Arab group,’ not ‘Palestinian group,’ due to “the problems that may arise otherwise.” Another female dancer similarly rejected any mentioning of ‘Palestinian’ in the label, because a group that called itself ‘Palestinian’ would be rejected by an Israeli Jewish audience. Yet another stated that her preferred label would definitely include the adjective ‘Palestinian.’

'Israel' in contrast, should be left out, as it caused trouble when traveling to Arab countries: "If I say 'Palestinian group in Israel' and I go to the Gulf, they would not receive me because it would look like a troupe from Israel. They would not want us. We had such a problem before in Iraq." Refraining from including 'Israel,' the group should stress its Palestinian identity when traveling: "'Palestinian,' that's the best when traveling. When we were in Germany, there was a Syrian group in the same hotel. They told us not to say that we are from Israel. They told us to say that we are from 'Palestine'." Thinking over the choices for a little while, however, she corrected herself. Rejecting all eight choices, she instead suggested her own label, which diplomatically avoided any political categories: "My preferred name is *The Galilean Al-Asayyel Group for Popular Dance (Fīrqiṭ il-aṣāyil il-jalīliyyeh li-'l-raḡṣ il-sha'bi)*." Thus, within the different contexts of its performance, *Al-Asayyel* not only improvised *dabkeh* in between, but also identity. Changing relations between Israeli Arabs, Israeli Jews and Palestinians variously shaped the group's stage presentations, and determined the ways in which the group labelled its identity performed through *dabkeh* on stage.

## CLOSING UP

My study aimed at showing how the performance of Israeli and Palestinian nationalism is not informed by an unbridgeable difference of clashing cultures. Instead, I sought to draw attention to the ways in which the difference between Israel and Palestine comes about through processes that define the unique distinctness of national identity not through opposition, but relationality. The double invention of the Arab *dabkeh* as first specifically Zionist/Israeli and second specifically Palestinian aptly illustrates how Israeli and Palestinian nationalism perform cultural uniqueness by drawing on the same practice and not some 'inherent,' essentially different cultural trait.

### POWER RELATIONS AND DABKEH/DEBKAH

Relations of unequal power shaped the ways in which both nationalisms performed the same practice differently as an expression of cultural uniqueness. In the case of *El-Funoun*, Israeli-Palestinian relations staked out the general parameters within which the group's stylistic negotiations took place, with the group framing its activities first in terms of 'steadfast resistance,' then in terms of 'uprising,' 'stagnation' and finally 'separation.' Yet Israeli-Palestinian relations not merely determined the general parameters of *El-Funoun's* performance. At the same time, even the degree to which stylistic changes under the impact of global flows could acceptably take place was delimited by the ways in which Israeli and Palestinian relations in the late nineties continued to be defined in terms of ongoing tension. *El-Funoun* members argued that in the context of a protracted national struggle, changing ways of movement could only occur in ways that did not essentially challenge the meaning of their activities as a means of national identification. Their last production *Haiifa, Beirut & Beyond* went too far beyond the familiar and thus never made it to the stage.

Israeli-Palestinian relations also directly impacted *Karmeit Makhol's* activities. Positing Israeli Arabs living in the Galilee as 'hostile Others,' Israeli Jewish policy-makers founded and developed the Israeli folk

dance ensemble *Karmeï Makhol* as a means of establishing an Israeli Jewish presence in the north. Yet, *debkah* as staged by *Karmeï Makhol* not merely reflected the power inequalities underlying Jewish-Arab relations in the Galilee. Rather, performing the Israeli Jewish Self as ‘modern’ in opposition to its ‘unmodern’ Arab Other, *Karmeï Makhol* contributed to consolidating the hierarchies of power that informed its Orientalist view of Israeli Arabs as Other in the first place. Through folk dancing, *Karmeï Makhol* thus not merely turned Arab spaces into Israeli Jewish place, but also ensured that this place once made would maintain its position of dominant power.

Similarly, *Al-Asayyel*’s activities were profoundly shaped by Israeli-Palestinian relations. In *Al-Asayyel*’s special case as a non-Jewish, Arab group in Israel that emotionally identified with the Palestinian nation, various, mostly conflicting relations came to bear on its performance in Israeli Jewish, Palestinian and Israeli Arab contexts. Accordingly, within these different performance contexts, not only *Al-Asayyel*’s presentations of *dabkeh* changed, but also its labels of self-identification. Improvising in between the nations, *Al-Asayyel* performed an identity whose performative norms as well as discursive labels remained subject to relationality: the ambiguous relationship between Israeli Arabs and a state that defined itself as ethnically Jewish, changing relations between Israeli Arabs and the Palestinian national movement, as well as generally the interaction between the Israeli state and Palestinians.

#### FROM MASCULINE TO FEMININE PERFORMANCES OF THE NATION

The relationality of Israeli and Palestinian nationalism did not only play out in the ways in which relations of unequal power shaped the performance of identity in each of the three different contexts. In addition, parallels in the ways in which *dabkeh/debkah* was invented as tradition twice and continued to be staged as a performance of national identity through the late nineties point to Israeli-Palestinian relationality. Initially, both Zionist/Israeli as well as Palestinian national discourse had invented *dabkeh/debkah* as a masculine performance of the nation. In both contexts, cultural leaders began referring to the invented *dabkeh/debkah* as a “men’s dance” and in both contexts, the performative norms of *dabkeh/debkah* as a national symbol were determined in terms of attributes which the dancers themselves defined as ‘masculine’: e.g. strength, energy, militancy and readiness to fight.

Brought to the stage as a 'men's dance' in both the Zionist/Israeli and the Palestinian context, *dabkeh/debkah* for both sides counted as a symbol of national emancipation from the nation's Other. In the Zionist/Israeli context in the time from the forties to the seventies, *dabkeh* as a 'masculine' *debkah* performed Jewish national emancipation from Europe. *debkah* was seen as a model performance of the *Sabra*—the Israeli Jew who was born and culturally rooted in Palestine/Israel and whom Zionist/Israeli discourse posited as the 'masculine, emancipated counterpart' of the *yehudi galuti*, the passive 'ghetto Jew' of the European exile and emasculated victim of anti-Semitism. Invented as a 'men's dance,' Israeli *debkah*, however, was not only a symbol of Jewish emancipation *vis-à-vis* a dominant Europe. *debkah* also served to construct and consolidate new hierarchies of power between Zionist settlers and the local Palestinian Arab population by positing the Palestinian Other as a 'noble, but unenlightened peasantry.' Palestinian nationalist discourse in the late sixties and early seventies similarly constructed the Palestinian *dabkeh* as a 'masculine' performance of national emancipation. In Palestinian nationalist discourse as formulated in the late 1960s and early 1970s, *dabkeh* as a 'men's dance' counted as a symbol of Palestinian emancipation from the surrounding Arab states. Yet in particular, *dabkeh* as a men's dance was also seen as a means of steadfastly resisting Israel. Palestinians in West Bank and Gaza could identify with the Palestinian nation and show support, without having to go and actively join the *fidā'iyyīn*'s military struggle.

Invented as a masculine performance of national emancipation, ongoing Israeli-Palestinian tensions prevented any radical 'feminization' of *dabkeh/debkah* in the nineties. Motivated to artistically break out of the isolation of West Bank life, *El-Funoun* with the help of the new media tried to develop what they saw as a more 'feminine' way of moving on stage emphasizing hips and shoulders. Whereas during the eighties, the group's women had mounted the stage alongside the men to perform steadfast resistance in terms of a 'masculine' *dabkeh*, both male and female dancers with the early nineties tried to move away from this rigidly 'masculine' to a more improvisational 'feminine' style of performing identity. Yet in the context of a protracted Israeli-Palestinian struggle, the group continued to strictly censor the degree to which these attempts at reconfiguring Palestinianness were actually presented to the public through the late nineties. Similarly, behind the backdrop of persisting Israeli-Palestinian

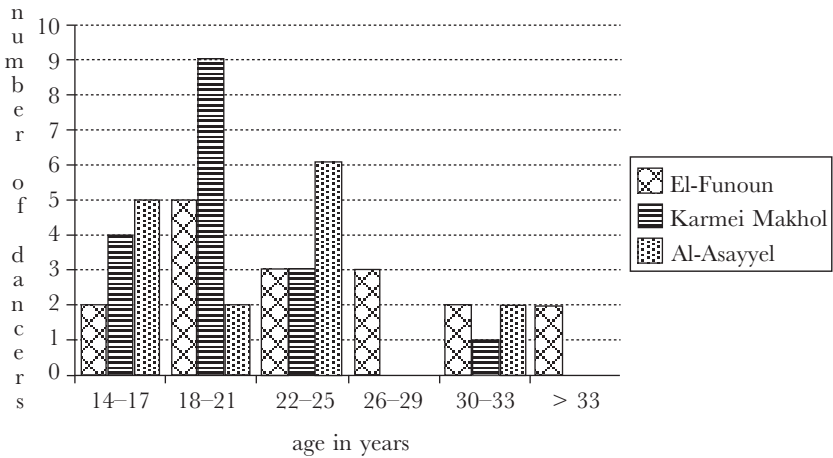
tensions, *Karme'i Makhol* continued to stage *debkah* in terms of masculinity. In general, Israeli folk dancing since the seventies had been subject to a 'feminization' of style. Loosing its defining *debkah* characteristic of the strong, powerful and energetic, Israeli folk dancing became characterized by a multitude of different, by and large more 'feminine' styles as folk dance practitioners explained. *Karme'i Makhol's* activities reflected this trend, increasingly moving towards ballet and modern dance in the mid- and late nineties. Yet while in general its style demonstrated an increasing 'feminization,' the group continued to stage *debkah* in terms of masculinity. Through the late nineties, *Karme'i Makhol's* activities thus reverberated Zionist/Israeli Jewish discourse as formulated in the 1940s which had posited the masculine *debkah* as a means of establishing and maintaining Jewish-Arab power hierarchies. Finally, continuing Jewish-Arab power inequalities also worked to undermine trends towards 'feminizing' style in *Al-Asayyel's* activities. During the nineties, *Al-Asayyel's* female members had increasingly attempted to claim a greater presence within the group on and off stage. Within an Israeli Arab performance context, they were somewhat successful in their endeavor. Yet the ways in which Israeli Jewish officials generally defined the authenticity of *dabkeh* in terms of gender roles that privileged men directly played into patriarchal ways of thinking among Israeli Arabs and thus worked to undermine the efforts launched by Israeli Arab women to demand greater equality on stage.

## APPENDIX

### TABLES 1–8: GROUP PROFILES

The graphics are based on a sample of sixteen respondents for *El-Funoun*, seventeen for *Karmeï Makhhol* and fifteen for *Al-Asayyel*. The sample only includes respondents who were actively dancing in the group at the time of my research. It is not directly representative of each groups' constituency, but should be taken as indicative of general trends.

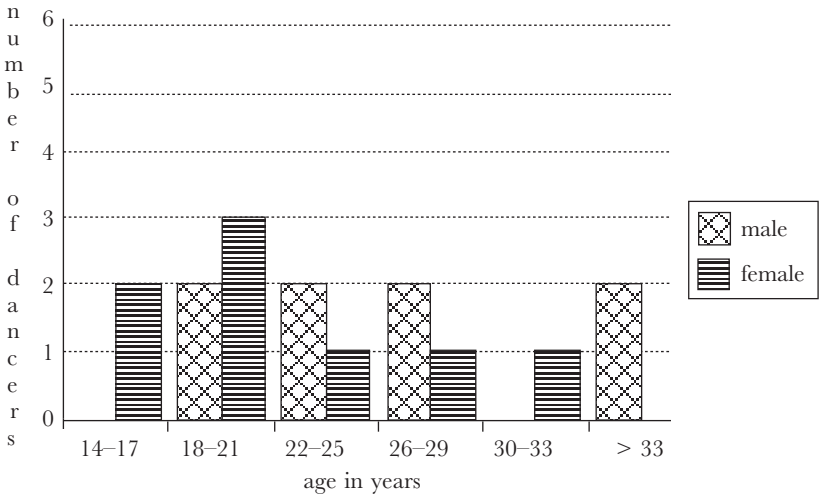
Table 1. Age of dancers according to group



In both *El-Funoun* and *Karmeï Makhhol*, the age group 18–21 was most strongly represented. In *Al-Asayyel*, most members came from age group 22–25. The high number of older members in *El-Funoun*, especially those older than thirty-three was due to the large number of founding and long-time members who were still active in the group. The high number of dancers in *Karmeï Makhhol* in age group 18–21 was due to the fact that the group was made up mostly of highschool students. It also contained some soldiers and college students (age group 22–25), but almost no professionals.

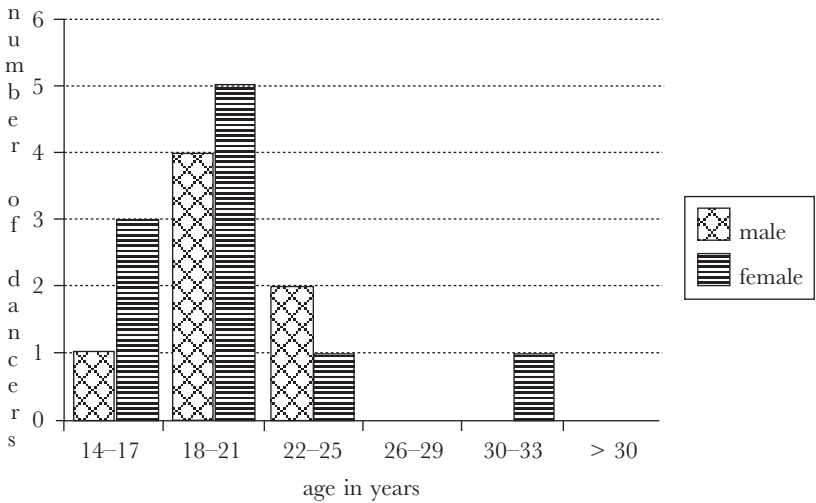


Table 2. Age of dancers according to gender in *El-Funoun*



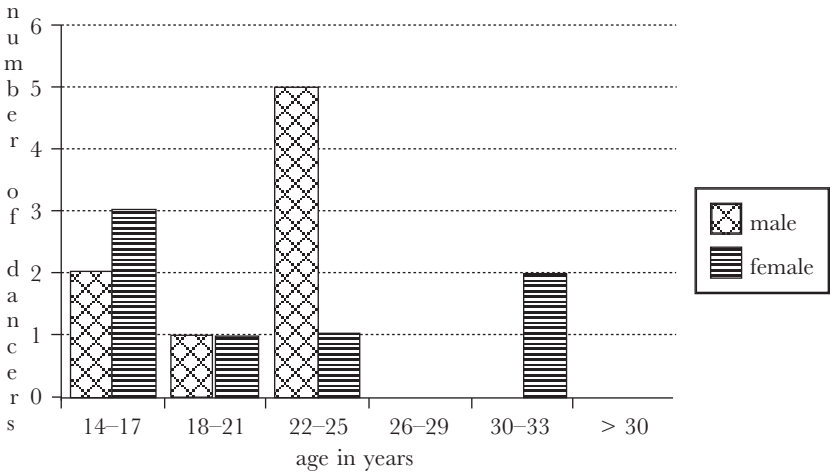
In *El-Funoun*, male members were generally somewhat older than female members.

Table 3. Age of dancers according to gender in *Karnei Makhol*



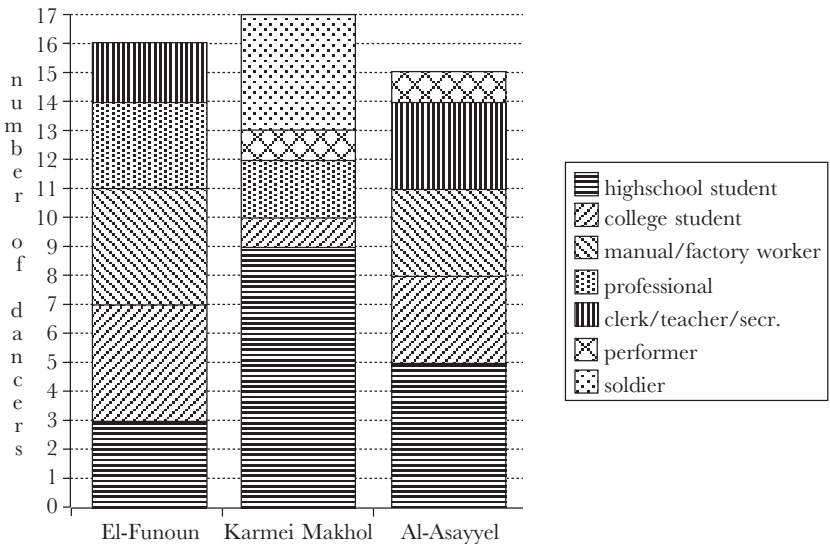
*Karnei Makhol* generally had more female than male members, with the ratio in the representative group under investigation in this study being approximately 2:1. In general, there was also a greater number of older female dancers, as more women than men continued dancing through and after military service.

Table 4. Age of dancers according to gender in *Al-Asayyel*



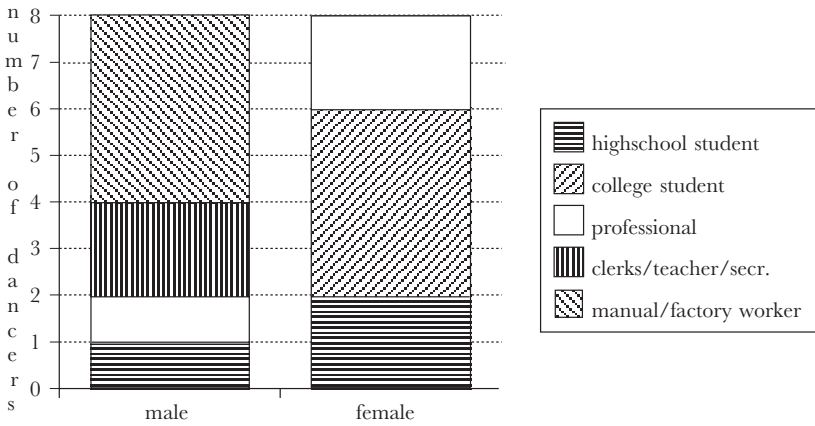
In *Al-Asayyel*, male members were generally older than female dancers. At the time of my research, two unmarried female dancers in their early thirties had recently joined. Their presence in the group, however, was exceptional and due to their status as single women and special family conditions.

Table 5. Occupational background of dancers  
Occupational background according to group



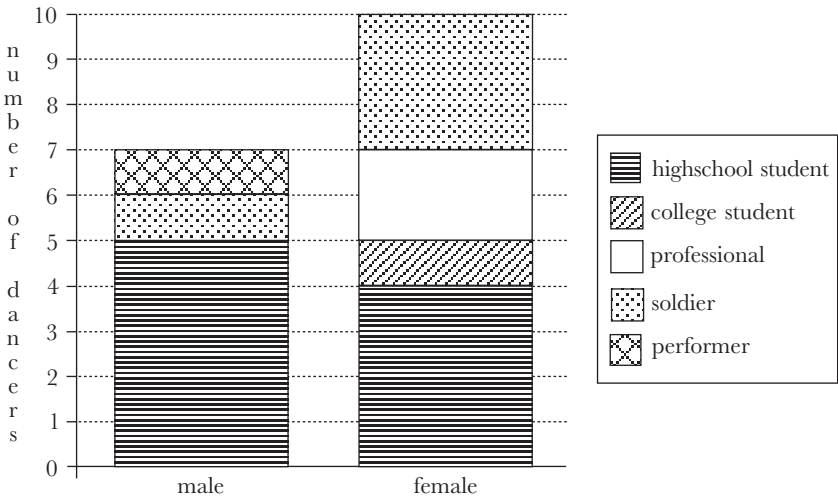
*Karmeï Makhol* was more student-based than *El-Funoun* and *Al-Asayyel* with most of its members going to highschool. *El-Funoun*, in contrast included few high school students. Here, most members were college students, professionals or workers. *Al-Asayyel* also contained a high number of highschool students, alongside some college students, workers and employees in the service sector.

Table 6. Occupational background according to gender among *El-Funoun* dancers

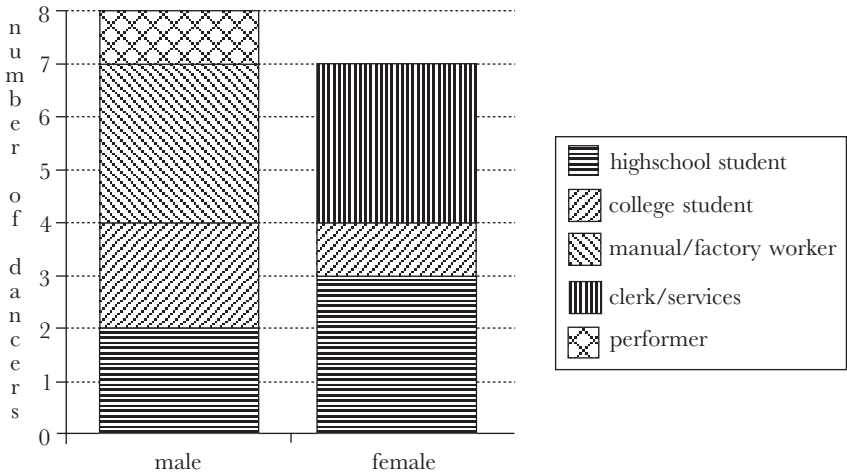


In *El-Funoun*, a clear gender difference existed in terms of the dancers' occupational background. Female members were mostly college students or professionals. There were no female workers in the group. Male members were mostly workers, with some professionals and clerks.

Table 7. Occupational background according to gender in *Karimei Makhol*



In *Karimei Makhol*, most members were high school students and thus there was only a small gender difference concerning the dancers' occupational background. The higher number of female soldiers among my respondents was due to the generally greater number of older women in the ensemble.

Table 8. Occupational background according to gender in *Al-Asayyel*

*Al-Asayyel* had more female than male high school students. Also, older female members were employed in the service sector, while older male members tended to be manual/factory workers.

#### TABLES 9–12: MOTIVATION TO DANCE

The semi-structured interviews conducted with the dancers of *El-Funoun*, *Karimei Makhol* and *Al-Asayyel* included a ‘game,’ for which I asked the interviewees to rank cards in their order of importance. Based on data gathered from prior informal and unstructured interviewing in the three target communities, I designed two sets of cards, one in Arabic for *El-Funoun* and *Al-Asayyel* dancers, and one in English for *Karimei Makhol* dancers. I doubled-checked the cards by giving them to two members of each group and discussing the choice of words. The cards listed the same five motives for all respondents:

- |                            |  |
|----------------------------|--|
| – social life in the group | – <i>al-ḥayāh al-ijtimā‘iyyah bi-’l-firqah</i> |
| – love of art              | – <i>al-ḥubb li-’l-fann</i>                    |
| – identity                 | – <i>al-huwiyyah</i>                           |
| – exercise                 | – <i>al-riyāḍah</i>                            |
| – trips                    | – <i>al-riḥalāt</i>                            |

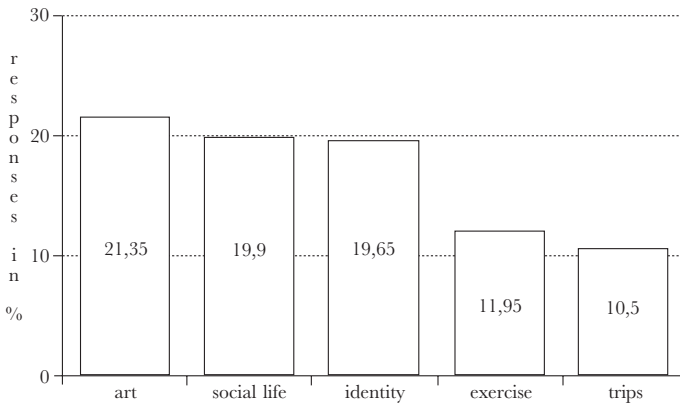
During the interview, I first asked the interviewee an open-ended question to explain his/her most important personal motivation for dancing in the group. Next, I asked him/her to read the pre-scripted

set of cards and arrange them according to importance, placing the most appropriate at the top and the least appropriate at the bottom. I told the respondents that it was possible to place two or more cards at the same level. Cards that were felt to be not appropriate at all were put aside. In order to get a better understanding of how he/she interpreted the factors given on the cards, I requested that the interviewee afterwards explain to me why he/she put the cards in this particular order. I finished each game by asking the informant if he/she felt the motives listed on the cards to be adequate, and whether he/she thought that there were reasons missing.

The game was generally received with enthusiasm. It served to lighten up the formal interview setting created by the tape recorder and interview guide. Also, while the female dancers generally had no problem in speaking freely about their involvement in the dance group, the male dancers tended to be more restrained. Focusing on arranging cards, however, often worked as a means to overcome initial hesitancy to articulate feelings and meanings normally not expressed verbally but through physical movement. The results are displayed in tables 9–12.

*El-Funoun* dancers generally indicated a variety of motivational forces for their engagement in the group, ranging from social and family ties inside the group, political orientation, an interest in sports, the arts and performing, to the general lack of extracurricular activities in the West Bank. Asked to rank the five pre-scripted cards, *El-Funoun* dancers answered as follows:

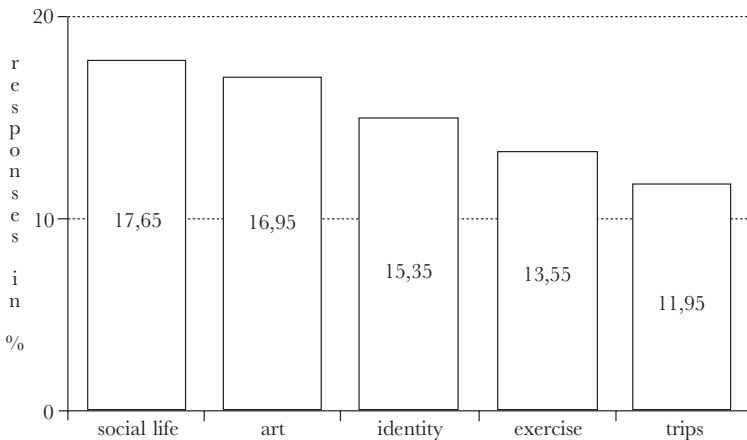
Table 9. Motivation for dancing in *El-Funoun*



In *El-Funoun*, art constituted the most important motivational factor for participating. Social life and national identity came second. Exercise and trips as motivational factors were judged as least important.

In general, *Karme'i Makhol* dancers indicated that their participation was prompted by the group's prestige (it was a 'hip' thing to do), a general lack of activities for young people in the Karmi'el region, social reasons, joy of dancing and pride of performing on stage as well as the feeling of warmth and security that the dancers felt *Karme'i Makhol* provided. Some even indicated spirituality and religious factors as motivational forces for their dancing.<sup>1</sup> Asked to rank the five motive cards, the dancers responded as follows:

Table 10. Motivation for dancing in *Karme'i Makhol*



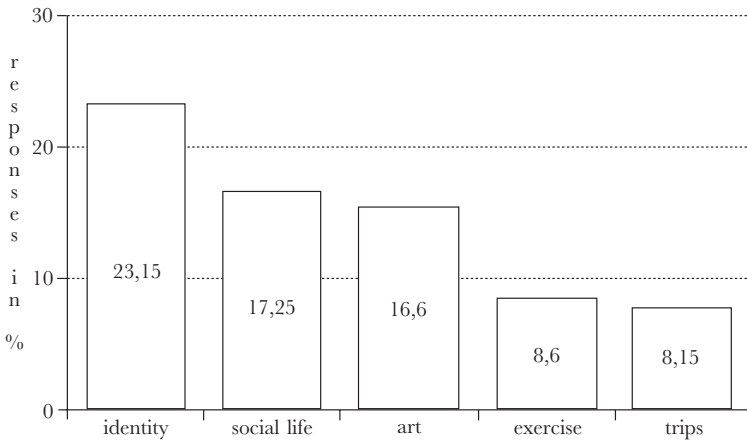
For *Karme'i Makhol* dancers, the most important motivational force was the social life inside the group. As a majority of them explained, *Karme'i Makhol* was like "a home" to them. Art came second. National identity was third. Exercise and trips were least important.

Like *El-Funoun's* and *Karme'i Makhol's* activities, *dabkeh* as performed by *Al-Asayyel* held a variety of meanings for the dancers as well as their audience which ranged from purely social aspects to enjoyment of the performing arts, exercising and traveling, as well as a lack of better things to do. For Abū Jum'ah, in particular, doing *dabkeh* since the mid-nineties had turned into a way of earning his livelihood. Yet *Al-Asayyel* members not merely considered *dabkeh* as a fun extracurricular activity for filling their free time or, as in Abū Jum'ah's case, as a

<sup>1</sup> Judaism and spirituality as motivational forces for Israeli folk dancing were more prevalent in other areas in Israel, and as I found during my fieldwork in New York, especially also among American Jewry. As one dancer who came from a religious family explained, Karmi'el was a "very non-religious city."

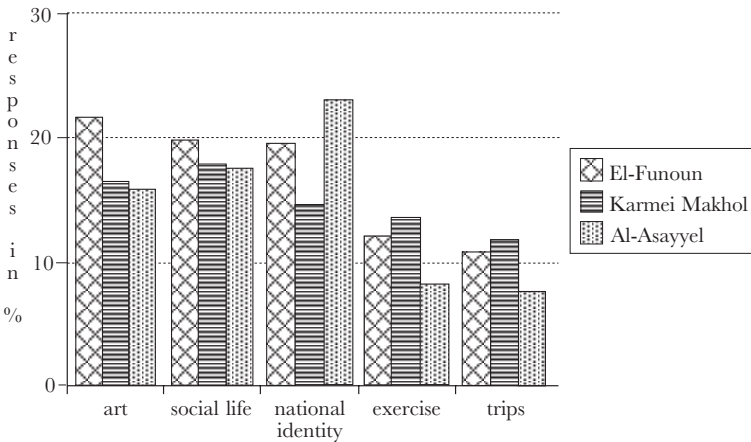
means to earn one’s living. As table 11 shows, both *Al-Asayyel*’s leader as well as the group’s members very explicitly stated that the performance of national identity constituted a major motivational force for their engagement in the group, with other factors such as social life, art, exercise and trips following behind.

Table 11. Motivation for dancing in *Al-Asayyel*



For members in all three groups, identity constituted an important motivational factor. *Al-Asayyel* members even identified ‘identity’ as their most important motivational factor.

Table 12. Motivation for dancing in all three groups



## INTERVIEW GUIDES

The following three interview guides were developed based on information gathered through participant observation, informal conversations and unstructured interviewing in each specific context. In the interviews, I used the guides merely as a broad frame of reference. Open-ended questions and a participatory approach in which I adjusted my questions to the answers received sought to provide room for each respondent to individually determine content and direction of the conversation. Interviews with *El-Funoun* and *Al-Asayyel* members were conducted in Palestinian dialect. Interviews with *Karme'i Makhol* members were conducted in English.

*Interview guide for El-Funoun*

Personal involvement and motivation to dance in the group:

- Since when have you been dancing in *El-Funoun*?
- Why did you join the group?
- Why did you join *El-Funoun* and not another group in the area?
- What is your role in *El-Funoun*?
- Do you have family in the group?
- Have you participated in trips abroad? If yes, where?
- Which was your favorite performance? Why?

Significance of *dabkeh*:

- Did you know *dabkeh* before you joined *El-Funoun*?
- If yes, how did you first learn *dabkeh*?
- Do you have any other dance experience?

Game:

- What do you like best about dancing in *El-Funoun*?
- Please rank the following five cards in their order of importance for you (social life, trips, national identity, exercise, trips).
- Why did you put the cards in this order?
- Do you feel that there is a card that is not appropriate?
- Do you feel that there is something important missing?



## Authenticity and Tradition:

- How would you characterize *El-Funoun's* style today?
- Which of *El-Funoun's* various choreographies do you like best? Why?
- Do you prefer the more modern/ballet influenced choreographies or more the ones inspired by *dabkeh*?
- Have you participated in any of the workshops in modern dance/ballet?
  - If no, why not?
  - If yes, in which ones?
  - What do you take from these workshops for your involvement in *El-Funoun*?
  - Do you feel that these workshops affect you in your everyday life? If yes, how so?

## Gender:

- *El-Funoun* emphasizes the role of women in the group. But there were and are other groups that have women. In your opinion, is there anything special about women's roles in *El-Funoun*? If yes, what?
- Are there specific steps in *El-Funoun's* choreographies that are done only by women, resp. only by men? If yes, which ones, for example?
- Has this changed over time?
- Have you as a woman/man participating in *El-Funoun* ever experienced any difficulty because of your involvement in the group? If yes, in which regard?
- Were there ever any problems from the side of Hamas?
- Would you participate in *El-Funoun* if it were a professional dance troupe? Why, why not?
- Do you think *El-Funoun* should become a professional dance troupe? Why, why not?

## National identity:

- Have you performed with *El-Funoun* in Gaza and the Galilee?
- If yes, how were these performances?
- In your opinion, should *El-Funoun* continue to perform in the Galilee at a time when traveling to Israel is very difficult for the group (e.g. permits, check points, etc.)?

- Do you know that there is an Israeli *debkah*? If yes, what do you think about that?
- Do you see your engagement in the group as contributing to a cultural exchange with Israeli Jews? If yes, how so? If no, why not?

#### INTERVIEW GUIDE FOR *KARMEI MAKHOL*

Personal involvement and motivation to dance in the group:

- Since when have you been dancing in *Karmeï Makhol*?
- Why did you join the group?
- Do you do any other kind of dancing?
- Do you have family in the group?
- Have you participated in trips abroad? If yes, where?

Meaning of your involvement with *Karmeï Makhol*:

- In your opinion, how does *Karmeï Makhol* distinguish itself from other Israeli folk dance groups?
- Is there a particular choreography that you like most? Why?
- Is there one that you don't like? Why?
- How would you characterize *Karmeï Makhol*'s style today?
- Do you prefer the more modern/ballet influenced choreographies or more the ones based on Israeli folk dance? Why?

Game:

- What do you like best about dancing in *Karmeï Makhol*?
- Please rank the following five cards in their order of importance for you (social life, trips, national identity, exercise, trips).
- Why did you put the cards in this order?
- Do you feel that there is a card that is not appropriate?
- Do you feel that there is something important missing?

Significance of *dabkeh*:

- Do you know what is *dabkeh*?
- Can you explain to me as a foreigner who has never seen *dabkeh* what it is?
- Have you seen Arabs perform *dabkeh*? If yes, where, when? How was it?

- If it is an Arab dance, why does *Karmeï Makhol* dance it?
- Do you like the *debkah* that *Karmeï Makhol* performs?
- Is *Karmeï Makhol's debkah* different from the Arab *dabkeh*? If yes, how so?

#### Joint Arab-Jewish activities:

- Do you have contact with Arab teenagers/students from the neighboring villages? If yes, in which way? If no, why not?
- Have you participated in the joint trips with *Al-Asayyel*? If yes, how was it? If no, would you like to?
- Would you participate in a joint Arab-Jewish dance group? Why, why not?
- Do you see your engagement in the group as contributing to a cultural exchange with Israeli Arabs/Palestinians? If yes, how so? If no, why not?

#### Background/environment:

- How long have you been living in Karmi'el?
- Why did your parents choose to come to Karmi'el to live?
- How do you like it here?
- What are your plans for the future, after finishing highschool / the army?

### INTERVIEW GUIDE FOR *AL-ASAYYEL*

#### Personal involvement and motivation to dance in the group:

- Since when have you been dancing in *Al-Asayyel*?
- Why did you join the group?
- What is your role in *Al-Asayyel*?
- Do you have family in the group?
- Have you participated in trips abroad? If yes, where?
- Which trip did you enjoy most? Why?
- Was there one that you did not enjoy? Why?

#### Significance of *dabkeh*:

- Did you know *dabkeh* before you joined *Al-Asayyel*?
- If yes, how did you first learn *dabkeh*?

- Was there a difference between the *dabkeh* you first learned and *Al-Asayyel's dabkeh*?
- Do you do any other kind of extracurricular activity?

#### Authenticity and Tradition:

- How would you explain to someone who has never seen *dabkeh* what it is?
- Is there a difference between *dabkeh* and *raqs*? If so, which?
- In your opinion, how does *Al-Asayyel* distinguish itself from other *dabkeh* groups in the Galilee?
- Why is the group called *Al-Asayyel*?
- What in your opinion is ‘original’ about the group?
- Which one was your favorite performance? Why?
- Was there a performance that you did not enjoy? Why?
- What do you think of the new choreographies, the ‘Lebanese dances’? Do you like them? Why, why not?

#### Gender:

- Have you as a woman/man ever experienced any difficulty because of your involvement in the group? If yes, in which regard?
- The Deir el-Asad Islamist movement has gained two seats in the recent local elections. Has this caused any problems for the group? If yes, in which regard?
- Are there specific steps in *Al-Asayyel's* choreographies that are done only by women, resp. only by men? If yes, which ones, for example? Has this changed over time?

#### Game:

- What do you like best about dancing in *Al-Asayyel*?
- Please rank the following five cards in their order of importance for you (social life, trips, national identity, exercise, trips).
- Why did you put the cards in this order?
- Do you feel that there is a card that is not appropriate?
- Do you feel that there is something important missing?

## National identity:

- From this list of eight possible choices, what is your preferred name for the group? Why?
- Do you think the choices are appropriate? If no, which other name would you give the group?
- Have you performed in Gaza/West Bank? If yes, how was it?
- Do you see your engagement in the group as contributing to a cultural exchange with Palestinians in West Bank and Gaza/Israeli Jews? If yes, how so? If no, why not?

## Joint Arab-Jewish activities:

- Do you have contact with *Karmeī Makhhol* youth?
- Have you participated in the joint trips with *Karmeī Makhhol*? If yes, how was it? If no, why not/would you like to?
- Would you participate in a joint Arab-Jewish dance group? Why, why not?
- Do you know that *Karmeī Makhhol* dances ‘debkah’ too?
- If yes, what do you think of their *debkah*?
- Is it different from the *dabkeh Al-Asayyel* does?

## LIST OF SELF-IDENTIFICATION LABELS

During the formal interviews with *Al-Asayyel* dancers, I presented the following list of eight self-identification labels to the interviewees in Arabic, asking them to indicate their preferred label and explain their choice.

- |   |                                    |
|---|------------------------------------|
| – <i>firqah ‘arabiyyah</i>                          | – Arab group                       |
| – <i>firqah ‘arabiyyah isrā’īliyyah</i>             | – Israeli Arab group               |
| – <i>firqah isrā’īliyyah</i>                        | – Israeli group                    |
| – <i>firqah ‘arabiyyah filastīniyyah</i>            | – Palestinian Arab group           |
| – <i>firqah filastīniyyah isrā’īliyyah</i>          | – Israeli Palestinian group        |
| – <i>firqah filastīniyyah fī isrā’īl</i>            | – Palestinian group in Israel      |
| – <i>firqah ‘arabiyyah filastīniyyah fī isrā’īl</i> | – Palestinian Arab group in Israel |
| – <i>firqah filastīniyyah</i>                       | – Palestinian group                |

Instead of one specific name, most dancers choose several labels from the list or came up with additional ones, explaining that depending on context, they preferred different labels. All of them rejected the third label *firqah isrā'īliyyah* (Israeli group).

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## GLOSSARY

- ‘abāyah*,  
[Standard Arabic: ‘*abā’ah*]  
*adbuk*  
*‘Alā ‘l-dal‘ūnah*,  
[short: *dal‘ūnah*]  
*aliyah*
- Arabic: cloaklike wrap.  
Arabic: ‘I do *dabkeh*.’  
A well known, popular Palestinian song historically accompanying the *shimāliyyeh*.  
Hebrew: literally translates as ‘ascent’ and is generally used when referring to the immigration of Jews to historic Palestine/Israel.  
Arabic: a black cord attaching the headscarf of Arab men.
- ‘aqāl*  
[Standard Arabic: ‘*iqāl*’]  
*arghūl*,  
[also *urghūl*]  
*arqus*  
*‘atabah*  
*Ashkenazi*, *pl. Ashkenazim*  
*bint*, *pl. banāt*  
*chalutz*, *pl. chalutzim*  
*dabakāt*  
*dabik*, *pl. dabikeh*  
*dabkāt*  
*dal‘ūnah*  
*darbūkah*  
[Standard Arabic:  
*darabukkah*]  
*dawka*  
*debkot*  
*Eretz Israel ha-yafah*  
*fidā’ī*, *pl. fidā’iyyūn*  
[dialect: *fidā’iyyīn*]
- An Arabic wind instrument made from a double reed, with one reed longer than the other and without openings.  
Arabic: ‘I dance.’  
A genre of improvised-sung folk poetry.  
Jews from Europe.  
Arabic: girl, daughter, young, unmarried woman.  
Hebrew: pioneer.  
Standard Arabic plural of *dabkeh*.  
Palestinian dialect: the person/people doing *dabkeh*.  
Palestinian dialect plural of *dabkeh*.  
→ *‘Alā ‘l-dal‘ūnah*.  
Arabic: small drum.
- Hebrew: in spite of.  
Hebrew Plural of *debkah*.  
Hebrew: ‘the beautiful homeland Israel.’  
Arabic: ‘the one who sacrifices himself.’ In Palestinian discourse in the sixties, the *fidā’ī* emerged as a new heroic cultural image, referring to Palestinian guerrillas fighting against Zionism.  
Hebrew: exile, diaspora.  
Hebrew: *Bloc of the Faithful*. A sociopolitical movement emerging in Israel after the 1973 war propagating the Jewish settlement of West Bank and Gaza.  
Hebrew: organized evenings of Israeli folk dancing open to the public.
- galut*  
*Gush Emunim*
- Formally known as the *General Federation of Hebrew Workers on the Land of Israel*, the *Histadrut* was established as the general union of Jewish workers in 1920. After the establishment of Israel in 1948, the *Histadrut* became the national trade union of the country’s workers.
- harkadah*, *pl. harkadot*
- A circle dance that is said to have been introduced to the Jewish community in historic Palestine by immigrants from Rumania and that emerged in the 1920s and 1930s as a cultural symbol of the → new *yishuv*.
- Histadrut*
- A *dabkeh* style defined by *Al-Asayyel* members as the ‘Iraqi *dabkeh*’ and distinguished by an additional step in the *shimāliyyeh* pattern.
- horah*
- ‘irāqīyyeh*

- al-jumhūr* Arabic: the popular masses, the common people, lower classes.
- kūfiyyeh* Palestinian dialect: A diagonally folded scarf worn as a male headdress.
- karādīyyeh* A *dabkeh* style defined by *Al-Asayyel* members as the 'Kurdish *dabkeh*' and similar in style to the *shimāliyyeh*.
- kibbutz* A form of cooperative settlement newly introduced by Zionist immigrants to historic Palestine in which marketing, production and ownership of the land is collective.
- kibbutznik, pl. kibbutznikim* Inhabitant of a → *kibbutz*.
- Kinyon* A shopping mall chain in Israel.
- lawīḥ* Palestinian dialect: leader of the *dabkeh* line. Also called → *rawīs*.
- mijwiz* An Arab wind instrument made from a double reed.  
[Standard Arabic: *mizwij*]
- Mizrahi, pl. Mizrahim* Literally translating as 'Eastern,' the term generally refers to Jews from Arab and Middle Eastern countries and in contemporary Hebrew is often used interchangeably with the term → *Sephardi*.
- moshav* A form of cooperative settlement newly introduced by Zionist immigrants to historic Palestine in which marketing and large parts of the production are carried out on a collective basis, but plots of land are privately owned by the workers.
- al-nakbah* Arabic: 'catastrophe, disaster.' Specifically refers to the Palestinian experience of national failure and utter loss as a result of the war of 1948.
- new yishuv* See → *yishuv*.
- old yishuv* See → *yishuv*.
- ra<sup>q</sup>ās, fem. ra<sup>q</sup>āṣah* Palestinian dialect: 'dancer.' Negatively connoted.
- rāqīs, fem. rāqīṣah* Arabic/Palestinian dialect: 'dancer.' More positively connoted than → *ra<sup>q</sup>ās, ra<sup>q</sup>āṣah*.
- raqs miṣrī* Arabic: 'Egyptian dance.' Used by *El-Funoun* dancers as synonyms of → *raqs sharqī*.
- raqs sharqī* Arabic: 'Eastern dance.' Dance style with a strong emphasis on hips and shoulders, in English usually referred to as 'belly dancing.' Used by *El-Funoun* dancers as synonyms of → *raqs miṣrī, raqṣ turkī*.
- raqs turkī* Arabic: 'Turkish dance.' Used by *El-Funoun* dancers as synonyms of → *raqs sharqī*.
- raqaṣāt* Standard Arabic plural of *raqṣah*, translates as 'dances.'
- raqṣāt* Palestinian dialect plural of *raqṣ, 'dances.'*
- raqṣāt lubnāniyyeh* Palestinian dialect: 'Lebanese dances.'
- rawīs* Palestinian dialect: leader of the *dabkeh* line. Also called → *lawīḥ*.
- rikudai 'am israeli* Hebrew: 'Israeli folk dance.'
- ṣabīyyeh, pl. ṣabāyā* Palestinian dialect: 'young, unmarried woman.'
- ṣahjeh* A type of dance performed in a line of fifty to over two-hundred people clapping hands outdoors during Palestinian weddings.
- sabra* Refers to all Jews who are not immigrants, but who are born in historic Palestine/Israel. It is originally the



- name of the fruit of a local cactus, whose prickly outside and sweet, edible inside prompts Israelis to use the term as a national allegory for their nation's 'strong, masculine, but dearly lovable' members.
- Sephardi*, *pl. Sephardim* A term originally referring to Jews living in Spain. With the expulsion of the Spanish Jews in 1492, the term came to refer to Jews living in Levantine countries to where the Spanish Jews had immigrated. Today, the terms *Sephardi* and → *Mizrahi* are often used interchangeably, connoting Jews from Levantine and Middle Eastern countries.
- shābb*, *pl. shabāb*  
*sha'b* Arabic: 'young, unmarried man.'  
Arabic: 'the people.' In Palestinian political discourse of the left since the sixties specifically linked to class, connoting the deprived lower classes.
- sha'bi* Translates as 'popular,' 'belonging to the people' in the context of Palestinian nationalist discourse after 1967.
- shimāliyyeh* A *dabkeh* style commonly performed in the Galilee, with the name said to derive both from the Arabic word 'the north (*al-shamāl* or *al-shimāl*),' thus rendering it as the 'northern dabkeh,' as well as from the word 'left (*al-shimāl*),' as its movement patterns usually starts on the left foot.
- sirwāl*  
*ṭayyārah* Wide trousers worn by Arab men.  
A *dabkeh* style distinguished by its fast rhythm exigit quick movements and jumps.  
Palestinian dialect: an embroidered dress.
- tōb*, *pl. twāb*  
[Standard Arabic:  
*thawb*, *pl. athwāb*]  
*twāth*  
*twāb*  
*Yā ḥalālī yā māti!* Arabic: heritage.  
Palestinian dialect plural of → *tōb*.  
Palestinian dialect: Literally translates as "Oh, how fortunate I am!" or "I am delighted with my money or wealth!" It is the refrain of a genre of improvised sung-poetry accompanying the → *sahjeh*.
- Yā zarīf al-ṭūl* A well known, popular Palestinian song historically accompanying the *shimāliyyeh*.
- yehudi galuti* Hebrew: the 'diaspora Jew,' in Zionist discourse the weak, effeminate counterpart of the → *Sabra*.
- yishuv* The Jewish community in historic Palestine before the foundation of the Israeli state in 1948. The term 'old yishuv' hereby refers to the community of Jews living in Ottoman Palestine before the advent of Zionist immigration in 1882. The term 'new yishuv,' in turn, is used for the growing community of Zionist immigrants from 1882 to 1948.



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