



Setting the Syrian Stage: A case study of Dance and Power

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Abstract

This article first presents the Syrian stage of official dance representations as portrayed by the Ba’thist regime. Second, it criticises the official ideology on the basis of anthropological/ philosophical understandings. Third it shows how criticisms are always already embedded within the official ideological discourse. The aim, thus, is twofold: on one hand it strives to underlie the necessity for more political ethnographic studies of dance, and on the other, it aspires to show how, in the context of the ideological populism of the Syrian regime, alternative readings resisting and challenging authoritarian hegemonic ideological writings, are already embedded not only in the ideological contradictions of the official portrayal, but even in the syntax and the grammar the official rhetoric employs.

Keywords

Syria, folklore, dance, power, politics, ideology

Introduction

“Pleasure and power do not cancel or turn back against one another; they seek out, overlap, and reinforce one another. They are linked together by complex mechanisms and devices of excitation and incitement.” (Foucault 1976: 48)

Anthropologists have long suspected that dance entails much more than body movements in the vicinity of music (Blacking and Kealiinohomoku 1979; Cowan 1990; Gell 1985; Hanna 1988; Lomax 1968; Schieffelin 1976; Shand 1998; Spencer 1985; Steingress 1998; Washabaugh 1998). More interestingly, dance appears to occupy the intersection between concepts and practices of pleasure, power and the technology of the body (Bourdieu 1977; Foucault 1975, 1976), through the ways by which it embodies (Bourdieu 1977: 87-95) and negotiates the boundaries of cultural performances (Bauman 1977; Bateson 1972; Butler 1990; Cowan 1990; Goffman 1974; Kirtsoglou 2004). Yet, the anthropological study of dance remains limited. Although recent anthropological theories converge on the point that dance constitutes a site of “both gender struggle and class struggle” (Washabaugh 1998: 9), much of this literature has emphasised the study of gendered (Abu-Lughod 1985, 1986; Cowan 1990; Hanna 1988; Butler 1990; McNay 1992; Kirtsoglou 2004- but see Manuel 1988 for a different view) contestations rather than its potential in terms of agency (Gell 1998) and political consequences.



The representations of Syrian folklore dancing through the official website of the Syrian Ministry of Tourism hint at the greater complexities surrounding dance, politics, and power simultaneously along discourses of tradition, modernity and legitimacy in contemporary Syria. Inspired by Gilson's (1996) anthropological - literary – performative analysis of narratives, and Foucault's notion of power (1982) as well as the role of the body in modern episteme (1975,1976), this article first presents the Syrian stage of official dance representations as portrayed by the Ba'thist regime. Second, it criticises the official ideology on the basis of anthropological/ philosophical understandings. Third it shows how criticisms are always already embedded within the official ideological discourse. The aim, thus, is twofold: on one hand it strives to underlie the necessity for more political ethnographic studies of dance, and on the other, it aspires to show how, in the context of the ideological populism of the Syrian regime, alternative readings resisting and challenging authoritarian hegemonic ideological writings, are already embedded not only in the ideological contradictions of the official portrayal, but even in the syntax and the grammar the official rhetoric employs.

The Syrian Stage: The Case of Folklore Dances through the Syrian Ministry of Tourism

Changes in modern societies had robbed many traditions and things that characterized life in the past. Now every thing is moving swiftly and hastily. Even folklore dance had lost its characteristics, originality and distinctive movements, and joined modernism which deformed every beautiful and original thing in our artistic, cultural and social life. (Syrian Ministry of Tourism¹)

“Even folklore dance had lost its characteristics” the Syrian Ministry of Tourism informs its visitors through millions of electronic circuits and digital bytes, employing the past tense of the verb ‘to have’. The official government rhetoric that flows through the opening passage and the rest of the document entitled “Folklore Dances in Syria”, divides ‘modernity’² and ‘tradition’ in such a (crude) way that modernity is conceptualised as something “moving swiftly and hastily”, that which “deforms” beauty and originality, a modernity with clear yet underlying ‘made-in-the-West’ connotations:

“Swift and noisy rhythms now overwhelm the world and reflect states of boredom, restlessness and hopelessness.” (Ibid.)

Tradition becomes the precise opposite of the corrupted, impure and deformed “modern societies”. Ideas of originality and distinctiveness are connected to the concept of *asala* (authenticity, descent, root from *asl*: see Salamandra 2004: 17-19; Abu-Lughod 1986: 41), where “in the Middle East generally, calls for authenticity often take the form of Islamist, nationalist, or nativist arguments against Western cultural imperialism, the West’s cultural invasion (*al-ghazu al-thaqafi*)” (Salamandra 2004: 19) while “ ‘authentic culture’ is the stuff of social distinction in contemporary Syria, and lies at the heart of arguments over who is perceived to rule,

¹ <http://www.syriatourism.org/index.php?module=subjects&func=viewpage&pageid=2044> Accessed 12 February 2009

² For a discussion on the ‘enlightened’ dichotomies of modernity see Sahlins 1999; Argyrou 2002; Wise 1997; Latour 1993; Kastrinou-Theodoropoulou 2007: 14- 16. For a historical as well as theoretical discussion on the topic of music and dance and modernity, see Washabaugh 1998: 1-26.



who once ruled, and who no longer rules” (Ibid.). As ideas of original and authentic tradition are directly connected with aspects of power and political rule, as well as legitimisation of historical memory, it is not surprising, as the rhetoric goes, that tradition is also portrayed as fragile and weak in comparison with the modern Western Goliath: tradition, thus, is in need of saving, or better, in need of a saviour.

This saviour is, of course, connected and implied in the past tense of the verb ‘to have’: “changes in the modern world had robbed many traditions” but not anymore, not in Syria anymore. The past tense tells a story of rulers, the victorious writers of Syrian contemporary history: tradition and culture and all the beautiful things that characterized past times have been saved by the Ba’th revolution of 1963 (Hinnebusch 1991, 2001) and have found a saviour and a ‘corrective’ protector and patron in the face of Hafez al-Asad (Seale 1986; 1991), and now in his patrilineal successor, his son Bashar (Strindberg 2004; Ziadeh 2008). In the recent past, an intensification of cultural festivals celebrating ‘Syrian’ culture and tradition have been patronised by the State (Salamandra 2004; Cooke 2007), the most impressive of which is the Silk Road Festival, an annual celebration organised by the Ministry of Tourism since 2002, “to demonstrate to the world how nations in the past got over conflicts through constructional interaction between civilizations, where Syria, as geographically being the heart of the ancient world, played an essential role to attract the world trade to meet on its land and exchange goods and ideas ...”³. The political strategy of celebrating and patronising ‘tradition’ as a source of legitimisation is, of course, confined neither to Syria, nor the Middle East. ‘Inventing traditions’ (Hobsbawm 1983, 1990) for the political ramifications of nationalisms are abundant (Anderson 1983), and maybe specifically efficient or necessary in Middle Eastern contexts: the invented traditional camel races in the Gulf states (Khalaf 2000), the state’s patronage of the Jordanian Bedouin heritage (Layne 1989), the Israeli (Patai 1976) and Palestinian (Muslih 1987) formation and struggle for national identities, are local examples of what Alonso (1994) calls ‘the politics of space, time and substance’.

‘Had’, the choice of past, thus, plays a strategic role in the Ministry’s rhetoric and the official state view it represents: not only does it enforce the modernist enlightened dichotomy between ‘modernity’ and ‘tradition’, not only does it cast tradition in a positive homogenous and harmonious light as original, beautiful and certainly more humane, but it makes sure that the intended readers of the document, a global audience on the internet, will find an authentic and legitimate champion of this tradition in the face of the ruling regime. Tradition, or a selected representational ideal, is used as a political tool for the legitimacy of the authoritarian ruling party over a ‘dissident’ (Cooke 2007) politically, religious and ethnically diverse body of Syrian citizens (Antoun 1991). Dancing is the primary example of the physical rescue of tradition—the epitome in both ideological and practical embodied grounds, since “the appropriating by the world of a body thus enables to appropriate the world” (Bourdieu 1977: 89). This is the ground, then, on which the Ba’th Party cadres “beat the ground hard with their feet to express their strength and vivacity” (Syrian

³ Opening Speech of Mr. Sadallah Agha Al-Kala’a, Syrian Minister of Tourism, 2007; <http://www.syriatourism.org/modules.php?op=modload&name=News&file=article&sid=1411&q=Festival, 19/04/08>.



Ministry of Tourism website), and where the President initiates the Syrian Dabka: “Folklore dance in Syria was not merely a Dabka (beating the ground with feet in regular steps), but rather it was accompanied by rhythmic movements with men carrying swords” (ibid.). The sword signals local and global signs: silencing internal opposition and proudly facing external hegemony who label the state as part of the ‘axis of evil’. Who, whether Syrian, Arab or otherwise oppressed by such hegemony, would doubt the fair forcefulness of such performance?

Interlude on the Methodology of Deconstructing Meanings

From a philosophical perspective, Derrida (1976), many years ago, showed that any logical argument assuming primacy and fixed supremacy over any other has its logical deconstruction(s). The richness of multileveled interpretations of cultural stories has also been exemplified from Geertz (1973) through his thick description. Ethnographically, maybe the most vivid portrait of the play of power and resistance, domination and subversiveness, comes from Gilsenan’s *Lords of the Lebanese Marches: Violence and narrative in an Arab society* (1996). Gilsenan collects stories told by the people of Akkar, the northernmost province of Lebanon, and through exploring the “discourse and imagination of power” (Gilsenan 1996: xiii) he studies the “narrative structures of social life” (Gilsenan 1996: 57), i.e. how social life is structured in narratives and the ways people enact and embody such stories, the perception of what social life is through story-telling: the structure of events, their uses and timings and roles, their varying symbolisms. Concerned with “the social practices of narratives-in-use in the everyday life and history” (Gilsenan 1996: 57), Gilsenan engages in a literary analysis of the anthropological fieldwork experience. Hence, not only does he record stories, but he explores the different threads of meanings as they emerge relative to the performative contexts of their telling. Thus, through a careful and very scholarly literary and anthropological analysis, Gilsenan is able to reveal how one story can have, as it often does, many different and sometimes conflicting and ambiguous meanings.

Gilsenan uses oral narratives as excuses or opportunities to study power relations through a methodological literary analysis of everyday practices. Similarly, using the official textual dance representations as narratives, an anthropo-literal analysis of the multifold interplays of power and politics within interpretations as well as in cultural embodied performances such as dancing, becomes necessary and fruitful in depicting the inherent contradictions of the official rhetoric as well as the spaces for alternative subversive readings.

The literary margins of doubt or the weak weapons of the powerful

The narrative analysis of the official portrayal of ‘folklore dances’ opens up for criticism. Firstly, as already noted, it adopts an ideological framework which depicts tradition and modernity as ‘natural’ essentialised complementary oppositions, which is an enlightened Kantian dichotomy, a historically recent notion in itself. As the official website argues the case of tradition by accepting the dominant structural dichotomy, it falls victim to the ‘modernism’ against which it directs its rhetoric. Furthermore, the medium by which the Ministry chooses to disseminate the knowledge and the rescuing of tradition is itself a recent - ‘modern’ ,even technological - advance closely related both to the West and to capitalism (Castells 1996):



the Internet. Using such ‘modern’ technological developments underlies the contradictions and ambiguities within the official rhetoric since the Ministry’s argument is not clear at all on whether it advocates a traditional revival or an alternative modernity.

Not only, thus, the medium becomes the message (McLuhan 2003), not only the message contradicts the medium, but, politically, such rhetoric presupposes and accepts the dominant structures of the power it seeks to challenge (Bourdieu 1994), falling victim to the Gramscian notion of hegemony. The argument not only doesn’t challenge modern western hegemony but Orientalises itself (Said 1978) by presupposing Occidental structures of thinking (Fox 2002). Therefore, a second reading of the official document reveals not only the political manipulation of concepts like tradition and embodied acts like dance as tools for legitimacy, but also the weak weapons of the powerful: the inherent contradictions within any rhetoric that appeals to fixed and constant ideas. Hence, the strength of everyday resistance(s) such as the “weapons of the weak” (Scott 1985) can be said to lie in their fluidity, while the weapons of the powerful become weak as soon as they try to impose monolithic readings, since words, by themselves networked webs of signification (Saussure 1983), are always already open to interpretation.

An Inconclusive Conclusion

“It is the whole technology of power over the body that the technology of the ‘soul’ [...] fails either to conceal or to compensate, for the simple reason that it [the body] is one of its tools.” (Foucault 1975: 30)

In *Discipline and Punish* (1975) Foucault argues that discursive changes occurring since the 17th century shifted the meaning of the body in that it became a tool or a medium for something else: “one no longer touched the body, or at least as little as possible, and then only to reach something other than the body itself” (1975: 11). Foucault further explores this argument in *The History of Sexuality* (1976), where he identifies how the relationship between the body and power transformed along with the movement from the “right of death” to the “power over life” (1976: 135–159): “now it is over life, throughout its unfolding, that power establishes its domination; death is power’s limit, the moment that escapes it” (1976: 138). Tracing this transformation, Foucault notes that power over life evolved in two general forms, the first of which is the body as a machine:

“its disciplining, the optimization of its capabilities, the extortion of its forces, the parallel increase of its usefulness and its docility, its integration into systems of efficient and economic controls, all this was ensured by the procedures of power that characterised the disciplines: an anatomic-politics of the human body.” (1976: 139)

As the body became a medium to reach one’s ‘soul’, to form, use and control an essentialised ‘identity’, it also became a way through which the modern episteme ‘disciplines’ its subjects, physically and otherwise, subjugating them through more subtle forms of control over both body and mind. Therefore, the body becomes repressed in a quite different way from, let’s say, the Victorian body - it becomes a field of and for power as “action upon other action” (Foucault 1982); it becomes repressed in its portrayal as a machine: a



tool that leads somewhere else other than itself. Yet, because of this transformative discourse, the body, as a basic field of power relations, proliferates in all its hybridity (also see Latour 1993). Hence, the body becomes at once central as well as centrifugal: central because it is the body which must be disciplined, centrifugal because the disciplined body is a machine or a tool with which to discipline something else. Of course, the fact that power has to depend on the body not only in order to discipline it but to discipline that something else, gives the body its centrality in both discourse and practice, and simultaneously attacks or reveals the fabricated and fragmented “technology of the ‘soul’” (Foucault 1975: 30)- thus, causing the body, or the discourses of the body to proliferate in such a way as to challenge the power discourses.

Foucault’s discursive body - or, rather, his conceptualisations of the interplay between power and body - interestingly connects with the way the Syrian Ministry of Tourism portrays the dance, as a way of employing the body as tradition and hence presenting itself as the legitimate hero for saving tradition. The Ministry portrays the dance like Foucault describes the actions of power over the body: similarly to the body, dance is portrayed as a machine and a tool for something else other than the dance itself. Dance becomes the medium through which the Ba’th regime links itself to Syrian national tradition and history, a historic-folkloric link which, by connecting itself to some great past, serves to politically and socially legitimise itself in the present. As dance becomes a medium and a machine, like Foucault’s technology of the body, then it also becomes harder “to conceal or to compensate, for the simple reason that it is one of its tools” (Foucault 1975: 30). Thus, dance too becomes simultaneously central and centrifugal: forming and yet concealing a Syrian (however loosely bounded) body of history and tradition through its political appropriation and manipulation while revealing the antinomy of an autonomous act, a dance and a body.

And so it is: the more the Syrian Ministry tries to ascribe to the dance a monolithic reading, the more the dance proliferates the inherent rhetorical, grammatical as well as physical and corporeal ambiguities: the dance begins and there is always something that escapes and disregards official definitions and projections, as these always depend (in their futile attempt to surpass it) on the body of the dance.

In this exploration of Syrian Ministry of Tourism representations of Syrian folk dance, it becomes apparent that dance and power are bounded together in a prism of multiple and complex relations - relations at which this article can only hint. It is not just the literary margins of doubt that are already embedded in the official rhetoric, nor only the weak weapons of the powerful or the weapons of the weak, nor even Foucault’s descriptions of discursive changes on the body of power: probably, these and many more factors shape the power of the dance or the dance of power. And, literary or even philosophical analysis remains groundlessly awkward without the richness of thick ethnographic description (Ortner 1995), while, furthermore, there exist anthropological suspicions, from the interconnection between anthropology and popular culture, that at the level of the masses boundaries, always embodied and performative, can be set defining or exposing the frailty of authority (Aronoff 1986) in which moments of freedom (Fabian 1998) and resistance can emerge within any embodied practices.

Bodies dancing with power signal that the Syrian dabka has just begun...



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