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## Folklore, Folklorism, and Synchronization: Preserved-Created Folklore in Israel

ABSTRACT: This article analyzes the concepts of folklore and folklorism and their mutual relations through processes of synchronization. It contributes to the growing thinking about the manifestations of folklore and folklorism worldwide and adds the notion of a *thirdhand* process of folklorism. It reveals the empirical social conditions in which folklore and folklorism are negotiated in a dialectic process of cause and effect. The sixty-year period of folkloric dance development in Israel, led initially by institutional leaders and later by private instructors, can be divided into three phases, during which sentimental claims and economic claims were sometimes separated, but at other times co-existed as part of the discourse regarding folklore and folklorism in the national context.

### Folklore and Folklorism

For more than forty years the concepts of “folklore” and “folklorism” have been debated in folkloristics. William John Thoms coined the term *folklore* in 1846, apparently as a translation of the German *Volkskunde* (itself introduced in 1787) (Bauman 1992:29), while *Folklorismus* was first introduced in Germany by Hans Moser in 1962 (Bendix 1988:5), and “folklorism” appeared during the 1930s in the writings of Russian folklorists (Šmidchens 1999:55).

The concept of “folklore” generally has connotations of an “authentic” and “genuine” expression of a “traditional” nature, performed in its “first life of existence” in its community of “origin” by group members who “own” it, sometimes manifested as a “naïve form.” “Folklorism,”

on the other hand, is commonly regarded as spurious and misleading “fake-lore” that exists in a “second life” outside its “source-community,” is materialistic and popular (e.g., “commercialized folklore”), and is manifest in an “objectified form.” (For more on this distinction, see Bausinger [1961] 1990, Ben-Amos 1971, Bendix 1988, Dorson 1976, Giolláin 2000, Handler 1988, Hoerburger 1968, and Kirshenblatt-Gimblett 1988).

While the study of folklore was widespread in Europe and in America from the nineteenth century through the middle of the twentieth century (though not necessarily as an autonomous academic discipline), beginning in the mid-twentieth century folklorism was primarily a European object of study. In the aftermath of the Second World War, European and American folklorists became even more divided regarding this issue. While Americans focused on investigating folklore “in its context” and stressed the importance of observation and documentation of what was perceived to be an authentic folklore, Europeans were increasingly willing to deal with folklore “out of context,” i.e., with the ideological, political, social, and economic implications of applied and exhibited folklore (Bendix 1988, Hasan-Rokem 1997/8, Kirshenblatt-Gimblett 1988).

This division inflamed an academic and emotional dispute between scholars holding the extremes of these approaches, a division that can be best identified with the works of Hermann Bausinger ([1961] 1990) and Richard M. Dorson (1976). Yet even within Europe itself, divided between East and West, there were different attitudes towards the practice and the study of folklorism. In Western Europe folklorism was perceived as resulting from commercial processes, while in Eastern Europe folklorism was seen as arising from governmental support. Early Soviet definitions of folklorism considered it a legitimate and welcome process of cultural development that included the adaptation, reproduction, and transformation of folklore under the aegis of official Soviet cultural programs (Šmidchens 1999:57).

### Folklore, Folklorism, and Synchronization

Strict divisions between folklore and folklorism are no longer so obvious and the nature of the distinction is debated (Bausinger [1961] 1990, Bendix 1988, Dow and Lixfeld 1986, Šmidchens 1999).

Šmidchens argues, for example, that “[f]olklorism is the conscious recognition and repetition of folk tradition as a symbol of ethnic, regional, or national culture. This repetition may have economic or political consequences, or both, but it responds to the needs of people who embrace folklorism” (1999:56). In this definition, folklorism is differentiated from folklore primarily by its *conscious* use of tradition (which may or may not have further consequences). Šmidchens further suggests that folklorism can be referred to as a sub-category of folklore (p. 56).

This rethinking of the folklore-folklorism division can be viewed as arising from post-modern approaches in the social sciences and the humanities that have increasingly influenced folklore studies. An important cause for this change is the anthropological “crisis of representation” (see Kirshenblatt-Gimblett 1988) that has affected the way researchers view their subjects. Scholars have become aware of the multi-layered interactions and social hierarchy that exist in their field of study due to the researchers’ influence (conscious or unconscious) upon the field. It is common knowledge now that researchers’ arrival inevitably changes the “original” (i.e., prior) nature of groups’ behaviors and traditions (Clifford and Marcus 1986). The impact may include the conversion of folklore manifestations into folklorism. Bausinger takes this notion much further by declaring that “folklore today cannot appear except in the mutative form of folklorism” because “it was precisely the conservative characterization of ‘genuine’ that pushed traditions into the field of view of the ever-increasing sentimental public: it provided for a longer life-span of the old only where the authentic was presented as authentic and therefore lost its original function and original authenticity” ([1961] 1990:152, 156).

The old argument has now shifted its focus somewhat: instead of strictly insisting on the big question of whether culture is “genuine or spurious” (Sapir [1924] 1949), some folklorists find that they cannot necessarily rely on their professional knowledge to classify folkloric items and evaluate their merit as authentic or artificial. Rather, they must reflect upon and question the social authority of hierarchical institutions such as museums (Kirshenblatt-Gimblett 1998) or national departments (Wilson 1976, Handler 1988, Giolláin 2000) that display “authentic folklore.” Harkening back to Sapir’s work, Handler and Linnekin state that:

Traditions are neither genuine nor spurious, for if genuine tradition refers to the pristine and immutable heritage of the past, then all genuine traditions are spurious. But if, as we have argued, tradition is always defined in the present, then all spurious traditions are genuine. Genuine and spurious—terms that have been used to distinguish objective reality from hocus-pocus—are inappropriate when applied to social phenomena, which never exist apart from our interpretations of them. (1984:288)

Bausinger states that “[t]here are manifestations of folklorism which cannot be distinguished from items which come from the ‘traditional systems’ . . . first and secondhand traditions are often intertwined. The researcher of tradition falsifies his results if he categorically wants to exclude one of these categories” (1986:115). Based on this statement, I propose the notion of *synchronization* between folklore and folklorism. I argue that “firsthand” folklore can coexist and be performed simultaneously (i.e., at the same period of time and/or by the same performers) or merged with its “secondhand” elaborations as “folklorism” in their national or commercial manifestations (or in both).

In order to better understand the idea of synchronization between folklore and folklorism, consider Handler’s work on the politics of culture in Quebec (1988). Handler describes folklorism as an “objectified form” that is opposed to the “naïve form” of folklore. In his analysis one can find two important contributions.

First, he examined how tourists’ and folklorists’ yearning for rural areas in Quebec changed the way of life for local farmers. As interest in rural folkways grew, farmers found themselves more and more engaged in accommodating tourists. Finding hospitality much more rewarding and comfortable than farm work, they became increasingly dependent on visitors’ money as a main source of income. Ironically, the more visitors sought the farmers’ authenticity, the less these farmers maintained it. As they became increasingly engaged in converting their way of life into a *display of folkways*, they gradually stopped living those folkways.

Second, Handler dealt with the dialectic relation between folklore and folklorism. Using folk dancing as an example, Handler describes his stay as a *vacancier* (a guest in a local family household) in detail. The main activities of the host family in the evenings were dancing and feasting. One evening, the hosts were dancing and playing harmonica in their kitchen when the dancing was interrupted as the family sat down *to watch themselves* dancing on a television show: the Canadian

Broadcasting Corporation had filmed a staged performance by the family a few weeks earlier. Handler recalled:

Thus we found ourselves [the anthropologist included] interrupting an ongoing celebration to watch a recorded version, narrated in English, in which that night's celebrants performed dances and festivities which they were in the very act of doing. . . . This juxtaposition of "live" and recorded folklore suggests a transition between unconscious lifeways and objectified "tradition." (1988:55)

This example beautifully demonstrates the synchronization of folklore and folklorism, the simultaneous coexistence of both modes of expressions by the same performers in two different settings.

Like Handler's work, this study explores the national project of folklore creation and the cultural politics that surround it. The empirical data is derived from a socio-historical research study conducted in Israel (Roginsky 2004a) that traces 100 years of Jewish-Hebrew-Israeli folk and ethnic dance development. It presents a historiographical (rather than ethnographical) analysis of the Israeli folk-dance movement to extract and examine different phases of its development. The research draws on critical works that emphasize the socially constructed character of culture as invented tradition (Hobsbawm and Ranger 1983) and as a process of heritage production (Kirshenblatt-Gimblett 1998). The article examines the ways in which the nation-building project uses "traditional" folklore to legitimate political claims made in the present (*cf.* Giolláin 2000 on Ireland, Handler 1988 on Quebec, Herzfeld 1986 on Greece, and Wilson 1977 on Finland.)

The present article has three goals. First, it adds the notion of synchronization between folklore and folklorism to the discourse on the folklore/folklorism distinction and reveals the empirical conditions in which folklore and folklorism are negotiated and synchronized in a dialectic process of cause and effect. Second, it introduces ways in which national-sentimental claims and materialistic-economic claims may be separated from each other or coexist as part of the discourse regarding folklore and folklorism. While West European scholars have treated folklorism primarily as the commodification of folklore and East European researchers revealed the governmental foundations of folklorism (Šmidchens 1999), the Israeli case study shows how both motivations can be combined.

Third, I suggest that the Israeli case serves as a unique example in that it introduces a *thirdhand* process of folklorism. While a firsthand repertoire of traditional dances—ethnic dances of Jews and Arabs and European folk dances—served as the basis for the creation of new “Israeli folk dances” by governmental institutions and operated as secondhand folklorism for nationalist-sentimental goals, in the past twenty-five years a younger generation of dance creators in Israel has taken the lead. The result has been a decentralization of governmental departments and the introduction of materialistic-commercialized interests into the Israeli folk-dance field. Nonetheless, both apparently conflicting positions regarding “governmental folklorism” versus “commercialized folklorism” claim to represent the true nature of the Israeli nation. Both elderly, European born (*Ashkenazim*), socialist, institutional leaders and the young, energetic, “orientals” (*Mizrahim*)<sup>1</sup> who seek fame and money through the creation of new vital Israeli folk dances, declare that their aim is to take part in the creation of a national Israeli folklore, and both claim to be the “authentic” representatives of that national folklore.

### The Israeli Folk-Dance Movement

The invention of Israeli folk dances and their distribution to the public were part of a social movement, a national project to create a new physical and cultural Israeli identity. The movement’s initiators proudly declared their Zionist ideological goal: the creation of new folk dances for the renewed Jewish people in Palestine-Eretz Israel (Palestine-EI).<sup>2</sup> Contrary to commonly held notions regarding folklore, and folk dance in particular, as having deep historical roots, the dances that are danced in Israel and throughout the world as “Israeli folk dances” are relatively new, no more than sixty years old. These new dances, however, are based on a cluster of components that were borrowed from older Jewish and non-Jewish ethnic, religious, and folk dances.<sup>3</sup>

In 1944—the formal birth year of the Israeli folk-dance movement—less than ten “Israeli folk dances” were listed in the program of the a folk-dance festival (found in the Israeli Dance archive in Tel-Aviv), but by 2007 there were over 5,000 dances, a number that is constantly growing. Around 5 percent of the Jewish population in Israel participates regularly (i.e., on a weekly or monthly basis) in Israeli folk-dance

sessions. About 350 Israeli folk-dance sessions take place every week throughout Israel.<sup>4</sup> These dance sessions attract Jewish men and women of varied socioeconomic status, education level, age, and ethnic origin from all over the country, with the most devoted dancers attending sessions five evenings a week. The annual Karmiel Dance Festival in Israel draws a crowd of approximately 250,000 participants (Ronen 1994:50) and some 3,000 people have graduated from the Folk Dance Instructors Training Program that was run by the national Folk Dance Section (1952–2000). Around fifty prominent creators of Israeli folk dances are currently active in Israel, with perhaps fifteen others living and working abroad. Many of the dances by known choreographers have become widespread and are danced at other occasions such as celebrations and weddings.

Throughout the documented history of the Israeli folk-dance movement, folklore and folklorism emerge as constantly negotiated, sometimes blurred categories. However, it is useful to consider three socio-historical phases to demonstrate these interrelations. *Governmental sentimental folklorism* (mid-1940s to mid-1980s) was characterized by the institutional creation, dissemination, and public performance of new Israeli folk dances based on existing ethnic, religious, and folk dances. *Governmental ethnic folklorism* (early 1950s to mid-1980s) featured institutional nurturing at the national level of existing ethnic dances of Jews from Arab countries and of local Arabs living in Israel and the establishment of staged ethnic dance performances. *Privatized commercialized folklorism* (mid-1980s through the present) is a post-governmental era of folk dance in Israel characterized by growing numbers of new Israeli folk dances that have become an economic enterprise and a conflicting discourse regarding the authenticity of Israeli folk dances.

### Governmental Sentimental Folklorism

Very little is known about the folk dances of the Jewish community in Palestine-EI prior to 1882 (the first Zionist immigration).<sup>5</sup> It is known, however, that the Jewish inhabitants of the region danced primarily in family celebrations such as weddings and circumcisions and during Jewish religious ceremonies (Friedhaber 1997).

The new Zionist immigrants differed from the old Jewish community. They were young and secular and turned to the new rural, agrarian,



**Fig. 1.** Romanian hora in the land of Israel, 1946. (Courtesy of the Lavon Institute Archive, Tel Aviv.)

kibbutz way of life established in 1909 that combined national Zionism with economic socialism. The young pioneers danced not only on religious occasions but also as part of their daily routine. They brought to their new way of life non-Jewish peasant dances from Eastern Europe, including the Polish *polka*, *krakoviak*, and *mazurka*, and the Russian *kosatshok* and *rondo* (Kadman 1972). The Romanian *hora*—a social circular dance that involved holding hands and touching shoulders in open spaces—came to symbolize the pioneers' new Zionist socialist ideology of equality, solidarity, and unmediated contact with each other and with the earth (fig. 1). The pioneers were also open to the folklore of the earlier populations of Palestine and adapted the native Jewish dances, the Arab *dabkeh*, and the Circassians' *cherkessia*. The pioneers danced informally to relieve tension, especially at the end of their working day (for diaries and memories of that period see Habas 1947).

The early 1930s in Palestine-EI marked the beginning of a deliberate search for Hebrew ceremonial festivals to express the new cultural way of life in the kibbutz villages. A large number of Jewish women who emigrated primarily from Europe (particularly Germany) explored ways of expressing their new Hebrew culture through movement. Gurit Kadman and Rivka Sturman, in particular, laid the basis for the Israeli folk-dance movement. Gurit Kadman (Gert Kaufman) (1897–1987) is widely recognized as the “mother” of the Israeli folk-dance movement. She was the one who conceived of creating new folk dances and nurturing existing ethnic dances, a double project for which she won the Israel Prize, the highest state-awarded honor in Israel, in 1981. Rivka Sturman (1903–2001) is known as the first creator of new Israeli folk dances. Both women were trained in Germany as gymnastics teachers and had some dancing experience. (See Brin-Ingber 1974 for more information on both women’s lives.)

As with many Jewish artists of the time in Palestine-EI, Kadman and Sturman looked to revive old Israelite ceremonies as they were then imagined. In opposition to European folkways that were common among the immigrants in Palestine-EI, and contrary to scholarly views on the development of folk dance, Kadman stated:

How [was it] possible that the Jewish nation with one of the oldest traditions in the world should be lacking a folk dance tradition [and] could we revive those [biblical] dances? It turned out that of those ancient dances no testimonies whatsoever remained which could help us to understand, to reconstruct, to revive them . . . 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.* (1972:27–28, emphasis mine)

It is important to note that Kadman was profoundly influenced by the German ideals of Romantic nationalism that surrounded her as a secular youth in Germany, ideals that held that folklore and folkways revealed the “genuine” nature of the German Volk (Bauman 1992). The German Wandervogel (wandering bird) youth movement, which took masses of teenagers from the cities to the countryside, influenced her teenage experience with folklore exploration. A parallel Jewish movement, Blue-White, conducted the same activities with Jewish youth. As Kadman recalled, “Before the years of the First World War a strong stream of German thought urged a return to nature and the simple life. . . . We really wandered with a guitar on our shoulder, sleeping in the villages and collecting folklore” (quoted in Brin-Ingber 1974:7). Kadman transformed this

idea into a Zionist-socialist form in Palestine-EI that found its most vivid expression in the kibbutz way of life: "In the Kibbutz we were striving to build a new society of equality and justice, simplicity of life and also the renovation of the old cultural values of Judaism" (p. 7).

These two women, along with their colleagues, were well aware of the artificial character of their folklore creation, but they justified it as an essential act both suitable for its national purpose and appropriate in modern times. Kadman declared: "This was against all the laws of the development of folk culture the world over. How can one create purposely, artificially, folk dances which usually grow slowly?" (Brin-Ingber 1974:9). Sturman stated:

I found it understandable that in the past times the creator was forgotten and the folk dance became anonymous. But this does not have to be true for our time, when Israeli folk dance happened. We have radio, newspapers, television, notation, tape recorder and videotapes that can document and publish what has happened. It is not fitting in our time to think that a dance today exists without a creator. (Brin-Ingber 1974:16)

There was a strong reaction against the European folk songs and dances then popular among the Jewish population living in Palestine-EI. The common belief that European folk culture threatened to conquer the local Jewish youth led to a highly emotional atmosphere surrounding the new Zionist creation of folk dances. The perceived urgent need for such a creation is demonstrated in the following quote by Sturman:

This was in the early 1940's 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. 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. (Brin-Ingber 1974:17)

Kadman, Sturman, and their colleagues had no evidence of the form of biblical dances, so they turned to existing dances and movements from various traditional sources to create new Israeli folk dances. While the new dances could not revive the old biblical ones, the creators looked for a genuine choreographical idiom that would express the revived cultural life in Palestine-EI.

The basic repertoire of steps and gestures that were (and still are) incorporated in Israeli folk dances was based on existing folkloric elements taken from various traditional sources, specifically: (1) the dances of native Jews that lived in Palestine-EI prior to the Zionist immigration, (2) Jewish Hasidic religious dances, (3) Jewish Yemenite religious dances, (4) European non-Jewish peasant folk dances brought by Jewish European (Ashkenazim) immigrants, (5) Eastern and Muslim folk dances brought by Jewish Eastern (Mizrahim) immigrants, and (6) the folk dances of Arab, Druze and Circassian minorities.

The synthesis of all these sources produced what were called “new Israeli folk dances.” New step elaborations, new body movements, and especially a typical new “spirit” characterized them. Liveliness, ease, vitality, liberty, joy, and physical and emotional expressiveness are their popular trademarks in Israel and throughout the world:

Absorbed into the themes, dance steps, and patterns were ancient biblical elements [themes] that were integrated with dance movements of Jews from communities outside of Israel. In analyzing these factors we have to state that our basic step patterns and group formations originated mostly in traditional dances from the Diaspora, but creative activity prevails in the adaptations and variations of the basic steps and also in the execution and spirit, which are specific to Israel youth. (Kadman, quoted in Brin-Ingber 1974:14)

In her 1969 *Am Roked* (Dancing Nation), Kadman analyzed the sources of influence of about 250 Israeli folk dances, which she placed in the following categories: European, Jewish East European, Yemenite, Oriental, Arab and Druze, mixed, genuine Israeli (new dances that were created for the wide public by Jewish choreographers in Israel), and undifferentiated (pp. 82–83). While hers was not a scientific analysis, and many of the sources were influenced by or related to each other, it nevertheless enumerates the common sources that affected Israeli folk-dance creation.

Mizrahi traditional dance elements from Yemenite Jews and local Arabs warrant special attention as they had profound influence on the creation of Israeli folk dances. Kadman even stated that some of the most important influences upon Israeli folk dances were the Jewish Yemenite and Arab steps (1969:85). Longing for a revival of biblical times, the European initiators turned to existing Semitic models, primarily Yemenite Jews and local Arabs, Druze, and Bedouins,<sup>6</sup> to promote the creation of a new national folklore that seemed to originate from deep

historical roots. (The section on Governmental Ethnic Folklorism further elaborates this process.)

1944 marked the beginning of Israeli folk-dance formation as a national movement. In that year the first organized Hebraic dance festival took place in Palestine-EI (then still under British mandate), a tradition that continues in the annual Karmiel dance festival held in the Galilee. The first festival, held in Kibbutz Dalia, presented three categories of dances in its program: (a) folk dances from foreign countries popular among the Jewish population in Palestine-EI (e.g., hora, krakoviak, polka, and cherkessia) as well as folk dances not customarily danced in EI–Palestine (such as Scandinavian and British dances); (b) fewer than ten dances described as “Israeli folk dances” (i.e., new dances created by Jews living in Palestine-EI); and (c) traditional dances typical of the religious Yemenite and Eastern European Jewish communities.<sup>7</sup> Arab dances were not presented in this first dance festival, but since the second dance festival in 1947 Arab dancing groups composed of Israeli-Arab dancers have been represented on stage.

Within a year of its founding the movement was already formalized into an institution. In 1945 the cultural branch of the Histadrut, the Jewish Workers Union, established the Inter-Kibbutzim Committee for Folk Dance. This institution organized the first official course for folk-dance instructors that year, and the first communal folk-dance session (*Harkada*)<sup>8</sup> took place in Tel Aviv in 1946. This organization was formed before Israeli independence and operated continuously for seven years. In 1952, four years after Israeli independence, it was replaced by a national department, the Folk Dance Section (FDS), based in the Histadrut. The Ministry of Education and Culture, the Foreign Office, and the Ministry of Tourism all assisted in special dance projects. This national institute controlled all official activities relating to Israeli folk dance, such as initiating training programs for folk-dance instructors, cultivating folk-dance creators, organizing seminars for instructors, selecting which dances were to be publicized, and establishing the “Dancing School” and “Dancing Kindergarten” projects. It disseminated folk dances in the army, youth movements, immigrant towns, development towns, and disadvantaged neighborhoods. It also established a central dance company for performances in Israel and abroad (fig.2) and worked towards expanding Israeli folk dances as a cultural leisure activity worldwide.



**Fig. 2.** Israeli folk-dance performance group, 1961. (Courtesy of the Lavon Institute Archive, Tel Aviv.)

### Governmental Ethnic Folklorism

After the successful establishment of the FDS in early fifties, Kadman began her second national folkloric project, the identification, documentation, and nurturing of the “folkloric treasures” of the “ethnic-oriental people” living in Israel. The title “ethnic dances” was given to dances of the “ethnic” population in Israel, the Mizrahi Jews and local Arabs. Both groups were perceived to be authentic representatives of ancient, biblical folkways as portrayed by the European Ashkenazi creators of folkloric dance. In this way widespread romantic and orientalist European ideas regarding the “primitive” or “authentic” East (Said 1978, Barkan and Bush 1995) were transformed in the Israeli context of social relations between European Jews, Mizrahi Jews, and Arabs. As human carriers of embodied ethnic dance traditions, both Mizrahi Jews and Arabs came to symbolize the “genuine,” “native,” and “exotic” qualities that supported the modern, European, Zionist nation-building project (see Roginsky 2006a).<sup>9</sup>

Kadman’s first objective in this project was to preserve Jewish ethnic dances. She began filming Jewish immigrants who had come to Israel in the early 1950s. Most noteworthy were the films she took of Yemenite



**Fig. 3.** Kurdish Jews' ethnic dance, 1961. (Courtesy of the Lavon Institute Archive, Tel Aviv.)

Jews days after their arrival in Israel. Kadman was convinced that they had an authentic folk heritage that would disappear if not immediately documented and preserved. Without any formal financial help, she and a cameraman started to make films. In addition to Yemenite dances, she also documented dances of Jews from Libya, India, and Kurdistan (Iraq) (fig. 3).<sup>10</sup>

Kadman did not attempt to document local Arab folklore at that time because she perceived it to be safely kept in the community of origin. Jewish oriental folklore, in comparison, was considered to be more at risk of disappearance as a result of cultural/political “melting pot” policies prominent in Israel through the 1970s, into which the Arab population was not welcome to take an equal part. The oriental Jews were simultaneously privileged and forced to blend into the European-derived Israeli culture.

Kadman describes the confusing situation of the oriental, Yemenite population, which fluctuated between integration and seclusion, between east and west:

In the first immigrant years [their] ardent wish to be integrated quickly into the cultural life of Israel caused the Yemenites to neglect their ancient traditions and to abandon their songs, dances, and customs. Later, their younger generation eagerly learned the Israeli dances as well as international folk dances and modern dances. There was a great danger that the ancient folk art treasures of this artistically gifted “tribe” would fall into oblivion. . . . Films of Yemenite life style, customs, dances, and costumes were produced and preserved as precious documents. (1976:3)

Kadman’s activities from the 1950s to the 1970s in nurturing “ethnic dances” and emphasizing the particular character of the “ethnic” groups in Israel were in conflict with the national emphasis on the creation of new cultural products and the integration of different cultural elements into one new Israeli formation (a plan which the creation of new Israeli folk dances fit perfectly). However, in the 1970s, social protest against the melting pot and its elimination of cultural difference led to an educational program of cultural pluralism.

This new policy was the basis for Kadman’s success in convincing several organizations of the importance of institutionalizing ethnic dance preservation, a move made possible only after two decades of her personal initiative on the “ethnic project.” In 1971 a new governmental division, the Section for Fostering Ethnic and Minority Dances or Ethnic Dance Section (EDS), was established in the Histadrut. (The term “ethnic” is used to refer to Mizrahi Jews, as opposed to native Arab, Druze, and Circassian “minorities.”) The EDS worked in parallel with the existing FDS to support ethnic dance preservation, revival, and performance in order to keep this folklore alive and to inspire new Israeli dance creation.

The EDS was also sponsored by the Ministry of Culture and Education and the folklore division of Hebrew University. These institutions had three primary goals in establishing the EDS: first, they wanted to document and research Mizrahi dances; second, they sought to revive and keep the dances of the Mizrahi communities alive as a preserved national asset; third, they sought to use traditional dance as a legitimizing tool upon which to lay the basis of new Israeli folk-dance creation. With this last goal they strived to create a “secondhand folklore”—newly invented Israeli folk dances—based on what was perceived as a “first-hand folklore”—traditional and authentic ethnic dances of the Mizrahim. The activities of the EDS included organizing festivals for ethnic

performances, conducting seminars for elderly people to document their memories as a rich source of folklore tradition, encouraging elders to dance with their children and grandchildren in order to keep the dances alive, and the founding of performing dance groups.

At first, many people from the “ethnic groups” were suspicious of governmental efforts and did not collaborate. Their hesitations resulted from the fact that in other aspects of their lives, such as education, occupation, family size, and language, they were encouraged to bridge the perceived gap between eastern and western ways of life in Israel. However, after a time, many members of the ethnic groups were convinced of the importance of their folklore and became interested in the financial support that the EDS offered. Thus people from the ethnic groups did come to collaborate with the national project of ethnic folklore preservation. Kadman described this process thus:

This is no small challenge because youngsters desire a kind of melting pot of the exiles and the longing of all Israeli youth to be modern. If we succeed in catching the new Israeli generation of the ethnic groups in time, then we may accomplish two very important things. We will be able to bridge the generation gap and also bridge the gap between East and West. (1977:1)

As EDS activities spread, more and more ethnic groups accepted its model of folklore preservation. Numerous dance groups for oriental Jews and Arabs were created, supervised by the Jewish instructors of the EDS. The institutional intent was to encourage the formation of ethnic dance groups among people of every ethnic group, who would then present an authentic folklore. It is important to note here that Arab dancers were encouraged to create Arab folk groups in order to perform their “national” folklore, which delivered an ambivalent message to the Arab performers regarding which nation they represented. (The Israeli Labor Party’s Histadrut, with its foundational ideal of socialism and coexistence, was the financial, political, and cultural patron of these Arab groups, but it also had a declared Zionist ideology of Jewish nationalism.) The national ambiguity of being an Arab citizen of a Jewish state was never fully resolved, and Arab folklore was incorporated into the national Israeli performance without national Arab connotations. This process is somewhat comparable to the social and cultural intentions of the Soviet regime. By incorporating the folklore of different Soviet republics into national ensembles such as the Moiseev Ensemble, the Russian government declared its

cultural politics of diversity and its seemingly democratic pluralism (Šmidchens 1999).

In Israel the reward for participation in the government's ethnic dance project was symbolic capital (Bourdieu 1984) and ethnic pride. However, this aim became increasingly complicated as dance groups in Israel found the presentation of staged non-traditional/"non-authentic" performance (with the possibility to earn money through its presentation as traditional and authentic) attractive. The ethnic groups gradually released themselves from national patronage, changed their performed folklore, and sought material (rather than symbolic) remuneration for their performances. Kadman was aware of the process and stated that, "[n]aturally, the Yemenite dances cannot remain exactly the same as they were; they must be changed and adapted according to the epoch and life style" (1976:4). Kadman thus admitted that ethnic dances cannot be kept in their "authentic" form, despite the efforts of the EDS to do just that. What was intended as the preservation of folklore gradually came to be the performance of folklorism. Nevertheless, these folkloric performances were managed and supported by national governmental forces through the 1980s. From the mid-1980s onward the field of folkloric dance in Israel was gradually privatized and relied increasingly on market forces that decentralized the national folkloric sections.

### Privatized Commercialized Folklorism

Since the mid-1980s the power, authority, and budget of both national sections for folkloric dance (the FDS and EDS) have gradually decreased, along with the political and cultural hegemony of the Labor Party in general and the Histadrut in particular. The shift from a socialist welfare state to neo-liberal economics and accelerated globalization was expressed in the Israeli folk-dance field as a microcosm of Israeli society. Indigenous forces in the field itself led to the gradual decentralization of the two folkloric dance institutions. Young innovators and instructors who were nurtured in the national sections rebelled against their "ancestors" by opposing the centralized bureaucratic management of folklore and they systematically "conquered" the field. Both the FDS and EDS were accordingly abolished in 2000.

At the same time the earlier values of Zionist socialism—collectivism and volunteerism—were also vanishing. The Israeli folk-dance scene

evolved from friendly collective dances in small communities where everybody knew each other and danced holding hands to a more impersonal activity that often involved masses of strangers. Electronic music and equipment replaced live music. While the early dancers shared a mindset that abhorred public displays of intimacy, in the 1980s dances became a recognized setting for people looking for romantic relationships. Once an idealistic and volunteer effort, Israeli folk dancing became dominated by economic interests (see Roginsky 2004b).

Ironically, those Jewish oriental, “ethnic” groups previously patronized by the EDS and perceived as passive, have now taken the lead. The European women who acted from idealistic motives are being replaced by young, energetic men who view dance as a materialistic enterprise imbued with an aura of patriotism. Most of the prominent figures in the Israeli folkloric dance field today are men of Mizrahi origin (see Roginsky 2006a for more on the role of gender and ethnicity in nationalism and folklore).

### Current Discourse within Israeli Folkloric Dance

Today the field of Israeli folk dance is saturated with quarrels concerning materialism, yet it still retains a rhetoric of nationalism and symbolic values. These disputes are often centered on the conceptual gap between the veterans of the Israeli folk-dance field and the young generation that has grown up in the field and gradually changed its character. In order to understand these differences of opinion, consider the following letter published by Tirza Hodes, director of the FDS from the 1950s through the 1980s (and, like Kadman and many veterans, of German origin). The letter explains what many of the pioneers in the field of Israeli folk dance feel about the changes in “their” field and expresses aversion to the activities in the Israeli folk-dance field today and fear of being left behind as an anachronistic, non-necessary institution:

Are Israeli folk dances simply a dance to relieve tensions, as a fashionable past time—like “Rock ’n Roll” and aerobic dances? The creation of Israeli folk dances is a special phenomenon. They were created as an important expression of the pioneering spirit and Zionist Socialist values. . . . Our problem today is: How to preserve and continue the creation of a national culture?!!! In recent years, we have been witnessing a flood of combinations of steps. The creation of folkdances, so to speak, is

tasteless, both from the point of view of movement, as well as from the musical point of view. Perhaps it is good and fitting for the commercial market, but this is far from their being Israeli folkdances. . . . and in their thirst for the new, it is not important whether they are good or suitable dances. . . . What is essential is that they are *new*. . . . We believe that we have the responsibility to guide, to direct, and to differentiate between Israeli folk dances as they are, and between entertaining an audience, which at times is also spoiled. We have set up a permanent workshop . . . which was established to teach and develop good taste, to distinguish between good dancing and bad. (1985:1, 4, emphasis original)

As a representative of the former Ashkenazi Israeli elite, Hodes clings to cultural distinctions of value as they were crystallized during the institutional phase of the Israeli folkdance movement. Distinguishing hierarchically between “good” and “bad” taste (Bourdieu 1984), Hodes suggests that she and her colleagues should still be the arbiters of quality in an Israeli folk-dance field that seems to her to be losing any value.

Disparaging such attitudes, the young instructors and creators have adopted a materialistic, popular, “McDonaldized” approach towards the dances and have emphasized their struggle in a new global and technological environment. A typical reaction among the younger generation is to oppose the national, communist-style centralized regime that characterized the past FDS as an extension of the Labor Party and the Histadrut (the Eastern European leadership of the Israeli Labor Party had taken socialist regimes as their organization and political model). The younger generation instead focused on folklore in a post-modern, capitalistic era that offered new opportunities for previously excluded groups. Their kind of response can be found in the following letter (tellingly entitled “Save Us from the Commissars”):

Around the world, in a variety of contexts apart from Israeli Folk Dance, we are witnessing those who seek sameness proclaim it as evidence of goodness, and change as deviance of danger, from whom the average person must be protected by self-appointed arbiters of good—their good. Yet, we are also seeing challenges to long held beliefs and ways of doing things, which can either be exciting and liberating, or frightening and controlling. The same technologies have allowed the widespread and rapid dissemination of the basic Israeli Folk Dance materials: music, dance, recordings and notations, and opinions. By definition, this allows others who have been actively excluded from either the closed community of Israeli Folk Dance decision makers, or those disenfranchised or distanced by the community . . . to have a say, and to be heard. (Posen 2004:28)

Neither of the writers, of course, uses the professional concept of “folklorism,” but their discourse is focused on the issue. The letter from Hodes demonstrates the awareness of the veterans of the artificial, created nature of the Israeli folk dances. It also demonstrates that the first generation is aware of its crucial role in their formation.

The division evident in these letters is also evident in the division between “Old Israeli Folk Dances” and “New Israeli Folk Dances.” The “old dances” are those created from the early 1940s through the 1980s, while the “new dances” have arisen since the 1980s. The veterans consider the former to be characterized by pure cultural-national values and “good taste” under the criteria of the national FDS, while they consider the latter to be empty of any authentic values and characterized by “bad taste” and an influx of uncontrolled creation, materialism, and commercialization (with an accompanying loss of genuine merit). The young instructors, in contrast, claim that the Histadrut should not control folklore creation in Israel since each generation of Israeli folk-dance creators represents the Israeli culture at that time.

### Synchronization of Folklore and Folklorism in a National Context

It is important to mention comparable examples of the use of folk dance in the service of nation-building projects. Gilman (2004) analyzes the traditionalization of women’s dancing in Malawi (which obtained its independence from British rule in 1964). In that country a politician constructed traditional women’s dancing in new ways in order to emphasize Malawi’s national value and create a symbolic link with the past that opposed imperialist European practices. In spite of sharing some common characteristics with the Israeli case— independence from the British rule in the mid-twentieth century and a national rhetoric that regarded folk dance as an essential part of nationalism, tradition, and cultural politics—no formal governmental body in Malawi dealt specifically with that project. Furthermore, women’s dancing in Malawi was particularly manipulated by strong male patronage, stressing the female characteristics in the dance, while in Israel it was the women who were motivators and managers of folk dancing as a widespread popular activity for everybody.

Irish folk dancing also shares many characteristics with Israeli folk dancing (Moe 1995, Wulff 2003). As in the Israeli case, Irish dancing

was organized into a formal institution that controlled folk-dance preservation and teaching under the rule of the nationalistic Gaelic League. This league strived for a national revitalization that included folk dancing and language revival, much like Zionism in Israel. Irish folk dances, however, were revived without the creation of “new” Irish folk dances. Additionally, Irish folk dancing remains strictly controlled by the institutional department, notwithstanding any privatization.

While the examples of Israel, Ireland, and Malawi all represent acts of national folklorism, only in the Israeli case was there a deliberate move to *create* folk dances. By laying additional levels of folklorism on top of the previous governmental one, young creators are constructing the thirdhand process of folklorism. They are challenging the institutional point of view and stressing that Israeli folk dances *always were* a symbol and reflection of Israeli society. The popular character of Israeli folk dancing today reflects the many changes in Israeli culture and society. For the older generation, to be an Israeli meant kibbutz life, socialism, agriculture, and volunteerism, all themes that found their way into Israeli folk dances. For the younger generation, values of globalization, Americanization, commercialized culture, and striving for material success find their way into new Israeli folk dances.

It is noteworthy that part of Israeli folk-dance sessions today is devoted to the “old dances” under such names such as “nostalgia dances,” “first-generation dances” or “evening of roses.” Furthermore, in the early 1990s, a veteran group of Israelis established an association named REIM (the Hebrew acronym for Israeli Folk Dances and “friends” in Hebrew) that runs non-profit “old-fashioned” dancing events.

While the first dimension of this historic process took the form of Governmental Sentimental Folklorism and the latest can be termed Privatized Commercialized Folklorism, both still coexist because all Israeli folk dances created since the 1940s have been documented, and many of them are still danced today on different occasions, by different participants. Furthermore, Governmental Ethnic Folklorism introduced another aspect of synchronization. In the process of governmental preservation of “ethnic” folklore, many traditional ways of dancing were gradually lost in favor of modern staged performances. The “ethnic” groups that were nurtured by the EDS today maintain little “authentic” (i.e., pre-national) ways of ethnic-communal dancing. Both groups—Mizrahi/Oriental Jews and local Arabs (sometimes performing

along with “Israeli folk-dancing groups” and sometimes separated from them)—now have folkloric dance groups with a commercial and touristic orientation that perform in folklore festivals in Israel and abroad, introducing the mixture of preserved-created folklore in Israel.

The perceived distinction between a “pure past” and the “utilitarian present” portrays sixty years of “invented tradition” as long-lasting “folklore” and the last twenty-five years of Israeli folk dancing as “folklorism.” Nevertheless, from a theoretical standpoint, both phenomena express different kinds of modern folklorism (governmental and commercial) and are, in fact, synchronized: they coexist and negotiate with one another.

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## Notes

1. “Oriental / Eastern Jews” refers to “Mizrahim,” a collective name used in Israel to describe those who immigrated to Israel from Asian and African countries, including Yemen, Kurdistan, Libya, Morocco, Central Asia, Georgia, India, and Ethiopia. “Ashkenazim” is the collective name used in Israel to describe “Western Jews” who immigrated to Israel from Europe and North America.

2. Palestine was the region’s political name prior to the formation of the State of Israel in 1948. *Eretz Israel* (EI) literally means “land of Israel.” In this article I refer to the land of Israel prior to the formation of the Israeli state as Palestine-EI, a common formulation in Israeli historical writing.

3. The classification of different types of dances into “folk,” “ethnic,” “religious,” and “social”, still used by dance researchers and folklorists, is a problematic issue that needs to be considered with reference to the social context of their creation, a topic dealt with in a forthcoming article by the author.

4. Figures were collected from the Internet site [www.israelidances.com](http://www.israelidances.com) and from the notice-board published in *Rokdim-Nirkoda* (Dancing), a quarterly magazine for the Israeli folk-dancing public. The magazine recently became bilingual (Hebrew and English) and began collaborating with the Israeli Dance Institute (IDI) in New York City. See Kaschl (2000) and Roginsky (2006b) for more on the relations between Israeli folk dancing in Israel and abroad.

5. I have drawn upon Hebrew-language archives concerning the development of Israeli folk dance and the Zionist incorporation of Arab dances into it, resources that do not deal with Arab folk dances prior to the Zionist era. See Kaschl (2003)

for information on the development of Arab Dabkeh and Friedhaber (1998) for dances in the biblical period and the Middle Ages.

6. It is important to note that one other “ancient” and “exotic” group served symbolically in the formation of Israeli national folklorism, the East European orthodox (*Hasidim*). However, while some of their dance movements were incorporated into the repertoire of Israeli folk dancing, the Hasidim as a group persistently avoided any contact with the official Zionist, national, and secular folkloric governmental bodies. This is the significant difference between them and the oriental groups, Jews and Arabs, which did collaborate with the national Zionist project.

7. From the program of the first Hebrew dance festival in Kibbutz Dalia in the Israeli Dance Archive in Tel-Aviv.

8. *Harkada*, the Hebrew word used for Israeli folk-dance sessions, does not have an accurate translation. Perhaps “endancement,” the encouragement (or even forcing in some cases) of people to participate in collective dancing, best conveys the meaning.

9. See Oring’s (1973) work on Israeli Chizbat humor for comparison. Focusing on the cultural clash created in Israel between the European diasporic character and the Levantine Sabra (Israeli born) image, he concluded that the Chizbat stories narrated by Israeli Palmakhniks served as a tool for negotiating the boundaries of their self-image. While they wished to portray themselves as part of the local Levant region, their real self-image was still embedded in their European roots.

10. Copies of these films are kept in the Israeli Dance Library archive in Tel-Aviv.

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