

# THE DEBKA - A TRADITIONAL DANCE OF UNITY AND RELAXATION

By Naomi Bahat

Dancing is one of the means of preserving socio-cultural values. There is nothing new in this statement. In this article about the Debka as a characteristic socio-cultural expression of a certain society I wish to emphasise the necessity of a complex, comprehensive view of the subject. The dance is an element in a ceremony, one component of a whole event, which itself is but a part of a larger system. In other words, it has to be observed as part of a social framework, transmitting common values which the given society wishes to preserve. The creation of festivities and special occasions provides the individual with the means to express his identification with the group he feels he belongs to – the group itself forming a part of a larger social framework. More than anything else this makes it possible to emphasize the common values shared by the individual and the group he belongs to – common meaning those values the community cherishes and cultivates and which are the adhesive element holding its members together.

The Debka is a dance connected with every festive occasion in the Arab and Druze communities in the Middle East. As we shall see, it serves to underline and to express the solidarity between the individual and the group, the family and society as a whole.

Another aspect of dance is its providing a creative, playful outlet for the imagination of the individual, an outlet denied in everyday circumstances. The festive occasion provides an opportunity for creative and recreational activity, especially important in a conservative society like that of the Arabs and Druze. There exists only a vague demarcation line between the playful recreation needed to alleviate everyday boredom, and the relaxation of tensions generated and accumulated by the rigid requirements of traditional society. Dance as relief is particularly needed in any community prescribing exact forms of behaviour for the individual and possessing a restrictive set of inviolate rules which demand much restraint and repression of emotion. The festive dance becomes an emotional outlet, a “temporary abolition of restrictions” which underlines the festive, “special” element of the occasion, removing it from the humdrum sphere of every day. All these factors are expressed in the dance.

Geographical and economic circumstances and the factors we call “cultural heritage” contribute to the characteristics of dance of a given society and make it “typical” and representative of that society.

## THE DEBKA – THE DANCE OF THE TILLERS OF THE SOIL

The Debka being a peasant dance, it is imperative to describe, if only in a few words, the rural Arab and Druze society before proceeding to the analysis of the Debka itself.

The extended family – the chamullah – is the cornerstone of such a society even today, when the importance of the extended family is on the decline and clan solidarity is waning. The family is the basic unit of any agrarian society from an economical point of view, though today not exclusively so.

Economic developments have caused cracks in the family structure of the village, but still, the relative isolation of rural life compared to urban development tends to preserve traditional modes of behaviour and thus the changes in village life tend to be much slower.

The advent of modern agricultural techniques and modern communication have brought city and village closer together, but the gap between the level of education in towns, as compared to that in some remote villages, and the still existing gap between the schooling of men and women in Moslem and Druze communities constitutes a problem even today.

The head of the family, the patriarch, whose name is the one his Chamullah is known by and whose house is in many cases surrounded by the dwellings of the other members of his extended family, is still the representative who deals with government officials and all the other dignitaries of the civil or religious establishment. Often he is the one who determines the family's political affiliation. In his book *The Arabs of the Middle East* Gabriel Bar describes the characteristics of the Arab village thus:

Even in those villages in which during the last generation new professional and economical classes appeared, the dependence of the villager on the old social formations has not disappeared or even diminished. (p. 196 of the Hebrew edition).

Some of the traditional formations are disintegrating. Cracks appear in the extended family and the tribe. Religion is no longer the sole determinant of allegiance. (Ibid., p. 270).

The next quotation brings us right up to the traditional ceremonies as these are celebrated nowadays, which is central to our survey.

Indeed most of the social problems besetting modern Arab society are created by a situation in which side by side with social changes traditional social forms and ancient ideas exist in a part of or in the whole population, and form an organic part of that conservative society.

## MARRIAGE CEREMONIES

Betrothals are the most common occasions for rejoicing. In some places, where religion still rules supreme, as in some Druze villages, the marriage ceremony is conducted altogether without singing or dancing.

There are differences between Arab and Druze dances and songs, and in different geographical regions several forms may be found. The social status of the family and the wealth of the village and that of the family concerned also influence the characteristics of the ceremony. Very little research has been done in this area, so let this statement suffice, and let us refrain from further comparisons and drawing of conclusions.

Let us consider the typical components of the ceremony and the dance belonging to it as a separate phenomenon.

In his book **Beduin Society in the Negev** Emanuel Marx writes about the ceremonies and festivities:

Many researchers tend to regard the festival as an image of society. Therefore they assume that people living in a common society, sharing the same cultural tradition and political structure will celebrate in the same way. Therefore, when one has seen one festival, one knows them all. But closer examination will reveal differences according to the diverse sectors of the community. Details of ceremony, who takes part, the form of presents offered, reflect the status of the celebrant's sector in society. (p. 208 of the Hebrew text)

Nowadays the marriage ceremony tends to last about three days. This includes a festive dinner at the house of the bridegroom's father, while at the same time the maidens congregate at the bride's family's house, and sing and dance around the bride seated on a "throne".

In the house of the groom's father the songs will be led by the Sha'er, the minstrel singer-poet. Should the family be wealthy, two singer-poets may be engaged. Then the musical dialogue between them becomes a contest, adding flavour to the merriment.

At night all the men congregate in the village center, where the singer-poet conducts the proceedings as Master of Ceremonies. The male population will join in the singing and dancing, while the rest of the population watches. Without an audience which reacts and cheers, there will be no merrymaking and no dance. The Debka is the climax of the festivity. Even when the debka is not a proper part of the ceremony, there can be no real celebration without it.

As opposed to the danced processions accompanying the groom or the songs to which the audience responds in a refrain, only a few dancers participate in the Debka. The Debka is danced by a representative team of men. Its execution requires skill and dexterity, and above all musicality, a keen sense of rhythm, the ability to respond immediately to changes and a talent for teamwork. There are usually between 8 and 16 dancers. A group of this size is capable of uniformity of movement, precise execution of the steps and flexibility.

The dance is learned only through experience and participation, so there is a natural process of elimination of the less talented. The individual prowess of the dancer is evident, but the ability of the group as a whole to perform as a perfect machine is the real test. The collective sense of rhythm is there all the time, even when individual dancers engage in personal deviation from the norm, always remaining in the general framework. Such variations emphasise the uniformity of the dancing group. The Debka is a rigorous, energetic dance, based on sharp stamping of the feet. This feature of the Debka is found in many peasant dances of other regions, all of which emphasise the link to the soil. In the Debka one can also observe remnants of a warrior's dance, which it once was.

The Debka is based on the following principles:

1) The line of dancers moves along like one body, sometimes embellished by an improvisation by one or two soloists dancing opposite the group.

2) Intricate footwork. The central feature is the stamping of the heels, sometimes syncopated, which is very prominent on the musical background which is most of the time in double time, played on a reed flute.

3) The body is rigidly erect, the dancers' eyes are on the leader. The movement of the shoulders, hips and head is rather restricted.

The dance begins with all the participants assembling in a row holding hands, the line curving so that all can see each other. The flute-player stands in the center, the dancers move around him, tracing the perimeter of an imaginary circle, the musician and the dancers maintaining constant eye-contact.

The flautist starts playing and the dancers join in by treading on the spot, to become familiar with the rhythm, warm-up and prepares the muscles for dancing. The dance proper begins with a rather simple, straightforward section of steps, a march which serves as a refrain and enables everybody to adjust to the general rhythm, get the feel of the group and thus prepare himself for the more complicated steps ahead.

The alteration of a simple refrain with a more sophisticated series of steps gives the audience an opportunity to cheer and applaud the spectacular feats of the dancers in those sections requiring virtuosity.

The leader is usually one of the experienced dancers and he is obliged to choose the appropriate steps, fitting them to the music as he dances. Therefore the leader must be in constant eye-contact with the flautist. Sometimes the leader leaves the head of the line and performs as a soloist. While he is leading the line, he usually waves a handkerchief above his head. Several informants told us that the handkerchief is a substitute for a sword, which was used when the Debka was still a dance of warriors preparing for battle or returning home after a victorious war.

#### THE TEXTS OF THE SONGS OF THE DEBKA

The songs accompanying the Debka are usually in honour of beauty, youth, or love in general, or in praise of a man

or a woman. Following is typical example (freely translated):

Your beauty blinds me,  
Oh, my love.  
My lamb, open your door,  
The night is over now.

Or it may be the popular Arab song "Alla Dal'una" as cited by Sa'id Bushnak (of Nazareth) in his article "Dance and Play at Arab Weddings" (in the Hebrew translation by Baruch Bernstein in *Hachinuch Hagufani* 1978/1):

Alla Dal'una says: Take it easy,  
I am neither your likeness nor your peer.  
Wait, listen carefully and I'll tell you  
What happened to me yesterday and today...

Such are the songs, and the singer-poet adds topicality by adding praise for the groom's family and by mentioning the names of the village or of present notables and honoured guests.

#### TONAL ELEMENTS OF THE DEBKA

The five central tonal elements of the Debka are:

The f l u t e — Na'i — the reed flute of the shepherds, which plays nearly incessantly.

The s i n g i n g of the dancers, who join the flute from time to time.

The s t a m p i n g of the feet, which is part of the movement but whose audial effect is important.

The h a n d c l a p p i n g of the spectators and sometimes of the dancers themselves. These are spontaneous.

The v o c a l c h e e r i n g of the dancers or the audience.

We shall further describe these elements, but without attempting a musicological analysis (which may be found in the present author's work about the subject: **The Music and Movement of the Druze in Israel.**)

The flute is the constant, basic requirement, while all the rest are auxiliary and may or may not be present. Sometimes a drum — the earthenware drum called the *Darbouka* — is added to the flute, as accompaniment. The singing, sometimes parallel to the tune played by the flute (one octave lower), and at other times following a different,

second tune, thus creating a double-tune sometimes on a different scale altogether, causing bi-tonality.

The other 3 elements are rythmical rather than melodical and are created by dancers or spectators with their bodies alone without the help of instruments.

The stamping of the feet is typical of this dance. There is variation in the stamping, but mostly it is vigorous, emphasized and syncopated.

Gustav Dalmann, the German researcher, who in his book *Palastinensischer Diwan* describing the music, dance and songs of Palestine at the beginning of the century, calls the Debka the "Stamping Dance" (as opposed to the danced procession which he termed "Handclapping Dance"). Dalmann, and several others who wrote descriptions of their travels in the Middle East at that time, did not follow a strictly scientific method, assuming that what they came upon by chance was typical and "normal". We know that there exist several forms of the Debka. In Israel alone there are a number of "local" variations on the basic form, each containing the constant and the variable elements of the dance.

#### THE MAIN CHARACTERISTICS OF THE DEBKA

The Debka is a dance of male dancers in a line-formation, its movements vigorous and emphatic. It is primarily a dance of the feet, with the torso nearly always rigidly erect. The elasticity of the knee and ankle joints, together with the rigidity of the foot make the strong stamping possible.

The typical step consists of putting the weight of the body on one heel, followed by a quick beat with the sole. This step is found in several forms of jumping and stamping. The leader chooses the step. The improvisations of the leader which the line of dancers follows as closely as possible create a characteristic and specific formation.

The dancers hold each other by grasping their neighbours' belts or by linking elbows, wrists or fingers or by putting arms on shoulders. All these forms of contact make the uniform movement of the line possible.

#### PROBLEMS OF ETHNOMUSICOLOGICAL RESEARCH

The task of recording and analysing the many variants of

the Debka found in Israel is still to be done. The ethnomusicologists will have to compare their findings with the extensive research already done in the surrounding Arab countries.

Following is the first page of a transcription of a recording made at the G'at village in Western Galilee in August 1973. The dance lasted for about two hours, the recorded portion taking about eight minutes. All musical happenings pertaining to the dance during these eight minutes were recorded. One must keep in mind that this "score" endeavours to depict a musico-social event in which much is improvised. We believe the following example to be typical, but it has to be regarded in a phenomenological light, as a complete unit, without any attempt at categorizing or as statistical evidence.

Due to lack of space no graphic description is added. Examples of Debka steps may be found in the work of Noa Eshcol's "Movement Notation Society" and its publications.

Due to the improvisational nature of the Debka, all records are to be regarded as ad hoc examples only.

Both the dancers and the musicians know the basic forms of the dance, so that the result is improvisation based on standard units, influenced by the atmosphere, the dancers' ability and the interaction of these elements.

The Debka is, therefore, a variegated interaction of visual and vocal accents, in which all the components possess constant but variable structures, changeable in themselves and in their relation to the other musical or movement elements, and the variation in the different elements taking place independently of each other.

#### THE DEBKA IN ISRAELI FOLK DANCE

The Debka has been "naturalized in what is called Israeli Folk Dance. Several of the creators of Israeli folk dances have "invented" or adapted Debkas and these have become an integral part of the Israeli folk dance repertoire.

Of course there exist many more dances that contain Debka elements in them, without being called Debkas. In her book *Am Roked*, Gurit Kadman lists 14 dances under the title Debka. They are the following:

Recorded and transcribed in  
the village Gat in Western Galilee,  
Summer 1973  
by Naomi and Avner Bahat

DEBKA דבקה

הקלטת ונרשם  
בכפר ג'ת  
בגליל המערבי  
קרץ 1973.  
ע"י נעמי ואבנר בהט.

$\text{♩} = 120$

*חליל*  
A<sub>1</sub> A<sub>2</sub> A<sub>3</sub> A<sub>4</sub>

chant  
↓  
ידה

shouts  
קריאות  
עזיאות  
כפיי

hand clappings  
צעדים  
יד קציות  
steps

A<sub>1</sub> A<sub>6</sub> A<sub>5</sub> A<sub>6'</sub>

ch.  
↓

sh.  
ק

h.c.  
↓

A<sub>7</sub> A<sub>1</sub> A<sub>3</sub> A<sub>8</sub>

ch.  
↓

sh.  
ק

h.c.  
↓

S

\* דוגמת ההתחלה בלבד, מתוך טרנסקריפציה של קטע הנמשך 8 דקות.

\* An example of the beginning from a transcription of eight minutes.

Title	Name of Creator	Music by
Debka Adama	J. Levi	D. Zahavi
Debka Uriah	M. Levi (Moshiko)	N. Shar'abi
Beduin Debka	"	Oriental Folk tune
Debka Gilboa	R. Sturman	E. Amiran
Fisher's Debka	S. Hermon	G. Aldema
Debka Dalia	S. Cohen (Viki)	Y. Kenan
Debka Dal'una	J. Ashriel	Arabic Folk tune
Debka Druz	S. Cohen (Viki)	U. Giveon
Debka Hillel	"	A. Netzer
Donkey Debka	"	E. Zamir
Debka Cana'an	M. Levi (Moshiko)	Folk tune
Kurdish Debka	"	Oriental Folk tune
Standard Debka	arr. G. Kadman	Arab Folk tune
Debka Rafiah		Arab Folk tune

The list includes Debka based on movement taken from the ethnic sources (a good example being "Debka Druz", where the traditional dance and musical elements are integrated so that they do not interfere with the flow of the new composition). There are others in which the term Debka simply implies an influence or a thought-association in the mind of composer or creator. Though the creators in such cases use traditional elements, the result is but a distant relative of the original Debka, if only because the variable elements of the socio-ethnic circumstances in which a Debka takes place are missing. The inter-relation between the dance and the music may, perhaps, be imitated, but not really reproduced. But even such imitation, in order to become integrated and properly executed, requires a protracted acquaintance of several generations.

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