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UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA
IRVINE

Dance in the culture of Baalbek, Lebanon

THESIS

Submitted in partial satisfaction of the requirements
for the degree of

MASTER OF ARTS

In Dance

by

Maha Afra Haddad

Thesis Committee:
Professor Alan Terricciano, Chair
Dr. Janice Plastino
Professor Mary Corey
Professor Israel "EL" Gabriel

2001

UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA SCHOOL OF THE ARTS

REPORT OF A THESIS

The Thesis of Maha Afra Haddad, consisting of

Dance in the culture of Baalbek, Lebanon

Has been accepted towards the fulfillment of the requirements toward
The Master of Fine Arts Degree in Dance.

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Thesis Chairman Date

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University of California, Irvine

2001

DEDICATION

Ila ahel Baalbek ...

TABLE OF CONTENT

		Page
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS		v
ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS		vi
INTRODUCTION		1
CHAPTER I:	History	6
CHAPTER II:	The Journey	11
CHAPTER III:	The Male Dances	16
CHAPTER IV:	The Weddings	29
CONCLUSION		42
BIBLIOGRAPHY		47
APPENDIX:	Laban Notation	49

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Thank you Dr. Plastino for being there for me and guiding me through all these years. I am in your debt forever. Professor Corey, you were the first person I talked to in the department and you helped me choose UCI. Thank you for everything. Israel "El" Gabriel, I cannot believe that at one point I was scared of you. You are loving, sensitive, caring, a brother, a father, and sometimes a mother, to every one in the department. Thank you my friend. Karen and June, what will anybody do without you? This question is scary!

I also thank the rest of the faculty for shaping me into who I am. It has taken five years, but it is worth it. Dr. Ruyter, it works!

I thank my classmates who have been supportive and have listened patiently to my nagging, especially Phoenix, David, Scott, and Christine.

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What is life without friends? Nadia, what can I say da'hling, Hend, Tony, Suad, the Asaad's, thank you for babysitting and being there. Ready for more?

To my family in Lebanon, Nelly, Gaby, Micky, Linda, Roger, Yvonne, Nadim, Rola, Fouad, Nimat, Dorra, and my one of a kind mom, thank you for your help and putting up with crazy me.

Thank you Alissar Caracalla for being "THE LINK," and introducing me to the wonderful people of Baalbek. The Naboush families, *lakom el mazid minal shokor li mousa'adatikom, wa li e'atibari minal a'ila. Lan anssakom.*

Last but not least, to the daring, amazing, nameless, intelligent people, you know who you are. What is life without you!

ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS

Dance in the Culture of Baalbek, Lebanon

by

Maha Afra Haddad

Master of Fine Arts in Dance

University of California, Irvine, 2001

Professor Alan Terricciano, Chair

"Dabke is manhood, existence in life," is how *dabke*, the line dance of Baalbek dance of Baalbek, a village in Lebanon, was described to me. Traditional *dabke* dances of Baalbek are for men only; and only "real men" do these dances. The women's place in this society is only to bear children. Yet these traditional male dances are becoming a stage vestige. In addition to belly dance, another traditional Middle Eastern form, only the *dabke* danced by both men and women is performed, and only at celebrations.

My thesis investigates the role of dance, especially *dabke*, in the modern Baalbek culture. My observations of male and female behavior in this society, as well as the relationship between the genders, and the effect of television on the culture, were

instrumental in helping me draw conclusions about the evolution of the *dabke*. The stories, along with an understanding of the political and economical situation in the area, provide necessary background to fully appreciate the role of dance, the *dabke* in particular, in this culture.

Introduction

Lebanon was my birth country. I was raised there and only left at the age of twenty-six. I grew up in a Sunni Moslem family in a culture where music and dance were always part of daily life and every celebration, but mostly Arabic music and what we called Arabic dance, known in the United States as belly dance. This is a solo form of dance usually performed by females. With my mother glaring at him, my father would turn on the radio to an Arabic music station and would clap the rhythm for me so I could dance. He only liked Arabic dance and called the line dance performed in the villages, the 'dance of the peasants.' He considered himself, as do most Lebanese Sunni Moslems, an urbanite, and a cut above the Christians and the members of the other Moslem sect, the Shiites, who mostly lived in villages. He also preferred the Egyptian Arabic dancers to the Lebanese ones because he said they were more authentic and feminine, yet called these same professional dancers prostitutes!

During celebrations, everybody would dance the latest fashionable Western dances to the latest Western tunes. When Arabic music was playing, only the women would perform the Arabic dance, and I was one of them. As a teenager, I joined the dance company of Wadia Jarar. At that time, she was one of the most famous dance teachers and choreographers in Lebanon. When I showed promise and interest however, the whole family became alarmed. A proper Moslem girl would not dance in public in front of strangers. A Christian girl might do that, but not a Moslem.

Ironically, I spent the fifteen years that spanned kindergarten, elementary school, junior high school, and high school in an American Baptist school. Christian education and converting the students to their idea of Christianity was the ultimate goal of the school faculty. One of the main doctrines stressed in the school teachings was that the body was sinful, shameful and dirty. Dance was banned, even condemned, but all the while I was studying folk dance and ballet, without my parents' knowledge or blessing.

Years later, while an undergraduate at UCI, I became fascinated by dance history and ethnology. Because of my formal training, dance to my mind was what I saw on stage, beautiful, perfect, and rehearsed. That was the dance performed by trained amazing bodies doing feats that defied normal human abilities and limits. Then I realized that there was another type of dance, the dance of my youth, performed by untrained dancers, in everyday events, by everyday people. That dance was complex and carried meaning beyond an athletic body, a fairy tale, or a message about a social issue. That dance told stories about cultures, relationships, history, habits and habitats. I also realized that there was a strong heritage of 'everyday people's dance' in Lebanon.

In writing this thesis, I wanted to pay a tribute to my cultural heritage. The best way to pay this tribute required me to identify a place in Lebanon with a strong dance heritage. I identified Baalbek, a town North-East of the capital Beirut in the Beqa'a valley, the major agricultural region of Lebanon (Ragette, 13).

Baalbek is a town with a rich heritage of folk dance out of which emerged several professional companies, famous for stylizing the folk dance and putting it on stage. Lebanon is part of the Middle East, and therefore is part of the complex political web that plagued the area since centuries. There are some cultural heritages and beliefs that are

particular to the area and others that are particular to Lebanon. Baalbek, being part of Lebanon, thus shares in the general politico-cultural-religious background, but it has its own special flavor and color in these areas.

I compared the dance practices of the people of Baalbek to the ritual of their everyday life. I also tried to put their dance in the context of religious beliefs and cultural customs, especially gender relationships, a complex task.

Baalbek was a world of men. But not all men were equal. There were the 'real men,' *(rejel 'an ha'a wa ha'ia;)* the 'manly men,'*(rejel;)* the 'man of men,' *(sheikh el shabeb)*[*]. These men were generous, strong, and brave. They had no shame on them. The women kin brought the shame on the men. Shame could only be erased by 'honor killing' of the woman who caused it, and the man would prove he was a 'real man.'

Tribal laws were the predominant laws in the area. Vengeance killings were common and only the 'real men;' the 'manly men,' could mediate between the families involved and put an end to these vengeance killings, ending the bloodshed.

Baalbek was the birthplace of Hizb'allah, a militant, Shiite Moslem religious group. This group's armed resistance was the key factor in ending the Israeli occupation of Southern Lebanon and many of its members, considered martyrs in the Holy War against Israel, were from the Baalbek area.

The Syrians have occupied Lebanon since the late seventies. Because of its proximity to Syria, Baalbek felt the Syrian military presence most keenly. The Syrians terrorized the Baalbek men. There was a suffocating economic crisis in Baalbek

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[*] In spite of the awkward translation, these choices reflect the most accurate sense of the Arabic terms.

perpetuated by the competition between the Lebanese workers and products and the cheaper Syrian laborers and products.

The following chapters present historic and cultural information about Lebanon and Baalbek. Some of the information is from academic sources while other information is from my observations and from the people I have been in contact with. Therefore, the information in this thesis is subject to my sources' point of view, and religious, cultural and socio-economic perspective. My opinion is subjective as well. In this document, I am taking a strong anti-Syrian position, a stand that reflects that of the majority of the Lebanese.

My experience in Baalbek has taught me to respect other's cultural practices. I have been able to see harmony and balance in a society whose norms and moral standards defied my beliefs about women's rights. I have drawn several conclusions about the social connotations of the dance in Baalbek.

In the old days celebrations were gender segregated and there were only the male dances. One of the signs of 'modernization' or 'westernization,' was the gender mix in celebrations.

The dance practices of the people of Baalbek were showcases for the men, dances that could display their manliness. They were a way for the men to assert their power and existence in world of oppression and economic striving. The dances that were restricted to the men were vanishing from celebrations, a major cultural loss with no impact on the manliness issue. Unlike the old days, women participated in celebrations and only the dances that were danced by everybody were still part of the celebrations.

Sexuality in Baalbek, in particular, was a private affair and reserved for marriage. Public dancing was devoid of eroticism. The women's dancing was a scaled down version of the men's. The women were dancing to celebrate and to exist in a world where they accessorized men.

CHAPTER I

History

Discussing the Syrian presence in Lebanon is like opening Pandora's box. It cannot be ignored. The Syrian's presence is part of the reality of the Lebanese existence, and Syrian influence is more felt and out in the open as one gets closer to the Beqa'a Valley.

Lebanon, a small country the size of four thousand square miles, (map page 10, World Book, 171), has the Mediterranean Sea to the West, Israel to the South and Syria to its Northern and Eastern borders. Syria and Lebanon were under the Ottoman Empire during World War I and after the war were under the French Mandate. In 1920 the French drew the current international borders of Syria and Lebanon (Harris, 41). Some of the territories added to today's Lebanon were "at the expense of interior Syria," a fact that would later become an issue in the Israeli- Arab conflict (Harris, 43).

Lebanon got its independence from France in 1943, and by 1946 the last French soldier left Lebanon. In 1948 Israel was born, and the Palestinians living in what is now Israel, were expelled to Jordan. Lebanon was and still is a medley of people with different faiths, mainly Christian, Moslem, and Druze, with the Christians, specifically the Maronite Catholics, in control of the country. In maintaining a status quo between the diverse Lebanese groups, the democratic Lebanese government was weak, lacking the dictatorial control over potentially dangerous political activities. This situation made Lebanon a fertile ground for political movements and terrorists who fled oppressive

regimes in the other parts of the Middle East. In 1961 there were clashes in Jordan between armed Palestinian refugees and the Jordanian army. The Jordanian army massacred the Palestinians in what is known as Black Saturday. The Palestinians fled to Lebanon and only added more complexity to the Lebanese situation. In 1969 there was an agreement in Cairo between the Arab countries and Lebanon known as the Cairo Agreement. This agreement allowed the Palestinians in Lebanon to arm themselves for self protection and to use the South of Lebanon to launch attacks on Israel. The Palestinians gained a lot of power and became major players in the Lebanese political arena.

The Lebanese Civil War started in 1975 between the Palestinians and the Christian factions. The Moslems sided with the Palestinians, and Beirut, the capital, was divided into a Christian zone and a Moslem one. Syria needed to control Lebanon in order to control its own internal and external security. Syria was afraid that political opposition to its regime would grow and be exported from Lebanon. Syria also needed to control Israel through Lebanon. At stake were the Palestinians and Middle East leadership. It was imperative to Syria to keep the Palestinians under its thumb and to lead the Middle East in the political maneuvers with Israel. Therefore when the Civil War escalated in Lebanon in 1976, the Syrian army was invited into Lebanon as part of the Arab peace keeping force known as 'The Arab Dissociation Forces.' By the late eighties, only the Syrian army stayed and the other Arab Armies left. The Israelis declared the Litani River in the South of Lebanon as the farthest south that the Syrian army could penetrate into Lebanon without military confrontation between them and the Syrians. The Palestinians escalated their attacks on Israel from the South of Lebanon in

1977-1978, and Israel invaded the South of Lebanon north to the Litani River, establishing the Israeli Security Zone.

Egypt signed the Camp David peace treaty with Israel in 1979 and Syria took the opportunity to become allied with the Palestinians. In 1982 Israel invaded Lebanon and drove the Palestinian guerilla out and forced the Syrians to retreat to the Beqa'a Valley, where the village of Baalbek is located. The population of Baalbek was mostly Moslem and the majority belonged to the Shiite sect of Islam. The Shiite's were economically and politically disadvantaged in Lebanon (Ranstorp, 25). Due to several factors and particularly the Israeli Invasion of Lebanon in 1982 and the occupation of predominantly Shiite South Lebanon, there was an insurgence of several radical Shiite movements that merged into the formation of Hizb'allah, meaning the party of God, in the Beqa'a and mainly in Baalbek. Many of the leaders of the smaller Islamic movements that merged into Hizb'allah were from the Baalbek area (Ransport, 25-36). Hizb'allah was backed by Syria and Iran and many of its martyrs were from the Baalbek area. In 1983, the Israelis gradually retreated to the Security Zone (O'Ballance, 125). In a controversial move to back the United States in its war against Iraq, Syria was able to get the American green light in the invasion of Lebanon. This was seen in the United States backing of the

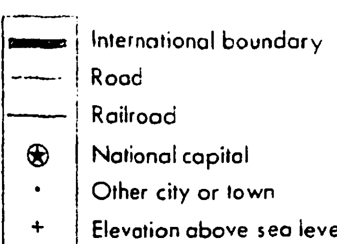
Taif agreement that gave the powers to the Syrians to appoint a Lebanese president. In 1990, the pro-Syria Lebanese president asked the Syrian army help in controlling the Civil War. The Syrians came in full force into Lebanon (O'Ballance, 196-206).

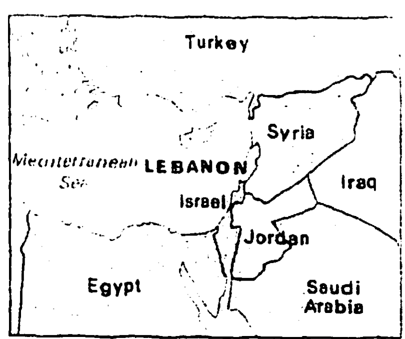
Syria controls every aspect of Lebanese politics and foreign affairs. It controls the election process and determines who will be President, Prime Minister, and Head of the Parliament. When I was in Lebanon in the Summer, 2000, there were elections for

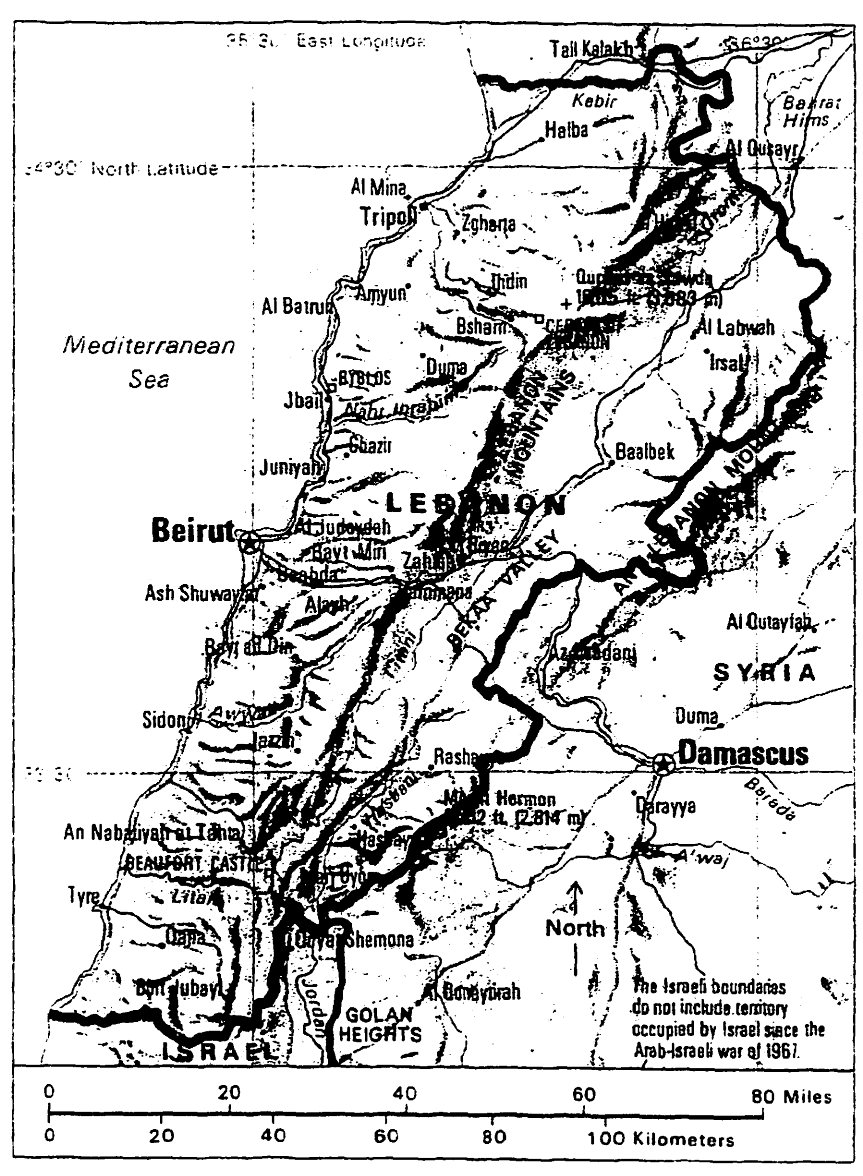
the House of Representatives. The pictures of the candidates were all over the streets, on every wall, pole, and building, but people knew that Syria decided who would get elected. Politicians spent their time going back and forth to Syria to get approval and worse, disapproval. A bullet in the head or a mysterious car explosion could be the fate of any Syrian political opponent. Many Lebanese have disappeared in Syrian prisons or by Syrian hands. They imposed their laborers on the country in competition with the Lebanese, sending millions of dollars back to Syria.

The unemployment level has reached an alarming level in Lebanon and is at its highest level in the Beqa'a valley where most people make their living as laborers and through agriculture. Local agricultural products compete with Syrian products. During my stay the farmers staged a strike and blocked the Damascus road with their produce. Opium was a major crop in the Valley and people made lots of money planting it, processing it and selling it. The Syrians controlled the whole process. At one point the Western countries, particularly the United States, decided to put an end to the opium cultivation in the Beqa'a. The Lebanese government promised an alternate crop to the area but never came through, adding to the misery of the area.

Lebanon







CHAPTER II

The Journey

Defying all counsel, on July 10, 2000, I packed my meager belongings, making sure that all my clothes were conservative, no short skirts or sleeveless shirts, and drove from Beirut to Baalbek. My family and friends thought I was crazy to go to Baalbek. They said a man would not go there to stay with the people, much less a woman alone, and a stranger on top of that. It would be the ultimate madness. The people of Baalbek were considered to be brutal. Women were the property of men and should always be accompanied by male kin.

Driving in Lebanon is a challenge for the best of drivers. Nobody follows the rules even if they exist. Most of the roads have no lanes or road signs. It takes two hours to travel the eighty-five Kilometers from Beirut to Baalbek, driving on the winding roads through the mountainous areas. The road to Baalbek is known as *Tariq el Sham*, meaning the Road of Damascus, a reference to the capital of Syria to the Northeast. The road goes up the Lebanon Mountain Ranges (*Al Selsela Al Gharbiyah*), reaching to the highest point, *Dahr el Baidar* and descends to the Beqa'a Valley that lies between this mountain range and the Anti-Lebanon Mountain Range (*Al Selsela Al Sharkiyah*).

Once out of Beirut, the traffic was light but there were a lot of trucks. Passing the trucks or the slow vehicles is a major challenge for me in Lebanon, especially on this road. You never know who is coming on the opposite side. The radio was on, loud as usual, and helped to calm me down. I am not scared of dying. I accept my mortality as I

accept that the sky is blue. I believe in fate and God's will and that when the time comes there is no way of evading one's death. What scares me is hurting someone else or the possibility of getting incapacitated and dependent.

Once I got to Alley, the first of the major mountain towns or villages, the traffic got heavier. There were many police officers and hoards of men walking together. All over the place were pictures of Hafez al Assad, the recently deceased president of Syria of forty years, and that of his son Bachar, the heir apparent to the presidency. The hoards of men seemed, to my trained Lebanese eyes, to be some of the one million hated Syrian workers imposed on Lebanon by Syrian neighbors whose army, stationed in Lebanon, is supposedly keeping the peace. At that point I had no idea why there were so many men and police roaming the roads. It turned out, that was the day when the Syrians were going to the polls to decide whether the son of Hafez el Assad, Bachar, would be president. Therefore they opened special polling places for the Syrian patriots in Lebanon so they could vote as well. The Lebanese police were there to direct traffic.

I passed the rest of the mountain towns and the same picture kept repeating, the hoards of men, the Assad's father and son pictures and the signs. I passed the *Dahr El Baydar* point, before starting the descent to the Beqa'a plain. At *Dahr El Baydar* was the first checkpoint, this one for the Lebanese police. In Lebanon checkpoints are very common. During the Civil War they were everywhere and could have been for the several militias that rose during the war, the Lebanese army or police, the Syrians, the several factions of the Palestinian armed factions, or the Israeli's after their invasion of the country. It depended on the time, place and area. At checkpoints everybody was expected to produce an identification document if asked. The Civil War ended in 1991.

The Israeli's withdrew from the South, their last Lebanese territory, in May 2000. The checkpoints now belong to the Lebanese army and police and to the Syrians in the areas where their army is present, as in the Beqa'a Valley.

My air conditioner was on but as I got down further toward the valley I could feel the heat increasing even through the closed windows. I got to Chtoura, the first major town in the valley, and passed the Syrian checkpoint. The traffic was terrible. At that checkpoint, the first Syrian one, there was an immense statue of the deceased Syrian president's other son, Bassel. He was the oldest of his sons and was killed in a car accident. He was depicted riding on a horse, a picture of the heroic horseman, a sign of respect in the Middle East in general, and in the Beqa'a and Baalbek in particular. The rumors say that he had never been on a horse and that he was killed speeding in his luxury sports car. More and more men were walking around and a lot of police officers trying to keep things under control. After twenty minutes to travel what would normally take two minutes, I was on the highway leading to Baalbek. The Beqa'a Valley is mostly inhabited by Shiite Moslems, with some Sunni Moslems and a minority of Christian strongholds. Most of the Christians are opposed to the Syrian presence in Lebanon. When I passed through Zahle, a major Christian stronghold in the valley, and a few surrounding Christian villages, the pictures of the Assad father and son, along with the written signs disappeared, only to appear later when the road passed through Moslem villages. The Moslem villages that were most probably Shiite had the banners of Hizb'allah hanging from homes and on the utility poles on the road. From then on the villages got smaller, and the fields crept closer to the road with workers tending them under the unmerciful sun. There were produce stands all along the road and a few

Bedouin tents every now and then. I even saw sheep and goats. The soil looked so reddish and rich, promising food and income.

I passed several Syrian and Lebanese checkpoints and finally got to the entrance of Baalbek, marked by a government sign bearing the name of the city. There was a man-made arch of steel and wood with banners of Hizb'allah and a sign written in Arabic, about its martyrs. Past the arch was the Syrian military headquarters, a large building with a huge statue of the deceased president Assad in front. Later, every time I passed the headquarters with the men from Baalbek, they would make jokes about the statue and the Syrians. Many of the men had been detained, for no reason, by the Syrians at one point or another, some when they were thirteen years of age. The detainees were subjected to many kinds of torture, the most common one was being put in a tire and suspended and hit on the soles of the feet with a stick.

In 1992, my husband, children and I went to Lebanon from the States for the first time in seven years. We went to Baalbek to show the children the temples, still under Hizb'allah. We were frightened, especially because we were American citizens and Hizb'allah held the American hostages in Baalbek during the Lebanese Civil War.

The last time I was in Baalbek was in 1999 to attend the festivals that take place in its ancient Roman Temples that made it a tourist center. Margot Fonteyn, Rudolf Nuryev were some of the famous people who performed in the festivals. The Festivals of Baalbek were interrupted by the Civil War and the Hizb'allah control of the city.

The Temples of Baalbek are at the entrance of the city. Like most of the people who go to the Festivals, I took a chartered bus from Beirut that dropped us off at the Palmyra hotel, the major hotel of two in town. The women wore conservative clothing.

We walked from the hotel to the Temples that were down the street, between the Lebanese army lining the street; attended the show and walked back to the hotel to go back to Beirut in the bus. We never walked in the city or its market or had any contact with its people. We never wanted to buy food there because we thought it was dirty. Baalbek was a Hizb'allah town whose population was crude, uncivilized; they were killers.

This time, I went Baalbek's Palmyra Hotel and stayed there while I got to know the people who would become my friends, family, my home and connection to a world of culture and dance so close to my origins yet so alien.

CHAPTER III

The Male Dances

In Lebanon, as in most of the Middle East, having the right connection is the only way to get things done. To do my research in Baalbek, I was lucky to have that right connection. Her name was Alissar Caracalla.

Alissar Caracalla, the friend of a friend of mine, is the daughter of Abdel Halim Caracalla, the founder and artistic director of the *Caracalla Dance Troupe*. Alissar is working on her MFA at UCLA, and she is one of the choreographers of the dance troupe. When she was living in Los Angeles, my friend let me talk to her on the phone, and we promised to meet sometime. The Los Angeles meeting never happened, and she moved to Lebanon to work with her father. I went to Lebanon in December 1999 to find contacts for my thesis. I met Alissar, and she promised to help me whenever I needed help. When I went to Lebanon in the summer of 2000, I called Alissar. She was busy in rehearsals for the troupe's summer show. I did not get to see her, but in the weeks following she called me to give me the name of my contact in Baalbek.

The Caracallas are originally from Baalbek. Their house in Baalbek is close to the ancient Roman temples that made the city a tourist site. During my stay in Baalbek, every time we passed the house, somebody would point it out for me, "this is the house of the *Estez*." *Estez* means teacher or sir in Arabic. Many people in Baalbek did not like the Caracallas because they felt that they did not do much for the community of Baalbek, but they still recognized them. They were the first to take the dance tradition of the area, put it on stage, and tour the world with it. They were well known in Baalbek.

Alissar put me in Khaled Naboush's care. Khaled was from Baalbek, a dancer in the Caracalla Troupe and Mr. Caracalla's 'do-it-all' man. He was in his mid-twenties, soft spoken, and polite. On my first trip to Baalbek, he met me at the Hotel Palmyra. He had with him his first paternal cousin, Mohammad. Mohammad, in his late twenties and unmarried, was the key player in my research. Khaled worked with the Caracallas in Beirut and Mohammad was the connection and bodyguard.

Therefore, during my time in Baalbek, I was in the custody of the Naboush family, staying mostly with the wife and children of Khaled Naboush. His wife's name was Khadijeh, a common name for Moslems because it was the name of the Prophet Mohammad's daughter. Khadijeh welcomed the company of a woman, one already approved by her husband. It would not have been appropriate for a woman, a stranger unaccompanied by her husband, to stay in the house when the man was present. Even Khadijeh's fifteen years-old sister slept at Khadijeh's house only when Khaled was away. They lived in a downstairs apartment, part of a building owned by Khaled's father. The father, along with Khaled's mother, and adult unmarried brothers lived in the upstairs apartment. In Lebanon and the Middle East in general, children live with their parents until they are married and sometimes even after. In Baalbek, the male children, except the youngest build apartments above, below, or adjacent to their parents'. The youngest marries and lives with the parents. Female children marry and move in with their husband's family. If unmarried, they live in the parents' house. Khadijeh's mother and sisters lived nearby.

Mohammad lived with his parents, sisters and brother. His mother's name was Khadijeh, too. So I called her the older Khadijeh and Khaled's wife the young Khadijeh. The two families lived in the same neighborhood.

At first I assumed Mohammad's family was Shiite Moslem, like most people in Baalbek. Most people assumed that I was a Christian because I was alone, unaccompanied by a male kin. Only Christians were 'modern' or had loose enough morals to allow their women to venture alone. It could have also been that the way I dressed was considered too modern for a Moslem woman. But I started noticing that Mohammad and his family would drop spiteful remarks about the Shiites. I finally asked Mohammad and he confirmed my suspicions; they were Sunni Moslems. I told him that I was a Sunni Moslem too. It made everybody happy and possibly more cooperative. But I also felt more dismay or disgust that I was too modern for a Moslem. I had to navigate the approval-disapproval maze of the people. Khaled's mother asked me if my husband was a 'real man' because she thought no real man would allow his wife not only to work outside the house but also to venture on her own among strangers. The young Khadijeh and her sisters kept commenting that I was "like men."

The men who still performed the old traditional dances of the area that I wanted to study were also Sunni peasants. They were elders from different branches of the same family, the Solh family.

Mohammad took me to the Solh Quarter to find them. This is one of the oldest neighborhoods in Baalbek. Visiting other people is a natural part of the social life in the Middle East and especially in small towns like Baalbek. People just show up at each other's door and visit. Therefore, Mohammad planned a lot of visits for me with families

Mohammad lived with his parents, sisters and brother. His mother's name was Khadijeh, too. So I called her the older Khadijeh and Khaled's wife the young Khadijeh. The two families lived in the same neighborhood.

At first I assumed Mohammad's family was Shiite Moslem, like most people in Baalbek. Most people assumed that I was a Christian because I was alone, unaccompanied by a male kin. Only Christians were 'modern' or had loose enough morals to allow their women to venture alone. It could have also been that the way I dressed was considered too modern for a Moslem woman. But I started noticing that Mohammad and his family would drop spiteful remarks about the Shiites. I finally asked Mohammad and he confirmed my suspicions; they were Sunni Moslems. I told him that I was a Sunni Moslem too. It made everybody happy and possibly more cooperative. But I also felt more dismay or disgust that I was too modern for a Moslem. I had to navigate the approval-disapproval maze of the people. Khaled's mother asked me if my husband was a 'real man' because she thought no real man would allow his wife not only to work outside the house but also to venture on her own among strangers. The young Khadijeh and her sisters kept commenting that I was "like men."

The men who still performed the old traditional dances of the area that I wanted to study were also Sunni peasants. They were elders from different branches of the same family, the Solh family.

Mohammad took me to the Solh Quarter to find them. This is one of the oldest neighborhoods in Baalbek. Visiting other people is a natural part of the social life in the Middle East and especially in small towns like Baalbek. People just show up at each other's door and visit. Therefore, Mohammad planned a lot of visits for me with families

and friends so I could get a picture of the social and economic life of the people of Baalbek. We would go anywhere, unannounced and were welcomed, offered coffee, soda, and fruit. The people we visited were all poor but exceedingly generous. Generosity is an admired attribute in the Middle East, and in Baalbek it is a must.

One of our visits was to Abou Moustapha, one member of a group of elders that preserves the old songs and dance of the Baalbek. To find him, we went through tiny alleys with houses built close together. Mohammad parked in front of one and went in all alone to announce us. We passed through a small room that had two goats in it. Then we went into a patio and turned right into the house. The front room had couches and a refrigerator. A door led to a bedroom and, for the most part, that was the house. A middle-aged lady, short, plump, blonde and blue eyed received us. Mohammad introduced her as the wife of Abou Moustapha. We sat down and Abou Moustapha came out. He was an old man, tall, dark and thin. He had bad teeth like everybody else, and a very kind smile. He wore the traditional dress-like gown, a heavy, long, gray, wrap around dress, with a leather belt around his waist. He had on his head the thin, white, long scarf, with the black circular, braided cord around the crown of his head, an old, traditional style of dress. His wife served soda and the traditional coffee flavored with cardamom. When Mohammad told the man who I was and what I was doing, Abou Moustapha was delighted and promised to get his group of old men together. He said only he and these men preserved the traditional songs and dances of the area.

Abou Moustapha told the stories of the peasants' old way of life, how they used to work the land, eat natural food and were healthy because of this lifestyle. They used to

sing and dance, especially after the harvest, and tell stories during the harsh winter, taking turns sitting around the fire.

I did not expect Abou Moustapha to dance and sing for us. We were not there to interview him but to pay him a customary visit and set an appointment to meet with him and his group of elders. He would not let us go. He wanted to talk, to tell the stories of his days of glory. But his stories were about the glory of men's lives. The women in his stories, if mentioned would be preparing a man's meal. He sang a couple of traditional songs, with only the music of his deep, wavery voice as an accompaniment. The songs were strong, with a fast and uplifting rhythm. Then Abou Moustapha started dancing while singing. He did the *Dabke*, a traditional line dance performed in villages all over the Middle East. However, he danced the *Dabkes* that were the signature of Baalbek. He was proud, and erect for his seventy something years, but the steps were heavy and downward, plowing the floor. He would step on to one foot, hold his position and then shift his weight to the other foot. One arm was behind his back and another was held above his head, elbow bent, twirling his worry beads. His smile never faded. He was not supposed to dance for me. He was to wait until his friends came over another time. Abou Moustapha was showing off, exhibiting his manhood in his dance. His unexpected preview of the dances that I had traveled so far to see was overflowing with generosity. There was a sense of urgency in his continuous charade of song, dance, and stories. He was supposed to be sick in bed when we arrived. Still he was dancing, slashing his arm across his body as he stomped his feet; moving in the tiny room as if he was in the hall of a castle.

it was months before the appointment to see other dances finally arrived. Mohammad and I were back to Abou Moustapha's house to meet the elders-Abou Moustapha's friends who danced the old Baalbek *dabkes*. The week before we were supposed to meet with these men at Abou Moustapha's home, but the whole village was shaken because there was a vengeance killing involving the Solh family. All the men we were to meet were either from the Solh family or the Shalha family, which was a branch of the Solh family. I have included the details of the vengeance killing as an example of the customs of Baalbek. This incident illustrates the concept of 'manliness.'

A member of the Solh family, one of the oldest Sunni peasant families of the area, killed a man from the Shoukair family, who were Shiite. These vengeance killings had been going on for eight years. The army was all over the streets to make sure there would be no further escalation of the situation. The stores owned by any Solh were closed. The victim was a young man with a wife and children. He had planned to leave the next week for Canada, where his parents were. He was going out of his house, and the killer approached him and told him that he was going to kill him. The man protested that he had done nothing wrong. The killer shot him nevertheless. Someone drove the man to the hospital, but he was already dead. The kin of the victim refused to retrieve the body, indicating their willingness to get revenge. At the funeral, one of the men took off his headdress and threw it in the grave swearing vengeance and declaring every male from the Solh family between the age of ten and seventy years eligible for killing. That was a tribal tradition in the Baalbek area. Only respectable and honorable men, with no shame brought on them by their female kin, like the dancing elders, could, through peaceful negotiation, put an end to a vengeance cycle between two families.

The dancing elders were settled Bedouins, and many traditions in Baalbek were Bedouin in origin. The Bedouins used to take their women to battle so they would fight fiercely. If the women were captured, raped and enslaved, it would mean the loss of honor of the women and consequently of the men. The loss of honor of the women, through adultery, rape, or even being alone with a man other than her close relatives, brought shame onto the men. Abou Majed, one of the elders, erased the shame and regained the honor of the family, by killing his sister who had brought shame to her family by wanting to marry against their will. He was considered a 'real man,' a 'man'of all men,' a 'manly man,' as were the other members of the elders' dancing group. They were thought generous, honest, courageous, and had no shame brought on them. The *Dabkes* they danced were only for men. The women were not allowed to dance them.

The dancing elders, meaning Abou Moustapha and his friends, formed a dance troupe called "*Ferkat Tourath Baalbek,*" meaning "Troupe of the Heritage of Baalbek." They would be paid to dance in festivals and on television. In addition to seventy-two years old Abou Moustapha; there were Abou Yehya (also called the king of the *Arja*), seventy-five years old, Abou Majed, eighty years old, and Abdel Karim, forty-three years old. There were two musicians who were part of the ensemble, but they could not attend that day.

The *dabke* was a 'stand of honor and glory,' 'manly' like the blow of the sword. The *Arja Dabke*, meaning 'the limping,' was a dance of victory dating back to the time of tribal wars. The men would come back to their tribe; get off their horses and sing and

dance to the ululating women. They would hold hands forming an arch to signify the arch of victory.

The elders stood up slowly and laboriously in Abou Moustapha's tiny living room, formed a line facing me, held hands, and demonstrated the *Arja* (notation, Appendix-page 49). Abou Yehya, the king of the *Arja,* was leading. Abou Moustapha started singing and they joined in. The song was about welcoming the men coming back from the mountains, a victory song. They swayed together side to side, slowly, as if in a breeze. The *Arja* was slow, heavy. It was about tired men coming back victorious from war. Suddenly Abou Yehya brushed his left foot across his body and they all followed in synchrony, arms held up in a victory arch. They fell backward diagonally, on the left leg that was brushed, in a syncopated shift of weight back and forth on their solid planted feet, and then walked to the right with the left foot and then the right foot. They repeated these steps but with heavy shakes of their bodies, a tiny menacing rocking indicative of the power inside their old bodies. Their backs were straight but there was a slight curve indicating their readiness to jump, defend their honor, and even to kill. The dance was slow and heavy but generous in the contained energy and display of pride and courage. These men were not tainted with shame.

The demonstration ended and Abou Yehya lunged towards me, holding a thin stick like a sword. He stomped, stopped, jumped and twirled his stick. I was scared by the intensity of the fire coming from his eyes. His movements were neither big nor high, but they were sudden, unpredictable, slashing, and strong.

I wanted to know about the *dabke* and women. When I asked, Abou Moustapha was the one who answered me. The others seemed to be irritated. There were a few

dabkes for women, Abou Moustapha said, but they were very light, nothing. He demonstrated by showing tiny little steps going clockwise. All through the demonstration his wife did not utter a word. She seemed so sweet and subdued. She had never been introduced to me by name, just as the wife of Abou Moustapha. I found out later that she had no children and thus could not be called "Um," meaning mother of the oldest male son, as the tradition dictates. "Abou Moustapha" means the father of Moustapha. He had children from a previous marriage.

The wife of Abou Moustapha was the opposite of her sister-in-law, Um Mohammad. Though they dressed alike-wearing a skirt over pants, a long sleeved shirt and a scarf tied behind the head-Um Mohammad was straight and proud, tall for a Lebanese woman. She had a gentle smile and bad teeth. She worked the land, their land. It used to be all that the family did but now it is extra work, supplementing the family's paid labor. Of her eight children, mostly boys, the daughters were married and the boys each had professions as builders or mechanics. One of the sons was educated enough to be able to teach at a high school. He was married and his wife was educated too, but he would not allow her to work outside the house.

Um Mohammad was illiterate but sharp. She believed in education for girls and women. She also believed in women working and helping their male kin. She said she saw no difference between women working in the fields or out in the world. The times were hard now, she said; everybody was jobless and scraping to make ends meet. She wondered why the 'stay at home' women were not working instead! The men just laughed at her and thought her ideas were absurd. According to them, it was the men's duty to take care of the family and feed them and women should stay at home. Women

working in the public places like the "souk," the market place, or downtown, would bring shame to the family or the male kin.

Um Mohammad explained that her son Maher, who was sitting with us, was in an accident and unable to work. The economic situation was desperate and there were no jobs for the other men. The fields were not giving their usual yields, and she could not work out of the house. She said that the women deserved to get an education that would enable them to get respectable jobs to help their husbands in earning money for the family. The men, her husband and sons, were flabbergasted. They said women should stay at home no matter what. But Um Mohammad was not to be taken lightly. She was fifty-one, opinionated, strong, and down to earth. The wife of Abou Moustapha, on the other hand, seemed non-existent by comparison.

Um Mohammad might have been strong and independent but, like the wife of Abou Moustapha, would not do anything to defy and shame her male kin. Baalbek is a world of 'manly men,' and women are their worldly possessions. The traditional dances were only for men, and the women were the ululating accessories. However, the traditional male only dances are dying in occasions that call for dance, and are becoming the specialty of the dancing elders, and in a stage version. The only *dabke* that survived was the *Chmalieh*, the generic type that is performed in many areas of the Middle East by men and also by women who are now part of the celebrations. In the *Chmalieh*, like the other *dabkes*, the men still showed their strength in the big jumps and low squats; steps the women did not do. The men also showed their individual style in all the *dabkes*. Any man could lead a line of men or of men and women together, and a woman would lead a

line of women. A young woman I knew used the *dabke* line at a wedding to dance next to the man she secretly loved and hold his hand.

When the dancing elders were young, women used to sit on the roofs of the houses and watch the men dance and ululate for their male kin, especially for the ones considered 'manly men' leading the dance line. Now women attended celebrations and joined in the dancing. Women stayed at home and watched television all day long and were aware of a lot of what was going on in the world. They did not approve or identify with most of it, but even though they were confined in the home space, they were conscious of the possibilities for women. They saw independent women, uncovered, dancing, singing, and acting. Women were doctors, engineers, and politicians. They saw women outside the home sphere with men, and in charge of their lives. These women were alien to the world of Baalbek women. They were the women of the West and Beirut.

The young Khadijeh's brother was university educated and worked in the Arabian Gulf and Eastern Europe. He was visiting his family in Baalbek and went to Beirut for some business. He was recounting with disgust how all the employees in the Beirut shops were women. He was wondering where were the men in Beirut, and what was the world coming to when women had to work. His sisters and mother were stunned. He was telling a story of a female television producer he was working with, and the humiliation she had to endure, and how he saved her from shaming herself in front of the men who were taking advantage of her. His sister Fatmeh, who ran a part-time hair styling business at her home, declared that the people of Beirut had no shame. I think the young Khadijeh was ready to faint.

Their younger brother who was doing his obligatory military service was barely back home and recovering from the last mission his unit was on. They were at a village in the Baalbek area because of an honor killing that took place. A young woman and a man eloped. The bride's male cousins ran over her mother, their aunt, with their car. The mother died. They blamed the mother's bad upbringing of the young woman, for the shame she brought onto the family. Khadijeh, her sisters, and mother agreed that a woman who elopes and shames her family deserves to be killed. Everybody stated in a matter of fact way that the eloping couple would be soon captured and killed by the woman's family.

Before her marriage to Khaled, the young Khadijeh wore the traditional head to toe, Islamic dress. Once married, he ordered her not to dress so conservatively. She felt guilty about not covering her body, but Khaled was a dancer in the Caracalla Troupe, worked in Beirut, and traveled the world with the troupe. Dress was a complex issue for Khadijeh because, on one hand she was reluctant to cover her body because she knew that pretty women surrounded Khaled, and on the other hand her upbringing demanded the traditional clothing. She did not want to risk a divorce, or worse Khaled taking another wife. To add to her insecure position, Khadijeh was two years older than Khaled and had been offered in place of her younger sister, whom Khaled originally wanted to marry.

Even when wearing western style clothes with uncovered head, the women of Baalbek still conformed to the social system. Lara, Mohammad's sister, was a fifth grade drop out, stayed home and did the housework and helped raise her younger sister. She watched television all day long, when electricity was available; it was her only pastime.

Yet she, like many, had her dreams. Lara was not covered and wanted to open her hair styling shop, but her family forbade her.

The dancing elders were at one of the weddings I attended. They danced their *Arja dabke* and were all the leaders of the line, followed by a few men. Next they danced a *dabke* called *Zaino* (notation, Appendix-page 49), another traditional all male *dabke* named after a man called Zain. Again the elders were leading with a few men following and then a woman from Baalbek, in her mid to late twenties and uncovered joined the *dabke* line. She stayed towards the end of the line and did not do any of the individualized stylizations of the *dabke*, but she was dancing boldly, proud and erect in a male only *dabke*. I had not yet interviewed the old men, but I was surprised and scared for the woman. My Baalbek friends assured me that there was no problem. After I interviewed the old men and they stressed that those *dabkes* were a men only dance, and women were incapable of dancing it, I was amazed at the courage of that woman. I did not think she was rebelling, but joining in that dance was a sign of the women joining in the celebration itself, with the permission of the men. I did not dare ask the old men about that incident, but I could guess their reaction, offense, insult, and perhaps curiosity.

CHAPTER IV

The Weddings

The people of Baalbek held their weddings between April and September. I was there in July and August; therefore I got to go to several weddings. Currently, weddings are the social arena where one is most likely to encounter dance.

The first wedding I went to was that of the neighbors of the young Khadijeh. It was my first night sleeping at her house. Khadijeh made it clear that if she was going to the wedding because her husband asked her to help me. A woman would not go out to a party without the company of her husband. She left her baby daughter with her mother, and Fatmeh, Khadijeh, the boys and I walked between the houses.

We reached the house and loud music was coming from inside. As we entered through the back door into the kitchen, a group of women were squatting and chopping parsley on a huge rectangular board. I wanted to videotape them and suddenly they screamed and shouted. That was my first major mistake. These women were *Mhajabeen*, which literarily means eclipsed or blocked. There bodied were covered from head to toe except for their faces, according to Islamic law. Although they were covered as far as I was concerned, their sleeves were rolled up which showed their forearms. They only agreed to be taped if their faces were not included.

We went to the backyard and it was already full of people. The cement backyard was half the size of a tennis court. Resin chairs were lined in two to three rows around the walls of the backyard, leaving a dancing space. There were two armchairs for the

bride and groom, on a low rising amid abundant flowers. The bride and groom were not there yet, but a DJ was playing Arabic music, the latest in contemporary pop. The music was quick, quivery and pulsating. The melody was snaking into people's ears and people were dancing. The crowd consisted of all age groups and both sexes. There were women covered from head to toe and others in jeans. What I found particularly interesting was that some young girls were wearing head covers and long sleeve shirts with form fitting pants and platform shoes. Some of them had full make-up. I asked who everyone was; they were relatives, friends and neighbors. Everybody was invited, and even if people were not invited they could just walk in. They all knew each other. I was the outsider.

Men danced with men; women danced with women; and women and men danced together. It was all accepted. When women belly danced, they shook their hips side-to-side, in tiny quick isolations. They stood straight, erect, arms stretched out, bent at the elbows, wrists circling. They took small steps right and left, front and back. The men joined in as well. They danced with more energy, bigger steps, but less hip movement. The men reminded me of peacocks. Some of the women were all covered up yet they belly danced. I asked if it was okay for a man to invite a woman to dance. The answer was that there is no problem if the man is a relative or a friend of the family. A woman came in dressed up as a Bedouin, a long, black velvet dress, embroidered with golden threads. It was impossible to identify her. Her head and face were covered with a flowered scarf. Only her eyes showed. She was also pregnant. She took over the dance floor and danced holding an umbrella as a prop. She was an good dancer. She mixed belly dancing with some jumping and stomping steps of the *dabke*. She seemed more comfortable dancing with a concealed identity. She covered space and wanted to be

noticed. I asked who she was and they said she could be a friend of the family disguised as a Bedouin to entertain the guests. She left as suddenly as she came in.

I was eager to dance, but Fatmeh did not want to because she thought it was inappropriate for her. She was an unmarried girl with no male kin escort; and Khadijeh was already feeling uncomfortable about going out of the house while her husband was in Beirut. Mohammad, his brother Mahmoud and their friend Nidal were there. Nidal invited me to dance. I danced with him for a short time but felt too self-conscious. I also did not want to offend anybody so I decided to sit down. Later the *dabke* started. Everybody joined in but it was the men's showcase. They danced the basic *dabke* step that I know, the *Chmalieh*, a six beat step (notation, Appendix-page 49). It starts with a small shuffling step with the left foot-crossing front, followed by a step side with the right foot. These steps are repeated, followed by a small low kick with the left foot that ends with a stomp with the same foot. People hold hands, shoulder to shoulder. But each man and each group showed off their own individual skills and styles. There were several groups and lines that developed into open circles, each doing their own variations within this basic six count step structure. They followed the leader of the group and immediately understood his variation. Sometimes each man did his own steps but even when they did, individuality was the issue. The three men, Mohammad, Mahmoud, and Nidal showed off for my camera and me. They jumped together and each in their own style, high in the air and landed in squats on the floor but still holding hands and keeping the rhythm.

The bride and the groom came in. They were in their apartment, which was in the second story of the house we were in, the groom's parents' house. The marriage contract

had already taken place, probably months before. That day was the consummation of the marriage. It was the day the groom and his entourage, meaning his family and relatives. went to the bride's parents' house and brought her to her new home with her husband or husband's family. It is called 'the day the bride moves.' The bride looked like any Western bride, white dress and a veil.

At first, I did not pay attention to whether the wedding was Sunni or Shiite. I wondered whether mixed marriages were even permitted. I only learned later that the young Khadijeh herself is Shiite, (Khaled is Sunni), meaning that marriages could be mixed. One day the older Khadijeh, a Sunni, declared that she would rather her daughters become old maids than marry a Shiite. I did not dare ask further but I assumed that she would not want her daughters-in law to be Shiite either. However, the children follow the father's religion so it might have been easier for a male child to marry a Shiite. I learned a lot about the marriage sequence, and the following description holds true for both the Sunni and Shiite people of Baalbek.

Mohammad was a *derbake* player in a band, and I accompanied the band to a few weddings. The sequence of the marriage arrangement varied according to the agreement between the bride and the groom. There was always the engagement and the marriage contract. The engagement would be when the groom and his male kin. father and perhaps uncle. go to the bride elect's house and ask for her hand in marriage. If the bride's family approves, they will set a date to exchange rings; they would say *Al Fatiha*, or the opening verses from the *Quran* the Moslem Holy Book, in blessing. The marriage contract *Katb el Kitab*, that legally marries the couple. would be drawn by a Moslem Clergy with the agreement between the father of the bride and the father of the groom and

the groom, deciding the dowry that the groom should give the bride. Also set is the alimony money that she should get from him in case he decided to divorce her. If the bride should be the one asking for a divorce, she would lose her right to alimony.

The marriage contract would not necessitate the consummation of the marriage. That would be decided by the readiness of the groom to move his bride to his house. The groom was responsible for all expenses incurred, including the bride's dress and hairdresser. The consummation of the marriage takes place after a wedding party with the bride and groom and their friends and families, such as the one I attended with the young Khadijeh. In place of a wedding party, a groom may have a henna night where henna is used to decorate the groom and bride, with the bride only permitted to attend a part. I got to be present at two henna nights. The day after the henna night, a *Mouled,* a men-only gathering, would be held, where a Moslem clergyman recites verses from the *Quran*. After the *Mouled*, the groom and his family would go to the bride's house to bring her to her married home.

Except for the religious ceremonies like the marriage contract drawing, *Katb el Kitab*, and the *Mouled* the people of Baalbek danced. I did not have any contact with the Christians of Baalbek but my Moslem contacts said that there was no difference between the dancing at the Christian celebrations and the Moslems. As an aside, I found this interesting because the Moslems considered the Christians more westernized. The Christian women did not cover up and Mohammad said that he would recognize a Christian woman from her clothing, her skirt would be shorter than a Moslem's and she might be wearing a sleeveless or low cut shirt. At a wedding the dancing would be the same, only the clothing would differ.

The place and content of the celebration depended on the groom's financial situation. Still there would be dancing; belly dancing and the *dabke*. One particular henna night that I attended with Mohammad and the band, was for a Shiite family. The family was relatively well off. The celebration was at the groom's parents' house and they hired the band, three singers, and a professional *dabke* troupe.

The band started playing. Mohammad was on the *derbake or darbouka*, which is the pear shaped drum that is stuck by hand. Ali was on the tambourine and Savio on the electric keyboard. The music was percussive, fast and sassy. It started suddenly without the usual warning of instruments being tuned or tested as in an orchestra, immediately in a fast pace.

An old woman with a face wrinkled like an overripe fig, stepped into the dancing area, without a warning like the music itself. A white cloth concealed her hair and neck and circled her gentle smiling face. She had a long, flowered dress that hid the form of her body. She was small but she stood straight, chest open, head high. She danced with a small delicate shuffling of her feet. She stretched her arms to the side, with her elbows bent and circled her wrists with the music. She did not move her hips or her shoulders as is usually done in belly dancing, but her body responded to the seduction of the music, confident and rhythmic. She wanted everybody to see her. She was traveling in little circles and lines, turning all directions to face the guests who were sitting around the square dance space. The arrangement of the space was typical of the area, functional and with no decoration. The resin chairs, usually red or white, were arranged in the cemented outdoor yard in rows around the dance space. No one dared sit in the best front row

seats. Everyone understood they were reserved for the older men of the family. They wore the traditional dress, long flowing robe and the white headdress described before.

Another old woman joined her. She was younger but heavier. She also had a white cloth on her head and wore the same type of long, loose, form- hiding dress. She had a gentle smile too, but lacked the energy of the older woman and was more sunken into her body. She moved with the same small shuffle of her feet, and with outstretched arms, but she lacked the grace and the showmanship of the older woman. The older woman was the grandmother of the groom and the other one was his paternal aunt. They were the matriarchs of the family. Their children were grown and they had done their duties. In the Middle East, old people are respected and taken care of by their children and grandchildren. The matriarchs were opening the celebration of their son's wedding, the celebration of the most important event in the life of a man. In Islam, marriage, and having children only through marriage, is sacred duty. When I was young I used to hear people around me saying that marriage was "half the religion."

The band played non-stop, one song after another, all percussive, energetic, appropriate for belly dancing. The singers took turns singing. They sang praises of the groom and his father. The bride was never mentioned, even after she arrived at the party. More guests were arriving and other women started joining in the belly dancing. There were no alcoholic drinks served, only water and bitter coffee flavored with cardamom, because drinking alcohol is forbidden in Islam. The people did not need the alcohol to uplift their spirits and dance. They walked to the dancing area whenever they pleased and started dancing. The cousin of the groom, in her forties and unmarried, whom I was

introduced to at the beginning of the henna night, disappeared for a while. She appeared later, reeking of liquor, and danced the night away.

The younger women used their hips and shoulders. Some shook their hips, isolating them side-to-side, so quickly it was as if they had an earthquake going through their bodies. A few shook their shoulders front and back with the same energy as that of their hips. All stretched their arms to the side and upward in a U-shape. They did not move their arms in the snaky manner I have noticed in belly dancing especially in the city. The hands were soft as their wrists circled. The people of this valley village, noted for its harsh climate and tribal rules, belly danced in a more forceful manner than the city belly dancing I was used to; it lacked the snaky, sexy quality of the city women.

Village women were not supposed to be sexy in public. Most of them started covering up their heads and bodies at the age of nine. They could be married by the age of fourteen. The woman I was staying with would not wear anything showing her ankles in front of any man other than her husband. But when her husband came home she would have make-up on, and she even bought a revealing negligee to wear for him. At the henna night, I was the only woman whose ankles were showing. I was so self conscious that I sat in the third row to have the front chairs as cover. However, the women of the village danced, even when they wore head covers. They danced to celebrate their community and their families. They danced to celebrate their allegiance to their tribal family. They danced with the permission of their male kin and sometimes only when the male kin were present in a large gathering. They celebrated their normally concealed bodies but still made sure they guarded their sexuality, only to be celebrated with their

husbands. They were proud of their culture and stuck to its rules with no questions asked.

Most of the women had televisions in their homes and were bombarded with images and movies of female sexuality and female emancipation. The images and the movies were of Lebanese and Arabic people. There were also Mexican soap operas, dubbed to Arabic. They thought of those in the movies as the others who did not know any better. Their culture was the best in the world. It was being challenged and upset. Some of the very young girls dancing had their heads covered but wore tight, form-fitting pants and platform shoes. It was not in rebellion, but a sign of modern days, and with the permission of the men. Still they were dancing the same belly dance as the other women, a dance devoid of open sexuality.

Some of the groom's family went to the bride's parents house to bring her and her family to the party. The bride arrived and was no more than eighteen. She was dressed in a golden ball gown. They sat her down next to the groom in the two armchairs set for them. The bride and groom danced for a while and sat back. The older women and a man brought two huge brass trays decorated with flowers and candles. They walked in ceremoniously singing their traditional songs and ululating. I was hoping it would be food because I was starving but it turned out to be the henna trays, one for the groom and one for the bride. The last singer was singing too. It was very exciting. They applied the henna to the pinkies of the groom and bride and wrapped them with cloth. Then anybody who wanted got henna too. I asked the significance of that and everybody shrugged and said it is a tradition. The henna would last six months, a sign of

permanence and ties. After the henna was done the bride and her party left and the festivities stopped as fast as they started.

I went to another wedding with Mohammad and the band. I was seated in the back of the car and she sat next to me. Ali was in the front seat. I felt more at ease sitting in the back because it suited the culture of Baalbek. When I was young, in Beirut, I was short and skinny and I was always squeezed in the car wherever there was a tiny spot left at the end. The elders got priority. When my paternal grandmother was with us, she would sit in the front and my mom in the back. It used to irritate me, but now I do the same thing when my mother in law rides with us in the car. When my husband and I would go out with other couples, sometimes the men sat in the front and the women in the back but it depended on who the couple was.

This wedding was supposed to be special. The people were rich from drug and arms trafficking, and it was going to be in a restaurant! I was also more relaxed than usual because I felt I had on the proper attire. In the middle of the July heat, my skirt reached my ankles and my shirt was long sleeved and high collared.

The restaurant was a ten-minute drive from Mohammad's house. The attendant at the door asked the men to leave their weapons in the car. I thought that was the funniest thing on earth because he asked it in a matter of fact way as if he was asking them to leave any snacks they had in the car. None of the men had any weapons.

The restaurant hall resembled a big enclosed patio with resin chairs and tables arranged in a U-shape around a dance space and across from the bride and groom's special seating area. Some women were still adding artificial plants and flowers to the decorations there.

Nada, Mohammad's cousin, and I sat at a table closest to the band. The band set up their instruments and started playing immediately. I knew most of the music they played and Savio, the bandleader or founder, was a good keyboard player. His mother was proud of him. She told me he learned how to play by himself. The music was a mixture of traditional Arabic songs and new Arabic pop music. I liked them all.

If we were in a Beirut nightclub or even in a club in the States I would have been the first to dance. They were the songs that would fit the social belly dancing that I like to do. I was brought up with that type of music in the house. My dad loved music and the first thing he would do in the morning was turn on his radio. My dad only liked the belly dancing type of songs. He disdained the other songs that would fit the folk line dancing, or *dabke*. "Those songs were for the peasants only," he would say. We were city folks.

Nada did not show any inkling that she was going to dance. Other women guests started dancing. Some were covered up according to the Islamic tradition; others had their hair covered. They all danced with style and some had amazing hip and shoulder movements. They were not embarrassed to be dancing. I was thinking about the contrast between the way women were mostly hidden from public life in general, as opposed to the social permission to exhibit themselves when dancing. But there was a difference between the way these women belly danced and the dance of the women of the city. The women of the city had the element of seduction in their dancing. These women seemed to dance just to dance, socialize and celebrate. I did not feel there was any sexuality in there dancing. If I were dancing I would be dancing to dance but I also would be celebrating my sexuality especially in belly dancing.

The men joined the women in the belly dancing. These men had no problem getting up and belly dancing, while most men I know in the States or the city men would hesitate and would rather admire the women dancing. The men did not shake their hips as much as the women but they moved their shoulders with machine gun rapidity. There was one man who used the dance space as if it were his own private stage. He shimmied his shoulders and walked like a runway model across the space. He did not care if people were watching him. He was dancing for himself.

The *dabke* music started and people started forming their lines. The men to stayed with the men and the women with the women. They all danced the *Chmalieh dabke*. It was the easiest and most popular *dabke* in Lebanon and some areas of the Middle East. They started slowly with a basic six counts step, as described above. Slowly each sub-group would speed up a little. All of a sudden a group, usually the men, would go into sophisticated jumps, and squats. The leader would decide what to do. Each person in the group would keep his style, his own syncopation, and jumps but they all kept to the rhythm.

The dancers exuded strength and pride. There was no softness in their movements. Even the women's movements were strong. I was trained in stage folk dance and the girls had to have softness and femininity in their movements. These girls did not squat and leap like the men, but they had no softness about them. It seemed as if they were trying to be smaller and non-competitive or threatening to the men but not weak.

Sometimes when all the dancers were doing these big fast movements I would feel scared. I knew that these people came from a village whose people are notorious for their brutality, and the dance was so forceful and aggressive.

At one point the singer decided to sing praises of the groom's father and the president of Lebanon. One man took out his gun, pointed it out of the window and fired shots in their honor. The owner of the restaurant pulled the plug on the band in protest. Some men came to the man with the gun and were arguing with him. More men joined in and then all of a sudden they went outside. The music resumed. Slowly but surely most of the men went outside. The man who fired the shots was the cousin of the groom. The other cousins got mad at him because he ruined the wedding. The owner of the restaurant did not want any weapons so there would not be trouble with the Syrians who were near by. The firing cousin was offended, and outside altercations were going on. The women were sitting inside like nothing was happening, but were not dancing. Another singer was introduced and interrupted so the bride and groom would cut the cake. The bride and groom cut the cake with a sword. Slowly the men came in but the party was over. The singer was offended and did not want to sing. People ate the cake and left. The band and I had dinner in the other part of the restaurant, paid by the groom's family who had already left. The band members drank beer with their dinner. I asked what happened, and it turned out that the shooting cousin was finally convinced to leave, but he vowed revenge in the morning. I never knew what happened the next day.

Conclusion

I went to Baalbek with more than my clothes and my cameras. I was carrying a load of preconceived ideas about the town and its people. I also had my own perspective of life.

The first thing that struck me about the people was their gentleness and generosity. Mohammad, my escort turned friend, took me all ever town to visit with families he knew. I was welcomed in the houses of people that I had never met before. I was offered food and shelter. I do not know if I would have received the same treatment if Mohammad did not accompany me, and I do not have an answer to that.

The people I visited told the same story; a life of poverty, unemployment, government neglect, and Syrian abuses. Regardless of the time of the day or night, men were sitting in the homes I visited, watching television, if the electricity was available, drinking coffee and chatting with whoever were visiting them. The men were jobless. They were mostly construction workers, painters, tile installers, car mechanics, truck drivers, and farmers. The Syrian laborers did the same jobs for half the price. The men were the providers of the family. Women stayed at home, except for the few women who worked in their fields, or were widows supporting small children.

When opium was the crop of the area, there was a lot of money rolling in people's pockets. There was a boom in construction and the area was flourishing. Opium was banned and the government sent the army to destroy the fields of poppy. There were still

some areas that illegally grow opium poppies. When I was there the army raided a village in the mountains in the Baalbek area, notorious for drugs and arms smuggling. The young Khadijeh's brother was serving his military service in the army unit. He told us the story of his ordeal. He was hiding in a goat shed when the officer in charge of the unit knocked on a house's door looking for a suspect. The wife of the suspect asked the officer to leave, threatening to shoot him. Because she was a woman, the officer did not take her seriously and insisted on questioning her. She pushed the officer, breaking his leg and a deluge of bullets and grenades fell on the army unit from the village. The unit had to retreat. The Syrians supported these villages that still took the risk to grow opium illegally.

The farmers lacking the support of the Syrians grew corn, tomatoes, cucumbers, watermelon, eggplant and other vegetables. Some grew tobacco, a government subsidized crop. However, the water supply was scarce and the government did not provide loans for buying pesticides and fertilizers. The cost of growing and processing the produce was higher than its price. Many of the farmers destroyed their crops. I visited field where the vegetables were dying from thirst and disease. Some farmers used sewer water for irrigation. The Syrian products were cheaper than the Lebanese. The population tried to boycott the Syrian products but the lack of income forced them to buy them. The irony of the situation is that the strategic location, weather, and mostly rich water supply were the reasons why the Romans built Baalbek.

Blackouts were the *plat du jour*. They were common in Lebanon, particularly during the Civil War. After the war ended, the government fixed the damaged power plants, but that June, Israel raided several power plants and one of them was in Baalbek.

Out of twenty homes I visited, one had a telephone line. The roads had holes in them, some big enough for a car to fall into.

Most of the people I met were dropouts, many from elementary school, but even the few who had reached higher education were jobless. The public schools were crowded and not at the level of the expensive private schools.

Therefore what struck me about the population of Baalbek was their poverty and lack of a light at the end of the tunnel. Still, they were stubborn. They got engaged, sometimes for five years, hoping that the man would slowly build the house. They got married and celebrated the continuation of life. They danced and did so with vigor. For the men, it was their way of asserting their precious 'manliness.' They were strong, brave, and generous in their dancing. They were the leaders and the ones in control. They were the rulers of their bodies' movements, space, and energy. They were the 'manly men,' the 'real men,' they were not able to be in real life. They were resilient. The women were there to celebrate too. They celebrated the continuation of life and their existence in it. The women were confined to their homes and many times sealed in their clothes. They were the private property of men- the fathers, the brothers, and the sons - cooks, maids, and uteri. The women had no opinions and if they did, the last word would still belong to the men. The women held the honor of the men between their legs, and could be killed for losing it. The morning after the consummation of the marriage, a bride had to give her mother-in-law the *Alemeh* or the mark, a piece of tissue with blood on it, a confirmation of the bride's virginity.

The men could divorce the woman, paying her alimony and sending her back to her parent's house. She would lose everything else, including her children. They were

the man's children. If she was the one asking for the divorce, she would have to forsake her alimony. There was also the nightmare of every woman, a husband taking another wife. Polygamy is legal in Islam, up to four wives at a time, provided that all the wives and the children are treated equally by the man. I only encountered a few of such cases, one was a man with two wives, and each had eleven children.

The women dance a low-key version of the men's *dabke* style. The men showcased themselves. The women showed their strength in fulfilling their duties as wives, mothers, and daughters, but they were the followers of the men. Even when they belly danced, their dance was devoid of eroticism. Therefore they danced even when they were covered from head to toe. They were not celebrating their sexuality, but their humanity, obedience and will power to obey and conform.

'Modernization' and 'westernization' were apparent in the younger women's appearance. They wore western style clothes-suits, pants, jeans-as opposed to the long, flowing dresses worn by old women. Even when their heads were covered, they wore the latest style flared bottoms pants, with platform shoes. They also wore make-up. Still, the men had to approve how the women dressed. Mahmoud, Mohammad's younger brother, was very strict and conservative. He ordered Lara, his nineteen year old sister to change her clothes many times because he disapproved of them. He wanted his mother and sister to cover-up according to Islamic laws, but his mother stopped him, declaring that her husband, their father was still alive and hence the ultimate authority.

In the old days, celebrations were gender segregated. Nowadays the majority were gender mixed. The male only *dabkes*, like the ones danced by the old men, were absent from celebrations. The only *dabke* that was danced in celebrations was the

Chmalieh, the *dabke* danced by everybody. The men's *dabkes* were danced when the old men were around, or in a stylized stage version by the professional groups that emerged from Baalbek. For some men, like the old men, this was the curse of western culture on the world and the loss of the true meaning of *dabke*, as the platform for 'manly men.' One appalled dabke advocate saw the stage versions of the men's dances as a showcase for homosexuals. I saw it as a loss of cultural heritage, and a sign of integration of women in mainstream society. The stage versions I saw were not true to the spirit of the men's dances. The concept of the 'real men,' manly men,' 'man of men' was alive and well in the surviving dances.

Did the demise of the male dances into a stage relic signify a change in the role of women? I do not think so. First of all the women were happy in the niche that they considered God created for them. Their strength was in their willful act of obedience, despite their exposure to the outside world through television. They were content to know their destiny. Second, the extinction of the male only dances did not come about through an act of rebellion by the women. The men gave the women permission to join them in the celebrations.

The lesson I learned from my experience in Baalbek was to leave my cultural baggage at home. The women were not oppressed and they did not need someone to save them. There was equilibrium and satisfaction in that society. Every person knew his or her job in life and their place in society. Would I live there? No, but I would definitely visit, after all I have friends and family in Baalbek.

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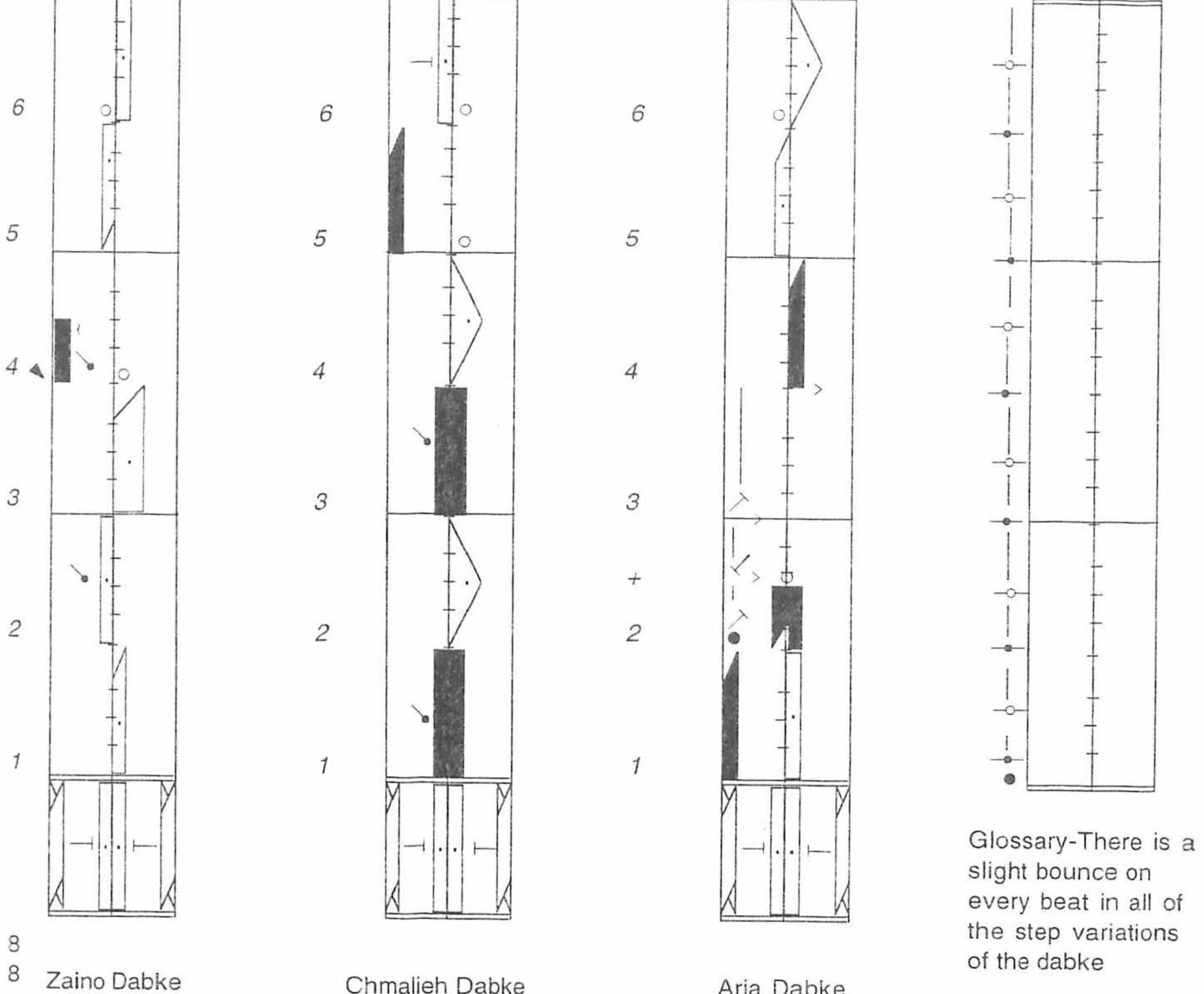

Glossary-There is a slight bounce on every beat in all of the step variations of the dabke