

## THE ODYSSEY OF DAHLIA OBADIA: MOROCCO, ISRAEL, CANADA

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Dahlia Obadia is a dancer of Middle Eastern traditional music. She is a particularly interesting person to study because of the numerous insider/outsider dichotomies she has faced. This paper will describe Dahlia and explore the challenges she has dealt with as she searched for her identity through the dance.<sup>1</sup>

Dahlia Obadia was born January 1, 1943 in Marrakesh, Morocco into the Moroccan Jewish Corcos family. The name Corcos is of Spanish origin.<sup>2</sup> Dahlia was named Zohra after her grandmother, but she was called Zarie throughout her childhood.<sup>3</sup> She lived with her family in her maternal uncle's villa (he owned the whole street and was a very wealthy man), and Dahlia remembers it as being a beautiful Arabic house. When she was two, Dahlia moved with her family to Casablanca, as her uncle had died and her father needed to look for work. There would eventually be ten children, seven girls and three boys, of which Dahlia is the fifth.

In the more cosmopolitan Casablanca, Zarie Corcos grew up in a French culture and attended a French school run by the Alliance israélite universelle,<sup>4</sup> but never felt comfortable with the "typical" French girl image, as it was too coquettish for her. She disliked the situation of the girl in a Middle Eastern family, in which she was expected to learn and perform household duties in preparation for a role as servant to a husband and family. While the Corcos family had limited contact with Arabic Moroccan culture, it had a Muslim Moroccan maid named Zohra (who covered her face when she went outside) and who taught the Corcos girls to dance. Zarie never participated actively in these sessions, but watched and learned and then practised in private in her room with the door locked. Dahlia remembers that at parties her little sister Esther (whom she called a piquante person with bright olive-like eyes) was always called upon to dance on the tables. Dahlia herself was too shy, and a growth spurt about the age of ten made her feel too ungainly to dance well. While she had little contact with Arabic culture and music, Dahlia remembers that whenever a bar mitzvah for one of her brothers occurred, Arabic music was "fed to me whether I liked it or not."

In 1957, when she was fourteen, Zarie Corcos met her future husband, Charles Obadia (born September 22, 1941—"for me, he was the one"). In 1961, having been caught up in the Zionist movement, Zarie emigrated to Israel with a group of fifty youths, which included Charles. Her mother opposed her leaving for Israel without the rest of the family (her father had died in 1959) and Zarie in fact left Morocco without her family's consent. The group went first to a farm in Belgium, where they trained for kibbutz life by helping to renovate an old house. For the first time, Zarie saw dahlias, which she greatly admired for their wild look and their colours. The farmers began to call her Dahlia and she liked the name enough to keep it, learning only later that it was, in fact, an Egyptian name. During this time, Dahlia's brother even came from Morocco to try to take her back home, but she refused to return.

Upon arrival in Israel, the group was assigned to a kibbutz near Gaza, and, after a few weeks of difficult farm labour, Dahlia and some of the others who were also products of an urban, sophisticated culture unused to that kind of living and labour conditions, moved to Haifa. There she learned Hebrew and began to integrate into

the new Israeli culture, while still moving in a group that retained its contacts to French culture. She had no real contact with Arabic culture.

By this time Dahlia's entire family had emigrated to Israel, and on September 25, 1962, she and Charles were married. Sometime before the marriage, Charles had found Dahlia dancing in her room, which she had forgotten to lock. He said, "I didn't know you knew how to dance," and she replied, "I don't," and stopped dancing for the next eleven years, until she was twenty-nine. She listened to French records (Piaf, Aznavour) and Hebrew Israeli songs on the radio. The only Arabic music she heard was at weddings, which aroused feelings of nostalgia in her which she could not admit to herself were really there.

On May 1, 1963, her first child, Michael, was born, and on September 19, 1965, her twins, Betty and Solomon, arrived. It was a difficult time for Dahlia; understandably, taking full care of three small children left her exhausted. On October 21, 1967, Dahlia and her family emigrated to Canada, where her fourth child, Ronnie, was born September 14, 1968.

They chose Canada because it was a big nation with many different kinds of people. A lesser factor in their emigration from Israel was the perceived discrimination against Sephardic Jews by the dominant Western Jewish community; Dahlia said members of the Sephardic community were called "black Jews."<sup>5</sup> She made a visit to Israel in 1970 but then did not return again until 1980, during which time many changes took place in her life.

Even after emigrating to Canada, Dahlia was not able to break with traditional ideas linking public dancing with immorality, and repressed any desire she had to learn more and to dance publicly. By 1972, however, Dahlia had become very depressed. Perhaps to counter this depression, she began to study the dance, first with Anna Maria Fuentes at the YMCA, and then with Ibrahim Farrah of New York and Laila Hakim of Montreal.

Fuentes had no training in Arabic dance, but according to Dahlia, had a real feel for it. She included Dahlia in a show after only ten weeks of lessons, and Dahlia was impressed that Fuentes was not afraid to create her own steps.

Ibrahim Farrah, the most widely known teacher of Middle Eastern dance in North America, felt Dahlia was talented but lacked discipline. She was not the best in his class as she had been in other classes, and she ended many sessions in tears. He told Dahlia that the best dancers are the ones who are the most uncoordinated, the "klutzes" of the class.

Laila Hakim offered Dahlia the benefit of having danced with the Egyptian national dance troupe for several years. Since Farrah also used much of the Egyptian style, it is no wonder that Dahlia grew to dance mostly, and feel most comfortable with, that style of dance.

Dancing helped Dahlia immensely. She says "Until I started the dance ... I felt like I didn't exist." From the age of eighteen to twenty-nine she did not dance at all, and says she did not care at all. After that it took her ten years, she says, to understand how to use the body as a tool in order to express the soul. Her goal is to show in her dancing "the art of the dance." During this time, she continued to study, on and off, with Farrah and Hakim, but now she is her own teacher. Dahlia feels that dancing in festivals helps a lot in her drive to develop respect to the art of Middle Eastern dance. She feels happy with her progress in helping to dispel the notion of the dancer as a scantily clad nightclub entertainer, although she recognizes that there is still much work to do. One anecdote will illustrate this point well. After a performance at the Flying Cloud Folk Club of Toronto in September of 1990, a man came up to

Dahlia, who was with her husband, and asked her why she did not take off more clothes. She replied “Am I supposed to?” and was very annoyed, but not as annoyed as she would have been years ago. The man went away without replying.

In North Africa, as in the Middle East, matters of religion are foremost, and can cause considerable difficulties for individuals and groups who are perceived as threats to established religious order. One of the first problems Dahlia faced was being a member of a religious minority, the Jews, in a Muslim country, Morocco. Her memories are not unlike those of members of other minority groups, in that she felt that she was an outsider. Although the Jewish community was second only to Muslims (the Christian community was mainly limited to the European Catholics) the creation of the state of Israel in 1948 caused what had been a fine relationship between Arabs and Jews, with a lot of communication and respect (these are Dahlia’s words) to deteriorate. She remembers that by 1955, at a time of violent political upheaval that saw the end of the French and Spanish Protectorates and the creation of an independent Moroccan state in the spring of 1956, Jews began to be attacked, and the community suffered. She always had to be home by six in the evening, because of family fears that partisans of the Arab nationalist party (the Independence, Party) who opposed the government (which protected the Jews) would attack her.<sup>6</sup> Presently, only one of Dahlia’s relatives remains in Morocco, her bachelor uncle-in-law; the rest of the family is in Israel or Canada.

In Israel, where she belonged to the dominant religious group, Dahlia felt far more freedom than she had felt in Morocco. Because the society was for the most part secular and European, she did not feel discriminated against because she was a woman. Dahlia says it was liberating to be in Israel, but she was too busy with children to dance. Yet she agrees that in the highly patriarchal religion of Orthodox Judaism, there are many strictures against women. Her own sister, Esther, the “piquante” one mentioned earlier, is now an orthodox religious woman who would never dance in public. This parallels the situation in the rest of Middle Eastern society, where religious Muslim and Christian women will only dance in private for their husbands or in the company of other women. More secular women will dance at mixed parties, but never in a public venue.

Dahlia stated that “religion means I cannot dance ... you cover your head, cover legs, arms, everything, sit separately in synagogue ...” However, she has taught a dance class for religious women in Israel, for, as with other sectors in this conservative Middle Eastern society, women have a great deal of freedom within the “private sphere.” Dahlia is reluctant to lay blame on anyone or any system for the difficulties she faces in promoting Middle Eastern dance, other than to say that her background was, and is, her prison.

Middle Eastern society associates dancing in public by women with immorality. The status of the music for the dance is the lowest for any music, as Lois al-Faruqi mentions. She describes it as “sensuous music associated with unacceptable contexts.” (al-Faruqi 8), and puts it squarely in the illegitimate (*haram*) category. She states, “Finally, the lowest level of the hierarchy is given to that sensuous music that is performed in association with condemned activities, or that is thought to incite to such prohibited practices as consumption of drugs and alcohol, lust, prostitution, etc.” (al-Faruqi 12). The opposition Dahlia faces from within her own family, many of whom are Orthodox, and who would have the same conservative attitudes as their Muslim and Christian neighbours, should be understood in this context. During her 1980 visit to Israel, family members were both shocked and pleased with her dancing. One of her brothers took her to a Christian Arab village, where she danced

in a folk (*baladi*) costume to the music of a group that played traditional music on traditional instruments, *ud*, *nay*, *darabukkah*, and *riqq* and with whom her brother sang some secular songs. Of that experience she states, “I felt my heart was there – it was so beautiful.” Her family was happy and said that her face was “talking the music.” They liked the fact that she wore a *baladi* costume and not a nightclub one. Her younger sister Ilana, an educator who had come along to find out how Dahlia danced, was pleased to see how the village women came up to Dahlia, calling her *hadawiyah* (Bedouin woman). Here, the performance context of Dahlia’s dancing falls within the legitimate (*halal*) category of musical activity tabulated by al-Faruqi (12), because it occurred at a wedding, in the category of Family/Celebration Music. It would thus have been easier for the family to accept her dance because it was separated from its nightclub venue.

On another occasion, one of Dahlia’s sisters organized a musical evening with a Greek bank for the express purpose of allowing the family to see Dahlia dance. Dahlia says these experiences helped her family to understand her desire to dance as a professional, because she was able to demonstrate to them both her love of the dance itself and her wish to project the beauty of the dance outside of its traditional associations. However, Dahlia’s view of dance as an art form that can be extracted from its social context is not a Middle Eastern concept, and to convince a conservative society to rid the dance of its traditional linkage with immoral behaviour is a difficult task. Now, for example, the same brother who in 1980 took her to dance in the Arab village would never take her back to the village, because he has become more Orthodox. Dahlia says, “No, never ... he won’t even go himself.” Dahlia did have some success at a Sephardic religious synagogue in Toronto, where she twice danced, in front of both men and women, in her *baladi* costume, because some men in that community said that the Biblical Hebrews danced to celebrate “and the way Dahlia dances brings out that feeling.”

Although her husband’s family is not as conservative as her own, she has faced problems with them. For example, one male family member saw her name advertised “*Dahlia Obadia*” and said he did not think she should use the Obadia name in public. He came to see her dance to make sure the family name was not “lowered” by her dancing in public. Dahlia’s (and her husband Chares’) reaction to this was “It’s my name and I use it and I’m proud of it and I add some pride to it by dancing, and that’s all.” Dahlia says now the rest of the family is proud of her, even her mother-in-law, with whom Dahlia has had some disagreements. Once, in the late seventies, Dahlia invited her mother-in-law to see her at the Cleopatra nightclub on Bloor Street in Toronto. Dahlia was performing there because she wanted to dance with a live orchestra, and get some experience. She said, “I don’t know why I allowed her to come ... she was not pleased at all.” However, her mother-in-law did approve of a concert Dahlia gave with the Traditional Arabic Music Ensemble at the Université de Montréal in 1985. For her husband’s family, it was not necessarily the dance itself that was bad, but the location where she performed. Dahlia is reluctant again to blame them, for their views reflect their community’s views of the dance as vulgar nightclub entertainment. She says, “They don’t know about what I’m doing.”

Dahlia has had to deal with her own feelings about her body as well. “I had to convince myself actually more than anybody else — it’s me — I had a hard time dealing with myself, and my costumes were in-between (*baladi* and nightclub) ... weird! harem pants and skirts.” Now she has reached the stage where she regards the exposed body as something beautiful, but, for herself, still feels most comfortable in a costume with “lots of fabric.”

Dahlia feels that Middle Eastern dance has a natural sensuousness and a sense of female strength that scares people, and readily agreed to my suggestion that this is why the religions of the area try to control it so much. She related the story of how she danced at a *henna* party<sup>7</sup> for a girlfriend's daughter. The friend told her she looked like she was in ecstasy, like after having sex.<sup>8</sup> For Dahlia, a spiritual climax is possible, by becoming one with the music; this concept is akin to the use of the dance in the Sufi tradition.

Another problem facing Dahlia is that of age. Being an older dancer does not really bother Dahlia much any more, as it used to, because she has found the right kind of audience for her, those who attend concerts and workshops, and who presumably do not demand the stereotyped image of the belly dancer as a young woman. She believes that people will readily accept a dancer up to the age of 35 for nightclubs and weddings, but feels that people look more for style of dance and costume than age. She has, for example, seen a dancer of about fifty years of age successfully entertain people in a nightclub setting; the audience liked her because of her performance and seemed unconcerned with her age.

A different and more difficult problem for Dahlia is Arab resentment, especially Palestinian resentment, of her as an Israeli citizen. She says that when she started dancing she thought "I am doing Arabic dance, I am Jewish, it will be my way to kind of contribute to peace between Arab and Jewish, my way. I had that in mind." Several years ago, she was very disappointed to learn that the Arab community was upset that she danced at the Jerusalem pavilion of the Caravan festival, the multicultural festival held every June in Toronto.<sup>9</sup> George Sawa, the leader of the Traditional Arabic Music Ensemble, told her she was creating a bad reputation for herself with the Arab community and asked her, "Why are you dancing for them?" She was shocked. "How can you ask me why I am dancing? Because this is my community. I am dancing for them ... they hired me and it's my community ... and if (the) Arab community hired me, I will dance also." It was confusing for her, "I couldn't believe. I thought by liking their dance they won't even mix [politics and art]."

In another incident, which took place several years ago, Dahlia learned from a colleague who had played at an Arab party that the dancer, a "white" Canadian, was not good at all. The colleague had asked someone in the audience if he liked the dancer, and the reply was "No, but at least she's not Jewish."

Dahlia's feelings about this have cooled over the years. She says it doesn't hurt her feelings but it annoys her, and she doesn't take it personally any more. "It's their problem ... if they are not open-minded enough to separate politics from art, that's really sad. So probably I realized then, O Dahlia, it's about time to wake up ... there is discrimination there."

More than one factor may be involved in the community's decisions over the hiring of Dahlia to perform for them. For example, in the spring of 1990, a young Jewish Israeli dancer in Toronto was hired to dance at a Lebanese Muslim engagement party. She was hired in preference to Dahlia for two reasons: her youth and the fact that Dahlia is a married woman. Dahlia's Jewishness and her status as an Israeli citizen were of no concern to the people hiring a dancer, but they clearly wanted a young dancer. The importance of a dancer's age to many people clearly conflicts with Dahlia's feelings on the subject, for here someone who was not as good a dancer as Dahlia, but who looked very similar and who was at least ten years younger, was hired in preference to her.<sup>10</sup>

I asked Dahlia if she was ever questioned by the Jewish community why she would dance for Arabs, and she said no. With particular reference to the Moroccan

Jewish community, she stated that it had hurt them to know she was dancing in nightclubs — it was not a problem of dancing in front of Arabs, because Jewish Arab musicians and dancers had always performed in front of Muslim and Christian Arab audiences — but “it’s like one of their daughters going to dance ... they want to make sure they give me the respect I deserve.”

Dahlia’s difficulties with public dancing are reflected in the Sephardic Jewish community’s sometime reluctance to hire her. Referring to the Iraqi community, she stated that they would prefer to hire a young nightclub dancer who wears a typical “belly dancer” costume. She does not really know the reason the community does not hire her, but suggests that the spiritual feeling of her dance is too emotionally intense for them at their parties. As well, it is too “close to home” to have a Jewish dancer. Dahlia also feels the community is reluctant to hire her as a dancer because of her status as a family person. I suggested that they think because she is a married woman with a family she simply cannot take the part of the dancer — the dancer is immoral and because Dahlia, by definition as a family person, is moral, she cannot dance. Dahlia replied “Exactly — what is she doing, doing this dance in public. They don’t understand that to bring the dance to a certain level you have to do it professionally.” Dahlia cited the example of an Iraqi Jewish woman, not a close friend, who wanted to have her at a party, but not as a hired dancer. Dahlia says, “I am talented, I am a good family person ... they would like to have me as a guest, and then I’ll get up and I’ll express my talent.” Also, people used to be at home and practice all the time. Since nobody in the community listens to Arabic music any more, how could anybody just get up at a party and dance well. She says “If I don’t dance professionally, how can I express myself in this dance.”

This last example illustrates that family and community acceptance of Dahlia’s dancing is not only hindered by the dilemma of the dance being regarded as immoral, but is directly linked to the amateur versus professional issue, a situation well documented for music, and applicable here to the dance. As Lois al-Faruqi pointed out in her article “The Status of Music in Muslim Nations: Evidence from the Arab World” (67):

... Arab-Islamic society accords little social prestige to the professional vocalist or instrumentalist ... on the whole the professional musician, unless he reaches national or international reputation, has some difficulty in proving himself in society. This is not true of the amateur musician who seems to float above the controversy over music and its respectability. It is probably for this reason that only a limited number of very skilful performers choose to give up all other occupations in order to be full-time performers. They seem to prefer to claim the more favorable social status of the amateur, a fact of musical life in other core Muslim nations

There is also the fact that people are people, and wish to take advantage of Dahlia’s talent without having to pay her, as possibly evidenced by the invitation of the Iraqi woman previously mentioned. This is corroborated in the musical world by the experience of both George Sawa and the lute player and co-founder of the Traditional Arabic Music Ensemble, Ebrahim Eleish, who have had people from the Arab community telephone with an invitation to a party and then say, “Oh, and by the way, bring your instrument.”

I asked Dahlia if the Moroccan Jewish community held the same view of her dancing. She said they know she performs, and a few hire her because they like the way she dances, and her costume, and they do not want a nightclub dancer — “they want a respected person to perform.” However, “most of them ... hire other belly dancers ... they want a typical nightclub belly dancer.” She has had some successes within the community. Some time ago, she was hired by a synagogue, and the rabbi

said he would sit in the audience but would leave if he found her dance offensive. He stayed for the whole performance and complimented her afterward. As well, she received a standing ovation for her dance at a New Year's party for the Moroccan Sephardic community, held at her own synagogue's hall, where other dancers have not been allowed to perform. But she still faces the problem of not being hired because she is moral – a family woman – and the fact is the community wants to be able to respect her “because they know my husband.”

Dahlia expressed the wish to be somewhere where she knows nobody so she could dance “without worrying what the community will say – [without worrying about what] people that know me will say.” She would like to be somewhere on her own for a few months, just to dance and feel freer than she is now – not that she wants to suddenly be wearing uncovered costumes, but just to feel free of the constraints of her community. For the most part, Dahlia is viewed as the complete “insider” by those *outside* Middle Eastern society: for them, she is simply a dancer from the Middle East, and they are able to appreciate her efforts to transform the dance into a socially acceptable art form. It is those from *inside* her culture, who, for religious, cultural, political or misogynist reasons, force her to be an “outsider,” so Dahlia's background remains her prison, and her odyssey continues.

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## NOTES

1. This paper is a revised version of a presentation given at the Annual Meeting of the Canadian Society for Musical Traditions/La Société canadienne pour les traditions musicales in Calgary, October 26-28, 1990. It is based on three taped interviews (August 22, September 17, and October 10, 1990), numerous phone calls, and years of association with Dahlia Obadia as a friend and a colleague in the Traditional Arabic Music Ensemble. Direct quotes are from the taped interviews.
2. The Corcos family (with genealogical records dating back to the expulsion of the Jews from Spain in 1492) was one of the most distinguished Jewish families in Morocco, producing many rabbis, important merchants, advisors to the sultans, and community leaders. For further information see Tolédano and Corcos.
3. *zahrâh* = flower, blossom; splendor, beauty, or *zuhrah* = brilliancy, light, brightness; beauty; Dahlia thinks the meaning her family used is the second.

4. For a discussion of the role of the Alliance in Moroccan Jewish life, see Laskier: 1983. For background reading on the Jewish communities of Morocco before and after the establishment of the Protectorate in 1912, see Deshen and Bensimon-Donath.
5. Because of the increased visibility of Sephardic Jews in daily Israeli life, and their importance as a political block, this discrimination has now all but disappeared.
6. This deterioration began long before the creation of the state of Israel, but whether it was the result of strictly anti-Jewish feeling is hard to determine. It is possible that, like the Maronites in Lebanon and the Copts in Egypt, the Jews of Morocco, especially the middle and upper-class ones, were favoured by the colonialist powers, in this case, the French in particular, and that the Jewish community was better equipped than the Muslim community to serve the colonialists' needs, and how they did so even before the establishment of the French and Spanish Protectorates in 1912, see Laskier, 312-15, and Burke, 36-37.
7. The *henna* party is a pre-wedding ritual for women in which the bride's hands are decorated with henna.
8. The friend also jokingly told Dahlia's husband Charles that he would have to put more money in the *ketubbah* (the contract Moroccan Jews draw up before the marriage to protect the woman after her marriage) because Dahlia's dancing in such a way presumably enhanced her worth to her husband! For more information on rituals in the Moroccan Jewish community, see Zafrani.
9. The issue of the Jerusalem pavilion was an emotionally charged one indeed. The Arab community had first requested the use of the name from the organizing committee of the festival, using the Arabic version, al-Quds, but they refused. The committee members had decided not to award the use of the name to any group, because the issue was too politically volatile, and this was, after all, a cultural festival. However, they reneged on their promise and allowed the Jewish community of Toronto to use the name, as they have every year since, and the Arab community in Toronto was outraged. Their opposition to Dahlia's dancing must be understood in the context of this anger over the behaviour of the Caravan organizing committee.
10. Personal communication from George Sawa, Oct. 25, 1990.

*Résumé: Dahlia Obadia interprète les danses de la tradition du moyen orient. Pendant sa carrière, elle a remarqué qu'il existe des grandes différences entre les interprétations de cette tradition vue de l'intérieur et de l'extérieur. L'auteur décrit la vie de Dahlia et explore les problèmes qu'elle a affrontés pendant sa quête de sa propre identité culturelle.*

#### WORTH NOTING

##### **Ann Lederman: Not a Mark in This World**

Aural Tradition Records, Vancouver Folk Festival, 3271 Main Street, Vancouver, B.C. V5V 3M6, 1991.

This is an enjoyable record. Ann has chosen material that is fresh: most of it has rarely been recorded. She presents a good cross-section of songs reflecting the Canadian mosaic—a greater variety than most other records, and arranged them with a wide variety of instruments. They include a dance ditty, a Gaelic song from Manitoba, a Ukrainian song about wife-beating, a French-Canadian lumbering song, a shipwreck ballad, an Auction Block medley, a song about the Battle of Batoche, an Indian lament, and a Dennis Lee poem.