The Reda Folkloric Dance Troupe and Egyptian State Support During the Nasser Period

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After the Egyptian Revolution of 1952, much of the cultural production coming out of Egypt took on an increasingly nationalist tone. In this context, Mahmoud Reda's recently founded Egyptian folkloric dance troupe, the Reda Troupe, achieved great success beginning in 1958, so much so that by the beginning of 1961, the Troupe had acquired government financial support. By distancing his choreographies from *raqs sharqi* (Eastern dance, or "belly dance"), the most common and contested form of Egyptian dance, Reda was able to obtain public and state support for his work. His innovative choreographies during the Nasser period (1954–1970) were the unique product of an aspiration to self-representation in cultural practice in the context of a newly independent Egypt. Reda's choreographies demonstrated both the effects of colonization and active resistance to it. His vision of Egyptian dance for the stage was welcomed by the Egyptian public. Subsequently, his style has also become popular with performers of Egyptian *raqs sharqi* globally. The early Reda Troupe's successful articulation of Egyptian dance, combined with staged folk dance's growing international popularity during the Cold War, prompted the Nasser Regime to overcome cultural unease with professional dance in order to utilize the Troupe in the service of nationalism. The 1952 Egyptian Revolution and the following rise of Nasserist ideology created an environment that allowed Egyptian folkloric dance to become respectable stage performance invested with new nationalist significance.

Historical Context: The Egyptian 1952 Revolution and Nasserism

Seeking an end to corruption and colonial complicity in the Egyptian government, Muhammad Naguib and Gamal Abdel Nasser headed the Free Officers in their overthrow of British-backed King Farouk in Egypt's July 1952 Revolution. By 1953, the Free Officers had taken control of government offices, declared Egypt a republic, and had completely abolished the constitutional monarchy. Nasser took formal control of the State as Prime Minister in 1954, and as President in 1956. He inaugurated a period of authoritarian, secular, leftist-leaning, anti-colonial government. One of his goals was the creation and presentation of a strong, colonizer-free nation (Daly 2008, 302; Kassem 2004, 50; Rosefsky Wickham 2005, 21). During these early years, Nasser's dedication to Arab socialism and non-alignment was very popular with large sections of the Egyptian public. His move to nationalize the Suez Canal in 1956 and his success in the wake of the Tripartite

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Aggression that followed cemented him as a popular hero (Gordon 2000, 175; Jankowski 2000, 143; Mellon 2002, 4–5; Prashad 2010, 41, 52). Like other newly independent nations of this period, Nasser's government took a specific interest in strengthening the image of a powerful nation-state, now free of Western control.

Nasser's Arab-socialist government sought a complete historical break with the previous constitutional monarchy and its ties to Western power. While various historical processes continued beyond the flash point of revolution in 1952, Nasser's ascent to power marked a point of sharp change in the articulation and orientation of cultural ideals (Armbrust 2012, 1). Nasser's idealization of workers and farmers, for example, represented a break from the constitutional monarchy's Western-liberal political and elitist cultural orientation (Botman 1999, 285). The Western-oriented *effendi*[1] (bureaucracy) and aristocracy were no longer venerated. Egypt's new heroes were the hard-working *fellahin* (peasants/farmers) and the *awalad/banat al-balad* (literally meaning sons/daughters of the country, a description most often applied to Egypt's urban middle and lower classes).[2]

The *awalad/banat al-balad* were often typified as having essential qualities, which included having an independent, strong, direct nature, being jovial, and finally, being committed to tradition. The *awalad/banat al-balad*, in the government's post-revolution social rhetoric, were the ideal and authentic Egyptians. Nasser himself was said to be an *ibn al-balad*, as his origins were in Cairo's middle class (El-Messiri 1978, 5–6). Under Nasser's leadership, these groups and their essentialized characteristics were presented in arts and culture as Egypt's heart. This stress on the importance of the *ibn/bint al-balad*'s "spirit" was constructed in opposition to the image of the weak, corrupt, occidentophile elite and monarchy (Dougherty 2000, 265). *Awalad al-zawat* (the aristocracy) and the *effendi* that had sought to align themselves with Western styles, language, and dress in the colonial period were now out of touch with what the State hoped to present as the new "real" Egyptian identity (El-Messiri 1978, 6). In the Nasser period, "authentic Egyptianness" was increasingly portrayed as residing in the essentialized qualities of the sons and daughters of the country.

This socialist, nationalist, anti-colonial ideology that Nasser championed would come to be termed Nasserism. Nasserism prized the people and called for a complete turning away from the monarchy. Under the new government, many streets and squares bearing connection to the monarchy were renamed. Yoav Di-Capua (2001) notes, for example, that *Fuad al-Awal* Street, a street named after Fuad I of Egypt (1868–1936), became "26 Yuliu," in reference to the date of King Farouk's abdication, July 26, 1952. The Egyptian government's new versions of coins, bills, stamps, and medals no longer carried the images of past monarchs, but instead were imprinted with the nation's new heroes: workers, farmers, and soldiers (Di-Capua 2001, 105–106). Di-Capua concludes that Nasser was skilled at mobilizing the Egyptian people through the use of this new revolutionary symbolism (Di-Capua 2001, 104). The revolution opened up a space for the representation of the newly imagined nation. The national idealization of folk culture after the 1952 revolution allowed for the success of Reda's new versions of Egyptian folk dance, which tapped into the *baladi* ideal.

Mahmoud Reda and the Reda Troupe

Mahmoud Reda was born into a relatively privileged family in Cairo in 1930. As a young man, he studied gymnastics and represented his nation as a gymnast at the 1952 Helsinki Olympics (M. Reda 2003a). He loved the dance styles of Gene Kelley and Fred Astaire, as did his brother Ali Reda. After working with an Argentine folkloric dance company for a period in 1954, and witnessing the choreographies of the Soviet Moiseyev Dance Company, Mahmoud and Ali Reda were inspired to put Egyptian folkloric dance on the stage (Franken 2001, 16; Shay 2002, 16, 226). Mahmoud and Ali Reda founded the Reda Folkloric Dance Company in 1958, with Mahmoud taking on the role of choreographer and artistic director, and Ali the role of business, promotion, and planning director (Kent 1995). Farida (Melda) Fahmy, Ali Reda's wife, was the Troupe's first

principal female dancer. In order to begin producing his choreographies in 1958, Mahmoud Reda and some founding Troupe members toured Egypt's provinces to study local dances, and from this field work, with a focus on the rural and the *baladi*, established dance tableaus and theatricalized versions of various Egyptian dance styles.

Despite hard work and preparation, the new Reda Troupe struggled to mount its first theatrical production because of the common negative stereotypes that denigrated professional Egyptian dancers. While the workers, farmers, and sons and daughters of the country may have been Nasserism's new heroes, there remained an enduring entrenched social stigma against working-class entertainers and dancers. Private, nonprofessional *raqs sharqi* often carried no stigma, but its professional public performance was generally understood as sexually charged and shameful for the dancer.[3] While the professional performance of *raqs sharqi* was a beloved requirement for a variety of celebrations and venues, the professional dancer who performed it faced social marginalization (Nieuwkerk 1995, 180). The unspoken common assumption was that the professional female *raqs sharqi* performer was perhaps also a prostitute, or at the very least, a promiscuous woman. Her performances were loved but her profession was considered a mark of shame. Professional male dancers, both of *raqs sharqi* and other styles of dance, also faced stigmatization and were generally considered shamefully effeminate (Zirbel 2000, 121). Furthermore, in Egypt, professional dance was widely not considered an "art" (Nieuwkerk 1995, 110, 129, 182–183; Roushdy 2013, 7; Shay 2002, 137–138). Professional *raqs sharqi*, the most common folkloric and professional form of dance across Egypt, was in the precarious position of being simultaneously loved, regulated, and reviled (Roushdy 2013, 2–3).

It is unsurprising then, that theater owners assumed that the Reda Troupe's Egyptian dance performances would not be artistically respectable, and therefore, that they would be unsuitable to perform in a theatrical space. However, the Troupe refused to perform in cabarets or nightclubs (where dance was considered acceptable as a form of entertainment), because they wanted their work to be perceived as art (Kent 1995). In order to book their first show in a theater, the Reda Troupe made the shrewd decision to categorize its performance as "theatrical." However, after the theater owners saw the first dress rehearsals, which were filled with music and dance, they canceled the Troupe's booking (Kent 2015). Ultimately, Farida Fahmy's father, Hassan Fahmy, organized the group's first show by booking a theater himself at Cairo University, where he worked as an engineering professor.

Success, however, was far from guaranteed. The first performance was attended by an all-male audience (Franken 1998, 274). The unsure audience members, who were probably expecting *raqs sharqi*, were instead met with large, regional, and narrative-focused choreographed numbers. These stylized group tableau dances featured both men and women wearing costuming that reflected everyday indigenous wear that had been re-fashioned to suit staged dance performance. The costumes gave no hint of the *raqs sharqi* bra-belt costumes of cinema stars like Samia Gamal and Taheyya Carioca. Instead, the costuming was clearly folkloric dress that drew on traditional Egyptian elements. While certain movements of *raqs sharqi* were present in the women's choreographic elements (hip articulation, torso articulation), they were toned down, and the focus was on group performance, and not on a female (morally questionable) soloist (Franken 1998, 275; Shay 2002, 147–151). To the Troupe's relief and joy, the very next week, entire middle- and upper-class families came to the show, indicating growing support for Reda's vision of Egyptian folkloric dance (Franken 1998, 274). Soon after this, the Reda Troupe's performances were selling out.

Why did the audiences return? What made these dance shows acceptable, and what made them later achieve the status of Nasser's "pride and joy" (Kent 1995, 24)? Anthony Shay (2002, 162) suggests an important factor was Mahmoud Reda's ability to make dance appealing to an Egypt that had been influenced by European colonialism. Many Westerners visiting Egypt during the nineteenth century condemned *raqs sharqi* as a sexually charged symbol of backwardness.

Western-educated Egyptian intellectuals during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries began to echo European condemnation of the dance. These intellectuals agreed that *raqs sharqi* was backward and sinful, and as such, should not be used to represent the modern Egyptian nation; furthermore, many members of Egypt's elite came to believe that Western arts were "more advanced" than Egypt's (Mitchell 1988, 33, 99; Shay 2002, 162). Mahmoud Reda was able to achieve middle- and upper-class support and interest by presenting idealized folk dance with toned-down *raqs sharqi* movements that were fused with Western dance influences from Hollywood and ballet. Shay concludes that Reda's new representation of Egyptian dance was successful, in large part, because it matched colonized expectations.

Categorizing Reda's productions as primarily continuing colonial labor, however, denies him agency and power in his creative process. Shay states that Reda's "alterations and modifications [to domestic forms] have produced a pale and anemic version of the vital dance form that the interested observer can see in the field" (Shay 2002, 149). But Reda's alteration of Egyptian dances for stage did not necessarily produce work that was anemic. For example, his decision to modify hip and torso movement in his choreographies meant they differed from domestic forms; it did not necessarily make them weak in comparison.

The hip movements in Reda's choreographies were typically large movements that were driven by stepping motions. Generally, Reda hip work would express a single drum beat, whereas a *raqs sharqi* dancer would often utilize hip movements to express various instruments. The dancer performing in Reda's style would also move across the floor while performing hip articulations, whereas when a dancer performed *raqs sharqi*, hip articulation was often expressed in a stationary position. *Raqs sharqi* hip articulations could be large and external like those found in Reda's work, but more often, they tended to exhibit a range of sizes and levels of energy. Intricate hip articulation that shifted dynamically and unpredictably in focus from illustrating rhythm to melody while the dancer remained stationary was largely absent in the style of the folkloric dance Reda developed. Also, *raqs sharqi* dancers projected many emotions and a strong sense of flirtation while completing their torso and hip work, whereas Reda's dancers generally projected joy and avoided female soloists presenting exaggerated *raqs sharqi* style *dalaa* (coquettish flirtation) while doing intricate hip and torso focused articulations.

The dances Reda produced for the stage maintained vitality by shifting the location of energy and focus. While a *raqs sharqi* or *baladi* dancer often included vibrancy and variety in the subtle movements of the torso and hips, Reda's work often incorporated energy and diversity in rapid turning and jumping patterns with subtle patterning between multiple dancers on the floor at one time. On the contrary, Reda's decision to create new indigenous dance for stage is an example of the vitality and flexibility of Egyptian dance forms.

Reda's choreographic success is not best described as a consequence of Egyptian internal colonization. His work can better be understood as the effect of a hybridization process, in which Western ideas were continually both absorbed and resisted by the individuals that made up Egyptian society. Homi Bhabha's (1985) construct of "hybridity" allows for a nuanced understanding of the relationship between the colonizer and the colonized (Katrak 2011, 142–143). However, when combined with a historical framework, which is not present in Bhabha's original essays, the concept of hybridity provides for a more complex understanding of the relationships between these two groups (Bell 2012).[4] Viewed through this combined framework, Egypt's colonization was a multidimensional process that resulted in hybrid social/cultural changes in all levels of Egyptian society, from individual bodies to the State's operations. Unique political systems and cultural production emerged that were not purely colonial or indigenous, but something in between (Bhabha 1994, 5, 10). This third space—a place of transnational cultural creation—was evident in the development of the Egyptian state, and also Egypt's architecture, education systems, and economic activities during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Egyptian systems increasingly intertwined with European

and broader global influences during this period. British colonial officials, with whom many in the Egyptian elite cooperated (many of whom had Turkish roots or points of origin from across the Ottoman empire), shifted Egyptian political life into a mode familiar and controllable by British interests. English and French education and culture, in themselves transnational mixes, were conduits for Egyptians to access power in the colonial system, and thus, were attractive to Egypt's upper classes. Through a complex mixture of collaboration and resistance, elements of Western thought influenced the worldviews of Egyptian individuals (or were rejected by them) in a plethora of ways, fostering a hybrid cultural production. A variety of hybridized cultural productions emerged during this period that were influenced by class, gender, and other identity elements that ultimately affected how individuals chose to engage with Western ideas. This analysis will show that the Reda Troupe and Mahmoud Reda's choreographies, which drew on a variety of dance traditions within a postcolonial Egyptian context, are examples of hybridized production because each individual's worldview on dance was continuously renegotiated. Hybridity resulted from the internalization of and resistance to colonial influences. Reda's choreographic decisions in this context then, are not simply evidence of Egyptian internal colonization, but rather of a dynamic engagement in postcolonial hybridized self-representation. The historical process of hybridization and individual artistic agency were central to Reda's decision to avoid placing traditional *raqs sharqi* or *baladi* movement on stage. Colonial concerns over dance propriety and pre-existing local patriarchal anxiety about professional dance hybridized to influence, but not absolutely dictate, Reda's choreographic decisions as he crafted Egyptian folkloric dance for stage.

Egyptian paradoxical perceptions of *raqs sharqi* performers and performance predate Western colonial control of Egypt, further evidencing that Reda's move to avoid elements of *raqs sharqi* in his choreographies cannot be summed up as primarily the work of a continuing colonial project, as Shay suggests (Shay 2002, 132–133).[5] Noha Roushdy (2013, 30) indicates that because of dance's low status, as early as the end of the eighteenth century (during Napoleon's occupation, while Egypt was an Ottoman province), female dance performances were subject to various local (not French) prohibitions.[6] Similarly, Kathleen Fraser (2015, 47) concludes that in Egypt, between approximately 1760 and 1870, female dancers transgressed a variety of local culturally and religiously mandated gendered boundaries in performance (Fraser, 2015, 47). Fraser notes that an Egyptian "ambivalence" toward professional dancers and dance performance during this period existed because of professional dancing's problematic moral status. Egyptian absorption of Western-toned moralistic condemnation of *raqs sharqi* did not coalesce under colonial rule until the end of the nineteenth century, and then, colonial rule only served to reinforce already existing moral reservations about this dance's public performance. These shifting attitudes are an example of the slow colonial hybridization of patriarchal concerns about public display of female sexuality in dance (Mazid 2003, 55). Thus, with the introduction of Western colonial moral condemnations of *raqs sharqi* over the nineteenth century, the existing unease over the morality of *raqs sharqi* public performances was reformulated and re-entrenched.

Because of this hybridization of patriarchal concerns over *raqs sharqi* performance, by the end of the nineteenth century, many Egyptian intellectuals were uncomfortable with *raqs sharqi* as a representation of Egypt. This is because they had engaged with, or were keenly aware of, Western attitudes that viewed it as backward. Author Muhammad al-Muwaylihi (1868–1930), in his novel *Hadith Isa Ibn Hisham* (2015), illustrated this discomfort.[7] In his narrative, the main character, Isa, was upset by the performance of Egyptian dancers in the Egyptian quarter at Paris's *Exposition Universelle* in 1900. Isa and his friends were ashamed of the show because they believed it presented Egypt to the world as a place of sensual timelessness and moral backwardness (Al-Muwaylihi referenced in Çelik 1992, 46). Çelik indicates that a variety of Egyptian intellectuals in this period felt Egyptian innovation, intellectual life, and cultural production were unfairly sidelined by European interest in Egyptian dancing girls and romantic cafés (49). Orientalist attitudes meant Westerners consistently saw *raqs sharqi* as exotic, sexual, and ancient. In response to these attitudes, many late nineteenth and early twentieth century Egyptian intellectuals believed *raqs*

sharqi was shameful or that it was not an appropriate choice for representing Egypt on international stages. Egyptian condemnation of *raqs sharqi* stemmed from a variety of places, which included both absorption of and resistance to Orientalist attitudes.

Despite professional *raqs sharqi*'s morally problematic position in pre-Nasserist Egypt, it was widely loved and continued to be associated with the nation on the international stage. King Farouk named star *raqs sharqi* dancer Samia Gamal the national dancer of Egypt in 1949 ("Egypt's National Dancer" 1951, 46). However, in postcolonial Nasserist Egypt, the extravagantly costumed *raqs sharqi* dancer appointed by an ex-monarch was not held up as an officially sanctioned symbol of the nation. Samia Gamal, arguably the embodiment of professional *raqs sharqi* at the time, conjured for many Westerners ideas of a luxurious, sensual, feminine, ancient Egypt that did not align with Nasser's vision for a modern masculine Arab-socialist state.[8] Under Nasser, it was the Reda Troupe that achieved state funding and support post-revolution, and *raqs sharqi* performers who faced new regulations. In a bid to increase the respectability of professional *raqs sharqi* during the 1960s, the Nasser government attempted to make Russian balletic training compulsory for dancers (this was not successful). Moreover, the government under Nasser also legislated new controls for performers' costumes and choreography (Warsom 1967, 23). In 1961, legislation forbidding floor work (where a dancer performs on the floor, as opposed to while standing) and overtly sexual performance was introduced, alongside requirements for dancers to cover their midriffs in performance (Warsom 1967, 23). Thus, Reda's choice to distance his choreography from *raqs sharqi* was not because of an attitude "of Victorian British morality [that] continued under a new guise with the advent of nationalism," as Anthony Shay argues 2002, 135). Neither was his choreography "created under a Victorian colonialism," as C. V. Dinicu suggests (Dinicu quoted in Shay 2002, 149). Reda's distancing of his folkloric choreography from *raqs sharqi* was a response to a post-colonial political moment that prized nationalist dance representation in a society that was already entrenched in hybridized ambivalent attitudes toward *raqs sharqi*.

Representing the Nation

Reda's choreographies were not an ethnographic reflection of Egyptian dance as it was practiced in homes and at festivals, but they were never meant to be. Shay considers that Reda's work was an example of an "invented tradition" geared for the consumption of the upper-classes (Hobsbawm and Ranger 1992, quoted in Shay 2002, 135). Specifically, he suggests that Reda, in his invention of tradition, glorified and romanticized the peasantry while also avoiding their "actual" movements to make his choreographies attractive to colonized upper middle classes "now turned nationalist" (Shay 2002, 135–136). However, I suggest that Reda's inventions were not only made with his own class in mind, as he and the Troupe worked hard to present dance that could be attractive to audiences from a variety of class and ethnic backgrounds. Marjorie Franken (2001) cites and supports Farida Fahmy's argument that Mahmoud Reda was true to what the Egyptian general public considered the spirit of Egyptian folkloric dance, folkloric costuming, and folkloric music. This is despite the fact that he made use of ballet in his choreographies, and even though his folkloric movement arrangements did not always comply with ethnographic accounts of folkloric dance (Franken 2001, 45–53). The spirit Franken and Fahmy refer to is not an eternal Egyptian essence, although many Egyptians may have seen it that way. Instead, Franken and Fahmy indicate that Reda's work was a unique product of the Egyptian modernist experience (Franken 2001, 46–48). These choreographies were created by people who identified themselves as Egyptians, within an Egyptian context, with the goal of showcasing Egyptian traditions and life. Mahmoud Reda's *Sugar Doll Tableau* in the film *Mid-Year Holiday* (A. Reda 1962), for example, although relating in no way to any on-the-ground folkloric Egyptian dance movement, was indeed Egyptian in its reference and homage to the traditional distribution of sugar dolls at *moulid* festivities (Franken 1998, 276). Reda's work was concerned with generating a representation of a new Egyptian cultural expression that was connected to the past, but not a replica of it. He took elements of folklore, along

with elements inspired by life in Egypt, and created new Egyptian choreography for stage. In an interview in 2003, he stated, "So what I call my choreography is not folkloric. It's inspired by folkloric" (M. Reda 2003b). For instance, Reda's development of a dance with the *millayah laff* (a modesty garment) as worn in the urban areas of the Delta region was not from any traditional folkloric dance; instead it drew on inspiration from Reda's personal experience of Egyptian culture. Farida Fahmy recalls: "In the earlier dances in the dance repertoire of the Reda Troupe on stage, Mahmoud Reda turned to the characters and environment that influenced him in his youth. They are his own impressions of the customs and traditions of a society he grew up in, and a culture in which he was immersed" (Fahmy 2014, 3). As indicated before, Reda did not intend his work to be an accurate ethnographic portrayal of Egyptian folklore. Rather, Reda's work achieved success because he used imagery and ideas accessible to Egyptians from a variety of backgrounds and fused local dances with international forms in the service of a collective self-representation and identity construction in line with the post-revolution *ibn/bint al-balad* ideal.

These romantic images of the lower classes were also attractive to many of those being represented (Franken 2001, 52–53, 104). The Reda Troupe would not have otherwise encountered such widespread success throughout Egypt. Reda and the regime that funded his work wanted a dance form that could be accepted by all Egyptians, not only by those in the upper classes. The immediate post-revolution period was a time of intense hope for many Egyptians; as Nasser addressed farmers and workers across the country, he promised increased social justice and equity that had been denied them under the colonial monarchy (Nasser 1956). Before the economic stagnation of the late 1960s, and the blow of Egypt's 1967 defeat, many Egyptians imagined that the Revolution would bring positive change for the previously disadvantaged (Osman 2010, 73; Prashad 2010, 52; Waterbury 1983, 223). Mahmoud Reda's choreographies reflected this shared feeling of hope for a joyful and strong Egypt for all Egyptians, which was connected to its cultural heritage. For instance, the choreographies in the film *Agazet Nos el Sana* (*Mid-Year Holiday*; A. Reda1962) highlight dance stemming from Egypt's lower economic classes of *fellahin* and various Bedouin groups, while *Gharam fi-al Karnak* (*Love in Karnak*; A. Reda 1965) centers the traditions of Nubian, Saidi, Bedouin, and Cairene Egyptians among other groups. However, post-revolution hope was certainly not felt equally by all, as many of these minorities continued to face marginalization within Egypt during this period (Beattie 2015, 138).

The folkloric dance styles that Reda created were constructed through collaborative creative processes. Many of Reda's dances were predicated on research and collaboration with Egyptians throughout the country thanks to the company's intensive fieldwork (M. Reda 2003b).[9] The Reda Troupe's folkloric tableaus focused on dances presented as indigenous, or as representing indigenous ideals from across the nation. In each regional tableau, dancers were richly costumed and sharply choreographed, and their dances were celebrated as equally beautiful and Egyptian, as evidenced in the films *Mid-Year Holiday* (1962) and *Love in Karnak* (1965). Marsa Matrouh, Cairo, Alexandria, and Upper Egypt were among many regions represented by the Troupe over the years. Reda and Fahmy both indicate that the dances they created were accepted by those they interacted with during fieldwork in the Egyptian countryside (Franken 2001, 52–53, 104). Farida Fahmy's father provides anecdotal evidence that supports this. During one of the Troupe's early shows, Hassan Fahmy sat in the audience beside a group of *fellahin* who had also come to watch the performance. He struck up a conversation with some of the audience by saying, "this is not *fellahin* dance." According to an interview with Mahmoud Reda (M. Reda 2003b), Hassan was contradicted by *fellahin* audience members, who stated that the Reda Troupe's representation *was* their dance. Reda concluded that "they recognized themselves, although there is like ninety percent extra put on the dance" (M. Reda 2003b). While Reda invented tradition, as Shay (2002, 135) notes, it also appears it was accepted as staged folklore by those represented in the dance.

The public's positive reaction to the dance performances combined with the wider global blossoming of folkloric dance companies during the Cold War helped secure the Troupe's future direct

government support (and later, control), which began in 1961. The polarized international climate resulted in the growth of state support for dance as the U.S. and USSR both strove for global cultural dominance; a state that toured impressive folkloric or national dance companies could achieve global recognition of the strength of its cultural heritage. Also, concern over dance's role in fostering internal nationalism and providing strong international representation was why the Russian Soviet State funded Russian folk dance companies and the ballet during this period (Ezrahi 2012). In response, the Eisenhower administration in the United States funded and supported the presentation of American dance tours both at home and abroad in order to export an idealized image of the nation (Caute 2003; Prevots 2001, 11). Clare Croft argues further in her book, *Dancers as Diplomats* (2015), that American dancers engaged in cultural diplomacy by reworking the meaning of "American" through dance as embodied diplomacy (Croft 2015, 6). The Reda Troupe was one of the Egyptian state's cultural nationalist voices, and its members engaged in similar embodied diplomacy, both at home and abroad.

But the Troupe's performances did not aim or set out to champion American or Soviet ideals. Instead, it represented Egypt, and its increasingly non-aligned foreign policy. Nasser was an important figure in the emergence of the Non-Aligned Movement (which had roots in the Bandung Conference of 1955, and was formed in Cairo in 1961), which was made up of primarily postcolonial states that sought to avoid aligning with either of the major Cold War blocs. These states not only avoided aligning with Soviet or Western powers, but also banded together to resist previous imperial powers' attempts to dominate their nations through indirect means. The goals were to opt out of the global binary, to press for the democratization of the United Nations, and for worldwide nuclear disarmament (Prashad 2010, 101). Nasser was a major force in this movement and a consistently outspoken critic of neo-colonialism at home and abroad, both before and after the movement's official organization.[10]

The Nasser regime utilized the Reda Troupe as a symbol of a strong, independent, non-aligned Egypt. During the 1960s, Nasser consistently requested the Reda Troupe to entertain foreign officials on state occasions in Egypt and sent the group on tour internationally to showcase Egyptian culture. Nasser twice decorated Mahmoud Reda and Farida Fahmy for "services rendered to the State through art" with The Order of Arts and Sciences (Kent 1995). The State also ensured that the Troupe participated in cultural exchanges specifically with non-aligned and newly independent nations, including Indonesia, India, Kenya, and Brazil (Franken 2001, 55–57). Through these exchanges, and by entertaining international visitors at home, the Reda Troupe both projected the Nasser regime's desired image of a strong Egypt and encouraged solidarity with other non-aligned and postcolonial nations abroad.

The Reda Troupe's performances were also used as a tool for encouraging and establishing a shared Nasserist Egyptian cultural identity. For example, Marjorie Franken (1998) notes that the film *Love in Karnak* (1965) articulates Nasserist cultural-nationalism in its idealization of Egyptian inter-regional connection and in its representation of the fusion between Egypt's rich history and its contemporary trajectory. The story of *Love in Karnak* centers on the newly formed Reda Troupe's trip to perform in the temple at Karnak by Luxor, approximately two hundred kilometers north of Aswan. Mahmoud Reda (playing himself in the film) oversees the respectable, middle-class Cairene Troupe's performance in an area of the nation associated with some of the great monuments of ancient Egyptian history, including Karnak and the Valley of the Kings (Franken 1998, 276). Franken argues that the film contained a clear postcolonial Nasserist message: the Troupe members had to overcome interpersonal conflicts in order to ensure the Troupe's success, just as Egyptians had to "put the cause of the new nation foremost" (Franken 1998, 276).

Love in Karnak (1965) also contained a message of Egyptian national interconnection and strength through dance. For example, the *tahtib* piece in *Love in Karnak* illustrates the ideal of a modernized Egypt connected to its heritage and the ideal of the *awalad al-balad* for all Egyptians. *Tahtib* was and

continues to be a regular practice in Upper Egypt.[11] In the film, it is presented for stage with Reda's gymnastic and dance innovations. Anyone watching the film knows that this typically Saidi display of controlled power and traditional strength is being performed by troupe members who were middle-class young men from Cairo. This presentation of modern youth embracing traditional arts worked to further the Nasserist ideal of traditional values being upheld by a modern populace.

This ideal of Egyptian regional interconnection is also present in the film's stylized presentation of Nubian dance (originating in the region furthest south in Egypt, stretching into northern Sudan). The Reda Troupe members dance joyfully, stepping and swaying their scarves, referencing movements of Nubian origin (A. Reda 1965). In this dance piece, the men in the Troupe have darkened their faces with makeup to mimic the darker complexion of Nubian people in Egypt.[12] The Troupe's representation of this region and the image of a happy, problem-free relationship with the rest of Egypt was an exercise in power (Shay 2002, 2; Trout Powell 2001, 28). The goal was to encourage Egyptian cultural solidarity, but the privileged Cairene Troupe's use of blackface to represent the ideal of a united Nile Valley, and a larger united Egypt, was an action that effectively silenced and stereotyped Nubian Egyptians. The Reda Troupe's favoritism of middle- and upper-class urban performers and its analogous representation of problem-free relationships between classes and ethnicities reinforced deeply engrained patterns of racial and class discrimination in Egypt, as Shay (2002) rightly notes. These problematic representations of Upper Egyptians were especially appealing to the State in this period.

During the early 1960s, when *Love in Karnak* was being produced, and the Reda Troupe performed its Saidi and Nubian numbers, the region many Saidi and Nubian Egyptians called home was being heavily affected by the construction of the Aswan High Dam. This was a period of change and hardship for many Nubian and Saidi Egyptians, many of whom lost their lives, or were forced to relocate during the construction of the dam.[13] The positive representation of these groups in the film was a nationalist message that focused on Egyptian strength and solidarity with Upper Egypt. The film idealized the history and dances of Upper Egypt and asked Egyptians to put their individual needs aside for the greater good of the nation (as Franken [1998] indicated in her reading of the film). The Troupe's dance endeavors in this film aligned directly with the State's goals for the nation and region, making the Reda Troupe in this instance an effective cultural nationalist tool.

The messages of the Reda Troupe performances were also put into the service of the nation internally. Beginning in the 1960s, the Troupe directly addressed the building of the High Dam. In performances of a piece entitled *The High Dam*, female members of the Troupe danced in flowing patterns, representing water, and were directed by male dancers dressed as engineers. In the finale of *The High Dam* performance, dancers representing Egyptian farmers celebrate the Dam's ability to control the flooding of the Nile (Kent 1995). The joy in these performances stood for the ideal to be hoped for in the wake of the dam's construction. The connection of past and present, and the idealization of the rural and lower classes in joyful dance in *Love in Karnak* (A. Reda 1965) and *The High Dam* performances, were a reflection of the Nasserist state's goals, not a reflection of the experiences of Nubian Egyptians, who faced forced relocation and consistent marginalization in Egyptian society. Reda's style of folklore was deemed useful and respectable by the State in part because of its ability to articulate politically appealing ideals in post-revolution Egypt.

Conclusion

The 1952 Revolution initiated a complete restructuring of Egypt's political and social trajectory, which affected emerging expressions of Egyptian dance. In this new socialist climate, idealized workers were the nation's new heroes, and the lavish lifestyle of the elite was stigmatized. The introduction of Nasserist ideology encouraged the growth of anti-colonial Egyptian national pride. Mahmoud Reda, in this environment of postcolonial cultural-nationalist sentiment, felt compelled

to represent Egypt in the form of a folkloric dance company. But the Reda Troupe was not met with immediate support, due to dance's complex position within Egyptian society. Reda overcame the stigma of indigenous dance by placing theatricalized versions of local dances on stage within large group choreographies focused on regional variation and by combining folkloric dance movements with elements from non-Egyptian dance traditions like ballet. His group choreographies focused on narratives about idealized daily rural life that dissipated concerns over dance's problematic sexual connotations and distanced the choreography from the dominant, paradoxically loved-yet-stigmatized Egyptian dance expression, *raqs sharqi*.

Audiences responded positively to these representations of Egyptian folk dance because Reda's choreographies resonated with the broader processes of hybridity ongoing in the Egyptian postcolonial Nasserist context. The hangover of colonial influence on Egyptian society did not dictate Reda's self-representation of Egypt in dance. Reda's decision to distance much of his choreography from *raqs sharqi* was not only in response to Victorian colonialism's contribution to Egyptian cultural condemnation of the form, but also the result of an ongoing rocky relationship with *raqs sharqi*'s public performance in Egypt that was historically entrenched in both local and colonial discourses. By focusing on Reda's work in the context of hybridity as a category of analysis, his agency is not lost in the colonizer-colonized dichotomy. Hybridity allows for a more nuanced understanding of the Egyptian public's responses to his work, not only as a result of colonialism, but also a clear result of resistance to its influence in the post-revolution Nasserist context. The early Reda Troupe's artistic decisions in self-representation were beloved by many in Egypt. While surely not all voices have been heard on this issue, the goal of the Troupe was Nasserist solidarity in representation (although, very problematically, not participation) across specific and idealized ethnic, regional, and class lines.

The Reda Troupe and its messages of national solidarity in dance were initially shaped and supported by the Ministry of Culture, although it should be noted, not without contention. Nasser's strong non-aligned and anti-colonial position was augmented with the touring of the Reda Troupe. By the 1960s, the Troupe was consistently performing on behalf of the State at home and abroad, even appearing in feature films like *Mid-Year Holiday* (1962) and *Love in Karnak* (1965). The Troupe successfully showcased political messages of inter-regional national pride and solidarity. However, to achieve this success, the Troupe perpetuated elements of ethnic and class discrimination. Mahmoud Reda's artistic vision, to animate Egyptian dance for stage, was able to blossom in Egypt because of his ability to take advantage of the unique social and political climate that emerged in Egypt after the 1952 Revolution. His choreographies reflected artistic agency and hybridized ideals unique to post-revolution Egypt during the Nasser period.

Notes

1. *Effendi* was originally a respectful Turkish title used to address a high-status individual. It was first introduced to Egypt through Ottoman Turkish rule. By the early twentieth century this term was firmly established as a reference to Egypt's bureaucratic class, and was used of government workers who typically wore Western suits and Turkish-style tarboushes. For more on this, and on Egyptian conceptualizations of class, see Sawsan El-Messiri's *Ibn Al-Balad: A Concept of Egyptian Identity* (1978, 5).

2. Typically, the terms *ibn al-balad* and *banat al-balad* (literally sons of the country and daughters of the country) have been used of middle- and lower-class Cairenes. These terms are also used to reference middle- and lower-class urban Egyptians generally (craftsmen, shopkeepers, grocers, fruit-sellers, butchers, etc.). They carry with them specific gender and class stereotypes. For example, a *baladi* woman is often stereotyped as being strong, tough, and independent, and having acceptable masculine qualities. For more on the meanings of *banat al-balad* and *ibn al-balad*, see

Karin van Nieuwkerk's "Changing Images and Shifting Identities: Female Performers in Egypt" (1998, 21–36).

3. *Raqs sharqi* is an Arabic term that literally translates to eastern dance or oriental dance in English. However, *raqs sharqi* is most widely known as belly dance in the English speaking world.

4. In his seminal 1985 essay "Signs Taken for Wonders: Questions of Ambivalence and Authority under a Tree outside Delhi, May 1817," Homi Bhabha suggests that the English Bible (and other English books) were utilized as symbols to glorify both colonial rule and culture. However, Bhabha also notes a contradiction in this symbolic role of English literature in the colonial endeavor; while the English Bible was perceived by the English as a symbol of their cultural dominance, Bhabha suggests its use and dissemination in India resulted in hybridization that challenged colonial rule. Through Indian engagement with English literature, the colonized could "unsettle" colonial power by utilizing elements of the colonizer's culture in their own interest (Bhabha 1985, 147–148, 154). Indians who read, copied, and engaged with this literature introduced new interpretations of its meaning. Bhabha suggests there is political power at the heart of this this ongoing process of hybridization. He concludes that when the colonized turn the gaze back onto the colonizer, they "unsettle" the "narcissistic" colonial power by creating something new that mixes elements of the colonizer's culture with their own (Bhabha 1985, 154). Bhabha provides a useful theoretical lens that can allow for historians to center the agency of historical actors.

My analysis explains the success of the Reda Troupe through Bhabha's process of hybridization, but with a focus on historical context not present in Bhabha's original essays. Bill Bell (2012) notes that Bhabha's use of hybridity in "Signs Taken for Wonders" (1985) is elegant, but lacks significant historic contextualization. Bell suggests that processes of hybridization were more multidirectional than Bhabha recognized. Additionally, the colonial activity of missionaries and government officials was not as uniform as Bhabha presented it, as in many cases missionaries and colonial officials were in conflict (Bell 2012, 314). Bell concludes that while using useful theoretical frames like hybridity, "we should be careful not to write history out of the subject, or the subject out of history" (Bell 2012, 325). Thus, this article's use of Bhabha's lens of hybridity to examine the Reda Troupe's success is done so with careful consideration of historical context.

5. It predates colonization even as Mitchell defines it, not as direct political control, but as a growing European economic and intellectual influence over Egypt (Mitchell 1988, 14).

6. Roushdy (2013) cites early European traveler writings to indicate this. One example she offers comes from Vivant Denon's *Travels in Upper and Lower Egypt* (1803), where Denon accounts how French soldiers pressured sheikhs into providing dancers for them. Denon suggests the sheikhs were reluctant to provide dancers for an audience of foreign, single non-Muslims, writing: "We requested of the sheiks a sight of the almés, a description of female dancers similar to those of India. These chiefs . . . made some difficulty in allowing them to be brought into our presence. If polluted by the inspection of infidels, their reputation might suffer . . ." (Denon 1803, 230; Roushdy 2013, 30). The implication was that dancers who already struggled to maintain respectability did not wish risk any status they had by performing for invading military forces.

7. The story was originally published at the turn of the century as a serial in the Egyptian newspaper *Misbah al-Sharq*. The serial, including the stories of *The Second Journey*, was compiled into the book *Hadith Isa ibn Hisham* and published by the Egyptian Ministry of Education in 1927 (Al-Muwaylihi 2015, xiii–xv, xvii).

8. Newspaper and magazine coverage of Samia Gamal's debut in North America in the early 1950s consistently presented her performances as sexual and exotic. This is evident in articles with titles such as "Mees Gamal's Trouble Ees Clothes" (1953, 4).

9. Although the research for his folkloric productions was not conducted by ethnographers, it was rigorous. Reda recalls, "I took a group of five or six of my dancers and went to Upper Egypt. We started from Aswan, studying real folklore. We took cameras. We took recorders. We took somebody to write . . . [to] talk to the people and record their stories and ideas and we wrote the songs. We started from Aswan and continued until we reached Cairo. In every city we chose, we stayed three to four days. We brought the people; they danced for us. We recorded the dances and the music, and wrote down the stories and everything" (M. Reda 2003b).

10. Kwame Nkrumah, Ghana's first prime minister, helped set down the definition of neocolonialism that came to be used by the emergent Non-Aligned Movement with his publication of *Neo-Colonialism: The Last Stage of Imperialism* in 1965. Nkrumah pointed out that while many states may have the trappings of sovereignty, economic systems controlled by imperial powers and major corporations prevent these nations from achieving complete independence and agency (Nkrumah 1965, x).

11. Depending on its context, *tahtib* can be understood as a dance, a mock fight, a choreography, or as a martial art. In the majority of its contexts, it is performed with instrumental accompaniment, including various drums, *mizmar*, and *rababa*.

12. Blackface in an Egyptian context did not carry the same historical meaning associated with its use in the U.S. or Western Europe. For a full discussion of blackface's unique and problematic Egyptian usages in the twentieth century, see Troutt Powell (2001, 2003).

13. Constructed to control the Nile's annual floods, the Aswan High Dam was a monumental project. Its construction resulted in the displacement of thousands of people, as previously inhabited regions were overtaken by water. During the course of the dam's erection, over 90,000 *falahin* and Nubian Egyptians were forced to relocate. Moreover, the construction work itself was dangerous; 451 workers in total were killed in construction accidents. The Aswan High Dam's implementation, while deemed necessary to prevent high floods, to guard against drought, and to provide hydroelectricity, was not without great difficulty for many.

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