

*A Trade Like Any Other: Female Singers and Dancers in Egypt.*  
By Karin Van Nieuwkerk. (Austin: University of Texas Press,  
1995. Pp. xi + 226 pp, photographs, appendix, notes, glossary,  
bibliography, index, \$35 US, ISBN 0-292-78720-0 cloth, \$15.95 US,  
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In the West, the image of the female Arab dancer has been a sensual symbol of the "Middle East" region for centuries. As a dance ethnologist researching and performing dances originally from cultures in northern Africa and western Asia, I was excited to read *A Trade Like Any Other: Female Singers and Dancers in Egypt*, a study that goes beyond the stereotypes held by Western observers. Although rooted in history and tradition, public entertainment in these lands, as well as the related worldwide Oriental dance (commonly called the "belly dance") phenomenon, has often been dismissed as unworthy of serious recognition or study. Fortunately, these performers are beginning to receive growing attention from scholars such as Dutch anthropologist van Nieuwkerk.

This fascinating ethnography of professional female entertainers in Egypt brings together issues and ideas relevant to dance, anthropology, folklore, ethnomusicology, gender studies, and area studies. The investigation highlights the contradiction that exists in Arab society in the realm of music and dance. On one hand, singing and dancing are signs of joy and happiness, and entertainers are required enhancements for important celebrations. Yet those who provide these services for pay, particularly women, are regarded with disdain and disrespect. The author asks: "Is the tainted reputation of female entertainers due to the fact that entertainment is a dishonorable profession or that it is dishonorable for women?" (p. 2-3). To answer this question she looks at the history of the trade, the status of performers in society, and the life stories and views of the performers themselves. The concepts of marginality, honor and shame, and gender are thoroughly explored and integrated into the study. By providing new insight into historical, political, economic, religious, and cultural forces, van Nieuwkerk accounts for the ambivalent attitudes towards female professional performers in Egyptian society as well as the way they cope with their status.

Van Nieuwkerk's anthropological approach contributes to the comprehensive nature of the study. Van Nieuwkerk spent sixteen months in Egypt between 1988 and 1990 interviewing female entertainers, observing performance events, and gathering information from primary sources such as newspapers and magazines. Her detailed account of fieldwork experiences is informative and typifies how this process works in many cultures, from the making of contacts to the presenting of gifts. One result of this fieldwork is the presentation of life stories of four groups of entertainers that illustrate the development of the profession in the last fifty years. Emphasizing

contextualization and guided by “experience-near” and “experience-distant” perspectives, she relies on the everyday discourse and behaviour of Egyptians to verify theories. For example, she talked to fifty Egyptians from different socio-economic backgrounds about their views on the entertainment trade and on performers. In addition to answering questions about their own wedding celebrations and relationships to performers, Van Nieuwkerk had them order a set of index cards of different professions, including the various forms and contexts of entertainment for male and female performers.

The author examines the place of singing, dancing, and music in Islamic religious opinion as well as in secular culture. She notes that the context of entertainment — be it the performing arts circuit, the nightclub circuit, or the circuit of weddings and saint’s day celebrations — plays a pivotal role in the perceived status of the entertainers. Van Nieuwkerk concentrates on the latter context while making some comparisons to the nightclub circuit.

From my perspective, one of the best parts of the book is van Nieuwkerk’s research into the evolution of professional female entertainment in Egypt from the early nineteenth century through the present day. Two chapters are devoted to this history in terms of types, audiences, and contexts, relationships with religious and government authorities, and legal status and organizational development. By means of socio-economic, political, and cultural perspectives, van Nieuwkerk offers detailed explanations of events and trends such as ruler Muhammad Ali’s banishment of dancers in 1834 and the rise of nightclubs in the early twentieth century.

One aspect of this ethnography that I found weak concerns the actual content of the entertainment. We are told “who, when, where and why” without much “what.” Other than providing references to a teasing, flirtatious “suggestive dance” with movements of the pelvis and eyebrows (p. 87), she does not offer descriptions of the dances themselves in terms of movement, space, body placement, relation to the music, and so on. Similarly, description of the style and content of music and songs is lacking. Readers are left to use their existing knowledge of these forms, or worse, preconceived notions based on myth and stereotype. While the focus of the study was not on the dance or music itself, a more thorough description would have represented a greater contribution to the small body of scholarly writing on this subject.

Van Nieuwkerk’s use of the term “belly dance” throughout the work is also cause for concern. Scholars are faced with the ongoing challenge of trying to find appropriate terminology to apply to dances associated with sensual, expressive movement forms such as those found in cultures ranging from northern Africa through western Asia. “Belly dance,” “Oriental dance,” “*raks Sharqi*,” and “*Danse du Ventre*” are some of the terms used to describe these dance forms. Van Nieuwkerk chooses to use the term “belly dance” to denote all dance other than folk without justifying or explaining this choice, other than to say (without citation) that the term was used for the first time at the turn of the twentieth century.

These points notwithstanding, *A Trade Like Any Other* adds significantly to the growing body of scholarly work on music and dance in this region. Van Nieuwkerk synthesizes much information and many perspectives to characterize the lives and conditions of female performers, past and present, within the larger context of Egyptian society. As van Nieuwkerk herself notes, her findings on the constructions of gender and body in Egypt are a starting point for further anthropological and feminist research in this area. This ethnography also could be used as a model for fieldwork techniques and their translation into a conclusive study.

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***Flights of Fancy, Leaps of Faith: Children's Myths in Contemporary America.*** By Cindy Dell Clark. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995. Pp. ix + 158, ISBN 0-226-10777-9 cloth.)

The ethnography of children began internationally as the province largely of women. Whereas late-nineteenth and early-twentieth century male scholars tended to investigate foreign or at least exotic folk, their female counterparts generally were encouraged by the cult of domesticity to find subjects closer to home, frequently focusing upon the “noble savages” amongst us — our children. This gendered (some have said “natural”) association persists, evident in the substantially female current membership of the Children's Folklore Section (of the American Folklore Society). Likewise persistent is the tendency to view children's folklore scholarship as marginal, seldom central to the disciplinary mainstream unless undertaken by men, such as by scholars from W. W. Newell (1883) to Roger Abrahams (1969, 1981) and Brian Sutton-Smith (numerous major works from 1959 to the present), or occasionally, by women teamed with them (the classic works of Iona and Peter Opie). The past two decades of cultural scholarship at the margins have, however, increasingly drawn us to confront central concepts, approaches and directions which are consequential to our lives, as well as to our discipline.

Cindy Dell Clark's work is rooted in this well-established tradition of female, marginal/marginalized yet personally significant scholarship. Hers is a modest volume, written in comfortably accessible prose laced with wit and common expressions, and illustrated with appealing children's drawings. But it carries a powerful and potentially revolutionary message encapsulated in the statement she quotes from Alistair Reid: “Children are entitled to their otherness, as anyone else is” (p. 101). To make children the “other” is not at all exceptional (the adult world does that daily). But to accord them the full