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To cite this article: Paul Tabar (2005) The Cultural and Affective Logic of the Dabki: A Study of a Lebanese Folkloric Dance in Australia, *Journal of Intercultural Studies*, 26:1-2, 139-157, DOI: [10.1080/07256860500074359](https://doi.org/10.1080/07256860500074359)

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/07256860500074359>



Published online: 06 Aug 2006.



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The Cultural and Affective Logic of the *Dabki*: A Study of a Lebanese Folkloric Dance in Australia

Paul Tabar

To Fawwaz Trabulsi whose writing on the *dabki* in Lebanon inspired me to write this paper.

The dabki is a folkloric dance enacted by Lebanese migrants in Australia. This paper examines this dance and shows that it is invested with many issues pertaining to the harsh realities of Lebanese migrants in Australia. In doing so, it criticises the reified understanding of the dabki that reduces it to a mere spectacle and a metaphor for Lebanese identity. Our analysis of the dabki shows the irreducible complexity of this cultural practice deriving from social processes that surround its production. These processes pertaining to the experience of displacement, discrimination and a change in gender and class relations result in imputing new meanings to the dabki and transforming some of its formal aspects. Overall, these changes alter the dabki and make it a site of contradictory investments: an object of intrusive gaze by the dominant culture, a strategy of building the unity of the Lebanese community, a symbolic reversal of inequality between the migrant and the host society, a site of changing class and gender relations and a strategy of re-connecting with the home of origin.

Keywords: Dabki; Identity; Ethnicity; Home-building; Class; Gender; Communitas; Liminality

In this paper I examine a folkloric dance, called the *dabki*, performed by Lebanese-Australians at most of their communal festivities and family celebrations in Australia. In doing so, I wish to go beyond a commonly held view about the significance of the *dabki*, one which argues that the *dabki* is an essential marker of Lebanese ethnicity

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and as such it should be allowed to confirm the multicultural character of Australia. Both the official definers of multiculturalism and the leaders of the Lebanese community share this understanding of the *dabki*. They reduce the *dabki* to a metaphor for the cultural identity of Lebanese migrants in multicultural Australia. For the host society, the *dabki* is one more spectacle that could be consumed in the increasingly expanding market for cultural products in Australia, and for the official 'representatives' of the Lebanese community it is an icon of Lebanese culture and traditions.

This popular understanding of the *dabki* in Australia is not simply essentialist and reified, but it also contributes to the process of silencing Lebanese migrants in Australia by propagating an understanding of the *dabki* that disregards its rich and oppositional character, especially as it gets transformed within the context of a migrant society.

Frank's (1991) sociological discussion of the 'body' provides me with an interesting point of departure in my analysis of the *dabki* in Australia. In this paper, the author suggests four ideal types of body usage, with the 'communicative body' most pertinent to my discussion here. He arrives at this concept in his analysis of how the body deals with four dimensions of activity: control, desire, relation to others and self-relatedness. Dancing, he argues, is one model of the 'communicative body' which is defined as a 'dyadic [as opposed to monadic] relation with others who join in the dance and it implies an associatedness which goes beyond one's own body and extends to the body of the other (s)' (Frank 1991: 80). My discussion of the *dabki* will reveal the significance of this dyadic relatedness as it is expressed not only among the dancers but also in the context of the relationship between the dancers and their broader community.

In Australia, Gill Bottomley (1992) uses a culturalist approach when she examines the Greek circular dances (the *Hassapiko* and the *Zembekiko*) in Greece and Australia. In her attempt to explain this approach, she declares: 'I am treating dance itself as a muted mode that may convey some knowledge not articulated in available representations of the social world' (71). It is the argument of this paper that the *dabki* is primarily an embodied discursive practice and, as such, one should 'listen' to it very carefully when it is acted out, and try to decode its movements. In other words, I will disclose the meanings that are communicated in and through the dancing moves of the body when involved in the *dabki*. As a 'muted mode' of cultural practice, the *dabki* needs to be read so that its complex and multilayered reality is brought to the open. Moreover, I argue that what makes the *dabki* in Australia particularly interesting is the fact that as a cultural practice it is traversed by relations of ethnicity, class, gender and even age differences.

The *Dabki* in Australia: The Struggle Over its Ownership

Lebanese migrants have brought the *dabki* to Australia since the early days of their arrival. Anecdotal evidence suggests that the *dabki* was even performed on board of

ships carrying early Lebanese passengers on their way to Australia. In addition, early migrants sometimes celebrated the arrival of their relatives or fellow villagers to this land by performing the *dabki*.¹

In the 1950s and the 1960s when the *dabki* began to make its appearance in Australia at Lebanese community functions and ceremonies, most of the migrants were directly involved in its performance. This is not surprising given that the vast majority of early migrants coming to Australia were villagers, and the *dabki* has its origin in rural communities in Lebanon. In times of festivities, family and religious rituals, migrants would normally get together and perform the *dabki* in a space, be it a family backyard, a community or a church hall, where events took place. People of different age groups and of both sexes would take part in the dance, and the act of joining the dancing group or leaving it after a while would occur without strict formalities to regulate these movements. In this sense, the *dabki* was totally the affair of the migrants who participated in its performance. The Lebanese community had complete ownership and control over the dance. Although the dancing skill of the participants differed, there was no separation between them whereby skilled dancers would perform their dance on a stage removed from the audience. The hard and fast distinction between ‘*dabki*’ dancers and spectators did not exist.

As multiculturalism emerged in Australia in the early 1970s, the community ownership of the *dabki* began to be challenged. Cultural producers in the community were encouraged by the official representatives of multiculturalism to form separate dance groups to be called upon whenever there was need for a performance representing the ‘Lebanese’ culture. In the eyes of the multiculturalists, the staging of folklore belonging to various ethnic communities was essential for building a multicultural image of Australia. Accordingly, the *dabki* was transformed into a spectacle expressing the cultural identity of the Lebanese migrants. This is best exemplified during the Arabic Carnivale which has been organised annually since 1983 in the city of Sydney. During this event, community organisations are invited to participate in the Carnivale by booking a space in which their activities and various objects are put on display for endless lines of spectators. In addition, a centre stage is installed, and designated skilled *dabki* dance groups are invited to perform the *dabki* on it in front of thousands of onlookers who normally include politicians, bureaucrats and community workers. For these people, the enactment of the *dabki* on stage is nothing less than a clear example of what ‘real’ Lebanese culture is about. In this context, the *dabki* is not only reified, but is also taken away from its owners and transformed into a fetishised spectacle for the audience to consume and intrusively gaze upon (during the 2004 Carnivale, a media release was issued (15 Apr. 2004) in which the Australian Arabic Communities Council [AACC] set itself the target of ‘setting a new world record for the longest Line Dance by performing’ the *dabki* in the Sydney Olympic Park Athletic Centre). In fact, multiculturalism sought to move the dance into what Attali (1985) calls a ‘mode of representation’ whereby those who have been represented have been essentialised and denied the right to take part in the process of producing and defining their own acts. Similarly, when

community organisations hold their annual balls and invite politicians and bureaucrats to impress them with the extent of their communal representation, the *dabki* is often performed on stage and is represented, alongside Lebanese food, as a metaphor for Lebanese culture. This categorisation of the *dabki* is also shared by many cultural producers within the Lebanese migrant community and supported by the Lebanese community leaders who are generally clientelised by the state politicians. Their conception of the *dabki* becomes an integral part of the symbolic (ethnic) capital generated by the field of ethnicity and needed for the legitimisation of their leadership (Tabar, Noble and Poynting 2003: 267–87). A critical reading of the *dabki*, grounded in the complex character of the Lebanese migrant cultural experience in Australia, would certainly assist in the process of revealing and disrupting the power order established by the dominant field of ethnicity.

Over the years, the *dabki*, as a contested cultural performance, has never been totally appropriated by the official definers of multiculturalism in Australia. In fact, the struggle over the definition of the *dabki* could be seen as an instance in the broader struggle between the hegemonic culture of white Australian society and the resisting culture of the Lebanese community. By the retaining of the right to define and perform the *dabki*, the majority of Lebanese migrants resist and challenge the ‘multicultural’ mode of representing the Lebanese community. They reject being defined by the state guardians of multiculturalism, refusing to give up the practice of the *dabki* by the community and to give it up to a ‘special’ group of dancers. This is confirmed by the views expressed by the interviewees when asked about whether they prefer to see the *dabki* performed by a professional group of dancers: ‘It’s nice to watch a professional group dancing the *dabki*. But it’s much better for people to participate in the dance’ (Executive Director of AACC, 15 May 2004). The President of AACC commented:

The beautiful aspect of the dance is that every one takes part in it. You’re not a spectator anymore. You’re taking part in making the dance successful. I like to be part of the whole scene. It’s best when people in the hall participate in it. (15 May 2004)

Generally speaking, the community has by and large rejected the separation between the audience and the *dabki* dancers and has continuously insisted on freely participating in its enactment. The social processes underpinning this perseverance and intensity in the performing of the *dabki* by the Lebanese community will be examined in the following section.

Group Solidarity and the *Dabki*

The *dabki* is a group dance by definition. It is performed by a group of people whose number can be increased or decreased depending on the context in which it is enacted. The number of *dabki* dancers performing on stage, for instance, is normally less than that which partakes in it in community events. In both cases, however,

dancing the *dabki* in groups is a defining characteristic of this folkloric dance. When performing the *dabki*, people have to cross their arms and hold each other with their hands by tightly interlocking their fingers (as a sign of modesty, a female dancer, when interlocking her fingers with those of a male dancer, does not clasp her fingers against his). This physical link between the dancers suppresses the individuality of dancers and generates instead a heightened feeling of group identity. This feeling is further exacerbated by another requirement that each dancer should keep his or her shoulder closely attached to that of the next dancer so that the repeated movements performed by the dancers are totally synchronised.² As a result, the movement of one becomes totally integrated in the movements of others. Furthermore, like most types of dancing, the *dabki* is a rhythmic dance based on a set (or sets) of steps,³ which is repeatedly followed by the dancers and is accompanied by sharp and irresistible shouts thrown out intermittently by mostly male dancers. The physical bonding of the dancers, their synchronised and repeated movements and their occasional shoutings, all create a sense of solidarity intensely experienced by the migrants who participate in the *dabki*. The heightened sense of solidarity generated by the dance is literally embodied in the round or semi-circle shape of the *dabki*. The anti-clockwise direction of the *dabki* evokes the feeling of a closed unity which is difficult to break down.

In her study of Greek dance, Gill Bottomley wrote: 'The large circle dances offered participants psychic and physical communication, shared pleasure, perhaps a relief of tension and an expression of joy' (Bottomley 1992: 77). I argue that the *dabki* does not only offer its participants a shared feeling of 'pleasure', it also creates a sense of 'communitas'. 'Communitas', according to Turner, involves rituals 'in which egalitarian and cooperative behavior [*sic*] is characteristic, and in which secular distinctions of rank, office, and status are temporarily in abeyance or regarded as irrelevant' (Turner 1974: 238). The people whom we interviewed variously expressed this sense of 'communitas' generated by the *dabki*. A female librarian who migrated to Australia in 1982 and is married with two kids, pointed out this sense of 'communitas' in the following words: 'The spirit of participating with others is expressed in the *dabki*. All the dancers make the same movement. It [the *dabki*] makes us united, and unity gives us a nice feeling, a bigger momentum' (7 May 2004). The President of AACC, who arrived in Australia in 1977, stated:

The nice thing about the *dabki* is its communal aspect; all the people equally participate in it regardless of their dancing skill. People become comfortable in a group environment. Social boundaries are broken down; the boundaries between the young and the old; the rich and the poor. All are equal. (15 May 2004)

A third (a public servant, middle-aged male who came to Australia in 1980) interviewee declared: 'It [the *dabki*] reflects an inner feeling. It's an act of meeting with one another. It gives a feeling of happiness'. At another point in the interview, he mentioned that the *dabki* 'introduces people [Australians] to the positive things in our culture in contrast to the stereotypical images of a camel driver or a gangster' (15

May 2004). In an interview that I conducted with a second public servant of Lebanese background (arrived in Australia in the early 1970s and was in his mid-50s), the respondent told me that he personally liked the *dabki* because it provided him with the opportunity to spontaneously express his joy and happiness. More importantly, he added that the *dabki* generated in him a feeling of belonging to Lebanese culture. It offered him the venue 'to express his belonging to a group, and participate in a group action' (31 Mar. 2004). During an interview with a high school student, the theme of belonging and the drive to preserve 'the Lebanese heritage and traditions' featured very prominently. George, a 17-year-old youth, was born in Australia, but his parents came from Lebanon. At the time when the interview took place, George told me that a 'big fight' between Asian and Lebanese students occurred at his school. This incident made him even more motivated to learn the *dabki*. When I visited George at home to make the interview (20 Oct. 1998), I found him even wrapping himself with the Lebanese flag. 'It's Lebanese heritage and traditions, mate. We have to preserve them'. This was George's justification for learning the *dabki*. As a matter of fact, he asked his uncle to teach him the dance and, more particularly, the leading role (*al-qaydeh*) in the *dabki*. For George, learning the *dabki* enabled him to participate in its performance when attending community celebrations. This act of participation will allegorise the unity of his community, which he strongly needed to protect himself from the threat of the non-Lebanese 'other'.

More importantly, the sense of 'communitas' generated by the *dabki* assumes an additional significance for the Lebanese migrants because of their particular experience of living in an Australian environment characterised by urban, capitalist relations and at times racist treatment of the migrants. In his insightful study about the difference between the rural and urban sensibilities, Simmel claimed 'that urban life demanded an attitude of reserve and insensitivity to feeling because of the multiplicity and diversity of stimuli in the metropolis' (O'Connor 1997: 162). A similar conclusion is reached by Brian Turner in his book on *The Body and Society* (1986). In this book the author suggests that 'industrial societies emphasise "closed bodies". Emotions and intimacy are limited to privacy, and the "public" is defined by formality' (Bottomley 1992: 142). The *dabki* as an act of spatial inscription disrupts the 'formality' of the 'public' space by generating a feeling of solidarity, associatedness and egalitarianism. Although these attributes reveal the reification of the *dabki* at the hands of the 'aggrieved Lebanese other', they remain needed to resist the mounting racism that the Lebanese migrants have been experiencing since the 1990s (Collins et al. 2000; Poynting et al. 2004). Accordingly, the Lebanese dancers transform the *dabki* into an act of 'strategically essentialising' Lebanese ethnicity.

It is this urge to generate a sense of group belonging⁴ and obtain symbolic power in an otherwise alienating environment which explains the changes that we observe in the way the *dabki* is performed in Australia. During the many times in which the *dabki* was observed, I noticed Lebanese migrants attending a community event showed an unusual interest in the performance of the dance. Almost everyone in the hall where a community event is organised would take part in the *dabki* charged with

affective intensity and remarkable enthusiasm. Male and female migrants of various ages, class backgrounds and generations of migration, always showed a keen interest in learning the *dabki* and participating in its performance. During this fieldwork, I also observed people remarkably spending most of the time dancing the *dabki*. Even when the music or the song is not suitable for the *dabki*, people continue dancing the *dabki*, hoping that the next song would be rhythmic enough for their preferred dance. At many weddings and community functions I noticed that when the band keeps ignoring the wish for *dabki* music by a persisting crowd, many people refuse to leave the dance floor unless their request is met. The drive to achieve symbolic unity via the *dabki* is far stronger than the desire to listen to non-dancing songs and music. By comparison, this situation is not encountered in Lebanon where dancing the *dabki* at festivals and ceremonies makes up only a part of the event's program. The other part may consist of listening to *tarab* songs and music (i.e. a slow-pace music that would require careful listening) and watching performances of belly dancing.

The drive to create group solidarity is further illustrated by the fact that Lebanese migrants tend to participate in all types of *dabki* dances regardless of regional differences. Despite the tiny size of the country (10,452 square kilometres), each region in Lebanon is known by a specific way of dancing the *dabki*, and people who live in a particular area would normally perform the type of *dabki* which characterises their own region (and sometimes a particular village, such as *Ehden* in north-east Lebanon, develops a particular way of dancing the *dabki* which is used to reinforce its distinctive identity vis-à-vis other villages. The *dabki*, in this instance, becomes a defining element of an in-group). Usually, the name of the region is given to the dance in order to distinguish between the various types of *dabki*. So in the north district of Lebanon, people dance the so-called Northern *dabki*, whereas in the south and the *Beqaa* Valley they dance the Southern and the *dabki biqua'ya*, respectively.⁵

In Sydney, on the other hand, Lebanese migrants coming from different regions in Lebanon would join in the *dabki* regardless of its regional character when attending a community event or celebrating a festival. People who are unfamiliar with the *dabki* would quickly acquire the skills needed to join other dancers. Even the migrants (including the author) who come from the cities in Lebanon and who normally look at *dabki* dancing as a sign of social backwardness, do not hesitate in learning this new dancing skill and becoming an active participant in its performance. The inner drive to belong to a group, felt by alienated and 'aggrieved' migrants, overcomes all other divisive factors emanating from their country of origin. This is not only encountered among first-generation migrants, but also among second-generation migrant youths, as exemplified by the case of George who, as previously mentioned, showed remarkable interest in learning and dancing the *dabki*. Accordingly, the *dabki* is being re-negotiated within the context of a host society characterised by individualism and ethnic discrimination. Dancing the *dabki* becomes a public statement of Lebanese ethnicity, delineating what Benedict Anderson calls, 'imagined community' (cf. Bottomley 1992: 76).

Symbolic Power and the *Dabki*: 'I Feel a Kind of Pride and Glory'

At this point, it is significant to describe the performance of the *dabki* in the presence of the Anglo-Saxon Australian 'other' who represents the dominant culture. In the course of observing various celebrations by the Lebanese community, I noticed on many occasions the presence of Australian individuals, whether politicians or acquaintances of Lebanese migrants, who often get invited to dance the *dabki* while attending community events organised by Lebanese associations. The most interesting part in this encounter, however, is the perseverance shown by the Lebanese dancer to make sure that the Australian 'other' accepts his invitation to dance the *dabki*, and the passion and eagerness which he/she shows while teaching his/her guest the steps required by the dance.

On 14 May 2004, during the annual party of the AACC, there were a number of invitees from an Anglo background, including a state and a federal member of parliament. When the people began to dance the *dabki*, most of the Anglo-Australians joined in. The Executive Director of the Council was insisting on inviting her Anglo guests to dance the *dabki*. On more than one occasion, she literally pulled them by their arms toward the dance floor. Two days later, when she was asked: 'Why did you feel so strongly about inviting your Australian guests to dance the *dabki*?' she replied: 'It's my party, to sit and watch was not enough. I didn't want them to leave early. I wanted them to enjoy themselves'. A closer look at what she said later in the interview and what other respondents related to me reveals that the issue was not simply trying to be nice to the Australian guest and make sure that he/she enjoyed himself/herself. The Director of AACC added these words:

It's simply to make them [Australian guests] participate . . . they are merging with us . . . they learn the interaction between cultures . . . it's happening. It's nice to teach them something about our culture. If people start to hear your music or language, they become closer to you, otherwise they remain distant. It makes me happy when I see everybody participating, no difference in class between politicians and non-politicians.

I also asked the same question to another Lebanese migrant (late 40s employed in the public service) who was involved in teaching the *dabki* to a number of Australian guests during the same occasion. He firstly said to me that the guests were interested in learning the *dabki*. 'More generally', he added,

The Australians participate in the dance in most parties organised by our community. And when they do, I feel that they are somehow participating in our culture and they are acquainting themselves with part of our culture. It's nice when they take part in the dance. When they ask to learn the *dabki*, it means that they are willing to get familiar with our culture, and consequently, I feel a kind of pride and glory. When I teach them and they start to dance some of the steps, I feel pleased because they acquire something from our civilisation.

In response to a similar question, the President of AACC stated:

When the Australian guest dances the *dabki*, I feel happy because the social boundaries between us are broken down. I am glad because of his participation and because he's acquainting himself with our culture . . . he's mixing up with us . . . the boundaries are pulled down despite the fact that it's a symbolic act. (15 May 2004)

The same views were expressed by another interviewee who was commenting about his feelings regarding the participation of Anglo-Australians in the *dabki* on other occasions:

The participation of Australians in the *dabki* is most welcome and positive. We welcome their acceptance of our art [i.e. the *dabki*] and our food, and especially, their open mind towards the culture of a minority group like us. It shows that they accept and appreciate us. (15 May 2004)

A second female respondent had this to say:

When I go with Australian fellow workers [the respondent is a librarian in the city of Parramatta] to a Lebanese restaurant and we listen to Lebanese music, I find that a selected number of them are eager to learn the *dabki* dance. It's maybe out of curiosity or what have you. They say things like, 'It's lovely, it's nice'. Maybe they want to please me, but in any case, I feel proud when I teach them the *dabki*. (7 May 2004)

A solicitor, who was 16 years old when he migrated to Australia with his family, mentioned to me: 'I was happy to see them happily dancing the *dabki*. It goes to show that they are happy to participate in part of our culture. It shows that they learned and accepted a positive aspect of our culture' (20 May 2004). The solicitor (35 years old) was commenting on dancing the *dabki* at a get-together with his Australian friends in a Lebanese club.

It is clear from the above quotes that the sense of pleasure expressed by the Lebanese migrants when the Australian guest joins with them in the *dabki*, partly derives from their realisation that in dancing the *dabki* the otherwise dominant Australian is temporarily becoming on equal par with them. In the act of dancing the *dabki*, the inequality characterising the relationship between the white Australian and the Lebanese migrant in broader society is being abolished. Moreover, when the dominant 'other' takes part in the *dabki*, it effectively valorises the Lebanese culture and recognises its positive character. In doing so, it makes the Lebanese migrant community feel more accepted by the host culture. This is so despite the fact that this appreciation implies robbing the *dabki* of its oppositional meanings by transforming it into a mark of identity and an object of celebration and fetishisation. In Bourdieu's terminology, this is an act of 'symbolic violence' based on perceiving the *dabki* (and the Lebanese food) as a metaphor for Lebanese culture, and merely reducing it to its leisurely aspect. It also makes this perception of the *dabki* legitimate in the eyes of the Lebanese migrants.

In addition, there is another reason for the heightened pleasure felt by the Lebanese *dabki* dancers when getting the Australian guest to dance with them. This is clearly

manifested in the following remarks: 'There is more appreciation [of us] when there is interaction with, and understanding of, our culture', said the Executive Director of AACC. 'When they began dancing the *dabki*, I felt joyful because I finally taught them something out of our civilisation' (15 May 2004). Obviously, these comments, made by the public servant who attended the AACC annual party, are similar to the ones expressed by the interviewees last quoted in the above section. Clearly, the overriding concern of these dancers was to assimilate the Australian guests into 'their way of life', as if they were saying to them 'enough instructions on "the Australian way of life". Now it's time that you learn about our way of life'. The librarian's additional comment was most revealing in this regard:

This time I'm teaching them rather than been taught by them. When they speak to you, they raise their voice thinking that you're deaf and they speak to you with a sense of superiority. On this occasion, it's my turn to teach them. I teach them something other than how to cook Lebanese food, I teach them a valuable thing from our culture. (7 May 2004)

In this instance, the Australian 'other' is not only made equal to the migrant, but the relations of dependency favouring the Australian 'other' in broader society is reversed, though temporarily, in the act of performing the *dabki*.

On many occasions, I have observed that the euphoria associated with going through this experience is also manifested in the way the migrant dancers physically reacted to seeing the Anglo invitees dancing the *dabki*. In this instance, Lebanese dancers were observed cheering, clapping their hands and jumping up and down upon the successful completion of teaching the dance to their guests. This is suggestive of victory in the 'battle' between their own culture and that of the dominant 'other'.

Furthermore, the participation of the Australian guest in the *dabki* offers the migrant with a new power order in which the latter could assert his masculinised superiority by showing his outstanding skills in the performance of the dance. No matter how skilled the guest has become in the *dabki* dance, he/she would never be able to surpass the migrant in its performance. The feeling of superiority experienced by the Lebanese migrant dancer during the *dabki* is exacerbated to compensate for the harsh experience of inferiority in broader society. More importantly, the *dabki* contains certain steps which could be read as acts of challenge when performed in the face of an opponent. In the context of Anglophone society, and especially in the presence of Anglo-Australians during the performance of the *dabki*, these challenging steps assume a specific meaning. They provide the migrant dancer with cultural tools to challenge symbolically his opponent, the Australian 'other'. As mentioned earlier, part of performing the *dabki* involves the uttering of sharp cries which are released in the face of the dancer's opponent. The opponent in the context of our analysis is not a competitive lover or unwelcome dancer from a neighbouring village, as the case might be in rural communities in Lebanon. He/she is an Australian guest who reminds the Lebanese dancer of his subordinate status in broader society. In addition

to this shouting, there are other steps involved in the *dabki* which could further be seen as expressions challenging the opposed 'other' and as acts of symbolically subjugating him to the will of the migrant dancer. These involve the acts of leaping in the air and pounding the earth. They also involve spinning and swirling and moving the group in the shape of a circle. The consecutive enactment of these moves and their repetition produce a heightened state of mind whereby the dancers feel the 'opponent' is under their control, subdued and besieged in the space where the dance is inscribed.

During this whole process, the 'opponent' is placed in a position of linguistic deficiency in relation to the vocabulary of the dance, a situation that translates itself into 'feminising' the 'opponent' and subjugating him to the masculinity performed by the male migrant dancer.

Memory, Home-building and the *Dabki*

This feeling of enthusiasm when teaching the *dabki* to the Australian guest, which indicates the intense implication of the dancer in his dancing act, is not only associated with the symbolic act of assimilating the dominant 'other' into the culture of an ethnic minority and achieving a symbolic dominance over it. It is also related to the process of building an 'imaginary home' that the Lebanese migrants desire in the context of an alienating society. The intensity of this feeling is mostly revealed by the firm moves of the dancers and their intermittent shouts mentioned above, as well as by the degree of body sweating that occurs during the dance. My field observation of the *dabki* showed that hardly any dancer would stop dancing before his body is covered with sweat. As my analysis will show below, this 'affective intensity', as described by Hage in a different context,⁶ is also closely related with migrant memories about their imaginary homeland.

Studies of identity (see Hall 1996: 274–314) have shown that time and space are essential components in its construction, and if either of these two components changes, identity changes too. Migration as a process of displacement involves radical transformation of people's identity because it results in the replacement of their sense of space and time simultaneously. This in turn will make the use of memory an important tool for the migrant to combat the negative effects of displacement and desolation. The settlement of migrants in Australia involves the suppression and/or intensification of their memories about their homeland. This is not due only to the total change of the space and time of their original location, but also to the harsh realities they encounter while living in a new country.

It is interesting to note that my informant, the librarian, talks about her experience with the *dabki* in sensory terms. She claims that the *dabki* changes her mood, activates her memory and her visual, olfactory and tactile senses. In other words, the *dabki* seems to have the effect of making my informant acutely aware of her bodily existence through the activation of her senses. This is all the more important when one learns from other researchers (Thomas 2004) that the dislocating experience of

migration has the impact of turning migrants into stoned, floating and insignificant bodies. Contrary to this, the *dabki* for my informant is an act in which migrants are animated through the transposition of their imaginary homeland to the sensory domain. Despite the liminal character of the dance, the *dabki* enables the migrants to transform the *homeland* into a *hereland* and consequently to put an end to their bodily (dis-) engagement in the host society, whose external forces over which they have very little or no control.

Within this context, the *dabki* creates a liminal space where the uncanny of the present moment is bracketed and memories of the migrants' country of origin are activated with high intensity. The music, the rhythm, the lyric, the singing voice and the dance are elements which evoke memories about the migrants' past experience in their country of origin. In his discussion of 'universals of performance', Turner defines the liminal phase as 'being dominantly in the "subjunctive mood" of culture, the mood of may be, might-be, as if, hypothesis, fantasy, conjecture, desire, depending on which of the trinity, cognition, affect, and conation (thought, feeling, or intention) is situationally dominant' (Turner 1990: 11–12). This 'mood' is articulated in words of the solicitor referred to previously, 'The *Dabki* reminds me of *lubnanyati* (my Lebaneseness), I feel as if I am speaking to them [the dancers] about Lebanon . . . as if I am communicating with them about Lebanon'. 'The *Dabki* music motivates me to dance', said the librarian reflecting on the *dabki* when she danced it with her in-laws and their children in her backyard:

It makes me feel nostalgic, it moves me, I feel I heard it a long time ago. The [*dabki*] music takes me back to my childhood [in Lebanon]. The dancing happens in the backyard. We teach the kids the *dabki*. The [*dabki*] music changes our *Mazaaj* (mood) . . . it makes us happy. It awakens my longing for Lebanon: *Besharri* (her village in north Lebanon), my childhood, *rihat ada'ya* (the smell of my village). The dance makes you identify with them, *bitseer tehesson* (you get to feel them). *Beseeru bil-khayal* (They become residing in your imagination). (7 May 2004)

It is clear from the respondents' comments that the *dabki* induces a kind of communication between the dancers and the music 'in a language that resonates with memory and habitus' (Bottomley 1992: 143). It is through these memories that the migrants manage to suspend Australian physical space and replace it with fragments of their imagined home. The *dabki* 'works metonymically to bridge the distance between "Lebanon" as an imagined' entity and the migrant. In other words, the immersion of the migrants in this mode of communication results in their positioning in a comfort space generated by the construction of their imaginary homeland. In dancing the *dabki*, the migrant does not dance to a music coming from Lebanon, he/she *dances Lebanon* itself. The *dabki* becomes a cultural practice which helps the migrant to cope with his feeling of homesickness and desolation. However, it is interesting to note that the constructed homeland of migrants is generally idealised through a process of selective remembering based on suppressing the past

negative experiences of the dancers. 'When I listen to Fayruz singing, my tears drop because she takes me to the beautiful life in Lebanon: the moral values, generosity, chivalry that go with the *dabki*. All these things are awoken in me'. In the act of remembering Lebanon while performing the *dabki*, the difficulties associated with past (e.g. the civil war in Lebanon between 1975 and 1989) and present (e.g. economic and political conditions) living conditions in Lebanon are totally elided and suppressed. So in contrast to the harsh realities experienced in the 'homeland' and the new place of settlement, the migrant's invented home is made comfortable and without any feeling of anguish, anxiety and pain. The cultural logic of the *dabki*, therefore, is not only determined by the present conditions of the dancers, but also by the reconstructed memories associated with their past.

Gender, Migrancy and the *Dabki*

The transformation in the logic of the *dabki* as a cultural practice is not only related to the realities of Australian multiculturalism and the experience of discrimination and marginality by the Lebanese migrants. It is also due to the change in the position and function of Lebanese migrant women in Australia.

The *dabki* is a highly gendered exercise. In rural Lebanon, it is one of the rare occasions in which 'muted' contact between the two sexes would take place. When villagers celebrate a particular event (e.g. a wedding or a Saint Day) in their village, young males and females use the opportunity to meet in public and flirt with one another. In doing so, they make their relationship or the beginning of such a relationship known to the village community. These aspects of the relationship between the young males and females of a village, along with many other social processes, are manifested in a particular way in the enactment of the *dabki*.

To begin with, there are *dabki* dances which are exclusively performed by men. These are referred to as *dabkat al-douyouk*, the 'roosters' dance (Trabulsi 1997: 157). During these performances the dancers execute dancing steps characterised by skimming the ground followed by hearty leaps into the air, spinning and strong pounding of the ground. They show in their dancing an extreme form of agility accompanied by unsuppressible shouts. Overall, their movements are vertical and full of masculine pride, assuredness and self-confidence. In the face of women watching them, the male *dabki* unravels virility in its most dramatic form. In contrast, women in these instances are expected simply to watch the dancers with admiration and reveal their appreciation by clapping their hands during the performance and more intensely upon its completion. More importantly, they in turn have their own dances (the so-called '*dabkat al-ferakh*', the hens' *dabki*) which are characterised by softer leaping and earth-stamping, supple hand movements and a lot of hip-shaking and twisting. On the whole, they move horizontally in opposition to the vertical movements which are predominant during the male *dabki* dance. Stiffness, agility, shoutings, leaping and earth-pounding are all suggestive of pride and assured

masculinity, whereas soft leaping, supple hand movement, breast and hip-shaking and twisting are indicative of sensual but controlled femininity.⁷

More importantly, the examination of the status of women in the practice of the *dabki* dancing reveals the contradictory character of men's relationship to women's sexuality: on the one hand, female sexuality is a source of pleasure and, on the other, it should be kept under control. Already we have shown how the gendering of women's sexuality is partly manifested in the opposite sets of dancing steps (vertical versus horizontal steps) performed by each sex group. However, there are more acts in a *dabki* dance, which reflect men's ambivalent relationship to women's sexuality. This is best illustrated by examining the *dabki* enacted by both men and women. On the whole, the *dabki* in this case gives both sex groups the opportunity to be in close physical contact: they hold hands together and they dance with their shoulders drawn close against each other. However, the leader of the dancing group is always a man who is one of the most skilled dancers in the community. In his leadership of the dancing group, he will perform all the 'masculine' steps described above while the other male dancers are forced to subdue their movement to be in tune with the 'feminine' moves of their female counterparts. In contrast, on the rare occasions when a woman leads the dance or breaks away from the group to dance separately in the middle of the semi-circle created by the remaining dancers, her solo dance will bring her 'feminine' performance into sharper focus. Ideally, she should be a good dancer and someone who is physically attractive and a potential bride. In her solo dance, the female lead dancer exacerbates her sensual moves (the shaking of hips and breast and other flirtatious moves) whereas other female dancers would be acting demurely with modest steps and downcast eyes. On the whole, the community turns a blind eye to the female leading dancer, especially in the presence of her likely marriage partner, but they would never let the act go beyond the permissible. Ultimately, modesty is a must which should be respected by all members of the community.

The ambivalent aspect of man's relationship to woman's sexuality can also be observed in another important movement that takes place during the *dabki* in which both sexes participate. This is the time when the female dancers part with their male counterparts and then join with them several times in the course of performing the dance. This contradictory act of parting and joining hands at different points during the dance could also be interpreted as an act seducing and repelling men at the same time. Once again, provocation has to be counterbalanced with self-control.

In Australia, the gender dimension of the *dabki* has been transformed as a result of re-negotiating the status of migrant Lebanese women. Notably, the *dabki* is rarely performed as a single sex dance in Australia. In most community occasions, male and female Lebanese migrants participate in the *dabki*, disregarding the type of dance that would require the exclusive performance of either group. Mixed *dabki* is the predominant, if not the only, form of *dabki* in Australia. In addition, my fieldwork revealed to me that women attending a community celebration would take part in the *dabki* regardless of family and regional differences. Their participation in the dance

and the sexuality associated with it is not any more restricted by the context of the extended family or the village to which they belong, as the case would be in rural Lebanon. Female dancers in Australia feel freer in joining the *dabki* dance group without being restrained by the regional and the family background of their dancing partners. Moreover, women can lead the dance group and their leading dance is increasingly characterised by sexual innuendo that does not necessarily abide by the stricter rules of conduct normally encountered in rural communities in Lebanon. This development and that relating to the freer participation of female migrants in the *dabki* have on many occasions led to conflicts between the male 'guardians' of the female dancer and those who are seduced by her dance. As a result, many community functions in Sydney have been interrupted by, or even ended with, a brawl. The increasingly independent and strong economic role played by migrant Lebanese women in Australia has led to a relative improvement in their power relationship with men. This broader change has resulted in re-negotiating the terms and conditions under which migrant Lebanese women are participating in the *dabki*. It has certainly transformed the economy of seduction embedded in the *dabki*, and consequently created the conditions for occasional angry outbursts by male dancers aimed at containing the transgressive acts of migrant women. In other words, the changing status of migrant women in broader society resulted in a double process of de-differentiating and re-differentiating the gender order embedded in the *dabki*, reflecting ultimately a 'new' balance of power between male and female migrant dancers.

Class, Ethnicity and the *Dabki*

During my long-term observation of the *dabki* in Australia, I have found that broadly speaking different class groups within the community deal with the *dabki* differently. Lebanese migrants with a working-class background showed extreme interest in the *dabki* and always insisted on taking part in its performance when the opportunity arose. At no point during my field observation, did they show an interest in turning into an audience passively watching the performance of a designated group of dancers. Ethnic solidarity, with all its attendant messages analysed above, seem to be unshakeable among the Lebanese migrant workers when dancing the *dabki*. It is cemented by gendered symbolic messages referring to group belonging and challenging the dominant 'other' and integrating 'him' into the migrant culture.

Community workers and other professionals such as lawyers, teachers, engineers, etc. coming from a Lebanese background, also expressed an interest in learning the *dabki* and partaking in its performance. However, their class interest pertaining to their specific work, especially in the Australian 'multicultural industry' where many take an active part in the battle for the elimination of ethnic discrimination, leads them to deal with the *dabki* predominantly as a mark of identity and a site of resisting discrimination. The belonging to this identity and its invocation in public are utilised as symbolic (ethnic) capital (Tabar, Noble and Poynting 2003) to enhance the pursuit

of their middle-class interest. Valorising ethnic minority (Lebanese) background should, as far as basic principles of multiculturalism in Australia are concerned, discredit any form of discrimination against the Lebanese migrants. The invocation of one's ethnic identity also provides the justification for the Lebanese middle class to create community leadership and work for the protection and interests of the Lebanese community. For this reason in particular, middle-class Lebanese migrants do not object to the idea of transforming the *dabki* into a reified spectacle performed by designated dancers apart from the participation of the community. Being a member of a *dabki* audience overtakes their interest in being a part of it as a communal activity. For them, when performed on stage, the *dabki* reflects no less than the epitome of Lebanese culture which they need to identify with as a distinctly protected ethnic identity.

It is interesting, moreover, to examine the way in which the *nouveau riches* within the Lebanese community appropriate the *dabki*. This group of people normally consists of first-generation Lebanese migrants who came from a poor rural background. After hard work over several years in Australia, combined with periods of general economic prosperity, they have been able to establish successful businesses which ultimately promoted them to the class of rich people within their own community. Given their social capital (Lebanese ethnicity), they usually spend most of their leisure time in Lebanese dancing clubs. Our field observation of their behaviour in these clubs revealed the manner in which the cultural logic of the *dabki* was further transformed by their newly acquired class position.

Like any other club in Sydney, Lebanese clubs in Sydney provide their clients with food, drinks and entertainment. In general, the entertainment program involves the playing of live music, singing and dancing. At a time when most people in the club dance to *dabki* music, the *nouveau riches* take this opportunity to publicly display their newly acquired class position by lavishly spending money on the singer, the drummer and the flute player who make up the key figures in the performance. A similar situation is also noted by Bottomley in her analysis of what she calls 'the interpersonal politics' of Greek dance: 'Large social dances provide opportunities for public display, for lavish spending, for an exhibition of personal skill. High status men are expected to display their success, and there is some competition in payment for dances and monopolising the musicians' (80). In addition, the Lebanese *nouveau riches*, who are found in Lebanese clubs, buy expensive bottles of champagne, wine and whisky and lay them open at the feet of the *dabki* singer. This is not done to simply mark their high economic status, but also to spread the word about their newly acquired wealth within their community through the gossip of those who frequent the club. My fieldwork clearly shows that the *nouveau riche* among Lebanese migrants hardly show an interest in *dancing* the *dabki*, and if they did, their concern to reveal their wealth overrides other considerations characteristic of working-class and middle-class (mainly professional) migrants. As a result, the *nouveau riches* do not partake in the *dabki* and experience its liminality. For them the *dabki* is not an instance where nostalgic feelings towards Lebanon are activated or symbolic

community power and unity are sought. The *dabki* is mainly a site to autograph the story of their economic success. For this reason, affective intensity is distinctly manifested when working-class and middle-class Lebanese migrants are seen dancing, whereas this intensity is hardly noticeable in the role played by the *nouveau riches* in the *dabki*.

Finally, second- and third-generation Lebanese migrants who belong to the upper class rarely attend community events, let alone dancing the *dabki*. They have no need for such events, and the *dabki* had no symbolic value in the course of strategically serving their class interests. If they were to attend a community function and the *dabki* was presented on stage, they would merely show a passing interest in its performance out of courtesy. The *dabki* reminded them of a dying past and a folk tradition which has absolutely no value in their everyday activities. Their integration into the dominant white culture and their economic integration into the Australian high class made the *dabki* insignificant to them, and they treated it with little regard.

Conclusion

My cultural reading of the *dabki* shows that it is traversed with social processes reflecting several contradictory power relations pertaining to issues of ethnicity, racism, gender and class. The aim of this paper was to examine these processes and show that as a cultural practice, the *dabki* is continuously recreated by the agents (i.e. dancers and spectators) who are involved in its enactment under the changing conditions of the context in which they are located. In the age of migration, the liminality of the *dabki* assumes a specific character pertaining to the migrant experience of displacement and social exclusion. As a site of cultural production, the *dabki* is transformed not only to accommodate the new realities found in the host society, but also the reality of the migrants' persistent attachment to their home of origin. Its adaptiveness is such that it reveals resilience as a dance form and a capacity to be constructed and reconstructed for various purposes.

The examination of the *dabki* in Australia has revealed that it is invested with interests and power relations which disclose a great deal of the realities associated with the experience of Lebanese migrants living in multicultural Australia. It is one more cultural site in which the Lebanese migrants spatially inscribe their experience, using their bodies as means of communication.

Acknowledgements

The author wishes to acknowledge Greg Noble and Scott Poynting for editing and commenting on the early draft of this paper. The referees of the *Journal of Intercultural Studies* are also thanked for making this paper theoretically more focused.

Notes

- [1] The author of this paper is of Lebanese background. He and his family (i.e. his mother and his two sisters and one brother) arrived in Sydney in August 1971. Being a member of the Lebanese community put the author in a position of an 'insider' while conducting his ethnographic work. This resulted in 'freeing' him from linguistic and cultural barriers that would otherwise face a non-Arabic and non-Lebanese researcher. The fact that the author was also active in community politics for more than 20 years, enabled him to witness numerous community occasions in which the *dabki* was performed, and to take part in its performance after he acquired the skill to do so.

In 1990, the author decided to start research on the *dabki*. Since then, he began collecting field notes while participating in community events, and later used these notes in the writing of this paper. As a field strategy, he also relied on the numerous remarks that he collected over the years from talking to a large number of community members who participated in the dance and came from different age groups and from both sexes. Furthermore, the long duration during which these notes were collected allowed the author to map out the various trends found in the way the dancers perceived the *dabki*. It also enabled him to examine the extent to which these trends repeatedly manifested themselves in the physical performance of the dance. Apart from this, the author relied on the semi-structured interviews that he conducted with a random sample of five male and two female *dabki* dancers. In short, therefore, he used 'respondent and informant interviewing, direct participation and observation and introspection' (Silverman 1985: 105).

- [2] Synchronising the moves of the group is primarily the task of the *sandeh*, the support-dancer who comes second in the order of the dancers after the *qyadeh*, the lead dancer. For further details, see Trabulsi (1997: 155) and Moubarac (1984: 549–54).
- [3] For a choreographic description of a number of *dabki* dances, see Moubarac (1984: 550–54).
- [4] For the role which group dancing plays in generating community solidarity, see Boas (1972), Radcliffe-Brown (1964), Rust (1969) and Lange (1975).
- [5] Trabulsi (1997: 156–57) argues that basically there are seven categories of *dabki* in Lebanon. These are defined according to: geographical location, landscape (e.g. the plain versus mountain *dabki*), the district, social or religious events, gender, songs and rhymes.
- [6] At a socio-psychological level, Hage argues that the migrant is intensely implicated in the act of reading the newspaper from Lebanon to overcome his guilt feeling induced by leaving his country and failing to pay it back for the 'gift' of communality it had given him originally (Hage 2002: 192–205).
- [7] See Trabulsi (1997: 159–60) for an insightful analysis of the *dabki* as a way of asserting and exhibiting gender differences between males and females in the context of rural Lebanon. Trabulsi argues that in this context, the *dabki* offers men the opportunity to assert his sovereignty over women. In addition, Bottomley (1992) shows the link between gender and the Greek dance, and how the latter is enmeshed with sexual conflict, rites of passage such as the wedding event and the celebration of female fertility and virginity (82). To show the specific symbolic meaning of the male dance in Lebanon, see also Trabulsi (1997: 163–64) where he argues that in rural Lebanon male leaping into the air takes the meaning of a symbolic call for rain to fall and for the plant to grow higher.

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