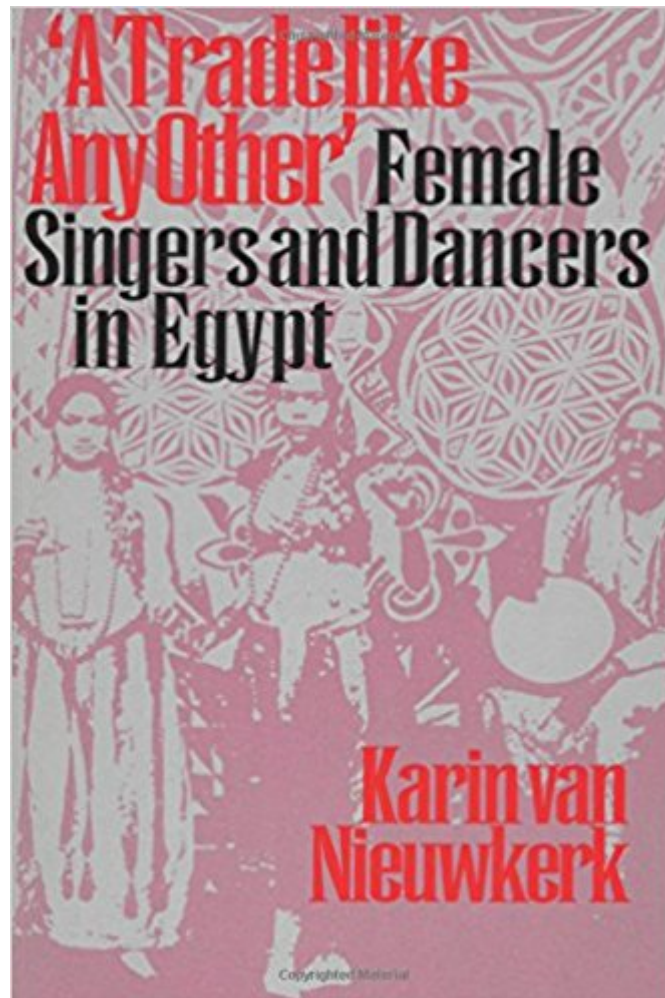




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"A Trade Like Any Other": Female Singers And Dancers In Egypt



Synopsis

In Egypt, singing and dancing are considered essential on happy occasions. Professional entertainers often perform at weddings and other celebrations, and a host family's prestige rises with the number, expense, and fame of the entertainers they hire. Paradoxically, however, the entertainers themselves are often viewed as disreputable people and are accorded little prestige in Egyptian society. This paradox forms the starting point of Karin van Nieuwkerk's look at the Egyptian entertainment trade. She explores the lives of female performers and the reasons why work they regard as "a trade like any other" is considered disreputable in Egyptian society. In particular, she demonstrates that while male entertainers are often viewed as simply "making a living," female performers are almost always considered bad, seductive women engaged in dishonorable conduct. She traces this perception to the social definition of the female body as always and only sexual and enticing – a perception that stigmatizes women entertainers even as it simultaneously offers them a means of livelihood.

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Customer Reviews

"This fascinating ethnography of professional female entertainers in Egypt brings together issues and ideas relevant to dance, anthropology, ethnomusicology, gender studies, and area studies.... 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." (Ethnomusicology)"Van Nieuwkerk's book is unique because it transcends formulaic suppositions and provides intelligent analysis of a world

which has been overlooked for too long. She has partaken in the life of humble entertainers and has tried to understand and explain what their daily and professional lives are like, how they perceive their profession and themselves and how they are perceived by others. In doing so she has written a highly readable and enjoyable ethnography." (Middle Eastern Studies)

In Egypt, singing and dancing are considered essential on happy occasions. Professional entertainers often perform at weddings and other celebrations, and a host family's prestige rises with the number, expense, and fame of the entertainers they hire. Paradoxically, however, the entertainers themselves are often viewed as disreputable people and are accorded little prestige in Egyptian society.

Karin Van Nieuwkerk certainly did a thorough job interviewing and exploring the roles a select sampling of women have had in the entertainment industry in Egypt and this book is one I'd recommend to lovers of history, dance historians and dancers in general. Her book is well researched and offers valuable information. However, because this paper was written for academic purposes some may find the writing style to be a little too formal. This sometimes makes the book a little dry and difficult to follow. However the effort is well worth it even if you normally don't read academic styles. She interviews several dancers who reveal a little bit about Egyptian society and their own lives allowing us to see how they came into this dance form despite the stigmas attached to dancers in Egypt. This is helpful for western women looking to understand the position of female entertainers in modern Egyptian society (also in most arab societies). Although much of their experiences are somewhat limited to the Mohammed Ali street area and Cairo in a larger sense much of it still applies to Egypt in general and much of North Africa and the Middle East. It takes a good look at the love-hate dynamic relationship Egyptians have with female performers and looks at the religious cultural, and societal implications of female performance. However, the book was written on research from the 1980's from a select sample of women in a relatively small sample area so when reading it remember that this research does not reflect the current entertainment trade in Egypt nor does it necessarily reflect the way things are everywhere in the Middle East/North Africa (although since it is specifically about Egypt one really shouldn't have that expectation anyways). For those who have already read the book or want to read a shorter updated piece, there is a follow up article by Karin Van Nieuwkerk available online at the following address:http://www.muspe.unibo.it/period/ma/index/number3/nieuwkerk/karin_0.htm

This book is packed with a great deal of first hand interviews, and really does get into some of the complicated Cultural shifts that Egypt went through that impacted the Rise and fall of Dance in Egypt. Unfortunately, the author uses 3 words wherever 1 or 2 would suffice, and repeats herself often. The book would be greatly improved by a good copy editor. The contents are worth the effort. I think that this should be required reading for anyone studying Dance anthropology or seeking to study Bellydance.

This was a book club assignment and it had far too much tedious history and not enough of it was interestingly written. I couldn't get through more than 1/4 of the book and I read 2 a week.

Too many books about Oriental/belly/Middle Eastern dance lean toward fantasy rather than scholarship. Van Nieuwkerk's book explores the seemingly paradoxical love-hate relationship many people have toward Egyptian belly dancing and dancers and details the history of the dance over the past few centuries.

I don't think I would leisure read this book. It has a lot of great information in it, but it's written like a college thesis. Some of the research is pretty weak and has a small sampling of people. That said, there are few books on the market that cover the topics that "A Trade Like Any Other" does. Any one that is truly looking for information on the lives and work conditions of singers and dancers throughout the last couple hundred years in Egypt should read this book.

This was disappointing for me. I have a bellydance troupe, and have been to Egypt, and this book read like someone's essay for school. There is a lot of information indeed, but way too much of the author's opinion of things to wade through. I did find a lot of misinformation too. A lot of "traditions" had never been heard of by my friends, young and old, living in different areas all over Egypt. Some were obscure indeed.

This is a fabulous and unique book which should be read by all scholars of the Middle East. Because entertainment has been so central to the identity of Egyptians this is an essential read. The author provides fascinating insights on the construction of gender in Egypt, the public/private realm, the complex web of morals and the role of dance and music in political development. This is worth twice its weight.

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