



Leading sea bands of the region Mayouf performing Feb 9.

Dr Urkevich offers a glimpse into Kuwait's cultural heritage

# Badawi, Ardha... the beats of Kuwaiti life

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On Feb 9, Dar Al Athar Al Islamiyyah offered their patrons and guests a spectacular presentation which not only entertained but also gave a quick look at an important socio-cultural aspect of Kuwaiti life, which if not preserved may soon get lost in the sands of time. On Monday evening the Dar hosted a presentation by Dr Lisa Urkevich titled "Battle Song-Dance Forms of Arabia: Women's Badawi and Men's 'Ardha' at the Al Maidan Cultural Center. Dr Urkevich's exposition was suitably illustrated by Sulaiman Al Mayouf and the Mayouf Band and Huda Ahmad's Folklore Troupe with lead choreographer: Altaf al-Ajeel, who with their performances brought to the darkened theater a slice of Kuwait's cultural heritage. "This programme is very appropriate for a month that celebrates Kuwait's independence and history," mentioned moderator Ahmad al-Khaja in his introduction. "These two dances have been part of Kuwaiti celebration for hundreds of years," he continued.

To attend one of Dr Urkevich's presentation is a rare treat especially for those interested in getting better acquainted with the socio cultural tapestry of the small Gulf nation in which they live. With the aid of audio visual arrangements, live presentations and her formidable academic experience Dr Lisa Urkevich provided a glimpse into the musical culture and through it an entire gamut of social behaviour. On Monday evening the audience was treated to a spectacle from Kuwait's past which is slowly but steadily getting lost especially amongst the younger generation.

The evening's performers were uniquely qualified for their roles. Dr Urkevich is Director of the Arabian heritage Project at the American University of Kuwait and has

spent years recording and documenting the musical culture of the Gulf and Saudi Arabia. The Mayouf Band is fast approaching its golden anniversary and is recognized as one of the leading sea bands of the region who are working hard at preserving and enriching their musical heritage. Huda Ahmad Folk Troupe with lead choreographer Altaf Al Ajeel have through their collaboration preserved folklore, music and dance with historical accuracy.

### Tradition

Ardha is one of the most famous folk song and dance traditions of the Arabian Peninsula. It is a ceremonial display of physical prowess and loyalty that arose from the incessant wars that man waged against the harshness of life in the desert. "For centuries battle and competitions have been at the heart of Arabian life," said Dr Urkevich. Life was a constant struggle against cruel natural conditions. "The desert killed many of their children, tortured their families with drought, dressed them in rags and yielded them nothing but scrap — yet the Bedouin and desert settlers were not defeated." With few vital resources intense competition was common between tribes and also among clans leading to a constant state of rivalry and combat that found expression as raids. Raiding was not a criminal act, she explained, rather it was a 'full time preoccupation for bored Bedouin males' which was approached more for the sport than for genuine hatred of the enemy. However at times these raids could escalate into fierce battles and thus an intense feeling of competitiveness and aggression were inherent in basic desert culture as seen in their collective dance forms whether male or female.

Ardha or the traditional war dance with its special patriotic and cultural role can be traced to Nejd in Saudi Arabia. Apart from desert ardha or nejdī ardha there are also traditions of ardha in the sea culture of the Gulf

States. The word 'ardha' means show or parade and it refers to the original function of the dance that is to prepare for battle. Before battle men from opposing sides would gather their weaponry in a show of military might and numerical strength inciting warriors, raising their morale and preparing them both physically and mentally. Infact in many cultures it is common to unsettle the enemy with shouts and cries and from this emanated the custom of formalized chants, said Dr Urkevich. The inherent sense of community in this dance form was noticeable in the video footage showed of a Saudi Ardha performance held in 1998 where the then crown prince of Saudi Arabia joined his men with his country's flag draped around his shoulders.

### Distinction

'Najdi ardha' went with the clans that migrated from Nejd following a drought in the 18th century thus accounting for the shared cultural connection of Qatar, Bahrain and Kuwait with Central Arabia. "Today in the Gulf, ardha is performed as a significant and noble ritual that marks important events including state celebrations, graduations and weddings." The ardha of the Gulf is however different from its 'najdi' counterparts with its usage of different instruments and lack of military trappings. There are three types of ardha, explained Dr Urkevich in the Gulf region. The first is a gulf version of the najdi ardha, a sea ardha called 'ardha bahri' followed by a unique ardha called 'ardha al amariya' which combines elements of both sea and desert.

The distinction between the ardha of Najd and the Gulf which might escape the notice

of a casual onlooker is due to the socio-cultural difference of the region. The countries of the Gulf did not have the same history of fighting as that of Nejd based as they were on a mercantile economy with livelihoods dependent on pearl diving and fishing. "Machismo" said Dr Urkevich, "was not part of their culture." And though Gulf ardha was also patriotic, inspiring and unifying it had none of what she called the 'bellicose spectacle'. When the Mayouf Band took the stage they performed the 'ardha bahri', the most important ardha cultivated in the Gulf. Though there are no weapons used in the performance, there remains a sense of solidarity, pride and competitiveness. 'Fresh off the press' as Dr Urkevich calls it, the Mayouf Band sang a new song written by poet Mutlaq Nawr Al Mutairi. 'Today is Kuwait's National day and the celebration of Abu Nasser, Many Happy Returns with pride and joy,' sang the Al Mayouf Band holding hands, with swaying motion, steps done in unison, standing in line with the lead singer calling out the text to the rows that tried to outdo the chants with great energy.

Very few get the rare chance to see a live sea band perform and on Monday evening Dr Urkevich and the Dar gave the audience an opportunity to savour the experience. The Mayouf band gave a lively performance of the rare 'ardha al amariya' singing praises of their motherland and reiterating their allegiance. And as the band performed this piece which combines elements of sea and desert repertoire, Dr Urkevich pointed out the 'camel' like movements of the dancers who moved with a backward shift and slow upper motion.

The musical lives of women are also a clear indication of Bedouin tradition of pride and competition. Wedding celebrations that include only female guest is the primary place where women express themselves in music and dance. They serve not only to cel-

brate the wedding but also to showcase young women to prospective in laws. It is in these performances that the element of 'competition and battle' is noticeable in women's collective performance. "Even today badawi is done in families with strong Bedouin roots." Badawi is the female battle dance and is also known as the female ardha. "In a traditional badawi the dancer should strive for the appearance of a charging Arabian horse," explained Dr Urkevich. In a traditional badawi, she said entire groups of women charge forward together, galloping, intimidating, goading the audience and throwing a challenge at another group.

### Movement

The importance of hand movements in badawi was noticeable when Huda Ahmad's performers danced a short version of the same to the absolute delight of the audience. "An important part of the dance is the right hand which can produce several gestures." With intricate hand gestures each with special meanings the women moved to the music. The lead dancer did the 'hair toss' or the head movement which allowed hair to be used as a dance prop. "The hair is also important to badawi with the women tossing their hair like horse mane. All the hair tosses are very challenging to perform and can easily make a dancer dizzy. Dancing the badawi can be very taxing and the dancer can tire quickly but it demonstrates to the prospective mother in law the health and vitality of the dancer," smiled Dr Urkevich. The badawi was followed by the 'doosri' a dance with aggressive hand and elbow movements. Despite the muted performance and absence of loud ululation, it was a rare privilege to watch these women who had braved conventions to give the audience a glimpse of their closely guarded socio-cultural life.



Dr Lisa Urkevich