Dancing modern gender roles: A study of male club dancers in Gumbet, Turkey

Maxine Robinson

Tourists flock to the small but lively resort of Gumbet on Turkey’s west coast in the summer months. For many it provides everything required for a simple relaxing holiday, long beaches, good food and cheap beer. However, there is something different about Gumbet. The aptly named ‘Bar Street’ pulls in hoards of visitors craving nightlife and the scene is similar to European tourist resorts frequented by the young and carefree, like Kavos in Corfu or Laganas in Zante. While the clubs in these resorts are filled with young women gyrating on bars, using their dancing bodies to pull in business and start the party, in Gumbet, this role is occupied solely by men and women are noticeably absent.

This is unusual, since dance forms associated with the club scene include pole and lap dancing that traditionally have been performed by women for a predominantly male audience. In certain places in Europe versions of this sultry dancing have migrated from gentlemen’s clubs into nightclubs. Although it is possible for men to work as nightclub dancers, the industry in Europe is still dominated by women. While it is important to make the distinction between strippers and nightclub dancers as they perform different roles and work in different venues, club dancers still often push the boundaries of what kind of sexual performance is acceptable in mainstream nightclubs. In the book Club Cultures: Boundaries, Identities and Otherness, sociologist Silvia Rief explains how many standard night clubs now feature platforms, poles and podiums occupied by performers employed by the club to entertain customers and entice them onto the dance floor (Rief 2009:91). Westerners, it seems have become largely desensitized to this provocative dancing in the quotidien. After all, historically, social dancing and performance in the dance halls has always been for pleasure and a tool for courtship (McRobbie 1997:211-2). Fast forward to the present day and we see that not much has changed, whatever dance forms were considered risqué for the time have always been a feature of the social night club scene.

Despite sexually suggestive performance in the club becoming normalised in the West, the nonexistence of women dancers in Gumbet and the presence of young, topless and muscular male dancers, was a physical, tangible reminder of how Gumbet masqueraded as a Western tourist haven, yet still retained a strong Middle Eastern identity. This situation where men dance and women do not is simultaneously an embodiment of modern day Turkish culture; and a reminder of different traditional values representative of an alternative social dance history that has shaped modern gender roles in the country.

The performers that work in nightclubs as
dancers in Europe and the men who gyrate on bars in Gumbet occupy a woolly territory between what displays of sexuality are acceptable in the mainstream. They combine sexual and illicit movements from striptease, with street dance and hip hop moves from popular culture, involving hip isolations and grounded dynamics. This is performed with an upbeat, infectious energy of a musical theatre entertainer but with a more sexually suggestive style. For the sake of this article, I will refer to both the men and women in these roles as club dancers. This article will explore some of the complex relationships between dance, sex and gender, focusing on how dance contributes to shaping modern gender roles in Turkey.

Fieldwork Background
My personal connection to Turkey comes through my sister who married a Turkish man and lived with him in Gumbet for several years. He is from the city of Adana in the southern central part of Turkey but more recently lived and worked as a bar manager in Gumbet on the west coast. I have visited both Adana and Gumbet which I consider to be two vastly different places. Gumbet could be mistaken for a European tourist resort as it is populated by Western tourists and shares other commonalities with holiday destinations on the continent: signs are written in English, Western pop music is played everywhere and much of the food is catered to Western tastes. In contrast to this Adana had a far more traditional, religious and homogenous population. Information was of course in Turkish, the radio featured an abundance of Turkish musical artists, staple foods were kebabs, koftes and salads and alcohol was scarcely served.

I met my sister’s husband’s friends and colleagues on visits in March and June 2012. My family connection granted me a level of familiarity to the male club dancers who I feel spoke openly to me about their work. While there has been much written about women performing provocatively as part of the popular nightlife scene- notably dance scholar Sherrill Dodd’s essay Dance and Erotica: The Construction of the Female Stripper, (1997) and subsequent books including Dancing on the Canon: Embodiments of Value in Popular Dance (2011) - the investigation of men remains narrow. Furthermore, to my knowledge, the study of young, Turkish, Muslim men dancing in bars and clubs in tourist resorts has never been explored.

Insights into Turkey’s Conflicted Cultural Identity
Turkey has an interesting identity, geographically between Europe and Asia, the country has developed a unique cultural position. Turkey has made political reforms in attempts to become part European Union, and liberal leaders in other Arab nations have been influenced by Turkey’s governmental model (BBC 2014). In his book The Passing of Traditional Society. Modernizing the Middle East, American academic Daniel Lerner convincingly explains the tension among Turks between the haste to modernize and the resistance to change. Writing in 1964 he says that “Turkey is not a Modern society in our sense; but it is no longer a Traditional society in any sense” (Lerner 1964:111). It is my more recent experiences in the country that I will go on to explain that convince me that this statement is still relevant today.

While there is no simple way to categorise people, Lerner uses the terms of Moderns and Traditionals to describe opposing modes of thought. These categories are general terms, and people do not necessarily fit into one category or the other, however, they are helpful to explain the mixed feelings toward modernisation and traditionalism in the country. Lerner describes how Traditional Turks as more likely to defend their traditions and dislike change, as they feel more comfortable in their familiar world consisting of family, the village and the mosque (Lerner 1964:141). The male club dancers I spoke to generally referred to their families residing in
either rural parts of the country or non-touristy cities in this way, explaining how they rarely travelled outside of their home town and socialised mainly with family and neighbours. In opposition to this, according to Lerner, the Moderns in Turkey largely follow the Western model that was championed by Mustafa Kemal Atatürk who admired the West and was responsible for bringing about much change (Lerner 1964:112). Geographically, the West of the country was considered the most modern which is partly credited to being more connected to the media and world events (Lerner 1964:130). This theory supports my findings, as in Gumbet on the west coast, the habitants and workers are mixing with foreign Western tourists all the time, thus possibly stimulating their interest in wider world politics and culture and influencing their views. The men I spoke with were interested about my life at home and asked questions about how Gumbet compared to Britain. Many of them had never been outside of Turkey and they were curious about Europe. I sensed a real desire for knowledge and an assumption that my life was somehow richer than theirs, because in their eyes I was surrounded by wealth, opportunity and a liberal society. They felt Turkey was still transitioning towards this and mostly viewed the Westernization of parts of the country as positive.

Many of the men I spoke with explained how travelling to work in Gumbet in the summer season was a great opportunity to make better money than they would labouring in their home towns. The financial gain was enough to convince their parents, and partners that working away each summer was a good idea. However, they also explained how working in Gumbet had exposed them to an alternative lifestyle with more liberal attitudes than what they had grown up with. The distance afforded them the freedom topartake in activities that would be frowned upon, or prohibited by the more traditional members of their community at home, such as drinking alcohol, flirting with European tourists and dancing on bars. Once they had tasted this life, they continued to come back to it each year.

It was not just the money that attracted the men to working as club dancers in Gumbet. They enjoyed dancing and couldn’t believe how fun and easy it was to earn a living in this way. One man mentioned that even though the work was exhausting, he always had a smile on his face because coming to work was just like partying all night long. They also relished the opportunity to practice speaking English which they considered to be helpful for prospective employment. I also spoke to the men about the camaraderie with each other, as many returned each year to work with the same colleagues around the resort and so developed close bonds. As there were many aspects of their experience in Gumbet that they would either not share with people back home due to a fear of being judged or reprimanded, many men shared the view that it was only their friends in Gumbet that knew what they considered to be their true personalities. This was another contributing factor that led to them returning to work in the resort each year.

Many of the club dancers confessed to me that they had not told their families they were earning money from dancing, instead allowing them to believe they were waiters or hotel staff. They believed that to their families, a club dancer would be an unacceptable occupation as it was immodest, and working in a bar that served alcohol would be condemned. One man told me that his home town was so traditional that his mother would not even be able to imagine the life he lived in Gumbet, dancing with crowds of intoxicated people, therefore it was easy to keep the truth from her. He said that his mother believed that he got up to pray each morning and worked in a restaurant, adding that she was very proud of
the money he makes each year from working so hard.

These men appear to be embracing many of the definitions of a modern viewpoint as illustrated by cultural anthropologist Brian Silverstein in his book Islam and Modernity in Turkey. He explains how advocating market capitalism and holding a critical stance toward tradition and religious wisdom are features of modernity (Silverstein 2011:4). The men’s drive for economic gain in order to be considered successful and independent matches with this definition. Similarly, the men were taking their religious beliefs less seriously, as many admitted that they no longer worshiped in an orthodox manner despite still describing themselves as Muslim. The more they embraced these modern values the more they distanced themselves from having a traditional occupation and family life. Despite this these men were still not completely comfortable with their identities as club dancers. After all, many were keeping the real details of their jobs secret from their families for fear of disapproval. They seemed conflicted about being a club dancer. On the one hand their work was light-hearted, harmless fun that earned them a good living. On the other hand they still felt pressure and some desire to honour their Muslim cultural roots and family traditions.

The Innately Sexual Nature of Dance

In her essay Embodying Difference: Issues in Dance and Cultural Studies, professor of American Studies and Women’s Studies Jane C. Desmond argues that we cannot ignore the ability of dance to represent a highly codified enactment of many categories of identity including race, gender, ethnicity, nationality and sexuality (Desmond 1997:49). Since the human body is the required vehicle for dance, all facets of one’s identity are present in performance. Thus, dance becomes a unique avenue to explore conflicted identities which are reflected and developed through practice. It could be argued that the male club dancers were using dance in this way, creating and exploring what it was to be a modern, young Turkish man, without having to put it into words.

The non-verbal and therefore ambiguous nature of dance makes it particularly well placed to communicate about sex, which is often considered a private and taboo subject for open discussion. Dance Anthropologist Judith Lynne Hanna explains in her book Dance, Sex and Gender. Signs of Identity, Dominance, Defiance and Desire, that dance is inherently and naturally connected to sex because of its use of the body. She argues many points on this matter, stating that dance is often a part of courtship, able to stimulate sexual fantasy, and that the impulse to dance among humans may be reproductive, thus, dancers are automatically sexy (Hanna 1988:5-6). This helps explain the different ways performance can be used to signify a range of messages about sex. For example, strippers might communicate more explicitly, while club dancers would be more flirtatious and suggestive.

Since dance is largely non-verbal it can communicate powerfully about a wide range of themes – including sex - with little accountability. This affords it the potential to be a safe and subliminal course for change (Hanna 1988:xvi). In the West, dance has operated in this clandestine way to influence what levels of sexual performance is now commonly present in the regular night club scene. Despite the different contexts in which they work, the sexual performance of strippers and club dancers share similarities. This is because their movements often evoke a comparable sultry performance style; body rolls, swivelling hips and high leg extensions for girls; and macho muscle flexing and pelvic grinding for men. Club dancers that embody similar movements to strippers have appeared to subtly extend the sexual nature of striptease from the select community in gentlemen’s establishments to the
mainstream club scene, through this connected movement language. In turn, a constant increase in the type of sexually suggestive performance present in mainstream society becomes a feature of modern Western culture.

In Gumbet the club dancers used dance to stimulate change in this undercover way whether they were consciously aware of it or not. The men in Gumbet were cheeky, flirtatious and covertly sexual. They performed simple routines to popular songs and encouraged people to get up and join in. At times they took their shirts off and sometimes I watched them playfully pull down each other’s trousers in a rehearsed fashion, flashing their underwear to groups of girls, like amateur strippers. Some of them also developed relationships with female holidaymakers, for which the dancing may have been a trigger. Flaunting their bodies this way and having casual relationships certainly rebels against more traditional cultural norms and may be understandably disapproved of by more modest and traditional Turks. One man that I knew had a strategy of targeting middle aged single women who he assumed would be financially secure and flattered by his attention on the dance floor. This had some positive benefits for both himself and the bar. Firstly, the bar would seem friendly and approachable and young male tourists wouldn’t feel threatened by the dancers making potential advances to their younger girlfriends. Secondly, this dancer had someone who would buy him meals and pay generous tips in exchange for trips around the resort, and his company when he was not at work.

This behaviour, which began with confident, flirtatious performance in the bar, rebelled against more modest traditional Turkish culture. The sexual subtext present in the playful dance performance that happens in the clubs in Gumbet indicates assimilation toward the Western nightclub scene. It is interesting to note that this sexual club dance culture is becoming popular in Gumbet like it is in the West. Therefore it could be argued that this dance context present in Gumbet contributes to the Westernization of this area of the country.

Where Were All the Women?
“Whereas sex refers to biological phenomena, sex role or gender denotes their cultural, psychological, and social correlates: the rules, expectations, and behaviour appropriate to being male or female within a particular society” (Hanna 1988:7).

If we accept that dance and sex are inherently linked, then it could be argued that male club dancers performing in a public, social area are using dance to alter typical Middle Eastern gender roles that usually value modesty (Al Omari 2008:119). As explained it also reflects an affiliation with Western culture. Simultaneously, the
absence of women does not necessarily suggest that women are not constructing new modern identities. Rather, it might be that Turkish females just would not find dance an appropriate method to do so, or clubs an appropriate space to dance in. I asked some of the men why there were no women working as dancers and I was mostly met with laughter as though they could not take my question seriously. When pressed for answers, responses were mixed between an assumption that women would not want to do this kind of work, and a belief that it would not be appropriate. One man commented that a woman would damage her marriage prospects if she worked as a club dancer because it would be assumed that she would be engaged in casual relationships as many of the men were and flaunting her body for money, which was even less acceptable for women than it was men. He felt that Turkish women would happily sacrifice the chance to work as a club dancer because in his opinion they valued getting married to a man that could provide for her as more important than her own career. When I suggested that Turkish women could hide their job as a dancer from their families the way many of the men did he admitted that while this was possible, the risks of being discovered were worse for women. He did not specify what might happen, but implied that women would face a worse fate than men if caught.

Historically in the Middle East women often danced for men as a prelude to sex. Furthermore, women dancing in public were deemed to be breaking Islamic laws and were likened to prostitutes (Hanna 1988:51). This helps explain why club dancer roles would not be occupied by women in Turkey and reinforces what the men explained to me. It would be unlikely for many Turkish women to feel comfortable in such a job, as if dance is inherently sexual, then performing publicly would conflict with the historical and cultural attitude to dance in the Middle East. It is here that we see the conflicted identity of Turkey once more. Despite the men in Gumbet compromising their more traditional values to perform as club dancers, the fact that female sexuality is still regarded as something that needs to be protected illustrates the issue with the simplistic view that Turkey is blindly following the Western model of modernisation. It appears that tradition has a stronger influence in certain areas, and perhaps beliefs about female sexuality are one of these areas. If this is the case then it would explain why women dancing in public in this casual club context would be seen as culturally inappropriate.

It would be easy to see all the other aspects of Western modernisation present in Gumbet and interpret the absence of women club dancers in exchange for the presence of male dancers as being repressive for women. After all, the common Western view of Muslim women can be that they are repressed because they cover their bodies. However, the Muslim view of Western women is often that they are supressed as they show their bodies for the approval of men (Kristof&WuDunn 2010:154). In any case, club dancing and sexual performance becoming commonplace in the West, makes it a feature of Western modernity but not necessarily a positive feature. According to author DenizKandiyoti, in her book Gendering the Middle East, Emerging Perspectives, she asserts that feminism in the Middle East has developed from local culture but also in dialogue with other international models of feminism (Kandiyoti 1996:7). It is only right that Turkish women would create modern gender roles that are right for them based on their own culture and traditions. Furthermore, Kandiyoti explains that Muslim women have power and influence behind what may look like gender segregation (Kandiyoti 1996:9). Therefore, just because we do not see women performing alongside men as club dancers does not mean that they are not active and powerful in shaping Turkey’s modern culture. Despite these positive steps for women it would be
erroneous not to mention the counter argument to this, as even with the government making many reforms for women rights, some still believe that the government have only reacted to EU pressure and are not truly committed to gender equality (BBC 2014).

Conclusion
It can be easy to ignore dance, and in particular what would be considered non-technical and at best, semi-professional social dance performance in the club context as an area worthy of serious study. Yet, if we accept the argument that dance is inherently connected to sex, and sex as naturally linked to gender, then it can prove to shed fascinating insights into human identities. The physical body is the central vehicle that links dance, sex and gender, and in dance performance, we are permitted to watch the design and transformation of all these facets at once. Dance can provide a non-verbal and emotional way to communicate about these themes in public. Additionally, who we are permitted to watch dance and who we are not can carry much meaning. It is through who performs, when, and how that shows how dance is able to subliminally extend certain boundaries and shape personal, cultural and gender identities.

Male Turkish club dancers appear to be experimenting with dance to help build modern gender identities which in turn fades certain relationships with their cultural traditions. The fact that in Turkish culture women historically danced before becoming intimate with their partners reinforces dances connection to sex as a universal theme. It is just different cultural attitudes to dance and sex that either enable or disable dance performance in public clubs. The men I engaged with were very clear about the importance of family loyalty and professed to be good Muslim boys. However they enjoyed working as dancers in Gumbet and somehow either believed or convinced themselves that their work here did not conflict with this view. Despite this, the conflict was apparent when I watched them perform shirtless, flirt with Western women and encourage alcohol consumption. Perhaps it was the money and chance to earn a better living that made this acceptable. On the other hand, it may be that dance offered that wonderful space of unaccountability. The club dancer’s performance communicated clear messages about who they wanted to be as young Turkish men, without the directness and heaviness of language. They embraced sexual movements that signified a virile assertiveness and active rebellion that they knew would be criticized by more traditional outlooks, hence why many shrouded the truth from their absent families. However in their own minds, they did not question their behaviour as wrong, seemingly because they are content to embrace these more modern aspects of culture.

REFERENCES
1. Al Omari, Jehad

2. BBC
   2014 Turkey Profile


4. Hanna, Judith Lynne

5. Kandiyoti, Deniz, ed.
   1996 Gendering the Middle East, Emerging Perspectives. New York: Syracuse University Press.

6. Kristof, Nicholas D. and Sheryl WuDunn

7. Lerner, Daniel  

8. McRobbie, Angela  

9. Rief, Silvia  

10. Silverstein, Brian  