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## **Caste in the making, dance in the making**

SUMMARY: The present paper is based on fieldwork in Pushkar (Rajasthan) with the Kalbelia caste: traditionally associated with snake charming, it has recently been turning its own musical and dance heritage into a distinguishing feature of *Rājasthānī* folklore. This paper, through the description of the ethnohistory of Kalbelia dance leads to some considerations concerning the social status of female professional dancers in modern Indian society. The present social status of female professional dancers will be here described as an outcome of the past British colonial presence in India. The analysis will prove how the colonial past continues to haunt the Indian social and cultural present. Besides, through this case study, it will be argued that caste is not the unchanging, historically frozen structure as ethnographic imagination has largely presented it. On the contrary, caste will be considered to be the product of a dynamic balance ruled by economic, ideological and cultural requests.

KEYWORDS: Kalbelia, *Rājasthānī* folklore, tourist gaze, *devadāsī*, orientalism, caste, Gypsy.

This paper, by means of the analysis of the occupational shifting a particular *Rājasthānī* community is going through, aims first of all at showing how art, while being a historical, economic, political and cultural product, is, at the same time, an agent for historical, economic, political and cultural transformations. Besides the outline of the ongoing transformation from snake charming to dancing, this article is going to deal with some other topics: first of all it will be shown how caste, far from

being the unchanging, historically frozen structure that it is usually presented as, is rather a highly responsive one and a legitimate subject of analysis (Inden 1990; Dirks 2001). Moreover it will be argued that in the study of the phenomena related to globalization, it is necessary to allow agency not only to hybridized elites who come into direct contact with European ideas and practices, but also to the illiterate labourers, blue collar workers or unskilled migrants who, just as much as, if not even more than their elite fellow-citizens, practice and experience modernity on all its ambivalence and contradictions (Osella 2000: 261). It will be implicitly proved that globalization itself does not produce a global culture except in the most superficial sense; instead, it serves localized cultural purposes and helps to reshape pre-existing systems of thought (Guneratne 2001: 527). Globalization is manifested in the array of distinct local cultures produced by the interaction of transnational flows and local practices and its processes actually reinforce the particulars of locality. Finally, the case study presented here, providing a paradigmatic example of invention of tradition (Hobsbawm-Ranger 1983), contradicts stereotypical but all-too-familiar images of an unchanging India of insular and self-contained villages and passive rural peasantry.

The community this paper deals with belongs to the Kalbelia caste. Today concentrated in the Rajasthan districts of Pali, Jaipur, Jodhpur, Ajmer, Cittaurgarh and Udaipur, the Kalbelia caste consists of twelve exogamous clans (*gotra*) and is traditionally identified with the art of snake charming. Kalbelias consider themselves to be descendants of Kanipāv, one of the nine Nātha, the semi-divine masters of the practice of *haṭha-yoga* which inspired the *nātha-yogin* movement, an important philosophical and religious tradition that established itself around the 12<sup>th</sup> century. Doctrines common to Vajrayāna Buddhism and Tantrism in general converge in this movement. The art of snake charming, the main social characteristic of the caste, is connected with the descent from Kanipāv. There are two versions of history which seek to explain how Kanipāv came to practice the art. One version has it that Kanipāv was cursed by Gorakh Nāth to carry poisonous snakes around with

him and to use them for begging whilst the other has it that Kanipāv was blessed by the god Śiva, who, pleased by the former's strong faith and devotion, allowed him and his disciples to embrace the profession of snake charming.<sup>1</sup> Memory of the descent from Kanipāv also lives on in the habit of placing the term "*nātha*" after men's names. The same word is also used to refer to Kalbelia one of which is a honorifics' caste membership. In Rajasthan, in fact, there is a system of multiple naming whereby each caste can be identified by at least three names, one of which is honorific, one demeaning or offensive and one neutral (Bharucha 2003: 57). For example, amongst themselves the Kalbelias call themselves Jogi, a word used to refer to a large number of nomadic groups such as the Gadolia Luhar, the Kuchbandiya and the Bansdewal, all possessing specific skills thanks to which they provide the settled communities with a wide range of specialized services, of both a ritual and non-ritual nature. The word "*jogī*" or "*yogī*" is still applied very broadly (Russell-Lal 1916: 389), so much so that it can indicate both Hindu and Muslim groups. The term is also comprehensively used to refer to ascetics,<sup>2</sup> above all if they practice any form of yoga. The word "*kalbelia*", however, describes a more restricted endogamous group and is used by members of other castes without any particular connotations being attached to such use. "*Saperā*" (Briggs 1938: 59-61) is another name used to identify snake charmers in a general sense and is widespread above all outside Rajasthan. The term "*nātha*" can be also used to define, but in a honorific way, Kalbelias' caste membership.

This multiple naming system is completed with the use of the term "Gypsy", mainly used by members of the caste to introduce themselves to foreigners. A broad digression is required in order to clarify the reasons which have led an Indian caste to identify themselves as a community of Gypsies.

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<sup>1</sup> The association between Śiva and the snake is deeply rooted in *hindū* culture.

<sup>2</sup> Originally the term was related only to the *Gorakhnāthī*.

The term “Gypsy” is the result of one of the many hypotheses (Piasere 2006: 1-54) formulated, from the 15<sup>th</sup> century onwards, with regard to the origin of those peoples of uncertain provenance who in the second decade of the 15<sup>th</sup> century began to move around the lands of Western Europe. Such groups, headed by leaders with high-sounding titles, claimed the status of pilgrims in search of expiation, amassing imperial guarantees of safe passage and letters of protection, which allowed them to move around the countries of Central and Western Europe. The idea that such groups originated in Egypt established itself in the popular imagination due to declarations made by those same nomadic groups, and was reported in the earliest records. The idea also had a scholarly basis. The first writer to admit the feasibility of the Egyptian origin theory was Heinrich Cornelius Agrippa von Nettesheim (1486-1535), doing so in his work *De incertitudine et vanitate scientiarum*, published in 1527. He believed that the area of provenance of these groups lay between Egypt and Ethiopia. The term “Gypsy”, together with its equivalent terms in other European languages, precisely attests to this hypothesis. The word is, naturally, no longer used to refer to groups of people who are presumed to come from Egypt. It is a name which refers to a polythetic category, i.e. a classification which cannot be defined by means of a set of necessary and sufficient traits which brings together all members of the category, who, on the contrary, share only some characteristics. There is no lowest common denominator to which to refer, so much so that two members of the set may find that they do not share any characteristic but are still associated by virtue of their link with other members of the group. The word “Gypsy” refers to a polythetic classification since the word denotes a large number of communities which are not united by a selection of peculiarities which characterize in an absolute sense the category which comprises them, with the exception possibly of negative stigmatization on the part of whoever gives them this name. This, however does not constitute a trait which is either necessary or sufficient, as many groups not classified as Gypsies are still socially and culturally discriminated against. The members of the Gypsy set

are, rather, associated by a concatenation based on the recurrence of a number of non-uniformly distributed features. These are, essentially, the sharing of family resemblances and a conceptually very flexible method of classification which allows inclusion of an extremely composite variety of people, possessing even very marked cultural differences, within the same group (Piasere 2004: 3; Piasere 1995: 3-13).

In order to understand on the basis of which dynamics and which criteria an Indian caste of snake charmers has become part of the transnational Gypsy set, mention needs to be made of another of the hypotheses formulated with regard to the origins of the Romani groups – the so-called “Indian Connection” theory (Okely 1983: 8-13).

This theory, which maintains that such groups arrived not from Egypt but from India, came to prominence in the second half of the 18<sup>th</sup> century. The question of who actually first formulated the Indian origin thesis is much debated, credit being given to different scholars. However, much weight now tends to be given to the argument that it was a Hungarian preacher, Stephan Vályi, who first came upon the link, identifying a relationship between the Romani languages (Hancock 1994: 3603) and the Indian languages. According to Samuel Augustini ab Hortis (in a report published on 6 March 1776 in the Vienna Gazette) Stephan Vályi made a fruitful comparison of the vocabulary of Indian students from Malabar whom he met in Leiden and that of Hungarian Roma. The German scholar Johann Carl Christoph Rudiger scientifically elaborated Vályi’s intuitive discovery. In 1782 he published a paper entitled *Von der Sprache und Herkfunft der Zigeuner aus Indien* (On the Indic Language and Origin of the Gypsies) in Leipzig as part of a collection of essays on linguistics. In this work he demonstrated, using the comparative method, that some phrases in the Romani language were connected to dialects of Northern India. This discovery was consolidated and developed by Heinrich Moritz Gottlieb Grellmann, who, in his book *Die Zigeuner. Ein Historischer Versuch über die Lebensart und Verfassung, Sitten und Schicksale dieses Volkes in Europa, bebst ihrem Ursprunge* (Gypsies. Being a historical enquiry on the manner and conception of life,

customs and destiny of this people in Europe, and on its origins), published in Leipzig in 1783, demonstrated,<sup>3</sup> combining linguistic analysis with historical examination and a description of customs, the Indian origin of the Romani people (Spinelli 2003: 131-132). The Austrian linguist of Slovenian origin Franz Miklosich, who between 1872 and 1881 published around ten essays based on an analysis of the way in which the Romani people handled nouns in their speech, reached the conclusion that the communities must have left India around the 10<sup>th</sup> century and, furthermore, as there are Greek words in all the dialects of the Romani language, the Greek area must have been the region from which all the groups set off in turn for Europe.

Just as the Indian origin theory was demonstrated by means of eminently linguistic instruments,<sup>4</sup> so the hypothetical reconstruction of the historical events in which the Romani people were involved prior to their arrival in Europe in the 15<sup>th</sup> century has been based principally on an analysis of lexical loans.

The success attained by the Indian origin theory by the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century and its subsequent establishment as a paradigm, must be seen in relation to the simultaneous birth of comparative and historical linguistics and the recognition of modern linguistics as a science proper. Leonardo Piasere (Piasere 2006: 50) relates how, one year prior to the publication of Grellmann's work, Sir William Jones, in an address to the Royal Asiatic Society of Calcutta, confirmed Sanskrit's historical relationship with Latin, Greek and the Germanic languages: the Indian origin theory was in perfect syntony with trends

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<sup>3</sup> The widespread circulation of Grellmann's work, testified by the many translations of the book in other European languages and by the great number of the book's editions, lets Grellmann be considered the real prophet of the Indian origin thesis.

<sup>4</sup> Nowadays there is no doubt that Romani is at its core an Indo-Aryan language, and this is reflected in the retention not just of Indic core vocabulary, but of complex morphological inflection patterns, grammatical vocabulary, and key features of the sound system (e.g. Matras, 2005; Matras, 2003, Banfi, 1993; Banfi & Grandi 2003).

in the thinking of the scientific community, which was ready to accept the parallel birth of Indian and Indo-European studies.

The geographical origin being found out by linguists, the *Rāj*, i. e. the British colonial rule, identified the living ancestors still settled in India: Indian Gypsy can be basically considered to be one of the products of the cultural and political enterprise called by Edward Said (Said 1978) “orientalism”. A lot of material, ideological and cultural reasons, supported the identification of some Indian castes with the communities which arrived through subsequent stops from India to Europe in the 15<sup>th</sup> century. Through the identification of a certain number of the family resemblances previously pointed out, the name Gypsy was attributed to some particular castes. The nomadic attitude and the relationship with some particular jobs must be surely included among the main criterions. Such identification process started during the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. The years between 1857, when the revolt called mutiny by the English took place, and 1877, when Queen Victoria was declared Empress of India, were characterized by the improvement of the cultural-symbolic construction of British India. The main political fact was the end of East India Company’s predominance and the proclamation in 1858 of Great Britain King as India Sovereign. Together with this affirmation of sovereignty came the imposition of a new social order dominated by the British Crown as the centre of authority able to reorganize in one unique hierarchical scale all his subjects, both English and Indian, through what has been described as a “impressive operation of dissection, classification and hierarchical ordering of social, cultural and religious reality of the Subcontinent” (Basile-Milanetti-Prayer 2003: 87). The difficulty that English colonizers had in understanding the complexity of organic articulation of Indian society resulted in a hardening of religious, caste and linguistic divisions which started to be perceived not only by the British but paradoxically by the same Indians as racial divisions. Indians started to get used to learning their own culture through European ideas and erudition. The British objectified perception of India, of its life, of its

thinking, of its sociology and of its history influenced the same perception Indians had and still have of themselves.<sup>5</sup>

The Kalbelias, similarly to other castes, such as the Banjaras, the Gaduliya Lohars, the Nats, the Doms, the Meos, the Gandhilas, the Kikans and the Bavaris, were identified (Kenrick 2004: 75-78), mainly thanks to the linguistic studies of the first orientalist, with the descendants of the ancestors of Romani people, to such an extent that a delegation of Banjara was invited in 1981 to take part in the congress of the Romani Union. The attribution of the expression Gypsy to the caste is the result of a coarse simplification produced by a “though only able to classify and order, mark and separate, or impose its own strict categories to reality, mortifying the same reality” (Remotti 2010: 48). The Kalbelias’ internalization and appropriation of the heteronomous term Gypsy openly proves how deeply colonial societies and their members have been affected by the economic, political and cultural policies of dominant cultures. Kalbelias’ Gypsy status is at the same time a product of orientalism, an outcome of an aristotelic classification and the result of the application of a monothetic categorical structure, based on a set of necessary and sufficient features (language, nomadism, economy based essentially on buying and selling of goods and services, inborn inclination to join illegal activities and to perpetrate criminal acts).

On the whole Kalbelias’ social identity turns out to be the result both of *Rājasthānī* system of multiple naming and colonial taxonomies.

This article is based on six years of fieldwork with the Kalbelia community living in the environs of Pushkar, a famous place of pilgrimage, *tīrtha*,<sup>6</sup> for Hindus and a popular tourist destination, especially for

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<sup>5</sup> A. Sen (2005: 139) states that: “the self-images (or ‘internal identities’) of Indians have been much affected by colonialism over the past centuries and are influenced – both collaterally and dialectically – by the impact of outside imagery (what we may call ‘external identity’)”.

<sup>6</sup> The Sanskrit word *tīrtha* can be translated as “sacred space”, “pilgrimage place”, and “salvific space”. In the holy Hindū geography the term

foreigner backpacker travelers, situated at the edge of the Thar desert and at the outer fringes of the Aravalli mountain chain, at the centre of the western state of Rajasthan. During this lapse of time the growing popularity of Kalbelia dance style both in India and abroad has gone with the deeper and wider involvement of the members of the Kalbelia group living in Pushkar in the dance business.

Previously associated to snake charming, Kalbelias' traditional means of living describe a form of economic adaptation that has been defined as service nomadism: service nomads in India are endogamous groups that offer highly specialized services to settled populations, such as entertainment, ritual religious specialties, folk medicines and repairs of specific types of implements. Their movement is caused by the limited demand for their services in any one location (Hayden 1983: 292). Snake charming, before being a permanent element of western imagery of India, is an activity loaded with spiritual and devotional meanings, the snake being a form of Lord Śiva. The snake is regarded by many communities, especially in rural areas, as the embodiment of God, and the Kalbelia "are regarded as the priest of snake" (Bharucha 2003: 53). They are able to attract donations with a creature which to Hindus is full of religious symbolism. Snake charming, besides the religious connotation, has a pragmatic meaning: Kalbelias are summoned both to remove snakes from public or private buildings and to administer an antidote to the poisonous snake bite. There is in fact a strong belief in Rajasthan that Kalbelias have the knowledge and the expertise to cure poisonous snake bites and still today they are often resorted to in preference to hospital treatment. Nevertheless, the meaning and the content of Kalbelia service nomadism have been going through a deep transformation, which can be considered to be mainly a cre-

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indicates a place of divine or extraordinary power that is believed to fulfill wishes and grant salvation. Such places are often but not always associated with water. The translation of *tīrtha* as "salvific place" is meant to emphasize not only the power of the place but also the fruit of visiting, that is the salvific promises of the pilgrimage places.

ative answer to a whole string of significant social changes occurring in *Rājasthānī* society. Nowadays snake charming, as a mean of living, is proving to be highly outdated: the Kalbelias living in Pushkar, even though still working and begging as snake charmers, economically mainly rely on dance and on the artistic activities related to singing and music. They are booked in India and abroad by private individuals, events' organizers, cultural institutions and hotel managers in order to perform for local as well as foreign people. Besides, a growing number of female foreign tourists go to Pushkar in order to take dance classes from girls belonging to the caste.

Even if today Kalbelia dance style is considered to be a significant part of *Rājasthānī* folklore, an “authentic *Rājasthānī* tradition”, distinguishing mark of Rajasthan's peculiar culture, it must be noticed that this dance style in its present shape is a relatively new dance form. In the past of the caste, dance was in fact performed only during the celebration of some *Hindū* festivals and it was bound to an inter-communitarian and inter-caste fruition. Until a recent past it was a spontaneous display, absolutely not codified, opened to the free expressivity of the members of the caste, inspired by sheer devotion and free from any commercial purposes. Apart from snake charming and begging, which was in the past the mainstay of the caste, the Kalbelias have always had several economic strategies, some of cyclical nature, as e.g. agriculture, others sporadic, such as construction labour, but they have never been and cannot be considered to be a caste of hereditary professional folk musicians and dancers. They did not enjoy the patronage neither of royal courts nor of common people as dancers and musicians. Their past spatial mobility was meant to exploit both natural resources, through the capture of poisonous snakes, and social ones, in the form of people needing their services and expertise as snake charmers. Since a single village would not have been able to provide them with adequate work, while others might not have needed their services, they had to be constantly on the move. The dance style today embodying the specificity of the Kalbelia caste has acquired in the last twenty years its present artistic and commercial shape, becoming a recognizable and codified

product of *Rājasthānī* folklore, thanks to the intertwining of a series of social, political, cultural and biographical circumstances.

The new emerging working profile of the caste and the commercial and artistic status of Kalbelia dance depends on three main causes: the promulgation of the Indian Wildlife Act in 1972, the *Rājasthānī* tourist market growth and the biographical experience of Gulabo.

Kalbelias' service nomadism, already weakened by the general decline of *jajmānī* system<sup>7</sup> in modern Rajasthan, was further affected in 1972 by the issuing of the Wildlife Protection Act. This Act, regardless of the customary rights of hunting and gathering of nomadic communities, in order to protect biodiversity, maintains that "wild animals are government property" and "no person shall without the previous permission in writing of the Chief Wildlife Warden acquire or keep in his possession, custody or control or transfer to any person by way of gift, sale or otherwise or destroy or damage such government property".<sup>8</sup> Since all the species of snakes used by the snake charmers are considered to be "wild animals" and "government property" and because of the provisions of the Act, the profession of snake charming became illegal.

The weakening interaction among various castes, the consequence of the decline of *jajmānī* system, and the issuing of the Wildlife Protection Act, directly affecting snake charming, explain the actual difficulty for Kalbelias to carry on their traditional profession. Similarly to other castes of service nomads, the Kalbelias have been forced to abandon their traditional subsistence strategies, less and less profitable, and adopt new means of surviving. Worldwide, the ethnological record indicates that flexibility and resourcefulness are the most common and vital characteristics attributable to the cognitive, structural,

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<sup>7</sup> *Jajmānī* system describes how different castes interacted with one another in the production and exchange of goods and services. In its classical construct, different caste groups specialized in specific occupations exchanged their services through an elaborate system of division of labour.

<sup>8</sup> <http://envfor.nic.in/legis/wildlife/wildlife1.html>

and organizational features of spatially mobile communities (Berland-Rao 2004: 19). The Kalbelias are proving, through the occupational shifting they are going through, to be especially tuned to the changes in social and economic circumstances as well as a broad spectrum of other factors that may influence patterns of human needs and desires.

The most blatant cause which made it impossible for Kalbelias to keep on relying on snake charming as their main livelihood identified, the dynamics which led Kalbelias to turn to dance in order to find a new working and cultural identity must now be pointed out.

The hypothesis is that the transition from a caste of snake charmers to one of dancers and musicians has been first inspired by the biographical experience of Gulabo and has secondly found its consecration in the tourist market.

In order to properly understand the role played by tourism in this transition, it is necessary to focus on the relationship between tourists and Kalbelias. I have been studying the relationship between the Kalbelias living in Pushkar and the foreign tourists visiting the town during the past six years. During my fieldwork I have gradually realized the importance and the performative role of the word Gypsy in shaping this relationship. In their approach to the caste, tourists are directed and guided by the term Gypsy, which is actually able to conjure up an image constituted by a certain number of fixed and recurrent elements. Such an image, in its turn, gives rise to markedly different but always emotionally connoted attitudes and behaviours towards those who are named Gypsies. The word "Gypsy" is invested with symbolism and loaded with images and meanings deeply rooted in Western consciousness. The imagery evoked by the term Gypsy is the result of literary and artistic fascinations: according to literary and artistic recurring *topoi*, Gypsy people are mysterious and daring, nonconformist and free from the limitations and formalism of bourgeois society, their charm being obscure and irresistible. The divination, the scorn for social rules, the love for dance and music, the stubborn tendency to kidnap children, the mendacity, the laziness, the nomadic attitude, the passion, the strong instinct are all literary *topoi* European authors have

been using since 1500 and European readers have deeply internalized. As Miconi underlines “literature contributes [...] to create identities and as such to the construction of forms of humanity; fulfils in this way a ‘human condition construction’ function” of production of a model “which will be later raised to independent reality” (Miconi 2008).

The direct experience of tourists meeting the members of the Kalbelia community living in Pushkar is anticipated, influenced and shaped by all the preconceived ideas, the prejudices, both negative and positive, and the expectations that non-Gypsy people have towards the ones belonging to the Gypsy set. The word Gypsy evokes a stereotype which due to its pre-consciousness roots, to its emotional investment and to its universality, can be undoubtedly considered to be an archetype. This is the reason why the term is actually able to establish *a priori* likings and dislikes and consequent behaviours and reactions charged with cultural and practical meanings. Applied to the tourist experience of the Kalbelia caste, the word Gypsy conveys at the same time the feeling to approach an already well-known sphere and the freshness of a completely new and authentic experience. The familiarity and emotional involvement conveyed by the word shapes and prepares others for the relationship with the Kalbelias.

Moreover the Indian connection theory not only contributes to give the Kalbelias an identity easily recognizable to foreign people travelling in Pushkar, but, stating the status of the caste as ur-Gypsy, original Gypsy, implicitly but effectively acknowledges Kalbelias’ dance antiquity. The tourists’ implicit argument is the following: if the Kalbelias are the living ancestors of all the Romani groups scattered all over the world, then Kalbelias’ cultural products must be the forerunners of Romani arts and if the Kalbelias represent somehow the original Gypsies, the ones who have not been corrupted by the long journey to the West, then Kalbelia artistic expressions must be considered to be “authentic”. The tourists who in the heart of Rajasthan run into this Gypsy caste do not link the existence of Indian Gypsies neither with the first orientalist’s lucubrations nor with the socio-political rule’s will of a colonial power in Asia during the second half of

the 19<sup>th</sup> century. The Indian connection theory, whose paradigmatic status does not allow objections, draws an ever running thread of cultural continuity among groups belonging to the Gypsy transnational category, feeding that quest for origin and authenticity, shaping the tourist consciousness and feeding its market. The greatest part of female tourists taking dance lessons from Kalbelia girls in Pushkar I met were, for example, absolutely sure that the flamenco developed from Kalbelia dance style.

With regard to touristic context, Kalbelias' Gypsy status, resulting from orientalism and colonialism taxonomies, promote first of all the touristic interest in the caste. In the touristic experience, the term Gypsy applied to the Kalbelia caste serves as a cognitive schema for organizing and ordering the tourist experience of the "other": i.e. it serves as a cultural interpreter, allowing initial decoding of unknown cultural traits into known cultural traits. The word Gypsy used to identify members of the Kalbelia community of Pushkar shapes the relationship between them and the foreign component of the tourist population of the city, moulding the tourists' imagery, their expectations and their responses upon encountering the 'other', the unknown *par excellence*, who is approached, as generally happens, through the known.

Secondly, the definition of the Kalbelias as Gypsies brings about the attribution of authenticity and originality to the caste and to its cultural expressions: Kalbelia dance style, as an artistic product, can be considered to be a creation of the tourist gaze and a product aimed at satisfying the quest for authenticity moving the tourist consciousness (MacCannell 1973; MacCannell 1976) and feeding the tourist market. The antiquity and the authenticity of Kalbelia dance are products of the touristic gaze, guided by both the Indian connection paradigm and the imagery linked to the word Gypsy: the tourist market not only provides lots of possibilities to perform, but most importantly creates and legitimates artistically the content of folklore.

In order to understand properly this last point, it is now necessary to introduce Gulabo, since it is in her biography that Kalbelia dance for the first time enters the tourist market and starts to be perceived

as a source of income, a distinguishing mark of Kalbelia identity, a significant part of *Rājasthānī* folklore and an artistic product.

Gulabo is today the most famous Kalbelia dancer, who widely performs both in India and abroad. In 1981 the twelve-year old Dhanvatri, called Gulabo by reason of her rosy complexion, was spotted by Hanumat Singh and Tripti Pandey, two officials of Tourism Department. Indian Government was at the time trying to market the Pushkar Camel Fair, now one of the main tourist attraction of Rajasthan drawing a huge number of tourists from all over the world, but at the time still a local animals fair. Singh and Pandey were involved in the touristic promotion of the fair and they convinced Gulabo's father to let his daughter perform throughout the fair. Gulabo's father agreed notwithstanding the blame of Kalbelia community: according to the members of the caste dance was meant for a close enjoyment and had to be performed only during some moments of the *Hindū* devotional calendar. Standing out against the caste's will, Gulabo's father let his daughter perform and the success was such that in 1986 the girl was invited to perform in Washington, where she took part in the Festival of India, a cultural manifestation fostered by Rajiv Gandhi. According to Rajiv Gandhi, the Festival of India should have exported a new image of the Country abroad, displaying the whole Indian cultural variety and richness. Quite interestingly the artistic status of Kalbelia dance was legitimized by the widely perceived repute as connoisseurs of Hanumat Singh and Tripti Pandey: thanks to the acknowledgement of their expertise, in what could have been dismissed as a form of begging great art was discerned. From now on two trends established within the Kalbelia caste: on the one hand, the support for the model represented by Gulabo and the attempt to make the dance a distinguishing feature of the caste and the main source of income of its members; on the other hand, the effort to repress the irresistible social, cultural and economic course drawn by Gulabo, in an attempt to protect the traditional social and cultural features of the caste. However, the growing commercial success and the increasing artistic acknowledgement of

Kalbelia dance style both in India and abroad foreshadow the standing out of the model represented by Gulabo.

While within the caste the male commitment to music does not face any kind of opposition, even if the social status of hereditary professional folk musicians is generally considered to be very low in *Rājasthānī* society, the female involvement in dance is still perceived by a good share of Kalbelia society as being highly reprehensible. It must be reminded that Kalbelia men are often sought as players and singers of *bhajana*: talented singers travel around Rajasthan getting feasted and collecting cash gifts for participating in all-night song fests.

The strong opposition to the public fruition and to the marketing of the dance style can be explained by the association, still deeply rooted in contemporary India, between dancers and prostitutes. Such an association and the related moral condemnation of professional dancers affecting their social status in modern India is, again, an heritage and an outcome of the colonial past still haunting the Indian social and cultural present. Precisely the current social status of female professional dancers is an heritage of the early twentieth century campaign (the so-called anti-Nautch movement) concerning the social and moral legitimacy of *devadāsī*, the temple dancing girls. At the beginning of the nineteenth century, temple dancing girls constituted corps of unmarried temple servants who had been dedicated to temple deities as young girls through rites resembling Hindu marriage ceremonies. They performed a range of ritual services, derived incomes from endowments associated with their offices and enjoyed considerable prestige within traditional Hindu society as eternally auspicious women married to temple deities (Kersenboom 1987). By the early twentieth century, temple dancing girls had been criminalized as prostitutes; strong legal foundations had been established for their complete suppression as a viable group within Hindu society. The dramatic change was produced in large part through the incremental efforts of the Anglo-Indian judiciary, which enjoyed almost unfettered discretion in shaping legal conceptions of temple dancing

girls between 1800 and 1914. Temple dancing girls were represented as prostitutes not as participants in a sex trade, but in terms of Hindu legal norms, according to which all female sexual activity outside marriage was designated “unchastity”, “incontinence” or “prostitution” (Parker 1998). *Devadāsī* as other indigenous customs and institutions were being re-perceived in the light of the Victorian and rational approach. *Devadāsīs* were expected to live by puritanical ideals of asceticism associated with celibate Brides of Christ, Jain and Buddhist monks and Hindu widows. The zealous reformers could neither comprehend the *devadāsī*, nor her function, nor the sensitive socio-historic structure of sponsorship that enabled her to devote herself to perfecting her art. Orientalist discourse and Christian dualist concepts of separating sensuality and spirituality generated the perception of exploited womanhood. A campaign, the anti-Nautch movement, was launched to discredit the *devadāsī*'s person and lifestyle. This called into play entrenched convictions about the need for ritual and personal purity predicated along caste-based functions. Such brahminical concerns became conflated with Victorian convictions regarding social purity, where women could be respectable only within monogamous heterosexual marriages (within patriarchy) or as celibate workers dedicated to worthy vocations (Coorlawala 2004: 52). The debate resulted in a series of laws and consolidated the long lasting association between professional hereditary dancers and prostitutes or women of low moral standards. The low moral status even today still attributed to professional female dancers by *Rājasthānī* society openly proves how deeply colonial societies and their members have been affected by the economic, political and cultural policies of dominant cultures. The growing involvement and the more and more enthusiastic commitment to dance activities of the Kalbelias living in Pushkar are deeply affecting the status and the social and cultural attitudes of the group. Among the members of the caste itself there is, for example, a widespread belief that dancers, once married, should not perform any more.

If from an economic point of view dance is undoubtedly an important and advantageous source of income, the social and moral status of

the women of the caste is badly affected by their new profile of professional dancers. While the shifting from a caste of snake charmers to a caste of performers and entertainers is not surely going to improve the social status of the caste, the Kalbelia women status is even worsening. The nature of their subsistence activity as professional folk dancers is largely considered to be despicable, dirty and polluting in *Rājasthānī* society to such an extent that many members of the caste itself share such a judgment of moral pollution with the wider *Rājasthānī* population. As far as India is concerned, there are levels of acceptability where performances can take place: to perform when the audience is eating and drinking, particularly if alcohol is served, is considered very “low” (Gaston 2005: 68), and Kalbelia women in India usually dance precisely in this kind of frameworks: weddings, festivals, fairs, hotels and restaurants.

But dance has not only been influencing the economic, social and moral status of the Kalbelia caste: it has been deeply affecting the *forma mentis* of the group as well.

One example will let the reader understand better the exact meaning of this last statement: nowadays the Kalbelias living in Pushkar welcome with great happiness and relief the birth of female children while in the past, and still by the Kalbelia communities less involved in the dance business, the birth of a female child was generally perceived as a disgrace. According to the Kalbelias living in Pushkar, a female child is a future dancer with a solid profession which will let her earn money and help her parents. It is important to notice that Kalbelia girls in Pushkar start to perform very early: even children of six/seven years old take part in public shows and since the money earned for an exhibition is equally divided among all the artists, dancers, musicians and singers who take part in the performance, even these young children get their share. Besides, since a few years ago, a number of foreign female tourists have been coming to Pushkar in order to take dance lessons from Kalbelia dancers, providing a further source of income for the girls of the caste. Moreover when a woman is no more able to perform as a dancer, she can however join the exhibition

as a singer. On the whole Kalbelia women have more chances to get money than the male members of the caste. Basically Kalbelia parents belonging to the Pushkar community prefer to have female children because, thanks to dance, girls can start to earn money very early while male children never take part in the dance exhibitions: musicians and the few male dancers are always adults. Thanks to dance the traditional preference for male children, shared with presumably the greatest part of Indian population, has been eradicated from Kalbelia cultural mind.

Besides affecting the traditional cultural view of the caste, dance might let the Kalbelias translate their traditional nomadic way of life into contemporary globalized world. The greatest part of the members of the Kalbelia community living in Pushkar keep on moving, all over the year, especially in India but even abroad, in order to perform in cultural events, hotels, religious festivals, at weddings, public functions, etc., etc. The service nomadism of the Kalbelias has found a new meaning, artistic instead of devotional, a new content, dancing instead of snake charming, new places, hotel, schools, theaters instead of streets, temples, forts, and new patrons, tourists instead of *Rājasthānī* castes and communities' members.

In conclusion, the present outline of Kalbelia dance ethnohistory is meant to underline the way in which art is either product or active agent of historical and social changes. The members of the Kalbelia community living in Pushkar are proving to be the active agents in the construction of their own socio-cultural identity and their involvement in the tourist market is not the inevitable consequence of the "onslaught of tourism", but quite the opposite, the result of conscious and deliberately calculated acts by creative individuals seeking to maximize their opportunities in an ever-widening world. Kalbelia economic mobility and fluidity can be read as a form of resistance to the attempt of colonialism to rigidify caste: Kalbelia shifting nature is an attempt at defence against attribution by others and against being assigned a once-and-for-all identity and place. Dance is definitely accompanying the transition into modernity of a social group extraordinary receptive to the quest for authenticity of the globalization.

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