

Performing Samba in Beirut: Citizenship, Precarity and the Lebanese State

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ABSTRACT

In this article, I will present a case study of singer and dancer Leila Khoury, a Lebanese-Brazilian performer who lives and works in Lebanon. I will examine how her struggles with aspects of Lebanese legislation are indicative of broader governmental attitudes towards performing artists and foreigners in general and reveal institutionalised prejudices toward women and people of colour. These laws are the Nationality Law and the 'Artist Visa', the latter of which is part of the broader *kafala* (sponsorship) legislative framework. The 'Artist Visa' reinforces societal clichés regarding dancers and also serves to reify globally circulating stereotypes of Brazilian women and Latin American women in general. In Leila's case, this visa system plus her inability to obtain Lebanese nationality, thanks to the outdated and sexist Nationality Law, has resulted in her living in a situation of precarity. Despite these restrictive laws, the demand for foreign performing artists by the Lebanese entertainment industry remains high, due to both the commodification and global circulation of genres like samba, and also in part due to the still-enduring problematic status of female professional performance in Lebanese society.

KEYWORDS

Samba; dance; precarity; exoticism; migration

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“I told her, I’m not gonna do any public shows for a while because maybe immigration are searching for me. But then one day she said come on, it’s in the Bekaa, it’s so far away, nobody will see you there. We were joking, like, I will put on a wig, and pretend I am someone else!

So I went to do the samba show, and the big general of the immigration was there, it was his best friend’s wedding! And it was me, Roberto, Teresa, all the illegal people, and nobody had a visa. Yasmine, my friend, she’s dark skinned, she caused attention, she’s a foreigner, she’s not Lebanese. But she’s born in Lebanon. Everybody illegal was dancing, but the general was so happy! Someone said, what about those artists, where are they from, do they have papers? The man said, I don’t care. Today is the wedding of my best friend, let them dance!

So he didn’t recognise me. After a few months, I went to Brazil and came back, Samira told me, Leila if you want, let’s go to immigration and see what to do to make your paper. So I went to the immigration and I found out everything. But they didn’t tell me at the end of a year how much was the price, and how much harassment and discrimination you suffer. They didn’t tell me the side of how it’s bad...

There was a lot of shit I didn’t know, so I subscribed to be a dancer. And a dancer is just a prostitute here, because what do they do, they have cabarets. They pretend. The women come from Eastern European countries, and even South America, maybe Central America, to work as a hostess or dancer. They do sexual slavery, sexual services here, and they come under the category of dancers.

They think they are coming to be a hostess, and they arrive here, and they find out. So when I subscribed to be a dancer, I didn’t know I’m paying to be under the category of prostitution. So nobody obliged me to be a prostitute, but the price I pay is the same price and I have to do a blood test every three months.”¹

The woman who told me this story is a Lebanese-Brazilian singer and dancer called Leila Khoury, who I first met in Beirut, July 2017. Over the past two years, I have interviewed her, had many informal discussions with her, and watched her perform on several occasions in Lebanon, as part of my broader Ph.D. fieldwork. The above quotation, taken from an interview I conducted with her in August 2017, outlines many of the issues faced by professional practitioners of Brazilian music and dance, and more broadly, by foreign, specifically female, performers without Lebanese citizenship living and working in Lebanon in general. Using Leila’s story as a starting point, this article, based on fieldwork undertaken in Beirut, Lebanon, between July 2017 and March 2019, will outline her experiences working as a singer and dancer in Lebanon, including an overview of the matrix of legislation that Leila must navigate.

Leila’s identity as a Brazilian woman with Lebanese heritage is complex and fluid, and the tensions between these two significant parts of her identity come to the fore when she is living and working in Lebanon. Although Leila has been able to profit from her Brazilian identity, due to the popularity of Brazilian music and dance in Lebanon and her perceived status as an ‘authentic’ culture-bearer, she is faced with certain societal and legal prejudices, and must navigate intercultural tensions

¹ All names of informants have been changed.

(Tsuda, 2003). I will examine how her struggles with visa requirements, immigration officials and the Lebanese General Security forces are indicative of broader governmental attitudes towards foreign performing artists in general, and reveal institutionalised prejudices toward women and people of colour. These laws, some of which are part of the broader *kafala* (sponsorship) legislative framework, force women like Leila into a situation of precarity, and leave her fate to be decided by capricious immigration officials. This legislation also reinforces societal clichés regarding dancers, and serves to reify globally circulating stereotypes of Brazilian women and Latin American women. Additionally, Leila’s story outlines some of the ways in which Lebanon has a complex and ambivalent relationship with its diaspora. Lebanon relies heavily on financial remittances, and strongly encourages citizens with Lebanese heritage to ‘return to the motherland’, obtain Lebanese citizenship and invest in business or property. Yet, the Nationality Law prohibits those without a Lebanese father from obtaining a passport or any citizenship rights, and thus reveals deeply entrenched institutional misogyny and sectarian anxieties.² The ruling elites claim that this law, which was first implemented in 1925 during French Mandate rule (1920-46), must stay in place in order to prevent “upsetting Lebanon’s unsteady confessional equilibrium”, as it prevents descendants of Palestinian or Syrian (mainly Sunni Muslim) refugees from obtaining Lebanese nationality (Arsan, 2018, p. 262).

In her research about migrant domestic workers (MDWs) in Lebanon, Amrita Pande uses the term *meso-resistant* to describe activity that falls somewhere between personal, private acts of ‘everyday resistance’ (Scott, 1985; Abu Lughod, 1990) and public or collective displays of activism or political action (Pande, 2013). Meso-resistant activity typically consists of informal support networks and intra-communal solidarity that enables MDWs to gain access to certain forms of sociocultural knowledge and improve their general well-being. It also encapsulates minor, but significant, acts of disobedience, and the subtle subversion of legislation. Far removed from romanticised notions of resistance (Abu Lughod, 1990; Nooshin, 2017), Pande’s work provides a useful framework for understanding and describing the ways in which Leila circumvents restrictive Lebanese laws in order to make her life in Lebanon tenable.

THE BRASILIBANÊS: MIGRATION, CULTURE, COMMUNITY

“Come on, it’s in the Bekaa, it’s so far away...”

The story Leila told me took place at a wedding in the Bekaa Valley, where she was dancing samba, performing alongside several other Brazilian and non-Brazilian performers. The location of this wedding is significant, as it took place in a particular region of Lebanon where there are significant numbers of Lebanese-Brazilians. This remote region, in eastern Lebanon, is home to several villages where the primary spoken language is Portuguese. Many of the residents are part of the so-called *Brasilibanês* community, a heterogenous community of Lebanese-Brazilians and Brazilians descended from the thousands of Lebanese who migrated to Brazil. The first significant groups of Arab migrants left for the Americas from Ottoman Greater Syria or *Bilad el Sham* – present-day Lebanon and Syria – in the 1880s (Lesser 2013, p. 124). By 1933, the total number of Lebanese arrivals in Brazil reached around 130,000 (Truzzi, 1997; Lesser, 1996, 2013). Lebanese

² For example, if a foreign man marries and has a child with a Lebanese woman, neither the child nor the foreign spouse can obtain Lebanese nationality.

emigration to Brazil continued across the 20th century, with numbers of emigrants and returning migrants ebbing and flowing depending on the political situation in Lebanon. Today, it is estimated that there are anywhere between seven and ten million citizens with Lebanese heritage in Brazil.³ Likewise, there is a much smaller, but culturally significant, community of Brazilian-Lebanese citizens living in Lebanon, estimated at 17,000-20,000.⁴ Of these, a significant proportion were born in Brazil, and/or speak Portuguese fluently, and most retain familial, social and business connections with Brazil. These dual-heritage citizens are often given a colloquial Portuguese endonym, '*Brasilibanêses*' (Khatlab, 2005). The wider *Brasilibanês* socio-cultural community also encompasses many Lebanese citizens who have spent time living in Brazil, without becoming naturalised citizens or passport holders, although many have retained the Portuguese language and certain cultural habits or traits; for example, listening to Brazilian radio, and watching *telenovelas*. There are particular areas with higher concentrations of *Brasilibanêses*, such as in certain parts of the Bekaa Valley, as already mentioned, and in Beirut.

There is also a very small number of Brazilians living in Lebanon who have no prior connection to Lebanon. These tend to be either those working in the diplomatic sector and their families, or Brazilian culture-bearers who have come to Lebanon in order to perform or teach dance, music or language, and the majority of these citizens are based in Beirut and its surroundings. Additionally, there is a primarily Lebanese 'affinity-culture community' (Slobin, 1992) who are also primarily based in Beirut.⁵ Although they may not have any direct familial links with Brazil, these people partake in Brazilian cultural events, speak Portuguese to some level, and have been embraced as part of the broader *Brasilibanês* community, whether through partnerships, friendships or sometimes, performance ability. Indeed, many of them entered into this broad community through taking *capoeira* or samba dance classes, or learning Portuguese at the Brazil-Lebanon Cultural centre, also known as *Brasiliban*, in Achrafieh, East Beirut.

In general, symbols of Brazilian culture are highly visible and audible in Lebanon. There are Brazilian coffee brands in the supermarket, the sound of bossa nova emanates from expensive cafes, and during the World Cup in particular, the Brazilian flag adorned grocery shops. Brazilian cultural life in Lebanon (although primarily in the capital, Beirut) spans a wide range of activities, from live music performances, to themed parties, restaurants and nightclub events. However, Brazilian culture in Lebanon is not just a consequence of migratory flows between the two countries and the broader *Brasilibanês* community. The global spread and commodification of primarily Rio de Janeiro-centric Brazilian dance and music genres, notably samba and bossa nova, has also undoubtedly reached Lebanon. Indeed, Brazilian music is one of many globally circulating cultural trends that has gained a foothold in the country's nightlife and entertainment industry. The demand from the cosmopolitan Lebanese middle and upper classes for varied and novel

³ For example, this estimate is from the Brazilian Ministry of Foreign Affairs website. Available at: http://www.itamaraty.gov.br/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=7223:lebanese-republic&catid=155&lang=en&Itemid=478 [Accessed 10 March 2018]. The United Nations estimates Brazil's population to be 210,000,000. Available at: <http://data.un.org/en/iso/br.html> [Accessed: 2 December 2019].

⁴ Thiago Oliveira, Head of Culture and Education at the Embassy of Brazil in Beirut, personal communication.

⁵ Slobin (1992) defines 'affinity cultures' as 'communities created through the surprising and often powerful attraction people feel for music that they did not grow up with or to which they have no direct sense of connection through heritage'.

forms of entertainment is reflected in the wide variety of international restaurants, themed bars and live performances present in Beirut and across the country.

LEILA KHOURY

I first met Leila in the summer of 2017 at a venue called Onomatopoeia, an independent music venue in East Beirut. She was singing that night with Yemanjá, a band she co-founded with Lebanese guitarist Tarek Doueihy. Named after the goddess of women and the ocean praised by adherents of the Afro-Brazilian religion of *candomblé*, Yemanjá play samba, *música popular brasileira* (MPB) and bossa nova repertoire, and perform regularly in Beirut. Leila also plays percussion and sings with Bloco Orquídea, a small carnival-style *bloco*⁶ based in Beirut, and she is often a featured singer and dancer with Ziad Rahbani, a highly popular Lebanese musician, composer and playwright, who is the son of legendary Lebanese singer Fairouz. As well as performing Brazilian music, Leila makes her living teaching and performing dance, both Arabic and Brazilian styles; she is as likely to be found dancing *raqs el sharqi* – commonly known as bellydance⁷ – in Doha as she is to be performing *samba no pé* at a Brazilian restaurant in Beirut.⁸ She is a very important member of the Brazilian performance community, and is also one of the very few performers in Lebanon who has the significant skills and cultural knowledge to cross the worlds of both Arabic and Brazilian dance.

Leila was born in São Paulo, to a third-generation Lebanese mother and a father of Lebanese, Portuguese and Spanish heritage. She had always taken an interest in Lebanese culture, and so, as a young woman, she began to learn *raqs el sharqi* — which is very popular in Brazil, and she also began to sing Arabic music at events within the Arab community in São Paulo. Concurrently, she practised *capoeira*, the Afro-Brazilian martial art, and studied a range of Brazilian folkloric dances. In the early 2000s, Leila decided to travel to the Middle East to explore her heritage, learn Arabic, and to dance. She has told me frequently of a “pull” she felt towards the region, and the tensions. In contrast to her mother, who felt no affinity with the culture of her Lebanese parents, Leila identifies strongly with her Lebanese heritage. When I asked her to reflect on her cultural identity, she outlined the tensions and duality she feels between these two parts of her identity:

I feel like both. Because what brought me here makes me feel more Lebanese, but at the same time my mentality is Brazilian and I was raised there, my childhood, my music, the dance. I was raised Brazilian, but the Lebanese is in my genes, the Arabic music too is in my soul. I don't know how to explain this. (Leila Khoury, interview)

In 2008, after travelling to Egypt, Syria, Jordan and Lebanon, Leila decided to live more permanently in Lebanon. She is unusual in the Brazilian community in Lebanon as she arrived alone, with no known family ties or a Lebanese husband⁹, nor did she have a pre-existing contract with a dance troupe or entertainment agency like many other performers. When she arrived, although there was an existing

⁶ A *bloco* is a street percussion band that typically plays during the annual *carnaval* celebrations in Brazil and can be found in many towns and cities across the country.

⁷ I will be referring to bellydance as *raqs el sharqi* – ‘Eastern/Oriental dance’ in Arabic – due to concerns with the colonial and orientalist connotations of the term ‘bellydance’ as expressed to me by multiple interviewees.

⁸ Literally ‘samba in the foot’, *samba no pé* is a term used to describe the intricate style of samba footwork typically used when women dance samba solo.

⁹ The vast majority of Brazilian women within the *Brasilianês* community that I met moved to Lebanon either as a result of marrying a Lebanese man, or to live with their Lebanese family.

Brazilian community – the *Brasilibanês* – there were very few Brazilian performers in Lebanon, and indeed few foreign visitors at all, as Lebanon was in the process of recovering from several tumultuous events in recent years – notably the assassination of President Rafik el Hariri in 2005, and the devastating Hezbollah-Israel war in 2006 and its aftermath (Arsan, 2018). She arrived just as a period of instability was subsiding, and the economy was tentatively beginning to grow again. Initially, Leila worked freelance for various dance companies, performing a range of styles, including samba, salsa and other Latin genres, as well as Lebanese folkloric dance. However, despite her considerable experience dancing *raqs el sharqi*, once potential customers and agents found out that she was Brazilian, they inevitably wanted her to dance samba.¹⁰ Leila’s Brazilian nationality is inextricably tied up with her identity and her professional opportunities in Lebanon, and thus she was perceived to be able to provide an authentic Brazilian entertainment product, which at the time – and still now – was something quite ‘exotic’ and unusual. This was despite her lack of professional samba dancing experience; interestingly, the first time Leila danced samba professionally was in Lebanon, which was also the case for some other Brazilian dancers that I spoke to (Tsuda, 2003).¹¹

THE PROBLEMATIC STATUS OF DANCE AND DANCERS IN LEBANON

“A dancer is just a prostitute here.”

The paid work available for samba dancers and musicians in Lebanon includes performances at nightclubs, festivals and Brazil-themed events, although the majority of their income comes from weddings. Weddings in Lebanon are a highly lucrative industry and as such have become one of the primary sources of employment for Leila. Weddings in Lebanon are more than ‘simply a means of underscoring a union’; they have become a ‘social performance, a way of signalling status’, through ostentatious displays of wealth, displayed through luxurious venues, lavish buffets, and of course, entertainment (Arsan, 2018, p. 347). A *zafeh*, traditionally a group of musicians who process alongside the bride and groom, is *de rigueur*, and there are dozens of companies who provide *zafeh* services, each competing with each other to have the most beautiful dancers, inventive choreography and striking costumes.¹² However, the work is seasonal and fickle, and depends on the trends desired at that time by customers. As one dancer explained to me:

Before, Brazilian was luxury, one of the most expensive. It was crazy, if you bring Brazilian to your wedding it’s like, woah. A girl used to go for \$500. One dancer! But it’s not exclusive anymore, you know? I think before Brazilian was the hit, now it’s not anymore. It’s very common, everyone is doing Brazilian. That’s the worst part. Then there is like crazy *zafeh* groups who are getting these ugly, disgusting costumes and putting girls that don’t even know what Brazilian is! (Aram Atavian, interview)

¹⁰ This also outlines samba’s hegemonic position as *the* national dance of Brazil; see Pravaz (2008).

¹¹ Tsuda discusses the similar phenomenon of Japanese-Brazilian ‘return migrants’ (*nikkeijin*) performing samba in Japan for the first time (2003, pp. 283-286).

¹² There are numerous companies that provide *zafeh* groups for hire, ranging from the more traditional varieties featuring sword-dancers and tabol drums, to companies offering flamenco, contemporary dance or burlesque versions, for example.

Indeed, thanks to the swell in popularity of Brazilian *zafeh* performances at weddings and other events, for Leila and other Brazilian dancers and musicians, for the most part their performances have to fit into a very narrowly-defined conception of Brazilian culture, based on clichéd and hegemonic images of Rio de Janeiro-centric cultural manifestations that circulate internationally. Musically, this tends to mean that Rio de Janeiro-style samba and bossa nova are privileged over styles from elsewhere in Brazil, and these styles are often subsumed under the generic rubric of ‘Latin’ culture, and regularly conflated with other Latin American genres, such as salsa, Spanish-language popular music, and even tango.¹³ Dance spectacles at weddings and nightclubs are frequently performed to electronic backing tracks that bear little resemblance to samba as recorded in Brazil, and the body and costume of the dancer becomes the focal point, rather than the music and the skill of the dance itself. These commercialised versions of samba have gained in popularity and have become the norm that customers expect.

Visually, representations of Brazil found on event posters, nightclub promotions and social media advertising often contain exoticist and clichéd images of football, beaches and carnival, plus, of course, mixed-race women in bikinis. The iconic image of the *mulata*, the sensual, brown-skinned and erotic samba dancer, as a symbol of Brazilian national identity was heavily promoted by Getúlio Vargas, president of Brazil during the 1930s and 40s, as part of his drive to promote a unified Brazilian culture, based on cultural manifestations from the Southeast of the country, underpinned by discourses of *mestiçagem* (racial mixing) and racial democracy (Pravaz, 2008). In Brazil at least, the word *mulata* is polysemic, and has a complex history, rooted in colonial-era stereotypes.¹⁴ Although its original meaning is a woman of mixed African and European heritage,¹⁵ it is often synonymous with samba dancer, and in certain contexts it also indicates sex worker (Pravaz, 2011). These discourses are resilient; the subsequent reification of the *mulata* figure through its constant presence at carnival, in music videos and in exported Brazilian culture has led to worldwide fetishization of samba dancers, and Brazilian women in general, as sexually adventurous and available. Indeed, these stereotypes remain in common parlance today; in Lebanon, I often heard Brazilian women described as hyper-sexual women with big bottoms, almost unthinkingly, during casual conversations with acquaintances or taxi drivers.¹⁶

The reification of exoticist stereotypes of Brazilian culture has led to the widespread practice of auto-exoticisation by Brazilian performers; a phenomenon that has been well-documented in regard to other contexts (Gibson, 2013; Pravaz, 2011). In her work about samba dancers performing for tourists in Brazil, Natasha Pravaz writes, “The women who perform as *mulatas*, for their part, are highly aware of the stereotypes surrounding their role and generally weary of being misread as sexually available. At the same time, they clearly capitalise on the ability to embody the

¹³ For analysis of ‘tropicalisations’ and discussion of the objectification and ‘othering’ of Latin American music in general, see Aparicio and Chávez-Silverman 1997.

¹⁴ Equating Brazilian mixed race women with innate sexuality is a Portuguese colonial construct, exemplified in the old, racist saying: “*branca para casar, negra para trabalhar, mulata para fornicar*” – meaning “white women for marriage, black women for work, mixed race women for sex”, which outlines an accurate, if blunt, description of the racial and gendered hierarchy established in Brazil by the Portuguese male colonisers. See Parker, 2009, pp. 171-172.

¹⁵ *Mulato* is the male equivalent.

¹⁶ For example, I once told a taxi driver that I was researching Brazilian music in Lebanon, and, after I had convinced him that it did actually exist, he and his friend started making jokes about how Brazilian women were ‘sexy’. Also, his friend’s immediate reaction to me telling him I was working with Brazilians was to mimic outlining the shape of a large bottom with his hand.

exoticism and eroticism invested in them by a colonizing gaze” (Pravaz, 2011, p. 128). Performers like Leila have to auto-exoticise: they must reiterate and reproduce these exoticist, narrow constructions of Brazilian cultural identity in order to gain employment (Savigliano, 1995). Autoexoticisation can be lucrative, but of course, these practices only further entrench stereotypes and further embed the exoticised interpretations of Brazilian culture that Lebanese audiences have become accustomed to.

Although dance in general – as entertainment, as leisure or as sport – is very popular in Lebanon, it was made clear to me by informants that certain styles and genres retain a ‘bad reputation’ to an extent, and many performers described to me a clear hierarchy of ‘acceptable’ and ‘unacceptable’ dance genres. For example, music and dance genres deemed to be ‘sophisticated’ and typically associated with the European upper classes, such as ballet, are deemed prestigious, and a marker of upper-class cultural capital (Racy, 1986). Additionally, Latin and ballroom styles danced in couples, such as salsa or tango, were generally not considered too problematic, and certainly far less problematic than *raqs el sharqi* and samba dancing; these dances are perceived to be innately erotic, due to the often-revealing costumes worn, hip movements and the fact that these dances are usually performed by solo women. Additionally, many of my informants agreed that although dancing socially or going to dance classes was socially acceptable and increasingly popular activity, dancing professionally for money – especially for women – was problematic. As Leila commented, “They want to dance to go to the party and show they know how to dance, not for nothing else, no money. It’s not about money, never to work...because of the stereotype, the stigma of being like a prostitute”.

In her ethnography of Egyptian female dancers and entertainers, Karin van Nieuwkerk outlines a similar story. Like Lebanon, despite the central importance of singers and dancers in celebrations such as weddings – “a celebration without performers is not a real celebration” – professional performers are regarded with ambivalence, and generally are not “honored or accorded much prestige” (van Nieuwkerk, 1995, p. 2). Although this ambivalence applies to any performer, women working in these roles have a particularly problematic status, as they “exhibit the body in public for money” (van Nieuwkerk, 1995, p. 7), which has long been deemed a disgraceful activity in a wide variety of sociocultural contexts. Nieuwkerk describes how the liminal, marginal status of these women “pertains to the fact that they do not have the habits and qualities considered to be feminine, such as sitting at home, producing children, and avoiding contact with male strangers” (van Nieuwkerk, 1995, p. 10). Indeed, as I will outline below, one of the reasons given by General Security for the legal discrimination applied to dancers is because of this last point: there is a presumption that female dancers will have physical contact with male strangers, which is the justification used for the draconian and humiliating visa regulations female dancers must endure in order to work legally in Lebanon.

LEBANON’S NATIONALITY LAW

“She’s a foreigner, she’s not Lebanese. But she’s born in Lebanon.”

Leila’s legal status sits at a knotty intersection of Lebanese legislation; patriarchal laws that affect her right to claim Lebanese nationality and citizenship, her right to work in Lebanon, and her right to be treated with dignity, fairness and gender parity. She is subject to gendered discrimination at the highest level, and thus experiences a situation of precarity based on both her gender and her national identity. These laws are the Nationality Law, and the ‘Artist Visa’, which is part of the broader

kafala system, to be discussed below. The Nationality Law in particular reveals deep-seated anxieties concerned with the ethnoreligious and national character of Lebanon.

As outlined above, Leila has Lebanese heritage on both sides of her family. Her Brazilian-born mother has two fully Lebanese parents, and her father has a Lebanese mother, yet under Lebanese law Leila is not eligible for a Lebanese passport. Since its first implementation in 1925, Lebanon's Nationality Law has changed little¹⁷. The Law posits that Lebanese nationality can only be passed on through the paternal line, and spousal naturalisation as a route to citizenship can only occur through marrying a Lebanese man. Therefore, a child born to a Lebanese mother and foreign father, regardless of whether the birth occurs on Lebanese soil or not, is not entitled to Lebanese nationality, as was the case with the woman referred to in the quotation above.¹⁸

The website for the Lebanese Nationality Programme, advertised and accessible from Lebanese Embassy websites, states that, "You are eligible for the Lebanese Nationality if you have a father or grandfather with Lebanese origins, who left Lebanon and did not register their children as citizens [...] Or, you are the foreign wife of a Lebanese man".¹⁹ These adverts are part of an ongoing drive by the Lebanese government to reach out to Lebanese citizens abroad and their descendants, in order to encourage them to return 'home', whether for a visit, to live, or to build a semi-permanent presence via a holiday home, for example, or to invest in a business enterprise. As many diaspora communities have been commercially successful and now live in the 'global north' – the US, Canada, Australia, France – the government is clearly keen to capitalise on their success.

The Lebanese state-diaspora relationship has continued to develop and intensify over time. Remittances have been steadily increasing since the mid-2000s; by 2009, remittances represented "a full 21.7% of Lebanon's GDP", compared to a regional average of 3.5%; rising to an astonishing total of \$7.5 billion in 2014 (Arsan, 2018, pp. 223-225). Indeed, Arsan points out that in Lala, a village neighbouring the 'Brazilian' villages I visited in the Western Bekaa valley, 70% of the village's income was from residents abroad. I witnessed this pattern myself; when driving through Kamed Il Laouz with Sawsan, a Brazilian woman of Lebanese heritage who was now settled in the Bekaa, she pointed out the provenance of the money used to build the grand villas that lined the otherwise basic streets: "*essa casa é brasileira, aquela colombiana, aqui americana, aquela brasileira também...*".²⁰ Others introduced me to sons and cousins in sharp suits and expensive sunglasses, recently arrived back from São Paulo for the summer; I was told by several residents

¹⁷ See, for example, the Human Rights Watch report 'Lebanon: Discriminatory Nationality Law.' Available at: <https://www.hrw.org/news/2018/10/03/lebanon-discriminatory-nationality-law> [Accessed 2 December 2019].

¹⁸ If, for some reason the father of the child cannot pass on his nationality, the child will be born stateless on Lebanese soil; there are approximately 60,000 to 80,000 stateless people (excluding Palestinians and migrants) in Lebanon. These citizens have no route to naturalisation, nor easy routes to travel abroad. Most live in poverty, and do not have any of the rights and benefits of Lebanese citizenship. (Human Rights Watch report 'Lebanon: Discriminatory Nationality Law.' Available at: <https://www.hrw.org/news/2018/10/03/lebanon-discriminatory-nationality-law> [Accessed 2 December 2019].

¹⁹ See, for example, 'Lebanese Nationality Programme.' Available at: <http://www.lebanity.gov.lb/> [Accessed 12 December 2019].

²⁰ In English, the quotation reads: 'This house is Brazilian, that one Colombian, here American, that one Brazilian too...'

that the population of these villages doubles or triples in size every summer, when migrant workers return to their home villages for the holidays.

Yet, despite the dependant relationship Lebanon has with its diaspora, the Nationality Law remains one of the most contested, yet stubbornly persistent civil rights issues in Lebanese jurisdiction. There have been many attempts to give women the right to pass on their nationality, both at the behest of civil society organisations, women's rights activists, lawyers and some politicians.²¹ Leila herself has taken part in these public protests, and has exhausted every possible legal avenue in an attempt to gain her Lebanese citizenship, or at least to obtain permanent residency status. Likewise, several judges and politicians have raised the issue in parliament over the past ten years, to no avail. Arsan outlines the oft-repeated claim that the "refusal to grant women rights is, ultimately, born of anxiety and a deep-seated fear of upsetting Lebanon's sectarian system" (Arsan, 2018, p. 328); if women were allowed to pass on their nationality, it is claimed that the delicate sectarian balance in place since the *Ta'if* agreement would be thrown off-kilter, by the numbers of Palestinian and Syrian refugees who would be eligible for Lebanese citizenship.²² Several studies show that a relatively small number of refugees would be eligible to obtain citizenship through these means, and so the government's refusal to allow women the right to pass on their nationality demonstrates how closely bound patriarchy and sectarian politics are, and how women's efforts to change the political-legal situation are frustrated.²³

THE 'ARTIST VISA' AND KAFALA SYSTEM

"So, I went to the immigration and I found out everything. But they didn't tell me at the end of a year how much was the price, and how much harassment and discrimination you suffer."

The comment above from Leila refers to the legal and social prejudice she is subject to for being a dancer in Lebanon. These attitudes are expressed within certain sectors of Lebanese society in general, reified in law by the Lebanese government, and implemented by the General Security Directorate – the Lebanese intelligence agency responsible for the entry, exit, and control of all foreigners in Lebanon.²⁴ As noted above, professional dancers like Leila are often viewed in negative terms, and her profession is often conflated with sex work, mutually reinforced by long-held cultural stereotypes of women in this profession, and official legislation relating to foreign workers.

Once Leila decided to settle in Lebanon, and started working as a dancer, she had to apply for a special visa called, euphemistically, the 'Artist Visa'. The Artist Visa

²¹ For example, the National Commission for Women's Affairs has lobbied the government on several occasions, and peaceful protests were organised by the civil society organisation Hamlat al-Jinsiyyeh ('Nationality Campaign') in 2013. See Arsan 2018, p. 326.

²² The Ta'if Agreement was a treaty ratified in 1989, near the end of the Lebanese Civil War (1975-90), aiming to resolve inter-sectarian political disputes by distributing power equally amongst Christians and Muslims, and disarming all militias. See Arsan 2018, pp. 13-16.

²³ As Lebanon has not had an official census since 1932, there are no precise population estimates for either Lebanese citizens or refugee populations. However, a 2016 census of Palestinians in Lebanon conducted by Human Rights Watch (available at: <https://www.hrw.org/news/2018/10/30/lebanon-data-contradicts-political-fearmongering>) found that there were "just 3,707 cases of a Palestinian head of household married to a spouse of a different nationality", which would arguably make the "Palestinian excuse" moot. [Accessed 12 December 2019].

²⁴ 'General Directorate of General Security.' Available at: <http://www.general-security.gov.lb/en>. [Accessed 30 March 2019].

was originally designed for foreign women who come to Lebanon to dance in cabarets and strip clubs, although it applies to any woman who works professionally as a dancer, in any context. Many of these women work in ‘super nightclubs’, which are essentially strip clubs, concentrated in certain areas of Beirut and its outskirts – notably Maameltein, a suburb of Jounieh located 20km north of Beirut. Often described as somewhere in between a strip club and a brothel, the dancers that are employed by the ‘super nightclubs’ are presumed to engage in sex work, whether they actually do or not. In many cases, the dancers are in fact trafficked women who come to Lebanon expecting to work as dancers but are forced into prostitution upon arrival.²⁵

Lebanese feminist writer and politician Joumana Haddad described the Artist Visa arrangement as ‘an inventive scheme that the Lebanese authorities use to avoid admitting that they allow prostitution’²⁶; by conflating sex workers with dancers, this visa arrangement allows bar and club owners to claim they only hire dancers to work on their premises. This legislation has helped to entrench already existing long-held societal stereotypes about dancers and thus it has become a general truism that ‘artist’ is a euphemism for sex worker.²⁷ Indeed, the term ‘artist’ used to connote female sex workers has a historic precedent in Lebanon, as Racy outlines; “Of baser implication is the commonly used French word *artiste* (typically in feminine gender), a notorious euphemism for the lower echelons of entertainers, taking in cabaret dancers, bar girls, and prostitutes” (Racy, 1986, p. 419). Like the Nationality Law, the first iteration of the Artist Visa was originally implemented during the French Mandate. French officials used the category of *artiste* to regulate foreign women performers. In contrast, they defined and regulated local women performers as prostitutes, deliberately conflating the categories of sex worker and performer, and thus legally entrenching stereotypes and suspicions concerning the morality of performing female bodies (Pastor de Maria Campos, 2017, pp. 287-288).²⁸ Leila’s experience shows the enduring nature of these colonial-era categorisations:

If you're a dancer you are [in] a special, worst, category, like more discriminated [against]. Because when I am in the airport, I understand Arabic, I see they're saying, ‘*hiyye fananah*’ (‘she’s an *artiste*’, sarcastically)... There is a prejudice. (Leila Khoury, interview)

As well as the negative connotations associated with this visa, ‘artists’ are also subject to a plethora of restrictions, financial burdens and humiliating treatment. For example, the Artist Visa rules stipulate that the dancer in question cannot marry a Lebanese man, and is only allowed out, accompanied by a male chaperone,

²⁵ There is plenty of media coverage of this phenomenon; for example, ‘A nation’s worst-kept secret: the women lured to Lebanon with a one-way ticket into slavery.’ Available at: <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/middle-east/a-nations-worst-kept-secret-the-women-lured-to-lebanon-with-a-one-way-ticket-into-slavery-183021.html> [Accessed 12 December 2019] and ‘Prostitution – The business of sex’, Executive Magazine. Available at: <http://www.executive-magazine.com/business-finance/society/prostitution-the-business-of-sex> [Accessed 12 December 2019].

²⁶ ‘When Tatyana said yes to Abu Bilal.’ Available at: <https://now.mmedia.me/lb/en/commentaryanalysis/when-tatyana-said-yes-to-abu-bilal> [Accessed 25 March 2019].

²⁷ See for example, ‘Sex for Sale in Beirut’, Foreign Policy. Available at: <https://foreignpolicy.com/2012/02/09/sex-for-sale-in-beirut/> [Accessed 30 February 2019].

²⁸ Needless to say, female performers were not categorised indiscriminately as sex workers back in France (Pastor de Maria Campos, 2017, p. 288).

between 1pm and 8pm. Women with an artist visa must also have an HIV/Syphilis blood test every three months, which costs far more than it would in a healthcare clinic, and more for a foreigner than a Lebanese citizen. If they do not do this at the ministry of immigration with their sponsor present, their visa is void. The visa plus the blood tests cost around \$8500 per year in total, which, for a freelancer working in Beirut, is a considerable, and often unmanageable, financial burden. If it is paid a day late, the fee doubles.²⁹ Leila asked if she could change to get a visa as a singer, which has a separate, less draconian set of rules, but she was told by General Security officials that she would not be able to dance at all, and if General Security came to one of her shows and saw her dancing, she would be deported.³⁰ As her primary income is teaching and performing dance, and even her singing shows with Yemanjá or Bloco Orquídea feature dancing, as is typical of Brazilian music, this was not an option for her.

These rules, which are published on the official Lebanese General Security website, are only for women: rules for male dancers are simply not present on the page.³¹ Some of Leila's male colleagues, also Brazilian and also working as dancers, do not have to have blood tests, although they still have to pay the extortionate visa costs. Additionally, the rules state that 'She will eventually be permitted a day off per week, if the owner agrees to this'. This statement needs little decoding, but suffice to say, the dancer is treated as property, and has no automatic rights to time off; in essence, slavery. Indeed, perhaps the most restrictive and dangerous aspect of the Artist Visa regulations is that it is part of the broader legislative framework of *kafala*, and thus dancers are legally required to have a male, Lebanese sponsor to whom they are bound; a *kafeel*.

Meaning 'sponsorship system', the *nizām al kafala* or *kafala* system is a mechanism for hosting foreign workers in the Middle East, primarily in the Arabian Peninsula, but the system has also gained traction in Jordan and Lebanon in particular. Migrant workers – of any profession – coming to work in these countries must be 'officially sponsored by a Lebanese agency or individual employer', or *kafeel*, who assumes "legal and economic responsibility for the migrant domestic worker (MDW) during the contract period" (Pande, 2013, p. 418). The responsibility for the foreign worker in question is left to a network of recruitment agencies and the *kafeel*, which has led to widespread abuse of the system, human trafficking and ultimately slavery, as has been well documented.³² The Lebanese Ministry of Interior, rather than the Ministry of Labour, is the official body responsible for the management and employment of *kafala* workers, which 'denies migrant workers the cover afforded by the protections of domestic labour law and the opportunity of entering a labour dispute process to address their complaints'.³³ Additionally, the worker "needs the permission of the original sponsor to leave Lebanon and return to her home country, and she becomes illegal if she leaves her sponsor without his/her consent and official release" (Pande, 2013, p. 419). These laws leave workers in a position of intense vulnerability. Fortunately, Leila's *kafeel* has always been a supportive male

²⁹ There is no mention of this on the General Security website, and I have not been able to verify this claim independently, but both Leila and other dancers have told me that this is the case.

³⁰ The General Security rules for musicians are not entirely clear, but they do not require the musician to undergo medical tests, there is greater freedom of movement and the fees are less expensive.

³¹ General Security official website. Available at: <http://www.general-security.gov.lb/en/posts/43> [Accessed 30 March 2019].

³² See for example, Pande (2013), and Khan and Harroff-Tavel (2013).

³³ International Labour Organisation (ILO), 'Reform of the Kafala System.' Available at: <https://www.ilo.org/dyn/migpractice/docs/132/PB2.pdf> [Accessed 30 March 2019].

friend and colleague of hers, who would not ever try to curtail her freedom of movement, so Leila has been able to lead a freer life than most *kafala* workers.

THE 'PRECARIAT'

“The man said, I don’t care. Today is the wedding of my best friend, let them dance!”

Despite the legal restrictions, financial burden, humiliating treatment and situation of precarity that Leila is subject to, her plight, and that of many other dancers in her position, is somewhat invisible. Firstly, Leila could easily ‘pass’ as a middle-class Lebanese woman. Tall, graceful and stylish, she has olive-toned skin and dark hair, commensurate to many Lebanese. She does not carry the physical trappings of poverty or of *kafala* workers: she dresses in good-quality, fashionable clothes – not a housekeeping uniform, which many MDWs wear³⁴ – nor does she look like the stereotype of the blonde, Slavic Eastern European cabaret worker often trafficked to work in the ‘super nightclubs’. In other words, in Lebanon she does not look ‘other’ and only betrays her foreignness when she speaks. Her ability to ‘blend in’ means that she attracts far less attention from security forces than her darker-skinned counterparts, which has enabled her to develop intimate knowledge of Lebanese societal norms. Thus, she is able to build networks and friendships within the Lebanese middle and upper classes easily, which would be far harder for her to achieve if she looked or dressed like a MDW or cabaret worker.³⁵ This privileged and intimate social knowledge gives her greater capacity to deal with immigration officials, as she is highly familiar with typical Lebanese social behaviour and customs, and speaks a colloquial form of Lebanese Arabic.

Leila also had a middle-class upbringing in Brazil, speaks several languages, and thanks to her Portuguese and Brazilian passports, enjoys relative freedom of movement (Lebanon notwithstanding). Most of the time, she has the financial means to live relatively comfortably and travel when she needs to. Yet, technically she also is a migrant worker, and sits at the upper end of Lebanon’s vast precariat class, of refugees, *kafala* workers, contract workers, and those born stateless. According to Guy Standing (2014), the precariat class is characterised by conditions of unstable labour, no secure occupational identity, exploitation outside the workplace as well as in it, and lack of non-wage benefits, for example, pensions, paid holidays and medical coverage. All of these aspects apply to Leila, meaning that despite her ability to ‘blend in’ to Lebanese society, she lives a precarious existence, without any economic stability, or any concrete legal rights. This level of precarity has taken its toll on Leila’s emotional health, contributing to a general feeling of anxiety and malaise in her day-to-day life. The humiliating regulations of the Artist Visa proved too much for Leila, so in 2017 she stopped paying for it, and is now working illegally, which puts her at risk of deportation. Of the Artist Visa rules, she told me, “I felt very bad when I was inside this system...I just cannot pay the price, and it’s more than price, it’s the moral price, it’s horrible, it’s unbearable”. For her, the risk of being caught working illegally and being deported are preferable to being under this system, and refusing to adhere to *kafala* legislation is arguably the only way she can assert her agency in this situation. As it stands, the capriciousness and corruption of General Security officials, who may or may not

³⁴ In Beirut (and elsewhere in the country), MDWs are often seen wearing pastel-coloured, infantilising housekeeping uniforms. There are numerous housekeeping shops that sell these uniforms across the city.

³⁵ In general, Lebanese society is extremely stratified in terms of class, race and sect, with the exception of certain socially progressive and radical circles. For discussion regarding this, see Seidman, 2012.

care whether entertainers are illegal or not, mood and context depending, mean that her situation remains unpredictable. As Pande (2013, p. 385) points out, it is widely acknowledged that both individual and ‘meso’ acts of resistance “seldom transform structures of subordination”. Thanks to her intimate local knowledge, Leila has managed, for now, to avoid deportation or imprisonment. However, it remains true that in Leila’s case, her disobedience does not and will not change the status quo. If anything, the mercurial nature of the Lebanese authorities only serves to demonstrate what might be termed the ‘flexible inflexibility’ of the system: it can bend as much as an individual in power permits, but it will never give her rights, security or peace of mind.

Additionally, internal power struggles within Leila’s wider network of fellow performers are rife, and have led to an atmosphere of mistrust and unease within the live music scene. Whilst I was in Beirut, at nearly every live concert I went to, whether jazz, Brazilian music or pop, in the many small, independent venues that are scattered across the city, I heard conversations about ‘papers’. At a jazz concert at a bar in Beirut in March 2019, I had a passing conversation with a friend, an Italian musician who plays jazz and Brazilian music regularly in the city. He pointed out that most of the band on stage were foreigners (Palestinian-American, Swiss, Italian), saying “for sure, they will all have had problems”. When I asked him to elaborate, he told me that non-Lebanese musicians often got deported because they did not have the right paperwork, either because they are reluctant to pay the prohibitive visa costs, or are unwilling to become a worker under the *kafala* system. But, often the threat of deportation did not come directly from the General Security themselves; rather, they had been tipped off by Lebanese musicians, who, in his words, were “jealous” of the skill and education level of the foreign musicians, many of whom had trained at prestigious conservatoires in New York or Paris. The foreign musicians were thought to be “taking all their work”; a complaint also common elsewhere in the world, whenever those in marginal professions are not afforded stable living costs (Standing, 2014). These threats are not baseless: Leila’s husband, who is Spanish, was deported upon arrival at Beirut Rafik Hariri Airport after General Security received a list of musicians’ names from a Lebanese musician, who had a brother in the security services. He was unable to re-enter until he had secured somebody who was willing to act as his *kafeel*. Leila has also been subject to threats of deportation, from agents, dancers and General Security officials during her time in Lebanon; even when she was supposedly legally protected by the Artist Visa.

CONCLUSION

“I told her, I’m not gonna do any public shows for a while because maybe immigration are searching for me.”

At the annual carnival celebrations at *Brasiliban* in March 2019, Leila, resplendent in a gold sequined two piece, performed to a packed and diverse crowd; singing classic samba tunes made famous by the likes of Clara Nunes and Beth Carvalho, accompanied by musicians from her band, Yemanjá. The centre was well over capacity; so full that revellers were forced to listen to the music from outside in the garden. The popularity of the event increases every year, and the Brazilian cultural scene is thriving, but at the expense of whom? If Leila, and the others in her position, can no longer bear their situation in Lebanon and leave, what will happen? The culture and nightlife industries rely on these illegal or *kafala*-bound workers; who would take their place? Although dance has been increasingly growing in popularity over the past decade in particular, and more Lebanese women are

becoming professional dancers or dance teachers, the stigma attached to dancing professionally persists. Thus, there are relatively few professional Lebanese dancers, so the sector relies on foreign women (and it is mainly women) to dance at weddings and other events.

Arsan argues that for all who fall under the precariat class – in other words, *kafala* workers or refugees – ‘these unwelcome guests...find themselves shut out by the combined forces of law and security’, yet are also subject to mechanisms of both governmental and private surveillance regimes; thus the state ‘encourage[es] their flight by making life untenable under present conditions’ (Arsan, 2018, p. 307). However, despite this, Lebanon’s elites rely upon these foreigners, for a multitude of reasons, as they are both a source of cheap labour, and will do the jobs that the Lebanese are reluctant to do – in this case, dance publicly. Indeed, what wedding or nightclub party is complete without a lavish *zafeh* or a troupe of jewel and feather-clad dancers?

The endurance of the *kafala* system is in part, symptomatic of the ever-increasing neoliberalisation of Lebanon. The latter, characterised by economic deregulation and the unequal apportioning of rights and resources, has led to an increasing number of citizens living precariously, and an increase in demand for such workers (Baumann, 2017; Standing, 2014). The human has become a commodity available for purchase; a trend which has gradually become the global status quo over the past 30-40 years (Baumann, 2017; Arsan, 2018). These processes have also increased the wealth and mobility of Lebanon’s cosmopolitan middle and upper classes, which has led to a growing demand for a wide variety of entertainment options and increased participation in global trends (Baumann, 2017). Therefore, samba too has become commodified, leading to clichéd, exoticist versions of the genre, which relies on heavily gendered and racialised tropes, as outlined above.³⁶ These stereotypes are essentially reified by the law, which demands that foreign samba dancers, amongst others, are classed literally as sex workers.

Since she stopped paying for the Artist Visa, Leila now enters Lebanon with a Tourist Visa. Therefore, she has to be a little cautious in how she promotes events, although her level of caution varies, depending on how emboldened she feels, and whether she has had good or bad immigration experiences at the airport recently. Other performers in her situation have found – or have been forced to find – alternatives. Many of these ‘enablers of leisure’ (Arsan, 2018, p. 308) have been deported, and others have left voluntarily. She said to me, “unless the law changes here, this country is not gonna change, the mentality is not gonna change”; so, although she has spent a decade in Lebanon, and has her life, friends, and work there, Leila is also considering leaving.

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