

## Obituary

# Gaage Naima



## A Talented Dancer who Languished in Obscurity

**died on Saturday, the 20<sup>th</sup> June 2009**

*Gaage Naima, or Fathumathu Naima, was born on the 7th May 1951 in Male'. She was related to the Maldivian Royal Family through her mother's alliance with the brother of the before-last king. Her mother died when she was 4 and her father shortly thereafter. She was looked after by a palace official, along with her brothers and sisters. Naima lived for a few months in Addu Atoll in the 1960s, during her youth. She returned to Male' and has lived in the capital until her death. Naima is survived by one older brother and a younger sister.*

Gaage Naima was trained as a dancer at the early age of 9. Her dance instructor was Okko Muhammad Fulhu, a man who devoted his entire life to the preservation of the ancient Maldivian traditions. Naima underwent her training along with other girls, but she was the best. Naima would find her lifelong interest and vocation in this artistic expression. The discipline that Okko

Muhammad Fulhu taught her was based on the Northern Indian Kathak dance style. But Naima had talent and incorporated on her own many traditional Maldivian elements she learned from her instructor into her dances.

A ballet troupe of the palace had been started by Maldivian leader Muhammad

Amin Doshimēnā Kilegefānu in the early 1950s. After introducing parades of uniformed soldiers marching to the tunes of a military band in order to welcome important foreign visitors, the charismatic ruler wished to have a Court dancing troupe. Amin saw the dance performances by noble ladies as an addition to the modernization of the Maldivian military.

After Muhammad Amin was ousted and the monarchy was restored in the Maldives, high officials sought to expand and raise the level of the official protocol at state ceremonies. Thus the idea of having a Royal Court ballet was revived under Sultan Muhammad Farid. A contest was staged, and in 1964, at the age of 13, Naima joined the budding official Maldivian Royal Ballet.

The Maldivian Royal Court dancers were modeled on the Royal Ballet troupes of other countries in the region. At the time when Asian nations, many of them newly-independent, were looking for symbols of identity, the Royal Cambodian ballet, where then King Norodom Sihanouk's own daughter Bopha Devi was premiere dancer, and similar official troupes in Thailand and Laos, inspired other countries. The idea reached neighboring Sri-Lanka, where, although not a monarchy any longer, the government's troupe of danseuses would perform classical dances as part of the welcome ceremonies for state-visitors at the Colombo airport, the harbor or other selected locations. From Sri-Lanka this addition to official protocol, reached the Maldives.

Naima became the premiere dancer of the court. She enjoyed dancing and put her

whole soul into it. Her skill in dancing stirred bitter jealousies though. Some people, resenting the attention Naima was getting from high officials, lashed her severely with their tongues and it was easy for them to do so. Prevalent religious sanctimoniousness played into the hands of the envious slanderers.

Reminiscing the times, Naima lamented that many people said such evil things about her, mostly behind her back. They told that her life was forfeited and that she would go to hell. She became afraid of the hatred and the threats, a fear that would breed an anxiety that would haunt her for the rest of her life.

With religious fanaticism in the ascendant, Maldivian national traditions suffered. A person such as Naima who tried to keep the ancient flowers of court refinement and artistic skills alive, withered in the hostile atmosphere. Under pressure from the influential religious figures, the idea of an official Maldivian Royal Ballet had to be put aside. Barely one year after having been started, the project was not allowed to continue and the official dancing troupe was disbanded while still undergoing training.

Naima, only 15, established herself as a dancer on her own, training people she chose. She also performed dances at private celebrations. But the self-righteous lashing tongues would not stop. They would keep torturing her, demoralizing her and pulling down her efforts to soar in the gracious art of dancing. Finally, Naima realized that she had not the strength to fight back the jealous hatred aroused by her dancing skills and gave up. Deprived of the possibility of exercising her artistic vocation, something in

Naima died before her time. She was forced to live in obscure average mediocrity, a dull state pleasing to the religious powers.

The Maldivian Royal Dancing Troupe is now just a memory. While during the 1960s there was much emphasis on nation-building in the Maldives through the promotion and consolidation of national symbols, that spirit was much diluted in the last quarter of the century when the emphasis was on “pure” Islamic ideology. In the last decades the Maldives has become culturally a Gilbertian place, where everything has been farcically inverted. Bright, talented young national artists like Naima were stifled, while the enemies of artistic expression, a crowd that would easily, with a little change in costume, perfectly fit as crew of the most sinister pirate ship, were hailed as the local guardians for the promotion of virtue. Self-righteous, boorish characters took the upper hand, unimaginatively quoting religious texts with owl-like seriousness, as if that repetitive activity took so much effort.

The social leaders who pulled Naima down from her pedestal promoted intransigence and venomous slander, all in the name of the preservation of a puritanical ideology, a system that thrives by being enforced using

violent means whenever it is expedient. One wonders though what the word "purity" has to do with an ideology that exalts those who have bloodstained hands, religious murderers alright, but murderers all the same.

Under such vicious religious leadership the Maldives has become a cultural desert. Many traditions have disappeared. Naima whose flowering creativity was stifled for over forty years, suffered in silence and muffled anxiety. One shudders at the thought of how many other geniuses have been stifled in the Maldives by Islam. One wonders how such mindless destruction can be helpful for the interests of the Maldives as a nation. One grieves deeply for the slow death and the undeserved indignity Naima had to endure, seeing her talents and her body losing strength without being able to bloom, her creativity killed in the bud by the harsh, persistent winds that have blown fiercely all these years of artistic sterility in the Maldives.

*Xavier Romero-Frias, Bangkok 2009*

*Originally published in Maldives Royal Family Website in 2009*