



Pharaonic Costume Worn by Benat Maazin

1. Crown (*Taj*)
2. Chemise (*Kamisa*)
3. Vest (*Anteree*)
4. Bustle (*Azzama*)
5. Slip
6. Drawstring Skirt
7. Ribbon Skirt
8. Dowry Necklace (*Kirdan*)



# The Legacy of the Ghawazi

...

by Habiba

They were a household word in the 19th century. Egyptian dance star of the late 20th century Nagwa Fouad has called them "the purest exemplars of the Egyptian Dance."<sup>1</sup> The Ghawazi (singular: Ghaziyyah) were Egypt's dancing girls made famous by the 19th-century European travelers who wrote accounts of their travels to Egypt after Napoleon's 1798 expedition to that country.

Most of these dancers came from a group of people who were thought to be ethnically different from the Fellahin, the Egyptian peasants. Their origins have been debated, however. Some thought they were Gypsies or another tribe from India or Persia. Some have attributed their position outside the bounds of respectable Egyptian society not to ethnic differences, but to the fact that they perform occupations that have

very low status. Traditionally they are tinkers, traders, ironworkers, oral poets, dancers and musicians.

It is fairly well agreed nowadays that most of the Ghawazi were Gypsies and that they came from the Nawar, Bahlawan and Halab tribes that have been in Egypt for hundreds of years. Among these groups there are families in which it is traditional for the girls to earn their living by dancing. In recent times the most celebrated Ghawazi came from the Maazin family, who are Nawar.

These dancers are an important link with the past for bellydancers because they represent one of the original forms of Egyptian dance, unencumbered by theater dance and Western influences. And yet today, at a time when Oriental dance is at its peak of interest in the West, we are losing an important part

of our dance history because, for a variety of reasons, all of these dancers but one have retired from public performance.

In contrast, over one hundred years ago, program notes for a Palisades Amusement Park spectacle, called *Egypt Through the Ages*, referred to a parade of "...almees, gavazies, gypsies and jugglers."<sup>2</sup> When thirteen-year-old Ruth St. Denis saw this very show in 1893, there had been almost a century for the public consciousness to embrace the dancers called Ghawazi as part of the world cultural landscape. More average Americans would have recognized the word "Ghawazi" then, than now. This tells us that what is part of public culture is often gone a few generations later. No matter what style of bellydance you prefer, the story of these dancers cannot fail to be relevant.



Starting with Napoleon's 1798 expedition to Egypt, a torrent of information about Egypt swept Europe and America, bringing on successive waves of Egyptomania. "Egypt has long been famous for its public dancing girls." With this simple statement Edward Lane began his chapter on the dancing girls of Egypt in his widely read account, *Manners and Customs of the Modern Egyptians*, first published in 1836.<sup>3</sup> Many other writers before and after Lane recorded their impressions of these dancers. Painters like Gerome, Delacroix and Roberts also did their part to let people who couldn't travel experience dancers from the East. Later in the century, clever impresarios brought the dancers to the World's Fairs and Industrial Expositions of the late 19th century, allowing people who hadn't the means or time to go to Egypt to see them. "In 1889 in Paris, the *danse du ventre* made all of Paris run [in its orbit] and an average of 2000 spectators flocked to watch the belly dancers every day."<sup>4</sup>

Interestingly enough, each generation got the Egypt it needed to inspire a different

focus on art. For example, painters of the 19th century saw a sensual and decadent "other" on which to impose their fantasies about Middle Eastern women. At the turn of the 19th century, early pioneers of modern dance, like Ruth St. Denis and Isadora Duncan, used ancient Greek, Middle Eastern and Indian dance to break free from the suffocating conventions of classical dance.

In the world of dance, movement vocabulary was changed forever, even in classical ballet. Emotions ran free and binding clothing was cast off. They were not claiming to present authentic Eastern dances and they, too, were aware of the marketability of exoticism and its rewards.

The next renaissance of interest in Eastern

dance came with our very own Middle Eastern dance pioneers of the 1960s and 70s. The new age of the Ghawazi began with two landmark series of articles, which were embraced wholeheartedly by the new generation of Middle Eastern dancers. Both writers had the scholar's passion to discover the "true," the "original," and they both were inspired to follow their hearts.

Between 1971 and 1973, Aisha Ali traveled in Egypt to document true Egyptian dance and to find the dancers known as Ghawazi. In writing, she expressed her determination not to accept information that did not ring true. "Although I had seen a variety of dancers in Egypt, defined by the locals as Ghawazi, I was still determined to locate the group whose lifestyle, costumes and music were those that had originally excited my interest."<sup>5</sup>

Already a well-known Oriental dancer, Ali became a licensed folk dancer in Egypt and performed with the family of dancers known as the Benat Maazin (Maazin sisters). Aisha Ali was inspired by having heard the recording *The Folk Music of Egypt*, which appeared in 1967 under the auspices of the Egyptian Ministry of Culture and the Ethnomusicological and Folklore Institute of Bucharest. She published a series of articles in *Arabesque Magazine* about her travels between 1979 and 1981, "Meetings in the Middle East," that documented her search

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**The evolution of the Ghawazi costume. From left to right: Mid-19th Century, Late 19th Century, Mid-20th Century, 1980s.**





Samia and Fayza in typical  
back-to-back formation,  
1986



reputation by association with dancers and the embarrassment of folk traditions considered "tawdry and out of style."<sup>7</sup> In addition, the families of dancers feared bringing attention to themselves. Ali and Nearing's work revolutionized our dance and the way it is taught. When we read these accounts today, we are reminded of the great difficulties encountered by these two women in finding the elusive Ghawazi. Now we only have to search the Internet, yet, 25 years later, we still don't have all the answers to the mystery of the Ghawazi.

Most of the Ghawazi came from a group of people who were thought to be ethnically different from the Fellahin (the Egyptian peasants). Their origins have been debated, however. Some thought they were Gypsies or another tribe from India or Persia. Edward Lane says that they are a "distinct tribe."<sup>8</sup> He also makes the point that their dance style is "exactly agreeing with the descriptions which Martial and Juvenal have given of the

performances of the female dancers of [the Roman colony of] Gades."<sup>9</sup> Lane was referring to descriptions of dancers in humorous and satirical poems about the moral decline of Romans by these two ancient Roman writers in the 1st and 2nd centuries A.D. These poets encountered the dancers called Gaditanae at banquets and entertainments in the Roman colony of Gades, now the city of Cadiz, Spain. While you can say that the style goes back to the 1st century A.D. and that the early practitioners were probably brought from Egypt by Phoenicians to the Roman colony of Gades, the people who are now known for performing this dance were not in Egypt before 1500 A.D. As to the modern practitioners of the art, Lane says, "Many of their customs are similar to those of the people that we call gypsies."<sup>10</sup>

Some, however, have attributed their position outside the bounds of respectable Egyptian society not to ethnic differences, but to the fact that they perform occupations that have very low status. Traditional

Fayza Maazin and her cousin  
in Luxor dresses, 1989



for the dancers known as the Ghawazi. In 1973 she released a recording called "Music of the Ghawazi." It was to be the first of many authentic recordings that she made that taught us to see regional dance and music traditions of the Middle East in a different way.

Another dance researcher, Edwina Nearing, writing under the pen name Qamar El Mulouk, detailed her 1976 adventures in a series running in *Habibi* Magazine called, "The Mystery of the Ghawazi." Nearing was determined to find "the original professional dancers of Egypt."<sup>6</sup> Dealing with ever-contradictory information, Nearing tried to find out who these famous but shadowy people were. Did the word Ghawazi refer to a tribe of people, a particular dance form, the dancer who performs those dances or a profession? She started by going to Sumbat in Lower Egypt, the legendary Delta home of the Ghawazi and came up against a stone wall of fear against reprisal. Nearing went down many blind alleys until she met the Maazin girls of Luxor. Nearing also became a licensed dancer and got firsthand experience performing with the Benat Maazin in Luxor.

Several things conspired to make Ali's and Nearing's searches difficult. First was the Egyptian ambivalence about the role of music and dance in general and the providers of such. Then there was the fear on the part of ordinary villagers of getting a bad





Samia and Fayza Maazin singing, 1985

Egyptian Gypsy occupations are "smithing, tinkering, wool work, dancing and singing, and trading."<sup>11</sup> It is fairly well agreed nowadays by observers that most of the Ghawazi were Ghajar (what Egyptians call Gypsies, but not to their face) and that they came from the Nawar, Bahlawan and Halab tribes that have been in Egypt for hundreds of years.<sup>12</sup> Among these groups there are families in which it is traditional for the girls to earn their living by dancing. In these families the women earn most of the

income. In recent times the most celebrated Ghawazi came from the Maazin family, who are Nawar. Also causing confusion were dancers "who call themselves Ghawazi, but who are not."<sup>13</sup>

French ethnomusicologist Alain Weber

summed it up in an interview with the dancer Jalilah:

The original professional dancers of Egypt prior to the Oriental cabaret style dancer known in this century were the Ghawazi and the awalim. The awalim were more respected, as they danced in enclosed spaces for the upper classes. The Ghawazi on the other hand, being Gypsies, were considered low class and danced in public places accompanying themselves throughout the dance on sagat. The Ghawazi, as we know, had to take flight from Cairo when during the reign of Mohammed Ali in the 19th century their dancing was ... banned and they were exiled to Upper Egypt. Thus, their dance form did not follow the same evolution as that of Oriental dance, which developed from the folk styles of urban centers into the form which we recognize today. Isolated from such influences, the Ghawazi and their unsophisticated dancing have undergone fewer changes and even their costuming has remained similar to the style worn at the turn of the century.<sup>14</sup>

The Maazin Ghawazi however, have



Samia and Fayza sitting with band, 1986





Back-to-back in Luxor dresses, 1989

series of beliefs about themselves which may also differ from scholars' accounts. Youssef Maazin, the patriarch who died in 1986, says that his family was of the Nawar tribe. He did not care for the term Ghawazi, and denied being Ghajar.<sup>15</sup>

What is certain is that Ghawazi have been in Egypt for perhaps five hundred years and, during that time, have made their living by music and dance. The migration of the Gypsies out of India was thought to take place in the 14th century. This does not conflict with an arrival date of the 16th century after first trying to make their living in Persia and Turkey. In looking for a reason for their migration to Egypt, it was thought they were camp followers of the Ottoman Turks that conquered Egypt in the 16th century.<sup>16</sup> The Fellahin do not think they are Egyptian but from there opinions diverge. Fellahin call them Ghajar while the Ghawazi call themselves simply Nawar, Halab or Bahlawan, depending on tribe.<sup>17</sup>

Origins aside, what is certain is that they are considered outside the bounds of respectable society. An Egyptian sociologist says, "The people who practice this profession are despised by Ghajar and non-Ghajar alike."<sup>18</sup> They have other low-status occupations but music and dance are the lowest. The Ghawazi have also been associated with prostitution over the years and that hasn't





Fayza with  
cane, 1989

mance in general, and for foreigners in particular, the feeling that foreigners were monopolizing the dancers, and the knowledge that the government was profiting from disreputable activity.<sup>20</sup> "It was probably a combination of internal and external factors"<sup>21</sup> that prompted the banning of the "'public women,' all lumped together." It also

helped, although Aisha Ali is told by her informant that since Nasser, "the girls are only permitted to dance."<sup>19</sup> Whether or not individual *ghaziyyas* continued to be prostitutes into the second half of the 20th century is an open question. In any case, this would not be something they would have wanted to advertise about themselves to the outside world.

At various times, religious pressure and a reaction to foreigners prompted suppression of Ghawazi and other female dancers and singers, most notably the banishment by Mohammed Ali of the dancers from Cairo to Esna in 1834. Although the taxes levied on female performers was very lucrative for the government, the religious authorities were always pressing for suppression for several reasons: opposition to female perfor-

didn't help a ruler who was trying to present Egypt to the world as a modern state to have the rest of the world associate Egypt most strongly with dancing girls.

So, when the French writer Flaubert came to Egypt in 1848, he had to go to Esna to see the dancers. By 1866, many Ghawazi had returned to Cairo, the ban having been lifted and a new tax on danc-

ing girls instituted.<sup>22</sup>

When asked, the Benat Maazin always considered their art to be different from Oriental dance. Amal and Karam Maazin "spoke of their dance as Raqs Sha'bi (folk dance) rather than Raqs Sharqi (oriental dance)."<sup>23</sup>

Traditionally they performed their dances to *mizmar* or *rebab* music. Their performances consisted of singing and dancing in groups of two to five. They performed at country weddings on high wooden stages in the open air or in tents at religious festivals. A typical wedding job would be performing for five or six hours in the evening and then going to the wedding house the next morning and performing. Part of their performance was choreographed and part improvised. They are famous for their side-to-side shimmy movement and the fact that they play *sagat* (finger cymbals) throughout their performance. The first time I saw them dance in 1985, I was smitten by their effortless grace and power.

In an interview with Edwina Nearing, Josef Maazin describes the dances done by the Maazin Ghawazi.

### The Raqs al-Takht

The opening dance of a wedding entertainment, performed to *mizmar*, a raucous oboe-like instrument, and drum by three or four dancers. There is no choreography but, though the dancers improvise, the majority

Habiba with Sanaa, Fayza and Samia  
Maazin looking vastly different in  
their daytime personas, 1985



PHOTO: ROBERTA DOUGHERTY





Habiba dancing with Ghawazi, 1985

PHOTO: ROBERTA DOUGHERTY

must be doing the same thing at any given time, while the remaining dancer performs the step/movement which the majority were doing last.

### Al-Na'asi

A side-to-side shimmy dance, performed in unison by three or four dancers, with light cymbals...The na'asi is accompanied by *mizmars* played very low by muffling the bell.

### The Asherat al-Tabl

A drummer moves about the dance area playing a large *tabl beledi*, or double-headed drum slung before him. The *ghaziyyah*, leaning backwards across the barrel of the drum, follows him in this position, dancing.

### The Raqs al-Jihayni

The *ghaziyyah's* stick dance par excellence, described as "very old." Performed by two dancers, it contains elements of *tatiyb* (an Egyptian men's stick dance based on martial arts).

### The Nizzawi

A fast, choreographed dance for two dancers with staffs. A typical figure is the dancers' moving apart while facing each other, then coming together again, then taking a quarter pivot to face forward and advance, side by

side, while twirling their staffs like batons."<sup>24</sup> It is no wonder that people are confused when they start to research the Ghawazi.<sup>25</sup>

Scholars spend so much time looking for the facts that they neglect the fact that

sometimes a people's myths and beliefs about themselves are as important as the "truth." So it is with the Ghawazi. There is no question that these people fit the pattern of Gypsies in that they adapted and improved upon the local regional music and dance and excelled as oral poets, musicians and dancers. There is also no doubt that Egyptians have a dual attitude towards music and dance. They love it but despise the practitioners. The Nawar and Halab actually preserved the music, dance and oral poetry of the Fellahin.<sup>26</sup> Their version of their origins exists both for their protection and to increase their social status. The Ghawazi were vulnerable and have purposefully lived under a smokescreen. It is tragic that even today Gypsies around the world are regarded with suspicion and barred entry to society.



When I first traveled to meet the legendary dancers in 1985, I met Youssef Maazin and his nieces Samia and Fayza, daughters of his brother Saad. I held my own Ghawazi performance in a hotel ballroom and described the experience in an article, "A Party in Luxor," in *Arabesque Magazine*<sup>27</sup>. If I cared passionately about the tradition before I met them, I was absolutely obsessed after. They had that effect on people.

I saw Fayza and her cousin dance again in 1989 just before Cassandra Lorus announced in *Cairo Today Magazine* that the last of the Maazin Ghawazi still performing, Amal and Karam, were retiring to get married. Pressures from increasing religious fundamentalism and the attractions of Western popular culture had conspired to rob the Ghawazi of their livelihood. Edwina Nearing sounded the alarm in the dance community in an article for *Habibi*.<sup>28</sup>

Now there is one bright ray of hope for the survival of the Ghawazi tradition. Khairiyya Maazin, youngest of the daughters of Youssef Maazin, is trying to continue her family tradition. It should be a priority in our dance community to help however we can. **H**

#### FOOTNOTES

1. Nearing, "Sirat al ghawazi," pt. 1, p.8
2. Kendall, *Where She Danced*, p. 28.
3. Lane, *Manners*, p. 383.
4. Celik, *Displaying the Orient*, p. 24.
5. Ali, "Meetings in the Middle East pt. VI," *Arabesque*, v. VII, no. 1, May/June 1981, p.18
6. Farrah, "Bon Chic, Bon Genre," *Arabesque*, v. XVI, no. 5, Jan/Feb 1991, p. 5
7. Nearing, "Sirat al Ghawazi" pt. 2, p. 1.
8. Lane, p. 383.
9. Ibid.
10. Ibid., p. 386.
11. Hanna, *Ghagar of Sett Guiranh*, p. 23.
12. Reynolds, *Heroic Poets, Poetic Heroes*, p. 50.
13. Lane, p. 387.
14. Farrah, "Bon chic," p. 5.
15. El Mulouk, "Mystery of the Ghawazi," *Habibi* IV:11, p. 10 cited in Saleh, p. 144-5.
16. Reynolds, p. 89.
17. Ibid., p. 50.
18. Hanna, p. 31.
19. Ali, "Meetings in the Middle East pt. VI," p. 19.
20. Tucker, *Women in Nineteenth Century Egypt*, p. 150.
21. Nieuwkerk, *A Trade Like Any Other*, p. 31-32.
22. Tucker, p. 151.
23. Nearing, "Sirat al Ghawazi," pt. 2, p. 4.
24. Nearing, "Mystery of the Ghawazi," *Habibi* IV:11, p. 11 cited in Saleh, p. 146.
25. In addition to the mysteries of ethnic identity the word Ghawazi is puzzling. Some Egyptians have voiced the theory that it does not refer to a particular ethnic group, family or tribe but refers to someone who dances in a particular traditional style for a living in rural Egypt. The word Ghawazi is commonly thought to mean "invaders of the heart" but there are other theories as well. One theory suggests that it refers to the Turkish gold coins that they used to wear on their costumes, called ghazi. See El Mulouk, "Mystery" cited in Saleh, p. 144-5
26. See Canova, "Bisaccia dello Sheikh."
27. *Arabesque* vol. 11, no.4, Nov./Dec. 1985 p.10-11, 19-20
28. *Habibi* v. 12, no.2, Spring 1993, "Ghawazi on the Edge of Extinction."

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2. Canova, Giovanni. "Notizie sui Nawar e sugli altri gruppi Zingari Presenti in Egitto: La Bisaccia Dello Sheikh, p. 71-85. *Quarterly Journal of the Iranist*, University of Venice Seminar (Venice) 1981.
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5. Farrah, Ibrahim. "Say it isn't so!" *Arabesque*, v. XV, no. 4, Nov/Dec, 1989, p. 3-4.
6. Farrah, Ibrahim. "Say it isn't so! The last dance." *Arabesque*, v. XV, no. 3, Sept/Oct 1989, p. 4.
7. Habiba (Barbara Siegel) "A Party in Luxor," *Arabesque*, v.11, no. 4., Nov/Dec 1985, p. 10-11, 19-20.

8. Habiba. "Long Lost Relatives: From Ghawazi to Rom." *Bennu*, Winter/Spring, 2003, p. 24.
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#### VIDEOS THAT CONTAIN FOOTAGE OF THE BENAT MAAZIN GHAWAZI

1. Ali, Aisha. Dances of Egypt. www.aisha-ali.com.
2. Morocco. Folk dances of Egypt, Nubia and Sudan. Includes footage of the Benat Mazin Ghawazi. 1 hr.
3. The Romany Trail: Part One: Gypsy Music Into Africa. Beats of the Heart Series. 60 mins. Harcourt Films, 1992. (Shanachie 1210)

#### AVAILABLE MUSIC

- Aisha Ali. Music of the Ghawazi (DA700), released 1973. now on CD. www.aisha-ali.com.