

# Dance Archaeology Orientalia:

## *The Hagallah Revisited*

by Barbara Siegel (Habiba)

I became interested in the dances from Egypt's western desert when I saw the provincial troupe from Mersa Matrouh perform at a festival for youth in Cairo in 1985. They performed their version of the *Hagallah* and also a dance depicting a wedding. The *Hagallah* is a standard offering in many folklore shows, but I expected a regional troupe to be closer to the original. The choreography is extremely simple. Very few movement elements are employed, but this is a good opportunity to see a typical step repeated over and over. The one oscillating hip movement was spellbinding, and the music, played by local musicians from the region, was different from other Egyptian music. The more I investigated, the more I realized how distinct and diverse this culture is and how recent events have affected the artistic life of the women in this area.

The *Hagallah* is found among the Bedouins of the western desert, who are called, in Arabic, *Mugharba* (Western Arabs). The largest and most important of these is a group of tribes known collectively as Awlad Ali. At present they occupy the north coast of Egypt from Salum to Alexandria. They are descendents of the Beni Suleim and the Beni Hilal, Arab invaders from the Najd in the Rub al Khali Desert (Saudi Arabia) who swept through North Africa in the 11th century. Although they have intermarried with Berbers, their identity is based in Bedouin ancestry. They settled originally in Libya (Cyrenaica) and started moving into Egypt about 200 years ago.<sup>1</sup> Their economic base has traditionally been herding, grain production, trade, and smuggling. Efforts in the 19th century by Mohammed Ali to control them, and later, in this century to assimilate them have largely failed.

In the 1950s, the Egyptian government sought to settle and assimilate them. The government's efforts to end their nomadic existence<sup>2</sup> have been successful, but they have not yet been assimilated into Egyptian society.<sup>3</sup> Because their main allegiance is tri-



*A woman from the Western desert relaxes while a curiously timid child peers from behind her. The little one is already being infused with the traditions of her elders, and when the springs of her maturity open up, she too will hide behind the veil. "The elder woman's veil is manipulated according to her degree of social comfort." (Photo from Veiled Sentiments by Lila Abu-Lughod)*

bal, they have little concern for extra-tribal affairs. Although they drive trucks and listen to music cassettes, attitudes remain the same. Dr. Lila Abu Lughod, who lived with the Awlad Ali for 2 years, describes a radio program "*Iskandariyya-Matrouh*" (Alexandria-Matrouh) which features Bedouin songs, poems and greetings for various parties, all identified by name and tribal affiliation.<sup>4</sup> This is a convenient way for formerly nomadic people to keep in touch with kin. Because of their claim of direct ancestry to the Bedouin they hold themselves apart from Egyptians. Their allegiance is not to a particular country or geographical area but is based on blood affilia-

tion. They consider the conduct of the people of the Nile Valley to be without honor particularly in area of the relationship between the sexes. Sex segregation is more strictly enforced among them than among the Egyptians, and they are horrified at the immodesty of the Egyptian women.<sup>5</sup>

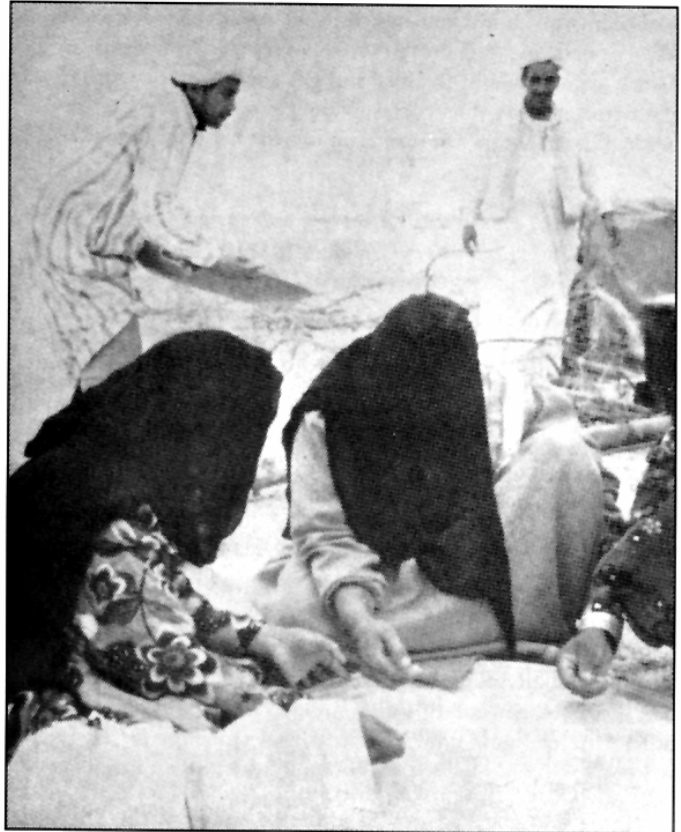
In the past thirty years the Bedouins have benefitted from economic development of their area. In addition to the traditional means of making a living, the Awlad Ali have made money in real estate speculation.<sup>6</sup> Settlement and gains in wealth have brought men new contacts with the outside world. Women, on the other hand, have lost ground economically and with regard

to personal freedom. Women always had a role and a contribution to make in the economy of herding sheep and barley production. As men engage in new, non-traditional pursuits, women have been economically marginalized. Women's contributions have been devalued to solely domestic chores. Also, settlement means often that the Bedouin are living among strangers, or, at least, non-family members. The fact that the men have new business partners who are non-kin has forced a more formal segregation upon the women. The women of the western desert have not worn the permanent veil like the Bedouins of the eastern desert.<sup>7</sup> They veil only in front of certain categories of men, older relatives, in-laws and strangers. Segregation in the desert traditionally meant a hung curtain; now it means separate rooms. Where neighbors are not kin, women are confined to the house.<sup>8</sup>

In the artistic and expressive arena, women have also lost ground. Women were participants in reciting *ghennaywas*, short poetic songs similar to Japanese *haiku*. They are either sung or recited. Uttered either at odd moments or in more formal celebrations, they were heard, repeated and appreciated by family members for their artistry. Because there is not much opportunity for individual expression, these poems are also a clue to the emotional state of the reciter. When separated by a tent flap the women could hear and appreciate the poetry sung by men and vice versa. In everyday life this practice is disappearing. With the new technology of the cassette tape recorder, the men's poems are being preserved and passed around, but it is not considered proper to record the women's songs. Woman no longer have as wide a voice.<sup>9</sup> The professionalization of this folk art includes only men. Also, people sing them less and listen to recordings more. Because of the changing division of labor and the increasing segregation of the sexes, there are less opportunities for expressive and artistic interchanges between men and women. As we shall see, poetry and dance have suffered a similar fate.

The dance song from Mersa Matrouh known as the *Hagallah* has been affected by all of these changes. The *Hagallah* is one of the variants of an Arab Bedouin dance found throughout the Arab world. Common to all are the

*Veiled women cleaning rice. Note that in the traditional version of the Hagallah, the dancer wears a veil similar to the ones used here. (Photo from Veiled Sentiments by Lila Abu-Lughod)*



following features: Veiled females, singly or in pairs, dance before groups of clapping youths. The dancers sometimes brandish weapons to keep eager youths away. Both the *ghennaywa*, and a longer form of poetry, the *shettaywa*, play a part in the performance. Magda Saleh cites similar dances reported from Iraq and Sinai. In one such dance the female defends herself with a sword from youths trying to snatch off her veil.<sup>10</sup> Throughout, the dancing is "extremely reserved, strictly decent and very coy."

An early account of a *Hagallah* is given by the wife of G. W. Murray who observed it at a wedding of the chief of the Jumeiat tribe:

As the afternoon wore on, the young men shook off their heaviness and lethargy, and, with the advent of two amateur dancing girls, things began to hum. Both girls were so veiled and muffled in clothing, that they were little more than shapeless bundles while their arms were covered from wrist to elbows in heavy silver bangles which jingled as they moved. Today's bride had

been one of them at the last 'id a fact that no doubt inspired them to future hopes and greater efforts. A *jird*, the plaid of the Libyan Bedouin, in which he rolls himself up in winter for protection against the bitter winds, was each dancer's costume and it was fastened in clumsy folds at the waist with bright red and yellow shawls. Their forms were hardly sylph-like in this distorted get-up. The young men stood in half circles to sing and clap for them. Most popular was a guessing game, in which the lady made a great play over her choice, tapping one of the candidates lightly with her wand. The selected one fell on his knees to beg for mercy; if she relented, the dance went on, if not, he had to pay a forfeit.<sup>12</sup>

Numerous descriptions of this dance exist in which female members of the family participate. In the last 25 years or so things have changed. Dr. Lila Abu-Lughod says that "in the less distant past . . . the exchange of



The National Folkloric Troupe of Egypt in a theatrical version of the Hagallah. (Photo courtesy of Mr. Mohammed Khalil)

*ghennaywas* at weddings was common. According to informants, the young men forming the semicircle in front of the camp not only sang or chanted the longer types of poetry, primarily to the dancer (*hajjala*), but also individually directed *ghennaywas* to girls or women with whom they were enamored. The women and girls, all gathered in a tent nearby, could hear all that the men sang, and individual women responded with songs.<sup>13</sup> Unfortunately, wedding festivities have "changed dramatically in the past few decades. In the past, weddings and circumcision ceremonies were celebrated for up to seven days. The main activities were singing and poetry recitations, mostly by the young men. The major wedding performance was the *saff*, in which the young men formed a semicircle and clapped and sang while a young woman, usually a sister or cousin of the groom, danced completely veiled in their midst . . . The men's songs extolled the dancer's beauty, detailing parts of her face and body. Most of the women over thirty remembered this well. At the weddings I attended, however, women only danced for each other."<sup>14</sup> Now, when the dance is performed at a wedding it is done by a professional dancer. Interestingly enough, Dr. Magda Saleh relates that the veil the professional dancer was wearing when she was filmed for "Egypt Dances," reportedly "for reasons of modesty during the dance, was discarded unhesitatingly during tea-break, when the *Hagallah* and her entourage bantered on terms of the greatest familiarity."<sup>15</sup> Clearly, here is a professional performer assuming the

character of a family member and then discarding the role on break. Dr. Abu Lughod suggests that this is another sign of marginalization for women. Within the context of a wedding the dancer represented an emissary to the world of men representing the women. There is also a corresponding emissary to the world of women by a male relative during the wedding. This changes somewhat when the dancer is hired from outside.

The dancer as well as the dance is called the *Hagallah*. The word might be derived from *hag'l* (skip or hop).<sup>16</sup> Dr. Saleh describes the dance as organized into three sections: the *shettaywa*, the *ghennaywa* and the *magruda*. Most of the dancing is done in the first section. Dr. Saleh cites a description by Mahmoud Reda: the *shettaywa* is sung by the whole group, the *ghennaywa* is a solo poetic improvisation and the *magruda* is sung by a soloist and the group.<sup>17</sup> During the *ghennaywa* there are "recurrences of the *shettaywa*, involving pantomime of dalliance and flirtation with the men."<sup>18</sup> There is no instrumental music – clapping and singing only.

In the performance which Dr. Saleh filmed, the *shettaywa* begins with one of the men leading the *Hagallah* from a tent. She holds one end of a stick and a man, holding the other end, leads her out. The man leading her takes the stick from her and plants it into the ground before the row of men who bow to greet her. While the organization of this dance, with its three sections, is complex, the movement content is relatively simple and with little variation. An interesting theory is that the "swiveling or gyrating

movement that characterizes the *Hagallah* dance may be related to 'tail dances,' in particular to survivals of animal-imitation dances descended from a hunter gatherer society and which were common in ancient Egypt."<sup>19</sup>

Dr. Saleh describes the movement: The (woman) in a mincing, high-stepping walk on low half-toe with (slight) flexion of the knees, parades (counter clockwise) before the row of (men). The distinctive oscillating pelvic movement rotates back and forth on the vertical axis of the spine throughout the dance . . . First (the woman) leans on or drags the stick for the first quarter circle, raises it as in a salute, then plunges it in the ground in front of (the men).<sup>20</sup>

The actual symbolism of the stick is yet to be interpreted. The clapping and oscillating movements escalate to a frenzy. The dancer "also gestures with her left hand, occasionally giving slight head tosses and nods (encouragement?), arms bend [at maximum flexion] (teasingly?) [and] lifts the corners of her veil."<sup>21</sup>

During the *ghennaywa*, the second part of the performance, all are seated. When the *shettaywa* recurs the dancer minces before the men with the stick balanced on her head. At this point she chooses one man by pointing the stick at him. He lays it on the ground. He crouches before her on one knee and the flirtation begins:

"[The man] crouch[es] before her on one knee. [The woman] undoes the shawl from about her waist, bestows it and her jewelry upon the same [man] who she pointed the stick at. There ensues a mock quarrel: as [the man] receives it on a panel of his "*tob*," [the man] on his left demands and takes each gift in turn, handing it to the [man] next to him. [The woman], posing in a side-backbend, retrieves her jewelry. [The man] mimes taking each bracelet out of his eye and removing his eyeball [symbolically offering his sight] to return to her with the bangle. While he is thus engaged, [the woman] awaits, standing with her right fingers almost touching her shoulder, head inclined to the

right, leaning slightly sideways towards him. [The woman] in asimilar pose, palm turned at face level, leans into the side-backbend towards [the man] and sketches a snatching gesture. [The woman] snatches his cap away, and places it on her head, parading before [the man] arms outspread [slightly], in a [clockwise direction] for a half circle. Going towards [the man] leaning and leading alternately with left and right sides forearms bent [slightly], veers away again in [clockwise circle] and turns toward [the man] to return his cap with a dip towards him. [The woman] retrieves her shawl, holding it stretched across the back of her neck, oscillates and [the man] claps with renewed vigor. [The woman] minces before [the man] following a curving path, spinning around at one point. Stopping before [the man] she gestures, signifying him to arise, arm swing inward, out and out and extending down towards [the man], then swinging back till her hand rests on her head.<sup>122</sup>

The dancer then salutes the *ghennaywa* singer and chooses the *magruda* singer. The third and last part, the *magruda*, has a similar dance content, only poetry.

In the three versions I've seen; the Reda, the Hassan Affifi and the provincial troupe, the dancer wears a Bedouin dress that incorporates an overskirt that has a peplum effect. There is always a head covering but no veil. The traditional costume bears only a slight resemblance to the professional troupe version which is, understandably, made more exciting for the stage. Closer to home, a dancer might wear the typical Bedouin embroidered robe but she also might wear some newer type party dress. She is always veiled. A shawl is tied around her waist. The overskirt (which has been translated into the stylized extra layer) is actually a man's white cloak, "*tob*" or "*jird*," which the men wear wrapped like a toga around themselves. In another use, "in traditional weddings, the bride is completely covered by a man's white toga (*jird*) from the minute she is brought from her father's house until the defloration . . . <sup>23</sup> The dancer makes a double layered skirt out of his cloak. Another

piece of fabric is used underneath as padding at the waist. The custom of enlarging the hips and posterior (here to accentuate the pelvic movements) is related to an older custom. Arab women used to wear "cushions" under their robes to enlarge the posterior. The padding is called "*el Azzama*" which means the magnifier.<sup>24</sup> The *ghawazee* used the same thing under their skirts. (see author's article "A party in Luxor," (*Arabesque* vol. XI, no. IV, Nov.-Dec. 1985). The *ghawazee* version looks like a muslin sausage that ties at the hips underneath the skirt. The most essential elements of dress for the Awlad Ali women are the black headcloth (*tarha*) which doubles as a veil and a belt or kerchief at the waist. Married women wear red woolen belts. They consider it indecent to go without something around the waist.

The *Hagallah* is chaste in the extreme, good-humored and, when confined to family members, has a significant function in the life of the people. The arrival of the professional female dancer changes a participative dance into a reenactment of former times when the more isolated Bedouin could safely allow this interaction between men and women. The encroachments of the outside world and the probable influence of Islamic fundamentalism have served to enforce a greater separation of the sexes, to the detriment of the women. The women still dance, but they do it only for each other. It might even be said that here life is imitating art in that the local version has become similar to the Cairo troupe versions: A record in dance form of a vanishing way of life.

## FOOTNOTES

1. G. W. Murray, *Sons of Ishmael*. London, George Routledge & Sons, 1935, p. 275.
  2. Lila Abu Lughod, *Veiled Sentiments: Honor and Poetry in a Bedouin Society*. Cairo, American University in Cairo Press, 1987, p. 42.
  3. *Ibid.*, p. 42-43.
  4. *Ibid.*, p. 44.
  5. *Ibid.*, p. 48-49.
  6. Lila Abu-Lughod, "Bedouin Blues," *Natural History*, July 1987, p. 26.
  7. Austin Kennet, *Bedouin Justice: Law and Customs Among the Egyptian Bedouin*. London, Frank Cass & Co., 1968, p. 132.
  8. *Veiled Sentiments*, p. 72-73.
  9. *Bedouin Blues*, p. 31.
  10. Magda Saleh, *A Documentation of the Ethnic Dance Traditions of the Arab Republic of Egypt*. (Ph.D. dissertation) New York University, 1979, p. 47-68.
  11. Murray, p. 66.
  12. *Ibid.*, p. 186.
  13. *Veiled Sentiments*, p. 290.
  14. *Ibid.*, p. 288.
  15. Saleh, p. 52-53.
  16. *Ibid.*, p. 43.
  17. *Ibid.*, p. 54-55.
  18. *Ibid.*, p. 56.
  19. *Ibid.*, p. 53.
  20. *Ibid.*, p. 62.
  21. *Ibid.*, p. 65.
  22. *Ibid.*, p. 67-69.
  23. *Veiled Sentiments*, p. 134.
  24. Saleh, p. 53.
- NOTE: I found the words "*ghennaywa*" and "*shettaywa*" transliterated in a variety of ways. Dr. Abu-Lughod uses "*ghinnawa*" and "*shittawa*." For the sake of consistency, except when quoting directly from a work, I have used the same form used by Magda Saleh. □