

# Art of Middle Eastern Dance

## ... a Brief History

Middle Eastern music and its rhythms are quite varied but the movement to the music is said to be picturesque and charming. This dancing has left lasting impressions in the minds of those who have seen it and its charm takes hold of the senses in a most extraordinary way...

I have prepared this booklet for your reading pleasure and to give you some historical background and costume information related to this ancient and enduring art.

May you discover the creative, graceful, sensual **ESSENCE** of you!

*Tahya*

December 2009

Note: As my friend Omar once said in one of our many conversations over the years....

*There is a philosophy behind the dance  
which is even more important than the dance technique ...*

May this resource be among the keys revealing that philosophy for you...

Considered to be among humankind's oldest expressions of movement, the dance I practice, teach, perform, and love is known by many names ~ e.g., Middle Eastern dance, Danse Orientale, or 'Belly dancing'. It is believed to have originated in pre-Biblical times and in the ancient, but still existing, traditions of Middle Eastern countries, girls learned to dance at home and grow up performing for each others' entertainment at women's gatherings.

The traditional movements of this historic art re-connect us with the peoples of ancient civilizations who revered the vibrant spirit of the Goddess.

It is my intention to assist you in discovering the diversity of Middle & Far Eastern dance traditions, to replace misconceptions and to reveal an art form celebrating femininity, sensuality and spirituality.

A glance, a smile, a shimmy, a sweep of a crescent hip circle ~ all express this millennia-old dance honoring the Divine Feminine.

All over the world women have begun to rewrite the script wherein we Remember our beautiful essence and Rediscover our true nature through hypnotic rhythms and mystical dance, reconnecting the body, mind and spirit, elevating an awareness of passionate soulful existence, and generating a positive esprit which we can bring to our families and the communities in which we live.

An American woman of Irish and German descent, I am often asked what drew me to studying Middle and Far Eastern arts. My reply is

*"Upon first hearing the intricate melodies and intoxicating rhythms of Middle Eastern music, I was swept away on a magic carpet ride!"*

Along the way I have gained a deeper appreciation for the traditions and history of ancient civilizations... I have learned a new vocabulary of rhythms, music, movements, costuming, cuisine, and poetry...

The movements have been handed down from generation to generation from mother to daughter, grandmother to granddaughter and it is believed it may have been part of a religious ritual which venerated motherhood and prepared women for the efforts of childbirth.

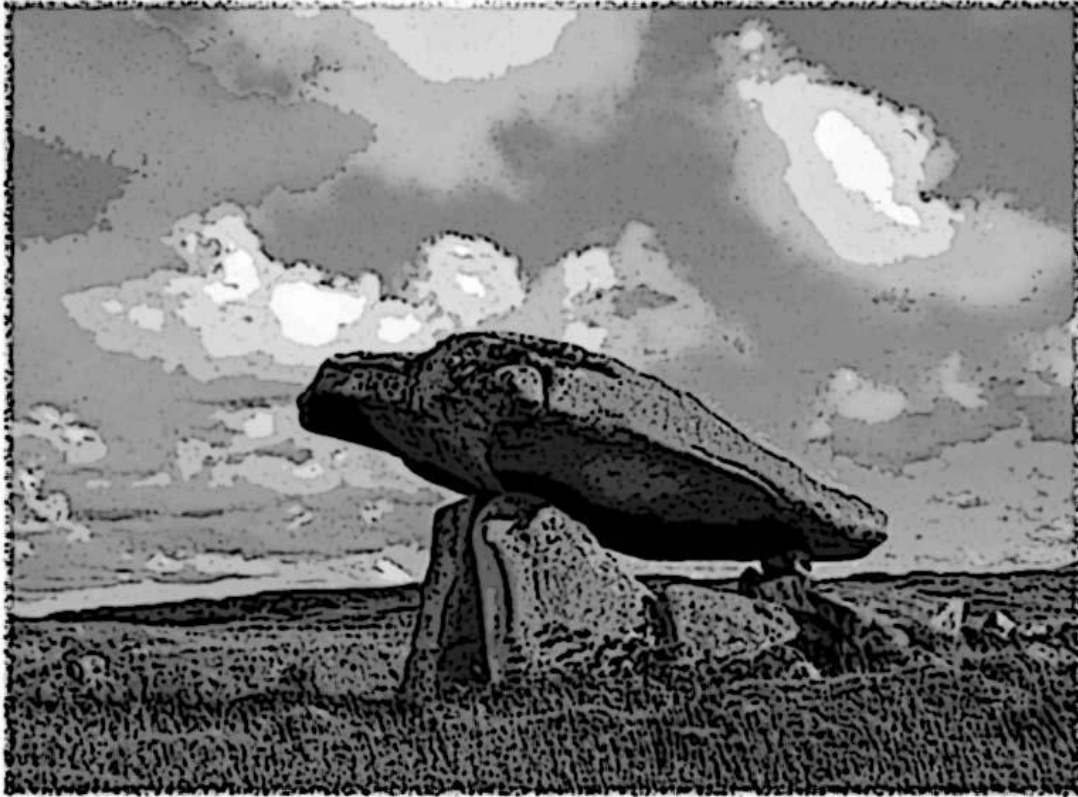
The ritual was accompanied by mime whereby the priestess was the earthly representative of the Mother Goddess, according to many women who have authored books on the subject ~ for example, Jamila Salimpour, author of *Belly dancing: From Cave to Cult to Cabaret*; Rosina-Fawzia Al-Rawi, author of *Grandmother's Secrets*; Daniela Gioseffi, *Earth Dancing*; Layne Redmond, *When the Drummers were Women*; and Iris Stewart, *Sacred Woman, Sacred Dance*. (See also Bibliography)

When primitive people copulated, the act was instinctive. It was not understood that the male played a role in conception. Pregnancy was a birth magic ritual and men imbued the female with power of life and death; therefore, one of the first deities was the Mother Goddess.

The dance of motherhood was the dance of the mime of the magic or birth performed with reverence in the affirmation of the phenomenon of birth through the female. The devotees of this deity invoked the blessings of the Great Mother in the hope of perpetual pregnancies and safe and easy deliveries. The movements of this imitative dance centered on the abdomen as the receptacle of life!

The female reproductive organs were worshipped as a symbol of life and the Dolmen was erected as an area of worship whereby to "come out of" symbolized rebirth.

## The Dolmen



*Portal Dolmen, Kilclooney, County Galway, Ireland.*

The phases of the moon were likened to the bodily functions of the female and she became the Goddess of the Moon, Astarte, Ishtar, Isis (among others). The Moon was worshipped as the begetter of children, a legend that has had counterparts in many areas of the world and one that still survives in many regions even today. The image of the crescent moon and star are astral symbols representing the Goddess as queen of the night sky.

In early civilizations the ritual copulation of the chosen tribal male protector with the priestess who was the earthly representative of the Mother Goddess produced kings who claimed supernatural origin.

As civilization progressed mother goddesses became nature goddesses; deification of the earth as sustaining and reproducing the wild life of nature and the nourishing mothers of man, giver of the arts of life, etc. The reproductive forces of nature were worshipped with ritual, music, signing, and dancing.

As the birth ritual developed a prescribed pattern of procedure, the priestess evolved a dance which rose above the caliber of an amateur participant. It was this stylized dance that was to be included in the rituals related to the sacred mysteries dance dramas which were exported through the

trade routes. Their popularity stemmed from being stirring and sensational. These rituals were performed by priestesses to the accompaniment of flutes, tambourines, fingers cymbals, wood clackers, and rattles.

In portraying the dance of the mystery of birth, the priestess pushes out her stomach slowly to simulate the stage of pregnancy. There is an involuntary undulation as the fetus moves. The devotees become overwhelmed at her mimicry of the stirring of a new life. She motions labor. In sympathetic compassion, the congregation moans and cries as the priestess, physically and emotionally exhausted, reenacts with motions of her hands, the final act of childbearing. Please also read ADDENDUM: *Dancing the Baby Into the World* By Morocco (C.V. Dinicu) first published in Habibi: Winter '96 Vol.15, No.1.

The regular intervals of rhythmic pulsation become ritual procedure as the dance evolves from an involuntary, natural occurrence to a planned religious performance. The dance of creation, which centered about the abdomen, was then the dance of birth, death, and rebirth.

### Venus of Laussel



*Dated to approximately 25,000 B.C., the mother goddess holds a bison horn, symbol of the crescent moon and the hunt. The strikes on the horn may indicate a yearly cycle of thirteen lunar months. The original held traces of red ochre, probably to indicate the color of blood which was venerated as the life fluid. The monthly menstrual cycle of women therefore made them magical in their ability to shed blood and yet live. This mother goddess also seems pregnant, another aspect of femininity obviously seen as miraculous.*

Great Mother  
Daughter of the Moon  
Mother of the Earth  
We were borne in your vessel  
And emerged from your Sacred portal  
In your image.  
Merciful Mother of consciousness  
Protectress of women in childbirth  
Patroness of women in labor  
Goddess of birth  
And  
Re-birth.

Jamila Salimpour 4/76



*A squatting woman giving birth, assisted by two goddesses (Hathor and Taweret),  
from the Temple of Hathor at Dendera*

... and at the tomb chapel of Princess Watetkhethor (wife of 6th dynasty vizier, Merenuka, approximately 2200 B.C.) in Saqqara, there is a carving which shows female dancers performing before the mistress of the tomb who is seated in a birthing chair and the hieroglyphics under the carving of the dancers reads, "*Behold the secrets of birth.*"

The origins of this dance predate recorded history with its roots in the cultures of the countries that comprise the Middle East. Practiced to express and explain the mysteries of creation, the movements that form the basics of the dance imitate the act of giving birth as a way of connecting to the life force.

Even as late as the middle of the 20th Century this dance was still performed in less Westernized parts of the Arab world during labor and birth. Women of the tribe danced around the bedside of the pregnant woman to inspire her to imitate the movements of the dance with her stomach and pelvic muscles, facilitating delivery and reducing pain. As matter of fact one of my teachers, MOROCCO, recalls her own 1967 eye-witness account of such a ritual outside Casablanca. Again, I invite you to read ADDENDUM: *Dancing the Baby Into the World* By Morocco (C.V. Dinicu) first published in Habibi: Winter '96 Vol.15, No.1 and/or visit her website: [www.casbahdance.org](http://www.casbahdance.org)

*“The other women had formed a series of circles, three deep around her... All the women were singing softly and undulating their abdomens, then sharply pulled them in several times. They repeated the movements while slowly moving in clockwise circles. The (woman in labor) would get up and do the movements in place for a few minutes and then squat for a few minutes and bear down....”*

This style of dance is thought by scholars to be one of the oldest forms of dance known to civilization. A typical gesture depicted in prehistoric drawings is the upraised arm: there is religious significance in this ~ invoking blessing from the heaven above. There are drawings and sculptures from antiquity which have been interpreted as a “Goddess with upraised arms in dancing attitude.”



*Female Figurine.* Egypt, circa 3650–3300 B.C. Terracotta.  
Brooklyn Museum

Dancing is the oldest and liveliest of the arts. People in all countries and in all times have expressed their feelings in rhythm and body movement.

When studying the development of dance, records of Egyptian dance date back at least 2000 BC indicating religious ceremonial dances. Ancient writing, the hieroglyphics, and carvings on tombs show kings dancing before their gods.

By the way, in a fascinating book entitled *When the Drummers were Women*, Author Layne Redmond documents the finding of a cave painting dating back to 5800 BC. This painting depicts humans participating in the oldest dance: walking in a circular path. It also illustrates them accompanying themselves on frame drum one of the oldest instruments in ancient history predominantly played by women. It is believed the frame drum was probably designed after a grain sieve.

In ancient Egypt dancing and feasting were the most popular ways of celebrating the smallest and greatest acts of rulers and Gods. Thanks to the preservation of Egyptian pyramid & temple drawings and paintings, to designs featured on papyrus, we have access to ancient and often secret religious rituals.

Professional dancers and singers, both male and female, as well as acrobats and magicians were trained in the famous temple schools by masters of these ritual arts. Temple documents depict dancers, singers and acrobats celebrating in ritualistic style certain religious events, perhaps the inauguration of a sanctuary or the commemoration of a victory.

An inscription consecrating a temple to Isis reads:

*“How beautiful is this dwelling place! . . .  
it will last as long as the heavens; it was created for you to dance in every day, eternally. . .”*

Ceremonies from the most ancient times onward were held to express the emotional climate of the Pharaoh and his people. The paintings which remain on walls and columns, and the carvings on stone, depict dancers adorned with necklaces of flowers and a lovely lotus flower tied to their heads.

Whether performed in front of the great pyramid at Giza or in front of the Sphinx, each step/gesture / expression put the performer in contact with the earth & the land of the living with all of its pain and joy, blending it with the land of the dead and the domain of divinity.

The worshippers of ancient Egypt expressed in the solemn or jubilant rhythms and motions of the dance, the progression of humankind toward a superior transcendent state.

As civilization progressed a stylized dance evolved which was exported through the trade routes. The rituals were performed to the accompaniment of flutes, wood clackers, rattles, tambourines, and finger cymbals.

Finger cymbals which were introduced to Egypt around 1500 BC from Mesopotamia following the Bronze Age. Brass was created by combining tin and copper. One large cymbal was held in each hand and their sound enhanced music, singing and dancing. From Egypt, the Greeks used these brass instruments in rites to the nature Goddess Cybele; the Romans then got the idea from the Greeks but wrote *Cymbalum*. [*Cymbala*, Plural.]

You may also hear them referred to as *Zills*, the Turkish word from the Arabic "sil-sil" OR *Zagat* the word used in Egypt to depict finger cymbals, which means "metal against metal sound."

\* \* \*

When England's Queen Elizabeth the First (queen of England from 1558-1683) sent an ambassador to the Sultan of Turkey with costly gifts, she hoped to enlist this monotheistic monarch in her quarrel with Catholic Spain. The military power of Turkey is inferred from these overtures, and military might implies the ability to remain aloof and yet dictate the course of events. It is at this point Europe is supposed to have "discovered" the Orient.

Feasible arrangements were soon arrived at, and by the 18th Century English ambassadors were bringing their wives along. Notable among these was Mary Wortly Montague, whose letters (see <http://www.ic.arizona.edu/ic/mcbride/ws200/montltrs.htm>) from the Ottoman Capital.



Mary Wortley Montagu, by [Charles Jervas](#).

### To the Countess, 1 April 1717, Adrianople

*... The first piece of my dress is a pair of drawers, very full, that reach to my shoes and conceal the legs more modestly than your petticoats. They are of a thin rose-colour damask brocaded with silver flowers, my shoes of white kid leather embroidered with gold. Over this hangs my smock of a fine white silk gauze edged with embroidery. This smock has wide sleeves hanging half way down the arm and is closed at the neck with a diamond button, but the shape and colour of the bosom very well to be distinguished through it. The antery is a waistcoat made close to the shape, of white and gold damask, with very long sleeves falling back and fringed with deep gold fringe, and should have diamond or pearl buttons. My caftan of the same stuff with my drawers is a robe exactly fitted to my shape and reaching to my feet, of about four fingers broad, which all that can afford have entirely of diamonds or other precious stones. Those that will not be at that expense have it of exquisite embroidery on satin, but it must be fastened before with a clasp of diamonds. The curdee is a loose robe they throw off or put on according to the weather, being of a rich brocade (mine is green and gold) either lined with ermine or sables; the sleeves reach very little below the shoulders. The headdress is composed of a cap called talpock, which is in winter of fine velvet embroidered with pearls or diamonds and in summer of a light shining silver stuff. This is fixed on one side of the head, hanging a little way down with a gold tassel and bound on either with a circle of diamonds (as I have seen several) or a rich embroidered handkerchief. On the other side of the head the hair is laid flat, and here the ladies are at liberty to show their fancies, some putting flowers, others a plume of heron's feathers, and, in short, what they please, but the most general fashion is a large bouquet of jewels of different coloured rubies, the jessamines of diamonds, jonquils of topazes, etc., so well set and enameled it is hard to imagine any thing of that kind so beautiful. The hair hangs at its full length behind, divided into tresses braided with pearl or ribbon, which is always in great quantity...*



Thus, you see, Montagu helped to introduce the fashion for dress *a la Turque* and *a la sultane*, which painter Jean Etienne Liotard has left us charming pictures.



*Costume a la sultane*: Portrait of Mary Gunning, Countess of Coventry, 1749 by: Jean-Etienne Liotard

While Oriental Dancers exercised a powerful mystique in their native locales for centuries, it was not until the 19th Century that they began to attract the attention of the growing number of European and American travelers in the Near East. Interest in the Orient was sparked every more greatly by Napoleon's campaign to Egypt at the end of the 18th Century. Many of the Western visitors, enchanted and intrigued by the sensuous, exotic oriental dancers, brought back stories which generated a wave of interest in the West.

Fortunately, many of these western visitors recorded their impressions of Egypt in their correspondence and journals (among them Gustave Flaubert and Edward William Lane, *Manners and Customs of the Modern Egyptians* (1836)) and on canvas (Jean-Léon Gérôme), so that today we have an enduring historical (although perhaps somewhat romanticized) picture of the 19th Century Near East.

painting by Jean-Léon Gérôme:





*Ghawazi*: by Jean-Léon Gérôme

Lane's observations were recorded for the most part between 1825 and 1834. He is considered to be one of the most objective authorities on Egyptian culture of that era. Most of the dancing girls he saw came from a specific tribe called "Ghawazee" (more on them later). The Ghawazee danced, unveiled, in the streets or were invited to dance in the harem on special occasions, such as the celebration of a marriage or baptism. But by 1834, the government of Egypt prohibited public female dancing and prostitution everywhere except in three cities: Kean, Esna and Aswan, three towns up the Nile to which all known courtesans were deported. Esna was the place Gustave Flaubert began his Egyptian episode and his descriptions of the renowned dancer Kutchuk Hanem are some of the most memorable and beautiful.

A description of what it was like at the end of the 19th Century appears in the romanticized memoirs of an Armenian dancer, Armen Ohanian, who compares herself to the legendary dancers of Shamahka. She called her memoirs, "Dancer of Shamahka", published in 1918.\* Her adventures in Persia, where she danced for the young Shah, and in Egypt, give a fascinating picture of the surroundings from which she emerged.

In the 19th Century when dancers from North African countries (Egypt, Algeria, Morocco) performed in public they collected gold pieces which they strung into necklaces and had beaten into

bracelets, earring and tiaras. The main point was to have the dowry in gold actually on the person as opposed to "in the bank" as a display of the girl's dowry for marriage.



Woman of the Ouled Nail of Algeria

Today you may see dancers with coin hip belts and other heavy jewelry imitating this historic look in their costuming.

The growing appetite for exotica, often expressed in "oriental" style gingerbread houses, was catered to by entrepreneurs like P.T. Barnum, who imported a troupe of *nautch* dancers (*nautch* is an entertainment in India consisting chiefly of dancing young professional dancing girls).



Nautch dancer in Calcutta, ca. 1900

\*See excerpt at the conclusion of Morocco's article in ADDENDUM: *Dancing the Baby Into the World* By Morocco

Fascination with the oriental world was expressed in the great expositions, or "world fairs" that began to proliferate in the second half of the 19th Century. The Philadelphia 1876 Centennial Exposition featured an Algerian cafe with native entertainers, and in 1889 the great Paris Exposition presented such a variety of exotic cultures that American organizers, not to be outdone, determined to create ethnological exhibits on an even grander scale for the World's Columbian Exposition in Chicago in 1893. When that fair closed, the effective publicity and vivid development of the oriental theme had set in motion various imitations of the dance, that in one form or another are still with us today.

Danse Orientale, the dance performed to Middle Eastern rhythms and melodies, has many names: Beledi dancing, Dance of the Almees, Ghawazee dancing, Middle Eastern dance, Egyptian, Moroccan, Arabic or Persian Dance, ancient Etruscan dancing, the list goes on. It here was in the United States that Oriental dancing became known as "Belly Dancing," through the efforts of a public-relations man working for the 1893 World's Fair in Chicago.

The 1893 World's Columbian Exposition in Chicago was billed as the biggest and best world's fair ever. Dedicated in 1892 in honor of Columbus's discovery of the New World 400 years before and opening in May of 1893, it would be the first fair ever to solicit the participation of the entire world.

Stretching for two miles along the Lake Michigan shore, the fair "lay like a magic carpet spread with the mechanized electrified wonders of the dawning 20th century." The Ferris wheel - built for the exposition by engineer George Washington Gale Ferris - turned out to be of the most thrilling wonders of the fair. It was called Queen of the Midway.



It stood 4 stories higher than the world's tallest building. Two wheels hung on an axle. Between the wheels were suspended 36 cars the size of trolleys that could hold 60 people each! From





The dancer above performed at the Street of Cairo Theatre during the 1893 Columbian Exposition in Chicago.

In Hubert Bancroft's *World's Fair Catalogue* he includes several illustrations of women and men in costume, including a picture of an "Oriental Danseuse." Bancroft devotes several passages to describing their art and his reaction to it.

*"...Dark-eyed Egyptian girls in gauzy garments, with great golden ornaments in their head-dresses and tiny cymbals upon their fingers, dance in dangerous proximity to sharp swords and lighted candles,"* he writes in a section about a street in Cairo transplanted to Chicago. *"The semi-circular stage is lined with divans and on either side are richly curtained rooms for the dancers and musicians."*

Some of the dance forms of the Orient seem to offend the world fair chronicler's taste. In his tour of the Persian palace, for example, he finds "a special hall... in which are entertainments of a "questionable character."

But another attitude emerges in Bancroft's fullest description of Oriental dance - a passage depicting Algerian performers:

*"The concert hall is a favorite resort; not for its music but for its dancing girls, who are beauties in their own way, though with strongly marked features and somewhat too plump of outline. Their attire is modest and not without elements of the picturesque; for the Algerian dancing girls wears more clothes, and here is not unseemly. Most of them are attired in skirts that reach to the ankle, with loose embroidered waists of silk and bolero jackets spangled with tinsel ornaments. From a bench where all are seated side by side with orchestra, one of the damsels steps forward and begins to dance, swaying her lithesome form in rhythmical fashion at first slowly and then in accelerated*

*measure. As the orchestra warms to its work, her figure appears to tremble and undulate, as though in an ecstasy of delight; for the motion is rather of the body than of the feet, yet agile and far more graceful. Among the most pleasing is the scarf dance, where the performer waves scarves above her head while posing symmetrical attitudes."*

Thus it seems the beauty of Middle Eastern dance loosened the tight-laced Victorian view of this historian of the huge Chicago exposition just before the turn of the 20th Century.

## THE LEGEND OF LITTLE EGYPT FACT OR FICTION?

By Jamila Salimpour

*During my lifetime I heard the phrase "Little Egypt" and was fed the information that went something like, "first Belly Dancer to appear at the Chicago World's Fair". I remember an Avant Garde television program called POW that has as a background for it's title and credits, a brief glimpse of a silent film clip showing a heavy-set, old time dancing girl which had been stamped over the film "censored". The film was supposed to be that of "Little Egypt", or at least it was advertised as such. In y first visit to Disneyland, shortly after it first opened, I saw an un-cut, uncensored version of that same film about twenty times. With pen in hand I made notations furiously as I waited for the film to play over and over again.*

*The film is still vivid in my memory. The dancer was poised in front of a painted backdrop which was supposed to represent a garden scene and, since it was a silent movie and there were not musicians in the background, I could not say she was dancing to live music. Her costume consisted of a sheer blouse with long sleeves, a vest and a skirt which looked like it was cut on the straight and, because of the way it hung, could have been a heavy cotton woven in large stripes. Several layers of coins were draped around her neck and bosom which swayed to and fro throughout her dance. She had extremely long hair, thick and wavy, which hung all the way down to her thighs. Whether or not it was the beginning of her dance one could not say because the film started abruptly with her spinning about six times while playing the cymbals, shook her shoulders vigorously as she advanced toward the camera in what I call "Arabic second." Two repetitions and the film ended. I wasn't particularly impressed with her technique. As the film played again I kept saying to myself, "is this it? Is this the real thing" Even though it was nothing sensational, it was nice to see old time photography.*



Jamila & Suhaila Salimpour  
c. 1980's



from film by Thomas Edison

*What is the importance of proving or disproving the "Little Egypt" legend? I believe the importance lies in the fact that several exploiters seized the opportunity to capitalize on the sexual sensationalism which advertised, "come and see the dance that was banned at the Fair." The curiosity and patronage of an unknowing public from coast to coast encourage imitators and what was seen was not the real dance du ventre but a sordid pretence of an ancient dance which was later dubbed the "Hootchie Kootchie." Can we imagine the females who "created" and "made up" steps which they thought might pass for "Oriental"? I have at various times seen several different women in photographs titled "Little Egypt". One such example is the photograph showing her titled "Little Egypt Barbary Coast 1893." The Victorian figure draped on the piano dates the photo but we wonder what*



*kind of dance was done accompany by a slide trombone, trumpet and xylophone? Her skirt is beaded mesh often worn by present day Turkish dancers. This smart lady could have seen the show in Chicago then hung around the dancers and maybe bought a costume and a few baubles and hightailed it to san Francisco to cash in on the Fair.*

*Sol Bloom, the director of the Midway Plaisance at the Chicago World's Fair of 1893, denied emphatically that he had anything to do with a female entertainer known professionally as "Little Egypt." He states that at no time during the Chicago Fair did this character appear on the Midway. In his autobiography Mr. Bloom affectionately describes the Algerian Village as his favorite among favorites and states that the Algerians were genuine beyond question. They presented a variety of entertainment that had never been seed in the United States before. There were acrobats, dancers, scorpion swallows. "What artists they were, he says, particularly the ballet troupe, with their specialty, the Dance du Ventre.... It is regrettable ~ or if anyone should choose to disagree, it is at least a fact ~ that more people remember the reputation of the danse du ventre than the dance itself. This is very understandable. When the public learned that literal translation was 'belly dance' they delightedly concluded that it must be salacious and immortal. The crowds poured in. I had a gold mine."*

*Mr. Bloom goes on to say that "the dance du ventre, while sensuous and exciting was a masterpiece of rhythm and beauty; it was choreographic perfection..... Almost at once this dance was imitated in amusement parks all over the country. As it became debased and vulgarized it began to acquire the reputation that survives today ~ the reputation of a crude, suggestive dance known as the 'Hootchie Kootchie'." He unwittingly contributed tot he success of the bastard version of the danse du ventre when, at a preview for the Chicago press he jumped at the chance for free publicity by bringing a dozen or so of the dancers to the hotel room where the only musical accompaniment was a piano player. He hummed a tune and to give the pianist an idea of the rhythm, he picked it out on the piano with one finger. A score was later arranged from his improvisation and as Sol Bloom states "the music became better known than the dance itself."*

*In my youth one of the risqué rhythms I learned went something like this, "and they wear no pants in the southern part of France." I assumed all my life that it was an Arabian tune brought back by travelers or servicemen who put words to it that "caught on." I have heard several verses which I would not repeat here. Anyway, the Little Egypt Legend and the once famous tune are the two gems of trivia that I now share with you which are attributed to historical fact but they are in fact the concoctions of an imaginative press agent and the innocence of one Mr. Sol Bloom. The press agents legend still persists to the present day and is denied by Mr. Bloom. The mystery tune and its composer have not been identified by Sol Bloom didn't copyright it for, if he had, it probably could have landed him thousands of dollars in royalties... You know the tune....*

[ Tahya note to readers: To hear the tune Jamila refers to herewith and "see" it incorporated into cartoons et al, go to <http://www.shira.net/streets-of-cairo.htm> ]

As mentioned previously, a typical gesture depicted in prehistoric statuary drawing is the upraised arms: there is religious significance in this and it can be interpreted as conveying prayer, invocation, or magic. In a Paleolithic stone drawing from Egypt, an archeologist interprets the activity of the "Goddess with upraised arms as figures in dancing attitude, and as such are the earliest known attempts to represent the human figure in specific activity." The priestess identified with the Great Mother as well as the women who worshipped her may well have assumed this same attitude and I find it interesting to note that descriptions of Ghawazi dancers mention upraised arms that certainly must trace back to the dance of the Mother Goddess worshipping practices.



*Lend your mind to an impression of yourself as  
a devotee of the Mother Goddess  
dancing with arms upraised  
invoking blessings from the Heavens Above...*

## *MORE ABOUT THE GHAWAZEE.....*

Aisha Ali



In 1973 Aisha Ali traveled to Egypt in the hopes of find the Ghawazee/Ghawazi and she did, in fact, find dancers called the Benat (or Bannat) Maazin, who lived near Luxor. Luxor is located in central Egypt, approximately 100 miles north of Aswan, which, you will recall, was one of the cities where the courtesans of 1834 were deported.

Khariyya Maazin



The Benat (Arabic word for "dancer") Maazin entertained at weddings and for tourists on excursion boats along the Nile. Aisha accompanied them on one such excursion and recorded their musicians playing the mizmar music that was to go on the record "Music of the Ghawazee."



Aisha Ali, contemporary Ghawazee costume



In contrast to the costumes of the 19th Century, these 20th C. dancers wore a glittering, crescent shaped headdress which they refer to as a *taj*, gathered chiffon skirts that came just below the knees trimmed with rows of multi-colored fringe and over this were narrow panels trimmed with metal spangles.

Bannat Maazin sisters



In spite of their generous figures, they felt it necessary to pad their hips with a roll of cotton batting worn under their petticoats on the hipline. There were short, tight fitting vests trimmed with bugle beaded fringe hanging from their shoulders.

Aisha's guide told her that "in the days before Nasser, although the girls lived with their father, each was given her own house for entertaining her clients. Since Nasser, the girls are only permitted to dance, but are kept busy and make a lot of money."

The Ghawazee sing and dance to earn the family income, but they turn all the money over to the man of the house, who sees that everyone is provided for. Since it is the women who bring in the wages, the families hope for daughters to be born.

For more images of the Banaat Maazin, go to:

<http://www.gildedserpent.com/cms/2009/10/06/peppermazinphotos/>

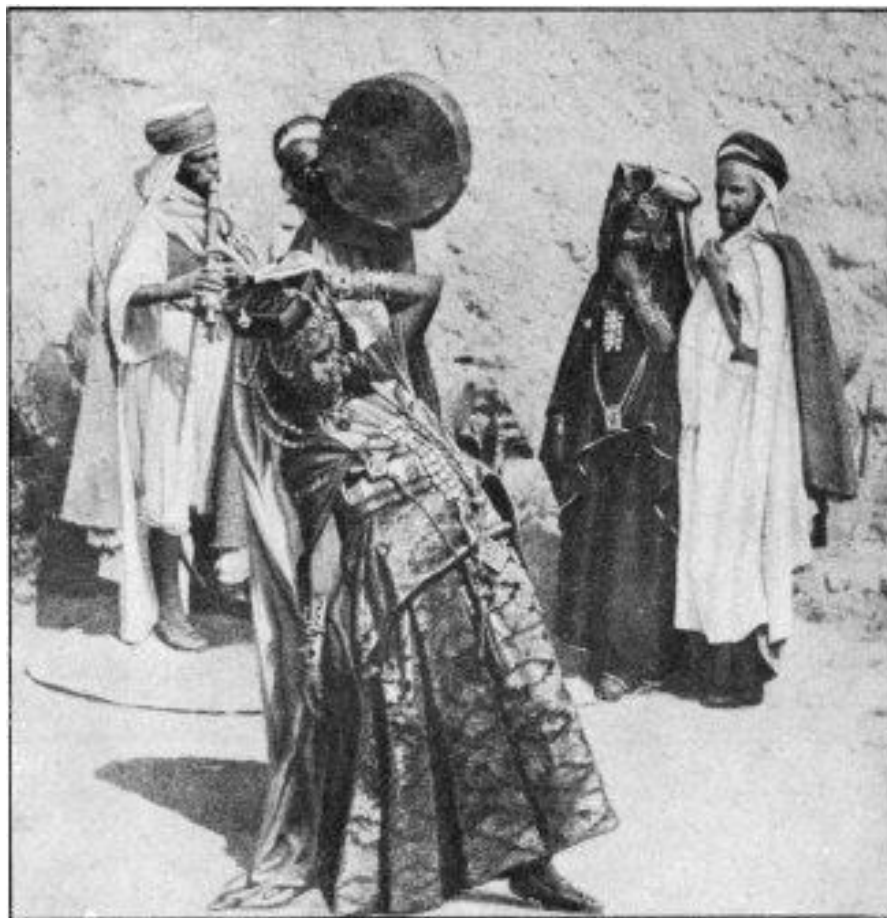
.... and for an update on **Khariyya Maazin**, go to:

<http://www.gildedserpent.com/articles25/edwinakhairiyyastruggles.htm>

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Art dances are often a direct outgrowth of the folk dances of an area refined, amplified and polished. Thus the basic dance movements of the *motreb*, a term used for Persian dancers, during the Qajar dynasty (a Turco-Persian Qajar royal family who ruled Persia (the country now known as Iran) from 1794 to 1925), are still seen in some of Iran's provinces. It is equally true that localized dances may be the legacy of a more sophisticated past and reflect ancient artistic standards and tastes.

**The Ouled Nail** are very likely heirs of such a tradition.



Ancient Far and Middle Eastern countries worshipped the Mother Goddess and ritual and sacred prostitution were practiced in her honor. It was necessary for every woman of the time to go to the temple precinct and await the first male who would ceremoniously break a symbolic cord which was tied around her neck for the occasion and drop a coin in her lap which was to be donated for the upkeep of the temple. Later, families were to pay women to take the place of their daughters. These women would tie cords around their neck and have them broken time and again. Eventually ritual prostitution was to be practiced by girls, who presenting the Mother Goddess, accumulated wealth for their dowries. As late as the 20th C., there still existed such tribes where this custom is still practice and there is no stigma.

As the temples disappeared the practice still survived throughout the ancient world, merging with the religion of the conqueror. The perpetuation of the ritual signifies a ceremony in which the female devotee of the Mother Goddess, in her consistent intercourse with strangers participates with Her in the divine nature of the act of procreation. Each man, in contact with the Mother Goddess, insures his immortality. The act is therefore sacred when performed under these conditions.



Tribes such as the Ouled Nail performed the Dance du Ventre (birth magic ritual) for the love of the Mother Goddess Tanit in her honor. These priestesses of a sacred sect look like the ancient deity whom they represent. They cover themselves with the hand, symbolic talisman which represents the hand of Tanit, protectress of women from the "evil eye." The hand has come down to us in the present day as the hand of Fatima.



Combining ritual and entertainment in their profession, the Ouled Nails worshipped the Goddess Tanit as they did before she became associated with Ba'al the Cannanite deity. The Ouled Nail is the link between the old custom of polyandry (the practice of having more than one husband at one time) under the matriarchy which, when combined with the infusion of temple obligations that were compulsory for every female, evolved into an exclusive tribal family whose ancestors trace back to the priestess and sacrificial substitutes.

Dido, founder and first Queen of Carthage (in modern-day Tunisia), may have introduced the practice to North Africa through the Cyprian devotees of Aphrodite who presented themselves when they disembarked in Carthage. This historian Herodotus tells us they offered the enjoyment of their charms, the price of which was intended to form their dowry. Dido chose eighty of these gallant Cyprian girls, embarked them in her fleet and united them with young Tyrians\* who accompanied her, in order to people the city she proposed to build. She arrived in Africa and there founded Carthage.

\*Tyrians ~ the inhabitants of an ancient Phoenician city and the legendary birthplace of Dido. Today it is the fourth largest city in Lebanon.

The Tyrian and Cyprian girls transported the manners and religion of their countries into this new region. The custom which obliged the young girls to earn their dowry at the seashore was instituted there. Valerius Maximus(1) informs us that the young Carthaginian girls came to this place, and under auspices of the Goddess religiously gave themselves up to strangers and acquired as the price of their virginity a sum which served to marry them,.

Perpetuating the tradition of acquiring a premarital dowry, the Ouled Nails combine dance, mime and song as they act out their believe of being the earthly representation of the Goddess.



Women of the Ouled Nail have their little apartments which encircle miniature squares where the dancing takes place in the summer. Here they receive their friends to drink tea and give little dinner parties, It is an atmosphere of frank gaiety. Some of them have their babies with them, others live with their mothers. The majority of the women are of the tribe of the Ouled Nail, but there are other girls from too, the great difference being that those who come from the Ouled Nail are not in any way lowering their prestige by living this way. They have come with the full consent of their parents and one day they may leave and honorably marry. It depends a great deal on the dowry. In the old days the girls always tried to collect gold pieces, which they strung into necklaces and it would be very possible to see a woman all dressed up and her neck weighted down with hundred-franc and twenty-franc pieces. Now that gold is no longer current in France the women convert all the notes they have into bits of gold, which they have beaten into bracelets and earring and tiaras. Some of them manage to buy hoarded collections of gold pieces to make into necklaces, while others have inherited them from their mothers. However, the main point is to have the dowry in gold actually on the person, so that there is no danger of its depreciating in value, and when the girls leave the quarter to go to some private party in order to dance, they are accompanied by a soldier with rifle. The result of this system of buying gold had, of course, made the girls very rich. Paper currency has depreciated, so that a hundred-franc piece sells for a high price, and the money, though not fructifying in actual interest, is a capital in ever-increasing value. A girl of the quarter invests all she has in jewels and keeps only a small portion of her earnings to buy her frocks.

The tribe itself is a strange one from the standpoint of both its cult and tradition. The men earn their living as blacksmiths, barbers, doctors and magicians; the women as dancers, singers, and prophetesses. Were it not for their women-folk, who by their art often earn considerable sums of money with which they help their fathers and brothers, or bring dowries to their husbands, the men, who do not in the least object to the frivolous life of their wives, daughters and sisters, would be beggars throughout their lives. The women of the Ouled Nail travel all over Africa and their dances are famous as a perfection of choreographic art.

(1) was a Latin writer and author of a collection of historical anecdotes. He flourished in the reign of Tiberius (1st C. AD)



.... and now for a little bit more, little bit more...

My journey in the dance cannot be considered without the contributions of two immensely inspired and influential American women who paved the way for women like me to pursue their dance dreams!

With thanks to Ms. Ruth St. Denis and Isadora Duncan...

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### ***Ruth St. Denis***

The year was 1900 and while working as a dancer and budding actress in a production in which she danced and sang, came the incident which changed the course of Ruth St. Denis' life.

In a store window she saw a poster advertising Egyptian Deities cigarettes. She obtained it and found in it the key which unlocked the treasury of ideas and passions long hidden within her. The poster showed a serene figure of the goddess Isis sitting upon a throne. "When I identified myself with the little seated figure of Isis" she said, "*I didn't think at all. My ego, hovering near my solar plexus simply expanded itself into proportions of power and joy within that left me in complete amazement at the whole experience. For you see, in the split second of time after I got the poster home and stuck it up on the wall I said to myself, "hereafter, I will be Egypt..."*"



Six years later, in 1906 when she teamed up with Ted Shawn she realized her vision of an extravagantly designed work which included Pharaonic gestures and poses such as those found in drawings and artifacts of the older Kingdoms.



Acclaimed as a creative genius in the history of American dance Ruth St. Denis was very much influenced by the religions and mysticism of Eastern Life. Out of her involvement with Eastern imagery, Ruth St. Denis created art forms of the dance.

Notably one of her most popular dances, entitled, RADHA, was inspired by the nautch dance of India



... Nautch dancers were traditional dancers in Hindu temples, but by 1830 also danced at court. In fact, the present-day belly dancer's costume bears little resemblance to the long-sleeved blouse and pantaloons which were worn in the nineteenth century. The reason for this is to be found in the disruption of tradition that followed the British presence in Egypt. The voluminous skirts, worn on the hips and the brief spangled upper garment formed the nautch dress, the costume in which the British were accustomed to seeing dance in India.

Incidentally in the ninth and tenth centuries, South India witnessed a sudden spurt of temple building which brought with it a comparable increase of interest in the temple arts. The class of musicians and dancers known as 'devadasis' ('servants of god') enjoyed high status and prosperity at this time and were encouraged in their art. An inscription from 1004 AD by the king Rajaraja refers to four hundred devadasis who were attached to the Great Temple, received free living quarters on four neighboring streets and were allowed tax-free land out of the temple endowment.

Throughout the 19th century the clash between Indian social practices and Western reforms under the British produced some tragic results which threatened to extinguish the very life of this dance tradition. The artistic reputation of the temple dancers gradually became associated with their skill as courtesans.

Many devadasis may have been bright and able artists, but by the end of the 19th century they were no longer respected members of the Indian social community. It took the combined zeal of Christian missionaries and morality –conscious Hindus to finally tip the balance against the devadasis. In addition, many prostitutes on the fringe of the devadasis community had taken up "nautch-dancing" to attract business and the reform-minded zealots who led the anti-nautch campaign were hardly disposed to make fine distinctions between one form and another. In my opinion, not unlike the belly dance here in the U.S. being adapted into the strippers repertoire coming to be known as "hootchie cootchie"

So.... returning now to the shores of the United States, at the dawn of the twentieth century two young American women ~ Isadora Duncan and Ruth St. Denis. ~ dreamed greater things for dancing than were to be found in the dance they saw about them which was pretty much limited to ballet and tap dance. Rejecting the weary ballet ~ and what they felt was its emotional and spiritual emptiness ~ they claimed for their art values equivalent to those in the sister arts of music, drama, painting and literature. They believed that the body, though trained, should be free to move expressively, free to communicate the profoundest thoughts and feelings.

Isadora Duncan defied ballet convention; she turned to ancient Greece for inspiration. She discovered that dancing was not predicated upon the movements of legs and arms but that it grew from an inner urge to action. (Terry, *The Dance in America*, p. 39)

The originality of Ruth St. Denis' work proved to be the beginning of America's dance revolution. Together with her husband Ted Shawn she laid the foundations of the American dance. Their famed company of Denishawn Dancers included Martha Graham, Doris Humphrey and Charles Weidman, who were destined to share in the leadership of American dance. So, if Martha Graham is hailed as the Mother of Modern Dance, then surely Ruth St. Denis must be considered the Grandmother!

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## *Isadora Duncan*

Dancer, adventurer, revolutionist, ardent defender of the poetic spirit, Isadora Duncan has been one of the most enduring influences on 20<sup>th</sup> century culture. Yes, ironically, the very magnitude of her achievements as an artist, as well as the sheer excitement and tragedy of her life, have tended to dim our awareness of the originality, depth and boldness of her thought.

Isadora was a thinker as well as poet, gifted with a lively poetic imagination, a radical defiance of "Things as they are," and the ability to express her ideas with verve and humor. She was a theorist of dance, a critic of modern society, culture, education and a champion of the struggles for women's rights, social revolution and the realization of poetry in everyday life. Isadora restored dance to a high place among the arts, breaking with convention, tracing the art of dance back to its roots as a sacred art.

*"I see America dancing, beautiful and strong,  
with one foot poised on the highest point of the Rockies,  
her two hands stretched out from the Atlantic to the Pacific,  
her fine head tossed to the sky,  
her forehead shining with a crown of a million stars.*



*Let her come forth with great strides, leaps and bounds,  
with lifted forehead and far-spread arms,  
dancing the language of our pioneers,  
the fortitude of our heroes,  
the justice, kindness and purity of our women,  
and through it all  
the inspired love and tenderness of our mothers."*

- Isadora Duncan

*"The dancer of the future will be one whose body and soul have grown so harmoniously together  
that the natural language of that soul will have become the movement of the human body.  
The dancer will not belong to any nation but to all humanity."*

- Isadora Duncan



*Seek the wings of the spirit. Be intuitive, poetical, psychic.  
Otherwise what you do is only exercises.*

- Maria-Theresa Duncan\*

*All the movements of the earth follow the lines of wave motion  
The motion of water, winds, trees, and plants progresses in waves*



*If then one seeks a point of physical beginning for the movement of the human body, there is a clue in the undulating motion of the wave. It is one of the elemental facts of nature, and out of such elements the child, the dancer, absorbs something basic to dancing.*

- Isadora Duncan

\*Maria-Theresa Duncan, a dancer who was the last of Isadora Duncan's adopted daughters was born Therese Kruger, in Dresden, Germany and was one of six young dancers legally adopted by Isadora Duncan and known as "les Isadorables."

FOR MORE ABOUT ISADORA DUNCAN, I recommend reading: **Isadora Duncan: Her Life, Her Art, Her Legacy** by Walter Terry

There are numerous steps and figures, and though the danse du ventre (belly dance) which is muscular distortion of the abdomen is always carried through, there are many other dances which are pleasing to the eye, and the movements of the hands are reminiscent of the wings of a butterfly. More-over, simple as these dances may seem, there is a tremendous amount of technique about them and the poise of the body and the movements of the feet, quite apart from the hands take long years to learn....



*An Ouled-Nail Tribal Dancer,*  
a painting by Georges Jules Victor Clairin (French Painter, 1843-1919)

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**TAHYA NOTES:**

*Some of the information I compiled here comes from (out of print) Belly Dancing: From Cave to Cult to Cabaret by Jamila Salimpour, and articles published in (now vintage) Arabesque magazine and Habibi newspaper. I consider myself privileged to have started my pursuit of the dance when these publications were in circulation; they proved to be of great inspiration and it is with the greatest of gratitude that I applaud everyone who had a hand in making these publications come to fruition during a time that I fondly think of the Golden Age of the Dance, before it became so diluted it is hardly recognizable anymore....*