Meetings in the Middle East

PART VI

by Aisha Ali

Although I had seen a variety of dancers in Egypt, defined by the locals as "Ghawazee," I was still determined to locate the group whose life style, costumes and music were those that had originally excited my interest. Eventually, I found them through a source unexpectedly close to me.

During a visit to Cairo in 1973, I stayed for several weeks with the family of Vivienne Hammamjian, a well-known folkloric dancer who had studied and worked with Sami Younis at the Cairo Opera House. It was in Lebanon, however, where she established international recognition as the choreographer and first dancer with Sabah's company, performing at Baalbek and the Casino de Lebanon. Although I had not yet met Vivienne, I had been closely acquainted with her cousins and paternal uncle in Beverly Hills. On that basis, I was received warmly by the Cairo branch of Hamamjians, as though I were a relative. They offered me the security and companionship of a large family, and I didn't have to be apologetic about my profession with them. The eldest brother, Lolo, who had various connections in the entertainment world, arranged an interview with Samir Sabre and got me publicized as being the dance coach for Nadia El Ghindi, who at the time was making a film called "Bamba Kasha," the life story of a notorious actress-dancer. An Egyptian movie magazine was doing a story on Nadia and sent a crew to photograph us lunching together at the Sheraton. The tie-in was that I had been brought from California to coach her for the dancing parts in her new film. Actually, Nadia had never had any sessions with me, but it was her agent's way of getting publicity for both of us. She had been eyeing me coolly all afternoon and finally turned to her agent and said in Arabic, "Is she really a belly dancer?"

In spite of his close connections in the entertainment field, Lolo seemed to have little regard for female artists in general, and when I described the kind of Ghawazee I hoped to find, he expressed his low opinion of them. "I know those girls," he said. "They're called the Benat Maazin, and they live near Luxor." Then he wrote the name for me in Arabic and English. It was the first solid information I had received.

There was a group of Japanese musicologists in Cairo at that time who had come to Egypt to record folk music and had sought assistance from the Ministry of Culture. Mahmoud Reda, the director of one of Egypt's prominent folk dance companies, had been helping me. When he learned that these musicologists were planning to record a group of well-known musicians and singers, he arranged for me to record at the same time. The session took place inside the Al Samar Theatre during an afternoon when there was no performance scheduled. When I arrived, the others had already set up their equipment, and I noticed we all had Uher recorders. Since this was to be my first opportunity to tape live music, I was somewhat nervous and one of the musicologists made some helpful suggestions about sound levels and where to place the microphone. I conceded to their professionalism and sat back quietly while they requested particular kinds of music. It soon became apparent that they were

mainly interested in recording short samples of each instrumental and vocal style. The artists seemed to be trying to guess what we wanted of them and were not given an opportunity to develop the music in a natural manner. When the musicologists had everything they wanted, I requested some dance music and proceeded to amuse the musicians by dancing until they relaxed and began to enjoy playing the music.

When I announced my plans for going to Upper Egypt to see the Benat Maazin, Mahmoud thought it would be difficult for me to travel alone. Since the Japanese group was also going to the same area, he suggested to the officials at the Ministry of Culture that I be included in their travel arrangements. I told Mahmoud that I thought it would be better for me to work alone because I was interested in a different aspect of the music. Since my mind was made up, he referred me to his travel agent at the office across from the Reda studio. This agent told me about a Mr. Khalil in Upper Egypt who arranged to hire all the dancers and musicians for the film companies that go there on location. Mahmoud thought it better that I didn't get involved with Khalil, but he wrote a letter of introduction for me in Arabic which I could present to any official from whom I wished to seek help.

When I arrived in Luxor I soon realized that I was the only foreign passenger getting off the plane who wasn't part of a guided tour. Preoccupied with trying to find where the luggage had been unloaded, I refused help several times from a guide, thinking he wanted me to hire him. The other passengers had been safely herded into buses, but their group leaders were hesitant about departing until they discovered to which one of them I belonged. I was approached again, and this time asked if I had a guide. I said, "Yes, my guide is Mr. Khalil," thinking the man would leave me alone. But I saw that he was now even more concerned. "I am Ahmed," he said. "Mr. Khalil is my boss. If you don't allow me to take you to him, he will be angry with me." We discovered that my luggage had been loaded on the tour bus. Ahmed had it removed and insisted that Khalil would want him to drive me in the limousine at no charge. After some hesitation, I decided to trust him, and we drove to the new Winter Palace where we found Khalil in the lobby. Since I had lied, I wasn't sure what I would say to him but had the inspiration to hand him the letter from Mahmoud as though it had been intended specifically for him. After looking at the letter, he sized me up cautiously, nodded and said he would help me with everything I needed.

Within an hour I was riding in a horse-driven buggy through the narrow streets of the village where the Benat Maazin live. We were greeted at the house by their father, Yousef Maazin, who invited us in for refreshments. Khalil introduced me as a dancer from America who had been recommended by Mahmoud Reda and explained that I had read about the girls and tried many times to find them. Yousef was very gracious and appeared to be flattered on behalf of his daughters. He said that he was fortunate to have been blessed with so many beautiful daughters who provided him with a comfortable living. The girls had gone to Qena several days

Khairiyeh Maazin wearing a "taj." (Photo: Aisha Ali)

ago to entertain at a wedding, but they were expected back that evening in time to dance for a group of French tourists on one of the excursion boats — a party which Khalil had arranged. In the meantime several young girls had come into the room and were staring at me with open curiosity. Khalil explained that they wanted to see me dance. The room was crowded with furniture, but I did my best to move a little to the rhythm of their tapping fingers. They laughed and said I danced the same way their girls danced. Khalil suggested that I perform with the Benat Maazin that evening so that I could be included on the excursion and see how they entertain. I agreed to do so, and after accepting a dinner invitation to the Maazin home for the following evening, we left. On the way back to the Winter Palace, Khalil told me what kind of costume to wear and how to conduct myself in front of the tourists. He said to be quiet as much as possible and not to be heard speaking any English.

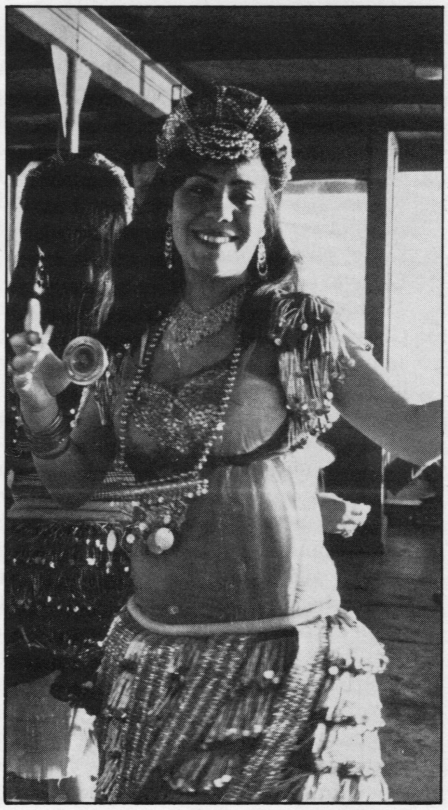
At sunset, a young man came to carry my bags, and we walked to the river bank where I saw the Benat Maazin for the first time waiting with the musicians near the boat. Their costumes were covered with long, gathered black dresses, and they wore veils over their hair crossed under the chin for protection from the evening breezes on the river. We smiled and nodded at each other. When all the tourists were on board, we took our places at the rear of the boat with Abu Kherage and his mizmar band. The musicians began to play as the boat was taking off, and we commanded the attention of all the passing boats and pedestrians along the embankment. The girls removed their veils, each revealing a glittering, crescent-shaped headdress which they referred to as a *taj,* and then pulling their gowns over their heads, I saw they were wearing costumes the same as those in Koizumi's Ghawazee photographs. Their gathered chiffon skirts came just below the knees and were trimmed with rows of multi-colored beaded fringe, and over this were narrow panels trimmed with metal spangles. 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. They wore short, tight-fitting vests trimmed with bugle beaded fringe hanging from the shoulders. When they swung their hips from side to side, these heavy skirts and panels — lifted by petticoats and padding — produced a tremendous effect. I was wearing a net toub with metal embroidery from Asyut, which the Benat Maazin exclaimed over a great deal.

They began their dance slowly, stamping their feet on the first and third beat of the measure and singing in unison with high, girlish voices. As the music accelerated, they added a rapid vibrating shimmy to their little stamps and changed the segat pattern to a double-straight time. Then they stepped back and motioned for me to go forward and dance. The music was wonderfully familiar to me, as I had been dancing to the Koizumi and Hickmann recordings for many years, and although their style was different from anything I had seen, I was able to imitate them at once, being accustomed to the technique required for their walking, vibrating shimmies. When I had danced for a short time, the three girls came out to join me and two of them dipped into a back-bend, supporting each other by pressing the backs of their heads together, while the third did the same with me. From this position, I was surprised by one of the girls breaking away suddenly and bending back further until her face was below mine. At this point she kissed me on the lips. I later learned that this was part of an old tradition among the Ghawazee.

When the excursion was over, we stayed aboard while the tourists disembarked and afterward returned to the middle of the river. Shutting off the motor, we drifted downstream while I recorded Aby Kherage's band playing the mizmar music that was to go on the record "Music of the Ghawazee."

The following day, Khalil had lost any trace of aloofness, and he volunteered many stories about his association with the Maazin family as we rode to their house for the appointed dinner. "In the days before Nasser," he said, "although the girls lived with their father, each was given her own house for entertaining her clients. I was a young, handsome boy then, and one of the sisters, whom you did not meet, was very much in love with me. We spent much time together in her house. But, of course, she would never take money from me. When her father found out about us, he was angry and made her stop seeing me. She was very unhappy, but later she made a good marriage and moved away. This is how it goes. The girls marry a rich farmer or *Amdah* and then don't dance or go with men anymore. Since Nasser," he continued, "the girls are only permitted to dance, but are kept busy and make a lot of money."

I asked Khalil if it was true that



sometimes a Ghaziyeh will agree to a *Mut'a* marriage which might last only two or three days or weeks. He said it was so, and that this custom was accepted among the Shia branch of Islam.

When we reached the Maazin house, the three sisters were sitting on the doorstep looking almost Victorian in their dark gowns and veils. Dinner was served in the sitting room on a large, heavy brass tray placed on a small wooden table. It was carried in by one of the younger girls who did not yet qualify as a professional dancer. When everything had been laid out, she disappeared with nothing more than a shy smile. As a rule, children among the Egyptian lower classes seem to be very wise for their years and share a great deal of the daily work load. They perform their work cheerfully, taking pride in the responsibility entrusted to them.

Our dinner began with a soup made with *mulaheya,* then an eggplant salad, a dozen or more pigeons stuffed with rice and herbs, stuffed squash, stuffed tomatoes and rice. It wasn't long before I too was stuffed. It was no longer a mystery to me how the girls managed to maintain such ample figures while dancing so much of the time. Yousef Maazin talked about his elder daughters who had been famous dancers but were now retired. Framed photos of them hung over the divan, and I recognized one of them from Koizumi's pic-

The Benat Maazin entertaining on a river boat. (Photo: Aisha Ali)

tures. I learned that Khairiyya, Touha and Rajat were younger than I had assumed, unless girls start altering their ages much earlier in Upper Egypt. They claimed that their costumes were unique, and the *taj* they wore on their heads dated back to Pharaonic times. While it was true that their costumes had a distinctive style, other versions of the same panels and vests were worn by Ghawazee all over Egypt.

Khalil mentioned that most of the Ghawazee from that area lived in the same village, and because of frequent intermarriage, many of the families were related in one way or another. "Yousef is the head of all the families in the village," Khalil said. "When someone wishes to hire dancers for a wedding or other occasion, they come here from all over Upper Egypt to see who is available. Because they are the best, the Benat Maazin are the first choice for most of the parties. When they are not free, you can see the agents riding up and down the roads looking for the next best."

Touha did not stay for the meal on that occasion, and I only saw her a few brief times again because shortly afterwards she married and moved to another place. Years later I heard that her husband had died, and she returned to work for her father, bringing with her all of the property acquired from her marriage.

Khalil fulfilled his promise to help me with all that I needed to accomplish my work. At his own expense, he arranged everything with an extravagence for which I wouldn't have dreamed of asking. On one occasion he brought together the finest groups of folk musicians from all the surrounding areas and made a party for them in the courtyard of an inn located a short distance from the Valley of the Kings on the west bank.

I had already set up my microphones by the time the music began. Each of the groups, one after another, played favorite pieces while I danced to keep them entertained. One of the musicians, the leader of the arghool and mizmar band, had recently made a *hadj* to Mecca and vowed that he would no longer play for any Ghawazee. When he saw me dancing, he explained this to Khalil who told him I was really a school teacher so he wouldn't worry about breaking his vows. Sometimes a misunderstanding led to the discovery of interesting music that would not otherwise have been played. When I requested that the salameya group play a piece called "Bambi," they thought I

was referring to something they call "Bambo" where the men sing and dance in pairs, each turning like a dervish in alternating opposite directions. In another instance I asked for "Ya Baheya" and Khalil brought a singer who he said was well known for this song. His interpretation sounded nothing like the "Baheya" I knew, but it was wonderful. He sang in a high-pitched voice that at times resembled a cry. Cupping his hands behind his ears, he closed his eyes and swayed his body from side to side, making it difficult for me to pick up his voice with the microphone.

Khalil enjoyed every minute of that evening, and he seemed to be closely acquainted with each of the musicians. He was the first person I had met in Egypt with such a genuine love for his country's folk music and who had no interest at all in any pop music, either Egyptian or Western.

One balmy night I was sitting outside on the hotel veranda listening to recordings I had made earlier that day of the Ghawazee singing some of their famous love songs. Ahmed and another young man who worked for Khalil, were seated nearby and overhearing the songs began laughing quietly. When I asked why they were laughing, they became flustered and wouldn't say. Finally they told me the songs were "very sexy" and that the girls who sang them were "not nice." Their reaction amused me because the girls behaved in a very ladylike manner, considering their profession, and their singing voices reminded me of school children.

By 1974 I had choreographed a Ghawazee dance in the style of Benat Maazin as part of my dance company's repertoire for the Omar Khayyam in London. Wadia, the lead musician in our orchestra, was from Cairo and had worked for the Egyptian Ministry of Culture. He told us he was delighted to see that we had faithfully copied his favorite dancers. I was surprised that he even knew about them since just a few years earlier they seemed to be known only by the locals and a few musicologists. He explained how the Ministry of Culture had recently taken notice of them and had brought them to Cairo for a television special.

Later that year, when I returned to Egypt, I found that Wadia had been correct about the Maazin girls who were earning more than ever and enjoying a much broader recognition.

Next issue: The conclusion — "Death on the Nile"

A Mizmar group at the party on the west bank. (Photo: Aisha Ali)