Meetings in the Middle East

Part VII: The Conclusion

by Aisha Ali

Having performed the Benat Maazin dance style in London for the better part of 1974, I returned to Egypt at the end of the year and danced with the Maazin girls at special parties and festivals. Working with them in this way enabled me to become more intimately acquainted with their life style.

Standards of beauty can vary widely, not only between cultures, but among the various classes within a culture. It wasn't long before I began adopting the Ghawazee mannerisms and style of dress, and when they danced I recognized the advantage of having ample hips. I was also influenced in matters of personal grooming. The Maazin girls, like the majority of women in Egypt, use *halawa* for removing body hair, since it is considered unsightly, unsanitary and therefore an offense to society. This attitude is reinforced by the teachings of Islam which prescribe removal of certain body and facial hair.

When I mentioned that I wanted to use *halawa,* Khalil's wife sent for an old woman who was the best local practitioner of this skill. She arrived wearing a dusty black dress and carrying a sack across her back. Greeting us with a toothless grin, she looked about the room, and then directed me to sit in a wooden chair by an open window. Squatting on the floor, she reached into her sack and removed something resembling a piece of hard clay. This she pounded into a small heap of reddish brown powder, stroked onto her fingers and dusted lightly on my forehead. The soft winter sunlight and the motion of her deft fingers on my brow had a tranquilizing effect, and before I realized what was happening, she proudly held up a piece of broken mirror to show me the results. Looking into the glass, I discovered that with only her finger nails, she had tweezed out most of my eyebrows, leaving two shallow half moons that gave me the doll-like expression so popular in Egypt. When I saw that both women seemed pleased with my new look, I pretended to like it.

Next came the preparation of the *halawa.* She boiled water with the juice of an Egyptian lemon (which resembles a lime) and sugar. When the mixture became the right consistency, she poured it onto the sink tiles to cool slightly, and then taking it into her hands, kneaded it until it became like taffy. Starting with my arms, she slapped the taffy-like mixture against my skin and quickly pulled it away in the opposite direction, taking the hairs with it. In a short period of time, my arms and legs were smooth, so I thanked her and started to rise. But she said she wasn't finished and pushed me back into position. Although I protested strongly, both women insisted that it was necessary to remove *all* of the body hair. When this was finally completed, parts of me were strawberry red, and all my skin was sticky. I walked with considerable discomfort to the shower and then later hired a carriage to take me to the Maazin house to show off my new look.

When Touha Maazin got married and retired, she was replaced as a dancer by her brother's wife, so the new Maazin trio at that time consisted of Khairiyeh Rajat and the sister-in-law who was also called Khairiyeh.[1] This second Khairiyeh was in her late thirties and had a very unconcerned attitude about her performances. No longer ambitious for herself, she was looking forward to the near future when her teenage daughter, Shadia, would replace her as the family breadwinner.

One evening I danced with the Maazin girls for a group of German men at an inn owned by a man called Sheik Ali on the edge of the Theban desert. This party was arranged by Khalil's friend Ibrahim, and they cautioned me once again not to mix with any of the guests and to speak only when necessary, in Arabic. At dusk we met Rais Quinnawi and his mizmar group at the river and took the ferry boat to the west bank. When we arrived at Sheik Ali's, the Germans were seated at tables waiting for dinner to be served. The musicians were to eat in the courtyard, and we were led to a room upstairs where a table had been laid out for us. After changing into our costumes, we sat down to a large meal, unconcerned with the fact that we had to dance in a short while. After dinner we heard the mizmar and tabl music begin and hurried downstairs, playing our segat as we entered. We danced in pairs on either side of the room, sometimes changing sides for variety. The Germans watched us with amused curiosity and occasionally reached out to throw an arm across our shoulders or pinch us on the cheeks. The younger Khairiyeh and I were much slimmer than the others, and the Germans seemed to prefer us to our corpulent sisters.

Khalil told me to change into a cabaret costume, and then he announced there would be an oriental dance. I frequently find myself in a situation where I must perform folk dances accompanied by oriental musicians who don't play the traditional instruments and now, ironically, the situation was reversed and I was expected to perform raqs al sharqui to a mizmar and tabl band. My audience didn't seem to notice the difference, and they cleared the center table to serve as my stage. This oriental dance seemed to go over in a big way, probably because they preferred the exposed midriff and cleavage. None of this went unnoticed by the sister-in-law, Khairiyeh, and it is possible that my success that evening influenced her decision to train her daughter, Shadia, in the oriental dance.

After our performance we waited in the courtyard with the musicians to be taken back to the ferry. There was a contingent of handsome young men from the nearby village who had been hanging around all evening hoping for an opportunity to speak with one of the Maazin girls, and I was charmed by the special style of coquetry that the girls used on these hopeful youths. Their manners were at once girlish and queenly, innocent and wise; and they became vulnerable when it suited them, but were always aware of the power they commanded over men.

The girls have a cousin named Housny, the houseboy and cook for Khalil. The first time I arrived in Luxor, Khalil instructed him to accompany me to various locations where I recorded music, and he was given the responsibility of looking after me and helping me carry my equipment. In those days he treated me with an almost idolatrous respect and anticipated my needs even before I was aware of them. Often the musicians

The young Khairiyeh Maazin with Abu Kherage's mizmar band.

would encourage Housny to dance for us and he would always begin by refusing, but with a little persuasion, he would dance all night. Finally when he sat down, exhausted, he would wipe his brow complaining that he disliked dancing. With the exception of the tahtib, most of the dancing performed by Egyptian men is not much different from the women's dances, yet there is rarely any question of their masculinity. Housny's movements were both graceful and sensuous, but it was his vivacious humor and swaggering personality that captured one's attention.

When I returned after several years, I found a new Housny. His position among his peers seemed somewhat higher, although he still volunteered to accompany me to the villages, but his attitude was decidedly different. He had taken on a proprietary air and made a point of displaying me to his friends, and I sometimes wondered what sort of relationship he claimed to have with me. By now, he was a popular performer in these parts, and we even did a cane dance together as part of my show at the Etab Hotel. He was swarthy and handsome and the proud possessor of several shining gold teeth. Since he was talented and charismatic, as well as loyal to Khalil's best interests, I learned to accept his bragging ways. Once while returning from Sheik Ali's where I had filmed some tahtib dancing, Housny arranged for us to get a ride with some of his friends. Seven of us were riding along a bumpy road, squeezed together in a small Fiat, when suddenly Housny produced a pistol and began shouting my name and firing a salute from the window. Someone brought out a second pistol and they also began shouting and firing at random. To my consternation, they continued this activity all the way to the ferry, and their bullets sometimes came dangerously close to the water jars carried on the heads of passing women.

Dancing for Stars

During the winter of 1977 I had written to Khalil to say I would be returning to Egypt, this time with my brother, to attempt filming all of the various country dances. After receiving my letter, he called me from Luxor to say that it was important that we arrive by the third of December because he wanted me to dance at a party he was giving in connection with a movie being made there. He suggested that at the same time I would have the opportunity to film all the other entertainers who were performing. I promised to do my best, and luckily we were able to change our flight schedule to leave a week earlier in order to get there just in time.

In Cairo we spent four hours riding in a taxi before finding a vacant hotel room. We managed to sleep off some of the jet lag and then reluctantly giving up our hotel room, returned to the airport to catch our "confirmed" flight to Luxor. When we arrived, we were surprised to hear there was no flight scheduled to leave for Luxor that night, and no one could guarantee us reservations for the following day, or even tell us when there would be another flight. The situation was exasperating and it was useless to complain. It was the evening of the second, and we had promised to be in Luxor the third. Finally someone suggested we might catch the last train out of Cairo and arrive in Luxor by morning, so we loaded our baggage into another taxi and headed back to the city for the Rameses station. Fortunately we found two tickets for a sleeping car, and I was so grateful to be given another chance to make it on time, that I didn't want to question whether the train was to be "deluxe" or what they call "regular." After all our rushing, we waited for hours next to the tracks with crowds of Egyptian and Nubian peasants who were sitting calmly on their large bundles. Nearby were food and drink vendors, and after a while I didn't mind eating kebab cooked by dirty hands or drinking cola from bottles chipped and scratched to a frosted finish by endless use.

When at last the train arrived, there was a terrible commotion, and the people around us who had been quiet and friendly, suddenly became frantic and hostile. With much shouting and cursing, they hurriedly pushed toward the train and all the doors became jammed with people climbing on top of each other. The clever ones had tossed their bundles through the open windows to young accomplices who had managed to get on board, and all the vacant seats were quickly reserved in this way. Soon there wasn't even space to stand on the train, and I thought we would be turned away, but fortunately because of our sleeping car reservations, we were admitted on board. Our sleeping car was a tiny, dingy cell with two shelves for beds and dirty pillows; but we were protected from the crowds, and we did arrive in Luxor in the morning.

Khalil was happy to see us, but extremely preoccupied. A British film company was shooting "Death on the Nile," and he was responsible for their accommodations, transportation, hiring of servants, etc. There was an army of workers reporting to him every few minutes for instructions, and in addition to providing for the needs of the director and cast, he was dispatching orders to take care of his normal business. We accompanied him to the Temple of Karnak where they were shooting a scene, and at noon a fancy buffet luncheon was brought in. How strange to be sitting at tables in such an ancient place, listening to Angela Lansbury and David Niven chatting with Mia Farrow and Olivia Hussey.

The final scene on the schedule was filmed in downtown Luxor's main street, a dirt road which is generally quiet during mid-day. On that day the street was bustling with extras and it was odd to see so many women about carrying

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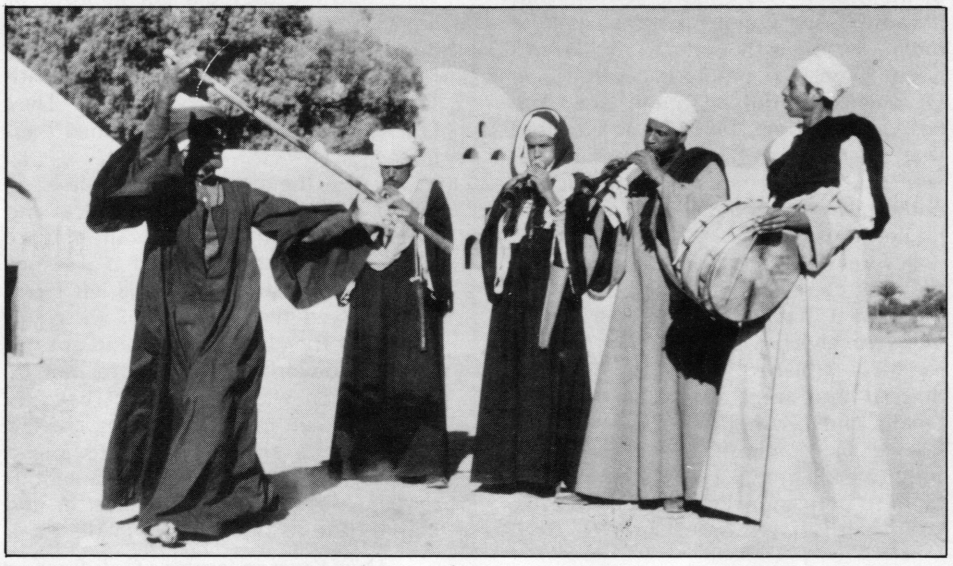


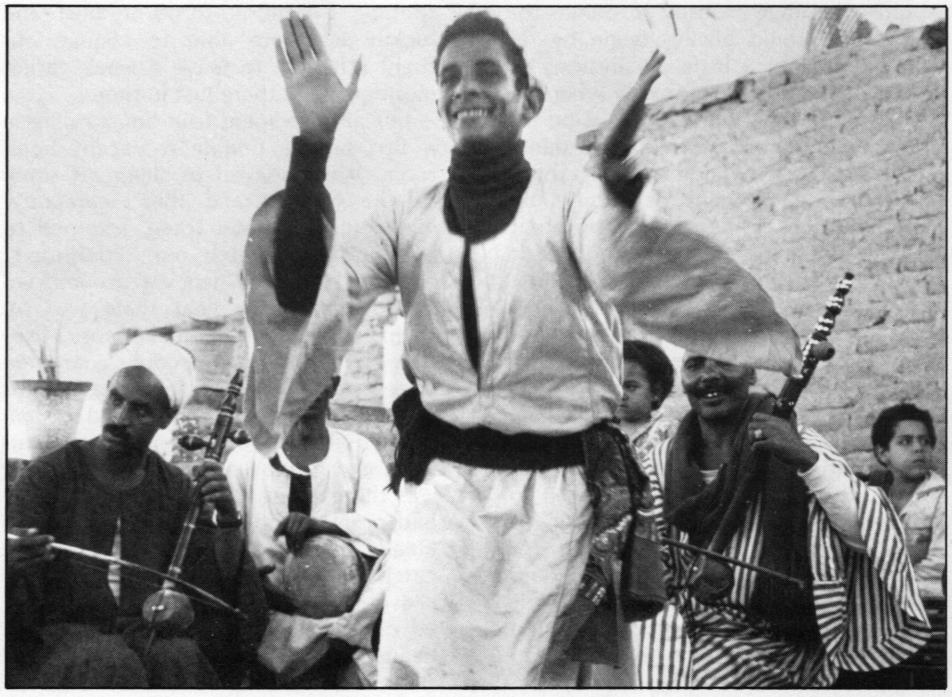
Housny performing Raqs el Asaya with Rais Quinnawi and his group. (Photo: Aisha Ali)

baskets on their heads filled with large quantities of uncovered bread and vegetables. The families that lived above some of the shops were happily crowded onto their balconies with friends and neighbors, watching the activities below.

When the work was finished, the cast and crew were taken to their hotel to rest before attending Khalil's party celebrating the last day of location in Luxor. Khalil had ordered four lambs to be roasted and served with mountains of rice and *mezza.* It was really too much food, but it made a good show, and the entertainers and workers got to enjoy what was left of the feast. The party was held outdoors in the garden of the Hotel Savoy and most of the artists from the area were present to entertain.

The Benat Maazin were now a trio consisting of Khairiyeh, Rajat and a new girl named Farida, who was pretty and petite but somewhat tight in her movements. Khairiyeh, the sister-in-law, was there — this time not as a dancer but as a chaperone for her daughter Shadia who was to perform an oriental dance. Housny was dancing with an *asaya,* and at one point the Maazin girls joined him with their canes. Even the musicians danced, and Rajat leaned her shoulders against the large tabl and pivoted with the drummer as he played, swinging her hips from side to side while in a backbend. I danced in a pink Asyut dress and was later joined by little Khairiyeh who outsparkled me in her long Lurex gown spangled with large sequins. When I returned to the dressing room to change into an oriental costume, Shadia and her mother were waiting for me because Shadia wanted to wear my Asyut dress for her next dance. (Prior my earlier visit in 1973, I don't believe any of the present day Ghawazee from that area had seen dresses made from *tulle bitelli,* although they must have known about them. (For a more in-depth article on this beautiful material, see *Arabesque,* May/June, 1981.) I was surprised that Shadia didn't prefer wearing her own toub which was flashier, but her enthusiasm touched me, and I agreed to let her wear it.

Several days later I was awakened by the desk clerk at the Etab Hotel, telling me that I had visitors in the lobby. Since receiving visitors in one's hotel room is frowned upon in Egypt, I dressed and went downstairs to find Shadia and her mother, who had come hoping to purchase my costumes. I tried to explain that I would be needing them to perform even after I left Luxor, but Khairiyeh wanted Shadia to have



them. Finally I promised to bring her the materials to make a costume similar to my beaded one, but I had to point out that the dresses from Asyut were scarce and expensive in the United States, and supposedly no longer available in Egypt.

Dancing and Murder — Ghawazee Style

That night I went with my brother to the Maazin home for dinner, and word had already reached them about Khairiyeh and Shadia's visit to me. They were annoyed by the incident and felt that their sister-in-law had been out of place to ask me to sell my costumes. They told me they did not approve of Shadia's recent debut as an oriental dancer because, until that time, the family had always been associated with the traditional country dances. They felt the oriental dance cheapened their image.

Later in the evening I kept hearing music and songs in the distance and when I asked the girls about it, they shook their heads and said it was not anything interesting. When we left them, we followed the sound until we could no longer travel by carriage and got out to continue on foot. We were met by several men with a flashlight because they had seen us coming. They greeted me by name and invited us to join a wedding party. My brother thought it remarkable that strangers out in the countryside recognized me in the dark. We followed them to a gathering in an open field, and they told us the bride had just been taken to the groom's house. The friends of the groom were seated in rows, and at one end there was a small bandstand where a *rababa* orchestra of four musicians and a singer were performing. I was the only woman present, but I didn't realize this at the time, being so absorbed in the entertainment. The singer was a young boy of about fourteen, with all the confidence of a seasoned performer.

I was gradually learning more about the Ghawazee life-style and beginning to understand them. "These people are different," Khalil had once said to me.[2] "They are not like other people because no daughter from a proper Saidi family can dance for money like the Benat Maazin. There are three tribes," he continued, "that the Ghawazee of Upper Egypt came from — the Halab, the Nawar and the Batar." The Maazin family is from Nawar, and he stated that the Nawar women sometimes are courtesans as well as entertainers, but the Halab people are only entertainers and the Batar are like the Halab. Khalil thinks that some of them come from Syria, Lebanon and Iraq, while others were from Morocco. Although their families have lived in Upper Egypt for five or six generations, they are still considered "foreigners" by the Saidi families.

The Ghawazee sing and dance to earn the family income, but they turn all the money over to the man of the

Abdul Karim performing a Saidi dance with Muhammed Murad's rabab group. (Photo: Aisha Ali)

house, who sees that everyone is provided for. Since it is the women who bring in wages, the families hope for daughters to be born — sons are not desired. It would seem that the men of these families had nothing better to do than visit their friends or sit quietly at home fingering their beads. Often when I asked Khalil what was the occupation of the husband or brother of so and so, I would get the same quick answer: "He has none." In all fairness this is not entirely true. It is the men of the families who handle the dancers' bookings, and in some cases like Abdul Karim and his father, they are themselves entertainers. It is also the men's duty to escort the girls to the wedding parties where they perform and carry the large cases of liquor and wine which they sell to the guests.

Yousef Maazin is very possessive of his daughters since his wife passed away, and they are everything to him. He allows the unmarried girls the pleasure of male companionship within the confines of his home, because he doesn't want them to marry and believes that by allowing them some freedom, they will not be so eager for husbands. When he sees a relationship getting too close, he tries to discourage it. Yet it's important to all of them that the family tradition of providing dancers will be unending.

Yousef's older brother, Mortada, has two lovely daughters named Loula and Awatif who are also dancers. Both married into families who were not Nawar, however, and their husbands didn't permit them to continue dancing. Mortada also had a son, Shoqui, who accompanied his sisters to the weddings until he got married himself to a dancer. They have two daughters who began dancing recently and are known as the "Benat Shoqui," but Shoqui became ill and died last year.

At Idfu there is the Ghazeeyeh Waheida Er Rekabi who is very famous. Now a wealthy landowner and still fairly young, she enjoyed a long career as a dancer femme fatale and caused many suitors to sell their land for her favors. She was always the first in demand for weddings, and it was necessary to make a contract with her many months in advance. Her fee was always four times higher than three of the Maazin girls together, but that was only a portion of her earnings since she earned most of her money from the *noqout* (tips) she received and from selling bottles of liquor. They say the tips alone came to 500 pounds per night and most wedding parties last for three or more nights. She sold her beer and wine for three times the cost, and everyone knew it was expensive but preferred buying it from her rather than from someone else for less. Those who hired her also had the additional expense incurred by her fans who would follow her from Idfu without being invited. She knew her job very well for when the men came to beg for her favors, she would smile and laugh without giving them an answer.

Karam was a young Ghazeeyeh from Qena. Like Waheida, the men would do anything for her. There was one man who loved her so much that he sold all his land to be with her. When he had nothing left, she became cold and behaved heartlessly. When he saw that she loved another man, he became insane with jealousy and threatened to kill her.

Her friends tried to warn her, but she only responded with, "I don't care. I'm not afraid." One night she saw him at a wedding where she was entertaining, and he tried to plead with her but she ignored him. Feeling distraught, he began to drink, and the people said he drank three or four bottles of whiskey. At two in the morning, Karim was on stage with Rais and Qinnawa and the mizmar band. She sang a popular folk song:

"Dayaat malak wena mali."
(You lost all your money — it has nothing to do with me.)
"Dayaat malak wena amael eh?"
(You lost all your money — what can I do?)
"Dayaat malak ala helak."
(You lost all your money on yourself.")
"Dayaat malak wena zembi eh?"
(You lost all your money — is it my fault?)

When her discarded lover heard those words, he went to the stage as though to tip the musicians. As he came near, he took out his pistol and shot her again and again. She sank to the floor without a word, and they say she died instantly.

The murderer went to trial, but his family hired good lawyers. They claimed he was intoxicated, not in his right mind and therefore not responsible for his actions. They got him off with a token sentence.

The musicians still talk about that night. It was to have been the grandest wedding of the year, and they were sorry he committed that terrible deed. The party might have continued for a week and every musician a richer man.□

Notes

1. In the May/June issue I erroneously reported that Touha's husband died, and she returned to work for her father. Actually it was Souad, the elder sister who became widowed and resumed her career.
2. It would be helpful to know a little more about Khalil in order to evaluate his comments properly. He was born in Thebes on the west side of the Nile in a small village where his family lived for generations as long as can be remembered. Like most families of the region, they believe their ancestors go back to Pharaonic times. Now a wealthy man, he acquired his wealth through industrious application of his natural intelligence. Although he is quite generous with his family and friends, his own life-style has changed very little over the years. He is a friend to artists from all classes, only demanding that they have talent. I have noticed a trace of snobbery or puritanism in his attitude toward them, but he prefers their company to that of others.

Aisha Ali and Housny performing at the Etab Hotel in Luxor. (Photo: J. Ali)