Aisha Ali

and The Nawari Nights of Egyptian Music and Dance

By Kristin Raeesi

Photo of Aisha, 1962 - *Photo by Leona Wood*

Introduction: Ghawazee and Aisha Ali

When most instructors provide their students with historical information about the foundations of belly dance they typically begin with a discussion of Badia Masabni's Opera Casino in Cairo, one of the earliest venues featuring staged productions of belly dance. However, Badia's stage was not the first to host live public dance performances, nor the first to feature belly dancing. Still, many in the belly dance community view Badia's casino as the beginning of raqs sharqi.

In this series of articles, we will explore earlier influences on public dance performances, with a focus on the impact of both Romani and Domari populations in the Middle East and North Africa, and on the preservation and presentation of folkloric dance forms which gave rise to raqs sharqi.

Romani and Domari History

According to Ian Hancock, one of the foremost Romani scholars, Romani and peoples are descended from populations that left their original homelands in India (although there is an ongoing debate regarding the year(s) they left). The people known as Romani took a route through the Middle East, traveling through Turkey and for those who did not stay in Turkey, continued through Greece and up into Europe. The Domari also traveled from India through the Middle East but instead of going North to Europe, many Domari sub-groups stayed in various Middle Eastern countries and others engaged in a peripatetic lifestyle, traveling extensive distances throughout the Middle East and North Africa. A central occupation for both Romani and Domari peoples was public entertainment and performance, especially as musicians, dancers, and singers. In an effort to secure paid performance opportunities, most Roma and Dom made concerted efforts to learn local songs,

dance styles and music in the cities and towns where they traveled. Due to their substantial traveling, many groups developed a broad repertoire of musical styles, songs, and dances that could be performed or adapted to virtually any audience. They also performed and shared their art with the new regions they traveled to, influencing local styles as well. The Roma and Dom populations that settled in one region, mastered local styles and in some cases, were the main people to perform and preserve those styles for future generations. In some instances, they kept traditions alive, albeit under the radar of local authorities, in regions where folkloric traditions were under suppression. The Ghawazee dancers of Egypt learned, performed and preserved the folkloric music, dance, and songs of the Egyptian people, both in urban and rural areas. This article will explore the experiences and insight of Aisha Ali, an American dancer and scholar, who over decades of travel and dedicated investigation into the life and art of the Ghawazee, helped introduce a new generation of dancers and researchers to these fascinating people.

Tell me a little about your background:

I was born in Pennsylvania; my mother was first generation Italian-American and my father was first generation Arab-American. My parents lived in the house of my paternal grandfather in Pittsburgh while my father was away serving in WWII, and when he returned he built us a house in the suburbs. There were no Arab families in either of our neighborhoods, and like many families of immigrants, my parents wanted to blend in with American culture and lifestyle, so they chose not to emphasize our Mediterranean heritage to others. Within our family, however, we were proud of our ancestors' long history of artistic excellence and most members on both sides of the family became painters, photographers, musicians, and writers.

I still remember the beautiful Arabic tiles and oriental paintings that decorated my grandfather Ali's house, especially a long tapestry depicting a scene of musicians and a dancing girl. These were the images that planted the seeds of my later fascination with everything Oriental.

What is your earliest dance memory or what kind of training did you have before beginning belly dance?

My mother took me to ballet classes when I was about five. After half a dozen dance lessons, she stopped taking me, and when I asked her why, she said the teacher told her not to waste her time because "she will never be a dancer". That was the end of my dance training until I moved to Los Angeles and a series of circumstances unfolded which would lead me towards belly dance.

Let's talk more about how and why you became interested in dance and then belly dance; why did you move to Los Angeles?

I moved to LA directly after high school to attend UCLA. At first, I lived with my maternal grandmother and was under her supervision, as well as that of my two maternal aunts. They were very conservative and insisted that I should adhere to a more modest style of dress; they cut my long hair short and were very controlling of me. It was not long before I made the decision to look for a part-time job so I could live on my own and be independent. During this period, by chance, one of my co-workers had signed up for fencing lessons with The Niko Charisse Dance Studio; he lost interest quickly and decided to gift me the rest of his credits, suggesting I could trade them for dance classes. I wanted to learn belly dance, but in Los Angeles there were no instructions on the subject that I knew of. The closest thing to belly dance offered by the Charisse Studio was something called, "Primitive" – a style originally created by Katherine Dunham and taught by one of her protégés, Ellie Johnson. Upon joining Ellie's group I learned primarily Afro-Cuban movement, mainly to a calypso album by Harry Belafonte and a record called "Taboo" by Lex Baxter.

That's an interesting way to begin your dance journey! How did you eventually find belly dance music and classes?

Later I found an Arabic record (and there weren't many out at that time) called "Flames of Araby" with the singer Kahraman. Using some of the movements that I had learned from Ellie, I began to develop my own style of oriental dance. For my first stage performance I represented the Arab Student group at UCLA at an international festival, and on that occasion, I met Leona Wood and her husband Philip Harland, who were also performing. They had formed a small group of musicians and dancers that they called the "Friends of Arabic Music" (At that time Jamila Salampour was one of the dancers in the group before it became *The Aman International Dance Co.*) and they invited me to join. They also encouraged me to join Mantel Hood's newly formed program at UCLA for which Hood had coined the term "Ethnomusicology".

I continued to develop my own style of dance and before working at Arabic night clubs, I worked at the "Greek Village" and "The Torch Club" in Hollywood. Most of the singers, dancers, and musicians were gypsies, and they were *fabulous*! The club owners would pay their transportation from Greece, accommodate them in apartments located walking distance from the club, and give them money for food; but they depended on tips for their earnings. Legally, they were not permitted to stay for extended periods of time (perhaps due to visa restrictions), so every 6 months a new group would arrive and replace the previous group. On many nights after work, around 2:30 or 3:00 am, I would share a meal with the singers and musicians at one of their apartments where the women would cook our dinner while the musicians played music until dawn. It was magical!

How did you get interested in the Ghawazee or become introduced to their music, culture or dance? What made it attractive?

From the music archive at UCLA, Leona Wood's husband Philip discovered some Egyptian folk recordings by scholars such as Tiberiu Alexandru, Fumio Koizumi, and Hans Hickman. Previously, we had only been exposed to the Middle Eastern pop music that was played in the night clubs or the few records of Arab music we were able to find. The first time I heard the haunting sounds of Egyptian folk music on these recordings, I was enthralled. At that time I was unaware of the fact that the music was mostly played by Gypsies. It was these recordings that inspired me to later travel in order to learn more about the culture and dance arts.

In those days, most field recordings were not high quality and some of the musicologists doing the recordings only wanted short "samples" of each instrument, so the music was not complete in every song. Fortunately, the Egyptian folk recordings we discovered were full versions of the songs and music as it was played by the Ghawazee and I was able to enjoy dancing to it for almost a decade before traveling to make my own recordings.

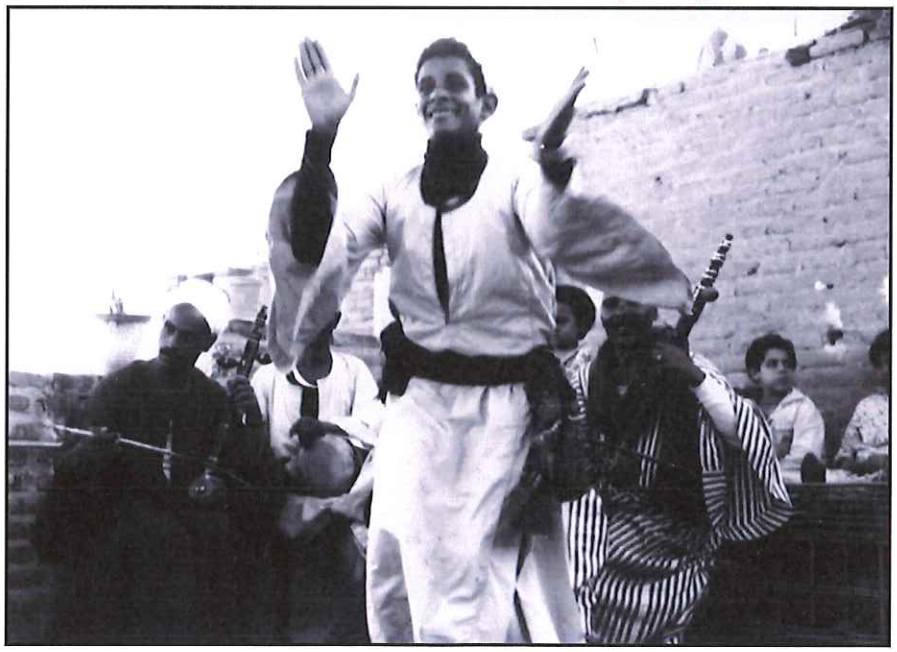
What did you want to learn when you decided to further your explorations understanding of this genre?

In the beginning, my mentor, Leona Wood, pieced together the traditional dances and costumes and most importantly, she researched everything about this music and dance genre that had previously been written by prominent 18th and 19th century travelers and historians, going back as far as the Roman poet Martial and satirist Juvenal who first described the dancing girls of Gades (Now Cadiz). It was from these writers that we first learned about the Ghawazee being a tribe of public dancing women in Egypt.

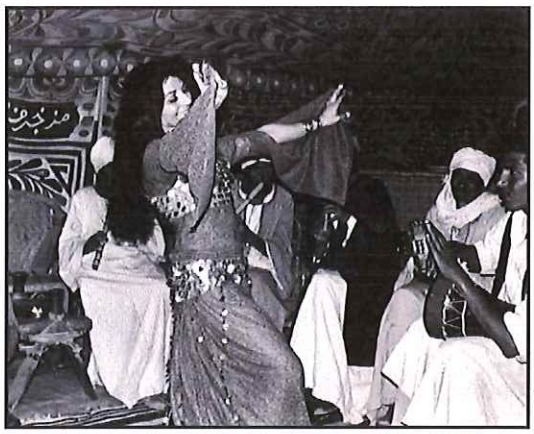
Leona's research brought this group to the forefront; since prior to this there had been no direct effort to specifically focus on the Ghawazee, neither among those who made reference to the Ghawazee in their writings, nor among those who recorded their music. I was fortunate to have mentors like Leona and Philip, who readily shared their research with me and established the foundation for my further studies. To reciprocate, I always shared my field recordings and films with them, thus providing them with models for the choreographies and music developed for the Middle Eastern section of The Aman International Dance Company.

During the 1960s, before going to the Middle East, I had been belly dancing in night clubs as well as performing the folk dances that I learned from the Arab students at UCLA. Finally, in 1971 I decided it was time to travel to the Middle

Domari Boy dancing - Abdel Khrem



East to search for these musicians and dancers in order to photograph and film them and to make high-quality recordings of their music. My driving motivation was to find the Ghawazee because I believe them to be the oldest surviving exponents of the dance which had not yet been influenced and diluted by Western culture.



Aisha performing in desert tent at Giza, 1973
Photo by Alu Ashur El-Gabry

Let's talk a bit about Ghawazee history and how you began your search once you arrived in the Middle East:

The term "Ghawazee" is the 19th-century plural spelling for the name "Ghazee" (m. sing.) which translates as "invader" as well as the act of making a raid. (Ghawazi is the plural spelling used today) In an interview with a British Journalist, one of the Mazin sisters suggested that they were called "Ghawazee" because they invaded men's hearts. When I first went to Egypt and began to inquire into the whereabouts of the Ghawazee, no one seemed to have heard of them. I sometimes came across musicians and dancers performing in the street but they were not the group I was seeking. I knew that the Ghawazee were public dancing women, but because I was going by early descriptions of them taken from Edward Lane's 19th century book, "The Manners and Customs of the Modern Egyptians", I had been lead to believe they were not Gypsies. Lane described them as being a tribe and mentions that some people did associate the Ghawazee with Gypsies, however, he believed they were merely a special people who kept separate from the general population. It was only later that I confirmed the Ghawazee to be Domari people.

When I first arrived in Egypt in 1971, I met Mahmoud Reda and Farida Fahmy, who were the directors of the Reda Troupe, which was Egypt's first national folkloric dance company. They allowed me to attend their rehearsals every

Rajat, Touha, and Khayria Mazin Dancing on the Ferry Boat, 1973 - *Photo by Aisha Ali*

other day when they taught Egyptian folkloric dances. (On alternate days Mahmoud's wife taught ballet) It was thru them that I met Nazla Al-Adil and Samia Gamal, both from whom I received private coaching at the Reda Studio. In the evenings I was dancing at Sahara City, a large tent supper club geared towards tourists that actually featured authentic folkloric entertainment. It was there I met and worked with Ibrahim Akef who was training the Ghawazi troupe from Sumbat for the show. Part of their performance included lifting tables and chairs with their teeth and balancing them over their heads as they danced and played Segat. I filmed them but the footage was choppy so I never released it.

Aisha with Yousef, father of the Banat Mazin, 1977 - *Photo by J.J. Ali*

At a night club in Giza called "The Swan", I met the legendary Sofia Helmi, one of the last of the m'alimahs (female master teachers). She would take in young girls from poor families and train them to perform in her night club. Later, I learned that with the exception of Mahmoud, Farida and Samia, all of the performers who were Ghawazee were Domari, or Middle Eastern Gypsy people. Since I had not been specifically looking for "Gypsies", the subject of ethnicity initially didn't come up whenever I met gypsy performers. Later I learned that both Ibrahim Akef and his famous relative, the dancer Naima Akef, were Domari. I was told the Akefs came from a family of circus performers. It was on my second trip in 1973 in the Luxor area that I finally found the group I had been looking for and learned that they were called the Banat Mazin (or "Daughters of Mazin").

Learning from the Ghawazee and Advice for Students

When I returned to Egypt in 1973, I traveled to Luxor, where I met the infamous "El Baron". He was considered to be well acquainted with not only the Banat Mazin but all the families of musicians and dancers that were Domari. He introduced me to them and arranged for me to perform with them for tourists on a Ferryboat. It was he who told me there were three groups of Gypsies in Egypt: The Nawar, the Halab and the Batar. Since they are Nawari, the Mazin girls lived in a neighborhood where only Domari lived. When I visited them I would go alone, taking a small horse-driven buggy. If a friend from Luxor drove me, they would drop me off in front of the house and never came inside. When the Mazin girls would visit me during the times I was working and living at the Winter Palace or the Etab hotel, I would have to come down and meet them outside on the veranda. Because they were Nawar it was forbidden for me to invite them into the hotel, and most outsiders avoided visiting them in their homes. When we gave a performance it was generally in a garden, a courtyard or on a ferry boat on the Nile, and we had to be specially licensed for that occasion. While I was filming the Ghawazi at Baron's villa for a sequence in Wedding in Luxor, his family members stayed upstairs and didn't come down until the sharqi musicians from Cairo were rehearsing and the Ghawazee had left. It has been almost 18 years since I've been back to Egypt, and I'm not certain if that sort of discrimination still exists, but it probably does.

How did they feel about you wanting to learn about their music and dance? Were they accepting? Was anyone hesitant to provide information?

They were flattered by my interest in them, and during various interviews, sometimes gave different answers depending on what they thought I wanted to hear.

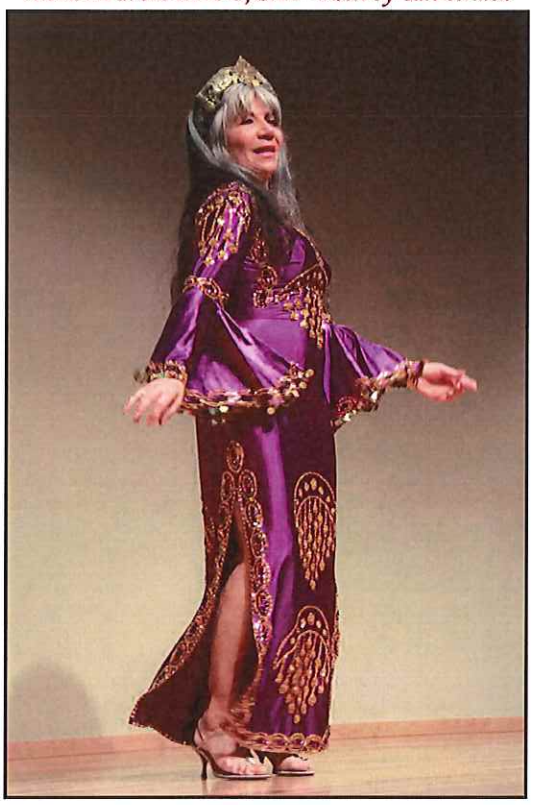
I learned mostly by performing with them and imitating their movements. It never occurred to me to take formal lessons from them and I don't think they taught foreigners or people outside of their family at that time.


Aisha, 1988

How does the broader society feel about their dance and music (if that can be generalized)?
With the exception of al Baron, it was *rare* to find Egyptian people from the Middle and Upper classes who loved or even appreciated this kind of music and dance, although the Reda troupe helped by introducing it to the general public in a way that was "safe" to them and encouraged pride of their cultural heritage. When I say "their" heritage, I do mean Egyptian heritage rather than Gypsy heritage, because the Gypsies go into an area and absorb and preserve the folkloric music and dance traditions of that region. For many, performing these folkloric styles has become their main occupation. So although the entertainers were Domari, the folkloric styles they preserved were Egyptian. Furthermore, since in Egypt folkloric music and dance is important for every rite of passage, not only were they preserving the traditions of the area, they were guaranteeing a demand for their own arts. During the 70s and 80s both male and female Gypsies, often accompanied by a young son or daughter, performed a Sufi whirling dance which is part of the Tanoura, in nightclubs for tourists. In Egypt, it is mainly the Domari people who have lovingly preserved all of the valuable Egyptian folk traditions.

What advice do you have for students who want to study and perform Ghawazee?
Beginning in 1973, I left a trail of resources which many musicologists and well-known dancers have followed while doing work on their own. Most, if not all, of the research that has been done since that time was first guided by sources we published in the booklet accompanying my recordings for the LP "Music of the Ghawazee". It was the music in this album that fired broader curiosity about these fascinating dancers. I would encourage students who want to study the Ghawazee dance, music and culture to read my articles, listen to the real music, watch my (or other) documentary videos, and when possible, study with Khayria Mazin, myself, or any of the other teachers who have taken a serious interest in this genre. Here in the western world, I am always pleased when I can watch Ghawazee performances that have a natural organic feel to them because it shows me that the dancers cared enough to study and present the dance authentically. It's not so much about the choreography, it's more about the dancer's love of the music and her/his ability to express all of its subtle nuances.

Aisha Ali at the BDUC, 2014 - *Photo by Carl Sermon*



Aisha Ali will be giving a weekend workshop in Pittsburgh, PA on April 1-2, 2017, which includes classes in Ghawazee, Tunisian, and Moroccan shikat. For more information about *this event and to register, visit:*
https://www.facebook.com/events/242332642814210/
For more information about Aisha, please visit: http://www.aisha-ali.com/

KRISTIN RAEESI

Kristin Raeesi is a Romani-American scholar, activist and dancer; a former board member for "Voice of Roma", she continues to promote accurate information regarding Romani rights and representation.