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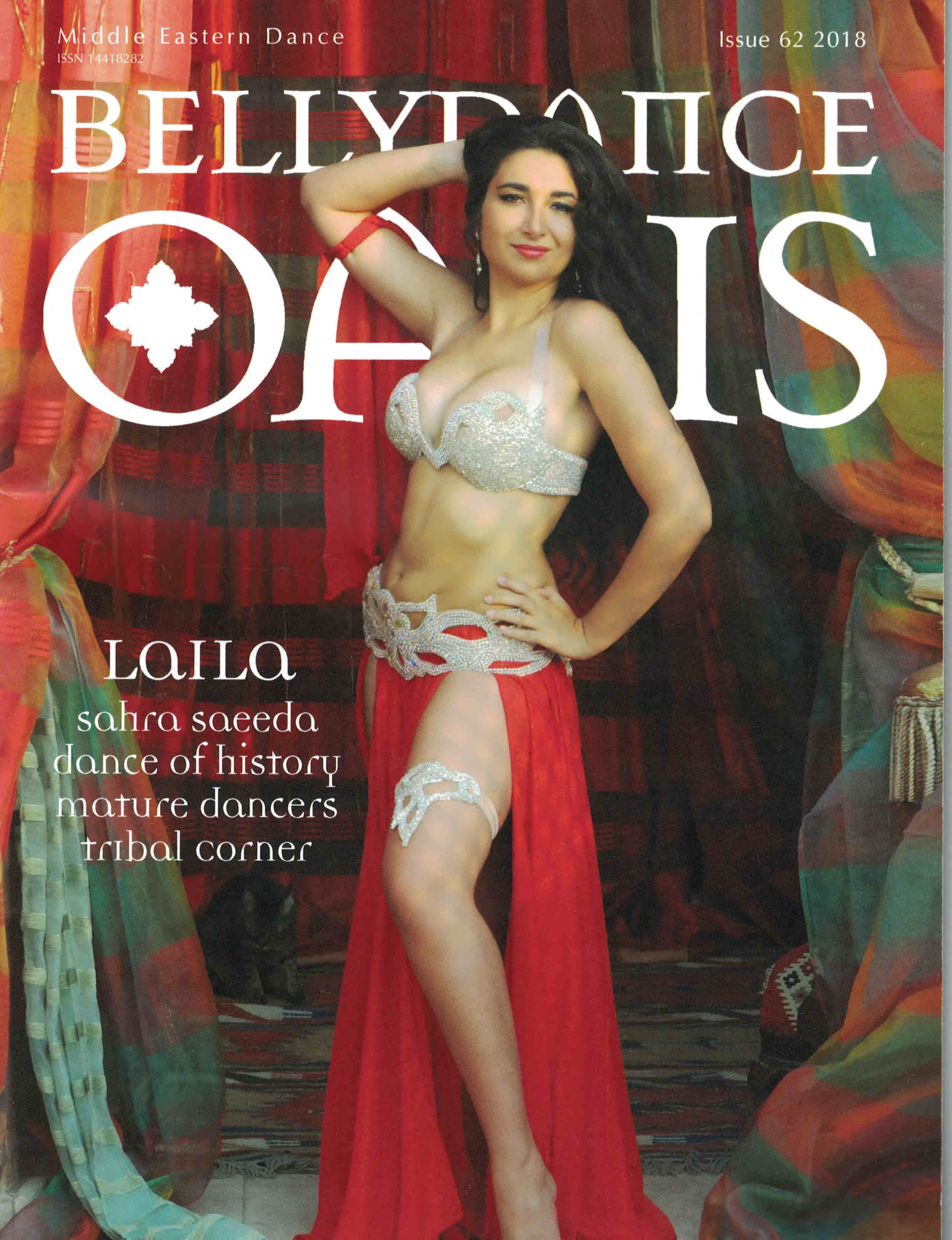

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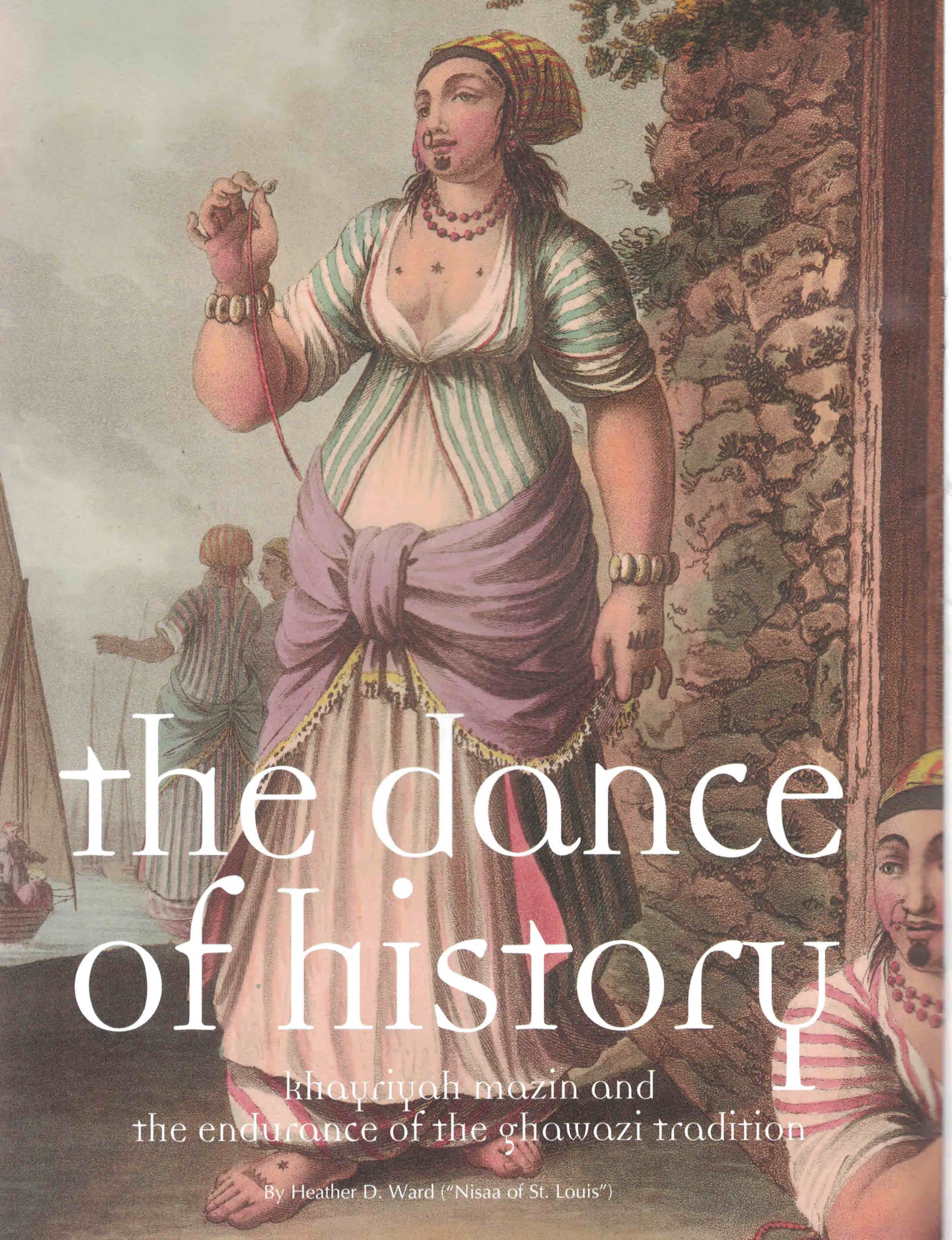


the dance of history

khayriyah mazin and the endurance of the ghawazi tradition

By Heather D. Ward ("Nisaa of St. Louis")

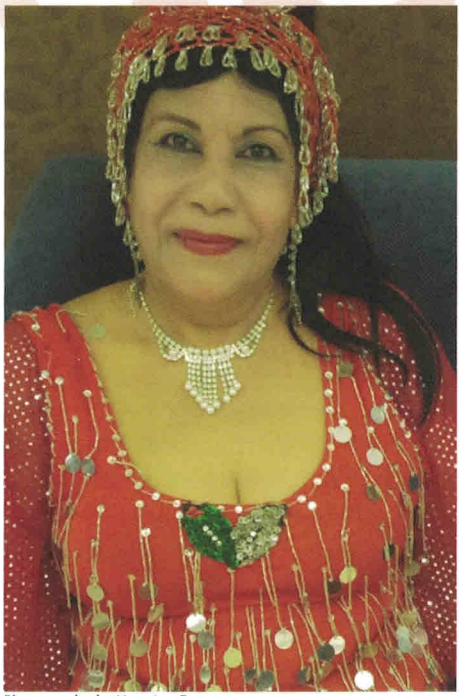
she calls her dance 'al-raqs al-asli' the original dance


Nisaa

Since the 1960s, dancers with more than a passing interest in Egyptian dance tradition and history have made the pilgrimage to visit the famed Mazin family of *Ghawazi* in Luxor, Egypt. Researchers such as Morocco, Aisha Ali, and Edwina Nearing were fortunate to visit the family in its heyday, the 1960s and 1970s, when the Mazin sisters, known collectively as the Banat Mazin, performed together at weddings in and around Luxor. Today, only one of the sisters, Khayriyah, remains active in dance. The rest have passed away or have retired. Yet Khayriyah soldiers on, teaching out of her tiny flat on Salah Salim Street; dancers from all over the world continue to seek her out. For this tiny woman, with her kind eyes and beaming smile, embodies a dance tradition of tremendous longevity and of profound historical significance.

The *Ghawazi* of Egypt: Who Were They Then, and Who Are They Now?

In order to grasp the importance of Khayriyah and her dancing, it is first necessary to situate her in historical context. The story begins at the turn of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, when the term *Ghawazi* first turns up in the historical record. At the dawn of the nineteenth century, there were two classes of female professional entertainers in Egypt: the *awalim* (singular *almah*) and the *Ghawazi* (singular *ghaziyah*). At this time, the term *almah* carried a generally positive connotation. An *almah* was a "learned woman" – a female entertainer skilled in poetry, music, and dance, and frequently hired to entertain in upper-class Egyptian households on occasions such as weddings and circumcisions


Photography by Yasmina Ramzy

(Savary 1785: 149-156). Though favored by the Egyptian elite, the *awalim* belonged to the "popular classes" (i.e. the lower strata) of Egyptian society (Chabrol 1822: 381).

At the same time, there was a lower class of entertainers who were termed the *Ghawazi* (Chabrol 1822: 418, Clot-Bey 1840: 90-91, Jomard 1822: 733, Savary 1785: 155-156, Villoteau 1809: 694-695). Two important features distinguished the *Ghawazi* from the *awalim*. First, while the *awalim* generally performed for the elite, the *Ghawazi* provided entertainment to the Egyptian lower classes. Second, whereas the *awalim* normally performed in the privacy of the *harim*, or women's quarters, of the homes in which they were hired, the *Ghawazi* frequently danced and sang in public spaces for mixed-gender or male audiences. The *Ghawazi* performed at public festivals, particularly *mawalid* (singular *mulid*, a festival celebrating the birthday of an important religious figure), and at celebrations of birth or marriage among lower-class Egyptians. In essence, the *Ghawazi* were the *awalim* of the ordinary Egyptian masses.

Both the *awalim* and the *Ghawazi* were recognized and taxed by the Egyptian government, although at the turn of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the government's regulation of their trades seems to have been minimal. This situation would change, however, as in the early decades of the nineteenth century, both the Egyptian populace and the Muslim elite of the *ulama* (scholars) began to agitate for some sort of government action regarding female entertainers and prostitutes. There were three sources of agitation. First was the moral indignation, particularly among the *ulama* and other pious Egyptians, regarding the government's receipt of tax revenue from what were perceived by many to be morally reprehensible occupations. Public outcry over the taxation of vice had led to the repeal of taxes on female entertainers several times throughout Egyptian history (Fraser 2015: 90, 158; Saleh 1979: 125-126). Second, corruption and abuses in the application of these taxes generated significant public outrage. Tucker (1985: 151-152) documents the scandal that erupted when the tax farmer of prostitutes added several "honorable women" to his rolls in order to increase his revenues and to exact revenge on his enemies. Finally, as female entertainers and prostitutes increasingly plied their trade among foreigners, public indignation and resentment grew over this blatant expression of foreign dominance in Egypt.

Ultimately, the Egyptian government was willing to sacrifice tax revenue in order to quiet the growing discontent over

Ghawazi and musicians from Naj Hammadi, Upper Egypt. Old postcard supplied by Nisaa

"public women," and in the early 1830s, took the drastic action of banning public performances by the *awalim* and the *Ghawazi* in Cairo and Alexandria (Clot-Bey 1840: 90, Lane 1860: 377, Lane 2005 [1836]: 566). The same pronouncement also banned prostitution in Egypt's urban centers. Many entertainers fled the cities, while some were actually deported after they were found to have broken the law (see, for example, Didier 1860: 341). Although a few prestigious *awalim* managed to continue working in Cairo and Alexandria, as a result of the ban, the majority of *awalim* and *Ghawazi* were forced to migrate to the smaller towns and villages of the Delta and Upper Egypt.

Life was more precarious for entertainers in rural Egypt. The *fallahin*, the poor farmers who formed the majority of the rural population, could not afford to hire expensive entertainers for their weddings, leaving the rural *mawalid* and performances for foreigners as more reliable sources of income (Van Nieuwkerk 1995: 34). In addition, security risks outside of the metropolitan centers of Alexandria and Cairo, combined with economic uncertainty, made entertainers vulnerable to extortion by pimps, protectors, money lenders, and sometimes even the local police (Van Nieuwkerk 1995: 35-36). Cross-purposes with the intent of the ban, the move to rural towns such as Esna, Qena, and Luxor actually propelled female entertainers further into performing for foreigners, as well as into prostitution. The *awalim* and the *Ghawazi* found themselves facing the same difficult circumstances, competing for the same work.

Taxation of both prostitutes and female entertainers would resume as early as 1866 (Duff Gordon 1875: 94-95), and dancers would return to Cairo and Alexandria, but governmental restrictions on prostitution and public dance would persist for the remainder of the century and into the next. At the dawn of the twentieth century, the vicissitudes of governmental regulation and a desire for more regular employment would prompt some dancers to venture into a new performance setting – the newly-established theatres and entertainment halls of Cairo and Alexandria – a transition that would set in motion the emergence of an entirely new dance form known as *raqs sharqi* (Ward 2018).

The dancers who continued to perform at the weddings of the lower classes and at the *mawalid* were still known as *awalim* and *Ghawazi*, but these terms carried different connotations than they had one hundred years prior. The term *almah* had lost its prestige. By the 1930s, *almah* had come to denote a common singer/dancer who performed for the lower and middle classes of urban Cairo and Alexandria (Lagrange 2009: 227-228). The term *ghaziyah* referred strictly to singer/dancers working in the rural villages and the *mawalid*. In essence, the terms *awalim* and *Ghawazi* lost their class associations; rather, they began to convey a distinction between urban and rural entertainers. Importantly, neither group was highly esteemed in Egyptian society.

While the *awalim* continued to ply their trade until the late twentieth century, a combination of sociocultural and economic factors initiated their gradual decline (see Van Nieuwkerk 1995: 55-60). Sadly, the *awalim* tradition no longer exists, though echoes of the old *awalim* style can sometimes be seen in the innumerable dancers who currently perform at the weddings of Egypt's urban lower classes. Moreover, a handful of retired entertainers with connections to this tradition are still living and willing to share what they know.

By contrast, the *Ghawazi* tradition persists in rural Egypt, though it faces grave threats from a variety of fronts, including the precipitous decline of Egypt's economy in recent years, the rise in religious conservatism, and the invasion of urban *raqs sharqi* into local dance scenes. Most of the remaining *Ghawazi* are located in Upper Egypt, in the vicinity of Luxor, Qena, and Sohag. According to Khayriyah, the handful who still actively perform are based out of villages such as Abu Shushah and Naj Hammadi. These dancers, including Khayriyah, form the last scattered remnants of this old dance tradition, a style that, together with that of the *awalim*, is ancestral to theatrical *raqs sharqi*.

Khayriyah and her sisters, because they have been visible and accessible to foreign researchers since the 1960s, have become the *de facto* standard-bearers of the *Ghawazi* tradition of

Upper Egypt. This is appropriate, as the Banat Mazin, even though they no longer exist as a performing group, remain well-known – even legendary – among the local population. During my recent visit with Khayriyah, my translator, a young woman around 30 years of age, remarked that as a little girl, she had heard stories about the famous Banat Mazin, but she didn't realise that they were still alive until she was hired by a tour group to translate for Khayriyah. As Khayriyah has aged and her sisters have either passed away or retired, Khayriyah's livelihood has increasingly come to depend on her earnings from teaching foreigners. In a way, the Mazin sisters were forced down the same path as their grandmothers, who, when faced with dire circumstances, turned to foreigners as a potential source of income.

Lessons from Khayriyah

The first time I met Khayriyah was during an all-too-brief dance lesson in early 2013. I resolved to return to see her again and was able to visit Khayriyah again in January 2018. The discussion below reflects some of the information that I gleaned during this recent interview and dance lesson with her. One of my goals during this interview was to record Khayriyah's opinions and perceptions regarding her own dance style. How does she define her dance style? What makes it different from *raqs sharqi*? What terminology does she use to describe her dance and herself, the dancer?

One fact that became clear in my conversation with her is that Khayriyah is ambivalent about the term *ghaziyah/ Ghawazi*. Though she understands the broader usage that connotes "rural dancer," she explains that in her local area, the term is generally derogatory. For this reason, she does not refer to herself as a *ghaziyah*, preferring terms such as *raqqasah shaabi* (folk dancer) or *fannanah shaabi* (folk artist).

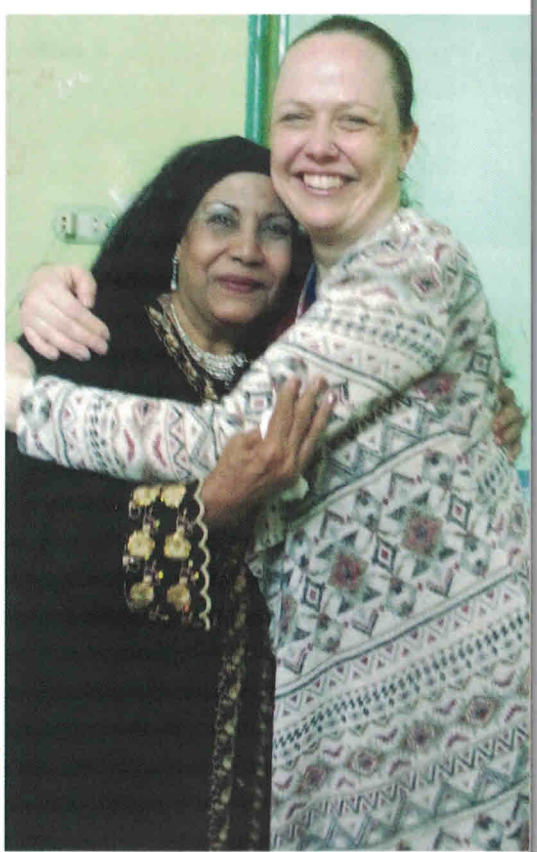
Khayriyah refers to her style of dance as *raqs shaabi* – i.e. folk dance. Asked to explain how the *Ghawazi* dance, *raqs shaabi*, is different from belly dance, *raqs sharqi*, she simply states: "The differences are like the sky from the earth" (*"faruq al-sama min al-ard"*). She describes the steps and the movements of *raqs shaabi* as art (*fann*). Stressing the depth of history and tradition behind it, she calls her dance *al-raqs al-asli* – the original dance.

Khayriyah's dance is characterised by near-constant motion of the hips, and by an array of heavy, grounded steps that profoundly connect the dance to the driving rhythms of the accompanying music. Indeed, the entire dance is intricately tied to the ebb and flow of its musical accompaniment. Though the dance is improvisational, it is hardly random, as specific movements and steps are associated with specific variations in the music. Indeed, each performance segment, with its particular combination of dance and music, bears a specific name. Some of the performance segments mentioned in my January meeting with Khayriyah include the following:

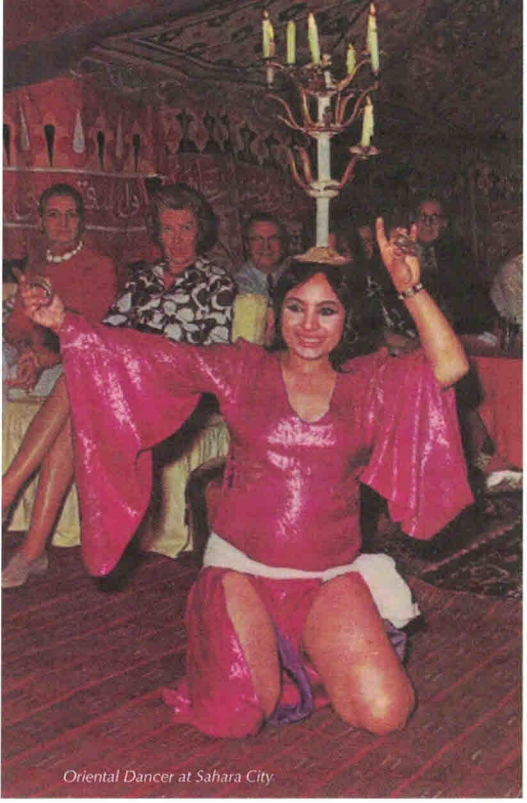
- *ashrat al-takht*[1] – according to Khayriyah, the *ashrat al-takht* is generally performed at the beginning of a show. Elsewhere in Egypt, the melody of *ashrat al-takht* is known as *Raqs al-Hawanim* (Dance of the Ladies). This song has been widely associated with *awalim* and *Ghawazi* dance since at least the nineteenth century.
- *ashrat al-dikkah* – this dance is performed while standing on a *dikkah* (wooden bench). The dancer exaggerates her steps in order to pound out the rhythmic accompaniment on the *dikkah*.
- *ashrat al-naawsi* – the term *naawsi* means 'sleeping' and appears to refer to the muffled sound of the accompanying *mizmar* in this segment.
- *ashrat al-bambah* – during my meeting with Khayriyah, this performance segment was briefly mentioned, but not described.
- *ashrat al-juhayni* – one of the stick dances performed by the Banat Mazin. This stick dance, as well as the *ashrat al-nizzawi*, appear to be related to local men's dances (see Saleh 1979: 240-266)

Several of these performance segments, as well as the *ashrat al-tabl* (in which the dancer leans against the barrel of the *tabl baladi*), were also noted by Edwina Nearing (2004). While Khayriyah remains active in teaching, an important goal for researchers would be to develop a complete catalogue of these performance segments, including precise descriptions of the specific dance technique and musical accompaniment associated with each.

I asked Khayriyah whether her style of dance ever involved acrobatic feats, such as descending to the floor in the splits, or balancing acts, where various objects, such as bottles, cups, chairs, and *candelabra*, are balanced on the dancer's head, in her teeth, or elsewhere on her body. I was curious about this for a number of reasons. First, these acts were common to the dancing of Khayriyah's *Ghawazi* counterparts in the Nile Delta, as well as to the dancing of the urban *awalim*. Second, numerous historical accounts indicate that these sorts of acts were present in the dancing of Luxor's *Ghawazi* in the nineteenth century. For



Nisaa with Khayriya Mazin



Oriental Dancer at Sahara City

example, a young American woman, Mary L. Ninde, observed the following performance in Luxor in the 1880s:

Most wonderful of all was the bottle-dance, in which one of the girls performed all sorts of tricks, even to rolling over on the floor, while balancing on the crown of her head a tall bottle with a lighted candle in its mouth. (Ninde 1886: 249-250)

According to Khayriyah, these sorts of acts were never part of her dance, and she strongly associated this style of dancing with the *awalim* of Cairo's Muhammad Ali Street. Given the historical evidence for these kinds of acts in nineteenth century Luxor, however, the question becomes: when, how, and why did they disappear from the local *Ghawazi* dance tradition?

In spite of the stylistic differences from her own way of dancing, Khayriyah spoke with great reverence for the artistry of the Delta *Ghawazi* and the *awalim* of Muhammad Ali Street. The same cannot be said about Khayriyah's attitudes toward contemporary *raqs sharqi*. Her comments in this respect echo those that I have heard from retired Muhammad Ali Street entertainers, who argue that *raqs sharqi* has become less about showing skill and more about showing skin. I suspect Khayriyah's feelings in this regard stem from the role that *raqs sharqi* has played in the dilution of *raqs shaabi* in her area, as *raqs sharqi* performers have migrated into Luxor from urban Cairo and Alexandria, and local dancers have adopted *raqs sharqi* movements, mannerisms, and costuming in order to stay competitive.

Khayriyah spoke fondly of the *raqs sharqi* performers from the 'Golden Age' of Egyptian cinema, i.e. from the 1940s and 1950s. She spoke highly of Naimah Akif, describing her as a true artist. Naimah portrayed a *ghaziyah* in the film *Tamr Hinnah* (1957). I was curious what Khayriyah thought of Naimah's dancing in this film. Was it what she would consider *Ghawazi* dancing? While Khayriyah described her dancing in very favorable terms, she was quite adamant that Naimah's dancing was *sharqi*, not *shaabi* (at least, not the Mazin style of *shaabi*).

Bridging the Past and the Future

The insights I gained from my January 2018 meeting with Khayriyah reveal why researchers have sought out her and her sisters since the 1960s, and why they continue to do so. Khayriyah represents a dance style with deep historical roots and profound cultural significance, and there is still so much more to learn from her. Every meeting reveals something new about the *Ghawazi* tradition and opens up new and exciting avenues for future research. Though the *Ghawazi* tradition faces a variety of social, cultural, and economic threats to its existence, just as it has throughout its history, Khayriyah Mazin continues to weather the storm of history to carry her dance legacy into the future. I hope that this piece inspires a new generation of researchers to seek her out. She is waiting, smiling a warm welcome, and ready to share her dance.•

(1) The term '*ashrat*' literally means 'ten', but here means an approximate period of time – not literally "ten minutes of x" but more like "do x for a while."

Heather D. Ward (Nisaa) is a Middle Eastern dance instructor, performer, and researcher based in St. Louis, Missouri, USA. She specializes in Egyptian raqs sharqi (bellydance), and has conducted in-depth examinations of primary textual, photographic, and pictorial evidence as well as on-site investigations in Cairo in order to advance knowledge of the history and development of this fascinating dance form. Her first book, 'Egyptian Belly Dance in Transition', explores the emergence and early development of raqs sharqi at the turn of the 19th and 20th centuries.
www.bellydancewithnisaa.com

References:

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