

**Memories of Muḥammad ‘Alī Street  
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**Published on November 21, 2014**

From the late 1800s, Muḥammad ‘Alī Street was the heart of music and dance in Cairo. In its heyday in the early-to-mid twentieth century, the street was the epicenter of Cairo's music and dance scene and home to musicians, singers, dancers, and musical instrument makers. The street was lined with shops selling musical instruments and with cafes where entertainers would sit, sip tea and smoke shisha while waiting to be hired for parties. Today, however, most of the music shops have been replaced by furniture stores, and nearly all of the entertainers' cafes have closed their doors. This unique and remarkable piece of Egypt's music and dance tradition appears to be fading into history, and all that will remain is the legacy that has been handed down by the generations of men and women who made their living on this legendary street.

Muḥammad ‘Alī Street was constructed during the reign of Khedive Ismā‘īl (1863-1879) as a means to connect Cairo's newly-created European-style downtown with the Citadel. The street is named after Muḥammad ‘Alī Bāshā, Khedive Ismā‘īl's grandfather and the ruler who in 1834 banned the *‘awālim* and the *ghawāzī* – the forerunners of today's belly dancers – to Egypt's rural south. The ban was lifted in the mid nineteenth century, and in one of history's great ironies, most of Cairo's professional belly dancers came to reside on the street named after their persecutor.

From its earliest days, Muḥammad ‘Alī Street was home to Cairo's musicians, singers, and dancers, many of whom found work in the weddings of the urban lower and middle classes, or else in the entertainment halls that were emerging in nearby Azbakīyah and ‘Imād al-Dīn Street (Figure 1). The street also became home to a range of businesses connected to the entertainment industry, including costumers, musical instrument manufacturers, record producers, and more (Figure 2). By the middle of the twentieth century, the street was firmly established as the vital core of Cairo's music and dance industries.

The decline of Muḥammad ‘Alī Street began as early as the late 1970s and has continued unabated since then. A combination of sociocultural and economic factors is responsible for this decline (Van Nieuwkerk 1995: 55-60). Following the short-lived economic boom of the early 1970s, Muḥammad ‘Alī Street entertainers began to lose their monopoly on music and dance as entertainers from outside Muḥammad ‘Alī Street infiltrated the industry. These “intruders” – as they are called by “indigenous” Muḥammad ‘Alī Street entertainers – now dominate the music and dance scene in Cairo. Moreover, the cost of hiring entertainers for weddings and other celebrations has moved beyond the reach of most lower or lower-middle class Egyptians, the primary clientele for Muḥammad ‘Alī Street entertainers. The poor economic climate in Egypt, combined with a trend toward increasing religious conservatism, has greatly reduced

the number of work opportunities available to Muḥammad ‘Alī Street entertainers – particularly dancers.

In light of the decline of Muḥammad ‘Alī Street, I have been endeavoring to collect oral history from some of the remaining Muḥammad ‘Alī Street entertainers. One of my primary informants is Sayyid Ḥankish of the Ḥankish musical dynasty (Figure 3). Mr. Ḥankish is a well-respected accordion player (following in the footsteps of his father, Al-Rayyis Ḥankish). His brothers Ramaḍān and Riḍā are noted percussionists, as was his late brother Khamīs. Sayyid Ḥankish provided invaluable assistance to Karin Van Nieuwkerk as she conducted her seminal research on Egyptian singers and dancers in the 1980s. Much of the following information is derived from or supplemented by several interviews that I conducted with Mr. Ḥankish in 2013 (January 8) and in 2014 (August 25, August 30, September 1) at the Ḥankish music store on Muḥammad ‘Alī Street.

In my 2013 and 2014 interviews, I was particularly interested in recovering and recording Sayyid Ḥankish’s recollections regarding two of Muḥammad ‘Alī Street’s most famous dancers, Zūbah al-Klūbātīyah and Nazlah al-‘Ādil. As a historian of *raqṣ sharqī* (the dance form popularly known as “belly dance”) and related dances, I have a special interest in these dancers for two reasons. First, both women either trained or influenced other dancers who went on to be prominent belly dance stars in the latter half of the twentieth century. Second, both dancers were renowned for their *raqṣat al-sham‘adān*, or candelabrum dance. In fact, Zūbah is sometimes mentioned in belly dance circles as the possible originator of this dance (see, for example, Dinicu 1996). In *raqṣat al-sham‘adān*, the performer wears a specially crafted candelabrum – the *sham‘adān* – balanced on her head. She shows off her skill and dexterity by performing feats such as descending to the floor and playing *ṣājāt* (finger cymbals) while balancing the *sham‘adān*.

Of these two entertainers, Nazlah al-‘Ādil is the better-documented. She appeared in at least one Egyptian film (*Qaṣr al-Shūq*, 1966), and she was interviewed for a German documentary (*Die Königin der Mohammed-Ali-Strasse*, 1991). Renowned Egyptian dance researcher Aisha Ali met and studied with her in 1971 (Aisha Ali, personal communication, October 2014), and Nazlah is mentioned briefly in Aisha Ali’s documentary, *Dances of Egypt* (2006). Nazlah was well-known for performing the gymnastic feat of lowering into the splits and then pulling one foot up to her ear and tapping the beat – an act currently associated exclusively with Muḥammad ‘Alī Street style *raqṣat al-sham‘adān*. Nādīyah Ḥamdī, a Muḥammad ‘Alī Street dancer who went on to worldwide fame, also performed this act during her *raqṣat al-sham‘adān*, which she learned from her maternal grandmother and great aunt (Dinicu 1996). According to Dinicu (1996), Nādīyah’s grandmother and great aunt learned *raqṣat al-sham‘adān* from Zūbah al-Klūbātīyah and Shafīqah al-Qibṭīyah, and Nazlah al-‘Ādil also learned from Zūbah. This would seem to suggest that Zūbah and Shafīqah were contemporaries; however, my research indicates otherwise (see below).

As an occasional member of Nazlah’s orchestra in his younger years, Sayyid Ḥankish was able to share several interesting details about the format of her typical show. According to his recollection, Nazlah opened her show with a *majansī*<sup>1</sup> – a piece of music composed specifically for a *raqṣ sharqī* performance. She performed her opening number in a *badlah* – the standard belly dance costume consisting of a bra, a belt, and a skirt (though it is possible that her navel was covered by mesh or tulle). After her opening number, Nazlah changed from a *badlah* to a *malas* – a *fallāḥīn*-style dress – to perform *raqṣat al-sham’adān*. Presumably, the dresses worn by Nazlah during her performances in *Die Königin der Mohammed-Ali-Strasse* were similar to the *malas* of Mr. Ḥankish’s recollection. Following the *raqṣat al-sham’adān*, Nazlah changed back into a *badlah* to perform to a second *majansī*.

Interestingly, Mr. Ḥankish stressed that Nazlah performed the same style of movement in both the *raqṣ sharqī* and *raqṣat al-sham’adān* segments of her show. The *fashkhah* – or splits – was not reserved for the *sham’adān* portion of Nazlah’s performance. This is corroborated by Nazlah’s appearance in the 1966 film *Qaṣr al-Shūq*, as well as by one of her dances in *Die Königin der Mohammed-Ali-Strasse*, in which she performs this exact feat, minus the *sham’adān*.

In contrast to Nazlah al-‘Ādil, Zūbah al-Klūbātīyah has remained somewhat of a mystery, although her name is frequently invoked by dancers around the world in reference to the history of *raqṣat al-sham’adān*. It is strange that her life remains shrouded in myth and hearsay, despite the availability of individuals such as Mr. Ḥankish who have direct connections to her family.

It is commonly stated by Egyptians and non-Egyptians alike that Zūbah earned the moniker “al-Klūbātīyah” because she balanced a glass lamp, known as a *klūb* (possibly derived from the English word *globe*), on her head. Some go a step further and suggest that Zūbah created *raqṣat al-sham’adān* as an elaboration on her *klūb* balancing act. According to my January 2013 interview with Sayyid Ḥankish, “al-Klūbātīyah” derives not from a *klūb* balancing act, but from a more mundane source – Zūbah’s family were sellers of these lamps, so she adopted the nickname “al-Klūbātīyah” based on her family’s trade. I am continuing to seek independent verification of this alternate explanation of “al-Klūbātīyah.” Nevertheless, this information raises doubt about the *klūb* balancing act narrative, and I would encourage individuals to avoid accepting either “al-Klūbātīyah” explanation as fact until additional evidence comes to light.

Regarding Zūbah al-Klūbātīyah and *raqṣat al-sham’adān*, although it is widely agreed among Muḥammad ‘Alī Street entertainers that Zūbah was an expert performer of this dance style and trained other performers, it is chronologically implausible that she could have had anything to do with its invention. *Raqṣat al-sham’adān* has been performed

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<sup>1</sup> It is probable that the term *majansī* is an Arabicized version of a non-Arabic word or phrase. However, the etymology of the term has yet to be firmly established. Some possible sources include the French *mise-en-scène* (literally, “placing on stage”) and the French *émergence*. I have transcribed the word based on how I have heard it pronounced by several Egyptian Arabic speakers.

by Egyptian dancers since at least the 1890s (Figure 4). Shafīqah al-Qibṭīyah, another dancer who is closely associated with this dance style, was in her heyday at the turn of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries (Ward 2013). Both Zūbah and Nazlah al-‘Ādil, though not precisely contemporaries, lived well into the second half of the twentieth century, though Zūbah was the older of the two. In a 2009 interview, Egyptian journalist Yūsif al-Sharīf reminisced about meeting Zūbah in 1960, although he stated that she had already retired from performance by that time (Al-Ḥūfī 2009). Both the 2009 interview and a 2011 article in *Al-Ahrām* newspaper suggest that Zūbah al-Klūbātīyah was contemporary with the famous Egyptian comedian Maḥmūd Shakūkū, which would mean that her heyday was in the 1940s and 1950s.<sup>2</sup> This would preclude the possibility that Zūbah was the inventor of *raqṣat al-sham‘adān* in the 1890s, or that she was a competitor with Shafīqah al-Qibṭīyah. However, it is conceivable that a very young Zūbah al-Klūbātīyah could have seen or studied with Shafīqah al-Qibṭīyah in the latter’s declining years.

Zūbah al-Klūbātīyah and Nazlah al-‘Ādil shared a family connection through marriage. According to my 2014 interviews with Sayyid Ḥankish, Zūbah al-Klūbātīyah married three times. Each marriage was to a musician: first, Najīb al-Salaḥdār (piano); second, Aḥmad ‘Alī (*qānūn*); and third, ‘Abd al-Mun‘im al-Bīrī (accordion). Nazlah al-‘Ādil was married to Sayyid al-Bīrī, an *ūd* player and the brother of Zūbah’s third husband. A daughter of Nazlah and Sayyid is currently employed at the Balloon Theater in Cairo (unfortunately she was not willing to be interviewed about her mother).

Sayyid Ḥankish’s own family was closely connected to Zūbah’s. Aḥmad ‘Alī, Zūbah’s second husband, was the father of Mr. Ḥankish’s brother-in-law (his sister’s husband). Mr. Ḥankish’s sister and her husband resided in the same building as Zūbah.

Sayyid Ḥankish stressed that Zūbah al-Klūbātīyah had a reputation for generosity. According to Mr. Ḥankish, Zūbah created a shelter for the poor in her own building on Muḥammad ‘Alī Street. Also, although Zūbah had no children of her own, she took in a homeless girl and adopted her as a daughter. In various interviews, the famous Egyptian belly dancer Lucy has stated that her mother was raised by Zūbah al-Klūbātīyah. Was Lucy’s mother the same homeless girl mentioned by Sayyid Ḥankish? I failed to ask Mr. Ḥankish this question. However, I recovered some circumstantial evidence from my recordings. According to Mr. Ḥankish, Lucy’s mother was named Na‘īmah al-Iskandarānīyah (Na‘īmah “of Alexandria”). The homeless girl adopted by Zūbah married a *fallāḥ* man from the town of Kafr al-Dawwār, near Alexandria.

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<sup>2</sup> A widely circulated photograph of a dancer purported to be Zūbah al-Klūbātīyah seems to support the idea that Zūbah’s career peaked in the mid-twentieth century. I am unable to reproduce the photograph here because I am uncertain of the copyright holder. The photograph shows a dancer performing *raqṣat al-sham‘adān* to the accompaniment of several musicians. The dancer appears to be in her late 40s or possibly early 50s, and the clothing and furniture styles suggest that the photograph was taken sometime in the early 1950s. Sayyid Ḥankish identified the *ṭablah* player as Mr. Faṭḥī Zūbah. This strongly suggests that the dancer in the photograph is, in fact, Zūbah al-Klūbātīyah, as it is commonplace in Egypt for an employee to adopt his or her employer’s name as a surname. For example, one of my other Egyptian informants, Khālīd Maṣṣūr, is also commonly known as Khālīd Ghuzlān, after his first employer.

The information presented above reveals that there is still a great deal more to be learned regarding the history of Muḥammad ‘Alī Street and the legendary musicians and dancers who built their careers there. Moreover, this information demonstrates that the remaining Muḥammad ‘Alī Street entertainers still have much to share regarding this famous street, if only researchers would take the time to listen and record this legacy. As the older generation passes on and the music and dance scene continues to change in Egypt, it is more important than ever to engage in this work.

### Acknowledgments

I owe a huge debt of gratitude to Sayyid Ḥankish, who generously shared his valuable recollections and answered my many questions with great patience and unfailing kindness.

I am also extremely thankful to Khālid Maṣṣūr and his son Bijād, who tirelessly assisted me with translation during my interviews with Mr. Ḥankish.

### Notes on Transcription

In general, I followed the ALA-LC (American Library Association and Library of Congress) system when transcribing Arabic terms, including the names of individuals and places. I used the anglicized spellings of well-known place names such as Alexandria and Cairo.

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## Figures

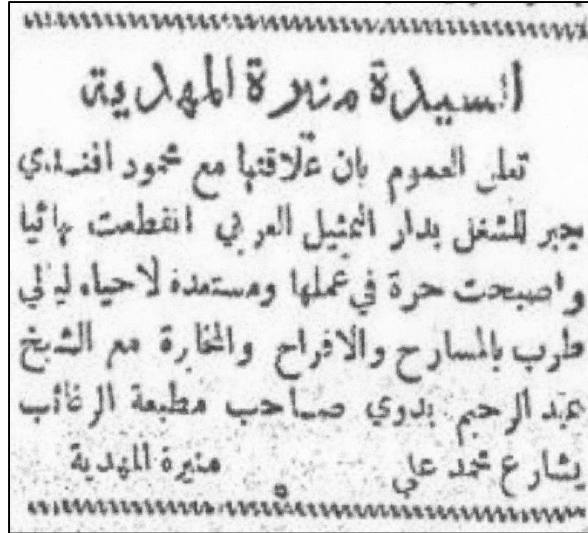


Figure 1. In this July 24, 1924 advertisement from the Egyptian daily newspaper *Al-Ahrām*, famous singer Munīrah al-Mahdiyyah announces that she is partnering with a new impresario, Shaykh ‘Abd al-Raḥman Badawī, based on Muḥammad ‘Alī Street.

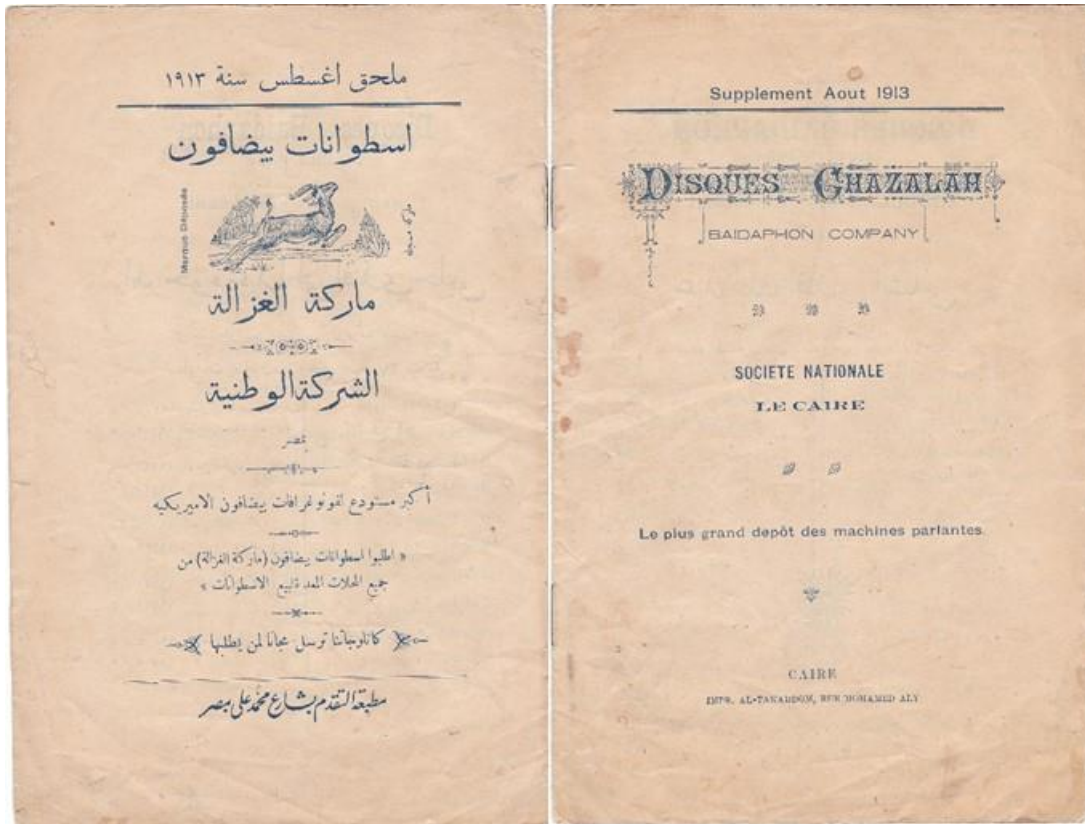


Figure 2. This catalogue of gramophone recordings by Egyptian singers was published for the Baidaphon Company by the Imprimerie Al-Takaddom (Al-Taquadum Press) on Muḥammad 'Alī Street in August 1913. From the author's personal collection.





Figure 3. This photo of the author with Sayyid H̄ankish was taken on August 30, 2014 in front of the H̄ankish music store on Muḥammad ‘Alī Street.

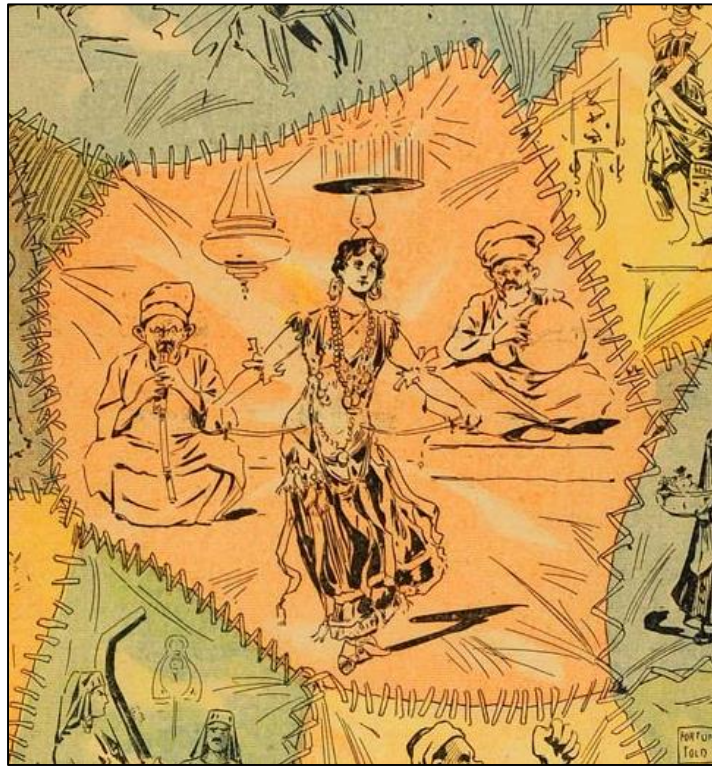


Figure 4. This is a detail from a Charles Saalburg illustration that appeared in an 1893 issue of Chicago's *The Inter Ocean* newspaper. The illustration depicts various scenes from the Midway Plaisance of the Columbian Exposition that was taking place that year in Chicago. At the center, detailed here, is a depiction of one of the Egyptian dancers who performed at the Exposition. It is unclear whether she is balancing an actual *sham'adān* or a tray of candles on top of a vase. Nevertheless, this illustration indicates that the precedent for something resembling *raqṣat al-sham'adān* was established as early as 1893. Photo courtesy of Cynthia Thornbury.