

On the Hunt for the elusive ghawazee

by Johara



Johara

My hunt began with a request to teach Ghawazee style dance at the Fire in the Belly Festival in October, 2015. What began as information-gathering for a two-hour workshop metamorphosed into eighteen months of hunting for 'the truth' about Egyptian Ghawazee.

Why was it so difficult? Isn't there plenty of information? That, in a nutshell, is the problem. There is so much information, regurgitated from one website to another; how to discern fact from fiction? How to distil accurate information?

Another problem is the unreliability of sources. Sources may repeat hearsay or say what they think a researcher wants to hear. Was the source influenced by previous researchers? Did the source embellish the information to seem more important or interesting?

From this quest, I have learnt to question everything, check and double check sources and to seek verification of information from more than one source. I have garnered some insight and a greater appreciation of Egyptian culture and how they view dance and its practitioners. This article is a brief summary of what I have discovered to date.

Firstly, pronunciation of the word Ghawazee is *Gha-WAA-zee*, with the *gha* sounded deep in the base of the throat; muscles tightened and constricted, an almost guttural sound with a rolling French R. The *Gha* is actually the Arabic letter *Ghayn*, a very difficult sound for non-Arabic speakers to articulate, hence our tendency to Westernise the term as *Gah-waas-zee*.

The term Ghawazee (pl) generally denotes a professional group or class of paid public entertainers; Ghaziyah is the singular form. There is a long history of dance and music within the families and these arts are passed from one generation to the next. The men provide musical accompaniment and the women sing and dance.

The Ghawazee were once found throughout Egypt; they are now mainly in Upper Egypt, around Qena, Luxor, Sohag and Esna, and some have settled in the Delta region, around Alexandria and Sonbat. Each group has its own distinct costuming and individual style of dancing. Some movements are consistent but differ in their execution and embellishment.

Ghawazee performed at religious festivals or *moulids*, at parties and at village weddings to entertain the Egyptian Fellahin (peasants). Dancers, singers, musicians, tinkers, labourers and metalworkers were not respectable in Egyptian society. Recent religious and social conservatism within Egypt has led to a further decline in opportunities for Ghawazee to perform and make a living. Many now teach foreign dancers and perform for tourists, which lowers their esteem even further in the eyes of Egyptians.

Who are the Ghawazee?

There is disagreement on exactly what or who are Ghawazee; does the term define a tribe of people, a particular dance form, the dancers or the profession? Each source appears to have its own assumed definition and may use more than one definition at the same time.

The information garnered from the writings and diaries of travellers in the 1700s, 1800s and 1900s painted a romanticised and mystical picture of Egypt, its dancing girls and the Middle East in general. These visitors interpreted a culture vastly different from European culture of the time. While their observations and writings have been helpful in providing information on the history of the Ghawazee, these travellers were not dance ethnologists. Their observations were also confused by the inter-changeable use of the terms Ghawazee, Awalim and Ghajar.

In interpreting this historical information, it is important to remember that most of these sources – historians, travellers, writers and diplomats in the 1800s – were men. Men would only be

permitted entrance to certain aspects of society in Arab countries, nor would they have seen women, or dancers, perform for the women and children of a household.

Their 'eyewitness accounts' were also influenced by the context of the performance. As European travellers arrived with unrealistic expectations, enterprising entrepreneurs commissioned performances and adapted costuming and settings to meet those expectations. According to sources such as Edward Lane and Gustave Flaubert, dancers at private men's parties wore the *shintiyan* and a *thobe* of semi-transparent material open at the front. Were these dancers actually Ghawazee or were they prostitutes, presented to entertain the foreign men?

The origins of the Ghawazee

There is a great deal of uncertainty as to the origins of the Ghawazee. The Ghawazee have an oral tradition, which is often embellished by the narrator. For example, Youseff Mazin, patriarch of the Mazin family, one of the best known families of Ghawazee performers, has given different versions of his family's origins in separate interviews. In one interview, he linked the Mazins to the Nawara Tribe. In a later interview, he mentioned connections back to famous Ottoman houses. Whether he embellished the information or had incorporated the questions and stories



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Ghawazee, Cairo by David Roberts. Victoria & Albert Museum



Old Postcard

from foreign dancers and researchers is unknown.

One hypothesis is that the Ghawazee are descended from Domani Gypsies. Migration of Gypsies from India through Pakistan, Afghanistan and the Middle East began around the 1100s. In Turkey, the Gypsies split into two groups; the Romani Gypsies pushed north into Europe and the Domani migrated south through the Levant and into North Africa. The Domani may have entered Egypt during the 1500s, possibly as camp followers of the Ottoman Turks.

Evidence to support this theory revolves around language, nomenclature and aural history. For example, the Mazin family self-identify as Nawari from the Nawara tribe. *Nawar* is a specific Gypsy subtype and the word, 'Nawari' is found throughout Egypt, Palestine and the Levant. As well as speaking Arabic, the Mazin family have their own distinct language, which is also spoken amongst Syrian Gypsies (known as *Nawar*). Researchers believe that the Mazin ancestors migrated down through the Levant and into Egypt.

Another Ghawazee family (from a different area in Egypt) has its own language and claims to be *Haleb*, an Arabic word for Aleppo, the largest city in Syria. This also suggests a possible migration through the Levant and into Egypt.

Although Ghawazee tribes have been in Egypt for centuries, families who have lived in Upper Egypt for five or six generations are still considered foreigners

by the Saiidi families. Nor do Egyptian Fellahin consider the Ghawazee to be Egyptian; they call them *Ghajar*, a *baladi* term for Gypsy.

From facial aspects and language differences, the Ghawazee appear to be a separate race to the Egyptians. The Ghawazee call themselves *Haleb*, *Nawar*, *Bahlawan* or even *Dom* (short for Domani) and consider the terms, Ghawazee and *Ghajar*, to be a slur.

Origins of the word

The terms Ghawazee (pl), Ghaziyah (F) and Ghazi (M) may be derived from the classical Arabic 'Ghazi', which means 'invader', 'raider' or 'Knights of the Faith of Islam'. The early Turks, who invaded and carved up the Byzantine Empire, called themselves 'Ghazi', or 'Son of Ghazi'. Their camp followers, including dancers and entertainers, were called 'Ghawazee'. These dancers and entertainers, who migrated with the Ottoman army as it pushed south through the Levant and into Egypt and Africa, may be the ancestors of today's Ghawazee.

These dancers may also have been called Ghawazee due to their custom of wearing Ottoman coins on their costumes and as jewellery. The thin coins were pierced and worn in their hair or sewn to the headdress of traditional female attire (a habit also adopted by the dancers of Egypt). This Ottoman currency was colloquially referred to as 'Ghazi' or 'Ghawazee' coins. In Syria, the term 'Ghawazee' still refers to these coins as well as to their modern counterparts.

Many online resources cite the phrase,

"Invaders of the heart" with reference to Ghawazee dancers. This phrase is a misquote from Suad Mazin. In the DVD, 'The Romany Trail' ⁽²⁾, Suad said, "They call us 'Ghazeyah', but we say, "We are invaders of the heart." She was reframing the word, 'Ghazeyah' into a positive by saying that "we" invade "their" hearts with our dancing and entertainment.

Awalim or Ghawazee?

Both Awalim and Ghawazee were singers and dancers, i.e. paid entertainers, the difference being their audience. Awalim performed for the elite of society, in private areas of the house, and were seen as more respectable than other entertainers. Ghawazee performed for the lower classes outside the home, in lower class situations like *moulids* and local weddings, and were looked down on.

The Muslim elite and public conservatives did not like the government collecting taxes from illicit occupations, nor the fact that these entertainers were performing for foreigners. In the 1830s, the Egyptian ruler, Mohammed Ali outlawed public entertainment. This ban exiled dancers, singers and prostitutes from Cairo and the surrounding cities. Some practitioners stayed to perform clandestinely, but many went to Upper Egypt. Only the high class Awalim (pl.) or Almeah (sing.) stayed to entertain society's elite.

In Upper Egypt, the locals had no money to hire the migrating entertainers, who had to perform in *moulids*, at weddings and for tourists. They also

turned to prostitution to earn money. The ban did not have the desired effect at all. Indeed, tourists interested in the famed dancing girls followed them south to Upper Egypt!

The ban blurred even further any distinction between the lower Awalim and the high end Ghawazee, based on performance quality. It forced the Awalim to perform for the urban poor in Cairo and other cities. Ghawazee performed for the lower classes, or Fellahin, in the Delta and Saiidi regions (Upper Egypt). Nowadays, these terms are considered old fashioned and Egyptians refer to a dancer as *Rakkas* or *Rakkasa*.

Costume

Each Ghawazee family has its own distinct costuming, which has evolved, as dictated by style, fashion and availability of fabrics.

In the mid-late 1800s, the Ghawazee danced in dresses very similar to those worn by middle class Egyptian women in private life. The fabric was the best they could afford and they tied scarves around their hips to accentuate hip movements. What was scandalous was that they wore 'indoor' (private) clothing 'outside' - without covering.

This costume, known as 'Ottoman style', consisted of a *yelek*, a tight fitting, floor-length long-sleeved vest, worn over a chemise, a wide-sleeved gauze blouse. Under the *yelek* was a pair of voluminous pantaloons tied around the hips, called a *shintiyan*. They also wore an elaborate headdress comprised of a *tarbush*, or red cap, a bejewelled turban and a convex

filigree gold disc worn on the cap (a *kurs*). The dancers wore ornaments, jewellery, their eyes made up with kohl and henna on their fingertips, palms, toes and feet.

The Ottoman style costume evolved in the mid-1800s. A shorter waist length *ánteree* replaced the *yelek*; some dancers wore an even smaller vest, a *sudayri*, which was sleeveless and barely covered the bust. In the 1860s, a distinctive ribbon belt was added to the costume. From the 1880s, long skirts replaced the *shintiyan* and dancers began to wear European style shoes and stockings.

Much of the available information on modern Ghawazee dance style and costuming comes from the Banat Mazin, or Mazin sisters. This family of professional dancers has been the most accessible of all the groups to researchers. Although wary of foreigners, the family have been interviewed and filmed. They have also been willing to teach their dance style to foreign dancers. Khariyyia Mazin, the youngest sister, is well into her sixties and still performs and teaches foreign dancers.

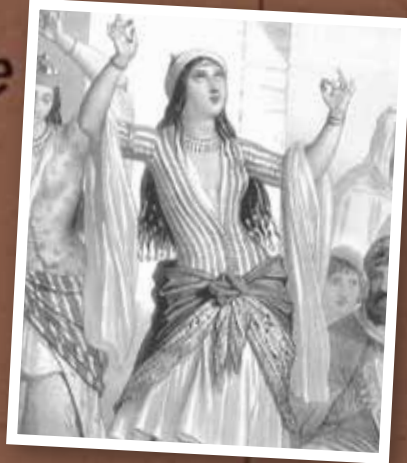
One costume from the 1950s to 1980s is known as the 'Pharonic Style'. Thought to have been invented by the Banat Mazin, this costume has distinct similarities to pictures and photographs of dresses worn by Ghawazee in the late 1800s. Some researchers believe that these similarities reflect a long history of performance entertainment within the Mazin family. The Mazin sisters may simply have modernised the costume by

adding 'glitz'.

The Pharonic costume comprised of a chemise (*kamisa*), a body stocking or tight blouse, sometimes a flimsy blouse with tight sleeves and, in the 1970s, a high-necked skivvy. Over this was a short, tight, low-cut version of an *ánteree*. An underskirt was worn under a bustle (*el azzama*) to emphasise hip motion. The overskirt was ankle length in the 1950-1960s, and knee length by the 1970-1980s. The overskirt was four metres of dense chiffon, georgette or net fabric with eight rows of bugle bead fringe, tipped with paillettes. It weighed up to thirty pounds (hence the *el azzama*) and was gathered by rope and tied at the hips. On top was a girdle or ribbon skirt with 3-5 broader streamers, covered in large paillettes, hanging at the front of the skirt to the hem. A kirdan, the Egyptian dowry (crescent moon) necklace, sat low over the bust, attached to the costume by ribbon with coins sewn to the edge. A *taj* (crown) decorated with sequins and beads was worn, pieces of jewellery and shoes with small heels or wedges.

Curiously, the Qena Ghawazee featured in the Egyptian section of the film 'Latcho Drom' ⁽³⁾, were asked by the Director to wear a *galabaya* with hip scarf instead of their own costumes, which were similar to the Banat Mazin's 'Pharonic' costume. Apparently, the Director believed that the *galabaya* would look more 'ethnic'. ⁽⁴⁾

This raises the question of how often something researchers take as truth was someone else's vision. Was the Qena



Prise d'Avennes Ghawazee 1848
Victoria and Albert Museum

dancers' costume a copy of Banat Mazin costumes, or their own version of the 1890s style?

From the mid-1970s, many Ghawazee, including the Banat Mazin, adopted the *Thobe Beledi*, a full length, stretchy, fitted galabaya covered with either fringes or paillettes.

Music

The musicians were usually men from the same tribe or family as the dancers. It can be difficult to distinguish Ghawazee music from Saiidi, as many of the same instruments are used, however, the Ghawazee usually play variations of the Fellahi or Maqsum rhythms.

Instruments included *rababa*, *tar* (a tambourine with no cymbals), *tabl baladi*, *mijwiz*, *mizmar* and *zummarah/zemr* (flute/pipe with two tubes, 25 – 40cm). In recent times, the *darbuka* has appeared.

Traditionally, the dancers performed to either a *mizmar* or a *rababa* band, dependant on budget (the former was cheaper), location (*mizmar*: outside, *rababa*: inside) and the audience (*mizmar*: tourists, *rababa*: locals). Nowadays, both instruments are used.

Performance

Ghawazee performances were once an important part of religious festivals (*moulids*), engagements and consummation parties (*Laylet el Dokhla*), but increased conservatism has limited performance opportunities. Ghawazee now primarily teach and perform for tourists.

For a performance such as a country wedding, high wooden stages were set up for the band and dancers, in either tents

or the open air. A wedding performance would typically be five to six hours in the evening, sometimes followed by a second performance the next morning at the bridal party's house.

The dancers conserved energy throughout the night by performing as a group, rotating the dancers to allow for rest breaks. The Banat Mazin usually performed with three dancers, due to any one of the sisters being pregnant or with young babies, rather than any significance to the number three. The Mazin sisters also sang popular songs and could improvise song selection at the request of the audience or guests.

The musicians and dancers communicated to control the momentum and cadence of the performance. The escalation of energy within the music to a mini-climax was followed by a break, e.g. into a *taksim*. This pattern was repeated throughout the performance. The dance could become more sedate following the *taksim* and the dancer could sit with the band or interact with the audience when she needed to take a break.

The performance was mostly improvised. In the group, a lead dancer cued the other dancers and some aspects of the performance may have been 'choreographed' in that some songs had movements that were expected with certain phrases.

Props

The Ghawazee used props and the *assaya* was quite common, both the straight men's and crooked female stick; often an audience member passed an *assaya* to the dancer. The stick was spun at the side of the body, balanced on the head or held tummy to tummy between two dancers.

In some performances labelled Ghawazee, the sticks are balanced shoulder to shoulder by a duet or trio; this is actually a modification by the Egyptian National Folkloric Troupe, El Kaomeyya because the tummy to tummy balance was considered too vulgar to be put on stage.

The Banat Mazin were famous for their *sagaat* playing, even while using *assaya*. The Ghawazee from Sonbat

played *sagaat* while dancing and balancing chairs or tables in their teeth.

Ghawazee dancers interacted with the musicians. A musician would hold a *rababa* above a dancer's head or in front of her body while she danced or a dancer bent backwards over the rim of the *tabl baladi*. A second dancer often formed a trio by going behind the *tabl* player, standing shoulder blade to shoulder blade with him while continuing to dance.

Some researchers believe that the *Shamadan* originated as a dance prop from the Sonbati Ghawazee. Others suggest it was either invented by a Mohammed Ali Street dancer or performed by a Sonbati Ghaziyah taught the style by local dancers while working on Mohammad Ali Street.

Dance Style

Along with differing costumes and props, each Ghawazee family had their own style of dance with their signature movements. Some movements appear fundamental to the Ghawazee style as a whole, however each group execute and embellish the movements in their own way.

Much of the existing performance footage is of the Banat Mazin, with limited examples of dancers from areas such as Sohag and Qena. From the available footage (and researchers' observations), the Mazin dancers appear to have a very different dance style from that of other Ghawazee. Due to limited examples, it is difficult to determine whether the differences derive from the Nawari tribe or are a construct of the Mazin family. It could be asked whether the style Western dancers learn from the Banat Mazin, and more specifically from Khariyya Mazin, is truly a Ghawazee style or simply the Mazin version?

Nagwa Fouad said that the Ghawazee are the purest exemplars of Egyptian dance. ⁽⁵⁾ Ghawazee dance is considered to contain the roots of Oriental dance in Egypt, without influences from theatre, television or the West. ⁽⁶⁾

To support this view, there are a number of clear similarities between Ghawazee and Oriental movements; one could be a precursor to the other. Ghawazee is a relaxed and earthy style

that has a low centre of gravity, with movements about the hips and a quiet torso. Ghawazee style has very little structured footwork or use of space on stage. It may not be as precise and clean as Oriental dance can be, however it is not messy, lazy or lewd. The knees are quite bent, the pelvis is pushed slightly forward and the torso leans slightly back. The ¾ shimmy – stationary or traveling - single hip lift, alternating hip lift and repeated foot stomp are fundamental movements (in most but not all styles). Figure 8s, circles, stationary shimmies, shoulder shimmies and very low abdominal undulations are present in a loose fashion, although not in every family.

It has been suggested that when Khariyya Mazin retires from teaching and performance, we will witness the death of Ghawazee as a dance style. Sadly, we may lose the Mazin style of Ghawazee. However, dancers who have learned

from Khariyya will continue to dance this style and to pass the knowledge on to their students, along with what can be learned from the available footage.

There are also other Ghawazee families and troupes working in Egypt, such as those from Qena. Little is known of these families and their styles, which opens other avenues for research to broaden our understanding of Ghawazee origins, history and dance style.

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Johara is an established performer and teacher within Sydney's Arabic, Turkish and Persian communities. She has studied with Sydney-based teachers Päivi Mielikäinen, Cynthia Tabone and Jrisi Jusakos and with many International teachers. She is a longstanding member of Jrisi's Hathor Dance Troupe and a founding member of Farrah, Sydney's only Egyptian Folkloric Dance troupe. Johara will present workshops on Ghawazee dance at WAMED Festival 2016 and Bahar Bayram Dance Camp, October, 2016. www.joharabellydancer.com

References:

An extensive reference list is available on our blog page with links to videos www.bellydanceoasis.com

it's massive and it's tribal



Ariellah by Yaniv Halfon



Jill Parker by Yaniv Halfon



Mira Betz by Yaniv Halfon

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