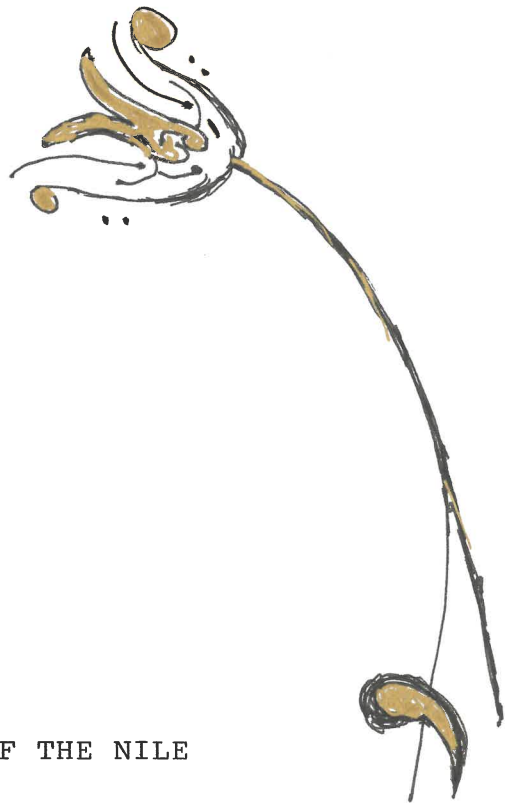


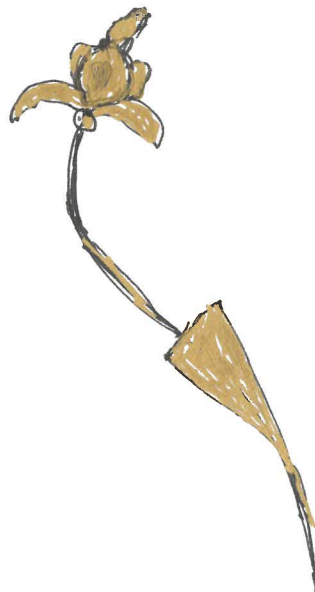
The
Serpent
of the
Nile



solis



THE SERPENT OF THE NILE

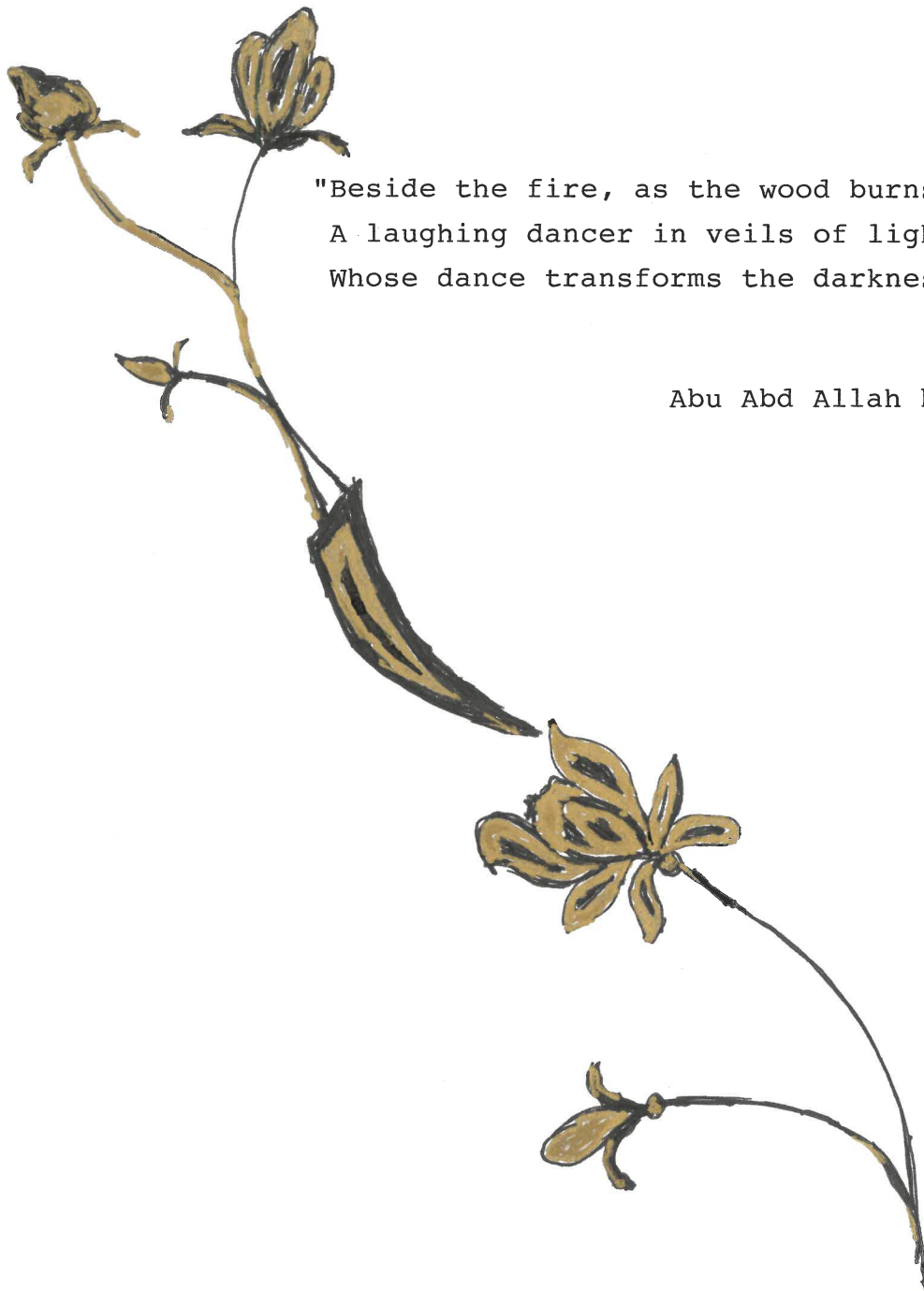


For Professor A. Obeid
Arabic Culture 2102
Submitted March 11, 1996
Barbara Solís



"Beside the fire, as the wood burns black,
A laughing dancer in veils of light,
Whose dance transforms the darkness to gold."

Abu Abd Allah ben Abi-l-Khisal

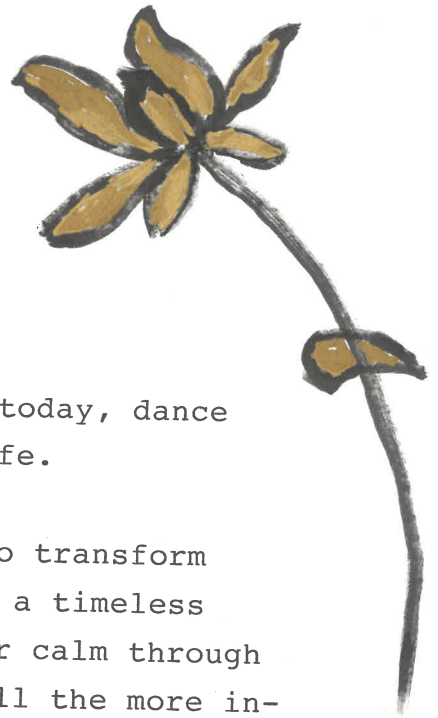


ARABIC DANCE

In most of the Arab-Islamic world today, dance still plays an important role in everyday life.

Dance has always had the ability to transform by its beauty, intoxicate the senses, create a timeless rapture, soothe the mind and provoke an inner calm through its hypnotic quality. ⁽ⁱ⁾ These points are all the more interesting because of the ambivalent attitude towards the dance and the close harmonization it has with the visual arts of Islam. ⁽ⁱⁱ⁾

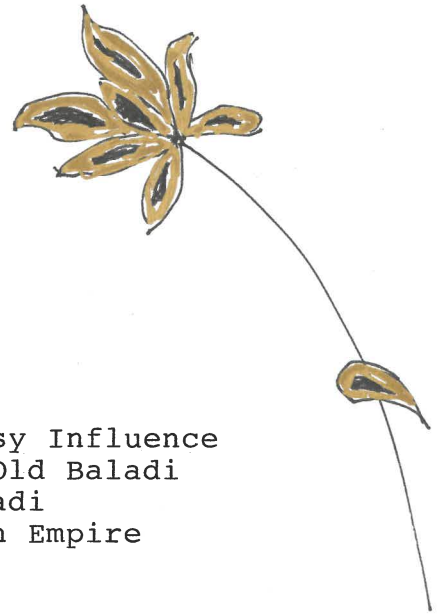
Arabic dance has a tradition that is still very much alive. The tradition has survived from the ancient world and continues to illuminate the modern sophisticated age. ⁽ⁱⁱⁱ⁾



G.



TABLE OF CONTENTS



A. ANCIENT ECHOES

1. The Ancient Fertility Dances
2. The Old Baladi
3. La danza serpiente - The Gypsy Influence
on the Old Baladi
4. The Arabesque in the Old Baladi
5. The Baladi During the Ottoman Empire

B. EXPORTATION OF THE BALADI TO THE WEST

1. The Danse du Ventre
2. The Baladi and Interpretive Dance
3. The Serpent of the Nile
4. The Dance of Salome

C. MODERN AND CONTEMPORARY BALADI

1. From Private to Professional Entertainment
The Cabaret
2. The Baladi Today
3. The Raks al-Sharqi
4. Conclusion





ANCIENT ECHOES



Ancient Fertility Dances were once, in the distant past, an important part of religious ritual. They touched upon natural occurrences which were most easily understood by the people such as the rising and setting of the sun, harvest cycles, birth and death. The Fertility Dances were performed during the religious rituals to keep order while offerings were made to satisfy the spirits. The dances were also used to convey the deeper things of life that could not be communicated or expressed through the medium of speech.

The outstanding element of the ancient fertility dance was that of sacrifice. Without human sacrifice, there could be no creation. The sacrificial rite always culminated with the body of a chosen one cut into pieces and thrown into a field in order to fertilize the earth.

The ancient rites connected with the fertility dances were relayed through singing and dancing accompanied by beating drums. After the sacrifice, the dance became more frenzied and involved sensuous pelvic movements intended to catch or entice a mate.

The dance movements were based on the things of nature such as swaying reeds, water and the wind. The main movements were those of pelvic rotation, swaying hips and rotation of the hips. The primitive Mortar Dance, for instance, combined the rotation of the hips and the jerking of the body

.../2



to imitate the motion of a pestle used to grind grain in a mortar, a strong vessel in which the food was placed and then pounded.¹ The twisting and writhing of the Willow Wand dance was a direct imitation of the willow trees. All the movements in the Fertility Dances were intended to stimulate the senses for the purposes of coupling and procreation.



Compare with primitive dances by the African tribes.



THE BALADI

One of the oldest dances in the Arabic-Islamic world to evolve from the ancient Fertility Dances was the traditional Egyptian dance known as the raks al-baladi. Danced exclusively by women as a solo dance, it traced its distant past through the principal expression of movement of the hips. Like the ancient fertility dances, the precise meaning of the baladi was also associated with ritual and ceremony since it too, expressed the great mysteries of life and death.

As with the ancient fertility dances, the early baladi was full of symbolism and connected to religious worship. A holy dance, it was a poem about the mystery and pain of motherhood. In its earliest form, it was considered to be a pure dance. The essential characteristic of the early baladi was that of hip rotation. The movement was so prominent that it greatly influenced dance in other parts of the then known world. Grecian dancers took the hip rotation of the baladi and turned it into a slow, sinuous hip movement while Spanish dancers from Cadiz, famed for their beauty and dancing ability, "sank to the floor with quivering thighs."² In Persia, the chief attribute of a great dancer was her agility to twirl and sway her hips.³



THE GYPSY BALADI


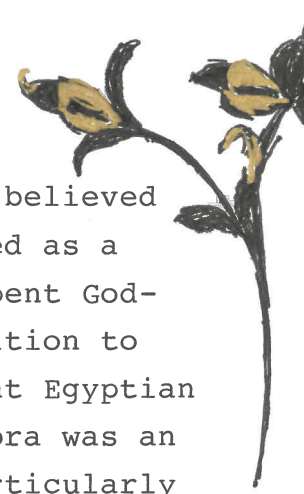
From its ritualistic representation of conception, suffering and joy with which a new Soul was brought into the world, the early baladi evolved towards a secular dance with the arrival of the first gypsy tribes from India to Arabia around the 5th century A.D. Known as ghawazee, these tribes settled in Egypt. Taking the local traditions of music and dance and combining them with their own gypsy traditions, the baladi was amplified and now used to heighten the senses and lower the inhibitions.⁴

The movements of the early baladi centered on isolation and control of the different parts of the body. The upper torso remained absolutely motionless, the face grave and impassive while the hips undulated in vigorous, ever accelerating patterns.⁵ The movements of the hips ranged from agitated violence to quivering without any signs of fatigue or perspiration in spite of the soaring temperatures of the Egyptian day or heat of the night. The arms were slowly raised or lowered or held out sideways from the body with the middle fingers and thumbs touching together lightly. On other occasions, the arms were held out in front of the dancer and gently rotated back and forth.

To the original movements of the early baladi, the gypsies added arm movements which were more sinuous in nature, side to side head movements, finger gestures and hand motions, all of which described the maneuvers of a cobra. Two other important innovations were the back bend and the figure eight hip movement called Snake Hips.

The cobra was greatly revered in both Egypt and India. The Egyptian cobra, up to nine feet in length, was considered to be the guardian of the Nile River who lived in



a great cave and controlled the waters. The cobra was believed to be the Serpent Goddess and was almost always depicted as a rearing serpent in the form of a figure eight.⁶ The Serpent Goddess was considered to have life-like qualities in addition to being powerful, poised and graceful. Since this ancient Egyptian goddess was also a protective nurturing symbol, the cobra was an important part of the primitive religions and myths particularly of a people who lived close to the soil.⁷

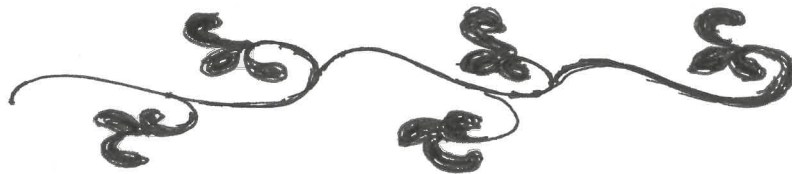
One of the imitated movements of the cobra mentioned in the gypsy form of the baladi was the backbend. In the baladi, a dancer leans back and at times, depending on her agility, she assumes a position that is almost parallel with the floor. When the cobra is annoyed, it leans back and spits potent venom as a form of protection. A movement which takes considerable control focuses on the abdominal and rib cage areas and involves the rippling of certain muscles in those areas. A cobra is the only snake to have ribs in its throat and upper body which distend, contract and are movable in an up and down motion similar to the movements in the dance. The beautiful Snake Arms movement of the baladi are easily identifiable with the undulating movements of a rearing cobra as it emerges from its basket to the strains of some ancient instrument.

With the invasion of Spain in the 8th century, the baladi crossed over to Cadiz. Arabic dance had a great impact in Spanish dance which was almost equal to that of the music. One of the most beautiful influences of Arabic dance upon Spanish dance was the arabesque. In Islamic art, the arabesque has been described as a flowing unbroken line with intertwining tendrils of vegetation. The plant forms were thought to have been derived from the vine whose leafy scrolls and branches spiral in and out, quiver and undulate in the wind.⁸ Insinuating hip movements and lascivious loins caused great enthusiasm amongst the conquering Arabs and made many of them forget their duties.






The early baladi was mostly accompanied by two instruments, the rebec and the darabukeh, a large goblet-shaped drum covered with fish skin. The darabukeh produced a deep sound which resonated in the lower part of the dancer's body thus placing the center of movement firmly in the dancer's hips. Performed on the flat of the feet or the balls of the feet, gave the baladi a heavy, grounded look.⁹ The sound of the darabukeh matched the poignancy which the dance exuded and beautifully emphasized the suffering, disappointment and love depicted in it. The gypsies introduced finger snaps for which they were famous and croatolas or castenets, small pear shaped pieces of wood that were clacked together to produce sound. Tinkling bracelets and anklets also provided excellent musical accompaniment. A dance of earthly sensuality, the early baladi differed from village to village.



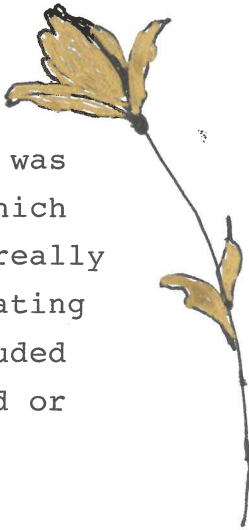
THE BALADI DURING THE REIGN OF THE OTTOMAN EMPIRE

During the reign of the Ottoman Empire, dancing of any kind became extremely dangerous. Baladi dancers were no exception and virtually lived by their wits. While they could perform in public squares, cafes and on the steps of hotels, they were not invited to dance in the harems. Dancers were strictly forbidden to fraternize with Napoleon's generals in Cairo since their sinuous movements were blamed for the unrest that resulted after they had visited. Once, for disobedience of this harsh ruling, 400 hundred dancers were decapitated and their headless bodies were thrown into the Nile. Some dancers were offered private protection but did not dare to leave their house for fear of the police and military who roamed the streets outside, waiting for the first sounds of the cymbals and tars that told them that the dancers were within.





By the 1860's the most popular dance in Arabia was the Egyptian baladi despite the secrecy and stealth in which it had to be danced. While the basic movements had not really changed, they continued to be soft, serpentine and undulating with focus on the abdominal muscles, the baladi now included mime and acrobatic feats such as balancing cups of liquid or swords on top of the head.¹⁰



The baladi costume of the 19th century consisted of an undergarment of transparent white muslin with long sleeves so that when the arms were lifted above the head, the sleeves fell back to reveal the elbows. The arms were adorned with gold and silver bracelets. Over the chemise was a long jacket or bolero style chaqueta made from satin. It fit snugly to reveal the contours of the upper body. Turkish style (this was an Ottoman influence) pantaloons gathered at the ankle were worn low on the hips. Sometimes one or more shawls were tied around the hips to emphasize their sensuous movements. This was another gypsy innovation and also influenced some Spanish dances in which the shawl is used in a similar way.¹¹

The hair was generally worn long. It was braided and intertwined with gold coins, silver balls or a single strand of pearls. As with the ancient baladi, this was the way a dancer had of keeping an eye on her wealth. Baladi dancers were oftentimes rewarded for their performances with jewels which they wore around their neck and gold coins which in addition to wearing them in their hair, they also sewed into their costumes. Kohl which had become popular during the time of Cleopatra was used on the eyes. A thin line was drawn on the inside of the eyes to accentuate them. The hands and feet were tinted with henna once more following a custom of Cleopatra. The dancer's breasts were visible beneath her chemise and adorned accordingly for private performances.



Breasts & hips
the symbol of
fertility. The most
of hands & feet are colored
to enhance their beauty

A baladi dancer in the 19th century was often forced to perform desnuda when requested to do so by foreigners. At such a time, she wore only her jewellery. She did not smile but turned her gaze away and refused to meet the eyes of her visitors. Full of regal gravity and disdain, she sought the distant, invisible desert.¹² Arabic gentlemen present, according to a strict code of moral ethics, were required to turn their backs and submit to a blindfold while the musicians also had to turn their backs before she would begin to dance.



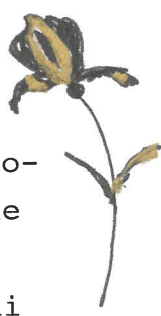


EXPORTATION OF THE BALADI TO THE WEST

THE DANSE DU VENTRE

When the spirit of the west touched this once holy dance, the baladi was tagged with the unholy name of the Danse du Ventre or belly dance. It was also given the label of the hoochie koochie after the Kooch dancers of India.¹³ An early American feminist, Julia Ward, described the baladi as "simply horrid"¹⁴ when she attended one of its earlier performances. While the baladi was, like all Arabic dance, a liberating experience for Middle Eastern women, it forced western women to confront their prejudices. Instead of rising to the challenges of the dance, most western women acquiesced to patriarchal values which concerned sensual expression and the female body.¹⁵

The form of the Danse du Ventre corresponded amazingly close to that of the Egyptian baladi despite efforts to promote it as a new dance. The uncensored version of the film titled "Fatima's Dance" which incidentally was the first film in the history of cinema to be censored, confirmed how little the form had really changed. It portrayed a woman who, from her dance technique, was from the Middle East. Her costume consisted of a striped skirt, puffed sleeve bodice, high-heeled shoes and a decorous little pillbox hat on top of her head. Her only jewellery was a necklace of dangling coins. Playing the cymbals as she turned, she displayed white stockings held up by decorated garters.

She began the dance vigorously shaking her hips. This was followed by a little jump at which time the opposite foot is crossed over. The step is reversed with the other foot and a shoulder shimmy alternating with an undulating kind of walk emphasizing the forward tilt of the hips commences with one hand held high above the head and the other behind the back.¹⁶



To draw a comparison then, between the Danse du Ventre and the old baladi, it will be seen that the new form opened similarly to the old baladi with the vigorous shaking of the hips. A jump and cross over of the foot replaced the throwing out of one leg in front of the other which the gypsies had introduced while the shoulder shimmy and undulating walk replaced the turning in a circle movement using one leg as a pivot. Cymbals replaced the old finger snaps and castenets. As with the baladi in the early 19th century, mime was an important part of the new dance and added to the danse du ventre were dramatic poses which were included solely to satisfy western fantasies.

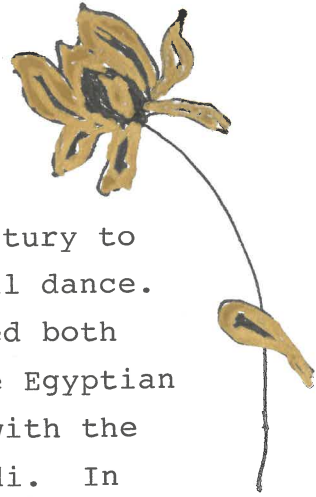
The Danse du Ventre in the early part of the 20th century became the featured attraction of every burlesque theatre. During one such convulsive performance, a dancer's shoulder strap broke. Since the dance had its critics and was policed in the same manner as the baladi was during Napoleon's days in Cairo, the dancer was of course, brought before the magistrate on the grounds of shameless dancing. When her accuser, a gentleman of older years, began, at the magistrate's request, to describe her sinful motions by wiggling and squirming and making all sorts of contortions himself, the courtroom roared with laughter and the case was dismissed.¹⁷



THE BALADI AND INTERPRETIVE DANCE

The Egyptian baladi also influenced interpretive dance. This was another new form which flourished primarily in Europe in the early 20th century and had been created by a group of uniquely inspired American women. The outstanding artist of the group was Ruth St. Denis. Her main inspirations were drawn from the antiquity and spirituality of the ancient civilizations. She expressed her ideas through tableaux. Her Egypta mounted in 1910 consisted of 5 scenes and St. Denis appeared in each one wearing the semi-transparent tunic, braided hair with beads and shells and heavily outlined eyes in the style of the old Egyptian baladi dancer.¹⁸ In place of the tawdry exhibitionism of the Danse du Ventre, St. Denis

returned the themes of her dances to the ancient celebration of ritualistic ceremony and goddess worship once so revered in the baladi.



THE SERPENT OF THE NILE

The third type of dance in the early 20th century to be influenced by the ancient raks al-baladi was Oriental dance. Known as The Serpent of the Nile, its movements imitated both the rhythmic flow of Islamic art and the motions of the Egyptian cobra. All straight lines in the dance were replaced with the sinuous, curved lines of the old gypsy influenced baladi. In Oriental dance, the hair worn long and loose and softly waved became part of the style of the dance because it could swirl with the dancer's movements.

Recalling the old baladi was the costume which also contributed to the fashion of dress for Oriental dance. The baladi style, with its flowing lines set dancers free for the serpentine movements of the new dance and from the rigid whale-boned scaffolding of the corset worn by western dancers of the period. Most beloved by the Oriental dancer was the veil. Mysterious and alluring, it became the important item among exotic interpreters of Oriental dance. The veil was very long, usually 45 meters in length and was always of two colours. It was wrapped around the dancer and as the dance unfolded so did the veil, uncoiling itself like a beautiful serpent, rising, floating, undulating, coiling again and finally reclining at the end of the dance in a heap on a Persian rug.¹⁹



THE DANCE OF SALOME

Expressing the ancient baladi beliefs in the powers of fertility was the intriguing manifestation of the Dance of Salome.



An obscure Biblical figure, Salome was rarely represented in the arts before the late 19th century. Originally, the Dance of Salome was an allegory on the death and rebirth of nature. Somehow the Biblical version made Salome into a dark, destructive force. Of all the writers, Flaubert alone, captured the true essence of Salome's dance. Echoes of the baladi can be heard as his Salome performs to flutes, finger cymbals and the funereal sound of pipes.

*resulted
cutting the
of Jean the
Baptist*



"With eyes half closed she twists her body backwards and forwards, making her belly rise and her breasts quiver while her face remains expressionless."²⁰



THE MODERN BALADI

FROM PRIVATE TO PROFESSIONAL ENTERTAINMENT

The baladi moved into cabarets and clubs in the early 1900's mainly to satisfy colonial tastes. The first Egyptian cabaret opened in 1926 in Cairo with a Syrian dancer named Badia Masabni and with this auspicious event, the baladi moved from private to professional entertainment. It was this great dancer who decided to return the baladi to its ancient form and to bring to it, new inspiration.

One of the many innovations the dancer from Syria introduced to broaden the scope of the ancient dance was to make more use of the arms and the upper torso. Movements such as the Snake Arms were combined with a basic walk or with the backbend of the gypsy baladi to describe the flowing patterns of the serpent. The Turkish arms movement involved arm and wrist movement while parallel arm circles and Butterfly hands added mystery and snake-like charm to the sensuous beauty of the Oriental dance.

Space, too, was explored. Previously, the baladi had been performed more or less in one spot. Movements such as the Egyptian Entry walk, Floating steps and simply walking in a circle brought a whole new dimension to the Serpent of the Nile. The use of the veil continued, what was new with the veil, was its manipulation. Also, the veil was no longer discarded since, traditionally, in the old baladi, to discard any part of one's costume during a dance was not considered proper etiquette.

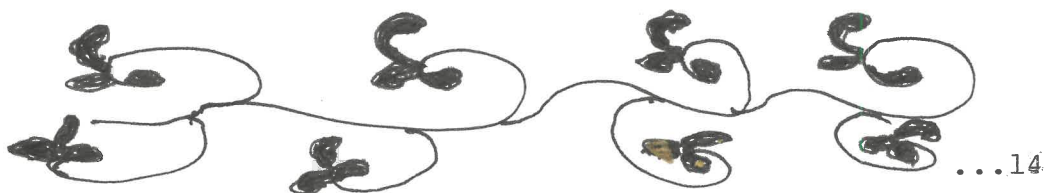
High heels was yet another newly inspired idea brought to the Oriental dance by the Syrian dancer. Baladi dancers had always performed barefoot or on occasion wore little slippers to protect their feet from the heat. The wearing of high heels pre-

sented the dance in a completely different light.

The waltz-like pirouette was the new step which was introduced into the ancient form of the baladi. Specifically choreographed, it changed the original baladi from earthiness and heaviness to subtlety. Once again, the movement imitated the glide of a serpent as it slithered its way across the ground.

Costuming underwent changes. Traditionally, where the old baladi dress had covered a dancer from head to foot, the baladi dress for the cabaret consisted of a bra type covering and a low slung, gauzy skirt with side slits. The forerunner to the cabaret uniform was made up of ornamented breastplates and a skirt that rested on the hips revealing the dancer's legs through its folds. It was not uncommon to have serpents embossed upon the breastplates, thus symbolizing the serpent in every way.²¹ Modern cabaret costuming gradually evolved towards heavily sequined, rhinestoned and fringed fashions and clearly took away from the dance since these additions created great distractions.

Unfortunately the progression of the baladi from private to cabaret entertainment eventually killed any real love of the dance due to the boredom and tedium of presenting the same routine night after night in order to please audiences. Integrity for the dance succumbed to commercialism. Fast, rhythmic passages had to replace the more lyrical ones for fear the audience would become bored and leave. While the ancient application of the primitive Fertility Rites dances could still be seen in the modern cabaret style, the individual elements were lost. Lovely, passionate moments became banal offers of intimacy and innuendo. The sensuous female image of ancient times which supported the renewal of life had been supplanted by that of a glamorous doll.²²

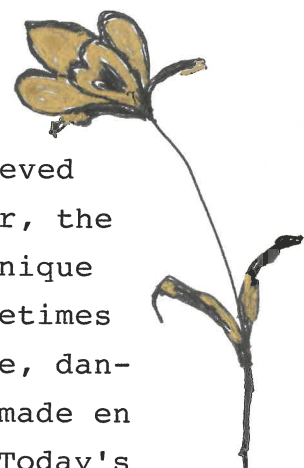




THE BALADI TODAY



The development of Arabic dance today, has achieved its greatest sophistication in solo work and in particular, the baladi. The modern baladi has, for example, evolved technique suitable to the confining conditions in which it must sometimes be performed and in which it began. Even on a large stage, dancers use very little space. Its intricate movements are made en place. The placement of the audience has been altered. Today's audience sits around a baladi dancer so that her movements and poses can be presented to different members of the audience in turn. Side and back poses are very much part of the dance patterns. Modern baladi is not choreographed. The patterns of the dance may be compared to those of an Oriental carpet. Each design is individual and exquisitely beautiful.²³ The dance follows the design. Each passage has its climax and its resolution. There is no one single climax. Sometimes there is no finale, the dancer carries the movement out with her as she exits, implying that there is no end to the pattern.



The unity of today's baladi is achieved through its recurrent patterns of movement but the order of the patterns together with the individual steps of the dancer will differ. Spontaneity and improvisation are the two key elements of modern baladi.



THE RAKS AL-SHARQI

Changes to the baladi has resulted in the emergence of a fresh, new style known as the raks al-sharqi. This hybrid has been influenced by elements of Persian, Indian and Turkish dance. Its western elements include balletic turns, soaring arm movements and entrances using a diaphonous veil. Its main feature is to open with a veil as this heightens the imagination and audience perception. The energy flow is also redirected from the



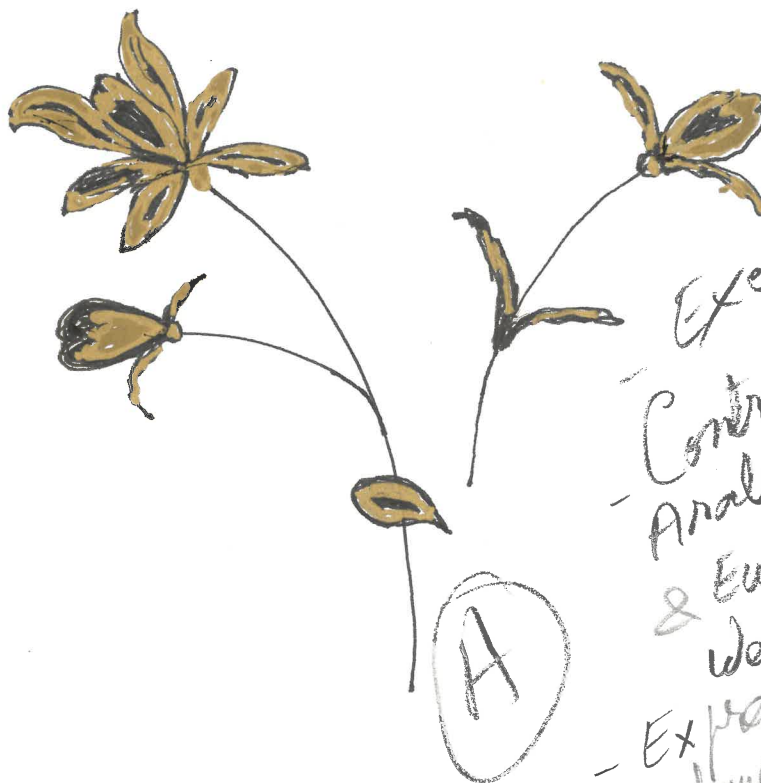
head to the upper torso. The tabla provides the basic structure for the music of the sharqi and sets the body in motion while the melody serves to weave its way around the basic beat.



CONCLUSION

Today, both the baladi and the sharqi allow exploration of the archetypes latent in all women; the earth mother, the coquette, the sensualist, the medium and the poetess. No one is disbarred from learning these dances. While the baladi stresses earthly qualities, the sharqi offers the fluidity of the ballet and the rhythmic power and intensity of the flamenco.²⁴

Both dances provide an opportunity to express the inner self and reassessment of one's own image in an atmosphere of support. The dances affirm one's sensuality, attractiveness and desirability no matter what the age or size. Most important, the baladi and the sharqi define a woman for who she is - herself.²⁵



Excellent work.
 - Contributions of the
 - Arabic dance to spa
 & European dances are
 well done.
 - Expressions of the dance
 & dancers are well out

Moorish Rebab



solis
2

Arabian Jaar



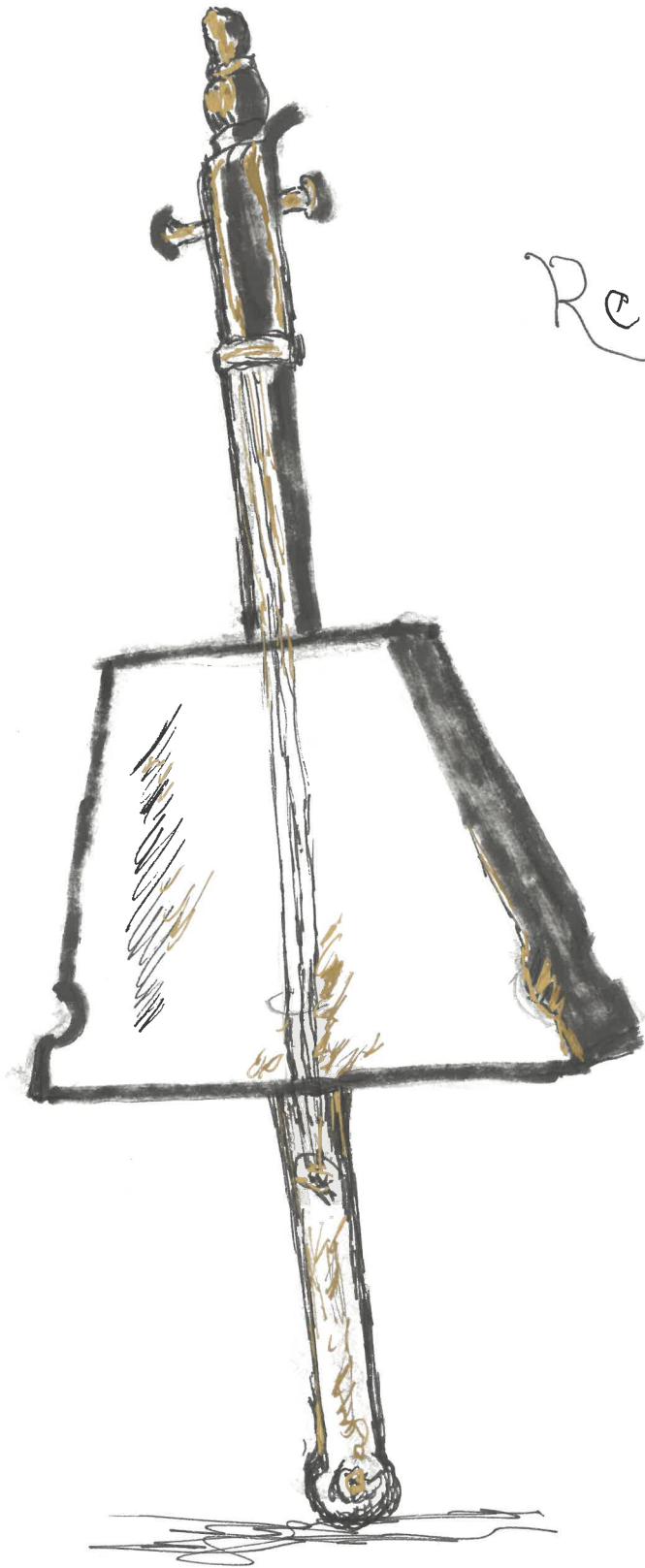
Solis
=

Derbouka

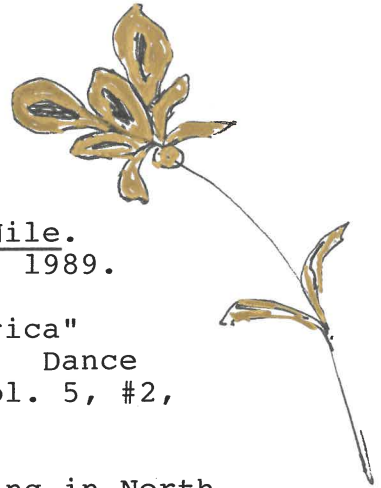


Eastern

Rebab



BIBLIOGRAFIA



- Buonaventura, Wendy. The Serpent of the Nile.
London: Saqi Books, 1989.
- Shawn, Ted. "Dancing in North Africa"
The Dance. New York: Dance
Publishing Corp., Vol. 5, #2,
1925.
- Young, Clemson R. "Arab Music and Dancing in North
Africa" The Dancing Times.
London: Publisher unknown,
1931.
- Story, Sommerville. "Arab Dancing Girls" The Dancing
Times. London: Publisher unknown,
1936.
- Saretta, Phyllis. "Arab Dancing Girls" Arabesque.
New York: Ibrahim Farrah, Inc.,
1977.
- Ribera, Julian. Music in Ancient Arabia and Spain.
New York: DaCapo Press, 1970.
- Farmer, Henry G. A History of Arabian Music.
London; Luzac & Co., 1929.
- Farmer, Henry G. The Music and Musical Instruments
of the Arab. British Virgin Islands:
Longwood Press, 1976.
- Burkhardt, Titus. The Art of Islam. London: World of
Islam Festival Publishing Co., 1976.
- Johnson, Sally B. The Cobra Goddess of Ancient Egypt.
London: Kegan Paul, 1990.



FOOT NOTES



ⁱ
Wendy Buonaventura,

The Serpent of the Nile. (London:
Saqi Books, 1989), p. 16.

ⁱⁱ
Ibid, page 16.

ⁱⁱⁱ
Ibid, page 202.

¹
Ibid, page 29.

²
Ibid, page 11.

³
Ibid, page 11.

⁴
Ibid, page 12.

⁵
Ibid, page 43.

⁶
Sally B. Johnson,

The Cobra Goddess of Ancient Egypt.
(London: Kegan Paul, 1990), p. 12.

⁷
Ibid, page 4.

⁸
Titus Burkhardt,

The Art of Islam. (London: World of
Islam Festival Publishing Co., 1976),
p. 56.

⁹
Wendy Buonaventura,

The Serpent of the Nile. (London:
Saqi Books, 1989), p. 190.

¹⁰
Ibid, page 66.

¹¹
Ibid, page 66.

¹²
Ibid, page 98.

¹³
Ibid, page 116.

¹⁴
Ibid, page 102.

¹⁵
Ibid, page 202.

¹⁶
Ibid, page 105.

¹⁷
Ibid, page 124.

¹⁸
Ibid, page 126.



¹⁹
Ibid, page 132.

²⁰
Ibid, page 139.

²¹
Ibid, page 138.

²²
Ibid, page 158.

²³
Ibid, page 188.

²⁴
Ibid, page 200.

²⁵
Ibid, page 201.

