Al-Haggala – The Dance of the Western Desert, Egypt

Field Research on Egyptian Folkloric Dance styles by Farida Fahmy,

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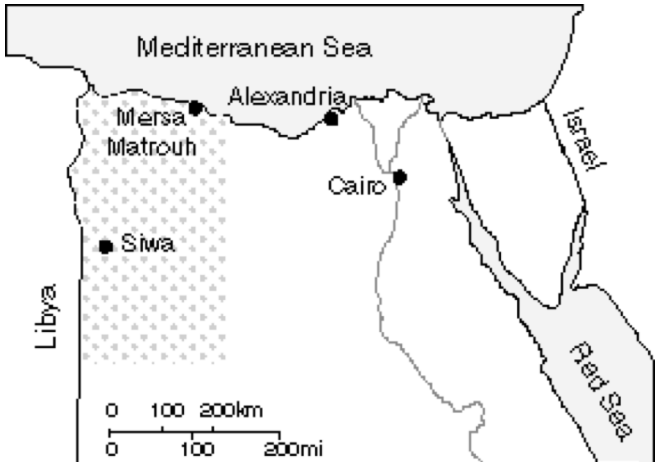

Today, dancers all over the world come across the word " Haggala. " While some know that it is the name given to a certain pelvic movement, very few know how it originated and became popular. This article is not an ethnological study of an indigenous dance tradition, but a description of my first-hand experience as a witness of a dance event that has remained so vivid in my memory. I can recall how exited I was because I knew at the time that I was experiencing a very special and important occurrence. It is not known now if this dance event is still practiced.

From the years 1965 to 1967, I was fortunate to accompany Mahmoud Reda on some of his many field research trips undertaken to the provinces of Egypt. In 1965, I accompanied him to the province of Matrouh on the Western Coast of Egypt, near the frontier with Libya. I witnessed an indigenous dance event that usually took place on various festive occasions.

On the evening of the event, al-Haggala (the name of the local professional female dancer) was traditionally summoned to participate in the dance with the male inhabitants of the community. She arrived in her ankle-length, colorful floral-designed Bedouin dress, revealing a tan-colored boot embroidered in multicolored designs. She was adorned with silver jewelry typical to the area, and her hair was plaited and piled on the crown of her head. Both her face and head were covered by a very thin, gauze-like veil.

As the event commenced, the men-folk of the community began to arrange themselves into small groups in semi-circular formations. They stood shoulder to shoulder, and began to sing in their local dialect and began to clap as they leaned forward and backwards in unison. Meanwhile, the Haggala circumvented her hips with a toga-like wrap - similar to what the men wore - that are unique to this area of Egypt. She arranged it in a way that allowed the folds and flounces to give extra volume to her hips.

She only began to dance when the clapping and singing gained momentum. Each formation of men competed with the other groups. The men dancing became more animated. Each group increased their competing by adding syncopation to the clapping, deep knee bends, forward inclinations and interspersing their singing with shouts of encouragements. Al Haggala started to dance, all the while retaining an aloof and demure and reserved demeanor. She alternated her attention from one group to the other, and advanced towards the group that showed the most zeal. This created a competitive fervor amongst the male participants. This interaction offered a dynamic that is unique to the dance. Al-Haggala's hip movement was basically a continuous pelvic oscillation. This oscillation was executed simultaneously as she stepped. After the dance was over, I was able to get a closer demonstration of al-Haggala's hip movement in her private quarters. Most indigenous dances are learned through imitation. After repeating the movement many times I was able to learn it. Later, after breaking down the movement, this type of oscillation was added to the dance vocabulary and was introduced to the class exercises of the Reda Troupe.

This dance event inspired Mahmoud Reda to choreograph his own theatrical version, "Al-Haggala", which was presented on stage in 1966. This pelvic oscillation has shown versatility. It can be sped up or slowed down. It can be for example, followed by undulating movements of the pelvis, or it can follow transit steps, turns etc. Dancers are encouraged to experiment with this oscillation and discover ways to blend it into their dance.

-Article, Farida Fahmy 2008- www.faridafahmy.com
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