

About Saiidi Dance & Music

by Nicola, updated February 2010

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This is intended as a supplement to content covered in Intermediate classes and Saiidi workshops held between 2005 and the present.

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The *Said* (also spelled *Saiid*) is a region of Egypt, located along the Nile banks from Cairo south to about Aswan. (South of the *Said* is a region known as *Nubia*.) The people of the *Said* have historically been farmers, known as *fellahin*, but now also include a rural working class as the region industrializes and changes.

The “gypsy” or Rom dancers (the female ones) of Egypt are known as *Ghawazee* (plural, singular is *ghaziyeh*). These women are a dying kind, with few acknowledged working professional dancers left. Khariyya Mazin, for example, is the last female dancer in the Mazin family line. The *Ghawazee* dancers, and their male musician relatives who play for them, are their own cultural subgroup, but while culturally distinct, the music and the rhythms are largely inseparable from the rest of the *Said*. Exceptions would be songs and ballad related to the history of their families and people. Gypsy dancers and musicians, in many areas of the world, have long mastered the art of fusion, borrowing and assimilating music and dance wherever they live. *Ghawazee* dance has a number of distinctive elements that are not discussed below. Families of this ancestry have traditionally been looked down on in Egypt by native Egyptians, and been pushed the margins of society. Traditional livelihoods include iron working and the raising of bulls and horses.

The specific rhythm called *Saiidi* is measured in 4/4 time. It is very earthy, bouncy, and tends to make people want to bop along with it. It is played like this:

dumtek dum dum tek
1 + 2 + 3 4

OR

dumtek dum dum dum tek
1 + 2 + 3 4

The second variation is often played at the beginning of a *Saiidi* piece or when transitioning from another rhythm within the same piece of music. The *Saiidi* rhythm is not always just for *Saiidi* dance and music. The onus is on the dancer to listen further to the instruments being played--the rhythm also appears in *baladi*, *fellahi*, *Bedouin*, *shaabi*, and *raks sharqi* dance.

Most *Saidi* music is characterised by a particular, distinctive sound, comprised of a small number of instruments. These instruments are very different than those used for classical *raks sharqi* or *raks baladi*.

Saidi and *Ghawazee* groups tend to be small, with 6-8 musicians, including: several drummers, one of whom plays the *tar* (a large frame drum played with a stick and the hand or a smaller stick), also *doumbek* and *tabla* or *darrabouka* (smaller goblet-shaped drums); perhaps *sagats* (finger cymbals), although all *Ghawazee* dancers use them; perhaps *reque* (tambourine); melodic instruments including the *mizmar* (a double reed, nasal-sounding oboe relative), *arghoul* (a deeper sounding reed instrument) , *nay* (wood or papyrus flute), and *rebab* (upright gourd and fret board violin relative, bowed or plucked).

These instruments take turns usually to play the main melody while the others play a drone (a single prolonged note in the mode/key, or *maqam*, that is being played), or sometimes repetitive phrases. Sometimes the musicians will play call-and-answer with the melody and with the drummers.

The drummers will usually start with one laying down the basic rhythm and tempo, who may play a little call-and-answer with the main musician.

When playing for dancers, this has the practical effect of calling the dancer(s) to the song, letting her/them know what is being played and at what tempo.

Rarely will you hear *oud*, guitar, violin, saxophone, accordion, brass horns, *qanun* or keyboard in traditional *Saidi* music, although there are now plenty of cross-over pop songs that mix elements of traditional Egyptian music.

Saidi dance is characterised by large, earthy, sometimes repetitive movements. Not all *Saidi dance* is based on *Saidi* rhythm. Sometimes, the other basic rhythms are used, such as *baladi*, *maqsum* , *fellahi*, and *ayoub*.

Typically hip movements are emphasized downward, backward, and outward. Dips in the knees and heel drops are added to diagonal figure 8 hips, large hip circles with a back emphasis, full camels, and travel steps such as step-hops and basic Egyptian.

Many movements are borrowed from the movements of horses, with pawing feet and proud, high chest bounces.

Shoulder shimmies and hip shimmies are larger, looser and slower than for *sharqi* dance. Most shimmies are 3/4. Most movements are performed flat-footed. Like *baladi*, it has a more relaxed, happy feel to it. Isolations are not performed strictly on 2 planes of movement (e.g. up and down, forward and back). This is the kind of dancing people do when they are getting

together for celebration and rejoicing.

What we regard as “traditional” *Saidi* dance is actually more conventional, based on a movement repertoire used by the 2 main folkloric troupes of Egypt, *Khom-eyya* and *Reda*. Throughout the 1960’s, especially, members of these groups toured Egypt, collecting steps from different regions and towns, interviewing local dancers, and adapting this information to create a theatre- or movie-worthy version of these folkstyles. As Sahra Saeeda Kent explains in her Journey Through Egypt coursework, these dances are like “fantasy” versions of folk dance--what local men and women fondly wished they wore and danced in their best vision of themselves. It is folkdance dressed up, fancied up and made into more of a storytelling device.

Saidi dance also includes cane dance, known as *raks al assaya*. Men dance with *tahtib*--a large, long, heavy bamboo pole, while women dance using a shorter, lighter, cane that often has a crook. Men combine hops, turns, twirls, tosses, low dips, and travel steps in their dance that is partly a martial art and partly a game--they attempt to strike each other’s staffs, shoulders, underarms, and forearms.

Stage versions have been stylized to remove much of the combat.

Women’s *assaya* dance is partly a parody and partly an homage to the men’s dance. It has also evolved into a form all its own. It includes more twirling and more use of the cane to pose and frame movements of the ribs, shoulders, hips, head and torso. Women’s dance has a more fun, playful feel, as it would be unfeminine to dance in a way that could be seen as dangerous. Women are not supposed to look like they could cause harm.

Men and women alike traditionally wore a long, loose tunic sometimes called a *gallebeya*. Men often wear pants underneath, a neck scarf, and a white or blue head covering. Often they are dressed in white or blue.

Women tend to wear brighter colours, a head scarf which may be decorated, and a hip scarf. Men and women often wear shoes, the men in black boots or slip-on shoes, and the women in ballet-type slippers or low-heeled, “Daisy Duck” shoes.

There are historical references in writings and paintings and photographs of *Saidi* dance done outside in the marketplaces (by professional dancers only), at outdoor wedding celebrations, in the streets, in camps, or on bare floors inside the home.

Men and women who do not work as professional dancers do not traditionally dance together. Women do not dance publicly unless they are working dancers.

Modern costuming has evolved into very elaborate, decorated, tight dresses for women that may have no sleeves, deep v-necks, cut-out sections, and heavy fringe. Canes, too, can be heavily embellished with sequins, beads, and metallic tape.

Video Recommendations:

Hadia's Instructional videos/DVDs, Volume 2 and 3, available from <www.hadia.com>; Dances of Egypt by **Aisha Ali**; portions of **Sahra Saeeda Kent's** Al Dounya and **Sahra Saeeda** shows; **Nourhan Sharif's** cane instructional video; **Best of Lucy** performance show.

Music Recommendations:

Hossam Ramzy's Best of Baladi and Saidi, Rhythms of the Nile; **Musicians of the Nile's** From Luxor to Isna or Charcoal Gypsies; Afrak Baladna Saidi; **Gypsies of the Nile's** Rahhal.