

The Artistic Impact of the Reda Troupe

by Farida Fahmy

Article #7 of 8

Saidi Dance?



*Al 'Assayah al Gadida The New Stick Dance
(Performed in the Roman Amphitheater in Jerash, Jordan)*

The aim of this article is simply to show how dancers worldwide have been made to believe that the term "Saidi dance" (which is the wrong transliteration by the way) was correct and sufficient in describing what they were being taught. The term is too general. Please look at the map for clarity, and to see exactly how vast the spectrum of the El Said region is, and which areas it includes.

UPPER EGYPT

Upper Egypt in Arabic is Qibli Masr (south of Egypt) or Sa'iyd Masr (Upper Egypt). It is also referred to as Assa'iyd.

The River Nile flows northwards to the Mediterranean Sea. The area that extends from Lake Nasser in the extreme south to the area between Dahshur and al-'yat just south of modern day Cairo is known as Assa'iyd. From there on northwards is the Delta region. The area from Aswan northwards to Asyut is referred to as Southern Upper Egypt. Northern Upper Egypt includes the governorates of al-Minya, al Fayyum, Bani Suweyf and Asiyut.



This vast area of Upper Egypt embraces inhabitants that vary in their cultural traditions and means of subsistence. There are the peasants, farmers and landowners who dwell in the Nile valley proper. There are also the Bedouin tribes who inhabit the peripheral desert of the governorates. Some of these tribes are nomadic in nature while others have settled in some of these areas. There are also gypsy tribes found in the outskirts of towns and cities, and of course, the Nubians with their unique social and dance traditions, in the far south. This article is only about the dwellers of the river Nile valley.

Egyptians are basically homogeneous in nature. For example, one can find al-Nubiyin (the Nubians), Assa'yadah (Upper Egyptians) and other communities residing in the Delta region and in large cities such as Cairo and Alexandria and visa versa.

The following is a brief account of the indigenous dance traditions that were sources of inspiration for a number of dances in the Reda Troupe repertoire.

Indigenous Dance Events

The following are dance events in which participants are members of a village, town or a community and are carried out on different celebratory occasions

Al -Tahteb and Al 'Assayah

Al-tahteb is a popular combative (sport-dance) that is most often followed by al-'asayah (the stick dance). On occasions, al-'assayah is practiced independently. Al-'asayah is a solo improvisational dance in which the participant uses his stick to emulate the attack and defense movements of al- tahteb. In a stylized fashion, each man displays his own individuality and talent in the way he manipulates his stick as he dances. The dancer skips or jumps, slows down or gathers momentum according to his spontaneous reaction to the tempo of the accompanying music and his own inspiration. The dancers on the whole retain graceful fluidity, as well as masculinity in their movements and posture.

These two dance events are an exclusively male activity. It is very common to see the men in Upper Egypt carrying sticks, as they go about their daily life. These sticks are sturdy and when held parallel to the body, usually are about shoulder high. These same sticks are used in both dance events. While these two events are indigenous to Upper Egypt, both events take place, to a lesser degree and lesser numbers of participants, by the Upper Egyptian communities who have settled in other part of the country. Men dancing with sticks can be found in other parts of Egypt when they take part in festivities such as weddings and other celebrations.

We attended these two dance events numerous times during our field trips to the provinces of Upper Egypt in 1965. We were struck with amazement at the huge number of participants at the events we witnessed in the temple of Karnack in Luxor, Suhag and Beni Sweyf, among others. It was in Suhag that Mahmoud Reda was most inspired and his theatrical representation of the al-'Assayah was named (al-Assayah from Suhag).

Al-Kafafa

Al-kaffafa, sometimes-called al-kaff (the palm) is another popular dance event that was researched and documented in 'Arab Mute', a village in the province of Asyut. The men participating in this dance depended greatly on their singing and clapping of hands, hence the name. We were again amazed at the large number of participants. There were about a hundred men in a linear formation with leaders interspersed within the line.

After the men began their dance, four women appeared from either side of the space in front of the line of men. They kept a slight distance from the men and each retained her personal space throughout the dance. They advanced towards the center in a stately manner moving their torsos to the front and back. Whenever they danced in place, they swung their hips, and a flat and heavy tap with the same foot accompanied each hip side thrust. All through the dance, the women had their arms raised above their heads. They either kept both hands in front of their eyes with the palms facing out, or wide apart with slightly bent elbows and clenched fists.

The women that participated in this event were elderly. They were the mothers or aunts in the community. Both movements of the men and women showed a calm fluidity as they kept to the tempo of the clapping and singing. Mahmoud Reda's choreography for the theater was named (Al-kaffafa from Asyut).

The characteristics of this dance event offered Mahmoud Reda to develop and enlarge upon them. He focused on the different qualities of movement and stressed the different unique styles of both the men and women. Because of his cultural sensibilities, he conformed to local traditions by maintaining the original degree of proximity between men and women and their relationship to one another.

Introduction Of The Female Element

From the earliest dances presented for the stage, female dancers were introduced into choreographies where men danced with sticks. All these dances were choreographed to the typical music, rhythm, and popular songs of Assa'iyd. Reda Troupe female dancers never danced with sticks. The way they danced remained within the social decorum and moral codes and was accepted by the Egyptians at large.

New Choreographies of Indigenous Dances

Mahmoud Reda continued to develop new approaches in his choreographies. He turned to dance material that offered further potentials for innovation and recreation. Among the new dances performed on stage in 1976 was the newly choreographed al-`Asayah. It was called al-`Asayah al-Gadidah (The new stick dance) and was danced to a new musical score and a new choreographic approach.

Mahmoud Reda's creative development as choreographer allowed him to be more liberal in the treatment of both the structural characteristics and movement content. More depth and scope was added to the spatial designs. The performers covered a large area of the stage, and moved in various formations. The action that took place developed into the projections of different individuals, and focused on group relationships at different points during the time span of the dance. Action and interaction occurred between individuals in some instances, and between groups in others. Solo parts were highlighted through their counter action to the subordinated movements of the group.

In this dance, male performers manipulated two sticks instead of one. This produced more variations and dynamics in their dance. The style of the female performers was at times contrasted, and juxtaposed to the earthbound steps and sustained swaying of sticks of the men. Their dance movements were some times contrasted and at other times blended with the rhythmic movements of the women.

The Term "Saidi?"

Since the earlier years of the Reda Troupe, Mahmoud Reda constantly said that his work was the result of his inspirations. He has always been very specific about his work and the information he gave. The vague and generalized term "Saidi" was never used in our repertoire To make double certain of what I am saying, I brought out from the store-room a large box that contained a great amount of programs, brochures and pamphlets that my mother had collected through the years. Looking through them not one dance was referred to as a "Saidi" dance.
