

Dance
AISHA ALI

Dances of the Ouled Naïl

During the 19th century, Algeria became familiar to the Western world through the paintings of the French Orientalists and, towards the end of the century, through photographs of the elaborately adorned dancers of the Ouled Naïl. A confederation of tribes, the Ouled Naïl originate from the high desert region and can be found living in towns such as Bou Saada, Biskra and Chellala.



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In the Middle East and North Africa it is generally assumed that a woman who dances professionally is of questionable reputation. The dancers of the Ouled Naïl, however, were born into a tribe where the arts of the entertainer were not only condoned, but also valued and their young girls approached this profession free of inhibitions. Their earnings in the form of gold and silver coins were made into necklaces and other jewellery that both ornamented their costumes and provided tangible evidence of wealth. Once a sufficient dowry had been amassed, they found no difficulty in finding a suitable marriage partner among their own people and raising a family.

The fame of the Ouled Naïl reached a high point during the time of the French occupation, when they attracted a large patronage from among the military personnel. After Algeria's independence, however, their good fortune was not to last as demands for their talents were once again limited to performances at weddings and festivals for a mainly local clientele.

Female from the Ouled Naïl tribe, *Frauen Des Morgenlandes*, Z. rich.

Today there are fewer young women entering into the profession, and although their costumes are still traditional, they have changed to a certain extent. The silk brocades, golden diadems and festoons of coins are rarely seen. Now layers of diaphanous dresses are worn, sometimes covered with a *palla*, and their turbans and headscarves are usually made of synthetic materials. Some dancers completely cover the face with a transparent veil, while others wear no veil at all. Dancers who also sing command a higher fee and their careers may continue to an advanced age.

The best known troupe of Ouled Naïl dancers and musicians is located at Bou Saada, where occasional tourists may still visit. Many performances begin with a procession led by the musicians. The exciting call of the *ghaita* (a folk oboe) and the women's high-pitched *zaghareet* (ululation) announce to all that there will be a performance, and the audience gathers. When they arrive at the stage area, the dancers and musicians sit together on a platform while the soloists and groups take their turns. The men of the tribe also perform, their repertoire including a rifle dance. When dancing, the men of the Ouled Naïl cover the lower part of their faces with a portion of their head wraps in the manner of the Tuaregs.

In Chellala, tribes gather to set up their tents at the times of festivals and holidays. During the rug festival, the Ouled Naïl perform informally for the buyers and sellers of carpets. Each tent shelters a different group of singers, dancers and musicians. Sometimes a man sits at the entrance to encourage passers-by to enter. Here the dancers are mostly women presenting the *danse du ventre*. As in the past, dance performances continue to be an occasion for displaying the attractions of the dancers to potential patrons. ♦

Some of the preceding material appears in Aisha Ali's contribution to the International Encyclopedia of Dance (Oxford University Press), published in 1997 as well as the booklet accompanying the ARAF (Associated Research Arabic Folklore) CD, Music of the Ouled Naïl.

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