

Tribal Odyssey: Evolution of an Art Form

By Miramar, ©2010

Tribal Odyssey is an outgrowth of American Tribal Style (ATS) belly dance. It was in the year 2000 when Kawakib phoned to ask me if I would be interested in teaching tribal style dancing to my students. She had created a new style of tribal dance and if I taught my students the same vocabulary of movements and staging then our students would be able to dance together. I had never even thought about learning or teaching tribal before, but the idea of having our students perform together was intriguing and, quite frankly, I was flattered that Kawakib, whom I had only recently met, had invited me to share this adventure with her. We brainstormed and came up with the unique name for our unique version of tribal dance: Tribal Odyssey.

I often consider that American tribal style dances such as Tribal Odyssey are recent forms of American folklore. The definition of folk dance, as recorded in the Webster dictionary, is “a dance that originated among, and has been transmitted through, the common people.” America has long been called a “melting pot” – and American tribal style dance is certainly a melting pot of dance styles: from many Middle Eastern countries of course, and also India and Central Asia, and contains various American elements as well. The idea of “follow the leader” comes from many dances such as the Conga line, Bunny Hop, Greek line dances, the English Contra, Square dancing, and of course, the Debke. The costuming elements are also a melting pot: cholis and bindis from India, jewelry from Afghanistan, conk shells – the ultimate symbol of the Goddess, pantaloons from Istanbul, flowers in the hair from the Polynesian Islands and North African facial tattoos.

It is not the first time in the long history of dance that folklore dances of one nation have evolved from the folklore of another. A case in point, the Morris Dances of England, practiced in the early 20th century, were described as “quaint” and had “the importance of being English,” reflecting a “romping, care-free spirit of Merry England,” said to be “several centuries old.” Morris dances were thought to be derived from Moorish dancing, of “Gipsy derivation.” Morris dancers had a tradition of decorating

themselves with tiny bells and colorful ribbons around their legs and arms, which, according to Troy and Margaret West Kinney, was very “Gipsy-esque.” (Kinney, p. 172) So here we have in the earliest 20th century England, a well-known English folk dance of Eastern origin - a parallel that we can draw to late 20th century American Tribal Style dancing.

Many credit Jamila Salimpour with creating the original tribal style dancing. She began teaching Middle Eastern dances in California in 1949 after having had a successful career in the circus as an elephant trainer and performer. In the late 1960s, she trained her students to dance in carnival type settings, performing authentic dances from various Middle Eastern countries including Morocco, Algeria, Egypt, Lebanon, and Turkey. She called her dance company Bal Anat, which translated as Dance of the Mother Goddess. Drawing on her past Ringling Brothers Circus background, her 40-member strong troupe was very entertaining with its colorful costuming and facial tattoos. Her students, who wanted to show their forms and athletic bodies, resisted very covered looks and a costuming developed that was part authentic and part not. Jamila described the costuming and the dancing as “half real and half hokum” (Djournahna, p. 20). Jamila and her students performed at the Renaissance Pleasure Faire which was an “arty event,” centered round a huge outdoor circus with a 16th century setting. Many of her students went on to teach their own forms of tribal dancing. Most historians of belly dancing agree that this was the beginning of tribal fusion style dances, even though Jamila never labeled what she did as tribal. She stated: “So, it wasn’t tribal style, it was more like an attempt to give the audience a thirty-minute education in the dances of the Middle East, cabaret style included!” (Djournahna, p. 20).

According to Kajira Djournahna, the next step in the evolution of tribal art forms began with Masha Archer, one of Jamila’s students. She didn’t try to be traditional or accurate in her presentation but rather combined many different elements to make an American belly dance using non-traditional music, costuming and dance steps. One of her students, Carolena Niriuccio, is the mother of the American Tribal Style belly dance that we know today. American Tribal Style (ATS), synchronized-group, improvisational belly dance, was developed by Carolena in the mid 1980’s in California. Carolena and her troupe, Fat Chance Belly Dance, formed in 1987, inspired tribal dancers all over the

United States and has since, spread all over the world. The ATS format employs both improvisation and choreography. It is Carolena who started using the idea of leading and following in her tribal format. Paulette Rees-Denis and Kathy Stahlman were both founding troupe members of Fat Chance Belly Dance and went on to develop their own [unique forms, often described as I.T.S. or Improvisational Tribal Style: Paulette Rees-Denis with Gypsy Caravan and Kathy Stahlman with Tribal Moon](#). Another student of Carolena's, [Kajira Djoumahna formed BlackSheepBellyDance](#) and also authored the well-known Tribal Bible.

ATF (American Tribal Fantasy) is another term used to describe tribal styles of dancing. Other dancers describe themselves as tribal but they are neither doing ATS, ITS or ATF. Instead they take on a “tribal persona” with similar costuming to ATS, ITS and ATF, but they are really doing their own unique creations. A good example of this is the gorgeous, undulating dance style of Rachel Brice. And, to make it all more confusing, many dancers call their staged version of authentic, Middle Eastern dances - tribal. Of course, this is nothing new to the field of Middle Eastern dance with our many different names to describe what we do. The 21st century has spawned even more versions of tribal: Goth Tribal, Urban Tribal, and even Burlesque Tribal. Recently I heard of something that through its description sounded like it should be called Trash Tribal – and not because of the dance movements, but rather because the dancers were wearing garbage bags as costumes!

Laurel Victoria Gray studied with Jamila Salimpour among other notable teachers and went on to form her own troupe, Sharazad, which performed a repertoire of dances, some authentic and some that she labeled California Tribal. Several of the movements that I contributed to Tribal Odyssey's format, I learned at Laurel's California Tribal Workshop. Kawabib took a dance workshop with Kajira, which sparked her interest in ATS, and so again and again, the dance comes full circle. A new version of tribal dance was born: Tribal Odyssey!

What makes Tribal Odyssey different from other tribal art forms? When Kawabib began creating this dance, she drew from her largely Egyptian dance training and therefore the movements, posture and arms and hands are more Egyptian-based. A

second major difference from other forms of tribal dancing is the demeanor; the expressions are mostly very joyful. Black is rarely used; the costuming is very colorful with lots of jewel-tone colors. Turbans work well out in California where the air can be chilly especially in San Francisco where FCBD members mostly perform. In Virginia, the humidity and the heat, contributed to our tossing our turbans and letting our hair flow.

I remember reading that Carolena had remarked that Fat Chance Belly Dance members could never do veil work because their big headpieces made it impossible; there was no flipping anything over the headdress. That is one problem we don't have since we wear our hair down; six beautiful veil moves make for an interesting option for center dancers.

In 2009, Kawakib developed eight skirt moves that make Tribal Odyssey even more interesting and different. They're inspired by the movements of Romani Gypsy and Spanish Flamenco dancing - flaring, twirling and fun! The moves can be sprinkled throughout a set or a whole dance can be devoted to just the skirt moves. When wearing pants without skirts, tucking the veil into the hip belt allows the veil to be utilized for "skirt dancing" instead.

Tribal dancing of this type is more accessible to the everyday bellydance student than Raks Sharki -- when one thinks of "cabaret" or Raks Sharki style dancing, the image that comes to mind is a slim, young woman who could be a model. Kawakib's performing group, PRISM, is a study of diversity, with age ranges from teen to senior, with a wide variety of body types. The combinations of our unique dance format, being based on "folk" type dance moves, are energetic to do, while at the same time they're feasible for the non-professional dance student to perform well. An inspiring example for older dancers is Kawakib herself who is again performing Tribal Odyssey with her group at full speed only six months after a Total Hip Replacement.

Often I design a set for my students where the staging is planned. In 2005, I came up with the "Skill Drill to Fulfill" for my most advanced students so that they would have a "quick-and-dirty" way to practice all the Tribal Odyssey moves, staging, finger cymbal patterns and veil work they had learned. For each song, there was at least one goal to satisfy. This three-song routine was something that we could perform at haflas

and shows. Although it was somewhat choreographed – each song had a plan for the staging – we knew that ultimately it would help our “completely improvisational skills” when we just turn on the music and dance without direction. In 2006, we performed the set at a recital and later shared and performed the drill with Kawakib’s students.

Kawakib prefers the “all improv all the time” approach with her students, knowing that they’ll eventually develop the awareness to be fully “in the moment”. They often discuss what they’d like to have happen during a performance set, but Kawakib feels that trying to remember too many plans ruins the group-mind experience, so she happily gives up “planned pizzazz” in favor of a dance created in the moment by the dancers themselves.

Even though we are dancing in an improvisational manner, we are definitely multi-tasking. I often tease my students telling them they will never go senile with all the brain-stimulation that occurs. Indeed, with all the multi-tasking that students do to perform Tribal Odyssey, each individual student’s involvement and dedication to this art form becomes very important. According to Kawakib:

Although dancing together as a tribe fosters comradery and socialization in an art form usually focused on the individual, group improvisation brings other benefits as well. Students become aware of the group as a functioning entity in itself, and realize not only their relationship within the group but also their responsibility to it – if it is to be successful.

(Kawakib and Miramar, p. 1)

Tribal Odyssey is very appealing to students for a variety of reasons. Barbara Hartman, one of my current students remarked: “The first time I saw Tribal Odyssey performed, I was mesmerized by the beauty and trance-like quality”. Rajni, a student of Kawakib’s, stated: I love the open, fluid nature of Tribal Odyssey. I have to say I didn't get it right away. Improvisation scared me until I let go of worrying about doing something ‘wrong’ and began to dance in the moment. Once I was able to confidently perform the combinations, I was also able to feel more connected to the music. I could relax and let the dance flow out of me without over-thinking it. Learning Tribal Odyssey has improved my

dancing because I also learned a variety of finger cymbal patterns and became comfortable with performing with them, I learned to recognize Middle Eastern rhythms, and I learned to connect with other dancers on stage.

During the past decade, Kawakib and I, have brought our students together to perform Tribal Odyssey at shows, dance recitals and outdoor events. In the beginning, little idiosyncrasies in our styles appeared like different dialects of the same language, such as additional hand flips, that we would ultimately work to make uniform. Recently, Kawakib and I plan to bring our students together several times a year several at Tribal Meets. We have several goals we hope to accomplish: to promote Tribal Odyssey and the concept of our students being able to dance together because they know the same dance vocabulary; to motivate students to be interested in performing together at workshop shows; to share music, costuming and make-up ideas; and help students advance to the next Tribal Odyssey level. Each Tribal Meet will be geared to the students who are attending, the content based on their input and dance skill needs. We will dance together, play Tribal Odyssey games, do drills that will help students perfect performance skills, work on expressions and tribal persona, and polish cues, technique and steps. Some Tribal Meets will have special activities like tassel-making or make-up instruction. We hope to make each Tribal Meet unique and fun!

One of the things that I really enjoy about Tribal Odyssey is being able to use a variety of music; new songs keep things fresh and interesting. Challenged with issues over music rights, Kawakib decided to make her own music for performance. In 2008, Kawakib produced her first music CD entitled Tribe O, which she describes as “rhythm-driven belly-funk with a space-goth edge.” My favorite tunes on this CD are Tailspin, which is bright and cheery, and Edge of Day, which is very uplifting. We tend to lean toward brighter sounding music than what most tribal dancers use, which I think of as sounding sort of dark. We have used Desert Knights songs: Lone Dove and the theme song, Desert Knights, by Adam Burke. Lately, I’ve tried using some songs that have a

Caribbean groove and another with a Balkan beat and my students really seem to be enjoying these songs.

Every couple of years Kawakib updates the Tribal Odyssey manual that contains an overview of Tribal Odyssey, all the formations, combinations, veil dancing, finger cymbals, costuming, detailed step descriptions, and more. This is a big help for our students as they have all the information they need in a concise approximate 31-page booklet.

Earlier this year we released our first Tribal Odyssey Level One Instructional DVD. The goal of the DVD was to supplement student's classroom instruction and encourage students to practice and perfect their movements. We are currently hard at work producing our second Tribal Odyssey DVD as well as finalizing details concerning Tribal Odyssey Certification.

Kawakib and I are anxious to share our knowledge and expertise to teach and help grow Tribal Odyssey. We hope to achieve this in a number of ways: by encouraging our students and existing dance teachers to study and teach Tribal Odyssey; by producing quality instructional videos to supplement classroom instruction; by providing a means for teachers to become certified in Tribal Odyssey; and teaching Tribal Odyssey at workshops.

Tribal Odyssey continues to evolve with plans for additions of candles and sword work. It has been a wonderful adventure and there's never a dull moment!

References

American Tribal Style Belly Dance, accessed November 15, 2010 from http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/American_Tribal_Style_Belly_Dance

Djournahna, Kajira. (2003). *The Tribal Bible, Exploring the Phenomenon That is American Tribal Style Bellydance*. Santa Rosa, CA: BlackSheep BellyDance.

Djournahna, Kajira. FatChanceBellyDance, American Tribal Style, Habibi, Vol 17, No.

3, pp. 20-23, pp. 36-37. Santa Barbara, CA.

Kinney, Troy and Margaret West. *The Dance*, Originally published in 1914 by the Frederick a. Stokes Company, USA

Kawakib & Miramar, *Tribal Odyssey: Improvisational Tribal Style Belly Dance*, 2002-2008, published by Kawakib in the USA.

Richards, Tazz. (2000). *The Belly Dance Book: Rediscovering the Oldest Dance*. Concord, CA: Backbeat Press.

About the Author (Miramar) and Kawakib

Both Kawakib and Miramar have been teaching Tribal Odyssey for approximately 10 years. Kawakib is nationally certified to teach Middle Eastern dances by the *National Association for Teacher Certification in Middle Eastern Dance* and is a recipient of "Best Kept Secret" 1999 National Award. Miramar has a Bachelor of Science degree in Business with a concentration in Marketing from Shepherd College and her Master's of Science degree in Arts Management from Shenandoah University. Miramar received the Research Excellence Award in 2005 for her Master's thesis on codes of conduct for Middle Eastern dancers. Both Kawakib and Miramar are published authors of numerous Middle Eastern dance articles.