

Wekalet El Ghouri Arts Center

History of the Area

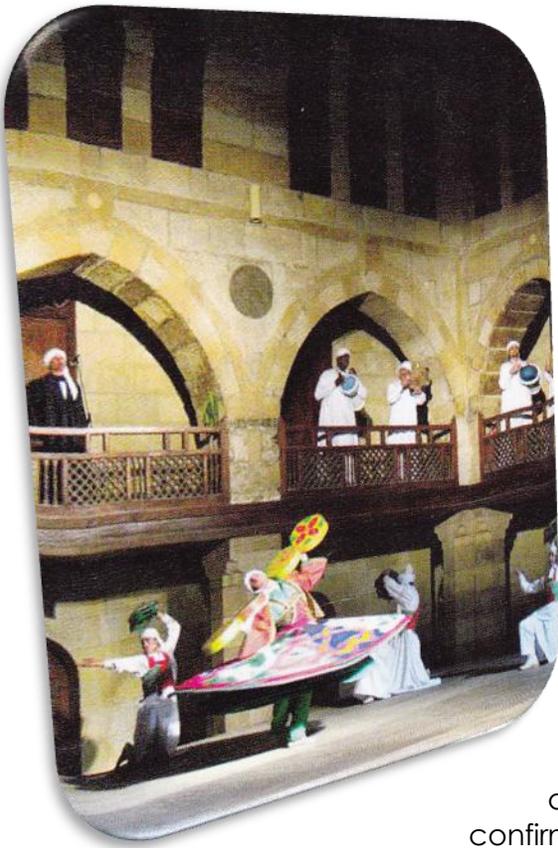
Al Azhar area houses three other cultural centers, all worth a visit. The Beit El Harrawy and Beit El Sehamy, each brings a variety of cultural activities and events to the area. Each center focuses on a specific area, such as children activities or an exhibition of new musical artists. We visited Al Ghouri Palace to watch Al Tannoura performance, and to interview Abdel Daym.

After arriving in the bustling area surrounding Khan El Khalili, we set about finding Wekalet El Ghouri. Asking around, we were directed down a street crowded with stalls on both sides, while we wondered how exactly we were going to find the center in this huge and crowded area. Finally, after reaching the end of the street, we asked another stranger for directions to the Wekalet. He confirmed we were looking for the Tannoura show, and led us back towards the main road (Ghouri Street). We entered an area filled with merchants selling copper and other handcrafts, and in the hub of this area we found El Ghouri center, easily recognizable by the beautiful architecture as well as the queues of people awaiting the beginning of the show.

The outside of the building is stunning, with intricate wood and stone work. The original center was built in 1504 A.D. by Sultan Qunsuwah Al Ghouri. According to Abdel Daym, "Wekalet Al Ghouri is one of three buildings, making Al Ghouri complex. There's El Ghouri Mosque, El Ghouri Palace and Wekalet Al Ghouri. When it was built, the complex had many spaces for commerce, for a hotel, even for horses. "

"In August 2005, I was asked what we can do in this zone in historic Cairo. At that time we already had three other art centers in the same zone. I wanted to think of a way to find harmony between the history and people. Al Tannoura performance was a good choice for the center, to always keep the place illuminated, to stick out of the crowd. We also have performance on Sundays and Thursdays, and during the summer, we have the summer festival. In the winter's scholastic vacations, we host the winter festival. We also host each month a folk art performance from another country."

"As for the audience, it depends on the performance. We target the local residents, but for Al Tannoura, about 60% of the audience are tourists. We first target local residents but mostly youth and kids from the zone."



After entering through the security check, we were struck by the arches and Islamic designs on the roof of the building, and by the mystical feeling the structure exudes with its high ceiling and dim lighting. The security in front of the building informed us that show would start at 8:30 pm, but might be ten minutes delayed. We instinctively inquired about fees or donations, but were confidently informed that no payment was necessary. "The free performance comes for several reasons. First of all, this is the of the Cultural Development Fund...second; we have to think about the ticket culture. This might be the culture of the Cairo Opera House, but not of the people here in the zone. People here don't like the formal attire and closed door attitude; we have to always be welcoming. We rent the space for special events, and we have the gift shop for resources."



If there ever was a cultural treasure to be found in Cairo, this would be it. For those who have not had the pleasure to visit Wekalet El Ghouri, it is an architecturally stunning arts center in Al Azhar area in Central Cairo. The center operates under the Ministry of Culture, and the Cultural Development Found Since finalizing restorations to Wekalet in October 2005, it has become a hot-spot for organizing cultural events, the most popular being the bi-weekly Al Tannoura dance performance .

The performance is similar to the more commonly known whirling dervishes; however, this version of the indigenous dance incorporates instruments and other additional elements. We spoke to Mohamed Abdel Daym, the Director of Wekalet El Ghouri to get a clearer picture of the history of the area, the background of the Wekalet, as well as the Al Tannoura performance.

Al Tannoura Performance

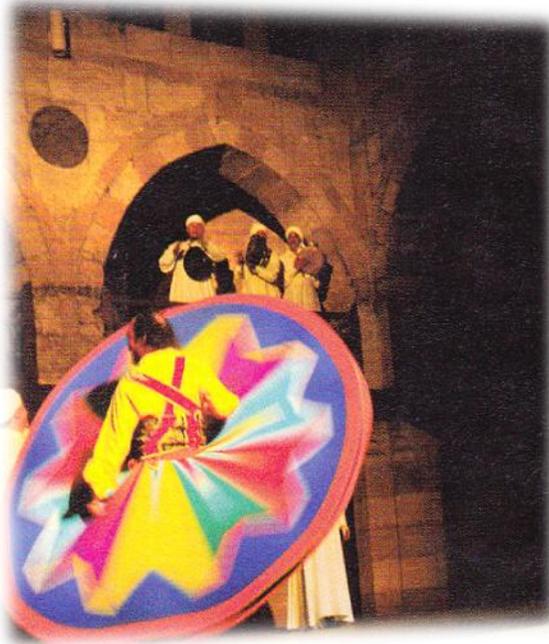
While we sat with tourists and locals alike, a group of performers appeared with an array of instruments ranging from the tabla drums to the oud and ney flute. After a few solos by the same artists, a vocalist appeared on a balcony lit with a faint light.



"The performance consists of three parts; the vocalist appears at the end of the first, which is the musical interlude." This specific vocalist officially known as the Muezzin, sings of spirituality, not related to religion only.

The second part of the performance, the Sufi Tannoura Dance (Al Darawish) is derived from the dance performed as a part of a Sufi ritual.

The third part incorporates a more spectacular dance, more based on showing skills and costume design.



Abdel Daym remarks on the differences between the two performances and the history of Al Tannoura. "The Egyptian dancers developed the dance to make something not related to religion. The history of the dance is the Sufi, and during the performance you find spectacular part, and a Sufi part. During the spectacular part, the performers are adding colors and smiles. In Sufi dancing, the dancer must be spinning in a certain direction related to the direction of the sun. One hand must be pointed to the sky and the earth. The atmosphere is different."

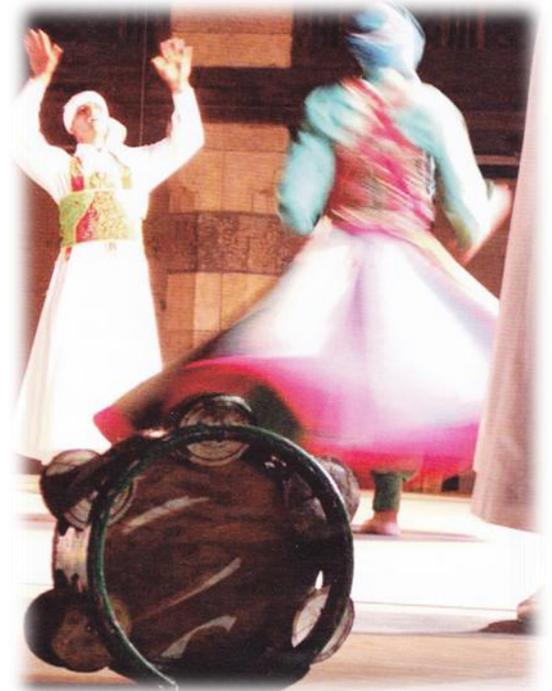
During the remainder of the show, entrances are also made by charming gentleman playing the small finger-held cymbals. The performer I personally found most memorable

was the central dancer of the Sufi Tannoura Dance who, encouraged by a troupe of musicians, seemed to enter into a trance. In fact, the dancer himself is a Sufi. He appeared to reach a level of ecstasy while on stage, possibly due to the dance functioning as an intermediary between him and God. Overall, the dance is full of Sufi symbolism, and having some background knowledge can make the viewing more interesting.

The dancer's pointing of one hand toward the earth and one toward the sky symbolizes establishing a connection between the two. The circular movements of the dancer represent the ridding of worldly burdens, until he reaches ecstasy through this attempt to reach heaven. The untying of the belt around the waist towards the end of the dance represents the beginning of his journey to heaven.

Although much of the symbolism is still preserved in the performance, Egyptian folk traditions have also very much become incorporated. The rhythmic tone of the music and the colorful costumes, have brought an added value. These days, the dance is as much a popular folk dance as a direct religious ritual.

The show incorporates so many musical elements, and the dancers especially seemed almost to reach a new emotional and spiritual plane while turning. Symbolically, the performance can be said to depict the values of friendship, generosity, wisdom and mercy.



**Wekalet El Ghouri Arts Center is one of four cultural centers in the Al Azhar area.
The Al Tannoura Traditional Troupe performs Wednesday s & Saturday s at 8:30 PM.
Everyone is welcome to watch.
3 Mohamed Abdo Street (off Al Azhar St.)**