

GUEDRA: THE FAQ

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THE GUEDRA

The Guedra is the Tuareg Blessing dance. In Arabic the Guedra is also the name of the cooking pot (or cauldron) which these nomads carry with them. This pot was covered with an animal skin to make a drum. The Guedra rhythm according to Morocco is: duh DAH m duh DAH/ dun DAH m duh DAH. She compares this to the Flamenco Bulerias rhythm, which is the same basic beat. It is not traditionally played on a dombeck and there are no sharp "tek" sounds used.

Unlike other trance dances of the middle east (the Zar, the Hadraa), it does not involve the exorcism of demon spirits or killing chickens. It is purely beneficial and joyful. The Guedra which Morocco audio-taped at King Hassan's palace was three hours long. The moves are simple, but like all trance dances, you must lose yourself in the movement and feel it before you can truly make it work. And the thing about trance dances is that they do work, i.e. inducing altered states of consciousness.

TUAREG ORIGINS

The origins of the Tuareg, like other Berber tribes, are lost in antiquity. Scholars have claimed to find both Christian and pagan practices in their customs, although today's Tuareg are muslim. Guedra uses Muslim chants in its songs, but it obviously has other associations. The Tuareg culture today has been irrevocably damaged by the current political situation, which has divided them into several areas under the control of different governments.

The Tuareg are one of the many Berber tribes; the "blue people" are a sub-grouping of the Tuareg, i.e. all Blue people are Tuareg, but not all Tuareg are "Blue People". They are so called because they really ARE blue. They use a fabric dyed by a process which involves pounding indigo powder into the cloth with a stone. Since desert tribespeople don't take a lot of baths, this blue powder rubs off on their skin. In fact, they consider this blue coloring to have a beneficial and cosmetic effect. It appears that it does actually help hold moisture in the skin. The Tuareg do not refer to themselves as "Tuareg" which they consider a perjorative term. They have become known as "the People of the Veil", or "Kel Tagilmus" because of the habit that Tuareg men have of wearing a veil after a certain age, while the women go unveiled.

They have strong matriarchial influences in their culture. Men hold the cheftain and council positions, but Chieftanship is hereditary through the female line. Inheritance is through the mother's side and a man who marries out of his tribe will move to the woman's tribe. A man may move up in society by marrying a higher status woman, but the woman seldom marry below their station. The women engage in contests of strength (Check references below: Where the Women are Strong). The Tuareg men are recognized as some of the fiercest warriors in the desert, and some of the best traders. In short, the

position of Tuareg women in their society is unique.

TUAREG MARRIAGE AND COURTSHIP

Despite any comments you might hear about the Guedra dancers as "prostitutes", the truth is that in their culture, according to Morocco, it is considered an advantage to gain experience in love - both men and women have many lovers before marriage. The respect and freedom given to Tuareg women is easily misinterpreted by the members of other tribes with more restrictions upon women. Where prostitution does exist, it is heartily condemned by Tuareg society.

Before marriage the women are said to enjoy a surprising measure of freedom. According to Rodd they do no work, but instead dance and sing and make poetry. Tuareg society includes a noble class and a slave class. This also exists on a group level where some tribal units are expected to serve others because of inherited status. Noble women who own slaves do as little work as possible. They make cheese and butter, sort dates, or herd goats. They are said to be skilled at leatherwork, but Tuareg men are said to have the most skill at needlework and sewing clothes.

Unlike their neighbors, Tuareg women are allowed to choose their mates; men may have more than one wife, but it is not generally practiced. Courtship dances are held to give the young people a chance to meet: the "tendi" and the "ahal". The tendi is usually an afternoon celebration, while the ahal is held in the evening and might feature a visiting musician. The Tuareg even have an equivalent to the medieval "court of love" with a "Sultan" and "Sultana" chosen to preside over the gathering. Rodd claims that it is common for a girl to take a camel and ride all night to see a man, and then return to her own place; or for a suitor to undertake superhuman expeditions to see his lady.

The Tuareg bride retains control of all her personal property, including livestock, while the husband is expected to pay the family's expenses. After marriage, respectable behavior is required of both sexes, but a woman may have friends of both sexes in a way that correlates more to western culture. A Tuareg proverb says, "Men and women towards each other are for the eyes and the heart, and not only for the bed."

Another possible reason for misunderstanding the virtue of Tuareg women is exemplified by the male writer who reported that until 1956 the dance was performed bare-breasted. According to Morocco this was more likely a misunderstanding caused by the fact that a foreign man would not have had access to the Guedra tribal women; he would be more likely to encounter prostitutes. Morocco also adds that in Southern Morocco (which is in North Africa) as in much of the middle east, it is still nothing special to go bare-chested. In this part of the world the female breast is considered more utilitarian than erotic.

COSTUME

The traditional women's costume is essential to the dance. It is a haik which is formed from one very large piece of material. The haik is held in front by two fibula pins of ancient design, with a long chain draped between the two. (similar to the Celtic Pentanulum). For examples of Tuareg jewelry, check out the book "AFRICA ADORNED". Previously these pieces were very difficult to find, but more belly dance

suppliers are stocking them as they have become popular amongst American tribal style belly dancers and medieval society members. If you do not have the traditional haik, second best choice for costume is a very loose caftan. This dance should never be done in any version of a "bra and belt" costume.

There is a related dance which is done for weddings in a long dress. This dance is the "Betrothal Dance of Tissint" and can be seen on Morocco's video as part of the Guedra suite performed by her troupe in the "Benediction" section.

The traditional headdress is decorated with cowrie shells, as are the artificial braids which hang from it. Any other items may be added which suit the dancer's fancy. The dancer weaves her her hair in with the fake ones to hold in the the headpiece, which is a decorated wire framework - one piece circling around the top of the head and one arcing from the top of the frontpiece to the back of the bottom circlet. Other versions appear to be merely a mass of braids circled at the top of the head. (I make a version which has slight theatrical adaptations including more braids and adjustment for fit in the back.)

This is very practical for desert wear, since it leaves an airspace open above the head. This headdress also shows to good advantage the kind of head sways which occur in trance dance. The hands also show up well in this costume, which mostly covers the rest of the body. Feet movements are mostly flat-footed with some toe-toe, heel-heel, slide movements to the side.

The Tuareg women use henna on their finger and toe nails, and kohl (antimony) for their eyes. On festive occasions they daub their cheeks and foreheads with paint, prepared from a whitish earth found near Agades, or with red or yellow ochres.

CHOREOGRAPHY

The basic rhythm puts the emphasis on the second beat according to Morocco. The Guedra is a 3 layer ritual built accordingly:

1. Alternate clapping, one group clapping on 1, second group clapping on 2. Rhythmic element also provided by drumming on the "cauldron".
2. Chants which blend together to create a wall of sound, and
3. the dancer, who translates this energy into movement through her hands.

The basic move is a hand flick, when sends energy out from the dancer. Doing this in different ways gives different meanings. The dance begins with the head covered by the end of the garment (a haik, with a caftan worn underneath; color is Taureg blue and/or black). This symbolizes being in darkness and lacking understanding/knowledge. The dancer begins her hand moves and gradually lifts the material back onto her headdress when she feels ready.

Choreography is not complex, but having the correct intentions and focus are everything. The dancer starts with the end of her haik covering her head until she is ready. The Guedra may be performed by one women, two women, or a woman and a child.

In traditional settings, the dancer may begin by greetings members of the audience

- Alternates with:
 HOW-EE (One of the 7 levels of spiritual love)
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- 2a) A'ISH HASSAN TANEH "Life to the King" (King Hassan)
 Alternates with:
 A'ISH ENAH EMALEH "Life to us, too!"
- 2b) WA HO WA JEH "He is coming"
 Alternates with:
 HA HAY WA JET "She is coming"
 (He/She are used interchangeably because during ritual the Guedra embodies both the male and the female essence. She is then a vessel for the divine as she enters the trance. "Coming", i.e. coming into trance.)
- 2c) JOW-EE (Smell of Heaven/Frankenscense)
 Alternates with:
 HOW-EE (One of the 7 levels of spiritual love)
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- 3a) YAH-DEEN-AH ALLAH ALI (God has given us Ali)
 Alternates with:
 ECHNA* WAHJ-MEE AL HAH-DREEN
 (Note *this is the ONLY chant in which the word accent is on the first beat and not the 2nd)
- 3b) YAH-DEEN-AH ALLAH
 Alternates with:
 AL ALLAH
- 3c) ALLAH
 Alternates with:
 ALI
- 3d) JOW-EE (Smell of Heaven/Frankenscense)
 Alternates with:
 HOW-EE (One of the 7 levels of spiritual love)

[Editor's note: For a better idea of how this sounds, try this 32 second Guedra music [sound sample](http://www.dsg.ki.se:80/~v95-mel/Music/music.html) from <http://www.dsg.ki.se:80/~v95-mel/Music/music.html>]

LESSONS/VIDEO/INFO:

Morocco, a.k.a. Carolina Varga Dinicu, has researched this dance in person amongst the Tuareg of Morocco. If you would like to contact her direct about Guedra information she can be reached at: 320 West 15th st, New York, NY 10011 212-727-8326. E-mail address is: 104224.2526@compuserve.com. Morocco has for sale videos of the Marrakesh Festival as well as one of her troupe performing Guedra.

TUAREG IN POPULAR MOVIES

"The Man who Would be King" has a sequence in the middle where a group of women are said to be "daughters of the chief" and offered to Sean Connery. They are wearing burgandy dresses, and are sitting and dancing.

"The Sheltering Sky" is an art movie which has beautiful scenery from Morocco. Toward the end of the story the female lead is rescued and romanced by what appears to be a Tuareg male (very steamy sequences and great cinematography, however you should put

the children to bed first and don't take the storyline as particularly probable). No dancing, however.

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