

The Belly Dance: Ancient Ritual to Cabaret Performance

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Enduring time, crossing nations and surviving images ranging from spiritualism to sex, the *danse du ventre* or belly dance has a history as rich and mysterious as the countries of the Far East from which it originates. Although the notion is exotic, our experience is likely less so. It has too often been simplified to a dinner at a Greek or Lebanese restaurant.

Far from just simple entertainment, belly dancing is believed to have originated in the Paleolithic era. Even cursory study reveals its history to be as much that of women as the dance itself. The fact that there is an exotic stigma associated with belly dancing can make it a sensitive subject to discuss. It is a story with a steamy yet compelling past.

It was an early custom to perform the dance around a woman in labour, rendering the birth less painful. This custom is still practiced by many women in North Africa and in parts of the Middle East. Saudi Arabian women cry out sympathetic laments with a woman in labour.

Discoveries in Egypt and India have revealed early representations of full-breasted, pregnant women, painted on stone walls and as terra-cotta statuettes, in positions suggestive of dancing. Archaeologists have dated some of these artefacts to 25,000 B.C. Other accounts of early belly dancing are found in ancient literature. During the first century A.D., the Roman poet Martial described the dancers of Cadiz who used to "swing their lascivious loins in practiced writhings." The Spanish town of Cadiz was colonized by the

Phoenicians and Carthaginians who likely brought the dance from North Africa. One might conjecture that the Phoenician traders moved the dance west and that various cultures were interpreting what many practitioners refer to as the "oriental dance," the dance that came from the East.

Ancient dances of India, Africa, Polynesia and Southeast Asia also show resemblance to the belly dance. Their stylistic similarities perhaps result from parallel cultural development rather than the movement of peoples and sharing of culture. Where Polynesian dancing remained close to its ritualistic form with a workable mix of sacred and sexual imagery, belly dancing travelled the rocky road from birthing ritual to cabaret performance.

The U.S. dance ethnologist La Meri, who performed authentic versions of Eastern dance, wrote of her time in Fez, Morocco, in 1929:

I was told by my teacher Fatma that the "danse du ventre" was of ritualistic origin and was at that time still performed at the bedsides of women in childbirth. She told me that in its ritualistic form, men were not allowed to see the dance.

This is in keeping with the notion that women have long been both feared and respected by men for being able to give birth, for possessing biological and spiritual powers that provide them with what was sometimes perceived as a closer association to the gods.

In *World History of Dance*, Curt Sachs refers to the

dance as a "birth mime." Describing the Bafioti people of West Africa he states, "The purpose of this particular dance is for ancestor worship and the glorification of future generations via the birth process." As a case for parallel cultural development, the Bafioti dance is more likely linked to its own culture's pre-history than to any direct influence of the Middle East. On the other hand, the influence that the spread of Islam had on the world of belly dance cannot be underestimated.

Islam was founded in Mecca by the prophet Muhammad in 569 A.D. and early practitioners undertook a quest to convert whole civilizations to their way of life. The Islamic disciples moved north through India and south through Africa. They spread as far west as Spain and east as Java, prescribing their interpretation of the Koran. Even today, most of the Middle East and North Africa are Muslim countries. While on these crusades dances and dancers were exchanged and both Islam and the danse du ventre moved beyond the shores and deserts of Arabia.

The Islamic practice of polygamy may have given rise to harem life and belly dancing in the Middle East. Confining women in a harem was a way to control and protect the more "delicate sex." The all-encompassing nature of the Islamic faith provides a sense of security for women yet at the same time imposes strict, encumbering regulations. For example, the enforced veiling of women in traditional Muslim society protects them not only from the desert winds but also, symbolically, from the harsh realities of the world. The word harem comes from the Arabic "harim," that which is both sacred and forbidden.

A certain mystique has grown around the image of harem life: that it was a lavish, exotic existence of fine foods, warm baths, oils, incense and oriental dancers. In some cases this was true but in many instances the harem was simply the women and children's quarters. Nonetheless, belly dancing flourished in these harems. It was common for the sultan to call up his chosen dancer(s) to entertain him and his male guests. They are said even to have blind-folded their musicians to

prevent flirtation with the dancer and to ensure the exclusivity of the concubine's beauty.

Given such practices the harem was often viewed as an example of men's enslavement of women. At the same time, it was the place in ancient Islam where women possessed the most freedom. In the harem they were allowed to go unveiled, could share the workload of children and were free to dance. Behind these walls the dance had its own life, it was an art form created by women for personal entertainment and an avenue for sexual expression.

The role of belly dancers in the contemporary Muslim world is ambiguous. On the one hand it is a respected art, part of the cultural heritage. Yet in a more traditional family a father would not tolerate his daughter dancing publicly. Then again he might ask such a dancer to entertain at a family wedding.

Although the spread of Islam helped to introduce the belly dance to new parts of the world, it may have been kept most alive and mobile by a wandering race of people from India known as the Ghawazee (from the Arabic "ghawa" meaning "invaders of the heart"). We know them as Gypsies. It is uncertain what circumstances drove the Ghawazee from India but by the thirteenth century A.D. they had left their homeland, populating what is now Afghanistan, Syria and Lebanon. On the shores of the Mediterranean they divided, moving north into Turkey and Greece and south into Egypt, North Africa and Spain.

The Ghawazee had a free-spirited wild-mannered lifestyle which both shocked and fascinated the traditional Muslim world. Draped in colourful fabrics decorated with coins, bangles and glitter, the Gypsies entertained in the market places and began settlements along rivers and the edges of towns and cities. Influenced by the cultures they crossed, the Ghawazee created their own hybrid of the oriental dance. Although gypsy folklore is obscure it is clear they were a very vital part of the diffusion process of the belly dance.

Early in the nineteenth century belly dancing began to be considered disreputable. It underwent a drastic image change as northern armies swept south into

Egypt and belly dancing took on the trappings of bawdy entertainment and prostitution.

As the Middle East was of strategic and commercial importance to the West, military leaders did everything in their command to keep their men from such an enticing pastime. The most extreme case was Napoleon, who in 1830 ordered that four hundred dancing girls be decapitated and thrown into the Nile for causing havoc among his soldiers. Following this incident the Egyptian leader Mohammed Ali banished dancing girls from the Cairo area to a village called Esna. It was not long before Esna was a tourist attraction.

Belly dancing was also popular with artists and statesmen. French and German writers and painters exhaustively depicted the pleasures of the dancing girls. The most renowned of these performers was Kutchuk Hanem and many celebrities, including Gustave Flaubert, were lured to her bedroom. In a letter to his poet friend Louis Bouilhet, an infatuated Flaubert wrote:

She is a very celebrated courtesan, large breasted, fleshy with slip nostrils, enormous eyes and magnificent knees. I will spare you a description of her dance for I can find no words to describe it. Her body was covered in sweat. She was tired from dancing. She was cold. I covered her with my fur pelisse and she fell asleep, her fingers in mine. As for me, I scarcely shut my eyes all night.

American journalist and humourist Charles Leland was left less lacking for words, he did well in describing the dance of the Ghawazee:

The first dancing of all Ghawazee is simply moving about to the music and undulating the body. Then waves of motion are made to run from head to foot and over these waves pass with incredible rapidity the ripples and thrills, as you have seen a great billow in a breeze look like a smaller sea ribbed with a thousand wavelets.

Similarly transfixed, French author Joseph Gobineau wrote:

Hours pass, and it is difficult to tear oneself away. This is the way the motions of the dancing girls of Asia affect the senses. There is no variety or vivacity and seldom is there a variation through any sudden movement, but the rhythmic wheeling exhales a delightful torpor upon the soul like an almost hypnotic intoxication.

Other travellers, such as Frenchman Gérard de Nerval and American journalist G. W. Curtis, also wrote of travels to the Orient. Their stories followed them into more sober homes and gave rise to a rich and fantastical image of life along the Nile. It was not long before this exotic imagery of the East physically crossed the Atlantic. North America had been well prepared for the arrival of Little Egypt in Chicago for the 1893 World's Fair. The Syrian-born dancer satisfied the yearning of those who could not afford an exotic pilgrimage. Her success at the fair led to Little Egypt imposters across America, dancing in night clubs, performing in carnival settings and rebelling against the restrictive code of behaviour of Victorian England. The belly dance was about to embark on yet another image shift as it took on the tawdry performance style associated with burlesque.

Oriental dancing now conjured up images of scantily clad females and lost its status as a folk art requiring skill and control. In North America the dance no longer had a place among women. It was relegated to strip joints, restaurants and night clubs. In the 1930s and 1940s the dance was further corrupted by its appearance in Hollywood epics. This commercialization of women's oldest dance ritual did nothing but exploit the so-called exotic aspects of belly dancing.

Fortunately the emerging world of modern dance had also found inspiration in the Orient. The imaginations of modern dancers like Ruth St. Denis were stirred by the sensuous spirit and the unfettered serpentine movements of dancers from the East. St. Denis believed that she was an embodiment of Egyptian mystery and created her infamous "Egypta" based on au-

thentic oriental movement. Artistic interpretations of belly dance, performed in a concert dance setting, provided a new context in which to view this dance form. Dance ethnologist La Meri, committed to presenting authentic versions of ethnic dance in a folk art context, also helped to redirect the Western image of the belly dance away from the cabarets.

The show-girl image of belly dancing in North America and the Middle East is thankfully not an exclusive one. Tribes like the Ouled Nail of Algeria continue to relate the dance to its ritualistic and folk roots. A North American return to the dance's origin as a birth ritual blossomed in the 1970s among women's groups. Our public libraries now contain copies of "how-to" books expounding the benefits of this ancient fertility dance. Keeping in shape before, during and after pregnancy by belly dancing created a fresh milieu for the dance. It stressed the universal and timeless element of the dance and its centre of force, the belly.

But for many Western women it is the music which initially draws them to belly dancing. Professional dancers who perform in restaurants and cabarets are often able to work with live musicians and play their hips to the solid rhythms of the jar drum or doumbec. In *The Serpent and the Sphinx*, writer and belly dancer Wendy Buonaventura states:

If the music is good it inspires certain movements: a plaintive flute solo makes a dancer unwind her veil and twirl it around her; an intense drum solo sets her hips shaking; a rhythmic tapping of the tambourine makes her hips move sharply up and down.

Although it once again holds a great deal of appeal, double standards continue to surround the status of belly dancing. On the one hand, the movements are alluring and seductive; we in the West are unaccustomed to watching a bare-bellied woman gyrate her pelvis and shimmy her breasts. As such, we tend to ignore the skill at work and focus solely on the superficial sexual

imagery. In the East, the dance is caught in the maze of what may pass for acceptable behaviour under Muslim law. It is recognized as part of Arabic cultural heritage yet there is still condemnation for the dancer who performs publicly.

A Male View

Born in 1963 in rural Lebanon, Ali Jomma currently resides in Calgary, Alberta where he works as a lawyer. In an interview with Shawna Helland, Jomma expresses his views on belly dancing from a traditional, Muslim male perspective.

Were you familiar with belly dancing when you were growing up?

Belly dancing is not taught in schools in Lebanon. It's not something that is common in the villages or in the rural areas where I grew up. The dance that we grow up with was the debka. It is danced in a circle, holding hands.

But in a city like Beirut are there night clubs with belly dancers?

Put it this way, the nightclubs that feature belly dancing in Beirut are the equivalent to our strip joints here and from a moral, social and religious point of view that's how they are looked at. Canadian high schools don't teach people how to strip tease and they don't teach them to do belly dancing over there. Strip joints are very common here and belly dancing is common there, it's the same kind of thing.

Are both men and women allowed into the nightclubs?

Lebanon is different from most of the other Arab countries. Until the civil war started in 1975 we had the same liberties as in the Western world. In a lot of Arab countries like Saudi Arabia and in some of the Gulf countries nightclubs don't even exist. Neither does belly dancing and sexes don't mix in public.

What do you think of belly dancing? Do you view it as a very old ritualistic dance or a cabaret dance?

To me it's an artistic form of entertainment. To me it doesn't bring to mind a sense of history, although I realize that it has its roots in the Middle East. I think North Americans have mixed messages about our culture from watching movies from the 1950s like *Lawrence of Arabia* and *Ali Baba and the Forty Thieves*. I see that the Western adaptation of belly dancing has taken hold in North America in a very different way than the original idea ever did in the Middle East.

How do you think that Middle Eastern men view belly dancing?

Well I think there are two sides to it. On one hand there is the same sort of sexist attitude as a man viewing a swim suit competition or a strip tease. There's that aspect of it and then there is the artistic, musical and dance aspect of it which, depending on how much credit you want to give to the average male, is more or less present. I think that North American men with a background in Middle Eastern culture see it as exploiting a negative aspect of that culture. There are a lot of rich aspects of our culture which are never exposed and yet here is a quasi-sleazy aspect that the West has decided they want to sensationalize and exploit.

Does it bother you that the belly dance has been misrepresented?

What bothers me is that it is characterized as being an Arabic dance when in fact it's a North American aberration, kind of like chop suey. If I approved of the way it was done it wouldn't bother me, but obviously the fact that it does bother me suggests that there must be some negative aspect of it that causes concern. You don't see men doing it to entertain women. I feel the same way about belly dancing as I do about strippers and the way that they are exploited. It's basically the same thing.

At an Arabic party, if a belly dancer performs, would traditional Muslim men be uncomfortable?

It would offend the typical right-thinking Muslim man, absolutely. My father and anyone like my father would not watch a North American belly dancer. He would find it offensive. In Islam a women is supposed to cover herself, with the exception of her face and her hands. A belly dancer is considered to be naked. In Saudi Arabia, if someone was caught in the street dressed like that they wouldn't hang her but she might get three hundred lashes.

Would your father disapprove of his daughter or wife becoming a belly dancer?

Oh absolutely, as would anyone who has any religious convictions.

All the belly dancers I contacted in Calgary were North American in origin.

That just emphasizes the fact that it really is a North American thing. It has been given this label of being an Arabic dance when in fact it has really been used and popularized in the West.

Interview with a Belly Dancer

Born in Ontario of Ukrainian ancestry, Samea is a professional belly dancer currently working in Alberta. She spoke with Shawna Helland about public and personal perceptions of belly dancers and their art.

What first attracted you to belly dancing?

My sister is a belly dancer. I had two children and did not want to become a full-time housewife. I was trying to find my own thing. Initially I was horrified at what people might think, but the instructor was just a normal person and I fell in love with the music.

What kind of music do you dance to?

I dance to both Greek and Lebanese, but prefer Egyptian music. They are the best composers and singers. They create great mood swings, something that is particularly true of the new style of Egyptian music.

Who becomes involved in belly dancing?

Very few Egyptian or Lebanese women in North America. Although I am treated with respect when I dance at a party I feel that the people are glad it is me and not their daughter. In places such as Cairo dancers are looked down upon when they first begin but if they rise on the ladder they quickly are elevated to the status of queen.

Is belly dancing a part of Muslim culture?

And Christian. Muslims are rather strict, depending on the degree of their religious convictions. They insist that the midriff is covered. When I dance for Muslims I wear a netted dress.

Do Muslim women ever become belly dancers?

Yes, but they will be going against their family. It is a very mixed-up concept. Here, as well as in the Middle East, any belly dancer, Muslim or otherwise, will gain respect if her dance is well-liked.

How many belly dancers are there in Alberta?

There are about six who perform professionally. I do some work with two or three dancers. If someone needs several performers there are people I call on but I prefer to work on my own. It is very personal.

Are there belly dances which are totally choreographed?

Yes, those are the folkloric dances. Something like the Bedouin Wedding Dance is a set piece. However, most dances are very individual. Belly dancers have simply taken the basic steps of folkloric dance, made them more intricate and put them into a cabaret performance. My own dances are largely improvised, drawing on nine years of dance experience.

What is it like to dance in informal places, like restaurants?

I prefer to perform on a stage with a live band. In most Middle Eastern countries dance is performed on a stage. The dancer might go out to the audience to

have a bit of fun and interaction. Montreal has about seven Arabic clubs. An evening consists of alternating singers and dancers. On a night when there is no program, the whole audience might get up and dance. It's much like a big party. When I dance it's basically an imitation of that sort of personal exuberance.

Do women come into clubs to watch belly dancers?

Absolutely. The idea is not to get a woman jealous if she is sitting with her boyfriend. If at some point you want to have a bit of fun, you might give the woman a wink, to include her in the game. This is particularly important when dancing for North Americans who often fail to appreciate the dancing. Too many people have the idea that it is sleazy bump and grind because dancers have made it that way. It's a shame. They don't understand where it has come from.

A lot was written about belly dancing in the seventies.

Does it paint a true picture of the art?

I think you have to see what it is like in the Middle East. They are very classy people, not at all like the hippy-types in Gypsy costume portrayed in the "how-to" books. That's just not it. That idea has developed along with the North American burlesque appeal. It shouldn't even be called belly dancing. It is "more dance oriental."

Is it an erotic form of dance to you?

No, the dance is definitely sensuous but not erotic. I think of it as almost loving.

Would you like to see the image of belly dancing change?

Yes, definitely. Too often it is seen as something hokey or sleazy. Dancers need to develop a different attitude. It is up to them to research and find instructors who stay true to the art. Publications such as *Arabesque* are invaluable in providing accurate and timely information. If you are truly interested, that is the sort of commitment you must make to yourself and the dance form.

Can a belly dancer have a long career?

It is physically possible. Unfortunately audiences do not often recognize fitness or technique as often as they do personal attractiveness. They forget to appreciate the intricacies of the dance, it is simpler to base criticism in physical beauty.

Is it considered attractive to have a large belly?

Arabs don't like thin dancers. It is considered a good thing to have hips, but you don't have to have a particular look to be involved. I would love to see more people become belly dancers, regardless of their age or ability. Unlike other types of dance, it seems that better understanding and ability comes with age. In Egypt the really big names in the field are around fifty years old.

Have you been to the Middle East to study?

Not yet, but I definitely will. Cairo is where the trends arise, especially the styles of dance and costumes. There is constant change. Belly dancing is very fashion-conscious. One example is the use of castanets, a North American trend which the Egyptians don't favour. I too find them distracting because they take away from the possibility of beautiful hand movements. They can't be used with a lot of the newly composed Egyptian music because it is so erratic. Typically their use is restricted to the performance of slow, folkloric ballads.

How do you keep up with the change?

Belly dancing is a little world of its own. We have a newsletter with information about workshops and who the instructors are. For a beginner I would definitely recommend people in Alberta who can provide lessons but normally I travel to the larger centres, particularly Montreal, to take workshops.

Are belly dancers in touch with any spiritual aspect of the form?

I think it is spiritual if you love the music.

Aside from the music, what is there in belly dancing which holds an appeal for you?

There is a definite power associated with the dance. You can turn an audience on or off almost at will. You can also express emotion in a way that I find very satisfying. It is possible to make the audience almost fall in love with you.

A Chronology of the Belly Dance: History in the Shaking

- 25,000 B.C. Upper Paleolithic age. Earliest known female figurines of Venus figures date to this time. Earliest indications of a matriarchal dominance in society. Female body worshipped for childbearing capabilities.
- 5500 B.C. Neolithic era. Mother Goddess religion practiced in the Middle East. Establishment of agricultural societies. Curt Sachs (dance historian) places the beginning of the *danse du ventre* here.
- 4000 B.C. Suggestive evidence points to earliest invasion of Middle Eastern Goddess-oriented societies by male-dominated tribes of the North.
- 2300 B.C. Sacred lovemaking widely practiced in the temples in worship of the Mother Goddess. (Caste tribes like the Ouled Nail may have developed at this time.)
- 1800 B.C. End of the era of matriarchal dominance in Egypt following a series of Northern invasions.
- 1500 B.C. Egyptian conquest of portions of the Middle East. Egypt sends dancers to other countries and imports dancers from other countries.
- 960 B.C. Solomon becomes king of Israel. He worships both Jehovah and the Goddess and has a harem of seven hundred wives and three hundred concubines.
- ca. 500 B.C. Phoenician finger cymbals used in Carthage.

- ca. 60 B.C. Romans import dancers from Syria.
- 28 A.D. Salome dances before her stepfather, King Herod. He is so pleased that he offers her any request, not knowing that her evil mother, his wife, has already told her to ask for the head of John the Baptist.
- 300 Closing of Goddess temples begins under the Byzantine emperor Constantine.
- 450 The Parthenon of the Acropolis, formerly a sacred shrine of the Goddess religion, becomes a Christian church.
- 527 A celebrated oriental dancer, actress, and alleged courtesan becomes the empress Theodora, wife of Emperor Justinian of the Byzantine empire. As the *de facto* ruler of Byzantium, she is the author of legislation favorable to women's rights.
- 612 Moors settle in Spain, bringing a dance related to the "oriental form" with "African embellishments." Moorish women typically live in harems.
- 519 Mohammed's flight to Medina (the Hegira). Beginning of the Muslim calendar.
- ca. 622 Mohammed forbids painting or writing about any living things, promotes harems. Beginning of Muslim conquests.
- ca. 850 In *Prairies of Gold*, descriptions of qualities of a good dancer are recorded as told by a scholar to the Caliph Mu'tamid.
- 1096–1300 The Crusades—Christian Europe vs. Muslim Middle East. Middle Eastern dancing girls become influential in Europe when brought back by the soldiers.
- 1498 Renaissance court dance develops.
- 1500 Persecution of Moors and other minorities in Spain throws them together in the mountain regions, where the flamenco dance develops.
- 1798 G. W. Browne reports Ghawazee dancers flourishing as an accepted part of Egyptian society.
- 1851 Oriental dancers appear at the Crystal Palace Exhibition in London. Queen Victoria is there.
- 1893 Belly dance movements incorporated into strip tease and vice versa. Many Little Egypts appear. Hootchie Cootchie blends with belly dancing. Modern cabaret costume and high heels introduced.
- 1906 Ruth St. Denis debuts as an oriental dancer. Not wishing to share billing with a boxer and a herd of trained monkeys, she subsequently rents her own theatre.
- 1927 Badia Masabni founds Casino Opera in Cairo. Presents shows featuring Tahia Caricoa, Samia Gamal.
- 1955 Egyptian government requires dancers to cover themselves from shoulders to ankles.
- 1970 Women's liberation group pickets a performance by Jamila Salimpour's students in Berkeley on the grounds that belly dancing treats women as sex objects and is "antithetical to women's rightful role."
- 1970–1979 Belly dance movement sweeps U.S.A. Hollywood begins to use real belly dancers and genuine Arabic music.
- 1975 *Arabesque*, A Journal of Middle Eastern Dance, is founded in New York City.
- 1978 Thirty conservative members of the Egyptian Parliament call for the belly dance to be banned forever in Egypt.
- 1979 Belly dancers are still undervalued and underpaid in the United States and subject to political persecution in the Middle East, but look to the future with optimism. The Ayatollah Khomeini bans music on radio and television in Iran.