Spring 2023

From Raqs Sharqi to Belly Dance: The Influence of Western Cultural Values on a Middle Eastern Dance Form

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on a Middle Eastern Dance Form

This paper was selected under double-blind peer review as one of the best academic papers in dance of 2022-2023 by a review committee consisting of members of the LMU National Dance Education Organization Student Chapter, Dance department students, William H. Hannon Librarians, Dance faculty and an external scholar.

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I Am Therefore I Dance: Dance, Culture & Society - DANC 282.01

July 5, 2023

A belly dancer, often female, walks onto stage surrounded by audience members. Depending on the time period and occasion, the audience ranges from wedding reception guests, tourists wanting a taste of "Oriental" culture, French soldiers under Napoleon's occupation of Egypt, or members of a deep and private sisterhood in relation to the skilled performer. The dancer begins her movement by articulating isolations and undulations of the hips, pelvis, and chest in tune with music punctuated by hollow ticking noises and trilling.[1] While the dancer maintains a pleasant and possibly flirtatious smile, she masterfully isolates her torso through rapid abdominal contractions which undulate and ripple through her stomach. These isolations represent the contractions of the womb during labor. As most of the performance is improvised, she moves through a host of movement elements and techniques: she shimmies her chest side to side, she rotates her hips frontward and backwards or upwards and downwards in opposition, she rolls her hips in a figure eight motion, and she rises and falls in the knees and ankles to emphasize sections where the music rises and falls.[2] She steps throughout the space either by punctuating her steps with spiraling poses or by hopping with a jubilant buoyancy. Her arms softly stretch outwards with slight bends in the elbows and wrists while they flow through either symmetrical positions when executing upper and lower body isolations or through asymmetrical positions during contralateral movement. During the entire performance, the dancer's attitude remains indirect yet playful.

This paper traces the development of *raqs sharqi*, a classical Egyptian movement form, into what is now known as belly dance due to the influence of Western cultural values. Belly dance originated from the movement form of *raqs sharqi* and became popular in Cairo during the mid 18th century. The introduction of Westerners to *raqs sharqi*, as attributed to Napoleon's

[1] "Belly Dancer Dubai," YouTube, last modified June 20, 2018, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1RBDIrDWg3A.
[2] Ibid.

occupation of Egypt during that time period, exposed the eastern-originated dance style to Western values. This negotiation and integration of opposing cultural frameworks eventually produced the art form of belly dance as it is widely practiced and appreciated today. However, the history of belly dance and its origins in *raqs sharqi* provides yet another historical example of Western insensitivity to Eastern movement forms. Western influence imposed a framework of independent values lacking critical thought or consideration of the Middle Eastern cultural particularities which inform *raqs sharqi* and its movement relatives, such as belly dance. The multitudinous modern practices of belly dance represent its rich cultural history and the diversity of influences which informed many stylistic and cultural offshoots from its origination. The globalization of belly dance as attributed to Western influence exemplifies the importance of learning foreign movement responsibly by engaging with the unfamiliar movement in a culturally appropriate and sensitive way. This method for a holistic understanding which authentically represents the cultural values of the dance form may be further illuminated through considering the emotional, kinesthetic, and conceptual elements of dance, as outlined in Deidre Sklar's article titled "Five Premises for a Culturally Sensitive Approach to Dance."

The earliest form of belly dancing, known as *raqs sharqi*, may be traced back to 5500 BC, according to Curt Sachs, author of *World History of the Dance*.[3] *Raqs sharqi* arose from movement which mimicked the contractions of the womb during childbirth, resulting in the articulative abdominal contractions characteristic of belly dancing. Not only did this dance offer an exploration of the human mystery of birth, but it aimed to worship ancestors and glorify upcoming generations through the process of childbirth.[4] This movement form soon assumed its role as a source of empowerment in the private spheres of women because it provided a safe

[3] Renee Critcher Lyons, *The Revival of Banned Dances: A Worldwide Study* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2012), 118.
[4] Ibid.

space for both personal entertainment and sexual expression. In this historical context, belly dance served as a tool of empowerment and social engagement for tight-knit communities to participate in relaxation and fun together.[5] The heightened intimacy in these dance spaces plays a key role in its function, as it allows self-expression to dominate and flourish, where "one may behave as loosely or as decorously as one chooses."[6] Furthermore, belly dancing engages everyone in the space and provides the opportunity for women, no matter if single or married, to "affirm her own worth and beauty."[7] Women who were experts in *raqs sharqi* became known as *awalim,* designating them as women well versed in the arts. These women passed their knowledge about lovemaking onto brides at their weddings through song and dance.[8]

Raqs sharqi holds strong cultural roots in valuing and honoring female rites of passage, including childbirth, menstruation, marriage, and sexual empowerment.[9] This style of dance expresses and celebrates maternity, fertility, conception, and "the suffering and joy women must endure and experience as they bring a new life into the world."[10] These traditional values may be enumerated as celebrating the triumph and hardship of childbirth, the honoring of female sisterhood, and the empowerment of sexual expression. However, although these beliefs and concepts remain strongly characteristic of *raqs sharqi* today, some forms of belly dance deviate from these original values. Napoleon's occupation of Cairo in the late 18th and early 19th century sparked the globalization of *raqs sharqi* into a form of entertainment for Westerners which became known as belly dance.[11] The *awalim* refused to entertain the French soldiers brought to Cairo during the military occupation. However, the *ghawazee*, gypsy tribes which

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[5] Renee Critcher Lyons, *The Revival of Banned Dances: A Worldwide Study*, 125.
[6] Najwa Adra, "Belly Dance: An Urban Folk Genre," in *Belly Dance: Orientalism, Transnationalism, & Harem Fantasy*, ed. Anthony Shay and Barabara Sellers-Young, (Costa Mesa, California: Mazda Publishers Inc, 2005), 41.
[7] Renee Critcher Lyons, *The Revival of Banned Dances: A Worldwide Study*, 125.
[8] Renee Critcher Lyions, *The Revival of Banned Dances: A Worldwide Study*, 119.
[9] Renee Critcher Lyions, *The Revival of Banned Dances: A Worldwide Study*, 124.
[10] Ibid.
[11] Renee Critcher Lyons, *The Revival of Banned Dances: A Worldwide Study*, 125.

practiced *raqs sharqi*, fulfilled the roles of entertainment demanded by the Westerners.[12] The French soldiers who were exposed to *raqs sharqi* greeted the new dance form with efforts to conform the art to Western ideals of costume and performance. These efforts were aimed towards fulfilling the soldiers' expectations surrounding solo performances directed toward male audiences. The alterations of the original form of *raqs sharqi* to accommodate Western values resulted in "dance du ventre" in French, or "belly dance" in English.[13]

The development of belly dance from *raqs sharqi* as a result of French influence demonstrates a historical example of what Rachel Kraus, a researcher and Associate Professor of Sociology associated with Ball State University, calls the "interaction membrane." Kraus defines the interaction membrane as the "informal guidelines that shape interactions within different settings."[14] In a particular setting, two groups interacting with each other negotiate their own values and aesthetics they bring to the space, and together they improvise and establish guidelines to determine how the interaction unfolds. To an extent, a consensus must be reached between the two parties to construct these new guidelines successfully. However, as the negotiation transpires, one party may make more compromises than the other. As a consequence, the guidelines for interaction are dictated by one party over the other. This imbalance of the interaction membrane is evident in the development of belly dance. The audience of the movement shifted from an intimate, culturally-homogenous makeup to an audience of foreigners. Moreover, the French soldiers possessed a different set of values from the performers as well as misconceptions about Egyptian culture. The French values and aesthetics dominated the negotiation, evident in their naming of the new dance form as "dance du ventre," or belly dance.

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[12] Renee Critcher Lyons, *The Revival of Banned Dances: A Worldwide Study*, 126.
[13] Renee Critcher Lyons, *The Revival of Banned Dances: A Worldwide Study*, 126.
[14] Rachel Kraus, *Gendered Bodies and Leisure: The Practice of American Belly Dance* (New York, NY: Routledge, 2017), 144.

This domination allowed only two choices: the dancers could either consent to the imposed guidelines or walk away. The *ghawazee* allowed these new norms to dictate their performance and audience engagement which allowed for the origination and spread of belly dance. However, the *awalim* did not consent to the guidelines imposed by the French. As a consequence, the *awalim* decided to remove themselves from the setting and consequently created a division in Middle Eastern dance subcultures.

The introduction of Westerners to Middle Eastern movement forms provides one instance of the expansion of "Orientalism" during the 18th and 19th centuries. Defined in Edward Said's book titled *Orientalism*, a seminal text on the subject published in 1978, orientalism is a body of theories and images of Arab societies in the Middle East and North Africa constructed by the West. Composed in an imperialist light, orientalism exotifies the East by viewing it as primitive, overvaluing its spiritual ritualism, and exaggerating its sensuality.[15] This "othering" of the East evokes an ethereal magnetism and Western fascination with Arab culture which sparked great intrigue surrounding belly dance. The exotification of belly dancing by Westerners incentivized Middle Eastern nightclubs to attract Western tourists by performing an Americanized version of belly dance known as cabaret style belly dance.[16] This style of belly dance was popularized in the 1920s to cater to Western travelers seeking the glamor of "Hollywood-type entertainment."[17] These styles of belly dance, which were not authentic to the original form, were promoted to tourists as a representation of the local culture, which caused tension and distaste among more traditional belly dancers.[18] The *awalim* considered the popularization of cabaret style belly dance to be offensive as it strayed from the intentions and values of the *raqs sharqi* dance form.

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[15] Shay and Sellers-Young, "Belly Dance: Orientalism: Exoticism: Self-Exoticism," 25.
[16] Rachel Kraus, *Gendered Bodies and Leisure: The Practice of American Belly Dance*, 7.
[17] Ibid.
[18] Renee Critcher Lyons, *The Revival of Banned Dances: A Worldwide Study*, 128.

The tension between American cabaret style belly dance and *raqs sharqi* poses a contrast between fusing aesthetics of multiple cultures and the preservation of original form. This contrast depends largely on the element of context. As Kraus states, "performing on a stage creates a particular set of interaction rules, while dancing among crowds suggests different norms."[19] Context informs the degree and matter in which performers evoke their sensuality as a part of their performance and interaction with the audience. For example, performers at a Renaissance Fair may be more inclined to have a flirtatious attitude as they engage with audience members who are typically inebriated men.[20] On the other hand, contexts with a greater separation between performer and audience member may result in "less crude" interactions.[21] The differences in audience engagement between the two styles manifest vastly different impressions of belly dance on outsiders. As a result, differing levels of importance regarding cultural preservation creates opposing values across belly dance styles which cater to different contexts. This opposition manifests tension in the movement form, as evidenced by the rift between the *raqs sharqi* and American cabaret styles of belly dancing.

Western influence on Middle Eastern dance forms demonstrates a cultural insensitivity on behalf of Western spectators. A specific historical instance of this violation appears among *awalim* and *ghawazee* women who publicly danced *raqs sharqi* for foreign audiences in Cairo. These women were known as the "dancing girls" and they regularly performed at a popular festival in Cairo during the late 19th century.[22] The growing popularity of their performances attracted tourists and a significant number of Western peoples. Core articulations emphasized in the dancing girls' movement greatly offended Victorian sensibilities of the time, specifically

[19] Rachel Kraus, *Gendered Bodies and Leisure: The Practice of American Belly Dance*, 144.
[20] Rachel Kraus, *Gendered Bodies and Leisure: The Practice of American Belly Dance*, 144.
[21] Ibid.
[22] Rachel Kraus, *Gendered Bodies and Leisure: The Practice of American Belly Dance*, 12.

modesty and abstinence from sexual expression.[23] The dancing girls evoked "[a] tension between the shock of familiarity and the thrill of the absolute and exotic difference" in the eyes of Western travelers.[24] The resulting repulsion instilled within the tourists a fascination with what they interpreted as overt displays of sensuality. Confronted with the exposed bodies of the dancers executing articulated movement in the arms, waist, and hips, Western visitors understood "North Africa and the Middle East as a site of excessive display."[25] Westerners projected their inner conflict of aversion and attraction back onto the dance form. The construction of "the Orient" through the eroticization of Middle Eastern culture evoked "[a] necessity for Western political regulation of an overly sensualist Arab world."[26] As a result, Western dominance over Middle Eastern dance forms stigmatized these movement forms and debased the power of self-expression key to the original form.

Much of the history of Western influence on Middle Eastern dance forms may be explained through the process of stigmatization. Stigmatization occurs "when a person possesses an attribute that is labeled different, and the difference [becomes] linked to a socially undesirable characteristic or negative stereotype."[27] The history of stigma in Middle Eastern dance forms is apparent in the example of the dancing girls. Western spectators of the dancing girls in Cairo during the 19th century mistook the dancers' self-expression for a display of overt sexual abandon. Victorian society, the dominant culture of Western spectators at the time, categorized such overt forms of sexual expression as disgraceful. The Victorian lens through which the spectators viewed the performance informed their judgment of the movement as not only undesirable or contrary to their value system, but immoral. This designation of belly dance as

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[23] Ibid.
[24] Barabara Sellers-Young, *Belly Dance, Pilgrimage, and Identity* (London, UK: Springer Nature, 2016), 32.
[25] Barabara Sellers-Young, *Belly Dance, Pilgrimage, and Identity*, 4.
[26] Barabara Sellers-Young, *Belly Dance, Pilgrimage, and Identity*, 32.
[27] Rachel Kraus, *Gendered Bodies and Leisure: The Practice of American Belly Dance*, 146.

unvirtuous grew more popular as Western culture redefined traditional values of the form in accordance with their own values. Thus, Westerners initiated and perpetuated the stigmatization of belly dance– an issue which remains apparent in modern-day associations of belly dance with erotic dance. Despite efforts of self-determination by belly dancers, many people in Western society, namely in the United States, misperceive belly dance as an erotic dance form rather than an intimate social outlet tailored to self-expression. The modern misunderstanding of belly dance cultural values exhibits the extent and degree to which Westerners stigmatize the dance form, which illuminates the considerable ways in which Western influence harms popular perceptions of belly dance.

Deidre Sklar's "Five Premises for a Culturally Sensitive Approach to Dance " provides a vital perspective in understanding the propensity of Western spectators to stigmatize Middle Eastern dance forms. In her article, Sklar outlines a culturally responsible way of interpreting movement from unfamiliar cultures. In the conclusion, Sklar "[advocates for an] approach that considers movement performance not just as visual spectacle but as kinesthetic, conceptual, and emotional experience that depends upon cultural learning."[28] Sklar emphasizes the necessity of understanding movement beyond its visual performance by investigating and participating in the emotional, kinesthetic, and conceptual experience of the dance form. Historically, Middle Eastern dance forms were disseminated in accordance with these culturally sensitive guidelines. In North Africa and the Middle East, dance forms were shared and learned through an increasing level of participation on behalf of the observers. In this process, "the observer increasingly takes on the nuances of the performer's body…until their entire being embodies not only the movement phrasing but the entire emotional ethos attached to the movement."[29] Through using

[28] Deidre Sklar, "Five Premises for a Culturally Sensitive Approach to Dance," in *Moving History/Dancing Cultures: A Dance History Reader*, ed. Ann Dils and Ann Cooper, (Albright, 2001), 32.
[29] Barabara Sellers-Young, *Belly Dance, Pilgrimage, and Identity*, 6.

this method of dissemination, Middle Easterners maintained the cultural and aesthetic integrity of the dance form as they learned and continued to share social movement forms.

The involvement of Western cultures in Middle Eastern dance forms, however, demonstrates a method of engagement that is counterproductive to the culturally sensitive approach outlined by Sklar. Rather than immersing themselves in the phenomenological experiences of *raqs sharqi* or belly dance, Westerners limited their participation to merely observing the visual spectacle. As a result, the level of understanding achieved by Western onlookers was not sufficient to perpetuate an authentic representation of the original form. Through a lack of attentiveness and sensitivity to the cultural context informing the movement, Westerners lost the values of childbirth, sexuality, femininity, autonomy, and sisterhood integral to *raqs sharqi*. Western observers incorrectly redefined the values of this dance form because their own cultural lens lacked the capacity to properly interpret Middle Eastern cultural values. Instead of participating in a culturally sensitive approach, Westerners structured their participation with belly dance– whether intentional or unintentional– through domination of the interaction membrane and stigmatization of the *raqs sharqi* and early forms of belly dance. Through avoiding sympathetic engagement in these dance forms, Western influence maintained a level of otherness and separation which afforded them the power to conform the dances to their own values and aesthetics. Rather than equalizing the cultural exchange through a culturally sensitive approach capable of achieving and preserving understanding, Westerners instead reshaped the perceptions of Middle Eastern dance forms, namely belly dance, to benefit the perpetuation of their own cultural framework.

Negligence to engage in the full embodiment of a dance, in all of its present and historical influences of experience, causes an inability to grasp the cultural values and aesthetics

foundational to that movement form. Without an understanding properly equipped to bridge drastically different value systems and cultural practices, the Europeans readily imposed their cultural framework onto *raqs sharqi* and belly dance. Throughout history into modern times, belly dancers have countered Western attempts of misdefinition with efforts of self-determination: "Belly dance is so often misunderstood in the West as an overtly sexual and intentionally seductive form… that Arabs tend to feel they have to bend over backward to deny any sexual connotations to the genre."[30] This must not be the case. The responsibility of cultural understanding must not fall to the misunderstood group. Rather, outsiders must assume the responsibility of restructuring their conceptions to accommodate a true understanding of the art. Embodying a movement form in all of its emotional, conceptual, kinesthetic, and visual aspects necessarily instills an empathy for the embodied form its practitioners. This empathy broadens one's capacity and motivation for understanding, and simultaneously combats the construction of degrading or disparaging misunderstandings. Only through this embodiment and empathy may an adequate understanding of the cultural values and aesthetics of foreign movement be realized and carried forward with faithfulness to its most authentic form.

[30] Najwa Adra, "Belly Dance: An Urban Folk Genre," 45.

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