

# *Belly Dance*

Orientalism, Transnationalism,  
and Harem Fantasy



*Edited By*

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## CHAPTER 1

### Belly Dance: An Urban Folk Genre<sup>1</sup>

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#### Preamble

**A**MIRA enjoyed welcoming visitors while helping her parents and sisters serve them tea and sweets. Her great aunt and uncle, who lived in Damascus, were home for a visit. Relatives, neighbors and old friends had come to the house to welcome them. Even without the glitter of a wedding, the crowd's festive mood was palpable. The soft sound of chatter, children's laughter as they played tag underfoot, and the clinking of tea glasses all contributed to the ambiance of joy. Later there would be music and dancing. She wondered if she would dance this evening. As much as she loved to dance, she was 15 and needed to behave properly. Although the guests were all relatives and old friends, there would be men and women present. Her friend Amal was never allowed to dance when men were around, even her own brothers. Amira's family was not so conservative, yet last month, when her father's friends visited, her mother's warning glance had told her it would be improper for her to dance. Thus, when the conversation died down and someone put on a dance CD, Amira remained seated. The children immediately took the floor. Amira noticed that her young cousin, Soraya, was quite good, though still a little awkward. Soon, older girls began to dance. Although she was dying to do so, Amira demurred when her aunt asked her to dance. "I don't know how," she lied. When they insisted, she said that she wasn't feeling well and stubbornly remained seated. It was not until her grandmother wrapped a dance scarf around her hips that she stood up, realizing that on this occasion it was permissible

for her to dance.

#### Dance in the Arab World

Many informal social gatherings in the Arab world include some dancing, yet adults at each event must negotiate the propriety of their performing in a particular context. This article will discuss belly dance as performed by non-professionals. Although variations of this dance are performed throughout the Middle East, North Africa and Central Asia, this discussion will be limited to its performance in those countries where it is indigenous and where Arabic is the predominant language. Dancing at informal social gatherings in homes during celebrations such as weddings will be described. The contexts of performance and identity of performers will be discussed, as well as an indigenous distinction between amateur and professional dancing. An understanding of the cultural significance of this genre as performed in homes and at celebrations will shed light on apparent contradictions between dance performance and the seclusion of women. It will also help explain incongruities in its performance when transported across cultural boundaries. Belly dance may be performed by women or men. Nevertheless, the female pronoun will be used in this discussion because the genre is often associated with women. Unless otherwise stated, however, this discussion should be understood as applying in most cases to men as well.

#### One of Many Dances: the Wider Context

Belly dance is only one of many dances performed in the Middle East and North Africa. Almost everyone in the region dances or has danced at some point in their lives. Weddings and other large celebrations normally include dancing, and dancing is frequently part of informal social gatherings. Dancing is so popular and widely performed in the region that I would argue that all have some experience of dance. The idea that entertainment implies dancing is taken for granted; those who consider themselves too 'modern' or westernized to perform belly dance learn the latest ballroom or global dance styles. There is also often a keen interest in learning other people's dances. When people return home from a trip, they are likely to be asked to demonstrate the dances of the area they visited. Visitors from else-



where may be asked to perform their own local dances. Dances learned from television and films are performed at home.

Exposure to dancing and music begins early in life. Social life traditionally includes children who have access to gender segregated as well as mixed gender social spaces, thus they have ample opportunity to learn local dances. Only in recent years, and among a few highly westernized families, are children excluded from parties and celebrations.

Not only is everyone familiar with dancing, but the variety of dances found in the region is staggering. It is important to realize that variations of belly dance form only a fraction of the dance traditions in the region. Towns or villages may have their own dances. Many communities perform several dances, with some reserved for specific occasions. There are dances purely for entertainment; others are associated with work, such as the agricultural, fishing or pearling dances of the Persian Gulf countries.

Some dances are performed by men and women together; some are performed only by men, others only by women; still others involve men or women in given contexts (Adra 1982, 1998a). In her exemplary study of Egyptian dances, Magda Saleh (1979) documented twenty dances in Egypt. There are at least thirty distinct dances in the Persian Gulf countries of Bahrain, Kuwait, Qatar and the United Arab Emirates and at least twenty-five named dances in Yemen (Adra 1998b, 2002).<sup>2</sup>

Although extensive, the dance traditions of the region are folk<sup>3</sup> or popular dances. Most are considered play by performers and spectators alike, and their playful, or ludic, qualities are their major distinguishing characteristics. Currently, there is no indigenous classical dance tradition in the region.<sup>4</sup> Lacking the status of classical art, dancing was not considered worthy of documentation by many Arab scholars. In recent years, however, Arab folklorists and anthropologists have developed an interest in their own local dances.

Belly dance, then, is only one example of a rich dance tradition. Although reputed to be of Egyptian origin and widely performed in urban and rural Egypt, belly dance is also performed in countries of the Levant (Syria, Lebanon, Jordan, Palestine), urban Iraq, and the Maghrib (Morocco, Algeria, Tunisia and Libya) as well as in Turkey, Iran and Central Asia. It was not

traditionally performed on the Arabian Peninsula. However, many young people on the Peninsula have learned it from television and currently perform it along with traditional local dances at parties and celebrations.

Recent changes in the Middle East have resulted in a decline in dance activity in all its forms. Watching television, especially soap operas, frequently replaces dancing during informal afternoon and evening gatherings, although it also exposes viewers to unfamiliar dances. Some religiously conservative families argue that music and dancing are immoral, and these families replace professional dancers and musicians with chanters of religious songs at weddings and other celebrations.<sup>5</sup>

### **Description of Traditional Belly Dance**

Traditional belly dance is an improvised genre, led by music which may also be improvised.<sup>6</sup> The dance consists of fluid arm and hand movements as well as isolations and shimmies of the shoulder, pelvis, abdominal muscles and/or head. The dancer's shoulders are kept low and held back, while the head is held high. Steps are small and close to the ground. The dancer's feet may be placed flat on the floor or her weight may be concentrated on the ball of her foot. Level shifts include forward or back bends—rarely, the dancer will dramatically touch the floor with the top of her head while shimmying her shoulders and/or torso. The dancer may change level by bending her knees with head isolations or shoulder shimmies during her descent and ascent. Otherwise no high kicks or high jumps are associated with this form of dancing. The dancer's gaze may be directed outward towards the spectators or turned modestly downward, yet drawing attention to subtle pelvic isolations. Some dancers maintain serious facial expressions, while others smile.

Arms are usually held high, curved at the wrist and slightly bent at the elbow. Hand and finger movements are important. They circle, define figure eights, gently push and gather space, and embellish the rhythm. Arms are not merely a vehicle for the hands, but define geometric spaces and frame the dancer's face and body while protecting it from outside intervention. Shay's (2002, 878) description of poses in Iranian dancing that inscribe geometric form applies to typical movements as performed in Arab countries as well: "...extending the arms and hands away



from the body in a linear figure extending from the shoulders, with the torso and head leaning away from the extended arms, creating a long diagonal." The dancer may curve one arm high with fingers pointing to or touching the side or back of her head, or permit the back of her hand to gently cover her eyes or forehead, while the other arm delicately pushes space away.

When a man dances with a woman, his arms outline a protective circle that frames her dancing. This may also happen with a same sex duet, although in these cases, the movement is understood to mimic or parody the dancing of a man and woman together. While arm and hand movements are essential to this form, they are contained and not completely extended. Rarely are arms out-stretched as they would be in American jazz dance or a modern dance composition. They are always restrained by some curvature at the elbows, wrists and fingers. Dancers do not usually touch each other or spectators. Even when a dancer directs her movements to a spectator or another dancer, she stops short of touching that person.

An important defining element of this form is the dancer's indirect attitude. Movements forward and backward are almost always performed on a diagonal from the body's axis (Laban 1996, Bartenieff 1980). Rarely does the dancer step straight forward or back. The dancer's focus is directed inward or indirectly outward. When her glance engages another person—another dancer or spectator—it is with a sidelong rather than a direct gaze, and for brief periods. For the dancer to focus her gaze at the audience or another dancer is alien to the form and its aesthetic.

In Egypt and other countries of the Mashriq, hip movements are often initiated by a lift and inward rotation of the legs which creates a diagonal inclination to pelvic isolations. In the Maghrib, pelvic isolations are often performed in a back and forth motion along a single plane, while arms are opened wide in a more symmetrical stance than is typical of dancing in the Mashriq. In Maghrib countries, Egypt's Eastern Desert, the Arabian Peninsula and in the Persian Gulf, swinging the hair back and forth is typical of women's dances. However, this is not traditionally part of belly dancing in Egypt and other Mashriq countries. Men frequently manipulate a cane while dancing. Women may also use a cane, stick or sword while dancing. Arm, leg and foot

movements are contained, as are pelvic isolations. They are controlled without being suppressed or repressed. Breasts and pelvis are not thrust forward. The dancer is clearly in control throughout the performance, even when shimmying her shoulders and pelvis. In Morroe Berger's words, "The effect of the dance is somewhat like that of Arab art in general. That is, it depends on form, the arrangement of parts within a compressed area, as in a mosaic. It is not an art of abandon, but largely of restraint and control" (1961, 23.)

On occasion, older women, men, or boys may lampoon belly dance using frontal pelvic movements and a general lack of decorum for comic effect. Such spoofs serve to highlight the importance of control in the dance and the gross inappropriateness of its loss.

### **The Dance Event**

A typical belly dance event unfolds as follows: during an informal get together of friends or relatives, a dance tune comes on the radio, one of the people assembled turns on an audio tape or CD, or more rarely these days, someone beats a dance rhythm on a drum, cooking pot or plastic bucket, and the best dancer in the group is cajoled to dance. People will ask her (or him) to dance; she might demure (e.g., "I don't feel well." "Not today." "I can't dance.") and others will entreat her: "Please, for my sake." "Just a little," etc. until the dancer agrees. If she absolutely refuses to dance, someone else will get up to dance. Alternately, a good dancer may simply begin the dancing without being asked. A dancer may tie a long scarf around her hips before beginning to move, or someone may just sling a scarf around her hips and pull her up to the dance space. The dancer will then improvise, sometimes turning her attention inward, sometimes playing at flirtation with a spectator of either sex. The dancer might move toward a spectator with shoulder shimmies or execute a back bend directed at a spectator's lap, stopping short of touching the person. The spectator may be a friend, a favorite relative or an honored guest. At a family gathering, this normally would not be a prospective spouse or anyone with whom a serious flirtation could legitimately occur.

A spectator may get up to perform a duet with the dancer. Depending on the mood of the party and the people present, the



duet may be friendly competition with each dancer showing off her best moves. Sometimes an older more experienced dancer performs with a younger dancer in this way, subtly showing off her skill and directing a look of mock judgment at the younger dancer, as if to say, "Let's see what you can do." A duet may parody a scene from a film or a professional dance performance, drawing laughter from spectators. If the dance space permits, other dancers may perform separately at the same time. When a dancer tires, she unties her scarf and puts it around a spectator, inviting her to begin dancing (sometimes giving her a kiss on the cheek as well.) She then takes a seat to watch others dance. Or, a dancer may simply join the audience without inviting another dancer. In sum, there is considerable flexibility in the event format.

A similar pattern is repeated at weddings with live music. At such large celebrations, several dancers are likely to perform at the same time, individually, in duets, or in a large circle. A dancer may perform solo for a few minutes, move towards another dancer to improvise together, then separate to perform solo or in duet with someone else. At events where a professional dancer is hired, she will often initiate the dancing. Hosts and guests will take the dance floor or join her towards the end of her performance. Sometimes young girls will perform in the dance space before the professional dancer arrives; they will then vacate the space to permit her to dance alone.

The dance space is usually formed by a ring of seated or standing family, friends, or guests at a celebration. At a small gathering, it may be very small. At larger dance occasions, guests are seated against the walls of a large room, with the space in the middle left open for dancers, hosts who move in and out of the space serving drinks, and guests who may be waking about.

Belly dance events are profoundly social, with active support from the audience. Spectators clap, sing, ululate and encourage the dancer[s] with calls, such as "*hizzi*" (literally "shake"), and ululate. In spite of an initial pretext of modesty the dancer is aware that she is being watched and will perform her best. Competition is built into the genre in that dancers' skills are informally compared with each other. Nonetheless, these comparisons are not institutionalized in any way, *i.e.*, there are no ama-

teur dance competitions with panels of judges. While spectators support the dancers, however, they will also maintain conversations with those near them, and continue to drink their cold and hot drinks; they may move about among each other or join the dancers. Thus, dancers and spectators move fluidly within the dance and audience spaces.

As dance events vary with the occasion and people assembled, they also vary with the social status of the hosts and guests. Earthy, bawdy, or burlesque performances are not likely to take place among those of high social status. Self censorship in this form maintains accepted rules of decorum. Social class is a key factor in negotiating the appropriateness of involvement and the level of play.

### **Who Dances, Where and When?**

Amateurs regularly dance to CD's or the radio whenever friends and family get together—during afternoon visits or evening leisure hours, when the atmosphere is relaxed and informal, but rarely when strangers or foreigners are present. Belly dance is not considered presenting behavior in the formal sense; it is not something one does to impress another. In contrast, professional dancers traditionally performed in homes, clubs or in the streets during weddings, other large celebrations, and religious holidays. Professional dancers currently also perform in nightclubs and cabarets and in the film and television media.<sup>7</sup> In Egypt, the Prophet Muhammad's birthday and various saints' days are celebrated with festive street decoration, Ferris wheels, acrobats, puppet shows and professional dancers. Amateurs may also perform at these celebrations, but they are more likely to be men than women, and rarely members of the educated elite.

In general, amateurs may perform in homes or settings defined as intimate, while professional dancers, that is, those who are paid to dance, perform in contexts defined as public. However, "public" and "intimate" are situationally defined. There is no clear indoor/outdoor distinction. The nature of the audience defines a context as public or not.<sup>8</sup> Thus, amateurs may dance in a nightclub among close friends and relatives, or in space that has been rented for a wedding or other celebration, but they would be criticized if they performed on the stage of the same space in the presence of total strangers.



A performance space outdoors within the walled compound of a house is not usually defined as a public space, nor is an open space in a community where residents define themselves as kin or neighbors. A group of friends may be seen dancing together on the beach or on the aisles of a bus on a long trip. As long as this is not a performance for strangers, it usually remains within the bounds of propriety.

Professional dancers often accompany the bride's procession to the groom's home and the groom's procession from the public bath or mosque to his home. Although the street is very clearly defined as a public space in most contexts, it is not ordinarily considered improper for family members to perform in these processions. A large gender segregated wedding party is very much a public space, and is treated as such in terms of dress and comportment, but because it is gender segregated, no shame is attached to amateurs who dance at the party. Likewise, nearly everyone is expected to dance at a mixed gender wedding, although they may not know all of the guests. To be considered appropriate for dancing, the context needs to be one in which the dancer judges the group to be close friends or social equals or, at the other extreme, one in which no one knows her at all, people she is not likely to see again and whose words will not harm her reputation.

### **Determinants of Appropriate Contexts for Dancing**

Most Arabs will agree that dancing for pay is only permissible for professional dancers or others from low status groups, and that dancing among members of the opposite sex in a large public arena is not permitted, yet there is considerable room for negotiation as to what constitutes a public or an intimate space. The adult members in each family usually define the lines of permissibility. While women in some families dance in the presence of male cousins and uncles and in others, with neighbors and close friends; some women will not dance around any men no matter how close the relationship.

Rules tend to be most stringent for women or men from elite social strata, who will rarely dance except in very intimate circles, even in gender segregated contexts. Belly dancing is locally defined as frivolous and is not considered appropriate for those who are expected to maintain a restrained and respectable

demeanor. Those with reputations for dignity and reserve will not generally jeopardize these reputations by dancing in "public." But even this is negotiable. It is expected that mothers will dance at their sons' and daughters' weddings, or a woman may want to dance to honor her hostess. One way of dealing with an ambiguous situation without unduly threatening one's reputation is to dance with exaggerated restraint for a very short period of time.

There has been some accommodation to social change and global influences. Currently, mixed gender groups of friends and relatives can be seen dancing at elite urban nightclubs without loss of respect, at least by their peers. This dancing, however, does not include the same pelvic isolations that would be performed at home among intimates or at gender segregated parties. An adaptation of belly dance that combines small hops and the footwork of traditional local line dances with an elaboration of arm movements, minimizing shoulder and pelvic shimmies are performed to Middle Eastern music. This is the variation of dance often performed in mixed gender parties in Arab cities as well as in diaspora, especially in Europe and the United States. (In these contexts, western dances are performed to western or global music.) Thus, the public sphere widens and narrows according to the community, social status of the dancer and attitudes of the adults in her family.

### **Attitudes Toward Belly Dance**

Arab culture is not homogeneous, thus, attitudes toward belly dance vary within each community. In general, this genre of dancing is viewed with considerable ambivalence. It is enjoyed by most, yet professional dancers are stigmatized. The genre is regarded as indigenous activity which is difficult for outsiders to copy well. Few Arabs will perform belly dance in environments that include foreigners. Thus, foreign imitators are unlikely to learn the proper form and appropriate behavior.

There is an ongoing debate among Muslim religious scholars about the permissibility in Islam of dancing and playing musical instruments. This debate extends throughout the Islamic world and is not limited to Arab societies. At one extreme are mystics who laud dancing (not just belly dance) and music as the ultimate paths to divine ecstasy. On the other, there are those who



argue that all music and dancing are prohibited in Islam.

One reason that dancers in the Ottoman courts in Turkey often belonged to religious minorities is that their performances could not then be banned on religious grounds. One could not tell a dancer it was a sin to perform if her or his religion did not ban dancing. There is little evidence in early Islamic writing to support a complete ban on dancing, but there is ample reason for scholars' and religious leaders' discomfort with dance, especially belly dance. Besides its sensual connotations, it is unabashedly irreverent. Its form and performance make light of the rules of comportment clerics cherish; to some this implies a questioning of morality itself.

Among the general population, whether Muslim or Christian, opinions as to which (if any) contexts are appropriate for dancing vary according to family and individual. Some families do not permit dancing even at weddings (they engage a professional chanter of religious songs to entertain guests at their own weddings,) while others do not object to dancing even in nightclubs where strangers may be present.

#### **Attitudes Toward Professional Dancers**

Nowhere in the Middle East do professional dancers enjoy high social status. Historically, professional dancers were recruited only from lower status families, and it has often been assumed that dancers' morals are more lax than those of the general population. Currently, as in the past, some dancers are highly respected for their poetic and artistic skills. Nevertheless, professional dancers do in public what most people consider appropriate only in private. More importantly, they make a living from an activity that is considered play. This has historically had a negative impact on attitudes towards them as individuals.

While not enjoying high social status, professional belly dancers tend to have more economic independence, mobility and freedom of association than most other women in their communities, and good dancers may accumulate considerable wealth (see Nieuw Kirk 1995). Attitudes towards professional dancers have become more flexible as dancers from educated families have been trained in ballet (recognized as a classical form) and theatrical folk dance. The formation of the Egyptian National Ballet provided a respectable arena for middle- and upper- class

dancers.

Folk dance troupes formed in Egypt and Lebanon in the 1950s (and later in other Arab countries as well) provided another locally accepted context for dancers from the middle classes to perform. These dance companies perform programmatic dance skits intended to portray rural life. Urban audiences appreciate these dances for their nostalgia. By the mid- 1960s, middle class women were acting in films and eventually a few became dancers in nightclubs. Consequently, professional dancing has lost some of its stigma, and disapproval of professional dancers has declined in some middle class circles.

#### **An Apparent Paradox**

How does a dance that highlights pelvic movement and shoulder shimmies become the traditional dance form in societies that appear to value modesty and respectability? In traditional Arab culture, the public expression of sensuality is curtailed in most social contexts. Self expression is not permitted to take precedence over responsibilities to others or behavior that furthers social cohesion. This is the case for men as well as women.

The importance of taking responsibility towards one's community is expressed in a number of ways. Caring for guests and the poor are considered absolute duties. Rules of hospitality are strict. One must offer guests food and drink. There is no choice, whether or not the host likes the guest. Similarly, reciprocal visiting is compulsory. Weddings, death, illness, birth, a return from travel to distant places: all these require visits from friends and neighbors. Failure to reciprocate is considered a serious breach of etiquette. Mutual help is expected from relatives, neighbors and friends. Once a relationship is established between two parties, each party can expect the other to help in almost any matter, and requests for help are considered appropriate. Members of the community actively participate in decisions that in other societies may be considered personal. Older relatives often choose careers for younger family members (ideally, they take the person's talents and preferences into account,) and the choice of a marriage partner is often a community affair.

Folk heroes in traditional Arab society may not be the wealthiest or the most successful in their careers; instead, the admired hero/heroine may be the most generous, or those who



place their own ambitions second to caring for younger siblings or elderly parents. This is in stark contrast to parts of American society, in which men are encouraged to express their individuality and follow their ambitions irrespective of community or family obligations. (See Gilligan 1982.)<sup>9</sup> In Arab society, the professed ideal for men, at least as much as women, is that they further the interests of the community before promoting their own potentially conflicting interests.

Consistent with the focus on community and de-emphasis on self expression in public, behavior is expected to be more decorous than expressive. One dresses to conform to social norms and not for self expression. Dress is one way to demonstrate an understanding of local rules of modesty and comportment, much as "dressing for success" in American business circles. Thus, dress, whether on the street or in social visits, conforms strictly to community rules. Depending on the community, this may involve some level of veiling, the latest Paris and New York fashions, or tight jeans and low cut t-shirts. Women who veil in public often do so simply to conform to social attitudes, and many women who veil see no contradiction between veiling and participating in public life, driving a taxi or belly dancing.<sup>10</sup>

In sum, restraint, self control, generosity and seriousness in public are highly admired in women and men. When people break the rules of conduct in public, others wonder if they can restrain themselves in other contexts: can they stop themselves from getting into a fight when angered? Can they be trusted with a member of the opposite sex? Proper comportment in traditional Arab society communicates a general self control, an assurance that the person can be trusted to behave appropriately in all situations.<sup>11</sup>

Given these attitudes, how is a sensual expressive form like belly dance tolerated? Why has it become the traditional vernacular dance form in so much of the region? The social responsibility and strict rules of behavior described above are not the only important generative values. Autonomy and self-expression are also highly valued, as are romance and sexuality within marriage. It is only their expression in public places that is discouraged.

In most Arab communities, social rules are relaxed at home and among friends; in these intimate contexts people are ex-

pected to express themselves and assert their autonomy. When they go home, they do not simply 'peel off' their street clothes, but they may also 'peel off' their dignified demeanor. At home (or elsewhere among close kin and friends) it is no longer improper to kiss and flirt with one's spouse, enjoy bawdy jokes and dance. In intimate contexts, self-expression rules, and one may behave as loosely or as decorously as one chooses. Moreover, competition is not circumscribed in these contexts. These intimate spaces are important contexts for self-expression that is curtailed elsewhere, and it is here that belly dance flourishes.

### **Belly Dance as Play**

Traditional belly dance is above all lighthearted play. It is neither programmatic nor literal. Like traditional Arabic music, it has no story line and no articulated goal other than to provide pleasure. Johan Huizinga's treatise on the importance of play in society (Huizinga 1950) can provide a framework for understanding the playful elements of belly dance. Huizinga first establishes play as fun, its irreducible quality being "pure playfulness." (1950, 7). "For the responsible adult," he writes, "play can be deferred or suspended at any time. It is never imposed by physical necessity or moral duty...It is done at leisure, during 'free time'." He delineates four main characteristics of play: the first is that it is free ("is in fact freedom"); the second is "that play is not 'ordinary' or 'real' life. It is a stepping out of 'real life' into a temporary sphere of activity with a disposition all its own." Third, "it is 'played out' within certain limits of time and place." Finally, once performed, play "at once assumes a fixed form as a cultural phenomenon. It is transmitted, it becomes tradition" (Huizinga 1950, 7-10).

Belly dance, as performed by amateurs, conforms to all of Huizinga's criteria for play. Except for professional dancers (for whom performance is pay, not play,) dancers perform for pleasure and not duty. There are very few occasions in which one would belly dance from a sense of duty. We have seen that a dancer who does not wish to perform on a given day or in a given place is not forced to do so. Because this is play, there is considerable variation among families and communities in terms of when and where to dance and with whom. This contrasts with rules of etiquette and prescribed behavior that permits little



variation.

Appropriate contexts for dancing are the time slots and places devoted to leisure activity. In its reversal of social mores, including the rules of modesty and the avoidance of publicly recognizing sexuality, dancing expresses freedom from social restraints. When the dancer feigns modesty by covering her eyes with the back of her hand while moving her pelvis, she is making a good humored meta-statement about this dance that is anything but modest.

As an improvised form, the genre provides considerable freedom for individual self-expression. Belly dance is entirely fantasy, unconnected to the reality of the dancers' lives. In real life, they maintain decorum and reserve; many wear the veil in public; and they are expected to give precedence to the needs of others over their own wishes. Like Huizinga's play, belly dancing is clearly bounded within time and place. Finally, whenever and wherever it originated, and in spite of considerable criticism from elite circles, it is well established as traditional entertainment in the region.

Belly dance, as play, is performed purely for the pleasure of the dancer and spectators. It is *not* intentionally seductive. Seduction implies a goal orientation, e.g., "I want to arouse the spectators/my husband." Instead, there is considerable teasing of social mores and satire in the dancing. Along with the sheer pleasure of dancing are elements of self mockery, parody of the genre and of societal expectations.

### A Cultural Metaphor

I propose that the combination of play and restraint found in traditional amateur belly dance is not only pleasurable entertainment, but a metaphor of important values in Arab society. The rules governing dancing behavior reflect and affirm the centrality of community in the culture and its tension with a valuation of autonomy, a focus on the multiplicity of roles each person plays, a cultural valuation of flexibility and humor, and Arab gender roles.

Arab culture appears to be characterized by the coexistence of two foci, one on community and another, "agonistic," pull that emphasizes autonomy and self-expression (Joseph 1980, 1981.) Where the pivotal unit is the community (or extended family),

personal desires and sexual urges are potentially divisive.<sup>12</sup> Yet, there is a simultaneous value on autonomy and self-expression in Arab societies. Culturally, this potential conflict is resolved by limiting the contexts in which autonomy is allowed to rule and separating these contexts as much as possible from public life. Within the intimacy of home, among close friends and in a few other domains, one is expected to follow one's predilections rather than focus on the needs of a wider community. But this autonomy is not to be flaunted or even discussed in public contexts. Belly dancing enacts and represents this aspect of Arab culture.

There are few limits on which parts of the body to use when belly dancing, and the emphasis on improvisation and lack of programmatic intent all maximize the dancer's autonomy. Yet this is an autonomy restrained by clear boundaries. Locally defined decorum is built into the rules of the dance, which include restraint in stretches and steps and the avoidance of touch and frontal focus, thus negating explicit sexuality. Arm movements extend the dancer's personal space, gently pushing at boundaries but not reaching for the sky. As described previously, performance contexts and spaces are strictly limited. The small space allotted the dancer represents not only the clear cut boundaries of the dance performance, but also the limited life contexts in which free play and individuality are permitted.

This dance form is very much the Arab ideal of self-expression. By encouraging individuality and competition while controlling its contexts, the cultural message is that there is considerable leeway for a person to do what she wants so long as it is done away from the public gaze. Others should not have to confront the flaunting of rules in public. Belly dance expresses, not only the individual, but also cultural values that limit sexuality to marriage and a small, protected domestic sphere.

In a society that simultaneously values community and autonomy, the authentic self is less important socially than the multiple roles each person is required to play. The negotiation of rules of appropriate behavior inherent in amateur belly dancing events, the concurrent isolation of various body parts, and continuous improvisation all replicate the negotiation skills necessary for daily life in this society.

There exists a flexibility in Arab culture and a resistance to



rigidity in rules and classification systems.<sup>13</sup> As has been shown above, flexibility characterizes this genre. Like other forms of play, considerable differences exist between individuals and families in terms of their enjoyment or tolerance of dancing. None of the rules are absolute regarding who is permitted to dance and in which contexts. Improvisation and the humor inherent in belly dancing and its mockery of social mores reflect a malleable attitude to rules that is also found in the plethora of jokes in Arabic that target figures of authority.

Finally, belly dancing, although performed by men as well as women, is closely tied to gender roles. Ironically, secluded women in traditional Arab culture have more occasion to express their individuality and autonomy than men who are constantly in the public eye. This stands in stark contrast with American society, where women tend to be more community oriented than men (Gilligan 1982).

It is consistent with an Arab value system as described here that a genre representing autonomy and self-expression is so closely associated with women. The dancer's control of when and how to dance reflects the woman's complete control in the domestic sphere. Her competence in dancing metaphorically represents the cultural expectation that she develop competence in activities such as parenting and hospitality that are highly valued in Arab society. My argument is that participation in belly dancing and other arts creates and affirms culturally held values.

### East Meets West

What has been described above is an aesthetic that differs radically from Euro-America. Art in the West is highly programmatic; classical traditions usually depict a story or mood. Even modern and post-modern works that pretend not to be literal contain messages about art and society that the audience is expected to infer. Appreciation of a work often depends on understanding the message. Europeans and Americans thus expect semantic intent in art. When exposed to the quivering hips and shoulders of belly dance performance, they tend to assume intent, in this case, seduction. Protestant attitudes towards the body, its suppression of and simultaneous obsession with sexuality, further support the impression that this dance form is some sort of exotic sexual game.

Missing from historic or contemporary Euro-American interpretations of belly dance is its ludic sense—its play and humor. This may be due to the decline in play activity in Europe and the United States. According to Huizinga, “the play-element in culture has been on the wane since the eighteenth century when it was in full flower” (1950, 206). He argues that organized sports have lost their spirit of play and that social norms and fashion are no longer as playful as they once were. In his view the individualization of art is also inimical to play as a social form (1950, 201). If Huizinga is correct, belly dance as pure play and without overt meaning or intent may be entirely foreign to contemporary European and American observers.

Although many married couples dance together, Arabs will often deny that husbands and wives ever do so. Just as one does not talk about kissing and making love, dancing together is not something to be discussed with strangers. Another reason for the fervent denial of mixed gender couple dancing is a felt necessity when talking with westerners to de-emphasize the sexuality of this dance form. Belly dance is so often misunderstood in the West as an overtly sexual and intentionally seductive form, and this reflects such misunderstanding of the genre, that Arabs tend to feel they have to bend over backward to deny any sexual connotations to the genre.

American feminists of the 1970s, looking for liberation from a suppressive morality that denied the value of the body, embraced variations of belly dancing, which appeared to glorify the body. To them and to many belly dancers since then, performing these dances is a feminist act of liberation. The dancers were not entirely mistaken because attitudes in the Middle East towards sexual activity are very different from Protestant attitudes. Although the Christian concept of original sin taints sexual activity even within marriage, this moral tableau is absent in Islam. Sexual pleasure within marriage, not only for procreation, is valued. It is sexual activity outside marriage that is categorically disavowed.

Ironically, while Euro-American dancers often cite solo improvised dancing as a means towards their own sexual liberation, few follow the logic of their arguments by viewing their modestly dressed Arab sisters who have performed this dance since childhood as sexually liberated. The colonial disdain thus re-



mains undisturbed. Again, the issue is one of misunderstanding and ignorance of underlying cultural values.

Meanwhile, many Arabs consider popular dances indigenous to Europe and the United States immoral. We have seen that belly dance avoids touch between performers and very rarely crosses sexual boundaries even in its exaggerated forms. Those who grow up in a tradition that constrains public expressions of sexuality are often shocked at ballroom dances that include heterosexual couples touching in public and disapprove of global popular dances involving members of respected status groups performing frontal pelvic isolations in mixed gender environments. To the Arab community, this form of couple dancing looks like wanton behavior, not unlike that commonly attributed to professional belly dancers. The idealization of the heterogeneous couple in western social dance contrasts markedly with the Arab idealization of the community and its right to govern the place and time individual expression is permitted. While Arabs and Americans share basic moral tenets—honesty, the golden rule, the value of human life—there are important differences in outlook and aesthetics, and these differences account for the very different perceptions of belly dance in the two cultures.

### **Eastern Elite Meets West**

While some upper class families in the Middle East will enjoy bawdy jokes and belly dance in intimate contexts, others maintain aristocratic reserve even at home. Members of elite social groups in the Middle East, as elsewhere, have more invested in the status quo and tend to believe their own myths. That is, they are less likely to mock rules of conduct and morality, even in privacy. Those members of the elite who maintain reserve at home are often in total sympathy with the western bourgeois horror at all burlesque forms. Their revulsion to belly dance is reinforced by what they see as the modern, "civilized" attitudes of their global counterparts. Further, many members of the elite have been exposed to ballet and ballroom dancing without a knowledge of the historical development of these genres. Impressed with the predictability of composed art forms, they idealize western dancing at the expense of indigenous earthy local genres.

### **The Transformation of a Folk Art**

Cultural contact between East and West since the 18<sup>th</sup> century has also wrought changes in belly dance as performed in Arab countries. Occupying armies and European travelers encouraged sexualized forms of the dance performed by professional dancers. The versions of the dance performed in American dance halls in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries were also highly sexualized. These new versions of the dance were then exported back to Cairo and other Middle Eastern capitals to be performed in nightclubs for tourists.<sup>14</sup> The restraint and control that originally typified the dance disappeared. Overtly seductive moves were added to the dancers' repertoire. Local nightclub dancers picked up the Hollywood-inspired beaded and sequined halter top, gauze skirt and high heels. Western-style orchestras replaced the small group of musicians (often relatives of the dancer) that had traditionally accompanied dancers. Dancers used the whole of the stage instead of limiting themselves to one spot. In short, a commercial version of belly dance was developed to cater to tourist tastes, and subsequently labeled as a local dance.

The aesthetic of the new professional dancing is no longer indigenous and many locals find it distasteful. Those educated in the West have picked up colonial attitudes towards this dance. They simultaneously disdain it as a sign of backwardness and resent that it provides fodder for exoticizing westerners to incorrectly label Arabs as sensuous and depraved. Further, the association of this dance with gender segregated parties and working class popular culture makes it appear the opposite of liberated feminism to many elite educated Middle Eastern women.

Other changes also influenced belly dance in the Middle East. For years, the Egyptian film industry featured belly dance in its films. These films, and later televised dancing, spread the genre throughout the region as a popular art form. Belly dance was learned by women in communities where it was not traditionally performed. Increasingly, at weddings on the Arabian Peninsula one sees women belly dancing instead of performing their own traditional dances. Also through media exposure, women in the Middle East are learning western "belly dance" movements, thus changing the look of the dance performed in homes. Global popular dance movements have been incorporated into the belly dancing performed in traditional contexts. Shoulders are no



longer held low and back; direct pelvic tilts, which would have been considered indecent by an older generation, can now be seen at weddings and parties.

It is clear that several influences are currently impacting the genre and its performance. Among them is a conservative mood in the region that attempts to control dance performance. Media influences and exposure to Euro-American ideas both extend and limit the performance of belly dance. Nevertheless, because the genre is defined as play and as self-expression, there still exists a wide range of attitudes towards it. Accommodations made in the dance to permit its performance in less intimate contexts, and the fact that it continues to be performed in homes speak to the continuing vitality of this playful tradition.

### Conclusion

Belly dance has been described as indigenous to Arab and other Middle Eastern countries, as a folk genre in an extensive and diverse dance tradition. Its performance includes pelvic, shoulder and head isolations, arm and hand movements and small steps. It is both sensual and restrained. Although enjoyed as self-expression, it is only performed in limited contexts, locally defined as intimate or playful. Professional performers are appreciated and admired for their skills but they do not enjoy high social status.

It has been argued that belly dance, as performed in its indigenous contexts, is play, both in local perceptions and following Huizinga's (1950) definitions of play. In its movements and the manner in which they are executed, appropriate contexts of its performance and local attitudes towards the genre, it is both a humorous metacommentary on social mores and a metaphor of generative values in Arab society. It embodies the importance of autonomy and self expression and their positioning in intimate or gender segregated contexts. The restraint and decorum expected of Arabs when in public arenas are also embedded in the dance and rules of performance. Its very humor speaks to a local propensity for self mockery. Class differences in attitudes towards belly dance are related to the relative seriousness with which particular families view the social system. In some cases, local elite and western bourgeois attitudes towards belly dancing reinforce each other. Finally, there have been significant changes in

the dance and its performance engendered by cultural borrowing. In sum, belly dance appears to be a folk genre that has shown itself to be malleable to social change and a pervasive signifier of self-expression in Arab societies.

### Notes

<sup>1</sup> Portions of this paper have been presented in three lectures: "Belly Dance: The Translation of a Cultural Movement," Caravan Foundation's Silk Road Journeys, The Great Hall, Cooper Union, New York, NY, Dec 10, 1998 and "Belly Dance: Exploring the Mundane and Translating the Exotic," Visual Research Conference, Chicago, IL, November 1999. I also presented at CORD July, 2003. I thank Rhoda Grauer for encouraging me a long time ago to think seriously about this playful genre. I am also grateful to Suad Abd al-Haq Muhammad and Emna Zghal for their very helpful comments on an earlier draft of this paper.

<sup>2</sup> See Adra 1998c for references on dancing in the Middle East. The journals *Al-Ma'thurat Al-Sha'biyya*, published by the Arab Gulf States Folklore Center, Qatar, and the Iraqi, *Al-Turath Ash-Sha'bi* include research on dancing in the region.

<sup>3</sup> LeeEllen Friedland (1998:32) argues that the term "vernacular dance" carries less historical baggage than "folk dance", which is associated with the rise of nationalism in Europe, or "popular dance," with its connotations of commercialism. I retain the term "folk dance" here to emphasize that it is indigenous and not a classical genre, although it is also very much part of popular culture in the region.

<sup>4</sup> See Shiloah (1962) for a discussion of classical dances in an earlier age.

<sup>5</sup> While there probably have always been ascetic families in the region, their numbers and influence have grown in the past 30 years.

<sup>6</sup> A pattern of improvisation in which the artist, bound by given parameters, improvises in response to an ongoing communication with the audience characterized traditional music and dance in the region. (See El Shawan Castelo-Branco 2002, 559.)

<sup>7</sup> See Nieuwkerk for a study of professional belly dancers and attitudes towards them.

<sup>8</sup> I thank Emma Zghal (personal communication) for pointing this out to me.

<sup>9</sup> While there are problems with Gilligan's argument, I think it reveals a dichotomy and set of values characteristic of American society but that are not necessarily universal.

<sup>10</sup> Women's veiling in public has increasingly taken on religious connotations in the past 30 years. Reasons for veiling are complex and



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haven explored in: El Guindi (1999) and Zuhur (1994). Veiling is uncommon in situations considered intimate. Thus, most women do not veil in their own houses unless unrelated men are present.

<sup>11</sup>. Compare this with table manners in the United States. It does not matter how you eat at home alone, but knowing how to eat in public is assumed to reflect other social competence as well.

<sup>12</sup>. Compare this with traditional middle American values in which the heterosexual couple is pivotal. Here, showing off one's sexuality and/or one's partner, becomes a way of affirming this cultural value.

<sup>13</sup>. This propensity can lead to conflict with local conservatives as well as with westerners who value strict definitions and guidelines.

<sup>14</sup>. It is interesting to note that when the heroine in Naguib Mahfouz's *Midaq Alley* (1975: 188-189) is seduced to serve as a prostitute for Britons in Egypt, she is first taught to dance in a westernized style.