2000

An Arab woman's exploration of an ancient/modern dance form

Iman Abdelmohsien
San Jose State University

Follow this and additional works at: https://scholarworks.sjsu.edu/etd_theses

Recommended Citation

Abdelmohsien, Iman, "An Arab woman's exploration of an ancient/modern dance form" (2000). *Master's Theses*. 1966.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.31979/etd.g2sq-nq69>

https://scholarworks.sjsu.edu/etd_theses/1966

This Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by the Master's Theses and Graduate Research at SJSU ScholarWorks. It has been accepted for inclusion in Master's Theses by an authorized administrator of SJSU ScholarWorks. For more information, please contact scholarworks@sjsu.edu.

INFORMATION TO USERS

This manuscript has been reproduced from the microfilm master. UMI films the text directly from the original or copy submitted. Thus, some thesis and dissertation copies are in typewriter face, while others may be from any type of computer printer.

The quality of this reproduction is dependent upon the quality of the copy submitted. Broken or indistinct print, colored or poor quality illustrations and photographs, print bleedthrough, substandard margins, and improper alignment can adversely affect reproduction.

In the unlikely event that the author did not send UMI a complete manuscript and there are missing pages, these will be noted. Also, if unauthorized copyright material had to be removed, a note will indicate the deletion.

Oversize materials (e.g., maps, drawings, charts) are reproduced by sectioning the original, beginning at the upper left-hand corner and continuing from left to right in equal sections with small overlaps.

Photographs included in the original manuscript have been reproduced xerographically in this copy. Higher quality 6" x 9" black and white photographic prints are available for any photographs or illustrations appearing in this copy for an additional charge. Contact UMI directly to order.

**Bell & Howell Information and Learning
300 North Zeeb Road, Ann Arbor, MI 48106-1346 USA
800-521-0600**

UMI[®]

**AN ARAB WOMAN'S EXPLORATION OF
AN ANCIENT/MODERN DANCE FORM**

A Thesis

Presented to

The Faculty of the Department of Theatre Arts

San Jose State University

In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree

Master of Arts

by

Iman Abdelmohsien

May 2000

UMI Number: 1399770

UMI[®]

UMI Microform 1399770

Copyright 2000 by Bell & Howell Information and Learning Company.

All rights reserved. This microform edition is protected against
unauthorized copying under Title 17, United States Code.

Bell & Howell Information and Learning Company
300 North Zeeb Road
P.O. Box 1346
Ann Arbor, MI 48106-1346

c 2000

Iman Abdelmohsien

ALL RIGHT RESERVED

APPROVED FOR THE DEPARTMENT OF THEATRE ARTS

Dr. Karl Toepfer

Dr. David Khan

Dr. Bob Jenkins

APPROVED FOR THE UNIVERSITY

William Fish

ABSTRACT

An Arab Woman's exploration of

An Ancient/Modern Dance Form.

by Iman Abdelmohsien

This thesis addresses the topic of belly dancing. A phenomenon that creates a common bond among people. It has survived since antiquity, and has changed very little since its origin, but seems to have a solid hold in the future. It is a power dance that differentiates individuality and provides the special dominion of regional culture owned by women through a particular performance. How has this occurred? Using participant-observation, interviews and analysis of primary sources, this study resolved the tension of belly dance perception between Middle Eastern and Western values systems where cultural and sexual differences operated. It also clarifies the peculiar message of the dance and its importance in both cultures where it exists.

Chapter 1 focuses on the theoretical and personal perspectives on belly dancing.

Chapter 2 outlines the cultural identity of the belly dance.

Chapter 3 explicates belly dance history from the ancient temple to the 20th Century cabaret.

Chapter 4 focuses on modern images of Middle Eastern professional performance.

Chapter 5 examines belly dance femininity and sensuality and the present and future trends on belly dancing.

Acknowledgments

I wish to thank all those who have helped me in the preparation of this thesis. Among them I am grateful to my professor Karl Toepfer for his advice and for providing me with endless sustenance during the writing of this thesis. I wish to thank the chair of my thesis committee Bob Jenkins and committee member David Khan for their time.

I am particularly indebted to Jordan Dancer. for her invaluable contribution on American belly dancers, her time and support. I also wish to thank Ghanima Gaditana, and my friend Hala Fawzi for their assistance with this thesis.

Finally, I would like to express appreciation to my family for their encouragement and support. Thanks to my husband Aladin Bedri, who has encouraged and supported me in more ways than I can say.

Contents

List of illustrations	vii
Chapter One Theoretical and Personal Perspectives on the Belly Dance	1
Chapter Two Cultural Identity of the Belly Dance	35
Chapter Three Belly Dance History from Ancient Temple to Twentieth Century Cabaret	67
Chapter Four Modern Images of Middle Eastern Professional Performances	104
Chapter Five Belly Dance Femininity and Sensuality	133
References	149
Glossary	152

List of illustrations

1. Feast with music and dancing girls. Wall picture from a Theban tomb in the British Museum. After a photograph by Wilke.
2. Female dancers under the new Empire. The tall ones with kettledrums, the short ones with castanets. (Rekuef At Gizeh. after Perrot-Chipiez)
3. Egyptian Ladies at a Feast Wall picture from a Theban tomb in the British Museum. After a photograph by Wilke.
4. Acrobatic Dancers Incised relief on red quartzite. Theban tomb. Photo by Wim Swaan.
5. Harpist and Acrobatic dancers Incised relief on red quartzite. Theban tomb. Photo by Wim Swaan.
6. Scene of Dancers accompanied by an orchestra. From the tomb of Nenk-fer-ti-kai. Shakkara. 4th or 5th Dynasty, or Approx. 3000 B.C.
7. A Child Dancer from the Siwa Oasis in Upper Egypt Photo by Mahmoud Reda. 1965.
8. A Dance at Sunset Otoo Pilny. Mid-19th century. Oil painting. Sotheby's. London
9. Gypsies of the Sacc'd Egypt C.R. Huber. C.1870. Engraving
10. *Ghawazee* entertaining travelers by torch-light in Asiut Mid-19th century. Engraving. Arabesque collection. New York
11. Dance of the Almeh. Jean-Leon Gerome. Oil painting. Dayton Art Institute. Ohio.
12. A dance in the ruins of Karnak. Late 19th century. Engraving.

13. Badia Masabni, the artist who created a renaissance of belly dance and music. Photo courtesy of Dr. Mo Geddawi 1930.
14. Tahia Carioca on stage. November 1940s. Photo courtesy of Mohammed Emara.
15. Tahia Carioca with a *baledi* dress, extracted from a feature film "Li'bet el-Sit" (The Woman's Game) October, 1940s.
16. Samia Gamal on stage wearing a high-heeled shoes, an innovation of late 1920s.
17. Samia Gamal and Farid Al Atrah, in an Egyptian film Musical "Al Rajool Al Thaani" (The Other Man) November, 1950s. The chorus girls are seen around and at the back.
18. Nagwa Fouad performs for the 2nd Middle Eastern Dance Festival held in Frankfurt. October 1989. Photo courtesy of Dietlinde
19. Nagwa Fouad with her immediate warmth and magnetic personality performing at Cairo nightclub, 1989. The costume is a blend of East and West.
20. Soheir Zaki with the percussive section of her orchestra. In her performance she actually becomes the music 1989. Photo courtesy of Grace Pagano.
21. Soheir Zaki in a *baledi* dress, performing at the "Cave du Roi" (Zamalek) 1987. Photo Arabesque collection.
22. Nadia Gamal performing at the Phoenicia Hotel, Beirut 1968. Photo Arabesque collection.
23. Nadia Gamal the earth salutation, the physical contact with mother earth, the beckoning hand, all are rituals of woman. Photo Arabesque collection.

24. For Nadia Gamal belly dance is an expression dance, she expresses her feeling with her body, face and hands. Photo Arabesque collection.
25. Nadia Gamal her hand expresses is an invitation to an audience to share the deeply personal and all encompassing passion of the dance. Photo Arabesque collection.
26. Nadia Gamal's hands are an expression of an outer and inner flow of pure energy. Her shoulders accent the vivid expression of her face. Photo Arabesque collection.
27. The delicate hands, the teasing shoulder, the tilted head; these facets of open sensuality are the secret delights and desires of Middle Eastern men. Photo Arabesque collection.
28. Nadia Gamal's uplifted arms speak of an intimate awareness of the knowledge of gesture, her gestures designate designs in space, carve lines in air. Photo Arabesque collection.
29. Nadia Gamal in a climatic head-swing of a zar ritual of exorcism. Her hair moves as a wild mass and appears to have a life of its own. Photo Arabesque collection.
30. Nadia Gamal her hands say "come to me, my love". It is as if that mouth, those lips were articulating Arabic melodies that can reveal a thousand variations and yet appear ever new and enchanting. Photo Arabesque collection.

Chapter One

Theoretical and Personal Perspectives on the Belly Dance

In the wake of political crises, oil embargoes and the new-found influence of the Middle East, there exists an attempt at a creative and unifying force, an art form that has survived thousands of years shrouded in mystery crossed seas and found a home on new continents. This is the belly dance. It is a vital form of art and a cultural phenomenon that creates a common bond among people. In the Arab-Islamic world, the North African coast, the countries bordering the southern and the eastern shores of the Mediterranean, as well as the vast desert of the Middle East (this area will be referred to as “Middle Eastern countries”), the belly dance has become a secular art, a mode of performance dominated by and largely defined by women.

The basic pelvic movement is the starting point. Belly dancing has the same motion characteristics throughout the centuries. It has changed very little since its beginning. Nonetheless, its meaning, respectability and ambiguity have evolved. Thousands of people all over the world exercise it. Many questions arise here: What is belly dancing? Why has it become one of the popular forms of entertainment not only in the Middle East countries but also in the Western world? What is the enduring value

associated with belly dance that has enabled it to last with insignificant change all those years? Why are women in the Middle Eastern countries fond of it?

To answer these questions, this chapter will identify the meaning of belly dancing and point out how it is different from other dances performed by Middle Eastern women. It will also explain the literature and the previous position of belly dancing, focusing on the Middle Eastern countries. Through a historical analysis and cultural context of this art, I will review the enduring values associated with belly dancing which has led Middle Eastern women to become interested in it. I presume that the continuing appreciation of this dance connects to the difference between the way men and women perceive it. Hence, the study will show, from a different perspective, the various virtues assigned to belly dancing by women who perform it and by men who watch the dance. This distinction of the belly dance's perception between male and female of the Middle Eastern and Western countries will be the guiding questions for chapter two and chapter five.

However, my main research perspective has been delving into the history of the belly dance and the discourse over the different views of perceiving it. Meanwhile, by examining the dance features displayed by performances in different media and by considering a particular staging or presentation, the thesis will resolve the tensions of belly dance perception between Middle Eastern and Western values systems where cultural and sexual differences operated. It may also clarify the peculiar message of the dance and its importance in both cultures where it exists. First, I would like to investigate

the special and interesting pleasures and advantages related to the belly dance for the performers and audiences of both sexes in the Middle Eastern and Western countries. Second, through an analysis of the visual material, such as, video clips, photos, as well as presenting the significance of performances of three well known professional dancers, Nagwa Fouad, Sohair Zaki and Nadia Gamal, I will describe the conventions or signifying practices that can be ascribed to the performance values of the art. Then, I will discuss the indicative feats that are uniquely performed by a certain dancer, Nadia Gamal and, along with the meaning that can be ascribed to the specific signifying practices of her performance.

To implement this methodology, I relied on my own background as a Middle Eastern woman and my personal knowledge on the subject. As belly dancing is an exponent and popular art in my own culture, it gives me the first-hand experience in the subculture for two reasons. First, by definition, the term belly dance refers to the dancer's moving of her muscles in the abdomen area of her body. This, of course, is done in an artistically and attractively manner that makes the gawkers gather in fascination. Therefore, in this thesis, the main focus of discussion will be a conscientious endeavor to answer some of the questions pertinent to the mystery often associated with this art, as well as revealing and shedding light on the subject. To do that, I choose remarkable and famous belly dancers, Tahia Carioca and Samia Gamla, who in my view, represent the different stages through which this art has

developed. A second objective is to provide more information about the dance, culture, customs, and traditions of this vast and diverse part of the world.

The wide variety of terminology especially in terms of what the art form is called has been best explained by Leona Wood in 1976. (Wood, 1976, 18) The classificatory (anatomically descriptive) term “belly dance”, restricted to a special and limited image of the dancer, is the embodiment of what *danse du ventre* has come to mean to most people. However, it represents only the most familiar aspect of a dance form that is both ancient and various. Therefore the terms most commonly used to identify the belly dance are *raqs Masri* (Egyptian dance), *raqs baledi* (native dance), *raqs sharqi* (oriental dance), *raqs Arabi* (Arabian dance). The cogent defining element is the variety of articulated pelvic movements that differentiate it from most, but certainly not all, other dance traditions.

It is more properly termed “oriental dance,” to designate the form in the Middle Eastern and North African countries. Yet how and why it was a dance for North African and Middle Eastern women, as opposed to those of other areas, who retained the old fertility dance and made of it such a sophisticated art, remains a mystery.

For this thesis I choose to use “belly dance” because it is the most common term used in the United States and seems to have been derived from the literal English translation of the French *danse du ventre*, a term used to describe dances seen by European travelers in northern Africa as early as the eighteenth century.

As belly dancing is the primary concern of this thesis, its practitioners from northern Africa may also perform versions of related regionally or culturally-defined dance styles such as the Moroccan *guedra*, Egyptian *ghawazi* styles, and the Lebanese *dabka*. These forms are often grouped as Middle Eastern dances since World War Two, because this geographical region has been commonly termed “Middle East”. Belly dancing can be viewed as part of the Middle Eastern art complex. In this thesis, these other dance styles and their performance will be discussed only in relation to the belly dance context.

It is the purpose of this paper to gather primary information on the belly dance. The literature found has primarily surfaced in the last ten to twenty years. What little literature is available focuses on various forms of belly dancing as it occurs in the Middle Eastern countries with some reference to its spreading into the Western countries. Source materials include interviews and analyses of books and magazines targeted to the subject, mostly written by participants about themselves and the dance. The popular literature in the form of articles, videotapes and books is usually written by dance practitioners or journalists whose research, while useful, does not always include scholarly apparatus and whose validity and reliability may be questionable.

Some articles and books, which are not directly relevant, offer background information that informs the cultural and historical context of this study. An important article on belly dance appeared in 1976, “Danse du Ventre: A Fresh Appraisal” by Leona Wood. The author’s comments reflect the popularity of the belly dance in the United

States in the 1970s. Her goals were to dispel myths and reconcile “real and apparent inconsistencies” about the origins and history of the dance resulting from the “enthusiasm of its protagonists” which had “become a chief hindrance to an objective assessment.” (Wood, 18) She addresses the “Changing Image,” how the public views this dance at the present time, evidenced by its expectations in the “field of entertainment” which continues to be an issue of concern today.

A large portion of the material on belly dancing relevant to this thesis was written by Oriental dancers in the form of articles or books for the Middle Eastern dance community or the general public. Several articles appearing in the form of magazine articles, provide primary source material on the culture and tradition of the Middle Eastern people.

The history of the belly dance in America and its subculture development between approximately the 1920s and the 1990s, is discussed in several works:

Ibrahim Farrah, a publisher of Arabesque magazine which started 1975, has sprinkled information about the proliferation of belly dancing in America. Early editorials and the series “Cairo on the Hudson, San Francisco on the Nile” offer particular insights on this subject. (Farrah, 1975, 4)

“From Bon Chi Bon Genre to Bumming on the Nile”, Farrah recounts the transformation of a rational Frenchman Alain Weber, a classical music impresario responsible for organizing concerts in France into a *fellah* (in life style) and musician (by profession) and his integration into the musical and social life of Upper Egypt. There he

describes the *ghawaze* as the original professional dancers of Egypt prior to cabaret style. (Farrah, 1991, 4)

Another article which was reviewed by Farrah featured the National Geographic's Explorer Series in the program "Egypt Beyond the Pyramids." This Series included the feature film "Cairo Unveiled" aired in August, 1992. The film focused on the 'art' and spotlighted the life of a popular Egyptian professional belly dancer Lucy, who is amongst the newer dancers in vogue. (Farrah, 1992, 10)

A number of authors wrote about the belly dance in the Middle Eastern countries and North Africa through sociological, ethnographic and historical perspectives. In "Homage to a Belly Dancer", Edward Said described the legendary Egyptian professional belly dancer Tahia Carioca from the late 1940s and early 1960s as revolutionary in belly dancing and in politics. (Said, 1994, 8)

The wide variety of terminology, especially in terms of performance code and performer code, has been explained by Karl Toepfer in his article "Decontextualization and Performance Analysis." (Toepfer, 1995) For readers unfamiliar with the terms, a brief explanation is offered here. When using the terms performance code and performer code, I observe these distinctions. 1) performance code refers to conventions, signifying practices which we can ascribe to a culture or historical era, not to individuals. These are conventions which performer and audiences learn, and they establish the "readability" of a performance. 2) the performer code refers to conventions or signifying practices peculiar to an individual performer, and these conventions establish the "consistency" of

a performer across texts or media. The performer code is necessarily in tension with the performance code to some degree, for the performer code is a major source of innovation within the performance code we identify the signifying practices or conventions defining each code. For belly dancing, we can break down the signifying practices as follows (for example): 1) whole body movement; 2) movement of particular body parts; 3) make up and costume; 4) music; 5) choice of setting or performance milieu (nightclub, film); 6) relation to other bodies in performance, including the audiences; 7) off-screen or off-stage performance dynamics - how the performer interacts with the “public” or in public/private life, including the “image” of the performer in non-performance contexts (such as magazines, posters, advertisements, media discourse). What are perceived and unacknowledged advantages and limitations of the code? Why does the code operate within a particular context, why does it fail or expire? What are problems, consequences, or benefits derived from employing the code? This terminology helps in explaining the signifying practices and a unique performance of Nadia Gamal in relation to the other two performances Nagwa Fouad and Sohair Zaki.

In Life in Ancient Egypt, Adolf Erman explained dances images and their movements which “appear to have been very measured” under the Old Empire, and comparing them with the dances of the New Empire, which “were more like those of the East of the present time.” (Erman, 1894, 246)

In Dance with the Pharoahs, Leon Grieg did extensive research into the dance in Egypt, where in the 1950s he did choreography for the first large scale musical and dance

film made in Cairo. Samia Gamal, one of the legendary Egyptian professional dancers of the 1920s, appeared as a modern culmination combined with classical ballet. (Grieg, 1955, 12)

Magda Saleh wrote a comprehensive dissertation on Egyptian dance traditions. An article “Images of Women: The Portrayal of Women in Photography of the Middle East,” includes a section on historical and ethnographic descriptions of belly dance. (Saleh, 1979, 10) Among her other articles is the history of Middle Eastern ‘dancing girls’ through photographic portrayals, “The Ghawazi of Egypt: A Preliminary Report,” offers a revitalized look at the “public dancing girls” from the perspective of someone who is considered an authority on the indigenous dances of Egypt. (Saleh, 1993, 8)

“Dancing at the Edge of the World: Ritual, Community and The Middle Eastern Dance,” by Andrea Deagon. Ph.D. in Classical Studies, investigates the ever mysterious tension of the sacred and profane aspects of Middle Eastern dance. “The oriental dancer of today,” she states, “is clearly the heiress of network of ritual symbolic structures.” (Deagon, 1994, 8)

In “Some Ways of Looking at Ethnic Dance: A Contemporary Look at Ethnic Dance,” Linda Small goes back many thousands of years to about 3,500 B. C., when Egypt was divided into 42 districts. Each district exercised a great deal of autonomy in religious matters. (Small, 1981, 11)

In “Egyptian Feasts and Dances of Earliest Times.” Dr. Bettina Knapp described the images of dance and ritual dance, feast and ceremonies from the ancient times as depicted in the tombs. (Knapp, 1981, 13)

In “The Fairs of 1893:1876 and 1904,” Barbara Siegel described the Chicago World’s Fair of 1876. In this Fair the belly dance was introduced for the first time to the American public, when confluence of Eastern and Western cultures began. (Siegel, 1993, 7) Other historical transformations and convergences of the secular and sacred feature in the article by Siegel “Belly Dance: The Enduring Embarrassment,” which presents a historical foundation for the conflicting affinities in a dancer’s soul. She discusses the enduring and fascinating contest between acceptance and rejection; sin and virtue; sacred and secular in the interpretative belly dance. (Siegel, 1995, 11)

Several books written for the general public cover a wide range of material on the belly dance from ancient history through the 1970s and early 1980s. Most of these books indicate the authors’ perspectives and biases as belly dance practitioners. For instance, in her book, Earth Dancing: Mother Nature’s Oldest Rite, Daniela Gioseffi includes history and movement description, and reflects her feminist and spiritual approach to ‘earth dancing’ as part of women’s cultural heritage, a “dance of life and birth created as a celebratory enactment of our earthly beginnings.” (Gioseffi, 1980, 9)

Belly Dancing: the Serpent and the Sphinx, is a general look at the history of the dance. Wendy Buonaventura, an Oriental dancer living in England, traces the way the Egyptian *baledi* (people, village, country) form in the Arab-Islamic countries was

transformed from a private “dance of the people” to an entertainment “cabaret” form that was exported to the West. Buonaventura’s main concern was the belly dance in North Africa and the Middle Eastern countries. In predominantly Islamic cultures, stereotypes and social stigmas dominate discussions about belly dancing, Buonaventura comments, “Islam never looked kindly on dancers.” (Buonaventura, 1983, 92)

Her second book, Serpent of the Nile: Women and Dance in the Arab World, is a large-size volume replete with color reproductions of artwork related to the dance. Buonaventura speaks with many voices of glory as well as the shadows surrounding the belly dance of yesteryear and today. Her amalgamation of materials, textual and visual, evoke a work by someone whose respect for the subject is both tasteful and thoughtful. It is a forceful depiction of the ambiguous role of the woman who dances in the Middle Eastern due to the stigma still unfortunately attached to this noble art as a “profession”. She explains the historic phases of the dance, lit by copious quotes and references from the traditional as well as occidental sources of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. (Buonaventura, 1990, 13)

Buonaventura devotes several chapters to the early history of belly dancing in America. She appears to be biased against the cabaret version of the dance as she links orchestras, costume evaluations and expanding movement repertoires to Arab adaptations of Western tastes and expectations. Some of her description of a range of cabaret performances could apply to some American dancers:

At one end of this scale is an act which combines Arabic dance movements, Western notions of glamour and echoes of the Oriental dance of early Hollywood. At the other end is the sexy turn performed by women who know little or nothing about the dance, but who use it as a convenient money-spinner in which the only skill required is the ability to parade around in a revealing costume. (Buonaventura, 1990, 147)

This review of literature shows the range of both scholarly and popular literature on the subject and explores its relevance to this study. Considerably the work concentrates on description of belly dancing as it exists in North Africa and Middle Eastern countries, as well as its development in the Western countries. However, most of these works offer surface material or concentrate on specific aspects of the content. The following topics which are limited, had great significant value in revealing some of the mysterious aspects on belly dancing: 1) the difference in performance perception, from both sexes, that shape the notion of the belly dance in the Middle Eastern and Western countries; 2) the performance analysis and the unique signifying practices of the dancers. Yet during the past twenty-five years there were no other works that document the art of belly dancing in this framework. However, the thesis will examine the disparity in perceiving the dance performance both in the urban and rural settings of the Middle Eastern countries. Furthermore, it will elaborate on the divergence in perceptions, misperceptions and distorted perceptions of the belly dance; how it is controlled by the presence of sexual and cultural difference in Middle Eastern and Western countries. I

apply the semiotic method in terms of performance code and performer code for Nadia Gamal's dance in relation to the other two dancers. It seems that this performance analyses has never been done before. I hope the material developed in this thesis will provide a basis for future research in belly dancing and will serve as an example of the application of a semiotic perspective of the performance analysis.

My primary focus of belly dancing is in Egypt, for the simple reason that Cairo is the music, dance and film capital of the Arab-speaking world, and hence a center for the development of the belly dance.

All dances come from life, and in particular from our need to express ourselves and make sense of our existence. By its very nature dance is one of the most powerful means of auto-intoxication we have, developing energy in the body and then releasing it. Also dance is a sense of celebration, it helps discharge the pent-up energies of everyday life and reinforces identity as part of the social group. It has often been regarded as therapeutic, or healing, and has traditionally been a way of attracting a partner. Yet only in tribal communities and remote areas does it retain its old application of sympathetic magic, as a ritual device used to encourage both human fertility and the growth of crops. (Buonaventura, 1990, 25)

In some cultures old dances were part of religious ritual. Religion was a part of everyday life, with all natural occurrences touched by it. The rising and setting of the sun each day, the cycles of the harvest, and the birth and death of the body were all seen as the result of powerful, mysterious forces beyond conscious understanding. People learned

to deal with them first through the creation of a spirit world and then through myth and its attendant rituals, whose power lay in their ability to illuminate the unknown without reducing it to the mundane. Spirits were everywhere: under stones, in trees, in the air; indeed, in many remote areas, belief in a spirit world is as strong today as it has ever been. Recently in Egypt, people believed that the spirits or '*genii*' of the fire had to be placated with the words "Pardon O *genii*" whenever something was thrown into the flames. (Buonaventura, 1990, 25)

Dance had a central role to play in ancient ritual, and over the years grew to embody the value systems of the cultures which shaped it. As life grew more sophisticated, the mystic, tribal acts of early communities gave way to organized religious ceremonies, the most important of which were those concerned with the fertility of the earth and the human race. (Buonaventura, 1990, 26)

One of the most important fertility rites is the one designed to attract a partner and celebrate marriage. Erotic pelvic dancing has always played an important part in the long-drawn-out ceremonies used by tribal communities for sexual bonding. Although it is impossible to know the exact form a dance took in ancient times, our knowledge of sympathetic magic, in which imitative movements were thought to influence natural occurrences, can provide a clue, as can intuition and the work of anthropologists who have studied the practices of tribal communities still in existence. (Buonaventura, 1990, 28)

Early communities had a vivid, poetic understanding of life, and in time conjured up not only nature spirits but a multiplicity of male and female deities who were regarded as responsible for the natural order. Goddess figurines thousands of years old have been discovered in many parts of the world, and in the Middle East the cradle of goddess worship and the area where this faith had its most fervent and persistent support, these statues of female figures have been found dating back approximately 70,000 years. The earliest works of art ever discovered are figures of large-hipped, full breasted women. (Buonaventura, 1990, 30) The British Museum has a selection of these figures, naively carved in bone and stone with their arms raised aloft. Many of them look as if they are dancing, just like those who paid homage to them at temples and shrines. (Buonaventura, 1983, 17)

From the late fourth century BC down to the Christian era many of the most popular female deities in the Hellenistic and Graeco-Roman world came from the East, in particular Syria and Turkey. In Cyprus, birthplace of Aphrodite, the Greek goddess of love and fertility, women performed what have been described as erotic, ecstatic dances, to the accompaniment of wild singing and drumming. The trance, or ecstatic element, was crucial, for it released an energy in the body which helped the dancer enter into another realm of experience and unite with the deity, whose power was thus transferred to her. (Buonaventura, 1990, 31)

In Egypt, where the goddesses Hathor and Bastet were worshipped for their powers of fertility, large numbers of women attended their festivals, where they sang and

danced and offered themselves to men in the service of the deity. (Buonaventura, 1990, 32)

What happened to religious fertility dances as civilization changed and the old faiths were ousted, often brutally, to make way for the new? Today the majority of the human race follow male-dominated religions and live in patriarchal societies where women's power has been drastically curtailed. It was the ancient Semites who first set about dethroning the old female-centered, or pagan faiths. Yet the suppression of paganism and the consequent change in women's status did not happen overnight. It took a long time for the ancient esteem in which women were held to give way to the fear and distrust which have since expressed themselves, throughout the world, in the curtailing of female sexuality and women's place in public life. (Buonaventura, 1990, 33)

As we are more interested on belly dancing, we can trace its presence down the centuries through art, literature and mythology, with prehistoric sculpture and rock painting bearing mute witness to its existence in the ancient world. Statuettes of what appear to be belly-dancing women have been found in countries as far apart as India and Spain. Some date back thousands of years before Christ and they have frozen the body in dance positions which indicate prominent hip and belly movements. (Buonaventura, 1983, 3)

In the first century AD, the Roman poet Martial described the dancers of Cadiz, who used to "swing lascivious loins in practiced writhings." (Martial, 1947, 350) At the same time the satirist Juvenal remarked on their "sinking down with quivering thighs to

the floor.” (Juvenal, 1924, 232) We should not be surprised that both men were describing a performance seen in a Spanish town, for Cadiz had long since been colonized by people originally from Phoenicia, which corresponds roughly to the present-day Lebanon, and they could easily have introduced the art to Spain. Even if this were not the case, belly dancing in one form or another was once widespread throughout the world. In the seventh century AD a Persian scholar described the attributes of a great dancer, prominent among which we find “loose joints and a great agility in twirling and in swaying the hips”. (Masudi, 1874, 100) This kind of dancing was reported among Maori women in New Zealand, where it continued to be seen as recently as the middle of the present century. It was previously noted, and indeed is still common, throughout Africa, and has been performed for centuries in the Hawaiian Islands, where it is known as the *hula*. From this, we realize how widespread belly dancing was in former times. But although, in some parts of the world, it continued into the recent past, in other places it died out long ago. (Buonaventura, 1983, 3)

Most art evolves in response to changing social conditions. Hostility to what a dance represents can result in the dance changing until it becomes unrecognizable and every vestige of its original meaning has vanished. A dance seen in the alien context of commercial setting has become diminished and strange and one needs to use the imagination to see what it could once have meant. In his book The White Goddess 1895, Robert Graves testifies to the presence of erotic female dancing in Europe as part of goddess worship; but the tradition lapsed so early in Europe that no trace of it can be

retained. In its disappearance someone can see an early casualty of Christianity's suppression of freely expressed sexuality. (Graves, 1948, 5) Thus, instead of a vigorous pelvic dance, the Europeans developed the kind of dance movements which allowed them to keep what the French called the 'shameful' part of their bodies still. However, as late as the eleventh century AD, the dance had long since lost its significance as a fertility rite and had become pure entertainment. It finally disappeared from Europe as the last vestiges of paganism were brought under the control of the Church. (Buonaventura, 1983, 5)

Therefore, belly dancing was alive among a race of people less subject to the controls of the religion which tried to destroy it. These people did not belong to one country, but wandered the world. In every land where they settled they existed on the periphery of society, never fully accepted by their neighbours. These people were the original gypsies, who came from India and migrated west to Europe. Gypsy dancing influenced that of every country through which these people passed on their travels. (Buonaventura, 1983, 5)

After leaving India they made their way across the land routes of Afghanistan which linked India to the Ancient Middle East. They divided on the shores of the Mediterranean and some went west via present-day Iran, Turkey and Greece; others via Egypt and the northern shores of Africa. They went as far as Spain and some of them continued even further into France. By the beginning of the fifteenth century some of them were known as Egyptians or gypsies. (Buonaventura, 1983, 5)

The gypsies retained a remnant of the old birth mime and, in order to earn a living, preserved it and transformed it into entertainment. As they continued west, the dance gradually changed, influenced by each culture it encountered, and became the hybrid which we know today as the belly dance. (Buonaventura, 1983, 5)

In the endless migrations of history, men and women have crossed boundaries so many times, and those boundaries have shifted so frequently, that few arts which arose from such unquiet wanderings are the product of a single race. The gypsies began their wanderings in India and ended them in Spain and they left traces of their dance at both ends of this trail. Indian dance includes quivering shoulders, neck slides and sinuous arm movements, as well as a delicate muscular trembling throughout the body which in belly dancing is called a shimmy. Today the hips do not undulate, but Indian temple priestesses in former times performed a dance which simulated love-making, and among its movements were pelvic undulation. They also performed lying face down, resting on their hands. With their chest and abdomen arched, they twisted and rotated the lower half of their torsos. Today the Banjara women of Delhi are famous for their dancing. They follow the custom of tattooing their stomachs, and someone may speculate that this comes from a former tradition of decorating or highlighting a part of the body which plays a prominent part in the dance. (Buonaventura, 1983, 6)

Moving to Spain, the other end of the gypsies' migrant path, we find flamenco which includes the manipulation of veils, thrusting hips and a rapid stamping close to the ground, which again creates a subtle pelvic shimmy. In flamenco, though, the shimmy is

hardly noticeable, for our attention is fixed on the dancer's proud arms and dramatic stamping feet. (Buonaventura, 1983, 6)

The gypsies then added an oriental flavour to the musical arts of their host countries and were in turn influenced by local styles. The most famous belly dancers have always been gypsies, especially the female *ghawazee* of Egypt and the Turkish *cengi*. Indeed, the old Turkish word for female dancer is believed by some authorities to derive from their word for gypsy, which is *cingene*. Today, the gypsy quarter in Istanbul remains famous for dancing. There in Sulukule, the women instruct cabaret performers for a few lira an hour. (Buonaventura, 1983, 6)

From the late seventh century, the Islamic religion was firmly established as the dominant religion of the Middle Eastern countries. Under Islam women were forbidden to dance with men, a prohibition directed against "remnants of paganism, such as the orgiastic dances with which the heathen Arabs used to celebrate the Syro-Phoenician worship of Ashtaroth," another great goddess. (And, 1976, 21)

Therefore, gypsies were not accepted by the Middle Eastern society, for women who dance in public are considered somewhat socially unacceptable, because they move about with freedom which flouts the code of behavior laid down for the female sex by Islam. And it was in countries eventually subdued by Islam that belly dancing first flourished, and where today it remains most popular. In the Middle Eastern countries the dance underwent its most striking transformation and became the art of the professional charmers. (Buonaventura, 1983, 6)

Meanwhile, Europeans, having lost the tradition of belly dancing suddenly rediscovered the art in the eighteenth century. It was then that Europe first trained its ambitious sights on the mysterious orient. Artists and soldiers, busybodies and statesmen all went East. There, they saw something which proved an endless source of fascination. They recorded what they saw in minute detail: dancers who stood with a detached smile on their faces and made their bodies ripple and quiver from top to toe; women who lay on the floor and clinked together wine glasses, balanced on their stomachs by using only their abdominal muscles. Travellers marvelled at the many moods of this dance, on one hand bizarre and wildly exciting, on the other sensual and mysterious. (Buonaventura, 1983, 6)

In order to establish themselves, both Islam and Christianity had to destroy the rituals connected with goddess worship. Thus they attempted to eradicate female dance related to the celebration of sexuality and fertility. (Buonaventura, 1990, 35) Goddess worship gradually disappeared, along with its attendant rituals, and in many places the old fertility dances became only a memory. Where this type of dance remained, it lost its religious significance and became a secular activity, an entertainment among women known as “Women Only Dance” (WOD). While, a solo art form which was performed by professional belly dancers was been created for the purposes of observation rather than participation.

Therefore, as the belly dance ceased to be merely a means of self expression or part of communal ceremony, it became a secular entertainment. It was taken up and

refined by the professional performers who emerged on the scene. With this transition, a line was drawn between the acceptable and unacceptable aspects of this dance of the hips, which was a bold, sensual form of expression and sometimes a highly erotic one.

Over the years, the professional belly dancers developed different forms of performing according to the places where the dance moved. Although this secular entertainment has no conscious connection with the ancient fertility dance from which it derived, a powerful vestige of its ancestry still clings to it. (Buonaventura, 1990, 38)

Today in the Middle Eastern countries the characteristics of belly dance are part of a single art. They include hip and pelvic movements, the manipulation of veils, and the ritual wearing of a hip-veil or sash; it is unthinkable to dance without this sole remaining piece of ritual costuming. (Buonaventura, 1983, 23) Therefore, veiling and dance have a connection with the goddess religion. Also wearing a veil was a common practice for women in the Middle Eastern countries because the Quran demands a proper dress for a woman to cover her body and hair. Wearing a veil differs from country to country. In Egypt, Sudan, Syria, Jordan and North Africa countries, the hair is hidden by a veil. In Saudi Arabia and the Gulf states the hair and face are hidden by a veil.

Therefore, wearing a veil by Moslem women made them mysterious and inaccessible. For this reason men created fantasies about them in which women's very inaccessibility was a charm in itself. This was reflected in the Arab love poetry. Woman as an elusive creature of hidden beauty is a powerful concept in Islamic society. So is the belief that she is so frail that her best interests are served by being secluded, or as a

Moslem male would argue, protected from the harsh realities of the outside world. In the eleventh century AD, Moorish scholar Ibn Hazm wrote that:

Women are like sweet-smelling herbs, which lose their perfume if they are not cared for. They are a structure that collapses if neglected. For this very reason it has been said that beauty in men is finer, truer and more firmly rooted, because it withstands things like the noon-day heat, the desert simon and other winds, weather changes and homelessness, all of which leave indelible traces on part or the whole of a woman's countenance. (Titus, 1972, 65)

The myth of the mysterious veiled women of the Middle East could not, however, have been created had women not had a symbolic importance in the eyes of men. The concealment of women behind enveloping veils as well as their exclusion from public life indicate how great this symbolic value was, and still is today.

Nine hundred years later, the belief that a woman's attractions are adversely affected by exposure to the rough and tumble of public life is still current in the Middle Eastern countries. Today, in the rural areas WOD is performed as a solo dance or in a group by unskilled women who have little expertise and is accepted by this society as long as it is performed by women for women in the privacy of the home. While, in the urban areas it is accepted if performed in a group for men and women when communities gather to enjoy themselves, especially for social celebrations such as weddings. Also, the belly dance, if it is performed in the open air for money thrown by the crowd, or

performed in the homes of the wealthy for weddings, cabarets or night clubs, is considered socially unacceptable in rural and urban areas of the Middle Eastern countries. Two of the principal research questions arise here: Why it is acceptable for a woman to dance among women only and not in public? Why in the urban areas is it allowed for a woman to perform at weddings even if men are present?

Women in the Middle Eastern countries practice WOD for two main reasons; the first it is a popular living art, and one of the most openly accessible dance arenas that allow many women the opportunity, no matter what their level of dance expertise, to perform. Second, they can explore and express deep emotions which have been suppressed by the influence of Islamic religion, such as female sexuality or desire.

In the rural areas of the Middle Eastern countries: Egypt, Sudan, Saudi Arabia, Gulf states, Jordan, Lebanon, Syria, and North African countries, where people believe in Islam and according to the culture and tradition which people still practice, female sexuality was a negative force. Men considered it threatening by virtue of its very power, and sought to control it via the veil. Women belly dance among each other whenever they get together. They enjoy themselves at home for family celebrations, or social interactions such as weddings. No man is allowed to be present, because Islam banned dances between the sexes.

WOD was the favorite pastime for most women. As they gather together they start singing with hand-clapping and *zhagareet*. A woman stepping forward to perform a solo dance with her arms raised above her head and swinging her pelvis in circles. Her

abdomen trembling with a movement which rises from the base of her spine. Gently she rotates her pelvis and shakes her lower back. Beneath her heavy costume her hips and stomach rhythmically rise and fall. Her movements are repetitive and intense, with her feet moving back and forth. She performs barefoot to be easy for her to move. If she wants to vary the level of her movements she simply goes up on to the balls of her feet. When the music rises, more women join her. They perform no matter what their level of dance expertise is and no matter what other clothes are worn. Most of them have henna on their feet and hands. Their eyebrows are marked with dark *kohl*, and some are wearing large earrings.

“Woman in Middle Eastern countries are obsessed with belly dance. For them it is a sole means of self-expression and self satisfaction,” Lucy, an Egyptian professional belly dancer, stated. (Hanee, 1998, 65)

Through this type of dance which is concerned with the rituals of nature, women express their daily life and work, as well as their individual encounters between people. They display the “sensuous aspect of their nature” by the undulating movement of their bodies and the rhythmic hip articulation. The “movement of the feet” back and forth, pressing the ground and “beating the soil to awaken the earth spirits”, movements symbolic of penetration and fertility. The gestures of the hands express a desire to create a link between heaven and earth, the individual and the community, the mortal and the immortal. The “shaking of shoulders is an expression of joy and entertainment”, Lucy said. (Hanee, 65) This enjoyment came partly from having performed for each other.

They continue dancing for hours, without being fatigued, and all seem to have the power of moving any part of their bodies freely.

At wedding celebrations women in the rural areas dance separately from men. The young girls picking up the movements quite naturally. As women start singing and clapping their hands, a young woman steps forward for a solo dance, then one by one the other young women take turns to dance. Their dancing is a combination of playfulness, power and flame-like grace. The old women watch with a kind of appreciative concentration. Anyone who has been present at such an occasion will instantly recognize, for their daughters and sisters are the ones who are performing.

The enduring value of the belly dance is somehow hidden in the way women become passionate about it. Lucy said: "The rhythms of the music and singing are felt within the body, deep in the soul". Their involvement in the performance is the evident. "For them belly dance is an invention of women to establish either, the competition of doing it, or the process of self discovery and self affirmation." (Hanee, 65)

The respectability of belly dancing in mixed gender is much more accepted in urban settings in the cities of Egypt, Sudan, Jordan, Lebanon, Syria, and North African countries. In these countries where there are many contradictions between belief and practice, custom and tradition, and even the cultures of former times remain half-forgotten and only half-buried. As WOD was a natural part of the cultural expression and landscape for these countries, it was shaped by modern urban forces. Nearly all Middle Eastern people watch Arab features films. The images of professional belly dancers in

these films were the main influence that changed the people's behavior. These changes of people's behavior are reflected in their everyday life.

Since the 1950s the prolific Egyptian film industry produced roughly two hundred documentaries and fifty feature films every year. Most of these films were exported to other Middle Eastern countries. People in these countries watch the feature films which are often musicals and testify to the popularity of professional belly dancing (professional belly dancing was "professionalized" by show business efforts since 1920s). The films offer a fascinating glimpse of the role assigned to belly dancing by society and are a good indication of street morality and aspiration. Despite her moral ambiguity, the professional belly dancer does give a woman a chance to come into contact with the upper classes and possibly raise her status thereby. Because of their symbolic value, professional belly dancers are common film heroines and belly dancing appears in feature films for more than ten minutes. For instance Tahia Carioca in the feature film "Shabab Imra, in June 1950" (the Youth of a Woman) where she plays the role of a tough but sexually starved widow who rents a room to a handsome country bumpkin recently come to Cairo as a student; she seduces and marries him; but when he meets the angelic daughter of a family friend, he awakens from Tahia Carioca's Circe-like spell, denounces her, and leaves her for the safe, boring, younger woman. In an otherwise undistinguished parable, there is one great scene in which Tahia Carioca pulls her hungry husband away from a street celebration that features a young belly-dancer who has captivated the inexperienced student. Tahia Carioca takes him into the house, sits him down and tells

him that she will now show him what real dancing is like. Where upon, she treats him to a private performance that positively smolders, proving that middle aged or not, she still is the fine dancer. the most formidable intellect and the most desirable sexual object around. This film effected most of the youth in Egypt. For women in the audience, the professional belly dancers are a source of self-identification. Therefore the amateurs try to imitate the artistry of the professional dance whenever they get together.

Farida Fahmi, an Egyptian Dancer with “Mahmoud Reda Troupe” stated: “Since the 1970s belly dancing within a family gathering, where both sexes were present is acceptable.” (Masloom, 1998, 67) At wedding celebrations, if it is at home, or at a night club (night clubs in these countries are like a family gathering environment) they get together and have different activities (e.g. playing, watching TV etc.). There is a place for wedding celebrations, birthday parties, usually booked either for staff members or non-staff members’ celebration. At wedding celebrations, as the music starts, some women tie a veil around their hips and, stepping in the middle of the floor, simply move their bodies through a combination of movements matching the melody and rhythm of the music. With soft undulating and serpentine movements of the abdominal muscles.

The women perform in groups and no matter what their ages or physical sizes are. Each one has her own unique personality and creativity. They first absorb the music and then gradually start moving their bodies. They are not experts but because they watch the professional belly dancers on films, they try to imitate their movement to impress everyone in the audience by drawing the focus in to them through their movements. This

maneuver is a reflection of the impetus rhythm of the music and their sensual feeling. As the music rises, more women join them, and so it goes on, while men, standing in circle clap their hands to encourage them.

For the male audience, they are “impressed with the dance” because it seems to be “innocent,” more like a “beautiful entertainment,” morally acceptable as long as the performers are not wearing “cabaret costumes” and they are not “rewarded by money.” Both audiences feel it is a “family gathering environment” for relatives and close friends who know each other, Farida Fahmi stated. (Masloom, 67)

For women, WOD is a showing of someone’s physical self in an atmosphere of encouragement and appreciation. It is assumed that everyone can do something, even if it is only two or three movements. There is no need for a woman to feel embarrassed or inferior if she is not as skilled as her friends. For them, dancing within this private entertainment has three enduring motivating values:

The first motive is that WOD is not considered the unique province for the young. It is the expression of a woman’s entire life experience, whether it is used as a symbol of luck and fertility, or a means of passing the time. And though the older woman may well confine herself to dispensing refreshments, leaving the dancing to the young girls. Those well past their youth sometimes prove to be the most exciting performers at these private gatherings. Their dance is invested with the grace notes of maturity and fullness.

The second motive is that the Middle Eastern ideal of female beauty does not confine itself to the young and slim. It also takes in the quality of the voluptuous, with its

hint of an enveloping protectiveness and sensual ease. The performer need not fear her dancing days are over at forty, or even fifty. Her long prime reflects the unique possibilities of this dance, whose scope is enriched rather than narrowed by age and whose continuing importance in everyday life is a testament to all that it has to offer.

The third motive lies in the specific pleasure values associated with the performer. WOD allows each individual to dance freely and express a unique personality and creativity, bringing out the beauty of every woman who practices it.

I remember an occasion back home in Sudan for a wedding party of my sister. We invited the wives (two) of the First Chancellor of the Saudi Arabia Embassy (who was our neighbor). The day was a *henna* celebration for women (the day before the marriage day is for decorating the bride's hands and feet with *henna*). It was at the main salon for more music and traditional dancing. No man was allowed to be present. Suddenly, as the rhythm of the music changed to Egyptian music all attention was on the center of the room where the Saudi Arabian women started dancing. As they stood, both brocade robes slipped to the floor, then long tied black dresses slipped from their shoulders, baring their breasts, a wondrous jewel sparkled and flashed in the cleft between their breasts; lower down a girdle encircled their hips, hiding the upper part of their thighs, against which dangled a gigantic pendant glistening with rubies and emeralds; both women wore the same dresses and jewels. Their bodies moved with the rhythms of the melody, but each had her unique personality. One danced with her arms raised above her head, the other with arms around her waist. One swung her pelvis in circles, her abdomen

trembling with a movement which rose from the base of her spine. The other rotated her pelvis and shook her lower back. One was smiling but it seemed only to herself, while the other's eyes were half shut, and she seemed unaware of her attentive audience. Some women appreciated their dancing, while others thought that they were slow in their movement. When describing their dancing, one said:

Our dance was sensuous but we don't think of it as vulgar. We just felt the need to justify the spontaneous expression of our joy through dance. This is the way we spend our time in modern Saudi Arabia, either dancing for each other or watching videotapes.

For me, both women with their voluptuous undulating hips and serpentine body epitomize the power of their female sexuality.

During the past century and a half, the image of belly dancing has undergone a metamorphosis in the West. To most people, the words conjure up an image of scantily clad females performing a dance which requires little or no skill. Many people do not know that the belly dance is basically a popular Middle Eastern folk art.

Appreciation of the dance varies from culture to culture and from region to region. In the Middle Eastern and Western cultures the perception of women performing is complicated in two ways:

First there is the difference in perception of both sexes, in both cultures, from what is communicated in the performance. A Middle Eastern woman's perception of belly dancing is that she practices it not to please men, husbands or boyfriends, as others

might suppose, but because belly dancing is a process of self discovery and self affirmation. Middle Eastern men's perception is that belly dancing is fine as long as the woman performs for herself among those selected women, or at social celebration where relatives and close friends are present. In the Western countries where social life is different, the society lacks this kind of gathering. Belly dancing for most women is viewed as healthy, good exercise and a path to self-esteem. For men it looks to be a dance in which women look sexy, alluring, mysterious, open sexually.

Second in both cultures, women share the same perception. What is communicated to a female audience is not the same as to male audience, even though they are seeing it at the same time. For instance, in both cultures women dance for themselves even if the woman is alone as presented in the Western training books on belly dancing. They put on the costumes and dance in front of mirrors. In doing that, the woman is developing the idea of having or needing an audience for the dance, herself, detached from male and/or public audience, or any audience for that matter. The fulfillment of the dancer comes from performing for herself. In that sense, the Middle Eastern and Western women share the same perception of the dance that is in conflict with the perception held by both sexes in regard to performance for somebody else.

The different perceptions of professional belly dancers that affirm female identity for both sexes in the Middle Eastern and Western cultures will be explained in chapter two. Chapter three will show images of belly dancing through history with performance analysis of these images. Through a performance analysis, chapter four will explain the

performances in different media and across time in history. The last chapter will show how belly dancing is a power dance differentiating individuality and providing the special dominion of regional culture owned by women through a particular performance.

Therefore, the chapter breakdown will be as follows:

Chapter one will focus on the theoretical perspectives of the belly dancing, identify the meaning, how it is different from other dances performed by Middle Eastern women. The history of dance and the role of belly dancing in history with a clear definition of the problem, its perspective on literature with critical review of previous positions of belly dancing.

Chapter two, will focus on belly dancing, its development as a show business within the religious culture of the Middle Eastern countries. It will also explain the difference performance perceptions of the belly dance between male and female and their perceptions with the cultural difference of the Middle Eastern and Western countries.

Chapter three will explicate the history of belly dancing from ancient Egypt until now, revealing different images of the belly dance. Then I propose a performance analysis code, that is, the qualities of movement defining belly dancing that serve to influence in any way the audience. This information will be in the historical images of the belly dance from Middle Eastern countries, their paintings, films and TV, cabaret and night clubs.

Chapter four will focus on the performer code. Taking an example of a well known dancer Nadia Gamal as a basic point of reference, I will compare her performance with the other performances of two well known belly dancers. Also I will refer to those who

contribute to the performances, the audience as observers. I am going to use photographic analysis of Nadia Gamal, with video clips of her performance. Later, I will use a semiotic method, which identifies signifying practices associated with the performance. I want to identify values or meanings which a different audience may assign to these signifying practices.

Chapter five is the concluding chapter. I will examine the implication of the previous imagery. Then summarizing the statement of the material for belly dance's perception and belly dance identity, within the sexual and cultural difference of the Middle Eastern and Western countries. Finally, I will show the present and future trends on belly dancing.

Chapter Two

Cultural Identity of the Belly Dance

The belly dance existed in ancient Egypt then spread out all over the Middle East. It has fascinated every culture that came in contact with it: ancient Rome, Europe and America. By the end of the first century AD performers had been organized into companies in Egypt and other countries of the Middle East. In these countries, as in patriarchal cultures the world over, belly dance acceptability or unacceptability was intimately bound up with what was permitted and what forbidden by the people. On the acceptable side is dance as a social pastime, performed in the home by women for women to entertain each other. On the unacceptable side is professional dance, which was the province of gypsies, minority communities and the poorer members of society.

However, the Eastern and the Western perceptions of professional belly dancers rises out of a deeper male and female conflict in regard to the cultural perspective of those watching or appreciating the dance by either sex. Public perception of professional belly dancers is plagued by negative stereotypes and misconceptions which have long been associated with the dance. Questions arise here: To what extent are perceptions, misperceptions, and distorted perceptions of the belly dance controlled or defined by the presence of sexual or cultural difference? How are meanings associated with belly

dancing defined by the sexual identity of the spectator, the sexual identity of the performer, the cultural identity of the spectator and the cultural identity of the performer?

This chapter will explore the culture and sexual difference of the Middle Eastern and Western countries, and will focus on the relation between the two cultures in defining belly dancing. Also, it will explain the difference in performance perception between male and female of belly dancing and their perceptions within the cultural difference of the Middle Eastern and Western countries.

The belly dance is enjoyed throughout the Middle Eastern countries, but in the matter of professional belly dancers, there is a very important difference in attitude that has less to do with the dance itself than with dancer proprieties in general. It is not socially acceptable for respectable people in the society, because professional belly dancers violate the traditional Islamic values of feminine modesty and seclusion of women. Although professional belly dancers are welcomed for wedding celebration of respectable people in some countries, no man wants his wife, sister or daughter to be thought a whore.

For this reason professional belly dancers did not exist in some restricted Islamic countries of the Middle Eastern countries. For instance: in Saudi Arabia, Gulf States, Sudan, Iraq, Iran, Libya and Algeria professional belly dancers do not exist. In Morocco, Tunisia, Jordan, Syria and Lebanon they sometimes perform at weddings and frequently at hotels for Western tourists, while in Egypt, they perform for any social celebration, at weddings, night clubs, hotels and private gatherings. We will understand more about this

misapprehension of professional belly dancers in the society if we take a closer look at the Middle Eastern society and focus on Islamic attitudes towards female sexuality and how prostitution was attached to the professional belly dancer.

The majority of the people in the Middle Eastern countries owe allegiance to Islam, which embodies a political system as well as a faith and is an all-embracing religion which leaves no aspect of human experience unexamined, including the arts. (Buonaventura, 1983, 93) The people believe that any link between a man and a woman is considered to be a sexual desire, and friendship, affection, companionship, are not considered common bonds between the sexes. That a man and a woman can have a relationship based on love is a relatively recent idea, a romantic influence of the West. Therefore, women are exhorted to conceal their sexual attraction in public and a woman who does not do this transgress a fundamental law of Islam. (Buonaventura, 1983, 96)

Islam and Christianity have much in common on this subject and both admit that the sexual urge is powerful in both men and women, though Christianity has traditionally preferred to pretend otherwise, especially during periods of extreme sexual repression. The difference between the two is that Christianity considers sexuality without procreation in some sense 'sinful' while Islam does not. The Islam faith recognizes that it is such a powerful force as to be potentially disruptive, and therefore must be strictly controlled. Islam also considers it important for a man to satisfy his sexual urge, by allowing him to marry four wives if he is fair with them, or else the result may be an upset in the social order. It is this fear of chaos which is a thread that runs right through

Middle Eastern society, because women are regarded as the greatest potential source of chaos. so men must be protected from them. (Buonaventura, 1983, 95)

The Moroccan anthropologist, Fatima Mernissi, in her book Beyond the Veil, has argued that Islam offers a kind double image of sexuality. (Utas, 1983,5) She claims the prevailing contemporary view is that men are active in their interaction with women, while women are passive. But underlying this notion is a view of an active female sexuality casting woman as the hunter and man as the passive victim. This concept is formulated in the classical interpretation of the Quran by Sufi Lawyer and theologian Imam Abu-Hamid El-Ghazali, who sees women as powerful and dangerous beings due to their ability to deceive and defeat men, not by force but by cunning and intrigue. Women exert a fatal attraction which erodes the male's will to resist her and places him in a passive and pliable role. This power is seen as the most destructive element in the Moslem social order, because men become distracted from their social and religious duties. The man has no choice, he can only give in to the attraction of women, whence an association of females with what in Islam is termed *fitna* which means chaos as well as a beautiful woman. Whenever a man is faced with a woman, *fitna* may occur. Women must, therefore, be controlled so they do not tempt men. (Utas, 5)

From this we can see that what is attacked in Islam is not sexuality, but rather the woman as the embodiment of destruction, as the symbol of disorder. The woman is *fitna*, chaos, a living representative of the dangers of sexuality and its disruptive potential. The belly dance, however faintly, demonstrated woman's sexuality and reinforced what men

had perhaps feared. And they were greatly disturbed by the fact that women had strong sexual urges, just as they themselves did.

From earliest times in the Middle Eastern countries, women worshipped the Great Goddess in her various guises by giving themselves to strangers. This custom was current throughout Mesopotamia, a region which included present day Iraq, Kuwait and parts of Iran, Turkey and Syria. It was also known in Egypt as well as Phoenicia, now Lebanon. In the fifth century BC it was formalized in the worship of the Great Goddess in Babylon. Tradition has it that once in her lifetime every woman went and sat outside the temple of Mylitta and waited until a man came by who, invoking the name of the goddess, would throw her a coin as an invitation to sexual intercourse. Only when this had taken place could she return home. (Buonaventura, 1983, 26)

The early belly dancers were not prostitutes as we understand the word. The Priestesses who danced and gave themselves to male worshippers in return for money were regarded primarily as women who sold sexuality for personal gain. The most esteemed class of prostitutes were often powerful women in their society and they did not suffer the present-day stigma attached to their profession. (Buonaventura, 1983, 26)

When a temple priestess had carnal relations with different men, she was engaging in a sacred rite, not selling a sexual commodity in the marketplace. When she danced, she performed with her back to the worshippers, making her sinuous movements not for them but for the deity, represented in effigy before her. Dancing released an energy in her body, a power which enabled her to unite with the divine spirit and because of this, the

men who made love to her saw her as an intermediary with this sacred force. She transmitted her energy to them so that they too were able to make contact with the divine. There was in those days an understanding of sexual energy which the people later lost through the process of civilization and men certainly did not go to a temple out of simple physical need of a woman, for there existed prostitutes in the accepted sense of the word, who fulfilled this need. (Buonaventura, 1983, 26)

Historian N. M. Penzer believes that women were turned into sexual goddesses as a response to fears about the fertility of the soil. (Penzer, 1952, 131) Penzer speculates that so-called sacred prostitution may also have arisen from the custom of providing sexual hospitality to strangers and that it marked temporary recognition of pre-existing communal marriage. This last tradition ceased with the growth of patriarchal rule, particularly with the increasing domination of patrimony, that is, descent via the male line, when the importance of a child's paternity became crucial. The only way to ensure this was to limit women's sexual freedom. Though there is much argument about these changes, and how and when they occurred, a shift in society's attitude towards sexuality did take place. Different religions reflected the change in various ways. From the point of view of belly dancing, we are most interested in the spiritual faiths of Middle Eastern and Mediterranean countries where male-dominated religions came to prevail. (Penzer, 131)

In the Judaeo-Christian religions, sexuality became interwoven with sin and guilt. Its only justification became the continuation of the human race. The pleasurable, life-

enhancing aspects of sex were separated and are still distinct from the reproductive aspect to some extent in some Western culture. Islam, born in the same part of the world as Judaism and Christianity, drew on both, especially the former, for its mythology. With these new faiths emphasizing the dark side of sexuality, women came to be viewed with apprehension as supposedly destructive, wanton creatures, whose carnal urges had to be controlled. Women who succumbed to unlawful relations with men were punished, while men who did the same rationalized their transgression and claimed they had been tempted by the irresistible power of the female sex. (Buonaventura, 1983, 27)

Penzer suggests that the religious aspect of this type of dance was lost after foreign conquest and what he calls “the general spread of immorality.” We presume that, by this, he means the end of women’s sexual freedom of choice. The concept of sexual immorality would of course not have existed in a society where women enjoyed a broad sexual self-determination. Only with the development of monogamous marriage would the notion have been born. Penzer goes on to say that:

Dancers became ordinary prostitutes who danced when occasion demanded. They would naturally be called upon if any dancing was wanted for a wedding feast or other private entertainment, for dancing and prostitution have been inseparable from the earliest times. (Penzer, 1952, 131)

Edward. W. Lane included a discussion on ancient and modern dance in his work, The Modern Egyptian an exhaustive study of nineteenth-century Egyptian life. He describes the street dancers, the gypsy *ghawazee*, in detail and notes:

In many of the tombs of the ancient Egyptians we find a representation of females dancing at private entertainment. . . in a manner similar to the modern *ghawazee* depicted in a state of perfect nudity. . . this mode of dancing we find to have been common in Egypt in every remote times; even before the exodus of the Israelites. It is possible therefore that it has continued without interruption. (Lane, 1954, 98)

Lane was willing to believe the art had ancient antecedents, but was torn between a scarcely concealed admiration for the *ghawazee* and the feeling that there was something not quite acceptable about them. Many of his contemporaries felt the need to vindicate their interest in the dancers, even to defend the fact that they had gone to see the women perform.

As we recall, Penzer suggested that, at a time when women were revered, they became goddesses of sexuality in response to ancient fears about the continuing fertility of the soil. But prostitutes were sexual goddesses of another kind and they were regarded with ambivalence. Like the Greek Hetaerae, the most respected among them may well have been powerful, accomplished women; they may well have been preferred to the tamed, newly domesticated woman who confined herself to one man; but they could also use their sexuality to destructive ends. (Buonaventura, 1983, 30)

As Penzer remarked, prostitution and erotic dance had gone hand in hand from early times. But originally erotic dance went with the free exchange of sexuality; it only became the art of the professional seductress after profound lowering of women's social status. This changed attitude towards women themselves was responsible for lowering the status of belly dancing. The art has suffered from the sexual confusion which plagues both Moslem and Christian societies, because the professional belly dancer has been associated with prostitution as dance and prostitution are one of the few jobs which pay reasonably well for a woman. (Buonaventura, 1983, 34)

Therefore, professional belly dancers are accepted in the society, while their position in life is considered unchanging. This is because, unfortunately, a majority of people are still assuming that a woman must have come from an undesirable background to be dancing at all in public. Traditionally, it is known that a woman who danced in public and got paid, is automatically assumed to be advertising herself for sale, or else she is a prostitute. Although she may be highly applauded for her skill, at the same time there is something socially reprehensible about her.

In spite of this, in the Middle Eastern countries belly dancing became part of the show business world, and the cabaret provides one setting for it. Egypt, especially Cairo, has risen as a center for the development of the belly dance and Lucy said: "the Egyptian style has become popular since late the 1920s". (Hanee, 1998, 66)

Cabarets thrive most in Egypt, where the cultural influence of the West has made itself felt. Over a long period of time the dance has extended its repertoire of steps and

altered its costume, but its traditions of cabaret belly dancing are similar in Middle Eastern and Western countries. The cabaret performance, which is designed to highlight every aspect of the dance, “lasts for twenty minutes” or so, showcasing the dancer with “different costumes and aspects of performance.” Lucy said. (Hanee, 66)

Therefore, in the Middle Eastern and Western countries professional belly dancers stands at the crux of many conflicting images between the dancer’s purely sensual element and her aspect as a sacred image. This conflicting image might be from these categories: First, the result of the cultural and sexual difference of belly dance performance of the Middle Eastern and Western countries, and the relation between the two cultures in defining the belly dance; second, the reflection of the difference in performance perception between male and female of belly dancing, and performance within the cultural difference of the Middle Eastern and Western countries. By reviewing these two categories, we will show how the cultural context shapes perceptions of belly dancing and the dancers from both sexes in the Middle Eastern and Western countries.

For Americans, belly dancing is known by most people only in this, its cabaret form. For a number of women in America belly dancing has become part of their everyday lives, women who feel an affinity for the dance movement and music. For them, the dance originated elsewhere but is practiced in a new cultural context, thereby increasing the range of influence on the dance. Therefore, belly dance technique has become recognized as a complex form which includes emotional articulation, musical expression and movement execution.

Some American professional belly dancers combined movement influences from a number of Middle Eastern regions. The early foreign dancers, who came from Turkey, danced in Turkish style, those from the Arabic-speaking countries danced Arab style, as American dancers who were learning from them mixed the two with their own personal innovations and each one was free to develop her own style. They also observed each other for new techniques and execution.

I had a chance to watch on video tapes some American belly dancers and on various occasions such as restaurants or festivals. for instance “Belly Dance of the Year” at San Ramon, California, 1997. To have a clear definition of the different perceptions of professional belly dancers in the Middle East in relation to Western professional dancers, I rely on my background as a Middle Eastern woman and on what I saw through various occasions and including the following analysis of an American professional belly dancer at a restaurant in San Francisco, March, 1998. I choose this performance because a friend of mine. from Egypt, accompanied me. Our statements or comments might reflect how we perceived the performance, the similarities, and the differences in performance in both countries. These statements might be true for some, but not for all dancers in both countries. I will also refer to some statements by Egyptian professional dancers on the scene, who are expert in this field.

Hala, an Egyptian woman participating in establishing a “Middle East Dance Troupe,” in San Jose, 1998, who accompanied me, had been in the United States for more

than ten years, and had also a chance to see many American dancers in different places of the United States.

The beginning of the dance was the arrival of a beautiful young woman, who moved around the stage in various floor patterns displaying her body through a combination of movements manipulating the veil and various body parts. Suddenly, she wrapped the veil over her head, so that it hung down her back, and began to spin with one hand resting on her hip and the other hand extended in front of her. While spinning the veil billowed out behind her and, still spinning, she lifted her arm and removed the veil, and as she continued to turn, she took it in front and behind her, whirling to a halt. As the music turned slower she removed her veil and waved patterns with it, emphasizing a part of the body on which she was concentrating a movement. For instance, if she was making a circle with one hip, she held her veil across that hip. She then discarded the veil and centered herself on the floor and moved in a figure eight pattern; while the feet lifted up and down, the arms performed different patterns with torso movement. As the *taqsim* (musical improvisation generally on a solo instrument, or with one instrument prominent) changed, she started a hip/pelvic shimmy, where she remained motionless above the waist. After this, she did belly rolls and made the muscles in this area quiver. As the music slowed she stopped and suddenly dropped on the floor almost flat and horizontal and started moving her shoulder and hips in a slow motion with the music. Then she stood up and repeated her movements with various arm and feet movements, hip lifts, hip shimmies, steps, and turns. She then moved around the tables and collected tips from

people. A man who just wished to show his appreciation of her skill rolled his note up tightly and slipped it into her shoulder strap, avoiding touching her body. Some men on the other hand, encouraged by friends, jokingly slid their hands into her costume.

My first impression was that at the beginning, the dancer displayed little spatial movement with the veil, and most movement occurred with the veil and space rather than her body; her emphasis was on the manipulation of the veil, where she drew the audience's focus in to her through her attention and movements with the veil.

It seems that most Americans dance with the veil, manipulating it, covering their heads, as it becomes an extension of themselves, an ethereal toy which does the woman's bidding, sometimes covering, and sometimes revealing.

Americans see the Middle Eastern women as veiled. In the street she grips it between her lips or teeth so that her hands are free to carry packages. Behind her veil she conveys the subtlest glances, while at the same time keeping her guard. Americans think the belly dance mirrors perfectly this balance between restraint and openness and in the dance the veil is used sometimes to conceal, other times to reveal.

Nearly all Egyptian dancers use the veil at the entrance only. They do a couple of movements and then drop it, because veil work has connotations of the *harem*. The head cover disappears from the Egyptian style, it is more like a Turkish style. Some American dancers view it as a complementary part of the dance. Also, some American belly dancers display more variety in the steps to compensate for the fact that the audience may

never have seen a belly dancer before, and may be accustomed to constant variety in a dance or a piece of music.

During the second part of the dance, many of the movements are not in place with the music. For instance, with a hip/pelvic shimmy, “there is a shift of weight from one leg/hip to another.” Similarly, the movements themselves are “both open and withheld, being a combination of inward sensuality and outward display”. A dancer may make a “series of slow circles on one hip” alone, the hip leading her body to turn in a “gradual circuit on the spot with her other leg the pivot; an inwardly focused movement.” (Hala, March, 1998)

Middle Eastern spectators expect certain movements to certain types of music and certain types of melody or instrumentation, and the dancer should make a connection between movements and music. Some American dancers have to learn this connection between movements and music. Although they “know all the different rhythms” and they can play them, they may not know “how to move their bodies the same as the Egyptian dancers.” (Hala, March, 1998)

Most Egyptian dancers concentrate their “movement in the rhythmic hip articulation, the undulating movement, the shaking of shoulders as an expression of joy, the use of expressive gestures, and the liquid arms.” Lucy stated. (Hanee, 65) Also, sometimes the Egyptian structure of the dance show is slightly different than that in America. In America some dancers performs to “an entire piece of music broken into

different segments by *taksim* interludes, but in the Egyptian style only the first segment is purely instrumental.” (Hala, March, 1998)

During the third part of the dance, the dancer did belly rolls and floor work. Hala stated:

Belly rolls disappeared from Egyptian style. Usually the dancers do soft undulating serpentine movements of the abdominal muscles. Floor work, since the 1950s, disappeared from the Egyptian style, because it is viewed as sexual and degrading to women and some regard it as “suggestive”, and it has ceased being used by most Egyptian dancers. Americans highly respect floor work movement; for them it is physically difficult and challenging. I think American dancers most probably borrowed it from the Turkish style. (Hala, March, 1998)

Some Egyptian dancers do different floor work which is derived from ancient religious ritual involving a dynamic use of the entire body. For example, a dancer descends to the floor from a kneeling position, and tosses from side to side in a powerful contraction and release of the head and torso. This movement is part of the *zar*, a spiritual and therapeutic dance. Some American dancers do it the other way: a dancer kneeling on the floor with her arms extended, she bounces in a forward arc from side to side, flicking her hands, or she descends to her knees and arches her body until the crown of her head touches the floor. Hala said:

Most of the American dancers move rapidly, covering large areas, using the same configuration style, it is easy to grasp the movement if it is a natural one. If it is more of an exercise movement, you can recognize the counting at the beat, which is sometimes not matching the rhythm of the music. To dance naturally with the rhythm of the music is an important element in belly dance. (Hala, March, 1998)

Because some American dancers have balletic backgrounds, “they move the arms up with the hip toes, while the torso is held in and plays little part.” (Hala, March, 1998) Some of them do belly dance as story-telling. According to Tahia Carioca, a legendary Egyptian professional belly dancer “belly dancing is an art or form which encourages a feeling of repose and inner calm, and requires great skill.” (El Shenawi, 1998, 57) Some Americans do Jazz movements, with a lot of jumping, which is not common in Egyptian style. It is more like a Greek or Armenian style.

At wedding celebrations, money is given to a professional dancer to encourage her; money which is freely offered, not extorted. “Its role in cabaret makes the dancer something of a beggar,” said Sohair Zaki, an Egyptian professional belly dancer. (El Shenawi, 58) Night club and restaurant managers use tipping as an excuse to pay low wages, placing the responsibility on a dancer to guarantee her own salary. In addition, she is expected to help pay the musicians’ wages by giving them a proportion of her tips. She has to make them like her enough to give her money as well as pay the often inflated price of their meal. The way in which the American dancer moves round the table and

money being rolled and tightly slipped into her shoulder strap is not common in Egypt. "A man who wishes to show his appreciation usually throw the bills over the dancer and the band." (El Shenawi, 58) American dancers borrowed the physical touch style of tipping from Greeks and Persians, who tend to tip on the body, stuffing bills into the bra and girdle of the costume.

The most renowned Egyptian dancers commission their own music, and choreograph their performance down to the finest detail beforehand. Fifi Abdou, an Egyptian Dancing Star stated:

Most professional Egyptian dancers have their own musicians, and they are the ones who direct the music. When they get the rhythm, they perform with a special intensity that matches their hip movements to the powerful central rhythm around which the melodic pattern is woven. (El Shenawi, 58)

The dancers formerly used finger cymbals to dictate the rhythm they required. For a more meditative movement in their dance they either laid aside or held the finger cymbals in such a way that they do not sound. Sometimes the band has finger cymbals and not the dancer.

The finger cymbals are known as *sagat* in Arabic and *zills* in Turkish. Two are worn on either hand; one attached to each thumb and middle finger. They are struck sharply against each other to create a clear, bell-like ring, and are played to accompany a brisk rhythm in the music, while American dancers usually use taped music to perform

for a short time among tables, often very close to the patrons. They play the finger cymbals themselves to blend the music with the movement.

In Egypt, someone who is a performer is not regarded as highly as someone of a different profession. Egyptian stereotypes of professional belly dancers are marginalized women, for the people think that if a woman uses her body to make money she does not have the capacity to use her mind. Therefore, professional belly dancers continue to perform due to financial necessity, and performing becomes a commercial business. Lucy states:

It used to be a shame for someone of a good family to be a dancer, and though today still there are those who feel that way, at least a dancer can be respected and admired. (Hanee, 65)

American belly dancers come from varied backgrounds and performing is something which they often arrive at by accident, and then they discover the delights of belly dancing and its roots. Many of them have a high regard for the art, and most of the dancers are highly educated, many of them college degree holders. For instance, Ghanima Geditana, has an MS degree in Counseling Psychology, and Andrea Deagon has a Ph.D. in Classical Studies, and many more. American contexts of belly dance performance in various forms and styles range from women's circles to nightclubs, recreational classes to theaters, and some of them view belly dancing as a form of self-expression, an exercise, a dance that celebrates the human body. Moreover, the audience

loves it if the dance means that a woman is expected to be a dancer and nothing else.

Lucy stated:

It seems that the quality conveyed by the movements depends on the dancer. It is her interpretation and skill which make them erotic rather than sexy. It is her evaluation of herself as a woman that creates a dance which is an expression of pride rather than a form of titillation. (Hanee, 65)

It is interesting that while belly dancing has often been frowned upon in its own society, it has none-the-less developed a form which harmonizes closely with the visual arts of Islam, especially regarding its effect on the onlooker. For some spectators belly dancing soothes the mind rather than distracts it, and its hypnotic quality, which provokes an inner calm in the spectator, is one element which has often fascinated outside observers.

Buonaventura said:

. . . yet I have a letter from English musician Chris Gunstone, written after seeing a belly dancer perform, accompanied by flute and hand-drum, in which he says :
 “It was the most beautiful performance I ever saw-sensual yet not vulgar, spiritual yet human. It was something very rare and very beautiful.”

Buonaventura continued:

A dance, which can prompt this kind of response, a dance whose enduring charm has enabled it to survive centuries of social opprobrium has surely earned a re-evaluation. (Buonaventura, 1983, 8)

Just as men and women vary greatly in the physical, so they differ in their perceptions. Both genders have learned to be competitive in the acquisition of mates. By nature, women have usually been trophies, for their breeding ability, dowries, blood lines, desirability by other men, etc. Men have been valued for what they could provide in exchange, stability, provisions, longevity, security. Women have been the possessions and the men the possessors. Men have not wanted their possessions to be coveted. Since dance is an act to be watched, a woman dancing is seen as presenting a possession in a way which would cause others to receive part of the value and even possess it. But despite this, belly dance continues to be performed all over the world as a popular living art.

The audience watching a professional belly dancer in cabaret, nightclubs, or wedding celebration include men and women, each with his/her own tastes, views and feelings. Usually they perceive any movement between the neck and knees as sexual and for most of them it seems erotic. Also, the costume of the performer affects greatly the attitude with which the dancer is perceived. Lucy stated:

For some audiences the customs of the performance give more of a sexually presented nature. I was perceived as morally degrading and this

reflects the perception that I am a prostitute or I dance to tempt and titillate men more than presenting the art of belly dancing. For other audiences, they see the beauty of my performance, in my individuality, my femininity, my sensuality, and my control of the show, a display of self ownership needs no other woman to make it a personal statement. (Hanee, 64)

Ghanima Gaditana, a Professional American belly dancer in San Jose stated:

Some men are titillated at the prospect of just seeing a prostitute and imagining what they might do with her. When they see a woman who fits, however awkwardly, into their preconception of a prostitute, they eagerly force her into their fantasy picture. Hence, they assume that a dance performance constitutes advertising for more intimate services, and the tips tucked into the dancer's belt are a down payment. They are pre-set to perceive the dance as sexy, and believing it a prostitute's dance is a way of making it even sexier. (Gaditana, 1994, 21)

In regard to the differences in the behavior of Middle Eastern and American audiences, Middle Easterners respond very freely and happily during a successful performance: they clap in time with the music, call out encouragingly to the singers, musicians and dancers, applaud after especially brilliant passages, and are very open in their expressions of approval by showering money on the performers.

Americans, at their most polite, may put on their best concert-hall manners: they sit quietly, with their hands folded, with perhaps an attentive smile carefully in place.

Some women perceive the dancer's "unbridled sexuality" as a threat to themselves or their marriages, and cannot conceal their feelings of discomfort and hostility. Some men see the dancer's presentation as evidence of her "raging lust", and experience it as a challenge to perform in some way, and strange behavior and "acting out" can result. In both cases, their primary response to watching belly dance is their perception of the dancer as a sexual object. Ghanima stated:

Historically speaking, our society is uncomfortable with dancing in general, so belly dance is already suspect, particularly because it is foreign. A century of bad press for the dance contributes to the mental "set." Upon seeing the dancer's body moving freely, clad in a glamorous costume (which may reveal far less bare skin than many cocktail dresses, and certainly less than any swimsuit), the mind of the Western viewer quickly confirms the suspicion that the dance is indeed sexual in nature.

(Gaditana, 21)

Mixed-sex American audiences are uncomfortable as well, the women often hate her, and the men are ill at ease because of the tension between their wives' disapproval, and their own confusion about how to respond. If a dancer emphasizes the sexual aspects of the dance with a men-only crowd, she's setting herself up for trouble.

While in the Middle Eastern countries, women enjoy watching a good professional dancer as much as they enjoy dancing for themselves and for each other, individual performances vary greatly.

Farida stated:

The women sometimes remark that they are the ones who really appreciate the dance, because they are quick to recognize a well-executed or difficult movement and encourage a good dancer with the *zhagareet*, and by clapping in time to the music. (Mazloom, 1998, 67)

A man will admit that those who dance in a nightclub intrude upon his environment, and are doubly disturbing to him because she is engaging in an art that draws attention to her sexuality. "He assumes that she must have shown decided immodesty to have come so far. This is not necessarily to do with the fact that she may be a prostitute." Lucy stated. (Hanee, 65) As for Western man, he states that the dancers fulfill a necessary function in the society, for the presence of sensuality has to be admitted somewhere in public life and dancers are the expression of it. For many people, a professional belly dancer does please the vast majority of them. "She communicates a variety of emotions, touching some part of nearly everyone's psyche, and the feeling that she most often brings to the observer as well as to the performer, has traditionally been wholehearted." (Hala, March, 1998)

In the West, another reason for the dance remaining current is the need for retention of heritage, a return to roots. Much of what is presented to the society today is antiquated before a year has past. There is no enduring substance to form lasting identities much less identify with being a part of a long line in a history. Today, many people are turning to what are called "tribal" forms of dressing and adornment. They are

becoming tattooed, pierced, wearing clothes from other countries and cultures, practicing religions and philosophies of other lands, listening to music in languages they do not understand, searching for personal identities.

Therefore, the West was attracted by the belly dance, which is now being taught in towns and cities all over Europe and America, a phenomenon that has given rise to more media interest than it has enjoyed since the turn of the century. This interest reflects long-held misapprehensions concerning the nature of the dance. The questions most often asked: what does belly dance offer American women that is unique? Why has it become so respectable that an American woman is anxious to set her hips gyrating, her tummy fluttering and all of her body rolling serpentine fashion on the floor?

To answer these questions every woman will have a different answer. Let us first explain how the belly dance was introduced to the American public during Victorian times. American women were cinched into rigid, sometimes deforming, corsets, pinching in the waist while immobilizing the breasts. When musicians and dancers performed at the Chicago World's Fair, Americans were given a sensational performance of "exotic" music and unrestricted body movement. What a difference from the realm of ballet, with its rigid, almost unattainable, stylization to the free and grounded movement of dance older than the pyramids. Thomas Edison filmed one of the dancers, Fatima, who performed in New York, and before it was allowed to be viewed by the public, censors edited the film by drawing lines through the hip and breast areas in each frame in an effort to hide the natural movement. (Buonaventura, 1990, 105)

The American public was totally taken with the art. Fashion began to reflect the brilliant colors, jewel and bead adornments, headdresses, bold jewelry, etc. but still women were in the corsets. Unfortunately, because the dance was viewed with such an erotic, sexual perception the prostitutes of the Chicago area and then other metropolis areas in the United States, began to imitate, as best they could, the clothes of the dancers as well as trying to perform their movements. Out of this came the perception that belly dancers were prostitutes. Most of what Americans based their opinions of belly dancing and culture on has for years, unfortunately, originated in Hollywood movies with beautiful, sex-starved seminude women vying for the attentions of a jaded, overweight, and turbaned potentate. Sheherazade in Thousand and One Nights 1910, and the Salome mania of 1907-09, cared less about the truth than about spectacle and false suggestions of venality.

What were the elements that so appealed to the American woman and inspired her to dance? When asked this question Jordan Dancer, a professional belly dancer in San Jose, replied:

I believe the music was first and foremost. It had a power and beauty that transcended cultural differences. It doesn't really matter where belly dance came from. What matters is that it began and it continues to exist. The dance itself spoke of personal spirit, allowing each person a chance to express self. And, with America a melting pot of so many different cultures and all being pressured to assimilate into one, a chance to express

self was a longing for many. That this dance has intrigued and lured so many women to participate is not difficult to understand. (Jordan, June, 1997)

It seems that one of the belly dance attractions is the chance to express the inner performer in all American women, because entertaining each other through bodily expression is almost unheard-of for most people, and after childhood is considered an unpardonable form of showing-off.

American women have always struggled to be individuals as well as members of the whole community. Too often they, as a group, have been unrecognized or forbidden to reach full potentials. Their identities have usually been off-shoots of the men in their families, not the women. Yet women cluster to other women. Therefore, for many women dance is a release, a way to step beyond the conformities of preconceived lives and expectations and to express many emotions and thoughts through movement.

Jordan states:

For myself, belly dance was one of those releases. And the music of that part of the world spoke to me in a manner like no other. What I experienced, when first hearing Arabic music, is a feeling of returning home after a very long absence. And it is a feminine dance. (Jordan, June, 1997)

American women have taken what has been more of a traditional, handed down dance form and turned it into an art to be studied. They publish periodicals and books,

e.g. Habibi and Arabesque magazines, Nafis newsletter. They hold classes at community centers. e.g. weekly classes in San Jose, Los Gatos, and Santa Clara. They attend workshops with national and international instructors e.g. workshops with out of area, state and country performance and instructors; for instance, Mahmoud Reda from Egypt, Ibrahim Farrah in New York, Sarah in Los Angles, sponsored by Port Saidi Production, Tina O'Neil and Jordan Dancer. They produce shows and plays, lecture, demonstrate, document and videotape and hold festivals and cultural events such as Rakkasha Dance Festival, Richmond, CA., Desert Dance Festival, San Jose, CA., and Belly Dance of the Year. San Ramon, CA. But not every women who takes classes in belly dancing becomes a performer or even desires to. Most do it for fun, to feel feminine, to get social interaction. Jordan states:

And through this dance I also came to be comfortable with my own physical body, not as an object to be shown or displayed, or hidden for that matter, but as totally, unequivocally me. Just as I use my eyes or ears, my brain or legs to live everyday, the wholeness of my mind and body came to be an instrument in which to express so many things I thought and felt. At times my dance is elegant and ethereal, others times flirtatious and sensual, others strong and powerful. At times I dance from great sorrow, as release, as a story. Other times it's just for the fun of it, it makes me happy, no other purpose. God has given all of us a great gift in the

movement of women. At times it is truly an exquisite beauty to behold.

(Jordan, June, 1997)

As a solo dance performed by women for women for their entertainment, belly dance movements are ideally set for the feminine body. For instance, the movement accentuating the upper and lower torso, using the softness of the breasts and abdomen for vibration, just the very shape the women bodies, the curvatures of feminine sensuality. The belly dance is not only an initiation into the mysteries of body language but, also, a revelation of the mystical necessity to express power beyond words. Lucy stated:

Belly dance is feminine which is different from sexual. It was originated by women, it is of women, and about women. It originates deep within the body, moves up from the ground to the chest. It conveys deep emotion.

The body vibrates with energy and life. I don't go on stage to show my body, I do something that I am convinced is truly an art. The beat is the soul of belly dancing. Sometimes I dance fast, sometimes it is slow and sometimes, it is rhythmic but, it always has to have a beat. (Hanee, 66)

This means that belly dancing is not an exclusive dance, no one is debarred from it by virtue of her age or physical size. Many women who would love to dance have been discouraged by the demands of Western dance forms such as ballet, whose requirements include a body of almost anorexic proportions. Classical ballet does little to question the predominant Western perception of the body as an encumbrance, something to be transcended rather than celebrated. Needless to say, it is difficult to compare the two

dance forms based on such a dissimilar aesthetic and use of the body. Yet by contrasting the two, we can understand something of the appeal of belly dancing to modern sensibilities, and to women brought up with the “ballet” image as an ideal of feminine grace and beauty.

From this we understand that sexual difference and cultural difference are interacting, but it is not clear if cultural difference shapes sexual difference or sexual difference shapes cultural difference. Jordan states:

When people first learn that I am a professional belly dancer, many of them have the perception that I am some wild erotic woman driven by sexual lust and the need to be desirable to men. These reactions come from people of all countries. Some even feel they must demonstrate their understanding of my dance, usually by saying things such as “you shake your booty” and even “do a little dance for me.” It’s quite entertaining and it does make me laugh. Nothing could be further from the truth though. I live pretty much like anyone else. (Jordan, June, 1997)

It seems that what is acceptable in the society changes with who controls the society. If something works for a group of people it will continue, otherwise it will and must change. A culture does not exist without participants. Jordan continues:

And as an artist I feel we are a very misunderstood group. While I do want people to enjoy my performance, what I do in my dance is for myself. That others find enjoyment and appreciate it is that much better.

While I dance for myself, I do want to give to others, as other dancers give to me. (Jordan, June, 1997)

In the same respect, a long, interacting group of people will develop a system of standards. If sexual practices of a society enhance and/or insure the prosperity and continuance of a culture, then those practices will continue and be upheld. If the practices become encumbering, unproductive, suffocating etc. to the individuals or swing to the other side of the pendulum as to cause a decline in the health and longevity of the society, then those practices will cease either through choice or force. The state and nature of the individual and the culture play off one another, bouncing back and forth, like a Ping Pong ball. Jordan states:

Maybe it's joy, maybe fun, excitement, and should someone find it erotic or sexually exciting, then that is their response. What each person sees in my dance is his or her own mind reflected back. I can only control what I do, not what others experience or think. That I can educate them is possible. (Jordan, June, 1997)

As with any subject in which people are not knowledgeable, perceptions can be incorrect and distorted. During Victorian times, the image of all belly dancers as prostitutes was generated in America, and to this day that image prevails for many people. And in many similar situations, what people do not know, understand or agree with will color and shape their perceptions. Western and Eastern societies' perceptions of belly dancing differ mostly in, for lack of a better word, tolerance.

Jordan continues:

While my mother thinks I am beautiful and a wonderful dancer, as her child this was never her wish for me. Her perceptions of what would be the best life for me would be a homemaker, with a husband and children as my life's achievements. To be a performer, especially a dancer, was not her idea of the ideal career for me. Loving our entertainers and wanting our family members to be them are two different things. In America it is much more acceptable, especially with the possibility of making large sums of money should the woman go into the "right" sort of entertainment business. But still in the American society, belly dancers are still thought of and classified in the same groupings as strippers, and I am not making any judgment on that profession. However, the two are not the same in their performing or intent. The only similarity between them is that there are more women than men who practice this art form, they are both perceived by societies as erotic and sexual dance forms and people assume we are sexually loose or even prostitutes. (Jordan, June, 1997)

Lucy said:

Belly dance developed over thousands of years and now there are rules and certain steps and rhythm, but these are embossed from the outside. How they are interpreted, that comes from the heart, from inside. (Hanee, 66)

Belly dancing has been taken out of its cultural context and served up as a theatrical spectacle in the Western countries. Its level of performance necessarily changes, yet the basic movement and essence remains the same as from centuries ago. The ways in which it does so are largely to do with satisfying the expectations of its new-found audience, who come to see it armed with their own unconscious tastes and prejudices.

Chapter Three

Belly Dance History from Ancient Temple to Twentieth Century Cabaret

The unending upheavals of history, the vanishing and shifting of peoples through successive periods of change, have left their mark on dance the world over. It is not always possible to ascertain which stylistic elements are indigenous to a particular dance and which are the influence of migrant groups, though it is interesting to speculate how dance movements may have traveled from country to country; how a similar use of the body in two otherwise differing dance forms has allowed certain movements to enrich the repertoire of both.

This chapter will explain the historical images of the belly dance from ancient Egypt until now. Through the different images of belly dancing in the Middle Eastern countries, the paintings, films and TV, cabaret and night clubs, I propose a performance analysis code, that is, the qualities of movement defining belly dancing that serve to influence in any way the audience.

Many descriptions of Egyptian dance from the 1860s and 1870s indicate that the women's solo dance, *baledi*, was the most popular of all. Sometimes it involved mime, sometimes feats of acrobatic skill, such as balancing cups of liquid on the head. Writers commented on the basic isolation and control of different parts of the body, the upper

torso generally remaining motionless, with the face impassive and grave, while the hips described patterns of vigorous, ever-accelerating movement. Alexandre de Carcy, comparing the characteristics of Middle Eastern dance and Western dance, noted: “The upper body of the *almeh* dances a solemn minuet, while the rest of her person is worthy to figure in a wild quadrille.” (de Carcy, 1874, 236) Research into belly dance form, its origins and that of its practitioners, has been confounded by a welter of confusing data propagated over many years.

In the Middle East and North Africa, despite people’s reservations, belly dancing remained an indispensable means of animating private festivities. In this context, a conscious consideration of technique and aesthetic values gradually came into being and dance became the art of the individual, who took pleasure in displaying her own particular virtuosity and innovations. The use, or playing down, of a particular part of the body in belly dancing is related to taboos as well as aesthetic values.

While the cross-cultural infusions that have produced the current style called belly dancing must have been continuous for well over two millennia, it must not be forgotten that this dance is primarily and pre-eminently Egyptian, and Egypt is where it is still seen to its best advantage. Leon Grieg, former soloist with the Grand Ballet de Marquis de Cuevas, in his research into the dance in Egypt, stated:

Approximately 3500 B.C. when King Menes became the first ruler to unite Upper and Lower Egypt, each of these districts, or Nomes as they are usually called after their Greek name, retained a certain amount of

independence, particularly in religion. They all possessed their own local deity, and these deities were the main influence in the lives and culture of the people living in the area that they dominated. Although fashions changed and certain deities were later accepted as national Gods the people always remained faithful to their original ideals, though worshipping them on a lesser scale. Each Nome would have its religious ceremonies and festivals and these were accompanied by music, singing and dancing. (Grieg, 12)

The accompanying **Figure # 1** shows a Wedding Feast with music and female dancers. A Theban tomb picture of the eighteenth dynasty or 1300 B.C. in the British Museum. Erman in his explanation of this figure mentioned that:

The figure shows a wedding feast with music and female dancers. Amongst the guests in the upper row two married couples sit in front on arm chairs, behind them on stools sit alternately secular and priestly gentlemen. At the bottom there are two dancing girls, wearing nothing but girdles. Stand close to the wreathed wine jars; they go through their twists and turns, clapping their hands to keep in time. Meanwhile one woman plays the flute, and three others sing a song, evidently in praise of the pleasures of the cool happy time of inundation, as is the custom at the present day. (Erman, 249)

Figure # 1 Feast with music and dancing girls. Wall picture from a Theban tomb in the British Museum. (After a photograph by Wilke)

There were also many paintings from different tombs for female dancers in the ancient world with their whole body clearly visible beneath transparent robes. **Figure # 2** shows female dancers under the new Empire. (Relief at Gizeh, after Perrot-Chipiez).

Figure # 2

Female dancers under the new Empire. The short ones with castanets. (Relief At Gizeh, after Perrot-Chipiez)

The girls are dressed in long transparent clothes with tambourine or castanets in their hands; they turn round and round in quick time, bending their bodies in a coquettish manner. the short ones with castanets. (Erman, 249)

The old Egyptians took no more offense at these questionable movements of the dancers than do the modern Egyptians of to-day; it was a favourite amusement to look on at this dancing, and at social parties dancers were invited for the entertainment of the guests. (Erman, 250)

During the performance of music and dancing at the feasts, the guests in no way appear so engrossed in these pleasures as is required by etiquette at present musical soirees. On the contrary, they drink and talk, and busy themselves with their toilette. The Egyptian idea of a social feast was that the guests should be anointed and wreathed by the attendants, that they should receive new necklaces, and that lotus flowers and buds should be placed on the black tresses of their wigs.

If we look at the wedding feast represented in **Figure # 3**, Egyptian Ladies at a Feast, we see in the upper row three married couples, in the lower eight ladies, and the gentlemen sit behind on simple stools. We see also how absorbed the women of the party are in their own adornment: they give each other their flowers to smell, or in their curiosity they take

Figure # 3 Egyptian Ladies at a Feast. Wall picture from a Theban tomb in the British Museum. (After a photograph by Wilke)

hold of their neighbor's new earrings. The serving boys and girls go round offering ointment, wreaths, perfumes, and bowls of wine the singers sing to the guests as they quaff the wine. (Erman, 254)

The heb-sed, for example, in which the pharaoh himself was the principal player, was a ritual in which the Gods supposedly perpetuated the king's youth. The numerous accounts and various illustrations found by archaeologists support the idea that these festivals contained a great deal of dance movement.

Figure # 4

Acrobatic Dancers Incised
relief on red quartzite.

Theban tomb.

Photo by Wim Swaan

Very often, there would be a hundred or more participants and as painted records show no sign of confusion it is easy to ascertain that there must have been some fixed choreography, or regimentation, as shown by **Figure # 4** and **Figure # 5**.

The innumerable paintings of dancers found on the walls of the ancient tombs support this theory, for they show a remarkable co-ordination of movement, which cannot be purely coincidental with the artists' ideals. As shown by **Figure # 6** dancers accompanied by an orchestra, from the tomb of Nenk-fer-ti-kai. Sakkara. Fourth or fifth dynasty, or approx. 3000 B.C. (Grieg, 12)

Figure # 5

Harpist and Acrobatic dancers
Incised relief on red quartzite.
Theban tomb.
Photo by Wim Swaan.

This scene strengthens the belief that the dancers portrayed had a set choreographic patterns to perform, but also the feats that the illustration shows them executing could only have been performed by trained dancers and strong acrobats with a well perfected technique. The questions often asked: Were these dances completely lost with the fall of the ancient Egyptian civilization? Does it relate in any form to belly dancing?

From Aswan, the southern extremity of Egypt to Alexandria in the north, one still can recognize forty-two districts. Not that they bear any real resemblance to those of five thousand years ago, but there are forty-two, and they each have their own local costume, and homely customs. South of Cairo, which is only twenty-five kilometers north of the old dividing capital of Memphis, the land is a narrow fertile strip; like a green ribbon lying over the desert which banks it on either side. North of Cairo this ribbon spreads out to form the fan shaped delta.

Figure # 6 Scene of Dancers accompanied by an orchestra.
From the tomb of Nen-fer-ti-kai. Shakkara. 4th or 5th
Dynasty, or Approx. 3000 B.C.

The Nile divides, and its tributaries make up the lakes and marshes that make the delta a wild and flat and lonely place. If you go to any village, you will find music and dancing, and if you travel on to the next village you will witness the same spectacle. If you drive for twenty miles, you will find an entirely different atmosphere. The rhythm of the drums has changed, and the experienced eye can notice slight variations in the steps of the dance. From Upper Egypt to the delta change is formidable. These two regions produce the two vastly different styles that, with the oriental dance, form the trio that represents Egyptian folk dance today such as:

Saidienne, the dance of Upper Egypt has a long rhythmic quality. The female dancers concentrate on a sustained shuffling movement with their feet. The music gains rapidity, but the dancers keep a restrained movement as if held back by the heat or oppressed by the encroaching desert that they can see on either side.

In the north, *Isandarani* is a dance with more savage movements. The dancers use every part of their bodies to emphasize the quick rhythm of the drums. They stamp their feet, but not with agitation, and as always in the *Saidienne* that movement is lightly restrained, which adds to its exciting quality.

Baledi or *Masri*, is the Egyptian form of the *danse du Ventre*. It blends into this essentially oriental dance the qualities of both the *Saidienne* and *Isandarani*. The costume is modernized, and due to its obvious sex-appeal, this is the dance that one finds in all of the cabarets. It has no set pattern, or music, and both dancers and musicians continue ad lib, until they are exhausted. Sometimes the dancer will accompany herself with *el saggat*. These tiny cymbals worn on the fingers, are beaten together similarly to castanets. They resemble the style of castanets, used by the ancient Egyptian, to be seen in many wall reliefs, particularly ones representing a dance at a funeral at Sakkara. A line of men are walking about twirling girls beating tambourines, while others accompany them with *el saggat*. (Grieg, 12-13)

Therefore, the Middle East dance is characterized by its intricate hip movements which, to judge from fragments of description down the years, have changed little in essence in the last 1000 years, although they have been augmented and refined. Gypsies

were not the only ones responsible for the dissemination of this dance, although they played a major part in its development. Women who traveled with the invading armies of successive colonial powers also had a hand in taking it from country to country.

As we have seen, the belly dance has survived in Egypt as both a popular art performed by professional dancers at street festivals, weddings and nightclubs, and as a form of personal expression for women at family gatherings. This means that Egyptian belly dancing falls into three categories of performance genre: “individual” (personal expression for women), “professional and marginal” (*ghawazee*), and “professional” (nightclub or wedding).

Individual dance

In ancient Egyptian villages, girls grow up learning to dance from childhood, as

Figure # 7 A Child Dancer from the Siwa Oasis in Upper Egypt.
Photo by Mahmoud Reda, 1965.

shown on **Figure # 7**, a child dancer from the Siwa Oasis in Egypt. The girl is about six years old wearing a *galabiya* (the national dress for rural people) which reaches like a nightgown almost down her ankles, dancing, rolling her hips, and saucily shaking her bottom, while some of the other children clap a rhythm for her.

At these informal gatherings, children come to imitate the women's dancing as a matter of course, and are singled out from time to time to show what they can do. Step by step, they pick up movements and when they grow up every woman gets a particular technique, such as movement of head, eyes, breast, hands, stomach, hips and legs. By doing this the woman develops her own individual style within this framework, unconsciously revealing aspects of her personality as well as her general bearing and spirit.

As a woman gets up to dance a "women only dance," when they get together to relax and amuse themselves, she always receives the encouragement of her friends by *zhagareet*, not only before, but during the time that she is dancing.

Figure # 8 is a representation of a women's only dancer's stance which is correct from the position of her lifted arm, and the angle of her curved head. She looks as if she is describing a circle with her upraised hip, using her other leg as the pivot while she slowly wheels around, while some women are singing and clapping their hands for her to dance.

Professional and Marginal dance

In Egyptian villages a professional dancer is known as a *ghaziya* (pl. *ghawazee*). The original *ghawazee* were gypsies, though the word has come to be used as a generic term for dancers rather than to denote a particular tribe, or tribes, as was once the case. Egyptian *ghawazee* means “invaders”, or “outsiders”, and gypsies have

Figure # 8 A Dance at Sunset. Otto Pilny. Mid-19th century.
Oil painting. Sotheby's, London

Those *ghawazee* who did not live in Cairo camped along the banks of the Nile. They traveled about a good deal, and at the spring and autumn festivals the Delta would be dotted with their multi-coloured tents. One of the principal attractions of these festivals are the monkey trainers who teach their animals a parody of *ghawazee* dancing and exhibit them with great success at regular feasts.

As outsiders *ghawazee* refuse to conform to the society. When they settled, they assimilated the local traditions and made them their own. They took native folk dance and music, amplified and polished them, and used them as a means of livelihood. They have always met hostility in the countries where they have settled, and for hundreds of years they have made their living as public performers. They have no written history; instead, “their story has been kept alive and transmitted from generation to generation by means of music, song and dance, which hold a special place in their lives.” (Saleh, 1993, 8)

There are two kinds of gypsy entertainment: one remains private, the other, the *ghawazee* dancing has shaped their public repertoire. Music and dance are binding elements in their culture and are used as a means of mocking the pretensions of polite society, whose members they then go on to entertain in their homes.

Ghawazee usually dance in solo as *ghaziya*, pairs, three or four female dancers. They practice a distinctive form of dance peculiar to themselves and often perform in the court of a house, or in the street, before the door, on occasions, such as festivals,

marriage, or a birth. They perform free style improvisations, but also present choreographed or semi-choreographed dances.

Saleh said:

There indeed existed a repertoire of dances which, from subsequent description, each had distinctive characteristics and were, in most cases, partially or wholly choreographed. They were known generally enough to be specifically requested on occasion:

Al-Takht dance - the opening dance of a wedding entertainment, performed to *mizmar*, a raucous, oboe-like instrument and drum by three or four *ghawazee*. There is no choreography but though the dancers improvise, the majority must be doing the same thing at any given time, while the remaining dancer performs the step/movement which the majority were doing last.

Asherat al-Tabl dance - a drummer moves about the *ghaziya* playing a large table *beledi*, or double-headed drum slung before him. The *ghaziya*, leaning backwards across the barrel of the drum, follows him in this position, dancing.

Al-Jihayni dance - the *ghaziya*'s stick dance par excellence, described as "very old". Performed by two dancers, it contains elements of *tahtiyb* (combat dance with sticks).

Nizzawi dance - a fast choreographed dance for two dancers with staffs. A typical figure is the dancers' moving apart while facing each other, then coming together again, then taking a quarter pivot to face forward and advance, side by side. (Saleh, 1993, 12)

Figure # 9 shows *ghawazee* practicing the *Nizzawi dance* in Saeed Egypt c. 1870. The figure shows *ghawazee* performing unveiled in the public streets, to amuse the rabble. One of them has a staff which the other must have put aside; a woman sitting on the floor is playing the drum and singing for them. The *ghawazee* wore a small velvet cap on the crown of the head and braided their hair in ingenious ways, weaving in strings of black silk with gold spangles sewn onto them. James Neil described how complex their hair dressing could be:

At the end of each string of spangles was a multi-faceted gold bead, with gold coins suspended on a ring beneath it. The countless gold spangles almost entirely hide the hair and glitter and tinkle with every movement of the head. The women used kohl round their eyes, drawing a thin line inside the lower eyelid, and tinted their hands and feet with *henna*. (Neil, 1913, 197)

American traveler Charles Leland described the dance as “a charm beyond beauty” and compared the *ghaziya* with the European ballerina:

Sometimes two girls dance a duo: and I have seen this made quite as improper, though not as sickly sentimental, as in any opera house in

Europe, when the ballerina falls back into the male object's arms, eyeing him with a leering smile, while she lifts one leg to the gallery. (Leland, 1873, 132)

Figure # 9
Gypsies of the
Sae'd Egypt. C.R.
Huber.C.1870.
Engraving

Saleh says the last form of dance is :

Al-Na'asi dance - a side to side shimmy dance, performed in unison by three or four *ghawazee*; with light cymbals the *Na'asi* is accompanied by

mizmars played very low by muffling the bell. (Saleh, 1993. 12)

Figure # 10 Shows *ghawazee* practicing *Al Na'asi* dance in Upper Egypt in the 19th century to entertain travelers. The *ghawazee* wore golden caps upon their tresses. As the music started, their heels beat upon the ground, with a tinkle of little bells and anklets, their raised arms quivered in harmony; their hips shook with a voluptuous movement; they twirled about quickly and they wore little cymbals. Their dresses were similar to

Figure # 10 *Ghawazee* entertaining travelers by torch-light in Asiut
Mid-19th century. Engraving.
Arabesque collection New York.

those worn by women of the middle classes in Egypt in private, who also wear various ornaments. Their eyes were bordered with the kohl and the tips of their fingers, the palms of their hands and their toes and other parts of their feet usually stained with the red dye of *henna*.

The travelers recorded what they saw in minute detail: dancers who stood with a detached smile on their faces and made their bodies ripple and quiver from top to toe. Travelers marveled at the many moods of this dance, on one hand bizarre and wildly exciting, on the other sensual and mysterious.

In August 1762 the German explorer Niebuhr stated, when he saw the Egyptian *ghawazee* whose entertainment took place in front of his hotel:

At first we did not greatly appreciate this kind of entertainment, for the music was quite poor and the women immodest, to our way of thinking. They exposed themselves in front of us in every way, and we found them ugly, with their dyed yellow hands and blood-red fingernails. The black and blue necklaces and big heavy anklets, the rings in their ears and noses, and the rich use of grease in their hair was not to our taste at all. However, little by little we changed our minds and found them beautiful, even to the extent that we enjoyed their entertainment as much as we would have enjoyed seeing the finest dancers and singers in Europe.

(Niebuhr, 1790, 153)

James Aldridge writes that:

It was Niebuhr who introduced European readers to Egypt's oriental dancers who performed naked to the waist, with their yellow hands, spotted face, absurd ornaments, and hair larded with stinking pomatum . . . their movement graceful though indecent. (Aldridge, 1969, 153)

German and French travellers wrote exhaustively on the Middle East in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Occasionally they declined to describe the dancing, claiming that it was impossible to give a good account of it in their language. Leland though, did very well describing the *ghawazee*:

They all seem to have the power of moving any part of the body freely, just as certain persons can move their ears; and it is wonderful how they will continue to agitate every muscle in the most violent and rapid manner for hours, quivering from head to foot as if electrified, without being in the least fatigued and, what is incredible, without perspiring.

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. (Leland, 1873, 126)

Lane was impressed by the *ghawazee* to remark:

Many of them are extremely handsome, and most of them well dressed.

Upon the whole, I think they are the finest women in Egypt. (Lane, 1954, 97)

As we have seen, Lane believed their art derived directly from the dance of ancient Egypt, but he speculated that the latter was more licentious. He reached this conclusion from the fact that dancers depicted in the tombs apparently performed nude or in transparent robes, as shown by **Figure # 2**.

Mummies have been found of two young Egyptian dancers from the eleventh dynasty with tattoos on their arms, legs, feet and lower abdomen. A scar runs all the way across the lower belly and round the hips to end in a leaf-shaped brand on each buttock. This elaborate tattooing of slaves is an indication that their bodies were meant to be revealed, and we may also speculate that decorating the belly like this suggests its importance in the dance. (Buonaventura, 1983, 45)

These are the earliest Western descriptions for the *ghawazee*, who were to become one of the greatest sources of fascination for subsequent travelers. Some thirty years after Niebuhr's encounter with the *ghawazee*, the first organized European expedition to Egypt took place, when in 1798 Napoleon set out on his ill-fated voyage to Egypt. This date, which marked the beginning of an accelerating Western interest in the Arab world, can conveniently be taken as indicating the start of the Orientalist era.

By the nineteenth century “Orientalism” was a well-established phenomenon. The Orient was an ill-defined area which included parts of Asia, the Middle East, North Africa and the Mediterranean. It was a part of the world with which the West had previously had only intermittent contact, mainly through traders, political adventures and wealthy travelers.

The current, widely held view of Orientalism derives from Edward Said’s thesis, that the West has exploited, misunderstood and even invented the East for its own sinister purposes. From the wealth of material available, it is easy to select examples to suit this theory and ignore those which do not. Many Europeans who went to the Arab world compared the life they found there favorably with that of Europe. (Said, 1978, 2)

On a visit to North Africa in 1832, the French painter Eugene Delacroix wrote of the Moroccans:

They are closer to nature in a thousand ways, their dress, the form of their shoes. And so beauty has a share in everything they make.

As for us in our corsets, our tight shoes, our ridiculous pinching clothes, we are pitiful. (Jullian, 1977, 48)

When Napoleon set sail for Egypt he took with him a team of scholars to study the country’s culture and achievements from ancient to modern times. His occupation of Egypt proved short-lived, but the massive *Description de l’Egypte* produced by his team has proved of enduring worth and was responsible for stimulating enormous interest in the Middle East.

Therefore the belly dance gained worldwide attention after the expedition of Napoleon to Egypt in 1798. After this many painters and writers went to Egypt and were captivated with the *ghawazee*, who were famous for their heart-stealing performances. The *ghawazee* were the subject of paintings and writings of the Orientalist school, Delacroix, Gerome, David Roberts, Flaubert.

In Cairo, Napoleon's soldiers encountered the *ghawazee*, who lived in an-*Hhoshe Derbek* (Street of the Open Hall), along with other non-gypsy tribes who earned their living as entertainers. In the daily social intercourse between these people, it is possible that women from different tribes picked up each other's skills, and in this way developed a dance which owed something to both Egyptian and gypsy dance, as shown by **Figure # 11 and Figure # 12.**

In 1834 the *ghawazee* were outlawed from Cairo. Muhammad Ali, an Albanian adventurer, had seized power in Egypt in 1799 and had embarked on the modernization of the country with the help of European advisers. Religious pressure added to the notoriety of the dancers, led him to banish them to Upper Egypt where they settled in the towns of Esna, Aswan and Kean. Any woman who defied the ban was liable to fifty lashes for a first offense and hard labor for any further infringement of the law.

It appears that some dancers disobeyed the edict, though they carried on their profession with a good deal of secrecy and stealth. Many a traveler noted that it was always possible to find them if one looked hard enough.

Figure # 11 Dance of the Almeh. Jean-Leon Gerome. Oil painting.
Dayton Art Institute, Ohio.

Leland commented that:

Despite the ban, it remained fashionable among wealthy Egyptians to enliven their parties with dancers. Most travelers, if given the choice, would rather have seen the dancing than the pyramids. (Leland, 1873, 126)

Figure # 12 A dance in the ruins of Karnak. Late 19th century. Engraving.

Frenchman Alain Weber, a classical music impresario responsible for organizing concerts in France, stated when interviewed by Lorraine Zamora Mutke, a popular dancer in Berlin, Germany.

The *ghawazee* performed with a small musical ensemble whose leader was always a *rabab* player. But around the beginning of the 1960s, the *mizmar* became the more practical instrument to use. The *mizmar*, with its loud piercing sound proved more effective with larger audiences and spaces and for outside performances. Presently, the *mizmar* ensembles are used

almost exclusively for village performances, while the *rabab* is heard in urban cafes and private homes. (Farrah, 1991, 5)

The reputation of the *ghawazee* varied according to the social status of their audience. Those who performed for the wealthy and the ruling elite were highly regarded, as well as being wealthy themselves. Some of them owned property, animals and even slaves, professed faith in Islam and accompanied the pilgrimage to Mecca. At the opposite end of the scale were those who earned their living from a combination of dancing and prostitution. They lived apart from society and married within their own tribe. Marriage did not put an end to their dancing, however; indeed, their husbands were financially dependent on them and often acted for them in the capacity of musician and manager.

Professional dancer

After the First World War and due to a bad economic situation, some Egyptian women became professional dancers, because performing was one of the few jobs which enabled them to earn a handsome living. Therefore a cabaret (night club) style developed in the 1920s and the first Egyptian cabaret, the Casino Opera was opened in 1926 in Cairo by actress-dancers Badia Masabni, a Lebanese. She opened the Casino Opera to satisfy the demands of a colonial audience. The Casino Opera offered a varied bill of all-round entertainment, including an innovative six o'clock matinee for women only, which was packed every evening.

Badia Masabni, shown in **Figure # 13**, developed the belly dance as a cabaret entertainment and gave it a new style which departed from tradition in several ways. Until the 1920s the upper torso and arms had not played a particular role in belly dance. Traditionally the arms were simply lifted held, but now dancers started using them to describe flowing, serpentine patterns of movement. Also on Badia's extended stage, performers began to explore the use of space, whereas they had previously performed more or less on the spot.

Figure # 13 Badia Masabni, the artist who created a renaissance of belly dance and music. Photo courtesy of Dr. Mo Geddawi 1930.

Another of Badia Masabni's innovations was the use of veils. The manipulation of gossamer veils was not a feature of Egyptian belly dance. It was the creation of Western dancers at the turn of the century. As a reflection of how small a part it played in traditional belly dancing, today's cabaret entertainers do little with the veil except circle the stage, flourishing it before casting it aside.

Badia Masabni developed belly dancing as a cabaret entertainment, and gave it a new style. Yet it has remained essentially an improvisational art, depending on individual skill and creativity rather than precise choreography (though a cabaret artist tends to follow a familiar pattern of steps). With an eye on Western entertainment, Badia Masabni decided to broaden the scope of Egyptian belly dancing. She established a training school and, when she judged that one of her pupils was ready to perform, recommended her for private parties; this was considered the highest honor for a dancer. Tahia Carioca who was born in 1919, and Samia Gamal who was born in 1911, both trained with her, and went on to become two of the most renowned dancers in the Middle Eastern countries. Tahia Carioca was the legendary star of Egyptian professional belly dancing who dominated pre-1952 Cairo night life. Her earthy, simple, graceful technique and elegant dance movements, combined with her powerful and charismatic personality, made her a unique belly dancer in her time. **Figure # 14** shows Tahia Carioca on stage. Her body always dances to the rhythm of the music and she dances in one spot. Every part of her slender body has a role to play, forming a symmetrical choreography. Her audience is held captive under the spell of her enthralling performance and graceful body to the extent that they would stop drinking and eating while she was performing. Tahia Carioca is one of the few who mastered both dance and acting in both films and theatre stage as well.

Figure # 14 Tahia Carioca on stage. November 1940.
Photo courtesy of Mohammed Emara.

Tahia Carioca is a talented actress with many merit awards, founder of an independent theatre group in the sixties and former president of the Actors' Union. She effected political change, and she gained the respect of the intellectuals of Egypt due to her activities. Before Tahia Carioca's time, the theatre was used mostly for presenting comedies, but Tahia Carioca helped introduce serious political theatre. Her name has become synonymous with unconventionality and audacity of spirit. One of her popular feature films "Shabab Imara" (The Youth of a Woman, 1950), affected all the youth in

Egypt. It is the unusual love story of an older woman who seduces a younger man who is handsome, well built, but also coming from a rural area, naïve and uneducated. She convinces him to stay in the city and to work with her. The film with its unconventional sexual connotations ran against the traditional mores of Egypt at that time. It was a step toward more open-mindedness.

Another feature film where Tahia Carioca only danced is “Li’bet el-Sit” (the Woman’s Game, 1940), shown by **Figure # 15**. Her dance possessed subtly sensuous style, while still retaining the earthiness and the heaviness of traditional belly dancing. The nuances of this style can be seen in those old clips of Tahia Carioca, who mingles reserve, decorum and an extraordinary sweetness of expression with a rather

Figure # 15 Tahia Carioca with a *baledi* dress, extracted from a feature film “Li’bet el-Sit” (The Woman’s Game) October, 1940.

mysterious smile. Her costume is a *baledi dress* (national Egyptian dress) which covers her from head to foot, unlike the two-piece costume which came in with other innovations during the twenties.

Egyptian feature films testify to the popularity of belly dancing in the Middle East. They offer a fascinating glimpse of the role assigned to dancers by the society and are good indication of street morality and aspirations. The prolific Egyptian film industry produced roughly two hundred documentaries and fifty feature films every year, between the 1940s and the 1980s, which were exported to other Middle Eastern countries. The feature films were popular with their rags-to-riches plots in which dancers were often featured as heroines, working class women who sought to escape their poverty through a connection with the wealthy. Cabaret dancing invariably was featured in these films, even if only as brief diversion from the main plot. The period from 1920s to the 1950s saw the introduction of some Western elements into the cabaret dance. Hollywood exerted the greatest influence on film then, and its fantasy of Oriental dance filtered through and was taken up and unconsciously parodied by Egyptian dancers in their desire to emulate Western behavior and modes of fashion. Producers are aware of the popularity of belly dancing, which appears in films as more than just a few minutes' diversion sandwiched between the serious business of the plot. Dancers are an obvious source of self-identification by women in the audience, for despite its moral ambiguity, the profession of dancer does give a woman a chance to come into contact with the upper

classes and possibly raise her status thereby. Therefore, because of their symbolic value, belly dancers are common film heroines.

During the period from the 1930s to the 1940s, the heyday of the Egyptian film industry, the demand for dancers was so great that not enough of them could be found. The problem was solved by hiring Western women instead, who were given minor roles and required to do a minimum of dancing. The result is that in many films of this period, nightclub scenes show curiously un-Arab-looking women with blonde hair gyrating timidly in the background behind the principal dancer. (Buonaventura, 1983, 101)

During this period Cairo became the center of the entertainment industry, through which it exported its ideas to the rest of the Arab world.

Samia Gamal is another legendary Egyptian dancer and the most celebrated film actress and dancer in the Orient. Samia Gamal, a slim woman in her youth, danced with the Western fantasy element which began entering the dance in the late 1920s. It was she who broke with the custom of dancing barefoot, and it is ironic that her reason for wearing high-heeled shoes on stage was to prove that she could afford them. (Buonaventura, 1990, 150)

High-heeled shoes as shown by **Figure # 16**, were one of many innovations which led to fundamental changes in belly dancing, because it was not uncommon for dancers performing out of doors to wear slippers to protect their feet from the heat. Therefore, high heels give a different emphasis to the dance; they change its earthy nature and low center of gravity. The same is true of the waltz-like pirouetting

Figure # 16

Samia Gamal on stage wearing
a high-heeled shoes, an
innovation of
the late 1920s.

which became part of the new choreographed belly dance pioneered by Badia Masabni's dancers.

The feature films were often musicals and strongly influenced by Hollywood. The 1950s show the introduction of synchronized chorus lines of girls with the star dancer. In the mid-50s, the former soloist with the Grand Ballet de Marquis de Cuevas, Leoan Grieg, had completed choreography for the first large scale musical and dance film ever to be made in Cairo. The film, titled "Premier Amour", in June, 1950, was shown at the "Cannes Film Festival." The film stars Samia Gamal, and uses a corps of 24 girls and eight boys.

Grieg encountered considerable difficulties in making this film as there is no fundamental basis for chorus dancing in Egypt, everything is improvised by the performer. This was the first time a choreographer had been employed on a film and a whole new technique had to be evolved as the music changes rhythm every few bars and these may be as long as eighty counts each. This problem was solved by having a large drum beating eight continuously, irrespective of the rest of the orchestra. A steady beat was essential for the final big production number in which the girls are divided into groups representing Ancient, Lower and Upper Egypt and Oriental. Each dance in turn shows the development of the different styles until continuing their own movements, with Samia Gamal appearing as a modern culmination of them all combined with classical ballet. Grieg directed this sequence and also designed the decor and costumes for all the dance scenes. (Grieg, 12)

The trend of Egyptian musicals of that time often presented an argument in behalf of both the pros and cons of the changes of life within the country. Within the film, the camera often panned from the traditional to the modern in one scene, thus offering a unique juxtaposition. One can not ignore the existence of modern influences from Hollywood. At that time a costume emerged which largely owed its inspiration to Hollywood, where female allure was associated with the vamp. The Western belly dancer outfit, a combination of bra, low-slung gauzy skirt with side slits and bare midriff, was adopted by Middle Eastern dancers and became the cabaret uniform.

Figure # 17 shows Samia Gamal, with a legendary Lebanese singer, Farid Al Atrash, from a film musical of November, 1950. "Al Rajool Al Thaani" (The Other Man.) The chorus girls are seen around and at the back. During Nasser's regime, from 1952-1969, dancers were never allowed to show their navels; hence the long strip of material running vertically from the center of a dancer's bra to join up with her skirt, which we see in early films, and later on came the jewel in the navel. Also the dancers overcame the injunction to cover by sewing a flesh-colored body stocking onto their costume bra.

This cabaret costume has altered little, in essence, since its creation in the twenties. However, such changes as there have been have merely served to rob it of its early charm, which partly derived from its suggestion of the antique.

Today's bra and hip-belt encrusted with rhinestones and sequins are a more brassy version of Hollywood's fantasy of an Oriental charmer. Today's cabaret dancers show little inclination to update this costume or even adapt it to suit individual tastes or

changing fashions. It is a costume which expresses notions of glamour belonging to a certain era, and is curiously dated.

Figure # 17 Samia Gamal and Farid Al Atrah, in an Egyptian film Musical “Al Rajool Al Thaani” (The Other Man) November 1950. The chorus girls are seen around and at the back.

The question of dress is partly one of individual taste; it is also a question of suitability. The main purpose of this type of costume is to show off the body. Bare flesh can be a great distraction, as can swinging fringes and the reflected light of thousands of rhinestones and sequins, and as the number of distractions grows we notice the dance itself less and less.

In Egypt the government has repeatedly tried to suppress cabaret dancing by means of costume regulations and by refusing to issue licenses to clubs which include

dance in their program. Just as in the nineteenth century the dancers were banished from Cairo, there was a move several years ago by Muslim fundamentalists in Egypt to ban the dance altogether. Then as now, the reason was much the same. Scantly clad entertainers who, in the commercial world, are compelled to highlight the more provocative elements of their dance are not a good advertisement for Middle Eastern womanhood. Yet their high public profile, in contrast to that of the majority of women in Muslim society, makes them the best known of Middle Eastern women outside their own country. Needless to say, at the lower end of the scale dancers use the cabarets in time-honored fashion to advertise their charms to potential clients.

Chapter Four

Modern Images of Middle Eastern

Professional Performances

In the twentieth century, the belly dance went through transformations to make it palatable for newer, sophisticated audiences composed of upper class Egyptian and foreign tourists. Despite significant alterations in context, music, costume, and performers themselves, certain features of the performance remained consistent in spite of the context. Modernism brought sophisticated new costumes, composed music, Western dance elements, the nightclub setting and personal removal from the scene by means of film and television. Although the dance vocabulary widened greatly, there were certain constants that could be quantified in terms of movement up to the present day.

When analyzing any dance form, the energy and individual movements have to be considered, because the belly dance is designed for a small space, unlike other performances of this dance, which circle around the stage as in Western floor design. Edward Said, in his “Homage to a Belly Dancer”, points out that: “The less the dancer moves around, the more skilled she is”. (Said, 1994, 8)

There is an easy flowing shift of weight between the feet which is sometimes very rapid, and this is an important basis that gives the other movements a flowing and

breathing quality. Also, there can be a level of change within a step, the feet moving from flat to toe, but there is not the extensive use of vertical space as in Western dance. Small foot patterns are typical, with the feet moving forward and back and from side to side. On the other hand the extensive use of the pelvis region is the most striking feature of the dance and one of the most unusual, with the relationship between the hip and the drum beat probably the central relationship in this kind of dancing. Farrah in his article "This and That" said: "The distinguishing feature of belly dance is choosing the rhythm to interpret over the melody." (Farrah, 1994, 6)

Isolation movements of the hips and pelvis are not used indiscriminately, because in the belly dancing style, hip lifts and drops are used. Generally on the beat the hip goes to the floor, then typically moves in the vertical direction, although there are horizontal movements. There are eight places along the hip band where the hip can move, and there are a great many geometrical hip configurations with circles and figure eight. Certain movements have traditionally become appropriate to certain instrument's solos and certain types of music.

The upper body has its own set of geometric isolations that include circles and angular accents that lift or drop the rib cage. Posture is extremely important and is controlled by muscles in the upper back, while the upper body remains motionless when the hips are moving. The whole dance has a relaxed quality, nothing looks frantic, and it requires a great deal of muscle control to remain motionless.

Arms are exceptionally important, because they frame the action of the isolation movements and call attention to the part that is moving. It is also the emotional overlay and a nod to the melody. The solo belly dance style has been amended for stage. The spontaneous and improvisational style is adapted to formal presentation.

One of the beautiful aspects of belly dancing is the great variety of emotions it evokes on the part of the spectator. Most of the dance enthusiasts do not claim to have one favorite dancer, but more commonly, have several favorites. In some instances, people make a choice influenced by favorable comments, or by the fame and reputation of the artist. (Farrah, 1994, 6)

To have one favorite belly dancer is not unique to native countries of the Middle Eastern countries, but to audiences in the West as well. Those who are deeply involved in, or have knowledge of the dance, as it exists in Cairo, know that although there are many talented dance “stars” on the scene today, Nagwa Fouad and Soheir Zaki are considered to be the “superstars.” Each one has her individual styles of dance technique or choreography. Although some Arab spectators insist that Nadia Gamal, another dance performer, shares the spotlight with Nagwa Fouad and Soheir Zaki, but Nadia Gamal stands alone to be “the greater” and “the most talented” performer on belly dancing. (Farrah, 1989, 12)

The two major Egyptian superstars Nagwa Fouad and Soheir Zaki are contemporaries who have enjoyed international acclaim as belly dancers from the

late 1960s to the early 1980s. They are the rebirth of the dance in Egypt that had come apart at the seams in the late 60s during Nasser's regime.

The following performance analysis for Nagwa Fouad, Soheir Zaki and Nadia Gamal depends on the manipulation of certain elements such as: the body posters, tempo, multi-unit use of the torso, the vital relationship between the choreography and the music in terms of rhythm, multiple body part usage, blending, predominant shape-flow, spatial concepts and air design, technicality, theater projection, dance style, use and extension of the veil, continual movements, communication with the audience, artistic moods and emotions, and visual externalization. Through a semiotic method I will explain the unique and signify practices of Nadia Gamal's performance in comparison to Nagwa Fouad and Soheir Zaki.

Analyzing Nagwa Fouad performances at a night club, as shown by a video clip, in a feature film "Anta Habibi" (You are my love) 1973

Nagwa Fouad, Palestinian, born 1945, is an Egyptian dance star.

Her artistic ideals have to some degree helped maintain her popularity from the 1960s to the 1980s. She always wanted to be a performer, actress and singer, but she gained her popularity more as a belly dancer. She is a business woman, who knows how to market herself and is always able to reinvent herself to stay popular. She employs as many as fifty people on an on-going basis to mount her productions, and her shows are often modern and innovative. She is also a producer for most of her films. Nagwa Fouad's

style is totally choreographed, she makes all the movements with the help of someone, a trainer, not herself. **Figure # 18** shows Nagwa Fouad performing for the second Middle Eastern Dance Festival held in Frankfurt 1989.

Figure # 18

Nagwa Fouad performs for the
2nd Middle Eastern Dance
Festival held in Frankfurt,
October 1989.

Photo courtesy of Dietlinde.

In her performance, which is five minutes long, she uses an elegant walk around the periphery of the stage and coolly promenades around until she eventually hits center

Figure # 19

Nagwa Fouad performing at
Cairo nightclub, 1989. The
costume is a blend of East
and West.

stage. Her upper body is open wide to display her torso and freely manipulate the veil. Then she begins to move with subtlety and delicacy, as shown by **Figure # 19** Nagwa Fouad performing at Cairo nightclub 1989.

Reflecting the nature of the music style, sequences flow together with much less punctuation; some pauses in the music are reflected in pauses between movement phrases. Movement phrasing, as in the music, is more even. The “building” and subsequent “release” in the music in terms of speed and intensity is replicated in the time factor of the phrasing. Often movements are repeated within a phrase, such as hip lifts, hip shimmies, turns, various arm movements, and steps. The phrasing helps organize the movements, and is tied directly to the musical changes and rhythms. While phrases repeat in sequences only a few times, some aspect changes, usually the arm movements, to produce a different look. For instance, in two traveling phrases in which Nagwa Fouad moves in a figure eight pattern in the general space, the feet are doing the same movement, but the arms perform a different pattern in each, with more torso movement in the second one.

There is a part where the music goes off beat, but she continues with her dance instead of changing her rhythm. For instance, the knees must flex and extend in small, rapid movements during the several types of hip shimmies that occur in this section. In addition, weight transference is also important in many of the subtle and explosive pelvic/hip movements that call for a shift of weight from one leg/hip to another, symmetrically or asymmetrically. Only few movements were in place. Rotation occurs

in the hips and pelvis bilaterally and unilaterally several times, in the torso twice, and once when the arms rotate back to throw the veil. Shifting occurs in the hips during shimmies, in the pelvis and torso in undulations, and in the shoulders. These types of actions are often performed as accents to the music and serve to offset the larger, flowing or traveling movements.

Analyzing Soheir Zaki performances, as shown by a video clip at a theater stage in Cairo, 1984

Soheir Zaki, an Egyptian born 1948, had the same popularity as a dance star from the 1960s to the 1980s. She totally improvised, danced from her inner self, and never aspired to be other than a dancer. She developed her dance in a natural way. When she performed, “she felt the music and dance for every single person in the audience.” (El Safy, 1987. 9)

Her performance style, which is six minutes long, may be described as follows: when the music is rich and full-bodied, she characteristically opens her arms, gradually beginning to hear the music and absorbing it into her body. She circles around the open area, twisting her hips forward and back. Then standing straight, and perfectly still, with her left toe barely touching the floor, she moves her powerful hip and pelvis. Continuing this movement, she pivots in several directions, as shown by **Figure # 20**.

Figure # 20 Sohair Zaki with the percussive section of her orchestra. In her performance she actually becomes the music. 1989.
(Photo courtesy of Grace Pagano)

During a *taxim*, she creates a delicate shivering motion, while reaching above her head, making busy little hand movements as her arms descend. The head and shoulders

are tilted to the back two times as accents. The upper torso tilts back in a transition turn and during one of the walking phrases, the hips “tilt” to the front diagonal during lifts, the chest “tilts” forward during accents, and the torso/pelvis tilt front/back during two large rotations. Her body attitude is mostly maintained through the second section, with a few differences. With concentration directed inward to the body, the stance becomes broad often to support the planted backbend, shaping, carvings, and big shimmy. Knees flex and straighten more often in support of torso/pelvis movements. The torso becomes very convex during the backbend, and slightly concave during a “gathering” (arms moving in towards the body) phrase upon regaining uprightness. Flow predominates in this section as shown by **Figure # 21**.

Later in her performance, Soheir Zaki’s admirer rains money on her and hands her a stick to dance with; she is gracious and does a small amount with it. However, the piece of music she is performing to is not a “stick” or “tek tak” piece, she hands the stick back to her admirer, who showers more money on her and then returns the stick to her. Once more she does a small amount of it and then discards it to the side and briefly goes down into the audience so as not to embarrass her admirer in any way. When someone showers money on a performer it is a show of great appreciation. Here Soheir Zaki was modest and humble about it, but it changes her emotion, one emotion as she dances, another as she was showered. A stick dance has a more traditional, folklore style of

Figure # 21 Soheir Zaki in a *baledi* dress, performing at the "Cave du Roi" (Zamelek). 1987. Photo Arabesque collection.

music and is not done to just any beat. *Sae'id dance* (rural dance) is good for stick or just about anything of the *mizmar* (a racecourse). Also, later in her performance Soheir picks the finger *zagats* (cymbals). The *zagats* are a traditional percussive instrument. Usually dancers have musicians who play these in the groups, but dancers will play them themselves as an addition to their performance. Her finale was a marvelous *taqsim* section. It is more inner directed and contains several technically-demanding movement sequences. While performing she wears a *baledi* costume, and has a smiling expression throughout her dance.

Soheir Zaki's performance in contrast to Nagwa Fouad

In reflecting the contrast or differences in performance styles of both dancers, I rely on the following descriptions: use of choreography versus improvisation, the “purity” of movements and gestures, level of technical execution, and the level of sexuality or sensuality exhibited.

Soheir Zaki's performance style is fluid, often described by some Arab spectators as though she were moving through water. In her performance, movement is based on the percussive, while influenced by melody, the down or start of the movement is always on the “1” of the beat and the language of the move follows the language of the percussionist. Soheir Zaki totally follows this and is always on it. Nagwa Fouad, while following a choreography, is on it as long as she doesn't lose her place, otherwise she will accent with movement before or after the percussive accent.

Most of Soheir Zaki's movements are generated at a deep internal level and appear to ripple outward. When asked about her serenity while doing a drop shimmy she replied: "Those moments were between me and God!" (El Safy, 9) While Nagwa Fouad's performance posture is mostly normal stance, she sometimes has a broad stance during a few stationary phrases to support her pelvic/torso movements, and a few times has a more narrow stance during spins and pirouettes. Her predominantly vertical stress posture includes a slightly convex upper torso and a pelvis that is slightly tilted forward. The knees are almost always slightly bent, and both feet remain predominantly on the ground, rooting her to the earth when stationary. This elongated posture is necessary to separate body parts to perform the isolation with a full movement range.

In the first part of Soheir Zaki's performance the upper body and trunk are more active in the *taqsim* section relative to the use of the whole body. The arms move parallel, in symmetrical paths, with only a little opposition and asymmetrical use. In contrast, the lower body is mostly held, with some parallel movement in the bending and bilateral use during the few spins and steps. In Nagwa Fouad's performance the tempo of the entrance section is moderately fast, and uses a number of rhythm combinations in two-beat and four-beat patterns, as well as drum accents. The guitar improvisation on the *rast maqam* (mode) is more lyrical, and builds into a climax and subsequent ending.

By watching Soheir Zaki's performance one can say that she is someone to be emulated for her expert control and rhythmic grace. Every other part of her body moves like lightening. Her hips are amazingly strong yet fluid; her movements are sharp yet

executed with grace as if she was wearing a flower in her hair; while her dance includes shimmies and hip-twists, her upper torso and arms are elegantly posed.

What makes Nadia Gamal's performance different from Nagwa Fouad and Soheir Zaki is precisely those external and internal elements that are inseparable to the interpretations of belly dancing, the aural nuances of the music and the aesthetic dynamics of the body as a total entity. Nadia Gamal achieved unparalleled modernization in her performance. She capitalized on containment, minimal space, compressed movement, hidden intensity which gives one the feeling that something incredible is locked inside ready to explode when the time is right.

Analysis of Nadia Gamal's performance, as shown by a video clip, at the Phoenicia Hotel in Beirut 1968

Nadia Gamal, a Lebanese, born in 1946, is a Middle Eastern dance star from the early 1960s to the late 1980s. She is one of the few belly dance artists to achieve international stardom. With her sophisticated and stylized version of the dance, she differed dramatically from Nagwa Fouad and Sohair Zaki.

In explaining Nadia Gamal's performance, which is five minutes long, one can say that as one segment of music rises, her arms float to her side and slowly ascend, while her visual focus changes from up to center and down on the floor.

She bends the knees and her back reaches the floor, then starts moving her shoulders, torso, hands and arms. After a while, she gradually rises and sets down with knees bending, as shown by **Figure # 22**.

Figure # 22

Nadia Gamal performing at the
Phoenicia Hotel, Beirut 1968.
Photo Arabesque collection.

While sitting on her knees she moves the head left, right, and front several times. As the intensity of the music changes to *tar*, she makes a deep contraction without any loss of equilibrium. With this movement, her hair falls and sweeps the floor. This contrast makes the hair appear to be a part of her movements, long, flowing and deliberately moving, and with her climatic head-swing of her dark hair, she seems to be in touch with her soul and spirituality for the dance to be executed in the proper spirit.

With my personal observation, the first part of Nadia Gamal's performance, where she develops a series of head and body movements, is a segment never seen in any other dance performance; even the rhythm of the music was something never before seen in belly dancing. I recognized this as a *zar* routine. She had a balance between her body energies and emotions, which led her to develop the muscular coordination necessary to execute the *zar*; without this balance the dance would become spastic and frantic. Nadia

Gamal is one of a few Middle Eastern dancers who use *zar* in their performance. Later in this chapter, I will elaborate more on *zar*.

As the music rises to a climax, she stands and begins to whirl faster and faster, while her arms complete their quiet, graceful ascent. At that moment, her head whirls with a different power, reaching a spiritual height. When she stops, the music breaks for about ten seconds, a *nai taxim* associates the flute with more spiritual expression. A heavy but slow *baladi* rhythm begins, and her body rises with the cadence of the rhythm, following a segment which includes a series of movements executed with infinite variety of arm and hand gestures, torso (chest contractions) as well as facial expressions and head poses.

To better analyze the unique signifying practices of Nadia Gamal's performance in comparison to Nagwa Fouad and Sohair Zaki, I rely on a semiotic perspective performance analysis as it is mentioned by Karl Toepfer in his article "Decontextualization and Performance Analysis."

According to Toepfer while performances are unique to contexts, the signifying practices constructing performances seldom are: From a semiotic perspective, performance analysis focuses on identifying relations between performance elements which migrate across narrative and then across historical or cultural contexts. Performance signifying practices tend to remain transparent until one sees them removed from their performance context and compared with other examples also removed from their performance contexts. (Toepfer, 1996, 150) For instance Nadia Gamal's significant

movement of her shoulders, while on the floor, accents the vivid expression of her face, and her stilled pose of the back reaching the floor, the physical contact with Mother Earth, and the beckoning hand, are all rituals of woman, where she expresses how the spiritual elements of the art are connected to the earthy elements. The level with her position laying on her back, on the floor, and her expressive feeling, i.e. the contrasts between the open feeling down on the floor, the inward feeling when moving head and hair, and the release out feeling when raising her hand to salute on a deep, prolonged backbend, as shown by **Figure # 23**. "The camera frames her to urge the spectator to see her on her 'level' rather than his." (Toepfer, 153)

Figure # 23 Nadia Gamal the earth salutation, the physical contact with mother earth, the beckoning hand, all are rituals of woman.
Photo Arabesque collection.

Toepfer considers the role of codes in defining the object of performance analysis. He states the difference between performance code and performer code. Performance elements are common to both codes, and these include physical gesture, bodily movement, vocal gesture, make-up and mask, costume, lighting, bodily, scenography, scenographic properties, special effects, sound, music, architecture, and subsidiary elements which bear upon the perception of performance itself, such as programs, posters, publicity materials, spectator seating, and so forth. (Toepfer, 152) By performance code, Toepfer means that:

The complex of signs which migrates across performances and even across cultural context because their communicative power functions on a *cognitive* rather than cultural level. The performance code is 'anonymous,' as it consists of conventions or theatrical devices that are not unique to any performance or cultural context, but to the phenomenon of 'performance' as a recurrent cognitive activity. (Toepfer, 152)

For instance, part of Nadia Gamal's proud effect when she stands up and the music breaks for about ten seconds is a result of the body attitude which signifies knowledge of proper alignment and body awareness. These are fundamental according to Nadia Gamal; the fullness and completeness of the movement depends on assured placement from head to toe, as shown by **Figure # 24**.

In her choreography Nadia Gamal travels in various patterns on the stage and creates designs in the air around and above her; the body and its parts often make specific

shapes. She defines the focus of attention and energy: out to the audience, in to the self, up to the heavens, or down to the earth. The performance devices described here are not unique to Nadia Gamal in general nor to her costume nor to the music nor even to the lighting. Nadia Gamal's detached attitude of confidence is a direct path to seductiveness, "typical" devices for signifying female femininity and sensuality.

Figure # 24 For Nadia Gamal belly dancing is an expression dance, she expresses her feeling with her body, face and hands. Photo Arabesque collection.

Eroticism is part of a woman's charm, but so is spirituality which contributes essentially to Nadia Gamal's attractiveness. If another performer, for instance, Nagwa Fouad or Soheir Zaki, wore the same costume as Nadia's and performed with all the other devices intact, the performance level of communication would remain the same, but Nadia Gamal's passion and subtle emotions are merely an occasion for mobilizing a set of performance devices which operate in any number of performance contexts and in numerous performance genres. These devices migrate across performances and performers and "belong to a performance code which evolves in relation to *cognitive* controls over perception and to transcultural, transhistorical capacities of the mind to read signs." (Toepfer, 154)

The performer code refers to signifying practices that are unique to a performer because they recur only in performances of the performer, regardless of the performance contexts in which the performer appears. (Toepfer, 154) For instance, Nadia Gamal's performance includes the work of several performers, including several musicians, the lighting designer, the costume designer, the theatre designer and the director of photography. But the most obvious example of the performer code here comes from the performer, Nadia Gamal, for without her presence "the whole point of creating the performance or mobilizing all the performance devices of either the performance code or the various performer codes is obscure." (Toepfer, 155)

A curious feature of Nadia's performance style is her tendency to make subtle emotions and passions that she so fluidly pulls out from her hands, shoulders, face and

arms, as shown by **Figure # 25**. The very space in which she moves is pushed away, and what remains is the release of the inner being, where the shoulders accent the vivid expression of her face as shown by **Figure # 26**. Nadia Gamal consequently conveys passions and sensuality which are both powerful and seductive for both male and female spectators.

She presents sensuality as a mysteriously desirable state, while veiling the nature of her own desires in the “clutter” or ambiguity of her subtle physical inflection. (Toepfer, 155)

Figure # 25 Nadia Gamal's hand expresses an invitation to an audience to share the deeply personal and all encompassing passion of the dance. Photo Arabesque collection.

Any more detailed analysis of her performance cannot escape the conclusion that she performs the belly dance as an art of expression. She has a deeper understanding of the dance form as a result of her focus, and a heightened connection within her own emotional expression. Neither the music nor the lighting devices are unique to the performance of Nadia Gamal; they are unique to the personality of the performer and belong to a strong performer code which imposes its authority over performance contexts. However, the most powerful element in the performer code of Nadia Gamal's performance is the following:

Figure # 26 Nadia Gamal's hands are an expression of an outer and inner flow of pure energy. Her shoulders accent the vivid expression of her face. Photo Arabesque collection.

Nadia Gamal's physical and inner feeling remain subordinate to the beauty of her body, which she immediately establishes in her performance. "The body of the performer dominates perception of all sign production and therefore constitutes a central objective of analysis in relation to the performer code." (Toepfer, 156) Performance codes plainly emerge out of specific cultural contexts: all the devices of the performance code for Nadia Gamal's performance derive from Middle Eastern culture and traditional dance, which harbors a wealth of emotional and gesture content and choreographic design.

Figure # 27

The delicate hands, the teasing shoulder, the tilted head; these facets of open sensuality are the secret delights and desires of Middle Eastern men.
Photo Arabesque collection.

For instance, while performing, Nadia Gamal had an incredible smile, with her half-open eyes and her delicate hand with her teasing shoulder and tilted head towards her arm's direction. These facets of open sensuality are the secret delights and desires of Middle Eastern man as shown by **Figure # 27**.

Nadia's performer code obviously evolved out of the peculiar biographical-historical circumstances defining her life. But while the production or discovery of performance devices and codes is unique to cultural and historical context, the capacity to read signs and ascribe a transcendent value to them is not. (Toepfer, 156)

This uplifted arm speaks of an intimate awareness of the knowledge of gesture; her gestures designate designs and space-carve lines in the air, as shown by **Figure # 28**.

When her hands reach their highest point, they collapse dramatically.

Figure # 28 Nadia Gamal's uplifted arms speak of an intimate awareness of the knowledge of gesture, her gestures designate designs in space, carve lines in air.
Photo Arabesque collection.

The controlling idea here is that performance consists of devices which migrate across performances and performance contexts and establish the object of performance analysis as the analysis of performance devices. (Toepfer, 156) For instance, the rhythm of the music at the beginning is a more complex matter than her physical gestures, for it incorporates numerous inflections, the *tabla*, the *mizmar*, and the *tar*, all of which create the effect of an “intelligent” and “most talented” performer capable of incorporating another art compatibility with her emotional range. **Figure # 29** shows how Nadia Gamal’s hands brought in together indicate dramatic tensions within her body and movements, and with her climatic head-swing of her dark hair, she seems to be in touch with her soul and spirituality.

Figure # 29 Nadia Gamal in a climatic head-swing of a zar ritual of exorcism. Her hair moves as a wild mass and appears to have a life of its own. Photo Arabesque collection.

Video technology enables one to shift abruptly and easily from one performance shot to another, in the effort to identify performance devices and codes which migrate across performances and therefore indicate pleasurable conditions and magnitudes of freedom associated with performance semiotics or at least with the power to identify performance devices. But the urge toward freedom is not inherent to the analytical technology; it is inherent to the codes charted by *cognitive* mechanisms or system for assigning meaning and identity. (Toepfer, 157)

One knows upon seeing these images of Nadia Gamal, that one is in the presence of a great artist. **Figure # 30** shows how Nadia Gamal expresses her internal feelings

Figure # 30 Nadia Gamal's hands say "come to me, my love". It is as if that mouth, those lips were articulating Arabic melodies that can reveal a thousand variations and yet appear ever new and enchanting. Photo Arabesque collection.

with her body, face, and arms. Nadia Gamal senses the world within her and around her intuitively and creatively. She lives and moves in the very center of her dimurgical forces. Her body is a spiral that whirls from below upward to touch the heavens above and return to earth with arms full of gifts and offering. Nadia learns how to listen to her body and cultivates her mind to develop a sense of discovery in herself. Belly dancing is not only an initiation into the mysteries of body language, but also a revelation of the mystical necessity for Nadia to express power beyond words. This instinctively leads her to incorporate the *zar* into her belly dancing. *Zar* is an ancient dance tradition, which has never ceased to be practiced. Its penetration into secular or entertainment levels has only come about within the past thirty years. The *zar* is still practiced in remote villages that adhere to the belief that it should only be practiced as a ritual to exorcise negative spirits or to create a sense of protection. The *zar* is also performed by groups of people which can number over a dozen or in smaller groups or even as solo presentations. Perhaps its practice is even older than that of the belly dance.

Fascination with the *zar* dance and its traditions is not something new. Like many musical and dance presentations within the geographic locales of the Middle East, there seems to be an increase of interest in this specialized art at the present time. This resurgence is unique since not only the populace of the Middle East but the people of the West as well have become more engrossed in this specialized art. (Farrah, 1989, 12)

Most Westerners were first exposed to its practice when more and more of them began traveling to the Middle East in the nineteenth century. In many of the writings and

journals, especially of the French and English, and even in the letters that renowned personages wrote to friends on the Continent, there were references to their witnessing this unique practice. Though some of these writers do not describe it in the technical terminology of the *zar* cult itself, it is obvious that this is what they are referring to when they speak of “strange music and dances to ward off evil and exorcise demons.” It is interesting to note that some of these journals refer to this strange yet unique tradition and accept it as a cultural difference inherent in Middle East people, rather than judging it by European standards. (Farrah, 1989, 12)

There are purists of this dance form who believe the *zar* ritual should remain as an entity separate from other dance forms. Some believe that contemporary dancers have added *zar* movements to their belly dance routines only to add excitement to their dance.

As in the case of all forms, there is the opposite camp of followers who strongly believe that elements of the *zar* fit with the natural flow of the belly dance. (Farrah, 1989, 12)

The question often asked is, since the *zar* is a dance of ritual and many contemporary natives frowned upon its use, how could Nadia present it in her belly dancing and not fear major criticism?

Nadia considered all types of critics in answering this question. Concerning those critics composed of native purists, Nadia commented:

The Arabs will come to realize beauty in their folk arts and take pride in them. One day they will not be influenced by the European mentality

The Arabs will come to realize beauty in their folk arts and take pride in them. One day they will not be influenced by the European mentality whose complex institutions put the native arts in a “primitive” light. Ninety nine out of one hundred people who criticize me for this reason would, if invited to a private *zar* ceremony, probably be there and enjoy every moment of it. (Farrah, 1989, 15)

In her second response Nadia said that:

My artistic judgments concerning belly dance are readily acceptable to my critics because of my fame. My credibility is strengthened by my own role as an outspoken critic of the artistic values of belly dance. (Farrah, 1989, 15)

Nadia had been a valiant fighter against the mediocrity that arises in the form of performing belly dancers who shouldn't even be on stage. For those critics who are dancers, Nadia simply stated: “Those who criticize me now will incorporate the *zar* into their acts within a year's time.” (Farrah, 1989, 16)

In regard to the criticism that the *zar* is being used against tradition, Nadia said:

The *zar* fits in naturally with the belly dance, and if we referred to the roots of belly dance in the Abbasaid period of history. There the belly dance told a story through movement, and much of the literary content of that time dealt with protection against evil influences. (Farrah, 1989, 16)

Artful music and dance varied pelvic gyrations delicate arm and hands movement and the elements of folk dance that mix and meld with ritual in this art form. It has been pointed out, by many Arab spectators, that the art of dancing stands at the source of all the arts - music, poetry, painting, acting - that express themselves first in the human persona. One need never study dance to be able to belly dance. The belly dance is instinctive and is found in people of all ages in the Middle Eastern countries, children, teenagers, the middle aged and even in the hesitant, shuffling kinetics of the elderly.

Chapter Five

Belly Dance Femininity and Sensuality

Throughout the preceding chapters my intention has been to describe a dance form that has survived since antiquity and has changed very little since its origin, but seems to have a solid hold in the future. A recognition of its enduring value has become a unifying force between Middle Eastern and Western countries.

Through the historical survey of the belly dance, I analyzed the images of this enduring art and its appropriated picture in the Middle Eastern countries. By focusing on the performer analytic code to express the concept of the unique identity of the performance I relied on a semiotic method which identifies signifying practices associated with the performance. I recognized the power of belly dancing as a unique performance in the Middle Eastern countries because it differentiates the individuality of women: The belly dance developed within the cultural landscape of Middle East and influenced Western culture as well. It is a unique example of the power of Middle Eastern women to change both their own culture and Western culture.

The belly dance is part of everyday lives of Middle Eastern women, where goddess worship first flourished and had its strongest foothold. It is an art with an inseparable connection to its music and to the internal life of those who dance it and those who live or experience it.

In ancient Egypt dancing and feasting were the most popular ways of celebrating the smallest and the greatest acts of rulers and Gods. (Knapp, 12) Ceremonies from the most ancient times onward were held to express the emotional climate of the Pharaoh and his people. The paintings which remain on walls and columns, the carvings on stone, depict dancers adorned with necklaces of flowers and a particularly lovely lotus flower tied to their heads. During the festivities dancers were accompanied by various kinds of instruments: harps, lyres played with or without plectrums, guitars, string instruments of many shapes and styles; tambourines, cymbals, cylindrical maces, flutes with single and double pipes, drums, trumpets and the sacred sistrum. The images presented in chapter three **Figure # 4 and Figure # 5** shows different instrument players, women wearing G-strings, perform all kinds of complicated acrobatic stunts and bodily movements. In **Figure # 5** the climax of the women's dance (the bridge pose) consists of bending backwards, their torsos resembling an arch, their legs and arms acting as supporting columns. Each woman performs her vertical dance in turn. Such dances prove that the ancient Egyptians considered the body a thing of beauty; as such, it was closely linked to religious ceremonies.

Intensive research by historians and archaeologists brought to light the fact that these festivals encompassed much dancing with as many as a hundred or more participants at times. (Small, 1981, 21) This does not imply professional performers. Rather, it shows that to the ordinary people, dance and music formed a significant portion of their lives. **Figure # 6** shows some kind of choreographic ritual, a coordination of

movements, which has strengthened the belief that certain dance patterns were handed down from one generation to the next. At times, the character and style of steps suggested trained dancers.

Today, belly dancing in the Middle East countries is performed either by unskilled women to entertain each other, known as women only dance (WOD), or by dancers who have been trained to perform at cabaret or night clubs for reward purposes, known as professional dancers. As a cultural expression belly dancing has been passed from individual to individual, generation to generation, and culture to culture. The family is one method for transmission of WOD. Any child (a girl three years old) knows how to belly dance, because belly dancing does not need teaching or training. For professional dancing there are professional coaches who have been dancers themselves. The ancient custom of a girl dancing to attract a partner survives in modified form in the Middle Eastern countries. A girl may dance at women's gatherings to show herself off to prospective mothers-in-law. This custom is still current, although many middle-class women in the Middle East now have a place in public life and are free to socialize with men as they choose.

WOD is based on a particular technique, each person develops her own individual style within this framework, unconsciously revealing aspects of her personality as well as her general bearing and spirit. Dance is used above all as a means of self-expression. As women gather together at home or wedding celebrations, everyone performs simultaneously, dancing for themselves alone; they come forward as soloists, or in pairs.

When someone gets up to dance she always receives the encouragement of her friends, not only before, but during the time that she is dancing. She ties a veil/scarf round her hips to emphasize the focus of her movements, and when she finished she removed her veil/scarf and ties it round the hips of whoever followed her. Those sitting around provide musical accompaniment in the form of rhythmic hand-clapping, singing and drumming. The audience is as much a part of the performance as the soloist, and encourages her to give of her best, ululating and hand-clapping.

For women, WOD is a showing of someone's physical self in an atmosphere of encouragement and appreciation. It is assumed that everyone can do something, even if it is only two or three movements, and that there is no need for a woman to feel embarrassed or inferior if she is not as skilled as her friends. For them, dancing within this private entertainment has three enduring motivating values: The first motive is that WOD is not considered the unique province for the young. It is the expression of a woman's entire life experience, whether it is used as a symbol of luck and fertility, or a means of passing the time. And though the older woman may well confine herself to dispensing refreshments, leaving the dancing to the young girls, those well past their youth sometimes prove to be the most exciting performers at these private gatherings, for their dance is invested with the grace notes of maturity and fullness. The second motive is that the Middle Eastern ideal of female beauty does not confine itself to the young and slim, but also takes in the quality of the voluptuous, with its hint of an enveloping protectiveness and sensual ease. The performer needs not fear her dancing days are over

at forty, or even fifty. Her long prime reflects the unique possibilities of this dance, whose scope is enriched rather than narrowed by age, and whose continuing importance in everyday life is a testament to all that it has to offer. The third motive lies in the specific pleasure values associated with the performer. WOD allows each individual to dance freely and express a unique personality and creativity, and brings out the beauty of every woman who practices it.

Today, in many Middle Eastern countries for instance, Egypt, Jordan, Morocco and Tunisia, no grand celebration would be completed without a professional belly dancer. This performance emerged to clash with the strict morality of Islamic influence. Women dancing WOD among each other, or at family weddings where both sexes are present seems to have spread in Sudan, Yemen, Algeria, Saudi Arabia and the Gulf States. As far as the women follow tradition and dance for each other even if both sexes were present, WOD is accepted. It looked to be innocent, more like a beautiful entertainment, morally acceptable as long as the performers were not wearing cabaret costumes and they were not rewarded by money.

In many traditional societies, professional dancers are not socially acceptable to respectable people and thus form their own subculture. As a result of the spread of Islam, the tradition of female seclusion has prevailed in most of the Middle Eastern countries. This means that no respectable woman could be seen by men outside her close family. This custom increased the social stigma upon public dancers, but people still want entertainment, and to be able to dance themselves. Thus, the practice of the dance, which

long preceded Islam, was decreased but not eliminated by the changes Islam brought to the Middle Eastern society. Women dance in their private part of the household. In their free time, they might sing and dance for their own pleasure and entertainment. The dance allows women to disclose the competitive uniqueness of individual dancers and to release them from generic, traditional identities. Those women who perform in public for money reward are considered unacceptable because they violate the traditional Islamic values of feminine modesty and seclusion of women.

The original professional dancers of Egypt, prior to the cabaret style dancer, were the *ghawazee*. Throughout the eighteenth to the early twentieth century, travelers from the West such as Lane, Leland, Niebuhr recorded their impressions of the Middle East's *ghawazee*. Despite the obvious fascination of the dancers' art, the Western observers could never resist a remark or two on the dubious social position of these women. The *ghawazee*, being gypsies, were considered low class and danced in public places accompanying themselves throughout the dance with *sagat*. Their dance form did not follow the same evolution as that of the belly dance which developed from the folk styles of urban centers into the form which we recognize today. Isolated from such influences, the *ghawazee* and their unsophisticated dancing have undergone fewer changes and even their costuming has remained similar to the style worn at the turn of the century. The only change of note is the recent replacement of the once typical coins with beads and sequins. This contrast becomes more evident if we compare the costumes of the dancers seen on **Figure # 9** with the turn-of-the century examples **Figure # 17**.

During the 1920s the first professional school for belly dancing started in Egypt by Badia Mosabni, a Lebanese born dancer. Badia developed the belly dance as a cabaret entertainment and gave it a new style. Yet, it has remained essentially an improvisational art, depending on individual skill and creativity rather than precise choreography (though a cabaret artist tends to follow a familiar pattern of steps). From that time professional belly dancing started as an art to be taught and choreographed, and many Egyptians studied it. Before this school there were the *almah* who used to teach and sing at weddings. The images represented by **Figure # 14** and **Figure # 16** show Tahia Carioca and Samia Gamal, the first Egyptian professional belly dancers who came from Badia's school. Both dancers took a good deal of determination not to abandon their aim of making the dance respected among their own people, as well as pioneering its acceptance in the context of Western art. Farrah stated:

Tahia Carioca and Samia Gamal were the stars of their time. They were stars of great glamour, and other luminaries of today are no less appealing to the modern spectator. Tahia was the first legendary dancer who had great talent, a great sense of musicality, and marvelous control of body. She was the essence of the belly dancer woman's expression. Her real genius was in her commanding presence and the mesmerizing effect which she had upon the audience. Her popularity was enormous. Her very entrance to the stage caused a stir within the audience. Once there, her presence was magical and exciting. She knew her music and was able to

depend on her drummer, to stand tall and secure, but most of all to develop a rapport with her audience. (Farrah, 1994, 3)

This svelte and sparkling image of the vaunted vedette did, in fact, originate with Badia: before her day, the prevailing image was that of the fleshy *awallim* or *almeh* that so fascinated the Western visitor, and shaped his idea of what a belly dancer should be. Therefore, since the 1920s women have been less inclined to think they are whores or sluts, as was traditionally assumed, when they perform the belly dance in public.

Also, with the emergence of the film industry in the Middle Eastern countries in the 1950s, any girl who loved dancing and wanted to learn could go to the theatre with her family and watch her favorite dancers over and over. Such really fine dancers, as Tahia Carioca, with her gentle, calm, subtle movement expressed the music in a feminine and soft manner. Her style was perceived as pure oriental. She projected an image of oriental dance entirely devoid of those elements traditionally derided by its detractors, thus advancing acceptance into the larger world of dance. Tahia Carioca stated:

In the 1920s the contemporary Golden Age of the belly dance was born, and the art reached its zenith from the period the 1920s to the 1950s.

Professional belly dancing has its own choreography and synchronization is more difficult than any other art dance, because it needs muscle and mind control and not just belly movement. (Lutfee, 1998, 63)

She means that belly dancing requires ability in body control in order to manipulate that body in space as well as in rhythm and to control that rhythm on the

cymbals and the body at the same time, which often are in counterpoint to each other.

With this impact, Tahia Carioca set standards for more than a generation of Egyptian girls who would not, in the ordinary course of events, have been permitted to see performers of any greater skill than those hired for such weddings as they might have the opportunity to attend.

Many professional dancers were inspired by Tahia Carioca's style. For instance, Soheir Zaki, who studied and trained alone, performs within a small area, and most of her movement is in a minimal amount of space. These movements are generated at a deep internal level and appear to ripple outward. Someone familiar with both styles will notice the similarities to Tahia Carioca's style as well. Soheir Zaki said:

This movement is not easy, so most dancers don't do it. These movements come from my own sense, like a writer. She starts the first line, maybe difficult, but she then begins to be more perfect, and later she writes the book she wanted with her own senses as you see it. There is almost a science to belly dance movements. Some people say that belly dance is just some movements and nothing else. This is the thread between the dancers who dance perfectly and take it seriously and succeed, and dancers who don't succeed, because they don't take it seriously. Those dancers who succeed, they put in mind that belly dance movement is a science, it's something that has rules, and not just movements and nice dress. (El Safy, 1987, 10).

But since the 1930s, professional dancing was viewed in contradictory terms. It is seen as the most expressive of all dance forms by some, and relegated to erotic dance, by others. It has always been the myth of the common citizen of the Middle East that dancers simply came from poor families and were forced into a profession, wherein they did a dance that was in their blood, not one that has to be taught.

It seems that the chief source of cultural anxiety about the dances arises from the movements of the dancer rather than from the marginalized (gypsy) identities of the dancers in the pre-modern era or the whore image assigned to any female dancer in the pre-modern era. It is just a perversity of the Middle Eastern mentality that identifies the professional dancer as morally questionable, while at the same time welcoming her at weddings and all kinds of community and family celebrations. Public pressure insures that only exceptional women, or women who follow the pattern of sexual difference, will pursue the path of professional dance. As a result, sensual wildness remains embodied in the dancer, and retains its power to move audiences to the heights of communal feeling. The best of the belly dancers are able to create in their audiences this sense of communion, bringing them to the borderlands where the world of the spirit, and the boundaries of the soul dissolve into a community without limits. Tahia Carioca told Edward Said in his article "Homage to a Belly Dancer," that she felt dance was a spiritual experience. (Said, 1994, 8).

It appeared that for some audience the misperception of the performance's movement looks erotic. Although many dancers in the Middle Eastern and Western

countries attempting to define the solo dance in theatrical terms sometimes deny its origins, but they will not deny its erotic element. They regard the latter as a particular source of embarrassment, something which will prevent the dance from ever achieving respectability in the arts. Lucy stated:

Belly dance is a feminine dance and not erotic. Erotic dance is cheap.

Any woman can wear more open costumes and dance. If I have certain skill and I am well trained I present an art not erotic but feminine. (Hanee, 65).

Eroticism, like beauty, is in the eye of the beholder, and its expression through dance varies from country to country. The implied eroticism of Middle Eastern dance is of a different order. It is to do with a subtle, insinuating movement of the body, something which the nineteenth-century traveler, Delacroix, who insisted on dancers appearing nude, dismally failed to appreciate. Tahia Carioca said:

During the 1920s a professional belly dancer wore more open costumes than at the present days and no one thinks that she is erotic, because at that time they looked to belly dance as an art. (Lutfee, 63)

I think the quality conveyed by the movements depends on the dancer. It is her evaluation of herself as a woman who creates a dance which is an expression of pride rather than a form of titillation. Therefore, the erotic element of belly dancing has become its shadow side. This is unfortunate, for its exclusion strikes at the very root of belly dancing: an element of eroticism that can no more be excluded from Middle Eastern

dance than it can from, say, Western ballet. Art is a reflection of the human experience in its entirety. The fact that eroticism has acquired a negative connotation in most world cultures does not mean that it should be excluded from the arts. It demands, rather, a reappraisal.

Recently the perception of the art form has come to change with the growth of audience appreciation, particularly as applies to the thousands upon thousands of Westerners who go to Egypt to enjoy the belly dance there. Also, the religious communities have a great influence over the societies. What is considered chaste and proper varies from county to country. Jordan said:

I know restaurants and nightclubs that employ belly dancers are doing so because they want to support the dance form, they want to stimulate business. When we are looking at America we must also consider our legal background. In upholding the Bill of Rights and Constitution we end up allowing what the majority of people do not agree with, but seems necessary to allow in order to be true to those concepts. American society swings as a pendulum and there are only brief periods in time when the Americans are on the middle ground before they swing far right or left.

(Jordan, June, 1997)

It seems that in the American culture there are some groups which uphold certain chaste expectations, the populace is so large and diverse that no single ideal prevails.

And Americans are very driven by monetary acquisition, and what might be good for business usually dictates the acceptability.

For some people professional dancing is an expression of oneself blending artistic moods and emotions. Although it is difficult to perform because it requires its own particular skills, it must appear smooth and natural. It must be fulfilling to the spectator demanding every moment of their attention. For that reason many factors arise that make the belly dance look like an enduring form of entertainment. The first factor is the influence of the dancer in presenting the motion of dance to the audience to view and enjoy, this induces deeper emotion directed towards them. She mixes messages, manipulates a greater response in the viewer, creates sub-themes of surprise, fright, humor and possibly aggression. The second factor is that sometimes a dancer may not even come to a final ending, but will continue her movement as it exits, leaving the audience to carry on the dance in their own imagination, there is no end to the pattern: it may go on and on, duplicating itself in untold ways. The third factor is that most audiences when they watch a professional belly dancer do not focus on a single central figure, but on her own design, beauty, and her own special quality. Each passage reaches a resolution, or climax, of its own rather than building to a single, all-important resolution.

Based on these factors some dancers create their own movements to add to the belly dance's basic technical repertoire. They have the ability to spontaneously adapt and improvise according to the needs of the occasion, especially those of space (which may

not accommodate her choreography) and the idiosyncracies of their musicians, on whom they are particularly dependent. For instance, Nadia Gamal in her performance has developed certain movements that are peculiar to her style, such as the descending hip drops and touches the earth in a blessing. She expresses her internal feelings with her hands, face, and body, as shown from **Figure # 6 to Figure # 13**. In these different images, Nadia with her significant movement of her arms and hands, indicates dramatic tensions within her body and movements, and expresses an invitation to the audience to share the deeply personal and all encompassing passion of the dance. She proved that this balance of arms, hands, face and body movement is a prerequisite to communicate total aesthetic beauty in belly dancing.

The first part of her performance the *zar*, was the unique part of her dance, one of her famous trademarks. No dancer in the Middle East performs it to such a great extent within her dance with such technical proficiency, and with the same sense of excitement. Therefore, Nadia Gamal tried not to redeem this traditional culture. The pictures also demonstrate that she absorbed traditional dances, like the *zar*, into the belly dance, to show her power to appropriate tradition on behalf of a modern spirit that she wanted the belly dance to project. What she has done through her belly dance innovation is to claim: I control the tradition, the tradition; does not control me. Nadia Gamal presents the image of a woman who defines the value of her dance. By incorporating the *zar*, she suggests to her audience that, here is an interesting dance. I think I can use it in a new

way that says something about myself instead of about woman or some generic idea of female identity. (Farrah, 1989, 15)

And yet the distinctive power of the belly dance to differentiate a woman's identity is the collective contribution of women in the Middle Eastern countries. While those outside the belly dance profess to know or understand what the dance is about, why women do it, what it really means, it would benefit all to listen to the words of those who practice this art to truly begin to understand.

Jordan said:

No matter what the culture or part of the world, those who perform risk being scorned, shunned, harassed, ridiculed and prejudged. If the dance were not so spiritually compelling and wholly fulfilling, would these people put their very lives and reputations at risk? The time has come for this dance to be elevated to the pure, honest and simple expression of one's self that it is. Rather than being judgmental and making our conclusions based on dogmas and taboos, we should open our minds and our hearts and be thankful for the risk takers. (Jordan, June, 1997)

Everybody objectifies the dancer, and forgets that a dancer is a regular person, with value, dignity, feelings, intelligence, humanity and a personal life she may wish to keep private. They also overlook the possibility that she may have good reasons for doing this dance in preference to any other. They forget that she is dancing for her own free will, and that she's a grownup who is making her own choices.

Finally, belly dancing with its traditions, its techniques and skills, its varied pelvic gyrations, the delicate arms and hands movement, with all its various representations, remains an entertainment and expressive dance of the daily life of Middle Eastern women. This ancient dance which survived thousands of years will never die. That it can undergo changes and regeneration is one thing, but it will not be allowed to die out of the heart and soul of the people where it was born. There it becomes an art shared by all the people of the world.

References

Aldridge, James. Cairo Biography of a City. Boston: Little Brown, 1969.

And. Metin. A Pictorial History of Turkish Dancing. Ankara, Turkey: Dost Yayinlari, 1976.

Buonaventura, Wendy. Belly Dancing. The Sepent and the Sphinx. London: Virago Press Ltd., 1983.

---. Serpent of the Nile. Women and Dance in the Arab World. New York: Interlink Books, 1990.

de Carcy Charles Frederic Alexandre. De Paris en Egypte, Souvenirs de Voyage. Paris: Berger-Levrault, 1874.

Deagon, Andrea. "Dancing at the Edge of the World: Ritual, Community and The Middle Eastern Dance." Arabesque. 20 (Sep.- Oct. 1994) : 8-12.

El Safy, Shareen. "Reflections: Soheir Zaki." Arabesque. 12 (Jan.-Feb. 1987) : 8-10.

El Shenawi, Tarigue. "Physical impersonal, sensual feeling is the sole complex of Tahia Carioca." Rose El Yousif Magazines. 3656 (June-July 1998): 57-58.

Erman, Adolf. Life in Ancient Egypt. London: Macmillan, 1894.

Farrah, Ibrahim. "Cairo on the Hudson, San Francisco on the Nile" Arabesque. 10. 1975 : 4-5.

---. "From Bon Chi Bon Genre to Bumming on the Nile." Arabesque. 16. (Jan.-Feb. 1991) : 4+.

---. "An interview with Nadia Gamal." Arabesque. 15 (May- Aug. 1989) : 12-16.

---. "National Geographic Unveils Lucy." Arabesque. 17 (March-April 1992): 10+.

---. "This and That". Arabesque. 20. May-June 1994 : 3-7

Gaditana, Ghanima. "Shadow Dancing: Illuminating the Darker Corners of the Psyche." Habibi. 13 (1994) : 20+.

Gioseffi, Daniela. Earth Dancing: Mother Nature's Oldest Rite. Harrisburg PA: Stackpole Books. 1980.

Graves, Robert. The White Goddess 1895. London: Faber & Faber, 1948.

Grieg, Leon. Dance with the Pharaohs. London: Newman Wolse, 1955.

Hala. Personal interview. March, 1998.

Hanee, Mohammed. "Dancing is not a professional that is broke to fall." Rose El Yousef Magazine. 3656 (June-July 1998) : 64 - 66.

Jordan. Personal interview, June, 1997

Jullian, Philippe. The Orientalists. Oxford, England: Phaidon, 1977.

Juvenal, Satire. Juvenal and Persius. New York: Putnam, 1924.

Knapp, L. Bettina. "Egyptian Feasts and Dances of Earliest Times." Arabesque. 7 (May-June 1981) : 12-14

Koelmeyer, Nina. "Femininity and Sensuality: End of a Quest." Arabesque. 15 (Sept.-Oct. 1987) : 7-8.

Lane, Edward W. The Modern Egyptians vol. 2. London: Everyman, 1954.

Leland, Charles. The Egyptian Sketchbook. London: Strahan, 1873.

Lutfee, Waeel. "From Cabaret to Veiling." Rose El Yousef Magazine. 3656 (June-July 1998) : 61-63.

Martial. The Dancer of Cadiz. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press 1947.

Mazloom, Lina. "Personal degradation is not from the dancer but from the spectators." Rose El Yousef Magazine. 3656 (June-July. 1998) : 67.

Masudi. "Meadows of Gold and Mines of Gems" trans. C. Barbier de Meynard, Paris: Societe Asiatique, 1874.

Neil, James. Everyday Life in the Holy Land. London: Cassell, 19..

Niebuhr, Carsten. Travels Through Arabia. Edinburgh. no. pub., 1790.

Penzer, N. M. Sacred Prostitution, from Poison Damsels and Other Essays in Folklore and Anthropology. London: Chas. J. Sawyer Ltd., 1952.

Said, Edward. Orientalism. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 197..

---. "Homage to a Belly Dancer." Arabesque. 20 (May-June 1994) : 8 - 10.

Saleh, Magda. "Images of Women: The Portrayal of Women in Photography of the Middle East." Arabesque. 5 (July-August 1979) : 10+.

---. "The Ghawazi of Egypt: A Preliminary Report." Arabesque. 19 (July-August 1993) : 8-12.

Siegel, Barbara. "Bookends. The Fairs of 1893:1876 and 1904." Arabesque. 19 (Nov-Dec. 1993) : 6-7

---. "Belly Dance: The Enduring Embarrassment." Arabesque. 21 (Nov.-Dec. 1995) : 12-13.

Small, Linda. "Some Ways of Looking at Ethnic Dance: A Contemporary Look at Ethnic Dance." Arabesque 7 (May-June 1981) : 10+.

Titus, Burckhardt. Moorish Culture in Spain. London: George Allen and Unwin, 197

Toepfer, Karl. "Decontextualization and Performance Analysis." Luk van den Dries and Frank Peeters (eds.). Big Open doek. Antwerp: Pelekmans. 1995 : 149-152

Utas, Bo. Women in Islamic Societies. A social attitudes and Historical perspective. Scandinavia: Curzon/ Humanities Press, 1982

Wood, Leona. "Danse du Ventre: A Fresh Appraisal." Dance Research Journal CORI 8 (Spring-Summer 1976) : 18-30.

Glossary

almeh (pl. *awalim*). Women well-versed in the arts, especially music and poetry.

baledi dress. National dress.

dabka. Lebanese dance style.

galabiy. Loose, floor-length robe.

ghaziya (pl. *ghawazee*). Egyptian dancer, originally from gypsy tribe.

guedra. Moroccan dance style.

henna. Herb which gives red color on the hair.

nai. Arabic flute made of bamboo.

rababa. Predecessor of the violin, with a coconut shell body.

raks al-baledi. Dance of the people, the traditional form of the women's solo dance.

raks al-hawanem. Dance of the ladies.

sae'id dance. Rural dance.

saggat in Arabi and *zills* in Turkish. Two are worn on either hand; one attached to each thumb and middle finger.

tabla. Goblet-shaped hand drum, made of earthenware or metal, open at one end, covered at the other with fish skin.

tahtiyb. Combat dance with sticks.

taqsim. (pl. *taqsim*). Musical improvisation generally on a solo instrument, or with one instrument prominent.

zar. An ancient dance tradition.

zhagareet. Ululation: cry of encouragement or approval made by women, often in response to a gifted dancer.