

Tori Ihry

Dr. Strandjord & Dr. Knutson

INQ/IWC 100

14 December 2016

Bellydancing: A Tradition of Dance and Sisterhood

Bellydancing is described as “sinuous, rhythmic hip movements and undulating arms;” however, bellydancing is much more than just a dance (“Rasq Sharqi”). This seemingly modern dance is implanted in a long-standing history of tradition. Undoubtedly, the art form has changed from the time of its origins, but the dance is still recognizable as a form of the original. Because of this bellydancing is a prime example of how an art form can progressively become more modern while it still remains the same overall concept. Bellydancing in the midwest differs from the traditional Middle Eastern dance, while still keeping the integrity of the dance intact and at the same time continuing the practice of women joining together in sisterhood.

For this research paper, I observed a bellydancing company called “Oasis” in order to gain field research and conduct interviews. Oasis is located in Fargo, North Dakota and is comprised of about thirty women ranging in age from thirty to seventy-five years old. This dance company is solely focused on the well-being and empowerment of the women who participate, rather than monetary gain for the instructor. A quote from an interview that I conducted with the owner and instructor of the company, Rita, exemplifies this sentiment. Rita states, “Part of being in the Shimmy Sisters is that we are sisters. We are sisters in dance and in support and that's just the way we are” (Rita). Throughout my eight weeks of observations, this same feeling of acceptance and support consistently permeated the environment, upholding Rita’s statement as

true. Many individuals have participated in bellydancing over the course of its existence, and have experienced this same empowerment.

The origins of bellydance date back centuries, but the exact origins are unknown (“Bellydancing”). There are two main theories as to where bellydancing first originated: the Middle East and India. The Middle-East origin theory states that the “soul [of bellydancing] is lodged imperceptibly in Arab cultures” (Hammond). The way that Arabs converse, show joy or sorrow, and flirt are all portrayed in the dance (Hammond). The other theory states that bellydancing originated in India and was spread by the exodus of the Romany people to new lands (“Bellydancing”). As the group was traveling, they performed their dances in public for monetary gain (“Bellydancing”). This act of a public performance also served the purpose of spreading the dance to the public’s eye, as before this, the dance was most commonly performed in private quarters (Shay, 344). In my library research, none of the sources acknowledged that any other origin than the one that was being discussed existed. This same separation of origins also appeared in personal interviews with a bellydancing instructor of the group that I observed, Rita. Rita only discussed that bellydancing originated from India, but did state that different styles of the dance arose from the Middle East (Rita). This separation of origins allows, since it does not definitively prove where the first form of bellydancing was introduced, allows for the dance to be more flexible to adaptation into modern forms. This makes the dance inherently more flexible because it cannot be compared back to only one specific style in order to check for traditional accuracy. Traditional dances from one region may vary from another, which allows for interpretation on how moves are performed. Although the two geographical origins differ, there is one thing that remains consistent in both of the theories: It is believed that bellydancing

potentially started as a spiritual performance to induce labor, which was later adapted as a form of entertainment by a group of performers (“Bellydancing”). This idea that bellydancing started as personally spiritual performance is believed because the origins of the dance pre-date most organized Christian religions (“Bellydancing”). The topic of how the dance pre-dates organized religion was brought up in personal interview that was conducted. An active bellydancing member stated, “The dance itself precedes all this religion. It precedes everything that is going on now—all the Middle Eastern fighting. It was there before that so it is kind of nice to be a part of that tradition” (Aiyanna). This quote relays not only that this traditional dance is still alive and prominent in the world today, but also that its traditional origins are appreciated.

In order to proceed, a definition of tradition must first be established. There are many definitions of tradition that can be found throughout the world. Each serves its own individual purpose depending on the type of tradition in question. Many of these could be applied to the art of bellydancing, but I am going to focus on one in particular. This definition is a combination of tradition as temporal ideology and as communication, which are both found in Dorothy Noyes’ “Tradition: Three Traditions.” Tradition as temporal ideology is the theory that tradition can exist only if there is a pragmatic purpose to the craft; if there is not, the tradition remains as a form of heritage (Noyes). Tradition as communication is the idea that tradition is passed down and can change throughout time based on what the community values at that particular moment (Noyes). I am combining these two definitions to define tradition as: a practice that exists only if there is a pragmatic purpose and which changes over time as community values change. The hybrid temporal ideology-communication definition can be used to show that bellydancing is a tradition based on the dance aspect of craft, as well as the sisterhood portion.

Without a practical purpose and accompanying ideology, bellydancing would not be able to be categorized as a tradition; however, the dance uses stylized bodily movements to serve a purpose and also fits into a higher social structure. In Hanne's book on dance, it is stated that:

All dance has purpose or intent. The purpose may be primarily movement, the creation of an ephemeral, kinetic design in which concept (ideas about dance), process (what leads to performance), medium (the body instrument), and product (the dance performance) merge. . . . The purpose of dance can be understood also in terms of the larger social structure, the standardized social form through which conceptualization and action occurs. The social structure may dictate the criteria for participation and the dancers' relation to, and means of coping with, the broader social structure. Dance is part of those networks of social stratification that organize the interconnected activities of members of a society. (24-25)

Bellydancing has aspects that fit into both of these categories, but first the purpose of creating art will be discussed. Bellydancing fits the purpose of creating art, because it is a visual representation of art in the form of a dance, which is performed for oneself or in front of an audience. The concept of bellydancing arises from the basic moves and the choreography itself, of which the possibilities are endless. Rita emphasizes the importance of staging, because "it is a visual interaction between people," in which many factors can be manipulated to make something entirely new out of old routines (Rita). Bellydancing also has a process in which the dancers of "Oasis" practice at least once a week for an hour and a half, as observed in my field journal. The medium aspect of Hanne's definition, in this case, is the bodies of the women who are performing. Finally, the dance merges all of Hanne's requirements into a product: the dance

performance. I was able to witness one of “Oasis” performances at MSUM’s Day of Percussion. The performance itself was the cultivation of choreography, practice, and bodies. It is obvious, because of the final practical product that bellydancing fits the first definition of purpose.

Bellydancing does not only fit the first purpose of art, but it also can be described in a larger societal context. It is well known that dance has played a major role in society for many years; especially in the aspects of courtship and celebration (“Dance”). It is stated that, “Courtship dances . . . allow the dancers to display their vigor and attractiveness and to engage in socially accepted physical contact between the sexes” (“Dance”). This same idea that dance as a social aspect was a way to display and find potential suitors, was brought up in a personal interview. Aiyanna stated that, “future mother-in-laws would pick their son’s bride by watching the dancers. If they were a stronger dancer, it was thought that [the woman] would be able to bear sons for their son” (Aiyanna). This example shows that the women who bellydance have always viewed bellydancing as a social event, because of its importance to their courtship practices. In addition, bellydancing is also social because of its prominence in celebrations, as bellydancers “were highly sought after as entertainers, especially for weddings and festive celebrations” (Sharif). Both of these examples show how bellydancing is utilized in social settings. Overall, bellydancing, in order to be classified as traditional, satisfies the requirement of a practical purpose in two ways: creating a dance, and conforming to societal obligations

Bellydancing as a dance can also be classified as a tradition because of its strong tie to the communication aspect of my definition of tradition. This part of the definition means that traditions can change based on what individuals in a community decide to emphasize through his or her words or actions; however, since this is in relation to a dance, it is also imperative that the

integrity of the craft be maintained. If the main aspects of a craft vanish, then the craft may take on an entirely different form; however, bellydancing has remained consistent throughout styles and the ages by implementing seven basic moves into all of its combinations (Rita). These moves are: figure eights, circles, undulations, shimmies, slides, lifts/drops, twists (Rita). Any other bellydancing move is simply a combination of two or more of the basic moves. These basic moves are the foundation for the dance and hold all the styles together. Different styles of the dance essentially add different arm movements and stylistic measures to the dance. One visual representation that is easy to see from an outsiders perspective is costume. Some styles require that the dancer is modestly dressed, while others allow the woman's thighs and bellybuttons to be showing— these vary drastically by region (Rita). But in both cases, the dancer wears a bedlah, which translates to suit and represents the strength of women (Rita). Bedlah is a term used to describe both the bra and the belt that a dancer wears over a dress or skirt (Rita). The bedlah is an example of how bellydancing remains consistent throughout the styles and years, but there are numerous examples of how bellydance has evolved over the ages. For example, the Saidi style originally depicted a war scene with weapons (Rita). This dance was performed exclusively by men; however, as the world progressively modernized so did the dance, as now women typically perform the dance and use canes to symbolize the weapons. The group that I observed also exhibited ties to the past, while still changing the dance to fit their own needs. Multiple times throughout my observations, Rita mentioned that there are other ways to perform a move based on different styles, but in her class it is done this way, which was again also based off the style that she was teaching. This year "Oasis" is focusing on a style of bellydance called Bellydance Fusion. This dance style is a very Americanized version of bellydancing, but it incorporates

moves from a variety of more traditional styles. Even though it would be easy to forget where these moves are coming from, Rita makes sure to inform the group of the origins, whether Egyptian, Turkish, or any other various type of style, of each new combination that she introduces to the group. Katya, an Oasis dancer, appreciates this tie to culture and traditions. She states, “I enjoy that Rita will talk a little bit about the traditions of a country or the dance’s traditions. I appreciate that she knows those things and talks about them with us. I also enjoy that dance is a living art form and that we can change it. We do not have to be tied to the traditional ways” (Katya). The very fact that a dancer can look at how the dance was performed in the past, means that the dance has indeed changed over time. It can also be seen that Katya realizes that the dance still has the ability to change if the performers see fit. Rita also has noticed this pattern in her forty years of experience. She states that, “those differences are becoming smaller, just as the world becomes smaller” (Rita). Even though the dance has changed to fit this region and society, it is still recognizable as bellydancing, which continues and spreads the tradition.

Many people do not view bellydancing as a tradition, because in the Midwest there is less exposure to the dance, especially outside of its modernized form. Upon becoming educated on the dance, it is easy to see that the roots and the continuation of the dance aspect of bellydance can be categorized as traditional. This, however, is not the only way in which bellydancing is traditional. Bellydancing also allows for the continuation of fostering sisterhood between women. This tradition of sisterhood can also be analyzed under the hybrid definition of tradition as temporal ideology and as communication.

Bellydancing is an escape in which women are able to gather together separate from their daily lives and enjoy the benefits that dancing gives to them. It is common knowledge that for

ages, women have formed groups separate from the men in their daily lives. This was done for socialization and in the earlier ages, to work together to cook meals (Hunting and Gathering Culture). These times of togetherness may help to forge a bond of sisterhood of between the women. The same bond can be experienced in women today when they participate in groups together, such as the bellydancing group "Oasis." During my observations, the group did nothing but support and lift one another up. One dancer states that, "they are the biggest support group that you will ever find. You just go there and there is no judging. They just welcome you. They are there for anything: good or bad" (Aiyanna). This quotes shows the value that the women place in each other, but this value is not just a superficial feeling. A research study was conducted by female scientists at UCLA to compare how women react to stress compared to men, as before this study most stress related research was done on men (Berkowitz). Researchers found that when the women of United States, who participated in this study, were feeling stressed a response in their brain made them, "more likely to manage their stress with a tend-and befriend response by nurturing their children or seeking social contact, especially with other women" (Lebo). This trend in the data showed that when contact was made with children or other women, more oxytocin was secreted, which alleviates stress (Berkowitz). It is proposed that this chemical reaction occurs and helps to strengthen the bonds that women feel towards their support groups in ways that men can not experience because of higher levels of testosterone (Berkowitz). A positive stimulus, such as this, to the brain in response to this behavior may promote and encourage the repetition of forming groups. Although, it is impossible to see the reactions that are going on in an individuals brain simply by looking at them, the behaviors that the women exhibit coincide with the general trend of the data. It can clearly be seen that the

formation of women's groups have a pragmatic purpose in both researched and observed accounts, which contributes to its overall classification as a tradition.

The next way in which sisterhood is traditional is through communication. This means that sisterhood can change over time to fit societal needs; however, the societal need for sisterhood has not changed and because of this, sisterhood has remained consistent throughout the ages. The *Oxford Dictionary* defines sisterhood as: "An association, society, or community of women linked by a common interest, religion, or trade" ("Sisterhood"). The possibilities for these connections are endless and can be applied to a wide variety of women, but one thing is true throughout: the bonds formed often have a deeper meaning. Bindu states:

Women who understand how powerful they are do not give into envy over meaningless things, instead they fight to maintain the beautiful bond of the sisterhood. These are the real women who know that we need each other's love and support to survive in this world. Love is the essence of being a woman. We must be that light of love that seals the bond and unique beauty of our sisterhood.
(qtd. in Nelson)

The ideology of sisterhood that Bindu articulates can be seen throughout the "Oasis" bellydancing group, to the extent where sisterhood in these women is almost synonymous with empowerment. This arose because of Rita's encouragement of a positive attitude within her dance studio. Rita addressed this uplifting aspect of sisterhood in her studio by stating:

We used to say things in jest like, "That's so pretty, I hate you." Someone brought it up and mentioned that we shouldn't say that, and you know what, I agree. We shouldn't say that. Even if we are jealous, which is kind of what we are

saying when we say “I hate you.” I don’t want to be that kind of place. I want to be “WOW! That’s beautiful. Great Job!”

Ever since, the women have whole heartedly implemented this ideology into their every day lives and continue to build one another up in sisterhood. In my individual interviews with the dancers, each woman genuinely complimented another dancer in the group on how pretty her costume was or how beautifully she performed a turn, without being directed. Referring back to Bindu’s quote, it can be seen that these are the types of women who are maintaining the beauty of sisterhood. The simple fact that the women are able to appreciate the other women that they are being surrounded by, shows that they value each other. Katya states, “one of the best things about class is that we become friends. . . we really enjoy seeing each other.” The “Oasis” bellydancing group is a prime example of women from different backgrounds joining together in the tradition of sisterhood.

Albeit an unconventional group to study in the midwest, this bellydancing group exhibits traditional aspects, much like practices that are widely considered traditional. The definition of tradition that was used to analyze this art was based on the practicality of the craft as well as its ability to adapt to the needs of today. Upon this analysis it is clear to see that bellydancing both as a dance and as a sisterhood of women are traditional. The tradition of bellydancing is able to incorporate the history of the dance with the future of the craft through the dancers of the present time. This shows that individuals who participate in a tradition not only have a lasting effect on themselves,— for these women this is the bond of sisterhood— but also may leave a permanent imprint on the tradition itself.

Works Cited

- Aiyanna. Personal Interview. 7 Nov. 2016.
- Berkowitz, Gale. "UCLA Study ON Friendship Among Women." *Anapsid*. Melissa Kaplan., 1 Jan. 2014. Web. 3 Dec. 2016.
- "Dance." Britannica Academic, Encyclopædia Britannica, 19 May. 2015. Web. 18 Oct. 2016.
- Hammond, Andrew. "Belly dancing." *Pop Culture Arab World! Media, Arts, and Lifestyle*. Santa Barbara, CA: ABC-CLIO. *Credo Reference*. Accessed 8 Dec. 2016.
- Hanne, Judith Lynne. *To Dance Is Human: A Theory of Nonverbal Communication*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1979. Print.
- "Hunting and Gathering Culture." *Britannica Academic*, Encyclopædia Britannica, 4 Aug. 2016. Accessed 6 Dec. 2016.
- Katya. Personal Interview. 6 Nov. 2016.
- Lebo, Harlan. "UCLA Researchers Identify Key Biobehavioral Pattern Used by Women to Manage Stress." *UCLA Newsroom*. UCLA., 17 May 2000. Web. 3 Dec. 2016.
- Nelson, Sophia A.. "Time to Put the 'Sister' Back in 'Sisterhood.'" *Huffingtonpost.com*. The Huffington Post, 11 Dec. 2013. Web. 8 Dec. 2016.
- Noyes, Dorothy. "Tradition: Three Traditions." *Journal of Folklore Research* 46.3 (2009): 233-268. Print.
- "Raqs Sharqi." *The Oxford Dictionary of Dance*. 2nd ed. 2010. Print
- Rita. Personal Interview. 18 Oct. 2016.
- Sharif, Ketii. *Bellydance: A Guide to Middle Eastern Dance, Its Music, Its Culture and Costume*. Crows Nest, N.S.W.: Allen & Unwin, 2005. Print.

Shay, Anthony V. "Danse Du Ventre." *International Encyclopedia of Dance*. 1st ed. 1998.

Print.

"Sisterhood." Oxford Living Dictionaries: English. Oxford University Press, 2016. Web. 8 Dec.

2016.

Swain, Liz. "Bellydancing." *The Gale Encyclopedia of Fitness*. Jaqueline L. Longe, Gale, 2012.

Credo Reference. Accessed 27 Sept. 2016.

Contemporary Belly Dance and Yoga, with Ariellah: Tribal fusion bellydance classes, Belly dance fitness, workout, and yoga instruction, Beginner-intermediate. Ariellah. 4.6 out of 5 stars 170. She teaches yoga in the Viniyoga tradition as transmitted by Gary Kraftsow and the faculty of the American Viniyoga Institute, LLC. The yoga is followed by three drills sessions: Leg Strengthening Drills, including a variety of travel and level-change exercises, and mini-combinations. Belly Dance Isolation Drills (shoulders, torso, and pelvis) where you practice belly dance isolations and then layer each one on 4 footwork patterns; and the Belly Dance Shimmy Drill, a delightful high-energy non-stop shimmy practice with Rachel's signature shimmy layering. A. Through endless tries at the usual exercises and frequent failures, ballet dancers develop the natural pathways in the brain necessary to control accurate, fast and smooth movement. B. The ballet shoe offers some support, but the real strength is in the muscles, built up through training. C. As technology takes away activity from the lives of many, perhaps the ballet dancer's physicality is ever more difficult for most people to imagine. D. Ballet technique is certainly extreme but it is not, in itself, dangerous. E. The principle is identical in the gym - pushing yourself to the limit Belly dancing is a torso-driven dance, with an emphasis on articulations of the hips. Movements found in belly dancing are Percussive movements Fluid movements Shimmies, shivers and vibrations. Belly dancing have different form in different regions. In different regions belly dancing have different costumes. Belly dancing have a great effect on health and weight loss. This dance helps to strengthening your body. 4. Fluid movements Flowing, sinuous movements in which the body is in continuous motion, which may be used to interpret melodic lines and lyrical sections in the music, or modulated to express complex instrumental improvisations, as well as being performed in a rhythmic manner. These movements require a great deal of abdominal muscle control.