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# Representation of Middle Eastern Culture through Belly Dance in the US

Elisabeth Johnson

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**Representation of Middle Eastern Culture through Belly Dance in  
the US**

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May/2006

APPROVED

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## **Abstract**

In light of the myriad misunderstandings about the Middle East and its people, this paper will seek to analyze how Middle Eastern culture has been represented in the US through the art of belly dance. This project examines what is currently known about the roots of belly dance, especially in relation to how such origins may be presented within the dance, and the first exposures that the American public may have had to belly dance through literary accounts, theatre, and design in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century and the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. The representative accuracy and impact of these different sources are discussed as well as how they relate to current representations of the Middle East used in belly dance. The presence of the dance itself in the US, beginning with the Chicago World's Fair of 1893 through to current performances, is then examined to see how different aspects of the dance and the culture from which it came are either emphasized or neglected at different points in time.

Building on literature reviews, observations of performances, and interviews with current performers, this project will demonstrate that, since the introduction of belly dance to the US, and by extension much of Western society, the dance has never been authentically Middle Eastern. It has always been subjected to American expectations, interpretations, and some gross inaccuracies, and has changed to such an extent that current performances are no longer Middle Eastern in origin as much as they are American.

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## **Advice to Future Honors Students:**

My first word of advice is this: research something that you love. I know that with my project, if it was not a subject that I already loved, I never would have been able to finish it. A thesis is a very long, arduous process, and it is something that requires a great deal of dedication. Never choose a topic that will just look good on a résumé, because you'll be sick of it before you even finish the research. While researching belly dance in the US, I practically became obsessed. I went to every belly dance performance I could find in the Syracuse area, and even some at home during break; I listened to the music constantly; I ran endless Google searches for pictures of dancers; and I even spent many hours in the basement of Bird library watching over and over again the only old Egyptian belly dance movie that they had available. My thesis became my life, and I love it. The more I found out about my topic, the more I wanted to know and the more I wanted to shout about it from the rooftops. Without this kind of ardent love of my research, I never would have made it through the process. Find a subject that you want to discuss with friends until they start to look at you as if you've lost your mind—even if it's something that you've already researched (that can be a great base from which to start your project).

Like all the other theses in this vast collection, another word of advice is to start early and keep working. I was very disciplined in my approach to my thesis, even including a semester abroad. I had a head start since I had done some preliminary research for the paper that served as the springboard for this project, and just hit the ground running. I found books at the library whenever I didn't

have too much work with my other classes, and I read them with a critical eye while sketching out ideas in outlines. By the summer before my senior year, I was ready to start writing, and even had about 20 pages finished before coming back to campus. I cannot express how happy I have been in the run up to the thesis due date that I started so early. I've watched so many of my colleagues rushing around like crazy trying to scrape together research at the last moment. I was able to calmly revise and edit my thesis with my advisor and my second reader and now have a project that I am proud of and which I can present to the Honors Program. Honestly, starting early was the best thing I could have done, even if people called me crazy.

Finally, find other people who are interested in your topic. My advisor had never researched the same topic, but I found out about him because another person in the Anthropology department happened to suggest that he might know about it through his wife. He has been a wonderful boon to this project, as someone who is actually interested in the subject. My second reader, in addition to being a simply enthusiastic person in general has been a real motivation for me to continue the project. Getting comments back on written sections to the effect of "Cool!" or "I never knew that!" made me feel like some sort of expert on a really cool topic. Surrounding yourself with people who know about research and writing and who also demonstrate interest in whatever topic you choose will help motivate you, and that comes in handy the last semester.

Good luck, and have fun!

## Acknowledgements

I would like to take an opportunity to thank all the people who helped in the completion of this project. Firstly, I would like to acknowledge Fleur Frascella who first introduced me to the wonderful world that is American belly dance years ago and who was a trooper in also being my first ever interview subject. Also, Chris Geyer who oversaw this project from its very beginning as a research project for my sophomore writing class and who, since then, has been an incredible resource for someone just entering into the world of serious academic writing as my second reader and as someone who understand how much fun it is to become obsessed with one's research. I'd also like to thank Dr. Rubinstein for pushing me to be more structured and disciplined in my approach and pointing me to some very helpful resources.

I'd also like to extend deep, profound thanks to my parents who have clipped articles they happened to see in the local paper about belly dance, have sat through shows with me, and have generally done nothing but support me wholeheartedly. And to all my friends who had to endure me going on endlessly about my research, no matter how much it bored them, and to all my friends who came with me to performances. I'd also like to thank all of the wonderful women of Full Moon Tribal dance troupe in Central New York for being so open with me about their experiences, and for the wonderful insights of their interviews. Also to Tahya of the Allentown area, deep thanks for a very helpful interview. To Barbara Sellers-Young, my deepest thanks for your invaluable insights through both interview and in articles that inspire me to be a better writer.

## Introduction

A swish of gossamer fabric, the ring of finger cymbals, the jangle of a coin belt, and the flutter of an eyelid crowned by kohl may seem mysterious and sexy to a reader, but what lies behind both the image and this reception? While the lives of a group of women dancers in various parts of the world may seem completely insignificant, the history of thought and exchange behind it has serious implications. These implications extend to current political issues as well as retrospectives on historical accounts of travelers and authors.

Cultural communications are an essential part of interpersonal and international interactions. All of our actions take place within a cultural framework of appropriateness and priorities. It is for this reason that the study of such cultural interactions needs to be examined, so that we in the modern society can understand important meanings and repercussions to our actions when we interact with those in other cultures. This paper will seek to examine, in particular the interactions between the Middle East and the West within the framework of belly dance. As these two regions of the world become more connected and interact more frequently, the ways in which each views the other have dramatic effects.

The purpose of this project is to demonstrate that, despite many attempts to authentically represent belly dance as an aspect of Middle Eastern culture, presentations and representations of belly dance have always been affected and colored by Western expectations and preconceptions. The ways in which the West has received belly dance has long been a major indicator of certain mindsets

that are indicative of a more general approach to the entire region. While other aspects of such interactions have been widely studied, belly dance has been woefully underrepresented in academic circles, which increases the importance of examining these dynamics. This project will seek to demonstrate how, through history, various preconceptions about the Middle East and its population have surfaced through belly dance, from information gathered from literature reviews and interviews with current dancers. Despite the fact that so many presentations of the dance attempt to find and emphasize the “authentic” aspects of the presentation—reaching back as far as possible in the known history of the dance for symbols and images—these presentations fall far short of their goal of this elusive “authenticity.” In some of the first interactions between the Middle East and the West, particularly after the Napoleonic invasion of Egypt, belly dance made a deep impression on the visitors and can be seen as having great importance in the formation of Orientalist mindsets. Later, Flaubert’s writings on his travels, and especially on his affair with the dancer Kuchuk Hanem, spread the idea of a sensuality and sexuality that were particularly exotic to the Western reader. As the Orientalist movements in art and literature waxed over many decades, other works only reinforced such views.

By the time of various world fairs in London, Philadelphia, Paris, and the Chicago Worlds Fair in 1893, the views toward the exotic Orient created scandal surrounding the exhibitions from the Middle East and Northern Africa that featured belly dancers. The legend of Little Egypt was launched and inspired an entire entertainment genre known as “Hoochie Coochie.” Belly dance costumes

in the West were reduced from the quite modest traditional garments to such revealing things that they could be compared with the modern bikini top or even skimpier. In place of long shirts and wide trousers, short and even sheer skirts were worn. This trend was also transmitted back to the Middle East where costumes for, especially, cabaret performers became accordingly small, overriding customs in place for many years. The power of Western prejudices came to overwhelm the practices in the region of origin.

Once such changes were irrevocably set in place, there have been periods of increased interest in belly dance. During the 1970s, it became an exercise fad, as well as just recently in the late 1990s and early 2000s. It seems no small coincidence that these are periods of time when the US, in particular, was heavily involved in the Middle East for political and military reasons. As the Middle East has recently re-risen quickly in the consciousness of the West, it is important to once again reevaluate the place of belly dance in our society and what it represents within current mindsets. This, of course, necessitates discussion of the sexual as well as the sensual aspects of belly dance, and the more scandalous and polemic aspects of such practices. When confronted by images of voluptuous women barely clad in sparkling gold bikinis performing what is called belly dance, how could one question its relationship to sex? In order to progress toward understanding any other culture, such highly contentious issues must be understood first.

### **Important terms**

Specifically within the West, there have been many terms created to describe belly dance and its various offshoots. These terms are important to distinguish, as their usages and connotations have brought them to mean very different things to different people. My belief is that part of the reason there are so many names within this genre, beyond those that certainly define different styles like ATS and cabaret, is that many practitioners and authors are seeking to reject the connotations and the history associated with previous terms, and to differentiate their own views and practices as separate from predecessors. “Belly dance” itself seems to have acquired a sense of some vulgarity, perhaps tainted by the era of “hootchie cootchie” dance in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. The terms “danse orientale” and “danse du ventre” have very clear and overt tones of colonialism, having been created by French occupiers in North Africa. The latter term is certainly the most dramatically scandalous, since it not only mentions a part of the body, but it was perhaps the most frequently used term when the dance was still in the sensationalist phase of its introduction to the West. “Danse orientale” seems to have become, to some, a more legitimate term to describe their practice as the use of French seems to parallel the now acceptable and legitimate art of ballet dance. However, the use of the word “orientale” does nothing to cover the Orientalist experience of the Middle East. Some even seek to use terms like “Arabic” dance, another attempt to circumvent the associations of these other terms and also to actively associate with “authentic” versions with origins in the Arabian Peninsula. This term, however, denies ethnic and national differences within the classification to which it is applied. Wendy Buonaventura uses this

term in conjunction with her discussion of all the varied forms of belly dance, neglecting the many different nations and ethnicities within the Middle East with dance traditions of belly dance (2003, 261-283).

Another route some have taken in order to find legitimizing nomenclature are based on one of the Arabic names for belly dance: *raqs esh-sharqi* or *raks esh-sharki* ( رقص الشرقي ). Some use the simple transliteration of the term in what can be interpreted as an attempt to return to the original steps and movement with as little Western influence as possible. Whether this truly is so, or whether this is a simple fascination with an exotic-sounding phrase, depends heavily on the individual dancer or writer. Others have adopted a hybridized version of this name with English terms: “sharki dance.” This can only be seen as another attempt to perhaps evade connotations associated with the simple transliteration or fully Western terms, based on a hybridized approach—recognizing the influence on modern dance from both sources.

Simply for coherence, I will seek to use the term “belly dance to represent the aggregate of all forms that have been considered as belly dance in both the West and the Middle East. “Raqs sharqi” will be used to describe such dances solely in the Middle East, those that are as close to original styles as possible (i.e. the least Westernized and diluted forms). ATS, standing for “American Tribal Style’ will be later explained as a particularly Western form. And finally “cabaret” will be used to discuss stage-oriented forms that focus more on theatrical presentation than authenticity. A lengthy discussion of the various



different terms employed by writers and dancers as well as their implications can be found in Appendix A.

Also, based on the fact that this paper is seeking to demonstrate facets of interaction between the Middle East and the West, many references will be made to Edward Said's 1978 book, *Orientalism*, as its analysis of what is labeled as "Orientalist" literature was one of the early ways of introducing belly dance to the West. Such identifications of "Orientalist" or "Orientalism" made in this text will be referencing such attitudes demonstrated in Said's arguments. This term, through general usage, includes most lands found east of Europe from the eastern shores of the Mediterranean to India and as far as Japan. Said used the term with more emphasis on the literature about the Middle East: including North Africa, the Levant countries and Turkey, the Arabian peninsula, and including the area of Iran. It is with this same general focus that the term will be used in this project. Within the framework of this project, the use of this term creates two issues that must be addressed. The implications of the term for dancers are discussed in Appendix A as to the geographical area implied for their dance. The other issue is that, as a researcher, it is necessary to recognize that any flaws found in Said's methodology can be used as criticisms of my own work. Unfortunately, no other term has come to encompass the same recognition of a broad school of thought that has for so long influenced the way that the Middle East is conceptualized, and so it presents the best choice.

Similarly, the term "Orient" has been built in opposition to the "West." Within the context of this work, "West" is used to denote what may be a shared

culture and history of thought and literature shared amongst Europe, the United States, Canada, and Australia. This term is meant to imply at least some level of shared culture and history, a shared literature and schools of thought.

Another important term within the context of this project is the idea of “othering.” As used in this project, this is the process of casting another person or another group of people as inherently different from oneself or from the one’s own group. Othering mentally distances the individual from this external other, and, unfortunately, this mental process can easily result in the denigration of the other in order to boost the esteem of the self. Dangerous implications of this process are prejudices and racism in the extreme. Though this particular project does not deal with overt racism, the effects of this process can be seen in the ways that affect the treatment and reception of belly dance.

Throughout the history of belly dance in the West, its presentation has been altered to fit with preconceptions and expectations. The first section details the main groups who historically contributed to what is known today as belly dance, and how the dance has been received. The second section shows how Orientalist writers in the 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries characterized the belly dance that they saw in their travel journals and novels and how their preconceptions have influenced the way that the West approaches this dance. The third section explores the first physical encounters that Americans experienced with belly dance and how it was presented and appropriated within American culture. Section four then examines the various changes in presentation and style that have occurred since belly dance’s introduction up until the current day. The final

section analyzes how the presentation of belly dance throughout these different phases has been used to represent the Middle East and its culture and how such representations were inaccurate.

## **(1) Origins and Beginnings**

To delve into the origins of belly dance is to delve into the realms of speculation. There are two main theories, neither necessarily contradicting the other, but for which there is little if any actual evidence. This is a subject that is woefully neglected in the fields of archeology, art history, and dance research. One might chalk this up to bad luck, but the weightier consideration is the general dismissal of belly dance itself as simply a sexual art, without delving further into its history. The main facts accepted by the vast majority of writers and dancers related to the subject are few: origins in North Africa and the Middle East, generally a focus on movements of the pelvis and torso, and that most practitioners are women. Beyond such broad statements, doubts abound—doubts that this section seeks to explore.

### **Pharaonic Egypt**

The first main theory is that belly dance originated in Pharaonic Egypt. The “evidence” pointing in this direction is examples of hieroglyphics found in Egyptian ruins that seem to resemble dances that could be the origins of belly dance. Without seeing any specific friezes identified by this theory, it is necessary to remain a skeptic. By definition, it is exceedingly difficult to determine what moves are being used in a dance depicted by a still image and even harder still to attempt to compare such ancient still pictorial representations to a modern form of dance. Even if one can say that the pictures show a dance performed by females that focuses on the pelvis and abdomen (thus establishing some general similarities), there would be even more obstacles to determining

direct links to belly dance. There are unquestionably other forms of dance around the world performed by women with mostly pelvic or abdominal movements that have no relation to the form we know as belly dance. One clear example of this is the tradition of story telling through hula dance. The movements may share some visual similarities to those used in belly dance, but the origins and purpose are completely different. Thus, any dances found in these friezes could be different types of movements that merely resemble belly dance on the surface but could easily have been performed for entirely different purposes.

This theory has certainly influenced those who practice belly dance in both Egypt and the West. Some performers in the West may perform some numbers wearing a costume that looks more appropriate for a Cleopatra costume for Halloween, made of a gold lame and a large plastic-beaded collar and headdress with a plastic cobra, and moving in ways that are most strongly reminiscent of the Bangles' song "Walk like an Egyptian." Based on the theory surrounding the Pharaonic friezes, these dancers believe that they must be doing movements that are indeed part of the history of belly dance and that these two conceptions of dance are somehow related. While they may be correct in linking the images found in these friezes with what may be commonly thought of as belly dance, there is doubt regarding any direct relationship.

On a more positive note, another major repercussion of this theory is the national pride of most Egyptians regarding what they see as their dance. There is a sense of pride that Egypt is the homeland of belly dance, that their people know how to do it best. A common assumption among Egyptians is that any Egyptian

who does belly dance will automatically do it better than anyone else in the world (MacFarquhar 2004:1). Dancers in the West also accept this reputation—if a dancer wants to be seen as truly knowledgeable about her specialty, she must have been to Egypt, widely perceived as the center of the belly dance world. The most talented congregate in Cairo, and other areas of the country, to be part of the scene, to learn from the best, thus making it a self-fulfilling prophecy. Even if real evidence were to surface that would point to belly dance having origins anywhere else, Egyptians would never give up their birthright easily. Arguments would likely be made that belly dance existed in Egypt long before the time from which the contrary evidence dates and that those to which the evidence points would have learned belly dance by coming into contact with ancient Egyptians through trade. Thus, it is extremely doubtful that the status of Egypt within the belly dance world will ever be successfully challenged or refuted, despite the questionable nature of the evidence that supposedly supports this status.

Unfortunately, pride is not the only attitude demonstrated toward belly dance by Egyptians. Belly dance is caught in a complex web between being respected as a folk art and despised as a source of licentious behavior. Despite the complex attitudes towards belly dance held by most Egyptians, these feelings of pride still flourish. Morroe Berger (qtd. Shay and Sellers-Young 2003:24-25) points out how this may affect how Egyptian dancers reflect on their art's origins. To make their *métier* more palatable for society, they downplay the more sexual aspects of the art and focus on these fabled historical and national origins, claiming that every possible aspect of their dance is based on the dances of

ancient Egypt. Thus, these dancers seek justification for what is often viewed as a questionable art form, resting their reputations on spurious evidence.

### **Goddess worship**

It is also widely postulated that belly dance, and other visually similar dances came about in connection to worship of ancient goddesses, probably due to the prominent aspects of a woman's body associated with the dance that are also so closely associated with childbirth and child-rearing. It would be a logical assumption in this line of thought to connect such dances with worship of fertility and motherhood goddesses. Some see the worship of variations on an archetypal "Great Mother" such as Ishtar of Babylonia as being the original purpose of an ecstatic form of belly dance (Al-Rawi 2003:30). There are some that to this day continue to perform what they see as worship of a goddess or goddesses based on archeological findings that are believed to be connected to goddess worship and to belly dance. (*Biblical Archeological Review* 2001) There has been undeniable evidence of the existence of dance in early cultures, and many point to the preponderance of female figures connected to dance as being evidence that these dances were connected to these female figures by means of goddess worship (*Biblical Archeology Review* 2001). These connections are, however, tenuous. There is no direct link between goddess worship and belly dance that can be proven, thus necessitating a skeptical eye. While it is possible that they are connected, just like the claims of pharaonic origins, there is no way of proving it without some sort of archeological finding as evidence.

Some writers criticize such links as overly romantic, Orientalist assumptions. Wendy Buonaventura (1989:10-11), an often quoted writer in contemporary belly dance literature, postulates that many different civilizations had hip-based dances related to the mysteries of life, but that these dances were suppressed by major religions seeking to undermine goddess worship, leaving only a secularized version in the Middle East. This is indicative of the way that the Middle East is so often portrayed as stagnant, backward, clinging to old ways more than any other region—other regions simply progressed beyond this traditional dance.

Perhaps part of the reason some insist on the connection of pelvic dances and worship within the context of the Middle East is both the presence of such connections in other regions (e.g. Voodoo possession dances) as well as the meditative state of mind often induced by intense concentration on the physical existence. Meditation is quite often defined as a period or state of intense attention, especially on physical experiences such as breathing, yogic positions, or the slow movements in practices like Tai Chi (Heide 1986:71; Goleman and Schwartz 1976:457). In pelvic-oriented dances, especially for novices, a great deal of attention is required to subtly manipulate specific muscles while keeping others still. Such an intense concentration on physical sensations, similar to the often used meditation tool of focusing one's attention on breathing, could easily lead to a meditative state, causing modern practitioners to draw a connection between dance and worship and assuming that this connection was part of its original purpose. There is also a similarly suggestible connection between such



forms of concentration and the dances performed by Sufi practitioners during a *sema* ceremony—by performing certain movements, one frees the mind from transitory thoughts and desires.

### **Ouled (Auled) Nail**

Within recorded history, there have been several groups that have defined the modern practice of belly dance. These are groups whose practices and customs were recorded by local writers and artists as well as visiting Europeans exploring this region beyond their borders. Here, the traditions associated with the Ouled Nail of the Maghreb, the *ghawazi* most notably in Egypt, and the tradition of the *almeh*.

One source of what we know today as belly dance that can be positively identified is the practice of the Ouled Nail, depending on the transliteration. The name means either “children of Nail” or “children of the iron-plated shoes,” a reflection of the frequent stomping of feet incorporated into their style of dance. They have come to be seen as the most famous and infamous tribe of the Maghreb within the world of belly dance. Much of the relative attention given to these dancers is the result of the works of the French artist and author Étienne Dinet (1861-1929). During his travels to French Algeria, beginning in 1884, he made many drawings and wrote many stories about the people of the Ouled Nail, including the book *Khadra danseuse de Ouled Nail* (Belly Dance Museum). One example of his colorful depictions of the women of the Ouled Nail can be seen in Figure 1. Dinet eventually moved to the village of Bou Saada in 1904 to live amongst the Ouled Nail and eventually even converted to Islam (Buonaventura

1989:94). The Ouled Nail were apparently able to retain their way of living at least as late as the 1960s when they were severely repressed after Algeria achieved independence from France in 1962 (Carlton:30).

The dance of the Ouled Nail was a specific version of belly dance that became known to the West through the Algerian exhibits in the many World's fairs that would later come. At times, the term "Ouled Nail" even was considered to be synonymous with the idea of belly dance, and was used as a term for dancers without distinction between tribal affiliations (Buonaventura 1989:94). A major complication with the use of this same term is that in other ways, it was used indiscriminately also for courtesans, concubines, dancers, and prostitutes, drastically increasing the entanglement of dance and sex (Ferhati 2003). As with other major traditions in belly dance to be discussed later, the factual connections to prostitution greatly influenced the social status and acceptance, or lack thereof, of belly dance.

The complications of the entanglement of sex and the dance of the Ouled Nail can be attributed to their actual tribal practices. At about the age of twelve, girls would leave their tribe and travel to the cities, where they would live with older women while they sought to earn a living and to save for their dowry. They did this mainly by dancing in coffee-houses, but that work was often supplemented by prostitution, and once their savings were sufficient to fulfill their dowry requirements, they would return to their tribe and to their respectable lives (Al-Rawi 2003:44-45). These practices created a reputation not only for the dancers of the Ouled Nail, but also for belly dancers in other areas with no

connection to the Ouled Nail. These reputations also molded these dancers into an attraction for foreign tourists, especially Europeans, and French soldiers seeking an exotic entertainment, and the cafés in places like Biskra in Algeria (Buonaventura 1989:94). Also, the dancers of the Ouled Nail, unlike other women, would go about the towns without traditional veils (Belly Dance Museum). Such lack of perceived modesty would have further reinforced the connections between the dancers and their more salacious employments.

Buonaventura, more recently, includes descriptions of the Ouled Nail, as recounted by Lawrence Morgan in the 1950s, which were comparable to those of the ghawazi of Egypt for their sexuality and their disdain for restrictions in Islam on consumption of alcohol. They seemed to have imbibed alcohol and marijuana frequently and would change lovers, often lonely Europeans, with similar frequency (Buonaventura 2003:267-72). Such behavior would mean almost automatic exclusion from “good” Muslim society. These women, assuming the descriptions to be accurate, were in violation of many rules set out in the Qur’an and other facets of religion regarding gender expectations of abstinence and moderation. Such behavior would, of course, serve to underline that these women were also functioning as prostitutes and were outside the boundaries of “good” society.

For outsiders, the Ouled Nail must have seemed very strange, perhaps even shocking. They would wear kohl on their eyes and their hair in braids on both sides of their face, held in place by large earrings. These earrings were only a small part of the collection of jewelry they would wear as a means of displaying

their earnings in gold and silver and, thus, their status as gifted entertainers. Unfortunately, such a display also made these women into targets for attack by robbers and bandits, so many women opted for bracelets with long spikes to protect themselves (Belly Dance Museum). Their costumes in general gave the dancers a very particular look (Figure 2 and 3), distinguishable from other, similar dance traditions, and such particularity may have made them stand out more in memories of visitors compared to other dancers, making their styles seem more prevalent. Descriptions of their dance also seem to set the Ouled Nail apart from other belly dance traditions. Their movements are described as being much more brusque and much larger than the movements of the ghawazi in Egypt, which Wendy Buonaventura (1989:95) characterizes as being much more comparable to dance movements of “black Africa,” with intricate details reserved for the arms and hands.

### **Ghawazi**

The *ghawazi* (s. *ghaziyeh*), who were found mostly in Egypt, were generally street dancers, a poorer and less respectable caste of female dancers. A tradition originally attributed to local gypsies performing in towns, the term is now used for female dancers more generally. The Arabic word originally meant “invader” or “outsiders,” thus demonstrating from the outset their distinction from acceptable society. The name has, however, become more associated with the profession of public dancing than it has with any form of ethnicity or national identity (van Nieuwkerk 1995:95).

The *ghawazi* performed unveiled in the streets and in cafés, which set them apart from “good,” modest Muslim society. The women of “good” Muslim society covered their bodies and, in at least the 19<sup>th</sup> century, their faces in public, not drawing attention to their bodies like any dancer would inherently do. Even when invited to perform for a private party, they were often required to remain outside the wall of the house, perhaps performing in the courtyard. For a very long time, they were the popular performers of their day, performing in saint’s day festivals, and dancing with various sorts of props: swords, water pipes, candles, and more (van Nieuwkerk 1995:26-27). This may be the origin of the current practice among Western dancers of performing dances with these same objects balanced on their foreheads. These women appeared in public unveiled and they used their looks to help earn a living that was, and still is, socially unacceptable. Because they also violated tenets of Islam by drinking alcohol and smoking tobacco, the idea of a respectable young man marrying a *ghaziyeh* was unfathomable (Van Nieuwkerk 1995:27).

The descriptions written by Edward William Lane in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century recounted several performances attributed by the author to the women known as *ghawazi*. He described an indecorous dance that increased in rapidity until it nearly resembled the flamenco dancers of southern Spain and has little elegance (1846, vol. II:99-100). He also noted that the dancers would consume alcohol to drunkenness for audiences of men, dancing with abandon, and the guests would “dally and sport with these dancing-girls in a very licentious manner.” (1846, vol. II:271, 101) In addition, he also made mention of a very specific transgression

that these women committed against the often rigid boundaries of public and private. He wrote that these women would display themselves in public streets in dress that was typical of the Egyptian middle class to wear only in private (1846, vol. II:100). Their costumes can be plainly seen in Figures 4 and 5 where one can assume that they are probably performing their dances, wearing these generally private clothes in public. Not only did these performers flout Islamic doctrine in their behavior, they ignored other societal and cultural norms for the conduct of women.

### **Awalim**

The term *awalim* (s. *almeh*) has been a very confusing one for Westerners because of its early mistaken usage and its evolution since then. Originally, a “learned woman,” the *almeh* functioned in a similar way to a geisha in Japan. She was skilled in the arts of singing, poetry, dancing, and conversation. By Edward Said’s description, “the *almeh* was a courtesan of sorts, but a woman of significant accomplishments. Dancing was only one of her gifts: others were the ability to sing and recite classical poetry, to discourse wittily, to be sought after for her company by men of law, politics, and literature.” (Said 2000, 350) In this capacity, the *awalim* functioned as cultural guardians—ensuring that traditions would be continued as long as their employment continued. Such cultural importance is aided by the fact that they were modest in public and during performances. Comparisons are often made with the *geisha* of Japan, with regard to their role as cultural artists carrying on traditions. They were far more likely to wear veils and would conceal themselves behind screens when singing before

audiences of men (Buonaventura 1989, 48). Generally, a true *almeh* would only dance for other women in an enclosed environment, preserving her modesty (van Nieuwkerk 1995, 27). Lane wrote of a performance of an *almeh* within the space of the women's quarters—the “harem”—where, should the “master of the house” be in the company of the women, the singer would perform behind the screen of wooden lattice-work or another area where she could not be seen (vol. 11, 65-66). One example of a postcard depicting an *almeh* in Figure 6 seems to show her inside of a building, unlike the *ghawazi*. This also demonstrates that the talents of the *awalim* were focused not solely on dance, but here were demonstrated more as focused upon singing. Given this wider range of artistic talents and a higher degree of modesty, the *awalim* were generally described as singers and dancers while the *ghawazi* were described as dancers and prostitutes—creating two different strata of female performers (van Nieuwkerk 1995, 31)

Part of the confusion surrounding the term “*almeh*” was caused by both tourists and literature in the 19<sup>th</sup> century mistaking the definition and application of the word. European tourists often used the “*almeh*” to refer to female dancers indiscriminately, similar to the over-use of the term “Ouled Nail” (Buonaventura 1989, 48). This lack of discrimination seems to have started as a mistake, but with an increase in sexual tourism by Europeans in the area, the distinction denoted by the term lessened, but this could have also been associated with a rise in the number of *almeh* who began to also engage in prostitution (van Nieuwkerk 1995, 35). Either way, the generalized use of the term created some confusion as to what the role of the *almeh* encompassed.

The gender specification for performances was crucial to the way that society viewed the *awalim*, as was their more general modesty in public. Many may have had patrons to take care of them financially when their revenues from performances fell short, and thus were not seen as prostitutes (Buonaventura 1989, 49). When Muhammad Ali banned female dancers from Cairo in 1834, the singers—the *awalim*—were allowed to stay, but the *ghawazi* were forced to relocate to tourist towns outside of the capital city: Esna, Aswan, and Kean, until the ban was lifted in 1866 (Buonaventura 1989, 49, 60, 69).

When one looks at contemporary performances, especially in the West, these different origins are reflected in the movements, in the names given to many movements, the way that the dance is performed, where the dance is performed, as well as in costuming chosen by dancers. The different legacies of the Ouled Nail, *ghawazi*, and *awalim* continue within the general scope of belly dance. Superficially, the dance today is still very often performed in restaurants, just as the *ghawazi* and the Ouled Nail often performed in coffee houses, and both then as now, weddings seem to require dancers. On a deeper note, there continue to be strata of women who are regarded as respectable artists, yet there are also others who are seen primarily as performing a sexual dance and who are not generally seen as respectable.

These different groups of dancers are very important to the study of modern belly dance because it was these performers who were described by various traveling authors and would become enduring figures of Western literature. The images presented of dance and the dancers would continue to color



the expectations and appraisals by the West until the current day through the works of Gustave Flaubert, Edward William Lane, William Curtis, and Étienne Dinet. These were the dancers who, perhaps unknown to themselves, would lay the foundations for all dancers to come after them.

## **(2) Western Introductions**

As with many other aspects of Middle Eastern culture, the West was first introduced to the forms of dance that would later be known as belly dance as the empires of Europe grew. Napoleon's conquest of Egypt introduced many to both the Arabs and Arab culture, an introduction to a seemingly exotic environment (Sellers-Young 1992:142). Various other media were employed, and soon many more people in the West were familiar with what became popularly known as belly dance. Literature, theater, opera, world exhibitions, fashion, and fine arts all became expressions of Western fascination with the Orient and belly dance as well. There were many attitudes used in this approach to a new world. These ranged from Lane's detached academic interest in the 1840s to Flaubert's romantic sexual tourism in 1850 to Sol Bloom's marketing of titillation in 1893 to Paul Poiret's attempt to liberate European women in the 1910s. Because of the different lenses through which each author viewed the dance and the dancers, each depiction has its own distortions and flaws which would be incorporated into future Western approaches to belly dance. Many aspects of cultures and meaning were left out of the belly dance crazes and the attempts to transcribe Middle Eastern culture in the West. The way that these early exposures cast belly dance as well as the Middle East still affect the way that belly dance is thought of in the West.

### **Literary Orientalists**

In the 19<sup>th</sup> century, a European fascination grew regarding the exotic "Orient" and included a fascination with female dancers. European readers were

introduced to the region by the published journals of travelers and the myriad of novels and stories set in the region. While some authors actually made the journey to these “exotic” lands to attempt to witness everything for themselves, there were others who simply repeated the previously published works already available without leaving Europe.

*Edward William Lane:* Lane wrote of his experiences of Egypt in the 1830s in *An Account of the Manners and Customs of the Modern Egyptians*. His works were written by a Briton for other Britons, as an outsider observing groups of others and evaluating these others based on his own culture’s beliefs and morals. In his descriptions of the *ghawazi*, he edits himself to avoid offending the sensibilities of his fellows. Describing the events at a party where these dancers were performing and had been drinking, he wrote, “The scenes which ensue cannot be described.” (1846, vol. II:101) He deemed that certain scenes that occurred in the Egypt were not fit for the delicate sensibilities of readers in Britain. These dancers, seemingly beyond everything else he saw were an affront to prescribed codes of conduct for women to which Lane was accustomed. He seemed shocked at the behavior demonstrated by the *ghawazi* dancers at such parties, in addition to their dress:

They are never admitted into a respectable hharee’m [*sic*]; but are not unfrequently hired to entertain a party of men in the house of some rake. In this case, as might be expected, their performances are yet more lascivious than those, which I have already mentioned. Some of them, when they exhibit before a private party of men, wear nothing but the

shintiya'n (or trowsers [*sic*]) and a to'b (or very full shirt or gown) of semitransparent, coloured [*sic*] gauze, open nearly half-way down the front. To extinguish the least spark of modesty which they may yet sometimes affect to retain, they are plentifully supplied with branding or some other intoxicating liquor. [Lane 1846, vol. II: 100-101]

Lane paints the inhabitants of this area as inherently more sexual in their nature and by their actions than the civilized European man (or woman)—such conduct witnessed, especially of the *ghawazi*, seem beyond the pale of their European counterparts. For Lane, these are dancers who are inextricably linked with prostitution. The chapter devoted to “Public Dancers” includes on the very first page with a detailed description in a footnote of how the *ghawazi* managed to get around anti-prostitution laws (1846, vol. II: 98). As Edward Said saw Lane’s presentation of the conduct of the *ghawazi*, it seems that the sexual display of the dancers was more than just morally reproachable, it was overtly dangerous:

In most cases, the Orient seemed to have offended sexual propriety; everything about the Orient—or at least Lane’s Orient-in-Egypt—exuded dangerous sex, threatened hygiene and domestic seamliness with an excessive ‘freedom of intercourse,’ as Lane put it more irrepressibly than usual. [Said 1979:167]

This was the other that was so over-sexed, these “female warrers against modesty”, as compared with the good, upright British man, like Lane, who cared not for such baser interests (Lane 1846, vol. II: 170).

This extrapolates to the actions and attitudes of women of the same area. These included the *ghaziyeh* and *awalim* that he encountered in his travels who conducted themselves in ways that seemed to be beyond what a good European woman might have been able to do. These “other-ed” women are described with disdain, especially the *ghaziyeh*. These are shown as “the most abandoned courtesans of Egypt.” (1846, vol. III:101) Yet, for all of his criticism of the behavior of these women, he seems to imply that he saw multiple performances in both private and public forums. For him to observe the dancer is not morally objectionable, for the transgression is all upon the dancer who is choosing to display herself, she takes all the burden of shame (*American Bellydancer*). This is a rather common phenomenon even to this day and across geographic regions that allows the audience to excuse their own viewing of dancing and also any possible lust or excitation—it is the dancer’s sin, not that of the audience.

*Gustave Flaubert:* Flaubert traveled to this exotic land and recorded his journeys and his adventures and also allowed the sights that he saw to influence his later writings. The most germane example of his experiences was that with the then-famous dancer, Kuchuk Hanem or Rouchiouk-Hânem or Kuchuk Hânim or Kushuk Arnem, depending on the transliteration. Her dancing was also written about by the American G.W. Curtis in his book *Nile Notes of a Howadji* in 1851, and seems to have provided the most detailed descriptions of her dancing itself, and is discussed later. Flaubert, however, had a greater hand in popularizing her story.

Around 1850, Flaubert and his traveling companion, Maxime du Camp, visited Egypt and included in their itinerary the village of Esna and the famous dancer. She is often described as having been a very talented singer, dancer, and musician, in keeping with the tradition of an *almeh*. Buonaventura posits a story as to why a woman in the occupation of *almeh* was subjected to the expulsion of the *ghaziyyeh* from Cairo that was generally not applied to these women. She said that Hanem was caught selling jewelry given to her by her protector, Abbas Pasha, the grandson of the same Muhammad Ali who expelled the dancers from Cairo (1989:71). After this incident, Hanem was banished to Esna where she lived at a fraction of her previous income and in fear of thieves because, like many other dancers, the savings she had from her dancing wages were generally in the form of jewelry (Tucker 1985:152). Because of this reduced standard of living, Hanem, like other *awalim* of the same era, was forced to supplement her meager income by prostitution, essentially making the classification self-fulfilling (van Nieuwkerk 1995:35). It seems that the misclassification of a woman's profession was not an uncommon event. Apparently, a governor could make additional income by threatening women found in compromising position with being classified as prostitutes in official registers unless the governor was paid off with a handsome bribe (Tucker 1985:151). This sort of situation, given the loss of protection of a powerful man could easily have led to an *almeh* being grouped with the *ghaziyyeh* and thus subjected to banishment.

When Flaubert and du Camp paid Hanem a visit, the pair was not seeking simple dance and song. It seems that Flaubert insisted that Hanem perform

“L’Abeille” (“the bee”) where the dancer pretends to be searching for a bee trapped in her clothing by removing each piece as the tempo increases. Unlike other renditions of this same dance, it was requested that she strip herself entirely. Other versions ended before such a point: according to Villiers Stuart, the imaginary bee was found before the last garment was taken off, and according to Warburton, the dancers over these other renditions discovered that it had been a mistake in time to prevent displaying too much of her body (van Nieuwkerk 1995:34-35). Apparently, Hanem only agreed after her musicians were blindfolded, and Buonaventura mentions that Hanem voiced her dislike for the dance to Flaubert himself, echoing the sentiments of other dancers who had even refused other tourists’ request to perform in the nude (1989:76; van Nieuwkerk 1995:34). Given that Flaubert had obviously heard of this dance previous to his visit to Hanem, as he requested it by a specific name, it must have been performed by other dancers often enough to have gained a reputation amongst prior European travelers. It may never be possible to know how many dancers willingly removed all of their clothes, but there must have been enough who did so to give Flaubert cause to think that this could be expected.

Flaubert also took advantage of Hanem’s services as a prostitute and wrote at length of his experience with her when he stayed the night. Ever the brooding Français, he painted his account with extreme melancholy, drama, and tragedy. He stayed up and watched her nearly the entire night while she slept. He would later write in his correspondence,

En contemplant dormir cette belle créature, qui ronflait la tête appuyée sur son bras, je pensais à des nuits de plaisir à Paris, à un tas de vieux souvenirs... et à celle-là, à sa danse, à sa voix qui chantait des chansons sans signification ni mots distinguables pour moi. [Flaubert 1850:176]<sup>1</sup>

As such an exotic sexual object, she captured his imagination with greater tenacity than any other liaison he had experienced in France. He later wrote, in a seeming fit of melancholy, that he had the desire to return to see her, because he passed there a night like few others that one experiences in life (1850:257).

The experience recounted in such detail by Flaubert later influenced other works such as *Salammbô*, *La tentation de saint Antoine*, *L'Education sentimentale*, and the short story "Herodias." In "Herodias," one can assume that the dance performed by Salomé and characters in the Flaubert's other works, which set the men around her ablaze with desire, was inspired and informed by the dances that Flaubert witnessed in Esna (1877:196-198). More directly, the queen of Sheba tries to tempt Saint Anthony by telling him that "Je pince de la lyre, je danse comme une abeille, et je sais une foule d'histoires à raconter toutes plus divertissantes les unes que les autres."<sup>2</sup> (1910:31) Hanem becomes the prototypical symbol of the inexhaustible sexuality of the Oriental woman who has seemingly boundless powers over males by the sensual and sexual power of her dance. Edward Said even notes that the location of the veil of Tanit, in

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<sup>1</sup> As a rough translation by this author: "In watching this beautiful creature sleep, who snored with her head leaning on her arm, I thought of those nights of pleasure in Paris, of so many old memories... and of that one there, of her dance, of her voice which sang songs without meaning or distinguishable words for me."

<sup>2</sup> Rough translation by this author: "I pluck the lyre, I dance like a bee, and I know a multitude of stories to tell each more entertaining than the last."



connection with the goddess described as “omniféconde”<sup>3</sup> is situated similarly to the residence of Hanem in Esna (Flaubert 1944:82; Said 1979:187). For Flaubert, this woman was principally a sexual object, and that was all that he saw in her dance. Her dance had been an advertisement for and an extension of her services as a prostitute—it was a dance intended to entice men and to bring them under the woman’s power, though this power was only sexual. Flaubert bases his archetype of the Oriental seductress on this dance performed by Hanem, a dance that Flaubert sees as irresistible to men. The dance of Salomé was portrayed as such, and other characters used dance as a powerful tool to their own ends, and the way that Flaubert seems to suggest the connection between the entire Orient and sexual promise extends this power to all women of the region (Said 1979:188). The sexuality of the Orient stood in direct contrast to the sexuality Flaubert was habituated to in Europe. In Europe, sex was to be found from either prostitutes, who demanded payment, within the cumbersome bounds of marriage with all of its obligations to so many different aspects of society, or with mistresses who needed to be hidden from most of society and especially a man’s wife; the Orient, however, provided what Flaubert seemed to see as “the freedom of licentious sex” that was so much freer and easier than what he saw in France (Said 1979:190). The Orient and the women of the Orient represented a sexual playground, as can be seen by the stories of tourist-trodden villages in both present-day Algeria and Egypt where the numerous and storied dancer-prostitutes provided an exotic alternative to European courtesans. For many, the

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<sup>3</sup> Essentially, “all-fruitful”, or perhaps more appropriately, “all-fertile”

geographical distance from Europe and its strict mores regarding sex, such villages may have seemed also culturally distant enough that these mores did not cover their actions while traveling, and men could feel freer with these prostitutes than those of Europe. These dancers, whether engaged in prostitution or not, became identified with the sex trade in these areas because of stories like those of Flaubert presented dancers only as connected with prostitution.

Meyda Yegenoglu draws many inferences based on a psychoanalysis of the situation presented by such performances as Hanem's own. As a continuation of Homi Babha's argument that the West is forced to seek "fetishized" objects to compensate for a difference perceived between the Middle East and the West to alleviate such Freudian anxiety as might arise from these perceived differences in race, culture, and skin, Yegenoglu posits that, within the situation presented by Flaubert's account of Hanem's dance, her clothing becomes that fetishized object (1998:27-29). The female body becomes the representation of ultimate knowledge and truth before the male gaze, and the male seeks to lift off these veils, as Hanem did during her dance for Flaubert—this erotic pursuit of nudity is an attempt to master both the female form and the ultimate knowledge that it represents (Yegenoglu 1998:110). Just as Sufis speak of lifting veils and coming closer to the knowledge of God, the act of Hanem stripping her clothes presented a way for Flaubert to seek some sort of carnal truth to understand the Oriental woman and the Orient itself. The only truth that Flaubert could have found from his de veiling and revealing of Hanem was an invented one—his own fantasized woman, so tragically romantic that this image that he created lingered in his mind

and emerged many times in his writings. He did not discover who this woman was or what her dance meant, but instead, he discovered what he wanted to find. He found a woman he saw as so very different from the women he had encountered in France, one he saw as sensual and unrestrained because he wanted to see her that way.

*William Curtis:* After his travels in Egypt, William Curtis published a collection of his journal and notes detailing his experiences in the area. Part of his account details a visit to the same Kuchuk Hanem. He describes in near sickeningly romantic details what he saw:

We reclined, breathing fragrant fumes, and interchanging, through the Golden-sleeved, airy nothings. The Howadji and the Houris had little in common but looks. Soulless as Undine, and suddenly risen from a laughing life in watery dells of lotus, sat the houris, and, like the mariner, sea-driven upon the enchanted isle of Prospero, sat the Howadji, unknowing the graceful gossip of Faery. [1851:131]

He claimed of their dancing, that it was the same as that of Herodias, as ancient as Aboo Simbel, an ancient Egyptian ruin (1851:115, 133). In contrast to the focus of movement in the extremities typical of European dances, Curtis noted that “once only there was the movement of dancing when she advanced, throwing one leg before the other as gipsys [*sic.*] dance.” (1851:134) He detailed in his account the movements of her dance, describing each different part in flowery language, yet the only mention of any adjustment of her clothing was to note that she loosened the shawl that had been tied around her hips—there was no mention of

the sort of stripping that so fascinated Flaubert (1851:133). He also described how both Hanem and her protégé, Xenobi, danced together and were even joined by an older woman who had been playing the accompanying music before. He was amazed that such an old woman, “old Hecate” would be able to join in the dance: “Crouching before like a wasted old willow, that merely shakes its drooping leaves to the tempest—she now shook her fibers with the vigor of a nascent elm, and moved up and down the room with a miraculous command of her frame” (1851:136). Obviously, both the movements of the dance and the age of the dancers that he witnessed in Esna were entirely foreign to him; these were parts of a dance that went against the traditions of dance as Curtis knew them.

He ends his section describing the visit by wailing “Farewell, Kushuk! Addio, still-eyed dove! Almost thou persuadest me to pleasure. O Wall-street, Wall-street! because [*sic*] you are virtuous, shall there be no more cakes and ale?” (1851:137) His entire focus seems to be upon Hanem’s talents in dancing, with no mention of prostitution, except this implication that the offer may have been made. There is no evidence presented in his account that he availed himself of these services during his stay. When beginning the next chapter of his book, he states that they did not leave until dawn, indicating that he and his fellow travelers stayed the night. It seems, however, despite the implied offer of sex, that Curtis still seemed to consider Hanem to be a virtuous woman, though this may have been in relative terms, not absolute. For a woman of the Orient, connected to many the women of biblical myth and literature to which he makes reference, she may have been seen as virtuous by comparison.

Curtis is builds a wide gulf between the lives and culture of those he sees in Egypt and himself. When describing the *ghawazi*, he states, regarding their moral existence: “let the moralizing mind reflect here, that the pursuit of pleasure is an hereditary tenet, dear to the husband as to the wife, who can not be false, because there is no such thing as faithfulness.” (1851:117) Because these are their tribal traditions, they fall beyond what Westerners can judge to be acceptable or unacceptable—they simply cannot be judged by the same standards as Americans. They are outside; they are beyond, simply by definition. But, even within Middle Eastern mores, Curtis judges the *ghawazi* as not acceptable:

The Ghawazee are not honorable, because, being, as Mr. Lane says, the most beautiful of Egyptian women, they show to the sun, moon, stars, and all human eyes, their unvailed [*sic*] faces. Then they receive men into their own apartments [...] And they dance unveiled [*sic*] in public [...] they adorn with nude grace the midnight revels of the Cairene rakes.

[1851:118]

These dancers are from a population that did not live by the same rules as the rest of the population—they live apart from the rest of society, they marry within their own kind, but they are able to take up professions that others will not. Without this population of differently moralized people, there would be no dancers for Curtis to extol. It is this creation of an “other” who is the dancer that distances the viewer from moral scorn for watching and potentially being aroused by the dance. It is the “othered” woman who dances who is scorned for her behavior, not those who watch her for they are not the ones actively participating in

transgressions. This projection of “otherness” persists in the world of belly dance, protecting the audience itself from any criticism, reserving all of the shame for the dancer herself. It is similar to the idea that, in prostitution and strip tease in modern society, it is generally the woman who receives the scorn of society—it is the woman who is using her body. In societies where female chastity is valued over male chastity, it is the typical neglect of female sexuality that makes the female prostitute or stripper a transgression of the gendered expectation. If women are not supposed to want or enjoy sex, then women who sell their bodies in the sex industry are flying in the face of such expectations. If men are expected to be sexual and always interested in sex, then a man’s hiring of a prostitute does not amount to a similar transgression—he is still within his socially defined expectation of sexual behavior. As with the lack of reproach that Lane assigns to himself for watching the “lascivious” displays of the *ghawazi*, as a male voyeur, an audience member is not necessarily transgressing social expectations and roles and reproach is reserved only for the belly dancer who is displaying her body.

*Oscar Wilde:* In 1893, Oscar Wilde published a version of the story of Salome, entitled *Salomé, drame en une acte*, which was later translated into English and used as a libretto by Richard Strauss. The text itself draws heavily on the story presented in Flaubert’s “Herodias,” itself based loosely on two rather short biblical verses: Mark 6:15-29 and Matthew 14:1-12. Hérode beseeches his young step-daughter to dance for him to make him happy, and after her protests, offers her whatever she might desire, as much as half of his kingdom. After swearing this promise, Salomé has her servants bring her perfumes and seven

veils and performs the now infamous “dance of the seven veils.” After finishing the dance, she demands the head of Iokanaan (John the Baptist), and a long debate ensues between Hérode and Salomé where Herod pleads to be released from his promise but eventually is forced to give in to the unyielding demands of his stepdaughter. When the head of Iokanaan is brought to Salomé, she kisses his lips as she had been previously denied while Iokanaan was alive, but Hérode sees Salomé and commands his soldiers to kill her (Wilde 1893:63-85). Salomé’s dance positions her and her dance as powerful in its sexual appeal. Her power over her stepfather is limited to blinding him by her dance, blinding him with her body. Presented as Oriental women, both Salomé and her mother Hérodiad become entangled with all of the other images of the Orient presented before. For example, the play was to be a vehicle for Sarah Bernhardt, the French actress, and she intended to wear the same costumes that she had worn originally in her role as Cleopatra (Carlton 1994:63). Already, one sees geographic confusion inherent in such a decision—the assumption that costume fit to represent an ancient Egyptian woman would be similarly suitable to represent an ancient woman from Judea.

Though the play was banned from performance in Britain due to Lord Chamberlain’s enforcement of a ruling against the use of biblical characters in dramatic productions, when Strauss used it as a libretto in 1900, it was on its path to production (Carlton 1994:64). Evidently, either some force caused the legal objection to fold, or the prohibition against the use of biblical characters did not extend to the opera. The libretto published for Strauss’s opera elaborated on the

simple “Salomé danse la danse des sept voiles,” (Wilde 1893:70) to describe the scene and enlarges the dance scene itself:

The musicians begin with a wild dance. Salome, at first, motionless, draws herself up and gives the musicians a sign upon which the wild rhythm is at once relaxed and a gentle rocking melody takes place. Salome then dances the “Dance of the Seven Veils.”

For a moment she seems exhausted, then rouses herself with renewed vigor. She halts an instant in visionary attitude near the cistern where Iokanaan is imprisoned, then falls forward at Herodes feet.

[1893:18]

The extension of the stage direction seems to, even simply on the page, place greater emphasis on the presentation of this “Dance of the Seven Veils.” When essentially adapting Flaubert’s “Herodias” to the stage, Wilde takes advantage of the visual value of this dance scene, as demonstrated by a significant elaboration in the description. This wild dance becomes a greater star in the play, and in its presentation could more easily become a point of focus in the production.

Toward the end of the first decade of the 10<sup>th</sup> century, there seemed to be a crazy of Orientalist theater: a succession of Salomes, Cleopatras, Scherezades, etc.

Most of these productions included some sort of attempt at recreating the belly dance popularized by Sol Bloom’s Algerian dancers at the Chicago World’s Fair in 1893. The concept of the “dance of the seven veils” is still found in common parlance of this day. It is something that is generally associated with sex, the sexual openness and availability of the woman doing the dance, and often this



name seems to imply that these are veils which, like Flaubert's accounts of "l'Abeille" are veils to be removed to reveal the naked female form underneath to the male viewer. As an example, Donald Duck, in the cartoon "A Good Time for a Dime" counts the veils discarded by the dancer and exclaims "I've been robbed" when he is unable to see the last two veils being removed, Figure 7 (Bdeir 2004).

These early introductions to belly dance through literature create the primordial conceptualization of belly dance in the wider Western mentality, without the advantage of exposure to actual demonstrations to refute it. The presentation of the dance primarily of the *ghawazi* is presented in association with prostitution through the works of Lane and Flaubert. While there is certainly evidence for such associations, as discussed earlier, within the context of the *ghawazi* and the Ouled Nail, such associations have continued to the present day. It is not uncommon for a belly dancer to have been propositioned by members of the audience acting on such images of belly-dancer-as-prostitute (Frascella interview 2004). Similarly, many dancers experience pressures to remove their clothes à la Kuchuk Hanem (Soffee 2002). When such stories as Flaubert's have been in circulation for well over a century, the idea that a belly dancer is simply an exotic stripper has had unfortunate staying power. A popular reference for this has been the notion of the "dance of the seven veils," and audience members, like Daffy Duck, may be expecting that the removal of each successive veil will bring them closer to Flaubert's unveiled truth. One author and dancer, Anne Thomas Soffee offers one possible reaction filled with indignity: "*As much as I paid for this costume, and you want me to take it off?*" (Author's emphasis) (2002: 94)

Certainly, from the point of view of the belly dance community, such stories had the shared merit that they introduced a new style of dance and movement to Western society, the way in which they presented the dance have had serious repercussions. The romanticism utilized by authors like Curtis certainly created a mystique around the dance, and possibly adding to a wider mystique regarding all of Middle Eastern culture, and many dancers have played on this mystique in the creation of stage personas and the stories they tell regarding the origins of the dance.

This mystique created by various authors set the stage for the first formal introductions of the American public to belly dance. Lane, Flaubert, and Curtis all described the dance and the dancers as incredibly exotic and captivating. Flaubert's and Curtis's writings created an aura around these dancers while Lane portrayed them as dangerous and scandalous. The American mind was already imprinted with these images and attitudes toward belly dance before any dancers actually stepped foot in the country. When dancers actually performed in the US, beginning with the Chicago World's Fair, the audience already had its filters through which to view the dance. The next section examines how the introduction of belly dance unfolded and how these established images changed not only the presentation and reception of the dance, but the dance itself.

### **(3) The Chicago World's Fair of 1893**

Scholars generally regard the Chicago World's Fair of 1893 as the introduction to the visual experience of belly dance for the US, after several other such events that included various "Eastern" dances as attempts to represent authentic aspects of the region. These fairs brought a taste of the East to the West through cultural presentations, introducing many Europeans and Americans to their first visions of "Oriental" cultures. First came the London's Crystal Palace in 1851, then the Philadelphia Centennial Exhibit in 1876, though neither had the impact of the Paris exhibition of 1889 for France or the Chicago fair of 1893 for the US.

The Paris International Exhibition of 1889 improved on the earlier format by including dancers in addition to the collections of *souks* and coffee shops that sought to portray the Middle East, trying to express the entirety of the region through a few select cultural segments. One area included a group of authentically clad Algerian performers (Sellers-Young 1992:142). Within the Parisian entertainment world, imported belly dancers took their place amongst the erotic dancers of the era, and all accounts of performances generally included references to common Orientalist ideas from Western art and literature (Çelik 1992:27-28, 29). The presentations were so flawed that several Turkish and Egyptian writers openly complained of the poor portrayal of their home countries. Regarding the Parisian exhibit, Muhammad Sharif Salim wrote that it was a deformation Egyptian culture to represent its entirety with merely a café, some stables and a group of *almées*. Ahmad Zaki noted the lack of presentation of

modern Egyptian industry, commerce, and intellectual life and expressed regret that belly dancers were included in lieu of these more important aspects, and the hero of Muhammad al-Muwaylihi's novel, 'Isa, left the Egyptian quarter of an exhibition in shame at the sight of two female dancers (Çelik 1992:48-49). Belly dancers were often packaged as cultural ambassadors at these events, presenting their entire culture through their dance, when, in fact, they were could only present that one limited aspect. They were to represent entire states, though they ultimately failed to demonstrate the full scope. This also spread greater confusion and misrepresentation, especially because the representation was not balanced to include other aspects of Middle Eastern society.

It was, however, the Chicago World's Fair in 1893 that had the most impact, especially in American society. In the Midway Plaisance various exhibits that sought to represent different cultures around the world in Europe, Asia, Africa, and South America greeted spectators; they brought the exotic lands of the world together for the average American who would otherwise have little chance of seeing any of these sights in their country of origin. There were many attractions devoted to countries of the Middle East, and several of these included different forms of belly dance. There was a Bedouin restaurant, Turkish bazaar, Turkish theater, Persian tent and theater, Moorish palace and mosque, The "Street in Cairo" theater, temple, and tombs, Sudanese huts, and an area to represent both Algeria and Tunis. Of these, the Turkish village, the "Street in Cairo," and the Algerian village all had displays of belly dance (Carlton 1994:12, 25). These specific attractions became so popular that they gained notoriety as well as

attention. The popularity of these attractions was so great that other concessions added stylized, Orientalist versions—a far departure from the original set that tried to be authentic to the areas of origin. The Persian Palace quickly became the most infamous of these bastardized performance arenas. To boost admissions, the management created a show for exclusively male audiences, performed by imported Parisian dancers (where Eastern-like dances had already become established in the burlesque circuits). These dances played up to Orientalist fantasies with little or no respect to Persian or any other culture to the extent that dancers even performed wearing corsets, which would be generally prohibitive in belly dance (Carlton 1994:23-24). What mattered to those individuals who saw shows like those offered by the Persian palace was not any cultural value or understanding, but the exotic and erotic vision paraded before them, playing to their own fantasies and stereotypes. These representations were certainly not culturally responsible and served only to tie sex and the invented region of the Orient. Like the reactions expressed by Muslim visitors to the Parisian exhibition, representing entire areas like Egypt, Turkey, and Algeria with cafés and such bastardized dances was an insult to entire populations. This demonstrates a fundamental lack of understanding of these other cultures, and without such an understanding on this basic level, positive interactions on more advanced levels seem difficult if not improbable.

Displays catered to harem fantasies. One intriguing example is a cartoon from the *World's Fair Puck* depicting a Turkish concession manager who changes his sign, after consulting with a local businessman, from “Life in the holy Lands!

Scenes from biblical days!!! The historic East as it is and was!!! A moral show!!!” to “Life in the harem!! Dreamy scenes in the Orient!!! Eastern dances!!! The sultan’s diversions!” (See Figures 8 and 9) While the original sign is posted, there seems to be no general interest from the public, but once the poster advertises belly dance, the cartoon shows all sorts of men falling over themselves in order to gain entrance to the attraction (Çelik 1992:28-29). This in fact was very similar to the reason for which the Persian Palace decided to add the infamous Parisian dancers to their program. The audiences in Chicago were captivated by any diversion advertised to be “belly” or “Eastern” dance, often advertised simply as “dancing girls,” and this incredible draw was a major source of income for the fair and offset many of the costs (Carlton 1994:25) In this manner, various forms of belly dance and dances proposed to be of similar origins became a source of titillation for the men in Chicago, but it was not shut down outright because it was presented as a cultural artifact. By presenting the dance as such, the purveyors of these dances created a form of erotica that was very rare in Victorian America but that was justified as a demonstration of a foreign culture which most people only knew through stories filtered through Western Orientalist lenses, and it was presented in the form of an ethnological exhibit—as simply what these other people did. The Orient was positioned as the sensual other compared to the restrained and civilized West, and it was not condemned of men to see these shows because they were performed by a completely external other who was the object of the shame.

The great figure to come out of this fair was the name of “Little Egypt.” While it is difficult to say for certain to whom this moniker rightfully belongs, it is most credited to a woman named Fahreda Mahzar, one of the dancers in the Egyptian theater. A legend grew around one of the dancers at this same theater who scandalized the audience by her sensual dance and the fact that she showed at least the lower part of her leg by lifting up her skirt during her performance (Carlton 1994:ix-xi). Many performers of both Middle Eastern and Western heritage in the American burlesque and vaudeville circuits later adopted the name “Little Egypt”. The legend of Little Egypt fueled an explosion of both belly dance and bastardized, Orientalist versions in these venues, as it had become a popular form of erotic entertainment. It developed quickly into what was called the hoochie-coochie dance, with a focus on what parts of the body were displayed during the dance. These theaters would boldly claim to have the original Little Egypt performing in their program in an attempt to draw the same sort of interest that the Midway Plaisance attractions did. “Little Egypt” became synonymous with the eroticized dancer of the Orient to a public that eagerly sought out these Orientalist representations.

### **The Spread of “Oriental” Dance**

Those who sought such visions in tangible form were also able to get their fix through many popular postcards that depicted visions of women in often sensationalized and exaggerated costumes that were vaguely reminiscent of what women in the Middle East actually wore. Many show women in translucent or transparent clothes, often with visible breasts or legs, and a selection can be seen

in Figures 10 - 14. This, of course, was at a time when Western women were not to show even their ankles in public and were generally imprisoned under petticoats, corsets, and picture hats, all of which prohibited the ease of motion so associated with belly dance. Such photographs were often found behind bars in saloons and these same images were further carried by Hollywood films from the 1920s and onward (Carlton 1994:19). Also, outside of the theaters, it was possible to see what was then presented as belly dance in short films in places like Coney Island. The films by titles such as *Danse du Ventre*, *Passion Dance*, and *Fatima's Dance* could be seen to show women dressed in Orientalist costumes spinning, shimmying, and shaking with different degrees of authenticity and often demonstrating the link between belly dance and the “extension of burlesque and pornography” (Dox 1997:151), but these short films became some of the first films to be censored (Buonaventura 1989:104-105; Carlton 1994:62-63; Dox 1997:151). For many years, it seems that there were few ways of experiencing anything related to belly dance outside of these vaudeville and burlesque productions—a few major films of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century included inspired dances. There were few sanctioned environments for a dance so connected to sensuality and sexuality, and the continued lumping together of belly dance and similar dances with those of burlesque has had a great impact even today on the connotations carried by the dance and dancers.

A major wave of incorporating “hoochie coochie” dancers in various sorts of attractions occurred just after the World’s Fair (Carlton 1994:58-59). Dancers traveled with touring carnival companies and would perform in the various towns



visited by the carnivals, thus widening the geographic area of those who were exposed to this new form of dance. Also, the addition of hoochie coochie to vaudeville shows was used just at the end of the presentation, and even Mae West was known for doing a “shimmy dance” to liven up slow nights (Carlton 1994: 59). This became the ultimate in shocking dances—the sight of women shimmying and moving their hips on stage—it became the most daring of the burlesque dances at the time. It tied together nudity with movements that were not considered to be acceptable for women. One account of the notorious Millie de Leon described how she “revealed her nude right leg from knee almost to waist” and compared her movements to that of someone suffering a seizure (Buonaventura 2003:190-191). Many presented such dance as authentic to the “Orient” either explicitly, by connecting it to the dances presented at the Chicago World’s Fair, or by presenting it in conjunction with traditionally “Oriental” costumes incorporating veils and pearls and coin belts. This connection with the burlesque world continues to taint the presentation of belly dance to this day, in its associations with strip tease, nudity, and a lack of respectability in the eyes of many.

There were several women of the Belle Époque who were extremely attracted to the concept of belly dance or “Oriental” dance. The most important was Ruth St. Denis. She was apparently inspired to take up Oriental dances as her own personal method of spiritual expression by a poster for “Egyptian deities” cigarettes showing different goddesses, but she incorporated more elements of Indian dances because it was still part of how she geographically defined the

“Orient” and it also had less emphasis on hip movements which were so taboo at the time (Carlton 1994:84). Images of her interpretations of the dance can be seen in Figures 15 and 17. As with other dancers in other films cited in discussions of belly dance in America, she created some of the choreography in the 1916 film, *Intolerance*, including a scene where a large group of dancers dance on the steps to the temple of Ishtar. The dance in the film, however, more closely resembles the figures found in Egyptian hieroglyphics than anything at all related to belly dance, as the movements are mostly confined to the arms and legs (*Intolerance* 1916). Isadora Duncan, Agnes De Mille, and Colette all adopted different aspects of belly dance, from movements to costumes, in their search for artistic expression. Even the notorious Mata Hari made a name for herself and a living as a dancer within the broad genre of “Oriental” dance (Buonaventura 1989:126-134). An example of Mata Hari and Agnes de Mille presenting themselves as Middle Eastern dancers can be seen in Figures 14 and 16, respectively.

The emergence of belly dance into the Western consciousness affected both the performances of dance itself and other facets of life, such as the world of design, and specifically fashion design. Both the Parisian couturier, Paul Poiret and Leon Bakst, the costumer for the Ballets Russes at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, as well as the designer Roman Petrovich Tyrto, known more commonly as Erté, became enthralled in the image of the Orient, as opposed to the Occident. Firstly, the designs of Poiret came to stand in opposition to the tradition of the constricting corset in European and American fashion. Influenced by his very avant-garde wife, Denise, his designs substituted a rubber corset for the restricting

whalebone corset, and sometimes abandoned the corset all together. He also incorporated many different Oriental elements in silhouettes, textiles, as well as overall designs. There were multiple occurrences of tunics, turbans, and harem pants or Turkish trousers. Poiret used this vision of the Orient to free women of their corsets but also incorporated elements of design that were pure fantasy of a sexualized dancer.

These harem pants were the most controversial of all, as these “jupe-culottes” were seen as an inversion of gender specifications in fashion—something forbidden as far back as the book of Deuteronomy (Troy 2001:19-21). Poiret’s creations have been described as “[oozing] sensuality by hinting at the unfettered bodies underneath.” (Ward 2005:134) While women’s torsos had previously been locked in whalebone and the cumbersome proportions of their clothing, they had been frozen in the name of chastity. To keep the lower torso still was to prevent unnecessary attention to an area where movement is often sexualized. By freeing the torsos of his elite customers, Poiret seems to have returned to them some of their previously denied sensuality as well as sexuality. When one looks at the regions of the female body most involved in, what was at the time, the new dance genre of belly dance, the freedom of this region of the body may have been just as scandalous as any portion of the body that was shown. Perhaps what was shocking to people was not the lifting of a skirt, but the fact that a woman was able to easily move her hips and her breasts beneath her clothing. By taking control of one’s own movements, one can take more control of one’s sexuality—a control that would have been a terrifying thought to a

society that still refused to grant social rights to women or to acknowledge their sexuality.

As a further example of Poiret's preoccupation with the image of the Orient, on the 24<sup>th</sup> of June, 1912, he and his wife hosted a party called the "Mille et deuxième nuit"<sup>4</sup> where guests were obliged to come wearing an "Oriental" costumes or borrow Poiret's Persian-inspired creations for the night, complete with Oriental dancers (Troy 2001:13, 20). Images of his creations can be seen in Figures 18 to 22. His creations and his parties were often inspired by the phantasmagorical exoticism of the Orient, not as it was in life, but as it was seen through the eyes of the West (Golbin 2003). In the period before the first World War, a fascination with Salome, Scheherazade, and all things Arab had taken hold of the West, and is often attributed, at least in part, to the appearances of the Ballets Russes in Paris, especially the performances of "Schéhérazade" in 1910, which instigated many of these fantasies (Menkes 1996:1). In addition to the scandalous dancing of the dancers, a scandal was created by the costumes designed by Leon Bakst. In line with Orientalist fantasies, the costumes employed layers of semi-transparent chiffon that allowed possibilities of seeing the body and flesh itself, as can be seen in Figures 23 to 26 (Buonaventura 1989:135). This was, of course, a matter beyond the simple extent to which the costumes exposed flesh itself. Similarly, there were the costumes created by Erté for the Folies Bergères. The designs that he created have often more in common with the development of the modern, stereotypical belly dance costume than any

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<sup>4</sup> "Thousand and second night"

sort of costume traditional to the Middle East. Many outfits included low-slung trousers and skirts which were often either semi-transparent or made of waist-length fringe that could easily display the entire leg when desired, a sample of which can be seen in Figures 27 to 30. The preponderance of turbans, pearls, feathers, and billowing chiffon contributed to a feeling of decadence and hedonism. The created feeling of the Orient, tied as it was to institutions like the Folies Bergère, the Ballets Russes, and the burlesque circles, associated with Oriental dance a feeling of sexual freedom and ease.

Thusly the first visual and widely spread exposure of the American and European audiences to belly dance was formed. The different ways in which belly dance and the culture from which it had sprung were presented to these audiences would continue to affect its reception and perception. The Little Egypt who circulated in the American burlesque and vaudeville circuits established and further cemented the links between belly dance and sex, strip tease, and pornography that create so many problems between dancers and audiences up to the current day. However, beyond the focus on sex, the designs of Poiret may have contributed to the later movements within American belly dance that focused on women's liberation. Without corsets, he gave women a certain physical freedom, and with this association with belly dance and "Oriental" culture may have encouraged the later connections that emerged between the women's liberation movements of the 1960s and 70s and the belly dance community. Certainly there was a deep infusion of a romantic vision of the Orient which has continued within the world of belly dance, and the visual

representations associated with these early visions has influenced the visual representations used to this day, from cuts of costumes to decorative motifs.

All of these different ways in which belly dance was presented at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> presented the dance within new frameworks, and often changed aspects of the dance to tailor it for the new Western audience. Such changes would only increase with the passing decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Locations and modes of presentation would change as different dancers sought to present the dance within the context of their own visions and different social movements altered the way that the audience themselves viewed the dance as it was presented. If one could contrast the dance presented by the Sol Bloom's Algerian dancers with that which is presented in night clubs today, chances are there would be many vast differences given the dramatic evolution that belly dance has undergone during the last century—in both the West and the Middle East.

#### **(4) Changes in the Dance**

Many changes have occurred in the dance from the time that it was introduced to the West to the present day. There has been a dramatic evolution of the various costumes used by Western dancers into a very well known image. Different genres have emerged within belly dance creating different schools for tribal, fusion, and cabaret formats. There are also new motives for women in the dance; a dance that was first used by Western dancers specifically for the titillation of men is now also used by women for themselves.

##### **The evolution of the Golden Bikini**

The costume most closely associated with belly dance in its most current incarnation is often a heavily beaded, sequined, and fringed bra top and a color-coordinated, low-slung, and generally semi-transparent skirt, often with slits as high as the hips. Many dancers also include a hip scarf or belt with fringes, coins, or other elements that will shake and swirl with the movements of the legs and hips. Variations include outfits with “harem pants,” long, billowing pants gathered at the ankle, instead of a skirt. While this is not entirely omnipresent, it is by far the most prevalent costume employed by modern dancers. This is very different from the costumes that were worn by dancers in Persia, Egypt, Algeria, and elsewhere in the 19<sup>th</sup> century and earlier—costumes which were recorded either by local artwork or accounts and drawings of foreign visitors.

Dancers in Persia during the 17<sup>th</sup> to 19<sup>th</sup> centuries were generally depicted wearing brightly colored floor-length dresses over wide trousers and a scarf or girdle around the waist, but these outfits changed under the influence of Western

ballet. Dancers began wearing skirts that ended only at the knees, making at least half of the leg visible and transparent blouses, leading many to question the decency of the dancers for this offensive display of the body (Al-Rawi 2003:43; Buonaventura 1989:47). The outfits of dancers in 19<sup>th</sup> century Egypt, as shown in recorded images, were also similarly distant from the creations worn today. They generally wore a white undershirt often allowed to fall to elbows when the arms were raised and a long jacket or shorter waistcoat that left much of the chest bare. This was on top of large pantaloons gathered at the ankle, often referred to as Turkish trousers or harem pants, and the hips were accentuated by the wearing of hip scarves tied to reduce the volume of the pants (Buonaventura 1989:66; Lane 1846, Vol. II:99). Figures 4 to 6 demonstrate this style of clothing. The volume of the pants, as with modern costumes, accentuates swaying movements of the hips by billowing and extending the motion in the same direction. While the tightness of the waistcoat and hip scarves brought the eye to areas where movements were focused, these costumes mainly would have extended the movements of the dancer, making these movements bigger within the visual field. Given that the movements that would have been possibly visible beneath this clothing, the focus would not have been specifically on the abdominal muscles as much as it is today, but more on the movements of the hips and shoulders. This is similar to the description of Kuchuk Hanem written by Curtis (1851:128-129).

One aspect of more traditional costumes that survived into the modern costume is the use of the coin belt. Originally, groups like the Ouled Nail would wear their wages as part of their costume, as seen in Figure 2, as a way to



advertise their skills as a dancer—the more earnings on display, the greater the assumed talents of the dancer. Some wages were incorporated in the form of jewelry given as gifts from admirers and customers alike were simply worn in addition to the costume. Perhaps the simplest way of incorporating earnings was to add belts and necklaces on top of the clothing that featured strings of coins which would jingle and could be used as a percussive instrument to accentuate the movements of the torso and hips (Al-Rawi 2003:45). This tradition is more frequently seen in presentations of “tribal” or “tribal fusion” dances in America, where the representation is distinct from that found in cabarets. Many dancers will wrap a belt around their hips that includes either actual coins or small metal discs, mainly for the effect of the sound in time with the movement of the hips. Some other dancers can be seen in photographs with similar discs incorporated into their bra-like tops.

American representations of dancers and “harem girls” in both theater and in movies during the 20<sup>th</sup> century greatly influenced the costume known today. Visitors who had seen the dancers at the Chicago World’s Fair and other exhibitions seemed rather disappointed with the costumes worn by the dancers. As evidenced by the costumes created for women posing for postcard photographs, the costumes quickly became far more revealing. Frequently, women would be pictured with little more than pasties covering their breasts and fabrics covering the rest of their bodies would often be at least semi-transparent. Costumes used in productions of *Salome*, especially that worn by the actress Maud Allen, and many different Hollywood movies became the basis for the most

prevalent two-piece construction. Photographs of Maud Allen from her 1908 production of *Salome* show her wearing a top that covers the breasts in an intricate beading of what seem to be pearls and other stones with a suggestive single black beading at the center of each breast. The skirt is slung low on the hips, especially considering where waistlines were generally located at the time, and the skirt is made of a semi-transparent material through which the legs are easily visible right up to the waist. The only covering over her bare stomach is a web of pearl strands, and can be seen in Figure 31 (Deagon). The costume shows the assumed sexuality and decadence associated with visions of the Orient. The costumes used in the film *Intolerance* by D.W. Griffith for the characters of the Babylonian story show similarly assumed decadence through the many strands of pearls and heavy beading in the beloved princess's costumes (as seen in Figure 32), and the costumes for the dancing girls which were certainly considered scanty by the values of the time (*Intolerance* 1916). At a time when women wore clothing that extended from the neck to the wrists to the floor, covering the entire body, the appearance of women with bare breasts inside the Babylonian temple set was a dramatic contrast. The silent film vamp, Theda Bara also wore the same ornamented breast plates and low-slung skirt made of transparent material, but her costumes often used imagery of serpents to cast her as strange and dangerous, see figures 33 and 34 (Buonaventura 1989:138).

Clearly, the modern costumes worn by Western dancers are a creation, a fabrication of American and European theater and Hollywood. With the spread of the hoochie-coochie dance, erotic postcards, and film and theatrical portrayals, the

image of the two-piece, highly revealing costume became fixed in the American psyche as being the necessary costume for belly dance. These costumes were partially also necessitated by a change in the setting of the performance, instead of fuller-coverage costumes that may have been more traditional, these theatrical venues required a more theatrical costume. The switch to the stage and film was supported by the more revealing two-piece costume because it accentuated the movements of the hips and the belly (Shay & Seller-Young 2005:20). This amalgam of images presented to the American audience cemented the image of the flashy two-piece costume as a staple of belly dance, a typical example of which can be seen in Figure 36. One American dancer said that there have been people at her performances who made comments like “Hey, you’re a belly dancer, how come you’re not showing your belly?” when wearing outfits that covered her entire torso (Tahya interview 2006). Rather ironically, this association of the flashy two-piece costume was adopted by many dancers in Cairo and other areas of the Middle East, complete with high heels, like the dancer Lucy in Figure 35 (Adra 2005:47). This adoption of the invented costume further reinforced the image of the golden bikini costume, as dancers and others who traveled to the region saw Middle Eastern women wearing this same costume and assumed it to be authentic simply by its occurrence in the region of origin.

As mentioned above, some credit these flashy changes to a change of venue. In stage and cinema, there is a greater visual area for the dancer to occupy and to command. As one dancer mentioned, sequins, beading, and other “sparklies” are easy for the audience to see, they draw the eye to the dancer and

reflect the lighting in the performance area (Frascella interview 2004). These same visual challenges, as well as Western influence, created changes in both carriage and movements. While traditional forms tended to allow the arms to hang by the body or were held still, not far from the body, the shift in performances encouraged increased use of the arms to visually extend the motions up and out from the body to fill more space. Dancers also developed choreographies, especially within the world of the cabaret, as opposed to the tradition of improvisation in order to fit into the Western concepts and mentalities of dance (Shay & Sellers-Young 2005:20; Frascella interview 2004). This created entirely new moves and new dynamics in the presentation. The introduction of high-heeled shoes also altered the posture used in the dance. From the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, postcards showed women in two-piece dance costumes wearing high-heeled shoes, as well as pointe shoes. This change of footwear changes the posture of the dancer by changing the angles of the ankles and knees as well as the center of gravity—some of the key aspects of belly dance. Samia Gamal, an Egyptian dance star from the 1940s and 50s, was famous for wearing high heels. Gamal, however, was generally said to have worn these shoes as status symbols, proving that she could afford them (Buonaventura 1989:148-149; Shay & Sellers-Young 2005:20-21; *Afrita Hanem* 1947).

Currently, there are other versions of costumes that are presented by American dancers, but these costumes are by far the minority. Some of these dancers will don what is known as a “beladi” dress, often simply a long black dress with sleeves that fall to the elbows and ends at the ankles, seen in Figure 37

(Soffee 2002:259; Tahya interview 2006). These dresses are generally accentuated with slits on the side of the skirt that can reach up to the middle of the thigh, and the hips are adorned with a scarf to draw the eyes to those movements. Such costumes are associated with more “folky” styles that are supposed to reflect the traditions of the country (the literal translation of the word “beladi”). Dancers who posit themselves as “tribal” dancers are more likely to adopt a different aesthetic regarding their costumes—in place of sequins and fringe, they are more likely to include brightly colored fabrics, tassels around the hips, and sheets of metal disks. The styles of tribal dancers can vary rather widely, as the costumes in Figures 38 and 39 demonstrate, but many elements are very similar. The dancers associated with the genre of “American Tribal Style” among others are also more likely to wear a top like the Indian choli—covering much more of the breasts than the usual bra-top as well as often the upper arms, wide pants and skirts that cover the legs down to the heel from Northern India and Central Asia, and an elaborate Berber-style turban to cover the head. Many dancers top off the outfit with layers of Afghani jewelry and tattoos and body piercings in line with contemporary ideas of the primitive (Sellers-Young 2005:286). Still, the abdomen is usually left bare despite the other changes in the presentation.

It is tempting to connect these two versions of belly dance, both of which are seeking to reaffirm the cultural roots from which belly dance came; both seeking legitimacy by covering more of the body. Both present themselves as being the dances of the tribal and country traditions, distancing themselves from the more mainstream presentation using the golden bikini costume. While

seeking to present their view of an authentic dance, they make part of the statement through a more modest costume. Similarly, when Farida Fahmy attempted to “bring up” belly dance to the level of an art form in Egypt during the 1950s, it was only by attempting to “remove” the more erotic aspects and the costumes chosen covered the entire body, as in Figure 40 (Rippenburg 1994:1-2). Since that the scanty costumes of most contemporary dancers were either invented or influenced by Western interpretations, rejecting those revealing costumes may be necessary in order to establish oneself as authentic. The visual differences create a stark contrast between these “authentic” dancers and the golden bikini dancers.

### **Development of New Styles**

Identifiably different genres of belly dance have developed in the US, amongst them cabaret, American Tribal, spiritual forms, as well as hybrids and offshoots of all of these. The cabaret can be seen as the mainstream, more stereotypical form generally adopting the golden bikini costume—that which is generally presented in popular culture.

#### *American Tribal Style*

American Tribal Style (ATS) is a term used to define a specific style of belly dance that started out in the San Francisco during the late 1960s and early 1970s. Three different women are generally acknowledged as creating and refining this specific form: Jamila Salimpour, Masha Archer, and Carolena Nericcio. Each of these women contributed different aspects to this genre in line

with their own specific visions. First was Jamila Salimpour whose knowledge of belly dance was based mostly on her father's accounts of the Egyptian *ghawazi* during his tour with the Italian military and the Egyptian movies she watched with her Egyptian landlady (Rall 1997). Through these sources, she developed her own version of the dance, supplemented by observations and imitations of dancers from different parts of the Middle East: a Turkish dancer's full-body vibration, a Moroccan dancer's use of a pot balanced on her head, another's belly rolls and "choo-choos" and many other different types of movements. She continued this methodology until she could be hired to dance in the same restaurants as these dancers she observed (Sellers-Young 2005:281). Later, when she began to teach, she found that she needed to develop a movement vocabulary and methods to teach the dance to her students. Salimpour concentrated on the cabaret form, and in 1967, created the Bal-Anat group based on a variety format, learned through her experience as a circus acrobat, each dancer seeking to represent a different traditional style from the Middle East with what were supposed to be authentic costumes (Rall 1997). The troupe was created as a performance group for the regional Renaissance Fair based on Salimpour's visions of an "Arabian festival, or *souq* in the Middle East" intended to disprove, at least partially, the Hollywood image of the harem dancer. This vision was based on interpretations of different visual representations of the Orient: photographs and paintings from sources like *National Geographic*, Jean-Léon Gérôme, and others, and she continued to rely on images presented in films. Despite her intentions to present an authentic image, her vision was still one heavily based on Orientalist exoticism, playing

with different ideas of gender presentation and sexuality (Sellers-Young 2005:284). One might also try to trace the use of the term “tribal” back to this presentation of different groups, or tribes, via the different dancers.

The next woman in the lineage of ATS, a student of Jamila Salimpour, is Masha Archer. She was a visual artist who sought uniformity in the dance by not distinguishing between different regions and areas, and applying the name “belly dance” to the entire amalgam. She founded a dance troupe called the San Francisco Classic Dance Troupe from the 1970s to the 1980s, and the most notable contribution of this troupe was the expansion of possible performance contexts. Belly dance was not necessarily limited to restaurants and bars, it was brought into the context of cultural shows and it was presented as an art or theater form (Rall 1997). Archer took great liberties with both costuming and music choices—incorporating elements from various different traditions both within and beyond the Middle East, and choosing music as varied as opera and the folkloric music of diverse regions (Rall 1997). This further contributed to regional confusion where the region represented by the dance was extended to include areas not considered to be part of the Middle East, from Europe and America to India. Not only is Archer seen as a controversial figure because of this lack of discrimination, she is the author of some highly controversial opinions. At one point, she viewed Middle Eastern dancers as unable to function as caretakers of the dance, because she saw the culture as shaming the dance and as abusive toward women. She felt that male club owners and governmental controls did not demonstrate the honor which American dancers and artists have shown the dance



(Rall 1997). These opinions seem to be at odds with the ways in which American society, including dancers, have changed and morphed the dance to their own desires and purposes. It is not so much that American dancers have, as a whole, faithfully preserved the traditions of a dance as much as they have borrowed many elements in the creation of their own style. Archer, especially, has done this rather extensively in her fusion approach to belly dance. She incorporated many different traditions in line with her own personal, eclectic aesthetic.

The current leader of the ATS world, and the woman who can be credited with the final definition of the style, is Carolena Nericcio who had been a student of Archer and formed the troupe Fat Chance Belly Dance in 1987. Nericcio can be seen as attempting to blend the methodologies of both Salimpour and Archer—while attempting to be true to the original cultures, distinctions are not made between the individual cultures and traditions (Rall 1997). In Nericcio's own words, the style is heavily based in the gypsy tradition—itsself a representing traditions of many different areas—and consists of an “American fusion of elements from many countries along the Romany Trail and heavily influenced by simply what works for the dancers and an audience of Americans.” (Sellers-Young 2005:287-286) The distinct style of Nericcio's format led Carolina Varga Dinicu (more commonly known as Morocco) to call the style “American Tribal” (Alexis & Madges 2002:52). In many ways, the appellation of “tribal” can be seen more as a label of relations and support between the individual dancers than as any reference to kinship or ethnic ties, as demonstrated in performances by constantly shifting leadership which places the solo performance of each dancer

in the context of the group. And one dancer specifically described a definition of this post-modern idea of tribalism as based on community and social support within the group (Natasya, qtd. in Sellers-Young 2005:292). Nericcio's style places much emphasis on attempting to find authenticity in the dance and keeping true to the original culture, though this culture is specifically defined as gypsy culture (Rall 1997).

Within the current belly dance world in the US, most performances fall into either the cabaret or the tribal categories, and these are seen as the two main venues for dancers. While they both draw upon the same general traditions, the presentation is quite different. Cabaret performances rely much more on glitter and sequins, using flashy moves that show up well on the stage under bright lights, like the outfits of Jilina and Lucy in Figures 36 and 35 respectively. Tribal style, like the costumes focus less on glitz and glamour than on attempts to incorporate aspects of what are thought to be "traditional" Middle Eastern culture, as in Figures 37 through 39. While many representations may not be accurate, the general tendency is to be true to various sources seen as the "traditional" dance, in line with the approaches of both Salimpour and Nericcio.

### *Spiritual Belly Dance*

Another trend in American belly dance has been one grounded thoroughly in a search for spiritual answers. This trend has thrived within belly dance literature with authors like Wendy Buonaventura, Curt Sachs, Rosina-Fawzia Al-Rawi, Judith Lynn Hanna, and others. Many of these authors portray belly dance as being based in goddess worship, birth rituals, and powerful feminine heritages.

The images conjured are earthy, maternal, and mystical, often citing devotional practices to so-called “mother goddesses” collected from different traditions especially Ishtar from Mesopotamia and Isis from Egypt. Such works, like that of Buonaventura and Hanna, often make claims that there was once a time where the “female pelvic dance” was a widespread phenomenon and that these ritualized dances celebrated female power and sexuality, but that civilizations later had to suppress these practices and rituals of previous times to assert their power, that the new patriarchal cultures had to confine the expression of female sensuality (Buonaventura 1989:10-12, Hanna qtd. in Shay & Sellers-Young 2003:25). One dancer near Easton, Pennsylvania, introduced her frame drumming performance with an allusion to an unnamed time when the women were the drummers in the temples (Tahya interview 2006). As mentioned earlier, the mental experiences that accompany any activity that forces the mind to focus intently on the physical experience may induce a feeling like that of meditation, which could easily lead someone to believe that the dance could have a spiritual basis. While this is certainly possible, as Shay and Sellers-Young point out, there is no way for contemporary scholars to be able to prove such statements about dance traditions dating back thousands of years, and that these claims of ancient goddess worship are used by dancers in the US to offset the sexual and erotic aspects of the dance that have accumulated as connotations (2003:25-26). By associating themselves with the concept of a childbirth ritual, these enthusiasts distance themselves from the sexual concepts. One author, in particular, expresses the notion that these reconstructions of ancient worship and matriarchal practices explain the disrepute

that the dance has accumulated—that this expression of female sexuality is the reason for which it is viewed with distrust (Dox 2005:307-308).

It seems that for many dancers, this imagery of either a defined mythology or simply the nebulous concept of empowering female spiritual force plays a positive role as a empowering image for women. The attached symbols are displayed as self-evident, the individual cultures from which they come are lumped together, often considered to be archetypal feminine images representing various different roles of women: maiden, mother, and crone (Dox 2005:311). There is also much use made of the imagery of the moon as a symbol of feminine fertility and cycles of life and matriarchy. Al-Rawi tells that

Early people understood that the strength of new life comes from the dark phase of the moon. As the centuries went by, they were to forget this truth and begin to fear the dark side of the moon. This view was given strong support in the subsequent era of solar divinities and can still be seen today. [2003:34]

She treats this concept as if any one statement can cover the entire “primitive” or “ancient” world and their transitions to later, more modern religions. She, and other authors who use this same imagery, paint a very romantic picture.

Buonaventura is another who expounds on the mythology of ancient goddess worship, and she sees this same widespread phenomenon of “female pelvic dancing” as something previously universal that had been suppressed in most areas except for the Middle East. In recounting part of her travels in Egypt, she states, “Time stands still in remote places. Traditions are slow to change and

memory is long.” (1989:9) While her research on the introduction of belly dance to the West is quite respectable, her recourse to such imagery and unfounded myths seriously hurts her authority. In line with one of Said’s principles of Orientalist thought, the Middle East is designated as an area where change is slow if it occurs at all, a region of “arrested development”, closely tied with the distant past (1979:234). Only in this region was this tradition cited by both Al-Rawi and Buonaventura able to survive to the modern day. Unlike the progressive West where dance has steadily evolved, the Middle East is supposedly a place where the dance hasn’t changed. Such claims are in contrast to documented evidence that costumes have dramatically changed and that, because of the great influence of gypsy culture on the dancing of different countries, the movements recognized as belly dance may not necessarily extend unchanged back in time prior to gypsy migrations. Both Al-Rawi and Buonaventura neglect these facts and ask their readers to believe that the dance that they describe has survived almost unchanged since ancient times.

Within even this specific genre, there are further divisions in approaches to the dance. Some dancers do not necessarily adhere to the concept of a defined deity or spiritual basis, but simply see belly dance as a means for meditation. These are dancers who do not connect this practice to any system of belief, but simply use it as a tool to achieve a specific mental state. As Dox explains, this version of the dance is presented as a form of dance meditation, meditation in which the practitioner achieves an altered mental state while executing movements based in Middle Eastern dance (2005:329). This form, however, is

more likely to abandon the costuming and symbols so often associated with other versions, rejecting connections to various mythologies, and is comparable to other forms of dance meditation, specially movements found in Sufi rituals and meditation practices (Dox 2005:332). Barbara Sellers-Young mentioned that she knew people who would dance every morning the way that many others, like herself might meditate (Interview 2006). This seems to be most directly related the definition of meditative practice offered by some relevant psychological studies, where the mind is directed to focus on physical states or sensations to achieve these altered mental states, similar to the effects of other moving meditations like yoga and tai chi (Heide 1986:71, Goleman & Schwartz 1976:457).

All of these different genres mentioned above, as well as the many different offshoots and fusion varieties, share a similar feature: in their quest to find the authentic roots of the dance, they accept mistakes. Dancers may point to various ancient drawings depicting dancers to legitimize their own movements, but an entire movement cannot be truly authenticated through still images that can only hint at the movement being portrayed. Some might also point to the descriptions of European travelers to places like Egypt for definition of “authentic” movements. Writings like those of William Curtis described the movements of Kuchuk Hanem in detail, giving a glimpse of what some of the dancers of Egypt might have done, and also tying in with some of the steps still popular current dancers. “Her hands were raised, clapping the castanets, and she slowly turned upon herself, her right leg the pivot, marvelously convulsing all the

muscles of her body” (1851:134). Curtis also described a move very common to cabaret performances called a Turkish drop: “Suddenly stooping, still muscularly moving, Kuchuk fell upon her knees, and writhed with body, arms and head upon the floor, still in measure—still clanking the castanets, and arose in the same manner” (1851:134-135). Based on these sorts of sources, as well as the images provided by paintings and illustrations in books, some dances will point to their “authentic” style.

Some purifications are rather self-evident, such as when Carolena Neruccio sought to return to the “roots” of the dance by rejecting Masha Archer’s use of music like opera and limiting her choices only to music from North Africa and the Middle East (Rall 1997). Others may attempt to create costumes based on the same still pictures that others may use to legitimize specific movements, such as the costume worn by one member of Full Moon Tribal of Syracuse, New York, which was based on illustrations of the Egyptian *ghawazi* of the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century (Interview 2005). Many dancers will try to find any way available to them to legitimize their art, to portray it as authentic to the original dance, through symbols, music, and names that are reminiscent of the Middle East. Dancers frequently take on pseudonyms for their stage personalities, sometimes adopting them as their name beyond the stage. Carolina Varga Dinicu became Morocco; others take up names like Delilah, Shakira, Tahya, and others. Middle Eastern names, Biblical names, and names associated with literary stories like *The 1001 Nights*, convey more of an aura of Middle Eastern culture.

Another major alteration in most contemporary forms of belly dance in the West is common regional confusion and homogenization. The different traditions within the Middle East and North Africa are treated as one large area with little or no regard to the internal differences and variations. Some groups under the tribal and fusion umbrella combine dances of areas beyond even these large designations, for example Nericcio's troupe, Fat Chance Belly Dance incorporates dances from Spain and India, "from traditions in which women danced together to entertain each other." (Alexis & Madges 2002:25). Others may include dances from the West, such as ballet and hip hop (Full Moon Tribal interview 2005). Even groups that do not acknowledge themselves as "fusion", and who present themselves as "belly dance" will generally incorporate a wide range of different movement traditions. The mainstream cabaret forms toss together movements from many different areas, one after another or sometimes at the same time. As Donnalee Dox outlines, these combined movements become the standard:

Western belly dance is grounded in the Egyptian solo dance, *raqs al'beledi*, but incorporates movements from the Maghreb, the Mediterranean, and east across Syria into India. Western dancers blend the heavy pulses of the North African *oled-nail* [sic.], undulations of Egypt's *gawahzee* [sic.] (gypsies), folk-dance steps from the Moroccan *chikhat*, sophisticated hand gestures from ancient Persia and India, Turkey's flexible spine and 9/8 rhythms, elaborate Tunisian footwork and lateral hip movements, and the intense communal energy of Bedouin dances. [1997, 151]



Thus, one can see how so many different pieces of different dance traditions have been blended together to make one over-arching form. It is important to note that the forms of belly dance which existed in the Middle East prior to its major introductions to the West would have already been subject to certain elements of mixing through the spread of gypsy populations and their form of dancing as well as interaction of different populations under the Ottoman empire and earlier caliphates. Sellers-Young also brings up another interesting idea regarding how this regional blending was increased in the US—as professional dancers in the North Beach area of California teamed up as duos for performances, they would observe and imitate their partner, integrating different movement styles (2005:279). One can see an acknowledgement of this blending of different regional movements common within belly dance groups. During instruction, one movement whose name references one country of the modern Middle East may be directly followed by step from another area: a “basic Egyptian” step may be followed by a “Turkish walk.” Some dancers may draw more from specific areas like Turkey, Morocco, or Egypt specifically, but they are certainly the minority and generally need to purposefully study and seek out sources to understand the different movements specific to that region and how to present them.

This change to a categorized and taxonomied system itself reflects a heavy Western influence. Dox points out that this approach is a way to, from Western eyes, legitimize belly dance through a linkage to French ballet and other Western forms where every move is part of a universally agreed upon classification (1997:151). Thus, a dance that was, for a very long time based on observation

and imitation with improvisation is dissected and ordered to fit a different sort of mentality. Jamila Salimpour was one of the first American dancers to create a formalized taxonomy of movements based on the styles of the different dancers in the San Francisco area, and this was mostly based on the need for a way to teach the dance to new students who likely had backgrounds in other forms of dance (Rall 1997). While this inclusion of categories and names for steps may be a radical change from previous incarnations of belly dance, the system of naming is not universal across the different genres or even between troupes in different cities. While observing a rehearsal of the Full Moon Tribal group in Syracuse, I saw the dancers creating their own names for various movements simply to make the choreography easier to remember. While there are commonalities between different troupes, like the use of the term “maya” for one version of a hip figure-8, many original terms are created based on the image of the movement, using descriptors to make the term meaningful to those individual dancers.

While presenting belly dance to a Western audience, in a Western context, American dancers generally try to position their dance as authentic in some way. Some seek to legitimize their work by tying their movements to those depicted in various images and literary sources, others seek to present themselves as connected with Middle Eastern culture by names or by music, and others seek to legitimize their dance and their art through mythologies that connect to ancient goddess worship. It could easily be interpreted as a reaction to the major changes that have occurred in the dance since it was introduced to Americans and the rest of the Western world: changes in costumes, changes in the movements, changes

in the way that the movements are presented and taught. The reaction to these changes, for many, seems to be a desire to distance themselves from these altered and inauthentic forms of the dance, to present themselves almost as ambassadors of the original dance, despite the fact that these “purified” forms are often subject to similar criticisms of that from which they are trying to distance themselves.

The next section examines how each period of change and each different school of belly dance have represented Middle East culture differently.

## **(5) Belly Dance and Representations of Middle Eastern Culture**

Since its introduction to America, belly dance has been used a way to represent the entire Middle East. At the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the belly dancer presented at the Chicago World's Fair and through the burlesque presentations of hoochie-coochie dance stood as the face of the exoticized Orient. For some women, belly dance, and various forms that took inspiration from it, became a vehicle for exploring their sensuality in a conservative social climate. During the 1950s, with the growth of ethnic restaurants owned by Greek and Middle Eastern immigrants that hosted performances, this exotic dance became a way for American housewives to titillate their husbands by adopting an alternative personality. Later, along with the women's liberation movement, belly dance allowed women to explore and own their own bodies and sexuality through the dance of another. In the most recent wave of belly dance interest, along with a divorce from the culture of origin, the dance provides a vehicle of the acceptance of different female body types. When it is connected with the culture of origin, it offers a counterpoint, in a slightly schizophrenic way, to the image of the conservative Muslim woman covered in the hijab or chador, or it presents a way to return to the roots of femininity.

From the time that the idea of belly dance was introduced into the American consciousness, the women dancing it were presented as exotic, sexual objects to be conquered by the Western observer. For Lane, these dancing girls were a lewd curiosity, beyond the pale of what was fathomable within British society. As Said notes, these *ghawazi*, among other aspects of Egyptian culture,

seemed to offend Lane's sense of what was proper for either gender. What he saw "exuded dangerous sex, threatened hygiene and domestic seamliness with an excessive 'freedom of intercourse.'" (1979:167) For Flaubert, the body of the Oriental woman was the subject for his gaze, a truth to be unveiled. The accounts written by Flaubert and others describing the dancing performed by and sexual encounters with Kuchuk Hanem created an image of the stereotypical Oriental woman. In *Madam Bovary*, which was written upon his return from his travels to the Orient, Flaubert creates a fetish for articles of clothing as needing to be torn down in the pursuit of truth through the erotic pursuit of nudity, and specifically the nude female form (Yegenoglu 1998:110). For Flaubert, Hanem represented the exotic, the conquerable, and the accessible. She was more accessible than the French women, who were swaddled in whalebone and petticoats, and she was far more exotic and romantic than the courtesans he found in Paris. She captivated his imagination and provided a template for characters in "Herodias," *Madame Bovary*, *L'Education Sentimentale*, *Salammbô*, and others. Hanem, as Flaubert's prototypical Oriental woman found in so many of his works, established a lasting impact in the image of all Oriental women. Through their accounts of these dancers, the authors established a representation and characterization of Middle Eastern women in general.

Said also notes that Flaubert's accounts of the women he met in his travels, along with the writings by Nerval and others, could be characterized as having a fascination with a "Fatal Woman" as exemplified in the figures of Cleopatra, Salomé, Isis, and others (1979:180). This image was one showing

Oriental women with a sexual power that was able to overwhelm the mind of men. Their power was only sexual, based in their ability to manipulate attraction and bend the wills of men to their own wishes. Cleopatra was able to manipulate the decisions of two of the most powerful emperors of Rome through her sex; the dance of Salome was powerful enough to bend the will of Herod and culminated in the execution of John the Baptist. Thus the sensuality and sexuality of these other women was irresistible and, for this reason, dangerous to men and to civilization. Joseph Conrad's heroine of *Victory*, Alma (whose name was an alteration of the word *almeh*), was presented as "irresistibly attractive and dangerous" to the character Axel (Said 1978:186). Conrad's book came toward the end of the Salome craze, riding that same wave of fascination. The concept of the nude Oriental female was a particularly seductive concept for Orientalist writers and artists. Gérôme created numerous paintings of partially nude female dancers before a mostly male audience, as in Figures 41 to 43. A popular topic for paintings was the image of the languid, undressed odalisques within secluded harem compartments and *hammam* baths.

The image of penetrating the Orient, specifically the harem became a popular subject for painters, writers, and filmmakers. Malek Alloula described the "colonial harem fantasy" couched in terms of drawing back the veil and dominating for sexual fulfillment. Thusly, the veil became the hurdle to be jumped and a symbol of resistance to imperialism, especially as regarding the female body (Carlton 1994:19). Tinged with the forbidden and the exotic, the Orient was presented as available and fertile, and as Said posits, the Oriental

woman was presented as full of unlimited sensuality, and above all, available for sex. These Oriental women were not uncommon in the world of the pornographic novel as sexual objects (Said 1979:207-8). Dancers especially, like the infamous Kuchuk Hanem, were portrayed as willing and able, silent figures with nothing to offer but their bodies. Their bodies were the objects of the male gaze, and the occurrence and accounts of nude dances only served to reinforce this. There were numerous accounts of dancers being required to dance nude, usually with some form of coercion for European tourists. To provide some degree of dignity, musicians often accompanied the dancers blindfolded and other Arab men would leave the room, and supposedly, Kuchuk Hanem herself admitted to Flaubert that she didn't enjoy performing nude for European men (Buonaventura 1989:68, 76).

Such accounts of Oriental dancers came at a time when European and American women were covered from neck to wrists to ankles and when the sight of a woman's ankle was considered scandalous. During the same time, the profession of ballet dancers also was the object of scorn. Ballet dancers were seen as being of "dubious moral character" and were even refused the sacrament during church services because their profession was long linked with debauchery (Buonaventura 1989:119). Ballet dancers were women who made their living by the display of their bodies, and the clothes that they wore on stage revealed their arms, legs, and bosoms to the audience. And these were women who still wore, for most of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the corsets that the society demanded. The sight of an un-corseted waist and the sight of any bare flesh was shocking, like the reactions to the radical creations of Parisian designer Paul Poiret in the 1910s.

It was within this framework that women who danced the “hoochie-coochie” were presented. While the original dancers at the Chicago World’s Fair wore relatively covering clothes, they did not wear corsets. While their lack of corsets, and revealing perhaps a bit more flesh than the American women would, may have been shocking, this original display was presented as an anthropological demonstration—it was more acceptable because it was supposed to be their culture. The women who later came to dance the hoochie-coochie in vaudeville and burlesque situations presented their dance were more likely to wear shorter skirts and reveal flesh to the audience because the audience was not so interested in the “culture” of the dance as the potential for nudity. This simple display of skin insinuated that these dancers were of dubious morality similar to the ballet dancers. They were women making their living from their bodies, even if not from the sale of sex, they were still painted with brushes similar to that of prostitutes.

With belly dance and hoochie-coochie dance, there was, in addition to the scorn associated with female nudity, the scorn of what were seen as obscene movements. Those who sought to present Middle Eastern dance movements within an “artistic” light felt that they needed to remove certain erotic aspects of the dance, especially the movement of the hips. Since most women still wore corsets, they were unable to move their abdomen and hips, but women performing belly dance and the hoochie-coochie freely moved these areas so associated with sex and reproduction. Thus, the dance was looked down upon as lewd because of such movements, but some tried to “bring it up” to a level that was respectable.



Pelvic movements were edited from the repertoire because this seemed to be so much more objectionable than the simple nudity (Buonaventura 1989:137). As an example, the scenes from the film *Intolerance* choreographed by Ruth St. Denis featured dancers wearing what were, for the time when it was filmed, scandalous outfits that clearly intended to draw attention to the breasts and hips, but the movements of their dance were focused on their arms and moving the feet to form almost geometric poses reminiscent of figures in ancient Egyptian pictures (Figure 44) (*Intolerance* 1916). The extent of bare flesh and the movements of the hips and pelvis doubly affect the reception of dancers. This same treatment extends to the dances of the Middle East to which they point. For St. Denis, these other dancers were somehow lesser in their morality than she could allow herself.

Some women in the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century became fascinated by belly dance and other dances from regions further east as modes of self-expression. Ruth St. Denis, Colette, later Agnes de Mille, and others saw in this exotic form of movement a way to be able to understand themselves and to explore their own sensuality and sexuality. St. Denis and de Mille tried on the identity of another, the imagery of another, and by removing themselves from the social requirements and restrictions of their own Victorian society in America, were able to explore the parts of themselves normally off-limits. Because the Orient provided imaginary place of sexual availability, by adopting a persona associated with the region temporarily, these dancers used this excuse of distance to explore themselves. Once more, through belly dance, the Middle East came to be represented as a playground for exploration of sexuality.

The idea of using an anthropological excuse was not limited to the Midway Plaisance or St. Denis's personal expression. In American cinema during the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the Oriental woman had a new sort of cache. In addition to the presentation of Oriental women as being available and exotic, during the restrictive Production Code of the Motion Pictures Producers and Directors of America, Inc. in force from the 1930s to the 1950s, they provided an excuse for showing flesh. While the code forbade nudity, female characters could be more scantily costumed when cast as either African or Middle Eastern, excused by the belief that it was simply the representation of another culture. Thusly, the presentation of women from these exotic women (though often not women actually from the area so much as American women dressed up in costumes) became a pretext for female nudity and otherwise prohibited displays of sexual behavior (Shohat 1997:46-47). Thus, the image of the woman of the harem, often wearing the same Hollywood-ized costume associated with belly dance became more associated with sexual availability. When women, Middle Eastern or simply posing themselves as such, present themselves in the context of belly dance, they are associated with these images of availability through connections to the images of Oriental women, the exposed skin of most costumes, and these sexualized roles in films, they present themselves amidst a myriad of sexual signals in the Western gaze.

By the 1950s, the next swell of interest in belly dance in the US. With additional leisure time due to the many new household conveniences after WWII, some women found inspiration through the performances at local ethnic

restaurants and movies which all brought the dance into their familiar world (Sellers-Young 1992:142-143). There was also a strong current of thinking that this was a dance for women to do to entice their husbands, or as the dancer Morocco put it once: the “dancing for your husband malarkey.” (*American Bellydancer* 2005). It was a democratization of the same attitude of the dancers earlier in the century; these were women who tried on a different sexuality by trying belly dance—the Orient became a safe place to experiment, in contrast with America. This shift in American belly dance was simply a continuation of the same attitudes and misperceptions, not a fundamental change in American approaches to the dance. It was only in the following decades that any tangible change occurred in how the dance was presented and understood by the dancers themselves.

During the 1960s and 1970s, a new and different sort of interest emerged in belly dance with the propagation of the women’s movement. Belly dance was seen as a liberating art form, through which women (as well as some men) were able to explore their newly recognized bodies and their sensuality and sexuality during the time of “free love” and birth control. With the sexual revolution, previous inhibitions has been loosened or greatly diminished and the freely moving hips of entertainers like Elvis Presley and Chubby Checker set the stage for a renewal of belly dance (Carlton 1994:86). For many, the movements of belly dance became a mode of personal expression through dance, a mode of expression that was very sensual and intriguing. Some of the professionals, whether Middle Eastern or American, started increasing their dance income by

starting up classes to meet the increased interest (Sellers-Young 1992:143). Even the use of the word “belly” was a signal that women were able to own their own bodies (Sellers-Young interview 2006). As Dox points out, belly dance has become popular at points in history when the female forms have been redefined through social movements: during the 20s and 30s to celebrate the liberation from the corset, and in the 70s with the liberation movements and new sexual expressions (1997:154). Especially in a society that so deeply values female forms that are lithe and shapeless like the anorexic figures of most ballerinas and Twiggy, the women who chose to try “belly” dance were opening themselves to the idea of having fuller-figured bodies. The counterculture movement also grasped the conceptualization of belly dance as a continuation of ancient goddess worship, encouraging women to be in touch with the goddess within (Dox 1997:154). In this way, the myths discussed earlier brought an allure of ancient mysticism that was different and exotic, more empowering for women than many traditional American belief systems.

Especially for the audience, sex is an undeniable element of the dance. A good example demonstrating the way many saw belly dancers is the lyrics of the song “Little Egypt”, recorded in 1961 by the Coasters and in 1964 by Elvis Presley for the movie *Roustabout*. The lyrics, which are the same in both recordings, describe the performance of a dancer by the name of “Little Egypt” who comes out to dance wearing “nothing but a button and a bow” adorned with a ruby and a diamond, and “danced the hoochie-coochie real slow.” Later, the narrator of the song tells the listener that “Little Egypt doesn’t dance there any

more” because she and the narrator have seven children and she spends all day looking after them and cleaning the house (Lirama).<sup>5</sup> This demonstrates several long-held beliefs about belly dancers. Firstly, the belly dancer is seen as available for the male audience member. Secondly, the belly dancer is associated with remarkable fertility, as she is able to conceive seven children. Finally, her profession is something that is not acceptable for a wife—the disrepute of her job would be intolerable for the husband.

The most recent upsurge of belly dance in the US, since about the 1990s, has been brought about and regarded with a mixture of the motives that accompanied the previous incarnations. Dancers are still seen through Orientalist-trained eyes to be both a part of and as representatives of an exotic and sexualized Orient. The skimpy costumes and erotic movements present the dancers and the dance as highly charged, drawing from and contributing to a tradition of seeing the Orient as an eroticized other. Dancers may be seen as almost a dangerous and corrupting source of sexuality, with many references to women fearing that a dancer may try to seduce and steal her husband away (*American Bellydancer* 2005; Soffee 2002:226). Partly because of this trait, dancers may be subjected to rude treatment from others, especially from male audience members. Some may expect a dancer to take off her clothing, especially with accounts like those of 19<sup>th</sup> century travelers who saw and requested nude performances. The associations with striptease even lead to situations where audiences may try to insert dollar bills into a dancer’s costume (Frascella

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<sup>5</sup> For full song lyrics, see appendix C

interview 2004). Like the dancer in the song “Little Egypt,” the dancers are assumed to be available for sex.

Once can also still see quite clearly how belly dance allows women, in its current incarnation, to create an alternative identity—to create another—through which to explore her sexuality. As Shohat demonstrates, American audiences have been presented through the cinema with a Middle East where, especially in the desert, gender transgressions are more acceptable because they are beyond the reach of repressive American social mores regarding sex and gender (1997:52-57). One of the dancers interviewed by Wright and Dreyfus, identified as Helen, mentioned that she felt that when she danced, she took on a different persona.

You’re actually playing a different character because you’re letting yourself go. [...] Yes, you’re just playing a different part. I think you’re getting in touch with probably different feelings and a different side of your nature but you’ve probably got a chance to express whereas you normally wouldn’t; it’s just probably being clamped in I suppose, because you’ve always had to be prim and proper [1998:11]

It is only within the cadre of an other, only within the context of an alternative culture, where this dancer feels able to step outside of her normal constrictions. This way, the dancer internalizes an other yet maintains a degree of distance. This distance prevents the dancer from seeing any transgressions of social mores associated with her alternate persona as reflecting on her primary personality.

Like with the views accompanying the women’s movement, a major draw for many women is a greater acceptance of the female form. Typical Western

views of the female body focus on slimness with limited muscle, and other indications of youth—it is a body associated with health and self-discipline (Wright & Dreyfus 1998:3). For many women, this emphasis on a slim figure runs counter to the way their bodies naturally accumulate weight, especially around the hips and thighs, and this for some is remedied through belly dance, because it proposes a different version of the female form. For example, the group FatChanceBellyDance actively tries to cultivate this sort of self-appreciation by appreciating all types of female figures as beautiful and sexy (Alexis & Madges 2002:52). While famous dancers like Samia Gamal and Tahia Carioca may have been very slim during their performing years, many dancers in Egypt have been described as being much weightier than dancers in the West are generally allowed to be (MacFarquhar 2004). This concept provides an alternative view of the desired female form—one with full hips and a larger belly. For many women who start belly dancing, this ideal, as opposed to that of the anorexic ballerina, allows for appreciation of their own figures and allows them to gain self-confidence. The movements of belly dance themselves also diverge from the slim lines favored by Western dance—dancers generally develop a softer, fleshy belly and hips as compared with the flat abdomen so prized by ballet and aerobics (Dox 1997:154).

An interesting side effect crops up because of this acceptance of different female forms. Because of the rejection the anorexic figures of ballerinas and models, belly dance attracts many more larger and overweight women than almost any other movement style. It is not an uncommon sight to see, especially amongst

amateur performers, women who are approaching criteria for obesity performing with their stomach bared to the audience. One author comments on this directly in her own memoir of her experience in the belly dance world.

It's this stereotype of belly dancers that makes me cringe, much more than the hoochie-coochie one or the 1970s *Cosmo* one. I don't mind if some idiot thinks I'm going to take something off, or twirl my tassels, or seduce someone's husband, because when I perform I can prove that wrong. But the idea that belly dancing is an excuse for "fat chicks to dress up," as someone on the belly dancing Web list once complained, really galls me. It cheapens what we do, it makes a judgment based on size that sells all belly dancers, both large and small, short, and perhaps worst of all, it has just enough of a grain of truth in it to make it really hurt. [Soffee 2002:226-227]

It does make some sense that, given the limited acceptable avenues for movement expression for women of larger size, that a disproportionately high number would be represented in the belly dance community. It is certainly unfortunate if there are those who would use this as a way to insult the entire community by insulting the motives of these specific dancers, who do not make up even near a majority of dancers. While they represent only a part of the pool of dancers, it may be the shock value of seeing a larger women engaged in an activity which has traditionally been denied to women of her size in the West that makes her stand out so much more.



Similarly, many see this dance as a way to connect with femininity as well as sensuality and sexuality. The interviews conducted by Wright and Dreyfus amongst Australian dancers demonstrated this attraction to their own femininity. One dancer, identified as Anna, mentioned that it was only through belly dance that she was able to find this femininity and to express this same trait (1998:11). There is also a strong notion that this is an activity that is for the dancer herself—not for anyone else, and definitely not for anyone of the opposite gender. Many of the dancers interviewed for this project mentioned that it was a way to reconnect with their bodies given their strenuous careers, such as nursing, and that this was an activity that they were able to do just for themselves. One dancer specifically mentioned that it was a major force in reconnecting with her sexuality after experiencing “abuse issues” earlier in life (Full Moon Tribal interview 2005). Thus, the dance becomes a tool for Western women to connect with themselves in ways that their typical lives were unable to help in the same way. It is not the culture that this specific facet of its allure involves—the dance itself is taken out of its context and separated from any cultural basis. It provides an imaginary world and a way to investigate one’s own character outside of what might otherwise be a restricted code of social norms.

One of the new ways in which belly dance has been presented is as a form of exercise. Belly dance is shown as a movement form that is able to target certain muscle groups in the abdomen that most workouts miss. Even the local paper from Bethlehem, Pennsylvania featured a report on belly dance and its physical benefits “Belly dancing can offer a good aerobic workout and

strengthening work for the waistline and biceps and triceps.” (Averett 2005:E1) It is seen in connection with yoga as a way to increase flexibility, and as a movement style that is easier for more body types, as compared with other movement forms (Wright and Dreyfus 1998:8). This is the aspect of contemporary belly dance presentation that is by far the most divorced from the original culture. While there may be some mention of cultural roots during such presentations, usually in the form of lessons, for the most part, the movements are presented entirely without context as simple movements.

These different currents represent a contradiction in the world and experience of belly dance. First, there is the exotification of the region of origin—the imaginary locus of the colonial harem and the dance of the seven veils. However, there is a very tangible divorce from this same culture. Many seem to see a disconnect between this liberating force that is seen in the movements of belly dance and a region where women are supposed to be oppressed (*American Bellydancer* 2005). There is a mental chasm between the land from which the golden bikini costume is thought to come and the land that shows women covered in chadors and hijabs in newspaper photographs. At the same time that belly dancers, regardless of individual origins, are being seen as a sort of cultural ambassador from the Middle East, as the face of an entire region in pop culture, it almost seems that the region of belly dance is being deterritorialized. The image of the exotic Orient relies on different images from previous eras, with names associated with translations of the tales from the 1001 Nights being particularly popular: Scheherezade, Ali Baba, and others. It is not

the actual Middle East that is represented through belly dance in contemporary culture, as much as it is the fantasized, romanticized, luxurious and indulgent Orient. As noted above, some genres take the dance completely out of its context and attempt to distance the dance from Middle Eastern culture, but those that do not attempt such a radical divorce still associate the dance with a romanticized imaginary region. Writers like Buonaventura and Al-Rawi create a world of goddess worship and female empowerment, while many others resort to the image of the “Orient” while others may simply rely on the constructed image demonstrated in 19<sup>th</sup> century literature and early 20<sup>th</sup> century Hollywood.

Presentations and re-presentations of belly dance in the United States have never been true to the cultures of its origin, always colored by the expectations and motives of American performers and showmen. Performers have used it as a vehicle for expression and for exploration of themselves and showmen have used it to draw audiences with the promise of flesh. Belly dance has long been packaged as a representation of Middle Eastern culture, but since its introduction, the dance itself has morphed and changed to fit American views and desires. The authors whose descriptions of the dance were available to 19<sup>th</sup> century America were filtered through Flaubert’s search for truth in nudity, Curtis’s romanticism, and Lane’s cataloging eye. Each author sought different things from their visits to Egypt and thus presented what they saw toward such ends, including belly dance. From the time that America first glimpsed Algerian and Egyptian dancers at the Chicago World’s Fair, the presentation of the dance itself fell to similar biases. Directors of the exhibitions showed the dance as titillation for men—excluding

women from audiences, emphasizing sexual aspects of the dance, and even bringing in Parisian burlesque dancers. At the Chicago fair, the rest of Middle Eastern culture was forgotten in favor of this exotic entertainment, reducing an entire region to a sexualized form of dance. With a rise of ethnic restaurants in the United States that showcased belly dance performances in the 1950s and 60s, belly dance was once more the most common image of the Middle East that average Americans saw. Other forces within the American belly dance world saw an aesthetic and a method of expression to use—an art that was divorced from Middle Eastern culture. While so much of the history of belly dance has been in the role of a packaged representation of the Middle East, it has never truly lived up to this role.

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## Appendix A

### The Language of Belly Dance

One of the interesting things that continually came up during the research for this project was the disagreement on terminology within the belly dance community. Certain dancers and researchers refer to the dance as one term but others will choose entirely different terms for the same dance. Different subgenres within belly dance received different names and various movements and accessories often do not have hard-and-fast, agreed-upon names. Some names, like “belly dance” itself accumulate a sense of scorn, seen as belittling to the dance or the dancer while others terms, like “danse orientale” try to bring with them the authority and legitimacy of other dances that have already been well established in Western traditions. The use of names creates divisions within the belly dance world: who is allowed to use which terms, which terms are more respectable, which terms are more authentic, etc. All of the different terms currently in use have both benefits as well as pitfalls that influence individuals in their choice of terminology.

In the early literature where one finds mention of what is currently known as “belly dance,” it is generally mentioned simply as a dance, with no specific name given to it. Lane, for example, only refers to the arts of the *ghawazi* as a dance, and by no specific name (1846, 2: 98-105, 270-272). The first recognizable names given to this dance seem to have appeared with the proliferation of world’s fairs and international expositions. The name of “danse

du ventre”<sup>6</sup> became a popular term, and this could be because of the impact of the Paris exhibition in 1889 and the explosion of belly dance and imitations found in the Paris burlesque circuit not long afterwards. By the time of the Chicago World’s Fair in 1893, some of the words used to describe the dance found in the Cairo Street theater included such names as “contortion dance,” “muscle dance,” “oriental posture-dance,” “nautch dance,” as well as the already known danse du ventre (Carlton 1994:40).

### **“Hoochie Coochie”**

The term “hoochie coochie,” while not a name for what may be considered under the umbrella of “belly dance” in the framework of this project, has had an impact on the history of belly dance in the America. It was a name given to a school of dance that spun off of the belly dance presented in the Chicago World’s Fair. There are several different theories as to the etymology of this specific term. Carlton thinks that this term came from a creolization of the French “hoche ma queue” [literally: nod my tail] in a similar history to the term “hokey pokey” from “hoche bouge” (Carlton 1994:57-59). While not strictly belly dance, this term for a sexualized and bastardized version appears occasionally in discussions of belly dance and the connection between the two must be acknowledged. It was the “hoochie coochie” that was performed in vaudeville and in burlesque venues, further connecting its cousin, belly dance, with nudity and disrepute.

### **“Belly Dance”**

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<sup>6</sup> Literally translated from the French: “dance of the belly”

Some contribute this specific term to Sol Bloom's promotion of the dancers of the Chicago World's Fair as a bastardization of the term *danse du ventre*. (*American Bellydancer* 2005). One can easily see how such a term would shock a conservative Victorian audience when one considers that this same audience had taken to calling the breasts and legs of poultry as "light" and "dark" meat, respectively, and had actually covered the "legs" of tables. The idea of naming a dance after any part of the body would have been quite shocking and would have easily attracted the attention of any passers-by, especially male passers-by. Despite the fact that, as many current dancers will point out, far more of the body is involved than just the "belly," the term caught on and has experienced rather impressive staying power.

There are many reasons that dancers and writers have both chosen to use and chosen to avoid this specific term. For many, this is certainly the most universally recognized name and the most used. It quickly and rather easily communicates to the audience or reader the general parameters of the dance to be either performed or discussed. For example, I have chosen to utilize this term in this paper as the broadest of any term and this same recognition factor. Unfortunately, as the most commonly used term, it has also been the most commonly abused term as well, and has thus accumulated some undesirable connotations in the eyes of many dancers.

One of the main objections that some dancers have is the immediate placement of focus on the physical appearance of the dancer by virtue of the term "belly." One dancer mentioned that she had long had discomfort with the size of

her abdomen and that, because of this, she generally opted to wear costumes that covered her stomach. In the past, some obnoxious audience members had shouted during her performance asking why, if she was a “belly dancer,” she wasn’t showing any belly (Tahya interview 2006). Another dancer expressed her concerns about this term simply because of the focus it put on her body and expectations she felt were thereby created of her performance, purely by virtue of the first word being a part of the body (Niedzwicki interview 2005). Given the history of concepts like the active male sexual gaze and frequently objectified positions of women in media, such focus on physical forms has other implications as well.

The connections between “belly dance” and negative aspects of dance cultures can be perceived in different ways. One of the dancers interviewed mentioned that she felt that if she presented her performance as “belly dance” that it was too generic a term to really communicate her own style, and that perhaps she would be associating herself with something a little sub-standard. She also mentioned that she felt that there was more connection to the concept of strip tease when a dancer uses the term “belly dance,” bringing along many different stereotypes, mostly already discussed, of belly dancers in an American context (Niedzwicki interview 2005). It seems that, because of the much broader exposure of the term “belly dance” in popular culture and the media, it is the term that becomes most associated with the image of the sexual properties of the dance. Two songs specifically demonstrate that it is this term that becomes associated with sex, because the use of another term would not carry the same sort of

connotations and connections. A song released in 2004 by the hip hop artist Akon, “Bonanza (Belly Dance),” presents belly dance as a way for beautiful women to “shake it” and entice men:

Hey ladies drop it down  
 Just want to see you touch the ground  
 Don't be shy girl, go Bonanza  
 Shake ya body like a belly dancer

Girl shake ya body body [...]  
 Jiggle it to the front then jiggle it to the back  
 And jiggle jiggle it all all night

There is a rather obvious connotation to this song that it is the woman dancing for the pleasure of the man because she is a sexual object, and this seems to be the way the singer thinks of belly dance itself.

The other song, as a French hip hop song, shows that this understanding is not limited only to the US, but includes other Western countries as well. This is an important note when one considers that belly dance in its current incarnation is found throughout the Western world, from Australia to Canada, Puerto Rico, Western Europe, and the continental US. Another important aspect about this song, given the this discussion is the fact that, though the rest of the song is sung in French, the singers, Kayliah and Pegguy Tabu, adopt the use of the phrase “belly dance” and even with an American pronunciation.

[Pegguy Tabu] Sensuelle elle a tout pour me plaire



Son corps me parle je perds mes repères  
 J'veux juste que tu m' fasses exister mamy  
 Dans ton monde que je puisse pénétrer mamy  
 [Kayliah] Comme un aimant, j'suis attiré vers toi  
 Baby est-ce que tu sens, j'suis dans tous mes états  
 J'veux juste que tu puisses t'exciter papy  
 Dans ton ton corps sentir la chaleur monter papy [...]

[Peggy Tabu] Belly belly belly belly dance  
 Jumps sur piste mamy et danse la belly dance  
 [Kayliah] Belly belly belly belly dance

J'sais qu' tu me kiffes papy donc j'danse la belly dance<sup>7</sup>

Both Kayliah and Peggy Tabu sing about this “belly dance” as a method for her to entice and seduce him. She is a sexual, sensual creature and the only goal she seems to have is to excite and arouse him. It is the “belly dancer” who is available sexually and who presents herself sexually to the male.

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<sup>7</sup> Rough translation by author:

[Peggy Tabu] Sensual, she has everything to please me  
 Her body speaks to me and I lose my bearings  
 I just want you to make me exist, mamy  
 In your world that I can penetrate, mamy  
 [Kayliah] Like a lover, I'm attracted to you  
 Baby, do you feel, I'm in all my states  
 I just want you to get excited, papy  
 Feel the heat rise in your body, papy [...]

[Peggy Tabu] Belly belly belly belly dance  
 Jump on the floor, mamy, and dance the belly dance  
 [Kayliah] Belly belly belly belly dance  
 I know that you like me, papy, and so I dance the belly dance

Almost as a counter to this image of “belly dance” as showing the female dancer as an object of the gaze, this image of the dance as a sexual tool to entice, there is also, for many, a strong component of women’s liberation sentiment to using the term “belly dance.” Barbara Sellers-Young, both a researcher and a dancer herself, said that part of her reason for using the term “belly dance” interchangeably with “Middle Eastern dance” was to express the fact that she owned her own body. With the introduction into American society of birth control and other advancements in women’s rights, the concept of having a belly, incorporating one’s own body into one’s identity was a major attraction (Sellers-Young Interview 2006). Not only was she able to embrace a form of movement that focused on the hips and pelvis—something almost dangerous before the 1960s—but she was able to call it in such a way that she could take advantage of the fact that the dance focused on the body. Given these long-standing connections to belly dance, especially under the term “belly dance,” women who decided to use this term could own their own sexuality. For those who believe that the dance comes from ancient birth rituals, this plays into the myth by putting the movement and visual focus on the areas of the female body most associated with birth, and such a focus could certainly be read as empowering this special female ability (Tahya interview 2006).

Given all the baggage that comes along with the term “belly dance”—Victorian eroticism, the expectation of nudity, female sexuality, and the like—one must be able to give the advantage of broad recognition considerable weight given the various sources of negative connotations that would turn dancers off to this

particular term. One interesting idea presented in a recent documentary by a dancer identified as Kaeshi, was the desire to “take back” the name, to reclaim it through admirable performances and turning “belly dance” into a more respectable art form (*American Bellydancer* 2005).

### **“Danse Orientale” / “Oriental Dance”**

The uses of the related terms *danse orientale* and *oriental dance* have many flaws. It doesn't seem to have been in use as early in the Western tradition as *danse du ventre* had been, but can be seen on postcards from the early 20<sup>th</sup> century and became a term that also had some staying power. One author in particular notes that the use of the French version is a “term which legitimizes the dance with a link to French ballet and reinscribes its colonization.” (Dox 1997:151) Dox seems to think that the only way that the dance has a reasonable hope of legitimizing itself in the eyes of an audience accustomed to French hegemony in the world of ballet is by connection to this already established art and its vocabulary. Thus, one is subjugating one form of dance to the form of the more powerful, more Western form, doubtlessly invoking colonialist concerns for many dancers.

The inclusion of a geographic term within the name creates mental distance between the origins of the dance and the culture associated with this origin. The use of the specific word “orient” also creates a problem for many dancers. Some will refuse to use the word simply because they define the “orient” as extending to the eastern edge of Asia, certainly not limited to the Middle East. One dancer mentioned that she began using the term only when she

incorporated dances from the “Far East” along with dances from the “Middle East,” thus encompassing what Americans generally define to be the entire orient (Tahya interview 2006).

**“Raks el Sharki” / “Raqs esh-Sharqi”**

Another reason some dancers may choose to use the term “danse orientale” or “oriental dance” may be its appeal as the direct translation of the term “raks el sharki” or “raqs esh-sharqi,” which is the Arabic term for what we know as belly dance. Without delving further, one might be tempted to assume a certain Eurocentricism in such a term, by positioning the region of the dance’s origin in the “East,” if one assumes this to be from the European perspective of the dance coming from the Middle East, and thus a representation of the term “danse orientale.” However, as suggested by Sellers-Young, it could conceivably be that for the residents of Egypt or other areas, the original dance could have been brought from areas further east, through groups like the Ottoman conquerors or incoming gypsy (*ghawazi*) populations (Interview 2006). This places the locus of inception in the “East” as compared to the region adopting this term.

Many dancers have adopted the use of this term, one of particular note is the dancer Morocco. By using the Arabic term, these dancers may be trying either to establish or affirm their own authenticity. This term distances a dancer from what may be regarded as countless imitators, Americans who don’t know the “real thing.” Morocco herself is proud of her efforts to present traditional folk dances in as authentic a fashion as possible and would understandably disagree with labels that would tie this specific style to other styles which incorporate

various different traditions as well as dancers of the “golden bikini” school. Certainly, her work should not be confused with the mainstream cabaret, given her respectable study of the region and the dance, however, there are undoubtedly others who appropriate the same term without similar credentials and apply it to a, perhaps, less solidified style of dance.

### **“Ethnic”**

Yet another way that some attempt to distance themselves from the myriad of negative connotations of “belly dance” is to use a term like “ethnic dance.” For dancers who specialize in the dance traditions of specific countries, this does not create much of a problem, except that it does not specify from which tradition they are drawing. This also positions the dancer and the dance within the context of a cultural study; it is not connected to sex as much as anthropology. The danger of this term is the dichotomy that it creates between the familiar or standard and the exotic or unfamiliar. That which is American is standard, but that which comes from elsewhere, from another sort of cultural tradition, is “ethnic.”

### **“Fusion”**

Compared to some of the other terms employed by dancers, this is one that often appears to be the most honest. It is more descriptive of what modern belly dance is in the US, integrating and fusing different types of dance, costumes, and music. Dancers who use this term recognize the different sources from which they draw as well as the fact that all dance from the Middle East is not the same—they recognize that the Middle East is not monolithic, at least in terms of dance.

This may also give dances a feeling of more license to add in various elements from styles like ballet and hip-hop (Full Moon Tribal: 12/13/05).

### **“Arab”**

This term has some serious repercussions in the fact that most dancers draw from traditions beyond, and doesn't make such differentiations between Turkish, Persian, Arab, Indian, Berber, and many other different internal groups not including groups whose movements are co-opted by current belly dance. This may be, more than anything else, a symptom of a lack of knowledge, even amongst dancers, about aspects of the Middle East.

### **“Islamic”**

The use of the term “Islamic” in association with belly dance or any other form of dance is severely flawed. Firstly, the label is inappropriate given that modern Islam stretches around the globe, with adherents in or from a great variety of cultures and societies. While this would acknowledge a fusion of diverse regional cultures into current dance, these cultures are not limited to those areas where Islam is the majority religion and is generally not presented in such a way. The use of the term “Islamic” is more likely a function of a lack of understanding. Secondly, the tying of Islam as a religion to any form of dance is unwarranted. Based on doctrines and texts, the practice of dance can be seen as detracting from an individual believer's focus on God. The audience is visually distracted, and the dancers are often going against ideas of modesty. The only support of any dance in Islam is based on a few “weak” hadith, or recorded sayings of the Prophet and the Prophet's companions. Even these few hadith do not in anyway

support dancing in public or in mixed-gender situations. The use of the term “Islamic” dance generally demonstrates ignorance, innocent though it may be, of the religion itself and the many different cultures where it is practiced.

The loaded nature of these various different terms employed by current and past belly dancers becomes quite complicated when the potential repercussions and interpretations are examined. Different names reflect the attitudes and presentation at that time or aspects of that particular style. While some terms, like “ethnic” or “Arab” have not been used long enough to have acquired the same sort of baggage as “belly dance” has accumulated since its inception over a century ago. Dancers generally recognize many of the subtleties in choosing which term to use when representing themselves and their style, though some may still reflect some misunderstandings of Middle Eastern cultures and societies. These are loaded words, and will likely continue to be so.

## Appendix B



**Figure 1:** Etienne Dinet, *La Danseuse d'Ouled Nail*



**Figure 2:** Ouled Nail dancer



**Figure 3:** Dancer of the Ouled Nail performing





**Figure 4:** Lane's drawing of the *ghawazi* from *The Manners and Customs of Modern Egyptians* (1846, vol. ii:99)



**Figure 5:** *Ghawazi* dancers



**Figure 6:** Postcard of "The Almeh, Dancer of Cairo"



Figure 7: Daffy Duck's voyeuristic experience in "Good Time for a Dime"



Figure 8: *World's Fair Puck* cartoon



Figure 9: Inset from *World's Fair Puck* cartoon



Figure 11: Italian postcard

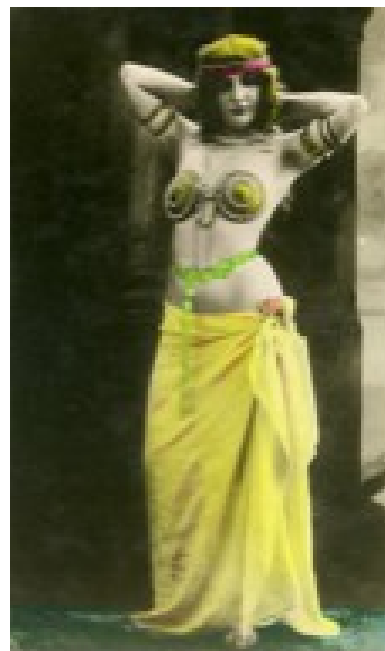


Figure 10: Colorized postcard from 1920s





**Figure 12: Postcard of a Salome**



**Figure 13: Colorized photograph**



**Figure 14: Mata Hari in a  
nronacanda postcard**



**Figure 15: Ruth St. Denis with her own interpretation**



**Figure 16: Agnes de Mille as an Ouled Nail dancer**



**Figure 17: St. Denis with dance partner, Ted Shawn**



**Figure 18: A stage designed with an Oriental theme by Poiret**



**Figure 19: An example of the increased movement possible in Poiret's corset-free designs**



**Figure 21: A gold lame turban created by Poiret for the Mille et deuxième nuit**



**Figure 20: Poiret and his wife at the Mille et deuxième nuit party**



**Figure 22: Another creation of Poiret reflecting his Oriental influence**





**Figure 24:** A design by Bakst for *Narcisse*, 1911



**Figure 23:** Bakst design for *Schéhérazade*, 1910



**Figure 25:** Bakst design for *Cléopâtre*, 1909



**Figure 26:** Dancers from *Shéhérazade* in costumes designed by Bakst, 1910



**Figure 28:** Erté, *Arabian Dancer*



**Figure 27:** Erté, *Fire Bird*



**Figure 30:** Erté, *Gypsy Dancer*



**Figure 29:** Dancer for the Folies Bergères in a design by Erté





**Figure 31: Maud Allen as Salome**



**Figure 32: The Princess beloved of *Intolerance*, 1916**



**Figure 33: Theda Bara**



**Figure 34: Theda Bara as Cleopatra**



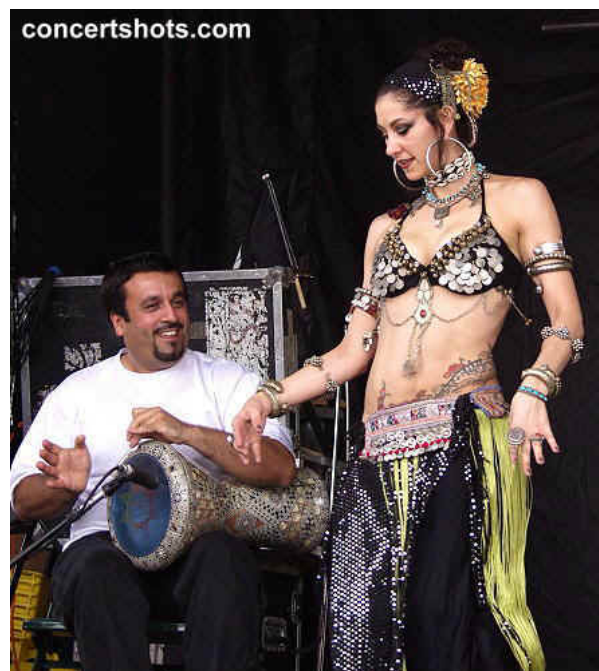
**Figure 36: Jilina of the Bellydance Superstars in a fairly typical cabaret outfit**



**Figure 35: Egyptian dancer Lucy in a typical cabaret costume**



**Figure 38: A fairly typical beladi dress**



**Figure 37: Rachel Brice of the Bellydance Superstars in a performance at Lollapalooza**





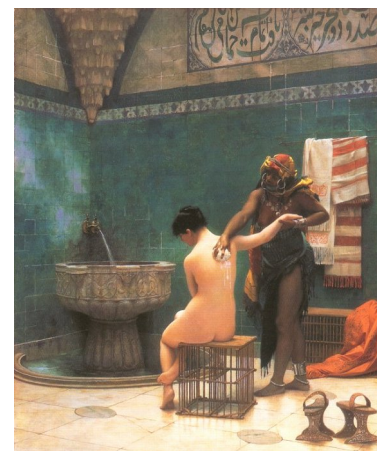
**Figure 40: Fleur Frascella of Philadelphia Tribal Bellydance in a 2005 performance**



**Figure 39: Farida Fahmy in costume**



**Figure 42: Jean-Léon Gérôme, *Danse de l'almée***



**Figure 41: Gérôme, *Le bain***



**Figure 43: Gérôme, *Intérieur Grec - Le Gynécée***



**Figure 44: Dance scene on temple steps, *Intolerance* 1916**

## Appendix C: Complete Lyrics for Referenced Songs

“Little Egypt” by the Coasters from the album *Little Egypt (Ying Yang)*, Music and lyrics by Jerry Leiber and Mike Stoller, recorded April 1961 (Also recorded by Downliners Sect in 1964 and Elvis Presley in November, 1964)

I went and bought myself a ticket and  
I sat down in the very first row, wo wo.  
They pulled the curtain but then when  
they turned the spotlight way down low, wo wo,  
little Egypt came out strotting,  
wearing nothing but a button and a bow, wo wo,  
singing, "Yeah yeah! Yeah yeah! Yeah yeah! Yeah yeah".

She had a ruby on her tummy and  
a diamond big as Texas on her toe, wo wo.  
She let her hair down and  
she did the hoochie koochie real slow, wo wo,  
When she did her special number on a zebra skin,  
I thought she'd stop the show, wo wo,  
singing, "Yeah yeah! Yeah yeah! Yeah yeah! Yeah yeah!".

She did a triple somersault and when she hit the ground,  
she winked at the audience and then she turned around.  
She had a picture of a cowboy tattooed on her spine,  
saying Phoenix, Arizona, nineteen forty-nine.

Yeah, but let me tell you people,  
little Egypt doesn't dance there anymore, wo wo.  
She's too busy mopping and  
a taking care of shopping at the store, wo wo.  
'Cause we got seven kids and  
all day long they crawl around the floor, wo wo,  
singing, "Yeah yeah! Yeah yeah! Yeah yeah! Yeah yeah"

“Bananza (Belly Dancer)” written and performed by Akon from the album *Trouble*, 2004

Hey ladies drop it down  
Just want to see you touch the ground  
Don't be shy girl go Banaza  
Shake ya body like a belly dancer

Hey ladies drop it down  
 Just want to see you touch the ground  
 Don't be shy girl go Bananza (hey girl)  
 Shake ya body like a belly dancer

Yo, excuse me, beg your pardon girl  
 Do you have any idea what you starting girl  
 You got me tingiling, come to me mingiling  
 Steppin off lookin bootylicious and jingiling  
 When you walk, I see you baby girl  
 When you talk, I believe it baby girl  
 I like that, thick-petite n' pretty  
 Little touch is a ditty  
 Love to work the kitty like purrrrrrr  
 She loves to stirr it up purrrrrr  
 I can hear her purring up  
 Cause shes the type that'll get arousy of  
 Get you excited and call her boyfriend up (ohh)  
 What's the man without the plan B  
 We can meet up at the hutter house for the tiki  
 So stand by like a butty pass  
 While I watch this beautiful thing shake that ass

Hey ladies drop it down  
 Just want to see you touch the ground  
 Don't be shy girl go Banaza  
 Shake ya body like a belly dancer

Hey ladies drop it down  
 Just want to see you touch the ground  
 Don't be shy girl go Banaza  
 Shake ya body like a belly dancer

Girl I must say you the flyest thang in here  
 So hot I gon' need some rain in here  
 Type to make ex-gangstas bang in here  
 Girl you could do anything you want in here  
 Clown if you want to, frown if you want to  
 You ain't even gotta drop down if you want to  
 Cause I'd rather see you shake it standin  
 Either way you do it girl you look outstandin (uhhuuuhh)  
 And now you got me spending (uhhuuhhh)  
 The way you got that body bendin (uhhhuhh)  
 Ass like that girl you gotta be kickin  
 And we goin to church next day repentent  
 Lap dancing for my FA crew

Slide it ova to boo cause he want some too  
Up in the VIP with no fee  
Blessing you with the G even tho we gettin it free so

Hey ladies drop it down  
Just want to see you touch the ground  
Don't be shy girl go Banaza  
Shake ya body like a belly dancer

Hey ladies drop it down  
Just want to see you touch the ground  
Don't be shy girl go Banaza  
Shake ya body like a belly dancer

Girl shake ya body body  
With somebody body  
Whatever you do don't break your body body  
After the party party  
Grab a hottie hottie  
In the back seat of your Maserati-ratti  
Jiggle jiggle it to the left (ah ah ah)  
Jiggle jiggle it to the right (ah ah ah)  
Jiggle it to the front then jiggle it to the back  
And jiggle jiggle it all all night (ah ah ah)

Hey ladies drop it down  
Just want to see you touch the ground  
Don't be shy girl go Banaza  
Shake ya body like a belly dancer

Hey ladies drop it down  
Just want to see you touch the ground  
Don't be shy girl go Banaza  
Shake ya body like a belly dancer

Hey ladies drop it down  
Just want to see you touch the ground  
Don't be shy girl go Banaza  
Shake ya body like a belly dancer

Hey ladies drop it down  
Just want to see you touch the ground  
Don't be shy girl go Banaza  
Shake ya body like a belly dancer

“Belly Dance” written by Kayliah, performed by Kayliah and Pegguy Tabu, 2005

Sensuelle elle a tout pour me plaire  
 Son corps me parle je perds mes repères  
 J'veux juste que tu m' fasses exister mamy  
 Dans ton monde que je puisse pénétrer mamy  
 Comme un aimant, j'suis attiré vers toi  
 Baby est ce que tu sens, j'suis dans tous mes états  
 J'veux juste que tu puisses t'exciter papy  
 Dans ton corps sentir la chaleur monter papy

Oh accorde moi, juste une danse  
 Je veux seulement, partager ce sentiment  
 Oh accroche toi saisis ta chance,  
 laisse moi ressentir ce que tu penses.

Belly belly belly belly dance  
 Jumps sur la piste mamy et danse la belly dance  
 Belly belly belly belly dance  
 J'sais qu'tu me kiffes papy donc j'danse la belly dance {x2}

Je pourrais rester la toute une nuit  
 Sentir ta chaleur, ton parfum vanille  
 J'veux qu'tu me rendes Ouh mamy mamy  
 Que tu m'enlouisses Ouh mamy mamy  
 Laisse moi te guider dans mon univers  
 Laisse moi t'initier que t'es les idées claires  
 J'veux qu'tu me rendes Ouh papy papy  
 Que tu m'enlouisses Ouh papy papy

Oh accorde moi, juste une danse  
 Je veux seulement, partager ce sentiment  
 Oh accroche toi saisis ta chance,  
 Laisse moi ressentir ce que tu penses.

Belly belly belly belly dance  
 Jumps sur la piste mamy et danse la belly dance  
 Belly belly belly belly dance  
 J'sais qu'tu me kiffes papy donc j'danse la belly dance {x2}

Montre moi jusqu'ou on va  
 Baby quels sont tes...  
 J'veux que tu mes donnes jusqu'au bout de la nuit  
 Ce soir je serais a toi  
 Fait de moi ce que tu veux



Je veux que tu me donnes tout  
Je vais te rendre fou  
Jump mamy mamy  
Jump papy papy  
Bouge mamy mamy  
Bouge papy papy

Oh accorde moi, juste une danse  
Je veux seulement, partager tes sentiments  
Oh accroche toi saisis ta chance,  
laisse moi ressentir ce que tu penses.

Belly belly belly belly dance  
Jumps sur la piste mamy et danse la belly dance  
Belly belly belly belly dance  
J'sais qu'tu me kiffes papy donc j'danse la belly dance {x2}

## Appendix D: Glossary of Terms

**Almeh (pl. awalim)** – a direct transliteration from the Arabic term *علمة* which means, in modern Arabic, “singer, chanteuse, belly dancer” and comes from the term of the same spelling but pronounced *‘alima* and which means “woman of learning, woman scholar” (Wehr 1994: 745). See Chapter 1 for a deeper discussion of the role of the almeh.

**Almée** – a French interpretation of the term “almeh” often seen in art like the paintings of Jean-Léon Gérôme and other painters of the French Orientalist school. This specific term was often associated with the dancers in the Paris burlesque circuits which were loosely modeled upon belly dance.

**Beladi** – transliteration of the Arabic term *بلادي*. Current translations include “native, indigenous, home (as opposed to foreign, alien);” “popular, national, folk.” (Wehr 1994: 88) It is used generally for dances approximating the folk dances of Egypt, as a contrast to more theatrical versions.

**Chador** – a term for a conservative Islamic head scarf worn by women which covers the forehead, hair, neck, shoulders, and bosom.

**Danse du ventre** – translated literally from the French is “dance of the stomach.” This was a popular term used for belly dance after the introduction of belly dance in France and to the French burlesque scene.

**Danse orientale** – translated literally from the French is “dance of the East” or “dance of the Orient.” It is a term still used by many dancers today for belly dance. See Appendix A for a full discussion of this term.

**Ghaziyeh (pl. ghawazi)** – transliteration of the Arabic term *غزية* originally a name to designate the gypsy population in Egypt, in modern Arabic, the term has come to mean “woman dancer, danseuse” (Wehr 1994: 788).

**Hammam bath** – public baths of Arab origin with large pools and steam baths which had varied uses: health and cleanliness as well as a location for social contact. Sexes were segregated either by hours or by facilities, and women in the hammam became a popular subject for Orientalist painters.

**Harem** – a popular transliteration for the Arabic term *حريم*, generally meaning “a sacred, inviolable place;” “female members of the family, women; wife.” It is related to the word *haraam* or *حمام*, meaning “forbidden,” “sin,” “inviolable,” “sacred,” and “cursed.” As used in English, it is generally a reference to the part of the house in house that is reserved for the female family members, and is off-limits to men outside the family.

**Hijab** – a transliteration of the Arabic term **حجاب**, referring to the Islamic head scarf worn by women that covers the forehead, hair, and neck.

**Hoochie-coochie (hoochy-coochy)** – term used to identify a dance beginning in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century which was based loosely on belly dance and was a mainstay of the burlesque circuits for a time. See Appendix A for a deeper discussion of the term.

**Ouled Nail, Aulad Nail, Awlad Nail** – transliteration of the name, **اولاد نيل**, of a tribe from Algeria which was an important source of what is now known as belly dance. See Chapter 1 for a greater discussion of the Ouled Nail.

**Raqs sharqi, raks sharki, raqs esh-sharqi, raks el-sharki** – various transliterations of the most popular term for belly dance in Arabic, **رقص الشرقي**. The literal translation would be “dance of the East” or “dance of the Orient.” See Appendix A for deeper discussion of this term.