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# Whether it's coins, fringe, or just stuff that's sparkly': Aesthetics and Utility in a Tribal Fusion Belly Dance Troupe's Costumes

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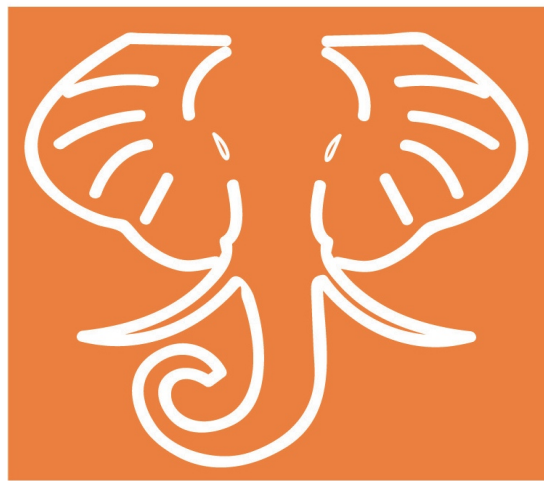
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“WHETHER IT’S COINS, OR FRINGE, OR JUST STUFF THAT’S SPARKLY:”  
AESTHETICS AND UTILITY IN THE COSTUMES OF A TRIBAL BELLY DANCE  
TROUPE

As both a scholar and a belly dancer, I believe that belly dance is recognizable on aesthetic grounds. In addition to the movements that belly dancers typically perform—muscle isolations, undulations, graceful hand motions and turns, and lots of hip work—belly dancers wear costumes that are visually identifiable as belly dance costumes. While this description may seem tautological, there are recognizable standards both in the public sphere and among dancers for what constitutes the belly dance image—or *images*, as belly dance is a diverse phenomenon that encompasses teaching, learning, performing, watching, socializing, and costuming.

Though its origins are in the Middle East and Mediterranean (including influences from India, North Africa, Spain, and nomadic cultures such as Rom peoples), belly dance has achieved special status in America as a fusion form of dance. Indeed, the name *belly dance* is used only in English-speaking regions (Djournahna 2000:10). The term belly dance is also very general; many belly dancers identify themselves as practicing a subcategory of the dance, apparent not only in the types of movements and music they prefer but also in their costuming choices. Some divisions in American styles of belly dance include cabaret, folkloric, and tribal. Brief definitions of these divisions will help provide context for this article’s specific study of tribal belly dance costumes.

Cabaret in America approximates styles practiced in clubs in the Middle East today. It is mostly a solo performance style, with a wide range of available movements that may be either choreographed or improvised; if a cabaret group performs (as opposed to an individual), the choreography is fixed. In an article, Dina, a cabaret belly dancer and costumer, addresses the question of what a cabaret costume is: “A magical vision of the glamorous, exotic belly dancer was popularized by Hollywood decades ago. In glittering bra and belly-baring skirt, draped with diaphanous veils, she undulated and shimmied to the accompaniment of her jingling finger cymbals. This cabaret style of costume and dance is flashier, more theatrical and more revealing than the many historic and ethnic styles of Middle Eastern cultures.” Dina defines in structural terms the costume pieces that compose a cabaret outfit: “The cabaret costume usually consists of a fringed hip-belt, ornate bra, skirt and/or harem pants, and one or more veils. A fitted gown sometimes replaces bra and skirt. Decorative arm coverings, headpieces, and shoes are optional. Jewelry completes the ensemble” (2000:108). The cabaret style allows for individual touches of glamour and glitz as desired by dancers.

More than cabaret dance, folkloric belly dance in America values authenticity and traditionality. Kajira Djournahna, author of *The Tribal Bible: Exploring the Phenomenon That is American Tribal Style Bellydance*, touches on folkloric styles in the U.S. in her definition of terms: “These groups learn as much as they can of actual folkloric dances of various countries in the Middle East, and then they change them if needed to suit their performance venues here in the U.S. These groups may or may not include completely authentic costuming, though their costumes do reflect an effort to appear traditional”

(2003:iii). The emphasis on “traditional” dances and costumes is one reason why folkloric belly dance is often seen at Renaissance Faires and other cultural events that value authenticity and traditionality. As in cabaret, group performances tend to be strictly choreographed.

In contrast to cabaret and folkloric styles, tribal belly dance originates entirely in America and is a collective improvisational style. Both the costuming style and the dance movements are syncretic (or fusional). The belly dancers that have written about tribal belly dance are divided as to whether they identify the dance style or the costumes as the defining factor of tribal belly dance. Relevant to their discussion is an important distinction between a general tribal style and the American Tribal Style (ATS).<sup>1</sup> To some troupes the criteria that define ATS are movement-based. According to these dancers, for a performance to be deemed ATS, the following standards must be met:

1. There must be interaction between the dancers. This means no solo expressions unless at least one other dancer is present on the stage with you. Even then, the solo is not meant to be the focus of any Tribal performance. Working together in troupes of two or more dancers for the majority of the show is imperative for what you are doing to be called “Tribal.”
2. This interaction between dancers during performance must be, at least primarily, improvisational. (Djournahna 2003:i)

Different tribal troupes negotiate this need for collective improvisation in different ways, but most follow or adapt the ATS system of cues, creating a shared vocabulary of dance movements that the dancers use to communicate with each other to facilitate improvising on stage. In contrast, the following definition focuses on costumes: “The most instantly recognizable aspect of ATS is the elaborate costume, with an ornately wrapped headpiece and multiple layers of fabric and antique jewelry” (Zenuba 2000:38).<sup>2</sup>

Regardless of the precise definitional balance of movement and costume, I would argue that costume is an important component not only in how tribal belly dance is defined but also in how it is performed and perceived. Additionally, costumes are an integral part of all belly dance due to the fact that it is a *dance*—at its most basic, “the body making patterns in time and space” (Royce 2002:3). But the body never dances unadorned in belly dance, so embellishments to the body must be taken into account when studying the dance. As Sheila Bock points out in her thesis on belly dance, “In dance performances, the viewer’s attention is drawn to the movements of the body, and the body is used to communicate to the audience” (2005:50). What the body relates during a belly dance performance is especially important due to discourses of power and control affecting women in the United States. Belly dancers participate in these discourses not only by dancing but also by taking on identities and creating communities related to the dance; they also, through their motions and body modifications, necessarily make statements about issues such as ethnicity and femininity (Bock 2005:51). In addition to negotiating cultural issues, belly dancers express their aesthetic preferences and group memberships through bodily communications and clothing.



Different Drummer at Gencon, August 2005. Front row: Heather and David. Back row, from left to right: Ann L., Ann S., Margaret, and Molly. The hairpieces Heather, Molly, and Ann S. are wearing are made of tubular crin; the hairpieces David and Margaret are wearing are made of foam and other components. Photo by Libby Bulloff.

### *The Different Drummer Belly Dancers*

The same tension between individual creativity and group constraints that draws me to folklore attracted me to the study of belly dance costumes in tribal troupes. I chose to focus on one tribal troupe, Different Drummer Belly Dancers,<sup>3</sup> for several reasons. First, they are easily accessible, meaning both that they are based where I live (in Bloomington, Indiana) and that they are friendly people. Next, their status as a tribal troupe is ambiguous, which interests me. Strictly following the definition of ATS given by Djoumahna, Different Drummer is not a tribal troupe because they do not collectively improvise during all of their shows. However, because the troupe emphasizes the group aspect of performance (for instance, everyone remains on stage when one member does a solo dance) and because the troupe conforms to many features of tribal belly dance costuming, I believe that this troupe fits a broad definition of tribal belly dance, if not ATS specifically. Different Drummer incorporates some key elements of ATS costumes and cues while deviating from ATS in other areas. Different Drummer's costuming choices are among the most distinctive and fascinating characteristics of the troupe, another reason I chose to study them.

Different Drummer was founded in the fall of 2003 by Margaret, the artistic director of the troupe. The three other founding members are Molly, Ann L., and Heather.<sup>4</sup> In July of 2005, the troupe gained two new members: David and Ann S.<sup>5</sup> I have interacted with the

members of Different Drummer informally for over a year, as I am also a member of the belly dance community in Bloomington. I have observed the troupe members dance together and individually at various events, ranging from belly-dance-specific parties and benefit shows to themed nights at clubs. For this project, I conducted individual interviews with troupe members, each interview lasting about an hour. These interviews took place at troupe members' workplaces or cafes, whichever was most convenient for the troupe members. I also asked their permission to use photographs of them that are posted online.

There are many perspectives from which to study Different Drummer's costuming techniques; few of these perspectives are exclusive to a single area of study like body art, folk costume, or dance. Laurel Horton and Paul Jordan-Smith's article "Deciphering Folk Costume: Dress Codes among Contra Dancers" provides a useful model (2004). Contra dancers, like belly dancers, must make dress choices related to their dance movements, and Horton and Jordan-Smith allow for motion in their study. Taking a semiotic approach, Horton and Jordan-Smith describe three functions of clothing in Western society: "(1) practicality, which includes considerations of protection, physical comfort, availability, and cost; (2) self-concept, which includes self-presentation and self-expression within the public sphere; and (3) group identity, which includes public issues of group membership and identity" (2004:421). Each of these functions is emphasized or de-emphasized relative to the others depending on circumstances. This model is a good start, though due to the prominence of everyday dress in contra dance attire, the authors' discussion of functions does not address issues related to stage performance. Similarly, while their discussion of culturally defined body-segmentation systems is useful, I feel that it is overly semiotic and does not rely enough on insider voices.

Thus, based on my fieldwork with the members of Different Drummer Belly Dancers, I would like to address emic categories of aesthetics and function in belly dance, while recognizing that one aspect of the dance—costume—is often inseparable from other aspects such as music and performance contexts. I wrote my interview questions with the aim of accessing as much of my informants' perspectives as possible, based on the belief that they are rational, articulate people and hence quite capable of telling me why they do what they do. As it turned out, I was right. Their voices are present in this study wherever possible, and it is in part through my conversations with them that I devised my categories of analysis: segmentation of the body, function of costume pieces in motion, obtaining and putting together costumes, individual aesthetic expression, group costuming concerns, audience, and music.

### *Segmentation of the Body*

*The Tribal Bible* contains a chapter on costume and adornment, interspersed with pictures of American performers, people of different cultures, costume pieces, and diagrams and instructions for constructing one's own costume pieces; the text ranges from personal opinions about dance attire to an explication of the major components of tribal belly dance costuming. Those major components are headdresses, torso wear, skirts, pantaloons, hip gear, tassel belts, footwear, jewelry, makeup, and both face and body tattoos (including drawn-on facial tattoos, permanent body tattoos, and nonpermanent body art like henna).

When I asked the Different Drummer dancers whether they could tell me how they would classify the types of costume pieces they wore, as though their bodies were segmented in a mix-and-match fashion-plate scenario, their answers for the most part corresponded with the components given in *The Tribal Bible*. Common categories identified by the dancers included torso pieces, skirts and/or pantaloons, hip adornments, jewelry, hair/head adornments, and makeup. There was enough variety in their answers to give the impression that even these basic categories were open to individual interpretation. For instance, Heather told me that the components of a tribal costume were big pants, a “big, big, big” skirt, a midriff-baring top, tons of jewelry, facial drawings and makeup, “something on your head, and about eighty more pounds of jewelry on top of that,” and hip belts decorated with “fringe . . . or tassels . . . or coins . . . or babies!” (As she said that, she laughed.) David described his mental belly-dance-costume plates as a headpiece, something worn on the torso, pants, something on the hips, optional footwear, jewelry, and makeup.

Although these descriptions are minimal, they are representative of the answers I received in that they describe a system of segmenting the body through costume. Each individual dancer can elaborate upon the basic segmented areas. One interesting aspect of the tribal belly dance method of segmentation, in contrast to the contra dance method described by Horton and Jordan-Smith, is that no part of the body is considered peripheral in the tribal belly dance system except, perhaps, the legs and feet. While a belly dancer’s legs and feet play an integral role in dancing, they are less visible than other body parts during a performance. The majority of the Different Drummer dancers wear shoes only when performing outdoors, in a nightclub, or anywhere with a rough and potentially dangerous surface. Similarly, most of the dancers do not seem to give much thought to how their legs look while dancing, since only the vaguest outline of their legs shows through the voluminous skirts that so often characterize tribal costumes. There are two exceptions to this: when Ann S. and Molly wear flared jazz pants to dance in what Ann S. describes as the more “slinky” urban tribal style, which demands streamlined costumes; and when David describes actually liking the way his legs look while dancing and wishing to create a costume that would show more of his legs. These examples show that while there is general consensus about the parts of the body that tribal dancers costume, there is also room for individual variation.

#### *Function of Costume Pieces in Motion*

Heather’s facetious remark about hanging babies from a tribal belt reflects a common attitude I noticed: the bigger, the better, especially when it comes to the hips. This is due to the nature of belly dancing, which incorporates numerous hip movements. The costumes are consciously designed to emphasize hip movements both visually and auditorily. As Ann S. says, “A lot of the stuff on the lower body, well, everything that we put on our hips is designed to accent the movement that we’re doing with our hips. Whether it’s coins, or fringe, or just stuff that’s sparkly, it’s gotta be something that moves and draws the eye to that movement, and then it makes it look like you’re working a lot harder than you are because it gives the audience something to focus on.” This statement addresses the dual functions of hip adornment: to highlight the movements and be interesting to the audience.

Two more examples of hip adornment further demonstrate how the components of just one area of costuming—the hips—can accomplish multiple goals. Fringe, often worn on a belt around the hips, serves first to highlight hip movements, as Molly demonstrates when she states that she usually tries to wear a combination of long and short fringe: the short shows off tight hip-moves like shimmies, and the long accentuates spins (since the fringe flies up). Also, wearing different colors of fringe adds variety to a basic skirt. The costuming element of fringe, found in many but not all tribal costumes, thus serves a variety of purposes in emphasizing different movements and diversifying costumes. Coins or bells can also be an important part of tribal costumes, as Margaret shows when she says of hip adornments that “some kind of noise is really, really good.” This, she says, is because the audience enjoys the auditory experience of coins and the dancer can hear what she is doing (since specific movements will cause coins to make certain noises).

While the tribal dancers I interviewed tend to pay a lot of attention to the functions of their hip adornments, they pay less attention to what they wear on their torsos. Heather said that she tends to think the most about what is going on below her waist while dancing. Consequently, she prefers a utilitarian approach from the waist up, such as putting on a *choli* that stays put: “This is here, I don’t have to worry about it.” She described the *choli*, the basic tribal costuming component of the torso, thus: “A *choli* is a tight-fitting, midriff-baring top that was originally designed to wear under a sari. It stops right under your breasts, generally has an open back that’s tied, and long or short sleeves . . . It’s very comfortable to wear, it’s designed to be worn without a bra.” Not only is the *choli* designed to be worn without a bra, in India (especially in the northwestern states of Rajasthan and Gujarat) the *choli* functions as a brassier: it is a garment that contours and supports the breasts (Bhandari 2005:78–79). Margaret, Ann L., Ann S., and Molly all mentioned *cholis* to me as well while describing their costumes, to varying degrees discussing how comfortable *cholis* are. (Ann S. added that open-backed *cholis* provide good ventilation.) The other torso options they listed, such as coin bras (worn alone or over a *choli*), vests, and tunics, are worn because they allow a large range of motion. David, the only male member of the troupe, said that he either dances bare-chested or wears a cropped T-shirt, which he noted is not suitable for a more traditional tribal look.

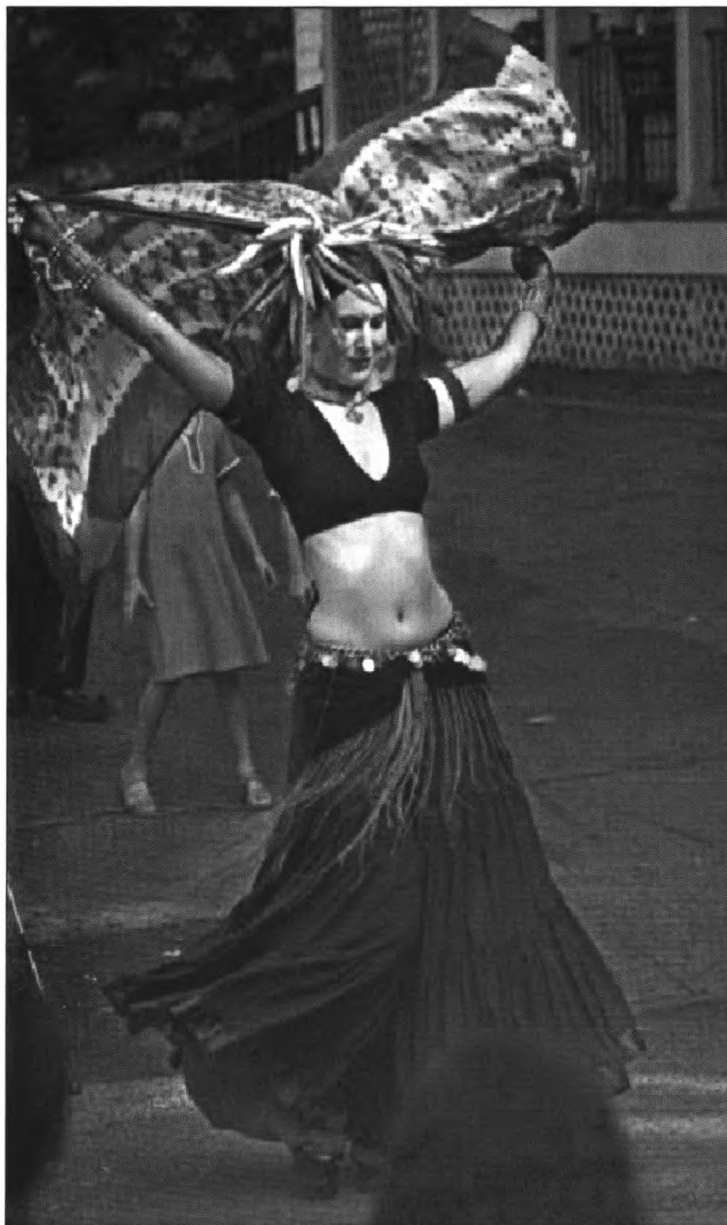
*Cholis* and other torso gear, however, provide a positive function by baring the dancer’s midriff so certain movements are clearly visible. By contrast, some aspects of tribal costumes are noteworthy because of their potential not to enhance the dance but rather to impede it. All of the dancers in Different Drummer own synthetic hairpieces, though they do not always wear them to perform, and many of them remarked during interviews that wearing fake dreadlocks or dreadfalls can complicate certain moves like hair tosses. Molly’s experience wearing metal body-adornments and fishnet sleeves provides another striking example of impediment: “I’ve gotten my arms stuck to my hip before in a choreography . . . With the fishnets, you have to watch getting your hands close to your body because they’ll get stuck on things, I’ve learned that from experience.” Ann S. had a similar experience while dancing with a cane, one of the props accepted among belly dancers as standard:<sup>6</sup>

Dancing with props can definitely affect what I decide to wear. There was a while when I was doing a cane solo with Pangaea [another tribal troupe in Bloomington], and I found that wearing the big skirt and wearing fringe were definitely not good things when I was doing the cane dance, because if you



have it down by the side of your body a lot, I do a lot of things where I rest it on the floor or kick it up or dance around it or twirl it, and there was one gig where it got horribly tangled up in my fringe, and it was not good! So in that case I usually try to go with a little bit less stuff around my hips.

Thus belly dancers must take into account not only how their costume pieces will interact with everything else they wear, but also how their costumes will interact with props.



Molly dancing at the 4<sup>th</sup> Street Festival of the Arts, Bloomington, 2004. Some of the layers Molly is wearing include red pantaloons under a black skirt, a blue fringed scarf on her hips with a coin belt over it, a black choli, and fishnet sleeves. Photo by Clinton Wolfe.

The troupe tends to use props in group choreography only occasionally, and then usually veils. For solos, however, the dancer is free to use any kind of prop; in addition to cane and veil, Molly and Ann S. each mentioned dancing with a sword. Molly noted that when she dances with a sword, one of her biggest considerations is her legwear, because she often does floorwork and needs to be able to lower herself to the ground and rise without using her hands to rearrange her costume. For such dances, she will usually wear a scarf on her head because when she balances a sword there, it tends to feel like its weight is crushing her skull: the scarf provides a small but welcome layer of cushioning. Ann S. agreed with this costume choice, adding that because hair is slippery, wearing a scarf or turban helps keep the sword from sliding. In regard to veil, Ann S. noted that she's gotten her veil caught in hairsticks in the past, so she has learned to modify her headdress to account for the motions involved in directing a veil—which usually exceeds two yards in length—around her body while dancing.

The veil more than any other prop has an additional function outside of the performance context: it can be used as an accessory, especially as a cover-up. I have observed some of the Different Drummer dancers wearing their veils wrapped around their costumed bodies before and after they appear on stage. David's perspective is interesting: he noted that he has customized his veil use such that instead of draping the veil around his torso as most dancers do, he knots it tightly around his arm or waist, leading to a unique look that has become part of his costume.

#### *Obtaining and Putting Together Costumes*

Assembling tribal belly dance costumes according to both the system of body segmentation described above and the functions of costume pieces is a complex activity. Some of the factors that dancers must consider are whether they will purchase or make the item, how much the item or its parts will cost, and how much use they will be able to get out of it. Of my informants, Heather, Molly, and Ann S. sew many of their pieces, while David's partner sews for him, Ann L.'s mother sews for her, and Margaret's friends sew for her on commission. The most commonly sewn costume pieces are pantaloons, skirts, cholis, and belts, since all these can be made according to patterns and then customized to individual tastes. Heather makes those basic pieces but she doesn't make jewelry, so she purchases it. Ann S. also purchases her jewelry. Molly remarked that in addition to sewing basic costume pieces, she enjoys making coin bras and tassel belts because they're very expensive to purchase, and she can personalize them; she does not make her jewelry, though, because her mother makes jewelry for her.

Regardless of whether they sew or purchase their costumes, the dancers of Different Drummer pay close attention to the fabric. Heather likes fabrics that are heavy and "fairly indestructible" due both to her personal aesthetic of liking costumes that have a weighty look and to the utility of having costumes that will last. Margaret likes machine-washable fabrics that are also affordable. Ann S. notes that when she's doing a traditional-style tribal costume, she tends to use natural fibers like cotton, silk, and linen, though for accent pieces, she might use something synthetic, shiny, or textured. She added that anything that's going to be against the skin should be a natural fiber so that it can breathe. On the same

theme, Margaret told a story about a pair of satin pants that caused her to overheat so much that she had to have them altered to include a cotton crotch and lace side panels. Ann L., who does not sew, still puts a lot of thought into the fabrics she prefers for her costumes:

I really like softer materials, like chiffon, because chiffon is the cheap alternative to silk [laughs]. I love silk, and part of that is just because I'm in love with Dalia [a well-known belly dancer], and Dalia loves silk. Silk is really beautiful, I love silk veils, I only have a couple of silk skirts. And a lot of my stuff is lining material, which you wouldn't think would be good but it's really cheap because it's only, like, a dollar-fifty a yard and it's very light; and it's, like, silky-satiny, so it's this very light, flowy material that looks great, and it's cheap, and I love it. And then I also have several skirts that have a bunch of different layers, and so it's got, like, two layers of chiffon, and then a layer of a heavy knit, not super heavy, but heavy-for-dance-costume-heavy, and the reason I do that is because chiffon, where it's very pretty and it flows, it's not heavy enough to fly up, so I did several layers of chiffon over a heavy layer, so that the heavy layer when I spin will push the chiffon up, so that you still get that pretty, flowy, angelic thing, but it's high.

In that statement, Ann L. mentions these crucial points: how dancers adapt materials to their own ends even though the materials may be marketed and priced according to other, perceived functions; how dancers may be influenced or inspired by the costumes of dancers they admire; and how, again, movement is a prime function of costume. Ann S. addresses cost when she discusses her ways of selecting fabric to sew skirts (see above). She chooses simpler fabrics so they will be affordable; she points out that because skirts tend to be covered by fringe and are not against the skin, the appearance and breathability of their fabric are not as important as they might otherwise be.

Since tribal belly dance costumes are largely assembled part by part according to the segmentation system, the components can be acquired at different times and combined in different ways. Costume pieces can be purchased through specialty vendors (for instance, Margaret mentioned the belly dance costume company L. Rose Designs, whose stretch-velvet cholis she likes), or other kinds of clothing can be adapted for use as belly dance costumes. David, for example, purchased a pair of sleek, black linen pants in a department store; he expects to incorporate the pants into a belly dance costume. Similarly, Ann L. said that she buys cheap glitzy jewelry at Claire's (an inexpensive chain store) but also commissions ethnic-looking pieces from a bead specialist she knows. She then decides which kinds of jewelry to wear depending on the "look" she is aiming for with the rest of her costume, which can range from traditional tribal style to more glamorous.

The mix-and-match aspect of tribal belly dance costumes, however, means that there are multiple potential costume combinations. The dancers view this in a positive light. Margaret remarked that she loved the "versatile style" of tribal costuming and chuckled, "I mash everything, I modify everything!" One deeper implication of tribal costuming, especially when one considers hair, jewelry, and makeup in addition to clothing, is that each performance costume is ephemeral. The dancers purchase different kinds of makeup and facial decorations (such as liquid eyeliner, powder, glitter, *bindis*, and stick-on jewels) following guidelines similar to those that govern clothing purchases (such as cost, inspiration from dancers they admire—including fellow troupe members—and aesthetic appeal). What is interesting about applying makeup as opposed to donning clothing is that while one can wear the same choli for different dances, one cannot always guarantee consistent results with makeup or hairstyle. The dancers often find something they like and

use it for a while, but because skin and hair are variable surfaces, the body art associated with belly dance performances necessarily changes from one occasion to the next.



Heather at the Allerton Bellydance Festival, summer 2005. Heather is wearing facial tattoos and a bindi, fake dreadlocks and cowrie shells in her hair, a scarf and flowers (obscured by the veil draped over her head), and a choker. Photo by Libby Bulloff.

### *Individual Aesthetic Expressions*

When I questioned the dancers of Different Drummer about what they liked to wear and why, they were articulate about their costume choices. The topic of color provides them a focus for discussing personal aesthetics. For example, Margaret likes colors that contrast with her fair skin, so she tends to wear dark, rich, jewel tones like blues, purples, and reds. On the other hand, David is drawn to bright colors, especially orange, so he tries to incorporate those colors in his costumes. Such preferences, based on what appeals to the individual as well as what the individual considers flattering, also change over time. Ann S. noted that she likes earth tones and jewel tones; she used to hate red but recently went through a red-and-black phase. She found one red piece of clothing that appealed to her and subsequently created an entire outfit around it. She joked that every belly dancer she met has gone through a red-and-black phase. Color phases among belly dancers are common;

Margaret has been in a red phase for a while, according to her own admission and the statements of her troupemates.

In addition to favorite colors and color combinations, each dancer has favorite clothing combinations. These choices are based on the dancer's comfort levels and personality. Ann L. said that she likes to wear smaller tops, whereas Heather prefers cholis with more coverage (e.g., a piece of fabric draped over her belly). David always dances with something on his head, either fake hair or a turban, and he further ornaments his white dreadfalls with a pair of fake horns and a headband decorated with mirrors, coins, and embroidery. He is clear about his reasons for choosing these items: the horns have "a Native American feel," he says, explaining that the big white puff of hair and horns resemble a white buffalo, while the mirrored headband suggests traditional Oriental associations of belly dance. Yet dancers also make aesthetic choices that are privately meaningful to them since the signs are not directed at, visible to, or comprehensible to anybody else. David wears an anklet with charms on it that are meaningful to him, but it does not always show beneath the hem of his pants; Heather wears her grandmother's antique jewelry because she likes the sense of connection it imparts to her; and Ann L. is drawn to chunky, ethnic-looking jewelry because she is a metalsmith and likes things that look handcrafted. Yet as Margaret pointed out when I inquired specifically about costumes as personal expressions, meaning extends beyond codified signs and symbols: "I mean, anything that you buy, that you like, is in a way reflecting you."

One aspect of tribal costuming that seemed to resonate with these dancers is how flattering the clothing is. Margaret states, "The costumes are pretty. The costumes look good on any woman. They also look good on any guy. They're very flattering clothes, it's a very flattering look." Molly characterizes tribal costumes as "forgiving," saying that one can gain or lose weight and the costumes remain flattering. Additionally, one can mix and match the tops and skirts for numerous arrangements; there are many ways to recombine tribal pieces, says Molly, "so they can suit pretty much anybody's body type." The potential to individualize the tribal belly dance costume is one of the reasons for its appeal, but costuming choices often simply reduce to what looks good. As David says, "Really, I think I make the final decision based on what I think looks good on me." In this way, choosing tribal costuming is like choosing clothing for any occasion: the wearer's ultimate goal is aesthetic.

### *Group Costuming Concerns*

With such a diversity of personal tastes, the dancers of Different Drummer face challenges every time they costume for an event. Margaret stated: "As the troupe director, I feel that people should wear costumes that they want to wear, and that we don't have to spend a lot of money on . . . The reason I called the troupe Different Drummer is that I want everyone to be different; I don't want everyone to be the same because we're not the same." As a result, Margaret noted, "When we first danced together, we wore all kinds of bizarre different things, and then we realized . . . it's good to have some kind of uniform look." This "uniform look" can be achieved in various ways. David remarked that before he joined Different Drummer, he always noticed "the crazy dreaded hair" that some or all of the dancers wore, and he felt that it gave the troupe an edge. Heather concurred; she feels that

the hairpieces have become symbolic of Different Drummer as a troupe. They are made locally by graphic designer Libby Bulloff, from various inexpensive materials such as felted wool and synthetic hair, usually made in a dreadlock style; other hairpieces are made with tubular crin (crinoline), which is more expensive, with materials such as plastic, rubber tubing, and foam incorporated into them. "They're very big, very bright, very distinctive," Heather says.<sup>7</sup>

Besides finances, other limitations inform the troupe members' decisions on how to present themselves. Since the troupe's costuming is done by consensus—"considering what people have in their closets," as Molly said—one strategy is to create costume themes for the troupe using similar colors and costume items. This could be as simple as asking all the female dancers to wear black skirts.

### *Audience*

One factor that is very important to the dancers in Different Drummer when deciding what to wear for a performance is the audience for that event. As Molly said, "Our costume is really venue-specific." As examples, she noted that the troupe tries to dress "period" for Renaissance Faires, and "edgy" for Stimuli, an erotic event. Ann L. mentioned that the troupe danced at Gencon, a gaming and science-fiction/fantasy convention in Indianapolis. The troupe members' costumes were, she said, "very different [from one another] but that's because all the solos were very different; but that's what goes at that convention anyway." Perhaps one of the reasons that audience forms such a significant context for Different Drummer's costuming choices is that belly dance is not always a normal part of erotic or gaming events: hence the dancers must cater to the crowd to assert their right to be there.

### *Music*

The final factor in Different Drummer's costuming that I will consider is music. Molly stated that before choosing which costume she will wear for a solo piece, she first decides what her music is. Music choice may shape an entire costume or just influence an accessory. Heather described a group performance at the Eroticon Ball: "We did the Moulin Rouge song, so we wore feather boas . . . as a nod toward the piece." Ann L. likewise linked music, choreography, and costume, but more broadly, when she stated: "I try to make my costumes fit with whatever it is that I'm dancing."

In some cases, music and audience contexts align so closely as to seem inseparable. Each of the original founders of Different Drummer (Margaret, Ann L., Heather, and Molly) mentioned during interviews the "goth gig" they danced at. There, they danced to punk rock and heavy metal songs, and consequently chose what Molly described as a "shredded, DIY look." (DIY stands for "Do It Yourself," a moral code and aesthetic associated with the punk movement.) Gothic music and costuming have had a broad influence on Different Drummer; all of the members discussed the ways in which the gothic aesthetic is compatible with the tribal aesthetic. Wearing fishnet stockings as sleeves is one example of this overlap. Some of the members are more personally attracted to the gothic aesthetic whereas others appreciate the sense of drama that gothic dress shares with tribal costuming.<sup>8</sup>

### Conclusions

Costuming is an important part of belly dance not only because the costumes can accentuate or hinder certain movements but also because the costumes have the potential to express various aspects of individual and group identity. Moreover, inflections of identity along with gender issues color how belly dance is performed and perceived. Whether men can belly dance is still an unresolved issue in the American belly dance community (despite David of Different Drummer and other male belly dancers who claim the right to participate in the dance and its discourses). Belly dance is not universally accepted as a viable form of expression in America, to the extent that it is sometimes perceived as hypersexual and inappropriate in certain contexts. Most belly dancers do not appreciate the implication that they are doing something akin to striptease in order to please or seduce a male audience. Hence representations become even more important to contest stereotypes and reclaim female spaces (see Bock 2005, chapters 2–4).

Perhaps most importantly, belly dance costumes serve as a vehicle of communication and meaning-making between dancers. The members of Different Drummer repeatedly refer to one another when discussing their inspiration for trying new things. They also ask one another for help with sewing and with applying makeup, and they freely loan and borrow costume pieces and props amongst themselves. In this sense, the troupe's costumes create and manifest a system, a mosaic, an interlocked web of community and friendship. The larger community surrounding the troupe—the dancers' friends, families, students, teachers, costume suppliers, and photographers—is a part of this network, as belly dance does not happen in a social vacuum. The dancers are literally wearing their affiliations when they don costume pieces made by friends and family. Additionally, as some members mentioned, they experience a feeling of camaraderie when dancing together, a feeling that is in large part due to the collective-improvisational aspects of tribal dance.

Belly dance costumes connect not only the dancers and their immediate community but also entire regions. Appropriation is an issue in tribal belly dance, as it draws on elements from cultures around the world. Heather emphasizes the fusion aspect of the dance when she states: "Because it's American, we don't as a group of dancers have to step lightly, we don't have to think 'I'm very sorry, I don't mean to offend you or your culture or your people or your thousand years of tradition when I shimmy to this particular song. I hope it's okay, I don't speak Arabic, I'm sorry.' I'm a white female in America, I feel apologetic to peoples of other cultures . . . Yeah, it's sad, but there it is." Labeling belly dance a *fusion* dance allows the artists to take liberties with cultural materials outside of their traditional contexts without having to apologize for colonizing or imperializing discourses as Heather does in her quote above. Djoumahna states in *The Tribal Bible*: "It is of the utmost importance that Tribal Bellydancers, as fusion artists, construct their costumes to reflect as many of the cultures and sources of inspiration that we can *without attempting to copy any particular one of these sources*" (2003:86, italics in original). This attitude, which I find prevalent among the dancers in Different Drummer, seems to me to be about creating a community without taking away from anybody else. Tribal belly dancers borrow widely for their costuming influences but attempt to do so respectfully and creatively.

As this brief case study of a tribal belly dance troupe's costumes has shown, the dancers of Different Drummer encourage individual and group expression through costuming and related aspects of the dance. They seemed to genuinely enjoy discussing their costume choices and performances, a fact that leads me to believe that belly dance costumes are an integral part of the pleasure of the dance, if not also one of its initial attractions. Many of my informants remarked that their first encounters with tribal belly dance were very powerful experiences—in part due to the aesthetic elements of the dance, both in movement and costuming. The clean, crisp lines of the tribal belly dance costumes paired with the dance style's strong and graceful movements make up an aesthetic system that appeals to people on various levels. Different Drummer's departures from standard (I hesitate to say "traditional") tribal belly dance costumes continue to evolve, as these dancers collaborate on personal and group needs, while simultaneously validating and negotiating the aesthetics of an American fusion movement.

### Notes

1. American Tribal Style (ATS) was pioneered by the San Francisco troupe FatChance BellyDance, formed in 1987. The tribal troupes that have followed FatChance's innovations vary in the degree to which they utilize FatChance's dress code and system of cues while dancing.

2. Zenuba gives an extended definition of the ATS costume that is interesting for its oppositional argument:

The ATS costume can be contrasted with the popular and glamorous look of the Egyptian-style costume, a style that swept the country during the 1980s and remains popular today. This popular costume style often features, for example, beaded fringe, sequins and sequin appliqués and costume pieces made from iridescent or diaphanous fabrics. In contrast, the ATS costume incorporates natural fabrics, fringe scarves, and antique jewelry. Diverse costume elements are drawn from many sources, including Berber culture, or from the Afghan or Moroccan peoples and culture, and elements from India and Pakistan, such as fabric embroidered with shisha mirrors. A costume often incorporates voluminous skirts, pantaloons, and a *choli* top, and may include tassel belts, coins, long rayon fringe, and Turkish or Russian scarves. (2000:38)

3. The troupe's Web site can be found at <http://www.ddbd.org>.

4. However, during the final stages of this study, Heather announced her intention to resign from the troupe in order to pursue American Tribal Style exclusively (online communication, December 16, 2005). As of the first draft of this article, Molly has also left the troupe. She, Heather, and Ann S. (who remains a member of Different Drummer) have formed a more strictly tribal-style troupe called Dark Side Tribal.

5. Each of the members of Different Drummer has different backgrounds and goals regarding belly dance. Briefly, Margaret has been dancing for eleven years and has been doing tribal exclusively for the past three years. Heather has been dancing off and on for nine to ten years, and has been doing tribal belly dance for the past three years. David started taking belly dance classes one year ago. Molly has been belly dancing for about five years but did other forms of dance before that. Ann S. has been belly dancing for four years but has only been doing tribal style for three years. Ann L. has been belly dancing for seven years (she did other forms of dance before that), and began doing tribal style four years ago. The dates can be ascertained by keeping in mind that the interviews took place in December of 2005.

6. I base my notions of what is "standard" in belly dance not only on seven years of personal experience taking classes, teaching, and performing but also on the articles in *The Belly Dance Book: Rediscovering the Oldest Dance* (Richards 2000). That book includes a section on props that lists the cane among other props like veils, swords, finger cymbals, candles, and snakes.



7. Libby Bulloff also photographs for the troupe. The Web site where she sells her hairpieces can be found at <http://www.exoskeletoncabaret.com>.

8. Molly, for instance, said: "I tend to lean a little bit more towards the dark colors and things in day-to-day dress, and my dance persona reflects my day-to-day persona too, just the black with certain colors' accents, that's pretty much how my daily wardrobe goes as well." Ann L. stated: "I think tribal especially lends itself to the goth look, and the reason is that it's so dramatic. And that's what I always think of when I think of goth—is just, drama, drama, drama." She also mentioned the dark colors and clean, crisp lines of the goth look. Heather had yet another view of the overlap: Both gothic and tribal styles, she says, are opulent and lush, "to the point of rotting if they were fruit!"

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