

Naming the Dance

Laura Osweiler (Amara)

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What to call this dance is perhaps the most contested issue in the American-Middle Eastern dance community.¹ The employment of different names sketches out the complex issues of how the dance has changed over time and what it means to its practitioners and society. When I write about the Middle East and the United States, I am, of course, referring to incredibly diverse cultural areas with fluid and malleable boundaries. Each region, country, city, and sometimes, even sections of a city has its own dance style. The debate also lies in the capitalist, postcolonialist, and Orientalist power structure of arbitrarily marking geographical areas into the East and the West, in which the Occident traditionally holds authority over the Orient. The conception of American-Middle Eastern dance resides in this differentiation and mixing of the East and West. The name I am looking for needs to encompass a variety of dance forms found in a huge geographical area which have close ties and complex interrelationships of shared history, and cultural traits. The appropriated countries include: Algeria, Bahrain, Egypt, Iran, Iraq, Israel, Jordan, Kuwait, Lebanon, Libya, Morocco, Oman, Palestine, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Syria, Tunisia, United Arabs Emirates, and Yemen. Further problems arise when trying to incorporate into the name dances found in the United States, Germany, England, and Australia, which are derived from the Middle East. In these transposed homes, the dances have gone through transformations such as blending of regional styles and the addition of forms such as Modern, Jazz, and Ballet.

In the Middle East, there are several genres and styles of dance. Today, the professional solo female dance is called in Arabic Raqs al-Sharqi (Dance of the East/Orient) and, or Raqs al-Arabi (Arabic Dance). The dancer may wear costumes including the bedlah (two-piece outfit), gowns, and beledi (one-piece folkloric outfit) and performs in many venues such as concerts, clubs, restaurants, parties, weddings, and mawalid (Saint's Day Festivals). Raqs al-Sharki, often employed by Americans when using a native term, is controversial in itself as it represents the compliance by the East to use Western markers to define themselves.

Folkloric dances, like Raqs al-Sharqi, can be performed by professionals and non-professionals. Though there are scores of folkloric dances, setting contexts, and costumes, they can generally be placed into two categories. Under the first, Folk dance, are the multitude of styles found in various villages and tribes. The second, Staged-Folk dance, was developed in the late 1950s, early 1960s. Mahmoud Reda was the first to present folk and village dances on stage, in Egypt, 1959. According to Farida Fahmy, principle dancer: "Prior to the extensive field research undertaken by Mahmoud Reda in 1965, and before the introduction of these dances to the public through his work, the majority of Egyptians and Europeans were unaware of the various

dance traditions that existed (and still exist) in which women do participate [and I would add men as well]."3 Reda did not try to recreate the dances, but "were his own vision of the movement qualities of the Egyptians;"4 a representation and not necessarily the actual dance found in the village and tribe. Since then many National Folkloric troupes have formed. Most people, such as Egyptian choreographer, performer, and teacher, Viviane Hamamdjian, do not call this Staged-Folk dance, just Folk dance. There are many distinctions between the Folk dance and the Staged-Folk Dance such as: context, content, usage of space, number of participants, choreography where there may have been improvisation, lighting, changes in costuming, and addition of ballet moves and theatricality. Staged-Folk dance, combining Folk dance and Ballet, helps bridge a gap between the masses and the elite. According to Fahmy: "The elite and upper classes of Egypt typically expressed embarrassment toward their native dances in general and towards belly dancing in particular. One of the causes of embarrassment is the impact the West has had on Egyptian culture. Many of the educated Egyptians to this day aspire to, and imitate the Western way of life."5 Both Raqs al-Sharki and Staged-Folk dance blend elements from each other and in fact, performances often have a demonstration of the other.

In the Middle East, Ballet took over sixty years to stand on its own merits. Though, Giselle, the first ballet in Cairo, was staged at The Cairo Opera House in 1882,6 there was not a state sponsored school until the mid-twentieth century.7 Metin And writes: in Turkey, "In 1947 Dame Ninette de Valois of British Royal Ballet was invited by government to set up school in the State Conservatory of Music and Drama,"8 now the Ankara State Ballet. "In the 1965/66 season, the first large-scale ballet (At the Fountain) was set to music by a Turkish composer, Ferit Tuzun... was choreographed for the company by de Valois using elements of Turkish folkdance.... In 1968, for the first time, the company performed a ballet (The Wheel) by a native choreographer, Sait Sokmen."9

Outside of dance for dance's sake or dance for entertainment, there are also a number of Middle Eastern movement events which center around trance and states of ecstasy, such as the Turkish Mevlevi/ Whirling Dervishes, the Egyptian Zar, and the Moroccan Guedra.10 With regards to these events, many Westerners implement an etic viewpoint of: "[j]ust about anything that cannot be classified as 'ordinary' movement can be, and has been called 'dancing.'"11 But from an emic angle, specifically for the Sufis, these rituals are not seen as dance: as explained by Katib Celebi (1609-57) (via Metin And): "The orthodox Ulema have classed those whirlings as 'dancing', and have pronounced it forbidden.... The Sufis begin by saying that the definition of dancing is not applicable.... The cyclic motion is a form of motion...."12 By not naming it dance, the participants attain an amount of religious acceptance. The same idea can be seen in the recitation of the Koran and the call to prayer. Many musicians outside of the culture call it music, but for those of the religion it certainly is not music. In regards to the Zar and the Guedra, the articles I have come across call them dance. Perhaps we should look to Adrienne Kaeppler, who replaces the word dance with movement for these settings in question.13

Most Americans outside and inside of the American-Middle East dance community, call it Belly dance. Currently, there are two versions of how the phrase Belly dance originated in the United States. The one, which holds most validity, is that Sol Bloom coined the term based on the translation of the French term *danse du ventre* - the dance of the stomach. Ibrahim Farrah deduced another theory. He believed Belly dance is "a corruption of the Arabic word, *beledi*,"¹⁴ an Egyptian term for people living in the villages and, or lower class citizens of the cities. Shira writes that it is only a coincidence that *beledi* and belly sound alike and was in fact coined by Sol Bloom.¹⁵

A main contention with the name Belly dance is its history and growth out of Europe's romanticized, exoticized, and colonial rule of the Middle East. For example, although dancers were from a variety of countries, the dance was placed under one name: *danse du ventre*/belly dance. This term does not take into account the vast styles, genres, and names present throughout the Middle East. The term also depreciates and dissects the performers by focusing on a scandalous body part, the stomach. Westerners discounted that Middle Eastern dance, like any dance, uses all parts of the body. And by emphasizing one body part the performer's body becomes dismantled, further objectifying the dancer by removing any sense of individuality and legitimacy. Through the power of renaming and homogenizing the different styles under one heading, Europeans took control of the dances. At the turn of the century, *danse du ventre*/belly dance referred to what is today considered folkloric or ethnic dance. Today, it generally stands for the cabaret, solo female club, and restaurant dancer (*Raqs al-Sharqi*). From the images given to the public by the male gaze and mediated through mass media, the term Belly dance conjures up the image of a voluptuous woman (large breasts and hips with a small waist), wearing a glittery two-piece costume, moving her body in a sensual, if not a sexual manner, to exotic music. It also brings with it connotations of a woman dancing to entice men and has no other value. This power and control created such a strong stereotype that many people still consider Belly dance to be the only dance form in the Middle East. As contemporary dancers are left with this confusing legacy and legitimacy, some discard the term Belly dance because of its history while others embrace it because of its usage by the general public.

A more contemporary (yet falling out of favor), is Oriental dance or *Danse Orientale*. This term attempts to cover Cabaret (solo style)¹⁶ and Folkloric styles. Its wide spread usage was due mainly to Farrah who in the dance magazine, *Arabesque*, repeatedly called others to abandon the term Belly dance. To show his impact, in a 1977 issue, Farrah writes that since the magazine began in 1975, the frequency of the use of the term Belly dance in advertisements had decreased from 70% to 30%.¹⁷ The name Oriental dance has many problems due to its various meanings. First of all, according to Morroe Berger, it is "a label apparently designed to lend modesty by shifting the point of reference from anatomy to geography."¹⁸ Second, the Orient can include the geographical regions of the Middle East/Near East and the Far East. Third, it does not take in account the power of the West naming something in the East and continues to denote "the high-handed executive attitude of nineteenth-century and early-twentieth century

European colonialism."¹⁹ But what Oriental dance does represent is the beginning trend of American-Middle Eastern dancers debating terminology. By this point in time, American styles of Middle Eastern dance were well established and the debates mark the beginning of finding a source of power through self-definition.

I will use Middle Eastern dance (the term Near East is also applicable here but is not as widely utilized) to connote the dances and movement events in and from the vast Middle Eastern region. Like the previous terms, this one also has its difficulties. First of all, once again Middle Easterners did not create the name. Secondly, geographically it may exclude the dances found in other countries while continuing the Western homogenizing of this area. Thirdly, when one says Middle, the question arises, the Middle of what? The term continues to place the West at the center: the Middle East as a region between Europe (West) and the Far East. I will not deny that Americans are taking, appropriating, assimilating, usurping, consuming, and manipulating dances and ideas for their own needs and creativity. But at the same time, there is a sense of power for the American-Middle Eastern dance community to self-name and self-define. Here dancers are wishing to define their own way of appropriating Middle Eastern dance against the male colonialists' representation. Though Patricia Hill Collins writes that Black feminists can find strength and power by re-labeling themselves, this could be said of any group. She writes: "[b]ecause, self-definition is key to individual and group empowerment, using an epistemology that cedes the power of self-definition to other groups, no matter how well-meaning, in essence perpetuates Black women's subordination."²⁰

For the dance styles found in the United States, I use American-Middle Eastern dance. This term refers to styles, contexts, and expectations, which differ and overlap with the dances found in the Middle East. Because the dance has been taken out of context and influenced by individual needs and power relations between the East and West, it has formed its own identity. (This can be seen in not only comparing the dance styles but in also how the American styles impact the Middle East). In the past hundred and twenty years, American-Middle Eastern dancers have built their own culture with a foundation in Orientalism, Feminism, ethnic diversity, innovation, and preservation. The community has created its own rules of performance, unique styles, and authorities. Distinct, and yet related to the mainstream stereotyped image of the Belly dancer, the community has also designed its own stereotypes, which are commodified and sold to the general public and its participants. This representation of a dance for women, by women, concerning women's issues, is continued through teaching, writings, videos, and performances.

In the United States there are many styles of Middle Eastern dance: Folk dance; Staged-Folk dance; solo female style (cabaret/Raqs al-Sharqi), and hybrids. Because this is a transplanted art form, the majority of the American Cabaret dancers blend regional styles together and create hybrids with Jazz, Ballet, and, Modern. Michelle Forner divides American-Middle Eastern dance into four categories: theatrical, ethnic, fantasy, and spiritual and into two socio-economic groups: amateur and professional. A professional is seen as one who can make a living by

dancing and teaching, is individually creative, and has knowledge of the dancers' culture. An amateur is seen as one who participates part-time, has "some level of consistent, [and] active use of the core skills and knowledge of the field."²¹ Like with the dance styles themselves, there is also overlap between professional and amateur divisions. Some performers, due to either cultural or economic reasons, may call themselves amateur or semi-profession even though they have the knowledge and talent of a professional.

Though most professional dancers have their own distinctive individual styles, the American-Middle Eastern dance community has produced unique genres. Besides a solo, female cabaret style, another, originally called California Tribal, American Tribal maintains the American eclectic manner. Growing out of the influence of Troupe Bal Anat, directed by Jamila Salimpour in Californian Renaissance fairs during the 1960s and 1970s, this style in the past fifteen years has been re-popularized by the San Francisco group Fat Chance Belly Dance and has since blossomed into a national phenomena. American Tribal is similar to American Cabaret in that both are a conglomeration of different styles and creative elements. The difference comes not only in music choice but basing the costume in historical wear or tribal outfits and the avoidance of glitzy cabaret material. Fat Chance Belly Dance has standardized the costume with their usage of coins and tassel belts, Indian cholis, vests, full skirts, large North African and Afghani jewelry, turbans, and North African facial tattoos. Part of this genre's appeal is that many women form groups, which are not necessarily about performing in public or making a living. Rather, they are often about building unity through shared experiences and movement. For some there is also a connection between Tribal style and the more spiritual side of dance. Once again, not necessarily a public performative style, it is about getting in touch with oneself, nature, and, or looking for a goddess/matriarchal past (in hopes of finding that there was and will be a non-patriarchal society).

1. See Farrah 1977b; Forner 1993; Stone 1991; Carlton 1994; Buck 1991.
2. Nieuwkerk 1995, 47.
3. Fahmy, 8.
4. Fahmy, 24.
5. Fahmy, 12.
6. Saleh 1998, 496.
7. See Saleh 1979b.
8. And 1976, 115.
9. And 1998, 212.
10. The Zar was outlawed in Egypt in 1983, and 1992 in Sudan. The Mevlevi sect was banned September 2, 1925.

11. Williams, 7.
12. And 1976, 34.
13. Kaepler, 88-90.
14. Farrah 1977b, 3.
15. Shira, n.d.
16. Many Middle Easterners consider cabaret to be a low class term.
17. Farrah 1977b, 3.
18. Berger 1966, 43.
19. Said 1978, 2.
20. Collins, 34.
21. Forner 1993, 48. Citation from: Stebbins, Robert. (1979). *Amateurs: On the margin between work and leisure*. Beverly Hills: Sage Publications.

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