

## Naming the Dance

By Amara/L. Osweiler



### Part 3:

I generally 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 again, 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 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 the Middle Eastern dance community as well. 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."<sup>20</sup>

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/Raks al-Sharki), 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.

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 now known as American-Turkish, another, originally called California Tribal, American Tribal Style (ATS) 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 phenomenon. American Tribal is similar to American Cabaret in that both are a conglomeration of different styles and creative elements. The differences between the two styles comes not only in music choice but also in 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). In the past few years, ATS has expanded its definition to include styles such as urban tribal, fusion tribal, and cab-tribal.

A new and emerging form of dance is experimental Middle Eastern dance with its many offshoots such as fusion and Gothic belly dance. Though it has roots in traditional forms and styles of Middle Eastern dance, it strives to explore new spaces. Unlike fusion that generally takes two styles of dance and seamlessly puts them together (like Flamenco and Arabic dance), experimental Middle Eastern dance explores and pushes what Middle Eastern dance is and can be. Dancers investigate the boundaries and barriers of the dance by playing with choreographic and improvisational structures, music, movement, and costuming. Experimental Middle Eastern dance takes the experimental processes found in all Middle Eastern dances and puts them out for all to see.

As I explore the various styles and names of Middle Eastern dance, I learn about the historical and social usage of the dance in a variety of cultures. By considering how people employ and define themselves and others, I see how the act of naming is a powerful tool. It is an act, a motion, a declaration that has various political and socio-economic implications. There is no correct word or name. And that is what I think is amazing about this dance. Its fluid and changing nature allows it to cross over temporal and geographical borders. By tracing its name, each of us can discover where we dance in large historical, social, and political contexts.

*Amara has performed as a soloist and in Middle Eastern Dance companies all over the United States. She teaches accredited courses on dance appreciation and Middle Eastern dance at a number of universities and colleges. Amara is also the Director of Ya Helewa! Dance Company and Producer of An Evening of Experimental Middle Eastern Dance concert and videos. Currently, Amara is a doctoral candidate at UCR's PhD program in Dance History and Theory. See her websites: [www.amaradances.com](http://www.amaradances.com) and [www.eemed.com](http://www.eemed.com)*

#### End Notes

20. Collins, 34.

21. Forner 1993, 48. Citation from: Stebbins, Robert. (1979).

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