

Belly Dancing: Where Did It *Really* Come From?

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When I first walked into the world of Belly Dancing, receiving its enchanting and sensual expressions of feminine power and liberation of the soul through the spirit of dance, I felt an immediate connection to the rites and rituals of the Ancient Khemites, my beloved ancestors. My first teacher told me that there is discussion about the origins of the dance, and there is constant debate between an Egyptian (Ancient Khemetic) vs. a Turkish (ancient Canaanite) origin. With all things debated in life, there is always the burden of proof that needs to be considered...however, being as ancient as it is, belly dancing can only be traced by identifying cultural aspects and revisiting timelines that will be sure to portray undeniable evidence about its origins.

Most historians and artists agree that Belly Dance is 6,000+ years old...evidence that takes it back to Ancient Khemet, the only civilization that was alive at that time. To the ancient Khemites, dance was an essential part of their culture. People from every social class were exposed to music and dancing. Dance types included: religious, non-religious festival, banquet, harem, combat, and street dances. Temple dancing existed also...more likely where chamber candle performance came in. An old Khemetic story about the gods & goddesses (the NTRU) gives suggestion as to how dance became a part of fertility cults:

The Sun-god Ra was about to become the father of triplets. The mother, Ruditdidit as the wife of Ra-usir (Ra combined with the manifestation of ASR) was a priest of Ra (or other form of). Rausir "did not know" that the father of the children was his beloved Ra. When Ruditdidit felt labor pains, Ra sent four goddesses (Ast, Nebt-Het, Sekhmet & Het-Hru) and the god Khnumu to help her. In order to arrive unrecognized, the goddesses transformed themselves into street musicians and dancers. The god

Khnumu assumed the role of their porter. When the group arrived, they were informed that the lady of the house was suffering pangs of childbirth, they replied, "let us in, for lo, we are skilled in midwifery."



In Ancient Khemetic culture, the women of the harem were considered "the adorned ones" and had names for their steps and gestures. They also displayed skilled technique in developing group formations as advanced as forming pyramids (perhaps this is where modern cheerleading gets the idea from).

Men and women (not affiliated with harems or religious rites) performed dances that are traditionally a part of the art to this day. Wooden castanets that were played with the hands, maintaining rhythms while dancing. Men also danced with canes, which were also performed as parodies by women. Cane dancing is performed by Belly Dancers today, maintaining the unique steps and movements that were passed down.



Because Ancient Khemet later became a very imperialistic civilization, inviting in other cultures and influenced them, as well as received minimal influence from them. The Bible references interaction with the Canaanites (modern day Turkey), which can explain why these cultures ended up experiencing infiltrations and combination of cultural ideas and traditions. Other cultures introduced include: Phoenicia, Syria, Palestine, Nubia, Sudan, Ethiopia, and the Bedouins. Not until **1500BC** was Indian culture (by way of the Bayaderes) introduced and incorporated into the dance.



Traditional styles still recognized from Egypt include the Ghawazee. These were documented only once the European foreigners began to travel in the Middle East. There was also a time in Egyptian (after the invasion of Hykso) when dancers were sold as slaves into the courts, or as property of the wealthy. Some acclimated well, but some retained their independence in a special way...they began dancing with

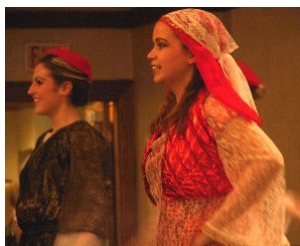
swords that were used in battle. Instead of weaving the swords around in fighting mode, they rather expressed themselves beneath the sword, balancing it upon their heads, from which came the saying: “You control my life, you hold the sword over my head, but you do not control my spirit.



When addressing the major arguments about belly dancing and its origin, the most common conflict is how to distinguish Egyptian and Turkish styles. The Turkish are known for dancing with lighted candles on plates (obviously originating from Egyptian chamber dance), henna ceremonies (originating from Egyptian and Indian culture), and dancing with rhythmic accompaniment...whether it be zills (finger cymbals), Turkish spoons (originating from the castanets of Egypt), or finger snapping.



The Persians also harbored an extension of the dance, as it traveled around the Middle East. Their dance style was regulated at times by the Islamic traditions and prohibitions of certain movements. A great contribution that they made was the incorporation of “Snake arms.” Contrary to popular belief, they did not use hip movements, but rather focused on arm and upper body movements to display the body’s response to the Persian classical music. Their dance form was more of an expression to their spiritual connection with their God, and used the imagery and intent of Persian classical poetry.



Finally, we end our exploration of cultural contributions of dance with the Berbers and Stambali (Tunisia) of Morocco and Northern Africa. When we think of dance from these regions, we think of trance dancing, or, dancing ceremoniously in order to achieve a connection with spirits (Jnum). It is said that attaining a trance-like state seems to be a common goal in most Berber dances, even when not specifically a trance dance.

The Guedra uses repetition and the constant crescendo of both music and movements to create a hypnotic effect on both the dancer and the spectator. Some even believe that if there is not a feeling of complete release at the end of the dance, ill health and bad luck will beset the dancer...this is under conditions wherein the dancing is used in religious ceremony to cure and illness, or release a demon spirit.



Similar to this is the Cult of the Zar, which is recognized by the clerics in the Sudan. The Sudanese (many being Islamic like some Moroccans) believe that the Zar belong to a class of spirits known as Djinn, which are considered to be amoral, capricious, hedonistic, and self-indulgent. These types of dances are very spiritual; involve the burning of incense, and drumming in order to summon spirits that will carry the dance. Such rites are now and have been practiced throughout the continent of Africa (and other continents which harbored indigenous groups of people) from the beginning of time.

Now the question is: how did this dance form spread itself around the globe, reaching as far as Spain (Flamenco), to Turkey and Greece, while beginning in the Nile Delta where the Ancient Khemetic civilization was born? Why did it spread to Turkey, Spain, Morocco, and skip over massive areas of land on the continent of Africa to be mentioned only when it influenced Semitic peoples (Arabic-Berber types)?

One of the major icons in Belly Dance is the Gypsy. Basic knowledge about Gypsy (avoiding offense) tells us that Gypsies were a very nomadic group of people who crafted metal objects and traded often with various groups around the world. Mention about Flamenco was delayed until the mention of the Gypsy, because this is the only valid explanation for its ties with Spanish, North African, and Middle Eastern aspects. The Gypsies were a part of the Spanish and Moroccan cultures, as well as Turkish, Indian, Persian, Arabic, and Egyptian populations. It was the Gypsies (in addition to other types of cultural mixes) that carried these dances around the world, adding and borrowing other cultural dance forms to the most ancient dance form in the world. Gypsies are famous for being street dancers, and for being very spiritual in dance and culture. Although many cultures say negative things about Gypsies and are

reluctant to claim them as a part of their own, they cannot avoid the truth that the Gypsies are to thank for salvaging many cultural traditions and sharing them with the world they encounter.



While the Gypsies get their recognition, the Turkish and the current Egyptians (descendants of Hykso invaders) get the credit of the Art of Raqs Sharqi (Belly Dancing), those who predated them by thousands of years were true progenitors of the art. They are the ones who remain mysterious...as dark and mysterious as the color of their skins. The Nubians, Ethiopians, Sudanese...the first people to walk the earth, those who walked the earth before the Continental drift, before continents were named, who built the Sphinx and the pyramids, those who painted themselves on the walls to express their culture and way of life, these are the people who are unknown and unacknowledged. I say this; it is undeniable that when one of their ascendants takes up the art, the result is all-powerful and miraculous. For a Nubian woman to dance the dance of the East, it is for her to awaken in her soul her ancient mothers Ast, Nebt-Het, Sekhmet, and Het-Hru, the divine connection that brings out the part of a woman that is of the NTRU, or existence with the Most High.



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The Origins of Middle Eastern Dance, or Bellydance.

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