

ARABIC DANCE

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Belly dance. Belly dance is one of the best-known cultural exports of the Middle East, after oil and religion. It is telling that the term for it in Arabic is “Eastern dancing” without any reference to the belly. “Belly dance” is actually a misnomer of sorts, because the hips are actually the center of attention, not the belly, and for most of history, the belly of the performer was covered. Tensions surround its status. In many Arab societies, dancing is an essential part of the culture and must accompany weddings and other celebrations. However, it is associated with inappropriate mixing of men and women and other forms of suspect behavior such as drinking alcohol and smoking hashish. Professional dancers are often associated with prostitution. Women and girls are often discouraged from dancing in front of men, and some Arab women will only dance in front of other women.

Old traditions. In the Middle East, singing and dancing performances date back thousands of years to the times of the Pharaohs and ancient Near Eastern kings. The New Testament connects the murder of John the Baptist with an episode in which Salome danced before King Herod. Dance performances occurred at rulers’ courts throughout the Islamic period, and it was one of the skills, along with singing and playing musical instruments, that women in royal harems were supposed to perfect. Dance of various types occurs in all Arab societies, and both men and women perform it. Some male dances involved stylized battles with staves or swords. Many regions feature line dances, such as the *dabke*, a dance performed by both men and women, often together, in Lebanon, Palestine, Jordan, and Syria. One of the main functions of dance is to mark a celebration—the archetypal example is a wedding, but any joyous occasion will do—and dancing is understood to express joy and jubilation. Belly dance was also an important part of popular culture.

Belly dance and the cinema. The tradition underwent a radical transformation in the twentieth century with the introduction of belly dancing in Hollywood films. Drawing on many sources, Hollywood directors transformed the image of belly dance, and this cinematic use of belly dance was soon mirrored in Egyptian films and nightclubs such as those of Badia Masabni in Cairo from the 1920s on. Thus began the age of belly-dance stars, such as Tahia Carioca, Na`ima `Akif, Samia Gamal, Nagwa Fuad, and Suheir Zaki, who acquired huge followings of fans through their appearances on screen. Since the 1980s, belly dance has retreated somewhat from center stage in popular culture because of the influence of Islamic fundamentalism. Famous dancers have “repented”, donned the veil, and given up dancing. In many countries, fewer weddings feature belly dance performances, and divided weddings, in which men and women celebrate separately, have become more prevalent. At the same time, though, at other end of the spectrum, Lebanese videos of popular songs are including increasingly risqué dance numbers.

Social stigma. Professional dancers and musicians must often face the critical views of the society in which they live. Van Nieuwkerk’s work brings out the difficulties that dancers and other performers face on account of the social stigma attached to their work. She argues that they are not entirely marginalized but that they face serious social difficulties. Her work provides an excellent overview of the workings of the nightclub circuit and of the lower middle-class weddings and festivals. Absent from her work is a treatment of the most famous belly-dancers, who perform regularly at Egypt’s most expensive hotels.

Questions

What social functions does dance serve in the Arab world?

How is dance related to other popular art forms?

How is belly dance viewed in the Arab world and outside it?

How has dance in the Arab world been affected by the types of gender segregation that occur in Arab societies?

Using the internet, find out about one Arab dance form that we have not studied, describe its features and its place in society.

Briefly summarize the history of the entertainment trade in Egypt over the last century. How has the status of performers changes over time?

Compare and contrast performances in nightclubs and performances in lower middle-class weddings and saints' festivals.

To what extent are female performers socially marginalized? How is their situation similar to or different from that of male entertainers?

How do the performers view themselves?

Define the following terms: Usta, Nu'ta, Mi`allim, Mi`allima, Mulid, Mawaldiyya, Ghawazi, sing. Ghaziyya, Bint il-balad, `Alma (pl. `Awalim).

Explain the performers' secret jargon. What purposes does it serve?

Reading

van Nieuwkerk, Karin. *A Trade Like Any Other: Female Singers and Dancers in Egypt*. Austin: University of Texas Press, 1995.

Hammond, *Popular Culture*, Chapter 7: The Belly Dance: A Reinvented Arab Groove, pp. 187-204.

Further Reading

Buonaventura, Wendy. *Serpent of the Nile: Women and Dance in the Arab World*. Dearborn, Michigan: Interlink Books, 1998.

Karayanni, Stavros Stavrou. *Dancing Fear and Desire: Race, Sexuality, and Imperial Politics in Middle Eastern Dance*. Waterloo, Canada: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 2004.

Shay, Anthony, and Barbara Sellers-Young (eds.). *Belly Dance: Orientalism, Transnationalism, and Harem Fantasy*. Mazda Publishers, 2005.