

## Bellydance – an incomplete overview!

'Bellydance' refers to a group of popular and professionalised dance forms from the Middle East\*. The popular forms are participated in during social dancing at celebrations such as weddings. At such events a professional dancer might also be hired to perform, and professional dancers can also be seen in nightclubs and hotels. Its name in Arabic is رقص شارقى - *Raqs Sharqi*, in Turkish it is referred to as *Oryantal Dansı* (both translate as 'Eastern Dance'), and in Greek *Tsifteteli* (from a Turkish term meaning 'double stringed'). There is an ongoing debate amongst practitioners of this dance as to whether it should be referred to as bellydance, or other anglicised terms such as 'Oriental Dance', or whether one of the original names should be used.

The professional form we are familiar with today evolved in the early decades of the twentieth century from the existing folk, social and professional dances of the region, with distinct styles of bellydance emerging in different areas of the Middle East, particularly those areas on the Mediterranean coast. As bellydance has developed from to become an international art form other styles have emerged, such as American Cabaret, American Tribal Style and Gothic.

It is almost impossible to give a complete account of how bellydance developed, or to do justice to all the different forms of it, due to a lack of documentation about its history. The precursor popular and professional dances were largely unrecorded in their original cultures, and the historical descriptions that we do have of these dances come mostly from the writings of nineteenth century European travellers (mainly, but not exclusively male). Whilst valuable sources, these descriptions tend to reflect prevailing Western attitudes of the time about appropriate dress and behaviour, and consequently paint the dance as lewd or mysterious. Some dance historians have tried to trace an ancient historical lineage for bellydance, based on depictions of dance on ancient artefacts and writings, but the connection between these depictions and the modern dance is tenuous. Some have interpreted bellydance as a women-only activity, but this ignores the fact that men have always been involved in bellydance.

What we can say with certainty is that for thousands of years there has been trading and political manoeuvring between the different parts of the Middle East. Therefore there will have been lots of cultural exchange between different tribal, national and religious groups, including language, foods, customs, religion, and...dance! This makes it unlikely that there is one cultural or geographical 'source' for bellydance, and rather indicates that it has evolved as a result of these interchanges.

In contrast to contemporary western dance forms which use leaps and extension, bellydance technique utilises fine muscle control and isolation, particularly in the abdominal area. Although it varies in its presentation and styling in different countries, bellydance is characterised by isolated percussive movements of the hips and upper torso and undulating movements of the abdominal area. Most bellydance styles use a core set of basic movements, with variations in execution and styling, and additional movements drawn from local dance styles.

A bellydancer aims to provide a visual representation of the music they are dancing to. Although bellydance doesn't have an innate narrative structure, in embodying the music the dancer may reflect some of the emotional content of the music, or reflect the lyrics of a song. It has traditionally been an improvised dance, and largely performed solo, although more recently performers have begun to choreograph their routines and work in troupes.

A brief history of the development of bellydance in key countries is offered below. It is **incomplete**, and for the sake of brevity I have omitted information that others would think essential! I do not claim that it is the result of my own research, as much of the information has been pulled together from the publications of others. The 'Further Reading' suggestions at the end of each section give details of full texts.

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\* 'The Middle East' is a vague term historically and politically, referring to the place where Africa, Europe and Asia join. In this article I am going to use it, inaccurately I am afraid, to refer to an extended geographical area including North Africa, the Eastern Mediterranean, and the Arabian Peninsula.

## Egyptian bellydance

Egyptian bellydance is a development of the dances of public entertainers of the 19<sup>th</sup> century (the *ghawazee* - descended from Sinti nomads) who performed outdoors and in courtyards for the general public, accompanied by musicians; and private female entertainers (the *awalim* who were talented poets, singers and musicians as well as dancers). At the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century the *awalim*'s relatively high social status began to decline, until most people didn't distinguish between *ghawazee* and *awalim*. All public dancers began to be known as *awalim*, and most grouped together in houses run by an *ustad* (female protector) on Mohammed Ali Street in Cairo.

Modern Egyptian bellydance is generally considered to have begun with the opening of the nightclub *Casino Opera* in Cairo by the actress Badia Masabni in 1926. Modelled on European cabarets, the club attracted customers from both the Western and Egyptian elites. Badia encouraged her nightclub dancers to take lessons from a Russian ballerina, and as a result bellydance began to incorporate a more expansive use of stage space (prior to this dancers had performed mostly on the spot), and introduced the use of a Western-style orchestra.

During the 1930s and 1940s the Cairo film industry became influential across the Arabic-speaking world. Many of the films included segments featuring a bellydancer, or were musicals that starred famous bellydancers. As a result Egyptian-style bellydance also became influential.

In 1959 The National Folkloric Dance Troupe of Egypt was founded, commonly referred to as 'the Reda troupe' after its principal male dancer and choreographer: Mahmoud Reda. The troupe travelled Egypt researching genuine folk dances and re-interpreting them for the theatre, through the use of tableaux. Reda's choreographies were influenced by the dancing in the films of Fred Astaire and Gene Kelly. The Reda troupe didn't perform bellydance, but a number of troupe members made a living from performing and teaching bellydance once they left the troupe, carrying with them the choreographic principles they had learned.

Egyptian bellydance is characterised by its earthiness, its elegant styling, the absence of floorwork (banned in the 1950s in Egypt – but still an element of Turkish and American bellydance) and the 'internal' quality of its use of the core movements. Little veil work is done, although dancers often enter the stage with a veil before discarding it. Finger cymbals (*sagat*) are rarely used.

The social form of bellydance (*raqs baladi* – dance of the country) is still practiced by ordinary people at a variety of celebrations, especially weddings. In this context young children learn the dance by copying their older friends and relatives.

## **Further reading**

- *A Trade Like Any Other: Female Singers and Dancers in Egypt*, Karin Van Nieuwkerk, 1996, American University in Cairo Press
- *Images of Enchantment*, ed. Sherifa Zukur, American University of Cairo Press, Cairo, 1995
- *The Manners and Customs of the Modern Egyptians*, Edward Lane, Everyman's Library, 1996
- *Letters from Egypt*, Lucie Duff-Gordon, Virago Press, 1983
- *Interview with Mahmoud Reda*, Carolina Varga Dinicu, [www.casbahdance.org/RedaInterview.htm](http://www.casbahdance.org/RedaInterview.htm), 2003

**Famous dancers:** Tahia Carioca, Samia Gamal, Naima Akef, Soheir Zaki, Nagua Fouad, Mona Said, Fifi Abdu, Lucy, Dina, Randa Kamel

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## Lebanese bellydance

In the early 20<sup>th</sup> century Lebanese and Egyptian style bellydance were very close to one another, focussing on musicality and articulation of the torso. As Egyptian bellydance became more influenced by ballet and ballroom dance, Lebanese bellydance was more influenced by jazz dance resulting in a lively aesthetic. Modern Lebanese dancers often dance in high heels, and make dynamic use of space,

including lots of turns, movements led by the hands/arms, backbends, head rolls and accents. Veil is often used when entering the stage and there is little use of finger-cymbals.

**Famous dancers:** Kawakib, Nadia Gamal, Amani, Suha Deeb

**Further reading:**

Information for this section has mostly been drawn from posts by the Lebanese bellydancer Suha Deeb (<http://suhadeeb.com/>) on various internet forums, especially Bhuz – [www.bhuz.com](http://www.bhuz.com)

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**Turkish bellydance**

Turkish bellydance is a development of the dances of the public entertainers of 19<sup>th</sup> century Turkey (female - *cengis* and male – *köçeks*), the court dances of the Sultans' harems and Europeanised theatre dances of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century.

The most important influence on Turkish bellydance was the dances of the *köçeks* and the *cengis*. They came from non-Turkish communities, such as Albanians, Armenians, Greeks, Jews, and Roma, as dancing was not considered a 'respectable' profession for Turks. The most proficient and famous dancers were the Roma, and their influence runs through all Turkish bellydance.

The women of the harems of the Ottoman Empire came from diverse backgrounds, including Middle Eastern, African and Central Asian. Women within the harem who exhibited dancing ability were trained further, and what developed from this mixture of backgrounds became the court dances of the Ottoman Empire. At the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century the harem was abolished, and those women who had been trained began to seek employment as professional dancers. At the same time as the abolition of the harems, Europeanised theatre dances were beginning to become popular in Turkey, and combined with the previous two influences is the last piece in the background of the development of Turkish bellydance.

Turkish bellydance is exuberant, energetic and athletic, and incorporates extensive use of finger cymbals (*zils*). Characteristic elements of Turkish bellydance that come directly from the Roma influence are the musical use of a particular 9/8 rhythm (*karsilama*), and the use by the dancers of various hand gestures. Turkish bellydancers often still incorporate floorwork into their performances (dancing whilst sitting or lying on the floor), and use veils for slow/medium tempo pieces.

A social form of bellydance is often seen at informal gatherings and celebrations, movements used by young and old, male and female.

**Further reading**

- *Turkish Oriental Dance*, Elizabeth Artemis Mourat, [www.serpentine.org/artemis/turkishdance.html](http://www.serpentine.org/artemis/turkishdance.html)

**Famous dancers:** Sema Yildiz, Princess Banu, Nesrin Topkapi, Didem, Tanyeli, Ozel Turkbaz, Nejla Ates

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**American bellydance**

The history and development of bellydance in the USA is complex! Middle Eastern dance evolved from the dances and music of Middle Eastern populations that migrated to the USA, and groups of dancers brought over for the Chicago World Fair of 1893, by impresario Sol Bloom.

In the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century Middle Eastern nightclubs began to spring up in large American cities. The owners would bring musicians and dancers from their home countries or cultures to entertain in the nightclubs. American or American-born dancers then learned the various dance movements from this 'first generation'. Because of the multiplicity of backgrounds of the original dancers, the American dancers picked up movements from a variety of different styles, producing a very hybrid form of

bellydance – this has passed down through subsequent generations of dancers, and become known as ‘American Cabaret’. The nightclubs really enjoyed their heyday in the 1960s and 1970s.

American Tribal Style bellydance is also an offspring of the nightclubs and Renaissance Faire scene of the US. Jamila Salimpour is credited with being the initiator of this movement with her troupe Bal Anat who performed a hybrid kind of bellydance costumed in textiles and makeup with an ‘ethnic’ look (as opposed to the two-piece costume generally seen in nightclubs). Former members of the troupe began themselves to teach younger dancers, one of whom was Carolena Nericcio. In the early 1970s, Carolena started a troupe, Fat Chance Belly Dance, and developed a format for improvisational group dances, using a movement vocabulary that brought together Indian, Spanish, North African folkloric and bellydance movements. Other formats and dance companies have developed different ‘tribal’ style formats since then.

A more recent development in America is ‘Tribal Fusion Style’, which doesn’t rely on the close groupwork of American Tribal Style, and often uses music which fuses electronic / industrial and traditional Middle Eastern sounds.

American cabaret bellydance is characterised by large movements, complex veilwork – including wrapping and unwrapping the body, use of zils and floorwork (similarly to Turkish), dancing with props such as swords and candles, and theatricality. American cabaret also draws on other non-bellydance dance styles as well.

American Tribal Style bellydance is characterised by the close dynamic between the members of the performing group, rather than with the audience, sinuous movements, group improvisation and a close degree of synchronous movement. Costuming generally uses earthy colours, chunky metallic jewellery and textiles from diverse ethnic traditions.

### Further reading

- *Looking for Little Egypt*, Donna Carlton, IDD Books, Indiana – USA, 1994
- “American Tribal Style Bellydance” by Zenuba in *The Bellydance Book*, ed. Tazz Richards, Backbeat Press, 2000

**Famous dancers:** Anahid Sofian, Elizabeth Artemis Mourat, Morocco (Carolina Varga Dinicu), Serena Wilson, Carolena Nericcio, Rachel Brice, Jillina, Zahra Zuhair, Tamylan Dallal

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### Greek bellydance

Bellydance, or tsifteteli, was brought to Greece by the Greek populations of Asia Minor, who were forced to migrate in the early 1920s, due to a population exchange between Greece and Turkey, following hostilities.

These Greek refugees from Asia Minor brought with them a rich musical tradition, combining elements of Armenian, Greek, Turkish and Arabic music. Once in Greece this music developed into a style called ‘rembetiko’, with sad lyrics reflecting the desperate situations experienced by the refugees. Rembetiko culture includes several dances, including tsifteteli. Tsifteteli spread over the next 80+ years to become a popular dance all over Greece, and modern tsifteteli music is much more upbeat than the original rembetiko songs.

Unlike the other forms of bellydance, you don’t often see tsifteteli performed professionally – it remains very much a social dance. People dance it mostly in pairs, improvising and communicating.

### Further reading

- *What is tsifteteli?*, Chryssanthi Sahar Scharf, [www.orientaldancer.net/articles/tsifteteli.shtml](http://www.orientaldancer.net/articles/tsifteteli.shtml)

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## Men and bellydance

Men have had a long involvement in bellydance. In all its social forms men participate – it is just that there is a stigma attached to their being professional performers – it is seen as effeminate. However, this attitude can be traced back to European influences on attitudes to male dancing from the end of the nineteenth century. There is a considerable history of male professional performers of bellydance or its precursors.

In 1834 the ghawazee were banished from Cairo, and until the ban was lifted some time in the 1850s, public dancing was continued at festivities by Egyptian men called *khawal*. These men dressed and made themselves up in the same kind of way as female performers. There were also other male dancers, from non-Egyptian or non-Muslim backgrounds, that were referred to as *ginks*. Although male dancers had performed prior to the banishment, their number increased rapidly during this period, to fill the gap left by female public dancers. More recently, in the 1980s, the dance ethnographer Aisha Ali filmed a young male dancer from a family of professional entertainers performing bellydance movements, showing that even relatively recently there has been male involvement in bellydance.

Male bellydancers have always been relatively common in Turkey, where they are still widely seen. Turkish bellydance partly developed from the dances of male public entertainers, called *köçeks*. *Köçeks* can still be seen in Turkey today.

As *tsifteteli* remains predominantly a social dance, men as well as women take part in it.

In the USA and Europe there are many male bellydancers, although this is a relatively recent development, concurrent with the rise in popularity of bellydance in these places.

## Further reading

- “It’s not just for women – men in Oriental Dance” by Tarik abd el Malik in *The Bellydance Book*, ed. Tazz Richards, Backbeat Press, 2000
- *Dancing Fear and Desire: Race, Sexuality and Imperial Politics in Middle Eastern Dance* by Stavros Stavrou Karayanni, Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 2004.
- *Bellydance: Orientalism, Transnationalism and Harem Fantasy*, eds. Anthony Shay and Barbara Sellers-Young, Mazda Publishers, 2005

**Famous dancers:** Tito (Egypt), Khaled Mahmoud (Egypt/UK), Amir Thaleb (Argentina), Mohamed Shahin (Egypt), John Compton (USA), Tarik Sultan (USA), Jim Boz (USA)

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## Conclusion

As I said at the beginning – this article is brief and incomplete! I have trusted that the sources I have used are reliable – however, there is always the case that they are not. As with any historical research – be critical: only **you** can decide what you should believe.

I hope that you find what I’ve written useful as a ‘jumping off point’ for further research and enquiry of your own!