

Why belly-dancing is more than just a fad

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Belly dancing may be one of the least understood dances.

Under the bright lights of dance clubs, with scantily clad women gyrating their hips and shaking their behinds, belly dancing seems more like a strip tease than a ritualistic tribal dance, but the most ancient dance in recorded history has much more to do with daily life and connecting the spirit with the body than most people realize.

"It's a dance that was created by women for women for ritual purposes and childbirth," said Yvette McDonnell, director of multicultural affairs at York College of Pennsylvania and a professional belly dancer and teacher.

Although historians can't determine exactly where belly dancing started, they do know it predates even the pharaohs of Egypt. Some believe it began with temple dances in India; others say it came out of the gyrating movements of dances from Central and Northern Africa. But what is certain is that aspects of belly dancing are apparent in a great variety of cultures around the globe and throughout time, McDonnell said.

At its root, belly dancing is a way for women to express themselves. There are dances for death, menstruation and childbirth. In some cultures, for instance, dancers would stand in a circle and slowly undulate their hips to hypnotize mothers during labor.

Belly dancing is raw, primal and animalistic. It engages the same muscles used in giving birth. It's a dance that was intended to be done barefoot, with feet on the stomping the earth. And although the dance looks sensual as a woman shakes her hips, breasts and buttocks, the movements come out of every day life and are rife with symbolism.

Many of dances, like the "Water Jug Dance" and "Stirring the Pot," were linked to the daily activities that women did, said McDonnell.

There was one dance that was done by an older woman at a wedding for a bride. The woman had to have been happily married for many years and the dance was about the joy of marriage, said McAllen belly dancer Becky Bormann.

While belly dancing was a way to pass time and socialize for many tribal people, it was also a way to make money. A group of belly dancers called *Owallim*, or learned women, were viewed as geishas. They would belly dance but also play instruments and recite poetry. They were artistic and literary people, said Bormann. Over time these women accumulated significant property and money.

The women in the Oulednal tribe would dance in large groups for men and seduce them. They would receive money for their efforts, which they sewed into their clothing. Once they had enough money to pay for the wedding they would return to their tribe as respectable women. The French colonists who encountered this tribe though viewed them as common prostitutes and were both horrified and fascinated by their cultural tradition, according to McDonnell.

The French colonial experience with the Oulednal along with the interactions of other colonists, linked belly dancing and sex. So long before the dance came to the United States it had a reputation of being something exotic, sexual and forbidden.

Belly Dancing's Change

Belly dancing became part of the American consciousness during the Chicago World's Fair in 1893. There the United States was introduced to Little Egypt, a belly dancer from Syria. Although people tried to ban the performances, Little Egypt became the talk of the fair and dancers started incorporating her moves into Vaudeville shows, calling it the "hoochy koochy." Their dances took on the purely sexual aspects of the dance and left out the rituals and the meaning behind the moves. A few years later, burlesque dancers incorporated the moves into their routines. Hollywood soon followed suit.

As belly dancing became glamorized it became far removed from its ritualistic origins.

Today two forms of belly dance co-exist. One form, generally what is seen in health clubs across the country, boasts that belly dance is great form of exercise that tones the abdominals and aids in seduction. The other form of belly dance takes it back to its ritualistic roots and tries to attune women to their inner spirit.

"I think as in anything, people see trends," McDonnell said. "Belly dance is not new in this country but it changes when it goes to a different place and people assimilate their own cultural values to it. We're a Western society, and everything is sex. I don't think that their looking at the essence (of the dance). The gym is where a lot of people go to burn calories and lose weight. That is not the essence of belly dance."

But people have seen belly dance as a way introduce a new form of exercise to the masses.

"Culturally, the United States is capitalist," she said. "We want to profit off of everything."

In search for profit, McDonnell argues people have forgotten the mind, body and spirit connect, which is at the heart of the dance.

McDonnell believes that the essence of belly dance can still be taught her, if that is what people are seeking.

"The women who come to my class are very self-conscious," she said. "They don't think they're beautiful. They don't they can. This one dance that you literally just come as you are."

Over the course of about a year, the women lose the baggy shirts and the complexes about their bodies. They "own" their stretch marks and the extra skin around the middle.

"You create that sacred space so they can just be themselves," she said.

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