

Belly Dance, Raqs al-Sharqi, Danse Orientale – By any name, this dance form is a skilled and beautiful art. Each of us dancers has probably heard many myths and dreams about our dance in modern and ancient times. Some of these may even have been passed down to us as fact by our friends, families or dance instructors. All of these stories make up the oral history of our dance, not necessarily a true history, but a collective memory of myths and truth that blend to create what we believe about our art form. Does this make them less valuable? No. It just means that we should be certain to educate ourselves on both the version history that is told and the one that can be substantiated with references.

So, what are some of these stories? Do they have any basis in fact?

Well, first, let's look at where this dance form originated – not by country or region, but by purpose. For myself, I have heard all of the following about the origins of our dance:

- ▣ For sultan in harem – The story told is often that this art was first practiced by women in the harem who wanted to be extra pleasing to their husbands.
- ▣ By women for women – The opposite of the sultan myth, this story posits that the dance was performed within the harem by women to amuse themselves and never for men.
- ▣ Aid childbirth – Some people trace the origins of belly dance to rituals for childbirth and the movements of the dance are said to correspond to movements necessary in the birth process.
- ▣ Worship goddess – Dancing as a means of worship is well documented. According to this version of the origin, belly dance arose as a means of goddess worship in ancient times.
- ▣ Ancient Egyptian rites – A bit like the question of goddess worship in dance, some dancers have drawn lines from modern belly dance to the practices in the times of the pharaohs, both religious and secular.

By now, you are probably wondering if any of these are true or if we will need to re-think some of our ideas. Well, honestly, the answers are not nearly that simple. Any dance form can be used by its practitioners for any activity that they feel it would be appropriate to. So, it is likely that for some woman at some point in the past or present, all of these have been true – and – for other women, all of them have been false. There have almost certainly

been women who have used their dancing skill to seduce, to celebrate, to worship, to prepare their bodies for a life event or even as a connection to their culture's past. However, we have to keep in mind that none of these stories is the entire answer for where the dance originated or why it continues today.

So what do we know and how do we know it? Unfortunately, there isn't a lot of hard evidence for any of these stories because to follow a dance form, you need a set of the following to trace current dance back to ancient practices:

- Written descriptions
- Artistic depictions
- Oral histories
- Video representation

By combining these types of documentation we can develop a picture of the historical changes in a dance form, including belly dance. In our case, dances similar to belly dance have been described as entertainment in historical literature, but any written description is open to interpretation and may not refer to the movements common in our modern dance. Artistic representations abound from the 1700s to 1900s, but most of them fall under the rubric of orientalism, even if not within its heyday. This makes their accuracy somewhat suspect and, while the dances do appear to be what we would call belly dance, we can never be 100% sure. Oral histories trace the dancing back for at least 8 generations, but beyond that, the details tend to become very sketchy at best. Still, the problem of what did their dances actually look like remains. If direct transmission, this is a better idea than the others alone, though each person will alter the movements through time. And our best option? Video! We have video beginning in the late 19th C and continuing into the 20th C that documents the dance and can be reliably traced to modern belly dance.

While this doesn't tell us why people began belly dancing, it does at least help us to support the idea that belly dance has a longer history rather than being a totally new dance form. We may never be able to determine with an academic level of certainty why, when, where, or how this dance originated, but, at least, we are able to use this circumstantial evidence to triangulate the existence of belly dance and to begin to take a scholarly look at the history and evolution of our art.

[In future articles, the author will discuss specific styles, cultures and dance history in detail with references for future study. Upcoming topics include

Ghawazee, Sharqi/Shabi, Saiidi, Guedra, and many more specific items. If there is a topic you would like to see covered with an eye to the academic and anthropological, please feel free to request a topic for research. Thank you!]