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## Transformation in Belly Dance: Movement, Rhythm, Ritual, and Connection

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Transformation in Belly Dance:  
Movement, Rhythm, Ritual, and Connection  
by  
Hillary Elise Posey

Submitted in partial completion of the Master of Science Degree in  
Dance/Movement Therapy at Sarah Lawrence College

May 2015

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**Abstract**

Transformation of the self in belly dance occurs in the dance's movements and in the aspects of rhythm, ritual, and connection. Through the development of awareness and embodiment in belly dance, the mover experiences physical, psychological, social, and spiritual growth. Practiced in individual and group settings, belly dance promotes self-awareness and self-expression, as well as the opportunity for the witnessing of one's self-expression by a supportive community in a safe environment, and it is a pertinent method of leisure and performance art across gender, cultural, and socioeconomic boundaries.

*In loving honor of all the goddesses I have met on my journey, for your wisdom, strength, love, and all encompassing radiance. You encourage me to embrace every part of me – the child, the warrior, the nurturer, and the wild – I am beautiful, I am loveable, I am resplendent, I am grateful.*

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Last but not least, I would have been able to grow and blossom as a person, peer, and future dance/movement therapist without the loving and generous support of my cohort. Allyssa, Alyssa, Angelica, Elissaveta, Elizabet, Hideki, Jaina, Minh, and Sarah, it has been my honor and my pleasure to get to know each one of you in this crazy process we call “grad school.” I have learned so much from each one of you and I am forever grateful for the movement experiences, laughter, sushi dates, happy hours, yoga classes, tough love, tears shed, words of comfort and encouragement, late nights, pushing, pulling, reaching, yielding, deep breathing, and hugs you all have given me. I would not have made it here without you, my friends, and I am so happy we are DMT *family*.

Her presence was barely noticeable as she tried to shrink further into the back corner on that early evening in mid-June. The makeshift backstage, up the rickety stairs and creaking floorboards, above the fully stocked bar, was a swarm over the senses. The eyes blinded by bling, glitter, and flashy satin. The nostrils stinging, breathing in a smog cloud of hairspray. The mouth choking back a cocktail of too many flirty, floral scented perfumes. The ears buzzing with the ringing and clinging of beads, coins, and bangles. The skin of 28 belly dancers sticky with droplets of sweat trickling down in the Tennessee heat and humidity. She seemed small and timid, as if she could evaporate into nothingness at any moment. As her song came on and she made her way to stage, she transformed.

Larger than life, her shimmies shook the earth and her hips moved mountains to the rhythmic beats of the drum. To the sound of the saxophone, her arms moved languidly like honey and to the tinkling of the finger cymbals, her hands were delicate like cherry blossoms. She was alive, wholly embodying the music of the Egyptian *baladi*. Strong and heavy, yet gentle and graceful. She smiled humbly, but her eyes showed complete confidence in the fullness of her presence. The audience, sharing in the joyful, understood experience of her embodied dancing, roared with applause and cheers until well after she had exited the stage, and praise for her magnificent transformation was the subject on every dancer's tongue in the next day's workshops.

The ancient dance form known today as belly dance, Middle Eastern dance, Oriental dance, Raqs Sharqi, or Arabic dance, uses grounded, torso and pelvic isolation movements to express internal feelings and sensations, and often

embodies moods in music or movements in nature. In conjunction with the practice of belly dance by populations native to its cultural, ethnic, and geographic origins, this thesis suggests that transformation of the self occurs through the movements and aspects of rhythm, ritual, and connection found in this dance form. For the purposes of this thesis, transformation in movement refers to moments of realized and embodied learning, feeling, and healing. Transformative movement in belly dance happens when, in the chaos of movement and expression, the mover can simultaneously experience stillness, peace, and clarity. Similarly, the development of awareness and embodiment in rhythm, ritual, and connection are what make these aspects of belly dance transformative. However, it can also be considered that the word *transformative* is synonymous for the words *healing* or *therapeutic* when discussing these aspects. Practiced in individual and group settings, belly dance promotes self-awareness and self-expression, as well as the opportunity for the witnessing of one's self-expression by a supportive community in a safe environment, and it is a pertinent method of leisure and performance art across gender, cultural, and socioeconomic boundaries.

### **Brief History of Belly Dance**

Belly dancing has been passed down from generation to generation and across cultures from people to people, through what Karayanni (2009) describes as “time and geographical space to deliver us fragments of an ancient ritual that enacts itself through kinesthetic motion” (p. 449). Just as there is global history, there is also the history of an individual. From birth out of the belly of the mother to one's



death and burial back into the earth, the entire life of an individual is expressed and celebrated in this dance style. Particularly in its native Arabic culture, belly dancing and the ideal of feminine beauty express and include the whole experience of a woman's life. Both Buonaventura (2010) and Al-Rawi (2012) describe the older women's dancing to be the most exciting aspect of private gatherings because their dance displays grace and sensuality that can only come from the fullness and maturity of life experience and years of refining individual movements and style. It is with a similar sense of appreciation that the history, movements, and elements of belly dance can be viewed. Not just as the dance appears today, but how it evolved, who has partaken in it, and how it translates to the rest of the world must be taken into context.

Although belly dance is considered to belong to the Middle East and primarily Arabic culture, it is the product of a mixture of social and historical circumstances brought about by the spreading of cultures and civilizations over time. Aspects of the musicality and movement qualities of this dance can be found in other geographic regions, cultures, and dance styles from present day northern India, across Central Asia and into Eastern Europe, through the Mediterranean countries all the way to southern Spain, and reaching down into the countries of northern Africa from Egypt across to Morocco. Al-Rawi (2012), Buonaventura (2010), and Stewart (2013) explain that the origins of belly dance, as it is seen today, likely came from the pelvic folk dances of the Romani, or gypsy people, whose diaspora from northern India brought this earthy and sensual dance to the West beginning in the 5th century. Most commonly known as gypsies, these nomadic

people are given other names depending on the geographic regions they are found including, *gitana/gitano* (Spain), *cingene/cengi* (Turkey), *ghawazi/halab* (Egypt), *zingaro/czigany/rom/romani/sinte* (Europe), *luri* (Persia), and *jats/zutt* (Punjab region of India) (Ray-Gavras, 1993; Stewart, 2013).

The mass migration of the gypsies, thought to stem from famine, war, and hardship, took place over centuries and their integration into local civilizations and settlement into other geographic regions is well documented. Buonaventura (2010) cites that the Persians, Egyptians, Romans, and Greeks, among other civilizations through the present era, specifically document dance movements, costuming, and music of the gypsies that bear a striking resemblance to the dance movements and styling of belly dance as it is known today. This minority population has managed to maintain its own dances, music, folklore, customs, and even its own dialect of language while still settling in different areas and adapting to different societies. The documentary film, *Latcho Drom* (Ray-Gavras, 1993), chronicles the present lives of the Romani people's diaspora in northern India, Egypt, Turkey, Romania, Hungary, Slovakia, France, and Spain, and shows the heavy influence of rhythm, ritual, and connection in the communities through the use of drumming and music, singing and dancing, food and ceremonies, and collective participation of the whole community, young and old, in all activities. The connections between the movements, music, and communities of the gypsy dances observed in *Latcho Drom* and belly dance will not be extensively explored in this thesis, but it is important to note that despite differences in geographic location, music instruments, and clothing, it can be seen in the film that the dances of these gypsy peoples

prominently utilize weight, tension flow, and head-tail/upper-lower connectivity, just as belly dance does. The dances also rely heavily on music with a strong rhythm, a singing improvisation, and melodic string instruments to convey the mood of the music.

In fact, folkloric belly dancing (*raqs sha'abi*) of the Saidi region in agricultural Egypt can be seen in the film *Latcho Drom* (Ray-Gavras, 1993) at a gathering of Ghawazi men and women where both sexes are seen dancing, singing, and playing music together in the same room, which is forbidden in modern Islamic Egyptian society. Oriental belly dance, or belly dancing from a non-Arabic region or country, is seen later in the film, where a young, Turkish gypsy girl is seen dancing in the back of a restaurant to a live band playing onstage for an audience of only men, who are dancing and clapping while sitting in their chairs. Al-Rawi (2012) explains the gypsies' profound impact on dance across countries, as professional dancers to this day in the Saidi region are called *ghawazi*, which literally means "intruder or outsider, because gypsies always lived on the margins of society" (p. 42) and, in Turkey, the old Turkish name for a professional dancer is *cengi*, "which is believed to come from the word, *cingene*, or gypsy" (p. 42).

Stewart (2013) explains further that the Ghawazi have kept themselves separate from Islamic culture and Egyptian society, carefully preserving their own history, traditions, and derivation of language and "may be part of the Indo-Persian gypsies who migrated from northern India up toward Spain and Eastern Europe." According to Stewart, "an image on the wall of an early Eighteenth Dynasty tomb of Neb Amon attests to their antiquity" (p. 88). Another, more mysterious minority

population of gypsies, is the Ouled Nail of Algeria, whose existence also provides some clue into the origins of belly dance. Stewart (2013) writes that from as far back as the 6th century B.C.E. these dancers of the Sahara Djuradjura have been known for their *zeriref*, or jeweled headdresses, which carry silver and gold chains and coins with Phoenician pendants similar to those found as far away as ancient Carthage and Babylon. The women of the Ouled Nail are considered the breadwinners in their culture and earn their own wedding dowries by dancing specifically what Orientalists described as “*danse du ventre*, a rhythmic ‘rolling’ of the abdominal muscles” (p. 89). *Danse du ventre* literally means, “dance of the belly,” coining the term “belly dance” for the style of movements performed today. Upon earning their dowries, the women of the Ouled Nail return home to marry whomever they wish from their village, before settling into the Muslim culture around them (2013, p. 89). This adaptation to Islam and Muslim culture still exists in present society, when professional dancers in Egypt are usually forced by their families or by the religious police into early retirement from their careers and become upstanding models of conservative Muslim women. This is known colloquially and among the belly dance community as “taking the veil,” essentially shrouding away the dancer and, along with her, centuries of history, folklore, and ancestral rhythmic and ritual movements.

### **Movement Experience in Belly Dance**

In belly dance, history and the transformative aspects of rhythm, ritual, and connection cannot be separated from the dance’s movements. Individuals

performing the movements experience what Al-Rawi (2012) describes as natural rhythm, “In this dance form, she swings her limbs around the center of the body, around the navel of the world, through waves and swinging rhythmical movements of the pelvis, through movements older than any single woman, indeed older than human civilization” (p. 54). Anatomically, it is a dance of the pelvis, slightly below where the center of the body is located and from where body parts are distinguished. However, the movements of the dance are more often characterized as being literally “of the belly,” to describe the internalized movements within the torso of the dancer, especially compared with Western dance forms which focus more on the external movement of the limbs (Al-Rawi, 2012).

Belly dancing originates from the center of the body and extends through the dancer beyond the head and feet into space and into the ground. The range of outward accentuation of such an internal movement is dependent on countless individual factors, including anatomical structure of the dancer’s body, the technique and training of the dancer, the dancer’s emotional or physical intention for the movement, the creativity of the dancer in her exploration of different ways to use other body parts to aid in the accentuation of the one specific movement, and even the dancer’s choice in costuming, which visibly extends her movement into space, past the malleable container of her flesh.

Knowing where the movements of belly dance take place, one could also explore what types of movements are most characteristic of the dance. Zehr (2008) communicates that belly dance is primarily a dance of waves of energy, traveling through the vertical, horizontal, and sagittal axes and vibrating through the body.

Al-Rawi (2012) writes that belly dance is a polycentric dance of isolations where “the various parts and centers of the body are moved individually, independently from each other, yet end up forming a unity... [Developing] the body’s intelligence and capacity to react, finally resulting in multidimensional body awareness” (p. 58). Whether thinking about the movements of belly dance as waves, vibrations, or isolations, this multidimensional awareness is achieved.

Body awareness is critical in forming one’s sense of physical identity, as well one’s sense of self on a psychological and spiritual level, and the movements found in belly dance can be incredibly beneficial in helping individuals establish mind-body connectivity through the exploration of movement. A study by Moe (2012) found that the development of body awareness is made possible in belly dance because this dance style facilitates self-exploration of the body, movement potential, creativity, and self-acceptance; and “this self-exploration was deemed transformative for many, in that they began to recognize the beauty, grace, and joy their bodies allowed them through the course of belly dancing” (p. 23). The development of body awareness is noticeable in the movements of belly dance. Very often, one can observe a performing belly dancer looking downward towards the movement of a particular part of her body. It may be unknown to the observer if the dancer’s gaze towards that body part is her directive to the audience to look at the isolated movement of that body part with her, her own external observation of the movement, or her internal focus on the physical sensation of the movement.

Whether the dancer’s gaze downward is intentional or an unintended behavior resulting from noticing specific movements within the body, it invariably

indicates that the belly dancer is consciously establishing a sense of self and body awareness in that moment. Both Al-Rawi and Zehr, along with countless other dancers, teachers, and experts concur that the movements of belly dance should be natural, relaxed, and fluid, so that the body is flexible and receptive to the energy generated, allowing it to flow through, in, and out of the body unobstructed. Energy can be defined as movement imbued with conscious and/or unconscious intentions, feelings, and sensations. Al-Rawi (2012) explains:

The swings, circles, and spirals used in belly dancing stimulate gently and gradually dormant energies, which are then picked up by the body. So belly dancing refines energy and consciousness progressively and playfully, in perfect harmony without any risk of trauma (p. 63).

Belly dancing allows the waves, vibrations, and isolations of energy to be transported spatially within the body and outside of the body in a safe and contained way.

The body of the belly dancer can be seen as a vessel or container through which energy, as it is defined above, travels. Energy is generated when the circular, twisting, waving, vibrating, flowing, sinuous, and titrating movements of belly dance touch and pass through the contents of the body as the dancer adjusts her weight and inner and outer space to perform them. In addition, the dancer's embodiment of music or the dancer's intention to express the thoughts, emotions, or sensations that arise from performing these movements can even further drive the energy generated through the container of the body beyond the head and feet, out into space and into the ground. Even without emotional expression or creative

intention, the energy of these movements, originating from the center of the body before flowing out into the extremities of the body and then into space, creates a sensation of duality and one's own kinesthetic sphere. Awareness of the body core, one's sense of self and center of being, is strengthened most prominently through the anatomical and artistic use of weight, bound and free tension flow, and head-tail/upper-lower connectivity in belly dance. Although these Western, body awareness concepts are not studied or elaborated upon in Middle Eastern culture or dance education, simple explanations of how head-tail/upper-lower connectivity, weight, and tension flow are utilized in belly dance will be described.

Bartenieff (1980) writes that Rudolph Laban, the founder of Laban Movement Analysis (LMA), identified the Effort elements of "space, weight, time, and flow as motion factors toward which performers of movement can have different attitudes depending on temperament, situation, environment, and many other variables" (p. 51). Although all of the Efforts are present in belly dance, the elements of Space and Time are not as crucial in the description of the embodied movement experience of belly dance because they are related more to the dancer's interaction with external factors in the environment, and belly dance is considered to be a very internal dance. Al-Rawi (2012) illuminates this, saying, "Little space is needed for belly dancing, for its true space is the body... illuminating [the dancer's] inner space rather than needing space outside her" (p. 59). Similarly, Head-Tail Connectivity and Upper-Lower Connectivity are only two of the six Fundamental Patterns of Total Body Connectivity found in Bartenieff Fundamentals, which according to Hackney (2002), "form the basis for our patterns of relationship and



connection as we live embodied lives” and organize “a way of relating to self and to the world” (p. 13). However, they are the most prominent two Fundamental Patterns seen in belly dance because the dance’s movements are centered on the pelvis, sequentially along the spine, and express a sense of duality. Exploring the wavelike, vibrational, and isolative movements of belly dance in the constructs of Western dance and dance/movement therapy theory enables the reader to have a more embodied sense of how transformation occurs in belly dance. This thesis proposes the movements of belly dance, in addition to the rhythm, ritual, and connection found in belly dance promote a more holistic sense of self through grounding, centering, body awareness, and mind-body integration.

### **Head-Tail and Upper-Lower Connectivity**

In its truest sense, belly dance is a dance of duality. The belly dancer’s spine, pelvis, neck, and head act as an axis used to ground and anchor the dancer. The movements of belly dance revolve in circles, flow in waves, or vibrate in harmony around the axis of the spine and head-tail connection. In Bartenieff Fundamentals, Hackney (2012) explains that Head-Tail Connectivity establishes the individual’s sense of self, distinguishes the inner and outer worlds, and allows the individual to access reaching, pushing, pulling, and yielding through the flexibility and support of the spine. Not only do most Westerners fail to utilize Head-Tail Connectivity, but the idea that “head and tail are in a constant and always changing interactive relationship is often the single most important realization that a student of movement can have” (p. 87). In belly dance, freeing the movements of the pelvis

creates flexibility and fluidity in the spine, which then stimulates and massages all of the internal organs (Al-Rawi, 2012). An example of this “organ massage” can be seen in an abdominal undulation, which will be described later, in the section about tension flow.

Utilization of the head-tail connection via sequential movements through the spine occurs most visibly in belly dance movements and styles that emphasize wavelike movements, in what Laban Movement Analysis describes as the “wheel plane,” or along the vertical and sagittal axes (Bartenieff, p. 31). In Khaleegi, or Arabic Gulf, folkloric style of belly dance, the dancer’s sense of weight is in the chest, shoulders, and head. In Khaleegi dance, the women have long, thick hair hanging down in front of them to their waists or hips and wear long, loose fitting, heavily embroidered dresses, called *ghalabeyas*, with their most expensive, heavy jeweled necklaces and bracelets. This group dance uses linear traveling movements with small, shuffling steps; one foot is closely behind the other and uses the metatarsal with a flexed knee to propel the rest of the body and the front extended knee and leg sideways in a limping, or dragging like motion. As this step is performed, the pelvis moves back and forth from an anterior tilt to neutral, and the heavy weight of the necklaces, bracelets, and hair heightens the exaggerated forward and back sequential movement through the pelvis and tail to the spine and head. This style of movement provides a very trancelike and unique, rhythmic and rocking grounding sensation through the entire body that travels up and down along the body from the head into the feet and ground (Al-Rawi, 2012).

Hackney (2012) states that Irmgard Bartenieff emphasized Upper-Lower Connectivity more so than the other Fundamentals because Western culture “seems to lack an adequate understanding and embodiment of the skills gained in this arena” (p. 162). Upper-Lower Connectivity enables individuals to establish a sense of self-support, personal and body boundaries, and connection outwards to others and the environment while still maintaining a connection inwards to oneself and the ground (2012, p. 162). The belly dancer can also experience this sense of self, boundaries, and duality from the torso, or center of her movements, acting as a divider between the upper half and lower half of her body. This divide, along with the use of bound and free tension flow, forms the movement isolations that make belly dance so unique. Below the navel, the belly dancer exhibits a weightiness that roots her into the earth with the beat of the drum. Powerful, vigorous, and strong movements emanate from her pelvis and hips, sending shockwaves of energy into the ground, before rippling back up through the flesh of her belly. Above the navel, the belly dancer can be seen lifting towards the heavens with lightness, like a feather floating on water to the melody of the *nay*, or Egyptian flute. Flowing, airy, and flexible movements reach outwards and upwards from the shoulders and neck into the arms, hands, and head in extension. Establishing these opposite efforts and movement qualities simultaneously in the body brings a sense of empowerment and control to the mover, deepening her accessibility and connection to a wide range of physical sensations, ideas, and emotions.

**Weight and Tension Flow**

True to its likely origins as a sacred ritual dance celebrating the earth, spirit, and the cycle of birth, life, death, and renewal, belly dance is a movement expression that heavily relies on the emphasis of weight and gravity. Hackney (2012) says, “the center of gravity or center of weight is particularly important from both a movement perspective and from a sense of full embodiment” (p. 120). People in Western society live in their head and tend to lock their pelvis, preventing them from fully utilizing their spine and leaving them unable to sense their own weight to be grounded and centered (Al-Rawi, 2012; Hackney, 2012). Zehr (2008) believes that the shimmy is the most important movement in belly dance because of its direct relationship to the earth, with the movement coming from dancer’s release of weight into the floor through the body at a high frequency, creating a felt and seen vibration of energy. This vibration of energy provides the dancer with body awareness, specifically a sense of containment and body boundaries, as the individual parts move in relation and in response to the whole. The manipulation or isolation of energy occurs in the tension flow movement effort, where bound or free flow occur within the muscular tension of body changes. For example, a shimmy utilizes indirect and free tension flow, while a hip drop might use very direct and bound tension flow. For an abdominal undulation, the dancer must use bound tension flow to contract a specific abdominal muscle group, while making sure that the surrounding muscles remain free of any tension. The abdominal undulation also moves sequentially along the spinal, reinforcing the head-tail connection.

The use or placement of weight in belly dance varies depending on the artistic expression, stylistic qualities, or cultural background of the specific dance. In folkloric Egyptian belly dance, the dancer's weight is in the pelvis; while, as mentioned before, in Khaleegi folkloric belly dance the dancer's weight is in her chest and shoulders. The Oriental style of belly dance is performed on the metatarsals of the feet or in high heels and employs a far-reaching kinesphere and greater use of traveling steps. This style features balletic movements including spins, arabesques, and rond de jambe because it developed from the cross-cultural exchanges of the Orientalist period, where both accurate and stereotyped Middle Eastern movements blended with Western dance in films from Hollywood and Cairo. Consequently, the dancer's weight is held in her body core at the navel, so that she can access lightness to move buoyantly through space. Typically, however, belly dance is associated with being very earthy and grounded because the dancer's weight is held in the pelvis, rather than in the chest, as seen with Western dance.

In an anatomical example, weight is used to execute the belly dance movement technique known as the hip drop. Elevating one hip, vertically into the torso of the body, forces the pelvis into a lateral tilt, initiating the popular belly dance movement known as the hip drop. As this happens, the belly dancer's weight shifts from the elevated hip into the depressed hip. The energy of this shift of weight travels through the pelvis from the elevated hip into the laterally tilted pelvis, then into the opposing hip and leg and finally into the ground. For a more visible movement, the dancer can also focus her intention on abducting the gluteus maximus and gluteus medius as she elevates the hip into the abdominal cavity,

creating bound tension flow in those muscles. This is accomplished most easily if the dancer thinks about more visible body parts aiding in the lateral tilt of the hip and the abduction of the gluteus muscles. For example, the dancer can lift the heel of her foot on the same side of the hip she wishes to elevate, which in turn releases the knee. The dancer then pushes the metatarsal bones, or ball of the foot, on the same side into the ground and begins to extend the knee, forcing energy, weight, and bound tension flow both downwards into the ground through the foot and upwards into the body through the extension of the knee and thigh, which aid elevating the hip and tilting the pelvis, creating a more visible movement of weight and tension flow in the body. Then, the dancer switches the bound flow in the elevated hip and extended leg to free flow, releasing the full weight of the hip and leg towards the earth. When the hip and leg reach their neutral position or slightly past, the surrounding tissues vibrate with the weight of this movement. The performing belly dancer may frequently wish to make the hip drop movement described above as big or as strong as possible to provide the audience with a more vivid visual display of the energy and weight of the movement.

### **Implications**

Head-tail/upper-lower connectivity, weight, tension flow, and other movement efforts in belly dance provide feelings of grounding, safety, and containment in the mover's body. Hackney (2002) writes, "Movement both initiates and changes emotional feelings and how we think conceptually" (p. 45). Therefore, the incorporation or suggestion of specific wavelike, vibrational, or isolative

movements found in belly dance into one's movement repertoire has the potential to enrich the mover's sense of transformation through increased self-awareness (Al-Rawi, 2012; Downey et al., 2010; Moe, 2012; Zehr, 2008). Furthering the claim that belly dance has the ability to transform the mover, Al-Rawi (2012) describes a therapeutic process experienced in belly dance: "Learning this type of dance means learning new body wisdom and rituals, so that the dancer becomes physically aware of her culturally acquired conditioning, repression, and blockages" (p. viii). The movements of belly dance provide not only physical benefits, but also psychological benefits as the individual's level of self-awareness in body, mind, and spirit grows through the continued practice of the movements. The non-movement aspects of belly dance (rhythm, ritual, and connection) also provide transformation toward the integrated well being of individuals and groups and are explored in the following section.

### **Transformative Aspects in Belly Dance**

Integration and connection aid in the process of transformation by bringing the mover's inner and outer worlds into her awareness. The history of belly dance promotes a sense of connection to ancestors and other cultures, while the movements of belly dance promote the mover's sense of integration. The transformative aspects of rhythm, ritual, and connection found in belly dance transcend time, space, and cultures universally. The rhythm of the heartbeat, the ritual of birth, life, and death, and the connections made to oneself, others, and a higher power are apparent without belly dance. However, belly dance heightens the

mover's sense of these aspects in a way that promotes growth and learning. In the sections below, it can be seen that rhythm, ritual, and connection are interrelated and symbiotic in the sense that each works fluidly in conjuncture with other aspects of the dance, including movement, costuming, community, and structure, such as the circle formation, to create a sense of transformation.

### **Rhythm**

Rhythm is an integral part of every day life, and in belly dance, it is vital. In this dance form, rhythm directly and indirectly serves as a means for transformation, physically in the movements of the body, as well as psychologically, socially, and spiritually through aspects including the mood of the music and rhythmic synchronization on a personal or group level. To the mover, rhythm provides stability, groundedness, organization, and connection (Al-Rawi, 2012; Bartenieff, 1980; Hackney, 2002; Schmais, 1985; Stewart, 2013; Zehr, 2008). With rhythm, the belly dancer has a safe structure from which to explore and deviate, supplying a fertile ground from which transformation through integration and connection can develop. Outside of the dance itself, rhythm is considered to be fundamental to one's well being.

When life is in chaos or when one is sick with an illness, it is believed by many Eastern and indigenous healing systems that the person's rhythm is off, and when health is present, it is believed that the person's rhythmic flow is in harmony and balanced (Kossak, 2009, p. 15). Similarly, El Guindy and Schmais (1992) found that when an Egyptian woman has taken ill and becomes the patient in Zar



ceremony, it is the duty of the Kodia, the Zar leader, to play through many various percussive rhythms associated with different spirits until the right rhythm is found. The healing rhythm is discovered when the spirit possessing the women most vividly shows itself to the Kodia through the woman's movements. The Kodia continues to play that specific rhythm, coaxing the spirit out until it finally leaves the woman's body. In essence, the sick woman's movement response to the song and rhythm acts as a diagnostic tool in discovering what ailment is affecting her (p. 113).

In belly dance, different rhythms and musical scales known as a *maqamat*, or *maqam* if singular, also have specific tones, meanings, movements, and emotions associated with them, allowing for creative movement, expression, and even synchronicity in the belly dancer and her relationship to the audience, musicians, and other dancers. For those familiar with Middle Eastern music, a relatively universal "language" exists in the rhythms and *maqamat*, providing individuals with even further means for feelings of transformation through nonverbal communication and expression. Farraj and Shumays (2003) explain:

Each maqam has a different character, which conveys a mood, in a similar fashion to the mood in a Major or Minor scale... Since classical Arabic music is mostly melodic (excludes harmony), the choice of maqam greatly affects the mood of the piece ("The Arabic Maqam," para. 14).

There are innumerable *maqamat*, although about 40 of them are considered to be the most widely used, because each *maqam* comes from a specific region and people not just of Arabic decent, but also of North African, Turkish, and Persian decent (Buonaventura, 2010; Farraj & Shumays, 2003). Buonaventura (2010) states that,

in the Middle Ages, certain *maqamat* were tied to zodiac signs and personalities, and even today particular *maqamat* are thought to have a therapeutic influence and are associated with specific mental states (p. 189). This information corresponds with El Guindy and Schmais' (1992) description of using rhythms to diagnose ailments, based on the movement and physical response of the sick.

Expressions of happiness, love, sadness, yearning, anguish, melancholy, and other feelings have been associated not only with certain rhythms and *maqamat* in Middle Eastern music, but also styles of belly dance have such associations (Buonaventura, 2010). For example, Buonaventura (2010) explains, "The music for *baladi* resonates low in the body, placing the dance's center of movement firmly in the hips" (p. 195) and "*baladi* has a heavy, grounded look...which relates to the general theme of its accompanying music – that of suffering and disappointed love" (p. 195). Buonaventura (2010) adds the music for *baladi*, which most prominently features the accordion, saxophone, or electric organ in addition to an underlying drum rhythm was developed in cities and towns of Egypt. *Baladi* has a feeling of melancholy to it, likely because it reflects the loss of agricultural traditions and the hardships of urban life (p. 136). Within this structure of rhythm and music, the belly dancer transforms, becoming an archetype of a feeling, place, and situation that transcends her own experience and connects her in mutual understanding with the experiences of others directly and indirectly.

Kossak (2009) explains that shared connections and mutual understanding can occur both in everyday life and in the therapeutic relationship when rhythmic synchronicity, known as entrainment, occurs. Entrainment happens naturally in

breathing patterns, solar and lunar cycles, and brain waves, but can also happen when people experience a good conversation or engage in a creative activity together and just “click.” Essentially, attuned interactions between individuals or between group members can cause mirror neurons in the brain to fire off a response in another person, which acts to maintain rhythmic synchronicity and can lead to cohesiveness and positive process (Behrends et al., 2012; Cozolino, 2012; Kossak, 2009). Transformation via entrainment occurs in belly dance because “rhythmic synchronization through drumming and improvisational music has demonstrated marked shifts in psychological and somatic consciousness” (Kossak, 2009, p. 16). Additionally, “when rhythmic synchronization is a shared experience...the phenomenon of attunement extends from an inner sensitivity to self to an outer sensitivity with another person’s reality, which may include a transpersonal or transcendent experience” (Kossak, 2009, p. 16). These findings further support the suggestion that the mover experiences self-transformation through the rhythms and music of belly dance and that her shared experience with the audience, musicians, or other dancers can also be transformative in nature.

### **Ritual**

Middle Eastern and North African healing practices already use ritual as a relatively well established means for healing and transformation. Some of the rituals found in belly dance could greatly enhance the well being of individuals previously unfamiliar with the dance form. Rituals can be considered as any movements, gestures, items, or events that are repeatedly utilized by a group with

purposeful shared intention or significance in meaning (El Guindy & Schmais, 1992; Serlin, 1993). One important example of ritual found in belly dance is the use of costuming. El Guindy and Schmais (1992) found that costuming in the Egyptian Zar ritual was used as a means of language and communication between the sick patient and the group leader and witnesses, lessening inhibitions and promoting more authentic movement by triggering imagination, trying on new character roles, and/or hiding behind a mask (p. 113). Costuming also serves as a means of solidifying one's sense of self-identity and, although the authors Downey, Reel, SooHoo, and Zerbib (2010) do not explicitly state this, it can be inferred from their research findings that costuming can also strengthen gender identity and create a more comfortable sense of body image.

Other examples of ritual in belly dance are the creation of an altar/sacred space and the sharing of a meal. According to El Guindy and Schmais (1992), the altar serves as a beautiful focal point and provides a more spiritual experience within the healing process. Sharing a meal is also an important ritual in belly dance because eating together is an important means of building trust and forming bonds, increasing the sense of survival and continuity of care. What is being eaten is not nearly as important as the symbolic sharing that occurs (p. 119).

### **Connection**

Transformation of the self and of the group occur during moments of connection. Moments of connection, whether to the self, to a higher power, or to others, occur when the individual integrates inner, bodily experience with the

experience of the outside world. All of this can be seen in belly dance through its movements, the people that practice it, and the cultures it belongs to. Al-Rawi (2012) expresses that belly dancing serves as a strong tool for social bonding and communication, not just in Arabic and Middle Eastern communities, but in Western dance communities as well (Al-Rawi, 2012; Buonaventura, 2010; Moe, 2012). As others support the mover, the mover in turn connects to her body, learning to love and accept it. As she accepts herself, her love grows and she connects to others and to the universal spirit. In another example, both men and women can be seen crying, smiling, and connecting with one another after a Sufi whirling ritual where it is “as if time and space could no longer be perceived through the human senses” and transcendence is achieved through the shared experience of rhythmic and spatial synchrony through movement and the mutual intention to be closer to God (Al-Rawi, 2012, p. 17). Moe (2012) found that some women participating in belly dance described it as “a way through which to experience a deeper, more enhanced spiritual connection, often describing a particular energy circulation and flow during performance, when they felt a connection to others around them” (p. 22). In the types of connection found in these examples, transformative aspects are seen in belly dance and themes of connection to self, spirituality, and others can be seen through the discussion of body image and gender identity, transcendence, and group cohesion below.

**Body image and gender identity.**

Although body image and gender identity are self-concepts, each can affect and be affected by interactions in the environment, whether they are with other people, or with societal or cultural norms. Creating a strong, healthy sense of body image and gender identity will allow for more positive future interactions, because once an individual is more comfortable with their body and identification as male, female, or other, then they can become more comfortable in group interactions and interpersonal relationships. Unlike other dance styles that may have negative and unhealthy group norms, Downey, Reel, SooHoo, and Zerbib (2010) found that belly dance is a healthy alternative, demonstrating inclusive and open body image norms, lack of pressure to conform to a specific body image, high levels of body satisfaction among dancers (p. 377). The study collected data from 103 belly dancers with 92.1% of the dancers indicating that belly dance had a positive influence on how they felt about their body. The qualitative data showed that dancers, when asked if belly dance has the potential for positive contributions to women outside of the belly dance community, reported feelings of femininity, beauty, confidence, acceptance of diverse body shapes and sizes, and positive self-esteem (Downey et al., p. 384-385).

Karayanni (2009) examines the relationship between belly dance and gender identity from a man's perspective. He suggests that belly dance movements are useful for questioning social norms and strengthening gender identity and explains that belly dance can free the male body from the confined parameters of normative masculinity. Whether male or female, "Belly dance inspires a departure from

gender limitations and enables an arrival at a defiant body that transgresses societal confines. It has imbued many with a newly discovered bodily potential and a kinder way of perceiving the body” (Karayanni, 2009, p. 450). In her article about using dance/movement therapy to promote the development of a positive body image and healthy sexuality, Kierr (2011) used the isolation of the pelvic floor muscles, which is also a key movement activity in belly dance, to teach body awareness in men and women. Body awareness integrates the body, mind, and senses, providing a fuller and more enjoyable experience of one’s sexuality, which in turn solidifies positive body image and gender identity (Kierr, 2011). Similarly, Moe (2012) found “part of the attraction to [belly dance] seems to be the consent it provides women to explore and claim a sense of sensuality and sexuality on their own terms” (p. 21) and women who belly danced reported an increased sense of body awareness that was likely due to the emphasis on positive body image and improvisational movements, which are unique not only to each woman’s body, but also her interpretations. The self-exploration, shared experience, and performance of movements so internally focused allow for a transformation of the mover’s self-concept of body image and gender, usually from a place of disconnect to a sense of integration, connection, acceptance, and even satisfaction (Al-Rawi, 2012; Downey et al., 2010; Karayanni, 2009; Moe, 2012; Zehr, 2008).

### **Transcendence.**

The idea of transcendence holds a common, yet very broadly defined theme in belly dance literature. Transcendence, defined by Seidlitz et al. (2002) as “ a

subjective experience of the sacred that affects one's self-perception, feelings, goals, and ability to transcend difficulties" (p. 441), occurs when one's focus and movement go beyond the self into connection and unity with others and the universe, allowing for the transformation of consciousness into the integration of mind, body, and spirit. Serlin (1993) describes dances performed with the purpose of transformation as "a heightened form of life which has its origins in its original relation to the gods, its connection to the sacred through form, patterns, and transformative consciousness" (p. 69). Karayanni (2009) provides a very similar description of belly dance as pieces of ancient ritual that have traveled across space and time, converging with the kinesthetic motion of the human body and cosmos (p. 449). Belly dance references the embodiment of the mother/creator/goddess in human form and movement, as well as in nature's form and movement.

Transcendence has been suggested to occur through the use of Authentic Movement (Adler, 1992) and through the use of therapeutic attunement, which Kossak (2009) describes as "an embodied awareness of rhythmic flow and mutual connections that occur when there is an intense process of deep listening, kinesthetic awareness, and deep attention to what is occurring in the moment" (p. 15). Although neither author explicitly mentions this, a strong sense of trust between the mover, witnesses, and facilitator, along with a strong sense of safety and support in the environment should be present if a positive, therapeutic transformative process is to occur. A sense of trust and safety in the group leader, group members, environment, and healing ritual can be seen in the Egyptian Zar



where catharsis, faith, and group support contribute to its effectiveness as a mode of healing and transformation (El Guindy & Schmais, 1994, p. 116).

### **Group cohesion.**

Schmais (1985) defines cohesion as the active participation in other's symbolic statements. Sharing rhythms and repeating simple steps can create a sense of community when building a dance, but becoming emotionally and physically attuned to the movements of others and dancing their personal stories is true participation and cohesion (p. 31). One of the best ways to promote the sharing of movements and eventually group cohesion is through the use of a circle formation. Serlin (1993) states that the natural formation of a circle or circles in a group is a direct measure of cohesiveness; while fragmented groups incapable of forming circles on their own is a sign that cohesion is missing (p. 67). Whether the formation of a circle is naturally formed by the group or requires prompting, its use connects the participants ritually, rhythmically, and transcendently with cyclical movement of the human life, the order of nature, and the patterns of the universe.

Since ancient times, communities have used the circle for healing and connection to the earth, the heavens, and to each other. Although little is known about the purpose or presentation of belly dancing in ancient times, there is evidence that the native ethnic and cultural populations from where belly dance was first documented and still exists did participate in the use of circle dances for healing and religious rituals. Backman (1972) details the documentation of religious circle dances by ancient philosophers and writers stating, "Plato related

that the dances of the Egyptian priests round the temple altars and the dance formations which they executed were intended to represent the movement of the planets, the constellations, and the fixed stars in the heavens” (p. 2). This suggests that the circle also provided transcendental cohesion into the spiritual realm.

In modern Egypt, the use of circle dances and formations for healing and religious rituals can be seen in the Egyptian Zar (El Guindy & Schmais, 1994), as well as in Sufi religious practice and performance, where the Darwish – commonly known as Whirling Dervish in the Western world – can be seen spinning in a circle for hours, with each turn representing a prayer and the constant movement signifying the transcendental connection between earth and heaven, human and God. Dunn (2013) explains that the name for this 700 year old mystic sect of Islam, Sufi, commonly means “at the door to enlightenment” or “awareness in life,” both of which could be considered as signs of transformation.

In addition to the power of the circle formation, individual expression and witnessing can strengthen positive body image and identity as well as group cohesion through trust and safety (Adler, 1996; Kossak, 2009; Schmais, 1985; Serlin, 1993). Speaking about the Zar ritual in Egypt, El Guindy and Schmais (1994) summarize that there is “Something healing about being seen, being the focus of attention. For the individual watching someone else’s dance, there is a process of identification, sharing and relating to that person’s experience on a personal level. It [the Zar] is similar to the transpersonal experience in authentic movement” (p. 119). In the study conducted by Downey, Reel, SooHoo, and Zerbib (2010), belly dancing was considered to be an important source of community and identity for

participants with 97% of the respondents indicating feeling “a strong sense of community with other dancers” or “some sense of community” (p. 386). The study also indicated that the more advanced dancers solidify the cohesiveness and community norms of the belly dance group, because they are the strongest agents of socialization and tend to emphasize a greater sense of perceived benefits, healthier norms, and collectivity. The Egyptian Zar has a similar regulatory function, where cultural norms are maintained and stability is established through the women of the group regularly attending, helping, hosting, and taking part in the other group members’ ceremonies, creating a sense of community in embracing the healing process, or transformation, of the mover (El Guindy & Schmais, 1994, p. 116-117). The power of shared experience in group cohesion, as a form of connection, is clearly a powerful transformative aspect as seen by the convergence of literature on this topic.

### **Conclusion**

Belly dance is a multifaceted movement form with a rich and ancient history, embodied and expressive movements, and transformative aspects including rhythm, ritual, and connection. It is a dance of duality that connects inner and outer worlds, self-expression and universal energies, earth and heaven, and the dancer to her audience. Many of the benefits found in belly dance, including grounding, body awareness, and social connection, add to the mover’s overall well being. As the needs of the mover may change over time, transformation must occur to maintain optimal well being. Like the transformation of the dancer described in the

beginning, belly dance has the potential to affect those witnessing the dance in addition to the mover. Belly dance provides the mover with physical, psychological, social, and spiritual growth through its movements and the transformative aspects of rhythm, ritual, and connection.

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