



Cultural Appropriation in Belly Dance

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Hi, dear readers. It's been a long time since I posted. I seem to go in sporadic waves of inspiration with writing. I wanted to post something today because of a topic that has been coming up a lot in my social media feed: cultural appropriation in dance. Discussions on this subject have been heating up in the past year or so with regard to the style of Raqs Sharqi, or "belly dance," that I have been studying since 2014, FatChance Style (formerly known as American Tribal Style). Although I am just a hobby dancer, not a teacher or a professional, I take this discussion very seriously.



Me in FatChance Style costume, 2018

What Is Cultural Appropriation?

First off, let me explain what I mean by cultural appropriation (from Google Dictionary):

1. The action of taking someone's culture or subculture, typically without asking for permission from those who are culturally or subculturally related or who understand said culture or subculture.
2. The artistic practice or technique of reworking art (including, but not limited to, dance and movement composition, literary composition, musical composition, and visual arts) in one's own work.

In discussions about appropriation, typically, we refer to someone from the dominant culture taking something from a non-dominant and/or colonized culture. There has long been a debate about whether dancers from non-MENAHT (Middle East, North Africa, Hellas [Greece], and Turkey) cultures who study, perform, or teach Raqs Sharqi (and FatChance Style comes out of Raqs Sharqi traditions) are engaging in cultural appropriation. While the debate around FatChance Style is more new (since FatChance dance is a modern fusion style that was only codified in the late 1980s and early 1990s in San Francisco) the overarching issues have been around for hundreds of years. (I won't get into the whole history of Orientalism here, but it's important to read about this movement and what is problematic about it. See "Further Reading" for some sources.)



Me in costume for a street performance, 2019

My Place in Belly Dance

As a white American woman of European heritage, I do not have any cultural or family connection to MENAHT cultures, from which much of FatChance Style's dance moves come (as well as our typical costume pieces and jewelry). I just began doing belly dance because there is a vibrant belly dance scene here in northern and central California, and some friends were taking classes from local teachers. I gave it a try and got hooked. While I have listened closely to the criticisms I have heard about non-MENAHT dancers doing Raqs Sharqi, it's not easy to make sense of where I stand. I do not want to contribute to oppressing or offending people from MENAHT (or other) cultures, nor do I want to abuse the privilege I have as a white woman who has not experienced the same discrimination or oppression as have people of color and women from many MENAHT cultures. But I also don't think I believe that a white person can never study and appreciate dance (or other art forms) from cultures that are not their own.

For me, part of figuring this out involves how to be respectful and informed. This includes listening to people from the cultures that inspired my dance form, studying the history and music of MENAHT cultures, and learning more about the cultural aspects of costuming. While I am careful to avoid some of the more obvious forms of appropriation and racism (such as using makeup to appear darker skinned or using an "exotic"-sounding stage name), I wonder, can a white dancer ever really avoid appropriation when participating in this dance culture (or doing yoga, studying other forms of cultural dance,

etc.)? Is it wrong for me to wear a decorative bindi? To wear Afghani or Rajasthani jewelry and belts? To dance to traditional MENAHT music? There is no definite agreement among dancers I have talked to about it, including dancers from MENAHT cultures. But, that said, there are certainly a lot of problematic aspects of the dance culture in America, so there is a need for continued examination and evolution.

A well-known article on this subject

(https://www.salon.com/2014/03/04/why_i_cant_stand_white_belly_dancers/) was written by Randa Jarrar, an American woman with Egyptian and Palestinian parents, who grew up in Kuwait, Egypt, and the United States, for Salon.com. She takes the stance that white women who belly dance are *always* engaging in cultural appropriation. In a different article, Jarrar noted that it's not simply that MENAHT people want to protect belly dance; it's that they protest "... the right [of white people] to take anything they want and not be criticized for it." I can certainly understand that point. In addition, the belly dance community has been criticized for not making the environment more inclusive for people of various genders and for Black dancers.

These issues are ones I will be pondering as I continue to examine my position as a white dancer in this world. I hope I can continue to learn and perform this form of dance without believing I am doing harm. If I do come to the conclusion that I can't avoid doing harm, I would need to find a new hobby and passion. But for now, I will continue to do my best to navigate this dance form while educating myself about its roots and impacts.

Further Reading

Çelik, Z. (1992). *Displaying the Orient: Architecture of Islam at Nineteenth-Century World's Fairs*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

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Saïd, E. (1978). *Orientalism*. New York, Pantheon Books.

< San Francisco's Ocean Beach History: The 1960s to 1980s

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Live Music (<https://thethirdself.com/2021/06/03/live-music/>) >