

Dressing the Dancer: Identity and Belly Dance Students

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Abstract

Dressing the Dancer: Identity and Belly Dance Students

Dress is a primary tool in the public presentation of the self (Stone, 1962). Clothing, grooming, and the physical appearance of the dressed body contribute to self image in both professional and recreational settings. Attending belly dance classes is a popular leisure activity among American women, and for many, dress accouterments are a significant part of the class experience. Dressing of the self for recreational events gives individuals the opportunity to express alternate aspects of the self not typically evident in other social settings and provides an opportunity for female socialization. The appearance of vendors selling specialized dancewear for classes, seminars, and workshops suggests that dress plays a significant role for students at all levels of belly dance activity, not just among those who perform professionally.

This study examines the types of dress worn for belly dance classes and the motivations for dress choices made by students learning to belly dance from professional instructors in dance classes, seminars, and workshops. The study will further investigate how dress contributes to the expression of identity in the belly dance class context.

The methods used for this study are participant observation at locations and events where belly dance classes, workshops, and seminars are held as well as half-hour interviews with students attending those events. The procedure and interview schedule have been approved by the Institutional Review Board, study #0804P29690.

Table of Contents

Abstract.....	i
Table of Contents.....	ii
List of Tables.....	iii
List of Figures.....	iv
Foreword.....	vi
Chapter One: Introduction.....	1
Chapter Two: Social History of Belly Dance in the United States.....	6
Chapter Three: Theory.....	20
Chapter Four: Methods.....	36
Chapter Five: Who is a “Belly Dancer?”.....	42
Chapter Six: Belly dance class dress and choices.....	50
Chapter Seven: Belly Dance Class Dress and Identity.....	76
Chapter 8: Conclusions and further research.....	111
References (Annotated).....	122
Appendix A: Recruitment Materials and Consent Forms.....	136
Appendix B: Interview Schedule.....	139
Appendix C: Tables with expanded responses.....	140

List of Tables

Table 1: Skill level of interviewees	44
Table 2: Reasons for attending belly dance classes	46
Table 3: Responses to "Do you consider yourself to be a Belly Dancer?"	48
Table 4: Belly dance class dress items.....	72
Table 5: Responses to "How does the way you dress for belly dance classes...make you feel about yourself?"	84
Table 6: Time and Skill, expanded responses.....	140
Table 7: Starting and Staying, expanded responses.....	141

List of Figures

Fig. 1: Dahlal International Promotional, July 2008.....	4
Fig. 2: Soloist, Priscilla, 2004.....	6
Fig. 3: Dance Group, Devyani, 2006.....	6
Fig. 4: Algerian performer, 1893.....	11
Fig. 5: Film stills of Princess Raja, 1904: Library of Congress American Memories Archive.....	12
Fig. 6: An Oriental Dance, 1913.....	12
Fig. 7: Lobby Card for Salome, 1922.....	13
Fig. 8: New York Times Ad, 1972.....	16
Fig. 9: Community Ed Poster, 1980s.....	18
Fig. 10: Jill, Beginner.....	51
Fig. 11: Vicki, Intermediate.....	55
Fig. 12: Intermediate outfits.....	56
Fig. 13: Holly.....	59
Fig. 14: Eileen, Experienced.....	62
Fig. 15: Crop top with ‘cold shoulders’.....	65
Fig. 16: Lori.....	66
Fig. 17 Timeline of Cassandra School class dress, 1978-Early 1990s.....	68
Fig. 18: Timeline of Cassandra School class dress, Late 1990s-2008.....	69
Fig. 19: Shara.....	82
Fig. 20: Val.....	89
Fig. 21: Belly dance shirt logos: Shimmylicious, Ya Habibi, got hips?.....	98

Fig. 22: Rakshanda, Jawhara, and Priscilla.....	101
Fig. 23: Dance name license plates, palm tree plate frame, and Egyptian eye of Horus decal	105
Fig. 24: (A) Categories of dress as related to individual identity	108
Fig. 25: (B) Categories of dress as related to individual identity	109
Fig. 26: (C) Categories of dress as related to individual identity	110

Foreword

This study began as an auto-ethnography (Lofland, Snow, Anderson, & Lofland, 2006) as I tried to situate my own experiences as a long-time belly dancer within those described by formal literature. Most of the academic work focused on professional performers and the Orientalist expectations for performers in restaurants and other public venues. Although I performed professionally as a soloist in several Twin Cities' restaurants during the mid- to late- 1990s, my experiences as a performer are not consistent with those described by either Forner (1996) or Deagon (1996). I have never felt that donning belly dance costumes or performing belly dance thus dressed 'transforms' my self identity.

The notion of exotic Orientalism labeled as instrumental to the composition of public belly dance performances, documented by Rasmussen (1992) and Shay and Sellers-Young (2003, 2005) is not part of my internal motive. For me, performance has core elements of fun and "dressing out" of my usual, day-to-day roles (Stone, 1962), as well as the social interactivity that I enjoyed in both the professional and avocational venues where I performed during that time period. These included settings such as the Powderhorn Park Art Fair and the Minnesota Renaissance Festival; MiniCon, a science fiction and fantasy literature fan convention; and various Society for Creative Anachronism (recreational history re-enactment) and live role-playing events. Input from other dancers at a variety of levels is needed to form a more representative evaluation of belly dancer identity and the role that dress plays in the expression of self, not limited to the creation of an entirely separate "Oriental" identity.

Chapter One: Introduction

Americans today play a number of roles in life; each of these roles contributes to an individual's total self identity. The tools used to communicate and express those roles publicly are many and varied, but typically begin with the presentation of the self via dress (Stone, 1962). Clothing, grooming, and the physical appearance of the dressed body are critical components of self image in both professional and recreational settings. Individuals typically have wider choices for dress during leisure activities, depending on the nature and culture of a given activity, which in turn allows for greater self expression than in professional situations (Joseph, 1986).

In the past twenty years research has focused on the performance of classical *Oriental* dance in Performing Arts, Dance, Drama and Theater History departments, in which the professional female soloist has been defined as the 'belly dancer' archetype and as a Western icon of both commercialization and the cultural appropriation of Eastern performance art (Shay & Sellers-Young, 2005). While numerous papers concerning belly dance have been published since 2000, these typically address the Orientalist foundations of belly dancer stereotypes (Dox, 2006), their relationship to the creation and persistence of fantasy tropes in public belly dance performances (Shay & Sellers-Young, 2003) and the misrepresentation of women in the Middle East (Jarmakani, 2008). Although public performance costumes are the most obvious examples of belly dance dress and are the main topic in recent scholarly literature (Jorgensen, 2005; Keft-Kennedy, 2005), students taking belly dancing lessons must also dress themselves for participation in belly dance classes.

The studio venue has been largely overlooked, even though it is where most recreational belly dancers spend their time and is an important gateway through which future performers must ultimately pass. To appreciate the use of belly dance performance costumes worn by professional dancers to create a public performance identity—which, as Deagon, Sellers-Young and Jarmakani point out, is largely prescribed and standardized—we must first understand the relationship between dress and practice in the learning environment where future performers are enculturated and investigate the ways students use dress to communicate identity within the physical and social context of the belly dance class. **My research question is: What motivates American women’s choice of dress for belly dance classes and how does this dress contribute to identity and the expression of self?**

While newspaper articles regularly describe the “physical, emotional, mental, and spiritual” benefits of belly dance classes (Moran, December 28, 2009, p.E1), the distinctly female group-oriented subculture of belly dance classes has come to the attention of scholars in the fields of psychology and behavioral therapy as well. In the past five years, articles and letters found in physicians and therapists journals endorse belly dance classes as empowering for women and girls and as helpful in the development of self-esteem and a healthy body image (Bock, 2005; Samuels, 2006) as well as for those recovering from breast cancer (Yamey, 2002). In 1995, Austin recommend belly dance for patients recovering from eating disorders. Researchers in sociology and gay, lesbian, bisexual and transsexual studies, however, criticize the social concepts related to the public performance of belly dance such as Western imperialism, exploitation of women, and racial and gender stereotypes (Karayanni, 2004; Maira,

2008). Most of the commentary found in current literature is generated within academia, however; few studies have been published which directly involved women who participate in belly dance activities.

Several of these recent works (Shay & Sellers-Young, 2003; Maira, 2008) assert that ‘belly dancers’ are solely influenced by stereotypes in popular culture and imply that all participants want to emulate those types of characters. But little research has been done *among* women who belly dance to determine immediate influences on belly dance dress choices. Jorgensen (2006) decries the “lack of insider voices” evident in current literature discussing belly dance. I believe it is necessary to take into consideration the experiences and views of women who attend belly dance classes to better understand the motives for dress within the belly dance class environment.

Dress and Dance Class

For many American women in belly dance classes, dress accouterments are a significant part of the recreational experience, especially for those who do not perform professionally. Students “kick off their shoes, wrap the ornate hip belts around their waists, drape the brightly colored veils across the shoulders and begin to sway with the music, even before instruction begins” (Burton, 2007). “Half the reason we do this is so we can play dress up!” exclaimed one experienced participant at a belly dance flea market in Minneapolis, MN in 2007.

Participation in the many “games” of life is, again, always represented by appropriate dress which assists the players in their identifications of one another and helps those on the sidelines—the spectators—to know, in fact, what game they are watching. Stone, 1962.

In a recreational belly dance class the players and spectators are one and the same. Many class flyers or studio websites generically suggest “loose, comfortable clothing or dancewear” (e.g. The Cassandra School Class Schedule, Spring 2008). But magazine articles promoting belly dance as exercise invariably highlight the dress-up aspects of the activity: “...Why not try something new that challenges and inspires you with intricate hip-twists, lively Arabic music and elaborate costumes?” (Meyers, 2008). Vendors who attend belly dance seminars and host large internet catalogs such as Dahlal Internationale (www.dahlal.com), Sharifwear (www.sharifwear.com), and Moondance Costumes (www.moondancebellydance.com) do brisk business selling specialty dancewear, hip wraps and other accessories specifically for belly dance classes, in addition to imported performance costumes. The ability of these and many other belly-dance-wear businesses to persist suggests that dress plays a significant role at all levels of belly dance activity in the United States, not just in performance (Dox, 2006).



Fig. 1: Dahlal International Promotional, July 2008

This manuscript consists of eight chapters. In Chapter Two I describe the genre and various styles therein, and discuss the history of belly dance in the United States, as well as provide an overview of the relationship between dress and participation. In Chapter Three I define working terms, outline the theoretical framework from which I

approach the research questions, and identify significant themes regarding the social context of belly dance classes. In Chapter Four I discuss the methods used for the study, and briefly describe the process used to analyze the material. In Chapter Five I describe the group of women I interviewed and discuss responses to the question, “Are you a belly dancer?” In Chapter Six I present responses concerning dress choices, analyze motives for dress among belly dance students and discuss related findings. In Chapter Seven I analyze the relationship between dress and identity among belly dance students and discuss related findings. In Chapter Eight I summarize the findings and discuss the conclusions. Also note that I have annotated the reference list. My sources come from an assortment of printed and other media as well as academic journals, and the quality of books and other published materials concerning belly dance varies widely with regard to accuracy and bias. For this study, popular sources including magazines and newspaper articles provide valuable examples and comparisons, even though the authors, working journalists, are not firmly grounded in academic research practices.

Chapter Two: Social History of Belly Dance in the United States

Dress and Genre

Confusion exists both within and outside of the belly dance community as to the constitution or definition of belly dance; the variety of venue-specific costumes worn by dancers for public performances contributes to this confusion. Audiences in ethnic restaurants are likely to see a slender soloist wearing a form-fitting costume covered in sequins and rhinestones; this differs from the style of costume typically worn for outdoor events, such as Renaissance festivals or art fairs,



Fig. 2: Soloist, Priscilla, 2004



Fig. 3: Dance Group, Devyani, 2006

where performances typically feature groups of women wearing ethnically-inspired costumes with full, flowing skirts and jingling coin accessories (Devyani, 2006). Performance costumes for both

venues often, but not always, display the dancers' bare midriff—without a visible belly, audiences may not recognize the performer as a 'belly dancer.'

Nomenclature

Belly dance (also *bauchtanz* in German, *danza del vientre* in Spanish, *ballo di pancia* in Italian, etc.) is a broad term used worldwide to describe a genre of dance related to or derived from, directly or indirectly, women's dances of the Middle East. The term *dans du ventre* was introduced to Europe by the French during the 18th century, in reference to the concentration of dance movements in the torso (Sellers-Young, 1992). Many professional and avocational dancers detest the term 'belly dance' because they feel it casts frivolous or derogatory connotations on what has become, for many of its practitioners, a highly cherished art form (Karayanni, 2004). The source of controversy over the name and nature of the genre begins with the history and development of this dance in Europe and United States.

Belly dance is considered to be a sensationalist term avoided by many dancers, who prefer the terms Middle Eastern or Oriental dance (Keft-Kennedy, 2005). This aversion is typically related to Orientalist origins and persistent burlesque associations among American audience members, who frequently equate belly dancing with the seductive 'Dance of the Seven Veils' and the striptease act (Deagon, 2005; Mishkin & Schill, 1973). Belly dance serves as a useful generic label, however, when considering the myriad of dance forms that now populate the genre, many of which are not, in any way, associated with dances indigenous to the Middle East (Coluccia, Paffrath, & Pütz, 2003).

Styles within the Genre of Belly Dance

In the United States, the genre of belly dance encompasses many styles. These include:

- *Raks shaabi*, popular dances women engage in privately for entertainment at home or at parties and family gatherings throughout the Arab world (Adra, 2005).
- *Raks beledi*, indigenous folk dances of Egypt, North Africa, and various Middle Eastern countries performed by amateur and professional dancers at weddings and public celebrations (Karayanni, 2004).
- Folkloric or theatrical dances styled after beledi performances or historic depictions of dance (accuracy or authenticity notwithstanding).
- *Raks sharqi* and *Orientale* or *oryantal danse*, women's solo dances performed professionally in cabarets, nightclubs and theater settings in urban world centers such as Cairo, Beirut and Istanbul, as well as London, Berlin, Toronto, New York and Los Angeles (Shay & Sellers-Young, 2005).
- American Tribal Style (ATS) belly dance, group improvisational performances which combine Spanish, Indian, and African dance elements with beledi and Orientale movements (Djournahna, 2003).
- Fusion styles which integrate movements from modern dance, salsa, jazz, and hip hop as well as a diversity of gestures, poses and movement systems associated with physical-spiritual practices including yoga, tai chi, and sacred dances (M. Gavin, addressing participants of the *Tribal Pura* workshop, Fargo, ND, September 2, 2005), in addition to styles which combine belly dance with a fantasy or fetish subculture, such as Gothic belly dance (*Gothic Belly Dance*, DVD, 2006).

As a whole, these forms can not be accurately labeled Middle Eastern. Although certain forms in the belly dance genre accurately replicate styles of dance indigenous to Arab countries, depending on the skill of the dancer, most are ‘oriental’ only in the sense that they incorporate at least some movements with origins east of Europe. Furthermore, in the past 20 years belly dance has become a popular pastime among women from many countries throughout the world. The networking of belly dancers via travel to international dance seminars and especially use of the internet (Jerrentrup, 2002; Kenny, 2002) has created a global belly dance community with multidisciplinary and cross cultural influences.

Stereotypes

Nomenclature is highly dependent on both the context of participation and the *raison d'être* of engaged individuals. Jawhara, a Palestinian-American woman who teaches dance as part of a Near- and Middle Eastern studies college course told me that she is vehemently opposed to the term belly dance. “It becomes very sexist, very quickly...and it diminishes a dance that in my view deserves a lot more respect based on its history and origin; [the term] conjures up stereotypes and negative and incorrect imagery” (Interview, September 13, 2008). Lin, an American belly dancer who took her first dance class in 1975 and has traveled to Turkey, Egypt and Morocco to learn more about the cultures in which the dance movements arose, told me, “We always called ourselves ‘Middle Eastern’ dancers very religiously until 9/11, and then there was such a stigma, I think, in this country about the Middle East that we very quickly changed to be ‘American belly dancers;’ there was too much animosity when you said Middle East” (Interview, September 13, 2008).

The belly dancer stereotype can be used as a successful marketing strategy, however, by dance instructors for whom teaching dance is a full-time occupation and provides a sole source of income. Garnett, a professional instructor, explained: “If I said I was an Orientale dancer, [potential students] would think I was from China. So, I just tell them I’m a belly dancer, and they get it. They know what a belly dancer is, you know? And if they don’t get it, then I say ‘I Dream of Jeannie’ and then...they get that image, they make that connection. If I didn’t label my classes as belly dance, I probably would never get a student...because that’s what they’re looking for” (Interview, September 12, 2008; c.f. *I Dream of Jeannie*, NBC television series, Sheldon, 1965). As Bock points out, "The public image of belly dance in the United States, given its history of Orientalism and fantasies of racist, objectified sexuality, is problematic, but it is also one of the elements of the dance that initially draws in audiences and new dancers” (2005, p. 8). Therefore belly dance is the most “familiar” and practical alias for this study, and I hope that “...respectful usage might reclaim it to a certain extent” (Karayanni, 2004, p. 27).

Origins of belly dance in the United States

During the last two decades of the nineteenth century, dancers from the Middle East were popular performers at World’s Fairs in Europe, such as the Paris Exposition Universelles (AlZayer, 2004). Dancing girls—and men—from the Middle East were introduced to the general public of the United States as fairgoers attended ethnic spectacles at World’s Fairs and Expositions held in America (Bryant, 2002). In 1893 one ambitious show promoter, Sol Bloom, featured numerous musicians and dancers on the Midway Plaisance at the Columbian Exposition of Chicago (AlZayer, 2004); women

from Algeria, Tunisia, Egypt, Syria, Turkey and elsewhere performed for crowds demanding exotic entertainment, the *dans du ventre*, which Bloom enticingly re-branded as “belly dance” (Dinicu, 1993).

The dancing women were fully covered, wearing stage versions of their native dress. Even so, the dancing caused a great deal of moral concern among fairgoers, especially genteel ladies, who were at that time conservatively corseted and had never imagined such “unrestrained movements of hips, pelvis, abdomen, etc.” (Carlton, 1994, p. 47). In contrast to the solid, progressive American identity promoted by other Fair exhibits, the unrestrained foreign dancers symbolized the anxiety associated with social changes occurring at that time (Jarmakani, 2008). Attempts to shut down Midway theaters failed and, following the Chicago fair and subsequent Expositions, many foreign performers and imitators alike joined circus sideshows and vaudeville shows to perform the less than reputable—but extremely popular—‘hootchy kootchy’ (McDonnell, 2002).



Fig. 4: Algerian performer, 1893

Belly dance dress and public performance

Early film makers, including Thomas Edison, filmed many dancers—Americans and their Middle Eastern counterparts. Silent film shorts of fair dancers, such as the 1904 “Princess Raja Dance” (American Mutoscope and Biograph Company, from the Library of Congress American Memories Archive) show that immigrant dancers abandoned their ethnic clothing and adopted dress more like American ladies for performance. As belly



Fig. 5: Film stills of Princess Raja, 1904: Library of Congress American Memories Archive

dance moved into burlesque houses and peepshow venues, more refined patrons attended fashionable theaters to enjoy Orientalist dance performances with lavish sets and more elaborate costuming.

Orientalist themes—Biblical tales, historisque dramas, and stories from Persian and Indian religious and literary epics—were extremely popular on stage during the late



Fig. 6: An Oriental Dance, 1913

nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, and ethnic dancers inspired the choreographies of Ted Shawn (pictured left with Norma Gould, New York Public Library Digital Gallery), Ruth St. Denis and their contemporaries (Srinivasian, 2004). Playwright Oscar Wilde and composer Richard Strauss started the European *Salomé* trend, and Canadian dancer Maud Allen’s widely acclaimed 1905 performance of the ‘Dance of the Seven Veils’ helped

disseminate the concept of Orientale dancers in diaphanous un-dress to the rest of the world (Wilson, 2007). In 1907 the Manhattan Opera Company of New York opened its own production of Strauss’ opera, and

American women soon flocked to dance classes to learn how to properly portray Salomé (Caddy, 2005). This epidemic of ‘Salomania’ reflected not only the swelling tide of Orientalist fantasy in the public representation of eastern themes, but an implicit undercurrent of social change represented in women’s performances as potent protagonists in a novel sexual context (Deagon, 2005).

Exotic elements from temple and tomb art and ethnic clothing were combined with contemporary clothing styles to create remarkable theatrical outfits (Brown, 2004,

see also Kinney & Kinney, 1924). The bared midriff and dripping beads of Hollywood silent film actress Alla Nazimova (New York Public Library Digital Gallery) and others who appeared as Salomé, Cleopatra, and Radha—exotic and erotic female characters—



Fig. 7: Lobby Card for Salome, 1922

scandalized theater-goers even as posters and show bills piqued curiosity and sold tickets (Gould, 2007). As at the World’s Fairs, theater audiences were both rapt and repulsed, and demands to close notorious shows merely invigorated publicity. Soon, similar productions in a new medium—the cinema—brought moving images of veiled dancing women to Hollywood, where costume designers made a lasting contribution to belly dance attire in the ‘sword and sandal’ epics.

American costumers reveled in the opportunity to create exotic outfits for starlets portraying historic and religious figures on the ‘Big Screen.’ Theda Bara is perhaps the best known early *Cleopatra* in 1917 (silent film, Edwards, Fox Film Corporation),

followed by Claudette Colbert in 1934 (black and white, deMille, Paramount Pictures) and Elizabeth Taylor in 1963 (color, Mankiewicz, 20th Century Fox). The already fantastic European theater costumes of the early twentieth century were elaborated upon and made even more extraordinary by Hollywood designers. These American confections were embraced by Egyptian dancers as the film industry in Cairo also boomed (AlZayer, 2004), strengthening the association between ornate dress and belly dancing.

Further development in the Egyptian belly dance performance costume occurred during the period of increased mobility during and following World War II, with the establishment of theaters and cabarets in Cairo. Europeans and wealthy Egyptians enjoyed live performances featuring belly dance—often ‘westernized’ by choreographers classically trained in ballet—in club venues such as the Casino Opera Theater, a nightclub owned and operated by Lebanese dancer Badia Masabni which featured star dancers such as Taheya Carioca and Naima Akef (Lüscher, 2000). By 1940, the two piece bare-midriff performance ensemble now known as *bedlah* (lit. “suit”) had become the uniform of professional dancers in Egypt (Deagon, 2007), on stage and on screen.

American audiences were re-introduced to belly dance mid-century and became familiar with this new, now ‘traditional’ costume when foreign belly dancers appeared in American films. For example, Egyptian dance star Samia Gamal appears wearing bedlah, dancing in a café in *Valley of the Kings* (Pirosh, Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer, 1954).

Furthermore, as Arab expatriates in large American cities opened nightclubs, a distinctly American form of live Middle Eastern entertainment began to evolve.

American Belly Dance

During the 1950s and 1960s musicians and dancers from throughout the Mediterranean and Middle East performed in restaurants and cabarets in immigrant communities in New York, Boston and other cities in the eastern United States, leading to the development of a multi-ethnic entertainment genre (Rasmussen, 1992). Expatriates from Turkey, Lebanon, Egypt and elsewhere took pleasure in music as an essential element of ethnic culture while Americans enjoyed the club experience as exotic entertainment. Restaurant and nightclub owners quickly realized that belly dancing was extremely popular among American patrons, whether the dancer was an ‘authentic’ performer such as Nejla Ateş of Turkey (pictured on the album cover of *Port Said*, Audio Fidelity Records, 1957) or an American performer using a Middle Eastern pseudonym such as Scheherazade, a common Persian lady’s name made famous by the 1001 Nights tales. The latter was just as likely because dancing professionally was, and in many Middle Eastern cultures still is, considered to be a low status occupation (van Nieuwkerk, 1995). The real nationality of the belly dancer was irrelevant to audiences, and club owners perpetuated—and profited from—Orientalist themed entertainment (Shay & Sellers-Young, 2003).

Belly dance classes

Transformed from its carnival origins as a “grotesque display” of the female body (Keft-Kennedy, 2005), belly dance re-emerged as an avant-garde part of American popular culture during the 1970s. Unlike female spectators during the previous century, modern American women embraced belly dancing as an art form. The growing demand

for proficient belly dancers lured many American women to classes so they could “join the increasing ranks of professionals who perform in clubs and at thousands of more lucrative private-party engagements” (Mishkin & Schill, 1973). While relatively few women went on to become professional performers, dance studios throughout the United States began to offer belly dance classes for exercise and entertainment.

During the 1970s belly dance was enormously popular as a way to relax and work out among American women (Mishkin & Schill, 1973). Proponents touted weight loss and improved posture as well as increased sex appeal among the many benefits of belly dance (Özel, 1976). Professional performers started teaching

classes for female audience members who had seen their shows (Sellers-Young, 2005), and newspaper advertisements for East Coast studios such as “The Serena School of Belly Dance” (*New York Times*, February 4, 1973, p. 343), and “The Navel Academy” (*New York Times*, November 19th, 1972, advertisement p. 176) reached women who weren’t regular visitors to the ethnic nightclubs of New York City. For those who wanted to learn to belly dance in private at home, how-to books and LP record albums with instructional booklets quickly became available (e.g. ‘Instruction Booklet by Vina Enclosed’ with *The Art of Belly Dancing*, Monitor Records, 1973).

You Can Learn To Belly Dance.

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Fig. 8: New York Times Ad, 1972

Belly dancing appealed to a wide variety of American women. ‘Liberated women’ of the feminist movement appreciated the agency which belly dance accorded the female body (Shay & Sellers-Young, 2005); women felt that it allowed them to “express their total nature, including their sexuality” (Mishkin & Schill, 1973, p. 20). Belly dance also appealed to “dutiful wives and mothers” seeking “dignified sexuality” (Özel, 1976). Any woman could learn *How to Make Your Husband a Sultan* with the help of Turkish belly dancer Özel Turkbaz (El-Ay Records, 1970); all she needed was a phonograph, the record with its instruction book, a space to move in and—of course—the right outfit. Belly dance classes became a popular workout for many women; as for any exercise activity, dance practice requires clothing that will meet the physical and mental needs of the wearer.

In 1972, the authors of *The Serena Technique of Belly Dancing: The Fun Way to a Trim Shape* wrote, “Most of Serena’s students wear leotards to class because they fit, as she says, ‘like a second skin’” (Serena & Wilson, p. 36). Likewise, the authors of *The Compleat Belly Dancer* told the reader to “grab your skimpiest workout clothes” (Mishkin & Schill, 1973, photo on p. 48). As for any type of dance, belly dance students should wear clothing that “does not conceal the lines of [the] body” (Serena & Wilson, A., 1972) for unrestricted movement and to make it easier to learn the dance moves correctly: “visibility of the body” is key to understanding how to effectively execute dance movements (Williams, 1994, p. 4). Belly dance students must be able to see the instructor’s body to learn how to generate movements properly, and both the instructor and the student must be able to see the student’s body to evaluate those movements. Özel (1976, p. 31) forthrightly noted, “The best way to see how you’re doing is to be able to

look at your gut.” Durability and the ability to wash clothing that gets sweaty in dance class is also an important feature, especially among students who attend more than one class per week and those who also teach.

As the health and fitness industry evolved, the popularity of belly dance classes went into decline. Around 1980 aerobic exercise—with its own distinctive skin-tight uniform—displaced belly dance as the latest trend in women’s fitness. Celebrities such as Jane Fonda and Cher popularized aerobic workouts, and the new availability of the video cassette recorder (VCR) created a market for home workout videos. Belly dance classes lingered as an ‘ethnic’ dance form in small dance studios and as novelty classes offered through community education programs, but the initial boom was over.

Belly dance anew

Another belly dance boom began in the late 1990s, in part because young women sought classes after seeing celebrities such as Shakira, Britney Spears and Anna Nicole incorporate belly dancing—or at least belly dance costumes—into performances and public appearances (Dox, 2006). Twenty-first century magazine articles and newspaper essays began to promote the benefits of belly dance again, with a renewed focus on women’s body awareness and self-esteem as well as physical health; for those who want to learn at home, instructional DVDs and books with CDs are available. As in the 1970s, the

**Some Of Our Classes
Appeal To People At
A Gut Level.**



Belly Dancing. It's just one of the low-cost courses we offer. Others include CPR, Home Buying, Time Management and hundreds more.
Minneapolis Community Education
Learning that's fun, not work. 348-4125

Fig. 9: Community Ed Poster, 1980s

feminist undercurrent is stronger than ever (Keft-Kennedy, 2005), but the majority of women in classes bear little resemblance to hot young pop stars and the apparent motives for learning belly dance are far from political.

Headlines such as “Navel gazers welcome at belly dancing class/Art form helps many women drop their shyness and pounds” (Elzey, August 10, 2007), “New labor moves: belly dancing hits delivery room” (Zimmerman, August 7, 2007), and “Movers & shakers; Women of all ages enjoy ancient dance at multigenerational center” (Burton, April 15, 2007) highlight the diverse goals of participants, who are almost exclusively female, as are instructors. Self expression and camaraderie are frequently cited motives for participation, but women are attracted to belly dance classes for many reasons: “I was especially drawn to Middle Eastern Dance because of the costumes” wrote Tamalyn Dallal in the introduction to her book *Belly Dancing for Fitness* (Dallal & Harris, 2004).

In the next chapter I build a framework for the study of dress, the self, and identity, define core elements such as dress and costume, and build a foundation of relevant theory in relation to the social systems and processes in which belly dancers present themselves.

Chapter Three: Theory

The self and identity: social entities

George Mead (1962) describes the self as one part of an individual, attached to but distinct from the physical body, which “arises in the process of social experience and activity, that is, develops in the given individual as a result of his relations to that process as a whole and to other individuals within that process” (p. 135). Mead further emphasizes the importance of communication, noting that “It is the social process itself that is responsible for the appearance of the self” and that “There are all sorts of different selves answering to all sorts of different social reactions” (p. 142). As a social construct, the self engages in communication with and responds to other members of the community likewise engaged. In doing so, the self acquires an identity for each given set of social circumstances. Since Roach-Higgins, Eicher, and Johnson (1995) note that “it is the physical self that is subject to acts of dress” (p. 2), the body is connected to the social self via dress and thus self identity is connected to the appearance of the body in the social environment. Erving Goffman (1961, pp. 20-21) describes clothing and personal grooming paraphernalia as an “Identity Kit,” necessary for the creation of an appropriate or expected appearance, emphasizing the role of dress in the presentation of a suitable identity for social situations.

Gregory Stone (1962) stated that “One’s identity is established when others *place* him as a social object by assigning him the same words of identity that he appropriates for himself or *announces*” (p. 93, original emphasis), typically through the use of “apparent symbols such as uniforms.” The intended identity announced via dress of the

individual must coincide with the identity perceived by others, and must be suitable for the current context. Identity is further related to context, wherein the individuals present enact specific, or even specialized, socially related roles.

Through the establishment of identity, dress enhances an individual's ability to enact a given role, pertinent to the situation. But Stone (1962) also states that "collusion is required" from other participants (p. 109); the identity of the individual must be accepted, especially where it differs from one's usual identity. Others present who are similarly dressed become part of a complicit "peer circle" (ibid., p. 113) in the social setting where the group enactment of the alternative role takes place. Dress provides both a way for an individual to establish self identity and contributes to the social context in which individuals interact. The types of dress used by participants in this study, concerning dance, fall into the same category as dance dress, which can in turn be compared to and contrasted with related dress categories, costume and uniform.

Categories of Dress

For this study, I define the meanings of costume, uniform, and dance dress, with dance dress basically inclusive of the types of dress evident in the belly dance studio. All types of dance dress meet various criteria for both costume and uniform, thus all three definitions require further refinement. I begin with Roach-Higgins & Eicher's (1992) most basic and useful definition of **dress**, being the sum of modifications of and/or supplements to the body.

I define **costume** as a special subset of dress which can be used to convey to the viewer an identity which differs from the usual identity of the wearer, to enhance that identity (after Eicher, Evenson & Lutz, 2008). For this study, however, I do not restrict

the use of costume to formal ceremonies or public performance as Eicher, Evenson and Lutz (ibid) define it. My working definition of costume concurs with Stone's (1962) use of the term **costume** as a type of dress that signifies the departure from the ordinary and the assumption of an other's role (1962, p. 108), but it differs from Eicher, Evenson and Lutz (2008) in that it does not necessarily conceal the usual identity of the wearer, as for an actor. Costume is similar to uniform, in that it places the individual in an alternate role, but the use of a uniform differs somewhat in relation to the larger concept of social context.

I use Stone's (1962) designation of the term **uniform** for dress that conveys "real" identity as an individual placed within society, as for occupation or as a member of a particular social cohort (ibid. p. 113). A uniform reinforces the legitimacy of the wearer's announced identity or current role, beyond the boundaries of a theater performance or ceremonial event. A child or an actor costumed as a policeman, for example, does not wield the authority of an officer of the community police force. Similarly, a minister wearing a clerical collar is recognized as such in a hospital or grocery store, even without the complete set of liturgical vestments worn during church services—that single item of dress serves as a uniform, as does the badge revealed by a plainclothes police detective when making an arrest. Thus I differentiate between costume and uniform in this way: A costume is worn by an individual to express a transient role or temporary identity in a short-term social situation, whereas a uniform is worn to express an established identity engaged in an ongoing or regularly recurring role in an enduring social context.

Concurrent use of dress as both uniform and costume—not to be confused with the nearly identical "uniform costumes" worn for performance among dance chorus lines

and drill teams—is also pertinent within the context of dance classes. This requires a discussion of the use of dress specifically in relation to dance.

In relation to ceremonial African dance, Eicher (1997) distinguishes between a dance costume, which typically disguises the identity of the dancer, and **dance dress**, which conveys “an ongoing or new (perhaps temporary) social role and enhances the individual identity” (p. 94) within the specific context of the dance event. This differs from Stone’s (1962, p. 109) definition of costume, because he asserts that a costume “misrepresents” the wearer’s identity; it is important to make the distinction that per Stone, the costume does not necessarily disguise or conceal the identity of the wearer. As a new role is enacted, identity may be altered but not abolished entirely. Eicher (1997, p. 96) also describes a “body revealing” dance costume, however, where the face of the dancer is visible and “the individual’s personal identity is revealed.” Eicher, Evenson and Lutz (2008, p. 380) note that day to day clothing, like costumes in the performing arts, “enhances an individual’s identity;” but they also reserve the term costume for dress that “conceals the true identity of the actor” (performer). In relation to belly dance classes and events, not excluding performances but also not limited to them, dance dress may serve as either costume or uniform, or as costume *and* uniform, on a sliding scale related to the goals of the wearer and the specific context in which she presents herself. I will discuss this further in Chapter Six.

Dress and the communication of identity among dancers

Drid Williams (1994, p.1) stated that the initial view of any dancer will be the way he or she is dressed: Dress “takes precedence in matters of communication over the actions, gestures, and body language(s) of interpersonal communication...observers see

how bodies are dressed before they see how bodies act.” For belly dancers and others present, dress is a critical component for communication in relation to self and the social space in which dance activity occurs (Bock, 2005). The use of dress in the expression or creation of self identity is not limited to professional shows, where the belly dance performance costume is largely dictated by the venue (Jorgensen, 2006). Kenny (2002) similarly recognizes that professional performers “must capitulate to the aesthetic demands of the culture” where they perform (p. 305); audiences expect a certain type of costume, on a certain body type, therefore that is what a successful performer must present. For professional dancers in performance, the correct costume is the only sound choice.

Students, however, typically have more choices when deciding what to wear in the classroom or studio. A woman who participates in rehearsals or dance classes, like a performer, “negotiates the intersections between self, society and the perceptual awareness of her dancing body” (Sellers-Young, 2005, p.289). Identity is foremost among things communicated, and dress is a key element at this intersection--the student has multiple options for the expression of identity via dress, as long as it meets the minimum criteria for physical activity as discussed previously (does not limit movement, can be washed frequently, etc.).

Identities and roles

Miller (1997) adapted Eicher’s (1981) framework concerning the division of the self into public, private and secret components to address the possibility of concurrence between these three selves when dressing for recreational events. This revised framework takes into account “the costumed self who [is] not anonymous” (Miller, 1997, p.231).

The costumed self enables the expression or formation of an alternate identity associated with a role that differs dramatically from other roles in life, but does not obliterate them. The participant is at liberty to explore alternate aspects of the self without creating an entirely new identity. Fron, Fullerton, Morie and Pearce (2007, p. 1) note that “Dress-up also provides the opportunity for transformative play, for in dressing up and taking on new roles, we learn more about ourselves.” In a belly dance class students are at liberty to indulge in a recreational personal exploration via “ethno-fantasy” (Fisher, 2005) in the studio setting.

Role playing and “dress up” play

Lofland, Snow, Anderson and Lofland (2006, p. 135) summarize roles as “behaviors associated with a particular position in a relational network;” at any given moment an individual’s identity is related to his or her current role, which in turn depends on the social context, i.e. the relationships between others present at that moment, age and gender as well as occupation or social status. Furthermore, playing one role usually takes precedence, at least for a time, over other roles (Waskul & Lust, 2004, p.337).

The recreational enactment of a role that differs from one’s usual roles in a setting divergent from everyday life or reality is called role playing. Players create and develop a character or persona simply for the fun of doing so; role-playing games such as Dungeons and Dragons or computer games can be played alone or in groups, in person (“analog”) or on the internet, with or without a visual representation of a player’s character (Waskul & Lust, 2004). “Live” role-play activities involving dress, also called costume play (Fron et al., 2007, p. 4), usually occur at a prescribed time and in a liminal space (between public and private) where costumed participation is accepted, such as Science

Fiction/Fantasy conventions, historic re-enactment venues and period fairs (such as the Minnesota Renaissance Festival), and fundraiser masquerade balls (ibid. p. 11-13). Miller (1998, p. 38) found that costume play and similar “dress up” recreational activities provide an opportunity for “fantastic socialization in public;” further more, for many women participating in historical re-enactment groups, activities related to events, such as the making of costumes, provided additional opportunities for female social interaction (p. 51).

Belly dance and gender

As a predominantly female pastime, belly dance is a strongly gendered activity. Belly dance is typically promoted as a women’s art form, and most teachers and professional performers are women. Although there are several male belly dance instructors who are well known in the United States, including Egyptian Yousry Sharif (based in New York) and American Jim Bos (based in California), the weekly classes familiar to most American belly dance students are taught and attended almost exclusively by women. In the all-female belly dance class, the expression of an ultra feminine role may be linked to a woman’s desire to develop and share an alternative and private, but not intimate, self (Eicher, 1981; Miller, 1998). In a belly dance class, a woman can engage in this exploration among members of a like minded and presumably supportive community, in a physical environment that spans the gap between private and public. Dressing to accentuate the womanly form, such as tying a colorful scarf with jingling coins or sparkling beads around the hips, emphasizes female physical sexual characteristics and further delineates the homosocial context. Enacting an alternate role

by dressing for belly dance classes may be a symbolic way of achieving gender identity goals.

Like performances, belly dance classes, recitals, rehearsals, and seminars or workshops are often conducted amidst the co-opted backdrop of the fundamental Oriental fantasy. Instructional video sets and studios dedicated to belly dance classes are often similarly dressed with oriental carpets and lush draperies which contribute to the Orientalist ambiance of the belly dance experience (Kenny, 2002). Like their counterparts of 30 years ago, many American belly dancers seem drawn to the idea of a harem. The belly dancer's harem, however, has perceptibly shifted from a setting for heterosexual erotic fantasy to an exclusively female homosocial environment (Maira, 2008).

Dox (2006, p. 58) describes the new belly dancer's harem as "an idealized community of women into which men may—or may not—be granted access." The typically all-female population of a weekly belly dance class and the semi-private physical context of class activity situate the dancer inside a gendered space, outside her daily routine. "For that one hour, I'm just a dancer—not a wife, not a mother, not a cook, not a driver, not the laundry lady—just a dancer" (Anderson quoted in Elzey, 2007). Belly dance classes meet these spatial and temporal criteria and are thus a suitable site for the exploration and expression of an alternate component of self via the performance of a different role, that of the "belly dancer." This liminal situation allows for the enactment of a new role.

The gendered space of the local American belly dance class parallels the social belly dance experiences of women in the Middle East. As per Deaver's (1978) discussion of belly dancing in Saudi Arabia, the all-female population and secluded atmosphere of

the dance studio place the activity within a culturally acceptable gendered location—a “private, enclosed, female space” (p. 15). In the U.S., most dance instructors discourage onlookers, both for the comfort of students and the practical application of a pay-to-play business policy. The community within the dance class consists of friends and peers, allowing freedom of movement and self-expression in a socially appropriate venue. Among Arab women, amateur belly dance is a form of play that is “entirely fantasy, unconnected to the reality of the dancers’ lives” (Adra, 2005, p. 43). The ability to enjoy belly dancing among friends in a venue deemed socially appropriate transcends cultures.

Belly dance and ideology

To some extent, belly dancing engages participants in a subtle political feminism. In class, the dancer is the *subject* of personal exploration rather than the *object* of external scrutiny (Dox, 2005). Classmates see and are seen by their peers in a dynamic performer-audience relationship (Martin, 1992). The ability of belly dance to grant a woman agency over her body through its visibility empowers her and provides a medium for resistance to patriarchal hegemony (Bock, 2005). Sensuality, sexuality and the expression of gender are imbued with political power; like early modern dance, the public revelation of the female body continues to challenge lingering social constraints of the female figure in all of its physical manifestations.

The varying female body, at all ages and weight ranges, is accepted within the student belly dance community. Women whose figures do not resemble the youthful, slender American ideal portrayed in advertisements are welcomed in belly dance classes and often participate in class recitals to demonstrate their new skills publicly. Students learn in a supportive, cooperative feminist environment which acknowledges the full

range of women's body types (Bock, 2005; Carr, 2005). Among belly dancers, a bared midriff or form-fitting outfit is generally accepted regardless of size or shape of the dancer.

This challenge to the American ideal image of the female body, with heavier women typically neglected by entertainment media, may also extend to social mores which restrict various women's physical activities (and associated dress) to circumstances deemed proper by family members as much as by 'society in general,' a suppression of what Sellers-Young (2005) describes as the female body's "natural sensuality;" contrasting the muscular 'hard body' depicted as the masculine ideal.

Dox (2005) and Deagon (1997, 2005) link belly dance to religion specifically via the female body with natural order and belly dance as part of women's creative ability, i.e. childbirth and birth ritual. By extension, some dancers perceive modern belly dance practices—even neo-fusion styles—as an 'ancient and traditional' vehicle for the expression of sacred femininity and power. These "invented traditions" (Hobsbawm and Ranger, 1983; see also Bock, 2005; Dox, 2006) are nominally justified by their ostensible link to historic religious practices (c.f. Hagan, 2007). The creation of and adherence to group rituals or traditions contributes to the ongoing solidarity of the sisterhood or Tribe (Coluccia, et al., 2003; Jerrentrup, 2002).

Jarmakani (2008) observes that many Western belly dancers establish social or emotional legitimacy via this mythological link to ancient practice. It is worth mentioning that choreographers from Egypt or Iraq and elsewhere similarly justify the popularity of belly dance by linking it to Pharonic or Mesopotamian practices, distinctly pre-dating Islam but wholly part of Egyptian or Persian (etc.) cultural history, as long as the dance

has been suitably caricatured or theatricized (Shay & Sellers-Young, 2003). Many current scholars of dance history and classical studies—including Deagon, Shay, and Sellers-Young—are skeptical of this historic stance, criticizing authors such as Buonaventura (1994) and Hobin (2003) for making unverifiable claims about belly dance in relation to ancient religious practices. Most participants agree, however, that belly dance is a vehicle for the expression of feminism.

These feminist narratives are not universally accepted. Opponents decry participation by women from western countries in belly dance as “cultural appropriation” of an ethnic art form (Nopper, 2004). Laukkanen’s (2004) paper concerning Finnish belly dancers addresses the numerous cultural issues involved with a “transnational” dance form, i.e. one that has “multiple locations between nations and cultures, and the various dance and music styles it has been influenced by” (p. 1). Her study illustrates the complex negotiation of the adoption of foreign or ethnic activities by outsiders, which she refers to as the “consumption of strangers,” concepts of multiculturalism, and the ways in which Otherness is enacted; she concludes that her subjects recognized the “changing nature of cultures” and need for cultural responsibility in the genre (ibid., p. 21).

Feminist scholars condemn professional *Oriente* soloists, like striptease dancers, for perpetuating the commoditization of the female body (Bock, 2005; Jerrentrup, 2002). In *Performing Femininity*, Lockford (2004) addresses a divisive current in academic feminism, wherein women who choose to enact gender identity in an ultra-feminine way are often criticized by more fundamentalist feminists who eschew expressions of femininity as contrary to the women’s rights movement. With regard to self-performance

Lockford remarks, “Acts that are positively experienced as empowering women should be at the heart of the feminist enterprise” (ibid., p. 50).

Ardent proponents of specific belly dance styles likewise criticize other forms as inauthentic, hyper-sexualized, or overly competitive. But the ongoing popularity of the ‘Seven Veils’ theme among all styles of belly dancers (Deagon, 2005), which range from dramatic dances of seduction to the ritualized portrayal of the dancer as an agent of unlimited female power (the *femme fatale*) or an object of sacred feminine adoration (goddess) (Coluccia et al., 2003), illustrates the collision/collusion between feminism, authenticity and artistry time and again. In practice as well as performance, the veil and other articles of dress contribute to the transmission of these various ideas and actions between the individuals who comprise the *gestalt* of the American belly dance community and contribute to its overall cultural composition.

Dress and the transformation of identity

The sanctuary of the dance studio and adoption of an alternate role allows the dance student the opportunity to engage with numerous aspects of her self, including gender, away from other distractions. Bock (2005) and Forner (1996) use models for rites of passage or transformation to discuss the transformative capabilities of belly dance dress—hip scarves, skirts, and costumes—as part of the process by which dancers remove themselves from the everyday world to participate in belly dance activities. Waskul and Lust’s (2004) study of role playing games among adults and Fron, Fullerton, Morie and Pearce’s (2007) analysis of computer game avatars and “analog” dress-up play indicate that recreational activity involving costumes is linked to a temporary transformation of identity and the creation and enactment of an alternate role. Unlike

computer avatars which conceal each participant's identity, belly dance class dress does not disguise the individual in a live setting. Belly dancers "(re)frame their identity and related subjective experience" (Sellers-Young, 2005). Because they share the space with other women who are sympathetic, belly dance classes provide a secure physical, emotional and social environment for doing so.

Belly dance as play

According to Adra (2005), amateur belly dance fulfills Huizinga's (1955) conditions for play: Play is a voluntary, enjoyable activity, apart from regular duties, bounded by time and place, and informed and transmitted through cultural practice. The dance class is Huizinga's orderly play-community, in which members share a leisure activity in a temporary setting, though often on a regular basis. Although professional belly dancers may compete for jobs, and performance contests have become popular at national belly dance seminars, a notable feature of belly dance as recreation is that it lacks competition at the amateur level. In this way, avocational belly dance resembles role playing games in that the concept of 'winning' is generally absent (Fron et al., 2007, p. 4; Waskul & Lust, 2004, p. 336). Belly dance recitals in which all members of the class who learned the choreography are welcome to participate if they choose are commonplace in Community Education programs, and many studios host informal dance parties, called *haflas*, which feature open stages for students who want to develop solo or small group performance skills as well. Performers—or audience members—may be attired in dance class wear or a costume of some sort for the occasion. Dress unites participants in the space and demarcates the situation as "extra-ordinary" (Huizinga, 1955).

Among belly dancers, dance class as a form of recreation or play typically occurs on a weekly basis and becomes part of the belly dancers' regular routine. For many participants, relationships formed within the play space extend beyond the special and temporal boundary of the event and become an important component of the individual's social support network (Huizinga, 1955; Jerrentrup, 2006). Numerous belly dance associations and American Tribal Style belly dance groups throughout the United States, as well as internet lists, chat rooms, and blog spots demonstrate the critical social function of belly dance as a shared recreational activity which transcends the studio environment and continues beyond the participants' classroom identities, creating a substantial community of immediate, local, national, and even global proportions. The role of the belly dancer pervades the self and becomes significant to other areas of a woman's life. Each individual is a member of several communities, all of which overlap with relation to roles enacted therein.

Community and the construction of context

Within a given community and between individuals dress is symbolic and functions as a communicative icon inherently subject to both local and immediate context (Kuper, 1973). Context is in turn constructed by the participants in the social environment; in a play environment, where play is a form of situated interaction, participants have agency over that environment (Lutfiyya, 1987). Belly dancers create the context of the activity, each participant defines her self within that context, and the action of the constructed self in turn influences and re-shapes the context as a framework for ongoing social interaction. Within this system, belly dance dress plays a significant role non-verbal interpersonal communication per symbolic interactionism.

Symbolic interaction and Stone's "program and review"

Hanna (1979) advocates the study of dance from a symbolic interactionist perspective. I will use the related concept of dress as a social symbol for communicating identity (Roach-Higgins, Eicher, & Johnson, Eds., 1995, p.5) as the foundation of my study. The elements of symbolic interaction theory first appeared in the writings of several early 20th century social scientists, notably Georg Simmel and Max Weber. These were elaborated upon and consolidated by George Herbert Mead (Rose, 1962; see also Mead, 1962). Symbolic interactionism essentially states that the self is created through communication, including the use of learned signs and non-verbal signals exchanged through behavior, dress, and other culturally distinct symbolic activities. These symbols hold predisposed meaning and convey ideology and other complex cultural values, as well as information about roles, status and hierarchy among the engaged members of a collective network. For this study, the collective network involves belly dance students and their teachers.

Dress for belly dance classes and avocational activities pertains to Gregory Stone's (1962) concept of an individual's "program" of appearance, whereby an individual presents a dressed self which is subject to the "review" of others, and to which the response will either accept and "validate" the self thus presented or reject or "challenge" that self (pp.101-102). Stone maintained that individuals will typically create a program of dress most likely to elicit validation; choices for dress depend on those others present who will do the reviewing. Belly dancers are akin to Nash's runners, (1977, in Roach-Higgins, Eicher & Johnson, Eds., p. 86), part of a subculture with "a well-developed language of clothes and body movement." Styles and subtle dress cues

are not always apparent to those who are not fully enculturated. The perceived meaning of belly dancer's dress choices are thus related to whether the physical setting is open to the public, strictly private, or somewhere in between and, in turn, those choices contribute to the social construction of context as discussed earlier. A discussion of levels of privacy as related to the settings chosen for this study follows in Chapter Four.

Belly dance students, no matter how well enculturated they are, however, are unfamiliar with this broad theoretical discourse. To access students' thoughts and ideas on the subject of dress in the belly dance studio setting, I opted to use fieldwork and personal interviews as my primary methods for this study, which I discuss in the following chapter.

Chapter Four: Methods

Field Work: Participant observation and the known researcher

To approach those involved in a specialized and, sometimes, marginalized activity for their opinions, rather than relying on library research, a researcher must be willing to personally engage in fieldwork. To meet with study subjects, preferably within the environment under study requires a knowledge of acceptable physical and social sites and of how to get access thereto. Since dance studios are generally “semi-public” locations, gaining access is a social problem more so than a physical challenge.

Both Hanna (1979) and Kaeppler (2000) consider field research to be vital to the qualitative study of dance. Riemer’s “opportunistic” strategy (1979) is appropriate for this particular ethnographic field study, and in this situation it is logical to use the “known researcher” strategy, where the researcher is an “insider” participant (Lofland et al., 2006). Two decades of participation in belly dance classes, seminars, performances, and related events have made me acutely aware of the enormity of this field and of the variety of settings in which belly dance activities occur. As a long-time member of the local and regional belly dance community, I am ideally situated to investigate this topic. I have nearly unlimited access to the settings in which belly dance activities occur, and my role as both a student and teacher of dance has led to acquaintances with belly dance participants at many levels of achievement, throughout the United States. This strategy has been very successful: At a private dance retreat in 2007 (Oasis Dance Camp North, Traverse City, MI), I made myself known to the group as both camp participant and

researcher. Since my peers already know and trust me, this generated interest in my study and facilitated recruitment of interview participants at the same event the following year.

As recommended by Waskul and Lust (2004), participant observation has been very important to my study, both as a preliminary method for forming the research question and in constructing an interview schedule and as a method for ‘testing’ the accumulated information—do students really behave (or dress) the way they say they, or their friends do, in class, or not? As an “interactive” researcher I have gained a “thorough appreciation of where and in what ways [my own] experiences may approximate and differ from those of others in the setting” (Prus, 1996, p. 20). Although I am very close to the topic of study—immersed, as may be—I am committed to respect the views of individuals whose experiences differ from my own, and am aware of the need to actively work towards and maintain an objective perspective in the collection and analysis of data.

To access the experiences of individuals, I opted for personal interviews as the principal research method (Kvale, 1996). I used a purposeful or ‘judgment’ sampling strategy (Lofland et al., 2006) to locate belly dance students, targeting those who attend belly dance educational events such as weekly classes, workshops or seminars, and camps or retreats in Minnesota, Wisconsin, and Michigan as potential participants. I made field observations when attending classes and seminars in 2007 and 2008; as I was attending those events as a “dancer” and not recruiting at that time, I did not usually introduce myself as a “researcher.” The exception to this was Oasis Dance Camp North, where I made it known that I was playing a ‘dual role’ for the event.

Recruitment

I obtained Institutional Research Board approval for the recruitment methods, consent process, interview schedule and interview procedure before beginning the study. When I began recruiting for the interviews, I contacted teachers and seminar and camp sponsors in Minnesota and Michigan by telephone or e-mail for permission to use their events as sites for interviews; when they agreed, I asked them to announce my study to their students before the events. Once at the site, I introduced myself to students and event participants and set up an interview area near the class space with a flyer and sign-up sheet near the class space. With the study having been announced in advance, the flyer and sign-up sheet that I put out were unnecessary; event participants volunteered enthusiastically despite the fact that this study was entirely self-funded, so informants were unpaid.

I began with two pretest pilot interviews which I conducted on May 2, 2008 in Chisholm, MN (see Interview Schedule in Appendix A). The night before an upcoming seminar I interviewed two experienced belly dancers from St. Paul, MN who were also staying at the hotel. I anticipated certain responses from them, both as individual dancers and as members of a similar dance cohort, and they provided honest and helpful feedback on the clarity of questions; one of them holds a PhD and is familiar with human research procedures. I found I needed to reinforce the *class and seminar* focus of the questions for interviewees who perform as well as attend classes, especially for the question regarding makeup and hair style, which are strongly related to performance. Since both of the pretest interviewees were talkative, the pilot interviews also helped me devise a strategy

for keeping the interview conversation on topic: “Okay-okay-okay, we’re having WAY too much fun here, we have to get back on track!”

I presented potential interviewees with an informal coversheet (see Appendix A) explaining the study and two consent forms: one informed consent for the interview and one for consent to be photographed, which includes a photo/image release form for use of personal images in the dissertation manuscript. I also asked if they wished to remain anonymous, or if they would like to be quoted using a personal name or pseudonym. None opted for anonymity, and the division between those preferring legal first names and stage or ‘dance’ names was about even, and proved convenient for multiple interviewees having the same first name, i.e. Susan. After each interviewee had read the coversheet and consent materials, I had her explain to me what she thought the study was about. Once I was assured that she understood the study, we both signed the consent forms and began the interview.

The interviews

I conducted thirty-four interviews during the summer of 2008. Each interview lasted between twenty and forty-five minutes and was recorded on audio cassette tape. For the ease of students who attend belly dance classes, the interviews were held in the studio or close proximity to the class space. At the seminar site I set up on a desk in the hallway near the vendors, in the middle of the activity; I moved to the vestibule where it was quieter at lunchtime, during the shopping frenzy. At the private dance camp I conducted interviews wherever it was convenient—on the balcony next to the teaching space, on the deck behind the dormitory, in the lounge, or in dorm rooms. Interviews with more experienced dancers understandably took longer than those with new students, as their

answers typically included some background explanation or a discussion about the ways their dance class dress had changed over time.

The 34 interviews were conducted as follows at educational belly dance events:

- I interviewed 8 belly dance students participating in a one-day seminar taught by Fahtiem, a nationally known belly dancer from California, in Chisholm, MN, on May 2-4, 2008. Interviews were conducted in the hallway outside the gymnasium where the seminar occurred (Chisholm High School) and at the hotel (Chisholm Inn and Suites) where visiting participants were staying for the weekend. One interview was conducted during a commute to the airport in Duluth, MN.
- I interviewed 5 students at the fourth meeting of a weekly community education belly dance class in Grand Rapids, MN, on May 5, 2008, in a space outside the school cafeteria where the class was held (Grand Rapids High School).
- I interviewed 5 belly dance students at a downtown studio (Jawaahir Dance Company and the Cassandra School) in Minneapolis, MN, between classes and during office hours between July 17 and August 18, 2008.
- I interviewed 16 belly dance students and two instructors at a five-day residential camp (Oasis Dance Camp North) near Traverse City, MI from September 10-14, 2008.

Following the interviews I transcribed the recordings as soon as possible, using dictation software for about half of the interviews. After the last event where I conducted interviews in September, 2008 I went through the transcripts and coded them for themes and recurring statements. I noted especially vehement responses to questions about which

certain interviewees felt very strongly. After identifying key themes, I organized related themes into larger categories, allowing for overlap within and between ideas and statements, and began my analysis.

Interpretation: Inductive analysis and grounded theory

My analysis largely follows Stone's lead in relation to dress as nonverbal communication. With respect to the way belly dance dress in particular is used, however, the analysis is more "inductive" (Lofland, Snow, Anderson & Lofland, 2006), as it is directed by themes that emerged from the interview responses. This is consistent with Grounded Theory, in which researchers use results to foment hypotheses, rather than using data solely to verify existing theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1999). Glaser and Strauss (ibid.) further suggest that comparative analysis is a useful strategy for interpreting qualitative data. This was helpful in devising a framework for understanding of the role of dress in various class settings and the organization of emergent themes regarding belly dance wear categories as costume, uniform, or combination thereof. By exploring responses with those categories in mind, I was able to generate a more cohesive analysis of the material. In the next chapter I describe the basic demography of the women I interviewed and discuss responses to the interview questions that form the foundation of the interviewees' identity as 'belly dancers.' I also discuss responses concerning motives for participation in belly dance classes.

Chapter Five: Who is a “Belly Dancer?”

I began my analysis of the transcripts with a basic breakdown of interviewee demographics and motives for participation in belly dance classes. Using printouts of the transcripts, I cut out responses concerning dance class dress and organized them into three prominent identity themes: role, persona, and cohort. Throughout, the responses were generally delineated according to the amount of time that had passed since the interviewees had started taking belly dance classes. Sources for dance class dress examples and ideas are relative to the students’ time spent in belly dance classes and exposure to the dress of instructors, class peers, and other dance students at workshops and events.

Age and education

The women I interviewed ranged from 26 to 67 years of age. All have high school diplomas and most attended at least one year of college; one is currently a university student. Three have Associate degrees or professional certificates, seven hold Bachelor’s degrees, six have one or more Master’s degrees, and five hold Doctoral degrees in the fields of Law, Clinical Nutrition, Plant Biology and Genetics, Clinical Medicine, and Astrophysics. Notably, three of the interviewees who have not completed college degrees specifically ‘dropped out’ of college to pursue a career in dance, and teaching or performing belly dance as a soloist or with a dance troupe or company is now their principal means of income.

Time and skill

Interviewees ranged from new beginners attending their 4th belly dance class to long time participants who started taking belly dance classes more than thirty years ago, during the first belly dance boom, and who are now internationally recognized teachers and performers. In general, the amount of time spent in classes is productive, i.e. the more time spent in class, the better the dancer. As with any physical endeavor, individuals with greater ‘natural ability’ tend to surpass peers who started taking belly dance lessons at the same time. I decided to ask each interviewee to rate her own skill level as a starting point; during the events, I observed all of the interviewees in class, to assess their self evaluation by my standards as an experienced belly dancer and dance instructor, to see if the two matched.

For transcribing the interviews I established a scale for quickly comparing skill levels: I assigned a number ranging from 1 to 6 depending on the interviewees’ description of their skill levels:

- 1 corresponding to “just started” or “beginner”
- 2 being “advanced beginner,” having spent more time in classes
- 3 being “intermediate”
- 4 being “ advanced intermediate,” having spent more time in classes
- 5 being “advanced, expert or professional”
- 6 being “masters,” specifically the two instructors at Oasis Dance Camp, Cassandra and Habiba, having earned national/international credentials*

*Although both Cassandra and Habiba continue to study dance as well as teaching, they do so from a more highly developed set of physical skills as well as having a large body of cultural knowledge with respect to both the Middle Eastern countries in which the dance originated and American belly dance culture.

When I observed the interviewees in class or at the seminar or workshop where I interviewed them, I determined that their self evaluations and my evaluations were predominantly concordant. Table 1 shows interviewee’s responses compared to the skill I assigned them, along with the amount of time passed since each began taking belly dance classes. An expanded table (Table 6) showing responses and skill level is included in Appendix C.

Table 1: Skill level of interviewees

What is your skill level?	Assigned Skill	Number of Interviewees	Years in class
Beginner	1	5	<3
Intermediate	2, 3, 4	10 (11)	3-10
Advanced, expert, or professional	5	18 (17)	>10
Master	6	2	Credentials

Note: The number in parentheses represents my adjustment of skill level per my observation where it differed from an interviewee’s responses, with time taken into consideration. For the masters, I based my skill rating on their national/international credentials rather than time.

The students I interviewed typically described their own skill level in relation to their ‘home’ peer group. For example, several of the women attending the Fahtiem seminar logically rated themselves as “intermediate” because they attend a “Level Two” belly dance class. To my experienced eyes, they are clearly not professional performers, but after I had the chance to watch them in class I would say that one or two had

underestimated her technical skills in comparison to her fellows. Similarly, I would say only one or two interviewees overestimated their skill level. One of the students in Zia's community education beginning belly dance class, for example, ranked herself as "pretty advanced" because she had already been taking belly dance classes for two years and she had performed professionally, i.e. she had been paid to dance at a private party. Her skills greatly exceed those of her fellow students, most of whom had never had any prior dance lessons, but I rated her technical skill as intermediate because she was competent—but not outstanding—in the execution of the basic movements in the beginner's class. For the most part, however, interviewees' responses to "What is your skill level now?" were par with my evaluation of the skills of each individual after I'd observed them at the event. This parallel suggested four categories: three time-related, with students of fewer than three years (beginners), students who have been taking classes for three to ten years (intermediates), and students of more than ten years (experienced), with the two master teachers—both with more than thirty years of study and having national and internationally recognized credentials—separated out into their own category.

Motives for taking belly dance classes

Ten interviewees said that their main reason for starting to take belly dance classes was for exercise; three of these also said that it "just sounded fun." Seven told me that they started after they had seen a belly dancer performing and wanted to try it, while four took a belly dance class because they were interested in dance in general. Four listed a desire to meet people, and three had been recruited by a friend, family member or acquaintance who was already taking belly dance classes. Two said they wanted an activity that was exclusively "self time," and one said she "wanted to learn more about

the ME.” Three were specifically looking for an activity they perceived as “feminine,” but only two (of the thirty-four interviewees) listed the “exotic” image of belly dance as a motive for starting to take classes. Table 2 shows the number of responses concerning reasons interviewees started taking belly dance classes compared to reasons why they continue to attend belly dance classes as a student. A table (Table 7) showing expanded responses is included in Appendix C.

Table 2: Reasons for attending belly dance classes

Why did you start?	Number	Additional reason?	Number	Why continue?	Number
Fun way to exercise	10	Fun	3	Improve skills	12
Saw a belly dancer	7			Camaraderie	8
Social activity	7	Recruited by friend	3	Exercise/health	6
Another style of dance	4			Feel good about self	3
Feminine activity	3	Exotic	2	"Love it"	2
Self time	2			Self time	2
Learn about the ME	1			Creativity	1

These stated motives suggest that for some students who enrolled in classes after seeing a performance, such as Vickie and Kate, Orientalist imagery is likely to have influenced their idea about belly dance as “exotic.” For others, such as SuSu and Priscilla, the evidence of necessary technical skill in a performer, such as balancing a sword, may also have played a role. Exercise, however, was the most common reason given for starting to take belly dance classes.

Since newspapers and magazines periodically promote belly dance for women’s physical fitness, and exercise was often listed among multiple reasons for participation even if it was not named first or singly, it is likely that readily available media and invitations from friends touting belly dance as enjoyable exercise play a very important role with regard to starting to take belly dance classes. On par with those seeking

exercise, however, were those interested in the social value of classes as a place to make friends or engage in a shared activity. These two motives are also important reasons to continue taking belly dance classes.

Among those who stay, goals for progress seem to be important. Twelve interviewees said they continued taking belly dance classes so they could learn more or improve their skills; several of the women I interviewed are retired from an earlier non-dance career but still teach belly dance, and thus continue taking classes or attend seminars and workshops as ‘continuing education.’ Eight of the women I interviewed listed social aspects such as camaraderie, fellowship, or “female bonding” as a reason for continuing to attend belly dance classes and events. Six interviewees said exercise was the next most common reason to stick with it, and four said they continue to take belly dance classes just because they “love it” with no further explanation. Two—only one of whom started for “self time”—said they appreciate the time dedicated to self. One specifically named creativity as a motive for continuing, although this could also be implied by the interviewees who responded that they wanted to increase their dance abilities. One woman, who also listed camaraderie as a motive, said she uses belly dance to help her connect with her female sexuality.

“Do you consider yourself to be a Belly Dancer?”

To help determine how being a belly dance student fits in with my interviewees’ larger identity, one of the questions I asked during the interviews was, “Do you consider yourself to be a belly dancer?” The responses are presented in Table 3, following page.

Table 3: Responses to "Do you consider yourself to be a Belly Dancer?"

	Yes	No	Yes & No
Simple answer	21	5	4
Qualified answer	3 Middle Eastern	1 Raks Sharqi	"Not yet"

Twenty-one of thirty-four interviewees said "Yes" when asked if they considered themselves to be a belly dancer. Four interviewees said "Yes and No," saying they loved the dance but that they didn't feel their skills warranted the title of belly dancer—yet! Five said "No," they did not consider themselves to be a belly dancer, either because they did not feel their skills were adequate or because belly dance was one of many activities in their lives and thus they did not feel participation was definitive.

Three who responded "Yes" and one who said "No" said they consider themselves to be 'dancers' in general first, and 'belly dancers' second. The title of 'belly dancer' seems to be linked to the amount of self engagement with the activity ('who I am'), rather than the amount of time spent pursuing the activity ('what I do').

When asked "Do you consider yourself to be a belly dancer?" one interviewee said adamantly, "No, I am a *raks sharqi* dancer," and three others who said "Yes" but also told me they "...prefer to call it..." *raks sharqi* or Middle Eastern dance. These four women prefer the Orientale style and teach or participate with a dance troupe in addition to attending workshops and seminars as a student. As Jawhara noted, the term 'belly dance' does not reflect the origins of the dance in the Middle East, and in my experience, I must agree that the term does not typically conjure an image of a dedicated and well-trained artist. Notably, however, all of interviewees whose only or principal income

currently arises from teaching or performing belly dance responded “Yes” flat out when asked if they considered themselves to be “a belly dancer.” Neither Cassandra nor Habiba, both nationally known performers/instructors, voiced any objection to the term ‘belly dancer.’ The interviewees who opposed the term ‘belly dancer’—Jawhara, Priscilla, and Zarifa—are women who have or have had mainstream professional non-dance careers and who also teach dance or perform, but are not dependent on earnings from teaching and/or performing as a sole source of income. They are in a position to debate terminology without endangering their livelihoods. In the following chapter I discuss responses concerning the types of dress worn for belly dance classes among beginning, intermediate, and advanced students. Using these responses, I analyze motives for dress choices among students at all levels.

Chapter Six: Belly dance class dress and choices

What motivates American women's choice of dress for belly dance classes?

At all levels of participation, dress is an essential component of dance practice. When pressed to name the main reason for wearing what they do, belly dance students named utility, i.e. “functionality” or “comfort,” as the key motive. As for any physical activity, utility is very important.

Clothing worn for dance class must allow a full range of movement and visibility of the body, while meeting each student's needs for modesty. The outfit must have versatile components to keep the student warm or cool depending on studio temperature and level of activity, must protect the wearer's feet/ankles (as for shoes or legwarmers) depending on the floor, must be washable to remove sweat and dust from the floor (as for floor movements and stretching) and for some students, able to withstand frequent washing for several classes in a week and/or teaching.

Hair is often pulled up or back to keep it out of the face or off the neck, so it is not distracting or hot, and many belly dance students at all levels said they forego makeup in class, because they will sweat it off. Students in belly dance classes go beyond the requirements of pure utility, however, when making dress choices, especially students attending workshops or seminars. This is related to the amount of time since they started and, to some extent, reasons for continuing to attend belly dance classes.

Beginners: Fewer than three years

New students often ask the instructor for direction on ‘what to wear,’ and they are typically told ‘something you can move easily in.’ The styles of workout wear suitable

for other exercise classes, including sweat pants, yoga pants or leggings and a tee shirt and sweat shirt are typical for beginning students in the belly dance class I observed. Some also wore socks to keep their feet warm on the cold tile floor. One experienced belly dance student reminisced about her first year class dress choices, saying, “When in Rome, do as the Romans do—or as a new dancer, not knowing what to wear” (Interview with Jawhara, September 13, 2008).

Many belly dance instructors recommend wearing a scarf or shawl tied around the pelvis to help new students ‘find’ their hips and make the movement more obvious. Ideally the hip scarf should be tied at the line of the hip socket to emphasize the working relationship between the legs and the pelvis along that plane—but most of the students in Zia’s beginning belly dance class had the hip scarf tied with the knot in the center front and high, nearly at the waist, even though Zia wore her scarf low and tied at the side of the hip. Many also had their shirts pulled down over the top of the scarf, concealing (most likely unintentionally) the hips and thus obstructing the teacher’s view of that important line. In my experience as an instructor, many beginners are reticent to tie the scarf lower, because it visually emphasizes the width of the hips as well, something that may be personally undesirable for students who enrolled to lose weight. Regardless of where the hip scarf was positioned, however, all of the students in Zia’s class were wearing a hip scarf.



Fig. 10: Jill, Beginner

Some teachers loan hip scarves and finger cymbals to their students so they can wear them while in class but don't have to purchase them. Dahmia, one of the belly dance students I interviewed who also teaches, told me, "In my regular dance class that I teach, I always have hip scarves for all of my students, and veils" (Interview, September 11, 2008). If the instructor does not mention a hip scarf but wears one while teaching, students will soon emulate the instructor and don a hip scarf.

Jingly hip scarves

With respect to practice, the hip scarf focuses attention on the hip both visually—students *see* the movements made by each other, or in studios with a mirror, themselves—and they *feel* the pressure of the scarf tied about their hips. If the scarf is an imported Egyptian style with decorative metal coins on it, they also *hear* the jingling in response to their movements, hopefully in time to the music. Olga, a new student who wore sweatpants, a tee shirt, and a coin hip scarf to class—and did not consider herself "dressed up"—told me, "I really want to put the movements and the hip scarf together, so I listen to the sound" (Interview, May 5, 2008). CiCi, one of the experienced students I interviewed who also teaches classes, noted, "I generally prefer my students not to make noise, because it distracts them; the coins are always slightly off beat" (Interview, September 13, 2008). Kate, another interviewee who teaches, told me that her students prefer the coin-style hip scarves over beaded or fringed shawls; she summarized their fascination with the sound, saying "...They really associate that with belly dancing" (Interview, September 10, 2008).

Although many beginning students buy their hip scarves from on-line vendors—Heather and the friends with whom she attends Zia's beginners' class purchased theirs

from a website (Interview, May 5, 2008)—some teachers make consignment arrangements with a vendor and sell hip scarves to their students directly. They are aware that their students are influenced by their attire: Naima, another interviewee who also teaches said, “Whatever I wear, they get eventually....When I have a new shipment of coin scarves, I wear a coin scarf because then they want to buy a coin scarf. It’s very wrong, but that’s how it goes” (Interview, September 13, 2008). Kate noted that “...most of [my students] have never been to any other place; they haven’t really seen how other [dance students] dress” (Interview, September 10, 2008). New students clearly rely on their teachers for class dress cues, at least when they first enter the belly dance class.

When I asked the students I interviewed from Zia’s beginning belly dance class if they paid attention to what others were wearing, all five said yes (Interviews from May 5, 2008). Jill told me she “notice(s) what they wear” just because “people are interesting.” Olga said, “I pay attention to the teacher—just her; I wish I could wear that and look like her.” But Lynette told me she looks at what other students are wearing in class to “make sure I’m fitting in,” a sentiment shared by Heather “I wear the same kind of things [my friends] are wearing.” Jessica explained, “I don’t need to draw attention to myself; the class dictates dress for me.” Class participants become aware of themselves as members of the class in relation to both the activity and the others engaged therein; once students begin to get the movements under control, they become more aware of how they are dressed in relation to the instructor as well as to other students in the class.

Dress facilitates social interaction between new students in weekly classes. The first day of class, the instructor typically introduces herself to the participants, but the instructor may not know all of the students by name. Many belly dance students slowly

become acquainted with one another during class; during this process, they are motivated to choose class dress that allows them to blend in with their cohort.

Not all beginning students will continue beyond their first session of belly dance classes. For those who do, however, dress may be a factor: “I think...a lot of people stick with [belly dance] as long as they do, because of the dress” (Interview with Djin, May 3, 2008). In turn, the evolving social environment in the studio makes an enormous impact on dress choices.

Intermediates: Two to ten years

While still dressing to accommodate the physical activity of class, belly dance students with a few more years experience are more likely to create a more self-specific program of dress for belly dance class. The dress items I observed at the Fahtiem seminar in Chisholm, MN, May 2-4, 2008 included unitards or a leotard with skirts, harem pants or yoga pants, and a variety of tops including tee shirts—many with pretty silkscreened designs or belly dance logos—or camisole tops, sometimes layered with a shrug or crop top. There were no bare midriffs, but the gymnasium in which the seminar was held was quite chilly; students quickly donned sweatshirts when they stopped moving. I saw a wide variety of hip scarves, including coins and/or beaded styles as well as shawls made of lace or velvet burn-out fabric with fringe. Many were barefoot, though some wore ballet slippers, and a few wore legwarmers as well. I noticed a lot of dangling earrings and bangle bracelets. Hairstyles varied, and makeup was noticeable on quite a few participants.

Class dress expectations for belly dance vary regionally, undoubtedly related to the example set by each instructor. Jessica’s first belly dance teacher in Duluth dressed

differently than Zia, her current instructor: “At Eman’s we dressed up every day; there are some things you can do that make you feel special, so we dressed up because she did. [Eman’s] dress set the bar higher” (Interview, May 5, 2008).

On the day I visited the community education class in Grand Rapids, MN, I observed that Jessica was dressed much like Zia, the instructor, wearing black yoga pants, a colorful T shirt and a coordinating hip scarf, tied lower on the hip—though Jessica’s sported coins and was tied in the center front. With five years experience in belly dance and having taken classes in more than one location, she chose to dress more like the teacher rather than like her brand-new classmates, most of whom wore sweatpants to class, though she wore a coin hip scarf, like her peers. Kate told me that following a Tribal belly dance workshop she attended with several of her intermediate students, “...one of the students bought fancy velvet pants [like ones] that I have, because she liked mine” (Interview, September 10, 2008). At the intermediate level, some belly dance students still look at their teacher for dress ideas.



Fig. 11: Vicki, Intermediate

Burton (April 15, 2007) reported that Amaya, a dance teacher in Albuquerque, NM tells her students to wear “...Lots of eye makeup and all of the jewelry you own.” Kate described a related experience when teaching a workshop in Fairmont, MN: “All the women who came to class had put more makeup on; they were actually putting makeup on before class! I would never do that, I sweat” (Interview, September 13, 2008). Zia told

me, “Some girls like to come to class dressed up, with makeup and eyeliner and everything else; then next time they come they’ll have less on, because they find out they sweat...but there are some that still come with makeup on....” (Interview, May 4, 2008). Expectations for belly dance class dress vary between regional and national groups as well as between classes taught by different instructors. Intermediate students will also make choices based on personal preferences as well as the instructor’s example.

New hip scarves...and other “pretty outfits”

Some intermediate belly dance students continue to follow the teacher’s lead, adding items to their class wardrobe, such as black yoga pants or a closer fitting top. Interviewees dressed in this way often expressed a desire to improve their dance skills, and thus dress to show a growing commitment to the study of belly dance. Like Olga, who admires Zia’s class attire, they are motivated to dress like those whose skills they admire, their instructor or more advanced students they see at workshops or seminars where belly dance students of all levels are present. Simple and subtle changes in dress, such as wearing their hip scarves lower, tied at the side of the hip, and with that line unobstructed by the hem of a tee shirt, show that they are trying to dress like a dedicated student. Not all intermediate students follow their teacher’s lead, however.

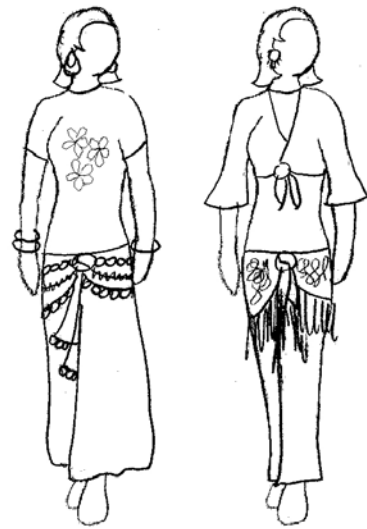


Fig. 12: Intermediate outfits

Several of Zia’s intermediate students told me said they are influenced by trendy or unique dress items evident on other students in the class. “If I see something I like, I’ll

ask where they got it; we swap catalogs and stuff” (Interview with Vickie, May 3, 2008). Val admits, “I’m always looking for ideas. I like to see the way people put things together” (Interview, May 3, 2008). And for some students, dressing for fun makes the physical effort of class easier; according to Djin, “We have the chance to wear pretty outfits and loads of jewelry, we go around jingling noise—and we’re exercising!” (Interview, May 3, 2008). Some belly dance students develop a personal style of dress for class, while others follow changing fashions in belly dance class wear.

Fashions in belly dance dress

With more and varied learning experience, many intermediate students start to become style and fashion conscious. The concept of fashion in dress-up play is only briefly touched upon by Fron, Fullerton, Morie and Pearce (2007, p. 3), who note that fashion now “play(s) a significant role” in an increasing number of computer games where game characters are created and outfitted for action within the game system. Those who partake of fashion and those who create it are “parts of a collective process that responds to changes in taste and sensitivity” (Blumer, 1969, p. 384). Foremost among Blumer’s “essential conditions” for the existence of fashion is a willingness to change, “with people ready to revise or discard old practices, beliefs, and attachments, and poised to adopt new social forms” (p. 388). Fashion is part of the social system, and the transmission of fashion is in turn dependent upon the visibility of individuals who become fashion leaders for the social group (Eicher, Evenson & Lutz, 2008, p. 372).

While beginners do not typically venture beyond their local weekly class, intermediate students may also attend workshops or seminars, held locally or ‘out of town.’ They observe the dress of the guest instructor and other participants with whom

they are not acquainted. This increases their knowledge of available dress items, beyond those apparent in their local dance class, and they gain in-person access to vendors who may attend seminars and workshop events. With the ready availability of belly dance class clothing and accessories from vendors ‘live’ or later, via the Internet, items that make a favorable impression can be purchased by those who lack the sewing skills to copy the item in question.

When asked where she gets the things she wears for dance class, SuSu told me, “I used to make them all; but now, probably in the last ten years, I buy them. Because you can, now!” (Interview, May 2, 2008). Djin said, “Whenever I get to one of these functions I buy stuff...I try to make things...” (Interview, May 3, 2008). Val, who told me that she likes to ‘dress up’ for dance class, said “I made harem pants—I love harem pants!—and those pretty little choli tops Dahlal [a dancewear vendor] has, they’re wonderful. And then I try to match ‘em up with hip scarves and stuff like that” (Interview, May 3, 2008). Regarding dance class fashions, Eileen observed that among students at the Cassandra School in Minneapolis, MN, “Some people are immune, and some people are up on the latest hip scarf” (Interview, July 17, 2008). While some belly dance students follow the crowd and others follow the trend, yet others follow their own creative inclinations when dressing for class.

Playing dress up

Intermediate students may also develop a personal, ‘signature’ style of dance class dress that differs from their instructor and immediate peers. When I asked Holly, who wore yoga pants, a kurti-type cotton top (photographed with her sleeves rolled up), and a velvet burn-out shawl tied around her hips at the Fahtiem seminar, to tell me about her dress—which was different from other attendees—she told me that she “dress[es] out of the ordinary anyway” and that many of her ‘everyday’ dress items, such as skirts and jewelry, do double duty as belly dance class wear and as costumes for attending the Renaissance Festival (Interview, May 3, 2008).



Fig. 13: Holly

Shara similarly explained her multi-purpose wardrobe: “Some things I wear to Renn Faire, some things I wear to science fiction conventions. You know, to places where dressing up is okay” (Interview, September 13, 2008). Intermediate belly dance students may wear belly dance items when attending the Renaissance Festival as ‘playtron’ (the term combines the word player, meaning a cast character who works there, and patron, meaning an attendee who pays the gate fee), or to science fiction and fantasy conventions in the guise of a fictional character; an individual’s preferred styles of dance class dress may be influenced by participation in other group micro-cultures, such as Sci-Fi/Fantasy fandom. In these latter situations, belly dance dress functions to lend credibility to an alternate character role in which she is engaged at a special event.

For belly dance students at the intermediate level, items of belly dance dress can be used to express various aspects of her self, as a belly dance student in dance class or elsewhere as a themed persona. Motives for dress choices vary with the goals of the individual student. Among intermediate belly dance students, dance class dress also provides an opportunity to socialize with fellow classmates.

Class dress and social interaction

For many belly dance students, conversations about class dress are an enjoyable part of the class experience. Thirteen of those I interviewed said they compliment peers on new or novel items, and three specifically discussed learning about stage makeup, costuming, and other performance accessories—such as fake eyelashes or hair pieces—from classmates as well. Djin told me, “Usually when somebody gets something new, they’ll wear it to class the first time. And get the oo’s and ah’s and we’ll ask ‘Where’d you get that?’” (Interview, May 3, 2008). Like dance, dressing for class is a creative act, and dressing for belly dance class provides the opportunity to dress differently from everyday life. Djin continued, “Normally I’m wearing sweats and jeans, so it’s just something different. It’s an opportunity to dress up...there’s not a lot of places to wear dressy things, you know?” This type of exchange and reinforcement of dress practice is consistent with both Stone’s (1962) concept of program validation and Miller’s (1998) experience with costume play participants, where dress provides the opportunity for women to dress differently than their day-to-day look in a place where their creative attire will be appreciated.

Belly dance dress outside the studio

Intermediate dancers are also more likely to wear their belly dance dress items outside the dance studio. In part, this may be related to the suitability of current street-wear fashions for belly dance class dress and vice versa. “I have a couple of skirts that I do wear [outside of class]; because without the hip scarf, they just look like a nice skirt” (Interview with Djin, May 3, 2008). But some intermediate belly dance students will wear items specific to belly dancing outside of class: “When I go out, a lot of the time I’ll throw a hip scarf over my jeans” (Interview with Val, May 3, 2008). When I asked why, Val replied “It’s fun to dress up a little bit, and they’re ‘in’ now; a little sparkle now and then never hurts!”

Intermediate belly dance students thus fit into one of three categories: those who dress creatively for class as play, those who dress to enhance a role or persona, and those who follow the instructor’s lead for belly dance class wear, demonstrating that they are part of the student cohort. Those who modify their dress to look even more like the instructor may also wish to reflect growing experience as a dedicated belly dance student, demonstrating their commitment to the ongoing study of the dance through their dress.

Experienced: Ten years or more

Although experienced dance students clearly enjoy the social aspects of class and seminars, their primary stated reason for attendance is to improve their skills. Ten of the seventeen interviewees who have participated in belly dance for ten years or longer named learning more about the dance as the sole reason they continue to attend classes and seminars. Garnett, a professional dancer who has been a student of belly dance for

more than 25 years, said “With Middle Eastern Dance...I’m constantly learning something new” (Interview, September 12, 2008).

Many of the experienced participants I interviewed at Oasis Dance Camp North near Traverse City, MI, told me that they were dressed “to work” when attending workshops or seminars. “When I come to train with Cassandra, it’s business time” (Interview with CiCi, September 13, 2008).

With few exceptions, experienced belly dance students wore a unitard or yoga pants with a tee or camisole and a hip scarf that did not make noise. Most were barefoot, though some wore various types of dance shoes and/or legwarmers, depending on the temperature of the space, the type of floor and the technique under study (Example: Students at Oasis



Fig. 14: Eileen, Experienced

Dance Camp North were strongly advised to wear shoes during the Tunisian folkloric dance classes, which involve vigorous twisting of the hips, which in turn quickly leads to blisters on the balls of the feet). Notably, all of the experienced students tied their hip scarves at the hip line with the knot to one side, emphasizing the line of the hip and accentuating hip movements. I found it interesting that even though participants at Oasis Dance Camp North came from all over the United States, and many attendees were initially not acquainted with one another, as a cohort they presented a surprisingly consistent appearance in class.

Dress and the studio environment: *Quiet* hip scarves...and legwarmers, too

Among experienced dancers, dress makes an impact on the physical learning environment. While many beginners said they enjoy the auditory sensory effect of the jingling coins, and like Olga, a beginner, some intermediates also rely on them as a rhythmic indicator (Interview with Sue, September 13, 2008), more experienced students said they prefer noiseless hip scarves in large classes or at seminars because the sound of the coins en masse makes it difficult to hear the instructor. Eileen told me, “Frankly, I get annoyed with students who wear big, jingly hip scarves and wander about while I’m trying to hear the teacher” (Interview, July 17, 2008). Kate concurred, noting that less experienced students “don’t realize it makes a lot of noise” (Interview September 10, 2008). Since the noise interferes with participants’ ability to learn, coin hip scarves are seen as undesirable by experienced belly dance students.

When asked if the way they dress for dance classes and seminars made the experience more enjoyable, experienced dancers usually said No—with the caveat that dance class dress must not interfere with their concentration. When asked if the way she dresses for belly dance classes and workshops makes them more enjoyable, Eileen told me, “Mostly I wear what I wear because I don’t want to screw around with it in class; I don’t want to worry about what I’m wearing, so I wear something that is as maintenance free as I can make it.... If I choose badly...then it makes it *unenjoyable*” (Interview, July 17, 2008). Cassandra echoed this sentiment: “If I were to wear something I was uncomfortable in, then it would make it less enjoyable for me” (Interview, July 25, 2008). Angela noted, “I guess the way I dress is helpful to me; it makes it possible for me to do things without being irritated by my clothes” (Interview, August 14, 2008). With

experience, belly dance students learn what to wear—and what not to wear—with respect to their own physical requirements for class participation.

Among experienced dance students, the women I interviewed took the dancing space and the availability of changing facilities and bathrooms into consideration when choosing dress for belly dance classes and workshops, especially all-day events. “I am particular about what I wear depending on the floor, the event, the temperature” (Interview with Eileen, July 17, 2008). Priscilla told me that she switched from wearing a unitard to pants after Nadira remarked that she started wearing pants for camp “because it’s easier to go to the bathroom—and I thought, Oh! That’s a good idea!” (Interview, September 13, 2008). But Priscilla also pays a great deal of attention to dance class dress styles and fashion, so the change in her choice of attire may also reflect recent changes in belly dance class dress fashions.

Fashion changes

While experienced students are generally aware of dance class dress fashions, they may or may not follow fashion trends. Jana said she started wearing a sarong tied over her unitard, instead of a skirt and hip scarf, after seeing someone wearing one in a class: “I liked the look of them and the ease of them, you know? That’s why I started wearing them” (Interview, May 2, 2008). Priscilla noted, “Way back in the olden days, I used to wear a leotard and harem pants, and then I graduated to a unitard and a skirt. I basically copied whatever [Cassandra] was wearing. Then I moved to the pants....” (Interview, September 13, 2008). Kate told me, “As fashions change, I go along with the fashions. When I first started taking dance class, it was the fashion to wear a skirt to class...then I invested in the first leotard; then I got one or two leotards, and now I’ve

been getting more dance pants” (Interview, September 10, 2008). Eileen admitted, “I’ve started to modify what I wear in class because styles are changing; everybody used to wear unitards more or dress up, and now there is an availability of yoga pants that didn’t used to be there. So I will occasionally take the unitard and replace it with a tee shirt and yoga pants; I’m still in the experimental phase!” (Interview, July 17, 2008).

Priscilla and Eileen dress in accordance with the current pants trend, even though their principal instructor, Cassandra, continues to wear a unitard. When I interviewed Cassandra, she talked about noticing dance class fashions: “I notice people who are wearing the latest in belly dance dancewear; they have the cute little crop top with the



Fig. 15: Crop top with ‘cold shoulders’

‘cold shoulder’ sleeves, and the matching skirt and a new kind of hip wrap.” When asked if she dresses differently than her students, Cassandra observed that she does, “but that is true of all the master teachers I’ve ever taken classes with—they always look different from the students because of *when* they started dancing. They wear what they’re used to wearing and the fashions have changed, you

know...as they get older, the fashions changed....I’m not making a conscious choice to change with [fashion] or to stay there; I’ve stayed there, so I guess that’s the choice” (Interview, July 25, 2008).

Lori, who teaches belly dance classes as well as taking belly dance classes as a student, noted differences between belly dancers with other dance backgrounds and new students, for whom belly dance is the only style of dance they know: “I noticed the

[college] kids in my class don't have [that classic background]...so I don't wear the more traditional stuff.... I want them to think of it as just belly dancing. There's a whole culture around it [belly dancing], so sometimes I'll wear stuff that other belly dancers wear, or stuff that's either within our own culture as belly dancers [referring to Oasis Dance Camp attendees], or that is in the Middle eastern culture” (Interview, September 11, 2008).

Studio fashions and personal styles

Priscilla told me that when she started taking belly dance classes in Minneapolis thirty years ago students wore a leotard with harem pants or a full-circle skirt and a fringed shawl to class (Interview, September 13, 2008). Jana, who started around the same time, recalled wearing a leotard with harem pants and a matching vest and, after she'd been taking classes for a few years, a performance-quality dance belt with real coins and brass bells to class in lieu of a hip scarf: “Cassandra called me ‘The Timekeeper,’ because I was always on the beat for 4/4 shimmy” (conversation with Jana, January, 2010). Jana also recalled changing to a broom-stick skirt at some point, when they became fashionable as street-wear. Lori, an experienced dance student from

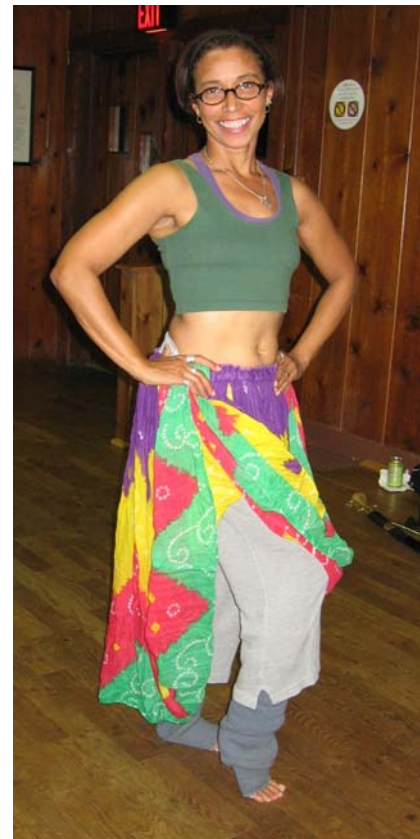


Fig. 16: Lori

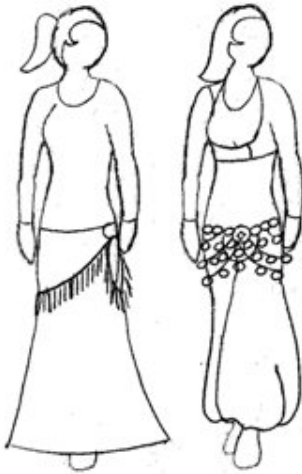
Chicago, still wears a colorful broomstick skirt which belonged to her mother (now deceased) to belly dance class, even though it's no longer in style, for sentimental reasons. She is also the only belly dance student I interviewed who did not wear a hip

scarf to class. When I asked Lori what she thought the way she dresses for class says about her to others, she laughed: “They probably think I’m a goof, because I’m wearing sweats and this really loud skirt! ...Or maybe that I don’t take it seriously. It’s not that I don’t take it seriously—maybe I have no sense of style” (Interview, September 11, 2008).

Visual timeline

I created a timeline to illustrate the changes in dance class dress that have occurred in the past thirty years at the Cassandra School in Minneapolis, MN. I spoke with Priscilla and Jana, both of whom started taking belly dance classes in Minneapolis around 1978, to fill in the decade before I started taking classes at the Cassandra School in 1988. These figures are a representative summary of our recollections of class dress, in many cases supported by personal photos and ‘retired’ class dress items stored away. Since Priscilla, Jana, and I all attend workshops and seminars as well as local classes, the figures include influences on fashion from outside our local dance communities (Priscilla has lived in Chicago, IL, for more than a decade). Class dress changed very slowly until Egyptian hip scarves and other class dress became readily available from vendors in the 1990s; prior to that time, most dance students sewed their own skirts or harem pants, or had them made by a seamstress (Interview with SuSu,, May 2, 2008). The increasing popularity of Tribal belly dance styles in the early 2000s increased the variety of dancewear items available from vendors. Dance class fashions change more rapidly now, in part because a larger diversity of items are available ready-made. The visual timeline appears on the following page.

Fig. 17 Timeline of Cassandra School class dress, 1978-Early 1990s



Circa 1978: Fig. 17A When Priscilla started taking belly dance classes at the Cassandra School in Minneapolis, MN, Cassandra and her students wore leotards with harem pants or a full-circle skirt and a hip scarf, shown left. The figure at right shows the ensemble Jana described wearing to class around 1980, harem pants and a vest over her leotard with a heavy coin belt.



1988: Fig. 17B When I began taking classes at the Cassandra School, Cassandra and the students were wearing leotards or unitards with circle skirts, and lace shawls were popular hip scarves—a prom-wear accessory available at any shopping mall. The Egyptian coin hip scarves had not been ‘invented’ yet. Students who continued beyond the beginners’ class donned legwarmers, imitating Cassandra.



Early 1990s: Fig. 17C Students mainly wore unitards and skirts to class. Cotton “broomstick” skirts, so-called because their tie-dye patterns were achieved by scrunching the fabric around a pole (shibori), were in style as summer street wear and they were popular classwear, too. Coin hip scarves, an innovation by Egyptian costumers, became more common as American belly dance vendors started selling them.

Fig. 18: Timeline of Cassandra School class dress, Late 1990s-2008



Late 1990s: Fig. 18A. By this time Cassandra had stopped wearing a skirt; students emulated her look, wearing a unitard with a hip scarf. The mesh-midriff unitard was introduced by Sugar Petals, a dancewear company specializing in belly dance. New varieties of hip scarf arrive from Egypt and Turkey, including skirt-length variations and styles with beaded edging.

Circa 2000: Fig. 18B Unitards or leggings and a tee with or without a workshop/seminar logo were popular among experienced students. Hip scarves of many types were apparent; styles without coins were most popular in higher level classes. Suede half-sole dance shoes started appearing at seminars. Legwarmers were still worn by experienced students. Belly dance logos started to appear on dancewear.

2008: Fig. 18C In tune with exercise dress trends, yoga pants and camisole tops, right figure, are as popular as unitards if not more so. Vendors supply class-wear inspired by Tribal Fusion style costumes: Flare-leg pants gain popularity among students of all styles, and tops with belly dance rhinestone slogans are chic, shown left. Legwarmers are a staple for experienced students.

Functional dance class dress

Many long time participants are aware of changes in dance class styles and fashions, but may change their dress for reasons other than fashion. For any style of belly dance, hip movements are often powered by the legs. Regarding her change in class dress during the 1990s, Cassandra told me, “I used to wear a skirt, and then I realized that I was having to pull my skirt up when I was teaching to show people what my legs were doing, so I just dispensed with the skirt at some point” (Interview, July 25, 2008).

When teaching at Oasis Dance Camp, master teacher Habiba wore ‘basic black’ dancewear—pants and a leotard with jazz shoes—to which she added a white wool yarn belt while teaching the Tunisian folkdance movements. “I wear clothing appropriate for any dance form...and then on top of that, just some little item like a hip scarf or [short] skirt; I wear very little jewelry or fru-fra. If I’m due to specialize in, say Tunisian, where all the movement is enhanced so much by the [yarn] belt, it’s easier for people to see what you’re doing” (Interview, September 14, 2008). Similarly, three interviewees mentioned wearing their hair down for class for Gulf-style hair tosses, or wearing full skirts etc. when attending classes where learning special or signature movements which require—or are made easier by—specific dress. And purely functional dance class dress items that are neither specific to a belly dance style nor fashionable, such as legwarmers, are still apparent in belly dance classes.

Classic dancewear in the belly dance studio

Belly dance students who started in ballet or modern dance classes—including Cassandra and Habiba as well as Jenny, Eileen, Sabrina and others among those I interviewed—may to the “classic” elements of dancewear, such as leotards and

legwarmers (Williams, 1984), in addition to and/or despite changes in belly dancewear fashions. Jenny, who teaches at the Cassandra School in Minneapolis, MN as well as taking classes there, told me, “Not too many students wear unitards like I do...and those generally...have other dance backgrounds” (Interview, August 13, 2008). Cassandra told me, “I started taking dance in the 70s and we all wore legwarmers...I’m used to them” (Interview, July 25, 2008). Eileen said she’s been wearing “the same black legwarmers for...15 years” (Interview, July 17, 2008). Legwarmers are functional items of regular dance class dress, not specific to belly dance class.

Angela observed, “The older women dress a little more practical” (Interview, August 14, 2008). Logically, belly dance students with the most class experience are older; keeping the feet, ankles, and knees warm during physical activity is helpful, especially when dancing on a concrete floor, or during the cold winter months. Kate told me, “I will definitely wear legwarmers in the winter because my feet get cold, and I wear them over my feet” (Interview, September 10, 2008). Being seen wearing legwarmers, even though they are not part of the belly dance class clothing and accessory fashion trends that I have observed since I started in 1988, and certainly in warmer spaces where they are worn out of habit rather than necessity, suggests that the wearer has a lot of experience in the belly dance studio. Among belly dancers, legwarmers function as badges of professional or highly advanced participants. As a practical dance class dress item, the functionality of leg warmers allows them to persist irrespective of belly dance class dress fashion changes and marks dancers who wear them as “experienced,” since—unlike the hip scarf—they are not generally worn by beginners, and I only observed them on intermediate belly dance students who were dressed like their instructors.

Class dress essentials

To better understand the relationship between the various items of dress among belly dance students at various levels, I reviewed my transcripts and looked through photographs of the women I interviewed and made a list of the dance class dress items for beginners, intermediates, and experienced students.

Table 4: Belly dance class dress items

Level	Beginner	Intermediate	Experienced
Dress Item 1	Hip scarf, Coin	Hip scarf, Pretty	Hip scarf, Quiet
Dress Item 2 Variant	Sweat Pants Sport Pants	Harem Pants or Skirt Yoga Pants	Yoga Pants Unitard
Dress Item 3 Variant	Tee Shirt Sweat Shirt	Tee Shirt Cropped Top or choli	Tee Shirt w/BD Logo Camisole
Footwear	Socks if needed	Ballet slippers if needed	Dance shoes as needed
Accessories	Nothing special	Earrings, other jewelry	Legwarmers

Among my interviewees, beginning belly dance students had the least amount of variety in class, wearing general workout wear to which they added a hip scarf, which was exclusively the jingly coin type. Intermediates had the most varied dress, with yoga pants and harem pants being the most common bottoms observed (though skirts were frequently listed among class wear items), a variety of tops including tee shirts and trendy dance tops worn over a leotard or camisole, a wide variety of hip scarf styles.

Experienced dancers had a fairly uniform look, wearing unitards (usually black) or black yoga pants with a camisole or tee shirt, often with a belly dance logo. Many also wore legwarmers. Hip scarf styles varied among experienced belly dance students as well, including Jana's sarong worn as a 'skirt and hip scarf all-in-one,' but were usually a style without coins; only one experienced student was wearing a coin hip scarf when I photographed her. Only one experienced student, Lori went without a hip scarf, in her

mother's skirt, worn low on her hips over sweatpants. As the most common dress item among belly dance students, the hip scarf stands out as the single uniform item of dress that marks students at all levels as being in a belly dance class, as opposed to any other style of dance.

The hip scarf as an emblem at all levels

For beginning belly dance students, the hip scarf quickly becomes an emblem of the activity itself. Heather, a new student in her 4th week of class told me, "I wear my scarf at home when I practice, otherwise I can't do it!...I feel like it's a uniform that says I'm in class (Interview, May 5, 2008); she went on to observe that "...some people dress up for [class], and some people stand in their own spots; people who are similarly dressed stand together." Although most items of class dress worn by beginners are workout wear suitable for any physical activity, even Heather, a new student, was able to identify forming social cohorts through their dress (Stone, 1962). This is consistent with Joseph's (1986) description of one's awareness of group membership being enhanced through uniform dress.

Among intermediate and experienced belly dance students, where class dress is more varied, the hip scarf still functions as a uniform for participation. Students may wear a different style of hip scarf—beaded or fringed, for example, in addition to the coins favored by beginners—but it is rarely omitted from the ensemble, because it is a functional dress item that delineates the line of the hip. Lori, in her mother's skirt without a hip scarf over it, often wears a crop top, with a bare midriff—so there is no overhanging fabric from a tee shirt to obstruct the instructor's view of her hip movements. When Jawhara and I discussed the functional aspects of dress for dance

classes, she told me, “I’ve danced with other instructors who may not have a hip wrap on, but wear things that give us a chance to see where the movement is coming from” (Interview, September 13, 2008).

The hip scarf is a practical marker of the hip line, which is almost certainly how it originally came to be a uniform dress item in belly dance classes. Furthermore, since many experienced belly dance students said they strive for a professional appearance that is clean and coordinated without looking ‘overdone,’ which I will discuss further in Chapter Seven, the hip scarf—of which there are many, many styles—is one dress item where they can exercise a desire to get ‘dressed up’ for class while still achieving the uniform look of a dedicated student.

Summary: What motivates American women’s choice of dress for belly dance classes?

American women’s dress choices for belly dance class are dependent on both social context and personal goals for participation. Students in beginning belly dance classes wear clothing suitable for physical activity, to which they add the hip scarf as a uniform specific to belly dance. They choose dress items that help them to fit in with their student peers: the association between dress and practice in the belly dance class forms early, as students become aware of related-identity, distinct from the basic teacher/student hierarchy.

Students in intermediate belly dance classes dress to express themselves as individuals, rather than trying to fit in with the group. The semi-private and all-female context of dance classes allows women the freedom to dress for fun without fear of unwanted sexual attention from men or the criticism of co-workers and family. Belly

dance students may dress up as recreation and engage in dance dress fashions as a creative endeavor. They may use items of belly dance dress to enact the role of a belly dancer in class, or wear belly dance dress items to other events to help them enact the role of a themed character. Or they may refine their dress to more closely resemble their instructor or more advanced students, demonstrating a growing dedication to the study of belly dance.

Experienced students ostensibly dress for functionality, but make dress choices that allow for demonstration of their skill to fellow students, in addition to providing visibility of the body to the instructor, which facilitates their ability to learn. They are aware of a hierarchy in the studio, and dress to be accepted among the avocational experts and professional dancers present, especially at workshops and events where they will encounter the scrutiny of strangers.

The hip scarf is a unifying element among individuals within and between the varying class levels in the dance studio and at workshops, where students of all levels are in class together. The hip scarf is the only dress item common to belly dance students at all levels, and functions as a shared symbol which unites individuals throughout their tenure in belly dance classes, regardless of their goals or the roles they express in the dance studio. In the next chapter I discuss the relationship between dress and the expression of self, in relation to the identity of belly dance students at various levels and the roles they enact when attending classes and workshops.

Chapter Seven: Belly Dance Class Dress and Identity

How does [belly dance] dress contribute to identity and the expression of self?

Roles and the self

Women in belly dance classes can use dress to create or enhance one or more of the various roles contributing to total self identity, in conjunction with the personal creativity which permeates belly dance classes. For the women I interviewed, attending belly dance classes offers an opportunity to enact a role that differs from other day to day roles; in doing so they are able to explore or express alternate aspects of self identity. Vickie told me that when she is dressed for belly dance class, “I’m in the role!” (Interview, May 3, 2008). For belly dance students, the identity expressed in class is related to the role that she is playing and the cohort with which she wants to be identified.

New students, who have not yet been enculturated within a particular class cohort or studio, may expect to encounter the Orientalist belly dancer stereotype portrayed in movies when they initially sign up for belly dance class, but new students do not yet have the resources, either social or material, to dress for a belly dancer role based on these fantastic images. If they signed up for belly dance lessons with an exotic icon in mind, the real-life examples of belly dance dress seen in class rarely match the elaborate and exotic costumes of Hollywood starlets; they must follow local examples when dressing themselves for belly dance class.

Beginners said they dress for utility and try to fit in with the rest of the class, so their dress choices are guided by what they see in class. Since beginners do not yet have the experience to differentiate between various styles that make up the larger genre of

belly dance, their sense of appropriate belly dance class dress is initially based on whatever the teacher wears and what they already own. Since the only remotely ‘exotic’ dress item visible in beginning belly dance classes is the hip wrap worn by the instructor, the hip wrap becomes the symbolic dress of a belly dancer; beginning students soon acquire one to wear in class as well as when they are practicing at home. The women I interviewed in Zia’s beginning belly dance class were dressed in clothing suitable for any type of physical activity, typically sweatpants and a tee shirt, with the only visible marker of participation as a belly dancer being a coin hip wrap. If students stick with belly dance classes beyond the beginning stage, they will modify their dress to more closely emulate the dress of the only genuine belly dancers they actually know, their teacher and fellow students.

Dress and self expression

Intermediate belly dance students are more likely to dress up for class than beginners, in part because they have gained access to sources for belly dance dress ideas and items through their contacts in class (the teacher and fellow students) and in part because they have the social permission of their classmates to do so. They dress to enact the role of the belly dancer—but the belly dancer role varies. She may be akin to the Orientalist stereotype, dressed in fanciful outfit consisting of brightly colored clothing and jingling coin accessories, she may be a fashionista, wearing ‘the latest’ in belly dance class wear, or she may be a dedicated student of belly dance, wearing close-fitting clothing for maximum visibility of her body. Few of the dress items associated with these iterations are typically considered suitable for other roles in life.

When I interviewed Naima she told me about the way some of her students dress for class: “A lot of my long term students...have signature colors. I have one woman who...everything she has is hot pink and purple, another one who wears turquoise...she scours the thrift stores twice a week, and she’ll remake stuff and wear it to class” (Interview, September 13, 2008); Naima continued, “...when they put that stuff on, they walk differently, the move differently, they feel they can do things that they can’t; it’s almost like they’ve got their Superpower clothes on—and then they get back into their normal clothes and they become themselves again.” Belly dance students dress for class in a way that makes them *feel* differently about themselves.

Feeling like a dancer

Several interviewees, from the intermediate and experienced cohorts, told me that dressing for belly dance class helps them feel “Like a dancer” (SuSu, May 2, 2008; Cassandra, July 25, 2008); Vickie concurred: “It makes you feel more like a dancer; you can get into the spirit of the occasion” (Interview, May 3, 2008). Eileen specified, “It helps me feel like a *good* dancer” (original emphasis, Interview, July 17, 2008). Among the women I interviewed, feeling like a dancer in belly dance class, and thus being a belly dancer, paves the way for other feelings about herself. (I will discuss this further in the section on Gender.) Val explained, “To be a belly dancer, you have to be flashy...you have to get some glamour” (Interview, May 3, 2008).

Val’s body art

Because belly dance events are held in locations that range from quasi-public or quasi-private (socially and spatially), they are locations suitable for the revelation of a more private self (Eicher, 1981). Body art is a very personal type of dress, and Val, an

intermediate student who has several tattoos, told me that she got her nose pierced and had the back of her pelvis tattooed specifically for belly dancing. “I jump into whatever I’m doing with both feet,” she told me (Interview, May 3, 2008). She also got her navel pierced after starting to take classes, and her daughter encouraged her when she wanted to get her nose pierced as well. “I said, ‘Don’t you think I’m a little old for that?’ And she said ‘Of course not!’ so...” [she gestured to her pierced nose]. For Val, body art is an integral part of the belly dance experience, contributing to her identity as a belly dancer. Val’s tattoos do not reflect a particular style of belly dance, however, which I will discuss further in relation to Naima’s tattoo (see p. 91).

Miller’s (1997 and 1998) studies of dress and gender among participants at fantasy dress and reenactment events show that the creation of an ‘out of the ordinary’ role is instrumental in costume play among women, and may provide alternate clothing options for those who view dressing the body as a fun and creative pastime, even though they have fuller figures or are older. Whether enacting an extraordinary role by dressing the part of a themed character (see Chapter Six) or a belly dancer, dress offers belly dance students the opportunity to dress for self expression, whether she is dressed as a fanciful other or a glamorous self.

Among my interviewees, belly dance students recognize the intermediate belly dance class space as an environment where alternate types of dress will be tolerated or even appreciated, a place where they are able to dress up for class “just for fun.” For these women, belly dance class is an outlet for creative recreational dress, an opportunity to wear clothing and accessories that aren’t appropriate for household activities or the workplace, where they must enact routine roles. Among those who wear some of their

belly dance clothing or accessories outside of class—going out for dinner or even to a coffee shop—the glamorous image continues to be associated with that/those item(s) in the new context. Zia explained, “It shows a different side of me that people don’t see; I like to do that” (Interview, May 4, 2008).

In addition to the shortage of opportunities for getting dressed up in everyday life (see Chapter Six), based on my observations of numerous dance students at this level, women who dress in fanciful outfits for dance class often lack opportunities for public performance of the dance skills they have learned. Thus they may enact the role of the glamorous dancer—as a performer—in class, exercising their desire to perform by wearing dressier items for dance class.

Dressing for class in lieu of performance

When I asked interviewees if there was anything else they’d like to tell me about belly dance class and class dress, both Habiba and Cassandra remarked on student dress in the studio classroom. Cassandra told me, “Some people come [to class] dressed for a performance, and it’s not really practical....In your classroom situation, you perfect your technique and you perfect your steps, and you sweat a lot to become the dancer you can present on the stage” (Interview, July 25, 2008). Habiba concurred: “...[Students] can get so distracted with not only buying stuff—the social aspects are wonderful—but somehow the actual work of the dance gets pushed off to the side” (Interview, September 14, 2008). Cassandra explained, “Because of my history in dance...performance and class are really two separate places; so I feel that they need to be separated and one of the ways to do that is how you dress. There’s quite a lot of transformation...from the person that’s more like the everyday person, but in their dance wear in the studio, sweating...and then

transformation to presenting the magical part of it on the stage” (Interview, July 25, 2008). CiCi, an experienced student, similarly noted, “When I go to a workshop and I see someone who is...not in bedlah, but who has slagged on the works, I sort of wonder. [I think they] haven’t been doing this that long...or it’s a Halloween costume [to them]” (Interview, September 13, 2008). Habiba also remarked on the identity efforts of belly dance students outside the studio: “They’re on the Internet, and in discussion groups, and somehow they think they’re being [a dancer], but the essential technique and working at the dance part, which is really important to me, sort of gets pushed off to the side” (Interview, September 14, 2008).

For Cassandra and Habiba, who teach regularly, nationally and internationally, and experienced students like CiCi, who spend a lot of time in classes and at workshops to improve their skills, belly dance class dress is the dress of an everyday role; with many opportunities to perform, they reserve elaborate belly dance dress ensembles—their costumes—for performance. Like Forner (1996) and Deagon (1996), they feel their identity is transformed by the costume in performance—but not by dressing for dance class. For experienced students, like their master teachers, belly dance class is a place for learning, for improving their skills as dancers. Experienced dancers who wear more elaborate outfits to class may be evaluated as inexperienced or not serious by their peers (as demonstrated by Dahmia’s dress, see p. 95). For belly dance students with less experience, class dress can be used as a costume, in lieu of belly dance performance, to enact a variety of fantasy roles.

The interviews also reveal that, in addition to class, belly dance students may wear their belly dance class dress items when they go to Sci-Fi/Fantasy conventions or

Renaissance festivals, commercially-run themed fairs where costume play is welcome—and where their dress may depict them in yet another role, that of a ‘wench’ or ‘princess,’ not only a belly dancer. Shara told me, “When I go to Renaissance festivals, I tend to [wear my belly dance stuff]—half the time anyway, because if I’m not dressing



Fig. 19: Shara

like a Pirate, I’ll be dressed like a Gypsy” (Interview, September 13, 2008, note the flag on the door of her dorm room in the photo). Sue, who took her first belly dance lesson at a science fiction convention, noted that her husband likes the Middle Eastern dress items she wears when attending belly dance performances because they are “very much like Star Trek (*Star Trek*, NBC television series, Roddenberry, 1966-1969 and later franchise television series and motion pictures) —and he’s right, they used a lot of those [design] ‘lines’ in Star Trek” (Interview, September 12, 2008). Sue’s husband likes the visual

characteristics of his wife’s belly dance dress wardrobe.

Class dress and the senses

Six of the women I interviewed described the sensory—literally sensual—qualities they enjoy while dressed for belly dance class. In addition to the aforementioned “jingly” auditory qualities of coin hip scarves enjoyed by beginners (and disdained by experienced students), SuSu and Jana described their enjoyment of belly dance class dress in relation to the sensory aspects of fabric and clothing items. SuSu told me, “I like

fabric, I like sparkles, I like the tactile aspects of it” (Interview, May 2, 2008). Jana described the *feeling* the wearing skirts and sarongs, “something flowing;” when discussing dress items she notices others wearing in class, she remembered seeing “some of the flare dance pants; again, I think it all comes back to, I like the flow” (Interview, May 2, 2008). Lori echoed this sentiment when she told me about the other Middle Eastern ethnic dress items she associates with belly dance: “...they’re flowing, they’re elegant: (Interview, September 11, 2008). Unlike most of the students I interviewed, Angela and Nura said they prefer to wear their hair down for class. Nura told me, “My hair is the only part of my body that has a wit of its own, so the fact that I can just move it to add to whatever is happening, for me, that is important (Interview, August 13, 2008). Though both told me they will put their hair up if it’s really hot, they enjoy the feeling of their hair moving freely as they dance.

Sensory enjoyment of dance classes is also not limited to a student’s immediate person, however. Camaraderie and fellowship were often cited as a reason for continuing to attend dance classes (see Chapter Five), and two of the women I interviewed remarked on their enjoyment of *seeing* the group of women as a whole at workshops or events where participants are all dressed up: Djin told me, “At functions like this, you don’t really stand out, because *everybody* is flashy—I like to see them dressed up, as well” (original emphasis, Interview, May 3, 2008). Nura explained “...We’re all dancing together, you know? It just feels like everybody can look really nice and pretty” (Interview, August 13, 2008). Belly dance students find pleasure in seeing fellow participants dressed for a class or workshop as well as enjoying their own dress, validating the feminine experience within the social context of the event.

Gender and belly dance students

At all levels, close relationship between a student’s participation in belly dance classes and the act of dressing for classes and seminars provides an opportunity for the expression of gender in numerous interpretations. Heather told me that belly dancing is “...probably the most girly thing I do” (Interview, May 5, 2008). When asked, “How does the way you dress for belly dance classes, seminars, or workshops make you feel about yourself?” the women I interviewed described the feelings they experienced about themselves mostly in terms of gender, shown in Table 5.

Table 5: Responses to "How does the way you dress for belly dance classes...make you feel about yourself?"

First	#	Second	#	Third	#		#
Like I'm a dancer	3	Prettier	1	Exotic	1	Sexy	1
Feminine	6	Womanly	1	Sexy	2	Confident	2
Pretty	2	Self assured	1	Womanly	1	Feminine	1
Sexy	1	Beautiful	1				
"Cool"	1	Like I'm in class	1				
Good about myself	3	Young	1				
Self-confident*	3	Feminine	1	Body-conscious	1		
Like I'm a good dancer	2	Sexy	1				
Body-conscious	2						
Depends on the day	4	Dedicated to study	1				
Proud of myself	1						
Prepared*	3						
(Dress not important)	3						

*Replies derived from ‘confident’ with further explanation by interviewees

Replies concerning gender, directly or indirectly, ranged from “feminine” (eight times) or “womanly” (twice) to “pretty” (three times), “beautiful,” “exotic,” and “sexy” (five times), although only one of the women used this term first—it usually followed

another, less charged, adjective. Lynette also cited feeling more feminine as a reason for dressing the way she does for belly dance class, after comfort (Interview, May 5, 2008).

Three interviewees replied “good,” though Jill seemed unable (or unwilling) to elaborate when prompted to continue; “I dunno, I just feel good in this” (Interview, May 5, 2008). Sue explained, “If you look good you might not dance any better, but you feel better inside....I can look in the mirror and say, ‘I look good!’” (Interview, September 12, 2008). Zia went on to say the way she dresses for class makes her feel good about herself because it makes her feel young (Interview, May 4, 2008). Heather says being dressed for class makes her feel “cool or something,” because she’s dressed to participate in the belly dance class (Interview, May 5, 2008).

Six replied using the term “confident” or another related word with two separate meanings: three went on to describe feelings of ‘self-confidence’ while the other three said that the way they dress for class makes them feel confident because they know they are ‘prepared’ to engage in whatever activities the teacher has planned for the class. For example, Lori told me she feels “adventurous” while dressed for dance class; I asked to her to explain this answer, she told me “It’s kind of like I have nothing to prove to anybody, or to myself, so I feel...self confidence” (September 11, 2008). Naima said feels proud of herself when dressed for class (Interview, September 13, 2008). Three women added self-assured or confident *after* describing the way they feel while dressed for class as “feminine” or “pretty,” connecting feelings of self confidence to a dressed expression of gender.

For at least one of the women I interviewed, the feeling of femininity extends beyond dance class as well. When I asked Lynette if there was anything else she’d like to

tell me about belly dance, she remarked that the feminine feeling she gets from dressing for her belly dance class “has transferred into my day to day life more and more; I feel I need to learn that for my daughter, so I can present that for her” (Interview, May 5, 2008). Belly dance students engage their feelings while their female bodies are dressed for class.

Belly dance class dress and the female body

In any dance class, it is necessary to develop a connection between the self and the body in order to learn effectively. Belly dance is often described as ‘women’s dance’ because many of the movements, especially those involving the muscles of the torso, are reminiscent of the not only the sexual act but child birth as well. It is understandable that for many belly dance students, belly dance classes help them to become more aware of their female bodies.

When asked how the way she dresses for dance class makes her feel about herself, Nura told me, “It forces me to connect to, with my body in a very realistic, tangible way...so that whatever misconceptions I have about my body must vanish because everything is sort of revealed: it’s there. And whether good or bad, it makes me really have to feel like I connect with my body” (Interview, August 13, 2008). Priscilla noted, “[Class dress] makes me feel more conscious of my body because it’s formfitting, and I don’t typically wear formfitting clothing...which is good, because you need to be conscious of your body when you’re moving” (Interview, September 13, 2008). This connection is helpful to many belly dance students, especially among beginners. For students who also perform professionally, however, class dress can make them more

aware of their female bodies in relation to physical fitness and weight, reminding them of audiences' expectations.

When asked how being dressed for class made them feel about themselves, five of the women I interviewed discussed self-evaluation of a physical state (as opposed to appearance, i.e. "beautiful"). When I posed the question to Nadira, she made a face and answered, "Fat and not so happy with my body....The fitted clothes reveal the extra pounds all too well" (Interview, September 14, 2008). CiCi concurred: "If the yoga pants are tighter when I put them on, I don't feel so great" (Interview, September 13, 2008). Zarifa similarly replied, "It depends on what I ate—and how much! You know, it's...[gestures to her midsection] Some days you feel that, some days you don't" (Interview, September 11, 2008). Jawhara told me, "Depends on the time of the month! I think one of the things that [class dress] does is remind me that I'm making a concerted effort to stay fit and stay functional, and learning within my dance form" (Interview, September 13, 2008). Angela thought about it for a moment, then said, "Sometimes if you wear the right clothes, it makes you look skinny—and then you *are*, and I think that's a good thing; I guess that if you wear something that's flattering to you, it makes you feel like your workout is paying off" (original emphasis, Interview, August, 2008). For these women, dressing for class makes them more aware of the condition of their bodies; this makes sense for belly dance students who perform professionally, as the condition of their bodies is subject to the scrutiny of employers and audiences.

Femininity and the self

Laukkanen (2004) briefly discussed the perception of femininity among the Finnish belly dancers she interviewed, noting that ultra-femininity is one of the gender

icons western women equate with Middle Eastern women as an ‘other.’ It seems that when enacting the role of a belly dancer, women who participate in belly dance classes—including the women I interviewed—feel better able to connect with and develop female gender attributes, whether they express them only in class or in other areas of their lives as well. In the role of a belly dancer, a woman can express enigmatic and potentially erotic female qualities of her self such as ultra-femininity, sensuality, and sexuality, components of gender identity which are typically not considered appropriate in most everyday venues, giving visibility to Eicher’s (1981) “private” self under the public or semi-public circumstances described by Miller (1997).

Three of five of the beginning students I interviewed said they feel more feminine or sexier when dressed for belly dance class, even though they were attired in sweatpants and a T shirt when I spoke with them. Those who have progressed to intermediate levels, such as Vickie, Djin, and Val, have more opportunities to use class dress to enhance feelings of femininity. The desire to express more overt feminine qualities may be part of an intermediate student’s glamorous image or fantasy class persona, specifically because this is not enacted at work or while engaged with family members. Miller (1998) described how, especially for women with fuller figures, dressing recreational events accommodate the desire to accentuate gender attributes, such as a prolific bustline, that are not considered appropriate to dress for display under professional or other mundane circumstances.

When I asked Val about whether the way she dresses for belly dance classes highlights a particular quality in herself, she smiled, struck a pose and said, “I think I

have a nice figure; I'm turning 59, and for an old broad, I don't look too bad!" (Interview, May 3, 2008). When asked the same question, Vickie told me, "It shows off my womanly



Fig. 20: Val

figure!" (Interview, May 3, 2008), while Dahmia said her high heels enhance her "great legs" (Interview, September 11, 2008). At belly dance events, like historical re-enactment or fantasy costume gatherings, well dressed outstanding features are likely to be admired (Miller, 1998). Jessica explained, "It's a nice opportunity for getting attention as a woman without needing to put your defenses up—you don't need to be afraid of getting unwanted attention; you can dress sexier in class than you would going out" (Interview, May 5, 2008). The private setting of the dance studio affords belly dance students a similar ability to dress

the female body in a way that satisfies the expressive desires of the individual without negotiating the gaze of the 'general public.' She can show off her femininity among her peers in belly dance class.

Dress and the "serious" belly dancer

Not all intermediates belly dance students dress flamboyantly for class, however. An intermediate may instead dress for the role of a belly dance student with more experience. These intermediates are most likely to closely follow the example set by the teacher as their skills progress. They shed the bulky, multi-purpose sweatpants and adopt black yoga pants or a unitard, and choose a tee shirt that matches or complements the

color of the hip wrap. Kate remembered, "...As things went along, I invested in the first leotard; I'm like, OK, I'm really serious about dancing now, I'm going to get a leotard!" (Interview, September 10, 2008). When I asked SuSu what she thought her class dress says about her to others, she replied, "I guess they think I'm serious about being there, about working out, doing the class" (Interview, May 2, 2008). Students who attend seminars and workshops notice what other participants are wearing, and may alter their belly dance class dress to include fashionable items, such as a particular style of pant or hip scarf, which still fall into the uniform of the dedicated dance student, but allow the wearer to reflect personal taste without the risk of overdoing it.

Style of class dress VS style of belly dance

Dress choices reflect the stylistic orientation of the individual or cohort to some extent; those who focus on Orientale style belly dance (see Chapter Two regarding styles of belly dance) may choose leggings or tops with sequins and rhinestones, per the embellishment found on Orientale performance costume, whereas those who focus on Tribal/Fusion style belly dance may choose split flare-leg pants (initially sold at Tribal workshops by a vendor named Melodia, and now available from many belly dance wear vendors) or accessories with tassels, again referencing elements of costume worn for the performance of various branches of American Tribal and Tribal Fusion style belly dance (see Chapter Two regarding styles of belly dance). When Brea and I discussed costuming and the various styles of belly dance, she told me, "Even though I know it's more Tribal, I'm more drawn to that kind of costuming...[but] I wouldn't dance in a Tribal costume, [because] I'm not a Tribal Dancer" (Interview, May 3, 2008).

Naima's Tattoo

Naima similarly discussed the visibility of a new tattoo in relation to her costuming and even class dress as a professional Oriental dancer; she was surprised that I noticed it through the mesh of her unitard in class. Naima told me that she is especially careful to conceal her tattoo—a lotus and the Sanskrit word for ‘bliss,’ on the back of her pelvis—when performing (Interview, September 13, 2008). In the Tribal Style belly dance community, tattoos of all kinds (belly dance or otherwise) are much more common, and are an accepted and valued part of Tribal or Tribal Fusion dance dress. Among belly dancers collectively, they are thus more strongly associated with Tribal dance, and Naima, who prefers the Orientale style and is aware of the stylistic dress differences, does not want her tattoo to be visible when she is dancing, despite the current popularity of tattoos in mainstream American fashion. “I actually misplaced it—I meant to put it below the belt; that’s very important to me because I am an Orientale dancer, not Tribal, and I wanted to hide it” (Interview, September 13, 2008).

Naima’s choice to hide her tattoo may also coincide with her role as a *professional* dancer, not just her identity as an *Orientale* dancer, who is often hired by Arab employers. Angela, who is heavily tattooed (none of her tattoos are related to belly dance) was told by a Lebanese restaurant owner in St. Paul, MN, that although she is a fine dancer (she studies Oriental style belly dance with Cassandra), he would never hire her because of her tattoos (Conversation, August 16, 2008). For these women, tattoos can be detrimental to their belly dance goals outside the dance studio. For belly dancers, body art and belly dance require a thorough knowledge of self and the dress conventions of

various styles of dance among belly dancers, as well as an understanding of how employers and audiences may respond to visible tattoos during belly dance performances.

Not all dancers adhere to one particular dance style or another, however. The easy availability of dance class clothing and accessories from belly dance vendors means that belly dance students of any style may wear items associated with one style or another for class, as for Brea's preferences, and the current popularity of body art which accommodates dance style/dress style crossovers, as for Val's tattoo, just because a student likes a certain look –but without crossing dance style/dress style boundaries associated with public performance. The relationship between dress and specific styles of belly dance is something belly dance students need to be aware of, though, especially as students progress in their studies. They may have to make choices with respect to professional belly dance opportunities, as for Naima's misplaced tattoo, or the promotion of themselves as a dancer with a professional identity within the community of experience belly dance students.

Avocational experts and professionals

Among experienced belly dance students with the most tenure, dress is critically tied to practice. In addition to the facilitation of learning in the studio environment, dress is used to convey status within a social cohort where many students perform regularly, some as professionals, or are paid instructors. Participants at this level have other outlets for creative belly dance dress urges, in that they *must* wear costumes for public performances and have the opportunity to alter their class dress when teaching, which I will discuss shortly. They do not need to dress up for class.

Dressed for class in a unitard, tee shirt, and beaded hip scarf, Garnett—who performs professionally—told me, “I love to play dress up, that’s another part of me being a dancer...that still hasn’t gone away” (Interview, September 12, 2008). When asked about hairstyle and makeup for class, many belly dance students who have performed in shows immediately started describing the way they do their hair and makeup when performing, and they seemed disappointed when I reminded them I was focusing on classes and workshops, not shows. In the studio, non-clothing dress choices such as minimal makeup and a simple, out-of-the-way hairstyle show that that experienced students are dressed to learn, because they accommodate the sweating that goes along with vigorous physical activity.

Presenting a “professional” appearance as a student

The experienced students I interviewed were often concerned with presenting a professional appearance, citing two reasons: First, they said they show respect for the instructor and the dedicated learning environment by dressing appropriately for classes, seminars and workshops. Belly dance students who also teach are especially aware of this. Kate explained that whether in class or teaching, she tries to dress to “...look like I know what I’m doing... that’s really important for a teacher to get that across so that students can have confidence in them and respect them” (September 10, 2008). Master teacher Cassandra agreed, “It’s like going to church... [you dress well] out of respect...for your students and your studio” (Interview, July 25, 2008). The more experience students have in the studio, the more value they attribute to the studio as a learning environment. But they are also aware that the studio is a social environment, and must address both the physical needs of the class and the social circumstances in which

they practice. Experienced students typically avoid dress items such as pantaloons or full skirts in class because they interfere with the visibility of the body—experienced students want their bodies to be visible so that others present, including both the instructor and other students, can see the efficacy with which they execute movements. They know they are being observed.

Second, experienced belly dance students acknowledged the social value of dress as an emblem among student peers in an open hierarchy, which includes avocational experts as well as paid professionals. In a classic example of Stone's (1962) "program and review," experienced belly dance students compare themselves to their peers, and want to be compared favorably. Brea told me that she takes more time with her hair, and adds a little makeup, when going to workshops: "It's sort of a see and be seen thing, as well as being a professional" (Interview, May 3, 2008). Sabrina explained, "There's a difference between people who are just watching because you're watching each other, and it's just *watching*, and people who are *WATCHING*: Those are the people who I try to put on a little more presentation for" (original emphasis, Interview, September 13, 2008). Kate concurred: "You judge each other in class, unfortunately, and...you're comparing yourself, you know? [Dressing well] frees you up from that worrying about what other people are thinking" (Interview, September 10, 2008). Naima told me, "I used to wear just any old thing... and then I started developing...a professional persona. I started dressing up for workshops...and I started getting more professionals who talked to me and started giving me respect" (Interview, September 13, 2008). By taking the time to don the uniform of an experienced belly dance student when among dancers of that cohort, students indicate that they want to be taken seriously and respected; whether they

are professional in the 'paid' sense or avocational experts, they want to be recognized as part of the elite community.

Dahmia's dress

The following interview excerpts illustrate the interactivity of dress and the presentation of self within a particular cohort of experienced belly dance students.

Dahmia is an experienced dance student who also teaches dance classes; she is one of the few Oasis Dance Camp North attendees who has been to every camp since it began in 1985. When I asked her to compare what she wears when attending classes to her teaching outfit, she explained that for teaching, "I always wear 3 ½ inch heels because my first teacher was born and raised in Turkey, and that's how I was taught. I wear some sort of costume like a lot of people wear on the stage, two piece costumes that have a skirt and some coins on top.... I like to encourage other dancers to maximize their attitude and their look; [but] I realize not everyone is not comfortable wearing 3 ½ inch heels..." (Interview, September 11, 2008). In previous years I have attended Oasis Dance Camp, Dahmia also usually wore flamboyant outfits to class. When I interviewed her in 2008, however, Dahmia was wearing black yoga pants, a noiseless hip scarf, an Oasis tee shirt, and flat shoes. "This is very low key for me" she told me; when I asked why she had changed her look, Dahmia shrugged and said, "I'm trying to be like the other kids" (Interview, September 2008).

When I interviewed Naima at Oasis Dance Camp North two days later, she compared her own evolving dance class dress to Dahmia's signature style. Naima said, "I know there are people like Dahmia who...[have] this whole persona, and for her it's very fetishistic...the stilettos, the wigs...I'm just not that girl" (Interview, September 13,

2008). Both Dahmia and Naima acknowledged a certain “look” among regular attendees to Oasis Dance Camp North who are professional teachers as well as experienced students, both recognized the atypical nature of Dahmia’s preferred style in relation thereto, and remarked on it. Dahmia changed her dress to reflect her tenure within the Oasis camp cohort, so her dress would not detract from her dance abilities.

With respect to visibility of the body and being seen or “watched” in class, many of the experienced students expressed in some way that their dance class dress should not distract attention from their movements. Eileen summarized this sentiment: “I hope they’re not looking at my dancewear, but looking at my dancing so they can see my body working the way that it ought to work-*because of* what I’m wearing rather than at *what* I’m wearing” (Interview, July 17, 2008). After describing the sheer utility of her belly dance class dress, however, Eileen also conceded that “Occasionally I’ll wear a shiny hip scarf because it’s fun.” Angela likewise admitted, “Hip scarves are just fun; I guess...that would be the only dressing up part for me” (Interview, August 14, 2008). While adhering to the criteria for the uniform of experienced avocational belly dancers and professionals, students can express themselves through their choice of a hip scarf (not unlike a tie worn with a business suit).

Presenting a professional appearance as a teacher

When experienced belly dance students attend a belly dance class or seminar, among others with similar tenure and experience, they dress a certain way to present a ‘serious’ or ‘professional’ appearance. Experienced belly dance students who also teach may wear makeup or alter their dress somewhat, to meet the expectations of their students and to foster confidence in them as a ‘professional’ instructor, as mentioned

earlier by Cassandra and Kate. The meaning of ‘professional’ dance class dress thus depends on the immediate role of the individual, whether she is a student in a class or the teacher. Several belly dance teachers told me that they dress in a way that may inspire their students; Zia tries to create a “fresh” appearance (including fragrance) so her students will feel invigorated, and Lin wears eye makeup when teaching because it defines her eyes, which she feels increases the expressiveness and communicativity of her face and because her “students expect that” (Interview, September 13, 2008). Naima told me, “When people come to classes I want them to relax, so I...actually dress to look a little plumper sometimes; I dress to make them feel comfortable” (Interview, September 13, 2008). When teaching, these experienced belly dance students are aware of the different role they must enact for their own students, and they dress in a way that may not be obvious but they hope will be appreciated, at some level, by their students.

To recap, within the physical space of the studio or dance class, belly dance dress functions as a mechanism that allows students to “dress out” of regular, every-day roles, donning the trappings of a new role and signaling that she is officially engaged therein (Stone, 1962, p. 101 & 108). The belly dancer is also “dressing in” with her cohort, donning the uniform of the belly dance student, demonstrating her affiliation to the group, and communicating her “actual” identity—at least for the time being—to her peers (ibid. p. 113). Each dancer finds her own balance between personal creativity and the group’s aesthetics and accepted dress practices at all levels. Belly dance dress helps to establish and reinforce the student’s relationships with other women at the event (Jerrentrup, 2002; Jorgensen, 2006).

Constructing the belly dancer within the group

The interviews show that dress is a significant part of a strategy to present one's self as a dancer within the dance community, in the classroom or studio and outside of it at dance related events. Students often form groups to create choreography or assemble into a "Tribe" for the practice of ATS belly dance; cohesive costuming creates a unified group in practice as well as during performance, and the social commitment to the group is evident through dress as well as participation. "The individual's subjective identity is strengthened when expressed in conjunction with a community" (Sellers-Young, 2005).

The dress and aesthetic preferences of individuals as well as those within a cohort often convey ideology and values as well as group membership (DeLong, 1998).

This is apparent among belly dance students via the current popularity of dancewear items with belly dance logos, either generic (i.e. "Belly Dancer" on Brea's top, or



Fig. 21: Belly dance shirt logos: Shimmylicious, Ya Habibi, got hips?

"Caution: Contents may Shimmy without Warning" on Priscilla's pants) or troupe or event ("Cassandra's Weeklong" on Eileen's tee shirt) specific. Shirt slogans are the most obvious example seen in dance classes, as elsewhere, but other dress

choices may be telling as well.

Jorgensen (2006) describes the importance of American Tribal Style belly dance dress items which highlight improvised dance movements that need to be coordinated among dancers as a group, as well as the collaborative nature of costume creation. This is evident among other belly dance students who use performance-worthy dress—i.e. a costume—to achieve a unified appearance at events, even when they are off stage.

Field Observation: Tribal costuming for class participation

For some belly dance students, performance-level costume elements may be an important part of the class or seminar experience. Several attendees at the Northern Lights Belly Dance Conference in Cable, WI (October 26-28, 2007) dressed in ornate costumes for the entire event. In the morning, a small group of participants appeared at breakfast in the dining room of the resort clad in full belly dance performance dress, including dramatic makeup and *bindis* (adhesive skin ornaments from India worn on the forehead or around the eyes), specially styled hair with flowers and yarn falls, and American Tribal Style (see Chapter Two regarding dance styles) dance apparel. They wore their outfits all day to classes and meals, and after dinner, changed into even more elaborate costumes to attend the belly dance show, in which they did not perform. They wore these for the rest of the evening, including impromptu dancing to country and western music in the facility's lounge. The dress of these women unmistakably indicated their identity as belly dancers, specifically American Tribal Style dancers, and prominently advertised their participation in the belly dance seminar to fellow participants as well as other guests at the hotel, clearly illustrating the fundamental importance of dress in symbolic interpersonal communication (Wilson, 1994). Many

participants were also wearing tee shirts with logos from other belly dance seminars and events, which also communicate affiliation.

Belly dance students who attend classes at a particular studio or with a specific instructor often wear tee shirts emblazoned with their local logo. Eileen, an experienced belly dance student who is a member of Jawaahir Dance Company in Minneapolis, MN told me that when she goes to a seminar or workshop, “I try to wear a ‘Jawaahir’ tee shirt—because it’s advertising, and because people know Jawaahir and I want to be treated with some amount of respect” (Interview, July 17, 2008). When I asked Jenny, who also performs with Jawaahir, where she gets her dance class items, she told me that the shirts she wears for class usually come from Jawaahir (Interview, August 13, 2008). Both demonstrate their affiliation to the dance company by wearing shirts with Jawaahir logos, and advertise for the group as well.

Similarly, students who regularly attend annually recurring belly dance events show their affiliation to those events when attending other workshops. When I photographed SuSu at the Fahtiem seminar in Chisholm, MN on May 3, 2008, she was wearing an Oasis Dance Camp tee shirt. When describing what she wears for seminars and workshops, Jana told me, “...until I get warm I usually put on a tee shirt or a sweatshirt, if it’s real cold; and they’re always an Oasis Dance Camp shirt” (Interview, May 2, 2008). Both also wore Oasis Dance Camp shirts from earlier years when they attended Oasis Dance Camp North in September that same year. Among the belly dance students I interviewed at Oasis Dance Camp North, other group affiliations were evident through dress as well.

Dressed To Match

At Oasis Dance Camp North, I interviewed Priscilla, Jawhara, and Rakshanda from Chicago, IL who are part of a dance troupe called *Anwar al-Sharq* (lit “lights of the east”); Jawhara is the artistic director.

One of the days at Camp, all three were dressed to match in coordinating colors and velvet shawls worn as hip scarves with a peacock pattern. As I interviewed each of them alone, I specifically asked about their attire for that day. Priscilla (September 13, 2008) told me, “When I travel with my posse...we sometimes will do sort of a coordination thing, like you took our picture.” When asked if the velvet shawls were intended to be coordinating costume pieces originally, she replied, “No, it’s pretty much for class...in fact, to be honest with you, lately I buy more stuff for class than I do for performing....”



Fig. 22: Rakshanda, Jawhara, and Priscilla

During my interview with Jawhara (September 13, 2008), she said the three of them purchased the scarves from an Indian vendor at a cancer benefit event where they were performing, “and we decided that we could have matching hip wraps for Dance Camp.” Jawhara noted, “We also have another hip wrap that Rakshanda and I wore on

the same day...and that was also something that I picked up at a seminar for the group; we all sort of shop for what we think might add to the closet of the group.”

When I interviewed Rakshanda (September 13, 2008), she told me, “Jawhara had found these peacock hip scarves that she thought would be really cute for us; she had one in each of our colors, and so we bought them and thought we could use them with the troupe costumes or something like that. And when we were getting ready to come to Camp, Jawhara said, ‘Bring your peacock butts, and we can wear them in class one day, so everyone will know we are in a troupe.’” Rakshanda followed Jawhara’s example when choosing a hip scarf to wear on two occasions of the four-and-a-half day event. Priscilla dressed to match the group one day, but exercised her own dance class wardrobe for the remainder of the event, making personal dress choices in relation to herself as an individual and as part of the larger Oasis community as well. With regard to her dance class dress in general, Priscilla explained, “Being dressed this way makes me feel like I’m part of *these* people, and I’m a little different from *those* people; it’s kind of a way of separating me from other people and other parts of my life” (Interview, September 2008, emphasis original).

The boundaries of the social space expand, and the boundary between roles tends to blur (Waskul & Lust, 2004). Students who perform in an ensemble for belly dance festivals or class performances or attend seminars and workshops together often enjoy the social exchange that occurs when they must decide, as a group, “what to wear.” This junction between the private space of the studio and other more public interactions sometimes prove inconvenient to belly dance participants.

Negotiating life's multiple roles

Given the past relationship between belly dancing and burlesque theater (some of which evolved into modern striptease dancing) and the associated lingering disrepute of belly dance, those who participate in belly dance events sometimes conceal their participation from friends, co-workers or family members. Jana told me, "I keep it very private; it's not that I'm ashamed of it, but it's a private thing" (Interview, May 2, 2008). Avocational belly dancers as well as professional performers must address the awkward social discourse concerning belly dance and reconcile the public and private meanings for themselves (Bock, 2005). Even among Americans who are unaware of the socio-cultural bias against professional dance performance which exists in the Middle East, belly dance may have risqué connotations and many students emphasize that it's 'just for fun.' Djin told me, "My husband thinks it's sexy; my dad thinks it's disgusting. He's old fashioned; he's got some weird idea that it's like stripping (Interview, May 3, 2008). Dahmia told me about one of her relatives, who after 25 years still says, "'You're an exhibitionist!' ... Some people don't want to be educated, so there's nothing you can do about it" (Interview, September 11, 2008). Most of the women I interviewed enjoyed the support of close friends and family; however, coworkers and colleagues pose more of a social risk to belly dancers.

Students who risk castigation professionally still find ways to participate. Habiba noted, "Some of my colleagues know I do this; local colleagues know, but most of my research colleagues probably don't know" (Interview, September 14, 2008). Nadira similarly stated, "It's sort of a separate thing; it's a different facet of many different things that I do....Most of my research colleagues or collaborations probably don't know;

I don't know how much that has gotten around" (Interview, September 14, 2008).

Jawhara is cautious about revealing her potentially controversial alternate identity to corporate colleagues, and avoids dressing in a way that could reveal her participation in belly dance; for example, she told me that she only wears her ethnic jewelry for dance events, not to work: "Because I have a corporate identity, I have to keep a large separation between that life and this life" (Interview with Jawhara, September 13, 2008). They continue to belly dance—including performing professionally—even though they are aware that their colleagues may not understand belly dancing.

As Jawhara noted, subtle dress items not specific to class, such as ethnic clothing, textiles or jewelry, could reveal a belly dancer's identity, as opposed to (or in addition to) generally conveying an interest in cultures of the Middle East. Other women I interviewed told me they deliberately incorporate items they associate with belly dancing into their dress outside of class, including their professional wardrobes. Sue wears caftans and salwar kameez for evenings out with her husband (Interview, September 12, 2008) and Lori wears clothing elements from Morocco to work (Interview, September 11, 2008), and Jana told me, "All the Middle Eastern jewelry that I collect, I wore that to work with my professional outfits" (Interview, May 2, 2008). Dahmia explained, "The other day, when I was preparing to come to Dance Camp, I wore an outfit to work with Egyptian jewelry, because I was just getting my mind set, and then of course you get comments from other people, which gets dialogue going; I just love that!" (Interview, September 11, 2008). Priscilla similarly told me, "The jewelry I do wear elsewhere; it's something I take with me...that part of my dance world that goes everywhere with me" (Interview, September 13, 2008). This idea is reinforced when walking through the

parking lot at a seminars and workshops: some dancers put their belly dance pseudonym on their automobile license plates, and decorate their vehicle with belly dance related items.



Fig. 23: Dance name license plates, palm tree plate frame, and Egyptian eye of Horus decal

For these women, clothing, jewelry and even automobile accessories associated with belly dancing provide continuity of identity, across numerous roles in life.

Lori's Tattoos

Lori's tattoos further illustrate this continuity. Lori is an experienced belly dance student of twenty-seven years; in addition to her full time career as a university librarian, she is belly dances professionally through an entertainment agency and is a belly dance instructor. Most of her performances are for parties or events held by non-Arabs.

Following her mother's death, she got tattoos of both of her parents' names transliterated into Arabic script, then "...I got 'Jasmine' [her daughter's name] next" (Interview, September 11, 2008). Her other tattoo designs combine ancient and contemporary North African motifs with fanciful artwork, such as a spotted scarab—a reference to her interests in belly dancing, ancient Egyptian history and art, and an old family nickname, "Ladybug." The scarab and many of her other tattoos are drawn by Jasmine, who is also a

belly dancer, having been taught by her mother as she grew up. For Lori, body art reinforces family connections associated with belly dance as part of her total identity.

Summary: How does [belly dance] dress contribute to identity and the expression of self?

As the costume signifies the dancer's important role in a performance (Deagon, 1996), the hip scarf, as a uniform class dress item, contributes to the liminality of the occasion and facilitates the transition of the group—not just the individual—into a 'different' space, thus populating the new location with women identified as fellow belly dancers. The hip scarf is a shared symbol at all levels of belly dance students. The role enacted or the segment of self expressed is related to both the level and goals of each belly dance student, and the various roles students strive to enact in the belly dance class.

At all levels, students dress for their role as a belly dance class participant, with functionality—its usefulness for physical activity—being an important concern.. Having more experience and resources for belly dance clothing and accessories than beginners, and a larger variety of social options than experienced students, intermediate level students are more likely to dress up purely for recreational purposes, 'just for fun,' to feel more glamorous, or as play. They may create a belly dancer persona (as an individual in the dance class, or as part of a group or Tribe at a workshop or belly dance event) or themed character (outside the studio) through dress. These roles or characters are enacted through dress which differs from their day-to-day attire, dress which also allows them to express gender as part of a total self.

Dressing for dance class helps belly dance students feel more feminine, allowing them to express gender in a semi-private environment. They can dress to highlight female

physical attributes in ways that might not be considered appropriate elsewhere, and by doing so become more aware of their female bodies. Belly dance class dress makes them feel like a dancer: it can help them feel generally self-confident or prepared for dance class, as well as heightening their connection to and concern about their bodies' physical states.

As they progress, many intermediate students dress try to present themselves as being 'serious' while experienced students strive to dress like a 'professional,' wanting to be recognized as elite members of an hierarchical community where classmates are, for the most part, all experts. For experienced students, dressing in the relatively uniform garb of dance class links the immediate self with a larger reality that includes belly dancing, as opposed to dressing as a fantasy belly dancer. Like intermediates dressing like fellow Tribe members, experienced students who dance together may also coordinate their dress to demonstrate affiliation within the larger group, while still achieving the uniform appearance of the experienced student cohort.

Dress and accessories associated with participation in belly dance classes is recognized as coded dress and can be worn as a signal, or not, to those 'in the know' or for the wearer's self—that she is a belly dancer, both in and outside of the dance context. Students must negotiate multiple roles in life, including corporate or academic identities, with a belly dancer identity and manage their dress outside the dance studio to advertise or protect this identity from coworkers, friends, or family members. This negotiation includes the expression of gender in those various roles, and for some, the creation of an alternate persona or the enactment of a themed character is an additional use for belly dance class dress.

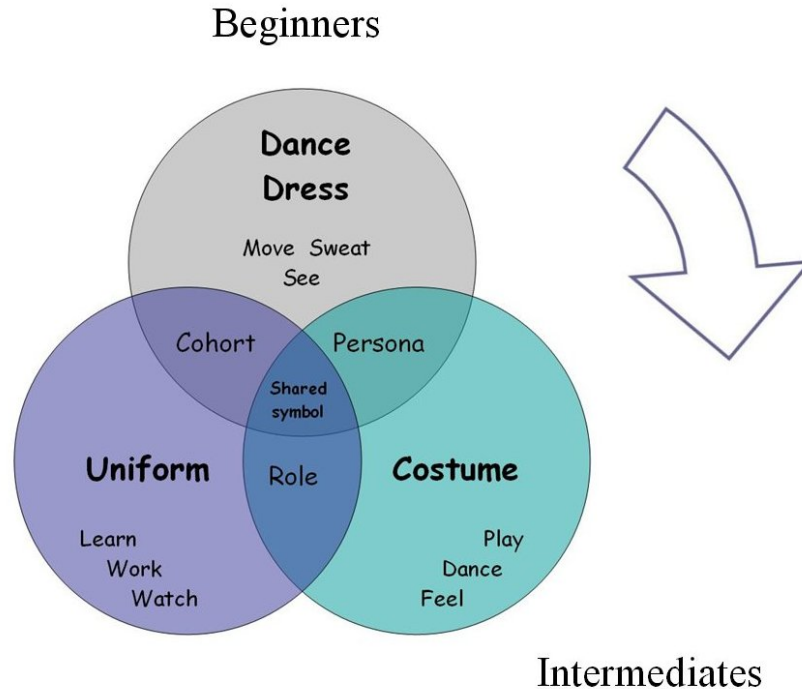


Fig. 24: (A) Categories of dress as related to individual identity among dance students © 2010 Margaret A. Deppe

Among dance students, dress items fit into different categories with respect to identity, illustrated in Figures 24-26, depending on the amount of time the student has been attending classes, i.e. the level of the belly dance student. For beginners, belly dance class dress is just **dance dress**: they can *move* freely and *work* up a sweat. They *see* what others in the class are wearing and dress to fit in. The only item of dress that marks their role as a student in a belly dance class is the hip scarf.

As students progress to the intermediate level and become more comfortable within the social environment of the dance class, Figure 24 (A), they are able to use dress as a **costume** to enact an extraordinary persona such as a belly dancer (in various forms, ranging from the fantasy icon seen in films to the elegant performer seen on a restaurant stage) or themed character, they can dress for class as *play* for fun or fashion,

or they can show their growing dedication and commitment to *dance* as their skills progress. Dress helps them *feel* engaged as they enact their chosen roles; the hip scarf is still worn, among other accessories.

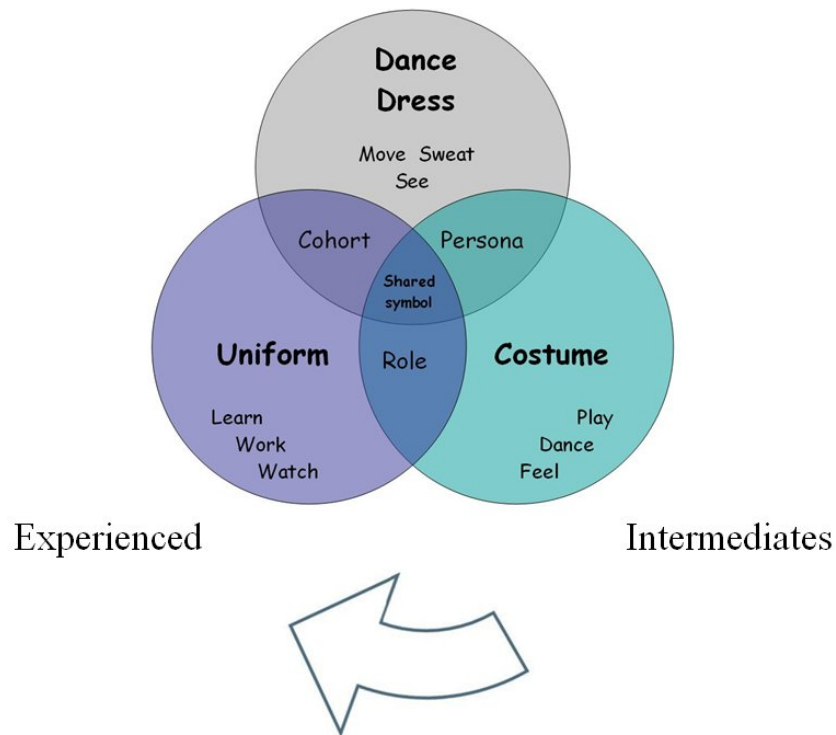


Fig. 25: (B) Categories of dress as related to individual identity among dance students © 2010 Margaret A. Deppe

Those belly dance students who progress to the experienced level are more aware of their identity within their cohort; they *work* to improve their skills (*learn*) and they *watch* each other in class. Status plays a larger role, as both avocational experts and paid professionals vie for recognition in the studio. Like beginners, they dress to fit in with their peers—but their entire “look” is a **uniform** ensemble, Figure 25 (B). The hip scarf is now the item they can choose to conspicuously reflect personality, as a fun—as well as functional—item of dress. Among masters, dress is primarily functional **dance dress**

related to physical practice, see Figure 26 (C). Masters have already established an identity at the top of the hierarchy, and students must be able to clearly see all movements presented by the master in the role of teacher. They dress to show respect for their students, rather than to impress them with fancy or fashionable attire.

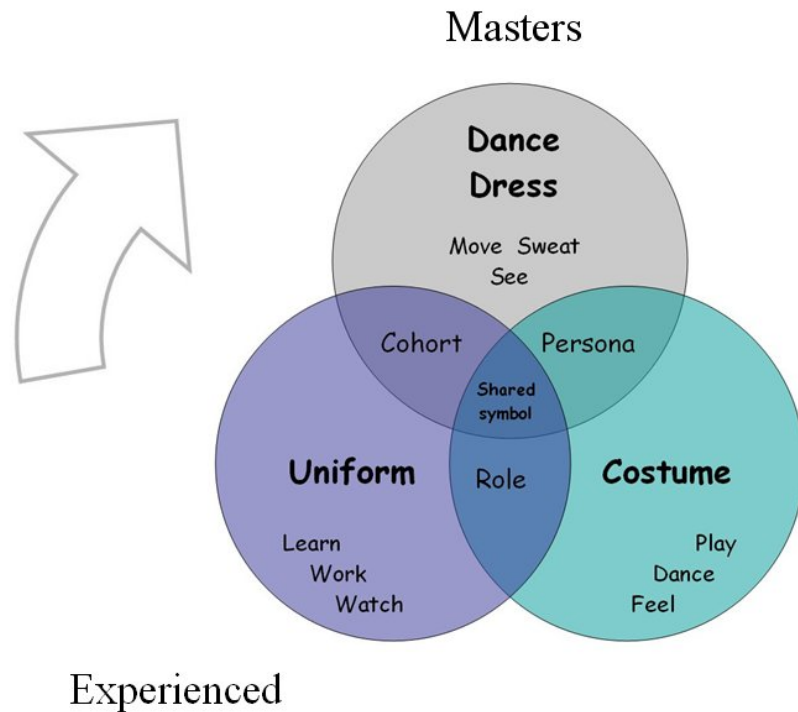


Fig. 26: (C) Categories of dress as related to individual identity among dance students © 2010 Margaret A. Deppe

At all levels, the hip scarf is the **shared symbol** of belly dance students in relation to key identity themes—persona, role, and cohort—for each dress category.

Chapter 8: Conclusions and further research

In the United States, the genre of belly dance encompasses many styles. The Orientalist stereotypes found in historic performances persist and prescribe the costume choices for professional belly dancers. But American women attend belly dance classes for a variety of reasons, including fitness, fellowship, and fun, not only as training to become a professional performer. Belly dance students must dress themselves for participation, from their first dance class through what is, for some of the women I interviewed, more than thirty years of class participation. My role as a researcher and participant observer contributed to this study, as it allowed me instant access to “inside” relationships and eased potentially sensitive discussions, such as those concerning feeling “sexy.” My dual role as a belly dancer as well as a researcher inspired the women I interviewed to trust me, which encouraged more in-depth answers.

The goal of my study was to find out **what motivates American women’s choice of dress for belly dance classes and how does this dress contribute to identity and the expression of self?** To address these questions, I interviewed 34 belly dance students at classes, workshops, and a residential camp seminar over the summer of 2008. Using both the self-evaluation of interviewees and observation of their abilities, I created four levels of experience: Beginning students with less than three years of participation, intermediate students having three to ten years of study, experienced students with more than ten years of study, and masters with decades of study and who have established credentials nationally and internationally as teachers and performers. As instructors of all levels of belly dance, the masters provide a useful contrast to the other three cohorts of

belly dance students, because they approach the study of belly dance with different goals. As instructors who teach in ‘home’ studios as well as throughout the nation, their dress serves as an example to students locally and ‘abroad.’ Students at varying levels play different roles in the belly dance class as they progress.

The belly dance class is a liminal site in which the participant may enact an alternate role, secluded from work and family restrictions and obligations [Bock, 2005]. In the role of the belly dance student, they are also to express a gendered, feminine self as one of several possible ‘belly dancer’ iterations, not limited to the exotic stereotype found in the media.

Orientalist images do not heavily inform or inspire the dress of belly dance students. When they enter the belly dance class, new students are initially by the appearance of their instructors, who are typically experienced dance students with more than ten years’ tenure. Beginners become aware of themselves as part of the social cohort in the belly dance class: They look around to see what their peers are wearing, and choose their dress accordingly.

Dress summary

I derived the following dress summaries from observations and interviews with students in belly dance classes (not dance style specific):

- Beginners wear generic work out wear, typically a tee shirt and sweat pants over which they tie a coin hip scarf in the center front, at or just below the waist; if the room is cold, they may also wear socks. They wear everyday makeup, left over from earlier or, if applied before class, consistent with other, regular activities; and they wear their hair done in their usual daily hairstyle.

- Intermediates ‘dress up’ more for class, and may develop a ‘signature style.’ They will wear a skirt, or harem pants, or fashionable workout pants and tee shirt or camisole to class, sometimes layered with a fashionable crop top. They wear an ornate hip scarf of some kind, often color coordinated with other dress items, tied slightly lower on the hip in the center or at one side. Jewelry such as dangling earrings or bangle bracelets is popular. Intermediate students will wear ballet slippers if the floor is cold or coarse. Intermediates may apply makeup just for class, though this practice diminishes with increased tenure, and the hair is *deliberately* styled or not for class (up for practicality or down for style, but on purpose).
- Experienced students have a uniform look, consisting of a black unitard or yoga pants worn with a camisole or tee shirt, often sporting a belly dance related logo. They wear a hip scarf that does not make noise, and may be color coordinated with other dress items—though it is always tied low on the hip at one side, emphasizing the line of the hip. Experienced students often wear legwarmers and choose footwear of some kind (dance slippers, jazz shoes, half soles, etc) as appropriate for the floor and techniques under study. Most wear their hair up to stay cool. Experienced students may wear a little makeup to seminars or when teaching, but typically leave it off in weekly classes because they sweat. Accessories include watches and earrings, not added for class but not removed if they are an everyday item for a particular student.
- Masters, who started taking dance classes thirty or more years ago and who teach regularly, tend to adhere to ‘classic’ dancewear, dance pants and a leotard or

dance top, or a unitard, to which they add a hip scarf for visibility of hip movements. Although students at all levels said they dress for utility, experienced students—like beginners—were more likely to choose their dress to fit in with classmates, while intermediates were more likely to dress for fun, fashion, or fantasy.

Self and role: “Identification”

Sellers-Young (2005) states that (belly) “dancers explore aspects of personal identity and power related to cultivating kinesthetic self-knowledge through the exploration of an exoticized orient” (p. 298)—but beginners, lacking the formal performance costume as well as the opportunity to perform, have no theatrical locale in which to enact a fantasy persona. When they enter a belly dance class for the first time, they tie on a hip wrap, which signifies that they participate in belly dancing and helps them to take a new role—specifically the role of a belly dance student—even though they are dressed in generic work-out wear. Students who continue taking belly dance classes progress to become part of Stone’s (1962) socially complicit cohort. In the social space of the studio, each “announces” her own identity within the class, and having been enculturated to the dress practices within the class context, accepts the declared identity of fellow students, via dress.

Stone (1962, p.90) describes “identification” in relation to role-taking in the following way: an individual who wishes to be identified *as*, must anticipate the responses by and thus identify *with* the other members who participate in social transactions. Dress, as an important element of appearance, contributes to the process of

identification. When a belly dance student is dressed for class and engaged with her peers in class, she achieves the segment of self identity that is a belly dancer.

Intermediate belly dance students are more likely to enact the role of a belly dancer, a role that is visibly different from other day to day roles. By dressing for class, belly dance students separate themselves from other routine activities and in the company of their peers, feel comfortable dressed in ways that highlight the female body. When dressed for class, intermediates may enhance feelings of femininity, womanliness, or sexiness. They gain self confidence and can further develop feelings of femininity, because they feel able to express their gender as part of their role as a belly dance student. In class, they can dress as a glamorous or sexy woman without fearing unwanted sexual attention. By dressing for the role of the belly dance student, they develop a gendered identity in the context of the belly dance class, which for some students, extends beyond the class as well.

Dress as play

Intermediate belly dance students for whom dress is an enjoyable activity can “dress up, just for fun” without waiting for a special event or performance; the dance class provides the opportunity to dress up, to perform. Students can engage in fashionable or fantasy dress as a recreational activity, expressing alternate aspects of self that are not routinely made visible. They can use items of their belly dance class wardrobes to entertain themselves outside of class as well, when dressed as a themed character to attend “costume play” events. Other intermediates in the belly dance class may focus on the role of the dedicated belly dance student, and emulate teachers or belly dance students

with more experience, demonstrating their commitment to classes and a desire to improve their skills.

Self and value

Experienced belly dance students dress to reflect their tenure, donning a uniform that facilitates learning or teaching. Advanced dance students and workshop/camp participants who identified themselves as professional instructors and performers during the interviews were less likely to dress for ‘fun,’ saying they were in class to ‘work’—and most maintained a distinct, uniform appearance—consistent throughout the region—that marked them as “serious.”

Some experienced students I interviewed said they were generally not concerned with what others thought of their appearance, while others expressed the desire to present a professional appearance, in the sense that they were clean and attired properly for effective participation in the dance class. Gender plays a smaller role at this level, although experienced belly dance students are more aware of the visibility of their female bodies, making them aware of and connected to their physical condition. The consistent appearance among experienced dance students, in addition to allowing ease of movement and full visibility of the body, proclaims the desire of one so dressed to be identified as a “professional” (i.e. one whose skills and abilities are publicly appreciated” by her peers in class, most of whom are experts, though they may be avocational dancers who do not perform or teach dance. This implies that, among dancers with more experience, there is a hierarchy at work in the space, even when the participants are all in the role of ‘student.’

Stone (1962) states that identities depend on social relations (p. 94), and that value is a qualification of identity, achieved through appraisal and acceptance (p. 97). Joseph (1986) wrote that a given organization holds a set of values, which may be “embodied in uniforms or assumed to rub off on the wearer” (p. 33). Kuper (1973) noted that all forms of dress—including day to day dress, costumes and uniforms per her definitions—disclose social status and stratification among dancers. By donning the uniform of an already established contextual identity which is valued by the pertinent community, the individual can be accepted as having that apparent identity—being dressed thus or having its merits ‘rub off’ on her—and achieve the desired status within that community.

Experienced belly dance students who started in ballet or modern dance classes maintain ‘classic’ elements of dancewear, such as leotards and legwarmers (Williams, 1994), in addition to and/or despite changes in belly dancewear fashions. Belly dance students without this classical background also adopt legwarmers as they progress, for utility and to reflect their social progress in the studio hierarchy as well. Among belly dancers, they are recognized as badges of professional or highly advanced participants, identities which are valued in the experienced cohort, in addition to the ‘dedicated’ segment of the intermediate cohort of belly dance students.

Dress is a key component of participation among students at all levels of belly dance. Physical utility is important, especially for experienced students, but social factors motivate most dress choices made by belly dance students. New students and those at the beginning level take their initial dress cues from the instructor, looking to see what their peers wear to class: Their principal dress motive is to make sure that they fit in with the

group. Intermediate students, having more tenure in classes and attending larger local or regional seminars, are more aware of belly dancewear fashions—often coinciding with mainstream trends—and develop a personal style influenced by dance style preferences and nationally known instructors as well as their primary instructors and peers in the home studio. They may be motivated to dress up for fun, to engage in fashionable or glitzy dress (if they lack opportunities to do so elsewhere), or fantasy, in the role of a belly dancer (ranging from an ultra-feminine woman to a dazzling performer, if they lack opportunities to perform or to express femininity in an appropriate venue), all of which bolster confidence and self-esteem in the community context of the classroom or studio. Intermediates who seek to improve their skills emulate the dress of the experienced students. Experienced students dress to show their dedication to the study of belly dance, and to assert their status as experts or professionals within a cohort of students having advanced skills. They watch each other, and they know they are being watched. Appropriate dress maximizes visibility of the body, facilitates physical performance, and displays their achievement to their peers. Experienced students are able to express individual personality through their choice of a hip scarf, a functional item of dress with many options for self expression, while still adhering to the ‘dress code’ of professional and avocational experts. Masters see belly dance as a large portion of their total set of identities; for those who make their living solely through belly dancing, it is a primary identity.

Uniform dress

The hip scarf is the only universal dress item worn by belly dance students at all levels. The hip scarf is tied on to emphasize the hip line and to provide a visual, physical,

and sometimes auditory marker in reference to the correct position of the hips while learning the movements. Markedly different from the general-purpose exercise clothing worn by new students, the hip scarf becomes a uniform for belly dance class early on. “The uniform is possible only after an organization has become permanently differentiated from other groups” (Joseph, 1986, p. 35). Students who continue beyond their first beginner class vary other items of their class dress ensemble, and may vary the style of the hip scarf as fashions and trends change, but they continue to wear one. From its functional origins, the hip scarf is an emblem of participation in belly dance and marks students as *belly dance* students.

Belly dance students may also choose to engage in other forms of coded dress, wearing matching items to a class or seminar to denote affiliation between troupe or Tribe members, or wearing dress items they and their peers recognize as belly dance-related items in everyday life, which reinforces their identity as a belly dancer. Some students avoid this type of coded dress in the work place or among friends who are not belly dancers, to protect their alternate belly dancer identity from coworkers who may associate belly dancing with burlesque dance or ‘stripping.’ Students use dress as a tool while negotiating many roles in life, one of which is that of the belly dancer. Stone (1962, p. 101): “Identifications of others are always complemented by identifications of the self, in this case, responses to one’s own appearance.”

Limitations and Further research

While these interviews provide data about an area of belly dance not before researched, this study is limited by the association of most of these students, directly or indirectly, with the Cassandra School of Minneapolis, MN. At least two of the women I

interviewed at the Fahtiem seminar in Chisholm, MN attend classes with Zia, who regularly attends Oasis Dance Camp North to study with Cassandra, the primary camp instructor. At least three of the women I interviewed in Chisholm attend Oasis Dance Camp North themselves. Since the primary dance styles taught at the Cassandra School and Oasis Dance Camp are Orientale and Beledi or Folkloric styles, the views of American Tribal and Fusion styles are underrepresented. The dress of students I observed at the Tribal Pura seminar in Fargo, ND, for example, differed from the dress of the American Tribal style students I observed at the Northern Lights Belly Dance seminar in Cable, WI, though both drew participants from throughout the plains northwest and central Canada. Without interviews, commentary on the class dress motives of exclusively American Tribal Style belly dance students would be speculative at best.

Dance class dress fashions and the origins propagation of trends through the belly dance community as a national entity merit research in the fields of marketing and retail merchandising. While larger vendors such as Dahlal Internationale attend seminars and workshop events, as well as hosting an online business, small specialty designers such as Melodia have made an impact on dance class wear fashions, not just Tribal Fusion performance costumes.

Further study of belly dance students and body image is an important area for continuing research. Belly dance classes are frequently endorsed as beneficial to women's health and wellness in popular media and dance journals, as well as professional newsletters. This suggests that studies documenting the efficacy of belly dance in its role as part of a larger mental, emotional, and physical health regimen should

be undertaken, with dress considered as one element of the larger system. Belly dance dress is a topic with many opportunities for further research.

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Identity. *Western Folklore*, 66:3/4, 301-327.
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Style belly dancers to create unconventional feminine identities in public
performance. Doing so challenges the slender 'norm' of the female body
portrayed in American culture and "creat[es] a public opportunity for
alternative, idealized identities to emerge...into the normative spaces of the
daily lived world."
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Oriental Dance (Pp. 196- 227) is filled with Orientalist interpretations
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 A paper discussing the use of dress for self expression when alone or among intimates.

- Miller, K. (1998). Gender Comparisons within Reenactment Costume: Theoretical Interpretations. *Family and Consumer Sciences Research Journal*, 27:1, 35-61.
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A book about belly dance as an all encompassing way of life for women. The authors, aka "The Belly Twins" address daily-wear and professional dress (clothing, makeup, etc.) as well as dance costuming for performance and class.
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- Özel (Turkbas). (1976) *The Belly Dancer in You: The joyous way to a youthful figure and a more vibrant personality*. NY: Simon and Schuster.
 A “how to” book concerning belly dance as both exercise and a lifestyle. Includes chapters on “Making your costume” and “Some Turkish recipes for you and your sultan.”
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 An adventure film set in Egypt starring Robert Taylor as an archaeologist searching for a lost pharaoh’s tomb, pitted against the wishes of black-market antiquities dealer. Samia Gamal makes a cameo appearance, dancing in a street-side coffee house.
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 Paper defining dress and discussing its role in communication of self identity.

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- A popular science fiction television series about the crew of an interstellar spacecraft starring William Shatner and Lenoard Nimoy. Numerous spin-off series were also produced by creator Gene Roddenberry, including *Star Trek: The Next Generation*, as well as eleven motion pictures based on characters in the television series. *Star Trek* became a 'cult classic' among science fiction fans. Costumes designed for both human and alien characters are often inspired by world ethnic clothing, including styles found in Middle Eastern countries.
- Rose, A. (Ed.) 1962. *Human Behavior and Social Processes: An Interactionist Approach*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin.
- An anthology of papers concerning the social processes influencing human behavior.
- Salem, L. (2001). Race, Sexuality, and Arabs in American Entertainment, 1850-1900. In S. Zuhur (Ed.), *Colors of Enchantment* (pp. 211-227).
- Salem discusses the role of race and sexuality in portrayals of Arabs in US media.
- Samuels, S. (2006) SEEDING Self Esteem. *Dance Magazine*. 80:6, 73-74.
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- Sellers-Young, B. (1992) Raks El Sharki: Transculturation of a Folk Form. *Journal of Popular Culture*, Fall, 141-152.
- This essay discusses the evolution of belly dance from its origins in folk dances to its current forms.
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- This paper discusses the relationship between the physical self and self identity among ATS belly dancers.
- Serena & Wilson, A. (1972). *The Serena Technique of Belly Dancing: The Fun Way to a Trim Shape*. NY: Crescent Publishing.
- A 'how to' book which includes chapters on movements, music, and costuming.
- Shay, A., & Sellers-Young, B. (2003) Belly Dance: Orientalism-Self Exoticism-Exoticism. *Dance Research Journal* 35:1, 13-37.
- A discussion of Orientalism and the belly dancer stereotype in performance.

- Shay, A., & Sellers-Young, B. (Eds.). (2005) *Belly Dance: Orientalism, Transnationalism, and Harem Fantasy*. Costa Mesa, CA: Mazda Publishers, Inc.
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- Sheldon, S. (Producer). (1965). *I Dream of Jeannie* [Television series]. Los Angeles: Screen Gems/Columbia Television via NBC.
A popular 'sitcom' about a genie discovered by an astronaut who finds her bottle washed up on the beach. Starring Larry Hagman and Barbara Eden as Jeannie. Jeannie was attired in a costume reminiscent of a belly dancer, with harem pants and a cropped vest—though her navel had to be covered to meet decency codes. Reruns of the show are still aired on cable television at the time of this writing.
- Srinivasian, P. (2004, April) Dancing Modern/Dancing Indian/Dancing... In America. *Ballet-Dance Magazine*. Retrieved January 22, 2009 from www.ballet-dance.com/200404/articles/asiandance.html
Srinivasian discusses the influences of Orientalism and modern dance upon and evolution of Indian dance in relation to authenticity and performance in the United States.
- Stone, G. (1962). Appearance and the Self. In A. Rose, (Ed.) *Human Behavior and the Social Processes: An Interactionist Approach*, (pp. 86-116) NY: Houghton Mifflin Company.
A treatise on the creation of human appearance—including dress—and its communicative function within society. Program and review, dressing in vs. dressing out, and the role of dressing up in play.
- van Nieuwkerk, Karin. (1995). *"A Trade Like Any Other"- Female Singers and Dancers in Egypt*. Austin: University of Texas Press.
An ethnographic study of the context of professional women performers in Egypt.
- Vogelsang-Eastwood, G. (1996). *For Modesty's Sake?* Rotterdam: Barjesteh, Meeuwes & Company/Syntax Publishing.
A discussion of the veil as symbol, metaphor, and barrier. Chapter 14: "Veiling, the theatre, and Hollywood."
- Waskul, D. & Lust, M. (2004). Role-Playing and Playing roles: The Person, Player and Persona in Fantasy Role-Playing. *Symbolic Interaction* 27:3, 333-356.
A discussion of the creation of identity and alternate roles among role-playing gamers.

- Weber, S. (2006). Shaking bellies: dance and femininity. *Contexts*, 5:3, 46-51.
A photo essay with a brief introduction to her study of women's bodies and femininity.
- Wilson, A. (2007). Salomania. *Habibi*, 21:2, 38-44.
An article about the Salome craze during the late 19th/early 20th century.
- Williams, D. (1994, May). *Anthropology of the Dance and Body Movement: African and American Contrasts; Dress, Gender, and the Moving Body*. Paper presented at the University of Minnesota, Department of Design, Housing, and Apparel and the African Studies Council, Minneapolis, MN.
Williams compares cultural expectations for dress and gender in dance.
- Wood, L. & Shay, A. (1976) Dans du Ventre: A Fresh Appraisal. *Dance Research Journal* 8:2, 18-30.
An essay on the ongoing evolution of Middle Eastern Dance as an art form.
- Yamey, G. (2002, June) Website of the Week column. *British Medical Journal*, 324, 1462.
Article highlights belly dance as a tool for breast cancer patients.
- Zimmerman, R. (2007, August 7). New Labor moves: belly dancing hits delivery room. *The Charleston Gazette*, p. 7A.
This article describes the value of belly dancing as pre-natal conditioning and during post-natal recovery.
- Zuhur, S. (Ed.) (1998). *Images of Enchantment: Visual and Performing Arts of the Middle East*. Cairo/NY: American University in Cairo Press.
A series of papers on visual and performing arts in the Middle East.
- Zuhur, S. (Ed.) (2001). *Colors of Enchantment: Theater, Dance, Music, and the Visual Arts of the Middle East*. Cairo/NY: American University in Cairo Press.
A second series of papers on visual and performing arts in the Middle East.

Appendix A: Recruitment Materials and Consent Forms

1. Cover Sheet/Flyer

Are YOU a Belly Dancer?

I am a belly dancer—and a graduate student from the University of MN. I study the way dancers use dress (clothing, makeup, body art, etc.) to express self identity during belly dance activities.

We all love the show costumes, of course! But we each make our own choices about what to wear in class, at seminars or workshops, or when dancing with friends. We have our own ideas about what our dance dress means to us personally, and what we think it says about us to others. I want to learn more about how and why we dress ourselves the way we do for dance classes.

My study is limited to adult belly dancers (age 18 and older) participating in the USA; you don't have to be a professional performer, teacher, or part of a group to take part.

Anyone who enjoys belly dancing is welcome!

If you're willing to participate, I will interview you for about half an hour and take your photo in dance class attire. For more information, just ask! If you'd like to participate, please fill out a contact sheet and put it in the box here, or mail it to my school address: M. Deppe, 240 McNeal Hall, 1985 Buford Ave, St. Paul, MN, 55108.

Thank you for your interest!

If you have questions, you are encouraged to contact me at the University of Minnesota, 240 McNeal Hall, mdeppe@umn.edu. My research advisors are Dr. Joanne Eicher (612-624-7710, jeicher@umn.edu) and Dr. Elizabeth Bye (612-624-3751, ebye@umn.edu).

If you have questions or concerns regarding this study and would like to talk to someone other than the researcher, you are encouraged to contact the Research Subjects' Advocate Line, D528 Mayo, 420 Delaware St. Southeast, Minneapolis, Minnesota 55455; (612) 625-1650.

IRB Code # 0804P29690 Version Date: 4/18/2008



2. Consent form

“Dressing the Dancer”

Consent Information

You are invited to be in a study of belly dance dress and self identity in the United States. You have been selected for the study because you are 18 years of age or older and participate in belly dance classes and activities. Please read this form and ask any questions you may have before agreeing to be in the study.

This study is being conducted by Margaret Deppe, a PhD candidate in the department of Design, Housing, and Apparel at the University of Minnesota.

Purpose: The purpose of this study is to explore the ways dress—clothing, makeup, body art, etc.—is used to create or express identity in the context of belly dance classes in the United States. Dancers and students of dance at all levels make choices regarding belly dance dress for class, seminar, and workshop participation which make a visible statement about personal identity in the belly dance community.

Procedure: If you agree to be in this study, you will be asked to participate in a personal interview, which will be recorded for later review by the researcher, and to have your photograph taken.

Risks of Participation: The study has minimal risk to the participant. Some participants may feel emotionally uncomfortable answering survey or interview questions about clothing choices, age, body type, gender, or motives for participation in belly dance. Your decision whether or not to participate will not affect your current or future relations with the University of Minnesota or myself. If you decide to participate, you are free to not answer any question and may withdraw at any time without affecting those relationships.

Benefits of Participation: There are no benefits to participation. Participation is voluntary and there will be no compensation.

Confidentiality: The records of this study will be kept private. Research notes, recorded interviews and transcripts will be stored securely and only the researcher will have access to the records. The researcher will ask participants if they wish to remain anonymous, or if they would like to choose a name or pseudonym for use in any future publication.

Contacts and Questions: The researcher conducting this study, IRB Code # 0804P29690, is Margaret (Peg) Deppe. If you have questions, you are encouraged to contact me at the University of Minnesota, 612-624-9700 (240 McNeal Hall), mdeppe@umn.edu. My research advisors are Dr. J. Eicher (612-624-7710, jeicher@umn.edu) and Dr. E. Bye (612-624-3751, ebye@umn.edu).

If you have questions or concerns regarding this study and would like to talk to someone other than the researcher, you are encouraged to contact the Research Subjects' Advocate Line, D528 Mayo, 420 Delaware St. Southeast, Minneapolis, Minnesota 55455; (612) 625-1650.

You may keep the top copy of this information for your records.

Statement of Consent for Interview Participants:

I have read the above information. I consent to participate in the study.

Signature: _____ Date: _____

Legal name (please print): _____

Signature of Principal Investigator: _____ Date: _____

Margaret A. Deppe

IRB Code # 0804P29690
Version Date: 4/18/2008

p. 1 of 2

3. Photo release/permission form

“Dressing the Dancer”
Consent to be Photographed

Please print:

Legal Name: _____

Address: _____

Home phone: _____

E-mail address (optional): _____

_____ (*initial*) I hereby expressly grant consent to be photographed by Margaret (Peg) Deppe for research purposes for her doctoral dissertation study, “Dressing the Dancer” IRB Code # 0804P29690.

_____ (*initial*) I hereby expressly grant Margaret (Peg) Deppe the right to make, use, and publish my photograph or physical likeness for the presentation of research information for her doctoral dissertation study, “Dressing the Dancer” IRB Code # 0804P29690.

Statement of Consent

I have read the above information and give consent to be photographed and grant permission for the use of my photograph or likeness to be used in the publication of this research.

Signature Date

Signature of Principal Investigator/Margaret A. Deppe Date

IRB Code # 0804P29690
Version Date: 4/18/2008

p. 2 of 2

Appendix B: Interview Schedule

A Tell me about your dance class~

1. How long have you been taking belly dance classes? _____
2. How often do you attend belly dance events? _____
3. What kind of belly dance activity do you attend **most often**? _____
4. What is your skill level of belly dance now? _____
5. Why did you **start** taking belly dance classes?
6. Why do you **continue** to attend belly dance classes as a student?
7. Who you usually go to dance class with?

B What do you wear to classes or seminars

1. Do you dress up for belly dance events? _____
2. What do you usually wear for dance **class**?
3. Why?
4. What do you usually wear for **seminars or workshops**?
5. Why?
6. Where do you get your belly dance outfits?
7. Tell me about your makeup, or the way you do your hair for dance events~
8. Tattoos and piercing seem to be popular these days; do you have any tattoos or piercings **specifically related to** belly dance?
9. Do you pay attention to what other students wear to class? Prompt: Is there anyone in your dance class whose outfits you like or dislike?
10. If you **teach** dance, do you dress differently than your students? Why or why not?

C Belly dance and you

1. Do you consider yourself to be a “Belly Dancer?” _____ Why or why not?
2. How does belly dancing fit in with the rest of your life?
3. Does the way you dress for belly dance events make them more enjoyable?
Prompt: If you went in a plain outfit, would it be as much fun?
4. What is the MAIN reason you dress the way you do for belly dance events?
5. How does the way you dress for dance classes, seminars, or workshops make you **feel** about yourself?
6. Does the way you dress for belly dance class, seminars or workshops highlight any particular quality in yourself?
7. Do you wear your belly dance stuff **outside** of the belly dance studio?
Where and why or why not?
8. What do you think the way you dress says about you to others?

D Tell me about yourself~

1. Where do you live? City/State _____
2. What is your date of birth? _____
3. What is your level of education? _____
4. Do you own or rent your place of residence? _____

Appendix C: Tables with expanded responses

Table 6: Time and Skill, expanded responses

Time	What is your skill level now?	Skill
9 years	I teach levels one through eight, so I would say I'm very advanced, I'm at the instructor/performer level; I've danced all over the world, so I don't really know how to list that...	5 (3)
6 years	I've been doing it for a long time, but I'm kind of klutzy...advanced beginner, maybe?	2
4 weeks	Beginner.	1
7 years	I'd say I'm in the middle...	3
30 years	I wouldn't consider myself a professional, but advanced.	5
5 years	I think I'd be more advanced, it's hard to say...	3
4 weeks	Beginner.	1
4 weeks	Beginner.	1
4 weeks	Beginner.	1
5 years	I'm in her...middle class...	3
4-5 years	I'd say I'm a low intermediate.	3
29 years	I'm a high level intermediate	4
8 years	I guess by class descriptions, it would be professional, or advanced.	5
34 years	I am a master teacher.	6
21 years	Professional.	5
13 years	Advanced.	5
5 years	A low intermediate (laughing). A little bit more than beginner, not quite advanced.	4
8 years	I've been checking the professional box on the dance camp form for years now...	5
34 years	My skill is professional...	5
26 years	I'm going to go with professional.	5
30 years	Professional.	6
30 years	I would say advanced, professional.	5
14 years	I would say advanced.	5
33 years	I danced professionally for 12 1/2 years and, but I'm not performing now.	5
27 years	I like to think I'm a professional!	5
24 years	Advanced.	5
9 years	Professional.	5
30 years	I would say advanced.	5
12 years	Advanced.	5
9 years	I like to think I'm a professional.	5
28 years	I used to say like semi professional or advanced, but I'm not sure I'm still there.	4
5 years	I'd say intermediate.	3
34 years	Professional, I don't know.... and still learning.	5
18 years	I don't consider myself to be professional, because to be a professional is to be someone who...that's how they make their living.	4 (5)

Note: The number in parentheses represents the skill level I observed where it differed from the interviewees' responses.

Table 7: Starting and Staying, expanded responses

Time	Why did you start taking belly dance classes?	Why do you continue?
9 years	I started out as an anthropology major, and I wanted to learn more about the Middle East culturally; especially with the things that are going on there right now...	There's so much left to learn. I mean, even when I was being educated, there are holes there that I need to fill.
6 years	Eight years ago I had bypass heart surgery and right away they get you into cardiac rehab. And I lost 60 pounds, and I was doing really good, and then it ended. I started gaining weight back. I needed exercise that I'd enjoy that was different.	The exercise is part of it, but I like the way I feel. It makes me feel pretty, and I get to wear costumes, and flashy stuff.
4 weeks	Because I'm getting married this summer, and I convinced three of my friends to take the class with me. ... I thought it would be fun to do something that is more girly.	Because I want to get it...Well, you know how some classes you go, and it's really easy? This is harder and takes more practice.
7 years	It interested me. I have some dance background, and I wanted something more scheduled, something to get out and do.	I've made a lot of friends in class; this is something that I do for me, not for anybody else. Plus I do it for the exercise.
30 years	I saw it performed outdoors by the teacher at the YWCA and fell in love with it. I've always loved the dance, and I wanted to do it. Partly because I didn't have to follow anybody. It was a very good personal way to just follow the music.	Mostly for the exercise. Because it's good... good for the 'core,' aerobics, flexibility....I still like the music, I still like to dance, but it's mostly for the exercise.
5 years	My college dorm roommates got me involved. I started in college, and we went to a seminar together.	I enjoy the camaraderie, and the cultural aspects, the music...and I think it's very connective to femininity, sexuality, not like...
4 weeks	My cousins took it and got me into it. So the three of us are doing it just for fun, and we love it!	It's fun, and I like getting together with my cousins.
4 weeks	Because I had a baby like three months ago, and I want to get back into shape and the news said this is really good for that.	I'm enjoying it and one of my good friends is in the class. And to get out of the house and away from my daughter!
4 weeks	Most of it for fitness.	I love what it's doing for me when it comes to my self confidence.
5 years	First of all I'm the kind of person who likes to do different things.... and then we happened to go to the Renaissance Fair with my stepdaughter, and I saw Cassandra there, and I thought, this is it!	I enjoy it. It keeps me fit... then my goal was to...get up in front of that audience and I was gonna dance if it killed me! And I love the costumes...
4-5 years	Belly dance always sounded mysterious, or exotic, and I wanted to try that.	Because of the camaraderie with the other women. We're all ages and sizes, and it doesn't matter. We do this.
29 years	I wanted to be a dancer ever since I was a small girl...and in 1979 I saw a belly dancer at a street festival and I fell in love with it.	For exercise and the camaraderie, to explore different styles and the cultural aspects.

8 years	I actually started taking dance classes because I liked the music...that sort of drew me into it; I was trying to find a hobby, something to do that was around other adults and didn't involve children...a way to get exercise and get out of the house.	I love it, it's addicting...and I feel like I'm in better shape actually now than I was probably when I was about 18... it keeps me in shape, and it's fun, and it's a great release, if you're stressed and have too many things, you can kind of lose yourself in class and not have to think about other stuff.
34 years	I started because I like dance, I've always liked to dance and it was another form of dance that I wanted to explore.	When I'm going to class now I have a distinct reason for doing it. I'm either researching to find out something about a style I don't know anything about; a folklore style or some real obscure niche style of dance from some part of the Arab world I don't know anything about, or that I would know some small amount about and want to know more. Or I am going to study with a master teacher or watch a master performer in order to refine my own understanding of the style or my own understanding of the music or my own vocabulary.
21 years	I've been a dancer since I was four, which was a long time ago. And I will take or try pretty much any kind of dance. And I was living in a duplex at the time, and in the woman downstairs wanted to start taking belly dance classes.	Because I have to dance to live. Because it's who I am, and Cassandra is the best there is. And to study with her is a privilege, and just to watch her dance even in class is an inspiration.
13 years	Because, a couple of friends of mine took belly dance classes ... and invited me to come to class with them.	Because I love it! Because it makes me feel good.
5 years	Because my mom and my sister and I were interested in having some activity in common. It's especially important because we live in totally different countries.	Because it brings me joy. I've always liked dancing, and so being able to learn more about it and feel that I become more proficient at it every time I go, it makes me feel really good.
8 years	The first time I saw belly dance live, it was such a pure and beautiful and lyrical expression of femininity, and it was totally something I didn't have...and I wanted.	Because I can't imagine not dancing... It's a pure form of emotional joy that I don't know at any other point in time.
34 years	I first started taking belly dance classes because it was a fun way to exercise.	Fellowship.

26 years	...I heard the music in the dance department, and I walked down the hall -- I followed the music. And I looked in the window of the door and thought hey, I could do that!	I like the diversity of the folkloric styles; I like the challenges -- With Middle Eastern dance, I can explore several different countries, cultures, or customs, so I'm constantly learning something new.
30 years	I was looking for exercise, some kind of enjoyable exercise, and I was attracted by the music.	Because studying another culture is a lifetime activity.
30 years	...partly in response to the fact that it was something that I knew was somewhere in my past, at least on the folkloric level, and then also that someone else I knew was doing it, I thought it was a great idea to do it too.	I take this very seriously and that I do everything I can within time and monetary limits to continue to grow that and expand it.
14 years	Because I thought would be something different to do, it sounded intriguing. I love dance, and I was looking to learn another form of dance, and it sounded really intriguing, and exotic, and different.	Because it continues to be challenging and fun, and I like the group of women, I like the creativity and expressiveness of it. I like the music; there's so much variety in the different styles. And it's good exercise...
33 years	We moved and...I needed to meet people, so I thought that I local community college was a great place to do that. Calisthenics sounded really boring, I hate equipment, and I thought this really sounded like fun.	I absolutely love it; I think once you get hooked on the whole concept of that, you can't pass up the camaraderie with people, the connection with other cultures... the costuming of course is always really fun.
27 years	I used to study jazz, modern and ballet, and it was getting harder on my knees. Belly dancing is softer on my body.	I like it a ... you know like from Flashdance, where she goes to this other zone? Belly dancing, I can do that with; it seems to be the only kind of dance where I can zone out and dance.
24 years	I was taking aerobics at community ed, adult community ed. and took it for a long time, and that was getting really boring, so I thought about taking ballet, and next to ballet or near ballet in the catalog was belly dance. So I made the random decision to enroll in the belly dance class.	To learn more.
9 years	Health and fitness.	To improve my skills.
30 years	I had seen a belly dancer in Toledo balance a sword on her head and I decided it was really cool; and I decided I wanted to do that.	To gain new skills, to learn choreography, to continue to correct and refine the skills I have, and for social reasons. Also exercise, self-expression. Vacation -- it will get me away from my daily routine, and when I'm focusing on technical choreography, I'm not thinking about work or some other thing.

12 years	I was a massage therapist, and my troupe director came in... and ultimately talked me into coming to class.	...there is no limit to what I can learn. The minute that I decided know it all, I'm done. There's always room for improvement.
9 years	I started going to it because it was something I could do that was fun; I still love dance...[but this was] For fun rather than for a grade.	I love to continue to learn and I like to continue to pass that along to students.
28 years	For the exercise.	I really enjoy it. I like the music, I like the camaraderie with all of the other dancers that I know. I know people from all over the world now because of this...
5 years	I went to a science fiction convention, and they had a belly dance 101 workshop.	Exercise...I enjoy it. I've always loved music, I've always love to move to music, it makes me feel beautiful.
34 years	...so I said to a friend of mine, I need some exercise! And she said well, I'd like to take belly dance, and I said I know where we can sign up.	To help me with teaching and performing; increase my skill level, learn new and different things, so I can offer those things to my students.
18 years	For another kind of exercise. I was doing that aerobic stuff, back in the 70s, for many years. And then that jumping was getting too bad...I started getting heel spurs...	Learning the technical part of it, I like that. I like learning that; I just like doing it. It's fun.