

Orientalism, Ethics, and Cultural Appropriation in Belly Dance



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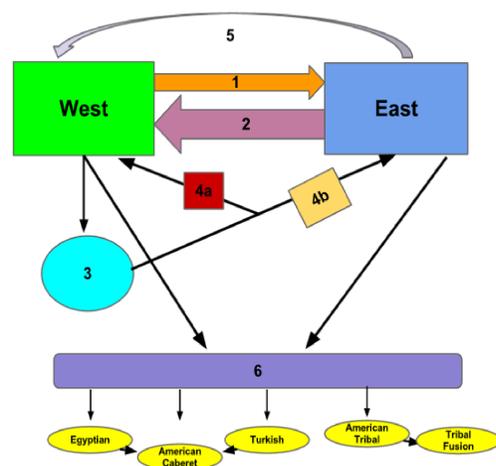
Abstract

This research examines if the Western adoption and adaptation of Raks Sharqi, commonly known as *belly dance*, is ethical or if it is a misrepresentation and appropriation of Middle Eastern culture. Frameworks for ethical cultural appropriation by James Young and Dwight Conquergood were applied to the historical record of Raks Sharqi. Results concluded that in many instances, the dance form is being unethically presented but that with minor adjustments in teaching and education about the dance, this can be corrected. The overall practice of Raks Sharqi by Westerners is determined to be ethical due to the cycle of feedback between East and West, general acceptance within the culture, and use of Raks Sharqi for self-realization by artists.

Introduction

Raks Sharqi, called belly dance in the west, is often seen as a sensual and sexual art imported directly from the Middle East, but in fact it is the product of many centuries of feedback between the Middle East and West. It is a combination of many cultural dance styles from the Middle East that have been appropriated and altered in meaning and style by westerners through the romanticization of the "Other" called Orientalization¹. Many people believe that Raks Sharqi is practiced in the west to continue to assert imperialist ideas and dominion over Middle Eastern cultures², while others believe its appropriation has more to do with feminine empowerment³, artistic expression, self-realization, and inquiry⁴ into cultures to which one does not belong. Many of the changes to the dance in the West were re-adopted by the East to encourage tourism, and create entertainment venues², which leads one to question if the adaptation is against their wishes or just normal evolution of an art form. The appropriateness of this appropriation therefore becomes a question of importance. Figure 1 briefly outlines the flow between East and West of factors affecting and influencing the presentation of belly dance and is based largely on the historical research projects conducted by Julie Marie Fisher, Sunaina Maira, and Virginia Keft-Kennedy.

Figure 1. Feedback Diagram demonstrating transference of Raks Sharqi through time.



1. Colonialism
2. Orientalism and Romanticism of the "Other"
3. Orientalist art including dance, painting, and music is created.
4. 4a. Imitation of Orientalist views to challenge current social norms (especially about beauty).
4b. Imitation of Orientalist ideas in costuming and movement to encourage tourism.
5. Exportation/Importation of Orientalized dancers for entertainment purposes. Genericized "Middle Eastern" cultural dance.
6. Blending of dance styles, assumptions, etc. into "Belly Dance".

Methods

An examination of literature concerning the history of belly dance will be performed to determine different perspectives about the creation and evolution the dance, including its eventual adoption in the West and back to the East. The history will be compared against frameworks by James Young and Dwight Conquergood about ethical cultural appropriation. Young will help to determine if an act of cultural appropriation can be judged as morally and ethically wrong⁴ and Conquergood determines if appropriation of cultural elements creates conversation between cultures or only a generalized misrepresentation of a culture.

Case Study 1: James Young Framework

The appropriation of another's cultural heritage is said to potentially cause profound offense, one which strikes at the individual's core values or sense of self. People can be offended by misrepresentation of their culture, being slighted or exploited when material is used without permission sought, or offended by the misuse of the sacred or private materials of culture. Young affirms however that only specific circumstances of cultural appropriation are wrong, and that those that fall into the framework Young introduces based on the work of Joel Feinberg (Figure 2) can be reasonably defended.

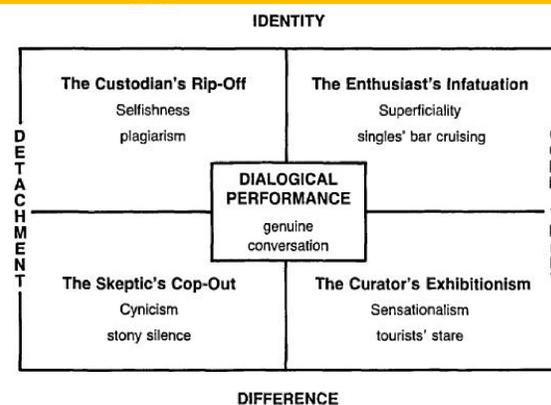
Figure 2. James Young Framework for Defense of Cultural Appropriation on Ethical Grounds

1. **Redeeming Social Value** (Creation of contemporary art, contributes to society.)
2. **Freedom of Expression** (Self-realization, and inquiry. Acknowledges source of info.)
3. **Time and Place** (Culturally appropriate timing? Competition with authentic performance? Composition of the audience? Discreet performance?)
4. **Extent of Toleration** (protested by many or few within the culture?)
5. **Reasonable or Unreasonable Offense** (Violates norms of conduct within culture? Is it accepted in the culture? Is the representation accurate?)

Case Study 2: Dwight Conquergood Framework

Conquergood argues that "goodwill and an open heart are not enough when one 'seeks to express cultural experiences which are clearly separate from his or her lived world'". He presents four ethical pitfalls that are morally challenging when attempting to perform or use cultural material. Conquergood presents four corners of extreme unethical cultural appropriation: jumping in and looking for performance material with detachment (Custodian's Rip-Off), "too facile identification" coupled with enthusiasm that creates ideas of generalization about a culture (The Enthusiast's Infatuation), obsession with the difference of the other with no desire to understand and denial of membership of the other cultural into one's own moral community (Curator's Exhibitionism), and finally refusal to attempt to view the struggle of ethical tension or take a stand which is in its self "taking a stand", which closes dialogue beneficial to both sides (The Skeptic's Cop-out). The perfect middle ground is referred to as Dialogical Performance which desires to bring together views and beliefs so they can converse with each other. This is most successful when it "affirms cross-cultural accessibility without glossing over differences". This is achieved by approaching the subject with energy, imagination, and courage.

Figure 3. Dwight Conquergood's "Moral Mapping of Performative Strances Towards the Other" (1985)



Results

When compared to the framework for judging cultural appropriation good or bad, belly dance passes some tests and fails in others. Dance like other art forms is part of the greater realm of human expression. Belly dance in many ways has adapted and become a contemporary form of this expression. It is also used by many for the purpose of self-realization¹. In the case of ethnographers and some students it is used as a method of inquiry into Middle Eastern culture. Although there is acknowledgement of the source of belly dance (largely of Middle Eastern influence), there is also a lack of respect and sensitivity to the culture from which it comes. Many dancers of western decent rename themselves Arabic names to feign authenticity in a masquerade of "the exoticized, primitized, Other."³ Time and place, may sometimes become an issue as Middle Eastern events such as weddings and festivals specifically for "traditional" and "ethnic" dancers⁵. Extent of toleration becomes tricky. It is easy to assume that overall the dance is tolerated because of its mutual adoption into Middle Eastern culture in the Western style² this is especially easy to see in costume trends through time (Figure 4). The two piece belly dance costume is a Western invention. Reasonable or unreasonable offense is hard to determine as belly dance is popular in its Orientalized fashion in the East it is hard to say that its practice by Westerners goes against societal norms⁶. Now, when it comes to the type of appropriation there are more factors to consider. Many people believe that the appropriation of belly dance to the west is out of pure selfishness or stealing without permission⁷. However, one must also remember that belly dance, like other dances is part of a continuous loop of exchange between geographic areas and time.⁷ If a dancer is giving credit it cannot be called plagiarism.⁸ The mania of belly dance in the west creates many enthusiasts which lead to unintentional superficiality (based on misconceptions due to Orientalism⁶), but this can be corrected with time. Conquergood also reminds readers that one must also not just choose to ignore the tension within the questioned artform⁸, nor believe that by seeking to not understand at all you somehow preserve the culture, because in this way you place it below your own¹. Instead he encourages a conversational tone in which the outsider and insider are always inquiring of each other, communing both in the art itself, but also a greater understanding of one another's culture⁸. This is the best way to avoid unethical cultural appropriation in belly dance.



Figure 4. Costume through Time. (left to right) Alwah Egyptian dancer with traditional costume, 1850. Sade Marquardt, western Dancer with western costume, 2000s. Samia Gamal, Egyptian dancer with western costume. 1960s.

Conclusion

Belly dancing is found at the "intersection between dance vocabulary, media images, the feminist and sexual liberations movements, cultural appropriations, and the community of origin, creating tensions that center on its practice and representation⁶". Its adoption and practice by outsiders is not always unethical or misrepresenting culture, although in many cases it can be. Much of this tension can be eased if the dance is practiced by outsiders in an ethical manner. Teachers must take it upon themselves to engage students in "Dialogical Performance" conversations, help facilitate self-realization through dance, give credit to the original historical sources, and provide etiquette for performance and practice that falls in line with frameworks like those presented by Young and Conquergood. This task becomes more and more difficult as dancers self-train using resources online or receive lessons from uneducated instructors, but becomes easier when resources about proper appropriation ethics are published and widely distributed.

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