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THE JOURNEY OF ITALIAN BELLY DANCERS

Abstract

Commonly referred to as Raqs Sharqi in Arabic, “belly dance” is a choreographic form intricately woven into the cultural fabric of the MENAT region. This paper begins by tracing its transcultural evolution, from colonial influences to recent feminist discourses, illustrating how research on belly dance offers a rich field for examining the complex interplay of culture, ethnicity, religion, gender, and power. The second section builds on this foundation, applying theoretical frameworks to investigate how dancers’ habitus is selectively developed through “reflexive body techniques” (Crossley 2004), exploring how gendered social structures are embodied (Sassatelli 2022) and performed (Butler 2006) by Italian dancers.

The third section details the research methodology, employing a mixed-methods approach informed by a narrative-inspired analysis (Greimas & Courtés 1982; Ferraro 2021). A web survey and in-depth qualitative interviews were designed to explore dancers’ perceived processes of transformation. The Greimasian and Ferraro frameworks were operationalised to structure the data according to the Canonical Narrative Schema (CNS), enabling an analysis of the key stages of the dancers’ journeys.

The fourth and fifth sections present and analyse data collected from 428 respondents and three in-depth interviews. Using NVivo software, all data were analysed thematically within the CNS framework. Five key themes emerged: Empowerment, Cultural Capital, Vitality, Socialisation, and Identity. These findings are contextualised within Italian society, with an emphasis on gender roles and stereotypes, which have shaped the experiences of Italian women over the past two decades.

Given the breadth of data collected, this paper focuses on one key dimension: the perceived experience of personal transformation, which most participants described as leading to the emergence of a “new self.” By examining the different stages of the Italian belly dancers’ journeys, this paper aims to explore

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how gendered social structures in the Italian context are embodied by practitioners, shaping their learning and performing as a journey of self-discovery.

Keywords: Middle Eastern/Oriental dance, Italian belly dancers, narrativity, habitus, women empowerment, cultural capital, vitality, self-discovery

INTRODUCTION

Edward Said's reflections on the demise of the renowned Egyptian *belly dancer*, Tahia Karioka, provide a valuable foundation for understanding the contemporary global appeal of this art form. He contrasted "Eastern" dance with the verticality and ethereal quality often attributed to ballet. "Eastern" dance, he observed, "shows the dancer planting herself more and more solidly in the earth, digging into it almost..." (Said 1999). This groundedness not only underscores a key aesthetic distinction but also highlights the deep connection between the dancer, her body, and the cultural meanings embedded in the performance.

Commonly referred to as *Raqs Sharqi* in Arabic, *belly dance*² is a choreographic form intricately woven into the cultural fabric of the MENAT³ region. This paper begins by tracing its transcultural evolution, from colonial influences to recent feminist discourses, illustrating how research on *belly dance* offers a rich field for examining the complex interplay of culture, ethnicity, religion, gender, and power. The second section builds on this foundation, applying theoretical frameworks to investigate how dancers' habitus is selectively developed through "reflexive body techniques" (Crossley 2004), exploring how gendered social structures are embodied (Sassatelli 2022) and performed (Butler 2006) by Italian dancers.

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² The term *belly dance* is problematic, as it is linked to the Orientalist portrayal of the dance. Practitioners often prefer *Raqs Sharqi*, *Raqs Baladi*, *Middle Eastern dance*, or *Oriental dance*, as a literal translation of the Arabic term *Raqs Sharqi*. However, in this study, the term *belly dance* (indicated from now on in italics) will be used to highlight the dance's transnational evolution. The term *Oriental dance* will also be used to reflect the 53% preference expressed by Italian respondents in the survey.

³ The acronym MENAT designates the Middle East and North Africa region, specifically including Turkey. It is also pertinent to consider the inclusion of Greece's "Chiftitelli" within this artistic, cultural, historical, and geographical context.

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A DANCING PARADOX

The portrayals of *belly dance* have been heavily shaped by Orientalist fantasies and colonial ideologies, supporting Said's view that the Orient was largely a "European invention" (Said 1994). For this author, European identity was shaped in contrast to the Orient, creating a surrogate self and leading to stereotypes of "Eastern" sensuality and depravity. This blend of desire and repulsion was particularly evident in the figure of the *belly dancer* (Keft-Kennedy 2005), where eroticism was also linked to the perceived availability of female entertainers. This stereotype persists in Italy, with nearly 30% of dancers reporting incidents of molestation and harassment during performances.

Although not a major colonial power, Italy's colonies, along with trade, art, and religious exchanges, fostered Orientalist views. Italy's traditional Catholic and patriarchal structures may have contributed to the

⁴ Data from: Téllez Elias Nemer 2022.

sexualisation of dance, as it was seen as a deviation from traditional norms. This is echoed in the words of Interviewee no. 2:

I used to dance around with a scarf... My mom caught me and her reaction was dramatic... She exclaimed, “What?! Morte, morte, morte! – (Death, death, death!) –”... It was a strong, immediate reaction... Whenever I asked to dance, my mom would always say: “No, no dancing at my house!”



Photo 1. *Fille arabe dans un passage*, 1873, Jean-Léon Gérôme.

Source: https://it.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jwiki/Jean-Léon_Gérôme

World fairs, public spectacles, and films in the late nineteenth and early 20th centuries set the stage for the exploitation of female entertainers, who were in high demand during European expansion and colonization (Moe 2014). Despite being ostracized locally and regarded as disreputable in Egyptian society (van Nieuwkerk 1995), and accused of sexual immorality (Fraser 2015), *belly dancers* have emerged as prominent symbols over the past century (Shay & Sellers-Young 2005). Numerous casinos and

nightclubs sprang up, offering a mix of “Western” dances and reimagined “Eastern” folklore, designed to entertain both English soldiers and Egyptian aristocrats. The *bedlah*, a two-piece *belly dance* costume often mischaracterized as traditional, is believed to have been introduced during this period. This costume holds cultural and symbolic significance for Italian dancers, with 85 respondents to a web survey expressing that they felt they became “true *belly dancers*” when wearing it.

Deagon (2016) traces the development of belly dance through two key periods: its origins in the Egyptian cabarets of the 1920s and 1930s in an Orientalist framework, and its emergence in 1970s America, where it was influenced by the feminist movement and began to be seen as a form of challenging social gender roles and fostering community building. This development presents a paradox: while *belly dance* often reinforces Orientalist stereotypes through its appropriation of Middle Eastern styles, it is also viewed as a celebration of women’s empowerment that challenges patriarchy. This was particularly evident in the American context of the 1960s and 1970s, where this dance form became associated with second-wave feminist ideals (Dox 2006; McDonald & Sellers-Young 2013). During this period, a narrative emerged that fused New Age spirituality with *belly dance*, often intertwined with tales of ancient goddesses, creating a myth that extolled the female body as sacred, tied to essentialist feminism



Photo 2. Cairo entertainer and nightclub owner Badia Masabni with her troupe. Source: *The Guardian*. Photograph: Lucie Ryzova, <https://www.theguardian.com/life-andstyle/2021/may/02/the-dancehall-divas-who-set-the-pace-in-egypts-roaring-20s>

(Shay & Sellers-Young 2005). Like their American colleagues, some Italian dancers believe in a conception of the self as a divine entity (score 107).

Belly dance has evolved from a traditional Egyptian folk form into a global practice blending local folklore with “Western” elements, driven by transnational festivals, the internet, and local social dynamics (McDonald & Sellers-Young 2013). This globalization has created diverse dancing communities worldwide, each adapting the dance to their local contexts, not without raising concerns about cultural representation (Shay & Sellers-Young 2003) and commercialization, as the dance transitioned from its traditional, socially free origins to a highly theatrical and monetized practice (Fisher 2003, in Chang 2012). The enduring appeal of *belly dance* is evident in its significant online presence: a Google search in September 2024 revealed approximately 3,450,000 results for “Danza del ventre” and 4,960,000 for “Danza Orientale” in Italy.

While “Western” interpretations often reinforce Orientalist stereotypes, they can also subvert them by focusing on the dancer as an active subject rather than merely an object of the spectator’s gaze (Dox 2006). Feminist perspectives highlight its role in women’s empowerment (Keft-Kennedy 2005; Moe 2012, Moe 2013; Patricio-Mulero 2021), fostering a sense of agency (Moe 2012) and building community (Moe 2012). Furthermore, *belly dance* is examined for its potential to challenge restrictive identity categories



Photo 3. Training the New Awalim seminars in Rome, 2017.

Source: the author’s personal archive

and facilitate emancipation (Bock & Borland 2011), emphasizing its ability to promote body positivity (Patricio-Mulero 2021). In Italy, this is reflected in the attitudes of respondents: 53.7% indicated that they would not alter their physical appearance for performances, while 40.2% would make minor adjustments, such as applying make-up or using hair extensions.

Scholars in the MENAT region have made significant contributions to *belly dance* research. Gurel (2016) highlights the role of male dancers in Turkey, while al Faruqi (1978) argues that *Raqs sharqi* (*belly dance*) can be related to the belief system and other aesthetic products of Islamic culture. Eğrikavuk (2021) and Abu Raideh (2021) view it as a tool for resistance, feminist identity, empowerment, and feminine visibility in social spaces. Roushdy (2014) focuses on how practices and beliefs around modesty affect women's expression of sexuality, drawing on Judith Butler's gender performativity (1988) and Victor Turner's concept of liminality (1967).

Although many studies offer context-specific insights, there remains a need for more detailed exploration of how local cultural, historical, and social factors uniquely shape the practice and perception of the dance form. This research aims to provide a distinctive perspective based on an Italian specific context.

„ONE IS NOT BORN, BUT RATHER BECOMES, A WOMAN”⁵

Deagon (2016) argues that Orientalism, with its stereotypical portrayal of passive, sexualized “Eastern” women, was actually inverted by them, who exoticized the “West” in a parallel manner. This process helped establish *belly dance* on the world stage and solidified its identity as an authentically Egyptian product, whose authenticity derived from its expression of the “Egyptian spirit”⁶ (Fraser 2015, in Deagon 2016). There is a specific feminine “spirit” linked to the Egyptian “Bint el balad”⁷ persona (Roushdy 2014)

⁵ De Beauvoir (1973, 301).

⁶ While Egyptian influence on belly dance is significant, its dominance is debated due to varying interpretations of the “spirit” across Middle Eastern, Turkish, and Greek contexts.

⁷ *Baladi*, an Arabic term referring to the countryside, is also associated with the dance style known as *Raqs Baladi*. A “*bint al-balad*” is a country girl and carries the connotation of being genuine and authentic, rather than pretentious or sophisticated (Shay &

and it is transmitted through generations as a social construct, rather than an inherent trait, aligning with Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity (1988). Mastering this dance form, indeed, extends beyond technical proficiency and includes embodying and performing that "spirit." As Butler (1986) describes, becoming a woman involves a purposeful set of acts and a "project," similarly, Italian dancers appear to engage in their own project, using dance habitus to reshape and redefine their gender identities.

I felt a need to use those same expressive canons for myself, to express what I felt, but with that language... because that register... those canons..., that lexicon were there (referring to the dance lessons) and I was beginning to understand my own alphabet in order to compose my own sentences.
(Interviewee No. 1)⁸

Habitus is described by Bourdieu (1990) as a "state of body," rather than "state of soul" that guides individual perception and action (Tsitsou 2014). This is crucial to analyse embodied practices such as dance (Sassatelli 2022). Insights from Interviewee No. 2 exemplify this unique "state of body":

I wrote a short story where the dancer danced without music, and... the instruments began to play on their own. The instruments followed the dancer, and not the dancer followed the instruments... That fascinated me so much... because, as a belly dancer, you are the body of the rhythm... and we are also one with the music.

Functioning as a repository of social norms (Bourdieu 1989) these "expressive canons" reflect the interplay between social structures and individual practices. Crossley (2004) highlights the body's dual role as both object and subject in shaping its embodiment through "body modification projects." Bassetti (2009) notes that dance exemplifies such a project, embedding bodily self-awareness into the dancer's habitus (Bourdieu 1990, in Bassetti 2009⁹). *Belly dance*, with its intricate movement qualities like

Sellers-Young 2005). The feminine gestures and subjectivity of a *bint al-balad* form the core of what we now recognize as belly dance (cf. Roushdy 2014).

⁸ Data from: Téllez Elias Nemer 2022.

⁹ Bassetti (2010) suggests that clothing is a form of reflexive body technique, and is primarily concerned with self-presentation and identity construction, rather than the physical maintenance of the dancing body. This aligns with the concept of self-fashioning explored by Bock and Borland (2011) in their research on exotic identities in belly dance.

sharpness and sinuosity, requires mastery and enhances self-awareness, contributing to the dancer's habitus and body modification efforts, as Interviewee No. 2 remarked:

I believe that the fact that we isolate the top and the bottom is the perfect awareness of having them both... It's a conscious effort to keep them distinct, because if I can't forget one, I'm acknowledging the existence of both.

This potential for critical reflection suggests that “we are not passive in our dance habits” (Wade 2011, 226). For instance, Respondent No. 3 noted that Oriental dance changed her gait, stating, “Now, I walk with my head held high,” viewing this as a new approach to life. However, this performative process is not entirely under individual control. Gender performances and experiences are shaped by social forces and historical contexts, complicating the separation of individual agency from socially constructed



Photo 4. Tribal Trip Show Rome 2015, Livio Melani.
Source: the author's personal archive

norms and reinforcing cultural stereotypes (Sassatelli 2002; Sassatelli 2022). The naturalization of gender inequalities, although arbitrary, is perceived as inherent and perpetuates symbolic violence – an entrenched system that enforces and internalizes control over women within cultural and mental frameworks (Gammaitoni 2023). According to the Gender Equality Observatory,¹⁰ 67% of Italian women feel that the domestic role distribution is inadequate, while the 2024 Global Gender Gap Report¹¹ places Italy 87th out of 146 countries as far as gender equality. Additionally, dance activities in Italian culture are often stereotyped as inherently feminine (Cerbara, Ciancimino & Tintori 2022). Consequently, it is not surprising that open-ended survey responses about personal concepts of femininity frequently include terms such as *sweetness, gentleness, hospitality, grace, delicacy, sensitivity, beauty, sinuosity, and softness*.

But do these words accurately represent the journey of Italian *belly dancers*? By exploring their personal narratives, this research aims to unravel the intricate ways in which their practice navigates, challenges, or reinforces inequalities by shedding light on the deeper meanings and implications beyond its superficial interpretations. As Crossley (2001) suggests, an agent's story is written in two forms: it is inscribed in the body through habitus and articulated in the language through self-narration.

„THERE IS A *BEFORE* AND THERE IS AN *AFTER* IN *BELLY DANCE* PRACTICE”

The initial research methodology entailed conducting in-depth interviews with Italian Oriental dancers. Upon commencing data analysis of the first interview, a recurring phrase emerged, strikingly familiar from the author's twenty-five-year professional experience as an Oriental dancer, instructor, choreographer, and organiser: “There is a ‘before’ and there is an ‘after,’ there is truly a benchmark at the beginning of dance... a benchmark in my life.” Subsequently, Interviewee No. 1's narrative unfolds a transformative journey initiated by witnessing the performance of a non-professional Turkish *belly dancer*, described as an “enchanted vision”:

¹⁰ Legacoop (2024).

¹¹ Global Gender Gap Report (2024).

She started dancing. Ah! She let her hair down, taking out the hairpin that had been holding it up, and danced – this is how I felt at that moment – with every single part of her body: from her hair to her eyelashes, to her pinky finger, to her eyelids. The way she used and modulated the opening and closing of her eyelids was part of the dance, and I assure you, the entire audience was like this (gestures, indicating amazement). We were truly in awe!

Her initial fascination with the *enchanted vision* and the dance's aesthetic principles led her to seek instruction and immerse herself deeply in the practice. The account describes the challenges she faced, the meaningful friendships formed within the dance community, and the complexities of teacher-student dynamics. Despite receiving criticism for sharing dance videos due to her academic role, she expressed pride in her identity as an Oriental dancer. Her story highlights the profound impact of this art form, illustrating a significant shift in self-perception describing the “after-state” as follows: “Here and now I do exist, I know who I am, and I do not want to be anything else.”

Internal identity is shaped by one's personal autobiographical memory, which consists of interconnected recollections. Constructing a narrative from these fragments is a creative process, as memories are constantly reinterpreted to form a coherent storyline (Heller 2017). Through language and narrative, individuals organize events to fit perceived reality, applying principles of coherence and chronology – such as *before*, *after*, and *therefore* – to make sense of experiences and navigate the complexities of life (Demetrio 1992). Indeed, the primary function of narrative form is to connect, organize, and endow meaning (Ferraro 2021). From Ferraro's socio-semiotic perspective, the attribution of meaning is intrinsic; as he emphasizes, a narrative's capacity to explain is fundamental to its essence. Explaining why something happened and describing what happened are one and the same (Ricoeur 1983, in Ferraro 2021).

The interviewee No. 1's narrative linked her dance practice to a growing self-confidence, which enhanced her professional life and made her feel more empowered during lectures. She attributed this resilience to the iterative nature of dance, where mistakes became opportunities for growth. This sequence of events prompted a narrative analysis of her dance journey, leading to a broader exploration of common experiences among practitioners. To support this, a mixed-methods approach was adopted, including a web-based survey, *La storia della mia danza* [ENG: My Dance Journey], alongside in-depth interviews to build a research framework in the Italian context.

“MY DANCE JOURNEY” THE QUESTIONNAIRE

While acknowledging that each dancer’s journey is unique, a foundational structure was required to identify commonalities and variations in the transformative process, consequently, the questionnaire adopted a structure inspired by Algirdas Greimas’ Canonical Narrative Schema (CNS) (Greimas & Courtés 1982, 194), a model descendant of Vladimir Propp’s functions, known for its simplicity and adaptability. The 43 open and closed questions detailing the diverse stages of the *belly dancer’s* journey were adapted into a web-based survey format. The first set of questions collected socio-demographic data to establish a foundation for the study, while the second followed Ferraro’s reconfiguration of CNS to focus on the subjective aspects of the dancers’ narratives (Ferraro 2021).

Through the use of computer-assisted research (NVivo software), the interviews and the web survey data were initially coded into sensitizing concepts (Blumer 1954). This process facilitated the development of



Photo 5. The New Awalim Show, Milan 2019.

Source: the author’s personal archive

distinct thematic areas, ultimately revealing five key dimensions¹² that aligned with the themes identified during the separate analysis of the three in-depth interviews (Empowerment,¹³ Cultural Capital, Vitality,¹⁴ Socialization, and Identity). To establish a coherent conceptual framework, each area was then associated with pertinent theoretical constructs.

DIGGING IN TO THE EARTH

The web survey data were collected using opportunity and snowball sampling methods from October to November 2022. The sample size is substantial (428) and demonstrates a good geographical distribution across Central (44.6%), Northern (35.3%), Southern, and Insular Italy (20.1%). The vast majority of participants are female (94.4%). The most prevalent age group is women aged 36–45 (37.4%), followed by those aged 26–35 (25%) and 46–55 (23.6%). Notably, 160 out of the 428 respondents in the web survey are professional figures (dancers/instructors/organizers), with 46 of these relying solely on dance for their livelihood. The predominant educational level is high (Bachelor's, Master's, Doctorate), and 58.2% of the respondents identified themselves as belonging to the middle class. The sample also includes a wide range of professions, with teachers and employees at all levels. Notably, 62.1% started between 2000 and 2010, a time when Silvio Berlusconi's media promoted hypersexualised images of women, potentially shaping participants' perceptions of femininity by emphasizing appearance over intellect (Gribaldo & Zapperi 2012; Guerrina 2014). This media influence created a tension between liberation and objectification (Gribaldo 2018).

¹² The conceptualization and operationalization of the five primary macro-areas were devised in collaboration with engineer Cecilia Spaziani from Unicusano University, Italy, as part of her undergraduate psychology thesis (September 2024).

¹³ This study examines empowerment through two dimensions: Personal Growth and Sense of Agency. Personal Growth involves improvements in body image, self-esteem, and self-awareness, among other constructs, while Sense of Agency relates to iterative processes, projectivity, and practical evaluation (Emirbayer & Mische 1998).

¹⁴ By drawing on cultural insights and “untranslatable” terms that capture nuanced concepts of vitality, Lomas, Lee, Ritchie-Dunham & VanderWeele (2022) identified over 200 terms, categorised into three domains. This study uses these domains, defining Spirit as vital force, joy, happiness, and resilience; Energy as strength, healing, peace, and serenity; and Heart as well-being, harmony, passion, and desire.

Contract-Lack of Status is the initiatory phase that activates the subject, providing direction and shaping the subsequent course of action (Ferraro 2021, 66). The narrative presented to respondents begins with a delineation of beliefs, collective imagery and cultural influences that precede the initiation of dance practice as well as their main motivations for starting the practice.

The data highlights a strong desire among participants to explore and embody femininity through dance, as evidenced by motivations such as: “feeling more womanly,” exploring sensuality through mastery of the dance movements, and, for many, being significantly influenced by the impact of a *belly dancer* they once saw (the *enchanted vision*). These factors collectively score 420, followed closely by aspects of cultural capital (398), indicated by items such as a pre-existing interest in music and rhythm, a need for techniques of artistic expression, among others. Such motivations may arise from Italy’s geographical proximity to the Arab world or travel experiences, suggesting not only economic means but also an intellectual curiosity extending beyond mere enjoyment. The motivation to study dance, driven by a search for creative artistic expression, structured by technical tools, reveals Italy’s deep sensitivity to art, as the leading nation for UNESCO World Heritage Sites, reflected in responses highlighting dance as an art form. Aspiring dancers bring cultural capital from their respective fields to the environments where they practise and perform. Urquía (2005) found that the ethnicized cultural capital of salsa, for example, is shaped by the cultural capital that participants bring from different social contexts.

I never thought that Oriental dance was only about selling, showing off one’s body... I’ve always seen an artistic side... that I wanted to discover... and that I later did discover. (Interviewee No. 3).¹⁵

The choice to engage in *belly dance* for those seeking a “different and unusual” activity (score 78) likely reflects a desire for differentiation, particularly among specific segments of the Italian middle class. In fact, 51% (IPSOS 2024) express a desire for novelty, new experiences, or deep knowledge on a subject, aiming to assert non-conformism or break from routine. Other motivations to start the practice include “I wanted to connect to my

¹⁵ Data from: Téllez Elías Nemer (2022).

sacred self” (20) further indicating an individual’s quest to explore essential aspects of their identity.



Photo 6. The author with Algeciras Flamenco Orchestra, 2017, Albano Laziale.
Source: the author’s personal archive

From a sociological standpoint, identity is shaped by social interactions and cultural norms, with the body playing a crucial role in communication and socialization. Individuals adapt their behaviour to meet social expectations (Goffman 1956). Our habitus includes an unconscious bodily language that reflects our masculinity or femininity (Wade 2011). In the context of *belly dance*, secondary socialization or new levels of identity integration are significantly influenced by the desire to embody and perform femininity as a core aspect.

However, these motivations, particularly the *enchanted vision*, which scores the highest, reveal a complex interplay between the desire to embody femininity and the freedom, power, and emancipation conveyed through the *enchanted vision* that represents a version of femininity characterized by playfulness and a strong sense of agency, impacting audiences not merely by appealing to the male gaze or presenting a standardized ideal of beauty – *belly dancers* are also known for their non-normative bodies – but by creating artistic and emotional experiences that engage directly with viewers. This suggests that the practice may

serve a compensatory or integrative role in self-discovery, an aspect closely linked to female empowerment.

Being characterized by the acceptance of non-normative female bodies, *belly dancing* studios provide a space for women to explore femininity, regardless of age or adherence to thinness ideals (Patricio-Mulero 2021). Many of the practitioners seek more inclusive female body models as they experience “normative discontent” – a widespread dissatisfaction with body weight due to unrealistic stereotypes. This reflects a broader desire for female empowerment through breaking away also from stereotypical body ideals.

Abu Raideh (2021) argues that *Raqs Sharqi* in Egypt can also disrupt dominant social discourses through its “undisciplined” nature, creating experiences that challenge societal norms. Similarly, Wade’s (2011) research on Lindy Hop supports the theory that habitus plays a key role in social change. Dancers become aware of their own habitus in relation to societal norms they no longer share, often experiencing internal conflict. As Interviewee No. 2 recalled, “My first dance lesson was so weird because... I kept



Photo 7. The New Awalim, Rome 2023.

Source: the author’s personal archive

remembering dancing in front of the mirror and hearing my mom's disapproval in my head, saying 'Oh no!'"

Competence-Self-Authentication is a formative preparatory phase that modulates the subject, altering their state of being in terms of knowledge and capacity (Ferraro 2021, 67). This phase focuses on the practice context and key relationships, including interactions with the teacher, fellow students, and external influences like family and partners. It also involves navigating challenges and immersing oneself in various aspects of "Eastern" cultures. This phase features physical and emotional changes, including learning dance movements and refining their aesthetic sensibilities.

The analysis of the question "Once in the studio, what did you enjoy the most?" reveals several socializing aspects of Oriental dance. From this data, the importance of the studio's inclusive and beneficial atmosphere and interpersonal relationships with peers and the teacher emerges clearly (score 240). Interviewee No. 2 recounts a dream in which her dance teacher offered her a gift: a piece of fabric from her skirt. This fabric, she was told, could be sold because "everyone would want it," but the teacher advised her to keep it until she called upon her to reveal its secrets (the dance and the "true self"). Notably, the Italian expression *avere la stoffa* means to demonstrate the qualities needed for something. Overall, the dream can be seen as a reflection of the dancer's journey towards self-discovery. The fabric serves as a potent symbol of both her potential and the path she must navigate to fully uncover and embody her *true self*. The profound relationship with her teacher suggests that true worth and authenticity are achieved through both internal growth and external guidance.

However, it is particularly interesting to note that the most appreciated characteristic (282) was found to be the music and rhythm, highlighting how the sonic dimension plays a fundamental role in constructing a shared experience and creating social bonds. Walking or moving together to the same music creates a shared experience, which facilitates social bonding. Launay, Tarr & Dunbar (2016) argue that synchrony, present in activities like dance and music, enhances group cohesion by triggering neurohormones that foster social bonding. This mechanism explains its prevalence across cultures. Endorphins, which induce euphoria and relaxation, also promote social trust and further interactions.

While all dance forms engage with music, *belly dance* is notable for its intricate relationship with melody and rhythm. Unlike simple temporal synchronization, Oriental dance involves complex coordination of distinct body

movements, such as performing different rhythmic patterns simultaneously. Repertoires like the “drum solo” highlight this complexity, where rhythmic precision and subjective interpretation signify mastery and originality. Music is not merely accompaniment but a dynamic component of the performance, shaping and enhancing the collective subjectivity within the dance group: “That... is what I’m looking for... I actually enjoy watching the others. Sometimes, (they) do things that really reach me... that sense of authenticity is what I take home with me” (Interviewee No. 2).¹⁶

In Italy, where 79% of people seek new forms of sharing and 80% desire a stronger sense of community (IPSOS 2024), Oriental dance appears to address these needs. Amidst social fragility and a high value placed on friendship (59%) (Risso 2023), dance communities provide meaningful connections. Interaction and music within dance studios foster group cohesion and lasting relationships beyond the practice itself. Data shows that 63% of Italian Oriental dancers form strong friendships, and the dance class environment supports a cooperative female subjectivity and a sense of community.



Photo 8. Al Masrawy Show, Rome 2011.
Source: the author’s personal archive

¹⁶ Data from: Téllez Elías Nemer (2022).

Performance-Identity Validation, akin to Propp's "rite of passage" (1946), involves the dancer's first public performances and the process of self-identification as a *belly dancer*, seeking validation from peers and audiences. These performances serve as liminal experiences, where dancers navigate between established social structures and potential transformation (Turner 1967). This phase often reveals tensions between personal values and community norms. These tensions emerge particularly in challenges to body image norms, gender roles, and criticisms that come from dancers' social contexts. Italian dancers face these challenges, feeling empowered by the dance itself and the environment of their dance community.

From a feminist perspective, Bystydzienski (1992) views empowerment as redistributing power to challenge domination, while Batliwala (1994) focuses on balancing power between genders. Rowlands (1998) adds that it involves building self-trust to overcome internalized oppression. Dox (2006) highlights the importance of body expression for American women's empowerment, often linked to feminism. In Italy, however, 58% of women do not identify as feminists (IPSOS 2024), a detachment likely influenced by neoliberal portrayals of women, such as Berlusconi's, which also perpetuated racist and misogynistic views of Muslim women (Fegitz 2019).

While Sassatelli (2022) argues that male dominance shapes bodily practices influencing desires and aspirations, Menzel and Levine (2011) suggest that embodiment practices can reduce self-objectification and foster a positive body image by shifting focus from external appearance to internal bodily capacities. Moe (2012) adds that exploring sensuality through dance enhances confidence and balance and various studies demonstrate that gaining effective control over one's body increases the sense of agency in contexts beyond dance (Haggard, Clark & Kalogeras 2002; Haggard 2017). This sentiment echoed in one Interviewee's No. 2 reflections:

It takes a lot of technique to do this! That was very liberating for me, as if to say, I'm sending a message because I choose to..., we're talking about a game of seduction where I calibrate the amount.

As a time- and space-bound activity, dance can subvert traditional social norms such as modesty and sexual repression. Adra (2005) views dance as a form of liberation from cultural restrictions, with gestures like covering one's eyes while moving the hips acting as playful, ironic statements. This

is not intended as seduction but rather as a way to satirize social norms. The practice involves self-irony and parody of societal expectations.

Aspects of validation are reflected in the responses to the question: “When did you first feel like a *belly dancer*”? where 56.3% of participants said performing in front of an audience was key, meanwhile, 19.9% felt that wearing a *bedlah* or coin belt was enough, and 16.6% felt authentic dancing alone. Many practitioners seek acknowledgment of this. One Italian dancer observed, receiving the compliment “You dance like an Arab” is highly esteemed, a sentiment not as prevalent among American dancers. This was humorously termed by Interviewee No. 1 as “ethnic validation,” illustrating how some Italians navigate the tension between cultural appropriation and artistic expression.

Italian Oriental dancers report facing criticism and ridicule (88 responses) and being sexually harassed and misperceived as sex workers by their audiences (160 responses), which threatens their identity both as artists and individuals. While many dancers seem accustomed to explicit comments, the deeper emotional impact of Italian Oriental dancers comes from not being recognized as legitimate artists.



Photo 9. Ottoman Dance New Awalim Milan, 2023.

Source: the author's personal archive

Some dancers also face mockery and disapproval from family members (35) and partners (23), with a small number prohibited from continuing

their practice (4 from family, 2 from partners). These negative experiences reflect stereotypes and symbolic violence against women, as well as a fundamental misunderstanding of the artistic value of *belly dance*, often perceived as sexualized exposure. Interviewee No. 3 described a mix of social anxiety, but at the same time a strong desire to dance because it allows her to feel “present to herself” highlighting a form of agency that also influences their social environment. *Belly dancers* indeed develop pride and self-esteem, in opposition to societal shame (Patricio-Mulero 2021).

Evidence of the cultural capital acquired through the practice of the dance, particularly in relation to Arab musical culture, can be seen in the 17.1% of respondents who reported encountering an indifferent audience as a negative experience. In Arab culture, the connection between performers and audiences is vital. The audience’s engagement can significantly affect the artist’s performance, with the audience (*sammi’a*) participating in the audience in search of *tarab*, a concept of musical ecstasy or joy. Unlike Italian classical music audiences, where vocal reactions would be disruptive, in Arab traditions, feedback from the audience guides the performer to excellence (Farraj & Shumays 2019). For the dancers, *Tarab* refers both to the classical Arab music repertoire and the emotional expression needed to convey feelings and move the audience. This emphasis on audience interaction shows that Italian dancers have developed a deeper knowledge and appreciation for this musical culture, as they now view indifferent audiences as detrimental to their performances, demonstrating that they have acquired a musical taste, a different subjectivity and a way to express it that they did not have before.

Sanction-Achieved Status. The final phase reflects on the dancer’s journey, culminating in two open-ended questions about the “ultimate gift” gained from Oriental dance and their understanding of femininity. The term “gift” was chosen for its emotional depth and resonance with the narrative style of the questionnaire, and for their anthropological significance as discussed by scholars like Marcel Mauss, Lévi-Strauss, and Mary Douglas, who view the gift as a symbol of communication, reciprocity, and social balance. In this study, the *ultimate gift* is symbolically expressed through the dancer’s embodied experiences.

The theme of female empowerment is also prevalent as the “ultimate gift”. Notably, responses highlighted both Personal Growth (77 mentions) and Sense of Agency (78 mentions) equally, indicating a balanced interest in both self-awareness and action.



Photo 10. Training the New Awalim Rome, 2021.

Source: the author's personal archive

Examining the *gifts*, the second preference is the vitality macro area (score 146), described as vitality (47), joy, happiness (28), harmony (27), regeneration (21), and expressions of healing and passion. These results align with findings from other nations, including Egypt, Korea, and North America (Moe 2013; Roushdy 2014; Yang & Shin 2022), where dancers associate the dance with feelings of joy and happiness. Considering Hofstede's model (2011), which measures the dimension of Indulgence (how cultures balance gratification and impulse), Italy scores 30/100,¹⁷ indicating stricter social norms around self-restraint compared to similar countries. It is not surprising that Vitality was one of the most frequently mentioned *gifts*. Interviewee No. 2 explains how the dance movements make this happen:

In the shimmy there's a vibrato, a real internal vibration. It can be sad, more dramatic, more joyful... is an incredible embellishment, because it's so unnatural... it embodies an internal vibration.

¹⁷ Data from: The Culture Factor.

Adra (2005) suggests that traditional *belly dance* is, first and foremost, a playful activity, aligning with Huizinga's (1955) criteria of play. Interviewee No. 2 highlighted this aspect, referring to another movement of the dance:

Have you ever seen someone throwing darts?... That moment when you hit the mark... that's the thrill. It's like a game for me... Can I do it? Am I on time? Or maybe, 'Two darts here would be perfect!' The satisfaction of nailing the shot, that's what comes to mind, because the rhythm calls to you the movement and the times and it's fun to hear somehow that 'plink plink' sound in your body.

Rhythm and music are crucial elements, serving as a dynamic "playground" for dancers. This engagement enhances mental focus and clarity (Launay, Tarr & Dunbar 2016), contributing to a heightened sense of well-being. Given that 39% of Italians (Risso 2023) express a desire to savour and enjoy life, it is unsurprising that Italian dancers, in particular, experience these benefits intensely

Deagon (2016) questions whether *belly dance* effectively transmits the complex musical and artistic traditions of the Middle East and the cultural capital underpinning them. In Italy, the data on *ultimate gifts* suggests an affirmative response manifesting itself as technical and artistic skills gained during lessons, institutionalized through competitions, festivals, and associations. The dance has also fostered openness to new expressions and, in some cases, a deeper understanding of Arab music, language, and culture. Notably, 134 of 428 respondents hold dance-related certifications, and of them, 27.4% rely on dance as their sole economic support, converting their capital into symbolic and material forms. Indeed, some responses have highlighted in particular the presence of symbolic capital, closely linked to an embodied habitus through the manifestation of attributes such as *artistry*, *charisma*, *beauty*, and *elegance*.

One of the most relevant findings is the response to the question that featured an internationally known image about *belly dance* (Figure 1): "Looking at this image, do you think there is a 'before' and 'after' in the practice of Belly Dance?" A substantial 92.1% of participants answered "Yes." The image contrasts a static figure of "ordinary" women with a dynamic silhouette of a dancer portrayed in motion, with a harmonious mind-body connection, accentuated curves, detailed fingers (suggesting refined abilities), and flowing hair.



Photo 11. A meme about bellydance's widely shared on social media.

Enzo Riso (2023) suggests that in the last 30 years, a paradigm shift has occurred. The concept of “Personalization” has evolved into “Pluralization of personalities,” or a “multiplicity of the self.” According to Riso, the modern individual, especially the consumer, embodies a Pirandellian philosophy, living through multiple identities and narratives, often displaying contrasting traits, being “a hundred thousand in themselves” (Riso 2023). In the past, acquiring goods, such as a car, was a way to project social status and personal attributes. Today, individuals “purchase” objects and experiences to build multiple identities, which they perform on the social stage (Riso 2023). As a part of their identities on social media, 67.8% of the practitioners share dance videos and thoughts, with 18.5% of them preferring their stage names to their real ones.

FEMININITY

Despite the explicit mention of femininity among the initial motivations, an analysis of the *ultimate gifts* reveals a surprisingly low number of direct references to femininity (score 4). This discrepancy can be interpreted in

light of the interconnectedness between the pursuit of femininity and the acquisition of female empowerment. It is also interesting to note that the orientalist imaginary is very present at the beginning of the practice but seems to diminish over the course of the dancers' journey.

When participants were asked to define femininity in open terms, the responses clustered around three thematic macro-areas: Empowerment (score 313), Cultural Capital (199), and Identity (170). Femininity was described as a state of being achieved over time, characterized by terms such as *power*, *strength*, *confidence*, *awareness*, *freedom*, and *expressiveness* (score 198), with some participants also highlighting the "body-soul connection" as part of this empowerment (21). Although some participants associated it with gender stereotypes such as *sensuality*, *gracefulness*, *gentleness*, and *nurturing qualities* (score 131), or described it in a dualistic manner (strength/vulnerability, score 24), Many interpreted femininity in more complex and dynamic terms, as reflected in one of the responses to the open-ended questions in the survey: "What is femininity to you? How many women are there? Billions? Then femininity is billions of 'things'."

In terms of cultural capital, femininity was associated with qualities such as *respect*, *charisma*, *appreciation for beauty* and *elegance* (78) with this last being the one that scores the most, suggesting a contrast with Berlusconi's depictions of women over the last decades. Within the realm of identity, femininity was linked to connecting with "one's female energy," *essence*, and *sacredness* (31), as well as a way of "expressing oneself as a woman," and *sensitivity* (105). Interviewee No. 1 encapsulated the prevalent femininity idea of Italian Oriental dancers with the following statement: "The femininity that this dance exalts is not a coquettish femininity; it is a powerful, assertive femininity. Here and now I do exist, I know who I am, and I do not want to be anything else."

CONCLUSIONS

Like the *belly dancer* who Said portrays as "digging into the earth," Italian dancers engage in a profound process of self-discovery and renewal through their practice. While navigating the tension between cultural appropriation and individual artistic expression, the dance provides them with vitality, sense of community and positive relationships, empowering them to challenge societal norms and stereotypes. Although *belly dance*

may sometimes reinforce conventional gender roles, it also offers participants the opportunity to explore, redefine, and embody a new vision of empowered femininity, a form of self-expression rooted in strength, confidence, and freedom, deeply intertwined with their identities.

This empowerment emerges from their alignment with an “enchanted vision,” as they perceive agency in creating and embodying the experiences the dance enables. In doing so, they draw upon their inherent sense of beauty, viewing the dance not merely as entertainment but as an art form they can acquire, refine, and share. Through the “ultimate gifts” of the dance, shaped by habitus, the skills, movements, and shared subjectivities transform their self-perception in a continual process of becoming. The dance thus serves as a playground where Italian dancers experience the vitality, joy, and fulfilment they seek.

Even though the socialization aspects are more evident at the beginning of the practice, I argue that they remain crucial, as self-exploration and discovery leading to female empowerment cannot fully emerge without the unique qualities of Oriental dance, music, performance, and the supportive environment of dance studios. In these welcoming and inclusive spaces, Oriental dance becomes accessible to non-normative bodies, fostering a sense of acceptance and belonging. Bonds and friendships form, and dancers collectively share transformative experiences, affirming their identity and empowerment through this shared journey.

In a pluralized world, as Risso asserts, the “orientalist self” of Italian *belly dancers* is just one of many identities used to navigate life’s complexities. This raises the question: are they “Pirandellian”? I tend to think not. Unlike temporary identities, such as putting on a dress or driving a car, embodied practices like dance cannot be simply adopted or discarded at will. The habitus developed through bodily practice is cultivated over time and becomes an internalized aspect of the self. It is not something that can be “removed” when the dancer leaves the studio, as the movements, shared subjectivities, and performance experiences become integral parts of their identity. As Bourdieu (1990, 73) notes, “What is ‘learned by the body’ is not something that one has... but something that one is.” This suggests that Italian dancers do not merely adopt movements or temporarily fashion an orientalist identity. Rather, their engagement with the dance involves a profound, embodied transformation that integrates personal, artistic, and cultural dimensions. The aesthetics of Oriental dance, particularly the distinct movements, serve not only as a form of self-expression but also

as resistance to the alienation of the body, often seen as a consequence of modernization.

Whether an employee in a bank, a waitress, or a university lecturer, these individuals share an embodiment of femininity as an empowered and assertive state of being, contrasting with the restrictive gender stereotypes often present in Italian society. In doing so, they perform a femininity that is both powerful and assertive -here and now, they know who they are and wish to be nothing else.



Photo 12. Training the New Awalim Rome, 2024.

Source: the author's personal archive

Further research could explore self-exotization and orientalist perspectives, focusing on how Italian views differ due to geographic proximity, immigration, and shared Mediterranean culture, and whether they experience a real sense of "otherness." This study did not fully address these factors, as participants had extensive practical knowledge of Arab cultures through years of dance practice, trips to Egypt, and classes with native teachers. A deeper investigation into the gestural expressiveness and characteristic movements of Oriental dance could reveal the playfulness and social interactions involved. Longitudinal studies might also examine how dancers' perceptions of femininity and empowerment evolve over time. Lastly, studying the impact of modern media on *belly dance* could shed light on its contemporary role in pluralist identities.

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