Baladi as Performance: Gender and Dance in Modern Egypt

by Noha Roushdy

January 2009:
Egyptian poet and satirist, Ahmed Fouad Nijm, a popular artistic figure in Egypt, is heavily criticized for making a formal statement on television urging the Minister of Culture to establish a syndicate for professional Oriental Dancers and lamenting the slow demise of a “genuine (asil) Egyptian art.”

April 2009:
A lawyer, member of the Muslim Brotherhood and former political detainee, Adel Ahmed Mu’awwad, raises a motion against the Egyptian Ministers of Culture,

Media, Tourism and Interior to prohibit the licensing of oriental dancers. He appealed to the court to withhold the implementation of the Minister of Culture’s Decision 273/1997 stipulating administrative requirements to obtaining an oriental dancer’s license in Egypt. Mu’awwad’s motion referred to a number of articles in the Egyptian constitution which identify “Islam” as a central source of legislation and a quintessential reference for the protection of the family and for insuring that woman’s right to labor does not infringe on her obligations towards the family. It argued that Qur’anic commandments against exhibiting ‘sensitive’ bodily parts (‘awrat), debauchery and lustful practices as well as the natural aversion of Egyptian society to such licentious practices requires that oriental dance be dealt with as a form of prostitution since the profession of an oriental dancer “is only taken up by prostitutes” who display their bodies revealing its sensitive parts in public (Sherif 2009).

**June 2009:**

Members of the Egyptian parliament incited a public uproar by formally denouncing “rumors” pertaining to the establishment of a high institute for oriental dance affiliated to the Ministry of Higher Education and sponsored by the High Council for Universities in Egypt (Younis 2009).

*Al-raqs al-baladi* is a dance form that currently occupies an unquestionably central role in various expressions of festivity throughout Egypt. It is more commonly known in English as “belly dance,” a term that denotes a conglomeration of related dance forms practiced in the vast geographic region that covers North Africa, the Middle East and Central Asia (Shay and Sellers-Young 2005, 1).³ *Al-raqs al-baladi* is not the only form of dance performed in Egypt. ⁴ Yet, as opposed to the region- or community-specific dances that are performed throughout the country, *al-raqs al-baladi* is not commonly associated with any particular ethnic or social group living in Egypt.⁵

It is the most frequently observed dance form that accompanies Arabic dance tunes today and is performed by women and men on many festive occasions, though more regularly

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² This essay is extracted from N. Roushdy, “Dancing in the Betwixt and Between: Femininity and Embodiment in Egypt” (M.A. Thesis, Department of Sociology, Anthropology, Psychology and Egyptology, American University in Cairo, Egypt). (2010)
³ The formal reference to *al-raqs al-baladi* in Egypt is *al-raqs al-sharqi*, which is more likely a translation of the French *Danse Orientale*.
⁴ Magda Saleh (1979) documented twenty distinct dance forms performed in Egypt at the time of her research. These included dances that are performed by men, dances performed by women and dances in which men and women participate.
⁵ It is possible to identify *al-raqs al-baladi* as an urban dance form with historical roots in Cairo.
during festivities commemorating rites of passage. The most commonly represented performance style of al-raqs al-baladi is the solo performance of female professional dancers. However, the performance of al-raqs al-baladi is neither limited to any particular professional group nor confined to any particular musical genre. Egyptians learn to stylize their bodies in tune with Arabic music at a fairly early age by mimicking grownups and professional dancers.

Performed by professional and amateur dancers, baladi dancing is not commonly regarded as an art form in Egypt. Even though recognition of the artistic skills of highly talented and publicly esteemed dancers is widespread and is sometimes given official status, this is rather an exception to a rule that tends to consider professional performers of al-raqs al-baladi as ‘fallen women’ and prostitutes who make a living out of exhibiting their bodies to strangers. The practice of al-raqs al-baladi by ‘ordinary’ Egyptians is thus popularly sanctioned inasmuch as it is a leisure activity that serves as an expression of festivity on special occasions.

The three incidents alluded to in the prelude, all of which took place in the short span of six months in 2009, demonstrate the extreme reactions that characterize discussions of al-raqs al-baladi in Egypt today. They expose intensity with which contemporary discourses scrutinize the professional performance of a dance form, arguably the most popular in Egypt, and of its enduring appeal that allows it to continue thriving. In this article, I look at the history of al-raqs al-baladi throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries in Egypt in an effort to explain the ways by which this particular dance came to signify art, heritage, and “everything beautiful in our life” on the one hand, and prostitution, licentiousness and a threat to public morality on the other.

Drawing on the literature of gender and sexuality in Egypt, particularly the works of Leila Ahmed (1992) and Joseph Massad (2007), I locate al-raqs al-baladi in the web of overarching socio-cultural, economic and political processes that produced the ideal modern female subject in Egypt, against which the marginalized category of the dancer came to be defined. However, in departure from studies that disconnect professional from non-professional performances of al-raqs al-baladi, I look at both performance styles as materializations of the same regulatory logic that established al-raqs al-baladi as a risqué dance form in the twentieth century. I thereby employ

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6 It consists of an improvised pattern of bodily movements that heavily rely on the controlled movement of isolated body parts, particularly through the shaking and vibrating of the upper body and the sides and on slow and rapid whirls.
7 The Egyptian state does not register male professional dancers.
8 An example would be King Farouk’s designation of Samia Gamal as raqisat misr al-rasmiyya (the official dancer of Egypt), Anwar al-Sadat’s presentation of Nagwa Fouad to American Foreign Minister, Henry Kissinger, during his official visits to Egypt, and the leading role that the Egyptian Minister of Culture played in the funeral processions of Tahia Carioca.
Michel Foucault’s (1972) approach to historical inquiry by attempting to connect the representation of *al-raqs al-baladi* as an “object of discourse” (1972, 49) throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries to an array of political, economic, social and cultural processes that allowed for the emergence of *al-raqs al-baladi* in the form that we are familiar with today. This form relies on three main features: it is ‘oriental,’ ‘sexual’ and ‘feminine.’ I will demonstrate how Orientalist literature’s identification of the dance with these three characteristics entrapped *al-raqs al-baladi* in a representational framework that reflects its location in Egypt’s modernity project.

The discussion of *al-raqs al-baladi* that ensues in the following essay thus focuses on the mechanisms of control and regulation that its professional and non-professional practice were subjected to in the modern period, and identifies it as a necessary offshoot of wider debates on gender and sexuality that were taking place in turn of the twentieth century Egypt.

**Baladi: Gender and Sexuality in Turn of the Twentieth Century Egypt**

The profusion of mass media in turn of twentieth century Egypt enabled the unprecedented emergence of gender and sexuality in public discourse as matters of national concern. As Joseph Massad (2007) argued, it was the “European-style institutionalization of heterosexual bourgeois monogamous marriage” that was represented as a foundational element in the civilizational project of modernizing Arab societies (2007, 159). The ensuing debates have been the focus of numerous studies in the past few decades that have examined pressing nationalist efforts to reconcile local culture with Western modernization under the aegis of capitalism and the making of the modern nation-state (Ahmed 1992; Shakry 1998; Booth 2001; Baron 2005).

These studies have clearly illustrated the way in which late nineteenth and early twentieth century calls for women’s participation in public life through education, labor or ‘symbolic unveiling’ were premised upon the objective of “crafting an educated housewife” (Najambadi 1998) that could mother the new generation of modern Egyptian subjects.

In Leila Ahmed’s (1992) discussion on the veil, for instance, she exposes the class-specific, male-centered limitations of gender discourse in the turn of the twentieth century. Her argument focuses on one of the leading figures in the gender discourse, Qasim Amin, known as “the liberator of women” in Egypt, to highlight the point that Amin’s call for the unveiling of women was a direct result of his Western education and outlook—an outlook which ultimately sought “the transformation of Muslim society along the lines of the Western model and for the substitution of the garb of Islamic-style male dominance for that of Western-style male”

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9 As evidenced in its formal designation in Arabic.
dominance” (Ahmed 1992, 161). By establishing links between Amin’s rhetoric and that adopted by the colonial regime regarding the inherently inferior culture of the colonized, Ahmed accuses Amin of “refashioning” Egyptian women along the ideals set by “Victorian womanhood and mores” (1992, 151). As Ahmed rightly identified, Amin’s rhetoric and the popular debates he had ignited in Egypt were centered on the wives and mothers of the upper classes, whose public behavior was by then expected to match the decorum and aesthetic ideals of the “new [modern] men” of Egypt (1992, 146).

Many postcolonial scholars since have come to identify the Orientalist representations of Arab life found in European colonial literature, with which the new national intelligentsia of Egypt had become well acquainted, as the foremost instigator of the gender and sexuality norms one finds in Arab society today (Massad 2007, 53). Representations of Egyptian life, for instance that found in the Egyptian exhibit of the World Exposition in Paris in 1889, shocked and humiliated Egyptian observers who grasped the decadence of their culture through the eyes of European perception (Mitchell 1988, 2). The inferiority of Egyptian culture thus came to be understood as something manifest in many aspects of Egyptian social life and, as is made clear in Salama Musa’s book, Fann al-Hub w’al-Hayat (1947), the relationship between men and women in Egypt was certainly among them.

In his 1947 work, Salama Musa, a prominent Egyptian intellectual of radically secular, socialist, and feminist convictions, wrote:

Europeans also surpass us because they learn to dance, and perceive in its practice an exercise for love and a discipline for the instincts. The Arabic word raks (dance) is of Greek origin and is derived from the word “orchestra,” which means a musical ensemble. And therefore, dance has been and still is a foreign art to Arab culture. What this community has known of this art is limited to the practices of slave girls, who learned to dance for the sole purpose of sexually arousing their masters. We have inherited these lascivious moves, which our integrity following our awakening in 1919 saw fit to abolish. That was a fine resolution. Yet, European dance is not like ours. It is a grand art. May the reader note that the European dancer looks up ahead as she dances; she rises. Hence, we understand why Europeans think positively of dance and we so negatively (Musa 1947, 81-2, my translation).

Musa is believed to have been the first Arab intellectual in the twentieth century to earnestly discuss the contemporary sexual life of Egyptians in Arabic literature (Massad 2007, 128). He is

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10 The title can be literally translated to “The Art of Love and Living.”

11 Besides this anecdote, I have not come across any study that confirmed any such abolition in this period. It is, furthermore, unclear in Musa’s work what the abolition entailed.
also one of the main figures in the cultural movement known as the “Arab renaissance” that evolved in turn of the twentieth century Egypt and that pioneered the development of a modern national culture (Gershoni 1992, 332). Musa included the excerpt noted above in his discussion on the importance of “liberating marriage” from the shackles of tradition and custom, where he praised marriage based on love and affection, which he associated with European practice. Musa was especially concerned with youth and the psychological effects of segregating young men and women. In contrast to European dances, according to Musa, the local dance, which Egyptians were accustomed to, increased estrangement between the sexes and was even a cause for homosexuality among men and women (Musa 1947, 128). Ultimately, as a dance of slave girls, Musa believed that Egyptian dance reinforces the inferiority and objectification of the ‘free’ modern women who practice it. Musa’s views corresponded with ongoing national debates concerning gender and sexuality in a determinedly modernizing Egyptian society, a point I return to later.

Growing disenchantment and outright aversion to local practices by the rising middle and upper classes in Egypt was also captured in Sawsan El-Messiri’s Ibn Al-Balad: A Concept of Egyptian Identity (1978). El-Messiri argues that a Western-styled education and cultural outlook engendered “an attempt to emulate [W]estern culture and to negate what was local, i.e. baladi’ by this social group (1978, 34). The following excerpt from Muhammad al-Muwalili’s Hadith Isa Ibn Hisham (1903), where two friends exchange opinions about their evening excursions in Cairo, has been incorporated by El-Messiri (1978) as an appropriate representation of this attitude:

First: Are you going to keep your promise to accompany me to our friend’s to see the famous baladi dancer (belly dancer)?

Second: Please excuse me, for it is impossible. First, this baladi dancing which awlad al-balad and the fellabin enjoy, doesn’t interest me. Second, I have invited “mademoiselle…” the famous opera singer for lunch in Azbakiya at ‘Santi (a well-known European restaurant at that time). After that, we will go to Khan al-Khalili…and some of the old areas of the city for entertainment. (in El-Messiri 1978, 35; Al-Muwalili 1903, 20-1).

As demonstrated above, the prevailing attitude of the middle and upper classes of Egyptian society, which also corresponded with the views of the intelligentsia towards al-raqs al-baladi, echo the attitudes of Western travelers that were documented in Orientalist literature in the

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12 For Musa, these included masturbation and homosexuality.
preceding century. In J.A. St. John’s (1845) depiction of the local dance in his *Egypt and Nubia*, he remarks:

> And this is not so much art as nature; she [the female performer] becomes what she would seem, *femina simpies* -- uncurbed by that restraint, and moral discipline, and religious principle, which, in Christian countries, more especially in England, subdue and purify the passions, and *elevate women into the most chaste and perfect of created thing*? (1845, 272, my italics).

While St. John appears to be referring to the female dancers and singers he observes in Egypt, his depiction nonetheless resonates with Musa’s words a century later in 1947, and is based on a fundamental distinction between the Christian (read Occidental) and the Oriental woman. Like St. John, Musa’s 1947 work is concerned with ‘elevating’ women and sees the degradation of women in the culture of the local dance in Egypt. Further, Musa’s work casts Arab men as the beneficiaries of a patriarchal culture that sexually objectifies women and undermines the potential for love and affection in marriage, the latter of which Musa identifies as a Western cultural norm.

Another early nineteenth century account written by a French diplomat during the French occupation of Egypt indicates similar concerns:

> Notwithstanding the licentious life of these females, they are introduced into the harems to instruct the young persons of their sex in all that may render them agreeable to their future husbands… It is not surprising, that with manners which make the principal duty of women to consist in bestowing pleasure, those who follow the profession of gallantry should be the teachers of the fair sex (Denon 1803, 234-5).

Since male European travelers were never admitted into the women’s quarters, we cannot accept their statements as indicative of the influence professional dancers had on the private lives of ordinary Egyptian women of the time. What becomes evident through such early depictions of the local dance, however, is the Westerner’s “fascination with the sexual desires and lives of Arabs” (Massad 2007, 47), which framed the performance of the local dance within its formulation of an “imminently corporeal” Orient (Said 1992, 184). Depictions of the dance accumulated in the nineteenth century and offered detailed descriptions of its varied performance by the different dancers European men and women had encountered. Few European writers were concerned with drawing out the aesthetic qualities of the dance, preferring to dwell upon the dance’s erotic undertones. The standard European account of *raqs*
baladi that prevailed and formed its signification in the first half of the twentieth century was, in essence, the exotification of a dance that has been read as purely sexual in nature: ars erotica.

Dance in Nineteenth Century Egypt

“The Dancing Girls of Egypt”
The turn of the nineteenth century marks the beginning of Egypt’s historical encounter with European colonialism and the establishment of the modern Egyptian state. In 1798 the French invaded Egypt and occupied the country for three years until their defeat by British-aided Ottoman troops in 1901. The outcome of the French defeat in Egypt was the rise of Muhammad Ali, an Albanian general in the Ottoman army, and his appointment as viceroy to the Ottoman sultan in Egypt in 1805. Backed by the British Empire, Muhammad Ali gradually attained independence from the Ottoman Empire in the late 1830s after having set out to rebuild Egypt as a modern Western-styled state. Muhammad Ali’s design for modern Egypt consisted of the establishment of a state of law and order that would essentially convince the British to aid his plan for complete sovereignty from the Ottoman Empire. Khaled Fahmy (1999) noted that “[making] Egypt safer for European, and especially British merchants, passengers and mail” was one of Muhammad Ali’s primary motivations for forwarding certain legal and administrative reforms in Egypt during his lifetime (Fahmy 1999, 346).

Descriptions of the local dance of Egypt by Western travelers throughout the nineteenth century recount similar observations, consisting mainly of rapid movement of the hips and vocal and instrumental music. From as early as the beginning of the nineteenth century and through the turn of the twentieth, Western traveler accounts used different designations for the female dancers of Egypt. According to these narratives, there seems to have been two groups of women in Egypt who danced for hire: the ghawazee and the ‘awalim.

Ghawazee were and continue to be identified as the female members of one of the “gypsy” tribes (al ghagar) that settled in Egypt in an unspecified “past.” They are thus believed to be from a distinct cultural background and to have no original connection to the Egyptian peasant or townsman. There is no doubt from a variety of accounts that ghawazee were paid dancers and they were also identified as fortunetellers and prostitutes (Von Kremer 1864, 264-5).

Male dancers, known as khawals, were also observed dancing.

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13 A third group of male dancers, known as Khawals, was also common in Egypt throughout the nineteenth century. As natives of the country, they were distinguished from another group of male dancers known as Gink. They dance in the same manner as ghawazee but dress slightly different. Their makeup likened that worn by women (kohl and henna on their hands and legs) and they were often mistaken for women by European travelers. (Lane 2003, 381-2).

14 Male dancers, known as khawals, were also observed dancing.
in a number of works. ‘Awalim, on the other hand, were not associated with any particular ethnic or cultural group. The singular form of the word ‘awalim is ‘alma, or “learned woman.”15 The ‘awalim, it has been argued, were a group of female experts in the arts of reciting poetry, singing, and playing music (Lane 2003, 355).

With almost all available nineteenth century accounts of dancers in Egypt produced by foreigners who hardly spoke the native language, an unfortunate consequence is that their accounts differ widely on the proper designation for female dancers. In Edward William Lane’s The Manners and Customs of the Modern Egyptians (2003), a distinction is stressed between the public dancers of Egypt, who are the female descendents of a particular “gypsy” tribe known as ghawazee16, and the group of “professional singers known as ‘awalim” (2003, 355).

Although Lane contends that the ‘awalim of “an inferior class” (2003, 355) have been observed dancing in weddings and private parties, he maintains a qualitative distinction between the ‘awalim and the ghawazee regarding their visibility to men, their attire and their relation to the women of the harem. While ‘awalim were hired to perform on special occasions for women in the harem, and could only be listened to but never seen by a male audience, ghawazee performed “unveiled” (Lane 2003, 377) “in the court of a house, or in the street, before the door, on certain occasions of festivity in the harem…They are never,” Lane asserts, “admitted into a respectable hareem, but are not infrequently hired to entertain a party of men in the house of some rake” (Lane 2003, 378-9). In other words, ghawazee were the group of singers and dancers who performed in public venues and on public occasions such as saint’s day celebrations before both men and women, while the performance of ‘awalim was restricted to female audiences in private venues.

It is unclear why Lane insisted that the majority of ‘awalim did not dance while many writers as early as the late eighteenth century had been referring to the performers of the dance they observed in Egypt as ‘awalim (Denon 1803). I argue that it was Lane himself who did not regard those whom he had observed dancing in Egypt as accomplished artists or learned and skilled individuals, hence his unwillingness to identify those who dance as ‘awalim—a perception that was apparently shared by most Western writers who recorded their observations of the dance in Egypt over the course of the nineteenth century. Given that Lane would not have been permitted to attend the festivities held in the women’s quarters, moreover, his reference to the

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15 The word also refers to a scientist in Arabic.
16 It is indefinite how Egyptians commonly use the word ghaziyya. In general, ghawazee are dancers from designated “gypsy” tribes (al-ghazan) whose dance is distinguishable from an Oriental Dancer. They do not perform their dance in the traditional Oriental Dance costume nor are accompanied by a takht sharqi. Their costume is called “bulbul.” Their dance differs in form from the dance of a professional Oriental Dancer.
inferior class of ghawazee who danced may have been limited to those who performed danced before men in public and not necessarily the wider community of dance performers, which would have included those who would only perform dance before an audience of women. Lane described the dance performance of ghawazee as follows:

Their dancing has little of elegance; its chief peculiarity being a very rapid vibrating motion of the hips, from side to side. They commence with a degree of decorum; but soon, by more animated looks, by a more rapid collision of their castanets of brass, and by increased energy in every motion...The dress in which they generally thus exhibit in public is similar to that which is worn by women of the middle classes in Egypt in private...consisting of a yelek, or an 'anteree, and the shintiyan (trousers)...of handsome material. They also wear various ornaments: they eyes are bordered with kohl (or black collyrium); and the tips of their fingers, the palms of their hands, and their toes and other parts of their feet, are usually stained with the red dye of the henna, according to the general custom of the middle and higher classes of Egyptian women (Lane 2003, 377-8, my italics).

In all cases, it is clear that one of the central functions of this dance style in nineteenth century Egypt was to provide entertainment on special occasions, most notably on weddings and saint's day celebrations. Private dance performances by ghawazee or 'awalim appear to have been a “fantasia” afforded mainly by the wealthy in Egyptian society (Leland 1870, 131). A number of authors, moreover, have referred to an instructional role played by professional dancers (again, 'awalim or ghawazee) in the lives of ordinary women. One author claimed that 'awalim were received by Egyptian families to provide instruction for the young women of the family on “dancing, singing, gracefulness, and, in general, of all voluptuous attainment” (Denon 1803, 232). Another maintained that ordinary women in Egypt were taught the art of dancing by the ghawazee in order to be able to “perform in their own apartments for the amusement of their families” (St. John 1845, 268). From descriptions of private dance events that included Egyptian or non-Egyptian residents, it becomes clear that the dance performed was familiar to the spectators and that men and sometimes women guests often participated in the performance or responded to the flirtation of performers (St. John 1845, 275; Duff-Gordon 1865).

‘Awalim or ghawazee, female and male public dancing had been categorized as an “entertainment trade” since the sixteenth century and was subjected to “the fiscal control of a tax farm” (muqata’ab of the khurdal) (Tucker 1985, 150). Again, reference to “public” should not solely imply performances in public venues such as roads or halls that are open to the masses, but also any non-gender-segregated setting.
In the beginning of the 19th century, Western travelers referred to the existence of some kind of prohibition on private female dance performances for single men. In two accounts from the turn of the nineteenth century, the authors make mention of some kind of prohibition that was brought to bear on their personal entourages, which consisted of single men (ghawazee and/or ‘awalim) (Denon 1803). One author even claimed that the prohibition was particular to non-Muslim men (Denon 1803, 230). That proscription may have been either too loose, too informal or simply could not withstand the European demand for local dance performances17, as by the 1830s performances of the local dance in Egypt were being introduced as one of the “most interesting and remarkable spectacles in the modern capital of Egypt...of which many travelers have made mention” (St. John 1845, 268) in Orientalist accounts of Egypt.

The 1830 Ban

Notwithstanding the growing popularity of raqs baladi among Western travelers, in 1834 Muhammad Ali, then the ruler of Egypt, issued a decree prohibiting public female dancing, singing and sex work in Cairo. Punishment for failure to uphold the new law ranged from fifty lashes for first-time offences to one or two years of hard labor for recurring offenses. Men found in the company of a dancer or prostitute could avoid punishment by agreeing on a temporary marriage to them (Lane 2003, 377). Women were typically deported back to Upper Egypt after receiving their punishment, mainly to the towns of Luxor and Isna where many originated (Van Nieuwkerk 1996, 32). In Upper Egypt, women were free to resume their activities including the performance of dance for both local and foreign clientele. The ban served only to increase the European traveler’s fascination with and desire for the local dancers of Upper Egypt (Van Nieuwkerk 1996, 34).18

The prohibition was shortly lifted in the 1850s during the reign of Abbas I (1849-1854), the successor to Muhammad Ali. Female dancers were allowed to reappear in the public space during the lift and once the ban was removed in the mid-1860s, a new tax on public dance earnings was issued by the state in 1866 and enforced at “the discretion of the tax-farming official” entrusted with collecting the money (Tucker 1985, 153). By the end of the nineteenth century, female singing in Cairo was limited to a series of newly-introduced café chantant situated in the area around Azbakiyya Garden, where women sang behind a curtain to a male

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17 In Vivant Denon’s Travels in Upper and Lower Egypt (1803), the author stated that notwithstanding the proscription, a request made by 200 French soldiers and a general could not be denied by their host, a sheikh in the Lower Egyptian village (1803, 231-2).

18 For instance, the celebrated encounter between French writers Gustave Flaubert and Kutchu Hanem took place during the period of banishment.
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public dance performances were limited to a few locations along the Nile (St. John 1845, 130) while private parties, weddings and saint’s day celebrations continued to follow the same tradition of ‘awalim and ghawazee entertainment in turn of the twentieth century Cairo.¹⁹

Scholars have offered alternative reasons for the issuance of the short-lived ban. It has been argued, for instance, that the register had intentionally included the names of ‘respectable ladies’ in the list of registered sex workers and other female performers suspected of engaging in sex work, causing a social scandal (St. John 1845, 272) and a series of public protests organized by Muslim scholars which were intended to urge Muhammad Ali to outlaw sex work in Cairo (Tucker 1985, 152). While I do not suspect the evidence gathered for such arguments, a thorough analysis of European traveler accounts of female dancers in Egypt, as well as a more comprehensive reading of the political and socio-cultural transformations that were taking place at the time, suggest that the criminalization of female public performance was part of the larger modernization project of nineteenth century Egypt.

In his study of the development of the police force in nineteenth century Egypt, Khaled Fahmy (1999) discusses the introduction of the disciplining mechanisms of the modern state to Egyptian society following the European model. As previously noted, the reign of Muhammad Ali was marked by the expressed willingness of the monarch to institutionalize a modern conception of “law and order” in Egypt. Fahmy argues that the development of criminal records in the mid-1800s helped introduce an understanding of the criminal, “as someone who is nearly pre-conditioned to break the law” (1999, 360). The register of sex workers fit within this paradigm, since public female performing and sex work, albeit legal, were administratively associated with illegal activities, such as stealing, begging and “other professions considered shameful” (Tucker 1985, 151).

I propose that the willingness of dancers to perform for European men, thereby overstepping customary and then state sanctioned proscriptions against private performances for male patrons, is one of the most evident causes of their intimate association with sex workers and their introduction into criminal categories. Even the ‘awalim, who European traveloguer Lane asserted had been better received and accepted in society, somehow lost their favorable distinction from the ghawazee, since “by the 1850s [the word ‘alma] denoted a dancer-prostitute” (Lane 2003, 35). Thus I argue that Muhammad Ali’s banishment of female performers from Cairo in 1834 is linked to his realization that a certain impression of Egypt was being left on European travelers, which undermined his efforts to represent Egyptians as a modern people. European attitudes towards al-raqs al-baladi and its dancers deemed it incompatible with modern

¹⁹ See Naguib Mahfouz’s Cairo Trilogy and Ahmed Mahfouz’s Khabaya Al-Qabira.
Western values and comportment due to its perceived erotic content. As Egypt remade itself to mirror the modern values being exported by Europe, the way by which dance became reintroduced into the public sphere of Cairo life in the late nineteenth century conformed the Western reading of al-raqs al-baladi as an erotic dance.

Dance in Twentieth Century Egypt

The Birth of the Cabaret

The reinvention of al-raqs al-baladi in twentieth century Egypt is linked to the creation of new public venues for dance performances. It was around the same time that the new ruler of Egypt, Khedive Ismail (1863-1879), declared his plan to turn Egypt into a European country. Already with the termination of Muhammad Ali’s reformation and modernization projects in 1848, the economic development of Egypt became highly dependent on the European market and the international economic order. Ismail’s plan included, among other things, the education of the Egyptian elite in Europe, reform of the Egyptian school system, establishment of the first Western-style colleges in Egypt and the introduction of Egyptian women to public education. On the other hand, Ismail’s plan included heavy expenditure on urban planning and infrastructure, following the model of European urban design (Cleveland 2004, 95-99). The new physical space that was created to the west of old Cairo brought with it a new spatiality that needs to be understood as both a “product of a transformation process and transformable itself” (Soja 1985, 94). Cairo was to be “the expression and achievement of an intellectual orderliness, a social tidiness, a physical cleanliness” (Mitchell 1988, 63) to earn its inclusion among European capitals.

The area forming the border between old and new Cairo, the Azbakiyya, was put under the spotlight in Ismail’s modernization and Westernization schemes. Inspired by Paris, Azbakiyya was turned into a garden and “intended as the new center of the city” (Raymond 2000, 315). An opera house was constructed in the area and Azbakiyya square was turned into “an English-style garden on the model of Parc Monceau” (Raymond 2000, 315). It included boutiques, restaurants and cafes, all serving a multi-national, Euro-Arab public. Arabic music was played all night in traditional cafes and the singing of ‘awalim was now performed behind a curtain in the cafés-chantant (Leland 1873, 128).

The adjacent Muhammad Ali Street was built in 1873 to connect Azbakeyya and the Citadel to old and new Cairo (Raymond 2000, 316). The street was intended as the center for artists of all kinds in the Egyptian capital. It functioned as residence and meeting point for musicians, singers and actors in Egypt since its construction and throughout the first half of the
twentieth century. The houses of female performers were now located in Harit al-'awalim, an alley connected to Muhammad Ali Street. The leading 'awalim, or ustawat, who managed groups of singers, dancers and actresses, owned offices on the ground floors of their building, as male customers were not to be received in the houses (Van Nieuwkerk 1996, 73).

By the turn of the twentieth century, professional dance performances were regularly observed in the music halls and nightclubs of Cairo. Most notably, El Dorado was one of the first music halls, where the local dance—for the first time called “belly-dance” in English—was performed. Female performers in nightclubs were neither 'awalim nor ghawazi, but were identified as artistes, whose job included performing different international and local dances on stage before socializing and drinking with customers, a practice commonly known as fath. The performer, thus, received her portion of the customer’s bill of drinks she helped order, a lucrative practice for both performer and nightclub owners.

In the 1920s and 30s a number of female artistes started establishing their own nightclubs, such as Badi’a Masabni, Insaf and Ratiba Rushdi, Meri Mansur and Beba. Badi’a Masabni, for instance, established her sala (hall) in 1926 mainly from money she had made working as actress and dancer (Danielson 1997, 48). She pioneered nightclub entertainment by establishing a daily entertainment schedule that included a singing and dancing performance of her own, a few other dancers, a comedian (monologist) or singer in the traditional style, a short theatrical performance by an Egyptian or European troupe and a final singing act by a star performer (Danielson 1997, 67). There were also early evening shows (matinees) for women since it was not commonly accepted for women to attend night shows. Dancers were recruited and trained by Badi’a herself.

It is important to underscore that these venues introduced some of the leading Egyptian and Arab singers and musicians in the first half of the twentieth century and included such icons as Farid al-Atrash and Laila Mourad (Danielson 1997, 48). This vibrant nightlife flourished at a

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20 A central feature of turn of the twentieth century Parisian music halls that was to be emulated in Cairo was the presentation of women as special performers of the cancan, belly dance and other striptease-like dances (Savigliano 1995, 103).

21 Since the late 19th century, we have no references to ghawazee in Cairo, and the word came to commonly designate any rural dancer. It is important to note, however, that ghawazee, a group of women descendants of “gipsy” tribes in Upper Egypt, most notably of the house of Nawara, and who define themselves genealogically as such, still exist.

22 Given the nationalities of many artistes, actresses and singers at the time, it is safe to assume that a significant segment of these women belonged to national or ethnic minority groups in Egypt (e.g. Armenians, Jews, Syrio-Lebanese).

23 It is important to note that nightclub performers were not legally and administratively identified as sex workers. Sex work was a separate profession regulated and legally permitted in Egypt until its abolishment in 1949.
time when Cairo was home to thousands of Europeans, mostly British army officers, who had remained in Egypt in the interwar period. Yet judging by the type of music performed, it is difficult to assume that these entertainment venues were by any means limited to young European men.

Notwithstanding the strong presence of the local dance in the artistic life of Egypt in the early twentieth century, music halls were targeted in waves of Egyptian police raids throughout the 1920s, 1930s, and 1940s. As places where male and female mixing was permitted and promoted by the practice of *fath*, and alcohol heavily consumed, they were the cause of moral outrages in the Egyptian public sphere. During the economic crisis in the 1930s, these places were emblematic of inequality and conspicuous spending patterns of the wealthier in Egyptian society (Van Nieuwkerk 1996, 47). During this time, the police intermittently used the law pertaining to “scandalous acts in public,” to prohibit local dance performances. Many managers of those nightclubs located on Emad al-Deen Street, however, escaped the law by alerting dancers upon the sight of a police car, thus enabling the dancer to switch her performance to a foreign dance (Van Nieuwkerk 1996, 47). These raids continued until more extensive socio-political and cultural unrest in Egypt led to the legal regulation of nightclub entertainment in 1951 that codified legal sanctions against the practice of *fath*. The law stipulated that “it is not permitted to allow women who are employed in the public space, nor those who perform theatrical acts, to sit with the customers of the shop nor to eat, drink or dance with them” (in Van Nieuwkerk 2005, 79).

While nightclub entertainment continues to the present moment, by the mid-twentieth century established musicians, singers and actors of both genders slowly moved to alternative, safer, venues for their performances. In the course of the second half of the twentieth century, the cinema screen came to be the major disseminator of the local dance.

Egyptian movies to be released from the mid 1930s to the mid 60s almost all consistently included *baladi* dance scenes performed by some of the leading dancers of the time, who also played leading female roles (Dougherty 2005). A significant number of movies dealt with the character of the dancer in their plots. These often included negative portrayals and common stereotypes about dancers, but also some positive portrayals of dancers in society. Egyptian cinema’s depiction of the local dance was mainly centered on the “nightclub scene,” but also included performances in wedding celebrations, on roads and in private gatherings. Movies also depicted “ordinary Egyptian women” dancing. Until the 1960s, such roles were acted out by real

24 By the end of Ismail’s rule in 1872, it has been estimated that 80,000 Europeans resided in Egypt who formed a significant segment of Egypt’s economic and political elite (Cleveland 2004, 94-95).
life professional dancers. Since the end of the 1960s, however, movies about dancers or those including dance scenes have not principally relied on professional dancers (Dougherty 2005, 167). Egyptian cinema’s crucial contribution to the culture of *al-raqs al-baladi*, not only in Egypt but also across the entire Middle East, is its diffusion of the dance style that became unique to Cairo’s nightclubs—or, the cabaret style—to the popular masses. The cinema’s power to influence the structure of *al-raqs al-baladi* performances in popular venues endures even today, while the popularization of television brought such characterizations in film into the Egyptian household and familiarized the wider public with the cabaret style, which had originally been observed by only a small segment of the population. 25 Popular media has thus played a central role in the normalization of local dance culture among young Egyptians and in shaping the performance style of professional and non-professional dancers in Egypt today.

I now turn from an exposition of major historical transformations in the professional practice of *al-raqs al-baladi* in Egypt in the course of the nineteenth and early twentieth century to an examination of how that period affected the professional and non-professional practice of *baladi* dancing in Egypt in the second half of the twentieth century.

**Dance in Post-colonial Egypt: Dance as Folklore**

In 1952 a group of Egyptian soldiers known as “the free officers” overthrew the Egyptian monarchy and took over power in the country. The political and economic development of Egypt for the following twenty years is characterized by “state-guided, state-dominated economic growth,” as well as the adoption of socialist ideas and principles (Waterbury 1989, 57). Under the presidency of Gamal Abd el-Nasser (1953-1970), the socioeconomic climate in Egypt was marked by a receding foreign presence in Egypt, the dissolution of the Egyptian bourgeois class under state socialism, and growing state support of culture and entertainment as a harbinger of a strong Arab national identity (Danielson 1997, 173). It was this political climate that facilitated the emergence of the local dance, for the first time, as an *artistic* expression of Egyptian culture.

In the late 1950s, an Egyptian college graduate of affluent and established family background organized the first dance troupe in modern Egyptian history that included young men and women, all college graduates of middle class background. According to Mahmoud Rida (1968), among the greatest obstacles that were faced in establishing a folkloric dance troupe (*firqa l’il-funun al-sha’bîyya*) were the associations that the very word dance (*raqi*) had acquired in Egypt.

25 The playing of black and white Egyptian movies on Egyptian television channels has rendered its characters public icons that Egyptians are familiarized with at a very early age.
by the mid to late 1960s. To transform popular connotations of the word “dance,” which by then had inherited blanket associations with “ḥazz al-wist wa ḥazz al-batn” (the shaking of waists and bellies) and little more, in Cairo’s nightclubs and cabarets was Rida’s ultimate goal (1968, 11). Although Rida’s troupe was first received with apathy on the part of Egyptian officials, the recognition it earned after performing in Moscow in 1957 permitted its full-fledged endorsement by the Egyptian state (Rida 1968, 19).

A choreographed narrative performance enacted by several male and female dancers, Rida’s choreographies were largely inspired by the different “techniques du corps” being observed throughout Egypt, such as the bodily movements of the traditional vendor of ʿirq sus (chilled anise drink), the peasant plowing the land or the peasant girl carrying the ballas (the traditional water jugs made of mud) and depicted larger motifs of the nationalist project. Nearly all of the choreographies performed by the Rida Troupe included elements of al-raqs al-baladi, most notably those performed by Rida’s sister-in-law, Farida Fahmy. In contrast to the cabaret style raqs baladi en vogue at the time, which accentuated the shaking of the upper torso and was typically performed in the two-piece costume, the choreographies of Rida softened and stiffened the shakes, stressed movement in space and the dancer’s use of the legs, and were performed in the traditional garments worn by provincial and urban Egyptian women. Rida’s folkloric rendition of local dance was thus significant for its introduction of al-raqs al-baladi to the general Egyptian public in theatres and entertainment venues frequented by families, and for its ability to inspire local appreciation of dance as an aspect of Egypt’s artistic heritage (Rida 1968).

On the other hand and around the same time, dance performances in the nightclubs of the downtown area were no longer the places one sought out for a “good” dance performance. Gradually, nightclubs and so-called cabarets were opening throughout the city, especially in five-star hotels and in the area around al-Haram street where dancing took place. Some of these nightclubs still retained the tradition of professional performances of al-raqs al-baladi, but a significant number had already begun to offer live music entertainment by European bands. Morroe Berger (1961), one of the earliest researchers of al-raqs al-baladi, noted that “old-fashioned local color has become so scarce in Cairo…that a new cabaret successfully cultivates it as folklore for sophisticates, who want to go slumming in tented, sumptuous Eastern style in the desert just beyond the pyramids” (Berger 1961, 36). Increased inspection of dance performances

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26 A common derogatory description of baladi dance among Egyptians is that stresses the mere shaking of the body.

27 Adoption of ordinary Egyptian women garments does not imply that those completely covered the body. Farida Fahmy appeared in galabiyyas with side slits reaching mid thigh and of semi-transparent fiber (see illustration in Rida 1968).

28 Al-Haram Street which connects the Pyramids to the city was established by Khedive Ismail in the 1860s for the occasion of the opening of the Suez Canal.
in the second half of the twentieth century, moreover, required dancers to cover their midriff (often with a transparent material) and, beginning in 1971, aspiring professional dancers were obligated to follow a set of procedures to obtain the license to work as professional dancers in Egypt from Al-Musannafat. The only difference between the registration process followed by professional dancers and that followed by any employee in Egypt for most of the twentieth century was that professional dancers were required to prove a clean record with the vice squad before a performance license could be issued.

The most consistent sites for professional performances of *al-raqs al-baladi* throughout the twentieth century remained wedding celebrations. While the ceremonies that typically merit a dance performance have varied by social class in Egyptian society over time, the *zaffa*, or the procession of the bride to the groom, has widely and consistently been celebrated with dance performance in Egypt. Families historically have competed over which ‘alma’ to hire the best and most coveted lead dancer for the *zaffa* of a family member. When the middle classes started holding their wedding celebrations in hotels or public halls in the 1950s and through the end of the twentieth century, a dance performance by a hired dancer including the *zaffa* remained a central feature. In fact, most middle class weddings during this period featured live bands that played Western music as an accompanying entertainment feature, which permitted guests to dance during the celebrations.

**Neoliberalism and Ascent of ‘Popular’ Culture**

Following the death of Abd el-Nasser and the end of decades of armed conflict with Israel in 1973, the Egyptian state under Mohamed Anwar el-Sadat (1970-1981) slowly abandoned its socialist orientation and paved the way for a full liberalization of Egypt’s economy. Egypt’s massive political and economic transformation under Sadat and later under Mubarak over the span of about twenty-five years held crucial consequences for the social and cultural life of Egypt. The state’s enforcement of economic liberalization policies increased class disparities in Egypt, brought about significant cuts in state spending on public services and triggered waves of labor migration from Egypt to oil-rich Arab countries following the 1970s oil boom.

These transformations broke down the homogenous social structure that had been propagated under Abd el-Nasser and gave rise to new communities defined by wealth and

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29 The department for censorship and supervision of theatres, films, music, and dance affiliated to the Ministry of Culture.

30 Dancers, however, are not syndicated and are required to carry their papers (musannafat) whenever they perform as opposed to musicians, for instance, who obtain an identity card from their respective syndicates.

31 By the mid-twentieth century the word used was *raqisa*, now literally meaning “dancer.”
economic practices that, in turn, began to express themselves socially through different lifestyles and different public demonstrations of culture. The middle and working classes’ widespread disillusionment with state policies, in combination with the regime’s mismanagement of the public sector and the rapid upward mobility of an Egyptian nouveau riche founded upon the nation’s new relations in international trade, served to popularize various forms of opposition to mainstream politics and policy, most notably the rise of political Islam.

It was during this period that the Muhammad Ali Street artists’ community started to slowly lose its control over Cairo’s entertainment industry as a rising demand for professional dance and other forms of entertainment brought on by the new economy raised dancers’ wages and thus presented an alternative venue for lucrative work for young women who did not care to comply with the communal values that defined the Muhammad Ali Street dancers (Van Nieuwkerk 1998, 55-60). The star performers of this period were thus neither brought up at the hand of an usta (master dancer), nor affiliated to a larger community of artists as more traditionally trained dancers had been. In fact, like their predecessors most of Egypt’s star performers, including Suheir Zaki, Fifi Abdou, Nagwa Foud32 and later Lucy, were migrants to Cairo from the provinces.

Though inspired by famous classical dancers such as Tahia Carioca and Samia Gamal, the new generation of star nightclub and wedding performers introduced significant changes to the performance style of baladi that can be attributed to the sha’bi33 musical genre, which achieved an unprecedented popularity in the 1970s. Some of the new generation dancers, particularly Nagwa Foud and Suheir Zaki, established artistic links to the classical musical tradition of the twentieth century by performing to the music of Um Kulthum and Mohamed Abd el-Wahab.34 Yet it was the duet performances between dancers from this generation and the renowned sha’bi singer Ahmed ‘Adawiya35 which ushered in a new performative style that reflected the culture and aesthetics of the urban poor. The duet style of performance moved the

32 Nagwa Foud is a Palestinian refugee in Egypt.
33 The word sha’bi indicates “popular culture”. In music, it refers to the musical genre that evolved in the 1960s that incorporated traditional music from Upper Egypt into an urban musical genre that integrated newly-introduced instruments to local music such as the accordion and the saxophone. The lyrics of sha’bi music are essentially reflective of the difficult conditions of the working classes in Egypt.
34 In 1976 the legendary Egyptian composer, Mohamed Abd el-Wahab composed a piece called Amar ‘Arba’tashar (Full Moon) specifically for Nagwa Foud.
35 Ahmed Adawiya is a native of Muhammad Ali Street. In the 1970s, he was the first native member of this community to become an Egyptian pop star. His lyrics evoked the sentiments of Cairo’s working classes in the 1970s and 80s. These were mostly presented in working class vernacular that expressed humorous criticism of the establishment and of the conditions of working class lovers. As opposed to the classical rhythm of popular music at the time, the sha’bi/baladi music was upbeat and fast.
popular *baladi* style of performance further away from the folkloric style that had been performed by the educated and middle class dancers of the Rida Folkloric Troupe, and reinscribed *baladi* in the social imaginary as the local dance form of the ‘unsophisticated’ lower middle and working classes of Cairo.

It can be argued that the development of *al-raqs al-baladi* in the 1970s was a more *baladi* aesthetic form (representative of the local culture) than the dance style that developed in the early twentieth century. As opposed to the high heeled and Hollywood costumed performances of the early twentieth century, later dancers like Fifi ‘Abdou popularized a performance style that was more reflective of local working class norms. ‘Abdou’s classic performance in which she simulates a traditional coffee shop owner dressed in male *galabyya* and smoking the water pipe demonstrate a more popularized style that allowed for an integration of certain movements more associated with male dancers, such as foot stomps and dancing with a stick.37 38

**Al-Raqs al-Baladi Today: Between Popularization and Globalization**

The dance performances one finds in the decaying nightclubs of downtown Cairo today are no longer the “good” dance performances one might imagine finding in the heart of Egypt’s urban center. The limited programs offered in these places, between the hours of midnight and dawn, consist of 30 to 60 minute dance performances (called nimar)39 that are performed by different dancers and typically accompanied by a male singer and a small Oriental ensemble of musicians. The clientele is usually lower-middle and working class men and sometimes a few women who accompany them. A central feature of professional *al-raqs al-baladi* performances is the performer’s acceptance of money notes40 during the performance41, as male guests will approach

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36 The *galabyya* is the name for the traditional gown worn by men and women in Egypt.
37 Some Western dancers identify *baladi* as that genre of belly dance that is performed to *sha’bi* music while identify oriental dance (*sharqi*) as the performance style that developed in early twentieth century cabarets.
38 The mimicking of body movements and gestures typically associated with the working classes of Cairo continuous to be observed among non-professional performers of *al-raqs al-baladi* in Egypt. This is particularly evident when *sha’bi* music is played, as opposed to the music that is popular among the middle and upper classes (such as the music of Amr Diab).
39 Single *nimra* (literally, “number”), the word used to indicate a short performance by one dancer followed by another. The dancer thus performs a *nimra* in one nightclub and hurries to perform another *nimra* in another nightclub.
40 The money notes are commonly referred to as *nuqta*, or *nu’ta* in Egyptian dialect.
41 *Tanqit* (tan’eet in Egyptian colloquial) – as it takes place during wedding celebrations- is a form of gift giving by the donor to the families of bride and groom. *Tanqit* is not particular to professional dancers and the tradition is fairly established in the wedding celebrations of the working classes, where guests tip performers hired for the entertainment of the celebration.
the dancer and scatter money bills over her head. In most nightclubs today, the portion of stage earnings allotted to the dancer is pre-arranged between dancers and nightclub managers. As soon as the money has dropped to the floor, a male worker in the nightclub collects it and inserts the notes into a money-box. The singer or dancer usually acknowledges the giver by name, occupation and area of residence in the microphone. Occasionally the guest will go on stage and dance with the dancer for a song or less.

The lack of variety in the performance styles one finds in downtown nightclubs today reflects the complete abandonment of these places by aspiring new dance artists. Dancers perform in the “by-now-traditional” badla, a tight and revealing traditional galabiya, or some variation of two-piece costumes. Next to the largely alcohol-free beverage menu offered in restaurants and cafes in Egypt, nightclubs principally offer alcoholic beverages. Other spaces with regular professional dance performances that cater to a more affluent clientele—largely tourists from Gulf Arab countries—can be found in hotels all over Egypt, as well as in the floating boats on the Nile. The area surrounding al-Haram Street continues to house a number of nightclubs with roughly the same programs as those found in downtown nightclubs, though they are generally thought to be of a higher quality.

The local dance culture of Egypt also underwent significant transformations at the turn of the twenty-first century as a result of its growing popularity among Western women. Professional dancers of non-Egyptian origin have replaced Egyptian dancers in a significant number of entertainment venues, particularly in the five-star hotels and expensive restaurants of Cairo and in the touristic resorts of the Red Sea area. Since 2000, Egypt has started hosting a competitive twice-annual oriental dance festival that is organized by two retired dancers. The festivals offer an important venue for the sale of dance paraphernalia and Egyptian producers of dance costumes thus flock to these events to establish contacts with foreign dancers and display their goods. Like the private classes offered by professional dancers, however, these festivals

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42 Sometimes, the money is given to a waiter in the nightclub who throws it on the dancer instead. In downtown nightclubs, these are usually a pile of five-pound notes.

43 This is done by calling: “tahiyya li XYZ,” and mentioning his occupation and neighborhood of residence. As a sign of generosity and an expression of the guest’s wealth and prestige, the ritual usually conceals competition among different male guests. It is common for guests to perform the nu’ta more than once during an evening.

44 Some examples include, hot shorts and bikini top or pants with long slits reaching the mid thighs and bikini top.

45 In 2003, the Ministry of Manpower issued a law that forbade foreign dancers from performing in Egypt. The prohibition was shortly overturned in 2005. However, foreign dancers continue to experience difficulty acquiring legal documents that permit their performances in Cairo.

46 Rakia Hassan and ‘Aida Nour.
mainly target foreign dancers, as high fees for registration for festivals and private classes often preclude the majority of aspiring Egyptian dancers from participation.47

*Al-Raqs al-Baladi* and the Limits of the “Modesty Code”

In his obituary of Tahia Carioca, a celebrated Egyptian dancer, Edward Said (1999) noted that *al-raqs al-baladi* is “performed inside an Arab and Islamic setting, but… quite at odds, even in constant sort of tension with it” (Said 1999). This tension that Said and many observers of *al-raqs al-baladi* rightfully identify takes root in the seeming incongruity between the stylization of the female body as it is performed in *al-raqs al-baladi* and the cultural values of *haya’*, commonly translated as sexual modesty, which many argue affects the everyday comportment of women in Egypt.

As a patterned system of movement that accentuates the attractiveness of the female body and yet is enjoyed and performed widely by different segments of Egyptian society, *al-raqs al-baladi* is sometimes identified as a diversion from *haya’* as it is typically outlined by scholars of femininity in the Middle East (Antoun 1968; Abu-Zahra 1970; Hoffman-Ladd 1986; Abu Lughod 1986; Mahmood 2005). The colorfully ornamented and often revealing outfit worn by professional dancers during performances is the most immediate and perhaps most often misconstrued signal to observers that the so-called modesty code is being contravened. This one component of the dance often becomes a fixation for those who would point out that the costume of *al-raqs al-baladi* contradicts standard expressions of gender and sexuality in Egypt and the Middle East, and the essentialized understandings of femininity that are deduced thereof.

Yet to assume, as Said has done, that this tension takes root somewhere between the dance itself and the cultural space in which it thrives is to suggest that dance is somehow independent of culture, that *al-raqs al-baladi* is a product of a different culture or practice beyond the “Arab Islamic [social] setting” in which it grew and continues to be avidly practiced. On the contrary, this article attempts to lay down the historical trajectory of the practice of *al-raqs al-baladi* in Egypt in an effort to advance an understanding of the dance as an ongoing exchange with culture, and as a *socially mediated* performance where the rules governing normative comportment are suspended.

47 Though amateur dancers are often the customers of these services offered by Egyptian dancers, the dance culture of Egypt largely conceives of these activities as not befitting women who are not interested in becoming professional dancers. For instance, during my fieldwork in Luxor, the musicians of the live band that accompanied the workshop suspected every dancer to be a professional. My personal affiliation to one of them aroused “the suspicion” of the male musicians that I am a professional dancer myself.
In his reflections on the intersections of space and time in the definition of culture, Homi Bhabha (1994) stresses the need “to think beyond narratives of originary and initial subjectivities and to focus on those moments or processes that are produced in the articulation of cultural differences” (Bhabha 1994, 2). The history I have proposed for al-raqs al-baladi is one such narrative. Because the local dance style of Egypt is typically identified as an Oriental (as opposed to an Occidental) dance style in the majority of Orientalist literature and even in contemporary scholarship on the subject, I have argued that the discursive formation of al-raqs al-baladi in Egyptian society throughout the twentieth century has been premised upon a consideration of those episodes in modern Egyptian history when cultural and sociocultural differences have been articulated.

The marginalization of the professional dancer in Egypt resulting from regular diffusion of cultural identification, social categorization and professional regulation in part from the colonial experience and in part from the national modernization project, has failed to unseat her as an important feminine archetype, particularly among lower middle and working class women that emulate various performance styles of the dance. Instead, the state’s attempts to marginalize the professional dancer have produced her as a betwixt and between figure in Egypt’s modernity project: one that personifies the boundary between proper (modern) and improper (un-modernized) feminine comportment. I have tried to show, however, that formulations of normative behavior in Egyptian society (as in any other society) are indefinite, as the parameters distinguishing proper from improper feminine comportment are continuously shaped and reshaped by wider sociocultural forces. As it pertains to al-raqs al-baladi today, public criticism tends to fixate on the costume, whereas in the mid-twentieth century it fixated on the practice of fath, or drinking and socializing with patrons after a performance, and, earlier in the mid-nineteenth century, on dancing in the streets. Yet no matter how much al-raqs al-baladi has changed over the past two centuries, and regardless of whether the dancer is referred to as ghaziyya, ‘alma, artiste, ra’asa, or fanana, the liminal positioning of this cultural form remains constant even as what the dance itself becomes capable of expressing about Egyptian culture continues to evolve within the confines of those spaces in which the codes of modernity remain blurred.

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