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# Intangible Cultural Heritage Beyond Borders: Egyptian Bellydance (Raqs Sharqi) as a Form of Transcultural Heritage

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**ABSTRACT**

The 2003 UNESCO Convention on Intangible Cultural Heritage highlights the importance of safeguarding traditional practices. While some of these practices are only performed in their place of origin, others (such as yoga and flamenco) take place worldwide. In this paper we explore what happens when a form of ICH that originated in one place becomes global. For this, we use Egyptian raqs sharqi (bellydance) as a case study. This is a dance genre with strong cultural roots in Egypt but is also hybrid and now practiced worldwide. Theoretically, we draw on a holistic view of living heritage, Welsch's transculturality and Urry's mobilities. Research methods include one-to-one interviews, analysis of written sources and of online dance videos. Raqs sharqi emerges as hybrid and transcultural, yet strongly connected to Egypt as the origin of its heritage. We conclude that ICH can be transcultural and global, whilst maintaining a strong connection to its place of origin.

## Introduction

The 2003 UNESCO Convention on Intangible Cultural Heritage (ICH) (UNESCO 2003) led to the creation of the UNESCO lists of intangible heritage of humanity, to safeguard and raise awareness of traditional practices. These lists now include practices such as performing arts, festivals and oral traditions.

Some of the activities included in UNESCO's lists (UNESCO 2017b) are mainly practiced in a specific location. For example, *Kuresi* wrestling (Kazakhstan); *Ainu* dance (Japan), and the horse-riding game *chovqan* (Azerbaijan). Other practices, although they originated from a specific location, are now practised worldwide, for example: tango (Argentina and Uruguay); flamenco (Spain); yoga (India); and the martial art capoeira (Brazil).

Furthermore, the inscription of a practice into UNESCO's lists can attract international attention towards a practice that was initially local, such as *Samba de roda*, a dance and

music tradition from Brazil (different from the widely known samba from Rio de Janeiro). According to Robinson and Packman (2014), after Samba de roda was added to the Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity (UNESCO n.d.b), in 2005, it started attracting attention from the media and the tourism sector; gaining increasing attention from outsiders.

The aim of this paper is to understand what happens when a form of ICH that originated in one place is transmitted worldwide. Also, we aim to investigate if the connections of heritage with its place of origin can remain strong, despite transcultural diffusion. This exploration is conducted through the case study of Egyptian *raqs sharqi*. Egyptian raqs sharqi (literally 'dance of the east' or oriental dance in Arabic) is a genre usually included in the group of dances commonly called bellydance, which have in common the use of hips and torso isolations. As Shay and Sellers Young (2005: 1–2) argue:

> Belly dance is not historically a single dance but a complex of movement practices or vocabularies that extends from North Africa through the Middle East and Central Asia to the western portions of the Indian subcontinent as well as western China.

Egyptian raqs sharqi is the stage version of the local Egyptian social dance (called *baladi*) and began in the 1920s in Cairo, in clubs which catered for mixed audiences of wealthy locals and overseas visitors, whose taste was influenced by international art forms, including dance genres such as ballet and ballroom dancing (Van Nieuwkerk 1995). Egyptian raqs sharqi, as well as other types of bellydance, is now practised all over the world (McDonald and Sellers-Young 2013).

Egyptian raqs sharqi is not currently in UNESCO's ICH lists as, for that to happen, a government must apply to UNESCO. Egypt was one of the first signatories of the 2003 Intangible Heritage Convention (UNESCO n.d.) and, at the time of writing, two Egyptian traditions are in the Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity (UNESCO 2017a): Tahteeb (a stick game) and the Al-Sirah Al-Hilaliyyah epic. Hence, it seems that Egypt has an interest in protecting its ICH, but raqs sharqi is not currently listed.

Nevertheless, we have investigated this dance genre from the cultural heritage point of view because of its strong cultural connotations, which give it heritage qualities, even if it is not listed by UNESCO. Also, one of the authors has been a raqs sharqi practitioner since 2003, which provides an insider's knowledge perspective. Moreover, its worldwide diffusion makes Egyptian raqs sharqi an ideal case study to explore how heritage may be transmitted across cultures, while maintaining the connection with a particular place of apparent origin.

In what follows, we first describe the theoretical background and the methodology. We then present our data through a historical reconstruction of Egyptian raqs sharqi, with particular focus on transcultural elements and conclude with an assessment of the transcultural and global dimensions of ICH.

## Theoretical Background

UNESCO's position, regarding their understanding of the international dimension of heritage, seems contradictory, as UNESCO addresses nation states, whilst embracing the idea of a cultural heritage of humanity. UNESCO places people at the centre of ICH, when

stating (UNESCO 2003: 2): 'communities, groups and, in some cases, individuals recognize [ICH] as part of their cultural heritage'. However, for a type of heritage such as flamenco, for example, do 'communities' comprise only a specific group of people who hold the tradition in Spain, or do they include all those people worldwide, who practise flamenco? Indeed, Blake (2000: 64) highlights this discrepancy between the idea of ICH belonging to geolocated communities and those considered a more diffuse human heritage.

However, there is no mention, in the UNESCO documents, that the communities, groups or individuals sharing a certain heritage must belong to the same nation. As Howard (2003: 182) suggests, heritage does not have to be connected to any geographical entity since 'communities that lack a territory are not debarred from developing a heritage'. As Cang (2007: 50) stresses, however, 'since the Convention is an international agreement, there is still a seeming adherence to the idea of national cultures'. For heritage to be added to UNESCO's lists, according to the procedures of inscription (UNESCO 2016), a case must be made by nation states. This process perpetuates the idea that, as Naguib posits (2013: 2178), 'heritage continues to be deeply tied to perceptions about nationhood, authenticity and deep, enduring roots that were developed during the nineteenth century'.

Drawing on Williams' (1978) concepts around culture, this contradiction could be explained in terms of the opposition between forms of 'residual' vs 'emergent' heritage. Williams (1978: 122) refers to residual elements of culture, as having been 'formed in the past, but […] still active in the cultural process […] as an effective element of the present'. Emergent instead refers to practices, values, meanings or relationships that are not only new, but also 'alternative or oppositional' (Williams 1978: 123) to the dominant culture. Regarding heritage, UNESCO (an institution produced by a dominant culture) has incorporated a residual understanding of heritage from the nineteenth century, connected with a definite sense of place. The 2003 Convention, however, engages with an emergent form of heritage, for which people and not nation states are central, thus raising questions around the feasibility of delimiting heritage within territorial boundaries.

Connecting heritage to a sense of place is problematic particularly for physical cultures, considering that, as the leading dance scholar Grau (2008) argues (using the examples of ballet and Bharatanatyam), most dance genres have been transnational from their inception. She then specifies though, citing Kealiinohomoku (1970),[1] that this does not mean that dances, such as ballet, are acultural. Hence, this raises the question of how to analyse a type of heritage that has its roots in a specific culture/s, but is also performed worldwide, by people of various ethnicities and nationalities.

To approach this problem, we start from the idea that people are central for ICH. As Kirshenblatt-Gimblett posits (2004: 58), 'people are not only objects of cultural preservation but also subjects'. Moreover, we adopt Lo Iacono and Brown (2016: 100) holistic concept of living heritage, which is:

> Embodied by individuals, in connection with the artefacts they produce and use and the environment they interact with and as expressed through practices, activities and performances. Living cultural heritage is also constituted by socially and culturally influenced traditions and conventions, as well as by the feelings and emotions of people and the way they relate to this heritage, including taste and perceptions. Heritage and human beings

are indissolubly connected and continuously shape each other in an open-ended fluid dialogue.

Living heritage, Lo Iacono and Brown (2016) explain, is based on Bodo's (2012) dialogical model of heritage, according to which 'heritage is constantly questioned and rediscovered by individuals who breathe new life into it'. UNESCO (2003: 2), in their ICH definition, mention that ICH 'is constantly recreated by communities and groups in response to their environment, their interaction with nature and their history'. In living heritage, however, this reflexivity is extended to include the agency of embodied individuals as they interact with space, artefacts, traditions, conventions and taste through practice.

The living heritage model, however, does not address the international dimension of heritage. Thus, we use Welsch's (1999) transculturality to fill this gap. Through transculturality, cultures are seen as a network, rather than as distinct entities. Welsch (1999: 204) argues that:

> The differences no longer come about through a juxtaposition of clearly delineated cultures (like in a mosaic), but result between transcultural networks […] showing overlaps and distinctions at the same time.

Welsch (1999: 204) comments that the traditional idea of cultures as isolated bubbles, has never been accurate, as cultures, throughout history, have always been hybrid, open to external influences and never homogeneous. Indeed, as Grau (2008: 236) comments, 'no society has ever been monocultural'.

For Welsch (1999: 203), cultures are entangled in a web, 'each arising from transcultural permeations'; they have a high degree of internal differentiation and a high degree of hybridity. Nothing is completely foreign, nor completely 'own'. As Welsch (1999: 205) states:

> Transcultural identities comprehend a cosmopolitan side, but also a side of local affiliation […] the local side can today still be determined by ethnic belonging or the community in which one grew up. But it doesn't have to be. People can make their own choice with respect to their affiliations.

Transculturality (with its concept of cultures as interconnecting webs, the importance placed on individual agency and the balance between convergence and differentiation) is a helpful conceptual tool for understanding transcultural heritage. With regards to dance, Fensham and Kelada (2012: 370) observe:

> A young man from Calcutta who is the reigning Indian salsa champion, an Hawaiian hip-hop dancer and an Aboriginal Zorba represent […] transcultural bodies […] new sites for the investigation of the dynamics of transnational cultural flows.

Thus, practitioners become instances of embodied transculturalism. Embodied heritage is not bound by geographical nor ethnic boundaries, as shown by Van Zile's (1996) example of a Caucasian woman teaching Korean dance in Hawaii. If we conceptualise international forms of heritage as being generated by cultural networks, the next step is to understand how these cultural networks develop and how tangible and intangible elements move. Urry's (2007) mobilities theory helps to develop this point. According to Urry, mobilities are not new, but what is new is the scale of movement around the world, the diversity of mobility systems[2] in play and the interconnection of physical mobility and

communication. Urry posits that (2007: 5), 'in a mobile world there are extensive and intricate connections between physical travel and modes of communication'.

Urry (2007: 47), identifies five interdependent types of mobilities: corporeal travel of people; physical movement of objects; imaginative travel through images in media; virtual travel, often in real time; and communicative travel through person to person messages, via a range of media.

Because mobilities are a combination of physical and embodied movement with virtual and imaginative movement, these mobilities, we argue, are the vehicles to transmit both tangible and intangible elements of heritage. It is the people, individual agents, who make the existence of the transcultural network possible, as they carry with them elements of cultures wherever they go. When people travel they carry artefacts with them along with their feelings, understanding, taste, embodied dispositions; in sum, all the tangible and intangible elements that comprise living heritage.

Urry (2007: 197) identifies a specific type of capital, in connection with mobilities, which he calls 'network capital […] the capacity to engender and sustain social relations with those people who are not necessarily proximate and which generates emotional, financial and practical benefit'. The network capital is dependent on what Urry (2007: 197) calls 'means of networking', which are a combination of technological, social and cultural means. Urry (2007: 213) posits that networks include close knitted clusters of people who know each other, combined with few long range weak links that create a small world effect. However, Urry (2007: 231) suggests, 'a network only functions if it is intermittently "activated" through occasioned co-presence from time to time' to develop trust. This is what happens for a type of heritage such as dance, as practitioners use the Internet to build relationships, in addition to travelling to perform, dance and learn together in the same physical space. This has been observed in a variety of genres such as lyndi hop (Wade 2011), breakdancing (Osumare 2002), Odissi dance (Ghosh 2013) and bellydance (McDonald 2013). The locations (both physical and virtual), in which people connect, generate what Naguib (2008) defines as 'contact zones', in which cultural borrowings take place, generating hybrid cultural expressions.

## Methodology

Data collection for this research (between 2013 and 2016) included a variety of methods, based on a qualitative methodology. Data from videos and textual sources generated information on the commonly held views on raqs sharqi, its specific dance movements and how these change across time, cultures and between individuals. Video data of famous raqs sharqi dancers (the majority Egyptians, a few non-Egyptians but with strong connections to Egypt) were collected from online sources to understand the key signature movements of the dance, and how these are transmitted through performance. Textual data included practitioner-focused books, DVDs, online magazines, blogs, websites, online videos of interviews with famous dancers, open forums and social networking sites. The online element of this research involved over 1000 online dance videos and over 300 online pages of textual data.

The research also involved semi-structured interviews with 10 selected participants, to understand how practising raqs sharqi has affected their lives and to explore how they experience and interpret the dance. Interviews took place in person for those participants

who were based near the researcher. Because of the transcultural nature of raqs sharqi, participants who were interviewed lived in a variety of countries, thus some interviews were undertaken online using Skype, which was, as Lo Iacono et al. (2016) suggest, a good 'complementary data collection tool'. Table 1 shows more details about the participants and how they were contacted.

The data gathered using this combination of sources is presented in the form of a history of raqs sharqi, thus showing how deeply ingrained the hybrid and transcultural elements are within this genre. As Buckland (2007: vii) comments, dance researchers can turn 'towards the diachronic perspective in order to shed light on present cultural meanings'.

## Egyptian Raqs Sharqi as Transcultural Heritage

Egyptian raqs sharqi, in its modern form, developed in Cairo in the 1920s, drawing both from Egyptian traditions and transcultural elements coming from other Middle Eastern countries, Europe and the Americas. Long before the 1920s, Egypt had a long tradition of performing arts, in particular dance performed either in public spaces (such as cafés) or in private homes to mark rites of passage such as weddings (Van Nieuwkerk 1995;

**Table 1.** Participants details.

| Nationality | Been to Egypt? | Level of involvement with raqs sharqi | Interview medium | Contact | Interview date |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| USA | Yes – dance training | Professional: teacher and book writer. | Skype | Email. Researcher attended one of her online courses. | 06/07/2015 |
| UK | Yes – dance training | Professional: teacher and speaker. | Skype | Email. Researcher first met her in Egypt. | 11/08/2015 |
| UK | No | Professional: teacher. | In person | Facebook and email. Researcher knew her from UK dancing network. | 08/07/2015 |
| USA | Yes – dance training | Teaches as a hobby. Academic writer. | Skype | Email. Researcher read her academic articles on bellydance. | 06/10/2015 |
| UK | Yes – general tourism | Professional since retired: teacher. | In person | Facebook. Known from local dance events. | 08/07/2015 |
| UK | Lived there ≈ 10 years | Performed professionally in Egypt. Teaches and performs internationally. Blogger. | In person | Facebook. Researcher saw her perform in Cairo. | 05/07/2015 |
| Portugal | Lived there ≈ 10 years | Performed professionally in Egypt. Teaches and performs internationally and writes books and blogs. | Skype | Facebook and email. Researcher read her e-book. | 18/08/2015 |
| Italy | Yes – general tourism | Student: Attends dance classes. | Skype | Email. She volunteered, after reading researcher's post on website. | 12/07/2015 |
| Finland | Yes – dance training | Professional: teacher. | Email | Facebook and email. She volunteered in response to researcher's FB post. | 30/09/2015 |
| Italy | Yes – dance training | Professional: teacher, book writer and blogger. | Skype | Facebook and email. She volunteered in response to researcher's FB post. | 05/10/2015 |

Fraser 2014). There are memories of these performances in written accounts and drawings by European travellers from the eighteenth and nineteenth century, which Fraser (2014) has collected and analysed. According to Fraser (2014), the most common movements of Egyptian dances at the time were: shimmies (vibrations, mostly of the hips and sometimes of the shoulders); soft body undulations; small travelling steps; head slides side to side and back to front; and belly rolls (performed mainly by male dancers). Fraser also found that performers danced mostly in pairs (rarely solo), in small spaces, using body parts isolations. Similarly, Karayanni (2004: 27) describes a 'dance idiom' with 'elaborate hip articulations, isolations, movements on the vertical and horizontal axis but not across large space'. Both Fraser (2014) and Karayanni (2004) report that it was common for performers to be of any gender, but that European travellers were uncomfortable witnessing males dancing, because of European taboos on gender roles and sexuality.

At the beginning of the twentieth century, Egyptian local dances started being performed for international audiences in high class nightclubs, which Van Niewkerk (1995: 43) refers to as *salas*. The clientele in the salas were sophisticated and wealthy patrons from both Egypt and overseas, hence these establishments catered for international tastes and at a time when Cairo was a cultural hub for the Middle East. As Naguib reports (2008: 475), 'for Egyptians the surge towards Europeanisation became, for many, synonymous with the idea of modernisation. […] Travels to Europe became fashionable'. Naguib (2008: 473) refers to places such as the Gezira Palace Hotel in Cairo (a hybrid architecture designed by architects from different countries) as 'contact zones […] interactive transient spaces […] which provide fertile grounds for various degrees of cultural translations and borrowings'. Similarly, salas, can be considered contact zones, in which emerging genres of the performing arts became hybrid.

The Egyptian audiences' transcultural tastes, are what Bourdieu (1984: 172, 173) referred to as 'distinction', as the Egyptian clientele in the salas would distinguish themselves from those less sophisticated by means of their transcultural tastes. Their capital (social, cultural and economic capital as defined by Bourdieu and Wacquant [1992: 99]) affected what Urry (2007) defines as networking capital, allowing access to different cultures and places. At the same time, these audiences would want to see their own cultural heritage reflected in the performances as this would provide 'a sense of identity and continuity' (UNESCO 2003: 2). These factors influenced the dancers and choreographers to produce a hybrid and transcultural performance in terms of movement vocabulary, music, performers' nationality, costumes and props.

The inception of modern Egyptian raqs sharqi revolves around Badia Masabni, the first documented developer and promoter of this transcultural dance form, who is remembered because of her connection to cinema. She owned salas in Cairo in the first half of the twentieth century, as Chamas (2009: 1) relates:

> In 1926 a woman of Levantine origin named Badia Masabny opened a nightclub in Cairo in the fashion of European cabarets. This nightclub, known as "Casino Badia," and another club later established by Masabny, "Casino Opera," were to have a profound influence on Middle Eastern Dance as we know it today.

Badia Masabni was born in Syria, but started her career as an actress, dancer and singer in Cairo in 1921 (Van Nieuwkerk 1995: 46). We know from an interview that Badia gave to Layla Rostum in 1966 in Lebanon (Adum n.d.), that she spent some time during her

childhood in South America, where she studied classical dance. In the same interview, Badia says that she travelled for work to places such as South America and Europe, that she started her career as an actress and the style she was most famous for was the vaudeville music hall. It is, therefore, reasonable to assume that Badia's background and travels must have influenced the dance as it was performed in her salas in Cairo, due to her own international apprenticeship, which was itself hybridising.

Badia Masabni's salas, were 'contact zones' not only because of Badia's international contacts and the international clientele, but also because they attracted performers from different countries. As Tahia Carioca recalls in an interview with Beata and Horacio Cifuentes (1999: 5), talking about Badia's nightclub, 'I started with a group […] two Italian girls, an English one and one Egyptian, myself.' Badia, as Shay and Sellers-Young argue (2005: 19–20), 'created cabaret revues, a primary component of which was dance that would appeal to both tourists and members of the Egyptian upper class,'. Badia herself commented how she changed the dance and how new transcultural influences were absorbed (Adum n.d.: Second Segment-Family), by saying, 'I made variations in the dance – I added Latin, Turkish and Persian dance to it'. Indeed, from the oldest video available of raqs sharqi in the Badia Masani's nightclub in 1934 (Lynetteserpent 2009), it can be seen how the dance has changed comparing to the descriptions provided by Fraser (2014). In this video, the dance is not limited to a small space, but performed by a group of dancers around Badia (who sing and play finger cymbals), who come down from a set of stairs and use all the space available.

The dancers who worked with Badia were trained in a variety of dances from outside Egypt. For example, Samia Gamal (Cifuentes 1994: 6), remembers, 'I started with Badia Masabni. […] I had such difficulties with turns, so I just had to take ballet'. Tahia Carioca (Cifuentes 1994: 18) also mentioned that she studied ballet 'I started taking ballet classes when I was a little girl'. One step in particular that is omnipresent in raqs sharqi, from our observation of dance scenes from movies from the 1930s onward, is the arabesque (a travelling step in which the dancer pivots on one foot while extending the other leg). This step was borrowed from ballet, but adapted to the raqs sharqi dance aesthetic it becomes more grounded and the extended leg is not lifted high.

Just like the dance movements were influenced by transcultural elements, the same happened to music. Badia Masabni recalls in an interview (Adum n.d.: Second Segment-Family), 'I'm the one who mixed Arabic music with foreign music. […] We added the piano and the contrabass, and the flute, the clarinet and the accordion, all together'.

Costumes and props in raqs sharqi from the late 1920s were also influenced by a convergence of Egyptian and foreign elements. In the previously mentioned video of Badia's-nightclub (Lynetteserpent 2009), the dancers are wearing the *bedlah*. This is the brassiere and skirt costume commonly associated with bellydance. It is seen in Egypt, only from Badia Masabni's time. Before then, the costumes of dancers in the Middle East, seen in photos taken at the turn of the century, were different. The old costumes can be seen in videos such as 'Princess Ali' (Edison and Hendricks 1895). Ward (2013: Costuming) describes the traditional costumes in Egypt at that time as: 'skirt, skirt "topper" with long ribbons, sheer chemise, vest, heeled shoes […] an elaboration on the everyday garments worn by ordinary women'.

The first examples of costumes with a bare midriff, start appearing in America at the start of the twentieth century as shown in photographs depicting Ruth St Denis (Buonaventura 2010: 126) and other Western oriental fantasy photographs (Buonaventura 2010: 119). According to the American dancer Morocco (Varga Dinicu 2013: 114), the bedlah is a 'western fantasy invention that was picked up "Over There"'. Ward (2013: Costuming), however, after analysing texts and photographs from the turn of the century, argues that:

> It is not impossible to imagine that the *bedleh* bra could have evolved from the vests worn by earlier dancers. […] rather than as a wholesale adoption of Western fantasy costuming.

The vest and skirt may have been the foundations on which the bedlah were designed. However, the bedlah visible in Badia Masabni's video, have skirts and sleeves made of chiffon, which Badia may have seen outside of Egypt. Indeed, Badia recalls (Adum n.d.: Second Segment-European Influence) that she travelled to Europe two or three times a year and that she was influenced by the Western music halls 'I bought set decorations and costumes from them. […] and gave them to my artists and my dancers'. This constitutes an example of Urry's mobility of objects.

Technology played a key role in the transmission of raqs sharqi. During the first half of the twentieth century, Cairo was the hub for film-making for the Arabic speaking world and 'Egypt became the film and entertainment center of the Middle East shortly after film was invented in the late 1890s' (Shay and Sellers-Young 2005: 19). Many Egyptian movies included dance scenes, in particular raqs sharqi which, up until that point was only performed in expensive salas. Thus, many of the dancers who worked at Badia's clubs went on to perform in films up until the 1960s and some of them gained celebrity status. The celebrity status of dancers in Egyptian movies might have led to focusing on the role of the dancer as a solo performer. Indeed, today raqs sharqi is mainly seen as a solo dance, whereas, according to Fraser (2014), until the late 1800s dancers in Egypt tended to perform most often in pairs. Also, in movies there are no men dancing raqs sharqi, which seems to reflect a change in the Egyptian audiences' taste perhaps driven by the westernisation of Egyptian society.

The portrayal of this genre in movies meant that many more people started seeing raqs sharqi in cinemas, and not only those who were wealthy enough to be able to afford to watch live performances in the nightclubs. Cinema acted as a type of 'imaginative travel', as it allowed the dance to be seen across the Arab world and not only in Cairo. To this day, those early dancers from the first half of the twentieth century are watched around the world and influenced contemporary dancers, given the ready availability of their videos on the Internet. Each one of the interview participants for this research mentioned seeing influential dancers from that age, with the most popular named as Samia Gamal.

In Egyptian movies, there are scenes of other dance genres too, in addition to raqs sharqi, which further highlights the transcultural network of this form of heritage. For example, Samia Gamal could dance a variety of genres, as we can see in the 1952 movie *Ma takulshi la hada* (Don't tell anyone), where there is a scene in a theatre with various dance genres, from Egyptian folkloric tableaux[3] to ballroom and Hawaiian style dance (*The Fabulous Samia Gamal 2003*: 01:04:08). It was not only these dancers' dancing style that was transcultural, but sometimes also their stage names. For example, Tahia Carioca was given her stage name after a Latin American dance called Carioca,

as the first solo choreography that was created for Tahia was loosely based on this type of dance (Molthen n.d.: 7). In this instance, cinema and dance act as a medium for a type of mobility that Urry identifies as imaginative mobility through media. The use of dances from different parts of the world and the exotic name given to Tahia, transport Egyptian viewers to far away locations, while the Egyptian folkloric tableaux and the raqs sharqi pieces connect them to their heritage and local sense of identity.

Up until the 1960s, Egyptian performers travelled outside Egypt and watched western movies to gain inspiration. For example, Mahmoud Reda (who founded a folkloric dance troupe in Egypt and worked as a raqs sharqi choreographer for Egyptian movies), was influenced by western dance and choreography. In 1954, as Fahmy (1987: 17) reports, 'he joined an Argentinian dance company and travelled with them on their tour of Europe. [...] he attended ballet and choreography classes'. Moreover, he had a passion for American musicals starring Fred Astaire. Mahmoud recalls, in an interview with Varga Dinicu (2013: 33): 'I used to see the same movie, maybe 30 times.'

More recently (from the 1990s onward), Mahmoud Reda and Farida Fahmy (who was the main female dancer of his troupe), have been travelling the world to teach and have also been involved in organising dance training and seminars for dancers visiting Egypt from abroad. Two interview participants said:

> Farida Fahmy and Mahmoud Reda were putting together … two weeks long seminars … I attended the first one of those in 2006. (Stacey)

> I've been to Cairo and Alexandria in connection with a dance project, The World Dances with Mahmoud Reda. (Irene)

Mahmoud Reda and Farida Fahmy are not the only senior artists who today travel the world to teach Egyptian dance and who organise workshops for foreigners in Egypt. The international interest in Middle Eastern dances and towards Egyptian styles in particular, including raqs sharqi, started in the 1960s in the USA. At that time, a big factor that contributed to the diffusion of bellydance in the USA was the Middle Eastern diaspora. Shay and Sellers-Young explain (2003: 12):

> Large groups [...] from Lebanon, Palestine, Egypt, Syria and elsewhere in North Africa and the Middle East had come to the United States to escape political problems in their native countries. They created communities in the urban environments of Detroit, New York, Los Angeles, Chicago and San Francisco [...] a series of restaurants opened [...] that became natural gathering places for immigrants [...] Arab American musicians cleverly adapted the emblems and symbols of Orientalism made popular by such contemporary Hollywood films as *Salome* (1953), *Kismet* (1955), *Never on Sunday* (1960) and *Zorba the Greek* (1964) and joined it to a new musical style derived from their traditional music.

Thus, Middle Eastern dance and music were transported by these emigrant communities to the US, producing identities that also linked to their distant homeland. This process is analogous to what has been done, by Sri Lankan Tamils in exile with Bharata Natyam (O'Shea 2007). In the 1960s, New York in particular was a hot bed of culture and, as Morocco (Varga Dinicu 2001: 9) recalls, '8th Avenue, from 27th to 29th Streets, had 10 restaurant/night clubs with continual live, nightly Mideastern music'.

American dancers, who were hired to perform in such restaurants, first learnt raqs sharqi on the job by observing people of Middle Eastern origin dance in those venues

(both professional dancers and customers who danced socially). Such dancers included Morocco (Varga Dinicu 2001), Jamila Salimpour (El Safy 1994), Dahlena (Gamal 1999) and Helena Vlahos (Westover n.d.). It was not long before the generation of dancers who learnt in the restaurants started teaching in structured classes. Alison, one of the interview participants who grew up in New York in the 1960s, recalls: 'When I was 16, there was a bellydance class down the street and I thought that would be really cool'.

In addition to the diaspora, it was the social change brought by feminism and sexual liberation that encouraged the diffusion of belly dance from the 1960s in the USA, as Sellers-Young (2016) and Deagon (n.d.) report. However, this process involved a certain amount of power and capital (both economic and social), since only people with the economic means could afford to attend dance classes. For example, Gamal (1999: para. 19) recalls that, when Dahlena opened her first dance studio in Chicago, in 1974, her classes were attended by wealthy women and 'Dahlena believes that it was the influence of these students, women of position and means, that allowed the dance to gain respectability'.

The American belly dancers who learnt in ethnic restaurants then continued studying Middle Eastern and Northern African dances in depth, travelling to the countries of origin of these dances. In the early 1970s, 'there were many American dancers who were also researchers traveling, working and studying in the Middle East' (Forner 1998: 86) and practitioners started organising big festivals around the US first and then around the world. Dr Monty has been credited as being the first to organise such events (Forner 1998; Gamal 1999; Varga Dinicu 2001).

Apart from books on bellydance being published, such as Dahlena's 1976 *The Art of Belly Dancing* (Gamal 1999: 1), tours were also organised. In 1974, Gamal explains (1999), Dahlena had opened her own dance studio in Chicago and she performed raqs sharqi internationally, including in France, Syria and Iraq. Dahlena then spent a month in Egypt to study the dance, before returning to Egypt several times to lead group tours. Dahlena was not the only American teacher to lead dance tours to Egypt. Auntie Rockie did the same for many years. This was a trend that developed as bellydance teachers started organising trips for their students, and the reputation of Egypt, among raqs sharqi practitioners, as the cradle of bellydance was cemented. Since the 1960s, when bellydance, including Egyptian style, became known in the USA, this genre has spread worldwide.

The diffusion of raqs sharqi outside of Egypt is due mainly to the ever-increasing corporeal travel of people, a type of Urry's (2007) 'mobilities'. Moreover, festivals were organised and artefacts such as books, magazines and later, tapes and DVDs were produced. These artefacts constitute part of the tangible aspects of raqs sharqi heritage. Moreover, these artefacts represent two types of Urry's (2007) mobilities: imaginative and communicative travel. By communicating ideas and showing images about Egyptian dance, these artefacts vicariously transport users to Egypt.

One of the Egyptian dancers who became highly influential in the transmission of raqs sharqi outside of Egypt through artefacts, was Mona al Said. Her videotapes were (El Safy 1996: 3) 'one of the first Egyptian performances available on video in the early 1980s'. Indeed, two comments from one of the videos of Mona posted on YouTube (Baadrobot 2008) state:

> I started to study Raqs Sharqi and Egyptian folklore with these videos. (Out of Babylon)
> This dance was on the first video cassette that I owned in the early 80s. (Amoura Latif)

Some Egyptian dancers who were famous in Egypt in the 1980s and 90s, now teach workshops at festivals in and outside Egypt. For example, Fifi Abdou attended festivals such as *The Global Bellydance Conference* in 2013 in China (Dance for Unity 2013) and Mona al Said the *Mediterranean Delight* festival, in Greece (Avihass 2014). There are three main annual oriental dance festivals in Cairo: *Ahlan Wa Sahlan* (Ahlan wa Salan Festival n.d.); the *Nile Group Festival* (Nile Group Festival n.d.) and *Raqs, of Course* (*Raqs of Course n.d.*). By looking at the teachers lists on these sites, it emerges that some are from Egypt, some are foreigners who work in Egypt and many are foreigners who live and work outside of Egypt, but who have connections with Egypt for training. Moreover, some of the teachers are men, who are reclaiming their participation in this dance. According to Luciano-Adams (n.d.: 21), *Ahlan Wa Sahlan* has become 'a perfectly globalized village, which has grown to 1200 participants from 55 countries'.

Even though raqs sharqi is a type of transcultural and hybrid heritage, and is practised worldwide, the connection with Egypt remains strong. Indeed, some non-Egyptian dancers decide to live and work professionally in Egypt for a few years. They are all women and most have a good amount of economic and/or cultural capital, but choose to work in Egypt out of love for the dance. The reasons that have emerged for them wanting to perform in Egypt, are mainly two: the musicians and the audience. In particular, it seems that the opportunities to dance to live music are far greater in Egypt. For instance, one of my interviewees based in Italy stated that 'there is no live band around here. It's almost impossible'. Also, Ana (from Portugal, who danced professionally in Egypt for several years), in her interview, said that in Egypt 'you still have the best musicians'. Luna of Cairo (Esposito 2011: para 9), an American who dances professionally in Cairo, writes that 'nothing compares to the joy I get from performing to a large band in front of an appreciative audience'. Similarly, Lorna (Gow 2006: para. 12), from Scotland, states that 'it's lovely working with musicians [...] fantastic feeling'. Dunya, from Finland (Sullivan and Farouk 2006: sec. 11:03, 35:55), said:

> I wanted to come to dance here [...] to learn about dancing, about the culture, about the people, dancing with a band, because in Finland, we have some musicians but it's not the same.

Regardless of how close or not non-Egyptian dancers are, or strive to be, to the 'authentic' Egyptian spirit, they have embodied through their dancing some of the elements of Egyptian culture but also developed their own style, sometimes drawing from their own cultural background and influencing other dancers, thus adding to the transcultural repertoire of raqs sharqi. For example, Soraya is from Brazil and her style is influenced by her Brazilian origins and samba moves. In a drum solo where she dances in Cairo (Kyria Dance 2014), the rhythms that the drummers play, in particular from minute 3:48, recall samba and the shimmies (quick hip vibrations) that Soraya performs are different from any shimmies seen before in Egyptian dance (as we have noticed after analysing over 1000 videos of raqs sharqi). The Brazilian influence is also seen in the artefacts, as she wears shoes with very high heels to dance, like samba dancers in Brazil. These dancers have become ambassadors for Egyptian raqs sharqi worldwide. As Raqia Hassan once said, 'I love the

foreigners who come to dance in Egypt because after a while they can go back to their countries and teach the dance there' (Sullivan and Farouk 2006: 1:36:46).

The global diffusion of raqs sharqi coincides with the emergence of what Urry (2007: 5) calls a 'mobile world', where 'there are extensive and intricate connections between physical travel and modes of communication'. These connections are created by the co-existence of 'physical mobilities' (of people but also physical movement of objects, such as costumes and props made in Egypt, books, CDs, and DVDs sold worldwide), with ever more powerful and faster 'virtual mobilities' thanks to the Internet. Because of its ubiquitousness, the Internet (which encompasses the imaginative and the communicative travel) has rendered raqs sharqi a transcultural phenomenon on a global scale. Learning via the Internet is possible through both synchronous (live streaming online courses with the use of a camera) and asynchronous (through recorded videos or written communication between teacher and learner) methods. Thus, as Sellers-Young (2016: 8) observes, teaching over the Internet is mediated through the camera and it allows individuals to learn 'in the privacy of their homes, without the inhibition associated with size, age, race or gender'. Also, the Internet has increased the deterritorialiation and detemporalisation of heritage, since dancers no longer have to be in the presence of a teacher to learn. Deterritorialisation and detemporalisation are connected with globalisation, which leads to a shrinking of time and space, or what as Giddens (1991: 21) refers to as 'the intersection of presence and absence'.

Mobilites have generated a worldwide transcultural community of raqs sharqi enthusiasts, who connect using social media, emails and blogs and who sometimes meet in person at festivals or during trips. Practitioners become members of (Welsch 1999: 204) 'transcultural networks'. In addition, practitioners create new 'contact zones', both in person and virtually, carrying with them the heritage that they embody and the artefacts they use.

Yet, even if mobilities represent a big opportunity for the transcultural transmission of heritage, they raise the issue of inequalities in terms of capital and power. For practitioners to acquire transcultural heritage, they need a certain amount of capital and resources. For example, raqs sharqi practitioners need financial capital to travel, buy artefacts and pay for lessons; cultural capital (embodied in the form of dance training and/or objectified in the form of artefacts and computers to connect online, for example) and social capital in terms of social networks they can join. These three forms of capital also influence their network capital because, if they can travel and communicate, they are able to keep in contact with practitioners worldwide.

The need for different forms of capital in order to embody and transmit this form of heritage could lead to its commodification, due to 'the rationalization of leisure via the interpenetration of market commodification logics' (Brown and Leledaki 2010: 139). This commodification, for heritage, could constitute either a threat (as commercialisation could override aesthetic and/or cultural values) or an opportunity (as it makes it possible for practitioners to make a living from their art and, therefore, continue transmitting it). Also, this issue could be particularly relevant for forms of heritage that originate in less privileged social environments. In these situations, there is a danger that heritage may be exploited by other people who own more capital, rather than benefitting the community of origin.

## Conclusion

Table 2 summarises the tangible and intangible elements of raqs sharqi, which are affected by the process of transculturality across its history, and the contact zones in which the process takes place. Table 3 focuses on the types of mobilities that have been identified in the history of raqs sharqi.

In the processes of transmission and creation relating to the transcultural elements of the raqs sharqi heritage, we have identified a wide range of mobilities. The people who are involved in the diffusion and hybridisation of heritage are in constant movement and communicate with each other. The physical movement of objects happens as costumes and props are moved, whilst also changing overtime.

Imaginative mobilities emerge as practitioners are influenced by images they see in media such as movies (in cinemas and today online, on video sharing sites). Communicative mobilities also play a big role as practitioners communicate using a range of media, but particularly the Internet.

Through these mobilities, people become increasingly transcultural. For example, an American dancer who learns raqs sharqi acquires cultural elements from Egyptian culture (but also other cultures embedded within raqs sharqi, due to this dance's hybrid nature) and connects with dancers from other countries, who share the same passion, thus building transcultural networks and meeting in 'contact zones'.

Practitioners and audiences also affect the way in which raqs sharqi is transmitted transculturally through their habitus, taste, feelings and social influences. For example, the Egyptian elite in Cairo in the 1920s encouraged the development of this hybrid genre. Also, dancers' bodies are sites for transculturality; as dancers learn different dance forms, they are integrating these movements in their bodies and developing hybrid forms of dance. This process creates what Bourdieu (1977) calls habitus, developed through practice.

The main conclusion that can be extrapolated from this research, is the fact that, although a type of intangible heritage can be transcultural and hybrid and be practiced worldwide, it is possible for its cultural affiliations to one place to be maintained. Egyptian raqs sharqi, for instance, has maintained strong connections with Egypt. Mobilities have facilitated the global spread of Egyptian raqs sharqi and its transculturality, but they have

**Table 2.** Tangible/intangible elements and contact zones.

| Time | Tangible/intangible elements that are transcultural | Contact Zones |
|---|---|---|
| *Late 19th/first half of 20th century* | Audiences with international taste | Salas in Cairo, first half of twentieth century |
| | Artists of various nationalities | |
| | Dance movements | |
| | Music | |
| | Costumes (the bedlah) | |
| | Props (veils made of chiffon) | |
| | Stage names of some dancers | |
| *1960s-80s* | Musicians from various ME countries playing together in restaurants in the USA | Ethnic restaurants in the USA; dance festivals. |
| | Books and magazines written by Americans about ME dance | |
| *1990s to 2010s* | Dancers from many different nationalities | Dance festivals in and outside of Egypt. |

**Table 3.** Mobilities.

| Time | Corporeal travel of people | Physical movement of objects | Imaginative travel | Communicative travel |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Late 19th/ first half of 20th century | Egyptian elite to Europe and Westerners to Egypt.<br><br>Badia Masabni travelled extensivley across different continents.<br>Other performers also travelled. | Costumes and set decorations that Badia Masabni bought in Europe and used for her shows in Cairo. | Cinema | |
| 1960s-80s | Diaspora of Middle Easterns to the USA. American dancers and their students start travelling to the ME for research and training. | | Images in books, magazines and tapes of Egyptian dance. | Text in books, magazines and tapes of Egyptian dance. |
| 1990s to 2010s | Egyptian dancers travel worldwide to teach.<br><br>Dancers travel from all over the world to Egypt for training. | Artefacts made in Egypt and sold to people worldwide. | Internet | Internet |

also helped reinforce the image of Egypt as the centre of raqs sharqi heritage. Also, the process of global transmission and development of ICH is complex as it involves the interaction of a multitude of tangible and intangible elements.

At the beginning of this article, we engaged with UNESCO's definition of ICH, wondering whether it is suitable for a type of embodied, hybridised and transcultural type of heritage such as Egyptian raqs sharqi, given the need for the involvement of nation states in the process of heritage recognition (which ties heritage to a specific locality). Conversely, the model of living cultural heritage described by Lo Iacono and Brown (2016) has the embodied individuals as its focus; individuals who have agency and distinct tastes and who are in symbiosis with and embody cultural heritage (in both its tangible and intangible manifestations). A model of heritage that highlights the role of individual agency can better connect with the idea of cultures as transcultural networks (following Welsch's [1999] concept of transculturality). Thus, individuals are carriers of transcultural heritage globally, through the engagement with mobilities (as defined by Urry [2007]).

The role of the individual is paramount in the global transmission of Egyptian raqs sharqi, given its practitioners' strong emotional, ideological and imaginative investments in this art form, which fosters individual agency and creativity. Particularly, Egyptian raqs sharqi seems to be what Williams would define as an emergent practice, in the sense that it tends to be oppositional to the dominant culture. In particular, as highlighted by Karayanni (2004) and Fraser (2014), Egyptian raqs sharqi (and bellydance as a whole) has always been associated with sensuality, thus its appeal, but also its subordinate status in different societies at different times. Investigating how oppositional heritage is transmitted is a topic that is outside the remit of this paper, but worthy of further investigation.

## Notes

1. This refers to Kealiinohomoku's 1970 article An *Anthropologist Looks at Ballet as a Form of Ethnic Dance*, in which she argues that, contrary to the assumptions of anthropologists of the time, ballet is ethnic just like any other form of so called 'primitive dances' because it is the expression of a specific culture at a certain moment in time.
2. Movements take place through what Urry (2007: 51) calls mobility systems, which 'distribute people, activities and objects in and through time-space'. Systems include, for example, roads, paths and railways.
3. Folkloric tableaux refer to adaptations for the stage of group dances that were danced socially across rural and urban Egypt. In particular, Mahmoud Reda is well known for having travelled across the country to document local dances and then adapt them to the stage (Fahmy 1987). One of such dances, for example, is the *Al-asayah*, which takes place at the end of a mock fight called *tahtib*. The asayah is the stick used during the tahtib, which is also used today in raqs sharqi dance performances.

## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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