

Bellydancing & Pregnancy A Powerful Combination!

Our world could benefit from healthy images of beauty and strength and power during pregnancy and childbirth!

In combination with Suzanne's work and others in the field, I thoroughly encourage women to practice the dance as long as and whenever they are able. Encourage your fellow dancers to blossom to the fullness of their expression, to feel proud to display their pregnant countenance and share the special roots of our dance.

Suzanne McNeil followed a group of women who bellydanced throughout their pregnancies.

Ten research discoveries found by Suzanne McNeil:

- 1 It's easier for women to learn bellyroll movements when they are pregnant. Powerful pregnancy move!
- 2 The undulation or camel walk was uncomfortable during labor for all the subjects. The motion made it feel like there was pressure downward on the cervix. After discovering this we did not use it during labor. It did not affect anyone in class except occasionally someone in their 8th or 9th month.
- 3 The movements most useful during labor were in relation to the hips and lower back, i.e., the figure 8, the hip circle and the pelvic thrust (not from bellydance)
- 4 All the students wanted to learn these movements in their dance form because it's more fun. A teacher could teach them separately as a technique without the bellydance name attached to it if she was hampered by a conservative community.
- 5 The circular movements of the pelvis could be done during labor standing, leaning on a bed or table and on hands and knees.
- 6 Pregnant women learned better when I placed my hand on the area of the body where the movement needed to be corrected. I would stand next to them- touching- to have them mimic the undulation. This seemed to accelerate learning.
- 7 Physical balance and energy increased.
- 8 Attitude about their body improved.
- 9 Indigestion during pregnancy (a common occurrence) was almost always eliminated.
- 10 One woman reported that her baby would kick a lot when she lay down to go to sleep. She tried using bellyrolls during the night and it did quiet the kicking.

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Some of the basic physical benefits:

The mind/body connection as developed in the art of bellydance is very much in tune with Hatha Yoga principles. The energetics involved in focus and concentration bring the dancer into full body awareness. This is important in feeling a greater sense of control physically, emotionally and mentally in one's everyday life experience. It is also an important factor in birthing whether it's a baby or an idea! All healing processes are strengthened. Concentration in the pelvic and lower abdominal areas send additional blood flow to female organs allowing more oxygenation to take place and thus enhancing proper growth and healthy functioning of the body. Physical competence leads to emotional wellbeing.

The veil dance, characteristic of bellydance, involves large extended arm movements which when combined with the fast paced-aspects of the dance provides an aerobic work-out strengthening the heart and building stamina.

Involvement in a local bellydance class or association can contribute greatly to a woman's self-esteem and sense of community with other women. It is a dance which has been enjoyed by women for centuries that celebrates life and the stories of our lives remembered and expressed wordlessly through our bodies.

My first inkling that there was any connection between the slower movements of Oriental dance and the physical act of giving birth came rather suddenly, in late February 1961, when, at the end of a performance at the Arabian Nights in New York City, I was pounced upon by a Saudi Arabian woman, **Farab Firdoz**, who refused to believe that I wasn't an Arab because I had danced so authentically (or so she said).

She was a dancer and had been taught by her grandmother, who had also been a dancer. She told me **that the "belly roll" (I hate that word), flutter, and some parts of the floor section were based on the movements of labor and childbirth and that thousands of years ago, they had been part of a religious ceremony, but that with the advent of monotheism and various styles of religious restrictions, had ceased to be religious and become secular:** either as an entertainment (women for women, men for men, women for male or mixed audiences, men likewise) or therapeutic.

In remoter areas, where the West hadn't bolluxed things up, all the women would gather around a woman in labor and do certain movements, encouraging her to do likewise, thus easing the birth and reminding each other that they shared the same destiny and experiences as women. Having done these movements in various folk dances since childhood, their muscles were stronger and better prepared for the stress of childbirth.

Of course, she didn't tell me all this the moment she cornered me in the dressing room. It came over several weeks of a burgeoning friendship and my interrogation tactics. To tell the truth, I thought she was full of it at the time.

Then a couple of Sephardic women mentioned that a LaMaze course they had taken had been a laugh riot, since the main movements taught were the "bellyroll" and flutter, but they were termed "pelvic rocking" and "deep

breathing". I checked out a couple of the LaMaze classes at Mount Sinai hospital and found that they were correct. My curiosity was aroused, to say the least, but I remained unconvinced.

In the London library, in 1962, I found "*The Dancer of Shamahka*" by **Armen Ohanian** and the passage I cited in my 1964 article: "*Belly Dancing and Childbirth*", as well as the rest of the book, which served to flesh out the times and cultural contexts from which it was written:

Thus in Cairo one evening I saw, with sick incredulous eyes, one of our most sacred dances degraded into a bestiality horrible and revolting. It is our poem of the mystery and pain of motherhood, which all true Asiatic men watch with reverence and humility, in the faraway corners of Asia where the destructive breath of the Occident has not yet penetrated. In this olden Asia which has kept the dance in its primitive purity, it represents maternity, the mysterious conception of life, the suffering and the joy with which a new soul is brought into the world.

Could any man born of women contemplate this most holy subject, expressed in an art so pure and so ritualistic as our Eastern dance, with less than profound reverence? Such is our Asiatic veneration of motherhood, that there are countries and tribes whose most binding oath is sworn upon the stomach because it is from this sacred cup that humanity has issued.

But the spirit of the Occident had touched this holy dance and it became the horrible danse du ventre, the "hoochie koochie". To me, a nauseating revelation of unsuspected depths of human bestiality, to others it was - amusing. I heard the lean Europeans chuckling. I saw lascivious smiles upon even the lips of the Asiatics, and I fled.

I didn't take the whole story of her life as gospel truth, however, and I still wasn't convinced. I questioned my friend, Farab again. She told me that as recently as 25 years before (1937), she had been present when the women of her grandmother's tribe gathered around the pallet of a woman in childbirth and did these movements, which she did along with them.

Other dances were done afterwards, to celebrate the birth, as well as a more elaborate repetition of the actual birth dance. **Men were forbidden to watch the birth or the women's celebrations afterwards. They had their own dances and celebrations for the event, from which the women were, likewise, excluded.**

I began to believe. In 1963, the Moroccan Pavilion of the New York World's Fair opened. I was there for the first show on the first day. I sat through four shows that day, returned the next and the next and the next.

The directors/ promoters, whom I'd met previously (whole *other* story!), noticed. (Gee, I wonder why?). They were surprised and pleased at the extent of my seriousness about the dance and culture and began to supply me with information (and food -- lots of it!).

Almost as a footnote to a conversation one day, one of them said that his wife had just gone back to Morocco, to go to a small village from where her cousins came. One of them was about to give birth for the first time and she went to help "*dance the baby into the world*". What? He repeated pretty much what Farab had told me two years previously.

First a Saudi and now a Moroccan with the same story. His wife wasn't a professional dancer, looking to "justify" or "apologise" for her profession. She was a damn wealthy, bourgeois housewife, who didn't try to deny her roots in a Berber tribe that had remained almost unaffected by Western plastic culture. I told him I would give half my soul to see such a ceremony and he promised to help.

In 1964 I wrote the article I mentioned previously, which was published in a national, medically oriented magazine. That article has since been re-printed in over five other publications, from feminist newspapers to dance publications to *Medical Dimensions* (1974). I found the April 1961 issue of *Dance Perspectives* and noticed that La Meri, the world respected dancer and dance ethnologist, had used the same "Dancer of Shamahka" passage to back her premise. Small world isn't it?

I thought my Moroccan friend had forgotten his promise, but in 1967 word came to me from Casablanca: get down here now, if you still want to see what you asked about. Another cousin was about to give birth, and from the size of it they thought it might be twins. I asked no further questions, grabbed my passport, borrowed some money from my mother (thanks Ma!) and split to Casablanca. (Come to think of it, I haven't paid her back yet. Then again, she hasn't mentioned it either.) The wife met me at the airport and explained the situation on the way to the village, which was between Tisint and Tintasart. (Not exactly what you would call tourist towns.)

Since I couldn't speak Berber by any stretch of the imagination, nor Moroccan Arabic (we spoke in French and Spanish), but I could easily pass for Moroccan physically, I was to pretend that I was deaf and dumb and would be introduced as a servant of my friend's wife. Anyone who knows me knows how hard it would be for me to keep my mouth shut for five minutes, let alone a few days...

She filled me in on the background and what I would see and could expect, so that nothing would take me by surprise and produce a reaction that would give me away as a foreigner. I was to start playing the role immediately, because we were going to pick up several other relatives on the way and they weren't to know a thing.

Of course we had to stay a few hours at every relation's house along the way and eat, etc. I was spared the excess *avoirdupois* by dint of the fact that servants ate the leftovers and didn't have to gorge out of politeness.

My "Mistress" got me in to see several of the family celebrations by saying that I was new to her household and that she had sort of adopted me because I was so young and so terribly afflicted by Allah. (When I asked her how she justified the lie along with God's name, she said that my "affliction" was that I wasn't really Moroccan!) I heard some dynamite singing and saw enough Schikhhatt to o.d. on it for a while. I even danced my

little asterisk off in the servants' quarters, when they got together after work and had their own Schikhatt parties.

It took three and a half long, hot, tiring days and nights of stopping at relatives homes to finally get to the village, but as soon as we got there, we were whisked off to the local *hammam* (steam baths). Allah be praised.

A special tent had been erected at one end of the village, to which the cousin had gone the day before, after having been bathed by several friends at the hammam. Her husband was a big mogul in the tribe and a lot of partying was to accompany the event.

She was sitting down on a divan in the back section of the tent, but I noticed that a small hollow had been dug in the ground in the center of the tent. There was food and fruit and mint tea aplenty for the female guests. Males weren't allowed within 100 yards of the tent flap. They weren't sure of the exact day she would give birth, but it would be very soon. More relatives were expected and there was enough food for an entire army, should it decide to go on manoeuvres.

We passed the day singing, playing bendirs, dancing Schikhatt, drinking mint tea (which I served to my "mistress" in a pretty passable manner, if I say so myself) and eating. Oh, yes -- the VERY pregnant cousin got up and danced half the day herself, dressed in a beautiful embroidered kaftan.

Later that night, when I was alone with my benefactress, I asked about the hollow in the ground. She said that it was there for the baby to fit into during the birth. Huh? Wait and see...

The next morning, we were awakened earlier than expected by one of the cousin's servants: labor had started. We jumped out of bed (off the divans), dressed, and ran like hell. She was dressed in a lighter kaftan and was squatting over the hollow, sweating up a storm. The other women had formed a series of circles, three deep around her, but made way for us to get to the first circle.

All the women were singing softly and undulating their abdomens, then sharply pulled them in several times. The movement was much slower and stronger than what dancers call the flutter, and can be seen in some Schikhatts. They repeated the movements while slowly moving the circles clockwise. The cousin would get up and do the movements in place for a few minutes and then squat for a few minutes and bear down.

She didn't seem to be particularly agitated or in any pain. The only sign of strain was the perspiration that soaked her hair and forehead. We stopped only for midday prayers. Thank heaven I'm a dancer and imitated the movements of Moslem ritual as if I were imitating a dance, or I would've blown it right there!

We drank some mint tea that she poured for every one of us and continued dancing. About an hour later, she gave a gasp and we heard a soft thud. She lifted her kaftan and there was a baby in the hollow. She held up her hand: it wasn't over yet. Fifteen minutes later, another gasp and another soft thud. It was twin boys.

They were cleaned with soft white tufts of lamb wool dipped in cool tea, but the umbilical cords weren't cut until the afterbirths had been delivered. Then the cords were cut with a silver knife and the afterbirths were buried in the hollow that had received the newborn babies. The women started zagareeting like crazy, the babies started crying (who wouldn't with all the noise) and from the shouts outside, I gathered that the men had realized what had happened and were carrying the news to the other side of town, where the father had been waiting it out with his friends.

Fifteen minutes later, he appeared, exactly 100 yards from the birth tent, and the babies were carried out in a pure white cloth for him to see. Then they were returned to the mother and she put them to her breasts. She had, by this time, returned to the divan. The women kept up the singing and dancing until way past sundown. It was so moving that I couldn't help crying.

While I had been watching her give birth, I could see her abdomen moving underneath the kaftan in involuntary undulations, much the same as my cats' abdomens when they kitted. I asked my "mistress" later, if she had still been dancing at that point, or if natural movement had taken over, and she said:

Nosotros hacemos una imitacion de los moviimientos naturales. Ella tenia que hacer esos moviimientos, cuando dio a luz, porque no pudo menos. (She imitated the natural movements. She had to do those movements when she gave birth because she couldn't do otherwise.) In other words, those were natural movements of labour and childbirth that we have been brainwashed out of in this society by religious propaganda and medical manoeuvring.

It was more than sufficient to me to prove the origins of some of the movements of what has become incorporated into Oriental dance and more than sufficient evidence to give credence to Armen Ohanian's allegation regarding Oriental dance and how it has become degraded and distorted as a valid artform.

Every dance form, done well (as well as sports, gymnastics, etc) is pleasing to the eye and therefore sensual. Unfortunately, there are many ignorant, uptight people who find any pleasing movement of the human body lewd and lascivious.

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Website Designed by Jae McManus

DANCE AS IF NO ONE IS WATCHING PREGNANCY AND BELLY DANCE by PAM ENGLAND

Ancient peoples danced to sanctify life, to celebrate rites of passage such as marriage. They danced and drummed in soulful preparation for physical ordeals, such as hunting or war, and, we might imagine, birth. Not so long ago, before families became isolated in television-addicted nuclear units, it was part of life for couples to dance often in communal festivities: barn dances, street dances, weddings, and waltzes. I think the joy and exercise of dancing must have had a positive impact on health in pregnancy and birth.

Reflect on the historical meeting of two worlds in the late 1800's: when "lady-like" American women bound in corsets that deformed their bodies beheld the sensuous and unselfconscious Middle Eastern dancers who arrived in New York and introduced Oriental dance, more commonly known now as Belly Dancing. For me this disparity mirrors birthing women today: most western women are bound in labor by technological "corsets" that often change the course of their labor. In addition, western women are restrained psychologically by abiding with a tacit agreement to "act like a lady," "keep your legs together" and "be quiet, don't make a scene."

What keeps most of us from dancing are the same assumptions and judgments that make us refrain from painting or writing poetry (or perhaps even laboring in our own way). In this way, we stay in step with the cultural tendency to defer creativity to the professionals. If you are a dance-avoider or a closet-dancer, notice if, instead of just moving freely in rhythm with the music you hear, you try to imitate professional dancers. In so doing, you probably are carefully, rigidly choreographing graceful movements while trying desperately to avoid making any funny-looking ones.

Dance your truth. It might begin with small, slow movements unfolding into free turns and jumps. When you dance with self-awareness, you experience the ecstasy of true awareness in your body. This is essential preparation for childbirth.

During pregnancy, the joints loosen a little and the hips widen; the legs must carry extra weight. The deep, rhythmical movements of Oriental, African or Ecstatic dance strengthen and tone abdominal, back and leg muscles. Bending your knees you become flexible in mind; you might spring into a new idea! Taking up space in a wide twirl, claim your right to be here; feel Joy. Dance your feet; Feel the earth. Breath blessed life-giving energy into your body from the earth. Some time ago Nicholee Froese, a doula, wrote me a letter describing the power of music and movement she witnessed during a labor she attended last spring:

"I had been giving the mother therapeutic massage since the end of her first trimester and was honored to be present as she labored and gave birth. Four people supported her through labor. She wanted to be touched, preferably by about six hands at a time, through each contraction. Although she was working hard, labor was progressing slowly. A doula suggested a change in the music-from a calm, relaxing melody-to something more upbeat. We put on a CD of African drumming and chanting." African women bring to birth the tremendous strength they acquire from years of night-long

even week long spirit dances. They dance to the lively beat of drums, big drums that sounded out the entrancing pulse of the universal heartbeat. It's no surprise that the rhythm of drumming, dancing and contractions are interrelated.

Nicholee described how they then "coaxed the mother out of her safe position in bed, and with one person on each side of her, we all began dancing to the beat of the drums. We put our hands on her hips and helped her move them to the rhythm. We all danced that baby out. It was a poignant experience."

When Dr. Michel Odent was medical director of the maternity clinic in Pithivier, France, the weekly Sing-a-Long with "our dear 72-year old Granny, Marie-Louise" was one weekly event he "wouldn't skip for the world . . . When she sits down at the piano, notes drop like pearls. Her voice rings out like pearls. Her voice rings out, singing for all the unborn babies and [their] mothers. . . She adjusts her glasses on her nose, and she's off again, into the celestial spheres of nursery rhymes and lullabies." As the evening progresses, "Marie-Louis steps up the rhythm. The melodies move faster and faster. . . In a flash, she is asking us to dance, to clear away the chairs, to float freely in the melodies of her guitar. And soon we are all dancing." When expectant mothers sing, they exercise their diaphragm muscles and learn to completely breathe out; they also learn unselfconsciousness and get in touch with their emotions. When everyone sings and everyone dances, it breaks down the hierarchy between professionals and parents. We share a community (excerpted from *Birth Reborn* by Michel Odent, pages 27-28; New York: Pantheon Books, 1984).

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Move That Belly! Bellydancing During Pregnancy

By Carma Haley Shoemaker

During pregnancy, attention is directed toward a woman's belly as the life inside her grows and develops. People pat her belly, listen to her belly, feel for evidence of life. But bellydancing? Do bellydancing and pregnancy go together?

Yes, they do! Women in all stages of pregnancy are learning to use the exotic tools of bellydancing to prepare themselves – and their spirits, minds and bodies – for childbirth. "Quite a few people would probably be skeptical about bellydancing during pregnancy. However, bellydancing, pregnancy and childbirth are in harmony. Today's pregnant woman can benefit from ancient cultural traditions," says Gaby Mardshana Oeffering, developer of the video *Bellydancing During Pregnancy*.

"Bellydancing was used as prenatal conditioning for women in ancient times," adds Delilah, an internationally-acclaimed bellydancing performer and instructor, who goes by her first name only.

In fact, the prenatal exercise market – which offers everything from yoga to low-impact aerobic routines – is now welcoming the more exotic form of bellydancing as a fitness option. "Midwives have pointed out to me that certain body postures and movements from bellydancing correspond to those used in prenatal preparation," says Oeffering, who eventually developed a bellydancing fitness program for pregnant women.

What Can Bellydance Do for You?

"Pregnancy is not a disease," says Oeffering. "Pregnant women must not be sedentary, neither during pregnancy nor during childbirth. The pregnant woman has a need to develop a more playful relationship with herself and her baby. When dancing, the woman feels more supported in her femininity and in the functional capability of her body. Moreover, no other such birth preparation guarantees such an intense contact with the baby."

From a medical point of view, bellydancing addresses many of the same concepts that other prenatal preparations do. According to Oeffering, bellydancing can help prepare for childbirth. "During dancing, the pregnant woman adopts body postures which favor an optimum engagement of the fetus," says Oeffering. "The natural birth positions are standing, sitting and squatting because the baby's gravity can have its full effect. Through bellydancing, the pregnant woman arrives at the necessary mobility and strengthening of the pelvis, while developing the required awareness of the muscles used in the birth process."

Listen to Your Body

What better way to learn about your body – and how to listen to it – than learning a new way to move it? "Pregnant women, through bellydancing, acquire confidence in themselves and their own bodies," says Oeffering. "In my experience, dance and the emotions connected with it, make women feel a lot more autonomous and self-assured regarding birth. They have trained themselves through the dance. They know which movements are helpful for pregnancy complaints. They know what is of benefit to their

babies. There are meditative elements to relax and release. Joyful music puts them in a serene, self-confident mood."

"I think that bellydancing is great for health, fitness and getting in touch with your own body," says Marnie Holmes, a writer from Sydney, Australia, who recently took up bellydancing. "I do it for myself and enjoy the movements. Also, my midwife thinks that my bellydancing is a major reason why my abdominal muscles are as good as they are at the 6th month of my pregnancy."

As beneficial as bellydancing is, there are situations in which it must be avoided. Fortunately, these situations are few and far between. "Bellydancing is only contraindicated where there is a risk of premature delivery," says Oeffering. "Classes for bellydancing should only be given by experts who are familiar with dance and the medical side of pregnancy and birthing. Pregnant women must consult their doctors for approval. Bellydancing is wonderful, but be safe."

Bellydancing Precautions

A pregnant woman can often perceive that her baby is cradled in her womb and lulled by soft, circling, rocking movements. These are the same movements that bellydancing mimics. However, there are movements of bellydancing that should not be practiced until the time is right.

"There are some movements that I call 'movements of expulsion,'" says Oeffering. "These movements include the hula circle, the pelvic tilt and soft shimmies. Where most movements result in a baby being lulled and calmed, these particular movements cause the babies to react with restlessness. These movements should never be danced continuously, as labor may be set off. These movements should be reserved for the birth process where they have a supporting and stimulating effect."

Pregnancy is a wonderful time of new feelings, new sensations and new experiences. Bellydancing will intensify these feelings, will offer even more sensation and will be an experience you will never forget. "If you are pregnant, I wish with all my heart that you may feel the comforting, pain-reducing and supporting effect of bellydancing, as well as gain access to your female strength," says Oeffering. "May the birth of your child be a happy and deep experience."

Compiled by April Kline