

the dance of life

ITS ORIGINS MAY BE ROOTED IN RELIGIOUS RITUAL, BUT BELLY DANCING OR BIRTH DANCING OFFERS A DELIGHTFULLY SENSUAL APPROACH TO LABOUR AND BIRTH

A woman in an elaborate and revealing costume performs a mesmerising dance, swaying her hips and undulating her belly in a sensual and earthy manner. She is performing not, as you might imagine, a seductive belly dance but a series of sacred birth movements whose origins are rooted in ancient childbirth ritual.

For thousands of years women have birth-danced their way through pregnancy and labour, and now this ancient tradition is enjoying a renaissance. Sheila Kitzinger, social anthropologist and mother of all birth mothers, who dedicates a chapter to birth dancing in her latest book *The Politics Of Birth*, reminds us of the similarities between the erotic dance and the birth dance. "We think of the belly dance as a sexual dance but the birth dance was and is as well. In the West we have forgotten that the act of birth is naturally a sensual one. It is only in our Western history, where birth has been separated from sex, that we have this conflict of ideas.

In Bedouin culture girls were taught this dance at the age of 12 to be used as a sexual dance and to aid in childbirth."

Through history the birth dance was performed by women for women to encourage them through the birthing process – the movements are designed to loosen the hips, open the pelvis and assist the baby on its journey to birth.

Although there are no records to pinpoint the origins of the dance, theories range from a dance for the ancient Egyptian goddess Isis, to an age-old fertility temple rite. Sheila Kitzinger has witnessed versions of this dance around the world, from the Caribbean to Japan and Mexico to South Africa. Even today, versions are still practised by the Maoris and the Hawaiians.

The most recent contemporary birth dance was witnessed by New York dance scholar and performer Morocco (Carolina Varga Dinica) in a Berber ceremony in the 1960s. She described how the woman giving birth was surrounded by concentric circles of women who performed abdominal movements to encourage and support her. "This dance was considered sacred," she writes "and the menfolk remained outside the tent at a respectful distance until the woman came out to present the newborn baby to the father."

But it is in today's contemporary belly dance that you can most see the ancient dance at work. As a pregnancy yoga teacher and mother (twice over), I see clearly how these movements benefit

labour and birth. The pelvic circles and figures of eight help to disperse the pain and assist the baby in finding the optimal fetal position for entering the birth canal. The movements also produce a soothing rhythmic effect that alleviates discomfort and promotes a healthy unfolding of the labour process. The famous camel walk, where the abdomen is undulated, and which was first taught by Birthlight founder and medical anthropologist Dr Françoise Freedman and then adopted by Gowri Motha, can help prevent a baby from getting into a posterior position.

During pregnancy, belly dancing offers a raft of health benefits: pelvic and lower abdominal movements send additional blood flow to female organs, enhancing growth and healthy functioning of the body; the basic posture, with the knees slightly bent and the tailbone tucked under, is excellent for correcting spinal misalignment, relieving lower backache; and, like yoga, belly dancing leads to increased strength and flexibility, both of which are important during labour.

Then there's the floor work, where you get onto your knees and do back bends. Symbolically, the woman is close to the earth, which is the giver of life. As the mother-to-be progresses deeper into labour, she is drawn towards the floor, drawing strength from the earth as she advances through the later stages of labour.

According to belly-dancing midwife Cathy Moore, many women entering the transition stage of labour experience an uncontrollable shaking of the limbs, a movement she compares to the famous belly-dancing shimmy: "I had struggled with this movement for a while and when I finally 'got it' I could feel the wonderful looseness and relaxation of the muscles of the pelvic floor. I knew instantly that this move was intended to move a baby down the birth canal."

All these movements, whether belly or birth dance in origin, are intrinsically female. As Sheila Kitzinger observes, "A woman who is in touch with her body will naturally perform these movements in labour... An active birth is a birth dance" ●

VERSIONS OF THIS DANCE APPEAR AROUND THE WORLD, FROM JAPAN TO MEXICO

RESOURCES

CLASSES – not all belly-dancing is pregnancy-friendly, so check your teacher is properly trained in birth dance. For details of Belly Babes pre-natal yoga, taught by Jacqueline Chapman, tel: 020 8300 7016; www.bellybabes.org.uk

MOROCCO AND THE CASBAH DANCE EXPERIENCE www.casbahdance.org
THE GODDESS DANCING www.thegoddessdancing.com – articles and links
The Politics of Birth by Sheila Kitzinger (Ebury, £22.99)

