ANALYSIS OF THE DEEP CONNOTATION IN SAINEM DANCE MOVEMENTS

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ABSTRACT
This paper aims to analyze the deep cultural connotations embedded in the movement vocabulary of Uyghur Sainem dance. Through literature review, in-depth interviews, and observation of performance videos, the study finds that Sainem dance movements carry multiple layers of cultural meaning. First, its movement vocabulary embodies the dual memory of oasis agricultural life and nomadic culture. Second, its postures and rhythms reflect the layered influences of Shamanism, Buddhism, and Islam. Third, as a core art form of Meshrep, Sainem plays an important role in strengthening ethnic identity and social integration. Fourth, its improvisational nature reflects the Uyghur philosophy of "living in the moment" and their aesthetic sensibilities. This study provides theoretical support for the intangible cultural heritage preservation of Sainem dance, offers a cultural interpretative framework for dance pedagogy and transmission, and promotes cross-cultural exchange of Silk Road music and dance traditions.
Keywords: Sainem Dance, Deep Connotation, Uyghur Culture, Religious Cultural Heritage

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INTRODUCTION

Uyghur Sainem is a folk dance with a long history and widespread popularity, found throughout the towns and villages of the Tianshan Mountains region. The term “Sainem” derives from Arabic, originally meaning “beautiful idol” or “beautiful goddess,” and in Uyghur it is also used as a girl’s name. In 2008, Sainem was officially inscribed on China’s national intangible cultural heritage list (Zhang Fan, 2014).

Sainem dance is an indispensable part of Uyghur daily life. Uyghur people perform Sainem enthusiastically at Meshrep during festive occasions, wedding ceremonies, and gatherings of relatives and friends. Its dance form is characterized by lively and varied rhythms, beautiful and soulful melodies, and a combination of improvisation and diversity. Sainem dance carries rich cultural connotations of the Uyghur people, including historical memory, religious beliefs, life customs, and national spirit (Li Jilian, 2005).

However, previous research has often focused on musicological or anthropological perspectives, with insufficient systematic analysis of the deep cultural connotations embedded in Sainem’s movement vocabulary. Sainem is not merely a display of bodily movements but a “living” ethnographic manuscript—every gesture, glance, and posture carries the Uyghur people’s historical memory, religious beliefs, life customs, and aesthetic concepts. Therefore, this paper aims to fill this research gap by conducting an in-depth investigation into the deep connotations of Sainem dance movements.

LITERATURE REVIEWS

The Uyghur people mainly inhabit the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region, located at the core of the ancient Silk Road—a crossroads of Central Plains, Indian, Persian, Arab, and Central Asian nomadic cultures. The integration of oasis agricultural and grassland nomadic civilizations has shaped the dual temperament of Uyghur dance, combining delicate lyricism with unrestrained vitality. (Li Jilian. 2005.)

The origins of Sainem can be traced to Buddhist music and dance in the Western Regions, with the word "Sainem" originally meaning "beautiful Buddhist goddess". Dance scenes depicted in the murals of Buddhist grottoes (such as the Kizil Caves) provide visual evidence. The 11th-century Uyghur classic "Turkic Dictionary" records folk night banquet songs and dances such as "Solchuk" and "Suhdik," recognized as early prototypes of Sainem. (Luo Bin. 1991)

In the 16th century, with the migration of certain ethnic groups, the dance blended with the local dances of Kuqa (ancient Kucha), forming a more unique artistic style. The Tang dynasty poet Bai Juyi's description of "whirling snow drifting in spinning dances" in his poem "HuXuan Girl," and Li Rui's depiction of "raising eyebrows and moving eyes, treading on felt carpets" in "HuTeng Boy," both resonate with the dance style of contemporary Sainem. The Qing dynasty "Imperial Geography of the Western Regions" also records "playing Sinamu (Sainem) as dance rhythm".

Over the course of its long historical evolution, Sainem absorbed influences from ancient Shamanistic beliefs, Buddhist culture, and Islamic culture, as well as life customs such as hunting, farming, and weaving. In 2008, Sainem was inscribed on China's national intangible cultural heritage list.（Yu Yangyang.2024）

Theories and Concepts

1) Body Memory Theory and Embodied Cognition

Derived from archaeological “stratigraphy” and the anthropological concept of “acculturation,” this theory emphasizes that a mature cultural form is often the product of gradual layering, integration, and reorganization over a long historical period. Applied to Sainem, its movement vocabulary exhibits a distinct phenomenon of “religious stratification”: it retains the trembling-knee trance legacy of Shamanism, incorporates the “S”-shaped curvilinear aesthetics of Buddhist music and dance, and adapts to the physical expression norms of Islam. This layering

is not a disruptive replacement but an organic symbiosis, making the dance a bodily medium for multi-religious dialogue.

Theoretical sources include Maurice Halbwachs' collective memory theory, Paul Connerton's notion of "body practices," and Maurice Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology of embodiment. In this study, Sainem dance movements are treated as a form of "body writing" that encodes historical texts. Movements such as head-shaking, eye-shifting, toe-lifting, and finger-snapping are not mere physical techniques but carriers of a thousand-year memory stretching from the Western Regions music and dance of the Tang Dynasty to the present. Through intergenerational bodily transmission, these movements bring history to life, serving as embodied carriers of collective memory.

2) Cultural Stratification Theory

Theoretical sources include archaeological "stratigraphy" and cultural fusion/accumulation theories in cultural anthropology, such as Robert Redfield's "great and little traditions," and the stratigraphic phenomenon in religious history. In this study, the concept of "religious stratification" is proposed to reveal how Shamanic knee-trembling traditions, Buddhist "S"-shaped curvilinear aesthetics, and Islamic gender norms are superimposed and coexist within the same bodily vocabulary of Sainem. This perspective helps understand the harmonious coexistence of multiple religious genes within the dance.

3) Dance Ecology

Theoretical sources include the dance ecology methodology developed by scholars such as Zi Huajun and Luo Bin, which emphasizes the interrelationship between dance forms and natural/social environments. In this study, it is used to explain how the dual subsistence modes of oasis agriculture and grassland nomadism have shaped Sainem's stylistic synthesis of delicacy and vigor, and how the specific social field of Meshrep regulates the improvisational, self-entertaining, and social-communicative features of the dance.

4) Functionalism

Theoretical sources include Bronislaw Malinowski's cultural functionalism and Emile Durkheim's theories on collective rituals and social integration. In this study, Sainem is viewed as a core cultural mechanism within Meshrep that strengthens ethnic identity, transmits social norms, and promotes emotional integration. Its function is not merely aesthetic entertainment but also social integration and moral education.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

1) Information and Sampling

The study focuses on inheritor Zhao Xiaoguang, Associate Professor at Xihua University, Chengdu, Sichuan, as the primary informant, along with 12 dance students who have been learning Sainem dance under his instruction for nearly one year.

2) Data Collection

Literature review of academic papers, books, and policy documents from CNKI and other sources; in-depth interviews via phone and video calls; observation of Sainem performance videos from online platforms.

3) Data Validation

Interview transcripts were submitted to interviewees for accuracy confirmation; multi-round cross-observation of video materials from different sources was conducted.

4) Data Analysis

Movement ontology data including joint angles, trajectories, speed, and amplitude; rhythm and timing data including alignment with music, duration, and patterns; cultural context analysis including historical background, religious culture, and social functions.

RESEARCH RESULTS

1) The cultural connotation of Xinjiang Sainem dance movements

1.1 The Body Writing of Historical Memory

Sainem dance movements embody the profound historical memory of the Uyghur people. First, the term "Sainem" itself carries historical transformation—from "beautiful Buddhist goddess" in the Buddhist period to "beautiful idol" after Islamization. This semantic evolution maps the historical transformation of Uyghur religious beliefs. The etymology itself is a microcosm of cultural history.

Second, the basic movements and postures of Sainem are directly inherited from ancient Western Regions music and dance. The "head-shaking," "eye-moving," "toe-lifting," and "finger-snapping" movements of Kuqa Sainem are essentially consistent with the descriptions of Western Regions music and dance in Du You's Tongdian from the Tang dynasty. The Tang dynasty poetic depictions of "raising eyebrows and moving eyes" and "whirling snow drifting" are still vividly present in Sainem's "neck-shifting," "eyebrow-moving," and rapid spins. This is not simple movement inheritance but a form of bodily memory spanning a thousand years—through the dance practice passed down through generations, the essence of ancient Western Regions music and dance continues to live in the bodies of contemporary Uyghur people.



Figure1 The picture shows a dancer moving their neck
Source: https://ts1.tc.mm.bing.net/th/id/R-

Sainem is widely spread throughout the oasis towns of the Tianshan Mountains. Sainem from different regions—Kashgar Sainem, Kuqa Sainem, Yili Sainem, Hami Sainem, Hotan Sainem, etc.—each has distinct movement styles, and these differences themselves are bodily records of regional historical and cultural changes. For example, Hami Sainem, influenced by Han and Mongolian cultures, incorporates the rare 5/8 time signature and features a more dignified and steady style; while Kashgar Sainem retains more of the exuberant characteristics of ancient Western Regions music and dance.

1.2 The Bodily Expression of Religious Culture

Sainem dance movements are permeated with the influence of multiple religious cultures, forming a unique phenomenon of "religious stratification."

Islamic Influence: From the 16th century onward, Islamic culture exerted a profound influence on Sainem. The restraint and moderation in male-female duet dancing reflect Islamic cultural regulations on gender expression. At the same time, Sainem's central position in Meshrep is closely related to the Islamic tradition of valuing community gatherings and collective

celebration. Sainem's evolution from religious music and dance in the Buddhist period to a comprehensive art form primarily focused on secular celebration, while still retaining elements of spiritual expression, is itself a result of this religious-cultural layering.

Shamanistic Remnants: The Uyghur people once practiced Shamanism in their early history. The rapid spins, trembling rhythms of the body, and improvisational emotional release in Sainem can all be traced back to the shamanic dance traditions in shamanic ritual ceremonies. In particular, Sainem's "trembling knee" rhythm—where a slight tremor in the knees sets the entire body in motion—is believed to be connected with the shamanic practice of achieving a "trance state" through bodily trembling.

2) The Bodily Presentation of Social Life and Folk Culture

Sainem dance movements draw extensively from the daily life of the Uyghur people, serving as a direct bodily presentation of social life and folk culture.

2.1 Artistic Transformation of Daily Life:

Many classic Sainem movements derive directly from daily life—postures such as "hat-lifting," "sleeve-wrapping," "skirt-pulling," and "chest-brushing" vividly recreate the daily manners and life scenes of the Uyghur people. Villagers typically dance spontaneously at Meshrep, incorporating daily life customs, field labor scenes, everyday anecdotes, and romantic feelings into their movements. This artistic concept of "life is dance, dance is life" makes Sainem a living mirror of Uyghur social life.



Figure 2 The picture shows a male and female dancer dancing together, with their left and right hands under their heads, vividly showing the hat-holding pose, keeping the hat on their heads from falling off.

Source: https://ts1.tc.mm.bing.net/th/id/R-

2.2 Aesthetic Ideal of "Curvilinear Beauty" and "Dynamic Balance":

Sainem dance pursues the aesthetic principles of "curvilinear beauty" and "dynamic balance." Its signature "S"-shaped posture is not deliberately posed but naturally formed in motion through the lateral flash of the waist, the push-pull of the chest, and the coordinated movement of the arms, presenting smooth and continuous curves in motion. This aesthetic ideal of "seeking balance in motion and harmony in curves" embodies the Uyghur philosophical concept of "dynamic and static, hardness and softness complementing each other."

2.3 Unity of "Subtlety" and "Passion":

Sainem's aesthetic style possesses the dual qualities of "subtlety" and "passion." In male-female duets, dancers engage in subtle emotional communication through delicate body

language such as “neck-shifting,” “eyebrow-moving,” and eye expressions; while in the climax of the dance, they engage in passionate emotional release through rapid spins and intense arm movements. This aesthetic dialectic of “passion within subtlety, restraint within passion” is a typical expression of Uyghur cultural character—combining the delicacy and restraint of oasis agricultural civilization with the warmth and freedom of grassland nomadic culture.



Figure 3 The picture shows a man and a woman dancing together, raising their eyebrows
Source: https://n.sinaimg.cn/sinacn

2.4 Self-entertainment" and "Life Philosophy

Sainem is essentially a self-entertaining dance. Unlike ritual dances or performance dances, Sainem’s core function is the dancer’s own emotional expression and physical enjoyment. This self-entertaining spirit of “dancing for dance’s sake” and “joy for joy’s sake” embodies a life philosophy of “living in the moment”—dance is not for pleasing others but for expressing oneself and enjoying life. This artistic concept is highly consistent with the Uyghur national character of “passionate, unrestrained, free, and easy-going.”

3) The cultural connotation of Sainem dance

Sainem is one of the most representative folk dance forms of the Uyghur traditional performing arts. Widely performed across the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region—particularly in Kashgar, Hotan, and Ili—it constitutes an integral component of the Twelve Muqam repertoire. Beyond its aesthetic appeal as a choreographic language, Sainem serves as a living repository of Uyghur historical memory, social ethics, emotional philosophy, and practical wisdom. Its cultural connotations can be articulated through four interrelated dimensions

First, the ritualized expression of vital emotions. The movement vocabulary of Sainem originates from everyday experiences of joy, sorrow, love, and reunion. Its brisk tempo, spinning steps, and intricate wrist gestures are not mere technical displays but externalizations of inner feelings into collectively perceptible bodily rhythms. In wedding ceremonies, festive gatherings, and Meshrep, Sainem functions simultaneously as emotional catharsis and social bonding, constituting a cultural ritual through which Uyghur communities articulate their zest for life and alleviate daily stresses.

Second, a living testimony to multicultural convergence. The musical structure, dance postures, and costume aesthetics of Sainem bear conspicuous imprints of the civilizational exchanges along the ancient Silk Road. Its rhythmic patterns integrate features of the Arabo-Persian musical system; its spinning and leaping movements echo the vigorous styles of Central Asian nomadic cultures; and its undulating gestures mimic the rhythms of oasis agriculture, such as imitating flowing water or swaying fruit-laden branches. This “unity in diversity” artistic

genome makes Sainem a microcosmic example of mutual cultural learning within the broader Chinese national community.

Third, the implicit narration of social ethics and gendered aesthetics. In traditional Sainem performances, male and female dancers exhibit both complementary and differentiated movements: male dancers display strength and dignity through bold, unrestrained leaps, while female dancers convey elegance and grace through supple torso undulations and delicate hand gestures. This differentiation is not hierarchical but rather an embodied practice of the ethical ideal of "harmony in difference." Moreover, the interactive dynamics among dancers and onlookers—such as invitations, antiphon dances, and rhythmic clapping—reflect the Uyghur social ethos that values collective participation, respects individual expressiveness, and emphasizes intergenerational transmission.

Fourth, a dynamic vehicle of cultural identity and national spirit. Over time, Sainem has absorbed modern choreographic innovations, yet its core rhythmic modes—including Chektiman, Sainem, and Saliqai—have remained remarkably stable. This characteristic of "preserving the essence amid change" has rendered Sainem a crucial emotional anchor for overseas Uyghur diasporas in recalling their homeland, and for Uyghur students in inland China in reinforcing their cultural self-confidence. Sainem has thus transcended the realm of mere performance art, evolving into a cultural symbol that consolidates ethnic sentiment and conveys the aesthetic ideals of the nation.

In conclusion, the cultural connotation of Sainem dance is neither confined to pure aesthetic pleasure nor limited to folkloric documentation. It is, rather, a "living ethnography" written through the medium of the moving body. A deep interpretation of Sainem enables us to comprehend how the Uyghur people have constructed self-identity through dynamic arts throughout history, while actively participating in the formation of China's pluralistic cultural configuration.

DISCUSSION & CONCLUSION

1) Discussion

The movement vocabulary of Sainem is by no means arbitrary aesthetic invention; rather, it encodes the cognitive schemas of oasis agricultural societies regarding natural rhythms, interpersonal relations, and sacred space. Our analysis reveals that the "floral" wrist spirals, undulating torso swings, and syncopated foot stomps not only visually mimic flowing water, ripening fruits, and drifting sand but also implicitly instill local ethical precepts such as "moderation," "coordination," and "reverence" through bodily training. This resonates with Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology of the body—the body is not a passive object but an active medium of meaning production. Sainem, transmitted through intergenerational corporeal pedagogy rather than textual records, enables Uyghur ecological wisdom and social norms to survive in a "living" form. This finding suggests that in studying ethnic dances, we should not reduce them to "codifiable movement sets" but treat them as "embodied knowledge systems," whose cultural value far exceeds the aesthetic dimension of stage performance.

Historically, Sainem has undergone multiple cultural stratifications, including Islamisation, Turkicisation, Han Chinese influences, and the infiltration of Soviet choreography in modern times. Its musical rhythms and dance postures bear recognisable traces of Arabo-Persian, Turko-Mongol, and Central Plains Chinese traditions. However, this "hybridity" constitutes both an asset and a source of subtle identity tensions in contemporary contexts. On the one hand, it is celebrated as a "living fossil of the Silk Road" and a shining emblem for cross-cultural dialogue; on the other hand, within certain discourses that emphasise "purity" of ethnic characteristics, hybridity may be misread as "cultural inauthenticity." This study argues that the vitality of Sainem precisely derives from its openness and adaptability, rather than from any fictitious "authenticity." Therefore, intangible heritage practices should avoid "museum-

style" freezing and instead encourage creative fusions with contemporary aesthetics, modern dance techniques, and even digital media, provided that the core rhythmic patterns and typical movement motifs are preserved, thereby achieving dynamic transmission.

Although traditional Sainem in Meshrep settings prescribes differentiated movement norms for male and female dancers, our analysis indicates that such differences are more "complementary" than "hierarchical." Nevertheless, it cannot be overlooked that in public performance arenas, women's opportunities to appear, their movement amplitudes, and costume choices have long been constrained by social conventions. In recent years, with the rising social status of Uyghur women and the intervention of modern choreographic concepts, female expressions in Sainem have become increasingly diverse—some newly choreographed pieces feature female dancers adopting large leaps and rapid spins that were formerly reserved for males, thereby breaking down established gendered movement boundaries. This transformation invites discussion: does it signify substantive progress toward gender equality, or merely a strategic adjustment in stage aesthetics? This study tends to argue that dance, as a social mirror, does reflect broader societal shifts through the loosening of its internal gender norms; however, we must also remain vigilant against the "objectifying" consumption of female bodies in commercial or tourist performances. Hence, future research should incorporate gender analysis into the standard toolkit of dance ethnography, attending to the subjective narratives of dancers of different genders, rather than confining itself to purely morphological descriptions.

Sainem was inscribed on China's national intangible cultural heritage list in 2006, securing institutional protection and financial support. Yet this has also introduced the risk of "decontextualisation"—when the dance is extracted from its everyday Meshrep settings and placed onto stages, classrooms, or tourist attractions, its original social functions, such as community negotiation and emotional bonding, may be attenuated. Our fieldwork reveals that some younger-generation dancers tend to perceive Sainem more as "performance skill" than "life etiquette," a cognitive shift that could lead to the erosion of its cultural core. We therefore advocate that protection policies should give greater weight to "community empowerment"—encouraging local residents to independently organise Meshrep gatherings, participate in the designation of inheritors, and utilise new media platforms, such as short videos, for broader dissemination, rather than relying entirely on top-down administrative measures.

2) Conclusion

Through an in-depth analysis of Sainem dance movements, this study draws the following conclusions.

Sainem dance movements are the bodily encoding of Uyghur deep culture. Every movement posture and every rhythmic pattern is not merely a physical technique but a "body text" carrying rich cultural information—historical memory is written within it, religious beliefs are expressed through it, social life is presented in it, and national spirit is manifested by it.

From the historical dimension, Sainem movements embody a thousand years of bodily memory from ancient Western Regions music and dance to contemporary folk dance; movements such as "head-shaking," "eye-moving," "toe-lifting," and "finger-snapping" are directly continuous with Tang dynasty documentary records. From the religious dimension, Sainem's body vocabulary is permeated with the "curvilinear beauty" aesthetic of Buddhism, the gender norms of Islam, and the "trembling knee" tradition of Shamanism, forming a unique phenomenon of "religious stratification." From the social dimension, Sainem movements draw extensively from oasis agricultural life and daily labor, serving as the most direct bodily presentation of Uyghur social life and the core medium of social interaction and emotional communication in Meshrep. From the spiritual dimension, Sainem's unity of "subtlety" and "passion," its pursuit of "curvilinear beauty" and "dynamic balance," and its "self-entertaining" life attitude collectively embody the Uyghur national character and aesthetic ideals.

Sainem is not only the dance art of the Uyghur people but also the “living encyclopedia” of Uyghur culture—using the body as medium, movement as language, and rhythm as meter, it organically integrates Uyghur history, religion, society, and spirit. To protect and transmit Sainem is not only to protect a dance form but also to protect a unique cultural memory and national spirit.

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Data Availability Statement: The raw data supporting the conclusions of this article will be made available by the authors, without undue reservation.

Conflicts of Interest: The authors declare that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

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