



ARTICOLO

Moving in Someone else's Hands: *An exploration of the boundaries between cultural embodiment and individual agency in Dhamāl Sufi Dance*

by Sara Azzarelli

Introduction

In approaching such a variegated and changeable phenomenon as a form of Sufism¹ could be, I find it appropriate to mention anthropologist Andrée Grau's statement according to which "we cannot look at *one* history of *one* dance, we have to look at *many* histories of *many* dances" (1998: 200). In the huge panorama of what we could define as "Sufi dance"², I intend to focus on one specific type of Pakistani ritual known as *Dhamāl* and characterized by its "informal" and "popular" nature compared with the ones practiced among more institutionalized Sufi orders, mostly placed out of Pakistan. According to anthropologist Jürgen W. Frembgen, this practice is specifically associated with the devotees of the Qalandar³ movement, based on "a radical, provocative, but also ascetic way of life which rejects the social values and the formalism of the external world and instead strives for states of religious rapture, abandonment and ecstasy" (2012: 79). Because of this "informality", the *Dhamāl* is characterized by an open approach to the ritual, both regarding the possibility of participation access and the range of movements permitted during the dance, when usually the main - or the only - movement typifying Sufi dance is whirling. However, the dance process is not totally free, but there are common bases from which the participants can draw to make their ritual dance: this allows them to move actively in the improvisation process, even remaining related to their embedded cultural background.

¹ According to Charles S. J. White's definition, "Sufism is an expression of mystic temperament found in the religion of Islam [...] [which] evokes an intense concern for divine love, combined with certain physical and psychic disciplines to create a state of ecstasy in its practitioners" (1965: 114).

² It is appropriate to underline the limitations of the term "dance", a Western word which denotes a field of corporeal activities not broad enough to use it in referring to several non-Western movement systems. As American anthropologist Adrian Kaeppler puts it, "in many non-Western societies there is no indigenous concept comparative to "dance" and a larger view of structured movement systems is *de rigueur*" (1991: 12). Nevertheless, I will use the term "dance" in relation to the *Dhamāl* Sufi practice, since the practitioners themselves (and firstly my collaborators) use this term to define it.

³ The movement derives its name from his pivotal figure, the Sufi saint Lal Shahbaz Qalandar (Frembgen 2012: 80).



My purpose is therefore to investigate how and in which measure the “informality” of *Dhamāl* allows the social actors to act through movement, make decisions in dancing and re-write the meaning and the function of the performance, based on their own perspectives and needs. Where does the embodiment of a specific socio-cultural position finish and where does the individual possibility of agency begin? How do the social actors “adjust their learned behavior to the given moment, the present situation of the dance event” (Felföldi 2002: 17)?

In this paper I will introduce a possible structure and methodology for going through the exploration of this ritual dance, selecting and analyzing significant patterns of movement - or even singular gestures - and locating them between the process of cultural embodiment, according to which “cultural knowledge is embodied in movement” (Sklar 1991: 6) and the one of individual agency.

Methodology

In elaborating a methodology to investigate this topic, the starting point is the observation of two video extracts staging different *Dhamāl* performances, both of them taking place in Pakistan in different contexts⁴. Because of the wide range of improvised movements, I do not find it appropriate to use a specific notation system to describe them, while I find it proper to undertake a careful description combined with the qualitative analysis of peculiar elements⁵. Moreover, I develop this investigation on two different levels: firstly I describe simple patterns of movements which are usually repeated continuously during the dance sessions and in some cases by a significant part of the participants and because of that, they could be considered as basic shared elements. From this point I move to the second level, considering the movements the dancers perform in creating their own devotional dance, their own “prayer”. As ethnomusicologist Richard K. Wolf points out, a careful analysis of basic simple patterns can be “an useful point of departure

⁴ As Anya Royce states, a film provides a record of a particular performance, rather than a record of a particular dance (2002: 53, in Bakka e Karoblis, 2010: 171). Therefore, their analysis constitutes a preliminary phase of the research, which should be followed by an active and continuous participation, direct observation and gathering data of several performances. Indeed, this paper wants to be nothing more than a methodology plan to develop a more elaborate research about *Dhamāl*.

⁵ In integrating description of movement patterns and qualitative analysis of relevant elements I take inspiration from the methodology used by Deidre Sklar in studying the annual fiesta of Tortuga in New Mexico (1991).



for examining the ways in which individuals create subjectivities and situate them within something larger” (2006: 261). However, since investigating individual actions means going over the kinetic phenomena we observe, the analysis of body movements has to be combined with a method for “going beyond the visual surface” (Felföldi 2002: 18) and exploring the meanings that the social actors give to their dancing. As anthropologist Deidre Sklar states, “the ethnographer wants to know nothing less than how a given group of people find or, more accurately, *make* meaning” (1991: 6). A necessary element the researcher should add to the descriptive analysis of movements is a more dialogical mode of knowledge construction (Bakka – Gore 2002), realizable through different interview techniques.

I attempt thereby to approach *Dhamāl* combining movement description and analysis with the oral material obtained by several interviews, including “self-confrontation interviews”, in which “the agent is replaced in the lived situation which is the object of the interview, under the controlled guidance of the researcher” (Bakka – Gore 2007: 2).

During the period of interviewing, my main collaborator, a Pakistani Sufi musician and dancer currently living in Italy, was temporally in Pakistan for visiting his relatives. Thus, what in the beginning was an attempt to communicate via Skype, became an actual small electronic fieldwork when his relatives and neighbours started to interact with me as well, telling me what they know about *Dhamāl*, in which way they participate to the ritual. Although lacking a standard fieldwork, the analysis of video material combined with a significant amount of information produced with my “online fieldwork” can compensate for the unaccounted elements, especially since one of the social actors performing in the videos is my main interlocutor himself.

Writing one’s own dance

“Basically *Dhamāl* can be described as a ritual dance which expresses a 'communal', spiritual state of trance (*hāl* - presence) or ecstasy in which the subject dissolves his or her self” (Frembgen 2012: 88). Even if the same devotional goal is shared between different social actors, they engage differently in the ritual showing diversity in body techniques and related aesthetic styles. As my collaborator Ayub explains to me, “the guru or someone else teaches you the bases, but when you



enter in the dance the movements just happen: it is here that everyone can reach the uniqueness”⁶. These common elements, usually actively learnt from a guru (dance and music teacher) or passively absorbed in the process of cultural embodiment, become, into the ritual, the bases for individual reworking. However, where is the line between their free process of creation, and the cultural background that moves them to make sense in their actions? It is exactly in this boundary that the analysis of movements has to be located, exploring the dance of the social actors presented in the videos.

The first clip we take into consideration is part of a documentary film⁷ about *Mela Chiraghan* (festival of the lights), a three days annual Hazrat Madho Lal Hussain’s ‘*urs*⁸ festival in the city of Lahore (north-east of Pakistan). The video shows a *Dhamāl* ritual which took place at the saint's shrine in March 2004 and involves, in addition to the drummers, five dancers, who, according to Ayub, could be both *malangs* (ascetics) and *dhamalis* (dedicated dancers)⁹. They are basically reproducing the drums’ rhythm, sustaining it mainly with feet and arm movements and entering in a strong coordination with the players. The drummers control their movements through the strokes of the *dhōl* (typical two-headed drum), using repetitive rhythmic patterns gradually increasing in rapidity but also creating interest for the dancers by inserting breaks (*toṛā*) and tripartite cadences (*tiyās*). Observing the video¹⁰, Ayub remarks that “in *Dhamāl* the musician has a fundamental role because he is the driver and the dancers are in his hands: they must follow the drummer when he changes rhythm, like if he was moving them as puppets”¹¹. Indeed, it is mainly in the way the dancers sustain the drums’ rhythm that the level of individual improvisation takes form.

The most elaborate sequences of movements are proposed by the only female dancer, who tries to anticipate and respond to the drummers' articulations frequently changing movements.

⁶ Interview with Ayub, 33, professional Sufi musician and dancer, (Skype conversation, 20/10/2012). All the interviews are translated from the original version in Italian.

⁷ The document is a clip from a documentary produced by Syed Hamraz Ahsan for IKTARA. Available on Youtube at: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oveIL43ZAjg>, (the movements analysis is focused on minute 1:03-1:35 and 2:13-2:52).

⁸ An *urs*’ is a “mourning/celebratory rituals commemorating a saint’s death as eternal rebirth and his final “wedding” or mystical union with the Prophet and God” (Werbner 1996: 311).

⁹ Interview with Ayub, (Skype conversation, 22/10/2012).

¹⁰ A part from the regular use of self-confrontation or “feedback interviews”, based on performers’ comments on their own video recording from various events (Giurchescu – Torp 1991: 6), within this investigation I frequently asked my interlocutors to comment and explain dance events in which other subjects were dancing.

¹¹ Interview with Ayub, (Skype conversation, 22/10/2012).



Female dancer, Mela Chairaghan 2004, Lahore.

She sustains the rhythm with a foot pattern more emphasized on the right leg which constantly gestures a stamping on the ground while the left leg has a continuous minimal step. She intermittently jumps and rotates the whole body still emphasizing this stronger movement on her right leg and after that she starts coordinating the feet pattern with arm movements: putting her weight on the right leg she stretches the right arm to the right up diagonal doing the same movement with the left arm toward the opposite diagonal. After the repetition of this motif on each side for two times, the woman continues to dance coordinating the movements of arms, torso and head and maintaining the same irregular footsteps pattern. In every movement and gesture she appears strong and energetic¹². Her presence is highly perceived in the space, since her showing of virtuosity and high technique in comparison with the other dancers involved. A moment that clarifies her preeminent role is when the female dancer and the man dressed in red start to shake their heads simultaneously right and left and it is the woman who decides to interrupt the interaction anticipating the drum change of rhythm, totally modifying the quality of movement and introducing facial and gestural expressiveness¹³.

¹² Description concerning minute 1:03-1:35 in the video.

¹³ Description concerning minute 2:13-2:52 in the video.



Interaction between two dancers, Mela Chiraghan 2004, Lahore.

The variety of movements added to the basic foot pattern by the woman and particularly their energetic and determinate quality, put her in a leading role in the ritual, displaying the presence of individual agency as well as performance art in *Dhamāl* (Frembgen 2012). Indeed, making decisions in the improvisation process, a woman, commonly having a separated place in Sufi ritual¹⁴, not only can locate herself in a more active role than the male dancers she is performing with, but can also re-draw her position as a dedicated dancer who is moving close to God. What makes her able to play such a preeminent role is the common shared “image of one controlled by a disembodied agency” (Wolf 2006: 249), a spiritual essence, who actually guides the dancer. According to my collaborators, “it is not possible to describe how someone is dancing *Dhamāl*, because when the “real” dance starts it is someone else who is moving your body”.¹⁵ Indeed, the main goal of this ritual dance is to abandon themselves “in someone else hands” (Qureshi 1994), where every action is allowed.

¹⁴ As my interlocutor Kossar explains to me, “when the *Dhamāl* takes place at the shrine of the saints, we (she means women) usually perform the ritual in a separated space, but there are particular occasions and particular spaces when we can dance with the men, all together, because we are all close to God and for him we are all the same” (Interview with Kossar, Skype conversation, 26/10/2012).

¹⁵ Interview with Ayub, Azim and Possar, (Skype conversation, 22/10/2012).

The *Dhamāl* settings which mainly highlight this cultural process are women's exorcisms. Azim is a Pakistani singer and musician who earns a living working with a group of female players specialized in this kind of ritual¹⁶. When a woman is possessed by a spirit, her family usually calls a group of musicians and singers like this one, for staging a *Dhamāl* ritual whose goal is to understand why the spirit is in the girl and make him go away through her dancing. "The musicians play and sing various songs dedicated to different divinities because you don't know from which religion the spirit comes from. So, we sing for Qalander, Kali Mata¹⁷ and other deities or saints and it is only when the woman starts to dance that we know we are singing for the right one"¹⁸.



Woman performing Dhamāl

In these occasions, the dance of the women involved usually consists in swinging their head in a circle sweeping the floor with their hair while they are sitting on the ground, kneeling or standing

¹⁶ All the information about women's exorcisms through *Dhamāl* were gathered from interviews with Azim, 22, musician and singer and his mother and colleague Possar, singer, (Skype conversation, 24/10/2012).

¹⁷ Kali Mata is one of the several names of the Hindu Goddess. The attitude of singing for deities from different religions highlights how *Dhamāl* is not an exclusively Muslim practise but indeed "is an expression of devotion to the divine that extends beyond any specific religious boundary" (Ramey 2008: 4).

¹⁸ Interview with Azim, 22, (Skype conversation, (24/10/2012).



with their upper bodies bowed forward.

However, Azim and his mother Possar remark that “they can do every kind of movement because when they start to dance they do not control their bodies anymore: someone else does that”¹⁹. It is exactly in the decision of which God is moving them and in which way that women's action takes place: the stage where they can dance is completely determined by their socio-cultural position, but when they are moved by an external agency they are allowed to make any decisions. Somehow, they are actually confirming Cynthia Novak's statement, according to which “dance may reflect and resist cultural values simultaneously” (Novak in Reed 1998: 521). Moreover, agency²⁰ is not only about someone moving, but also about how they perceive their moving: a basic element we have to consider in this investigation is what Wolf defines as “alternative readings of *Dhamāl*” (2006: 253), individual reinterpretation of the ritual, constitutive of the social actors' subjectivity.

Individual rhythm

The second clip proposed presents a *Dhamāl* session performed by my main interlocutor Ayub, in Lahore on the occasion of the annual Shal Jamal's²¹ 'urs festival²². As in the first video, we can observe a strong coordination between drummers and the dancer: the drummers control Ayub through the sounds of the *dhōl* and he reacts performing simple patterns of movements repeated continuously with particular attention and quickness in changing the speed of execution. The stamping of the feet is the basic movement during the entire ritual, executed in 4, 6 or 16 beats according to the drums' rhythm and intensified by the rattling ankle-bells (*ghungrūs*), an instrument which the dancer can use to reply to the drummers' calling in their rhythmical dialogue.

¹⁹ Interview with Azim and Possar, (Skype conversation, 24/10/2012).

²⁰ The term “agency”, having the connotations of autonomy and self-determination, could not be the most appropriated to speak about this process of disembodiment, especially since the social actors themselves stress the fact that they are not responsible for their actions, but someone else is. Nevertheless, the term highlights the fact that in the process of improvisation, the actors, appealing to someone else's agency, are actually allowed to act in relation to subjective perspectives.

²¹ Saint historically associated to the trance dance and weekly venerated performing *Dhamāl* in his shrine, situated in the quarter of Ichra, Lahore (Frembgen 2012).

²² The video was posted on Youtube by my collaborator Ayub himself. This is available at:

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=setT5pAUV_M



Example of Ghungrū, wore by Ayub

The dancer considers his feet pattern as the base of the dance, as a *dhikr*²³, a song in his mind that enters his body during the whole dance session²⁴. Performing *Dhamāl*, the dancers can usually hear *dhikr* formulas in the different sequences of beats and also recite them silently or audibly during the dance (Ayub explains to me how in every couple of steps he individuates the formula “Allah hu!” which means “God is”, with the precise pattern: Allah – step on the right foot, hu – step on the left foot)²⁵. Gradually Ayub starts swinging his bent forearms and shaking his head right and left, constantly increasing the speed of the movement. Even doing extremely rapid and sharp movements, he maintains a soft and relaxed abandon in his face, never contracting his expression. People around paying the musicians for his performance, pass the money before near Ayub’s head, in the traditional gesture of *Vel*, because in that moment he is dancing with God²⁶.

²³ Literally “remembrance”, the *dhikr* o *zikr* are formula which are usually sung in the more institutionalized kinds of Sufi dance (Frembgen 2012; Qureshi 1994; Werbner 1996). In *Dhamāl* ritual they are usually embodied in the beats of the drum and in the movement patterns but can also be recite during the performance (Frembgen 2012: 89).

²⁴ Interview with Ayub, (Skype conversation, 22/10/2012).

²⁵ This pattern is clearly observable in the video (minute 1:50-2:00), when the focus of the camera is on Ayub’s feet.

²⁶ Minute 5:18-5:34.

What we can observe in the video is a dancer actively playing with the rhythm and the basic foot patterns, something which perfectly reflects the role of a male Sufi dancer in the ritual as well as in the community. However, it was only “attempting to figure out the meaning that dance has in the personal life of the informant” (Gyorgy 2004: 44)²⁷, that I was involved in how Ayub really perceives his *Dhamāl*. “When I dance, my mother is with me and every movement brings me closer to her. When I shake my head right and left and my long hair swings touching my face and my shoulders²⁸, I can feel my mother touching and supporting me, and I'm not scared of falling, because I know she is with me”.



Ayub performing Dhamāl

²⁷ As ethnochoreologist Martin Gyorgy maintains “without taking the dance personalities into consideration, collected, studied or published dance material not only becomes stylized abstraction and a superficial simplified summary, but also becomes suspicious of being fabrication” (2004: 44).

²⁸ The head swinging is particularly present in minute 6:48-7:30.



According to him, love is the only key of this ritual dance: “the term *Dhamāl* is derived from the word “*dam*”, which means “breath”. When you dance God gradually penetrates you and the rhythm of your breath as well as the rhythm of your feet and your heart should be the same of the rhythm of the drums”. Ayub draws himself in this poetic of giving love, not only to God and to the saint, but to every human being, particularly to his dead mother: this is the deeper meaning he gives to his dancing. Without going beyond the observation and talking with him, it would have been impossible to understand that the softly abandonment of his facial expressiveness was related to this principle of giving love through the movement and reaching beloved people. In this case, the agency takes place in the individual redefinition of the meaning and function of the dance, which is however neatly localized in the position he has in the community.

Conclusion

By inscribing this variegated range of personal approaches to *Dhamāl* in the relationships between cultural embodiment and individual agency, we have the opportunity to observe social actors who “creatively alternate subject positions according to local terms of discourse and behaviour” (Wolf 2006: 247). The boundary where the cultural background is crossed even remaining influent could be identified with the observed tendency that the participants have to appeal their own agency to someone else. Attempting to totally dissolve themselves and reach the unity with God, possessed by a spirit with no name or abandoned in a dance with a beloved person, they seem not to consider themselves responsible for what they do and locate their own agency in a process of disembodiment. If, according to Jane C. Desmond, movement is a “social text” (1993-4: 36) on which cultural benefits can be inscribed it constitutes at the same time a tool with which the social actors can actively re-draw their positions, appealing their action to someone else, culturally recognized by the community.



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Abstract – ITA

Nell'ambito del fenomeno religioso a carattere mistico conosciuto come Sufismo, il movimento corporeo è percepito ed utilizzato come forma di preghiera per raggiungere la divinità. La danza diviene un rituale, attraverso il quale i devoti possono unirsi con il loro dio. Presso la maggioranza degli ordini Sufi istituzionalizzati in vari paesi, questa danza è generalmente regolata da rigide norme riguardanti sia la possibilità di accesso al rituale che la gamma di movimenti permessi. La danza *Dhamāl*, praticata da alcuni gruppi Sufi del Pakistan è invece caratterizzata da un aperto accesso al rituale e da un'ampia varietà di possibilità coreutiche a disposizione dei partecipanti. Con un'analisi focalizzata sui confini tra i movimenti di base che i danzatori condividono e le loro soggettive modalità di metterli in pratica, questo saggio esplora lo spazio di agency individuale che questo specifico rituale può creare.

Abstract – EN

Within the mystical branch of Islam known as Sufism, bodily movement is perceived and used as a form of prayer to reach the divinity. The practice of dance becomes a ritual, through which devotees can become one with their god. Among the majority of institutionalised Sufi orders all over the world, this dance ritual is normally regulated by strict norms both regarding the possibility of participation access and the range of movements permitted. The Pakistani Sufi practice known as *Dhamāl*, instead, is characterized by a relatively open access to the ritual and a variety of choreutic possibilities for the participants. Through investigating the boundaries between the basic movement shared among the dancers and their individual modalities of engaging with them, this paper explores the space of individual agency that this ritual may create.

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Sara Azzarelli consegue la Laurea Triennale in Scienze Antropologiche presso l'Università di Bologna nell'ottobre 2011. Associa agli studi antropologici quelli coreutici: dopo una lunga formazione in molteplici stili classici e contemporanei di danza, incontra il *Bhāratnāṭyam* e sceglie di approfondirne la conoscenza sotto una duplice prospettiva: pratica e teorica. Nel 2012 ottiene una borsa di studio per il Master Internazionale *Choreomundus – MA in Dance Heritage, Knowledge and Practice*, (presso NTNU, Trondheim – Norvegia; BPU, Clermont-Ferrand – Francia; SZTE, Szeged – Hungary; URL, London – United Kingdom), che sta correntemente portando a termine presso Roehampton University (London).

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