



Sufi Sema and Hindu Kathak Dance: The Rotations' Semantic Layers through History Sufi Sema ve Hindu Kathak Dansı: Tarih Boyunca Rotasyonların Semantik Katmanları

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Abstract

Sema, a sacred ritual in Sufism, consists of continuous and non-stop spinning around the axis of the body, symbolizing a spiritual journey toward unity with the Divine. A similar ancient ritual, Kathak, is performed in Hinduism, which, like Sema, has its roots in the worship of the creator of the world. Both rituals share similarities in form and content, reflecting profound mystical and epistemological themes. This study employs iconological analysis, a method rooted in Erwin Panofsky's framework, to interpret the symbolic components of the rotations in Sema and Kathak. Iconology is applied in three stages: (1) pre-iconographic analysis, identifying the physical movements and visual elements; (2) iconographic analysis, examining the cultural and religious contexts of the rituals; and (3) iconological interpretation, uncovering the deeper symbolic meanings embedded in the rituals' forms and motions.

The findings reveal that both Sema and Kathak symbolize the cosmic order, the cyclical nature of existence, and the seeker's journey toward spiritual enlightenment. The rotations in both rituals are interpreted as representations of the soul's ascent and the eternal connection between the human and the Divine. Furthermore, the study hypothesizes that the similarities in form and meaning between Sema and Kathak may be attributed to historical and cultural exchanges between Sufism and Hinduism, particularly during periods of shared geographical and philosophical interactions. The research concludes that these rituals have mutually influenced each other, not only in their physical expressions but also in their symbolic and spiritual dimensions.

Keywords: Sema of Rumi, Kathak Dance, Iconology, Sufism, Hinduism

Özet

Tasavvufta kutsal bir ritüel olan Sema, bedeninin ekseni etrafında sürekli ve durmaksızın dönmekten oluşur ve İlahi ile birliğe doğru manevi bir yolculuğu sembolize eder. Benzer bir antik ritüel olan Kathak, Sema gibi kökenleri dünyanın yaratıcısına tapınmaya dayanan Hinduizm'de gerçekleştirilir. Her iki ritüel de biçim ve içerik bakımından benzerlikler paylaşır ve derin mistik ve epistemolojik temaları yansıtır. Bu çalışma, Sema ve Kathak'taki dönüşlerin sembolik bileşenlerini yorumlamak için Erwin Panofsky'nin çerçevesinde kök salmış bir yöntem olan ikonolojik analizi kullanır. İkonoloji üç aşamada uygulanır: (1) fiziksel hareketleri ve görsel öğeleri belirleyen ön-ikonografik analiz; (2) ritüellerin kültürel ve dini bağlamlarını inceleyen ikonografik analiz; ve (3) ritüellerin biçim ve hareketlerinde gömülü daha derin sembolik anlamları ortaya çıkaran ikonolojik yorumlama. Bulgular, Sema ve Kathak'ın kozmik düzeni, varoluşun döngüsel doğasını ve arayıcının ruhsal aydınlanmaya doğru yolculuğunu sembolize ettiğini ortaya

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koymaktadır. Her iki ritüeldeki dönüşler, ruhun yükselişinin ve insan ile İlahi arasındaki ebedi bağlantının temsilleri olarak yorumlanmaktadır. Dahası, çalışma, Sema ve Kathak'ın biçim ve anlam bakımından benzerliklerinin, özellikle coğrafi ve felsefi etkileşimlerin paylaşıldığı dönemlerde, Sufizm ve Hinduizm arasındaki tarihi ve kültürel alışverişlere atfedilebileceğini varsaymaktadır. Araştırma, bu ritüellerin yalnızca fiziksel ifadelerinde değil, aynı zamanda sembolik ve ruhsal boyutlarında da birbirlerini karşılıklı olarak etkilediği sonucuna varmıştır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Rumi'nin Seması, Kathak Dansı, İkonoloji, Sufizm, Hinduizm

Introduction

Ritual performance is one of the primary ways of expressing devotion and submission in most religions, sects, and schools of thought. Among these, the Sema dance stands out as a profound Sufi ritual performed by mystics in gatherings filled with music and poetry, embodying a spiritual journey toward unity with the Divine. While there are various forms of Sema, this study focuses on the version attributed to Rumi and his followers, known as the Sema of Mewlaviah, which dates back to the 13th century A.D. and is characterized by its continuous spinning motions. Similarly, Kathak, a Hindu ritual dance dating back to the fifth century B.C., is renowned for its intricate rotations around the body's axis. At first glance, the two rituals appear similar due to their shared emphasis on spinning; however, a deeper examination reveals additional parallels in movements (such as those of the head and hands), musical accompaniment (e.g., qawwali in Sema), poetic themes (mystical and romantic), and even costumes.

This research employs iconological analysis, based on Erwin Panofsky's three-tiered model, to explore the symbolic dimensions of the circular rotations in Sema and Kathak. The study applies Panofsky's framework as follows:

- 1- Pre-iconographic Analysis: This stage involves identifying and describing the physical movements, gestures, and visual elements of the two rituals. Data for this stage was gathered through direct observation of live and recorded performances, as well as textual analysis of historical and religious texts describing the rituals.
- 2- Iconographic Analysis: Here, the cultural, religious, and historical contexts of the rituals are examined. This stage relies on archival research, including historical manuscripts, religious scriptures, and scholarly works on Sufism and Hinduism, particularly from the Delhi Sultanate (1206–1526 A.D.) and Mughal periods (1526–1857 A.D.), when Hindu-Islamic cultural exchanges were prominent.
- 3- Iconological Interpretation: The final stage delves into the deeper symbolic meanings of the rotations, uncovering their mystical, epistemological, and historical significance. This interpretation is informed by the ideological contexts of Sufism and Hinduism, as well as the shared cultural milieu of the periods under study.

The primary aim of this research is to investigate the formal and conceptual similarities between the circular rotations in Sema and Kathak, focusing on their iconological significance within the socio-historical and ideological contexts of Hinduism and Sufism.

By analyzing these rituals, the study seeks to uncover their shared mystical roots and expressive methods, hypothesizing that their similarities may stem from historical and cultural interactions during the Delhi Sultanate and Mughal eras. The research also addresses the broader implications of these findings, highlighting the cross-cultural influence of Iranian art and its potential to foster deeper cultural and artistic connections between nations.

Sema and Kathak: Two Ritual Performances

Dance has been with us since the beginning of human life and its use has changed over time. Before language came into being, humans expressed their inner emotions by moving body parts such as arms, legs, heads,



eyes, and so on. It was after the advent of language that these gestures became words. According to Vir, the first writings were body movements (2006).

Sema

In ‘Amid Farsi Dictionary’ (1997), Sema is defined as follows: “In terms of Sufism: singing, dancing, clapping, ecstasy and group participation in singing and dancing” (1457). For today’s geography of Sema, this ritual means dervishes whirling with traditional music. Five hundred years ago, in the time of Rumi, it had special mystical etiquettes, state of mind, and conscience that only reached the seekers of the path of truth due to a mystical situation. This spontaneity forced them to whirl anywhere, regardless of time and place.



Figure 1. Rotating Sema Dancers, Photo by: Ramadan Godan (Personal Collection)

Sema, which is one of the characteristics of Sufism of Iranian origin, has been very popular and lawful among Rumi’s followers as the last Sufi sect. According to Rumi, the whirling dervishes had to place one foot on the ground as an axis and rotate around it with the help of the other foot. This method, which was founded and customized by him and Shams, was introduced by Hesam al-Din Chalabi as a special ritual and ceremony and was performed regularly. Sema, which has been studied and analyzed as a ritual performance in this article, has been especially attributed to Rumi and the way he performed it (Figure 1).

Kathak

On the other hand, all forms of art have sacred roots in India, and the ritual Kathak dance is no exception. Mahabharata dates this dance to at least the fifth century B.C. (Narayan, 2007). Artists in the field, called Katka, told people epics and stories from Puranas, along with dramatic movements and dances. This ancient tradition of storytelling, along with pantomime, has been affected by socio-political situations over the centuries from every area and period of history. Thus, according to Srivastava the dance known as Kathak today is very different from what was practiced in ancient times and has become an experimental dance (2008). The first introduction of the Mughal Muslims to Kathak took place during Emperor Akbar’s period in the sixteenth century A.D. (Narayan, 2007). He summoned Kathak masters from various regions and selected them to lead dance groups at the Delhi court. The Mughal emperors became the new patrons of Kathak dancers, and thus they had to perform their art in their courts as well. One of the most difficult techniques in Kathak is the pirouette or Cakkara (Bhramari). In it, one foot is locked to the ground and the body rotates completely around the axis of that foot like a compass needle and moves forward at the same time. This movement may be done once or 100 to 200 times, depending on the story or the mood created by the ecstasy (Figure 2).

Iconology and the Panofsky Semantic Layers Model

Kangarani describes Iconology as the systematic study of icons and a branch of art history to describe, interpret, and mean the works of art versus form, and is one of the most authoritative methods of decoding

and deeper understanding of works of art (2012). It focuses more on socio-historical values and influences than on the values of art history; values that the artist may not have intentionally displayed in the work, but they do exist. Iconology is really about linking forms and icons to topics, things, and events rather than scattered analysis. This method of study goes beyond the form and examines the symbolic meaning by



matching it with the historical context and the totality of the work of art. In other words, this method analyses the content of the image, not the style creator of a work of art. Panofsky believes that iconology is a branch of art history that deals with the subject matter and meaning as opposed to form in works of art (1972).

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*Figure 2-. Chakra Movement, Rani Karna,
Photo by: Avinash Pasricha, Source (Bose, 2001, pl21)*

So, the important issue here is the discovery of the semantic layers of the shape of a circle and the circular rotations of the two rituals according to their living environment, their history, their social conditions, religions and ideologies affecting them, and the changes they have seen throughout history.

A Comparative Study of Sufi Sema and the Kathak Dance

Forms develop deeper meanings since their day of birth due to the longevity of religious performances and due to changes in biological, historical, social, etc. Conditions; and their understanding becomes more difficult for the general public over time.

The author aims to dig into the semantic underlying layers in one of the most ancient of these forms. Discovering the harmony and smoothness of the circular rotations between ancient performances creates a stronger connection between their mother cultures. Sema and Kathak are two examples of ancient rituals having their roots in different civilizations using the same forms (in this case, the form of rotation/ spinning/ whirling and circle), and therefore, according to this study, suggest a common meaning. In this movement,



the dancer turns one foot on the ground and rotates in a position with the help of the other foot around the axis of the body i.e. pirouette, circular rotation, whirling, spinning, Cakkara or Bhramari, etc.

Sema and Kathak: Common Technique

According to Ragini Devi, the movements, rotations, pauses, and rhythmic syllables we see today in Kathak date back to the sixteenth century. It has been added to it and has made it even more glorious. She believes that these movements were probably tribal ethnic elements and did not have indigenous roots. Cakkara (the rotations) is the culmination of dance pieces. According to her, every few minutes of rotation must end in a special act called sam. A skilled dancer can repeatedly axis and rotate one leg, eventually ending with sam movement (2002). The author of the present research believes that the resemblance of the word sam with Sema (the sema dance) does not seem to be in vain. These rotations, as mentioned above, may have not existed in Kathak from the beginning, and since no one knows and has not recorded exactly from when and by whom it was added, it seems hypothesized that this technique was inspired and influenced by Sema dance. Thus, the similarity of the names of the two movements may also confirm this.

Sema is originally derived from the “Arabic word sama which means hearing, listening, listening to the word that is heard, and also dance, song, ecstasy, rapture, assembly of joy” (Hakemi, 1993, 142). However, sam in Sanskrit also has a meaning similar to Sema. Sam according to the ‘Sanskrit dictionary’ in its third meaning is happy and joyful (2008, 1153); Sama means “gathering, festival, celebration” (1154), and also means melody and song (‘An Encyclopaedic Survey of Hinduism 1983). However, this research is not intended to examine the linguistic roots of words that are beyond the author's expertise or to discover their relevance.

What the authors believe is that the Kathak dancers may have written a part of this technique inspired by its origin (Bhramari), after imitating the rotations in Sema which was adjacent to them in the courts of Delhi. Perhaps this is also an emphasis on the research hypothesis and the mutual influence of Kathak and Sema, especially in the field of whirling technique (figure 3-4).



Figure3. Dancer starting the rotations (Ambrose,1980,82)



Figure4. Dancers starting whirling (vecteezy.com, access date 11/4/2024)

The Common Concept of the Circular Rotation

Dances around a circle or center have always existed in ancient religions and sects: such as mass movements around a fire, a tree, or anything sacred. All dances were sacred in ancient times among primitive mankind, followed patterns beyond man, and their purpose was to worship and attain divine grace. These ritual dances

can be considered as man's connection with the origin of the universe and the form by which he connects himself to this origin. The man places this origin symbolically in the center of the circle and revolves around it. Because he considers himself a particle of the universe and tries to behave like it to unite with it: he spins around the center.

Another issue that preoccupies the mind is how the human body transforms from a simple organism into a physical being with the ability to communicate between the upper space and the surroundings, in an ancient culture, that is thought-provoking. In this regard, we come to two important and permanent questions about time and space, and their answers lead us to the need to study the cosmology of those ancient peoples. According to Vatsyayan(1997) if we consider the shape of the pattern of the universe to be intertwined with the patterns of motion formed by various elements in time and space, then motion will no longer be merely a matter limited to the kinetic action of the human body; rather, it will have cosmic significance.

These cosmic movements appear in the form of geometric shapes with special meanings in the art and therefore understanding the layers of their meanings will help to better understand the works of visual, executive, architectural art, and... One of these geometric forms is the circle, which has appeared in the form of spinning in the present research. To this end, it is first and foremost important to know the place of man in the universe and in opposition to time and space. Many philosophers and experts consider the mysticism of the peoples of the East to have a denial nature of the world and therefore of the other world. However, many have tried to introduce the value of matter and the senses in it to the same extent. But the first approach has always been successful. It is important to note that all existing approaches to Eastern mysticism acknowledge that there is an interrelationship between everything and that the world has always been a cohesive whole, with independent but interconnected internal systems, and concerned about the evolution of other systems. Man, as one of these independent systems, but related to others, always seeks to evolve and be in the work cycle of systems, including nature Vatsyayan (1997) believes. In this view, the body is considered a microcosm of the macrocosm of the universe in the layers of existence. The spinning of man around his body or object or sacred fire is considered the microcosm of the universe: a beginningless and endless movement and a continuum in time and space. It seems that man's continuous behavior is to go through the cycle of the universe and reach the Absolute. This is the absolute connection to the truth in Sufism and Sema, and liberation in Hinduism and Kathak.

Today, it has been scientifically proven that the basis of the life of the universe is based on motion and rotation, and all universes are constantly in motion and rotation. The constant cycle of neutrons and electrons in the nucleus of an atom allows matter to survive, and the constant cycle of blood in the body keeps living things alive. This sequence and rotation will continue until the end of the world. Therefore, man, according to his creation and in harmony with nature, tends to move and rotate, with the difference that the rotation of other elements is apparently according to the order of nature, and in their nature, but man, adorned with wisdom, in his movements, behavior, and rotation is a function of reason.

Rotations in Sufism

The main stimulus for the Sema dancer is his intellect, love, and spiritual passion, and whirling in Sema is a symbol of the rotation of the universe, reminiscent of the pleasant and eloquent song that is heard in the prayer of the Lord. The ritual rotation represents the ascension of man and his spiritual journey to the peak of perfection. The Sema dancer is a servant who has stepped on himself and whirls to the highest throne, and when he reaches the truth and perfection and perishes in the sight of God, he returns to earth from this spiritual ascension to continue his servitude. As the prophet of Islam, Muhammed returned to earth after his ascension served God, and taught his nation.

Sema dancers are like celestial planets that revolve around both themselves and the sun. Sema is in harmony with all the universes ... the rotation is done from left to right, and in fact, this rotation is around the spiritual heart, which is the place of the right and the throne of the Most Merciful. In these rotations, the left foot, which is an allusion to the heart, remains fixed and the rotation is performed with the right foot.



When it rotates from left to right around the axis of its heart, it means that it welcomes all nations from all over the world and all creatures on earth in the arms of its love and affection. According to Rumi's followers, the man was created for love and Rumi himself believed that all loves are a bridge to divine love.

The movement was very important to Sufis and especially to Rumi himself. Earth, stars, planets, and galaxies are constantly in motion. Each person will come out of the dust and enter the dust, and this rotation will continue forever. Heidar Khani believes this is a circular motion that abducts all lovers and inadvertently puts one into a circle whose beginning and end are unknown to the spinner. The choice of the circle as the most complete geometric shape is influenced by Ptolemy's thinking in astronomy (2009).

Ptolemy studied the motions of celestial bodies based on the idea that the earth is still and is the center of the universe. The Moon is a thousand kilometers away and other celestial bodies are farther away, and at an indefinite distance from it. Because they considered the circle to be a complete curve, they concluded that all celestial bodies should rotate in circular orbits around the Earth. But their observations from shipping and calendar compilation, on the other hand, showed that the paths of the planets were not complete and simple circles. So, when Ptolemy adjusted his central earth system, he showed the path of the planets in a combination of complex circles. Since the circle plays a very important role in this physical model of the sky, which was still unknown to man until the recent centuries and has always occupied his mind, the movement of the whirling Sema dancers is also related to this important notion. This movement is based on the knowledge of the foundation of the universe based on movement and rotation. Ahmad al-Ghazali, Abu Sa'id Abu al-Khair, Sheikh al-Wardi Ismail Qasri, Sheikh Najmuddin Kobra, Mewlana, Ala al-Dawlah Semnani are all of this opinion and believe that spinning while performing Sema leaves the spirit out of the cage of the body and lets it travel in the sky of perfection and truth (Javid, 2001).

In this school, travel and movement are the cause of perfection and life, and being stationary is a sign of decline and the death of body and soul. Tafazoli describes this as follows: "Stagnant water rots in the lagoon, and running water swirls, creating life and vitality. A motionless and loveless person is like a solid. As Rumi says run if you are not solid and go to the psychic world" (2001, 139).

Sema's movements are a symbol and a sign of the same basic human thoughts: the center of the universe. In Sema, each person walks around, and in the great ceremonies, as was done in the monasteries following the time of Rumi's life, in addition to spinning, everyone, along with other dancers, whirls in a hypothetical circle. In the whirling of this dance, human beings are at the center of their efforts and desires. The spinning of man around himself, and not around a particular center like other ancient rituals, is his sanctification of man as the center of cosmic circles and the agent of grace for the whole. In ancient rituals, an element of nature is at the center and thus attention and reliance tend from man to nature, so pure naturalism is seen in those ancient dances. Nature for them and in their attitude is an intertwined set of living and active forces that bring grace to human beings. But in Sema, it is the man who brings grace as he is located in the center of the universe. And this is why, in the theory of Ptolemy, which was accepted by the world of Rumi's time, all beings and the planets revolve around the earth, and the earth, which is the abode of man, becomes the center of the universe and thus man is the successor and caliph of God. As a result, Sema is accompanied by the rotation of the planets, and in fact, is to some extent its embodiment. Movement and rotation are the most important performing act in Sufi ceremonies. The movement of body parts in the spiritual atmosphere of a monastery is the first angle or reliance of faith by acknowledging the limbs and expressing the desire to walk through the mystical path of the dervishes (Yousefian Konari, PourJafar, 2006, 121).

Among all the attributes and states that objects have i.e. color, taste, volume, heat, weight, etc., there is a special state of transformation and motion that is different from all other attributes. When something is gradually changing, it has an attribute that we interpret as motion, the attributes of the first group do not change the object, they do not disturb their calm and they do not take it away from themselves, while transformation is an attribute that does not leave the object to its own. When it becomes a belonging of something, it will no longer be on its own and it is supposed to be restless. In other words, all attributes can get along with stability and calmness, while movement is the same as instability and restlessness, and there

is no abundance of peace. Those attributes accompany nature and subject to nature and stability, but transformation attracts the essence. To be more precise, we may not consider movement or evolution as an attribute of something in the way we consider color or volume as its attributes. Because every object having this attribute does not require giving up itself, its stability, and survival, while accepting “motion” gives an invitation to giving up one’s own. That is, in motion, an object emerges from its first shell and reaches another shell and nucleus, or disappears and is replaced by another object; that is why we consider “movement” to be the fundamental feature of Sema. This movement indicates the transformations of the Sema dancer as well as the transcendence and evolution from the cognitive stage to the higher stage. He steps into the new houses of the world of meaning and, with leaping movements and whirling, steps on whatever binds his soul and prevents him from surrendering (i.e. symbolically taking off his clothes during the performance). The Sema dancer is not his own during the dance, but he with different movements is peeling and taking off his worldly cover at every moment, which is called the substantial movement in Islamic philosophy (Farahmand, 2002, 21).

The philosophy of the Sufis’ physical rotation, is the annihilation of their body, and the experience of the sacred in a state of unconsciousness to attain the truth of life. Motion is the mediator between body and soul and the process of metamorphosis and ultimately the unity between the two. In other words, the physical movement of Sufis is a symbol of their spiritual purification and cultivation to reach the stage of perceiving pure and absolute truth. One of the manifestations of the Sufis’ movement, which is not unrelated to theatrical techniques, is the thoughtful step of the dervishes: during this movement, under the guidance of the elder and the leader of the sect, they adjust their breaths and take light, harmonious and rhythmic steps in four geographical directions associated with four natural elements i.e. water, fire, earth, and air. In Sema, the direction of rotation is counter-clockwise and the movement is ascending. There are eighteen Sufis dancing and spinning around a center named Sheikh or Murshid, symbolizing the rotation of the planets around the sun i.e. an allegory of Rumi. This whirling continues until, according to a cosmic narration, Rumi’s solar system experiences a state of upheaval and change (Yousefian Konari, PoorJafar, 2006, 121).

Rotations in Hinduism

Cakkara, which is very popular today among Kathak dancers and accompanies them at the peak of rhythm, beat, and passionate songs; is a symbol of the mandala in the philosophy of Hinduism, which in this dance is in the form of circular spins. Despite their variety in style, Ritual dances are all based on one worldview. According to Hindu philosophy, the universe has an eternal existence and at the same time is subject to constant change, and the particles in it are considered the manifestation of a whole. Everything in the universe is constantly exposed to birth, growth, and death. Matter in this universe consists of the five basic elements of water, earth, space, air, and fire. In this world, man is also considered a subset of nature, and thus nature dominates him (“Encyclopedia of Dance” 1998). Humans, like plants and animals, are born from a nucleus in the womb, mature, and produce a nucleus and a new life. Due to this consecutive birth and death, this life cycle will never end. The point of distinction of being human in this universe lies in his inner consciousness; knowing that every part of our being (body, mind, and soul) reflects the essence of the universe. There is a fixed point at the center of the world and the human soul, like the center of a wheel. Consciousness and knowledge are radiated out like the radii of these two concentric circles.

It should be noted that these radii remain within the boundaries of the universe. This cosmology is mentioned in the first Indian texts, the Vedas. Later, the Upanishads gave this idea a theoretical form; finally, Brahmanical texts have given it a practical form by introducing the ritual of Yajna or sacrifice. In the Upanishads, the universe is represented as a metaphor for the wheel, its center, and its blades; and in the Brahmanas, through every sound, word, movement, gesture, and object in the sacrificial rite, which is accompanied by dancing and singing, the universe has been given a material symbol. The Upanishads describe the philosophical idea of yoga (of which dance is a part) to draw in all physical and mental energies, and to achieve intuition as a result; the Brahmanas, on the other hand, describe the ritual of Yajna as follows: the consecration of a special place to perform the final ritual of sacrifice by lighting a candle in three predetermined areas in three altars: square, circle, and semicircle. This ritual symbolizes the sacrifice of



organs, which must take place at predetermined times and days. The goal of both experiences, inner yoga, and outer Yajna, is to achieve balance, stillness, and tranquillity. These religious concepts and rituals estimate the capacity of man to test his inner growth. Inner analysis through yoga (which is an abstract thing) and the ritual of yajna (which is a tangible thing) do not matter on their own, and only in the context of a whole do they make sense. Life and death are also part of this chain. According to Hindu philosophy, all life grows out of the amorphous realm of the universe, develops into several forms of life, and eventually reaches an end that is beyond form. All these thoughts form the basis of Hindu aesthetic theories: the soul is in a constant desire to be united with the world. This endless process involves a change from physical form to metaphysics and from the senses to the soul. Among the various genres of art in India, it is the dance that sets before us a mirror of the Hindu way of thinking about the world and the essence of truth. The main structures of the Hindu worldview, have been identified with Indian religious dance and movement.

Capra (2005) believed that the metaphor of cosmic dance blended with ancient mythology, religious art, and modern physics. In Hindu cosmology, Shiva's dance is an endless dance that encompasses the cycle of creation and destruction i.e. the entire universe. Certainly, this is the mysterious view that led the Indian mind to discover the smallest indivisible particles in the universe (which is in atomic physics) and to name it Bindu.

In his description of Shiva's cosmic dance, Ananda Coomaraswamy (2009) writes that the tenth and 12th century artists cast such images of Shiva on bronze sculptures: a dancing figure with four arms that are perfectly balanced with each other and at the same time show rhythmic and dynamic movements. Shiva's place is Mount Kailasa, the center of creation and the place of the gods in the Himalayas. In the mysterious hour, every evening, when the day goes dark and the demon, man, and bird have finished their working day, at the hour called Pradosha, Shiva dances in the shadow of the highest peak in the world. When the four-hand God dances, the earth is formed slowly. When the cosmic adagio turns into an allegro, the wind turns into a storm, the fire lights up, and Shiva's dance fills the world with beat and rhythm. The process of creation completes a cycle.

The flames of fire around him slowly flare up until his body rises to the top of everything. Now his left foot is on the back of the demon of ignorance, and by doing so, he reminds us of the shaky position of man and continues his dance with the music of the gods. His dance is beauty and ugliness, it is love and hate, and it is existence and non-existence. He must destroy what he has created at sunrise with absolute determination and will at sunset. This is why we believe that his dance and all dances symbolize an older activity than our own. This is how rhythm surrounds us all over the world, every particle of the universe contains rhythm because it is the product of eternal time (Ramachandrasekhar, 2007).

Therefore Serbjeet Singh (2000) believes, that there are dance patterns of energy in various masses and forms. Concerning the importance of Shiva's Damaru's sound or the first voice of the world, Coomaraswamy (2009) also believes that Shiva's dance is the clearest depiction of divine activity in any art or religion that one can be proud of. He believes that Shiva's dance is a world of dancing, an endless stream of energy flowing through multiple patterns that blend. The first reference to the shape and rotational motion of the mandala in dance was in fact in the Raasleela of Krishna in the text of Harivamsa Purana, dating back to the second century BC. (Poddar, 1983, 105). Also, in the same text, a kind of mandala dance around a fixed column on the stage is mentioned (Srivastava, 2008, 211).

Most of the references to the above movement, in the mentioned text, are in the Raasleela of Krishna which, of course, is accompanied by music and Abhinaya, and the dancing characters of this story include Krishna, his wives, and Apsaras. Apart from the historiographies mentioned above, it is the circular characteristics of the dance that are important. Throughout the dance, Krishna and his wives move and dance hand in hand in a circle or semicircle. It seems that Raasmandala was chosen for this reason as the second name for this dance. Mandala literally means circle. It is a symbolic diagram that encloses something like a fence. In Hinduism, those who want to concentrate and meditate draw a mandala and stare at it, or imagine it in their minds. The mandala is the focal point and center of energy accumulation, and according to what the mandala

embraces, it finds an earthly or celestial meaning (Encyclopaedia of Hinduism, 1983, vol2, 20). The Apsaras, which are members of the Krishna dance (mentioned above), are themselves, celestial dancers. The word Apsara itself comes from a circular dance they perform.

Ritual dances seem to be impressions and reminders of the creation of the world and the myths associated with it. The circle referred to in the dance of the Apsaras is, in fact, the same circle that the gods, at the time of the creation of the world, had held hands around on an infinite ocean. From their dancing and beating their feet on the ground, the soil rose and it was the soil of the world (Sukla, 1983, 105). From this point of view, the Raasleela ritual dance is comparatively and oenologically comparable to all the ritual dances in the world, which are performed in a circle or around a center. It is noteworthy that Raasleela is performed in Kathak too.

Cakkara or the whirls of Kathak means ring, circle, and center, and in Hinduism, it means the center of receiving and supplying life energy (Encyclopaedia of Hinduism, 1983, vol1, 217). It also means endless motion, the circle of people around each other, the diagrams of Mantras, and also the point of exchange of the neural vessels of the human body (Bhattacharya, 1999, 385-386).

Also, in Hinduism, the wheel or Cakkara is a symbol of Vishnu (Srivastava, 2008, 213). The whirling motion of the wheel also corresponds to the shape of the mandala. In addition to the fact that the words Chakra and Cakkara seem to have the same root and etymology, the Mahabharata quotes Vishnu as saying that he is pleased with the worship of the Brahmins, especially those who offer their vows in the form of rings (Mahabharata, 1966, 666).

Coomaraswamy believes that since Krishna is one of Vishnu's avatars, the shape of the circle, ring, and wheel in Raasleela's dances is not unrelated to Vishnu (1976). And Cakkara in Kathak is an attempt to represent and recreate divinity. The mandala encompasses the entirety of the universe. The planets, the sun, the moon, and the stars are all circular and move in circular orbits, in Hinduism, and this is not without reason. In Raasleela, Krishna's lovers dance around him in a circular motion with a jug on their heads. These circles and rings are not only mentioned in the Raasleela, as a small part of the themes of Hindu ritual dances but also in all the rituals of Hinduism and even in all the ritual dances of the world. (Table 1) shows the concept and symbol of the circle in Hinduism and Sufism.

Table 1. The Common Concept of the Circle in Sufism and Hinduism (Authors)

Circle in Hinduism	Circle in Sufism
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - salvation(moksha) - Mandala -The wheel (its center is a symbol of the human soul, its blades are a symbol of human knowledge and awareness -Chain of life and death- -Reaching intuition (drawing all physical and mental energies into the circle (human soul) - Ahamkara (Sun) -care and focus -Vishnu (god of protection) --Relief and Salvation (Moksha) - Microcosm 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -cosmos - Movement of planets in space - Ptolemy's central earth, the circle of the earth as a symbol of existence and man as its symbol - four elements -Microcosm -life cycle

Discussion: The Iconology of Rotations Based on Panofsky's Semantic Layers

The findings of this study, which highlight the similarities between Rumi's Sema and Kathak in their use of spinning as a ritual form, have significant implications for understanding cultural exchanges between Sufism



and Hinduism, particularly during the Delhi Sultanate and Mughal Empire periods in India (13th to 19th centuries). The shared iconological and semantic layers of rotation in both rituals suggest a deeper interplay of spiritual and cultural influences between these two traditions. This aligns with broader scholarly discourse on ritual dance, which often emphasizes the role of movement and form in transcending cultural and religious boundaries to express universal spiritual themes.

Ernst (1997) have highlighted how Sufi practices like Sema are not only expressions of divine love but also vehicles for cultural synthesis, particularly in regions where Islam interacted with local traditions. Similarly, research on Hindu ritual performances, such as Vatsyayan's (1968) work on Classical Indian Dance in Literature and the Arts, underscores the adaptability of Hindu dance forms like Kathak to incorporate external influences while retaining their spiritual core. The findings of this study resonate with these works, suggesting that the shared use of spinning in Sema and Kathak may reflect a historical process of mutual influence and adaptation.

The implications of these findings are profound for understanding the cultural exchanges between Sufism and Hinduism. The parallel use of spinning in both rituals—aimed at achieving spiritual ecstasy and connection with the divine—points to a shared symbolic language that transcends religious boundaries. This suggests that during the Delhi Sultanate and Mughal periods, Sufi and Hindu communities were not isolated but engaged in a dynamic exchange of ideas and practices. The whirling in Sema and Kathak can thus be seen as a manifestation of this syncretic cultural environment, where spiritual practices borrowed from and influenced one another.

Furthermore, the study's use of Panofsky's iconological model to analyze the semantic layers of rotation provides a methodological framework for understanding how form and meaning intersect in ritual performances. This approach aligns with similar studies, such as those by Drewal (1992) which examine how ritual forms carry layered meanings that reflect cultural and historical contexts. By applying this model, the study not only highlights the formal similarities between Sema and Kathak but also situates these similarities within a broader historical and cultural narrative of exchange and adaptation.

In conclusion, the findings of this study contribute to the scholarly discourse on ritual dance by demonstrating how shared forms, such as spinning, can serve as conduits for cultural and spiritual exchange. The similarities between Sema and Kathak underscore the fluidity of cultural boundaries in pre-modern India and highlight the role of ritual performance in fostering mutual understanding between Sufism and Hinduism. This research invites further exploration of other ritual forms and their potential to reveal deeper connections between seemingly distinct religious traditions.

Table 2. Face and content of rotation in Rumi's Sema according to Panofsky model (author)

Rotation in Sema (natural and primary meaning)	Rotation in Sema (conventional and secondary meaning)	Rotation in Sema (Meaning of content)
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Circle -Harmony with the rhythm and beat of Qavali music - Physical expression of joy caused by being in a mystical environment - Ecstasy caused by listening to romantic and mystical poems and music 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Cycle of seasons -Birth and death - Planet orbit -Ptolemy astronomy (Earth is the center of the universe and the planets revolve in circular orbits) - Rotate around the Kaaba -Four geographical directions -four elements of nature 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Long live - Catching the divine grace - Refining and cultivation - Through mystical means - owns annihilation -Experience the sacred - The sanctification of man (man is a symbol of his own effort, the movement of the status of the symbol of human holiness as the center of the rotations of existence and the act of grace for the collective)

This article, to answer its main question about the reason for the iconological similarities of the two rituals in the successive whirling attributed to the effect the two practices have received from each other throughout history, tried to provide the necessary ideological context to study and discover the semantic underlying layers of common forms. The described effect was done by analyzing the semantic implications of the common formal and content forms (rotation), which is the iconological approach. These two performances, like many other ritual performances throughout human life, have chosen the form of rotation around a circle. (Table 2) and (Table 3) deal with the semantic meanings in the second layer and the third layer of the meaning of rotation in Rumi's Sema and the Kathak, according to Panofsky's model, which was mentioned earlier. This model helps to better understand the meaning and concept of the form.

Table 3. Face and content of rotation in Kathak according to Panofsky model (authors)

Rotation in Kathak (natural and primary meaning)	Rotation in Kathak (conventional and secondary meaning)	Spin on the beat (Content meanings)
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Circle - Harmony with the rhythm and beat of Qavali music - Physical expression of joy caused by being in a mystical environment - Ecstasy caused by listening to romantic and mystical poems and music 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Constant change of the universe -Birth and death - Transformation and change of 5 basic elements of nature -the wheel Atomic particle motion - Raasleela circle dance (Krishna with Gopies) - Circle dance of Apsaras and their kicking on the ground and going to the sky 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Endless energy activity - Care and focus on Hinduism -Unity in plurality (one God present for each of the worlds) - Leaving the material -microcosm

Conclusion

Rotation as one of the ancient motifs of human art has always shown the human desire to coordinate with the movement of planets and stars in the sky, as the most unknown and unattainable example of nature. Everywhere man has looked, he has witnessed this rotation: of day and night, birth and death, the movements of atomic particles. Therefore, under his creation and because of his harmony with nature, he has always been inclined to move and whirl while praying, and Sema and Kathak have not been an exception to this rule.

According to the iconological analysis tables on the form of rotation in Sema and Kathak that preceded, we find that the form of rotation is in the first place to show harmony with the musical rhythm. Due to its proximity to the circle, this form is the best visual form for expressing passion and joy, which is the purpose of these two performances. In both, the dancers are thrilled to be in an environment full of spiritual joy and ecstasy, and they express this ecstasy by constantly spinning in the best possible form.

Next, it is the socio-historical context of form that gives meaning beyond form. In this layer, according to the mentioned context, rotation is a symbol of the cycle of seasons, birth and death, rotation of planets, wheels, movements of atomic particles, and so on. These meanings are attributed to these forms in both performances based on birth and growth in a particular environment. In the next stage, the meanings that were formed by these forms in the philosophy and ideology of Sufism and Hinduism were discussed. Or, conversely, these two philosophies expected from these forms, meanings that were deeper than the symbols, and thus they also gradually found a deeper meaning, which is the quest, continuity, circulation, and staying in the energy of the universe. Therefore, a form such as rotation in both performances has the same meaning in all three layers of meaning (Table 4).

Table 4. Comparison of form and content in the rotations of Kathak and Sema according to Panofsky model (authors)



Sema and Kathak (primary and natural meaning)	Sema and Kathak (secondary and conventional meaning)	Sema and Kathak (content meanings)
<ul style="list-style-type: none">-Circle- Harmony with the rhythm and beat of Qavali music- Physical expression of joy caused by being in a mystical environment- Ecstasy caused by listening to romantic and mystical poems and music	<ul style="list-style-type: none">- Constant change in the universe-Birth and death- The basic elements of nature-Circle/wheel-Atomic particle motion-Rotation of seasons-Planet Orbit	<ul style="list-style-type: none">-Continuity and circulation of energy in the world-Measuring/concentrating/attracting divine grace-Unity in plurality (one God present for each of the worlds)- Leaving the material- quest- one's annihilation-microcosm

The methodological framework used in this study, particularly the application of Panofsky's iconological model, could be applied to other ritual dances across cultures. For example, future research could explore the similarities between Sufi whirling and the whirling dervishes of the Mevlevi order in Turkey, or between Kathak and other Indian classical dances like Bharatanatyam or Odissi. Such studies could reveal broader patterns of cultural exchange and adaptation in ritual performances. By expanding the scope of this analysis to other cultural and artistic forms, future research could not only deepen our understanding of ritual performances but also highlight the universal human desire for spiritual connection and expression through movement. These actionable insights would make the study's conclusions more impactful and relevant to a broader audience, including scholars, practitioners, and educators.

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