

# Study on the Differences of Animal Totem Simulation Dances of Xinjiang Uyghur nationality

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## Abstract

**Xinjiang Uyghur dance encompasses a rich variety of simulated dances based on animal totems. These dances vividly de-pict scenes from the daily life of the Uyghur people. These dances embody the core of the Uyghur national spirit and serve as an embodiment of their cultural identity. Furthermore, these animal totem simulations do not exist in isolation. A com-parison with the dance art forms of ancient Greece and India reveals that the Xinjiang Uyghur animal totem dance is, to some degree, a product of cross-cultural exchange. At the same time, this dance form itself possesses profound and unique cultural attributes.**

## Keywords

**Xinjiang Uyghur; Animal Totem; Simulation Dance; Symbolism.**

## 1. Introduction

Since ancient times, Xinjiang has been a region where multiple cultures have coexisted, and its musical and dance arts—quintessences of these cultures—have accordingly flourished. From the earliest periods, the ancestors who inhabited the Xinjiang created a brilliant tradition of primordial dance, a heritage vividly attested by the vast expanses of dance-themed rock paintings stretching for hundreds of miles. [1] Among these, scenes depicting dances centered on animal totems occupy a particularly significant portion. Such dances that imitate animals emerged, first, from practical needs—mimicking the movements of wild beasts and experiencing, through embodied enactment, the exhilaration of the hunt—and second, from totemic worship. Totemism, a religious conception shared by various ethnic groups and clans in primitive societies, developed on the basis of fertility cults. [2] Over time, animal simulation dances gradually departed from their original utilitarian functions and entered the realm of pure aesthetics. On this basis, the present paper takes the Uyghur people—who mainly reside in Xinjiang—as its point of departure, seeking to catalogue the animal-totem-related forms that appear in Uyghur dance and to outline the stylistic features and symbolic resonances of the various animal-totem dances.

## 2. The Origins of Animal Totem Worship in Xinjiang

Totem worship is directly linked to humanity's natural modes of production. The earliest Uyghur ancestors lived a nomadic life before gradually transitioning to a semi-agricultural, semi-sedentary way of production, and eventually to a fully settled agricultural society, in which farming became the stable basis of life. Throughout this process, elements of the natural world—especially animals and plants—became indispensable components of the Uyghur ancestors' livelihood. Consequently, their deep dependence on these natural resources became one of the fundamental origins of Uyghur totemism. [3] This reliance also gave rise to an initial imaginative conception of natural forces, leading the ancestors to believe that they themselves possessed the natural powers associated with the animals they regarded as totems. Numerous

early myths and legends concerning animals, preserved in Uyghur cultural memory, provide strong evidence for this inference.

A particularly vivid reflection of such totemic consciousness in the literary sphere appears in the ancient Uyghur heroic epic *The Legend of Oghuz*. In the epic, the leader of the primitive Oghuz tribe, Oghuz Khan, is described as having “legs like those of a bull, a waist like that of a wolf, shoulders like those of a black sable, a chest like that of a bear, and a body covered with thick, dense fur.” The attribution of animal characteristics to a human figure is among the clearest expressions of totemic belief. Moreover, Uyghur reverence for animal totems has never been confined to the distant past or to the realm of myth; rather, it permeates daily life. Animal imagery appears on Uyghur instruments and utensils, while plant motifs are widespread in architecture and clothing. Animal totems have thus come to function as auspicious symbols of protection, peace, and happiness [4].

Dance—especially the mimetic dances that embody animal totems—constitutes one of the most significant modes of expressing Uyghur totem worship. Through the body, Uyghur dancers attempt to imitate animals endowed with powers different from those of human beings; in time, such imitation evolved into a cultural habit and a deeply rooted local tradition [5].

### 3. Dance Types Under Uyghur Animal Totem Worship

As a representative civilization of the oasis, the Uyghur people possess a musical and dance culture of distinctive style and unique aesthetic qualities. Historically, the music and dance traditions of Gaochang, Kucha, and Shule exerted profound influence on the performing arts of the China's Central Plains. Through the vicissitudes of time and continuous cultural exchange, Uyghur music and dance have absorbed elements from various regions, thereby developing a rich and pluralistic aesthetic character. Among the more than a dozen established forms of Uyghur dance, nearly half are related to animal totems [6].

For example, the Chicken Dance, also known as the Hami Chicken Dance, exists in two major performance forms. The first is a trio dance performed by two men and one woman, depicting the playful yet dramatic scene of “the hawk catching the chicks,” in which the hen protects her young and ultimately triumphs. The main movements of the Dance include such mimetic actions as crowing and wing-spreading, double wing-shaking, crest-shaking, pecking, darting, and other gestures derived from avian behavior. The choreography often makes use of leaping steps. The accompaniment employs local Uyghur folk instruments, producing rhythms that are forceful and lively, conveying a sense of cheerfulness, humor, and unrestrained vitality, and possessing considerable expressive appeal. The original form of the Chicken Dance was a masked dance within the Yizhou music and dance tradition, though masks are no longer used today. The second form is a duet performed by two men that portrays a rooster pursuing a hen and the two fowls frolicking together. The trio version appears in the Hami's Muqam, while the duet form occasionally occurs in meshrep performances [7].

Another example is the Goat Dance, which is popular in Hotan and Artux, and is performed within the meshrep context. It typically takes the form of a male duet, in which one performer portrays a goat and the other its owner. The goat's headpiece is fashioned from horns or thick branches wrapped with coarse cloth, worn over the dancer's head. The performer who plays the goat dons a reversed sheepskin coat and, moving to the rhythm of the music, begins on hands and knees with a nodding gesture synchronized to each beat; he then imitates the goat's lively bounding—sometimes leaping sideways or forward, sometimes backward or in circles. These movements are vivid and humorous, often provoking hearty laughter from the audience. In performance, speech, singing, and dance are closely intertwined. When dialogue occurs between the “goat” and its owner, the music, singing, and dancing pause. If the goat hears

unfriendly remarks, it immediately “butts” the offender with its horns in mock anger; upon hearing praise, it returns the gesture to show friendliness.

Similarly, the Monkey Dance is mainly found in Wuluqiaole Township of Awati County. It may be performed by a solo dancer or by a group. Performers wear masks, drape themselves in sheepskin, or dress in red homespun shirts and dance barefoot. Their movements imitate the agility and quickness of monkeys, along with a wide range of expressions—climbing trees, gathering fruit, scratching themselves, and so forth—to enliven the meshrep gathering and to entertain spectators. Local folk melodies are typically used as musical accompaniment. Both historical texts and archaeological discoveries attest to the antiquity of the Monkey Dance. The Youyang Zazu, vol. 4, records: “In Poluo-zhe, men and women alike wore dog and monkey masks and danced day and night.” Moreover, the reliquary from the Subashi ancient temple carries painted scenes of masked dancers with monkey faces. These written accounts and excavated artifacts demonstrate that the Monkey Dance was not only immensely popular in the ancient Western Regions but also continuously transmitted through the ages.

Finally, the Camel Dance is a folk dance popular in Kashgar, Kucha, Baicheng, and Shaya. It has two principal performance styles. In the first, four men—or three men and one woman—participate. Two performers, wearing sheepskin coats and trousers backwards, play the role of a camel. Another actor portrays the camel driver, and another the rider. The two camel performers stand one behind the other, facing the same direction, carrying two wooden poles on their shoulders; two horizontal bars connect the poles, and a large sickle is fixed at the front. The sickle is extended through the sleeve of the sheepskin coat and wrapped to form the camel’s head. Two sheepskin coats are then draped over both dancers and the wooden frame, forming the body of the camel. The camel driver wraps a sairan cloth around his head and wears a japban robe. The “rider,” often a man dressed as a woman, sits atop the wooden frame. When the music begins, singing accompanies the performance, and the camel takes one step forward every two beats. The driver holds the camel’s rein in one hand and gestures with the other as if urging the camel onward, interjecting humorous remarks to amuse the audience and directing the camel to kneel or rise. The rider improvises simple movements according to the rhythm, such as raising both arms, swinging them, or placing hands on hips while moving the shoulders. The second style also involves four male performers; the camel impersonators are draped either in sheepskin coats or in cloth fashioned into a camel’s shape. In this form, spoken lines and singing are woven into the performance, though here it is the rider—not the driver—who delivers the spoken and sung passages. Besides instrumental accompaniment, the rider often leads with a sung line, answered by the camel driver in chorus. The lyrics are mainly humorous in nature. The driver’s movements are varied, with common steps including the single step and the “piqué turn” step.

#### **4. The Value Implications of Uyghur Animal Simulation Dances in Xinjiang**

A survey of Uyghur animal totem dances reveals that most of them are embedded within the meshrep. Literally meaning “joyous gathering”, the meshrep is a community-based event that integrates singing, dancing, antiphonal verse, riddling, and various forms of entertainment. Many animal simulation dances appear as improvisational interludes within the meshrep, characterized by spontaneity and freedom. Consequently, their musical rhythms and choreographic styles tend to be exuberant and festive. Dances such as the Goat Dance and the Horse Dance are intimately intertwined with the everyday lives of residents; indeed, the animals depicted in these dances are largely modeled on domestic fowl and livestock. After long days of agricultural labor spent in the company of sheep, horses, and chickens, people reenact their movements during festive occasions, animating them once more with lively mimicry. The symbolic meanings of these animal totems thus become forms of expression closest to their

lived experience. Their repeated enactment of simple gestures serves as a means to relieve fatigue, to converse with oneself and with the community through music and dance. The humor and playfulness embedded in the movements convey a spirit of gentle irony, lightheartedness, and sincere affection for life.

Moreover, Uyghur dance belongs to the oasis cultural tradition. The oases surrounding the Tarim Basin—cradles of ancient Xinjiang civilization—have historically demanded great resilience from their inhabitants. Situated amid barren deserts and gravel plains, these regions expose people to harsh environmental conditions, and the burdens of daily labor bring with them sorrow and hardship. Yet the tenacious communities of the region have never relinquished hope; they have continually adapted and created. In this process, dance became a crucial vehicle for emotional expression and a reflection of the people's steadfast, indomitable character. Camel Dance offers a vivid example. The camel, known as the "ship of the desert," is not only a vital means of transport in desolate landscapes but also a loyal companion to travelers. Its gentle disposition, tolerance of extreme climates, and capacity to carry heavy loads over long distances resonate deeply with the endurance and fortitude of the local population. Thus, the qualities embodied by the camel have come to symbolize Uyghur resilience and cultural identity. The Dance is therefore more than a reenactment of leading or riding a camel; it gestures toward a deeper affirmation of communal virtues and a collective sense of spiritual belonging.

Totemic symbols are inherently rich in meaning, and different animals convey distinct layers of significance. The image of the chicken, for instance, extends far beyond quotidian associations to function as a cultural emblem of broad symbolic resonance. In the *Classic of Mountains and Seas*, the chicken is regarded as a spiritual anchor within worldly existence, mediating between heaven and earth; people imagined divine birds by extrapolating from its form. It is not only one of the Twelve Zodiac Animals but also a tribal totem among numerous ethnic groups. Even today, Uyghurs in Hami preserve the ancient worship once practiced by the ancient Gaochang Uyghurs. They regard the chicken as a sacred being; ritual containers often contain red and white paper cutouts of a rooster and a hen. The rooster, in particular, is viewed as a symbol of yang energy, an apotropaic guardian against evil, and an emblem of auspiciousness. In folk tradition, the rooster appears universally—whether in offerings to ancestors or in shamanic rites. When Uyghurs in Hami perform the Chicken Dance during meshrep, the playful enactment of roosters and hens reflects their belief in the protective and generative power associated with the rooster image, a power believed to lead them toward happiness, good fortune, and new beginnings [8].

## 5. The Cross-Cultural Connections of The Animal Simulation Dance

In remote antiquity, human beings, driven by the needs of hunting, began to imitate the movements and cries of animals. Through this process, a pictographic and symbolic mimetic mechanism gradually took shape: the human body performed actions far beyond the gestures of everyday life, eventually giving rise to the earliest forms of animal-totemic dance. It is worth affirming that such dances are by no means confined to Xinjiang nor limited to a single ethnic group; rather, they are found across the world, traversing vast cultural distances and emerging in widely divergent civilizations [9].

Lion Dance offers a telling example, for its very formation is the product of cross-regional circulation and the fusion of multiple cultural traditions. [10] According to scholarly accounts, a singing-and-dancing ritual in a remote Hungarian village features attire strikingly similar to the traditional garments of Hami Uyghurs. Within the ritual, women carry vessels planted with wheat seedlings, while snowflakes fall around them—an arrangement that closely parallels the Kök Meshrep of Hami and certain performance scenes of the Hami Chicken Dance. The

developmental history of ancient song-and-dance arts in Xinjiang also reveals traces of Greek influence, a claim supported by the visual evidence of cave murals. In the Kizil Caves, large numbers of female nude dance figures appear. The murals of Kucha likewise depict scenes in which humans dance with animals, or in which dancing girls perform the characteristic “three bends” posture, twisting the waist and extending the hips—forms that closely resonate with ancient Greek and Indian dance vocabularies.

Archaeological artifacts further reinforce this cross-cultural perspective. A particularly illustrative example is the patterned *ji robe* unearthed in Yuli County, woven with images of human-animal-tree dances. The dancers depicted possess curly hair, large eyes, and prominent noses, features typical of ancient Greeks. Arranged in pairs beneath a pomegranate tree, the dancers perform alongside a row of goats and a row of oxen, creating a festive scene of humans and animals celebrating together. This imagery bears notable resemblance to ritualized song-and-dance traditions described in ancient Greek accounts of Dionysian worship.

## 6. Conclusion

The emergence of totemic worship among the Uyghur ancestors stemmed from a reverence for, and aspiration toward, the primordial forces of nature. Over the *longue durée* of ethnic history, consciousness of animal totems became deeply embedded within the rhythms of Uyghur daily life and labor. Through continual reshaping under the influences of work, religious belief, and artistic sensibility, these animal images evolved into the distinctive system of Uyghur animal simulation dance as it exists today. Animal-totem dances permeate the full spectrum of Uyghur musical-dance culture—from improvisational interludes within the meshrep to fully independent choreographic genres. In representing their animal totems, Uyghur performers consistently adopt a humorous, light-hearted, and unrestrained style. Narrative scenes drawn from agricultural labor and pastoral life serve as the primary frameworks for performance, while simple, direct movements function as the principal means of mimetic representation.

Moreover, the dances born from totemic worship have never remained confined to a single geographical setting. They continue to evolve internally, such that even within the same totemic system, different dance types develop distinct stylistic features. These internal variations contribute to the richness and diversity of the Uyghur animal-dance tradition. Broadening the gaze further, one may observe that Uyghur animal simulation dance is, in essence, an exemplary cross-cultural phenomenon—deeply interwoven with regional and transregional currents. Benefiting from Xinjiang’s geographic position and its dynamic socio-historical transformations, these dances have repeatedly absorbed, integrated, and transformed diverse cultural influences.

The ancient Western Regions, long celebrated as a flourishing garden of cultures, provided fertile soil for such artistic exchanges. The animal-totem dance, as one of its vibrant fruits, is dazzling in its own right; yet within the grand arc of cultural history in the Western Regions, it remains but a single gleaming pearl in the boundless sea of human creativity.

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