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CHOREOGRAPHING COEXISTENCE: DANCE, INTERFAITH DIALOGUE, AND CULTURAL MEDIATION IN MUSLIM COMMUNITIES OF NORTHERN GHANA

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Abstract

This article examines the potential of dance as a culturally grounded medium for interfaith dialogue and social mediation within Muslim-majority communities in Northern Ghana. Drawing on qualitative ethnographic research conducted in the Tamale Metropolis, the study engages Muslim clerics from diverse Islamic sects, traditional authorities, dancers, and youth groups to explore contested perceptions of music and dance within Islamic cultural life. Guided by structural functionalist and cultural mediation frameworks, the article argues that traditional dance functions as an embodied social institution capable of fostering moral reflection, dialogue, and communal coexistence. While dominant religious interpretations have contributed to the marginalisation of indigenous dances, the study demonstrates that performance-based interventions particularly the choreographed work Waa-pa zagbegu Musulinsini, developed from Islamic values of peace, tolerance, and faith created spaces for reflection and dialogue among Muslim audiences. Audience responses indicate that dance can operate as a mediating cultural practice rather than a source of religious conflict. The article concludes that choreographed performance, when grounded in local religious and cultural ethics, offers a viable tool for interfaith engagement, cultural sustainability, and peacebuilding in plural African societies.

Keywords: *dance, Islam, performance, haram, Waa-pa zagbegu Musulinsini, cultural mediation*

1. Introduction

Across societies, performance has long served as a medium through which communities negotiate identity, morality, and social coexistence. Dance, in particular, extends beyond aesthetic expression to function as an embodied social practice through which values are

transmitted, conflicts are negotiated, and communal bonds are reinforced. Scholars of dance and performance have consistently demonstrated that movement operates as a culturally encoded system of communication, capable of shaping behaviour and sustaining social order (Blacking, 1983; Hanna, 2006; Kaeppler, 2000). In many African societies, dance historically functioned as a moral, pedagogical, and ritual institution embedded within systems of belief and social organisation (Mbiti, 1969; Nketia, 1974).

Within contemporary Muslim-majority contexts, however, dance often occupies a contested position, shaped by divergent religious interpretations that alternately accommodate or reject embodied performance as a legitimate cultural practice. Dominant public discourses frequently frame music and dance as incompatible with Islamic moral codes, emphasising notions of *haram* and bodily restraint. Yet scholars of Islam caution against treating Islamic practice as monolithic or doctrinally fixed. Rather, Islam operates as a historically situated and interpretive tradition, shaped by local contexts, power relations, and competing authorities (Asad, 2003). Studies of African Islam further demonstrate that Islamic practice on the continent has long coexisted with indigenous expressive forms through processes of accommodation, translation, and selective adaptation (Sanneh, 1997; Kane, 2016).

Northern Ghana, particularly the Dagbon region, offers a compelling context for examining these dynamics. As a predominantly Muslim society with a rich heritage of traditional dance, Dagbon exemplifies the complex interplay between religious devotion and indigenous cultural expression. Dances such as Jera, Baamaaya, and Damba historically functioned as communal practices that reinforced moral discipline, social cohesion, and collective memory (Nketia, 1974). In recent decades, however, the increasing influence of reformist Islamic interpretations has contributed to the marginalisation of these dances, particularly among younger generations. This process has weakened traditional mechanisms of cultural transmission and informal moral education, echoing broader concerns about the erosion of indigenous knowledge systems under religious and modernising pressures (Gyekye, 1996; Oyèwùmí, 1997).

While existing scholarship has documented the decline or suppression of traditional performance practices within Muslim communities, far less attention has been given to the transformative potential of dance as a mediating practice rather than a site of religious conflict. Within applied theatre and performance studies, scholars have shown that embodied performance can function as a dialogic space; one that enables reflection, encounter, and negotiation rather than ideological persuasion (Boal, 1979; Nicholson, 2005; Thompson, 2009). Taylor (2003) further conceptualises performance as a *repertoire* through which societies transmit memory and meaning beyond textual or doctrinal forms, making it particularly suited to culturally sensitive contexts where verbal debate may be constrained.

This article builds on these insights by examining dance as a form of cultural mediation and interfaith dialogue within Muslim communities of Northern Ghana. Drawing on qualitative ethnographic research conducted in the Tamale Metropolis, the study engages Muslim clerics from diverse Islamic sects, traditional authorities, dancers, and youth groups to explore how dance is perceived, contested, and re-imagined. Central to the analysis is the choreographed performance *Waa-pa zagbegu Musulinsini*, developed from Islamic ethical values of peace, tolerance, and faith. Rather than positioning dance in opposition to religious sensibilities, the performance sought to engage Islamic moral discourse through embodied symbolism.

Guided by structural functionalist and cultural mediation frameworks, the article argues that dance operates as an embodied social institution capable of fostering dialogue and coexistence within religiously plural settings. This study is a demonstration of how performance contributes to interfaith understanding, cultural sustainability and peacebuilding in Muslim-majority African societies. In doing so, the article contributes to broader debates on religion and performance while foregrounding an African context that remains underrepresented in scholarship on applied performance and conflict mediation.

2. Review of Related Literature

2.1 Dance and Performance as Embodied Social Practice

Scholars across anthropology, performance studies, and dance ethnology have long established that dance functions as more than aesthetic display; it operates as an embodied social practice through which meaning, values, and social relations are produced and negotiated. Blacking (1983) famously argues that music and dance are “humanly organised” practices, inseparable from the social structures and moral orders that produce them. From this perspective, dance is not an autonomous art form but a culturally embedded mode of communication.

The works by Hanna (1987, 2006) further develop this position by conceptualising dance as a form of non-verbal communication capable of persuasion, regulation, and social control. She demonstrates that movement communicates attitudes, reinforces norms, and mediates social relationships in ways that spoken language often cannot. Similarly, Kaeppler (2000) frames dance as a structured system of knowledge—what she terms “cultural text”—encoded through movement vocabularies that reflect social hierarchies, cosmology, and collective memory.

Within African contexts, dance has been consistently theorised as a moral and philosophical institution. Nketia (1974) situates African dance within broader systems of communal ethics, ritual practice, and social responsibility, arguing that movement is inseparable from moral instruction and social cohesion. Mbiti (1969) likewise emphasises that African expressive practices are embedded within communal worldviews that prioritise harmony, continuity, and collective identity. This body of scholarship provides a strong foundation for understanding traditional dance in Dagbon as an embodied institution that historically facilitated moral education, social regulation, and communal dialogue.

2.2 Islam, Interpretation, and Cultural Contestation in African Contexts

While Islam is often represented in popular discourse as uniformly opposed to music and dance, scholars of religion caution against such essentialist interpretations. Formulation of Islam as a “discursive tradition” by Asad (2003) is particularly instructive, emphasising that religious practices are shaped by historically situated interpretations, institutional authority, and social power rather than fixed doctrine. From this perspective, debates over dance are not theological inevitabilities but contested interpretations embedded within specific socio-political contexts.

Studies of African Islam reinforce this interpretive plurality. Sanneh (1997) demonstrates that Islam in West Africa historically adapted to local cultural forms through processes of translation and accommodation, allowing indigenous expressive practices to coexist with Islamic belief systems. Kane (2016) further documents the intellectual diversity of Muslim West Africa, highlighting how different Islamic movements negotiate local customs in varied

ways. These studies challenge assumptions that Islam and indigenous performance are inherently incompatible.

At the same time, scholars have shown that reformist and revivalist Islamic movements often seek to redefine cultural legitimacy by reordering moral hierarchies (Soares, 2005). In such contexts, indigenous practices—including music and dance—may be reclassified as un-Islamic, not solely on doctrinal grounds but as part of broader struggles over authority, identity, and moral regulation. This literature supports the argument that opposition to traditional dance in Northern Ghana reflects interpretive dominance rather than Islamic consensus, opening space for alternative engagements between religion and performance.

2.3 Indigenous Knowledge, Embodiment, and Social Cohesion in Africa

African philosophical scholarship provides critical insight into the epistemological significance of embodied practices such as dance. Mbiti (1969) and Gyekye (1996) both emphasise that African moral systems are rooted in communal participation and embodied socialisation rather than abstract textual instruction. Knowledge, within this framework, is lived, performed, and transmitted through social practice.

Oyèwùmí (1997) critiques Western epistemological traditions that privilege disembodied rationality, arguing that African societies historically value embodied and relational ways of knowing. Dance, as a communal and participatory practice, thus functions as a repository of indigenous knowledge, encoding ethical norms, historical narratives, and social expectations. The marginalisation of such practices therefore constitutes not only cultural loss but epistemic erosion.

This perspective is particularly relevant in contexts such as Dagbon, where traditional dances historically played a central role in youth socialisation and moral instruction. The decline of these practices, accelerated by religious contestation and modernisation, weakens informal mechanisms of social cohesion and intergenerational knowledge transfer. Existing scholarship thus validates the claim that sustaining dance practices is integral to maintaining communal harmony and cultural continuity.

2.4 Performance, Dialogue, and Cultural Mediation

Beyond documenting conflict between religion and performance, scholars in applied theatre and performance studies have increasingly foregrounded the mediating potential of embodied practice. The work *Theatre of the Oppressed* by Boal (1979) conceptualises performance as a rehearsal for social transformation, enabling participants to explore alternatives to conflict through embodied action. While Boal's work emerged from explicitly political contexts, its emphasis on dialogue and participation has informed broader approaches to performance as mediation.

Nicholson (2005) extends this argument by positioning applied theatre as a dialogic process rather than a didactic tool, emphasising encounter, reflexivity, and negotiated meaning. Thompson (2009) further critiques outcome-driven models of applied performance, arguing instead for attention to affect, presence, and relational engagement—qualities particularly relevant in religiously sensitive contexts where direct confrontation may be counterproductive.

Taylor (2003) draws the distinction between the archive and the repertoire and provides an additional conceptual anchor, framing performance as a mode of transmitting memory and

meaning through embodied repetition. This understanding positions dance as uniquely suited to interfaith and intercultural engagement, where shared bodily experience can foster understanding beyond doctrinal debate.

Within this body of scholarship, performance emerges as a culturally grounded medium capable of opening dialogic spaces, mediating tensions, and fostering coexistence. However, much of this literature remains centred on secular or Christian-dominated contexts, with limited attention to Muslim-majority African societies. This gap underscores the significance of examining choreographed interventions such as *Waa-pa zagbegu Musulinsini* as forms of cultural mediation within Islamic ethical frameworks.

2.5 Positioning the Present Study

Drawing together these thematic strands, the literature supports a conceptualisation of dance as an embodied social institution situated at the intersection of culture, religion, and communal life. It also reveals a critical gap in scholarship concerning the use of performance as a mediating practice within Muslim communities in Africa. By examining how choreography grounded in Islamic ethical values can facilitate dialogue and coexistence, the present study extends existing debates on religion and performance while contributing an empirically grounded African perspective to applied performance and peacebuilding scholarship.

3. Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative research design informed by ethnographic and participatory principles to examine how dance functions as a medium of cultural mediation and interfaith dialogue in Muslim communities of Northern Ghana. A qualitative approach is appropriate because it facilitates a holistic and context-sensitive exploration of the social, cultural, and religious environments within which dance is created, performed and interpreted. By privileging lived experiences, meanings, and social interactions, the study seeks to understand not only what dance communicates, but how and why it operates as a bridge between religious and cultural identities.

Fieldwork was organised into three interrelated phases. The first phase involved secondary data collection conducted at local libraries, including the Institute of African Studies, TICCS, and the Ambariya Islamic Library, as well as through online academic databases. This stage provided a critical foundation by engaging existing scholarship on Islamic interpretations of music and dance, the historical development of Dagbon dance traditions, and broader debates on religion, culture, and performance in West Africa. Archival materials and media sources further contextualised contemporary practices within historical trajectories.

The second phase focused on interviews and community engagement. Face-to-face, semi-structured interviews were conducted with Muslim clerics representing Sunni, Tijaniyya, Shiah, and Ahmadiyya traditions, alongside traditional leaders, dance group leaders, and youth representatives. These conversations explored theological perspectives on dance, historical memories of performance practices, and contemporary views on interfaith coexistence. The dialogical nature of the interviews encouraged participants to articulate both convergences and tensions between Islamic teachings and indigenous cultural expressions, thereby illuminating the dynamic negotiation of identity within the community.

The third phase centered on dance learning and observation. The researcher actively participated in rehearsals and performances of *Jera*, *Baamaaya*, *Damba*, and the choreographed dance-drama *Waa-pa zagbegu Musulinsini* (Dance is not intrinsically prohibited in Islam; its permissibility depends on context, intention, and adherence to Islamic ethical principles). This experiential engagement provided embodied insights into movement vocabulary, musical structure, song texts, costume symbolism, and performance ethics. Participant observation enabled the documentation of how meanings are enacted and transmitted through gesture, rhythm, and spatial arrangement. Video recordings, detailed field notes, and reflexive journals were employed to capture both observable actions and interpretive reflections, ensuring systematic documentation for subsequent analysis.

The study employed a non-probability, purposive sampling approach to ensure the inclusion of participants with relevant knowledge and lived experience in Islamic practice and traditional dance. Participants were deliberately selected based on their expertise or active involvement in the subject matter, including Muslim clerics from four sects, traditional dance leaders, chiefs, elders, and youth engaged in dance activities. To capture a wide spectrum of experiences, maximum variation sampling was applied, ensuring diversity in age, gender, religious affiliation, and roles within dance practices. Snowball sampling further enabled access to additional key informants, particularly dancers and clerics who were not easily identifiable through formal structures. For the choreographed dance-drama *Waa-pa zagbegu Musulinsini*, performers were selected based on skill, willingness to participate, and their representation of both Muslim and traditional communities, thereby ensuring that the production embodied the objectives of cultural mediation and interfaith dialogue. Data collection continued until saturation was reached, that is, until no new themes or significant insights emerged, thereby strengthening the credibility and richness of the findings.

Overall, this methodological approach enabled a nuanced exploration of the cultural, religious, and social functions of dance while foregrounding participatory learning, symbolic interpretation, and the role of performance as a medium of interfaith dialogue in Northern Ghanaian Muslim communities.

4. Discussion of Findings and Results

The study's findings demonstrate that dance in Muslim communities of Northern Ghana is not merely an aesthetic form but a site of cultural negotiation, theological debate, and interreligious engagement. The complex interplay between indigenous expressive practices and Islamic interpretive traditions reflects broader debates in performance studies, religion, and postcolonial cultural theory.

The persistence and negotiation of dance within predominantly Muslim social life affirm arguments by Lewis and Mosquera (2020) that dance functions as a socially embedded practice that shapes and communicates cultural meaning. Traditional dance forms like *Jera* and *Baamaaya* operate as living repositories of communal memory, transmitting values and moral norms across generations. As one elder asserted, "*In Baamaaya, we learn humility. In Jera, we learn courage. These are not evil things,*" underscoring how dance historically served as a vehicle for communal pedagogy. This aligns with Nketia's (post-2000 editions) work on West African dance as part of social instruction, reinforcing that expressive practices are integrated into social order rather than peripheral entertainments.

4.1 Dance, Religious Contestation, and Interpretive Pluralism

The research reveals that dance is a contested cultural identity marker among Muslim communities in Tamale, Ghana. Some interlocutors, drawing on conservative Islamic interpretations, positioned certain forms of dance within a moral framework that associates bodily expression with *haram* (forbidden) behaviour. One Sunni cleric explained, “*Islam came to purify what people were doing before. Some of these dances involve practices that do not align with tawhid (oneness of God). We must be careful not to mix truth with error*”. This mirrors broader observations by Schielke and Debevec (2021) that lived Islam is not monolithic but shaped by diverse interpretations and local epistemologies.

However, the study also shows significant interpretive pluralism within Islam itself. Respondents from Tijaniyya and Sufi-oriented communities emphasised that dance should not be categorically rejected when moral intentions and communal values are foregrounded. As one Tijaniyya leader stated, “*Not every dance is shirk (idolatry). If the intention is clean and the message is good, Islam does not reject culture.*” This resonates with the argument that embodied practices are central to religious meaning-making and that religious traditions are engaged and negotiated through performance (Csordas, 2018). The field data thus echo the conceptualisation of Islamic discursive tradition as historically situated interpretation rather than fixed dogma as intimated by Asad (1986).

4.2 Performance as Mediation and Dialogue

A particularly salient finding is the role of choreographed performance in mediating interfaith dialogue. The *Waa-pa zagbegu Musulinsini* performance did not merely present dance for entertainment; it enacted a dialogical space where divergent worldviews intersected. The theorisation of “social drama” by Turner (1982) is useful here: performance becomes a vehicle through which communities process conflict, reimagine relations, and negotiate contested meanings. One participant reflected, “*When we performed the prayer movements in the dance, people saw that we were not mocking Islam. We were showing respect.*” Through this embodied negotiation, choreography operated as a bridge rather than a barrier between cultural and religious identities.

This finding aligns with notion of the *third space*, as espoused by Bhabha (1994) where hybrid identities and cultural meanings emerge not through assimilation, but through creative negotiation. Beyond mere coexistence, the performance became a site of epistemic synthesis in which Islamic ethical principles and indigenous movement vocabularies converged to produce new cultural forms. Such processes are central to theories of cultural hybridity and negotiated identities (Appadurai, 1996), especially in postcolonial contexts where local traditions and global religious norms intersect.



Figure 1. Dancers perform a choreographic gesture inspired by the Islamic declaration “Allāhu akbar,” translating devotional utterance into embodied expression. The movement illustrates how sacred language can be reinterpreted through performance to communicate reverence, faith, and ethical intentionality within a culturally grounded aesthetic framework.



Figure 2. Performers enact a stylised representation of the rukū' posture from Islamic prayer. The choreographic adaptation does not replicate ritual practice but symbolically references

humility and submission, thereby reframing prayer movement as an ethical metaphor within performance.



Figure 3. Choreographed representation of the sajdah posture symbolising devotion, surrender, and moral reflection. The image demonstrates how performance can visually communicate Islamic ethical principles through respectful abstraction rather than literal ritual enactment.

As illustrated in Figure 1, performers translated devotional utterance into symbolic gesture, demonstrating how choreographic language can function as a respectful extension of religious expression rather than its imitation. The adaptation of prayer postures into symbolic movement vocabulary (Figure 2) exemplifies how embodied performance can translate theological concepts into culturally legible forms without ritual appropriation. Figure 3 demonstrates how devotional symbolism can be communicated through abstraction, enabling audiences to recognise religious meaning while maintaining the distinction between ritual worship and artistic performance.

4.3 Youth, Identity Negotiation, and Modernity

The data further reveal generational differences in the interpretation of dance and religious identity. Younger participants tended to embrace a flexible interpretive stance, affirming that one's Islamic faith and cultural heritage need not be mutually exclusive. A university student commented, *"We are Muslims, yes. But we are also Dagbamba. Why should I lose my culture because of misunderstanding?"* This articulation reflects the claim by Appadurai (1996) that identities in contemporary societies are negotiated rather than static, shaped by multiple influences including education, media, and local heritage.

Nevertheless, youth also reported social anxiety linked to perceptions of religiosity. One young performer noted, “*If you join the dance group, some people say you are not a serious Muslim,*” illustrating how moral communities maintain social boundaries that influence behaviour and belonging. This tension aligns with Durkheim’s insight that collective beliefs function to regulate social integration and moral conformity (1915).

4.4 Moral Pedagogy and Cultural Continuity

Participants consistently underscored the pedagogical dimensions of traditional dance. For many elders, forms such as *Baamaaya* and *Jera* encode ethical values central to communal life. This supports what Agawu (2019) emphasis on West African expressive traditions as frameworks for social learning and ethical reflection. When certain Islamic critiques delegitimised aspects of traditional performance, elders lamented the erosion of intergenerational transmission channels, echoing broader postcolonial anxieties about cultural continuity. As one elder remarked, “*The youth now follow foreign ways because they are not taught our dances,*” highlighting how cultural practices also serve as mechanisms for community resilience in the face of social change.

4.5 Islamic Ethical Convergence and Cultural Coexistence

One of the most compelling results is the degree to which dance, once reframed through ethical intentionality and grounded in shared values, was recognised as compatible with Islamic principles of peace (*salaam*), moderation (*wasatiyyah*), and communal harmony. Participants reported that performances elicited reflection on shared moral commitments rather than doctrinal differences. As one cleric observed during post-performance discussion, “*If the dance reminds people of God and unity, then it is better than many other distractions.*” This suggests that when expressive practices are interpreted through the lens of ethical convergence rather than theological contrast, they can facilitate coexistence.

This finding resonates with the analysis of embodied cultural practices by Lewis and Mosquera (2020) as central to social cohesion and with insights on performance by Howell (2022) as a dynamic medium of religious expression in African contexts. Again, it aligns with reflections on postcolonial cultural negotiation (Mbembe, 2021), which emphasise relational processes over binary oppositions.

5. Conclusion of Discussion

In sum, the findings of *Choreographing Coexistence* demonstrate that dance in Muslim communities of Northern Ghana functions as a dynamic field of cultural negotiation, theological pluralism, and social mediation. Far from being solely a site of conflict, choreography emerged as a practical and embodied platform for dialogical engagement, where competing meanings and identities are mediated through creative performance. Drawing on performance theory, postcolonial cultural frameworks, and interpretive anthropology of religion, the study illustrates how dance can be reconceptualised as a technology of coexistence and a medium through which diverse cultural and religious values find expression, convergence, and mutual recognition.

This synthesis reinforces contemporary scholarship that views expressive culture not as static tradition but as an active site of meaning-making and communal negotiation (Appadurai, 1996;

Csordas, 2018; Lewis & Mosquera, 2020). In Northern Ghana's interreligious setting, choreography thus becomes both analytical lens and practical pathway toward coexistence.

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