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Stillness, Circularity and Grace in Motion: A Comparative Analysis of Japanese Classical Dance Nihon Buyo and Classical Manipuri Dance Forms

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Abstract- In this paper, a comparative analysis of Nihon Buyo and Classical Manipuri Dance will be carried out to explore the expression of convergent aesthetics within the disciplined body practices of two culturally and geographically distinct traditions. The study examines movement vocabulary, posture management, space arrangement, costume, and ritual setting by foregrounding stillness, circular motion, and cultivated grace as interdependent systems of embodied knowledge. Based on dance ethnography, close performance analysis, and comparative aesthetic theory, the discussion shows that both art forms focus more on continuity than discontinuity, on restraint rather than virtuosic performance, and on internal control rather than external representation. The special focus is on spiral and figure-eight movement patterns, the constitutive nature of costume in the construction of bodily discipline, and the devotional or contemplative paradigms in which performance finds itself. The article suggests that, without assuming direct historical transmission, the echoes of Nihon Buyo and Manipuri dance result from a similar aesthetic logic based on agrarian memory, ritualized discipline, and moralized ideas of the body. The placement of the traditions into a common analytical focus is that the study serves as a contribution to scholars of Japanese Studies in general and the debate on dance studies and cultural anthropology more specifically; by foreshadowing classical dance as an emblem of the ways societies write philosophical values, maintain the collective memory, and seek transcendence using the moving body.

Keywords: Nihon buyo, Manipuri dance, Embodiment, Stillness, Circularity, Sacred performance, Comparative aesthetics.

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Introduction

Dance is not an autonomous and noncommittal form of art. It is intricate body language that is part of a nation's cultural norms. The dance culture of a given nation is influenced by its geographical location, climatic conditions, societal setup, clothing culture, and general lifestyle. The physical expression of culture, experiences, and mindset is in the body language, movement, rhythm, and space usage in dance. The motions of the dance style depend directly on the weather and the geography of the country. The body posture and aesthetic framework of the particular dance form are also determined by the use of traditional costumes and ornaments. The way of life of a country's citizens is intimately linked to dance.

The forms of dancing that evolved in agricultural, religious, or court societies indicate work, ritual, authority, and the sense of class. Consequently, dance is a social practice that reproduces cultural values and aesthetic standards in addition to being an artistic act. As a result, studying dance moves can be seen as one of the theoretical approaches to understanding culture, where the body serves as a conduit for society, history, and the environment. Here, dance studies emerged as a prominent field of study within the multidisciplinary disciplines of performance studies, anthropology, and cultural studies.

The study examines and compares the aesthetic and philosophical similarities between Japanese Classical Dance (Nihon Buyo) and Classical Manipuri Dance. It is rather curious that, though formed in two geographically distant cultures, there is an implicit similarity in the body language, movement, costume, and expressions of the two different dance styles, which can be discussed only through historical interactions and through the prism of parallel cultural consciousness. In both forms of dance, the body is never a means of expression; it is instead structured into a highly repressed, controlled, and meditative mode. The slow movement, low center of gravity, and Japanese aesthetic of silence are significant in Japanese Classical Dance. The classical Manipuri Dance style is also used to express feelings through flowing, gentle, and circular body postures. This restraining body language places dance in a spiritual realm that is more akin to discipline and practice than amusement. In particular, the current paper is based on the fact that both kinds of dances have a propensity to convey emotions through movement and subtle body language rather than facial expressions.

As much as Manipuri Dance promotes direct gentle gaze and flowing posture, Japanese Classical Dance promotes emotion through a restrained gait and controlled body movements. In this case, the language of the two dance styles is silence and time itself. The two dances are very closely related to religion and spiritual faith. Similarly to the classical Manipuri dance, which represents Vaishnavite piety and spiritual absorption in the drama of Krishna, the classical Japanese dance also represents the self-awareness of Shinto and Buddhist ideologies. This religious background puts dance above ordinary reality, making it a meditative experience.

Objectives of the Study

The objective of this study is to conduct a comparative analysis of the Classical Manipuri dance and the Japanese classical Dance, Nihon Buyo, to identify the philosophies behind the graceful movements, circular motion, the sacred presence of the body on stage, and the cultural meanings embedded in their practice.

- To find and articulate the meaningful similarities between the Japanese classical dance Nihon Buyo and Manipuri Classical dance, two traditions that developed on opposite sides of the world, yet seem to share, somehow, surprising common ground.
- To examine the underlying ritualistic and devotional foundations, aesthetic discipline, and cultural transformation of Japanese and Manipuri dance practices.
- Identify shared movement principles such as stillness, circularity, and controlled grace.
- To explore the deep spiritual and religious connections between two diverse cultures that have a significant impact on both Nihon Buyo and Manipuri Dance.

Methodology

This proposal is based on the qualitative-comparative approach to methodology, in which movement analysis and cultural theory are used to guide interpretation. Rather than using quantitative data, it relied on close observation and a deliberate, interpretative approach to how movement, gesture, and physical discipline convey cultural meaning in particular performance practices.

The main sources of the research are ethnographic observations of live performances, evaluations of archived Nihon Buyo performances, and practical experience with Classical Manipuri dance. On the live side, as a Manipuri performer, there was a need to attend staged dance performances to see Manipuri dance performed, even though the traditional form of the dance could be seen in a modern context. During those observations, the dancer's posture, pace, spatial movement pattern, alignment with the music, and audience-performer dynamic were all given special consideration.

The picture also featured costumes, stage setting, and musical accompaniment, all of which contribute to the overall aesthetics and cultural atmosphere of a performance. In the case of Nihon Buyo, the study was based on available performances on the internet, documented stage performances, and teaching videos created by established dance schools. It was observed in some of the popular classical works, including Sagi Musume (The Heron Maiden), particularly in performances featuring the popular Bando Tamasaburo V, and Fuji Musume (The Wisteria Maiden) and Kyo Ningyo (The Kyoto Doll). These are works found in great Nihon Buyo schools, including Fujima and Hanayagi. Watching these

videos, it was focused on the movement itself, on the pacing of the choreography, on how props such as fans or long sleeves were handled, and on that kind of non-extremity and motion that defines the form. Conversely, the practice of Classical Manipuri dance forms such as Raas Leela, Bhangi Pareng, and other classical dance compositions has been transmitted through the training of well-known Manipuri dance gurus, including Guru Bipin Singh, Kalavati Devi, Sruti Banerjee, and Bimbavati Devi. The practice and observation that come with these forms have provided insight into the technical artistry of the dance, the rhythmic forms, the patterns of space adopted in a circular manner, and the devotional philosophy that informs the performance.

The secondary sources include classical literature, historical literature, dance manuals, and modern scholarly literature. Manipuri dance was based on classical literature (shastras), Vaishnavite literary materials, and local performance traditions. In the case of Nihon Buyo, the observation relied on Japanese dance manuals, research articles, histories of the theatres, and research on traditional Japanese performing arts, which provided valuable historical and analytical background. Embodiment theory, comparative aesthetics, and the idea of cultural memory condition the study's theoretical approach. In this context, the possibility of parallels between Nihon Buyo and Classical Manipuri dance is not understood as instances of historical borrowing or straightforward influence. Rather, they are perceived as parallel aesthetic traditions that developed in different cultural and historical contexts and emerged separately.

Findings and Discussion

This article presents the findings and discussion of the origins, historical background, dance technique, music, and costumes of both the Nihon Buyo and Manipuri classical dance forms.

Origins of Nihon Buyo

Japanese Classical Dance, Nihon Buyo, originated in ancient religious rituals and is influenced by Kabuki. Kabuki is a classical Japanese traditional dance-drama. `Ka' means Sing, `Bu' means Dance, and `Ki' means Skill (Ugai, 2022). In Kabuki performance, there are two important sectors: Dance and Drama. The dance choreographers of Kabuki later became independent and popular in society. The new way of presenting dance was called `Nihon Buyo' (Kayono-no Kai, n.d.). Nihon Buyo is also known as Nichibu or Kabuki Buyo. There is a strong similarity between Nihon Buyo and Kabuki in makeup, costumes, dance movements, and techniques.

In Kabuki's early history, during the Genroku period (1688-1704), the drama and dance were performed by male actors who specialized in female roles. This tradition is known as Onnagata. At that time, the focus of Kabuki dance was representing the beauty of the Onnagata rather than telling a story. Later, more profound and musically dramatic elements were included in dance drama. During

the Bakumatsu period (1853-1868), several refined dance pieces were developed based on Noh and Kyogen theatre. At the end of the Meiji period (1868-1912), a major change occurred in Japanese theatre. During this time, the previous term for dance, `Buto', which was the Japanese translation of the English word dance, was replaced by the newly coined term `Buyo'. In the Taisho period (1912-1926), many new dance compositions emerged, and female Nihon Buyo performers flourished. Over time, Nihon Buyo differentiated itself from Kabuki and developed into an independent classical dance tradition. During the Showa period (1926-1989), Japanese children were interested to learn Nihon Buyo dance and wanted to become professional performers. Then the Nihon Buyo Dance become more popular performing art in Japan. Also, Nihon Buyo can be described as the essence of the Japanese traditional art form (Nihon Buyo Association, n.d.).

Although Nihon Buyo was derived from Kabuki, it also shares movement aesthetics with other Japanese folk and traditional dances. Ancient religious rituals laid the foundation of Nihon Buyo dance. Priests and shrine maidens performed these primitive dance forms to show respect to God and spirits during festivals. Their movements were symbolic and aimed to connect the human world with the spiritual world. In this way, the customs transcended their strictly religious roots. The dramatic and narrative aspects of Nihon Buyo performances develop into a more comprehensive cultural tradition.

Dancers began narrating epics and folk tales through their movements, turning dance into something not just art but a living, breathing way of telling stories. The influence of ancient rituals is still visible today in the delicate gestures and emotional expressions of Nihon Buyo. The journey from sacred ritual to stage performance also brought new influences, such as Kabuki, Noh, Kyogen, and Bunraku, that played an important role in the development of Nihon Buyo dance (DanceUS, n.d.).

Dance Techniques of Nihon Buyo

As already mentioned, Nihon Buyo draws on the styles of shrine, court, and folk dances in Japan. Based on that, Nihon Buyo dance techniques can be analyzed into three elements: Mai, Odori, and Furi. The Japanese word `Mai' comes from the verb `Mau'. `Mau' is the short form of `Mahwaru', which means `to rotate'. Mai signifies slow, deliberate circling movements. `Mai' originated from the earliest forms of Miko Kagura, in which shire priestesses circle to reach a state of trance. Also, Mai has a close connection with the stately court dance style of China. Later, Mai became a core movement style in Noh theatre. Over time, Mai had a profound influence on popular Kabuki dance. In this style, the body of a dancer remains relatively still, the center of gravity is kept low, the knees are slightly bent, and the soles of the feet are always in contact with the floor, a technique called Suriashi. Occasionally, stamping is used to convey this strong bond between the dancer and the ground.

On the other hand, Odori is an energetic dance style. Odori refers to a relatively free and buoyant style of movement, in which the body is detached from the constraints of the ground. This causes the body to leap, the arms to swing more freely, and the music's melody and rhythm to become comparatively livelier.

The origin of this movement style also likely lies in the practice of Miko Kagura performers, who jumped to invoke auspiciousness or the influence of a goddess. Later, Odori became more popular for its rhythmic movements and footwork in the Buddhist prayer dance introduced by the priest Kuya. In Japan, Bon Odori is a traditional dance that is very popular because it is open to all participants, allowing community members to join freely. It is unlike other classical dance traditions, which are performed mainly by trained dancers. Because of its inclusiveness, it is a significant manifestation of Japanese folk culture and a means of preserving collective memory.

The Bon Odori is mainly performed during the Obon festival, a Buddhist ritual. The Bon Odori has its own pattern in every area specific to Japan, such as Nishimonai Bon Odori, Himeshima Bon Odori, Gujo Odori, Tokyo's Shina Gawa, and Awa Odori, etc. A significant characteristic of Bon Odori is its energetic, repetitive, and rhythmic movement. Therefore, it is not unlikely to interpret that this energetic and repetitive dance movement of Bon Odori has a significant influence on Nihon Buyo's Odori style (Ayamegu, 2024). Another style of Nihon Buyo dance is Furi, where the dancer presents mime or imitative poses (Ugai, 2022).

Some essential features of Japanese dance are also applicable for Nihon Buyo dance style. These are Kamae, Jy-shin, Koshi, and Uchiwa. The Kamae is a kind of pause. This pause is generally used when the dancer begins a movement or takes an intermission between movements. A basic Kamae is expressed through a specific body posture. The spine is straight, creating the feeling of being suspended from the ceiling. The dancer's feet are placed side by side, the hands are positioned slightly in front of the body, and a circular shape is formed with both arms, with the elbows slightly bent. The fingers of the hand are softly clenched into a fist, where the thumb is connected to the index finger. These features allow the dancer to adjust posture and permit a short pause before or between movements to help connect with the next movement. A stable Kamae creates a strong, restrained, and measured impression on the audience.

Ju-shin refers to lowering the body's center of gravity. In most movements of this dance style, the dancer's movements appear delicate, gentle, and effortless, even as he or she moves across the space and floor. These movements are long-lasting and extended, and dancers normally apply Suriashi, which is the process of moving the feet smoothly over the surface. A low center of gravity is required to move freely between spaces and floors in an orderly manner. These simple movements are rehearsed regularly by the dancers to deepen their understanding of dance and use them to enhance the aesthetics of their performances. A low center of gravity should therefore

be a part of it, and this will only be achieved through discipline and deep training.

Koshi, hip, or waist have a literal meaning: the stability of the lower torso and pelvis. Hips do not swing to the side or move too extensively vertically, like in Nihon Buyo. This steadiness prevents the body from shaking, and the movement is controlled and economical. The lack of movement of the pelvis enables the expressive nuance to be manifested through slight changes in weight, timing, and upper-body articulation (Ugai, 2022).

The other significant aspect of Nihon Buyo is Uchiwa, in which the legs are folded inwards. It is also linked to a small inward turn of the knees, which was previously a sign of femininity. All these qualities make silence, slowness, and stillness part of the expressive means, asking the audience to meditate and to place Nihon Buyo within a larger philosophy of disciplined embodiment and aesthetic introspection.

The dance movements of Nihon Buyo also comprise three-dimensional spirals and large figure-of-eight movements of the limbs. The Japanese Dance is replete with such gestures and movements. The root cause of this kind of movement has likely been in agriculture. The movements during the process of planting rice seedlings in a rice field are intricate, spiral-shaped, and involve connecting the fingers. This spiral motion is also flexible, as is the sharp-angle thrust of the samurai sword technique (Takane, 1990). The characteristic limited upper-body movement can be used to identify the movement of Nihon Buyo dancers. Dancers maintain the hips in a drawn-in position, whether sitting in their Seja position or walking, keeping the spine straight. Such practices of walking and sitting contribute primarily to the development of peace and tranquility in the body.

Music of Nihon Buyo Dance

Japanese traditional music is very significant in adding depth and emotion to the performances of Nihon Buyo. The Kabuki Buyo movements are highly structured, with certain gestures forming a smooth, rhythmic movement. Various kinds of music are employed in the various performances of Nihon Buyo. The graceful, restrained style of the 'Mai' dance features a relatively slow rhythm and melodious music, making the dance's flowing movement even more peaceful and aesthetic. Conversely, the music in the Odori style of dance is relatively energetic and rhythmic, providing excitement and vigor in the dance's dynamic movement. The soundscape that generates emotional elements is achieved through traditional Japanese instruments, including the shamisen, drum, and flute, which makes the dramatic story more realistic (DanceUS, n.d.). The narrative power and artistic worth of Nihon Buyo music are advanced to a new level through its multidimensionality in any performance.

Costume of Nihon Buyo

The actors of Nihon Buyo wear costly, brightly colored attire known as kimonos. This dressing makes their presentation solemn and grand. These cute suits are inspired by the Japanese geisha culture, with very elaborate designs and bright

colors that attract viewers. It is an outfit that adds extra beauty and flowing to the Nihon Buyo dance and makes every performance of its outstanding (DanceUS, n.d.). The clothes, adorned with elaborate embroidery, plain silk, and deep ornamentation, are certainly a testament to the artistic beauty and aesthetics of Nihon Buyo. The combination of classical elements and contemporary innovation can be seen in Nihon Buyo costumes using different colors and luxurious materials. From the folds and textiles used to make kimonos to the twinkling headwear, every detail is perfected, and the viewer is engrossed in the brilliance of Japanese culture (Figure 1).

Figure 1: *Japanese lady performing a Nihon Buyo dance wearing a kimono*



Source: https://mir-s3-cdn-cf.behance.net/project_modules/max_1200/f3a6461002 56659.5f04f1273361d.png, Retrieved on 27.03.26

History of Classical Manipuri Dance

Originating in the state of Manipur in the far northeastern region of India, Manipuri dance holds a prominent place in the movement tradition, not only as an aesthetic art form but also as an integral part of daily life and social behavior. Among other dance forms of India, Manipuri dance is the only dance form that is still closely associated with various rituals and rites of passage in Manipuri society. At the same time, it is also particularly appreciated by art lovers as a stage dance. This dance is dazzling and diverse, with its costumes, captivating melodies echoing in rhythm, unique vocal music, and above all, its unique dance technique, gestures, and body lines, in all, vividly presenting various scenes and stories narrated in the Srimad Bhagavatam, Jayadeva's Gita Govinda, Govindalilamrita, and other Vaishnava scriptures.

Manipuri dance has a long history that predates 33 AD. In this hilly valley on India's northeastern border, there is ample evidence of a rich and sophisticated culture that once thrived. In ancient times, the religious beliefs of the Manipuri people were nature-based animism, with elements of ancestor worship. As a result, various rituals and religious practices have been practiced in this region since ancient times, and their continuity has been maintained mainly through dance.

Many indigenous texts of Manipur describe the ritual dance of the Lai Haraoba festival, known as Anoirol. Here, Anoi means Dance and Rol means language; Anoirol means 'language of dance' (Bandopadhyay, 2010). The songs and dances included in Anoirol are considered the fundamental foundation or roots of present-day Manipuri dance. In the 18th century, Manipur became a Hindu state, and the worship of Vishnu or Krishna, the main deities of Hinduism, was introduced. This led to the emergence of Raas Dance, a highly artistic, choreographed dance drama centered on Krishna, which is still regularly performed in temples today. In recent days, both pre-Hindu religious beliefs and Hinduism coexist side by side in Manipur. As a result, the Manipuri dance we see today is a combination of ancient ritualistic dance styles and Hindu religious influences.

With the arrival of Vaishnavism in Manipur, Sankirtana, a special form of collective prayer and invocation of God, became an integral part of religious expression. This Sankirtana has had a profound and far-reaching impact on the daily lives of the Manipuri people and their artistic creations. The Nata-Pala also serves as a fitting prologue to the Raas Leela Dance Drama, held on full moon nights in different seasons. As a performing art, Manipuri dance is unique for its subtle beauty and elegant grace, with intricate aesthetics emerging in serpentine, flowing movements. In terms of theme and spiritual consciousness, Manipuri dance is a living reflection of devotion or devotional thought in its highest and purest form. Over the ages, Maibis (female priests) participating in the Lai Haraoba festival, Kings, the Guru community, the influence of Vaishnavism, and the changing social structure all played significant roles in the development of Manipuri dance, transforming it into India's most beautiful and lyrical dance style.

The first Raas Leela was dedicated to Sri Sri Govindaji in 1779 AD under the initiative and patronage of Maharaja Bhagyachandra. During his reign, the Basanta Ras and Kunja Ras were composed. Later in the 19th century, Maharaja Gambhir Singh and Maharaja Chandrakirti Singh emerged, and they are credited with composing the Nitya Rasa and played a significant role in developing and introducing the complex and subtle form of Sankirtana (Jhaveri & Devi, 1993). This period is considered a golden age in the history of Manipuri dance and music. Raas Leela is a divine dance form. It shows the path to salvation and awakens a sense of spiritual joy and fulfillment in the hearts of all devotees. Raas Leela is basically the Prem Leela between Radha and Krishna. It is believed that Krishna performed this Raas Leela with the Gopis in the beautiful Brajabhoomi Vrindavan. Different Kings of Manipur introduce five types of Raas Leelas. Maharaja Bhagyachandra introduced three Raas Leelas: Maha Raas Leela, Basanta Raas Leela, and Kunja Raas Leela. Later, during the reign of Maharaja Chandrakirti, Nitya Raas Leela was introduced, and during the reign of Maharaja Churachand, Diva Raas Leela became popular (Devi, 2024). Manipuri Raas Leela is a precious dance form, full of devotion and love. Nata Sankirtana precedes every Raas Leela,

and the performance of Bhangi Pareng is also mandatory during it.

Without these two elements, Raas Leela is not complete. Therefore, Nata Sankirtana and Bhangi Pareng play a very important role in Manipuri Raas Leela. With the rise of the British government's influence and power in the late 19th century, the rich development of Manipuri dance and music came to a halt. Fortunately, however, dance and music have always been an essential part of social life in Manipur. For this reason, they survive as prayers and offerings in temples and various social rituals. In the early 20th century, individuals associated with the revivalist movement came together to revive and preserve India's ancient cultural heritage. At the same time, many Gurus in Manipur actively took forward the rich tradition of Manipuri dance through choreography, creation, and teaching. Over the past two centuries, countless revered dance masters have dedicated their lives to developing and propagating this unique dance form.

Classical Manipuri Dance Techniques

The physical characteristics of Manipuri dance are always associated with expressions of prayer, supplication, surrender, and obeisance. The custom of standing in a humble posture with the face slightly lowered at the beginning and end of the dance is always observed. This humble movement and attitude are considered most important, as Manipuri dance is primarily performed to worship and appease the Almighty God.

Manipuri dance is performed with complete coordination between the left and right sides of the body. The two arms never separate but move in harmony with each other, and as one leg moves, the other follows in a very gentle, graceful manner. This integrated, gentle expression is clearly embodied in the movements and postures of Manipuri dance. In Manipuri dance, various parts of the body are moved with great restraint and control to form a complete movement. These parts include the neck, arms, wrists, chest, waist, hip region, thighs, feet, and ankles. In Manipuri dance, the hips are always held firmly in place, never moving sideways. Hip movements are only done up and down, with great caution and restraint. In Manipuri dance, the focus of the dancer should be on devotion and a devotional attitude. There is no special need for facial expressions here.

At the very beginning of the dance, there will be about two fingers between the ankles of both feet. The arms should be extended about 12 inches in front of the body, and the armpits should be about 6 inches away from the body. The distance between the two hands should also be about 12 inches. The neck should always be centered between the two hands, so the hands do not cover the face. In Manipuri dance, the tips of the hands can only be raised to a height equal to the narrow edge of the corner of the eye. If they are raised higher than this, the gurus consider it a violation of the tradition of devotion, which is very important in Manipuri dance. When lowering hands, they should always be kept above the waistline. All movements of the hands and feet must be performed within a certain range. This rule must be followed by the dancers (Haobam, 2009). Therefore, it is very important to study Manipuri dance with careful attention, properly understanding its

inherent significance and its traditional and cultural body movements, so that the emotions and expressions the dance seeks to convey can be accurately conveyed.

There are two different styles of Manipuri dance. One is the Tandava style, and the other is the Lasya style. The word 'Tandava' indicates the masculine form. The Tandava style is used in Krishna's Dance. Krishna's posture is called 'Tribhanga,' which means three bends in the body: the bend of the head, the bend of the torso, and the bend of the knees. The Tandav style expresses lively yet powerful movement through leaps, jumps, and sitting postures, which are simultaneously beautiful and powerful. When the dancer jumps to the right, the body leans to the right, and with this lean, the arms and neck also naturally move in the same direction. The same rule is followed when jumping to the left.

On the other hand, in the form of Lasya, the movements are undulating, gentle, and uniquely beautiful through the gestures of the hands and body, where the body posture follows the curve of the number eight (8). The word 'Lasya' symbolizes femininity. The Lasya style is used in the Dance of Radha and the Gopis. Radha's posture is called 'Avhanga,' in which the body's weight is transferred to one side. Moreover, the posture of the Gopis is 'Sambhanga', in which the body is completely straight, with no bend, and the weight is distributed equally across all limbs (Bandopadhyay, 2010).

Classical Manipuri dance moves follow the basic motif of a coiled serpent. The inspiration for this motif comes from the Lai Haraoba dance, where the dance part is performed in a continuous serpent motif. Simultaneously, the ritual activities adhere to the same motif. As a result, Raas Leela dance always places a high value on continuity, which is one of the characteristics of tradition.

The head follows a horizontal '8' shaped curve. The upper part also moves the chest in a curved line from right to left and back again, but without any pauses. Special care must be taken with the waist. The waist cannot be moved under any circumstances, but it controls the chest's movement. The arms follow the chest's movement, and the fingers open and close continuously with them. The thigh muscles also control the bend of the knees, as the knees are always kept together in the Classical Manipuri dance. The legs cannot be extended in any direction. The up-and-down movement of the toes gives the dance style its final form. The toes are placed softly on the ground and are not allowed to make any noise. Even Ghungroos or ankle bells are not worn. It is believed that the sound of footsteps or bells will disturb the devotional atmosphere (Haobam, 2009). Thus, Manipuri dance is formed by the combination of the head, chest, waist, knees, feet, and hands, with each part in correct posture and balanced movement. There is no idolatrous posture here; continuity itself is the uniqueness and identity of this dance.

In Manipuri literature, references to Rasamandalas date back to ancient times, and the circular shape has been maintained. In sculpture, circular figures with men and women dancing can be seen. Tribal and folk dances also naturally and unconsciously follow circular patterns. Vaishnava philosophy has given this trend

a special place, and through the direct introduction of male-female union, it has been possible to give full form to the desired creation. In the Raas Leela dance, beyond the separate dances of Krishna and the Gopis, it is also necessary to give importance to its presentational aspect. The Rashmandapa, where the Raas Leela is performed, is on a circular stage. In temples, the idol is placed in the center. The Gopis dance around it, sometimes facing the idol and sometimes facing the audience. This circular shape symbolizes the continuity of an eternal dance, which never ends. Its inspiration seems to come from nature (Jhaveri, 1989).

Dances like 'Bhangi Pareng' contain deep philosophical thoughts and theoretical themes. The main spirit of this dance is 'surrender to power'. The repeated Lomlei and Uplei spiral movements indicate 'giving up one's ego' and 'taking power' respectively. The earliest form of this movement is also seen in the Lai Haraoba dance (Bandopadhyay, 2010). Manipuri Maibi, or priest, performs many spiral postures during the dance of surrender. Another important movement of Classical Manipuri Dance is Khujengleibi, where the two hands are joined at the wrists and sequentially form the number eight (8) in space. This is another kind of flower offering the Classical Manipuri Dance. In Manipuri Dance, when the artists move their bodies in rhythm, a continuous 8-beat rhythm is maintained, and the movement gradually follows the pattern of 8. The movement of the feet on the ground is done according to the Lairen Mathek. Lairen Mathek is a special footwork pattern in Manipuri dance, in which the feet are kept close to the ground, and the movement is soft, smooth, and circular.

Music of Manipuri Dance

Classical Manipuri dance music is unique. Especially the singing style of Manipuri songs. In Manipur, this style is known as `Natashaishak'. The main characteristic of this singing style is the display of vibrations on the rhythm of the different notes. This is a special characteristic of the Manipuri singing style, which sometimes resembles South Indian singing patterns and at other times the Hindustani style, i.e., the North Indian singing style. In Raas Leela and Nata Pala, the Padabali Geet is sung, based on the love stories of Radha-Krishna and the childhood stories of Sri Krishna. In Classical Manipuri dance, a variety of musical instruments are used. Some of them are Pung or Mridanga, Mandira, Khol, Jhaal, Kartal, Maibung, Ramtaal, etc. Also, there are different types of Taalas (Rhythm) systems in Classical Manipuri dance. Such as Thanchep (4 beats), Menkup (6 beats), Chali (8 beats), etc. (Jhaveri & Devi, 1993). Combined, all these Padabali Geet, various Taalas, and diverse musical instruments make the Classical Manipuri dance music even more unique to the people.

Costumes of Classical Manipuri Dance

Classical Manipuri dance is also famous for its attractive costumes and graceful movements. The people of Manipur believe that Maharaja Bhagyachandra saw a Ras Leela in his dream, and the costumes for the Ras Leela were prepared

accordingly. A beautiful, heavenly ambiance is created when the dancers perform the Ras Leela while wearing exquisite clothing.

In Manipuri Ras Leela, Radha and the Gopis wear Kumin. The Kumin is a type of cylindrical skirt that extends from the dancer's waist to her feet. Generally, Kumin is made of red or green satin fabric. Its edges are sewn and decorated with beads and charms. The inner part of the Kumin is shaped into a round form with a cane frame. The Poshwal partially covers the upper portion of Kumin. The Poshwal is a long, flowing skirt that extends from the waist to the knees. Radha and the Gopis wear a velvet blouse called Resham-Phurit. A white cloth is tied tightly around the chest, which is called a Thabakyeth. There are two kinds of head ornaments: Koktumbi and Jhapa. Another type of headgear is Maikhum. It is a white cloth sewn together and worn over the hair ornament. As a result, the dancer's face and the back are covered up to the waist.

Additionally, Raas dancers wear ornaments such as Samjithet, Karnaphul, Kurak, Khaon, Khangnap, Kongoy, Tankha, Ratanchur, Shonakhuji, etc. Phanek and Inaphi are also worn by female dancers in the Manipuri Lasya style.

The Phnek is a type of wrapper skirt, and the Inaphi is a long scarf. On the other hand, in classical Manipuri dance, in the Krishna or Tandava style, the artists wear a dhoti called Phaijom. Male dancers also wear Resham-Phurit without sleeves. A gorgeous head dress of Krishna named Nakhum Chura. Both Radha and Krishna wear golden ornaments. While dancing, dancers do not wear Ghungoor. A type of foot jewelry called Nupur and Khongji is worn. In the Tandava style of Manipuri Dance, male dancers wear a special kind of turban called Kokyet. For the past two hundred years, Manipur's costume makers have been making subtle changes to enhance the beauty of this costume. Through their relentless efforts, Classical Manipuri dance costumes have become more versatile and popular (Figure 2).

Figure 2: *A Manipuri dancer performing Raas Leela, wearing the traditional Kumin costume*



Source: Jhaveri and Jhaveri, 1989

Figure 3: *A Manipuri dancer, Bimbavati Devi, performing Classical Manipuri Dance wearing Phanek and Inaphi*



Source: Author's personal collection

From Ritual Settings to the Modern Stage: Transformation and Continuity in Nihon Buyo and Manipuri Dance

Both Nihon Buyo and Manipuri dance forms are deeply rooted in ritual and religious contexts. The development took place through temples, religious ceremonies, and community-based events. In this context, the focus of the dance was to express devotion and inspiration, to foster spiritual experience, and to represent religious symbols. However, certain transformations and tensions naturally emerge when these dance forms move out of temple or ritual contexts and are performed on modern theater stages (Figure 3).

Initially, the dance experience is impacted by shifts in the audience and performance space. The dance is experienced as part of the religious ceremony when performed in a temple in front of devotees. However, in a stage performance, the audience assumes the role of aesthetic observers, engaging primarily with the performance from the perspective of art and entertainment. As a result, the spiritual and devotional perspective of the dance is reflected in a somewhat different way.

Secondly, the aesthetics of silence and prayer can be altered once such dances are staged on a stage. The quietness usually induces a meditative feeling and promotes spiritual focus in ritualistic surroundings; hence, the dance occurring in this environment is closely linked to the sacred space and the ritual backdrop. In contrast, to keep the audience's attention, artists may also incorporate more noticeable movement, adjust lighting, rearrange the spatial arrangement, or alter the stage design.

The religious atmosphere of the Manipuri dance, its slow pace, and its circular forms of movement persist as valuable parts of the performance. Likewise, Nihon Buyo does not lose its individualities, such as its restrained gestures and unagitated expression of emotions.

As both Nihon Buyo and Manipuri dance are transferred out of ritual context onto the modern stage, they remain in a process of transformation. It is also interesting to note the interaction and how these dance traditions are shifting towards modern performance environments while still retaining their cultural and aesthetic aspects.

Comparative Analysis of Nihon Buyo and Classical Manipuri Dance

The bodies of Japanese Classical Dance (Nihon Buyo) and Classical Manipuri Dance are not understood as places of overexpression in relation to emotion, but as tame media of expression. Similar in both genres, restraint, meditative attention, and controlled beauty are the foundations of aesthetic values, but these characteristics are communicated through various styles of movement and cultural philosophies. In particular, the use of stillness, circular motion, and graceful beauty has striking similarities between Nihon Buyo and Manipuri dance.

Both Nihon Buyo and Manipuri dance are not only associated with ritual settings, although they may be performed on the modern stage. The focus on composure, slowness, and symbolic gesture as part of Nihon Buyo is part of a larger Japanese aesthetic that holds importance in the areas of contemplation and time consciousness (Takane, 1990). Such dances as Manipuri dance (especially Raas Leela) are explicitly devotional, performed in temple buildings and organized in ritual cycles, including Natasankirtana and Bhangi Pareng (Takhellambam, 2018). Performance in both traditions goes beyond entertainment to become a sacrifice to deities, ancestors, or the collective memory. This ritual orientation supports the moral and aesthetic ideology, and the dancer is a disciplined agent between a human being and the transcendent one.

One of the important elements of Nihon Buoy Dance is the `Mai', which represents the slow and deliberate circling movements of this dance style. This spinning technique closely resembles the `Bhramari' of Classical Manipuri Dance. The word "Bhramari" means "rotation". So, the various techniques of Manipuri dance rotation are called `Bhramari'. Bhramari can be performed in both Lasya and Tandava styles. This rotation can be done to the right or left. In both styles, the dancer's body remains relatively still, the center of gravity is kept low, the knees are slightly bent, and the feet are always in contact with the ground. As mentioned earlier, the word "Mai" originated in Miko Kagura, Japan's oldest religious dance form, in which Shinto priestesses danced in circles to reach a trance-like state. Similarly, the rotational techniques of classical Manipuri dance are also derived from the ancient devotional dances of Manipur, namely the Lai Haraoba dance, in which the Maibis, or female priestesses, dance to please their God.

The Tandava style of Manipuri dance has a special similarity with Odori, the jumping techniques of Nihon Buyo. Both Tandava and Odori are lively and

exciting dance styles. Both techniques involve relatively free, light jumping movements, in which the body is largely free from the constraints of the ground. In both styles, the dancer's arms swing more freely, the body jumps, and the music's melody and rhythm become comparatively livelier. Occasional stamping on the floor is allowed in both styles.

The posture the artist assumes before beginning any Classical Manipuri dance bears a striking resemblance to the Kamae posture of Nihon Buyo. In the starting position of Manipuri dance and in the Kamae position, the spine remains straight. The two legs are placed side by side. The hands are slightly in front of the body, and the elbows are slightly bent, forming a circular shape with the two arms together. The fingers of the hand are gently clenched, where the thumb is connected to the index finger. In Manipuri dance, this hand gesture is called Sandangsha Mudra. There are similarities between the footwork of these two dance styles. In both dance styles, the foot movements are prolonged and continuous. To move smoothly, Nihon Buyo dancers often use the `Suriashi' technique, where the feet roll on the floor. This technique is also applicable to Classical Manipuri dance, known as `Chari'. Nihon Buyo and Manipuri Dancers regularly practice these movements to improve their dance skills and apply them to enhance the aesthetics of their performances. There are different types of Chari in Manipuri dance, such as Rasantika Chari, Sampluta Chari, and Upabishto Chari, which also have some parallels with the Ju-shin feature of Nihon Buyo dance. In both dance styles, the hip and the waist are very important parts of the dancing body. In Nihon Buyo dance, the hips are kept parallel to the floor and flat to the floor. Also, lateral swaying or excessive vertical movement is avoided. Similarly, in Manipuri Dance, hip movements are restricted. The artists move their waists in a restrained manner to support the dance posture. While performing Classical Manipuri dance, the Manipuri dancer's feet and knees are slightly turned inwards, like the Uchiwa posture in Nihon Buyo.

Just as the body movements of Nihon Buyo dance are compared to a large figure 8, the body movements of Manipuri dance also follow an 8-shaped pattern. The spiral pattern of the Nihon Buo dance is thought to have originated from the sword-wielding posture of Samurai. Similarly, the hand gesture of Manipuri dance, especially the Khujenglaibi, the flower-offering movement, is also derived from the Manipuri Martial art Thang-Ta. Here, Thang means sword, and Ta means spear. In Manipur, Thang, or sword-wielding, techniques are practiced in Khujenglaibi, where the wrists of both hands are rotated together. While dancing, dancers rotate both wrists and sequentially form the number eight in space.

In both dance styles, facial expressions are never excessive. The artists present moderate facial expressions while dancing. Both dance styles convey a devotional impression, so the dancers avoid overly expressive faces.

Costume plays a crucial role in shaping bodily discipline in both Nihon Buyo and Manipuri dance. Japanese dancers traditionally wear a kimono or yukata, that wrap

closely around the body and restricts leg movement. The dancers must adapt their posture and gait to cultivate refined, contained motion. Training began with learning to wear the costume kimono correctly, highlighting balance and composure even in sitting and bowing (Ugai, 2022). Equally, the Manipuri dancers (women) practice in traditional dress called the Phanek, which inhibits leg separation and promotes an erect posture (Bangopadhyay, 2010). Like the kimono of Nihon Buyo, the Phanek of Manipuri dance takes mundane motion and turns it into an impromptu dance, ordering the dancer to maintain controlled, uninterrupted movement. Costume in both instances is not a simple visual decoration but a pedagogical instrument that is active in the formation of technique and aesthetic sensibility.

The Nihon Buyo and Manipuri have remarkable similarities despite their geographical and cultural separation and share several basic features. There is no direct historical trace of any exchange or relation between them. It has, however, been discovered in this study that the similarity between Nihon Buyo and Manipuri dance does not end on the surface but is firmly rooted at the structural, philosophical, and aesthetic levels.

In the study, it was also revealed that the two types of dances were closely linked to ritual and religion. It is explained in Manipuri dance in the spirit of religion, i.e., Vaishnava devotion through Raas Leela and the Sankirtana leading dance. The ritual heritage of Nihon Buyo is more likely to be reflected in the dances of Shinto shrines (Miko Kagura), Noh theatre, and meditative disciplines, which still affect the form of the dance. As the dance is performed on contemporary stages, it is never mere entertainment; rather, it is always a devotional part that determines the flow of the performance.

Conclusion

This paper compares Nihon Buyo and Manipuri dance through observation, practical interaction, and close examination. Such a comparative remark has not existed previously between Nihon Buyo and Classical Manipuri Dance, which would define the future horizons of uniting the two classical dance styles. These two dance forms have a serene intensity owing to their circular pathways, gentle transactions, and sustainable flow, which portray an aesthetic of inner values. In both styles, discipline, patience, and control have shaped the dancer's body. Other than the movement, costume, performance space, and ritual context, the way movement is done and the perception of it also have issues. It is constructed in a broader cultural context and is not placed in a vacuum. In this case, the body of the dancer is somewhat of a bearer of cultural memory, fashioned by the devotional practice and the traditions of the community in terms of heredity, which is an already established order of training, which is delivered through generations. Considering it in this light, Nihon Buyo and Manipuri dance become not only the traditions that share some interesting points. It demonstrates that across different

societies with distinct backgrounds and cultural traditions, it is possible to create incredibly similar versions of aesthetic embodiment. This takes the discussion in a different direction, where we begin to see classical dance as a continuous practice in which cultural ideas and philosophical viewpoints are maintained, experienced, and expressed, rather than being trapped in debates over who influenced whom or the origin of something.

Simultaneously, the area of the current research is narrow in some respects. The Nihon Buyo discussion is conducted mainly through recorded performances, written materials, and available documents. Simultaneously, it was not possible to conduct direct fieldwork in Japan and to spend considerable time with representatives of the tradition in the context of this study. The limitations of the study might be overcome in the future by conducting more comprehensive field observations and interviewing Nihon Buyo performers and teachers. Further comparative analysis could also focus on other spheres of the two traditions, such as the relationship between musical form and choreographic movement, or performances by male and female performers in either system. These types of enquiries could provide better insight into how these dance traditions continue to change their identities while preserving their cultural and aesthetic uniqueness.

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Photo Courtesy: Photo 1 from the Internet (Japanese lady performing a Nihon Buyo dance wearing a kimono). https://mir-s3-cdn-cf.behance.net/project_modules/max_1200/f3a646100256659.5f04f1273361d.png

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