

Artistic Features and Cultural Connotations of the 'Three Minorities' Dances in Inner Mongolia: A Comparative Study

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Abstract: This study explores the cultural meanings and ethnic memory embedded in the traditional dances of the Oroqen, Daur, and Evenki communities in China. Through a comparative analysis of their distinctive dance forms, it examines how these practices function not only as embodied expressions of aesthetic tradition but also as powerful representations of cultural identity, ecological awareness, and totemic belief systems. By focusing on movement vocabularies, ritual functions, and performance contexts, the study demonstrates that dance operates as a multidimensional medium that connects past and present, integrates sacred and communal life, and reflects relationships between the natural world and symbolic systems. Rather than being limited to artistic expression, dance emerges as a living archive of collective memory. It preserves narratives of historical experience, transmits knowledge across generations, and strengthens social cohesion within each community. The hunting related mimetic dances of the Oroqen, the ritual practices of the Evenki, and the festive performances of the Daur each reveal the close interrelation between dance, cosmological perspectives, and everyday sociocultural practices. In the context of modernization and cultural homogenization, traditional dance also functions as a form of cultural resilience. It sustains ethnic distinctiveness while remaining open to processes of adaptation and renewal. The findings of this study underscore the significant role of dance in maintaining social structures, affirming cultural continuity, and fostering a shared sense of belonging, thereby contributing to the ongoing preservation of China's intangible cultural heritage.

Keywords: Three minority groups, dance, cultural identity, ecological view, ethnic memory, totem worship, social structure

1. Introduction

Inner Mongolia Autonomous Region is an important multi-ethnic area in China, where the Oroqen, Evenki, and Daur ethnic groups are classified as the "three minority groups." Although their population is small, their traditional cultural systems, especially their dance forms, are highly representative and valuable for research [1]. The dances of these ethnic groups not only possess distinctive artistic styles but also deeply reflect their unique ways of life, religious beliefs, and worldview. In the interdisciplinary research between ethnography and dance studies, folk dance is often viewed as an important medium for cultural expression and identity formation. This is particularly significant in minority societies, where dance plays an irreplaceable role in rituals, collective memory, nature worship, and cultural transmission [2]. For instance, the Oroqen "Deer Dance" is not merely an imitation of animal behavior, but a way for the group to express reverence and worship of the spiritual forces of nature. Its movements and musical rhythms reflect the group's ecological views. However, current research on the dances of the "three minority groups" tends to focus on individual case studies, with systematic comparative analysis still being rare. In particular, the relationship between different dance types (such as fire dances, mimetic dances, and religious dances) and cultural connotations has not been thoroughly explored. Mimetic ethnic dances often reflect the primitive cognitive modes of a group [1]. Their movements not only derive from daily life but also carry mythological structures and symbolic meanings, yet further research is needed. Therefore, this paper primarily uses literature analysis to systematically review the dance history, classification of dance forms, movement language, and rhythmic structure of the Oroqen, Evenki, and Daur ethnic groups. Combining ethnographic research and dance anthropology theories, this study aims to explore how dance plays a role in the cultural construction of these three groups and, from both artistic and cultural perspectives, reveals the

multifaceted value of their ethnic dances.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Historical Records and Research on the Dances of the "Three Minority Groups"

Although the Oroqen, Evenki, and Daur ethnic groups possess unique cultural traditions, academic attention to their dance arts remains fragmented. Research has primarily focused on language preservation, ethnic clothing, religious beliefs, and lifestyles [1]. Dance, as a vital carrier of cultural inheritance, has not been adequately incorporated into mainstream ethnographic analyses. In particular, aspects such as the movement vocabulary, structural types, and ritual functions of their dances are scarcely addressed in the literature. Mimetic dances are one way primitive ethnic groups transform their life experiences into artistic expression, particularly in hunting-based societies [2]. These dances not only record survival experiences but also constitute a visual representation of collective memory. For example, the Oroqen "Hunter's Dance" and "Eagle Dance" employ techniques like hand gestures and body extension to mimic animal deities, reflecting traces of primitive totem worship.

Additionally, the Evenki "Shaman Drum Dance" is seen as a fusion of religious rituals and dance art. This dance uses drumming and rotational movements to "communicate with spirits," while also serving the function of conveying group identity [3]. The Daur ethnic dances are more closely associated with festivals and bonfire gatherings, displaying characteristics of collectivity, entertainment, and social interaction, although a systematic analysis of their movement structures and dance classifications remains lacking [4]. Overall, studies on the dances of the "three minority groups" are mainly focused on descriptive accounts or visual recordings, without a deep analytical framework for movement, structural types, and cultural functions.

2.2 Dance Classification Framework

To analyze the expressive forms and cultural meanings of the dances of the three ethnic groups, this paper adopts the dance classification method [5]. Huang categorizes ethnic dances based on their function, field, and expression style into "ritual dances," "life dances," "entertainment dances," and "symbolic mimetic dances." "Symbolic mimetic dances" primarily refer to movements that mimic nature, living beings, or deities, representing the primitive cognitive system, while "ritual dances" emphasize the ceremonial attributes of communication with spirits. Based on this theoretical framework, and in consideration of the expressive characteristics of the dances of the three minority groups, this paper proposes a classification of "bonfire dances," "mimetic dances," and "religious dances." This classification not only helps clarify the expressive paths of each ethnic group's dance but also facilitates cross-ethnic comparisons. For example, the Daur "Andai Dance" can be classified as a "bonfire dance," characterized by collective circular movements and rhythmic clapping, highlighting its social and entertainment functions; the Oroqen "Deer Dance" is a typical "mimetic dance," with symbolic biological significance in its imitative movements; and the Evenki "Shaman Dance" is clearly a "religious dance," featuring defined ritual processes and spiritual connection functions [5]. This classification framework also provides a theoretical foundation for the horizontal comparative analysis in subsequent sections, particularly in understanding the interaction between dance and cultural systems from a functional perspective.

3. Comparative Analysis of Dance Types and Forms of Expression

3.1 Rhythmic Structure and Ritual Nature of Bonfire Dances

Within Evenki traditional festivals and shamanic rituals, the bonfire dance emerges as a symbolic form that combines strong rhythmic patterns with ceremonial significance. This type of dance features simple, repetitive movements, emphasizing collective participation. Through synchronized steps and accompanying drumbeats, the performance manifests communal cooperation and the sacredness of sacrificial rites. Particularly in dances surrounding the bonfire, performers reinforce community cohesion and convey an understanding of the life cycle through uniform movements. These dances symbolize not only tribal unity but also the connection between nature and the divine. In contrast, the bonfire dance of the Daur ethnic group emphasizes more vigorous movement and pronounced rhythm. Such dances incorporate hunting elements, employing leaping and throwing gestures that highlight the

bravery and strength of male hunters ^[4]. Movements are often characterized by dynamic muscular tension and rhythmic fluctuations, reflecting the spirit of struggle between humans and nature. Compared to the Evenki bonfire dances, the Daur variants place greater emphasis on individual strength and celebratory entertainment, rather than purely ritualistic unity.

3.2 Mimetic Dance and Hunting Culture

The mimetic dances of the Oroqen people constitute a central component of their dance tradition and are deeply embedded in their hunting culture. These dances simulate the behaviors of animals such as deer, bears, and birds, serving not only to express reverence for the natural world but also to transmit practical hunting knowledge ^[4]. Through the embodied reproduction of movements such as running, tracking, and attacking, dancers convey survival strategies alongside culturally embedded forms of understanding. For example, the Deer Dance imitates patterns of foraging and alertness, while the Eagle Dance emphasizes expansive and soaring gestures, evoking the perceptual and spatial awareness associated with birds of prey. In this way, the dances reflect a dynamic relationship between humans and the natural environment, grounded in observation, imitation, and adaptation. These performances are often accompanied by oral storytelling and rhythmic drumming, which together enhance their narrative depth and reinforce their pedagogical significance. Beyond their instructional role, such dances are also integral to ritual contexts, including coming-of-age ceremonies and preparations for hunting. Within these settings, mimetic movement acquires symbolic meaning, articulating the community's ethical relationship with animals and the environment. As a result, mimetic dance functions simultaneously as a mode of knowledge transmission and a medium of spiritual expression, embodying collective values and lived experience within Oroqen culture.

3.3 Symbolism and Mysticism of Religious Dances

The religious dances of the Evenki, Oroqen, and Daur peoples are deeply influenced by Shamanism and are rich in cultural symbolism. Shamanic dances use bodily gestures and ritualistic movements to articulate communication with the spiritual realm ^[5]. Evenki shamanic dances are often performed by female shamans, incorporating drumming, spinning, and vocalizations to create an atmosphere of mystery and sanctity. Movements such as trembling and leaning backward are symbolic of divine possession and spiritual release, representing interaction between humans and both the natural and supernatural worlds. These religious dances not only fulfill roles in healing and prophecy but are also crucial rituals for maintaining contact with the divine. Shamanic dances serve as more than ritual performances; they are also vital expressions of cultural identity and spiritual worldview ^[6]. In contrast, Daur shamanic dances tend to be more reserved, often conducted within family-based rituals for blessings, fertility, or healing. Although these dances are less physically expansive, their symbolic meanings are profound, underscoring the sacredness and taboos within religious practices. Through the analysis above, it becomes evident that the dances of the Evenki, Oroqen, and Daur ethnic groups exhibit unique characteristics in movement, rhythm, and cultural connotation. These dance forms reflect each group's perceptions of nature, spirituality, and social cohesion. Dance functions not only as an artistic medium but also as an embodiment of social structures, cultural identity, and cosmological beliefs. Each form of dance plays a significant educational and ritual role within its specific cultural context, serving as a vital medium for cultural transmission and continuity.

4. Cultural Connotations and Ethnic Memory in Dance

4.1 Dance as a Symbol of Cultural Identity

Dance serves as a symbol of cultural identity, carrying the historical legacy and traditions of ethnic communities and reflecting their collective sense of belonging. It is not merely a language of the body but also a crucial form of cultural self-expression. Among China's ethnic minorities, the dances of the "three small ethnic groups" (the Oroqen, Ewenki, and Daur) reveal deep cultural symbolism through their distinctive movements and rhythms. A typical example is the Oroqen "Deer Dance," which mimics the behavior of deer to express the intimate bond between humans and nature. This connection is not only rooted in survival but also forms a key component of cultural identity. In this context, the deer is not merely an animal but a sacred and mythological symbol that reflects the community's reverence for nature and their aspiration to live in harmony with it ^[7]. Through such performances, traditional dances transmit cultural symbols across generations, reinforcing a sense of identity and

continuity. Similarly, the Daur “Andai Dance,” performed in group formations, emphasizes collective identity and social cohesion. The interaction between individual and group in this dance reflects ancestral culture and familial ties, strengthening internal unity. Every gesture and rhythm in the dance is closely linked to the collective consciousness of the ethnic group. Each dancer acts not only as an individual performer but also as a carrier of cultural transmission. Through this form, the group’s history, language, and values are vividly expressed, making dance a powerful medium for cultural inheritance and ethnic identity. In essence, dance as a symbol of cultural identity functions as a key vessel for ethnic memory. Through specific movements, rhythms, and formats, it both showcases a people’s historical and cultural heritage and reinforces collective identity. This identity serves as a bridge between past inheritance and future expectations, forming a continuous cultural transmission cycle.

4.2 Ecological Consciousness and Totemic Worship in Dance

The dances of the three small ethnic groups exhibit a profound connection between humans and nature, with many incorporating elements of ecological reverence and totemic worship. Animals and natural forces are not merely subjects of imitation but are integral components of ethnic philosophy and cultural expression. For instance, the Ewenki “Sun Dance” mimics the radiance of the sun to express reverence for the solar deity. The movements and changes in light within the dance symbolize the sacredness and inviolability of the sun ^[8]. This dance is not simply a ceremonial performance but a profound expression of the relationship between humans, nature, and divinity. The sun, in this context, is not just an element of the natural world but represents the source of life and the order of the cosmos.

Similarly, the Oroqen “Deer Dance” reflects veneration for nature by imitating the behavior of deer to symbolize the harmonious coexistence between humans and animals. Within Oroqen culture, the deer is regarded as a sacred creature, embodying the power of nature and the continuity of life ^[8]. The movements and rhythms go beyond mere physical imitation; they embody an ecological philosophy of balance and interdependence. The Daur mimicry dances also enhance the spiritual connection between humans and animals through the imitation of birds and beasts, reinforcing a philosophy of coexistence. These gestures reflect not only stylistic features but also deeper cultural and ecological beliefs. In these dances, nature and animals are seen as inseparable from human life, embodying the interdependence necessary for survival.

Such dances are not simply aesthetic expressions but profound articulations of ecological consciousness and spiritual values. They represent each community’s understanding of life, nature, and the universe. By preserving these traditions, ethnic groups convey their ecological wisdom and values of coexistence, manifesting their spiritual worldview through movement and rhythm.

4.3 The Role of Dance in Tribal Social Structures

Dance plays a critical role in the social structures of the three small ethnic groups, especially in festivals and ceremonial events, where it serves as a medium for identity formation, social cohesion, and intergenerational communication. Beyond artistic expression, dance helps to establish social order and define roles within the tribe. Through dance, relationships among members are clarified and social identities are affirmed.

A typical example is the Daur “Aobao Festival.” During this celebration, group dance not only expresses reverence for ancestors but also conveys hopes for harmony and peace. Dance acts as a cohesive force among different age groups, genders, and social roles within the community. These collective dances serve not only as artistic performances but also as reflections of social structure and hierarchy. Participants reinforce their understanding of their societal roles, and dance facilitates interaction and cooperation among different subgroups.

In Ewenki wedding ceremonies, dances highlight the role of gender and age distinctions, underlining the social encoding and cultural regulations embedded within the choreography. In this ritual context, dance functions as more than a festive form; it symbolizes the community’s values on marriage, family, and cultural continuity ^[9]. The movement sequences and ceremonial framing reflect social roles and shared traditions.

These examples demonstrate the fundamental role of dance in structuring social relations within tribal societies. Dance is not only a form of cultural expression but also a means of building relationships and reinforcing ethnic identity. It symbolizes both unity and structure, fostering

interaction among community members. Overall, the traditional dances of the three small ethnic groups serve significant functions in shaping cultural identity, conveying ecological philosophies, and maintaining social structures. Through specific movements, rhythms, and forms, dance transmits the collective memory, beliefs, and values of a people. Whether in cultural construction, ecological expression, or social function, dance remains a profound medium for ethnic memory and intergenerational heritage. These dances reflect unique understandings of life, nature, and society, revealing the depth of dance as a cultural vehicle.

5. Interethnic Dance Exchanges and Comparative Analysis of Differences

5.1 Similarities and Differences in Dance Movements and Rhythms

The dances of the Ewenki, Oroqen, and Daur ethnic groups reflect their unique environmental, cultural, and social contexts through distinctive movement patterns and rhythmic structures. The Ewenki dance style is characterized by coordinated movements of the shoulders and upper limbs, often symbolizing spiritual communication and harmony with natural forces. These movement patterns are rooted in the Ewenki people's close observation of animals and natural phenomena in their environment, revealing a cosmological perspective that respects and seeks unity with nature ^[10].

In contrast, the Oroqen people's dances emphasize dynamic and powerful lower-body movements, particularly leaps and crouches, which mimic the behaviors of prey animals. This physical vocabulary directly mirrors their traditional hunting-based way of life, serving both as artistic expression and as a reflection of survival strategies passed down through generations. Meanwhile, the Daur dance form incorporates more fluid and rhythmic group movements, emphasizing unity, celebration, and shared joy. These dances often serve as social rituals during festivals, highlighting the community's emphasis on cohesion, mutual enjoyment, and collective participation ^[11].

The differences in dance vocabulary and rhythm across these three ethnic groups underscore their diverse ways of engaging with the world. Ewenki dance embodies a ritualistic and mystical quality, evoking the presence of spirits and the natural world. Oroqen dance centers on practical life experiences and embodies a physical dialogue with the environment. Daur dance, on the other hand, functions as a medium of communal celebration and social bonding, with a strong focus on entertainment and interpersonal interaction. These distinct characteristics reveal how each group's lifestyle, values, and spiritual beliefs are deeply inscribed into their dance practices.

5.2 Cultural Functions and Purposes of Dance

Beyond formal differences, the dances of these three ethnic minorities serve different cultural functions, reflecting their respective worldviews and modes of social organization. The Oroqen dance tradition, particularly animal-mimicry dances, serves an educational purpose. These performances not only provide artistic enjoyment but also play a crucial role in the intergenerational transmission of hunting knowledge and survival techniques ^[11]. The dance becomes a pedagogical medium through which young members learn to interact with and understand the natural world, thus maintaining continuity with ancestral wisdom.

The Ewenki, by contrast, integrate dance closely with Shamanic rituals. Their dance practices are spiritual in nature and are often performed during ceremonies to communicate with deities or ancestral spirits. The central function of these dances is to offer blessings, mediate between the human and spiritual realms, and uphold religious traditions embedded in Shamanism. In this context, dance becomes a sacred act that reflects cosmological beliefs and maintains the equilibrium between the visible and invisible worlds .

Meanwhile, the Daur ethnic group utilizes dance primarily as a form of festival entertainment and communal celebration. Daur dances emphasize joy, social interaction, and the strengthening of tribal cohesion. By dancing together during festivals and communal gatherings, participants reaffirm their shared identity, history, and belonging ^[11]. In this setting, dance functions as a means of reinforcing social bonds and expressing collective memory. The distinct cultural orientations of dance among these groups demonstrate different ways in which dance operates as a cultural medium. Among the Oroqen, dance is primarily educational in function, while for the Ewenki it is closely tied to spiritual and ritual practices, and for the Daur it is more strongly associated with social interaction and entertainment. These variations reflect how each group engages with dance in relation to its own historical

experiences, cosmological understandings, and social structures. In this sense, dance is not a uniform cultural form but a flexible and adaptive practice. Each community shapes and interprets dance according to its specific cultural context, allowing it to serve as a meaningful expression of collective identity and lived experience.

5.3 The Integration of Dance with Language, Myth, and Music

Dance in these ethnic groups is not merely a kinetic activity but a highly integrated art form that fuses physical movement with oral language, mythology, and musical traditions, forming a comprehensive mode of cultural expression. For instance, the Oroqen's "Deer Dance" is a performative embodiment of mythological narratives. The dance not only imitates the behavioral traits of deer but is also intertwined with songs and spoken narratives that recount ancestral myths. This combination enhances the cultural transmission of mythological knowledge while also anchoring it in embodied, performative practice.

The Ewenki's Shamanic dances also demonstrate this integrative feature. In these rituals, movement is performed alongside mythic storytelling, chants, and drumming. The choreography itself becomes a physical enactment of mythic cosmologies, with each gesture and rhythm serving to maintain sacred connections between humans and the divine. The dance thus becomes both a performative and a narrative act, encapsulating spiritual beliefs, oral histories, and cultural identity.

In Daur festival dances, the integration is more secular but equally rich. Through rhythmic group dancing, music, and chant-based storytelling, the community recounts historical legends, heroic feats, and folk tales. The communal participation in such performances affirms shared values and enables the preservation of intangible cultural heritage through embodied storytelling.

This multilayered integration of bodily movement, language, myth, and music across these groups reveals dance as a powerful medium for holistic cultural communication. It illustrates how dance acts not only as an artistic performance but also as a repository of collective memory and identity. These elements together highlight the complex, multifunctional role of dance in non-written cultures and its enduring relevance in maintaining cultural continuity.

An in-depth analysis of the dances of the Ewenki, Oroqen, and Daur ethnic groups reveals the rich and varied cultural meanings embedded within their respective traditions. Among the Ewenki, dance articulates a deep reverence for nature and the spiritual realm through ritualized movement practices. For the Oroqen, dance functions as a living form of education, closely connected to hunting traditions and ecological knowledge. In contrast, the Daur emphasize collective enjoyment and social cohesion, with dance playing a central role in festive and communal activities. Despite these differences in form and function, a shared underlying logic can be observed. In each case, dance operates as a vital cultural repository through which values are communicated, knowledge is transmitted, and group identity is reinforced. Through the integration of movement, mythology, language, and music, these traditions demonstrate the complex and multidimensional role of dance in shaping and sustaining intangible cultural heritage. Ethnic minority dances, therefore, should be understood not only as aesthetic expressions but also as dynamic embodiments of social organization, historical memory, and cultural philosophy.

6. Conclusion

Through a comparative analysis of the dances of the Ewenki, Oroqen, and Daur ethnic groups, this study reveals the multilayered meanings of dance as a form of cultural expression. Dance is not simply an aesthetic activity but is deeply embedded in the social structures, belief systems, and value orientations of each community. The hunting related mimetic movements of the Oroqen, the ritual dimensions of Ewenki shamanic dance, and the celebratory qualities of Daur festival dance each demonstrate how these groups understand and engage with nature, spirituality, and collective life.

The rhythm, movement patterns, and symbolic meanings in their dances reflect a profound understanding of the human-nature relationship and serve as dynamic carriers of cultural knowledge and identity. These traditional expressions are not static relics of the past but evolving forms that continue to be relevant in modern contexts. The findings of this study not only deepen our understanding of minority traditions but also provide theoretical foundations for the preservation of intangible cultural heritage. By examining dance as a concrete and embodied form of cultural transmission, this research sheds light on the mechanisms through which ethnic identity is maintained

and renewed across generations. In the face of modernization and globalization, the protection and revitalization of such unique dance forms have become crucial for safeguarding cultural diversity and sustaining cultural vitality. Therefore, in-depth research and active protection of these dance traditions play a vital role in fostering intercultural understanding and promoting inclusive cultural development. Ultimately, this study offers new perspectives for academic discourse on ethnic minority dances and contributes valuable insights for the practical implementation of cultural heritage preservation. By comparing the dance traditions of different ethnic groups, this research underscores the significance of dance as an essential dimension of intangible cultural heritage and lays a solid foundation for future studies and protection efforts.

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