

Cemal Oyunu as Ritual Dance: Liminality, Embodied Memory, and Social Cohesion in Rural Thrace

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Abstract

Cemal Oyunu is a seasonal folk ritual from rural Thrace (Tekirdağ region, Turkey) that combines masked characters, animal disguise, bells, improvised verse, and collective movement. This study examines Cemal Oyunu through the lens of ritual dance and performance theory, emphasizing its embodied and choreographic structures. Drawing on participant observation and oral testimonies, it highlights how repetitive movement patterns, controlled chaos (noise, sudden chases, mock fights), and comic role reversals produce a liminal social space. Using core concepts from ritual theory, especially liminality and *communitas*, this study argues that Cemal Oyunu operates as an embodied technology of social cohesion: it reactivates collective memory through rhythm, costume, and performative speech while staging cycles of death–renewal and winter–spring transition.

Keywords: Cemal Oyunu, ritual dance, embodied memory, liminality, Thrace, performance

1. Why read Cemal Oyunu as dance?

Cemal Oyunu is often described as a “village theatrical game,” yet its internal logic is fundamentally choreographic: bodies move in patterned sequences, roles are transmitted through apprenticeship-like imitation, and meaning emerges from rhythm, repetition, and collective timing. The ritual does not rely on a fixed script; instead, it is sustained through embodied knowledge, what communities remember in and through movement.

Field accounts from Tekirdağ villages emphasize that the ritual is tied to seasonal thresholds (late winter, early spring, or after the harvest) and performed by groups who circulate through the settlement at night. The event’s atmosphere is deliberately intensified through bells, percussion, shouting, and abrupt gestures. These features are not “decorations.” They are the mechanism by which the ritual alters everyday perception and social order.

2. Movement vocabulary: repetition, imitation, and “controlled chaos”

Cemal Oyunu’s movements can be summarized in three layers:

(a) *Animal embodiment and disguise.*

The most iconic element is the “camel/deve” figure constructed and animated by two

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performers moving as one body under a textile cover, often with attached bells. Similar animal embodiments appear through skins, masks, and exaggerated locomotion. These enactments transform performers into liminal beings: neither ordinary villagers nor fully fictional characters, but something in-between. That “in-between-ness” is crucial for ritual efficacy.

(b) Processional circulation.

The group’s repeated route through streets and houses turns the village into a stage. Each stop produces a short performative episode: improvised verse, negotiation for offerings, teasing, and movement-based interaction. The repetition of entry –performance–departure functions like a recurring choreographic phrase that gradually builds collective momentum.

(c) Noise, chase, mock conflict.

Cemal Oyunu often includes staged confrontations between groups, where mock fighting, falling, and “death–revival” scenes appear. The point is not realism; it is ritual intensity—a heightened state produced by noise, speed changes, and synchronized reaction. In ritual theory terms, this is a controlled break from ordinary order that produces liminality and opens space for renewal (Turner, 1969).

3. Performative speech as rhythmic structure

Manis (short improvised verses), humorous insults, blessings, and pseudo-prayers are not separate from dance; they are rhythmic cues that shape timing and attention. Performers use speech to generate tempo, provoke laughter, or escalate tension before a chase or a “revival” scene. The alternation between spoken cadence and bodily movement creates a composite score: the ritual’s “music” is distributed across voice, bells, percussion, and gesture.

This mixture also enables role reversal. “Respected” figures may be parodied; social hierarchies can be temporarily inverted, producing a carnivalesque relief that strengthens communal bonds. Rather than threatening the social fabric, such inversions reinforce it by releasing tension and re-affirming shared norms after the ritual ends.

4. Liminality and communitas: what the ritual does socially

Cemal Oyunu generates a liminal zone in which ordinary identities loosen and collective participation intensifies. The ritual gathers villagers into a shared event of heightened emotion—fear and laughter, disturbance and pleasure—creating what Turner (1969) calls communitas: a sense of togetherness that exceeds routine social structure.

From this perspective, Cemal Oyunu is not merely representation. It is a practice that does something: it renews social ties, reasserts belonging, and symbolically negotiates the passage between seasons through enacted cycles of death and return. In this sense, it remains a living example of how a ritual dance has a social function—an embodied method for managing uncertainty, seasonal change, and communal continuity.

5. Why it matters

Ritual performances such as Cemal Oyunu matter not only as elements of intangible heritage but as living laboratories for dance research. Their integration of movement, sound, role-play, and seasonal symbolism provides insight into how collective bodily practices may have functioned in early social formations. Rather than approaching dance solely as an aesthetic or stage-based category, such rituals invite us to reconsider dance as a social technology—one that structures memory, negotiates transition, and sustains communal cohesion.

Studying embodied practices of this kind allows dance scholarship to move beyond stage-centered frameworks and engage with movement as a primary mode of social organization. In this perspective, dance is not simply performance but a method through which communities enact continuity, regulate tension, and symbolically mediate uncertainty. Documenting these practices—ethically, collaboratively, and with respect to local knowledge—contributes not only to cultural preservation but also to broader debates on the historical and anthropological foundations of dance.

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