



CAESURAE: POETICS OF CULTURAL TRANSLATION

Volume 6:2

(ISSN 2454 -9495)

July 2025

The *Gamira* Mask Dance Performance and the Spiritual Aesthetics of Consciousness

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Abstract: This paper interrogates the complex interplay between art, spirituality, and consciousness through an in-depth exploration of the *Gamira* mask dance performance, - a traditional folk performance of South Dinajpur. Art is admired not merely as a form of aesthetic expression but as a sacred act that unveils the divine within. Like other art forms, traditional performance art, when performed with the performer's engagement in rhythmic movement, vocalization, and physical expression, can serve as a bridge between the mundane and higher states of consciousness. The *Gamira* Mask Dance of North Bengal and most particularly of South Dinajpur is not merely a folk performance of a region; rather it is a way of life through which the performers can reunite with the Divine or with the spirit to whom they dedicate their masks through unique rituals. They can transcend to a certain state of consciousness where they completely lose control of their bodies and move according to the will of their desired deity during the performance. This study can be understood through the lens of the *Rasa* theory. It will explore how the dance evokes *Rasa* creating an empathic connection between the performers and the audience and facilitates a shared experience of transcendence.

Coomaraswamy's ideas about the spiritual and symbolic dimensions of Indian art have been used to gain a better understanding of the deeper meanings embedded in the masks, costumes, and movements of the *Gamira* dance and how they have functional roles to play to lead to the divine experience. The dynamics of the contemplating performance reveal that one's body is not solely one's own, but an interdependent sharing with all other bodies and therefore, a common collective participation in the God's body. In this process, the contemplating performance could be described as a semantic journey through which the God's body is realized encompassing the performer's body. The mask, the performance, and the deity-invocation rituals enable the performer to experience the four Jungian aspects: the Self, the anima/animus, the persona, and the Shadow, to become one with the world consciousness. Iconographic analysis, understanding of the metaphysical implications of the ritualistic performance unravel how the *Gamira* mask dance performance is a form of sacred art. Using local myths and traditions, it serves as a means to powerful spiritual awakening and demonstrates the timeless value of traditional art forms as cultural manifestations of consciousness.

Keywords: *Mask, Consciousness, Spirituality, Transcendence, Transformation, Art, Performance.*

Introduction

Art functions as a noetic medium through which the obscurations of quotidian existence, distractions, distortions, and perturbations are dispelled. In its highest vocation, it operates as a contemplative exercise that enables an intensified apprehension of and attunement to one's immanent reality. The creative process of art serves as a bridge between the material and, in many cases, the spiritual. It has also long been known that art is an invaluable instrument for self-discovery and spiritual enlightenment. In every cultural tradition, art serves as a source of pleasure and a reflection of that culture's identity. It continues to be a core element of the culture, expressed through various artistic forms such as visual arts, traditional songs, and performance art. Art is always admirable - "a work of art, even though culturally embedded ... has its own intentionality, which is precisely its aim to be aesthetically forceful, meaningful, and beautiful" (Deutsch 33).

Across all art forms, performative acts play a central role by mediating between a community and its spiritual practices. In a culturally diverse nation like India, each region has distinct performative art traditions that reflect and reinforce local religious beliefs that serve as a link to their heritage. Most of the cultural performances have two intentions to be performed. The primary and most widely recognized purpose of these performances is to entertain and provide an aesthetic experience for the audience. However, for the performers, the act is deeply personal, and it is a spiritual practice that allows them to transcend earthly boundaries and attain divine union or the sublime bliss of *Satchidānanda*, or existence-consciousness-bliss. In this context, Bengal stands out as a region of remarkable cultural and religious diversity. Across many communities, the traditional art forms like painting, dance and music are not merely artistic expressions but sacred practices, believed to forge a direct connection with the divine. Among all these art forms of Bengal, mask dance has a separate identity which can lead both the performer and the audiences to a higher state of consciousness where one can know the identity of the Self. Some of these art forms are *Chhau Nāch* of Purulia, *Gambhira* of Malda, Gamira mask dance of South Dinajpur, and *Cham* of some Himalayan districts of West Bengal. Among these traditions, Gamira dance is most unique as a ritualistic dance performance which elevates consciousness. It remains a sacred practice of the Rajbanshi community in South Dinajpur, which has been passed down through generations. As a mnemonic apparatus, masks function not merely as aesthetic artefacts but as epistemic signifiers, serving as conduits to submerged or occluded cultural discourses. They

operate as semiotic cues that summon forth latent ideas, thereby enabling access to narratives that have been silenced, suppressed, or overwritten within the dominant Western archival imaginary. To recuperate the histories and epistemologies encoded within these performative objects, histories that have been simultaneously embodied in indigenous practice yet effaced by the hegemonies of colonial documentation, scholars must engage in a hermeneutics of recovery. Such an endeavour entails reactivating the performative agencies inscribed within masks, reintegrating them with the ritual stories, spiritual ontologies, and collective memories articulated by traditional performers and intellectual communities. This task is not a mere antiquarian retrieval but a critical reconstitution of meaning that destabilizes colonial epistemic violence.

In the specific case of the Gamira mask dance of South Dinajpur, the masks, with their esoteric iconographies and ritual deployments, become active interlocutors in the discourse of cultural memory. They mediate between the visible and the invisible, the mundane and the transcendent and break the temporal distance to reassert an unbroken continuum of spiritual and aesthetic consciousness. To attend to Gamira masks as mnemonic archives is therefore to initiate a process of intellectual and affective transportation that transforms the imperial legacy of collection and objectification into the radically different project of recollection, a re-membling that resists fragmentation by suturing together histories, communities, and ontologies. Such scholarship ultimately gestures towards a reconfigured global historiography in which art forms like the Gamira are recognized not as peripheral curiosities but as constitutive expressions of alternative epistemologies. In this sense, the study of masks enacts a double movement: it dismantles the epistemic enclosures of coloniality while simultaneously enables a more inclusive aesthetic cosmopolitanism that honours the plurality of cultural articulations. By foregrounding performative traditions as sites of philosophical and historical knowledge, one participates in the restitution of a shared, though fractured, global human heritage.

This Gamira mask dance or the *Mukha Nāch* is a traditional ritualistic dance form originating from the South and North Dinajpur districts of West Bengal. This Dance is deeply rooted in the worship of village deities like *Grām Caṇḍī*, which is associated with the *Śakti* cult. This dance is usually performed by the villagers to please the Divine or to welcome ‘good forces’ and ward off the ‘evil forces’. The term “Gamira” is believed to be derived either from *Grām Caṇḍī*, referring to the goddess *Caṇḍī* or *Kālī*, or from *Gamar* tree which is used in making these

Gamira masks. Traditionally, this dance is performed during the Bengali months of *Boiśākh* to *Āṣārḥ*, and it is closely tied with the seasonal rituals including the worship of Grām Caṇḍī and *Śamṣān Kālī* (see fig. 1).



Fig. 1. Wooden *Grām Caṇḍī* mask of Gamira dance. Photograph by Sammya Brata. Facebook, 10 April 2025, <https://www.facebook.com/SAMSPOOK/photos/>

Most of the time the mask makers are the performers of this dance. The dance is characterized by the use of elaborate wooden masks, which represent various deities, animals, and some human forms like *Bura-Buri*. The whole mask making and performance is deeply ritualistic in nature which begins with the *Niṣi Pujā*, a midnight worship ceremony where the masks are consecrated (Dutta). The dancers put on these sacred masks and perform in designated open spaces known as *Gamira Tala* the next day, and this is often situated near shrines of the Śakti deity or Grām Caṇḍī. The musical instruments like *Dhāk*, *Kānsar*, and *Sānāi* are used to help the performers in meditating in the dance and to please the deity for their ‘good will’. The dancers often transform into another character or behave according to their masks, and this is called *Bhar Othā* by the believers. Not only the dance but the entire performance and sacred rituals help the performer to cross the mundane and enter into a liminal space where the performer's consciousness elevates to

a higher state. According to Turner, transformation takes place through ritual inhabitation of the mask as the performer is literally on the threshold of something new (Turner 97).

The Performance

The Gamira mask dance is acknowledged among wider cultural and scholarly discourses. But it finds the locus of its most authentic vitality and ontological resonance in the village of Kushmundi, situated in the South Dinajpur district of West Bengal. The Mask designers and the performers mostly belong to this village. Once, this tradition had a wide audience, and the people of that village would actively participate either in the mask-making or in the performance but as per the current data from various sources, there are only few hundreds of families in that village who are carrying forward this artistic tradition. The Mask, or *Mukha* is the core of this performance, that is meticulously crafted by skilled artisans on the timber of Gamar and Neem trees. Each mask embodies specific iconographic features corresponding to the deity it represents, playing a crucial role in the ritualistic and aesthetic aspects of the performance. The artists worship *Ādi-Śakti* or the primordial energy before the performance. The local villagers believe that the masks of Caṇḍī, Śiva, and some of the animal masks like *Bāgha* are consecrated through rituals that blur boundaries between the performer and divine embodiment. The performance itself follows threefold spiritual architecture:

1. Purification through rhythmic drumming and chanting.
2. Invocation where the dancer ‘dies’ or his ego is annihilated and he acts as the embodiment of the deity whom the mask that he is wearing, represents.
3. Communion where audience and performer share transcendental experience.

When performed with rigorous adherence to ritual discipline, austerity, and meditative concentration, the Gamira dance induces what Vedic philosophy terms *Turīya* which is the ‘fourth’ state of consciousness that transcends waking, dreaming, and deep sleep. In this state, the boundaries of the individual identity dissolve into an experience of universal oneness. Therefore, Gamira is not merely a folk art or a theatrical performance but a sacred act of embodied philosophy or an aesthetic and spiritual awakening that integrates the village community with the cosmic forces.

Transcending Geography

The provenance of this performative tradition remains contested in scholarly debates. However, it is evident that the dance emerges from a shared cultural continuum rather than an insular trajectory. Its formal and symbolic dimensions are, either explicitly or implicitly, articulated in conjunction with other mask traditions. The Gamira mask dance, along with Himalayan and Tibetan mask dance forms, appear to share common cultural and ritualistic roots. The Tibetan *Singheecham* is performed on a particular *Tithi* and features two dancers in lion masks whose movements are vibrant and dynamic while *Yachocham* and *Mepachham* dances remain non ritualistic. Similarly, the Nepalese Mahākāla dances of Darjeeling, as well as Bhutiya dances with wooden masks of Mahākāla evoke magical and esoteric states akin to those in Gamira, including the invocation of terror or supernatural presence through masks. This Tibetan Buddhist Cham dance, which is a part of the Himalayan tradition, frequently includes ornate wooden masks that depict fierce deities, animal spirits, and spectral creatures. These ritual dances, and most particularly Cham and Singheecham, use exaggerated, oversized masks to evoke awe and represent the battle between sacred and demonic forces (Ghosh 67). Similarly, the famed Gamira masks such as *Cāmuṇḍā*, *Bāgha* and *Kālī*, bear a striking resemblance in form and function to their Himalayan counterparts. The Mask of Grāma Caṇḍī is about two feet, and it reminds us of the massive Tibetan masks. Just like Gamira, Tibetan masks are huge and monstrous which do not only exaggerate the basic features of human face, to portray wickedness but they are also the more arbitrary product of an inflamed imagination so that the face loses its normal proportion. In Tibet, mask dancers portray spirits, deities, or historical Buddhist figures such as Padmasambhava during specific tithis in monastery courtyards or *gumphās*, emphasizing exorcism and spiritual instruction (Ghosh 63). Though geographically distinct, both the traditions share a parallel ritual logic: the masks are not employed as theatrical props but revered as sacred vessels mediating between the human and the spiritual realms.

In this regard, we can talk about Carl Jung's active imagination which is a method he developed to bridge the conscious and unconscious mind. According to Jung, active imagination is a method to bridge the conscious and unconscious mind by engaging creatively with the inner symbolic material (Jung 266). Here, the Gamira mask dance is the outer reality or conscious state,

which has a very inner or unconscious connection with those Tibetan mask dances. This dance, from a Jungian perspective, becomes a manifestation of active imagination, where the unconscious mind communicates through a symbolical enactment. The masks themselves are deliberately disproportionate, crafted to amplify the spiritual force and evoke the uncanny. By exaggerating features, artists transform the mask into an instrument of terrifically charged presence, a vividly liminal artefact that destabilizes ordinary perception in both Cham and Gamira mask dances. Gamira masks of Dinajpur use supernatural motifs, like skulls and animal figures, to represent Śakti's fierce energy and connections to the spiritual world. Such imagery reflects deep Tantric currents and ritual elements drawn from an ancient, pre-Hindu occult substratum shared across South and Southeast Asia. Both traditions, in their own way, transcend mere performance to enact the rites of cosmic tension: creative preservation and terrifying destruction, sacred protection and boundary-breaking transformation.

Transcending Emotions

Both the ceremonial masks and sacred choreography contribute to the potency of the Gamira dance. While it is mostly shaped by tantric thought, it is equally informed by classical Indian aesthetics. The performance itself gives birth to major Rasas among the audiences such as:

- a) *Śṛṅgāra* (love): Depiction of deities like Śiva and Pārvatī in the forms of *Bura-Buri* showcase themes of divine love and marital harmony, fostering feelings of affection and devotion among spectators.
- b) *Raúdra* (anger): Portrayals of fierce deities like Cāmuṇḍā and Śaṃṣān Kālī evoke awe and respect and symbolize the triumph of good over evil and inspiring courage.
- c) *Adbhuta* (wonder): The elaborate masks and dynamic movements and some animal masks elicit amazement in the audiences.

Gamira harnesses these rasas to transcend mere entertainment. The primary goal of Gamira dance performance is not simply enjoyment but to uplift and transport spectators into another parallel reality, where they can experience their own consciousness and this transformative intent aligns with the ancient Indian doctrine of *Rasa* in performative arts (Bharata 101-104). Through this shared emotional journey, both performers and audience undergo a communal purification, a spiritual catharsis in which aesthetic immersion becomes a gateway to transcendental insight. The ritual masks, believed to be infused with divine potency, further intensify this transformation by

turning the performers into temporary embodiments of gods and ancestral spirits, thereby collapsing the distinction between the human and the divine.

Beyond the Ordinary, Where Spirits Speak

The Gamira mask dance emerges as a distinctive articulation of performative culture that surpasses the boundaries of ordinary experience and gestures toward the unveiling of the performer's inner consciousness. Though Gamira mask dance is deeply rooted in traditions like other ancient art forms, it seamlessly blends aesthetic richness with esoteric symbolism. Ananda K. Coomaraswamy asserted that traditional art forms are far more than decorative or aesthetic expressions. He believed that such art is deeply rooted in metaphysical and spiritual principles, functioning as a means of conveying transcendent truths. According to Coomaraswamy, authentic art serves as a symbolic bridge between the material and the spiritual, guiding the viewer toward a greater understanding of cosmic order and their own existential role within it (Coomaraswamy 34-36). He interpreted Śiva's *Ānanda Tāṇḍava*, or the Dance of Bliss as a profound representation of the cosmic cycles of creation, preservation, and destruction, symbolizing the dynamic rhythm of the universe and the unity of all existence (Coomaraswamy 8-10). This cosmic symbolism finds a compelling parallel in the Gamira mask dance of South Dinajpur, where performers embody mythological figures through ritualistic masking and movement. Like Śiva's dance, the Gamira performance enacts themes of life, death, and rebirth, and evokes the eternal cycles of the cosmos. The artistic performance leads to acts of spiritual invocation (see fig. 2).



Fig. 2. Gamira dancers with wooden masks. Photograph by Sammya Brata. Facebook, 10 April 2025, <https://www.facebook.com/SAMSPOOK/photos/>

Through embodied symbolism and ritualized expression, each dance becomes a sacred conduit for metaphysical reflection that demonstrates how traditional art forms function as vehicles of spiritual insight rather than mere aesthetic displays. Furthermore, the Gamira mask dance exemplifies the performative dimension of ritual art wherein aesthetic practice becomes inseparable from ontological inquiry. The assumption of the mask is not merely a theatrical device but a semiotic act that effaces the individuality of the performer and enables the manifestation of archetypal, often numinous presence. The resultant symbolic transaction dissolves the boundaries between the spectator and participant and produces a liminal space of collective re-inscription of metaphysical truths. This ritualistic aesthetic process of Gamira aligns deeply with the Indian theories of *rasa* and *dhvanī*. The masks, music, and gestures of this performance act as determinants that evoke emotional states and transform ordinary emotions into universalized aesthetic experience or *rasa*. The carved masks and symbolic choreography operate through *dhvanī* that suggests spiritual and cultural meaning beyond verbal expression. For the local community, the performance transcends mere entertainment and becomes a mode of transcendent cognition where ritual efficacy and aesthetic pleasure converge. The spectators participate in a shared contemplative state and experience emotions such as awe, devotion and fear in a purified, reflective form. By orchestrating archetypal figures, cyclic temporality, and eschatological motifs, the Gamira dance stages an embodied hermeneutics of the cosmos, thereby affirming Coomaraswamy's insistence that traditional art is a vehicle of metaphysical revelation rather than autonomous aesthetic play.

Conclusion

In conclusion, by exploring various levels of consciousness, from the unconscious to the superconscious, it becomes essential for the mind to discover its true nature. In that case, only art, and most importantly a ritualistic art, can help the artist or the audiences to transcend through different levels of consciousness. As a prime example of transcendental art, the Gamira mask dance, with all its devotion and ritualistic precision, enables the performer to 'shed' his outer self and 'merge' with the divine. This transcendence in Gamira mask dance performance is so obvious that, during the performance, the dancers who embody deities such as *Smāsan Kālī* or *Caṇḍī* often enter ecstatic trance states, and someone must hold them from behind before they spin violently and collapse in apparent swoon. The local belief is that the dancer is 'exorcised' or 'possessed' by

the goddess, manifesting clear elements of magic and occultism. Unlike the purely recreational folk dances of Bengal, Gamira's mask ritual retains these esoteric depths. Though it has evolved over time, Gamira continues to evoke its mystical roots. The masks and movements serve as symbols, bring the material and the metaphysical, and allow both performers and spectators to experience a deeper connection with the divine. This dance performance also encapsulates the confluence of art, spirituality, psychology, and cultural identity. With fading patronage and with urbanization, the dance is becoming gradually a livelihood activity. It is now being performed mostly at village fairs, cultural programmes and government aided programmes. For spiritual seekers and artistes, there is a need for the cultural preservation of these esoteric art forms in the face of commercialization and economic challenges.

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