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The role of movement in the Džolomari ritual of North Macedonia

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Abstract

The Džolomari (Џоломари), or Džamalar (Џамалари), are masked pagan performers of the Kavadarci region in North Macedonia, traditionally active during the winter season to expel evil spirits and ensure fertility, health, and prosperity. The performers' rhythmic and coordinated movements are considered the central point of this ritual, which gives the ceremony its structure and symbolic meaning. The present study examines the Džolomari ritual through these embodied actions, showing how movement transforms the ritual into a living form of dance. Fieldwork in the villages of Begnište and Rasava included participant observation and interviews with performers and residents, documenting not only the physical movements but also their cultural significance. The performers' repeated jumps, rightward circles, bell-shaking, and symbolic fertility gestures are passed down through generations and recognized as essential to the ritual. Drawing on theoretical frameworks from dance anthropology, techniques of the body, symbolic anthropology, and performance theory, the present study shows that the ritual's meaning emerges through the body rather than through words. Movement creates unity, expresses cultural values such as renewal and protection, and turns the village itself into a performance space. The Džolomari ritual can therefore be regarded as a ritual dance, in which rhythmic, symbolic, and structured movement tells a story of social, spiritual, and cultural continuity.

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1. Introduction

The Džolomari ritual is one of the most well-known masked performance traditions in North Macedonia, practiced mainly in the Kavadarci region, including the villages of Begnište and Rasava, located near Lake Tikveš. The ritual is performed annually around the new year according to the Julian calendar and is commonly associated with the expulsion of evil spirits. According to Velickovska, a university lecturer in North Macedonia, who was interviewed on January 13, 2025, during the fieldwork, the purposes of the Džolomari ritual were aimed at providing fertility and food, health and happiness, and offering protection from diseases. Additionally, they are believed to possess certain

magical influences. Rituals are the mechanisms through which people are socially and emotionally integrated into the group.

The ritual involves young men dressed in thick animal hides and hoods, with long moustaches, white beards, and faces blackened with soot. They wear heavy bells and rattles that produce loud rhythmic sounds as they move through the village (Figure 1). Alongside these masked figures appear a “grandmother” dressed in black and two “brides” dressed in white, all traditionally portrayed by men. According to local interpretations, the brides symbolize the arrival of the New Year, while the grandmother represents the departing old year. Through noise, movement, and masking, the performers enact the symbolic transition from the old cycle to the new one.

During fieldwork in Begnište, I asked the leader of the Džolomari ritual, Ordancho Lazarov, to explain the meaning of the masks, characters, and actions in the ritual. According to him, the main purpose of masking is to drive away evil spirits. The performers darken their faces with soot from village ovens to look more frightening. This darkening, combined with loud bells and exaggerated movements, is intended to scare away negative forces and protect the village. As Lazarov explained, “we make ourselves look scarier and noisier so the evil spirits will leave.”

Lazarov also clarified the symbolism of the ritual characters. The group includes two brides dressed in white and one old woman dressed in black. The brides represent the New Year that is arriving, while the old woman symbolizes the old year that is passing away. One bride remains in the center of the village, while the second bride travels through the village on a donkey, accompanied by several Džolomari. They visit households and receive offerings such as flour, meat, wine, brandy, and other goods. These gifts are understood as offerings connected to fertility, abundance, and prosperity for the coming year.

The use of bells, hunched backs, and white beards further strengthens the ritual’s protective and symbolic character. The bells create loud rhythmic noise, which is believed to chase away evil spirits. When asked why the performers strike each other with sticks, Lazarov explained simply that this action also serves to drive away evil spirits. The movements are not violent but symbolic, emphasizing purification and protection.

Lazarov confirmed that the Džolomars traditionally represent grape growers and farmers. The ritual is closely connected to agricultural life, especially viticulture, and many performers are involved in wine production. For this reason, fertility symbolism is central to the ritual. Through

noise, movement, masking, and symbolic actions, the Džolomari seek to ensure a prosperous agricultural year and protect the community from misfortune.

In ethnology, customs such as masked rituals are explained as having both manifest (open) and latent (secret) functions.¹ Although research in the early 20th century focused on their manifest functions, *e.g.*, guaranteeing health, fertility, and happiness within the community, later studies emphasize their latent function of reinforcing group identity and unity.² These symbolic roles and fertility motifs are generally understood as survivals of older, pre-Christian agrarian belief systems, possibly extending back to the Roman period, when the New Year was associated with seasonal renewal around the first of March.

According to Vladimir Bočev, this ritual was once performed in almost every village in Macedonia. These rituals are most frequently performed during the so-called “unbaptized days,” from January 7 to January 20 (Julian calendar) each year.³ The Macedonian Church believes in the Julian (old-style) calendar, which currently differs from the Gregorian (new-style) calendar by 13 days. The dates such as 13 and 14 in the Gregorian calendar correspond to December 31 and January 1 in the Julian calendar, aligning the Džolomari ritual with the traditional New Year. The period from the Nativity (Gregorian December 25 / Julian January 7) to the Baptism (Gregorian January 6 / Julian January 19) of Christ, known in folk belief as the “unbaptized days,” is the liminal time when Christ is born but not yet baptized. Rituals performed during this interval are therefore believed to possess heightened protective and purifying power, which helps explain the prevalence of masked performances, loud sound, and fertility symbolism in the Džolomari ritual.

The Džolomari ritual can be compared with other masked New Year customs across the Balkans, which share similar purposes of expelling evil spirits and ensuring fertility. In Bulgaria and Serbia, masked performers enact noisy, ritualized movements tied to agricultural cycles, while similar traditions exist in Greek Macedonian communities. Romanian customs such as Buhaiul, Capra, Pluguşorul, and Sorcova also feature costumed participants performing symbolic actions to welcome the New Year and drive away negative forces.

2. Methodology

The present study utilizes a qualitative approach that combines ethnographic fieldwork with a movement-based analysis of ritual. The primary aim was to understand the Džolomari ritual by closely examining its embodied, rhythmic actions and to explore how these movements enable it to be viewed and interpreted as a form of dance.

The fieldwork for this study was conducted under the academic supervision of Dr. Anna Mária Bólya and was organized by her as a collaborative fieldwork initiative involving PhD students from the Department of Ethnology at the University of Debrecen. Although the research was carried out as a team, each doctoral researcher worked independently on a distinct topic. My specific focus was on ritual movement. The fieldwork was financially supported by the Pannonia Scholarship Programme.

Fieldwork was conducted over seven days in the Kavadarci region of North Macedonia, mainly in the villages of Begnište and Rasava, where the Džolomari ritual is still actively performed. During this period, I spent three full days (13–15 January 2025) closely observing the various stages of the ritual. This included the pre-ritual activities with children, the main night and early morning performances by the adult Džolomari, and the post-ritual gathering and communal feast. Throughout these observations, I kept detailed field notes on movements, spatial arrangements, rhythms, and the interactions between performers and villagers. I also photographed key moments of the ritual, which later supported the analysis.

The primary research methods included participant observation and semi-structured and unstructured interviews with performers and local residents. I maintained a detailed fieldwork diary throughout the research period, recording observations on movement patterns, spatial organization, rhythm, performer interaction, and community participation. Photographic documentation was also used to support the movement analysis. I walked with the Džolomari through the village streets and observed their movements from within the crowd. Moreover, I engaged in informal conversations whenever the opportunity arose. Unstructured interviews were held with ritual leaders, performers, and local residents, including both elders and younger participants. These conversations took place before, during, and after the ritual, either in people's homes or in shared village spaces such as squares and yards. Furthermore, the interviews explored how participants understand the purpose of the ritual, the meanings they attach to specific movements, the symbolic role of the bells and costumes, and how the tradition is passed down from grandfathers to grandsons. Names are mentioned in the text only when informants gave consent to be identified.

Alongside the fieldwork, an extensive review of the literature related to masked rituals, winter customs, and folk performances in North Macedonia and the broader Balkan region. However, I discovered that there is very little published work specifically on the Džolomari of Begnište and Resava, especially from a movement-based

or dance-anthropological point of view. Hence, due to the lack of focused research, I relied on broader theoretical frameworks to inform my analysis. These frameworks included Adrienne L. Kaeppler's view of dance as a culturally structured system of movement, Marcel Mauss's concept of "techniques of the body," Victor Turner's work on ritual and communitas, Clifford Geertz's symbolic anthropology, and Richard Schechner's Performance Theory.

The analysis was interpretive and guided by the theoretical frameworks selected for the study. I examined my field notes and observations with particular attention to how movements are structured, learned, repeated, and imbued with meaning within the ritual setting. These movements were then interpreted through the chosen theories, considering how they operate as culturally specific body techniques (Mauss), as structured and dance-like movement patterns (Kaeppler), as symbolic actions expressing values such as unity, fertility, and protection (Geertz and Turner), and as restored behaviors within a performance context (Schechner). As a qualitative study, the present study's goal was not to measure or quantify movement, but to offer a rich, descriptive, and analytical understanding of how movement shapes the Džolomari ritual into a meaningful and potentially dance-like cultural practice.

3. Discussion

The main research question in this study is: How do embodied and rhythmic movements function within the Džolomari ritual, and in what ways are these movements interpreted as dance? Here, in the ritual, one can clearly see a sequence of rhythmic movements. Dance is an act of moving rhythmically to music, typically in a prearranged order of steps.⁴ This ceremony involves some of the key elements of dance, such as body, space, time, and energy.⁵ Although there are no special instruments, the Džolomars wear 25 kg bells around their waists (Figure 1). These bells are played rhythmically as they rotate their hips, with the sound being similar to music. By this, we can conclude that this is a form of ritual dance.

The ceremony consists of three stages: pre-ritual customs, ritual, and post-ritual customs. The pre-ritual takes place the night before the main ceremony, in which young children in the village dress up as Džolomars and behave just like real Džolomars for the whole night. This performance indicates the younger generation adopting their traditions and is a valuable process of cultural legacy transfer to the younger generation. At 5 pm on the ritual day, the Džolomars, those who perform the ritual, begin preparations. One of the most significant parts of this

ritual is the bells wrapped around their hips that produce a very loud noise and echo throughout the whole ritual (Figure 1).



Figure 1. Leader of the village as Begnište a Džolomar with bells, January 14, 2025. Photograph by Lakni Prasanjali Kumarasiri, 2025.

The group is led by a leader called the “Grand Par,” and he carries a whistle. He directs the group and, using the whistle, signals when the ritual will begin, and the performers practice steps that correspond to the performance. At the final cue from the leader, the Džolomars jump in a rhythmic pattern following a two-quarter beat and swing their hips in a two-quarter beat. These are the two main movements I have identified in the pre-ritual phase.

After the announcement by the leader, all the Džolomars sprint in a line toward the ritual ground. The sprint is not ordinary; it is rhythmic with small jumps. The ritual begins with the creation of an open curve in which the Džolomars perform a pronounced leap while interlocking their arms, signifying unity. The procession follows a path that always curves to the right (Figure 2).

The ritual commences with performers geometrically forming an open circle, entailing a beginning stance with slightly bent knees, and dancing continuously to the right with the same movement pathway (Figure 2). They start by stepping right with the right foot while the left foot,

held in a gestural position mid-air, and spring on the same foot in the same direction. The sequence concludes with body weight resting on the left foot while the right foot remains mid-air in a gestural stance. During the dance, the performers are interconnected in a chain formation by placing their hands on the shoulders of the neighboring partners

The action begins with a steady, structured rhythm that gradually increases in tempo as the ritual progresses. As the ritual proceeds, the open curve naturally evolves into a closed circular form. This is not done consciously, but the dancers naturally move toward the inside in a smaller circle unconsciously as the rhythm quickens. The leader, who is equipped with a stick, directs the group, and using the stick and a whistle, he signals and guides their movements.

Grandmother and the two brides are always in the middle of the circle, but do not act like the Džolomars. They do not jump like the Džolomars; instead, they walk rhythmically with sticks in their hands. The movement is determined by a specific rhythm, with a stationary presence in the middle of the ritual.

The round dances are generally connected to the space inside; the dance intends to cause an effect, and in many cases, it has an impact on the center of the circle.⁶ The circular shape of the Džolomar ritual illustrates unity, continuity, and unity of the people. As the Džolomars open into a curve, then become a closed circle, the closing shape is symbolic of growing togetherness among the participants, illustrating their shared goal of warding off evil spirits and welcoming the New Year. The ring, which neither starts nor ends, represents the cycle of life, renewal, and unity among past, present, and future generations. The location of grandmother and the two brides standing together in the middle represents this because they symbolize peace and prosperity through harmony and balance between the new and old. This ritual ring not only choreographs the dance but also strengthens communal bonds, giving a sense of shared cultural history and belonging that unites the village in its centuries-long tradition.

During a casual interview with the chief of the Džolomar in Begnište village, he described them as grape growers who produce wine. The primary purpose of the ritual is fertility, and it is performed every year to ward off evil forces and welcome the New Year. They believe the ringing of bells drives away bad forces. Additionally, by rising and firmly shaking their hips, they attempt to ward off evil spirits and bring prosperity for the upcoming year.

The leader of the Džolomars in Begnište, Ordancho Lazarov, emphasized the necessity of shaking the hips to activate the bells. The same is observed in Asian traditional

dances, particularly in India, Sri Lanka, and Bangladesh, where dancers possess tiny bells. The ritualistic use of bells is extremely religious in character because the majority of cultures feel that ringing bells chase away negative energy and bring positive vibrations. This means that irrespective of cultural variation, the intention behind these actions and the application of bells remain uniform in every tradition.



Figure 2. Rasava-Džolomar performers getting ready to start the dance in an open circle, January 14, 2025. Photograph by Lakni Prasanjali Kumarasiri, 2025.

Lazarov added that the Džolomar ritual is the soul of Begnište, representing the ethnographic cultural riches and heritage of the region. The tradition is transmitted from grandfather to grandson. The horror-inspiring Džolomar create a stir and ward off wicked spirits with their woolen kulavki, beards as long as forest trees, straw humps, rattles, sticks, and soot-stained faces, all of which are preserved and passed down as family heritage and legacy. They are believed to usher in prosperity, good fortune, well-being, and great energy.

Another important aspect of this ritual is that no particular musical instruments are used. Music does not necessarily mean traditional instruments or even the sounds of the voice. In this ritual, the bells that the

participants carry are the primary musical element. The rhythmic clashing of these heavy bells, strapped to their bodies, creates a unique sound experience that guides the movement and energy of the performance.

The most recognizable rhythmic movement in the ritual is a symbolic sexual movement between the bride and a Džolomar. It is a rhythmic movement with a pattern and a duration of one minute, imitating an actual sexual rhythm (Figure 3). It represents fertility according to the reproductive energy. The Rizov leader of the Rasava village informed that a sexual act with a symbolic bride from the group transmits the idea of a new life without evil to be nurtured, protected, grown, and promoted to the world. He emphasized that he is proud of this ancient practice, which is still a real magnet wherever they perform.



Figure 3. The sexual movement performed by the bride and the team leader of the Begnište, January 14, 2025. Photograph by Lakni Prasanjali Kumarasiri, 2025.

According to Clifford Geertz's Symbolic Anthropology, the ritual is a rich symbolic tapestry of multiple meanings that present cultural values and beliefs.⁷

The work of Adrienne L. Kaeppler in dance anthropology provides a firm basis upon which to analyze the Džolomari ritual from the perspective of movement. Following Western standards of performance,

Kaeppler argues against the definition of dance as ‘staged choreography’ or ‘musical accompaniment’. She explains that dance is a culturally structured movement system where movements receive meaning by following culturally shaped rules, patterns, and social expectations. As Kaeppler so aptly wrote, dance is “a system of human behavior patterned according to culturally specific principles.”⁸ Such a perspective provides the possibility to analyze the ritual of Džolomari as a tradition of movement which conveys cultural meaning through the medium of the body, rather than through words.

Moreover, Kaeppler highlights that dance is an organized system, rather than a set of random movements. Each action carries form, pattern, and social logic. When this perspective is applied to the Džolomari ritual, it becomes clear that the performers are not moving freely or individually. Instead, they follow a shared movement structure: jumping in unison, stepping in a three-quarter rhythm, circling to the right, and shaking their hips to sound the heavy bells tied around their bodies. These are repeated annually, and the community recognizes them as integral parts of the ritual. The consistency of these movements through generations is a reflection of what Kaeppler describes as the “choreographic organization of cultural ideas,”⁹ where the movement becomes a means to express and preserve tradition.

Additionally, during my fieldwork, I observed how the Džolomars prepare for the ritual, practice their rhythm, and coordinate their patterns under the guidance of the leader. These movement choices reveal clear organization, sequencing, and timing. These are the qualities that Kaeppler identifies as central to understanding dance within cultural settings. Although the ritual does not employ musical instruments, the bells establish a rhythmic foundation. The usage of bells guides the performers’ steps, much like the rhythmic structures found in many traditional ritual dances.

Through the analysis of Kaeppler’s framework, it is evident that the Džolomari ritual cannot be separated from its movement system. The ritual conveys cultural values such as unity, protection, and fertility through the coordinated actions of its performers. Since Kaeppler defines dance as a structured set of movements shaped by cultural ideas, her theory strongly supports my interpretation that the Džolomari ritual functions as a form of ritual dance. Its meaning emerges through culturally patterned movement, fitting directly within Kaeppler’s understanding of dance.

Another theoretical framework to examine the Džolomari ritual is Marcel Mauss’s concept of “techniques of the body.” This can be especially useful for understanding why movement is central to the Džolomari ritual. In

his well-known 1935 lecture, Mauss described these techniques as “the ways in which, from society to society, people know how to use their bodies.”¹⁰ This indicates that every culture teaches its members specific ways of walking, sitting, running, dancing, or even carrying objects. Such bodily actions are not purely natural or automatic. They are learned behaviors that gradually become part of a person’s cultural identity. Furthermore, Mauss explained that people acquire these techniques slowly and often unconsciously, usually by watching others and practicing over time. He highlighted that these techniques are “assembled and transmitted almost entirely by education,”¹⁰ most often through imitation and repetition. This perspective helps me understand the role of movement in the Džolomari ritual and how these embodied practices are passed from one generation to the next.

During the fieldwork, I noted how the ritual movements are taught and passed down “from grandfather to grandson,” as one leader explained. I could observe how even the children began imitating the adult performers the night before the ritual, practicing the jumps, hip-shaking, and rhythmic running. Although they have not yet performed the ritual, these children are learning certain body techniques that they will later use as grown-up Džolomars. This aligns with Mauss’s notion that body techniques are acquired through imitation, rehearsal, and habit within culture.

The characteristic Džolomari movements, such as jumping with the bells, stepping in a three-quarter rhythm, running in a coordinated line, forming a moving circle, and shaking the hips to activate the heavy bells, are neither random actions nor personal choices. They construct the village’s cultural identity and are learned through repeated participation and observation. Over time, these movements become embodied knowledge. This means that the understanding of the ritual is stored in the body rather than in written or spoken instructions. When applying Mauss’s theory, it is clearly evident that the ritual endures because the body itself preserves the tradition. Instead of writing down the steps, the community teaches them through practice and imitation. This allows the movements to be passed seamlessly across generations. In this way, the Džolomari ritual exemplifies Mauss’s concept: performers use culturally specific body techniques to create a meaningful and enduring cultural performance.

Moreover, Mauss’s theory supports my argument that the Džolomari ritual can be understood as a form of dance. If dance anthropology views dance as culturally organized movement, Mauss explains how these movements become culturally structured in the first place. The meaning of the ritual arises from these learned body techniques, not

from random or spontaneous actions. They share the same characteristics found in dance traditions worldwide, as the movements are taught, repeated, structured, and valued within the culture.

Another theoretical framework that supports my argumentation is Victor Turner's ritual theory. This contributes to the explanations of why movement in the Džolomari ritual fosters such a strong sense of unity among the performers. Turner argues that rituals create a powerful emotional experience known as 'communitas'. According to him, *communitas* is a unique form of social togetherness that emerges when people engage in a shared ritual. According to Turner,¹¹ *communitas* occurs when individuals "submit together to the general authority of the ritual process," temporarily losing their individual status and becoming part of a unified group. This sense of unity does not rely on spoken rules or formal instructions but rather arises through shared actions, emotions, and bodily experiences.

Another observation that I have made during my fieldwork is that the performers place their hands on each other's shoulders, forming a connected chain. They move together in a large circle, stepping and jumping in unison. The bells around their waists are heavy, and each performer experiences the same physical effort as they jump and shake their hips. As the rhythm intensified, the circle began to close in, and the dancers moved even closer to one another (Figure 2). It is in these moments that the group starts moving almost as one body, the sound of the bells surrounding them and reinforcing their shared rhythm and energy.

This can be explained through Turner's explanation. He explained that *communitas* often emerges during liminal moments, periods of transition when normal social roles are suspended. The Džolomari ritual takes place during the New Year season, which marks a symbolic threshold between the old and the New Year. Wearing masks and costumes that conceal their ordinary identities helps performers enter a liminal state, in which social differences such as age, status, or family position become less significant. This signifies that this space is important for them to move together as a unit, as Džolomars. Turner's theory highlights that it is this shared movement, rather than verbal communication, that generates a profound sense of unity.

Moreover, another key point from Turner is that ritual movement has the power to transform participants. In the Džolomari ritual, the rhythm of the bells, synchronized stepping, and tightening the circle create an emotional intensity that strengthens group identity. Their connection to one another is felt directly through their bodies.

According to Turner, this kind of unity is often stronger than ordinary social relationships because it arises from shared physical experience. I observed this clearly during my fieldwork, especially when performers spoke with pride about being Džolomars and described the ritual as a tradition that unites the village.

Clifford Geertz's symbolic anthropology offers another perspective on understanding how the Džolomari ritual communicates meaning through movement. Geertz argues that rituals function as cultural texts, composed of symbols that are performed rather than merely spoken about.¹² One of the most striking symbolic actions I observed is the circular formation created by the performers. At the beginning of the ritual, the Džolomars stand in an open curve that gradually closes into a full circle as the rhythm intensifies. In symbolic anthropology, circles often represent unity, wholeness, and the continuous cycle of life. Geertz argues that symbols structure the way a community understands the world. By forming a circle through movement, the Džolomars enact a symbol of unity not through words, but through their bodies. As the circle tightens with increasing tempo, it conveys a growing sense of togetherness and shared strength. This movement expresses the idea that the community stands united, both to ward off negative forces and to welcome the New Year. Through Geertz's perspective, this movement becomes a powerful symbol of social cohesion and cultural continuity.

Additionally, the direction of movement in the ritual also carries symbolic meaning. The Džolomars always move to the right, never to the left. Across many Balkan and wider Indo-European traditions, rightward movement is linked with renewal, blessing, and good fortune. One possible interpretation of Džolomari's clockwise movement is that it symbolizes cosmic order. Just as the sun and stars appear to travel across the sky because of the Earth's rotation, the dancers' circular, rightward motion may represent the passage of time and the movement of celestial bodies. Such clockwise or rightward movement is a common pattern observed throughout Macedonian folklore, appearing in both ritual and non-ritual dances. This indicates that the Džolomari ritual follows a broader cultural tendency rather than creating a unique directional practice. A similar idea is found in Orthodox Christian rituals, where priests cense the altar clockwise, often accompanied by bells and never counterclockwise. This suggests that the direction of the Džolomari's dance may reflect human perceptions of cosmic time, connecting the performers' movements to larger, universal patterns. According to Geertz, this directional choice enables us to interpret the movement as a cultural symbol: stepping to the right signifies the community's hope for a prosperous

year. The performers do not explain this verbally; instead, they communicate it through their coordinated motion. This aligns with Geertz's idea that symbols are "in action"; they gain meaning not from speech but from being performed.

The shaking of the heavy bells tied around the performers' waists also carries deep symbolic meaning. Their loud, rhythmic sound echoes across the village, and during interviews, performers explained to me that the bells are believed to chase away evil and protect the community. From a symbolic anthropology perspective, this is far more than simple noise-making. It is a ritualized act of purification and protection. Geertz emphasizes that rituals dramatize key cultural values, and in this case, the value is the removal of harmful forces before the New Year. The performers convey this idea through strong hip movements that make the bells ring, demonstrating how symbolic meaning is embodied in action.

Further, the sexualized movement between the bride and a Džolomar can be considered another powerful symbolic action in the ritual (Figure 3). This movement is rhythmic, patterned, and performed publicly. While symbolic rather than literal, it carries profound cultural significance. Geertz reminds us that symbols often condense complex ideas into simple gestures, and this movement does exactly that. The movement brings together ideas of fertility, prosperity, and the renewal of agricultural life. It embodies the belief that the New Year must begin with fertility, both human and agricultural. Because it is performed publicly and with deliberate rhythm, it becomes part of the ritual's formal symbolic language, expressing social, spiritual, and biological renewal, as well as the community's wishes for growth and abundance in the year ahead.

Moreover, Geertz highlights that symbols are shared cultural meanings, understood primarily by the community that performs them. During my observations, it became clear that the villagers instinctively understand movements of the Džolomars even if they do not always verbalize their significance. For instance, the grandmother figure standing in the center represents the old year, while the bride signifies the New Year.¹³ Their positions are intentional and symbolic, shaping the ritual's overall meaning. As Geertz states, rituals "speak in a language of gestures, materials, and forms." In the Džolomari ritual, the arrangement of characters, the pathways of movement, and the physical rhythms all form part of this symbolic language.

Through a series of embodied symbols, the community communicates its identity, history, fears, and hopes. The circular formation represents unity and continuity, while the rightward movement signifies renewal and good

fortune. The shaking of bells functions as a ritual act of cleansing and protection, and fertility gestures symbolize new life and prosperity. At the center, the main figures embody the transition from the old year to the New Year.

Hence, Geertz's symbolic anthropology shows that these symbols do not exist independently of movement. They rely on bodily enactment to convey meaning. The ritual's significance is not spoken or written, but it is performed. This aligns perfectly with my goal of analyzing the Džolomari ritual through movement, as the symbolic system only becomes visible when the performers enact it. By applying Geertz's framework, I can argue convincingly that the Džolomari ritual serves the same symbolic functions found in ritual dances around the world. Through choreographed movement, the community expresses cultural ideas about unity, fertility, protection, and renewal. In this sense, the Džolomari ritual can be considered a form of ritual dance: its symbolic meaning is created and transmitted through the body, exactly as Geertz describes in ritual practices globally.

Another theory that can be incorporated for the analysis is the Performance Theory. This theory further helps to explain why the Džolomari ritual can be read as dance, as it emphasizes what people do with their bodies in cultural events. Richard Schechner describes performance as any behavior that is repeated or reenacted, extending far beyond formal theater or artistic settings. He refers to this as "twice-behaved behavior," meaning actions that communities have carried out before and continue to carry out as part of their cultural traditions.¹⁴

Seen through the above perspective, the movements of the Džolomars are clearly not random. Each year, the performers repeat the same actions, learning them from older generations and practicing them as part of the ritual, much like dancers preparing for a performance. This ongoing repetition reveals that the ritual is shaped by restored, intentional movements that carry structure, rhythm, and purpose.

Moreover, Schechner emphasizes that performance primarily communicates through the body. In the context of the ritual, meaning is conveyed through physical action rather than words. This perspective supports my approach of interpreting the Džolomari ritual through movement. Everything is significant in the ritual. The unity of the group, the cleansing of evil, the welcoming of the New Year, and the symbol of fertility are expressed through the body. When the Džolomars shake their hips to make the bells ring, they are performing a symbolic action through movement. During my observations, performers explained that the bells are intended to drive away evil and safeguard the village. This symbolism exists only because of

movement; without the physical action, the symbol would not exist. This perfectly exemplifies Performance Theory's idea that the body itself serves as a medium for creating and communicating meaning.

Another important insight from Schechner is that performance creates a special state of being. Performers step out of everyday life and enter what he calls "performance mode." In the Džolomari ritual, the men wear masks, animal skins, and heavy bells, leaving behind their ordinary identities to become Džolomars (Figure 1). This transformation occurs through action: when the leader blows the whistle, and the men begin jumping together, they enter a performance state. Their bodies move in ways that are unlike daily life. Schechner emphasizes that this kind of transformation is central to ritual performance, and it is the movement that brings it about. As the Džolomars advance in a rhythmic line toward the ritual ground, each gesture is culturally meaningful and recognized by the community. Movement, in this sense, marks the boundary between ordinary life and ritual existence.

Performance Theory also illuminates the deep sense of togetherness experienced by the performers. As the Džolomars place their hands on each other's shoulders and move in a circle, they begin to act as a single, coordinated group. Their jumps follow the rhythm of the bells, and their steps fall into a pattern. As the tempo increases, the circle tightens, and the men feel the shared physical effort of the heavy bells.¹⁴ Schechner notes that in performance, shared physical activity fosters emotional connection and unity. This mirrors many dance traditions, where dancers feel a sense of unity through shared rhythm and movement. In this way, Performance Theory demonstrates that the Džolomari ritual employs dance-like movements to foster social cohesion; the performers become a collective body through coordinated actions.

Schechner also highlights the importance of performance space. Rituals create a special environment that differs from everyday spaces. During the Džolomari ritual, the performers use the entire village as their stage; the streets, the ritual ground, and the early morning paths all become part of the performance area. As the performers move through the village, the bells echo, and villagers come outside to watch. This interaction between performers and audience is crucial. Even though the villagers do not dance themselves, their presence contributes to the performance environment. This is similar to dance events in many cultures, where spectators help to shape the performance emotionally and socially. In the Džolomari ritual, movement is recognized by the community as meaningful, reinforcing its identity as a cultural performance.

Additionally, the symbolic fertility movement between

the bride and a Džolomar can be understood through Performance Theory. This movement is deliberate and public, carried out rhythmically within a specific space and in full view of the audience. It embodies fertility, new life, and prosperity for the coming year. Schechner emphasizes that performance is always meaningful, with symbolic actions central to ritual expression. In this context, the fertility movement communicates a cultural message through the body, much like fertility dances in other traditions. Performance Theory thus supports the interpretation of this movement as a structured, intentional, and culturally significant component of the ritual, rather than a random or private act.

Through this lens, the Džolomari ritual can be understood as a form of dance due to its use of the body, rhythm, and repeated gestures to convey cultural meaning. The movements are rehearsed, structured, and meaningful. They create transformation, unity, and symbolic communication. These are qualities that anthropologists identify as central to dance. The ritual does not require musical instruments or a formal stage. Its patterned, symbolic movements are sufficient to categorize it as a ritual dance. Performance Theory reinforces my main argument: movement is at the heart of the Džolomari ritual, and it is through movement that the ritual communicates meaning. By reading the ritual through movement, it can be understood as dance in the anthropological sense, a repeated, meaningful, and culturally structured performance of the body.

4. Conclusion

This study addressed how embodied and rhythmic movements function within the Džolomari ritual and how these movements can be interpreted as dance. Observations in Begnište and Rasava, along with insights from local informants, show that movement is central to the ritual. Repeated actions such as jumping, rightward circling, shaking the heavy bells, and performing the fertility gesture are organized, rhythmic, and culturally meaningful. These movements follow specific patterns, are transmitted across generations, and are recognized by the community as essential to the ritual, fitting anthropological definitions of dance as a culturally structured system of movement.

Theoretical frameworks support this interpretation. Kaeppler's concept of dance as structured movement highlights the ritual's choreographed nature and its expression of unity, fertility, and protection. Mauss's "techniques of the body" explain how these movements are learned and embodied, ensuring the ritual's persistence. Turner's idea of *communitas* shows how shared physical effort and synchronized circular movements create social

cohesion. Geertz's symbolic anthropology demonstrates that the circle, rightward motion, bell sounds, and fertility gesture convey deeper cultural meanings. Performance Theory reinforces that these repeated, publicly enacted movements constitute a cultural performance in which the body itself communicates meaning.

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Author contributions

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Data supporting this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

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