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Jale Erzen

Middle East Technical University, erzen@vitruvius.arch.metu.edu.tr

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The Dervishes Dance — The Sacred Ritual of Love

Jale Erzen

Abstract

In the Sufi Way, the experience of the world and its perception is aesthetic in an ecstatic fashion. The awareness of the overpowering beauty of the world fills the heart with love and opens the mind to cosmic relations. The integration of reason, form-making, and imagining, along with yielding the body and mind to the powers of the earth, is a total aesthetic in Sufism.

In the Islamic world, humans' movement, the way they understand the process of time and space, depends on nature and parallels the cosmic order and the basic underlying forms that are found in nature. They are not only circular, which means they revolve and repeat, but rather spiral. They grow and expand in a way that radiates from the center out. Many forms of city order, architectural arrangement and movement pattern, including the basic orders of music and the representation of space in miniatures, comply with such an understanding of space and time. The Dervish Dance is in complete harmony with this understanding and with the cosmic movement.

Key Words

Dervish Dance, ecstasy, love, path/way, Rumi, seeing with the heart, Sufism, the Sufi Way

1. Introduction

The Mevlevi Order (The Mevlevi Tariqa),^[1] founded by the son Walad and the disciples of Celaleddin Rumi, in the onetime Seldjukid capital of Konya^[2] after his death in 1274, has institutionalized an ecstatic dance as part of the education of the disciples to forget the present and become united with the lover^[3] in infinity in a trance that is engendered by a constant spiraling movement to chants and to the music of the ney.^[4] This dance, which is called the Samâ, also means 'hearing.' In the words of one of the most well-known scholars of mystical Islam, Annemarie Schimmel, "The samâ is no doubt, the most widely known expression of mystical life in Islam."^[5]

The Mevlevi Order continued to practice in Konya until the foundation of the Turkish Republic in 1923, which prohibited all public religious performances. After 1956 it was permitted to perform again each year on the anniversary of the death of the Master Celaleddin Rumi. Today it is practiced on certain occasions in the exact manner that it was performed in the time of the Master.

In the Sufi Way, the experience of the world and its perception is aesthetic in an ecstatic fashion. "In Sufism the term generally translated as 'ecstasy' is *wajd*, which means literally 'finding', i.e., to find God and to become quiet and peaceful in finding Him."^[6] It is the awareness of the overpowering beauty of the world that fills the heart with love and opens the mind to cosmic relations. In a way, what Nietzsche tried to find in the idea of the tragic, as combining the mental and the visual with giving away the body to the rhythm of the earth, can be seen to exist naturally in a unity in the Sufi approach to the world.^[7] The integration of reason, form-making, and imagining, with yielding the body and mind to the powers of the earth, is a total aesthetic in Sufism. In order to relate this approach to Western philosophy, we can say that the Sufi is more than the uniting of Apollo with Dionysos. It is more because to the Sufi, whose life is a constant journey on the Way, the unending yearning to reach the absolute being creates a limitless potential in becoming increasingly aware of it. There is no end to the Sufi path.

The Sufi Way is taking the road towards the fulfillment of love, to unite with the beloved, and to become the instrument for the admiration of creation. The Sufi approach is aesthetic in a complete way in that, without denying the human reality on earth, it venerates the physical as the manifestation of the absolute spirit, viewing it with the heart both with passion and with the calm of reason.

A short survey of Islamic aesthetics from the Sufi perspective will help to understand the rituals of initiation to the Sufi Way and the ritual performed in dance. In the Islamic interpretation of the world, a special temporal and spatial order dominates all forms of expression, from music to architecture to painting. One could say that, in a way, this resembles the kind of spatial and temporal understanding that we see in all medieval cultures. For the Islamic world this understanding did not undergo major changes until the eighteenth century, and especially until the twentieth century, the era of modernism. This order, or the interpretation of the temporal and spatial realm in which the Islamic individual and culture find themselves, relates to their complete harmony with and dependence on nature. Whereas with the Renaissance and the independence of humans from nature, through scientific discoveries and empirical approaches, Western peoples created their own order that was practical, measurable, and limited, and that they could manipulate. This is the linear order with which Renaissance people begin to see and interpret the world. In the Islamic world, for a long time still, humans' movement, the way they understand the process of time and space, depends on nature and parallels the cosmic order and the basic underlying forms that are found in nature. They are not only circular, which means they revolve and repeat, but rather spiral. They grow and expand in a way that radiates from the center out.

Many forms of city order, architectural arrangement and movement pattern, including the basic orders of music and the representation of space in miniatures, comply with such an understanding of space and time. The Dervish Dance is in complete harmony with this understanding and with the cosmic movement.

Jalaluddin Rumi wrote 30.000 verses of lyric poetry all on the theme of love and spiritual bondage. His most venerated work, the *Mesnew*, is by many considered as the second *Koran*. The Sama, the dance ceremony of the Whirling Dervishes, has very precise rules as it is performed today.

2. The Dance

In the interior of the Tekke (convent) reigns a shady atmosphere and the soft music of flute and tambourines. In the center of a circular hall, men clad in black and with long cylindrical hats are bowing towards an elderly man with a white beard, seated with his back erect and his arms crossed. Slowly moving away, the Dervishes form a large circle, while the music slowly changes rhythm with the sound of the ney, the Turkish flute, which fills the atmosphere with a plaintive and insistent cry. After a long period of meditation the dervishes get up, again forming a circle. Their movement is so slow and concentrated that the observer can hardly acknowledge that they had moved. Their expressions are so much out of this world that their eyes look without seeing: They are looking to the profundity of their own interior world; they are vividly aware of the moment, of themselves, and of what surrounds them.

One by one they remove their black attire, symbolizing the separation from the ego.^[8] The tunic that is exposed is called the *hirka* and is a very symbolic garment, sewn by the dervishes themselves or passed on. Their white tunics shine with splendor. This white garment has a long sleeveless robe, on top of which is worn a short jacket that is tied at the waist. One of them, the Chief Sema dancer (Semazenbasi) "stands at the most honored

corner of the dancing place, and the dervishes pass him three times each time exchanging greetings until the circling movement starts. This is to be performed on the right foot with accelerating speed. If one of the dervishes becomes too enraptured another Sufi would touch his frock gently in order to curb his movement." [9] Slowly, raising the right arm towards the sky while the left arm points to the earth, the dervishes begin to move very slowly around themselves and around the center.



Yelda Barel, *Skylife*, *Turkish Airlines Journal* No.245, Vol. 12 (2003), p. 92.

The music begins with the great hymn in honor of the Prophet Mohammed, written by Jalaluddin himself, and ends with enthusiastic short songs. The Sama, the name given to the ritual, actually means to listen to music. At the beginning the Dervishes listen only to the music and the dance then becomes an instrument in giving one's whole being away to the music. "For Rumi the house of Love was made completely of Music and music was the sound of the doors of paradise. When someone said to Rumi he did not like the scratching of the doors, Rumi said, you hear the doors when they close, I hear them when they open." [10] The sama for him was nourishment of the soul. This expression forms the last part of the Mevlevi dances and songs. Whenever the lover touches the floor with his foot, the water of life will spring out of the darkness, and when the name of the lover is uttered, "even the dead start dancing in their shrouds." [11]

"What does the Sema, the dance ritual, signify? Jalaluddin Rumi, the founder of the Mevlevi Order in the thirteenth century says that the dancing dervishes represent the solar system and the planets that revolve around the sun. At the same time that they are immersed in their own microcosmos, they create new worlds and make contact with eternity." [12]

The fact that humans can join the choreography of the cosmos by dancing to its rhythm is an awareness that humanity has had since very ancient times. One can say that all dance, in a certain way, is yielding the body to the earth's movement. Slowly, as the body sways and the blood rhythm changes, consciousness also changes. With the revolution paralleling that of the cosmos, the mind assumes a freedom from the earthly bondage: It would be as though the mind begins to concentrate on the depth of existence on its

own, while the body has been given away to the earth. This may sound very much like the Dionysian ritual, but here the difference is that if there is a trance, it is the separation of the mind from the body, implying the soul's freedom from physicality. Through this dance the dervish understands the possibility of the eternity of the soul; he has given away his body to the earth and his mind and soul can now concentrate on the fully transcendental. The Mevlevi philosophy is called "transcendental philosophy." On the other hand, the body is not denied. And it is in this understanding that the power of the Whole, the Totality of life is understood.

Rene Rebetez, whose book on Sufism *La Odisea de la Luz* interprets the ritual dance as the way to unite with the cosmic powers and also with eternity, claims that the rotation of the dance is related to three different movements within the body. One is the movement of the electrons, the other the movement of molecules and the third the movement of the cells. He claims that all these have different movements and relate to different spiritual approaches of the self. The electrons are related to emotions, the molecules to the intelligence or the mind, and the cells to physicality and thus to the earth. In the ritual dance, the movement that changes its velocity creates a harmony among these different essences of the self and evokes a profound consciousness. The dance is a special way of training the dervish's perception and awareness; it is a kind of meditation where consciousness can penetrate the metaphysical world. This creates a relation between human and the divine. For the Sufi, knowledge is metaphysical, and this can only be attained through practice and not through thinking. Therefore the practice of the dance is important in attaining knowledge. As in the dance, the Sufi is with the world but is also away from the world; Sufis lives concentrated on the essence of what they search for and not in the quotidian world. All their quotidian work is to train the body to bear the burden and weight of its material and thus to be able to go beyond it.

In their electronic structure humans partake of the sun and of light; in their molecular structure humans are like the planets and relates to them; in their cellular structure humans are like the earth and relates to the earth. Thus in the way all these move with different speeds and are harmonized and synchronized in the sacred ritual dance; humans extend themselves from the earth to the cosmos. At the same time, they become aware of absolute time by concentrating their movements on all different velocities. By moving in space from the center out, they also unite in their consciousness space and time and in a way joins the eternal unity of existence.

Rene Rebetez also states that, as with some chemical experiments where fast rotational movement is applied to separate different materials from each other, this rotational movement separates the consciousness from what is alien or superficial to it.

3. Conclusion

The body is the perfect instrument. The Sufi fully understands the importance of the body. The Sufi Way is entered with long ordeals put on the body. The novice has to sit hours in certain positions and has to fast for days. The novice has to do the most menial work of the monastery: to clean, to cook, and serve others. Only in this way, only through the strict discipline of the body can the mind assume freedom. But also in all this education the service to others is important. It teaches modesty and the strict limitations of the ego.

Only when the complete surrender of the ego is achieved through this physical training and abstinence is the ritual dance taught. The kind of ecstasy that is attained in the ritual dance is called 'vejd' which in arabic means 'finding' Thus in the ecstasy of love and of the ritual the Sufi finds God and peace.

On the other hand, the Sufi is fully aware of the material beauty of the world. The whole world is a manifestation of the Absolute. Love is the only means to see beyond this world and its beauty and to join true beauty. *Eros* is the aesthetic joining of the lover with the beloved. In the transcendental philosophy of Sufism and the school of Mevlevi, if the world is the manifestation of the divine, then humans are also divine. In the ritual dance where consciousness penetrates the essence, the lover joins with the beloved, the dance is a ritual of divine love.

Many Sufis of the Mevlevi Order were great artists, either in music, in calligraphy or in miniature painting. In fact, in the Ottoman court where the Mevlevi Order was highly venerated, artists were often Sufis. Although the center of the Mevlevi Order was in Konya, there were many Sufis in Istanbul and Edirne and they were very famous for their different, out-of-this-world behavior. As with Omar Khayyam, who was an architect and a mathematician besides being one of the great Sufi poets, with his book *Rubaiyat*, for many Sufis wine was a symbolic drink. Sometimes the movement of the Dervishes Dance was seen to be like the workers of the wine who beat their feet on the grapes.

"The Sama means to die to this world and to be revived in the eternal dance of the free spirits around a sun that neither rises nor sets. Fana and baka, annihilation and eternal life in God, can thus be represented in the movement of the mystical dance as understood by Rumi and his followers."[\[13\]](#)

Today, as Schimmel has observed, "the admiration for this ritual is deeply rooted in many Turkish families."[\[14\]](#) A poem by a modern Turkish mystical poet, Asaf Halet Çelebi, truly reflects the feeling aroused by a performance of Samâ inspired by Rumi's verse: "The trees, donning their dancing gowns, supplicate in love."

The image in me
is a different image
how many stars fall
into my interior dance!
I whirl and I whirl
the skies whirl as well
roses blossom out of my face
The trees in the garden, in sunshine
"He created Heaven and earth"
the serpents listen to the song of the reed
in the trees donning their dancing gowns
The meadow's children intoxicated
Heart
they call you
I look smiling, at suns
which have lost their way...
I fly, I fly

the skies fly. . . .[15]

Endnotes

* Illustrations of the Sufi dance follow the endnotes. All photos from Melewi Center, Konya, Turkey.

[1] Mevlevi Tariqa, meaning the Mevlevi sect, in literal translation means the Mevlevi Path. This concept is important because the teaching concentrates on the journey to find the truth. When the disciple attains relative maturity, he becomes the "path" rather than the voyager.

[2] The Seldjukids were a Turkish people who came into Anatolia from Iran, conquering the Byzantines in 1071 and, in a couple of years, moving all the way to the Aegean coast. Konya, presently a Turkish city, became the Seldjukid capital, where Celaladdin Rumi taught in a madrasa (religious college) under the protection of the Seldjukid Sultan.

[3] The "lover" is the symbol of God, or God himself, for the Sufi mystic; but could also be personified by a living person, just as the world in which the mystic lives is a personification of the divine.

[4] Ney is the Islamic flute which represents the divine breath.

[5] Annemarie Schimmel, *Mystical Dimensions of Islam* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1975), p.179.

[6] *Ibid.*, p.178.

[7] "We shall have gained much for the science of aesthetics, once we perceive not merely by logical inference, but with the immediate certainty of vision, that the continuous development of art is bound up with the Apollinian and Dionysian duality... . this coupling ultimately generates an equally Dionysian and Apollinian form of art -- Attic tragedy." Nietzsche, F., *The Birth of Tragedy*, trans. W. Kaufmann (New York: Vintage Books, 1967), p.33.

[8] Described by the late Rene Rebetz in his book on Sufism, *La Odisea de la Luz -Ciencia y Sufismo* (Bogota, Colombia: Ediciones Martinez Roca, 1997), pp. 434-457.

[9] Schimmel, A., *Ibid.*, pp.178-186.

[10] *Ibid.*, pp.178-186.

[11] *Ibid.*, p.183.

[12] *Ibid.*, p.183.

[13] *Ibid.*, p.184.

[14] *Ibid.*, p.185.

[15] Asaf Halet Çelebi, *OM (He)* (Istanbul, 1951), trans. by A. Schimmel.

Jale Erzen

Middle East Technical University

Ankara, Turkey

erzen@vitruvius.arch.metu.edu.tr

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