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Sufi Samā' and The Cosmology of Mandala

Abstract

This paper is compiled in an interdisciplinary comparative manner touching upon the universal language that connects different forms of sacred arts. This 'language' is discussed in the context of two forms of religious arts, namely mandala (visual) and samā' (performing), from two religious traditions (Buddhism and Islam); the subject of 'language' is dealt with both under the "Introductory Remarks" and "Art: The Language of Heart".

Under "Mandala: The Primordial Symbol" we have introduced 'mandala' as a form of sacred geometry of universal significance; in it, all 'contradictions' are transformed into 'complements' that form one single unit of perfect balance. The symbolic significance of this primordial form is then elaborated upon in light of the most sacred congregational ritual of Islam – the Hajj. The discussion of mandalaic cosmology is further extended to the domain of the Sufi samā': Here we felt the need to touch upon the position of music and dance in Islamic tradition, under "Traditional Music" and "Dance and Devotion" before we embarked on the samā'. The samā' is then discussed under three subheadings namely "The True Samā'", "Samā': Nourishment of the Soul" and "Samā': Art of Selfless Expression".

Rumi's Mathnawi has been quoted frequently throughout our discussion in both its original Persian and English translation. This is because Jalāl al-Din Rumi was not only an authority in Sufism but a practicing Sufi; the whirling assembly of dervishes and the performance of samā' in



an orderly format was initiated by him in twelfth century. His poetry is therefore used as the connecting thread that unites all related topics in the paper.

* All the translations of Rumi's poems to English in this paper are my own.

Introductory Remarks

On the very 1st day of my arrival in Istanbul, to attend the International Conference on Rumi, the simple logo of the conference, on the banners and other printed material, caught my eye. It exhibited, in an effortless and, if I may say, minimalistic manner, the spiral movement of a Sufi in *samā'* (Figure 1). With just a simple floating line, that changed thickness as it moved on – like the natural change in the flow of ink/paint from the brush on paper in a Persian *qalamgiri* technique – the designer had successfully communicated his message. A sophisticated idea was successfully expressed in all simplicity. The design reflected, in an artistic manner, the philosophy of *samā'* – a minimalist form of dance with profound metaphysical meaning.

The poster of the conference also was creative, meaningful and visually pleasing (Figure 2). It showed a group of individuals, with no individuality, in a collective selfless dance. The colors used were white and blue – very calm colors – with just minute red dots in the center of each circle, indicating the *samazan's* headgear.

Impressed by the modest yet effective designs, I showed them to some of the colleagues and explained to them the relation between form and content in the said designs.¹ I was especially pleased to see that the designs (of both the logo and the poster) related, both in form and

¹ I was educated in Art and design and worked for a while as a professional graphic designer. I also taught *Art Fundamentals* to university students of Fine Arts for quite a number of years where I dealt with how concepts should be translated into visual forms. Subjects such as the values of hue, line, plane and volume, and their overall interaction in a successful composition were discussed and analyzed in my classes. This may justify my artistic assessment of the designs! I still paint and design though my teaching is now more focused on theoretical subjects.



message, to *mandala* – the idea that I elaborated in length in my presentation at the conference, along with some forty slides, and that which I will be dealing with, in a more academic and less artistic manner, in this paper! I have, however, included a number of images that I felt were absolutely necessary.

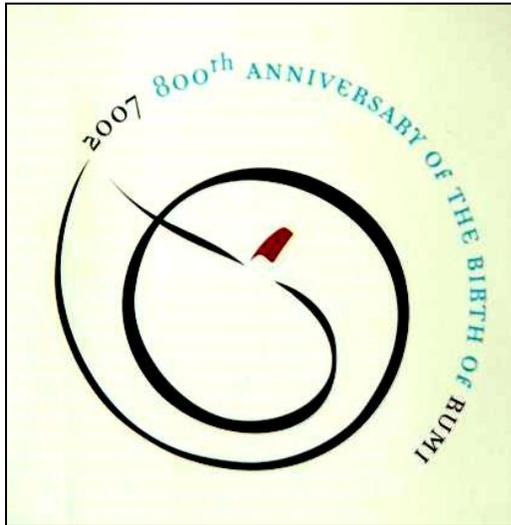


Figure 1

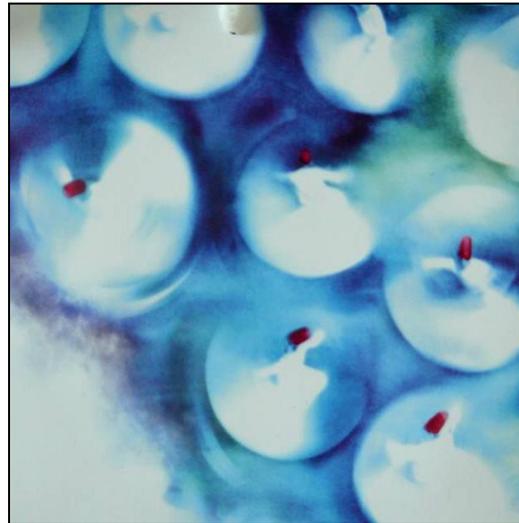


Figure 2

Art: The Language of Heart

In 2006 I presented a paper comparing the sacred arts and mystical literatures of Buddhism and Islam at the holy city of Koyasan in Japan². That paper discussed some aspects of Sufi tradition and referred briefly to the *samā'* and the poetry of Maulānā Jalāl al-Din Rumi. Surprisingly the next academic invitation that I received was about to take me to Konya, another holy site where the mausoleum of this great Muslim mystic and Persian poet is located. This came to me as a sign of confirmation to continue on the same path. So I decided to write this paper as an

² The paper entitled “Esoteric Buddhism and Islamic Mysticism: An Interdisciplinary Overview of the Sacred Arts and Mystical Literature” was presented at the International Conference on Esoteric Buddhist Studies, 5-8 September 2006, Kōyasan University, Kōyasan, Japan



extension and elaboration of what I had presented in Koyasan. It has been my life's passion to search for the invisible thread that connects, relates and, to a certain extent, unites the people of faith – whose belief in the eternal truth is stronger than their attachment to the perishable material reality.

In the arts of most traditional societies one may find a common language beneath all the diverse artistic manifestations – a language that has its roots in faith and devotion to God: Such diverse manifestations are but re-adaptations of one original principle in various forms; the changes in forms do not affect the essence of tradition in any way.³ This unifying language is referred to by the sages and mystics in expressions such as “*the language of heart*”, “*the language of presence*”, “*the tongue of the soul*” etc; It is this language that makes all forms of sacred arts (from poetry to painting, from architecture to performing arts) members of a big family. This language, as Rumi explains it in his Mathnawi, is an esoteric one; it unites the people who share the same heart (i.e. the state of spiritual presence), even if they do not speak the same literal language:

همزبانی خویشی و پیوندی است
مرد با نا محرمان چون بندی است
ای بسا هندو و ترک همزبان
ای بسا دو ترک چون بیگانگان
پس زبان محرمی خود دیگر است
همدلی از همزبانی بهتر است

To share a tongue is a sign of kinship and connection

³ Rene Guenon elaborates on this “language” and extends it to all branches of science: “As far as metaphysical doctrine is concerned only the expression can be modified, in a manner more or less comparable to translation from one language into another; though the forms may be various which it assumes for the sake of expressing itself, in so far as such expression is possible, metaphysic remains one, just as truth is one.” See, *The Crisis of the Modern World*, under chapter IV (Sacred and Profane Sciences), Suhail Academy, Lahore, 1999,



A man among strangers is like a prisoner in chain
Indians and Turks may connect through a shared tongue
While two Turks may be strangers in vain
Therefore the language of hearts is of a different nature
To be one in heart is indeed better than to be one in tongue
(Mathnawi, Book 1, 1205-1207)

The question of whether such an esoteric language – which can manifest anywhere and everywhere through various forms of art – exists, had occupied my mind for quite a while; it received positive confirmations, over and over, in the course of my few journeys along the historical Silk Roads where I studied the sacred arts of the Silk Roads’ cultures. I lived among those who had left the worldly positions and possessions in search of something higher and deeper. I talked with Hindu sadhus, Buddhist monks and some outstanding scholars of the east about serious issues in religious faiths; issues such as ‘*tawḥid*’, Islam’s central doctrine asserting and maintaining the divine unity. Not surprisingly, in our long and sincere discussions about the “nature of the sacred”, both the polytheistic Hindu and the non-theistic Buddhist⁴ agreed that at

⁴ When I use the term non-theistic, and not atheistic, I refer to the absence of a defined entity called ‘God’ in the Buddhist faith. Buddhism is usually regarded as a religion without an absolute God; it is explained by some as a way of life which does not hinge upon the concept of a Creator God who created the universe *ex nihilo* (from nothing). Nevertheless in Mahayana Sutras and Tantras expression is given to an apparent “*Ultimate Ground of all things - the immanent, omniscient and transcendent Reality of the Awakened Mind or the boundless sphere of the "Buddha Nature "* (Buddha-dhatu or Tstthagata-garbha)”. Some Mahayana Sutras envision the Buddha –or rather the Buddha Nature - as the this Ultimate Ground and as the "God above the gods", as a primal, eternal, sustaining essence within all beings and phenomena, while some tantras depict an image of the Buddha on a cosmological scale and in cosmogonic terms as the emanator of all universes. “To the extent that the Buddha is seen in this way as the indestructible Ground of all, even as the progenitor of all persons and phenomena, he can be equated to a mystical notion of immanent and transcendent Godhead.” (See B. Alan Wallace, in his “Is Buddhism Really Non-theistic?”, a paper presented at The National conference of the American Academy of Religion, Boston, Mass., 1999). Here he examines the question in the context of Vajrayana Buddhist theory in terms of light, space and the creation of universe.(The text is available at http://www.alanwallace.org/Is%20Buddhism%20Really%20Nontheistic_.pdf). Wallace concludes that



the core of their faith lies the very essence of Unity or Oneness of the Source. I recall clearly my last discussion with an Indian scholar⁵, when he invited me (along with another scholar) to his house as a farewell gesture towards my leaving India after a long memorable stay of nearly a decade. We often had good and deep discussions of mutual interest: spirituality, philosophy, art and subjects of that sort. This time I asked him about his opinion – both in the capacity of a scholar of Indian religions and as a practicing Hindu - about the Islamic concept of ‘*tawhīd*’. I asked whether he believes that a common ground can be perceived that can accommodate the two contradicting doctrines of polytheism and monotheism. He answered with the following simple words: *My dear friend: there is no contradiction. Hindu gods and your Allah are not comparable! You know very well that the Hindu deities – according to the scripture – were ‘created’ after the creation of the universe; so they are creatures, not creators! They are forces of nature representing a single divine source. I believe in your Allah! Upanishads have elaborated on the existence of this Supreme Being; the One that is Ultimate and Formless. From this Single Source emanated the world of multiplicity – the world of matter and diverse manifestation of forms. Upanishads, as you are well aware, even went so far as proposing paths of self purification through which man may once again unite with the Cosmic Source*⁶. “Again

“While Buddhism is deemed nontheistic, the vedas are regarded as polytheistic, and the Bible is monotheistic, we have seen that the cosmogonies of Vajrayana Buddhism, Vedanta, and Neoplatonic Christianity, have so much in common that they could almost be regarded as varying interpretations of a single theory”.

⁵ Prof. Dr. B. N. Saraswati is an author of many books. A good scholar and a fine human being with whom I had close association during my stay in India in the 1980s and 1990s. During those times he was associated with IGNCA. A devoted Hindu, he moved to Banaras after retirement to spend the rest of his life in solitude, contemplation and meditation.

⁶ This subject is elaborated under the unity between the individual soul or spirit (ātman) and the Universal Spirit (prem-ātman). See René Guenon, *Man and His Becoming according to Vedanta* (translated by Richard C. Nicholson), Oriental Book Reprint Corporation, 1st Indian Edition 1981; also Titus Burckhardt’s *Sacred Art in East and West: Its Principles and Methods* (translated by Lord Northbourne), Perennial Books, UK, 1967.



and again, from Upanishads to the most devotional theistic hymns the Godhead, ultimate reality, is spoken of as unlimited by any form, not to be described by any predicate”⁷.

The kind of intimate energy that was being exchanged among us at that point in time reminded me of Rumi’s couplet quoted above: “*A Hindu and a Turk [in my case a Persian!] may connect through a shared (inner) tongue*”. I could feel then, as I have been feeling long before and long after, that “*the language of shared hearts is of a different nature*” and that the capacity of this language surpasses that of the ‘language of tongue’.

For a long period of history, the Silk Road linked peoples of different race, language and culture, and prepared the grounds for elevation of the languages of tongue to the state of the language of hearts. Some may think of ‘silk’ or ‘spice’ as the main commodity that was exchanged through the Silk Routes, but the truth is that ‘thought’ was the most important subject of exchange. The exchange of thought, and the transformations that the cultures went through as a result of it, manifested in the forms of the arts that were produced. The sacred arts that have reached to us from those remote times speak in a language peculiar to nature of their sacredness – a language beyond the capacity of words:

Kukai, the founder of Esoteric Buddhism in Japan⁸, in a letter to the Emperor on December 806, quoting his Chinese master, Hui-kuo, wrote: “The Esoteric Scriptures are so abstruse that their meaning cannot be conveyed except through art.”

Mandala: The Primordial Symbol

The Sanskrit word mandala means ‘container of essence’⁹. The earliest recorded use of the term ‘mandala’ associates it with the Aryan or Indo-European religion in the Vedic Age of India (2nd

⁷ Ananda K. Coomaraswamy, *The Transformation of Nature in Art*, Munshiram Manmoharlal, Delhi, 1974, p.158

⁸ Kukai (774-835) learned in China and introduced to Japan the Buddhism known as the True Words (Mantrayana in Sanskrit, Shingon in Japanese)



and 1st millennium BC). Mandala is especially associated with the Rig Veda, where the term is used to mean a “chapter”, a collection of verse hymns (mantras) chanted in Vedic ceremonies, “perhaps coming from the sense of round, as in a round of songs”. The universe was believed to originate from these hymns, whose sacred sounds contained the essence being; we can therefore sense the logic behind seeing mandala as world-model.

This visual language was refined and, at the same time, spread to other forms of art associated with the act of worship, namely religious rituals and the architectural plans of temples; this is where the term ‘mandala’ became synonymous with sacred geometry, sacred space, or, in a universal scale, a cosmogram – a diagram representing the inner structure and evolvement of the universe. Mandala has been used as an instrument of meditation.

The perfect symmetry of the geometric structure of mandala symbolizes the ‘cosmic balance’ – the balance between all opposites: spirit and matter, hidden and manifest, inner and outer dimensions. Balance is an essential aspect of sustenance of any system, and its lack is deficiency of character that causes adversity in life. Balance indicates permanence and is always challenged by the forces of impermanence.

Everything in this world, including the balance that may exist in the pattern of our lives, is transient; our well-structured bodies will eventually deteriorate; the climate is in constant change and all that surrounds us continuously experience death and rejuvenation. A special type of mandala, ‘sand-mandala’, represents both the eternal principle and the transient nature of life. ‘Sand-mandalas’, as the name indicates, are made of sand; they are built with great precision by devoted monks in a state of ritual purity. The completed mandala is then swept to demolition in an instance as the concluding part of the ceremony!

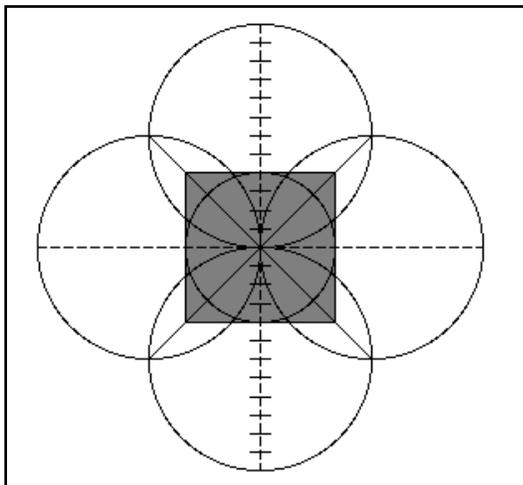
Guhyasamaja mandala is a sand mandala used in Tantric rituals. It is a temporary art form created on the floor. The structural lines are drawn on the floor and the fine grains of colored sand are used to build up the structure. The monks that participate in the ritual must memorize

⁹ The word has two parts ‘manda’ and ‘la’. Manda is the root word and means ‘essence’ while the suffix ‘la’ means ‘carrier’, ‘holder’ or ‘container’. Mandala would therefore mean a container in which essence is kept.



the names, lengths, and positions of the primary lines that define the basic structure of the mandala. They must also be equipped with the skills and manual techniques of drawing and pouring sand. Making a sand-mandala is a collective effort of Tibetan Buddhist monks. It is a long tedious process that demands patience and dedication, and most important of all “detachment”. They must be devoted because they are engaged in an act of devotion; but they must also be detached because the sand of the mandala is swept to demolition in an instance. The sand is then poured into a nearby stream or river. The whole process represents the transient nature of the world we live in; the impermanency of life is displayed dramatically in skillfully built and compositionally balanced form of sacred art.

There are three stages of making a ‘sand mandala’: basic drawing, elaborate drawing and adding the colored sand. (See Figure 3a-b & c)



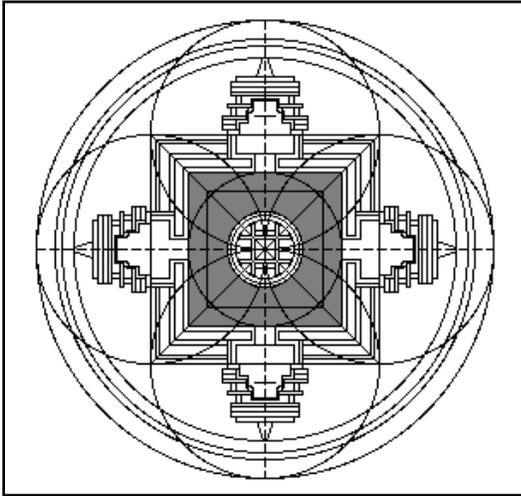


Figure3a, 3b, 3c: The three stages of making a Sand Mandala
In Japan, on the other hand, the whole spectrum of the sacred arts of the Esoteric Buddhism (Shingon) can be viewed in the ‘Two World Mandala’ (Ryokai Mandala): It is composed of two separate, yet complementing, mandalas. In Shingon temples the two large mandalas are typically mounted on wooden screens at right angles to the axis of the image platform. The mandala on the east side, the Kongoukai (Diamond World Mandala, Sanskrit = *Vajra-dhatu*), represents the cosmic or transcendental Buddha, while the mandala on the west side, the



Taizoukai (Womb World Mandala, Sanskrit = *Garbha-dhatu*) represents the world of physical phenomenon. These two mandalas represent different aspects of the universe: the *garbha-dhatu* (“womb world”), in which the movement is from one (singleness) to the many (diversity), and the *vajra-dhatu* (“diamond world”), from diversity into unity. (Figures 4 & 5)



Figure 4 Kongoukai
(Diamond World) Mandala
represents the cosmic or
transcendental Buddha



Figure 5 The
Taizoukai (Womb
World) Mandala
represents the world
of physical
phenomenon

The two mandalas introduce two directions of a single circular path. Although in appearance the two opposite directions must lead travelers to two far away destinations, yet in reality they move toward a single aim, for the path is circular – the starting and ending points are one. The whole journey takes place in the traveler: at one time inward, at other outward. These two mandalas may be translated, in Islamic terminology, as a pair of Divine Attributes (*Al-Asmā' al-Ḥusnā*) namely **الظاهر و الباطن** (the Manifest and the Concealed), or The Exoteric and the Esoteric.

A mandala originates from a central dot – a dimensionless, physically non-existent abstract being – that gives meaning, order and system to all that emanate from it. It is a reference point that all the outside energies are drawn towards it. It is an undividable ‘nothing’ that gives being and meaning to everything; like a small seed from which a grand tree of many parts grow, or tiny drops of sperm from whom an animated life form – with all its sophistication – issues. Mandala removes the subject-object or outer-inner dichotomy and allows for the whole existence to be viewed as one. Mandala implies, in a visual manner, the very notion of ‘*tawḥīd*’.

Hajj: The Living Mandala¹⁰

The *Hajj* pilgrimage is one of the five basic requirements (*arkān* or ‘pillars’) of Islam. It consists of a series of extensively detailed rituals. These include wearing of a special plain white garment that symbolizes purity and modesty. Worn by millions of pilgrims that collectively observe the ritual, it also symbolizes unity. The main part of this ritual, however, is the collective circumambulations of the Ka‘ba. The whole ritual is a living mandala in motion. The Ka‘ba, located at the centre of this mandala, is the central point of focus. Ka‘ba is but a large hollow cubical structure located inside the Masjid al-Ḥarām in Mecca (the mosque was built around the original Ka‘ba the same way the structure of a mandala is an organic extension of the central point).

¹⁰ Part of the content under this heading is taken from my presentation at the International Conference on Esoteric Buddhist Studies, 5-8 September 2006, Kōyasan



This simple hollow cube is regarded as the holiest site in the Muslim world. Ka'ba plays a very remarkable role in Islamic cosmology, not only because of its liturgical status but also its symbolism: The four walls, representing the four cardinal directions, refer to the finite domain within which man's physical existence operates. The inner void, on the other hand, symbolizes the 'spirit' or the 'essence' that is infinite, transcendental, immortal, unpolluted and free from anything that is temporal. Muslims all over the world face Ka'ba five times daily to offer their prayer ritual, and they travel there to circumambulate the Ka'ba as part of the Hajj pilgrimage at least once in a lifetime as a religious obligation. In this holy ritual, body, speech, and mind participate simultaneously. This has been a non-stop ongoing process for over fourteen centuries now – a live comprehensive cosmic mandala that has integrated '*minds*' (purification and one-pointed-ness of mind of the worshipper), '*words*' (recitation of divine verses and devotional hymns) and '*actions*' of the billions of souls throughout the world for over a millennium. This cosmic ritual actually resembles in its appearance to the floating movement of countless planets of a galaxy around the central axis (Figures 6&7).



Figures 6 & 7 The circumambulation of worshippers around the Ka'ba has been a nonstop movement for over fourteen centuries; this ritual is among the most important of all Islamic



rituals. The circular movement of the circumambulators around the central axis of Ka'ba resembles the spiral cosmic movements of planets in their orbit around the central star, and the floating movement of galaxies in the cosmic ocean.

The Sufi Samā': Mandala in Performance

Before we embark on our intellectual discourse on the subject of Sufism and Samā', it is necessary to make one thing clear, and that is: the mechanism of man's intellectual faculty is designed to deal only with certain aspects of life and existence, and that when it comes to issues that involve inner experiences such as faith, spirituality and love, then both the faculty and the language it adopts, prove to be ineffective. Rumi, in his Mathnawi expresses his views with respect to the weakness of the reasoning faculty to understand love; he compares the disability of man's intellectual power in an encounter with love to a "struggling donkey stuck in mire"; and further emphasizes that "the notions of 'lover' and 'love' may only be described by love (itself)", in the same way that "the illuminating sun is by itself the reason for its presence":

عقل در شرحش چو خر در گل بخت
شرح عشق و عاشقی هم عشق گفت
آفتاب آمد دلیل آفتاب
گر دلیلت باید از وی رو متاب
(Mathnawi 1, 115- 116)

In the sources of Islamic mysticism ('Irfān or Sufism) constant discussions and great emphasis are made upon the 'inner' and the 'outer' realities that represent the 'hidden' and the 'manifest' layers of existence. Man stands on the confluence of the two magnetic fields. The inner guiding light, speaks to man of a Primordial Timeless Truth in the "language of Presence" (لسان الحال)



while the other domain puts forward the manifest reality that is time-bond and is expressed in the “*language of tongue*” (لسان القول).

‘The language of presence’ or the ‘language of heart’ belongs to the inner or esoteric realm; it is to be spiritually experienced and cannot be expressed in words, in the same way that the experience of ‘love’ that is internal one cannot be caught or expressed in its thoroughness through literal expressions:

هر چه گویم عشق را شرح و بیان

چون به عشق آیم خجل باشم از آن

گر چه تفسیر زبان روشنگر است

لیک عشق بی زبان روشنتر است

*Though I struggle hard to explain the nature of love
When I encounter love (itself), I'm ashamed of my strive
The commentary of tongue is indeed appealing
Yet a tongueless love is far more revealing
(Mathnawi 1, 112-113)*

Traditional Music

No form of art can penetrate in the audience as deep as music, and for this it is said that the target of all forms of arts is to get as close as possible to music. The movements towards abstraction in the history of plastic arts were, in one way or another, efforts to free art from the boundaries of



concrete forms in order to express pure emotion and thought in a formless manner, and this is what music can do. It can possess the soul, intoxicate the mind, move the body and shift the musician and the audience alike to a state of trance.

Traditional music has been, according to the recorded history and the passages in religious scriptures, a medium through which the religious man has celebrated his achievements, lamented in despair and expressed his desire to transcend the temporal limitations of body. In Greek, Egyptian, Buddhist and Hindu art we find gods and goddesses represented in different poses referring to symbolic movements in dance, behind each of which lies a certain meaning and philosophy. In the Hebrew scripture we find David dancing before the Lord overjoyed that the Ark of the Covenant was being brought into the city (*The Second Book of Samuel*, 6:14-16); also the book of Exodus refers to the celebration and thanksgiving of the Israelites in the form of playing musical instruments and dancing on the occasion of crossing safely the Red Sea while the Egypt army have been overwhelmed with the waters: “*the prophetess Miriam, Aaron’s sister, took a tambourine in her hand; and the women went out after her with tambourines and with dancing*”(Ex. 15:20).

Though the issue of music has been a controversial one, especially from the perspective of the Islamic Law (*shari’ah*), yet we find many Muslim philosophers, scientists and theologians throughout the history who were well versed in music. Abu Naṣr al-Fārābī (259-339 AH/870-950 AD) compiled a monumental treatise entitled "الكبرى فى الموسيقى" (*The Grand Book on Music*) in which he gives an elaborate account of the Theory of Music.¹¹ In his “*Cure Through Music*” (العلاج فى الموسيقى) Al- Fārābī deals with therapeutic effects of music both on

¹¹ Mehdi Barkeshli has elaborated on the matter in *Farabi’s Scientific Discourses about Music*, published in 1978 by Pezhoheshkadeh Musiqi Shenasi, Tehran. There he explains Al-Fārābī scientific ideas of music and his methodology; he also discusses the structure of the intervals of the Khorasani Tanbour based on logarithmical mathematics. (Tanbur /Tanbour is a lute-like musical instrument that originates from Khorasan, Iran).



the body and the soul. Al-Kindī, Ibn Sīnā, Ṣafī al-dīn Al-Urmawī¹², Abu al-Faraj al-Iṣfahānī¹³ and many others have written extensively on music. This in itself refers to the special status of music in the Islamic cultures. And if there are controversies about its permissibility, it is most probably due to music's incredible effectiveness on human soul.

Great authorities have addressed the issue of permissibility of music¹⁴, yet there is no clear and concrete answer that would satisfy everyone, for the question is not merely a theological, judicial or philosophical one; it engages the esoteric and the exoteric senses alike and involves both the spirit and the matter. Al-Ghazālī, in his writings, gives a long account of music, approaching and analyzing it from different angles; his argument eventually leads to the permissibility of music, but under certain conditions! Many such conditions are dependent on the state of mind and type

¹² Ṣafī al-Dīn Abd al-Mu'min al-Urmawī in his important treatise, *Al-Risālah al-Sharafiyyah Fī al-Nisab al-Ta'līfiyyah* (The Sharafian Treatise on Musical Proportions), has presented a thorough analysis of the old Greek resources along with that of the works by the Muslim scholars like al-Kindī, al-Fārābī and Ibn Sīnā. His other treatise, *Kitāb al-Adwār* (The Book of Musical Modes) too deals with the theory of music. Al-Urmawī also studied the practical music of his time and is known to have played lute (ūd) well.

¹³ Al-Iṣfahānī compiled a treatise called *Kitāb al-Aghānī* (Book of Songs). This great work of many volumes comprises a collection of poems and songs with the stories of the composers and singers. It covers the oldest Arabic literature down to the 9th century. Such poems were once sung along with music composed to accompany it. Though the musical signs are no longer available but the accompanying biographical annotations on the authors and composers gives the book a historical importance. See S. G. Sawa, "The Status and Roles of the Secular Musicians in Kitāb al-Aghānī (Book of Songs) of Abu al-Faraj al-Iṣfahānī", *Asian Music* 17 (1): 68-82

¹⁴ Al-Ghazali argues that the three factors of "time", "place" and "association" can lead to the permissibility or non-permissibility of music. By 'time' he means both the circumstance and the amount of time spent for performing or listening to music: the time should not be excessive so that it interferes with higher goals of life. The place and occasion are also important as they should not be identified with banned activities according to Islamic *shari'ah*; performing in wine houses is therefore not allowed. The association, that is, the type of people present during the performance or the kind of music that is associated with certain unaccepted acts too affects the permissibility; for instance sensuous music that is performed in association with consumption of drugs, alcohol, prostitution and other prohibited acts is banned.



of feelings provoked in an individual in the course of performing or listening to music, therefore immeasurable by outside means.

Music, or any form of art for that matter, must be understood as a carrier of great capacity. Art has been used to transfer both the sacred and the temporal, moral as well as immoral contents throughout the history. “Rhythm produces an ecstasy which is inexplicable, and incomparable with any other source of intoxication. This is why the dance has been the most fascinating pastime of all people, both civilized and savage, and has delighted alike saint and sinner”¹⁵. But if one studies the status of art among the ancient people, and its application in the traditional societies, one would realize that art was closely associated with magic; it was “originally” regarded as a vehicle with which one could relate and connect to the transcendental domain.

The pre-Islamic Arabs considered the Qur’anic verses as ‘magical poetry’ referring to the magical effect of the words due to the depth of their meaning and the harmony of sound – the music that it produced while recitation. The decline of art coincides with its separation from its religious roots, and this is where art began to lose its original identity. “Until the sixteenth century, the boundaries demarcating religion, art, spirituality and nature were nebulous. A work of art that was not founded in the spiritual and the natural was inconceivable. The catastrophe that is Modernism has meant man’s estrangement from his basic origin, nature, and has resulted in all his values, moral, religious, ethical as well as artistic, being radically changed”¹⁶. “The history of Western art since the Renaissance is chequered and distorted . . . , and finally we begin to think that there can be no great art or great periods of art without an intimate link between art and religion.”¹⁷

¹⁵ Hazrat Inayat Khan, *The Mysticism of Sound, Music and Word* , First Indian Edition, Motilal Banarasisidass 1988, pp. 44-45

¹⁶ See Amir H. Zekrgoo, “Man, Nature and Art: An Irano-Islamic Perspective” in *Prakriti: An Integral Vision* (General Editor: Kapila Vatsyayan), co-published by IGNC and D. K. Printworld (P), Delhi 1993



An ancient legend tells how the angles sang and played the *dotār*¹⁸ (a type of middle-eastern guitar with two strings) at the command of God to induce the unwilling soul to enter the body of Adam. ‘The soul, intoxicated by the song of angels, entered a body which is regarded as a prison’¹⁹. An Ayatollah (a high Islamic cleric) once told me that ‘right music’ is the closest sound to the voice of revelation! Music, according to Rumi, has its origins in the Paradise; with its magical effect, it can transform ugliness of the surroundings and make life pleasant and bearable.

مومنان گویند کآثار بهشت
نغز گردانید هر آواز زشت
ما همه اجزای آدم بوده ایم
در بهشت آن لحن ها بشنوده ایم

*The believers say: the drifts of Paradise
Beautifies sounds of unpleasant guise
We have once been components of Adam
Those melodies we'd heard in the Heavenly Realm
(Mathnawi IV, 735 – 736)*

¹⁷ Herbert Read, *The Meaning of Art*, Faber and Faber, London – Boston, 1984. p. 82

¹⁸ The Persian term *dotār* literally means “two strings”; it is the name of a simple lute-like instrument with two strings used in Iranian and Indian folk music.

¹⁹ Titus Burckhardt narrates the story as explained by a singer in Morocco in the introduction of *The Sacred Art in East and West* (translated by Lord Northbourne), UK, 1968. Hazrat Inayat Khan too quotes the same legend in *The Mysticism of Music, Sound and Word*, India 1988



For Rumi music is not merely a pleasant composition of meaningless sounds; it is the eternal language that connects man to his heavenly abode; it is the first expression of the emotions, passions and of thoughts²⁰.

Music, in religious traditions, are never produced for ‘amusement’ or as ‘decoration’, nor it was listened to for mere pleasure at the time of leisure; it is supposed to help both the musician and the audience to attain a different level of realization. Dance too, like all other forms of art, was originally an expression that exhibited man’s devotion to God. “When beauty of movement is taken as the presentment of the divine ideal, then the dance becomes sacred”²¹.

Dance & Devotion

Dance is music in motion, a graceful expression of thought and feeling through the movement of body. Islam’s position towards dancing is fully expounded in the controversial literature about the sacred dance of the mystic orders. Al- Fārābī in a brief passage of his “*The Grand Book on Music*”, classifies dance with drumming and hand clapping but he does not elaborate more. Secular dance is ignored in this literature as if its illegitimacy is taken for granted. Abu al-Ḥasan al- Mas‘ūdī (896 – 956) on the other hand, in his “*The Meadows of Gold and Mines of Gems*”²², provides a detailed account of a public session at which an expert speaks in length to the Caliph Al-Mu‘tamid (870-92) in response to his question about the origin of music and the principles of

²⁰ On the nature of traditional music of the East see ‘The Ancient Music’ (Ch V) in Hazrat Inayat Khan’s *The Mysticism of Sound, Music and Word*

²¹ St. Ambrose (c. AD 340–97), bishop of Milan, cautioned anyone who would criticize King David's or anyone’s dancing: “These actions of the body, though unseemly when viewed in themselves, become reverential under the aspect of holy religion, so that those who censure them drag their own soul into the net of censure.”

²² مروج الذهب و معادن الجواهر



dance. In this session the dance specialist begins with an explanation of the relation between dance and rhythm, and continues with the attributes essential for a proficient dancer²³. Al-Ghazālī's views on dance performance is in line with the conditions he sets for music in order for it to be considered "permissible". In his *Book of Knowledge*²⁴, Al-Ghazālī emphasizes not only to the factors of "time and place" for the performers, but he also prevents them to perform in front of "onlookers whose motives are not worthy". The participants, according to him, "must sit silently and not look at each other. They must seek what may appear from their own hearts". On the issue of 'dance', his position is much stricter: A disciple had asked permission to take part in the 'dance' of the Sufis – the Samā'; the Sheikh said: "Fast completely for three days. Then have luscious dishes cooked. If you then prefer to 'dance', you may take part in it."²⁵

True Samā'

Fakes are taking over our lives. Our world is undergoing a fundamental transformation with a pace that is constantly increasing; this is a transformation from the 'true reality' to, what is now known as, 'virtual reality'- a fake form of reality that is replacing original ones and, as a result, creating lifestyles that are based on false needs and false accomplishments. False religions are mushrooming and contaminating the sacred domain of spirituality. We are now facing new forms of terrorism: intellectual terrorism and virtual terrorism, behind whom are political agendas that seek to control man and nature in a globalize manner. Man relies on his technological achievements and advancements in some branches of exact sciences, which he regards as 'knowledge in its totality'; he is now more arrogant than ever and regards himself 'the master of the universe'. Instead of being synchronized with the universal rhythm he rapes and disrupts

²³ Such attributes include, among others, a natural inclination, an innate sense of rhythm, appropriate physical properties ... flexibility of flanks and finger" and so on. This dance is described by Al-Isfahānī (d. 950) in his *كتاب الاغانى*. On the type of dance: individual, collective, folk dance etc. and a more detailed account of historical references see Amnon Shiloah, *Music in the World of Islam*, Scolar Press, UK, 1995, pp 137 – 153

²⁴ *The Book of Knowledge* (*كتاب العلم*) is a chapter of his monumental work , *احياء علوم* (*الدين*), edited and translated by Nabih Amin Faris Lahore, 1962

²⁵ Ibid



nature and his environment. He declares himself ‘god’ and demands that his rules be treated as ‘sacred’²⁶.

In the realm of art, too, fakes are abundant. By fakes I do not mean reproductions made from original works; in fact producing such copies may benefit both the copier and the audience for it may spread the message inherent in the original, only in a diluted manner. It can also help to increase the technical and mental capacity of a student of art and acquaint him with the essence of originality. But now we face works that have little substance but are projected as ‘originals’, only because they are ‘different’ or ‘new’. This is in fact one of the fundamental differences between the ‘traditional’ and the ‘modernist’ perspectives²⁷. Arts that were once expressions of the divine reality have been reduced to expressions of man’s animal instinct. Dancing was originally a selfless form of expression that helped man liberate himself from the boundaries of the physical senses and awaken the esoteric senses in him. In the Sufis tradition, the sacred dance of spiritual ecstasy is called *samā’*. Rumi speaks of ‘true *samā’*’ in his Mathnawi when he points out the difficulties in becoming worthy of performing a sincere *samā’*:

²⁶ Today, in the ‘virtual mindset’ created by ‘the modern West’, the word ‘Democracy’ carries more ‘sacred weight’ than ‘the words of Revelation’. Blasphemy is growing under the umbrella of ‘freedom of expression’ while any expression that may question any aspect of ‘Western interpretation of democracy’ is seen as a blasphemous act that is punishable by meanest means.

²⁷ Tradition reveres continuity; Modernization demands new beginnings. Traditions are not hostile to change, provided that the “new” can be integrated with the old through the reform or renewal of the tradition. The change should therefore take place in a slow pace so that the flow of tradition is not disrupted; drastic changes can break the relation between the accident and the essence and can cause identity crisis and loss of direction – something that the tradition cannot tolerate. A sense of tradition is to allow the old to be appreciated as ‘ever new’ and the new as clarifying and fulfilling the old. See *The Encyclopedia of Religion* (ed. Mircea Eliade) vol. 15, under ‘Tradition’. Also Rama Coomaraswamy elaborates on “The Fundamental Nature of the Conflicts Between Modern and Traditional Man” in: *In Quest for The Sacred* (ed. S. H. Nasr and K. O’Brien), Suhail Academy Lahore, 2001



بر سماع راست هر کس چیر نیست
طعمه هر مرغی انجیر نیست
خاصه مرغی - مرده ی پوسیده ای
پر خیالی - اعمی - بی دیده ای

*Not every one is capable of a true Samā'
Not every bird deserves fig as its morsel
Especially a bird that is dead and putrid:
A blind, visionless fellow filled with vain hopes*

(Mathnawi 1, 2762-2763)

In a "true samā'" the depth of contemplation transforms the vision and the heart of the seeker to an extent that he becomes entirely absorbed in the whole and single immanence of nature. In this dance the dervishes take rhythmic turns which cause the skirt of their garments to form a circle. The movement of hands and neck too form smaller circles. The whole movement creates a spiral thrust (inward as well as outward) that resemble the *ṭwāf*, the liturgical circumambulation around the Ka'ba, or, a mandala.

Rumi perceives *samā'* as an act of harmonization with the cosmic dance of the stars, planets:

پس حکیمان گفته اند این لحن ها
از دوار چرخ بگرفتیم ما
بانگ گردش های چرخ است اینکه خلق
می سرایندش به طنبور و به حلق

*The sages have said: the melodies we hear
From the rotation of the celestial sphere
It's the music of that whirling sphere
That people sing and lutes play here*
(Mathnawi IV, 733-734)



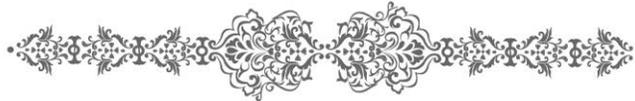
Samā': Nourishment of the Soul

Man needs nourishment for his body, mind and soul; in order to keep them healthy and strong he needs to exercise. We engage in physical exercises to keep our body in shape. Likewise intellectual activities strengthen the mind. The food for the soul, however, is love and devotion. An ideal human being is one that can experience the Absolute in all its manifestations: "Precisely as love is reality experienced by the lover, and truth is reality experienced by the philosopher, so beauty is reality experienced by the artist: and these are three phases of the Absolute"²⁸.

Beauty, love and truth unite and find embodiment in the artistic forms of devotional act, i.e. rituals, gestures and postures. Certain liturgical acts are prescribed by the scripture while others develop in time as ways of tuning oneself with the rhythm of the Cosmos. The devotional dance of *samā'*, like the movement of the heavenly bodies, has a spiral momentum. The individuals take part in this collective dance of whirling spins in order to become liberated from the 'individuality' that makes them limited and isolated. They, under the supervision of a *murshid* or *pīr* move toward absorption in the tempo of the cosmic symphony and become united with it, in the same way that the sound of individual instruments are stripped of their individuality in the performance of a huge orchestra. While each instrument contributes to the perfection of 'the whole' it receives energy and direction from it; in fact each minute melody that is created by an individual instrument becomes meaningful only if it is heard in the context, and as part, of 'the whole'. This rhythmic practice awakens in man that part of his emotional nature which is generally asleep; it nourishes it. Rumi refers to *samā'* as the nourishment of lovers:

پس غذای عاشقان آمد سماع
که درو باشد خیال اجتماع

²⁸ Ananda K. Coomaraswamy, *The Dance of Shiva*, 2nd edition, New Delhi, Munshiram Manmoharlal, p. 59



قوتی گیرد خیالات ضمیر
بلکه صورت گردد از بانگ و صغیر

Samā' is the nourishment for the lovers (of God);

In it lies the fantasy of their union

The inner images gain strength and grow

Marked in music and songs they go

(Mathnawi IV, 742-743)

And in the process of joining the cosmic procession they get a glimpse of 'perfection', for perfection cannot be experienced unless all particles that form a unit move in a selfless harmony with the movement of the whole and become the whole:

در هوای عشق حق رقصان شوند
همچو قرص بدر بی نقصان شوند
جسمشان رقصان و جان ها خود میپرس
وانکه گرد جان – از آنها خود میپرس

In the air of Divine Love they begin to dance

Like the full moon's orb flawless in trance

Their bodies in dance, their souls – beyond words;

And all that surrounds them, they too, beyond words

(Mathnawi I, 1347-1348)

Samā': Art of Selfless Expression

Art is usually described as a form of 'self expression'. This definition is very new; it reflects the



modern perspective of art according to which man's 'individuality' constitutes his 'identity'. The modern man's exaggerated regard for his 'self' is translated in a disregard for the Ultimate Self.

In his quest for Truth, man must free himself from all illusions, including the illusion of his 'self'. The 'self', according to Qur'anic definition, manifests in three levels:

- النفس لاماره بالسوء : "The self enjoining-unto-evil" (12:53)
- النفس اللوامة : "The reproaching self (the accusing voice of man's own conscience)²⁹ " (75:2)
- النفس مطمئنه : "The self at-peace" (89:27)

A person with a "self at-peace" is the one in a state of selflessness; in this state of being, the individual self dissolves his individuality in the divine Self, and this is when the inner peace prevails. Man's experience of the state of selflessness may be compared to a clear mirror with no individual identity in itself. 'No self' means 'no ego' and 'no pride'! Only such a selfless mirror could reflect the Truth without distortion.

The individualism is a "profane point of view" that denies any principle superior than the individuality itself. The problem with this point of view is that it provides plural principles (countless selves) of identical weight values side by side. This will eventually lead (and to a certain extent, has already led) to "an absence of principle"³⁰. The use of a single word ('self' and 'Self') in two different contexts and in reference to two fundamentally different entities (the

²⁹ I have taken the translation of the verse (that is given within the brackets) from Mohammad Asad's *The Message of the Qur'ān*, Dar Al-Andalus, Gibraltar, 1980

³⁰On the issue of "Individualism" see Rene Guenon, *The Crisis of the Modern World* (A New Translation from the French by Marco Pallis and Richard Nicholson), Suhail Academy, Lahore, 1981



first one transient, the second transcendent) is something ontological and not a mere accident; God has been referred to in many languages and in certain philosophical contexts as the 'Ultimate Self'. According to the Islamic teachings, the path to the state of God-realization passes through the realization of one's self³¹.

This kind of self-realization is fundamentally an esoteric experience in which one unites the particle (self) with the transcendent Self. The same notion is expressed in Vedantic scriptures: *Ātmā* (the ultimate self) is "essentially beyond all distinction and all particularization; and that is why, in Sanskrit, the same word *ātman*, in case other than normative, replaces the pronoun 'itself'"³². Further more the relation between the ultimate 'Self' and the individual 'self' must not be regarded as correlation, for the individual self is essentially invalid in respect to the Ultimate one, which " must always be considered under the aspect of eternity and immutability which are the necessary attributes of pure Being"³³.

The individual self is also referred to as the "ego". By realizing the transient nature of the individual self (ego), the seer will realize that the rays of the true Self will not shine unless the distracting sparkles of the ego are extinguished. In other words "selflessness" would lead to "Self-realization".

جهد کن در بی خودی "خود" را بیاب

زودتر - والله اعلم بالصواب

Strive for selflessness and find your true Self

³¹ A *hadith* narrated from the Prophet reads : من عرف نفسه فقد عرف ربه

³² René Guenon, *Man and His Becoming According to Vedanta* (translated by Richard C. Nicholson), Oriental Book Reprint Corporation, 1st Indian Edition 1981, p. 31

³³ Ibid, p. 29



Proceed: for God only knows of the right course

(Mathnawi 4, 3218)

خویش را صافی کن از اوصاف خود

تا ببینی ذات پاک صاف خود

Purify yourself from the impure attributes of the self

For only then you may see the clear essence of the pure "Self"

(Mathnawi 1, 3457)

Rumi refers to the 'self', in his Mathnawi, using Persian terms 'خود', 'خویش', 'من' and the Arabic 'نفس'. In the above couplets the 'خود' and 'خویش' are used freely in reference to both the 'divine self' and the 'ego'.

نفس خود را کش – جهان را زنده کن

خواجه را کشته ست – او را بنده کن

Kill your ego and resurrect the World of spirit

It (ego) has killed his master, make a slave of it

(Mathnawi III, 2504)

Here Rumi declares that only through the enslavement of the temporal self (ego) the Ultimate Self, which he calls "the World", may be resurrected within a person; for the "ego" is "evil" and the good self is divine:

نفس و شیطان هر دو یک تن بوده اند

در دو صورت خویش را بنموده اند

چون فرشته و عقل که ایشان یک بدند

بهر حکمتهاش یک صورت شدند



*The Ego and the Satan were always a single entity
Yet manifested themselves in a dual identity
Like the angle and the intellect that were essentially one
But received two forms to show the insights of Divine*

(Mathnawi III, 4053-4054)

The ego is the sum of many spiritual blockages; it is that part of our self that is in constant fight with the internal peace, hence preventing us from becoming one with God. Increasing devotion to God and spiritual progress enslaves the Ego, resurrects the Divine Self in us and lead us to an increasing enlightenment. In the process of dissolvment of ego in the fire of Divine Love, “spiritual ignorance is replaced by wisdom and God-consciousness”.

In a *true samāʿ* performance, the Sufi can reach a state of total “presence” – a God-conscious presence in which the ego is dissolved. *Samāʿ* is not a show where the performer is to please the crowd and raise their admiration for his perfect performance. In a secular dance, or any kind of performing art for that matter, the performer’s pleasure depends to a great extent, on the degree he can please his audience; the more he is admired the greater his satisfaction and the higher his achievement; he builds up name and fame – things that boosts his fleshly self. In *samāʿ*, on the other hand, the performer must be selfless, nameless and fameless. This spirit can be sensed even in the comercial *samāʿ* performances in the modern Turkey: there the audience stay silent all through; the performers move in the stage quiete and calm, and leave the stage in the same manner with no clapping, no expression of immotion; even the name of the performers are not announced³⁴. Rumi’s command to the *samāʿ* performer (*samazan*) is to crush his ego; he compare the dance stage to a battle-ground where the blood of the true fighters is spilled:

³⁴ This statement is based on my own observations at the few *Samāʿ* performances that I attended in Istanbul and Koniya in 2007



رقص آنجا کن که خود را بشکنی
پنبه را از ریش شهوت بر کنی
رقص و جولان بر سر میدان کنند
رقص اندر خون خود مردان کنند
چون رهند از دست خود دستی زنند
چون جهند از نقص خود رقصی کنند

Dance in a way (place) that would crush your 'self'

Remove the cotton from the blaze of lust

The dancing ground is indeed a battlefield

Where true men dance in their own blood

They clap, when freed from the grip of 'self';

They dance, when released from their own flaw

(Mathnawi III, 95-97)

Conclusion

The sacred traditions share a common belief that is: Truth is one, the Primordial Source is one, and the Ultimate Destination is also one; and the above three realities too are but a Single One.³⁵ This metaphysical “singleness” or “oneness” of the essence has no fundamental relevance to the “diversity” that also includes ‘singles’, for the ‘being’ of everything that ‘exists’ in the plane of ‘manifestation’ is but an “illusional being”, “a shadowy presence”, or, in Hindu terminology,

³⁵ This unity of The Source (*tawhīd*) is a pillar of the Islamic faith. The cyclic movement that brings back to The Source all that has emanated from It is also a Qur’anic concept : “verily, to God we belong and to Him is our return” (2:156)



“*maya*”.³⁶ This is because the ‘being’ of the created world is dependent and transient; it constantly relies, in its very existence, on an eternal Being – in the same way that shadows depend on the physical body, or images of a dream depend on the dreamer and the dream.

Sacred arts, to the people of faith, are reminders of the transcendent realm and, in this way, they get engaged in the act of worship. They help the worshipper to let go of his ego and be absorbed, instead, in the true self that is eternal. Through self discipline, prayers, meditations and performance of religious rituals, the worshiper participates in the cosmic scenario and meets face to face with his ‘real self’. There he experiences a being with no boundaries, eternal and immortal. The Hajj ritual, the Sufi *samā’* and the cosmic forms of mandala (and many other practices prescribed by the scriptures, or developed in accordance with the religious spirit and law), are means to help man experience the divine presence. The true experience takes place only when the barriers that divide “form and content”, “inner and outer”, “spirit and body” are removed, and the whole existence is seen as an integrate unit. Mandala is that sacred geometry that displays the perfect assimilation of the individual components in the whole. In other words mandala is the ultimate symbol, the very universal language of the sacred arts.

In *samā’*, not only each individual performer becomes a mandala but the congregation too forms a larger mandala. We have already shown the resemblance between the movement of the stars and galaxies in the universe with the hajj circumambulation and that of the devotional whirl of Sufis in *samā’*. It is further to be added that the same cosmic structure can be observed in smaller scales in nature in composition of fractals³⁷.

³⁶ The ultimate illusion, which is the illusion of being (*maya*), is central to Hindu cosmology and philosophy of life. This rather complicated idea is explained through some attractive mythical stories narrated in Indian mythology. Many such narrations involve the life of a sage by the name of Narada who seeks to understand the essence of *maya* by the help of Vishnu, the head god. See Heinrich Zimmer, *Myths and Symbols in Indian Art and Civilization*, edited by Joseph Campbell, Chapter II, Motilal Banarsidas, Delhi, 1990



True samā' is a journey that involves both the body and the soul. It requires patience, devotion and detachment from all that boosts the ego. The seeker of the truth must keep his intentions pure throughout the journey, for, according to a famous hadith narrated from the Prophet: "The value of action is determined by the nature of the intention"³⁸. The *samazān* (performer of samā'), by reaching the state of spiritual, mental and physical perfection in his performance, turns into a living mandala that collects all the energies around him and may be used as an instrument of meditation by the members of the audience.

³⁷ Fractal is a complex geometric structure with each of its components being a reduced-size copy of the whole. Fractals are found in many forms both in the nature and the arts. Many organic structures (such as trees and furns) are fractal in nature. See B. B. Mandelbrot, *The Fractal Geometry of Nature*. W. H. Freeman and Co., 1982.

Ron Eglash displays the use of fractal designs in African *Fractals: Modern Computing and Indigenous Design*, New Burnswick, Rutgers University Press, 1999

³⁸ انما الاعمال بالنيات

