

ISLAMIC SPIRITUALITY AND MUSIC

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Abstract : Music in Islam has been a subject of deep theological debate, oscillating between prohibition and acceptance. While orthodox Islamic jurisprudence often denounces music as unlawful (haram), liberal scholars and mystics, particularly Sufis, have embraced it as a means of spiritual elevation. Though the Qur'an does not explicitly mention music, its recitation and the call to prayer (adhan) reflect musical elements appreciated by the faithful. Historical instances, such as the use of music in jihad or celebrations like weddings and pilgrimages, show its pragmatic integration into Islamic life. Sufi mystics such as Al-Hujwiri, Al-Sibli, and Jalal ad-Din Rumi viewed music not merely as entertainment, but as a divine instrument for spiritual transformation, leading to ecstatic states and divine union. Sufi orders like the Chishti and Suhrawardi institutionalized musical practices through **Sama** and **Zikr** gatherings, emphasizing personal spiritual experiences over rigid orthodoxy. This paper explores the theological discourse on music in Islam, its historical applications, and its unique spiritual role within Sufi traditions, portraying music as both a contested and sacred element in the Islamic spiritual landscape.

Keywords : Islamic music, Sufism, Sama, Zikr, Qur'an and music, Al-Qaradawi, Al-Hujwiri, Ghina, Whirling Dervishes, spiritual ecstasy, Islamic mysticism, Chishti Order, Suhrawardi Order, Pir-Murid tradition, Islamic theology and art, Rumi.

1.0 Introduction

Music has been a subject of controversy among Muslim jurists. The orthodox school maintains that it has been prohibited, whereas liberal thinkers claim that it has been permitted. Islam relies basically on the teachings of the *Qur'an*, and there is no mention of music in the *Qur'an*.

The *call to prayer (al-adhan)* is almost always sung, as is the noble *Qur'an*, whose chanting is the most nourishing of all music for the soul of the faithful (*mu'minun*), although this chanting has never been technically called music[ⁱ].

Muslim armies performing the *holy war (al-jihad)* were accompanied from the earliest times by a type of music which intensified the qualities of bravery and courage within the hearts of the soldiers. This music also has a directly religious character, although here the esoteric rather than the exoteric dimensions of religion are involved.[ⁱⁱ]

The contemporary Egyptian theologian Al-Qaradawi, in his book *The Lawful and the Prohibited in Islam*, composed at the request of the *General Institute of Islamic Culture of Al-Azhar University*, under the section entitled *Singing and Music*, wrote:

"Among the entertainments which may comfort the soul, please the heart, and refresh the ear is singing. Islam permits singing under the condition that it not be in any way obscene or harmful, and in its being accompanied by music which is not exciting[ⁱⁱⁱ]."

Music was known by the generic term *ghina*, which primarily meant "song"; hence *mughanni* or *mughann* stood generally for "musician," although in its specific sense it implied "singer." Music was also called *tarab*, hence *nutrib* meant "musician." From the point of view of stricter Muslims, music was considered *lahw* (i.e., 'entertainment') and musical instruments were dubbed *malahi*: Throughout the *Kitab al-Aghani*, we find verses that were set to music, superscribed with the term *saut*^{iv} (voice/melody). The first musician to make a name under Islam was Tuwais ("The Little Peacock"). Even as a child, he was attracted by the melodies sung by the Persian slaves employed at Al-Medina, and he imitated their style.

Ibn Khaldun, one of the most prominent Muslim historians, agreed with the idea that musical complexity is related to the material progress of society, while completely disagreeing with the moral condemnation of social progress^v.

Music became a necessity during the pilgrimage. It was allowed when joy was allowed, such as during private festivals like betrothals, weddings, births, and other occasions. Yet, there was something even the jurists had not accounted for — the **spiritual effect** of music. It was this that had given soothsayers and magicians of old their

wonderful power over people. Strangely, the legists did not apprehend this. The mysterious power of music was something the Arabs could observe in everyday life.

Al-Hujwiri, the author of *Kashf al-Mahjub*, divided music into two classes: those who hear the spiritual meaning, and those who hear the material song or sound^{vi}. He says:

"Listening is a divine influence which stirs the heart to see Allah; those who listen to it spiritually attain to Allah, and those who listen to it sensually fall into heresy."

Another Sufi, Al-Sibli, said that:

"Listening to music is outwardly a temptation and inwardly an admonition; it causes one to perceive the existence of truth beyond the veil."

Seyyed Hossein Nasr writes that the spiritual states evoked by Persian Sufi music are closely related to the inner spiritual states of the Sufis. Through the influence of the *Qur'an*, Persian music represents a spiritual art of high order — a powerful aid in spiritual attainment.

The Persian as well as Turkish dervishes belonged to the Sufi order. These mystics were absorbed in ecstatic visions of the all-loving, all-blissful Allah. The religious and philosophical doctrines of these dervishes were known as *Sufi Mysticism*, and their teachings were passed down through spiritual lineages^{vii}.

The Sufi saints developed their own devotional songs and poetry. Sufism, through popular *Sama* (religious music) and 'zikr' gatherings which were common amongst most of the Sufis.^{viii} In particular, the reciting or recollection of God's name and the listening to spiritual music were common. This was often practiced collectively in special gatherings led by a spiritual master. From early Sufi treatises, it is implied that singers with special spiritual competence served in these mystical assemblies.

Sufi leaders and their spiritual descendants played an important role in establishing centers of mystical life for Sufi Adepts also served the purpose of spreading the teachings of Islam among the non-Muslim population. Some prominent Sufi orders were the **Chishti** and **Suhrawardi** orders. The Sufis had carefully imbibed the teachings available in the works of earlier masters such as **Al-Hujwiri**, **Al-Ghazali**, **Shaikh Abdul Qadir Jilani**, and **Shaikh Shihab-ud-Din Suhrawardi**.

The strict adherence of the Chishti and Suhrawardi orders to orthodox theology dampened all enthusiasm for creative thinking. They accepted the concept of God as the **Creator of the Universe**, the ideas of the **unity and permanence of the Divine Essence and Attributes**, and endorsed the doctrines of **predestination** and **divine omnipotence**. The characteristic feature of Sufism was the **acquisition of knowledge through individual experience**, this precluded the possibility of inflexible patterns of rituals, beliefs, and ethics^{ix}. Sufis often attained spiritual visions and states of ecstasy.

Dr. Tara Chand writes that:

"Sufism indeed was a religion of intense devotion; love was its passion, poetry, song, and dance were its worship, and passing away in God was its ideal^x."

The Sufis had established a system of **spiritual preceptorship** known as *Pir-Muridi*. The *Pir* was the spiritual guide, and the *Murid* was the disciple. Every Sufi who sought union with God required a spiritual guide or preceptor (*Pir* or *Shaikh*), who regulated the disciple's conduct, watched over his spiritual development, and enabled him to pass through the stages leading to **essential unity with God**.

Their local centres of preceptorship — around both living and deceased Pirs, including legendary figures — provided **local places of pilgrimage**. Sufi *dargahs* have historically served as centres of **religious preceptorship**. For the Muslim ruling elites, it also served to reinforce their spiritual standing, validating the saint's spiritual power with tangible evidence.

Another author says that the spirit is like pure water, and when anyone touches it, the impact of Sufi ideals is also felt in their thoughts. Spiritual excitement and glimpses of mystic realities are created in people's minds. So, the Sufis preferred a **State of Grace** to devotion and obedience to the twelve Imams. Sufis had shaped both Islamic belief and practice^{xi}. They had searched **Absolute Beauty**, **Absolute Love**, and **Absolute Bliss**^{xii}.

Many Sufi saints organized music concerts and spiritual assemblies. Some of them sang and danced in praise of God. The **spiritual dance**, which constitutes a most ample base, begins with the initial *qabd* — a stately procession in which the dancer crosses his arms over his breast and clasps his shoulders, while a singer chants to the accompaniment of flutes, drums, and sometimes other instruments.

Then, at a given moment, the Shaykh takes up his position as the folded-up figures file solemnly past him. Each dancer, as he enters the orbit of the Shaykh's presence, begins to unfold his arms and turn his body — slowly at first, then more quickly — with his arms now stretched to either side at full extent: the right palm turned downward to transmit Heaven to Earth. And so, the **whirling** continues. This dance and music is thus a rite of a centralization, a foretaste of the lost center, and therefore of a lost dimension of depth and height. The most celebrated of Those is one given by Jalalad-Din Rumi, whose members are thus better known to Westerners as the Whirling Dervishes^{xiii}.

The use of music by the Sufis led to the growth of semi-religious congregations assembling to hear songs of divine love, sung by professional singers called Qawwals (singers of Qawwalis). Qawwali is Sama realized in practice — mystical poetry set to music and enhanced by powerful rhythm as well as repetition, so as to suggest Zikr^{xiv}. It became the vehicle for conveying mystical experience.

Thus, the practice of Sama — listening to mystical music — takes on a controversial character, for the traditional music for Sama has normally included the use of instruments, particularly percussion, to reinforce the element of Zikr (repetition), which is considered inherent in it. Within the Sufi conceptual framework, Sama is therefore not universally accepted.

Orders with a more orthodox orientation, like the Naqshbandiyya, prohibit its use altogether, or compromise by permitting mystical songs unaccompanied by instruments.

This doctrine of musical therapeutics had fairly wide acceptance.^{xv} Listening to music is considered like medicine.

Sufis have always had a sensitive social conscience and have rebelled against tyranny, oppression, and social disparities. In this respect, great Sufis have espoused progressive humanist ideologies.

Due to the impact of Sufi philosophy, both Hindus and Muslims alike came to attend the Khanqahs and tombs of Muslim Sufi saints. Consequently, Muslims followed and adopted several aspects of Hindu spiritual life. Its principal objective is to dissociate the mind from the worries and anxieties and sordid selfish interests of this transient world to help the artists and audience to concentrate their mind and thereby attain spiritual consciousness .

Thus, we have seen the role of music in Islamic spirituality. The emphasis lies much more on the **ecstasy** induced by music than on the formal religious or legalistic aspects of Islam. Now, let us conclude with some lines from the poetry of Rumi, in which he calls his Beloved to lead him to the *Sama*, and thus to the sphere of love:

O Come, O Come! You are the soul !
of the soul of the soul of whirling!

O Come! You are the cypress tall
in the blooming garden of whirling!

O Come! For there has never been,
and will never be, one like you!

O Come! Such a one has never been seen
by the longing eyes of whirling!

O Come! The fountain of the sun!
is hidden beneath your shadow!
You own a thousand Venus-stars
in the circling heavens of whirling!

The whirling sings your praise and thanks
with a hundred eloquent tongues:
I'll try to say just one or two points
translating the language of whirling.

For when you enter in the dance
you then leave both these worlds

For outside these two worlds there lies
the universe, endless, of whirling.
The roof is high, the lofty roof
which is in the seventh sphere,

but far beyond this roof has reached
the ladder, the ladder of whirling!
Whatever there appears but thee,
you tread on that in dancing!
The whirling, see, belongs to you,
and you belong to the whirling.

What can I do when Love appears
and puts its claw round my neck?
I grasp it, take it to my breast
and drag it into the whirling.

And when the bosom of the notes
is filled with the glow of the sun:
They enter all the dance, the dance,
and do not complain in the whirling!

2.0 References

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