

## Dancing the Islamic Way

### Two Famous Sufi Masters

This contribution consists of two short translations from the Persian language pertaining to dance as a religious practice among Muslims. The texts are excerpted from hagiographies of Sufi masters famous for their teaching, practices, and long legacies. While situated within specific socio-historical circumstances, the perspectives on Sufi dance brought up here index issues that have mattered throughout history whenever dance has been the subject of Islamic religious discussion. These texts are especially helpful for giving us a sense for the place of traditional, psychosomatic, interpersonal, and social issues pertaining to dance within Sufi contexts.

The translations are quite straightforward and my overall purpose is to let them speak for themselves. I would like to preface them by explaining the choice of leaving the word *samāʿ*, which denotes dance, untranslated within the English text. This is because the literal meaning of *samāʿ* is 'audition', even though, from context, we can be certain that the activity to which this word is referring corresponds to what we would commonly describe as dance. The seeming non sequitur is a noteworthy point of information: it indicates dance's presumed absolute predication on aural stimulus in Sufi contexts.

Among Sufis who advocate or allow dancing for religious purposes, the body is activated into dance on the precondition of sound entering it through the ear in the form of recitation or music. From this understanding, the word *samāʿ* comes to refer to both hearing the stimulus and dancing in reaction to it. Furthermore, it is noteworthy that the word *samāʿ* has a semantic field wider than dance. It can refer to any experience of hearing music or its recitation for religious purposes, without it necessarily leading to dance. *Samāʿ* is also closely connected to *zeker* (Arabic: *dhikr*), literally 'remembrance', which refers to any kind of disciplined spiritual practice aimed at concentrating one's being on God or an intermediary, such as one's Sufi master. Sufis who frown upon listening to music and dancing usually distinguish clearly between *zeker* (which is allowed) and *samāʿ* (which is reprehensible). Among those who use music and dance for religious purposes, the two terms tend to meld into each other, and one has to discern the matter from individual context. Overall, Sufi dance is situated within a larger spectrum of corporeal religious practices that run the gamut between silent and still meditation, on one end, and vigorous movement in dance, on the other (Avery: 2004; Bashir: 2011, 68–77; Lewisohn: 1997).

## 1. The Dance of Jalāloddīn Rūmī

The first translated selection describes the place of dance in the life of Jalāloddīn Rūmī (died 1274), the famous poet (in Persian as well as in modern translations), who is also the original figure of the Sufi community known as the *Mevlevi*s (Ambrosio/Feuillebois/Zarcone: 2006). Basing their perspective on Rūmī's exemplary life spent in Konya (present-day Turkey), the *Mevlevi*s are known as the 'whirling dervishes' in English on account of their elaborately choreographed dancing liturgy. The *Mevlevi*s are by far the best known practitioners of Islamic religious dance. Their performance began its long life in the 13<sup>th</sup> century. It has been celebrated both as a religious exercise and as an impressive spectacle inspiring people ranging between pre-modern Sufi adepts, modern western theorists of dance, and tourists (Barber: 1980; Behar: 2014; Hamilton: 2016; De Zorzi: 2015).

The text pertaining to dance which follows comes from the oldest known source providing an account of Jalāloddīn Rūmī's life. Its author, Farīdūn b. Ahmad Sipāhsālār (died first quarter of the fourteenth century CE), claims to have been attached as a disciple to Rūmī until his death, following which his descendants succeeded him as the community's leaders. Following a pattern common to this type of Sufi literature, he states that he decided to write a posthumous account of the master in order to preserve his sacred memory. He considered this an urgent task because, at the time of writing, Rūmī's contemporaries were dwindling rapidly in number due to advanced age (Sipāhsālār: 1946, 4–8). In the long term, Sipāhsālār's account was superseded by another, lengthier hagiography of Rūmī that utilized his work as a resource (Elias: 2020; Lewis: 2014). Sipāhsālār's description of Rumi adopting dance is both laudatory and apologetic. The defensiveness observable here reflects socio-religious ambivalence that is a common feature of Islamic discussions pertaining to dance. Rūmī's adoption of dance is justified through tradition, his personal encounter with another Sufi, and psychosomatic effects relatable to a cosmology traceable to the Quran.

Translation (Sipāhsālār: 1946, 64–68)<sup>1</sup>

<p>Know, truthful lover and agreeable friend – may God accompany you in both the worlds – that in the initial part of his life, our Eminent Lord (Hazrat-e Khodāvandegār) – may God let his light flow upon us – carried on according to the path and example of his father, his eminence Mawlānā Bahāoddīn Valad. This included imparting lessons, giving sermons, and undertaking religious exercises. He followed all the forms of worship, and performed spiritual exercises that are attributed to his eminence the Prophet [Muhammad]<sup>2</sup>, God’s prayers and peace on him. He experienced such epiphanies and stations that had not come to anyone else among others who were also perfected persons, devoted to prayer, fasting, and spiritual exertion. But he never did <i>samā’</i>.</p>	<p>بدان ای عاشق صادق و انیس موافق، وفقک الله فی الدارين، که حضرت خداوندگار ما افاض الله نوره علينا از ابتدای حال بطریقه و سیرت پدرش حضرت مولانا بهاءالدین ولد رضوان علیه مثل درس گفتن و موعظه فرمودن و مجاهده و ریاضت مشغول میبودند و از هر گونه عبادت و ریاضت که از حضرت رسالت صلوات الله علیه و سلامه منقول بود متابعت مینمودند و آن تجلیها و مقامات که هیچ کاملی را ریاست نداده بود در صورت نماز و روزه و ریاضت مشاهده میفرمودند، اما سماع هرگز نکرده بودند.</p>
<p>Then, he saw, with spiritual sight, that the Sultan of beloveds, Mawlānā Shamsolhaqq Vaddīn Tabrīzī – may God exalt his memory – is the beloved and lord among [God’s] friends and holds the highest station among beloveds. He fell in love with him and regarded everything he said as a bounty. He [Tabrīzī] then told him: “Come to <i>samā’</i>, because what you seek increases in <i>samā’</i>. <i>Samā’</i> is forbidden to the multitudes because they are mired in worldly desires. When they do <i>samā’</i>, their blameworthy and deplorable condition increases, because their movement is directed toward enjoyment and play. There is no doubt that <i>samā’</i> is forbidden for such a group. However, those who desire and love the Truth, their condition and desires increase through <i>samā’</i> such that no one other than God comes within their sight. For this group, <i>samā’</i> is allowed.”</p>	<p>چون حضرت مولانا سلطان المحبوبین مولانا شمس الحق والدین تبریزی عظم الله ذکره را بنظر بصیرت دید که معشوق و سلطان الاویاست و باعلی مقامات محبوبان مقام دارد عاشق او شد و بهر چه او فرمودی آن را غنیمت داشتی. پس اشارت فرمودند که در سماع درآ، که آنچه طلبی در سماع زیاده خواهد شدن، سماع بر خلق از آن حرام شد که بر هوای نفس مشغولند، چون سماع میکنند آن حالت مذموم و مکروه زیاده میشود و حرکت را از سر لهو و بطر میکنند، لا جرم سماع بر چنین قوم حرام باشد، بر خلاف آن جمعی که طالب و عاشق حق اند، در سماع آن حالت و طلب زیادت میشود و ما سوی الله در آن وقت در نظر ایشان نمی آید، پس بر چنین قوم سماع مباح باشد.</p>
<p>He [Rūmī] heeded these instructions and entered into <i>samā’</i>. In <i>samā’</i>, he saw and examined what had been described, and he continued this practice to the end of his life. He made it his path and rule. The greatest among <i>shaykhs</i> and knowers, possessors of ecstasy, are said to have done <i>samā’</i>, enunciating great words during it. It is related that, one day, an Arab of the desert from Najd was singing these verses [in Arabic] in a beautiful and captivating voice:</p>	<p>بنا بر اشارت ایشان امتثال فرمودند و در سماع در آمده، آنچه اشارت فرموده بودند در حالت سماع مشاهده کرده، بمعاینه دیدند و تا آخر عمر بر آن سیاق عمل کردند و آن را طریق و ائین ساختند و از اکثر مشایخ و عرفاء صاحب وجد مرویست که سماع می فرموده اند و در اثنای آن کلماتی عالی نقل میکردند و در آن وقت در نظر اعرابی در نجد باوازی خوش و دلکش این ابیات می سرائید که:</p>

1 In accordance with the statutory provisions of copyright law, the author/publisher has made every effort to obtain copyrights from the authors of the texts. It has not been possible to locate the copyright holders in all cases; the publisher may be contacted for legitimate claims not mentioned here.

2 Words in square brackets are additions by the author in the following.

<p>Every morning and daybreak, My eyes weep tears of ardor. Desire's serpent has stung my liver. There's no doctor, nor an enchanter for this, Save the beloved, with whom I am smitten. He alone has my talisman and medicine.</p>	<p>تَبَك عَيْنِي بَدْمَعِ كُلِّ صَبْحٍ وَ كُلِّ اشْرَاقٍ لَا لَسَعَتْ حَيَّةَ الْهَوَى كَبِدِي مُشْتَاقٍ إِلَّا الْحَبِيبَ الَّذِي طَبِيبَ لَهَا وَ لَا رَاقِي عِنْدَهُ رَقِيبَتِي وَ تَرِيافِي، شَعَفَتْ بِهِ</p>
<p>When his eminence [Prophet Muhammad], the lord of the firsts and the lasts – on him highest prayers and plentiful salutations –, heard these verses, the great oceans of spiritual knowledge, love, and passion that were in his enlightened heart came to a boil. He indicated the Arab to repeat the verses, while his eminence, from height of desire, twirled his blessed hands. His movements were so vigorous that his blessed mantle fell away from his shoulders.</p>	<p>حضرت سید الاولین و الآخرین علیہ الصلوٰۃ افضلها و من التحیات اکملها چون این ابیات بشنید دریاهای معرفت و محبت و شوق که در دل منورش بود در جوش آمد. اشارت فرمود تا اعرابی این ابیات را مکرر کرد و حضرت ایشان از غایت شوق دست مبارک می افشاندند و حرکت عنیف میکردند، چنانکه ردای مبارک از دوش بیفتاد</p>
<p>The people of God have written many treatises on the permissibility of <i>samā'</i>. Those committed to investigating it have found it admissible and sound. Lovers' singing voices strike as being pleasant [to them] because, during the gathering of <i>alast</i><sup>3</sup>, they were drawn to beautiful spiritual voices and were thus nourished to pleasure from <i>samā'</i>. Today, when they are imprisoned in the dense world of base desires, that spiritual world having been left far behind, when a tiny bit from those beautiful, subtle sounds reaches their open ears, the height of passion drives their saddened hearts to perturbation and boiling. In their [hearts'] wake, bodies go into motion as well.</p>	<p>در بیان اباحت سماع بر اهل الله رساله بسیار ساخته اند و اهل تحقیق آنرا مسلم و جائز داشته، آواز غنینه عاشقان را از آن خوش می آید که در بزم السمت در میان آوازهای خوش روحانی انس گرفته اند و با سماع نزهت آن پروریده، امروزه که در عالم نفس و کدورت وجود گرفتارند و از آن عالم روحانی دورمانده چون شمه ای از آن آوازهای خوش و لطیف در گوش هوش میرسد از غایت شوق دل محزون در اضطراب و جوش می آید و تن را بمتابعت در حرکت می آورد.</p>
<p>All movements that issue forth from truth-seekers during <i>samā'</i> signify a point and a [greater] reality. Spinning is an indication of affirming God's oneness. This is the station of knowers who affirm unity. In this situation, they see the beloved, the one sought, everywhere their sight goes. Whichever way they turn, they are recipients of His effulgence. Jumping and stepping have two meanings: First, jumping means a communion with the higher world from the height of desire. Second, these [actions] indicate that the practitioner has conquered the lower soul and has crushed everything undesirable underfoot. Twirling hands have multiple meanings as well. On the one side, [this represents] happiness caused by having reached the honor of union, and attention being focused on the stage of spiritual perfection. While on the other side, [twirling hands denotes] victory over the army of the aspect of the soul that commands to evil. This is what is meant by the greater struggle (<i>jeḥād-e akbar</i>).</p>	<p>تمامت حرکاتی که در سماع از محققان صادر میگردد اشارتست بنکته ای و حقیقتی، چنانکه چرخ زدن اشارتست بتوحیدی، و این مقام عارفان موحدست، که در آن حال محبوب و مطلوب را در همه جهات می بینند و بهر سو که می گردند از فیض او بهره می یابند و اماجهیدن و پا کوفتن اشارتست بدو وجه: وجه اول از غایت شوق اتصالست بعالم علوی و پا کوفتن اشارتست که سالک در آن حال نفس را مسخر خود گرداند، ما سوی را در پای همت پست می گرداند و دست افشاندن اشارتست بچند وجه، وجه اول از شادی حصول شرف وصالست و توجه بدرجه کمال و دوم ظفرست بر عسکر نفس اماره، که جهاد اکبر عبارت از آنست.</p>

3 The gathering of *alast* refers to the Quranic statement that, at the beginning of creation, God assembled all human essences and asked them “am I not your Lord (*alastu bi-rabbikum*).” They responded with a resounding “yes” (*balā*, Quran 7:172). Especially among Sufis, this exchange is regarded as the establishment of a covenant between God and human beings that is buried within humans during earthly existence and needs to be recalled through spiritual exercises.

<p>Sometimes it happens that a dear one who is a part of the <i>samā'</i> and is moving loses all sense of consciousness of the self. In that moment, in the middle of the gathering, s/he sees her/himself clearly [from the outside], as if looking into a mirror, considering the object beautiful and becoming involved with it in the game of love. Drawing people to <i>samā'</i>, to incite them into movement, is the station of those who falter [in their steps like this]. Doing this, they scatter divine effulgence to the hearts of all those present and turn divine mercy into a common good for all.</p>	<p>و در سماع عزیزی را در کنار گرفتن و سماع زدن وقتی واقع می گردد که فقیر بکلی از خودی خود مستهلک می گردد، و در وقت افاقنت خود را در میان آن جمع در آینه درون هر که بصفای تمام مشاهده میکند، آن عزیز را در کنار گرفته، با خیال جمال خویش با آن عزیز عشقباازی می کند و مردم را در سماع کشیدن و بحرکت تحریض کردن مقام اهل سهوست، که فیض را بر قلوب همه حضار می افشانند و رحمت را بر همه عام می گردانند.</p>
<p>Submitting and prostrating signifies servanthood. Likewise in <i>samā'</i>. They serve the Beloved through acts of standing, bowing, and prostrating, in the same way as occurs during the ritual prayer (<i>namāz</i>). When they observe an aspect of the Truth inside themselves because of the journey they are undertaking, they fall into prostration in front of it. These are lengthy issues. A seeker who has not reached the requisite station cannot picture the state of pleasure and enjoyment in question: whoever has not tasted does not know.</p>	<p>تواضع و سجده کردن عبارت از مقام عبودیت دارد، تا محبوب را در سماع بقیام و رکوع و سجود عبادت کنند، چنانکه در نماز و نیز صفتی از صفات حق در درون هر که مشاهده می کنند، بنسبت سیر که دارند آن صفت را سجده می آرند. این معنی تطویل دارد، تا طالب بدان مقام نرسد کیفیت مزه و لطف آن حال را بمقال نتواند تصویر کردن، «من لم یذق لا یعرف».</p>
<p style="text-align: center;">Verse</p> <p>Someone asked: "Who is a lover?" I said: "When you become me you will know!"</p>	<p style="text-align: center;">بیت</p> <p>پرسید یکی که عاشق چیست گفتم که چو من شوی بدانی</p>
<p>His excellence, our Eminent Lord [Rūmī] – may God be pleased with him – has written great things about the realities of <i>samā'</i>. All who pursue studying these will surely have their minds' mirrors light up and they will become privy to these realities. He says regarding <i>samā'</i>:</p>	<p>وحضرت خداوندگار ما رضوان الله علیه در میان حقایق سماع کلماتی عالی انشا فرموده است، هر که در مطالعه آن مداومت نماید هر آینه آینه ضمیر او روشن شود و بر سر حقیقت آن وقوف یابد و در سماع می فرماید:</p>
<p style="text-align: center;">Verse</p> <p><i>Samā'</i>, for lovers, comes like food. In it imagination aggregates together.</p>	<p style="text-align: center;">بیت</p> <p>پس غذای عاشقان آمد سماع که درو باشد خیال اجتماع</p>
<p>In the <i>samā'</i> done by our companions, emptiness of the stomach is a condition, since this increases the pleasure and enjoyment. Therefore, our Lord says:</p>	<p>و در سماع اصحاب ما خلوی معده شرطست، تا تروض و تطف زبانه گردد، چنانکه حضرت خداوندگار ما می فرماید:</p>
<p style="text-align: center;">Verse</p> <p>Man of <i>samā'</i>, keep your stomach empty, Because one satiated issues no cries of longing. If you fill the stomach with a lot of delicacies, You remain void of the heart-ravisher's kisses and embrace.</p>	<p style="text-align: center;">بیت</p> <p>ای مرد سماع معده را خالی دار زیرا چو تهیست نی کند ناله زار چون پر کردی معده زلوت بسیار خالی مانی ز دلبر و بوس و کنار</p>
<p>All forms of moving and stopping of people in <i>samā'</i> are based on reason and are not in jest or meaningless. Therefore, he says:</p>	<p>حرکت و سکون اهل سماع بنا بر جد دارد، نه بطر و هزل، چنانکه می فرماید:</p>

At time's end, the Beloved plays an entrancing tune. His inner reality is the truth of truths, the outside seems a mere game.	سازنی طرب کرد زمان آخر در یار بازئی او ظاهر جد جد او باطن
If someone denies the secret of following the lights of <i>samā</i> , do not count this an error. Say: "To you your religion and to me mine" [Quran 109:6]. Perhaps s/he does not have the correct disposition in order to have the ability to appreciate these points. As it is said: "The believer is discerning and careful". Our Lord says:	واگر شخصی از سر تقلید انوار سماع را منکر باشد عیب مشمن، «لکم دینکم ولی دین» بر خوان، شاید که او را آن مذاق صحیح نبوده باشد که تمیز کند این دقایق را، که «المؤمن کیس ممیز فطن» و حضرت خداوندگار ما میفرماید:
For the living, <i>samā</i> ' is life's comfort. One knows that it is life's life.	کسی داند سماع آرام جان زندگانست که او را جان جانست

## 2. The Dances of Shaykh Safī of Ardabil

The second translation consists of episodes selected from the chapter on dance in the hagiography of the master Shaykh Safīoddīn (Safī for short, died 1334) of Ardabil (present-day Azerbaijan, Iran). This master was a major religious figure in his own times, heading a large religious community and playing an influential role in the region's sociopolitical affairs. Moreover, his legacy developed in ways that people in his own time could scarcely have imagined. Less than two centuries after his death, in 1501, one of his descendants named Esmā'īl (died 1524) claimed himself the king of Iran. Only fourteen years of age at the time of the proclamation, Esmā'īl was both the political authority and the hereditary Sufi guide of his soldiers known as the *Qezelbāsh*. While Sufis intermingled with the political elites quite often during the Middle Ages, the descendants of Shaykh Safī of Ardabil (who came to be called the Safavids) are extraordinary for transforming from a religious lineage to a ruling dynasty that lasted for more than two centuries, from 1501–1722 (Bashir: 2004; Gronke: 1993; Mazzaoui: 1972).

My translation below comes from a work entitled *Safvat as-safā* (The Essence of Purity), written by Ebn Bazzāz Ardabīlī (died in the last quarter of the fourteenth century CE). As in the case of the author writing about Rūmī, this author also claims to have written to preserve sacred memory. In this case, the author was a disciple of the great master's son and successor, Shaykh Sadroddīn (died 1391/92), who is mentioned often in the text and is cited as the person who asked him to collect the traditions. The resulting text is possibly the longest hagiography dedicated to a single Sufi figure written in Persian during the Middle Ages. Ensnared within this lengthy document is a short chapter on Shaykh Safī's practice of dance for religious purposes. From this, I have translated episodes that represent the major themes that run through the overall account. In this instance, the discursive representation of Sufi dance reflects the larger world of post-Mongol Iran. In this context, Sufis held an increasingly important place as religious as well as political and socioeconomic

mediators. Shaykh Safi's dance provides us a sense for how a great living Sufi master sanctified his surroundings and conditioned the practices and beliefs of his followers.

Translation (Ardabīlī, Safvat as-safā: 1997, 642–651)<sup>4</sup>

<p>Shaykh Sadroddīn [Shaykh Safi's son and successor] – may God prolong his blessings – related that Shaykh [Safi] – may God sanctify his innermost secret – went one day to Ardabil. At this time, the environs of Ardabil were desolated because of attacks by Georgians, and a part of the city's walls that had partly fallen was scattered on the ground. There, an itinerant singer sat reciting a Persian poem by Farīdoddīn 'Attār (died 1221). When the Shaykh's blessed ears heard this, he went into a total ecstasy and started a monumental dance:</p>	<p>شیخ صدرالدین، ادام الله برکتہ، روایت کرد کہ شیخ، قدس الله سرہ، روزی در اردبیل می‌گذشت، و اطراف اردبیل بواسطہ خرابی گرجیان ہنوز بایر بود و اندکی از باروی شہرکہ نیم ریختہ بود بر پای بود. بر آن جا لوری نشستہ و از پارسہای فریدالدین عطار، رحمہ الله علیہ، غزلی می‌خواند. چون شیخ، قدس سرہ، بہامسام مبارک استماع فرمود، وجدی تمام یافت و در سماع رفت و سماع عظیم کرد.</p>
<p style="text-align: center;">Verse</p> <p>They sent, from their abode, a wind toward the soul's bird. No wonder the song's wing enlarged the heart with passion.</p>	<p style="text-align: center;">شعر</p> <p>مرغ جان را زآشیان خویشتن دادند باد لاجرم بال طرب اندر هوای دل گشاد</p>
<p>Then [after the dancing] he said: "This effulgence that graced me by descending [on me] during <i>samā'</i> conveyed something to the place where the <i>samā'</i> happened to have occurred." Now this was the case even though a home and hospice in Ardabil were yet to be built for the Shaykh. At the time, he had a house in the village of Kalkhūrān. After, he made a home in the <i>Fiqā'iyān</i> area, which is one of the lower quarters of Ardabil, but this too remained incomplete and was never inhabited. He later laid the foundations of a home in the <i>Bāgh-e As'ad</i> [The Felicitous Garden], which is now distinguished by royal possession – may God continue its blessing – but that also did not become available. Then, he made a home outside the <i>Nawshahr</i> gate but it too was not completed. Finally, he made his home in the place that is now the location of his house, hospice, and blessed seclusion chamber. Upon its completion, it became a gathering place for people, the abode of saints, and the destination of the pious.</p>	<p>پس فرمود کہ «از فیضی کہ از حق تعالی در آن سماع فایض و نازل شد چیزی بدین مقام رسید کہ برآن جا سماع اتفاق افتادہ بود.» و حال آنک شیخ را، قدس سرہ، در آن وقت خانہ و زاویہ در اردبیل ہنوز مبنی نشده بود بلکہ خانہ در دیہ کلخوران داشت. بعد از آن در درب فقاعیان کہ از جملہ دروب سفلی اردبیلی است، مقام و مسکن ساخت تمام نشد و کہ اکنون – میسر نکشت. باز در باغ اسعد اختصاص ملکی ادام الله برکتہ دارد بنیاد خانہ نہاد. آن نیز میسر نشد. باز – خارج دروازہ نو شہر خانہ بنیادکرد و تمام درین مقام کہ اکنون خانہ و نشد. پس زاویہ و خلوتسرای متبرک است جای و مسکن ساخت، تمام شد و کمال گرفت و محط رحال و مہبط رجال و قباب اولیا و مآب اصفیاء شد.</p>

4 In accordance with the statutory provisions of copyright law, the author/publisher has made every effort to obtain copyrights from the authors of the texts. It has not been possible to locate the copyright holders in all cases; the publisher may be contacted for legitimate claims not mentioned here.

<p>That venue of <i>samā'</i> – about which the Shaykh had said that “from divine emanation that has come down upon my heart, a portion will be conveyed to that place” – is the place of his illuminated tomb. This is now the <i>qibla</i><sup>5</sup> of felicity and the Ka'ba for hopes that seek protection in the world. All the religious benefits and effects of purity that will appear there, between now and the time of Resurrection, are issuing forth from the emanation (Ardabīlī: 1997, 642–643).</p>	<p>و آن موضع سماع که شیخ، قدس الله فرمود که «از فیض الهی که به دل سره، من فرو آمد بدین موضع نصیبی رسید» آن مقام است که اکنون مرقد منور شیخ است که قبله اقبال و کعبه آمال امانی جهانی است و جمعیت دین و آثار صفایی که تا قیامت بر این مقام ظاهر خواهد شد از آثار آن فیض است.</p>
<p>[Shaykh Sadroddīn,] – may God prolong his blessing – said that one night there was a <i>samā'</i> in the city of Sarāv [Sarab] in the mosque inside the hospice of Khwājeh Afzal. When Shaykh [Safī] began to move his feet on the occasion, an earthquake rattled the city and many people came out of their homes.</p>	<p>ادام الله برکت فرمود که شبی در شهر سراو در مسجدی که بر در زاویه خواجه افضل، رحمة الله علیه، سماعی بود و چون شیخ، قدس الله سره، قدم مبارک در سماع در حرکت آورد زلزله در شهر افتاد که بسی مردم از خانهها بیرون افتادند.</p>
<p>Verse As the heart extended its foot into that field, An upheaval came to life in the world.</p>	<p>شعر دل قدم چون اندر آن میدان نهاد شورشوی اندر جهان جان فتاد</p>
<p>Those who were in the <i>samā'</i> looked around. Some saw that all the walls of the mosque had started going around in order to become a part of the <i>samā'</i>, and the mosque's lamps were also spinning. Some others saw that the mosque's walls had raised themselves up from the ground and flares of divine light were leaping from the lamps.</p>	<p>آن مردم در سماع بودند. نظر میکردند. بعضی می‌دیدند که دیوارهای مسجد تمامت بر سیبل موافقت در سماع و دور آمده بودند و قندیلهای مسجد همه بر سیبل در چرخ رفته و بعضی می‌دیدند که دیوارهای مسجد برخاسته بود و مشاعل الهی شعله کشیده.</p>
<p>When the world's atoms become intimates [<i>mahram</i>] of the secret, They mix their voices into the tumult of lovers.</p>	<p>شعر ذرات جهان چو محرم راز شوند با شورش عاشقان هم‌آواز شوند</p>
<p>Among the people who had come out of houses because of the earthquake was a woman, a Sayyid [that is, descendant of Prophet Muhammad], who was the wife of Amīr Zeyāoddīn Qūschī. When she came out and heard the great noise and commotion, she went toward its origin, until she got to the neighborhood of Khwājeh Afzal. She asked, “What is going on here?” They said, “Shaykh Safīoddīn is dancing in ecstasy.” She said, “For God's sake, make a path for me so that I can see his blessed face.” She came to the threshold of the mosque, but as soon as her sight fell on the Shaykh, he left his state and sat down from the dance. His followers, who were under his spiritual guardianship, realized that the Shaykh had known from his spiritual sight that a <i>nā-mahram</i><sup>6</sup> [non-intimate] had cast her eyes on him and had hence sat down.</p>	<p>و از آن جمله که سب زلزله از خانهها بیرون آمده بودند عورتی بود سیده که حلال امیر زین‌الدین قوشچی بود. چون از خانه بیرون آمد ولوله و آوازی و زجلی عظیم شنید. در پی آن روانه شد و می‌آمد تا نزدیک محله خواجه افضل، رحمة الله علیه، رسید. پرسید که «این چه حالی است؟» گفتند: «شیخ صفی‌الدین، قدس در سماع و وجد است». گفت: «از سره، برای خدا راه دهید تا یک نظر روی مبارکش بینم.» در دهلیز آن مسجد آمد. در حال که نظارش بر شیخ آمد شیخ حالی در میان سماع فرو نشست. ملازمانی که داب ولایت شیخ، قدس سره، می‌دانستند که چون نامحرمی نظر به شیخ اندازد شیخ به آنور ولایت بداند و فرو نشیند.</p>

5 *Qibla* is the direction toward Mecca, to which Muslims face for ritual prayer. The Ka'ba is the cube-like shrine in Mecca to which the *qibla* is oriented. The author's point here is that Shaykh Safī's grave has become like the Ka'ba for his followers.

6 *Nā-mahram* is the Islamic legal category that pertains between members of the opposite gender who are unrelated by marriage or select forms of kinship. The opposite of this is *mahram*, meaning people married, or in relationships that preclude the possibility of marriage (father – daughter, brother – sister, and some other pairs established in legal texts).



<p>They inquired all around the premises, saw the woman at the threshold, and said to her, "Go away!" She asked, "For what reason?" They said, "The shaykh knows from his spiritual light that a <i>nā-mahram</i> has cast her eyes on him. This has muddied his experience and caused him to abandon <i>samā'</i> in the middle of it." The woman left and thought to herself, "If this <i>samā'</i> had been for worldly reasons, it would have energized further from the look of a <i>nā-mahram</i>. Since the <i>samā'</i> was due to emanation of divine secrets, he took the gaze of a <i>nā-mahram</i> as forbidden." She then became his disciple and devotee. On a later day, she arranged a glorious banquet, took an oath of discipleship to the Shaykh, and donated a part of the village of Ahmadābād to him. The Shaykh gave that donation away to Khwājeh Afzal.</p>	<p>تفحص در و بام کردند. آن عورت را در دهلیز دیدند. گفتند: «بیرون رو.» گفت: «به چه سبب؟» گفتند: «شیخ به آنور ولایت دانست که نامحرمی در وی نظر می‌کند. وقت بر وی شورانیده شد و در میان میدان فرو نشست.» آن عورت بیرون آمد و با خود فکر کرد که «اگر آن سماع نفسانی بودی به نظر نامحرم زیادت می‌اشدی. چون سماع فیض اسرار الهی است با شوایب نظر نامحرم حرامی می‌اشمردن، و مرید و معتقد شد. روز دیگر دعوتی و ضیافتی شگرف بساخت و مرید شد و حصه دیه احمدآباد به اشیک، قدس آن حصه را سره، داد و شیخ، قدس سره، به خواجه افضل داد.</p>
<p>When intimates [<i>mahramān</i>] share around the tasteful goblet in company, Seekers outside are reminded of the dregs' sweet smell (Ardabīlī: 1997, 643–644).</p>	<p>شعر محرمان چون جام ذوق آرند در مجلس به دور خاکبوسان را به بوی جرعه‌ای یاد آورند</p>
<p>[Shaykh Sadroddīn,] – may God prolong his blessing – said that when the late Khwājeh Mohyioddīn left for the eternal abode, Shaykh [Safī] retracted his foot from <i>samā'</i> into his tunic. He neither did <i>samā'</i> nor heard [any] intercession [from those urging him]. Until one night, when he was sitting in his blessed hospice with a group of singers and Sufis in his presence, he suddenly stood up and went into <i>samā'</i>. Since no religious singer (<i>qavvāl</i>) was present, Mawlānā 'Abdorrahmān Hāfeh who was famous among the group – may God have mercy on him – began by reciting a verse from the Quran. The Shaykh – may his innermost secret be preserved – went into ecstasy and people's eyes poured out fountains of tears.</p>	<p>دامت برکنه فرمود که چون مرحوم سعید خواجه محیی‌الدین، رحمة الله علیه، به‌دار بقا رسید، شیخ، قدس سره، قریب سالی پای مبارک از سماع در دامن کشید و سماع نمی‌کرد و شفاعت نمی‌شنید. تا شبی در زاویه متبرکه نشست بود و جماعتی از حفاظ و متصوف در حضور مبارکش ناگاه برخاست و در سماع رفت و سماع کرد. چون هیچ کس از قوالان که- حاضر نبود مولانا عبدالرحمن حافظ آیتی مشهور بود به عده، رحمة الله علیه از قرآن آغاز کرد و می‌خواند و شیخ، قدس سره، وجد می‌آورد و خلق از چشمها چشمه‌های اشک می‌افشانند.</p>
<p>Once the Shaykh's ecstasy and <i>samā'</i> had concluded and he had taken a seat, he inquired, "Aren't you going to ask me the reason for the <i>samā'</i>?" They said, "Shaykh, please tell us." The Shaykh said, "As I sat, I saw my son Mohyioddīn – may God have mercy on him – appear with a light in his hand, and behind him was Shaykh Zāhed – may God preserve his spirit.<sup>7</sup> Mohyioddīn came, kissed my hand, and said: 'Father, I have brought Shaykh Zāhed as an intercessor in order to convince you to do <i>samā'</i>.' He put his hand on his throat, saying, 'Do <i>samā'</i> for my sake, and for the sake of Shaykh Zāhed's intercession.' Inevitably, I did <i>samā'</i> on the direction and intercession of Shaykh Zāhed – may his spirit be preserved."</p>	<p>پس چون وجد و سماع شیخ به اجلوس انجامید، فرمود که «سبب سماع نرسید؟» گفتند: «شیخ فرماید.» فرمود که «نشسته بودم، دیدم که فرزند محیی‌الدین، رحمة الله علیه، درآمد شمعی در دست و در عقب او شیخ زاهد. قدس سره. محیی‌الدین بیامد و دست من ببوسید و گفت بابا شیخ زاهد را به شفاعت آورده‌ام تا سماع کنی. و خلق خود بگرفت که از برای من و شفاعت شیخ زاهد که سماع کن. ناچار به اشارت و شفاعت شیخ زاهد، قدس روحه، سماع کردم.»</p>

7 Shaykh Zāhed Gilāni (d. 1301) was Shaykh Safī's own Sufi master, who had died long before Shaykh Safī came to preside over the kind of community that is being described in this incident.

<p>We sing, desiring thoughts of that friend. The beauty of the beloved's face is our life's delight. My life's wages are the steady loss that is the night of separation. On market day, let us all get to work to meet him (Ardabāī, 1997, 649–650).</p>	<p>ما طرب در طلب خاطر آن یار کنیم نزهت جان زجمال رخ دلدار کنیم نقد عیشم به شب هجر، روان کاسد بود روز بازار وصالش همه بر کار کنیم</p>
<p>Farrokh Qavvāl (singer) said that once the Shaykh – may God preserve his innermost secret – took the hand of Pīreh 'Ezzoddīn and took him home. He told me this too so that I also went to his place. There, he lay with nothing on his body except a sheet. He did not have a shirt, belt, or outer cloak. He indicated to me, “Farrokh, recite something!” I recited:</p>	<p>فرخ قوال گوید که باری شیخ، قدس الله سره، دست پیر عزالدین بگرفت و در خانه برد و مرا نیز بار داد تا در خانه رفتم و تکیه فرمود. از جامه بر تن مبارک او یک فرجی بیش نبود و پیراهن و ازار و جنبه هیچ بر تن مبارک نداشت. اشارت فرمود که «فرخ چیزی بخوان.» بخواندم:</p>
<p>Everyone who, on the path to truth, has no mark left from reality, The world's leader has come, he is guide to humans and the <i>jinn</i>.</p>	<p>هر که در راه حقیقت از حقیقت بی‌آشان شد مقتدای عالم آمد پیشوای انس و جان شد</p>
<p>The Shaykh – may his innermost secret be preserved – went into great ecstasy, stood up, and did vigorous <i>samā'</i>. I was beset with a great apprehension that the sheet would accidentally come apart and reveal his blessed body. I kept my eyes on this. However, the two edges of the sheet remained stuck to each other such that one would think that they had been sown together. They never came apart at all until the ecstasy reached its end and he sat down.</p>	<p>شیخ را، قدس سره، وجدی عظیم بشد و برخاست و سماع کرد بسیاری. و من در این فکر عظیم متوزع خاطر بودم که نیابد که فرجی گشاده گردد و کشف اندام مبارکش شود. نظر تیز کردم، هر دو لب فرجی چنان مماس همدیگر شدند که پنداری دوخته‌اند و قطعاً از هم جدا نمی‌شود، تا چندانک وجد به آخر پیوست و بنشست.</p>
<p>We have become naked, losing the stranger's dress. The unseen hand is the instrument that maintains our decency. Love is now in control, as long as separation remains the life, Our intellect and consciousness are for meeting the Beloved (Ardabāī: 1997, 651).</p>	<p>از لباس غیر تا عریان شدیم دست غیرت پرده‌پوش ما شد دست عشق تا هجران جان کرد اختیار وصل جانان عقل و هوش ما شد دست</p>

### 3. Conclusionary Remarks

While the excerpts that I have translated are small samples of Islamic discussions about dance, they touch upon issues we can find debated widely in the larger literature. From these we get a sense for dance as an exceptionally potent human activity. This can be gathered both from the positive evaluations of dance, and from the implied criticism that the work on Rūmī in particular aims to address. Those who objected to dance also understood it as being transformative, although in an improper direction. Sufi supporters of dance attempted to counter this by insisting on the importance of context. They agreed that dance for carnal pleasure was reprehensible. Nevertheless, when undertaken as a response to divine and appropriately authoritative calling, dance was a means for achieving the highest religious ends.

Among Sufis invested in dance, the activity helped to define the community. In both cases I have presented, dance is shown to come to the great masters as a kind of divine gift. Rūmī and Safī were extraordinary men, who ‘entered into dance’ spontaneously as expected under hagiographical convention. Their followers, who took these descriptions as prescriptions, were compelled to recreate the desired ecstasy in dance through cultivation. Elaborate performances, such as those done by the *Mevlevi*s, were inspired by Rūmī’s words and stories, but required years of training for practitioners to execute adequately. The disciplined effort to recreate Rūmī’s dance made it a signature act that was crucial to the community’s religious ethos and was its marker for outsiders.

In stories about Safī, we see dance as a connector between members of a Sufi community separated by generations. He gave up dance when a beloved disciple died, and came back to it when a disciple (a generation after him) and his master (a generation before him) both beseeched him to do so. Transposed into groups surrounding Shaykh Safī and his successors, the imperative to dance helped to maintain the community’s traditions over time.

Dance had the potential to invite people to a community, as well as to restrict their access. We can see this in the story of the woman who was not allowed to see Safī dancing because of her gender. The lack of visual access did not mean that she could not join the community or become Safī’s disciple. However, the fact that dance is a corporeal practice meant that it interfaced with other social norms pertaining to bodies, such as those concerning gender. A parallel situation occurred among men in the story about the disciple’s apprehension regarding Safī become naked in public. In this case, an unseen power saved the master from being deprived of his dignity while still being able to dance.

To dance requires space, which makes the action a means for sanctifying locations. All the places Shaykh Safī is said to have inhabited, from temporary abodes to the site of his grave, were made sacred from what descended on him from God during his dance. Since all these venues acted as places of pilgrimage for his followers, his dance was a perpetual source of blessing during his life and after (Rizvi: 2010). In a similar vein, throughout the centuries, the establishment of *Mevlevi* hospices around the world has required creating spaces to dance. The *Mevlevi* community’s placement in the physical world has therefore been mediated through the practice (*Journal of Ottoman Studies*: 1994). Altogether, between the issues I have highlighted, the focus on dance is an important venue from which to understand and examine the history of Sufi ideas and practices.

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