

DARŪ 'L-MAṢNAVĪ OF THE MEVLEVĪ ORDER

In Defense of the Whirling Prayer Ceremony (Sema)

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In spite of the centuries-old opposition to Islamic sufism [taṣawwuf] maintained by certain kinds of conservative Muslim clerics (such as those called "Wahhābī" or "Salafī" today), many educated Muslims continue to respect and value Muḥlībī sufi teachers and teachings. Generally, teacher's of the "sober" traditions of sufism are easier for Muslims to accept.

It is the "ecstatic" traditions of sufism that have long been more controversial, especially their practice of "audition" [samāʾ], which sometimes has included "dancing" or, more precisely, dance-like movements. The purpose of entering into a state of ecstasy [wajd] is the temporary obliteration [maḥw] of one's ordinary state of ego-centered thoughts and desires and entering into a state of "annihilation" or "passing away" [fanā] in which there is pure awareness of "except (only) God" [lā ilāh-*Qurʾān* 47:19]. "All that is upon (the earth) will pass away [fan-īn], but the Face of your Lord will abide", *Qurʾān* 25:26-27). Sufis of the ecstatic traditions have viewed this as a rare attainment for sufis of the sober traditions if their remembrance [dhikr] has not gone beyond thoughts, even the most pious and lofty thoughts about God. It can be said that the real goal is sobriety after ecstasy (symbolized by the term, "drunkenness," in sufism), as mentioned by Shams-i Tabrizī, Mawānā Rūmī's teacher:

"The man who reaches this perfection is drowned in the light of God and drunk in the pleasure of the Real [Ḥaqq].... Beyond this drunkenness [mast] there is another sobriety [hoshyārī], as explained. "The drunkenness of God's road [rāh-i khodā] is the third level. It is an immense drunkenness, but it is linked with stillness [sükun], for God has brought him out of what he had fancied it to be. After that is the fourth level of drunkenness: in God. That is perfection. After that is sobriety,"—from the *Discourses of Shams-i Tabrizī* (Maqālāt-i shams-i tabrizī, pp. 147; 700), selected translations by William Chittick, published as *Me and Rumi: The Autobiography of Shams-i Tabrizī*, pp. 118-19; p. 117 (words in double brackets added by I. Gamaral)

Most Muslims would view "sufi dancing" as an innovation [bidaʾ] they would ask, rhetorically, if the Prophet (may the peace of God be upon him) or his companions (may God accept them) ever engaged in such. No. But there is a Tradition [Ḥadīth] in the most respected collection of Traditions, *Ṣaḥīh al-Bukhārī*, in which the Prophet permitted some Abyssinian Muslims to do a spear dance in the masjid in Medina during an "Eid celebration." This view, of judging the permissibility of actions, is often too narrow and restrictive. For example, it was said about Abu Yazīd al-Bisṭāmī, an ecstatic type sufi teacher (died, 875 CE) that he refused to eat Persian melon because of the lack of a Tradition stating that the Prophet had done so. There are many actions that were not judged by the Prophet and many of these can be called permissible [mubāh] because they were neither enjoined to be done or forbidden, so doing or not doing them is equal (unless such actions contribute to sinful actions). Other actions are considered offensive or disliked [makrūh] according to Islamic law [sharʿi ah] but not strictly forbidden [Ḥarām], and therefore not deserving of punishment. According to sufi manuals, the Prophet (puh) approved of certain kinds of poetry and certain kinds of singing (such as by camel-drivers to gain better cooperation from the animals). Some sufi authors have cited a Tradition (no doubt controversial) in which the Prophet approved of a musical instrument, a type of flute [mizmār], in a particular situation. "*Maqālāt-i shams-i tabrizī*, p. 741; p. 82 in Chittick's translation

According to very conservative Muslims scholars, all innovations are bad. But according to many scholars, "good innovations" [al-bidaʾ al-Ḥasanah] that further increase Islamic piety are desirable. Examples of actions not done by the Prophet that are often cited are the collection of *Qurʾān* in a written and authoritative form, the writing of Traditions [aḥādīth], and group performance of the tarāwīḥ prayer during Ramadan—called by Umar, "What a good innovation this is!" [nī imātu l-bidaʾ atu ḥadhi-h]. Another is the widespread use, for centuries, of a circular string of beads [tasbeḥ] used for the mention and remembrance [dhikr] of God through praise and glorification [tasḥīḥ]. And, of course, the sufis defend their own practices and rituals of "remembering Allah" or "chanting the praises of Allah" [dhikru l'ilāh] as actions based on frequent commands in *Qurʾān* to remember and mention God.

The early development of individual and group sufi practices occurred in the vicinity of Baghdad during the eighth and ninth centuries CE. The early sufis specialized in the cultivation of Islamic virtues and methods of remembering God as much as possible. It seems likely that most of these practices were inspired by mystical interpretations of verses from the *Qurʾān* having to do with remembrance of God [dhikr] and surrender to the Divine Will [taslīm].

An explanation is needed about the misunderstood sufi practice of "audition" [samāʾ]. This was intended to be a form of Islamic remembrance of God [dhikr] and nothing else. The sufi was to listen to all sounds, including selected chapters and verses of *Qurʾān*, mystical verses of poetry and, mystical music as he was hearing the voice of God (such as "Am I not your Lord?", said by God to souls who answered, "Yes!" prior to the creation of the universe—Q:7-172), and hearing the sound of the angelic Trumpet inaugurating the Resurrection of the Dead on the prophesied Day of Judgment—Q:39-68). In this state of mystical hearing, if a sufi entered into a spiritual state [Ḥāl] of consciousness [Ḥāl] and felt inspired to move, then it was permitted to engage in spiritual movements in order to strive for ever-deeper submission to the Divine Will. Such movements would have included the basic positions of ritual prayer (sitting, bowing, standing, and prostration), calling aloud to God ("Allah, Allah!"), chanting any of the beautiful Names of God from the *Qurʾān*, and so on. It was forbidden to move according to self-will, a whim of the imagination, or for physical pleasure. The most legitimate sufi groups had strict rules for samāʾ, such as no talking to or touching another, no women or "beardless youths" (whose presence and attractiveness could be a distraction from the remembrance of God), and no movements done for the sake of impressing others (which leads to hypocrisy). Of course, the samāʾ sessions stopped when the call to pray was heard, and could resume after the ritual prayer [ṣalāt] was performed.

Professor William Chittick has explained the origins of samāʾ: "a bit differently, "Literally, 'listening.' The word designates sessions of music and recitation of poetry, often accompanied with dancing, with the aim of heightening the participants' awareness of the divine presence. Sama grew out of the importance of reciting the Koran and the divine names, practices that were often carried out with great attention to beauty and musicality. Sama has always had an ambiguous legal status."—from *Rumi and Me*, p. 393.

The mention of specific movements is rare in sufi literature but these include standing while waving the hands [dast afshāndan] (in imitation of the angels' praise of God), tearing the top of the shirt or the cloak when in a state of spiritual ecstasy (this was not "tearing off one's clothes" as it is sometimes mistranslated today, since public nudity is forbidden in Islam), whirling [charkhīdan] (which was probably inspired by the verse, "Whichever way you turn, there is the Face of God"—Q:2:115), and "dancing" [raqs]. The latter should be understood as a dance-like movement done out of deep spiritual surrender to God combined with intense spiritual yearning [shitṭiyāq]—far from something done deliberately from self-will, out of physical pleasure and excitement, or to impress viewers.

Dhu 'n-Nūn al-Misrī (died, 859 CE) said: "Audition is a divine influence (wānīd al-Ḥaqq) which stirs the heart to seek God: those who listen to it spiritually (ba-Ḥaqq) attain unto God (taḥaqqāqa) and those who listen to it sensually (ba-nafs) fall into heresy (tazandaqa)."—translated by Nicholson, quoted by Hujwiri

The practice of audition (which may also be translated as the "mystical concert") spread most rapidly among Persian sufis, and it became so popular that it became corrupted early on by groups that ignored the rules—to such an extent that leading sufis declared samāʾ to be forbidden [Ḥarām] to such people. Here is what Hujwiri (died, 1071 CE) wrote:

"Foolish aspirants to Sufism, seeing the adepts absorbed in ecstasy during audition (samāʾ), imagined that they were acting from a sensual impulse and said, 'It is lawful, else they would not have done so,' and imitated them, taking up the form but neglected the spirit, until they perished themselves and led others into perdition. This is one of the evils of our time. I will set it forth in the proper time... It's lawfulness depends on circumstances and cannot be asserted absolutely: if audition produces a lawful effect on the mind, then it is lawful; it is unlawful if the effect is unlawful, and permissible if the effect is permissible... Auditors may be divided into two classes: those who hear the spiritual meaning [maʾnā n]... those who hear the material sound..."—translated by Nicholson

"You must know that dancing (raqs) has no foundation either in the religious law (of Islam) or in the path (of Sufism), because all reasonable men agree that it is a diversion when it is in earnest, and an impropriety (baghw) when it is in jest. None of the Shaykhs has commended it or exceeded due bounds therein, and all the traditions cited in it favour by anthropomorphists are worthless. But since ecstatic movements [Ḥarakāt-i wajḍ] and the practices of those who endeavour to induce ecstasy (ahl-i taʾawūḍ) resemble it, some frivolous imitators have indulged in it immoderately and have made it a religion. I have met with a number of common people who adopted Sufism and believed that it is this (dancing) and nothing more. Others have condemned it altogether. In short, all foot-play is bad in law and reason, by whomever it is practised, and the best of mankind cannot possibly practise it; but when the heart throbs with exhilaration and rapture becomes intense and the agitation of ecstasy is manifested and conventional forms are gone, that agitation (Ditrāb) is neither dancing nor foot-play nor bodily indulgence, but a glorification of the soul [lāh-godāktārīan]. Those who call it 'dancing' are utterly wrong. It is a state that cannot be explained in words: 'without experience no knowledge.'"—translated by Nicholson

"The rules of audition prescribe that it should not be practised until it comes (of its own accord), and that you must not make a habit of it, but practise it seldom, in order that you may not cease to hold it in reverence. It is necessary that a spiritual director [pir] be present during the performances, and that the place should be cleared of common people, and that the singer should be a respectable person, and that the heart should be emptied of worldly thoughts, and that the disposition should not be inclined to amusement, and that every artificial effort (takallūf) should be put aside. You must not exceed the proper bounds until audition manifests its power and when it has become powerful you must not repel it but must follow it as it requires. If it agitates, you must be agitated, and if it calms, you must be calm; and you must be able to distinguish a strong natural impulse from the ardour of ecstasy (wajḍ)... I think it would be more desirable that beginners should not be allowed to attend musical concerts (samāʾ hā), lest their natures become depraved. These concerts are extremely dangerous and corrupting, because women on the roofs or elsewhere look at the dervishes who are engaged in audition; and in consequence of this the auditors have great obstacles to encounter. Or it may happen that a young reprobate may join the party, since some ignorant Sufis have made a religion (madhhab) of all this and have flung truth [Ṣidq-i maʾnā] to the winds."—translated by R.A. Nicholson, *Kashf Al-Mahjub of Al-Hujwiri: The Oldest Persian Treatise on Sufism*, words in double brackets added by I. Gamaral

In the time of Mawānā Rūmī, samāʾ was practiced as it had been among Persian sufis for four hundred years—spontaneous, unplanned spiritual movements inspired by mystical poetry and mystical music (usually only one or two instrumentalists). The earliest Persian sources often state that Mawāna participated in samāʾ—not whirling [charkhīdan], as has been incorrectly translated and misunderstood in Turkey. According to the earliest biography, Mawāna did not participate in such gatherings until after he met Shams-i Tabrizī, who indicated to him, "Enter into the audition, for that which you are seeking will become increased in the audition" [dar samāʾ dar ā, ke ān-che Talab-i dar samāʾ ziyāda khwāh-ad shodan]. Audition has been forbidden [Ḥarām] to the common people because they become engaged with the desires of the base ego [bar ḥawāy-i nafs] (see *Ṣeṣāʾlār, Zendaḡ-nāma-yi mawānā jalāluddīn mawlānī*, p. 65). According to another early biography, Rumi's son said that when his father began to participate in audition, he would mainly wave his hands (in praise of God), but that later, Shams-i Tabrizī showed him how to whirl [charkhī zadan] (Alfākī, *Manāqib al-ʿArifīn*, p. 681). However, the sources rarely state that he whirled. Two such cases are well-known: when he heard the pounding of the millers of goldsmiths and when he stood before a creaking windmill. In sum, samāʾ ("Sema" in Turkish) should not be translated as "whirling" and Rūmī should not be called the originator of Sema. Whirling was only one feature of samāʾ for centuries. Of the several thousand lyric poems [ghazaliyyāt] and quatrains [rubāʾiyyāt] that Rūmī composed, most of them were probably intended to be used in samāʾ, (which is probably why the Mevlevi ordered all the ghazaliyyāt according to twenty-three poetic meters in one early manuscript—making it easier to sing multiple poems in the same meter). Here is what Mowānā Rūmī said about samāʾ:

"Feet-pounding, hand-waving in praise (of God), exulting in the glory (of God), [and exclaiming], "O our Lord, You have brought us to life! [Q:40:11] [pāy-kōbān dast-afshān dar Sanāʾ nāz-nāznān rabba-nā aḥyāya-nā—*Masnawī* I: 367g]

Here is what Rūmī's teacher said about samāʾ:

"The men of God have more of this disclosure [tajallī] and vision [rūʾyān] of God in the sama. They have come out of their own existence, and the sama brings them out of other worlds, so they reach the encounter with the Real [Ḥaqq] in Haqq]. In short, there is a sama that is forbidden [Ḥarām]. In fact, he was kind to say it is forbidden. A sama like that is unbelief [kufr]. A hand that is raised without that state [Ḥālat] will certainly be chastised by the fire of hell [and a hand that is raised in that state will certainly reach to paradise]. There is a sama that is allowable [mubāḥ], and that is the sama of the folk of ascetic discipline and asceticism, which brings them to tears and tenderness. There is a sama that is incumbent [farīḍa], and that is the sama of the folk of states [āḥ-i Ḥāl]. [Since it is an essential requirement [farz-i ʿayn], such as the five (daily) prayers and the fast of Ramadan, and like the consuming of water and bread at the time of extreme need], it is an essential obligation for the companions of states] because it is an aid to their lives."—from the *Discourses of Shams-i Tabrizī* (Maqālāt-i shams-i tabrizī, pp. 72-74), selected translations by William Chittick, published as *Me and Rumi: The Autobiography of Shams-i Tabrizī*, pp. 277-78; words in brackets added by I. Gamaral)

Samāʾ among Rūmī's descendants and followers (known as Mawlawī or Mevlevī) continued to be spontaneous until the time of Rūmī's great-grandson Pir ʿAdl Chelebi (died 1460), when it became more ritualized and began to take the form it has today as a "whirling prayer ceremony," a specified and fixed choreographed ritual based on circular movements. This circular format enabled whirlers to strongly concentrate on the remembrance of God by stepping with the right foot at the end of each rotation in time with the drum beat of the music and the the silent repetition of the name of God (Allāh) in the heart. The rhythmic beat also aided the other Mevlevi present at the ritual concentrate on their own internal repetition of the Divine name. The whirlers were trained to whirl at the same speed together and to maintain the same physical position in order to facilitate an attitude of selflessness and to discourage individual display of spiritual passions, including states of ecstasy.

To someone who has not experienced the benefit of rhythmic sound and simple physical movement in helping to concentrate and go deeper into God-centered states of consciousness, one can only quote the Arabic saying, "He who does not taste does not know" [man lam yadhuq lā yuḍī]. When individual sufis or a group of sufis are engaged in simple repetitive movements, it should be understood that they are engaged in the remembrance [dhikr] of God. If they are sitting in a circle or line, they are exerting themselves in pure worship. And if they are standing in a circle or line, they are immersed in concentrated worship—not dancing. Whether audible or inaudible, sufis repeat various sacred words and phrases from (or derived from) the Qurʾān in Arabic, sometimes together with physical movements, such as: "There is no divinity except (only) God" [lā ilāha illā Allāh—Q:47:10], "except (only) God" [ilā Allāh, illā Allāh], "God, God" [allāh, allāh], "He is God" [huwa Allāh—Q. 112:1], "God is One" [allāhu aḥad—Q.112:1], "God is He" [allāh ḥu—Q.3:1], "O Living, Eternal One" [yā Hayy yā qayyūm—based on Q:3:2], "Glory be to God" [subḤāna Allāh—Q.12:108]. "The praise is to God" [al-Ḥamdu li-illāh—Q:1:1].

Mevlevi Sema generally took place once a week following the noon-time Friday congregational prayer. Every Mevlevi center throughout the Ottoman Empire had a Sema hall (Semahane), where Sema was done privately. The Mevlevi community would gather for Sema (women Mevlevi had a separate entrance and stairway to a room with a screen through which the Sema could be viewed). Each whirler [semazen] was not a "dancer," but a "rememberer of God" [dhikrī], who generally had years of training to silently repeat the name of God in his heart in every step of his rotation. The whirlers did not perform for an audience; rather, they inspired the whole Mevlevi community to strongly concentrate on maintaining the silent dhikr of the Mevlevi ("Allāh, Allāh"). As in the ancient (spontaneous) samāʾ, the Shaykh's immersion into spiritual movement was considered to be more profoundly surrendered to God than that of his disciples, so his participation came last. In the Mevlevi ritual, the Shaykh whirled slowly in the middle of the whirling hall. He symbolically "tears" his cloak by holding the front of his mantle in a certain way—reminiscent of how, in the ancient samāʾ, the shaykh would tear his cloak in a state of spiritual ecstasy, after which his disciples would eagerly compete to grab pieces to sew on to their own cloaks for a blessing [baraka].

The most prominent Mevlevi Shaykh of the late Ottoman Empire, Rusūkhuddīn Ismāʾīl Anqarawī (died, 1631), wrote a book in defense of Sema entitled, *Argument in Proof of Audition* ("Hujjat al-ī-samāʾ"), which was approved by the Shaykhu l-Islām, the highest authority on Islamic law in the Empire.

A number of sufi orders in Turkey had a circular format [dawrān, devran] to their weekly communal dhikr rituals. For example, the Helveti-Jerrahi sufi men hold hands in a circle and step to the left at the same time. All sufi (devran) sufi rituals were condemned as "dancing" by the opponents of the sufis. Anti-sufi jurists/pundits had condemned the practice of samāʾ in Rūmī's time, and since then. Usually, the Mevlevi and other sufis were protected by supporters in high positions (including the Sultan and the Shaykhu l-Islām) who were themselves sufis or who were sympathetic to sufis. There was one exception: The Kadizadelis managed to get Sema (and all dance-like sufi rituals) banned in Istanbul from 1665-1684. Then in 1925, the secular Turkish State made all sufi orders illegal and confiscated their buildings.

Starting in the early 1950's, after being banned for nearly thirty years, Mevlevi Sema was permitted again, for tourists—not as a spiritual ritual of the remembrance of God, but as a form of "Turkish folk dancing" to be done in basketball stadiums and theater stages in front of ticket-paying audiences. For many years, Sema was allowed only once a year in Konya on the solar eclipse anniversary of Mevlāna Rūmī's death—changed to the Western solar calendar (December 17) from the lunar Islamic calendar (5 Jumada II), when it had been memorialized for almost seven centuries. Later, the December Sema was done in Istanbul. Later still, Sema was performed in Konya and Istanbul to commemorate Mevlāna Rumi's birthday on September 30—which had not been a Mevlevi custom. Early on, the Ministry of Culture and Tourism compromised with the Mevlevi and permitted recitation from the Qurʾān at the end of the Sema, as was done traditionally. The Ministry also accepted that the direct descendant of the last Grand Chelebi of the Ottoman Empire (whose official position as the leader of the Mevlevi Order was abolished in 1925) had the sole authority to appoint a new Sema leader (called "Postneshin"—and formerly, "Shaykh"). An exception to this occurred when the Ministry formed its own professional group of musicians and whirlers in Istanbul, on its own authority, a new Postneshin to lead Sema.

Nowadays, the whirlers generally know little about sufism, or if they do, they may not even identify themselves as Mevlevi, but as members of other sufi orders. And they may or may not be committed to the basic religious practices of Islam. They lack sufi/dervish training, so very few whirlers are genuine "whirling dervishes." Since they whirl in front of an audience, they are subject to the temptation to impress the audience with their performances, which can lead to pretension and hypocrisy. If the call to prayer is sounded, the Sema does not stop. Few whirlers maintain a valid ritual ablution (wuḍūʾ), a traditional requirement for participating in Sema. The sheepskin on which the Mevlevi ceremony leader, or Postneshin, is supposed to be placed pointing to the prayer direction [qibla] toward Mecca; this is disregarded when the Sema takes place on theater stages. The musicians seem to have little identification as Mevlevi; rather, they have been academically trained to play Turkish sufi music. And few, if any, of the musicians who sing Mevlāna Rūmī's poetic verses in Persian During Sema know the meaning of the syllables they are vocalizing.

Traditionally, Mevlevi lodges were financially supported by numerous kinds of endowment [waqf], after basic expenses, wages and management fees were paid, the profits received from a single farm or business owned by a Mevlevi lodge might continue for centuries. After 1925, all endowments supporting sufi lodges were ended. Today, Sema whirlers are paid only at the minimum, their travel, laundry, and meal expenses; Sema musicians may be paid more. The money comes from ticket sales. In other words, they are paid to perform for an audience that expects to be pleased. In this regard, Sema in Turkey is both a spiritual performance and a type of business. Some whirlers leave the Sema group, after they have received the training and garments, and become self-employed, whirling at weddings and for tourists in hotels. The other source of money comes from the Turkish government: the Ministry of Culture and Tourism employs two groups of Sema musicians (one in Konya, the other in Istanbul) and one group of whirlers (in Konya). These professional Sema groups fly all over Turkey to give performances. In other words, they are paid to perform Sema according to high standards, not for the purpose of mystical prayer and glorifying God, but to make audiences happy and proud about their Turkish "folklore" traditions.

The Turkish government, through the Ministry of Culture and Tourism has exploited Mevlevi Sema so that it has degenerated into a public performance detached from it's original purpose. The Turks (including many Mevlevi) seem to be unaware of this and seem quite happy with the "whirling dervish" performances, which are extremely popular. The Islamic roots and symbolism of Mevlevi Sema are largely forgotten, and few seem to care.

Mevlevi Sema has become so secularized and corrupted that some Muslim readers of this article may conclude that Mevlevi Sema, controversial for centuries even when done privately, should be viewed as completely forbidden [Ḥarām] for Muslims to participate in, now that it is done publicly.

However, here is a different view: It is not the fault of the Mevlevi that all their lodges (including private Sema halls) were confiscated by the government, that their weekly dhikr ritual was allowed to be done only in front of audiences, or that they had to accept whirling with little or no knowledge of Mevlevi Islamic sufi traditions. Mevlevi have been trying to keep their tradition alive despite great adversities. For decades, after 1925, they were spied on and arrested and, therefore, fearful of meeting together. When Sema was permitted again for tourists in the 1950's, this was also a renewal for the surviving Mevlevi. Without the revival of Sema at that time, it is unlikely that there would be more than a few Mevlevi left today.

In spite of everything that is wrong with Sema today, Mevlevi rituals are justified in participating in it for the following reasons: Maintaining the Sema ritual today may enable it to be restored in the future. God willing, to its original function as a private dhikr for Mevlevi. It is a communal dhikr ritual of great spiritual value and beauty as part of the Islamic sufi heritage. It expresses sublime Islamic mystical themes derived from the Qurʾān (such as turning or returning to God, remembering God often in the heart, and the joy of the elect of God after the Resurrection). To the extent that the Postneshin or Shaykh and only a single whirler are immersed in glorifying God by silently repeating the name of God in their hearts and are oblivious of the audience, that is the degree that the traditional Mevlevi Sema is authentic. It is also important that Sema should continue to be done as a concentrated whirling prayer, as much as is possible and in spite of all the obstacles, because it is derived from the spiritual practices of the great Muslim sufi saint, Jalāluddīn Rūmī. And, finally, unless sincere Mevlevi Muslims continue to participate in the Sema ritual, it is doubtful that what remains of the Mevlevi tradition of Islamic sufism can survive.

Instead of taking a narrower, either/or approach by asking whether Sema should be permitted or forbidden to Muslims according to Islamic law [sharʿi ah], perhaps it is better to take a broader approach by following the example of authorities on the ancient samāʾ, who stated that it should be different for certain kinds of individuals. The following are suggested as possibilities (keeping in mind that legal judgments in Islam should be made by those who are qualified): Certainly, Sema should be forbidden [Ḥarām] to those who do it primarily for worldly reasons such as physical excitement, money, social status, personal vanity, and the admiration of others; for them it is little more than dancing in public for show. Since Sema is almost always done in front of an audience that views it as a kind of "folk dancing to music" (perhaps with some idea that it is also spiritual), it is hard to propose that it could have a higher status than disliked [makrūh] in Islamic law. But perhaps, being more liberal, it could be whirled as permissible [mubāh] only for the most sincere Mevlevi: the Postneshins and whirlers who are engaged in spiritual movements for the glorification of God alone, and who are detached or oblivious of the presence of an audience; for them it is not "dancing," but authentic worship in the Islamic sufi way.

Now, let us examine how Sema can be presented more accurately. Sema has been described for many years using mostly secular and idealistic explanations, in order to make it attractive to as many people as possible. However, Sema is so popular now that it can be explained differently, in a way that connects it to its roots in Turkish sufism [taṣawwuf, taṣawwuf] and Islam. Sema [samāʾ] is a ritual for worshipping God. Sema is not a whirling dance performance; it is a whirling prayer ceremony. Sema was the weekly ritual of the remembrance of God [dhikr] [lāh, zikirullah] for the Mevlevi community, in which everyone (semazens, musicians, postneshin, semabāsh, other Mevlevi, and women Mevlevi in the past) made the same silent "remembering of God" ("Allāh") in their hearts together in the Sema hall [samāʾ khāna, semahane]. Repeating the Name of God ("Allāh, Allāh") was the zikir done by Hz. Mevlāna, as well as his father.

It is similar to the weekly zikir ritual of other Turkish Sufi orders in that there is a sitting part, a standing part, and a circling part [dawrān, devran] (for example, in the devran part of the Helveti-Jerrahi zikir, the men hold hands in a circle and step to the left at the same time). Whirling in Sufism was probably inspired by the verse in the Koran, "Whichever way you turn, there is the Face of God" (Q.2:115). Sufis developed many forms of zikir because the Koran commands zikir (such as, "Remember God with much mention"—Q.33:41). Whirling in Sema is a special way of concentrating on the Name of God in the heart. The semazen or whirlers, are not supposed to be the stars of the show. They are admired by an audience that is busy choosing its "favorite performers." Rather, every semazen should be the servant of the Whirling Prayer Ceremony and the rememberer of God [zikrī], under the spiritual leadership of the postneshin, or Mevlevi shaykh.

There is important Islamic symbolism in Sema. The red sheepskin [pōst, post] upon which the postneshin [pōst-neshin] sits and stands is supposed to face the prayer-direction [qibla, kible] toward Mecca. The tall hat [sikke] of a Mevlevi symbolizes his tombstone, so that he should be dead to worldly concerns. At the end of the sitting part of the ceremony, the semazens and their two leaders (the postneshin and the chief of the semazens [semazenbazen]) stand up after a loud drumbeat (which represents the Trumpet sound that starts the Resurrection of the Dead). They then do a slow walking ritual (which represents the solemnity of the Day of Judgment) and complete three circlings (which symbolize the first three circumambulations [ṭawāf] of the Kaʿba in Mecca). After that, the whiteners come out from their black cloaks (symbolizing their graves) and begin to whirl in white garments (symbolizing their grave clothes). Here, the semazens represent the joyous souls that have been blessed by God: "O soul at peace! enter among My servants and enter My Paradise" (Q.89:27). The semazens complete four sections of circlings (which symbolize the final four circumambulations of the Kaʿaba in Mecca). Going round in a circle also symbolizes the soul's journey from God into the world and the return to it's origin: "We belong to God and our return is to Him" (Q.2:156).

People who introduce Sema to an audience could briefly explain the above and then invite the audience to silently chant "Allah, Allah" in their hearts to the beat of the drums (or to silently chant "God," "Almighty God," or "God is Love," and so on in their own languages) during the entire Sema.

Introducers should stop saying that Hz. Mevlāna said the words, "Come, come, whoever you are, even if you are an unbeliever [kāfir] or a Zoroastrian or an idol-worshiper"—because that is not his poem. It is a quatrain [rubai] of Abu Saʿid Ibn Abi l-Khayr, who died in 1048 CE (159 years before Mevlāna was born). Dr. Nuri Shmshketir of Seljuk University in Konya has confirmed this. And the late Mevlevi shaykh and scholar, Shefik Jāiri, has said that it is not Mevlāna's quatrain.

Introducers should stop saying that Hz. Mevlāna accepted people of all religions. He doesn't say that in any of his true poetry. There is only one story in which some Jewish rabbis visited him, supposedly as part of a group that included Christian monks; another story told his exile poetess wife greeting Christian monks. However, the end of these stories, Alfākī admitted that they all became Muslims after meeting him. He had one disciple who had been a Christian named Divyānūs, but who became a Muslim and was given the name 'Alā'uddīn. In *Masnawī* and *Therāʾāt Kabīr*, Mevlāna mentions black-skinned Hindus as slaves or as symbols of "darkness" (contrasted with Turks as symbols of "light") but nothing about Hindu religion. And when he said, "The speech of the country of India is made in the name of God" (for the Himālayas and the Himalayas), he meant the Muslims of India (who had, by then, lived along the Indus River for over five hundred years)—not the polytheists and idolaters of India. The story of Mevlāna's funeral should not be told in this way as it may imply that people of all the world's religions attended his funeral. When Alfākī wrote that "all the religious communities [jamiʾ-i milal] and their leaders were present," he meant the religious communities present then in Konya. And he specified: "... were present, including the Christians and the Jews." He did not refer to people of any other religious groups were present (such as Zoroastrians, Hindus, Buddhists, Taoists, Manicheans, etc.)—which would be unbelievable in any case.

Introducers should stop talking about exalted spiritual states experienced by the semazens from whirling—such as saying they achieve "annihilation (of ego) in God" (fanā fi llāh) in the third selām and then return to serve the world in the fourth selām; or that they achieve "the truth of Certainty" [ḥaqqu l-yaqīn] in the fourth selām; or that they receive divine blessing [baraka, barakat] with their right hands and give it to the world with their left hands; or that they experience ecstasy [wajḍ, veccid] or oneness [ittihād] with God. This is Sufi theory about spiritual stages that has become a kind of "promotional advertising," especially when referring to performers on stage in theaters. Besides, ecstasy is not the goal of Sema, but one of its possible blessings. The goal of Sema is to concentrate on the remembrance of God [zikru l'ilāh]; to forget oneself during the zikir of Sema and to remember only the Most Beloved.

And, finally, people who introduce Sema should quote only authentic verses from Mevlāna's poetry, especially those about love of God. The audiences do not know that some of Mevlāna's verses are sung in Persian during Sema. Members of the audience could be given one-page handouts with the poetic verses translated into Turkish and English. Some brief explanations would be needed to explain the symbolism of some frequently misunderstood Sufi terms, for example: that "wine" and "drunkenness" refer to spiritual states of consciousness and not to alcoholic wine; that "idol" refers to the Sufi master (often Shams-i Tabrizī) and his spiritual beauty which attracts the love and devotion of his disciples (and not a carved idol); and that "unbelief" [kufr] may refer to the rejection or preoccupation with things of the world [dunyā] (and not the rejection of God).