

**Between Hearing (*samâ'*) and Perceiving (*wajd*):
neuropsychological considerations for the study of the healing
potential of the Mevlevi *Samâ'***

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Abstract

*In the field of Dance Anthropology, the concept of 'ecstatic dance' has been used generically to refer to African, Afro-Brazilian, Middle Eastern and Shaman dances. Researchers as Jennings (1995), Baxman (1990), Gore (1995) and Camargo (1996) have begun to employ the concept more specifically, but very little is known about how these dances are induced. As a dance anthropologist, I turned to other fields of analysis – such as Neuropsychology and Ethnomusicology – in order to obtain hypotheses that could illuminate my understanding of the trance induction process (including its healing potential) in Mevlevi *Samâ'*. In *Samâ'*, the main repetitive and trance-inducing action seems to be the spinning dance itself, a Sufi method of dynamic meditation that aims to awaken the subtle organs of perception (*lataif*), opening the individual's consciousness to its greatest potential. According to ethnomusicologist Gilbert Rouget (1985), the relationship between *samâ'* (hearing) and *wajd* (perceiving) is so close that the word *samâ'* could mean 'trance state': "Know that *samâ'* [...] brings to fruit a state in the heart that is called perception or trance (*wajd*)". On the realities of 'trance' and 'hearing', Al-Ghazzali wrote: "*wajd* is the expression for what is found (*yujadu*) through hearing (*samâ'*)".*

Keywords

Ecstatic Dance. Trance ritual. Sufi dance. Whirling Dervishes. *Samâ'*.

In Anthropology of Dance or Ethnochoreology, the analytical category 'ecstatic dance' encompasses a wide range of psycho-physical practices whose common feature is to produce certain altered states of consciousness in their performers/participants.

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Those dances are often associated with African and Afro-Brazilian trance-dances, Middle Eastern dances, and Central Asian Shamanism. Researchers such as Jennings (1995), who have examined the healing potential of ecstatic dances from the participants point of views; Baxman (1990), who studied the hypnotic dances of the twenties; Gore (1995), who investigated the role of rhythm in trance; and Camargo (2006), who related the repetitive spinning action with the activation of subtle centers of perception started to begun to employ the concept more specifically, but very little is known about how these dances are induced.

Because of this need, anthropologists are impelled to turn to other fields of analysis, such as Neuropsychology and Ethnomusicology, in order to obtain hypotheses about why certain rituals induce participants to trance:

Ethnographers have returned from the field with intriguing reports of the unusual behavior of ritual participants. These reports, although far from agreement in their classification, interpretation or observational rigor, point to the impact of standardized and repetitive actions on the human nervous system (Lex 117).

In Mevlevi *Samâ*’, as we will see further, the main repetitive and trance-inducing action seems to be the spinning dance itself, a Sufi method of dynamic meditation that aims to search for intuitive knowledge through the awakening of ‘special faculties’ or subtle organs of perceptions (*lataif*)², analogous to the Hindu *chakras*. Dance is part of the set of meditative techniques used in Sufism in order to suspend the disciple's conditioned thought and emotion, opening consciousness to its greatest potential.

² *Lataif* corresponds, in Arabic, to the plural of *latifa*: incipient organ of spiritual perception; place of purity; lighting location; center where *baraka* (divine grace, spiritual influence, impalpable beauty) is subtly manifested. The name *lataif* also designates the process that begins with the awakening and activation of subtleties, passing through the refinement of perception and, finally, the dissipation of conditioned thinking or automatic thinking. Properly activated, these subtle organs, according to Sufi mystics, develop in the person qualities such as goodness, softness, gift and delicacy. The brilliance of these subtleties is called *tadjali*.

The word *samâ'* means, properly 'hearing' or 'listening', referring to one of the divine names or attributes revealed in the Quran (*ya-samí*, the one who hears everything). Although, for many scholars of Sufism, the *Samâ'* only designates the entirety of the dancing ceremony of the Mevlevi dervishes or Whirling Dervishes, Sufi masters prior to Rûmî described it with emphasis on its original meaning, that is, as a ritual that essentially consists of listening to the Quran, poetry or a specific type of music.

This ritual, as described by the Sufi master Al-Ghazzali (1059-1111) in his *Kitb adab al-Samâ' y wa al-wajd* ('*The Book of correct uses of Hearing and Perception*'), consisted of collective ceremony of dervishes made of prayer, poetry, music and dance. Its proposal was communion with the Divine through perception/trance (*wajd*).

Thus, concluded the ethnomusicologist Gilbert Rouget (1985) in his chapter 'Music and Trance among the Arabs', the relationship between *samâ'* (hearing) and *wajd* (perception/trance) is so close that the word *samâ'* could mean 'trance state': "*Know that samâ' [...] makes fruitful a state in the heart that is called perception/trance (wajd)*" (Rouget 256).

Still, according to Rouget, if we took the meaning of the word to the extreme, we could also say that *Samâ'* means 'music', since it comes from the root *s.m.a.* (listening, hearing), denoting, in a first and general sense, the act of listening or hearing, without any reference to any particular acoustic phenomenon. However, in traditional Sufi texts, the verb 'listen' is always associated with an implicit object, "*which is either poetry, the Koran, or music, though a particular kind of music only*" (Rouget 256).

Would be this the reason why Al-Ghazzali did not use the Arabic word *musiqi* (derived from Greek) to refer to the Sufi practice in question? According to Rouget, the reasons can be enumerated as follow: first, the word *musiqi* denoted the rules or art of music, but not music itself, as a product of art, in the concrete sense; second, because *musiqi* referred more to the musical composition's rules than to the listener of the music, and it was, precisely, the listener who interested him, not the musician. And the third reason for not using the word *musiqi* was because it did not connote any moral value, as its rules are applied to all types of music, and not that performed for spiritual purposes.

From Al-Ghazzali's point of view, which seems to be, essentially, to find a moral justification for *Samâ'*, 'lawful music' (as opposed to 'profane music') would be that which accompanies, for example, a recitation of mystical poetry or that which follows after reading the Quran (*taghbir*).

This music should be played with permitted musical instruments, that is, instruments that are not associated with reprehensible³ musical practices. And yet, his 'audition' would demand, from both, listeners and performers, feelings and thoughts that were high enough:

It is permissible to hear only what a person hears when he/she, himself/herself, is in a certain state of inner purity. It is not just what is sung or played that counts; it is also the listener's disposition. Listened with a pure heart, music becomes lawful, just as it ceases to be lawful if listened to in a lascivious state of mind. This delimitation of the repertoire (Quran and poetry, accompanied by song) [...] is precisely what is appropriate for the word *samâ'* (Rouget 257).

This conceptual pattern of reality to which the word *samâ'* corresponds is not, according to Rouget, comparable to any other, much less that of the word 'music', as we conceive it in the West. In this way, he concludes, the range of options for 'hearing' (*samâ'*) is, in the Sufi context, restricted to poetry, the Quran and 'lawful music', and these three elements combined, for the simple reason that they constitute a particular sound.

Thus, this category of sounds (the objects of 'hearing') is not constituted only by the intrinsic qualities of its three components; the fact that it is heard also gives it meanings, since its existence is only confirmed insofar as it is perceived by the ear, and insofar as it affects listening.

Let's, therefore, to move on to the relationship between *samâ'* ('hearing') and *wajd* (encounter/perception/trance). Speaking about

³ This exclusion of some musical instruments – with the exception of the drum (*kudum*) and the flute (*ney*) – was the way that some Sufis found to protect *Samâ'* from possible accusations of heresy, arising from Islamic orthodoxy. It is known, however, that before, after and during the time of Al-Ghazzali, other instruments were also used, such as the lute, *rebab*, *ud*, *tambur*, *kanun* and *kemençe*.

the reality of ‘trance’ for Sufis and the reality of ‘hearing’ for the soul, Al-Ghazzali wrote: “*wajd* is the expression for what is found (*yujadu*) through hearing (*samâ*)”. The word comes from the root *w.j.d.* and also designates, as the word *samâ*, one of the 99 divine attributes found in the Quran – *ya wajid* (the one who finds).

According to the Al-Ghazzali’s ‘right uses’ (*adab*), one should not abandon oneself in the ‘trance’, unless that state was really strong. On the contrary, during the ‘trance’ the person should try to dominate it: “So don’t think that the person who throws himself/herself on the ground, agitated, is more perfect than that which remains without agitation. Often the most perfect trance is that of one who has remained serene” (Rouget 260).

Once this state of ‘trance’ has been achieved, it is externalized through dance, which is nothing other than the translation of music into action. In this way, the person who participates in the *Samâ*’ (we are talking about the *Samâ*’ of the 11th century) listens to music, but does not perform it, either as a musician (performer) neither as a ‘*musicater*’ (performer and listener, at the same time), except, perhaps, when they clap their hands. Conversely, the musicians – singers or instrumentalists – are there only to provide the music, and not to actually participate in the *Samâ*’, in the sense that they are not seeking any divine contact, that is, they are not seeking the encounter/trance (*wajd*).

Unlike the classical *Samâ*’, which can be reconstructed through the writings of Al-Ghazzali and his brother Ahmad, the *Samâ*’ of the Mevlevi (‘Dancing Dervishes’) is characterized by the fact that dance is not the result of ‘trance’, but rather its cause.

In classical *Samâ*’ it is the ‘trance’ that prompts the participants to dance, while in Mevlevi *Samâ*’ occurs the opposite. Just like the classical *Samâ*’, the Mevlevi *Samâ*’ begins with a session devoted to prayers and invocations, followed by listening to music (usually a flute), which the adepts listen to while seated, without any mention of bodily movement. At a given moment, between the silence of the flute and the first beat of the drum, they get up, starting a walk around the environment. This is accompanied by a concert of various instruments. After three circumambulations (*devri-veledi*), the dervishes remove their cloaks and begin to spin.

There are four cycles of tours, also accompanied by four musical sessions, with different rhythms.

In line with the conclusions of Gilbert Rouget, when comparing the classical *Samâ*' with the Mevlevi *Samâ*', I hypothesize that the main repetitive action that leads to 'trance', in the latter, is the spinning dance itself:

[...] they don't wait to go into trance and then start spinning, in other words, dancing. On the contrary, it is the motion dance spin itself that "leads them to ecstasy, or, as I prefer to say, to trance". This trance is, however, the result of the adepts' own action. Regarding his entrance into trance, the adept is already active. He is the protagonist, through his dance, of his own entrance into trance. The subject's intention is involved in a way not found in classical *Samâ*', in which the adept simply suffers, first, the effects of the music to reach trance, expressing it through the movements of his dance (Rouget 286).

As we have seen, in the current *Samâ*', dance seems to be the main conductor of meditation (which does not mean that cannot have induction), while in the classical *Samâ*', the induction was clearly through music, since the dervishes only began to spin after they were already in a meditative state, induced by the rhythm of the music. Regarding rhythm, as a trance-inducing factor, we can consider Gore's hypothesis:

Musical rhythmic themes operate as a language. And it is when the rhythm comes into total conformity with his speech, when submission to its order becomes absolute, that, paradoxically, the dancing subject can [...] anchor himself in the mesh [...] of the symbolic unconscious, to enter into a trance or possession (Gore, 1995).

Through this quick comparison, we arrive at the fundamental difference between the two types of 'trance': while the 'trance' of classical *Samâ*' is "induced" by music, the second is 'led' by dance. Let's see what Rouget says about the two modalities:

'Induced' trance means that the subject is 'musicated', in other words ['tranced'] by music provided by others than himself, and that his dance is first and foremost the effect

and not the cause of his trance; ‘conducted trance’ means that the subject engenders his own action as a ‘musicant’(Rouget 288).

Sensory overload resulting from the action of inductors and/or conductors of altered states of consciousness should be considered a key factor for understanding the ‘trance’. Here we refer to the work of Lex and Ornstein (Lex 125), in the field of Neuropsychology, who offer explanations about the effects of ‘trance’ on the hemispheres of the brain. According to them, practices that stimulate the senses enhance the activity of the right hemisphere of the brain, which results in a change in the state of consciousness.

This is very evident in *Samâ*, in which ‘selective hypervigilance’ (concentration with which the person blocks out everything that is outside his focus of attention) –provoked by the action of musical rhythm and the repetition of highly complex movement patterns – bombards the person with a variety of sensory activities that are more attributable to right hemisphere responses, such as ‘spatial and tonal perception’ and ‘pattern recognition’(Lex 125). Let's see how this definition resonates with Simpson's description of the ‘trance’ of a contemporary whirling dervish:

The person is engaged in listening to music and prayer, and feeling the rise of body temperature induced by the ritual's heavy clothes and intense activity. In addition, the person has to perform the spin by focusing on the thumb of the left hand, concentrating on the patterned rhythmic movements of the legs, and maintaining awareness of the other spinners in space (Simpson, 1997).

Seen from the perspective of their relationship with dance and music, both – the ‘trance’ described above (Mevlevi) and the one described by Al-Ghazzali – can be considered, according to Rouget’s classification, ‘ritualized trances’ (differentiating themselves from the non-ritualized’) – ‘religious’ (as opposed to ‘profane’). Its relation, which is of ‘communion’, oscillates between the ‘possessive trance’ (‘involuntary trance’ in which spirits or gods visit the world of men) and the ‘shamanic trance’ (‘voluntary trance’ in which man visits the world of the spirits). So,

somewhere between possession and shamanism, the relationship of ‘communion’ with the Divine occurs:

He experiences the situation as an abrupt encounter – the true meaning of the word *wajd* – a revelation, an enlightenment. Therefore, the emotional aspect of the process, a very striking aspect because this encounter takes place imbued with passion, since the love of God, which inspires desire and search, is always more or less impregnated with eroticism – sublimated or not, nothing changes (Rouget 296-297).

It is important to note, however, that in the context of traditional esoteric philosophies, where we place *Samâ*’ and, by extension, Sufism, the recent discovery of right hemisphere activation in intuitive cognition should not reduce the mental aspects of esoteric knowledge to functioning on the right side of the brain, because knowing that these processes occur in the right hemisphere does not mean knowing how the brain works (Ornstein 34-35). It is necessary, rather, to study the ‘trigger mechanism(s)’ that induce these processes in their particular contexts.

But, if we studied only these ‘trigger mechanisms’ – such as, for example, the repetitive action of dance – we would continue to reinforce scientific reductionism, which assumes that man can be studied from outside and that knowledge and consciousness can be fully reflected in words and actions.

This view is the result of Western ‘rationalism’, a scientific paradigm that believes in the sequential procedures of analysis, explanation and verification (activities associated with the left side of the brain), as opposed to the supposedly ‘incomprehensible’ disciplines and theories of the East, based on a complementary way of thinking of consciousness, which Western rationalism erroneously calls ‘irrationalism’, but which is actually what might be called ‘intuitive thinking’, processed in the right side of the brain and expressed in insights, creative inspiration, or in the form of a comprehensive awareness of the relationships between ideas and objects. The way each one operates, according to Ornstein, is explained in different ways:

The logical way of thinking operates sequentially, arriving at a truth inferentially, proceeding logically from one element to another. Intuition operates simultaneously, it concerns the set

of relationships between elements, which receive their meaning from the totality of the holistic context (Ornstein 26).

The predominance of the logical way of thinking, typical of Western culture, generated what Ornstein calls ‘cultural hemianopia [blindness]’, a disorder of perception that causes us to develop only half of our abilities to recognize external reality. This same disorder resulted in the Cartesian view of being, which divided into distinct parts what for holistic thinkers is an integrated totality: body, mind and spirit – the Salt, Mercury and Sulfur of Paracelsus.

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