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AGNIESZKA AYŞEN KAIM

Sema Ceremony – between Ritual and Performance



Abstract

The *Sema* ceremony is a ritualistic dance which evolved from and was inspired by the philosophical ideas of Mowlana and was developed by his son Soltan Valad, becoming a part of Turkish custom. This sacred dance, not approved by early orthodox Islam, represents elements of shamanistic dances from Central Asia and those of ecstatic dance practices of ancient Asia Minor. Movement and dance enables a person to enter the sphere of sacrum and has been a way to attain a unity with God by combining body, mind and emotion. It reflects the structure of the universe and the circle of energy. As a rite, it preserves its symbolic structure, sacred costume and space, it belongs to a certain community. As an artistic expression *sema* (Pers. *sama* ') involves dance, music and poetry, it has its particular costume, rhythm, choreography and professional performers. Contemporary show culture converts rituals into entertainment and results in a de-sacralisation of the rite.

Mowlana was walking in the goldsmithing section of Konya when he heard hammering that sounded like beautiful music. The rhythm of the pounding hammer exerted such an overwhelming influence on him that he began to whirl in harmony with the rhythm. The goldsmith apprentices hammered until they were ready to drop. *Dance (only) where you break (mortify) yourself and (when you) tear away the cotton from the sore of lust./ (Holy) men dance and wheel on the (spiritual) battle-field: they dance in their own blood./ When they are freed from the hand (dominion) of self, they clap a hand; when they escape from their own imperfection, they make a dance.*¹

¹ *The Mathnawi of Jalalu'ddin Rumi*, edited from the oldest manuscripts available with critical notes, translation and commentary, Reynold A. Nicholson, New Delhi: Adam Publishers & Distributors, 2003, Vol. 3, p. 95–98.

This is how the legend describes the beginning of the *Sema* ceremony, a ritualistic dance of the Mevlevi order which evolved from, and was inspired by the philosophical ideas of Mowlana and was developed by his son and poet, Soltan Valad (Tur. Sultan Veleđi Celebi).

Mowlana Jalalodđin Rumi (Tur. Mevlana Celaleddin Rumi, 1207–1273) was born on the far eastern edge of the Persian Empire in Balkh (present-day Afghanistan). His father, renowned scholar and mystic, Baha'odđin Valad, had to flee from Balkh with his family and after ten years of wandering settled in Konya in the province of Rum (ancient Iconium, present-day Turkey) when Jalalodđin was 22 years old. The Seljuk capital with its cosmopolitan population with Christians, Jews, Greeks and Armenians afforded him the atmosphere to evolve and express Mowlana's new unorthodox ideas and independent spirit. His profound philosophy introduced the new dimensions of Islamic mysticism. He achieved the distinction as a young theologian and Sufi master. The spiritual heights he attained in his teachings are reflected in his written works. Among the main works of Mowlana are the exposition of his teachings *Masnawi*, the collections of poems *Divan-i Shams-i Tabrizi* written in Farsi in the 13th century, but using some Greek and Turkish words and phrases scattered throughout the texts. Rumi's poetry with the distinctive marks of Sufi symbolism and poetic allegory, especially his *Masnawi* makes a synthesis of mystic ideas taken over from Neo-platonism, Christianity, Indian, Persian, Greek mythology, stories from Holy Books, Arab and Persian legends and folk stories.²

This mystic and poet constantly expanded the main themes of his works such as spiritual exile, sorrowful separation from God and the Beloved and the yearn to return for the Beloved. This search has three stages: purification, enlightenment, and union. Thus the ideas of humanity, spiritual purity, love and tolerance worldwide recalled with Mowlana's faith marks are only the effects that emerges beside this main Sufi path.

Apart from the teachings and written heritage left after Mowlana, his philosophy engendered the Mevlevi movement which is known in Europe as "The Whirling Dervishes". One of its religious practices is *sema* (Pers. *sama*). In Sufism *sama* means "listening to music", singing and chanting to attain the state of religious ecstasy (Arab. *wajd*, Tur. *vecd*). In other words whirling dance is an outcome of ecstasy evoked by the *sema*. However in time of Mowlana ritual *sema* was done at any time or any place, even without music.³ The present ritual in its structuralised form came into being in the 15th century. Scholars have made their assessments on the basis of observations made within the last hundred years.⁴ Nowadays this mystic rite's artistic expression involves several branches of art such as dance, instrumental and vocal music and poetry. The *Sema* ceremony, regarded as innovative in its early stage, gradually evolved into perfection. The whirling has the attributes of

² Sufism with its intensive contact with other belief systems throughout its emergence and development all over the Islamic world is influenced by many external factors such as Judaism, Christianity, Buddhism, Shamanism, and Animism.

³ Talat Sait Halman and Metin And, *Mevlana Celaleddin Rumi and the Whirling Dervishes*, İstanbul: Dost Yayınları, 2005, p. 93.

⁴ İlker Evrim Binbaş, "Music and Samā' of the Mavlaviyya in the Fifteenth and Sixteenth Centuries: Origins, Ritual and Formation", in: *Sufism, Music and Society in Turkey and the Middle East*, Anders Hammarlund, Tord Olsson and Elisabeth Özdalga (eds.), Richmond: Curzon, 1999, p. 67.

dance and ceremony which has surpassed its rite structure and has become an advanced form of dance performance.

But, this is nothing exceptional, because the movement and dance have always been associated with rite, enabling a human being to enter a sacrum sphere and communicate with the gods. Dance is said to be a vehicle of emotional experience. For the Mevlevi order the *sema* is one of the techniques of meditation. *Sema* can be described as *a prayer of feet*, meditation of feet, or, in other words, a meditation in movement, worship through dance and music.

This sacred dance represents a line of evolution following several patterns of culture, those of Shamanistic dances dating back to the period when Turkish tribes were present in Central Asia and those of ecstatic dances derived from various dance practices of Asia Minor (Bacchae). One hypothesis claims that the raising of hands in the *Sema* ceremony comes from ancient Greek mystery plays, the Dionysian ritual (which used to be practised in Central Anatolia), through the ecstatic movements of hands and whirling/spinning movements, is very typical as the religious *gestus* for various cultures and can be also influenced by Shamanism. Nevertheless, while a dithyrambic ritual essentially has indignity, even obscenity, no whirling dervish ever touches another. Although the dance ritual itself is communal the dervish is in a world unto himself purifying his soul, having communion with God. Dionysus recalls the cult of wine, whereas the Sufis' ecstasy requires no wine in reality, only on the symbolic level, nor even music to be induced.⁵

The idea of *tariqa* (Arabic term for a path) and journey towards the Beloved has been easily adopted from the foreign rooted Sufi philosophy and Koranic tradition and later developed by the nomadic Turkish tribes, being on the move all the time.⁶ Islam through Sufism referring to the 'old Turkish beliefs' was easier to be accepted.⁷ Early orthodox Islam regarded the religious dance practices cultivated among the people as an intoxicating activity and an obstacle to the new religion. Although early Islam had an essentially negative attitude towards music and entertainment, elements of pre-Islamic and non-Islamic ritual chant and dance were incorporated into a variety of Islamic practices.

As a part of this movement, Jalaloddin Rumi freed his order from the ban of music and dance. Eventually *sema* became a part of Turkish custom and cultural activity.

The circle (Tur. *devr*, Arab. *dayere*) dance movement for praying and ritual purposes were used by the other sects as for instance Rifa'i, Bayrami, Gülşeni, Uşşaki, or the orders of Central Asian origin as Halveti, Naqshbandi. Actually the term "dancing" is not applicable to these practices. Perhaps it is not a dance, not even a foot-play or bodily indulgence but the dissolution of the soul, the state of the soul is impossible to explain by words and to be put into a specific definition.

An attempt to describe the role of "dance" in religious practices can be supported by many examples of dance in various cultures. In Indian culture, gods dance by themselves. King

⁵ Halman and And, *Mevlana Celaleddin Rumi...*, p. 31.

⁶ Talat Sait Halman, "Kaç/ Göç: Göçebe kültürü ve Türk kültürü" (Flee/ Migrate: Nomadic culture and Turkish culture), in: *Türk(îye) Kültürleri* (Turk(ish) Cultures), Gönül Pultar and Tahire Erman (eds.), Ankara: Kültür Araştırmaları Derneği, 2005, p. 67–76.

⁷ However, at the same time the Turkish Sufi orders in their convents (*tekke*) offered the practices of orthodox Islam as well, such as pious retreat, meditation, contemplation, prayers and fasting to the initiates (*mürîd*).

David dances before the Arc of the Covenant. According to the apocryphic text of early Christian literature from the 2nd century B.C. *Acta Joannis*, even Jesus Christ danced. This text draws a controversial picture of the Last Supper where Jesus sings the hymn with his disciples. Actually that hymn was not only sung but also danced in a mystical procession with twelve disciples holding hands dancing in a circle, Jesus in the middle, singing, while the others kept repeating the refrain *Amen (I'm the word in a Word where all creation danced)*.⁸

According to some cosmogony theories, the act of creation involves whirling and dance. The whirling of the Mevlevi dervish resembles the spinning movement of the microcosmos and macrocosmos, simply that of the universe. According to Mevlevi teachings, all the condignations of the universe are moved by divine love so that a human being is regarded as a reflection of God who is urged (begs) to become one with his Beloved and has to whirl with the same power. This mystical journey brings man's spirit through mind and love to perfection. The idea of turning comes from the Quran. *Onto God belongs to the East and the West, and wherever you turn, there is God's countenance* (sura Bakara 2, verse 115).⁹

On the technical level, the whirling movement is a matter of balance, balance being a matter of centering the body. Finding the right center is a very important aspect of any performer's act, the Turn technique based on a specific form of concentration. *Sema* beginners look at the thumb of their left hand and after gaining some fluency, retain focus, reciting *dhikr* (kind of litany) in every single turn (Pers. *charkh*, Tur. *çarh*).

The dervish who rejects his ego (Tur. *nefs*, Arab. *nafs*) and makes his spiritual journey to reach maturity and unity with God does not belong to himself anymore.

*I thump my feet on the floor/ I dance my soul; I whirl my world,/ Clap your hands, my soul; clap your hands, my world,/ Please do – for the sake of this man in ecstasy.*¹⁰

A shaman's journey can be in flight or can descend while the dervish's is an ascent. The recalling of a shaman here is not a coincidence, the term *sema* has another meaning of "blue firmament" while at the same time, the sky function can be perceived in a similar light. It can emphasise the shaman's trance to the upper world and the dervish's soaring to ecstasy.

The complexity of terminology brings a chain of different experiences. In the idea of one *who is possessed (a holy fool)*, a trance and ecstasy emerges in the rites of several cultures and always has its religious function. In the Dionysian rituals with the roots in Anatolia, the maenads involved in his mysteries were possessed and empowered by the god himself, their ecstatic dance freed them from self-consciousness. However, the spiritual experience in the *Sema* ceremony is not a trance but ecstasy, not an unbroken ecstasy nor a loss of conscious thought. According to Annemarie Schimmel's suggestion the Sufi ecstasy should more appropriately be called an "in-stasy" as the Sufi stays in himself, sunk in the "sea of the soul".¹¹

⁸ Transl. by Robert Reszke, not published, after Leszek Kolankiewicz, *Samba z bogami. Opowieść antropologiczna* (The Samba of Gods. The Anthropological Story), Warszawa: Wyd. KR, 1995, p. 72–75.

⁹ Abdülbaki Gölpınarlı, *Mevlanadan sonra Mevlevilik* (The Mevlana Order after Mevlana), İstanbul: İnkılap Kitabevi, 1953, p. 20.

¹⁰ Halman and And, *Mevlana Celaleddin Rumi...*, p. 34.

¹¹ Annemarie Schimmel, *Mystische Dimensionen des Islam. Die Geschichte des Sufismus* (Mystical Dimensions of Islam. The History of Sufism), München: Diederichs Vlg., 1995, p. 253, after Bahodir Sidikov, "Sufism and Shamanism", in: *Shamanism, An Encyclopedia of World Beliefs, Practices, and Culture*, Mariko Namba Walter and Eva Jane Neumann Fridman (eds.), p. 241.

Even from such an authority as Mircea Eliade, these two terms are used synonymously – the precise distinction between ecstasy and trance given by Gilbert Rouget.¹² His approach finds in trance and ecstasy two poles of some sort of continuum of certain phenomena. At one end (ecstasy) there is solitude, motionlessness, silence, hallucination etc. and at the other (trance) there is social experience, movement, noise, lack of hallucination etc., According to Rouget's theory, trance has been a psycho-physiological disposition of human nature and the variability of its symptoms depends on the diversity of cultures it is shaped in. When looking for the parallels between shaman's and semazen's ecstatic state of soul, the contents of ecstasy are different but the techniques can be described as similar.¹³ As a religious practice of the Sufi order, *sema* has been a way to attain a unity with God (Allah) by combining three basic elements of human nature: body, mind and emotion. It reflects the structure of the universe and the circle of energy of which a human being is a part. As a rite, it preserves its symbolic structure, sacred costume and space and, most importantly, it belongs to a certain community. It is the latter that is the main actor in the rite. Somehow though, the Mevlevi *sema* ceremony surpassed its rite structure and became an advanced form of dance performance. Looking at the other tarikats' dance practices, we can see just the ecstatic movements form side to side and the recitation of *dhikr*.

As a performance, *sema* has its particular mise-en-scene, stage decoration consisting of costume, its rhythm, choreography, music with a life of its own and singing, as well as performers trained in the use of body, balance and energy. *Sema* has the universal features of every dance such as movement, the sequence of movements composed into the choreography and stage semiotics.

The dancers come into a sacred space, called *semahane* and sit in the places assigned for them. The sheikh enters the semahane with a slow walk, takes the position exactly opposite the main door. The semazens sit in a row according to their degrees in the hierarchy of order. The musicians are seated opposite to the main point in Muslim sacred space *mihrab* indicating the direction of Mecca. The *sema* instruments consists of a reed flute (*ney*); a small drum (*kudüm*) covered in camel or sheep skin and played with two sticks, a rebeck (*robab*), bow instrument (*ıklıĝ*), similar to the Persian fiddle *kamancha*; a zither-like plucked instrument with 72 strings (*kanun*), a long-necked plucked lute (*tambur*), a pear-shaped lute (*ud*). The role of music in *Sema* ceremony has been very important. According to the cultivation of *musiki*, the traditional art music in Turkey and the Middle East, was in fact largely dependent on the Mevlevi *sema* practice.¹⁴

Looking at the *sema* with its fixed 'acts of drama' I will try to deliver the brief description of this ritualistic performance maintaining its sacral and profane elements.

The ritual starts with eulogy *Nat- ı Şerif* to the Prophet, followed by drum sounds and musical improvisation *taksim* with a *ney*, a kind of ornamental passage like *cadenza* in the various appropriate modes, ending with the mode chosen for the day. It serves to emotionally

¹² Gilbert Rouget, *La musique et la transe. Esquisse d'une théorie générale des relations de la musique et de la possession*, Paris: Gallimard, 1980; Kolankiewicz, *Samba z bogami...*, p. 105–106.

¹³ Sidikov, "Sufism...", p. 238–242.

¹⁴ Anders Hammarlund, "Sacral, Secular or Sacred? An Essay on Music and Aesthetic Emancipation", in: *Sufism, Music and Society in Turkey and the Middle East*, Anders Hammarlund, Tord Olsson and Elisabeth Özdalga (eds.), Richmond: Curzon, 1999, p. 37–46.

uplift the participants. Then, the dervishes stand up and with the sheikh leading three times, repeat a *Devri Veledi*¹⁵ circular walk anti-clock wise, reciting the formula – the name of Allah *ismi Celal* – his name is *Jelal (Glory)*, accompanied by the *peşrev* (preludium) played by all musicians. The sheikh takes his place, called the *post*, and the dervishes take off their *hirkas* and take the dance position followed by whirling consisting of four salutes (*selam*) towards the *post*. The right hand's position is higher on the breast while the hands rest crossed at arm level, the fingers spread. *Selam* is a form of salutation wishing peace and greeting. Here, the music is improvised on a *ney*. At the end of the fourth part, the oral segment concludes with instrumental music followed by the musical vocal form called *yürük semai*.

Except the *semazenbaşı* (the head of semazens), the semazens lay aside their outer cloaks, dressed in white *tennures*. Semazens, with a senior *semazenbaşı* first, one by one approach the sheikh and kiss his hand who in turn bends down and kisses the head dress of every dervish. The *semazenbaşı* takes the place next to the sheikh and points out the place to dance for every semazen. If someone is a good dancer the *semazenbaşı* moves his right leg to the right, which means that dancer should take his place in the middle of “the stage”. Otherwise, if he approaches a novice, he moves his leg in front of him and drives the dancer aside. Beginning his dance the semazen rolls up his sleeves, slowly opens his arms at breast level, the hands spread on two sides, right hand directed up, left hand turned down, the head softly falling on the right arm. The dance sequence repeats three times, every time it finishes by returning to the circular order. The head dancer walks among them and with a soft thump urges those whose whirling is not sufficiently fluent.

When the *sema* part starts for the fourth time the sheikh himself joins the circle of dancers taking the central position. He turns in place, slowly, with arms closed, *hirka* on, accompanied by *ney* improvisation. The sheikh whirls to the center point called *qutb* (Tur. *kutb*, Eng. *pole*), the place entitled for Mowlana and his followers by succession. The chief semazen does not admit anybody else to inner circle.

After this first act the semazens in a group of four support each other in order not to lose balance and fall. With a bow of the head they greet the sheikh and pass to the next step of the ceremony. The ritual finishes with the sheikh's return to his *post*. The next part consists of collective kneeling and kissing the earth with the prolonged the shortest name of God, *Huuu* (Him), a sound imitating divine creation. The last, sixth part, is a reading of the Quran and prayer. While one of the singers recites from the Quran, dervishes sit down. Following the recitation, the head of semazens stands up and starts to pray in front of sheikh *dua-gû duası*, prayer which is dedicated to Mowlana and holy saints. The whole *sema ayini* lasts from 45 minutes to one and a half hours.

Any artistic technique involved in the *sema* always has its symbolic connotation. The sacred space is divided into two symmetrical parts: the right half symbolizes the tangible, human world and the left, one of the unseen, divine world. Salutations evoked by shapes and movements of bodies symbolize the salutation of soul to soul.

According to Mevlevi teaching, the first part of the ceremony is a turn of the sky sphere which is possible to be assumed within human cognition, the second turn of the sun, the third that of the moon. The fourth doesn't have any reference in the universe, being only the work of a human.

¹⁵ *Devri Veledi* has been called after Sufi poet Sultan Veled, son of Rumi.

The central position of the sheikh is a metaphor of the sun and the planets in their own orbits, the turning figures all composing the universe. Its central localization can be compared to those in the Hasidic mystic dance tradition of a zaddik or to the role of coryphaeus in an ancient dramatic chorus. But there is no intermediaries in seeking ecstasy, each Sufi dancer is integral man.¹⁶

The sheikh's seat post here is coloured red to symbolize divine nature. The role of costume also has its mystic dimension with the dancer giving life to the costume. The dervish's black cloak called the *khirqa* (Tur. *hirka*) symbolizes his tomb, head-dress called the *sikke* his ego's tombstone, and his white skirt *tennure* his ego's shroud. The *tennure* also supports the body of the dancer in keeping balance during the whirling.

Each emotion, each gesture has a divine significance. The direction of keeping hands has the meaning of a vertical stream of energy transferred from God into people, with the right hand directed to the sky as a sign of readiness to receive God's beneficence, the left hand turned toward the Earth.

The turn's direction is from right to left, pivoting around the heart. The sudden turns are an attempt to see God in all directions. The left leg is static as a column, while the right is moves in a circle (*charkh* means "turn" in Persian).

Thumping the ground symbolizes tampling crass selfhood, crushing ego. While a jumping is a gesture of soaring towards the supreme world. *Kill you vile ego, for it is your own devil. then houris will appear within your breast. Once you have killed your vile ego, then for certain you can place your foot upon the roof of the seventh heaven!*¹⁷

Genuflection expresses an abandoning one's soul to God. Opening the arms to the sides is the aspiration to the spiritual excellence and union with God.

The *sema* as the rite a performance has its fixed structure divided into parts, regarded also as acts of a drama. The first part, *çarh* represents the period of 20 years of age, the spring of human life. The second part, *raqs* (Tur. *raks*, dance sequence), represents the period between 20 and 40 years of age. It is therefore dynamic, expressive and full of motion, symbolizing the summer of human life. The third part, *muallak* (the body drifted in the air), symbolizes time between 40 and 60 years of age, representing the autumn of human life. The last, *pertev* (the sudden turn), is after 60, symbolising winter. In this context, the main movement of whirling has a special meaning, where through its stages the dervish reaches spiritual maturity.

Even the number of performers has its mystical dimension, The number one that is like a coryphaeus, is 1 like God's unity. When the dervish holds his arms crosswise he also represents the number one and testifies to God's unity. The inner circle of four represents the four main elements. The inner circle with one soloist makes up 5, which means the 5 pillars of Islam. The outer circle plus the soloist makes 7, the seven circles of Heaven and 7 circles of Hell. The number of days of a traditional novelty is 1001. The number of dancers is 11.

The space has its symbolic dimension also. The right half of the *semahane*, "the stage" symbolizes the tangible and visible world while the left half is the invisible, angel's world.

¹⁶ Halman and And, *Mevlana Celaleddin Rumi...*, p. 36.

¹⁷ William C. Chittick, *The Sufi Path of Love: The Spiritual Teachings of Rumi*, Albany: State University of New York, 1983, p. 89, original Rumi, Divan 21323–24.

The flute *ney*, in Sufism is regarded as a divine breath that gives life to everything. It represents the trumpet called the *sur*, which will be used by the Archangel Israfil, on the Day of Judgment to wake the dead and help them to attain eternal life. According to this interpretation the role of the sheikh is in guiding Sufis' souls to the divine truth.¹⁸

As in every ritual, the *sema* has its fixed time, usually practiced with afternoon worship, sometimes in the evening. The special holiday time for celebration is the day of the death of Mowlana, the 17th of December, celebrated as a *Wedding Night* (Shab-i 'Arusi) when Mowlana reached full union with God.

The metaphysical dimension of a dance has been understood also by some famous professional stage dancers. One of the most important names in world dance history, Isadora Duncan, also regarded dance in general as "a revelation of the energy of the world through the medium of the human body", and dancers for her are those who "...transfer the energy of planets onto the audience".¹⁹ The dancer here stressed the role of the audience in a circulation of energy.

This aspect is particularly significant in relation to performance. Whereas the theatre performer transforms his energy into communication with the audience, the *sema* dancer transforms it to build communication with Allah, to reach real unity. The performance audience may respond or not respond by attending. Staying away from ritual means rejecting the congregation or being rejected, though the performative function may dominate. This happens nowadays when the influence of contemporary show culture converts rituals into entertainment and is why even the role of the audience has also shifted from participants in a rite to those who attend a performance. Let me quote from Richard Schechner's *Performance Theory* on a audience's attitude toward *sema* as a ritual show, which took place in the Brooklyn Academy of Music. There the announcement had a special note: 'The program is a religious ceremony, you are kindly requested to refrain from applause'.²⁰ This was to signal the rarity of what the audience was about to see. However, the approach of the audience doesn't change the essence of this ritual. This inner transformation belongs only to the performer and constitutes his private experience. While in a shaman's *kamlanye*, the performer is responding to the social request, even order, and his task takes the form of a social service. Everything fits into the dynamics of ritual, which according to Levi Strauss, involves asymmetry which is postulated between the profane and the sacred.

Another important element of every rite is repetition, the oral and movement. This formula becomes the sacred pattern, where exact repetition as it has been passed on through the ages, should be somehow protected. In the structure of the *Sema* ceremony any pause – a rest has also its important role. This is a kind of resting while the body stays active in a static way, where the rest is still a part of the rite. It is important to underline that silence and pause, like four *selam* in *sema*, is also an element of dance, requiring the presence of the performer in the cumulation of energy.

Technical information about the *sema* can be collected according to the experience of the practicing dervishes. Practicing semazens often admitt that the hardest part is to

¹⁸ Halman and And, *Mevlana Celaleddin Rumi...*, p. 100–101.

¹⁹ Włodzimierz Tomaszewski, *Człowiek tańczący* (Dancing Man), Warszawa: Wydawnictwo Szkolne i Pedagogiczne, 1991, p. 76–77.

²⁰ Richard Schechner, *Performance Theory*, New York: Routledge, 2005, p. 150–151.

overcome the feeling of nausea from spinning. This involves learning to control your body, through special breathing techniques.

This means that the *semazen* craft requires training, learning a specific language of body and mind where it has two levels: technique and philosophy. Each dervish and novice is trained not only in religion but also in playing an instrument and singing, some in whirling. The shaman is an *ozan* (bard) and the dancer – actor and uses a transformation of characters to perform. The dervish is a someone who enters along a journey regarded as a kind of abnegation of ego that enables him to develop his self according to Sufi stages.

On the other hand, the stage performer has to develop the character within its physical and psychological possibilities, while the dancer learns the sequence of steps. Practising *semazen* Bülent Sefermendi says that he started his training with two teachers and trained for six months at a special school, just learning this dance. Others, like Hamsi Kırgız needed only one and a half months to learn the *semazenlik* and began this practice thanks to his ethno-musicological interests, having studied Mevlevi culture and dance. They say “You can only perform it if you really understand the philosophy behind it”.²¹ After a performance the stage dancer deserves a rest, drink and food, while *semazen* meditate in silence (*tefekkiür* – meditation) in their cells.

The dervish training technique has attracted several experimentalists from around the world in the use of the body and search for the pure dance movements in performance arts. The dance researcher, mystic and occultist Giorgios Gurdjieff²² visited Constantinople in 1885, where he studied Sufism, attending the teachings of the Mevlevi and Bektashi orders. In the early 12th century he created 39 movements²³ that are called after him Gurdjieff movements, based on Sufi training techniques, taught to his students as part of the work of *self observation* and *self study*. The pause frequently described as a “stop exercise” is traditionally used in this canon type movement in which the hands describe a huge semi-circle from right to left. From time to time, the instructor calls out “Stop!” and the dancers are required to freeze in the exact position they were in. With the command “Continue!” or “March!”, they resume the movement where they left off. The main purpose of this exercise is to enable the body to quit its old habits and automatic movements, thereby gaining a new feeling for the world.²⁴ It is also an essential study for finding a “moving center” that is in charge of one’s learned movements. Explaining it in the Sufi way, the mystic self (mystic consciousness, soul) is surrendered to suspension and intelligence is cleared of any content. In this state the soul reaches the ability to rise toward God.

The other famous theatre reformer who used Eastern methods of trance in his training was Jerzy Grotowski, a Polish director and theoretician of theatre. In a brief conversation, his friends prof. Osinski and Kolankiewicz shared with me some undocumented information on Grotowski’s ideas connected to the *sema* practice. It transpires that the latter was

²¹ Quoted in: D. Jones, “Turkey: Discovering Spirituality with the Whirling Dervishes”, *Deutsche Welle*, September 2007, <http://www.dw.de/dw/article/0,,2798133,00.html> (accessed 06.09.2012).

²² Giorgios Gurdjieff (1866–1949) born in the Ottoman Empire in Gumri (Alexandropol), as a son of an Armenian mother, and half Greek and half Russian father.

²³ Those who have practiced the Movements often refer to them as a “sacred dance”, because of their extraordinary impact on their psychological state and expanding awareness.

²⁴ Omar M. Burke, *Among the Dervishes*, London: Octagon Press, 1973, p. 110.

profoundly interested in oriental ecstasy practices and incorporated some of them into his training. His idea of the Poor Theatre, Theatre Of Roots, Ritual Theatre, was simply approached by this revolutionist and was considered the only way to meet God. He was desperately looking for ritualistic unity²⁵ with the spectators who were moving in his performances towards the role of participants. According to Leszek Kolankiewicz's memories, Grotowski's plans never were carried out further than initial thoughts but he considered involving Polish Tatars living in the Eastern part of Poland in training work by using *sema* as the only way to bring them to understanding Sufism.

The other names associated with experiments in whirling are American theatre director and the visionary of modern theatre, Robert Wilson with his Performance Group and choreographer Laura Dean, dancer and experimental choreographer of modern dance, popular in the 1970's, who developed many types of dance based on spinning. His Company 'Byrd Hoffman School Of Byrds' used Mevlevi whirling movements in the performance *Ka Mountain* and *Guardenia Terrace* set in the middle of the ruins of Persepolis and the mountains near Shiraz in annual 6th Festival of Arts 1972. The performance lasted for seven days. Whirling dance elements emerged also in Wilson's works such as 12 hour-marathon *The Life and Times of Joseph Stalin* (1973), *Letter for Queen Victoria* (1974) and *The \$ Value of Man* (1975), *Einstein on the Beach* (1976).

The phenomenon of staged rituals is followed by the idea of touring that results in a desacralisation of the rite. It could be a reflection of the other phenomenon – hybridisation of culture. On the other hand, the fusion of different faiths and philosophies (Christianity, Shamanism, Islam) may be the reason why the whirling dervishes continue to amaze and mesmerize so many people representing different cultures and religions. This kind of worship offers another perspective of Islam at a time when the idea of the clash of civilizations is always fashionable.

From the cultural anthropology point of view, this specific case – the *Sema* ceremony – is a ritual intended to be a performance where performers through dance reach a level of ecstasy. In these circumstances, the *sema* as a dance technique is not the aim but only the guide or vehicle to reach the aim, one of a metaphysical not, performative nature. On the emotional and religious level, the *sema* can be considered as the only way of fulfilling human longing after God, which is an eternal part of every human being.

²⁵ Jerzy Grotowski, "Teatr a rytuał" (Theatre and Ritual), *Dialog*, No. 8, 1969, p. 65.

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