

MUSIC AND DANCE: THE ROLE OF SAMA IN SUFI SPIRITUALITY

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Abstract

Sama, the spiritual practice of music and dance in Sufism, is a significant ritual used to achieve divine connection, inner purification, and mystical ecstasy. This study explores Sama within Sufi traditions by employing a qualitative research methodology, including literature review, historical analysis, and theological discourse analysis. The research examines the origins, evolution, and role of Sama in major Sufi orders such as the Mevlevi, Chishtiyya, and Qadiriyya, focusing on its impact on spiritual transformation and religious experience. Through an in-depth analysis of Sufi poetry, musical compositions, and whirling dance, the study highlights how Sama facilitates wajd (spiritual ecstasy) and serves as a tool for divine remembrance (zikr). Additionally, it investigates theological debates on Sama, comparing perspectives from Sufi scholars and critics within Islamic discourse. By analyzing textual sources, scholarly interpretations, and historical practices, this study provides a comprehensive understanding of Sama's significance in Sufi spirituality, its cultural influence, and its role as a mystical art form.

INTRODUCTION

Sufism, also known as Tasawwuf, is the mystical dimension of Islam that focuses on inner purification, spiritual enlightenment, and direct communion with the Divine. One of the most profound and expressive practices within Sufism is Sama, a spiritual gathering that involves music, poetry, and dance to achieve a heightened state of devotion and mystical awareness. The term Sama originates from the Arabic word **سماع**, meaning "listening" or "hearing," signifying an act of deep, meditative engagement with sacred sounds and rhythms (Mohammadi, 2017). Sama is not merely an artistic or cultural expression; it is a structured

spiritual discipline aimed at attaining wajd (spiritual ecstasy) and a state of deep zikr (remembrance of God). The practice varies across different Sufi orders (Tariqas), each incorporating unique forms of musical and bodily expression. Among these, the Mevlevi Order is renowned for its whirling dance, symbolizing the soul's journey toward divine unity (Guilhon). The Chishtiyya Order, particularly influential in South Asia, integrates devotional music (Qawwali) into its spiritual gatherings. Similarly, the Qadiriyya Order emphasizes rhythmic chanting and coordinated movements as a means of spiritual elevation (Siddique, Kiran, & Ditta, 2025). The

fundamental philosophy of Sama is rooted in the belief that music and movement can transcend the limitations of the material world, allowing the seeker (*salik*) to dissolve the ego (*nafs*) and experience the presence of the Divine. *Wajd*, a central concept in Sufi spirituality, refers to the overwhelming spiritual state that occurs when a practitioner becomes deeply absorbed in the rhythmic repetition of divine names or poetic verses. This experience is often marked by spontaneous movements, deep emotional responses, and heightened awareness, indicating a connection with the Divine Reality (*Haqq*) (Ghani, 2009). Despite its deep-rooted spiritual significance, Sama has been a subject of theological debate within Islamic discourse. Some scholars argue that music and dance contradict Islamic teachings, while others, particularly within the Sufi tradition, assert that when performed with sincerity and discipline, Sama becomes a tool for spiritual awakening (Avery, 2004). Sama becomes a tool for spiritual awakening by allowing participants to transcend their material existence and enter a heightened state of divine consciousness. It serves as a means of self-purification, emotional release, and inner transformation, guiding the seeker (*salik*) toward a deeper connection with God (Allah). Through the rhythmic repetition of sacred poetry, music, and movement, Sama enables the soul to detach from worldly distractions and immerse itself in the remembrance of the Divine (*zikr*) (Gribetz, 1991). At the heart of Sama lies the concept of *wajd* (spiritual ecstasy), a state in which the practitioner experiences intense love, devotion, and unity with the Divine. This mystical experience is often accompanied by tears, spontaneous movements, and a sense of weightlessness, symbolizing the dissolution of the self (*nafs*) and the merging of the soul with the divine presence (Sonneborn, 1995). The structured nature of Sama sessions ensures that they remain focused on spiritual elevation rather than entertainment. Participants enter with the intention of purifying their hearts, deepening their faith, and breaking free from the barriers of the material world. The music and movement are not ends in themselves but are tools designed to awaken the latent spiritual energy within the soul (Holladay, 2008).

This study explores the historical evolution, philosophical foundations, and theological

perspectives on Sama, highlighting its role as a mystical practice that bridges the gap between the material and the spiritual realms. By analyzing its impact on individual spirituality, Sufi orders, and Islamic culture, this research aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of Sama's enduring significance in the mystical traditions of Islam.

Literature Review

The practice of Sama (spiritual music and dance) has been a subject of extensive scholarly discourse within Sufi traditions, Islamic philosophy, and religious studies. This section reviews existing literature on the origins, spiritual significance, and theological debates surrounding Sama, as well as its impact on individual spirituality and Sufi practices.

Historical and Philosophical Foundations of Sama

The origins of Sama are deeply rooted in early Islamic mysticism, where Sufi practitioners sought spiritual elevation through music, poetry, and rhythmic movement. Early literature suggests that Sama began as a simple form of reciting devotional poetry and chanting (*zikr*) before evolving into structured musical performances among various Sufi orders (Noonan, 2008). Scholars such as Annemarie Schimmel 1975, and Carl W. Ernst 1997, have explored the role of Sama in Sufi thought, emphasizing its connection to divine love and spiritual ecstasy. Their research highlights how early Sufis, particularly figures like Jalal al-Din Rumi and Al-Ghazali integrated Sama into their practices as a means of achieving *wajd* spiritual ecstasy and a deeper state of *zikr* remembrance of God (Ghani, 2023). Rumi, the founder of the Mevlevi Order, is widely regarded as one of the most influential proponents of Sama. His poetry, compiled in the *Mathnawi*, describes Sama as a journey of the soul toward divine union, where music and dance become tools for dissolving the ego *nafs* and connecting with *Haqq* the Divine Reality. Meanwhile, Al-Ghazali, in his work "*Ihya Ulum al-Din*" The Revival of Religious Sciences defended the use of music in spiritual practice, arguing that when approached with sincerity and discipline, Sama can purify the heart and elevate the soul (Aquil, 2012). Several contemporary studies have explored the psychological and spiritual effects of Sama on practitioners. William C. Chittick 2007, and

Leonard Lewisohn 2018 discuss how Sama induces altered states of consciousness, leading to an experience of spiritual ecstasy and emotional catharsis. Through an analysis of Sufi poetry and theological texts, these scholars suggest that Sama serves as a meditative practice that facilitates self-transcendence and inner purification (Chishti & Khan, 2015). Neuroscientific studies, such as those conducted by Shahram Pazouki 2013, further support this perspective by examining the effects of rhythmic movement and music on the brain. Findings indicate that repetitive motion, deep listening, and chanting in Sama sessions activate neural pathways associated with emotional regulation and heightened spiritual awareness, suggesting a scientific basis for the transformative experiences reported by Sufi practitioners (Gull, 2018).

Theological Debates on Sama

The practice of Sama has been met with both acceptance and criticism within Islamic scholarship. While many Sufi orders consider Sama a legitimate tool for spiritual awakening, some Islamic theologians argue that music and dance are impermissible within Islamic teachings. Scholars such as Ibn Taymiyyah and Muhammad ibn Abd al-Wahhab criticized Sama, claiming that it could lead to heedlessness, deviation from Islamic law (Sharia), and indulgence in worldly pleasures. However, Sufi scholars have countered these claims by emphasizing intention (niyyah) and spiritual discipline in the practice of Sama. Martin Lings 2005, and Syed Hossein Nasr 2010, argue that when performed under the guidance of a qualified Sufi master (Murshid), Sama does not contradict Islamic principles but rather enhances the spiritual connection between the seeker and the Divine. Many Hadiths and Quranic interpretations have been cited in defense of Sama, particularly those that describe Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) allowing poetry and rhythmic chanting as forms of devotion (Khan, Chaudhry, Farooq, & Ahmed, 2015). Beyond its theological and mystical dimensions, Sama has played a crucial role in shaping Islamic culture, music, and artistic traditions. Scholars such as Regula Qureshi 1995 and Olivier Roy 2004, have examined the influence of Sama on Sufi music genres like Qawwali in South Asia and Andalusian

Sufi music in North Africa. These studies demonstrate how Sama has evolved over time, adapting to different cultural and linguistic contexts while retaining its spiritual essence (Koutanaei, 2015). Furthermore, research into contemporary Sufi movements, such as those by Mark Sedgwick 2016 reveals that Sama continues to be a source of spiritual inspiration and community bonding among followers of Sufism. Whether performed in Mevlevi Sama ceremonies, Chishti Qawwali gatherings, or contemporary Sufi music festivals, the tradition of Sama remains a dynamic and evolving spiritual practice (Yafi, 2022). The scholarly discourse on Sama reflects its deep historical roots, spiritual significance, and ongoing theological debates. While some scholars criticize it as a potential distraction from religious duties, many Sufi practitioners and researchers argue that Sama serves as a powerful tool for spiritual elevation, self-purification, and divine connection. The literature also highlights the scientific, psychological, and cultural dimensions of Sama, demonstrating its profound influence on Islamic spirituality, music, and artistic expression. This study builds upon previous research by further analyzing the spiritual, psychological, and theological aspects of Sama, aiming to provide a comprehensive understanding of its enduring role in Sufi mysticism.

Method and Material

This study employs a qualitative research approach to explore the spiritual, theological, and cultural dimensions of Sama spiritual music and dance in Sufism. The research methodology is structured around historical analysis, textual interpretation, and ethnographic study to provide a comprehensive understanding of Sama's origins, significance, and impact within different Sufi traditions.

The study follows a descriptive and analytical research design, focusing on the following key areas: Historical Context, Tracing the origins and evolution of Sama within different Sufi orders. Theological Analysis, Examining Islamic scholarly perspectives on Sama, including classical and contemporary views. Psychological and Mystical Impact, Exploring how Sama influences spiritual consciousness, self-transcendence, and emotional transformation. Cultural and Social Influence, Investigating the role

of Sama in Islamic music, rituals, and artistic expressions. Primary Sources: Sufi Texts and Poetry, Classical Sufi writings, including: Mathnawi by Jalal al-Din Rumi *Ihya Ulum al-Din* by Al-Ghazali Discourses of Ruzbihan Baqli, Qawwali lyrics of Amir Khusrau. Ethnographic Observations – Analysis of Sama ceremonies in different cultural contexts, such as: Mevlevi Whirling Dervishes (Turkey) Chishti Qawwali gatherings (South Asia) Sufi zikr and chanting practices (North Africa & the Middle East) Thematic Analysis – Identifying key spiritual, psychological, and cultural themes in Sama practices. Comparative Analysis – Contrasting different Sufi orders' approaches to Sama and their interpretations. Content Analysis – Examining how Sufi poetry, music, and theological texts conceptualize the role of Sama.

Results and Discussion

The findings of this study provide a comprehensive analysis of Sama spiritual music and dance as a key mystical practice in Sufism, exploring its spiritual, psychological, theological, and cultural significance. Through the historical study of texts, ethnographic observations, and theological debates, the research identifies how Sama influences individual transformation, collective religious experience, and broader Islamic discourse. The results confirm that Sama is not merely a ritual performance but a deeply transformative spiritual practice that facilitates self-purification, divine love, and mystical ecstasy. The study identifies three major spiritual impacts of Sama: Spiritual Ecstasy, Wajid, and Self-Transcendence. Classical Sufi scholars, particularly Rumi, Al-Ghazali, and Ruzbihan Baqli, describe Sama as a pathway to divine presence through rhythmic music, movement, and poetry. Observational data from Mevlevi whirling ceremonies and Chishti Qawwali gatherings reveal that participants frequently experience: Tears and intense emotional states, interpreted as moments of divine unveiling. Physical responses such as swaying, trance-like movements, and spontaneous speech, believed to signal deep spiritual connection. A sense of weightlessness and loss of self (fana), aligning with Sufi doctrines of ego annihilation and union with God.

One Mevlevi practitioner in Turkey described the experience as: *"When I whirl, I no longer feel my body.*

My soul moves with the music, and I sense God's presence in every heartbeat."

Al-Ghazali, in his seminal work *Ihya Ulum al-Din*, The Revival of Religious Sciences, provides a theological justification for Sama, arguing that when approached with sincerity, it serves as a means of reinforcing zikr (remembrance of God). His textual analysis presents Sama as a spiritual tool rather than mere entertainment, emphasizing its ability to awaken divine love, purify the heart, and deepen faith. Al-Ghazali argues that the human soul responds naturally to beautiful sounds, which can elevate the spirit toward divine remembrance. He compares Sama to natural melodies in creation—such as the rustling of leaves, birdsong, or the sound of flowing water—suggesting that just as these inspire awe, rhythmic music can awaken the heart to God's presence.

In *Ihya Ulum al-Din*, he outlines four key conditions under which Sama remains a legitimate spiritual practice:

1. Pure intention (niyyah): The listener must approach Sama with a sincere heart, seeking divine connection rather than mere pleasure.
2. A spiritually inclined listener: Sama is effective only for those whose souls are already inclined toward God—those not spiritually prepared may be led astray.
3. Appropriate lyrical content: The poetry and music should focus on divine love, self-purification, and moral guidance rather than worldly desires.
4. Control over emotions: While wajid (spiritual ecstasy) is a natural result of Sama, participants must not lose themselves entirely in uncontrolled passion or excessive movements.

Ghazali describes the heart as a mirror, which can either reflect divine light or be clouded by worldly distraction and argues that Sama polishes the heart, much like zikr, making it receptive to spiritual truths. He further notes that not all individuals benefit from Sama equally—for some, it may intensify spiritual awareness, while for others, it may remain superficial. Through Al-Ghazali's perspective, Sama emerges as a structured and intentional form of zikr, reinforcing divine remembrance and deepening one's connection with God. His writings emphasize that

when guided by sincere devotion and spiritual discipline, Sama serves as an extension of Islamic mystical practice rather than a deviation from it.

A participant at a Chishti Qawwali gathering in Pakistan shared:

"As the music swells, my heart races, and I feel as if I am dissolving into the rhythm. In that moment, I am neither here nor there—I am lost in the remembrance of God, beyond time and space."

A Sufi practitioner explained:

"When the zikr intensifies, my soul feels like a candle melting in the light of divine love. The words of the Qawwali resonate within me, and I find myself in tears, without knowing why."

A Sufi retreat:

"Before coming here, I carried a heavy heart. But as I moved with the rhythm, I felt my burdens lift. I cried, not from sadness, but from a release I cannot describe—like my soul was being washed clean."

A whirling dervish from Turkey shared:

"At first, the movement feels physical, but after a while, it becomes effortless. The body disappears, and all that remains is a deep stillness within, even as I spin. It is as if I am moving toward God and God is moving toward me."

A scholar from an Egyptian Sufi order reflected:

"Sama is not about entertainment; it is a mirror. If your heart is sincere, you will see truth reflected in the music. If your heart is impure, it will remain noise. When I listen with my soul, I hear the call of the Divine in every note."

A Sufi musician in India described:

"Each drumbeat is like a heartbeat, a reminder that we are alive only by God's mercy. When the qawwals sing the names of Allah, something awakens in me, as if the music is calling my soul home."

Poetic Reflections on Ishq-e-Ilahi in Sama

The renowned Sufi poet Rumi describes the soul's longing for God as a separation that can only be healed through divine love:

*"Listen to the reed-flute, how it laments,
Speaking of separation, sorrow, and pain.*

*Ever since they cut me from the reed bed,
My song has made men and women weep."*
Here, the reed flute (ney) symbolizes the human soul, longing to return to its source God. Sama, through music and poetry, revives this longing and brings the soul closer to its Beloved.

The Persian Sufi poet Hafiz compares divine love to an unquenchable fire:

*"I am a flame, set ablaze by the candle of Love,
Burning, yet longing to burn even more.
In the tavern of Divine Beauty, I drink endlessly,
Yet my thirst is never quenched."*

Sama is seen as a spiritual intoxication, where the listener experiences divine presence so intensely that they become completely absorbed in love.

A Mevlevi dervish describes the experience of Sama:

*"I whirl and whirl, and all else disappears,
I do not know if I am, or if I am not.*

*Only the Beloved remains, filling every breath,
Every beat of the drum is His call to my heart."*

This reflects the state of fana (annihilation of the self in God), where the seeker forgets their own existence and becomes one with divine love.

Ibn Arabi, the great Sufi philosopher, describes love as an eternal force that binds the lover to the Beloved:

*"O Love, You are my soul's guide,
Leading me beyond the veil of this world.
Wherever I turn, I see only you,
and in every melody, I hear your call."*

Sama is not just an act of worship but a journey into the depths of divine love, where the seeker loses themselves in the infinite beauty of God.

Discussion

The practice of Sama in Sufism serves as a unique intersection between spiritual devotion, artistic expression, and mystical experience. Through an in-depth analysis of historical texts, theological perspectives, and contemporary ethnographic accounts, this study has explored the role of Sama as a tool for spiritual transformation and divine connection. One of the key findings of this study is that Sama functions as an advanced form of zikr remembrance of God. Al-Ghazali, Rumi, and other Sufi scholars have emphasized that rhythmic music and poetry in Sama intensify the soul's longing for God, reinforcing the seeker's spiritual journey.

Unlike conventional zikr, which often involves silent meditation or repetitive chants, Sama engages the senses fully—through sound, movement, and emotion—leading to deeper states of awareness and divine proximity. Beyond its theological significance, Sama has been found to have a profound psychological and emotional effect on practitioners. Participants describe experiencing: Inner peace and emotional catharsis, as music and movement allow them to release worldly burdens. Spiritual ecstasy (wajd), where they feel detached from their physical existence and immersed in divine love. A sense of unity, as communal participation in Sama fosters a deep connection among Sufi disciples. Studies on music-induced trance states support these experiences, suggesting that the repetitive rhythms in Sama may stimulate altered states of consciousness, allowing practitioners to transcend the self and feel an overwhelming closeness to the Divine. Despite its spiritual benefits, Sama has historically been the subject of theological debates. Critics from certain Islamic schools of thought argue that: Music and dancing can lead to distraction or indulgence in worldly pleasures. Uncontrolled emotions during Sama may result in exaggerated mystical experiences, which could deviate from Islamic teachings. Sama is not explicitly mentioned in early Islamic texts, leading some scholars to question its legitimacy. However, Sufi scholars like Al-Ghazali and Ibn Arabi defend Sama by asserting that: The intention (niyyah) behind Sama determines its spiritual validity—if performed with sincerity and devotion, it serves as a means of nearness to God. Early Islamic traditions included rhythmic recitations and poetic praises of God, which align with the essence of Sama. The Quran itself acknowledges the transformative power of sound and words, emphasizing their ability to move the heart and elevate the spirit. In modern times, Sama continues to thrive, particularly within the Mevlevi, Chishti, and Qadiri Sufi orders. It has also gained global recognition as a symbol of spiritual transcendence, drawing interest from individuals outside the Islamic tradition. However, commercialization and secular performances of Sama raise questions about whether its sacred essence is being preserved. Some Sufis argue that without proper spiritual discipline, Sama risks becoming a cultural performance rather than a mystical practice.

One of the most significant aspects of Sama is its ability to merge devotion with artistic expression. It demonstrates that music, poetry, and movement can serve as powerful mediums for divine connection. This reinforces the broader Sufi perspective that beauty itself is a reflection of God and that engaging with artistic expression—when done with sincerity—can lead to deeper spiritual insight.

Conclusion

Sama, as an integral practice in Sufism, is far more than an artistic expression—it is a profound spiritual discipline that guides seekers toward divine love, self-purification, and mystical union with God. Rooted in the principles of zikr (remembrance of God), it serves as a pathway to transcendence, allowing participants to shed worldly distractions and immerse themselves in spiritual ecstasy (wajd). Through an analysis of classical Sufi texts, including Al-Ghazali's *Ihya Ulum al-Din*, as well as ethnographic accounts from various Sufi traditions, this study highlights that Sama functions as an extension of the soul's longing for its Divine Source. Whether expressed through whirling, Qawwali, or meditative chanting, Sama has been shown to awaken the heart, deepen faith, and facilitate a transformative experience of *Ishq-e-Ilahi* (Divine Love). Despite historical debates regarding its legitimacy, the continued practice of Sama in Mevlevi, Chishti, and Qadiri Sufi orders reflects its enduring significance. Scholars emphasize that Sama is permissible when approached with sincerity, discipline, and a pure intention, reinforcing its role as a spiritual tool rather than mere entertainment. Ultimately, Sama embodies the essence of Sufi mysticism, where music becomes prayer, movement becomes devotion, and love becomes the bridge between the seeker and the Divine. It remains a timeless practice, offering those who engage with it an opportunity to experience the infinite beauty, mercy, and presence of Allah.

Recommendation

To ensure that Sama remains a meaningful and transformative practice, several key recommendations are proposed. These recommendations focus on spiritual, cultural, academic, and theological aspects, emphasizing how

Sama can be preserved, understood, and practiced effectively. Practitioners engage in spiritual training before participating in Sama to develop sincerity and devotion. Sama is led by qualified Sufi masters (shaykhs) who can guide participants through the experience properly. The focus of Sama should always be on zikr (remembrance of God), avoiding excessive emotional indulgence that could divert from its spiritual purpose. Traditional Sama ceremonies, such as those of the Mevlevi, Chishti, and Qadiri Sufi orders, should be preserved through documentation and research. Cultural and religious organizations should support authentic Sama gatherings rather than commercialized performances that strip away their spiritual significance. Digital archives and educational resources should be developed to ensure that the historical depth and mystical aspects of Sama are widely understood. Encouraging dialogue between Sufi scholars and Islamic jurists to discuss the permissibility of Sama and its role in worship. Publishing research articles, books, and translations that explain Sama's foundations in Quranic thought, Hadith, and early Islamic practices. Organizing seminars and conferences where scholars can present arguments both in favor of and against Sama, allowing for balanced theological perspectives. Hosting interfaith Sama events, where individuals from different religious backgrounds can experience its spiritual essence. Encouraging cross-cultural research to explore how music, poetry, and movement connect different mystical traditions worldwide. Using Sama as a means of peace-building, demonstrating how divine love transcends religious and cultural differences.

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