

## Sama' in Muslim Mystic Tradition

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### **Abstract:**

The debate concerning the religious legality of Sama' (musical audition) is one of the most interesting features of Arabic polemical literature. The controversy over its permissibility and prohibition exists from the early period of Islam. Those who consider it prohibited, they derive basically their argument from the Qur'anic verse of lahw al-hadith (Q:31:6). However, those who claim its permissibility, they argue that Sama' represents spiritual dimension of Islam and it is permissible only with observing certain conditions. These conditions were systematically introduced by a leading Sufi Abu al-Qasim Junayd (d.297/910) and elaborated by Abu Hamid Muhammad al-Ghazali (d.505/1111) in their works. It has been established in this research, that the subsequent Sufis based their arguments regarding the permissibility of the Sama' on Junayd and al-Ghazali's scholarship. The present study aims to explore the attitude of Sufi Orders regarding the Sama' in historical perspectives.

### **Keywords:**

Sufism, Junayd, Al-Ghazali, Muslim Sufi Orders, Sufi ritual, Sama' and spirituality.

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## Introduction:

In fact, one can come to see after a thorough search that Sama' is a very controversial issue amongst both contemporary and classical scholars. There are many factors that have influenced them and led them to form these views. It might be worthwhile if I point out at this stage that the way people react towards Sufism had great impact on the way the people respond towards Sama'. Therefore, it is important to look at Sufism first, before one attempts to discuss the issue of Sama'.

It is hard to define Sufism in specific terms because it contains divergent and multidimensional metaphysical and socio-cultural elements. Many eminent Sufis, as Abu Nu'aym Ahmad al-Isfahani (d. 430/1038) mentioned, claim that Sufism is to purify hearts and direct the intension towards God.<sup>(1)</sup> Moreover, the Sufi orders have devised a specific path and regulation to achieve the realisation. There are particular spiritual states and stations in Sufism, which may be attained by acting upon specific practices and rituals. A Sufi struggles for the purification of intention towards God and this leads them to formulate specific practices. In time, these practices become an indispensable part of their teachings. They perceive the esoteric realities and spiritual subtleties through the performance of these rituals. Arberry notes that Sufi Orders have particular characteristics based upon their individual rituals rather than merely doctrines, as these have been adapted according to the requirements of specific time and space.<sup>(2)</sup> Nevertheless, research also establishes that there are

many common practices and rituals in all Sufi orders such as initiation, liturgy, fikr, muraqaba, mushahida, wird, suhba, dhikr and Sama' (Sufi audition).<sup>(3)</sup> According to Sufi masters, all these rituals play a significant role in Sufi life. However, one can note that many Sufi orders considered Sama' to be one of the most important rituals for the elevation of Sufi devotion while the others challenged its legality and validity. They are not the traditional scholars, but also Shari'a-minded Sufis. This research not only explores various opinions of leading Sufis and religious scholars about Sama' but it also evaluates their arguments and tries to highlight their strengths or weaknesses which will lead to the conclusion I reached to, after extensive research and through study of different sources. Before we analyse the argument about the permissibility of Sama', I would like to discuss how it developed and identify the main Sufi Orders which contributed most towards its advancement.

### Sama' and Spirituality

Sufi Sama', or music, are international phenomena in spiritual life in the history of religion. 'In ancient Greece, dance is the "absolute play" and was considered the movement of gods. Both Apollo and Dionysius have dancing movements that suit their particular characters'.<sup>(4)</sup> The Sama' is, no doubt, one of the most widely known expression of mystical life in Islam. This mystical dance has been noticed in the Maulawis, the Whirling Dervishes. The whirling movement has been institutionalised in the Maulawi Order.<sup>(5)</sup> Netton, I. R. rightly points out that the "Music and the Sama' became a normative

part of the Sufi way. The rationale for the Sama' was that it produced a state of non-verbal, non-categorical meaningfulness prefigured the absolute beauty which was the Sufi's goal."<sup>(6)</sup> Nasr, S.H. notes that Sama' 'is not merely juridical or theological. It involves most of all the inner and spiritual aspect of Islam, and therefore, whatever ambiguities exist on the juridical level, the ultimate answer, especially as far as the relation of music to Islamic spirituality is concerned, must be sought above all in Sufism.'<sup>(7)</sup>

#### Sama' in the Sufi Tradition:

Sama' in Sufi tradition has its spiritual value. According to Sufis, it is hearing with the ear of the heart for absorbing the divine love and elevating the spiritual states. All the leading Sufi Orders practised the Sama'. However, the Naqshbandiyya do not allow to hear Sama' and their opinion regarding Sama' is more analogous with that of the legalist theologians.

Abu al-Qasim al-Junayd (d. 297/910) argued for the permissibility of Sama' with some conditions. According to his assessment, a permissible Sama' requires proper time, place and brethren (zaman, makan and akhwan). Almost all subsequent Sufis made reference to al-Junayd's conditions when they passed their judgement regarding Sama'. It can be observed that all the later Sufis accepted the authority of al-Junayd and they conditioned the permissibility of Sama' with the conditions and antiquities devised by al-Junayd.

Opinions concerning the permissibility of listening to music have varied widely, and it seems that from the beginning

Sufis have felt a need to justify their use of music and to make stipulations limiting its use. Abu al-Qasim 'Abd al-Karim b. Hawazin al-Qushayri (d. 465/1072) said that since the Prophet had allowed the recitation of religious poetry, religious songs should likewise be allowed for spiritual benefit. Malik b. Anas (d. 179/795), and other legal schools, said singing was reprehensible (permitted, but disapproved), but Qushayri adds, that is not the kind of Sama' we are talking about.<sup>(8)</sup> Similarly, Abu Nasr al-Sarraj (d. 378/988) evaluated this matter meticulously. He revealed many Qur'anic verses and Prophetic traditions to establish the Sufi stance on this issue. He explained the beauty of voice and its effects on the human mind with the reference to the Qur'an and hadith. He recorded the opinion and many events of early Sufis about the Sama' and its motives. He admitted the wisdom and effects of Sama' and endorsed his opinion by citing many events. He opined that Sama' had a special effects for ecstasy (wajd). Interestingly, in the last section of this debate, he criticized the extra indulgence in the Sama' and revealed that a group of Sufis condemned Sama' and that they considered it as reprehensible. This is the tradition of the pious ancestors to abstain from unnecessary and irrelevant things.<sup>(9)</sup>

Abu al-Hasan 'Ali b. 'Uthman Hujwiri (d. 463/1071) presents the Sufi Sama' and its implication in detail in his book *Kashf al-Mahjub*. Hujwiri first analyses some relevant discourses and then studies Sama' according to the fundamental verdicts. He asserts that poetry is permissible and

Muhammad (peace be upon him) and his companions not only heard it but also spoke it. Hujwiri further notes:

The Sufi shaykhs follow the example of the Apostle, who, on being asked about poetry, said: "What is good thereof is good and what is bad thereof is bad," i.e., whatever is unlawful, like backbiting and calumny and foul abuse and blame of any person and utterance of infidelity, is equally unlawful whether it be expressed in prose or in verse. Moreover, the prophet said: "beautify your voices by reading the Qur'an aloud". The Prophet said in another place: "Whoso wishes to hear the voice of David, let him listen to the voice of Abu Musa Ash'ari."<sup>(10)</sup>

Al-Ghazali (d. 505/1111) is among those theologians who supported Sama'. He devoted a chapter in his famous book *Ihya' 'Ulum al-Din* (The Revival of the Religious Sciences). Al-Ghazali's understanding and assessment influenced the subsequent Muslim scholarship. Most of the scholars and Sufis based their argument regarding the validity of Sama' on al-Ghazali's work. Prior to al-Ghazali, there was a group of scholar who have had a moderate opinion regarding Sama'. Ibn 'Abd Rabbihi (d. 328/940) devoted a chapter in his book *'Iqd al-Farid* (The Unique Necklace) on the permissibility of Sama'. Lewisohn notes:

"Ibn 'Abd Rabbihi's discussion centres around the legality of singing, rather than music in general, although his arguments are relevant to the understanding the place of music in Islamic culture as well. He argued that 'he who listens to singing (ghina) does not take the verses of God «in the

Qur'an» for mockery. And the most just view in this matter is that its medium (sabil) is poetry. So its good is good and its evil is evil." Essentially Ibn 'Abd Rabbih maintains that if the singer chants poetry of a spiritually uplifting and moral nature, his song is praiseworthy, but if contrary to that, quite reprehensible."<sup>(11)</sup>

Al-Ghazali validates the conditions devised by Junayd for permissibility of Sama'. Walking on the footsteps of Junayd, he explains these conditions in his *Ihya'*. He asserts that proper time is compulsory. A Sufi must have a free time from performing the obligations, when he can purify his heart for his Beloved. He further states that "Sama' should be conducted during any times when one's heart is engaged [with worldly concerns], nor when it is time for ritual prayer (namaz) nor when eating or when one is distracted." Al-Ghazali asserts that Sama' should be conducted in neat and clean place. It should not be conducted in dark and unpleasant place. It should also arranged in place where one can feel serenity and holding Sama' in home is not suitable.<sup>(12)</sup>

Rusbihan Baqli (d. 606/1209) emphasizes on the Sama' and dance. He believes that music and dance had a great effect on the spiritual life of a man. He was very much inspired by the teaching of Abu 'Abd Allah Muhammad b. Khafif (d. 371/982) who was a ardent adherent of Sufi audition. He thought that for perfect spiritual enjoyment three things were required: fine scents, a beautiful face to look at, and a lovely voice as the beauty of singer is a prerequisite for spiritual happiness.

Rusbihan even symbolised the state of mystical union as "a dance with God."<sup>(13)</sup> Actually, it is a psychological approach to the subject rather than a religious one. Therefore, it might not stand up against the arguments presented by traditionalists.

### Sama' and the Position of Sufi Orders

#### 1- The Maulawiyya and Chishtiyya Sufi Orders

The most characteristic feature of the Maulawiyya Order is the famous whirling dance performed by the fuqara'. This dance is still performed at Konya in Turkey where Rumi's tomb is located. Jalal al-Din Muhammad Rumi (d. 672/1273) was completely absorbed in the love of Sufi music.<sup>(14)</sup> He writes:

"Sama' is the food of lovers;  
The strands of dispersed imagination  
In it gain concentration.  
The fantasies of the inner psyche in music and strength;  
No, transcend strength, by the wail  
Of the flute and horn, take form."<sup>(15)</sup>

The Chishti Sufis also use music as an instrument for their message. This Order was founded by Abu Ishaq Chishti (d. 329/940), but its popular founder was Khawaja Mu'in al-Din Chishti (d. 627/1230) in Indian Subcontinent. The followers of this Order believe in an audible method of performing prayers and regard Sama' or music as the food of soul.<sup>(16)</sup> The early Chishti Sufis had to face the enmity of the jurist of the time because of their indulgence in music. According to the Fawa'id al-Fawad, Shaykh Bakhtiyar Kaki (d. 634/1235) was a great lover of music. He kept himself aloof from the royal court and



he considered that the relations with the royal court are injurious to spiritual life. He was fond of Sama' and listened secretly because the 'ulama were opposed to it and the Sultan, being under their influence, did not allow music even to the Sufis.<sup>(17)</sup> Sanjjari reported that Nizam al-Din al-Awliya' allowed to listen Sama' with four conditions: i) the singer must be a man, ii) the songs must be meaningful, iii) the intention of the listener must be focused on the realities and remembrance of God, iv) Sama' must be held without instruments.<sup>(18)</sup>

#### The Suhrwardiyya and Ni'matullahi Sufi Orders:

The Suhrwardiyya Order also acknowledges the importance of Sufi Sama' for the development of spiritual teaching. The 'Awarif al-Ma'arif of Abu Hafs 'Umar Suhrawardi (d. 632/1234) is considered the most celebrated book of the Suhrwardiyya Order. He maintained that proper antique must be observed during the audition. He writes:

"The aspiring disciple, yearning aspirant, sincere wayfarer and seeker inspired by divine love must invest himself with the robes of pious vigilance (taqwa) which inspire him with steadfastness and grant him hidden powers of will, and which bear the fruit of high spiritual rank and salvation in the hereafter. In this fashion, the flames of divine yearning within him will be rekindled every moment and freshly renewed so that God's grace—the bounty of this world, will bless all of his days, such that in Sama' he will be able to control his movements, except when he is unable to keep his

peace—like a person who must sneeze, no matter how much he wishes not to."<sup>(19)</sup>

Similarly, the Ni'matullahi Order also affirm the permissibility of the Sama'. Netton describes the method of Sufi music of the Ni'matullahi Order that their Sama' is very simple and based on a simple dīkr and with clapping, tambourine and reed flute.<sup>(20)</sup> Other small Orders also use Sama' for the promotion of their message. One can notice that in the West, popular appreciation of Sufism today frequently focuses on music which in our public cultures is much more familiar categories than prayer or metaphysics. Carl W. Ernst rightly observes that today Sufi practice in the form of music and dance is being redefined in terms of contemporary Western aesthetic standards, as the tradition of the Whirling Dervishes of Turkey and Chishti Qawwali of Indo-Pak are very famous contemporary Sufi ritual.<sup>(21)</sup>

#### The Naqshbandiyya Sufi Order:

The controversy over the issue of Sama' is not a new phenomenon. There is a long debate about the legitimacy and permissibility of the Sufi music and dance among the Sufis and jurists. Most Sufis Orders except the Naqshbandiyya (though there have been notable exceptions in the Order) believe that Sama' is beneficial for spiritual elevation. A traditional bent permeates the Naqshbandi path in its external aspects: the great masters of this path established that the mystic states are subordinated to the precepts of the shari'a, and that the spiritual experiences and perceptions are subservient to the

religious sciences. Therefore, they do not permit singing and dancing (Sama' wa-raqs) and do not immerse themselves in vocal recollection of God.<sup>(22)</sup>

### The Position of the Traditionists (Muhadithin) and Jurists (Fuqaha') on the Permissibility of Sama':

The traditional scholars, experts of exegesis and jurisprudence analyzed the legal position of Sama'. Many of them believe that audition is prohibited in Islam. They validate their argument by the following verses of Qur'an:

"And among the mankind is he who purchases idle talks (lahw al-hadith i.e music, singing) to mislead (men) from the path of Allah without knowledge, and takes it (the path of Allah, or the Verses of the Qur'an) by way of mockery. For such there will be a humiliating torment (in the Hell-fire)."<sup>(23)</sup>

They believe the Sama' is also a kind of lahwa al-hadith mentioned in the above Qur'anic verse. Ibn Jarir al-Tabari (d. 310/923) narrates that the meaning of lahwa al-hadith is audition and this is the opinion of eminent scholar like Ibn Abbas, Sa'id b. Jubayr, Jabir b. 'Abd Allah, Mujahid and 'Ikramah. Mujahid said: "Everything which takes a man away from the remembrance of God, that is prohibited and audition is indeed one of them."<sup>(24)</sup> On the basis of this, the traditional scholars do not permit music and they prohibit Sama' absolutely. They offer a detailed answer to the question rather than just a simple "yes" or "no" solution.

Similarly, Ibn Rajab (d. 795/1392) composed a book

Nuzhat al-Asma' fi Mas'alat al-Sama' (The Ears' Delight in the Practice of Musical Audition). He classified Sama' into two categories: sacred and propane. However, he considered the use of musical instrument forbidden.<sup>(25)</sup> On the other hand, there are always a group of scholars who argued that the Sama' is prohibited. Most of them consider Sama' as a hateful and impressible act. They assert that the Qur'anic term lahw al-hadith (idle talk) is about the Sama'.<sup>(26)</sup> Ibn Abi al-Dunya (d. 281/894), Ibn Jawzi (d. 600/1201), Ibn Hajaj (d. 736/1336), Ibn Jama'a (d. 739/1338) and Ibn Taymiyya (d. 728/1327).<sup>(27)</sup>

Ahmad Zarruq (d. 899/1493), a Maliki jurist and Shadhili Sufi, analysed the status of Sama' under some juridical rules.<sup>(28)</sup> He writes that Sufis also have three different opinions similar to jurists. He reveals their opinions and expresses finally his own opinion:

"According to the established research, (al-tahqiq), it is a doubtful act that should be shunned because it is similar to a false dogma that is hilarity (al-lahw) except with a necessity that needs one to resort to it; therefore it may be allowed."<sup>(29)</sup>

Ahmad Zarruq's arguments on the prohibition of Sama' are taken up by the Islamic reformist and puritanical movements such as the movements of Muhammad b. 'Abd al-Wahhab (d. 1206/1792), Hasan al-Banna' (d. 1368/1949) and Abu al-'Ala Mawdudi (d. 1399/1979). Moreover, they rejected the notion of any saintly mediation between God and ordinary humanity. In an attempt to destroy the accretions of

history and return to the purity of Islam at the time of the Prophet, the traditional scholars reject the ritual and local cultural adaptation of Sufism as non-Islamic.<sup>(30)</sup> They also reject Sama' on the basis of the arguments given by the early traditional scholars.

### Conclusion:

On the basis of the present study, it can be concluded that the debate over the permissibility and prohibition of Sama' is based on the arguments of the traditional Sufis and traditionists. Those who argue that Sama' is permissible, they based their argument on the works of Junayd and al-Ghazali, while those who reject its legality, their arguments revolve around the debates of classical traditionists and legalists. The permissibility of Sama' is also established by the Prophetic traditions. Those who assert for the permissibility of Sama', argue that there are many ahadith reported by Muhammad b. Isma'il al-Bukhari (d. 252/870) and Abu al-Hussayn Muslim b. al-Hajjajj (d. 261/875) on the authority of 'A'isha (may Allah please with her) which reveal that the people used to listen music on the occasions of marriage, eid and other festivals in Medina in front of the Prophet (peace be upon him) and he did not prohibit them. It clearly proves that singing and playing are not haram. Similarly, it is reported that many Companions of the Prophet (may Allah be pleased with them) as well as second generation Muslim scholars used to listen to singing and did not see anything wrong with it. The concept of lahw al-hadith (idle talk) as mentioned in the Sura Luqman 31:6) is

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related to everything that leads people towards wrongdoing. If the Sama' is of that kind then it is also prohibited. In fact, the reason which made some scholars declare it to be prohibited or at disliked is that singing in many cases associated with drinking parties. They state that singing constitutes that kind of idle talk which is mentioned in the Qur'an. Therefore, it is necessary to observe the proper manners as established by Junayd and subsequent Muslim Sufis. On the basis of this discussion, it can be recommended to avoid labelling the Sama' as absolute haram and unlawful. However, it is maintained that one cannot permit it without having certain restrictions to safeguards the maqasid (purposes) of Shari'ah and making sure that it is not misused.

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Note: Lewisohn argues that the 'right time' is both a temporal 'moment' and a metaphysical condition which connotes the heart's detachment (*faragh al-qalb*), the condition of 'place' must not to be interpreted only literally. Thus the 'place' of the concert is also paradoxically a 'no-place', a *u-topos*, a 'heart-land', rather than any specific bodily locus. A 'place' is sacred by virtue of the heart's presence here rather than the heart's presence physically contingent upon the geographical locus of the body. Lewisohn, "The Sacred Music of Islam", p. 9.

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