

## SUFI SAMĀ' AND THE COSMOLOGY OF MANDALA\*

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### *Introduction*

This paper is compiled in an interdisciplinary comparative manner touching upon the universal language that connects different forms of sacred arts. This 'language' is discussed in the context of two forms of religious arts, namely mandala (visual) and samā' (performing), from two religious traditions (Buddhism and Islam); the subject of 'language' is dealt with both under the "Introductory Remarks" and "Art: The Language of Heart."

Under "Mandala: The Primordial Symbol," we have introduced 'mandala' as a form of sacred geometry of universal significance. In it, all 'contradictions' are transformed into 'complements' that form one single unit of perfect balance. The symbolic significance of this primordial form is then elaborated in light of the most sacred congregational ritual of Islam – the Hajj. The discussion of mandalaic cosmology is further extended to the domain of the Sufi samā'. Here we felt the need to touch upon the position of music and dance in Islamic tradition, under "Traditional Music" and "Dance and Devotion" before we embarked on the samā'. The samā' is then discussed under three subheadings namely: *The True Samā'*, *Samā': Nourishment of the Soul*, and "Samā': Art of Selfless Expression."

Rumi's Mathnawi has been quoted frequently throughout this article in both its original Persian and English translation. This is because Jalāl al-Din Rumi was not only an authority in Sufism but a practicing Sufi; the whirling assembly of dervishes and the performance of samā' in an orderly format was initiated by him in twelfth century. His poetry is therefore used as the connecting thread that unites all related topics in this paper.

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\* All the translations of Rumi's poems to English in this paper are my own.

*Art: The Language of Heart*

On the very first day of my arrival (May 7, 2007) in Istanbul to attend the International Conference on Rumi, the simple logo of the conference—on the banners and other printed material—caught my eye. It exhibited, in an effortless and, if I may say, minimalistic manner, the spiral movement of a Sufi in *samāʿ* (Figure 1). With just a simple floating line that changed thickness as it moved on – like the natural change in the flow of ink/paint from the brush on paper in a Persian *qalamgiri* technique – the designer had successfully communicated his message. A sophisticated idea was successfully expressed in all simplicity. The design reflected, in an artistic manner, the philosophy of *samāʿ* – a minimalist form of dance with profound metaphysical meaning.

The poster of the conference also was creative, meaningful and visually pleasing (Figure 2). It showed a group of individuals, without individuality, in a collective selfless dance. The colors used were white and blue – very calm colors – with just minute red dots in the center of each circle, indicating the *samazan*'s headgear.

Impressed by the modest yet effective designs, I showed them to some of the colleagues and explained to them the relation between form and content in the said designs.<sup>1</sup> I was especially pleased to see that the designs (of both the logo and the poster) related, both in form and message, to *mandala* – the idea that I elaborated in length in my presentation at the conference, along with some forty slides, and that which I will be dealing with, in a more academic and less artistic manner, in this paper! I have, however, included a number of images that I felt were absolutely necessary.

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<sup>1</sup> I was educated in Art and design and worked for a while as a professional graphic designer. I also taught *Art Fundamentals* to university students of Fine Arts for quite a number of years where I dealt with how concepts should be translated into visual forms. Subjects such as the values of hue, line, plane and volume, and their overall interaction in a successful composition were discussed and analyzed in my classes. This may justify my artistic assessment of the designs! I still paint and design though my teaching is now more focused on theoretical subjects.