

A Critical Review of Psychological and Spiritual Dimensions of Sufi Music

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ABSTRACT

Sufi music, deeply intertwined with Islamic mysticism, serves as a profound medium for spiritual expression and transcendence. Across cultures, particularly in South Asia, the Middle East, and North Africa, Sufi music has evolved as an experiential tool to facilitate states of spiritual ecstasy (wajd), divine remembrance (dhikr), and the dissolution of the ego (fanā) (Qureshi, 2006; Ernst, 2011). This paper explores the historical origins, philosophical underpinnings, and contemporary relevance of Sufi music as a catalyst for spiritual awakening. It critically examines how musical traditions such as Qawwali, Sama, and Hadra embody Sufi cosmology and discusses debates around orthodoxy, authenticity, and commercialization in the modern era.

Keywords: Sufi Music; Spirituality; Mysticism; Psychology of Religion, Religious Music

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INTRODUCTION

Music occupies a contested yet vital space within Islamic civilization. While certain orthodox interpretations discourage or reject musical expression (Zaman, 2012), Sufism, the mystical dimension of Islam, has long embraced music as a legitimate, even essential, vehicle for spiritual transformation (Ernst, 2011). For Sufi practitioners, music transcends mere aesthetic experience; it functions as a spiritual technology designed to awaken the soul, dissolve the ego (nafs), and draw the seeker into proximity with the Divine (Schimmel, 1975).

Across geographies, Sufi music manifests in diverse forms. Qawwali in South Asia, Sama in Turkey, Hadra in North Africa, yet all share the common purpose of inducing an embodied, emotional, and transcendent encounter with God (Qureshi, 2006; Frishkopf, 2010). Despite its rich historical and cultural significance, Sufi music remains under-researched from an integrated, interdisciplinary perspective. This paper addresses these gaps by examining the historical, theological, psychological, and neuroscientific dimensions of Sufi music, with a particular focus on the phenomenon of Wajd.

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2. Theological Foundations Music and Spirituality in Sufism

2.1. Sufi Conceptions of Divine Love and Ecstasy: At the heart of Sufi practice lies the concept of Ishq-e-Haqiqi (Divine Love) and the soul's yearning for union with God. Music functions as a bridge between the seeker and the Beloved, bypassing rational barriers and speaking directly to the heart (qalb) (Schimmel, 1975). Sufi poets like Rumi, Hafez, and Bulleh Shah have expressed the ineffable mysteries of divine love

through music-infused poetry, often accompanied by rhythmic chanting, instruments, and movement.

2.2. The Role of Music in Sufi Rituals: Sufi orders have historically employed music within structured ritual contexts such as Sama (listening sessions), Qawwali gatherings, and Hadra ceremonies. These practices, often accompanied by poetry and rhythmic movement, aim to evoke Wajd, temporarily dissolving egoic boundaries and immersing participants in divine remembrance (dhikr) (Ernst, 2011; Qureshi, 2006).

2.3. Orthodox Debates on Legitimacy: Islamic jurisprudence offers diverse interpretations regarding music. While strict Salafi and Wahhabi interpretations condemn music as a distraction from religious devotion (Zaman, 2012), Sufi scholars distinguish between spiritually uplifting music and profane entertainment. They draw upon Qur'anic references to beauty, love, and poetic expression, as well as Hadith traditions that reflect the Prophet Muhammad's tolerance for rhythmic recitation and spiritual gatherings (Schimmel, 1975).

3. Major Traditions of Sufi Music

3.1. Qawwali (South Asia): Originating in the Indian subcontinent, Qawwali is one of the most recognized forms of Sufi devotional music. Rooted in the Chishti Order, it combines Persian, Urdu, Hindi, and Punjabi poetry with rhythmic clapping, harmoniums, and percussion to create an immersive spiritual experience (Qureshi, 2006). Pioneered by figures like Amir Khusrau, Qawwali sessions aim to induce Wajd among listeners, leading to emotional catharsis and divine remembrance.

3.2. Sama and Whirling Dervishes (Mevlevi Order, Turkey): The Sama ceremony, associated with the Mevlevi Order founded by followers of Jalaluddin Rumi, incorporates instrumental music, recitation of poetry, and the iconic whirling dance. The rhythmic rotations symbolize the soul's journey toward God and the shedding of worldly attachments (During, 1997).

3.3. Hadra (North Africa and Middle East): In regions such as Morocco, Egypt, and Syria, Sufi brotherhoods practice Hadra, a ritual gathering involving rhythmic chanting, breathing techniques, and collective movement. Through repetitive invocations and melodic patterns, practitioners seek to transcend ordinary consciousness and attain

divine proximity (Frishkopf, 2010).

4. Music as a Catalyst for Spiritual Transformation

Sufi music operates on multiple psychological and spiritual levels. Emotional resonance evokes longing (shawq) and love for the Divine; physical engagement through rhythmic clapping, swaying, and dance facilitates embodied spirituality; communal participation fosters spiritual unity; and symbolic lyrics redirect consciousness from the material to the metaphysical (Becker, 2004; Maslow, 1964). Neuroscientific studies suggest that music modulates emotional states, enhances neural connectivity, and induces trance-like experiences (Koelsch, 2014).

5. Debates, Controversies, and Orthodoxy

The integration of music into Sufi practice has historically attracted criticism from orthodox Islamic scholars who view music as leading to heedlessness or moral laxity (Zaman, 2012). Sufi scholars emphasize the distinction between spiritually elevating music and profane entertainment, the role of intention (niyyah), and historical precedents for music's spiritual function (Ernst, 2011).

6. Contemporary Relevance and Globalization of Sufi Music

In the 21st century, Sufi music has transcended religious and geographic boundaries, captivating global audiences through concerts, festivals, and digital platforms (Frishkopf, 2010). Artists such as Nusrat Fateh Ali Khan, Abida Parveen, and Sami Yusuf have popularized Sufi music, blending traditional forms with contemporary styles. While this promotes cross-cultural understanding, concerns persist regarding superficial consumption and cultural appropriation.

7. Psychological and Neuroscientific Analysis of Wajd

7.1. Understanding Wajd: Psychological Perspectives Wajd is described as a temporary state in which the self (nafs) dissolves and the individual experiences profound love, unity, and transcendence. It shares characteristics with altered

states of consciousness (ASCs), including dissociation from ordinary awareness, emotional intensity, and perception of unity (Maslow, 1964; Becker, 2004).

7.2. Music, Emotion, and Induction of Wajd Music serves as a powerful emotional trigger capable of modulating arousal, mood, and attentional focus (Koelsch, 2014). In Sufi contexts, features like repetitive rhythms, melodic improvisations, increasing tempo, and poetic lyrics contribute to the induction of Wajd.

7.3. Neuroscientific Correlates of Wajd and Altered States Neuroscientific studies reveal that altered states akin to Wajd involve deactivation of the Default Mode Network (DMN), increased theta and gamma oscillations, and activation of brain regions associated with reward and emotion (Newberg & Waldman, 2016; Lou et al., 1999; Koelsch, 2014).

7.4. Cultural Framing and Interpretation of Wajd While neurophysiological mechanisms may be universal, the interpretation of Wajd is shaped by Sufi religious and cultural frameworks, where it is regarded as a legitimate spiritual experience rather than a psychological anomaly (Schimmel, 1975).

Conclusion

Sufi music exemplifies the intimate relationship between sound, emotion, and spirituality, offering a pathway to transcendent states like Wajd. Integrating theological, ethnomusicological, psychological, and neuroscientific perspectives enhances our understanding of Sufi music not merely as cultural heritage but as a profound spiritual technology (Becker, 2004; Koelsch, 2014).

However, several avenues for future research remain. Empirical studies employing neuroimaging or psychological assessments with Sufi practitioners could deepen scientific understanding of Wajd and music-induced altered states. Comparative research exploring similarities and differences between Sufi musical experiences and those in other mystical or meditative traditions may also yield valuable insights.

Furthermore, the broader social and policy implications of Sufi music warrant attention. As a

living spiritual tradition that fosters interfaith dialogue, emotional regulation, and cultural cohesion, Sufi music holds significant potential in promoting mental health, peacebuilding, and cultural diplomacy. In an era marked by spiritual alienation and religious polarization, preserving the authenticity and accessibility of Sufi music is not only a scholarly concern but a pressing societal need.

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