

DANCING THE WORLD : AN INTERPRETATION OF DANCE AS A METAPHOR FOR
EXPERIENCE.

There is no divinity outside the only Divinity and
Muhammad is the Envoy.

The Testimony of Faith.

He is the First and the Last and the Outward (Zahir)
and the Inward (Batin) and He knows infinitely all
things.

(Qoran LV11,3.)

T. Burckhardt : An Introduction to Sufi Doctrine.

Rites.

To carry out a rite is not only to enact a symbol but also to participate even if only virtually, in a certain mode of being, a mode which has an extra-human and universal extension.

The meaning of the rite coincides with the ontological essence of its form.

He goes on to discuss the failure of modern man to appreciate or to apprehend the implicitly universal nature of the qualitative form of rites. Rituals only bear fruit if carried out with an intention (NIYAH) that conforms to its meaning. He quotes a saying of the Prophet, not acknowledging the source, - "The value of actions is only through their intentions" This does not mean that the intention is independent of the form of the action

" It is precisely because the inward attitude is wedded to the formal quality of the ritual - a quality which manifests a reality both ontological and intellectual - that the act transcends the domain of the individual soul "

The quintessential element, the sacramental element, of Muslim rituals is the Divine Speech. For example the recitation of the Qoran by itself constitutes a ritual.

In certain cases this recitation may be concentrated on a single phrase, repeated a definite number of times with the aim of actualizing its deep truth and its particular grace. This practice is common in Islam because the Qur'an, at least in part is composed of rhythmic formulas, which lend themselves to litanies and incantations.

In esotericism, repetitive recitations of sacred formula constitute a basic method.

All repetitive recitations of sacred formulae or sacred speech, whether aloud or inward is called -"DIKHR"

Dikhr - has the connotations of remembrance, evocation, memory.

Sufism makes of such invocation, which is dikhr in the strict sense of the term, the central instrument of its method.

In order to fully appreciate the scope and force of this method it needs to be recalled that according to the revealed expression, the world was created by the Speech of God (al-Amr, al Kalimah)

There is therefore here indicated a real analogy between the Universal Spirit (ar-Ruh) and speech

In invocation the ontological character of the ritual act is very directly expressed : here the simple enunciation of the Divine Name is the symbol of a state or an undifferentiated knowledge superior to mere "rational" "knowing."

Man cannot concentrate directly on the Infinite, but by concentrating on the Infinite, attains to the Infinite Itself. When the individual subject is identified with the Name to the point where every mental projection has been absorbed by the form of the Name, the Divine Essence of the Name manifests spontaneously, for this sacred form leads to nothing outside of itself: it has no positive relationship except with its Essence and finally its limits are dissolved in that Essence.

Thus union with the Divine Name becomes Union (al-wasl) with God himself.

The meaning "recollection" implied in the word DHIKR indirectly shows up man's ordinary state of forgetfulness and unconsciousness (ghaflah). Man has forgotten his own pretemporal state in God and this fundamental forgetfulness carries in its train other forms of forgetfulness and of unconsciousness.

"Assuredly prayer prevents passionate transgressions and grave sins but the invocation of God (dhikru-'llah) is greater)(Qur'an xxix.45)

" Those who believe and whose hearts rest in security in the recollection (memory) of God : verily is it not through the recollection of God that their hearts find rest in security? " (xiii.28).

By implication the state of the soul of the profane man is here compared to a disturbance or agitation through its being being dispersed in multiplicity which is the very antipodes of the Divine Unity.

"Allah" is the synthesis of all the Divine Names and is transcendent as compared with their differentiation (99 names).

" Oh ye who believe! invoke God with a frequent invocation" (xxxiii.41)

"Happy is he who purifies himself and invokes the Name of his Lord and prayeth"(lxxxvii. 14 and 15)

To these passages from the Qur'an must be added some of the sayings of the Prophet :

" It is in pronouncing Thy Name that I must die and live."

Here the most important connection between the Name, "death", and "life" includes a most important initiative meaning.

" A man said: O Prophet of God, truly the laws of Islam are many. Tell me a thing by which I can obtain the rewards. The Prophet answered: Let your tongue be ever moist with mentioning God."

The universal character of invocation is indirectly expressed by the simplicity of its form and by its power of assimilating to itself all those acts of life whose direct and elemental nature has an affinity with the "existential" aspect of the ritual. Thus the DHIKR easily imposes its sway on breathing, the double rhythm (inhalation and exhalation) of which sums up not only every manifestation of life but also symbolically, the whole of existence.

Just as the rhythm inherent in the sacred words imposes itself on the movement of breathing, so the rhythm of breathing in its turn can impose itself on all movements of the body. Herein lies the principle of the sacred dance practiced in Sufi communities.

The practice of the dance is the more remarkable since the Muslim religion as such is hostile both to dancing and music, for the identification through the medium of a cosmic rhythm with a spiritual or divine reality has no place in a religious perspective which maintains a strict and rigorous distinction between Creator and creature.

Also there are practical reasons for banishing dancing from religious worship, for the psychic results might lead to typically ecstatically based deviations.

Nonetheless the dance offers too direct and too primordial a spiritual support for it not to be found in regular or at least occasional use in the esotericism of the monotheistic religions.

Jilal ad-din Rumi, founder of the Mevlevi order, drew the inspiration for the collective dhikr of his community from the popular dances and music of Asia minor/ (an aesthetic feeling can be a support for intuition for the same reason as a doctrinal idea and to the extent to which the beauty of a form reveals an intellectual essence. But the particular efficacy of music as a means, lies in the fact that it speaks first of all to feeling which is clarified and sublimates. Perfect harmony of the active intelligence (the reason) and the passive intelligence (sensitivity, feeling) prefigures the spiritual state - al hal.

Al- Ghazzali : When man has made himself familiar with dhikr he separates himself (inwardly from all else).

Preferable however invocation is practiced in solitude. The ecstatic mode should not be practiced either in isolation from other techniques of knowing Allah, nor should it be practices alone. We are here dealing with a non-individual symbolising of a spiritual journey.

Whatever spiritual practice is used, it is dangerous to do so outside of an established traditional framework..

The Bakhtiari dance differs from the purely spiritual aims and intentions of the Mevlevi darwishes, with its ritual vocal incantations and recitations. The object of the Bakhtiari dance is somewhat different and is to my mind oriented inward only to centre the self effectively IN the world. ~~And~~ as such it uses a somewhat different mode to attain this vision of, - or implicit experience of - "centredness". The analogy to speech rhythms are the body rhythms of the dance - the chupi -, endlessly repetitive, made of balanced symmetrical sequences of movements replicated time after time. It is the body, not the voice which is manipulated in its parts with a rather awesome symmetry, and in its totality in a sweeping circle.

This induces, through its repetition, the experience of harmony, order, balance and rhythm, ~~which is~~ inescapable. The musicians aid this process, particularly the horn player, who constantly directs the horn towards the dancers, so that they are literally enveloped in rhythmic sound waves, punctuated with the beat of the drum. To dance is to experience the tightening of one's body into the rhythm by the directed sound waves, ~~directed~~ ^{inducted} by the music in the most explicit way into the rhythm of the dance. This goes beyond conscious awareness as the author experienced on many occasions

while trying to learn the dance. The body learned faster than the mind so to speak and this was only possible by participating, by subjecting the self to the rhythm.

The rigid and stylised movements of the first two or three rhythms ~~and~~ finally dissolved, in the accelerated rhythms of the Aqab bazi, which only women are allowed to dance, covered by their veils.

This Aqab bazi is perhaps most analogous in mode and structure to the whirling technique of the Mevlevi dervishes, ~~which~~ both, in themselves imbedded in their own traditions and rituals ~~so to speak~~. The Aqab bazi is the culmination, or the end point, to which the slowly accelerating chupi rhythms ~~lead~~ ^{which} aspires and finally, only in the female body can ever be ~~realised~~ realised. Symbolically here we have (the enactment) through ~~an act of a~~ separation - male from female - by analogy rational } from animal - ~~from the~~ intellectual separated from ^{the} ~~passionate~~ ^{part} human nature; of the primordial source of all creation - pure energy - symbolised by the quivering "aqab" or ~~backward~~ ^{reversed} motion of the FEMALE body. Energy in its pure form is the very essence of creativity and destruction it has the potential of both and therefore must be protected, set apart, made "sacred".

The female, within this conceptualisation symbolises creative energy not only in its social form, created form, but in its pure or creative form, it partakes of the Divine presence in Human nature, in all created things, and therefore must be hidden and protected. It brings potentiality for creation as well as for destruction. The conjunction of the Impure with the sacred is a conjunction found in many cultures in the world. ^(two aspects) We have here, dance as a metaphor for ^{the} conditions of being human - both order and pure undifferentiated knowledge which is higher, in its positive connotations than differentiated order.

It is perhaps a metaphor for the return to the source of all creation, a return to the Divine. It is a metaphor for the process of Knowledge itself.

through bodily manipulation

The long gradual induction of awareness of order ~~as the body is~~ symmetrical ~~manipulated~~ in balanced opposition between inside and outside, up and down left and right, in all six dimensions and directions, while gradually ~~move~~ moving to the right, always concentrating on facing ~~to~~ the inside of the circling circle of dancers, concentrating the gaze of the inner eye on the soul, inwards, centering the self, imperceptably accelerating through different rhythms; one of which importantly hold the body immobile for a single beat in every 16 beat sequence, thus concentrating the mind in the spiritual centre inside the self, finally ecstatically spiraling in one the centre itself where the women dance on the source of Light, fire, energy, order by destroying the order built up by the dance. The end that is truly a beginning returning order and differentiation to its pure Divine, undifferentiated state. A return to ~~to~~ ^{call} the future which is continuity; though the individual is mortal, the energy persists. *Time transformed to timelessness.*

The processual structure of the dance therefore is a beautiful metaphor for the process of life and death, for the continuity of life forms, for the centring of the self to achieve true balance and harmony.

The multiplicity of Dancers, through the medium of the dance, dissolve their multiplicity, their differentiated individuality in the circling of the communal dance while remaining individuals immersed in the circle, finally, in the ecstatic whirling on the source itself totally dissolving and transcending the individual selves to become a single human ^{form} circling, veiled and hidden on the source, the centre itself - returning thus to the state of pure being..

The dance is a metaphor for both becoming human and being part of Divine creation, energy. *and for realizing the nature, the soul, the self*
Both Being and becoming are symbolised by the sequential structure of the dance. Becoming human in the world and Being of the essence of the world which is created by Divinity. It is a metaphor for the journey of the self and of the soul through the order and rules necessary for social life to the source out of which all order emanates.

A dance can be defined as bodily movements linked to a thought and a sound or series of sounds. The movements develop the body, the thought focusses the mind and the sound fuses the two and orients them towards a consciousness of Divine contact (hal)

Leap, leap! for the rhyme
Of the soul is afoot
The sweet drum keeps time
With the soft reed's note.

Rise up and go about
The Pole of our salvation
As winds the pilgrim route
By Mecca's holy station.

slender band
Why are thou slender band
Like clay the earth caressing
In movement shall be found
The key to every blessing.

Jilal ad- din Rumi.

Dance is of course a peculiarly apt metaphor for a nomadic life style dominated as it is with seasonal cycles of movement.

However the image of movement is one which is of the very essence of nomadic survival. The life conditions faced by every nomad are volatile, changeable, only partially knowable and the major technique of survival is mobility, both social, physical and above all mental or psychic. Flexibility, fluidity are built in to all institutional forms of nomadic life. Their residential units are fluid, leadership is unstable through time. Rigidity in any form is fatal to the continuity of the nomadic life. Stability, static forms do not fit nomadic life, yet order must be perceived, regularity must be achieved if any social life is possible at all.

It is perhaps for this reason that nomadic experience is expressed in oral forms, poetic allusions folk songs and dances, all of them dynamic modes. Perhaps also the stress on abstract forms of representation, representing in stylised form relationships which are not static is the consonant mode, consonant with the nature of nomadic experience.

As they journey through the world in their constant search for grass and water, their journey through nature, so too this is analogous to the journey through life, and to the journey of the soul in search for God, for Divinity, for Knowledge. Movement is indeed the key to every blessing, to knowledge - harmony and rhythm which connects man to the universe, the microcosm to the macrocosm, the finite form to its infinite essence/.

Throughout the works the spiral has been so often the image used to express this idea of the journey. It is seen in all types of cultural products whether literature, art, weaving or dance. It is a common motif, a dynamic and necessary element within Islam and not surprisingly amongst the nomads is a dominant motif. The spiral images the process of life itself as well as the way in which life must be lived, in balanced harmony, multiplicity in Unity. The spiral form images the underlying unity or in the Divine mode the transcending unity as is seen through the major religious

ritual of the pilgrimage to Mecca and to lesser shrines throughout Iran. Spiralling on a religious journey to a Centre Outside, to attain a state of grace, a reversal of fortune, a state of being and knowledge, to be transformed into a higher state of being and knowing.

The culmination of the pilgrimage to Mecca is in the seven fold circling of the Ka'aba, the Navel of the World, veiled in Black marking the point where the microcosmic earth is joined to the macrocosmic universe of eternity. This ^{anti} inati clockwise circumambulation is done seven times, three times at running speed - symbolising lesser control and the passions and four times slowly -symbolising control and the intellect.,

The "akhtiari dance which is oriented to living in this world and usually done at weddings, the start of a new social unit and the presage of a new born life, is the mirror image of this. Moving from slow to faster rhythms returning to the source of creation preparatory to giving birth to a new social unit is the perfect mirror complement to the ritual journey to the soul of the Hajj.

"Thus God is the mirror in which you see yourself, as you are His mirror in which he contemplates His Names. Now his Names are not other than Himself, so that the analogy of relations is an inversion"

Ibn Arabi.

The dance is the inversion of the pilgrimage, moving from the world to the centre and back to the world. The opposite direction, where the relationship between directions is that of inversion is a theme which dominates so much of Muslim life.

The private world is the inverse of the public world. The inside is the inverse of the outside.

Here is the key to interpret the deeply symbolic mode which dominates Islam, which sees the phenomenal world, reality as nothing other than an illusion hiding, veiling, protecting its inner essence which is the true reality. By gazing into a mirror, or a pool of water, at all reflecting

surfaces, is to possibly glimpse reality. The inverse of the phenomenal world. Mirrors are in fact an art form in Iran, testament to this fundamental structuring of the world into an outward form and an interior essence.

The outward form is analogous to the public world, the world of posturing men, with controlled public behaviour, swathed in clothes hiding the body's contours, where social intercourse is always controlled and formal, rational in its broadest sense.

The inner self, the inner world, is the world of the home, the domestic world, the world of women, where women in their selves symbolise the inside, the source. Whether veiled as in the settled world of villages and cities or unveiled but separated, the world of women is a world apart, but in fact is a world totally private and interior, where a man's real self can be unveiled revealed to his intimates in the family.

This inside, protected quality of the home is summed up in most exaggerated form by the idea of the Harem. That forbidden and sacred place where reside in luxurious isolated splendour the women of the Caliph. Harim means sanctuary, sacred, set apart, forbidden.

The centre is inviolate and death is the only possible response to any violation of the centre, of the inner sanctum of the home, of the inner aspect of man's nature, of his control over his self.

Women could in their most positive aspect be conceived of as being metaphors for closeness to the undifferentiated state of Divinity.

"To look into the face of a woman is to see Divinity" Jami.

Here too we come up to the Aqab Bazi, the dance of the centre in which the women ^{part of record, reversal} reverse the direction of their turning and provide thus the mirror image of order, - true energy whirling round the centre of the world, of the self, where the self and continuity are to be found.