

Sama (Mystical Music)

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This is an edited version of an introductory talk given at the commencement of a live Sama session held in celebration of the anniversary of Khwaja Gharib Nawaz Moinuddin Chishti, r.a.

Sama falls into that legal classification of acts which are technically called 'Mubah', which mean that they are Permitted by the Shariah, but have no religious value or significance. For a good purpose it is legally permissible, but if it is used for an undesirable or an evil purpose, then it becomes forbidden.

In other words, Sama or Qawwali falls under the neutral category. There are four situations of Sama:

1. First is the situation where Sama/Qawwali is held only for the sake of entertainment and pleasure. It is not correct, legally speaking, according to the Shariah or otherwise to hold that Sama is haram or forbidden only because it pleases the heart and one gets pleasure and happiness from it, for the reason that not all pleasant and pleasurable things are made haram, forbidden. Only those pleasurable things which contain hidden potential for evil are the ones that are made haram. Pleasant songs and voices of the birds, tasty foods, pleasant sights of natural panoramas and gardens and enticing fragrance of flowers are all permissible. So it is that it is not haram to watch entertaining dance and listen to melodious songs to please our hearts. I refer to two sound Traditions of the Prophet (pbuh) i.e., Sahih Ahadith to make this point clear.

Once, on an Eid day, some Abyssinians were giving a song and dance performance right on the premises of the Prophet's Mosque in Medina. Bibi Aisha . r.a. narrates that the Prophet asked her if she would like to watch it. She agreed and both she and the holy Prophet watched it for quite a while.

Another Hadith, also by Haz. Bibi Aisha, r.a. -- on the Day of Eid, two slave girls were singing with the accompaniment of duff drums, right in front of her and in her own apartment, when the Prophet (pbuh) entered the house, passed by them and laid down on his bed with his face turned the other way. Haz. Abu Bakr r.a. also happened to enter later and chided them for doing such devilish things in the Prophet's own house. Whereupon the holy Prophet urged Abu Bakr r.a. to let them do it because after all it was the Eid day.

2. The second situation is where the listener of

Sama has some undesirable thoughts on his mind or evil passions in his heart eg. love of some beautiful woman to whom he is not married and listens to Sama music in front of her, or in her company. It is obvious that this would only increase the pangs of his love or the passions for the carnal desires for her. With the mind occupied with such thoughts in such a manner, such a Sama would be haram.

3. The third situation is the reverse of the second. Here, in this third situation, the heart and mind of the listener is not polluted with evil thoughts and passions. Instead good and praiseworthy thoughts and intentions for doing good prevails. In such a case Sama would enhance the good qualities of his heart and influence him to pursue his intended course of good actions e.g. (1) going for Hajj or for Jihad or fulfilling any other obligatory duties such as Salat, etc. or (2) It could be for the purpose of enhancing the consciousness and acute awareness of the regrets of one's own sins and transgressions so that the melancholy feelings will bring tears to his eyes and cause him to ask for forgiveness of the sins; or (3) hold Sama on festive or pleasant occasions such as weddings, *walima* feasts, *Aqiqah* or to celebrate occasions of return from journeys, etc. Sama would enhance the joys and further increase the enjoyment of such pleasures, resulting from the blessings and favours of Allah ta'ala. The best authority or precedent is that on occasions of the Holy Prophet's return to Medina from journeys, people of Medina used to welcome him by singing songs with the accompaniment of Duff drums. So it is that Sama is permissible on occasions of Eid and other festive occasions or just for friends and relatives to get together out of mutual love and affection and comradeship, share food and eat together in order to enhance the happy moment and make the happy moments even happier, more pleasant and more enjoyable in the company of the dear ones.

4. The fourth kind of Sama/Qawwali actually deserves to be termed the real Sama/Qawwali. This relates to the situation where love of Allah Ta'ala has

reached the point of an ardent love (*Ishq*).

In this case, Sama is not only permissible, but it becomes extremely necessary for such a person. Everything or act that increases the friendship or love of Allah Ta'ala obviously becomes the object of a plenitude of spiritual recompense and this is why the Sufis' attach so much importance to it.

Sama/Qawwali is, in reality a means of increasing the brightening light of the burning flame of the love of Allah and it has a tremendous spiritual effect on the listeners. Many a Sufi undergoes a state of unveiling of spiritual divine mysteries. When such states coming from the world of the unseen thus become overwhelming, the Sufis experience a particular kind of spiritual state of transformation which is called '*wajd*' or spiritual ecstasy.

Man, or rather man's spirit has a special connection and affinity with the celestial world of spirits. This connection and relationship is a mystery. It is the Sama which moves and activates this mystical element in man in such a way that it makes the listener totally unaware of his surroundings in this phenomenal world to some other reality. The man thus becomes completely unaware of this world, its surroundings and the effects of the corporeal universe. Sometimes the effect of Sama becomes so intense and severe that all the energy and strength of the listener's limbs becomes suspended and he loses his consciousness. One who remains intact and manages to stay on his original position even after passing through such a state of deep ecstasy reaches and attains to very high spiritual positions indeed!

SAMA - Sufi Poetry

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It is said that the very essence of Sufism is poetry and the Sufis are never tired of speaking or writing at great length on the '*Ishq*', or '*love of Allah*'.

The Mathnawi of Maulana Rumi teaches in the sweetest strains that all nature abounds with love divine. The works of the celebrated Jami and the lyric odes of Hafiz are so full of ecstatic rapture that these works together with the moral lessons of Sa'di may be termed the scriptures of the Sufis in the Persian language.

In their poetry, the Sufis often exchange the external features of all things for the internal, the corporeal for the spiritual, and thus give an imaginary significance to outward forms. They behold objects of a precious nature in their natural character and for this reason, the greater part of their words have a spiritual and figurative meaning.

For instance, when, like Hafiz, they mention wine,

they mean a knowledge of God, which figuratively considered, is the love of God; wine, figuratively viewed, is also love.

The tavern or the wine-shop, with them, means the *murshid-ul Kamil*, or spiritual director, for his heart is said to be the depository of the love of God.

The wine-cup (*Jam*) is the TALQIN, or the pronunciation of the name of God in a declaration of faith, as "There is no God but Allah" or it signifies the words which flow from the Murshid's mouth respecting divine Knowledge, and which, when heard by the disciple or salik (one who pursues the true path), intoxicates his soul, and divests his heart of passions, giving him pure spiritual delights.

The sweetheart/beloved means the excellent preceptor, because when anyone sees his beloved, he admires her perfect proportions, with a heart full of love. The sweetheart is the object of a worldly affection, but the preceptor of a spiritual attachment.

The salik/disciple beholds the secret knowledge of God which fills the heart of his spiritual preceptor, or Murshid, and through it receives a similar inspiration, and acquires a full perception of all that he possesses, just as the pupil learns from his master. As the lover delights in the presence of his sweetheart, so the salik rejoices in the company of his beloved Murshid, or preceptor.

The curls or ringlets of the beloved are the grateful praises of the preceptor, tending to bind the affections of the disciple.

The mole on her face signify that when the pupil, at times, beholds the total absence of all worldly want on the part of the preceptor, he also abandons all the desires of both worlds -- he perhaps even goes so far as to desire nothing else in life than his preceptor.

The furrows on the brow of the beloved one, which they compare to verses of the Qur'an, mean the light of the heart of the Murshid. They are compared to the verses of the Qur'an, because the attributes of God, in accordance with the injunction of the Prophet: "*Be ye endued with divine qualities*" are possessed by the Murshid.

SAMA - Rules of Etiquette

It is necessary to bear in mind that three things are essential for Sama/Qawwali gatherings: –

1. **Time:** It is not appropriate to hold Sama at a time when *Salat/Namaz* (service of worship) is to be offered or when food is usually served. If Sama is held at a time when the heart is occupied with other things and other

thoughts, Sama would be ineffective and useless.

2. **Place:** Should not be held on a street or thoroughfare where people usually pass through or travel. It should not be held in any dark or unpleasant place, nor should it be held in the house of a person who is known to be a cruel and unjust person.

3. **People:** It should be held in the company of people who are sophisticated and capable of observing the importance of the rules of good conduct and etiquette. If people who object to or believe that holding Sama is not permissible under the Law, or people of proud nature and worldly pomp and show are allowed to attend, then the Sama sessions are likely to be tainted by frequent hypocritical ecstatic outbursts and showy dance performances of such undesirable people.

Imam Ghazzali prescribes the following ten rules of etiquette: --

1. Sit in a seriously attentive manner by keeping the head down.
2. Do not look at each other.
3. Every one should concentrate and occupy himself fully in the Sama.
4. Should have no conversation during Sama.
5. Do not do distracting things -- do not even drink water.
6. Do not look, gaze or stare hither and thither.
7. Do not move your arms or legs unnecessarily and do not make any movement with a show.
8. Sit in a position which is presented for *Qaida/Tashhahud* in salat.
9. Occupy the heart and mind fully with the thought and remembrance of Allah.
10. Keep yourself under control so that you do not stand up or move about in a voluntary manner, of your own accord. However, if anybody does so under the condition that he has no control over himself and involuntarily (that is, not of his own accord or volition) then, others should also stand up and help him in order to prevent him from losing his balance and hurting himself.

To the above points I would add:

11. There should be no applause from the audience, especially by way of clapping and saying 'wahwah'. The audience must appreciate the fact that the musicians might feel insulted by such undesirable means of expressing their appreciation. For, one must always bear in mind that the musicians/qawwals are to be respected because of their devotion and dedication to their performance for the sake of Allah alone, and only for the purpose of hoping to achieve the pleasure of Allah.

All praise belongs to Allah and all rewards for the performance and audition is from Allah. Musicians should neither be encouraged nor discouraged by the lack of clapping or lack of requests for repeating certain lines of Poetry or any other form of applause.

However, the audience, when overwhelmed by certain lines of poetry or music, feeling obliged in an uncontrollable manner to express their delight, may express satisfaction by uttering subhan'Allah, or masha'Allah.

12. According to Indian/Pakistani tradition, the audience may offer donations of money to the head of the Sama assembly, that is the chairman presiding over the Qawwali sessions.

It is in the discretion of the chairman to use that donated money for the purpose of defraying the costs of holding the Qawwali session eg. rental of accommodation, equipment and other incidental expenses. Sometimes, the presiding chairman may symbolically accept the donation by simply indicating his blessings by touching it momentarily and re-directing the donations then to be passed on to musicians.

Offering money directly to the Qawwals may very well be regarded as ill-mannered and unethical.

Traditionally too, the Qawwal, the person who is held in great respect for the good work he does, only for the sake of Allah, can and does often take a hint for repeating a particular couplet if the audience indicates their special appreciation by making further trips to make additional donations to the chairman in a repetitive manner at the time of singing a particular couplet or couplets.

This procedure continues on throughout the Sama (Qawwali) sitting.