



## THE COSMIC DANCE OF THE MEVLEVI DERVISHES

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Fernau Hall

During the heyday of the Ottoman Empire, there were tens of thousands of Mevlevi Sufi dervishes, living in various parts of that immense empire. Though orthodox Muslims were opposed to dancing as part of religious ritual, this was not true of the Sufis. These tended to prize dance and music as helping them to achieve the greatest possible fervour and intensity in their religious experience, and thus to achieve their ultimate goal—direct access to God.

The Mevlevis took their name from the great mystic poet Jalal-ud-Din Rumi who they called Mevlana ("Our Master"). Rumi did not originate religious dancing among the Sufis—we find references to religious dancing by Sufis long before Rumi, who lived in the 13th century—but he laid great stress on it; it has remained central to the order founded by him, and given more precise shape by his son, Sultan, Veled. As Rumi wrote, "Many roads lead to God. I have chosen the way of dancing and music."

Rumours of the dancing of the Mevlevis spread to Christian Europe, and in the 19th century people in Britain were familiar with the idea of "whirling dervishes". In fact the idea was so familiar that the phrase "whirling like a dervish" came into use, and it is clear that people in the West thought of this dancing as taking the form of fast, vertiginous whirling. But only a small number of travellers saw the real thing, and the real nature of Mevlevi dancing came as a surprise to Londoners when a group of Mevlevi dancers was brought to London from Turkey by the Oriental Centre in November, 1971. Their dancing could then be seen as relatively slow and very solemn and dignified, being full of complex symbolism. The dancers did not seek to send themselves into a trance; in fact the very strict patterns they executed would have been quite impossible to trance dancers, and their chief (Ahmet Bican Kasaboglu) moved among them as they danced, making sure that they preserved their proper style and patterns.

In fact the Mevlevis were shown in almost ideal circumstances: in Friends Meeting House, with the audience surrounding the dancers





on three sides, and a raised platform by the wall on the fourth side where the musicians could place themselves. This enabled the Mevlevi to present their ceremony much as in the *semahane* or assembly hall in Konya in Anatolia; a theatre would have provided the wrong ambience, whereas the Quaker ambience was admirable.

It is in Konya, once the capital of the Seljuk Turks, and the place where Rumi and his son established the Mevlevi order, that the Mevlevi ceremony is still performed though those who perform it cannot now live the life of a dervish, they perform the ceremony in pure form, with the right devotional intensity, under the strict control of their chief.

During the centuries when the Sufi orders flourished in Turkey and other parts of the Islamic world, the education and training of the Mevlevi novices was long and arduous, involving many forms of penance and religious study as well as dance training; in fact it was called the "1001 days of penitence". The training for the whirling step was done with the aid of a nail fixed in the floor: the novice fixed two toes of his right foot around the nail, and circled while gripping the nail with his toes, thus learning to remain steady in one position.

After the establishment of Turkey as a secular state, the public dancing of the Mevlevi dervishes was forbidden, and might easily have fallen into oblivion. But conditions changed in 1054; then permission was given for a performance of the Mevlevi ceremony at Rumi's tomb in Konya on his birthday and thanks to the devoted work of Ahmet Bican Kasaboglu it was found possible to revive the ceremony. The group that came to London in 1971 included not only 13 dancers, together with their chief and their

Sheikh; but also a number of the finest classical singers and instrumentalists of Turkey.

The ceremony began with the solemn professional entry of the dancers. They wore a white robe with wide skirt, symbolising their shrouds; over this they wore a black mantle, symbolising their tombs, and on their heads a tall cylindrical hat symbolising their tombstones. The mass of dancers wore grey hats, while their leader wore a white hat, and the Sheikh wore a hat decorated with a black scarf.

Led by the Sheikh, followed by the leader and then by the dancers, the Mevlevis moved three times around the dancing area in procession. At the first turn they all bowed in turn to the red sheepskin rug, symbolising the red of the setting sun on the day Rumi died. Later there was a rather more complex ceremony, in which each dancer moved past the rug and turned back to bow solemnly to the next dancer, who bowed to him at the same time.

Then all the dancers knelt at one side of the dancing area, and the leading singer performed a complex song using words written by Rumi. Then came a complex piece on the *ney* (a long vertical reeded flute) which was improvised within the rules of classical Turkish music much as an *alap* is improvised in North Indian music.

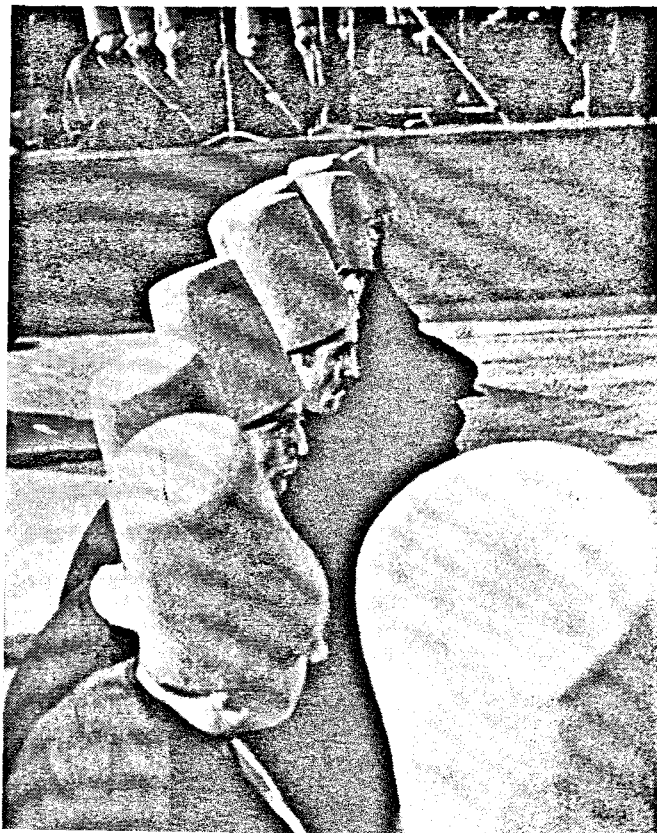
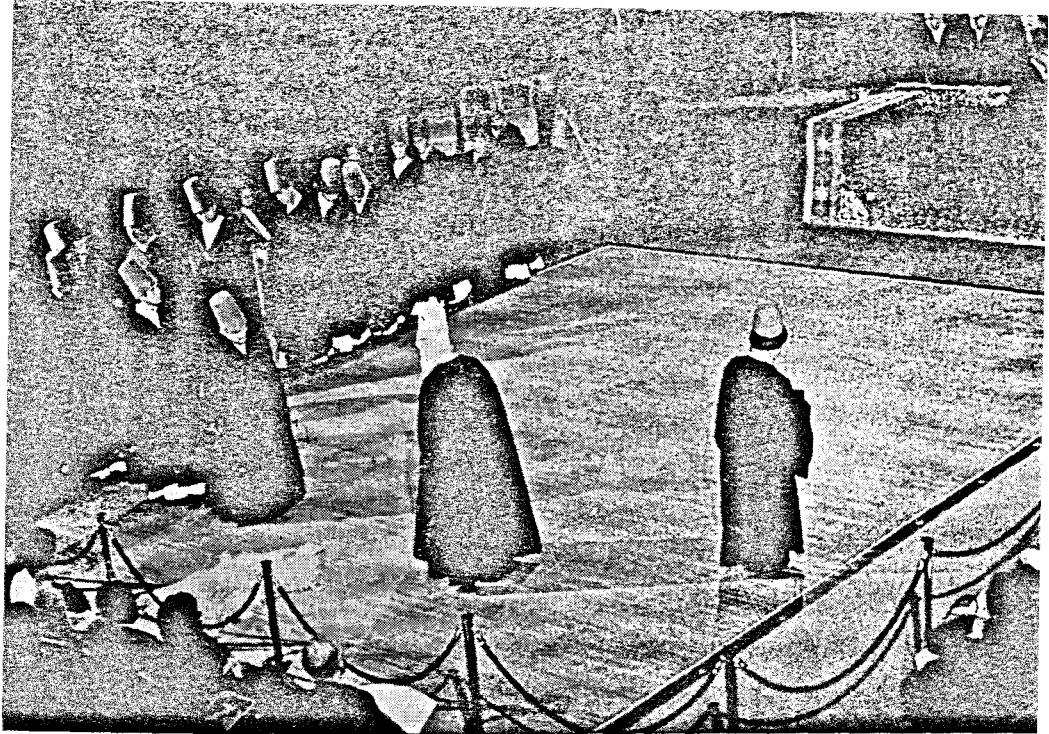
At the end of this piece all the dancers banged their hands on the ground, symbolising the Resurrection. Then they stood up, and the dancers took off their black mantles. Meanwhile the leader stood at the head of the line of dancers, and the Sheikh stood at the front of the rug, both retaining their mantles.

One by one, in a long line, the dancers approached the Sheikh and asked permission to dance by bowing their heads before him; he gave permission by kissing the back of their necks. At this time their arms were crossed over their chests, their hands gripping their shoulders. As they moved away from the Sheikh they began very slowly to turn. Gradually their arms extended to the side, and the speed of their turning increased (though never going past a moderate tempo); at the same time their heads tilted to one side, and their foot movements took them slowly around the edge of the dancing area as they turned. The bulk of the dancers moved outside the Sheikh and continued to move around the edge of the dancing area—though “around” is not strictly accurate, for eventually they moved in straight lines along one side of the rectangular dancing area before changing course to move in another straight line along another side. When they moved along the side where the Sheikh stood, they moved much faster than on the other three sides.

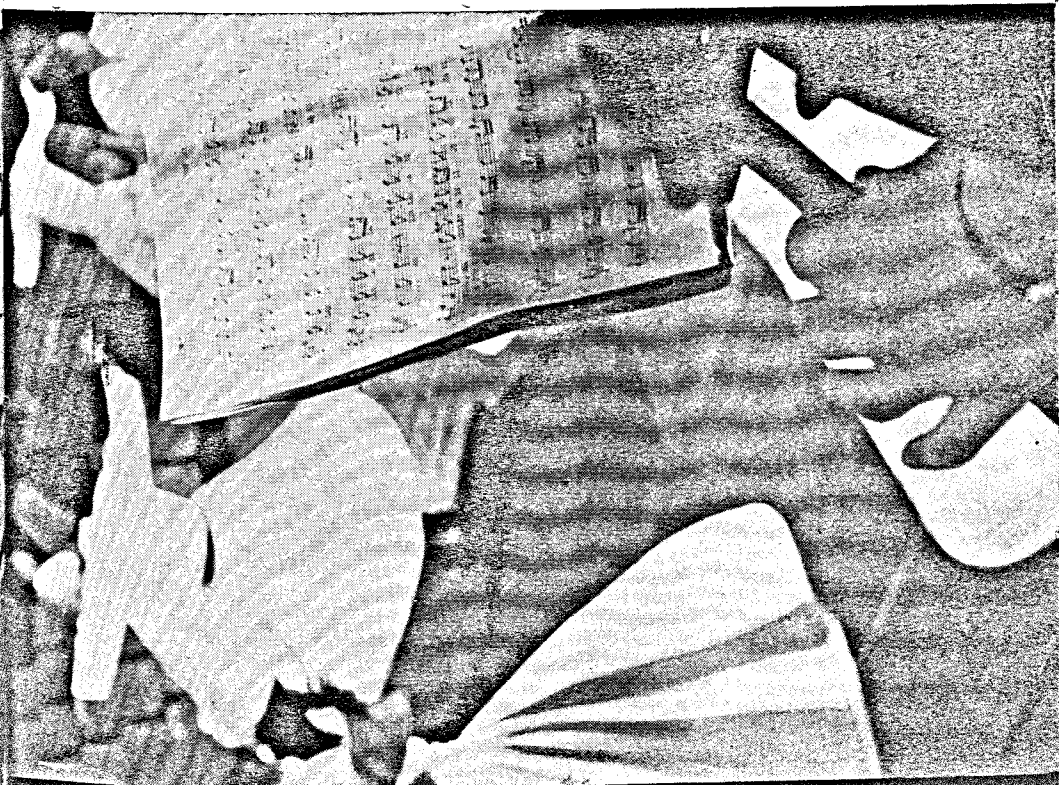
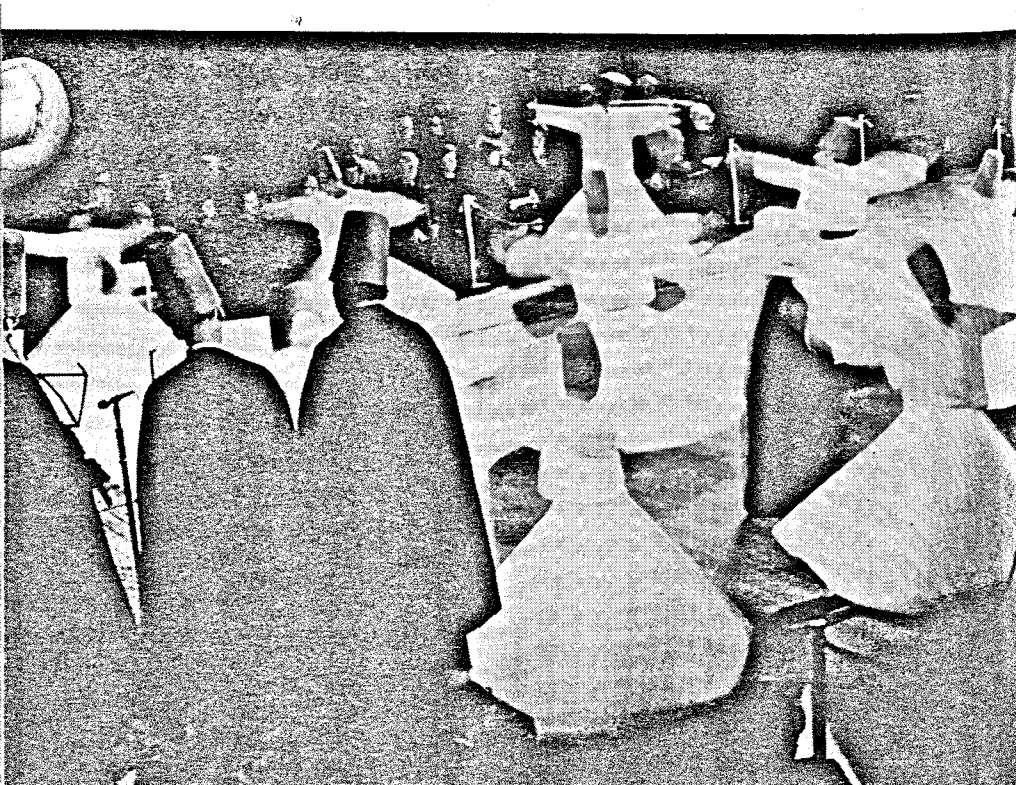
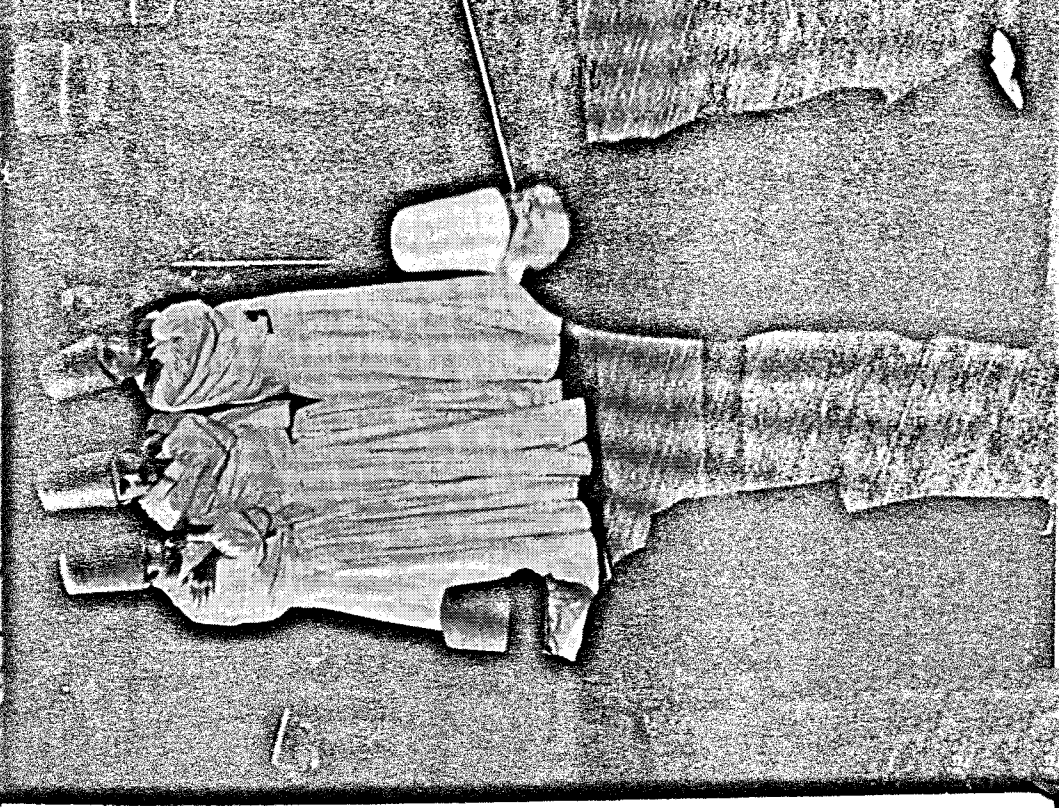
At the start of the first three dances, three of the dancers moved inside their leader to take up positions whirling and moving in a tight circle in the middle of the dancing area. All the dancers turned and moved in an

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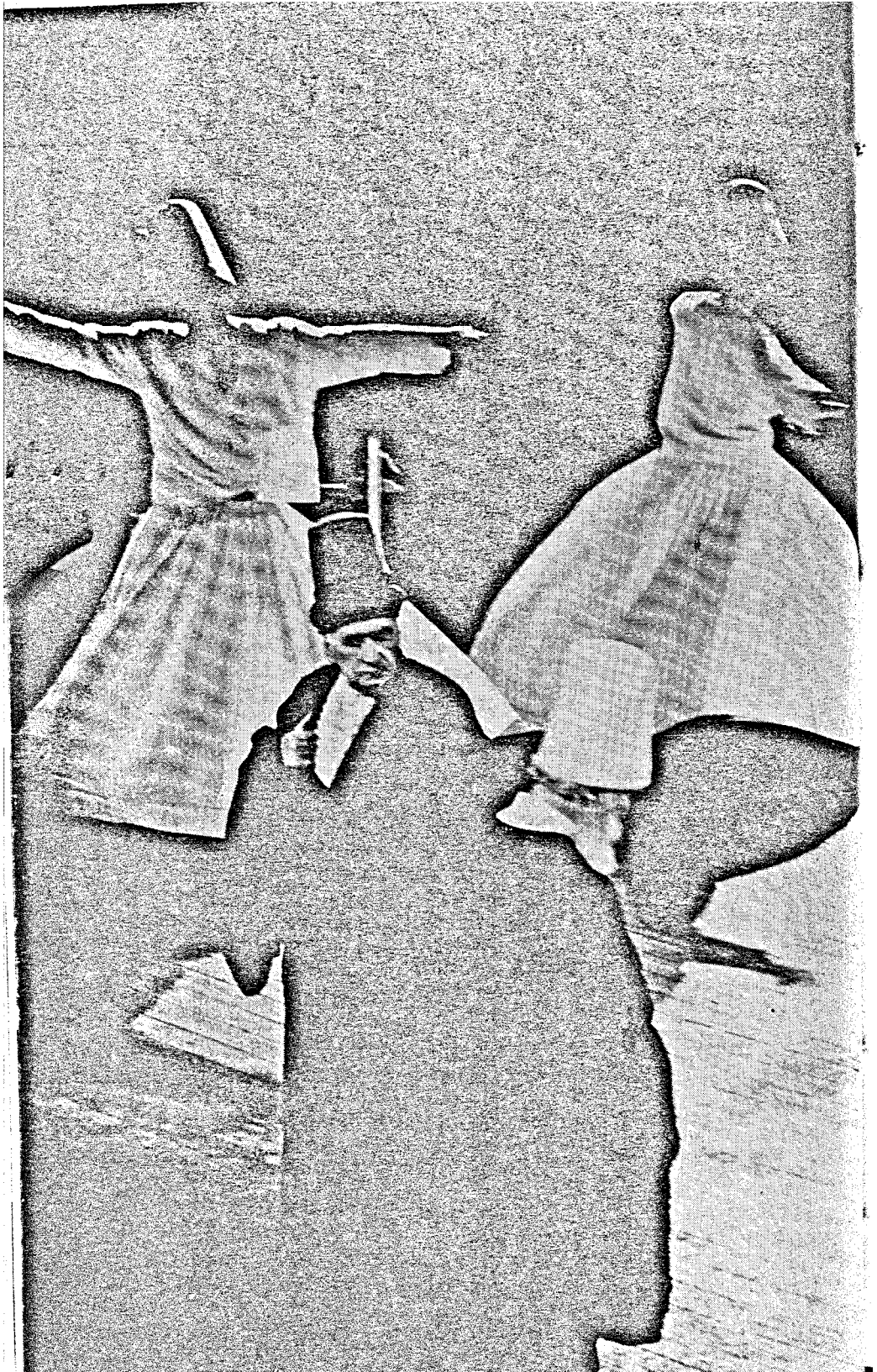
*Illustrations: P 57 Above: Procession around the dancing area. Below, Dancers kneel while a verse by Rumi is sung. P. 58 Above: Dancers take off black mantles. Sheikh stands in front of the red rug. Leader in front of the dancers. Below: The dancers whirl.*











anticlockwise direction. During the interval before the fourth dance some of the dancers dropped out, and the old Sheikh moved to the centre, taking the place of the three dancers of the inner circle. There he turned very slowly and gently, with his right hand grasping his mantle at the middle of his chest, and with his left arm at his side.

When the old Sheikh began to turn, the cosmic symbolism of the dancing became very clear. He was the sun, and the dancers moving around him were the planets.

The other dancers held out their arms horizontally, with the right hand turned up to heaven to receive grace, and the left hand turned down to pass this grace on to the world. This symbolism is beautifully in harmony with the fact that the Mevlevis (unlike some Sufi orders) have always welcomed spectators: they provide balconies for them, wishing them to share in the transmission of grace.

The step performed by the dancers was the same throughout the four dances. The left foot remained under the body, and the right foot was lifted up and put down in such a way as to give the impetus needed to cause the rest of the body (torso, arms and head) to make a smooth continuous turning movement. In between the dances (*Salaams*, as they are known to the Mevlevis) the dancers stood in groups at one side of the dancing area, their arms crossed over their chests.

Though the same step was performed throughout the four dances, the dancing gripped the spectator in an extraordinary way; I watched the ceremony over and over again, and was always gripped by it, feeling a sense of participation which was clearly shared by the other spectators. (In fact the Meeting House was packed every evening).

One reason for the appeal of the dancing was the subtle diversity within the apparent simplicity and uniformity. Each dancer had his own tempo, his own way of holding his head and arms, and looked subtly different from his companions. One dancer showed special dignity, grace and perfection of line, bringing to life old paintings and prints of the Mevlevi whirling dervishes. The leader, looking immensely dignified with his long white beard, moved slowly among the dancers; his walking movements had a remarkable quality which made them part of the cosmic dance.

Diversity was also to be seen in the relationship between the dancing and the music. The music changed from dance to dance, moving through various rhythms and becoming considerably faster in the final dance; but the dancers kept the same tempo and rhythm throughout.

The ending of the ceremony is as dignified and beautiful as the rest of it, with a gradual "unwinding". The dancers put on their black mantles

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*Illustrations: P. 59 Left: The "ney" is a vertical Turkish flute. Western notation is used for the Turkish music. Right: Interval between two dances. P. 60 The fourth and final salaam or dance. The Sheikh (in dark hat) symbolises the sun amidst the planets. The leader (white hat) walks among the dancers.*



and knelt on three sides of the rectangle, leaving open the side with the rug and the Sheikh. The singer recited some verses from the Koran; the dancers stood up, bowed in salutation to the Sheikh, and moved off in a solemn procession, followed by their leader and the Sheikh.

The musicians included players of *ney*, also players of various stringed instruments and drums and a number of singers. Though music composed at different eras was played, it all had the solemn devotional quality demanded by the ceremony. One specially interesting aspect of the symbolism was appreciated in the playing of the *ney*. As Rumi said, the reed of the *ney* comes from the middle of the reed-bed; just as this reed longs to be reunited with the other reeds, so does the soul of man long to be reunited with God.

The ceremony of the Mevlevis has had a strong impact on the architecture of the *semahane*, the ceremonial hall which is the central feature of the *tekke* (Mevlevi college). The oldest surviving *tekke*, that in Konya, Pera and Cairo; those in Aleppo, Damascus and Tripoli are in a dancing area delimited by the balconies for the spectators.

Later *semahanes* took somewhat different shapes, the architects being clearly influenced by the cosmic symbolism of the dancing. In Pera (part of Istanbul) the *semahane* is octagonal; in Cairo, it is circular. Apart from the *semahane*, the *tekkes* have other buildings: cells for the resident dervishes, the kitchen where the novices served their 1,001 days of penance, and mausoleums. *Tekkes* survive in a fairly good state of preservation in Konya, Pera and Cairo; those in Aleppo, Damascus and Tripoli are in a more ruined state.

Apart from the more obvious and direct links between Mevlevi dancing, music and architecture, there are fascinating links between the Mevlevi ceremony and other types of Islamic abstract art (including architectural ornament and calligraphy); in fact we must be very grateful that the Mevlevi ceremony has survived, for it provides invaluable insights into Islamic art as a whole.

Repetition is of the greatest importance in all types of Islamic abstract art: a special kind of repetition, which includes a good deal of subtle variation, and suggests profound truths. Something like the fusion of simplicity, repetition and subtle complexity characteristic of the Mevlevi ceremony is to be seen in the great Mosque at Cordoba in Andalusia: here there are endless rows of columns, arranged in the strictest order, but with great diversity in the details of the individual columns.

Another important aspect of Islamic art is the subtle abstraction of the symbolism; and there are (as we might expect) a great many parallels between the dancing of the Mevlevis and the mystical poems of Rumi. In one of these he suggests how the dance leads us on a path which unites us with the whole of Nature:

*Oh, day, awake! The atoms dance,  
The soul, lost in ecstasy, dances,  
In secret I will tell you where the dance leads us.*

*All the atoms which are in the air and in the desert  
Know well they are charmed like us,  
And each one, happy or sad,  
Is stunned by the sun of the Universal soul.*

As a mystic, Rumi unites the tiny atom and the immense cosmos with man, and speaks of ecstasy and secrecy; but his poem is written with the help of great knowledge and technical skill, and is intended to be heard and read by others. Something rather like this paradox is to be found at the heart of the Mevlevi ceremony: the dancers seek for grace, for direct communion with God, yet move in precisely ordered patterns, and welcome spectators to share in the transmission of grace.