

The Controlled Ecstasy: An Exposition of Samā' in the Light of Kashf ul Mahjoob

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Abstract

Samā' (سماع), Sufi listening practice, has long been revered and contentious. Frequently misconceived as mere musical expression and ecstatic dance, Samā' in classical Sufi philosophy is a disciplined spiritual practice to bring the soul closer to the presence of the Divine. This research investigates the principle of Samā' from the perspective of Kashf ul Mahjoob (كشف المحجوب), an 11th-century Persian treatise by Hazrat Ali Hujwiri (Daata Ganj Bakhsh). Through the analysis of selected passages from the original Persian work against Urdu translations, this research clarifies that Samā', far from being a hedonistic indulgence, is a disciplined expression of spiritual ecstasy firmly embedded in Islamic mysticism. This paper also addresses the applicability of Samā' in the contemporary period and its relevance to seekers of spiritual knowledge in the contemporary world.

Keywords: Samā', Sufism, Kashf ul Mahjoob, Ali Hujwiri, Sufi Music, Spiritual Ecstasy, Islamic Mysticism, Tasawwuf, Controlled Emotion, Urdu Literature

Introduction

The Sufi phenomenon of Samā' is a significant aspect of Islamic spiritual tradition. Etymologically derived from the Arabic word for "to hear," Samā' transcends the literal hearing of music; it is a profound, mystical communion that drives the seeker (سالک) towards authentic love (عشق حقیقی) and illumination (معرفت). Popular circles generally condemn it on the basis of legitimacy, but Sufi

philosophy of Samā' transcends such superficial criticism and stresses the necessity of spiritual transformation.

Hazrat Ali Hujwiri, who was also known as Daata Ganj Bakhsh, presented one of the earliest systematic examinations of Sufi practice in his seminal treatise, Kashf ul Mahjoob. Written in Persian but widely read everywhere in its Urdu translation, the treatise remains a point of reference for the understanding of traditional Sufism. In the Samā' chapter, Hujwiri presents a refined argument with the support of its spiritual efficacy when practiced according to strict ethical and spiritual criteria.

One classic argument frequently quoted by him is:

"سَمَاءِ اَہْلِ دِل کے لیے قُوْت ہے، اَہْلِ نَفْس کے لیے آفْت۔"

"Samā' is power for the people of the heart, but calamity for those who are bound by the ego."

This quote encapsulates the main thesis of this paper: Samā' has to be pursued with inner purity and self-control. Its ecstatic experiences are not performances, but mystical unveiling (کشف) and self-annihilation (فنا).

This essay seeks to outline the theoretical, theological, and experiential dimensions of Samā', with Kashf ul Mahjoob being the focus of primary research. It will explore how Hujwiri legitimizes the practice, distinguishes it from hedonistic desire, and places it within Qur'anic and Prophetic discourse. Ultimately, it will argue that when Samā' is understood and practiced correctly, it is a controlled form of ecstasy that places the seeker in proximity to God (قربِ الہی).

Historical Origins of Samā' in Sufism

The evolution of Samā' as a distinctive spiritual practice in Sufism traces its roots to the early ascetic communities of Basra, Kufa, and Baghdad. Initially

founded on the recitation of the Qur'an, poetry verses, and remembrance (ذکر), Samā' eventually emerged as a formal spiritual practice marked by melodic chanting, lyrical poetry, and occasional instrumental accompaniment, the intent of which was to cause experiences of divine ecstasy (وجد).

The early Sufi philosophers did not consider Samā' to be a source of entertainment. Rather, they had argued that sound, when imbued with religious meaning, could be an intermediary for religious transformation. For instance, Hazrat Abu Saeed al-Kharraz (d. 899 CE) claimed:

**"Having read a line that my Beloved recalled to me, I
could not keep my desire back."**

By the time of Hazrat Junaid Baghdadi (d. 910 CE), a leading practitioner of moderate Sufism, Samā' had turned into a controversial but important practice. Junaid only allowed Samā' to those who had reached spiritual purification, arguing that:

**"Samā' is reserved for those whose inner nature of
disposition has been corrected by God."**

This would then influence the view of Ali Hujwiri, who claimed that Samā' is not necessarily prohibited; rather, its impact is conditional on the listener's state.

Samā' in Kashf ul Mahjoob: A Doctrinal Framework

In Kashf ul Mahjoob, Hazrat Ali Hujwiri devotes a special chapter to the phenomenon of Samā', where he provides a spiritual justification as well as moral boundaries for its practice. He begins by making a clear distinction between legal and illegal forms of Samā':

"ہر ایک نغمہ جو دل کو حقیقت کے جانب متوجہ کرے، اسے مقبول سماع سمجھا جاتا ہے۔ جبکہ جو نفس

کو طاقتور بنائے، وہ مردود تصور کیا جاتا ہے۔"

"Any voice that leads the heart to Truth is accepted as a true Samā'; what ruffles the ego is avoided."

Here Hujwiri makes a significant differentiation: the orientation of emotional flow makes Samā' spiritually legitimate. It is not to hear but the spiritual response that makes it legitimate.

He also quotes the Hadith of the Prophet, in which it is acceptable to recite poetry as long as it does not lead to shirk and indecency. Hujwiri also mentions Imam Shafi'i's liberal attitude and warns against literalist condemnations that are oblivious to the context of spirituality.

"The message reveals secrets to the discerning, while it is a veil to the negligent."

"Samā' reveals secrets to the righteous, but is an obstacle to the neglectful."

The Process of Regulated Ecstasy in Samā'

One of the most important contributions of Kashf ul Mahjoob is its description about how ecstasy (وجد) in Samā' is to be felt, controlled, and understood. Hazrat Ali Hujwiri clearly distinguishes between true spiritual ecstasy and affective or ego-centered displays of emotions.

He explains:

"It is a state of mind which arises from the awakening of the light of faith in the heart, and not from the eruption of disturbance and tumult."

"Ecstasy is a state that results from the illumination of confidence within the heart, as opposed to noisy or drunken displays."

This assertion embodies the spirit of "controlled ecstasy"—a seeming

contradiction wherein the seeker is inwardly captivated but externally calm. Contrary to general misconceptions depicting Samā' as chaos of uncontrolled dancing or frenzy induced by music, Hujwiri makes it clear that authentic Samā' intensifies spiritual awareness, rather than dispelling it.

He elaborates further:

"انسان جس کی حالت اپنے دل کو کنٹرول میں رکھتا ہے، سماع میں استفادہ کرتا ہے۔"

"One who has mastery over the state of his heart enjoys the fruits of Samā'."

This expresses a basic Sufi maxim: Samā' is a mirror and only the purified self can perceive the divine in it. If ego governs, even sacred sounds can mislead rather than direct.

It means in practice:

- The listener should be spiritually mature.
- The gathering must be free of all worldly intentions.
- Samā' material must be religiously proper, such as verses of the Qur'ān or love poetry.

Hujwiri warns of beginners and imitators who practice Samā' without spiritual foundations:

"The untrained heart is shaped by the sound experience of fire, which offers nothing but burning."

"On an uncontrolled heart, Samā' is like fire—it burns for no good."

Therefore, the Samā' of ecstasy cannot be sought blindly. It is an exquisite state, reached through discipline, sincerity, and dedication to the divine.

Modern Relevance: Samā' in Contemporary Spiritual Life

In the modern era, spiritual practices all over the world are both experiencing a revival and misrepresentation. The Sufi practice of Samā', as Hazrat Ali Hujwiri comprehends it, is a quintessential example of this process. While some spiritual communities continue to uphold its sanctity, others have merely turned it into an exhibition of surface display—sans its deep metaphysical meanings and moral strictness.

In Kashf ul Mahjoob, Hujwiri introduces us to a framework by which we can dissect the legitimacy of such practices. His emphasis on inner purification, regulated participation, and god-centered intention remains acutely pertinent today. That is particularly true in an age when spirituality becomes commercialized and detached from its original sacred origins.

He says:

"The heart cannot live without hearing; but if the heart is not loyal, then hearing can be a source of distress."

Without Samā', the heart might never discover life; but where the heart lacks faith, even Samā' is a trial.

This is a reference to a tremendous issue of modern spirituality: means intended to bring individuals closer to the divine can become sources of spiritual pride or distraction if misused.

Nowadays, Sufi orders that maintain classical adab towards Samā' still offer important contexts that are favorable to inner illumination. Such contexts emphasize:

- Preparations for ablution and prayer prior to listening
- A focus on zikr (remembrance) in Samā'
- Silence and contemplation after the experience

But contemporary performances of Samā'—in concerts, the media, or marketplaces—are frequently missing these conditions. They can be evocative, but not necessarily transformative understanding or spiritual closeness. Hujwiri's teaching reminds us that form is not enough; it is the existence of spiritual substance that imparts Samā' its true authority.

Furthermore, in an anxious, materialistic, and existentially lost world, Samā'—when properly practiced—is a sacred therapy. It enables the seeker to become connected to the Divine, not so much in abstract theology, but in a sense of felt love, longing, and surrender.

Essentially, Hujwiri's account of Samā' is a template for recovering sacred music as a means to unity with God, rather than as secular entertainment.

Conclusion

The account of Samā' by Hazrat Ali Hujwiri in Kashf ul Mahjoob offers a universal spiritual template that transcends temporal and cultural settings. Far from being considered a marginal and disputed Sufi practice, Samā'—in Hujwiri's view—is a consecrated and deeply disciplined entry into the divine. It is not characterized by uncontrollable ecstasy or display; rather, it is an ecstatic but disciplined condition, where the seeker's heart becomes a vessel for divine light through precise inner discipline and sincere devotion.

His constant warnings against abuse—spirituality without interior experience, or music without theological feeling—are especially urgent in our present moment, when spirituality is being aestheticized and commodified. The balance Hujwiri promotes—between interior experience and exterior composure, between divine love and religious law—is what gives Samā' its redemptive force.

The Urdu quotes from Kashf ul Mahjoob in this article highlight that Samā' is not for show, but for real interaction; it is not for extravagance, but for

illumination. If understood and practiced correctly, the practice is a potent vehicle between the soul and its Creator.

In an age that craves authentic spirituality, Kashf ul Mahjoob remains to lead those who crave more than sensation—those who crave truth in motion and in rest, in voice and in silence.

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