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Religious Dances in Turkey in the Middle Ages

— The Whirling Dance and Historical and Religious Background —

By *Shuko Homma**

In studying the relations between religion and dancing, it is easy to suppose from various literature that religion had a very close relationship with dancing as people lived since the olden times. Historically, the life of people, which was supported by farming and hunting, cannot be imagined without religion, and dancing itself increased its values of existence as religion made development.

In this paper, consideration is given to Western Asia in the middle ages.

Consideration is given to the historical background of Sema (whirling dance) famous as a religious ceremony performed by Mevlana Jalalu'ddin Rumi (AD 1207–1273), who was a spiritual leader during the last years of the Seljuk Period in the 13th Century, and who was a follower of the Islamic mysticism of the Tasavvuf and Sufi School, and by Dervishes who respected Mevlana Jalalu'ddin Rumi as a teacher, and also to the relations between dancing and religion existed during the time of these two men.

In Western Asia after it was conquered by the Mongolian Race, the conquerers are said to have been very generous toward the literature and religions of the native people, and positive in the protection and development thereof. It may be a matter of attention that culture enjoyed prosperity in the conquered region where the old culture is generally considered to have been destroyed by the conquerers. Rumi, who lived in the same period as Sādī (died in 1492), Hāfīz (died in 1389) and Jāmī (died in 1492) lived, played an important role as a poet and a musician for the development of Persian culture, together with the said three men. Also, Rumi, who inherited the Persian culture, is considered to have exerted great influence upon the development of Turkish culture, which was attained thereafter. Western Asia in that time was in the so-called Islamic Period. It was the time in which Islam established by Mahomet and called one of the biggest three religions in the world formed

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a base for the life of people. Sufi—Islamic mysticism—had a profound relationship with Mevlana Jalalu'ddin Rumi and Dervishes who respected him, of whom description is made in this paper.

The culture of several kinds which were formed with the religious thought of Islam as a background played an important role in view of cultural history in introducing the eastern culture into the western regions.

The subject of Islamic faith is the sole, absolute, supreme God—Allāh; this religion ousts idol worshipping and polytheism; and it expounds the human equality before Allāh. The Koran, a Islamic Bible, has the power to regulate all of the life of the believers of Islam. This may be the same as in the case of Christianity in the middle ages, under which people lived regulated lives.

Sema—a whirling dance—which was originated by Rumi and handed down by mysticismic monks for a long time was played by the people who loved and respected Rumi.

Playing is an expression of religious joy and it shows the state where players have touched the mystery of Allāh.

Thanks to the revolution made by Atakirk in the beginning of this Century, the congregation has survived after many turns and twists.

Consideration is given here to the base of thought on whirling dances. The thought of Mevlana Jalalu'ddin Rumi, who was called later the holiest man of Sufi, is the base, and what is supporting whirling dances may be said to be mysticism. This unworldly, religious mysticism may have been born with the rigorous life of nomads as a background.

According to Rumi, the spirit of man is part of the spirit of Allāh, therefore, reunification of man and Allāh is essential. Rumi tried to enter a state where man and Allāh could come together by dancing rhythmically and whirlingly like a top.

One of the features of Sema may be that it is simplified very much. What is expressed by Sema may seem the desire of people to enter the world of Allāh by simply making whirl. Whirling dances have to be played religiously, therefore, they, different from other dances, have been simplified; the principal axis of the whirling dance may be the repetition of simple movement in a desire to get into the world of Allāh.

Meantime, what is the nature of Sema when viewed from the conception of dance?

Sema was performed by people who sought after truth amidst worldly worries

and illusions in the hope that they would enter the state of religious exaltation as their spirits were relieved from a jail of flesh. If Sema is viewed from the way it was played, it is too religious to be interpreted with conception of dancing, and an idea to refuse the flesh can be seen.

Some relationship between the religious thought in the middle age Europe and Sema can be found, and it may be said that Sema belongs to a special genealogy when viewed from the nature of dances, which takes a cheerful view of man.

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