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## The Role of Women in Sufism. Female Followers of Mevlevi Order and Their Active Participation in *Sema* Ritual

### *Rola kobiet w sufizmie. Kobiące naśladowczynie Zakonu Mevlevi i ich aktywny udział w rytuale Sema*

#### **Streszczenie:**

*Sema*, rytuał identyfikowany z zakonem wirujących derwiszy, znany również jako Religia Miłości, stworzona przez Caaledina Rumiego Mevlana, od wieków przyciąga uwagę ludzi z wszelkich zakątków świata. Zakon wirujących derwiszy w ostatnich latach zdobywa szczególną popularność, pozyskując kolejnych zwolenników w krajach Zachodu, gdzie ich aktywność zdaje się być coraz lepiej widoczna. *Sema*, mistyczny taniec rytualny, zapoczątkowany w XIII wieku, przedstawia duchową podróż człowieka poprzez jego umysł i miłość do Perfekcji. Zakon Rumiego Mevlana jest jednym z najlepiej znanych zakonów sufickich. Wyjątkowy, z uwagi na szczególnie stosunek filozofa do postaci kobiety w islamie. Mevlana akceptował wśród swych słuchaczy zarówno mężczyzn jak i kobiety, twierdząc, że istotną jest dusza, nie ciało. Nauczał, że wszyscy ludzie są równi oraz zjednani w swej wierze i miłości. Wiele kobiet, wybrało filozofię Mevlana, biorąc czynny udział w mistycznych rytuałach *semy*, dążących do „Jedności z Bogiem”, będąc przekonanymi, że odnalazły swoje miejsce w świecie islamu. Kobiety, odgrywające szczególnie istotną rolę w upowszechnianiu filozofii Rumiego Mevlana, znane są nam dziś jako poetki, muzycy, jak również, jak dowodzą źródła, suficy mistrzowie, stając się „głosem” kobiecej społeczności.

**Słowa kluczowe:** Zakon wirujących derwiszy, Caaledin Rumi Mevlana, sufizm, *Sema*

#### **Summary:**

*Sema* ritual identified with Rumi Mevlana's order, known as Mevlevi Religion of Love, has been attracting people from different cultures from all over the world for centuries. Mevlevi followers are noticeably growing in number in the West, where their great engagement is well visible. *Sema*, which is a mystic dancing ritual known from the 13th century, represents man's spiritual journey to Perfection through mind and love. Mevlevi as one of the most-known Sufi orders was exceptional for Rumi's recognition of spiritual beauty and wisdom of women. Mevlana was accepting and teaching men and women alike, as he said that it is not the body but the soul that is important. He taught that all humans are equal and are united in their faith and love. Many female Sufis decided to follow Mevlana's teachings practicing *sema* that aims at "Unity with God", truly convinced that they found their place within Islamic world. Women, who had noticeable role in the process of spreading this mystical concept have been playing multiple roles, i.e.: poets, musicians, and sometimes even *pirs*, becoming "the voice" of feminine Muslim society.

**Keywords:** *Mevlana, Rumi, Sufism, Sema, Female Sufis, Mevlevi Order, Whirling Dervishes*

## 1. Introduction

In the following article I am discussing female role in Sufism, their engagement in Mevlevi order and their active participation in *sema* ritual. *Sema*, which is a dancing ritual known from the 13th century, represents man's spiritual journey through mind and love to the Perfection. Nowadays *sema* is performed in many places in the world, but I, myself, had a chance to see one of these inspiring rituals in Konya, during my residence in Turkey in 2010. My attention besides the beauty and symbolism of the ritual draw the fact of the great number of women who composed the majority of the present audience. Women, who were profoundly experiencing this unique spiritual ritual of sacred music and whirling dances. *Sema* ritual identifying with Mevlevi order, known as Mevlevi Religion of Love, is attracting people from different cultures all over the world. Mevlevi followers are noticeably growing in number in the West, where their great engagement is well visible. American female Sufis by their active participation in the rituals, and on the other hand their ability and willingness to share their experiences and knowledge with the wider audience are breaking the stereotypes of women role in Islamic culture; so often highlighted by the Western media. Nevertheless, to understand the act of *sema* performed by women, as well as their active participation in the other Sufi rituals and their genuine role in Sufism, it is necessary to learn about its historical background. We must understand how their position was shaped throughout the centuries, since the beginning of Sufism in the 8<sup>th</sup> century.

## 2. Woman's Place in Sufism

The beginning of Sufism<sup>1</sup> occurred in the early 8th century as a response to the oppressive *ulama*<sup>2</sup> and difficult time of poverty and torpor ubiquitous under the Umayyad Caliphate. First Sufis were disregarding their outward while concentrating on immateriality, spiritual dimension of their life. Recognized by their attachment to *zuhd* (asceticism) and *dhikr* (remembrance of God). Sufism arose among poor stratum of the society. Women had noticeable role in the process of spreading this mystical concept in Islam. Sufis who were more interested in the conquering people's hearts

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<sup>1</sup> Sufism (*Tasawwuf*) – is the inner, mystical dimension of Islam. Term derived most probably from the Arabic word *suf* which means wool that has been used for the mystic's coarse woolen cloaks. It symbolizes their lack of concern for worldly thing as well as signifies the loving commitment of the dervishes to serve humanity. Arab term *Tasawwuf* means "engagement in mysticism". Another explanation of the term refers to the Greek word *sophia* which means wisdom. Followers of Sufi orders, who also called Dervishes, were pursuing to "reveal the truth". Sufis all their principles based on the Qur'an and hadith.

<sup>2</sup> Ulama – educated class of Muslim legal scholars engaged in several fields of Islamic studies.

than new territories mostly were “unconscious agents of *tasawwuf*”. Early Sufism was based on individual inclination and personal devotion. Numerous sources mentioning female Sufi mystics respected for their faith and knowledge. Undeniable fact is that “mysticism was the only religious sphere where women could find their place”<sup>3</sup>. Female mystics by intuitive and emotional spiritual faculties that they trained when passing successive stages (*maqamat*)<sup>4</sup> along the path (*tariqa*) were able to approach the Reality (*haqiqa*). Despite the fact there were many female Sufi mystics, most of them remained unnamed. Among those whose names are known, most often single out is Rabiah al-Adawiyah (717-801), pious ascetic, who devoted herself to the love of God. Rabiah was a first mystic who expressed the relation with the divine in the way recognized to be specific for Sufi mystics referring to God as the Beloved<sup>5</sup>. Moreover, she was well known by her poetry. Nowadays, she is considered one of the most important poets from the early Sufi period. In the Western folklore are present several well-known anecdotes illustrating her spiritual life. “She was also credited with numerous miracles such as quoted episode with Kaaba<sup>6</sup>, that came to her when she made her pilgrimage. As a Sufi ascetic, she rejected all the earthly ties, including marriage.”<sup>7</sup> Marital status of Sufi woman seems to be an important fact that should be emphasized. Most of Sufi mystics men and women alike, used to be unmarried devoting themselves to God. Especially in the early period of Sufism, those who followed the example set by Rabi’a were all celibate and unmarried. But “they were not regarded by ordinary people as rebels against society. They were felt to belong to the society and fulfill a social function. Without kinship and social ties they moved about freely. The Sufi Way attracted people of certain kind of temperament through the fascination of the numinous and mysterious, the call to explore unknown realms open only to those prepared to follow a dedicated life”<sup>8</sup>.

Ecstatic forms of Sufism were present in life of many female Sufis. Woman emotionally more advanced than men, more often lose oneself in their love to God. As an example may serve us Rihana al-Waliha, who lived in constant ecstasy. Kelly Pem-

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<sup>3</sup> S. J. Trimmingham, *The Sufi orders in Islam*, Oxford 1971, p. 26.

<sup>4</sup> Maqaam (plural maqaamat) – translating to “stations” in Arabic; refers to various stages a Sufi’s soul must attain in its search for God. The number and order of maqaamat are not universal but the majority agree on the following seven: Tawba, Wara, Zuhd, Faqr, Sabr, Tawakkul and Rida.

<sup>5</sup> [www.sufi.org/articles/women-and-sufism-by-camille-adams-helinski-2](http://www.sufi.org/articles/women-and-sufism-by-camille-adams-helinski-2); [accessed: 10.01.2011].

<sup>6</sup> Kaaba – a cuboid-shaped building in Mecca, Saudi Arabia, the most sacred site in Islam. The Qur’an states that was constructed by Abraham and his son Ismail.

<sup>7</sup> A. Schimmel, *My soul is a Woman. The feminine in Islam*, New York 1997, p. 35.

<sup>8</sup> [www.barakainstitut.org](http://www.barakainstitut.org); [accessed: 12.01.2011].

berton in her article<sup>9</sup> mentions about the female mystic as about ritual agents. State of ecstasy was a result of the one's progression throughout the stages of an ascent towards the Divine Beloved (under the supervision and guidance of a Sufi master), it has been explained as a form of witness to God's power and presence in the world. Female mystics are "portray as a catalysts for the spiritual awakening of rational – minded or "sober" Sufi<sup>10</sup>". Although, female and male mystics alike, have been also meeting with disapproval. Number of Sufi scholar was claiming that such ecstatic practices unfit the role of guide or a teacher of the other. Moreover such rituals were strongly criticizing by the Orthodox mainstream. Furthermore it was stated that such a permanent state of ecstasy led to the madness, and that was how some Sufi female mystics were perceived. Even when their madness where considered as a divine madness, which made them desirable as a medium, it was controversial because of their unpredictable, uncontrollable and also in some extent simply dangerous reactions.

Women were also well known as singers from the beginning throughout the centuries, while Sufism has been spreading. In the Indian subcontinent women were Sufi agents, both in their households, and in the villages, to which they traveled and sang to make a living in the later times. As Shemeem Burney Abbas claimed in her book<sup>11</sup> those who were involved in these practices were coming from poor communities and mostly were widows or unmarried women. Their full devotion and infinite love to God fructified in new dimension of Sufism. Since the ages female voice has attracted people, because of its unique beauty. When they sang the mystical poetry, they were creating the soul of the context. Element of love (*mahabba*) which is a foundation of Sufism has giving them strength to resist the aversion and condemnation that they have faced in the Muslim world. As Shemmen Burney Abbas writes "The community attitudes in relation to women singing are also linked with women's veiling (*parada*). Woman must not be seen in public, especially by unrelated men."<sup>12</sup> This is also the reason for which those women were remaining mostly unmarried. Such an occupation was a shame for a husband of a musician woman, and was socially damaging.

Nevertheless, Sufi female mystics could attain higher range. Several cases that are documented in the literature represent women especially from the 13<sup>th</sup> century onward engaged in *tariqa*, as disciples of a great master, and also as masters themse-

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<sup>9</sup> K. Pemberton, *Muslim women mystics and female spiritual authority in South Asian Sufism*, "Journal of Ritual Studies", 2004 vol. 18, issue 2.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 16.

<sup>11</sup> S. B. Abbas, *The Female Voice in Sufi Ritual. Devotional practices of Pakistan and India*, Austin 2002.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 51.

lives. Moreover, “in the early years women also participated in community gatherings devoted to recitation from the Qur’an and to *dhikr*.”<sup>13</sup>

Over time, another ascetic practice became crucial for Sufis, *muraqaba* (meditation) that was leading to deeper self-understanding and consequently better cogitation of God. Two ways of meditation were distinguished. First one was focused on fathoming the nature of human being and consequently approaching the mystery of God. Another was employing the contemplation of the idea of God consisted in Qur’an. Initially meditation was practicing by individual mystics, later as some scholars claim, under the influence of Christianity this ritual have used to occur more often within the groups. In the XII century in the Islamic world emerged various Sufi orders. Located at some distance from the towns, partly isolated Sufi lodges developed around the shrines or tombs that were dedicated to the founders of particular *tariqas*. Served as school and residence for Sufi members of *tariqa* who live there, but they were also open to travelers and visitors of the shrines who were coming to prey or receive a blessing (*baraka*). Most popular among the Sufi lodges were *khanqah*, *ribat*, *zawiyya* and *tekke* (name of the Sufi lodge in Turkey). It is worth to notice that a *zawiyya* served as the space where particular ceremonies and ritual such as *sema* were performed. Since the idea of sex segregation was common, all the rituals, ceremonies or prayers were kept as single-sex, separating women from men. The only exception was a Bektashiya order within which women and men have been always integrated in the ceremonies<sup>14</sup>. Additionally, within the complex of the buildings, there was a dwelling of Sufi master or *pir* and rooms for his disciples or *murids*, common kitchen and room that served as a mosque. Dervishes congregated in the Sufi lodges were both single and married. This brought the opportunity to women to gain the unique knowledge from their fathers, brothers and husbands engaged in particular *tariqa*. Sufi orders had a hierarchy structure, *sheikh* (Sufi master) was controlling all his disciples who were fully respectful and devoted to him.

### 3. Mevlevi Order

Through the centuries number of Sufi orders arouse within Islamic world. Although, the most significant were initiated within Ottoman Empire. Well known and most prominent were the Bektashi and the Mevlevi Orders. The Mevlevi Order emerged in the early 13<sup>th</sup> century in Konya, in the central Anatolya. Its founder, Celaddin Rumi Mevlana (1207-1273), emigrated with his family from Balkh (in a present day

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<sup>13</sup> A. Schimmel, p. 42.

<sup>14</sup> [www.sufism.org/articles/women-and-sufism-by-camille-adams-helminski-2](http://www.sufism.org/articles/women-and-sufism-by-camille-adams-helminski-2); [accessed: 10.01.2011].

Afghanistan), because of the danger of the approaching Mongol invasion, they settled down in Konya (in present day Turkey). Adolescent Rumi was greatly influenced by his father Baha un-Din Walad, a theologian, jurist and a Sufi mystic. His composition “Gnosis” was a first Sufi work that young Rumi became acquainted with, and which provoked him to the deeper exploration of mystic’s secrets in Islam. In the farther life of Rumi, three other figures had significant impact on his spiritual life. First of them was Sayyid Burhaneddin, who gave a spiritual education to young Rumi, who under his master’s watchful eye grew in knowledge and consciousness of God. Another significant figure, who was both a friend, and a spiritual guide of Rumi, was Shams ad-Din of Tabriz. He enabled Rumi to attain another level in his way to God. Rumi, who was already great religious scholar and mystic, received enlightenment from Shams hands and became an inspired poet and a great lover of humanity. After he lost his master Rumi’s grief took him on an enlightened journey to Love. He spoke his poems whirling in ecstasy and scribes recorded them.”<sup>15</sup> One of them was his disciple Salah ud-Din Zerkub, last of the most prominent figures in Rumi’s life. He became Rumi’s close friend. He wrote down Rumi’s work “The Mathnawi”, considered as a one of the greatest spiritual masterpieces ever written by a human being.

Mevlevi philosophy is based on the Love to God. Only “way of love” leads to the real happiness and the Unity with God (*tawhid*). Mevlana was claiming that *dhikr* is only a means, which induce one’s minds to the process of thinking, and all the rest is completed in dancing. He taught his disciples that man should always respect and accept one’s own nature to recover oneself. Rumi instructed them to open their hearts not only through theological studies but also through music and poetry. He taught that the spiritual path of awakening to truth is for seeker turned to finder. He revealed the greatest secret to all: ”annihilation (*fanna*) is bliss”. He taught about dying to the world while be born to God. “ Rumi was talking of mastering the art of dying to love and seeing beyond with the eternal heart into everlasting life and joy while conscious alive. Rumi assured that heaven is here and now, on earth, by waking you to the transitory nature of the world and its objects and letting it all go. He prompted people to the only ultimate reality of love as God: the true Beauty of Love that selfless and pure.”

#### **4. Women Place in Mevlevi Order**

Mevlevi religion of Love was attracting seekers of both gender. Mevlana said: “In your body is a precious jewel. Seek that.” He was accepting and teaching men and

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<sup>15</sup> [www.lightandlife.com/lighthouse4.thm](http://www.lightandlife.com/lighthouse4.thm); [accessed: 10.01.2011].

women alike, as he said it is not the body but soul important. He taught that all human are equal, and are united in their faith and love. His disciples and later followers of Mevlevi order which was established by his son Sultan Veled Celebi was congregating seekers from different environments and classes. In Mevlevi *tariqa* according to the doctrine young Dervish should see in oneself the reflection of his master, supposed to devote his soul to him and fully follow his teachings. Sufi master was always fully respected and trusted.” *Pir* who was a guide and the leader of a Sufi order, invested through a well-documented chain of succession of *pirs* with the authority to develop the moral and spiritual character of disciples who, through ritual ceremonies of investiture, have pledged “allegiance to him. In such an agreement, the disciples aspire to ascend the various stages of spiritual perfection through a process of self-examination, discipline, and total authority of the guide.”<sup>16</sup> Many female Sufi decided to follow Mevlana’s teachings truly convinced that they found their place, since in his “family had long been a tradition of the recognition of the spiritual beauty, yearning, and wisdom of woman.”<sup>17</sup> Women had an important role in Rumi life, both his mother, Mu’mine Hatun and grandmother, the princess of Khorsan were assisting his education and spiritual development. Rumi’s mother, was a devout and saintly lady, whose tomb after she passed away was visited by many women from Anatolya. Also Rumi’s sister Fatima Hatun, was well known as one of the wisest woman, was often consulted on legal matters and deeply respected for her knowledge. There were number of Mevlevi female family members who became well know Sufi masters, one of them was second wife of Rumi, Kerra Hatun. She was a female mystic, spiritually gifted, and credited with many miracles, who became a master for number of Konya’s women.

Women who were engaged in *tariqa* were both *pir/shaikh* or disciples. Disciples were distinguished in two groups, those who were leaving within the *tekke* were called *dedes*, they also had to perform retreat for 1001 days, and those who were staying outside *tekke* – *murids*, without performing retreat. *Murids* were obligated to come to the *tekke* everyday and undergo intense training in the Dervish practice. *Dedes* and *murids* alike were undergoing oath rite. During the ceremony candidates were expected to divest all the sins and adopt new pious way of life. That meant that they consciously deciding to redirect their life from self to God. *Pir* who is accompanying new candidate during his oath say prayers in his intention. Farther, wisp of candidate’s hair had to be cut off as a symbol of rupture of his current life. Another ceremony associated with the entering the convent involved the ritual of accepting a camel’s

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<sup>16</sup> K. Pemberton, p. 10.

<sup>17</sup> [www.sufism.org/lineage/mevlevi/mevlevi-women-2](http://www.sufism.org/lineage/mevlevi/mevlevi-women-2); [accessed: 10.01.2011].

hair hat (*sikke*) and the long cloak (*khirqā*). New Dervish sitting in front of *shaikh* and laying his head on his master's laps while *shaikh* reciting names of the most important Mevlevi followers and praying to God in the intention of young Dervish, asking for a grace of God, so he can persevere in poverty and follow his new way. *Dedes* who decided to perform retreat, were undergoing their first test in the *matbah* (kitchen), under the careful eye of *ahchi dede* (cook). It was related to the symbolic representation of the *matbah*: "a raw material need to be cooked into the dish which is edible". In this context, a raw material is a man, who decides to redirect his life to God, by following a proved path. Those who became a master had number of disciples, women and men alike. Nevertheless, those who became *pirs*, could receive such honor "through formal master-disciple relationship established through an oath of allegiance. They were given "sanction" to guide and counsel others on the Sufi path. Second are those who have developed a close relationship with God through constant prayer, observance of Law and purification of their minds and souls. While according to this *pir*, woman may not become the first kind, they could, and did achieve recognition as the second kind."<sup>18</sup> There are various interpretations of the idea of *pir*. Woman could be considered as a spiritual guide, in the result of the marriage with the *pir*, or being related to the *pir* by other bonds. They were devoting themselves to the deep studies and prayers. Such dependence represents the example of Mevlana and his daughter in law, Fatima Kauton, who under his care grew to be an accomplished disciple of her master. Later she was a guide for other female Sufi, also well known for *sema* rituals which she held. Moreover, in the available literature sources especially concerning early Sufism, authors have been mentioning about great female Sufi mystics who acquired "secret knowledge" and were referred to as *pirs* even with no existing ties to Sufi order. But those who received great knowledge from their enlightened relatives, further broadened through their own self improvement, ascending various stages of spiritual perfection along the path enabling them to approach "the Beloved", seemed to receive more respect and being much often recognized by the male Sufi masters. Nevertheless, undeniably women were only unofficial *pirs*, never officially assumed the leadership of Sufi order. According to the Kelly Pemberton's article, female Sufi mystics were working hard, trying to improve themselves, and to gain profound spiritual knowledge, as well as, to become knowledgeable in the matters of the Islamic Law, in order to legitimize their authority. But despite their competences and wisdom, most often they served as unofficial figures, whose role was limited to the responsibility for leading Sufi centers: Qur'anic recitations, organization of prayers and com-

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<sup>18</sup> K. Pemberton, p. 9.

munal assemblies. The other were known as great poets, musicians and composers of sacred songs, as an example may serve Dilhayat Khalifa who, lived in 17<sup>th</sup> century, a tanbur player, pious woman and follower of Mevlana's teachings. Sufi woman mostly those of Sufi family (most often mothers, sisters or wife and daughters of the *pir*) were also playing another important role. They were providing *pir's* disciples and visiting pilgrims with counsel and also distributing prescribing amulets. For those female visitors, they were playing significant role. Women were coming with all their problems and concerns, searching the answer to their questions.

Those who were visiting Mevlana's shrine and also shrines of the other Sufi master all over the Muslim world, were hoping to receive assistance and most often they were coming to pray in imitation of fertility blessing. Sometimes, it was the only place and situation when women could gather with the others outside their households. Moreover, those Sufi mystics who were given an opportunity to offer spiritual support to those women from different communities consequently were becoming "the voice" of them.

Since Sufism had a social recognition, attracting people from all the social classes, region and occupation groups, particular Sufi orders including Mevlevi, were in favored relations with the authority of Seljuk and Ottoman states<sup>19</sup>. In this case those Sufi masters, both men and women, were mediators between the government and the regular people. It could turn to be a danger for the local governments when a particular Sufi order leaders understood the meaning of one's own role and what possibilities it gives. The historical sources mentioning such leaders who were aspiring to political power through revolt against the established authority, but despite this, much bigger concern in case of female Sufi authority was the possibility of their direct intervention into the state affairs. Obviously, their role could also serve for the government interest as well, if even that not happened more often. This possibility given to women, and consequently their engagement in the political issues, which was imposed by people's needs, apparently became one of the major obstacle for the position they had in the eyes of both great Sufi masters and representatives of Orthodox mainstream.

### **5. Ritual of *Sema***

The ritual of *sema* or whirling dance, began with the inspiration of Celaddin Rumi Mevlana who in an ecstatic dance was roaming the streets of Konya. *Sema*, is the most distinctive element of Mevlevi order that express "the cosmic joy experience by the simultaneous effect of annihilation and glorification."

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<sup>19</sup> S. J. Trimmingham, p. 233.

It is the witnessing of the state of perceiving the mysteries of God through the heavens of divinity. Sema is to fight with one's self, to flutter, struggle desperately like a half-slaughtered bird, bloodstained and covered with dust and dirt. It is to be aware of Jacob's grief and know its remedy; to know the vibration of meeting Joseph and the smell of his shirt. [...] Sema is a secret. The Prophet Muhammad said, 'I have a time with God and during this time neither angel nor prophet can intrude.' Sema is to attain that place where even an angel cannot go<sup>20</sup>.

Dervishes (*semazens*) engaged in the performance of *sema*, symbolizes human being spiritual journey, wore special costumes. A camel's hair hat represent the tombstone of the ego (*nafs*), when dervish's white skirt (*tenure*) symbolizes the ego's shroud and the long black cloak dervish's worldly tomb. The moment of *sema* when Whirling Dervishes removing their black cloaks symbolizes the moment of spiritual reborn to the Truth (or Reality). *Sema* is performed by Dervishes and their *Shaikh*. Among the sound of the kudum<sup>21</sup>, kettle drums, a reed flute (*ney*) is always emphasized. Traditional form of the ritual is composed of four important parts. Ceremony begins by chanting to Mevlana *sura*<sup>22</sup> from Qur'an. At the beginning of *sema* dervishes holding their arms crosswise, their figure is symbolizing the first letter of Arabic alphabet, *aleph*, and also number one, thus testifying to God's unity. While whirling, Dervishes arms are open. Left arm is turned toward the earth, when the right arm is directed to the sky. Its symbolism is significant. Dervishes are conveying God's spiritual gift to all of these who are witnessing *sema*, while never keeping anything to themselves. Whirling from right to left around the heart, embrace all humanity with love.

## 6. Female Dervishes

Within Mevlana order a number of female Sufi were engaged in *sema* ritual. According to the encyclopedia source<sup>23</sup>, devoted woman who hold *sema* were meeting at their homes and inviting in there Rumi. Interestingly, it was acceptable to held ceremonies and gatherings with no sex segregation, especially from 13<sup>th</sup> through 15<sup>th</sup> centuries. That is worth to be noticed that the phenomenon of sex segregation was much more widespread in the settled communities than nomads through-out of

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<sup>20</sup> [www.cassiopaea.org/cass/dervish.htm](http://www.cassiopaea.org/cass/dervish.htm); [accessed: 12.01.2011].

<sup>21</sup> One of the most fundamental rhythm instruments in classical Turkish music. The person playing it is called kudumzen. It is among ney, rebap and halile as one of the four main instruments in Mevlevi music. It consists of a pair of small, hemispherical drums.

<sup>22</sup> Sura – a division of the Qur'an, often referred to as a chapter.

<sup>23</sup> S. Joseph, *Encyclopedia of Women & Islamic Cultures. Volume V: Practices, Interpretations and Representations*, Leiden – Boston 2007, p. 202.

Anatolya. In the cities women mostly were gathering within their own circles without male participants.

*Sema* and *dhikr* brought to Sufi mysticism new dimension. Early mystic practices were "less advanced", and were a kind of psychic experiences<sup>24</sup>. Spancer J. Trimmingham, stressing that the change that came with the 12<sup>th</sup> century onwards brought kind of innovation to the mysticism that enabled ordinary man to realize such spiritual experience in the relatively short period of time by rhythmical exercises such as control of breath, coordination of movements and oral repetitions. "By this century dervishes had acquired a complete technique. They employed all sort of methods which helps to open ones consciousness to the attraction of the super-sensible world." On the same time they were aware of the fact that majority of those who attempted to reach the Unity with God, never will be able to approach it because they "were born deaf". This unique inner gift was given only to several people, but all those who were trying to approach to the state on Unity through those practices, led them to the unconscious, and gave them the illusion of a glimpse into Reality. It led to the objective conclusion that loss of conciseness in the divine unity in the ecstatic trans could be regarded as an adaptation of Sufism to the needs and capacity of the ordinary man. On the other hand these features and the use of drags and alcohol in order to enter mystic trans were perceived as a degeneration of Sufism.

### **7. Female Dervishes in the North America**

Throughout the centuries female Sufi have been followed Rumi's teachings, finding their own place within Mevlevi order. Their engagement in *sema*, and other Sufi rituals, suddenly encountered great obstacles when in 1925 Mustafa Kemal Ataturk<sup>25</sup> closed all the dervishes *tekkes* and forbade the practice of any Sufi order in Turkey. Thus, the followers of Mevlevi *tariqa*, decided to move most of their practices to their own houses, till the year 1953 when the first authorized whirling took place in a cinema in the city of Konya. Since than, dervishes could again publicly participate in the spiritual gatherings and openly practicing. Nevertheless, Sufism in that period has already became very popular in the West, especially in the North America. Sufism, was brought to the United States in 1912 by the Indian teacher, Hazrat Inayat Khan<sup>26</sup>. American of both genders began to fathom secrets of mysticism. Inspired by Sufism,

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<sup>24</sup> S. J. Trimmingham, p. 199.

<sup>25</sup> Mustafa Kemal Ataturk – (1881-1928) national leader and founder and first President of the Turkish Republic. Launched a programme of revolutionary social and political reform to modernize Turkey.

<sup>26</sup> [www.hisstorycooperative.org/journals/whc/4.1/hermansen.html](http://www.hisstorycooperative.org/journals/whc/4.1/hermansen.html); [accessed: 13.01.2011].

discovered Mevlevi order. Rumi's poetry and his teachings have attracted great number of Americans. In the number of Mevlevi circles present in America, I would like to point out the Threshold Society in Portland. Established in 1975 by Camille Helminski and her husband Kabir Helminski, trained as Mevlevi by Suleyman Dede<sup>27</sup>. Kabir Helminski was appointed the *shaikh* of the Mevlevi Order in North America in 1990 by Dr. Celaleddin Celebi, the head of the international Mevlevi order in Turkey. Camille Helminski joined her husband in writing and teaching activities, bringing closer the teachings of Mevlana to the American society. Helminski in 1991 discussed with Dr. Celebi the possibility of holding mixed *semas*. She based her request on the equality between men and women as creatures of God. Dr. Celebi after deep reflection enabled to hold mix ceremonies every 30 September and 17 December in public<sup>28</sup>. It seems to be another symbolic element that influences changing position of women within Sufi circles.

*Sema*, as well as other rituals performing by women from all religious affiliations, races and cultures, is giving them the opportunity to awakening One's Self. Rumi's teachings and "the religion of Love" attract American women who seek a religion that fulfills their life with love and knowledge, and enables them to approach the Beloved. Since, they are convinced about the equality of their rights and they are emancipated, their openness and engagement in the *tariqa* doesn't seem to meet with such difficulties and obstacles as in the case of "their sisters" from the "Muslim world". Nowadays, female Sufis from all over the world continue to share their experiences and inspiring the others by their poems and songs. They are devoted to teach and guide the seekers along the path. But also they are becoming much more visible, actively participating in the conferences and meetings regarding woman role within Sufism but also more generally, in the Muslim societies. Moreover, American Sufis work on the translation of the original poetry, sacred songs and teachings in order to make it more accessible to the followers of its American division.

American female Dervishes who engaged in the Mevlevi order, are traditionally following Rumi's teachings passing along the spiritual path under the guidance of their *shaikhah*. Nevertheless, the Mevlevi *tariqa* in North America is influenced by the Western attitudes, practices and individuals. Despite their great engagement, American female Sufis differ in some aspects from the former order followers. There are many factors that determinate it, one of them is the influence of the culture and

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<sup>27</sup> Suleyman Dede (1904 -1985) – great Sufi master of the Mevlevi Order.

<sup>28</sup> [www.sufi.org/lienage/mevlevi/mevlevi-women-2](http://www.sufi.org/lienage/mevlevi/mevlevi-women-2); [accessed: 10.01.2011].

the hierarchy of values, people's attitudes towards Islamic mysticism and what is the most important women place and their role within the society.

## 8. Conclusion

From the very beginning through the centuries women have played very important role in the development of Sufism. Despite the common attitude of subordinate of man over women in the Muslim world, they found the way to cross the borders of the limitations in the spiritual and social life alike. Women based their right to active participating in the spiritual life on the words from Qur'an, which convey the equality of men and women before the eyes of God. Their activism has been present in playing various roles such as educational, supportive and mediatory. The element of fame activity was also present in the literature. Regardless difficulties, after deep studies, we can find proofs of their involvement that resulted in a beautiful form of poems, sacred songs or sometimes just regular historical facts.

Ability of women to circumvent the cultural borders, their mobility outside their homes, gathering with the others, while praying and asking for an assistance, active participating in the spiritual rituals were promoting the attitude opposed to the idea of sex segregation and female subordination to male authority. The hegemony of male authority has been undermined by the women usurping themselves, traditional male spheres of influence. Female high social and spiritual status, and their ability to guide along the path both, men and women alike, meant the possession of the authority of woman over man. All those changes influenced the process of self-determination of women; they became aware of the possibilities of the role they played. Their growing independence and involvement in Sufi orders on all of the levels of the hierarchy led to straightening of their authority, and in some cases even to their involvement in the political issues. Naturally, it met with the opposition from the side of male representative of Orthodox mainstream as well as Sufi masters, but as we can see also nowadays, the process of self-determination and reinforcement of women role within the Islamic culture couldn't been stopped. It is noticeable, that these changes have had a religious but also social meaning alike.

In the end, also female Sufis engaged in *tariqa* in the North America, by using the language of the Beloved and expression of the recognition of feminine in the spiritual dimension of Islam and their manifestation of the equality of the men and women on the spiritual path, have been able to overcome the stereotypes present in the media and so often highlight whenever referring to the role of women in the Islamic culture.

