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## Hearing and Understanding in the Islamic Gnosis

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In the Islamic culture, reflections on hearing in general as well as on listening to music or to speech developed together with Sufism, mysticism and theology. However, this specific relationship is not only limited to the comprehension and interpretation of the listening process. On the one hand the myths and significant anecdotes are also open to other interpretations, such as those of a psychological or phenomenological nature. On the other hand, the philosophy of perception—notably visual and auditory—, which is open to larger theosophical perspectives, is deeply anchored in experience. Mysticism and Sufism are not speculative paths but rather theological or metaphysical interpretations of those experiences that possess a particularly intensive and special quality. Within these interpretations, experiences that are witnessed through vision and listening occupy an important position in mysticism, in gnosis and in the esoteric sciences.<sup>1</sup> Vision particularly refers to the "imaginative" world and is hardly taken into account as part of the world of the senses, since in the Islamic gnosis there is no meditation on icons, mandalas or plastic forms. Contrary to this, hearing, which is the other fundamental axis to Revelation, was privileged as a kind of contemplation, particularly in relation to the Sufi practice of *samāʾ*, a spiritual concert.

### 1. Preeminence of Hearing

The Persian proverb which says, "Could hearing ever be like seeing?", only applies to the world of the senses, to physical appearance or to those things of which one can speak or which are made evident through seeing. In Islamic thinking, hearing in its general sense is a faculty given a higher position than all others, even higher than vision. Certain masters have themselves advocated that one learn to listen "with the eyes" (*samāʾ-e cheshm*),<sup>2</sup> but they never spoke of seeing with the ears.

This preeminence, or at least this priority, is confirmed in different ways on religious and anthropological levels. First of all there is the immaterial aspect of hearing which is emphasized in the treatise of the *Ikhwān as-safā* (Brothers of Purity): "Visual perceptions are to a great measure physical, while those of hearing are completely

spiritual" (Shiloah 1965/1967:188). Another important idea is that science, both secular as well as sacred, is acquired through hearing. The French words *entendre* (to hear) and *entendement* (understanding) have the same roots.<sup>3</sup> Hujwirî (11th century), one of the first authors who wrote on *samâ'*, applied this principle to spiritual knowledge:

God has sent Apostles with true evidence, but belief in His Apostles does not become obligatory until the obligatoriness of knowing God is ascertained by means of hearing. It is hearing, then, that makes religion obligatory; and for this reason the Sunnis regard hearing as superior to sight in the domain of religious obligation (*taklif*). If it is said that the sight of God is better than hearing His word, I reply that our knowledge of God's visibility to the faithful in Paradise is derived from hearing...and all the prophets on their appearance first spoke in order that those who heard them might believe, then secondly they have showed miracles (*mu'jiza*), which also were corroborated by hearing (Hujwirî 1959:393f.)

The cognitive argument is further reinforced through psychological and ethical-spiritual considerations. The fact of hearing a message implies an interiorization and a receptivity which are equivalent to the acquisition of knowledge. In Arabic as well as in Latin, hearing and listening mean to subjugate oneself, that is, *obéir* (*obaudire*), to obey, at least for a moment, the one who speaks. This attitude is the sign of a receptive and positive ethical disposition, a disposition that is particularly indispensable for the acceptance of the religious message. The hearer, so remarks Hujwirî, is more perfect in his condition as he who recites the Koran, for he who recites can do so with or without true feelings, while the hearer is truly moved, because discoursing, or performing, is a kind of vanity, but hearing is a kind of humility (cf. Hujwirî 1959:396).

In the domain of belief, those who do not listen are seized by pride, for the first effect of receiving the call is repentance and fear (Koran, 50/33; 36/11; 20/3; 48/50).

In the end the preference given to hearing in the Islamic culture includes as well the fact that the Revelation was a fundamentally "aural," an auditive, phenomenon, even when it was sometimes accompanied by visions. The Koran was heard, then recited and orally transmitted before it was written down, and the term itself comes from the root *QR'*, which signifies "recitation of a text." From the cultural point of view, the pre-Islamic Arabic civilization (as that by the way of Persia as well), gave preference to the oral over the written.

## 2. The Founding Myth

Hearing is the supreme experience because it is the first experience with which the individual is awakened. This point will be demonstrated with two well-known myths. In the first, the soul of Adam refused to enter the body of clay molded by God. Thereupon God told the angels to make *samâ'* and, in the ecstasy of this music, Adam's soul was led to the prison of his body. In the second myth, Adam wakes up hearing the sweet voice of the divine Other, saying, "Am I not your Master?" (*alastu*

*bi rabbikum*). He answered in ecstasy with these words: "Yes, I attest to it," confirming the eternal Covenant (*mithâq*) which binds the entire humanity to their creator.<sup>4</sup>

Supported by the thoughts of Ahmad Tusi, N. Purjavâdi shows that the Myth of the Pact supports the faculties of comprehending, of hearing and of enunciation through the introduction of the Word and through the revelation of the divine Other by hearing:

In fact, the first thing that God created for the descendants of Adam on the day of the Covenant was comprehension, then the auditive and enunciatory faculties (after Adam responded). Then, before the descendants of Adam were asked, the Creator presented them with these three faculties or abilities; and upon the answer "yes," all three were set into action. Although language is posterior to understanding and hearing, it is the irradiation of the verb (*alast*), which unifies understanding and hearing. If the call from the side of the Creator had not come, then neither the ear would have heard anything nor the understanding understood anything (Purjavâdi 1979:242).

From the viewpoint of anthropology, this myth reminds us that the lifting of consciousness from our existential foundations, inseparable from a certain state of grace, takes place directly through the means of musical hearing (for, in spite of the enunciation of the question, it does involve above all a voice), and this process expresses itself through an answer that is heard.<sup>5</sup>

And as there is always a background lying behind the foundation, so it seems that the relation between music, the Word that creates, and ecstasy (*wajd*) that accompanies the sensations of existing (without other contents) is revealed in another myth by *Sharh-e ta'arraf* of Bokhâri (d. 1042) at a time when the Sufi *samâ'* had already expanded from Bagdad and Persian throughout the entire Muslim world:

Some say that the principle of *samâ'* is that of the rapture produced by the sound of the creative Decree; the word consists of what He had said to the world: "Be"! (*kun*), and it was so. The first joy that things can attain is the joy of this word. Now that beings can be listened to, the *samâ'* is a form of nourishment through the memory and the perfume of this first *samâ'* (Purjavâdi 1979:237).

The Myth of the Covenant and that of the *kun* Creator (*fiat!* or *esto!*) complement each other in a reciprocal manner and serve to justify the practice of Sufi *samâ'* in the sense of a commemoration and reaffirmation of the Pact. Music is the reflection of universal harmony: "Where this melody (the resonance of the Creator's Word) does not exist, there the soul can understand nothing. The universe is this melody itself, so as the eternal Master played it" (ibid.:250).

## 3. Spiritual Listening and Understanding

In its specific sense *samâ'* designates all forms of sacred concerts and particularly the mystical concert in which listening entices a state of grace or ecstasy and takes a more or less ritualized form. Fundamentally, this word signifies listening to and understanding the divine call pronounced by all the prophets and in particular to listen-

ing to the message of the Koran. (One should keep in mind that the original form of *samâ'* was limited to listening to the psalmody of the Koran.) These two levels of *samâ'* (listening to the Message as well as listening to and practicing music) correspond to the concept of *dhikr* (lit., call, remembrance, meaning, invocation), whose principle sense is equally "to hear." *Dhikr* is carried out in a rite similar to that of *samâ'* and is at the same time complementary to it.<sup>6</sup> Both the term *samâ'* and *dhikr* are originally found in the Koran in their most abstract and broad meanings: *samâ'* refers to the faculty of spiritual understanding before referring to the perception of the symbolic message of music and poetry, while *dhikr* appears in the Book in the sense of memory, meaning, and remembrance of God, before being understood in a more concrete sense as ritual invocation.

Also in view of the cognitive plan, hearing-understanding and invocation-remembrance are tied to each other because, according to Plato, knowledge is reminiscence. There is therefore a difference between *samâ'* and *dhikr* in relation to the participation of the subject: *passive* in listening but *active* in remembering, with its litanies, movements, respiration and rhythms. It is understood that in ritual practice, hearing is also remembering and active invocation that frequently incites movement and dance, just as *dhikr* also is the hearing of invocation.<sup>7</sup> In spite of all this, it is interesting to note that the historical development of ritual practices reflects the ontological and anthropological order, because the ritual of *samâ'* is earlier than that of *dhikr*.

#### 4. The Object of Listening and Its Experience

In the Sufi texts, *samâ'* (as pure listening) in a general and universal sense did not limit itself to words and music but above all meant audible and inaudible sounds, both sounds that were apparent and hidden. There is no text that gives an inventory of all mystical perceptions, but in reference to anecdotes and quotations, it is possible to make some conclusions about the inaudible concert. On this, the following voice:

a) In the most abstract sense of the word, that which is given as "to hear" is "the warning," the appeal or the call that is contained in the religious message, particularly in the Koran. By extension, all words and all sounds laden with meaning are the object of *samâ'*.

b) The song in praise of creatures, the inherent vibrations to all that exist, is a prayer (*tasbîh*) or a *dhikr* whose inarticulated expression can be understood like a kind of music. These sounds are referred to in the verses of Ahmad Ghazâli (d. 1126): "Broaden your vision and realize in the span of life/That all that exists is occupied with saying "lâ ilâha illâ llâh." This listening is accompanied by a state of ecstasy, at least at the beginning of this stage.

c) Among the creatures, the heavenly spheres represent a higher order, as subtle a reality as that of the angels. Their song of praise (the vibration results from their rubbing) engenders a cosmic harmony, an archetype of all harmony. The ability to per-

ceive these sonorities is limited to only those souls who approach the Principle and rise above the worlds in an oceanic and visionary ecstasy that in a certain sense represents the fulfillment and attainment of the listening experience of subtle sounds coming from the sublunar creatures. This aspect of Islamic spirituality appears only seldom in texts and when, then in a poetic context. Pythagoras heard these sonorities and Sohrawardi (12th century) related his experience on this subject.

On the same level as the spheres with which they are merged are the angels, whose song is perceived in similar ecstasy. In the end, the supreme music is the divine voice, as in the Covenant. There are few witnesses to report about this except for the great saint Shirâz Ruzbehân Baqli (d. 1206) who, in his famous visions, contemplated God while he played music on the *tanbur* lute and even danced together with Him (Ruzbehân 1996:151, 208, 212). At the end of his life, incidentally, he renounced *samâ'*, in that he declared, "It is God himself who is the *samâ'* that I hear."

d) One can distinguish a degree of listening that derives from b) where the individual perceives precise voices in certain sounds of nature which transmit clear information to him that is not of a mystical nature and does not induce a state of ecstasy. This involves a kind of clairvoyance and "clair-audience", in reference to the charisma that is attributed to certain saints in folk beliefs.

e) Closer to the environment of the Sufis are the particular messages that contain certain natural or accidental sounds. The numerous references available allow us to determine two types:

—It may involve short and intense enlightenments, during which the individual comprehends the essence or the signification of a thing through an acoustic event (for example, the secret language of plants or of objects).

—It may involve a supernatural message that is addressed through the medium of a sound, a noise or a deformed word that in itself has no meaning; for the listener the rapture of this allusion is overwhelming. (Very often this message emerges through interiorized listening, as in point a) above and consists of sudden, illuminated understanding of a relevant point of faith or theological dogma.)

Often the individual operates consciously an attentive hermeneutic which leads to the feeling, if not to the discovery, of transcendental meaning (*ma'âni*). In a certain sense, this is an "effort" (*tawâjud*) made to achieve a higher plane and is accompanied generally by a more or less intensive state of grace. At times, meaning is manifest but will at a given moment assume considerable importance to the person who can be profoundly upheaved.

Actually, the last two types of experiences are the only ones that refer directly to the phenomena of *samâ'* in its specific sense. They particularly occur while listening to Koran recitation.

## 5. Listening With One's Soul

In the above-mentioned examples, "hearing" is defined particularly as a spiritual and mental faculty, not in aesthetic or emotional terms. The idea of "hearing" in the sense of a source of knowledge implies in general that "hearing" is the hearing of speech or words. Only the most discerning authors such as Kalâbâdhî, Abu Hâmed Ghazâlî, Ruzbehân or Qushayrî admit that pure music represents a carrier of the cognitive experience, in which they see a mystery. For the majority of the authors, the experience of hearing mostly implies a transformation of sounds into language, a shift of meaning or of a hermeneutic, and it is almost never a question of the musicality of the sounds themselves. However there exist above all numerous practices of *samâ'* and of dances in which the word gives way to the melody, and one knows that the famous ecstatic saints appreciated this kind of music and the benefits that derived from it. Yet the Sufis say almost nothing about the way in which music should be listened to, even though they give clues as to how one can decode the poetic images. The sensibility for music is, for them, either an inborn aptitude that reveals the temperament of each person (and consequently is not of interest for mysticism), or it is purified, moralized and spiritualized in the sense that it is definitively no longer the ear that perceives, but rather the soul, or the "ear of the soul." Music does not serve an ultimate purpose in itself, but is rather a means to access another dimension. But for this to be possible, the physical ear must give way to spiritual hearing. According to Sohravardi, after that which one can observe as a preliminary phase of aesthetic ecstasy, "the power of the soul pulls this pleasure from the power of the ear: 'You are not worthy, he said to her, to listen to that.' The soul displaces the ear in its function of listening and listens directly itself. It thus belongs to the other world, for the auditory perception of the other world is no longer a matter of the ear" (Corbin 1976:404–405).

Therefore the musical form loses its importance, since what is to be perceived is situated beyond appearance or outward reality. Actually, it is a rough simplification to speak of the ecstatic effect of music and of dance: it is the ecstasy that leads to the dance, and not vice versa. This means that in the final stage of ecstasy, the music becomes superfluous and even prevents one from hearing the inaudible. Be that as it may, the treatises say nothing about what one should listen for in music (except for the famous "warning" about its dangers), or how one should approach it, but rather with which faculties one should listen to music: with the heart, the soul, the spirit, etc. As far as the method to achieve this is concerned, this is precisely the entire program of the mystic way. Since the beginnings of *samâ'*, the masters have underscored the illusions and dangers that can be contained in the fact of hearing according to one's nature (*tab'*) or according to one's ego (*nafs*). And they removed the adepts from the *samâ'* who were not able to listen with their hearts or their souls.

## 6. The Prerequisites of *Samâ'*<sup>8</sup>

The references that one encounters here and there, particularly in the later tracts, although highly interesting, are not adequate to establish a psychology of musical listening. According to Semnâni (d. 1336):

The prerequisites of *samâ'* are as follows: to renounce the world; to renounce desires; to have achieved mastery over one's carnal soul; to practice *dhikr*; to regard God as present; to see everything with a pure eye; an appropriate time; an appropriate place; not to let the younger people participate; not to be forced to move oneself or to remain still, but to be rather, as the Sufis recommend, "sons of the moment," to behave in such a way as the moment (*vaqt*) requires (in Heravi 1993:282).

Other authors add to this recommendations like the following: meditate by thinking on one's spiritual goal or by having carried out one's ablutions, fast beforehand, do not drink during *samâ'*, do not move in the presence of the *sheik* but rather concentrate on him, and match the movements of the ecstatically dancing dervishes in order to reinforce the unity of the gathering. These are the essential prerequisites for the success of the *samâ'* and for the descent of grace on the participants.<sup>9</sup>

The general idea that emerges from these prescriptions is the unity, the unification of all elements and on all levels, particularly in reference to faith and the beliefs of the participants, their emotions, their representations and mental images, their way of behavior, etc. Incidentally, the concert or the *dhikr* is designated as *jam'*, which means union or gathering. On the level of individual psychology, according to Gizuderâz (d. 1422), the effect of *samâ'* reaches its climax when the five components of being contribute to hearing: temperament, the soul, intellect (*'aql*), the heart and the spirit. (Some Sufis add to this the body, which expresses itself among other things in dance.) Contrary to that which occurs in prayer or in meditation, these five components do not conflict with each other in musical listening. One of the components reacts to meaning, another to poetic images, another to melodies, etc. (Hussaini 1983:140). It is their harmonic mobilization which confers on the *samâ'* the character of a total experience. Accordingly, Gizuderâz distinguishes two types of listening, according to the way in which this harmony is established. In the listening of the "*viator extatique*" (*sâlek-e majdhub*—wanderer of ecstasy), each of these components is found and has their own worth in the *samâ'*, while in the listening of "*l'extatique viator*" (*majdhub-e sâlek*—ecstatic wanderer), the components unify under the guardianship of the heart. The difference is that, in the first case, ecstasy manifests itself through emotion and agitation, while in the second, it implodes into "enstasy," an inward explosion which creates a serene beatitude (ibid.:141).

## 7. Psychoanalysis and Hermeneutics of Fundamental Listening

What can Sufism teach us, when we leave aside the doctrinary and ideological aspects? There is a gap in the Sufi classification of types of listening: having focused

on the listening of common people that induces mere sensual pleasure, and the spiritual *samâ'* of the elected ones, the Sufi sheiks have not paid any attention to the intermediate level of aesthetic listening, which is attested by numerous facts and literary sources. While mysticism spread very quickly in the Islamic culture, particularly in the Orient, the ideas of music devotees and of mystic teachers encountered those of Sufism,<sup>10</sup> especially in their ethical concerns and in their way of directing musical effects.

We shall focus here mainly on the principle of the unification of all factors that appear in musical performance as expressed by some Sufis.<sup>11</sup> This involves the unity and communion between the actor and the participants and between the interpreter, his instrument and his music. Instead of the concepts of union and communion, which display mystical overtones, one can use the more neutral and more general concept of *proximity*, which characterizes the practice of traditional music at large. The intensity of effect depends on the fact that the distance between all converging elements in one musical event is reduced to its minimum: in addition to the mentioned elements there is on the level of participants an affective, intellectual, spiritual and even physical proximity, as well as a profound intimacy, with melodic and poetic forms. The secrets of the power of music do not reside so much in the musical object as with the subject himself (the performer as well as the listener) and with the art of the performance.

If reflections on music are oriented towards the subject himself, this leads back to the essence of listening as apprehended not through a theosophic lecture on the founding myth of *alast*, but through a phenomenological approach. The power of a symbol is that it offers various interpretations without contradicting itself as a result.

The remarks traced here are inspired by the work of the Lacanian psychoanalyst Alain Didier-Weill, who developed a theoretical reflection on music "as a possible path towards understanding the most important relation of the subject to the Other" (1995:249). Within musical hearing is revealed a pure otherness, completely different from that revealed by the possibility of saying "no" or of remaining silent or of answering in the wooden language of normality. Following this author's line of thought, one comprehends better that which the Sufis express in their Myth of the Pact, which is reactualized in each *samâ'*. This is not at all a relationship to a divine Master (*rabb*), a "yes" of submission that could have been a "no," or silent resignation to a command of the kind, "I am your Master," as heard by the common believers. The statement is open in a demanding form that expects a reply. In the reply, the subject is heard and it is his turn to be heard and his ecstasy also derives from this, as the Other gives the reply that he expects and which fills him with joy ("Am I not...?" "Yes, you are."). This dialogue is immediately presented as open, thus the Pact must always be renewed and the best reply is that of music, whose essence is repetition, but a repetition that never bores and never tires. For "the call that is in music does not demand an I that should already be here but rather a subject that is not yet here, indefinite and on the verge of appearing" (Didier-Weill 1995:247).

In this way, the *samâ'* is the renewal of the Pact, the creative modulation of "yes" (*balî*) and of testimony (*shahîdna*, "I attest to it"). It does not matter if it is formulated clearly (as in the chants of the Mevlevi Turkish dervishes), or implicitly, since the summons of the music, independent from all theological orchestration, contains the essence of change, with its ecstasy, its Pact, its "yes."

When I hear music sound, I discover each time, always stupefied, that I cannot help but say "yes" to it (...), it is a complete "yes" which is not derived from internal deliberation which gives me the choice of saying "no" (...). But to whom do I then say "yes"? To a subjective transmutation that turns (...) my position from a listened subject to one of a listening subject: in effect, while I believe to be engaged in the act of music listening, I discover now, in that moment when it sounds, that it is the music which listens to me. (...) I have heard (...) a call which I answered "yes," whose extreme simplicity can only be compared with its enigmatic character: for I know neither to whom I say "yes" nor who says "yes." (...) Music delivers from non-existence the enunciator of this "yes," it delivers the subject, bringing him into existence (Didier-Weill 1995:246).

One sees, therefore, that through the psychoanalytical exegesis, symbolic representation and myth join together once more. At their point of juncture remains music and the unique experience that music brings forth. One can thus reverse the traditional order and observe whether it is in fact not the Myth of the Pact that forms the *samâ'*, but rather far more musical listening that seals the Pact before drawing its substance out of its commemoration. Thus the musical experience not only rejoins the mystical experience but reverses it, in that it takes the place of the mystical experience in the ontological order. This is at any rate the thesis, formulated in psychoanalysis, that curiously refers also in its specific content to a "Pact" (ibid.:268).

Therefore, our question about music is this: if music alone holds the power to seal the Pact that had been undone, are we not correct in proposing the hypothesis that music alone is that which renews the Pact?

(translated from the French by  
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## Notes

- 1 In fact, spiritual vision and hearing complement each other as two forms of testimony. There is a theosophy of testimony (*shuhûd*) which shines through *hadîths* like "I have contemplated my Lord in the most beautiful of forms," or the parable of Moses who, though he was *Kalîm al-lâh* (interlocutor of God), did not have the privilege of seeing the face of God as Mohammed did at the time of his ascension to heaven (*mi'râj*).
- 2 "He who does not possess the *samâ'* of the eyes, his *samâ'* of the ear is not reliable, for in all that the eye sees, it sees warning, and all that the ear hears is wisdom. Just as the eye sees in all things the beauty of the Beloved, so does the ear hear in all the voice of the Beloved" (Ahmad-e Jâm Zhende-Pil, in Heravi 1993:193).

- 3 On this topic, Aristotle remarked, without thought to political correctness, "Among the persons deprived of one or another sense from birth, the blind are more intelligent than the deaf" (*Parva naturalia*, quoted in Shiloah 1967:188).
- 4 For a structural analysis of *mithaq* and of the creation myths of music, cf. During 1994a.
- 5 One sees in the conclusion that this myth refers to a psychoanalytical reading, which however does not exclude other approaches. One thinks of the work of Tomatis on listening and his therapeutic works. For him, primary listening is that of the fetus hearing the voice of his mother, which is such a fundamental experience that, if one reproduces this under particular circumstances, it becomes possible to achieve astonishing therapeutic results.
- 6 Independent of their origins, *samâ'* and *dhikr* are intimately interconnected with each other, although up to the present day, pure *samâ'* and the collective *dhikr* without music listening are seldom. For examples of *dhikr* and a description of the ritual, cf. During 1994b, 1995.
- 7 The listener of *samâ'* is very often absorbed in an inner and mental *dhikr*, particularly in the course of instrumental solos that do not refer to any texts. For example, he hears the music in that he adapts his personal *dhikr* to his own rhythm.
- 8 For more precise information on this point, cf. During 1990.
- 9 Gizuderâz explains that one never knows if an individual prayer is accepted, while everything that is hoped for in prayer, meditation and in *dhikr* is "paid in cash" through the grace of the moment (*naqd-e vaqt*) during the *samâ'* (Hussaini 1983:127).
- 10 Cf. During 1994c, particularly Chapter VII, "Le hâl et la tradition."
- 11 This subject has been developed by the Iranian master D. Safvate (1984).

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