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Processual Form in Sufi Dhikr Ritual

ABSTRACT

For four hundred years, the *zikir* ritual has been performed weekly in *Kadirîhâne* in Istanbul. Sufi rituals are believed to have been compiled by the founder (*pîr*) of the order. The ritual conductor (*şeyh, postnişin*) symbolizes the founder. The ritual form consists of chanting (dhikr) several divine names (*esmâ*). While participants perform the divine names with drone-like melodic repetitions or guttural rhythmic ostinatos, musicians perform songs, recitations, and improvisations. Through rhythmic enunciation, body sway, and breath control, these chants are embodied as ostinatos while music varies the mood. The ostinato polyphony between the *derviş* and *zakir*, as well as the succession of the divine names symbolizes unity (*tevhid*) in different ways. The manners and the formality of the ritual (ethics) and their musical expressions (aesthetics) implies harmony that leads to communal and/or individual unity. This article examines the form and content of the ritual, and shows their relation to Sufi concepts.

KEYWORDS

Sufism

Qadiriyya

Ritual

Ayin

Dhikr

Chant

Ostinato

Introduction

The *Rûmî* branch of the *Kadirî* order (Qadiriyya) was founded in Istanbul in the early seventeenth century. When masters modify rituals, ceremonies, teaching methods, or other features of a certain order, they are called *pîr-i sânî* (second founder) and the new branches are attributed to their name. The founder İsmâil Rûmî (d. 1631) is regarded as the *pîr-i sânî* of the *Kadirî* order. The *tekke* that he built in Istanbul/Tophane in 1630 is known as *Kadirîhâne Tekkesi*. Being the âsitâne (central *tekke*) of the *Kadirî* order, it is also called *İsmâil Rûmî Âsitânesi* and *Kadirîhâne Âsitânesi*. Today, his descendants live at the adjacent house and keep the tradition alive. The weekly ritual (*âyin*) is still performed in *Kadirîhâne*.

This ritual has been performed every Tuesday for four centuries. It is not performed during the month of Ramadan except the one on *Kadir gecesi* (Qadr night). According to Islamic belief, the revelation of the Quran began on this particular night in the month of Ramadan while the Prophet Muhammed was in seclusion at Mount *Hira.* Although it is not known what day of the month this night was, it is thought to be in the last ten days and is officially celebrated on the 27th (Özervarlı, 2001). Pîr İsmâil Rumî reserved this month for reading and meditating on the Quran and did not perform the *zikir* ritual except *Kadir gecesi* (Eren Erkmenkul, personal communication, December 26, 2020).

Zikir (dhikr) means remembrance and generally denotes the repetitive invocation of the divine names (*esmâ*). This repetition can be silent, vocal, individual, or collective (Öngören, 2013). The dhikr ritual (*zikir âyini*) involves the vocal (*cehrî*) and collective version of this practice. In its different aspects, it is a devotion, a meditation, a ritual and a musical performance. In this weekly public ritual, participants chant six divine names and phrases (*esmâ*) while musicians perform songs, recitations and improvisations.

I did fieldwork in *Kadirîhâne* between 2018-2022 as part of my doctoral research and participated in the weekly *âyin.* This study is based on my doctoral field research and here I will try to illustrate how ritual form is constructed by and through music, using both analytical and phenomenological approaches. It aims to introduce the *zikir âyini*, about which there is very limited information in the literature. This article presents a formal model for the *âyin* and discusses the significance of the form, content, and the subjective experience in terms of Sufism.

Form

Ritual form is the most distinctive feature of a particular Sufi order. The form is believed to have been composed by the *pîr* (father), the founder of the order. The *şeyh* in service (*postnişin*) symbolizes the *pîr,* and is responsible for maintaining the order as it is. In ritual, the *şeyh* conducts the process while the *zâkirbaşı* (head musician) undertakes the musical aspects such as repertory, vocal or instrumental improvisations, songs and recitations. Being a *zâkirbaşı* requires exceptional performance skills and vast knowledge of repertory and texts, as well as having a good command of various rituals.

There are three main ritual forms categorized by their position and motion: *kuud* (sitting), *kıyam* (standing)*,* and *devran* (circling)*.* These three forms are interrelated. In a weekly ritual, people make a circle (*halka*) after the night prayer and sit down for *zikir*. *Kuud* constitutes the first part of the ritual. It includes *evrâd-ı şerif* (litany), *kelime-i tevhid* chant, and *durak*. The rest of the *esmâ* can also be performed on *kuud.* But it is performed in its full form rarely or in situations in which standing up is not possible. While *Kadirîhâne* was under restoration in 2014, I observed the *kuud* rite on several occasions at the *konak* (*şeyh's* house) adjacent to *tevhidhâne*. Later I learned that this was because of the small capacity of the room.

Kıyam starts with *kuud* and continues with standing up after the *durak* and proceeds thereafter. It has two different forms. They are associated with two *pir-i sani* of the *Kadirî* order in Anatolia and named accordingly; *Rumî kıyam* and *Eşrefî kıyam*. The only difference in the latter is that two different melodic *Allah* chants are performed between the second and the third *esmâ*. *Eşrefi kıyam* is performed during special days such as *kandil* or *bayram*. *Devran* is performed less often and requires experienced participants. In *devran*, *zikir* starts with *kuud* and proceeds to *kıyam.* During the second *esmâ* (*Hayyul Kayyum Allah*) the *şeyh* guides people to create a circle. Participants chant specific *esmâ* for *devran* while the circle rotates counterclockwise. The circle keeps expanding and dissolves at the *Hay* chant. This dissolution leads back to the *kıyam* naturally, and the chanting continues. To eliminate confusion, figure 1 shows the comparison of four ritual forms. *Devran* includes *kuud*, *kıyam*, and *devran*; *kıyam* includes *kuud* and *kıyam*; *kuud* is both a standalone form and the first part of every form.
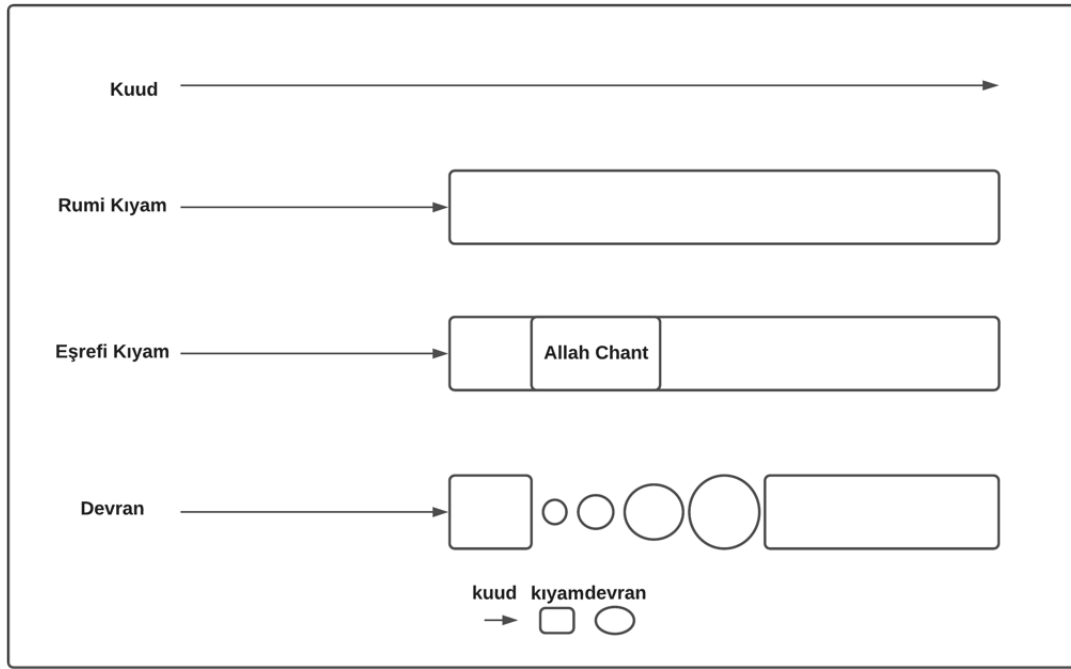
Figure 1. Comparison of ritual forms

The *şeyh* decides on a particular form. Consecutive chants are performed in the order of a chosen form. Since the intention of all ritual forms is *zikir,* chanting the *esmâ* is the main organizational motive. The diagram in figure 2 shows the orders of *esmâ*, comparing different forms. *Kuud and kıyam* have the same order. After standing up for *kıyam, Hayyul Kayyum Allah* is the strategic point that assigns the rest of the ritual to one of the forms; *Rumî, Eşrefî, or Devranî.* The intertwining of forms seems to allow for shifting to other forms as seen in figure 2. Considering the various forms, ranging from simple to complex, *kıyam* apparently holds a middle level. This position emphasizes the generative syntax that drives the ritual procedure. The words *âyin* (pr.) and *usûl* (ar.) are used interchangeably denoting ritual or procedure. *Usûl* already implies a procedure: several actions undertaken successively towards a specific goal. Such forward-moving syntax defines the sense and structure of ritual.
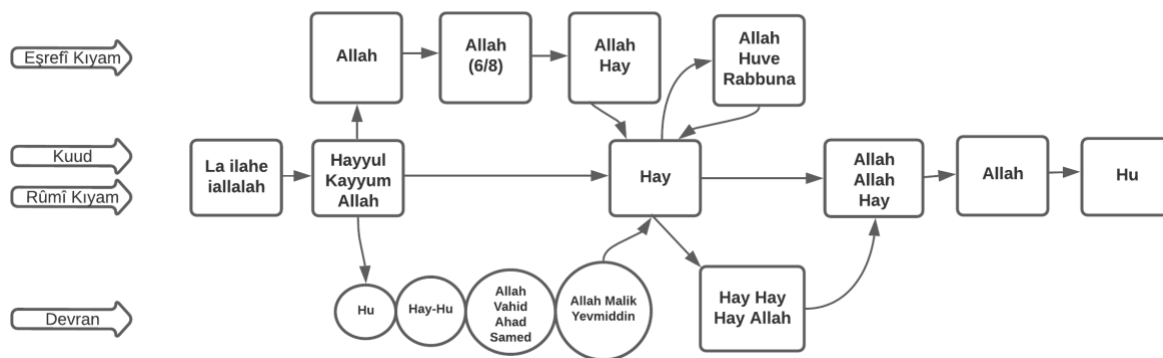
Figure 2. Model for ritual process

Rûmî kıyam represents the default form. It was composed by and is associated with the founder İsmâil Rûmî. The order of *esmâ* in *Rûmî kıyam* is *La ilahe illallah, Hayyul Kayyum Allah, Hay, Allah Allah Hay, Allah,* and *Hu*. Their succession is coherent in terms of meaning, direction, rhythm, breath and movement. And the coherence is parallel among these temporal categories. For example, ostinatos proceed from complex to simple and the succession of divine names reaches '*Allah*' and eventually '*Hu*' (third-person non-gender pronoun). In this last *esmâ,* ostinato contracts into one beat and one breath. The heart and the breath balance until a long *Hu* finishes the chanting.

Chants

As a meditation, participants chant the divine names while directing the names to their hearts. Syllabic structures produce different rhythmic/melodic motifs for every *esmâ.* Thus, each chant is a combination of verbal, melodic, rhythmic ostinatos that coincide with the specific gesture and breath rhythm. Meditating on the *esmâ*, controlled breathing, pounding of the heart, and moving the body bidirectionally are experienced as one *embodied ostinato*. Sonic, somatic and visual elements meld into a holistic experience and converge performance and perception. Regulating the heartbeat and breath may also lead to exaltation.

The unique characteristic of this collective chant is an unpitched and percussive timbre. This voice comes from the larynx and coalesces with the pounding of the heart in the subject's experience as if coughing. Usually, the last half of the duple metre contains inhalation that produces a contrasting sound. Thus, every *esmâ* ends up with a different ostinato. Also, in some of the *esmâ*, especially during the *kaside,* the *şeyh* shouts "*kalbî!*"

(from the heart) that signals the pronunciation of the *esmâ* by closing the mouth and fixing the tongue to the palate as if humming. This technique conceals the enunciation and the rhythmic pulses of the syllables in the chest create the sensation that the *esmâ* is being uttered from the heart. The muffled sound of *kalbî* chanting also reduces the volume and intensity and suppresses the exaltation. Naturally, solo recitation (*kaside*) becomes more apparent in the sonic spectrum.

A combination of body sway, breath rhythm and syllabic structure creates unique ostinatos for each *esmâ*. Through their common metre, these *esmâ ostinatos* are capable of connecting consecutively. The only exception to this rule is *kelime-i tevhid* (*la ilahe illallah*). Since the following part is an intermission (*durak*), this *esmâ* stands alone with its beginning and ending. The beats, breaths and gestures of this chant are shown below in figure 3. The red-black dot shows the starting point: the first beat. Orange dots correspond to syllables. Blue dots indicate inhalation points. Starting from the red-black dot while facing the right, the lower corner shows the third beat with the body in normal position. The left hand corner shows the first beat of the next bar and starts facing left. The top corner shows the third beat of the second measure that completes the ostinato. In quadruple metre, the first two beats correspond to facing right while the last two beats correspond to left. The meaning of the phrase (*la ilahe illallah*) is also embodied with these gestures. Facing right is an abnegative gesture emphasizing the first half of the phrase: *la ilahe* (there is no god). The next half responds to this by pointing the heart (left) with the head and directing the word *illallah* (only *Allah*) with a strong guttural accent.

This *esmâ* has two phases. In the first (a), shown as a straight line, enunciation starts slowly on a specific pitch (C3). It is slow (60 bpm) and exhaled along with the bar. Throughout this (a) phase, the *şeyh* raises the pitch three times while *ney* player improvises over the drone of the chant. This pitch rise is called *perde kaldırma* (tr.) and presents an ambiguous concept. The word *Perde* is a homonym that means both pitch and veil. So, *perde kaldırma* both means "pitch raising" and "unveiling". It symbolizes the *şeyh*'s subjective-spiritual experience (Murat Şahin, personal communication, 5 March 2021). After chanting the *esmâ* for about five minutes the *şeyh* goes up a whole step (D3) on the last syllable '-*lah*' and continues thereafter. Participants recognize the pitch rise and attend to this new pitch. After a few minutes, *perde kaldırma* happens again (E3) and continues for a few minutes. These pitch rises increase the volume and change the timbre

as well. A few minutes after this last pitch rise, the *şeyh* hits the floor and moves to phase (b) with a sudden and dramatic emphasis on the first syllable *La.* Unlike the previous rises, where the *şeyh* indicated the changes on the last beats, punctuation by hitting the floor does not only inform but affects as well. The *şeyh* hits the floor and the following ostinato produces a half-time feel following with acceleration. This abrupt hitting on the first beat dramatically changes the vocal quality. The first phase's drone-like, slow chanting displays an apparent contrast with the loud and rhythmical accents in the second phase. This accentuation brings down the pitch almost an octave. Lower pitch (C2) and strained voice produce a timbre with a strong attack. Additional inhalation accents on upbeats (^) create a percussive and almost unpitched timbre. The square in figure 3 (b) shows the ostinato at this second phase. As the notation indicates, the ostinato spreads to two bars. Half-time feel gives the impression of slowing down, but actually, it is slightly faster. As soon as phase (b) starts musicians start to sing over this ostinato. After the song is performed, a solo recitation (*kaside*) takes place while *dervişler* (dervishes) are still chanting the ostinato. This first *esmâ*, *la ilahe illalah*, follows with an intermission (durak). Here, while everyone is resting before standing up, one *zakir* performs a *durak ilahisi.*
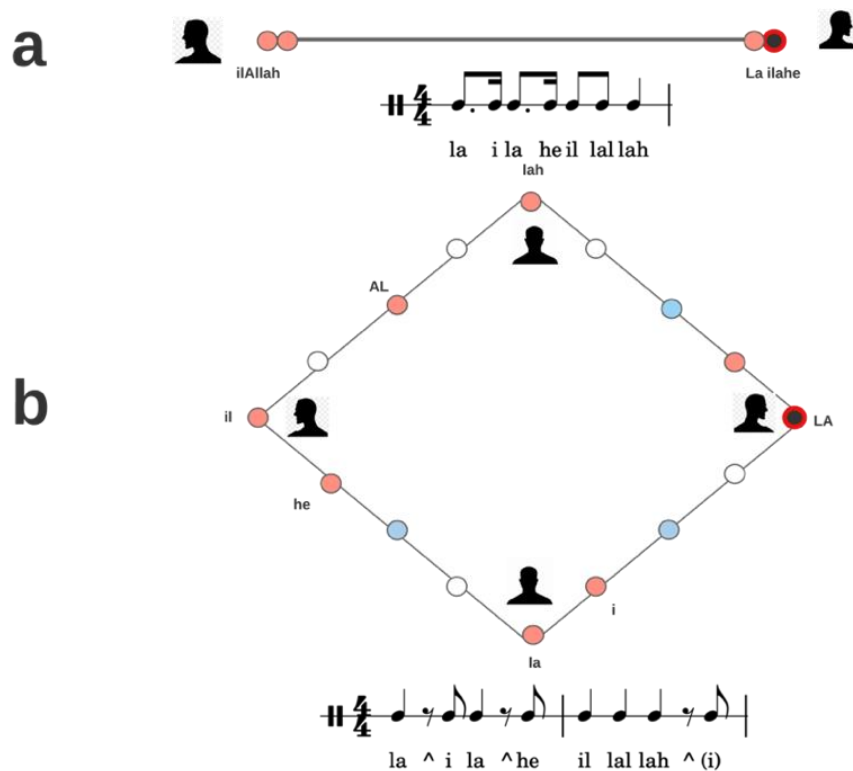

Figure 3. Description of the first chant

As the solo singing ends, the *şeyh* performs a prostration by hitting his hands to the ground and stands up (*kıyam*) while participants start to sing (*cumhur ilahisi*). This song is also followed with another *ilahi* (*kıyam durak*). Chanting the *esmâ* continues on *kıyam* with the second *esmâ*: *Hayyul Kayyum Allah*. The *şeyh* chants the *esmâ* two times and everybody joins in. After the *ney* improvisation, the *zâkirler* (musicians, singular: *zâkir*) start to sing again. The *zâkirbaşı* takes the *bendir* (frame drum) from the *şeyh* and hands it to the player ceremonially. In the rest of the ritual, every ostinato connects to the next one until the end. Figure 4 shows consecutive ostinatos from *kıyam; Hayyul Kayyum Allah, Hayy,* and *Allah Allah Hay.* This time inner squares are added to show the drum rhythm. Comparing the first ostinato to the second, we can say that adding an eight-note to the last beat on the drum increases the intensity and makes the ostinato even more symmetrical. The first ostinato as having two movements divided between upper and lower parts of the square changes to four parts in the second ostinato. Slight rhythmic changes and added breath points drive the tempo and intensity. When the *Hay* (chant) reaches its fastest tempo, orange dots merge with the heartbeat in the subject's experience. After this paramount experience, the fourth *esmâ* works as a cooling-down phase with the contribution of its *düyek* [12122] feel. But this *düyek* rhythm is provided by the songs, not the chant itself.
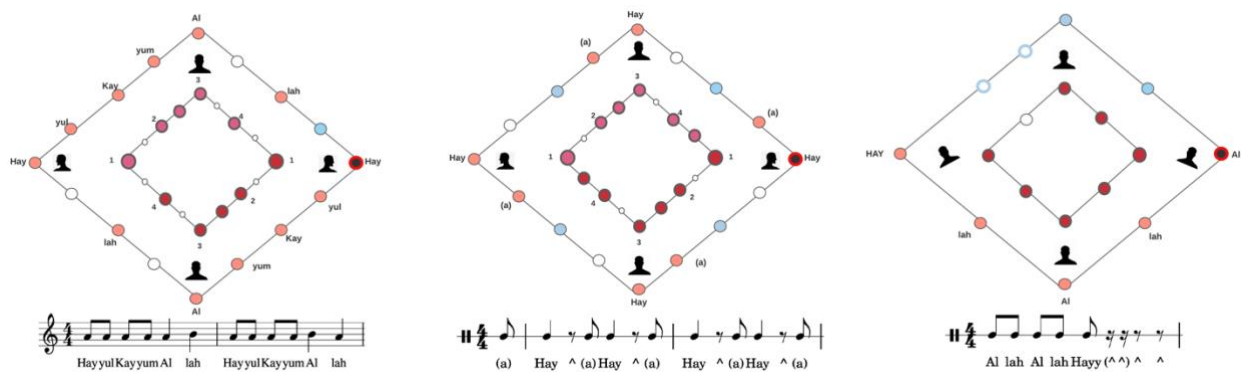

Figure 4. Second, third and fourth chants

While the intensity increases, ostinato structures simplify. The last two ostinatos are shown below in figure 5. The first one, *Allah* (*ism-i celâl*) has two gestures and syllables in two beats. It starts by hitting the first syllable to the left (heart) on the first beat and turning to the right (or middle) on the last beat while inhaling on the last quaver. This ostinato can be as fast as 160 bpm. It ends abruptly and follows with three long *Hu*

accompanied with bowing. After these three initial *Hu* tempo anchors at 60 bpm. This ostinato (*Hu*) divides syllable and breath equally as shown in figure 5. After it reaches the fastest point (160 bpm) as the previous one, a long *Hu* finishes the chanting. Silence. Everyone sits down and a *zâkir* recites the Verse of Light (24/35) from the Quran.[1]
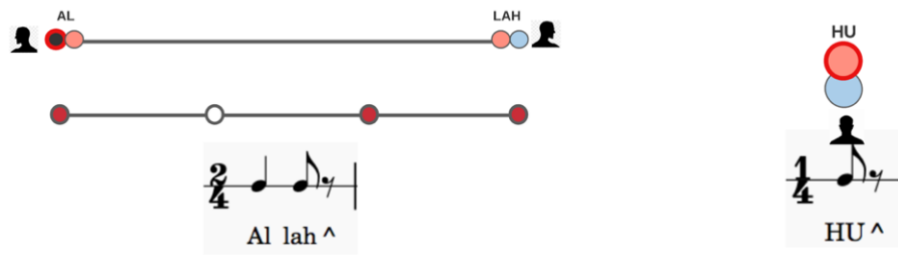

Figure 5. Fifth and sixth chants

Music and Musicians

The *zikir* precedes music and provides ground for its performance. While consecutive *esmâ* are being chanted, musicians provide musical performances. Although their numbers vary, there are usually five to ten musicians. The musicians' role in the ritual encompasses several different tasks. During the chanting, the *zâkirler* perform songs and improvised melodic recitations. They also perform instruments. These instruments, *ney* (reed flute), *bendir* (frame drum), and *halile* (cymbals) are not used during the month of Muharram to respect the martyrs of Karbala.

The *Zâkirbaşı* is responsible for choosing the right piece for particular situations. *Makam* (melodic mode), *usul* (rhythmic mode), textual content and the author or the composer of the piece are factors that he should consider. The *şeyh* may also make suggestions for each new song (*ilahi*). The virtuosity of the *zâkirbaşı* depends on his knowledge of repertory and various ritual forms as well as musical skills (Murat Şahin, personal communication, 5 March 2021). When considered from this point of view, improvisation precedes performance. So much so that choosing songs within the process can be seen as a higher-order improvisation. The *zâkirbaşı* (and the *şeyh*) observes the processual

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[1] The audio recording and visual diagram of the ritual can be accessed at: https://youtu.be/RLRtVUmNBck.

energy of ritual and provides content for it. This, in turn, contributes to the formative ritual energy.

The *şeyh* conducts the ostinatos in terms of tempo and intensity. Firstly, the *ney* improvisation (*taksim*) starts on the drone of the ostinato. This stabilizes the tonic and serves as a preparation for singing. However, since the listening activity is always from the point of the ostinato, which generates a buzzing sensation, the *ney* improvisation enriches this meditative effect. After the improvisation introduces the *makam* and lands on its tonic, the *zâkirler* start to sing an *ilahi*. During the singing, the *ney* player may accompany the *ilahi* or provide a drone.

Song types in Sufi rituals and ceremonies vary. *İlahi* and *kaside* are two main forms of singing. Besides being musical forms, they are also poetic forms (Uzun, 2000). In the *Kadirî* ritual most *İlahi*s are composed of several quatrains. Each one repeats the same rhyme throughout the poem. These Turkish poems are measured in syllabic metre. Musically they are composed in A-B form. The first half of the quatrain corresponds to the tonic melody and the second corresponds to the dominant (figure 6). Usually, vocatives such as *illallah* or *Hu* are added at the end of the melodies to fill them up, as seen in the example.

Cemi enbiyâlardan Muhammed cümlenin şâhı
Yüzü nûrundan almışlar felekler şems ile mâhı

Bu **Eşrefoğlu Rûmî**'nin günâhı çok dürür gâyet
Şefâ'at kıl yâ Muhammed yüzün şems ü kamer mâhı

Figure 6. *Hüseynî ilahi*; *Cemî' enbiyalardan…* (Author's transcription)

These songs are performed over *zikir* ostinatos. Melodically, they are consonant with the drone that is provided by the chanting. Consisting of crotchets and quavers, the melodies usually emphasize the beats. This demands clear enunciation and makes it easy to sing

collectively. With minimal ornamentation, this singing is loud and exciting for singers and listeners.

The rhythmical structures of songs and chants interlock. Notation in figure 7 shows the first line of the *ilahi*. This line, by spanning over four bars, is completed in two ostinato cycles. The structure produces a sensation that is exciting for both dervishes and musicians.

Figure 7. Song-ostinato relation on the first chant

The *Kaside* is another poetic form and its improvised musical recitation (Özkan, 2001). It is performed right after *ilahi,* following its melodic mode*. Kaside* performance is very similar to *taksim* in the Turkish *makam* music tradition. Therefore, the *ney* player may provide drones and improvisations in between the lines of *kaside*. While *ilahi* is performed in a low male vocal range, *kaside* is performed often in the high register. The *kasidehan* improvises the text and incrementally reaches the highest note possible. Textual contents usually emphasize longing for the Prophet Muhammed and praise his virtues. This odic feature affects the very performance of the poem and may lead to mild exaltations among participants. For this reason, *kasidehan* pays attention to textual content and tries to convey its emotional aspects. Also proceeding to the next *esmâ* occurs during the *kaside*.

Having opposing qualities such as solo/group performance, low/high register and composed/improvised melodies, *ilahi* and *kaside* contrast very well, and therefore drive the overall ritual performance. As shown in figure 8, this succession of *taksim*, *ilahi* and *kaside* over the *esmâ* ostinato establishes the overall musical strategy. This structure contrasts *derviş* and *zâkir* and their concurrence generates an *ostinato polyphony*.
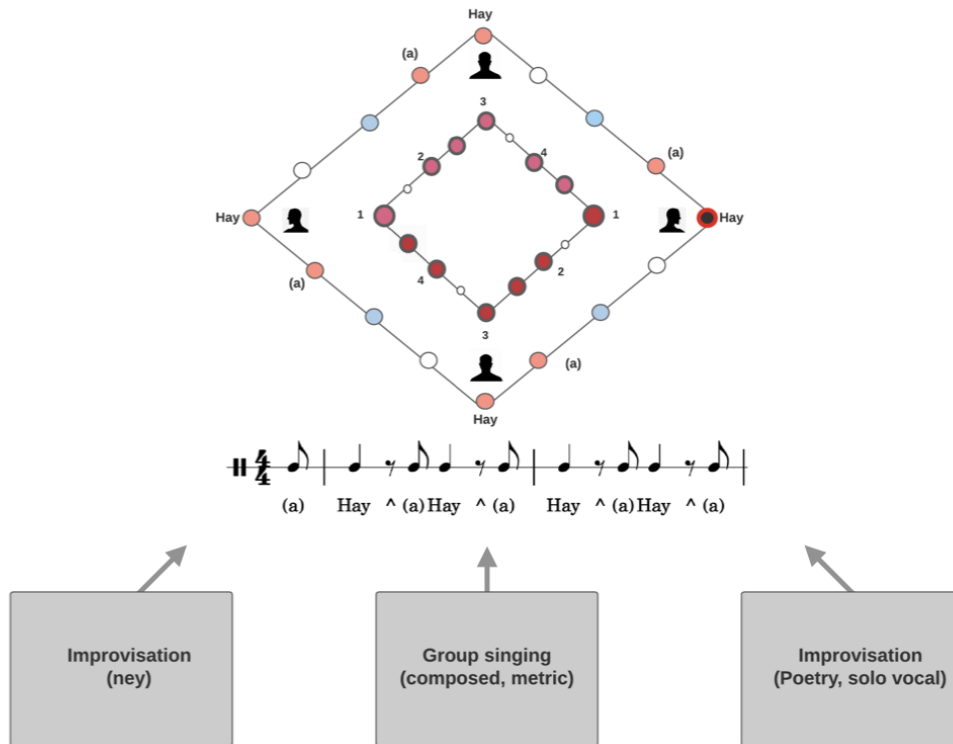
Figure 8. Model for the musical procedure

Conclusion: The Sense of Ritual

Apart from many of their common features, music and ritual have the power to affect participants through temporal processes. The sense of ritual is revealed through the ritual's formality and affectivity. As I tried to illustrate throughout the article, ritual form and its contents are organized by and through music. Even the ritual subject is constructed with the musicality of the chants. The polyphonic relationship between *zikir* and music, in other words the chanting of the ostinato and the succession of *taksim*, *ilahi* and *kaside*, should be seen as concentric rather than parallel. Recognition of this concentric development characterizes the ritual process from the subjective point of view of the participant. The structures of these chants and their transformation symbolize the physical and emotional transformations of the subject.

Two parallel lines, chanting and singing, complement each other musically. While the participants follow the trajectory of the *esmâ* through successive, interconnected chant-ostinatos, the *ilahi* and *kaside* both emotionally affect them and provide additional themes and concepts to contemplate. On the other hand, the chant-ostinatos provide

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rhythmic and tonic ground for the performances of the *zâkir*s. The harmony among the chanters, and also between the chanters and singers symbolizes the *tevhid* (unity).

According to Rappaport, participation and performance (1974: 8, 1999: 37) together with formality (1999: 33) and invariance (1999: 36) are indispensable for any ritual. Considering ritual as a general human activity, he stated that rituals primarily communicate through their formal features, rather than their symbolic and expressive features (Rappaport, 1979: 174-78 as cited in Bell, 2009: 72). The processual form of the *âyin*, even as a mere form, limits and shapes the individual. At the same time it creates spaces of freedom and allows one to focus one's own work since it is also a meditation. In ritual, both the form itself and the gestures that initiate or close sections highlight the concept of propriety (*edep*). This emphasis on decency also manifests itself as politeness and courtesy. Both in ritual and in everyday life this manifestation of decency gives way to self-awareness. In this way, various aspects of beauty (gestures, arts, etc.) are both produced and perceived. Thus, decency and beauty, namely ethics and aesthetics, are embodied in the ritual.

In Sufi dhikr ritual, participation is not a passive activity. The ritual subject is constructed through chants and music; from inside and outside. These two components always complete each other and provide the necessary transformative force. The transformative quality of the processual form with its goal-oriented progress is coherent with the explicit purpose of the *tasavvuf* as a 'way to God'. This 'way' materializes itself beginning from rules and manners (*âdab*) to multi-sensory congruence generated with chants and communal unity (*vahdet*). Each component in ritual is aestheticized (*lütuf*, *güzellik*) through gestures, words, sounds and shapes. In other words, the "way" that is paved with beauty, starts with decency and moderation, and ends with unity.

This public ritual summarizes the *tasavvuf* practices by presenting it as an ethic and aesthetic way of life. This presentation highlights music as a component of it and uses it as a perfect way to show affection for God (*muhabbetullah*), acknowledging that the human is the reflection of God. The reciprocity of *zikir* (*Fezkuruni ezkurkum*— So remember me, and I shall remember you [Bakara 2/152]) and the processual form situate the *âyin* as the *axis mundi*, a point where two entities meet; God and Human, divine and mundane.

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