

# American Dervish

Making Mevlevism in the United States of America

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## ABSTRACT

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In the late 1970s, the Turkish Mevlevi Sufi sheikh Süleyman Dede arrived from Konya, Turkey, in the United States. There he initiated a number of individuals primarily belonging to American esoteric groups as sheikhs in the Mevlevi order, known in Euro-America as *the whirling dervishes*. Some years later he sent his son the Postneshin Jelaluddin Loras to the United States, where he founded the Mevlevi Order of America (MOA) in 1981. The MOA has since then developed in a confluence between Ottoman-Turkish Islamic traditions and American esoteric currents and is today one voice in an ongoing transnational debate on how Mevlevi Sufism is to be understood and represented.

The thesis is the result of fieldwork carried out among MOA circles in the United States and Europe in between 2008 and 2010 and focuses on the use of narratives, documents, garments and rituals in informant's Mevlevi-making. Primarily, the study set out to examine how members of the MOA practice and authorize what they define as being Mevlevi Sufism in relation to (1) conceptualizations of tradition and authenticity, (2) questions regarding the legitimacy of leaders, (3) female participation and (4) members' religious affiliations.

A reoccurring theme throughout the study is simultaneity and inter-play between what is sometimes understood as incoherent or conflicting modes, such as continuity and change or alignment and autonomy. Such inter-play is analyzed as a fusion of what is presented as *deferential* and *inferential* approaches to tradition. Rather than an either-or attitude to such seemingly conflicting modes – where authoritative traditions are either made objects of submission or rejection – the approach of the individuals focused in the study is characterized by such simultaneity and inter-play.

Keywords: Sufism, Mevlevi Sufism, Western Esotericism, Women and Religion, Rumi, Ritual, Materiality, Performance