

# Shamanic Traditions

## ORUÇ GÜVENÇ AND THE HEALING POWER OF MUSIC

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**F**or millennia music has been used throughout Turkey and Central Asia to promote healing and well-being in practices that have their origins in traditional shamanistic techniques and Sufi ritual. There is currently a revival of this healing and restorative use of spiritual music in modern medical treatments and psychotherapy. One of the preeminent teachers of the therapeutic use of traditional Asian music in the present day, Dr. Rahmi Oruç Güvenç, has devoted his life to the practice of Sufism and to the preservation and teaching of Turkish and Central Asian music and its use in healing ailments and promoting health. Güvenç was taught by eminent masters who were both practitioners of Islamic Sufism as well as accomplished musicians and poets. His music is a goldmine of beauty and inspired creativity, rooted in the deep wisdom of Sufism.

*and Sufism*



Oruç Güvenç was born in 1948 in Central Anatolia. His family emigrated from Central Asia to Turkey in the early 19th century. At home he often heard his mother singing old songs from their home country. His brothers and uncles played Central Asian instruments. At the age of 12 he had an empowering dream: a big black-coated man gave him a violin and asked him to play. “But I cannot play,” answered Oruç. “Yes, you can. Try!” replied the man. And indeed, when Oruç took the instrument in his hands, he started to play. He was fascinated by the sound and woke up with a feeling of pleasure and joy. Immediately, he told this dream to his father, who purchased a violin the very same day so that his son might realize the dream.

About the same time Güvenç met his first Sufi master. During the years that followed he would meet other Sufi masters, continue to study the violin and learn to play various traditional Asian instruments. He completed his studies in Philosophy and Psychology at Istanbul University, where he wrote a thesis about Rumi and earned a Doctorate in Ancient Oriental Music. In 1976 he founded the international music group Tümata (from the Turkish, *Türk Müziği Araştırma ve Tanıtma Grubu*, or “Turkish Music in Research and Presentation”). Today Güvenç travels in Central Asia, Europe and the US to present his work at international conferences and in concert. He also passes on his knowledge of Sufism and the healing potential of music in seminars and courses. The springboard for all his work is Sufism—and the understanding that behind the ocean of life is a power that creates and moves it.

#### SUFISM AND SHAMANISM IN CENTRAL ASIA

Sufism is usually regarded as the mystic path within Islam. However, some Sufi masters say Sufism is much older than Islam, though in its present form it was nurtured in Islam. After the Prophet Muhammad’s death, Islamic Sufism spread widely from Arabia to Central Asia, where it encountered ancient traditions of spiritual practice in existing local cultures. A particularly lively exchange took place between the new mystical form of Islam and the ancient practices of Central-Asian shamanism in the Turkic regions of Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan, and as far as Uighur China. The mystical path of Islam absorbed shamanic elements and shamans integrated numerous elements of Sufism. Güvenç travelled to many of these regions where the two traditions have nurtured one another. He immersed himself in methods of employing music in spiritual practice, as well as in the healing of physical and emotional ailments.

In Central Asia shamans are generally called *kam* or *bakşı* (pronounced “baksey” and reflected in the Turkish word *bakmak*, which means “looking into other worlds”). Shamans have been “looking into” the spiritual worlds for tens of thousands of years. Their work did not evolve out of philosophic, intellectual or theological speculation, but rather from direct encounters with invisible realities and their experience of the spiritual and physical cosmos. This knowledge is both mysti-

cal and practical—especially in the context of healing.

Shamanism is often regarded as the earliest system for the therapeutic treatment of illness. Tens of thousands of years ago in the Paleolithic and Neolithic Periods, the arts of healing were documented in rock-paintings and closely studied over the course of the last century. These ancient practices were primarily handed down orally, passed down in a direct line from the ancient teachers. The souls of these ancestors are not forgotten even today, and shamans tell us they are in contact with them. In fact all of nature is seen as animated with spirit with which we can communicate. Thus, if we listen we gain deep wisdom. This notion of the interpenetration of spirit in all things lives on in Sufism and other spiritual traditions that have developed and been preserved over time.

#### THE USE OF SUFISM AND SHAMANISM IN HEALING

This brings us to how Oruç Güvenç has emphasized Sufism and shamanism in his work with Tümata. He uses music and movement to create experience that bypasses the intellect and works on the whole organism. Oruç is not the first Sufi teacher to have focused his energies in this way. Hoça Ahmet Yesevi (1103-1167) from Turkistan was one of the most important masters in the early centuries of post-Islamic Sufism. It is believed that he was one of the first Sufis to thoroughly familiarize himself with Shamanic methods. The earliest assertions that Sufism and shamanism are in harmony are ascribed to him. His openness to exploring various spiritual practices was part of an effort to allow practitioners to unite with the roots of their own spiritual communities. Because he knew the hidden secrets and powers of divine love, he succeeded in salvaging the values and practices of the ancient cultures and integrating them with the principles and practices of Islam.

What drew Yesevi and Sufi masters to shamanistic practices was the understanding that over many centuries the *bakşı* had discovered skillful means to resolve personal and social chaos, crises and difficulties. Sufi masters saw how shamans in their healing work experience the sickness and diseases of ailing persons in their own (i.e., the shamans’) bodies, to gain experiential understanding of the problems with which they were confronted. This enabled them to locate the proper healing forces from the other world and to bring them to the patients’ world. To undertake these tasks, the *bakşı* had to become not just a healer but an artist, musician, poet, dancer, painter—trained through the observation and imitation of processes in plants, animals, the mineral world and sounds created by nature. The opening for shamanic travelling to cross into other realities could come through any of these routes. Rhythm, music, sounds, chants, movements and dreams, being deeply connected with the subconscious, play important roles in healing processes. Here we find a connection with the earliest Sufi practices. Many Sufis, of course, have been poets, musicians, composers and singers, and some have used movement and dance as part of their spiritual practice. And in many Sufi orders disciples are encouraged to tell their guide about certain dreams, with the



#### ORUÇ GÜVENÇ MUSIC HEALING SESSION

understanding that the guide may thereby better understand the states of the disciple and “treat” the disharmonies that may be blocking progress on the path.

Though the exterior rituals of shamanism and Sufism are similar and have influenced one another, there are some distinct differences. The former emphasizes the spirit forces of the cosmos and nature, the latter focuses on the divine source in all aspects of the universe. However, for both traditions music and dance are among the “skillful means” through which the soul can fully unfold, and the doors to one’s intuition can open. With music and dance we pulsate with all of existence, spinning and vibrating. The heart—our center—wakes up through music and dance, which may arouse our love and compassion for ourselves, our fellow human beings and the whole of existence. In the words of one *hadith* (a saying attributed to the Prophet of Islam): “From birth to death there is music.”

#### ANCIENT ORIENTAL MUSIC (AOM): AN ARRAY OF INSTRUMENTS

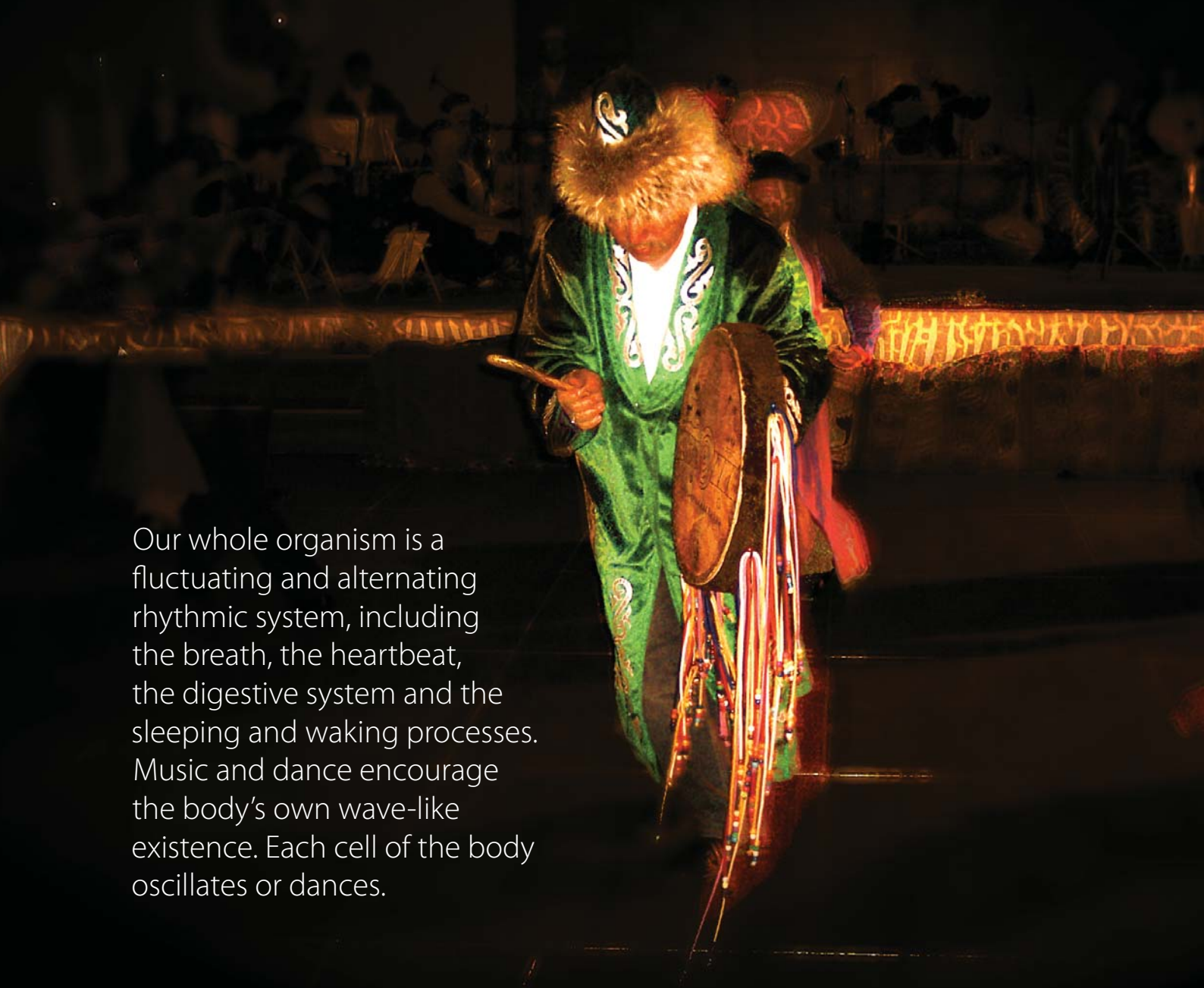
Several decades ago Güvenç gathered musicians to work with contemplative and healing music forms. As Tümeta, they combine shamanic and Sufi musical practices to study and implement the uses of these musical and dance traditions in therapy they call AOM (Ancient Oriental Music and Movement Therapy.) This work uses elements of Central Asian folk music, music and dances of the Sufi traditions, shamanic music and dances, and *makams* (various modes or tonal systems in classical Turkish music). Pentatonic scales, rhythm, move-

ments, dances and trance are part of this work, enhanced by visualization, meditation, *dhikr* and *sama* (in Turkish, *sema*).

The instruments themselves have special significance in Ancient Oriental Music and Movement Therapy, as well as in Sufism. Each one is a vehicle carrying symbolic value, and each creates a sound that brings about a unique effect. In a small Istanbul museum Tümeta has collected more than 300 traditional instruments from Turkey and Central Asia, many of them having been used in ancient times in therapeutic situations: the *oud*, *dutar*, *tar*, *kudüm* (shamanic drums), *kanun*, *baglama saz*, *dombra*, *ney* (reed flute), *kılkopuz*, *kopuz*, *rebab*, *çeng* (a small harp), *gubuz*, animal horns, shells, and drums and other rhythmic instruments.

The *ney* plays a major role in traditional therapy as well as in the spiritual practice of many Sufis. The story of ‘Ali and the reeds of the well illustrates the importance of the *ney* to Sufis, who are sometimes referred to as “people of the secret.” In that tale ‘Ali, the son-in-law of Prophet Muhammad, asked the Prophet to tell him a secret. In the end the absolute commitment to keep the secret proved too heavy for ‘Ali, so when he came upon a dry well he spoke the secret down into the well. Later it rained and the well filled with reeds. A shepherd passed by with his sheep and cut himself a reed to make a flute. He played it so well that the Prophet of Islam heard about him and invited him to visit. When he heard the sound, he immediately recognized the secret that ‘Ali had told to the well. Thus, the *ney* imparts the secret to practitioners of the meditation of “listening.”

Another venerated story shows the close relation between



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the sacred and healing. When Allah created the human being, the soul was afraid to enter the vessel of the sacred human body. It loved eternity and infinity, so it hesitated. The angel Gabriel observed this and went to paradise. From there he came back with a *koşa ney*, or “double flute.” As Gabriel played the instrument the soul gained confidence and courage and finally entered the body where it was held and could now unfold its fullest beauty. Being fully present and aware and at ease in one's body is a state conducive to healing. Thus, one might consider the angel Gabriel to be the first music therapist!

#### THE EFFECTS OF AOM ON THE BODY

Both music and dance came into being out of the essential human need to contact both the manifest and hidden worlds. When we listen to music we are not only hearing with our ears. The vibrations are entering into our body right down to a cellular level, and our cells react to these frequencies. Our body actually resonates with the tiniest vibrations, as has now

been observed in microbiological research, giving Güvenç's work with ancient music increasing credibility among the scientific community, and expanding its application among western therapists.

Our whole organism is a fluctuating and alternating rhythmic system, including the breath, the heartbeat, the digestive system and the sleeping and waking processes. Music and dance encourage the body's own wave-like existence. Each cell of the body oscillates or dances. Today with the assistance of modern technology, we can make the vibration audible. One may view the body, soul and spirit—made up of vibrations—as musical creations. The body is made up of lower frequencies, spirit and soul by higher, very fine ones. Life itself can be seen as a living rhythmic system. When the pulsations and vibrations in us cease to be attuned, they can be brought back into balance through music and dance.

When AOM is employed in therapeutic sessions, one can distinguish between active and receptive processes. In the “active” form of AOM, the client is invited to move in

prescribed forms based on one or more shamanic dances, movements from the Sufi tradition and traditional Central Asian dances, as well as improvisations, or free movement. In “receptive AOM” the client lies down, closing his or her eyes, and listens to music played in specific rhythms and modes (“makam music”) that send the client into a deep relaxed state, open up the subconscious and activate the imagination. Sometimes specific instruments are indicated. For example, Güvenç may play the shamanistic *çeng* or small harp, a lost instrument reconstructed from pictures and descriptions, which according to record was of specific value in alleviating pain and anxiety for the dying.

#### THE HISTORICAL ADOPTION OF “MAKAM MUSIC” BY SUFIS AND HEALERS

Makam music practice—in which a specific *makam* or musical form is chosen to be played with specific instruments selected according to a patient’s needs—developed thousands of years ago, in the region of Kandahar, in today’s Afghanistan, before arriving in Central Asia. Later *hakims*, persons trained in both the sciences and medicine and often in spiritual practice, expanded the use of musical treatment. Among the best known were Avicenna (Ibn Sina 980-1037) and Al-Farabi (870-950). Al-Farabi once said:

The body is sick when the soul is weakened. And it is disturbed when the soul is disturbed. Healing of the body happens through healing of the soul, by restoring its inner strength with true music and sounds, which are appropriate to achieve it.

Music was considered to be of immense value in ancient oriental medicine. The practice of playing at a sick person’s bedside is based on the certainty that music has the ability to restore lost harmony in a physical and emotional way. The *hakims* prescribed the proper *makam* or musical mode according to classifications assigned to the inner organs, various emotions, astrological signs, the five elements, the patient’s gender, “humor” or other character traits, as well as the optimal time for the therapy to be effective. The desired impact of a *makam* was brought to fruition by the specific effects of different instruments and the manner in which the chosen instrument was played. The following account illustrates the specific influence of a certain *makam* and choice of instrument:

One day, Al-Farabi was invited to the Sultan’s palace to perform a concert. On his shoulder he carried a big bag. On the evening of the concert, he opened the bag and took out several parts, out of which he built an instrument and began to play. The entire audience fell into a state of sadness and started to cry. Then he rearranged the components into a new form of instrument. When he started playing again, everybody listening began to laugh out loud. Again he changed the parts and began to play. All those present fell asleep, including the Sultan. Then Al-Farabi left.

As medicine made great advances in the Islamic world,

facilities dedicated to healing or health were established. The first *sifahane* or health house was built 1154 in Damascus, where music therapy was included in the standard treatments. In most cases, the *sifahane* was part of a bigger complex that contained a mosque, a university, a medical school for training doctors, a pharmacy, a kitchen, a laundry, a guest house and sometimes an orphanage, as well as a *hamam* (bath house). The model for these health houses was derived from the old Greek-Anatolian Asclepiad healing cult over 2000 years ago. In Bergama, Turkey, notes were found from the great Roman physician Galen (129-216), who recommended that music, dance, crafts, theatre and physical work be included in therapy.

The work of Güvenç has contributed to the partial restoration of this concept in modern health facilities. Recently researched programs in Germany, Austria, the United States and Turkey have shown the power and positive healing effects of makam music. Patients include people suffering from cancer, coma, certain chronic diseases, shoulder fractures, and in the case of children, autism and hyperactivity. For certain children’s conditions, for example, the pentatonic mode or *makam* might be used—the somewhat sweet and light five-tone scale typical of the far east, rather than the well-known wistful and mysterious pentatonic scale of the Indian subcontinent. In other settings, the *rast* mode is used for problems with the head and eyes, and also helps with paralysis; the *hüseyni* mode is generally used for internal organs, the stomach, liver and heart, and aids with systems suffering from malaria; the *zirefkend* mode is used for severe abdominal pain, as well as pain of the back and muscles; the *buzurk* mode works well with anxiety or fear. There are many other applications, which can involve complex combinations of instruments.

#### THE USE OF WATER IN ORIENTAL MUSIC THERAPY

Water plays an important role in Islamic medicine. Usually in the centre of the *sifahane* there would be a fountain providing a constant flow of water. According to Güvenç’s teaching, water is a sensitive medium to which people are very susceptible—as water is the source of our physical life. Vibrations make water move. Our bodies contain various liquids, and musical wave patterns cause these liquids to form new structures in our bodies. Further, depending on harmonic or disharmonic sounds, music induces positive or negative stimuli into our bodies and emotions. In Kazakhstan, in the centre of the large mausoleum dedicated to Hoça Ahmet Yesevi, stands an enormous copper kettle. Koranic verses about health are engraved on the outside, and after ceremonies the water is handed to sick people in the belief that sacred words have a positive effect on the water. When we listen to the gentle rippling and splashing of a creek, our attention is drawn to this sound and a sense of peace and reassurance spreads through our minds and our very being. The sound of water coursing on its path can awaken a sense of searching and the need to find one’s way in existence. For



of all these reasons water is often used as sound in AOM as an effective therapeutic aid.

#### MEDITATION AND TRANCE AS HEALING “TECHNOLOGIES”

For Güvenç and the *hakims* who came before him, the goal of AOM practice is to enable an uninhibited flow of thoughts and to calm the mind. When this happens the laws of constricted linear logic lose their power, and entirely different functions and qualities start to come alive. In such deep states of relaxation, clients come in touch with their essence. Getting to that essence or true Self by way of music is central to the method Güvenç is attempting to resurrect. Led and guided by Güvenç, Tümeta’s annual gatherings for *sama* or *sema* have grown over the years, and now can last

from one to 61 days and nights! In this re-channeling of ancient Central Asian shamanic methods through mystic Islam, music and movement combine with the *dhikr* (repeated silently or chanted aloud) to wash away obsessions, negative emotions and distracting thoughts. The combined potential of body, mind and soul is awakened. These are not the sort of practices used at the bedside of the sick, though they can fulfil a similar function—to restore spiritual and physical equilibrium in much the same ways that shamans and the Sufis have used to help ailing individuals and to guide seekers.

#### SKILLFUL MEANS FOR THE PATH

When we look at the history of music and dance as sacred healing phenomena, we see the material and spiritual worlds embrace and interact with one another. Shamans, Sufi



masters, famous musicians, sages and saints have always integrated different dimensions of reality in working with the people of their communities. Mevlana Rumi said that all that we think and feel in the here and now and all our words and actions exist in the other world as well; a reality beyond our physical and empirical world.

We live between birth and death. Thus at times living can mean sickness, pain, poverty and dying. But to live also means joy, love, kindness and peace. Each life is a composition, built by destiny and self-created as well, integrating vivid moments of personal experience. Life involves living, learning and feeling every moment fully if possible. Profound, ancient rituals or ceremonies like those the shamans have known since Paleolithic times give expression to those special and meaningful moments. As the Sufis emphasize, practices are needed

to help purify oneself of negative habits such as greed and aggression. These practices, like all authentic spiritual paths, offer methods with a similar goal—the transformation of the human self so that one may manifest one’s fullest potential, including the virtues of compassion, patience, tolerance and wisdom, as well as inner harmony and health. The guide employs skillful methods to help us approach our experience; to enhance our health; to overcome dread, helplessness and pain; and to transform suffering by accessing positive energies. To bring us back to spirit. \*