

Sacred Movement in Islam's *Sa'ee* and *Sama*

By Emily Victoria Hanlon

The human being's uniqueness, when reflected upon, is as much the source of its profound beauty as it is the source of the deepest loneliness. To be a human being is to be fundamentally alienated, both from one another and from one's environment, but ritual, like the creative arts and the theophanies, is an attempt to communicate *through* the veils of solitude and corporeality, with the intent to reunite with the transcendent Divine. Ali Sharī'atī's philosophical treatise on *Hajj* (1992) will underpin this investigation of sacred movement in Islam. His description of the lesson that can be derived from Hagar's failed search for water distills the essence of the seeker's journey: that which we seek is just beyond the reach of our comprehension, just outside the bounds of language.

When Sharī'atī describes the climax of Hagar's story, coming back from a search empty-handed and yet, with mysterious success, "[f]inding water through love and not through search but only after searching,"¹ he comes close to articulating that liminal, inarticulable space between the religious impulse and the sacred to which it points. In this essay I illustrate the ways that two rituals involving embodied movement link the human being's physical form to the divine through remembrance. The first two sections of this exegesis explore the *sa'ee*, the portion of *Hajj* that symbolizes Hagar's search for water, and *sama*, the Sufi dervish's whirling ceremony, through an investigation of their origins and origin stories, and an analysis of their literal and symbolic meanings. In

¹ Ali Sharī'atī, *Hajj: Reflections on Its Rituals*, trans. Laleh Bakhtiar (Albuquerque : Chicago: Abjad, ; distributed by Kazi Publications, 1992).

the third section I explore some of the ways that these embodied, sacred strivings ‘work’² on the corporeal level, and articulate their metaphysical significance. I conclude by stressing that all forms of ritual practice are attempts at remembering the divine and to grasp the ineffable.

The Sa’ee: Hagar’s Search

We [undertake pilgrimages] to find what has been with us all along. We find the presence that has been with us, inside us, around us all along. But we have to go on the journey to find the treasure we have been sitting on. When we return, we are transformed, no longer who and what we had been before. Ultimately, pilgrimage is not to a place, but to a different state of being.³

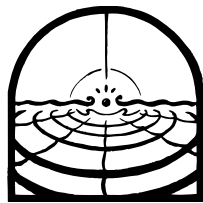


In this section I investigate *sa’ee*, the portion of *Hajj* that exemplifies the story of Hagar’s search for water, to save herself and her son Ishmael in the Saudi Arabian desert outside of Mecca. The *sa’ee* is performed after the second *tawaf*, seven circumambulations of the Kaa’ba, and consists of walking seven times across the desert between the Safa and Marwa hills. *Sa’ee* translates as ‘the effort.’ The fundamental story, woven into the Islamic pilgrimage, tells of a desperate search and struggle for survival.

² David Freedberg suggests that images ‘work’ because they are consecrated by people; but they also ‘work’ before they are consecrated because they have a signifying and significative function prior (98). As such, the relationship between the movement and the divine, which the movement signifies, consecrates the movement; David Freedberg, *The Power of Images: Studies in the History and Theory of Response* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989).

³ Omar Safi, “Forward,” in *Pilgrimage in Islam: Traditional and Modern Practices*, Foundations of Islam (London: Oneworld Publications, 2017).

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