

Dancing like a Mawlawi

Nevine El-Aref visits mediaeval Cairo's 17th-century Mawlawiya complex, newly opened following 10 years of restoration

Looking up at the awe inspiring Mawlawiya complex with its distinguished Ottoman architecture, and one cannot help wondering if restoring such a magnificent monument will bring back the Whirling Dervishes and their spellbinding performances in mediaeval Cairo? Perhaps it is not out of the question.

The Mawlawi complex with its museum, the monumental presence of the Sunqur Al-Saadi Madrasa (religious school), the Hassan Sadaqa Mausoleum and the Yeshbak Palace, is of great historical significance, not only because it witnessed the end of the Mawlawi Sect but also for its unique presence in Egypt as the only "Samaakhana", where the Mawlawi Dervishes performed their spectacular, trance-like rituals.

The museum is in a very popular area near the Citadel, between two narrow thoroughfares of Manah Al-Waqf Street and Al-Siyufiyah Street. This is where a sect of the Mawlawi order lived in Cairo from 1607 until 1945, and was one of the last built during the period of the Mawlawi confraternity. Its interior space and design are intimately linked with the cosmological symbolism represented by the *samaa* (listening) dance. As in other rare examples from this later period, the area assigned to the *samaa* function is circular. The circle according to the cosmological doctrines of the Islamic philosophers is the expressive synthesis of the cosmos. Over time the *samaa* dance has also been defined as a mystic-symbolical interpretation of the movements of the cosmos, according to the speculative elaboration of Mustafa Yaaqub Dede and Mehmed Celebi Al-Isma'il Rusuhi.

Who were these dervishes? When and why did they come to Egypt, and how did they come to practise their ritual performances in Al-Samaakhana?

The Mawlawi confraternity was founded in the 13th century in Konya, Turkey, based on the philosophy and teaching of the Persian Sufi poet Jalal Al-Din Al-Rumi, whose popular title Mawlana, or "our master", gave the order its name. The Mawlawi gained a special vitality along with the Ottoman expansion, spreading all over the Islamic world, with many centres connected with the mother establishment in Konya. In 1925 the Mawlawi order moved to Aleppo in Syria, then to Damascus, and in 1929 the order came to Cairo and settled in the area at the foot of the Citadel. The word *samaa* denotes the Sufi practice of listening to music and chanting to draw closer to God. The Mawlawi dervishes combined *samaa* with dancing.

The Samaakhana, which forms part of the Mawlawi complex, has been restored and reopened through the combined efforts of professor of architecture Guiseppe Fanfoni and the Italian-Egyptian Centre for Professional Training in the Field of Restoration and Archaeology. The Prince Sunqur Al-Saadi Madrasa is another part of the complex. Al-Saadi lived during the reign of Sultan Al-Nasir Mohamed Ibn Qala'un, a period of particular wealth for Egypt, and is known to have built



[Click to view caption](#)

A Mawlawi performance
(click fot more photos)

several monumental buildings. However he considered the construction of this madrasa outside Cairo's city walls as the most important architectural work of his life.

The magnificence of his palace presents architectural aspects similar to those of the Bashtak Palace in mediaeval Cairo, and is considered to be one of the most impressive Mamluk buildings in Cairo, even if it is reduced to ruins today.

Despite its huge walls, the palace is somewhat hidden by the buildings that surround it. Its great façade is revealed as one enters through the courtyard of the complex. It is understood that this palace was built in several stages. In 1476, Yashbak enlarged the palace, adding a large and majestic monumental entrance with *mukkarnas*, beautiful sculpted decorations. After his death the property was passed to Aqbardi.

The Mawlawi architectural complex developed in the area between the remains of the Sunqur Al-Saadi Madrasa and the Yashbak Palace, with the builders using suitable pre-existing monuments and adapting them to a new function. The Mawlawis, inspired by the plan and architecture of the mother house in Konya, built a new wing on Al-Siyufiyah Street giving a direct entrance from the street to the complex.

The area of the *samaa* is circular and has a horizontal axis on which are aligned the *mihrab*, where the sheikh stood during the ceremony, the point of entry of the dervishes, and the mausoleum where the previous sheikh was buried. As they entered, the dervishes who had completed their religious apprenticeship occupied the right side, symbolising the inner world, while those who had not yet completed their apprenticeship occupied the left side, symbolising the outer world. After a musical introduction, the dervishes moved in an anticlockwise direction around the perimeter of the *samaa* area, and when passing before the sheikh they made a sign of reverence. Then, as if by some inspired impulse, they began to turn in two orbits with the palm of one hand turned upwards and the other turned downwards, indicating the axis which links the absolute unity to the reality of the analytical existence. Later they might sit, pray, and begin all over again. The ceremony always ended with a prayer and a procession.

The Dervish dance also happens to be the origin of another folkloric dance which is very common in Egypt, the *tanoura* dance. Although very similar to the Mawlawi dance, the *tanoura* does not share the same beliefs and religious rituals, as it is only considered an entertainment. Twisting and turning, the multi-coloured dress of the dervish creates the illusion of a human kaleidoscope. These dancers wear a more colourful outfit and are mostly seen during a *mulid*, a festival held in Islamic Cairo and in cultural events worldwide.

The layout of the Samaakhana was geometrically developed in such a way that when one traces concentrically a circle whose diameter is equal to the radius of the Samaakhana, one visualises one of the two orbits made by the dervishes during the ritual performance.

The museum inside the complex exhibits photographs of the Mawlawis, as well as some documents. Some showcases set up in this area exhibit archaeological findings of the remains of the madrasa. There are also two other showcases in the great *iwan* (vaulted room opening onto a covered court), one of which exhibits Rumi's book, the *Mensnevi*, donated to the Italian Centre by the Turkish Ministry of Culture during the ceremony held in the Samaakhana on 18 January 1998 to celebrate the completion of its restoration. The other shows a Mawlawi dress donated by the Istanbul Samaa Group during a *samaa* that took place on 30 June 1998.

Ali Taha, director of the fine arts restoration department in the Centre of Professional Training for Restoration (CPTR), told *Al-Ahram Weekly* that the Samaakhana was the last centre to remain active after the edict that closed the *tikkiya* (the dance hall) and the dissolution of the Dervishes' Turkish confraternities by Atatürk in 1925. In 1945, the Mawlawi group in Cairo was dissolved and the whole complex was abandoned. The building was occupied by an NGO and used as a

hospice and outpatients department, which led to its decay with various parts literally falling to pieces.

During the late 1970s Carla Bouri, the then head of the Italian Cultural Centre, expressed an interest in restoring the impressive complex and gave some attention to the site. In 1979, Fanfoni organised a Cantiere-Scuola (a training school) for the recovery of the Mawlawi architectural complex, which is still functioning. The CPTR was then founded to carry out training activities for technicians and craftsmen who in 1984 began the restoration of the Samaakhana in collaboration with the *La Sapienza* University in Rome and various Egyptian universities.

"The state of conservation of the complex was very poor," Taha said. He explained that it was suffering seriously from environmental danger including air pollution, a high subsoil water level, a high level of humidity, leakage from communal pipes in the street, rising damp in the walls of the mausoleum -- up to a level of eight metres -- while the interior stucco has a surface deformation of salt up to four centimetres thick. The interior wooden covering, including the *mihrab*, was in an advanced state of rot. Horizontal and vertical cracks have decorated most of the complex's walls, the support brackets of the border beams have been completely flattened, the floor of the gallery was bending and the drum of the dome had elliptical deformation while some of its decorative items were missing.

To rescue the complex, Fanfoni invented a solution through the reintegration of the walls, made whole with slabs of reinforced concrete incorporated into the thickness of the wall and placed in the gaps left by the rotten wood. Buttresses which had lost their foundation rested on it. After eliminating the salt encrustation, the walls were consolidated by injection of lime and filler with a composition similar to that of the original mortar. Against the rising damp a particular epoxy-resin was injected in holes passing through the whole thickness of walls just under the level of the Samaakhana's ground floor. Leaked water was pumped out and all the wooden beams were cleaned and restored.

To return the dome to its original round shape, Fanfoni made three rings on the outside, each consisting of six steel parts connected together with suitable braces and resting on the wooden ribs by means of special sliding devices. After impregnating the wood of the dome in order to recover some of its elasticity, work was carried out on the six braces of each ring, gradually tightening the reins of the dome by 20cm. This had the effect of raising the apex of the dome by 12cm.

The internal layers of the dome were firmly attached to the ribs by binding the wooden laths with bundles of wire mesh fixed in place with mortar similar to that of the original. The external texture of wooden laths was restored. The paintings were cleaned and restored to their original condition.

Zahi Hawass, secretary-general of the Supreme Council of Antiquities, said all the restoration had been carried out according to the latest and most scientific methods. "Every effort was made to ensure that all original architectural features were retained," he said.

The beautiful restoration of the Samaakhana has kept its spirit intact. It is still peaceful and serene, even though a building that loses its residents loses part of its spiritual core.

© Copyright Al-Ahram Weekly. All rights reserved