

art in the archives

An occasional newsletter about art in Special Collections at the Graduate Theological Union Library

EAT, DANCE AND PRAY WITH PEOPLE: PEACE PLANS, PILGRIMAGES, AND POSTER ART IN THE GTU'S SUFISM COLLECTION

The recorded lectures, music, photographs, and posters pertaining to the life and work Samuel L. Lewis (1896-1971), also known as Sufi Ahmad Murad (S.A.M.) Chishti, or Murshid Sam (*murshid* meaning “spiritual guide” in Arabic), were donated to GTU Library’s New Religious Movement Collection in 2000.

The materials are part of the collection of William “Will” Noffke (1929-1997), a Bay Area radio host who covered spiritual and political trends from the Seventies through the Nineties via Pacifica Radio programs *The Meeting of the Ways*, *New Dimensions*, and *New Horizons*. Noffke described his beliefs as Vedanta/Sufi/Taoist!-unity of existence!. He was on the Board of Directors of the Dancer's Workshop of San Francisco and belonged to the Melvana Foundation.



Sufi Sam-- Sufi Ahmad Murad, Murshid Sam, Samuel L. Lewis. From the Will Noffke Collection.

Forming a key component of 1960s San Francisco Bay Area counterculture history, Murshid Sam, a “spiritual leader of the hippies,”¹ founded the Dances of Universal Peace (DUP). It was this spiritual practice, along with the songs, music, and teachings tied to it, begun in the basement of his San Francisco home, that would turn into a familiar sight at many of the post-Summer of Love counterculture festivals.

Eventually, the practice became a worldwide phenomenon expanding from the New Age Movement into the wider worlds of spiritual care, health, and wellness professions. In this issue I explore the history of this spiritual leader and his legacy.

Part I: Sufism in San Francisco

In 1919, at the age of 23, Samuel L. Lewis definitively broke away from the business and banking orientation of his family (his mother was a Rothschild and his father a vice president at Levi Strauss jeans) and chose the spiritual path of Sufism. A year after his initiation into the Sufi Order of the West (or Inayati Order), founded by Indian mystic Inayat Khan (1882-1927), Lewis entered the

Rinzai Zen school of Mahayana Buddhism under the discipleship of Japanese monk Soyen Shaku (1860-1919). He did not cease developing spiritually even after receiving training from some of the earliest representatives of Sufism and Zen Buddhism to help introduce these two traditions to the United States.

Lewis made pilgrimages to India to master yoga, to Pakistan and Egypt to receive initiation into several Sufi brotherhoods, all the while seeking to deepen his understanding of Jewish and Christian scriptures and religious practice. Rabbi Zalman Schachter-Shalomi (1924-2014), founder of the Jewish Renewal movement, described Murshid Sam as having “drawn from Revelation life-giving elixirs to sustain us through the chaos we must pass in order to enter the New Age.”

While recovering from a heart attack in 1967, he received a call to “be a teacher to the hippies.” Murshid Sam developed what would initially be referred to as Sufi dancing for the flower children flooding into Haight-Ashbury during the late sixties and early seventies. They affectionately referred to him as “Sufi Sam” and the dancing practice came to be known as Dances of Universal Peace.

Inspired by what he had learned from pioneer of American modern dance, Ruth St. Denis (1879-1968), while incorporating elements of the Mevlevi meditative practice of Sufi “whirling,” Murshid Sam would guide an ever-enlarging circle of musicians and dancers, chanting sacred phrases in Arabic (“Ya Hayy, Ya Hakk”), Hebrew (“Ya-Huv-Weh”), and Sanskrit (“Ram Nam”), alongside the singing of English traditional folk ballads and Christian hymns (“What Wondrous Love”). The Sufi Choir was born.

When Murshid Sam passed away in 1971, leadership of the community now known as the Sufi Ruhaniat International was passed on to Pir Murshid Moineddin Jablonski (1942-2001) and Murshid Sheikh Wali Ali Meyer (1944-2022).

In an interview with Meyer, Murshid Sam’s core teachings were described as centered on the Sufi notion of the Greater Witnessing, “where your heart becomes the altar of God and what you bring to it becomes visioned in the world.”

Lewis told his disciples “God is making me an instrument of the new age through these dances.” The purpose was to work toward world peace by repeating the name of God.

At the time, many of the hippies that Lewis had brought into the Sufi fold were suffering from severe drug addiction. These sincere, but troubled, youth would be brought to the ranches and farmhouses of older Sufis, students of Murshid Sam from the three decades preceding the Summer of Love, where they were able to get clean and become rehabilitated through spirituality, music, and dance.

Meyer edited many of Murshid Sam’s books, notably his *Jerusalem Trilogy*, where in “bringing the seed from one culture into another,” a plan for peace in the Middle East and, through his travels to the USSR, between East and West, was outlined as follows: “Eat, Dance, and Pray with People” of other religions, races, nationalities, and lifestyles.

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or motion to enter your
intrinsic ecstasy.
Dance is a way, too, especially
the Sufi dance in-vented by
Sam Lewis to actualize ALLAH.
Pay attention to his gift.*

*Receive it. Practice it.
If the music is too strong or the
beat too loud, STOP. Begin again.
Do one dance well.
It takes only a word or motion
to enter your intrinsic ecstasy.
—Reps*


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Monday Night Sufi Meeting, California Hall in San Francisco, September 11, 1972; Whole Earth Festival, University of California, Davis, 1969; Shanti and the Sufi Choir at the House of Good in San Francisco, August 26-27, no year; and Sufi Choir, Comin' Down Soon, at the Veterans Auditorium in San Francisco, November 22, 1969. From the Noffke Collection.

Part II: Meetings of the Ways

“One of my unspoken commandments is ‘Thou shalt not starve’”² Lewis often said. “We only have one guest here at our dinner and that is God.”³ At first blush, this may sound unorthodox, and yet the sentiment is in conformity with the Hadith Qudsi (statements attributed to God through the wording of the prophet Muhammad), found in that most orthodox of Sunni collections of prophetic traditions, *Sahih Muslim*:

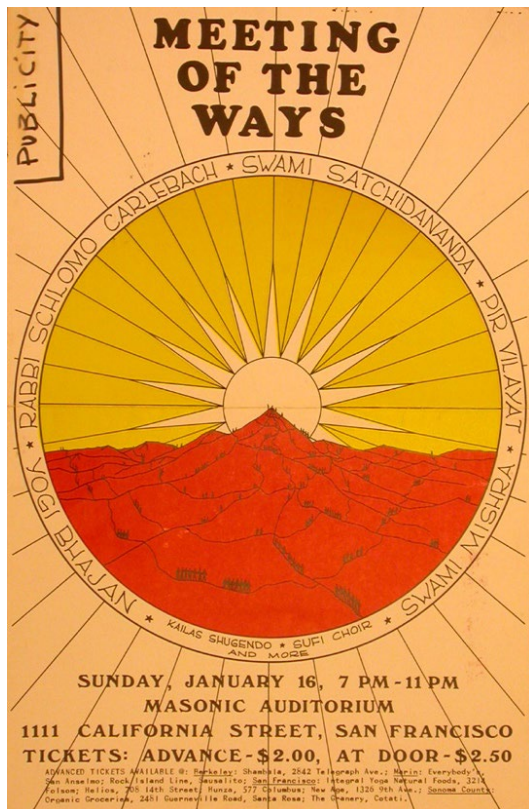
Allah (mighty and sublime be He) will say on the Day of Resurrection: O son of Adam, I fell ill and you visited Me not. He will say: O Lord, and how should I visit You when You are the Lord of the worlds? He will say: Did you not know that My servant So-and-so had fallen ill and you visited him not? Did you not know that had you visited him you would have found Me with him? O son of Adam, I asked you for food and you fed Me not. He will say: O Lord, and how should I feed You when You are the Lord of the worlds? He will say: Did you not know that My servant So-and-so asked you for food and you fed him not? Did you not know that had you fed him you would surely have found that (the reward for doing so) with Me? O son of Adam, I asked you to give Me to drink and you gave Me not to drink. He will say: O Lord, how should I give You to drink when You are the Lord of the worlds? He will say: My servant So-and-so asked you to give him to drink and you gave him not to drink. Had you given him to drink you would have surely found that with Me.

(<https://sunnah.com/qudsi40:18>)

“We cook for everyone as if they were representatives of God,” Murshid Sam stated with even greater clarity on another occasion, a statement that reminds one of the story of Abraham being visited by three angels who bring tidings of the birth of Isaac. “There are only two things we forbid here: cold feet and empty stomachs...” the Murshid told his followers that same evening, reiterating the point made in the hadith, “because I don’t care how many superiority complexes a person has, but if they have any inferiority complexes, we get rid of them.”⁴

The universalist spiritualism of these teachings also made their way into Murshid Sam’s political thought. This is most apparent not only in his interest in Middle East peace and his travels behind the Iron Curtain, but also in his reflections on social justice and the Vietnam War. “Peace doesn’t mean you give into me,” Lewis said in the wake of increased US bombings in Vietnam, while with respect to domestic policy, he said the following:

I wish to read something from Hazrat Ali, who was the son-in-law and nephew of Mohammed, and some say his successor. “Remember, the limited few of the upper class will never answer your call in the hour of need. They will endeavor not to follow the path of justice and equity but will demand more than their lawful share and will not be grateful for the good done to them. In adverse times they will be perturbed and worried but will not repent of their mistakes. It is only the common man who is the backbone of religion and the country. And he is the one who fights the enemies. Therefore, remain close to the public and keep their welfare always in mind.” (*Sunseed* Out-takes)



Meeting of the Ways event with Pir Vilayat and Sufi Choir held at the Masonic Auditorium in San Francisco in 1972. Pir Vilayat Inayat Khan was the oldest son of Samuel L. Lewis's teacher, Hazrat Inayat Khan. The two promoted Sufism in the West. Noffke organized a number of these events. For better images of the posters go [here](#).

and music worlds of that time and place, like Jerry Garcia (1942-1995), bandleader of the Grateful Dead, and poet Allen Ginsburg (1926-1997).

In addition to learning the traditional musical stylings of the South Asian subcontinent, Vilayat Khan had been a student of European classical art music masters like Nadia Boulanger (1887-1979), Igor Stravinsky (1882-1971) and Pablo Casals (1876-1973). All of these meetings of different ways, spiritual and musical, had their precedents, whether in the Mevlevi Sema ceremony or in the Chishti Order which Murshid Sam describes, in contradistinction to other Sufi orders like those of the Naqshbandis and Qadiris, "use music in spiritual training."⁷

With characteristic reverent irreverence, Murshid Sam commented on Hazrat Ali's quote above, "This must have been Mao-Tse Tung in some former life, but this was Hazrat Ali...If you're a good Muslim you don't have to follow this, but I'm a bad one; I follow it."⁵

From his "Fairy Godmother" Ruth St. Denis⁶ whom he also sometimes referred to as "Earth Mother," (*Sunseed* Out-takes) Murshid Samuel Lewis was inspired to incorporate forms of dance and walking as acts of spiritual concentration. From Inayat Khan, he learned to center musical performance in his spiritual instruction. Along with Pir Vilayat Khan (1916-2004), son and successor to Inayat Khan, Sufi-inspired spirituality in the form of song and dance saw an efflorescence in the United States starting in 1968.

This moment in time was covered in-depth in the 1973 documentary *Sunseed: The Journey*, directed by Amertat Cohn. The film shows both Murshid Sam and Vilayat Khan within the larger context of new religious movements inundating the Bay Area. This "Meeting of the Ways," as one poster advertisement in the collection describes it, included not only Sufi masters but also Hindu, Buddhist, and Sikh yoga gurus, as well as promoters of various forms of Christian and Jewish esotericism. The new religious movements and their leaders crossed paths with figures in the art



Shah Jahan (1592-1666), gouache on paper, 10 x 7 inches, by Shri Kailash Raj, 20th century. The Taj Mahal (here a model) was built in Agra, near Delhi, and made of white marble, by the Mughal emperor Shah Jahan in memory of his beloved wife Mumtaz Mahal; Silver rupee of Shehab-ud-din Muhammed Khurran, also known as Shah Jahan ("king of the world"), who ruled Hindustan from 1628-1658 at the height of the Mughal empire. Artifacts from the [Sacred World Art Collection](#).

Even the phrase “meeting of the ways” has its precedent, particularly in a work by Sufi philosopher Dara Shikoh (1615-1659), *The Confluence of the Two Seas*. Citing classical Sufi scholarship by al-Ghazali (d. 1111), Ibn Arabi (1165-1240), and Rumi (1207-1273), Dara Shikoh’s treatise outlines core teachings derived from Islamic and Vedantic schools of thought, highlighting their compatibility. He was also the eldest son of Shah Jahan (1592-1666), the Mughal ruler most well-known for his having commissioned the building of the Taj Mahal, a palatial mausoleum in Agra, northern India. Several pieces in the Sacred World Art Collection are linked to the Shah, including replicas of the Taj Mahal, a Mughal coin minted in his name, and a royal portrait.

After reading from a passage in one of the works of Inayat Khan, on the “long gallery of women who...shine like stars in the annals of the history of Islam on account of their intellectual accomplishments or spiritual attainment,” Murshid Sam had this to say of Shah Jahan, particularly of his dependence on Mumtaz Mahal (1593-1631), both chief consort of the Shah as well as his most trusted political advisor: “I want to point out that the Taj [Mahal] was built by a Muslim man for a Muslim woman. And that nobody has done anything like that.”⁸ That the Taj Mahal continues to be cited as one of the Great Wonders of the World, suggests Murshid Sam did not exaggerate.

Part III: The World Finds Peace...

The Sufi Choir continued from 1969 to 1982, directed by William Allaudin Mathieu. Mathieu had already had experience as an arranger for jazz greats Stan Kenton (1911-1979) and Duke Ellington (1899-1974), and had formal study in European concert music. Upon founding the Sufi Choir, his repertoire expanded to include Middle Eastern and North African music, under the tutelage of the Nubian master oudist Hamza El Din (1929-2006), as well as the North Indian classical tradition under Pandit Pran Nath (1918-1996).

Another institution co-founded by Murshid Samuel Lewis in 1968 that one would be remiss to ignore is that of the Holy Order of MANS, a monastic movement dedicated to the study and implementation of Christian traditions of esotericism. In 1970 the Murshid gave a series of ten lectures based on St. Paul’s First Epistle to the Corinthians, later published in book form. In 1988—two decades after its founding—the order was discontinued as several of its founding members embraced traditionalist Eastern Orthodox Christianity.

The burial site of Samuel Lewis is, since its dedication in August 2017, the Murshid Sam Dargah (*dargah* is the Persian word for a Sufi shrine) in Taos, New Mexico. It is open throughout the year for anyone who wishes to perform *ziyarat* (pilgrimage or pious visitation).

The Dances of Universal Peace has expanded throughout the world as part of the Sufi Ruhaniat International helmed by Pir Shabda Kahn, once the personal assistant to Murshid Sam and musical student of Pandit Pran Nath. The Sufi Ruhaniat International, rooted in the Chisti Order of mystical Sunni Islam, continues the independent, universalist, one might say pluri-versalist, approach of Inayati Sufism.

Those attending the Parliament of World’s Religions in Chicago last year may have witnessed the Dances of Universal Peace in one of their community gatherings. (To see one of the performances, follow this [link](#) .)

Emphasizing that the core message of Samuel L Lewis, and some spirit of the Sixties, lives on, their conference handout reads “When we eat, dance, and pray together the world finds peace...”

FOOTNOTES

Quotes are from interview transcripts from Lewis, Samuel L. William "Will" Noffke Papers, GTU 2001-8-01, and from Sufi Islamia Ruhaniat Society (Noffke). New Religious Movements Organizations: Vertical Files Collection GTU 99-8-1, The Graduate Theological Union Archives, Berkeley, CA.

1. Reel 9, Side 1, March 13, 1968, One Practice Fully Concentrated.
2. Reel 3, Side 2, 1967-68, New Year's Eve.
3. Reel 10, Side 2, p.11 [77], Communicating with God.
4. Reel 13, Side 2, p. 4 [72], April 21, 1968.
5. Reel 10, Side 2, p.74, date unknown, The Meaning of Initiation and Discipleship.
6. Reel 13, Side 1, p.6 [60], April 18, 1968.
7. Reel 10, side 2, p.12 [78], date unknown, On Paths of Initiation and Discipleship.
8. Reel 7, Side 2, p. 12 [79], March 3, 1968, Ramdas, Buddhism and Hazrat Inayat Khan—Passion.

FURTHER READING AND RESOURCES

The spirit of the Sixties lives on in GTU's New Religious Movement Collections. Highlights include the Will Noffke Papers (1953-1998) which contains many New Horizon Radio Tapes, including a long-form interview with Chet Helms (1942-2005), music promoter and father of 1967's Summer of Love. Helms was recently honored by the official Janis Joplin website and related social media outlets, managed by younger sister Laura Joplin, on what would have been Helms' 81st birthday.

Another recommendation to those readers for whom the politics of the time is of particular interest is a 1972 sermon by Robert McAfee Brown (1920-2001) titled "A Christmas Eve Sermon on the Christmas Bombing," which is available on the [Gaduate Theological Union Digital Library](#).

Apostolos-Cappadona, Diane and Doug Adams, *Dance as Religious Studies*. New York: Crossroad, 1990.

Kahn, Shabda and Wali Ali Meyer, *Physicians of the Heart: A Sufi View of the Ninety-Nine Names of Allah*. San Francisco: Sufi Ruhaniat International, 2011.

Khan, Zia Inayat. *A Pearl in Wine: Essays on the Life, Music and Sufism of Hazrat Inayat Khan*. New Lebanon, NY: Omega, 2001.

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Lewis, Samuel L. (1986). *Sufi Vision and Initiation: Meetings with Remarkable Beings*. 2nd ed. San Francisco: Sufi Islamia/Prophecy, 2015.

Lewis, Samuel L. *This is the New Age, In Person*. Tucson, AZ: Sufi Ruhaniat International, 1973.

Meyer, Wali Ali. "Wali Ali at Lama Recalling Murshid Samuel Lewis." The Murshid SAM Dargah at the Lama Foundation, Taos, New Mexico. Recorded in 1994, uploaded on December 16, 2013. YouTube video, 27:32. <https://youtu.be/uqiJ9JH51mg>

Miller, Kamae A., ed. *Wisdom Comes Dancing: Selected Writings of Ruth St. Denis on Dance, Spirituality and the Body*. Seattle: PeaceWorks, 1997.

"Murshid Samuel Lewis Archive." Sufi Ruhaniat International. Accessed January 24, 2024. <https://www.ruhaniat.org/index.php/archive-home>

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art in the archives

The Graduate Theological Union has taught the study of Art and Religion since its founding in 1962. Jibreel Delgado Trabal, a PhD student, worked in Special Collections and Archives from 2022 through 2023. Follow the links, for additional information on our [sacred dance collections](#), [archival collections](#) including New Religious Movements, [Sacred World Art Collection](#) and go to the View Complete Catalog, and [Special Collections](#).



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