

Rumi followers fight to keep tourism industry from cashing in on mystic's legacy

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ISTANBUL (RNS) Each Sunday, visitors line up outside of the old Sufi lodge, now a museum, in Turkey's tourist-filled Galata district, informational pamphlets, cameras and \$20 tickets in hand.

The site is but one of the many places tourists flock for performances by the country's famed white-robed whirling dervishes.

Cafes, hotels, and former Sufi lodges reinvented as tourist attractions, like the one in Galata, have all cashed in on the ritual's popularity.

The sema ceremonies, as they're called, promise attendees a peek into a 750-year-old practice that is as graceful as it is spiritual.

Yet as more ceremonies spring up, excitement has been met by skepticism by descendants of the very 13th-century mystic who first popularized it.

"It's becoming like a show," said Faruk Hemdem Celebi, a 22nd-generation descendant of the famous poet, jurist, Islamic scholar, theologian and Sufi, Jalaluddin Rumi (1207-1273). "There are people doing this now to make money and attract tourists."

Rumi was a Persian mystic who preached inclusivity and respect for all. His poetry and writings on divine unity and love have attracted a global following.

Celebi, who leads the International Mevlana Foundation, believes that Rumi's practices have been wrongly appropriated for profit.

Last month, he announced the launch of a campaign to reclaim Rumi's practices.

Through familial lineage, Celebi claims to be the heir of the Mevlevi (meaning *my master*) order, which was founded by Rumi's followers after his death and includes a collection of disciples who follow Rumi's teachings.

Celebi is working to bring Rumi's name under his foundation's control. He has trademarked 10 terms related to the Sufi saint. But that has, so far, failed to stop its appropriation.

Celebi said he has meetings coming up with some high-ranking government officials, including Prime Minister Ahmet Davutoglu, to discuss how the foundation can have more say in decisions related to Mevlana traditions, and particularly sema.

Istanbul's Galata district is not the only site for Rumi's practices.

Thousands of people gather in a sports arena in Konya—the site of Rumi's shrine, about 450 miles southeast of Istanbul—each December to commemorate the saint's death through a week of dancing and whirling. (Rumi died in Konya in 1273.)

Legend has it that Rumi, a devout Muslim, was walking through Konya's gold district when, upon hearing the rhythmic hammering of goldsmiths and their chanting of God's name, the religious scholar broke out into ecstasy. His body slipped into a trancelike state as his hands raised toward the sky, his body whirling until he reached oneness with the divine.

The whirling has grown into an iconic form of “dhikrullah” or “remembrance of God”—practiced primarily by Rumi's followers. With each turn, practitioners repeat God's name.

“It's a very powerful, meditative experience,” said Ismail Fenter, an American dervish who belongs to the Mevlevi order. “To turn it into dance or into public exhibition . . . it just cheapens it.”

Today's Mevlevi leaders grew up at a time when Sufi orders were illegal under Turkey's strict secular code. Sufi dens were shut down and religious whirling was outlawed in 1925, but reintroduced to the country in the 1950s, strictly for tourism.

It was then that religious whirling turned from a private form of meditative remembrance of God into a public and profitable national artistic display.

The length of sema ceremonies has been truncated to cater toward tourists, and some of the traditional requirements—such as studying for years in Konya to become a dervish—have been dropped.

The Mevlevi order has been trying to rein in the group ever since. While Mevlevi leaders welcome the admiration for Rumi, some are skeptical of the way his message has been interpreted.

“People in America find emotional highs, and Rumi becomes an emotional high,” Fenter said. “But they don’t all understand the part about Islam . . . and it doesn’t completely make sense without that.”

Many people, however, believe that the popularity of Rumi’s teachings and traditions has outgrown the control of any single family, even if the family claims to be rightful heirs of the saint.

“Rumi has inspired a lot of people and has given comfort and wisdom,” said Margaret Rose, an American expatriate living in Istanbul who has attended a number of whirling ceremonies. “It’s very spiritual and I felt like you could get a glimpse of this ceremony that might have otherwise been private.”

Rose said she would be sorry to see restrictions put on the ceremonies, which she considers a cultural treasure.

“I felt lucky that I got to see it,” she said.