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## PIERCING THE SKIN:

### PAIN AND PIETY IN RIFA'I RITUAL SENSESCAPES

Sara Kuehn

*Hayy, Hayy, Hayy, Hayy–Hayy, Hayy, Hayy, Allah!*

The Rifa'i Sufi religious order, which developed in Iraq towards the end of the twelfth century, is known for the distinctly “physical” *zikr* (Arabic *dhikr*) rituals its adherents carry out in remembrance of God (Allah). Those who participate in these rituals feel them, both literally and figuratively, in their bodies, flesh, and skin. As a Sufi community that follows the mystical tradition associated with Islam, the Rifa'iyya have always stressed the importance of extreme asceticism. Poverty, abstinence, denial of the body, and self-mortification rituals are central virtues. These extreme actions were not defined by Shaykh Ahmad ibn 'Ali al-Rifa'i, the order's founder who lived in southern Iraq between 1106 and 1182. Rather, they seem to have been introduced during the thirteenth century when the order's popularity spread amongst the Turkic tribes. Sari Saltuk, perhaps the most famous thirteenth-century “dervish-warrior” widely credited with propagating Islam throughout the Balkans, was a follower of the Rifa'iyya (also known as

<sup>1</sup> Rifa'i invocation during the *zikr* ritual.



Rufa'iyya) and is believed to have performed extraordinary deeds<sup>1</sup>. The community spread into the Balkans where it still maintains a large following today<sup>2</sup>. Rifa'i dervishes are renowned for having challenged established modes of piety through notorious practices such as the thrusting of sharp metal spikes, skewers, or swords into their bodies (a practice known as *ijrah* or *shish*, Arabic *darb al-silah* or *darb al-shish*), walking unharmed over fire or burning embers with bare feet, and swallowing glass, burning coals, or live snakes<sup>3</sup>.

In this paper I intend to look at the performance of certain physically demanding and potentially dangerous religious sensory forms<sup>4</sup> that take place in the context of the most important

<sup>1</sup> Kamal al-Din Muḥammad al-Sarraj al-Rifa'i, *Tuffāh al-arwah*, cited by the Palestinian Sufi writer Yusuf ibn Isma'il al-Nabhani (1849-1932) in his *Kitab jami' karāma al-awliya'*, Beirut 1974, vol. 2: 100-101. An unpublished copy of this text, preserved in Berlin Staatsbibliothek Stiftung Preußischer Kulturbesitz, Katalog W. Ahlwardt No. 8794, was translated into German by Bernd Radtke, see Kiel, 2000: 262-265.

<sup>2</sup> On the history of the Rifa'iyya in Southeastern Europe, see Popovic, 1993: 46-146; in Albania (with ample references to the Kosovo), see Clayer 1990: 150-162, 438 (with a description of ritual glass-swallowing, 152).

<sup>3</sup> The thirteenth-century Arab biographer Ibn Khallikan (d. 1282) reports Rifa'i practices such as riding on lions, eating live snakes, and walking on hot coals while the famous fourteenth-century traveller Ibn Battuta (d. 1368-9 or 1377) records similar rituals conducted by Rifa'i dervishes in Wasit in Iraq (respectively Ibn Khallikan, *Wafayat al-a'yan*, vol. 1: 153, and Ibn Battuta, *Tuhfat al-nuzar*, vol. 2: 274). In a contemporary Mevlevi (Mawlawi) hagiography, Aflaki (d. 1360) disapprovingly describes the Rifa'i extravagances of fire-walking, snake-swallowing, blood-sweating, as well as putting red-hot iron implements into their mouths, bathing in boiling oil, etc. which could be witnessed in 1250 at the Sufi lodge of Sayyid Taj al-Din Ahmad al-Rifa'i in Konya; Shams al-Din Ahmad Aflaki, *Manaqib al-arifin*, 202-203. Cf. Tringham, 1971: 37-40; Karamustafa, 2006: 56; Bosworth, 2009.

<sup>4</sup> The conceptualisation of sensory forms as regulating the "sensory engagement of humans with the divine and each other" is informed by Birgit Meyer (2008: 11-17), who, in turn, refers to Hirschkind's (2006: 11) notion that the

annual Rifa'i ritual. Performed communally, this ritual lasts from four to five hours and is the culmination of a whole series of earlier elaborate ritual actions<sup>1</sup>. What can be seen as the more visceral affective dimension of corporeal practice, aptly termed "corporetics" by Christopher Pinney (2004), generates particular sensory receptivities and gives us an insight into a Rifa'i multisensory engagement with the divine. Called Sultan Nevruz (literally "new day" in Persian), the ritual is held on one of the most important religious days for this Rifa'i gathering place, the Teqeja e Haxhi Shejh Iljazit, also known as Teqeja e Haxhi Shejh Lazes, in the small city of Rahovac in western Kosovo<sup>2</sup>. Celebrated on the 21<sup>st</sup> of March, the beginning of the New Year that welcomes the spring, the ritual takes place on the supposed birthday of Hazret-i 'Ali, a holiday which is celebrated by many Sufi orders in the Balkans.

The importance accorded to the annual commemoration of Nevruz reflects the influence of Shi'a spirituality and its attendant sensibility on the Rifa'iyya<sup>3</sup>, as well as on other Sufi

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resultant sensibilities "are rooted in the experience of the body in its entirety, as a complex of culturally and historically honed sensory modalities".

<sup>1</sup> For other first-hand accounts of Rifa'i *ziks* held in the Balkans see Meibohm, 1956: 81-108 (this *ziker* takes place without self-mortification); Mašulović-Marsol, 1992: 14-42; Norris, 2007: 70-74; Biegman, 2007: 23-25; Biegman, 2009. For Rifa'i *ziks* held in Syria, see Gonnella, 1995: 74-76; Pinto, 2012: 62-70; Pinto, 2016: 197-212.

<sup>2</sup> The *teqeja* was founded by Haxhi Shaykh Iliaz Zika (d. 1947) in 1902. His work has lived on through his main successors: first, his son Shaykh Baki (d. 2002) and, today, his grandson Shaykh Mehdi. The *lingua franca* at this *teqeja* is Albanian – hence terms in italics are Albanian unless otherwise specified – but most members also speak Bosnian and some Turkish. While the liturgical language is of course Arabic, some religious hymns (*ilahis*) are included in Albanian, Bosnian and Turkish.

<sup>3</sup> Describing the Rifa'i position with regard to Shi'a Islam, Shaykh Xhemali Shehu put the situation in this way: "We belong to the Sunni school of Islam, but we believe in the same thing as the Shiites" (Biegman, 2007: 13).



communities in the Balkans. This impact is likewise reflected in the representation of a twelve-petalled rosette on the shaykh's headdress, a white felt cap with a black turban wound around it (*taj*; literally "crown")<sup>1</sup> that serves as a pivotal symbol of honour, piety, and distinction in a Sufi context. The twelve petals are said to symbolise the twelve imams, the focus of devotion for Shi'i believers.

While I draw on my "sensuous" ethnographic observations (Stoller, 1997) of these rituals in Kosovo and Macedonia during 2011 and 2012, the primary source for my account here is the sensory immediacy of the charismatic feats I witnessed on the 21<sup>st</sup> of March 2013. Two years earlier, I had been introduced to the Rifa'i Shaykh Mehdi Shehu (b. 1977) of Rahovac by one of the most senior Sufi shaykh's in Bosnia and had the opportunity to observe some of the rituals he conducted. A year later, I received special permission to attend the 2013 ritual and to take photographs for use in my research project<sup>2</sup>. As a woman, I had to observe the ritual from the gallery overlooking the *sema'hane* (literally, house of "sema," Arabic *sama'*, "listening") of the *teqeja* (Turkish *tekke*) [fig. 1] – the room in which prayer (*dua*, Arabic *du'a'*, plural *ad'iya*) and the spiritual practice of the *zikr* ritual are collectively performed – so I asked a male Bosnian friend to accompany me and to take photographs with my second camera in the *sema'hane* itself<sup>3</sup>. With these two cameras we were able to document pivotal aspects of the visual sensory experience involved in this ritual and can give some vision-derived insights into the "sensescapes" (to use a word coined by David Howes, 2005: 143-146) experienced by participants and viewers. My intention here is to explore the sensorially-mediated ontological dimensions that expand the sensescapes

<sup>1</sup> For a depiction of the rosette, see Mašulović-Marsol, 1992: 12.

<sup>2</sup> Cf. Nicolaas Biegan's (2007; 2009) innovative use of photography.

<sup>3</sup> I would like to thank Mustafa Arslanović for his help.

of this ritual beyond the realm of ethnography and into other interdisciplinary territories.



Figure 1

#### Rifa'i ritual sensescapes

The day of Nevruz at the Rifa'i *teqeja* in Rahovac reaches its climax with the *zikr*, the embodied religious ritual of remembrance. The space in the *sema'hane* and on the gallery fills very quickly. The audience consists of aspirants on the mystical path, as well as non-initiated relatives and friends (during my visit in 2013, there were more than seventy performing dervishes – Sufi devotees – and audience members tightly packed into the *teqeja*). As mentioned above, women are confined to the balcony. As the crowd on the balcony and in the *sema'hane* below begins to swell, bodies gradually develop an attunement with one another through contact and touch. The initial low murmur is followed by a respectful silence. Even though it is late morning – on this special day the ritual, which otherwise takes place after sunset, is exceptionally performed during the



daytime – the light is dim with only some sunlight filtering through the narrow windows into the *sema'hane*. Engulfed in diaphanous light the members of the audience, with a composed demeanour, focus their gaze on the *sema'hane*, savouring the “*mis-en-scène*” of the sacred site (Drobnick, 2005: 272-274), a melange of different fragrances comingled in space. An atmosphere of anticipation fills the ritual space also communicated through the excited but hushed whispers of the women around me.

In keeping with the strict ceremonial protocol, Shaykh Mehdi and certain guests of honour are the last to arrive. The shaykh wears a “second skin”, a long black coat (*hirka*) over a white garment of similar length that is open at the front and secured by a large black belt (*kemer*). He is crowned by the *taj*, which he received during the ceremonial act when he “took the hand” (that is when spiritual power was transmitted and he succeeded his father and received the *hilafetname*, Arabic *khilafat-nama*) from Shaykh Masari of Gjakova. Clad in his ritual garb, Shaykh Mehdi takes up his place in front of the *mihrab* niche from where he will direct the *zikr*. Appealing to the outer and the inner senses, the *zikr* ritual slowly begins. The shaykh offers prayers while seated in front of a low table on which stand two lit candles [fig. 2]. Two senior dervishes, who also function as standard bearers (Turkish *bayraktar*), represent Hasan and Huseyin, ‘Ali’s sons and the grandsons of the Prophet Muhammad. Even though this is a Nevruz celebration, the performative understanding of the community revolves around the symbolism of the tragic events of Ashura, which represents the polar opposites of light and darkness, good and evil characters, as well as the self-sacrifice of the individual in order to bring communal salvation, eternal life, and light (cf. Mélikoff, 1966: 133-148; Mélikoff, 2018; Aghaie, 2007: 111).



Figure 2

The two dervishes wear, respectively, a red and a green sleeveless vest called *haydariye*, a term which reveals an association with ‘Ali, who is held to have transformed into a lion (Arabic *haydar*). The vest of the dervish acting the part of Huseyin is red, signifying the martyr’s predestined bloody death on the battlefield of Kerbala in southern Iraq (680 CE)<sup>1</sup>, while that of the dervish representing his older brother Hasan is green, in reference to the colour Hasan’s skin turned when he was poisoned eleven years before his younger brother’s martyrdom. The two dervishes distribute sweets in small envelopes to everyone present [fig. 3], both in the *sema'hane* and in the gallery above. The sugary content conveys the special powers of the Nevruz blessings (*bereket*, Arabic *baraka*) to the tongue, allowing all those present to “taste”, and thus experience, the ineffable nature of the spiritual bliss (Arabic *dhawq*) of this special day.

<sup>1</sup> This fate was shared by Huseyin’s family and his companions, some of them women and children, who remained with him to the end and were also tragically martyred alongside him.





Figure 3

The transformative impact of the all-encompassing sensory performance, which affords a glimpse into the Rifa'i "empire of the senses" (Howes, 2005), begins with slow, meditative chants. It gradually becomes more energetic with acoustic expressions of piety playing a vital role<sup>1</sup>. Also known as *zikr-i asma* (Arabic, *asma*; literally, "names"), divine names and related prayer formulae, are first gently intoned, then gradually more forcefully projected. Either aloud or subvocally, in conjunction with rhythmic breathing and corporeal techniques, physically and mentally directed into different parts of the body. When frequently repeated, each of the names of God has the power to create a distinctive quality in the *nefs* (Arabic *nafs*, often translated as "base impulses", "(lower) soul", "self", or even "mind"<sup>2</sup>)

<sup>1</sup> For insightful audio recordings of a Rifa'i *zikr*, see Bernard Mauguin, *Islamic Ritual from Yugoslavia: Zikr of the Rifa'i Brotherhood*, UNESCO Collection, Musical Sources, Holland: Philips, 1974; Niek Biegan, *Skopje Rifa'i Dervishes. Ilahis and Zikr Ceremony: For Centuries They Waited, for Years They Celebrated*, PAN Records 2006.

<sup>2</sup> The root of the Arabic word for "breath" (*nafas*), *n-f-s*, is also the root of the word *nefs* (Arabic *nafs*), meaning "self" or "soul," which may be compared to the word "anima" (soul) in English, which shares the same root as "animate(d)" or "animal", hence also the reference to "animal soul". Cf. the comparative approach in Izutsu, 1956: 39-49.

of the practitioner who, at the same time, also visualises the letters composing the divine name so that they become engraved in the imagination. Reflection on the form of the words provide an opportunity for a deeper meditation upon the dual meanings of their sounds and shapes and a more intuitive grasp of their "essence". The aural and visual sensoria allow for an allegorical interpretation that serves to extend the visualised written form of the divine names, such as *Hayy*, which means "life" and "(being) alive" into the realm of direct sensual experience.

The performing dervishes have undergone a rigorous training (the development of a sensitivity) in which they have internalised such ritual practices informed by souvenirs of bodily sensations of the past which, as related to me by some of the dervishes, are still alive in their minds. The immediate, experiential sensibilities of the practices are thought to lead to a more advanced stage in the path of gnosis (often referred to by the dervishes as "knowledge of the heart"). The disciples are connected by their initiation to Shaykh Mehdi, who possesses the hidden, inner, and esoteric knowledge (*batini*, Arabic *batini*) transmitted from the Prophet Muhammad. This knowledge reaches the shaykh through an unbroken chain (Arabic *silsila*) of initiates that begins with Hazret-i 'Ali, Huseyin, and Hasan, and passes on through Ahmad ibn 'Ali al-Rifa'i, Hazret-i Pir or founder of the order. The shaykh is, thus, the ultimate source of religious knowledge and embodied charismatic power. In order to advance on the long and difficult Sufi path, and to achieve transmutations of the *nefs*, or sense of self, the disciples commit themselves to the shaykh's authority and submit to his oversight as their spiritual guide. The inner and outer senses play a pivotal role in the intimate interactions of the disciples with the shaykh and in the bonds they form with each other. In this practice, the disciples are invited to have a subjective experience, akin to a sensual experience, by meeting "imaginally" all the external and internal sense faculties. As far as physical phenomena are concerned, the imagi-



native experience of the external senses comprises touch, taste, smell, hearing, and sight, while, according to mystical understanding, the "heart" perceives the internal "hidden senses" (an expression used by the dervishes), such as imagination, memory, estimation, and representation, analysing what the outer senses bring in. In this interactive process of self-transformation, a new selfhood is attained. It first revolves around the bodily senses until, according to Sufi teachings, the new awareness becomes imprinted upon the practitioner's "heart" by means of the internal senses. The various aspects of the *nafs* are based on the three principal stages of self-transformation mentioned in the Qur'an. The lowest form of the soul is the *anima bruta* or "commanding soul," which instantiates the negative qualities of the lower soul (Arabic *nafs ammarah*, Qur'an 12:53) that are symbolised by the battle between the soul and the body. This is then followed by a higher stage, "the blaming soul," which is sometimes associated with conscience (Arabic *nafs lawwamah*, Qur'an 75:2). Finally, the blaming soul is transformed into a "soul at peace" (Arabic *nafs mutma'inna*, Qur'an 89:27-28), the stage from which it will be called back to God.

The ritual activities are thus seen as, above all, a ceaseless moral and spiritual struggle (Arabic *jihad al-akbar*) against the inclinations of the disciples' *nafs*. They provide access to experiential arenas within which various states (Arabic *ahwal*, sg. *hal*) and stations (Arabic *maqamat*, sg. *maqam*) of the mystical path have to be traversed in order to rigorously subdue and erase the *nafs*, a process which is deemed to be more meritorious than physical struggle. In this way, the disciples can achieve the complete annihilation of the *nafs* "in" the shaykh, in the founding saint of the order, in Hazret-i 'Ali, in the Prophet Muhammad. In all cases, this annihilation is a simultaneous cessation of being and an absorption into God (*fana*, Arabic *fana'*).



Figure 4

Immediate bodily sensations are generated through the repetition of the divine names, interspersed with devotional songs, prayers, qur'anic recitation, and references to narratives of the Kerbala tragedy. This repetition provides a rhythmic beat that starts out gradually and then speeds up to an almost frenzied pace. The practice is facilitated by rhythmic breathing and punctuated by the pervasive rhythm of percussion instruments, including *def* (small tambourines), *mazhars* (large tambourines), and *kudums* (conical metal drums covered with donkey skin and beaten with a leather strap), some of which have several pairs of *zils* (cymbals) incorporated into the frame [figs. 4 and 5]. Occasionally, there is the sound of a *ney* (end-blown reed flute).





Figure 5

The *zikr* continues in this way for well over two hours, with continued religious chanting and singing, and in particular the communal repetition of the formulae which include the first-half

of the Muslim testimony of faith "*La ilaha illa 'llahi*" (there is no god but God). The pace of the *zikr* gradually amplifies and accelerates, with the sounds being accompanied by a range of vocal techniques and continuous bodily movements, including a constant alternation between bowing and straightening, the intermittent closing of the eyes, breath control, and calculated movements of the head. Sensibilities to movements of the head and body (kinesthesia) are known to be partially guided by information gathered by the operations of sight.

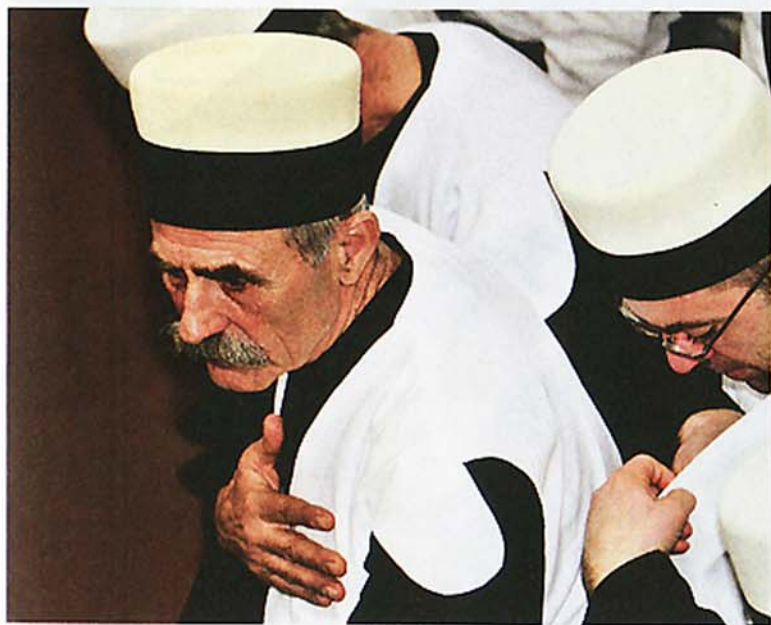


Figure 6

Heads are bent in the direction of the navel, the source of breath, and then back over the right shoulder, before being inclined to the left in the direction of the disciples' physical and spiritual kernel, the heart. At this point, Shaykh Mehdi suddenly shouts, *Kalbi!* (Arabic *qalbi*, "with the heart"). Many disciples place their right hands on their hearts as a symbolic expression of their love of God [fig. 6]. The tempo increases even more. The voices become



deep and guttural, they synchronously ejaculate the names of God in almost onomatopoeic arrangements of raucous saw-like panting. Concomitantly evoking tactile sensations, the resultant sounds are closely linked with the sensory experience and the sensory symbolism of this Rifa'i community. The forced modulation of the breath together with the internally-transmitted vibrations in the throat rouse tangible sensory impressions.

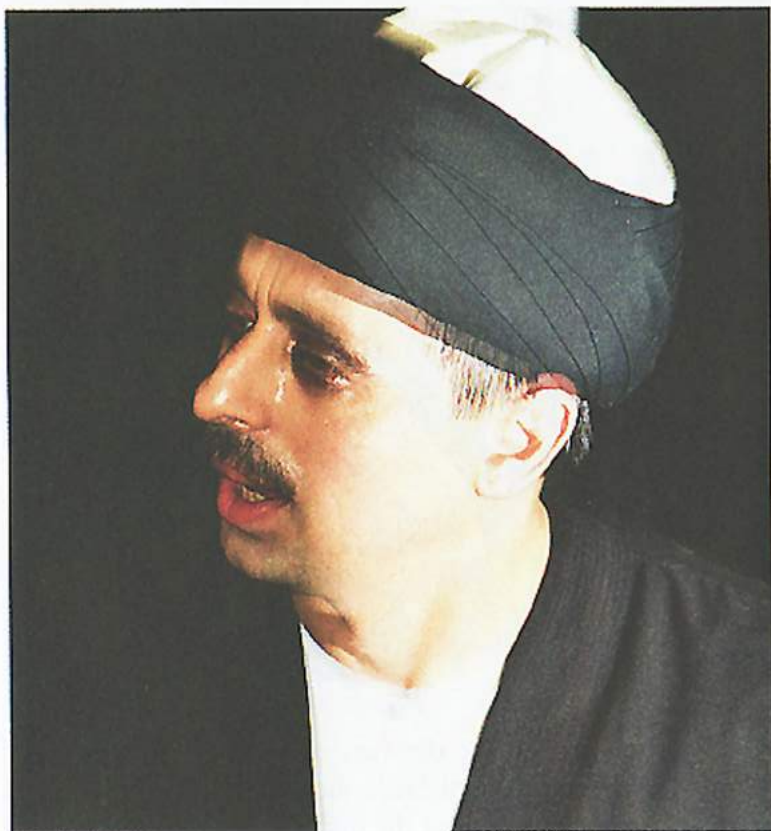


Figure 7

At this stage, the continuous forward and backward movement of the upper body, together with the oscillation of the heads and the closing of the eyes to better concentrate on the

*zikr*, begin to disorient both vision and audition. Even though the disciples have internalised the same bodily rhetoric during many years of practice, and thus have an embodied sense of these ritual movements and an awareness of the concomitant sensations, the incessant disturbance of the physiological balance now offsets the equilibrium in at least some of the practitioners, instigating feelings of dizziness or unsteadiness. The senses of hearing, sight and smell become increasingly entangled and interwoven. The gradual intensification of the rhythmical motion of the tightly packed bodies results in an increase in heat in the *sema hane*. The emerging odour of sweaty bodies seems to fan the religious fervour. Smell, “the sense of transition” (Howes, 1987), brings an elementary awareness of the approaching threshold, announcing a subtle transformation in the ritual process [fig. 7].

After about three hours, the *zikr* is being performed while standing (*kiyami*, Turkish *kiyami*, Arabic *qiyam*). The performing bodies move in unison, vivaciously swaying their upper bodies back and forth. The dervishes go on to fervently repeat one of the most important divine names in Islam, exclaiming *Hayy*, which, as mentioned earlier, connotes “life” and “(being) alive”, and *Ya Hayy*, “Oh, Living”, invoking the living being, the eternal life (Mašulović-Marsol, 1992: 39-40)<sup>1</sup>. These words are followed by repetitions of *Hayy, Hayy, Hayy, Hayy* and *Hayy, Hayy, Hayy, Allah*. The name contains not only esoteric knowledge of the divine essence or quality but also has a sacred

<sup>1</sup> In her book *Melancholic Modalities*, Denise Gill only briefly touches upon the divine name *Hayy* (Turkish *Hay*) (86: 2017) but focusses on the name of God, *Hu*, which in Arabic manifests as *humu*, “he” (third person masculine singular personal pronoun) and can be translated as “essence” (2017: 67-89). The invocation of the name *Hu* (which has a prolonged ending) is of central importance in Rifa'i *zikr*s (as in all other Sufi communities); due to repetition of the long sound of *Huuuuuuuuu* in their loud, dramatic *zikr* rituals, the Rifa'iyya became known as the “Howling Dervishes” in nineteenth-century Western travel writing. Both divine names are invoked in the important Turkish proverb of Sufi origin, “*Hay'dan gelen Hü'ya gider*,” which can be translated as “that which comes from the everlasting God returns to the essence of God” (Gill 2017: 86).



sound. In addition to its meaning, the word then has a dynamic physical force, which operates not only at the site of the ear and mind but leads to an interplay of multisensory stimulations, involving both the inner and the outer senses, which affect the entire field of the body.

### Practicing Rifa'i ritual piercing

The profound evocative power inherent in the continuous utterance of the divine names, the visceral affective dimension of the commemoration of unjust suffering and self-sacrifice at Kerbela, the overpowering musical and "dance" practice with ceaseless drumbeats growing ever more intense and rising to an almost deafening din, all these features come together to assault the senses and strain the "human sensorium" to the limits of its tolerance.



Figure 8

This is when the most dramatic moment of the ritual cycle begins. Select male disciples of Shaykh Mehdi humbly approach the shaykh, their arms folded across their breasts and their right hands placed on top of their left. When they arrive in front of the shaykh, the first toes of the right foot are placed on

top of the left foot, a greeting that communicates the dervishes' complete submission. The disciples then bow down low before the shaykh. They take his right hand and press their eyes and forehead into the palm of his hand, which is seen as a special depository of benediction that indicates union with, or the transferral or communication of, a spiritual potency that is often transmitted by contact and the sense of touch [fig. 8]. In anticipation of the impending sensory experience of piercing, the disciples absorb some of the shaykh's intercessory power in this way before he inserts metal pins (*r'g*) roughly 40 cm long through one or both of their cheeks<sup>1</sup>. For the small male children taking part in the ritual, aged six and upwards and mainly the sons of the shaykh and his relatives, shorter pins called *shish* of about 20 cm are used [fig. 9]. They are shaped like double-bladed axes (*teber*), a traditional weapon of the dervishes, often used in a ritual context.

Once pierced, the disciples return to their dancing before, after another sequence of invocations of *Hayy, Hayy, Hayy, Allah*, the ritual movement stops. One after the other, the disciples, their arms still folded, again respectfully approach the shaykh, who stands in front of the *mihrab* and carefully removes each *r'g* while the percussion instruments keep thrusting and pulsating. After removing the *r'gs* from the cheeks of his dervishes, the shaykh rubs the pierced parts inside and outside with his fingers and hands, the healing touch remedying the incisions of the ritual piercing [fig. 10]. At the same time, it reflects the shaykh's control over his dervishes' sensory faculties and their organic bodies. Because of the blessed tactility of his fingers, no blood (or only a trickle) is spilled and the wounds heal very rapidly<sup>2</sup>.

<sup>1</sup> In some Rifa'i orders the implements can also be inserted into the lip, tongue, chest, heart, or head.

<sup>2</sup> Because of his *bereket*, Shaykh Mehdi also writes amulets (*amayfiya*) to protect or heal a person.





Figure 9



Figure 10

The charismatic asceticism intensifies when some more senior disciples approach the shaykh in the same deferential manner to kiss his hand and reverently touch it with their foreheads. In doing so, they express their love, devotion, and respect for the shaykh, underscoring their lifelong bond with him and seeking his blessing and protection [fig. 11].



Figure 11



The dervishes that approach now are given larger instruments, reflecting the seniority of their positions. They receive from the shaykh's hands long metal skewers of roughly 40 to 50 cm, topped by solid spherical wooden tops with pendant chains (*zarp*, Arabic *darb*). This act also symbolises that the shaykh's *bereket* is linked in an unbroken chain with 'Ali and the Prophet Muhammad. The disciples kiss the instruments and the shaykh inserts them into their cheeks [fig. 12]. Others hold up the *zarp* with both hands and whirl it so that the chains fly through the air radiating from the sphere [fig. 13], then they kneel down, kiss the *zarp* [fig. 14], throw their heads back and vigorously insert the lower part of the *zarp* behind their collar bones. Once this has been done, they get up and continue dancing [fig. 15] while keeping their right hand on their heart. Later they insert the *zarp* into other body parts, such as the abdomen [fig. 16]. With these acts of piercing, the inserted ritual weapons become one with the disciples' bodies, which serve as the terrain on which these ascetic practices are acted out.



Figure 12



Fig. 13 above

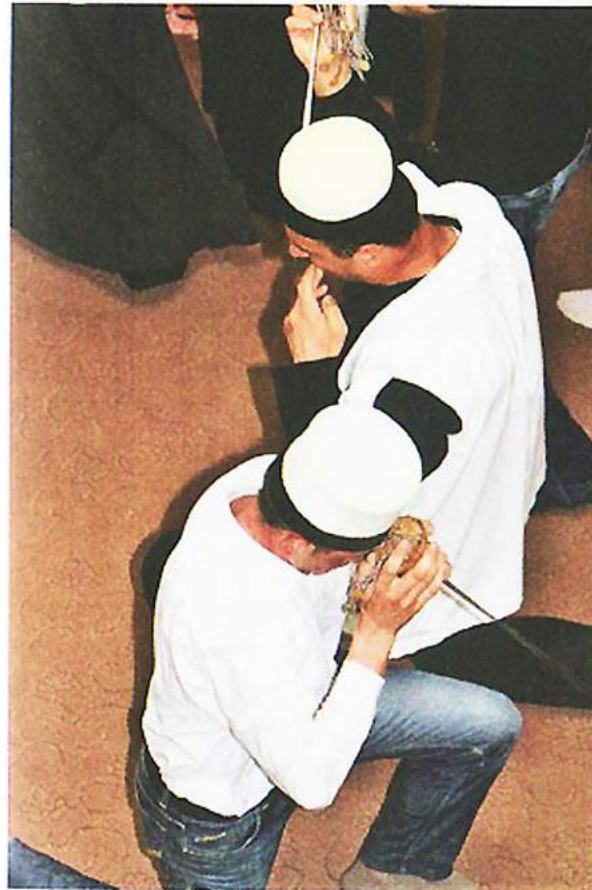


Fig. 14



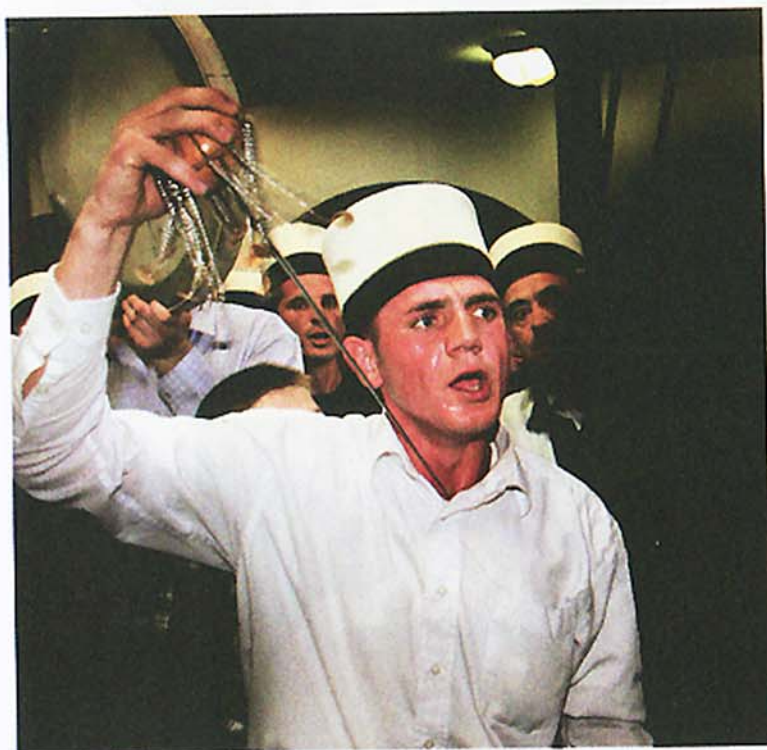


Figure 15



Figure 16

As a consequence of voluntarily submitting themselves to the collective self-inflicted embodied experience of ritualized pain, the disciples instantiate transformative agency with creative powers<sup>1</sup>. As the auditory dimension of the ritual, the dervishes' "hearing" and "listening," builds to a crescendo, their pierced dancing bodies are at the very centre of the collective religious fervour, their bodily movements becoming ever more frenzied. At a signal from the shaykh, the dervishes then remove the *zups*, kiss them, and hand them back.

By this time, sensory overload produced by the dizzyingly rhythmic sound, continuous strenuous bodily movements, increasing physical exertion, excessive sweating, and the corresponding increase in heat in the space, and the resultant dehydration and pulmonary hyperventilation, gradually induces an ecstatic trance-like immersion. The temperature of the room and the level of noise keep rising, the vibrations of the collective chanting resonate. The space of the *sema'hane* is filled by the faint lingering salty smell of perspiration. At this point, Shaykh Mehdi takes a long sword (*shpate*) which hangs in the *mihrab* and slides the blade along his lips, lacing it with the blessing of his saliva, which also functions as a medicinal cure. His youngest son, perhaps four years old, is placed with his bare feet on top of the naked sword blade. The two dervishes embodying Huseyin and Hasan hold the sword at either end and parade the child around the *sema'hane*, his bare feet precariously balancing on the edge of the sword blade [fig. 17]. Since the choice of the instrument reflects the "spiritual state the dervishes reach during the ritual" (Biegman, 2007: 11), the most experienced disciples now line up. One after the other, they proceed to lift their shirts

<sup>1</sup> For ethnographic studies on ritualised pain, see Dimitris Xygalatas, 2014 investigation of the fire walking ritual of the Orthodox Christian Anastenaria in Northern Greece, Elizabeth Fuller Collins, 1997, study of members of Malaysia's Tamil Hindu community piercing their tongues and cheeks with replicas of their patron god Murugan, or E. Valentine Daniel's 1987 description of the annual barefoot pilgrimage of Ayyappan devotees to Sabarimala temple in Kerala, India.



and to lie flat on the shaykh's red-dyed sheepskin (*post*, Arabic *pūst*), the ceremonial seat which is spread opposite the mihrab niche [fig. 18]. The shaykh's *post* symbolises the below-discussed mystery of "dying before dying", as well as the continuous presence of the patron saint of the order.



Figure 17



Figure 18

It is credited with miraculous powers imparted to it through the blessing and the beneficial grace of the spiritual masters who employed it in earlier generations. By stretching out on this *post*, the disciples partake in Ahmad al-Rifa'i's blessed power and that of all the shaykhs who have followed him. It accords not only *bereket* but also protection. The *post*'s red colour once again alludes to the 'Alid leanings of the Rifa'iyya. As an act of blessing, the shaykh places the sword blade with its sharp edge across the bare stomach of the disciple and with the flat soles of his feet, placing first one foot then the other, he mounts onto the edge of the blade pushing the sharp edge of the blade into the disciple's abdomen [figs. 19-20]. In this way, the disciple receives some of his shaykh's *bereket*. This facilitates an interior (*batini*, Arabic *batini*) connection and transmission of some of the shaykh's "essence", in effect sublimating (some aspects of) his innermost "substance". This allows the temporal mystical experience of the complete effacement (*fana*, Arabic *fana'*) of the disciple's *nefs* in the shaykh, leading to the annihilation of imperfect attributes and a vision of divine attributes and qualities. After the shaykh dismounts and the sword is lifted, the disciple's abdomen shows no visible wounds or bleeding. The same ritual action is repeated on all the lined-up disciples, who each take their turn at baring their stomachs and offering themselves in the same place to receive the blessed touch of their shaykh's feet. In the case of those he thinks are ready, the shaykh places the sword across a recumbent dervish's throat and then steps on it with both feet [fig. 21]. The power inherent even in the lowest part of the shaykh's body is also reflected in the custom of *dosu*, which was still performed in Istanbul during the first two decades of the twentieth century. This custom involved the Rifa'i shaykh walking, or even riding on horseback, over the bodies of his prostrate followers (Anderson, 1923: 185). Just like by piercing his dervishes' cheeks or by mounting the sword blade with the soles of his feet, the shaykh circulates his *bereket*, reflecting his permanent spiritual connec-



tion with his disciples. This *bereket* displaces any sense of pain in the body, flesh, or skin. The entire corporeal field of the body of the shaykh and, by extension, the ritual implements he touches, handles, and manipulates are intimately connected with performed reparation and healing.



Figure 19



Figure 20



Figure 21

This ritual practice of the taming and cultivating of a disciple's *nafs*, often referred to as "training the soul" (*riyadat al-nafs*), also reflects the complete submission of the disciple to the shaykh, who has unconditional authority over the dervishes who voluntarily yield to him "like corpses in the hands of the mortician" (a maxim which is already attested in the writings of the important eleventh-century theologian and practicing Sufi, al-Qushairi (d. 1072-73), *Al-Risalah al-qushairiyyah*, 368, see Böwering, 1979: 76). By doing this they follow a well-known injunction attributed to the Prophet Muhammad to go through the mystical process of dying to this world and what is in it: "Die [to this world] before you die!" (Arabic *mutu qabla an tamutu*). While this is usually interpreted metaphorically, the Rifa'i enact this physically. When I asked Shaykh Mehdi about this process, he told me that they believe that humans suffer in this life because of their painful separation from the divine. By welcoming and embracing pain, loss, and separation, the dervishes master the sensory stimulations of the perishable



physical body and come out of it anew, with new life. He also said that they demonstrate that, in order to experience sensations of pure love of God, they must surrender to Him. Pain is experienced as a form of piety through which the sensorium of physical passions and sensualities is mitigated, overcome, and mastered<sup>1</sup>. The control achieved by the disciple over his *nefs* is confirmed through the expansion of the capacities of his body. Shaykh Mehdi explained that the increased spiritual power of the performing dervishes is expressed by the fact that their deeds transcend the natural order in that they do not bleed or perceive pain<sup>2</sup>, and nor are they marked by visible wounds.

The denouement of the *zikr*, during which everybody is again seated, underlines once again the experiential side of the correlation between inner senses and sound. Further invocations and recitations are made until Shaykh Mehdi ends the ritual with a concluding prayer directed towards the tomb (*tyrbe*, Turkish *türbe*) adjacent to the *sema'hane*, which houses the shaykh's father, Shaykh Baki, and grandfather, Haxhi Shaykh Iliaz Zika, as well as other male and female family members. Finally, he gives the disciples leave to exit the *sema'hane*. The ceremony is now buttressed by a large communal feast. The heady flavour of the ritual food, the sacrificial

<sup>1</sup> See also Gill's 2017 publication *Melancholic Modalities*, in which she analyses the aesthetic sensibilities of pain in the context of Turkish (especially Mevlevi, Arabic Mawlawī) Sufi musicians as revolving around the notion of the Turkish blessing "May God increase your pain" and the development of "melancholic" music as well as the Sufi discussion of the transformation of the experience of suffering and pain into creative power.

<sup>2</sup> A scientific investigation of a ritual piercing carried out by a dervish in the USA produced "images of unusual brain activation and deactivation in specific locations related to pain perception [set against a normative database]. The results show that this individual effectively self-regulated his brain activity in specific locations, leading to the ability to endure an otherwise painful experience, while remaining evidently comfortable and healthy." (Collura, Hall and Peper, 2014: 293).

meat (*kurban*, Arabic *qurban*) prepared as a thick meat stew, provides yet another commemorative sensorium that is shared by all the participants, including the shaykh and his guests. All partake in the ingestion of the *kurban* and break bread together. While some few participants use a spoon to eat, the majority feed themselves in a more tactile manner, tearing off chunks of bread and using these to ferry the food to the mouth, the sense of touch being an integral part of the ritual meal alongside taste.

### The role of pain in the Rifa'i sensory realm

The ascetic observances and the infliction of pain during the Nevruz ritual are often carried out to aid the participants to internalise the pain and suffering experienced by Huseyin, other members of the Prophet's family, and their supporters. Some of these practices not only help participants "to feel pain in the body of another" (to cite Ludwig Wittgenstein, as referred to by Cavell, 1997: 97; cf. Csordas, 1993: 139) but also reflect the readiness to "be martyred for" Huseyin (Aghaie, 2007: 122). Many of the visceral reactions associated with Kerbela attest to the firmly entrenched notion that the forceful, particularly mournful and esoteric expressions of this tragedy have the potential to offer a power of blessing and deliverance from suffering.

There is no doubt that the socialist Yugoslav period, which lasted from 1943 to 1992, has affected Sufi life in the Balkans. Sufi institutions also suffered from repression, loss of lives, and substantial destruction during the Kosovo conflict in 1998 and 1999. In the wake of this conflict many Kosovans were forced to leave the country, often migrating to German-speaking countries to rebuild their lives in the diaspora. Some of Shaykh Mehdi's disciples are also part of the growing diaspora in Austria, Germany and Switzerland, but they return to Rahovac to partake in important rituals, such as the New Year's celebration on



the 21<sup>st</sup> of March. Seeking to heal the wounds of war, trauma, repression, economic hardships, and challenges of diaspora migration, the ritual of this Sufi community – set in the historical frontier region of Western Europe – also gives a shared religio-cultural meaning to the sensation of their existential and social suffering (Das and Kleinman, 2001: 1-30; Kleinman, 1997: 222-232).

In spite of being a potentially harmful ordeal, the dervishes who participate in the ritual piercing do not seem to experience any significant pain, there is almost no bleeding and the practices leave no visible wounds. We have seen that, with their multisensory panoply, the Rifa'i excitatory corporeal techniques performed during the ritual can induce intense feelings and sensations in the disciples that come close to or can be identified as devotional trance, rapture, and ecstasy (*jezba*, Arabic *jadhba*) (cf. Ludwig, 1968; Rouget, 1996: 301-310). In this state, the dervishes distance themselves from their *nefs* (cf. Oğén, 1982: 236) and have the sensation of leaving the embodied earthly space to enter into a spiritual sphere. It is known that prolonged, forceful ritual movements, as undertaken in the context of the above-described ritual, lead to elevated levels of endorphins (Boecker *et al.*, 2008) and these can facilitate such pain sensations. At the same time, increased endorphin release is thought to have short-term analgesic (pain-relieving) effects, and can thus function to reduce sensitivity by numbing the “human sensorium” during the ritual. It is also important to note that pain expectations influence pain experience (Barrett and Martin, 2014: 37-42). The extraordinary sensorial stimuli in the above-discussed ritual context, and the exceptional feelings and sensations to which they lead, can have genuine therapeutic results, which might help to explain why, in spite of the deliberate wounding, the performers feel no pain, bleed (almost) not at all, and heal very rapidly.

Throughout the ritual performance a highly interactive verbal and non-verbal communicative process develops between the performing dervishes and the other worshippers. At the same time, a sense of assimilable and effective solidarity and group cohesion forms between performers and observers that forms a bridge between sensation and meaning. The other worshippers often react with visceral bodily responses of their own (some of them later referred to this as a kind of harrowing experience) as well as empathy with the perceptual forms of the dervishes' bodily engagements and the phenomena of vicarious experience [fig. 22]. Through bodily display and sensation, pain thus seems to be experienced and communicated to the audience. The dramatic sensory immediacy of the practice, which takes place in a dynamic “intersubjective milieu” (Csordas, 1993: 138), is reflected in full corporeal engagement of the viewer and listener which acts on the body and the entire sensescape. In this way, the ritual performance is *effectively* and *affectively* shared. I observed how members of the audience adopt the posture of the observed, reflecting an inner subjective experience when witnessing the performing dervishes' exertions. These “languages of pain” are embodied and include both gestures and facial expressions. In these moments, some audience members intuitively touch their necks [(see fig. 22) or other body parts in an internal resonance and behavioural imitation stemming from this sensory and emotive appropriation. By mimicking the outward behaviour, they come to adopt the inner states of the performers (Barsalou *et al.*, 2005; Warren *et al.*, 2006; Iacoboni, 2008). And within the cultural context of the New Year's ritual, distinguished by the shared collectivity of a set of performative experiences and religious beliefs, this ritual piercing is integral to “the *creation* of community” (Bourke, 2017: 46; Bastian, Jetten, and Ferris, 2014: 2079-2085). At the same time, this event becomes infused with rich, personally-



significant sensations. Research has shown that a special social bonding may thus develop not only among the participating disciples who undergo the same ritual but also among the audience members who partake in the shared emotionally-stimulating sensory arousal (or “sensory pageantry” to use the words of Lawson and McCauley; McCauley and Lawson, 1990 and 2002).



Figure 22

### Concluding remarks

Seeking to bridge the gap between man and God, the entire sensorial range of the body is deeply interwoven into the lived practice of this Rifa'i community. Their ritual piercing conducted during Sultan Nevruz underscores the powerful dimension of pain in these ascetic sensory experiences. By inflicting pain and thereby, in a way, “befriending” (to use a word employed by the dervishes) the sharp, clear sensation of pain caused by the cuts of the ritual instruments, they are, as one of the dervishes said, “freed” of the bitter, murky dark sensations

associated with suffering. The configuration of these sensations is thus utilised in the ecstatic ritual to soothe and heal suffering as well as to express exaltation of the divine. Disciplines affecting the sensory formations of the body are known to transform one's mental states. In the context of the ritual, the mastering of the body's pain and suffering is not, then, perceived as a negative but as an intrinsically positive empowering force which activates imagistic dynamics involving the inner senses.

Above all, self-sacrificing pain in such “rites of passage” is experienced as an essential, necessary force in the taming and cultivating of the participating dervishes' own *nefs*, the (ongoing) “training (of one's) soul”. It is not only the struggle with one's *nefs* in the context of ritual activities that is central in the process of self-transformation but, and this might seem paradoxical, also a powerful attendant process of self-*dis*empowerment and self-*de*construction that is used to attain a particular selfhood through which transformative spiritual advancement is reached.

As Paulo Pinto has pointed out in his research on related Rifa'i rituals in Aleppo, Syria, “the performance of extraordinary deeds, such as the ritual piercing, produces in the disciple a *dramatically condensed* experience of the Sufi path” (emphasis added, 2016: 204). At the same time, these deeds are “an ordeal that [they] have to pass through in order to advance through each stage of the Sufi path” (Pinto, 2016: 201). In spite of, or perhaps because of, the extreme sensory stimulation during these particularly intense and potentially dangerous ritual events, the disciples disassociate the *nefs* from the materiality of the body that is sensed, observed, and conceived. This is achieved by shutting the gate on sense perception, worldly ties, and the material side of the mind, while receiving the charismatic transmissions of the shaykh, the ultimate source of *batini* knowledge that goes back to Imam 'Ali and the Prophet



Muḥammad. When conducting the ritual ordeals, the Rifa'i incessantly invoke the name of God, *Ḥayy*, which is considered to be among the "mothers of the divine names": *Ḥayy, Ḥayy, Ḥayy, Allah*. It belongs to the seven divine names of *the essence* (Arabic *asma dhatiyya*), representing the seven qualities of the divine. The related acts of ritual self-mortification stand as a testimony of the living, everlasting being, that which is able to fully actualise all its perfection. This makes the ordeals not only spiritually redeeming and reparative but a celebration of the ultimate end: reunification with the divine and with eternal life.

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« BEING HANGED BY HOOKS  
IS AN UNSPEAKABLE EXPERIENCE »  
FIELDWORK NOTES ON SENSORY  
CHALLENGES AND EXPERIMENTAL  
COMBINATIONS OF WORDS AND OBJECTS

Federica Manfredi

Anthropologists have been trained for years to approach the world through words as main form of data-collection, data-analysis and data-report. In this paper I will expose considerations about these three fundamental steps of the ethnographical labor focusing on an experimental strategy developed during my ongoing research on body suspension<sup>1</sup>. During the fieldwork, I am studying meaningful body experiences that constitute a methodological challenge due to the centrality of the body, the declared inadequacy of words to express the experience, the sensorial dimension of the practice, the creative

<sup>1</sup> The doctoral project "Learning to fly. A trans-spatial ethnography on body suspensions in Europe" aims to study meanings associated to the body suspension practice, as well as the circulation of people, materials and meanings characterizing suspension events in Europe, with an explicit fieldwork attention in Norway, Italy and Portugal. The project started in 2016 and it is in course of development under the supervision of Dr. Chiara Pussetti and co-tutored by Prof. Cristiana Bastos at the Institute of Social Sciences (ICS), Lisbon University.



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