

## 8. ‘Watching myself in the mirror, I saw ‘Alī in my eyes’: On Sufi Visual and Material Practice in the Balkans

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### Abstract

After the expansion of the Ottoman Empire during the fifteenth century, sizeable numbers of dervishes emigrated to the newly conquered territories in the Balkan peninsula. Reacting against the increasing institutionalization of Sufi orders, these itinerant antinomian dervishes embraced a variety of unconventional and socially liminal practices, including ascetic acts that are practised to this day. This chapter discusses such Sufi material-visual practices with particular reference to the memorial services for the Prophet Muḥammad’s grandson Ḥusayn and other members of his family during the sacred days of ‘Āshūrā’ and Sultan Nawruz. These include special ritual practices such as piercing dervishes’ bodies with swords or iron spikes aimed at taming the base soul (*nafs*).

**Keywords:** Sufi; dervish; Balkans; ‘Āshūrā’; Sultan Nawruz; training the soul

Muḥammad is ‘Alī, ‘Alī-Muḥammad,  
‘Alī is Muḥammad, ‘Alī-Muḥammad, Allah!  
‘Alī is Muḥammad, ‘Alī-Muḥammad.  
Ilāhī (Devotional song).

In his *Mashā’ir al-shu’arā’* (Biographies of the poets) the sixteenth-century judge and poet ‘Āshik Chelebi (d. 1571–72) from Prizren in Kosovo described a dervish of the Ḥaydarī sect, named Baba ‘Alī Mest as having worn earrings, a collar around his neck and chains on his body, as well as a ‘dragon-headed’ hook under his belt and a sack.<sup>1</sup> Following the expansion of the Ottoman Empire in the fifteenth century, sizeable numbers of dervishes, mostly of heterodox origin like ‘Alī Mest, emigrated to the

<sup>1</sup> ‘Āshik Chelebi, *Meshā’ir al-shu’arā’*, fol. 270b.

newly conquered territories in the Balkan peninsula. As a reaction to the increasing institutionalization of Sufi orders, these itinerant antinomian dervishes, sometimes referred to as *qalandars*, embraced a variety of unconventional and socially liminal practices. Travelling alone or in bands, they deliberately inverted social hierarchies and explicitly violated Islamic law as a form of religious and social protest.

Some of these dervishes performed special ascetic practices that were profoundly physical and material in character. These included ritual self-laceration, and piercing their own bodies with swords or iron spikes. Such self-mortification left marks on the body that stood as material-visual reminders of the dervishes' exertions and communicated their spectacular and theatrical actions to wider audiences. The concomitant display of animal attributes also reflected the dervishes' own animal-like force. It acted not only as a means of liberation and a critique of social controls but, above all, served as a prime tool in the dramatic attempts to discipline, control and tame their own 'animal' or base souls (*nafs*).<sup>2</sup>

Institutionalized Sufi orders also began to arrive in the Balkans with the Ottoman conquest of these areas. They brought elements of Ottoman Turkish, Arabic and Persian culture into the region which laid the basis for a fertile and multidirectional cultural exchange. While some of the antinomian Sufis openly professed a form of Shi'a Islam, certain Shi'ite influences or tendencies could also be observed in the practices of the orders (*туруқ*, sing. *таріқа*). And, despite the policy of 'Sunnitization' pursued by the Ottoman authorities, heterodox Sufism continued to thrive in the Balkans.

Sufi rituals that encompass both antinomian and orthodox expressions can still be observed in present-day Sufism in the Balkans. Even though most Sufi orders practise strictly within the framework of the *sharī'a* ('revealed law'), individual Sufis have maintained a spiritual frame of reference wider than that of their *tarīqa*. This is corroborated by the customs of initiation that were practised within various esoteric traditions. These rites are a constant feature of Sufism and are fuelled by the desire to multiply means of access to the beneficial flow of *baraka* or immaterial blessing, a spiritual energy often transmitted by contact. Thus the fluid lived reality of Sufism, which infiltrated rural and urban Muslim life in the religiously plural and culturally diverse environments of the Balkans, is today characterized by both Sunnism and Shi'ism, in their dual aspects of intoxication and sobriety, meaning and form, spirit and letter.

This chapter examines contemporary Sufi practice to cast light on the early modern forms of this tradition. The integral role of images, objects and physical actions to Sufi spirituality is revealed through a close analysis of aspects of Sufi ritual practice relating to the material-visual presence of words and representational imagery, the symbolic appropriation of animal symbolism, and ritual self-control aimed at training the *nafs*. Throughout, physical responses to objects and materials, such as touching, kissing, imbibing or ingesting, are found to be central to accessing divine blessing and immaterial spiritual energy.

2 Terms in parentheses are Arabic unless otherwise specified.

## Esoteric Interpretations in Sufi Material Culture

The spirit of these cross-currents is to some extent encapsulated in a printed calligraphic composition (*levha*) with images from ‘Alī ibn Abī Ṭālib’s life, preserved in the context of the oldest and most important surviving Naqshbandī *tekke* (‘dervish gathering place’) of Bosnia-Herzegovina.<sup>3</sup> Miraculously, it has survived both the socialist regime and the 1992–95 war in Bosnia-Herzegovina, owing to its remote location in the village of Živčići/Vukeljići in the mountains of central Bosnia. This coloured print (Plate 8.1) allows for a deeper contemplation of the true qualities of the Prophet Muḥammad’s closest male relative, ‘Alī, and his intimate relationship with the divine. It asserts the material-visual presence of epigraphic and figurative elements in mirror-image halves reflected across a vertical axis. Viewed through a Sufi mode of reasoning, this epistemology sets up a contrast between a phenomenal, visible world (*zāhir*), which represents the body and can be perceived by the senses, and its true esoteric meanings (*bāṭin*), derived by special knowledge available only to the initiates. Attaining comprehension of these hidden, inner meanings (*tāwīl*) is deemed to be a spiritual birth that enables the dervish to accede to a higher plane of being.

The central credo, written in bold letters in the so-called ‘doubled style’, states ‘Alī is Allāh’. The divine presence in the human face is evidenced by the shape of the letter *‘ayn* for ‘Alī, which follows the contours of the human eye. In this context, the eyes represent the two sons by Muḥammad’s daughter Fāṭima: the right eye represents Ḥasan and the left eye Ḥusayn.<sup>4</sup> These letters thus are symbolic images with which the devout engage emotionally and intellectually. The centre of the *levha* is punctuated by a large symbolic stone, carved with twelve flutings, which is presented to a Bektāshī dervish at the end of his discipleship and which he subsequently wears around the neck suspended on a fine cord. Known as ‘the stone of surrender’ (*teslīm tāsh*),<sup>5</sup> it symbolizes the union of human individuality with the eternal truth and the abandonment of human individuality in the eternal truth that is the unity of Allāh, Muḥammad and ‘Alī.<sup>6</sup>

3 For a comparable print, see De Jong, ‘Iconography of Bektāshism’, 24, pl. 8; Shani, ‘Calligraphic Lions’, 135, fig. 56.

4 See De Jong, ‘Iconography of Bektāshism’, 12; Trix, ‘Symmetry’, 205–6. On mirror-image calligraphy, see Avcı, ‘Türk Sanatında Aynalı Yazılar’, 20–33.

5 The word for (spiritual) surrender or submission (*teslīm*) is built on the Arabic root ‘s-l-m’ that underlies the Arabic term *islām*, literally, submission (to God), and associates it with one of the most famous Sufi *ḥadīths*, ‘Die before you die’ (*mūtū qabla an tamūtū*), implying a metaphorical death to the concerns of the material world through the reigning in of the concupiscent desires of the self before the physical death; to achieve ‘death before dying’ was to attain spiritual union with the divine. See Karamustafa, *God’s Unruly Friends*, 21, 41, and Ritter, *Meer*, 583. In the same vein, the button on the Bektāshī cap symbolizes a ‘human head’, since the Bektāshīs are often glossed as ‘the beheaded dead people’ (see Karamustafa, ‘Kalenders’, 124). For a discussion of the motif of the beheaded saint, see Ocak, ‘La tête coupée’, 75–80.

6 See Brown, *Dervishes*, 180–81.

The material-visual discourse in the *levha* revolves around two well-known events from 'Alī's life. Its visual performance entails dynamic and transformational processes of interpretation, translation and adaptation of a visual vocabulary encoded with specific attributes. The first incident, in the upper section, features a veiled figure leading a camel carrying a coffin. It illustrates the famous legend according to which shortly before his death 'Alī told his two sons, Ḥasan and Ḥusayn, that, upon his death, a veiled man would come to their house, he would wash his corpse and load his coffin on a camel and lead it away for burial. He cautioned his sons not to follow the veiled man or to question him. When on his death 'Alī's predictions came true, Ḥasan and Ḥusayn could not refrain from asking about the man's identity, whereupon the stranger lifted his veil and revealed his face: it was their father 'Alī, who, in a miraculous manner, carried his own body to the place of his tomb.<sup>7</sup> The symbolic configuration of the narrative confirms 'Alī's divinely inspired, wondrous powers materially-visually presented on the *levha* as the ultimate 'seer', who foretells and enacts his own death for his sons.

The second depiction, featured in the lower section, relates to his metamorphosis into a lion (*haydar*) or, more precisely, the victorious lion of God (*al-asad Allāh al-ghālib*), also known as 'the impetuous lion' (*al-ḥaydar al-karrār*).<sup>8</sup> The bilaterally symmetrical arrangement in mirror image shows the lion couchant (representing 'Alī) wrestling with a serpent, alluding to the transformation of the mythical warrior into a spiritual warrior (*fātā*). The combat which takes place on an external mythical ground – symbolized by the lion's fight with the snake – can on another level be considered as an individual and a collective moral and spiritual struggle (*jihād*) against one's *nafs*, a process which was deemed to be more meritorious than physical struggle.

'Alī's legendary double-bladed or double-pointed sword, *Dhu'l-faqār*, which is carried next to the coffin on the back of the camel, also became an integral element of the calligraphy. Its shape is repeated in the Arabic letters 'Alīf and yā'. The *lām*-*Alīf*, considered a single letter, is often compared to the sword of 'Alī.<sup>9</sup> In this depiction, it is vertically flanked by the bifurcating *Dhu'l-faqār* while the letter *yā*' is horizontally extended to form the *Dhu'l-faqār* below, which surmounts the lions couchant with serpents. According to some sources, 'Alī's most recognizable symbol, his 'miraculous sword' *Dhu'l-faqār*, was obtained by the Prophet Muḥammad as booty after the critical battle of Badr (623–24). He presented this sword to the person with the strongest blood ties to him at the battle of Uḥud (625). The tips of the *Alīfs* frame a Bektāshi *tāj* (literally 'crown'), the headgear of dervishes, *bābās* and *dedes*, from which the twelve-fluted *teslīm tāsh* is suspended on a fine chain.

7 Ergun, *Bektaşî sairleri ve nefesleri*, III, 35. See Ocak, ed., *Sufism and Sufis*, 272.

8 See Shani, 'Calligraphic Lions', 122–58; Zarccone, 'Lion of Alī', 104–21.

9 Aksel, *Türklerde dinî resimler*, 49, 61, 124–25.

Like other *levhas* that adorn the walls of this Naqshbandī *tekke*, this *levha* is an object of visual and textual contemplation, which contains and communicates apotropaic and mystical power to the viewer. The display of images of Muḥammad's cousin and son-in-law with his sons is a way of gaining protection and blessing. The complex interrelations of image, text and ritual supply the viewers with diagrammatic cosmologies. The visual exegesis thereby creates important new space for complementary and figurative contents and meanings, intrinsic to its composite structure, which take on a number of different roles. It speaks of the acknowledged status of 'Alī as the personification of a certain *bāṭin* (the inner or esoteric levels of correct interpretation of the verses of the Quran), the allegorical or hidden aspect of the divine intended to be transformed into visualizations within the viewers' minds. The symbolic language is a pathway which enables the viewer to bridge the physical world to the spiritual realm of divine truth. A famous Prophetic dictum states, 'I am the City of Knowledge and 'Alī is its Gate; one cannot enter a city without passing through the gate.'<sup>10</sup> In this continuous and interdefinable process 'Muḥammad and 'Alī' are considered to be two names of the same person and seen as special manifestations of the same divine reality. Owing to their inherent talismanic power as carriers of blessings, or *baraka*, amulets, composed from the written names of Muḥammad and 'Alī, became (and remain) popular in the Balkans.<sup>11</sup>

According to the renowned Qādirī Šejh Fejzulah Hadžibajrić (d. 1990) of the Hajji Sinan Tekke (Hadži Sinanova Tekija) in Sarajevo, one of the foremost figures in the revival of Sufism in Bosnia-Herzegovina, the four fundamental stages for mystics, *sharī'a*, *ṭarīqa*, *ḥaqīqa* and *ma'rifa* ('*gnosis*'), are the concentric circles of the discipline of *tasawwuf* (the process of realizing ethical and spiritual ideals, literally 'becoming a Sufi').<sup>12</sup> Following mystical exegesis, Muḥammad personifies *sharī'a* and 'Alī is regarded as the *ṭarīqa* that in Muslim mysticism denotes the way which ultimately guides the Sufi from the *sharī'a* to *ḥaqīqa*, that is, to Allāh Himself (*al-Ḥaqq*; 'the Absolute Truth' or 'the True Reality'). This trinity is symbolized by the letters of the Arabic alphabet which begin their names: '*Alif*' for Allāh, *mīm* for Muḥammad, and '*ayn*' for 'Alī.

Every detail in a *tekke* has its own precisely defined symbolism. This *levha* is displayed in the antechamber to the *semā'hāne* (*samā'-khāna*) in which prayer and the spiritual practice of the Sufi *dhikr* ritual (remembrance of God's absolute unity and transcendence) are performed. As a material deposit of meaning, the prominent position of this *levha* also reflects the fact that, like most of his predecessors, the acting shaykh of this *tekke*, Šejh Husejn Hadžimejlic, is initiated into several streams of Sufi tradition.

<sup>10</sup> Birge, *Bektashi*, 173–74.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 132–34; De Jong, 'Iconography of Bektāshism', 8; Trix, 'Symmetry', 205.

<sup>12</sup> Hadžibajrić, 'Tesavvuf'.



Fig. 8.1. *Semā'hāne* at the Hajji Sinan Tekke (Hadži Sinanova Tekija), Qādiri *ṭarīqa*. Vrbanjusa district, Sarajevo, Bosnia © Photo: Sara Kuehn, 2011

At this eminent Naqshbandī *tekke*, as elsewhere in a Sufi context, animal skins, mainly of sheep but in some cases of other animals, are used as ceremonial seats (Persian *pūst*, literally *pellis*, or 'skin'; Fig. 8.1). Having served as the characteristic garb of the itinerant antinomian dervishes that populated the religious landscape in a previous time, these assume a special significance in most Sufi orders and are a vital ingredient in their strategies of ritualization. Reflecting the strength of continuity of traditional practice, the hides of the animals – which had been ritually slaughtered and skinned, and had their meat consumed on the day of the shaykh's appointment – serve as sacred spaces and as markers of mystical meditation par excellence. Before the beginning of the ritual ceremony, the disciple who carries and spreads this visual materiality of ancient practice pays homage to them. He kisses them and bows his head in salutation with the arms folded across the breast in a humble posture toward the animal skin (*pūst*) of the shaykh after laying it down. When the ritual ceremony is to be performed, the shaykh's *pūst* is spread opposite the *mihrāb* niche, the niche in the wall making up the focal point for prayer ritual in the *semā'hāne*, indicating the direction of the Ka'ba in Mecca and the direction that Muslims should face when praying. In some *ṭarīqas* (commonly translated as Sufi 'orders' or 'brotherhoods') the *pūst* of the shaykh is black, in *ṭarīqas* that have 'Alid leanings the *pūst* is red (see, for instance, the red sheepskins in a Rifā'ī context, Plate 8.2).

During the ritual practice (*dhikr*) the shaykh seated on the *pūst*, the *pūst-nishīn*, embodies 'the spiritual heir of the founder [of the order], whose qualities and powers

become inherent in him upon his succession'.<sup>13</sup> He symbolizes the presence of the founding saint of the order. Succession to the *pūst* is 'spiritual'.<sup>14</sup> As a result, dervishes ascribe to these skins miraculous powers that were imparted through the blessing and the beneficial grace of the spiritual masters who employed them.<sup>15</sup> The great respect accorded to the traditional seat of authority of the shaykh is, once again, due to the fact that it represents the spiritual master's controlled animal self (*naḥs*).

Among most brotherhoods, sections of the hides also communicate specific religious meanings and are inscribed with a specific mystical symbolism. The Naqshbandī Šejh Nijaz Džindo (head of the 'Mehmed efendiya Hafizović' Tekke in the mountains of Olovo, some 50 kilometres north-east of Sarajevo), who was initiated by Šejh Husejn Hadžimejlić, explains that the hairless parts of the hide, for instance, serve as signifiers to the disciple that he has to try harder not to be attracted to matters of this world.<sup>16</sup> For we brought nothing into this world, and it is certain that we can carry nothing out, just like the hairless parts of the animal skin. It is also said that if the *pūst-nishīn* can recognize hands on the *pūst*, it means that he is guiding, while if he can see legs he is standing. The right side of the skin is *sharī'a*, the left side is *ṭarīqa*, the middle of the *pūst* is the Love of God and also serves as a reminder of an important station of the mystical path: perseverance in patience (*ṣabr*) and the endurance of every difficulty and hardship. The middle is divided again into two parts, *ḥaqīqa* and *ma'rifa*. As mentioned above, these four terms are four gates or stations the dervish should pass on his or her path. Šejh Nijaz next talks about the meaning of the right leg, which symbolizes the alternating worship and glorification between God (*al-Ḥaqq*) and creature (*khalq*), each in service and obedience to the other. The left leg alludes to the *ḥadīth* (Prophetic tradition), which calls for the believer 'to die before dying to the world' (*mūtū qabla an tamūtū*),<sup>17</sup> and to protect the secret (*sirr*) of the *ahl al-bayt* ('the [immediate] family of the Prophet', i.e. his daughter Fāṭima, his son-in-law 'Alī, and their two sons, Ḥasan and Ḥusayn). The right hind leg mnemonically reminds the dervish never to forget the shaykh, and at times of trouble to remember to be with *al-Ḥaqq* and *ḥaqīqa*. The left hind leg, to do service to satisfy the divine precepts and decrees, and the reciprocal contentment of the *naḥs* and God (*al-Ḥaqq*). These individual terms are, themselves, endowed with a symbolic quality that is understood as an emanation of the divine, or even the incarnation of the divine, such as *Hū* ('He') and *al-Ḥaqq*.

The Naqshbandī *tekke* of Vukeljići, an oblong, two-storeyed structure, is located on a mountain slope above a deep valley. It was founded in 1781 by a native of the

13 See Trimmingham, *Sufi Orders*, 173.

14 *Ibid.*, 173.

15 Landolt, 'Gedanken', 244, 247.

16 Interview with Šejh Nijaz Džindo on 19 June 2011 at 'Mehmed efendiya Hafizović' Tekke, Olovo, Bosnia-Herzegovina.

17 See note 4 above.

village, Šejh Husejn Zukić (d. either 1798–99 or 1799–1800), as indicated by the plaque to the right of the main entrance of the *tekke*. Hanging below a panel with two large *Hū* in mirror image, this bears the inscription: ‘This retreat was built for wayfarers on the path by the heir of the Master of the Prophets, the servant of the Naqshbandī order, the preceptor of men, Šejh Husejn Zukić, the Bosnian, in the [*hijrī*] year 1195.’<sup>18</sup>

Above the Naqshbandī *tekke* are three tombs (Turkish *türbes*) that are a centre of pilgrimage for visitors from all over Bosnia and beyond. They come for remembrance (*dhikr*) and to seek blessings. Each *türbe* is constructed in the form of a simple cubic structure with a conical tiled roof, distinguished by a large *Hū* painted on the walls. The largest of the three encloses the grave of Šejh Husejn Zukić, the founder of the *tekke*. The second *türbe* houses the remains of his successor Muhamed Mejli Baba (d. 1854); and the third, six tomb occupants which include the subsequent Šejh Ḥasan Ḥilmī Baba Hadžimejlić (d. 1899) at the top, flanked on his right side by his first wife Melek, the daughter of Muhamed aga Elezović, and to his left by his sons, Hafiz Kjazim (d. 1961) and Šejh Refik (d. 1970), followed in a second row by his son Šejh Abdulatif (d. 1952) and his grandson Šejh Behaudin (d. 1996).

Rites of pilgrimage (*ziyāra*) and ritual acts of veneration have to be observed when visiting this or other blessed sites. It is generally considered *adab* (‘proper attitude’) for the worshipper to devoutly kiss the threshold at a saint’s *türbe* and to touch it with the forehead, then to kiss the sides of the doorway before crossing to enter the sanctified sphere and gain access to the spiritual power present in the sacred space. This special reverence paid to the threshold is reflected in an *ilāhī* (‘devotional song’) composed by the above-mentioned Šejh Behaiddin Hadžimejlic, who was much respected in religious circles throughout Bosnia:

I came to thy door,  
 And humbly I stood on the threshold,  
 With humility I said to thee,  
 Mercy, O Shaykh, help, O Pīr!  
 I bear the burden of (Satan) the foul  
 My sins are laid to rest with thee,  
 A command was given to me,  
 Doing, ceaseless battle with the *nafs*.  
 ‘Fulfil thy promise.  
 Mercy, O Shaykh, help, O Pīr!  
 But I was once a servant, so receive me!  
 So inscribe me in thy book.’<sup>19</sup>

18 Algar, ‘Some Notes on the Naqshbandī Tariqat’, 172 and n. 3.

19 Cited after Algar, ‘Some Notes on the Naqshbandī Tariqat’, 203 (from the original manuscript at the Vukeljići *tekke*).





Fig. 8.2. *Türbe* at Hayati Baba Tekke (Sheh Hayati Tećija), Khalwati *ṭariqa*. Kićevo, Macedonia © Photo: Sara Kuehn, 2011

In line with tradition, Sufis usually avoid touching the threshold with their feet, thought to be sullied by the dust of the profane world, and step over it with the right foot first. In order to partake in the blessing power of the saint, prayers are offered, a light is kindled, and the grave is circumambulated three times. On each circuit the hem of the cloth covering the sarcophagus is venerated by touching and the stone at the head and foot of it is kissed and touched with the forehead. The sarcophagi inside *türbes* are often covered with personal items of supplicants. Linking the piety of the dead and their presence across space and time with the aspirations of the living, it is customary for visitors, sometimes as the result of a vow, to bring towels, or other cloths, or personal belongings. These are placed on, or next to, a sarcophagus where they are kept for a while to absorb the saintly blessings (Fig. 8.2). Once the items have been retrieved, they are frequently used for beneficiary purposes such as healing.

### ‘Āshūrā’ and Sultan Nawruz

Among the important religious days at the Naqshbandī *tekke* in Vukeljići, which are also observed by all other Sufi orders in the Balkans, are the first ten days of Muḥarram, the first month of the Islamic calendar, culminating in the special and auspicious day of ‘Āshūrā’. Another important holiday is the pre-Islamic Persian practice of the celebration of the coming of spring (Sultan Nawruz), New Year’s Day on 21 March,

regarded by some as the birthday of 'Alī. The traditions surrounding 'Āshūrā' and Sultan Nawruz have ancient, sacred roots. These involve a common conceptual vocabulary, a shared 'text' around which different Sufi communities evolved, forming a kind of visual and material lingua franca in the Balkans and beyond.

'Āshūrā' revolves around the Prophet's grandson Ḥusayn ibn 'Alī who died as martyr on the day of 'Āshūrā' at the historic battle of Karbalā' (680). For the same ten days an annual period of fasting and abstinence is observed. From dawn to dusk the dervishes perform *matem* (Arabic *mātam*, or memorial services; literally 'bereavement') in mourning for Ḥusayn and other members of the Prophet's family who were martyred on the day of 'Āshūrā'. Following the example of the Jewish Day of Atonement (Hebrew *āsōr*, 'the tenth'), a day of penitence for the sins of the past year was identified by Muḥammad as a holy day of fasting. The fast, which lasts ten or, in the case of the Bektashī order, twelve days, entails abstinence from meat, for during the fast no blood can be shed, nor milk drawn, or butter churned. The water the dervishes drink is not pure but has to be mixed with drops of another substance such as tea, coffee or yogurt. The ensuing opaque colour of the beverage mnemonically recalls the dust from the sacred site of Karbalā', mimesis acting as re-enactment of the agony of scorching heat, thirst and hunger experienced then by the wounded martyrs. At the same time, by imbibing the liquid the believers partake in the ingestion of the sacred. During the fast the dervishes do not shave or cut their hair, they do not laugh or talk, and they abstain from sexual activity. After the day of 'Āshūrā' some dervishes continue with the fast for the rest of the month.

During the fast the plight of the Karbalā' fighters is evoked through a plethora of dramatic depictions in devotional songs (Turkish *ilāhiyāt*), an important vehicle for the wide dissemination of Sufi teachings. At Bektashī *tekkes* the worshippers chant:

18,000 people crave for water.  
 Karbalā' burnt with thirst, the grief wounded the soul.  
 Shāh Ḥusayn burnt with thirst.  
 Karbalā' burnt without water.  
 May the traitors be cursed  
 May the believers be blessed.  
 Those who are in trouble.<sup>20</sup>

And in many *tekkes* throughout the Balkans we hear:

Watching myself in the mirror  
 I saw 'Alī in my eyes.  
 May the line of Ḥasan and Ḥusayn continue.  
 For the love of Khadija, Fāṭima and 'Alī.<sup>21</sup>

20 See *The Day of Ashura*, a Macedonian documentary film by Elizabeta Koneska, 2005.

21 The lines are echoed in the poetry of the celebrated Bektashi poet Ḥilmi Dede Baba (d. 1907), as cited in Mélikoff, 'La divinisation d'Alī', 101–2.

During the ritual evocations and bodily manifestations of *dhikr*, the melodic nature of the recitation of special prayers (*wird*) and of the Quran is gradually amplified to increase and intensify the emotional impact and the transformative effects and implications of the performance. Immersed within structures of repetition, the rhythmic soundscape of collective recitation operates as the generator of shared partaking. The somatic representation mnemonically evokes the combat during which Ḥusayn's heavily outnumbered and underequipped forces, comprising his family and seventy-two men, were placed under siege in the desert of Karbalā', close to Kūfah in southern Iraq, and were denied access to potable water (to the Euphrates river, their only aqueous source) – an inversion of his brother Ḥasan's murder which occurred ten years earlier by poisoned water. All but two of Ḥusayn's men were slain mercilessly on the battlefield at noon on Friday 10 Muḥarram ('Āshūrā') 61/9 October 680. The Imām was decapitated, his body trampled by horses, and the women were taken prisoner. The physical suffering and painful death of Ḥusayn and the other heroes symbolize his heroic struggle against religious tyranny and corruption.

In his long poem *Qerbelaja*, which remains one of the most recited and chanted poems in Albania today, the nineteenth-century Bektāshi poet Naim Frashëri (d. 1900) appeals to the ritual and mythology of Karbalā', when Ḥusayn was killed by forces of the Umayyad caliph Yazīd ibn Mu'āwiya (r. 680–83):

O brother Albanians!  
 Come closer while crying  
 And mourn this death  
 So the light from the Lord comes [up]on you.  
 Remember Karbalā'!

The *Qerbelaja* goes on to offer material-visual knowledge of Ḥusayn's rebellion, the divinely preordained nature of his final death and ultimate triumph being understood as an epic battle culminating in the triumph of Good over Evil. Many of the customs associated with 'Āshūrā' attest to the firmly entrenched notion that 'Āshūrā' has the potential to offer blessings and deliverance from suffering. There is no doubt that the socialist Yugoslav period (1943–92) in Bosnia and Herzegovina, Macedonia and Kosovo, and the Hoxhaist regime in Albania (1944–90), have affected Sufi life in the Balkans. Sufi institutions suffered from repression, loss of lives, and substantial destruction during the war of 1992–95 in Bosnia-Herzegovina, the Kosovo conflict of 1998–99 and the civil wars in Albania (1996–97) and Macedonia (2000–1). Special importance is attached to the 'Āshūrā' feast's common social ideals, which emphasize the spirit of brotherhood and the construction of group identity. This also allows for the visualization of grief and atrocity, striking deep chords in the

different Sufi communities. By thereby tapping into the 'collective memory' and salvation history of the orders, the idea of martyrdom and the 'redemptive nature' of suffering create community among the Sufis of the various orders by linking them with events across time and space. In addition to its psychological and therapeutic significance, the iconography of this mystical and religious symbolism and its related rituals contains, as will be shown, cognitive information about the Sufi world view.

The first ten days of Muḥarram culminate in an elaborate ritual which is observed to this day in a Rifāī *tekke* in the small city of Rahovec in western Kosovo. On the seventh day of the ten-day morning period, the current shaykh, Sheh Mehdi Shehu, provides his disciples with some milk and honey, just as Ḥusayn had done for his seventy-two men at Karbalā' before they were martyred. During the *matem* the shaykh personifies Ḥusayn and wears a red *tāj*, red being the colour of Ḥusayn during his life and black after his death. On the tenth day, the day of 'Āshūrā', when Ḥusayn was raised to heaven, the shaykh himself consumes milk and honey. He then wears a black *tāj* in commemoration of the death of Imām Ḥusayn.

The *imām's* apotheosis is commemorated by a ceremonial feast which attracts many worshippers. Festive gatherings such as this involve collective propitiatory animal sacrifices (*qurbān*), carried out to secure the well-being of the entire community. Interestingly, preserved in the *türbe* of the Baniyi Dergāh of the Rifāī *ṭarīqa* in Skopje, now headed by Sheh Murtezan Murteza, are the antlers of a deer which, in about the mid-nineteenth century, is said to have offered itself as *qurbān* by miraculously entering the *tekke* grounds during 'Āshūrā' (Fig. 8.3).<sup>22</sup> With the blood of the sacrificed animal, a spot is painted on the forehead and cheeks of those that are present, especially children, for prophylactic or therapeutic purposes, blood being a powerful apotropaion denoting life and birth. The sacrificial meat is then cooked in a cauldron. The ritual food – usually a thick meat soup – is shared by all those present.

The central dish at this festive occasion however is known as Ashüre ('Āshūrā'). It is a kind of sweet soup prepared with grains, and depending on the tradition, ten, twelve or forty different types of fresh and dry fruits, which is ceremonially eaten.<sup>23</sup> The Bektashī cook these substances in twelve enormous cauldrons throughout the entire day. In popular imagination and perception, the day of 'Āshūrā' is also observed in the memory of the day when the prophet Nūḥ, the Noah of the Bible, left the ark and made the first meal on dry land after the Flood during which almost all

<sup>22</sup> This is in line with the prevalent *adab*, or proper attitude, according to which, what has been brought into a *tekke* for communal use must also remain there. See Biegman, *God's Lovers*, 19.

<sup>23</sup> For an account of the traditional ritual preparation of the "Aşüre of Muharrem" at the Sünbül Efendi Tekke at Kocamustafapaşa and the Qādirihane at Tophane in the Beyoğlu district in Istanbul, see Smith, "Aşüre", 229–31. Smith (231) also notes 'the great degree to which Shī'ī sympathies imbued the life of a *ṭarīqa*[t] generally considered to be quite orthodox'.



Fig. 8.3. Deer antlers at the *türbe* of the *tekke* of the Rifā'iyya (Teqja e Rufaive, Baniyi Dergāh). Skopje, Macedonia  
© Photo: Sara Kuehn, 2012

of Nūḥ's people were annihilated.<sup>24</sup> It also alludes to a Prophetic *ḥadīth* which says, 'My family is like Noah's ark: whoever embarks upon it reaches salvation.' According to tradition, Nūḥ's ark was three storeys high and when everybody, men and beasts, were aboard, it started sailing. It sailed for exactly five months and seventeen days until it reached dry land. However, there was wasteland around them, everything was devastated and nothing was to be found, so for the first meal they gathered the last ten grains that remained in the ark. They prepared it in honour of the moment when they saved themselves from the flood, coming out of the ark and stepping onto dry land. Observing the fast, men and beasts waited until evening to eat this 'Āshūrā'.

Some *tekke* complexes have a room which is especially reserved for preparing the dish 'Āshūrā'. The famous Hadži Sinanova Tekija of the Qādirī *ṭarīqa* located in the Vrbanjusa district in the heart of the old city of Sarajevo has a room where it has been cooked since 1640 when the *tekke* was built. The bowl in which the 'Āshūrā' is served acts as a marker by materializing the ritualization of the sacred day. It is often displayed in the *semā'hāne* of *tekkes* throughout the rest of the year, as is the case at the Potok Tekke of the Naqshbandī order in the Kovači neighbourhood in Sarajevo.

24 Quran 11:40 and 45–46; 21:76–77; 23:27; 37:76–77.

The mourning reaches a climax during the *dhikr* ritual on ‘Āshūrā’, which often lasts for several hours. The Rifā’ī and Sa’dī orders, which are well represented in Kosovo, Macedonia and Serbia, are known for their distinctly ‘physical’ *dhikr* rituals. At the beginning of the *dhikr*, special prayers (*wird*) are said. Quranic recitation is intensified in *dhikr* to increase the transformative impact of its performance and audition. Accompanied by musical instruments and singing, the ritual weaves its way from the repetitive recitation of the Quran through the acoustic symbols of *dhikr* to its essence and back again to recitation. It makes use of configurations of sounds that include diffuse verbal forms, more concise verbal forms and non-verbal utterances, varying in volume with periods of relative quiet giving way to louder sounds that gradually intensify as they rise towards a crescendo. The spiritual goal of leaving behind the multiplicity of the world to achieve ecstatic union with God is reflected in the coming together of the participants in a shared ritual context and the creation of a single ritual performance from a diverse variety of sonic and physical elements.

When these efficacious verbal formulae are recited over water or other liquids placed near the *mīhrāb* during the ritual, the verbal images are thought to have the ability to manifest the protective and providential powers of divine speech in the liquid (*tabarruk* or transmission of *baraka*). It operates on the materiality of the liquid and affects and modifies its symbolic status. The transmission infuses and invigorates the liquid and, by extension, sanctifies it allowing it to nourish both body and soul. As breath and saliva are fraught with an intense metonymy that encompasses both spiritual and physical efficacy, this special oral performance is believed to emanate exceptional powers.<sup>25</sup> Imbued with divine essence, the saliva of the shaykh is believed to have curative powers and is credited with the transmission of *baraka*. It is also thought to bear and transmit virtues and spiritual influences from the shaykh to his dervishes. The liquid placed in the *mīhrāb* during the *dhikr* is thus sometimes further sanctified by his spittle, augmenting the blessings and imbuing the liquid with benefit and protection.

The Rifā’ī *dhikr* in Rahovec is distinguished by a particular mournful and esoteric meaning embedded in the material-visual symbolism. Two of the dervishes embody Ḥusayn and his brother Ḥasan. They wear, respectively, a red and a green sleeveless vest called *ḥaydarīyā*, a term which reveals an association with Ḥasan and Ḥusayn’s father ‘Alī, who, as mentioned earlier, metamorphosed into a lion (*ḥaydar*). It is, moreover, fashioned with armholes shaped like the letter ‘ayn for ‘Alī. The vest of Ḥusayn is red, representing the martyr’s blood, while that of Ḥasan is green in reference to Ḥasan’s skin, which turned green after he was poisoned. The *ḥaydarīyā* bears

<sup>25</sup> For the example of the blessings attached to the saliva of the Prophet Muḥammad, see Chelhod, *Structures*, 188 and n. 1, and Goldziher, ‘Veneration of Saints’, 281; see also the examples in the hagiography of the Bektāshī saint, Ḥājīm Sulṭān, *Vilāyetnāme*, 72. The healing and spellbinding power of saliva as ‘potent soul-substance’ also plays an important role in the Christian scriptures. Jesus heals, for instance, through the medium of saliva mixed with earth (Mark 7:33, 8:23; John 9: 6). For further examples, see Kuehn, *Dragon*, 129, n. 142; 206.



Fig. 8.4. Red *haydariyâ* in the *semâ' hâne* at the Hadži Sinanova Tekija, Qâdiri *ṭarīqa*. Vrbanjusa district, Sarajevo, Bosnia © Photo: Sara Kuehn, 2011

yet another level of meaning: it serves as a reminder for the worshippers that the arms of a dervish are cut off because of the love of God.

During the *matem*, the shaykh himself, as mentioned earlier, personifies Ḥusayn and wears a red *ḥaydarīyā*, as do many shaykhs and their disciples throughout the Balkans and beyond, especially during the ‘Āshūrā’ *dhikr*. When the vest is not being worn during these ritual enactments, it is often displayed in Sufi *tekkes*. At the Hadži Sinanova Tekija of the Qādirīyya in Sarajevo, for instance, the red *ḥaydarīyā* is displayed opposite the *miḥrāb* in the *semā’hāne* throughout the year (Fig. 8.4). A material-visual reminder of the martyrdom of both ‘Alī and his son Ḥusayn, it is accorded a permanent presence during communal *dhikr*.

### Ways of Training the *Nafs*

Like the Qādiris, the Rifā’īs stress the association between mystical doctrine and a special bodily engagement. The activities of members of the Rifā’ī order, as noted above, are known to include charismatic feats, ecstatic performances with self-mortification, performed at moments of emotional arousal in commemoration of Ḥusayn’s martyrdom. In such moments of intoxication, they pierce their cheeks, throats and other body parts with sharp iron skewers and swords (*darb al-ṣilāḥ*; Plate 8.2 and Fig. 8.5). The order is well known for its charismatic ritual practices. The thirteenth-century Arab biographer Ibn Khallikān (d. 1282) reports Rifā’ī practices such as riding on lions, eating live snakes and walking on hot coals, and the fourteenth-century traveller Ibn Baṭṭūṭa (d. 1368–69 or 1377) records similar rituals of Rifā’ī dervishes in Wāsiṭ in Iraq.<sup>26</sup> In a contemporary account of the Mawlāwī dervishes, Aflāki (d. 1360) describes, with disapproval, the extravagances of fire-walking and snake-eating, which could be witnessed at the Sufi lodge of Sayyīd Tāj al-Dīn Aḥmad al-Rifā’ī in Konya.<sup>27</sup>

The symbolic paraphernalia (*darb al-ṣilāḥ*) that are used in the ritual piercing develop a sacred agency. Marked out for the ritual action, they embody a ‘power’ that elicits a performative mode of behaviour in the dervishes. Before employing the implements, the dervishes devoutly kiss them. The devotion accorded to these implements is underlined by the fact that they are preserved in the *miḥrāb* (Plate 8.2 and Fig. 8.5). In most cases they approach the shaykh with arms humbly folded across their breasts, whereupon it is the shaykh who inserts the implements into the cheeks of the disciples of different age groups (Fig. 8.6a). Smaller skewers are used for small male children (Fig. 8.6b), most of whom are the children of the shaykh and his relatives.

As material-visual reminders of the custom of multiple affiliation to initiatic streams of Sufi tradition, the same implements are prominently displayed in most *tekkes* throughout the Balkan peninsula, such as at the Hadži Sinanova Tekija in Sarajevo.

<sup>26</sup> Respectively Ibn Khallikān, *Wafayāt al-a’yān*, I, 153, and Ibn Baṭṭūṭa, *Tuhfat al-nuzār*, II, 274.

<sup>27</sup> Aflāki, *Manāqib al-‘arīfīn*, II, 202–3.



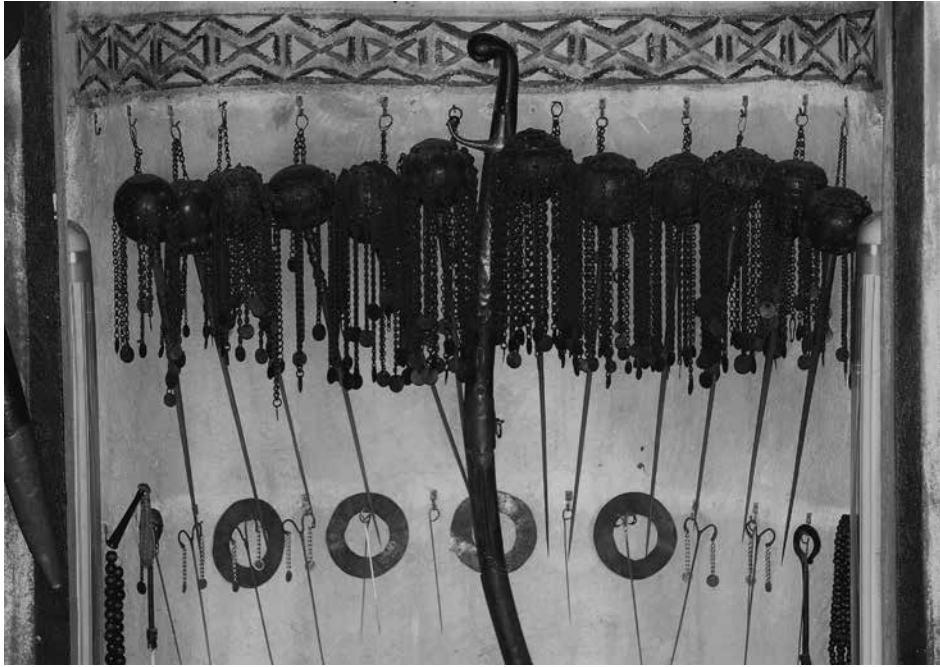


Fig. 8.5. Special ritual paraphernalia (*darb al-šilāh*) preserved in the *mihrāb* niche in the *semā' hāne, tekke* of the Rifā'īyya (Teçja e Rufaive). Prizren, Kosovo © Photo: Sara Kuehn, 2012

At some *tekkes*, such as the large Naqshbandī Tekija Mesudija, which is situated on the outskirts of Kaçuni at the foot of the path that leads to the village of Vukeljići, the weapons also serve as ritually deployed instruments. The *tekke's* Šejh Cazim Hadžimejlic, a nephew of Šejh Husejn Hadžimejlic, is initiated into the Rifā'ī tradition and thus himself practices the *darb al-šilāh* during the 'Āshūrā' *dhikr* and at other occasions.

These ritual activities are seen as a sign that the struggle with one's own *nafs* is the supreme choice. Displayed *levhas* call on the believer to take care of his or her behaviour, stating, for instance: 'Beware, the swords displayed on the wall will know if you misbehave: fight with all your being', implying that the weapons call upon the worshipper to devote his or her entire being to this struggle. The bow and arrow hanging on the wall likewise urge caution in life, representing the passing of time and the proximity of death because once an arrow is released, time cannot be recaptured.

Not only the shaykh's saliva but also his fingers are thought to transmit the power of *baraka*. The shaykh's rubbing with fingers and hands is thus an integral part of the ritual. In the Rifā'ī *tekke* in Rahovec, too, after removing the *darb al-šilāh* from the cheeks of his dervishes, Sheh Mehdi rubs their mouths with his fingers, and the sides of their cheeks inside and outside as medicament after the ritual piercing. Due to the curative power of his fingers no visible marks remain. In this way he accords the worshippers healing and protection.



Fig. 8.6 *Darb al-şilâh* during the 'Āshūrā' *dhikr* at the *semā' hāne* of a Rifā'ī *tekke*: (a) the shaykh inserts implements into the cheeks of disciples; (b) the shaykh inserts smaller skewers into the cheeks of small male children. Rahovec, Kosovo © Photos: Sara Kuehn, 2013



Fig. 8.7 *Darb al-şilāh* during the ‘Āshūrā’ *dhikr* at the *semā’hāne* of a Rifā’ī *tekke*: (a) dervishes insert sharp iron skewers into their throats and other body parts; (b) dervishes receive the blessing of the power of Şejh Mehdi’s feet; (c) a sword is placed across the dervishes’ throats; (d) other worshippers react viscerally to what the dervishes undergo. Rahovec, Kosovo © Photos: Sara Kuehn, 2013

This practice also reflects the belief that the shaykh has unconditional authority over his dervishes, who to him are ‘like a corpse in the hands of the washer of the dead.’<sup>28</sup> The charismatic austerities intensify when some dervishes insert sharp iron skewers into their throats (Fig. 8.7a) and other body parts. Then the shaykh takes a sword which hangs in the *mihrāb* and slides the blade along his lips, lacing it with his saliva. The ritual practices next involve a form of bodily engagement in which trust in the shaykh is unequivocal. First, Sheh Mehdi’s youngest son is placed with his bare feet on top of the sword blade, lifted by the dervishes who personify Ḥusayn and Ḥasan, and is carried around the *semā’hāne*. Next, as an act of blessing, the shaykh places the sword blade with its sharp edge across the bare stomach of a dervish who lies on a red sheepskin in front of the *mihrāb*. Just like his hands, the shaykh’s feet are filled with special powers, as is evident during this ‘Āshūrā’ *dhikr*. *Baraka* is inherent even in the lowest part of his body.<sup>29</sup> With the flat soles of his feet he mounts onto

<sup>28</sup> Trimmingham, *Sufi Orders*, 29 and n. 3.

<sup>29</sup> See also the so-called *dawsa* ritual which includes the trampling of prostrate adherents by a mounted shaykh of the Sa’di or Jibāwi orders founded by the grandson of Aḥmad al-Rifā’ī, ‘Izz al-Dīn Aḥmad al-Şayyād (d. 1271–72). See *ibid.*, 73, n. 2.

the sword. The ritual is repeated on several of his dervishes who, one after the other, proceed to lie down in the same place to receive the blessing of his feet's power (Fig. 8.7b). In some instances he places the sword across the recumbent dervishes' throats (Fig. 8.7c). By piercing his dervishes' cheeks or by mounting the sword blade the shaykh circulates his *baraka* reflecting his permanent emotional connection with his disciples. 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 the taming and domesticating of a dervish's *nafs*, often referred to as 'training (one's) soul' (*riyādat al-nafs*).

The spiritual power of all of the performing dervishes is expressed by the fact that there is no resultant bleeding or visible wound. A sense of immediate, assimilable and effective solidarity and shared emotion, bridging sensations and meaning, develops between the performing dervishes and the other worshippers who often react with visceral bodily responses and empathy to the perceptual forms of the performing dervishes' bodily engagements (Fig. 8.7d). The ritualization of pain and the repetition of these performative expressions of suffering thus function like 'cathartic' acts of devotion, signifying a physiological dimension of intense emotion. In this interrelational community process the religious performance celebrates the semiotic complexity of a rite of passage. By thus mastering the vulnerability of the perishable physical body, the dervishes demonstrate that, in order to experience pure love, physical passions must be mitigated, overcome and mastered. Some of the dervishes were also credited with power over scorpions and snakes (Fig. 8.8). This was still part of the ritual practice a few decades ago. It involved handling and devouring live snakes and scorpions without any pain or wound. The dervishes were said to become so transported in their prayers that they were oblivious to the bites of the venomous reptiles. Again, the symbolic significance of the ritual is the *riyādat al-nafs*.

During the feast which is served after the ritual ceremony all of the participants, including the shaykh and his guests, eat food from the same plate during the communal meal. The community of dervishes that partook in the ritual activities thereby implicitly 'share' and 'exchange' their saliva. This devotional 'ingestion' allows all those present to identify with the shaykh and the community.

As a closing point, when the worshippers take leave, the performance of bowing and hand-kissing inaugurates the final act of this ritual ceremony. The dervish kisses the shaykh's hand, which, only moments ago, had held a skewer that pierced his disciple's cheeks. By so doing, and by humbly touching it with the forehead, the dervish expresses his love, devotion and respect for the shaykh; he underscores the lifelong bond with his shaykh and seeks his blessing and protection. It symbolizes reaching the Prophet Muḥammad through the intermediate degrees of the shaykh and his shaykhs who have each performed these rituals in the past. The shaykh, in turn, extends the hand of discipleship to the dervish. Many dervishes strive to kiss the palm of the shaykh's hand and to rub their eyes and forehead on it because it is seen as the locus of a special depository of benediction indicating union with or



Fig. 8.8. Sheh Ahmed Shkodër, the most important Rifā'ī shaykh in Albania in the twentieth century. *Tekke* of the Rifā'īyya (Teqeja e Rufaije). Berat, Albania © Photo: Sara Kuehn, 2011



Fig. 8.9. 'Āshūrā' *dhikr* at the *semā' hāne* of a *tekke* of the Rifā'īyya. Rahovec, Kosovo © Photo: Sara Kuehn, 2013

the transferral or communication of spiritual power (Fig. 8.9). The religious experience of the *dhikr*, the fresh memory of the ritual acts, even the concomitant piety on display, all are inscribed in this one act of lasting potency.<sup>29</sup>

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