Sufi Devotional Aesthetics.

Fieldwork in Contemporary Sufi Communities in the Balkans

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Abstract

Through an examination of visual materiality and ritual landscapes, this study takes a multidimensional approach to unraveling the nuances of Sufi devotional aesthetics. It explores the convergence of religion and aesthetics, focusing on the sensory dimensions of religious expression. In line with the methodological trends inspired by the 'aesthetic turn,' the aim is to shed light on various facets of ethnographic experience within contemporary Sufi communities in the Balkans. Drawing on insights from a decade of fieldwork, two case studies are presented that illustrate how an immersive, multisensory, and collaborative approach to fieldwork can be effectively used to explore the instrumental role of Sufi mystical experience in shaping devotional aesthetics in the region.

Keywords

Immersive ethnography; multisensorial ethnography; ethnography and the aesthetics of religion; Sufism; self-transformation.

1. Introduction

This study employs an immersive, multisensory, and collaborative approach to fieldwork, drawing inspiration from the aesthetics of religion. To illustrate this approach, I will delve into a study of Sufi devotional aesthetics as manifested in the visual materiality and ritual landscapes of Sufi lodges (*tekke*s)[1] in the Balkans. Using two case studies drawn from a decade of fieldwork, I investigate the transformative role of Sufi mystical experience in shaping Sufi devotional aesthetics, focusing on Bosnia and Kosovo. In the first case study, I focus on the exploration of poetic aesthetics, specifically theopoetics, aiming to establish a connection between devotional practices on the one hand and modes of religious knowledge on the other. In the second case study, I examine the bodily and sensorial engagement inherent in *zikr* (Ar. *dhikr*, remembrance of Allāh), the central Sufi ritual.

Building on recent methodological tendencies inspired by the 'aesthetic turn' (Cancik and Mohr 1988; Koch 2004; Meyer and Verrips 2008; Grieser and Johnston 2017), my aim is to explore the rich aesthetic language cultivated within Sufism, the mystical stream in Islam. The intention is to shed light on various facets of the ethnographic experience encountered during fieldwork within contemporary Sufi communities in the Balkans, and to contribute to

[1] Although the liturgical language is Arabic, the common language spoken in this and other Bosnian *tekke*s (case study 1) is Bosnian. In the Kosovar example (case study 2), it is Serbian and Albanian. Terms in italics are Bosnian/Serbian unless otherwise noted. Religious hymns (*ilahija*) in the Balkans are sung in the above languages as well as in Turkish.

a nuanced understanding of the 'lived' Sufi experience (Streib, Dinter, and Söderblom 2008, ix–xiii).

Adopting a 'participatory' lens when exploring the aesthetic dimensions of Sufism, my research addresses the complexities involved in documenting mystical experiences (Schmidt 2016). Employing an interdisciplinary methodology, this approach integrates the aesthetics of religion with the study of ritual symbols and practices, religious iconography, and visual anthropology, combining emic ('insider') and etic ('outsider') perspectives (Arweck and Stringer 2002) to navigate the intricate landscape of Sufi experience and ritual.

In my exploration of the convergence of religion and aesthetics, I emphasize the sensory dimensions integral to expressing religious beliefs. In practice, this entails studying not only texts and oral utterances, but also delving into material culture and its visual manifestations. It is against this background that Muslim mystics often integrate the senses in articulating encounters to convey their experiences with the divine, aligning bodily aspects with affective, sonic, textual, and visual sensibilities.

Within this framework, the term 'aesthetics' is used to signify *aisthesis* or cognition through sensory perception. This is inspired by the eighteenth-century German philosopher Alexander Gottlieb Baumgarten's concept of a 'science of sense-based cognition' (cf. Berleant 2005; MacDougall 2006, 95–99; Grant 2013; Griffero 2015; Grieser 2015).

2. Capturing the aesthetic dimensions of 'lived' Sufi experiences

I employ a blend of participant observation and qualitative fieldwork interviews to explore the aesthetic dimensions of 'lived' Sufi experience within distinct Sufi orders. Using semi-structured and open-ended interviews, I implement a reflective 'snowball' sampling strategy, tapping into interviewees' networks to identify relevant case studies that are often overlooked due to the closed nature of Sufi orders, which are typically accessible only to their initiated members.

To clarify this point: Access to a Sufi *tekke*, attendance at Sufi community gatherings, and participation in rituals are generally exclusive privileges granted through introduction and invitation by the respective shejh. Over time, I have cultivated a network and maintained close relationships with members of the Sufi orders that continue to enrich my own life and personal experience.

Networking is therefore an essential part of my fieldwork and a fundamental element of any successful field study. The establishment of trust within this context is paramount. Building trust and cultivating familiarity involve consistently maintaining personal connections. Regular visits to the Balkans allow me to remain engaged and connected with these Sufi orders.

For members within Sufi communities, this is a way of life. Once this path is chosen, Sufis (as a rule) adhere to it throughout their lives. The story of Ekrem Fočak, a dedicated Sufi even during the difficult Yugoslav period in Sarajevo, illustrates this way of life (Fig. 1). When I photographed him in 2011 (Fig. 2), he held the position of vekil at the Mlini Tekke in

Sarajevo, representing the prominent Naqshbandī Sufi shejh, Husejn Hadzimejlic, a key figure in the Bosnian Sufi community.

Fig. 1: Ekrem Fočak and his son Amir in the Nadmlini Tekke in Sarajevo, Bosnien-Herzegovina, 1978. Photo © Private Collection Ekrem Fočak

Rather than relying solely on observation and listening, I place a strong emphasis on integrating my own bodily perceptions, an approach known as 'sensing the field' (Mattes, Kasmani and Dilger 2019; cf. Mossière 2007; Conquergood 1985). By actively participating in a range of bodily practices and community life, including devotional rituals such as *zikr*, across the Balkans, I employ co-performative witnessing as a method for my fieldwork. In essence, this method involves not only observing, but also engaging and participating in the activities, rituals, or practices under study. In this way, it is a form of participant observation in which I immerse myself in the experiences of the Sufi community I am studying in order to gain a deeper and more 'empathetic' understanding of what I am studying. Translating these aesthetic perceptions and experiences into words and ethnographic descriptions

presents significant methodological challenges (Heidemann 2017, 459). Acknowledging the subjectivity and bias inherent in ethnographic work (Domínguez Diaz 2011), I navigate ambiguities and contradictions to offer nuanced, authentic, and less representational perspectives. Avoiding superficial descriptions, I aim to produce 'thick descriptions' of the field site (Geertz 1973, 3–30)[2] and offer in-depth accounts of the Sufi *zikr* ritual as a site of aesthetic experience.

Fig. 2: Ekrem Fočak as *vekil* in the Nadmlini Tekke in Sarajevo, Bosnien-Herzegovina, 2011. Photo © Sara Kuehn

[2] 'Thick description' is one of the key steps in ethnographic research (the other one being 'diagnosis') as defined by Clifford Geertz. In his words, thick description and diagnosis consist of 'setting down the meaning particular social actions have for the actors whose actions they are, and stating, as explicitly as we can manage, what the knowledge thus attained demonstrates about the society in which it is found and, beyond that, about social life as such' (Geertz 1973, 27).

This overall approach aligns with Paul Stoller's call for a sensory scholarship that engages the researcher's body and challenges the traditional separation of mind and body (Stoller 1997, xvii). Drawing on Sarah Pink's insights into sensory ethnography, I explore 'attending to the senses in ethnographic research and representation' as a way to uncover 'new routes to knowledge' (Pink 2009, 7–8). To illustrate this methodology, I will recount my participation in one of the most important religious days in a Rifāʿī Sufi *tekke* in Rahovec, Kosovo (case study 2).

Like many anthropologists and ethnographers, I use a field notebook during my fieldwork, not only to document observations but also to sketch, a practice Michael Taussig calls the 'art of sensual immediacy' (2011, 49). This is complemented by the collection of photographic and video data, which is another crucial aspect of my fieldwork (cf. Perezil 2008; Kuehn 2023; Kuehn 2021b). Roland Barthes (1980) raised questions about the nature of photography as a new anthropological object, considering whether it functions as a language, a message, or a sign. To elaborate, François Laplantine's work (2007, 51) helps to understand its generation of non-verbal knowledge, serving as a testimony of experience while assuming an illustrative and descriptive role. But unlike written records or sketches, still and moving images have the capacity to capture moments in all their complexity, while functioning as investigative tools that reveal nuanced actions or subtle gestures often overlooked by direct observation.

In keeping with a long tradition of thinking through images in anthropology, I document my sensory ethnographic observations in a series of photographs/videos, considering them as 'powerful sensational forms' (Meyer 2015). Operating in the realm of the sensitive, still and moving images convey emotions endowed with 'powers' (Freedberg 1989) that are grounded in ritual practices and imaginaries. As a dynamic and episodic medium of narrative expression with the potential to surpass the capacity of writing, these images, effectively convey emotions and can encapsulate the fervor of collective *zikr* rituals.

Despite initial hesitations about using the camera, especially during intimate moments, I recognize its potential value. Large *zikr* rituals, however, already documented by disciples (*murīd*s), journalists, and tourists, accommodate the photographer without disrupting social interactions. In this framework, visual materials hold significance for conveying symbolic insights into a Sufi community, and this applies to both photography and ethnographic video. The emergence of 'visual sociology' and 'sociology with images,' in which respondents themselves contribute photographs, supports this approach (La Rocca 2007, 37).

My photographs often capture scenes from the balcony of a *tekke*, which is typically reserved for women (Fig. 3). Occasionally, therefore, I will entrust my second camera to a male colleague or dervish who has access to the main ritual space below, allowing him to take photographs from a different angle. This is generally an important point in fieldwork: there are many things that cannot be done alone; collaboration is often necessary and can greatly enrich one's research.

Fig. 3: Observing the Ashura *zikr* of the Rifāʿī Sufi order from the balcony (front row with green headdress) of the Teqeja e Haxhi Shejh Iljazit in Rahovac, western Kosovo. Photo © Mustafa Aslanović, 2013

Such collaboration also extends to the broader social context. To stay with my example, the photographs taken during the ritual are later incorporated into interviews or shared with the respective shejh and those photographed to serve as documentation and a basis for dialogue. The photographs typically elicit commentary, foster connections that transcend textual narratives, and provide emotional depth and visual complexity while avoiding reification of the community. Finally, the sharing of photographs builds trust.

The key source categories underpinning my fieldwork include: 1) rituals, encompassing both enacted and textual components; 2) mystical texts in Arabic, Persian, and Turkish, as well as related literature in Albanian and Serbian; 3) hagiographies, religious manuals, and calligraphy in written, visual, and enacted forms; 4) travelogues and popular literature containing narratives of Naqshbandī, Bektāshi, and Rifāʿī rituals and interactions; and 5) devotional objects such as representations of the *silsila* (genealogical chain of succession), certificates (*idžazet*, Albanian *ijaza*) of deputieship (*hilafet*) (Fig. 4), *levḥa*s or prints displayed on the walls of religious structures such as *tekke*s and Sufi tombs (*türbe*s).

These sources are subjected to interdisciplinary scrutiny, using a fusion of methods from different disciplines and research fields, including cross-cultural comparative research. The theoretical framework is informed by concepts from narratology (Bal 2004), text and image studies (Barthes 1977, 32–51; Selden, Widdowson, and Brooker 2017), and viewer response theory (Freedberg 1989). In addition, an entangled history approach is applied to materials transmitted in written, visual, enacted, and oral forms, drawing insights from developments in narratology that emphasize cross-cultural perspectives.

I reinforce this approach with specialized art historical methods that integrate iconographic and symbolic analysis (Cassidy 1993, 3–15) and the interpretive decoding of signs and symbols (Johansen and Larsen 2002). It advocates a contextualized historical interpretation of materialities, drawing on my extensive practical experience in museum work.

Regrettably, there is a scarcity of studies focusing on the aesthetic language developed within the Sufi communities in the Balkans, which is particularly disheartening given the loss of invaluable visual-material religious heritage during major conflicts, including the 1992–1995 war in Bosnia-Herzegovina, the 1998–1999 Kosovo conflict, and the civil wars in Albania (1996–1997) and Macedonia (2000–2001).

Limited attention has been paid to the challenges faced by scholars conducting fieldwork within Sufi orders. Despite notable contributions to our understanding of contemporary Sufi fieldwork by anthropologists such as Katherine Pratt Ewing (1997), Victor Amaro Vicente (2007), Julia Day Howell (2007), Paulo Pinto (2010), and Pnina Werbner (2005), this area remains largely unexplored. A recent exploration by Dominik Mattes, Omar Kasmani, and Hansjörg Dilge (2019) has focused on the researcher's own senses, allowing for a comparative analysis of affect in the context of religious gatherings and practices.

My research builds on current theories and previous inquiries into Islamic aesthetics, drawing on the works of Seyyed Hossein Nasr (1987), Doris Behrens-Abouseif (1998), and José Miguel Puerta-Vílchez (2017). Positioned within an overarching interdisciplinary framework, my study aims to foster a more contextualized and embodied understanding of religious aesthetics, in line with the perspectives of Hubert Cancik and Hubert Mohr (1988), Susanne Lanwerd (2002 and 2023, 124–146), David Morgan (1998, 217–258), Birgit Meyer (2006), Jürgen Mohn (2012), and Lucia Traut and Annette Wilke (2015). In this framework, I explore the formation of sensory perception by examining the religious uses of sound, movement, smell, and taste. In doing so, I draw on work on Islamic sensescapes by Jean During (1997), Charles Hirschkind (2006), Naveeda Khan (2011), Brian Larkin (2014), Emilio Spadola (2014), Wasim Frembgen (2020), and Seema Golestaneh (2022; cf. 2012). Additionally, I examine artistic, devotional, and bodily practices aimed at nurturing the presence of the invisible world of God in the heart and mind of the believer, echoing the insights of Laura Marks (2010) and Nils Bubandt, Mikkel Rytter, and Christian Suhr (2019).

Birgit Meyer calls this activity an 'aesthetics of persuasion' that operates through 'sensational forms.' Religious sites, rituals, and material elements engage our senses and influence the unique intertwining of the senses with human experience and emotional expression. The correlation between sensation and materiality plays a key role in Meyer's (2009, 2012) conceptualization of religion as a mode of mediation. Based on her empirical study of neo-Pentecostal religious practices, Meyer contends that these groups use various sensational forms—such as language, texts, sounds, and images—to establish a direct link between congregation members and the intangible spiritual realm (Meyer 2010; also Promey 2014). Thus, an emphasis on sensational forms provides a lens through which to

comparatively examine how specific religious encounters are shaped and how they connect bodies and material aspects to the realm that extends 'beyond the ordinary' (Meyer 2012, 26).

Fig. 4: Saʿdi Shejh Ruzhdi Shehu displays his *ijaza*, Teqja e Sheh Eminit in Gjakova, Kosovo. Photo © Sara Kuehn, 2012

3. Case study 1: Poetic Aesthetics

The following case study underscores the importance of paying attention to the 'poetic aesthetics' of the culture being studied. For a fieldworker, comprehending the multifaceted dimensions of the studied milieu involves a focused exploration of the cultural poetics that permeate it. This poetics extends across various media, including oral and written communication, artistic representations, bodily performances, and even more unexpected material objects such as spiritual genealogies (see Fig. 4). The approach goes beyond conveying mere analytical or factual observations; it seeks to penetrate the deeper layers of cultural meaning, capturing the emotional, symbolic, and metaphorical dimensions of

practices and rituals. The goal is to stimulate contemplation and to allow for a more evocative and nuanced understanding of the (religious) community under investigation.

Thus, by adopting a 'poetic aesthetic' approach, I aim to create a more resonant representation of the lived experiences within the Sufi community studied. Recognizing the expansive range of expression encompassed by the poetic aesthetic can greatly enrich one's fieldwork experience.

A *levḥa* as site of aesthetic experience

In the specific context of contemporary Sufi communities in the Balkans, religious aesthetic languages, encompassing signs, symbols, and bodily expressions, often serve a pedagogical or theological purpose. *Levḥas* or prints, paintings, and calligraphies that adorn the walls and engage in an intricate dance between the visible and invisible realms, constituting integral elements of the religious culture and aesthetics within Sufi *tekke*s, such as those in the Balkans.

In the realm of Sufi devotional engagement, the term *al-ghayb*, denoting the hidden and unseen, carries profound significance. This significance is further substantiated by the integration of the *murīd*s into the Sufi genealogical chains (*silsila*) of the respective Sufi order, intricately connected to the religious authority of the shejh (see Fig. 4). These genealogical chains materialize in the form of diplomas and certificates (*idžazet*) that also adorn the walls of the *tekke* (cf. Henig 2016). During collective prayers, the entire *silsila*, traced through the Naqshbandī shejhs to the founder of the order, Bahāʾ al-Dīn Naqshband (1318–1391), and ultimately back to the family of the Prophet Muḥammad (Ehli bejt), is invoked, enriching their devotional gatherings.

The *levḥa* examined in this case study, surviving both the socialist regime and the 1992–95 war in Bosnia, aligns with what Caroline Walker Bynum identifies as 'vibrantly active stuff, a locus of divine agency' (Rosler, Bynum, Eaton et al. 2013, 12–13). Such devotional objects can influence the ritual practices of Sufi *murīd*s (e.g., Roberts and Roberts 2006; Spadola 2014) and evoke responses that are not only visual but also tactile, occasionally even gustatory, as they can be touched, caressed, or kissed. The colored print, housed in a Naqshbandi *tekke* nestled in the secluded village of Živčići amid the central Bosnian mountains, is an integral part of theopoetic devotional aesthetics, inviting in an existential way a profound contemplation of the qualities of ʿAlī ibn Abī Ṭālib, the closest male relative of the Prophet Muḥammad (Fig. 5).

The *levḥa* consists of epigraphic and figurative elements in mirror-image halves reflected on a vertical axis (Ar. *muthannā*) (Akin-Kivanc 2020). Viewed through a Sufi mode of reasoning, this epistemology sets up a contrast between a phenomenal, visible world (Ar. *zāhir*) and its esoteric meanings (Ar. *bāṭin*). Appearances in the material world have other meanings in the spiritual realm which can be deciphered by reference to esoteric teachings that are revealed only to a closed circle of initiates. Bold letters in the so-called 'doubled' style declare 'ʿAlī is Allāh.'

Fig. 5: Images from ʿAlī ibn Abī Ṭālib's life. Colored print. Naqshbandī tekke in Živčići/Vukeljići near Fojnica, founded in 1781 by Shejh Husejn Baba Zukić; headed by Shejh Husejn efendi Hadžimejlić. Photo © Sara Kuehn, 2011

The manifestation of the divine in the human countenance is revealed through the configuration of the letter *ʿayn*, which mirrors the contours of the human eye and is typically associated with ʿAlī. In this particular depiction, however, the eyes symbolize ʿAlī's two sons by Muḥammad's daughter Fāṭima: Ḥasan (shown as the right eye) and Ḥusayn (shown as the left eye). In the center of the picture, a large symbol with twelve flutes stands out. This distinguishing sign is bestowed upon a Bektāshi dervish after he or she completes discipleship and is subsequently worn around the neck. Known as the 'stone of surrender' (*teslim tash*), it signifies the unity of human individuality with the eternal truth and the surrender of human identity to the eternal truth, representing the unity of Allāh, Muḥammad, and ʿAlī.

The visual narrative within the *levḥa* depicts two significant episodes from the life of ʿAlī, the first Shiʿa imām. In the upper section, the story of ʿAlī's burial unfolds: a veiled figure leads a camel carrying a coffin. This symbolizes the Sufi mystical tradition in which ʿAlī, anticipating his demise, miraculously transports his own body on a camel to a burial site (Birge 1937, 139). Moreover, ʿAlī warned his sons, Ḥasan and Ḥusayn, not to approach a veiled man who would arrive after his death to load the coffin onto a camel for burial. When this prophecy came true, Ḥasan and Ḥusayn, driven by curiosity, nevertheless inquired about the stranger's identity. To their astonishment, the veiled man unveiled himself and revealed

himself to be none other than their father, ʿAlī. This account not only attests to ʿAlī's divine and miraculous attributes, but also casts him as the ultimate 'seer' who orchestrates his own demise for the sake of his sons.

In the lower section, the second depiction revolves around ʿAlī's metamorphosis into a lion (Ar. *al-ḥaydar*), also recognized as the triumphant lion of God (Ar. *al-asad Allāh al-ghālib*), fighting with a serpent. The fight between the lion and the serpent symbolizes an individual and collective moral struggle commonly referred to as *jihād*. This internal struggle is directed against one's lower soul (Ar. *nafs*, Bosnian *nefs*), which is considered more virtuous than physical combat, as it leads to the dissolution of the self/ego and the cultivation of an alternative consciousness.

The most iconic symbol of ʿAlī, the 'miraculous' double-bladed sword known as Dhuʾl-faqār, is prominently positioned alongside the coffin on the camel's back, constituting an integral part of the calligraphy (Yürekli-Gorkay 2015). Its distinctive shape is echoed in the configuration of the Arabic letters *ʿalīf* and *yāʾ*. Tradition holds that this sword was acquired by the Prophet Muḥammad as spoils of the decisive Battle of Badr (623–4). Later, during the Battle of Uḥud (625), the Prophet bestowed this sword upon the person with the strongest blood ties. The tips of the *ʿalīf*s frame a Bektāshi *tāj*, or crown, which serves as the distinctive headgear of dervishes.

The *levḥa*, akin to others in the Naqshbandī *tekke*, functions as an object of visual contemplation, conveying mystical power, protection, and blessing. It establishes a realm of complementary meanings, recognizing the Prophet Muḥammad's literal revelation (*zāhir*) and ʿAlī's allegorical embodiment of the divine (*bāṭin*). This conceptual framework is often associated with the prophetic saying:

> I am the city of knowledge and ʿAlī is its gate; one cannot enter a city without passing through the gate.

In this ongoing process, 'Muḥammad and ʿAlī' are perceived as two names representing the same individual and as distinctive manifestations of the same divine reality. Within the mystical interpretation, Muḥammad symbolizes *sharīʿa*, while ʿAlī is recognized as the *ṭarīqa*, signifying the path from adherence to *sharīʿa* to the ultimate realization of *ḥaqīqa*, or the direct knowledge of Allāh Himself (al-Ḥaqq).

Much like the *levḥa*, each element within a *tekke* is imbued with carefully defined symbolism. The placement of this *levḥa* in the antechamber of the central ritual space within this *tekke* serves as a tangible repository of meaning. It signifies that the *tekke*'s shejh, Husejn Hadžimejlic, one of the most senior Sufi shejhs in Bosnia, akin to his predecessors, is initiated not only into the Naqshbandī tradition but also into various other Sufi traditions. This underscores the diverse spiritual heritage and multiple influences that shape Sufi practice within this and other *tekke*s in the Balkans.

In the following case study, which focuses on an important annual ritual within a Rifāʿī Sufi community in Kosovo, the aforementioned genealogical connections (*silsila*) are

intricately interwoven with diverse sensory elements, culminating in a synaesthetic crescendo. Beyond these pivotal ritual ceremonies in Sufi communities, the shejh and his murīds routinely gather for the recitation of devotional songs (ilahija), which serve as a conduit for storytelling. Through these melodious expressions, narratives unfold, shedding light on the profound connections and relationships between the Prophet, Sufi saints, and local dervish figures recognized as 'friends of God' (*evlija*) (Fig. 6).

Fig. 6: The Rifāʿī Shejh Mehdi Shehu and his *murīd*s routinely gather for the recitation of devotional songs (*ilahija*), Teqeja e Haxhi Shejh Iljazit in Rahovac, western Kosovo. Photo © Sara Kuehn, 2012.

4. Case study 2: Ritual aesthetics

Like poetic aesthetics, a ritual aesthetic approach to ethnographic fieldwork involves a nuanced exploration of the sensory and symbolic aspects of rituals in order to uncover the aesthetic dimensions embedded in these practices. This approach involves not only studying the functional aspects of rituals, but also considering the symbolic meanings embedded in ritual performances, the use of ritual objects, and the overall aesthetic qualities that contribute to the cultural and social significance of rituals. In my research, I explore ritual as bodily performance, using 'sensuous' ethnographic observations (Stoller 1997) of rituals in Kosovo and Macedonia in 2011 and 2012. In this second case study, which focuses on the rituals of the Rifāʿī Sufi order, my primary source for this account is the sensory immediacy of the charismatic performance I witnessed on November 13, 2013.

Founded in Iraq in the late twelfth century, the Rifāʿī Sufi order is known for its distinctive 'physical' *zikr* rituals rituals, in which adherents engage in devout remembrance

of Allāh. These rituals provide a tangible and symbolic experience, fostering a spiritual connection felt within their bodies, flesh, and skin. Embracing profound asceticism, the order emphasizes virtues such as poverty, abstinence, and self-mortification, practices often characterized as a form of 'sacred pain' (Glucklich 2003; Kuehn 2021a). Contrary to popular belief, these austere practices did not originate with Aḥmad ibn ʿAlī al-Rifāʿī, the order's founder who lived in southern Iraq between 1106 and 1182. Instead, they seem to have been introduced in the thirteenth century, coinciding with the order's rise in popularity among Turkic tribes.

Sari Saltuk, arguably the most renowned warrior dervish of the thirteenth century and widely credited with spreading Islam throughout the Balkans, was a follower of the Rifāʿīyya (Kuehn 2021d; eadem 2024). This community, reputed to have performed extraordinary deeds (al-Nabhānī 1974), has survived in the Balkans and retains a substantial following to this day (Clayer 1990, 150–162, 438; Mašulović-Marsol 1992, 14–42; Popović 1993, 46–146; Biegman 2006; idem 2007, 23–25; idem 2009; Norris 2007, 70–74; Kuehn 2021a; eadem 2021c). Rifāʿī dervishes are particularly known for their charismatic performances, which include piercing their bodies with sharp metal spikes, skewers, or swords (referred to as *ijrah* or *shish*, Ar. *darḅ al-ṣilāḥ* or *darḅ al-ṣhīsh*), walking barefoot unharmed over fire or burning embers, and even swallowing glass, burning coals, or live snakes.

These practices have been consistently denounced as heterodox by the dominant Sunni *ulema*. Because of their association with Shiʿa or ʿAlī-oriented beliefs, such practices are considered un-Islamic and, since the late nineteenth century (Ernst 2005, 191–192), have been regarded as outside the sanctioned Sunni Islamic tradition of discipline and practice (Clayer 2011; Norris 2006; Popović 1985).

In the course of my fieldwork, I examined the performance of such physically demanding and potentially perilous religious sensory practices (Meyer 2008, 11–17; Hirschkind 2006, 11) that are integral to one of the most significant annual rituals of the Rifāʿī order. Unfolding over a duration of four to five hours, this ritual represents the culmination of a series of ceremonial actions. The facet that can be described as the more visceral and affective dimension of corporeal practice, as coined by Christopher Pinney (2004) as 'corpothetics,' gives rise to distinct sensory receptivities, providing insights into the Rifāʿī community's multisensory 'connection with the divine.'

Known as Ashura (Kuehn 2022), this ritual takes place on one of the most important religious days for the Rifāʿī community at the Teqeja e Haxhi Shejh Iljazit, also known as Teqeja e Haxhi Shejh Lazes, located in the small town of Rahovac in western Kosovo. The importance attached to the annual observance of Ashura underscores the influence of Shiʿi spirituality and its associated sensibilities on the Rifāʿīyya,[3] as well as on several other Sufi communities in the Balkans. This influence is also evident in the depiction of a twelve-petaled rosette on the shejh's headdress—a white felt cap adorned with a black turban (*tāj*, literally

[3] Describing the Rifāʿī position with regard to Shiʿa Islam, Shejh 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.

meaning 'crown') wrapped around it (Mašulović-Marsol 1992, 12). The twelve petals are believed to symbolize the twelve imāms, which serve as the focus of devotion for Shiʿi believers.

As mentioned above, the focus of this study is on the vivid sensory experiences derived from the charismatic performances observed on November 13, 2013. This is based on ethnographic observations emphasizing the 'sensuous' aspect, as outlined by Paul Stoller (1997), during rituals in Kosovo and Macedonia in the previous years, especially in 2011 and 2012. Having been introduced to Rifāʿī Shejh Mehdi Shehu (b. 1977) of Rahovac two years earlier by Shejh Husejn Hadžimejlic, I had the opportunity to observe some of the rituals he conducted. A year later, I obtained special permission to attend the 2013 ritual and take photographs for my research project.

As a woman, I observed the ritual from the gallery overlooking the *semaʿhane* (literally, the house of '*sema*,' Ar. *samāʿ*, meaning 'listening') of the *teqeja* (Turkish *tekke*) (see Fig. 3) - the space where prayer and the spiritual practice of the *zikr* ritual are collectively performed. In this case, therefore, I enlisted the help of a male friend, Mustafa Aslanović, who took photographs with my second camera in the *semaʿhane* itself. Utilizing these two cameras (I used a telephoto lens from the balcony), we documented central aspects of the visual sensory experience of this ritual, providing vision-derived insights into the 'sensescapes' (a term coined by David Howes 2005, 143–146) experienced by the participants. My goal was to explore the sensorially-mediated ontological dimensions and to extend the sensescapes of this ritual beyond the confines of ethnography and into other interdisciplinary territories.

The first ten days of Muḥarram, culminating in the special day of Ashura, are among the most important religious days observed by this Rifāʿī *tekke* and other Sufi orders in the Balkans and beyond. Ashura revolves around the martyrdom of Ḥusayn ibn ʿAlī, the Prophet's grandson, who was tragically killed in the historic battle of Kerbala on Ashura. During this timeframe, a fasting and abstinence period is observed annually. Dervishes perform *matem*, mourning for Ḥusayn and other members of the Prophet's family who were martyred on Ashura. This ten-day fast involves abstaining from meat, with a prohibition on shedding blood, drawing milk, or churning butter. The water consumed by the dervishes is mixed with substances like tea, coffee, or yogurt, creating an opaque drink reminiscent of the dust of Kerbala—a symbolic reenactment of the heat, thirst, and hunger experienced by the wounded martyrs. This beverage, in turn, symbolizes the ingestion of the sacred and evokes empathy for the suffering of the Kerbala fighters. Throughout the fast, dervishes abstain from shaving, hair cutting, laughter, excessive speech, and sexual activity. Dramatic depictions of the plight of the Kerbala fighters are vividly expressed in devotional songs (*ilahija*), which enhance the emotional impact and transformative effect of the performance.

The ritual evocations and physical expressions of *zikr* gradually intensify, underscoring the heroic struggle against religious tyranny and corruption symbolized by Ḥusayn's suffering and death. Religious poems, such as the nineteenth-century Albanian poet

Naim Frashëri's *Qerbelaja* and the visual narrative of Ḥusayn's rebellion, highlight the triumphant outcome of the epic battle.

The socialist Yugoslav era (1943–92) and the Hoxhaist regime in Albania (1944–90) left a significant impact on Sufi life in the Balkans. Sufi institutions bore the brunt of repression, loss of life, and substantial destruction during the conflicts in Bosnia-Herzegovina (1992–95), Kosovo (1998–99), Albania (1996–97), and Macedonia (2000–1). Despite these challenges during the socialist Yugoslav period and the Hoxhaist regime, the Ashura festival continues to unite Sufi communities, fostering a sense of brotherhood and shared identity.

The verses of *Qerbelaja* vividly recount Ḥusayn's rebellion, portraying his final demise as divinely ordained and framing it as an epic battle of good versus evil. Numerous rituals associated with Ashura underscore the deeply ingrained belief that this day holds the potential for blessings and deliverance from suffering. The communal celebration provides a platform for the visualization of grief and atrocity that resonates deeply within diverse Sufi communities. By tapping into the 'collective memory' and salvific history of the orders, the concept of martyrdom and the 'redemptive nature' of suffering cultivates a sense of community among Sufis of different orders, connecting them to common events across time and space.

On the seventh day of the ten-day mourning period, Shejh Mehdi, the shejh of the Rifāʿī *tekke* in Rahovec, observes the tradition of offering milk and honey to his *murīd*s, echoing the gesture attributed to Imām Ḥusayn. Throughout the *matem*, the shejh personifies Ḥusayn, wearing a red *tāj*, symbolizing Ḥusayn's life, and later changing to a black *tāj* to commemorate his death.

The apotheosis of Imām Ḥusayn culminates in a ceremonial feast that attracts numerous worshippers and features collective animal sacrifices (*qurbān*) for the benefit of the entire community. While sheep are the typical *qurbān*, other animals may also be used.

Interestingly, the antlers of a deer are preserved in the *türbe* of the Baniyi Derĝah of the Rifāʿī order in Skopje in North Macedonia, currently headed by Shejh Murtezan Murteza. According to legend, the deer offered itself as a *qurbān* by miraculously entering the *tekke* grounds about one hundred and fifty years ago. The antlers are now housed in the *tekke*'s *türbe*.

During the ritual, the blood of the sacrificial animal, usually a sheep, is applied to the foreheads and cheeks of the participants, especially children, for prophylactic or therapeutic purposes. In this context, blood serves as a potent apotropaic symbol, embodying the essence of life and birth. The sacrificial meat is then cooked in a cauldron, and the resulting ritual meal, often a hearty meat soup, is shared among all participants.

Sufi *zikr* ritual as site of aesthetic experience

Fieldwork is a crucial avenue for exploring aesthetic encounters, offering insights into their intricacies and meanings. By conducting thorough fieldwork, we deepen our comprehension of the complex interplay between spirituality, embodiment, and religious ritual. In exploring

this nuanced dimension, the Sufi ritual of *zikr* stands out. The second case study I present serves as a compelling illustration of the importance of sensual experience ('aesthesis') in understanding religious phenomena. I will concentrate on the Rifāʿī ritual of *zikr* in Rahovac on the special day of Ashura to underscore the central role of fieldwork in providing a comprehensive understanding of the profound impact of sensual and bodily experience and its significance in lived religious practice.

Special prayers mark the beginning of *zikr*. The recitation of the Qurʾān is intensified during *zikr*, enhancing its transformative effect as discussed earlier. Accompanied by musical instruments and chanting, the ritual progresses from the repetitive recitation of the Qurʾān through the acoustic symbols of *zikr*, reaching its essence, and then returning to recitation. This journey evolves from relatively diffuse verbal forms to more concise ones and then to the non-verbal, progressively amplifying sound intensity to a crescendo. Colors, textures, bodies, and gestures that previously dominated the visual field give way to a sonic singularity—an intricately layered ensemble of sounds that draws attention to rhythms, melodies, and resonances. The diminishing visual experience finds compensation in the resonances of the body. The various movements and gestures that visually constituted the moving circle are now manifested differently as the men interlock their arms, traversing the chain of bodies. The spiritual goal of transcending the world's multiplicity for ecstatic union with Allāh is reflected in the participants' collective convergence, forming a unified ritual performance from diverse sonic and physical elements.

When these potent verbal formulas are intoned over water or other liquids placed near the *miḥrāb* during the ritual, it is believed that the verbal images have the capacity to actualize the protective and providential attributes of divine speech within the liquid. This transmission not only nourishes and invigorates the liquid for body and soul, but also sanctifies it. Because of the profound metonymy associated with both breath and saliva, signifying spiritual and physical efficacy, this particular oral practice is believed to emanate extraordinary powers. The shejh's saliva is believed to have healing properties and is associated with the transmission of *bereket*. It is also believed to transmit virtues and spiritual influences from the shejh to his dervishes. In some cases, the liquid placed in the *miḥrāb* during *zikr* is further sanctified by his saliva, which increases the blessings and provides additional benefits and protection.

The Rifāʿī *zikr* ceremony at Rahovec is characterized by a distinctly mournful and esoteric meaning conveyed through visual symbolism. Two of the participating dervishes symbolize Ḥusayn and his brother Ḥasan. They each wear a distinctive sleeveless vest known as *ḥaydarīyā*, one in red and the other in green (see Fig. 10). This term signifies an association with ʿAlī, the father of Ḥasan and Ḥusayn, who, as noted above, is known to have turned into a lion (Arabic *ḥaydar*). As seen in the *levḥa* discussed above, the garment's armholes are shaped like the letter *ʿayn*, symbolizing ʿAlī. Ḥusayn's red vest represents the martyr's blood, while Ḥasan's green vest alludes to the color of his skin, which is said to have turned green

after he was poisoned. The *ḥaydarīyā* carries another symbolic layer, reminding the faithful that the dervish's arms were metaphorically cut off because of his deep love for God.

During the *matem*, the period of fasting, the shejh embodies Ḥusayn by donning a red *ḥaydarīyā*, a practice observed by numerous shejhs and their followers throughout the Balkans and beyond, especially during the Ashura *zikr*. Outside of these ritual contexts, the vest is often displayed in Sufi *tekke*s. In the Hadži Sinan *tekke* of the Qādirīyya order in Sarajevo, for instance, the red *ḥaydarīyā* remains on display opposite the *miḥrāb* in the *semāʾhāne* throughout the entire year (Kuehn 2019, Fig. 8.4). As a visual symbol of ʿAlī's and Ḥusayn's martyrdom, it maintains a constant presence during communal *zikr* as a poignant reminder.

Fig. 7: *Darḅ al-ṣilāḥ* during the Ashura *zikr*, Teqeja e Haxhi Shejh Iljazit in Rahovac, western Kosovo.
Photo © Sara Kuehn, 2013

Members of the Rifāʿī order engage in charismatic feats and ecstatic performances of self-mortification, especially during moments of intense bodily and emotional arousal, as a commemoration of Ḥusayn's martyrdom leading to the annihilation of the self (Kuehn 2021a). In these states of intoxication, they perform piercing rituals by inserting sharp iron spikes and swords, known as *darḅ as-ṣilāḥ*, into their cheeks, throats, and other body parts—a ritual traditionally reserved for male dervishes.

The symbolic paraphernalia itself acquires a sacred agency. Designated for ritual action, these instruments embody a 'power' that prompts a performative behavior among the dervishes. Before using these tools, the practitioners devoutly kiss them, underscoring

their profound devotion. This reverence for the instruments is underscored by the practice in some *tekke*s of keeping them in the *miḥrāb* throughout the entire year.

As the ritual reaches its climax, the dervishes approach the shejh with their arms crossed over their chests and their hands pointing toward their shoulders, a sign of humility and respect. At this juncture, the shejh proceeds to insert the implements into the cheeks of *murīd*s of various ages, using smaller skewers for young male children, many of whom are the children of the shejh and his relatives (Figs. 7 to 9).

As visual evidence of the practice of multiple affiliations with initiatic streams within Sufi traditions, the same implements are prominently displayed in numerous *tekke*s across the Balkan peninsula, such as the Hadži Sinan Tekke in Sarajevo (Kuehn 2019, fig. 8.1). In some *tekke*s, like the Naqshbandī Tekija Mesudija, these weapons are also employed as ritual instruments. For instance, the acting shejh of the *tekke*, Cazim Hadžimejlic, a nephew of Shejh Husejn Hadžimejlic, is also initiated into the Rifāʿī tradition and consequently performs ritual piercing during Ashura *zikr* and on other occasions. These ritual practices are seen as a symbolic manifestation of the crucial decision to confront one's lower self or *nefs*.

*Levḥa*s on the *tekke* walls serve as a constant reminder, urging believers to remain vigilant in their conduct. For instance:

> Beware, for the swords adorning the wall discern your actions: engage in combat wholeheartedly.

This suggests that the weapons implore the *murīd*s to devote their entire existence to the ongoing struggle. Similarly, the bow and arrow on the wall serve as a caution against recklessness in life, symbolizing the passage of time and the imminent reality of death. Once an arrow is released, the irreversibility of time becomes apparent. The exhortations emphasize the relationship between bodily and sensorial engagement and the transformation of the *nefs* in particular.

Both the saliva and the fingers of the shejh are believed to transmit the power of *bereket*. The shejh's use of his fingers is an integral part of the ritual. After removing the skewers from the cheeks of his dervishes, Shejh Mehdi rubs their mouths with his fingers and treats the sides of their cheeks, inside and out, as a remedy after the ritual piercing (see Fig. 8). Thanks to the healing properties of his fingers, no visible marks are left. In this way, he grants healing and protection to the *murīd*s, reflecting the belief that the shejh has unconditional authority over his dervishes, who are considered 'like a corpse in the hands of the washer of the dead' (cf. Biegman 2007, 14).

The charismatic austerities reach a heightened level when the shejh takes a sword hanging in the *miḥrāb*, passes the blade over his lips, and anoints it with his saliva. The subsequent ritual practices involve a physical commitment that requires unwavering faith in the shejh. First, the youngest son of Shejh Mehdi is positioned with his bare feet on the sharp blade of the sword. He is then lifted up by the dervishes symbolically enacting Ḥusayn and Ḥasan, who carry him around the *semāʾhāne* (Fig. 10). Following this embodied aesthetic, as

an act of blessing, the shejh places the sharp edge of the sword across the bare belly of a dervish lying on the ground in front of the *miḥrāb*. The dervish lies on a sheepskin, symbolically associating him with a *qurbān*, or animal sacrifice. The red color of the sheepskin reflects the ʿAlīd orientation of this Sufi community.

Fig. 8: *Darḍ al-ṣilāḥ* during the Ashura *zikr*, Teqeja e Haxhi Shejh Iljazit in Rahovac, western Kosovo. Photo © Sara Kuehn, 2013.

Fig. 9: *Darḅ al-ṣilāḥ* during the Ashura *zikr*, Teqeja e Haxhi Shejh Iljazit in Rahovac, western Kosovo. Photo © Sara Kuehn, 2013.

Fig. 10: The youngest son of Shejh Mehdi, with his bare feet on the sharp blade of the sword, paraded around the *semāʾhāne* by the dervishes, symbolically enacting Ḥusayn and Ḥasan, Teqeja e Haxhi Shejh Iljazit in Rahovac, western Kosovo. Photo © Sara Kuehn, 2013

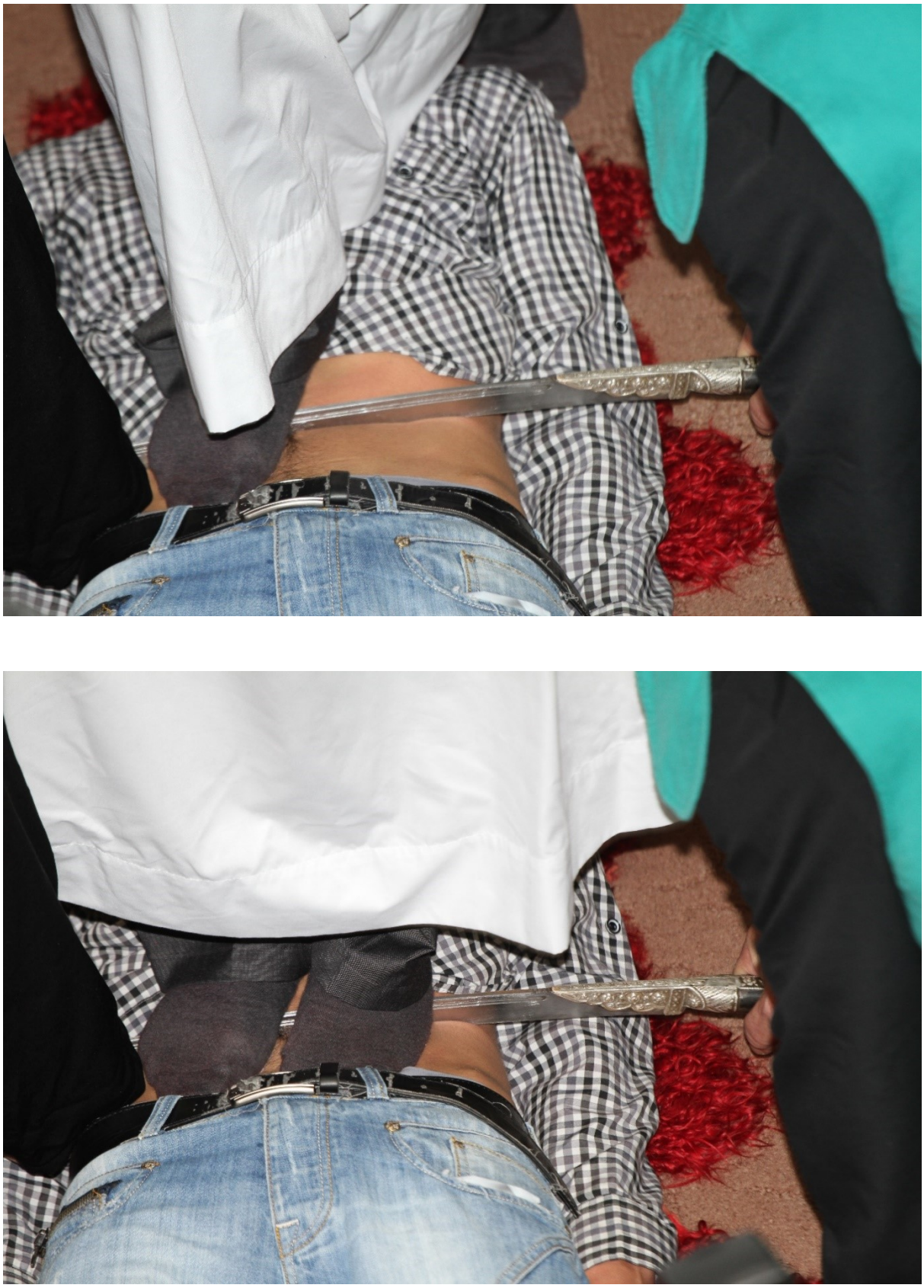
Just like his hands, the shejh's feet have special powers, a feature that is evident in this Ashura *zikr*. The blessing extends even to the lowest part of his body, with the shejh mounting the sword with the flat soles of his feet (Figs. 11 and 12). The ritual is repeated on several of his dervishes who, one after another, lie down in the same place to receive the empowering blessing from the shejh's feet. In some cases, he positions the sword across the throats of the reclining dervishes. By either piercing the dervishes' cheeks or holding the blade of his sword, the shejh circulates his *bereket*, demonstrating his constant emotional connection with his *murīd*s. The shejh's entire body, along with the ritual implements he touches, is intimately linked with the taming and domestication of a dervish's lower soul, often described as the 'training of (one's) soul' (Ar. *riyāḍat al-nafs*).

The spiritual potency of all participating dervishes is evident in the absence of bleeding or visible wounds. It would be dishonorable for a dervish to show any sign of blood. A profound sense of immediate, absorbable, and impactful solidarity, arises between the performing dervishes and the other participants, creating a connection between sensation and meaning. The latter often respond with visceral bodily reactions and empathy to the perceptual manifestations of the performing dervishes' bodily involvement. The ritualization of pain and the repetitive enactment of these expressive displays of suffering serve as 'cathartic' acts of devotion, symbolizing a physiological aspect of emotion.

In this communal interplay, religious performance exalts the semiotic intricacy of a rite of passage. By demonstrating mastery over the frailty of the transient physical body, the dervishes convey that in order to attain pure love, one must regulate, transcend, and conquer bodily passions. Some dervishes are also said to have mastery over scorpions and snakes, which were an integral part of ritual practice until a few decades ago. This involved handling and consuming live snakes and scorpions without experiencing pain or injury. The dervishes were believed to be so absorbed in their prayers that they were oblivious to the bites of the venomous reptiles. Once again, the symbolic essence of the ritual lies in the subjugation and domestication of the 'training of the soul.'

During the communal meal that follows the ritual ceremony, all participants, including the shejh and his guests, share a common plate. This collective act of eating among the community of dervishes who have actively participated in the ritual results in a symbolic sharing and exchange of saliva. Through this devotional consumption, all participants establish a sense of connection with the shejh and the community.

As the dervishes bring the ritual ceremony to a close, the concluding gesture involves bowing and kissing hands. With reverence, they kiss the shejh's hand, the same hand that moments before wielded a skewer to pierce the murīds' cheeks. By gently touching the shejh's forehead, the dervish expresses profound love, unwavering devotion, and deep respect, emphasizing the enduring bond with his shejh while seeking blessings and protection.



Figs. 11 und 12: Shejh Mehdi blesses his dervishes by mounting the sword with the flat soles of his feet during the Ashura *zikr* (the sharp edge of the sword is directed at the naked belly of the reclining dervish), Teqeja e Haxhi Shejh Iljazit in Rahovac, western Kosovo. Photo © Sara Kuehn, 2013

In response, the shejh extends the hand of discipleship to the dervish. Many dervishes aim to kiss the palm of the shejh's hand and rub their eyes and foreheads against it, recognizing it as a sacred repository of blessings, signifying a connection with or transmission of spiritual power. This single, enduring act encapsulates the religious experience of the *zikr*, the vivid memory of ritual acts, and the displayed piety—all etched into this potent moment.

5. Concluding remarks

Throughout this study, I have emphasized the potential of a comprehensive synaesthetic approach, enriched by the mediation of still and moving images, as a method of exploration, communication, and (re)presentation. This methodological choice has been exemplified through the exploration of two distinct case studies that illuminate the dynamic influence of Sufi devotional aesthetics on the construction of religious concepts. These studies delve into the intricate connections between visual materiality and landscapes of ritual, demonstrating how these elements are integral to the core principles of Sufi orders. Such a multidisciplinary, synthetic approach, coupled with visual documentation, not only enhances our understanding, but also reveals the active role that devotional aesthetics plays in shaping religious discourse within Sufi communities.

The immediate presence and multisensory nature of devotional artistic conceptualizations and their theopoetic qualities in religious practice, as exemplified in the *levḥa* discussed in case study 1, are significant. They shed light on what lies behind the veil of representation and offer a nuanced understanding of ritual and aesthetics in the Sufi context. In addition to its semantic content, the word carries what might be considered a dynamic physical force. It acts not only on the ear and the mind, but triggers an interplay of multisensory stimuli. This encounter with the aesthetic has the potential to unveil knowledge of the divine as a mode of experience rather than a product of reason.

Seeking to bridge the gap between man and God, the entire sensorial range of the body is deeply interwoven into the lived practice of the Ashura *zikr* at a Rifāʿī *tekke* in Rahovec, Kosovo (case study 2). As illustrated, *zikr* can be perceived as an 'aesthetic phenomenon' (Golestaneh 2022, 100) that emerges as a concentrated and intensified form of 'religious-aesthetic' interaction with the world, giving tangible expression to the invisible and fostering a dynamic interplay between various senses. This interaction acts as a conduit, connecting inner and outer experience, particularly evident in the realm of sensation.

In this methodological approach, the researcher's immersive bodily experience, involving all the senses during fieldwork, serves as an essential tool for capturing the immediacy and synaesthetic impact of religious performances. Subsequently, this firsthand experience helps to articulate and represent these sensory encounters. Extending beyond the boundaries of ethnography, an exploration of the ontological dimensions of a Sufi community's multisensory connection to the divine unfolds, transcending traditional disciplinary confines.

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Recommended Reading

In addition to the references cited in the text, the significant fieldwork of Jürgen Wasim Frembgen in Pakistan must be mentioned. His profound engagement with Sufism in the region over more than three decades adds particular value to his many writings. Rare insights into the often hidden world of Sufism can be found, for instance, in his books *At the Shrine of the Red Sufi: Five Days and Nights on Pilgrimage in Pakistan* (2012) and, more recently in the companion book, *We are Lovers of the Qalandar: Piety, Pilgrimage, and Ritual in Pakistani Sufi Islam* (2021). Seema Golestaneh's recent ethnographic case studies in *Unknowing and the Everyday. Sufism and Knowledge in Iran* (2023) opens doors to the affective and sensory dimensions of *maʿrifat*, or gnosis, which she describes as 'not knowing,' in Iran and its relationship to religious, aesthetic, and social life in the region. Above all, the writings of Annemarie Schimmel, especially her iconic *Mystical Dimensions of Islam*, remain among the most important and comprehensive introductions to Sufism.

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