



Tasting Islam: religious aesthetics and modernity in a contemporary Egyptian Sufi brotherhood

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ABSTRACT

This article describes the convergence of Sufi and modern traditions of thought within ritual practices in an Egyptian brotherhood and its European branches. I disentangle the different threads behind one of my interlocutor’s words and experience of *dhawq* (taste), a spiritual sense that in Sufi tradition reconnects the disciple to the divine. I argue that the way my interlocutors experience *dhawq* builds up into a form of religious aesthetics and architecture of the self that draw on the encounter with European psychological traditions. Distinctive in this encounter is that the self emerges as the location of an experience that is always, and already, an experience of transcendence, of an outside that is constitutive of selfhood. By putting into dialogue two traditions of knowledge that stand at the margins of the modern world, namely the esoteric trend of Sufi tradition and the Gestalt tradition, my interlocutors’ religious aesthetics promotes an architecture of the self that is alternative to hegemonic understandings of modern Islam structuring the contemporary Egyptian public sphere, as it foregrounds divine intervention and backgrounds individual responsibility and action.

KEYWORDS Sufism; subjectivity; transcendence; modernity; psychology

Sufism is dhawq, taste; I may explain to you what honey is Paola, but you won’t understand it until you try, words are not enough. You need to do the hadra.

Maqbul, a 45-year-old Egyptian man, Sufi disciple and *murshid* (spiritual guide) of the *tariqa* Burhaniyya, wrapped up our conversation and got ready for the lecture he was about to deliver. It was October 2006. I was in Cairo to pursue the research began some years before among the European branches of the *tariaa* Burhaniyya Dusuqiyya Shadhiliyya, an Egyptian-Sudanese Sufi brotherhood founded in the middle of the twentieth century by *Shaykh* Mohammed Uthman Abdu al-Burhani in Atbara, Sudan.

Maqbul acknowledged the limits of words in conveying the meaning of the Burhaniyya’s main weekly ritual, the *hadra*. Shortly after our conversation, during

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his lesson to the disciples, Maqbul emphasised the importance of *inshad* (praise singing) and *sama'* (active listening) within the *hadra* which, coupled with the *dhikr*, the repetition of the name of Allah, allow the disciples to actually taste Islam, beyond the scope of language.

As it often happened during fieldwork with many of my interlocutors, Maqbul praised Burhani faith and practises in an implicit move of defence against the *mutashaddidun*, as he defined them, those *wahhabi* Muslims who had spoiled the attitude of Egyptians towards Islam. Under their influence Islam had become a matter of imposition, he argued, referring to the widespread practice of *hisba* – commanding good and reproving evil – and Sufi methods lost reputation, stigmatised as backward and heterodox. Scolding the wrongdoers, however, was not at all a solution: the Burhani *shaykh* had taught that words and reprimand do not accomplish the task of drawing people to Islam, rather the opposite is true. The sweet taste, *dhawq*, attained through music and dance within the *hadra* can do the job instead, because it conveys the beauty of Islam. Islam is easy, and must be easy to live by, so he concluded.

The Burhaniyya is certainly not alone among the Sufi groups employing music and favouring sensory engagement during the *hadra* and *inshad* practices (e.g. Shannon 2003b; Shannon 2004; Tambar 2010), and the role of music within rituals is the subject matter of a long-running debate among Islamic scholars, known as the *sama' debate*. Critics of Sufism hold that music in rituals triggers emotions that distract the practitioners from the moral purpose of worship, while others speak of music's capacity to awake mystical feelings with the aim of worshipping god (Nelson [1985] 2001).

The notion of *dhawq* itself belongs to a long-standing Sufi tradition which in Ibn al-Arabi's work finds its finest illustration as a form of intuitionist knowledge reconnecting the individual to the cosmos. However, the way in which Maqbul talks about *dhawq* pushes this notion into the contemporary debate on modern Islam in Egypt and beyond. In this paper, I will disentangle the different threads behind Maqbul's words and the experience of *dhawq* within the Burhaniyya and I will argue that such notion is embedded in a religious aesthetics and an architecture of the self that draws on the encounter with European psychological traditions and that, at the same time, are built in counterpoint to hegemonic understandings of modern Islam structuring the contemporary Egyptian public sphere.¹

Burhani religious aesthetics: experiencing the self and transcendence

The *tariqa* Burhaniyya rapidly spread from Sudan to Cairo during the 1960s achieving a great success among the educated middle classes and a certain visibility among foreigners (Hoffman 1995). This availability to converts has always been a characteristic of the Burhani path. In the *Shaykh's* lessons we read: 'Allow

people to come to the *hadra*. It may be that they come because of the music, but let them read the *awrad* (litanies) and things will change.²

During the 80s and 90s, the Burhanis found themselves in the middle of a harsh debate, concerning the alleged heterodoxy and backwardness of their cosmologies and practices, which led to the ban of the brotherhood from the Egyptian National Sufi council (Hoffman 1995). It was during these same years that the Burhaniyya increased its transnational presence, founding branches in many countries. In Europe, the Burhaniyya has rapidly grown between the 70s and 80s, mostly among *New Age* spiritual seekers and religious nomads, having its foothold in particular among a group of German Gestalt psychotherapists (Lassen 2009). It is most representative of those brotherhoods that, in Europe, have a mixed affiliation, in terms of ethnic and national belonging and of the presence of converts and Muslim immigrants. The immigrants, if mainly Sudanese and Egyptian, also belong to a wide range of nationalities.

Since the 1970s, following the encounters with the European milieu, the Burhani spiritual leaders have been re-articulating the religious aesthetics of the brotherhood to touch the sensibilities of the converts. In line with an established trend in scholarship that refers to the Aristotelian notion of *aisthesis*, I understand here aesthetics as the sensory regime that produces an embodied experience of the world and an empathic knowledge of it. In this regard, aesthetics moulds 'sensing' subjects and forms of sociability. Religious aesthetics in particular, following anthropologist Meyer (2006), builds specific relations between senses, media and the transcendental, namely an (embodied) religious knowledge and sensory relation with the divine. On its turn, religious knowledge is produced and perpetrated by 'sensational forms', 'relatively fixed, authorised modes of invoking, and organising access to the transcendental' (2006, 9).

Following the encounter with European converts, Burhani religious aesthetics has given primacy to the embodied dimension of ritual praxis, enhanced by the power of music (in the forms of *inshad*-singing and *sama'* listening), while the intellectual engagement with textual sources has been backgrounded, and this for different reasons. First, most of the converts, illiterate in Arabic, approached Islamic revelation through its sonic dimension.³ As many converts told me, the sound of Burhani *qasaid* (odes), as well as the sacred sound of koranic recitation, had been crucial in drawing them to Islam. Second, in this encounter, the Burhanis have put into dialogue notions belonging to the Sufi mystical tradition – *dhawq*, taste, *zahir* (manifest reality) and *batin* (hidden reality)⁴ – with psychological notions of organismic experience linked to *Gestalt* psychology. Most importantly, through this religious aesthetics, the Burhanis advance a notion of modern Islam that foregrounds subjective embodied experience and the primacy of music in religious practice.

Within the *hadra* there must be harmony, like in an orchestra in which there are many sounds and many instruments ... if the director manages harmony among the instruments then the *sama'* produces happiness and spiritual comfort. It is

necessary to have harmony between the *munshid* (singer), the *bast* (rhythm holder) and the *dhakkira* (practitioner of *dhikr*). If there is no harmony then they will be in a vegetative state. The *munshid* has to follow the *bast*, he cannot sing a *qasida* on his own, he has to follow the sound of the clapping hands ... (Fieldnotes, Cairo October 2006)

Within the Burhaniyya, conforming to al-Ghazali's (d. 1111) arguments, *inshad* singing is considered the core of the *hadra* ritual since it employs the aesthetics of sound – thus the pleasure of the senses – with the aim of awaking mystical feelings and *dhawq*. Practicing *inshad* is to give praise to God by the act of singing, and *inshad* is the melodic performance of *sh'ir*, a poem (in praise of God). Among the poetic forms that can be used for *inshad*, the form of the *qasida* (hymn) is mostly used in Egypt and in the *tariqa Burhaniya*. A *qasida* 'becomes' *inshad* only once it is performed by a *munshid* (singer of *inshad*), following the structure of *maqamat* and *iqa'at*, melodic modes and rhythmical patterns respectively, proper of the classic Arabic musical tradition. Moreover, the *inshad* presupposes an active listening, a *sama'*, thus giving way to an aesthetic process which engages both singer and listeners, with all their senses, in the construction of a spiritual experience. In fact, as Maqbul added during our dialogue, words do not contain all the meaning. The emotional-aesthetic flow between listeners and performers is known as the *tarab* style (Racy 2003).

In the Burhani *hadra*, the *inshad* starts when practitioners, seated in a circle around the *munshid* (singer) and the *bast* (the rhythm holder), perform the *dhikr* at a steady pace together, following the hand clapping of the *bast*. During the *dhikr* performance, the *dhakkira* (performers) recite the name of *Allah* and sway their torsos from left to right following the rhythm. The recitation of the name of god in this moment is called the *dhikr al-anfas*, namely the *dhikr* of respiration, because the repetition of the word *Allah* implies a specific pattern of inspiration and expiration that, in Maqbul's words, works through the lungs on the heart. When the orchestra of sounds and movements of the *dhakkira* (performers) is ready, the *munshid* intones the *qasida*, carefully matched to the rhythm of the *dhikr* held by the *bast* (the rhythm holder). The *munshid* then progressively increases the volume and the speed of his chanting, calling for the reaction of the practitioners' bodies and voices, thus triggering a rhythmical and emotional responsiveness with the *dhakkira*.

The *munshid* sings the *qasida* in the mode of the *maqam khamsy*, a melody composed of five tones following a five-beat rhythm, *iqa' khamsy* (Sudanese-Nubian rhythm). During the *hadra*, the *munshid* uses specific performance strategies, such as melismatic improvisations (*taqsim*), that bolster the melody in order to generate an empathic interaction with the audience. The involvement of the listeners and their affective and spiritual response to the singing is expressed in particular at the *qafila* (the cadence – the pause between the lines of singing), with cries such as *ya allah*, *ya salam*. In this process the melody prevails over the words of the *qasida*, which are further covered by the *dhikr*. The

repetition of the name of Allāh, indeed, dominates with its pitch and *tempo* the ritual performance, resulting itself transformed through the respiration pattern and resounding in the phonetic form of *Hay – Hu*.

As a result of this aesthetic dialogue, the performed text differs radically from the generating text of the *qasida*, wherefore the sounds and rhythms gain primacy over the semantic order and meaning of the poem. Further, the linear logic of the words – that is to say the sense and teleology of the text – is discarded since the *munshid* breaks the sequential order of the stanzas (*buyut*) of the poem (*qasida*). He repeats some lines as refrains and chooses the stanzas he will sing on the grounds of his emotional dialogue with the *dhakkira*. This process of aesthetic selection of words and stanzas, and the amplification of specific letters and sounds is referred to, in classical Arabic music, as *taswir al-ma'na'*, literally the depiction and figuration of the meaning, sense or idea of the text (Danielson 1990–91).

From a spiritual point of view, in Maqbul's words, this is the process through which the physical sense of hearing is transformed into *sama'* (the listening), the inner sense of hearing. Through this spiritual sense, the well-trained disciples may hear the *batini*, inner symbolic meaning of the Arabic letters in which the *qasida* is written, a meaning that goes beyond the literal, semantic meaning of words, otherwise called *zahiri*, or mundane meaning. In more analytical terms the sonic dimension of language is given primacy over its semantic and referential meaning.

This religious aesthetics gives way to a specific form of subjectivity wherefore spiritual experience is essentially mediated by bodily and sensory engagement. 'Let your body *yefrah*, enjoy'. Explaining the *hadra* performance Maqbul invited his disciples to let their body express the joy experienced during the spiritual journey in the *batin*, the inner dimension of creation/life, which takes place when the *inshad* reaches its climax.

The *hadra* is like a dance, you have to be relaxed and free and do the *muraqaba* (concentration on the image of the *Shaykh*) with closed eyes; in this way, the *dhikr* and the movements of the body start. Every part of the body must be relaxed and there must be no tension. A *hadith* of the *rasul* (*sallalhu aleihi wasallam*) says that in the love of Allah there is dance. The rhythm of the *bast* should give the right pace in order to bring the disciples to Medina and Mecca ... the rhythm should carry their soul (*ruh*). The end must be slow, not sudden, because the body must have the time to come back; otherwise, it is like killing ... (Fieldnotes, Cairo October 2006)

This quote introduces us to the aim of ritual practice and to the epistemology of the senses implied by the Burhani *hadra*. Happiness and spiritual comfort are the appropriate feelings, and relaxation is the aim of ritual discipline. The ritual draws out the inner emotions and dimensions of the human being and the subject is conceived as constituted of depths and surfaces.⁵ The body is released of all tension in order to unveil the most intimate structure of the human being, his/her *fitra* (nature), where God is hidden. The aim of the mystic is to lose himself within himself, in order to find God. Sound, music and harmony show their

materiality and their agency while calling into play the deepest dimensions of the self. Moreover, for the Burhanis, and differently from mainstream Islamic reformist movements, the inner dimension of *fitra* and spiritual emotions are not something a person can discipline herself to, nor something that can be conveyed by an intellectual understanding of the sacred texts. Spirituality is an interior, immediate affair, which has to be discovered. If on the one hand this vertical understanding of the self, split between an interiority and an exteriority, recalls a modern architecture of the self (Taylor 1989) in which the spiritual is deeply seated in the inner dimension of the individual, on the other hand, the aim of Burhani spirituality is self-annihilation, the unveiling of the divine *fitra*, the transcendent nature of the human being, that reconnects the self to the cosmos.

During the ritual performance the use of different media reproduces the experience of the immediacy of spirituality: by enhancing the prevalence of the structure of sound at the expenses of referential language, the *hadra* triggers the embodied experience of the divine through the language of rhythm.⁶

The *munshid* sings the *inshad* in a microphone that increases the distortion of the text because of its loudness and the interferences and so eclipses the referential meaning of the texts. The performers detach themselves from the contingent world and transcend into the *batin*-inner dimension of existence. As Khan (2011) has suggested writing about the debated use of loudspeakers for the *azan* in Pakistan, among the possible virtues of technological mediation of sound resides the potentiality of transforming prayer and ritual into transductive experiences, entailing transcendence through the immersion in the flow of things.

Indeed, many Burhanis have enthusiastically told me that, in such moments, the most advanced among them manage to hear the *dhikr* of the world, the praising of *Allah*, in which every worldly element, animal, vegetable or mineral, is continuously engaged. Concomitantly, the performers may perceive the presence (*hadra*) of the saints, and eventually the Profet, who have joined the *dhikr* circle. At the same time, the lights are switched off and the room is softly lit only by the *fanus*, a lamp positioned at the centre of the disciples' circle that symbolises the human body. Seven metal rays covered by a green yellow and white fabric enclosing a bulb symbolise the human ribcage enclosing the heart, the disciples in the circle being the body. This symbolic composition of technological instruments and human bodies reproduces the harmony and the correspondence between human beings and the cosmos. Maqbul explained that once everything is set for the *hadra* the lights are switched off and the *fanus* is lighted. In this moment, electricity and the sounds connect the participants and get the *baraka* circulating. Together with a vertical configuration of the self, made of depths and surfaces, there is also at stake here a specific conception of spirituality as *dhawq*, an experiential knowledge of the divine that allows the disciple to finally transcend the self by diving into its depths. Through the process of *tadhawaqa* – tasting – the disciples reach the awareness of the *tawhid*, the

unity of existence, of soul and cosmos, *batin* and *zahir*; transcendence consists in a realisation of this truth for oneself, through one's own embodied experience.

Interlacing traditions

Following sociologist Salvatore (2007), Sufi tradition has generally grounded the following of the *sunna* and the Qu'ran in embodied mystical practices, sidelining *phronesis*, individual moral reasoning on texts, which is instead at the core of modern Islamic reformism. Within the tradition exemplified by Ibn al Arabi's work, *dhawq*, ritual practices and spiritual exercises are finalised to a universalisation of the self within the cosmos and ultimately to transcendence and re-compensation in the hereafter. In this perspective, the backgrounding of texts and doctrine within the strive for transcendence is proper to Sufi tradition itself. If embodied, the access to transcendence nonetheless is not conceived as immediate, but rather as the result of an engaging path of discipline: the *suluk*, the discipline and habituation of the body precedes and is preparatory to *wajd* (*extasis*).⁷

The configuration of Burhani ritual aesthetics stretches this Sufi tradition to different limits. Burhani *dhawq* entails an immediacy of the experience of the divine and, contrary to the emphasis of Sufi mystics on the *suluk*, Burhanis give primacy to the here and now of subjective embodied experience and affect, as the ultimate aim of ritual practice. There is moreover a sense of ethical immediateness that foregrounds individual existence in the here and now of society⁸ where transcendence is to be found. The aim of the Burhani method, as the *shaykh* writes in his Decalogue for the converts, is to live a virtuous existence in society and, as Maqbul said, to find the beauty of Islam in everyday life. In this sense, Burhani practice gestures towards a configuration of Muslim selfhood that, on one hand, haunts the hegemonic model of modern Muslim selfhood, by sidelining the reasoning on texts and ethical deliberation, as I will detail in the following paragraph. On the other hand, however, this configuration of religious selfhood is just as modern. Modern is, indeed, the very foregrounding of the culture of the individual self.⁹

The production of an immediate and embodied experience, the grounding of oneself, through the body, in ordinary life, and the foregrounding of spiritual awakening over habituation and discipline, are common to many contemporary spiritual (Islamic and not) religious groups.¹⁰ And music appears as a shared and central tool among the sensational forms producing transcendence. Describing the role of music within the practice of *sama'* in the context of transnational Sufism, Deborah Kapchan writes: the 'power of words does not depend on an intellectual understanding of them. Rather the songs live independently of any one interpretation. They are vehicles of the *sirr*, the secret of initiation' (2009, 78). This is all the more true in the wake of the spiritual cosmopolitanism inspired by Sufi tradition (Shannon 2003a; Kapchan 2008; Ter Laan 2012), wherefore

disciples acquire spiritual knowledge through the 'literacy of listening', building upon the sound within the words.

The Burhanis ritual aesthetics shares some features with this form of cosmopolitan spirituality although the brotherhood does not take part in the context of international music festivals in which Sufism often overlaps other forms of other forms of spirituality. It is interesting thus to discern the specific paths through which such modern tendency to foreground the embodied experience of the self encounters Burhani aesthetics and to distinguish the particular traditions that orient it, keeping in view the contextual, historical and social specificities of Islamic forms of mysticism in Egypt.

Indeed, the Burhani aesthetics has a specific genealogy embedded in recent Egyptian intellectual history that links Sufi concepts with *Gestalt* psychology. As a discourse both of burgeoning psychological schools and alternative paths of Islamic modernity, the blending of Sufi cosmology and certain elements of Ibn al-Arabi's theosophy with Western psychological traditions has had a certain relevance in the post-Second World War Egypt. In a study on the reception of Freudian psychoanalytic theories and methods in Egypt, El Shakry (2014) traces the entanglements between Sufism and pre-psychoanalytic discursive formations, and sketches the contours of a nascent integrative psychology.

The combination of approaches and notions belonging alternatively to *Gestalt-theorie*, psychoanalysis, spiritualism and Sufism gives rise to an understanding of the self as a unit of psychic, bodily and societal aspects. Opposing materialist orientations and positivist conceptions of knowledge that emphasise the rational self and its autonomy, this integrative orientation foregrounds intuition and sociality as primary dimensions of selfhood. By the same token, woven within the texture of contemporary Sufi tradition, this psychological orientation to selfhood sets off, in the 1960s, an alternative discourse on Islam and modernity that resides on the fringes of dominant understandings of Islamic modernity whereby rationality and autonomy of the self are given primacy.

Circulating in the Cairene milieu during the years of the Burhaniyya's major expansion, this discourse was reflected in the predisposition of many Burhanis to engage in dialogue with alternative psychological traditions. It took form in encounters with European converts and the formulation of a specific kind of religious experience and, more generally, of a modern religious aesthetics shaped in a dialectical relationship with hegemonic understandings of Islamic modernity. Once again, I will resort to Maqbul's words and his experiences as a travelling international teacher in order to make this point, in the last section. Before that, I will describe how the Burhaniyya relates to contemporary debates on Islam, modernity and Sufism in Egypt today, and hint at how Maqbul's words on *dhawq* also speak to such context.

Sufism and *inshād* in contemporary Egypt

In the mid-70s, Sadat adopted a new stance towards Islamist movements and reformist Islam, which had been severely curbed by the Nasserist regime, and endorsed the vocabulary of Islam within the public sphere. This ultimately contributed to setting out a definition of 'orthodox' and 'modern' Islam. And most interesting, it did so in the language of the aesthetics of Islam.

Indeed, promoting a tendency started at the inception of the modern Egyptian nation, Sadat encouraged critical and scientific thinking in Islam against rote memorisation, with the intention of spreading a form of 'domesticated', modern *and* nationally valuable Islam. Following Starret (1998), such changes resulted in two processes which underlay the definition of an Egyptian modern national religion. On one hand there was the objectification of Islam into a set of beliefs to be consciously learned rather than unconsciously apprehended. On the other hand the functionalisation of Islam through transposition of scriptures and doctrines from their field to other fields of significance, strategically serving the purposes of progress with political and social ends.

In this perspective, a 'modern proper Muslim' should be able to understand by himself textual sources, to debate them with fellow muslims and to have a say over doctrines and moral issues. The national public sphere is institutionalised as a platform of debate on definition of the national and Islamic common good (Salvatore 2007).¹¹ Implemented by public schooling, mass education, official discourses and legal doctrines, Islamic practices and sensibilities increasingly took on this specific form, and given the official link between the main Islamic institutions and state power, this form soon gained the flavour of 'orthodoxy' (Starret 1998).¹²

At the same time, following Sadat's *infitah* – the economic open-door policy that stimulated the private sector by attracting foreign capital – Egypt's mass-media, from being predominantly state-owned and centralised became a relatively unregulated, decentralised lot.¹³ Alongside Western products and *musiqā*, illegally reproduced cassettes from Saudi Arabia, printed booklets and other Islamic commodities became easily accessible to everybody. This furthered the spread of Islamic references and transformed, borrowing Hirschkind's words, the Islamic trend from 'being an organising principle within specific institutions to becoming a popular form of public practice and participation' (Hirschkind 2001, 10). Islamic virtues became subjects of everyday debates, held in taxis, in shops among friends or simply on the street.

From the point of view of ritual aesthetics, Saudi preachers and reciters (*qari*) promoted a style of quiet and direct koranic recitation style (*tilawa*), geared toward speech-bound performances: the *murattal* style (Frishkopf 2008). This progressively took the lead and replaced the prevailing Egyptian *mujawwad* style,¹⁴ a more elaborate style based on classic Arabic melodic modes (*maqamat*), *tarab*, emotional exchange with the listeners, and vocal virtuosos (Frishkopf

2009). Indeed, by excluding *maqamat*, *tarab* and virtuosos, the *murattal* style was praised for restoring the primacy of the Qu'ran literal meaning by restoring attention to the text (Nelson [1985] 2001).

Maqamat and *tarab*, and by the same token (Peterson 2008a, 2008b), *inshad* began to be perceived as being beyond the scope of religious aims since they foreground collective emotional spirituality at the expense of textual content. More generally *maqamat*, *tarab*, and *inshad*, were associated with the status of *musiqa*: pop, folklore classic and other forms of music belonging to the domain of secular entertainment.

Confronted with this situation, an increasing number of Sufi brotherhoods reformed their practices in order to distinguish them from traditional performances and folkloric entertainment. Sufi reformists argued that giving praise to the Prophet through *madih* (lauds) and *qasaid* singing is commendable if it is done in the respect of certain rules. First, singing should be practised in autonomous gatherings, independently from the basic Sufi rituals gatherings, such as the *hadra* ritual. Furthermore, it should be limited to singing texts of ascertained 'orthodox' Sufis, which concentrate on the love for the Prophet and, at the most, of his closest kin (e.g. *qasidat al-Burda*, by al-Busiri). Last but not least, *inshad* should not be aesthetically too engaging in its melodic and rhythmic performance, and instrumental accompaniment should be totally banned. The singing should be practiced in a sitting position, so as to prevent the body from being moved by unwanted affects, as it happens while listening to *musiqa*. With such bodily constraints, the performers and listeners may appropriately concentrate on the words of the praises.¹⁵ My interlocutors among the reformed brotherhoods told me about the introduction of a specific *adab al-hadra*, a behavioural etiquette made of three essential changes.¹⁶ First, melodic modes *maqamat*, instruments and *tarab* style were ruled out of ritual performance (namely, the ruling out of music and singing). Second, 'orthodox' texts were adopted, coupled with an increased attention to the semantic dimension of the performance. Third, there was a more controlled involvement of the body whereby every movement would be codified and functional to conveying a specific sacred meaning. If music and singing are to stay within Islamic praxis, they have to be morally purposeful (Winegar 2008).

In this regard, it is important to notice that such reformed Sufi aesthetics and the official state-sponsored position on religion share two features: first, they define themselves in opposition to a secular aesthetics as well as to traditional Sufi practices.¹⁷ Second, they both give primacy to the text and to a reflective relationship with the text, as a modern and orthodox form of Islamic worship, for how I have delineated it above. The text and the reflective relationship to it become the main means for reaching closeness to *Allah*. Referring back to what we discussed earlier regarding rituals as sensational forms, it may be argued that text becomes the main means of mediating the transcendental.

Language is foregrounded in its referential dimensions, as well as in its material dimensions, depending on the specific relation that is sought between reason and affects. On the material level, the text provides the rhetorical tools to habituate the body to the correct emotions. On the referential level, the actual meaning of the text communicates to the listeners the correct knowledge of Islam, binding emotions to the appropriate objects.

This configuration of ritual aesthetics, or sensational forms, following Meyer's (2006) notion of religious aesthetics, moulds specific 'sensing subjects', a specific relation between senses, media and the sacred or transcendent. Indeed, as Schielke (2012a) notes, the emphasis on textual interpretation and the habituation of the body to the correct emotions conveyed by textual meaning makes the sacred fragile and in constant need of cultivation. Piety, or virtue, is an extremely conscious state of mind that has to be constantly secured (Schielke 2012a). Thus, scriptural sources and the moral stories they contain become the ultimate means of self-confrontation. The aim of worship and ritual discipline is the achievement of virtue, intended as excellence in character, through a cumulative and progressive work of the self on the self. Here, the body and its senses are conceived as tools for embodying a specific moral physiology described in scriptural sources (Mahmood 2005; Hirschkind 2006). The modern pious Muslim is an aware (*wa'i*) person, constantly engaged in reflective practices of self-cultivation and self-scrutiny in order to secure the confines of the sacred, of the religious against the secular.¹⁸ As Mittermaier (2012) has already noted, such work of the practitioner on her/himself and self-scrutiny are at times given primacy over divine intervention, recalling to an extent a liberal understanding of individual responsibility and deliberate action.

The renewed individual engagement with textual sources among reformed brotherhoods is a phenomenon common to different national settings. As scholars have shown, it does not exclude emotional and embodied dynamics, nor does it substitute the hierarchical emotional attachment of the disciples to the *shaykh*, and the form of selfhood it presupposes carries substantial differences with respect to that presupposed within a liberal public sphere (Pinto 2004; Vicini 2014). Notwithstanding their different understanding of outer and inner expression of faith, reason and affects, individual and community, both liberal and Sufi reformist orientations within the Islamic revival advocate self-scrutiny and self-reflexivity. Consequently, scriptural sources and the moral stories they contain become the ultimate means of self-confrontation. Self-scrutiny and the reflective and epistemic relationship between the individual and text is given primacy.

Encounters and resonances

One afternoon, during a private conversation, Maqbul told me that no matter how much he tried to explain to his Egyptian disciples that *dhawq* is the essence of *inshad* and *hadra*, some of them did not really understand his lessons.

You see Paola – he explained – this is originally a Sudanese *tariqa*, and we use a Sudanese melodic mode, the *khamsy*, and we prefer Sudanese *munshidin*. Many of the Egyptian disciples want the *munshid* to sing the *qasida* to a *saba* mode (traditional Egyptian *maqam*-melodic style) rather than to the Burhani-Sudanese, *khamsy* mode, and ask the Shaykh repeatedly to name an Egyptian *munshid* rather than the traditional Sudanese *munshid*, so that his words may be more comprehensible to all. And this because, being more attuned to the *saba maqam* – that is the typical Egyptian mode – and to the Egyptian dialect, they may be sure of understanding the meaning of the *qasida* text during the *hadra*. But they don't understand, really understand, I mean.

Maqbul, at this point, guided me through an aural example. During the *hadra*, the vowels and consonants of the *dhikr* are pitched against the five beat rhythm and melody of the *khamsy* mode, and distorted by the respiration pattern: the main thing to be heard is a sequence of five I-T-A, bearing no manifest semantic meaning. But, for a person active in the performance, the rhythm triggers a mystical feeling of joy, the sound of spiritual longing-*hanin*-, that may be recomposed within the onomatopoeic word *iattaqutanga*. This onomatopoeia, he added, contains a hidden semantic meaning and it may be split into two meaningful spiritual imperatives: *ittaqi wa tanja* – have awe and you will be saved (in Arabic). At the climax of the *hadra* /*inshad* performance, this is the rhythm that opens the way to ecstasy (*wajd*) by triggering *hanin*, and at the same time, it testifies to the more sceptical, of the deep spiritual capacity of sound to connect with the divine.

While talking, Maqbul launched *Real Player* on his computer and played a song by Michael Jackson; with his hands, he kept the beat of the *iqā' khamsy*. Every song that is widely popular is based on this rhythm, the *iattaqutanga*, he explained. Not all the Sufis understand, he added, the importance of this rhythm, which amplifies the spiritual sense of listening. So every song, whether or not linked to a religious text, can be transformed into a tool of a mystical experience if it triggers *hanin*, longing. Indeed *hanin*, longing, is a stage of the *hobb* – love for Allah.

In a move of subtle cultural awareness, Maqbul then explained to me that in the context of the European branches the *shaykh* has approved the idea of recording *inshad* on the musical base of Beethoven's symphonies in order to stimulate *hanin* among the European converts. *Hanin*, Maqbul acknowledged, for him as for many other Egyptian Burhanis, was linked to that five beats rhythm which reminded them of their Sudanese links, bringing about specific memories of past experiences. But in order to trigger the same mystical feeling in

the Europeans, it is necessary to find the specific keys to their hearts and their memories, and Beethoven can do the job.

Underlying this last move, there is a complete undoing of the link between the semantic dimensions of language and mystical/religious experience. Not only is the text not important within the *inshad*, but also the onomatopoeia of *iattaqutanga*, the last anchor between semantic meaning and experiential knowledge is removed. According to Maqbul, moral progression is produced through the effects of sound on the body, which reconnects to specific 'cultural' memories and produces specific mystical emotions. Every culture has specific emotional and embodied keys. In this sense Maqbul implies that the aesthetics of *dhawq* is tied to a social aesthetics, as anthropologist Serematakis (1994) would have it: its meanings are not fixed in advance but linked to a historically and culturally variable repertoire of social and material forms and experiences. The performance of the ritual is *poetic* in the sense that it brings, synaesthetically, past memories into the present, creating a new spiritual awareness. At the same time, music, in a very Bergsonian fashion, is understood as introducing the individual to new feelings, as a mystical source of morality.

This attention to embodied memories and to the sensory landscape contains resonances of Maqbul's interactions with the Burhaniyya's European branches, and with another tradition of knowledge, phenomenological *Gestalt* psychology. For Maqbul and other international teachers of the Burhaniyya who have been travelling back and forth between Europe and Egypt, the body is a *barzakh*, the material link between *zahir* and *batin*, between mundane personal memories and spiritual emotions. This definition resonates with the holistic understanding of the *Gestalt-Theorie* or *psychologie de la forme* which maintains an organismic view of experience, as many of the converts have explicitly told me. In this perspective, perception is the product of complex interactions among various stimuli that bring about a 'form' of experience that is more than the sum of its parts. The self, in a *Gestalt*-phenomenological perspective, is understood as embedded and reproduced through its interactions with the surrounding social and material context.

Zeynab, a German sister very active in the *tariqa* and a *Gestalt* psychotherapist herself, explicitly told me that the therapeutic paradigm of *Gestalt* has many resemblances with the Burhani view of the *insan*/human being: similarly to the Burhani notion, it conceives of and works on the human being as a whole, bridging the split between body, mind, imagination and external reality, reconnecting the self to its context of everyday life. However, Zeynab clarified, Burhani faith adds another, different dimension to the *Gestalt* holistic conception: it presupposes that the body is the site of *batin*, eternal reality, another different 'outside' that the body engenders. Zeynab herself told me she had used the Burhani litanies with her patients in therapy. The sound of the Arabic letters opens up the heart and brings out its suffering memories – they trigger a therapeutic process in which *Allah* is the therapist. The blending of Sufism

and *Gestalt* psychology brings about a notion of the sacred linked to individual existential experiences, and virtue as *dhawq*, the product of an immediately embodied relationship with the divine cosmos.

Burhani modern in context

Burhani religious aesthetics speaks of the encounter of different traditions of knowledge in Europe and Egypt, such as pre-psychoanalytic discourses, Gestalt psychology, and Sufi mystical traditions. In order to trace such encounter, methodologically I have taken the cue from Omnia El Shakry's analysis of those 'quilting points', where 'terms or concepts [are] pregnant with epistemological resonances' (2014, 97) of such different forms of knowledge and the discursive formations in which they are circulated. I have explored *dhawq* as one such concept that brings into convergence Sufi tradition and Gestalt psychology, thus producing a specific architecture of the self. However, diverging from El-Shakry, my analysis relies on the resonances experienced by interlocutors in their praxis, rather than on the analysis of the 'ideological cohesion of discursive formations' (2014, 96). Indeed if the genealogy of Burhani aesthetics digs into such encounter between discursive formations, it takes a particular shape due to the disciples' experiences of transnational encounters and the necessity of positioning themselves in the contemporary context of Egyptian debate on modern Islam. The link Maqbul insists upon between music and *dhawq* and the way he explains it to me must be also related to the hardships and oppositions the Egyptian branch of the brotherhood went through, and to the kind of Islamic society that Maqbul envisions for himself and his brethren in Cairo. Given the central symbolic function of music in contemporary consumer culture,¹⁹ the different uses of music and their appropriateness in religious terms are particularly relevant for questions concerning competing definitions of modernity and morality in the public sphere. Thus, in the paper, I have paid attention also to how competing discourses on Sufi music and competing aesthetics actually bear upon on the ritual practice of a local brotherhood, and to how this brotherhood positions itself in such debate. Within Burhani practice, the materiality of sound itself is considered a vehicle of spirituality and this results in a specific use of music. Not only the folkloric *tarab*, but even at times modern and 'western' *musiqā* – such as Beethoven's symphonies – become part of ritual praxis. Burhani aesthetics results uncomfortable for different and competing parties because – in their eyes – it muddles, within the context of worship, religious and secular sensibilities.

By putting into dialogue two traditions that stand at the margins of the modern world, namely the esoteric Sufi tradition and the *Gestalt* tradition, Burhani aesthetics promotes an architecture of the modern self with a different rationality, one based on subjective embodied experience, uncertainty, and repeated experiment.²⁰ The immediacy of the experience of transcendence, as mediated

by the structure of sound, resonates with the phenomenological approach of *Gestalt* psychology where the self is the product of its interactions with the surrounding context. Here, the individual is not solely responsible for his/her life and the scope of deliberate action is limited by the role of different 'outsides', be it the *batin* or the cultural context.

By departing from the intellectual interpretation of doctrines and texts, Burhani aesthetics allows the mundane and the sacred dimensions of life to intersect and converge. These two outsides, social and divine, following Zeynab, are reconciled in aesthetic practice to the point of allowing for a secular song to convey religious experience. The modern Burhani Muslim experiences transcendence across the boundaries between the secular and the religious so defying hegemonic understandings of virtuous conduct. The emphasis on inner awaking, at the same time, sidelines the importance of deliberate action and self-scrutiny proper to the aware (*wa'i*) modern Muslim. Islam must be easy, Maqbul had told me, a conversation I recount at the very beginning of this paper.

Notes

1. In writing about modernity I refer to emic understandings of what modernity is, namely what modernity, both 'western' and not, means for my interlocutors and the people they deal with. I follow here Deeb (2006) who has suggested to leave aside the unfruitful task of defining modernity as an abstract category and instead to pay attention to how people practically approach the question of being modern and how their debates on the modern reflect and create power relations and claims of identity. This approach results particularly useful in the case of an exploration of Sufism, and even more in relation to my fieldwork.
2. Unedited collection of lessons, belonging to the Italian branch of the brotherhood.
3. In its diffusion to Europe, in the 1980s, the tariqa had to face the risk endemic to many Sufi brotherhoods of losing the charismatic power of its central authority. Alongside the difficulty of keeping the personal relation between Shaykh and disciples, an additional problem resided in the arabic illiteracy of the converts, who were thus more difficult to guide. Transliterations and a strict methodological organization of the spiritual path were needed to keep the tariqa going. The daily ritual litanies, the awrad, and the dhikr, together with the qasaid to be sang during the hadra have been transliterated in various alphabets in order to be accessible to non-arabophone disciples. At the same time the individual spiritual path has been standardized in a set of practical rules to be followed, in order to organize the tariqa in absence of a daily direct relationship between the Shaykh and his followers. This systematization actually produced a cleavage between ritual performance and intellectual engagement with the meanings of the Islamic texts, wherefore ritual performance became 'the' tool of spiritual progression. Indeed the significance of the koranic revelation is carried as much by the sound as by its semantic information. See Nelson ([1985] 2001).
4. '*zahir* and *batin*': two terms of Arabic theological and philosophical discourse, the first, *zahir*, meaning "outward, external, exoteric sense", hence "apparent, manifest sense", and the second, *batin*, its antonym, meaning "hidden, inner, esoteric sense". This pair of words occurs together four times in the Qur'an: in VI, 120, to describe the outwardness and the inwardness of a sin; in XXXI, 20, as adjectives to describe

God's blessings, both manifest and hidden; in LVII, 3, as names of God to mean that He is the Outward and the Inward [reality], and in LVII, 13, as opposites portraying both the inside as well as the outside of a thing' E.I. II ed. *El zahir wa el batin*. Whilst the '*barzakh*' is something that separates two things while never going to one side, as for example the line that separates shadow from sunlight ... there is nothing in existence that *barzakhs*, since a *barzakh* is the arrangement of one thing between two things ... and existence has no edges.' Ibn al 'Arabi, *Al-Futuhat al Makkiyya*, as quoted in Chittick (1989).

5. In Burhani anthropology the human being is conceived as potentially possessing seven inner senses or qualities belonging to the *ruh* (soul), which are awakened through ritual practice: *basira* (insight); *sama'* (the hearing); *qudra* (ability); *mutakalliman* (the speaking); *hayat* (the living/alive); *murida* (the willing); *'allima* (the knowledgeable).
6. Scholarship on media and religion has described how the use of media within rituals enhances the sensory capacities of the participants, moulding religious bodies, and how the mediation through technology is often productive of experiences of immediacy and immediate religious sensations. Among others: Hirschkind C. and Larkin B. (eds.); Meyer (2011).
7. Shannon (2004), i.e. writes extensively on the bodily discipline and the creation of moral subjectivities through aesthetics and music among Sufis in Syria. Ecstasy, he argues in line with recent works on the cultivation of Islamic moralities, is conceived as the product of an habituation of 'body-memory'. Similarly Schielke (2012a) highlights the centrality of *suluk* in the path of sufi *wajd*.
8. This sense of ethical immediateness is a shift brought about by Islamic modernist thinkers. Cfr. Smith and Haddad (2002). *The Islamic understanding of death and resurrection*, (New York: Oxford University Press 2002). Mittermaier (2012) further elaborates the link between ethical immediateness and individualist Muslim ethics.
9. This form of modern individualism is what Foucault (1983) defines the aesthetics of existence, the making of one's life a work of art. Writing about Foucault's aesthetics of existence, Hadot (1995) briefly mentions an important divergence between his and Foucault's understanding of the practices of the self (See also Vicini, in this issue). Foucault transforms a practice that in Stoic philosophy is essentially finalised to the transcendence of the self within the universal reason of nature, into a relationship of the self to the self, wherefore the ultimate goal/pleasure is found in one's own self, otherwise in one's own individual existence, as a 'form of late-twentieth century Dandyism' (1995, 211). A similar modern shift of emphasis toward the aesthetics of existence may be found in some Burhani circles.
10. Among others Bender (2010) elaborates on the genealogy of this spiritual imagination and the notion of religious experience, tracing one of its intellectual threads back to the Christian theologian Fredrich Schleiermacher who instantiates religious experience as prior and beyond structure. Bender's interlocutors further articulate this thread with New Age syncretic spiritualism and new Orientalisms.

Similarly, Burhani cosmology instantiates the immediacy of religious experience but its genealogy differs substantially and, in this sense, it brings in specific Islamic traits that emerge in the necessity to refer back to texts as sources of authority and legitimacy of their practices. This ultimately results in a continuous tension within the brotherhood between experience and textual reference. However a distinction must be made between this use of texts as legitimising references, and texts as concrete models for a continuous individual

moral confrontation. In the Burhani case texts are not used in their semantic value as means for mediating between the individual and the transcendental.

11. Following Salvatore (2001), the modern public sphere is a field of power that defines the rules for debating in public, wherefore the logic of reasoning in the interest of national good is primary. In this sense, through the processes of objectification and functionalization, Islam has been transformed into another field of debate.

Other works have argued how the Muslim public sphere does not always coincide in scope and in kind with the national public sphere i.e. writing about Sufism and public sphere in Syria, Pinto (2004) argues how Sufi forms of sociability establish existential and emotional ties between the *shaykh* and the disciples that exceed the national interest and community. In Egypt, Hirschkind (2006) describes the Muslim public sphere as a platform of debate where deliberation, rather than on disembodied rational reason, is based on the embodiment of virtuous sensibilities, and where (Muslim) civic virtue extends beyond and often conflicts with the interests and the well-being of the nation.

What is however important to retain is that the modern public sphere, national or not in scope, based or not on Muslim virtue, foregrounds textual sources and deliberation upon textual sources as modalities of correct sociability and of a modern Muslim attitude.

12. Following Asad, I intend orthodoxy as 'not a mere body of opinion but a distinctive relationship – a relationship of power. Wherever Muslims have the power to regulate, uphold, require, or adjust correct practices, and to condemn, exclude, undermine, or replace incorrect ones, there is the domain of orthodoxy' (1986, 15).
13. For a thorough account see: Armbrust (1996).
14. Egyptian *mujawwad* was the leading style of koranic recitation (*tilawa*) within the country, as well as within the many middle-eastern countries that had been receptive of the products of the groundbreaking Egyptian media industry. The Egyptian *mujawwad* is a slow-paced and melodically elaborate style that often retrieves the *maqāmāt* (melodic modes), characteristic of the 'classical Arabic music', and leaves space to the improvisation of the performer, who can lengthen the recitation with melismatic embellishments, in an emotional exchange with the listeners (*tarab*).
15. For an account of the position of Sufi brotherhoods in Egypt and Sufi reformist trends in the twentieth century see: Gilsenan (1973), De Jong (2000, 1978a, 1978b).

For an overview of the arguments of contestation of Islamic mysticism more in general see, among others: De Jong and Radtke (1998) and Sirriyeh (1999).

16. Information from the author's interviews with several Sufi Shaykh, in particular within the reformed brotherhoods: 'Ashira Mohammadiyya and Rifaiyya Sharaiyya, in 2007–2008. For the concrete changes that reformed brotherhoods implemented see also Johansen (1996) and Waugh (2008). See the *La'iha sufiyya*, 1976, for the official implementation of an 'orthodox' *adab al hadra* (etiquette in the practice of *hadra*).
17. For the definition of secular here I follow Hussein Agrama (Agrama 2012, 2010), who expands on Asad's (2003) theorization that views secularism as a state driven practice of shaping and defining religion, rather than as an actual separation between religion and politics. Framing secularism in terms of a narrative framework, rather than looking at its norms, Agrama in particular looks at 'the questions it makes indispensable to the social projects that define

modern life' (2012, 27). These questions, namely liberal questions concerning equality, freedom of belief and tolerance, become all the more important in the moment in which the state is challenged by opposing forces: to reinstate these questions means to reinforce state's power. It is in this sense that I believe Agrama's formulation is particularly useful for my analysis, which situates the rising force of the secular/religious distinction within the domain of Egyptian aesthetics, in concomitance to the rising threat of Islamist oppositions against the state.

18. As Schielke argues, the rejection of secularism from the side of the Islamists, beyond being a rejection of certain forms of civic discipline, is also the rejection of a lifeworld where the certainty of the divine is lost. In this sense, by 'centering on religious texts and individual moral agency, Islamists offer one of the most powerful and compelling ways to deal with the loss of the lifeworldly certainty that once marked the relationship of the human with the visible and invisible worlds' (2012b, 317).
19. On the different discourses on music, aesthetics and religion which populate the public sphere see Otterbeck (2008).
20. This insight is linked to the work of the Sufism and Transnational Spirituality comparative research project based at Aarhus University. See Lash (1999) for the genealogy of this alternative modernity.

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