BODILY MEDIATIONS:

Self, Values and Experience in Syrian Sufism

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The Orientalist myth of an a-historical and monolithic Islamic tradition which would determine all aspects of the individual and social life in the Muslim societies, has been systematically criticized by most of the scholars in the last three decades. Maybe the most successful anthropological work that tried to defend and to transform this view of Islam into social theory was Ernest GELLNER's *Muslim Society*, where one can read that

> Islam is the blueprint of a social order. It holds that a set of rules exists, eternal, divinely ordained, and independent of the will of men, which defines the proper ordering of society. This model is available in writing; it is equally and symmetrically available to all literate men [...] These rules are to be implemented throughout social life. (1981: 1)

The theoretical criticism of GELLNER's approach, combined with the production of empirical data through ethnographic researches, showed the plurality and dynamism of the various Islamic traditions and consolidated the methodological wisdom of thinking them through the particularities of the socio-cultural context of each ethnographic case. A large part of the recent analysis was dominated by the issue of interpretation and contextualization of the normative aspects of the Islamic tradition, focusing on how they informed religious identities and social practices[1].

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1 Edward SAID's *Orientalism* (1978) must be mentioned here because, despite having a methodological approach heavily centered on literary criticism and ignoring most of the anthropological literature, it became a major critical and theoretical reference to studies dealing with the Middle East or Islam. For other significant works on the anthropology of Islam and Middle Eastern societies see ADELKHAH (2000); ASAD (1986, 1993); CHIH (2000); EICKELMAN (1985); EICKELMAN/PISCATORI (1996); FISCHER (1980); GAFFNEY (1994); HEFNER (2000); HOFFMAN (1995); MESSICK (1993); WHITE (2003); ZAMAN (2002).

However, despite the fact that the embodied and performative aspects of authority and power relations in Islamic religious contexts were taken into account by some of the recent anthropological analysis, the emotional and corporeal dimensions of Muslim identities still remain relatively unexplored. This bias in the research can be related to assumptions shared by many social scientists about modernity, which portray the rise of bureaucratic and instrumental rationality as the main structuring forces in the social sphere. Thus, discourses and texts were valued as the main symbolic and normative arenas of modernity. Again, Gellner's analysis epitomizes this intellectualistic view of modernity, saying that "Egalitarian scripturalism is more suited to a mobile technical society than ascriptive, mediationist, manipulative spiritual brokerage" (Gellner 1981: 65). According to Gellner and his followers, the modernization of Muslim societies would enhance the importance of text-centered interpretations of Islam and, therefore, marginalize its ritualistic, embodied and emotional expressions, such as those of Sufism.

In the last decade many researches have shown that not only has Sufism persisted, but had also the capacity of internal renewal and expansion in many Muslim societies, such as Egypt, Syria and Indonesia (Geoffroy 1997; Hoffman 1995; Luizard 1991; Pinto 2004, 2004b; Howell 2001). These trends are clearly seen in the case of Egypt, where the state-controlled Sufi Council estimated a number of 3 to 5 million Sufis for a population of 65 million Egyptians in 1989 (Hoffman 1995: 13–16). These numbers give an idea of the importance of the Sufi presence in Egypt, but cannot be taken for the actual number of Egyptians affiliated to Sufi Orders, for they do not include women, who are a major force in Sufism, neither the members of non-official Sufi Orders, such as the Burhānīya, which was estimated to have 3 million members in 1976 (Hoffman 1995: 14). Also, the traditional understanding of the relation between Salafī Islam[2] and Sufism was questioned by some researches who showed overlapping areas and a multiplicity of personal, intellectual and social links connecting both forms of Islam (Geoffroy 1997: 15). In Syria, for example, many Muslim reformers – such as *šayẖ* Aḥmad Kuftarū, *šayẖ* Muḥammad Ḥabaš or *šayẖ* Sayyid Ramaḍān al-Būtī – are personally and/or intellectually connected to Sufism. There are also many links between Sufism and the politically oriented trends of the Islamic reform, which can be seen in the political

2 The Salafīya was a movement of religious reform that started in the ninteenth century and preached the return to the "original" Islamic tradition as it was enshrined in the sacred texts.

activism of Sufi *šayḫs*, such as ʻAbd al-Qādir ʻIsā from Aleppo, or in the Sufi connections of many leaders of the Syrian branch of the Muslim Brothers, such as Sayyid Hawwā (GEOFFROY 1997: 12–13; HAWWA 1979: 42–61; ʼISA 1993: 1–9). The picture of resilience and expansion of Sufism[3] – in both reformed and traditional forms – which was established by recent research done in various Muslim societies, showed that there is no incompatibility between "modernity" and emotional or embodied forms of religiosity.

Furthermore, many historical and anthropological studies done in the last decade pointed to the bodily dimension of the techniques of transmission of the scriptural tradition in the *madrasas* (Quranic schools), highlighting the embodied character of the religious authority of the *ʻulamāʼ* (religious scholars) (CHAMBERLAIN 1994: 108–151; MESSICK 1993: 75–166; ZAMAN 2002: 38–59). These studies blurred even further the borders between "text" and "body" in the Islamic tradition, pointing to the necessity of a more complex model for the understanding of how the normative framework of Islam is inscribed in the cognitive, affective, and bodily framework of the social agents. In this paper, I will first assess how this issue was dealt with in the anthropological theory. Then, I will try to advance some theoretical considerations about the relation between normative cultural systems and social practices through the analysis of ethnographic data about the construction of religious identities among Sufi communities in Syria[4].

1. Identity, Body and Self in the Anthropological Literature

The relations between the norms and values that constitute cultural systems, such as religious systems, and the social practices, choices and trajectories of the agents that are connected to them are usually thought within the framework of "identity". This category is used to mark the

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3 The fastest growing Sufi Order in Egypt during the 80's and 90's was the Burhānīya. The internal organization of this order is based on the saintly character of its leading *šayḫ*, which is proved by his capacity of performing or facilitating miraculous acts *(karamāt)* (LUIZARD 1991: 40–46). Also, power relations in the Sufi communities in Syria are structured by notions of sainthood and *baraka* (divine grace) through the ritual performance of miraculous deeds *(karamāt)* (PINTO 2004, 2004b).

4 The data analyzed in this article were collected during fieldwork research among the Sufi communities in Damascus, Aleppo and the Kurd Dagh, in Syria, from September 1999 to January 2001, and again in May 2002.

belonging of the individuals to a certain social group, usually also implying their internalization of its symbolic and normative cultural framework as the source of meaning and reasoning for social action. This way of approaching the topic constituted a major trend in the anthropological tradition from the School of Culture and Personality[5] in the 1930's to Hermeneutic Anthropology in the 70's. Culture was conceptualized as a bounded and integrated system of meanings and norms with homogeneous effects on the social actions of those who "belong" to it. The intellectualistic bias of this approach, which over-emphasized the public discourses as the main form of codification and expression of culture, had its best expression in Clifford GEERTZ's (1973: 448–552) definition of culture. He viewed culture as an ensemble of "texts", from which the anthropologist could only produce interpretations of a second or third order, because it was only the native who was able to produce first-hand accounts about the local culture (GEERTZ 1973: 15).

The main problem of this approach is that it could not provide a model for the understanding of the presence of pluralism, differences, or contradictions within a same category of "identity". It assumed that the normative force of cultural values and meanings over the practice of the agents was automatically given by its discursive enunciation. What was lacking was a theory about the mechanisms that connect and mediate between the cognitive, moral and symbolic elements that characterize the public boundaries of any particular social group – being expressed by the performative and collective aspects of "identity" – and the affective, emotional and bodily dispositions and certitudes that define the modality and the strength of the ties that bind its members as a community – labeled usually as the "self". The body is a privileged space for such analysis, because it is the arena of mediation between the normative and symbolic aspects of any given social system and the experiential and reflexive aspects of the individual biography.

The body periodically emerged as a central object for the anthropological reflection about the role of cultural or social norms in structuring the practices of the social agents. This trend goes back to Marcel MAUSS, whose groundbreaking essay "Les Techniques du Corps" was published in 1934. In this text, he developed the idea that the body is "man's first and most

5 Of course there are differences and nuances among the authors that constituted this "School". For example, Ruth BENEDICT (1959 [1934]: 46–56) presented culture as a totalizing and homogeneous normative system, while Margaret MEAD showed a more complex interplay between culture, body and psychology in the presentation of her ethnographic data about the Arapesh (1963 [1935]: 31–161).

natural technical object" (Mauss 1995 [1934]: 372) and, therefore, is invested with social values transmuted into embodied dispositions and capacities, which he defined as *habitus* (Mauss 1995 [1934]: 368–369). Mauss advanced in this text the idea that the social order is continuously produced and reproduced through the cumulative effect of the unconscious automatisms inscribed by society in the body of the agents (Mauss 1995 [1934]: 386).

Interestingly, in another text about the notions of "person" and "self" written in 1938, Mauss also pointed to the non-equivalence of the performative and public aspects of social identity, which he called "person" *(personne)*, and the emotional and reflexive ones, which he defined as "self" *(moi)* (Mauss 1995b [1938]: 333–336). However, he analyzed the relation between both spheres of the individual existence in strictly evolutionary terms, presenting a model of internalization of social norms that went from the collectively defined and performative roles of the *persona* to the morally autonomous and responsible individuality of the "self" (Mauss 1995b [1938]: 350–362). Nevertheless, despite the implicit connections between self and body in Mauss' analysis, in particular in his use of the notion of *habitus* as embodied dispositions that determined one's social behavior (Mauss 1995 [1934]: 368–369), he did not treat them as part of the same sociological problem.

The links between notions of "body" and "self" were only made explicit by later authors, such as Mary Douglas and Pierre Bourdieu, who centered their theories on the role of embodied social principles in determining social identities and practices. Mary Douglas advanced the idea of "systems of natural symbols", where symbols were cultural constructs which use the human body as a vehicle of communication in order to express values and social relations in a non-discursive way (Douglas 1996: xxxvi). Then, she focused on the process of child rearing in order to show how the primary experience of socialization produces the internalization of the guiding principles of a certain social and psychological environment, creating enduring dispositions and habits that are expressed through the body (Douglas 1996: 20–36). According to Douglas, there is always a psychological drive towards an "*experience of consonance*" between the internalized cognitive and practical dispositions and the objective social structures, leading to a constant re-thinking and re-evaluation of the dispositions created by the primary experience of socialization throughout the social trajectory of the individual (Douglas 1996: 72–79).

While Mary Douglas presented a model of construction of the self heavily centered on the internalization of social structures, Pierre Bourdieu

tried to produce a generative model that could explain both the regularities and the variation of individual actions and choices in practical settings. Bourdieu borrowed Marcel Mauss' notion of *habitus* and expanded it as a system of dispositions that determines the range of possibilities for the actions and choices of the individuals, guaranteeing the reproduction of objective social structures, but also opening possibilities for their transformation by the cumulative effect of the social practices of the agents (Bourdieu 1997: 72). According to Bourdieu, the idea of human agency based on pure rational choice is an illusion, which helps to dissimulate the pre-conscious and embodied character of the dispositions that constitute the *habitus*. These dispositions are inscribed in what Bourdieu defines as the

> socially informed body, with its tastes and distastes, its compulsions and revulsions, with, in a word, all its senses, that is to say, not only the traditional five senses – which never escape from the structuring action of social determinisms – but also the sense of necessity and the sense of duty, the sense of direction and the sense of reality, the sense of balance and the sense of beauty, common sense and the sense of sacred [...] moral sense and the sense of practicality, and so on (1997: 124).

One should add to this passage the "sense of self", understood as the cognitive, emotional and experiential certainty about one's mode of engagement with objective and subjective realities.

Bourdieu emphasized in his analysis the importance of *habitus* in reproducing objective social structures, based on the unequal distribution of economic and symbolic capital[6], through the cumulative effect of the individual actions and choices. However, he avoids the pitfalls of social determinism by introducing in his model the notions of "strategy" and "field". Bourdieu defines field as a social space of disputes where the agents compete for power and status, developing strategies to maximize their social – both symbolic and economic – capital. The cumulative effect of the most effective strategies incites the other competing agents to elaborate counter-strategies, making the structural features of the field to rest over the equilibrium of competing forces. As these forces are in a dynamic relation, their configuration might change, leading to a reorganization of power relations that structure the field (Bourdieu 1997: 183–197).

6 Bourdieu defined symbolic capital as the property of socially prized intellectual or cognitive skills and techniques of the self, such as education, artistic taste or honor, which can be converted in social prestige or power. In Bourdieu's model, symbolic and economic capital follow distinct or, even, opposed logics of acquisition and accumulation (Bourdieu 1997: 178–180).

While Bourdieu tried to combine in the notion of *habitus* the dynamics of generative analysis with the recognition of the objective structural constraints to the individual action and choices, he tended to reduce its structuring elements to the social position of the agents and its dynamics to the quest for symbolic or economic capital. Thus, there is a theoretical slippage in his model that shifts from the conceptualization of the body as a space of mediation between moral, cognitive, emotional, and material forces in the production and organization of social practices, to its presentation as a vessel for internalized social structures, which are expressed in the logic of the individual practices. Notwithstanding the fact that Bourdieu's analysis advanced in many points the understanding of social determinations over individual actions, it did not elaborate theoretically on the mechanisms which could allow the embodied dispositions to be combined and re-combined in different configurations according to each social context. Therefore, the main point missed by Bourdieu's analysis, which will be explored in this analysis, is that the cluster of generative and structural embodied principles described by the category of "self" has a certain degree of autonomy from the various social structures and power relations that inform it.

The centrality of the "self" for the understanding of the dynamics of social identities and their groups of reference was highlighted by Thomas Csordas, who defined the existential ground of cultural phenomena, such as the sacred, as the "lived body" (1990: 23). This "lived body" is constituted by the articulation of embodied experiential, moral, and cognitive elements within the framework given by the objective social structures. Thus, Csordas defines the "self" as

> an indeterminate capacity to engage or to become oriented in the world, characterized by effort and reflexivity. In this sense self occurs as a conjunction of prereflective bodily experience, culturally constituted world or milieu, and situational specificity or habitus (1997: 5).

He argues that the embodied character of experience makes it a *pre-abstract*, but not a *pre-cultural*, phenomenon in that it is a cultural construct that is not fully objectified by the cognitive and emotional categories available to the agents (Csordas 1990: 9–10).

However, Csordas rejected the criticisms coming from the scholars on semiotics – that one cannot write about experience when the data is available only in the form of language – by defining language as a medium of intersubjectivety, which can provide an "authentic access to experience" (Csordas 1997: xii). He thus reduces language to a mere symbolic indicator

of the bodily processes that constitute experience. CSORDAS' approach supposes that the various kinds of experience have clear boundaries which are expressed by the cultural categories used to describe them. This last point differs from the analysis that I propose here, in that I consider the vocabulary used to "describe" experiences to be a constitutive part of it. The categories used to signify experience also shape and define clusters of sensations and emotions felt by the agents, and at the same time provide the communicative and symbolic tools to make them public and collectively meaningful. The discipline of individual experiences according to shared models is dependent on their public display and communication through verbal and corporeal forms of language, because they allow the establishment of frameworks of comparison and/or questioning based on other people's experiences and/or on the normative principles of the social system. The corporeal and verbal expression of experiences create collective and individual memories that serve themselves as models for future experiences in a continuous process of delimitation and redefinition of the embodied framework of the "self".

I propose here that the analysis of the experiential dimension of the "self" can give a better understanding of the relation between the normative framework of religious traditions and the practices and perceptions of the agents in each social context. For, as CSORDAS pointed out, "to observe self processes, or processes of self-objectification [...] [is] to examine a series of shifting constructs of relationship among bodily experience, world and habitus" (CSORDAS 1997: 15). Thus, the analysis that I present argues that the rules, values, meanings and practices that constitute social and cultural systems, such as religion, have their normative force based on their capacity of producing, organizing and combining the cognitive, emotional and corporeal elements that constitute the agents' self. I will demonstrate these theoretical propositions by analyzing the processes and transactions involved in the embodiment of doctrinal and ritual elements of the Sufi tradition as the "religious self" of the members of a Sufi community in Aleppo, Syria.

2. Sufism in the Syrian Religious and Social Landscape

The Syrian urban centers of Aleppo, Damascus and Hama have had important Sufi communities since the Middle Ages, having harbored important figures of Sufism such as Ibn 'Arabī and *šayẖ*[7] H̱ālid an-

7 The plural of Arabic words will be done by adding an "s" to the end of the singular form of the Arabic words, the Arabic plural will be indicated into brackets at the first appearance of the word in the text.

Naqšbandī. While Syria was not the cradle of any major Sufi order *(ṭarīqa*, pl. *ṭuruq)*, Syrian Sufism has incorporated elements of Sufi traditions coming from Iran, Iraq, Egypt, Anatolia and the Maghreb (Geoffroy 1995: 216–239). Sometimes they were recombined into new religious synthesis, such as the fusion of mystical traditions of the Qādirīya and the H̱alwaṭīya orders which have existed since the 19th century in the *zāwiya al-Hilālīya* in Aleppo (Zarcone 2000: 444–451). The Sufi communities in Syria were affected by the transformations that took place in the Middle East during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, such as the rise of textually driven movements of religious reform, European imperialist policies, the rise of secular Arab nationalism, and the establishment of independent nation-states. The impact of these phenomena was differently felt in the various expressions of Sufism depending on their social basis and form of expression.

The urban elites in Syria were strongly attracted to ideologies, such as Arab nationalism or Salafī Islam, which considered Sufism to be a deviance from "true Islam" or simply a popular superstition that should disappear under the weight of modern education. The demise of the elite implied a lack of funding for the Sufi rituals, which were considered to be backward and unfit in the public sphere, a view shaped by the modernist project of the nation-state. Thus many public rituals linked to Sufism, such as the *mawlids* (saint festivals), were discontinued during the 1950's and 1960's. However, this trend did not mean an overall decline of Sufism in all strata or spheres of Syrian society. It remained an important framework for the expression and experience of Islam in the rural and popular milieus. Sufism also continued to shape personal piety among various sectors of the urban middle and upper classes, such as women and the members of the traditional merchant families. Furthermore, the connections between Sufism and the religious scholars *('ulamā')* were never completely severed in Syria, for until nowadays many religious leaders combine the functions of textual scholars with those of mystical leaders, such as Aḥmad Kuftarū, the Grand Muftī of Syria and the leader of the Kuftarīya Sufi order.

After the dissolution of the short-lived union with Egypt in 1961, the Syrian state increased its control over the Sunnī religious sphere through the organization of the Ministry of the *Awqāf* (pious endowments). This ministry became responsible for the administration of all religious endowments and, therefore, of the economic basis of the Sunnī religious establishment (Bottcher 1997: 18–19; Deguilhem 1992: 135–138). The rise of the Ba'th party into power in 1963 meant an increase in the political and ideological role of the Ministry of the *Awqāf*, which was instrumentalized in order to provide a religious legitimacy to the regime and its

nationalist policies (Deguilhem 1992: 138–139). However, despite its economic control over the religious personnel, the Ba'thist regime faced fierce resistance and opposition from the Syrian *'ulamā'*, who, besides having strong social and family ties with the traditional elite, did not approve the secular character of its socialist rhetoric and who were badly affected by some of its policies, one of which was land reform.

The consonance between class and religious discontent among the members of the Sunnī religious establishment became even stronger after Hāfiẓ al-Asad took power in 1970, for he stabilized his personal rule by creating a system of patronage along confessional, tribal and regional lines. This system privileged members of the 'Alawī sect[8], who came to hold the key positions in the regime, such as the security services, thus allowing the religious opposition to denounce the regime as sectarian (Perthes 1995: 182–183; Van Dam 1996: 62–74). The Ba'thist regime took on a repressive character and targeted the secular parties and organizations, which made the Islamic organizations, such as the Muslim Brothers[9], to become the main force active in the opposition to the state. The Syrian branch of the Muslim Brothers had strong connections with the traditional religious establishment, for most of its leaders had been trained as religious scholars and/or had been initiated in the Sufi path (Abd-Allah 1983: 95; Geoffroy 1997: 13).

Soon the repressive policies of the Ba'thist regime were targeting religious organizations as well, which was accompanied by their radicalization and organization under the leadership of the Muslim Brothers. The "Islamic Front", which was created in 1980, united various religious

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8 The 'Alawī sect is a branch of Shiism that has an esoteric interpretation of the main rituals and doctrines of Islam, which leads some Sunnī Muslims to see its followers as heretics or disbelievers *(kuffār)*. The 'Alawīs comprise 15% of the Syrian population and until the establishment of the Ba'thist regime they constituted a poor and rural community. Hāfiẓ al-Asad and his son Baššār al-Asad, who succeeded him as president of Syria in 2000, as well as a significant portion of Syria's political and military elite, belong to the 'Alawī sect (Chouet 1995: 106–111).

9 The Muslim Brothers *(al-iḫwān al-muslimūn)* is a political Islamic organization founded in Egypt in 1928 by Ḥasan al-Bannā', who was a schoolteacher in Ismā'īlīya. It aims at creating an Islamic society through the conquest of the state and the imposition of the *šarī'a* (Islamic law). Soon, similar organizations were created in other Muslim countries as autonomous branches of the Muslim Brothers. The Syrian branch was created through a long process of merging of local Islamic organizations which took place during the 1930's and 1940's (Abd-Allah 1983: 88–95).

organizations, which went from Salafīs to what was described by the leaders of the Front as "*the true Sufis*" (ABD-ALLAH 1983: 122). The confrontation between the regime and the Islamic Front escalated to a cycle of violence that resulted in a revolt prompted by the Muslim Brothers in the city of Ḥamā in 1982 (SEURAT 1989: 72–83). The revolt was crushed by military intervention and resulted in the destruction of most of the city and a massacre of many of its inhabitants[10]. This marked the end of an organized Islamic opposition against the rule of the Baʿth party. Despite having consolidated his rule over Syria, al-Asad adopted a more accommodating position towards the public expression of Islam, which was paralleled by a gradual liberalization of the regime.

The defeat of the Islamic Front attempt to gain the control of the state changed the political and social dynamics of the public expression of Muslim identities in Syria. While many Sufi *šayḫs* and their communities were politically mobilized by what they perceived as a threat against the Islamic community – the *umma* –, their activism became more diffuse by their accommodation within the webs of reciprocity and patronage that structured public governance in Syria. However, the decline in the overtly political and militant forms of Islam that occurred after the tragedy of Ḥamā did not mean a decline in the importance of religious identities as channels and normative frameworks for participation in the public sphere. On the contrary, in the last two decades there was a marked increase in the public display of signs of Muslim piety, such as mosque attendance and veiling (PINTO 2004). This construction of a form of "public Islam"[11] through the moral reform of the individuals has strong connections with Sufi doctrines and practices. For example, the followers of the Šāḏilī *šayḫ* ʿAbd al-Qādir ʿĪsā highlighted the social relevance of the Sufi notions of personal morality, by affirming that only "the true Sufism" *(at-taṣawwuf al-ḥaqq)* could bring a solution to the state of corruption *(fasad)*, to materialism *(māddīya)* and to sensuality *(šahwānīya)* into which the Islamic community had fallen (ʿĪSA 1993: 3–5).

The importance of Sufism in the contemporary Syrian religious landscape can be seen by the official policies destined to co-opt the production of diffuse forms of "public Islam" by sponsoring Sufi orders, such as the Kuftarīya (BOTTCHER 1998b: 137). Indeed, a great part of what can be

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10 The exact number of victims is not known, but many authors point to figures around 25,000 (ABD-ALLAH 1983: 192; VAN DAM 1996: 111).

11 "Public Islam" can be defined as the objectification and systematization of Islamic values and practices as a moral framework for social participation (SALVATORE 1998: 91).

defined as "official Islam" in Syria, i.e. religious organizations and networks either sponsored or tolerated by the government, is connected to Sufism, in particular to the Naqšbandīya order (Bottcher 1998: 131–146). However, despite the importance of the state policies in fostering Sufi forms of Islam, the pervasive presence of Sufism in the religious life in Syria cannot be reduced to the benevolent attitude of the regime towards it. Aside from the Kuftarīya, there are thriving Sufi communities in Damascus and Aleppo that have distant or indifferent relations with the state. These communities are either organized in hierarchical Sufi orders under the leadership of a *šayḫ al-mašāyiḫ*, as is the case with the Qādirīya in Aleppo, or in autonomous *zāwiyas* (lodges) linked to one or more of the main Sufi *ṭarīqas*, such as the Qādirīya, the Rifāʿīya, the Šāḏilīya or the Naqšbandīya. Sometimes the *šayḫ* combines his activities as a Sufi leader with those of *šayḫ* or *imām* (ritual leader) of a mosque. In that case he can use the mosque for the ritual gathering *(ḥaḍra)* of his Sufi community, as is the case with the Šāḏilī community that gathers in the ʿĀdilīya mosque in Aleppo.

The expansion of Sufism in Aleppo can be seen in the new *zāwiyas* created throughout the city during the last decade. Aside from class divisions, whereby text-oriented Sufi *šayḫs* focus on the upper and middle class religious market, these new *zāwiyas* tend to follow ethnic lines. Thus, the *zāwiyas* in the Kurdish neighborhoods of Aleppo, such as Ašrafīya, *šayḫ* Maqṣūd and Hamdānīya, tend to have Kurdish *šayḫs* presiding over rituals performed and chanted in *Kurmanci*[12]. These new *zāwiyas* tend to be part of larger networks based on hierarchical (initiation) and/or horizontal (marriage, kinship or friendship) personal ties that connect their *šayḫs* through large geographical areas. The Sufi networks can also integrate and connect rural and urban *zāwiyas* following ethnic boundaries, as is the case with the Kurdish Sufi networks that connect *zāwiyas* in the villages of the Kurd Dagh with the Sufi communities of Aleppo.

However, local *zāwiyas* have a high degree of autonomy, even when connected to larger networks or orders, and they remain the main *locus* of production of Sufi identities. The main structuring element in Sufi communities is the charismatic religious authority of the Sufi *šayḫ* based on his *baraka* (divine grace), which is considered to have been acquired through a direct experience of the divine reality *(ḥaqīqa)*, or by being acquired through a saintly lineage (Pinto 2004b). The "inner core" of the Sufi community is composed by the *šayḫ* and his disciples *(murīd*, pl. *murīdūn)*,

12 *Kurmanci* is the Kurdish dialect spoken by the Kurds of Syria.

who can only enter the process of initiation in the mystical path *(ṭarīqa)* after taking a vow of allegiance *(bay'a)*, through which they put themselves under the complete control of the *šayẖ*.

All *zāwiyas* have public ritual gatherings, where the ritual of the *ḏikr* (mystical evocation) is performed under the guidance of the *šayẖ*. This ritual performance is open to the public and it is the occasion for the reunion of the "middle circle" of regular participants in the Sufi community. This "middle circle" is composed of those who base their religious identities on their belonging to the *zāwiya* and their devotion to its *šayẖ*, despite not having become disciples or gone through the process of mystical initiation. The ritual gatherings also create an "outer circle" in the Sufi community, which include those who attend occasionally or who are linked to the *zāwiya* or its *šayẖ* by other religious practices of Sufi inspiration, such as the cult of saints or the quest for *baraka*. These religious practices, as well as the circulation and uses of Sufi texts by non-Sufis, create practical and devotional links between the Sufis and the other religious expressions of Sunnī Islam in Syria.

3. Bodily Mediations: Constructions of the Self in a Sufi Community in Aleppo

The construction of the religious self of the members of the Sufi communities is achieved mainly within the framework of teachings, mystical exercises and bodily ordeals which constitute the process of mystical initiation *(tarbīya)* in the Sufi path. However, the process of initiation must be understood in relation to the other religious practices that constitute the framework of social interactions of each particular Sufi community. Furthermore, the relationship between the *šayẖ* and his *murīds* plays a central role in this process. This relationship epitomizes the distribution of religious knowledge and power within the Sufi communities, whereby it structures the transactions in knowledge and experience involved in the constitution of the religious self of the adepts of Sufism.

šayẖ Nadīm was a well-known religious leader in Aleppo, known and respected as a religious scholar *('ālim)* by other members of the religious establishment. He combined his duties as the *šayẖ* of a mosque in the upper middle class neighborhood of Sabīl with those of a Šāḏilī Sufi *šayẖ*. He had twenty disciples who took the oath of allegiance *(bay'a)* and were in process of initiation into the mystical path. The disciples, most of whom were merchants or public servants, constituted the "inner core" of *šayẖ* Nadīm's community. Their religious identities were completely defined by

their personal relationship with their *šayḫ*, unlike the other members who were not being initiated in the Sufi path. These other members of the community also shared a devotion to the *šayḫ*, but their access to the doctrinal and ritual framework of the Sufi tradition was limited to its display and enactment in the public rituals and sermons that they could attend, and in the limited set of personal interactions – cures, blessings and counseling – that they could have with the *šayḫ*.

The main public ritual in *šayḫ* Nadīm's community was the weekly *ḥaḍra* (ritual gathering), which took place in his mosque every Thursday after the *maġrib* prayer. Each *ḥaḍra* assembled around 100 participants, which includes his disciples, regular participants, occasional participants and curious ones. The ritual commenced with the recitation of the *wird* (mystical prayer) of the Šāḏilīya by the *šayḫ* and his disciples for the duration of half an hour, during which time the other participants arrive and take their place according to a rigid hierarchical spatial organization. The participants were situated in concentric circles where physical closeness to the *šayḫ* indicated a higher rank in the mystical hierarchy of the Sufi path or, sometimes, in the social hierarchy of power and prestige. A visiting religious or political leader was always put near *šayḫ* Nadīm as a sign of respect and hospitality, while the regular participants in the ritual would be ranked mainly according to their religious qualities. The organization of the participants in the ritual spatially reflected the esoteric principles of the Sufi path, spreading in successive layers of mystical positions from the point of greatest concentration and activity of *baraka* (the *šayḫ)*[13]. Some disciples of the *šayḫ* remained at the door to receive the newcomers and walked around the mosque to ensure that everyone is properly ranked and seated. After which the *šayḫ* stood up, followed by all the participants, and signaled to the disciples to begin singing the first litany of the *ḏikr*, which was then repeated in unison by the other participants.

The *ḏikr* was the main ritual of the *ḥaḍra* and it was composed of songs that evoked God's love, the Prophet, his family and the quest of the Sufis for God's presence. The singing was accompanied by coordinated bodily

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13 There was also a shared understanding among most Sufi circles that an exposure to a large amount of *baraka,* which exceeds the capacity of the individual *nafs* (self) in accepting and incorporating it, can have dangerous consequences. Indeed, the disciples of *šayḫ* Nadīm had a repertoire of stories about powerful state bureaucrats who became mentally ill after having treated their *šayḫ* with contempt. They usually pointed out that the mental disarray of these men was the result of their sudden consciousness of their sinful state of *kibr* (pride), a recurrent theme in the discourse of *šayḫ* Nadīm, which was "unveiled" by the *šayḫ*'s *baraka*.

movements, such as rocking side to side or back and forth, in order to create an emotional and sensorial framework for the production of "mystical experiences". States of joy, sadness and spiritual bliss alternated among the participants depending on the content of the songs and the general mood of the ritual as decided on by the *šayḫ*. *šayḫ* Nadīm always created a joyful mood when the Prophet's name was mentioned, choosing songs that emphasized the connection of his *persona* to love *(ḥubb)* and light *(nūr)* – two central concepts in the Sufi path – and performing the jumping movements of the Šāḏilī *ḏikr*. Usually this point was the emotional zenith of the ritual, when the participants lost themselves in the flow of sensations and emotions, which were disciplined and communicated as mystical experiences later on. Soon after this, *šayḫ* Nadīm ended the *ḏikr* with the recitation of his *silsila* (chain of mystical masters).

Despite the overall mood of excitement during the *ḏikr*, *šayḫ* Nadīm's disciples presented a very cohesive and structured performance throughout the ritual, maintaining the coordination and the rhythm of their movements even in the moments of ritual intensity. Furthermore, while they clearly expressed a high state of physical and emotional mobilization, they never fell into trance *(wağd)*, and controlled the timing of the alternation between emotional states. The reason for this disciplined behavior resulted from the way their religious self was shaped during the process of initiation. *šayḫ* Nadīm explicitly condemned the expression of uncontrolled states of consciousness, particularly trance, during the *ḏikr*, that sometimes occurred among the participants in the "outer circles" of the ritual. In one *ḏikr* a man fell into a trance, and howled and cried for a long time, even after the ritual had ceased. This prompted *šayḫ* Nadīm to give a sermon on the importance of reason *('aql)* in Sufism. He said that "without reason, no one can achieve the divine truth *(ḥaqīqa)*, for how could the one who is lost in his mystical states know that his self is being transformed?" However, in *šayḫ* Nadīm's discourse, "reason" did not mean simply a free critical evaluation of reality, but rather the systematic application of the normative principles of the religious tradition in individual and collective behavior. Thus, he concluded that

> without reason there would be no respect for the law, for morality. There would be no order *[niẓām]*, no *umma*! Prophet Muḥammad, peace be upon him, used reason to rule his community, and so did the Sufi saints *[awliyā']* with their disciples.

This emphasis on order as a strict observance of moral and social rules, which appears in the organization of the public rituals of *šayḫ* Nadīm's

community, informs the disciplinary practices that constitute his mystical path. *šayḫ* Nadīm defined the Sufi path in a conversation circle which I attended alongside some of his disciples as "achieving a complete control over the *nafs*[14]". He explained that his disciples had to lead a *ǧihād*[15] against their *nafs* in order to tame it and to redirect towards God its desires. Furthermore, *šayḫ* Nadīm's teachings focused on the importance of the moral qualities that he considered to be fundamental for advancing in the Sufi path, such as repentance *(tawba)*, righteousness *(ṣidq)* and self-accountability *(muḥāsaba)*. He also pointed to their connection to notions of individual responsibility and public behavior. Despite the Sufi devaluation of social ties as part of the realm of external appearances, *šayḫ* Nadīm stressed in his sermons and teachings the importance of showing a correct public behavior as a sign of spiritual advancement in the esoteric reality *(al-ḥaqīqa al-bāṭinīya)* of the Sufi path through an effective control of the self.

šayḫ Nadīm's focus on social practice as an important part of the Sufi path is linked to his priviledged position in the religious establishment of Aleppo and, therefore, his connections with the state apparatus, for he re-signified the traditional Sufi adage that considered faith and knowledge worthless if not accompanied by good deeds within the framework of public governance[16]. Thus, *šayḫ* Nadīm's disciples had to internalize and enact the rules of social etiquette *(adab)* as part of their effort in controlling and transforming their *nafs*. They needed to always maintain an overall detachment from the surrounding reality, to never express anger or emotions that could reflect a commitment or desire for material things. They

14 *Nafs* can be roughly translated as "self", in contrast to the body *(ǧism)* and the soul *(rūḥ)*. The Sufis, as well as some passages in the Quran, define the *nafs* as the source of impulses and desires which may lead people towards material or illicit things (Encyclopedia of Islam 2, *Nafs:* 880–883).

15 In the religious context *ǧihād* means an effort or struggle to pursue the path of God. There are two forms of *ǧihād* accepted by the Islamic tradition: the lesser *ǧihād (al-ǧihād al-ṣaġīr)*, which includes the armed defense of the Muslim community, and the great *ǧihād (al-ǧihād al-kabīr)*, which aims to control the sinful impulses of the *nafs* (self).

16 The re-signification of the Sufi concepts of *niẓām* (order) and *ṣidq* (righteousness) within the framework of public governance reflects as much the commitment of *šayḫ* Nadīm with the worldview of the state apparatus, to which he belongs, as his religious ideals for a reformed Sufism committed to the fostering of public morality. Michael Gilsenan (1973: 127) reported a similar case of use of the logical and organizational framework of the state bureaucracy by the *šayḫ* of the Hamīdīya Šāḏilīya, himself a former bureaucrat, in order to reform and "modernize" his Sufi order.

should not look the *šayḫ* in the eyes while interacting with him as a sign of humility, or when dealing with women in order to avoid being taken by lust *(šahwa)*. The pitch of their voice should always be controlled and their thoughts carefully selected and articulated before speaking, in order to prevent the emotions generated by their *nafs* to take control over their mind.

In order to achieve such a state of control over their *nafs*, *šayḫ* Nadīm's disciples had to go through a series of mystical exercises, such as fasting, recitations and meditation, which constituted the more esoteric part of the mystical path. All his disciples, besides their individual tutoring with him, had to assist with his lectures and sermons by explaining the principles of Islamic law or Sufi mysticism, which were accompanied with several forms of mystical exercises. The mystical exercises aimed to foster the acquisition and use of body techniques[17], breathing techniques, body positioning and rhythmic movements, inscribing the experiential framework sanctioned by the Sufi tradition as a constitutive part of the religious self of the disciples. On one occasion, *šayḫ* Nadīm delivered a sermon to his disciples on the sinful character of the *nafs*, stating that

> you must remember that God created us, he gave us our body, our soul and our *nafs*. So, when we say 'I am' we are referring to a part of him, but the *nafs* never remembers that, for it is egotistic and wants everything to itself. The *nafs* is prone to *kibr* [pride], which is the same sin that made Iblīs to be removed from God's presence.

Then he invited his disciples to a silent recitation of their personal mystical prayer *(wird)*, which he gave to each of them at the moment when they took their oath of allegiance. While the disciples were sitting around him with their eyes closed and mentally repeating their prayers, *šayḫ* Nadīm started a rhythmic vocalization of "*Allāh*". He then moved around the room, standing in front of each one of the disciples pressing his finger on their heart, and saying "this is your heart, you will feel God here. At the beginning you will feel nothing, but love *(ḥubb)* will open your heart to him. You will feel it like a new life coming out of an egg". Then, he would repeate loudly "*Allāh, Allāh, Allāh*" while pressing harder with his finger on the disciple's heart. This example shows how the process of mystical initiation combines the discursive transmission of a set of doctrines – the sinful character of the *nafs*, the dangers of *kibr* and the esoteric reality of

17 The concept of body techniques was coined by Marcel Mauss in order to reflect upon all forms of practical knowledge that use the body as a tool in order to produce phenomena endowed with physical and social effectiveness (Mauss 1995 [1934]: 370–272).

God's presence – with the production of corporeal and emotional sensations, such as love being a physical phenomenon taking place in the heart, in order to embody normative principles of the Sufi tradition as part of the self of the disciples. The *šayẖ* made sure that the discursive description of love as the basis of the mystical path was accompanied by the physical sensation of pressure over one's heart while the name of God was repeated. Thus, by evoking the pressure that a newly formed life does on the eggshell that contains it, this sensation revealed in a non-discursive and experiential way the meaning and the moral connections of one of God's names, *ḥayy* (The Living One).

The combination of this process of embodiment of the Sufi tradition as moral dispositions inscribed in the self with the emphasis that *šayẖ* Nadīm puts on personal intention *(niyya)* as the measure of the religious legitimacy of the actions, pointed to the production of individualized and morally autonomous religious agents. However, this individual autonomy was tamed by the constant presence of *šayẖ* Nadīm as the ultimate source of bodily sensations and emotions resulting from the mystical exercises, as well as of the doctrinal categories that delimit and legitimize them as experiential steps in the Sufi path, and make his religious *persona* the point of contact between the embodied dispositions that constitute the self of his disciples and the normative and symbolic principles of Sufism. The personalized character of the disciplinary practices (Asad 1993: 125) involved in the production and legitimization of mystical experiences in the disciples enhances and expands the scope of the hierarchical relation between *muršid* (master/guide) and *murīd* (disciple). This hierarchical relation is embodied as affective ties between the *muršid* and the *murīd*, embodying it as a constitutive part of the self of the *murīds*. So, while *šayẖ* Nadīm's disciples have moral autonomy to make decisions and to take action in the various spheres of their social life according to their own consciousness, they have in him a source of moral certainty that grounds their selves in the Sufi tradition.

This oscillation between hierarchy and individuality is expressed in the way that the embodied dispositions that constitute the religious self of the disciples provide a normative framework for their social practices. For example, three of *šayẖ* Nadīm's disciples have shops in the commercial neighborhood of Bāb al-Farağ in Aleppo, where they sell different products (electrical devices, clothes and books). They however refuse to engage in the traditional practice of bargaining and haggling over the price of the commodities which they sell. These disciples saw their attitude as a moral achievement in their efforts in perfecting their selves, and were very eager to tell me so in my first visit to them, which took place in the bookshop.

When I asked the reason behind this attitude, the electrical devices shop owner said:

> We do not do it [i.e. bargaining] because it would be very bad. When you tell the client a price higher than what you would take you are having an evil intention in your heart, and you are inducing him to do the same, for he will offer a price lower than the one that he would pay.

Then I inquired whether this was not bad for his business. He explained that:

> What good is it to be rich if God is not in your heart? Thanks to God we all live well, we have good people who buy from our shops because they know they can trust us. More than that, our master [pointing to *šayḫ* Nadīm's picture hanging on the wall] is always protecting us from temptations.

I then asked if *šayḫ* Nadīm had informed them to refrain from haggling, to which they all said "*No!*". The electrical shop owner explained to me that:

> We were all feeling bad about it [i. e. haggling] after we became his disciples and actually we renounced to it by ourselves. Only later, when we told our *muršid* about it he said that we had achieved the state of righteousness *[al-ḥāl aṣ-ṣidqī]*, then, after his approval, we started meeting and helping each other.

When I asked if the other disciples of *šayḫ* Nadīm were following the same path, they said that no, they might be struggling against other sinful practices instead and that "only the *šayḫ* can judge, for only he can see the truth in our hearts". Thus, one can see how the normative principles of the Sufi tradition inscribed as part of the religious self of these disciples provided them with a realm of morally resonant "embodied certainties", which allowed them to refuse to follow social practices legitimized by shared cultural values, such as bargaining. Also, the meaning of Sufi doctrinal concepts, such as *ṣidq* (righteousness), was shaped by the experiential universe in which it was inscribed by the disciplinary mechanisms, which in the case of *šayḫ* Nadīm's disciples is constituted by a very strong sense of moral duty towards the community and trust and respect towards the *šayḫ*.

However, the various degrees and forms of personal engagement of the disciples in the cognitive, emotional and bodily transactions that constitute the process of initiation in the mystical path of this Sufi community allow the emergence of different articulations and expressions of the embodied dispositions of the religious self in their social practices. For example, another disciple of *šayḫ* Nadīm, who owns a famous shop that sells clothes

in the middle class neighborhood of Sabīl, was surprised when I suggested that bargaining could be in contradiction with the concept of *ṣidq*. He explained how he saw no contradiction between following traditional social understandings of the public good and pursuing the moral perfection of his self, by saying that:

> Those who think like that, did not understand that the most important thing is to show *ṣidq* in your deeds by having a pure heart *[qalb ṣafī]*. Bargaining is how people shop, by reaching a fair price you show them your good intentions. If you start condemning all things, instead of purifying your heart while living life, you are not really performing your duties as a servant of God.

This example shows how the self should not be thought of as a homogeneous and coherently integrated basis for identity, but rather as the crossing point of disciplinary mechanisms, social dispositions and power relations, where the meaning and the scope of religious values can be crossed and changed by other forms of what Foucault (1998: 264–265) defined as "modes of subjectification". Sometimes the competition between conflicting modes of subjectification trying to discipline the self in a total way, might lead to changes and ruptures in the trajectory of the individual. This was the case of a 34 year old engineer who, according to his own words, was a very devoted disciple of *šayḫ* Nadīm, following all his orders and commands for seven years, until an incident made him abandon his spiritual guidance. He told me that:

> one day the *šayḫ* told me that my mother was performing magic *[siḥr]* and, thus, I should not talk to her anymore. I could not believe what I was hearing, for I loved my *šayḫ*, but I also loved my mother very much [...] I just could not do what he ordered me to do. So, after a long time of being scorned by the *šayḫ* for my spiritual weakness, I left him.

This example shows how the *šayḫ* tried to subsume the various forms of subjectification that informed the self of the disciple into his own religious self by re-signifying negatively the social relations that informed and supported them. However, this disciplinary mechanism created a conflict between two sources of identity and social insertion which had strong emotional and moral value, because they both were perceived and experienced by the disciple as fundamental parts of his self. The rupture of the relation of master and disciple was caused, in this case, by the failure of the *šayḫ* in offering a normative and symbolic framework that could incorporate the experiential certainty that the disciple had about his mother.

The strength of the relationship between the disciple and his mother was based on both shared cultural understandings of motherhood, and the affective and emotional links and memories constructed and accumulated through their close interaction, which in turn created a solid experiential and cultural ground for the emotional attachment that he felt for her. Thus, the experiential and cultural resonance of the affection of the disciple for his mother created embodied certainties, expressed as emotional attachments, which could not be re-signified by the discursive framework offered by the *šayẖ*.

4. Conclusion

This analysis shows how the connections between the normative framework of religious traditions, such as Sufism, and the choices, desires and calculations involved in the social practices of the agents can be better understood by taking into account the cognitive, emotional and bodily transactions through which principles of the Sufi tradition are embodied as part of the self. The self can be seen as an experiential space where "embodied certainties" are created by the cumulative effect of disciplinary practices, which inscribe the normative principles of the religious traditions as sensations, emotions and bodily memories. These embodied certainties inform and constrain the social practices of the agents by creating a framework of moral, emotional and corporeal dispositions and attachments that define the modes of being and engagement with the world.

However, it is fundamental to keep in mind that the self is not a bounded and homogeneous sphere, but rather a "complex site of conflicting desires and multiple subjective modalities [...] whose experience of wholeness is illusory and contextually specific" (Ewing 1997: 35). In order to understand how the various normative and symbolic references of the self compete and articulate with each other in various social contexts, we have to analyze how they are inscribed as affective and bodily dispositions by the "disciplinary practices" (Asad 1993: 125) that regulate, inform and construct them. The mode of operation and the effects of the disciplinary practices depend on the forms of codification of the particular tradition to which they are referred – which in the case of religious systems can be roughly divided in doctrinal/discursive and imagistic/experiential mechanisms (Whitehouse 2000: 58–72) – and on the transactions in knowledge (Barth 1990: 640–642) and experience through which traditions are continuously produced and transmitted.

The various dimensions of the self may be articulated under a hegemonic mode of subjectification, as was the case with the disciples of *šayẖ*

Nadīm who disciplined their economic practices according to the moral principles which informed their religious self, establishing an "experience of consonance" (Douglas 1996: 72) between the embodied moral principles and the social practices which informed the agents about their forms of being and engagement with the world. However, as Thomas Csordas pointed out, this orientation in the world created by the sense of self is the result of "effort and reflexivity" (1997: 5), which is different from being a natural result of a psychological necessity, as Mary Douglas (1996: 72–79) suggested, but rather the result of the practical and cognitive engagement with the world. The disciplining of the multiple dimensions of the self within the normative framework given by the Sufi tradition is the result of the combination of a system of disciplinary practices, such as the initiation in the mystical path, with a performative arena, such as the Sufi ritual gatherings, where embodied dispositions can be mobilized, expressed and communicated as "mystical experiences". The ritual setting is central to this process, for the principles of the Sufi tradition are transmitted through the articulation of bodily experiences with public and initiatory/secretive doctrinal discourses. The Sufi rituals not only function as a general and diffuse disciplinary practice, providing the participants with the basic categories offered by Sufism as markers of religious experiences, but also allow the production and display of experiences and deeds that give personal and social resonance to the moral principles and values of the Sufi tradition.

Despite the continuous work of the disciplinary practices of the Sufi communities over the self of its members, the possibilities of hegemony of their mode of subjectification over the other competing ones (kinship, social status, ethnicity, etc.) depend on their capacity to inscribe their normative principles as part of the emotional, affective and bodily elements which constitute the experiential realm of the self. Therefore, the construction of emotions and affective ties is a fundamental element in defining the scope of the normative force of any religious tradition over the practices and trajectories of its adepts. A dramatic example of the importance of taking into account the emotional and embodied aspects of the self is that of the disciple of *šayḫ* Nadīm who was divided between his devotion to the *šayḫ* and the love for his mother which resulted in his rupture with Sufism. Therefore, the concept of self, with its capacity of combining reflexive, existential and performative aspects of the social insertion and trajectories of the agents, can move the anthropological analysis beyond the dichotomy between the mechanical model of "internalization" of normative frameworks and the post-modern idea of fluid identities, by providing it with a

model for the understanding of the processes of collective identification and personal differentiation that create "identity".

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