



The Burhan Between Embodiment, Disciplines and Techniques of Self

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Abstract: This work has analyzed how a religious practice, the *burhan*, is employed as political and subjective expression by some Sufi communities that consider it the symbol of the infinite love of God and reverence to their Shaykh. Its symbolic and discursive diversification outlines the great pluralization of the post-socialist religious field, in which such a practice, highly arousing, can be stigmatized or sublimated as community or individual label. In post-socialist time, the body becomes more and more an expression of the self that is disciplined to forge individual subjectivity. In this sense, some people independently regulate and define their bodies with disciplinary practices such as the *burhan*, which thus entail their visions of the world.

Keywords: Sufism – Islam – Burhan – Balkans – Ritual.

INTRODUCTION

This paper analyzes the performance of the practice of *burhan* (Arabic *burhān*, lit. “proof, trial”) among some Sufi communities in Albania and Kosovo.¹ The *burhan* involves performers piercing their bodies with a pin (*zarḥi*) that is blessed by a Shaykh (Sufi master) during the *dhikr*² ritual. Firstly, it shows a disciple’s ability to improve his soul by controlling his *nafs* (ego) and expanding his bodily skills. Secondly, it attests to the Shaykh’s *baraka*³ to bless pins or swords so that they do not injure the bodies of the *murīd* (disciple). In this sense, *burhan* contributes to legitimizing the Shaykh’s authority and to reinforcing the continuity (ideal fixity) of a certain religious tradition (Bloch 1974) embedding disciplinary devices

¹ During the fieldwork among Sufi communities, the author took part in several *dhikr* that included *burhan* performance in *tekke* that belong to Rifa’iyya and Sa’diyya orders located in Kosovo (Pizren, Gjakova, Rahovec) and in Albania (Bajram Curri, Berat).

² *Dhikr* is the most typical Sufi ritual; it consists of the repetition of the name of God, either silently or aloud. See Gardet, L., “*Dhikr*”, in: *Encyclopaedia of Islam, Second Edition*, Edited by: P. Bearman, Th. Bianquis, C.E. Bosworth, E. van Donzel, W.P. Heinrichs.

³ In Islamic tradition, the *walī* (God’s friends) possess the *baraka* (magical powers, lit. “divine blessing”) that attests their *walāya* (holiness) that indicates proximity (*qurb*) to God.



(Foucault 1984). Anyway, as a complex and highly evocative act, the *burhan* embodies several symbolic features that entail *moods and motivations*;⁴ following Geertz (1966), these symbols express certain social and cultural frameworks and shape them.

As has been pointed out by several scholars, in post-socialist Southeastern Europe, several religious and political entrepreneurs considered Islamic practices to be ideological markers regardless of their cultural and social features (Duijzings 2000; Creed 2011; Roy and Elbasani 2015). This fashioned a gap between the authorized religious discourses of the official Islamic authorities (often state-supported) that ideologically overshadowed cultural and local specificities and the lived religion of the faithful who perform daily their religious customs (Oktem 2011). In post-socialist religious arenas, highly fragmented by global and local instances (Roy and Elbasani 2015), some ritual acts, such as the *burhan*, could be employed as means to individually and collectively forge religious symbols and narrations that are detached from official discourses. Otherwise, they could be considered as tools to legitimate religious authorities by embedding such corporal techniques and ethical dispositions. In the case of the *burhan*, these forms of power and control are expressed *through the body* of the Shaykh, who expresses his holiness, and *on the bodies* of the faithful who receive such highly symbolic action. In this sense, the *burhan* considerably heightens the embodiment experience as the condition that allows the creation of an objective structure of reality (symbolic representation), in which the body is a holistic performative subject (Csordas 1990).

Starting from these assumptions, this paper analyzes how the embodiment experience of the *burhan* shapes the legitimizing charismatic⁵ grounds of religious authorities and the symbolic patterns that frame the sense of self and the vision of the world by the faithful. Secondly, it considers also its political implications as an item able to forge collective and individual identities within post-socialist religious arenas. Finally, it aims to understand the symbolic representation and practical treatment of the body, i.e. the social body (Turner 2008), which ranges from the

⁴ According to Geertz (1966, 121), moods are a system of bodily and mental attitudes that can be induced by symbols; motivations lead someone to do something and to act in the direction indicated by the truth of religion.

⁵ This work follows Max Weber's theoretical conceptualization of "charisma" as "A certain quality of an individual personality, by virtue of which he is set apart from ordinary men and treated as endowed with supernatural, superhuman, or at least specifically exceptional powers or qualities. These are such as are not accessible to the ordinary person, but are regarded as of divine origin or as exemplary, and on the basis of them the individual concerned is treated as a leader". See Max Weber, *The Theory of Social and Economic Organization* (London: Simon and Schuster, 2009), p. 398. See also Max Weber, *On Charisma and Institution Building* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1960).



claims of ethical and disciplinary domination made by political and religious authorities to the instances of autonomous and diversified self-determination.

BURHAN: PRACTICES AND CREED

It is hard to discover the real cultural and historical origins of this practice, the product of various systems of semantics and Islamic discourses. The *burhan* exists among several Sufi orders (*turuq*)⁶ or Islamic communities (Pinto 2013) and attests the fulfillment of the advancement along the initiatory journey of the Sufi *murīd* (disciple) performing a kind of *karāmāt* (miracles). Islamic literature is full of episodes of *karāmāt* that may include several cases of miraculous deeds, such as eating glass, walking on fire, handling poisonous snakes, piercing the body with pins or swords (*Ibidem*). Many of them were reified by Orientalist scholars or prettified by performers, shaping some forms of ‘fakirism’ that entailed a stereotyped and folkloric vision of Sufism (Ernst 2011). Trimingham (1998, 38) said that «during heightened states of Rifā‘ī Ratib [ritual performance], Rifā‘ī followers were noted to have eaten live snakes, entered ovens filled with fire and ridden on lions and thrust iron spikes and glass into their bodies». In the Balkan area, as in Syria, Turkey and Iraq, the *burhan* is usually linked to Rifā‘iyya (Dubouloz-Laffin 1943; Gautier 1891; Godart 1921; Mašulovic-Marsol 1992; Popovic 1993; Bosworth 2012) or other *turuq* that perform it as a ‘proof of faith’; rarely is it seen as mortification of the body. Inside the *tekke*,⁷ the pins of *burhan* performance are usually hung on the wall with other ritual instruments like swords, axes and flags, in order to visibly display their ritual tools.

In Albania and Kosovo, Rifā‘ī followers attribute the origin of the practice of the *burhan* to Ahmet er-Rifā‘ī (Ar. Aḥmad al-Rifā‘ī, 1118-1182), who is the founder of the *ṭarīqa*. There is no shared narration about its origins: for example, for Hassan, a Rifā‘ī dervish⁸ of Pizren (Kosovo), «Shaykh Ahmet er-Rifā‘ī got the *burhan* to show his love (*‘ashk*) to Allah»;⁹ while for Bledar, a dervish from Tropoja

⁶ *Ṭarīqa* (pl. *turuq*) means road, path or way, and has come to refer to the Muslim spiritual path toward direct knowledge (*ma‘rifā*) of God or Reality (*ḥaqq*). In the ninth and tenth centuries, *ṭarīqa* meant the spiritual path of individual Sufis (mystics). After the twelfth century, as communities of followers gathered around Shaykhs (teachers), *ṭarīqa* came to designate the Shaykh’s entire ritual system, which was followed by the community or mystic order. Eventually *ṭarīqa* came to mean the order itself.

⁷ In Turkish, the term *tekke* (Albanian *teqe*; Arabic *zāwiya*) refers to a site or lodge, usually private, to where the Sufis may retreat.

⁸ In Albanian Sufism, the term *dervish* generally indicates a follower of a *Ṭarīqa*. Within Sufi communities, however, *dervish* (Ar. *darwīsh*, lit. “poor”) indicates a specific hierarchical and spiritual degree. Usually, the degrees are *murīd*, *dervish*, *veqil* and *Shaykh*.

⁹ Interview, Prizren, December 2015.



(Albania),¹⁰ «a snake bit Ahmet er-Rifā'ī who did not die, for the love of Allah [...] then his followers practice *burhan* to remember him». Any narrative enforces the performative and normative charge of the *burhan* as Islamic practice. Following Asad (1986), its imposing authority came from its capacity to be a recognized tradition, under an Islamic or Sufi umbrella, that connected it to divine transcendence through a medium, a *walī* (God's friend). In this case, Rifā'ī followers *believe* that there is a line of continuity from Amhet er-Rifā'ī that allows them to recognize it as authentic Sufi practice. For McCauley and Lawson (1993), ritual engagement comes from the reference to a transcendent agency, perceived as complete otherness, which sanctions it as highly evocative and formalized action though it may change over time and space.

Albanian and Kosovar Sufis do not practice singly the *burhan* which is always included in the greater ritual framework of the *dhikr*, following specific patterns and features, but in any case, they assert that they follow the right tradition. For example, in Tropoja or in Berat, Rifā'ī dervishes pierce their face after permission from a Shaykh; in Prizren, the Rifā'ī Shaykh pierces the dervish with the pins; in several cases, the Shaykh decides how to do the ritual. Sufi communities perform it during a special event in the Sufi calendar, usually the *Sultan nevruz*,¹¹ rarely the 'āshūrā' or during other special days, such as the anniversary of some eminent *Prī*¹² or founder of the *tekke*; sometimes, the Shaykh can decide to celebrate it without any specific reference. In each case, the Shaykh manages directly the practice, choosing the timing and the people who can do it to attest his mystical power and to prove the spiritual degree of his *murīd*.

On 1st August 2014, I was for the second time in Tropoja to take part in the anniversary of the founder of the *tekke*, Shaykh Ademi Nuri Gjakova. I assisted in the *dhikr* of the community that was led by the Shaykh, Shaykh Haydar, which included the performance of the *burhan*. The main room of the *tekke* was full of people, many of them were Sufis who formed several circles around the Shaykh: people who were closer to him had a higher spiritual degree. Shaykh Haydari guided all operations of the *dhikr*, while the *veqil* (vice-Shaykh) sung various formulas that concerned the repetitions of Allah's name; some dervishes played drums in rhythmical style. The dervishes sang aloud following the *veqil*'s voice, while women assisted upstairs. When the dervish repeated «hu – hu – hu – hu – hu», the Shaykh went to the center of the *ḥaḍra*, moving his head to invite eight dervishes into the center; then he took the pins that were hung on the wall; after he wet them with his saliva he gave one pin to each dervish that kissed his hand;

¹⁰ Interview, Tropoja, August 2014.

¹¹ In Albania and Kosovo, *Sultan Nevruz* is an annual festival, held on 22 March, to commemorate the birthday of 'Alī ibn Abī Ṭālib and, at the same time, the advent of spring.

¹² In Albanian Sufism, the *Prī* is the founder of the specific branch of the *ṭarīqa*.



then they danced with the pins and moved them through the air. After that, the Shaykh communicated to the *veqil* to change formulas, singing «lā ilāha illā Allāh». This was a highly dramatic moment: the dervishes screamed aloud and moved their heads, the drums were very loud; the dervishes at the centre of the *ḥaḍra* pierced their faces with the pins and danced moving their heads. They invoked Allah, Muhammad, Ali and Shaykh Ahmet Rifā'ī. Later, the Shaykh called them to him, kissed each dervish on the head and pulled away the pins from their faces. After some seconds, the *veqil* stopped singing and the Shaykh guided the end of the *dhikr*.¹³

Shaykh Haydari of Tropoja guided the performance of the *burhan* under his leadership in a way that fully embodied the authoritative and performative charge of the practice. In this way, he attests and legitimates his *baraka*, showing how his saliva has miraculous effects, allowing the piercing of the body without any bad effects on the dervish. In Islam, the *baraka* is a magical power that derives from the closeness to God that the Shaykh acquired when he obtained his spiritual degree (*kirqa*). Anyway, Albanians believe that this kind of magical power can be conveyed via familial inheritance, being substantially a kind of hereditary issue that acculturates also Sufi holiness. The Shaykh could sanctify with his *baraka* any object or person: so his saliva has magical power, like his blow. Osman, a *murīd* of the Rifā'iyya in Prizren, said: «*Shaykh* could never kill you because he loves you, he could not hurt you [...] when you pierce your face, he does not injure you, he blesses you with his love [...] then you feel better, because you feel his love»¹⁴.

This answer underlines the commitment to the Shaykh's charismatic authority that has attracted many believers, who may be more attracted to his charisma than to the Sufi path. Miraculous acts of this kind, like the *burhan*, attesting his *baraka*, are the main grounds of his charisma, that could be legitimated also by his spiritual degrees and esoteric knowledge. Anyway, the *burhan* establishes an intense corporal link between the Shaykh and his *murīd*: the saliva on the pins embodies his charisma that can overcome any counterintuitive assertions, piercing the *murīd*'s bodies without any effect. In this sense, the body is the main means of that religious experience which forms and frames moods and motivations of Sufis and together shapes religious authority. For Merleau-Ponty (1964), the body is a 'chiasm', the means to perceive the outside world, what we feel to be completely external. The experiences of embodiment, daily and variously lived, allow the perception of an external sign as a symbol. The *burhan* is the symbol of the infinite love of Allah and the Shaykh's holiness. Its corporal

¹³ Information collected during an ethnographic survey in Tropoja in August 2014.

¹⁴ Interview, Prizren, December 2015.



experience, although dramatic, involves the Shaykh and his disciples who perceive different sensory and emotional feelings. Besim, a *murīd* from Tropoja, said: «When I made the *burhan* for the first time, I was very happy [...] it was an honor for me and I grasped a new degree of my personal journey».¹⁵

In this sense, the *burhan* contributes to shaping the subjectivities of each *dervish* who takes part in its performance: it holds several meanings that constitute the collective ethos shared by the community, but have a specific sense in individual life. So, the *burhan* could also be a kind of ‘ritual of passage’ that attests to a new status, following Van Gennep (2013), that allows access to adult life. Formally, the *burhan* sanctions a further degree of Sufi journey; but within the community it is an initiatory rite. In Gjakova, a Rifā‘ī dervish said to a young *murīd*: «Well, you are an adult now [...] you could sit with us».¹⁶ This statement underlines different semantics and symbolic embodiments of the *burhan* than mere individual status and socio-cultural frames. In other ways, this rite outlines the hierarchical organization of Sufi community, as usually the *burhan* provides different levels of difficulty that depend on the part of the body that is pierced, starting from the face (easier) to the more difficult zone around the navel: greater difficulty provokes more pain which requires more bodily control which usually proves higher spiritual degree. In Gjakova, within the Sa‘di community, only a few dervishes tried to pierce their navels, as that was labeled as a very dangerous zone. In this sense, the control of the pain is an arousal form of bodily discipline that concerns the embodiment of corporal techniques (Mauss 1936) and therefore discourse and practices i.e. *habitus* (Bourdieu 1972). Directly concerning the body, this discipline allows the introjection of the representation of the self by performers who embed stable social status such the degree of ‘dervish’ or the status of adult.

The embodiment of this kind of discipline reinforces religious authorities respecting the teachings of the leaders, but in other ways, such enforcement educates the followers to respect and obey the Shaykh’s dispositions. This condition is fully expressed by the following quote that expresses the Shaykh’s charismatic legacy on the *murīd*: “the disciple is a child in the hands of the master”. During the *burhan*, this control goes farthest as the Sufis abandon themselves completely to the master, through a highly moving emotional and sensory experience. The *murīd* must be ready to grasp this experience, instructing his body to receive the infinite love of God. Bledar, a dervish from Shkodra, said: «We do not know who the Shaykh will choose, but everyone must be ready to do

¹⁵ Interview, Tropoja, August 2015.

¹⁶ Information collected during an ethnographic survey in Gjakova in July 2016.



it». In this sense, the Shaykh fully instructs his dervishes to be able to receive and practice the *burhan*: during the *sohbet* ¹⁷he explains how to do that and what it symbolizes. For Shaykh Haydari of the Rifa'iyya in Tropoja: «the pin of the *burhan* is like the hand of Allah that caresses you». ¹⁸

This explanation heightened the symbols of the *burhan*, that fully embodies Allah's reference but indirectly attests the Shaykh as a medium of God. The pin has no magical powers, although his saliva sanctifies and gives miraculous qualities to it. The Shaykh's explanation about such ritual, in this way, addresses the symbolic representations of the ritual that led the Sufis to *believe* in it. The believing, according to Pierce (1931), is a 'social fact' that permits acknowledgement of the qualities of the divine medium (person or object). This acknowledgement, therefore, depends also on various social and cultural factors that frame the process of socialization and the religious symbolic representation. In other words, social context has an enormous weight in determining creed dispositions, in shaping individual and collective religiosity (Geertz 1966). In this way, political dynamics such as historical evolution deeply entail the symbolic portrayal of the rituals, including the *burhan*, that could embed identity claims and ideological features.

POST-SOCIALIST FRAMEWORK

In Albania and in Kosovo, the socialist political experience deeply shaped the religious experience, because authoritarian regimes limited public and daily portrayal of religion. ¹⁹ Since the 1990s, the fall of communist regimes has led to new social and political transformations: in Albania, the end of the religious ban, of party monopolism, and of geopolitical isolationism, opened up new, pluralist arenas; the massive urbanization and capitalist conversion transformed the society where (ex-communist) administrative and police systems were still present; nationalist feeling with its secular and ecumenical grounds regulated socio-

¹⁷ The *sohbet* ('chat' or 'discussion') is Sufi devotional practice that consists of 'keeping the company of the Shaykh and one's fellow disciples in accordance with precise behavioral norms'. See Algar, Ayla Esen. *The dervish lodge: Architecture, art, and Sufism in Ottoman Turkey*. Vol. 10. (Los Angeles: University of California Press. 1992), p. 213.

¹⁸ Interview, Shkodra, November 2014.

¹⁹ The Albanian dictator Enver Hoxha (1908 – 1985) in particular aimed to erase any kind of transcendence reference from the society, except for the charismatic worship of his own person and the myth of the cultural and positivistic progress of the nation. In ex-Yugoslavia, Josip Broz Tito (1892-1980) adopted anti-religious policies that subjected religious leaders to the promotion of the primacy of communist reason. Both also promoted positivistic educational programs and atheist propaganda that radically framed disposition of creed (atheism).



political discourses in the public arena and the relationships between state and religion (Clayer 2003). In Kosovo, the post-socialist transition was considerably troubled by political fragmentation and wartime contrasts with the Serbs that stressed ethnic-religious (Albanian Muslims) belonging and the myth of great Albania (Clayer 2001). In both Kosovo and Albania, religious secularization and post-socialist pluralism favored the individualization of the faith, a critical approach to religious authorities and direct interpretation of sources (Elbasani and Roy 2015), while the secularist legacy is still strong within government and administrative institutions.

Otherwise, the articulation between Islam and politics differs in Kosovo and Albania where the majority of the Albanian is living, because of the diversity in the historical and political evolutions and of the variety of ethnic and national equilibriums (Clayer 2001). Furthermore, in Kosovo, the *turuq* still remain key actors in religious activities, while in Albania they are substantially marginalized by nationalistic-atheist rhetoric and Bektashi monopolism (Bria 2019). In any case, neo-Salafist networks and global-Islam indoctrination on the Internet spread scriptural interpretations that are gradually formatting and flattening (or deculturizing) Islamic ritual and doctrines, including Sufi ones. Some Muslims who are close to such networks²⁰ believe that some practices, like the *burhan* and also the *mawlid*²¹ are totally forbidden by *sharī'a* law (*ḥarām*); while some Muslims, the so-called *born-again*²² who have joined a normative virtual Islam, do not consider Sufism to be the right way and have labeled this practice as archaic or pagan. For example, Agron, a young Muslim from Tirana, defines the *burhan* as «the practice of Satan»;²³ similarly, during my visit in the mosque of Prishtina, the imam said «be careful of those who pierce their face [...] it is not Islam, they are not Muslims».²⁴ This feeling may involve also some Sufis that sometimes hold strongly competitive attitudes. For example, Shaykhs or dervishes who studied in Arabic schools regard the *burhan* or the *āshūrā'* as Shiite practices; while a Syrian Shaykh who escaped from the war in his homeland to stay in Albania labeled those practices as sinful innovation (*bid'ah*).²⁵

²⁰ In the early post-socialist period, these networks were formed by several Arab missionaries who sought to co-opt Albanian Muslims with huge investments, construction of new mosques and scholarships for young people who studied in Middle Eastern religious institutions.

²¹ The *mawlid* is the observance of the birthday of Islamic prophet Muhammad which is commemorated in Rabi' al-awwal, the third month in the Islamic calendar.

²² This term, borrowed from the neo-Protestant or Catholic movements, indicates the conversion to faith and the spiritual rebirth of the faithful who previously led secular lives.

²³ Interview, Tirana, November 2016.

²⁴ Interview, Pishina, November 2013.

²⁵ Interview, Durres, May 2018.



This attitude is the result of what Olivier Roy (2012) defined as deculturalization and deterritorialization of the religion, involving the detachment of religion from local culture. The global interconnection has shaped the individualistic and critical religious behaviors of Muslims who choose what, when and how to believe, joining with a high level, standardized Islam that has become an ideological ideal-type. For Merdjanova (2012), the faithful are integrated into the global sphere, i.e. the virtual *umma*, where Islamic rules and values are standardized to be adapted for different cultures and people, reducing historical Islamic complexity to few and strict norms of practice (strict orthopraxis). The idealization of this global community shapes a “transactional Islam” that considers the Middle East to be a sacred-real space and the Prophet the fulcrum of Islamic religiosity. In his framework, the *turuq* are marginal, because they are perceived as heretical. Sufi practices are thus discriminated against, including the *burhan*, which is labeled as archaic or strange. Otherwise, its dramatic and arousing portrayal could fascinate some people, especially tourists or scholars who regard it as an exotic or bizarre spectacle to record or photograph. Orientalist (Said 1978) or Balkanist (Todorova 1997) attitudes have led this view, such as the current idea that Rifāʿiyya and other *turuq* practice these customs on folkloric grounds, overshadowing its real symbolic meaning and political implications.

POLITICAL AND INDIVIDUAL PORTRAYAL

This religious *aggiornamento* has produced fragmented religious arenas, where more actors claim new spaces and moods of legitimation. Although the religious public sphere is managed by state-recognized Islamic communities, many Muslims, individually or collectively, perform the ritual as a means to entail particular religious feeling that can be detached from official discourses. Within these highly politicized and fragmented religious arenas, rituals can be a way to legitimate new and old authorities and to shape the identities of religious communities. In this way, the *burhan* becomes the symbol of Rifāʿi or Saʿdi communities, marking the differences from other Sufi *turuq* and enforcing collective and communitarian bonds. Maurice Bloch (1974) underlined the political features of religious ritual, in that it ensures the validity and continuity of certain founding principles (symbolic and discursive orders) among the faithful. The solemnity, the repetitiveness and the formal style of the ritual reduce creativity and any contradictions, thus favoring the continuity of religious power.



Harvey Whitehouse (2004), partly following Bloch's intuitions, asserted that rituals could perform different sociopolitical patterns acting on cognitive memory: for him, the long-term memory, unlike the short-term memory, is divided into two types: the semantic, that concerns general knowledge; the episodic, that consists of specific events of life. The two are differently activated in doctrinal and imagistic modes of religiosity. Frequent and routinized repetitions activate the doctrinal mode of religiosity that shapes semantic memory. In this case the ritual concerns mostly verbal mechanical repetitions that are slowly memorized but lead to deeply embedded verbal and corporal techniques, despite possibly reducing levels of motivation. Infrequent repetitions and high arousal activate episodic memory (imagistic mode) that concerns creative and intuitive behaviors by the faithful. For Whitehouse (2004), the doctrinal mode allows the embedding of specific knowledge and the enforcement of orthodoxy and central authority; the imagistic mode assures the sociopolitical cohesion of the community through fashioning emotional perceptions. These two modes of religiosity could be variously modulated within the same ritual frame that employs different sociopolitical patterns.

Following this theoretical supposition, the *burhan*, as a highly dramatic and infrequent act, activates imagistic modes of religiosity, shaping the sociopolitical cohesion of the community. In this sense, the *burhan* heightens an individual's sense of belonging to a Sufi community and therefore marks its identity as a particular *ṭarīqa*. In other words, it becomes the religious marker that asserts particular and distinctive features. As Hasani, the *murīd* of the Rifā'iyya in Tropoja, said: «Only we in Tropoja do that; only we do *burhan* today». ²⁶ Following his words, the *burhan* does not concern only Sufi belonging, rather it establishes community and local identity, becoming the label of each community: each practical or nominal item needs to mark the difference in relation to other Sufi communities. Within the highly competitive and fragmented post-socialist religious arena, the *burhan* is used like a label to mark the identity of each Sufi community. A highly visible mark that attracts many people: Shaykh Adriu of Prizren admitted that the events with the *burhan* are the best attended of the year. ²⁷ The high arousal and dramatic portrayal of the *burhan* attract many people, framing their emotional and ethical view.

In this last sense, the experience of *burhan* allows the embodiment of several emotional and ethical patterns that concern disciplines and techniques of the self. In post-secular societies, the definition of the self mainly focuses on the body that,

²⁶ Interview, Tropoja, August 2015.

²⁷ Interview, Prizren, July 2015.



as a window-on-the-world, is fashioned by variable aesthetic and hedonistic ideal-types, through diets, clothes and (spiritual or psychological) practices to develop an ideal individual dimension. Although religious criticisms (Fedele 2013) and the secularization process (Taylor 2007) have weakened the social portrayal of religion, some people aim to renew their life by embracing specific religious beliefs or practices that concern several techniques of the self. Often, specific practices and aesthetic markers may be stressed to communicate a particular choice to the outside world. In the Islamic framework, the neo-Salafist faithful expose their faith through beards and cropped trousers (Roy 2007); equally, some dervishes practice *burhan* to mark their Sufi way. Each choice is thus loaded with individual symbolic attributions within a post-socialist pluralist religious arena that offers a variety of choices like a market. Following the words of Shaykh Alì of Tirana: «Each one chooses his *ṭarīqa* according to its features [...] some select the Halvetiyya because it is smooth; others choose the Bektashiyya because it is New Age, democratic and moderate; still others adhere to the Rifā'iyya because they like its screaming and violent *dhikr*».²⁸ The choice of a particular master or *ṭarīqa* corresponds to one's own subjective orientations to define the self. In this way, practices such as the *burhan* embed collective as well as individual concerns for the social representation of the body.

CONCLUSIONS

This work has analyzed how a religious practice, the *burhan*, is employed as political and subjective expression by some Sufi communities that consider it the symbol of the infinite love of God and reverence to their Shaykh. Its symbolic and discursive diversification outlines the great pluralization of the post-socialist religious field, in which such a practice, highly arousing, can be stigmatized or sublimated as community or individual label. At the same time, *burhan* performance outlines the evolution of different social and symbolic representations of the body. During the communist period, the regimes exercised power through the physical coercion of bodies, excluding any other ethical discipline, including a religious one. In the post-socialist era, that corporal coercion was replaced by an individual self-determination that otherwise indicates the incorporation of liberal and capitalist ethical rules. The body becomes more and more an expression of the self that is disciplined to forge

²⁸ Interview, Tirana, October 2015



individual subjectivity. In this sense, some people independently regulate and define their bodies with disciplinary practices such as the *burhan*, which thus entail their visions of the world: the body is treated like an object to shape according to individual and free subjectivities. On the other hand, this treatment underlines the common symbolic of the body load that follows the capitalistic behavioral frame in post-secular societies (Habermas 2008).

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