Essentializing Difference. Text, knowledge and ritual performance in a Sufi brotherhood in Italy[1]

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Abstract

The paper explores the different and competing understandings of 'proper Islamic praxis' between Egyptian Muslim immigrants and Italians converts to Islam within the Italian branch of an Egyptian-Sudanese Sufi brotherhood, in Rome.

The Italian brethren foreground intellectual engagement with texts and scriptures over ritual performance and the role of the body, elements to which immigrants instead give prominence. I suggest that such polarization and the reasons of its persistence may be best understood by focusing on the performative role of cultural essentialisms against immigrants and of stereotypes concerning the definition of 'orthodox' Islam circulating in Italy and beyond. Whereas these prosaic essentialisms and binaries do not actually map socio-cultural realities, they are on their turn performative: essentialised discourses orient everyday praxis, make sense of experience and support forms of empowerment and of domination within the brotherhood.

keywords: Migration; Italy; Islam; Ritual; Performance; Cultural essentialism.

1. Prologue

In March 2004, the Italian converts to the Tariqa Burhaniya, a Sufi brotherhood of Egyptian-Sudanese origin[2], read an article I had written about my research, carried out for my master thesis, on the Italian branches of the Tariqa (Abenante 2004). My text sparked off an animated discussion among the Burhani disciples attending the *zāwiya* (lodge) in Rome, led by Abdel Ghafour, – an aged intellectual man belonging to the high Italian bourgeoisie who had encountered Islam some twenty years earlier through a group of intellectuals and academics devoted to the study of mystical texts. According to Abdel Ghafour, I had placed

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[1] in I. Weinrich (2016).

[2] Founded in the middle of the 20th century by Shaykh Muḥammad ʿUthmān ʿAbduh al-Burhānī [henceforth Shaykh Mohammed Uthman] in Atbara, Sudan, the Tariqa Burhaniya [arab. al-Ṭarīqa al-Burhāniyya] spread rapidly from Sudan to Cairo during the 1960s, achieving great success among the middle classes and a certain visibility among foreigners. In the 1980s the Burhaniya concentrated its efforts on its European branches that had been thriving since the 1970s, especially in Germany. See Pierre Jean Luizard (Luizard 1991, Luizard 1990) and Valerie Hoffman (Hoffman 1995).

far too much stress on the role of bodily practice and ritual performance on the journey of mystical progression, thereby devaluing the intellectual and spiritual engagement required by the Sufi path. I went through an informal trial that finally judged me guilty of misunderstanding the real core of Sufism. The Italians decided to further submit my case to an expert, namely to Safwat, 'the' international Burhani teacher, so that my presence in the Tariqa could be reconsidered. I met Safwat on 'hostile' territory, Abdel-Ghafour's living room, one spring afternoon in Rome. To my great, and Abdel-Ghafour's even greater, surprise, Safwat praised my insight. The body and the performance of rituals had an indispensable role within the Burhani spiritual journey, he maintained. His verdict was that the European converts, and especially the Italians, were overly influenced by their study of Islam and by their previous Catholic education, to the point that they did not acknowledge the importance of the body on their spiritual journey and the material efficacy of Burhani ritual performances, be it the *ḥaḍra* (the weekly collective ritual), the *awrād* recitation (the individual litanies), or the singing of *qaṣāʾid* (the odes written by Shaykh Uthman, the founder).

I was thus reintroduced into the community. However, following this episode, my presence was looked upon with some suspicion. Safwat's decision continued to generate gossip and some dissatisfaction among the converts for some time. His decision, together with my article circulating among the milieus of Italian Islam, was held responsible for stoking the reformists' fire against Sufism by insinuating the suspicion of heterodoxy and the backwardness of Burhani practices.

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This episode familiarized me with a tension present within the Burhaniya concerning the proper way of practising Sufism, informed by an alleged opposition between intellectual engagement with the scriptures and the bodily performance of ritual. This opposition was framed by my interlocutors in terms of the Sufi/anti-Sufi debate, a prominent and enduring issue among Muslims, that has gained momentum with the rise of Islamic reformism and according to which Sufi ritual life is coupled with backward practices and set against an allegedly 'orthodox' scriptural Islam (De Jong and Radtke 1999; Sirriyeh 1999). As scholars have noted, Sufism and Islamic reformism are not opposed realities, and many studies have described how reformist ideas and practices, scripturalist tendencies, as well as popular ecstatic rituals, charismatic leadership and supererogatory ritual praxis are all elements that belong to both Sufi and non-Sufi movements. By the same token, in Islam as in many other religious settings, reading and performance, the work of the intellect and that of the body, are not in principle two distinct practices. On the contrary, the Qur'an itself is a text that

contains Revelation both in the semantic dimension of the words and in the sound of its performance. <u>Iqra'</u>, "read out loud", is the imperative given to the Muslim who is invited to vocalize the prescription of the Qur'an in order to both apprehend the manifest meaning conveyed by the propositionality of language – the *ẓāhir* in Sufi vocabulary – and perform its inner, symbolic meaning – the *bāṭin* –, conveyed by the sound of the Arabic letters (Nelson 2001).

From an analytical point of view, scholars of Islam, anthropologists and linguists, beyond confuting the existence of a concrete doctrinal and socio-cultural distinction between Sufis and non-Sufis, rightly insist on breaking down the binary between the semantic/propositional and the embodied/material dimensions of language, showing how words (and texts) call into play the human being as a whole, his/her moral physiology, and how the embodied and emotional dimensions are one with reason and reflection (Csordas 1997, Hirschkind 2006, Hodgson 1974, Metcalf 1993, Weinrich 2009). Whereas I agree with the analytical importance of this insight, at the same time I also stress the importance of acknowledging the fact that people actually, if more or less consciously, employ these binaries in making sense of their way of living Islam. As ethnographers, we should not overlook people's prosaic use of essentialisms and oppositions. On the contrary, we should make them the object of ethnographic analysis, as I set out to do in this paper[3].

By looking at the dynamics of the polarization between text/ritual, reading/performing, intellect/body within the Italian branch of an Egyptian-Sudanese Sufi brotherhood, I suggest that such a polarization, together with the reasons for its persistence, may be understood through the ways in which it blends and overlaps with other discourses and dynamics of Islam in Europe, particularly in Italy, and the work these discourses[4] do in the practice of Islam and in people's lives.

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[3] I use ethnographic analysis in the sense employed by Pnina Werbner (Werbner 1997) and Bruno Riccio (Ricco 2004).

[4] By 'discourse', I mean a group of statements which provide a language for talking and thinking about a particular subject.

2. The Italian Branch. First converts: traditionalism and the intellectualist approach

The Tariqa Burhaniya arrived in Italy more or less 40 years ago, brought by an Egyptian migrant and *murshid* (spiritual master), Jalal, who had moved to Rome with his wife in search of a job. Until 1984 the disciples of the Italian branch were very few, in the number of two or three immigrants. They met for the weekly *ḥaḍra* in a specific mosque on the outskirts of Rome, on piazza Pitagora.

The first Italian to approach the brotherhood was a man, Matteo Abdel Haq, a secondary school philosophy teacher, with an academic background in philosophy and history of religion. Some years before meeting Jalal, in 1980 to be precise, Matteo had converted to Islam under the guidance of his academic friends. He recounted his experience as follows:

> My path towards Islam has been very long and complicated. I have always been interested in the mysteries of the world, in the search of truth, beauty and wisdom. Following my BA in philosophy I continued my studies but with much dissatisfaction, so I started studying, all alone, Christianity, its history... I embarked upon the path and I spoke with a number of monks, I visited many monasteries, even in Greece. After that came my interest in Hinduism – it was fashionable then in the sixties – and I practised yoga... but also this path was not satisfying for me. Concerning Islam... well I had avoided it altogether because I had many prejudices... when I discovered that an 'inner' Islam existed beyond 'exterior' Islam I understood that it was possible, also for Westerners, to become Muslims. I had some friends from university who knew a lot about Islam because of their studies, and had already converted to Islam. I asked them to help me to approach it and they introduced me to the study of the religion[5].

It was at this moment that Abdel Haq met, by chance, Jalal, in the mosque on piazza Pitagora where he used to pray, and had been fascinated by the practice of the *ḥaḍra* ritual.

Soon after, in the mid-eighties, three other Italians joined this pioneering group: Abdel Ghafour, Abdel Rahim and Leila. Before encountering the Burhaniya they had tried out several other Sufi brotherhoods. Abdel Ghafour and Abdel Rahim, just like Abdel Haq, had converted to Islam through their studies, having read much about Islam and Sufi spirituality. Abdel Rahim's wife Leila had followed him on his Sufi tours from brotherhood to brotherhood until they both stopped and became affiliated with the Burhaniya in 1986. After their divorce, Leila stayed in the Burhaniya, while Abdel Rahim changed brotherhood once again.

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[5] Interview with Abdel Haq, Rome 2002.

Starting from the above four cases of conversion, we can draw the contours of the first generation of Italian Burhanis and gather the threads of their representation of Islam and the expectations they linked to the practice of Sufism. Abdel Haq, Abdel Ghafour, Abdel Rahim and Leila had all joined the brotherhood at the beginning of the 1980s, their journey towards Islam burgeoning from their academic studies or from their intellectual engagement with Islamic texts. The intellectual and the spiritual discovery of Islam overlapped, following a pattern of conversion common to a broad generation of Italian (and more generally European) converts to Sufism (Allievi 1999, Allievi 1999b, Marchi 1999). Indeed, many of these converts, including the first Italian Burhani constituency, accessed Islam through the door of Traditionalism (Sedgwick 2004, Sedgwick 2004b, Marchi 1999), a syncretic philosophy postulating the loss of a spiritual tradition in the West and the necessity of seeking it in an allegedly spiritually superior Orient. In this sense, the converts' intellectual approach to Islam is associated with a quest for 'Oriental philosophies' and with a fascination for Oriental meditation practices and exotic styles of life[6].

On the basis of its first constituency, the Italian branch of the Burhaniya could be classified as belonging to an elitist group of brotherhoods spread across Italy and mainly composed of converts coming from a university education background and equipped with an intellectual knowledge of Islam[7]. Within these brotherhoods the study of Islamic and mystical treaties is given primacy over ritual practice and the converts enjoy a sense of distinction because of their knowledgeable approach to Islam, their leaning towards spiritual matters and their neglect of worldly religious engagements. Such an approach to Islam is considered more adaptable to Italian society than the approach proposed by other brotherhoods and Sunni movements, the latter two often being criticized for practising a traditional, cultural form of religion, and for their strict rules of conduct.

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[6] Traditionalism was a loose movement of people in Europe between the 1920s and 1960s, without formal structure, connected by a common debt to the work of René Guénon. Guénon (1886-1951) was a French author and intellectual working and writing on Eastern metaphysical doctrines considered to have a universal character and to be the last heirs of spirituality in the modern world. Having converted to Islam during his youth, he saw in Sufism the best route towards universal spirituality. A number of European intellectuals were inspired by his writings and example; in some cases European branches of Sufi brotherhoods were based on his teachings. See Mark Sedgwick (Sedgwick 2004b).

[7] On the Italian panorama of Sufi brotherhoods see in particular Fabrizio Speziale (Speziale 2000), Elisabetta Marchi (Marchi 2001, Marchi 1999).

3. Burhaniya in 2002: beyond traditionalism

By the time I started my fieldwork in 2002, the Italian branch owned an apartment of roughly 50 square metres in the north of Rome, in Valle Aurelia. Approaching the location, the repetition of the *awrād* and the singing of the *qaṣāʾid* could be heard from the street and upon entering the apartment the visitor was met with the intense smell of Sudanese *bakhūr* (incense) and the kindness of the disciples. A pair of curtains was drawn, roughly dividing the one-room apartment into two spaces on the occasion of the *ḥaḍra*, the weekly collective ritual, for men and women to sit apart. The walls were decorated with photos of Medina and Mecca and several other photos of the *maqām* (tomb) of Mohammed Uthman, the founder himself, and of his son and grandson, and of all Shaykhs of the Tariqa. A green moquette covered the floor and at the far end of the room stood a small console, holding a Qur'an, that functioned as *miḥrāb*, pointing in the direction of Mecca. On the right of the entrance stood a closet, containing the Burhani rosary, Italian translations of books on Sufism and spirituality by René Guénon, Titus Burckhardt and other Traditionalists (Nelson 2001), the *awrād* booklets and several copies of the *Baṭāʾin al-asrār* (The Hidden Secrets), that is, the book containing the collected *qaṣāʾid* of the founder.

In 2002 the branch in Rome counted approximately 30 disciples, a group which consisted of different types of converts and an equivalent number of immigrants, mainly Egyptian and Sudanese *murshids* (teachers) and *munshids* (singers) belonging to the Tariqa. After the phase of its first converts, beyond the increasing number of immigrants, the Burhaniya progressively witnessed a change among its Italian constituency: a wave of new converts, ignorant about Islam, approached the Tariqa as a consequence of professional or personal troubles (illness, family quarrels, work problems etc.). Leila, Abdul Rahim's (former) wife, who had followed the Tariqa since the beginning, commented on the progressive change of the constituency and its orientation:

> The idea of Islam came upon me because during that period reading René Guénon was really in fashion. In fact all the old disciples who are now in the brotherhood, the men I mean, come from that school. I was married to Abdul Rahim and I was the only woman taking part in the discussions. They were theoreticians who talked only philosophy, theology and philology ... I really felt that this was totally useless. Once I even said to them: why do you talk all the time instead of taking action and practising? Today only a few of these theoreticians are still in the Tariqa, the others have left. The Shaykh has taught us that the primary tool is the method, the individual *awrād* ritual path organized by the *murshid*[8].

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[8] Interview with Leila, Rome 2002.

Leila's words testify to the emergence of the polarity between an intellectual and a practical approach to Sufism, linked to the disciples' different approaches to Islam and amplified by the progressive assertion of the Egyptian direction. In 2002, the Italian Burhaniya qualified as a mixed brotherhood, and not only in terms of its diverse ethnic composition, but also because of its ambivalent ideology and praxis of Islam, caught between the need to include the immigrants' specific culture of Islam and the converts' more intellectual approach. In this sense, the comment by Abdul Rahim, Leila's ex-husband and one of the converts who left the Burhaniya, is revealing:

> The level that Shaykh Mohammed Uthman calls the maqām (stage) of liberation can be reached through two different paths: either following a regular path with regular awrād, or through an overabundance of ritual performance. This is why I think that the Burhaniya is a ṭarīq (path) and not a ṭarīqa (path organized by a brotherhood), because even if someone manages to reach the maqām of liberation through an excess of rituals and a good intention, he then anyway stops there and is not able to advance in his spiritual life. It is a fact that the Burhaniya has lost all of the intellectuals among its disciples. Just like all the other Guénonians, I too left the brotherhood[9].

Dissatisfied with the present-day constituency of the Burhaniya, Abdul Rahim emphasized that the Shaykh did not select his followers and was welcoming to anyone who wanted to approach Sufism, whether Muslim or not. Abdul Rahim added that many of the new converts did not know the Qur'an, they were ignorant about the Sunna and were not interested in studying religious matters, therefore they could not aspire to truly understand Islam. By accepting followers who lacked the elementary notions of Islam and Sufism, the Burhaniya, from his point of view, was not a proper Islamic Sufi brotherhood, and came close to heterodoxy. In Abdul Rahim's words, the intellectualist tendency of the Traditionalist converts converges with the reformist approach of objectifying Islam (Starret 1998), that is to say, transforming Islam into an object of intellectual analysis, something to be understood. By criticizing the Burhanis for their lack of attention to texts, scriptures and intellectual engagement, Abdul Rahim was positioning the Burhaniya right in the middle of the Italian debate around Islam.

The panorama of Islam in Italy is fragmented into different ideologically and politically competing parties, which make it impossible for 'Italian Islam' to acquire an identity and to have, even today, a coherent voice in its dialogue with Italian institutions[10]. This range of different parties includes at one end of the

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[9] Interview with Abdul Rahim, Rome 2002.

[10] The Italian Constitution recognises freedom of religion and the right of all religions to self-organise. Their relations with the Italian state are regulated by law in the form of bilateral agreements between representatives of a religion and the state. As of 2014 there is no

spectrum a conservative extreme, represented by the UCOII (*Union of the Islamic Communities in Italy*). Ideologically linked to the Muslim Brotherhood, the UCOII has a reformist mindset that espouses a scripturalist approach, foregrounding individual critical reasoning about Islamic texts, before the role of ritual practice and mystical experience. At the other end of the spectrum come the Sufi brotherhoods that make up, themselves, a very inhomogeneous lot: there are brotherhoods consisting prevalently of immigrants, such as the Senegalese Muridiyya, as well as brotherhoods composed predominantly of converts, such as the COREIS (*Communita Religiosa Islamica*), an association of Sufi-oriented movements linked to the milieu of converts and Guénonians. In the middle of this wide range of movements there are other formations such as the so-called "nations's Islam", or the "Islam of the mosques", an expression of the political orientation of the nations of emigration (Saint-Blancat 1999, Guolo 2004).

In 2002 the Burhaniya did not fully fit into either of these parties and found itself in the position of confronting, on the one hand, the reformist/Islamist criticism against rote and 'heterodox' ritual practice, and the need to speak to the more universalizing and spiritualist tendencies of the COREIS and the converts' approach to Oriental philosophies on the other. Early on in the course of my fieldwork, I realized that such an increasing polarization of the practice and understanding of Islam within the Burhaniya, together with the brotherhood's idiosyncratic collocation within the ideological panorama of Italian Islam, mapped onto yet another discourse: a form of cultural essentialism played out in the difficult encounter between Italian converts and Egyptian immigrants.

4. *Cultural essentialisms: intellectualist versus embodied knowledge*

In the course of our interviews and conversations Jalal, the first murshid of the Italian branch, often mentioned that the Italians were yet unable to manage the Tariqa's teachings and ritual life by themselves, because they were too young to Sufism, and he thus concluded that his guidance was indispensable. Because of his Egyptian background and his competency in the Arabic language, which allowed him access to the 'secrets' of the sacred language of the Qur'an, Jalal claimed for himself the exclusive entitlement to manage the Italian branch of the Tariqa and its pedagogical path. A year or so before my encounter with the Burhaniya, Jalal had been accused by the converts of wanting to seize control of the Tariqa, and of betraying the Shaykh and his rules. The news of this unhappy incident soon reached the brotherhood's centre, in Egypt. The Shaykh immediately discharged the Egyptian *murshid* from his duties and assigned

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such agreement concerning Islam because there is no organisation unanimously agreed
upon as representative of the various parties of Muslims in Italy.

Abdel Ghafour the temporary management of the *irshād* (spiritual guidance). Safwat, another and more highly qualified Egyptian *murshid*, was to arrive a few months later in order to take charge of the spiritual advancement of the Italian branch. Eagerly awaited, Safwat's arrival in Italy, however, very soon thwarted the Italians' expectations.

Introduced by the Shaykh as an international teacher of the Burhaniya, Safwat was expected to be very knowledgeable in spiritual matters and mystical treaties and was welcomed by the Italians with open arms: the Italian brothers paid the expenses for his trip and Abdel Ghafour acted as his legal guarantor in the issuance of the visa. Safwat was well aware that his future in Italy greatly depended upon his performance as a teacher and upon his ability to gain the Italian brethren's confidence. And, as he later told me, he had immediately felt inadequate to the role he had been chosen for:

> When Abdel Ghafour fetched me at the airport he wanted me to translate one qaṣīda. We spent the entire drive on just one verse. So he knew I did not speak English … My English was terrible. When explaining religion I could not talk in English. For 20 years I hadn't spoken English, since secondary school … [11]

This episode was the first in a series of miscomprehensions between Safwat and his Italian hosts: miscomprehensions that sprang from the ambiguity of him being, at once, a teacher and an immigrant, the ambiguity between what the Italians expected from him as a teacher and the prejudices they held towards him as an immigrant. Soon enough Safwat discovered that his lack of competence in the Italian and English languages was but a first and superficial expression of what the Italian perceived as a deeper inadequacy which was rooted in the way he inhabited and used his body in religion and, notably, in his whole conception of Islamic knowledge. The converts expected Safwat to be a knowledgeable teacher who could help them navigate the sea of spiritual knowledge contained in mystical Sufi texts, helping them to fully master Islamic literature. To their great disappointment they had to cope with a man who could barely speak English and who mechanically practised his rituals.

These miscomprehensions fed into a deeper tension that had been vexing the Italian branch since the beginnings and was linked to a form of cultural essentialism driving the converts' attitudes towards their fellow disciples coming from abroad, the 'immigrants'. Shams, one of the first Italian converts, summarized this tension in an interview he held with me right after the scandal:

> Many of these, let's call them extra-communitarians, come to Italy to work. They already belong to the Tariqa in Egypt before arriving, but they do not perceive it as

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[11] Interview with Safwat, Rome 2003.

we do ... they are not at our level ... we, we are seeking a spiritual path, a spiritual lineage ... for them the Tariqa is a .. a natural thing .. they start the *awrād* and they are not conscious of what they are doing ... Many of them say: tell me what I have to do, I don't want to know the theory ... they don't want to know, understand ... For us instead understanding is the core of inner growth, for both spiritual and cultural advancement ... we may call it knowledge[12].

Shams speaks for all the converts: the priority of intellectual knowledge is beyond discussion, and hence the engagement with Islamic and Sufi treaties is deemed essential to being a proper Muslim. The dissatisfaction with Jalal, Safwat and their understanding of Islam easily slips into a form of cultural hierarchization in which 'we' becomes one with 'knowledge', 'high culture' and the search for the 'spiritual', while 'they', the immigrants, the extra communitarians, are seen as driven by habit, nature and lacking in spirituality. A racial discourse on the 'Oriental's' lack of consciousness and the disparagement of the racialized body as a symbol of irrationality are culturalized. Difference is reified and asserted on cultural grounds (Grillo 2003). The converts' suspicion towards an approach to Sufism based on ritual performance is mapped onto a prejudice against an alleged Egyptian form of Islam, according to which Islamic practice is an unconscious habit driven by societal factors and associated with traditional, if not backward, customs. By contrast, the path of Sufism, from the Italians' point of view, is a conscious striving for Knowledge, and Islam itself is understood as carrying a set of beliefs to be consciously learned rather than unconsciously apprehended. A 'cultural' hierarchy is established, and social difference is essentialized: by asserting authority on cultural grounds, the Italians' at the same time reinforce the already existing relationships of power between converts and Egyptians brought about by the latter's status as immigrants. Indeed, the inequality in the relationship between Safwat and the converts grew parallel to Safwat's dependence upon the converts for financial and bureaucratic support.

Falling in the middle of the wider debate on the position of Sufism in Italy (and in Egypt[13]), in which the Burhaniya needed to find its standpoint, this tension was

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[12] Shams, Rome 2002.

[13] Indeed, in those same years, in the face of the Islamic revival and the renewed focus of reform-minded Muslims on Islamic scriptures, the main branch of the Burhaniya in Egypt found itself at the centre of a harsh debate concerning the heterodoxy of their cosmologies and practices. The critics raged against allegedly esoteric and heterodox doctrinal points within the Shaykh's teachings and against Burhani practice, defined as backward and superstitious. Most importantly, the Burhani method was accused of keeping the disciples in a state of ignorance of the Islamic doctrines and texts and of promoting a totalizing submission of the disciples to the direction of the Shaykh, depriving them of the right to challenge the scriptures. The Burhaniya, which counted a vast constituency among the educated middle classes, was a hindrance to the reformist and Salafi movements. With its stress on the Shaykh-disciple relationship and ritual life, it conflicted with the reformist-minded aspiration to form 'modern Muslims' as persons capable of cultivating an individual relationship to

soon framed in the terms of the anti-Sufi debate: the cultural stigmatization of rote performance and ritual body practice dovetailed with the fear of a possible critique coming from the reformist parties in Italy such as the UCOII, which at the time was leading the dialogue with Italian institutions. From the converts' point of view, Jalal's and Safwat's approach to Sufism foregrounded ritual performance at the expenses of intellectual knowledge and the study of both mystical texts and Islamic scriptures, preventing the Burhaniya from legitimately positioning itself among the Italian 'orthodox' Islamic movements.

5. *Cultural essentialism reversed: the value of performance*

The same prosaic essentialism characterizing the converts' discourse was deployed by the Egyptians themselves as a form of defence against the Italians' hostile attitudes: on the one hand, by assuming and foregrounding an essentialized representation of Islamic knowledge as primarily an embodied form of knowledge, Safwat stressed his position as a proper Muslim. On the other, he asserted his authority by describing the Italians' ignorance in matters such as ritual performance and the Arabic language. When I got to know him in 2001, Safwat's status had changed: he had just married Leila, an Italian convert to the Burhaniya and Abdel Rahim's ex-wife, and he had finally given up his stressful search for work since his Italian brethren were now willing to sustain him economically. His authority had increased so much that thanks to his intervention I solved my first ethical conflict in the field. To understand how this inversion of status was possible it is necessary first of all to explore in depth the architecture of the Burhani *awrād* pedagogy, and the specific form it has taken in its journey to Italy.

6. awrād *pedagogy in Italy*

From my interviews with Shaykh Ibrahim, then Shaykh of Tariqa, on the subject of the *irshād* (teaching), I soon gathered that he considered the *awrād* practice to be 'the' method of spiritual growth and the foundation of *irshād*, the Burhani pedagogy. The *awrād* keep the Tariqa together, Shaykh Ibrahim told me in response to my questions.

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textual sources. A reflective relation of the believers to the texts was to substitute, according to the reformists, the practice of *taqlīd*, the 'blind and rote' imitation of living models. At the same time, the Burhaniya made official Islamic institutions, such as the National Sufi Council, particularly uncomfortable in their struggle to come to terms with the growing revival movement by curbing the 'excesses' in Sufi praxis and reinforcing its scriptural dimensions. See, among others, Hoffman, Sufism.

As the Shaykh explained, *awrād* (sg. wird), are a set of standardized litanies composed of Qur'anic *āyāt* (verses) rearranged by the Shaykh, which regulate the disciples' individual paths through progressive spiritual stages (*maqāmāt*) towards the *fanā'*, annihilation in the Shaykh. Officially, a *murshid* (teacher) is responsible for assigning the *awrād* to his disciples and for their *irshād* (teaching). Every *murīd* (disciple) who has achieved the first three levels of initiation can, theoretically, become a *murshid* to someone else. Once the method of the *awrād* is established, the Tariqa grows all by itself, added the Shaykh. In practice, however, things are somewhat more complicated. Indeed the management and the performance of the *awrād* method within the Italian branch generate relations of authority which result in continuous tensions between Egyptian and Italian *murshids*.

In its diffusion to Europe, in the 1980s, the Tariqa had to face the risk endemic to many Sufi brotherhoods of losing the charismatic power of its central authority. Alongside the extension of the brotherhood across the globe, which made gatherings more problematic to attend, an additional problem resided in the converts' lack of knowledge of Arabic, which made them more difficult to guide. Translations, transliterations and a strict organization of the spiritual path were needed to keep the Tariqa going. The *awrād* themselves have been translated into the various languages of the converts and, most importantly, transliterated in various alphabets in order to be accessible to any disciple. All the Burhani branches have been provided with booklets collecting the *awrād* in their transliterated form, alongside an *irshād* handbook describing the main tasks of a spiritual guide and the management of the *awrād* repetition sequence in relation to spiritual progression. The converts themselves, independently of the time and the modalities of their affiliation to the Tariqa, are allowed to take up the role of spiritual masters by attentively following the rules of the *irshād* handbook. With the aim of obviating the converts' ignorance of Arabic, particular attention has been redirected to the transliterations, provided with diacritical signs that establish the correct pronunciation of the corresponding Arabic letters and the correct prosody of the verses. The *awrād* booklets provide the non-Arabic readers with a rendition of the *tajwīd* style, i.e. the set of prosodic rules that define the pronunciation of the single letters composing the *awrād*, together with the tempo and rhythm, and that are normally used in Qur'anic recitation.

This systematization of the spiritual path, pursued in order to organize the Tariqa in the absence of a daily direct relationship between the Shaykh and his followers, has actually deepened the cleavage between an embodied spiritual knowledge and intellectual knowledge of the texts. In the process of transliteration and the regulation of the repetition sequences, the *awrād* lose their importance as meaningful texts. Their efficacy is attributed nearly

exclusively to performance, which calls into play the sonic dimension of the revelation, contained in the sound of the Qur'anic verses forming the *awrād*. The literal semantic meaning of the texts is backgrounded with respect to the symbolic knowledge contained and channelled by the material work of the sacred Arabic letters on the soul and the body. The significance of the *tajwīd* style and the correct pronunciation of the sacred texts are indeed supported by the *'ilm al-ḥurūf*, the science of letters, established definitively by Ibn al-'Arabī in the 13th century, which presupposes a specific relation between Arabic letters, cosmology and bodies. On the grounds of this science, the Burhani Shaykh warns that an incorrect performance of the *awrād* is not only spiritually void but may even be dangerous for the performer, unleashing powerful spiritual forces. The value of performance for the spiritual path, and, precisely, the correct ritual performance, is foregrounded with respect to oral teaching, the reading and the study of texts and Islamic scriptures.

The restructuring of the *irshād* method, working towards the decoupling of the performance of the sacred word from the semantic dimension of reading, changed the relationships of authority among disciples on the basis of their different intellectual and practical skills, and turned out to be a tool of empowerment for the immigrants within the Italian branch.

7. *Performance and embodied knowledge*

Between Jalal's departure and Safwat's arrival, the Italian disciples had been guided in their spiritual path by some of the oldest converts to the Tariqa who focused much of their efforts on the written lectures of the Shaykh, beyond other mystical treaties. Once enrolled as the Italian *murshid* (teacher), Safwat, with the Shaykh's compliance, started implementing the *awrād* method within the Italian branch of the Burhaniya, gradually sidelining the importance of oral or written lectures. As a consequence, the role of bodily techniques became primary on the path of spiritual learning, backgrounding the 'intellectual' and textual knowledge of Sufi literature and mystics. Safwat's ignorance of English and Italian and his difficulty in giving lectures became irrelevant to the successful outcome of his teaching. Conversely, his 'natural' fluency in Arabic and his embodied abilities in perceiving the spiritual power of the *awrād* letters and sounds were foregrounded: within the Italian branch Safwat was, by far, the most competent in teaching the *tajwīd*, the correct pronunciation and prosody of the *awrād*. During our interviews, Safwat eventually placed much stress on these embodied aspects of the *awrād* method, saying how essential it was for the Italian disciples to learn the proper body techniques in order to articulate the *awrād*'s sounds. The repetition of the *awrād* implies a correct movement of the lips and of the

tongue, the correct pronunciation of guttural letters, alongside a concentration on proper images and the ability to glide the rosary (Egypt. coll.: *sibḥa*) through one's fingers in order to keep count of the repetitions. These are competencies, according to Safwat, that require practice in order to be acquired and naturalized as a habit. Abdel Ghafour was soon superseded in his role as Italian teacher, a role he had been holding – as the oldest and most erudite convert – since the very beginnings of the Burhaniya in Italy. All of Abdel Ghafour's symbolic capital, based on his knowledge of Sufi literature, lost importance once confronted with Safwat's embodied capital.

This reorganization of the structure of learning – from intellectual and textual to embodied and practical – corresponded with a reconfiguration of the converts' subjectivity, starting from a reordering of the hierarchy of the senses. The Italians had long been training themselves to read the transliteration of the litanies in Latin letters using a written aid. Once Safwat took over the teaching responsibilities, he asserted his competence by teaching the sound of sacred Arabic letters by means of oral repetition (as the *tajwīd* prescribes) rather than the importance of reading the litanies from the written aid. This implied as a consequence an increased attention to the bodily techniques of repetition. By preserving the oral and acoustic character of Qur'anic Revelation and its symbolic dimension implicit in the letters, the *tajwīd* is in the first instance a method that works corporeally through the art of listening and reciting (Nelson 2001). By stressing the pre-eminence accorded to the sound (through pronunciation and prosody) of the *awrād* and the art of listening and reciting, i.e. the *tajwīd*, over the ability to visualize and read the written text of the *awrād*, Safwat, with his embodied capital, was once again challenging Abdel Ghafour's leading position which was based on his spiritual knowledge. Both intellectual knowledge of the Sufi texts and the competence in reading written transliteration were not comparable with the spiritual insight provided by the embodied knowledge of the secret science of the letters. Of all those who belonged to the Italian *zāwiya*, only Safwat possessed this knowledge capital, or better put: only his body possessed this knowledge as an embodied memory. His past life, his long-standing practice of Sufism in Egypt, the opportunity to live within the aura of the Shaykh and, not least, the opportunity to live in Cairo, the city of the *ahl al-bayt* (the prophet's family), were all now present in his ability to recite with a perfect *tajwīd*.

By virtue of the *awrād* performance, the Italians reshaped their hierarchy of the senses as well as their way of understanding knowledge. By changing the Italians' horizons of perception, their understanding and practice of Islam, Safwat soon became an irreplaceable teacher, thereby also shifting the power relations between immigrants and converts. The relevance of this reconfiguration of the hierarchy of the senses to the Italians' path in the

brotherhood was confirmed to me by many of my subsequent interviews. Most of the converts highlighted the importance of *qaṣāʾid* singing (the singing of mystical poems) and the beauty of the sound of the Arabic language as a determining factor in their spiritual engagement. Today the international offices of the Tariqa produce records of the best Egyptian and Sudanese voices of the Burhaniyya singing *qaṣāʾid*, and sell them to the disciples. Many Italians have replaced their music cassettes with cassettes of *qaṣāʾid* singing which have become the soundtrack of their car journeys or their ipods. In this case, too, Safwat's embodied memory of the *qaṣāʾid* singing in Cairo was unmatched. The 'intellectual' capital of knowledge owned by the converts was twice undermined and subverted: as a form of 'textual' knowledge, it was inessential to the appraisal of the bodily techniques essential to the practice of the *awrād*, as well as to the symbolic knowledge comprised in the oral, thus acoustic, dimension of the *tajwīd*.

8. Conclusions

"Existence is a letter of which you are the meaning" (Ibn al-ʿArabī 1997 [1329]).
"… The realm of letters is endowed with
the most pure of languages and the most evident of eloquence"
Ibn al-ʿArabī Ibn al-ʿArabī 1997 [1329].

In these Ibn al-ʿArabī quotations the Arabic letters, and by extension the words and texts, reveal their full meaning, which invests the believer in his/her entirety with a meaning that is at once material, manifest, spiritual, intellectual, inner, *bāṭin* and *ẓāhir*. This ethnographic study has looked at how the act of reading and performing the sacred Arabic letters are set apart and perceived as two different practices within the Italian branch of a Sufi brotherhood. I have argued how the difference between the material and the semantic dimensions of letters and words, between text and performance, is polarized by the specific dynamics of Islam and conversion in Italy, and further articulated through cultural stereotypes.

The point of view of the Italians converts, I have argued, is rooted in their exposure to two mutually reinforcing discourses which converge in foregrounding an intellectual engagement with the scriptures over the performance of rituals: on one hand a discourse that blends Sufism, Oriental philosophies and the Orient, informing certain Italian milieus of converts linked to Traditionalism, and on the other hand the long shadow of Islamic reformist discourse, which finds echoes in the debate on Italian Islam. Such a text/performance binary is then further enhanced by its coupling with a form of

cultural essentialism current in contemporary Italian discourse about immigrants and that is embraced by both immigrants and converts in the face of the social problematics of a mixed brotherhood. Indeed, the Burhanis I met while attending the Italian *zāwiya* consciously overlapped the text/performance binary onto a reified cultural difference distinguishing 'Italians' from 'Egyptians'. Whereas these prosaic essentialisms and binaries do not actually map onto socio-cultural realities, they are in turn performative: essentialized discourses orient everyday praxis, make sense of experience and support forms of empowerment and of domination. My interlocutors consciously uncouple the intellectual mastery of Sufi knowledge from the performance of the spiritual path, linking them with two different forms of knowledge, one intellectual, the other practical. In turn, these different forms of knowledge call into play different cultural competencies and configurations of subjectivity which are played out in the encounter, at times difficult, between Italians and immigrants, generating subject positions and relations of authority.

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