

2 Sonic Ways to Embodied Remembrance

Sufi *dhikr* in an Italian Roma camp

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Abstract

This chapter focuses on the sonic aspects of *dhikr*, the ritual of “remembrance” of Allah, as performed by a Sufi brotherhood inside a Roma camp in Florence, Italy. The collective act of remembrance involves specific bodily techniques pertaining to different sensory registers (including the sonic, breathing, visual, proprioceptive, kinaesthetic, and imaginative spheres), weaving a net of correspondences able to generate an all-embracing aesthetic/synaesthetic coherence, and generating a heightened sensitive experience, or hyperaesthesia. The sonic gestures, simultaneously enacted and perceived, are means to, and instantiations of, the experience of *embodied remembrance*, which is found at the meeting point of corresponding dichotomies: unity and multiplicity, self and other, eternal and contingent, steadiness and movement, repetition and variation, soloist singing and collective chanting.

Keywords: Sufi brotherhood, lived Islam, embodiment, ensoundment, cultural phenomenology, ritual

[...] I heard Dhu ‘l-Nūn say, when I asked him about remembrance: “It means the absence of the one who remembers from his act of remembrance.” He then recited the following [verse]:

I multiply my remembrance of you not because I have forgotten you
Remembrance simply flows from my tongue!

Abu ‘l-Qāsim al-Qushayrī (d. 1072) in Knysh (2007, 235)

Introduction¹

The word *dhikr*² and its derivatives frequently appear in the Quran both referring to the prophets' role to "remind" people of their own divinely given reality and to the due "remembrance" and "mentioning" (a further meaning of *dhikr*) of Allah from the side of humans (Chittick 2004, 49). Since the earliest stages of Sufism in 9th-century Baghdad, the recollection and invocation of God was regarded as a main practice carried out in order to cultivate the presence of the heart (*qalb*), intended as the spiritual organ of divine abode inside the human being (Karamustafa 2007, 19–21). The practice soon led to the development of "distinctive prayer rituals in the form of the invocation (*dhikr*) and the audition to poetry and music (*samā'*) that frequently led to rapture or ecstasy (*wajd*)" (*ivi*, 20). In the course of the centuries these practices underwent further elaborations that led to sophisticated understandings of the nature of the spiritual realizations and of the experiential states (*ahwāl*, singular: *hāl*) disclosing, as divine gifts, in the course of *dhikr*, together with a theoretical grounding of the practice based on subtle theological, anthropological, and epistemological tenets (Shamsy 2016, 224). Practices of "audition" (*samā'*) of spiritual concerts and techniques of remembrance (*dhikr*) overlapped in the active search for ecstatic states, resulting in a wide range of repertoires carried out up to contemporary brotherhoods (*ṭuruq*, sing. *ṭarīqa*),³ along with techniques pertaining to different sensory registers including the sonic, breathing, visual, proprioceptive, kinaesthetic, and imaginative spheres.

An act of private or congregational worship, *dhikr* can be performed across different brotherhoods as a loud (*jahrī*, sonic) or silent (*khāfī*, hidden) practice, in a standing (*zīkr-i kiyam*, in the Turkish version) or sitting position (*zīkr-i kaiden*); it can involve the execution of certain codified bodily gestures and dance movements (*raqs*) and choreographed group movements

1 I wish to heartfully thank Carola E. Lorea for her commitment to the realization of this chapter, through encouragement and appreciation toward my work, linguistic and formal instructions, precious revisions and bright observations. I also wish to warmly thank Rosalind I.J. Hackett for her appropriate suggestions. My gratitude and esteem also go to Luca Hosseini, the author of the photos presented here, who agreed to their inclusion in this chapter.

2 Unless differently stated, all religious terms are in Arabic.

3 The term *ṭarīqa* ("way" or "path") is rendered here as "order" or as "brotherhood"—the latter being a rendition which nonetheless does not acknowledge the vertical dimension of a Sufi *ṭarīqa* nor its female constituents. *Ṭarīqa* refers both to the spiritual path and to the methods and the systems adopted for its crossing; these methods evolved "from a simple world-renouncing piety to a series of highly sophisticated doctrines that circulated within a formal and highly hierarchical institutional framework known as the *ṭarīqa*" (Knysh 2000, 2) in the 12th century.

in circles (*dawrān*). Certain orders, most notably the *rifā'i*, *sa'di* and some *qādiri* branches, carry out some spiritual exercises of mortification of the flesh—or, better, of its vitalization—as with the practice of *burhān*, a “proof of faith” (Bria 2019, 128) in which the practitioners pierce themselves in one or more parts of the body with a forty-centimeter metal pin blessed by the spiritual leader (*shaykh*).

This article is an attempt to examine the sonic dimensions of the *jahri dhikr* carried out by a *khalwati* brotherhood⁴ centered inside the Poderaccio Roma camp in Florence, Italy, employing the theoretical framework of cultural phenomenology (Csordas 2002).⁵ The ethnographic material I present is drawn from my fieldwork research conducted among Sufi brotherhoods inside Italian Roma communities, which I started in 2018. A “Roma camp”, or “nomad camp”, is a term which indicates different residential solutions provided by the Italian authorities since the mid-eighties, based on the culturalist assumption that all Roma are nomads (even if this is not the case of these Yugoslavian groups), which produced their organized exclusion within a particular chronic temporariness inside demi-urban marginal areas.

The term Roma is an autonym (Rom in Italian language). It is a term of common use, regarded as politically correct—different from the term Gypsy—that nevertheless comprehends groups that would not name themselves as such. The inhabitants of the Italian camps are mostly *xoraxané romá*, a term used to denote Muslim groups from former Yugoslavia. Among the members of Roma families who crossed the Adriatic Sea between the late 1960s and throughout the 1990s, some of them were affiliates of a Sufi order in their homelands, while many took the vows of affiliation into the lineage during their diasporic journeys.

The Poderaccio camp is situated among unauthorized dumping grounds, factories and plots of land, right upon a floodplain used as dumping ground of hospital waste. Established by the municipality in 1988 after numerous arrivals of Roma families, the camp witnessed river floods, deaths of minors, legislative changes, judiciary interventions, and other hazards. Finally, in 2004 the Poderaccio camp was provided with 74 new wooden houses as a

4 The *khalwatiyya* order developed between the 14th and 15th centuries, originating from the eponymous saint 'Umar al-Khalwatī (d. 1397/1398 in Tabriz, Iran). Numerous lineages descended from his successor Seyyid Yahya Shirvani (d. 1457–1458/1464–1465 in Baku, Azerbaijan), spreading in the following centuries across two main trajectories: toward Anatolia, and from there to Southeast Europe; and toward Egypt (where we find the main centers to this day) and further into the Arabic world, in Africa and in Asia (Clayer 1994, 5–7).

5 A previous study of their *dhikr* was carried out by Fabrizio Speziale and Elisabetta Passalacqua (1998).

temporary measure while figuring out a long-term housing solution for the residents. Since its establishment in 1987 the Macedonian *shaykh* Baba Dževat⁶ had recreated the traditional social structure of a Balkan Sufi lodge (*tekiya*, from Turkish), in which the dervishes lead a communal way of life gathering around their spiritual guide (*shaykh*, pl. *shuyūkh*)—a rare to find feature in contemporary Balkans. In August 2020 the camp was definitely dismantled, while its inhabitants found different accommodations, in some cases provided by the municipality; the mosque (*masjid*) is the last building still standing..

The performance of *dhikr*

Audiovisual samples 2.1 & 2.2

I warmly invite the readers to start this section by watching and listening to these audiovisual samples, recorded during my fieldwork at the Poderaccio camp and at the Coltano camp.



First file: *Dhikr*, Coltano camp, June 2019.



Second file: *Dhikr* in occasion of *sultan nevrüz*, Poderaccio camp, March 2019.

On special occasions of gathering, as on the days of *sultan nevrüz*⁷ and ‘*āshūrā*’,⁸ or for the bestowal of a “spiritual station” (*maqām*) to a member of the brotherhood, the communal *dhikr* is performed in all its features

6 It needs to be pointed out here that my interlocutors are well aware that I am using their real names in this chapter, of which they agree to the circulation, seeing it as a means for their reality to come out of the ethnical enclosure in which they are still confined.

7 *Sultan nevrüz* (Bosnian, Albanian, from Persian *nawrūz*) falls on the spring equinox, on the first day of the Persian solar calendar. A number of events of great historic and cosmogonic impact are attached to it, such as imam ‘Alī’s birth, his investiture as *shaykh* and his marriage with Fatima (the Prophet’s daughter). It is also regarded as the day in which Allah gave origin to the world and Muḥammad received the order to carry out his mission (informal communication with Usein Rufat, September 20, 2019).

8 ‘*Āshūrā*’ falls on the 10th day of the month of *Muḥarram*, the first in the Islamic calendar. It is the last of ten days of mourning (*matem*) observed in remembrance of the martyrdom of al-Ḥusayn ibn ‘Alī and his 72 companions at the hands of the Umayyad caliph Yazīd ibn Mu‘āwiya at Karbalā’ (Iraq) in 680 CE.

(*majlis al-dhikr*). In these circumstances, disciples (*murīdīn*, sing. *murīd*) and masters of various orders, coming from different Western and Eastern European countries, gather at the Poderaccio camp for one or more days of reunion characterized by common meals, religious discussions (*sohbet*, Turkish), and singing of *ilahije* (Bosnian, from Arabic *ilāhī*, literally “divine”, hymns).

While the strictly religious activities are mainly—but not only—a concern for men, these gatherings represent for the women of the *ṭarīqa* an occasion to meet and spend time together while passing long hours in the kitchen where they prepare food for the numerous guests, also aided by some men. When women attend to the ritual they do so from an area of the mosque separated from the main hall by a curtain.

I suggest to understand *dhikr* as a ritual performance carried out in order to generate a number of emergencies pertaining both to the sphere of social relations and to the personal and collective experience of the transcendent. Its execution attempts to generate a number of socially relevant outcomes, such as the renewal of bonds between members of the brotherhood, the reaffirmation of the *shaykh*'s status and that of his closest family, the strengthening of alliances within members of Eastern and Western European orders. It is also an occasion to present the brotherhood to newcomers and to reiterate the introjection of norms of conduct and interactional modalities (*edep*, Turkish, from Arabic *ādāb*) which have significant repercussions in the sphere of wider social relations.

The *dhikr* I am going to describe comprises characteristic features of different Sufi brotherhoods due to Baba Dževat's affiliation to multiple orders (*khalwati*, *rifā'i*, *qādiri*, *naqshbandī*) and to the phenomenon of transfer of ritual features and aesthetic codes across brotherhoods. It presents an eminent musical content, following and reinterpreting long-established ritual features of Ottoman origin which are widespread across the Western Balkans. Repertoires of *ilahije* are sung by solo performers in Ottoman Turkish, Romani, Bosnian, and Albanian languages both before, after and during the execution of *dhikr*. A performer singing an *ilahije* may continue in an uninterrupted progression and sing then a *kaside* (Bosnian, from Arabic *qaṣīda*), which in this context refers to a eulogy consisting of melodic and textual improvisation in Arabic language in which Allah, the Prophet and prominent Sufi saints are glorified. Younger performers play the frame drum (*daf*) while singing and often use a microphone.



Figure 2.1 Muksin, a young singer of *ilahije*, playing the *daf* (Photo by Luca Hosseini).

Execution of *dhikr*

A *majlis al-dhikr* usually starts shortly before midnight and might proceed for many hours. To start the ceremony, the *shaykh* calls the dervishes to stand up and a circle (*ḥalqa*) is formed. The first formula to be repeated is *Lā ‘ilāha ‘illā llāh* (no deity but God), the testimony of Oneness (*kalimāt at-tawḥīd*), sung on a three-note melody, set on 4/4 time. As everybody starts singing, a tilting movement of the chest is performed following the same beat (*ḍarb*) as the rhythmic articulation of the formula, bending right, coming back to the center, bending left and again to the center. The *shaykh* then claps his hands to set an increase of tempo and shouts: “*Qalbī!*” As a result, the melodic repetition of the formula is replaced by a one-note execution with a clearer rhythmic articulation, united with a breathing technique consisting in an emphasis of inhalation and exhalation. Together with the increase in the intensity of tempo the chest’s movements become wider and someone may add rhythmical movements of the arms extending to the center of the circle and back to the chest. While passing from a melodic rendition of the formula to a mainly rhythmical one, young performers of *ilahije* and *kaside* get authorization from Baba Dževat to sing and beat the *daf*, and someone may start to keep the rhythm by playing a pair of cymbals (*halîle*, Turkish).



Figure 2.2 Baba Dževat whirling in the center of the *halqa* (Photo by Luca Hosseini).

Baba Dževat positions himself inside the circle where he starts walking anti-clockwise facing the participants, bestowing blessings (*barakāt*) to everybody; he then takes position at the center where he starts inviting, one by one, the others to join him. When someone reaches him the two start performing certain dance movements (*raqs*), circling anti-clockwise holding their right hands and lifting the left arm, circling at an increased speed while holding both hands, and also moving them up and down or toward each other. These *raqs* are always performed while keeping eye contact. The *shaykh* might call more than one person at a time to join him in the center, and in that case they execute the same rotatory movements in group. When Dževat is alone in the center, he might move along the perimeter of the circle in side steps or he might start whirling around his own axes in the *mevlevi* fashion.

Then, on the *shaykh's* initiative, the whole assembly holds hands and forms one or more circles that move anti-clockwise around the hall in crossed-steps (*dawrān*), while the uttered formula shortens to 'illā llāh (in 2/4), and ultimately becomes *Hū Hū*. Someone may also faint in the course of *dhikr*, an eventuality that doesn't often occur; in those cases, the *shaykh* immediately turns to him, holds him, and slowly lifts him up.

The *shaykh* then calls for the end of this part of the ceremony. Everyone comes back to a fixed position in silence, where a series of prayers (*du'ā'*) is recited. Then it is the turn of another *shaykh* or *murīd*, appointed by



Figure 2.3 The final phase of *dhikr* (Photo by Luca Hosseini).

Baba Dževat, to start a new session using a different formula which might comprise God's "name of essence" (*ism al-dhāt*) *Allāh*, one or more of His most beautiful Names (*al-asmā' al-ḥusnā*) as well as the names of the Prophet and of his family (*ahl-al Bayt*, the "People of the house").

If the circumstances are considered to be appropriate, the *shaykh* calls for the start of the spiritual exercise of *burhān* in which the dervishes can either pierce themselves, or let the *shaykh* pierce them, in one or more parts of the body—typically the cheek, tongue, throat, earlobe, below the eye, hip, or chest. In the final phase of the ritual a new set of turning in circles is carried out, in which the participants, united by holding each other's hand or the arm, form different circles and spirals, ending in a tight grouping around the *shaykh*, with everybody touching the person in front on the shoulder, jumping up and down and repeating the *Hū Hū* formula out loud. Then the *shaykh* declares the end of the *dhikr* by shouting *Yā Allāh !*. Everyone takes a seat and several prayers follow, concluding with the choral chanting of the *takbīr* (magnification).

Embodied remembrance

I suggest that the *dhikr* described above aims to alter the participants' customary modalities of attending to the human world through the generation

of a hyperaesthesia, intended as a heightened sensitive experience realized by means of intercorporeal practices performed with increasing intensity. The bodily experience takes shape and meaning through the weaving of a net of correspondences linking different sensory registers and generating an all-embracing aesthetic and synaesthetic coherence referring to the object of remembrance, Allah. The enactment of a constant interchanging of corresponding dichotomies—unity and multiplicity, self and other, eternal and contingent, steadiness and movement, repetition and variation, soloist singing and collective chanting—is intended to highlight and overcome the body/self-perception of the subject-object dichotomy. Through the realization of certain “somatic modes of attention”—defined by Thomas J. Csordas as “culturally elaborated ways of attending to and with one’s body in surroundings that include the embodied presence of others” (Csordas 2002, 244)—the object of remembrance retrocedes from being something to be grasped in the outer world (through objectification) or in the inner world (through self-objectification) to coincide with the embodied experience itself in an act of *embodied remembrance*.

For the Sufis the experience of *dhikr* intends to supersede the human’s ego (*nafs*) with a quality of presence (*ḥaḍra*) which is ecstatic awareness of God, in a transcendence of identity that is not much an act of inner fusion (*ḥulūl*) or identification (*ittihād*) (During 1987, 22), but rather accounted as God’s overtaking of the human and passing away of self (*fanā’*).

The divine presence is believed to be realized in the heart (*qalb*), which in Islamic mysticism is conceived as the sensitive representation of a transcendental principium, corporeal and spiritual center of the body, locus of faith, understanding and attention (Nasr 2014). Following a traditional understanding, the repetition of *dhikr* and the emission of sweat during the ritual are envisaged by my interlocutors to cleanse one’s own heart from impurities accumulated in the course of time. The heart is the pivot of the movement of the chest, as described by my interlocutors: while repeating *Lā ‘ilāha* (“no deity”), the negative part of the *kalimāt at-tawḥīd*, the movement is performed on the right side, away from the heart, as to deny any ontological subsistence to the customary acknowledged objects of experience. The affirmative part, *‘illā llāh* (“but God”), is instead uttered while moving to the heart side, thus reviving the felt-presence of God’s dwelling in each one’s heart. The synaesthetic association of motoric, rhythmic, sonic, and imaginative techniques fosters a gradual internalization of remembrance coalescing experience and meaning.

While the *dhikr* progresses the formula shortens to comprehend just the affirmative part, *‘illā llāh*, then reducing to the third person masculine



Figure 2.4 Dervishes standing in the circle repeating the formulas of *dhikr* with the *qalbi* emission and performing ritual movements (Photo by Luca Hosseini).

singular pronoun—*Hū* (*Huwa*). This progression leads to/enacts the three changes in experience traditionally acknowledged as occurring during *dhikr*, each one classified under a term rooted in the Arabic verb *wajada*, “to find.” The first stage, *tawājud*, refers to the manifestation of an inner state, the effort to reach the next stage or its imitation in order to reach it. The second stage is *wajd*, in which the “ecstasy” is “found” and experienced. While the third stage, *wujūd*, sometimes rendered as “enstasy,” is the actual “finding” and it is known as the state of permanence and supraexistence in God (During 1988). The term “ecstasy” (in Italian: “estasi”) is employed by my informants both referring to the changes in experience occurring during the ritual and to the actual fainting of a participant during a particularly intense phase of the *dhikr*.

Through the repetition of *Lā ‘ilāha ‘illā llāh* the practitioners put an effort to discern their object of remembrance from every other inner or outer object of experience, which are in turn deprived of any ontological status; with *‘illā llāh* the objects of experience are fully reintegrated in God, the common ground of existence overtaking the single beings; finally, the formula becomes *Hū* (“Him”), drifting into the breath of the participants, overcoming the tension between signifier and signified into the referent (the object of communication or, in this case, of invocation/experience). The *shādhili* Arab mystic Ibn ‘Aṭā’ Allah (d. 1309) described the *dhikr* of the pronoun He as the culmination of the practitioner’s spiritual progress. In its

utterance the pronoun stands alone in the generation of meaning without need for a predicate, as “God has become so immediate that no statement can be made about Him beyond the witnessing of His being Him” (El Shamsy 2016, 88–89). In its sonic (*jahrī*) rendition the semantic meaning coincides with the very sound of breath emission (similarly to the articulation of the Name *Ḥayy*, the Living), which is intended, following the *qalbī* technique, as coming from the heart, “locus for the Breath of God” (Nasr 2014, 37).⁹

This makes it a phonetic, onomatopoeic, and sonic performance aimed at establishing a biunivocal correspondence between subject and object of remembrance. As the participants aim at a synthesis of knower (*ālim*), knowledge (*ʿilm*), and known (*maʿlūm*), the same progression is enacted through the “ensounded” (Ingold 2007) experience by overcoming the trialectic of signifier, signified and referent through the media of sound, language, and breath.

Between unity and multiplicity

Throughout the ritual the practitioners are constantly immersed in sound, simultaneously as producers and as listeners. The sonic dynamics enacted during the ritual reproduce the dynamics occurring in the spatial disposition, thus being at the same time means to and instantiations of the embodied experience of remembrance. This experience is realized through the elaboration of a perceptive modality regarded in Sufi literature as *jamʿ al-jamʿ* (the union of union) which is described as “the contemplation of unity in multiplicity and multiplicity in unity” (*mushāhadat al-waḥda fī ʿl-kathra wa ʿl-kathra fī ʿl-waḥda*) (Ventura 2017, 68–69).

According to the Sufis, Allah is the whole of existence not as a totality obtained by the sum of his parts, but as one divine essence (*al-dhāt al-ilāhiyya*) from which the multiple modifications of being spring as his manifestations (*maẓāhir*) or modalities (*shuʿūn*) (*ivi*, 24–26). Therefore while the two aspects are interrelated in a way that unity belongs to multiplicity and vice versa, it is to the actual Being only that the ontological status of reality pertains, while the single beings are but determinations of the one essence (Ventura 2016, 69).¹⁰ The stress on the ontological nothingness of creatures together with

9 A comparison could be made between the use of the pronoun *Hū* during *dhikr* and the Sanskrit mantra *soʿham*, where we find again an example of compresence and the overcoming of signifier and signified through the medium of breath (Padoux 1990, 140–41).

10 The concept of Being in some Sufi literature—as in ʿAbd al-Karīm al-Jilī (d. 1424) and Aḥmad Sirhindī (d. 1624)—does not directly correspond to the highest Principium, of whom it represents its first determination. Nevertheless, expressions as “total being” (*al-wujūd al-kullī*)

a magnification of Allah's only being is frequently found in the discourses of the Poderaccio *shaykh*.

The circular (*dā'ira*) disposition of the participants generates from a center (representing unity) which develops in a circumference (representing multiplicity).¹¹ The *shaykh*, who occupies the center, stands as the pole (*qutb*) around whom the contingent beings are turning. The principium of unity he represents is then reflected into each one's heart, spiritual locus of self-objectification.

Then the *shaykh* invites each one to join him from the circumference where everyone performs the same movements to the center where a higher freedom of expression is allowed. Here the *murīd* performs the rotatory movements gazing at the *shaykh*'s eyes, perceiving the external circle as moving and himself as fixed, while from the circle's perspective the reverse is happening. As explained by a former member of the brotherhood:

I mean, you are actually fixed, everything turns because you are on the axes, and you realize that the whole world is turning... But everything is made so that you understand through intuition. (interview with former member, July 14, 2019, my translation)

The antithesis between the movement/transience of the phenomenal world (*dunyā*) and the firmness/everlasting of Allah is a recurrent Dževat's theme:

Only Allah is fixed, everything else is moving, everything goes, also the Pope has to go when his time has come! (informal dialogue with Dževat Rufat, July 31, 2020, my translation)

Also, for the one turning in the center the *shaykh*'s glance is the only fixed point, instantiation of divine unity, as in Usein's words, Dževat's son and spiritual heir:

When you have your *shaykh*, your *murshid* in front, he is a mirror for you where you can see something, you can feel something, because during *dhikr*, if you find *dhikr*, if you don't feel anything then you haven't done

and "absolute being" (*al-wujūd al-muṭlaq*) are found to indicate the Reality over its determination as Being (Ventura 2017, 47–49).

11 Metaphysical enquiries into the relation between center and circumference have been developed by the Andalusian mystic, philosopher, and poet Ibn al-'Arabī (d. 1240) in *Futūḥāt al-Makkiyya* (Ventura 2017, 61–66).

dhikr; you're not in it, if you don't feel that freedom, because when you perform *dhikr* it sets you free, you have to get rid of all worldly things, the mundane things as we say. (interview with Usein Rufat, September 7, 2014, my translation)¹²

While the many participants (multiplicity) are united under a set of simultaneous bodily gestures (unity), the *shaykh* (unity) performs codified movements according to his own feeling (multiplicity). Then the single participants experience the progression from the circumference (multiplicity) to the center (unity): here, spinning around holding the *shaykh*'s hands, they witness unity in his glance while simultaneously acknowledging the outer circle turning, but it is actually fixed.

Sonic correspondences

The sonic dimension of the ritual synaesthetically enacts the above-mentioned dynamics. The collective chanting unites the assembly in a simultaneous sonorous gesture: the single is lost in the many, while the many becomes a new unitary subject on its own, as in Patrick Eisenlohr's notion of "shared felt-body" (Eisenlohr 2018, 116). With the beginning of the one-note *qalbī* rendition of the formulas, the experience of unity of the group, now united in one single breath, is further increased. The experience of a shared felt-body in this context does not represent a goal on its own: it is one pole of the dialectic between unity and multiplicity, self and other, I-felt and we-felt. Through an incessant fluctuation of the body/self between these modalities of experience I suggest that the endeavor of the practitioners is to perceptively inhabit what Maurice Merleau-Ponty describes as "the abyss that separates the In Itself from the For Itself" (1968, 136–7). The finding of this liminality, which might be enacted in the liminal state of body/self-surrender of fainting, is a culturally constructed "transformed way of attending to the human world" (Csordas 2002, 49)—hence pre-reflectively meaningful, and deeply emotional—described as "ecstasy" or as being in God's "presence" (*ḥaḍra*).

The soloist singer then starts performing his repertoires of *ilahije* and *kaside*; his role in the sonic sphere can be related to the role of the *shaykh* in the spatial setting, as he is the only one free to express himself through hierarchies of pitch above the repetition of the formulas carried out by the others. In the

12 Interview by Gabriele Berti and Luca Hosseini.

sonic dimension of experience the contemplation of unity in multiplicity and multiplicity in unity is then given by the compresence of many sound producers united in one sonorous gesture and of one soloist singer expressing himself in hierarchies of pitch. The presence of the soloist singer is regarded by my interlocutors as an aid in the recollection of God, as the dimension of beauty inherent in singing is perceived as an instantiation of God's beauty (*jamal*). This is a long-established Sufi theme: Abū Naṣr al-Sarrāj (d. 988) states in the *Kitāb al-Luma'* ("Book of shafts of light"), a foundational survey on Sufism and on the subject of listening (*samā'*), that "all people of a spiritual disposition (*dhī rūḥ*) find a beautiful voice pleasing because it has qualities of the divine spirit, and it heralds the recollection of this spirit" (Avery 2004, 151).

Employing Eisenlohr's use of Gilbert Simondon's concept of transduction as the emergence of certain bodily sensations and psychic phenomena generating from sonic immersion (Eisenlohr 2018, 9), I suggest that the intangible, ephemeral, invisible yet enjoyable presence of the singing is *transductive* of the perception of divine presence, which is culturally constructed as sharing the same characteristics. We have many examples of the importance attributed to sound as medium of the transcendental experience in Islamic literature, as in epistle 5 of the *Rasā'il Ikhwān al-Ṣafā'* ("Epistles of the Brethren of Purity"), from 10th-century Iraq, where it is stated that "most of the percepts of sight are physical, but all the percepts of hearing are spiritual [*rūḥānī*]" (Wright 2010, 167).

Conclusions

When someone asks me: "What does *dhikr* mean?" It is something that only a mother delivering a child can know, in that moment the mother doesn't think of anything else, she thinks only of freeing herself of that child because he's slaughtering her.

(interview with Usein Rufat, September 7, 2014, my translation)

I find this quote truly evocative of the depths of the embodied experience of *dhikr*, as it shows the practitioner's strive to reach the sublimation of subject and object while being enraptured into something which he cannot fully control.

As already acknowledged by Fabrizio Speziale and Elisabetta Passalacqua (1998, 174) the actions performed during the ritual, even in moments of great intensity, are usually not chaotic or left to chance, but always pertinent to the expressive codes of the *dhikr*. The movements of the chest get bigger and the articulations of sounds get louder, while the participants appear enraptured



Figure 2.5 Uusein performing *dhikr* (Photo by Luca Hosseini).

in the performance of actions taking place beyond their control. Nevertheless, the practitioners unfailingly keep on following the beat without mistake, and in case someone loses it, the *shaykh* immediately helps him to get back in it.

Through their actions the dervishes build up an elaborated topography/phonography of sacred in which dichotomies are constantly interchanging and merging into each other. An overwhelming hyper/syn/aesthetic experience forcefully reabsorbs reflective thinking into the pre-objective (“you have to get rid of all worldly things”) to coalesce embodied perception and imaginative processes at the meeting point of corresponding dichotomies. It is an effort to reach that “hinge”, “solid, unshakeable, ... irremediably hidden” between “the auditory experience of my own voice and that of other voices” (Merleau-Ponty 1968, 148). The experience of Allah taking hold of the individual is then a strictly embodied experience, “existential ground of culture and self” (Csordas 2002, 4), and of self-dissolution (*fanā*).

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