

Fragile bodies and Sensuous Spirits: performing womenly virtues in a contemporary Egyptian brotherhood

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It was 2006 when I first arrived in Cairo as a guest of an Italian couple who had converted to the Burhaniyya, which is an Egyptian-Sudanese brotherhood¹ present in Europe since the nineteen-eighties. I had carried out nine months of fieldwork on this movement's Italian branch for my master's thesis. Asia and Abdul Rahim, which are my Italian hosts' Islamic names, introduced me to the Cairene branch of the brotherhood so that I could start my new fieldwork for my PhD and, from their point of view, begin my path towards Islam. This outcome indeed seemed quite likely, from their point of view, given that many of the Italians, who had first approached the Burhaniyya for research and study reasons, had then converted to Islam. Preserving this hope for my conversion, for a long time during the course of my fieldwork in Egypt my interlocutors treated me as a possible convert and for this reason entrusted me to the cares of Heba, a Burhani sister in her forties who was renowned for her virtue, for her commitment and her good service to the Burhaniyya.

1 Founded in the middle of the twentieth century by Shaykh Mohammed Uthman Abdu al-Burhani in Atbara, Sudan, the *tariqa* Burhaniyya spread rapidly from Sudan to Cairo during the nineteen-sixties, achieving great success with the middle classes and a certain visibility among foreigners. In the nineteen-eighties the Burhaniyya concentrated its efforts on its European branches that had been thriving since the nineteen-seventies, especially in Germany. Pierre Jean Luizard, Egypte: "Le rôle des confréries soufies dans le système politique égyptien," *Maghreb-Machrek*, 131, 1991, pp. 26-53. Pierre Jean Luizard, "Le Soufisme Egyptien Contemporain, Egypte," *Monde Arabe*, 2, 1990, pp. 36-94; Valerie Hoffman, *Sufism: Mystics, and Saints in Modern Egypt*, (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1995).

Heba welcomed me within her family, in her own house, as soon as Asia and Abdul Rahim departed and, during the six months I spent there, I was proffered all the attention that every European Burhani disciple receives. Soon a friendship matured between us, making me part of Heba's everyday life and I had the chance to observe the different contexts and modalities in which she enacted her faith. When I first met her, Heba announced that she would introduce me to the beauty of Islam and to the life of a modern Sufi woman. Indeed within the *tariqa*, she was considered to be an example of womanly virtue. In the Burhani vocabulary, she was a woman committed to the cultivation of *riqqa*, or literally 'frailty,' intended as an emotional and spiritual sensitivity.

Indeed, in the Burhani discourse on spirituality, *riqqa* is a specifically female talent giving access to the *alam al-khayal*, the esoteric-*batini* world of spiritual imagination: an innate talent that every woman should cultivate and discipline following brotherhood rules, in order to become a virtuous Muslim in everyday social life, the *zahiri*-exoteric and contingent dimension of existence.² The degree to which a woman is able to conduct a virtuous social life in the *zahiri*-exoteric world is a proof of her being *riqqa* and testifies to her connection with the saints and spirits populating the *alam al-khayal*. Heba's successful social and spiritual life were indeed evidence of her being *raqiqa* (adjective of *riqqa*) and testified

2 *Zahir* and *batin* are two terms of Islamic theological and philosophical discourse. The first, *zahir*, means "outward, external, exoteric sense," hence "apparent, manifest sense," and the second, *batin*, is its antonym, meaning "hidden, inner, esoteric sense." This pair of words occurs together four times in the Qur'an: in VI, 120, to describe the outwardness and the inwardness of a sin; in XXXI, 20, as adjectives to describe God's blessings, both manifest and hidden; in LVII, 3, as names of God to mean that He is the Outward and the Inward [reality], and in LVII, 13, as opposites portraying both the inside as well as the outside of a thing. Whilst the *alam al-khayal* is the world of the spiritual imagination where spirits reside and that has been created by Allah to separate the two realms, a *barzakh*: "something that separates two things while never going to one side, as for example the line that separates shadow from sunlight . . . there is nothing in existence that *barzakhs*, since a *barzakh* is the arrangement of one thing between two things . . . and existence has no edges." Ibn al-'Arabi, *Al-Futuhāt al-Makkiyya*, as quoted in William Chittick, *The Sufi Path of Knowledge*, (N.Y.: State University, 1989). As we will see in this article, the Burhani discourse re-articulates these notions with a liberal understanding of inner faith and exterior conduct.

to her commitment to brotherhood life; and indeed this was one of the reasons why she had been chosen to be my guide.

Towards the end of my stay at her home, however, certain events occurred and, as a result, Heba's reputation for virtue suddenly declined. She experienced a tension between her commitment to the spiritual path and her social and religious status within the brotherhood.

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In the following review I will argue that such discontinuity and tension in her life should be understood in relation to the indeterminateness entailed by the performance of *riqqa*, and for that matter, by the nature of the performance itself. I use the term 'performance' in the sense of a scene of interaction: a relational interaction that carves discursive meanings, such as the normative concept of *riqqa*, into the social and cultural material of everyday life.³ Discursive and performed meanings are not always, if ever, consistent since the latter are subject to the unpredictability and multiplicity of everyday circumstances and contexts.⁴ The meaning of *riqqa*, intended as a virtue to which Burhani women should commit, is shared by all Burhanis. The practices linked to its cultivation are set through a normative discourse that rests on the mystical tradition and that refers to the distinction between the esoteric-*batin* and the exoteric-*zahir* dimensions of life. The cultivation and enactment of such a talent in a woman's life involves diverse performances whereby women have to come to terms with daily changes, social and material constraints, and respond

3 Michael Lambek, "The value of (performative) acts," *HAU, Journal of Ethnographic Theory*, 3(2), 2013, pp. 141-160; DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.14318/hau3.2.009>.

4 I intend the everyday as an analytical framework that allows one to bring in the ethnography the diachronic and relational dimensions of life and, for that matter, of subjectivity. Paola Abenante and Daniele Cantini (eds), "Life-worlds and religious commitment: ethnographic perspectives on subjectivity and Islam," *Ricerca Folklorica*, 69, 2015, pp. 3-19). See also Lila Abu-Lughod, *Writing women's worlds: Bedouin stories* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993); Samuli Schielke and Lisa Debevek (eds), *Ordinary Lives and Grand Schemes: An Anthropology of Everyday Religion* (New York: Berghahn, 2012).

to a multiplicity of concrete discursive arenas and relational contexts. The ways a woman performs *riqqa* may be multifarious: on the one hand the performance varies because of the diverse social requirements arising from the role that the performer takes up in each interactional scene; on the other hand the performance also depends upon the affective and emotional shades that characterize different relationships. In addition there are the unexpected consequences of one's actions and of the turns in one's life itself.

During my fieldwork I have seen Heba performing her virtue in relation to at least three different interactional scenes, in which a different audience was foregrounded. In each scene, the discourse on *riqqa* took a particular shade and a specific performed world was brought to life. One scene was defined by the context of Heba's everyday life as an Egyptian lower middle-class mother living in contemporary Cairo, where specific debates on Islam and modernity articulate with class and gender based distinctions, and define meaningful interactions in the public sphere. In this context Heba performed Burhani *riqqa* as difference with respect to contemporary hegemonic forms and understandings of Islam, responding to and engaging with a plural and imagined audience. In another scene, Heba needed to perform as a virtuous disciple within the brotherhood itself, responding to the specificities of the Burhani discourse on gendered sociality and expressing belonging in relation to the audience of Burhani brothers and sisters. Thirdly, her performance of *riqqa* was also linked to the context of the ritual practice itself, where the interactional scene is set by the relations the disciples entertain with the saints populating the '*alam al khayal*, the world of imagination. The regular practice of the '*awrad* method,' as the Burhanis define a set of individual rituals such as *dhikr* and *wird* respectively the invocation of the name of Allah and the recitation of standardized litanies, all unveil the disciple's esoteric sensibilities and connect her to the *batin* realm of the divine.

Adding to this complexity, unexpected events occurred during a moment in Heba's life, and these contributed towards making the different contexts of her life irreconcilable.

A recent trend in anthropological literature on subjectivity and

Islam⁵ sets the focus of analysis onto committed Muslims and explores the everyday practice of Islamic virtues as a self-pedagogy. The work of becoming a pious Muslim woman is understood to be a continuous and conscious practice of virtuous comportment aimed at molding one's own sensibilities to ethical states of being. According to this perspective, ritual practice such as the moment of *salat*, for example, is not considered as being epistemologically different from everyday virtuous conduct. The category of ritual itself, intended as a symbolic activity confined in an extraordinary space of action, is contested.⁶

Such an approach has given a definite twist to the study of Islamic practice and has made understandable commitments otherwise incomprehensible through a secular and feminist vocabulary; this sets out the importance of agency as a capacity to act which is integral to specific historical and cultural articulations of subjectivity. At the same time two caveats need to be emphasised. Firstly, and from a methodological point of view, this approach is used and works well for understanding the specific Salafi and reformist movements, which pitch themselves against secular and liberal modern society, and it is not generalizable to all forms of Islamic piety. Secondly, this shift towards the analysis of Islamic discipline implies also a shift of emphasis towards an analysis of the ethical work of the self on the self. In this shift of emphasis, however, the intersubjective, contextual and interactional dimension of performance is set apart while the complex lifeworld in which the performance of virtue takes part, as well as its destabilizing effects in relation to disciplined conduct, somehow get lost.⁷

5 I am referring here to the line of anthropological inquiry following the Asadian discursive tradition approach, starting with definitive studies by Mahmood and Hirschkind. Saba Mahmood, "Rehearsed Spontaneity and the Conventionality of Ritual," *American Ethnologist*, 28, 2001, pp. 827-853; Charles Hirschkind, "The ethics of listening," *American Ethnologist*, 28, 2001, pp. 623-49.

6 Talal Asad, *Genealogies of religion: Disciplines and reasons of power in Christianity and Islam* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993).

7 For a comprehensive review of the drawbacks of such an approach in terms of loss of the relational-intersubjective dimensions see among others: Filippo Osella and Benjamin Soares (eds) "Islam, Politics and Anthropology," *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute*, special issue, 2009, pp. 1-256. See Mittermaier for one of the first ethnographies contesting the ethics of the self on the grounds of the intersubjective dimension of agency implicit in ritual life.

In this paper, I continue to retain the importance of the ethical dimension of Islamic self-pedagogy which, to different extents and in different forms, is present as well in Islamic mystical traditions. However, I take a different approach towards the analysis of Islamic practice, and I keep the focus on the dynamics of performance; in other words, on the moment in which the practice of a virtue is carved in the interactional, intersubjective and situated dimension of everyday living. Also, following the position of my interlocutors, I assume a difference between ordinary performativity in the exoteric-*zahir* world, and extraordinary-ritual contexts of performance in which access to the esoteric-*batini* world is favoured. The *suluk*, the path of self-discipline, the method of the *awrad*, for example, or the ensemble of virtuous comportment in daily life, are essential practices to internalize piety and discipline oneself as a pious Burhani. At the same time the Burhani discourse stresses the mystical tradition's distinction between *zahir* and *batin* for which the extraordinary moment of ritual itself shifts the disciple into another state of being: the *batin*-esoteric reality. Here self-discipline and method, typical of *zahir* – exoteric comportment, lose their primacy in face of an intensified contact with the divine; which comes, for example, under the form of the dialogue and connection with spirits and saints during the *dhikr*.⁸

As I anticipated, all scenes of performance belonging to the *batin* and to the *zahir*, whether ritual or not, imply relational dimensions and are situated in the wider context of a person's lifeworld. Such attention to relations and contexts making up different moments of a lifetime will allow me to describe the many crossovers, transitions and links existing between the extraordinary ritual performance of a virtue, namely the virtue of *riqqa* through *dhikr*, and the everyday performativity of a *raqiqa*

Amira Mittermaier, *Dreams that matter: Egyptian landscapes of the imagination* (California: University of California Press, 2010). For a more specific analysis of ethics and life-worlds see also Paola Abenante, "Inner and outer ways: Sufism and subjectivity in Egypt and beyond," *Ethnos: Journal of Anthropology*, 78(4): 2013, pp 490-514.

8 On the self-discipline, divine agency and the limits of self-cultivating subject see Amira Mittermaier, "Dreams from Elsewhere: Muslim subjectivities beyond the trope of self-cultivation," *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute*, 18, 2012, pp. 246-254.

woman. By the same token, the contextual and relational dimensions implied by the approach to performance allows one to go beyond the specific agency of the individual in relation to a historically and culturally meaningful discourse on Islam, and situates the ‘performing self’ within the complexity of a lifeworld where social and material constraints and feelings, as well as saints and spirits have their say.

Riqqa: modern Sufi women in contemporary Cairo

In a wider perspective, this ethnography aims to contribute to the incipient field on studies of women Sufis and Islamic performance.⁹ If the role of women in Sufism has a long history, as documented in literary studies,¹⁰ then the exploration of concrete performances, rituals and practices is yet to be deepened. Ethnographies on women and Islam have concentrated, not surprisingly, on modernist or reformist women’s movements. This is because, in view of the ways in which the discourse on Islamic orthodoxy has been articulated in the modern public sphere, these movements have

9 See among others: Valery J. Hoffman, *Sufism, Mystics and Saints in Modern Egypt* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1995); Sossie Andezian, “Sufi Women in an Algerian Pilgrimage Ritual,” in David Westerlund and Eva E. Rosanders (eds.), *African Islam and Islam in Africa: Encounters between Sufis and Islamists* (London: Hurst, 1997), pp. 193-213; Catharina Raudvere, *The Book and the Roses: Sufi Women, Visibility and Zikir in Contemporary Istanbul* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2003); Anne H. Betteridge, “Muslim Women and Shrines in Shiraz,” in Donna Lee Bowen and Evelyne A. Early (eds.), *Everyday Life in the Muslim Middle East*, (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2014), pp. 276-289. And many examples from the South Asian continent: Pnina Werbner and Helene Basu (eds.), *Embodying Charisma: Modernity, Locality and the Performance of Emotions in Sufi Cults* (London: Routledge, 1998); Shemeem Burney Abbas, *The Female Voice in Sufi Ritual: Devotional Practices of Pakistan and India* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2002); Kelly Pemberton, “Muslim Women Mystics and Female Spiritual Authority in South Asian Sufism,” in Pamela J. Stewart and Andrew Strathern (eds), *Contesting Rituals: Islam and practices of Identity-Making* (Durham, North Carolina: Carolina Academic Press, 2005), pp. 3-39; Omar Kasmani, “Grounds of becoming: Fakirs among the dead in Sehwan Sharif, Pakistan,” in Paola Abenante and Fabio Vicini (eds.), *Interiority Unbound; Sufi and Modern Articulations of the Self, Culture and Religion*, special issue, forthcoming.

10 Cfr. i.e. Annemarie Schimmel, “Women in Mystical Islam,” *Women’s studies Int. Forum*, 5(2): 1982, pp. 145-151; Nelly et Laroussi Amri, *Les femmes soufies ou la passion de Dieu* (Editions Dangles, Saint-Jean de Braye, France, 1992). And more recently Camille Adams Helminsky, *Women of Sufism: A Hidden Treasure* (Boston: Shambhala Publications, 2003).

gained more visibility than others. The struggle over orthodox Islam indeed overlaps to a good extent with the struggle over the definition of a modern and civilized form of Islam, which has seen its incipit with Islamic modernist thinking and has affirmed itself particularly in Egypt with the Islamic Revival in the 1970s. Against that background, Sufi praxis has been discredited as being the traditional and backward ‘other’ of modernist and reformist Islam, and has been distinguished from more welcome ‘cultured’ Islamic mysticism, as described in knowledgeable texts and recovered by the wave of reformed brotherhoods.¹¹ In this perspective the visibility of women’s participation in Sufism has been doubly hindered. Firstly, women Sufis are mostly excluded from official and written sources and secondly they are excluded from authorised spiritual lineages that grant specific contemporary forms of Sufi piety, and in particular reformist-oriented brotherhoods, access to the civility and modernity of Egyptian Islam.

Sufi women’s stories belong more often to the informal script of orality and praxis and, in order to become acceptable and to find a space within the public sphere, they need to confront, rearticulate and overlap, where possible, with discourses promoting civility, citizenship and modern orthodox Islam. As Samuli Schielke notes,¹² the access to such discourses is limited by class habitus, other than gender. The bourgeois Sufi woman, mother and wife within a well-off family, embodies more easily the requirements of modern and civil piety when compared to women in the lower orders who lack access to the social and cultural contexts where such habitus is formed. Heba, the woman portrayed in this ethnography, belongs to a circle of middle class disciples, and it is in relation to this socio-cultural background that her story within the Burhaniyya needs to be contextualised. Heba had the tools, which included the embodied habitus of a respectable and cultivated woman, as well as a proper social status, needed to live out her Sufi faith in a way that best represented the

11 See for example for the Egyptian context Julian Johansen, *Sufism and Islamic Reform in Egypt: The Battle for Islamic Tradition* (Oxford University Press, 1996).

12 Samuli Schielke, “Mystic States, Motherly Virtues, Female Participation and Leadership in an Egyptian Sufi Milieu,” *Journal for Islamic Studies*, 28, 2008, pp. 94-126.

Burhaniyya as a modern and civilised form of Islam. As such, she was for years the guide model of womanly virtue.

Heba was born in Kuwait to Mimi, a resourceful Egyptian woman and school teacher who had migrated in the nineteen-seventies to Kuwait City, Heba was young when she married an old friend of her mother's. The man had introduced her, along with the whole family, to the tariqa Burhaniyya and he assumed the task of being their *murshid*, or spiritual guide. In the late nineteen-nineties the family had become relatively wealthy and the family, including Heba, her mother, brother and husband, returned to Cairo. Soon after, Heba gave birth to twins: Hedi and Zeynab. Besides fulfilling perfectly her duties as a wife and mother, Heba managed to find a job as a music teacher in a secondary school; that job granted her the time to provide her children and family with the required attention and affection, while also leaving her space for the practice of her personal ritual life, which included sessions of dhikr and litany recitations. Soon she became known among her Cairene fellow brothers and sisters as a model of womanly and motherly virtue, otherwise as *raqiq*a.

At the time, the Cairene branch of the Burhaniyya had its main lodge in the middle class environment of Medinat Nasr, a satellite residential city of Cairo. Its adepts were both men and women and included not only public employees, many of whom were in the teaching sector, but also workers in private firms or in commerce. They used to meet weekly to perform their collective ritual, the *hadra*, and held other gatherings in the private houses of those brothers and sisters who made their places available. When I started my fieldwork in Egypt, the Burhaniyya was slowly recovering from a ten-year downturn following earlier imputations by several public Egyptian religious officials against its doctrines and its shaykh; those doctrines were supposedly esoteric, heterodox and lax.¹³

13 See: Paola Abenante, "Essentialising Difference: text, knowledge and ritual performance in a Sufi brotherhood in Italy," in Ines Weinrich (ed.), *Performing Religion: Actors, contexts and texts. Case studies on Islam* (Beiruter Texte und Studien, 122, 2016), pp. 219-233. Gritt Klinkhammer, "Traditionalizing Spirituality: the Burhaniya Sufi Order in Germany," in Sigrid Nökel and Levent Tezcan (eds), *Islam and the New Europe: Continuities, Changes, Confrontations: Yearbook of the Sociology of Islam*, 6, (Bielefeld: Verlag).

This is not the place or context for an in-depth discussion of the reasons for such imputations, but suffice it to say that the Burhaniyya found itself in the middle of an ideological fight over the place of Sufism in modern and reformed Islamic practice.

After these events occurred, the Burhanis started becoming more self-conscious about their beliefs and practices and they stopped practicing their *hadra* in mosques and public spaces. Generally speaking, the public discourse of the Burhaniyya has been partially re-articulated in order to respond to issues of modernity. The discourse on *riqqa* itself mirrors such changes. As several scholars have shown,¹⁴ since the nineteenth century the ‘woman question’ has become a symbolic political and ideological battlefield within the Egyptian public sphere and the battle involved Islamists, feminists, modernists, nationalists and other parties’ competing perspectives.¹⁵ Loaded with claims of cultural authenticity or modernity, women’s conduct and their bodies are considered to be the foundations of both a modern and virtuous Islamic society, while issues concerning employment, clothing, modesty and public presence have become central in many discussions.

The Burhaniyya positioned itself fully within this broad and populated battlefield by deploying its discourse on *riqqa*, which inverts the relationship that some conservative Muslims presuppose exists between the irrationality of women, due to their the heightened emotional predisposition, and their moral vulnerability. Frailty and emotional sensitivity, on the contrary,

14 Lila Abu-Lughod, “Zones of Theory in the Anthropology of the Arab world,” *Annual Review of Anthropology* 18, 1998, pp.267-365; Beth Baron, *Egypt as a woman: Nationalism, Gender and Politics* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005); Deniz Kandiyoti (ed.), *Gendering the Middle East*, (N.Y.-London, I.B. Tauris, 1996); Judith Tucker, *Women in nineteenth century Egypt* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985).

15 Lara Deeb has suggested leaving aside the unfruitful task of defining modernity as an abstract category. I follow that approach when I refer to modern Islam and modernity. Thus, I intend emic understandings of what modernity is; in other words, what modernity both in the ‘western’ and ‘non-western’ sense means for my interlocutors and the people with whom they deal. By paying attention to how people practically approach the question of being modern, I read the debates on the modern as reflecting and creating power relations and claims of identity. See Lara Deeb, *An Enchanted Modern: Gender and Public Piety in Shi’i Lebanon* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006).

are understood in Burhani discourse as being talents granting women an advantage in the performance of their spiritual path and in the access to the world of saints and spirits, the *batin* dimension of existence.¹⁶

The complex mystical tradition within the Burhaniyya distinguishes, at the same time, between *batin* and *zahir* existence; this is coupled with liberal notions of religiosity and is narrowed down to a difference between inner states and outer compartments, serving arguments of liberal modernity against Islamist reformism. Modern Muslims are supposed to be spiritually advanced enough to understand the difference between rote religious praxis, as professed by more conservative movements, and the real spiritual moral stakes of Islam. According to this perspective within the Burhani discourse, a woman's spiritual life is pictured as an individual inward path, while exterior conduct, or religious habit, is considered to be a consequence following real inner faith. On such grounds, and while citing liberal understanding of religious privacy and women's emancipation from religious discrimination, the Burhanis maintain that their practice of Islam conforms better to the modern world than competing forms of contemporary Islam;¹⁷ through 'their' women, they claim a space of visibility in the public sphere.

16 The different perspectives are common to most of Islamic discourses to the point that these have diffused into Egyptian popular literature. Behind them lies the notion of the complementary role of men and women. This is grounded on a notion of biological difference inferred from some 'ayat (verses) in the Qur'an suggesting a different distribution of emotions and of 'aql-rationality between men and women. Accordingly, women are considered emotionally frail and less inclined to rationality than men. For some conservative exegetes such embodied difference implies women being more inclined to moral corruption and that their compartments might easily trigger *fitna* (division) among fellow Muslims. In order to maintain their modesty women need to follow strict codes of conduct and observe male authority over a wide array of matters. See: Valerie Hoffman-Ladd, "Polemics on the modesty and segregation of women in contemporary Egypt," *International Journal of Middle East Studies*, 19(1): 1987, pp.23-50.

17 For a discussion of the relation between body, ritual and faith in Egypt, different discourses and parties see among others: Gregory Starret, "The hexis of interpretation: Islam and the body in Egyptian popular school," *American Ethnologist*, 22(4): 1995, pp.953-969; Saba Mahmood, "Ethical formation and politics of individual autonomy in contemporary Egypt," *Social Research*, 70(3): 2003, pp. 1501-1530; Samuli Schielke, "Policing Ambiguity: Muslim saints-day festivals and the moral geography of public space in Egypt," *American Ethnologist*, 35(4): 2008, pp. 539-552.

Performing Riqqa as Difference

During our afternoons spent talking about the importance of Islam and the role of women, Heba would explain to me that women in the Burhaniyya manage to reach a high level of spirituality and virtue in a way very different from those *mutashaddidun* (strict Muslims) out there; those Wahhabis, as the Burhanis generally label all Muslims who hold a critical stance against Sufism and adhere to a reformist view of Islam. She claimed that unlike ‘Wahhabi women,’ her Burhani path encouraged her to be a devoted Muslim, a judicious mother and an obedient wife while at the same time living a very modern life; her career, behaviour, clothing and whole lifestyle, as well as that of many of her sisters, testified to this.

Recalling many of the Shaykh’s lessons, Heba used to tell me that the achievement of virtue starts from one’s interiority, by clearing one’s own heart of the *nafs*, the lower selves that sidetrack from spiritual elevation. The need to abide by the *shari’a* and the *sunna* will naturally follow. In this perspective an excess in the practice of *sunna* and a meticulousness in following conservative rules of conduct – such as norms of ablution, strict gender dressing codes etc. – is considered to be useless, or worse, it is regarded as a desire to display ostentatiously, if not to feign, one’s own piety. According to this understanding, Heba felt free to challenge the strict gender codes applied by the hegemonic discourse of reformed brotherhoods: she moved alone around the city, and frequently made pilgrimages to the saints’ shrines out of the framework of communal festivities. She was rarely rigorous in wearing her *hijab* or in the practice of her prayers and ablutions, which she used to postpone when strolling in shopping malls with me or while watching TV, or more generally when enjoying the life that any ‘modern’ Muslim woman deserved, from her point of view. Islam and true faith did not depend upon observing social conservative codes, she insisted. Although she was flexible in her religious duties, she was also dedicated to the practice of her individual litanies and ritual life, cultivating her sensibilities to enhance her ethical states of piety and to cultivate her *riqqa*.

Michael Lambek argues that performative acts “put what would otherwise be chaotic and ambiguous interactions and conditions under a set of descriptions such that what follows is meaningful and interpretable by means of the criteria instantiated in the act.”¹⁸

Indeed in the name of *riqqa*, Heba performed in a virtuous manner certain comportments that might otherwise have been contentious. By the same token, abiding to the Burhani notion of *riqqa*, she was taking part in a public debate on the relationship between body, ritual and modernity, where women’s status is considered the benchmark of such modernity. The promotion of women’s active participation in society was indeed a pride and a stronghold of the Burhani discourse on the modernity of the brotherhood: because of their *riqqa* and their spiritual maturity, Burhani women are considered to be ready to navigate the difficulties of society.

Additionally, this discourse on modernity was legitimised further by the presence of contemporary normative examples. The *tariqa* Burhaniyya has a transnational breadth and its presence in Europe, especially in Germany, is significant in relation to the performed identity of Burhani faith. The present Shaykh is married to a German convert and lives in Germany with his closest kin. The form of piety that he promotes suits the liberal European context well, in which the brotherhood is spread. German female converts are accorded a large space for maneuver concerning their religious comportment, for two main order of reasons: on the one hand there are implicitly recognized as virtuous due to their high spiritual achievements, such as converting and being committed Muslims in a European context where the practice of Islam is less obvious; on the other hand they are left space of maneuver due to the necessity for not being outstanding in a context where strictly *sunna*-oriented comportments might result in more harm than good.

As a consequence, the frequent exchanges between Egyptian and European sisters contributes to discussion on what appropriate and

18 Lambek, *The Value of (performative) acts*, p.147.

modern womanhood should be,¹⁹ and the converts to the Burhaniyya represented a legitimising model of women comportment, and the Shaykh's wife was a normative example. Beyond this, the European Burhanis also represented a trans-national audience with whom she was communicating, and I myself surely belonged to them.

But I was not the only European living in the Cairene Burhani milieu. Heba soon demonstrated that she was very fond of Asia, an outspoken German convert to the Burhaniyya who had moved to Cairo shortly before my arrival. In search of her place within the Egyptian brotherhood, the German lady had been organizing women's meetings and encouraging Egyptian sisters to sing Sufi hymns in public, as is general practice in the German branches. Asia also challenged, overtly, obsolete modesty codes that unjustly, she thought, hindered Egyptian disciples. The project soon failed, also because Asia had targeted the wrong audience: she had been allowed to set up her gatherings in a less visible lodge in Alf Masqan, which is a low income neighborhood in Cairo. Here the local constituency of the brotherhood belonged to a lower social class than at Medinat Nasr, and gender codes appeared more strict. Asia's project sounded much too progressive, if not morally unacceptable, to those women. Thus, the singing lessons continued as private lessons between Asia, Heba and me, and together we visited saints' shrines and sang devotional hymns to the dismay of other visitors.

Taking Asia's and my own conduct as an example, Heba was performing as a virtuous Burhani woman also in relation to the discourse set out for the European branches. In a wider sense, while performing *riqqa*, Heba was producing difference with respect to other understandings and forms of Islam, in relation both to national and international audiences.

19 On the transformative consequences of female religiosity produced by the different encounters of Sufism in and with modernity and the 'west,' see among others: Marta Dominguez, *Women in Sufism: female religiosities in a transnational order* (London & NY: Routledge, 2015); Deborah Kapchan, "The promise of Sonic Translation: performing the festival sacred in Morocco," *American Ethnologist*, 110(4): 2008, pp.467-483; Paola Abenante, "Misticismo Islamico: riflessioni sulla pratica di una confraternita islamica," *Meridiana: rivista di scienze storico-sociali*, 52, 2005, pp. 64-94.

Performing Riqqa as Belonging

The production of difference, as it happens, is not separable from the production of belonging, and indeed the performance of *riqqa* is relevant to producing belonging with respect to Burhani values and discourse on Islam. This is so, not only in relation to a faraway European audience, but also in relation to the audience of brethren with whom Heba related every day in Cairo. Performing as *raqiqa* implied taking part in an interactional scene and responding to an audience parallel to but dissimilar from those described above, and responding to which the discourse on *riqqa* takes a different turn, with different rules of conduct being foregrounded.

As mentioned above, the notion of *riqqa* endows women with a spiritual inclination while calling, at the same time, for a regulated social conduct – a *zahiri* dimension in Sufi vocabulary – made of regulated forms of brotherhood sociality that define the boundaries of Burhani belonging. On the occasion of the public weekly Burhani *durus* (lessons), the ‘Burhani woman’ is explicitly described as being in charge of the morality of her family; the judicious mother of her children as well as a member of a virtuous and modern society.²⁰ The practice of *riqqa* is a social enterprise, as the Burhani have often told me, and it is reflected first and foremost in women’s behaviour towards their nuclear families, as well as towards the enlarged family of the brothers and sisters.

At times, however, the performance of such a *zahiri*-social virtuous life is implausible because of everyday material constraints that make it difficult, if not impossible, to follow certain rules of conduct. Amongst other things, virtuous womanhood is dependent also upon accessing certain socio-economic standards of living. Unexpected events in Heba’s life made her socio-economic status shift, impinging on the different spheres of performance of her virtue: the inability of a disciple to conduct a proper life in the *zahiri* dimension soon forces that disciple to come to terms with what is expected from her spiritual status. Notwithstanding her commitment, Heba experienced much discontinuity between

20 Burhani Durus, *Tariqa Burhaniyya*, private printing. For a parallel with the discourse on womanhood and motherhood in Egypt see also: Baron, *Egypt as a woman*.

her *batini*-inner spiritual life and her *zahiri*-exterior status within the brotherhood.

Until the date of my arrival at her home, Heba had managed to keep together the threads of her different performed virtuous worlds: her being a modern Muslim and her role as a virtuous woman and, by the same token, her difference with respect to other forms of Islam and her belonging to Burhani communal life. She had proved to be a modest wife, a loving mother and respectful daughter, while leading an active working life and being a sensitive and dedicated Sufi disciple. Heba managed her time between her spiritual-*batini* life and her *zahiri* everyday relations, roles and ritual duties, standing out as a model of piety for all Burhani women. Indeed the honor of having her house chosen as the temporary location for the collective *hadra* ritual testified to her virtue. Burhani sisters and brothers gathered weekly in her living room and often exchanged visits with her during the week. The *ziyara*, or the visits disciples exchange with each other, are a sign of mutual respect: in this context everyday gender codes are partially suspended and men are allowed to attend women's houses.

By the end of my stay however, she had lost not only her fame of virtue but also her visibility within the *tariqa*.

Her husband had passed away very recently and, following this unexpected event, Heba's life began to change, and so did her status within the brotherhood. By taking over her husband's duties, Heba took also charge of the family and soon she encountered the problem of making ends meet every month. She could not count on the support of her relatives who had no substantial wealth, and her school salary was barely enough to cover the rent, so she started teaching private classes during her spare time and took up additional jobs that helped her financially but, ultimately, came at the expense of her children's education. Hedi, her son, failed at school that year, while Zeynab, her daughter became an endless source of concern, causing bitter quarrels with Mimi and Heil, respectively Heba's mother and brother. Zeynab, who had turned sixteen, lived a life unacceptable for a girl her age, from her grandmother's point of view, while her disastrous school performance made matters worse. Almost every day Zeynab stayed

out late with friends, taking advantage of her mother's material and moral absence. Indeed, when not busy with private classes or too tired to follow family life, then Heba was engaged in her ritual duties. She used to wake up every morning to recite her litanies before the *fajr*, the dawn prayer, and continued her repetitions until time to go to work. She continued her recitation in the evening before dinner.

In such a critical situation, her commitment to her spiritual path, ritual disciplines and duties appeared awkward, if not blameworthy, to her family and brethren. They felt that she was taking precious time from her family duties, and she was not respecting the rules of ritual conduct.

The Shaykh teaches that the balance between the inner and outer, *batin* and *zahir*, dimensions of a woman's virtue, is linked to an attentive practice of the 'awrad method' that Heba was overlooking. The *awrad* method consists of the individual ritual recitation of a set of litanies established and performed under the guide of a *murshid*, a spiritual master who is responsible for deciding the right timings, quantities and the progression of his disciple's ritual life. In the case of women, the spiritual guide should rather be a man since, as the Shaykh repeats in his oral lessons, generally men are by nature (*tabi'ai*) less fragile than women inasmuch endowed with more 'aql-rationality, an indispensable quality for keeping control over emotions.²¹ In addition, a woman's *murshid*/spiritual guide is supposed to be a *muhrim*; that is, her husband, father or brother. The master-disciple connection, as in the Burhani path, reproduces patriarchal relations: the *murshid* and *muhrim* are responsible for the management of a woman's daily duties, her spiritual rights and, in sum, of her morality. The very conception of women's spiritual progress is itself patriarchal: because of their embodied *riqqa*, their proneness to emotional sensitivity and spiritual perceptions, women are taught not indulge in ritual repetitions as much as men, and they are taught to follow different rules. Generally speaking the quantity and timings of ritual repetitions are set in a way that grants women the time to accomplish their duties as mothers and wives.

21 Burhani durus, *Tariqa Burhaniyya*, private printing.

Only when these gender roles and rules between master and disciple are carefully respected, are women recognized as truly virtuous. The patriarchal model finds its place in brotherhood life: male and female disciples who are not bound by a master/disciple relation may act as siblings and are allowed to attend each other's houses, pay each other visits and interact as if they were indeed a family.

On the contrary, if a woman's spiritual life is not properly guided, then emotions will be undisciplined: the Burhani Shaykh admonishes that such lack of control might lead to women becoming disrespectful of family values and gender roles in everyday living. Issam and Safwat, my two main interlocutors among the brotherhood's spiritual guides, often confirmed to me that the path of spiritual progression must be carefully managed. Although *awrad* practice is meant to detach the disciples from worldly life, it carries an implicit risk: if not properly disciplined, spiritual life might induce the complete loss of *'aql*, the rational faculty necessary to pursue a proper sociality in everyday life. Affected by their emotions and their connection with saints and spirits, women lose sight of the *zahir*-contingent world and its rules, neglecting domestic and social obligations and codes of conduct. A life lived in divine rapture is not appropriate for anyone.

Since her husband's death, Heba had not managed to respect the felicity conditions of the *awrad* ritual practice, despite her commitment to her spiritual life. Heil, her brother, was her only possible *muhrim* after both her father and her husband had died. However, he was much too disengaged from the *tariqa* to take up the role of spiritual guide. Heba had turned to an old friend, Nidal, the wife of notable brethren, who became her *murshid* and her confidant, but this ended up widening her distance from the *tariqa*'s rules of social conduct and its hierarchical gender-based relations. The feeling in her community was that by choosing a woman *murshid*, Heba mixed friendship, discipleship, comradeship and spiritual guidance to the point that many in the Burhaniyya started casting doubt on Heba's spiritual achievements and on her virtue. The number of *ziyara* received from her fellow brethren gradually dropped: her status of widowhood raised questions concerning the respectability of having male guests in the house. Heba seemed to have failed her tasks.

The unexpected changes in Heba's life conditions made it difficult for her to maintain standards of a virtuous conduct: after having her economic and social conditions changed, her approach to the ritual life of the brotherhood also needed to be re-formulated.

The normative discourse of the Burhaniyya on *riqqa* challenges conservative Islamic discourses on women and their role within religious life, circulating in the public sphere. At the same time, however, it reproduces class and gender-based forms of sociality proper to hegemonic reformist discourses on modern and civilised Islam.

Performing Ritual: the Dangerous Potency of Riqqa

Heba's contested spiritual independence suggests that the performance of *riqqa* allows for an ambiguity, a space of maneuver and shift in face of social and gender based discourses on virtue. It can be a risk or a potency, depending upon the point of view, implicit in the act of performance. The issue of women's heightened sensitivity becomes disturbing for the brotherhood at the moment when the felicity conditions of the social-*zahiri* performance of *riqqa* are not respected properly. Indeed, by foregrounding her contact with the esoteric dimension and her relationships with the saints, Heba searched for legitimation in overcoming established rules of social conduct.

Within months of my arrival, the brethren's visits to Heba's house had consistently diminished and this applied also to our visits to the Shaykh's house, while the tension within her family had increased. More and more often, I received invitations from the Burhaniyya's male spiritual guides, Issam and Safwat in particular, to participate in the *tariqa*'s life independently from my host. Clearly the Shaykh's intention was to find a more suitable situation for my stay: Heba was no longer such a good guide for me.

Heba's mother and brother proposed as a solution to her situation that, she should marry an old and wealthy man who was another close family friend: by doing so she would gain a 'real' *murshid* together with a husband, and she would finally gain a level of economic stability that would benefit her relations with her son and daughter. Ultimately, they

argued, she would be able to conduct the duties of mother and wife in a manner proper to a virtuous woman. Heba was unwilling to engage once again in an organized marriage, and she refused the pressures by her family. She was sure that her spiritual elevation, accrued after years of practice and ritual life, would help her face these times of hardship: she confided in Sitti Nadia, the Shaykh's late grandmother, who always guided her soul from the realm of the *batin* and with whom Heba claimed to have a special connection.

One day, while watching a romantic film by Adel Eman, Heba told me she had fallen in love with Magdi. He was a handsome man, more or less her age and a shareholder, with his brother, of a bankrupt furniture factory in Damietta. He had started visiting Heba's home a month or so ago, seeking her hospitality during his trips to Cairo on the occasion of the brotherhood's meetings. Magdi had become particularly committed to the Burhani meetings since the Shaykh's cousin had announced his wedding. A new house was needed and Magdi saw the possibility of selling his furniture. Mimi, Heba's mother, was very hostile towards the man from the very beginning and had never stopped warning her daughter that Magdi was taking advantage of her, as well as of the Burhaniyya. Obviously neither her family, nor the brethren considered Magdi to be a good match for Heba: their marriage would surely not help Heba to fulfill her duties.

Although her love was opposed by her relatives and many of her spiritual brothers, Heba persisted in her intentions.

Once again, she framed and legitimised her comportments through the mystical tradition giving primacy to *batin* and inner spirituality over exoteric comportment; by doing so, she overcame her duties as a daughter. She claimed the status of a spiritually mature woman and insisted that Magdi was the right person to marry as, following a *salat al istikhara* (consultation prayer), Sitti Nadia had appeared to her in a dream vision, approving the contested wedding. The marriage, with Sitti Nadia's approval, would have joined two very committed disciples and strengthened the *tariqa*.

Not long afterwards, Heba and Magdi married, without much fuss,

in Damietta. Their union was far from supported but the Shaykh never explicitly disapproved their marriage, nor did he have the right to do so, given the spiritual authorization Heba had claimed for it. If problematic in terms of gendered sociality, Heba's actions were meaningful as regards the spiritual interactional space that existed between three women: Sitti Nadia, Nidal, Heba's spiritual guide, and Heba herself. By performing litanies and prayers in the contained interactional space of her ritual life, Heba had opened up a space of dialogue with the saints in the *batin*, an audience which stood apart from and parallel to both the audience of her brethren and that of the Egyptian public sphere.

This leads to a further reflection about performance. The performance of *riqqa* in relation to the *batin* dimension differs from the performance of *riqqa* as belonging and difference. The former is located within the confined spaces and times of a ritual moment while the latter two are located in the diffused spaces of everyday interaction.²² In defining ritual I refer here to the literature that sees in ritual life a specific kind of performance, and in particular I follow Kapferer's definition of ritual as a self-contained (imaginal) space that enables participants to break free from the constraints or determinations of everyday life and even of ritual rules themselves.²³ As such, the ritual space of the *dhikr*, or *salat istikhara* as performed by Heba, reproduces life processes in a virtual space that frames these processes out from the everyday and allows for the intervention of divine agency: ritual space allows hermeneutical openings,²⁴ the possibility of reproducing and reorienting established discourses and norms of comportment following existential conditions. Kapferer writes that: "the phantasmagoric space

22 Tea Virtanen, "Introduction: Performance of belonging, difference and exclusion in the Muslim Africa," International workshop, The Nordic Africa Institute, Uppsala, 5-6 December 2013.

23 Bruce Kapferer, "Ritual Dynamics and Virtual Practice: Beyond Representation and Meaning," *Social Analysis* 48(2), 2004, pp.33-54.

24 By 'hermeneutical opening' I refer to a space of reflection and self-reflection that allows an individual to perceive and work on the limits of an established discourse, reinterpreting and transforming it in relation to his or her individual existential conditions and understandings. Cfr. Paola Abenante, "The ambiguity of virtue: expectations and experiences of piety in the life of a young Egyptian woman," *Ricerca Folklorica (Errefe)*, 69, 2015, pp.39-53.

of ritual virtuality may be conceived not only as a space whose dynamic interrupts prior determining processes but also as a space in which participants can reimagine (and redirect or reorient themselves) into the everyday circumstances of life.”²⁵ Ritual performance is charged with a heightened potency with respect to everyday performativity. During the ritual, time slows down and the social rules, structures, parameters and sedimented habitus of everyday life are suspended while at the same time its concerns are addressed. What needs to be added to this definition of ritual, which concentrates very much on the agentive possibilities of the subject, is that re-imagination and reorientation are made possible by the interaction with a divine agentic audience. Reframing her everyday desires and problems in the dialogue with Sitti Nadia and in the ritual virtual space of the *batin*, Heba was engaging with the very process of life-making. Authorized by the mystical tradition presupposing the primacy of esoteric-*batin* life she, with the help of her saints, was readjusting the dynamics of her *zahiri* life.

The mystical tradition offers women different styles of participation: next to the style of the virtuous woman conducting a proper *zahiri* existence, there is the style of the spiritually elevated disciple whose proximity with saints allows for an existence inclined towards the esoteric world and relatively unconstrained by social norms. This path, however, implies a different status within the brotherhood. Thus, Heba was never again, to my knowledge, considered to be one of the ‘models’ of Burhani virtue, nor was she ever again to be the guide for new adepts or the host for European Burhanis. Heba continued to live her spiritual life as a highly sensitive, *raqiqa* disciple, and found in such style of performance a different way of belonging to brotherhood life, but her visibility in the Burhaniyya was lost.

Scenes of Performance in Tension

All Burhanis agree that *riqqa* is a talent to cultivate: frailty makes women particularly sensitive and prone to spiritual life; in other words, virtuous

25 Kapferer, *Ritual Dynamics*, p.47.

women. The performance of such virtue however is not so straightforward. Through the description of Heba's life I have suggested how complex it might be to enact *riqqa* virtuously, since its performance involves at least three different interactional scenes. Regardless of how much the practice of *riqqa* follows established rules and is backed by a normative discourse, the results of its performance are never predictable; these depend upon the variety of historically and socio-culturally specific discursive contexts in which a person takes part and upon the variety of the respective audiences with whom she interacts. The tensions in Heba's life must indeed be read within a wider socio-historical perspective taking into account the Burhaniyya's position within the contemporary Egyptian Islamic panorama, and the different kinds of relations and interactions this reproduces. As I mentioned earlier in the paper, after twenty years of good fortune between the end of the nineteen-seventies and the beginning of the nineteen-nineties, the brotherhood was suddenly drawn into a debate concerning the heterodoxy of its cosmologies and practices, reaching the first pages of the national newspaper al-Ahram. The critics raged against Burhani doctrine and especially Burhani practices which they defined as backward, promiscuous and superstitious on the grounds that these practices were culturally rather than divinely inspired. Following these events, the national Sufi council banned the Burhaniyya and its then Shaykh left Egypt. It was during those years that the brotherhood concentrated its efforts on Europe and started to proselytise in Italy and Germany.²⁶

Since these events, the Burhani normative discourse on virtue has been more consciously articulated in modern terms. Foregrounding a liberal and modern conception of inner awaking, the Burhaniyya proposed a spiritual path proceeding from an interior renovation of the heart to the construction of a modern but virtuous society, grounded on the respect for brotherhood life. This discourse presents the Sufi path as an alternative to the authoritative and restrictive norms of the hegemonic form of reformed

26 Abenante, "Essentialising Difference"; Klinkhammer, "Traditionalizing Spirituality: the Burhaniya Sufi Order in Germany," p. 6.

Sufism. At the same time, it normalizes these spiritual openings by enhancing relational models that contain its anarchic risks and constantly bring the individual back to gender and class-based forms of sociality, in the name of a common good. The Burhani disciple is called upon to face an inner *jihad* between the opening up of new spiritual horizons and the respect for brotherhood and social rules of authority and conduct. *Riqqa* itself, once a natural gift of the female body and a potential danger, fully expresses this tension between an otherworldly dimension and social norms, and the social gendered hierarchies within the brotherhood itself.

The ambiguity contained in such a discourse on *riqqa* complicates further the performance of virtue, adding yet other elements of indeterminateness. The ambiguity between the three kinds of performances or interactional scenes described in this paper is tied to the ways in which this complex Burhani normative discourse on women's virtue is then enacted and transformed into contextually meaningful worlds: as a performance of difference, *riqqa* is made meaningful in relation to the Egyptian public sphere and the debate on modern womanhood; as a performance of belonging it relates to the Burhaniyya and its discourse on gender sociality and *zahiri* life; finally, as a performance of ritual life it links to the discourse on *batini* world of imagination and to the audience of the Burhani pantheon of saints.

The performance of *riqqa*, and for that matter performance *tout court*, does not correspond to truthful meanings nor does it perfunctorily enact authoritative normative discourses, in this case established by the brotherhood. Instead, it creates contextually meaningful worlds that stand parallel but always in mutual relation to one another.

I would now like to refer to my second point on performance. The second point concerns the distinction between ritual performance and everyday performativity. I have described the performance of virtue both in terms of everyday performativity, the social *zahiri* dimension of a virtuous life, and of ritual performance, intended as an extraordinary moment giving access to the *batin*, inner dimension of life. This distinction, which is assumed by the Burhani themselves, is relevant because the *zahiri*-social and the *batini*-inner performances are tied

to different discursive arenas and audiences. However distinct, these scenes of performance are also ineluctably related to one another, and this relation, whether conflictual or not, is always an unpredictable one because of the contextual, intersubjective and thus indeterminate nature of performance itself. In Burhani terms, the *zahir* and the *batin* are distinct but not separate and, rather, are connected through a *barzakh*, a diaphragm in which the *zahir* transforms into the *batin* and vice versa: in analytical terms, what happens in everyday performativity transforms ritual performance and vice versa.

Performance literature generally tends to polarize around two distinct analyses of performance: on the one hand is the study of performances as moments 'out of the ordinary,' such as ritual performances and more generally cultural performances;²⁷ while on the other hand is the study of everyday performativity concentrating on modes of interaction or self-presentation in everyday life.²⁸ In this ethnography I have aimed at keeping the two dimensions together, showing their links, continuities and discontinuities.²⁹ I have described how ritual performance of virtue is not confined to the building of a spiritual status alone but has concrete fallouts on everyday life performativity; likewise, everyday life performativity as a modern woman has fallouts on ritual life. It is possible to grasp this mutual influence between the everyday and the extraordinary dimension of ritual practice, I argue, by applying an approach to performance intended as an interactional scene. This approach shifts the emphasis from an analysis of

27 Turner has given the lead to this approach. See Victor Turner, *The Anthropology of Performance* (New York: PAJ Publications, 1987). It must be however considered that Turner's approach also paved the way to read ritualistic comportment out of a neat ritual setting, by identifying 'liminoid' compartments in everyday life as well.

28 Goffman is instead generally considered to be the initiator of the everyday life performativity approach. See Erving Goffman, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*, (New York: Doubleday & Company, Inc. 1959).

29 Starting from Cantwell Smith's first definition of *sunna* as orthopraxy, studies of the anthropology of Islam have generally paid more attention to the link between everyday life performativity and to ritual life, since much Sunna-related comportment unsettles the boundaries between ritual and ordinary life. Wilfred Cantwell Smith, "History of Religions - Whither and Why?" in Mircea Eliade and J. M. Kitagawa (eds.), *The History of Religions: Essays in Methodology* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1959).

discursive meanings to one of the dynamics of performance, and it reveals the indeterminateness of performance itself, as well as the potency and hermeneutical openings that this indeterminateness allows for. In the interaction with multiple audiences and contexts, the individual finds spaces to reframe her or his actions in response to altering material life constraints; at the same time the individual comes to terms with unexpected situations and turns in life.

I shall now deal with my third and last point on performance. Any approach to the indeterminateness of performance intended as a scene of interaction differs but runs parallel to the current tendency in the literature to analyse the practice of Islamic virtue mainly in terms of self-discipline and of the enactment of normative discourses. Regardless of how much an individual's commitment to *riqqa*, or to any Islamic virtue, is regulated by a specific discourse and well described by an approach focused on self-cultivation and discipline, the focus on performance nonetheless allows one to take into account how such commitment faces contextual circumstances, different audiences and is subjected to unexpected consequences.³⁰

My ethnography understands the individual sensibilities, expectations and desires of my interlocutor as formed and cultivated through the vocabulary and disciplines of the brotherhood to which she is committed. But most importantly it describes the forms of sociality, both human and divine, the gendered and class based relations, and the diverse discursive arenas to which the performer relates and that a wider attention to performance brings forth. Through and against the texture of Heba's relations and the forms of intersubjective engagement – both with spirits and humans – Heba is able to experience the dilemmas and possibilities her spiritual commitment unfolds in her life.

In this paper I have aimed at disclosing the complex lifeworld that lies behind the path towards the achievement of Islamic piety. This aim has involved the joint reading of such different scenes of interaction in the performance of *riqqa*, the conflicts and mutual influences between them.

30 Lambek, *The value of (performative) acts*.