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# Sufism, subjectivity and parapsychology: refashioning the *dirbāsha* ritual among Sufis in modern Iraq

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**Abstract:** This paper explores the ritual of the *dirbāsha* as an extraordinary miracle performance and its role as a bodily practice in the formation of modern Muslim subjectivities among the Qādiriyya-Kasnazāniyya Sufi communities in Iraq. During the climax of collective *dhikr* gatherings, male Sufi novices perform extraordinary and dangerous acts, perforating parts of their bodies with swords or long skewers without seriously injuring themselves. From the Sufi perspective, this ritual is, first of all, interpreted as the miracle of a Sufi shaykh and not of the performing Sufi novice since it is seen as an expression and proof of God's power as transmitted through the shaykh. Moreover, it has been argued that the ritual is constitutive for the formation of the religious subjectivity of the performing Sufi novice since it allows the embodiment of mystical concepts as emotional, sensorial and existential realities. For the individual ritual experience to work, the social construction and constant reframing of these “miracles” needs to be taken into account as well, namely the ordinary ethics of the extraordinary which allow the miracles to be perceived as such. The present case of the Kasnazāniyya will show how Sufis combined their pious with a modern, critical and self-reflexive subjectivity and successfully managed to reframe this highly controversial practice – which is criticised by religious reformists and secularists alike – beyond its traditional ritual context with the modern science of parapsychology.

**Keywords:** bodily practice; disenchantment of the world; modern Muslim subjectivities; parapsychology; Sufism in Iraq

## 1 Introduction

On 9 July 2020, hundreds of Sufi dervishes of the Qādiriyya-Kasnazāniyya baffled the authorities in Iran and the Iraqi Kurdistan region when they overran the

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Bashmakh border crossing between both countries, allegedly without any legal travel documents and against the current travel restrictions due to the coronavirus pandemic. Carrying swords, knives and daggers and chanting religious slogans such as “*ḥayy Allāh*” (ever-living is God) accompanied by Daf drum percussion, the dervishes forced their way into Iraqi Kurdistan determined to attend the funeral of their late shaykh, Muḥammad ‘Abd al-Karīm al-Kasnazānī<sup>1</sup> in Sulaymāniyya.<sup>2</sup> Shots fired by Iranian border security left several dervishes injured but could not halt their March into the Kurdistan region. According to Farangis Ghaderi, their open disregard of national borders out of loyalty to their late shaykh was denounced by the Iranian and Kurdish authorities and sparked a heated discussion on social media that ranged from their outright condemnation as “ignorant fanatics” to their embrace for challenging colonial borders.<sup>3</sup> For many, this incident proved once more the “ignorance” and “superstition” that, according to Ghaderi, Kurdish nationalist and modernist circles have propagated about Sufi dervishes for a long time and that questions their place in a modern world.<sup>4</sup> However, the incident can easily give a wrong impression to outside observers. The dervishes did not carry out a middle-aged onslaught with knives and swords against the border guards and their modern arms. They chanted formulas of their traditional collective remembrance of God, the *dhikr*, and some of them carried swords, knives and daggers as items of a ritual for which Sufi orders and the Kasnazāniyya in particular gained popularity but also received criticism in modern Iraq and the wider Islamicate world. This ritual, called *dirbāsha* or *ḍarb al-shīsh*, consists of an extraordinary miracle performance during which the dervishes pierce their bodies, for instance, with swords and daggers without experiencing any physical injuries, and this is intended to prove of their strong faith and the spiritual strength of Sufism.

The branding and perception of Sufis and their rituals as irrational, backward and anti-modern is not a recent phenomenon but already formed part of the political agenda of colonial authorities during the nineteenth century when “the ‘irrationality’ of native superstitions and practices was necessary to demonstrate the rationality of modern European institutions”.<sup>5</sup> Similar ideological views are still widespread among many modernists, nationalists, secularists but also religious reformers in the Islamicate world today. Against this background, the present study argues that the

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1 The shaykh had died a week earlier after medical treatment in a US hospital and was brought back to his former home region by his family.

2 Wali 2020.

3 Ghaderi 2020; Rudaw Media Network 2020.

4 Ghaderi 2020.

5 Wiener 2003: 140, quoted in Jones 2010: 94.

practice of this bodily ritual among Sufis in contemporary Iraq does not at all contradict their forming of distinctively modern and rational cognitive repertoires including a critical, self-reflexive subjectivity. On the contrary, by applying the concepts of subjectivity and processes of self-cultivation together with those of multiple and successive modernities, this contribution seeks to show that the practice of *dirbāsha* as well as its social reframing and refashioning in the scientific context of parapsychology contributed to the formation of pious and modern Muslim subjects in the Iraqi context.<sup>6</sup> The following paragraphs will outline the theoretical framework of my approach including the role of bodily practice in the formation of religious subjectivity, the concept of multiple modernities and, related to it, modern esoteric approaches synthesising science and religion.

Since the early 1990s, scholarly approaches to religious subjectivity formation through bodily practice have gained a new impetus from influential contributions to gender studies such as Judith Butler's *Gender Trouble*<sup>7</sup> and the anthropologist Talal Asad's critique of Clifford Geertz's symbolic interpretation of rituals. Inspired by Marcel Mauss' concept of habitus and Michel Foucault's technologies of the self, Asad argues against the assumed primacy of belief over practice in religion and the widespread understanding of rituals as non-instrumental and non-practical.<sup>8</sup> Instead of analysing rituals as a "medium of symbolic meaning", he focuses on authoritative discourses and the materiality of the body "as an assemblage of embodied aptitudes".<sup>9</sup> Asad understands rituals as "disciplinary practices through which bodies, dispositions, and subjectivities [including moods, emotions, and

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<sup>6</sup> Étienne Balibar offers a useful approach to subjectivity in terms of an old play on words, namely the fact that we translate as subject the neutral notion of the Latin *subjectum*, that is an individual substance or material substratum for properties, but also the personal notion of *subjectus*, that is a human person who is subjected to the more or less absolute or legitimate authority of a sovereign power (human or, in this case, divine). Thus, both translations evince a historical tension within the subject, between its being the supposed originary site of freedom, autonomy and agency and its subjection to the law of a sovereign or the authority of a superior power. Against the backdrop of Western liberal thinking, Balibar proposes that "the humanity (subjectivity) of man [should be] identified with a practice and a task: the task of self-emancipation from every domination and subjection by means of a collective and universal access to politics" (Balibar 1994: 8–12). It is open to debate to what extent this liberal understanding can be applied to Muslim societies and Islamic tradition, but his basic idea of identifying subjectivity with practice, including religious ritual practice, forms the core of the approach in this paper.

<sup>7</sup> Butler 1990. Because of Butler's philosophical argument for distinguishing between anatomically determined identities and gender as learned performance of norms, many found in this text "a powerful tool for analyzing the body as a signifying practice rather than as an 'intractable' physical fact" (Furey 2012: 18).

<sup>8</sup> For an overview of Asad's argument, see, for instance, Hollywood 2004: 57.

<sup>9</sup> See Furey 2012: 16; Asad 1993: 75.



beliefs] are formed and transformed”.<sup>10</sup> In turn, religious symbols, according to Asad, cannot be known without the socially constructed disciplinary practices that secure their meaning.<sup>11</sup> Inspired by this approach, several anthropological studies in the 2000s, by scholars such as Charles Hirschkind, Saba Mahmood and Lara Deeb, began to stress the importance of disciplinary practices and self-cultivation in the formation of pious ethical-moral subjects among contemporary Islamic piety and revivalist movements.<sup>12</sup> As rightly stated by Samuli Schielke, these pious subjects must be seen as only one part of a whole plurality of moral-ethical registers, including non-religious ones, with ambivalent and fragmented subjectivities that prevail in societies not only in the Middle East but worldwide.<sup>13</sup>

A common feature of these novel approaches lies within an almost exclusive focus on the formation of moral-ethical and virtuous subjects through ordinary religious practices of everyday life such as listening to cassette-sermon auditions in the case of Hirschkind, and regular prayer, donning the veil, the regular attendance at mosque sermons or not shaking hands with the opposite sex in the case of Mahmood and Deeb. Complementing these studies, this contribution aims to shed more light on how extraordinary miracle performances and their social reframing also constitute a modern form of religiosity. The continuing significance of the extraordinary in the form of miracles, sainthood and saintly charisma in the contemporary Islamicate world has received and still receives a lot of scholarly attention, to be sure, but mainly through symbolical interpretative and phenomenological approaches, for instance, by Pnina Werbner, Helene Basu and Mikkel Bille.<sup>14</sup> An exception is Paulo Pinto’s work about Rifā‘ī Sufis in northern Syria in which he shows that the ritual manipulation of the body during the same Sufi practice as mentioned above (here called *ḍarb al-shīsh*) may serve as an experiential arena for the constitution of religious subjectivities.<sup>15</sup> The extraordinary was also the major focus of classical ritual studies before the recent turn to quotidian practice and “ordinary ethics”,<sup>16</sup> yet is it not closely linked to and can it not be part of the quotidian and the ordinary, too? Problematising the analytical category of the “ordinary” and “everyday”, Morgan Clarke convincingly argues for the interdependency of the ordinary and the extraordinary. His investigation of the social construction of miracle performances among Sufi communities in contemporary Lebanon makes clear that their extraordinary practices also possess their ordinary

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<sup>10</sup> See Hollywood 2004: 58.

<sup>11</sup> Furey 2012: 16.

<sup>12</sup> Deeb 2006; Hirschkind 2001; Mahmood 2005.

<sup>13</sup> Schielke 2009, 2010.

<sup>14</sup> Bandak and Bille 2013; Werbner and Basu 1998.

<sup>15</sup> Pinto 2012.

<sup>16</sup> Lambek 2010.

ethics and are constituted within the social of everyday life with their own conventions, appropriate places and contents, techniques and contradictions suggesting an “ordinariness of the extraordinary for extraordinary people”.<sup>17</sup>

Taking the role of ordinary and extraordinary practices in the formation of modern subjects into account also adds an important dimension to studies that highlight the multiplicity of paths to modernisation. Contrary to assuming one singular and linear development of modernity, scholars use the concepts of “multiple modernities” and “successive modernities” in order to understand the emergence of different forms of modernity in different cultural settings and in different periods of time respectively.<sup>18</sup> Dietrich Jung, Kirstine Sinclair and others have stressed the heuristic value of the concept of subjectivity formation for the study of the emergence of modernity in Islamicate societies and against a Western-centred understanding of a singular and linear modernisation. They use Andreas Reckwitz’s Western-derived ideal types of modern subject cultures (the classical bourgeois, the peer-group-oriented type of salaried masses and the post-modern entrepreneur) together with theories of multiple and successive modernities in order to show how Islamic reformists of the nineteenth and twentieth century merged Islamic traditions with global social imaginaries. In contrast to the role of religion in the European context, Islamic traditions gained a particular importance here for the definitions of authentic Muslim modernities.<sup>19</sup> This, however, is not to say that religious traditions and practices had no impact on modern subjectivities in Europe at all. Problematising Max Weber’s famous disenchantment thesis, Egil Asprem sheds light on the plurality of available epistemological positions in Europe’s post-Enlightenment intellectual culture, including proponents and opponents of the disenchantment process as well as those who opted for a middle path.<sup>20</sup> Asprem shows the complex nature of this disenchantment process that, from the nineteenth century onwards, also included esoteric circles and an emerging religious and “open-ended” naturalism that negotiated a synthesis of nature, science and religion. This naturalism, according to Asprem, allowed the emergence of new natural theologies that undergird and form part of the post-war New Age science, parapsychological and esoteric discourses in the late twentieth century.<sup>21</sup> The following

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<sup>17</sup> Clarke 2014: 408–10, 418–21.

<sup>18</sup> Jung and Sinclair 2015: 26.

<sup>19</sup> Jung and Sinclair 2015, 2020.

<sup>20</sup> Asprem 2018: 4. Weber formulated his disenchantment thesis as a process that had already begun with the intellectualisation and rationalisation of magic, that continued with the invention of monotheism, and that pushed the divine, mysterious and magical from the immanence of this world more and more into transcendence, ushering in the separation of religion and science and the emergence of a modern mentality and perception of the world based on reason, evidence and fact (Asprem 2018: 1–10).

<sup>21</sup> Asprem 2018: 1–10.

sections will demonstrate that the ideas of esoteric circles, religious naturalism and parapsychology also took root among Iraq's intellectuals in the 1950s.

After a short introduction into the concept of miracles in the Islamic tradition of the Iraqi Qādiriyya-Kasnazāniyya Sufi order, my aim is to revisit Pinto's and Clarke's recent findings about extraordinary bodily miracle performances among Sufis, their social construction and their role for subjectivity formation. My own observations among Iraqi Kasnazāni Sufis will complement and shed new light on previous discussions of these performances. In a next step, I will shortly trace the first Western scientific encounters with bodily Sufi rituals in the context of colonial Algeria and Europe during the nineteenth century. These encounters ranged from the outright rejection of the Sufi rituals as irrational and fraudulent trickery by colonial ethnographers and scientific illusionists to their enthusiastic embrace by esoteric circles. The latter's scientific interest in miracles and the paranormal gained popularity among Iraqi intellectuals and led to the emergence and institutionalisation of parapsychology in the country during the late twentieth century. In the final section, I will analyse how Kasnazāni Sufis became actively engaged in parapsychological research of their own practice of miracle performances and how they by so doing reframed the ritual practice and combined the formation of their pious subjectivity through the *dirbāsha* with a modern, critical and self-reflexive subjectivity. This engagement in parapsychology marks a considerable shift away from the performances' traditional ritual function and context as analysed by Pinto and Clarke towards a medical New Age context of spiritual healing and the potential to perform these practices at any time and any place in everyday life. Their case illustrates pious, modern, and self-reflexive Sufi subjectivities in which religious belief and empirical science are synthesised to find a new meaning for this traditional ritual in Iraqi society. The idea for this study emerged from my experiences and observations in the house and Sufi convent (*takiyya*) of shaykh Muḥammad 'Abd al-Karīm al-Kasnazāni in Amman during the research for my dissertation<sup>22</sup> in November 2015, as well as from my interviews and conversations with Kasnazāni Sufis since then.

## 2 Extraordinary miracle performances in the Islamic tradition of the Qādiriyya-Kasnazāniyya

Miracles, particularly in the form of extraordinary ritualised practices, have formed an important but controversial part of Islam's and Sufism's traditions for centuries. The Islamic tradition, here represented by the Iraqi Sufi order of the Qādiriyya-

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<sup>22</sup> Jordan 2022.

Kasnazāniyya, knows several categories of miracles which are generally subsumed under the term *khawāriq al-‘ādāt*, literally phenomena that break the normal order or transcend the conceivable or the rational. The tradition knows miracles proper (*mu‘jizāt*), which are the preserve of prophets.<sup>23</sup> The *Qur’ān* mentions relatively few miracles of the Prophet Muḥammad in order to buttress the revelation and some of other prophets such as Ibrāhīm, who was thrown into a fire that became, upon God’s order, “cold and peaceful” (*bardan wa-salāman*) to him (Q 21: 68–70). These prophetic miracles are often cited by Sufis, such as the Kasnazānīs, in order to justify their own extraordinary practices. Another category is that of premature signs (*irhāṣāt*) preceding, indicating and founding prophethood and the revelation. The third category are marvels (*karāmāt*), a distinct sub-category of *mu‘jizāt* and an exclusive privilege of saints, the so-called friends of God (*awliyā’ Allāh*). Divine succour (*ma‘ūna*) for the average people to release them from their worries, pains and hardships forms the fourth category. The two final categories offer a distinction between true miracles and mere deception: the first is mere enticement (*istidrāj*) and refers to the successful performance of *khawāriq al-‘ādāt* by a vicious person, based on the right method but directed towards a certain (personal) aim such as pride. This performance unwittingly deceives the performing person himself as well as his audience and is caused by evil and low spirits. Finally, there is deliberate abuse (*ihāna*) of such performances with the aim of deceiving others, thus providing a discursive mechanism to outcast “fake and deceitful Sufis”.<sup>24</sup>

The practice of perforating the human body with swords and skewers among the Kasnazāniyya mentioned above is known in Iraqi vernacular as *dirbāsha*.<sup>25</sup> It is categorised as a *karāma*, a marvel of the Sufi shaykhs, and also practised among other Sufi communities throughout the Islamicate world from Morocco via North Africa to the Levant, the Gulf region, Iran, South and South East Asia, and on the Balkans.<sup>26</sup> The traditional environment and stage for this practice is the ritual gathering of Sufi circles for the commemoration of God, the *dhikr*, and the performance of other spiritual exercises, particularly at major festivals such as the birthday of the Prophet or of other saints. During these events, a Sufi shaykh himself or his deputies (*khulafā’*) will gather their followers to commemorate and come spiritually close to God through the rhythmical recitation of certain formulas. One formula used by the Kasnazāniyya during my stay in the central *takiyya* in Amman was “*yā Allāh*,

<sup>23</sup> Kasnazānī al-Ḥusaynī 1996: 156.

<sup>24</sup> Kasnazānī al-Ḥusaynī 1996: 156–7.

<sup>25</sup> The term is a modification of the Arabic “*ḍarb al-shish*”, meaning skewer strike.

<sup>26</sup> Historically, this ritual is mainly associated with the Rifā‘iyya, and some countries, such as Egypt, tried to restrict these and similar other practices from the nineteenth century onwards (see, for instance, De Jong 1978: 94; Johansen 1996: 22–23; Trimmingham 1971: 247). For the Moroccan context, see Zillinger 2013.

*yā qayyūm*” (O God, O Subsisting). In the Levant, Iraq and Iran, these recitations are complemented by the energetic rhythm of drums and interspersed with the performance of poetry (*madā’ih*) in praise of the Prophet and other saints. Nowadays, this centuries-old ritual is often supported by the use of modern amplifiers and sound systems. As shown by Carla Petievich and Max Stille for South Asia and by Patrick Eisenlohr for the Indian Ocean, certain chanting techniques in combination with these technical devices can create an overwhelming sonic atmosphere that is intended to give the attendees a physical and emotional experience of the divine presence.<sup>27</sup> At the climax of such an event, Sufi novices (*murīdūn*) will ask for permission from the shaykh or his deputy to perform a marvel in order to give physical evidence of the shaykh’s power and the truth of Islam. Only after having received permission will they eat glass, nails, burning charcoal or living scorpions. Some dervishes cut their tongues with sharp daggers or hammer them into the top of their cranial bones and into their eye sockets. Others, in turn, will, with the help of the deputy or alone, perforate parts of their bodies (including cheeks, tongue, neck, shoulders, chest and belly) with swords (in which case it is called *ḍarb al-sayf*) or long wooden or iron skewers (called *ḍarb al-shīsh*).<sup>28</sup>

Keeping up with modern technological progress, the Sufis even adapted and extended their performative repertoire with new devices. They began to eat fluorescent tubes and razor blades. In one Kasnazānī videotaped performance, novices perforate their necks and parts of their abdomens with iron skewers and connect them to the circuit of a power line at the other end of which a light bulb lights up.<sup>29</sup> In extreme cases, novices use machine guns and rifles to fire live ammunition through marginal parts of their abdomen and, seemingly unharmed, keep on swaying to the rhythm of the drums in the background.<sup>30</sup> In successful performances, all this happens without severely injuring the performer, oftentimes even without spilling any blood, and proves, according to the Sufis, God’s blessing (*baraka*) as transmitted by the shaykh. In order to avoid misunderstandings, Pinto rightly pointed to the fact that these rituals are not considered a form of self-mortification as compared to the Shī’a flagellation ceremonies.<sup>31</sup> Admittedly, performances like these are extraordinary cases and far from being a mass phenomenon as compared to other rituals. However, they are still immensely widespread throughout the whole Islamicate

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<sup>27</sup> Eisenlohr 2018: 1, 6; Petievich and Stille 2017.

<sup>28</sup> The Kasnazāniyya literature provides a number of detailed photos of their performances (Kasnazānī al-Ḥusaynī 1996: 158–9).

<sup>29</sup> Mohammed 2012, 00:52:31.

<sup>30</sup> Mohammed 2012, 00:35:15–00:35:43.

<sup>31</sup> On the Shī’a flagellation ceremonies as an innovation of the nineteenth century in Najaf, see (Nakash 2003: 148).



world to date and their accordance with “true” Islamic principles is heavily debated in religious reformist and secular contexts.

According to the Kasnazāniyya, the marvels such as the *dirbāsha* are a “lively extension” (*imtidād ḥayy*) of the Prophetic *mu‘jizāt* to prove God’s existence and his unity, and aim at nothing but the religious and spiritual guidance (*irshād*) of those who have gone astray (*ḍāllūn*) and of the deniers (*munkirūn*) in order to bring them back to the path of truth and belief.<sup>32</sup> Generally, the *dirbāsha* is not obligatory but optional for the novices of the shaykh, and it is considered a means (*wasīla*) for religious guidance but not a goal (*ghāya*) in itself. If a novice decides to perform, he proves his strong faith, sacrifice and courage, which is seen in analogy to the martyrdom of the Prophet’s companions (*ṣaḥāba*) in the holy war (*jihād*) for Islam. This novice will be obliged to repeatedly practise the *dirbāsha* every time it turns out that the religious and spiritual guidance of the people is more effective with the support of a marvel. The marvel itself is only made possible through the blessing (*baraka*) of God as the ultimate agent, transmitted via the spiritual lineage of the order through the shaykh as the necessary intermediary – hence the need to ask for permission to perform.<sup>33</sup> Consequently, the performance by a novice is not his own marvel, something with which he could pride himself, but that of the shaykh alone, re-confirming his position as true source of *baraka*. In this understanding, the body of the novice appears as a mere instrument or stage upon which the shaykh – ultimately God – acts. This might be another example of the often-cited strong trust in God (*tawakkul*) and slavish obedience (*Kadavergehorsam*) of novices in Sufism since the ninth century: according to a widespread saying, the Sufi novice has to be to his master like a corpse in the hands of the corpse-washer.<sup>34</sup> However, how do this ritual and corporeal experience contribute to the formation of a pious Sufi subject?

### 3 Miracle performances, the Muslim body and Sufi subjectivity in a ritual context and beyond

Even though a novice himself, according to the Sufi perspective, has no agency in this performance and his body is only being acted upon, the whole ritual is nevertheless constitutive for his formation as a religious subject as a Sufi. In his research about the Rifā‘iyya in northern Syria, Paolo Pinto describes another view of the *dirbāsha* that differs from that of the Kasnazāniyya. Among these Rifā‘īs, the

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<sup>32</sup> Kasnazānī al-Ḥusaynī 1996: 158.

<sup>33</sup> Kasnazānī al-Ḥusaynī 1996: 158–60.

<sup>34</sup> See, for instance, Goldziher 1899: 42.



Sufis' capacity to perform marvels is closely linked to the spiritual advancement on the order's mystical path (*ṭarīqa*), with the different forms of the *ḍarb al-shīsh* corresponding to certain advanced spiritual stages in accordance with the increasing difficulty or danger of the performance.<sup>35</sup> For instance, the perforation of the cheeks represents a lower spiritual stage than that of the abdomen, with its high risk of damaging vital organs. Pinto also stresses that the ritual is incomplete without the establishment of its esoteric nature through a number of codified conditions that have to be fulfilled in order to discern true marvels that originate from God from mere magic influenced by demons (*jinn*). These conditions include the absence of bleeding, the closing of the wound within two weeks, and a reddish tonality of the scar. After a successful performance, a novice is either confirmed in his present spiritual stage or elevated to another level.<sup>36</sup> Pinto describes the Rifāʿī Sufi's performances in this context as a "dramatically condensed experience of the Sufi path. In each performance, he has to mobilise the appropriate cognitive framework and body techniques acquired during his initiation into the mystical path in order to achieve a successful result for both himself and the rest of the Sufi community".<sup>37</sup> Notably, a Sufi might be expelled from the community if he fails in his performance, since this would question the strength of his faith or the shaykh's being a medium for God's blessing.

The body chosen as instrument and stage for a divine act becomes in this way the existential ground for doctrinal and ritual principles of Sufism. One of Pinto's interlocutors remarked: "I felt the pressure of the skewer on my skin and, after it, the coldness of the iron passing through my body. Then, I felt alive! It was love, God's love filling my heart. I could feel God in my heart and I was sure that I was close to him".<sup>38</sup> The Sufi interprets his bodily experience in terms of the Sufi concept of love, as an emotional and intimate relation to the divine reality. In the words of Pinto, "this corporeal experience allowed the embodiment of the mystical concept of love as emotional, sensorial and existential realities that the disciples live and feel as constituent parts of their selves". In this case, it proved to him who he really is, and the feeling of his connection with God accompanies him in his life and keeps him on the right path.<sup>39</sup> It is important to understand that the *ḍirbāsha* is not taught in the process of initiation into the Sufi path but is more a performative improvisation. Nevertheless, the initiation into and teaching of the Sufi path are essential since both provide the cognitive framework and bodily techniques which

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<sup>35</sup> Pinto 2012: 62–4.

<sup>36</sup> Pinto 2012: 65–6.

<sup>37</sup> Pinto 2012: 66.

<sup>38</sup> Pinto 2012: 66.

<sup>39</sup> Pinto 2012: 66.

allow the perception of this experience as a *karāma* and as an embodiment of mystical states. Among the Rifāʿīs studied by Pinto, the novices experience long periods of fasting, they read sacred texts, meditate on religious concepts and perform physically demanding exercises. In this way, they acquire bodily techniques (gestures, postures, corporeal abilities), emotional schemes and discursive categories which help them to interpret, classify and communicate their own individual experiences clustered into categories of mystical states according to the tradition of Sufism.<sup>40</sup> Their learning to induce and mobilise certain desires, feelings and bodily sensations and to classify them as shown in the aforementioned example is an important prerequisite in order to endure such bodily rituals.

Among the Kasnazānī Sufis, performers and observers alike, the *dirbāsha* still functions as an existential ground for their Sufi subjectivities as was observed by Pinto. Among the order's many followers, it is more than likely that many also see these performances as embodiments of mystical states as Pinto's Syrian Rifāʿī Sufis did, yet most Kasnazānīs that I met denied such an association. Generally, most members of the order do not practise any form of the *dirbāsha*, and a few are not particularly fond of it, even though they accept it as a marvel of the shaykh. Those who practise various forms of these marvels also do it outside the *dhikr* context successfully and independently of any mystical states, thus blurring the boundaries of the extraordinary and the ordinary. In their view, all followers of the shaykh have the ability – at least in theory – to perform such marvels after they have sworn the oath of allegiance. Moreover, they talked about certain members of the order whom they considered to be absolutely immoral but who can, nevertheless, do impressive performances that are recognised in the order. There are even cases of eight- to ten-year-old boys whose cheeks are pierced with small skewers and who have certainly not much experience on the spiritual path of the Kasnazāniyya.<sup>41</sup> One of my interlocutors, a deputy of the shaykh and university graduate who became involved in parapsychological research (more on that later), described his experience with the *dirbāsha* to me: During one *dhikr* gathering in Baghdad in the late 1980s, he decided spontaneously to perform for the first time in his life. After he had asked for permission, another deputy of shaykh Muḥammad ʿAbd al-Karīm al-Kasnazānī ordered him to put his hands underneath his chin to stabilise his head and hammered a dagger into the top of his skull. He described the moment before the first hammer blow as a rush of various thoughts and feelings, a mixture of fear, doubt and uncertainty. “O my God is this really going to work?!” he thought. When the first blows hit and the blade entered his skull, he still remembers clearly to this day, that he perceived the blows of the hammer as if his

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<sup>40</sup> Pinto 2012: 67–8.

<sup>41</sup> See picture 18 in Kasnazānī al-Ḥusaynī 1996: 176–77.

head was numb as a rock and he felt no pain nor anything else at all. After a few moments, the deputy had difficulty removing the dagger since it was stuck but eventually managed to pull it out by force. Having lost a bit of blood, he returned immediately to the other Sufis and kept on reciting their *dhikr* formulas. For my interlocutor, this performance was one of the most difficult tests of his faith. He was firm in his belief in the shaykh before this performance, but this test, the overcoming of his fears and doubts, his trust in the shaykh's power to stand by, and the reality of this bodily experience and feeling further strengthened the sincerity of his belief and shaped his identity as a Sufi. Similar to the case Pinto describes, this bodily experience became the existential ground of this deputy's faith in general and left an imprint on him for the rest of his life, not as an embodiment of a mystical state, but as a proof of the shaykh's and ultimately God's protection and healing powers. If anything, the adding of these nuances to the findings of previous studies about these bodily rituals illustrates the varieties and ambivalence of religious experience and pious subjectivities in the modern Middle East.

Aside from the individual prerequisites of this bodily experience, social conditions are also important for the successful production of a marvel. Problematising Max Weber's understanding of the extraordinary as distinct from the ordinary through its lying outside the bounds of rules, Morgan Clarke argues that both are interdependent, and the extraordinary, too, has its ordinary ethics.<sup>42</sup> In the context of Sufi ritual gatherings in Lebanon, this ethics of the extraordinary include "its conventions, with regard to its appropriate content and reception; its responsibilities and virtues, of modesty, for example (perhaps surprisingly); its techniques, bodily, but also social; its contradictions – the ordinariness of the extraordinary for extraordinary people; and its reasons and aesthetics of success and failure".<sup>43</sup> According to this line of argumentation, marvels do not simply speak for themselves. In order to make it socially possible that performances such as the *dirbāsha* work successfully, they have to take place in the right setting and follow the right script. As Clarke notes, just sticking a spike through your side will hardly do, neither for the novice himself nor for the audience. The performance works like a play. "It has to be done in the right time, in the right way, to an audience, who even if not captured by its proposition, at least understand the terms in which it is being proposed".<sup>44</sup>

In Clarke's account, Sufism in Lebanon is also portrayed as "something of an intimate matter",<sup>45</sup> and the Rifā'i Sufis he met performed the *ḍarb al-shīsh* only with the utmost discretion, considering it as "top secret" to outsiders. This instance

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<sup>42</sup> Clarke 2014: 410.

<sup>43</sup> Clarke 2014: 41.

<sup>44</sup> Clarke 2014: 418.

<sup>45</sup> Clarke 2014: 411.

illustrates the vulnerability of such extraordinary performances to outside criticism and disbelief. Fearing the strong and widespread hostility to such practices by Wahhābī-inspired Salafis and secular nationalists alike in Lebanon as elsewhere throughout the Islamic world, these Rifāʿīs, according to Clarke, would not talk about the ritual in public.<sup>46</sup> This discretion is entirely different to what can be observed among the Kasnazāniyya in Iran, Iraq and elsewhere. During my very first visit to the Amman-based *takiyya* of shaykh Muḥammad ʿAbd al-Karīm al-Kasnazānī in November 2015, I became witness to one of their marvel performances without having articulated my wish to see one at all. Sitting in the *takiyya*'s office, I was discussing the conditions of my research and whether I would convert to Islam and swear allegiance to the shaykh or not with three of his deputies, when, suddenly, one of them approached me in order to provide evidence of the shaykh's spiritual power. He took a small paper envelope out of his jacket and handed it over to me. In the envelope, I found a new and extremely sharp razor blade ready for shaving. Mumbling a short private prayer in order to spiritually connect with the shaykh, the deputy took the razor blade from my hand, put it into his mouth, chewed it into little pieces and swallowed it without causing any bleeding in his mouth. The performance was truly impressive and left me in the uncomfortable position of finding good arguments for not converting to Islam, despite this marvel. It was performed in the *takiyya*, but, in contrast to Clarke's account, completely outside the ritual context of the Sufi *dhikr* with the rhythm of drums and an audience of Sufi novices as described above. The deputy did not ask for permission from the shaykh in physical presence, but he made a spiritual connection to him and simply performed right away without any fear that a non-Muslim could disturb God's grace or that he might incur the hostility of an outside critic. Among the Kasnazānīs that I met, marvel performances are not handled discretely, but are in fact promoted explicitly and openly.

The popularity of anti-Sufi polemics and hostility against Sufi marvel performances in Lebanon is certainly no different from that in Iran, Iraq, Jordan and the region at large. Nevertheless, the Kasnazāniyya has made the *dirbāsha* the most prominent flagship of its proselytism and advertisement activities and, notably, emerged as the most successful and widespread Sufi order in Iraq during the 1980s and 1990s until today.<sup>47</sup> Even though many branches of other orders in Iraq, such as the Rifāʿiyya and the Naqshbandiyya, practise the *dirbāsha* as well, the Kasnazāniyya surpasses them with its overt display of extraordinary bodily practices with regard to quantity and quality. Moreover, the order's strong and successful advertisement of the *dirbāsha* reached a new level during the 1990s when two

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<sup>46</sup> Clarke 2014: 416.

<sup>47</sup> Jordan 2022: 158–64, 200–6.

deputies of the shaykh and later also his son developed an entirely novel framework to study and legitimise this extraordinary ritual with the modern scientific methods of parapsychology. The next section will show that scientific debates on natural explanations for paranormal phenomena including Sufi rituals already began in the context of the European-colonial era in the nineteenth century and that parapsychological approaches in particular took root in Iraq in the 1950s.

## 4 Parapsychology and the naturalising of Sufi miracles from nineteenth-century Europe to twentieth-century Iraq

With the beginning of German romanticism in the late eighteenth century, Western Europe and America saw the rise of a fascination with supernatural phenomena and lively debates on their authenticity. Following France's capture of Algier in 1830, the aforementioned Sufi rituals began to attract also the attention of French colonial officials and henceforth the curiosity of a wider European scientific and non-scientific audience. Reactions to these rituals were mixed. European colonial ethnographers and illusionists rejected them outright as fraudulent trickery whereas esotericists recognised in them extraordinary abilities. The latter included mesmerists, preoccupied with the discovery of a natural force called "animal magnetism" and hypnotism, somnambulists and spiritualists, concerned with "a decisive testing of modern cosmology, [as well as] with mediation between this world and the beyond",<sup>48</sup> for instance, by communication with the dead. These trends together with psychic research<sup>49</sup> and a new psychological discourse of the unconscious contributed to the emergence of parapsychology as a modern (pseudo)scientific discipline<sup>50</sup> and, according to Anne Taves, to a "religious naturalism" that rejected the post-Enlightenment dichotomy of nature and religion in order to reconcile natural explanations with religious experiences.<sup>51</sup> This section will demonstrate that the ideas of psychic research and religious naturalism began to inspire also Iraqi intellectuals by the mid-twentieth century.

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<sup>48</sup> Schüttpelz 2014: 62.

<sup>49</sup> The British Society of Psychic Research, for instance, was founded by the philosopher Henry Sidgwick in 1882 and the American Society for Psychical Research by William James in 1884 (see Taves 1999: 207).

<sup>50</sup> One important institution for parapsychology is the parapsychological laboratory of the researcher Joseph B. Rhine (1895–1980) at Duke University in 1930 (see Asprem 2010: 34, 36–7).

<sup>51</sup> See Asprem 2018: 9; Taves 1999: 3–7.



A first scholarly debate on the authenticity of Sufi rituals occurred in colonial Algeria. As analysed by Graham M. Jones, the ‘Īsāwiyya Sufi brotherhood, whose holy men (identified by the French colonial authorities as marabouts) legitimised their religious authority with ritual practices similar to those mentioned above, played a central role in the resistance against the French colonial power. With the aim of breaking the religious authority of the rebellious ‘Īsāwiyya, the French colonial administration reverted to a surprising move. They commissioned the famous illusionist, Jean-Eugène Robert-Houdin (1805–1871) to perform in Algiers in front of an audience of Arab chiefs to debunk these Sufis’ miracles as primitive trickery and “simple child’s play”<sup>52</sup> and, implicitly, to prove the superiority of French sorcery and illusionism. Cultural historians have highlighted that scientific illusionists, such as Robert-Houdin, were considered “a powerful symbol of progress”<sup>53</sup> in Europe and Asia during the nineteenth century, and they influenced “the formation of distinctively modern cognitive repertoires, as a genre that promotes critical, self-reflexive subjectivity”.<sup>54</sup> This role was also expected from Robert-Houdin during his mission and, as shown by Jones, he and his generation of illusionists and French colonial ethnographers were preoccupied with portraying the ‘Īsāwiyya as insufficiently disenchanted magicians, fraudulent tricksters, charlatans and religious fanatics. Largely ignoring the emic perspective of how the local Algerian population understood and interpreted these ritual practices and marvels, the French illusionists and colonial ethnographers were merely interested in the authenticity of the ‘Īsāwiyya marvels and judged them, according to their own understanding, as entertainment magic. In fact, the colonial labelling of these rituals contributed to their emergence as a popular tourist attraction in North Africa, and the ‘Īsāwiyya began to tour ethnographic exhibitions and fairs in Paris and London with their “show”, thus promoting the spread of their negative image as charlatans among the European audience even further.<sup>55</sup>

The ‘Īsāwiyya shows in Europe also drew the attention of esoteric circles who were immensely interested in the Sufi ritual performances. Mesmerists, spiritists and occultists embraced the ‘Īsāwī Sufis and their ritual and likened them to Western mediums to substantiate their own claims and interpretations about extraordinary human abilities and paranormal powers.<sup>56</sup> Similar to the illusionists, esotericists represented the modern, critical and self-reflexive subjectivity of their time. They discussed and put forward quite different scientific interpretations

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<sup>52</sup> Robert-Houdin 1995 [1858]: 502, quoted in Jones 2010: 67.

<sup>53</sup> Cook 2001: 169, quoted in Jones 2010: 69.

<sup>54</sup> Jones 2010: 68.

<sup>55</sup> Jones 2010: 66–89, 93–6.

<sup>56</sup> Jones 2010: 89–96.



on issues such as spirit manifestations, the existence of unknown natural forces, and the human capacity as a “medium” to accumulate and distribute these forces as groundbreaking scientific discoveries. As argued for by the media theorist Erhard Schüttpelz, the emergence of mediums as a cultural phenomenon in this era began “with the establishment of a common space for unceasing debate” of all these interpretations.<sup>57</sup> Highlighting the non-linear, chaotic history of these debates, Schüttpelz and others recognise particularly American Spiritualism, its promulgation by trance mediums and mass media, and its success in Christian churches as an undoubtedly modern phenomenon that was “radically aligned with all the period’s progressive inclinations” – although it is considered as in opposition to modernity nowadays.<sup>58</sup> The cultural anthropologist Ehler Voss, in turn, concludes that the controversy about mediumism in the nineteenth century has always been situated between religious and secular aspirations, and debates on trance and corresponding bodily practices were part of it.<sup>59</sup> The aforementioned debates and the oscillation between the religious and the secular are also reflected in the Iraqi engagement with parapsychology during the twentieth century.

In Iraq, the first popular intellectual who was influenced by Western ideas of parapsychology (*‘ilm al-naḥs al-hāshimī*)<sup>60</sup> and psychic research was the famous sociologist ‘Alī al-Wardī (1913–1995). During a stay at Texas University in the late 1940s and early 1950s, al-Wardī became influenced by the parapsychologist George N. M. Tyrell’s book *The Personality of Man*. This book investigates the human consciousness and subconsciousness with a focus on inspiration, genius and mysticism and clearly reflects religious naturalism’s central concern. It closes with an evaluation of the state of science and its relation to religion in which Tyrell formulates the following: “Thus, the beginning of a new world-perspective is coming into view in which religion and science might, conceivably, make contact with one another in the same intellectual field. This, as I see it, is the chief significance which psychical research has for religion”.<sup>61</sup> Tyrell inspired al-Wardī to seek natural explanations for central phenomena of Islam, including the source of genius, prophecy and *karāmāt*, that is the psychical mechanisms of those phenomena, while taking a neutral stance between those who believe in the existence of the world of spirits (*‘ālam al-rūḥ*) and those who deny it.<sup>62</sup> In 1952, he published his *Khawāriq al-lā shu‘ūr* (Miracles of the unconscious) in which he articulates, after a comprehensive historical summary of

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<sup>57</sup> Schüttpelz 2014: 60–1.

<sup>58</sup> Schüttpelz 2014: 63; Voss 2014: 212.

<sup>59</sup> Voss 2014: 212.

<sup>60</sup> Wardī 1996: 147.

<sup>61</sup> Tyrell 1946: 282.

<sup>62</sup> Al-Wardī refers here, notably, to *Qur’ān* verse (17: 85) in which the spirit (*rūḥ*) is said to be the affair of the Lord and mankind has only little knowledge of it (Wardī 1996: 28).

psychic, psychological, philosophical and parapsychological studies in the West, his intention to establish a branch of the Society for Psychic Research in Iraq. Referring to the many miracles that are heard of in Iraq, he wishes to put an end to the longstanding dispute between those who believe in them and those who deny them. According to al-Wardī, a neutral scientific council, such as this society, could investigate the truth of popular reports about *karāmāt* of saints and Sufis and the wonders of fortune-tellers, magicians and the like. He remarks critically, “maybe in this pile filled with lies we will stumble over a small part of the truth, and that would be a big issue in our scientific thinking”.<sup>63</sup>

In the chapter “*al-Nafs wa-l-mādda*” (Spirit and matter), al-Wardī analyses *dirbāsha* performances by Rifā‘ī Sufis in Tikrīt against the background of the philosophical distinction between mind and body. His is an attempt to dismantle the miracle character of the Sufi performances with a natural explanation of the religious phenomenon, and, notably, Sufis themselves would later refute such an approach with their own scientific research. Based on his own observations in Tirkīt, al-Wardī affirms that these performances are real and not mere jugglery or magic. For him, the miracles of the Sufis are miracles of the unconscious. They illustrate the control of belief (*‘aqida*) over the human body, by which he means that the Sufis practise a form of autohypnosis during the performance of the *dirbāsha*. They use their ritual chanting, the beating of the drums, and dancing as techniques in order to enter a state of trance (*ghaybūba*) – identified by al-Wardī with *madad* (support), the invocation of a saintly mediator for God’s succour – in which the conscious mind (*al-‘aql al-ẓāhir*) is subdued in favour of the unconscious mind (*al-‘aql al-bāṭin*). In religious terms, this unconscious mind is often interpreted as the source of inspiration (*ilhām*) and revelation (*waḥy*).<sup>64</sup> For al-Wardī, it is a faculty that cannot be controlled, but it has the capacity to overcome logical thinking, fear and pain within the conscious mind. Whereas the Sufis interpret these marvel performances as proof of the correctness of their belief (*‘aqida*), al-Wardī sees them rather as proof of the strength of their belief that is located in the unconscious and makes these marvels possible.<sup>65</sup> On the basis of this natural explanation of the *dirbāsha*, al-Wardī attributes a failing performance in which a Sufi lost a lot of blood and almost his life after piercing his abdomen with a dagger to a technical failure to enter the necessary state of autohypnosis, in this case, for instance, due to the distracting presence of women.<sup>66</sup>

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<sup>63</sup> Wardī 1996: 145.

<sup>64</sup> Wardī 1996: 142.

<sup>65</sup> Wardī 1996: 183–7.

<sup>66</sup> Wardī 1996: 184–5.

Throughout the second half of the twentieth century, Iraq saw the publication of a number of books on various paranormal phenomena until academic research in this area was institutionalised in the 1980s.<sup>67</sup> A similar development can also be observed in Europe, where parapsychological research (on telepathy, precognition, clairvoyance) experienced a heyday during the same decade. On the one hand, this was due to the general openness to occult phenomena in the New Age zeitgeist, but on the other hand it was also due to considerable investments in this direction by the USA and the Soviet Union at the height of the Cold War.<sup>68</sup> In Iraq, which was still at war with neighbouring Iran (1980–88) at the time, the Centre for Psychic Research (*markaz al-buḥūth al-naḥsiyya*) was founded at Baghdad University upon al-Wardī's efforts on 28 June 1986.<sup>69</sup> Under the presidency of Dr al-Ḥarith 'Abd al-Ḥamīd al-Asadī, the centre's official journal was launched on 2 May 1987, and regular study circles and conferences were organised throughout the 1980s and 1990s. In cooperation with the psychology department of al-Mustanṣiriyya University, the centre also offered an academic education with an M.A. degree. A further journal, *Majallat al-Bārāsikūlūjī* (Magazine of parapsychology) was launched in April 1992, and the Society for Psychic Research (Parapsychology) (*jam'iyyat al-bārāsikūlūjī*) was founded in August 1993.<sup>70</sup> By 1991, even the secular Ba'ṯh regime under Ṣaddām Ḥusayn developed an interest in these issues and encouraged officers of the Special Security Organization (*jihāz al-amn al-khāṣṣ*) to take courses in parapsychology to increase expertise in this field.<sup>71</sup>

In 1993, Dr 'Abd al-Sattār 'Izz al-Dīn al-Rāwī (b. 1941), a member of the Centre for Psychic Research, deputy president of the Iraqi Society for Psychic Research and Iraqi ambassador in Iran (1998–2003), published the first comparative study of Sufism and parapsychology, *al-Taṣawwuf wa-l-bārāsikūlūjī*. He analysed Sufism and parapsychology as two only slightly similar forms of knowledge, whereas the latter is only able to prove the existence of some phenomena of the former. In the end, he considers both as methodologically incompatible. Even though he is quite critical of many miracles performed by Sufis, Sufism remains superior to Western scientific methods and perceptions through its connection to the spiritual world and God. He emphasises the practical experience in Sufi teaching such as introspection, which makes any objective analysis of the subject difficult and only communicable via symbolic language and analogies. In his view, Sufism goes deeper with its personal spiritual experience, whereas parapsychology remains in

67 See the newspaper article in *al-Jumhūriyya*, 5 June 1987, 3.

68 U.S. Army, Office of the Surgeon General, Medical Intelligence Office 1972.

69 Anon n.d.

70 Anon 2011, Anon 2013; Marwah Shaykh al-Arḍ 2009.

71 Sassoon 2011: 108–9.

the field of objective science and statistics.<sup>72</sup> Even though scholars such as al-Wardī and al-Rāwī were quite critical towards religious practices and faith and their studies included a certain aim to disenchant the world, they were, nevertheless, believing modern Muslims themselves. Their intellectual engagement should not be seen as a process to separate science from religion but as one that opened the field to religious representatives who sought a synthesis of both perspectives. With the growing intellectual engagement with Sufism and its marvel traditions and the institutionalisation of academic studies of the paranormal, Sufis themselves became inspired by this new scientific approach. Reflecting a critical, self-reflexive subjectivity, they started to research their rituals and added a new scientific discourse to legitimise their performances.

## 5 The Sufis, parapsychology, and re-enchantment: modern Sufi subjectivity and the refashioning of the *dirbāsha* as spiritual healing

During the 1980s and 1990s, religiosity and religious practices, including the *dirbāsha*, experienced a considerable upsurge in Iraq's society. Interestingly, unlicensed parapsychological healers were also gaining popularity as an alternative to regular clinics and the Iraqi press began to label them in cartoons with the newly coined term “bārālūṭī” (para-swindler).<sup>73</sup> Reasons for this development can be found in a growing need for spirituality due to extreme suffering and hardship among the population during the Iran–Iraq War (1980–1988) and under the UN embargo during the 1990s, which resulted in a humanitarian crisis with widespread famine, deteriorating health services and high mortality rates.<sup>74</sup> Both periods also saw the rise of the Qādiriyya-Kasnazāniyya as the most popular and successful Sufi order in Iraqi society. In 1988, the order gained two new university-trained followers and practitioners of the *dirbāsha* who initiated the study of the order's marvels from the perspective of parapsychology. Their reframing and refashioning of the *dirbāsha* in a modern spiritual healing context illustrates that the active practice of this ritual certainly does not contradict their having a modern, critical and self-reflexive Sufi subjectivity. Confirming Egil Asprem's thesis about the role of esoteric movements and their offspring, parapsychology, in Western modernity, their case will also show how the controversial scientific

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<sup>72</sup> Rāwī 1994.

<sup>73</sup> See, Associated Press 1998, A5.

<sup>74</sup> See, Haddad 2011, chap. 4 and 5; Khoury 2013.

discipline that originally set out to naturalise the supernatural and contribute to the disenchantment of the world is used by Iraqi Sufis to implicitly re-enchant science and secular culture.<sup>75</sup>

The first follower is Jamāl Naṣṣār Ḥusayn, who became interested in paranormal phenomena as a student of physics in Baghdad in 1978 and further developed his engagement in parapsychology in exchange with students of philosophy and anthropology in Vienna in 1982. According to his own account, Ḥusayn started the so-called Paramann Programme in order to research parapsychological phenomena from an interdisciplinary perspective in Iraq in 1983 and established the first laboratories in 1988. Reportedly, the latter were designed to study marvel performances by Kasnazānī Sufis under laboratory conditions through examining the psychical and physiological conditions of the Sufi test subjects before and during performances, for instance, by monitoring the electrical activity of their brains, their heart rate, blood pressure and electrodermal activity.<sup>76</sup> However, clear evidence of such studies can only be found from the mid-1990s onward after Ḥusayn had emigrated to Amman in Jordan. By that time, he and the second Kasnazānī follower, Lu'ay Fattūḥī, were deputies of the shaykh and published their research on Kasnazānī marvels in several books and numerous essays in international journals. Moreover, they successfully addressed a broader audience by giving presentations at international conferences, for instance, at Baghdad's "First World Congress on the Instantaneous Healing of Deliberately Caused Bodily Damage Phenomena and Unconventional Healing Methods" in 1993 and during a Sufism symposium in San Francisco in 1995. In the USA, both laid an important foundation stone for the order through a long-time cooperation with the American clinical psychologist Dr Howard Hall from the Institute of Noetic Sciences in San Antonio. Hall himself converted to Islam, became a deputy of shaykh Muḥammad 'Abd al-Karīm al-Kasnazānī and, as an active practitioner of the *dirbāsha* and researcher of spiritual Sufi healing traditions, has been contributing to advertising the Kasnazāniyya in the USA ever since.<sup>77</sup> In Iraq, other Kasnazānī deputies also began to pursue similar research, and the order's central media office has produced several documentaries and another book about the *dirbāsha* and spiritual healing techniques to date.<sup>78</sup>

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<sup>75</sup> See, Asprem 2010: 634.

<sup>76</sup> Ḥusayn and Fattūḥī 1995: 205–9.

<sup>77</sup> See the video recording of a public *dirbāsha* experiment with Howard Hall: brainmastereeg 2013.

<sup>78</sup> See, for instance, Abdulah Mohammed 2016; ALkasnazan 2012; al-Ṭarīqa al-'aliyya al-qādir-iyya al-ksnazāniyya 2013; Kasnazānī al-Ḥusaynī 2007.



In 1995, Ḥusayn published their research about the order's marvel performances, particularly of the *dirbāsha*, in their book with the translated title "Parapsychology between hammer and anvil: a pioneering experimental study of the muḥammadan miracles in the Kasnazāniyya order", in which the linking of Sufism and science becomes apparent. According to the authors, this book is addressed to a broader public of specialists and non-specialists alike. One interesting feature of the book is a thematic shift in the way the *dirbāsha* is contextualised, namely from its traditional ritual context as proof of the truth of Islam to a medical context of "miracle therapy" (*ilāj khāriq*). The book's first part is dedicated to a detailed discussion of parapsychological phenomena and research and shifts in the second part to miracle therapy.<sup>79</sup> This part gives an overview of alternative medical therapies, including meditation, hypnosis, autogenic training, biofeedback, acupuncture, homeopathy, osteopathy, chiropractic and miracle therapy, which is defined as comprising all phenomena of psychic, spiritual and faith healing.<sup>80</sup> Part three discusses the varieties of states of consciousness,<sup>81</sup> part four presents a summary of the history and teachings of the Kasnazāniyya,<sup>82</sup> and part five outlines the research findings about the *dirbāsha*.<sup>83</sup> The sixth and final part explains the spiritual background of parapsychological phenomena from the perspective of the Kasnazāniyya.<sup>84</sup>

One of the authors' central findings that distinguish the *dirbāsha* from most other parapsychological phenomena with their spontaneous character and their limited occurrence at a certain time and a certain place is the repeatability (*tak-rāriyya*) of the Sufi performances.<sup>85</sup> Among the Sufis studied by Pinto and Clarke, the marvel performances were limited to the ritual context of the *dhikr* and performed only on certain festivals or other special occasions. The Rifā'is only ask for permission to perform in this context, they can never be sure whether they will succeed or not, and their success is closely linked to their current mystical stage. According to Ḥusayn and Fattūḥī, however, all novices of the Kasnazāniyya can repeat the *dirbāsha* wherever and whenever they want, with or without the shaykh's presence. The only condition that makes these marvel performances possible is their pledging a second special oath of allegiance (*bay'a*) to the shaykh or one of his deputies. After this second oath, the novices enter a spiritual sphere of protection from any harm and dangers of these extraordinary practices through

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<sup>79</sup> Ḥusayn and Fattūḥī 1995: 11–51.

<sup>80</sup> Ḥusayn and Fattūḥī 1995: 61.

<sup>81</sup> Ḥusayn and Fattūḥī 1995: 93–129.

<sup>82</sup> Ḥusayn and Fattūḥī 1995: 129–65.

<sup>83</sup> Ḥusayn and Fattūḥī 1995: 165–219.

<sup>84</sup> Ḥusayn and Fattūḥī 1995: 219–35.

<sup>85</sup> Ḥusayn and Fattūḥī 1995: 165.



God's blessing as mediated through the shaykh and irrespective of their various mystical stages. They just need to spiritually connect with the shaykh to ask for his support (*istimdād*), for instance, by invoking him with the formula "*madad yā shaykh Muḥammad al-Kasnazānī*".<sup>86</sup> The authors further argue that the repeatability of the *dirbāsha* is a necessary condition in order to make the marvel performance functional for spiritual guidance (*irshād*) and proselytism. Since the order stresses *irshād* as one of the most important acts of devotion (*'ibādāt*) and as a duty for every novice, the Sufis need to be able to convince possible newcomers of their spiritual path under all circumstances.<sup>87</sup> From this perspective, God's blessing as transmitted and controlled by the shaykh appears as an energy (*ṭāqa*), a useful commodity that is always available and retrievable for each follower and a guarantee for protection.

In addition to repeatability, the authors also argue that the performing Sufis do not experience any pain or harm during and after the *dirbāsha* as any normal person would do. They distinguish here two categories of *dirbāsha* phenomena, namely the repair of deliberately caused bodily damage (*iṣlāḥ al-talaf al-jismī al-muta'ammid*) and the resistance (*muqāwama*) to deliberately caused bodily damage.<sup>88</sup> The former refers to the unusually rapid healing of the Sufi's body tissue after the perforation of different body parts within a short period of time and without leaving any severe injuries, whereas the latter describes the resistance of a Sufi's body to any wounding while swallowing burning charcoal, broken glass or poison.<sup>89</sup> The authors present both phenomena as forms of miracle healing (*shifā' khāriq*) and claim to have discovered a one hundred percent success rate among performing Kasnazānī Sufis in their studies of the *dirbāsha*. Based on this claim, they see a great medical potential in the shaykh's spiritual power as the only form of miracle therapy that has a full guarantee of success.<sup>90</sup> Contrary to mostly Western scientific attempts to explain similar phenomena in different cultural settings, they stress that they did not observe any physiological alterations among performing Kasnazānī Sufis with respect to, for instance, blood pressure or heart rate, nor psychological ones such as hypnosis.<sup>91</sup> In the presentation and critical discussion of their research findings, Ḥusayn and Fattūḥī correct and refute previous scientific explanation attempts by different disciplines and do not leave much room for natural explanations of these phenomena in general.

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<sup>86</sup> See, for instance, Ḥusayn and Fattūḥī 1995: 172–3.

<sup>87</sup> Ḥusayn and Fattūḥī 1995: 172.

<sup>88</sup> Ḥusayn and Fattūḥī 1995: 166.

<sup>89</sup> Ḥusayn and Fattūḥī 1995: 166–73.

<sup>90</sup> Ḥusayn and Fattūḥī 1995: 168.

<sup>91</sup> Ḥusayn and Fattūḥī 1995: 193–204.

Due to the lack of any convincing scientific explanations of the *dirbāsha* and other parapsychological phenomena, the authors criticise the materialism (*māddiyya*) of Western sciences and their exclusive centredness on the human being as the single agent in the world. Proposing a more holistic, comprehensive and complementary approach, they emphasise the Kasnazāniyya's religious explanation of such marvels that takes the world of spirits (*‘ālam al-rūḥ*) with its angels, demons, devils and ultimately God into account as it is described in the *Qur'ān* and the tradition of the Prophet (*sunna*).<sup>92</sup> Without considering the non-material origin of such extraordinary phenomena that are ultimately caused by God's blessing and His spiritual force as transmitted by the shaykh, parapsychology cannot but fail as a scientific discipline that aims to study and explain paranormal phenomena.<sup>93</sup> This line of argumentation was also taken up by Shaykh Muḥammad ‘Abd al-Karīm's son and successor Nehrū in his book *Khawāriq al-shifā’ al-ṣūfī wa-l-ṭibb al-ḥadīth* (The miracles of Sufi healing and modern medicine) in 2007. Nehrū al-Kasnazānī, too, argues for a holistic medical approach that includes not only the regular modern medical therapies but also the Sufis' miraculous spiritual healing techniques in the order. According to him, the order's offering to all people to emulate the pious model (*al-quḍwa al-ṣāliḥa*) of the perfect human being (*al-insān al-kāmil*) that is represented by the Prophet Muḥammad contains a great chance and potential for all humans. Not dissimilar to the modern Christian neo-Pentecostal movements,<sup>94</sup> the Kasnazāniyya, in Shaykh Nehrū's interpretation, offers spiritual healing not only for individual diseases of the body, the heart and the soul but also for moral societal and political illnesses that can be found worldwide, including envy, corruption, hypocrisy, extremism and terrorism.<sup>95</sup> Here, Shaykh Nehrū, who emerged as the leading shaykh of the order after his father's death in July 2020, offers not only healing for the wounds of individual bodies but, similar to the neo-Pentecostal example, also for those of modernity on a broader societal level. He and the previous authors are pious Sufis and modern academics who actively practise the *dirbāsha* and indicate with their engagement in a scientific discourse a critical and self-reflexive subjectivity. Their use of modern parapsychological methods and theories ultimately leads to a re-enchantment of science and knowledge and provides the Kasnazāniyya with a modern scientific engagement and legitimisation of its religious claims of truth.

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<sup>92</sup> Ḥusayn and Fattūḥī 1995: 219–34.

<sup>93</sup> Ḥusayn and Fattūḥī 1995: 223.

<sup>94</sup> Compare, for instance, Hansjörg Dilger's study of a neo-Pentecostal church in Tanzania and its aspiration to heal the wounds of modernity (Dilger 2007).

<sup>95</sup> Kasnazānī al-Ḥusaynī 2007: 76–116.

## 6 Conclusions

Contrary to the still widespread assumption that the growing modernisation and secularisation of state, education and society ushers in an increasingly disenchanted world, the role of marvels and such bodily rituals as the *dirbāsha* have not lost their social salience in the contemporary Islamicate world. Certainly, they do not have the same effect today as a hundred years ago and convert fewer and fewer people. However, these rituals have retained a certain popularity that was bolstered by the general religious resurgence in Iraq and the Middle East at large during the 1980s and 1990s up until today. Throughout the past decades, the Kasnazāniyya, with its strong promotion of the *dirbāsha*, became an unprecedented success story and surpassed most other Iraqi Sufi orders in popularity with a dense network of *takāyā* in all Iraqi provinces and a large membership among Sunnis as well as Shī'is, Arabs as well as Kurds, and other ethnicities. Kasnazāni Sufis prominently promote the practice of the *dirbāsha* not only in the ritual context of *dhikr* gatherings that was observed by Pinto in Syria and by Clarke in Lebanon but also beyond that in ordinary life, and their case shows the varieties and ambiguities in the subjective interpretation of this ritual. The Sufi practitioners of the *dirbāsha* presented here are not backward illiterates or mere representatives of an outdated worldview as a popular stereotype might have it. They hold university degrees, for instance in physics, and have developed an active interest in the scientific study of paranormal phenomena – a discipline that gained increasing popularity in Iraq during the 1980s. They are pious believers in their shaykh and, similar to Pinto's Rifā'i Sufis in Syria, their experiences of the *dirbāsha* strongly shape their subjectivities as modern pious Sufis, not as an embodiment of mystical states, but as a corporeal ordeal of faith. The fact that they are able to expose their own bodies to such a ritual without any harm becomes, in Pinto's words, an existential ground for the truth in their faith and distinguishes them from other believers. They actively choose to transgress bodily limits to embody their Sufi notion of being in the world and to demonstrate belonging to the order, thus combining both an entrepreneurial and a peer-group-oriented modern subjectivity. Moreover, their belief and ritual practice is coupled with a no less modern critical and self-reflexive subjectivity that is expressed in their intellectual and scientific interest in the *dirbāsha*. Taking modern scientific progress seriously, these Sufis do not merely follow orders unconsciously but began to research their own ritual practice scientifically with the methods and theories of parapsychology, in this way engaging with a modern authoritative discourse and legitimising the practice of the *dirbāsha* and their religious claims in a modern setting. They brought this practice from its traditional ritual context as miracle proof of Islam

into the lab and contextualised it in terms of spiritual healing. In their findings, they argue for the ability to practise the *dirbāsha* without any harm at any place and any time in everyday life. According to them, God's blessing (*baraka*) as transmitted by their shaykh appears as an energy that is retrievable by all Sufi followers at will and provides a tremendous potential for individual and societal spiritual healing in a holistic medical approach. This is similar to a modern spiritual healing discourse that is also characteristic of New Age religious movements worldwide and illustrates an Iraqi answer to the modern problem of disenchantment through a successful synthesis of both religion and science.

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