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### A catalogue of vice

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*A catalogue of vice: a sense of failure and incapacity to act among Roma Muslims in Macedonia*

Key words: failure, incapacity, weakness of the will, positive agency, Roma ethnicity, Sufism, Macedonia

*A sense of failure:*

*Zikir*<sup>1</sup> (Turkish, *zikr*; Arabic, *dhikr*) rituals at the “Gypsy”<sup>2</sup> dervish lodge (*tekke*) - a distinctive Sufi practice of chanting the beautiful names of God<sup>3</sup> - were scheduled on Sundays, a day-off according to the civil and Orthodox Christian calendar in Macedonia. In disregard of the locally voiced theological controversy that Tuesdays or Fridays (the most important day of the week in Islam) would have been more appropriate, the *Rifai* (*Rifaiyya*) order, also known as Howling Dervishes<sup>4</sup>, met on Sundays to accommodate those members who had full time jobs and were only available at weekends. Despite this measure, the turnout was unpredictable. Sometimes up to thirty dervishes participated. On other weekends, after several hours of lonely waiting, the two leaders of the order,

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<sup>1</sup> During my fieldwork in Macedonia (intermittent in 2006- 2007, one year in 2008-2009, and briefly in 2010), my Roma informants, long-settlers or new-comers from Kosova, spoke a colloquial Para-Romani admixture of local dialects and languages including a version of Romani, Macedonian, Turkish and Serbian. Codification of modern literary Macedonian has been gradually implemented in Macedonia since the creation of an independent republic in 1944 (Friedman 1998) but few Roma I worked with were proficient in all registers. Many of my informants rejected attempts by a local Romani NGO to teach them an emerging standardized Romani language because they saw this linguistic policy as patronizing and unfit for local conditions. Some watched Turkish television; most avidly consumed Serbian television. Ottoman and Modern Turkish and Turkish loanwords are an important component of Balkan languages, including Macedonian Romani dialects (Friedman 2003: 30-39). This multilingual situation has created a linguistic environment where people codeswitch between dialects and languages mid-sentence. For this article, I have transcribed words and expressions as they were articulated, perhaps tenuously and ungrammatically. I have borrowed the Latinization style of Macedonian from Keith Brown (2013) and rendered Arabic terms in Latin characters without accent marks.

<sup>2</sup> I use both appellations, Roma and “Gypsies”, purposefully to reflect local meanings. ‘Roma’ signals neutral, academic or politicized usage, well established in anthropology and among Roma elites. People’s commonplace self-description as a “Gypsy” highlights their own poignant articulation of marginalization in the Ottoman Empire and contemporary Macedonia. Although I do not endorse their perjorative language, it is important to retain the negative connotations of the term to comprehend my informants’ self-understanding as inept.

<sup>3</sup> A Rifai *zikir* ritual involves loud and repetitive chanting of a phrase “there is no god but God” (*la ilaha illa allah*), accompanied by forceful expulsion of air through one’s mouth - “howling”.

<sup>4</sup> Sufi orders have existed from the earliest days of Islamic history and spread worldwide. Sufi orders originated as hospices (Turkish, *tekke*; Arabic, *ribat* or *zawiyya*) where students, visitors and mendicant Sufis could pray, study and socialize (Ernst 2004:680). In contrast to Christian monastic orders, dervish orders have a fluid hierarchical structure according to the degree of initiation and attainment of ethical and spiritual mastery (ibid.). In theory, a recruit into mystical Islam gradually progresses from a low rank of God’s lover (*ashik*) to a spiritual virtuoso (*dervish*; Arabic, *darvish*, translates as “poverty”) under the guidance of a shaykh (or *sheikh*, translated as “mastery”). An exemplary shaykh should possess spiritual qualifications, a great deal of theological and worldly knowledge and other merits. The leadership of a lodge is transmitted genealogically, but if a hereditary lineage is broken, a leader can be elected by the members of a lodge, which was the case with the father of the current “Gypsy” shaykh who took over the lodge after the departure of the last Turkish shaykh for Turkey in 1950s.

the shaykh, Baba Mehmed, and his son and preacher (*imam*), Refik, would lock the gate of the lodge and trudge home, glum and irritated. Even when a ritual event had a high turnout, the rituals frequently disappointed as they did not generate the kind of ecstasy and enjoyment of activity (*rahat*) that dervishes hoped to experience. Sometimes a *zikir* ritual disintegrated because the dervishes could not synchronize their rocking and swaying movements and bitter arguments erupted about “why we are so inept” (*zashto nas ne biva?*) to bring off a spiritually charged performance. The shaykh grew angry when his dervishes chanted loudly, a practice permissible within the parameters of the Rifai, “Howling”, Sufi order. Baba Mehmed preferred a sober, quieter *zikir*<sup>5</sup> to the “traditional”, spiritually intoxicated “racket”. “We do not have the ritual basics,” he complained.

“Inept (*nesposobni*)”, said one of the dervishes after another ritual let-down.

“One has to know his limits”, explained Refik. “We are not saints (*evliyas*; Arabic, *awliya allah*; translated as “allies of God”). We are Roma from Macedonia”.

Among the ethnically Roma Sufis, members of the male-only Rifai dervish order I worked with in Macedonia, a sense of failure emerged at the nexus of people’s own racialized perception of innate ineptitude for religion and their philosophical take on the problem of actualizing desire for self-transformation in action. Sufis are conventionally seen as exceptional Muslims who aim for supererogatory, excessive forms of piety, aptly dubbed the “spiritual athleticism in Islam” (Hodgson 1977[1974]: 393). Yet, my informants were the first to claim that they had routinely missed their prayers, botched up their rituals, squabbled with each other, and gossiped maliciously about everyday affairs. They lamented that they had “no capacity” (*nemame kapatsitet*) for religious performance.

The article illuminates this dynamic of self-derogation. My informants experienced and articulated *failure* as a deferral between desire and action and as an inability to will themselves to commit to ritual disciplines and thus transform into virtuous beings. Their predicament- failure to act on one’s desire for virtue - allows me to analytically problematize action-centered, or *positive*, ‘I-can-do-it’, *agency* that constitutes a default conjecture about what counts as agency in anthropology. *Positive agency* foregrounds achievement<sup>6</sup>, success (Ortner 2003: 188; Demerath 2009), self-authorship, instrumentality, efficacy and self-

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<sup>5</sup> A silent *zikir* is associated with the Nakshibendi (Naqshbandiyya) order, popular in Turkey and elsewhere.

<sup>6</sup> Achievement defies a trivial or normative definition (Long and Moore 2013:3). Broadly, it entails an understanding of “standards of excellence” and self-elaboration (ibid.:15; 11).

determination, all of which are naturalized by anthropologists as “obvious grounds of experience” (Keane 2003:242). Consequently, “positivity”, i.e., “enactment of collective representations, as belief in beliefs, as valuation of values, as obedience to rules, as exercise of grammars”, constitutes a default assumption that strikes failure or ineptitude out as an ‘aberration’ (Fabian 1990: 768).

For example, inaction (Halliburton 2011) or apathy (Greenberg 2010) can be approached as a type of deliberative resistance or an efficacious mode of the political, respectively. Greenberg’s fascinating study of young people’s withdrawal from the state politics in post-Miloshevic’s Serbia proposes apathy as an agentic form. However, agency is never explicitly defined, while its disavowal is traced to inaction, nonparticipation and inability to exert an effect. Reverse the logical argument, and the unexamined assumption that agency entails action, participation and efficacy becomes apparent. My aim, however, is not to dismiss this deeply entrenched assumption as flawed especially because agency as action, including collective action, serves well in contexts such as alterglobalization movements (Maeckelbergh 2009). Instead, I would like to render the conceptual pre-eminence of *positive agency* visible.

A similar exaltation of positive agency exists in some ethnographic studies of Islam that foreground the processes of self-cultivation and describe how efforts to transform Muslims’ selves and their culture-historical conditions prove successful. Crudely summarizing Saba Mahmood’s sophisticated argument about mosque movements in Egypt (2005), Mahmood’s informants found it in themselves to commit to prayer and, what’s more, to cultivate desire to pray and hone various qualities essential for everyday ethical formation; those who waived in their self-discipline were admonished by those who succeeded (Mahmood 2012:230). Yet, how people account for their perceived failure (rather than achievement) remains nebulous. Certainly, there is no dearth of critical voices of Mahmood’s analysis of pietistic agency as self-cultivation. For example, Laidlaw has queried Mahmood’s presumed distinction of pietistic agency from a reified ‘Western liberal’ modality of action (Laidlaw 2014:150-154). Another trenchant critique of pietistic agency appears in Amira Mittermaier’s work about Egyptian Sufis that demonstrates how self-cultivation as a matter of volitional ritual regimen to attain piety is undermined by other-than-human modes of agency experienced as being acted upon by divine or unpredictable forces (2012). Samuli Schielke has argued that the portrayal of Islam as “a perfectionist ethical project of self-discipline” (Schielke 2010:2) obscures the fact that most people are not particularly pious or willing to adhere to prescriptive principles of their religion and some Muslims are indifferent to their religion. A

similar contradiction between purist religious precepts, ideals of virtuous life, and a felt sense of failure to live up to religious ethical imperatives is at the core of many reformist movements in Islam (Marsden 2005; Metcalf 1994). Aiming to add a theoretical dimension to this body of literature, I look at a surprising case of Roma Sufis in Macedonia who aspired to a reformed religious self yet felt to have failed to fulfil their ambitions. Of particular interest to me is people's own understanding of *failure* as *incapacity*, or an intrinsic ineptitude of "Gypsies" to initiate desired action and escape this racialized ontology. In order to explore the difficulties and inhibitions of virtuous self-fashioning<sup>7</sup>, I shift attention from self-cultivation to self-overcoming, in a sense of obstacles to action and attainment of a desired ethical transformation.

Below, I will provide some general historical context to the imperative for a reform in the "Gypsy" lodge. Then, I will detail my informants' ruminations on the nature of their failure to become virtuous and observant Sufis. A few episodes of reflective self-evaluation that resulted in drafting a catalogue of vice reinforced the dervishes' conviction that failure correlated with their innate incapacity to act, consistent with the self-racialized perception of the "Gypsy" self although explanation should be sought in broader historical conditions of marginality of "Gypsies" and the emergence of ethno-national categories of the self in the Ottoman Empire and contemporary Macedonia. In the conclusion, I revisit the theoretical premises of this paper.

### *Self-racialization and historical subjectivities*

The Republic of Macedonia, or the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, was a province of the multi-faith Ottoman Empire until the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. Even today, its population is a mixture of Christians and Muslims. Albanian Muslims<sup>8</sup>, belonging to different branches of Islam, constitute an important religious and ethnic minority group in the predominantly Christian Orthodox and South Slav-speaking Macedonia. Although Macedonia was not engulfed in violence between its ethnicized populations like Croatia,

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<sup>7</sup> Elisabeth Anscombe (2006 [1959]) argued that ethics cannot be understood as a legalistic obligation. Building on non-utilitarian writings of Aristotle, Anscombe and others have redefined ethics as pursuit of virtues (virtue ethics), an activity valuable for its own sake. Multifarious across time and space, "catalogues of virtues" (MacIntyre 1981:181) enumerate physical, intellectual and socio-political "qualities the possession and exercise of which tends to enable us to achieve those goods which are internal to practices and the lack of which effectively prevents us from achieving any such good" (ibid.: 191). Having appropriated these philosophical debates for their own purposes, anthropologists have forged an ethnographic approach to pervasiveness of ethical considerations in everyday lives (Lambek 2010). Importantly, the Aristotelian intellectual tradition of virtue ethics influenced Islam and Sufism.

<sup>8</sup> Some Albanians are Catholics.

Bosnia and Kosovo in the 1990s, mundane relations between Albanians and Macedonians are a brew of civility and distrust (Neofotistos 2012). Co-existence and friendships are accompanied by a great deal of negative stereotyping and cultural racism (Dimova 2010). Recent primordialist nation-building projects in Macedonia, such as the construction of statues and buildings with ancient Greek and Roman aesthetics (Vangeli 2011), have furthered ethno-religious polarization between Christian Macedonian and Muslim Albanian populations as the government's architectural rewriting of the Ottoman and socialist cityscape of Skopje has purposefully or unwittingly put the city's ethnically and religiously plural and syncretic past under erasure (c.f. Taneja 2013).

Smaller ethno-religious populations, such as Turks and Muslim Roma, see themselves and are seen by others as insignificant. Nevertheless, "things Turkish", such as the language and soap operas, are highly valued by many Muslims in Macedonia (Ellis 2013:151). Muslim Roma that I worked with - hereinafter referred to as 'the dervishes' - craved Turkish cultural and material products and saw Turkish theologians and religious leaders as experts in authoritative, "correct" Islam. At the same time, my informants bore a grudge against "the Turks" for stigmatization of "Gypsies"<sup>9</sup> as flawed Muslims. Their historical subjectivity was shaped by a perception of exclusion of "Gypsies" from the circuits of religious learning in Ottoman times. It was said that "Turks", the custodians of "true" Islam, barred "Gypsies" from entering religious schools (*medresa*), hid books from them, threw them out of mosques and Sufi lodges, and denied them the burial ground in Muslim cemeteries. Historical data largely corroborates this view (Barany 2001; Marushiakova and Popov 2001).

But, what if "the Turks were right", reasoned the dervishes, thinking about "the Turks" as an abstract category, static from the Ottoman days till contemporary Macedonia. "Gypsies", they reiterated, "have a limited capacity for learning Islam". Language of failure can be revealing of self-deprecation as worthless and abject beings on a different scale and plane: local and global, political and subjective (Peutz 2011:339). For instance, Peutz has encountered intimate articulations of abjection among the Bedouins in Yemen's Soqatra

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<sup>9</sup> Roma ethnicity has been studied in anthropology, although much research has been channeled into clarifying 'Roma culture' and, thus, essentializing Roma lives through reducing their experiences to the issue of 'ethnic identity' (Theodosiou 2007). This is one of the reasons why I do not frame this article as a contribution to Roma studies and do not review the relevant literature extensively (but see, Stewart 2013). Similarly, nationalism, ethnic co-existence and violence in the Balkans have been explored amply. However, the conventional regional focus on nationalism poses a risk of isolating the Balkans in the "ethnonational ghetto" (Brown 2010:817, 819) that diminishes the theoretical relevance of the region to anthropology in general and obscures the fact that many people are motivated by concerns other than ethnic identity politics. For example, Arolda Elbasani and Olivier Roy (2015) have criticized the narrow focus on Islam as ethno-national identity in the Balkans and urged for a more nuanced understanding of Islam in the Balkans as an alternative space of political, religious and spiritual experiences.

Archipelago, which she struggled to sufficiently explain as mere rhetoric directed at her as a foreign researcher and potentially a benefactor. Instead, Peutz suggests that the Bedouin abjection is not a theatrical affectation; it is inhabited and deeply felt. Another example of self-derision comes from Joel Robbins's study of Christianity among the Urapmin in Papua New Guinea that "dwells on sinfulness" (2006: xviii) and, just like Sufism, emphasises the need for self-perfection. The Urapmins constitute their sense of self through a Christian trope of moral fallenness (ibid.: xxiii) in its multiple manifestations: bad-tempered quarrels, inability to attract development, and perceived relapse into traditional forms of religiosity and so on. In parallel with my research, the Urampins did not cite outside forces, such as postcolonialism, as a sufficient justification of their moral failure; "to them, the decrepit state of their community life was the result of their inherent depravity as sinful creatures" (ibid.: xxiv).

### *Reformist Islam*

Driven by the experiences of marginality, shaykh Mehmed Baba, the current leader of the "Gypsy" lodge, initiated a modernizing reform of his mystical order in the 1980s. The reform aimed at "rationalizing" the order and preening it of "superstitions", such as divinatory practices, that the reformed dervishes interpreted as usurping Allah's power to know the future. By way of background, the initial impetus to the reform can be grasped in relation to a complex entanglement of reformist Islam and socialism in the region. In the 1980s, Baba Mehmed as a young Roma Muslim in socialist Yugoslavia was drawn to the ideological and vernacularized tenets of socialism, with its core values of rationality, progress, and self-perfectability. He has remained sympathetic with the key premises and policies of the Yugoslav socialism, such as modernization through industrial growth, education that rapidly increased the literacy rate in Macedonia, and a version of secularism that defined some religious practices as "backward".

However, tropes of modernization, rationalization and secularization, analogous to socialist discourses, characterize reformist Islam that has circulated in the Ottoman Empire, subsequently Turkey and the sovereign Balkan states, from the 19<sup>th</sup> century until today (Clayer 2008:128-155; Fortna 2002). In the 19<sup>th</sup> century, many Ottoman Sufi orders underwent institutional modernization and reforms (Turkish, *islah*) that saw an incorporation of contemporary techniques of governmentality, such as bureaucratization, centralization and new meritocratic assessment of qualifications for a shaykh's post (Silverstein 2009). More, many Ottoman and regional, Balkan, Sufi lodges jettisoned their unconventional,

“antinomian”, ritual practices (Watenpaugh 2005), such as drinking spit to transmit and receive a spiritual blessing (a common practice among the grandparents of my informants who expressed disgust at the thought), and aligned with more legalistic, scriptural versions of Sunni Islam promoted by Ottoman and Turkish religious institutions and officials, such as Turkish Consulates and Sunni hodjas (Tsibiridou 2015:180, 189).

Because of the affinities between the discourses of socialism and reformed Islam and zealous transmission of Communist ideas into religious contexts (Elbasani and Roy 2015:461), the battle over power and claims to authoritative knowledge between reformers and traditionalists that informed the political and religious life in the Ottoman provinces since the 19<sup>th</sup> century (Katsikas 2009) appears to have been won under socialism by the reformist official organizations, who sought to assert control over religious affairs (Elbasani and Roy 2015:461) and explicitly promoted ‘progressive’ values of rational education and modernization and, thus, inadvertently contributed to a kind of secularization of the state (ibid.:463). Thus, not only did the socialist federal state pursue the policy of containment and co-optation of religious institutions in the second part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century (Ballinger and Ghodsee 2011), but the rhetoric and institutions of Yugoslav socialism seemed to have become a vehicle of reformist Islam, often represented by the official Islamic Communities in Yugoslavia, which saw many religious practices ‘atavistic’ even though, in contrast to Bosnia-Herzegovina, Sufi orders were not banned in Yugoslav Kosovo and Macedonia (Henig 2014:100). At the same time, a modality of neoliberal agency, underpinned by the resonant notions of self-improvement and management of failure (Gershon 2011: 540-542), might be gaining currency in post-socialist Macedonia and shading into my informants’ religious project, boosting its appeal.

As an instantiation of the above processes, Baba Mehmed’s reform at the “Gypsy” lodge induced a radical change. Previously, the members of the order had gathered for ecstatic rituals that involved body piercing with skewers. They sang, drank plum brandy, practised divination, witchcraft, jinn exorcism, and amulet making. Mehmed Baba, now in his late 50s, felt ashamed reminiscing about those practices. They seemed “un-Islamic” to him, something a “Gypsy” would do. Under his guidance, all ecstatic rituals were replaced with meticulous self-instruction in Islamic theology. However, the “rationalizing” reform in the Roma lodge drove many of its members away because it thinned out the intensity of worship. Those who stayed within the order did so for many reasons: pride and pleasure in learning the Quran, childhood friendships and family networks, and better marriage prospects within Roma circles. Those who abandoned the order either joined “traditionalist” Sufi congregations or



took the reform further and converted to stricter movements like Salafiyya and Wahhabiya that gained prominence in the post-socialist Macedonia.

For the “traditionalists”, the reform engendered a sense of loss. The “traditionalist” Roma shaykhs continued to convene Sufi gatherings in ritual halls, known as *semana*, that usually consisted of a room inside or adjacent to a shaykh’s house, decorated with carpets and Islamic posters and prayer beads. It was said that the difference between a lodge, (*tekke* or *tekija*), and a *semana*, was that a “true” lodge ought to be built around a tomb (*turbe*) of outstanding Sufi ancestors while a ritual hall had a make-shift quality. In my informants’ eyes, *semanas* lacked spiritual energy and healing powers that tombs emit. More, during my research, *semanas* and their shaykhs were continuously denigrated by rumours of ritual and ethical failings among their members. Some shaykhs were famed for sexual misconduct; others were described by the dervishes as greedy, money-grabbing impostors. The title of a shaykh and a certificate (*hilafet*) could be bought inexpensively from other shaykhs, and many Roma possessed it despite their lack of spiritual, genealogical and scholarly credentials in the eyes of local people who proclaimed that Sufi Islam in Macedonia was inauthentic and corrupt.

In sum, the reformist Islam and socialism, with their rhetoric of modernization and rationality, coalesced into a perspective among the reformist Rifai dervishes that their inherited religious practices were “backward”. Another Yugoslav legacy was literacy, a skill acquired by “Gypsies” in the socialist Yugoslavia. Literacy facilitated an engagement with religious texts that became rapidly available in Islamic book shops that mushroomed in the post-socialist Macedonia. After socialism, the religious marketplace opened up and, today, Islamic literature bookshops, satellite television, and the internet enable access to Islamic theology. The dervishes, who were all literate, read newly available Islamic literature avidly, but their encounter with textual Islam only deepened their sense of failure. For the dervishes, the increasing familiarity with the requirements of Islamic piety added a theological dimension to the sense of ethnic marginality and self-abjection.

#### *Disciplinary meetings*

How did the dervishes interpret Sufi injunctions? The subtleties of Sufi theology are beyond the scope of this essay; I can only illuminate my informants’ tentative definition of Sufism, scrupulously compiled out of internet sources and printed out for

me by Refik. Their working definition said that Sufism (*Tesavvuf*; Arabic, *Tasawwuf*) constitutes

“a spiritual journey (*suluk*). The aim is to become a mature human being (*vozasni chovek*). *Tesavvuf* teaches how to reach the level of *insani kamil* (translated as ‘perfect human’), a complete, without flaws, well-brought up and well-educated human being (*potpoln, bez nedostatok, vospitan i obrazovan chovek*). Crucially, *Tesavvuf* is a struggle against one’s lower self<sup>10</sup> (*nafs*; Arabic, *nafs*) through the cultivation of self-control, sincerity, piety, steadfastness in worship (*istraynost vo ibadet*). A good dervish should be committed to “ritual practice” (*praksa*) and ethical self-work (*samoureduvanye*)”.

This programmatic definition of Sufism is important because it determined the coordinates of virtue, posited interiority - the lower self - as the locus of self-discipline, and accepted ritual practice as “the unconditional ought” proposition (Beldo 2014), a performative necessity without which a sought-after self-transformation was unfeasible. In early Islam, ethics meant the practice of self-discipline but was later codified and systematized as abstract values which, nevertheless, have to be embodied and enacted as virtuous dispositions (Moosa 2003:225). The bedrock of Sufism is control and struggle with vice (Sedgwick 2003:5). With this end in view, different Sufi techniques, such as solitary or communal *zikir*, are prescribed because Sufism goes beyond compliance with the commands of the divine law (*sharia*) by adding a possibility of ethical refinement through mystical insight (Heck 2006). Nevertheless, the propositional ‘ought to’ posits a problem of re-enactment in practice.

Many failed rituals were followed by the moments of collective introspection that the dervishes called a “disciplinary meeting” (*distiplinski sostanok*). One night, Refik, chaired the meeting that gathered ten dervishes. The preacher wanted to draw a programme of action (*plan-program*) that everyone should adhere to.

“Now, prayer...we have to pray regularly,” said Refik. “I didn’t come to pray in the morning. It is really hard. In the morning, I was impure, had intercourse with my wife, then in the afternoon I had a guest ... We need to schedule our whole day around worship to see the results. We need to pray to keep djinn spirits away: mandatory prayers, plus additional ones (*nafile*), plus daily reading of the Quran to accumulate merit”.

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<sup>10</sup> The term *nafs* (or *nafs*) is not easy to pin down. It can be translated as sinful dispositions, passions, evil inclinations, or vice. Ewing, for example, translates *nafs* as a “bodily soul” (1990: 259) to avoid unwarranted reintroduction of the Cartesian dualism. Sedgwick’s description of *nafs* as a lower self fits my informants’ understanding (2003:4). I gloss *nafs* as vice for stylistic reasons.

Refik warned the dervishes of the dangers of lapsing into Evangelical Christianity, if they could not find it in themselves to change. “You need to decide what moves you ...”

“Money”, joked one of the dervishes and everybody laughed.

“Not me”, said Refik

“Nothing moves us (*nishto nas ne biva*)”, said another dervish.

“I long to strengthen this congregation”, said Refik. “Transform you, remind you to come to the lodge, consolidate your faith. I told you (*Refik pointed an accusing finger at one of the dervishes*) to come to prayer yesterday, and you told me you had to finish something at work. We are slack practitioners of Islam. An electric bulb will not shine without energy. I don’t want to mention their names but why are our closest friends not here today? We haven’t seen them for a month. Why can’t we follow Allah’s commandments even though we know them? You know religion, why don’t you live according to its principles? (*Zashto ne zhivesh kako Allah, a znaesh din?*). Where there is a will, there is a way (*Samo volya da imame*).”

“Are we here to chat or shall we come up with a collective programme of action?” somebody protested.

“Shall we draft the programme of action?” asked Refik.

One dervish stood up: “We need to understand that we live in sin at home. Pornography, sports channels, alcohol, city crowds... I wish I was scared of Allah. I came here of my own accord; you don’t have to tell me to come and then pipe on like this... Okay, let’s draft the programme...”

“Pardon me but why are we here today? I’ve got work to do,” interrupted another dervish.

Refik suggested: “I could create a file, like a police file on each one of you. To write everything down, to organize you, to note down who came, who was absent and why”.

“That’s too bureaucratic!”

“Maybe something will touch your heart.”

“Nothing will touch us. We are Sufis in the name alone”.

“Is there a man who is not motivated by anything?”

“We don’t even pray”.

One dervish stormed out of the room: “I have had enough of this. We always talk about prayers. I am ashamed to speak of Islam”.

Another dervish jibed: “I am burning with energy today, and this one (*he nudged a dervish next to him*) is showing me his new mobile phone...”

“Let’s wrap it up”, suggested the dervish who wanted to go back to work.

Everybody nodded and started collecting their things. “If we are not going to pray, there is no point in meeting here, in the lodge”, concluded Refik.

Next day, I bumped into Refik on the way to his house. He carried a shopping bag and fretted about the dispiriting meeting the night before. At home, we were joined by two dervishes who struck a conversation about how, in their view, moral turpitude (*rasipanost*) was a product of modernity as local people could not approximate old Sufis out of sheer laziness. The two men discussed how Osmanli Turks did not teach correct Islam to other nations (*natsiya*), which was why Roma were underdeveloped (*zaostanati*). Anyhow, even those among them who knew correct interpretations of the Quran did not practise them, they said. Would a good Muslim enter a mosque without ablutions? In Macedonia, I was told, Roma dervishes know Islamic history and theology but go to a mosque with a dirty bum; Roma, they said, are “black, bruised; they make a travesty of religion (*tsirni, pomodreni, igrat maytab*)”.

#### *The catalogue of vice*

The disciplinary meeting reiterated the parameters of failure: an intrinsic incapacity of Roma dervishes to commit to rituals and control one’s *nefs* to effect a transformation into virtuous beings. It had also broached the subject of the weakness of the will as a failure to overcome one’s reluctance to pray – the topic to which I will return shortly. Nevertheless, the disciplinary meeting had energized some members of the congregation and a few days later, two dervishes arrived at the preacher’s house. The brothers, Aslan and Kariman, sought the preacher’s advice on how to proceed practically on the path to true Sufism. Refik suggested that there were three methods: the method of good deeds, the method of love and the method of struggle against one’s lower self (*nefs*) – but he was not sure what the methods involved in practice. Aslan brought with him a little notebook in which he had recorded a few important quotations from the theological books he had been reading. Aslan was impressed and confused by the Sufi scholarship and asked the preacher to clarify the meaning of one quote: “Faith marks the difference between people”.

*Refik*: “I don’t get it”.

*Aslan read another quote*: “The path of a Sufi who practises jurisprudence (*fikhr*) is the most complete. If you discard *fikhr*, you become an apostate”.

*Refik shrugged his shoulders again*: “I do not understand”.

The men sat in silence for a few minutes.

*Kariman*: “Yesterday I lay in bed and had a feeling that all was lost, all knowledge”.

*Aslan peered into his notebook:* “Here it says the five actions (*dela*) to achieve a higher level of spirituality are to value poverty over wealth, to refrain from eating...(*He paused and glanced at the corpulent preacher*). The first stage, a person (*chovek*) is conscious of his being (*svesten na svoya sostoyba*). Next, hearing and speech will be taken away; only the heart will speak. Then, comes either consciously or unconsciously (*He stumbled and finished the sentence abruptly*)... the secrets of the veil (*gayb*) are revealed”.

*Kariman:* “Yesterday I was searching for meaning, thinking about everything I know and ... I do not understand it, brother”.

*Refik interrupted him:* “I am groping for words to explain. It is the same story with all Sufis. One speaks about special abilities but there is no consistency in what he says, everything is mixed up (*nema nishta dosledno, meshano*). Look at what one of them says. (*Refik got up and read from his computer screen*). “For a start, you are content to follow Allah’s guidelines. With hard labour, impossible without hard labour, follow faithfully the Prophet Muhammed, be obedient, recognize Allah’s oneness and do not attribute any evil to him.” And there is no method that teaches you how to strive for Allah. One must strive. It continues, “Temptation, here one can see the awareness inside the spiritual eye. A Sufi must remove the veil.” Rifai say there is a veil between Allah and a human, throw it open with the correct *zikir* and the Quranic verse (*ayet*). How you confront temptation will be a proof of your spirituality. Sufis say “Weed the garden of perfection”. But, what should we do? [*His voice raised in exasperation*]. It is not clear to me. They say when all the hope dies, all material and bodily needs die; first dies all the hope in this world. Withdraw from people, purge your passions, lose you sexual desire (*nagon*), and accept the will of Allah. Overcome your desires...<sup>11</sup>”

*Kariman:* “We wallow in sin”.

Three days later, Refik, his wife and I were sitting at their coffee table strewn with chips, mayonaise stains and oily hamburger wraps. It was nearly midnight. I asked to explain the meaning of *nefs*.

Refik drew two columns on a piece of paper. One was titled “What should be eliminated” (*shto treba da se izgubi*); another, “What should be controlled” (*shto treba da se kontrolira*). In the left column, Refik wrote down various *nefs* on the scale of gravity: 1. idolatry (*shirk*); 2. disbelief/ rejection of Allah (*kufur*); 3. nervousness (*gadeb*); 4. pride (*kbr*); 5. sexual desire (*shehvet*).

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<sup>11</sup> In this paragraph, the quote is deliberately arcane to demonstrate the dervishes’ perplexity at Sufi figures of speech.

He paused, thinking about other *nefs* and filled the columns, creating a catalogue of vice:

To eliminate

Pride and boasting (*chalam*)

Backbiting (*ozboruvanye*)

Jealousy (*zavidlivost*)

Hypocrisy (*dvolichnost*)

Narcissism (*samobendisanost*)

Avarice (*koristolyubiye*)

Cynicism (*tsinichnost*)

Hatred (*omraza*)

To control

Jealousy ( *lyubomora*)

Nervousness (*nervoza*)

Lying (*laga*)

Lust (*nagon*)

Stubbornness (*inaet*)

Ambitiousness (*ambitsioznost*)

Indifference (*ramnodushnost*)

Chattiness (*zborlest*)

The real challenge, Refik explained, was to come up with practical exercises to control one's *nefs*. Withdrawal into solitary prayer (*halvet*; Arabic *khalwa*) required a separate room, which was impossible to procure in overcrowded conditions of Roma households. A *halvet* room in the lodge burnt in the 1990s and was not restored. Refik suggested that pride can be controlled by conventional Sufi methods that cultivate humility: begging in the streets. Refik recommended self-monitoring of one's transgressions by keeping a diary. He argued that every dervish could carry a small notebook with him to record how many times per day he ogled at women, thought about money, or got angry.

The above episodes might constitute a tacit mode of self-knowledge and ethical self-work (Keane 2010: 75-76). However, undetected transformation had little value for the dervishes in the absence of an ostensible ritual action, such as prayer, because they formulated their reform as a self-conscious activity, a programme of action, with a specific goal in mind: overcoming of the lower self. The already-mentioned definition of Sufism (*Tesavvuf*) alludes to a process of self-transformation into a perfect human that involves a gradual decentering of the self and a reorientation from one's own desires and needs to an ethically good life in the presence of others and God. The decentering involves a rejection of the lower self (*nefs*) that results in self-annihilation (*fena*; Arabic, *fana*) (Heck 2006). Self-annihilation progresses from reflective concern with the self in order to initially inculcate Sufi ethical dispositions to the eventual habituation of Sufi ethics when one forsakes one's self in God. In this manner, the Sufi journey is both

internal self-transformation by means of ethico-ritual discipline and self-transcendence. The Sufi imperative was consistently formulated by the dervishes as a reflectively and actively sought rejection of one's habitual actions and vice. Virtue was seen both as a telos that could be strived for in ritual and as an on-going process, in which case perfection is unattainable and failure is inevitable like the total detachment of a Jain (Laidlaw 1995).

That winter the snow fell early and lasted for four months. The roads were slippery and the winds pierced to the bone. Few dervishes ventured out to visit the preacher for advice or theological conversation (*sohbet*) and the doors of the lodge often remained bolted. Refik felt defeated by the lack of enthusiasm for worship and futile search for employment and stayed at home watching television.

#### *Incapacity and the weakness of the will*

My argument is twofold. First, I suggest that a sense of failure sprang from the tension between the ethno-nationalist and racialized definition of the 'Gypsy' personhood as predetermined by one's perceived 'culture' and ethnicity, and the reformist striving to overcome this fixity and think about the self differently, as somebody capable and open to experiment and transformation. Through simultaneous acknowledgment and occlusion of the historical circumstances of their marginality, the dervishes explicitly articulated their failure as an inability to overcome one's intrinsically inept "Gypsy" nature and commit to the desired course of action. Education, specifically self-instruction in Islamic theology, failed to engender the change because the dervishes' self-understanding resonated strongly with ethno-nationalist conceptions of personhood (c.f. Ciotti 2006) that makes a deterministic and essentializing claim about the relationship between ethnicity, culture, nation and the self. According to this ahistorical but ubiquitous logic, one's ethnicity, culture and personhood are fixed, inherited and innate<sup>12</sup>. Such ethno-national personhood might contradict a religiously-inspired project of self-fashioning that requires a degree of discontinuity with a former self (c.f. Lambek 2013).

Self-racializing and cultural essentialism constitute a temporal perspective that impinges on one's future-oriented imagination that sees future as "a space of possibilities and a project of action" (Vigh 2006:483). Reformist aspirations are an element of future orientation but, in their prospective form, they are "always a deferred project" (Weiss 2009:37). Failure occurs

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<sup>12</sup> The critical essays by Stolcke (1995), Candeia (2010) and Cowen (2008) are of great interest.

because one aspires to and anticipates a desirable future as a completed action that will have been executed (Throop 2013:35-39). In this framework, the recurrent trope of “Gypsy incapacity” among the dervishes was not only an understanding of history but an anticipation of failure. A Sufi lodge can be understood as an “inaugural scene” (Mattingly 2012), a kind of “moral laboratory” (ibid.) where a future virtuous self could be cultivated. However, in this ethnography, the ontological potentialities of an unstable mystical self were inhibited by essentialism of deeply held racialized identification as “Gypsies”, a conservative definition of the self that the dervishes found impossible to escape (contrast, Campbell 2015).

Yet, as mentioned, ethnic marginality as an explanation of the perceived failure to become virtuous Sufis does not exhaust the interpretive possibilities of this material. I also want to understand failure as a hiatus between a formulated desire (desire to pray) and absence of anticipated action (prayer). Failure has been discussed in anthropology primarily in the context of an isolated faltered performance rather than a series of events - a project - unfolding over a period of time. A number of ethnographies of ritual or performative failure have implicitly problematized failure because ritual is intrinsically risky (Howe 2000). Stanley Tambiah suggests that, in contrast to practice, which refers to invariant and formal elements of rituals, an instantiation of practice, i.e. the actual performance<sup>13</sup> of a ritual, is open to uncertainties, variations, and mistakes of enactment (1979:115, 136). There are descriptions of faltered ritual routines (Husken ed. 2007), inefficient magical acts (Luhmann 1989: 129-153), failed prophecies (Festinger et.al., 1956; Kravel-Tovi 2009: 254), inconclusive healing séances (Lewis 2000), reluctance to publicly authenticate rituals (McIntosh 2004; Wolf 1990; Chao 1999) and failure of images to index the invisible reality (Suhr 2015). Semantic failure to generate meaning has been explored in ethnographies of Christianity (Engelke and Tomlinson 2006). Bembi Schieffelin (1996) has investigated why some rituals produce qualitatively different social and spiritual reality, or “presence”, and why others result in performative failure. A performative failure can be triggered by a lack of expressive competence of ritual performers, a lack of interactional credibility between ritual performers and their sceptical audience, or sheer contingency of a concrete performance (ibid.: 59-90).

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<sup>13</sup> Anthropologists draw the line between performance as a theatrical metaphor that connotes illusion and performance as something that substantiates, materializes and gives form to practice (Meyer 2009:7). Performance is different from performativity (Kulick 2003). Performance is something concrete that you do. Performativity is a process that creates subject positions. Many anthropologists use performance in the Kulick’s sense of performativity as an event that generates presence and reforges one’s ethical self (Schieffelin 1996:59).



In addition to performative failure, failure in anthropological scholarship can refer to ethical contradictions and disjuncture between ideals of religious purity and realities of quotidian existence (Laidlaw 1995; Mayblin 2010), which has also informed some of the literature on Islam (Marsden 2005; Schielke 2009). Today's anthropological discussions of virtue ethics are heavily influenced by a neo-Aristotelian idea that "cultivating virtue is part of that becoming and action (with all its frailty) is at the centre of things" (Mattingly 2012:307). So, frailty is at the heart of my ethnography but, in this case, there is no clash between alternative ethical codes; instead, there is a more basic disruption of an agentive causality: desire into action. The dervishes did not always share with me the language of philosophy of action and virtue ethics, but in the course of their deliberations about failure, the dervishes introduced an analytical distinction between desire and action (e.g. prayer) that strongly resonates with the Aristotelian notion of the weakness of the will (*akrasia*). In a sense, this is the most straightforward way of *failing*: not being able to cause something to happen yet trying to act which involves reflexivity about a possibility of failure, and/or an actual failure (Hornsby 2010:19; Bach 2010:51).

Human beings have a capacity to will to do or not to do something, for example, to be different (Frankfurt 1971:7), to experiment with one's self (Matza and O'Neill 2014) or to be virtuous. This is particularly relevant for our understanding of virtue not as a given ability, but something that engages the will (Foot 2002). Jason Throop has coined the term "effortfulness" to describe, in Ricoeur's terms, an inner push that "pro-jects the project" (2013:35), but, *the will*, can do just as well to capture the same principle of actualizing desire in action. Harry Frankfurt succinctly defines the *will* as a "second-order desire" (1971:6), which is not the same as prior psychological causes that are commonly called 'intentions' of an agent (Bowden 2014). Frankfurt argues that the will is "an effective desire – one that moves (or will or would move) a person all the way to action" (Frankfurt 1971:8).

However, what happens when one is not moved to action, as the dervishes debated during their disciplinary meeting? In practical philosophy, the Aristotelian notion of *akrasia*, or weakness of the will, problematizes the automatism of the motivational link between a formulated desire and action. Aristotle writes of different forms of desire: appetite, spirited emotion and "rational" desire (*boulesis*) (Dahl 2009:498), rational in the sense of mindful or formulated ethical thought (ibid.: 503). For Aristotle, a reflectively formulated desire for what seems the good originates in the mind but the mind is also subject to analytical differentiation into theoretical and practical intellect or reason. It is the practical rather than abstract theoretical reason and a reflectively formulated desire that compels a person to act

(ibid.: 508). Here, Aristotle disagrees with Plato who saw the weakness of the will as a pedagogical problem of knowing (Rorty 1970), a question that puzzled the dervishes as well. According to Plato, if a person is educated in the principles of virtuous behaviour, she will act upon her knowledge. Vice, for Plato, is an intellectual failure of not knowing what is morally best. In his distinction between theoretical and practical reason, Aristotle rejected Plato's mentalist model that the knowledge of the good constitutes a sufficient motivational force, which was precisely the dervishes' conundrum: incapacity to act in spite of knowing the good. For Aristotle, a qualitatively different combination of desire and thought (i.e. practical reason) moves a person into action (Rorty 1970:56). A virtuous person possesses a habit of acting. In contrast, an *akrates*, who suffers from the weakness of the will, finds it difficult to develop a habit of acting according to his or her formulated desires. In this reading of Aristotle, the weakness of the will implies an inability to pursue a course of action that we intensely desire (Dahl 2009).

Jon Bialecki narrates how the pastors of the Vineyard, an American Neocharismatic church, have a tripartite conception of the *will* (2014). There is an active will of a person. There is God's will. Crucially, there is the "recalcitrant will, the unwilling aspect that has to be overcome, the stubborn attachments that prevent a person from simply choosing what she wills, and not having to attempt to change their direction by threading their will through God" (ibid.:2). The ideas of the *weak* or *recalcitrant will* points out to a fundamental philosophical problem that self-cultivation is premised on the simultaneous process of *self-overcoming*, i.e. becoming what one is not or becoming a non-self (Mulhall 2013:ix), moving away from one's prior self. Far from being exclusive to philosophy, the ideas of non-self, self-overcoming, self-transcendence, renunciation, negation of one's subject-position are at the heart of many mystical systems (Faubion 2013) including Theravada Buddhism (Leve 2011) and in a version of Sufi Islam I have described above. Ultimately, self-overcoming suggests a degree of difficulty since, for Aristotle, virtue is about what is hard (Foot 2003:1-19). In this formulation, failure is related to incapacity to will one's self into action where the self in its plurality is as an obstacle to be overcome, and this is precisely how failure was understood by the dervishes.

#### *Coda: failure and positive agency*

Conceptually, the dervishes' trouble with overcoming their static ethno-national personhood and reforming their "lower self" (*nefs*) permits me to refine the extant overstretched notion of *agency* that overrides failure and incapacity in favour of action and

self-cultivation. In this paper, I have reversed the order of agency and concentrated not on efficacy as an outcome of taken-for-granted action but on the motivational force (the will) that moves into action. I did so because to highlight ritual efficacy as an aftermath of a completed action implies the “near-inevitability” of processes themselves (Kendall 1996:19). The reversal seems significant to me because, inspired by Laidlaw, I would like to problematize a popular understanding of agency as “a matter of the effectiveness of action” (2002:315). As mentioned, agency is usually presumed to be within a shared context of understanding that requires no definition among anthropologists. However, explicit definitions of agency, such as “an ability to initiate events and begin something” (Gell 1998:16) make apparent an unspoken assumption that agency is coterminous with action. This definition conflates volition with an intuitive category of causality and runs the risk of circularity as agency, events and actions can subsume each other (Lowe 2010:3). Finally, it makes a conjecture about human ontology. In this idealistic framework, an agent consciously or unwittingly engages in self-realization through action (Norman 1998:109-127). This philosophical vocabulary of self-fulfillment in action and becoming – derived from the discourses of Enlightenment and German Romanticism and differently present in Kant, Herder, Hegel, Sartre, Deleuze, Foucault and many others - has profoundly influenced anthropological theories of agency, subjectivity, and ethics (ibid.).

I suggest that Gell’s definition of agency refers to a specific modality of agency that entails “the act of doing x” (Austin 1955:105). However, this action-oriented agency, or *positive agency*, is frequently mistaken for generic and decontextualized as universal, which explains why failure is often overlooked. Positive agency is inadvertently privileged in many anthropological studies that tend to recast people’s misery and desperation into productive acts of, for example, ritual efficacy and potent technologies of the self. For example, the life of Mapuche clowns in Chile, whose adoption of stereotypically ‘white’ practices with their drunkenness and urban poverty, tends to be framed as a “positive mimetic cooptation of the potency of white Others” rather than a case of colonial tragedies, reattributes “agency where there is none” and denies “indigenous peoples the very possibility of defeat and failure that makes them human” (Course 2013:773, 790). Similarly, to brush aside the dervishes’ experience of abjection and their perceived incapacity to will themselves into ritual action would be to threaten the complexity of their being.

The implication is that positive agency postulates human lives in linear terms of cause and effect, impact and outcome. My ambition has been to disaggregate and

circumscribe this notion of action-oriented agency because it obscures that self-transformation or anticipated action might be untenable. The motion is to treat action and efficacy-oriented positive agency as a narrow instantiation, a subset of agency that begs a re-definition of agency from action to potentiality whose nature is not the ability to do something but “the relation to one’s own incapacity” (Agamben 1999:182).

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