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## Hospitality as Diplomacy in Post-Cosmopolitan Urban Spaces

### Dervish Lodges and *Sofra*-Diplomacy in Post-War Bosnia-Herzegovina

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If the first step in developing an ethnography of everyday diplomacy requires re-scaling analytical focus on the forms of mediated exchange beyond the realm of the nation-state, this needs to be followed by an exploration of the ‘sites’ where everyday diplomacy actually takes place. One such ‘site’, which epitomizes the quintessence of diplomatic practice, is dining and commensality. By re-scaling this axiom beyond state-level diplomacy, I explore how the notion of *sofra* [table/dining etiquette] is deployed by a Muslim Dervish brotherhood in a post-cosmopolitan town in post-war Bosnia-Herzegovina. I suggest that the notion of *sofra* embodies both *a mode of being diplomatic* as well as *a site* of everyday diplomacy. The *sofra* thus enables the brotherhood to stage ‘events of hospitality’ to forge and mediate relationships between various ‘others’, locally and transnationally.

**Keywords:** Bosnia-Herzegovina, dervishes, diplomatic sites, everyday diplomacy, hospitality, post-cosmopolitanism

One day in August 2014 I took part in a conversation on wonder-making in the dervish lodge [*tekija*] of a small provincial town in Central Bosnia where I have been conducting fieldwork since 2008. A male teenager from a nearby Muslim village had come to the lodge out of curiosity. Being

interested in the other-worldly matters and Islamic healing and dreaming, he was told by his fellow villagers that he might witness some miracles in the lodge. The boy was warmly welcomed and taken to the room, with comfortable sofas covered by ram skins and embroiled pillows, where the sheikh usually received guests. The boy was immediately seated by one of the dervish disciples at the nearest corner of the sofa facing the sheikh, which is reserved for honoured guests. He was offered hot and cold drinks and a snack made of biscuits and fruits. The refreshments were served on the *sofra*<sup>1</sup> that had been spread between him and the sheikh. This gesture of hospitality, bringing the boy and the sheikh to the *sofra*, made the boy more relaxed. With increasing confidence he asked: ‘Is it true that you can make the Qu’ran levitate when you are reciting from the book?’. The sheikh smiled, sipped from his glass of tea, encouraged the boy to eat something from the *sofra* and replied: ‘Making the Qu’ran levitate? That’s nothing. It’s more comfortable to make my heavy body levitate over the Qu’ran when I am reciting from the book, don’t you think so? Unfortunately, I am not in the mood today so you will need to come another time’. Everyone in the room apart from the boy, who was still hoping to see something miraculous, laughed. Then the sheikh started asking the boy questions about the village and a number of villagers whom he seemed to know. The boy, evidently perplexed by both the response as well as the sheikh’s detailed knowledge of his own village and individual villagers, a kind of miracle [*keramet*] as well, answered all questions and left the lodge. To my knowledge he has never come back.

Here I am less concerned about the details of the boy, as his story is not entirely unique in the social life in the lodge – on the contrary. Over the years of my fieldwork in the lodge I have become accustomed to such guests, diverse categories of individuals, coming from the town, surrounding villages and further afield. The questions they seek the sheikh to answer concern miraculous healing, and making and writing amulets [*zapis*]. Although the sheikh did not perform

any of these, he never entirely dismissed such questions. On the contrary, he enjoyed them. His answers were always deliberately opaque. Answering such questions with a sharp wit was an opportunity to cultivate and extend his charisma as someone who can perform miracles of levitation, marvels and other extraordinary feats, or of just simply being ‘in the know’. The extraordinary, as Morgan Clarke (2014) and Michael Gilsenan (1982) have described, are part and parcel of the ordinary discourses and practices among Sufi disciples in Egypt, Lebanon and Bosnia-Herzegovina. Yet this vignette also reveals that at the heart of social life in the dervish lodge lie myriad practices of mediation between various realms, be they between the realms of extraordinary and ordinary, hosts and guests, or townspeople and villagers. As not everyone can levitate over the Qu’ran, not everyone can mediate as effectively as the personnel endowed with such miraculous capacities as the sheikh. It is this practice of *mediation* between the various realms situated in the dervish lodge, and the capacity embodied in the person of the sheikh, that is explored in this paper. Specifically, I ask to what extent we can consider this practice of mediation staged in the events of hospitality as a form of everyday diplomacy in the post-cosmopolitan urban space.

### **Re-scaling Diplomatic Sites**

If diplomacy refers to the forms and processes of mediated exchange between polities (Neumann 2013: 7), an ethnography of everyday diplomacy would extend and nuance such forms of mediation beyond the realms of state-centric relations into other forms of political order and domains of life. Such a shift in perspective enables us to re-scale connections and trace mediations between what might seem at first sight as incommensurable assemblages and groupings situated in multiple zones of contact and friction (Neumann 2013), be these cultural, geopolitical, religious or linguistic. The foundations for such an endeavour can be traced back to Malinowski and his

analysis of the *Kula* exchange. As Malinowski puts it, his *Argonauts of the Western Pacific* can be read as a study on the origins of trade and economic relations, and of ‘primitive international law’ in general (Malinowski 1984 [1922]: 405). Following Malinowski’s contemporary, Marcel Mauss, Claude Lévi-Strauss’ (1969 [1949]) expanded the argument about the role of exchange in the origins of human organization cross-culturally. Exchanges between communities or tribes were for Lévi-Strauss ‘peacefully resolved wars, and wars ... the results of unsuccessful transactions’ (1969 [1949]: 67).<sup>2</sup> Marshall Sahlins elaborated this diplomatic argument further in his essay on the diplomacy of primitive trade, where he argued that in the absence of a sovereign power, peace can be secured ‘by extension of sociable relations to foreigners – thus, the trade-friendship or trade-kinship and, most significantly, *by the terms of exchange itself*’ (Sahlins 1974: 302, original italics). In further studies, Sahlins explored cultural encounters, mediated exchanges of a kind, between Hawaiians and Captain Cook (Sahlins 1985), and cosmologies of imperial trade policies unfolding between British and Chinese imperial realms (Sahlins 2005 [1988]). These studies broadened the diplomatic edge of mediated exchange into the scale of global historical encounters (see also Cheuk, Marsden, this issue), and had a significant influence on the study of the diplomatic domain beyond anthropology (Neumann 2012, 2013). By starting my argument with a Malinowski–Lévi-Strauss–Sahlins lineage, I want to suggest that the history of modern anthropology is a rich cross-cultural repository that has much to offer to the study of everyday diplomacy, and diplomacy more generally (Latour 2013).

As these debates make clear, everyday diplomacy unfolds in various guises. In this paper I follow three lines of debate in particular in developing my argument. Historical anthropologists have paid considerable attention to forms of everyday diplomacy by focusing on the role of ‘middleman minorities’ (ethnic, linguistic, religious) in brokering between transimperial realms in

the past (e.g., Alavi 2015) and the present (Marsden, this issue and 2016). Another fruitful line of enquiry on everyday diplomacy emerged from the studies of post-cosmopolitan urban civility as a framework for investigating people's coexistence with difference (Mazower 2004Humphrey and Skvirskaja 2012; Werbner 2015;). The idea of post-cosmopolitan cities refers to those urban spaces which have experienced 'a co-presence of cosmopolitanism and its opposite, ethnic violence, in the same city over time' and that have had to come to terms with a delicately negotiated balance of everyday forms of 'living together and apart' (Humphrey and Skvirskaja 2012: 6). These studies have attended to post-cosmopolitan urban civility as an ethnographic-cum-historical exploration of spaces of social heterogeneity in which specific practices are employed to overcome difference in order to weave the fragile daily social fabric that is enabling the social forms of 'living together and apart'. Finally, a similar line of enquiry has recently emerged in the debates on 'shared spaces' in the post-Ottoman regions (Bryant 2016). Shared spaces refer here to religious sites, markets or mixed neighbourhoods in which an everyday diplomacy has developed as a set of skills activated during particular everyday encounters and exchanges, or ritual events of sociality, in the process of living together with difference (Bryant 2016; Henig 2012a). Overall, these practices of brokerage, and practices and skills for overcoming difference in the process of living together, are instances of the analytical heuristic – the *modes of being diplomatic* – that has been outlined in the Introduction as a way to study the actually existing forms of everyday diplomacy. Yet, as I shall discuss, we need to go a step further.

Building on these debates, in this article I argue that the study of everyday diplomacy needs to focus not only on the *modes* of being diplomatic (being a broker, trader or neighbour, for example) but also on the *sites* where such encounters and mediations take place. Indeed, in his ethnographic studies of diplomacy, Iver Neumann (2012, 2013) has suggested focusing on the

processes and events that turn spaces and social places into diplomatic sites. As Neumann argues, as the world changes so do the sites in which diplomacy actually happens, and we need to be attentive to identifying emerging sites of diplomacy. Diplomatic sites can be either physical or virtual, but always refer to the nexus of *how*, *where* and *when* diplomacy actually takes place. The turn towards the study of diplomatic sites as promoted by Neumann paves the way for a study of existing forms of everyday diplomacy. The sites of everyday diplomacy, again, are multiple, including neighbourhoods (Bryant 2016); container markets (Humphrey and Skvirskaja 2009); picnics (Marsden and Ibañez-Tirado 2015); checkpoints (Reeves 2014); or state border offices (Dzenovska 2014). Everyday diplomacy thus emerges not only from the embodied practice and etiquette of mediating encounters with various others, but also from particular spatial and material configurations that, in particular conjunctions, enable the processes of mediation and mediated exchanges to actually unfold between different actors, assemblages or groupings across political, cultural and geopolitical divides.

One such 'site', which epitomizes the quintessence of diplomatic practice, is sharing food (Constantinou 1996), enacted through acts of hospitality and commensality (cf. Pitt-Rivers 2011 [1992]; Bloch 2005). In his tour-de-force argument, Andrew Shryock (2012: S22) writes, 'hospitality is a shared language of human interaction, a first link between Others, a medium of greeting and exchange'. As he points out, 'stagecraft is essential to the management of this situation' (ibid.), thus referring to the *where* and the *when* of the encounters between strangers (see also Candea and Da Col 2012). In addition, hospitality can also be conceived of as a site of the political (cf. Shryock 2009). Discussing forms of hospitality among the Balga Bedouins of Jordan, Shryock traces the uses of hospitality which the Balga Bedouins have used to resist and refashion imperial as well as national ideas of 'what a centralised state is, holding politicians and public

institutions accountable to a logic of host and guest' (2009: 33). In turn, hospitality as the site of the political unfolds here as a process of re-scaling encounters between incommensurable actors (e.g., the state and a Balga Bedouin household) into a logic of mediated exchange between the host and the guest. Such a process of refashioning the political into the logic of hospitable encounters, echoes Neumann's argument about the need to trace the processes whereby social places are turned into diplomatic sites.

Focusing on the practices of dining and hospitality as a form of re-scaling diplomatic encounters beyond the state-level, this paper is situated in a dervish lodge in a post-cosmopolitan town in post-war Bosnia-Herzegovina. It explores how the notion of *sofra*, which the dervishes associate with an elaborate etiquette of hospitality, dining and food sharing, is deployed as an idiom embodying both a *site* of everyday diplomacy in its spatio-material configurations, as well as a *mode* of 'being diplomatic'. This paper traces the moments and instances of the deployment of *sofra* by the dervish brotherhood as a way to forge and mediate relationships between various linguistic, national and confessional 'others' locally and transnationally.

### **Situating Everyday Diplomacy in a Post-Cosmopolitan Town**

Before discussing the lodge as a 'site' of everyday diplomacy let me begin by situating the dervish lodge [*tekija*], where the dervishes gather daily in the post-war Bosnian context, and outline the local post-war urban dynamics as a post-cosmopolitan urban form of civility.

The lodge is located in the very centre of the provincial town of Vareš in the Central Bosnian highlands, about thirty miles northwest from the Bosnian capital, Sarajevo. The lodge was opened in the town only after the 1992–1995 Bosnian war; it was in 1998 that its sheikh moved from a village situated fifteen miles further north, in the Zvijezda highlands. The town itself has a



long history of ‘social heterogeneity’ that is characteristic for post-cosmopolitan cities (Humphrey and Skvirskaja 2012). The dominant population of post-war Vareš consists of the Bosnian Croats and Bosniaks (Muslims), and significantly smaller Bosnian Serb community, though the population composition does not resemble the pre-war one by any means. Despite its size, there are two Catholic churches (one dating its origins back to the early sixteenth century) and a convent for Franciscan nuns. There is also a soup kitchen run by a Franciscan charity that feeds anyone in need irrespective of confession. Furthermore, close to the convent there is the dervish lodge, the town mosque and one Orthodox church, with one more Catholic church and a mosque at the outskirts of Vareš about two miles from the centre.

During the Bosnian war, the town’s infrastructure survived more or less intact, but this cannot be said about its diverse population and social fabric. As the war unfolded, Vareš came to hold a significant strategic position for all parties of the conflict and was eventually overrun by the Bosnian army. This resulted in Bosnian Croats and Serbs fleeing the town. The story is, however, more complicated. For example, in October 1993, the units of the Croatian Defence Council (HVO) carried out a massacre of Bosniak civilians in the nearby village of Stupni Do. On a different occasion, the Serbian-led forces (JNA) drove a tank through the ancient wooden mosque Karići, a significant Muslim pilgrimage site nearby Vareš, whose caretakers before the war were the Serbian families living in its vicinity (cf. Henig 2012b: 755). After the war, a number of people returned, but the urban social fabric remains fragile. However, it is not just the war legacies that have shaped the town’s current post-cosmopolitan character.

During the Austro-Hungarian period, and in particular during the socialist Yugoslav era, Vareš was an important metallurgical town. To accommodate the workforce, Vareš, like many socialist industrial sites, attracted socialist urban planning, and membership of the Yugoslav

Communist Party was high in the town. This period is inscribed into Vareš's townscape, and epitomized by typical socialist-style communal apartment complexes (Jansen 2015) where people of different walks of life continue to live together.

The metallurgical industry has never recovered from the disintegration of Yugoslavia, the war, and the disastrous post-socialist privatization that followed. As a result of these pervasive transformations the population has shrunk by more than half in the past twenty years, and the level of unemployment is high (49.8 per cent). Many people moved to Sarajevo, or live in diasporic communities in Croatia, Germany, Austria, Sweden, Switzerland and as far away as the United States and Canada, returning only in the summer months. Nowadays, it is not only the local economy but the overall urban infrastructure that is in ruins, and the town is periodically on the verge of bankruptcy.<sup>3</sup> Many local residents as well as municipal authorities make a direct link between Vareš's marginal location in the highlands and the cantonal government's careless inattention to municipalities like Vareš.

I have been visiting and living in the dervish lodge in Vareš since 2008, staying on numerous occasions, amounting to more than a year in total. Although my research was not primarily focused on the town's post-cosmopolitan urban dynamics I could not escape it. On the one hand, Vareš's urban spaces, like many post-cosmopolitan cities, maintain, by and large, the boundaries of inclusion and exclusion between the significant others quite clear in everyday urban encounters, ranging from ethno-religiously charged ways of greeting to non-socializing in the cafés, 'unmixed' educational spaces (cf. Hromadžić 2015), or separated 'pork meat' sections in the local shops. Many of these boundaries, however, are crossed, as I could observe whenever I went shopping, strolling along the stalls at the weekly market, attended funerals, or just moved between the town's neighbourhoods [*komšiluk*], where the category of *komšija* [neighbour]

continues to be used in some parts of the town irrespective of people's categorical identities (cf. Henig 2012a). This is also the case for the mosque, church or the convent during annual feasts such as Ramadan, Kurban Bajram, Christmas and Easter, where people of different walks of life can get together. Put differently, everyday sociality in Vareš's townscape unfolds as a process of living together with difference, where sociality across difference can and does unfold. That is not dissimilar from other post-cosmopolitan cities, which have experienced 'a co-presence of cosmopolitanism and its opposite, ethnic violence, in the same city over time' (Humphrey and Skvirskaja 2012: 6). Navigating through the processes of living together with difference is itself a form of skill and everyday labour (Bryant 2016), and thus a mode of being diplomatic.<sup>4</sup>

On the other hand, there are two primary 'sites' of post-cosmopolitan everyday diplomacy in the town where shared urban civility, instantiated primarily through acts of commensality, can be located, namely the lodge and the soup kitchen. Unlike the soup kitchen, which operates chiefly locally and feeds anyone in need, living in the lodge enabled me to witness situations in which the lodge became a diplomatic site for the conduct of mediation with multiple local but in particular non-local others. In the rest of the paper, I shall focus on the lodge, as it is a primary site of encounters and mediations. Specifically I focus on how the stagecraft of such encounters is orchestrated and mediated as events of hospitality. Before I do so, however, let me say a few words about the dervish lodge.

### **The Dervish Lodge as a Site of Everyday Diplomacy**

In considering the dervish lodge as a diplomatic site, and specifically the idiom of *sofra*, I shall begin by going back in time for a moment. In his account of a global history of Sufism, Nile Green persuasively argued that Sufism has historically been a 'cultural technology of inter-regional

connection and exchange' (2012: 12, 44). Throughout the history of Eurasian Empires interconnected by the trading routes, the peripatetic conduct of dervishes played a significant role in intertwining different imperial nodes and realms, along with traders, diplomats and soldiers (e.g., Clayer 2011; Green 2012; Alavi 2015). In the case of the Ottoman empire, of which current Bosnia-Herzegovina was part until 1878, dervishes played a significant mediating role as well (cf. Lifchez 1992). As messengers and proselytizers of Islam, or as companions of the frontier guards, the dervishes moved with ease within and around the Empire's frontiers, where they often settled and carried on preaching and teaching, thereby mediating the cosmopolitan experience of the larger Ottoman ecumene and local connectivity.

By mediating locally the cosmopolitan and transregional realm of the Empire, many peripatetic dervishes of the Ottoman era thus became an analogue of what Engseng Ho (2006) described as local cosmopolitans, in his context Hadrami merchants, another example of 'partial grouping' (see the Introduction and Marsden, this issue), originating in Yemen, and settling along the shores of the Indian Ocean, from Mogadishu to Malaysia and Indonesia. Local cosmopolitans, Engseng Ho suggests, are those persons and networks of persons 'who, while embedded in local relations, also maintain connections with distant places ... [and] thus articulate a relation between geographical scales' (Ho 2006: 31).

The role of dervish lodges in the processes of mediation between different imperial, bureaucratic and linguistic realms became vital in nodal cities of the Ottoman Empire. In her work on Central Asian Naqshbandi Sufi networks in the fin-de-siècle Istanbul, Lâle Can (2012) described the role of these networks in forging and mediating transimperial relations between the Ottoman Empire and Central Asian polities of the Russian Empire. In particular, Can showed how the dervish lodges played an important role as nodal points for the Silk Road trading routes and

pilgrims to Mecca, assisting the traders, pilgrims and elite and non-elite transimperial mobile subjects alike with navigating the Ottoman bureaucracy as much as with providing shelter and hospitality (Algar 1992). She concludes that these lodges were ‘important centres of informal diplomacy’ (Can 2012: 379). Can, along with other historians (e.g., Gelvin and Green 2013), has documented the importance of the Sufi/dervish lodges as points of connectivity, transimperial mediation and everyday diplomacy, demonstrating how these endured changes in transportation and communication technologies that were brought about by expanding railway networks and the greater accessibility of steamships for transimperial mobile subjects coming from Central Asia and the Balkans. This endurance of transregional connectivity can be traced into the present (Henig, forthcoming).

The dervish brotherhoods on the territories of former Yugoslavia experienced tight surveillance and official bans during communist rule in the second half of the twentieth century for being considered a threat to the ruling nomenklatura (Duijzings 2000: 106–131; Clayer 2011; Henig 2014).<sup>5</sup> Nowadays, however, dervish orders are thriving across post-communist Southeast Europe at large (Henig 2014). This short historical excursion is important because it illustrates that despite the geopolitical ruptures in the workings of dervish lodges on the territories of former socialist Yugoslavia, the idioms of connectivity and mediation between translocal, linguistic or ethno-religious realms form a context of reference in which the dervishes in Vareš situate themselves and their conduct as *local cosmopolitans*. This has become even more explicit since the sheikh became the vice-regent of a transregional network of the Rifa’i dervish order spanning across Albania, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Greece, Kosovo, Macedonia (FYROM) and Turkey (cf. Henig 2014, forthcoming).

Building on this historical context in what follows, I am specifically interested in developing two further points. First, how are dervishes' self-perceptions of being 'mediators' and the practice of 'mediation' through *sofra* hospitality shaped by the discursive tradition of a transregional dervish ecumene outlined here? Second, how far is the lodge seen by the local inhabitants as a site of diplomacy and mediation? The nexus where the two points meet, I suggest, is articulated in the idiom of *sofra* as a site and a mode of everyday diplomacy in post-cosmopolitan Vareš. What is the *sofra* then?

### **Spreading the *sofra***

'The *sofra*', the sheikh began his short sermon to the disciples assembled around a carefully arranged communal meal in the Vareš lodge, before breaking the fast in the holy month of Ramadan in 2012, 'is the heart of the *tekija* [the lodge]. Remember, sitting around the *sofra* is more important than what is on it'. These words resemble countless comments and conversations on the hermeneutics of the *sofra* that I recorded in the lodge over the years. Alongside the collective *zikr* prayers remembering God, the discourses on the *sofra* and the practice of eating together on a dining cloth spread over the floor are the key ritual events in the social life of a dervish lodge. These events are significant not only for strengthening the brotherhood's cohesion and bodily nourishment. The *sofra* is also important for spiritual nourishment and pedagogy oriented toward the formation of a certain kinds of moral self. The *sofra* is a site over which religious tales of moral and ethical guidance are told (also Algar 1992; Soileau 2012).

The tales shared during the *sofra* events are carefully crafted and charismatic performances carried out chiefly by the sheikh. For the dervish/Sufi disciples, the act of the oral transmission as a form of narrative pedagogy is recognized as the practice of *sohbet*. Brian Silverstein's translation

of the term *sohbet* as ‘companionship in conversation’ is apt here (2008: 121). For the sheikh in Vareš, the tales narrated in conversations with his disciples and guests comprise jokes, poetry and quotations from Hadiths as much as from important Sufi figures, or refer to the historical tales of peripatetic dervishes, as discussed in the previous section. These tales are part of a more encompassing moral aesthetics and pedagogy of *adab* [manners] in the lodge (Henig 2014). *Adab* refers to practico-moral conduct and etiquette in the lodge, but also to a particular forms self-cultivation and moral aesthetic of action among the disciples (Metcalf 1984).

In his study of the polysemic meanings of the *sofra* as a form of ritual practice among the disciples of the Bektashi dervish order in Turkey, Mark Soileau (2012) suggested that the *sofra* is a form of generative rather than prescriptive ritual performance. It is generative in that each *sofra* gathering happens ‘at a new historical moment, with a potentially new set of participants or participants with a new set of experiences that influence their receptiveness to whatever cultural significance is being presented to them’ (2012: 4). *Sofra* as a ritual meal enables ‘a situation in which the process of cultural sharing and partaking can take place’ (2012: 29) to develop. On the other hand, the highly elaborated etiquette of *sofra* is inevitably prone to creating situations of breakdowns, disrupting the process of cultural sharing. In particular, guests who do not know or do not follow the basic principles of *adab* in the lodge are often a source of many tensions during the *sofra* events. During my fieldwork I witnessed situations during which visiting imams as well as local and regional politicians interrupted the sheikh during his *sofra* narrative performances. Some of the guests turned their backs towards the sheikh, or did not respect the seating pattern, which was considered as disrespectful by other participants in these events. On other occasions, the guests refused to eat any of the food that was being served. Each of these situations was dealt with ad hoc by the sheikh and the disciples. When the guests were interrupting the sheikh, for

example, he gestured towards his disciples to start singing aloud songs of reverence [*ilahija*]. When someone refused to eat the food from the *sofra*, the sheikh refused to eat as well and attempted to engage in a conversation with the guest. Such an improvisatory endeavour on the part of the sheikh and his disciples was often successful but not always. Sometimes, it resulted in the guest's departure in the middle of the *sofra* event, and the event continued as if nothing happened. Yet, as we shall see in the following section, it is this performative flexibility of the *sofra* etiquette and its capacity to accommodate ad hoc encounters that allows *sofra* to be deployed as an idiom of everyday diplomacy.

However, there is another important aspect of *sofra* in the dervish lodge. Organizing *sofra* is logistically demanding. In particular in ad hoc situations of encounters with strangers arriving unexpectedly at the lodge, it requires skill to stage *sofra* instantly and yet smoothly. In order to fully understand how encounters with strangers are mediated through *sofra* we therefore need to move beyond the idiom of *sofra* solely as a matter of 'spiritual nourishment', dervish ritual practice, or moral conduct, and conceive of *sofra* also as *a skill of stagecraft*.<sup>6</sup>

The internal social life in dervish lodges unfolds as a complex division of labour, and each dervish disciple has his specific duty. This is also part of the *adab* conduct of the lodge, meaning that the sheikh does not need to instruct his disciples what to do in every circumstance, and in particular when the guests are around. On the contrary, it is a sign of good *adab* when the sheikh can entertain his guests rather than supervising his disciples.

It has been widely documented in various dervish lodges, of different paths of teaching and conduct, that there have been specific posts associated with the preparation of food and drink (Algar 1992; Soileau 2012). In case of the Bektashi lodges, as Soileau writes, of twelve key posts in the lodge, five were related to food and drink preparation, and the role of the cook was, after the



sheikh (Bektashi's *baba*), the most important position (2012: 12). Writing about the Mevlevi lodges, Ayla Algar relates that the kitchen 'was a place of training and initiation, and many of the hierarchic ranks ... were connected to various functions exercised in the kitchen' (1992: 297). In the Vareš lodge, the post of *kahvedžija* [the coffee maker] is equally important, as the disciple who holds the post needs to be available any time to come and serve the guests in the lodge. This availability and plentifulness of food and refreshment for any guests magnifies the performative effects of the sheikh's generosity and extends his charisma (also van der Veer 1992; Werbner 2003).

Spreading the *sofra* for the guests in the lodge, however, is not only a logistical task in terms of coordinating the disciples to perform specific chores. *Sofra* as a skill of stagecraft in a diplomatic encounter also requires the infrastructural capacity of the lodge to orchestrate such encounters in the first place.<sup>7</sup> There are two kitchens in the lodge, fully equipped with cauldrons, pots and stainless steel plates and cutlery to serve up to two hundred people. In addition, there is about the same number of glasses to serve Turkish tea, and cups to serve coffee. And finally, in one corner of the downstairs kitchen there is a pile of dining cloths [*sofra*] of different widths and lengths from which the dervish hosts can choose. Furthermore, the lodge is situated in the vicinity of the local bakery, which runs night and day, and where fresh bread or *pita* [savoury pie filled with cheese or meat] can be purchased any time. Despite living in Vareš, many disciples, like other Vareš inhabitants, maintain connections with the villages where they came from, and these networks are also mobilized regularly when there is a need for a ram sacrifice or a lamb roast to be served in the lodge. This is not uncommon in the dervish lodges. When I interviewed a sheikh of a dervish lodge in Sarajevo about the logistical challenges in his lodge, I learned that the lodge needs about 120 rams/lambs a month for various events and guests. The sheikh therefore purchased

a flock of sheep, and one of the disciples who lives in the countryside is paid to keep the supply of meat for the lodge. In the Vareš lodge, the demands are considerably smaller; nonetheless, they still require arrangements to mobilize the supply immediately whenever needed.

Scholars of diplomacy have emphasized that the choice of food, drinks, seating patterns and table manners are essential in staging diplomatic events (Constantinou 1996; Neumann 2013). Moreover, there is also a growing recognition of the ‘more-than-human’ character of diplomatic practice and the role of material objects and infrastructural conditions in shaping diplomatic processes and the workings of foreign offices and embassies (Dittmer 2015). These debates are thus helpful in reconsidering *sofra* as a site of everyday diplomacy, and what skills of stagecraft and infrastructural capacities it entails.

### **Staging an Encounter: ‘Have You been to the Tekija Yet?’**

Hospitality, and hospitality is a very general name for all our relations to the Other, has to be re-invented at every second, it is something without a pre-given rule. That is what we have to invent – a new language for instance. When two people who don’t speak the same language meet, what should they do? They have to translate, but translation is an invention, to invent a new way of translating in which translation doesn’t simply go one way but both ways, and how can we do that? That’s the aporia, and this is political, the new form – but it had always been a form – of politics, but today it has, because of the development of communication, of crossing borders, of telecommunications, it has new forms of urgency. (Derrida 1997)

Soon after I commenced my fieldwork in 2008, focusing on vernacular Islam in the villages of the Zvijezda highlands, I started receiving questions, in effect recommendations, as to whether I have already been to ‘the lodge’ [*tekija*] and talked to Hajji Azmir (this is how the sheikh is known to the villagers). Although I was living in the villages and conducting my fieldwork there, my village friends still thought that the lodge and its sheikh were the right place for me to go to get answers to many questions I had been asking them, as the sheikh was ‘in the know’. It was too good an opportunity to miss, and I arranged my trip to the lodge via a distant relative of the sheikh who was living in the same neighbourhood where I was based during my fieldwork. I still remember the first visit very vividly. My first encounter was not dissimilar from the village boy who came to seek miracles several years later. The choreography of the encounter was almost identical, including a warm welcome, seating pattern and well-directed questions about the villages of my fieldwork, concrete individuals, as well as about the Czech Republic (my country of origin). Everything was orchestrated in a relaxed atmosphere and hospitable manner over the *sofra*, including hot and cold drinks as well as a snack. I was very nervous, but the overall hospitable arrangement of the encounter, and sharing food, drinks and stories, made me quickly relaxed and enabled the ‘exchange’ to happen.

Such hospitality events spatially orchestrated around the *sofra* form a language of everyday diplomacy echoing Shryock’s point about hospitality as ‘a first link between Others, a medium of greeting and exchange’ where ‘stagecraft is essential to the management of this situation’ (2012: 22, 24). This also echoes the observations about the generosity and hospitality of the dervish/Sufi lodges with various others and strangers (Algar 1992; van der Veer 1992; Werbner 2003). Algar (1992: 301–302) writes specifically about dervish lodges and *sofra* manners [*ādāb as-sufra*], and

describes how food was ‘served as a means of communication with the general population’, not only for the local poor but also for wayfarers and other strangers passing through the lodge.<sup>8</sup>

These historical discourses on and practices of *sofra* are echoed in the Vareš lodge. *Sofra* etiquette, however, often extends to encounters with others, strangers and foreign guests who are neither dervishes, nor even of Muslim background. Following Shryock’s (2009) observation about hospitality being a site of the political/diplomatic, *sofra* etiquette allows the dervishes to refashion such encounters into the logic of host and guest. In such events, the stagecraft of *sofra* is almost identical but the performance of the sheikh is pursued in such a way that the stories and instructive tales fit the ‘state’ [*hāl*] of the guests, make them laugh, be more relaxed and thus feel more welcome. Hence, to return to the introductory vignette, the sheikh very quickly but politely shifted the conversation with the boy from miracles into a shared language of the boy’s village and his kin that made him more relaxed in the hospitable atmosphere of the lodge. Moreover, this quick yet smooth shift in conversation and its tone demonstrated the sheikh’s unique capacity to mediate between various realms and encounters. Yet this does not automatically lead to erasure of differences and potentially conflictual interests and enmity. The stagecraft of *sofra*, I therefore suggest, is a mode of everyday diplomacy that rescales the encounters with others into an event of hospitality during which food is shared, (temporary) amity is exchanged, and a degree of cultural intimacy established (Herzfeld 2005).

Through such *sofra* encounters, which are themselves generative rather than prescriptive modes of conduct that have to be ‘re-invented at every second’, to echo the quotation above from Derrida’s *Politics and Friendship*, we can observe the elasticity of the *adab* idiom, that is, the practico-moral conduct and etiquette in the lodge. As I discussed in the previous section, in the everyday life of the lodge the *adab* unfolds as a complex division of labour between the disciples

who are in charge of specific tasks to keep the lodge functioning, including the stagecraft of *sofra* events. However, we can also consider the idiom of *adab* as a mode of being diplomatic.

During my fieldwork, I have observed how the sheikh has carefully allocated other *adab* duties based on the individual competence and skills of the disciples. The sheikh helped the disciples to nourish and cultivate these skills further. This includes playing specific musical instruments (drum, *ney* flute), as these are important for accompanying the collective *zikr* ritual remembrance of God, but also to entertain the guests. Another disciple with good academic skills and passion for history was encouraged and financially supported to continue with his university studies. Other disciples have been encouraged to study and translate texts of dervish teaching and lyrics of *ilahija* [songs of reverence] from various languages including English, Turkish, Persian, Albanian and Arabic, whereas still more became skilled calligraphers (cf. Henig forthcoming). By helping to cultivate these skills of the disciples in the lodge, the sheikh has effectively created a repertoire of diplomatic skills that enable him to mediate encounters with various others, as the disciples can be drawn into the conversation with the guests, depending on their expertise, or can translate from the languages that neither the sheikh nor anyone in the town speaks apart from the dervishes in the lodge. Again, this is not an entirely unique feature of the idiom of *adab* as a mode of being diplomatic in the lodge in post-cosmopolitan Vareš. Pnina Werbner writes about Hajji Ibrahim, a devoted disciple of the Sufi sheikh Zindapir in a lodge in Pakistan, who entertained guests from Japan by speaking Japanese and serving tea ‘Japanese style’. As Werbner suggests, ‘each guest to the *darbar* [lodge] is honoured according to his custom – an English visitor is provided with a bed, the Japanese with the appropriate kind of tea’ (2003: 94), echoing my point that hospitality in a dervish lodge can become also a mode of diplomatic conduct.

Over the years of my fieldwork, I realized that the question ‘Have you been to the lodge [tekija] yet?’ is one of the first questions many strangers, newcomers, and in particular *foreigners* usually receive from the local residents of different walks of life upon arrival in the town. This raises a question about the position of the lodge in post-cosmopolitan Vareš, where maintaining, negotiating and crossing multiple boundaries between various others, in particular the ‘ethno-religious’ ones, are part and parcel of everyday life. Yet it also opens the possibility of the lodge being as a site of surveillance, irony and irreverence (Marsden 2016) that might be beyond control of the local residents.

In the everyday labour of living together with difference in the post-cosmopolitan townscape of Vareš, the lodge is a site where the boundaries of inclusion/exclusion get more blurred, in particular when compared with the local mosques and churches – although the degree of crossing is less frequent than in the case of the local soup kitchen. In particular the lodge cooperates with the nuns from the convent that is located in its vicinity.<sup>9</sup> The position of the lodge as a mediator between the local inhabitants and the non-local ‘other’ became more visible and prevalent when various strangers arrived in the town. Usually they were directed to the lodge. There, upon their arrival, they were seated in the very same corner of the sofa, with the sheikh and his disciples around the *sofra*, drinking either Turkish tea or Bosnian coffee depending on their preferences and ‘according to his custom’ (Werbner 2003: 94), enjoying the sheikh’s hospitality.

In the chronicle of the lodge as well as in my field notes, the list of guests who end up seated around the *sofra* is diverse. It includes foreign students, scholars and researchers (including myself, but also a Norwegian anthropologist, a Czech human geographer, Croatian archeologists and botanists, and a Turkish linguist); Kosovo Roma refugees; and a group of Tablighi Jamaat and Salafi proselytizers. The lodge also hosted many Bosnian muftis, Islamic scholars, and the largest

delegation of Rifa'i sheikhs on Bosnian territory in many decades coming from Greece, Kosovo and Turkey, to name just a few.

On another occasion, I encountered a group of Turkish businessmen who were brought by the local mayor to the lodge to discuss their interests and plans in the region.<sup>10</sup> Sitting comfortably around the *sofra*, surrounded by dervishes speaking with them either in Turkish or English, made the Turkish guests to the town feel more comfortable than sitting in the sterile office of the mayor with an interpreter. Moreover, going back to Shryock's argument about stagecraft in events of hospitality and Werbner's argument about being hosted 'according to one's custom', the guests were offered Turkish tea rather than the coffee traditionally offered in Bosnia, a gesture that they appreciated and commented on several times during the meeting. Furthermore, the discussion about the economic potential of the Vareš region was followed by watching videos and looking at photographic collections of the local *turbeta* [mausoleums from the Ottoman era], and listening to the sheikh about other memorable sites associated with the Sultan Mehmet II, who conquered the Bosnian territories in the fifteenth century, satisfying the guests' great interest in these sites, and thus making Vareš more attractive to Turkish investors.<sup>11</sup>

Finally, the lodge also hosted a Carmelite friar from Croatia, who is also an ethnologist and who arrived in the region in search of traditional dress. The local sheikh is also a local patriot and the lodge displays a large collection of these textiles and objects. During this encounter, the friar sat together with the sheikh on the very same sofa and they kept shaking hands in a friendly way during the conversation. Moreover, the stagecraft of *sofra* was orchestrated in such a way that the friar was sitting on the sofa next to the sheikh, rather than on the floor around the table cloth, and the feast was served on trays. In turn, this encounter led to an invitation to Croatia where the dervishes from Vareš were hosted in the Carmelite monastery in Tomislavgrad, thus reciprocating

the hospitality encountered in Vareš. The sheikh and his disciples became a sort of cultural ambassador, representing dervish teaching but also speaking on behalf of the Vareš region and its rich tradition, as illustrated by the collections of textiles and dresses that the sheikh brought for a temporary exhibition to Croatia, and also by participating in ecumenical music performances with the Carmelites from Zagreb described by the local media as ‘blossoms of tolerance’ [*cvijeće tolerancije*].<sup>12</sup>

All these encounters listed in the chronicle of the lodge became events of hospitality carefully orchestrated around the *sofra*. Although it would go beyond the scope of this paper to unpack any of these encounters in full detail, the diversity of these encounters between the dervishes and the strangers coming to the town who are directed to the lodge illustrates the unique position that the dervish lodge occupies in the post-cosmopolitan townscape of Vareš. Over the years since its opening in 1998, the lodge has thus become a site mediating these encounters between the local (i.e., speaking on behalf of the town) and the foreign.

## **Conclusion**

Situated in the post-cosmopolitan townscape of Vareš in post-war Bosnia-Herzegovina, where mediations between various others are part and parcel of the everyday labour of living together with difference, this paper has sought to contribute to the debates on the nature of everyday diplomacy in the modern world. In so doing, I suggested that we move our analytical perspective beyond the realms of formal state-centric relations to explore how diplomacy unfolds in other forms of the political, and in various domains of life. By reorienting the focus on the diplomatic sites where multiple forms of mediation between different assemblages and groupings emerge in the flow of social life, I have attempted to ethnographically unpack the local dervish lodge as a



site of everyday diplomacy. My aim was to show that such mediations, orchestrated as hospitality events, can be conceived of as a form of *sofra*-diplomacy. In order to fully elucidate the dynamic of hospitality events in the post-cosmopolitan context, we need to study not only the deployment of specific modes of being diplomatic but also the spatial-material configurations that allow such events to take place.

Focusing on various instances of deploying *sofra* as an idiom of hospitality, this paper showed how *stagecraft* is important for the management of such encounters, in order to re-scale them into the logic of hospitality between hosts and guests. In their genealogy of an anthropology of hospitality, Candea and Da Col observed that many accounts of hospitality neglect the ‘happenstance’ of hospitality, and suggested that more ethnographic attention needs to be paid to ‘the *scale*, the *contingency*, and the *specificity* of each hospitality event’ (2012: S8). Hospitality is a form of diplomatic practice (Marsden 2016). By amplifying the ‘happenstance’ argument as a heuristic to the debates on everyday diplomacy and the dynamics of diplomatic sites more broadly, is a helpful way of thinking about the actually existing forms of everyday diplomacy, such as the case of *sofra*-diplomacy.

As I have discussed in this paper, the encounters orchestrated around the *sofra* enable the dervishes to bring local politicians and Turkish businessmen together, or to foster friendship between the sheikh and the Carmelitan friar, and thus illustrate the moments in which social places turn into diplomatic sites. Put differently, an everyday diplomacy mediated through hospitality encounters unfolds here as a nexus of the *how* (i.e., a mode of being diplomatic) that is always intertwined with the *where* and the *when*, be these instantiated in the idiom of *sofra*, ecumenical music performance, (not) performing miracles, or otherwise.

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## Notes

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<sup>1</sup> An expression that refers to a cloth spread out on the floor on which people place food, but also to dining etiquette more broadly, as I shall discuss later.

<sup>2</sup> This is also echoed in Neumann's point that 'Diplomatic practices are integrative, inasmuch as they nudge human beings into relationships of amity and enmity' (2012: 62).

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<sup>3</sup> See for example: <<http://www.klix.ba/vijesti/bih/dramaticno-upozorenje-nacelnika-vares-je-grad-koji-odumire/150323135>> (accessed 14 February 2016).

<sup>4</sup> This could be amplified further to other urban contexts of postwar Bosnia-Herzegovina as Stef Jansen's recent study of materialized divisions and borders in Sarajevo aptly illustrates (2015).

<sup>5</sup> There is no space to go into detail of these historical vicissitudes that are described elsewhere (e.g., Clayer 2011; Henig 2014, forthcoming).

<sup>6</sup> A parallel can be drawn with recent debates on music and performance in the regions where Sufi lodges are less or no longer vibrant such as *mahfil* in Chitral, Pakistan (Marsden 2005), *mulid* in Egypt (Schielke 2012), or *tarab* in Syria (Shannon 2003). It would go beyond the limits of this paper to discuss the influence of such practices and sites in realms of life no longer thought of as being religious per se. I am grateful to Magnus Marsden for bringing my attention to this aspect of stagecraft.

<sup>7</sup> This is something that for example the local mosque or church often do not have.

<sup>8</sup> Pnina Werbner describes such practice as a form of perpetual sacrifice (2003: 109–113).

<sup>9</sup> In 2014, the dervishes and the nuns wrote together on several occasions a joint letter to the local authorities. They asked the mayor and the police to address the issues with those drivers who park on their respective properties, or patrolling during the weekend nights around nearby bars.

<sup>10</sup> Unlike in case of the local mosque, which publicly supports the pro-Bosniak (Muslim) SDA party, there is no direct link between the lodge and formal political structures, and no political rallies are held there.

<sup>11</sup> To my knowledge, the investors had not decided whether or not to invest in Vareš by the time of writing this paper (February 2016).

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<sup>12</sup> Cvijeće Tolerancije Derviša i Bogoslova: <<http://tgportal.net/cvijece-tolerancije-dervisa-i-bogoslova/>> (accessed 14 February 2016). It is worth mentioning that this initiative was organic rather than a politically orchestrated and sponsored performance of inter-faith tolerance.