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“Pilgrims of Love”

Sufism in a Global World

PNINA WEBBNER

I first met Hajji Karim (a pseudonym) in 1987 quite accidentally, while researching Pakistani community politics in Manchester, England. The Central Jami'a mosque, a corporate institution built with voluntary donations in the days when the Muslim community of Manchester was still united, had witnessed a series of factional conflicts over its leadership. A succession of dramatic and sometimes violent confrontations occurred as faction leaders mobilized their supporters. There was no doubting the fierce passions aroused by this competition for honour and status in local diaspora politics.

It was during these heady but often traumatic months of fieldwork that I first encountered Hajji Karim. What struck me from the very start was his air of calm tranquillity. As he began to tell me about his Sufi tariqa and its beliefs, I felt as though I had entered a world of peace and order, of voluntary altruism and deep faith. Unlike the factionalism and conflict-ridden relationships at the mosque, Hajji Karim's universe was one of intellectual and aesthetic speculation and mystical experience, in which people sought transcendence rather than honour and instrumental gain. The order shared many similarities with other regional and pilgrimage cults in South Central Africa and Latin America, in which disciples or adepts follow ritual practices focused around a sacred centre, shrine, or person.

The term regional cult is a comparative, analytic term used to describe centrally focused, non-contiguous religious organizations which extend across boundaries. Regional cults are thus religious organizations built upon periodic ritual mobilizations of followers, in which cult branches, often located well beyond a central lodge or shrine, are linked in a sacred topography through flows of persons, goods, and tributes. Such cults are more far-reaching than any local, parochial cult, yet they are less inclusive in membership and belief than a world religion in its most universal form. The central lodge of the Sufi regional

cult I studied in the North West Frontier Province, was connected to hundreds of widely separated branches located throughout Pakistan, from Kashmir to Karachi, and to dozens of branches in Britain and the Gulf, wherever Pakistani migrants had settled.

As the research progressed over the next twelve years, a series of new and fascinating questions and observations emerged. For example, I discovered that the 'urs (in Arabic, *mawlid*) celebrations, which commemorate the birth of the Prophet Muhammad and Muslim saints,

was highly structured. It had a beginning, a middle, and an end. It effected, in other words, a sacred transformation and as such it was a transformative ritual, not merely a festival. The 'urs, was also, it became evident, the organizational hub of a Sufi order, conceived of as a regional (and now global) cult. Even beyond its centralizing role, I found that the 'urs was also significant for understanding the way in which

Sufism contains inherently trans-regional, transnational, and trans-ethnic dimensions. The difficulty in trying to understand Sufism is that in any particular locality there is a wide range of Sufi saints, from major shrines of great antiquity to minor saints with a highly localized clientele. Charting difference and similarity in Sufism as an embodied tradition requires attention beyond mystical, philosophical, and ethical ideas, to the ritual performances and religious organizational patterns that shape Sufi orders.

the saintly shrine system in South Asia was interpolated into the Barelvi movement — a religious movement of ulama in South Asia that arose to defend the veneration of saints and their tombs. Barelvis foster extreme adoration of the Prophet Muhammad and advocate his continued “presence.” In Pakistan they have their own mosques, schools and religious seminaries for the training of religious clerics. The 'urs helped to explain how, within a loosely inclusive movement, connections between

Sufi saints and Barelvi ulama are created and perpetuated. It is through the many thousands of 'urs festivals held annually at shrines and lodges throughout Pakistan, as well as in England and elsewhere, that Sufi regional cults are linked into, and sustain, the wider Barelvi movement.

The transnational and transethnic dimensions of Sufism

Like other regional cults, Sufi cults are trans-regional, transnational, and trans-ethnic. They interpenetrate with one another rather than generating contiguous, bounded territories. They leapfrog across major political and ethnic boundaries, creating their own sacred topographies and flows of goods and people. These override, rather than being congruent with, the political boundaries and subdivisions of nations, ethnic groups, or provinces.

The difficulty in trying to understand Sufism and comprehend its systematic ritual and symbolic logic and organization, is that in any particular locality, there is a wide range of Sufi saints, from major shrines of great antiquity, managed by descendants of the original saintly founder and guardians of his tomb, to minor saints with a highly localized clientele. In any generation, only some outstanding living saints succeed in founding major regional cults which extend widely beyond their immediate locality. Such cult, or *ta'ifas* as Trimmingham calls them, “undergo cycles of expansion, stagnation, decay, and even death,”¹ but since there are “thousands of them... new ones [are] continually being formed.”² Hence, to compare Sufi regional cults across different places, separated by thousands of miles of sea and land and by radically different cultural milieus, is in many senses to seek the global in the local rather than the local in the global. Either way, charting difference and similarity in Sufism as an embodied tradition requires attention beyond mystical, philosophical, and ethical ideas, to the ritual performances and religious organizational patterns that shape Sufi orders focused on a living saint or a dead saint's shrine in widely separated locations.

As the history of Sufism in South Asia and elsewhere (e.g. North Africa, Senegal) shows, Sufi regional cults are inextricably intermeshed in regional politics. The cult's key personnel seek recognition from politicians and administrators while, in turn, they accord legitimacy to these temporal authorities. This dialectics between the political and the sacred in Sufi cults arises because they are not inclusive in the same way as a world religion might be. They foster an exclusive membership based on personal initiation to a particular saintly order, and yet their sacred centres and the major festivals around them are open to all. Relations between initiates are said to be (generic) relations of love and amity, stripped of any prior status, idealized as beyond conflict or division, yet the organization of regional cults is based around the ingathering of elective groups from particular, defined political and administrative communities—villages, towns, city neighbourhoods—while cult relationships are often marred by interpersonal rivalries and jealousies. The egalitarianism between initiates comes alongside internal relations of hierarchy, and all disciples, whatever their rank, are subject to the ab-

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solute authority and discipline of the saint or his successors at the cult centre. Indeed, worldly status, class and caste are implicitly recognised at the central lodge, while saintly descendants often vie bitterly for the succession after the decease of the founder. If there is a moment of experienced *communitas* during the annual ritual at a Sufi regional cult centre, it is the product of complex logistical planning, a highly disciplined division-of-labour, and constant vigilance on the part of the organizers.

The 'urs is the organizational nexus of trans-local, regional and global Sufi cult. Such cults are inserted into the broader framework of Sufi orders, such as the Naqshbandi order to which the cult I studied was affiliated. The Sufi cultural concept which best captures the idea of a Sufi region is *wilayat*, a master concept in Sufi terminology, denoting a series of interrelated meanings: (secular) sovereignty over a region, the spiritual dominion of a saint, guardianship, a foreign land, friendship, intimacy with God, and union with the Deity. As a master concept, *wilayat* encapsulates the range of complex ideas defining the charismatic power of a saint—not only over transcendental spaces of mystical knowledge but as sovereign of the terrestrial spaces into which his sacred region extends. The term regional cult, a comparative, analytic term used to describe centrally focused, non-contiguous religious organizations which extend across boundaries, seems particularly apt to capture this symbolic complexity.

Power, charisma, and authority

Unlike the sort of political conflicts that might emerge over leadership of corporately owned central institutions such as the Manchester central mosque, Sufis recognise the absolute authority of a charismatic figure, a Sufi saint. The charismatic living saint at the centre of the cult I studied was known as Zindapir "the living saint." He began his career during the final days of Empire in the British army, as a tailor contractor for the seventh Baluch regiment, and many of his disciples were army men. His beautiful little lodge is located in a valley near Kohat, an army cantonment in the North West Frontier Province of Pakistan. After establishing his lodge, he continued to recruit army personnel. Over time, as these soldiers retired to their villagers or migrated to work in England or in the Gulf, the catchment area of Zindapir's regional cult increased vastly. Moreover, he deliberately sent his vicegerents to establish branches of the cult in most of the towns and some of the villages of the Frontier, the Punjab, and Sindh. In his later years, he initiated new disciples from among the Afghans living in the refugee camp near the lodge, and thus he now has a following in Afghanistan as well. He provided a *langar*, a free kitchen distributing "pure" food, during the Hajj, organized by the English branch of the cult order, and this attracted additional international followers. He also has branches of the cult in South Africa. Like his *murshid* (Sufi guide), Baba Qasim of Mohra Sharif, located at Muree, north of Islamabad, in the foothills of the Himalayas, his faith was inclusive and trans-ethnic. He was a man of peace.

The love for him felt by his ordinary disciples was a deep wellspring, which supported them in their daily endeavours. Orthodox, reform Sufism, of the kind I studied, which follows the shariah, and self-consciously avoids heterodox practices, is thriving in South Asia today: many of Zindapir's present followers are prominent men in the civil service, the army, the police, and even the government. My meetings with the saint, which usually occurred late at night, resembled intense psycho-analytic sessions in which it was never clear who the healer was, and who the patient. I had early on decided that I would not interrogate the Shaykh. He was far too big a figure and indeed, on the rare occasions when I was tempted to ask him a question, the answer was inevitably aphoristic and enigmatic. Instead, the Shaykh talked and I listened. Now and then he would say something that clearly sparked my inter-

est and, lighting up, he would elaborate on this theme. My main hope was to communicate my friendship and admiration without overstepping any boundaries. This seemed to work, because he called me to him again and again. He also allowed me to witness sessions with his female disciples, and with supplicants. Over time it became evident, however, that my role in the lodge as researcher was never quite clear. I was there to write a book, and the Shaykh supported the research, and yet the Shaykh did not want a book. He was a classic "directing" Shaykh, who wanted the people to come to him, to bask in his grace, not to read about him or admire his picture.

The saint died in 1999, and I attended the first 'urs commemorating his death in 2000. It was a sad event for me, though his followers celebrated his life in death with the usual devotion and pleasure. I missed his delightful, often mischievous, and invariably unpredictable presence. It was a deeply felt absence. But I gained many insights from this last visit to the lodge about the cult, its organization, its khalifa, and the organizational continuity following the death of a saint.

The peace that first attracted me to the Zindapir's order did not, to my disappointment, last forever. In particular, Hajji Karim and the order's mosque in Manchester came to be embroiled in internal conflicts of power and authority, which affected my own relationship as a field-worker with the order's living saint in Britain, the senior khalifa (deputy, vicegerent) of Zindapir. Yet Hajji Karim remains a faithful khalifa of Zindapir's son, now head of the order in Pakistan, and he continues to seek the divine revelation promised by Sufi mystics in their scholarly books, and to believe in the possibility of transcendence.

Notes

1. J. S. Trimmingham, *The Sufi Orders in Islam* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1971), 179.
2. Ibid., 172.

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Setting off on a procession in Birmingham