“Pilgrims of Love”
Sufism in a Global World

I first met Hajji Karim (a pseudonym) in 1987 quite accidentally, while researching Pakistani community politics in Manchester, England. The Central Jamia’s 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 emerged 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, linked in a sacred topography through flows of persons, goods, and tributes. 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 minor shrines of great antiquity, managed by descendants of the original saintly founder and guardians of his tomb, to minor shrines 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 tariqas as Trimingham calls them, “undergo cycles of expansion, stagnation, decay, and even death,” but since there are “thousands of them...one another continually being formed.” 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, contrasting 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.

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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.

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.

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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 pro

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 fieldworker 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

2. Ibid., 172.

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