Eastern Shrines and Western Values

A Subjective (self-) Reflection on why Western and Western Educated Scholars have Neglected State Run Pakistani Shrines.

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Introduction

In the beginning of 2008 I was still in search of a suitable topic for my PhD when a Professor of Cultural Anthropology and an adept of Lahore suggested I have a closer look at the shrine of Data Ganj Bukhsh, also called Data Darbar. Soon after, I found myself in a strange position. The shrine it seemed, was not only one of the oldest shrines of Lahore, and the largest of Pakistan in terms of visitors and space, but also one with immense importance for the city and the country at large. And yet, at the same time, there was hardly any academic literature to be found. It was mentioned in a number of works on topics such as the discourse on modernity and Sufism (Ewing, 1997), the nationalization of the countries auqaf-properties (Malik 1996) and a single article had been published on the urs of the shrine (Huda 2000). But considering the numerous monographs on shrines it seemed to me impossible that the western academic world had left this one out.

In time I have realized that the neglect of Data Darbar is closely linked to two characteristics of the shrine, namely its architecture and the fact that it is state run.

This paper therefore centres around one question: Why, with all the interest for Muslim shrines of Pakistan in the West, were state run shrines either completely neglected or, at least, the fact that they are state run was never dealt with? As an Anthropologist and Human Geographer I want to reflect upon what makes shrines interesting for western scholars and how they were viewed during both colonial and postcolonial periods with a distinct set of western values. I will start with a short overview on how shrines were viewed during the colonial period, then passing on to how certain paradigm shifts in the social sciences during the later half of the twentieth century suddenly changed much of the way shrines were seen and valued, and I will end with a description of how they fit into today's picture of South Asia and with what kind of academical baggage western students like myself, enter the study of Muslim shrines.

The Colonial Dichotomy

The British administration, always in search for local authorities to work with, used many of the sajjada nishins (traditional caretakers of the shrines) and pirs at the shrines to control the rural masses. A number of scholars have dealt with the close relationship between religious authority and political power, and this is not part of this paper (Gilmartin 1979, Malik 1996, 1983 and 1997). Besides this however there was a general devaluation especially of wandering Sufis and, subsequently, of the shrines where they could be found. The groups of qalanders and faqirs were viewed as problematic to society since they did not contribute to it in any form (given that their religious practices were viewed as useless and/or criminal). This view reflected the European values about labour that had evolved during the 19th century where

- "...labour for its own sake had taken on a transcendental value beyond any particular material reward that labor

might offer, and conversely, mendicity was regarded as a refusal to labor, a form of willful idleness. Idleness was interpreted as a manifestation of sinful pride, the ultimate rebellion against God." (Ewing 1997: 58-59)

Ewing writes this in her chapter Sadhus and Faqirs: The Sufi Pir as a Colonial Construct (Ewing 1997), which she begins, for our purpose, with a valuable description of a shrine from an article by Flora Davidson published shortly before Independence:

- It goes to one´s heart to see poor women who have trudged wearily miles and miles, with an ailing and perhaps dying baby in their arms, prostrating themselves at one of these shrines. They mutter long prayers, brush themselves down, present little oil lamps or a bit of cloth or food, at the grave of "who-knows-who", while the living Christ, the great Healer, His heart throbbing with love and compassion, stands by unknown and unrecognized. Islam, a religion founded on a Prophet… [now not living]… and buried, on obsolete laws, sterile precepts, customs and practices of the Dark Ages, maintains and even fosters a belief in superstitions and the efficacy of graves and dead men´s bones. (Davidson 1946, in Ewing 1997: 41-42).

The obvious dichotomy between the "living christ" and the "prophet… [not living]", between the "love and compassion" and the "customs and practices of the Dark Ages" is essentially that between the modern Europe and the traditional East. The shrines are seen as a remainder of older times and in the western descriptions negative aspects are highlighted such as corruption and misuse of power. Descriptions completely leave out the communal kitchens or the fact that many of the shrines were centres of Islamic teaching and other forms of knowledge.

But how did western scholars justify their interest in Sufism when it was viewed largely negatively? Ewing finds that in general all the positive aspects of spirituality in the subcontinent were positioned in the ancient times, when Sufi saints were still noble and wise (Eving 1997: 47). Western orientalists were mostly

educated in linguistics and concentrated on scriptures rather than how to deal with the concrete conditions in the colonies they were writing about. This was still the case when Trimmingham wrote his very influential book, The Sufi Orders in Islam, in 1971. While he viewed the early Sufis as creative individuals and a "natural expression of personal religion", through time, the orders (silsila) became more and more institutionalized to a degree where no further development of ideas was possible and thus symbolized the static tradition, par excellence, for Trimmingham (Eving 1997: 48f.). Today narratives about a golden past of honest Sufis versus a modern time of corruption and power misuse, can be found among many Pakistanis, while, in turn, I think a shift has taken place in the West.

Cultural Relativism, Orientalism & the Social Revolution

Two important shifts, one in Anthropology another in History changed the way western scholars wrote about shrines (and Sufism in general). Additionally with a change in values during the 1960s and 70's interest in these topics changed dramatically.

In the early nineteenth century cultural relativism was introduced to anthropology by Franz Boas. The basic idea, to understand every cultural phenomenon (and shrines would fall into this category) from within the "common sense" or logic of the particular culture of which it is a part, is today a doctrine of cultural anthropology. From this point of view, suddenly the shrines were viewed rather in their function to society and their meaning to the followers of a particular saint. A shift occurred from degrading the shrines as places of moral deterioration and corruption towards more interpretative descriptions of rituals at the shrines. Edvard Said´s Orientalism further strengthened reflexions on why and how western scholars used shrines as a way of showing eastern society´s inferiority compared to the West. But maybe the biggest change occurred when many social scientist became part of the general "cultural revolution" in Europe and North America in the late 1960s. More critical towards their own Governments, but also towards authorities in general many hitherto unquestioned

values came under criticism. In general this lead, together with the two mentioned shifts in paradigm, to a more self-reflective attitude towards their objects of study and to generally more problem-oriented studies, concentrating for example on child labor, modernization programs, natural disasters, ecological deterioration, religious conflicts and so on. Research on pilgrimage and sacred places led to more complex theories about these topics including the very influential works of Viktor Turner. Shrines were now viewed as places of liminality, where structural changes in power relations occurred and the egalitarian community at the shrines was seen as an anti-structure to the society surrounding it (Turner 1974). From today's perspective at least part of these theories can be explained as the attempt of explaining the shrines from within the society they were a part of, accepting, at least, on paper a different set of values and a hierarchical social structure as cultural relativism demanded, while at the same time leaving a back door open: even within these societies (eg. within the "cast system") egalitarian structures were possible, and be it just inside the shrines and temples or for specific period of time, for example the time of urs-festivals.

German Particularities and a New Ways of Studying Shrines

In Germany the study of Sufism has taken a slightly different turn. The reason is simple. When German romantic poets and artist discovered eastern philosophy and spirituality in the 19th century nothing stood in the way for an appreciation of these by the masses, unlike Britain where this could have led to a critical discussion about the legitimacy of colonial rule (Ewing 1997: 61). It is, therefore, little surprising that the most eminent scholar of Sufism in Germany, Annemarie Schimmel, had much affection for her topic. This affection has remained a characteristic of many scholars writing about Sufism in Pakistan in particular. The affection is, to a large degree, based on a concept I would call "Sufism as the better Islam". I will explain this in detail.

With the above shift in values in the late 1960's and 70's in Europe, more and more people turned away from religion as a

force defining norms and values and giving them the every day rules for interpersonal relationships. However, even though the church suffered losses and few people in Germany today visit a church on any occasion except maybe for Christmas, a new search for spirituality and mystical experiences had begun. People turned to Yoga, Zen-Buddhism, and various religions and religious practices from all over the world and some to Sufism in the way it was understood by many Europeans, not as one part of Islam, but rather as a religion in itself. This led to an appropriation of classical texts of the east, a revival of what had happened a century earlier. Shrines were now, not only the place where a more egalitarian social structure prevailed, but also where music was played, genders were mixed, people were dancing and drugs were taken. All viewed as positive indicators of a diverse and rich spirituality. Diversity of religion and cultures was also viewed as positive and the shrines and their similarities to Hindu temples was now emphasised in an attempt to show Indian and Pakistani common cultural roots. Much of this was and is the exact negative of the common image of Islam in the West, and in fact most of what is written recently starts with presenting Sufism and the many Muslim shrines of the subcontinent as the exact opposite of the Teleban and Al qaida.

Just to give an example I present the beginning of a recent article in The New York Times:

LAHORE, Pakistan — For those who think Pakistan is all hard-liners, all the time, three activities at an annual festival here may come as a surprise.

> Thousands of Muslim worshipers paid tribute to the patron saint of this eastern Pakistani city this month by dancing, drumming and smoking pot.
> It is not an image one ordinarily associates with Pakistan, a country whose tormented western border region dominates the news. But it is an important part of how Islam is practiced here, a tradition that goes back a thousand years to Islam's roots in South Asia.
> It is Sufism, a mystical form of Islam brought into South

Asia by wandering thinkers who spread the religion east from the Arabian Peninsula. They carried a message of equality that was deeply appealing to indigenous societies riven by caste and poverty. To this day, Sufi shrines stand out in Islam for allowing women free access. (New York Times, 26. Feb. 2010)

The pairs of negative and positive are common: hard liners vs. dancing, drumming and smoking pot; equality vs. caste and poverty, gender segregation vs. free access for women.

State run shrines as a "thorn in the side" for western scholars For those who see shrines in this way, and I would argue that most people today do so in the West, a shrine is a place of equality, where all forms of spirituality and folklore are possible and where no one is in control. Additionally many imagine a shrine to be an ancient place, centuries old and thus this should be reflected in its architecture. Numerous articles, books, cd´s and DVD´s celebrate Sufi shrines as places of tolerance and religious freedom.

Facing the original question put forward in this paper, we can now imagine how badly state run shrines fit in to this picture. First of all the fact that they are state run contradicts the view that there is little to no control, or that the sacred places are in some form "anti-structural". What happens inside a shrine is, in many ways, different to what happens outside it, but the state controls most of the Pakistani shrines to a much larger extent than other public places. This control is for example evident in the fact that numerous practices subsumed under the label "unislamic" have been banned from the shrines. It is exactly these practices that have created the idea of a "tolerant space" and, therefore, these shrines contradict the above picture. From a western point of view, the shrines lose their diversity and tolerant outlook. But for the many that work in the Department for Auqaf in charge of the shrines, or have influence on the Department, diversity has little value in itself. For them, a much more important value is the unity of Muslims, and for many this implies that certain practices that are strongly contested within the Muslim world, like circling a shrine as a compensation for circling

the Kaaba, or bowing in front of the tomb, be forbidden. Similarly the attraction of music, dance and drugs for the westerner seeking an exotic experience, in some cases, strictly contradicts the essential teachings of the saint for whom the shrine has been erected. This is, for example, the case at Data Darbar.

From this perspective it becomes evident why Data Darbar has yet to become a place of academic attention. The all-encompassing architectural changes the shrine has undergone have taken the "ancient look" and inflicted a strong fragmentation of the space. Qawwali sessions now take place in a basement and langar is distributed either outside it or in a specially designed distribution lot, while at many other shrines these activities take place just outside the tomb and make up much of what, for a westerner, is the "traditional atmosphere" of a Muslim shrine. The developments at Data Darbar are regarded by many as particular negative and a shocking example of how the state has "taken away the character of the place". But this negligence is dangerous for a number of reasons. First of all placing Sufism as the opposite of the Taleban and Al-qaida does great injustice to all the Muslims who might be critical of both and, in fact, often puts anyone who is critical of certain aspects of the shrines in a category with radical fundamentalists. Secondly, what happens at many shrines today reflects a wish by many to clean the shrines of corruption from the traditional caretakers, an aspect completely neglected in some of the writings by western academics about the time when the shrines were not in state hands. Anyone who holds the position that the Auqaf is simply making money at Data Darbar should visit one of the larger Muslim shrines in India. No one even gets to the gates of the shrines without at least a couple of people approaching with a demand for money on behalf of the "fact" that they are descendants from the saint.

What I want to show with this is simple. We are all part of a "Zeitgeist", a certain spirit of our times. The relationship between the West and the East is viewed according to this. And the way we pick our topics as well. However if history or historiography is there to tell us something, then it is to always keep in mind where

our interest comes from and which purpose it might serve. In the case of the many Pakistani shrines run under the Provincial Auqaf Departments, this has led to a dangerous negligence that needs to be corrected with more attention.

Endnotes

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