

7 Seekers on the path

Different ways of being a Sufi in Britain

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Organizational patterns of Sufi cult expansion

From its early beginnings, mystical Islam respected no national or international boundaries. Sufis moved along the trade routes and paths of imperial conquest and religious pilgrimage to remote and widely scattered corners of the earth. They began their itinerant existence in the tenth century CE, and have carried the message of Islam from the Near East to South Asia, Indonesia and West Africa.¹

Officially, Sufis claim to belong to named *tariqa* orders or fraternities, but none of these orders have inclusive command structures. What they share, notionally, are ways or paths towards Allah; *wazifas*, secret formulas and sequences of prayers for disciples to follow. These lead them through the different 'stations' on the mystical journey towards experiential revelation. In practice, Sufi cults focus around living or dead saints as *ta'ifas*, regional cults, organized very much along the same lines as other such regional cults.² Each cult has a sacred centre, the lodge founded by a living saint, and branches that recognize affiliation to it and participate regularly in its annual festivals. These branches extend across national boundaries wherever the emissaries of a saint, his *khalifas* and disciples, happen to settle. The foundation of a branch follows a predictable pattern and as it develops its material aspects (in the form of a mosque, for example) and ritual practice are enhanced. A branch may start with little more than a group which meets regularly to perform *dhikr*, the rhythmical chanting in unison of the name of Allah. It may progress to holding monthly *gyarvi sharif* ritual meetings in which sacralized food is cooked and distributed in commemoration of the birth/death of 'Abd al-Qadir al-Jilani, one of the founding saints of South Asian Sufism. It may gain its own *khalifa*, vicerent or deputy, recognized by the Centre (or miraculously, by God). It may even distribute *langar* (sacralized food, freely offered) on a daily, weekly, monthly or annual basis.³

Sufi regional cults are not particularly exclusive, although this varies somewhat. Disciples may follow more than one saint, attend more than one annual '*urs*' festival in commemoration of a departed saint, and in the absence of disciples' 'own' saint to whom they have sworn allegiance – happily attend the festivals of another saint, even from a different Sufi order. At the same time, however, Sufi regional cults are locked in thinly disguised competition with each other for disciples, and having many disciples, an enormous gathering at saintly festivals, certainly proves that a saint is a

great saint, a *wali*, friend of God. Like other regional cults, Sufi cults wax and wane, with the sacred centre of the cult rising to great prominence or sinking into oblivion.⁴ Characteristically, during the period of cult expansion, new branches are formed which leapfrog over the sacred dominions of other, established Sufi cults, and over political and administrative boundaries, to form a new sacred network focused on the central lodge where a living saint lives or is buried.

Within South Asia, there are the recognized cults of the great Sufi saints who brought Islam to the subcontinent, whose places of burial draw millions annually. But there is no obligation to perform pilgrimage to these places. A minor saint in the back street of a dilapidated part of a slum in a large city may draw devotion from a circle of local disciples.⁵ Sufism is thus extremely chaordic,⁶ having the capacity to expand across boundaries while remaining local and even parochial, recognizing its regional, national and international extensions while practising locally.

Post-colonial transnational Sufi cults outside Pakistan or India form one materially embodied way of being diasporic. Saints, disciples and followers move in predictable pathways between major and minor sacred centres, in the diaspora or between it and Pakistan, especially on festival occasions. South Asian Sufi regional cults are located 'in' a global South Asian Muslim diaspora rather than being simply 'diasporic'. The discourses and practices they perpetuate are a way of living and seeing things outside home, and the movements of Sufi cults in space, like their material exchanges across space, constitute one dimension (modality, perspective) of the Pakistani global diaspora today, and, even more broadly, of the Muslim global diaspora.

In Britain there are by now a large number of Pakistani Sufi cults centred on local *khalifas* or saints (*pirs*) which recognize sacred genealogical links to different orders and saints located in different parts of Pakistan. Each cult forms a network of saintly brothers and sisters (*pir-bhai/bhen*) with centres or branches in a dozen British cities: Bradford, Manchester, Birmingham, Luton, London, and so forth. In my recent research on such orders, I studied members of six very different orders, all located in Manchester, each with a local leader and an extensive national and international network. Disciples and saints visit each other's centres in other cities regularly on a weekly or monthly basis, and keep in regular contact with the cult centre in Pakistan. Reciprocally, saintly leaders of the cults from Pakistan visit their followers in Britain, often staying for several weeks or months.

In the present chapter I want to focus on the life paths and ways of being a Sufi of several *khalifa* belonging to a single Sufi order and regional cult of a Naqshbandi Shaykh, Zindapir, who died in 1999 in the North West Frontier Province at the age of about 89. Zindapir was a classic directing *shaykh* in the Naqshbandi style.⁷ Both amongst his closest *khalifas* in Pakistan, and those who migrated to Britain, the tendency was to emulate the saint as the supreme example of ethical living. So much so that in Pakistan itself the lodges of *khalifas*, their appearance and mode of living replicated the sacred centre through a process of remarkable religious mimesis. At the same time, as I argue in my book about Zindapir's cult,⁸ each *khalifa* also followed a distinctive path towards Allah.

As mentioned, the Naqshbandi order is only in theory a unitary order. It has, on the whole, been characterized by its orthodox stress on *shari'a* and a tendency, especially

in the Near East and Asia Minor, to work closely with political regimes.⁹ Originating in Central Asia, one of the more renowned Naqshbandi figures of Indian Sufism was Shaykh Ahmed Sirhindi, the Mujaddad Alfi-Thani, who attempted to synthesize mystical Islam with the more austere *shari'a* and engaged in a defence of orthodox Islam against the heterodoxy of the Mughal Emperor Akbar. The Naqshbandis in South Asia, unlike Naqshbandis in Turkey for example, thus have a tradition of dissent not found elsewhere.

Sirhindi founded a Naqshbandi sub-order in South Asia known as Naqshabandi Mujaddidi, which stressed the direct, unmediated contact with the Shaykh and his divine grace (*faiz*). The cult discussed in detail below was not, however, a Mujaddidiyya one, being more eclectic in its practice of *dhikr*, but it was nevertheless linked through its spiritual genealogy to Sirhindi, via the cult saint's master, Baba Qasim of Mohra Sharif at Muree. Zindapir, the living saint who was the founder of the cult, also highlighted his dissenting stance *vis-à-vis* Pakistani politicians by stressing their hubris and corrupt practices. The cult was also strictly orthodox in many ways. For example, the *pir* demanded that his disciples come into unmediated contact with him, forbidding during his lifetime all pictures or portraits of himself, and even the publication of any biographical accounts or poetry written in his honour. At the same time he rarely philosophized about Sufism with close disciples, preferring the use of parables and proverbs to illustrate his esoteric knowledge. As a *ta'ifa*, a separate regional cult, his cult was identified as belonging to the Sufi order of Naqshbandia Ghamkolia, thus appending the name of the cult centre to the wider order.

The heterogeneity of Diaspora

Elsewhere, as in my monograph *The Migration Process*,¹⁰ I have written about processes of Pakistani migration and community formation in Britain and Manchester, culminating in the building of the Central Manchester *Jam'ia* mosque. What makes the Pakistani communities that have emerged throughout Britain diasporic, rather than simply ethnic or religious, I argue, is an orientation in time and space – towards a different past or pasts and another place or places beyond Britain. What makes these diasporas into communities is categorically *not* their unity. Like Sufi cults, people belong to a diaspora in quite different, materially embodied ways. Some people set up Urdu poetry reading circles. They meet every month to recite poetry in each other's company. Some set up religious discussion groups known as *dars*. They meet in mosques, homes or restaurants to talk about Islam. Such groups host visiting poets or religious experts from Lahore, London or Delhi.¹¹ Some diasporas organize Pakistani political parties and commemorate Pakistani national leaders like Quaid-i-Azam, Muhammad Ali Jinnah.¹² The social heterogeneity of diasporas, their internal complexity, is a central feature of all established diasporas. This is particularly so in the case of South Asian Muslims who orient themselves towards a global Islam while practising a peculiarly Pakistani or South Asian version of that Islam.

In Britain, what is remarkable is the variety and heterogeneity of Sufi groups that co-exist even within a single British city such as Manchester, along with, at a deeper level, their similarities. Most significant I think is the fact already mentioned that all the groups foster national networks which connect Pakistani settlers from different

places in new social configurations which are both voluntaristic and intellectually exploratory. Seen in a broader sociological perspective, Sufi cults in Britain, like other forms of religious organization, created links between Pakistani communities which go beyond prior kinship, caste or village relations. Such cross-cutting ties, extending into Pakistan, created a consciousness of a broader, elective Muslim community.

There are several distinctive features of Sufi cults which might be worth highlighting:

- 1 Only some groups attract British-born followers. At present groups are being augmented and reproduced in Britain partly because of a continuous influx of inmarrying young people, both men and women, from the subcontinent.
- 2 There is a general stress, shared by all the groups, on *dhikr*, or meditation. Also evident is the heterodox character of Sufism in Britain. Some groups are particularly inventive of new traditions, others veer towards a strict *salafiyya* (fundamentalist) pole.
- 3 In some groups the extent of gender equality and mixing is quite remarkable. In others, gender separation is almost total.
- 4 Many of the British-born or bred followers of Sufi saints in Britain are educated professionals. This highlights the fact that mystical Islam can remain attractive to educated Muslims.
- 5 Although the groups perceive themselves to be open to members of all faiths and nationalities, in reality groups are composed almost exclusively of men and women of Pakistani background. The dominant language spoken is Urdu, and the cultural milieu distinctively South Asian.
- 6 All the cult leaders engage in faith healing and amulet writing, and this is clearly a key source of income and new recruits. The belief in afflicting demonic *jinn*s is widespread among young, British-born Pakistanis who have developed a whole lore of terrifying *jinn* stories. There is some evidence also, however, of disillusionment with Sufi healers, based on in-depth interviews I conducted.¹³

The study in Manchester showed that for young people in Britain of Pakistani origin Sufism is grasped in social and ethical terms, while at the same time it is perceived to lead to an experience of transcendence and to a deeper, more real, form of knowledge. In all the groups, being a disciple leads to a broader exposure to like-minded Pakistanis living in different towns and cities in Britain, and to new kinds of links with Pakistan and Islam.

For the rest of this contribution, I want to focus on three *khalifas* of Zindapir who exemplify some of the very different ways of being a Sufi in Britain, even within a single, orthodox, Naqshbandi Sufi cult.

The organization man: Building a Sufi order in the land of the infidels

'Sufi Sahib Ghamkolvi who is living in the land of infidels'—so the monthly Pakistani magazine *Moubafiz-e-Haq*¹⁴ opens its account of Zindapir's senior *khalifa*

in Britain – is, like ‘the perfect saints who spread Islam in India’ (here the magazine cites some famous examples), ‘taking them out of the darkness of infidelity and lighting the candle of God’s and the Prophet’s oneness. So too in Britain, from the land of Birmingham a fountain of unity (*tawhid*) and Prophecy (*risalat*) has spread all over Europe where preaching and printings quench the thirst of Muslims.’

The article, entitled ‘Zindapir’s Miracle (*karamat*) in Britain’, goes on to stress Sufi Sahib’s qualities as a man of practice and religion (*din*) with outstanding results: ‘The Ghamkolia mosque not only benefits the Muslims of Britain’, the magazine tells us, ‘but it also gives pride to all British people of the Prophet (*Ahl al-Sunna*, i.e. Barelwi followers)’.

Sufi Sahib, at 77 still a giant of a man, well over six feet tall, with a powerful presence, survived three years in a German Prisoner-of-War camp during World War II, before meeting his *pir* in Abbotabad in 1945. For the next 17 years he served as a Non Commissioned Officer (NCO) (*subedar*) in the Pakistan army while also serving his *pir*, helping to found and build the central lodge at Ghamkol. This long and intimate association with Zindapir during the founding years of the order has endowed Sufi Sahib with an almost mythical status. The days and weeks he spent at the lodge in the company of his *shaykh* at a time when it was still a wild, uncultivated place, are regarded as a source of immense spiritual power. During those years he was a close companion, helping to bring up Zindapir’s small child, Badshah Sahib, when he lost his mother at a tender age.

By the time Sufi Sahib migrated to Britain as a labour migrant in 1962, at the age of 35, he was well established as a trusted companion of the Shaykh. According to his own account, when the *pir* appointed him a *khalifa* to Britain he was filled with self-doubt: ‘I am only an ordinary person. How can I perform such an important task?’ he asked. Zindapir replied with his usual conviction that since he was embarking on God’s work, God would help him.¹⁵ In Britain he encountered Pakistanis who never prayed and did not even know the location of the mosque or the direction of the *qibla*. He describes the first ‘*urs* in Birmingham:

There were two other *pir-bhais* in Britain. The three of us celebrated the ‘*urs* with a *mahfil* which lasted half an hour.... We made a mosque in one room of our house. When we held the Friday *jum’a* prayers there for the first time we were only seven or eight people.... Later we began to do *dhikr* ... in 1964 we began to perform *dhikr* regularly.... Now with the blessing of God we have a mosque, a community centre, ten houses which are the property of the mosque, and a printing press.¹⁶

He also noted the order’s Dar-al-Ulum in Manchester and the school in Birmingham for *hafez qur’ans* which had so far trained over forty young boys to memorize the text of the whole Qur’an.

I visited Sufi Sahib’s Golden Hillock complex in Birmingham in 1994, when the building of the mosque was still in progress. By this time he had created an impressive array of institutions on his property: a community centre, funded by Birmingham Metropolitan Council to the tune of £400,000, which housed a training college for

industrial sewing machinists, a wedding and community hall and (in 1998) a centre for the elderly and disabled. Users of the hall were not charged a fee but were asked to make a donation to the mosque. The older terraces in the complex had been entirely refurbished and now housed an employment centre which included a job club for the unemployed, a pre-vocational training centre, information technology training, typewriting, youth training and English language courses. An Advice Centre employed two men and there was also a pre-university access course with an excellent attendance record. Paid workers included a mix of young British Pakistani disciples and English instructors. Upstairs, in one of the buildings, was a hostel for the young boys learning to be *hafez*. The concentration of services for Asians in a single complex was impressive, providing training in needed skills, and helping to motivate men and women lacking in self-confidence, and to cushion their access and entry into the labour market. This was very much an English way of being a Sufi – acquiring charitable status, establishing a management committee and voluntary organizational structure, serving the community.

The story of the building of the new mosque as told by Sufi Sahib is one of astute and miraculous negotiation with the City Council. Initially, he acquired some terrace houses and a large hut which replaced the downstairs living room of his house as the order's mosque and *dhikr* meeting place. Then, in 1985, his management committee applied to the Council for additional parking space. The Council offered an adjacent area of 35 derelict terraces. What did the Council intend to do with the rest of the houses? Did it have any other project in mind? Sufi Sahib commented,

Since this place was allocated by God to be a mosque, the City Council told us: if you build a mosque on this area we will sell the land to you for a third of the price. We fell silent for a minute but then we thought: a non-Muslim is offering us a place for a mosque and yet we are hesitating ... we sat together and talked the matter over among ourselves and realised that this is the best place in which to build a mosque. We then drew up a plan and presented it to the City Council. When they saw it, the English started to laugh: how could we build such a big mosque? They laid down a condition that if we failed to build a mosque in eighteen months, they would confiscate the land. We accepted their terms and, by the grace of God, the very day we were given the land, work began. ... We completed the mosque in four years. The mosque has 56 pillars, each 45 feet in diameter.¹⁷

Fund raising for the mosque involved a major drive. Sufi Sahib and his disciples travelled on weekends to every town and city in Britain, and contributions also came from Europe, from Iraq (which contributed £5000) and from Islamic Relief (Saudi Arabia) which gave £11,000. All the rest of the money, several million pounds sterling, was donated by ordinary people. 'When people say I built this mosque I say, No, I did not build it, the Muslims built it.' The chandeliers alone in the central hall cost £75,000 each. 'I am the son of a farmer and have been all my life a factory worker. This is all due to the blessing (*karam*) of God.' And Sufi Sahib continued: 'My *pir* has never been to this country but there are fourteen cities where, every week, *dhikr*

gatherings are held, and every month, *gyarvwin sharif* is celebrated [*in his name*]. So too the '*urs* [*to commemorate him*] is held in fourteen places'.¹⁸

This extension of Zindapir's regional cult to England has, in large measure, been the achievement of Sufi Sahib's tireless organizational work, along with his determination to emulate his saint. Much of the building work at the mosque was done with voluntary labour, cutting the costs substantially. The example set by Zindapir, who used voluntary labour extensively to build up his lodge¹⁹ clearly motivates him. Like his *pir*, he says, he never asks *murids* their names. This is because, as the *pir* told him: 'If you keep water, those who are thirsty will find you.' The *pir* also instructed him never to visit the homes of *murids* as this might arouse jealousy or impose expenses on the *murid* that he cannot afford, thus causing inconvenience rather than blessing. Like Ghamkol Sharif, Sufi Sahib's mosque is open to everyone. Like Zindapir, he has never, he says, delivered a sermon (*taqrir*). Even the performance of *dbikr* is regarded as a miracle (*i'jaz*) of his saint: in the early days they had had to defend the *dbikr* against detractors, but now *dbikr* is performed everywhere in Britain.

He describes the new mosque as a 'wonder of Islamic art for Muslims and non-Muslims alike'. Whenever groups come from abroad, he says, the City Council sends them to see the mosque. They are told: this mosque was not built with human power but with the spirituality of the saint of Ghamkol Sharif.

In the conclusion of the article, Sufi Sahib mentions with pride that the processions on Milad al-Nabi and on the '*urs*, which started in 1973, today attract thousands of followers of Ghamkol from all over the country, besides thousands of others who join in the march. During the two days of the celebrations, '*ulama* preach the virtuous deeds of the Prophet and *na't* singers sing his praises, much as they do at Ghamkol, while the *langar* is freely distributed. Besides this, thousands of booklets are printed and distributed free of charge, so that 'non-Muslims can understand Islam and our own people know the meaning of the true faith. All this is because of the miracles and grace (*faiz*) of Zindapir'.²⁰

With this, the magazine interview ends. It reveals Sufi Sahib to be in many ways a sensitive and humble person, conscious of his connection and indebtedness to his *pir*. This sense of humility is echoed by a thesis written about him and the order in Birmingham in the early 1980s.²¹ Draper reports that Sufi Sahib often claimed that his status was low, and abnegated himself as having no spiritual value. Out of the context of public display, Draper says, he revealed a 'humility and melancholy at certain times in contrast to other moments of apparent transcendent serenity'. This is 'in contrast to the personality image which many external critics consider him to manifest, claiming that he is arrogant and self-deluded', and it also contrasts with his large physical build which 'reinforces the image of authority that many feel he possesses'.²² As his power and influence have grown, so too, I myself found, has the volume of such denunciations. The *pir* is said to have become more like a *maulvi* than a *pir* (i.e. more concerned with exoteric matters than with spiritual Sufism), to have lost his way, to lack the spirituality of a saint, to be interested only in money or in self-glorification, so that when he invites '*ulama* to orate at the '*urs*, it is only so that they can praise him.

Draper (who for a while was a disciple himself and a Sufi follower) notes the *pir*'s 'sense of humour and joviality which never extends into triviality but functions as a means of reducing tension.... In many ways', he says, 'this sense of humour is the source of his charisma'.²³ When I first read this passage it surprised me: I had never seen the humorous side of Sufi Sahib's personality, which he clearly reserved for his closest disciples. There is no doubt, however, that the majority of followers both in Britain and in Pakistan respect him very highly, and that he has a reputation for being a meticulously honest man in handling religious donations. It was he, after all, who has for the past forty years organized the annual *langar* of Zindapir at Mecca, on Hajj, and this has made him widely known even to Pakistani disciples. After 1988, he began to attend the 'urs at Ghamkol regularly, and to dominate the all-night *dhikr* there. He led the *dhikr* prayers in March 2000, after the saint's death, much as he always does in Birmingham, with incredible vigour.

There is little doubt that Sufi Sahib has become a significant religious figure in the Islamic Barelwi landscape of Britain. The magnificent mosque he has built and the fundraising drive he initiated, which appealed to all Muslims in Britain and Europe, well beyond the Ghamkolia order, made him a national public figure outside Birmingham and Zindapir's regional cult. That he called the mosque Ghamkolia and acknowledged his continued deference to Zindapir and his family were thus significant acts of voluntary humility. In turn, the family of Zindapir respects his authority in Britain. Yet they feel uneasy about the fund-raising drive. Unlike Sufi Sahib, Zindapir had built his lodge almost entirely with voluntary labour, not through public appeals. Unlike Zindapir, Sufi Sahib has also always permitted open expressions of adulation towards his person from disciples, a form of veneration which Zindapir rejected and repeatedly tried to stop.

The ambiguity of authority was stretched to its limits by the death of the saint. Sufi Sahib was, after all, recognized to be his most charismatic *khalifa*. At the first 'urs after the saint's death, in October 1999, it was Sufi Sahib who was asked by the saint's son to say the final *du'a* in place of Zindapir. It was he who led the *dhikr* (the following year this was changed).

Such interregnums inevitably highlight ambiguities in authority. There is no doubt, however, that Sufi Sahib proved through his actions his continued loyalty and generosity towards the saint and his family. For one thing, he visited Ghamkol at least four times during 1999–2000: first, to see the Shaykh who was already very frail and ill; then, to attend the funeral; then, to attend the 'urs in October 1999 (the old annual date); and finally, to attend the 'urs in March 2000, the first to commemorate the death of Zindapir. This was on top of a trip to Mecca and Medina for 'umra during Ramadan.

Such tireless devotion from a man of 77 suffering from diabetes and other ailments undoubtedly proved his deep sense of love and commitment: the journey to Pakistan is long and tiring and includes an overnight flight and endless queues at Islamabad airport. During his sojourn at the lodge, Sufi Sahib stayed up night after night, energetically performing *dhikr*. He showed his solidarity with the family through these gestures of devotion, and on each occasion he brought with him a large entourage of disciples and followers from England. For the family at Ghamkol and the Pakistani

khalifas who were trying to manage a very difficult transition following the saint's death, the public support given by a person of such charismatic authority, deeply linked to the history of the lodge, who had travelled long distances from a faraway land to be at the lodge – such support was clearly of great symbolic and emotional significance.

Like Zindapir, Sufi Sahib was a supreme organization man. Unlike him, the increase in his organizational power seemed to generate suspicion and resentment among some of his closest disciples, along with accusations that he had lost his spirituality (*rubaniyat*) and grace (*faiz*), and had become too materialistic and religiously dogmatic. He never learnt to speak English and most English converts who came to him ultimately found him too 'Pakistani' and abandoned the order.²⁴ He clearly harboured deep suspicions against the 'infidels' (i.e. the citizens of the UK) in the midst of whom he had made his home and who are, after all, the majority in Britain.

This rejection of non-Sunni Muslims is a strand in the Naqshbandi tradition which can be traced to Sirhindi, but it was not the way chosen by his *murshid*, Zindapir, who, like Baba Qasim before him, was renowned for his religious tolerance and universalism.

Sufi Sahib also resembled Naqshbandis elsewhere in fostering very good relations with local government and with the '*ulama*'. At the same time he was without doubt one of the most successful Sufi *pirs* in Britain in attracting young, British born, Pakistani men as disciples, and this cohort was utterly loyal to him. As one such follower told me, these young followers would willingly 'go through fire and water' for him. More than anything, he clearly loved surrounding himself with his young male disciples, eating, sleeping and doing *dhikr* in their company, much like a scout leader or the NCO he once was. Sufi Sahib was, above all, an extremely sociable, indeed gregarious, man, a mover and a shaker, not the kind of Sufi who isolates himself in contemplation and meditation.

The Sufi intellectual, and the structuralist quest for gnosis

Sufi cosmological images are usually deployed in emotional and fragmentary imagery. This tends to disguise the deep structural logic of Sufism, interrupting it with flowery, highly elaborate poetical and ethical interpretations. It was thus unusual to meet a Sufi who had devoted his life's work to proving the highly systematic logic of Sufi cosmology as expounded by Sirhindi and others. Indeed, it was the chance meeting with this self-conscious structuralist which first enticed me as an anthropologist to study Sufism and Sufi orders.

If Sufi Sahib stressed practical worship ('*amal*') above all else, and Rab Nawaz – one of the closest *khalifas* of Zindapir in Pakistan who was a poet – expressed his love for his *pir* in poetical and ethical terms, another English *khalifa* of Zindapir, Hajji Karim, founder of the branch and mosque of the order in Manchester, sought ultimate knowledge of transcendent, eternal spheres. He was not satisfied with '*amal*' which did not open up the gates to gnosis, nor did the experience of love for his saint delude him into thinking that he had experienced true mystical revelation. Having mapped out all the Sufi conceptual schemata systematically, on the basis of his readings, he was seeking the specific key which might unlock the experiential and epistemological

gates to this universe. Idle talk of love or idiosyncratic references to Sufi terms were of no interest to him. He was a seeker for the Truth (*haqiqat*) beyond the ephemeral world of experience. His inability to reach this world filled him with sorrow. After Zindapir's death in 1999, and even before it, he began to seek another *murshid* who might guide him to spheres of divine knowledge which his Shaykh, the Shaykh's son and Sufi Sahib, had all failed to guide him towards. He took textual constructions of Sufi cosmology to be a literal description of a reality out there.

Through an elaborate series of diagrams which he constructed in Urdu based on Naqshbandi sources, Hajji Karim highlighted a series of oppositions and homologies: between body and cosmos, the ephemeral versus eternal worlds, carnal versus eternal soul (*nafs* and *ruh*), exoteric and esoteric, saints versus prophets, shadows versus truth, attributes versus essence, body lights versus body matter, all in ascending, hierarchical order. The movement he outlined is upward, through sainthood to prophethood, from the shadows through the attributes to the essence, and then back again, to incorporate on the way down the base body and achieve a final physical transformation. In these parallel worlds of microcosm and macrocosm, body and cosmos, the mediators are, on one side, sainthood/the throne of God, and on the other, the human heart. Each mediator participates in both the higher and the lower world. In Sirhindi's thought, represented by Karim in a series of spherical diagrams, each world reached opens up new worlds but the generative principles remain constant throughout.

What are we to make of such indigenous structuralist models? Structuralism has been the subject of powerful critiques from interpretivist and post-structuralist approaches. In the present instance a speculative mystical philosophy presents itself as an accurate science. The bricoleur is not an experimenter, as Levi-Strauss recognizes.²⁵ Because it is entirely speculative, Sufism is not bound by empirical realities. Nevertheless, the language and logic of science lends it authority and verity despite the fact that in many ways it is a highly tentative set of propositions, so that Sufis ultimately must rely on image and representation rather than on scientific evidence to make their claims.

As mentioned, Hajji Karim relied upon published sources in Urdu, including the letters of Shaykh Ahmad Sirhindi and the writings of other Naqshbandi texts, as well as on his discussions with his fellow *khalifas* in Birmingham. Our conversations on Sufism took place during innumerable sessions at his home in Manchester and at the lodge in Pakistan.

Hajji Karim is a British Pakistani from Mirpur. When we first started our conversations he was approaching 40. He came to England in his early teens to join his labour migrant father. Leaving school at 16, he worked for many years in a foundry, where he first met Sufi Sahib, and through him became a disciple and then *khalifa* of the saint in Pakistan. Despite his lack of formal education, what is remarkable about his account of Sufi philosophy is its total integration and sheer structural brilliance. Although Sufi Karim's mastery of texts has not enabled him to reach personally to the elusive realms of Sufi knowledge, it nevertheless supports his continued faith in Sufism.

During the course of my research I was repeatedly told that hidden knowledge in Sufism is arrived at through experience rather than through intellectual scholarship; the way to gnosis is via the heart, through the practice of *dhikr* and the love of a *shaykh*.

This Sufi privileging of knowledge as experience over knowledge gained from written sources is one which may be subverted, since esoteric knowledge is paradoxically a more public commodity than the mystical experience it supposedly reflects. This has not, however, undermined the charismatic power of the saint, for the 'real' hidden knowledge believed by his disciples to lead to mystical revelation is of specific technical directives – practices of seclusion and meditation associated with the repetition of Qur'anic verses and *wazifas* (litanies) – which only the saint knows, and which are thought to be the sole means of advancing on the Sufi path. The saint's *ijazat*, permission, is essential before embarking on any form of ritual practice. Without his knowledge and guidance, it is believed, a person may go mad, be 'lost' forever in mystical ecstasy.

Hence it is Sufi written texts – rather than revelation through experience – that may open up for ambitious disciples the realms of gnosis and the religious imagination. But these Sufi texts also serve to legitimize the saint's absolute authority. This is because, although disciples may have read widely in Sufi Naqshbandi texts, the key, they believe, to the realms of Sufi secret knowledge-as-experience still lies ultimately with the saint, and the saint in this case refuses to talk about these matters altogether. Hajji Karim remained a disappointed man. In this he differed from another *khalifa* of Zindapir and Sufi Sahib, a genuine modern scientist who has nevertheless embraced Sufism as a way of life.

The English scientist

Dr Alam Din, Zindapir's *khalifa* at Pennine,²⁶ a small town in Derbyshire, is a prominent scientist working at the cutting edge of current research in genetic therapy. He has a full-time permanent research post at a major British university. Dr Din is a youngish, thin man, about 40, sporting a dark beard and glasses and dressed in modern casual clothes. He speaks softly, in measured tones, at times breaking into a mischievous smile or grin when he suddenly becomes quite English. He grew up in England, arriving from Kashmir as a boy of about 9. Like Zindapir, he seems able to switch from a tone of deep piety to witty, cuttingly critical remarks. With his genuineness, integrity, quiet assurance, natural modesty and willingness to take risks and act independently, his persona radiates a measure of personal charisma.

Dr Din's father was a *khalifa* of Zindapir and a recognized minor *pir* in his own right. After his death, Dr Din took over his responsibilities as *khalifa* and juggles these with his full-time job as a scientist. He made little attempt, however, to describe Sufism to me as a scientific theory. Instead, his stress was on identity and identification:

Here in England our link to Zindapir was always mainly spiritual and I feel that this spiritual connection has actually increased after his death. I feel his presence all the time, he supports me, I am nothing without him.

The first time he met Zindapir was after his father's death and burial in Mirpur:

... the first time my eyes fell on him it looked as if I had come back to see my father. Hazrat Sahib looked exactly like father, with a sideways view, and I thought,

I've come back to my father. And that was [*intended*] for my peace of mind, to say that your father has not left you, he is still with you, but now physically in Hazrat Sahib's body [*in other words, the saint created the resemblance deliberately in order to comfort him*] ... and therefore, you know, Hazrat Sahib is not only my *shaykh* but my father figure. And so Hazrat Sahib gave me the responsibility of the *khilafat* that my father had; that was something beyond imagination.

He then told me of an admonishing letter sent to him by Zindapir following a scientific meeting he had attended in Switzerland where he omitted to observe some of the prescribed daily prayers. This miraculous knowledge from a distance strengthened his faith: 'I feel that, you know, he is there any time I need him, he's watching over me.' He also told me of his good fortune in getting his present post, having been passed over for another, apparently superior job. Although his present job had started at a lower level, it was followed by rapid and multiple promotions. He attributed this to God's will. The connection to the Shaykh gave him the will to continue with all the events of the order, the weekly *dbikr*, *gyarvi*, *milad*, '*urs*', consistently without gaps.

There were some rumblings from other disciples when he got the *khilafat* from the Shaykh at a very young age. 'I got the *khilafat* when I was 33 and I also got my Ph.D. when I was 33.' The branch in Pennine was built up slowly by his father and at first, even the performance of *dbikr* was greeted with criticism. But from the very start he had loved doing *dbikr* and never missed the Friday *mahfil*, even when he was a student in London.

After *dbikr* you physically feel very tired, if you've done it properly, but mentally and spiritually you feel very enlightened, you feel as if a burden has been taken off you, you know, and it broadens the mind, it opens, it, you start, you have a problem, you think about it and the answer comes to you. Afterwards, yes. Yes, it helps you to find solutions yourself.

[P.:] It's a very deep form of contemplation?

[Dr Din:] Oh yes, it is the only worship that automatically becomes worthy of acceptance. In prayer when you are prostrating in front of Allah and you've made your *niyat*, your intention, and during prayer, *namaz*, it is impossible to have your mind and tongue and heart united in what you're doing. Usually, most of the time, almost invariably, your mind is thinking about something else and your tongue is saying something else and you don't know where your heart is. So that kind of worship is not worthy of acceptance. In *dbikr-Allah* you have no choice: you are shouting at the top of your voice, 'God is Great,' and you are sitting in darkness, removed from distractions, you cannot shout at the top of your voice without having your mind, your tongue and your heart united, and those are the conditions of getting your worship accepted – when your mind and your heart and your tongue are united in the same.

He admitted that he had not even reached the first step on the Sufi path but at the same time, his Shaykh had given him 'close attention' (i.e. *tawajjuh*) that 'even

decades of worship can't take you there. That is the difference, that is why I feel I am lucky, because other people do worship for decades before they reach this stage when they can get the attention of their *shaykh*.'

He knew he had this 'attention' after he was reprimanded by Sufi Sahib during *Hajj* for supposedly backbiting against another *khalifa* who was acting as *darban*, the gatekeeper of the saint. He felt mortified and tried to persuade Sufi Sahib to come with him to the Shaykh to explain that this was not his intention, but to no avail. Sufi Sahib refused. Eventually, he mustered up his courage and went to see Zindapir on his own. He told the Shaykh that he had really meant to praise the *darban*. Zindapir looked at him and said, simply, 'I love you.' He just said, I love you, and he, Dr Din, believed him. Zindapir knew what was in his heart. How could Sufi Sahib believe his intention was bad? He, Sufi Sahib, is not a proper *pir*, he cannot see into people's heart.

He is a shy man, he said, but now he finds himself greeting strangers. And people come to him for healing from all over: Nottingham, London. He makes no claims but they still come. Sometimes there are queues outside, every night, even in winter. He even has permission to initiate disciples. His aim is to bring the true message of Islam to England, not the one promoted by fundamentalists. He runs the Friday *jum'a* prayers at the hospital. In this context he gave me a short summary of the four stages of Islam (TSWF): *Tauha* (repentance), *saf* (purification), *wali* (friend of God), *fana fi Allah* (annihilation in God, the complete merging with God). The first stage is to be lost in the *daman* (robe), the being, the body, of the *pir*, then the Prophet, then God.

Like most *murids*, Dr Din feels loved and chosen by his saint. For him the Shaykh is his father incarnate, his spiritual guide, his protector and comforter in the absence of a real father who died when he was quite young. His Sufism is for him a source of identity and conviction which complements his role as an English scientist and anchors him deeply in his local community, giving him a role, a standing and a mission. And yet one did not feel, in talking to Dr Din, as one did talking to Rab Nawaz, the *khalifa*-poet of Zindapir, that he missed Zindapir the man following his death. The Shaykh remained an exemplar, an emblematic figure, an imaginary – all of which continued to exist and to give him strength.

Conclusion

Each of the men considered here: Sufi Sahib, Alam Din and Hajji Karim, embarked on their own life projects partly through intense emotional identification with their saint in Pakistan. Only Hajji Karim constructed this project in purely intellectual terms. Unlike Zindapir, the cult in Britain headed by Sufi Sahib has, over time, generated a measure of conflict and suspicion, although often muted. Building up a religious empire in Britain has involved certain choices for Sufi Sahib of which other disciples disapproved. As his material dominion has expanded, so too has Sufi Sahib's spiritual reputation among early disciples and *khalifas* diminished. He is now seen by some to be corrupt, vain and power seeking. For others, he has become too closely

associated with the *'ulama* and their perceived prejudices and exclusions. His alienation from British society is a problem for many. Yet he has retained an aura of charisma and a large devout following among ordinary disciples throughout Britain. In his own eyes, he clearly remains a humble follower of his *murshid*, his perceptor and guide.

As a diasporic Sufi cult centred on Pakistan, Zindapir's regional-cum-global cult has been remarkably successful. It is perhaps the largest *ta'ifa* in Britain, and its international extensions into Afghanistan, the Middle East, Southern Africa and more recently Europe and the United States, have developed through sub-centres linked in viable connections to the original sacred centre founded by the saint at Ghamkol Sharif. Yet the following is still almost entirely composed of South Asian migrants and their descendants. Zindapir's cult has expanded in tandem with postcolonial migrations to the West. He began as an 'army' saint (he was a tailor-contractor accompanying the British and later Pakistani armies) with a following of disciples drawn from the army, the police and government service. These followers, once retired from army or government service, have extended his name globally wherever they migrated.

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Notes

- 1 There is a large literature on the spread of Sufism into South Asia (see, for example, Eaton 1993).
- 2 On the organization of *ta'ifas*, see Trimmingham (1971); on regional cults see Richard Werbner (1977, 1989).
- 3 For a more elaborate discussion of *langar* see P. Werbner (1998).
- 4 See Werbner (1977).
- 5 See Frembgen (1998).
- 6 Elsewhere I have written on the notion of 'chaorder' as a feature of diasporas which lack central command structures, yet develop along predictable lines (see Werbner 2002b).
- 7 See Buehler (1998).
- 8 See Werbner (2003).
- 9 There is an extensive literature on the Naqshbandis, both in South Asia and elsewhere, and on Ahmed Sirhindi, a key figure (see, for example, Schimmel 1975).
- 10 See Werbner (1990a).
- 11 See Leonard (2000).
- 12 See Werbner (2002b).
- 13 See Werbner (2003).
- 14 Feb–March 2000, pp. 7–9. The article is in Urdu, and was translated by my research assistant.
- 15 Ibid.
- 16 Ibid.
- 17 Ibid.
- 18 Ibid.
- 19 See Werbner (1998).

- 20 Ibid.
- 21 See Draper (1985), p. 26.
- 22 Ibid.
- 23 Ibid.
- 24 See Draper (1985).
- 25 See Levi-Strauss (1966).
- 26 Pennine is a pseudonym.

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