Empowering Moral Space

Recent critical readings of anthropological texts have exposed a tendency to map the discipline’s discursive universe of authoritative concepts (hierarchy, segmentary opposition, gift exchange) and authors (Dumont, Evans-Pritchard, Malinowski) as bounded “totemic spaces” (India, Africa, New Guinea), to use Strathern’s apt term (1988:91; see also Appadurai 1986). Strathern’s ironic phrase highlights that the mapping of differential “knowledges” onto culturally constructed space is a commonsensical discursive tendency, deployed not only by anthropologists but also by the people we study, to define topographies of good and evil, truth and falsity. The articles in a recent collection on Muslim societies, for example, disclose the complex geography of sacred knowledge Muslims have recognized since medieval times (Eickelman and Piscatori 1990). According to these studies, the specificity of the location of different forms of Islamic knowledge and spiritual blessing has impelled Muslims to travel to key places in the Islamic world, whereas the places of knowledge gained have served to legitimize various (and sometimes competing) religious leaderships in the Islamic periphery. Hence, as in anthropology, and so too in indigenous ideologies, totemic cultural spaces of knowledge also map, ipso facto, unequal power relations and contested moralities. Space and place are thus widely conceived of, whether in the groves of academia or the rapidly disappearing forests of the postcolonial world, as metaphors for, and metonymic extensions of, culture, moral virtue, identity, truth, hegemony, and subordination.

Given the complex symbolic connotations that space and place are endowed with, it is to be expected that the conquest of space, its inscription with a new moral and cultural surface, will be regarded as an act of human empowerment. The present essay discusses such a contemporary and historical process of religious spatial “conquest” effected by a transnational Sufi regional cult centered in the North-West Frontier Province of Pakistan and extending into Brit-
ain. I argue that the impetus to expand in Sufi cults is associated with an ideology of superhuman spatial and earthly transformative power. Conversely, movement in space constitutes and proves the charisma of Sufi saints.

It is important to consider the theoretical subtext of my argument. As Fabian (1983) has suggested, alien cultural spaces are often perceived as distant in \textit{time} as well as in space. For Muslims, for instance, the space of the West is perceived as opposed to the space of Islam—as separate, bounded, and historically distant. Yet the very same spaces (Western and Islamic) are also conceived of by Muslims as expansive, “open,” and coeval. This implies a dual spatiotemporal orientation: on the one hand, the past in the present (the pre-Islamic “West,” a “pure,” “Christian” England) defines and encloses the cultural space of the alien other, constituting it as separate and distant; on the other hand, the potential future expansiveness of this very same space (“Islamic” Britain, the Islamicizing West) reconstructs it as open and fluid. In refocusing on border zones in this way, we are, in effect, looking at what is powerfully contested but also shared in the \textit{here and now}.

Post–Second World War migration from Pakistan to Britain has entailed a breakdown, or deterritorialization, of former bounded (national) spaces, a reversal of demographic flows (back from the colonies to the center), and an active \textit{reinscription} of the spaces fragmented by the migration process. As Gupta and Ferguson (1992) have recently argued, global disintegrations of space are followed by acts of reintegration or reterritorialization; in these acts, newly defined spaces generate novel constraints. Pakistani migrants to Britain have in many senses, as I have argued elsewhere, appropriated space both in its commodified form and through the ritual transformation of home spaces into moral spaces. Cityscapes have also been colonized by these immigrants through the purchase of houses and businesses and the gradual invasion of whole residential and commercial districts (P. Werbner 1990c).

Alongside these territorial encroachments has been an expansion of Islamic religious movements of various shades (Lewis 1994; P. Werbner 1996). Among the South Asian Islamic sectarian groups in Britain, Sufi orders predominate, and it is these orders that work most actively to sacralize alien cityscapes—the “land of the infidels”—and reconstitute this land as moral space.

To understand this empowering potential of Sufism, the tendency toward movement in space must be understood as both an intrinsic feature of Sufi cult organization and a source of renewed charismatic authority. Hence the present article shifts back and forth in both space and time between Britain and Pakistan in order to demonstrate the hypothesis that the moral conquest of alien space is a test of charismatic authenticity that legitimates the rise of new “living saints.” One may cite here also an emerging literature demonstrating a similar process of spatial sacralization by saintly cults, which has occurred in Israel since the migration of North African Jews to the country in the 1950s (Bilu and Ben-Ari 1992; Weingrod 1990).
It is critical to distinguish between the mere pragmatic capturing of new spaces and acts of ritual sacralization, which are perceived to be essentially transformative of the substance and quality of lived-in space. Or, to put the matter conversely, we need to ask not only how new spaces are sacralized but also how sanctity is embodied in a new place. The Islamic encroachment into European spaces has been widely documented (see, for example, Lewis and Schnapper 1994[1990]). Arguably, what is perceived by many Europeans as most threatening about this encroachment has been the realization that, like most migratory movements, the movement of Muslims into the West has been associated with new ritual inscriptions upon old spaces (Metcalf 1996). Apart from the obvious growth in the number of mosques, more subtle inscriptions are evident: in France, for example, Senegalese migrants transform the spaces of municipal male hostels into temporary saints’ lodges (Ebin 1996) or sites of sacrifice (Brisbarre 1993; Diop and Michalak 1996), while in Germany the Turkish Alevi create spaces for ecstatic celebration (Mandel 1996). In sacralizing spaces, Muslims also root their identities qua Muslims in a new locality and embody the moral right of their communities to be “in” this new environment.

Central to the paper is the argument that the sacralizing of alien Western spaces by Sufi disciples is not haphazard: it is an ordered, culturally predictable process typical of Sufi regional cults. Regional cults are characterized by a nodal organization of hierarchically ranked sacred centers and subcenters, linked across space rather than enclosed within territorial boundaries. A further feature of such cults is that cultic centers are perceived to be religiously powerful places to which sacred journeys or pilgrimages are routinely made (R. Werbner 1977, 1989). Typically, regional cults cut across boundaries, whether of community, nation, or ethnic group, and generate their own sacred topographies, often in tension with national and local centers of temporal administrative power. Hence the expansion of such cults normally takes the form of leapfrogging across territory. In Sufi Islam, this process is carried out by migrating holy men who sacralize new centers linked to the founding center and who now and then establish new regional cults around them.

The sanctity of space is to some extent a matter of degree: while the headquarters of Sufi saints, their darbars, are permanently transformed into sacred sites by being imbued with the saints’ charisma, the sanctity of urban spaces is created and recreated by Sufi followers by marching periodically through the streets of their cities. This marching, I contend, must be grasped as a performative act, an act of metonymic empowerment, which inscribes and reinscribes space with sanctity. To stress the transformative dimensions of the processions (julus) requires that we recognize that Sufi urban julus are the first phase in a succession of ritual acts performed on the occasion of the ‘urs, the mourning/celebratory ritual commemorating a saint’s death as eternal rebirth and his final “wedding,” or mystical union, with the Prophet and God. At the same time the Sufi processions might be conceived of as “texts” conveying messages produced by Sufi followers through occasional public displays of collective identity. In deemphasizing the textual metaphor, I am not denying the rich multivo-
cality of the procession; rather, I want to stress the active inflection, the question “Who has the power to make places of spaces? Who contests this? What is at stake?” (Gupta and Ferguson 1992:11). With this problem of agency and power in mind, let us turn to the procession itself.

Julus

Twice a year, winding their way through the drab dilapidated streets of Birmingham, Manchester, or London’s immigrant neighborhoods, processions of Muslim men celebrate anniversaries of death and rebirth. As they march they chant the zikr, the remembrance of God. In chanting this, they not only purify their hearts and souls, they also sacralize and “Islamicize” the very earth, the buildings, the streets, and the neighborhoods through which they march.

Julus, zikr, langar, du’a—these are key ritual phases or episodes of both Eid-Milad-un-Nabi, the celebration of the birth and death of the Prophet, and of the ‘urs. The ‘urs starts with the julus, the procession or march, and culminates in the final du’a, the supplicatory prayer addressed to God, which the present living saint delivers on behalf of the whole community of worshipers. Here we are concerned mainly with the significance of the julus, as movement in and through space, and the performance of the zikr in relation to it. (See Figure 1.)

‘Urs: Midday, Birmingham, May 1989

We arrive from Manchester, a coachload of men, a minibus of women. The men congregate at the gates of a park, not far from the Dar-ul-Uloom, Birmingham-

Figure 1

Sufi Abdullah leads the procession (julus) in Birmingham on Eid-Milad-un-Nabi in 1989, closely followed by his most trusted vicegerents (khalifas).
ham, Sufi Abdullah’s religious center. Sufi Abdullah is head of a Naqshbandi regional cult in Britain and is first khalifa (deputy, vicegerent) and disciple of the head of the global regional cult, Pir (Saint) Hazrat Shah, known throughout Pakistan as Zindapir, the “Living Saint.” Zindapir’s khanqah, headquarters, are at Darbar-e-Alia Ghamkol Sharif, located in the wilderness of the hills of Kohat, in the North-West Frontier Province of Pakistan. We are celebrating the final and most important day of the ‘urs, a ritual gathered to commemorate the death and rebirth of another saint who was Zindapir’s teacher: Hazrat Muhammad Qasim, a renowned saint of the Naqshbandi order, whose shrine, Mohara Sharif, is high in the Muree hills, at the foothills of the Himalayas, north of Islamabad. Hazrat Muhammad Qasim, known as Baba (Grandfather) Qasim, arrived from Afghanistan and established his lodge headquarters in the Muree hills in the late 19th century. He died, a very old man, in 1943. Hazrat Shah, Zindapir, was his most illustrious disciple and khalifa. According to the legends told to me, Zindapir founded his own lodge in 1951 in the barren and lonely Kohat hills, beyond human habitation. He has built it up, during the past 40 years, into a vast regional cult focused on the lodge headquarters in Kohat; it stretches from Karachi in the south to Abbottabad in the north, and from Lahore in the east to Birmingham and Manchester in the far west. (See Figure 2.)

In advance of the julus, the men congregate at the entrance to Small Heath Park. Elderly venerable men with greying beards and turbans, young energetic men, teenage boys, and little children, all wearing white traditional Pakistani clothing and green caps. They come from all over Britain—from Derby, Burton-on-Trent, Watford, Manchester, Luton, London, Rochdale, and High Wycombe, as well as from Birmingham itself. (See Figure 3.) Each group carries a green or black banner inscribed with golden Islamic calligraphy, usually with the kalima (“God is one and Muhammad is his Prophet”) or other verses from the Qur’an. Leading the julus are several cars elaborately decorated with green, gold, and red tinsel, carrying Islamic insignia on a green background, a palanquin of cloth on the roof of one of the cars. Another car carries a loudspeaker. The loudspeaker blares out:

-Nara-i takbir! [Say He is Greatest!]
Alahhu akbar! [God is Greatest!], comes the answer from the assembled men.
Nara-i risalat! [Say prophethood!]
Ya Rasul Allah! [Oh Prophet of God!], comes the answer.
Zindapir! [The Living Saint!]
Zindabad! [Live forever!], comes the refrain.
Mera pir! [My saint!]
Zindabad!
Tera pir! [Your saint!]
Zindabad!
Islam zindabad! [Islam live forever!]
Zindabad!
Darbar-e-Alia Ghamkol Sharif! [the Lodge Ghamkol Sharif (Zindapir’s headquarters)!]
Zindabad!
Leading the procession is a group of some seven or eight vicegerents, deput-ies of Zindapir and of Sufi Abdullah, venerable sages with flowing beards. Each wears a black robe, a juba, a gift from the shaikh in Pakistan, over a white, new, cotton robe. The black robes signify the state of mourning, which is the initial condition in the ‘urs, a sadness associated with the remembrance of a departed saint. Heading the procession is Sufi Abdullah himself, one of the most prominent Sufi saints in Britain today. He is a giant of a man, dressed in flowing white and black robes. He bears his head high, his massive white beard covering his face. It is the face of a man who has known the heavy toil of 25 years of work in the iron foundries of the Midlands. He carries a long cane and strides ahead.

Figure 2
Pakistan portion of regional cult of Zindapir (the Living Saint).
of the procession, looking to an outside observer like an Old Testament prophet leading his flock.

It is time to start. I follow the procession in my car, accompanied by the women who have come with me from Manchester, and who are as keen as I am to witness the march, from which they are barred. In front of the procession and flanking it on either side are English policemen, who follow the march, redirecting the traffic and clearing the way ahead of the marchers. We move past the Dar-ul-Uloom and continue our way through Small Heath and Sparkbrook toward the Birmingham Central Jamia Mosque. As the men march they recite the zikr. Melodiously, *La ilaha illa Allah* (Allah is God) or, more stridently, *Allah-Hu, Allah-Hu* (God is present). Now and then the chanting is interrupted by the same loud, high-pitched calls of the loudspeakers mounted on the cars, to which the marchers respond with answering refrains:

*Nara-i takbir!* [Say He is greatest!]
*Allah-hu akbar!* [God is greatest!]
*Nara-i Risalat!* [Say prophethood!]
*Ya Rasul Allah!* [Oh Prophet of God!]
*Zindapir!* [The Living Saint!]
*Zindabad!* [Live forever!]

Figure 3
Established major lodges of Sufi Abdullah in Britain, 1989–90.
And so forth.

The men march through the streets of Birmingham, through Asian commercial areas that are shabby and run-down but teeming with life: grocery stores advertising ritually slaughtered halal meat, their vegetables and fruit piled high outside on the pavements; sari and clothes stores stocked with shining silks and colorful synthetics; Asian traditional jewelry stores with their delicately designed gold earrings and necklaces; Asian sweetshops with their sweets piled high in perfect conical towers; and Muslim banks, travel agents, restaurants, and takeaways. Aromas of cumin, cloves, and cinnamon follow us as the men turn the corner and march into a residential area with three-story-tall terrace houses overlooking narrow streets. As we pass, curious bystanders stare at us: English residents and shoppers, Pakistani women carrying their babies, young men idling on the sidewalk. Now we move into a second commercial area. Then, once again, back to terrace-lined neighborhoods. Birmingham’s Asian “ghetto” seems to stretch for miles. The procession itself extends for about half a mile, several hundred men of all ages marching along, three or four abreast. It is a three-mile walk. Finally, over the crest of the hill we see the Central Birmingham Mosque. Set somewhat apart from other buildings, and flanked by a busy thoroughfare, its minarets beckon the tired marchers. We reach the mosque; the march is over.

The women are waiting at the mosque together with the cooks of the langar, the ritually prepared and blessed food offered freely to all those attending the ‘urs. It is food cooked in the name of God by pure men who perform the zikr as they cook. They respect the food; it is tabarruk, blessed. Like all actions at the ‘urs—the procession, the prayers, the praises of the Prophet, the reading of the Qur’an—the giving of food is a source of sawab, merit, transferred to the soul of the pir of Mohara Sharif.

The traders have also arrived and have set up their stalls in the courtyard, displaying a colorful variety of wares: bottles of scent from Saudi Arabia and Pakistan, devotional musical cassettes of famous singers and groups, recorded khutbas, or sermons, of venerable Muslim sages, hagiographies of saints and other books in Urdu and Arabic, pictures of famous saints, and Qur’anic and Sufi calligraphy in bold gold lettering and in golden frames, ready for hanging in the terrace houses we have just passed. There are food stalls selling tea and bottled drinks. The traders are there for the profit; they need not be followers of Sufi saints, although many are. They come twice a year on the ‘urs and Eid-Milad-un-Nabi.

At the steps to the mosque the lord mayor of the city of Birmingham awaits, together with several Muslim city councillors and the Pakistani subconsul, who is based in Birmingham. The end of the julus is also an occasion for the leaders of the order to honor local notables and public figures who, in turn, dignify the festivities with their presence. Despite its cultural and religious specificity the celebration thus allows for the creation of a shared institutional space where Muslims and non-Muslims can assert common public values. The presence of the lord mayor signals the order’s identification with civic institutions and its in-
terest in cooperating with them. Indeed, the chairman of the order’s management committee has close links with the Labour Party in the city, and the order has been a recipient of a major grant to build a community center on its premises.

The Maulvi, a religious cleric, opens the proceedings with a prayer, followed by the Pakistani chairman of Sufi Abdullah’s Mosque and Islamic School Committee, a jovial, blue-eyed, spectacled man, an accountant by profession, who makes the opening statement. He thanks the marchers for joining the procession despite having arrived home late last night, after participating in an anti-Rushdie demonstration in London yesterday. His opening speech is followed by short speeches by the lord mayor, the subconsul, and two councillors. Finally, the pir stands up and raises his hand in du’a, supplicatory prayer. The congregation below the crowded steps raise their hands silently as he prays. This is the first supplication. It seals the julus and opens the mosque proceedings. The second and culminating du’a will be late tonight, and it will seal the ‘urs as a whole. This second prayer will be attended not only by the living congregation present at the ‘urs but by the living souls of all those saints and friends of God who have reached and merged with God and the Prophet, including Hazrat Shah, fakir and friend of God Hazrat Muhammad Qasim—the departed saint in whose name the ‘urs is being held—and all the other departed saints and prophets who watch over the living.1 In effect, what is represented at the ‘urs is a chain of saints, which is also a chain of linked places, in and beyond the world.

‘Urs: Ghamkol Sharif, Kohat, Pakistan, October 1989

Preparations for the ‘urs have been going on for several weeks. As the time of the ‘urs approaches, more and more murids (disciples) of the shaikh arrive to help with voluntary labor. The lodge nestles in the valley, climbing the slope of a hill, surrounded by hills on all sides, a series of stone buildings with internal courtyards, walled enclosures, walled orchards, vegetable gardens and cattle and goat pens. Surrounding it is a perimeter wall running along the slopes of the hills, protecting the lodge from the leopards that come down from the mountains during the winter. It is a lovely, prosperous, tranquil scene. The orchards bear apples, oranges, and lemons. Tomatoes, cucumbers, cabbages, cauliflowers, and chilies grow in well-tended vegetable beds. A herd of cattle and buffalo, 50-strong, graze in the valley. Chicken and geese honk in their coop. Goats bleat on the hills. Wild honey bees have made a hive in one of the trees of the orchard groves. The courtyards of the houses and hospices are surrounded by green lawns and bordered with flower beds and shady trees. The beautiful mosque, elaborately decorated in white, green, and dark red, its three domes and delicate minarets set against the blue skies and the hills beyond, is a scene of perfection. Two fountains of pure water splash into pools on either side of the entrance to the mosque’s vast open courtyard, shaded by a giant banyan tree. All is quiet apart from the sound of the zikr echoing in the mountains and the splashing of the water fountains. Ghamkol Sharif is, perhaps, as close to paradise as a Muslim can get on this earth.2 (See Figure 4.)
It was not always so. When the shaikh arrived here in 1951 there were only the bare mountains. The darbar contains several key landmarks of the pir’s settlement in this jungle (wilderness). Of these, one is the first cave in which the pir settled, located in the hills overlooking the darbar. This is where the Prophet first sent him. When he arrived, I was told by one of his disciples, the shaikh shut himself up in the cave for three days and three nights without eating or drinking. Then God said to him: “I have not sent you here to close yourself up inside a cave. Go out and meet the people.” This cave, now just beyond the perimeter wall, has been preserved as it was, apart from a lone electric bulb lighting the interior. It has become something of a shrine and pilgrims to the lodge climb the hill and leave pledges of their requests in the form cloth pieces tied to the thornbushes outside the cave. From here the pilgrim has a perfect view of the lodge and the valley below.

The second landmark is another cave at the heart of the lodge, towering above the mosque and all the other buildings on the slope of the hill. It is reached by a steep staircase. This cave has been converted into a windowless room. Its floor is covered with Persian carpets and its whitewashed walls are decorated with pictures of the Kaaba in Mecca and the shajara of the silsila (the spiritual genealogy of Sufi saints leading to the present saint, Zindapir). Outside this cave is the rock on which the shaikh sat and preached to his disciples for many years, before the mosque was built.

There was no water at that time, no electricity, no roads, no orchards, no cattle. The water was carried several miles from a spring on the other side of the hills on donkeys. Before the shaikh came there it was the abode of a famous dacoit from the fierce Kabaili tribes that live beyond the hills. He was said to have

Figure 4
The mosque in Ghamkol Sharif, Pakistan, built entirely with voluntary labor, is a site of tranquility and beauty.
robbed the British and stored his booty in one of the caves in the valley. The dacoit’s fame lives on to the present.

Many remember those days and the wilderness as it then was. It has taken almost four decades to build the lodge to its present state of perfection. Virtually all of the labor that went into this building has been voluntary, unpaid. Even the electricity and the well were installed by the government free of charge. They were not asked for; they were simply given. A good deal of the building work, the construction, the extension of water pipes, electricity, and sewage, the building and decoration of the mosque, the planting of orchards—all these have been achieved gradually, year by year, during the weeks preceding the annual ‘urs. This is the time of intizam, the arrangements and preparations for the ‘urs.

The vicegerent in charge of these arrangements has taken over the job from his father before him. He is also the darban, the gatekeeper of the shaikh, who handles the guests and decides how much time they will spend with him. He carries the keys to all the locked buildings, storehouses, and gardens, supervises the preparation of the langar and meals for the guests and the feeding of people during the ‘urs, and, indeed, oversees all the preparations for the ‘urs.

The disciples arrive in groups, many of the helpers about three weeks before the ‘urs. There is a good deal of building going on, and rocks are broken with sledgehammers by hand and carried in baskets on the workers’ heads from the rocky hillsides. This year the disciples are in the process of building a watchtower on the periphery to guard the lodge. The vicegerent supervising the building work is an ex-army man who comes from a place near Sohawa in Jhelum District. Another vicegerent, organizing the electrical work, is also an ex-army man. He comes from Faislabad and is supervising the decoration of the lodge buildings and hillsides with colored lights and neon signs, as well as the various extensions needed for the new buildings. Some of the lighting is already in place at the darbar from Eid-Milad-un-Nabi, which was celebrated one week earlier. The decorative lighting is highly elaborate, with chains of moving, flashing colored lights, brightly lit signs, spinning neon spoke wheels, and a writing in Arabir, “Allah Hu,” that extends across the hillside. Most spectacular, perhaps, is the decoration of the mosque, each of the three domes lit with chains of light that spin around it.

The teams are hard at work digging up last year’s broad metal chapati grills and giant tandur pits for baking nan, clearing the ground of rocks and stones so people can sleep on it, connecting new electricity and water lines for the expected guests, extending sewage lines and building sumps, and clearing areas for the coaches carrying the pilgrims. The mosque is being cleaned and redecorated, the elaborately designed iron gates repainted with blue and red flowers by a local “artist,” another disciple. One of the fountain pools flagging the entrance to the mosque is being whitewashed. The whitewashing of the other has been completed; its waters now are sparkling blue.

People at the lodge perform the zikr at all times of the day and night. Even as they work they perform the zikr. Some, especially the khalifas supervising the arrangements, have not slept for many nights, yet still they continue with this la-
bor of love, performing the zikr as they work (see also Lings 1971:18–19). The
hills echo with the melodic sound of “la ilaha illa Allah.” The melody changes
from time to time as new melodies become fashionable, but the words of the
chant are unchanging. The shaikh comes out to inspect the work’s progress, ac-
accompanied by a group of khalifas. Nothing happens in the lodge without his
knowledge. He is the ultimate planner and decision maker.

We meet two young men from Birmingham. They too have come to attend
the ‘urs. They have many wonderful tales of the karamat, miracles, associated
with the shaikh. One tells a story about the zikr:

The people here do the zikr all the time. Even when they are working they do the
zikr. When I came here the first time, I insisted that I wanted to do some work.
So they gave me an area to clean. I was cleaning one of the rooms when I heard
someone doing the zikr in one of the other rooms. But when I looked into that
room, there was no one there. But still I kept hearing the zikr. Then I looked up
and saw that there was a pigeon sitting on the edge of the roof doing the zikr. I
had heard that the pigeons do the zikr here.

The house we are staying in, a two-room home with a bathroom, running
water, and sewage, surrounded by a walled garden, had been built the previous
year for English Pakistani pilgrims, led by Sufi Abdullah, who attended the ‘urs
as a group. The house is beautifully furnished, with a sofa, matching chairs, cof-
tee tables, Persian carpets, and European beds—this is, after all, what British
Pakistanis have come to expect as normal, and the shaikh provides only the best
in hospitality for his guests.

The preparations continue. More and more murids arrive and join the work.
It is truly a labor of love, for the workers all speak of their great love of the
shaikh, of his devotion, his purity, his dedication. He never sleeps and barely
eats; all he does is pray day and night and devote his life to God. The cooking
areas are being prepared. Great pots are brought out. Eating utensils are stacked
in tall towers. Wood for the chapati ovens and cooking is piled high. Another
guardroom is being built outside the women’s quarters. Canvases are extended
over the whole area, so the women are screened from onlookers on the hills. The
cooking area is now fully set up with chapatis baking and pots simmering. The
intizami, the organizers, rush around madly, making sure everything is working.
People are arriving in buses and trucks, in qaflas, convoys. Some carry banners,
which they place around the pir’s courtyard as well as on the colorful tents they
set up. Decorated in green, white, and red, the tents are secured on tall bamboo
stakes with a wide gap between the walls and the roof. On the grounds, they
place thin rugs. Although it is October, it is very hot in the sun, and it is getting
very dusty.

Everywhere the zikr is being sung. People sing the zikr on the trucks when
they arrive, sometimes fast—“Allah Hu, Allah Hu,”—sometimes slow and me-
lodious—“la ilaha illa Allah, la ilaha illa Allah.” What they sing depends also on
the pace of driving or the work tempo. From time to time, other prayers are
blared over the sound system, but the sermons have not started in earnest yet.
The groups continue to arrive. They come from all over Pakistan. Some have been traveling for 48 hours, a distance of 1,000 miles. (See Figure 5.) A city of tents arises in the arid valley, myriads of people, men, women, and children, an enormous crowd composed of groups from every big town in Pakistan and many of its villages. All have come to attend the ‘urs and receive the pir’s blessings: they will share in his final du’aa. There are no processions. They do not perform the julus. They have traveled great distances in the name of Allah, traversing the length and breadth of Pakistan. They departed from home singing the zikr, first the zikr leader, then the answering chorus, and they go on singing thus all the way to Ghamkol Sharif.

**Hijra (Journey) and the Sacralizing of Space**

Sufism is conceived of essentially as a journey along a path (suluk) leading toward God. In Sufism the human being is a model for the universe, a microcosm of the macrocosm, and the journey toward God is a journey within the person. Very briefly, Sufi Islam posits a complex relationship between body and soul expressed in a spiritual dualism between the nafs, the vital self or spirit, and the eternal soul, the ruh. The move toward self-purification is a move toward the transformation of the self, the nafs, through a transcendence of bodily desires and needs. By totally denying the self, the nafs is purified and “dies,” merging during a series of phases with the saint, the Prophet, and ultimately God before, in the case of true saints, returning to instruct the living (Rao 1990; Subhan 1960:77; P. Werbner 1990b). In dying, the nafs is eternalized. The path is a com-

![Figure 5](image)

**Figure 5**
The convoys (qafta) arrive at Ghamkol Sharif for the ‘urs, 1991, completing long and arduous journeys from as far afield as Karachi.
plex and dangerous one, in which the spiritual guidance of an exemplary Sufi teacher who has undergone this journey is essential. In Sufism, knowledge is gained through practice rather than intellectual learning, through experience rather than rationality alone (Lapidus 1984). Divine knowledge is arrived at via the heart.

The central ritual practice on this journey is the zikr, the remembrance of God. By continuously practicing the zikr a person’s nafs and his very body is transformed. A young khalifa of Sufi Abdullah explained to me:

The way to do zikr is through the parts of the body that are latif. There are seven lata’if. First is the heart, qalb, but qalb is not the heart, but the hidden, transformed heart after doing the zikr successfully. As a result it is inscribed with the name of Allah and filled with the light of Allah. It is like if you twirl a fire on a string [so that it creates an illusion of a continuous circle of light]. You kill yourself, your nafs, and if you succeed in doing so, you die, hence at your death, since the Qur’an says you must all die, you do not die, but live again, since you have already died in your life.

When you do the zikr you breath in “Allah” and breath out “Hu.” “Hu” means he is, is present. If you say this long enough and concentrate then your heart begins to beat Allah Hu, Allah Hu, Allah Hu. Hence the way toward knowledge and light is through the zikr.

Logos is reality in mystical Sufism; the name of Allah inscribed in the rhythms of the heart and breath is God, or divine knowledge (Nicholson 1967[1921]:93). This from another young khalifa of the shaikh:

There are seven points of energy in our body through which the spiritual power of Allah enters the body. If you do the zikr correctly, and in my case it didn’t take long, then your heart starts doing the zikr all the time, every moment of the day and night, even when a person is doing other things. Like now, when I’m talking to you.

This merging of body and cosmos is the means of purifying and transcending the vital self, which is recovered as the eternal soul. The constant and continuous practice of the zikr (in the case of this Naqshbandi order, particularly zikr khafi, the silent zikr) purifies, or “opens,” the seven hidden lata’if, the light (or subtle) spots in a person’s chest and body, to receive the light of Allah. The purified soul cleansed by zikr reaches beyond this changing, continuously created world of illusions (‘alam-e-khalk) to the eternal world (‘alam-e-amar). It penetrates the thousands of screens or veils (parde) hiding the world of realities, moving on a journey toward an ultimate illumination, first of the shadows and reflections of the attributes of Allah, then of the attributes themselves, and finally of God’s very being or essence (zat) (see also Subhan 1960:61–66).

But Sufi Islam is not only a journey within the body and person, conceived of as a journey toward God. It is also a journey in space. The sacralizing of space is not, it must be stressed, simply a coincidental feature of Sufi cultic practices. It is a central, essential aspect of Sufi cosmology and of Sufism as a missionizing, purificatory cult. Beyond the transformation of the person, Sufism is a
movement in space that Islamicizes the universe and transforms it into the space of Allah. This journey, or hijra—a term that evokes the migration of the Prophet to Medina—empowers a saint as it empowers the space through which he travels and the place where he establishes his lodge.

The journey is twofold: on the one hand, into the wilderness, the “jungle,” the place of capricious jinns (spirits) and dangerous outlaws, of predatory nature beyond civilization; on the other hand, toward the land of infidels, kufristan, of idolaters, hypocrites, backsliders—the “unbelievers.” It is these dangerous journeys that endow a Muslim saint with his charisma. He who stays home and grows fat on the land may be rich and powerful, but he will never be the founder of a Sufi regional cult and he will never be revered and worshiped as one of God’s chosen friends. It is the divine transformation in space that is the ultimate proof of the divine transformation of the person.

About a week after the ‘urs in Birmingham, Sufi Abdullah came to Manchester to celebrate gyarvi sharif, a monthly Sufi ritual, with the congregation at the mosque there. After the celebration and the shaikh’s final du’a, he received supplicants with various problems and ailments seeking his advice and blessings. I went in to see the pir with several other women. When my turn came, we talked first of the ‘urs and Islam and he turned to me and warned me:

In the Qur’an God says, “Islam is my religion.” If that is the word of God, should you not accept it? When you come before God on the Day of Judgment he will ask you, “Did anyone tell you about Islam?” And you will have to say yes. He will ask, “Why did you not become a Muslim?” You will have no answer.

You ask about the julus. It is written in the Qur’an [and here he quoted a Qur’anic verse in Arabic] that you must do the zikr [remember God] when you are standing, when you are walking, when you are lying down. According to the Hadith, when you walk along saying the zikr, then everything, including people and objects and things of nature, will be your witness on the Day of Judgment that you have performed the zikr, yes, even the stones and buildings.

I asked, “Even the earth?” and he responded, “Yes, it is said in the Hadith that once you have said the zikr stamping on the earth, the earth will wait for you to come back again.”

Sufi Abdullah came to England in 1962. He had known Zindapir when he was still in the army, when Zindapir first became a saint, and he had shared with him some of the arduous experiences of the wilderness of the Kohat hills during his long leaves from the army. In the late 1950s there were many people, especially ex-soldiers who were among the shaikh’s disciples, who were going to England to seek their fortunes. It is said by some that Sufi Abdullah approached the shaikh and asked him if he could go to England. Reluctantly the shaikh agreed to part with him. Having agreed, he appointed him to be his first vicegerent in England. A British Pakistani visitor to the ‘urs in Ghamkol Sharif told me:

I went to England six months before Sufi Abdullah. We were together in the army. We came here to the ‘urs in 1961 and I showed him my visa for England. Sufi Abdullah promised to join me in six months. But when he was given the chogha
[the initiatory gown of a vicegerent, also known as juba] by the shaikh, he changed his mind. He cried and wanted to stay, but the shaikh told him he must go.

Zindapir told me that he had sent Sufi Abdullah to England because the people there, the Pakistani labor migrants, did not know how to pray and they did not celebrate Eid, fast on Ramzan, or perform the zikr: they had forgotten Islam. They needed a spiritual guide to lead them on the path of Allah. Before Sufi Abdullah left, Zindapir made him his khalifa. He was one of his earliest khalifas and most trusted companions.

One of the speakers at the ‘urs in Birmingham talked of this mission fulfilled by Sufi Abdullah and men like him:

It is all because of those God-loving people who started the movement to raise the religious consciousness in you [the people present at the Birmingham mosque gathering] years ago, and enabled you to raise the flags of Islam, not only in the U.K. but all over the world, and especially in kufristan [the land of the infidels] of Europe.

Whether it is to the land of infidels or into the wilderness, the saint’s journey is a lonely journey, filled with hardship. It constitutes the ultimate ordeal. This is why the followers of an “original” saint like Zindapir or Sufi Abdullah—a “living” saint, a fakir (Zindapir’s favored term for describing himself), a wali (inheritor, heir to the power of God), a friend of God—speak somewhat dismissively of the descendants of illustrious founding saints and living guardians of their shrines. These gaddi nashin, whose charisma is derivatory, are seen to benefit materially from the cult their gloried ancestors founded. Although they are respected, they are not regarded as “real” saints. A true friend of God is a man who endures incredible hardship. Zindapir told me:

When I first came here, the land was barren and hostile and it had never witnessed the name of Allah. Yet look at it today, a green and pleasant land [abad—cultivated, populated], all due to the faith in Allah of one man [i.e., himself]. No one had ever worshiped here since the creation of the world. It was a wild and dangerous place, a place of lions [my son saw a lion]. Now the earth is richer in religion than many other places. One man is the cause of it all. One man came here and did the zikr, and this place became a place of habitation. [Zindapir said this as a rhyme: sirf yeh jagah abad hai, ek admi ki waja see.]

In his final sermon on the last day of the ‘urs, Zindapir elaborated on this theme:

To all the congregation and my murids present here: You must know that it was not at all my wish to come to this place. [I speak the truth because] if anyone God has blessed and who is His fakir, if he tells a lie, it is just as if he became a kufr [an infidel, a nonbeliever]. A sinful person can tell lies, but not a fakir. For a fakir changing his religion and telling a lie are the same. [So I speak the truth:] It was not my express wish to come here. It was only the absolute order of the Prophet, peace be upon him, that I should go to this place. And if now this place is prospering, it is due to the express order of the Prophet. Nafs and Shaitan [the Devil] both said that I should not come here. There was not even water for a
sparrow [in this place]. Ajib Khan used to divide his booty in this area. There were not even trees. The place was barren and arid. Only God was here. At that time the nafs and Shaitan did their best to stop me from going here. They argued that the people were already my disciples and what is the need to go here? I said to Shaitan that I must obey the Prophet. Subsequently, I prayed two *rakat nafl* [optional canonical prayers] and then we started our journey from the graveyard [in Jungle Khel, his natal village, where he first lived on his return to Kohat]. And throughout the whole way to the cave [where he lived for several years] the Shaitan kept trying his level best to betray us, to say to us that we shouldn't go ahead. When I reached the cave that was shown to me [in a vision in Medina during hajj] I prayed to Allah, “Allah the magnificent and the merciful, I have come here only for you and now I am your guest.” And because of this infinite and absolute faith this place is now established and fully developed. I have not asked anyone for subscriptions or donations, nor did I ask for subscriptions and donations to build the mosque and establish this place. If it is prosperous today, it is only due to an absolute obedience of the order that was given to me by Rasul-i Pak [the pure messenger].

Nobody had bowed [knelt in prayer] before Allah on this earth prior to my coming to this place; even sparrows did not live here. When we came here there was water on the other side of the hill. The people of my village came to me and said that I should migrate to Bonapir’s *ziarat* [an established grave shrine of an earlier saint] on the other side of the hill where there were many facilities and plenty of water. I told them that I had come here only for the sake of Allah and I did not want to leave Him for the sake of water. And the water here has been brought by Allah; we have been blessed with this water by Allah [he refers to the well water that was discovered some time after his arrival].

A person who is an infinite believer and absolute follower of Allah, Allah will give that person great honor and respect in this world. And Allah will bring honor and respect to his grave. Allah will bestow honor and respect on the area where he lived his life, and Allah will undoubtedly bestow honor and respect upon him on the Day of Judgment. . . . Other people, when they die, no one can distinguish their graves after two years. . . . Allah leaves them when they die. But Allah takes care of His fakirs even after their death and bestows infinite honor and respect to their graves, to the places where they lived.

One of the guest speakers at the ‘urs in Ghamkol Sharif stressed this relation between the love of God and the sacralizing of space in the course of his sermon:

When a man starts loving Rasul-i Pak then everything starts loving him. Every part of the universe—the water, the flowers, the morning dawn, the moon, the roses, the green plants—everything starts loving that man. And this is the love of Rasul-i Pak that has given beauty to the flowers and beauty to the whole of the world. And whatever is present here is due to the love of Rasul-i Pak and the love of Allah.

**The Sufi Saint as Tamer of the Wilderness**

Zindapir and other speakers at the ‘urs repeatedly evoked the trope of the Sufi saint as tamer of the wilderness, a trope related closely to that of the Sufi saint as bringer of natural fertility. Zindapir’s story is of the successful overpowering of the Devil by the Sufi saint, on the one hand, and of wild animals, wild men, and the bare wilderness itself, on the other. It is the test of absolute
faith (*tawakkul*), the mastery of the nafs and its wild, animal-like passions, its desires and temptations. The way to the valley of the cave is thus a concrete embodiment of the battle of the nafs. It is the Shaikh’s *via purgativa* (cleansing path) (Schimmel 1975:4, 98). This is the first phase in the core myth of the legendary corpus—the triumph over the soul, the inner jihad, or holy battle. As Schimmel informs us:

> as soon as every feeling and thought is directed in perfect sincerity toward God, without any secondary causes, neither humans nor animals can any longer harm the mystic. Thus *tawakkul* results in perfect inner peace. The numerous stories of Sufis who wandered “in *tawakkul*” through the desert without fear of lions or highway robbers, without any provisions, reflect this attitude. [1975:119; see also Attar 1990[1966]:158, 164, 273; Nicholson 1989[1914]:108–109; Rao 1990:19]

Similarly, we are told by Nizami that Baba Farid chose as his abode a place “inhabited by backward Hindu tribes. There were *chuls* [deserts] all around. Snakes and wild animals were to be found everywhere” (1955:36). In this place he founded a *jama‘at khanah*, which was “the only place under the Indian sun where the Emperor of Hindustan and a penniless pauper were received in the same way.... It was an oasis of love in a world of strifes and conflicts” (1955:114).

The legends of North African saints’ miracles also evoke the mastery of the wilderness:

> A typically Maghribi feature [of such miracles is] that the saint wanders with his disciples through desolate areas and at one point sticks his staff into the ground, whereupon water springs from the ground and lush vegetation appears in the desert. The *zawiya* of the saint is then founded at such an oasis and brings blessing and salvation to later generations. [Goldziher 1971[1889–90]:270; see also Eickelman 1976:33–34; Meeker 1979:229–230]

Similarly, Clancy-Smith reports that “in most areas, the presence of springs, and thus the existence of the group and of life itself, was credited to the miraculous powers of legendary holy persons” (1994:31). And as Lapidus points out, a Sufi saint is seen to be “directly connected to the cosmos because he participates in the essential forces of rational or spiritual power” (1988:254).

The control of nature is an important feature of a Sufi saint’s claim to charisma. The challenge is to recognize that cosmos (*‘alam-i khalq*, the shadow world of becoming), person, and spiritual world (*‘alam-i amr*, the world of realities) are constituted in Sufi thought as three interdependent, ranked, and parallel domains. By mastering the spiritual world and reaching its source of power, the Sufi becomes master both of the cosmos and of humanity. In his mastery he not only humanizes but also energizes the cosmos; he generates both cultivation and fertility. Hence Rao reports that the Bakkarwal of Kashmir mythologize their founder saint as “someone who led directly to the taming of nature” and to the establishment of agriculture, a “Home” and a “specific Community” (Rao 1990:19). Gardner was told that “Sylhet District has more power than other dis-
tricts in Bangladesh. The trees and fields are more beautiful. This is because this is the country of the saints. The great saints came here. The soil has more strength, and the fields yield more paddy” (1993:6-7). Such widely held conceptions of saints as bearers of cultivated fertility fit Schacht and Bosworth’s argument that according to Sufi philosophy, nature is both theocentric (rational, yet subject to divine intervention) and anthropocentric (at the service of human-kind) (1974:352).

The centrality of a Sufi saint’s power over the earth and nature is explicitly personified in Sufi theosophy by a mystical rank, abdal, within a ranked community of saints. According to Sufi esoteric belief, there are at any one time 40 living saints in the world who are abdals. These saints, I was told, make the grass grow, give food to birds, and ensure the fertility of the earth (see also Nicholson 1989[1914]:123–124).

Just as saints are internally ranked, as well as being intrinsically superior to ordinary human beings, so too are places in Sufism. Their ranking corresponds to the ranking of the saints who live or are buried there. Thus another speaker, a well-known cleric, speaking in Urdu, told the congregation:

[To] the people who are resident in Pakistan and the friends who have come from outside Pakistan: I would like to say clearly that nothing in the universe is equal. Everything has its own status and honor. . . . Even the piece of land where we are sitting now has different honors. For example, not every peak of a mountain is the peak of Mt. Sinai [Tur]. And not every piece of land is the land of Madinah Sharif. And not all stones have been honored to become the House of Allah, the Ka’ba [in Mecca]. And not every domed mosque is Al Aqsa [the Dome of the Rock in Jerusalem]. And not all hills could be the hills of Ghamkol Sharif. People may wonder why the people of Pakistan and people from outside Pakistan have come here after obtaining visas and spending a great deal of money. What have they traveled so far for? All the speeches have been made. What are they waiting for? I know that they have all come here only to share in the du’a of Khawaja Zindapir. . . . We know that if we touch a flower it is crumpled. But I know one thing, that wherever Khawaja Zindapir has placed his foot on the earth, he has turned it into a garden and flower bed. . . . When love makes its place in the heart of man, the world is changed altogether. . . .

I will request all of you to place your hearts at the feet of Muhammad Mustafa so it be cleaned of sins and desires. Because when my Lord, the sacred Prophet, came on this earth and placed his feet here, the whole land was declared a pure and orderly place—East and West were cleansed. We the Muslims have been allowed in the absence of water to do ablution with sand or dried mud. Before the coming of the Prophet no person was allowed to do his ablutions with sand or mud, and no one was allowed to pray on the earth anywhere they chose. When my lord Muhammad put his sacred feet on the earth, the earth was declared a pure place and we were allowed to say our prayers wherever we liked and to do our ablutions with sand and dry mud. How was this permission given? It is clearly written in the Qur’an: “You may do ablution with dry mud.” This earth became pure, not because we cleaned it with soap but because of its relation with the feet of the Prophet. . . . And oh, audience, if the prayer of a person is accepted because of his contact with the dust that touched the feet of Muhammad, I will say to you that all the murids who have come to Ghamkol Sharif should come once a year; if you could, you should come daily, because in the hijra of Ghamkol Sharif there is a lover of the prophet Muhammad. We don’t come here to see Pir Sahab. We
come here to seek the path of Allah, the path that leads to Muhammad, and to see his true follower, who loves Allah and his Prophet beyond the imagination of any man, and who has been blessed by Allah above all others in this world. We pray to Allah that he should give fortitude and endurance to us, so that we should be able to keep coming to see our Pir Sahab every year and to have his blessings. Amen.

The Spatial Dimensions of Sufi Muslim Individual Identity

The spirituality of a Sufi pir is embodied in the space he has sacralized. His divine blessing purifies his spatial dominion and endows it with sanctity. For Sufi Muslims in Britain who are followers of Sufi Abdullah, Darbar-e-Alia Ghamkol Sharif is the center of their symbolic universe. The separation and distance between Kohat and Birmingham or Manchester are overcome in their symbolic imagination, thus creating a unitary cosmic order. For these disciples, religious identity derives from their connection to a chain of saints, from Sufi Abdullah to Zindapir to Baba Qasim, who are located within a sacred spatial network. As Pakistani migrants they are linked both by love and obligation to relatives and friends whom they have left behind in their natal villages and cities and by loyalty to Pakistan as a nation. They return periodically to Pakistan to renew these valued relationships. As Muslims and “brother-disciples” (pir-bhai) within a single regional cult they are united in their expression of love for two men, both of them “living saints”: Sufi Abdullah in Britain and Zindapir in Pakistan. Their religious identity as Muslims and Sufis is particularized through this love and loyalty and is revitalized periodically through pilgrimage and celebration at the spaces these holy men have sacralized by their religious activity.

I stress that they are members of a single “regional cult” rather than simply of a Sufi “order” (tariqa). The distinction is important. The Naqshbandi order stretches from Iraq and Turkey in the west through Iran and Afghanistan to the whole of South Asia. It is only in theory a unitary organization. As a distinct order it recognizes slight variations in Sufi mystical practice on the path toward unification with the Prophet and God. The regional cult built up by Zindapir is, by contrast, a viable organization with a known hierarchy of sacred centers and subcenters and recognized chains of authority. It is a known universe of specific communities linked together in devotion of a single man (Trimingham calls such “regional cults” tai'fa, but the name does not appear to be commonly used by Pakistanis; see Trimingham 1971:67–104). For disciples living in Britain, their various communities are united with all the other communities centered on Ghamkol Sharif, even though the majority of these communities are, of course, located in Pakistan itself.

Regional cults generate specific, individual religious spatial identities. This is because they are “cults of the middle range—more far-reaching than any parochial cult of the little community, yet less inclusive in belief and membership than a world religion in its most universal form” (R. Werbner 1977:iix). In certain regional cults, a universal God is particularized around sacred shrines and spiritual intercessors, and religious worship is mediated by ascriptive links
to spatially known and recognizable communities. In a similar vein Eaton has argued that the establishment of Baba Farid’s regional cult meant that

a certain tract of the Punjab had become identified with Baba Farid’s *wilaya*, or spiritual kingdom, which to his devotees was perceived as having specific geographical boundaries that bordered the *wilayas* of other saints. . . . [This geographical extension] demonstrates how closely the notion of spiritual sovereignty could parallel, in spatial terms, that of political sovereignty. [Eaton 1984:341]

Importantly, however, as Richard Werbner emphasizes, regional cults are *not* contiguous, spatially bounded territorial organizations; they are spatially discontinuous, interpenetrating organizations linked together through a common connection to ritually sacred centers and subcenters (1989:245–298).

As we have seen, the particularizing of the universal in Sufi regional cults makes the sacralizing of space central to Sufi cosmology. Moreover, the pivotal role of the Sufi saint as sacralizer of space also has important bearings upon our understanding of Sufi reform movements, the spread of Sufi cults into Britain, and the meaning this extension has had for British Pakistanis.

**The Waxing and Waning of Sufi Regional Cults**

To discuss space in Sufism is to comprehend the relations between three dimensions of sociality: power, spirituality, and religious organization. Although the basic outlines of Sufi regional cult organization are generally known, the social dynamics of cult organization and the complex relation between power, space, and theosophy are less clearly understood (but for excellent discussions of this relation see Clancy-Smith 1990 and Gilmartin 1979). Sufi regional cults, like regional cults elsewhere, do not remain constant either in the regions they control or in their following or political influence. Not all shrines are centers of currently viable regional cult organizations, with their sacred networks of vicegerents and cultic subcenters. Instead, there is a continuous vying for ascendancy between cults and between the saints that control them. At any one time there are particular centers that rise to prominence and gain reputation and followers at the expense of others. Sufi regional cults as viable, ongoing regional organizations, wax and wane; they rise and fall periodically (see Trimingham 1971:179; R. Werbner 1977).

This cyclical and recurrent process is evident at the micro level in any particular locality, as local extensions of regional cults within the broader encompassing Sufi order are displaced by new revitalized cultic centers or subcenters, energized periodically through the emergence of a charismatic saint. In any particular locality, there may thus be followers of several living saints at any time. Although shrines of illustrious saints remain points of personal pilgrimage and seasonal ritual celebrations, such shrines no longer extend as organizations far beyond a relatively localized area and cannot continue to control, as the cult founders did, a series of subcenters and sub-subcenters over a vast region.
This cyclical waxing and waning of Sufi regional cults is related to, but should not be confused with, historically specific revivalist movements. In different eras and centuries, Sufi revivalism engaged different religious challenges to its authority and responded to different religious debates and discourses. Revivalist movements tended, in each century, to challenge some of the theosophical premises current at the time in Sufism, as well as some of the shrine practices related to them. The revivalist movements that swept across the Hijaz and North Africa in the 19th century (Clancy-Smith 1990 and 1994; Evans-Pritchard 1949; Tringham 1971:105–127), as well as the Naqshbandi reform movement spearheaded by Ahmed Sirhindi in South Asia in the 17th century (Ahmad 1969:40–42; Subhan 1960:286–295) and the Chishti revivalist movement of the same and later period (Gilmartin 1979), transcended localized cults in setting new standards of religious excellence and a new ideology of ritual practice. In renewing the stress on the Shari’a (Muslim law) and on the austere practices of fasting and prayer, and in reformulating the relationship between Sufi saint and follower, the impact of these neo-Sufi movements was profound and far reaching.

In many senses, however, the movements may be regarded as part of a continuous process of renewal and not as radically unique events. Sufi cults are continuously revived through the periodic rise of new regional cults focused upon a holy man who ventures beyond the current boundaries of the established Islamic world and who founds a new center, generating a regional organization around it in the course of time. What reform movements share with ascendant local Sufi regional cults is, above all, a renewal through movement in space. This makes sense organizationally as well. Old shrines become the focus of endemic succession disputes, which dissipate the power of the center and of the current holders of saintly title. Such disputes challenge the moral authority of the center and its current trustees (Gilmartin 1984; Gilsenan 1982:240–241; Jeffery 1981). The shrine retains its sacred power but its current guardians cannot fully recapture its organizational authority.

Hence theosophy, missionary activity, and the revitalizing of religious organization are all tied to the high value placed on movement and the sacralization of hitherto profane space. The most remarkable feature of the Sanusi cult in North Africa, for example, was the Grand Sanusi’s periodic movement: once he had established a cult center, he left it to one of his vicegerents only to move once again, further and further south, along the oasis trade route across the Sahara (Evans-Pritchard 1949). He established a major Islamic library numbering some 8,000 volumes 100 miles from the coast, in the heart of the desert. Evans-Pritchard tells us that

Jaghbub, now to become the center of the Order and the seat of an Islamic University second only in Africa to al-Azhar, was till 1856, when the Grand Sanusi made it his seat, an uninhabited oasis, in which the water was brackish, highly sulfurous, and insufficient to irrigate more than a small area of gardens. [1949:14]
At its height, after the Grand Sanusi’s settlement there, it numbered some 1,000 people (1949:17).

The great regional cults in Pakistan today—Mohra Sharif, Golra Sharif (Gilmartin 1979; ur-Rehman 1979), Alipur Sharif, Sharqpur Sharif, Jalalpur Sharif, Ghamkol Sharif—have been founded since 1990. Such centers build up an extensive network of cultic subcenters extending throughout Pakistan, wherever loyal and devoted vicegerents of the original saint have founded branches of the cult. Some of these vicegerents will ultimately found new centers that in time may become the focus of new viable cults, outshining the tired successors of local shrines with their moral and religious excellence. It is, above all, the “living pirs,” those who venture beyond the established order, who endow Sufi Islam with its continued vitality.

Julus and Hijra

I have argued that the charisma of a holy man is objectified, and thus proved, through its inscription in space. The saint who has traveled beyond place (ilm-maqam) on the Sufi path and beyond the boundaries of Islam has, in doing so, inscribed his charisma on the new place (maqam) he has founded. This very act of inscription constitutes the ultimate proof that he is, indeed, a saint.

But there is a further question that needs to be asked if we are to understand the significance of movement through space for British Pakistanis: why is it that for these immigrants the holding of the julus in Britain seems to represent a radical departure from previous practices, a new movement imbued with deep subjective experiential significance?

To answer this question we need to recognize that the julus embraces a plurality of meaningful acts. Above all, as I have argued here, it is a religious act in which the name of Allah is ritually inscribed in the public spaces Muslims march along. Through the chanting of the zikr, British Pakistanis Islamicize the urban places where they have settled and the towns and cities that are now their homes. In South Asia, religious processions have been identified as important vehicles not only of group solidarity but also of communal riots and anticolonial protest. Freitag, in particular, stresses the effervescent and performative dimensions of such processions, arguing that through the “interplay” of sacred and profane space they foster the expression of “community” and link center and periphery in a single “civic culture” (Freitag 1989:134–135).

Historically, the holding of South Asian Muslim public processions in Britain can be seen as constituting a radical shift in the terms in which Muslim immigrants have come to present and represent themselves to the wider society. During the initial phases of migration, the only public religious signs of an Islamic presence in Britain were the stores and mosques immigrants built or purchased. Outside mosques, ritual and religious activities took place in the inner spaces of homes, which were sacralized through repeated domestic Eid and communal Qur’an reading rituals (P. Werbner 1990c: chaps. 4 and 5). Sacred Islamic spaces were thus confined within fortresses of privacy, whether mosques or homes, and these fortresses protected immigrants from external hostility.
When Sufi Abdullah first held a julus in Birmingham around 1970, he was warned by the ulama (experts on Islamic law) that such an assertion of Islamic presence could lead to trouble, exposing marchers to stone throwing and other attacks. Sufi Abdullah, not a man easily intimidated, went ahead with the procession anyway. Over the years, this procession has sometimes been the target of attacks, mainly verbal, from outsiders, but this has never deterred the marchers. The organizers of the processions take pride in the fact that these events have always been peaceful, that they have never become the scene of trouble or violence.

Marching through immigrant neighborhoods, the processions not only incribe the name of Allah on the very spaces stretching between and connecting immigrant homes or mosques, they also call Muslims back to the faith. The julus is, as one vicegerent told me, above all an act of tabliq, of publicly saying to other Muslims: Regard us; we are proud of being Muslims; we are willing to parade our Muslimness openly in the streets; we believe that Islam is the last and best religion; containing the true message of God; the whole message; including even its hidden truths; and we are not afraid to show our pride in our religion openly and publicly. But, he explained, we are also making clear that if you want to be a good Muslim you have to choose. You can’t “mix” with the English or be, in other words, a part-time Muslim.

The julus and the public meetings before or after it also lend themselves to more overt and specific current political statements about Islam in Britain. A julus can become, in other words, a kind of political demonstration. Not all Sufi groups are willing, however, to politicize the procession itself openly in this way. In the Birmingham processions I observed, the banners carried were in Urdu and Arabic and were inscribed mainly with verses from the Qur'an. In Manchester in 1990, by contrast, banners were in English and made implicit references to the Rushdie affair through the demand for a change in the blasphemy laws. Other banners, stating that Islam was a religion of peace, also referred implicitly to the association of Muslims with violence that the Rushdie affair had generated in the public mind.

Whatever the nature of the procession itself, in both cities the meetings held either before or after the procession included invited English dignitaries and officials, and the speeches made at these meetings referred openly to the current political concerns of Muslims in Britain (Werbner n.d.).

Much was made in speeches of the achievement of marching in Britain. Perhaps this is because once people have marched openly in a place, they have crossed an ontological barrier. They have shown that they are willing to expose themselves and their bodies to possible outside ridicule for the sake of their faith. Once they have organized a peaceful procession, they know they are capable of organizing a peaceful protest. Such processions can thus be seen as precursors to more overt (democratic) political protest.4

The banners in English are also part of the missionizing activity of Muslims in Britain (Lewis 1994). The banners appeal to an English audience of potential
converts—to people who feel that Christianity or secularism have somehow failed them and are seeking a new religious truth.

The processions also assert the legitimacy of a particular Islamic approach—that focused on saints and their shrines. Historically, this type of Islamic practice has come under attack from other reformist movements in South Asia, primarily from the Deobandis, Ahl-i Hadith, and more recently Jamaat-i Islami (Lewis 1994; P. Werbner 1996). In Pakistan today the processions are, of course, part of a popular national culture; they are shown on public television, and apparently no one dares question their legitimacy. In Britain, however, they still represent an act of assertion in a struggle between different Islamic approaches, all competing for local hegemony. Moreover, holding a julus, particularly a citywide one on Eid-Milad-un-Nabi, also attests to the ascendancy of a particular Sufi regional cult in a city. In Birmingham, Sufi Abdullah holds the processions to which all the other Sufi orders are invited. In Manchester, the procession was until 1991 dominated by members of the Qadri order, whose vicegerent controlled the central mosque.

Beyond matters of local competition, the composition of the procession is also significant. Whereas central mosques are often built and funded by management committees manned by the wealthy or the educated, and sometimes even by external governments, the processions are open to anyone. Many of those who march are members of the Muslim underprivileged or working class. It is they who assert, by marching, their pride in Islam, their self-confidence, and their power.

Marching through the streets of a British city, then, is in many different ways an assertion of power and confidence. This is, I think, why the holding of the processions seems to have a deep subjective experiential significance for those who participate in them.

Finally, and most simply, the julus is an expression of the rights of minorities to celebrate their culture and religion in the public domain within a multicultural, multifaith, multiracial society. Seen thus, Muslim processions do not differ significantly from Chinese New Year lion dances, public Diwali celebrations, St. Patrick’s Day parades, or Caribbean carnivals. They are part of a joyous, and yet unambiguous, assertion of cultural diversity, of an entitlement to tolerance and mutual respect in contemporary Britain. Through such public festivals and celebrations, immigrants make territorial claims in their adopted cities, and ethnic groups assert their equal cultural rights within the society.

Conclusion

As Pakistani Muslim migrants have migrated beyond the boundaries of their natal countries to create Muslim communities in the West, they have also created fertile ground for new Sufi cult centers. In Britain, all Saints are “living” saints. Through hijra (migration) they have become the original founders of a new order in an alien land. In marching through the shabby streets of Britain’s decaying inner cities, they glorify Islam, they stamp the earth with the name of God. If, like Sufi Abdullah, they are powerful vicegerents of a great saint, they
retain their link to the cult center, they pay homage to it, they go on pilgrimage to visit it, they marvel at its beauty, and they share in the powerful godliness of its keeper.

To establish these new diasporic centers, linked by ties of personal loyalty to “home,” these Muslims have expanded the totemic spaces of Islamic knowledge and spiritual power. Today the Muslim umma (community of believers) encompasses the “West” in a transnational network of Islamic scholars and religious leaders. By making places out of spaces, Sufi saints have decentered and recentered the sacred topography of global Islam. New peripheries, whether in Africa, Asia, or England, converge ultimately on the epicenter of the Islamic universe—the sacred Kaaba, navel of the earth.

Once a year, pilgrims from Britain led by Sufi Abdullah meet pilgrims from Pakistan, led by Zindapir, in Mecca on hajj. Zindapir provides free food to all needy pilgrims to the hajj and it is Sufi Abdullah’s responsibility to organize the langar, the cooking and the distribution of the food. Two men, friends and companions of old who have been separated for a quarter of a century by 5,000 miles of land and sea, meet annually at the sacred center of Islam. They form part of what has become through the process of migration a global sacred network generated by a belief and love for one man, following a divinely ordained mystical path.

The reverse colonizations and spatial appropriations implied by these Sufi movements through space, and the decentering of Western dominance, highlighted by the appropriations and reverse colonizations, lead us back to our original reflections on “totemic space.” Sufi movements—like Western colonialism and neocolonialism—reinscribe space morally, cognitively, and aesthetically. In the contemporary world, these inscriptions by Muslim migrants create and sustain alternative global topographies of knowledge, power, and morality.

Notes

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1. The presence of the living souls of departed saints at the final du’a was articulated quite explicitly by several khalifa. Their living presence at the lodge was further indicated by the fact that Zindapir was said by them to commune with the departed saints every morning before attending to the needs of the public. This, I was told, was why he was unable to meet anyone before 11:00 A.M.

2. On my visit to the lodge in November 1991, I was told a tale of a visitor who had explicitly described the place as paradise. It is noteworthy also that Zindapir himself
claimed to have found paradise on earth (P. Werbner 1990a:271–272). He was referring in this particular instance, however, primarily to the abundance of food and gifts at the lodge that he was able to distribute in his lifetime.

3. Chapati and nan are Indian flatbreads; a tandur is a clay oven.

4. The cultural and political significance of public processions varies widely. The display of dominance in official state processions may be contrasted with potentially explosive religious-communal processions, such as those in Northern Ireland. There are pilgrimage processions (Sallnow 1987), annual ritual processions (Fuller 1980), English miners’ processions, memorial processions, and processions that form part of broader rituals of revitalization, such as carnival processions before Lent. Although all processions may be said to constitute existential displays of power and territorial occupation and demarcation, their significance differs widely in different cultures and localities and at different historical moments.

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