Between Ethnography and Hagiography: Allegorical Truths and Representational Dilemmas in Narratives of South Asian Muslim Saints

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Between Ethnography and Hagiography: Allegorical Truths and Representational Dilemmas in Narratives of South Asian Muslim Saints

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The paper compares my anthropological monograph about a Pakistani Sufi cult founded by a living saint, known as Zindapir, with a translated hagiography written about the same saint by a devoted poet-khalifa. It aims to compare two representational strategies of an historical figure—on the one hand, that of an anthropologist writing for a wider audience of expert social scientists and Islamic scholars and, on the other hand, an indigenous devotee who knew the saint well, claiming divine inspiration in his writings intended to honour his departed saint and to sacralize his name. The paper interrogates the fuzzy boundary between hagiography and ethnography, literary and descriptive text, fact and fiction, truth and myth, history and archeology in order to raise questions about the limits of dialogical anthropology.

Keywords: Pakistan; Sufi Saints; Ethnography; Hagiography; Dialogical Anthropology

Introduction

Issues of ethnographic representation have become central to anthropological theorizing and, indeed, writing practices, particularly since the publication in the 1980s of three signal books, partly in response to Edward Said’s deconstructive critique of orientalist discourses about the “other” (1978): Writing Culture, edited by Clifford and
Marcus (1986), The Predicament of Culture, by James Clifford (1988), and Anthropology as Cultural Critique, by George Marcus and Michael Fischer (1986). In their trenchant critical revision of anthropological strategies of authoritative writing, the three books advocate more “dialogical” or “polyphonic” modes of ethnographic representation that locate the author explicitly within his or her texts and field of study, and, equally importantly, allow space within ethnographies for the authentic voice(s) of the “other”, the subject of anthropological study.

Earlier experiments aiming to achieve this dialogism were often made through the recording of biographical interviews. It is very unusual, however, to encounter the publication within a decade of two books on the same living saint, written during his lifetime from different perspectives—that of the anthropologist and that of the local native participant, each work adopting a radically different writing strategy—anthropological and vernacular. The present paper, based on a translation project funded by the British Academy, compares an anthropological monograph I wrote about Zindapir, a living saint who established his own Sufi cult focused on the central lodge he founded near Kohat in the North-West Frontier Province (now renamed Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, see Werbner 2003), with a translated hagiography written about the very same saint by a devoted poet-khalifa, who knew the saint well. The hagiography was published shortly after the saint’s death in 1999 (Rab Nawaz n.d., probably around 2005). My primary interest in the translation exercise is thus to compare two representational strategies or modes—on the one hand, that of a social and cultural anthropologist writing for a wider audience of expert social scientists and Islamic scholars and, on the other hand, that of an indigenous member of the order, claiming divine inspiration in writing a text intended to honour his departed saint and sacralize his name for an audience of devotees and other Muslims (on this process of sacralization, see Green 2012, 92 and passim). During my fieldwork in Pakistan, I came to know the poet-turned-hagiographer quite well over more than ten years, and visited his own lodge in the Punjab (Werbner 2003, 169–175), but I did not see the written hagiographic text until it was published in Urdu, circa 2005, six years after the saint’s death (the translation was only completed recently, in 2014).

Important in such comparisons, clearly, is not only what has been included but also what has been left out or suppressed. This points to the fact that a “life” is not a single unity—much depends on the encounter between writer and subject and the different qualities each brings to it. A second key consideration relates to the ontology of what is produced—in the case of the anthropologist, a scientific text; in the case of the loyal khalifa-hagiographer, a sacred object constituting the personhood of a saint in all its complex charismatic sanctity. In the light of this, it is possible to identify key points of comparison and difference between my anthropological monograph, Pilgrims of Love, and Zindapir’s Sufi hagiography or sacred biography (tazkira in Urdu). For a start, unlike an anthropological monograph a hagiography narrating the life, miracles and sayings of a saint is often felt to be materially or metonymically linked to him and thus powerfully sacred for readers in a way that an ethnography never can be (see, for example, Ernst 1995, 66). It thus differs ontologically from a mere discursive, anthropological “scientific” text. It is poetic and imaginative (Renard 2008, 246–247).
The extent to which hagiographies can be read as accurate historical accounts is discussed critically by Rapoport-Albert in an analysis of the hagiographies of two Jewish Hassidic saints. Distinguishing between “archeological” truth, and “historical” truth, Rapoport-Albert contrasts “archeological” facts based on documentary or other material evidence with “historical” tales of heroic personalities mythologized as “an active force in history” (1988, 119). Similarly, comparing hagiographies of militant saintly warriors written several hundred years after their death with earlier, contemporary depictions of the same Bengali saints showing them to be peaceful, pious Sufis, Eaton concludes that the later hagiographies were inflected by an “ideology of conquest and conversion” (1993, 74–77).

Even if hagiographical narratives are evidently “fictional”, however, they nevertheless locate exemplary individuals, as Hermenseun argues in the case of South Asia, in “imagined spaces” and provide some insight into local place and practice (1997, 319). Similarly, Cornell has argued, against the sceptical viewpoint of hagiographies as fictions that “it is simply not true that all sacred biography represents only topoi and not real human beings”. Hagiographies “contain too much quotidian information”, he argues, to be mere fictions (1998, xlii). Indeed, he uses data contained in hagiographical anthologies to tease out demographic, ethnic and other typifications of Moroccan saints (1998, 93–120). Lawrence too denies that the saints in sacred biographies are “mere metaphors” (1981, 65), although he admits that lesser biographers often “flatten” and eliminate paradoxes in their retrospective portraits (1981, 64). Nonetheless, Stewart insists that sacred histories must be understood as “fictions”—“not something that is untrue, but something that is constructed or fabricated imaginatively” (2010, 10 and passim).

Seen as literary texts, even when they are represented as “facts”, generic narratives of saints’ miracles and their lives tell a moral tale of exemplary personhood, often modelled on the Prophet of Islam or his early disciples (Ernst 1985, 1995, 310–311). Hagiographies may thus be interpreted as moral allegories. By contrast, anthropological narratives claim evidential veracity, yet as ethnographic texts they too may be “moral allegories”—“partial” in the sense of being selective, and conveying a broader moral message to a wider readership (see Clifford 1986). This implies an apparently fuzzy boundary between hagiography and ethnography, literary and descriptive text, fact and fiction, truth and myth, history and archeology. Against such postmodern ambiguities, however, my aim in this paper is not only to interpret the two texts but also to consider the significance of the discrepancies between them in depicting Zindapir’s life as a saint.

**Zindapir: A Living Saint**

Major living saints who establish large-scale new cults are, it should be noted, relatively rare in the Muslim world. Most indigenous hagiographies are of famous saints who died well before anthropologists and other scholars came to study their shrines and cults, often hundreds of years earlier. The acquisition of a translation of Zindapir’s hagiography thus presented, I hoped, a unique opportunity to make a genuine
comparison between two voices—the anthropological and the vernacular—about the same subject, written within a restricted period of ten years. The Sufi saint at the centre of each text was known to both authors during his lifetime. The present paper aims to contrast the underlying values informing not just each author’s ethno-graphic strategies but their differing encounters and experiences of knowing the saint and his followers. The project thus allows, I want to suggest, for a revision of utopian notions of ethnographic collaboration suggested in the Writing Culture critique, raising doubt about even the possibility of a unified, singular dialogical or polyphonic account in the case of certain kinds of charismatic religious figures. In my own writing project, I had begun by trying to write as much as possible from the perspective of saintly followers and the saint’s family but I soon learnt that this was not possible—they expected a hagiography, not a “detached” text with some grounding in (non-miraculous) observed realities (on the limits of dialogical anthropology more broadly see also Werbner 2003, 301–302). The following comparison between my own work and the hagiographical account thus reflects upon anthropological theory as well as the challenges of research on Islam in present-day Muslim societies.

Sufism has remained a subject of interest to contemporary scholars, partly at least because it is often seen as a counter to the strict morality of Islamist or Salafi groups espousing jihad. Indeed, in Pakistan, Sufism’s tolerant, inclusive and peaceful ideology has made it, it would seem, a target of terrorist attacks by hardliner members of the Taliban movement. Zindapir’s central lodge, the seat of the saint, is based near Kohat, an area where the Taliban are well entrenched, and I was thus hoping that the saint’s hagiography might provide important insight into the values underpinning Sufi saintly philosophy with regard to ideas about peace and tolerance; in particular, I wondered whether the hagiography would reveal the values of peacefulness and inclusiveness of the saint which he enunciated repeatedly to me on my stays in the lodge. As we shall see, this was not, however, the main thrust of the hagiography.

The Critique of the ‘Ulama

Where the hagiography and my own account converge is in relation to Zindapir and his followers’ disdain for the ‘ulama’s knowledge and its limitations (see Werbner 2003, 95–88). Early in the hagiography Rab Nawaz eloquently outlines this opposition between practising Sufis and learned clerics:

Modern Muslim students who study in religious schools, the vast portion of their lives passes in studying the formal sciences. They remain denied of those sciences which allow for the tazkiya (purification) of the nafs (soul) and tasfiya (cleansing) of the heart. This is the very reason why the majority of ‘ulama (religious scholars) expend their entire efforts in polemical disputation and conflict, and in becoming orators from whom other than sedition and corruption no positive outcome is attained. In religious seminaries, words remain but ma’ni (substance) is lacking. Traditionally, people used to reach ma’ni (meanings) through the acquisition of knowledge from which they attained the recognition of the holy zat (essence, being) of Janab Rasul Allah (the Messenger of Allah). For the ‘ulama (scholars) of today and in [today’s] madrassahs, this baat (language, matter) is no longer there. Refinement of the nafs (soul), riyazat (intense
worship of God, asceticism) and mujahadah (literally: struggle, derivative of “Jihad”), the mushahadah (contemplation or vision) [by way of] the anwar-i tajalliyat (“illuminating lights”) and the highway that is ma‘rifat (mystical, secret knowledge) of the divine zat (essence, being) and sifat (attributes) of the true principles of religion are totally (bilkul) ignored. (Rab Nawaz n.d.: 25 in the translation)

On the other hand, students of (secular) current education in schools and colleges, from beginning to end remain ghafl (mindless) and unaware of the shar‘i (juristic) ordinances, the necessities of Islam and their observance. The subjects they are taught only instruct towards bodily upkeep, worldliness and self-aggrandizement; they further promote the base desires and Satanic wasais (whispers). According to them, observance of the shar‘i ordinances and ‘ibadat (acts of worship) are meaningless and fruitless acts. Religion [more generally], in their eyes, stabs like a thorn and [thus] escape from its tradition and obedience is their paramount duty.

They believe today’s savoury progress to be authentic and real progress; thought of the afterlife and ‘aqibat (the end, conclusion, judgement day) does not appear even as a dream. Their whole life is spent in worldly superficialities and carnal pleasures [until] finally they depart the world, wanting, with hearts [burdened by] hundreds of regrets. In this irremediable era, should a man of sa‘adar (blessing, fortune) desire attainment of true tawhid (God’s unity) and distinction then it is [necessary] for him to seek out the company and fellowship of the people of Allah and acquire faiz (grace) and barakat (blessings). Otherwise, through the study of their utterances and actions, he can accord his zahir (exterior) and batin (hidden) [self] with them.

The men of Allah are masters of those sciences and secrets of which the ‘ulama of the merely apparent are totally unaware and totally distant from. Their speech possesses such an effect that is beyond explanation. Whilst living in the dunya (the temporal world), eradicating concerns from the heart and breaking [from] the intricacies of life, the ascent of the ruh (soul, spirit), from the ‘Alam-i Sulta (lowliest world) to the ‘Alam-i Bala (lofty, exalted world) is real and authentic progress, for the [sole] sake of which man was born into this world and before which modern progress and science is baseless and worthless. If the sum total of today’s scientists gather and wish to bring the sinful towards the straight path, and wish to change lowly morals into praiseworthy attributes, they could never achieve this. However, even a single glance from the men of God’s path, a single tawajjuh (intense gaze) and even a single gesture is enough for change! Where the doctors’ tried and tested prescriptions prove to be ineffective, there only the tawajjuh (concentrated gaze) of the mendicants of the lane of the beloved (ku-ey dost) delivers the function of the kalam-i masihai (literally: Masih-like discourse). The poet ends the passage by admonishing disciples to follow the “tenets of Islam”, at the same time as they seek to reach esoteric knowledge through obedience to “men of Allah”.

If progress means the m‘arifat of God and grasping haqiqat (reality) then it exists in obedience to [the tenets of] Islam [fulfilled with] zawq (pleasure), shawq (eagerness, love, zeal), and through being obedient to the studied utterances and actions of the men of Allah. (Rab Nawaz n.d. (circa 2005), 25–26)

Elsewhere this theme is repeated:

[Even] if the ‘ulama, lawyers and other educated [professionals] were to come, you (huzur) would entertain them with counsel and advice which were very effective; they
would be able to eradicate the hardness of their hearts. Huzur, Qibla-i ‘Alam”s congregation would be beautified by asrar (secrets), ma’arif (esoteric knowledge), divine anwar (lights) and zikrs. It was often observed that the state of the person seeing you would change, he would become endowed with istiqamat (utter steadfastness) in zikr and fikr (thought). Those denouncing the rites of Islam would, upon sight of you, become adherents of sawm (fasting) and salat (praying). (Rab Nawaz n.d. (circa 2005), 104)

Elsewhere the hagiographer explains that

The murshid-i kamil (perfect guide) is of the people of ‘ishq (love) and the ‘ulama are of the people of ‘aql (intellect). The murshid-i kamil is blessed because he has been apportioned both ‘ishq and ‘aql. On the path of suluk (the sufi path), the murshid-i kamil’s, the durweyshi’s and the faqir’s ‘ishq surpasses the ‘aql of the ‘ulama. The friend’s asrar (secrets) are indeed beautiful. (Rab Nawaz n.d. (circa 2005), 324)

In his broad criticism of the dead intellectual sciences of the ‘ulama, Rab Nawaz (the hagiographer) does not distinguish between the ‘ulama of different schools of thought in South Asia—Barelvi, Deobandi, etc. All are lumped together. But in other parts of the hagiography, he is more specific in relation to certain encounters with men of different religious tendencies.

An incident told by Rab Nawaz in the hagiography is of a time when he, a soldier, was stationed in a field unit of the engineering corps, when an attempt was made by two army subedars (junior commissioned officers) from the Tablighi Jamaat to discredit him by deliberately allocating to him a task he was not competent to fulfil. In response, he recalls, he invoked the image (tasawwur) of his shaykh who miraculously sealed their mouths until the commanding officer arrived, heard his complaint and punished the two. Thus, “the battalion’s pride remained intact” (since he would have discredited the battalion when he failed in the duty imposed on him) (n.d. (circa 2005), 268). In another confrontation two army officers, again members of the Tablighi Jamaat, attempted to transfer him to Multan. Once again, the pir intervened miraculously and prevented this transfer (Rab Nawaz n.d. (circa 2005), 279). Rab Nawaz comments that:

It was the barkat of Huzur, Qibla-i ‘Alam”s strength of tongue, that at one time that officer said that “he is the leader of the Ghamkolis, we’ll throw him far away,” and on another occasion he said “open up the office on a weekend and block his transfer”. (n.d. (circa 2005), 279)

The confrontation speaks of antagonism between Sufis and reformists based on the personal experiences of the author of the hagiography. The saint is there to support him and, by implication, is also hostile to the reformers.

Referring to another confrontation, this time between a maulvi and Zindapir, Rab Nawaz comments:

It is a point of wit that in childhood every wali (friend) of Allah learns of the ‘ilm (knowledge) of the din (religion) from an ‘alim (learned scholar) of the din, but a faqir or wali of Allah does not give bay’at (oath of allegiance) at the hands of a maulvi. Instead, the maulvi must offer bay’at at the truth-abiding hands of the faqir. This is because the world’s gaze is fixed upon lines and letters whereas the faqir’s is fixed upon m’arifat (esoteric
knowledge) and huzur (his presence, honour). The ‘alim exposes wahdaniyat (the oneness of Allah) in the light of ‘ilm but the faqir teaches the m’arifat of wahdaniyat. The ‘alim is well aware of matters pertaining to fiqh (law) from the whirlwind of ‘ilm, but the faqir is their very demonstration. (n.d. (circa 2005), 249)

Like the disdain for the ‘ulama, the hagiography is in agreement with my findings in Pilgrims of Love (Werbner 2003) when it comes to the morality tales told by the saint about his encounters with the rich and powerful, including politicians, generals and wealthy individuals (on this see also Green 2004). A tale about an early encounter that augments the morality tales in Pilgrims of Love is told by Rab Nawaz in the hagiography:

On the Peshawar Road from Kohat the second village is Sarmast Kaley. There a person by the name of Sarmast Khan came to know that in Ghamkol Sharif a lodge has been established. At that time neither the masjid of Ghamkol Sharif had been constructed, nor was there a guesthouse, nor any arrangements for water, and there were huts made of ordinary grass in which guests used to stay. At that time Sarmast Khan had so much money that he had sacks full of notes and a car full of sacks. Arriving at Ghamkol Sharif he offered this huge sum before Huzur, Qibla-i ‘Alam: “Here you have no masjid, nor guesthouse. With this money construct your lodge!” Huzur, Qibla-i ‘Alam commanded: “O Sarmast Khan, the zat (being) of God the Noble is very great, the mind of this great zat is not that of a child’s.” This example of your, Huzur’s, was not understood by Sarmast so then, having given the example, you commanded: “In the giving and taking of money and the rupee many the elder and experienced men test its sound. If the rupee makes the sound (a recognisable crackle of a genuine currency note) then he stands up and if it doesn’t make the sound then it is considered khota (counterfeit) and returned. If a child is given money then he too will imitate an adult, he will test its sound and if it makes the sound then the child will clasp it firmly in his palm and go towards the shop, and even a child won’t accept a false coin. The money that you have is counterfeit; God’s house is in no need of a bundle of papers; there is no need for counterfeit money. Tell me, do you give zakat? Have you placed your hand on the head of a destitute or orphan? Have you thought [to help] a widow? Have you done anything for the general benefit, the general good, tell me? On this basis your rupees are counterfeit, take them away with you!” With this he commanded: “May God the Noble not bring you here again.” By your, Huzur’s tasarruf (spiritual intensity) and strength of tongue, Sarmast Khan was not apportioned a second coming to the lodge again. (n.d. (circa 2005), 220–221)

As in the discussions of the saint’s munificent generosity, this tale and others like it stress the saint’s unwillingness to bow to worldly wealth and status. This is made very clear in the hagiography’s discussion of the saint’s hospitality.

Cosmopolitan Hospitality: Class and Inequality Versus Strangerhood

Although Pilgrims of Love and the hagiography agree on the lowly status of clerics and dignitaries who visit the saint, the emphasis changes when it comes to hospitality at the lodge. Both the hagiography and my anthropological account stress that the saint was generous and hospitable to all visitors. He prided himself on being God’s appointed feeder of the multitudes. The difference between the two works is in the almost exclusive emphasis in the hagiography on inequality, on the poor and the destitute as
receivers of hospitality, whereas Pilgrims of Love also highlights the saint’s welcoming of foreigners, strangers and believers from other religions to the lodge.

Repeatedly, Rab Nawaz stresses Zindapir’s generosity to the poor and destitute, as in these poetic lines:

His karam (generosity, favour, grace) is not limited to just his own

Protector and benefactor of all the destitute is the pir of Ghamkol. (Rab Nawaz n.d. (circa 2005), 73)

And elsewhere:

You were so well-disposed and gracious towards the destitute and poor that the intelligent would leave your mansion with their laps filled, thereupon, becoming lost in kayf (intoxication) and saying: "We are returning having acquired blessing from the holy mansion of the fragrant plant of the hearts”. (Rab Nawaz n.d. (circa 2005), 89)

The poet often refers to himself poetically as “destitute”, seeking the spiritual grace of his saint, as this short poem taken from the hagiography illustrates:

My heart’s garden flourishes upon your falling glance, my master

Let the angels be envious of your karam (generosity, favour) upon this destitute man, my master

I am proud even if it is but having attained the honour of servitude before you,

How can I be worried by the darkness of sorrow, when my heart is illuminated by the splendour of my master (Rab Nawaz n.d. (circa 2005), 284; for a similar poem by Rab Nawaz see also Werbner 2003, 172)

There are several stories in the hagiography of the saint helping impoverished followers with his infinite generosity.

Huzur, Qibla-i ‘Alam would command boundless care of his visitors. You commanded: If the guest is satisfied then the rahman (all-merciful God) is satisfied. You would take your honour to the langar in a refined manner and then command its distribution. As many guests as there were, to that same extent happiness and openness would enter your pure manner in that an opportunity and time to care for more guests has come. In an ijtema (congregation) as large as yours, Huzur’s blessed ‘urs, you would command that “if even one guest leaves wanting then all these expenses will be fruitless”; meaning, that each and every guest’s care would be ordered (to be given food and shelter). You commanded: “Amongst the guests there are mostly ill, upset, depressed and broken-hearted people; God is pleased when they are cared for” (Rab Nawaz n.d. (circa 2005), 295)

So too,

Huzur, Qibla-i ‘Alam Janab Zindapir Sahib’s platter of karam (generosity, bounty) is so vast [that] from it king and beggar, rich and poor, the resident and traveller, the knowledgeable and ignorant, the free and the enslaved, man and woman—all are satiated and blessed. It is an effect of Khwaja Qasim Sahib’s du’as (benedictory prayer) that in Janab Zindapir Sahib’s platter of karam there is no paucity and nor will there be until [the Day of] Judgement. (n.d. (circa 2005), 76; here referring to the blessing of Zindapir by his murshid from Mohra Sharif, Baba Qasim)
In addition to human beings, the saint also cared for insects, whom he fed sweets and sweet water, and for livestock and wild animals (n.d. (circa 2005), 296). When it came to the saint’s welcoming of foreign visitors, however, I found only one story in the hagiography referring to foreigners and even this one story was not of hospitality but of miraculous protection:

In 1998 a passenger plane was grounded in Peshawar due to a technical fault and parked in a garage for repair. Two air hostesses stood on the road outside the airport with the thought that “the High Lodge of Ghamkol Sharif is somewhere in the environs of Peshawar and we will return [to the airport] by the time the plane is repaired.” They were both standing on the road when a man in a car stopped the car and asked them: “Where do you want to go?” They said: “Ghamkol Sharif.” He sat them in the car saying that: “I too am going there, I will take you.” Reaching Dera he left the Kohat road and, deviating from the route, he wanted to go to an abandoned and unknown place. The girls showed each other their worry that: “firstly, we have come very far from Peshawar and secondly, the driver is leaving the road. Let nothing happen to us, we are in danger, what will become of us?” Dera is controlled by the F.C. meaning the Field Constabulary. The Kohat police is not allowed to go there.

[Then] They saw that a Kohat police car was coming up ahead and with it Huzur Qibla-i ‘Alam ba-nafs-i nafis (in choice, pure, refined manner) who commanded the police officers: “Stop this car and have it checked.” Even though you, Huzur, were in the High Lodge, presiding over meetings in your blessed chamber in all your glory. As soon as the Kohat police stopped the car the driver left the car and fled. The police took down all the details from the girls and brought them to the High Lodge. After meeting with them, Huzur Qibla-i ‘Alam commanded arrangements for their return and had them taken to Peshawar. (n.d. (circa 2005), 244)

Against this single narrative in the hagiography, I collected during my fieldwork at the lodge a whole lore of stories from the shaykh about the hospitality extended by him to strangers like myself. During my evening meetings with him, he continuously stressed that he expected no reciprocity from me for the generous hospitality he had extended to me. He will never be a guest in my house, he assured me. He treats me this way because I am a human being, insan, I am God’s creature, for the sake of Allah, irrespective of whether I am a Muslim, a Christian or a Jew.

The trope of unilateral, unreciprocated hospitality is key to vernacular forms of ethical cosmopolitanism. For Sufi saints like Zindapir, who remain permanently seated in their central lodges, hospitality is constructed as a pure ethical gesture, unilaterally extended without expectation of return. Like other hosts, however, such saints too must guard against accusations of hypocrisy and greed—the view that donations and offerings at the lodge “in the name of God” are in reality ways of enriching the shrine’s keepers. In this sense, hospitality at a Sufi lodge may also be interpreted in ethically ambiguous terms. Zindapir, in being an ascetic world renouncer, attempted to allay such suspicions. In his moral narratives, I argue in my ethnography, he stressed his inclusive acceptance of everyone, his willingness to engage with strangers and foreigners, irrespective of religion, culture and nationality, all of whom are treated as sacred guests hosted under the canopy of God above.

“What is a faqir?” Zindapir asked me, rhetorically.
A faqir is a friend of Allah. He does things only for Allah. Even if he is offered 100,000 rupees on the one hand, or to eat nothing for God’s sake, he would choose to stay hungry. If a faqir loves the people, he only loves them for the sake of Allah, not for himself. It is like the fan in his room.

Once an Englishman came from the British High Commission in Islamabad, the shaykh told me. He said: “I have a nice house in Islamabad, full of comforts, yet I feel so peaceful when I come here. Why is that?” The shaykh replied:

The fan is blowing cool air for me, but if someone is sitting in the room with me, he too will feel the cool breeze. So too, Allah is here for me and you share in his light. Allah says that if you want to find me, you must first find my friend, you must find mera banda (my man, my servant, the person who does bandagi, prayer).

The shaykh told me that usually women sit behind the barrier where they cannot touch him. He never shakes their hand. Why not? Because it is guna, sin. But once a white woman doctor came from Islamabad and he shook her hand because she is a Christian (for her it is not a sin).

The shaykh’s open-mindedness was repeated in many of the morality tales he told me, reported in Pilgrims of Love. He explained: “I respect all people whatever their religion because they are human beings. In fact, once a Christian came here and he was given food before the Muslims so that he would not think they regard him as inferior”.

Another story the shaykh told me was of an American who came to see him. The American asked him why Pakistan helps the Afghan refugees? The shaykh replied that ‘Pakistanis and Afghans believed in the same God, and so too do Christians, but the Russians (i.e. the Communists) do not believe in God’. Once, a team of doctors from the United Nations working with Afghan refugees in Kohat (the nearby cantonment town) came to visit him. The leader was a Christian doctor, himself not a believer, yet later he asked if he could bring another doctor friend. All are welcome at the darbar, the shaykh said, irrespective of religion, and he treats them all the same: “I gave the visitors food even though it was Ramzan and I myself was fasting. I said they should eat. I fast, but every person who comes here, rich or poor, gets something to eat”.

My own visit was an occasion to prove once again his universal acceptance and tolerance, irrespective of faith or creed. On the last day of my visit to the darbar in 1991, he called me to him and said:

You have stayed with us for three weeks and during this time you have slept on a bed, in comfort. We know that you are Jewish. While you have been here you have seen many Muslims come and all have slept on the ground. Would you get such good treatment even from your own husband? And where else in the world would you find such peace? Nowhere!

On my departure, I was showered with gifts, including wild honey, perfume, suits of traditional clothing in the most exquisite fabrics, and gifts for my husband. As in the case of important politicians and civil servants, the gifts objectified the shaykh’s ultimate transcendence and the miracle of his generosity.

As I report in my monograph, Zindapir stressed repeatedly that what he does, he does for the love of God and God alone. Some time ago, he recalled, a Japanese
team came to the darbar, headed by a Mr Hiroshima, a famous climber who had conquered Mount K-2 in the Karakoram range of the Hindu Kush, the second highest mountain in the world after Everest. The team consisted of scholars from a Japanese institute with an interest in Sufism. They asked the shaykh: “What is the significance of the dome on the graves of pirs?” The shaykh replied, he told me, that the dome is only for auliya, friends of God, not for generals, heads of state or kings. It is a sign (nishani) of a man of God, a friend of Allah. On the occasion of this visit, Hajji Ibrahim, a devoted disciple of the shaykh, told me that he had invited the visitors for tea, Japanese style, and spoke to them in Japanese. He had worked for a Japanese firm in the Gulf and he utilized his experience to entertain the guests in a fitting way. The lesson I derived from these tales was that each guest to the darbar is honoured according to his customs—an English visitor is provided with a bed, the Japanese with the appropriate kind of tea.

This stress on cosmopolitan hospitality as a key feature of Sufism seemed important to me and I reported it in detail in my ethnography (Werbner, forthcoming; see also Hill 2012). Thus, Schimmel comments that ‘[f]or people famous for their hospitality and accustomed to travelling long distances through uninhabited areas, the miraculous production of food and water and, very often, sweetmeat would certainly be one of the most coveted powers of the saint’ (1975, 207). In another tale the shaykh recalled that once, three young Englishmen came to the darbar. Two had already converted to Islam and one was converted in the darbar by the shaykh. When they met the shaykh on Hajj one of them put the question to him: “Should I stay with my mother who is still a Christian, or leave her?” The pir said that he should keep on living with his mother and should serve her and take care of her. “You should treat her with the respect due to her as a mother”. The Prophet, he said, told a man who had converted to Islam and whose father was an old man and a devout Christian: “You should take your father to the church door, wait for him outside while he prays, and then accompany him back home”.

On the last day of my stay in the darbar following the ‘urs in 1991, I went to bid goodbye to the shaykh. He looked particularly ethereal, thin and pale, his eyes darkened, and he smiled a sweet, innocent smile. He stressed once more that all he did was for the love of God alone and no one else. He knew I was a Jew (yahudi). If a Jewish and a Muslim woman came before a Muslim judge to be judged, and he put the Muslim woman in the shade, then the judge was not a Muslim. Muslims, Christians, and Jews have the same God, but he, Zindapir, does not like the Russian Communists (in Afghanistan) because they do not believe in God. During zikr people mention only one name—the name of Allah. By appealing to God, I argue in the monograph, Zindapir transcended Islam to reach out to all people of faith. In doing so, he underlined his own transcendence, the wide reach of his dominion. He also asserted the difference between the mystic’s knowledge of the inner truth of Islam with its broad, tolerant, universal message, and that of the narrow-minded ‘ulama.

This trope, of hospitality towards strangers is, remarkably, missing from the hagiography. It may be that because I was myself a stranger, Zindapir went to some lengths to tell me such tales. In the hagiography, Jews, Shi‘i and Qadiyani (Ahmadiyya) are
disdained: a Jew is described as an “enemy” who gives a hungry stranger three chapatti, only for them to be grabbed by his dog (n.d. (circa 2005), 139); the saint “sees” black smoke rising from the heart of a Qadiyani (n.d. (circa 2005), 248) who later converts; a follower flagellated himself in a Shi’a procession and later died “hopeless and unfulfilled” (n.d. (circa 2005), 274). In his encounter with Christian missionaries the saint, according to the hagiography, proves the pre-eminence of the Prophet of Islam over Jesus (n.d. (circa 2005), 286).

How are we to interpret such discrepancies between my own ethnography, as depicted in Pilgrims of Love, and the hagiography? The perspectives of the two writers, myself and Rab Nawaz, and our own personal encounters with and knowledge of the saint, would seem to play a crucial role here. There are also, however, some omissions and exaggerations in the hagiography that were so astonishing to me when I first read them that I found them unbelievable: they appeared to imply a desire by the saint’s family, perhaps, to elevate both the saint’s worldly status and his miraculous powers, in an attempt never made by the saint himself, at least to my knowledge, during his lifetime. I turn now to these critical discrepancies.

Respectability, Izzat and Miracles

Much of the early part of the hagiography is devoted to proving the status of Zindapir’s ancestors:

The most glorious grandfather of Huzur, Qibla-i ‘Alam, Janab Zindapir Sahib, Muhammad Ibrahim Sahib, also in accordance with the pious salaf (ancestors), in the propagation of the faith, migrating from Afghanistan to the village of Jangal Khel [which is] connected to Kohat, took up residency there. The rank, in terms of observance of Tasawwuf (Sufism, Sufi mystical theosophy) of Ibrahim Shah Sahib, exists at such a level that he has been greatly distinguished in terms of ‘ilm (knowledge) and ma’rifat (mystical, secret knowledge).

The offspring born to angels of Hazrat Muhammad Ibrahim Shah Sahib’s likeness, how great must their dignity be! It must be aptly said that this whole family was indeed of illustrious essence and possessing heart, as if the abundance of splendour and anwar (lights) were given to them as part of their inheritance. If the lineage possesses elevated degrees then for their offspring, since they remain directly under this plain of tariqat, it was as the blandishment of the look of chemical effect that amongst your pure offspring, Janab Zindapir Sahib became distinguished in his time and a leader of his era. You, having emerged upon the horizon of wilayat, resembled the full moon and, becoming the sun of your sanctified era, beamed a brilliant glow by which the plains were illuminated and perfumed. (Rab Nawaz n.d. (circa 2005), 38)

The irony is that in my observation, during his lifetime the saint avoided his family, particularly his immediate male siblings in the neighbouring town of Jangal Khel, and never stressed his ancestral elevation, beyond the fact that he was a Sayyid. Indeed, he was said to have quarrelled with his brothers. There was another, dominant Sayyid lineage also resident in his natal village, which was far more distinguished, holding important posts in the civil administration and in the air force. It was to
this Sayyid family that the saint attached himself, ultimately arranging a marriage for
one of his grandsons with a daughter of the “khel” (lineage).

An even more striking omission is that nowhere in the hagiography is it mentioned
that Zindapir’s original occupation was that of a tailor, and later a tailor-contractor
with the 7th Baluch regiment. This absence is especially significant because some of
the earliest miracle stories about the shaykh concerned his occupation as a tailor; they
told of his miraculous capacity to predict the promotion of army officers to a higher
rank by sewing them an appropriate uniform in advance of their promotion. Another
miracle story, which I report in Pilgrims of Love, also concerned the shaykh’s role as tailor:

Zindapir was asked to sew uniforms for the regimental brass band which had been
selected to represent the Pakistan army in a brass band competition of Commonwealth
nations which was to perform in England before the king. This was in 1949. On the
evening before the final inspection parade the uniforms were not yet ready. When he dis-
covered this, the colonel in charge became agitated and accused Zindapir of failing to fulfil
his contract. But the saint merely locked up shop for the night and went home. The fol-
lowing morning all the uniforms were ready and pressed, brass buttons shining, ranks,
braid and names all in place, perfectly fitted. The commanding officer who arrived to
inspect the band was duly impressed, and heaped praise on the regiment. (Werbner
2003, 70)

I cannot recall Zindapir himself telling me he had been a tailor, but I heard such stories
repeatedly from many different sources, even beyond the lodge. Nor does the
hagiography make clear what he was doing in the 7th Baluch Regiment. All it reports
is that his murshid, Muhammad Qasim, issued the command to Huzur, Qibla-i
‘Alam Zindapir Sahib to “join the army and undertake siwil mulazamat (civil
service)” (Rab Nawaz n.d. (circa 2005), 63).

A further embellishment, well beyond the kind of miracle stories told me about the
shaykh, was the elaboration of a story I recorded in Pilgrims of Love. In the original tale,
when the regiment was stationed in Qazi Bakr in Gujrat, the saint used to pray every
night on the banks of the canal (Werbner 2003, 68). In the hagiography, the story
has been elevated to a generically miraculous tale:

Huzur, Qibla-i ‘Alam was still in a hidden state. In 1948 his unit’s camp was located on the
river near the village of Qazi Baqir, near to Sarai ‘Alamgir. When your, Huzur’s, unit
would be asleep at night, at that time, you would walk on the river’s water and right in
the very middle of the river you would lay out your blessed musalla (prayer mat) and
offer nafl (supererogatory) ‘ibadat, even though the river’s water was fourteen feet
depth! It was reported to the regiment’s commander that Shah Sahib leaves his tent at
night. He sought to investigate [and] sat by Huzur, Qibla-i ‘Alam’s blessed tent at
night: “I will keep an eye as to where he goes at night” [he thought]. He sat hiding by
the trunk of a very large sesame tree by the river. You (aap, also third person), Huzur,
walking on the water, laying out the musalla and before making the
niyyat to offer the
nafl namaz commanded, calling out, to the C.O. Sahib: “If you mention all that you
have seen to anyone then you will face harm. It will be to your benefit if you go this
very moment and deliver three commands: firstly, the whole unit will keep a rozah
(fast), every man will fast the whole of Ramzan Sharif. Secondly, the regiment’s roll-
call, i.e. the nightly attendance, will take place in the masjid; the whole unit will offer
the tarawih namaz, a hafiz will be arranged for in the morning. Thirdly, until Ramzan
al-Mubarak, the unit will rest at ten o’clock every day.” At this time the first war between Bharat (India) and Pakistan was taking place, the C.O. said: “We are in a state of jihad, this is why the unit has not been fasting.” You (aap), Huzur, forced observation of Ramzan al-Mubarak on the C.O. Sahib with great insistence. (Rab Nawaz n.d. (circa 2005), 257)

We see in this tale the Naqshbandi shaykh’s stress on the observance of Shari’a, even under difficult circumstances. But more significantly, in my view, is the shaykh’s miraculous capacity to walk on water, which is a step beyond the attribution to the saint of prophetic powers, knowledge of the unseen or the ability to be in two places at once, as in the story of the air hostesses, capacities which enable the shaykh to reach his disciples wherever they are and see into their inner thoughts (on the former, known as buruz, and the latter, known as firasa, see Schimmel 1975, 205). In the hagiography, the stress is not on an inner vision or the soul’s invisible reach, but on the capacity to defy nature. Another miracle story in the hagiography, in the same genre, tells of the capacity of the shaykh to cast away a mountain. According to this miracle tale, soldiers from the Baluch regiment decided to spend the night in a cave in the nearby mountain, against Zindapir’s command, but when they tried to find the mountain, it had moved. In the morning the soldiers told the shaykh:

Last night you (aap) commanded that: “Do not go towards the mountain; it is very far away.” Us forty men spent the whole night looking for the mountain; we were neither able to find the mountain and cave nor see them. By the grace of Huzur, Qibla-i ‘Alam’s command and strength of tongue, the mountain became very far away, even though the distance between the two mountains is [only] of three hundred yards. In this area of three hundred yards these forty men went around in circles, the mountain became so far away that these men’s whole night couldn’t even take them to the mountain. (Rab Nawaz n.d. (circa 2005), 259)

Such miracle stories go beyond the morality tales of the saint feeding the multitudes from a small pot, foreseeing the promotion of an officer, rescuing travellers on the road or even discovering water, as in the following hagiographic account:

One night, while sitting on the rock a slight drowsiness overcame you (aap). In this state you saw that your hand reached to the world’s other extremity. With this, before you, a large spring had burst out. You stopped this water, your blessed eye opened. In the meeting, the divine descended on your heart. The proof of your blessed hand reaching the other extremity of the world is that your spiritual dominion will extend across the surface of the Earth and the spring refers to your boundless fayz. With you, the exposed creation of God will find the path of guidance. (Rab Nawaz n.d. (circa 2005), 102)

We see here also an interpretation of the symbolism of dreams in Sufi tradition. Other accounts told to me by various disciples differed somewhat. As I argue in Pilgrims of Love (2003, 76–77), the most significant evidence for the power of the shaykh over the natural world is the transformation he has brought about in the lodge itself: from a deserted wilderness to a place of cultivation. The discovery of water in the lodge is represented as a miraculous gift of God and exemplifies this spiritual power over nature. One version of the discovery of water at the lodge that I report in my ethnography was told to me by one of the shaykh’s first disciples and companions:
There was a blind disciple at the lodge and he began to dig a well, just outside the mosque. Some people searching for oil came by. They had with them sophisticated seismic instruments. They told the *shaykh* that according to their instruments, there was no water there, at the place where the blind disciple was digging. The *shaykh* asked: “How do you know?” They answered: “Our instruments show it.” The *shaykh* queried: “Who made the instruments?” They replied: “They were made by men.” The *shaykh* said: “But the water here is shown to me by God.” They continued with the digging of the well and found a plentiful source of water, enough to supply the whole lodge and all its visitors. (Werbner 2003, 76)

A different tale was told to me by a visiting Brigadier (Werbner 2003, 77–78):

There were eight *charsa* [cannabis] smokers who were digging the well. They dug down to 39 feet and there they struck hard rock. A water diviner was brought along. He declared that there was no water there. But the *shaykh* said: “I know there is water there, running from the hill—this way down [pointing]. I know, because I have performed my ablutions in it [i.e. in a vision].” So I [the brigadier] said: “We can blast through the rock with dynamite.” Which is what we did. The water below was so abundant that it flowed up to 30 feet. That happened in March 1953 or thereabouts. The *shaykh* had lived in the cave for six months before the water was discovered.

The brigadier added that the cannabis smokers gave up their habit and became disciples of the *shaykh*.

One reason the hyperbolic miracle stories contained in the hagiography seem to clash with my anthropological sensibility is, I think, that during his lifetime, stories about the saint’s miracles were told in order to impart an exemplary moral lesson; otherwise, it was said that the saint did not like followers dwelling on his “miracles” and preferred to stress the miracle of the *langar*, of feeding the multitudes (see, for example, Werbner 2003, 100). Schimmel remarks that the great Sufi masters “considered miracles snares on the way toward God… The performance of miracles is a sign that a person’s intention is still directed toward worldly approval, not exclusively toward God” (1975, 212). In Pilgrims of Love I comment that in the case of Zindapir, whom I knew as a living saint,

> tales of his miracles were subordinated to his depiction as a supreme ethical subject, supported by moral fables of his ordeals, self-denial, generosity, and encounters with temporal power in which he exposed the hubris of present-day Pakistani politicians and learned scholars. (Werbner 2003, 284)

**Ethnography Versus Hagiography**

I have puzzled over the omissions of fairly standard tales repeatedly told to me about the *shaykh*, but left out in the hagiography. Undoubtedly, the tone and poetics of the hagiography differ from those in my monograph, however respectful the tone I tried to use in describing the saint. By comparison to anthropological writing, a hagiography is reverential and poetic. Zindapir’s hagiography, written by a poet, contains numerous poems, some very beautiful, interspersed among discursive passages. The central aim of the hagiography is quite clearly to extol the outstanding virtues and mystical elevation of the saint and his closeness to God. An ethnography, by contrast, must necessarily
sustain a detached, “objective”, factual tone even when it attempts to convey the reverential or experiential dimensions of Sufism for its followers.

As I have noted, much is made in Zindapir’s hagiography of the saint’s pedigree, his name, title, illustrious ancestors and achievement of the highest mystical station on the Sufi path. The saint is also quoted as defending his privileged treatment of high-status visitors. But most remarkable is the omission of his early occupation as a tailor-contractor. Famous legends about him have not been included in the hagiography, arguably because they stress this earlier, perhaps lowly, occupation. On the other hand, the hagiography contains a very large number of stories taken from the army (Rab Nawaz, the author, is a soldier) and many concern the plight of soldiers with their commanding officers, where the saint sends miraculous support from a distance. Additionally there are encounters of the saint with army generals, politicians, etc. which I too was told, though the stories differ in their details. We do indeed get a sense of “place” for Pakistani soldiers.

Another striking omission in the hagiography, I have argued here, is the saint’s inclusive hospitality across ethnic and religious divisions, and his commitment to peace. Because I was a foreigner and Jewish, many of the stories told to me by the saint were about his tolerance, universal love and inclusiveness, the stress being on the extraordinary healing peace, *sukun*, achieved in the lodge. It is remarkable that such stories are notably absent from the hagiography. Instead, the hagiography stresses religious polemics, including some stories of sectarian conflicts with members of certain groups (Shia, Qadiani, Tablighi Jamaat, Jews, and ‘ulema) while other passages defend the Sufi belief in intercession and miracles. I never encountered such stories or heated defences in my dealing with the saint. He constantly stressed his universal love and its reach to other nations, though he did emphasize repeatedly his superiority in relation to the learned ‘ulema.

Another key difference between my anthropological account and the hagiographical account is the central place given in the hagiography to bodily fashioning—etiquette, ascetism and ordeals overcome. The centrality of etiquette (*adab*) is a major theme in the hagiography, and so too is the elaboration of different aspects of the body. While I also stressed the saint’s asceticism as a key source of his self-denial and charisma, and noted practices of etiquette, their salience as a treatise about respect towards the saint was not stressed in the same way. One example in the hagiography from a whole section devoted to the “Etiquettes of *muridi*” will suffice here:

The example of a *murid* in the presence of his *murshid* is like that of someone sitting by the sea waiting for *rizq* (sustenance). He is to listen intently to his *murshid’s* voice, by means of the *murshid’s* speech he is to await his *ruhani rizq* (spiritual sustenance). In this way the *maqam* (place, station) of his *‘aqidat* (firm faith) and pursuit of *haqq* (truth) becomes firmer and the *murid* becomes worthy of divine *fazl* (grace, bounty). When a *murid* speaks himself then this is his one false step. In all circumstances permission is a necessary basis. (Rab Nawaz n.d. (circa 2005), 361)

Not surprisingly, perhaps, the hagiography devotes a good deal of space to moral Sufi mystical and emotional pedagogy. But here too it differs from my ethnography in *Pilgrims of Love*. While my Sufi companion from Britain stressed Sufi mystical ontology
and theosophy, Rab Nawaz places much greater stress in the hagiography on the ethics, morality and emotional mastering of the Sufi path. This mastery of emotions and ordeals overcome is illustrated in the hagiography with many tales, only some of which I too was told.

Alongside this, miraculous stories in the hagiography stress the saint’s supernatural capacity to walk on water, move mountains or raise the dead—I was rarely told such hyperbolic tales, perhaps because it was thought I would not believe them. At the same time key narratives told by the saint to the congregation, such as his encounter with a brigand when he first arrived in the lodge valley, highlighting his capacity to stop bullets, were mysteriously omitted from the hagiography. This was only one of several puzzling omissions.

Finally, the hagiography includes an encyclopaedic compendium about a whole range of topics absent from my anthropological monograph. It is clearly a huge labour of love, undertaken over several years, in which a very wide range of themes is covered, from the sayings (malfuzat) of the saint to information about his children and tales told of other Sufi saints in Pakistan. It makes important analytical distinctions between different types of mystical power (for example, tasarruf, kashf and karamat), different central concepts (for example, wilayat), types of robes gifted by the saint, types of khalifa (deputies), etc. In this sense, the hagiography makes a major contribution to knowledge in the field of Sufi studies.

**Concluding Remarks**

Schimmel, like others, has remarked on the generic nature of Sufi narratives. As she says, “Islamic hagiography is filled with legends, and the same miracle is often attributed to Sufis in distant parts of the Muslim world (and even outside it). Motifs known from folklore and fairy tales are woven into this fabric” (1975, 206). Hagiographies produce “typifications” of normative sainthood, according to Cornell (1998, 276).

It is still too early to know if Zindapir’s reputation will be enhanced in the future, gaining him a place in the pantheon of distinguished South Asian Sufis (on this see Lawrence 1981). For the present, what are evident are the very real differences between my anthropological attempts to depict a “life” in Pilgrims of Love and the same life as represented hagiographically. Given these major differences, and taking into consideration that the hagiography was read and edited by members of the saint’s immediate family, it seems evident that despite my anthropological attempt to represent the saint and his Sufi order, and indeed Sufism more generally, from the perspective of my interlocutors, the gaps between my ethnocultural account and the hagiography are far too great to be bridged. This points to the limits of dialogical anthropology, advocated by postmodern critics. Generic features of writing and representation create an essentially unbridgeable gulf. The moral allegories contained in the text necessarily also differ, even when the anthropologist is a sympathetic interpreter of Sufi ideas and practice.

One can only speculate about the omissions from the shaykh’s life and legends, but it is also clear that the reverential tone that repeatedly places the saint in the realm of
mystical-cum-moral perfection cannot be duplicated in an anthropological account. In my reading of the hagiography from the position of a person who knew the saint during his lifetime, it appears to me that by omitting the specific details of the saint’s early career in the hagiography, and the more unusual stories about his miracles and morality tales, the individuality of Zindapir has been lost, and he becomes a mere cipher instead. I was sad at this loss of the saint’s uniqueness.

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[2] Munazarah and Mujadalah may be translated together as “polemics”.

[3] The Urdu sentence states: “bilkul tawwajjuh nahin karte”. A literal translation would be: “are not given attention to at all”.


[5] As opposed to sweet, in contrast to “halawat” (sweetness) mentioned previously.

[6] Buehler (2008) translates faiz as “effulgence”; others translate it by analogy with the Christian idea as “grace”. It differs somewhat from baraka, the saint’s power of generative fecundity, profleration and procreation.

[7] Prophet ’Isa, Jesus, in the Islamic tradition is referred to as the “Masih” which is often translated as “Christ” or “Lord”. However, the Arabic adjective is derived from the verb ‘masaha’ which means “to wipe, sweep, touch, polish”. Muslim theologians state that Prophet ’Isa is remembered by this epithet because of the power of miraculous cure and remedy his touch was believed to be bestowed with.

[8] In the hagiography, Zindapir’s presence is said to bring coolness, even to such places as Islamabad airport (see n.d. (circa 2005), 73).
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