EMBODYING CHARISMA

Modernity, locality and the performance of emotion in Sufi cults

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London and New York
Pilgrimage, sacred exchange and perpetual sacrifice in a Sufi saint’s lodge

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Introduction: pilgrimage and sacred exchange

An important feature of pilgrimages, it has been argued, is that the symbolic transformations pilgrims undergo effect a sacred exchange between two symbolic worlds, and mediate the contradictions between those worlds (see R. Werbner 1989: 261–262, 296). During pilgrimage, pilgrims shed their mundane persona, often through metonymic giving to the poor or at a sacred site, while they return bearing symbolic substances imbued with the sacred power of the ritual centre. Hence, for example, Huichal Indians in Mexico go on annual pilgrimage to their sacred centre of Wirikuta in order to return reborn and bearing with them the peyote needed to revitalise their world (Meyerhoff 1974). In the Kalanga cult of the high god of Mwali, the ‘hot’ ash of the old year is rubbed on the back of a female klipspringer buck, which is released into the mountains where the rain washes off the ash, bringing coolness. Paralleling this act, Kalanga adepts of the cult bring back from the oracle centre the dust they roll in when ‘tied’ in possession by Mwali. The dust is only washed off when they reach their natal homesteads, bringing coolness, fertility and prosperity to the earth (Werbner 1989).

A focus on sacred exchange in pilgrimage reveals the limitations of theories which stress merely the experiential dimensions of pilgrimage. Of these theories, that of Victor Turner on pilgrimage as ‘anti-structure’ and ‘communitas’ powerfully captures an important dimension of the pilgrimage experience, while glossing over the fact that pilgrimage is a highly structured process of metonymic (and not just metaphoric) transformation. The view proposed here is that pilgrimage is both ‘anti-structure’ and ‘counter-structure’. The counter-structural features of pilgrimage refer to the fact that pilgrims expect to undergo not only a spiritual renewal but a renewal of personhood through contact with the sacred, and a renewal of community through the bearing of what has been in contact with the sacred centre home into the structured, mundane world. These transformations
of personhood and home often require a highly structured and elaborate series of symbolic acts. Some of these acts may be in the form of transactions with ritually designated persons. Hence in Benares, as Parry (1994) has shown, pilgrims must unload their 'sins' in the form of gifts to brahmins before they can purify themselves.

This type of interested exchange leads Eade and Sallnow to describe metonymic exchanges effected at pilgrimage centres as 'self-interested exchanges between human beings and the divine' (1991: 24). 'This market ideology', they argue, 'embraces both the miracle and the sacrificial discourses' (ibid.). Although, they recognise, 'lay helpers are enjoined to set an example in self-sacrifice to other pilgrims by giving freely of their time and labour [in the spirit of the "pure" gift] . . . For a strongly salvatory religion . . . it is questionable whether the notion of purely disinterested giving can be anything other than a fiction' (ibid.: 25). Hence, Eade and Sallnow refer to this type of sacred exchange frequently associated with pilgrimage as 'sacred commerce' (ibid.).

In the spirit of this interpretation, studies of Islamic pilgrimage have repeatedly stressed the intercessionary role of the saint who mediates between supplicants and God. Pilgrims make offerings at a saint’s tomb in the name of the saint in order to return imbued with the saint’s charisma or baraka, containing the curative powers and blessing they desire. This type of sacred exchange seems on the surface to be relatively simple, and has been explained as modelled upon supplicants’ everyday experiences of secular power as being based on patronage (Eickelman 1976).

Sacrifice more generally has also often been conceived of in relatively simple terms as a sacred exchange between humans and god with the victim acting as mediator (Hubert and Mauss 1964). Recent research has, however, begun to explore the extreme complexity of the symbolic transformations involved in animal sacrifice as analysed in particular cultural settings (see de Heusch 1985; R. Werbner 1989: Ch. 3; also Werbner 1990: Ch. 5).

But reduction of processes of sacred exchange in pilgrimage to mere interested reciprocity, however disguised, obscures the highly structured and complex set of symbolic operations which bring about the desired transformation, both in the moral persona of a pilgrim and in his or her acquisition of the desired sacred substances to be taken back on the journey home. Within this process, animal sacrifice is a key moment which has to be set in relation to other symbolic acts.

The present chapter argues that the langar (the communal distribution of food at a religious lodge or celebration) at a Sufi saint’s lodge may be regarded as a form of perpetual sacrifice which is a key symbolic moment of metonymic exchange during pilgrimage to the lodge. As such, it structures both the routine organisation of the lodge and the wider organisation of the Sufi regional cult focused upon it. In its generative organising capacity, it also structures gender relations and makes women integral to the process whereby God’s blessing is objectified at the lodge.
LANGAR: PERPETUAL SACRIFICE

My interpretation of the acts of sacrificial service, and the act of sharing in a sacrificial meal at the lodge, stresses the need to unmask a self-interested discourse in order to reveal the central experience of altruism and humanism which energises Sufism. My argument thus reverses a common sociological tendency to seek material interests beneath the surface of apparent altruism. In Sufism, a discourse of market relations and patronage is used by supplicants to 'explain' their relation to the saint, alive or dead. Given an occidental tendency to seek self-interested motives behind apparently altruistic facades, this Sufi allegory of interested exchange may easily be accepted at face value, as a 'true' explanation of supplicants' motives. Similarly, the occasional unmasking of individual saints as exploitative charlatans or sexually promiscuous seducers of innocent female supplicants, is seen as proof of the manipulative nature of Sufism.

To comprehend fully the Sufi langar, however, it needs to be understood in the context of other forms of Islamic sacrifice, on the one hand, and in relation to the other sacred exchanges accompanying it – of voluntary service, ritual substances, social identification and powerful blessing – on the other.

For Muslims the hajj enjoined pilgrimage to Mecca is the ultimate pretext for all sacred exchanges during pilgrimage. My research on the hajj was conducted in Manchester through discussions with returning hajjis, who, in telling me of their journey in minute detail, relived the experience of the hajj while reflecting, at my request, on its significance.

Seen as sacred journeys, the counter-structure of the hajj and umra (see below) rituals achieves the desired symbolic transformation in the person of the pilgrim through a series of significant alternations and reversals in time. Starting from Mina on the eighth day of the month of hajj, the pilgrims are moved back in time on the ninth day at the valley of Arafat, which is both the beginning and end of time (the birthplace of Adam and the site of the final Day of Judgement). The sacrifice of the eid, commemorating the binding of Ismail, is followed on the tenth day by the encounter with the devils which lead to the binding of Ismail. This reversal of the original time sequence of the sacred Qur'anic (and Biblical) narratives is not accidental, in my view, but part of the process through which the pilgrim gradually sheds her or his sins and becomes as pure and innocent (masum) as a newborn infant. The pilgrim starts this symbolic journey dressed in two white sheets, likened to the shrouds of the dead; that is, at the end of life. After the sacrifice commemorating the binding of Ismail his or her head is shaved or clipped and he or she is reborn as a new person.

The hajj ritual is highly elaborate. From the valley of Arafat, where the pilgrims spend a day in the baking sun, they move to the valley of Muzdalifah, where they spend the night and where they collect forty-nine tiny pebbles. Returning to Mina for the second time on the tenth day, the day of hajj, they cast one lot of seven pebbles onto a single pillar, that of Aqaba. They then perform the qurbāni sacrifice of the Eid and eat of the meat. Finally, they shave their heads or clip their hair (in the case of women). Once they have completed the sacrificial
meal, they can put on their normal clothes and all taboos are lifted, except the prohibition on sexual intercourse.

On the eleventh day of the hajj, following the sacrifice, the pilgrims move to Mecca to perform the Meccan ritual. This ritual, also performed on its own throughout the year and known then as umra, highlights the time reversal of the narrative even more clearly. The movement during umra is from taqaf, the circumbulation of the house of God which is believed to have been rebuilt by Ibrahim (Abraham) and Ismail after their reunification. In the second phase, the pilgrim moves to the sacred spring, the zamzam, which Hajara (Hagar) discovered had sprung from the heel of Ismail as he lay wailing in the sand; here the pilgrim washes and drink the water. The final stage of the umra is sai, the running back and forth between the two hills of Saf and Marwa, which recalls Hajara’s agonised running in search of water for her baby boy. The movement is thus backwards from death towards purity like that of a baby.

Having completed the Meccan episode, the pilgrims then return to Mina once more for a final stoning – this time of all three devils. Altogether in these post-Meccan stonings, the pilgrims cast forty-two pebbles, fourteen at each of the pillars (seven times three, on each of two days). The pilgrims start from the pillar farthest from Mecca and end with the Aqaba pillar, which is the nearest. In the original narrative, Ibrahim (some say Ismail) encountered these three devils before the binding of Ismail. During hajj and umra the multiple stonings of the devils (except for the first stoning) occur after the sacrifice, reversing the original narrative. Finally, the pilgrims return to Mecca for another re-enactment of the Meccan ritual.

The hajj is thus a moral allegory which can only be understood in relation to its sacred pretext. The sequence of acts, moreover, brings about a series of identifications with exemplary persons. The key identifications elicited are two: with Ibrahim and the ordeal he faced in having to sacrifice his son, and with Hajara, his wife, and the ordeal she faced in wandering with her son in the desert, with no water to quench his thirst. The mythic narratives of these two exemplary persons are structurally identical. In both, a parent is asked to sacrifice his or her child for the sake of God without losing faith in God. In both, God intervenes miraculously at the final moment to save the child from certain death. The pilgrims enact this dual ordeal during the hajj and umra.

Islamic traditions stress the voluntarism of these ordeals: Ismail knew in advance, pilgrims told me, that God had ordered Ibrahim to sacrifice him and told his father to obey God’s command. Hajara too accepted the edict of God. Hence one pilgrim explained:

Mina is where Ibrahim sacrificed Ismail. The pillars are the places where the devil tried to stop him. The first devil was small, the second medium and the third large. Ismail said to Ibrahim: ‘Tie my legs and put my face away [from you] so that the affection [you feel for me] won’t stop you [from fulfilling God’s will].’
She explained about Ibrahim’s ordeals that ‘Whomever Allah likes most he tests more than others.’ Hence Hajara was sent into the desert in order that water be found and the Kaaba, the shrine housing the sacred black stone in Mecca, rebuilt.

The identification with a woman is significant. Hence, a woman pilgrim who had just returned from hajj explained to me that the story of Ismail and Hajara was very important to her as a woman. When she was there and performing sai‘, she said, she reflected on what an effort Hajara as a mother had made for her son. Just as all the pilgrims, both male and female, identify with Ibrahim, a male, so too they all identify with Hajara, a female.

The Meccan pilgrimage creates other key identifications. Pilgrims invariably explain that they perform the hajj in this particular order because this is the way the Prophet performed it; they are merely retracing his footsteps. When they visit Arafat, one pilgrim told me; they stand where Adam stood on Jabal (Mount) Rehemat to ask God for forgiveness:

In Arafat Adam asked in the name of the katimah for forgiveness, so we go there to ask God’s forgiveness for our sins. The hajj belongs to the Prophet Ibrahim as does the eid. There are two sunnmas, Ibrahim’s and Mohammad’s. It moves from Adam to Ibrahim. The Prophet did the same [when he performed the first hajj].

Although the transformation effected in pilgrims is fundamentally a spiritual one, nevertheless pilgrims return from hajj bearing with them sacred tokens – bottles of water from the holy spring, the zamzam, as well as dates, rosaries and shawls. They sprinkle this water on people back home, spreading the blessings they received (for similar metonymic transfer in Turkey see Delaney 1990: 520).

The making of qurbani sacrifice during the hajj is thus a moment in a sequence of structural transformations which effects the movement of pilgrims on hajj towards blessed innocence, a state embodied in the sacred water and dates they carry home with them. Sacrifice is a key moment of transition in this process. In saints’ lodges and shrines in South Asia, this moment is expanded and magnified to become the central trope of the lodge, binding together the moral ideas of mystical Sufism with the organisational agendas of the lodges as centres of far-flung regional cults.

Sacrifice in Islam as performed during the hajj is a moment of ordeal and release, in which a person’s faith in God is tested. One of the key features of the eid sacrifice on the hajj is that both the sacrificial slaughter and the prayers accompanying it are multiplied a thousand times. In explaining the hajj, Sharif’ Ahmad, a distinguished British ‘alim, (religious scholar or official) told his congregation:

When one person asks blessings alone from his God, he shall get the blessing. But if many people ask for blessing all together, they will get manifold blessings. The bigger the congregation is when they ask for
blessings, the more blessings Allah will give them, and in the whole world there is no gathering of human beings asking for Allah’s blessings as large at that of the hajj. And this gathering only takes place on the Mount of Rehemat and in Arafat, nowhere else. And on the day of hajj millions and millions of people, on the same day and with the same intention, call out to their God. So the blessings of God come running towards them. This state, this atmosphere, and this situation cannot be found on any other day, any other time or any other situation.

The time of hajj is the time of blessing. On that day if a person asks for blessing with a true heart, he will get a river of blessings and will be purified. Such a person will feel so pure, as though he was just born from his mother’s belly.

What is stressed here is mediation with God not by a single person but by the community of believers, united in their intentionality and all focusing on Allah. While for Sufis the mediation of the Prophet and of saints on the Day of Judgement is a cornerstone of their belief, this mediation is itself mediated by the ability of these saints to mobilise the multitude in a shared ordeal. Like the sacrifice, the day in the valley of Arafat, exposed to the heat of the sun, is regarded as a test of faith.

To develop this point in relation to sacrifice at saints’ lodges in India and Pakistan, let me begin by describing the annual sacrifice as a cultural performance held in Ghamkol Sharif, the lodge of Zindapir, in a little valley outside the town of Kohat in north western Pakistan.

**Perpetual sacrifice**

The annual sacrifice on the 'urs (commemoration of the saint’s death) at Ghamkol Sharif is a major event. In 1990 ninety-five goats, thirteen sheep, and seventeen cattle and buffalo were slaughtered over a three-day period, the equivalent of over 3,000 kg of meat, distributed to some 20,000 or more pilgrims and supplicants. In preparation for this annual feast local high-class Sayyid women of wealthy families who claim descent from the Prophet, along with a large number of women from other respected families throughout Pakistan, clean and scrape tens of thousands of clay dishes, hundreds of flat bread baskets, about twenty or thirty giant clay pots and an equivalent number of iron chappati stoves (tob). The latter accumulate a layer of rust over the year and need to be scraped and polished in readiness for the thousands of chappatis that are to be baked on them during the major three-day festival. Once cleaned, they have to be reinstalled in the earth and the women – again I must stress their wealthy, high-caste origins – use heavy iron picks to dig up the dry earth in order to install the ovens. Then the women smear the surface around the ovens with mud. The labour of the women is all voluntary, an act of khidmat, of public service; or, as the living saint of Ghamkol Sharif, Zindapir, stressed to me repeatedly, it is all done out of muhabbat, the love
of God. The women explain that they work for sawab, merit, and for God's forgiveness, Allah mu'af kare.

While the women wash, scrape and polish, the men invest their voluntary labour in piling up vast quantities of wood in preparation for the enormous quantities of food to be cooked.

The occasion of the sacrificial feast is the 'urs, the commemoration of the death/rebirth of Zindapir's Sufi master, Baba Qasim. Every year on the 'urs, the valley of the lodge fills with disciples coming in convoys from all over Pakistan. They bear with them tributary gifts for the saint known as nazrana and offerings for the langar, the sacred food provided freely at the lodge for all supplicants, disciples and pilgrims who visit it. The food is pure, I was told, because it is cooked by men of pure heart who chant zikr (the incantation of God's name) as they cook.

The 'urs is the high point of a continuous flow of food provided at the lodge by the saint all year round. This food may be conceived of as a perpetual sacrifice, one that provides an apparently endless supply of sacrificial meat every day throughout the year.

A key feature here is, first, the need to conceptualise the difference between Islamic ritual slaughter (halal) and ritual sacrifice, since nominally in Islam every animal slaughtered is a sacrifice (see contributions in Brisbane and Gokalp 1993). Ritual sacrifices are, however, set apart from routine Islamic slaughter by additional customs related to particular festive occasions - the id, 'aqiqah (on the birth of a son) or sadaqa (sacrifices of exorcism or expiation) (see Werbner 1990). The second question is: how can one speak of perpetual sacrifice, quotidian sacrifice, sacrifice as a routine of daily life?

Plate 5.1 Cooking pots and wood piled high in anticipation of the 'urs at Ghamkol Sharif
The key difference between routine ritual slaughter \textit{(halal)} and ritual sacrifice, I suggest, is related to an act of conversion. The conversion is from the cash economy to the moral economy, the good faith economy, the gift economy. Unlike ordinary \textit{halal} slaughter, a ritual sacrifice is the slaughter of an animal freely given, removed from the cash nexus of commercial buying and selling. This means that a purchased animal must be transformed through rites of sacralisation before it can be sacrificed or defined as an offering. Among Pakistanis this sacralisation is usually achieved through a communal reading of the whole Qur'an in a cooperative gathering, or through a special specified prayer of dedication – such as the \textit{eid} morning prayer – which takes place before the slaughter of the animal, or the cooking and eating of an offering of vegetarian food known as \textit{tabarruk}.

It is in the light of this that the slaughter of animals at the lodges of Sufi saints in Pakistan can be regarded as perpetual sacrifice. All the animals slaughtered for the \textit{langar} are freely given by pilgrims, disciples and supplicants – none is purchased. Moreover, the sacrifice takes place in a space which has been sacralised by continuous prayer. Zindapur, the saint of Ghamkol Sharif, is said never to sleep but to spend all his time meditating and praying. The lodge itself is a place of \textit{zikr}.

\textbf{Plate 5.2} A pilgrim leads his sacrificial goat for the \textit{langar}
- the remembrance of God, the incantation of God's name. The sound of zikr - Allah hu or La'lla il allah hu, both individually and communally sung - echoes continuously through the valley. The men who slaughter and cook the animals for the langar do so as a meritorious, freely given act, an act of selfless service (khidmat). All the labour in the lodge is freely given in the name of God. Hence the lodge is a space set apart from the commodity economy, and capitalist logic does not hold there. During the 'urs the convoys of trucks and buses coming from the different villages, towns, factories, army barracks or workplaces throughout Pakistan and beyond it, including from Britain, where Zindapir's order extends, bear with them not only animals but sacks of flour, bags of rice, large containers of clarified butter (ghee) and money donated for the purchase of food for the langar. These staples and animals, like the cash and the voluntary labour, are freely given. Perpetual sacrifice and other forms of offering are in this respect identical.

To understand this further we need also to appreciate that Islamic sacrifice in South Asia, as I have argued elsewhere (Werbner 1990: chs 5, 6), is framed by a semiotic of inequality characterising what I call hierarchical gift economies (see Figure 5.1).

The hierarchical nature of South Asian Islamic gift-giving is clearly expressed in the ideas and practices surrounding sacrificial giving. Gifts to God, including animal sacrifices and offerings of food and money, are always unilateral – given without expectation of return. Yet the direction of this gifting is highly significant. Gifts to God are directed either ‘downwards’, to the poor, in the form of sadaqa (alms), or ‘upwards’, as religious tribute to saints and holy men, whether alive or dead. Alternatively, offerings are made to communal causes such as the building of a mosque or the langar.

Saints, regarded as descendants of the Prophet or his close companions, are

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**Figure 5.1** The structure of sacrificial giving
almost invariably members of the highest Sayyid or Siddiqi Muslim castes. Members of these castes, I was told, will not accept sadaqa (gifts to the poor), but only nazrana, a religious tributary gift of money, valuable objects or food given as a mark of respect or in gratitude for a blessing bestowed. The remains of communal meals held after religious gatherings (usually fruit or cooked food) are distributed as tabarruk (blessing, thanksgiving) among the people to be taken home; the food is sacrificial and dedicated and hence it cannot be thrown away. Again, I was told that Sayyids are not offered and do not usually accept tabarruk.

In accord with this distinction between gifts to God via the poor and gifts to God via a superior religious intercessor (a saint), Pakistani Muslims also distinguish between different forms of animal sacrifice: sadaqa is an expiatory gift at the time of extreme danger of a life-threatening kind, in which the victim is given to the poor in its entirety; in qurban, the eid sacrifice, a portion is given to the poor and the rest shared among kin and friends conceived of as equals; and in zabah, an animal is given as a tribute at a saint’s lodge and is usually shared out as langar (see Figures 5.1 and 5.2).

The hierarchical nature of religious giving was made evident to me in Pakistan by Zindapir, the living saint of Ghamkol Sharif. Zindapir described himself as a faqir (an ascetic), and he explained: ‘A faqir is the friend of Allah. Even if he is offered one lakh [100,000] rupees or nothing to eat for Allah’s sake, he would choose to go hungry.’ The faqir, he said, denies himself while giving to others: ‘This is the way of a faqir. He fasts all day while making sure that everyone else is given food.’ Remarkably, the saint gives not just at his own lodge. Hence Zindapir explained: ‘I have arrangements to host people wherever I go, all over Pakistan and even all over the world. Wherever I go, whether here [at the lodge] or in Mecca, Allah provides the langar and hospitality for my guests.’ Here Zindapir is referring to his regional cult, the network of satellite lodges distributed through-

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*Sacrifice 2 (niyaz or qurbani) (in Pakistan)*

Meat partly eaten and partly given away

Both: expiation and baraka/communion

*Sacrifice 1 (in Pakistan)*

(sadaqa)

Meat all given away

Exorcism/danger/expiation

*Sacrifice 3 (in the diaspora)*

(niyaz or qurbani)

Meat all eaten, since there are no very poor people to give it to baraka/communion only

Key:

+ = Positive intervention

- = Expiation or expulsion of evil spirits

Figure 5.2 Sacrifice and offering in the context of migration
out Pakistan and Britain which provide langar for visitors. On the annual hajj, Zindapir distributes langar in Mecca. This langar is organised and funded by his vicegerent in Britain – Sufi Abdullah, a saint in his own right, based in Birmingham, itself the centre of a regional cult with satellite centres in nine British cities. The money for the hajj langar is donated by British Pakistanis, while the pots and utensils are kept by disciples of Zindapir living in Mecca who are labour migrants working in Saudi Arabia.

Explaining his remarkable generosity, Zindapir told me: ‘I have to be generous because this [the lodge, or Mecca] is not my house. It is the house of Allah. I too am a guest here. It is easy to be generous in someone else’s house. If it were my own house, it might be hard for me to part even with a glass of water.’ We see in this statement the close identification of the saint with Allah, his proximity to God. But it is also a commentary on the identification between the saint and the community. Commenting on the difference between himself, as a faqir and friend of Allah, and the ‘ulama, the learned doctors who are paid officials, he said: ‘Allah will undoubtedly take the ‘ulama to Paradise on the Day of Judgement. But Allah gives paradise to his faqirs on earth. I can give all the blessings of Allah.’

Zindapir repeatedly reminded me of the enormous crowds his langar had just fed during the ‘urs festival and the vast number of gifts of money and cloth he had bestowed on his followers and the needy. The ‘urs is said, somewhat hyperbolically, to draw 300,000 pilgrims to the lodge, all of whom are fed by the saint. By contrast, ‘ulama are mere employees. Zindapir told me: ‘Only yesterday I paid a maulvi [Islamic scholar] 400 rupees [about £15] for giving a sermon at the mosque’.

The saint, friend of Allah, most elevated and closest to him, asks for nothing except from Allah. He is the infinite giver through whom flows the bounty of Allah to his followers below him. If he takes, it is only as tribute, a mark of respect and gratitude made towards him by his followers. By contrast the ‘ulama, although undoubtedly pious men, are mere receivers, dependent on human generosity, employees of low status and honour.

Mediation with God is thus achieved either by giving to the poor or, indirectly, via a tribute to a saint who, in turn, is expected to use the tribute, if it is a sacrificial animal, for the langar; or by giving directly to the langar, for the sake of the people (makhluqat, the community). In Pakistan, and throughout South Asia, most major Muslim shrines and lodges have langar arrangements at festivals and often daily. In Britain, the langar is provided for the celebration of the ‘urs, of eid milad-un nabi (the commemoration of the Prophet’s birth/death), and during monthly rituals at a celebration commemorating the birth/death of Abdul Qadir Gilani, regarded as the founder of all the Sufi orders in India. These monthly rituals are known as gyanvin sharif, the eleventh of the month, and are held in most of Zindapir’s satellite lodges and mosques throughout his regional cult. In addition, during the month of Ramadan, food and offering are distributed daily at the mosque branches of Zindapir’s Sufi order in Manchester and throughout Britain. In all these instances the food is donated and its cooking is voluntary. The slaughter of the animal in Britain is, however, entrusted to the Pakistani butcher;
who slaughters it at the abattoir. There appears to be very little sentimental value attached to the act of personal slaughter, and similarly, people do not appear to attach much value to the appearance of the live animal. The choice of the animal, like the slaughter itself, is entrusted to the butcher.

At Ghamkol Sharif, however, animals are donated on the hoof and one of the disciples slaughters them, assisted by several companions. The same disciple acts as chief slaughterer for the lodge on all major festivals. The langar at Ghamkol Sharif is open twenty-four hours a day all year to all supplicants and pilgrims, from the very poor to the most elevated and powerful in the land. Zindapir is a well-known saint, and he is regularly visited by top civil servants, army brigadeers and generals, and even politicians. All partake of the langar. To partake of the langar is to partake of the blessings of the Shaikh, the divine blessing, faiz, which endows him with barkat, and indeed, the langar objectifies this perpetual source of saintly divine spiritual power.

The hierarchical nature of South Asian giving does, however, imbue even the langar with some ambiguity. At Zindapir’s lodge there are, in effect, two langars. One is an open, general langar, and the other is run by his son’s wife. Many of the most respected guests are fed from this more exclusive langar, although chappati bread usually comes from the central langar. The Sayyid women with whom I spent the ‘urs had brought their own food with them for the festival, and ate almost nothing from the central langar, although they denied that this avoidance had any significance, beyond a matter of taste preferences.

The langar, conceived of as perpetual sacrifice, is the key organising feature of Sufi lodges in South Asia. Such lodges are centres for the collection and redistribution of food on a vast scale. Virtually all the activity of the lodge is geared to

Plate 5.3 Distributing the langar to the pilgrims
this continuous provision of ritually sacred food. Ghamkol Sharif has its herds of cattle, goats and other livestock, its orange groves and fruit orchards, its vegetable gardens, as well as storage rooms for grain, rice and clarified butter, brought by supplicants or purchased with their donations. Gifts of camels and horses, and of strange and beautiful wild birds and animals, as well as of goats, sheep and buffalo are not unusual. Many are dedicated to the langar and cannot be used for any other purpose.

The saint himself is a vegetarian who eats no meat and regards himself as the protector of all living creatures. Every morning he feeds the ants with the remains of his sweet morning tea. Killing ants and any other creatures, however minute, is prohibited within the lodge area. This is also true of his conduct during the hajj, I was told. A special water trough has been constructed by the saint’s son for the wild animals that descend from the hills at night to drink from, while the legends about the Zindapir recount his conquest of the wild. He can cure poisonous snake bites, honey bees are said not to sting, and wild animals do not invade the lodge or attack its inhabitants. The saint is conceived of as the source of natural fertility, and his command over nature is a metaphor for his command over his passionate soul, his nafs. He is a source of both infinite nurture and infinite love.

Yet his abstention from meat underlines once again the hierarchical logic informing sacrifice. As a perpetual giver he cannot take. The unilateral nature of gifting would be compromised if he took of what was given him. God is the ultimate source of both food and life, which flow from him downwards into the world of ephemeral creations.

Sacrifice is a tribute to God just as nazrana is a tribute to the saint. The offerings or tributes are meritorious acts of respect, but neither God nor the saint needs the gifts offered them. Need implies a lack and hence imperfection. The saint is an exemplar of the perfect man, insan kamil. Just as God needs no sustenance from humans, so too the saint needs sustenance from God alone. The saint gives generously and accepts tribute, which he himself does not consume but redirects to the langar – and hence ultimately to the whole community. He fasts all day and is a vegetarian while being the source of meat.

Why do people give to the langar? They do so in fulfilment of a vow (niyah) or to seek merit (sawab), but also as an act of identification with an unbounded Muslim community, the umma. By contrast, the giving of nazrana, even if the expectation is that the tribute will ultimately be redirected to the langar, is much more simply an expression of love and respect for the saint by his disciples, or of gratitude, with the added assumption that God loves those who love God’s friends, his awliya. Although giving nazrana may be construed as meritorious and efficacious, it is not an act of sacrifice, unless we recognise the identification of the saint, as the exemplary person, within the community. Sacrifice is necessarily mediated either by the poor or by the community. It is an act of expiation, and – in the case of sadaga sacrifice – of exorcism of afflicting spirits (see Figure 5.2). The poor are not conceived of as scapegoats: since they need the meat for their sustenance and survival, it is assumed it will do them no harm.
The encounter between the good faith and bad faith political economies

To understand fully, however, why people give the langar, or why they devote their time and labour to voluntary work at the lodge, we need to recognise the contrast that they and the pir draw between the greed and corruption of the ‘world’ (dunya) and the purity of the lodge as a place of true religion (din). The postcolonial reality of contemporary Pakistan is seen by pilgrims as one of mendacious politicians, of greed, selfishness and violence. Even the politicians themselves acknowledge this reality: the celebrations of fifty years of Pakistani independence, which took place in August 1997, were an occasion for political leaders to beat their breasts in public about the endemic corruption and social divisions afflicting the nation. To lead the good life of a Muslim in this world is, people say, virtually impossible. Only pirs, awliya (friends of God), can therefore guarantee God’s forgiveness for their followers on the Day of Judgement.

Hajji Bashir, Zindapir’s vicegerent in Manchester and my companion and guide during my 1989 visit to Ghamkol Sharif, told me:

People believe that on the Day of Judgement they will appear before God as a group and the pirs will speak for them and ask God to forgive them, and they will then be forgiven and go to heaven. They know that if they stood alone before God they would definitely not go to heaven.

‘Why not?’ I asked. ‘You are a good man, why should you fear God’s judgement?’ ‘Because this is not an Islamic country and it is very hard to be a good Muslim here.’

Zindapir repeatedly explained that he refused to get involved in elections because, he said, ‘God is not elected, and to become a Sufi you don’t need to be elected’ (that is, a saint is chosen not by the people but by God). He continued:

Politicians come to me and ask me for my support but I always refuse. Once, a local politician who had cheated in the elections came to me. He wanted to put two of his political opponents in jail. But I said to him: ‘Even though you got elected by cheating, now you must do what is good for the people, and you should not put those people who fought against you in jail.’ Politicians come to me for du’ā [prayer, supplication] and I pray for them, but still they have the thoughts of politicians – by coming to me they are making a public demonstration that they respect me, in order to get the people’s support.

‘Why don’t you like them?’ I asked. He replied, ‘Because they tell lies [jihat].’

The corruption of politicians and large zymindars (landowners) is associated also with an unbridled hubris: they believe that their wealth can buy anything.
even God's approval. Zindapir is fond of telling stories of politicians who have wanted to supply the langar with vast quantities of food or money, and whom he has refused:

A very great landowner came to see me from Sahiwal district. He offered to provide all the food for the langar for three days if I gave him permission to heal by dam [healing breath]. I said to him: 'If I let you provide the langar for three days I will make you a partner with God which would be shirk [polytheism, blasphemy].' Indeed, I refused even to make him my murid [disciple].

In another version of this tale, it was the uncle of the Minister of Finance, Mian Muhammad Yasin Khan Watto, who made the offer after Zindapir cured him of an incurable disease. Pir Sahab cast dam (blew a prayer) on him and said: 'Let him eat from the langar's food and he will be cured.' Once cured, the minister's uncle offered to supply the langar for three days but was refused. Zindapir told him: 'You will provide for the langar for three days but what will happen after that? I cannot make you a partner (sharik) with God.'

The paradigmatic tale which illuminates the place of the lodge as the sole source of God's boundless nurture is contained in the founding myth of Ghamkol Sharif. On their first journey to establish the lodge, Zindapir recalled, he saw one of his companions carrying a sack of flour. He told the man: 'What will you eat when the flour is finished? Throw it away and trust in Allah.' This story, like others, stresses the finitude of men's resources, whatever their wealth or power, set against the infinity of God's capacity to feed the world. Wherever he goes, Zindapir regards himself as dwelling in the house of God. On one occasion he was invited by an important Saudi politician to stay at his home in Jedda, but he replied: 'When I visit the house of God, I am the guest only of Allah.'

On my visit in 1991 I was told confidentially that one of the leading political figures in Pakistan had visited the lodge and had wanted to write Zindapir a cheque for a very large sum of money. The saint refused the donation and instead offered the politician and his entourage food from the langar to eat. If it even crosses the mind of a saint to influence politicians, he told me, then he is no longer a fuqir, a man of God.

The evidence for the superiority of saints over politicians is proven, Zindapir repeatedly asserted, by the honour given to saints' shrines after their death:

'The tombs of kings do not get izzat [honour]; only those of awliya. The men whom God gives respect to in their lifetimes, in their death their respect grows and grows. Like Data Ganj Baksh in Lahore [the shrine of the eleventh-century Sufi saint Hujwel], If you go to the Emperor's tomb [Shah Jahangir's] you will find no people there. But at Data Ganj Baksh there are thousands of people all the time.
In similar vein he recalled: 'When the Viceroy of India visited the shrine of Khwaja Ajmeri [one of the great Muslim saints of India] he saw all the people coming there – Hindus, Muslims, Sikhs. After his visit he said: 'India is ruled by two governments – the British government and the government of Khwaja [lord, gentleman] Ajmeri, and the second one is the greater power because it rules people's hearts.'

Zindapir stresses that he asks no one his name, badshah (king) or garib (poor man). All are equal. The Chief Minister of Azad Kashmir visited him several times, but Zindapir told me, he never asked his name. When this was commented upon Zindapir responded: 'I have no need to know anyone's name. I know only the name of Allah' (that is, Zindapir needs no favours from those who come to see him; he is a giver, never a taker).

The polar contrast between the world of everyday greed and corruption and the infinite generosity of the lodge are captured by Zindapir in a series of aphorisms: 'Dunya ki taraf pith kare, ton khuda ki taraf munh hote hey' ('if you turn your back to the world you will face God') and 'The world and religion [dunya te din] are like two sisters. If you marry one, you cannot marry the other.'

In his encounters with politicians, the shaikh presents himself as tough and definite. Politicians who aspire to acquire some of his powers must confront the fact that they cannot compete with the divine spiritual power of God's chosen saints. Again and again, it is the shaikh's ability to provide nurture on a daily and annual basis to all who come, from an unending source, which the morality tales stress. It is this which makes it impossible for politicians to compete with him, and which proves that his following is much vaster than that of any politician. This world of generosity and giving as constructed by the saint is the one pilgrims enter into when they arrive at the lodge, bearing their gifts for the saint and the langar, in what may be conceived of as an imaginative as much as a real journey.

Yet just as he denies the importance of the visits and honours granted him by state officials and politicians, so too, paradoxically, do the visits prove that Zindapir is indeed a great and spiritually powerful friend (wali) of Allah. And despite the constructed ideological opposition between the lodge and the world, the growth and success of the lodge have profited from official goodwill. Land, telephone lines, water, roads and transport have all been provided free through official channels, and Zindapir takes great care, in reality, not to offend politicians. Moreover, there is a symbolic economy of gifting which pervades pilgrims' and supplicants' relations with the saint.

In exchange for the gifts of money, perfume, flour, animals, rice and clarified butter given to the pir as nazrana, or donated directly to the langar, the saint gives his close disciples white chiffon headscarves, embroidered praying caps and perfumes. These he draws, with the almost magical gesture of a conjurer, out of the treasure house of objects he accumulates in his room, buried in the silk and brocade cushions on which he reclines. He distributes salt and amulets to the supplicants who visit him, along with du'a and dam. He also donates money generously to the poor and needy who come to him with requests for help. I myself
was showered with gifts: several clothing outfits, jewellery, perfume and a handbag from the shaikh's son's family; four large bottles of honey collected from the lodge's beehives; a lovely white, finely woven cotton headscarf of a type usually reserved for disciples; a beautiful length of silk cloth; and a box of sweets (mithai), all to take home with me to England, gifts from the shaikh. My attempts to reciprocate were of little avail. The gifts embodied the saint's generosity but, even beyond that, they proved his supreme elevation above the anthropologist and, indeed, any educated, non-Muslim Westerner.

Experiencing the good faith economy

We see the limitations of the suggestion put forward by Eade and Sallnow (1991) according to which much of the activity at saints' lodges is a matter of 'sacred commerce'. Such a conception denies, moreover, the experiential dimensions of voluntary labour and sacrifice, particularly in the case of close disciples of the saint. Most of the women who work as volunteers in preparation for the langar of the 'urs say they are seeking merit, but I would argue that the reality of the transformation they experience is both far more immediate and far more complex.

For three weeks before the 'urs both men and women begin arriving at the lodge to contribute their voluntary labour to the preparations for the festival. Much of the building of the lodge takes place during this period, including the extension of water pipes, sewerage and electricity. New hostels are constructed for pilgrims. The women arrive daily, increasing in numbers as the festival approaches. They come from throughout the Frontier and even from Lahore. But a core of women come from neighbouring Jungel Khel, the birthplace of Zindapir himself. Most of the women are, as I mentioned, from the high-ranking Sayid family, which is the largest, wealthiest and most important in Jungel Khel, now a small town of 20,000 inhabitants. Members of this large family are scattered throughout the world, occupying professional positions as doctors, engineers or pilots. They hold, and held in the past, many of the top administrative positions in the town. They own large houses and the women who run these have servants to assist them. Yet these very women are willing to take on the most menial, dirty, unpleasant tasks, hard, tiring, physical labour, and live in crowded conditions, sleeping on mats on the floor if they come from some distance, in preparation for the sacrificial feast of the 'urs. During the 'urs they also help supervise the visits of women supplicants to the saint.

Paralleling the seasonal pilgrimage of organised groups to the lodge on major festivals is a constant daily flow of supplicants seeking healing for their ailments or divine blessings in their jobs, careers and marital fortunes. The healing powers of the saint are grounded in a belief in his ability to see below the surface, to the occult and social causes of illnesses, the thoughts, feelings and accidental transgressions which have brought about pain, chronic illness, infertility, depression, business failures and so forth. As an agent of God, the saint is able to act on these hidden forces and change the course of natural illnesses and social fortunes.
The saint is visited by both male and female supplicants. They sit at some distance from him. Both men and women expose their faces, the women drawing their veils above their heads. The exposure underlines the belief that the saint transcends sexuality. His persona combines male and female qualities – the gentleness, love and tenderness of a woman with the power, authority and honour of a man (see also Kurin 1984). He communicates very briefly with the supplicants, addressing them in short, distant tones. Once they have explained their problem to him, he usually instructs them to perform their daily prayers, sometimes throwing a rolled-up, inscribed paper amulet in their general direction. At other times, he instructs them to collect amulets ‘outside’. Once he has heard a whole round of supplicants (he takes in about ten at a time) he raises his hands in prayer (du‘a). Even in these brief interchanges, however, the symbolic transference appears to be very powerful. One can only speculate that for the supplicants his immense healing power derives precisely from his gendered ambiguity: he combines maternal and paternal qualities; he is a maternal father or a paternal mother, protective yet authoritative.

His relationship to the women preparing for the ‘urs is radically different. Every day during the weeks of preparation for the ‘urs, the saint visits the women at their work. They greet him ‘asalam u pir’ (‘greetings, saint’). There is no bowing or scraping. He does not allow it. They smile at him, an elderly man limping along slowly since his knees are painful and have been causing him some trouble. It is clear that the women are very fond of the saint.

After work every day the women workers come into the saint’s inner sanctum to receive his blessings. During these meetings he prays a *du‘a* (supplication) for them. The meetings are marked by their atmosphere of intimacy. To most women supplicants the saint is a distant, charismatic figure, fearful and awe-inspiring. His face as he distributes amulets, salts and prayers is expressionless, his tone matter-of-fact, verging on abruptness. The vast majority of his male disciples treat him with awe and respect. The saint is a remote figure, Revered, feared and respected. His commands are instantly obeyed. Grown men tremble at his anger and sink into despair. He is treated as a king or prince. On their visits to his room women supplicants sit behind a low wooden barrier to prevent them from reaching too close to him.

This remoteness contrasts with his relationship with his close disciples, those who work on the preparations for the ‘urs. The women disciples who assist in the preparations for the sacrificial meal of the ‘urs treat him with the freedom of companions. The shaikh (saint, spiritual mentor) clearly enjoys the company of these women, and they entertain him with anecdotes and tales of amusing incidents and gossip, including the ridiculous behaviour of the anthropologist, which he finds particularly amusing. They are an invaluable source of information to him about what goes on beyond the confines of the room in which he meditates. They are also privy to a good deal of information about his family and private life to which others have no access. They say they fear him, but in practice, what they mainly express is their fondness for him. During my visit to the lodge in
1991 Zindapir's son's wife was undergoing an operation on her throat in England. On the day of the operation the women visited the saint. Earlier he had been to pray in the northern guest house for the success of the operation. The women disciples kept trying to comfort him by discussing the details of his son's wife's condition. But he kept sighing and lapsing into long silences, then renewing the conversation. They too would lapse into sympathetic silence. This went on for about forty minutes. As time passed with no news of the operation from England, the whole lodge entered into a state of worried expectation. Eventually, at 9.30 p.m., the telephone message arrived, informing the saint that the operation had been a success.

I tell this story to underline the clear connection between sacrifice and moral amity. If sacrifice in Islam hinges on the existence of inequalities, of a category willing to define themselves as 'poor', it nevertheless also encompasses notions of moral responsibility within a moral community. The langar objectifies the moral community embodied by the saint himself as a figure of infinite generosity. This underlines the fact that in Islam voluntary labour, sacrifice, donations, offering and charity merge. All these acts are vehicles mediating the relationship between person and God. In all, moral space is extended, objectified and personified, while the identification between person and community is revitalised.

It is remarkable that in many ways the langar at Sufi dar ul ulooms (places of learning) in Britain differs rather little in organisation and ideology from the langar in Pakistan, except for the fact that, as yet, it is not a perpetual sacrifice. The same discourses and practices characterise both langars. The resemblance underlines the transnational nature of Zindapir's order. British branches of the saint's regional cult, like the branches of the cult in Pakistan, provide langar for the same major Islamic and Sufi holidays and festivals, just as the branches in both countries send tribute to the shaikh himself. The ultimate objectification of this diasporic transnationalism is through the langar provided annually by the order on the hajj. Members of the cult from Pakistan in the east and from Britain in the west, along with disciples working as labour migrants in the Middle East and Gulf states, meet in Mecca annually for the hajj. From the east comes Zindapir, the source of powerful blessing; from the west Sufi Abdullah, his most trusted and highly ranked khalifa (vicegerent). It is, however, Sufi Abdullah who provides the sacrificial offering, the langar (as against the eid sacrifice) which objectifies the saint's baraka and his infinite generosity. This ritual international division of labour produces a perpetual sacrifice at the global centre of Islam. What is evident is that the spread of Zindapir's cult has been associated with contemporary global movements of migrant labour from Pakistan to the West.

The global regional cult which has emerged as a result of this international migration process mediates between the universalism of Islam and the particularism of migrants' networks of associations (see Werbner 1989). The focus on a central lodge and its charismatic saint, and on periodic mobilisations - local, national and global - brings together a widespread network of disciples from the various branches of the cult for the purpose of sharing in a sacrificial feast.
On the surface, however, the saint's relation to the majority of supplicants is nevertheless based on a calculus of exchange. If we deploy familiar religious terms such as penance and salvation, we may easily mistake the work of the women and men for what they explicitly say it is—a calculating act of service before God for the purpose of accumulating merit. So too offerings and sacrifices, whether directly to the saint or to the langar, can be understood as they are apparently intended: as acts of reciprocity in which a favour is sought from the saint or from God in return for an offering. The saint's gifts to pilgrims—white cotton scarves and white embroidered hats for his disciples, gowns for his khalifa, amulets and salts for supplicants—may all be seen as items in a simple relationship of reciprocal exchange. If, however, as I believe, these ideological statements tell only a very partial truth, then the need is to consider what the sacred exchange effected in the pilgrimage to the 'urs is. At first glance, there is no elaborate sacred text or metonymic acts in the 'urs which may be said to parallel and comment upon those of the hajj.

Yet the 'urs too has its pretexts. Hence, a key feature of Ghamkol Sharif is its sacred peripherality (Turner 1974). The lodge was built outside any established settlement, very gradually, over many years, in what was previously an uncultivated valley. The men and women who return annually to work for the 'urs have participated in this gradual transformation of the lodge. Each year they retrace the footsteps both of the saint and of themselves in prior years as they move beyond the boundaries of their settled communities. Metaphorically, they move back in time by journeying once again to the lodge in order to be renewed. As they work they often recall the early days of the lodge. The women's gossip during the long working hours is in itself a work of making history, reliving the myth of the lodge's establishment.

The same is true for all the pilgrims who visit the lodge annually. The journey to the lodge is a movement back in time in the sense that it repeats an earlier journey. In his final supplication for the sake of the community, the saint recalls his own first arduous journey to the lodge. Indeed, he repeats the story of this legendary journey almost verbatim every year. The assembled crowd wait for this final du'a, the request for God's blessing, the peak moment of this three-day ritual festival. Yet as in the hajj, the supplication is more than the voice of a single individual: it is the sum of all the silent prayers of the multitude present, even if it is embodied in the trembling tones of the saint. So too the sacrificial feast is perceived to be more than the multiplication of individual acts of sacrifice. It is an achievement of a community that has stepped outside the world. As in the hajj, pilgrimage to Ghamkol Sharif is a fleeting act of world renunciation in which the pilgrims identify with their saint. In a sermon delivered in Rochdale on the day of the hajj, Ahmad Sharif, a well-known maulvi, told his congregation: 'While the real test of faith is faith in the world then...if someone wants to renounce this world, it is possible for him to do so on hajj; a pilgrim, as long as he keeps his ihram on [the two sheets the hajji wears], is a faqi of God.' The food of the langar eaten in this extramundane world differs in every respect from the sacrificial haram meat normally consumed.
This may be taken to imply that the annual pilgrimage to Ghamkol Sharif is a text (in the Ricoeurian sense) enacting Eliade’s myth of eternal return to a point of original creation (Ricoeur 1981: 197–221; Eliade 1954). It may also be taken to be a reiteration of Turner’s (1974) view that pilgrims both to the hajj and to the ‘urs experience a sense of communitas in which the boundaries between individual and community are obliterated. The ‘urs is a cultural performance which can be analysed from different perspectives (on this see Weinongrod 1990). Beyond calculus or communitas, I want to stress a further point: pilgrimage to the ‘urs, and especially the voluntary labour vested in preparation for it, is a text which is both personal and performative: each pilgrim reenacts his or her own text, her or his annual visit and contribution to the growth of the lodge. Each personal text reflects on all the prior personal texts, as a series of reflexive memorials of positive action. In addition, each personal text also allegorises the shared pretext of the saint’s first journey to the lodge, itself an allegory of the texts of the Prophet’s migration and return to Mecca, for which Ibrahim’s test of faith by sacrifice, and Hajara’s ordeal in the desert, searching for water for her infant son, are the ultimate pretexts. Hence also, for example, the text of the ‘urs in Britain echoes that at Ghamkol Sharif while being uniquely British. These acts of identification imbue the sacred exchange at a saint’s lodge with moral meaning in the world. The gifts, amulets and blessings, charged with saintly charisma, which are carried back from the pilgrimage have to be understood as tokens of moral renewal, energising this mundane world of the here and now in which pilgrims live their daily lives.

Acknowledgements

This chapter is based on research in Pakistan at the lodge of Zindapur during several weeks in 1989 and 1991, and on research in Manchester among returning pilgrims from hajj during 1988–1989. The research was supported by the ESRC, UK, and the Leverhulme Trust, and I am grateful to these foundations for their assistance. The sayings quoted here are from a sermon delivered by Sharif Ahmad at the Blue Mosque in Rochdale on the day of the hajj in 1989. The sermon was in Urdu and was translated by his daughter and son, Nyla and Arshad Ahmed. I would like to thank both Arshad and Nyla for their help. I would also like to thank Hajji Bashir Ahmed, who clarified many of the points about sacrifice at a saint’s lodge discussed here. An early version of this chapter was given at Nanterre University in Paris in 1991 to a seminar series on Muslim sacrifice organised by Anne-Marie Brisbarre and Altân Gokalp, of the Laboratoire d’Ethnologie et de Sociologie Comparative. I would like to thank the participants at the seminar for their comments.
Notes

1. The belief that this professional distance is abused is widespread, fuelled by tales of the excessive sexual appetite of saints (see Lindholm 1990: 33) and periodic scandals. The power of the cultural ideal of saints as world renouncers is evidenced, however, by the fact the women continue to unveil before the saint. In the case of Zindapir, his reputation was quite immaculate.

2. That healing is achieved through transference is suggested by Kakar (1982:91) and Ewing (1984). Ewing (1993) also suggests a similar view on the saint’s qualities.

References


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