PART TWO

CONTESTED REPRESENTATIONS
ENIGMAS OF A PAKISTANI WARRIOR SAINT:
INTERROGATING MEDIA CONSPIRACIES IN AN AGE OF TERROR

Pnina Werbner

Preamble: Terror and its Imaginaries

The fear of potential ‘fanatical’ revolutionary religious Muslim leaders has historically been deep-seated in the European social imaginary and was often magnified by colonial authorities, with the result that Sufi saints under colonial rule, particularly in Africa, were frequently persecuted even when they were pacifists. Even in the twenty-first century, the ‘fanatical Muslim leader’ has remained a secular western trope that has never fully disappeared from the popular imagination and has been revived most recently with the spectacular rise of Osama bin Laden and his Al Qaida terror organisation. This secular fear of potential religious militants is reflected in the conception of the Pakistani Sufi saint discussed in this essay and is the driving force behind many of the media representations of this saint.

Since September 11, 2001, and indeed well before that—certainly since the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan which led to the assassination of General Zia and was followed by renewed conflict between Pakistan and India in Kashmir—conspiracies about terror and counter-terror have flourished in the British and Pakistani press and media, and among ordinary people in Pakistan and its diasporas. Since the bombing of the London underground on July 7, 2007, security services in Britain and Pakistan have uncovered a

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1 Acknowledgements: this essay was presented to seminars at the South Asian Network in the Research Triangle, North Carolina, in 2011 and to the French Cultural Institute in New Delhi in 2012. I wish to thank participants in both these seminars for their challenging comments, and in particular Anna Bigelow, Remy Delage, Juergen Wasim Frembgen and Matt Cook for trying to convince me that Sufi militants were not an unusual breed. An earlier version of this paper was presented jointly with Mariam Abou Zahab at a conference on ‘Islamic Fundamentalism and Sufism’ at Haifa University in 2007. I want to thank Mariam and Itzchak Weismann in particular for their generous comments. Alix Philippon contributed generously of her own fieldwork to augmenting the argument in the paper.

2 An example is that of the Senegalese founder of the Murid order, Cheikh Ahmadou Bamba, who was imprisoned for many years by the French colonial government despite his pacifism (See de Jong 2010: 135, 140).
range of alleged seditious terror plots involving young Pakistanis living in the diaspora who appear to have received their training in camps in Pakistan (on some of these plots and the British response see Werbner 2009). In Pakistan itself, Al Qaida and the Taliban have established strongholds in the tribal areas and, since 2008, Pakistan has been terrorized by suicide bombers targeting the police, army, crowded markets and mosques. Benazir Bhutto, the prime ministerial candidate, was assassinated in 2008, and there have also been other spectacular attacks such as those on the Sri Lankan cricket team and on a hotel and railway station in Mumbai. In 2010 the most sacred shrine in the whole of Pakistan, the Data Ganj Baksh shrine in Lahore, was bombed, causing many casualties. Since then two other shrines, one in Karachi and one at Pak Pattan in Multan, have been targeted, with further casualties. There is no doubt that Pakistan is a fragile state; at times it seems almost ungovernable.

The question is: what implications do these events have for the role of anthropology as a discipline based on participant-observation? Anthropologists have laid claim to study the minutiae of culture and social relations, to see beneath the surface, to know people intimately in their daily lives. In the early days after 9/11 and 7/7, policy-makers thus hoped that anthropologists may be able to help shed light on hidden Islamic networks, beneath-the-surface conspiracies and the concealed values that motivate young diaspora Pakistanis to join Al Qaida cells and plot terror attacks. The problem has been, however, that anthropologists rarely encounter such plots, and are mostly excluded from studying anti-Western Islamic groups directly. Moreover, the atmosphere of suspicion generated in Britain by the government and media, which has permeated the Muslim diaspora since 9/11 and 7/7, makes it difficult to create and sustain relations of trust and transparency with diaspora Pakistanis. Thus, although anthropologists aspire to comment on significant, world-shattering events, their own fieldwork in fact restricts them to the ‘small places’ they study as fieldworkers (for further development of this argument see Werbner 2010). In these small places, they are unlikely to encounter anyone remotely connected to Al Qaeda or any other group plotting sedition. If they write about such matters, they mostly base their knowledge on reports in the media and press, relying—like most people—on gossip and rumour or on publicly available information.

During my years of fieldwork in Britain and Pakistan I have always assumed as a matter of course that I had never met an al-Qaeda operative. As it turned out, I may have been wrong. The present paper is an attempt to uncover as much credible information as possible about a
particular Pakistani figure, a descendent of a saintly family accused of being a militant member of Al Qaeda. Despite the public construction of Shaykh Mubarak Ali Shah Gilani, the saintly protagonist at the centre of this essay, as a violent militant, I argue in this essay that in reality, his career seems to have charted a path from militancy towards peacefulness. This movement towards increasing pacifism is consonant, I suggest in the paper, with a tendency among founding Sufi Shaykhs, saints, pirs or auliya, to espouse an inclusive ideology of peaceful co-existence among followers, irrespective of ethnicity or religion, as their order expands. Indeed, I propose, despite apparent historical examples to the contrary, Sufism is both organisationally and ideologically intrinsically peaceful, a striving for tawakkul, inner peace, and social, environmental and spiritual tranquility, sukun or sakina. For this reason a key feature of large-scale Sufi cults is their capacity to create an alternative moral and ethical order, opposed to the violence of the state (on this striving for inner peace, tawakkul, see Schimmel 1975: 119; on saintly discourses of peace and the experience of tranquillity at a Sufi lodge see Werbner 2003: 46ff, 131ff., 217ff., 274–275ff.). As Richard Kurin perceptive argued,

[T]he spiritual ties which bind members are thought to be everlasting and eternal with especially great relevance to the afterlife. They are ties that occasion not the alluring heat of blood ties but the cooling shadows of blessedness. Such ties are generally associated with kindness, tranquility and peacefulness. (Kurin 1990: 108)

This is not to argue that Sufi saints actively deny the legitimacy of the state or politics. Sufi saints in British India supported the creation of Pakistan and the Sufi saint I studied, Zindapir, recruited most of his followers from the army, the police and other government departments. The point is that he created for these soldiers and government employees an alternative world of ethics, peace and amity whenever the attended his lodge.

In the light of this stress on peace, the rise of violent Sufi militants or martyrs, ghazis, is not, I contend, self-evident, but calls for explanation. Here I want to introduce a cautionary note: although violent men may claim to be ‘Sufis’ or label themselves ‘saints’ (pirs) even when they have a very small following, my argument regarding the peace in Sufism relates to the peaceful tendencies specifically of charismatic founders of large-scale cults or tariqas who have an extensive, widespread geographical following, and to these founders’ most prominent spiritual successors, who have actively extended their regional cults or tariqa during their lifetime. There is thus an important definitional distinction to be made between Sufi Shaykhs of
this type and ‘Sufis’ more generally, especially because as the descendents of major Sufi *tariqa* founders multiply in numbers, many become secularised or adopt non-Sufi Islamic tendencies while still claiming Sufi descent, a feature highlighted in the historical examples outlined below. Many other, otherwise ‘modern’ individuals also claim to be ‘Sufis’ because they engage in spiritual meditation (see Bruinessen & Howell 2007).

The second important aim of this essay is methodological: to demonstrate the difficulty of relying on Internet sources at a time when conspiracy theories have a tendency to go viral not only in Pakistan but in the USA as well. This was evident as I tried to piece together a picture of this alleged saintly warrior, Shaykh Mubarak Ali Shah Gilani.

*Shaykh Mubarak Ali Shah Gilani*

Until I met Shaykh Mubarak Ali Shah Gilani, I had never met a warrior saint, and at the time we met at a friend’s house in Manchester UK, he had not yet embarked on his career as a Sufi militant. Shah Sahib, as he was known to his friends, was present at the birthday party of a friend’s son in Manchester, in January 1979. At the time he was married to my friend’s sister. He was, and is, a direct descendant of Mian Mir (d. 1635), the saint famed for his following among the Moghul emperors and for laying the cornerstone to the Golden Temple in Amritsar. In my fieldnotes I describe him at this first encounter as a ‘man with a beard’, a ‘holy man’, a ‘Sufi’ who is ‘very important in Pakistan’, ‘very hard to see’ (i.e. inaccessible). A month later, my fieldnotes record, I was told he’d had a fierce argument with the Chairman of the Manchester Jami’a Mosque over whether prayer was enough to save a person, whatever his deeds (i.e., without the need for intercession by a *wali*). The Chair, it seems, was a member of Tabligh-i Jamaat. Shah Sahib had been to Manchester three years earlier, and had spent several months living in different homes of Pakistanis in the city while he prepared his book on Islamic medicine for publication. By the time he arrived in Manchester in 1976, Shah Sahib was already a very devout Muslim, and he spent long hours in conversation on religious matters with a local Deobandi follower, who became his close friend. He was described to me by several close friends as a ‘very nice’ person. When I asked his wife’s sister if he ever earned any money, she laughed and said that, on the contrary, he spends it. The family is wealthy so it doesn’t affect her sister who lives with her in-laws. ‘That is their culture,’ she said, referring to the customs of saintly families. He might earn some money from healing, but not enough she thought.
When I began my research on Sufi orders in Pakistan in 1989, it was suggested that I visit Shah Sahib in Lahore. I never did. The next I heard of him was in early 2008, visiting a friend in hospital. He pointed out to me casually that Shah Sahib was mentioned in *Frontline Pakistan*, a recent book by a Pakistani journalist, Zahid Hussain (cf. Hussain 2005). Hussain reports that Daniel Pearl, the *Wall Street Journal* journalist who was abducted and assassinated by Al Qaeda,

...had pursued a story on the Al-Qaeda network in Pakistan for several weeks and had been promised an interview that evening with a Muslim cleric, believed to have close links with Richard Reid, the ‘shoe bomber’, who was facing trial in the USA for attempting to blow up a passenger airliner. Reid...was said to have trained with Al-Qaeda. The man Pearl thought he was going to meet was Sheikh Mubarak Ali Shah Gilani, leader of a shadowy militant group called Tanzimul Fuqra, which had long been on the US State Department’s list of terrorist organizations. (Hussain 2005: 123)

The same story appears in the film about Pearl’s abduction in Karachi, *A Mighty Heart*, based on the book by Mariane Pearl. With a nationwide search for him, after a week Shaykh Gilani emerged to pronounce that he knew nothing about Pearl and had never arranged to meet him. Pearl was tricked by an unrelated al-Qaeda operative (Hussain 2005: 123). Gilani disclosed himself to the authorities and was freed after questioning.

**Sufi Militancy**

Sufi militants are an unusual breed. Most Sufi myths in South Asia tell a story of tolerance, inclusiveness and peace, and this certainly true of Lahore’s Mian Mir shrine and its saintly traditions. Even in the case of the ‘warrior’ saints described by Susan Bayly (cf. 1989), the majority were Sufis who had established their cults by peaceful means; the warrior myths about them appear to be later accretions, added to an original mythic corpus during a period of extreme political violence several hundred years after these saints’ death (Bayly 1989: 190). Other warrior saints were Muslim soldiers canonized after their death as martyrs (Bayly 1989: 200; See, Schwerin 1981: 143–161). It is conceivable that dying in battle in the name of the faith activated the of the saint’s memory.

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3 The cult surrounding Masud Ghazi’s alleged tomb developed 200 years after his mythologised death in battle and encompasses Hindu and Muslim worshippers, mostly of the lower castes. Rather than martyrdom, the key focus of this cult appears to be the saint’s unconsummated ‘wedding’, which is elaborately ritualised and celebrated annually. The shrine is managed by a caste of drummers.
of Allah is regarded by disciplines as imbuing martyrs posthumously with saintly spiritual power.

Historically, only on very rare occasions have Sufi saints led real battles, usually in the face of extreme external threats. The original founder of the North African Sanusi order in the nineteenth century, a renown mystic of great learning, established hundreds of lodges from Arabia in the east to Algeria in the west and across the Sahara to the south (cf. Evans-Pritchard 1949: 24–25). Distinctively, it was in Cyrenaica among the acephalous Bedouin that Sanusi lodges were systematically distributed in every major tribal segment, thus creating a unified organization connecting the tribal groups that came over time, Evans-Pritchard argues, to form a 'proto-state' representing the Bedouin in their dealings with external powers. As head of the order, Al Sanusi located his centre in Jaghbub in the South, beyond the territory of any single tribal segment. The order's lodges were endowed by the tribes with hundreds of thousands of hectares of arable land, palm trees, livestock and wells, and they in turn provided religious, educational and moral leadership, mediated disputes and constituted points of stability for a nomadic population across a vast area. Over time the Bedouin came to be identified with the Sanusi in the eyes of colonial powers, and it was thus inevitable that in response to the Italian colonial invasion from 1911 onwards, the order would lead the religious-cum-nationalist struggle against the invaders, who were intent on colonising the plateau for Italian settlers. By this time, two generations from the original founder, Evans-Pritchard says, the Sanusi order had transformed itself from a purely religious movement to become a "political organization" and, indeed, an "embryonic state" (Evans-Pritchard 1949: 228). The Italian colonists expropriated tribal lands on the plateau and destroyed the Sanusi lodges, appropriating their vast property. In the face of Bedouin resistance the fascists created vast concentration camps, killing half the population. The grandson of the order's founder was forced to flee to Istanbul after a sustained military struggle against superior odds, and his successor, Sayyid Idris, escaped to Egypt. In 1943, after the British defeated the Axis powers in the Western Desert during World War II, a war effort to which the Sanusi and Bedouin exiles in Egypt gave strategic assistance, Sayyid Idris visited Cyrenaica for the first time since 1922, to be "received with wild enthusiasm by the whole country" (Evans-Pritchard 1949: 227). In 1951 Libya became a constitutional monarchy with Sayyid Idris as its first king.

The move from Sufi leader to political founder of an embryonic state repeated itself in the case of the Swat in South Asia. The Akhund of Swat,
also a world renouncer and charismatic saint, played an important role in “pacifying the tribes” (Ahmed 1976: 94–95). Although he did participate in two early battles, one against the Sikhs and one against the British, he was accepted by the British as a “genuine man of peace,” interested in creating an area of stability and restoring social order (Ahmed 1976: 92–94). Rather than ruling himself, he chose to nominate an external figure as “King of Swat” and remained thereafter a practising ascetic in his lodge at Saidu (Ahmed 1976: 97). It was once again his grandson who became the Wali of Swat, rising to power after feuding among cousins that left him the only direct descendent of the Akhund. He ascended during a period marked by a ‘proliferation of charismatic leaders of millenarian movements in the North West Frontier region, claiming the ‘appointed’ time had come and salvation from the British was at hand’ (Ahmed 1976: 107). These charismatics, who appropriated the title of ‘Mullah’, calling for ‘jihad’ and ‘promised a land free of the infidel’ (Ahmed 1976: 107–108), were opposed by local political tribal leaders, the Khans, who feared their disruptive impact (Ahmed 1976: 113). It was in this context that the Wali gained tribal and British support and, after neutralising all external contenders to leadership, became head of state. Despite an early period of violence and internecine feuding which left him the sole heir to the Akhund, and although he led military expeditions against external contenders (Ahmed 1976: 116–117), the Wali remained a very religious man (Ahmed 1976: 114). He unified Swat and built a peaceful state before abdicating and retiring to a life of asceticism. He thus moved over his life from violence to peace (Ahmed 1976: 122).

The stress on peace, order and stability is thus apparent in both the Sanusi and the Swat cases, despite their resort to violence against external threats. In both cases, the founding saints were almost entirely peaceful. By contrast, some militant Sufis turn out on closer inspection to be less Sufi saint and more puritanical reformist, albeit of Sufi descent. Such was the case of Sayyid Ahmad Bareilly, discussed below, and of Muhammad Ahmad bin Abd Allah, the Sudanese Mahdi, who began his life as an ascetic Sufi Shaykh before proclaiming himself the Mahdi, the divinely ordained messianic redeemer of the faith. Voll suggests that Muhammad Ahmad al-Mahdi can more accurately be described not as a false messiah but as a Muslim reformist—‘fundamentalist’ or ‘renewer’, who rejected Sufi notions of immanence (cf. Voll 1979: 154–155). He raised an army to fight against the ‘corruption’ of the Turks (Voll 1979: 159), defeated the Turco-Egyptian rulers of the Sudan and ruled for four years, from 1881 to 1885. Even after his death, the movement continued its expansion and was only finally defeated in 1896 by a British colonial force led by Lord Kitchener.
On the whole, then, where Sufi-led violence by established saints has occurred on rare occasions, as in the so-called Hurr rebellion in Sindh, this is often in response to direct provocation (Ansari 1992). Originary saints like Zindapir, the saint I studied resident near Kohat in the North West Frontier Province (now renamed Khyber-Pakhtunkhwa), have a stake in peaceful co-existence and tranquility, Sukun, which enables them to expand their order’s networks across administrative boundaries and regions and to reach different constituencies, whether political, ethnic or religious. The very inclusiveness of the order’s membership and its pragmatic accommodation to different regimes militates against violence.

Prominent Sufi Shaykhs often fulfil the role of mediators and peace makers between adjacent tribes, as studies in North Africa in particular highlight (cf. Evans-Pritchard 1949; Gellner 1969). Though honouring politicians behind the scenes, they do so to gain boons for their orders. Their main interest is, above all, in the expansion and glorification of the regional and translocal cults they lead, centred around their central lodge. Their orders cut across administrative and territorial boundaries and gather together disciples from a wide catchment area. The ethnic, regional and even national heterogeneity of followers means that disciples’ political affiliations, interests and commitments are often mixed or conflicting. For this reason alone, taking a political stand would be unpoltic for Sufi saints who head Sufi regional cult orders, since it could unnecessarily antagonise at least some followers, though Sufi Shaykhs did historically support the creation of Pakistan.

There have, however, been exceptions to the general rule of non-violence. The exemplary warrior saint of South Asia was Sayyid Ahmad of Rae Bareli in Oudh (1786–1831) who claimed to be a ‘renewer’ of the faith and led a holy war against the Sikh rulers of the Punjab at the time. Born in 1786 to a family of Naqshbandi Sufis and scion of a learned Sayyid family, he was, according to Metcalf (1982: 52–53), a reluctant student-scholar who ultimately abandoned his studies to become a cavalryman for a local nawab. On his return to Delhi, Sayyid Ahmad began to initiate disciples and conduct a campaign for reform. Unlike other Sufis, however, he condemned all veneration at saints’ tombs except for the reading of the fatihah and distribution of food at their graves. He also opposed Shi’ah customs, advocated performing the hajj and widow remarriage, and

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4 He claimed to be a direct descendent of a famous Naqshbandi khalifa (See Gaborieau 2005: 26).
denounced expensive ceremonial rites of passage such as weddings. At the same time, he did not denounce Sufism and was, indeed, himself a ‘Shaykh’ who accepted bai’at, the oath of allegiance, initiating followers into the so-called tariqat-i muhammadiyah, claimed to unite and transcend the four main Sufi orders in India. He was also, according to Marc Gaborieau (2005: 26 ff.), the renewer of the obligation of jihad as armed defence or expansion of the ‘land of Islam’, a medieval rather than modern concept of jihad.

Like many Sufi saints before and after him, Sayyid Ahmad and his followers toured North India preaching his reformist message and recruiting new disciples. By the time he reached Calcutta on his way to the hajj, he had gathered 600 followers (or 752 disciples according to Gaborieau 2005: 26 ff.) prepared to follow him. In 1826 he finally began his career as a holy warrior, travelling 3,000 miles to the Frontier border with Afghanistan to launch his jihad against the Sikh rulers of the Punjab at the time. After winning a battle against the Sikh army at Akora Khatak, he was killed in a subsequent battle with local Frontier tribes and their rulers, who disliked the excessive reforms demanded by his mujahidin (Metcalf 1982: 62). According to Gaborieau (2005: 26), he was defeated and killed by the Sikh army in Balakot. The remains of his army were finally defeated in 1860 by the British.

According to historical research conducted by Gaborieau, Sayyid Ahmad not only claimed to be a pir or Shaykh—he claimed to be the renewer, mujaddad, of the thirteenth millennium, and the imam who invites non-believers to convert before engaging in jihad. His ambition was not to be come a Sultan but amiru’l-mu’minin, that is, the caliph, the supreme authority over temporal rulers, and the mahdi of the ‘middle of time’. This latter millennial aspect was expressed in the belief of followers that he did not die at the battle of Balakot but would reappear as the mahdi (cf. Gaborieau 2005 34, 35–7, 38).

What can we conclude from this case study of a Sufi militant jihadi? It appears that volatile times and fragile states give rise to individuals who claim charismatic authority, whether by descent or divine inspiration, and lead utopian oppositional millennial movements. Sayyid Ahmad was evidently a maverick, acceptable neither to the Deobandi reformists (or ‘Wahabbis’) or the Barelwis (‘Sufis’). The expedition he embarked upon was highly individualistic and ultimately doomed. In his appeal for

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5 See also Gaborieau’s new book (2010) on Sayyid Ahmad.
support he combined elements both from Sufism and reformism, much like the leaders of the Taliban and Al Qaida do today (Werbner 2003: 283; see also Gaborieau 2005: 30; on al Qaida see Devji 2005: 42–44). The case of the ambiguously militant Shaykh described below who arose during a highly volatile period in Pakistan’s history is also that of an unusual person, a maverick who is both a Sufi and—for a while at least—was apparently a militant.

The Shrine of Mian Mir in Lahore

In the modern era, most religious reformers in South Asia have been not faqirs, world renouncers, but learned clerics or laymen (as in the case of Mawdudi) who founded their own movements, albeit with Sufi organizational undertones. Few have been direct descendents in the line of outstanding saintly families. The subject of the present paper, Shaykh Mubarak Ali Shah Gilani, is an exception in this regard. Shah Sahib’s illustrious ancestor, Mian Mir, was a Qadiriyya who had come to Lahore from Sind and who became the spiritual guide of several of Moghul emperors and Sikh Gurus (Schimmel 1975: 433).6 His mazar (shrine) still attracts hundreds of followers daily and is revered by many Sikhs as well as Muslims. Shah Sahib’s grandfather was, I was told, the sajjada nasheen (‘seated’ on, i.e. inheritor of the throne/carpet). Although the media provide few details, according to Alix Philippon who has studied the shrine since 2004, it seems that the established saintly successor or gaddi nasheen is Syed Chan Pir Qadri, a practising Sufi who claims to be the nineteenth descendent of Mia Mir or his first khalifas (vicegerent).7 Another person claiming to be the sajada nasheen, whose videos appear on Youtube, is Syed Haroon Ali Gillani. Philipson reports that Chan Pir has challenged the Awqaf Department’s attempt not only to manage the shrine but to control the rituals performed there, and has contested this right in the courts. The appointment of Yousaf Raza Gilani as prime minister in 2008, himself scion to a saintly family in Multan who favours Sufi traditions and is indeed related to Chan Pir—and his intervention—appears to have

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6 See the excellent summary and links on http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hazrat_Mian_Mir.
7 See, for example, Tribune News Service, Amritsar November 12 and 13, 2006.
tilted the dispute with the Auqaf in favour of Chan Pir. Mian Mir’s shrine occupies a huge courtyard, located in Mian Mir village or basti, itself now a large suburb of Lahore and a very valuable chunk of real estate. Shaykh Mubarak Ali Shah himself does not appear to have ever contested the custodianship. The shrine is famous for its huge, colourful ʿurs celebrations, attended by the urban population of Lahore and by many dignitaries, in which a ceremonial washing of the grave is performed by the shrine custodian. In 2009 Mian Mir celebrated its 386th ʿurs.

Early Career

Why did Pearl want to meet Gilani in connection with Richard Reid? As I pieced together a portrait of ‘Shah Sahib’ in the following weeks from anecdotal stories told to me by my Manchester friends, supplemented by online websites, a picture emerged of the man I had briefly met. An idiosyncratic and flamboyant character, he fitted neither the image of a saint nor a terrorist. Indeed, my friends repeatedly protested that he was a peace lover who condemned violence, as befits a Sufi saint. They also told stories about his many miracles—for example, mere contact with my friend’s son, the birthday boy whose party the Shaykh and I both attended, had blessed women with sons, the boy’s father told me. The father told me that he took one of his friends to meet the Shaykh in Pakistan because his wife was childless. Despite the fact that the queues to see the Shaykh in Pakistan were very long, Shah Sahib accepted him and his friend ahead of the queue. He never forgot his old Manchester friends and always welcomed them ahead of everyone else. He received the childless man and now the latter’s wife is pregnant.

When he was young, Shah Sahib was a keen mountaineer. Indeed, as I learnt later, in 2011, he was a member of the famous ‘Lahore Scouts’. He met his first wife, my friend’s sister, when he was a leader of youth who took young middle class women and men from Lahore on hikes in the mountains of Northern Pakistan. They used to sit around fires chatting,
she told me, much like youth do anywhere in the world. This was where
romance blossomed with her sister. It was not an arranged marriage. The
Shaykh, his wife and followers often went into the mountains, she said.
They meditated there or communicated with spirits. This story seems to
fit newspaper interviews which cite Shah as having a theory of jinns or
unseen cosmic forces permeating and determining world history.¹⁰

Later, Shah Sahib took a second wife, daughter of the Governor of
Punjab, who divorced him. He was still young at the time and not very
religious. My friend’s sister brought up the second wife’s children as well
as her own. Eventually, she too left him, when he took his third wife, an
African American woman with whom he ultimately opened an English-
medium school in Islamabad.¹¹ A Pakistani friend’s daughter attended
the school.¹² Indeed, unknown to me Shah Sahib and his third wife lived in
the very same middle class enclave in Rawalpindi where I too stayed
on my visits to the capital during the time I was in Pakistan studying
Zindapir’s Sufi order. The family in ‘Pindi was thus all too aware when one
day, shortly after Pearl’s abduction and assassination, the couple vanished
and the school closed down.

During his stay in Manchester in 1979, Shah Sahib asked one of my
friends, he told me, to advise him on how he could raise money to buy a
tank to fight against the Russian invaders in Afghanistan. Bemused, my
friend told him that this was a matter for governments. It was, however, the
start of Shah Sahib’s career as a global fund raiser for the war in Afghan-
istan and recruiter of mujahidin, initially to fight the Russian infidels.

back. Several others have also been detained and interrogated but none have been charged
or tried. A common element among all the accused is their association with organizations
active in helping al-Qaeda and Taliban elements regroup in Pakistan.’

¹⁰ One source, a CBS 60 minute report, cites the Shaykh as saying ‘There are beings
who are not visible to you,… But they inhabit this earth. And they are damaging, caus-
ing psychotic diseases, fits, epilepsies. And controlling the agents, controlling the human
beings.” According to the report, Gilani says he can control those evil forces. He says that
he is not a threat to the U.S., but could be its salvation. To understand why, he points to an
American television show “The X-Files.” He says the mind control and evil influence that
aliens wield over human beings in the programme is much like the power of the invisible
forces he believes in.

¹¹ According to the Boston Globe, he subsequently took a fourth wife, and my Man-
chester friends thought that in total he had taken five wives at various times, three of
them African American.

¹² According to Alix Philippon, after the Auquf took over the shrine, Chan Pir had
opened a chain of schools called Crescent Schooling systems (http://www.mianmir.org/index
.htm).
A hint of this hidden career was a story I was told in Manchester about an African American who sent a letter to Shah Sahib’s Manchester relatives from a United States State Penitentiary, addressed to Shah Sahib. He wrote that he had been a condemned prisoner on death’s row, awaiting execution, when he had a dream. In the dream Shah Sahib appeared before him and promised him that the charges against him would be dropped and he would be released from prison. He vowed that if the dream came true he would convert to Islam and follow Shah Sahib. One day, my friends told me, he arrived in Manchester. By that time however, Shah Sahib had already left. The man, an African American, stayed in Manchester a couple of weeks at my friends’ house, before following Shah Sahib to Pakistan. There he converted to Islam, they heard, and went forth to spread the word of Allah in Africa.

The African-American Connection

The African-American connection, hinted at this apocryphal anecdote told to me in Manchester, becomes the dominant narrative once one turns to the numerous websites about, or belonging to, Shaykh Mubarak Ali Shah Gilani. The websites report that in the 1980s, shortly after his visit to Manchester, Gilani founded Al-Fuqra, ‘the community of the impoverished’, in the United States. Its members are primarily converts from the African American community. Shah Sahib did spend some time in America, my Manchester friends confirmed—his sister or niece were living there. Al Fuqra, also known as Jamaat-ul-Fuqra (JF), is sometimes alleged to be a splinter group of the extremist Jaish-e-Muhammad, the Army of Muhammad (JeM), a Pakistani jihadi organization operating in Afghanistan that was banned by Pakistani President Pervez Musharraf in 2002 (see also Hussain 2007: 67). This seems unlikely, however, since JeM was only formed in 2000 (cf. Abou Zahab & Roy 2004: 28), and was renamed, in 2001, Tehrik al Furqan (Hussain 2007:31). The various websites duplicate each other in a spiral of rumors and half truths; they all cite the fact that Al Fuqra is described in the State Department’s ‘Patterns of Global Terrorism’ as early as 1998 as an organization that

Hussain speaks there of Jamaat-e-Furqa (2007: 67), and calls Gilani’s group Tanzimul Fuqra (2007: 123). It seems unlikely that he is referring to the same organization.
... seeks to purify Islam through violence. Members have purchased isolated rural compounds in North America to live communally, practice their faith and insulate themselves from Western culture. [Al] Fuqra members have attacked a variety of targets that they view as enemies of Islam, including Muslims they regard as heretics and Hindus.¹⁴

In a rumor gone viral, other websites report attacks by Al Fuqra members on Hare Krishna, Yoga and Ahmadiya Centres, Sikhs and Buddhists. It is also alleged that JF documents seized, including maps and lists, contained details of potential JF targets and victims in Los Angeles, Arizona and Colorado, including oil and gas installations and electrical facilities. Al Fuqra members have attacked a variety of targets that they view as enemies of Islam, including Muslims they regard as heretics and Hindus.¹⁴

The websites also allege that Al Fuqra has close ties with the ISI, the Pakistan Inter-Service Intelligence services. Al Fuqra is also linked to another allegedly extremist organization founded by Shaykh Mubarak, Muslims of America (MOA), which claims to have six offices in North America and Canada, and is also said to be virulently anti-Semitic.¹⁶ Several websites, obviously reproducing their information from the same single source gone viral, allege that Al-Fuqra has committed firebombings, fraud and murders on U.S. soil, and it is also accused of money laundering and smuggling. Many of the websites are disguised Christian, Indian or Jewish websites, intending to expose Islamic terror. There is no way of checking their reliability, and this is true even of journalistic accounts.

In 2006, one website, ‘CP’,¹⁷ reported the existence of ‘an encampment in the Catskill Mountains near Hancock, N.Y., called ‘Islamberg’, allegedly conducting military-style training. Neighbours were said to complain that they constantly heard bursts of gunfire from the place. The road leading to the community is reported to be called ‘Moslem Road’. ‘We don’t even dare to slow down when we drive by,’ one resident was reported to have said. They own this mountain and they know it, and there is nothing we

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¹⁴ The State Department is not always reliable (personal com. Mariam Abou Zahab).
¹⁵ See especially http://www.satp.org/satporgtp/countries/pakistan/terroristoutfits/jamaat-ul-fuqra.htm, for the most detailed allegations (accessed July 2012). SATP is an Indian agency, which often spreads disinformation (personal com. Mariam Abou Zahab).
¹⁶ This is the so-called ‘Vanity Fair’ site http://s3.amazonaws.com/911timeline/2002/vanityfairo802.html (accessed July 2012).
can do about it but move, and we can’t even do that. Who wants to buy property next to that?” One website reports that there is a road named after Sheikh Gilani in the vicinity of Virginia. Al Fuqra is said to have a school at Hancock, the ‘International Quranic Open University’, located on 70 acres of remote land on the western edge of the Catskill Mountains, about 40 miles southeast of Binghamton, NY. Gilani, who calls himself the sixth Sultan Ul Faqr, is also said to be founder of a village in South Carolina called ‘Holy Islamville’. The website claims that Jamaat ul-Fuqra recruits disciples through various social service organizations in the US, including the prison system. According to the websites, there are between seven and 30 jamaats in the US, with between 1000 and 5000 members (different websites give different figures). The communes are inwardly focused and set themselves apart from the wider culture. Several are said to have training camps. Although the US authorities have probed the organization for charges ranging from links to al-Qaeda to laundering and funnelling money to Pakistan for terrorist activities, the organization or its affiliates appears not to be on the US banned list of terrorist organizations, or at least, not any longer.18 Despite this Hussain reported as late as 2007 that Tanzimul Fuqra, Shaykh Mubarak’s militant group, has ‘long been on the US State Department’s list of terrorist organizations’ (Hussain 2007: 123). Against that, however, what seems like a relatively reliable interview on YouTube explains that the CIA investigated the allegations and decided not to ban the organization.19

One of the websites links the American organization with the mujahidin struggle against the Russians in Afghanistan:

Sheikh Gilani found his first American recruits by raiding the ranks of an existing American Muslim organization, the Dar ul-Islam. At a Brooklyn mosque, Gilani, sporting ammunition belts, preached Islam as the path to a better life and called for fighters to join the holy war against the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan.20

In 1993, the website reports, Gilani was sighted in Khartoum, along with delegates from various Palestinian militant groups and a Pakistani

18 Vanity Fair reports that ‘After interrogating Khawaja—who backed Gilani’s story—police began having second thoughts. Ul-Fuqra had never been involved with violence in Pakistan and indeed had become so inactive of late the State Department had dropped it from the terrorist list. Someone had set Gilani up.’
Nevertheless Gilani insists that he advocates peace, not violence, and has hit back against the slander by his opponents on his own websites.\textsuperscript{22} He categorically denies the allegations against him and points out that after Pearl’s kidnapping he was interviewed by the Pakistani authorities and released. His communities in America, mainly composed of African American converts to Islam, are described as epitomising truth, beauty, modesty, peace and humility. Despite the impoverished inner city background of the followers, their children with few exceptions have sought higher education and become doctors, lawyers and other professionals. In an odd aside, Gilani’s website praises General Musharaf as a ‘courageous individual… an ideal Muslim ruler, who single-handedly brought forth truth in defense of the Noble family, and sought to expose such conspiracies.’

Another of the pir’s websites contains letters from devoted murids, telling how the pir enabled them to rid themselves of the ‘filth of the cities’.\textsuperscript{23} He has taught thousands how to lead better lives; to be honest and honourable, upright and true. He teaches the men how to be men, telling them to wed their women and work to earn for their families, and they have. Thousands of marriages and hundreds of children from many hundreds of families still intact with the father as head of household and children not on the streets is testimony to the benefit our murshid has brought to this society. How many of these men would have died of drug overdoses, in prison or beaten somehow on the streets by this society’s cruelties if not for his instruction on how to lead a clean life in accordance with the dictates of our creator Allah Almighty.

Disciples’ letters speak of the love of the Shaykh, the ‘true Sufi master’. They speak of being saved and guided in the path of love. The last letter on the website concludes:

\textsuperscript{21} http://politicsofcp.blogspot.co.uk/2006_07_01_archive.html (accessed July 2012).
\textsuperscript{22} http://www.iqou-moa.org/rebuttals/slander_against_muslim_communities_miss_the_mark.htm (accessed July 2012).
There is no one on the face of this earth more broad-minded, caring and just. His knowledge is without limit, and his teachings are made available to all, Muslim and non-Muslim, without his asking for anything in return, only with the hope that mankind may be guided and loved by the Almighty in order to reach the true purpose of their being created.

In an interview Philippon conducted with Khaled Khwaja in 2008, before he was mysteriously killed in the tribal areas, he told her of Shaykh Gilani:

Most of his followers are in America. I don't find many of his followers here. And they are very committed and strong followers. When I gave an interview I said OBL [Osama Bin Laden] doesn't have one follower as strong as MG [Mubarak Gilani] has….they follow him to a great degree! Anything he asks them … I've seen very strange things. (…) people obey anything. He makes them strong. They obey his orders to any degree. One of them told me if we are asked to cut our hand and foot and stay with him, many would agree to that. So this is a kind of a strange following he has in America. They are all converts. The strongest piri-muridi I have ever seen is Mubarak Gilani. I haven't seen that sort of strength in any other piri-muridi (…) The commitment of his followers, if he asks them to do something very strong, like you can imagine, I have a school, and I needed some teachers, I told Gilani and he immediately called three, four women teachers. One of them was just married one month back, one of them had a child of about two months, and they immediately came here from America. They were earning there 2000 dollars, I would only give them 200 dollars. So they could sacrifice all this because they wanted to stay close to their Shaykh (…) Initially I wasn't convinced, I thought maybe himself he is a CIA agent because I could see so many Americans around him. I first met him in 1988, he also believed in jihad, he is a great leader and his mission is jihad.24

Khawaja is ambiguous in his evaluation of the Shaykh, insinuating ‘strange things’, while describing him in terms which are in reality no different from the usual devotional panegyrics Sufi followers attribute to a living saint (Werbner 2003). Although he is said to be a ‘great leader of jihad’, the Shaykh denies ever meeting bin Laden or having any links to al-Qaeda. His followers contribute to relief funds in natural disasters, from Hurricane Katrina to the earthquake in Kashmir. He instructs his followers to be patriotic Americans.

I watched the film, A Mighty Heart, with my friends who know Shah Sahib very well. They watched the unfolding events in horror but when it came to the cameo actor’s depiction of the Shaykh as the strident cleric

24 Personal communication of this recorded interview from Alix Philippon.
they objected vehemently. He was not at all like that, they told me; he was not in any way aggressive and ignorant-looking. He was educated, soft-spoken, with a look of open generosity and kindness. But above all he was, they implied, enormously powerful, attractive, charismatic. If he started to talk, they said, you would not be able to stop looking at him. He drew you to him. Such generic descriptions are appropriate to a saint.

At a Muslim Boy Scouts celebration which took place in ‘Holy Islamberg’ in Hancock, New York State representatives of the FBI and police presented special awards to the Muslim Scouts of America, while in ‘Holy’ Islamville, South Carolina, the head of the local state FBI, Les Wiser, gave a speech waxing lyrical about the scouts and diversity, and saying he had come to ‘build trust’. Such invitations to local civic and political leaders are common among all ethnic groups in the United States, and point to a far more benign image of the rural communities founded by Shaykh Mubarak.

**Between Rumour and Truth**

What are we to make of these conflicting claims and counter-claims online and in the press and media? Some things seem clear from my Manchester friends: Shah Sahib did support the mujahidin war against the infidel Russians, recruiting young followers and in all likelihood fund-raising for this cause. He may also have fund-raised for militant groups fighting in Kashmir. Until September 11, international funding of Pakistani militant groups was not subject to much scrutiny. It is also believable that Shah Sahib had good contacts with the ISI, Pakistan’s Inter-Services Intelligence, which for a long time supported the Taliban in Afghanistan, and was intricately enmeshed with the American CIA. The Shaykh’s links to the ISI were mentioned twice by a friend in Manchester who knew him well. He told me that General Hamid Gul said ‘If only I had people like Shah Sahib fighting for me, the war would be over in no time.’ But, my friend told me, the Shaykh, ‘Shah Sahib’, hated President Zia ul Haq (a Deobandi) and Gul himself, a fanatical Jamaati. The saying attributed to Gul is later reproduced as attributed to another ISI commander, Khawaja, the same man.

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26 Ibid. and for his speech on video see http://www.iqou-moa.org/muslim_scouts/les_wiser.htm (accessed July 2012).
Shah Sahib belonged to a high-status Lahore family and married into middle class or elite families in the city, so no doubt he had many contacts among Punjabi politicians and army personnel. But his personal career appears to have shifted over time, I want to suggest, from the militant pole to the Sufi, spiritual and organizational pole. For the African American converts whom he rescued from inner city ghettos he was a charismatic spiritual guide, a beloved pir or murshid. He inspired them to seek (secular) higher education and to aspire to middle class familial values. Locating them in small settlements in the American wilderness, away from the cities, chimes with his reported love of the mountains as a young man.

Allegations that he preached a violent Islam in America or was closely connected to al-Qaeda are hard to substantiate, though it is conceivable that a few of his more ardent followers engaged in violence against other religious groups. Like most Pakistanis, the Shaykh clearly accepts the prevalent myth among Pakistanis that it was the Jews who destroyed the twin towers on 9/11. Online, he speaks mysteriously of the ‘illuminati’ who are threatening America, no doubt inspired by Dan Brown’s second novel, *Angels and Demons*. But this does not make him a militant jihadi.

In a 2003 survey by Karen Leonard of Muslims in the United States (Leonard 2003), including African Americans, neither Al-Fuqra nor the Muslim Organization of America get even a mention. This implies that they are insignificant in the spectrum of American Muslim organizations and networks. Nor is Al-Fuqra a banned organization, as we saw. An investigative report on Islamberg in the Catskill mountains by a TV reporter from Al Arabiya found an isolated community but little to confirm allegations of militancy. Indeed, members of the Shaykh’s community were said to have extended their help during floods in the neighboring town. More importantly, however, Shah Sahib’s base was and has remained throughout in Pakistan, though a son from his first wife lives in the US. Despite all the allegations he was never imprisoned and the accusations of his involvement in Daniel Pearl’s abduction and assassination were dropped. It is most unlikely that he ever knew Richard Reid who was radicalized by

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28 Some websites accuse him of fleeing the US because of suspected involvement in the first attempt to bomb the World Trade Center.
Abu Hamza at the Finsbury Park mosque in London, despite the report of his links to Al-Fuqra in the Boston Globe (1/6/2002) which set Pearl on his mission to meet the Shaykh.29 Shah Sahib opened an English-medium school in the capital Islamabad for the children of middle class residents, hardly the act of a Taliban supporter. Yet the fact that not he but another kinsman is the custodian of the Mia Mir shrine may indicate that he does not quite fit the Sufi mould in the eyes of his family.30

Nevertheless, the transnational organization Shah Sahib built up as a ‘living’ Sufi saint is in fact quite remarkable, highlighting the extraordinary qualities of inventiveness and imagination he has brought to this project, and his willingness to explore the unknown and transgress conventional boundaries. If it were not for the suspicions cast upon him, Muslims of America (MOA) and/or Al Fuqra’s North American and Caribbean Sufi cult would make a marvellous anthropological research project. The ambiguities surrounding the study of terror, terrorists and terror networks are highlighted by the case of this Sufi warrior (if he is one), making evident that truth is stranger than fiction; that however much security forces attempt to profile the ideal-type terrorist there is no single identikit that can portray the reality on the ground.

In early 2010 my friend, the former sister-in-law of Shaykh Mubarak, went for a visit to Pakistan during the course of which she visited the Shaykh. I had previously been told that he was probably in ‘Gilgit’, implying that he was in hiding way up in the North where terror groups hang out. In fact, however, she visited him where he was living at his ancestral shrine in Mia Mir, though she said it was quite difficult to be allowed to see him. Despite being by now an elderly man close to 70, he had a young European wife, she told me. He blessed her and wished her happiness.

**Anthropological Fieldwork ‘Truths’**

What happens when the hyperreality of cyberspace confronts mundane reality? The quest for online information about a supposed Sufi warrior or Islamist, allegedly involved in an Al Qaida plot to assassinate an

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30 I have been unable to obtain a genealogy of the shrine that would give his exact genealogical relationship with the previous custodian.
American-Jewish journalist, was from the start interwoven with flashes of real-life anecdotal cues. As my journey progressed I became convinced that most of the online rumours were false and that Shaykh Mubarak Ali Gilani had become in many respects a typical, if somewhat unusual, originary Sufi saint. A visit in December 2011 to one of the saint’s rural communities in America, Holy Islamville in South Carolina, founded in 2002, convinced me that for his followers, Shaykh Mubarak was a truly charismatic saintly figure who preached peace and co-existence.

There were some surprising aspects to the visit. Despite its apparent remote anonymity, Holy Islamville had been blessed by a miracle, and it also had its own wali’s (saint’s) mazar (grave). Hazrat Najah Begum was a pious woman, a dynamic leader of the community, who had died a few months previously and was buried besides the ‘Beitoon Noor’, a large, domed, purpose-built red-brick structure, built over her home with voluntary labour she herself had mobilised (see Figure 4.1).

Her shrine was still under construction. I watched the current leader of the community as he knelt beside the grave and kissed the feet of the wali buried there (see Figure 4.2).

The Shaykh himself had advised the community of her elevated spiritual status. It was on her watch, in her house, that the miraculous event had occurred—the appearance in psychedelic rainbow colours of letters spelling Allah Azza wa Jalla in Arabic on one of the walls. Our guides claimed to have seen the writing with their very eyes. The miracle happened after the Shaikh’s dua (supplicatory prayer) had been faxed to the community, and the fax machine is still kept in the room where the miracle occurred, on a high stool. The wall itself, clad in marble, has a plaque in rainbow colours, screened by a black-and-gold tapestry embroidered with Arabic inscriptions. The top edges of the walls are inscribed with the attributes of God in Arabic (see Figure 4.3).

One room in the Beit Noor has a large flat-screen television linked to a computer. This is where the congregation communicates with the Shaykh in Pakistan on Skype, we were told, consulting him regularly. Most of his disciples have visited the Shaykh in Pakistan, and spent several months both at the Mian Mir shrine in Lahore and at one of his homes in the mountains to escape the overwhelming heat of the Punjab plains. They were hosted with lavish hospitality, they said. The present leader of the community, a practising hakim (healer), first met the Shaykh in Philadelphia in the early 1980s. At the time he was the follower of another leader, he told us, but the Shaykh was able to ‘lift’ him and the other disciples to the ‘highest platform’ (presumably of Sufi esoteric knowledge), so they
Fig. 4.1. The Beitoon Noor (photo by the author).

Fig. 4.2. The mazar under construction (photo by the author).
moved to follow him. The leader had spent many months in Pakistan along with his wife learning to be a healer, travelling widely. Followers call themselves ‘talibs’ (students), not ‘murids’ (disciples) though they refer to the Shaykh as their murshid (guide or teacher). They call the settlement a ‘darbar’ (lodge).

The 45-acre site purchased by members of the founding community in upstate New York seemed remote, located in the midst of woods in a scattered settlement outside the town of York, but its choice was explained by the fact that some members of the order living in upstate New York came from families in South Carolina. All the followers we met were African Americans, and they spoke of escaping the crime and drugs of the inner city to come to this place of peace and security. Some were converts, others were born Muslims who had discovered Sufism. In addition to the shrine the community also has a mosque, a school, a store and homes scattered throughout the site. But not all followers live in the darbar—most have jobs as nurses and other professionals in Charlotte or York.

What connected the American order to Sufism? It did not celebrate Eid Milad un-Nabi or an annual ‘urs and seemed unfamiliar with the word. Followers clearly practised a highly reformist, orthodox version of Sufism, perhaps in the Qadiriyya tradition (see Figure 4.4).
The biggest communal event they hold annually is, they said, Eid al-Akbar, the Great Eid, when they gather either in Islamberg or Islamville (or both) to pray and hold a sacrifice. They also convene large inter-faith dialogue conventions and a women’s ‘study retreat’, which gathers members from other communities. This Christmas they were expecting 200 participants from the wider region. There were communities of followers of the Shaykh in Virginia, Trinidad and Canada, and possibly elsewhere. The communities are ranked, with Islamberg in New York State being the most senior (a miracle occurred there too) and Holy Islamville ranked second. The Shaykh never attends the American gatherings ‘for obvious reasons’ they said. They asked me to promise to say good things about my visit, to let the world know the truth.

From a methodological anthropological perspective, it is true that a short visit of three hours can barely hint at the fascinating cultural complexity and inventiveness of this evolving Sufi order. It cannot refute Internet rumours once and for all. Even in this short visit, however, it was evident that the Shaykh was an ever-present reality in his followers’ lives, despite his geographical remoteness; it was equally evident that followers were not brainwashed Islamic radicals—they were independent,
dynamic, thoughtful, intellectually alive and morally conscious subjects, seeking a higher truth. If they believed in Shaykh Mubarak and his miracles, despite the rumours about him (of which they were clearly aware), it was because they perceived him to be a man of the highest moral calibre and ethical stature.

Conclusion

This case has aimed to show the difficulties of piecing together information based on the Internet, rumors and half-truths. As an anthropologist I accidentally met Shaykh Mubarak and heard intermittently about him from different acquaintances, but this hardly gave me a handle on the truth about this secretive character. Clearly, he no longer appears in public, but equally, he has not been banished from his home in his ancestral shrine village in Lahore. The case makes clear that Internet sites need to be scrutinized with the utmost suspicion and that allegations often go viral and are repeated on different sites. Some sites have a stake in discrediting Islam or American Muslims. Others spread conspiracy theories. Information is available online but much of it is excessive or simply false. How to distinguish between reliable and reliable Internet sources, when even experienced journalists often get it wrong, is a task regarding which most anthropologists have no training. At the same time stock generic phrases familiar from anthropological fieldwork can perhaps give clues to the reality behind the rumors.

On balance Shaykh Mubarak Ali Shah Gilani’s career seems to have been one in which he increasingly moved from militant activism towards becoming a full time charismatic living saint as he succeeded in building up his own Sufi trans/regional cult. It seems that over time he gradually decreased his involvement in militant activities, which were most prominent during the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan. At the same time, his past and tendency towards secrecy continues to follow him and define him as a ‘dangerous’ man despite little tangible evidence of his warrior qualities.

References