

**Transnationalism and Regional Cults:
The Dialectics of Sufism in the Plurivocal Muslim World**

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Introduction: the Problem of Comparison in Sufi Orders

I have been thinking for some time about the possibility of comparing Sufi orders, conceived of as focused, central place organizations, as they exist in different parts of the Muslim world. The challenge is, as I see it, how to formulate a set of analytical concepts to create a theoretical approach that encompasses Sufi ritual and religious movement, and which can be applied to Sufi practice in geographically distant geographical locations, from North Africa in the West to Pakistan and Indonesia in the East. I stress practice as against Sufi cosmology or poetry, since my aim is to understand the sociological and economic dimensions of Sufi orders.

Of course, it cannot be taken for granted in advance that comparison is a valid project. Superficially, even in a single locality, there is an enormously wide range of types and styles of Sufi shrines and saints, from major shrines of great antiquity, managed by descendants of the original saintly founder and guardians of his tomb, to minor saints with a highly localised clientele (see Troll 1989; Werbner and Basu 1998). The question is: if even in a single locality, shrines differ markedly, how much more so if we try to compare, for example, Sufi orders in Pakistan and Indonesia? In the following discussion, I highlight key analytical terms that I believe are crucial for a comparative account of Sufi orders.

One problem in the project of comparison I am proposing has to do with language. In parts of the Muslim world there appears to be a reluctance to use the analytic armoury of concepts developed elsewhere. Hence, Indonesian scholars, for example, prefer to use vernacular concepts to describe the ritual and organisational practices of Sufi orders, and this then leads a description of these cults that seems to imply that they are quite different from Sufi orders and cult practices in Pakistan, for example, or Morocco. One challenge, then, in the project of comparison is to begin to disentangle the meanings of vernacular terms in order to be able to explore if comparison is, firstly, possible and second, where difference lies. I began this project when I undertook a reanalysis of research on Sufi orders in Indonesia, which seemed to expose many unacknowledged areas of possible comparison between Indonesia, Pakistani and North African Sufi orders and the cults they generate (Werbner 2008). While it had been recognised in Indonesian studies that the ideas of Sufi theosophy were shared with the rest of the Muslim world, rituals practices seemed quite different. My reanalysis highlighted aspects of the cults that were described but left untheorised by south-east Asian scholars.

Key Terms

Broadly speaking, charting the differences and similarities between Sufi orders as embodied traditions requires attention *beyond* mystical-philosophical and ethical ideas, to *the ritual performances and religious organisational patterns* that shape Sufi orders and

cults in widely separated locations. We need, in other words, to seek to understand comparatively four interrelated symbolic complexes: first, the *sacred division of labour* – the *ritual roles* that perpetuate and reproduce the cult; second, the *sacred exchanges* between places and persons, often across great distances; third, the *sacred region*, its catchment area and the sanctified central places that shape it; and fourth, the *sacred indexical events - the rituals* – that co-ordinate and revitalise organisational and symbolic unities and enable *managerial and logistical planning and decision-making*. Comparison requires that we examine the way in which these four dimensions of ritual sanctification and performance are linked, and are embedded in a particular symbolic logic and local environment.

I begin with an example from my own research. The Sufi cult I studied in Pakistan (P. Werbner 2003), was in many senses remarkably similar organisationally to other, non-Muslim regional cults and pilgrimage systems elsewhere (for examples, see R. Werbner 1977). It also fitted the model of Sufi order cults analysed by Trimmingham (1971), which was mainly based on his extensive knowledge of Sufi orders in the Middle East and Africa.

During his lifetime, Zindapir, founder of the Sufi order of the saint I studied, established a lodge that extended globally: to Britain and Europe, the Middle East and even South Africa. Emerging as a saint during the 1940s, in the dying days of Empire, Zindapir began his career as an army tailor contractor for the seventh Baluch regiment, and his cult membership expanded through the recruitment of *state employees*, in this case soldiers and army personnel. These in turn recruited *members of their families* and, when they retired to civilian life, their *co-villagers* or townsmen. The cult expanded further as these soldiers went to work as *labour migrants* in the Gulf or Britain. Disciples were also recruited from among the stream of *supplicants* coming to the lodge to seek blessings and remedies for their afflictions from the saint, and from among casual visitors curious to see the saint and lodge itself, a place renowned for its beauty. Some disciples joined the cult after meeting Zindapir or his vicegerents on the annual Hajj to Mecca. Such *recruitment chains* form *network clusters* whose members share either occupational or geographical proximity (or both).

Zindapir's disciples met regularly to perform *zikr* at the *lodge branches* of the order, located throughout Pakistan. They gathered at the *central lodge* of Zindapir weekly, monthly, and in most cases, annually, at the *'urs*, the three-day *ritual festival* commemorating the mystical 'marriage' of a deceased saint with God. Some *pilgrims* arrived for the festival as individuals, but most came in convoys of trucks and buses from established branches, travelling in some cases for over 24 hours. The *sacred exchange* at the cult centre was extensive: the groups arrived bearing with them sacrificial offerings of grain, butter and animals. They returned bearing gifts from the saint – gowns or caps, and in some instances, the sacred soil of the lodge itself. During their three-day stay at the *'urs*, all the participants were fed and nurtured by the saint himself. The hundreds of beasts sacrificed, the hundreds of thousands of baked chappatis and nans, the enormous cauldrons of sweet and pilau rice distributed during the *'urs*, feed some 30,000 people over three days, a major logistical challenge. But the saint also feeds pilgrims to the lodge throughout the year, in what may be conceived of as a form of *perpetual sacrifice*. The lodge itself has been built with *voluntary labour* in the name of God, usually in the weeks

preceding the annual 'urs. The crowds depart following the final *du'a*, the supplicatory prayer enunciated by the saint himself on behalf of the whole community.

This annual celebration at a saint's lodge or shrine is known in South Asia as the 'urs. In North Africa it is known as *mawlid*. It commemorates the death/rebirth of a saint, the moment of his unification or marriage with Allah. The 'urs is the *organisational hub* of sufi saints' cults. The festival gathers together individual supplicants and pilgrims alongside organised groups of devotees and disciples who visit the festival annually and cultivate a special relationship to the saint and the Sufi *tariqa* or order he founded. These groups or congregations often travel great distances to attend the annual ritual. They frequently come from different linguistic, ethnic and even religious groups. Although the celebration marks the high point of the year, it cannot be understood apart from the more enduring links that constitute the organisation of the order.

Regional Cults and Sufi Inclusiveness

The mediation of cross-ethnic, inter-caste and cross-regional divisions in South Asian Sufi lodges fit *regional cult theory*, as it has been applied more widely to such cults, found in different cultures in many other parts of the world (R. Werbner 1977, 1989). In a seminal volume on such *Regional Cults*, Richard Werbner sums up their key features. Regional cults are, distinctively, he says,

...cults of the middle range - more far-reaching than any parochial cult of the little community, yet less inclusive in belief and membership than a world religion in its most universal form. Their central places are shrines in towns and villages, by cross-roads or even in the wild, apart from human habitation, where great populations from various communities or their representatives, come to supplicate, sacrifice, or simply make pilgrimage. They are cults which have a topography of their own, conceptually defined by the people themselves and marked apart from other features of cultural landscapes by ritual activities. (R. Werbner 1977: XI)

Like other regional cults, Sufi cults are very often trans-regional, trans-national, and trans-ethnic. Different Sufi cults interpenetrate with one another rather than generating contiguous, bounded territories. They leapfrog across major political and ethnic boundaries, creating their own sacred topographies and flows of goods and people. These override, rather than being congruent with, the political boundaries and subdivisions of nations, ethnic groups, or provinces (R. Werbner 1977: XI).

Werbner warns against the danger of what he calls naive holism, according to which 'essential relations with a wider context get stripped away when a small group, little community or tribe is studied as an isolated whole' (ibid.: IX). Clearly, Sufi lodges and shrine complexes cannot be studied in isolation from the wider regional and transnational cult generated around the sacred centre, or the political contexts in which the cult operates.

An equally misguided theoretical trap, which Werbner warns against - one often applied to the study of Islamic societies - is a tendency to adopt a 'correspondence' theory, that is, the kind of functionalist approach that argues that different domains (ritual, political, economic) underwrite each other, so that ritual and belief become mere representations of political divisions or economic interests (ibid.: XVIII).¹ In Sufi

¹ Such correspondence theories draw on simplistic Durkheimian or Marxist approaches.

regional cults in Pakistan, the symbolic order *cuts across* political divisions and remains in tension with the postcolonial and capitalist economies of modern-day Pakistan, and even more so in post-imperial Britain. Pakistani saints are often highly critical of politicians and *ulama*, religious clerics.

Regional cult analysis aims to disclose hidden structural interdependencies and ruptures between different domains of action: economic, ritual, political. Like other regional cults, Sufi regional cults are both linked to centres of political power and in tension with them. Various historical studies have highlighted the pragmatic tendencies of Sufis in South Asia which have enabled Sufi saints to accommodate to a variety of different political regimes and circumstances, over many centuries of imperial and postcolonial rule. The relationship between the political centre and the sacred centre is a changing, historically contingent one, and in this sense, as in others, regional cults are historically evolving social formations.

These are the bare outlines of Sufi regional cult organization. The Sufi cultural concept which best captures the idea of a *Sufi sacred region* is *wilayat*. *Wilayat*, a master concept in Sufi terminology, denotes a series of interrelated meanings: (secular) sovereignty over a region, the spiritual dominion of a saint, guardianship, a foreign land, friendship, intimacy with God, and union with the Deity. As a master concept, *wilayat* encapsulates the range of complex ideas defining the charismatic power of a saint - not only over transcendental spaces of mystical knowledge but as sovereign of the terrestrial spaces into which his sacred region extends. The term 'regional cult', a comparative, analytic term used to describe centrally focused, non-contiguous religious organisations which *extend across boundaries*, seems particularly apt to capture this symbolic complexity.

The sacred centres and subcentres of Sufi orders, known as *zawiya* in North Africa, and *darbars* or *dargahs* (royal courts) in Pakistan and India, are places of pilgrimage and ritual celebration, with the tomb of the founder being the 'focal point of the organization, a centre of veneration to which visitations (*ziyarat*) are made' (Trimingham 1971: 179). The centre is regarded as sacred (*haram*), a place of sanctuary for refugees from vengeance. Sufi regional cults (Trimingham calls them *ta'ifas*) are thus focused around a single living saint or his shrine. The shaikh, a living saint or his descendant, heads the *ta'ifa* by virtue of his powers of blessing. Under the shaikh are a number of *khalifas* appointed by him directly to take charge of districts or town centres. Trimingham reports that in larger orders each regional *khalifa* may have sectional leaders under him (1971, pp. 173-4, 179).

The word *ta'ifa* was not used by members of Zindapir's regional cult (and appears unknown even in some parts of the Middle East). They spoke of the cult as a *tariqa*, but to distinguish it from the wider Naqshbandi order to which it was affiliated, it was known as *tariqa Naqshbandiyya Ghamkolia*. By appending the name of the cult centre, Ghamkol, to their regional cult, they marked its distinctiveness as an autonomous organisation. The saint at the head of the order, *Zindapir*, ('the living saint'), was by the time of my study the head of a vast, transnational regional cult, stretching throughout Pakistan to the Gulf, Britain, Afghanistan and Southern Africa. He had founded the cult

Werbner also cites Robertson Smith's theory of sacrifice among the Semites as an example.

centre in 1948, when he first secluded himself, according to the legend, in a cave on the hill of Ghamkol. At the time the place was a wilderness.

A key feature of Zindapir's cult organisation was the way in which the exemplary centre has *replicated itself* throughout the saint's region through scores of deliberate and conscious *acts of mimesis*. In different parts of the Punjab important khalifas of the saint reproduce in their manners, dress and minute customs the image of Zindapir, along with the ethics and aesthetics of the cult he founded. In their own places they are addressed, much as Zindapir himself is, as *pir sahib*. Such mimesis, I want to suggest, creates a sense of unity across distance: the same sounds and images, the same ambience, are experienced by the traveller wherever he goes in the cult region. Along with this extraordinary mimetic resemblance, however, each khalifa also fosters his own distinctiveness, his own special way of being a Sufi.

In other ways, too, Trimmingham's account accords with regional cult theory. He makes the point that *ta'ifas* 'undergo cycles of expansion, stagnation, decay, and even death' (1971, p. 179), but that since there are 'thousands of them, new ones [are] continually being formed' (ibid., p. 172).

Ideologically, Sufi saints are conceived of in South Asia as tamers of the wilderness for human cultivation. The question of the relation with the natural environment is thus a key trope in Sufi orders, which exists elsewhere as well. Historically, Sufis appear to have been instrumental in uniting groups across tribal or caste divisions. Ansari (1992) has shown that saints contributed to the reorganisation of canal-based agriculture in Sindh towards the end of the nineteenth century, while in Bengal, they were at the vanguard of new rice cultivation (Eaton 1993).

Inclusivity is a key feature of South Asian Sufi cults. There are cases, as Mark Gaborieau documents, in which saints become patron saints of a particular occupational group (1983: 302-303), but these are relatively rare. Against that exclusivity, Saiyed echoes other scholars when he contends that it is through Sufi shrines that 'the subcontinent saw the best part of Hindu-Muslim integration,' and that it was 'the personal and spiritual influence of various saints that... allowed for the peaceful coexistence of the two communities for several centuries on the Indian subcontinent (Saiyed 1989: 242).

The catchment areas -- the sacred dominions -- of Sufi regional cults are importantly marked by their *instability* and by the fluctuating range of devotees drawn to them. Elizabeth Mann reports on a minor shrine which emerged in Aligarh in the 1940s and, over a short period, challenged and greatly exceeded in popularity the shrine of Shah Jamal, a long established Chishti saint. The Sufi saint and world renouncer who revitalised the minor shrine lived, she argues, 'within living memory, [and] stories of miraculous events are fresh in the minds of devotees who witnessed them at first hand' (Mann 1989: 163). Since his death in the 1960s, intensive building activities have greatly expanded the shrine.

Quite distinct from the fluctuating fortunes of medium-level shrines of this type are the universally venerated great shrines of the subcontinent such as those of Mu'inuddin Chishti of Ajmer or Data Ganj Baksh of Lahore. These are visited by millions. Until quite recently I had assumed that such ancient shrines were not comparable to Zindapir's regional cult, in the sense that they did not have a regional cult structure -- that is, they did not have specific groups of devotees who arrive in organised groups for the *'urs* at these centres. My recent visit to Paris in April 2009, and the work

on Sehwan Sharif by Michel Boivin and his colleagues at the EHESS, and by Juergen Wasim Frembgen, a scholar of Pakistan based in Munich, indicate that I was wrong. Groups, known as *sangats*, travel in *qafilas* to Sehwan Sharif shrine annually for the ritual festival. Indeed, many of these groups seem to be newly formed, as the shrine has gained popularity. In other words, Sehwan Sharif, seen as a regional cult, has expanded in the late twentieth century. So too, the shrine of Pak Pattan, another ancient shrine, to be studied by a doctoral student at the EHESS also has groups of devotees, known as *jama'ats*, which visit it annually.² This indicates that Zindapir's cult was not unusual and that regional cult organisation, consisting of a cult centre and branches affiliated to it, continues - sometimes for hundreds of years, with its composition fluctuating. At the other extreme are shrines of minor pirs with restricted local village followings, some of whom may even be nameless, as Lukas Werth has shown (Werth 1998).

The *bonds of spirit between disciples* of a single Sufi saint often consolidate and mediate biradari, affinal, lineal or village ties; but they may also form the basis for new friendships forged away from home, in the absence of family or neighbourhood during labour migration, and they may introduce parochial villagers to the glories of shrines located well beyond their district and even province. In such cases, being a disciple comes to acquire many new and complex meanings. This is true for the devotees of the living saint I studied, Zindapir, and his regional cult. To explain the cult's vast catchment area, we need to look to its genesis in relations between soldiers, labour migrants and city dwellers living away from their village homes, and their continued ties to their rural communities. It is thus the intersection between labour migration and village or urban roots which explains the spatial patterning of the Shaikh's sacred dominion and the reach of his cult.

Zindapir was during his lifetime, above all, an army saint. His career started as a tailor-contractor in the army where his early circle of companions was forged. Sufi Sahib, who created his own regional cult centred in Birmingham was one of these companions. Rab Nawaz, one of his trusted khalifas, told me that until white hairs appeared in the Shaikh's beard, he and all the khulafa, the deputies or messengers, wore khaki. It was only when his beard turned white that they began to wear white gowns. Even after becoming a practising faqir, Zindapir spent time in Abbotabad not far from the army base where he had worked, and he continued to recruit army followers to be his disciples. Ghamkol Sharif, the lodge he founded when he left Abbotabad, is located only a few miles from Kohat, a large British garrison town or cantonment which was taken over by the Pakistan army at Independence. The lodge's reputation as a place of local beauty attracts a constant stream of curious visitors. Many of his *murids*, disciples, told me how they first visited the lodge while stationed in Kohat. On seeing the lodge, they were overwhelmed by its gloriousness and the spirituality (*ruhaniyat*) of its Shaikh. Later they became his disciples.

The Redistributive Economy of Sufi Cults

There are several other features of Sufi orders as regional cults which make comparison a fruitful exercise. These relate to the *redistributive economy of central lodges*, their reliance on *voluntary labour*, and the *myths* or miracle stories told about founder shaikhs.

²A study of Nagore Sharif by Saheb (1998) also refers visiting groups as Jama'ats. See

The healing powers of saints are often constructed as their dominant characteristic, a key attribute of their power. Zindapir's cult was no exception. Every day truckloads of supplicants arrive at Ghamkol Sharif, the lodge and now shrine of Zindapir, to see the saint and seek redress and blessing for a wide variety of afflictions. On Fridays, holidays and 'urs festivals the stream turned into a veritable flood as mini-buses ferry supplicants from the neighbouring town, joined by others arriving in private cars, on motorbikes or in government vehicles. Healing is undoubtedly a central activity of Ghamkol Sharif as of most Sufi cult centres. While he was still alive, the saint devoted hours every day, often well into the early hours of the morning, to meeting supplicants, whom he usually took in groups of about ten men or women, supervised by a male or female gatekeeper (*darban*). This tradition has continued after his death, sustained by his descendents who have inherited his mantle.

Zindapir prided himself on never asking anyone their name or demanding payment for his healing. During his life time, no donation boxes were displayed anywhere in the lodge, despite the fact that such boxes are an almost universal feature of saintly shrines elsewhere in South Asia. On the contrary, rather than asking for money, supplicants were expected to eat first from the blessed food of the communal kitchen, the *langar*, as it is known in South Asia, before coming in to see the Shaikh. Nevertheless the quest for healing at Sufi shrines is associated with a cultural imperative to make a gesture of sacrificial giving or offering. There is no need to demand payment; supplicants insist on making their donations to the langar or in the form of *nazrana* (tribute) or *shukrana* (token of thanks) to insure the efficacy of the cure or blessing.

The income from individual supplicants is critical to the *redistributive economy* of a saint's lodge which is ultimately sustained by *individual supplicants' donations*. These enable the saint to display his generosity to his disciples in particular, as well as the multitudes at the 'urs. Much of the income of the place, arising from such individual supplicants' donations, is used to build up the lodge itself and support its vast regional and even transnational organisation. In many respects the lodge is a public space, a place of God owned collectively by all the saint's disciples and open even to strangers who are given a place to sleep and food to eat. While it is true that the Shaikh's family derive material benefits from the lodge's income in the form of expensive consumer goods and superior education, most of the income from supplicants' petty donations is channelled back into the lodge itself, expanding the accommodation and facilities for pilgrims, decorating the mosque, sustaining the daily langar and supporting the large retinue of retainers that the saint's family has gathered over time, many of them because they were homeless or destitute. The Shaikh is generous with needy disciples and supports his deputies, his *khalifas*, in their attempts to *build up the branches* of the cult. He not only gives all disciples embroidered caps and shawls as tokens of his special connection, but he donates money for their daughters' dowries, or in cases of dire need. And, as mentioned above, Sufi lodges are built with a large input of voluntary labour. In Zindapir's cult, this usually took place in the weeks preceding the annual 'urs, with volunteers arriving to do the work of God, *khidmat*.

There is thus a symbiotic relationship between money raised through the individual traffic of supplicants coming to the lodge and the ability of a saint to build up his regional (or transnational and global) cult organisation. One cannot exist without the

other. Thus Richard Werbner argues in relation to the organisation of the Mwali High God regional cult in South Central Africa that,

[t]he individual supplicants' traffic, so crucial for a priest's accumulation of great wealth, is not and cannot be divorced from the congregational traffic: one sustains the other. A priest must manage both together, or risk a decline in both. This is so, in part, because the priest gets funds from the supplicants' traffic which he can use, as he sees fit, to subsidise transactions with messengers and their congregations. ...[Moreover] This traffic comes from well beyond a priest's current region, and brings to it some of its future staff. Thus members of wards about to form a congregation or would-be-messengers may first come to an oracle as individual pilgrims... (R. Werbner 1977: 202)

As in the Mwali cult, the individual supplicant traffic is a source of *recruitment* into Zindapir's Sufi cult. Many disciples and khalifas first came to visit the pir in order to seek cures for their afflictions or blessings for new ventures.

Beyond the miraculous curing powers of the saint, it is important to recognise the healing qualities of the lodge itself for supplicants. The presence of the saint has transformed the site of the lodge into a sacred landscape, a haven of *sukun*, peace and security, in an otherwise cruel and greedy world. The Shaikh and the lodge bring to supplicants *aram*, healing, through rest, ease, relief, quiet, comfort. Many such Sufi lodges and saints are also sanctuaries, while saints often act or have acted historically as a mediators between warring tribes (see Evans Pritchard 1949, for example).

Sufi Myths in Comparative Perspective

Seen comparatively, we need to disclose what endows some men with extraordinary charismatic authority and hence the power to found new Sufi regional cults and expand their organisational ambit. To comprehend how the charisma of a living saint is constructed during his life time and underpins his authority requires a comparative analysis of the poetics of travelling theories; that is, the way that such myths tell, simultaneously, both a local and a global tale about Sufi mystical power everywhere, and the settlement of Sufis in virgin, barren or idolatrous lands, such as the lodge valley in Pakistan or industrial towns in Britain. Each Sufi cult is distinctive and embedded in a local cultural context. But, against a view of the radical plurality of Islam proposed, for example, by Geertz (1968), I propose that Sufism everywhere shares the same deep structural logic of ideas. These shape the ecological and cultural habitat and local habitus wherever Sufi saints settle. Such beliefs persist despite internal inconsistencies and evidence to the contrary, and remain powerfully compelling. I argue elsewhere (Werbner 2008) that legends about powerful Sufis from Indonesia and Morocco - which Geertz argues exemplify the contrastive localism of Islam - contain, in essence, the same fable or plot: (1) initiation through a physical and mental ordeal overcome; (2) the achievement of innate and instantaneous divine knowledge; (3) the triumphant encounter with temporal authority. The same legends can be found in Attar's 'Memorial of Saints' which records the lives of the early saints of Baghdad. What differs are merely the ecological and historical details: a flowing river and exemplary centre in Indonesia, desert sands and a fortress town in Morocco, the Baluch Regiment, an anti-colonial brigand's valley and corrupt politicians in Pakistan. A single paradigmatic common sense upholds this legendary corpus, while its local concrete details – regiments, rivers and desert sands,

embody this common sense and suffuse it with axiomatic authority. But the symbolic structure underlying this common sense is as unitary as it is inexorable.

Figure 1: Sufi Myths in Morocco and Indonesia (after Geertz 1968)

(1) Inner Jihad: Overcoming Inner Desires/Total Submission

Morocco: Saint Washes with Smallpox-Infested Water

Indonesia: Saint Stands in a River for 15 Years

RESULT: DIVINE KNOWLEDGE

(2) Outer Jihad: Overcoming External Evil/Lack of Faith

Morocco: Triumph Over the Evil Sultan

Indonesia: Conversion of the Exemplary Centre

RESULT: SPIRITUAL POWER OVERCOMES TEMPORAL POWER

The underlying logic of the fables constituting this religious imagination is the same logic, whether in Morocco, Iraq, Pakistan or Indonesia. It is based on a single and constant set of equations, starting from the ultimate value of self-denial or asceticism:

World renunciation (asceticism) = divine love and intimacy with God = divine 'hidden' knowledge = the ability to transform the world = the hegemony of spiritual authority over temporal power and authority.

Finally, to understand the genesis of regional cults we need to comprehend the way they mediate between a universalistic orientation to a high God and a particularistic orientation to a specific sacred site or holy person. The *tension between particularism and universalism* is the generative principle underlying the formation and expansion of such cults. And it is the *conjunction* between these apparently opposed modern and traditional religious orientations that enables the inclusive toleration evident at Sufi shrines.

In his book, *Muslim Society*, Ernest Gellner famously cites the philosopher David Hume's theory of oscillation between religious pluralism and monism. Human beings, Hume suggested, tend to elevate their deities

To the utmost bounds of perfection, [until they] at last beget the attributes of unity and infinity, simplicity and spirituality. Such refined ideas, being somewhat disproportioned to vulgar comprehension, remain not long in their original purity; but require to be supported by the notion of inferior mediators or subordinate agents, which interpose between mankind and their supreme diety. [But these mediators in turn] at last destroy themselves,'

so that, as Gellner sums it up, the pendulum is bound to swing once again from the particularist towards the universalist abstract pole (1980: 10). In regional cults it is, however, as I have suggested here, the *conjunction* rather than the oscillation between particularism and universalism which holds the key to understanding Sufi shrines. It is the simultaneous conception of a universal God for whom all men and women are equal along with the particularist conception of the saint as a unique and extraordinary individual, seen in terms of the place he has created, his person and his history - that generates the organisational features of Sufi cults. The Sufi saint is the beloved, friend, *wali*, of a distant, universal and hence inclusive God. It is this universalism which draw

followers from a wide range of different ethnic groups, regions and even religions. At the same time in his unique qualities of perfection, virtue and world renunciation, the Sufi saint endows God's abstract universalism with a specific uniqueness which his followers reach out to. They love the saint as they seek a distant and fearful God's grace and blessing through his mediation. The saint's specificity generates a regional cult. The universalism inherent in the idea of an abstract, universal God draws persons beyond the local community and reaches out to people of different classes, genders, ages, languages, and regions everywhere. The sacred centre and sub-centres form a unique cult organisation but the ideas and beliefs that animate them are universalist and shared across many such regional cults. Beyond ideology, to understand how such cults reproduce and perpetuate themselves in time and space as viable organisation we need to understand both the economy and the moral economy of the cult.

Movement, Circuits, Pilgrimage Routes and Sufi Networks in Comparative Perspective

The problem of whether pilgrims achieve 'communitas' at pilgrimage centres (Turner 1974) has dominated debates in the literature on pilgrimage (e.g. Eade and Sallnow 1991). This is not, however, to my mind, the key issue at stake in the comparative study of Sufi cults. The real unstudied question has to do with circuits of pilgrims, and indeed of saints or their emissaries, who in many Sufi cults move around visiting branches and disciples, though Zindapir himself chose never to leave the lodge except to go on Hajj once a year. One gets the impression, however, that in some places, such as Indonesia with its multiple islands, travel circuits of the cult head and messengers may be quite extensive and distant, involving sea or plane journeys.

Remy Delage's research on a Hindu pilgrimage cult in Kerala is also instructive for comparative purposes. The Hindu pilgrims he studied move through a series of named stations, many of them very distant from the cult centre, before arriving there at the end of their journey. They moved as groups, but presumably they could also follow the pilgrimage route as individuals. In Japan, where I am currently on a short visit, there are famous pilgrimage routes. One such route, is 1400 km. long and the pilgrim must visit 88 Buddhist temples on the way. Pilgrims move as individuals, meeting other individuals *en route*, and spend several months on the road if they make the whole journey on foot. There are thus many different forms of pilgrimage.

Thus, pilgrimage or visitation to Zindapir's tomb for the 'urs does not stress the merit acquired by performing pilgrimage on foot, and there are no stations along the way. This may not be the case, however, for all Sufi shrines. From a comparative perspective the routes, circuits and networks which pilgrimage and visitation establish are crucial for an appreciation of the organisational dimensions of Sufi cults as regional cults.

Future Research

On my recent visit to Paris in March 2009 as visiting fellow of the EHESS, Michel Boivin and I discussed the possibility of a larger comparative study of Sufi cults set within the comparative framework I have outlined here. The envisaged research would be a collaborative project between France, Britain and Germany. The current study of Sehwan Sharif by the French team and by Juergen Frembgen, and my own study would

be a starting point. The comparative study would encompass the shrine at Pak Pattan, being studied at the EHESS. These would seem to constitute a promising beginning.

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