

UNIVERSITY OF COPENHAGEN  
FACULTY OF SOCIAL SCIENCES



# EXTREMISTS OF LOVE

*Cosmological Activism among Sufi Muslims  
in Contemporary Lahore, Pakistan*

Ida Sofie Matzen

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PhD Dissertation  
Department of Anthropology,  
University of Copenhagen

August 2016



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**PhD thesis**

Supervisor: Professor Morten Axel Pedersen

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When *ishq* (divine love) makes itself known to someone, *ishq* kills that person.

(Maan Ji, female *faqir* from Pakpattan Sharif)

Once you leave the familiar hometown alleys  
then you'll know what I'm talking about  
Bees fly off the flowers, branches shed the leaves  
Only the flame knows what's it like to burn, the rest  
is empty chatter. Come on, Scholar,  
how can you explain the inexplicable?

(Shah Hussein, translated into the English by Naveed Alam)

Cover page: Veer Sipahi performing poetry at the Mystic Music Sufi Festival, Lahore, 2009.

Photo by Rune Selsing.

Arranged by Marianne Viktor.

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Printed book ISBN 978-87-93476-60-8

E-book ISBN 978-87-93476-61-5

Printed by SL grafik, Frederiksberg C, Denmark ([www.slgrafik.dk](http://www.slgrafik.dk))

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Since this thesis has been underway for a good handful of years, many people have been through its system. Since I first visited Pakistan in 2008, I have been personally and ethnographically engaged in the lives of different Lahori Sufi followers in connection with my MA project, which evolved into this PhD project – and in the meantime I have been blessed with two children. Above all, I wish to extend my gratitude to my friends and Sufi interlocutors from Pakistan. In particular, I wish to thank the wives, children, sisters, brother, parents, and extended family of the brothers Gonga Sain and Mithu Sain, who readily invited me in as part of their family. I give a special and loving thought to my friend Meherin and to the late Sharzia. I also wish to thank M. Sahib – King of Time – and Mama for opening their hearts and home and sharing with me details of Pakistani history, Punjabi humor, Urdu phrases, and the best Pakistani cooking. And to all those who have demonstrated Sufism for me and allowed me to participate in their lives, I express my heartfelt thanks: Veer Sipahi, Ahmad Shah, Asim Marharvi, Usman Raj, Sakhi Shafkat Abbaz, Maan Ji, Baba Yunaz, Baba Ishaq, Baba Billa Sain, Haq Sain, Pir Sahib, Haji Sahib, Sohail Abdullah, Munder Sain and Pathan (also for the most *masti dhamal*), Nighat Chaodhry, Zahir Abbas Dharbari, and many more whom I cannot mention here. Friends from Lahore who need a special mention are Syed Imad-ud-Din Asad, Faseeh Shams, Saeed ur-Rehman, Iram Sana, Wahab Shah, Ashna Khan, Rizwan Dar, Shaggy, Imran Kalash, and Sohail Ashraf. And my gratitude to a dear friend Naveed Alam, whose company and ideas I couldn't have done without. I am further grateful to Naveed for making Shah Hussain's poetry accessible in the most graceful of English (Alam 2016).

Turning to Copenhagen, I owe great thanks to my peers, friends, and colleagues at the Department of Anthropology (some of whom have moved on during the prolonged lapse of my studies). For careful readings of drafts, I specifically wish to thank: Sandra Lori Petersen, Lise Røjskjær Pedersen, Trine Mygind Korsby, Astrid Grue, Astrid Oberborbeck Andersen, Stine Krøijer, Dan V. Hirslund, Tamta Khalvashi, Aja Smith, Adrienne Mannow, Lea Svane, Lotte Buch Segal, Inger Sjørølev, Susanne Bregnbæk, Matthew Carey, and Atreyee Sen. To Line Richter, Marianne Mosebo, and Clara Christensen, thanks for hosting me during the write-up. I have been fortunate to have been invited to participate in seminars held by the Sufism and Transnational Spirituality (SATS) network at Aarhus University, an enriching environment for me within which to understand and discuss Sufism and Islam; I wish to thank in particular Mikkel Rytter, Christian Suhr, and Nils Bubandt for showing an interest in my work. I am also grateful to colleagues at the Centre for Advanced Security Theory (CAST) at the Department of Political Science, Copenhagen, where I have been employed during my PhD. I am thankful for having had

the opportunity to explore the world of Securitization and Security Studies (though I never became a particularly nimble-witted student of IR). Finally, a special acknowledgment to my supervisor and anthropology *pir*, Morten Axel Pedersen, whom I have been fortunate to work with since the inception of this project in 2008 and its – as well as my own – ongoing becoming. I have been immensely inspired by his ways of thinking through anthropology, and his influence throughout the following pages is unmistakable.

Furthermore, I wish to thank Jürgen Wasim Frembgen, University of Munich, and Alix Philippon (IREMAM, Aix-en-Provence), each for their expertise on Sufism in Pakistan and for sharing their ideas with me. I thank Jonas Stampe and Jeppe Pithum, with whom I have shared a perhaps less academic yet quite intense and fun interest in Pakistan, in particular a love for Gongga's *dhol* beats: *joollelal!* A big thank-you goes to my beloved brother Peter Matzen for his support throughout the years, as well as for his visit in Lahore and our exciting trip to the Northern Areas. A thank-you is also owed to Bastian Borup, who came all the way to Lahore as well. My love and gratefulness to dear friends with whom I've discussed and shared issues of spirituality: Gunnar Mühlmann and Anne Sofie Isolde Fischer. Also, I thank my family, in particular my warmhearted mother Anna Helene Matzen, and good friends. For being a super careful and encouraging copyeditor, I thank Emma August Welter, for proofreading the Danish abstract, I thank Malene Mouritzen, and for designing the front cover, I thank Rune Selsing and Marianne Viktor. And, finally, to Rune Selsing, who first introduced me to the world of Lahore and so much more, I am grateful beyond words for your immense patience, relentless support, and loving care. I look forward to hanging out some more with you, darling Ejnar, and darling Iris.

The generous support of the following institutions have made fieldwork in Lahore possible: His Royal Highness Crown Prince Frederik's Grant for Scientific Expeditions, the Asian Dynamics Foundation at the University of Copenhagen, Oticon Fonden, Greve A. Brockenhuus-Schacks Genforeningslegat, Knud Højgaards Fond, Krista og Viggo Petersens Fond, Hotelejer Anders Månsson og hustrus legat, and Augustinus Fonden. All financial support has been greatly appreciated.

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# INTRODUCTION

## PART ONE

### Extremists of love

Lahore, February 2012. The annual death anniversary and spiritual wedding (*urs*) of the sixteenth-century Sufi saint Baba Shah Jamal was underway at his shrine. As I stepped out of the auto-rickshaw, I solemnly promised myself that I'd return home within the hour. Exhausted from the preceding five months of fieldwork, which involved roaming around Sufi shrines at odd hours, I was also five months pregnant. It was close to 9 p.m., and two days later my partner and I would be flying out of Lahore, back to Denmark. But – as had happened before – I would not keep the promise I'd made with myself to go home early.

To enter the shrine area, one had to pass through a metal detector. This had become integral to shrine aesthetics, along with the barbed wire that had come to be draped over every major Sufi site in Lahore since the attacks on shrines in Pakistan began in 2007. Once inside, I met up with my friend and informant Usman, a Qalandar devotee in his mid-thirties who had also occasionally helped me out as an interpreter. As we took a small tour around the shrine, I saw familiar faces: I nodded to a transgendered (*hijra*) redhead, a regular at the shrine, and an ecstatic dancer (*dhamali*) came by to say hello. “Salaam, Ida *baji* [elder sister],” he said with a big grin, even though he was at least ten years older than me. In one corner, a man with long gray dreadlocks and ragged clothes was sitting with a poster the size of a big laptop around his neck; it showed a picture of a crippled man, also with matted hair. I understood that the pictured man was a special *murshid*, a spiritual teacher. Then I recognized a female beggar ascetic (*malangeni*), although I couldn't remember where I knew her from. She granted me permission to sit on the ground next to her, and what I had forgotten, she remembered: apparently we had met at a Sufi festival four years earlier. I didn't understand much of her Punjabi, which she spoke in a hoarse voice, but I felt comfortable in her company. As a *gori* (a white woman), I soon attracted a small crowd, and a boy of perhaps thirteen used the occasion to show off with a special trick: placing a lit cigarette under his left eyelid, he smoked it through his tear duct and exhaled the smoke through his mouth. A troupe of drummers passed by, and upon seeing us sitting with the mendicant ascetics, they decided to perform: the guy with the barrel-shaped *dhol* drum played some simple *dhamal* or “trance” rhythms, and a dwarf dressed entirely in yellow shiny attire, with bells around his ankles,

spun like a spindle; the way he whirled for me – and for a handful of rupees – made me feel awkward. The female *malang* blessed me, and on we moved.

We heard drumming, loud and coming from the courtyard in front of the shrine: Gonga Sain and Mithu Sain had arrived. My partner and I had known the drummers for many years; they'd even been to Denmark to visit us. We squeezed our way through the crowd to sit in relative ease on the ground in front. As always seemed to happen to me upon listening to the mesmerizing drums, I soon felt better: excited yet relaxed, somehow light. It hit me in full force that I'd come to miss all this – but my bliss didn't last long. A youngish, stern-looking policeman wielding a Kalashnikov came and signaled for us to follow him. "Some talking," was all he said in English. I thought about my passport: my visa, had it expired? "Damn," I thought, "how much cash do I have on me?" It turned out that the police officer in charge of the shrine security during the festival had called for my partner and me, as he was merely curious about our errand at the shrine. Sitting on stools, we talked about the topic of my PhD project – Sufi Islam in Pakistan and the imbrications of spirituality and politics – and about the suicide attacks on shrines throughout the country. The high-ranking police officer, slender but well-built and with a fine black moustache, laughed and said in perfect English:

You don't need to worry! We [the police] are here to protect you. And the Sufis protect you! And Sufism is also the name of love. To distribute love! To spread love, the message of love – this is Sufi! This is the anniversary of the saint. And the saint is the representation of our love. And we love all the people, we love all the world. We are not extremists; we are lovers! We are extremists in the sense of love! We are the extremists of love!

A police constable then arrived with two *chadors* – beautifully ornamented blankets – that had just been removed from the grave of Shah Jamal. Devotees had laid the *chadors* on the grave during the *chador*-laying ceremony earlier the same day as a blessing of the deceased saint, as well as a blessing of the devotees themselves. Now I was being offered one of the blessed blankets, its smell of perfume and roses intense. It was an immense blessing to be enfolded in a *chador* from the grave of a saint – especially during the *urs* festival, when the blessing quality was considered especially potent. It was the high-ranking police officer who swathed me: "This is from me," he said. A shrine representative who had also entered the scene didn't quite agree, however. With a resolute nod at the *chador*, he said, "This is from [the saint] Shah Jamal!"

We returned to the courtyard, where the drums were sounding to yet more intensive heights, but this time we were flanked by a small cortège of police constables and the high-ranking police officer. I didn't know which was worse: making my way alone through an all-male crowd at this hour in darkness (one of the regular power cuts was taking place) or in the tutelage of Kalashnikovs. With the latter, at least, no one from the crowd would take a chance and paw me in the

murkiness. But the looks were still curious, if not apprehensive – people were there to listen to the drums, tap into the rapture, and relax, perhaps smoke up, and the police were not necessarily a welcome bunch. At that point, however, I should have known not to take things too seriously. Mithu, one of the drum players, laughed and winked at me while continuing his drumming: after all, it's not bad to befriend the police, as it may well come in handy one day. It was almost 4 a.m.; dawn would soon break to the sound of the morning *azan* (call for prayer), and I was now drunk from tiredness. Time to go home.

\* \* \*

In many ways, this episode, from my final night of fieldwork in Lahore, brings us to the heart of this thesis: namely, the multiple political forms of Sufi Islam in Pakistan. Whereas scholars and locals have often associated Sufism with spiritual and folkloristic – and hence overtly apolitical – performances in and around shrines, this thesis explores how Sufi cosmological concepts and practices also amount to more or less explicit forms of political activities and visions. In this sense, the following is not only a study of how Sufism is interwoven with the formal politics of state, political parties, and official governance. It is also – and primarily – a study of Sufism's inherent political potential, of Sufi politics in their less visible yet notable and multifarious instantiations within, as well as beyond, the Pakistani state.

Besides serving as an entry into Sufi shrine life, my opening vignette reveals aspects of the intricate and at times vexed relations between followers of Sufi saints and the state (illustrated, for instance, by the shrine representative and the policeman, who both wanted to distribute blessings on behalf of the saint Shah Jamal). But this ethnographic episode also suggests that many people consider the power of saints to be immense. As I shall argue over the pages to come, the power of spiritual (*ruhani*) blessings, devotional practices (*bandagi*), and love (*muhabbat*) transcends not only the immediate situation at a given shrine, but also individual devotees, groups of people, nation-states, and indeed politics as usual. After all, as a Sufi intellectual once told me, “Sufism is basically a political movement! Europe has other ways to solve political, economic problems.” In keeping with this claim by my interlocutor, the conventionally segregated domains of the “spiritual,” the “political,” the “social,” and the “economic” are co-contained in Sufi cosmology and practice.

The abstract question of Sufism's multiple political forms is explored through a number of ethnographic cases: practices and concepts of spiritual protection and governance; a portrait of a trickster-like Sufi poet and policeman; an investigation of why devotees submit to spiritual masters; and, finally, a case study of the distribution and sharing of free food (*langar*) at shrines. My central claim is that the different forms Sufism takes revolve around a fundamental cosmological