

**Aleeza Asif**

**SOCL-363**

**231-451576**

**Instructor: Julie Flowerday**

## **SHRINE ETHNOGRAPHY**

Date and Period of Observation: 27<sup>th</sup> May 2023

Name of Shrine: Darbar Baba Nu Lakh Hazari

Location: Shahkot (Nankana Sahib District)

### **I. Introduction**

#### **a. Purpose of visiting the shrine:**

The shrine I chose to visit for this project was “Darbar Baba Nu Lakh Hazari”. This shrine was built in the 12<sup>th</sup> century and is as old as the renowned Data Darbar in Lahore. The purpose of visiting this shrine was not rooted in the requirements of this course but was actually driven more by this desire and personal connection to explore a place that is close to my heart. It was in March of 2023, when I initially began researching shrines in Lahore, curious about whether there were any unknown shrines for at that time Data Darbar in Lahore was the only shrine that came to my mind. I was set on going to Data Darbar initially for this project because it felt like the closest place to my house and due to the current economic crisis in our country it felt like the safest option that no one in my family would object to. It was however, during this time that I

had this urge in me that wanted this project to be more than just a mere academic exercise, I wanted something personal. To find that personal connection I delved into my own “rural background” and shed any sense of shame associated with it. When I delved deeper into my own background I discovered that the place “Shahkot” the birthplace of both me and my father had its own Sufi shrine upon which the city itself was named after. For further context, Shahkot, was a place where I had basically spent a significant part of my childhood before moving to Lahore. Growing up, I had limited knowledge of the place itself and my own paternal side due to various familial complexities, for I was never given the opportunity to delve deeper into it. It was this desire to explore that aspect of my heritage that led me towards this shrine. The project was a unique opportunity for me to finally be given that space to not only explore but also reconnect with my roots. Given the strict nature of my family, it was rare for another chance to present itself, so I recognized the significance of this moment and wanted to seize it.

The project for me personally, was a chance to break free from all limitations perceived and was a golden opportunity to embrace my own heritage with a sense of understanding and pride. The curiosity in me had sparked at that moment and I began my extensive research on the shrine. I started by delving into interviews conducted by renowned journalists who had visited the shrine. It was during this time that I felt an undeniable connection towards the shrine, for it also held significance for my deceased grandfather and relatives who would frequent the shrine every Friday during their lifetime. It became quite apparent to me that the shrine held a special place in their own hearts that they would visit it. As my curiosity grew, I was also hesitant initially, for as a girl living in a society bound by its patriarchal norms it wasn't expected of me to visit such a place. When I shared my excitement on visiting this place with my parents they had expressed

their hesitation and questioned my choice, for they wondered why I wanted to go to an area such as Shahkot in Nankana out of all the shrines in Lahore. But this Sufi shrine for me had this inexplicable pull, as if it was calling out to me, urging me to visit and discover its mysteries.

Furthermore, there was an additional motivation behind this decision to visit the shrine Baba Nu Lakh Hazari, a desire to challenge preconceptions and to create my own experience. I have had my fair share of uncomfortable experiences while visiting rural places, where I felt like an outsider constantly subjected to curious gazes. I wanted my younger sibling to share this journey with me, for the both of us had no memory of visiting a shrine before. This project was an opportunity to not only create a meaningful experience but also to broaden our own understanding of what cultural heritage and spirituality signify. I recall, my little sister harboring this preconceived notion that saints in shrines were akin to monks, waiting for visitors to arrive so they would bestow upon them their blessings. The reality in question was far different for the saint associated with Baba Nu Lakh Hazari had long passed away and the shrine was built to commemorate his existence, as a place of remembrance and reverence.

#### **b. Description**

The Shrine, Baba Nu Lakh Hazari being located in the city of Shahkot, was a drive of approximately 2 hours and 30 minutes from Lahore. It was during this prolonged journey to the shrine that I had experienced combined feelings of both anxiety and hesitancy which made me wonder if the expectations I had set for the shrine were too high or if they were associated more

with my desire to challenge societal norms as a woman. The distance made me question whether my own actual experience at the shrine would align with the immersive feeling I had gotten from the videos and stories I had heard from others. Despite these worries, my determination to go remained unwavering. Upon reaching the vicinity of the shrine, I began noticing that the roads became narrower, leaving limited space for cars to pass through. I also noticed a presence of a mountain parallel to the shrine, this mountain is of significance to the shrine for its top is believed to be the very place where the saint “Murad Ali Shah Bukhari” (also known as Baba Nu Lakh Hazari) stood. The mountain is adorned with marks that are believed to be the footprints left by the saint. The mountain is of significance for it was where the traditional belief associated with him originated. It was at this mountain where he brought together a lion and a goat and fed them water.

This event is of significance to the local community and many visitors of the shrine for it shows the power the saint had to bring two seemingly incompatible, opposites a “lion” and “goat” together in harmony. The mountain includes till this date the lion’s paw and the goat’s hoof marks as a physical reminder of this miracle. The presence of this mountain adjacent to the shrine contributes further to the sanctity of the place for it symbolizes the strong connection between the saint, shrine, and the surrounding landscape.

Before visiting the mountain, I had to visit the shrine first. Upon parking my car, I had to cover myself in a headscarf to show respect. As I made my way through the narrow road leading to the shrine, I saw a market area just outside the shrine which was bustling with vendors selling “Langar ” more commonly known as offerings (which the visitors usually buy before entering the shrine). The marketplace in itself was very vibrant for I didn’t feel like an outsider, for everyone

was too busy to gawk at the passerby. I made my way through this marketplace, still feeling anxious as I reached the entrance of the shrine.

Upon reaching the entrance of the shrine, I was asked to take off my shoes by the people in charge (though they let me keep my socks on). Once I entered the shrine, it felt as if the feeling of anxiousness that had consumed me evaporated for I felt a sense of ease upon stepping at this place. As I took in my surroundings, I observed that it was quite like the interviews and pictures I had seen but it felt more vibrant in person. Before I could proceed with capturing photographs and approaching the caretaker, I needed to take permission from the administrative authority in charge of the shrine.

Towards the left of the entrance the office of the administrative authority was stationed. This office primarily served as the central hub for not only overseeing but also managing the operations and affairs of the shrine. I was ushered inside the office, where I met with the administrator and explained to him the details regarding my project. He was welcoming and intrigued to learn about my desire to learn about this shrine and that I had come from Lahore to learn about it. I did not have the opportunity of asking his name, but this administrator also helped me in finding a caretaker to interview. The shrine had more than one caretaker. The initial caretaker the administrator had ushered me towards was hesitant to give an interview, so I had to search for another one on my own. I had also proceeded to ask this administrator whether I could get permission to visit the grave of the saint, he denied this request as he explained how even the

wives of high government officials were not allowed inside the buried site and even a one-month-old baby girl is not allowed to enter the site as it is deemed inappropriate Islamically. I took my time exploring and photographing any inscription I came across in the shrine. The shrine was adorned with a diverse array of symbols, each holding its own significant meaning. Among these symbols were the two trees, located parallel to the other (details in the transcription section). The trees were not merely present as decorative elements for they themselves held both cultural and historical significance. The shrine itself was a magnificent structure adorned with intricate designs and vibrant colors. I noticed that the shrine was quite spacious, unlike most shrines there wasn't strict segregation in this shrine. Although the shrine did have a designated area for women to sit, I still had the opportunity to freely explore. However, to observe the grave of the saint I had to peer through a window covered with steel rods at the rear of the shrine. As I observed the grave through the small window I noticed that it included a lot of ornate decorations and a chandelier which seemed to indicate that this was the final resting place of the saint. The window through which I was able to peer through, had bangles and threads tied to it. These were offerings made as "mannat" which is a form of wish, that expresses the desire for fulfillment and a vow made to the saint after the wish has been granted.

I also observed that the visitors of the shrine, especially the women, were engrossed in reading the Quran and seeking blessings from the saint. The men inside the burial site were engaged in the same practice. I talked to some of these visitors and learned that the saint is referred to as "Baba Nu Lakh" because he is known to have recited the Quran 900,000 times. Since the caretaker I first approached had expressed hesitancy and discomfort in answering questions and being filmed I had to explore other options. So, I approached the staff present at the shrine and

sought their assistance in finding another caretaker who was willing to be interviewed. The staff directed me towards a man sitting in a corner of the shrine, on the steps. I approached him and explained my purpose for the interview and asked him if he would be comfortable with me filming and conducting an interview about the shrine. To my relief, he seemed amused and did not object (The details of this exchange are included in the transcription and methodology section of this paper). After taking pictures and conducting my interview I was asked by the caretaker to film the qawwali that was taking place in the shrine to answer the interview question (excerpt has been included in the transcription). Apart from this the caretaker told me to visit the mountain site before I leave the shrine for it will contribute more to my understanding of the shrine. After leaving the shrine I visited the mountain site, (the significance of this place has been mentioned earlier). Visitors of this site were asked to remove their shoes, as a sign of respect. Upon reaching the top of this mountain I observed the hoof marks and the footprints of the saint on the stone slab. I also observed a sacred tree in this area which had threads and bangles tied to it like it was in the shrine. There was also the presence of diyas (oil lamps) in this area similar to the shrine which were a symbol of purity, devotion, and reverence. As a sign of respect, I made a prayer at this place and offered a donation before concluding my journey.

### **c. Methodology:**

Since the caretaker, I initially wanted to interview, had expressed his hesitancy and discomfort. I had to seek the assistance of the staff at the shrine. They had directed me towards a man sitting in a corner of the shrine, on the steps. I approached him and explained the purpose of my visit and

gave him details regarding the project and interview question. I made sure to ask him if he would be comfortable with me filming him while I conducted the interview or if he would prefer me to record it in audio. To my relief, he did not object to being filmed and interviewed and seemed quite at ease with my questions. I then proceeded to ask his name first before conducting the interview. He told me his name was Jahangir and that he was currently 28 years old and had been working as a caretaker in the shrine for the past 8 years. It was evident from this exchange that he possessed deep knowledge of the shrine and its practices. I had prepared other interview questions pertaining to the shrine to broaden my understanding. I handed Jahangir (caretaker) the mic before I began recording so that the audio was clear in the video. I asked him to remain comfortable and provide me with any information he deemed valid in the interview. During the interview, I made this one observation regarding him which was that he displayed confidence in his demeanor and spoke fluently and did not stumble or hesitate at all. Interestingly, he shared additional insights with me off camera by explaining to me how the shrine was welcoming to any visitor regardless of their religion and that there was no sectarianism in this shrine for everyone that enters this place is united and one in the eyes of the saint.

## II. Account of Scripts

- a. as few /as many as there are examples of script. (Posters, framed inscriptions, incised inscriptions; other symbols that appear to have special values) This can be represented as a table.

| Inscription number | Location | Language | Verse, Pir's saying, etc. |
|--------------------|----------|----------|---------------------------|
|                    |          |          |                           |



|   |   |                   |   |
|---|---|-------------------|---|
| 1 | Entrance                                      | Urdu &<br>Punjabi | سید حضرت مراد علی شاہ المعروف شاہ بادشاہ<br>نولکھ ہزاروی  |
| 2 | Inside the<br>Shrine<br>(towards<br>the left) | Urdu              | زائرین سے التماس ہے کہ خیر چاول<br>لنگر خانہ میں تقسیم کریں۔<br><br>حاضر داربار شریف میں سگریٹ، پان،<br>نسوار اور نشہ آور اشیاء استعمال نہ<br>کریں۔<br><br>لنگر تقسیم کرتے وقت جیب تراشوں سے ہوشیار<br>رہیں۔ حاضر داربار شریف میں فضول پھرنا منع<br>ہے۔ بہ حکم چوکی اندراج۔ |
| 3 | Outside<br>the<br>entrance to<br>the grave    | Arabic            | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● لَا إِلَهَ إِلَّا اللَّهُ مُحَمَّدٌ رَسُولُ اللَّهِ</li> <li>● یا حسن یا حسین</li> <li>● یا علی</li> <li>● یا فاطمة</li> </ul>   |

|   |   |        |             |
|---|---|--------|-------------|
| 4 | Outside<br>view of<br>grave<br>(from the<br>women's<br>section) | Arabic | ما شاء الله |
|---|---|--------|-------------|

|   |   |                  |  |
|---|---|------------------|--|
| 5 | Stone slab<br>outside the<br>graves<br>entrance | Arabic &<br>Urdu | بِسْمِ اللّٰهِ الرَّحْمٰنِ الرَّحِیْمِ<br>حضرت شاہ مراد المعروف سید ابو الخیر نولکھ<br>ہزاری رضی اللہ عنہ) شاہکوٹ کا سالانہ عرس<br>مبارک ہر سال 23-24-25 مارچ کو منعقد ہوتا<br>ہے۔ اور ہر ماہ کی پہلی جمعرات کو نوہندی |
|---|---|------------------|--|

### b. Translation

1. This is the Darbar of Syed Hazrat Murad Ali Shah, also notably known as the Shah Badshah Nu-Lakh Hazarwi (Nine Hundred Thousand).
2. Visitors of the shrine are requested to distribute the food (kheer/chawal) in the Langar Khana (the specified food distribution area). It is prohibited to use cigarettes, betel leaf, snuff, and any other form of intoxicating substances inside the shrine of the Huzoor Badshah (the saint). Visitors are expected to be cautious while distributing Langar (food) and to keep an eye on your pockets for Pickpockets. Wandering aimlessly inside the shrine of Huzoor Badshah is

strictly prohibited. By the order of the Choki Indaraj (Administration of the Shrine).

3. I) There is no god but Allah, Muhammad is the Messenger of Allah.  
 II) O Hassan, O Hussain ( These are names referring to Imam Hassan and Imam Hussain, the grandsons of Prophet Muhammad) Hassan is known to mean “the good one” whereas Hussain derived from the Arabic word "hasuna," means "to be handsome."  
 III) O Ali! (A notable imam and son-in law of the Prophet (PBUH)) it means “the exalted one”  
 IV) O Fatima! (The name of the daughter of the Prophet (PBUH)) it means “the one who abstains"
4. Praise be to Allah
5. In the name of Allah, the Most Gracious, the Most Merciful. Here lies Hazrat Shah Murad, also known as Syed Abu al-Khair No Lakh Hazari (may Allah be pleased with him), His Urs is celebrated annually in Shahkot. The blessed event takes place on the 23rd, 24th, and 25th of March every year. Additionally, a gathering is held in this place on the first Thursday of each month.

### III. Transcription from Interview

[00:00:00] [Audio fades in; coughing is heard]

[00:00:14] Jahangir (Caretaker): [clears throat] Yes, so [clears throat] uh [gently touches his beard, scratching it] [looks directly at the camera] [starts speaking] In the name of Allah, the Most Gracious, the Most Merciful [pause] you see we are the mujawir [caretakers] of this shrine [clears throat] of the saint whose real name [clears throat] is Syed Murad Ali Shah [extends hand, gesturing towards the shrine] The saint who has been given the honorary name of Syed Abu al-Khair No Lakh Hazari.

[00:00:35] Jahangir (Caretaker): [unclear] [clears throat] You [saint] are the son of Imam Ali Naqvi Badshah [ruler]. Who [clears throat] came from Madina Shareef [clears throat] [pauses] and when you [saint] stayed in Oudh, your spiritual guide was present alongside you. [pauses to recall] From there, you [saint] received command from your guide to visit the area called Teerat Ghar.[Gestures towards the shrine] You see the name of this region was Teerat Ghar during the time of the saint.

[00:01:15] Jahangir (Caretaker): After naming this area Teerat Ghar [pauses to look around] The sarkar [saint] commanded to change the name of this place [Gestures with his hands] He then

named this place Sandal Bar. [pauses] [Gestures with his hands] then everyone began calling this place Sandal Bar. [Pauses] [smiles] You see then he commanded again to change the name of this place [Motions with his hands] this place was then called Shahkot. [Gestures towards the Shrine] The greatest personality in Shahkot is Syed Data Abu Al Khair Nu Lakh Hazari [Saint] [Pauses] [Looks directly into the camera] we are the caretakers and custodians of the shrine who [pauses] [points hand towards me] warmly welcome visitors like yourself to the shrine and we [pauses] strive to serve them with utmost dedication. [Stops speaking, looks at the interviewer]

[00:01:18] Aleeza Asif (Interviewer): [pauses] [reminds him of the question] what is the nature of the kalam used here in the shrine?

[00:01:20] Jahangir (Caretaker): [pauses, leans forward, trying to comprehend] The Kalam used here is Sufiyana in nature

[00:01:22] Aleeza Asif (Interviewer): [interrupts] Could you please elaborate a bit more on this?

[00:01:30] Jahangir (Caretaker): [pauses and nods] The kalam is Sufiyana in the sense that [pauses] it holds a special status and in accordance with that status [clears throat] a qawwali is performed here and qaseeda [poetry] is recited here.

[00:01:33] Aleeza Asif (Interviewer): [pauses] Can you tell me a bit about the qawwali, for those that don't know about it?

[00:01:39] Jahangir (Caretaker): [pauses and gestures towards the qawwal] You can learn about the qawwali best by hearing it from the qawwals.

[00:01:42] Aleeza Asif (Interviewer): [nods understandingly] Can you tell me anything else about the Darbar [shrine]?

[00:02:09] Jahangir (Caretaker): [pauses to recall] I have told you most of the details regarding the Darbar [faint noise of Qawwali in the background][pauses] What I can tell you about is [pauses] the greatest miracle of the saint are these two trees [gestures towards the tree]. These are called Bair [a type of tree] one is located in the front of the first gate and the other is towards the second gate. [Pauses to recall] The miracle of these trees is that if a leaf from the Saint's tree falls on a woman's lap while she sits underneath it, that woman [pauses] is blessed with a daughter from the Saint. [Pauses to smile] And if the fruit of this tree falls on a woman's lap she is blessed with a son.

[00:02:26] Jahangir (Caretaker): [Continues Talking] And if you go outside [gestures to the exit] you will go up the hill, [pauses] the place where the saint gathered a lion, a goat, and the offspring's of the goat [pauses] and made them drink water from a cup made of stone. [Clears throat] It is said that the water in this cup came by the will of nature, and the lion and the goat were made to drink from it by the saint.

[00:02:30] Aleeza Asif (Interviewer): I also saw diye [Oil Lamps] in the Darbar

[00:02:59] Jahangir (Caretaker): [Interrupts] Yes those diye [oil lamps] [Pauses] they have been lit here in this place since the very beginning. [gestures towards the visitors of the Shrine] It is used by these visitors to make their wishes and fulfill their vows accordingly. [Pauses] If some visitor wishes to light a lamp in the presence of the saint [Pauses before resuming] or if someone wants to offer a chadar [sheet] or [pauses] bring flowers and distribute sweet offerings in the shrine .[Pauses to adjust the mic] then it is dependent solely on the wishes and beliefs of these visitors.[Pauses to look at the interviewer for further questions] [Clears throat] In the name of Allah, Shukriya [thankyou] [End of conversation].

**Additional Transcription (Excerpt from the Qawwali I filmed):**

[00:00:15] Qawwal: [Pauses as his eyes wander off to a distance] Nu Lakh Hazari is my spiritual guide [pauses] [adjusts instrument] Here, in this place lies a relationship between the spiritual guide and the disciple. [Starts humming slowly] The visitor who comes here [smiles while looking at me] with a question, fulfills their desires. [Pause] Between Shahkot, my master's banner is raised [Pause] Whatever God has bestowed upon me has been through your good graces [referring to the saint] [continues].

**IV. Summary and Conclusion**

After visiting the shrine, I reflected back on the initial hesitation I had felt and the questions that I contemplated over (such as if I would be treated as an outsider? Or would I be received well and if this experience would defy my expectations). On the contrary, it was an enlightening experience for I did not feel displaced in this city, and I was received well by the local community and this experience itself was truly as unique as I had envisioned it to be. This experience for me highlighted the importance of challenging societal expectations and norms and allowed me to go beyond my own comfort zone to explore an unfamiliar environment. I was able to not only break down barriers but was able to gain insights and bring forth a fresh perspective on experiencing a shrine as a woman. I learned during the visit to Baba Nu Lakh Hazari that such cultural and religious spaces carry their own sets of traditions and beliefs. The shrine itself stood as a physical reminder of the interconnected nature of heritage, spirituality, and the community. I discovered that although certain patriarchal norms existed in the shrine, there was this underlying inclusiveness within it. I also learned that by embracing my curiosity and breaking free from societal limitations had contributed greatly to my personal growth. For I was able to open myself up to newer connections and perspectives. It became evident to me from this visit why my deceased grandfather and relatives frequented this shrine, for I was able to forge this connection with the past and explore my own heritage. This experience also taught me the significance of determination and perseverance. Apart from this I learned the importance both empathy and respect hold when approaching such unfamiliar religious spaces. For it was through this sense of empathy that I remained receptive and open-minded to the stories and perspectives of the locals at the shrine and was able to gain a deeper understanding of the experiences of the devotees and its traditions.





## V. Photography

- a. Six or more photos of layout: entrance, grounds, practitioners, activities, tomb of saint (make sure you have permission to take photos)









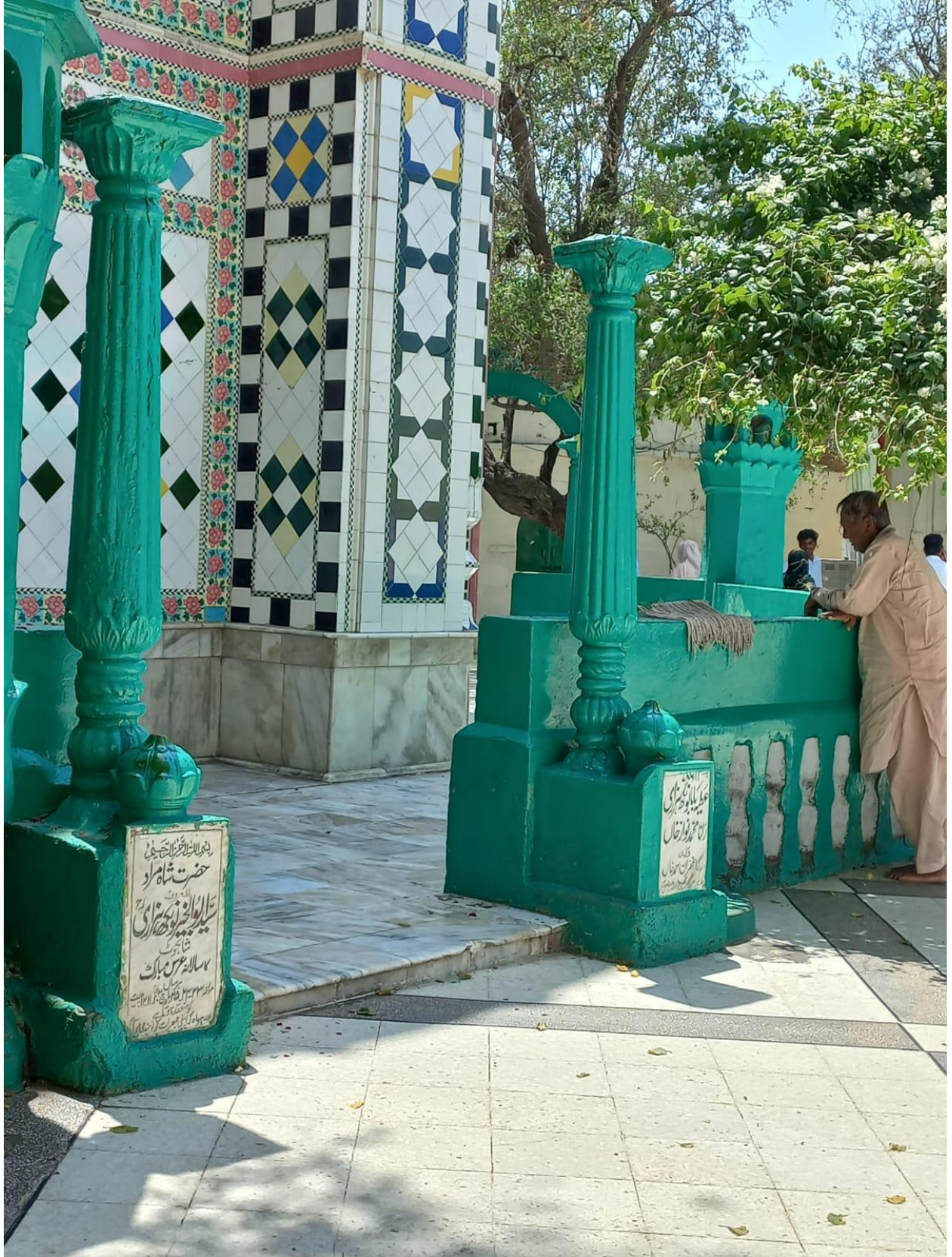


























b. Photograph every sacred writing/ symbol/ object that you see/ recognize at the shrine









