

Muhammad Umar Zafar

231466320

Submitted to: Dr. Julie Flowerday

FIELD PROCEDURE: PHOTO-ETHNOGRAPHY OF A SHRINE

Introduction

There is a shrine in the small town of Sharaqpur Sharif, 50 kilometers away from Lahore. The name of the shrine is “Hazrat Mian Sher Muhammad Sahab Rehmautllah Aleah”. It is situated at the border of the town. The shrine itself is in the middle of the graveyard. The shrine primarily was the reason the graveyard came into being.



The red line in the lower left corner represents the boundary of the town.

For this experience, I had to choose a shrine and initially, I was thinking of *Data Sahab*, but I knew how hard it was to get access to the caretaker let alone ask him for his time for the interview. The next option I had in mind was the Mian Sahab Shrine. I was born in the town of Sharaqpur Sharif where this shrine is located. I spent 7 years of my early life there. I do not have many memories of my life in Sharaqpur but the ones I have are closely associated with this shrine. I used to go there almost every week with my father, uncle, and cousins. However, this is not the sole reason. I feel more connected to that place than I feel anywhere in the world. At 7 years old when I was dancing in the exuberant life of my adolescence, life took a rather eye-opening turn. I have spent the better half of my life hiding this fact from my social groups but with time I learned to communicate and started sharing my experience.

My father was murdered by his brother, and he was buried in the graveyard right next to the shrine. Although, I left my hometown out of the fear of life and moved to Lahore in pursuit of a safe and secure life. That graveyard became a sanctuary for so many of my family members who were very close to me, hence, it feels like home whenever I visit it. This shrine holds another irony in it. The murdered and the murderer are buried right next to each other. The choice for me was obvious. However, the trip to the shrine was academically challenging. It was difficult for me to view the shrine as a visitor or as an observer who is visiting it for the first time. Shrines, saints, and Sufis were an integral part of my years of development. The books I read over the years, the stories I heard from my elders, and frequent visits to different shrines across Punjab made me a part of this culture. It was hard as by now I have become a part of this, connected through the plethora of emotions. Every scripture, every inscription, and each saying is nostalgic or a commemoration rather than a novel experience. Every visit seems like a family reunion. I was concerned about the way I was going to conduct this but as this project

encourages us to reflect on the experience, I tried to channel my emotions into something that could give a unique approach.

Mian Sahab passed away on the 20th of August 1928. He led a simple life and helped anyone who came to his door. Mian Sahab is from the lineage of the *Naqshbandi* series of Saints. Naqshbandi is a series of Sufis who practice the Kalam of Allah so rigorously that each heartbeat starts to sound like someone saying, “*Allah ho*” (God is the truth). His caste was Arain and did farming for a living. Mian Sher Muhammad Sahab is known by different names today, most famously, Mian Sahab and Sher Rabbani (Lion of God). As far as I can remember, the shrine is always hosting devotees, even in the scorching sun of May and June, there are at least 5-10 people sitting in the inner hall reciting Quran and praying for Mian Sahab. Some people sleep there for as long as they want and no one disturbs them, instead, everyone keeps praying silently so no one else gets disturbed or overwhelmed.

Mian Sahab passed away on the 20th of August 1928 which is the 3rd Rabbi-ul-Awwal according to Islamic Calendar. On the 3rd of Rabbi-ul-Awwal, a yearly *Urs* (a gathering of thousands of devotees at the shrine) takes place that lasts for three days, in those three days the shrine hosts the largest gathering of people in a year.

This time when I visited the shrine, the sun was scorching. Like always, I first went to the grave of my father, prayed for him, and then continued with the project. As it was midday, there were not as many people as in the evening. I went to the shrine, prayed there for some time, and then went to the room of the caretaker. The Caretaker was a different person this time, the last one who knew me and my family, was not there anymore. I had a man bun and a mustache. People there stared at me as if I was a foreigner. When I knocked on the door of the caretaker, one of the two men in the room invited me in with a hand gesture. They were making tea and

offered me some, again by a hand gesture. I replied in Punjabi “No, thank you so much”. Both looked at me surprised yet relaxed, they did not expect me to be local and fluent in Punjabi. I had to tell them that this town is my homeland. They were slightly embarrassed and apologized for taking me as a foreigner. As I am used to this happening at historical and cultural sites, I tried to make them feel comfortable, certainly not regretful, and the best way to do this was by communicating with them in Punjabi for a while before I officially started my interview.

As I mentioned, there were two men in the room, I will name them Akbar and Asghar. Asghar was a junior and a student of Akbar. Akbar was the elder and Asghar was a young man. Both were wearing *Shalwar Kamees* and had prayer caps on their heads. It was Asghar who offered me tea when I entered the room. He was sitting on the floor whereas Akbar was sitting on a chair. After the introductory chat when everyone was feeling safe and comfortable with each other, I asked for permission to start and record the conversation. During the interview, Asghar stayed silent, and all the responses were given by Akbar.

Interview

I asked him “What Kalam is recited in this Shrine.”

He replied “Mian Sahab does not have a designated Kalam. His preaching revolved around the recitation of *Kalma Shareef* and *Darood Shareef*, remembering Allah, and saying 5 times prayers. Other than that, he has no Kalam.”

He continued “Sarkar gave no *taweez* (amulet) nor did he do any *dam*. The only thing is that he made the well with his own hands and the water from that well has healing powers in it. Other than that, *Sakrar* is associated with a lot (emphasis on the word a lot) of miracles. One of those miraculous stories is that Sarkar and Data Sahab used to meet at river Ravi (Indus), this is the

Great Hazrat Mian Sher Muhammad Sahab for you. Other than that, there is no music here, there is no unIslamic activity here, just recitation of *Kalma Shareef* and *Darood Shareef*".

I reciprocated "*Baeshak* (no doubt)"

After a pause, he said, "It has not been 100 years yet, it has not been 100 years since Sarkar left this world".

I nodded in affirmation. I wanted to know what miracles he was referring to. He would go silent after giving me a precise response and I had to give a prompt, I asked "Miracles"?

He continued "Oh I say, there are a lot of miracles he has done. Outside of the shrine, there is a book stall (he raised his hand while keeping his head down and pointed to the outer gate of the shrine where they have a book stall which contains the stories of the Saint) where they sell a book that has the miracles of Sarkar written in it. He continued "He did and told what Allah and the prophet of Allah have advised, other than that he said nothing. Tens of thousands of people come here, and everyone recites *Kalma Shareef* and *Darood Shareef*. There is no *dhool* (drumming) here, no obscenity. You must be *ba wudu* (clean and pure) here".

I nodded and stayed silent. After a few seconds, he continued.

"The most famous story associated here is the first trip of Allamah Muhammad Iqbal. He came to see Sarkar. Both of them were saints so both knew about each other. Iqbal Sahab did not have a beard. Sarkar had established a rule that no man without a beard was allowed to see him. So, when Iqbal Sahab came to see him, he was not allowed to see him and was asked to go back. It is said that when the caretakers of the time told him the reason behind not letting him meet Sarkar, he smiled and left. When one of the devotees went in and told Sarkar that Iqbal came to see him,

but we sent him back because of the beard, he immediately asked the devotee to bring him back. The devotee was surprised and said, “But Sarkar, he doesn’t have a beard”. Sarkar replied, “his beard is in the stomach. Then people ran to bring Iqbal Sahab back”.

I asked, “What type of people come here?”

He responded “Most of the people who come here are the devotees of Mian Sahab. Moreover, people from Khyber to Karachi, in fact from abroad come here to pay their respects. Sarkar has a reputation, the shrine. For example, he has a lot of devotees”.

Analysis

Theo-linguistic Approach

I will be taking a rather theological approach to this photo-ethnography project, as I feel that with a good theological understanding my visit and concerns will seem more coherent. I was initially skeptical about the question which we had to ask the caretaker of the shrine. However, I still wanted to see how it goes and how this question will be welcomed by the caretaker of this shrine and the shrine my fellow students chose to go to as well.

The problem with the question in the first draft of the assignment was that it associated one kalam with one personality. Whereas, to my limited knowledge, the kalam recited in any shrine is associated with God in one way or another. When we pose a kalam to a human, it touches the boundaries of what Islam calls *shirk*, which means associating a human with God or thinking of a human as a God. Another important aspect of the shrine culture is *Tawassul*, meaning ‘by means of’. For example, if a devotee of Data Sahab says “*Data Sahab k tawassul sy Allah ny mujhy bete sy nawaza hai*” (By means of Data Sahab, God bestowed me with a son).

The problem with this statement is that some sects of Islam believe in *tawassul*, and others are strictly against it. The opposition, *Ahl-e-Hadith* and *Wahabi* school takes a Lutheran stance and argues that there is no point in having a mediator between humans and God when one can directly pray to God and get what they desire. They outright reject the whole idea of Shrines and the culture around them. They believe that God is theirs as much as He is to anyone else, whether it is some saint or Sufi. If I use a physical analogy to describe this belief, it will state that God is equidistant to everyone. Prophets are an exception to this notion.

On the other side of the spectrum is the sect called *Ahl-e-Sunnah*. This sect of Islam believes in the Shrine culture and in the idea of *tawassul*. Further, there is another schism that comes in the school of Sufism. As mentioned in the introduction section, Mian Sahab was from the Naqshbandiya series of Sufis. The other types of series are Qadri, Rizvi, and Chishti. Although all these Sufi groups have the same destination, the journey each opts for is a bit different from the rest. Naqshbandi Sufis avoid musical kalam and focus more on rhythmic kalam. They gather and start to recite "Allah ho " in synchronization with a slight movement of the head, this act is called *dhikr*. Contrary to that, the Qadri, Rizvi, and Chishti groups have musical touches in their gatherings. They hold *dhamal* and *qawali* every year and every Thursday respectively.

This was the reason that when I asked the caretaker about the kalam recited in this shrine, he abruptly replied negating my question by saying that the only kalam recited in this shrine is of Allah. Despite having some ideas about this issue with the question, I did not share my doubts with any of my classmates. I could have been wrong and if not, my assumption would have gotten peer-reviewed, it was a win-win. Interestingly, about half of my classmates encountered a similar response. One of them had a rather intriguing encounter with the caretaker. He got in

touch with me sharing his experience. He told me and I narrate, “When I asked the caretaker what kalam is recited in this Shrine? He started staring at me”. I asked him “What did you say then?” He replied, “I started staring back at him”. Satire aside, I think this is what I was mentioning earlier. The question was so abstract and misleading that it made it somewhat dangerous to ask this question. There are layers to interpret each text and in the case of this question, it was a layer on top of a layer. We were given the question in the English language, and we had to translate it into Urdu. Having command over both languages and knowing the context behind each, I was able to understand what the English text meant and yet the translation in Urdu did not convey the same essence. The second layer is the interpretation by the caretaker influenced by his background and culture of the translation of the question I was going to share with him. Meaning is the essence of language, or as Dr. Flowerday puts it, it is the currency of language and social interactions. Problems encountering this question helped me understand the importance of translation, interpretation, and meaning.

Later, I was given another draft of the assignment, and this time the question was still the same except there was an addition of just one more word. The word was ‘nature’. Now the question was “What is the nature of Kalam recited in this shrine?” Suddenly, the whole thing started to make sense in both languages, in fact in all three languages if we count in Punjabi as well, in which I chose to communicate with the caretakers. However, by the time I received the second draft, I had already conducted the interview based on the first question. I believe the first question was rather more interesting than the second one as it had more room for interpretation.

Mystical Approach

Being a Political Science student, I have been trained to think and do research as objectively as possible. We are told to rely on hard facts and data which leaves no room for personal biases, let alone mysticism. However, belief is something beyond physical facts and computable data. It has a metaphysical essence. We cannot test it, but that doesn't mean it can't exist or we get to reject it altogether. Something of a similar sort came across me while interviewing Akbar. Akbar told me that Data Sahab and Mian Sahab used to meet over the bridge of the river Indus. At that time, I believed him and acknowledged what he said. However, when I came back and did my research, it turns out it is not possible at all. The date of death of Data Sahab is contested but it is somewhere around 1072 to 1077. However, Mian Sahab passed away in 1927. Math dictates that there is a difference of at least 850 years between the era of the two saints. When I did the math and cross checked the references, it made me laugh. The initial thought that came to my mind was that perhaps the caretaker was mistaken, but that was my positivism speaking. Later at night, it struck me that I was examining the situation with utter naivety. Four years of being taught to be objective in my research almost took away abstraction from me. There indeed was a possibility that Data Sahab and Mian Sahab could have met on the bridge of the Indus River if I view the story mystically. Physically it is not possible, but mystically it can be.

There was one more such instance. There was a message written at the entrance which I have shown in the fifth picture. There it says that "motorcycles are not allowed to enter the premises. By the order of Mian Sahab". Factually speaking, motorcycles did not exist in the early 20th century. This totally goes beyond the scope of the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis, which says that language is a result of culture and social interaction or that language influences one's thoughts.

But if there were no motorcycles, how could Mian Sahab ask people not to enter the premises with motorcycles? Physically it is not possible, but again, mystically it could.

Context and definitions

- Kalma Shareef is the first pillar of Islam, anyone who wants to be a Muslim must recite Kalma Shareef, it is like baptism in Christianity. The translation of Kalma Shareef is:

“There is none worthy of worship except God (Allah) and Muhammad is the messenger of God”.

- Darood Shareef is an Arabic text that is only associated with Prophet Muhammad, recited to praise his highness. The translation of Darood Shareef is:

“O Allah, let Your Blessings come upon Muhammad (Peace Be Upon Him) and the family of Muhammad (Peace Be Upon Him), as you have blessed Ibrahim and his family. Truly, you are Praiseworthy and Glorious. Allah, bless Muhammad and the family of Muhammad, as you have blessed Ibrahim and his family. Truly, you are Praiseworthy and Glorious.”

- *Taweez* (Amulet) is used to cure evil eyes or any disease. It is a piece of paper with something written on it, packed inside a leather cover, usually worn as a necklace.
- *Dum* is pronounced as Th-um. It is a practice where usually a pious person says some Quranic verses and then blows on the devotee or a patient.
- Beard in Islam has multiple meanings. Some say it was just the fashion at the time of the Prophet. Others take it as something holy and pure because the Prophet had it. Here in the story of Iqbal and Mian Sahab, the beard signifies purity of soul. When Mian Sahab said, “He has a beard in the stomach”, it meant that his soul is pure which is why there is no need for him to appear pure by keeping a beard.

- One thing which I have seen in almost every shrine I have visited, including this one, is the excessive use of the color green. This is not by accident, planned in fact. Green is known as the color of Islam. This color holds holy significance to Muslims around the world. One of the reasons behind that significance is the green color of the tomb of *Masjid-e-Nabawi*, the second holiest site in Islam.

In picture number 24, a devotee of Mian Sahab wrote a poem. I translated it as:

Voice of a Seeker

Sher Muhammad Sher-e-Rabbani is the guide to Saints.

He found the land of Sharaqpur desirable to his persona.

In the realm of friends of Allah, he is one of the closest to Him.

An ignorant like me does not possess the intellect that can capture his essence.

In his presence, we found many saints as disciples.

And we found sinners becoming hermits under his guidance.

Whoever came under his wings found himself fortunate.

He is not just a king but a kingmaker.

He is the protector of our honor and dignity.

Keep us in your light, you are our sanctuary.

We never found a seeker agitated.

I too have come as a seeker.

Please bestow me with a path as well that leads to peace.

Written by: Umar Farooq Insha

Translated by: Muhammad Umar Zafar

Photos of the Shrine



Figure 1: This is the road that leads to the shrine. The incomplete structure of bricks and concrete is the first entrance of the shrine. There are some stalls on both sides of the entrances.



2: This is the front view of the main entrance. There is a flower stall on the left side with a stall owner taking refuge in the shade from the simmering sun. The custom is that whenever someone visits Mian Sahab or any family member, they buy flowers to put on the grave.



3: The first walkway after the entrance. On the right, there are beggars sitting in the shade, in the hope of getting some charity from the visitors.



4: On the left wall of the walkway, this was written. "Women whose head is not covered are not welcomed - orders by Mian Sahab."



5: Writing in black says, "Praise the pious, the kids of Sher Rabbani".



6: Second entrance, indicated by concrete stoppers to make sure any motorcycle does not get through. Walkway two starts from here.



7: On the right side of walkway two, there is "Wudu Khana". It is a place where people wash their hands, arms, face, and feet before entering the shrine.



8: The three small tombs (minarets) mark the point of entrance of the graveyard as well as of the shrine. You can see a motorcycle, which means that the rules do not apply to the shrine's caretakers. The billboard on top is a religious



9: Under the billboard there is the tile which has the name of the shrine. The ceramic tile says, "Mian Sher Muhammad Sharaquri".



10: From here starts the walkway three. You can see the three green colored tombs from here.



11: At the end of walkway three there is another stall which sells caps, sweets and flower petals, usually roses. This is where you take off your shoes.



12: Sweets "Reori" and "Makhani" are placed on the stalls for sale.



13: To get a clearer view of the tombs I had to enter the graveyard on the side. This is the graveyard where my whole family is buried. My father, grandparents, uncles and great grandparents. Perhaps I will never be able to look at this shrine objectively.



14: From this point I started seeing the decorations and an increased use of the color green. The color of the tomb is also green. There is a reason behind the excessive use of the color green. Green is the color of the religion Islam. It holds some holy value.



15: This is the final entrance of the shrine. The green light is coming from the green color sheet above, it also cools the temperature in the veranda and in the tomb.



16: This is the second entrance to the tomb. The text on top says, "Only for women, men are not allowed in". Right adjacent to it, where a man is standing, is the room of the caretaker.



17: At the entrance some extra caps are placed, it is considered modest if men wear caps before entering the shrine.



18: ". The enlarged text is the name of the Sufi saint who is buried and on whose name the shrine was built "The great Mian Sher Muhammad Sahab". The top right corner says " Ya Allah (Oh God)". The top left corner says "Ya Muhammad (Oh Muhammad). The middle text says, "Beginning from the name of God who is most beneficial and most merciful".



19: This is the door of the final entrance. There are five banners of different masses that have happened in the past. I do not know why they do not take it off once the mass has been conducted. The top two pictures however are not of any mass, they are the pictures of the cap of the Holy Prophet Muhammad, pasted in respect and love for the Prophet.



20: The decorated top view of the shrine, the inside of the tomb.



21: Most of the shrine is maintained by the donation money. Some of the things have the name of the donor on them. This fan was donated by Khalifa Haji Muhammad Ramzan (Dubai waly - The one from Dubai) and Hazrat Abu Bakar Sahab.



22: This is a picture with a calligraphic text that says "Allah". However, the text is written in a way that resembles the whirling Sufi, Rumi. Although there is no correlation between Rumi and Mian Sahab, the admirers have placed the picture out of love and admiration without knowing the context of Rumi and his ideology.



23: This is a picture of the holiest site in Islam; Khana Kaba also known as Haram Shareef (The house of God).



Figure 24 Translation is written in the analysis section.



25: Top view of the shrine. The marble slabs are the tombstones sculpted in a traditional Muslim culture with two minarets on opposite ends.



26 This is the first picture of the front view of the three graves. The vibrance of colors can be seen, especially the color green. The huge box is made of metal with locks on three sides of it used to collect donations and charity to maintain the shrine.



27: This is the final front view of the three graves of the shrine. The one in the middle with the bigger tombstone is of Hazrat Mian Sher Muhammad Sahab. The one on the right is of the elder son and the left one is of the younger son. There is a cloth covering the graves which is again green in color.

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