Afghanistan’s Islam

Nile Green

Published by University of California Press

Green, Nile.
Afghanistan’s Islam: From Conversion to the Taliban.

For additional information about this book
https://muse.jhu.edu/book/63381

For content related to this chapter
https://muse.jhu.edu/related_content?type=book&id=2260133
Female Sainthood between Politics and Legend

The Emergence of Bibi Nushin of Shibirghan

Ingeborg Baldauf

On the first day of 'Id al-Qurban in late February 1996, nineteen-year-old unmarried Bibi Nushin suffered an untimely death on barren land near Jangalbagh, on the western outskirts of Shibirghan. Her grave is near that place. Bibi Nushin was killed because she—or her family—turned down a marriage proposal. A short time afterwards, apparitions that indicated the elevated spiritual rank of the deceased person appeared in the environs of the burial place. After several miraculous healings took place, a modest mausoleum was built above the grave. By the summer of 1996, the location was regularly attracting crowds of pilgrims, the larger part of whom were women and young girls.

—ORAL TESTIMONY, NORTHERN AFGHANISTAN, 1996

By both the local population and in Afghanistan more widely, northern Afghanistan is considered the “holiest soil on Earth.” Not only are the famous seventy-two Masha’ikh-i Balkh (Shaykhs of Balkh) interred there. So are thousands of other saintly persons who lived and died in the area over the centuries in a process of regional sanctification whose earliest stages are described in Arezou Azad's chapter in this volume. Any study of the particularities of a given sanctuary reduces the research gap concerning “spatially distinctive cultural traditions of Islamic populations” in local contexts of saint cult and pilgrimage (as opposed to the well-investigated global significance of the hajj) that had been identified by scholars interested in mobility induced by religious belief.¹ Such regional studies add to our understanding of the “irresistible need of believers to localize the numinous and to inscribe into space, through rites, their expression of piety.”² Beyond these more general goals, this chapter aims to describe how a process unfolds that in most cases we find ourselves confronting only the historical results of, a process that
sets the preconditions for all manifestations of localized piety: How is the sanctity of a person identified and negotiated; how does a sacred place come to be a lieu de mémoire and then almost fall back into the condition of a “place of oblivion”? And how does all this relate to the manifold needs and interests of believers and others? The following pages attempt to answer some of these questions by relying on the immediate observation of the rise and further development from 1996 to 2009 of a single sanctuary in northern Afghanistan, namely the pilgrimage place (ziyarat) of Bibi Nushin.

Although detailed studies on minor Afghan pilgrimage places may still be scarce, the amazing concentration of all types of sanctuaries in Afghanistan is well attested from before 1979, from ziyarat to qadamja’i (memorial) and nazargah, from modest one-pole, one-flag locations to grandiose mausoleums. The civil war of the 1980s to the early 2000s, however, caused another high tide of flagstaffs and “hands of Fatima” to rise over the hills and flatlands between the Band-i Turkistan and the Amu Darya, just as it did everywhere else in Afghanistan. This was testimony of a “formidable army of shadows” whose martyrdom at the hands of the respective inimical infidels entitled them, as it were, to the time-honored special rank of shahid (martyr) but who at the same time came to represent a novel regional type of “the perfect Muslim”—neither an omnipotent tribal leader, nor Sufi, nor learned man, but rather a fighter in and victim of the jihad. The little space reserved for females in this heroic universe was that of a “passive and pitiable witness to the barbarity of the adversary.” And yet in 1996 it was the resting place of Shahid Nushin (Martyr Nushin), as young Bibi Nushin was named by many, which (insofar as travel was possible in that warlike situation) attracted crowds from all over northern Afghanistan and beyond. The crowds of visitors were second in number only to the pilgrims at the famous Timurid-period shrine of Hazrat ‘Ali in Mazar-i Sharif. Who, then, was Bibi Nushin, and what had happened to turn her into a saint?

Bibi Nushin’s story is not easy to tell. It includes sober elements in line with everyday experience and totally different ones, wondrous elements that can be explained only by the exceptional logics of dogma. The latter make the story partly sound like a legend. As happens with all seductive rumor, some people purported the story to be factual truth, whereas others said they were just recounting from hearsay, and again others openly uttered doubts about the veracity of their account but were spreading it all the same. The introductory core text above is pieced together from fragments that by the fall of 1996, when we collected them, had not grown into a master narrative and to the best of my knowledge have not done so until this day. We have to navigate an archipelago of glimpses and hints, now consistent and now contradictory, hoping to understand how these snippets, in lieu of a full-fledged narrative, are “at work in ordering experiences [and] negotiating collective values.”
In the fall of 1996, Bibi Nushin’s resting place consisted of a whitewashed, vaulted cenotaph covered with colorful quilts, mounted on a little concrete platform fenced in with iron bars and sheltered by a provisional timber roof. An embroidered panel of fabric indicated her name and the date of her martyrdom (*shahadat*). The little mausoleum was all decorated with flags and ribbons and covered with colored stones, coins, small bills, and other little votive gifts. Women and girls of all ages were huddling up against the fence, and many others were squatting and walking all around the place. On our first visit, Bibi Nushin’s father, a man in his fifties, was present at the gravesite, collecting gifts in cash and kind from some visitors, talking to people and handing out money to women who appeared to be in bitter need. He had been away from home for a business trip when the killing happened. Upon his return home for the ’Id al-Qurban he learned the sad news and went to see the spot that people indicated as Bibi Nushin’s burial place. Local residents told him that this was a water-bearing zone and that accordingly the peace of the grave would be disturbed and the quality of local water reserves damaged. They asked him to put her into a fresh grave a little farther away, which he did. This is all Nushin’s father told us. He did not mention how and why she had died, nor did he venture a guess about who may have been involved. However, when subsequently we inquired with visitors and others, women and men, there was much more that they had to tell.
The Revelation of a Sacred Place

Shepherds who kept their flocks in the environs of Bibi Nushin's burial place reported to her father that three or four nights after the reburial flames appeared above the grave. It is said that many a holy site in northern Afghanistan has been revealed by flames (a reminder of Bactria's Zoroastrian past) and flags (janda and 'alam in Persian, or bayragh in the local Turkic idiom), the most famous being the Janda-i sharif, which is wound around a tall pole and put up at the mausoleum of Hazrat 'Ali in Mazar-i Sharif on every New Year's Day. Flames appeared in order to bear witness for Bibi Nushin, which her father and others transformed into a metaphor of victory: “They killed her, but she has raised her flag [Turki: bayraghini kötardi].”

Bibi Nushin manifested herself to numerous persons in dreams and waking visions, which at an early stage of the cult around her grave added significantly to her fame. One gentleman arrived from as far away as Kabul, all in tears, after the saint had spoken to him in a dream. One lady in her dream had an apparition of the mausoleum as a big and beautiful ziyarat and consequently made a habit of visiting the burial place with her daughters while it was still a rather modest site. Another lady in a dream vision was advised by her spiritual guide (pir) to seek help at Bibi Nushin's place. Dreams and visions are at the core of many an etiological legend of mausoleums in and around the city of Mazar-i Sharif, of which the most prominent is the grave of Hazrat 'Ali, which according to the early-twelfth-century Andalusian traveler Abu Hamid al-Gharnati was first revealed to villagers of al-Khayr, in the province of Balkh, in dream visions of the Prophet himself. The Qumaj ruler of Balkh consulted the learned men of his day, and they confirmed the authenticity of the revelation. Only one religious scholar (‘alim) refuted this “absurd” claim, as he called it, saying that the saint had died at distant Kufa and could not possibly be buried here. The following night the saint's family appeared in his dream and dragged him to an open grave containing the remains of the saint. When the Qumaj learned that news, he hurried to the site in the desert, and indeed they found the tomb with the undecayed remains of his shroud, two marble plates, and a red brick—not a flag—with an inscription attesting that this was indeed Hazrat 'Ali. As a result, he had a splendid mausoleum built at the site.

The vision mausoleum (Arabic: mashhad al-ru’ya) constructed in direct response to a dream or vision is a timeless phenomenon in the Muslim world. Yet even the authority of the dreamed Prophet in the case of Mazar-i Sharif did not subdue all doubt from the start. To legitimize the extraordinary claim that was raised in Seljuq time at Balkh it took corroboration by the saint's own family in a second dream and finally the discovery of a grave vested with unchallengeable evidence. Having Bibi Nushin's resting place acknowledged as a sacred site in 1996 was no doubt a claim of less importance, but the issue caused hot debates among
the local population all the same. Accusations of fraud were in the air at an early stage during the discovery of Bibi Nushin's place, because the gravesite of another young girl was on people's minds. Only some years earlier—that is, in the late 1980s or early 1990s—the father of a girl who had attended a school in downtown Shibirghan near the road to Mazar-i Sharif spread word about his daughter's martyrdom and encouraged people to venerate her grave, which was located next to her school. However, this would-be shahid was found to be happily alive, and the whole fraud came to light. The story was recounted by a middle-aged gentleman who by contrast confirmed the authenticity of the martyrdom (shahadat) of Bibi Nushin. In debates on the sacredness of the place, my co-researcher and I often heard that God Almighty had Himself revealed unmistakable signs (ayats), like the flames that appeared to shepherds and neighbors.

When Nushin's father first came to see the grave, according to one gentleman to whom he had said so, a man on horseback emerged out of nowhere. The tall horseman alerted the bereaved father that this was not her proper burial place and told him where to put her to rest. Any northern Afghan listener will understand who that horseman was: Hazrat Khizr, the Lord of the Wastelands (Turki: dasht egasi) and helper in need. If this immortal saint (al-Khizr), who enjoys veneration in Central Asia that is second only to that of Hazrat 'Ali, so cares for a person as to find her a proper resting place, that person obviously holds a special and elevated rank. Khizr's intervention is well known from elsewhere in the region: Near Kashgar, just a few days on horseback east of Shibirghan, he is reported as having been instrumental in the revealing of a local saint's burial place as well.

The intervention of the great saint was but one of a number of numinous signs. When Bibi Nushin's father unearthed her body, “her blood had not coagulated” and “delicious scents arose” from her remains. According to one local man's account, the body had not been buried at all, but when her father came to collect it, “for so many days no wild animal had touched her.” In yet another account, the inviolability of Bibi Nushin and her burial place is evidenced by the fact that somebody tried to flatten her grave off with a bulldozer—but the bulldozer broke, just as many other bulldozers and road-construction machines had broken in recent times all over northern Afghanistan, thus revealing hitherto insignificant plots of land as actually being the burial places of saintly persons. And there is the startling assertion by one gentleman who told us that it was Bibi Nushin herself who changed burial places: since her initial grave was inconvenient, she walked some distance until she found her ultimate resting place:

This person died and then continued to walk. Who, for all reasons, would walk to his grave on his own feet?! Nobody does so, unless he is a saint.

The legend-like story of the walking dead who roams the lands in search of his or her adequate resting place, widely spread over the Eurasian continent, is in
northern Afghanistan present in the legend about Sayyid 'Alijan (see note 21, above), a companion of Hazrat 'Ali who was decapitated, so the story goes, when fighting in the desert near Balkh. He walked up to his present burial place with his head under his arm. According to dogma, shahids are not dead in any trivial understanding of the word (Quran 2:154), and so their bodies display features that are otherwise the preserve of the living, and they can do things that otherwise only the living can do. In Bibi Nushin's case the motif of the walking dead was retold by a fifty-year-old native of Aqcha who was at that time custodian (mutawalli) of the mausoleum of Muzrab Shah Palvan at Shibirghan. He explicitly grounded his story in the exceptional logic of the dogma: God grants this kind of sign (ayat) only to saints (awliya) and martyrs (shuhada), notions that in local belief are closely interwined. According to this logic, Shahid Nushin must therefore be a saint.

No matter how much the stories about the revelation of Bibi Nushin's burial place as a sacred site may differ in detail, out of dozens of people who talked among themselves or to us not a single one cast severe doubt on the veracity of what had happened around the grave or on the meaning that was to be made of all that. There seems to be no negotiating of signs (ayat) worked by God or saintly interventions like the one performed by Khizr. What caused a controversial debate was rather the point from which the whole story departed: the killing, its prehistory, and its immediate aftermath.

NEGOTIATING SAINTHOOD

Bibi Nushin was young and unmarried (or that is at least what most people say), and she (or more probably her father) received a marriage proposal from an influential military commander from Shibirghan that she (or her father) turned down. According to many local people, Nushin already had a suitor of her own age. One educated lady in her early thirties, who maintained that she had inquired extensively into the case, provided this account of the killing:

First the girl and the youngster had arranged a date at that particular spot. From one of the commanders—from somebody's side, that is; it could have been from within their kin—a marriage proposal was put forward. But she was in love with that boy; she liked him a lot; she had dated him, so that they would meet in that cornfield and chat together. . . . Exactly at that time the man who wanted her came along in his jeep; he was passing by on the asphalt road. When they saw this, when they realized that the jeep was making a turn and was approaching them, the girl and the boy threw themselves in the cornfield; they hid, and out of the field the boy fired at the jeep. In the jeep there were the commander and his driver. The commander was in the car with wooing in mind. The boy fired his gun on the jeep. He killed the driver, and the commander's hand was cut off—did he get stuck in the door, or what?—anyway, it was cut off somehow. The boy hid away in the cornfield and ran away. The girl also
escaped. The commander remained alive and said, “I won’t leave these people alive; I will kill them no matter how.” Later, when he had recovered, he came back and snatched the girl and the boy, both of them, and he took them away and killed them.

Bibi Nushin’s father did not tell why or how his daughter was killed. Nor did most other people have a story about her death. They simply held that the girl was shot dead. One woman, who referred to “sources from the family’s neighborhood,” suggested hanging or other means by which the girl had been put to death. Different versions of the events immediately preceding the killing were told: A group of informants set the killing in the context of a fighting scene: Bibi Nushin was spending the evening outdoors together with a young man, obviously an admirer or lover of hers, when a jeep approached and a lethal shootout began, initiated by either the lover or the other party. Others told a story without any lover, in which consequently the fighting scene was missing, and the girl, without any second person at her side, was straightaway executed near her later burial place.

The variant told by one middle-aged adherent of the saint bore the stylistic traits of a legend:

They marched the woman and her child off from her family home on the eve of the ‘Id festival and killed her out in the wilds of the desert. God the Pure may know how deeply she implored them, how much she cried, “Don’t kill me!” That woman—... but God Almighty has found it easy to grant her a high spiritual rank [martaba].

This variant does mention a second person but transforms it in ways that not only leave Bibi Nushin’s honor beyond doubt. After all, why should a young girl be out with a lover at nighttime? But this variant also added one more tragic motif to the story: there was her young child together with Bibi Nushin! Nothing more was told about the child, but the mere mention makes it hard to remain indifferent to the story, as does the hint that it was the eve of the great religious holiday that was profaned by the cruel event.

Some variants that include the fighting scene also contain motifs that enhance the plot in favor of Bibi Nushin, and it is, again, just as in the mother-and-child variant, anything but certain that these motifs are factually true. The folklorist’s observation that “floating motifs creep into any orally repeated report, no matter how firmly grounded in historical fact” seems to describe very aptly the genesis of these stories, although the assumption that “yet, under given conditions, the historic kernels endure and are identifiable” is not really supported by our materials, which do not lay any kernel patent beyond all doubt.

After having suffered physical death, Bibi Nushin is numinously protected from further intrusion: the jeep driver tries to overrun her body, but his car is beaten back and turned over. According to other stories, the servants of the commander tried to remove her body but were incapable of drawing close, let alone touching
her. Thus the dead girl remained out in the wilderness until her father came and buried her, but no animal touched her body. Although Bibi Nushin had suffered a violent death, at a postmortal stage she proved invulnerable to namahram persecutors and respected by wild creatures.\(^{26}\) (Note that a namahram is a male who, in Islamic law or local custom, is not allowed to be in the company of any woman not related to him by blood or marriage.) This condition prevailed well after word of her sainthood had begun to spread over northern Afghanistan and her mausoleum began to attract pilgrims from near and far.\(^{27}\) As her father said, ill-wishers (whose identity he did not reveal) attempted to destroy the modest mausoleum by overthrowing the sepulcher and flooding her burial place, attempting to extinguish her memory (Turki: nam-nishanini nist-u nabud qilmaq). All such attempts—including bulldozer attacks—ended in failure and were finally given up.

Whereas Bibi Nushin enjoyed postmortem triumph, her persecutors and murderers were punished in due course: The jeep driver died instantly. The person who killed her was paralyzed. The eye of the marksman lost its light, and his trigger finger was left deformed.\(^{28}\) The hand of the commander who had kicked off the whole tragedy was severed—or something like that. (See above.) One gentleman made a point of conveying that the commander suffered a well-deserved lethal stroke soon after the event—an account on which he insisted even when confronted with an eyewitness who had seen the commander in good spirits shortly before their conversation. What needs to happen will happen, and the logic of legend outdoes any profane eyewitness report, at least in the opinion of believers.

**BETWEEN CHASTITY AND VIOLENCE**

Skeptics, however, also entered the arena. In the fall of 1996 some features of the Bibi Nushin cause were hotly debated, particularly issues of morality and guilt. Both of them revolved around the killing. Did Bibi Nushin at all meet the moral standards required from a saintly person, a martyr (shahid) or saint (awliya)?\(^{29}\) The purported lover caused irritation in many minds. A group of elderly gentlemen from Shibirghan, all knowledgeable in Shari’a law and well acquainted with time-honored arguments for and against saintly cult, raised cautious objections against the possibility of a girl of dubious virtue as achieving an elevated spiritual rank (martaba). In Nushin’s father’s story there was no lover of his daughter, with or without his own consent; but does that mean that there had been no lover in real life? One pilgrim lady, when I asked her whether Bibi Nushin may have had a boyfriend, strictly ruled out that possibility. Another group of men agreed on a diplomatic view: “They were just talking. What’s wrong with them sitting together, then?!” The topos of the lover is a piece of gossip in that it “communicates what the group norms are”\(^{30}\)—female modesty and sexual abstinence are in that kind of talk suggested as criteria for sainthood. In the end, however, none of our
interlocutors insisted on a strict position with regard to Nushin’s possible lack of moral perfection\textsuperscript{31}—perhaps out of some general tolerance toward relationships inherent in the local custom of \textit{qallîgh} (see note 23, above), perhaps in remembrance of the greatest regional female saint, Rabi’a-yi Balkhi, who was ready to die for the love of her servant, or perhaps because people’s anger about the crime committed by Bibi Nushin’s murderer or murderers simply outweighed all moral reserve.

Not morality but violence was people’s prime concern while negotiating Bibi Nushin’s sainthood, and, remarkably, the violence argument worked both ways: that is, in her favor as well as her disfavor. One pilgrim lady in her forties, accompanied by a daughter of marriageable age, was cursing the murderer and all other commanders, “who think that they have the right to claim all girls and young boys
as they please and persecute and kill them if they refuse.” Many deplored the killing as arbitrary, wicked, and exceptionally cruel. However, some others, according to whom the girl was actively involved in the shooting that left her dead and the commander and his party heavily injured or dead as well, questioned the legitimacy of people’s assertions of her martyrdom. One lady, who believed that the boy had fired first, put it like this:

How could she possibly attain the rank of a martyr [daraja-yi shuhada] after one man was killed and another one injured? How would it be possible for her to regain her purity?

A native of Badakhshan who lived in Mazar, had studied at state and religious schools, and was serving as a high-ranking officer in General Dostum’s army, suggested, “She won’t be granted a spiritual rank [Turki: daraja almaydi]”; and in a discussion about the shootout that we observed at the mausoleum of Mulla Aka, somebody said, “No one is saying she is a martyr [Turki: shayt boldi dean yagh]!” Were people so fed up with violence that they refused to tolerate even the petty violence inflicted by a victim of aggression? Or did they envision passive and pitiable victimhood as the only proper role for a woman, thus blaming Bibi Nushin for breaking the rules of the game?

It seems as if Bibi Nushin did not conform to the socially accepted patterns of female sainthood in Central Asia: She was neither the self-sacrificing mother (although the Nushin-with-child motif pushes the story in that direction) nor the perfectly immaculate female who rejects the headstrong male out of disdain for anything sexual, like those virgin saints who refused to succumb to mighty power holders or all the Qïrq Qïz and Chil Dukhtar in who are venerated in the region (among them the Forty Virgins of Sherabad, near Dehdadi, halfway between Shibirghan and Mazar-i Sharif). Guilty of the death and mutilation of her aggressors, Nushin may be likened to Maryam of Kashgar, in Chinese Turkestan, who killed twenty-five enemies and is nonetheless sainted. But that girl had observed complete seclusion from the eyes of namahram (illicit companions), which Nushin had obviously failed to do. Public opinion, if we may call it that, in the fall of 1996 was still pending between disapproval of Nushin’s moral conduct and her involvement in violent action on the one side and compassion for her victimization by an unjust, self-serving, brutal strongman on the other.

Human desire to negotiate sanctity, morality, and guilt through the prism of Bibi Nushin’s comportment in matters of sexuality and violence played an important role in public debate. However, neither of these concerns would have mattered in the absence of one central phenomenon: the numinous and miraculous that radiated from Nushin’s sepulcher. No matter what stance people were taking toward her as an accomplished or deficient human being—it was godly sign (ayat), reinforced by saintly intervention on behalf of Bibi Nushin, and miracles.
(karamat) ascribed to her blessing power (barakat) that caused these ponderings and judgments in the first place and rendered them meaningful in public conversation about shared values.\textsuperscript{35}

**BIBI’S POSTHUMOUS MIRACLES**

The earliest miraculous healings reported from Bibi Nushin’s mausoleum occurred a short time after her death. Several persons who had been blind for many years regained sight after spending some time in the vicinity of the grave, and even “the eyes of people blind from birth would open” on the spot. Lame people were found walking again and “threw away their crutches,” as we were told by many informants, among them a middle-aged man who claimed to have been cured of paralysis and who out of gratitude now did service at the gravesite. We were shown several abandoned crutches on the flat roof of a nearby shack. People suffering from intestinal disease found relief, and even two persons ill with cancer were reported to have been restored to good health. From earlier studies we know that such fundamental ailments as blindness and paralysis were by convention the preserve of the greatest saint of the North, Hazrat ‘Ali, in Mazar-i Sharif.\textsuperscript{36} Now Bibi Nushin proved equal to that long-established saint. Her most important miracles (karamat), however, were related to an even more fundamental issue of the human condition: procreation.

The greatest miracles that Bibi Nushin’s intercession with God were (and still are) reported to bring about are successful conception, pregnancy, and childbirth in otherwise hopeless cases. For example, a young woman who despite three days in labor was unable to deliver her child was taken to Bibi Nushin in a carriage, accompanied by her mother and a few old midwives; she gave birth on the spot after having visited the grave.\textsuperscript{37} Dozens of women who failed to conceive made the pilgrimage to Bibi Nushin’s mausoleum and subsequently got pregnant. The most prominent lady who was helped in this way was the second wife of General Dostum, who in those years ruled over the northern provinces, with Shibirghan as his main stronghold and place of residence in mid-1996. As the story goes, after long, unsuccessful medical treatment—even at such distinguished locations as reproduction centers in Turkey—she finally sought Bibi Nushin’s help and became pregnant shortly after her visit to the grave. This story was very widely known and retold, matched only by, if any, the stories about miraculous healings of the blind. Bibi Nushin’s wide acceptance as a saint was mainly grounded in her supernatural power to promote people’s most urgent need, namely the need for life to go on.

The proof of the saint is in the miracle: miraculous signs granted by God, the numinous intervention on her behalf by Khizr, and many successful miracles that she was believed to have caused all contributed to the firm belief (‘aqida) and wholehearted faith and devotion (ikhlas) that made crowds of people metaphorically
and literally “turn around her [grave].” Many interlocutors said that Bibi Nushin grants people’s wishes (Turki: murad beradi), whereas others, who keep closer to dogma, said that “it is God who grants, while the martyr or the pilgrimage is [only] the catalyst [for God’s action].” Many sick had recovered, and many positive results (natija) had been brought about; and for that reason the number of people who took refuge with Bibi Nushin (muraji) rapidly increased over the first months after her death. Of course not all this went uncontested. Some people conceded a placebo effect of the pilgrimage act but insisted on rational causes for the actual healings. We heard a local intellectual poking fun at Bibi Nushin’s would-be wondrous deeds in a Doctor Eisenbarth mode: “The blind are walking, and the lame regain sight [Turki: kör yuri:di shal achiladi],” he declared. There was suspicion that Bibi Nushin’s father paid people money so that they would pretend to have been miraculously cured. One or two men went so far as to say that the whole thing was a fraud, invented by her father for business or by others for unknown different ends.

**THE MAKING OF A SHRINE BUSINESS**

Muslim shrines have at all times been at the center of business, petty or big, and in the Persian and Turkic idioms of northern Afghanistan they are bound together in the phrase ham ziyarat ham tijarat: “Pilgrimage is an occasion for doing business” or “A shrine is tantamount to a business.” In emergencies, people took refuge at Bibi Nushin’s shrine spontaneously. However, even after only a few months in existence a more standardized and ritualized cult was already developing around the mausoleum. On Wednesday and Saturday nights “four or five thousand or even more” pilgrims would turn the steppe around the mausoleum into a large, crowded camp “so that one could not see the ground between all the people who lay to rest there, side by side.” According to Nushin’s father the visitors mostly arrived in groups of a dozen people; they would wail and moan, pray, and recite the Quran. The ritual practices that we observed included circumambulating around the mausoleum, touching the tomb or at least its fence, bringing along roosters, goats, and even sheep, slaughtering them on the spot, and handing the raw meat out as alms (kham talash); others sacrificed and cooked the animals, offering food to needy persons present at the grave. Some pilgrims’ offerings consisted of cuttings of more or less precious cloth; some of these for a time used to cover the tomb, and some cloth were cut up into small pieces that were dealt out to the pilgrims as sacred stuff (tabarruk) through which some of Bibi Nushin’s barakat could be transmitted to people less lucky who were not able to make the pilgrimage.

Other pilgrims offered substantial votive gifts (nazr) in rice and wheat, some of which Bibi Nushin’s father readily passed on to pilgrims in need. We observed him presenting a substantial monetary gift (10,000 Afghanis) to a widowed pilgrim.
who had been squatting at the fence for hours and now and again thinner bundles of bills to others.\footnote{44} However, since we had no clue how much money he collected in all, it is difficult to estimate how significant these acts of redistribution actually were. Gossipers said that he was making a fortune. Although elsewhere in the region the tenders of saints’ graves (mutawalli) hold certificates that entitle them to collect votive gifts (nazr), Nushin’s father did not mention any such document.\footnote{44} It was not possible to get information whether he had a partner with whom to share the revenues—a relative, a representative of the local administration or political power, or other. The shrine economy also included a little bazaar for provisions, devotional gifts, and various goods that women prefer to purchase, which would be set up in the vicinity of the mausoleum on pilgrimage days; on in-between days peddlers would offer their wares. Cars, horse taxis, and trucks were nearby waiting for customers.

Obviously at least part of the revenue was used for the maintenance and development of the pilgrimage site. In the summer and fall of 1996, the location was modest but in good shape and well kept. Bibi Nushin’s father proudly mentioned that when the initial sepulcher was turned into a little brick mausoleum resting on a concrete basis, fenced in and protected by a provisional timber roof, it was General Dostum’s brother Qadir himself who contributed workforce and cash. Independently of written documents, the shrine enjoyed the protection and legitimization of the local ruler. Or vice versa.

**THE POWER OF SAINTS AND WARLORDS**

Some people denied that Bibi Nushin could have been a saint at all. Many more, however, were convinced that she was one and concluded from the *karamat* she caused to unfold that she must have been a powerful saint at that:\footnote{45}

Women who were previously unable to conceive get pregnant here. She is a friend of God [Persian: *dust-i khuda*], a person who is great before God [*pesh-i khuda kalan*].

As a saint who could rescue lives and help new life to come into being Bibi Nushin enjoyed the devotion (*ikhlas*) of people in many minor concerns as well. Pilgrims told us they were addressing her for prosperity, for a car, for a good job, for a good spouse for themselves or a relative, or for overall support and protection in their daily lives.

Protection was a problem of particular virulence in the decade of civil war. Although ‘Abd al-Rashid Dostum maintained a quasi statehood in his realm, personal security did not exist for the commoners.\footnote{46} We can read that pilgrim lady’s curse as an outcry of the powerless: the reproductive potential of females was deemed to be at the arbitrary disposal of those who held more guns and were closer to the ruler, and so was all young male human capital, whether for pleasure or for
armed service. General insecurity and in particular the lack of rights of women (and men) toward power holders was condensed in the story of Bibi Nushin’s martyrdom—but then she had “raised her flag” and proved much more powerful than her murderer (or murderers).\textsuperscript{47} All regular power hierarchies were overturned when this young female nobody came out victorious. She even granted offspring to the ruler of the day, who in his turn put his brother at the service of the saint, as it were.\textsuperscript{48} Who was powerful, then? The age-old Central Asian dictum that sultans cannot do without protection from the Friends of God seems in 1996 to have applied in Shibirghan as well.\textsuperscript{49}

General Dostum had in the mid-1990s been in control of Mazar-i Sharif and the noble shrine of Hazrat ‘Ali. He contributed to the regilding of the cupolas of the \textit{rawza} (mausoleum) and made others contribute;\textsuperscript{50} and it was on his initiative that new gold-embroidered covers were produced for the cenotaph of the saint.\textsuperscript{51} However, the saint apparently refused his protection. In March 1996, General Dostum presided over the opening of the New Year (Naw-Ruz), the ceremony of the raising of the flag (\textit{janda-bala}), which is otherwise the prerogative of the king or president of Afghanistan. But shortly after that, Dostum lost power, and his Junbish movement had to yield control of the mausoleum to their inimical allies, the Hizb-i Islami. Unlike the \textit{jihadi} party leaders investigated in the chapter by Simon Wolfgang Fuchs in this volume, General Dostum never aspired to religious merit or credit, and the Muslim allusion in the name of his Junbish-i Milli-yi Islami-yi Afghanistan can be regarded as simply an attempt to avoid stepping out of line with his allies during the 1992 coup d’\textsc{etat}. But, as the Bibi Nushin episode shows, respecting local religious belief and custom was certainly an integral part of Dostum’s populist agenda.

It was around the same time that General Dostum lost control of Mazar-i Sharif that the fame of Bibi Nushin began to rise. Moreover, it happened in Shibirghan, Dostum’s perpetual stronghold. The association of the martyr saint and the lord of Shibirghan was mediated by the ruler’s wife, and it proved successful from the start. I have not been able to find out if the miraculous conception antedated the General’s (brother’s) contribution to the mausoleum-development effort or vice versa. In any case, the connection between saint and ruler was clear enough, and many of my local interlocutors mentioned it one way or another. One may say that there is a big difference between a patron saint like Hazrat ‘Ali, who has for centuries granted protection to those overseeing the huge irrigation system of the Eighteen Canals (Hazhdah Nahr), and someone who had to yield her burial place to a single ditch. After all, that tall horseman may have been not Hazrat Khizr but merely the local water administrator (\textit{mirab}). But under certain circumstances, a somewhat minor saint who sided with a somewhat minor ruler appeared perfectly good enough for increasing their mutual power by sharing it.
Although two or three local informants gave other opinions, there was wide consensus among our interlocutors that the man behind the murder of Bibi Nushin had been La’l Muhammad of Shibirghan. La’l Qumandan was one of General Dostum’s commanders striving for more power in the internal political turmoil following the assassination in the late spring of 1996 of Rasul Palvan, the influential commander of General Dostum’s 511th division. This happened while Junbish-versus-Hizb enmity aggravated a fraught situation; and meanwhile the Taliban were approaching all the time. The accusations against La’l Qumandan were just rumor, but it was a rumor with great credibility among the populace. The murder of a young girl initiated by a commander would in 1996 not have caused great excitement outside her family and neighborhood. However, what then happened—or was said to have happened—around her burial place earned Bibi Nushin great attention, and the involvement of General Dostum with the emerging saint inspired second thoughts among some of the general’s opponents. “As a matter of fact,” one gentleman said without going into further detail, “rumors [Turki: gaplar] say that there were some political feuds.” He was obviously insinuating that the allegations of murder against La’l might have been forged by pro-Dostum people in order to raise feelings against the commander and rid themselves of a possible local rival. From sympathizers of the (anti-Dostum) leftist ethnicist Guruh-i Kar I have even heard allegations saying that the entire cult around Bibi Nushin may have been staged, relying on people’s credulity, in order to instrumentalize for political ends the common people’s desire for scandals, saints, and miracles. In that case there may never have been a dead girl at all—or even a girl named Nushin, for that matter.

CONCLUSIONS

The Bibi Nushin narrative complex has never grown into a complete and consistent story. In future, a process of scripturalization may level out inconsistencies and contradictions in the story, but no formal hagiography seems to have been written down. When I revisited northern Afghanistan in 2002, and many more times over the following decade, the collective correctives had already ruled out many details of the fragmented legend. Most people from Faryab to Takhar whom I asked knew of the saint, and many had visited her place once or repeatedly. Yet there were many who didn’t know her name and would simply call her “that girl” (Persian, in dukhtar; Turki, u qiz) or “the martyr” (shahid). The whereabouts of her death and the revelation of her sainthood were no longer mentioned. There was still some uncertainty as to whether she had been a girl or a married woman. In 2002, verses embroidered on a curtain tied to her iron fence were addressing her as shahid madar (martyred mother). Be that as it may, she was remembered by everyone as a person of unyielding virtue who resisted the desires of a military commander.
If “what continues to be social relevance is stored in the memory while the rest is usually forgotten,” then supremely important female chastity and its long-term triumph over male violence seem to be all that continues to matter in local society. And if this is not the case in real life, then it becomes the case in a vision shared by many local people. Within this timeless discourse, however, debate has changed over the last twenty years. The hottest topic in the discourse on morality in 1996, as we remember, was about Bibi Nushin as possibly having had a lover. Her entitlement to an elevated spiritual rank, without which there could have been no saint or miracle, was viewed as depending on that issue. The sheer factuality of her *barakat* and *karamat* silenced those voices that were questioning her purity, and her obvious rank and power tacitly questioned the relevance of the moralist argument as such. Collective wisdom seems to have rated societal demand for strict female chastity higher than God’s possible forgiveness of a love affair; in order not to put this at stake the lover motif was simply dropped from the story, and the debate has come to an end. Taliban reign over the region (1997–2001) and the illiberalism that came with it may have streamlined public discourse. After all, in 1996 it had been possible to hold and exchange divergent opinions on *qallïghs* and boyfriends.

In 1996, I was spared being told one more rumor, which my male colleague picked up at the gravesite: Bibi Nushin had been raped by the commander. Was this motif part of male discourse (not shared with a woman) expressing concerns about a powerless father’s or brother’s (and so on) ultimate loss of control over the sexuality of females and hence the honor of the family and the integrity of the male self? There may be no way to verify such an assumption ex post facto. In 2002 the Nushin story had been reduced to its core, as I said above; but there was one additional motif unheard of before: The violator had been not the commander but Bibi Nushin’s own paternal uncle, who first tried to seduce her and then (in a reversal of the omnipresent Yusuf and Zulaikha motif) hurried to silence her for good. It was a gentleman not from nearby but from a village in the Saripul province who related that rumor in 2002.

At the time, I was making inquiries on behalf of an NGO, and I realized that this position of mine caused some interlocutors to use more drastic language and talk about weird themes that I had not heard before. Sexualized violence within the scope of the *mahram* (licit companion) was one such theme. At first, I thought that this new motif might have been put forward in imitation of novel NGO discourses and investigative Internet journalism, scandalizing the worst of the worst. But then I remembered the words of that lady in her thirties in 1996, much like a slip of the tongue: “From one of the commanders—from somebody’s side; could have been from within their kin—a marriage proposal was put forward.” Knowing that my interlocutor was very close to the elites around General Dostum, I had been inclined to read her casual mention of a possible murderer from outside the
General’s entourage as seeking exculpation for him. However, if one puzzled the pieces together, the possibility of friendly-violence again gains plausibility. The fact that trespasses by a mahram would have been very much taboo in northern Afghanistan before 2002 made it easy to rule out such a story, no matter how factually true it may have been. The previously unspeakable violence against women and sexual relations more broadly that is at the core of the next chapter, by Sonia Ahsan, have only been brought into public debate during the post-Taliban era through the intervention of international actors. But in the north of Afghanistan before 2002, it was at least possible to use such a story to cast suspicion on a notorious power holder.

Here again, it is not possible to establish factual, historical truth. In the condensed legend that circulated in the 2000s, the figure of the evil commander held an important place. And in 2006, when the alleged murderer at last died from a stroke and was publicly mourned by General Dostum’s followers, I heard someone applying the cynical phrase bir ganda kam (literally, “one bad [man] less [on Earth]”). The oppressed who were siding with Bibi Nushin never saw the establishment of worldly justice, and it took a long time for the opportunity for ultimate punishment to arise. Meanwhile, however, people had seen Shahid Nushin, Martyr Nushin, being raised to an elevated rank by Almighty God. As a protector saint she was more powerful than the most powerful men at place. Although there exists only a modest textual tradition about her life, martyrdom, and miracles, the
ritual practices at her mausoleum indicate that, in the 2000s, her saintly power was considered even stronger than it had been earlier. Back in 1996, Bibi Nushin had been credited with easing and healing ailing lives and with securing the overall continuation of human life through her intervention in conception, pregnancy, and childbirth. In springtime 2004, 2005, and 2008, when I visited her mausoleum (which itself was physically almost unchanged after the Taliban period), I found wheat and other grains spread all over her grave. This was significant sign of her status, since the practice of casting a handful of grain for fertility of the soil is more commonly found at the memorials of Hazrat Khizr, the immortal Muslim saint who opens the agricultural year everywhere from the Balkans to Central Asia.56

In addition to Bibi Nushin’s miraculous intervention in saving existing lives and in the generation of new human life, she is now invoked when the material basis of life is at stake. These are the fundamental concerns with which pilgrims go to address her. Her involvement with the ruler of the bygone era of the 1990s doesn’t seem to matter any longer. Believers visit the place time and again; they care for its cleanliness and modest beauty, and they perform rituals, make sacrifices, and give small donations, as we can guess from the traces they leave. Bibi Nushin’s mausoleum has developed into one more of the many thousands of pilgrimage places that make the old Bactrian lands in northern Afghanistan the holiest soil on Earth.