Vernacular Cosmopolitanism as an Ethical Disposition

Sufi Networks, Hospitality, and Translocal Inclusivity

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1 Introduction

In *Regulating Aversion*, the philosopher Wendy Brown makes the point that “[t]olerance as a political practice is always conferred by the dominant, it is always a certain expression of domination even as it offers protection or incorporation to the less powerful” (Brown 2008, 178). Those who are perceived to be intolerant are defined by tolerant Westerners as barbarians, she proposes, and as such a legitimate target of aggression. The result is that tolerance, in marking what is “civilised,” confers superiority on the West, even in such cases when Western liberals concede that “the other” too may be “tolerant.” The discursive act of labelling establishes the relationship of dominance (see Brown 2008, 176-258).

If we accept Brown’s position, this creates a dilemma for students of Islamic societies, similar to dilemmas raised in the past by the questioning of ethnographic authority in anthropological writing. If cosmopolitanism is defined at least in part by an ethics of tolerance or “openness,” a willingness to reach out to a cultural “other” or stranger, may we conclude, with Brown, that cosmopolitanism is necessarily Western, secular-liberal, and elitist – a discursive strategy that disguises and depoliticises relations of dominance? And, if so, what room is there for ethnographers of Muslim societies to attempt to describe their research subjects as “cosmopolitan,” or to theorise a non-elitist, demotic, vernacular cosmopolitanism that is nevertheless tolerant, moral, and ethical? Can it be that the people anthropologists study beyond the West, including Muslims, are incapable of being “truly” cosmopolitan in their own right?

Against Brown’s view, I want to propose here that non-Western societies may be equally tolerant and cosmopolitan in their own, locally and culturally embedded, vernacular cosmopolitan ways. By vernacular cosmopolitanism I refer here to alternative, particularly non-Western, forms of cosmopolitan ethics, defined broadly as an openness to difference, whether to other ethnic groups, cultures, religions, or nations. One path towards
recovering the cosmopolitanism of societies beyond the West, I suggest, is to make more explicit the indigenous, vernacular terms used by them to express their cosmopolitan ethical outlook or ideology.

Against the notion of a Muslim cosmopolitanism, Muslims are often defined by the media and politicians as narrow, intolerant, repressive, and unwilling to recognise and respect non-Muslims; in other words, as anti- or counter-cosmopolitan. But is this really so? And is it so for all Muslims? Among Muslim streams and movements, many scholars have stressed the open, inclusive aspects of Sufism in particular as a major Islamic tendency that is peace-loving and tolerant of difference. In this essay I present first an example of Sufi tolerance and vernacular cosmopolitanism from my research on a Sufi saint in Pakistan. Second, I propose that a Sufi ideology of peace and tolerance is related to the kind of networks across boundaries that Sufi saints foster. I want to begin, however, by exploring some Pakistani or Urdu notions that refer to what might be construed as cosmopolitan.

2 Pakistani and Sufi Ethical “Cosmopolitanism”

It is possible to map out, I suggest, a semantic field of Urdu notions that between them speak to different aspects of cosmopolitanism. A key term in Urdu, often invoked, is the notion of “humanity” (insaniyat), which combines several ethical notions at the heart of cosmopolitanism: equality, compassion, and urbanity. According to Platts’ Urdu-English dictionary, insaniyat means “human nature, humanity, human kindness, affability, politeness, urbanity” (Platts 1884). A parallel term, admiyat, means “human nature, humanity, benevolence, compassion, sympathy, civility, urbanity, politeness, good breeding, rationality, reason, judgement, civilised.” In one sense, then, these two terms contain the idea that all people everywhere are equally human and that this humanity must be recognised and respected. Islam as a universal religion regards all human beings as potentially equal before God; indeed, unknown to them, they were born Muslims and therefore when they convert to Islam they are, in fact, “reverting” to Islam. Sufi saints like Zindapir, the saint I studied, recognise this inclusiveness before God, as I show below.

Perhaps even more striking is the fact that the same terms, insaniyat and admiyat, also imply urbanity, civility, good manners, kindness, reason and judgement. These are the central traits of cosmopolitans as colloquially understood in English, too. Muslim and South Asian cities have long been sites of multiethnic and multireligious commerce in goods and ideas, while
Muslims have been nomadic and long-distance traders for millennia. One would expect such societies to combine ideas of urbanity, civility, and universal humanity. As in ancient Greece, the word in Urdu for “citizen,” shahri, means “of or belonging to a city, a citizen.” Historically, the vast spread of Islam, the medieval and modern European colonial conquests and re-conquests of Muslim-populated lands and, from quite early on, the emergence of ungodly usurpers and lay dynastic rulers in the Muslim world, all made the injunction to migrate to a Muslim land virtually unachievable. As Shadid and Van Koningsveld have argued, with Muslims living permanently in non-Muslim lands, Muslim scholars began adapting a third category between the so-called “Land of Islam” and the “Land of War” (dar-el harb) – this was dar-el aman or dar al-ahd, the “Land of Security” or “Treaty,” concepts originally formulated as a guideline for Muslim travellers or traders who were living temporarily in lands friendly to Islam – to other circumstances (Shahid and Van Koningsveld 1996; Lewis 1994). The condition for remaining in such lands was that Muslims should be allowed to practise their religion openly and freely. The ethical notion implied by dar-el aman is close to the cosmopolitan Kantian idea of temporary sojourning in peace. Aman pasand is a peace-loving person in Urdu. Sufi saints’ lodges, which often serve as places of refuge, are described as being places of peace or serenity, su kun or sakina, dwelling in peace. This is also the word for Sufi

Figure 3  Doves over the shaykh’s room at Ghamkol Sharif
inner peace in contemplation. Peace is symbolised by the doves at a saint’s lodge (see figure 3).

Generally speaking, *bardasht* means “tolerance” in Urdu, but the most apt description in Urdu of openness to “the other” in a cosmopolitan sense is *wasi un-nazr*, literally a “vast vision,” referring to a person of open horizons, an open-minded, liberal person. This is the opposite of *mutasib* (prejudiced). There are many other related terms: *farakh dil* (open-hearted or generous), *khula damajh* (open-minded), *mehman nawaz* (hospitable), and *sakhi* (generous).

I asked a Pakistani friend if there was a term for “world citizen” in Urdu, someone who believes they belong to the whole world, not just one country. She responded, “this is what we believe in Islam.” She quoted a saying from the poet Muhammad Iqbal, “*Muslim hey, ham wathan hey, sara jehan hamara*” (as Muslims our homeland is the whole world). “We believe that Allah is the God of all people,” she added. Literally “world citizen” translates as *aalmi shahri*, but this expression is seldom used, I was told.

We see, then, that there is a complex vocabulary in Urdu, and no doubt in Arabic, too, referring to notions of tolerance, open-mindedness, and a shared humanity.

An apocryphal tale told to me about Shaikh Ahmed Sirhindi, a renowned seventeenth-century Sufi Naqshbandi, by a *khalifa* (deputy) of Zindapir, the Sufi saint I studied in Pakistan, exemplifies this sense of world belonging. The tale was intended to explain why true Sufi saints like Zindapir always remain in their lodges. Babaji – one of Zindapir’s *khalifas* – began his story by telling me that once, when Ahmed Sirhindi was standing in the company of his disciples, they saw the shaykh take a step forward, then withdraw his foot; he then took a step in the opposite direction and once again, withdrew his foot. This happened a third and fourth time. Wondering at this strange behaviour, his disciples finally asked him: “Your Honour, what is the matter, why do you keep stepping forwards and withdrawing your foot?” Sirhindi replied that there are three types of ranked *faqir* (mendicants): first, the person of *karamat* who can cross the earth in two-and-a-half steps. He moves from place to place, visiting his *murids*; second, the person of high rank (*maqamat*) who can cross the earth in a step-and-a-half. He only visits select places. And finally, the *faqir* who has achieved the rank of utter steadfastness (*istiqamat*). If this *faqir* lifts his foot, there is no place on earth for him to put it down; he can cross the earth in half a step and so he has no need to go anywhere. He remains fixed in one place. This is the place where he sits and this is the place where he is buried.
The tale is clearly one of global Sufi reach. Through it the *khalifa*, Babaji, connects himself both to Sirhindi and to his *pir*, Zindapir, of the same Naqshbandi *silsila* (chain of preceptors and disciples). Zindapir was famous for never leaving his lodge except to go to Mecca on hajj once a year. By contrast, many Muslims, including Sufis, have been world travellers. Muhammad Zaman reports on Ibn Batutta who travelled in the fourteenth century from Morocco to Delhi, where he was appointed a judge, before travelling further to China. This was possible because across this vast region, Muslim scholars shared the same language of scholarly interpretation (Zaman 2005). This is a kind of elite vernacular Muslim cosmopolitanism in which a single language may be shared across many regions and countries, enabling easy travel and communication.

As a devout Muslim, Zindapir, whose lodge was in an isolated valley in the North West Frontier Province, cannot be said to have been a cosmopolitan in either the elite or the secular sense of the term. But he was, in many respects, nevertheless a cosmopolitan. For a start, like other founding saints who created their own order or regional cult, he had a stake in peaceful coexistence and tranquillity. This enabled him to expand his Sufi order or cult network across regions within Pakistan and even countries beyond it, in the Gulf, Great Britain, South Africa,

![Figure 4 Arriving for the ʿurs at Ghamkol Sharif](image)
and elsewhere, and thus also to reach different ethnic and religious populations. The very inclusiveness of the cult or order’s membership and its pragmatic accommodation to different political regimes militated against violence. Throughout the year, supplicants seeking healing and blessing arrived, and continue to arrive, at the lodge. During the annual ‘urs celebration at the lodge tens of thousands of pilgrims and disciples gather together in peaceful amity from across Pakistan and even beyond it (see figure 4).

A further element relates to the spiritual authority of the saint, which transcends that of worldly rulers. If his authority is above that of temporal rulers, it follows also that it recognises no temporal political, ethnic, or religious boundaries. His tolerance towards members of other religions is stressed in many of the morality tales he tells. He repeatedly told me that

Figure 5  A Christian convert who is khalifa of Zindapir
the “true” Islam does not discriminate between men of different creeds and faiths. It was the Sufis, not the ‘ulama’ (the learned scholars), who had brought Islam to the subcontinent. Paralleling his claimed domination of the natural world was his love and dominion over the human world, including men and women of all faiths, from the poorest beggar to the most elevated politician or the most respected of learned scholars (see figure 5).

Saiyed (1989) echoes other South Asian scholars when he contends that it is through Sufi shrines that “the subcontinent saw the best part of Hindu-Muslim integration,” and that it was “the personal and spiritual influence of various saints that ... allowed for the peaceful coexistence of the two communities for several centuries on the Indian subcontinent” (Saiyed 1989, 242). Although Van der Veer has argued that current antagonisms between Hindus and Muslims in contemporary India have diminished and politicised the spirit of Hindu-Muslim fraternity at Sufi saints’ shrines (Van der Veer 1994), there are places in India and Pakistan where even today Hindus and Muslims participate harmoniously in joint celebration, as at the ‘urs of the saint of Nagore-e Sharif in Tamil Nadu (Saheb 1998). Among Zindapir’s disciples were Afghani refugees, Pathans, Punjabis, Sindhis and Kashmiris, peasants and urbanites, rich and poor. Against the puritanical strictures of the Deobandis, Zindapir’s reform Sufism espoused a spirit of openness and generosity, which encouraged followers to aspire to worldly success and prosperity, while envisioning a utopian world of nurture, tranquillity, and selfless giving (see Werbner 2003).

During my evening meetings with the shaykh, he continuously stressed that he expected no reciprocity from me for the generous hospitality he had extended to me. He will never be a guest in my house, he assured me. He treats me this way because I am a human being, insan, I am God’s creature, for the sake of Allah, irrespective of whether I am a Muslim, a Christian, or a Jew.

The trope of unilateral hospitality is key to vernacular forms of ethical cosmopolitanism. When I commented to a Pakistani friend during one of my stays in Pakistan that I would never be able to reciprocate the generosity his family had shown me, he responded that there was no expectation of reciprocity. They believe, he explained, that the stranger they welcome to their home was sent to them by Allah, affording them the opportunity to be generous hosts for the sake of Allah.

1 For other examples in South Asia, see Basu (1998), Liebeskind (1998), Rehman (2007), Bigelow (2010), and Frembgen (2011).
Hospitality, Honour, and Generosity towards Strangers

While anthropologists have not written explicitly about the ethics of vernacular cosmopolitanism, anthropological theorising on indigenous notions of hospitality as signalling an openness to “the other,” to strangers and unknown travellers, parallels in many ways my discussion of vernacular cosmopolitanism here. As Selwyn argues, “[h]ospitality converts: strangers into familiairs, enemies into friends, friends into better friends, outsiders into insiders, non-kin into kin” (2000, 18-19). Writing about Jordanian Bedouin, Shryock tells us that the Arabic word *karām* denotes “generosity, hospitality, nobility, grace and refinement.” But it also conveys, at the same time, a sense of “hazard” (Shryock 2004, 36). This is because the magnitude of generosity towards a guest is potentially almost infinite, and yet to be judged ungenerous is to risk one’s reputation and honour. A host depends on a guest to sing his praises when he leaves. More subtly, “hospitality creates a momentary overlap of the inner and outer dimensions of a ‘house’ (a *bayt* or *dār*)” (ibid.). In crossing the threshold, a guest ambiguously becomes an intimate insider while remaining a social and cultural outsider.

A delightful tale is told by Emrys Peters about his encounter with Cyrenaican Bedouin hospitality. In the first camp where he and his wife pitched their tent, they were welcomed generously with the slaughter of a sheep. While the animal was being prepared they engaged in a long series of formal ceremonial greetings as they reclined on carpets. The meal, when it arrived, was eaten in silence, “without conversing.” It was only when the tea was brought in that for the next two hours the guests were “plied with questions about our origin, our families, our marriage, our history, our country and our travels; and the Bedouin freely gave similar details about themselves ... their origin, their relation to other groups, and their wells, pastures and ploughland” (Peters 1990, 138). The denouement of the tale came the following day, when the anthropologist guests discovered that their spoons and forks had been borrowed for another guest, without permission, on the grounds that “we are now exactly equal together” (ibid., 139).

We see here the move from strangerhood to intimacy and mutual knowledge learnt after hospitality has been generously given though, as Shryock reports, among the Bedouin of Jordan there was a sacred age-old Arab tradition of offering hospitality for “three and one-third days without asking about the identity of the guest” (2004, 44), a custom respected by Zindapir who boasted that he never asked supplicants their names. But as the incidence of the fork-borrowing highlights, there is always a measure
of ambiguity in true hospitality. As Selwyn argues, citing Heal, “while the essence of hospitality lies in sharing (food, lodging, entertainment), the very process of sharing may involve dominating too … [This is because hospitality is] concerned with such values as honour and status, the quasi-sacred character of both guest and host” (Selwyn 2000, 27).

The similarity between hospitality and vernacular cosmopolitanism lies in the fact that in hospitality as in cosmopolitanism there is no intention of a guest or interlocutor being assimilated or fully incorporated into the house. S/he is accepted as a stranger and outsider and yet welcomed and enveloped in generosity as an insider. So, too, cosmopolitanism does not depend on cultural homogenisation or assimilation but on an acceptance: it is, simultaneously, both a relationship and a continuing otherness; a welcoming encounter with difference. A further similarity lies in the ethical voluntarism inherent in the act of hospitality, which, at the same time, is felt by hosts to be compelling and inescapable. So too with cosmopolitanism: cosmopolitanism is not a legal requirement but a voluntary gesture of acceptance and tolerance of a cultural other, which is yet necessary; it is the voluntary creation of nearness and familiarity with and despite strangerhood. In both hospitality and cosmopolitanism, “acceptance is bestowed in a context of vulnerability” (Shryock 2004, 37).

In a later paper, Shryock draws attention to the parallels between Bedouin thinking about hospitality and the thinking of metropolitan philosophers such as Jacques Derrida and Immanuel Kant (Shryock 2008). Kant regarded gestures of hospitality between nations, the injunction to afford the right to sojourn, as guarantors of “perpetual peace,” of cosmopolitan non-violence between nations. Derrida, Shryock tells us (2008, 409), argued that

the host must be prepared to receive the guest without expecting the guest, without acting out of duty yet feeling obliged to feed and cover the guest: “If I welcome only what I welcome, what I am ready to welcome, and that I recognise in advance because I expect the coming of the hote (guest) as invited, there is no hospitality.”

True hospitality, in other words, is for the unexpected guest, not the familiar one, for the unknown stranger who turns up at your door. This is the very opposite of the unwelcoming attitude French hosts have displayed towards Maghrebian migrants in France.

Often, hospitality is given without an expectation of return, but it can also be an opening move in forging a long-term relationship of gift exchange
and debt (Peters 1990, 139). Despite the idealisation of the ethics of hospitality as spontaneous and without calculation, in reality hospitality is at the same time also often highly instrumental for survival, as in the case of Afghan long-distance traders. Marsden shows that among such traders the hospitality they depend on or extend may, and often does, go wrong (Marsden 2012). Guests are a necessary risk and particularly so when it comes to movement across dangerous borders. Nevertheless, hospitality is essential to the lives of these traders.

For Sufi saints like Zindapir who remain permanently seated in their central lodges, hospitality is constructed as a pure ethical gesture, unilaterally extended without expectation of return (see figure 6). Like other hosts, however, such saints also must guard against accusations of hypocrisy and greed – the view that donations and offerings at the lodge “in the name of God” are in reality ways of enriching the shrine’s keepers. In this sense, hospitality at a Sufi lodge may also be interpreted in ethically ambiguous terms. Zindapir, in being an ascetic, a world renouncer, attempted to allay such suspicions. In his moral narratives he stressed his inclusive acceptance of everyone, his willingness to engage with strangers and foreigners, irrespective of religion, culture, and nationality, all of whom are treated as sacred guests hosted under the canopy of God above.
4 The Sufi Saint as Extender of Hospitality to Foreigners and Strangers

What is a faqir? Zindapir asked me, rhetorically. A faqir is a friend of Allah. He does things only for Allah. If he is given the choice between 100,000 rupees, or eat nothing for God's sake, he would choose to stay hungry. If a faqir loves the people, he only loves them for the sake of Allah, not for himself. It is like the fan in my room. Once an Englishman came from the British High Commission in Islamabad. He said: “I have a nice house in Islamabad, full of comforts, yet I feel so peaceful when I come here. Why is that?” The shaykh replied: “The fan is blowing cool air for me, but if someone is sitting in the room with me, he too will feel the cool breeze. So too Allah is here for me and you share in his light. Allah says that if you want to find me, you must first find my friend, you must find mera banda [my man, my servant, the person who does bandagi, prayer].”

The shaykh said that usually women sit behind the barrier where they cannot touch him. He never shakes their hand. Why not? Because it is guna, sin. But once a white female doctor came from Islamabad and he shook her hand because she is a Christian (for her it is not a sin).

The shaykh’s tolerance was repeated in many of the morality tales he tells. He explained: “I respect all people whatever their religion because they are human beings. In fact, once a Christian came here and he was given food before the Muslims so that he would not think they regarded him as inferior.”

An American came to see him, he told me, and asked why Pakistan helped the Afghan refugees. The shaykh replied that Pakistanis and Afghans believed in the same God, and so too did Christians, but the Russians (i.e. the Communists) did not believe in God. Once, a team of doctors from the United Nations working with Afghan refugees in Kohat (the nearby cantonment town) came to visit him. The leader was a Christian doctor, himself not a believer, yet later he asked if he could bring another doctor friend. All are welcome at the darbar, the shaykh said, irrespective of religion, and he treats them all the same: “I gave the visitors food even though it was Ramzan and I myself was fasting. I said they should eat. I fast, but every person who comes here, rich or poor, gets something to eat.”

My own visit was an occasion to prove once again his universal acceptance and tolerance, irrespective of faith or creed. On the last day of my visit to the darbar in 1991, he called me to him and said: “You have stayed with us for three weeks and during this time you have slept on a bed, in comfort. We know that you are Jewish. While you have been here you have seen
many Muslims come and all have slept on the ground. Would you get such good treatment even from your own husband? And where else in the world would you find such peace? Nowhere!” On my departure, I was showered with gifts, including wild honey, perfume, suits of traditional clothing in the most exquisite fabrics, and gifts for my husband. As in the case of important politicians and civil servants, the gifts objectified the shaykh’s ultimate transcendence and the miracle of his generosity.

Zindapir stressed repeatedly that what he does, he does for the love of God and God alone. Some time ago a Japanese team came to the darbar, headed by a Mr. Hiroshima, a famous climber who had conquered K2 in the Karakoram range of the Hindu Kush, the second highest mountain in the world after Mount Everest. The team consisted of scholars from a Japanese institute with an interest in Sufism. They asked the shaykh: “What is the significance of the dome on the graves of pirs?” The shaykh replied that the dome is only for auliya, friends of God, not for generals, heads of state, or kings. It is a sign (nishani) of a man of God, a friend of Allah. On the occasion of this visit, Hajji Ibrahim, a devoted disciple of the shaykh, invited the visitors for tea, Japanese style, and spoke to them in Japanese. He had worked for a Japanese firm in the Gulf and he utilised his experience to entertain the guests in a fitting way. Thus each guest to the darbar is honoured according to his customs – an English visitor is provided with a bed, the Japanese with the appropriate kind of tea.

Once, the shaykh recalled, three young Englishmen came to the darbar. Two had already converted to Islam and one was converted in the darbar by the shaykh. When they met the shaykh on hajj, one of them put the question to him: “Should I stay with my mother who is still a Christian, or leave her?” The pir said that he should keep on living with his mother and should serve her and take care of her. “You should treat her with the respect due to her as a mother.” The Prophet, he said, told a man who had converted to Islam and whose father was an old man and a devout Christian: “You should take your father to the church door, wait for him outside while he prays, and then accompany him back home.”

On the last day of my stay in the darbar, following the ‘urs in 1991, I went to bid goodbye to the shaykh. He looked particularly ethereal, thin and pale, his eyes darkened, and he smiled a sweet, innocent smile. He stressed once more that all he did was for the love of God alone and no one else. He knew I was a Jew (yahudi). If a Jewish and a Muslim woman came before a Muslim judge to be judged, and he put the Muslim woman in the shade, then the judge was not a Muslim. Muslims, Christians, and Jews have the same God, but he, Zindapir, does not like the Russian Communists (in Afghanistan)
because they do not believe in God. During zikr people mention only one name – the name of Allah. By appealing to God, Zindapir transcends Islam to reach out to all people of faith. In doing so, he underlines his own transcendence, the reach of his dominion. He also asserts the difference between the mystic’s knowledge of the inner truth of Islam with its broad, tolerant, universal message, and that of the narrow-minded ‘ulama’.

Lest it be thought that Zindapir was in some sense exceptional, a recent article on a Sufi khalifa in Mauritania exemplifies some of the same traits. Hill reports that his place of residence had become a cosmopolitan site for students from all over Europe, North and West Africa, Indonesia, South America, the US, and Canada (2012, 63). Hajj, the Sufi leader and his colleagues, he tells us, “avidly study their guests’ customs in order to offer appropriate hospitality” (ibid., 65). Hill tells us that

> Just as Hajj teaches Mauritanian disciples to build on common ground with fellow Muslims, he teaches them not to alienate non-Muslims … [W] henever Hajj heard someone (usually a visitor) ask about my beliefs, he quickly changed the subject, quipping that no one knows God’s judgments and that there is “no compulsion in religion” (Qur’an 2:256). (Ibid., 77)

Writing about efforts towards intercommunal peace and networking across different ethnic and religious communities, at Ajmer Sharif, the burial site of the founder of the Chishti order in India, Mu’in al-Din Chishti, and perhaps the most sacred shrine in the whole of South Asia, Kelly Pemberton tells us that in the face of violence and communal strife, keepers of the shrine in Rajasthan make continuous efforts to reach out across Muslim, Hindu, Sikh, and Christian communities in interfaith activism. In doing so they draw upon elements in the saint’s life that “promote a vision of a community in shared faith of the divine, particularly [the saint’s] universal message of love without compulsion.” They thus mobilise, she tells us, “the symbolic and cultural capitals of ‘idioms’ of Sufism” (Pemberton 2012, 270), while they also reach out to the local multifaith community and to other networks of anti-communalist activists.

The intercultural atmosphere of tolerance evident at Sufi annual festivals in South Asia can be found elsewhere in the Muslim world, too. In a recent paper on mulids in Egypt, Samuli Schielke describes the carnivalesque atmosphere at annual mulid festivals in Egypt. Such festivals are marked,
he tells us, by an ethos of joyful inclusiveness. Differences between Islamic religious tendencies, gender, or class are erased so that a “famous actress can eat next to a beggar, and there is no difference between them” (2008, 55). Attempts by Islamic reformists in the Egyptian administration to control what they regard as the disorderly dimensions of these festivals with their crowds, music, transgressive alcohol drinking, gambling, and spontaneous mingling between the sexes in intercultural amity, seem to be, in the long run, doomed to failure, however.

5 Sufi Orders as Trans/regional Cults

If traditions of hospitality towards strangers permeate the vernacular ethics of Muslims in the Middle East, South Asia, and Africa, Sufi saints like Zindapir appear to represent the outer extreme of unilateral giving and hospitality. This may be due, I want to suggest, to the counter-structural features of Sufi orders, seen as organisations that transcend structural and administrative boundaries. Hence, the mediation of cross-ethnic, inter-caste and cross-regional divisions in South Asia is a central feature of South Asian Sufi orders, regarded as regional and transregional cults focused on a single central place, which followers visit periodically. Such cults are not bounded territories. Instead, they interpenetrate with one another, leapfrogging across major political and ethnic boundaries and creating their own sacred topographies and flows of goods and people. These override, rather than being congruent with, the political boundaries and subdivisions of nations, ethnic groups, or provinces (Werbner 1977, xi).

Seen as networked spaces Sufi cults are creative and expansionary organisations. True, the bonds of spirit between disciples of a single Sufi saint often consolidate and mediate biradari (clan), affinal, lineal or village ties; but they may also form the basis for new friendships forged away from home, in the absence of family or neighbourhood during labour migration, and they may introduce parochial villagers to the glories of shrines located well beyond their district and even province. In such cases, being a disciple comes to acquire many new and complex meanings. This was true for the devotees of the living saint I studied, Zindapir, and his regional cult. The genesis of the cult’s vast catchment area could be found in relations between soldiers, labour migrants and, city dwellers living away from their village homes, and their continued ties to their rural communities. It was thus the intersection between labour migration and village or urban roots which
explained the spatial patterning of the shaykh's sacred dominion and the reach of his cult.

Zindapir was during his lifetime, above all, an army saint. His career started as a tailor-contractor in the army where his early circle of companions was forged. Sufi Sahib, who created his own regional cult centred in Birmingham, was one of these companions. Rab Nawaz, one of his trusted khalifas, told me that until white hairs appeared in the shaykh's beard, he and all the khulafa, the deputies or messengers, wore khaki. It was only when his beard turned white that they began to wear white gowns. Even after becoming a practising faqir, Zindapir spent time in Abbotabad not far from the army base where he had worked, and he continued to recruit army followers to be his disciples. Ghamkol Sharif, the lodge he founded when he left Abbotabad, is located only a few miles from Kohat, a large British garrison town or cantonment which was taken over by the Pakistan army at independence. The lodge's reputation as a place of local beauty attracts a constant stream of curious visitors. Many of his murids, disciples, told me how they first visited the lodge while stationed in Kohat. On seeing the lodge, they were overwhelmed by its gloriousness and the spirituality (ruhaniyat) of its shaykh. Later they became his disciples (see figure 7).

Figure 7  Ghamkol Sharif lodge, nestled in the valley
The story told to me by one murid exemplifies this intersection between army, labour migration, and village roots:

I took the vow of baiʿat in 1969. I come from near Tarbela Dam in the Frontier. Many people had told me about the shaikh and a friend suggested that I take baiʿat. Since then I have brought many murids here, and I come here for the ʿurs with three or four lorries every year. I am a qafila (convoy or caravan) leader, the leader on the Tarbela side. When I did baiʿat I was in the army. Now I am a pensioner, I retired in 1976. Today I am a farmer. I have performed the hajj five times, because after I retired from the army I went to Dubai with Ibrahim [another murid] and then to Saudi Arabia [as a labour migrant]. My name is Hajji Ghulam Muhammad and I am a stonemason. I am the person who built the perimeter wall around the Darbar.

It needs to be remembered that while many of Zindapir’s disciples were soldiers, it was as civilians that they joined his cult. The moment they entered the space of the lodge, they shed their military persona. Even in army barracks, when they performed zikr they created an ethical space set apart. Nevertheless, the fact that they were pir-bhai, saintly brothers, as well as comrades in arms served to deepen relations of amity between them. The camaraderie they forged in one context spilled over into the other to create multiplex relations of enduring obligation and trust. It countered formal relations of hierarchy in bureaucratic and military settings.

Before concluding this chapter I want to spell out the relationship between the way that Sufi cults are mapped in space and managed as viable organisations, and the more experiential dimensions of Sufism as espousing peace and tolerance. The experience of communitas at a pilgrimage centre, the sense of ethical voluntarism, and the bonds of friendship between disciples of different ethnic, caste, and occupational origins, forged by a shared devotion to particular places located away from the centres of temporal power, as well as their shared love for the saint, are all made possible by the complex organisation of Sufi orders as regional cults. Their sense of love and camaraderie comes from membership of a specific but deterritorialised organisation in which the saint’s lodge is a hub, drawing pilgrims and offerings, and sending out deputies to found new branches well beyond the centre, as well as redistributing gifts of caps, shawls, cloaks, and sometimes money to disciples living scattered across a vast area.
6 Conclusion

I have argued in this essay for a need to recognise the ethical dimensions of vernacular forms of cosmopolitanism as exemplified by Sufi saints and others in the Muslim world, and with it the need to analyse not simply cosmopolitan practice and performance but the way that ethical ideas and concepts are formulated in local, vernacular terms. In this sense, our depiction of the people we study as “cosmopolitan” may escape the accusation of an imposed attribute implying the superiority and dominance of the West over a so-called cosmopolitan “other.”

More broadly, cosmopolitanism as an ethical outlook enables us to explore ideas and values that spread beyond national boundaries or little communities, and to recognise the qualities of tolerance and open-mindedness that people beyond the West foster in their own terms. So, too, by examining Sufi networks as they extend across boundaries, we can also begin to understand the social underpinnings of Sufism as an ethos of coexistence in peace.

Bibliography


