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The Implications of Immortality at Islamic Shrines

Introduction

As I walked out of a tomb, a mother kneeling outside wept and prayed frantically as her small children stood nearby; clueless and almost naked. I was leaving a shrine in Lahore, Pakistan, a small green mausoleum in the middle of a wide marble courtyard. This was the shrine of Mian Mir, an Islamic Sufi saint from the early 1600s. Sufism is the spiritual branch and section of Islam. Muslims, especially in South Asia, have a tradition of visiting the tombs and shrines of famous Sufi saints seeking intercession for prayers to God on behalf of the deceased saint. They hope that God will help them as a result of His relationship with the saint. Over Spring Break 2017, I had asked my mother to take me to a Lahore shrine (a city known for its history and culture) so I could experience something raw which I would not experience in America. One of my regrets is that I did not stop to listen to the pleas of the mother in the shrine as I was leaving. Given the poor community where this shrine was located and my privilege as being a middle-class American, I'm sure that woman was desperately praying for something simple which I take it for granted.

The requirements of a grave in Islam may be simple but the controversy around shrines are not. Islam began as a religion opposing idolatry in Arabia, and this aversion to any mention of idol worship or God-partnership is serious. However, many cultures, including the Arabs themselves, accept shrines as being allowed if the proper intentions and rituals take place. In recent times, the rise of the fundamentalist Wahhabi theology from Saudi Arabia has evoked a targeted hate against shrines and those who go to them. Attacks at shrines and shrines being blown up is now not uncommon to hear. In fact, I avoided going to a larger shrine in Lahore because the famous shrine of Lal Qalandar in

the south of the country had been blown up not long before my trip (Bhutto 2017). As evident by the emotional, religious, and political implication shrines hold, these graves have not gone without the interference of politics and those who wish to influence the population through the means of a shrine. But why are Islamic shrines unique compared to other religious or political places? This essay argues that the graves of these Sufi saints exude a body politic – a religious power separate from the Body Mortal which cannot be seen and can be manipulate by visitors and other people. It is unique in that this body politic is contained within and can only be accessed at the shrine grounds. For these reasons, pilgrims to the shrine must physically go to the shrine to access this awe and shrine-opponents must destroy the physical shrine to destroy the connection between the shrine and pilgrims.

Background of Islamic Death Rituals, Views on Idolatry, and Spirituality

To begin, an introduction into Islamic theology, burial rights, and the context of shrines must be explained. Islam grew in contrary to the mainstream idol worship throughout Arabia in the 7th century. Therefore, from the beginning, Islam condemned idol worship. When the Prophet Muhammad re-entered his birth city after being exiled and Islam had now become prevalent in this area, his first act was to remove the idols from the largest temple in the city, the Kaaba, which is now the most sacred physical place in Islam and the site of the mandatory annual pilgrimage. As time goes on, shrine-opponents often cite this moment by the Prophet as justification for desecrating shrines and graves, which they perceive as idolatry.

Idolatry is opposed because it is sacrilegious to the Islamic conception of God – His Oneness. God is one, has no son, no partner, and no equal. The Prophets Adam, Jesus,

Moses, and Muhammad are all stressed as simply human. Therefore, in death, it is emphasized that graves be simple and not have any flair to show any vanity. Contrary to their lavish lifestyle, Saudi Arabian kings and royalty are buried in simple, unmarked graves (Metcalf and Huntington 1991: 134). In a lecture by Nancy Steinhardt on March 28, 2017 titled "When Muslims Die in China" at the University of Michigan, Steinhardt noted how in general, Chinese Muslim architecture (for example, a mosque) was indistinguishable from other Chinese architecture. However, if one looked at a set of graves, the one of the Chinese Muslim – so far from the Near East and South Asia – would still be easy to identify compared to the decorated graves of Chinese non-Muslims because of its minimalism. Of course, this does not mean all Muslim graves are the same. In a shrine, the decorated coffin is above ground inside a small mausoleum for people to stand and pray next to, with a courtyard outside for people to gather, pray more, and hold enthusiastic events – such as for pilgrimage on the saint's death anniversary.

Lastly, Islamic shrines are important because these are not the shrines of regular individuals, they are the shrines of *Sufi saints*. Sufism is the spiritual extension of Islam. It has many different branches, interpretations, rituals, controversies etc. However, the important characteristic is that there are different organized Orders from which Muslims can join to learn to become more spiritual. These Orders are based on the ideas of *Baraka* – spiritual charm, blessings, and charisma. To explain, as an individual becomes more pious and is obvious to have a close relationship to God, their presence is associated with more *baraka* and charisma. Sufi Orders arrange their hierarchy around this charisma: it can be taught, handed down, and felt in presence. A Sufi saint is someone who has achieved immense charisma and closeness to God. This is the distinguishing factor between the

grave of a saint and the common grave, for example, of a relative: the grave of the saint holds authorized blessings and charisma. The deceased individual held a closeness to God which could be confirmed by their status in the Sufi Order and observed by the community and followers. When people visit a shrine, they are using the *baraka* trapped around the grave of a saint in order to speak to God. Therefore, prayer is sought by the worshipper through intercession behalf of the relationship of the saint and God. The Arabic term for "intercession" is *shafa'a* which is pleading to God by the means of an intimate friend of God (Muslim saint) for forgiveness or some other prayer. Dr. Rudolph Ware, professor of History and Islam in Africa at the University of Michigan, agreed with me in a meeting on March 30, 2017 that the spiritual power of a Sufi saint is felt in the presence of a saint, even in after death. In fact, Dr. Ware also said that tradition goes as far as to say the *baraka* is trapped as deep as the soil surrounding the complex as well. Moreover, most of those who do visit shrines are practitioners of the two orthodox sects of Islam: Sunnism and Shi'ism – they are not otherized groups. Hence, there is justification for the act of intercession and shrines visiting in Islamic scripture and history. Lastly, it is important to note while there are those who do disagree to some of the immense ritualization which can occur at shrines and misguided intentions, it is only a select few who feel the need to desecrate and destroy a shrine, wrongly murdering people and destroying history.

In summary, Islamic shrines are the graves of spiritual Sufi saints who were attributed to having a closeness with God and blessings. Worshippers go to these shrines to seek intercession for forgiveness or prayer on the basis that by using the *baraka* of the deceased saint, their prayers have a greater chance of being answered. There is much controversy surrounding this practice as many Muslims – especially fundamentalists –

attribute this to idolatry, which Islam is strict in condemning. This results in many different interpretations regarding the existence of shrines. Some Muslims fully believe in the power and practice and do many rituals at these shrines. Others find a median by going to the shrines to pray and feel closeness on behalf of the saint's *baraka*, but do not do too many rituals associated with shrine pilgrimage. Some condemn the practice and do not do it. Others, believe that shrines need to be destroyed by force – and some of these people take it as their job to do so.

The Sufi Saint's Body Politic

The *baraka* and charisma of a saint can be compared to a similar metaphor among anthropology, the "body politic". In his co-authored book, *The Celebration of Death: The Anthropology of Mortuary*, Metcalf cites an argument describing how the body of a king differs from the body of the average man about the Tudors and European royalty:

> For the king has in him two Bodies, *viz*. a Body natural and a Body politic. His Body natural…is a Body mortal, subject to all Infirmities that come by Nature or Accident…But his Body politic is a Body that cannot be seen or handled, consisting of Policy and Government, and constituted for the Direction of the People, and the Management of public weal, and this Body is utterly void of Infancy, and old Age, and other natural Defects and Imbecilities [Metcalf and Huntington 1991: 168]

In this passage, the body of a political power, for example, a king, is ascribed multiple identities which have different representations. Other than the mortal body, the king is also ascribed body with a political aura – Body Politic – which is separate from the mortal body and cannot be physically touched. This body politic represents the individual's power as a king and how others feel this power when thinking of the king and the role he holds. I believe this body politic can similarly be ascribed to Sufi saints. The Sufi saints achieve formal responsibility and achievement as they rise the spiritual ranks in their respective orders. This is what distinguishes a Sufi saint from the common person: they

achieve a formal and socially recognizable high-ranking position which is accepted by the community. In this way, they are subject to the same identities with a body politic as a royal is in their respective community. Under Islamic terminology, this would be the *baraka* which Muslims associate the saint with. The more pious the saint becomes, their *baraka* becomes stronger, more recognizable, and – like the body politic of the Tudors – cannot be seen or handled, but holds authority.

It is important that this power is ascribed and recognized by the community. In her book *The Political Lives of Dead* Bodies, anthropologist Verdery notes how the bare dead body is not as significant until it is coupled with "the culturally established relations to death and throughout the way a specific dead person's importance is (variously constructed)" (Verdery 1999: 28). In the saint's respective community, a saint is attributed authority recognized by the people. This gives him legitimate power like a king is recognized as the power head of their respective land. As generations and centuries past, these Muslim communities are unique in that the agree to give authority to the deceased body, allowing the body politic of a saint to live on. In contrast, the body politic of a royal could end after his or her death. Verdery notes how often the death of a king "call[s] into question the survival of the polity" (Verdery 1999: 28). Among Sufi saints, the *baraka* body politic is clearly not at risk after its their death and continues to persevere. It is like a form of immortality. In fact, some literature claims in India devotees implore that the saint is alive by the concept of *zinda-piri* (Umashankar 2015: 129). They claim that the saint's physical death was the last step to the destruction of the self and "destroy[ing] himself completely (*fana'*) in the being of God (Umashankar 2015: 129).

To summarize, Sufi saints retain *baraka* after their death which is a power felt by people. This is like the body politic because it is an unseen power which is felt separate after the body mortal of the saint has died. The Muslim graves of these Sufi saints are unique from the graves or other royalty which had a body politic in that Muslims continue to ascribe a strong body politic to the grave after the individual has died. Next, I will introduce how in rituals and pilgrimage, people must travel to the physical body to access both the body politic and the *baraka*.

Rituals at the Shrine

Cultural adaptions mean that people do different rituals at shrines to achieve benefit. When I went to visit the shrine of saint Mian Mir in early March, I followed the actions of our driver who walked into the tomb, placed both his hands on the foot of the coffin, paused, then walked to the side and raised in hands in prayer. On the ornaments on the windowsill there are threads for which pilgrims have tied to when they have made a prayer hoping for something symbolizing the bond between the devotee and the saint. In Turkey in 2002, the Turkish government began posting condemned rituals on plaques at shrines for their own secular agenda. These include:

> …the sacrificing of animals as a vow to the shrine, lighting candles or sticking small stones or coins to the walls of the shrine, tying pieces of cloth to the shrines or to the trees in front of the shrine complex, throwing money on the tomb, leaving food at the shrine, touching the tomb or the cloth over the tomb with hands or face, asking a favor from the dead saint directly for help and not from God, circumambulating around the shrines and tombs, expecting miraculous healing from shrines, and sleeping and performing canonical prayers (*namaz*) inside the shrines [Akcapar and Jassal 2014: 98].

These rituals show that devotees who go to the shrine are physically invested in the place. What is important is that the rituals which are believed to be done at the shrine *involve* the space of the actual shrine. Candles are lit on the wall, money and food are left

near the tomb, the coffin is touched, and prayers are made next to the grave while circling next to it. Even animal sacrifice is done around the shrine as one individual in the Turkish investigation noted that it is important an animal be sacrificed after a wish is granted (Akcapar and Jassal 2014: 99). This shows that devotees must go to the physical space of the shrine if they wish to receive the benefits associated with it. This is why shrines are associated with pilgrimage – travelling to shrines and stopping by others along the way. In *The Secret Routes of Uyghur History*, historian Rian Thum relates how in Northwestern Uyghur China, the shrines of the Seven Muhammads in Yarkand are seven shrines for which people travel to the tombs during the middle of the Islamic month of Sha'ban to pray for intercession of the day (Thum 2014: 100). They circuit around these seven tombs during this time. Pilgrimages to shrines are common at the death anniversary of shrines, called an *Urs*; Mian Mir's 387th death anniversary was February 11 in the 2011 Gregorian calendar. The common place of worship for a Muslim is a mosque. However, Muslims are not required to go to a mosque to pray. The canonical ritual prayers as well as supplications can be done at home or any other clean place. On the contrary, shrine devotees need to actually go to the physical place of the shrine and the saint's grave if they are to successfully pray and ask for intercession. They need to access the body politic. This proves two things: 1) the body politic of a saint continues to survive centuries after the death of a saint and 2) the body politic both extends to and is constrained by the space of the shrine. A devotee must be in front of the grave to put their hands on it. They must be near its walls or a tree in the vicinity to tie a thread. Lighting a candle in one's house is not perceived to have the same effect as lighting a candle in the wall of the shrine. When devotees were told in Turkey that their ritual practices were condemned, they not only

criticized the plaque, but took it to be the same as visiting shrines entirely. One said, "What harm will come from visiting shrine?" and continued to talk about the rituals she does there (Akcapar and Jassal 2014: 100). Another explained how visiting shrines "is not in line with the government's ideology of Islam" (Akcapar and Jassal 2014: 100). For these devotees, visiting the shrine was not to only visit, but to perform these rituals as well. The two acts go hand in hand and one cannot be separated from the other. What these dynamic and interactive rituals people feel the need to perform at a shrine show us the power of something greater at the place which is attracting the devotees thousands of miles away to feel the need to come. Anthropologist Angela Zito notices this as well, when she remarks, "through our embodied physicality can we make visible our intuition of the things beyond it" (Zito 2011: 24).

In some instances, other individuals may wish to be buried near the saint in the complex after they die. These could be other devotees, relatives, or "nobility who wished to be buried in the courtyard of the saint" (Umashankar 2015: 129). This personal burial ritual and choice is significant because the it proves that these individuals are deciding their resting place based on the everlasting body politic of an individual they may never have met. Not for any other reason than they believe buried near his space will benefit them in the afterlife. Therefore, they acknowledge an everlasting body politic of the saint which will help the individual in his or her death and that they must be buried near the saint if they wish to receive an everlasting benefit.

In summary, the body politic of the deceased saint – called *baraka* under Islamic terminology – is everlasting even after the demise of the body mortal and exists only within a confined space. Muslim shrine pilgrims must go to the shrine if they are to do access the

power of this body politic because the rituals involve interaction with the physical space encompassing the coffin.

A Space of Unity

Sufi shrines have the unique function of being a mutually revered religious space in South Asia. In 1947, Pakistan was created to serve as its own nation for the Muslim minority in India. It can be fair to assume then that the subcontinent has deep divides over religions. It does. However, the Sufi shrine has become a neutral ground for the gathering of different beliefs. This is because the saint's everlasting body politic continues to represent principles of diversity and inclusion even after the death of the saint.

As stated earlier, Sufi saints delve into the spiritual and mystical realm within Islam. Among South Asians, this can transcend religious and identity barriers. The Sufi messages of unity and love for each other appeals to all religions. The songs they sing in the local languages can be specifically ambiguous so that each individual can ascribe their own beliefs to it. For example, Sufi poetry often talks about love of God, but is written as if a man and women are professing their love for each other. Listeners can now freely choose to engage with the metaphor and interpret the song as them loving their own deity or they can simply enjoy the song as a love song between two people. What is important is that many Sufi saints preached this universal love in their lifetime and these principles are still remembered hundreds of years later when Hindus, Sikhs, Muslims, and other religions gather at these shrines. They gather in these shrines because like the body politic of a king representing their land, the body politic of a Sufi saint represent principles of unity which are still present in the shrine's space after the saint's death.

The ritualistic practices of non-Muslims do not differ outwardly as much compared to Muslims. Hindus and Sikhs will uniquely break coconuts in the shrine's complex, but they will also circle the coffin, offer flowers and colored cloths, and participate in singing (Umshankar 2015: 135). What differs them between Muslims is the intention of the rituals. An important intention of Muslims praying at Sufi shrines is they stress that one is *seeking intercession* on behalf of the saint while praying to God. Hindu and Sikh visitors "often pray to the saint, as is common practice in their respective religions" (Umashankar 2015: 135). This is significant because it is a different interpretation between religions of the power of the saint and the shrine; yet, it proves a shared acknowledgment of the *baraka* and body politic surrounding the saint in his complex after death.

An example of a Sufi saint's respect for different religions which is celebrated hundreds of years later is the spring festival of Basant at the shrine of saint Nizamuddin Auliya who died in 1325 in New Delhi, India. The saint was sad over the loss of his nephew, so his disciple wore the bright yellow clothes of the spring festival which the Hindus were celebrating, and this cheered up the saint. The Basant festival is still celebrated enthusiastically today at Nizamuddin Auliya's shrine and is a clear example of how people continue to remember the preached diversity and unity of Sufi saints (Umashankar 2015: 135-136).

To summarize, Sufism encourages principles of unity, love, and diversity between different religions and identities. Sufi mystics and saints practiced these principles in their life time and its effect is still visible hundreds of years later. At Sufi shrines, people of different religions gather in the presence of the dead saint to access his body politic and

baraka – maybe with different intentions, but for the same universal pleas for a good life nonetheless.

A Perceived Reason for Shrine Desecration

On September 2, 1994, about two thousand men arrived at the grave of the patron saint of Aden, Yemen with shovels, pickaxes, assault weapons, grenade launchers, and explosives. They systematically decimated the shrine of Abu Bakr al-'Aydarus, who had died in 1508 and who's death anniversary brought tens of thousands of pilgrims. The desecraters systematically removed books, burned down almost 500 years of intricate woodwork, and exhumed graves and burnt the bones (Ho 2006: 5-6). This group of people clearly believed that shrine rituals were wrong, and they chose physical violence, intimidation, and erasing history as the means to which to stop the practice.

At the surface level, these individuals believed that shrine worship was not something which was religiously permissible. Engseng Ho, professor of History at Duke University, cites many controversial questions which Muslims debate over on the legitimacy of shrine visiting and the extent of what rituals could permissibly be performed:

> The division [between Sufis and Muslim fundamentalists] grow up around questions such as: Can a dead person hear a supplicant? Does she/he have power to benefit a supplicant? If we attribute this power to humans, and dead ones at that, are we usurping what belongs to God alone? What is the maximum height to which a tombstone can be raised – to prevent its becoming an idol?...Is it legitimate for a person to mediate between God and someone else?...Can one legitimately seek assistance from the dead? [Ho 2006: 11]

The people who attacked the saint's tomb in 1994 were definitely on the opposing side for many of the questions asked earlier. In their minds, they believed that they had to physically destroy the shrine if they were to end the practice of shrine pilgrimage. To explain, however, there are many people to opposed to shrine rituals but still are not vandals who destroy graves, art, history, and sometimes even kill people to prove their point. I

argue that for those who do feel the need to destroy the shrine, this is because of their understanding that to destroy the practice of the doing rituals at shrines, they must attack the entrancing force which attracts pilgrims to the site of a Sufi saint: the *baraka* or body politic.

Pilgrims must go to the physical coffin to receive the blessings of the intercession of the saint, and shrine desecraters perceive must go to the physical coffin to break the bond between the deceased saint and the devotees. This further proves that the body politic of the saint is trapped within a constrained space – the constrained space must be destroyed to break the bond. The wood must be burned, the graves undone, and the complex vandalized. In this sense, the shrine desecraters are acknowledging the body politic which the saint has, as shrine attenders do as well. Like the comparison that a Muslim can do his or her canonical prayers outside of a mosque, destroying a mosque will not impede the Muslim's ability to pray. However, destroying the shrine will affect the pilgrims from going to the actual shrines because they will not be able to achieve the benefits of shrine rituals without being able to access the body politic which surrounds the shrine complex.

A second example of a shrine desecration was the recent attack on the Lal Qalandar shrine in Sehwan, Pakistan. In her post-incident New York Times article, "ISIS Hates Our Saint Because He Belongs to Everyone", author Fatima Bhutto argued how the Sufi shrine is a representation of an "open, inclusive tradition" which conflicts with fundamentalists (Bhutto 2017).

> Before Qalandar arrived here, before Islam came to the subcontinent, Sehwan was known as Shivistan after the Hindu god Shiva. In time, the town's name was changed, but Sindh has long remained a home to all faiths. At the annual festival of Qalandar, a Hindu and a Muslim family together drape a ceremonial cloth over Qalandar's grave. A lamp-lighting ceremony reminiscent of Hindu rites is also performed [Bhutto 2017].

Different religions, sexualities, identities, and strengths of beliefs are attracted to the spiritual presence of a Sufi shrine. It is not about the body's Muslim identity as much as it is about their messages of love and respect which are admirable by everyone. This is one reason why fundamentalists such as ISIS target shrines with their Muslim heritage but sites of perceived "idolatry" and association with other religions. The dead saint in these shrines continue to exude a body politic strong and everlasting that people from different religions continue to come and embrace the spirit of unity. When shrines are attacked, the politic is disrupted and it is difficult for people to gather until a shrine for the individual is restored. And it is important that a space so integral to peace and dialogue does get restored.

In summary, when shrine desecraters feel the need to destroy shrines, they are acknowledging the same mysterious power many claim they theoretically should not feel because of they do not believe in the validity of shrine rituals. They feel the need to break the bond between the body politic and pilgrims, acknowledging that the body politic exists even centuries after the death of the saint and that it must be exploited at the physical space of the shrine.

Conclusion

This essay sought to bring to light the existence of the body politic sentiment among Muslims – not in royalty, but in religious spirituality. In Islamic terminology, this body politic is a part of the well-established theory of *baraka*, meaning charisma or blessings. The body politic among the Muslims saints are unique from some non-Muslim graves and from non-Sufi-saints for two reasons. First, the body politic of Muslim saints remains to be strong, prevalent, and everlasting even after death. Second, is that this body politic exists

in only the space surrounding the coffin. The shrine and tomb complex restrain the body politic within their walls. This is proven by the thousands of people who travel on shrine pilgrimage to those shrine desecraters who acknowledge the powerful body politic when they seek to destroy it from graves.

Knowing the strong opposing feelings of shrine fundamentalists, my mom was adamant that I do not go to see the large shrine of Data Darbar while I was in Pakistan. I was concerned as well since the Lal Qalandar was blown up only days ago. I therefore went in and out of the smaller shrine of Mian Mir quickly. I now regret not taking the few more extra minutes to acknowledge the historical power I was in the presence of and comprehend how simple walls can trap them – creating a space which has been so meaningful to help people deal with their troubles for hundreds of years.

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