



DASTAVEZI
THE AUDIO-VISUAL
SOUTH ASIA

Shahbaz Qalandar

Hasan Ali Khan and Aliya Iqbal-Naqvi

Abstract

The film Shahbaz Qalandar explores the vital role played by the Qalandariyya Sufi Order in the spiritual life of the town of Sehwan in Sindh, Pakistan, the last remaining centre of Qalandari dervishes in the world, and a major hub of intersectional piety in the wider region. Shahbaz Qalandar is a scholarly intervention into popular discourse, deploying the audio-visual impact and accessibility of film, with the aim of highlighting the religious coherence and historical continuity of the Islamic spiritual center at Sehwan. This paper is a collaboration between Hasan Ali Khan and Aliya Iqbal Naqvi: it reflects on the film-making process as experienced by academic scholars.

Keywords: Sufism, Sehwan Sharif, Islam

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Filming 'Shahbaz Qalandar': From Spectacle to Meaning

Introduction

Lal Shahbaz Qalandar, the 'Red Falcon,' God's beloved friend, is the pulsing heart of Sehwan, a small town in Sindh, 300 km north of Karachi. Known in common parlance as Sehwan Sharif ('Revered Sehwan'), the life of the town revolves around the shrine of the *Qalandari* Sufi Saint Syed Muhammad Usman Marwandi (d. 1274) or Lal Shahbaz Qalandar. Sehwan is the last remaining center of the *Qalandariyya* Sufi order in the world today. Attracting over 5 million pilgrims a year, Sehwan is not only one of the most visited and venerated sacred geographies in South Asia, but it is also arguably one of the most uniquely vibrant. Often characterized in popular discourse as 'the greatest party on earth,'¹ the shrine culture's very uniqueness and vibrancy have served to obscure the core realities of the *Qalandariyya* spiritual path integral to the ritual at Sehwan.

The shrine welcomes all to partake of the saint's *barakah* (holy blessing), and a motley crowd visits for a variety of reasons and motivations: Sunnis, Shi'as, Hindus, women, transgenders, aristocrats, beggars – and, some spectators. There are no set prescriptions, no preaching; thus neither spectators nor many devotees are fully aware of the history and theology underlying the sacred space of Shahbaz Qalandar. The vibrant spectacle, and the impressive numbers attracted to the saint, especially at the annual '*urs* celebrations, have generated numerous visual and print media pieces on shrine culture at Sehwan, including some documentaries,² but not one is interested in the question of what the rituals at Sehwan *mean*, what they signify, and have signified for centuries, to the initiated inner circle who safeguard the space.

Our film *Shahbaz Qalandar* (from now on: *SQ*) was made to root the devotional rites – epitomized by the electrifying drumming and dance called *dhamal* – in their historical and theological context. The film seeks to capture the sensory experience of *being* in the midst of 'the greatest party on earth,' whilst simultaneously understanding the multi-layered meanings that sanctify the ritual practices at the heart of this chaotic pageantry. Letting pictures and voices at Sehwan speak for themselves, *SQ* demonstrates how the rituals of the *Qalandariyya* are built largely around the Islamic

1 The title of a famous piece on Sehwan by celebrity journalist Declan Walsh published in the Guardian: <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2007/oct/04/pakistan.travel>

2 The two feature-length documentaries released before *SQ* are: *Mast Qalandar* (2005) by Till Passow; and *The Qalandar Code: The Rise of the Divine Feminine* (2018) by Atiya Khan

symbolism of Imam Husain, and the sacred history of the events of Kerbala. Using the mass medium of film allows us to make this critical contribution to both academic knowledge *and* public discourse.

Hasan Ali Khan's extensive research on the *Qalandariyya* and Sehwan served as the blueprint for the film *SQ*, and he directed all investigations at the site. *SQ* was shot by film-makers Shabbir Siraj, Nofil Naqvi, Talha Muneer, and Umair Bilal, supported by technical assistants Aamir Khadim and Nadeem Abbas, and by line-producer Hamza Arif. The editing was completed, at various stages, by Talha Muneer, Shabbir Siraj, and Owais Khan. The final script was a collaboration between Hasan Ali Khan and his fellow academic, Aliya Iqbal Naqvi, who is also the narrator for the film.

This essay is a collaboration between Hasan Ali Khan and Aliya Iqbal Naqvi, reflecting on the film-making process. It explores the heuristic value of the experience, the reflections, the challenges, and rewards of making this film for all those involved. Given the self-reflexive nature and auto-ethnographic lens of this writing, we will henceforth refer to members of the film team by the first name. Key members of the team, Shabbir and Hamza, were interviewed for this essay.

Hasan: How This Film was Made

I initially conceived of *SQ* as a medium for ethnography and the historical documentation of Sehwan's religious landscape. The wider vision was to make a film with scholarly depth which would appeal to both academic and lay audiences.

For several years, I have been researching the history, beliefs, and practices of the *Qalandariyya* Sufi order, previously an Asia-wide phenomenon now existing only in Sehwan (and its satellites). My association with the location goes back to 2009 when I was introduced to Sehwan as part of the research team working with the French Interdisciplinary Mission in Sindh (MIFS) under Professor Michel Boivin. Once MIFS quit Pakistan in 2012, I continued my work independently, expanding my base of contacts, and producing a series of research papers on the *Qalandariyya* and Sehwan. I realized that for one of the most important and religiously diverse Sufi shrines in the region, works of academic prose would simply not do justice to its reality, or to the role it plays in the lives of its adherents. It was then that I thought seriously about attempting a visual ethnography, a film that would be more for teaching than commercial use.

In April 2015, the project commenced with my old colleague Shabbir, an independent

filmmaker, and his D7 camera, for fun, without a budget. Like every other visitor to Sehwan, our initial focus was on the *dhamal*, the dramatic ritual dance of the Qalandars. As Shabbir says, ‘the first trip was just meant to be a survey, but we ended up shooting very effectively, especially the *naqqaras* (drums) and *dhamal*.’ Shabbir also noted that some of the best footage in the final film was captured without a plan, ‘just because we happened to be at the right place at the right time,’ including the iconic shot of the never-ending red *chadar* with which the film opens (0:00:37). Such serendipitous shots were among the happiest consequences of being forced, for more frustrating reasons, to make multiple trips.

Based on the initial footage captured with Shabbir, I proposed the idea of a feature-length documentary on the *Qalandariyya* to my employer, Habib University (from now on: HU). A small budget of 84,000 Pakistani rupees, at the time nearly 1000 USD, was allocated for the film, which only covered logistical costs; while equipment, technical resources, and most of the manpower were loaned from the HU Film Studio. The process of filming continued with Nofil until he left HU, followed by new HU faculty Talha and Umair, who went to Sehwan with me to capture some critical final footage. Both Aamir and Nadeem, the technical assistants for the film, also left HU. The film was eventually edited by Talha and the final tweaking was done by Owais, also at HU. For the sound and voice-over work, done by Shabbir in 2016, we ran into difficulties at HU but were granted use of the Journalism Center’s studios at IBA, courtesy of the director.

For a historian like me, work generally means the solitary activity of producing academic papers. A film, however, is, by necessity, a group enterprise and contingent on external factors not in the control of the scholar. The difficulties in making the film were manifold. There was the sheer heat, the crowds, and the odd timings at which we had to shoot the film. As Shabbir reminds us, the scorching temperatures would heat the cameras which would then refuse to switch on until cooled for at least half an hour. For me, as a non-technical producer-director, the technical challenges were the greatest obstacle. There was very little money, we worked with borrowed equipment, different sorts for each visit, and everyone worked for free. Employee turnover at Habib University is high, which resulted in several different people shooting different portions of the film. We thus ended up with critical inconsistencies in the quality of footage: several key scenes had to be shot multiple times. The use of different grades of cameras and other equipment made the color-grading and sound correction especially difficult for Talha and Owais who nevertheless managed to produce a polished final

cut. I learned all this on the job, initially dependent on the expertise of whoever was available.

Despite the challenges, the film came together because of the goodwill of individual colleagues. This is a representative illustration of how things often happen in Pakistan: excellent work is done, but the impetus usually comes from individuals who choose to collaborate, rather than through any driving institutional vision. The great advantage, however, of being based at a university in Karachi was that I always had ready access to both Sehwan and technical resources. It was more or less possible to hop into a car with someone from the HU film studio and go off on a shoot without much prior planning.

Aliya: Why Such a Film Should be Made

Hasan's determination to make this film, despite all odds, sprang from a variety of concerns. I would like to focus, however, on one major concern that affected all of us who worked with him. We worked on *SQ*, without compensation and with a sense of ownership, because something about the importance, the urgency, of what Hasan wanted to convey, resonated with us. The film team constituted *SQ*'s first audience, even before it was made. The process of making the film taught us what the film sets out to say: that there is a deep-rooted, coherent, and very *Islamic* context underlying the spectacle at Sehwan.

As Pakistanis, as Muslims, the journey of making this film, of seeing the *Qalandariyya* through the lens of Hasan's research, whilst simultaneously experiencing the sensory overload of Sehwan itself, was transformative. I am especially interested in this aspect of *SQ* – what it means for urban Muslim Pakistanis to have made this film, and what it might mean for them to view and experience this film, especially our students. Hasan writes that he 'conceived of attempting ... a film made more for teaching...' For me, as the other local academic, this potential student audience is paramount. Hasan and I teach in newly minted 'Liberal Arts' programs that have created a special space for critical engagement with Pakistani orthodoxies, by Pakistanis with Pakistanis. It is tricky, of course, but *SQ* adds a new dimension to this ongoing creation of a nascent post-nationalist discourse within Pakistan.

In cities, where the pressures of modern Islamic reformism (including the state version) is stronger, one is constantly forced to negotiate the public identity of being Muslim,

no matter where one might fall, personally, on the spectrum of belief. Despite the debates and enmities that abound, modern Islamic discourses (whether they be Wahabi, Tablighi, Deobandi, westernized, nationalist, even Shi'a) are mediated by a 19th century British Protestant conception of what proper religion *should* be: a rationally delineable, legalist orthopraxy.³ On the other side is the thing widely labeled 'Sufism,' associated with tolerance, color, music, irrationality, backwardness, heresy, and Coke Studio (prioritized according to one's modernist orthodoxy of choice).

'It wasn't the first time at Sehwan for many of us,' reports Hamza, 'but it was the first time any of us went beyond the idea that all Sehwan is, is a party town where you can smoke hash on the streets without being bothered.' None of us meant any harm: we came in peace, attracted to the exhilarating music, the transgressive freedoms. But we came without any understanding of what it was actually about, nor, in the unconscious hubris of our modern educated-ness, even the awareness that such an understanding may be important and lacking in us. In Karachi, from where the film team hails, we are all differentiated by the particularities of our backgrounds; but in Sehwan, our common distance from the Qalandar mode of being lumped us together into the category of white-collar city-slickers, products of colonial modernity, viewing the locus of Shahbaz Qalandar as a weird and wonderful place of otherness.

Before *SQ*, the name Sehwan conjured for me vague images of a joyous rustic devotionalism, a dumbed-down, incoherent relic of what was once a tradition rooted in the high Sufi philosophy of a long-gone Islamic golden age. I was no different to Hamza, then an HU student from a fairly typical urban middle-class Wahabi-esque family: before visiting Sehwan with Hasan, Hamza thought of Shahbaz Qalandar's ethos as 'idiot grave-worshippers' indulging in '*kufr*.' We drew a line, not quite consciously, between 'us-who-know-better' and the curious 'native' spectacle at Sehwan. And in this, we constituted a microcosm representative of the many urbanites like us who would form one of the major audiences of this film – especially our younger facsimiles in this attitude, inhabiting the classrooms to which some of us would return: the Pakistani students who know only the narrow continuum of Islam visible in the middle-class city. For all of them, *SQ* bottles something essential of our experience of being Muslim in Sehwan, something that cannot be conveyed only in words.

3 Whilst Islam developed strong legal and rational traditions throughout its history, a particular legalistic containment of public religion and identity took place in colonial times, especially in British India. For further reading on this, look at Cohn, Bernard, *Colonialism and its Forms of Knowledge*, New Delhi, Oxford University Press, 1997; Jalal, Ayesha, *Self and Sovereignty: Individual and Community in South Asian Islam since 1850*, New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2001; Zaman, M. Qasim, 'Religious Education and The Rhetoric of Reform: The Madrasa in British India and Pakistan,' *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, Cambridge University Press, Vol. 41, No. 2 (Apr., 1999), pp. 294-323.

One's starting point, then, was that of a colonial anthropologist studying the primitive in his native environment. One began as a visitor, observer, scholar, as the eye directing the camera's gaze. One thought one could not be a participant. But the energy of the space renders it impossible to remain on the sidelines. One is drawn, inevitably, into participation. It is a space of chaos, a space of possibility, in which familiar modes and boundaries may be transcended. It sounds trite to repeat the oft-cited truism that a major Sufi shrine like Shahbaz Qalandar attracts devotees from all backgrounds and religious denominations. It does. But the profundity of this only hits when one is there, experiencing the collapse of more intimate boundaries: when a skeptic finds himself unexpectedly moved by spiritual forces; when a woman suddenly understands that she can shed respectability, invade and own a space that ought to be the purview of men; when a city *sahib* finds himself in a meaningful exchange with a filthy *faqir*, finds his normal inhibitions, the defenses of his class, absent without leave.

The film thus becomes a means to convey, viscerally, some of what we learned about the relationality of one's body to this sacred space, where the lines between observer, participant, devotee, performer, and audience are in constant flux. Seduced and subjugated by the power of the *dhamal*, by the collective energy of the variegated crowd, one's self is marinated and reconstituted – engendering a bone-deep realization of the need to be respectful beyond lip service, to acknowledge that the 'party' *means* something (even if one can't quite rationalize it). The film can *show* this dynamic while simultaneously *telling* the viewer about the coherent history and beliefs behind the show. This multi-pronged strategy is how *SQ* mounts an effective intervention in global and local public discourse about Islam in Pakistan.

Hasan: The Audio-Visual Foci of the Film

The blueprint of the film had formed in my mind during the latter years of my research visits to Sehwan, as I got to know both locals and visitors to the shrine. The main subjects of the film are the salient elements, which, taken together, reveal a coherent theological framework at Shahbaz Qalandar's shrine, as I had argued in the three papers before beginning work on *SQ*. Like everyone, we focused first on filming the *dhamal*, the dramatic ritual dance of the Qalandars, and the central practice at Sehwan. But, unlike others, my purpose was to reveal the religious symbolism underlying the *dhamal*, otherwise familiar to audiences as nothing more than an

expression of wild Sufi ecstasy. The remaining foci of the film are all connected to the symbolism of the *dhamal*, which gravitates around two holy relics: the *tauq-i gireban* and the *'alam* (explained below).⁴

The *dhamal* is performed at the shrine by the initiated as well as lay devotees every single day of the year after the *maghrib* prayer – *except* for the first ten days of the Islamic month of Muharram. It was this juxtaposition of the central importance of daily *dhamal* against the ceasing of *dhamal* for all but ten days of the Muslim lunar calendar that became the main plot for the film. These two points define *SQ*: after the intro, the door of the shrine opens (time: 10.02); the *dhamal* is showcased with its various aspects (starting at 11.32); followed by the ceasing of the *dhamal* in Muharram and the door closing (time: 33.13).

The *dhamal* was a comparatively easier section to shoot, as it happens throughout the year. On every Thursday and the 1st, 21st and 29th of the Islamic lunar months, a 'big' *dhamal* performance takes place, when the population of Sehwan at times quadruples. The three largest *dhamals* in Sehwan, in which thousands participate, occur on the main days of Shahbaz Qalandar's *'urs* or death commemoration but are very difficult to film due to the crowds. Hence, the *dhamals* on the main lunar-month dates were used for *SQ* (time: 18.27 to 18.43).

During the first 10 days of Muharram, the *dhamal* falls ritually silent; the shrine keepers and devotees enact special ceremonies to commemorate the martyrs of Kerbala.⁵ There is a traditional self-flagellation (*matam*) in a form unique to Sehwan: the penitents strike their upper arms with their hands in a rhythmic fashion to remember 'Abbas's severed limbs (time: 28.29 onwards).⁶ Other penitents at the shrine also practice the more common Shi'a flagellation with bloodletting (time: 8.38-8.46). In Muharram the skin of the *dhamal* drums is changed ritually for the year, and on the 11th, the *dhamal* starts again and continues uninterrupted for the rest of the year, the conclusion of the narrative arc of *SQ* (time: 34.58).

Most closely associated with the performance of *dhamal* as a religious ceremony are the dervishes or faqirs of Bodla Bahar, located at a different space within Sehwan.

4 There are other extant relics associated with Shahbaz Qalandar, such as his dagger, his personal Quran, and his begging bowl, but none of these play a pivotal public role in shrine ritual as do the tauq and the *'alam*.

5 These ceremonies occur only for the 10 days, some just once, so if one misses a shot, one has to wait an entire year for it on occasion.

6 'Abbas was Husain's half-brother and is second only to Husain amongst the martyrs of Kerbala. 'Abbas was the standard-bearer and his arms were cut off before he was finally killed.

Bodla Bahar was Shahbaz Qalandar's disciple who, according to oral tradition, was a Hindu, had proceeded to Sehwan before the Qalandar, and was killed in an act of ritual sacrifice. He is considered a martyr and is the central intermediary figure between the *Qalandariyya* dervishes and Shahbaz in Sehwan today. Bodla Bahar's shrine is one of the few in the country not controlled by the state, and is hence religiously 'free.' It is run by its *sajjada nashin*, Pirzada Akhtar, head of the *Qalandariyya* order.

If one were to ask the initiated dervishes at Bodla Bahar whether the *dhamal* has any symbolic religious value, they would reply that it surely does. According to them, the word *dhamal* is made up of two words which have become corrupted, 'dam' or breath, and 'hal' or state. Together they make 'dam-hal,' the 'breath state,' or the state of transcendence for which Sufism is known.⁷ And, according to Sayyid Mehdi Raza Shah, the *sajjada nashin* ('inheritor of the seat') or lineal caretaker of Shahbaz Qalandar's shrine, the *dhamal* of the *Qalandariyya* dervishes is the symbolic representation of Imam Zain al-'Abidin's walk⁸ on the hot desert sands during his journey as a prisoner from Kerbala to Damascus. The film allowed one to show the rhythmic movements of the *dhamal* whilst Mehdi narrated the symbolism passed down to him through his father (time: 12.16-13.31).

As visible in the film after the shrine's door opens, there is a noticeable difference between the personalized *dhamal* performed by uninitiated devotees at Shahbaz Qalandar's shrine, and the ritual *dhamal* at Bodla Bahar, depicting Zain al-'Abidin's actual walk from Kerbala. On major lunar dates, the Bodla Bahar faqirs perform the *dhamal* first at their shrine, in their characteristic red robes, and then move in a procession to Shahbaz Qalandar's shrine (time: 17.52-18.09). These are the only occasions when the initiated *Qalandariyya* dervishes perform the 'real' *dhamal* at the great Qalandar's shrine, which they otherwise perform at the shrine of Bodla Bahar every day. They end the *dhamal* at Bodla Bahar with their characteristic *Namaz-i tariqat*, or 'prayer of the order' (time: 14.57-15.33), considered heretical, as it replaces the obligatory Islamic evening prayer, and is partly delivered in the vernacular.⁹

7 Many medieval Sufi orders had similar ceremonies which differed in content, but which were, in their symbolism, rooted in 'Ali's cult of personality. Unfortunately, due to the absence of an informant saying this on camera, such an explanation could not be included in the film.

8 The son of Husain (son of Ali, grandson of Muhammad) and the 4th Imam in the Shi'a Muslim tradition. Young Zain al-'Abidin was captured after the slaughter of Husain and all the other men at the battle of Kerbala; he was force-marched across the desert from Kerbala in Iraq to the Umayyad Caliph Yazid's palace in Damascus.

9 *Namaz-i tariqat*, or 'prayer of the order' is very similar to other ceremonies in non-Shar'ia adhering Sufi groups, mostly lost to history, except in certain lodges of the Alevi community, when they perform their evening Cem in the same manner.

The story of the daily *dhamal* and its ten-day silence at Sehwan unfolds further in *SQ* through the two holy relics mentioned earlier. One is the *tauq-i gireban*, or the ‘fetter of the neck,’ now encased in silver, which hangs all year next to Shahbaz Qalandar’s sarcophagus, and was reportedly worn by him around his neck until he died (time: 17.18). According to tradition, Shahbaz received the stone after attaining his spiritual flight in the *Qalandariyya* Order; but first ownership of the stone is ascribed to Zain al-‘Abidin, who is said to have borne the stone around his neck for months during his forced walk from Kerbala to Damascus. In this, the symbolism of the *tauq-i gireban*, like that of the *dhamal* itself, radiates directly back to Zain al-‘Abidin and Kerbala. In the film, the ritual closing of the Shrine’s door is preceded by a young man kissing the *tauq-i gireban* stone (time: 32.58).

The other holy relic is the 800-year old ‘*alam* of Shahbaz Qalandar, known in Sehwan as the *gajgah*, brought out only in Muharram to lead the mourning processions (time: 3.00 and 25.33). The ‘*alam*, a religious icon or standard attributed to Husain’s brother ‘Abbas, is familiar today as a common feature in mainstream Shi’a Muharram rituals. Contrary to common knowledge, however, the Qalandars were one of the first groups in Islam to have used the ‘*alam* as a symbol of religious identity.

Showing the centrality of the ‘*alam* at Shahbaz Qalandar was critical to my vision for *SQ* but it turned out to be the most difficult footage to shoot. The scene when the ‘*alam* enters the shrine door (time: 32.14-32.18) was filmed over three years with two different crews. The first attempt was discarded due to technical errors. Then Umair and Talha went back with us the third year and finally captured the moment. To shoot the procession led by the ‘*alam* on 10th Muharram as it returns from the graveyard of the Sehwan Sayyids to the shrine, Nofil had to sprint after the ‘*alam* (time: 31.14), trying to keep his camera steady, and somersaulted (31.19) midway to get the full shot!

Aliya: The ‘Show and Tell’ of Shahbaz Qalandar

We live in a time when the pressure to make Islam concrete and stable is greater and wider than ever before. As a historian of Islamic ideas, I know that there has been a shocking profusion of times and places where Islam has been lived, greatly and widely, as a thing that ‘agrees at variance with itself’; where the Qalandar’s *namaz-i tariqat*, the Sunni *maghrib salat*, and the Shi’a *maghrib namaz* 12½ minutes later, would all be

accepted as meaningfully *Islamic*. The reality of lived Islam probably remains shockingly profuse in its variance, but, as Shahab Ahmed posits, the colonial reconstitution of our hermeneutical toolkit – which teaches us ‘to conceptualize and categorize by the elimination of difference’¹⁰ – has left the makers of Pakistani and Muslim public discourse without the means to conceptualize all the seeming differences as variations on a single theme.

Thus, the counter-history posited in *SQ* is also a history of the present, a history of what is *not* in the film: the unspoken reality that the very survival of a space like Sehwan owes much to its ‘otherization’ in public discourse; it is safe because it is accorded, informally, the colonial status of a ‘minority’ culture. Personal approval or disapproval notwithstanding, contributors to public discourse employ a special vocabulary to talk about it. The likes of Hasan and I will call Sehwan a ‘hub of intersectional piety,’ because we do not wish to limit the openness of such spaces,¹¹ making us complicit in the unspoken agreement that Sufi culture is not quite Islamic. Somewhat more insidious are news reports on mainstream Urdu TV channels¹²: these employ a particular language to talk about ‘Sufi’ culture, categorically different to the language they use to talk about *Hajj*, Sunni ‘*Eid* Prayers or ‘*Ramadan*.’¹³ To check my impressions, I did a preliminary survey of Urdu TV news scripts for this essay. Some part of me wanted to be wrong, but there it was – the token annual news report on a

Sufi ‘*urs* in Pakistan is much the same as the token news report on events like Christmas and *Diwali*. There is total avoidance of words like Islam, *Musalman*/Muslim, *mazhab/i* (religion/ous) *du’a* (free prayer), *namaz* (ritual prayer) and, of course, Allah, including common-speech rhetorical exclamations invoking Allah – no *inshallahs*, *mashallahs*, *subhanallahs*, and *alhamdulillahs*, are to be heard – as though Allah required protection from the unfettered enthusiasm, *josh o kharosh*, of the *za’ireen* (a term used for all non-Sunni pilgrims to anywhere). One of my favorites was the carefully chosen description of a Muslim Sufi saint as ‘*khuda-parast*,’ a non-denominational

¹⁰ Ahmed, Shahab. *What Is Islam: The Importance of Being Islamic*, Princeton, 2016, Chapter-Five.

¹¹ Friendly academics tend to avoid using the word ‘Islamic,’ with its current-day connotations of narrow and exclusionary legalism.

¹² I am indebted to the editors of *Dastavezi* for pointing out that Urdu ‘language publics’ are not always the same as other language publics in Pakistan. Urdu, the national language, is also the language of modern Islamic reform movements as well as the language of colonial administration. If we were to examine the Sindhi language public, for instance, one would find a different valuation and judgment of Sufi culture. The lexical divide in Urdu, however, is significant, because Urdu is the hegemonic language of public discourse across the country.

¹³ ‘*Ramadan*’ is in quotation marks because normally, in South Asia, one would say and write ‘*Ramzan*,’ but recent global trends towards seeking greater Islamic authenticity through Arabization have resulted in many Pakistanis making a point to say ‘*Ramadan*.’

worshipper of ‘god’ with a little *g*.¹⁴ Unlike the many public speakers who actively denounce Sufi culture in Pakistan (without fear of repercussions), the examples given here reveal the ambivalent attitudes of those who are supposed to be accepting of Pakistan’s Sufi heritage.

This was my challenge with the voice-over, or the ‘telling,’ in *SQ*: to use language in a way that would make *meaningful* this place that is very visible, audible, outright legendary, and yet so marginalized. I do not feel we entirely succeeded. What I would like to be able to say is that the Islamic ethos that lives on at Shahbaz Qalandar reminds us of the erasure from our lives of imagination (*khayal*) and experiential knowledge as valid modes of human learning, of the dismissal of the once careful cultivation of our emotional, aesthetic and sensory faculties – all of which was central, for centuries, to pre-colonial Islamic tradition, allowing Muslims to travel back and forth along a continuum of meaningful Islamic possibilities.

My first introduction to the *SQ* project was through an early cut of the film. I was quite unprepared for the strong case it made about Shi’a beliefs at Sehwan, and my knee-jerk reaction was to question this narrative – surely, there must be some Shi’a bias at work? Subsequently, I visited Sehwan with Hasan during Muharram and came back feeling that the film was, in fact, rather too equivocal about the Shi’a-ness of the shrine’s culture. I have come to believe, for the moment, that the recognizable Shi’a iconography and symbolism of Sehwan is key to demonstrating the inherent Islamic-ness of *Qalandariyya* piety.

What do I even mean when I say *recognizable Shi’a* symbols and iconography? Though we have two sizeable or Ismaili or ‘Sevener’ Shi’a communities in Pakistan (Aga-Khanis and Bohris), and Sufi piety across Sindh and Punjab is heavily colored with a Shi’a reverence for Ali, none of this is really thought of as ‘Shi’a.’ Only the majority, mainstream, Twelver Shi’a community owns the generic and *Islamic* label of ‘Shi’a.’ Despite the history of violent sectarian clashes between Shi’as and Sunnis, Twelvers are more or less accepted as Islamic in South Asia.¹⁵ The Pakistani state provides a legal validation of Twelver Shi’ism by giving it the status of a fifth legal school,

14 This is from a long report on the 2019 ‘urs at Sehwan aired on a major news channel, Samaa TV: it takes the typical attitudes seen in public discourse to an almost comic extreme. The imperative to make and air such a report is to be politically correct and respectful of diversity, to which the narrator pays lip service, whilst managing to skilfully undermine and delegitimize the entire tradition; not merely by deploying a vocabulary that is carefully not ‘Islamic,’ but also by highlighting, in a mocking tone, the economic activity around the ‘urs, implying clearly that money-making is the ‘real’ reason behind all the hullabaloo. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fqJlrY6mpns&t=684s>

15 A current trend amongst some extremist Sunni elements to attack Twelver Shi’as as unbelievers does seem to be slowly influencing popular perceptions, but, for now, Twelver Shi’ism is very much part of the Islamic fold.

alongside the four Sunni legal schools, as the *fiqh-i-Ja'fariyya*. This legalistic definition, the name *fiqh-i-Ja'fariyya* itself, is in effect a modern sunnification of Twelver Shi'ism, a camouflaging of the doctrinal difference on which Shi'ism rests, but it serves to keep the Twelver Shi'as on the acceptably Islamic side of the divide.¹⁶

Sunni Pakistanis grow up familiar with the very public, nation-wide Twelver Shi'a commemoration of the martyrdom of Ali's family at Kerbala during the first ten days of Muharram. Music is banned on all TV and Radio stations. The 9th and 10th of Muharram, the days of martyrdom, are public holidays for everyone across Pakistan. TV channels run ten days of special programming, made by and for Twelver Shi'as. Muharram and Kerbala are the chief symbols of identity for the large Twelver Shi'a community and are not associated with Shi'a minorities (like Aga-Khanis) nor with Ali-reverence at Sufi centers. So when Hasan says that *Qalandariyya* piety at Sehwan is firmly rooted in the events of Kerbala, it causes some serious cognitive dissonance – Kerbala is way too mainstream, too *recognizably Shi'a* and Islamic, for the weird and wonderful world of Sehwan.

Shabbir, from a Twelver Shi'a background, was the first one of the crew to take Shahbaz Qalandar seriously. 'At first,' he said, 'all you see is ... *dhamal* as trance ... drugs and dancing for no reason.' But then he read Hasan's paper about the sacred relics: the *tauq* of Imam Zain al-'Abidin that is believed to have been at Kerbala; and the *alam*, Shahbaz's most important possession, and also a symbol central to Twelver Shi'a piety. In Shabbir's mind, there is little doubt that 'the most important relic of Kerbala' is at Sehwan; and this resonance with his Shi'a Muslim beliefs is what made the project personally important to him.

It is through these recognizable symbols of mainstream Shi'ism, of Kerbala, that the film *SQ* pulls Sehwan out from its otherness and imbues it with meanings that are familiarly Islamic to audiences who, consciously or unconsciously, regard Sufi culture as marginal to Islam. One of the traveling Qalandars shown in the film, Ali Haider, walking from Lahore carrying an '*alam* with '*Ya 'Ali Madad*' emblazoned across it, employs words that I would have liked to highlight more in the film: *jo safar aal-i-Nabi ne kiya uss safar ki sunnat ada kar raha hun* ('I am following the Holy *Sunna*, and traveling the path of the Prophet and his family'). Ali Haider's '*alam* is recognizably Shi'a, and his words, '*Nabi ki sunnat,*' are universally Islamic.

¹⁶ Shi'a communities like the Aga-Khanis, nominally acknowledged as Muslim, are relegated, in popular perception, to a space in no-mans-land, rather closer to non-Muslim minorities than to the Sunni Muslim majority.

Conclusion

The film *Shahbaz Qalandar* was conceived of as a historical and ethnographic document, which it certainly is; but, as a Pakistani product watched by Pakistani audiences, the film is also a political statement. Born Muslim in Pakistan, it is difficult to dodge the loud presence of a modern, reformist Islamic morality in public spheres. And yet, all of us, the dodgers, the state, and the Mullahs at the pulpit, have something in common: we are all looking to different ‘pasts’ to envision our futures, and these pasts constantly interrupt the present. We hope that *SQ* will be one means to interrupt and broaden the present development of the public discourses that are shaping a post-nationalist Pakistani identity for younger generations who do not remember and do not care about Partition and its ideologies.

That said, it is not our intention to conceptually limit a vibrant sacred space like Shahbaz Qalandar’s Sehwan. In *SQ*, we have attempted to encapsulate the experience of being present in the saint’s courtyard, which had to be done through an audio-visual medium because the engine driving everything is the live *dhammal*. The bodily affect induced by the rhythmic drumming is difficult to resist: it sucks everyone in and acts as an equalizer – in a very *Islamic* way – opening up broader conceptual possibilities through sensory experience.

Hasan chose to focus *SQ* on the *Qalandariyya* Sufi order, whose beliefs, rituals, and very existence are evidence of the historical continuity of a centuries-old Islamic tradition at Sehwan. Beyond the *Qalandariyya*, however, the shrine is also the locus of very contemporary popular piety. A bewildering variety of beliefs, practices, and communities gravitate around Shahbaz Qalandar. We are now working on a series of films to document other important aspects of the shrine's life, notably: the musicians, whose live performances are central to the *dhamal*; the many women who flock to the shrine and step out of conventional restrictions; exorcism ceremonies conducted at or near the shrine; the transgender communities who congregate at Sehwan on special dates; and the local Hindu community who have a long association with the Qalandar. Much of this has already been shot by Umair and Talha, and work has commenced on editing a second film.

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