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## Oral Competition Narratives of Muslim and Hindu Saints in the Deccan

### Abstract

This article presents a number of oral narratives from Aurangabad (Maharashtra, India) concerning competition between rival saints. The superficially uncomplicated issue of Muslim-Hindu competition is deconstructed with reference to the contexts of the narratives in order to reveal individual saintly cults within a local landscape as the main competitors rather than religions per se. Attention is therefore drawn to the contextual role of competing religious institutions within a local geography of pilgrimage in the shaping of such narratives. The presence of a mixed Hindu-Muslim following is seen to be an important factor in assembling the symbolic attributes of the Sufi saint Shāh Nūr, around whom the narratives revolve, forming a salient reminder of the role of oral narratives in the localization of religious traditions.

**Keywords:** Competition narratives—saints—Sufism—Hindu-Muslim interaction—Aurangabad

STORIES OF competitions between rival saints are a feature of many of the world's oral traditions.\* They are often found preserved in hagiographies relating to the early history and proselytization of religions into areas in which pre-existing religions and their representatives were already present, as in relation to early Christian saints in the British Isles. In such cases, where the religion of the victorious saint went on to become the overwhelmingly majority faith in the region, such tales tended to lose their relevance and so failed to find later re-expression. For while competition stories are ostensibly demonstrations of the strength of the saintly victor, they are by their very existence in fact testament to insecurity and potential weakness. After all, real power is about the absence of competition. Such narratives therefore flourish most in societies in which different religions co-exist.

Competition narratives have long existed in the Islamic world. In such narratives the Muslim holy man (generally though not exclusively cast as a Sufi) variously competes in the performance of miracles with the figure of a Hindu, Buddhist, shamanic, or Christian holy man (AMITAI-PREISS 1999, DIGBY 1994a, VAN BRUINESSEN 1991).<sup>1</sup> In other narratives, Muslim saints have been seen to compete between themselves, a tradition in which challengers (*murnāzi'*) competed in terms of engaging in miraculous or more simply pious acts (EL-SHAMY 1976). The theme of the contest, often involving a degree of trickery, is of course one of the oldest and most widely found of all folktale motifs and one that is also known throughout the Arab world (EL-SHAMY 1995, vol. 2, 379, 523–24). However, its adaptation and adoption as part of a wider body of religious teachings gives important insights into the ways in which a folk narrative device might experience a shift from the oral to the written register and in so doing change its meaning by becoming part of a wider system of religious knowledge (GOODY 1987, GRAHAM 1987, STREET 1984). In recognizing the fact that over time stories shift between oral and written modes, it is important to see oral competition stories within a wider context of the written tradition of Muslim religious knowledge, however localized its form at times.<sup>2</sup> As such, they form part of a wider

*ecumene* or system of cultural knowledge made up at any point on its compass of knowledge of a wide variety of different kinds and origins.

Like all complex cultures, those of the Muslims of South Asia are sustained by these different kinds of input, spoken and written, local and pan-Islamic, traditional and modern. Competition narratives bring out these complexities well in belonging on the one hand to a wider Indian folktale tradition with counterparts in other cultures elsewhere and on the other to a much more circumscribed tradition focussing on holy men of only local importance.<sup>3</sup> Competition of another sort was also sometimes expressed in romance literature, in which Hindu queens or other heroines refuse to surrender to Turks (often referred to as *mīrzās*), though we should be careful of what are perhaps anachronistic readings of such identities as simply Muslim versus Hindu (GRIERSON 1920, TALBOT 1994).<sup>4</sup> Analysis of such narratives has demonstrated that they are certainly more subtle than bald exemplars of Muslim superiority (ALAM 1989).

From the earliest points of Muslim contact with India, several traditions of Muslim scholarship took great interest in the religious systems of India and their exponents (ERNST 2003, FRIEDMANN 1975). The most famous exemplar of this tendency was the early polymath al-Bīrūnī (d. 1048), who wrote the encyclopedic *Kitāb al-Hind* (Book of India). However, the tradition of Muslim-Hindu intellectual and spiritual dialogue has been passed on via Persian translations of the religious and secular classics of Sanskrit literature sponsored by the Mughals to more recent cultural and religious movements promoting the common threads of Indo-Muslim and Hindu tradition.<sup>5</sup> Nonetheless, at other times Hindus have been almost entirely ignored in Indo-Muslim accounts of their own community past, so much so that it is possible to read some genres of Indo-Muslim literature and be lulled into forgetting the wider presence of a Hindu India surrounding such texts' composition.

However, the non-literate traditions of Indian Islam have always presented a somewhat different perspective, reminding us of the stark differences between the world as created in writing and the world itself. Indeed, "popular" Islam in India has long been characterized by its absorption of elements from its Indian surroundings, elements which some groups of Muslim religious reformers over the past two centuries have been eager to label as alien and "Hindu" (DE TASSY 1997, GABORIEAU 1999). The overzealous application of such all-encompassing labels as Islam and Hinduism by reformists speaking in the name of both traditions and scholars in other parts of the world has done much to obscure the actual nature of religion in India. Such basic issues as the definition, boundaries, and interaction of the different religions of India remain inadequately conceptualized.<sup>6</sup> Although

these issues are highly complex and problematic, primary evidence of the ways in which different religious communities in India perceive their religious boundaries and interaction helps to at least realize the scope of the question. The oral narratives presented in this article form one such contribution by showing some of the ways in which stories of the competition between a popular Sufi saint and his local non-Muslim rivals fit into their local contexts of shrine and cult.

The Sufi saint whose oral tradition is discussed in this article is popularly known as Shāh Nūr Hamawī.<sup>7</sup> His cult centers on the large shrine (*dargāh*) which surrounds his tomb on the outskirts of the Indian city of Aurangabad (Maharashtra).<sup>8</sup> Textual evidence informs us that Shāh Nūr died in the year 1692 and that his shrine was built shortly afterwards by a devotee serving in the upper ranks of the Mughal administration of the city. Although later oral and textual tradition give a number of variant accounts of Shāh Nūr's origins, ranging from Baghdad to Khurasan, it seems most likely that he originally migrated to Aurangabad from northern India.<sup>9</sup> While little more can be said with certainty about the historical Shāh Nūr, the saintly Shāh Nūr of later narrative tradition is a much more vivid and colorful figure. While Aurangabad has several other large and locally important Muslim shrines, each with its own attendant oral traditions, none presents the image of a saint so clearly at home with his Indian environment. As in the characterization outlined above, the city's Muslim saints in this way exemplify the two prototypical strands of Islam in India, as either standing aloof from the wider traditions of the region or absorbing and adapting them as its proper inheritance. Like many others of its kind across India, the shrine of Shāh Nūr is notable for its shared Muslim and Hindu clientele and it is the presence of this shared clientele that makes the competition narratives all the more compelling.<sup>10</sup>

Aurangabad itself was founded in 1681 as one of the last major urban centers of the Mughal empire and as part of the independent princely state of Hyderabad remained under Muslim political control until 1948. Sometimes seen as the birthplace of Urdu literature, Aurangabad has long enjoyed a tradition of Muslim high culture in both its secular and religious forms. Nonetheless, the Muslims have always been a minority community in the city. Although they are demographically most densely concentrated in the old city rather than the surrounding countryside, overall they still form a mere 10 percent of Aurangabad's population, a proportion that has changed little since the beginning of the twentieth century. Aside from the sheer demographic overbalance, the minoritarianism of the city's Muslims is exacerbated by the fact that the surrounding state of Maharashtra has seen the development of powerful Maratha and Hindu nationalist movements

since the nineteenth century (GOKHALE 1984). Since Marathi linguistic nationalism has played an important role in this, it is of more than mere technical interest that the narratives presented here were recounted in Urdu, Aurangabad's historic lingua franca.

#### THE NARRATIVES

The events that are recounted in each of the narratives happen at specific places within the local townscape of Aurangabad and its rural surroundings. The competitions that the narratives describe make reference to places known to each member of their audiences. This is especially notable since Shāh Nūr himself is widely believed to have come to Aurangabad from far away, according to different versions of his life story as far as Baghdad, northern Syria, or eastern Iran. Nevertheless, despite the prestige and mystique that such distant origins brought with them, the major events in the saint's narrative life occur only within the most local of settings. This localized *mise en scène* is important in that it lends the narratives a strong rhetoric of factual authenticity, the evident physical reality of the setting lending credence to the historicity of the events described. Yet there is more to the matter than this, as the first of the narratives demonstrates well.

In this narrative Shāh Nūr encounters the disciple of a famous though unnamed Hindu *sādhū* and demonstrates the superiority of his own power to that of the disciple's master.<sup>11</sup>

So it was that the *sādhū* was living in a temple at Sitara. He was living there. And he had a pupil whose name was Bhūshan, who would go to bring food for him every day. Once he was flying to bring the food. Hazrat Shāh Nūr Hamawī glanced at him, and he fell down. Bump. What happened after the fall? He said, "Why did you bring me down, *yār* (friend)? I have to go to bring my master's food." He [Shāh Nūr] told him, "*Bhāī* (brother), every day you (*tū*) are coming and going. Where are you going?" So he said, "I bring food from Kashi [that is, Varanasi] for my master. Flying in the air, I go to the temple in Kashi and fetch the food (*bhōjan*)." So [Shāh Nūr] said to him, "*Bhāī*, every day you are in service, flying here and there. What's it all about? What does he [the master] do anyway?" So, the pupil became nervous at this conversation. "*Bhāī*, my time is running out. My master will get angry. How can I go and get back from there? I have to bring *shīra-pūrī* [a popular dessert]!" So he [Shāh Nūr] said, "Don't worry. You eat the *shīra-pūrī* too!" He said, "Tell me what you want." So he [the pupil] said, "Just get me the *shīra-pūrī* from somewhere." A stream was flowing there, and he [Shāh Nūr] was sitting in the stream. There was a platform in the

stream and he was sitting on it. So he [Shāh Nūr] said to the stream, “By God’s command, flow with *shīra-pūrī*!” So metal plates of *shīra-pūrī* flowed by, and to this day the name of the stream is Shirapuri. He himself [the pupil] ate the *shīra-pūrī* and gave some to his master and told him everything. His master was sitting in the temple at Sitara and he told him, “I will not serve you and now I am going there.” And he came to Hazrat [Shāh Nūr] and entered his service, and died in his [Shāh Nūr’s] lifetime and he buried him. He gave him the name ‘Abdullah and ‘Abdullah means “the slave of God.” And so it was.<sup>12</sup>

What is immediately noticeable about this narrative is its presentation and indeed acceptance of the plurality of the Indian religious landscape. Although competing, the two religious figures, the Sufi saint and the *sādhū*, co-exist in the world of the narrative and its vision of local sacred geography. But while at first the story seems to be otherwise clear in its symbolic vision of the superiority of Islam over Hinduism, a more nuanced line of interpretation reveals a picture less dominated by such all-encompassing religious identifications.<sup>13</sup>

Seen in the context of its telling, the narrative re-emerges quite differently. As we have seen, the story takes place within a specific local landscape of sacred powers. The *sādhū*’s pupil in the story is allied to the temple in the nearby village of Sitara, where his master resided, while Shāh Nūr, as everyone knows, is to be found at his shrine on the edge of the city. The reference to the village of Sitara, some five kilometers distant from the shrine of Shāh Nūr, is important since it is the residence of the largest concentration of Shāh Nūr’s Hindu followers. Indeed, the saint’s attachment to the people of this village is such that he is sometimes seen wandering at night in the hills and forests around it.<sup>14</sup> In this sense the story makes a special reference to this Hindu client community that lives very close to the temple at Sitara. The Khandoba Mandir at Sitara is one of the oldest active temples in the Aurangabad region and has long formed a popular pilgrimage site for Hindus coming from the city and surrounding countryside.<sup>15</sup> In relation to this temple dedicated to the Marathi cult figure of Khandoba, the shrine of Shāh Nūr is the closest place of pilgrimage to rival it for the attention of devotees.

When placed into this local context the story therefore seems not so much part of a grand narrative of Muslim supremacy than about competition between local sources of supernatural power for the patronage of a limited local clientele. The narrative is at this level an attempt to resolve (in favor of Shāh Nūr) a situation of local cult competition between the shrine of Shāh Nūr and the temple at Sitara. The key point here is that the main character in the story, the character around whom the narrative revolves, is

neither the Sufi nor the *sādhū*. Rather it is the pupil or follower of the great *sādhū* of Sitara, whose allegiance is contested in the story. This follower therefore forms a model for the client for whose attentions the two local sacred sites compete. So the narrative reveals a picture of bilateral competition for this follower, who was first a devotee of the *sādhū* at Sitara before, in the key sequence of the narrative, switching his allegiance to Shāh Nūr, the Sufi of Aurangabad.

However, there is also an important rural-urban dimension to this process of cult transference. In reality, as in the narrative, as the villagers abandon their simple temple at Sitara they are being brought into contact with the religious institutions of the city. Such alignments of low-caste rural Hindus to urban Sufi shrines as that seen here with the Hindu clientele of Shāh Nūr have been seen to be among the first steps of an ongoing process of corporate conversion to Islam (EATON 1985, LAWRENCE 1982). The fact that two graves at the shrine of Shāh Nūr are revered as those of the two Hindu followers associated with the saint in oral tradition is certainly suggestive of such an adoption of Islamic religious customs alongside the abandonment of the Hindu religious requirement to cremate the body.<sup>16</sup> But despite theories suggesting an effective conversion of given communities by Sufi shrines over the *longue durée*, more certain is the fact that like the Hindu clients of Shāh Nūr certain social groups have managed to maintain their liminal religious position over extended periods of time. Operating in a universe that, according to monolithic conceptual models, is neither fully Islamic nor Hindu is for such groups therefore a permanent way of life rather than a staging post on a longer historical process of religious change. Given the undoubted ambiguities of living in this liminal position, the narrative of the *sādhū*'s follower in this sense perhaps also acted as a historical charter for the Hindus of Sitara, describing how they came to be the clients of the shrine of Shāh Nūr without formally converting to Islam. It provides a justifying aetiology for their now customary alliance to Shāh Nūr as a collective supernatural patron.

While thus forming a strong sanctifier of custom, the story also shows how supernatural power was expressed by narrative means in the context of a saintly marketplace. In this competitive context, in which the cure of illness or the finding of work might be the miraculous feat that was sought, there was always the risk that allegiance might be switched elsewhere. Yet it is also clear from this that potential clients made their choices not merely along lines of communal religious identity but also in the more simple terms of the efficiency of the supernatural service provided. There is then a certain naïve pragmatism in stories such as this that is easily overlooked. Less a parable of the wholesale superiority of one religious community over another, the

narrative in question served instead to advertise the shrine of Shāh Nūr as the most effective local source of the power over their destinies that was requested by the shrines' clientele in exchange for their regular visits and devotion.

A version of the same story recounted by a Hindu follower of Shāh Nūr highlights the theme of the replacement of one cult by another even more clearly.

There was a *sādhū*, who did lots of ascetic practices (*tapasya*), and so he had the power of flight. He used to fly. He used to fly to his guru, stay there, and then come back. Much later, after forty years, the guru was pleased with him and said, "Tell me what it is you want?" So he said, "Nothing but your mercy (*dayā*)." So he gave him a seed (*bīj*). It's not known what kind of seed it was. He closed the seed in his fist and left there, and was flying off while he [Shāh Nūr] was sitting on the bank of the stream. He [Shāh Nūr] cast a glance (*nazar*) at him, and so made him fall down. He fell down and [Shāh Nūr] asked him, "What's in your fist?" He said, "After so much devotion (*bhāktī*), my guru gave this to me." He [Shāh Nūr] took the seed and threw it in the stream. There was water flowing in the stream. He [the *sādhū*] became very sad that he had got it [the seed] only after forty years and this man had thrown it away. And he said [to Shāh Nūr], "You have made all of my hard work (*mihnat*) useless." So he [Shāh Nūr] made a prayer that the seed be changed into a great many trees. And the one seed [immediately] became many trees. He was very surprised. He rushed back to his guru and when he reached there he said, "So many trees came from the throwing of one seed [by Shāh Nūr]. So how many seeds would you like now?"<sup>17</sup>

Apparent in this narrative is the involvement of a different kind of religious practice to that taught by the *sādhū*'s guru. In the place of years of endless ascetic practice it recommends a path of simple devotion to the saint, a recommendation that was in part a reflection of the strong ties of the surrounding region to the tradition of *bhāktī* devotionism that have often transcended religious boundaries (GAEFFKE 1992).<sup>18</sup> At the same time, it of course demonstrated the greater power and generosity of Shāh Nūr in comparison to that of his rival, the guru. However, again we see that religion as such, either as a corporate model of identity or as a discrete body of knowledge and practice, was not emphasized by the narrative. What was in question was rather the relative power and generosity of two individuals and, by extension, the sacred spaces in which they could be encountered. The question that the

narrative addressed is less an abstract theological one than a localized practical and pragmatic one concerning the accessibility of supernatural capital.

Other oral traditions concerned Shāh Nūr's arrival in the Aurangabad region and his primary encounter in the forests surrounding the city with its originally Hindu inhabitants.<sup>19</sup> However, in the following narrative, Shāh Nūr adopts many of the narrative attributes more commonly associated with the likes of the very guru he challenged in the previous story.

When Shāh Nūr Hamawī came from Baghdad to India, Khwāja-e-Khwājagān Qutb al-Aqtāb Shāh 'Abdul Quddūs Gangōhī of the Chishtiyya lineage (*silsila*) was alive.<sup>20</sup> Shāh Nūr went to him and received the teaching licence (*ijāzat*) of the Chishtiyya lineage and an education from him. After that he left there and wandered here and there around India, though it is not known where exactly. During his wayfaring (*siyāhat*), he came to Daulatabad and there he became absorbed in worship (*mahv-e-'ibādat*), and in that absorption (*mahv*) white ants made an anthill around him so that his whole body was covered with earth. Hazrat Tāj al-dīn Hamawī, whose tomb (*mazār*) is in front of the "Powerhouse" in Aurangabad, wrote in his book that Shāh Nūr Hamawī was in that condition for eighteen years. There are some other traditions (*riwāyat*) that it lasted for seventy years. After a long time, someone saw the anthill in the jungle and saw that it was made completely like an idol (*but*). And so the Hindus began to worship (*pūjā*) it, because the idol was not made by any human but by the ants. When the people of insight (*ahl-e-nazar*) among the Muslims saw it, they said that it was a great saint (*allāhwalī buzurg*) and not an idol. And so there was a dispute about it, and neither of the groups could decide whose spiritual master (*buzurg*) it was. At the time when a riot (*fasad*) was about to take place, Hazrat Ghaws-e-Pāk<sup>21</sup> in Baghdad ordered a member of his family (*khāndān*) to go to India and awaken Shāh Nūr from his absorption in worship (*mahv-e-'ibādat*). So Qādir Awliyā, whose tomb (*mazār*) is near the Zafar Gate [in Aurangabad], came to India and saw that both of the groups, Hindu and Muslim, were quarrelling. He asked them what was the matter and they told him everything. So he said to them [the Hindus], "Look brother, you say something to the idol and if it replies to you, then it is yours. [Otherwise] I will ask it something and if it replies, it will be ours." And so it was decided. The Hindus and their gurus gathered and began to perform worship (*pūjā*), singing hymns (*bhajans*), and from early morning until evening they carried on doing the same. But there was no reply. At the time of the sunset (*maghrib*), Qādir Awliyā asked permission to

speak to the idol. They [the Hindus] gave the permission. So at sunset he began the call to prayer (*āzān*): “Allah akbar, Allah akbar.” When Shāh Nūr heard the sound of the *āzān*, he replied back to it with the *āzān*. And when the people heard it, they felt (*mahsūs*) that there was someone in the anthill, so they broke it open and Hazrat [Shāh Nūr] came out.<sup>22</sup>

In this version of the story Shāh Nūr is expressly associated with Baghdad and its greatest saint ‘Abd al-Qādir Jilānī. But despite this Islamic mantle, at a deeper level the saint’s identity in the narrative is constructed from the symbolic vocabulary of the traditional South Asian ascetic. Placed into a local landscape, Shāh Nūr’s narrative identity was now assembled from aspects of the architectural imagery of the sites associated with him in and around the city, for in this narrative we see the Sufi painted in the bright colors of the Indian landscape. Such local elements were often accentuated in other versions of the story through descriptions of the great number of years Shāh Nūr spent exercising breath control inside the anthill or of a commotion of lightning and explosions witnessed when Shāh Nūr awoke.

The image of the saint hidden in the anthill has in fact proven a powerful motif in many different religious contexts across South Asia. The traditional author of the *Rāmāyana*, Vālmiki (“He of the Anthill”) is the obvious example, though reference may also be made to stories associating Cyāvana and other figures from Jain and Buddhist tradition with the anthill motif (IRWIN 1982). On a more local level, the story of the holy body in the anthill is also known in the surrounding Maharashtra region in connection with Hindu figures such as Krishna-Gopāl (VAUDEVILLE 1992). The imagery of the Sufi residing in the anthill is also reflected in stories associated with Banē Miyān (d. 1921), an early-twentieth-century saint of Aurangabad whose shrine is found near the city’s main market. Oral tradition relates that despite the offers of the Hindu Prime Minister of Hyderabad State Kishen Pershad (1864–1940) to build him a proper house in which to reside, Banē Miyān preferred to live in the rough clay shelter which he had made by hollowing out a heap of mud.<sup>23</sup> Clearly, over time the imagery of the saint in the anthill was able to find a variety of narrative expressions with almost complete disregard for the formal religious affiliation of the figure concerned.

This was no less the case with regard to the theme of the extended periods of meditation stretching into long years which were associated with a variety of Indian saints, a topos that also belonged to this wider narrative tradition of tales of the ascetics. Shāh Nūr’s age at his death was thus usually stated in oral tradition as having been some three hundred and twenty-five years, here again reflecting stories of the Indian ascetic’s extraordinary

longevity. Similarly, Shāh Nūr's periods of immersion in the breath control (*habs-e-dam*) for which he was renowned lasted, like the meditations of yogis buried deep in the earth, for periods of up to seven years.<sup>24</sup> Reflecting this tradition, claims of in some cases up to seventeen-year-periods of breath control were made for Shāh Nūr by his devotees.<sup>25</sup>

As the story demonstrates, Shāh Nūr was at times a composite figure, his identity built according to the predispositions of his diverse clientele. Unlike the monovalent Islamic identities of the other saints of Aurangabad, reified through clear and authoritative Persian and Urdu textual traditions, Shāh Nūr was presented in oral tradition as a different kind of Sufi. As his emergence from the soil of the anthill demonstrates well, he was in an important sense an autochthonous figure, part of the ancient countryside and landscape of the Deccan. Yet, in a charged moment in which the emissaries arrive from Baghdad, his mystic sleep and true potential are only awoken on hearing the message of the Sufis.

Central to the story was Shāh Nūr's possession of sacred energy that was the basis of his extraordinary supernatural power and the subsequent success of his shrine. In his ability to change the flow of streams or, in other more dramatic versions of the story, explode from the anthill amid a great flash of thunder and lightning, lay advertisements of the power of the saint over the very forces of nature that so often directed the course of ordinary human experience. Against the background of the paramount need of a saintly shrine for a clientele, the story acted as a form of consecrated marketing that attested to the power of the saint over the forces of the surrounding environment. It was in protection against these natural forces, responsible for the crises of drought, death or disease which formed the daily exigencies of many of the shrine's clients, that one of the key functions of the shrine as a dispensary of supernatural power was fulfilled.

Although some versions of the story added an epilogue in which the worshippers of the anthill then converted to Islam, this was by no means the case with all narrators. Like that of the encounter with the follower of the *sādhū*, the story of the anthill benefits from a reading cautious in its adherence to a stark Hindu/Muslim script of interpretation. The structural components of the story reveal rather more, for without its optional emphasis on conversion to Islam, the story described an adherence to the saint that did not necessarily involve formal conversion to any wider belief system other than that of paying devotion to the saint. What is important here is the theme of the forest, whose dwellers we should not categorize too readily as "Hindus," just as other recounters of the story refrained from doing. Instead, they are able to represent also the topos of the people of the forest, the "uncultured" tribal people familiar to many of the oral traditions of South Asia. From this

perspective, it was not Hindu worship that was being parodied as such, but rather the model ignorance of the forest dwellers.<sup>26</sup> In the context of the cult, the narrative seems therefore to reflect a movement outside of formal Islam by which the people of the countryside were brought into the fold of the religious forms of the town. As with the tradition of the flying Hindu pupil, the narrative formed a soteriology for the Hindu followers of Shāh Nūr from Sitara and other surrounding villages that reflected the dignity of the shrine's Hindu clients' own religious practices *à propos* those of the surrounding country and village people unconnected to the shrine.

The theme of interaction between Sufi and Hindu was further illustrated in a tradition current at the *sādhū* lodge (*math*) of Mānpūrī Prasād at the nearby town of Daulatabad.<sup>27</sup> Mānpūrī Prasād was, according to one tradition, the Hindu companion of Shāh Nūr, though it is a significant reflection of the role of texts as markers of boundaries that Mānpūrī does not feature in any of the written accounts of Shāh Nūr. The tradition of Shāh Nūr's friendship with Mānpūrī Prasād is of special interest in adapting a tale-type usually associated with the theme of saintly rivalry to the requirements of saintly fraternity. According to the oral tradition prevalent in Daulatabad, Shāh Nūr and Mānpūrī were born in the same village. They spent their early wanderings together before reaching the Sultan Ganj mountain on the outskirts of Daulatabad. At this point Shāh Nūr received a vision bestowing Aurangabad upon himself and Daulatabad upon his *sādhū* companion. In the wake of their years of companionship, the narrative below expressed their longing for one another and described their subsequent meeting after their separation to oversee their respective territories.

After six months Shāh Nūr thought that he must visit his friend to see what he was doing, so he caught a tiger and came here [to Daulatabad] on his back.<sup>28</sup> Here during the separation (*judāī*), he [Mānpūrī] had become very weak and thin because he didn't eat for six months. He only drank water. He was so weak that he couldn't move. He was washing his mouth sitting on this wall [the narrator points]. It was early in the morning, the time of the dawn (*faḡr*) prayer. So when he saw that his friend [Shāh Nūr] had come.... There was a stream here [pointing].... So he [Mānpūrī] said to the wall, "O wall, move now! I have no power (*tāqat*) to move. O God, let it move." So the wall began to walk (*chalna*). And when he [Shāh Nūr] saw that that lifeless (*bējān*) thing was walking, he came down from the tiger and embraced him, and whispered in his ear, "My time has come and I will die." He [Mānpūrī] said, "If you die, I will make a living *samadhī* (*zinda samadhī*) [that is

cremate himself alive]. You will die by your death (*mawt*), but I will die by making a living *samadhi*.”<sup>29</sup>

It is possible that an earlier form of the narrative did stress the theme of saintly competition like other examples of the riding wall story from elsewhere in the Deccan as well as northern India, western Iran and eastern Turkey (CROOKE 1926: 168, DIGBY 1994a, VAN BRUINSEN 1991).<sup>30</sup> But although this narrative is, like its predecessors, concerned with the themes of saintly power over the natural world and the authority of particular saints over well-defined territorial jurisdictions, it is also significant for its vision of saintly co-existence. For in Shāh Nūr’s vision, a distinct territory was allotted to each saint. This once again shows the importance of the primary category of sainthood and saintly power over against the corporate category of specific religious identities. Just as the *sādhū* and Sufi competed only as comparable manifestors of divine, supernatural power, so here was territorial authority shared between the two figures as saints alone and not primarily as representatives of distinct belief or cultural systems, of Islam or Hinduism. The reference that the tradition makes to the common geographical origins of both figures in the same village, leaving aside any of the references to the great cities of Islam (such as Baghdad) found in both the textual tradition and some versions of the oral tradition in Aurangabad, shows how easily markers of Muslim identity may be placed onto a tradition as well as removed in turn.

If saints like Shāh Nūr could be perceived to be friends with Hindu saints, then they could also act as the rivals of other Muslims saints. Back in Aurangabad this was seen in connection with the presence of two minor shrines whose saints were identified with the same Qādirī order (*tarīqa*) of Sufis with which Muslim devotees often identified Shāh Nūr. Since these shrines could be seen as dividing the territory of the city into zones of their respective influence, there existed narratives that firmly subjugated their power to that of the shrine of Shāh Nūr.<sup>31</sup> This is seen in the two following narratives. The first narrative also reflects the theme of Shāh Nūr’s arrival in the city and his establishment of not only his own following but also of the city of Aurangabad itself. In the narrative it is claimed that Shāh Nūr’s position in Aurangabad had been entrusted to an earlier Sufi whom he had now come to replace.

Aurangabad city was founded by Malik ‘Anbar. At that time its name was Khirki.<sup>32</sup> So when he [Shāh Nūr] came.... There is one shrine [*dargāh*] near the railway station that belongs to Hazrat Shāh Sökhta Miyān. He was [already] dead. For his will, he said, “Do not make the

ablution (*ghusl*) for my body.” That was why after his death there were two groups among his disciples. One group was saying, “The Sarkār-e-dō ‘ālam Madīnawālā [that is, the Prophet Muhammad] was given the ablution, so why not him? Is he bigger than he is? We should follow the Muslim law (*sharī‘at*) and give him the ablution too.” The other group wanted to act according to his will, and so they were against the ablution. So again, the situation was in dispute. So Hazrat Shāh Nūr Hamawī went there and asked what the matter was, and the whole story was narrated. So he asked for a cup of water and put the small finger [of Shāh Sōkhta] into the water. That finger dissolved like ashes. The meaning of “Sōkhta” is burnt (*jalā hūā*), so his finger was just like ashes in the water. And then Shāh Nūr Hamawī said, “Now if you want to give him the ablution you can.” So they changed their minds and buried him without the ablution.<sup>33</sup>

The narrative clearly describes the arrival of Shāh Nūr in the city in such a way as to establish his position (which is to say that of his shrine) vis-à-vis Shāh Sōkhta, the other saint of that part of the city (and his shrine). At the same time it provides an aetiology in which Shāh Nūr was the protagonist of Shāh Sōkhta’s unusual name of “the burnt saint-king” and his unusual “un-Islamic” burial, which is the chief miracle associated with him. Through these means the narrative categorizes the nearby shrine of Shāh Sōkhta as subordinate to that of Shāh Nūr. With Shāh Nūr giving guidance to the followers of Shāh Sōkhta after his death, there is little question in the story as to which saint and which shrine is the higher ranking of the two.

Yet in characteristically Indic imagery, the narrative also characterizes the two Sufis as being different kinds of saint. Burning up with the inner heat of his austerities, Shāh Sōkhta is regarded by his followers as a *jalālī bābā*, as a saint manifesting the “hot” and violent aspect of divine power (BAYLY 1989: 139–41). He is reminiscent in this respect of the traditional image of the *sādhū* scorching from the inner heat of his asceticism (*tapasya*). This special quality of Shāh Sōkhta is also seen to have specific topographical dimensions, for oral tradition claims that anyone repeating the name of God beside his tomb would become so hot he would be forced to leave. Birds flying over Shāh Sōkhta’s shrine are frequently burned up in mid air.<sup>34</sup> Shāh Nūr, by contrast, is regarded as a *rahmānī bābā*, as a saint manifesting the gentleness and compassion of God. When he is seen in visions he correspondingly takes the form of a kindly old man bearing a lantern.<sup>35</sup>

A different narrator continues the story of Shāh Nūr after the death of Shāh Sōkhta.

What happened after the burial? He [Shāh Nūr] went to Angūrī Bāgh,

a place, and stayed there in a mosque. He found a couple of disciples [*murīds*] there. After meeting the disciples, [he came] to the north of Aurangabad, where there is a hill and his shrine (*dargāh*) is, and he stayed there.<sup>36</sup>

Here the geography of the encounter, obvious to a local audience, is more clearly expressed. It shows the shrine of Shāh Nūr assuming succession and seniority over the neighboring mausoleum of Shāh Sōkhta, just as the narrative in which Shāh Nūr exploded from the anthill may be seen to function with regard to the shrine of Qādir Awliyā in the old centre of Aurangabad. According to local Muslim devotees, Qādir Awliyā is the third Qādirī Sufi saint of Aurangabad along with Shāh Nūr and Shāh Sōkhta. Qādir Awliyā is identified by some devotees of Shāh Nūr with the follower mystically summoned from Baghdad to awaken Shāh Nūr from his state of entrancement in the story of the anthill. Through this reading of the anthill story, devotees could bring Qādir Awliyā into the narrative world of Shāh Nūr in a subsidiary position like Shāh Sōkhta under Shāh Nūr's authority, with the latter seen as having summoned Qādir Awliyā to Aurangabad. The oral narratives in this way ensured that the two other Qādirī Sufi shrines in the city were subordinated to that of Shāh Nūr through the elucidation of a sacred topography that was carefully structured through narrative. It was a narrative topography in which the shrine of Shāh Nūr was presented as the most powerful local source of supernatural power.

#### CONCLUSIONS

For some of the Muslim followers of Shāh Nūr the competition stories have served to demonstrate the superiority of their own faith, as other tellers of the competition stories sometimes highlighted. Nonetheless, when seen against the contrasting background of a written tradition and in their context of a multifarious clientele, competition narratives show us some of the ways in which societies deal with internal differentiation. As narratives that are close to the ground, the oral tradition of Shāh Nūr illustrates how the boundaries formed by the successive layers of religious and cultural superstructures that formulate religious identity and difference may on a local level be both reiterated and subverted at the same time through the different possible readings of the stories about competing saints. As we have seen, the nature of the competition can equally be read as one between distinct religions, between individual holy men or else between rival religious institutions.

The oral tradition of Shāh Nūr is notable among the saintly narratives of Aurangabad in its acknowledgement of the presence of Hindus and its bringing of that presence to the centre of many of its narratives. This must

be seen primarily in the context of the large number of Hindu followers that Shāh Nūr has compared to other Muslim saints of the city such as Nizām al-dīn, Shāh ‘Alī Nehrī, or Shāh Musāfir. The oral tradition surrounding Shāh Nūr presented a more pluralistic vision of Aurangabad’s saintly past from that pictured in the Urdu hagiographies associated with him, such as *Nūr al-Anwār* (ZUHÜR, n. d.) and *Āftāb-e-Dakān* (QURĒSHĪ, n. d.). Oral tradition could construct alternative visions of the past from those authorized by the textual tradition and the literacy in Urdu that gave access to it. Yet this is a contrast that is unsurprising, since very few of Shāh Nūr’s Hindu followers have had access to the written Urdu tradition due to both their own low social status and the increasing tendency of literacy in Urdu to be associated exclusively with Muslims. Since both Hindus and Muslims in Aurangabad can very often *speak* the same language, this matter often boils down to a question of the ability to read the modified Arabo-Persian script used for the writing of Urdu. It is this sociolinguistics of literacy that has allowed the written world of hagiography to reflect only one dimension of the broader spoken narrative tradition surrounding Shāh Nūr’s cult.

According to the model of saintly power suggested by the oral tradition of Shāh Nūr, sainthood depended little on the prestige of association by birth or visitation with the religious centres of the Near East or Central Asia that is often emphasized in written hagiographies of Indo-Muslim saints. Nor did sainthood need to be formulated in a self-consciously Islamic framework to the exclusion of the traditions of a wider Indian environment that was so often a feature of hagiographical writings. Instead, sainthood appeared as the combined product of the pragmatic acceptance of the varied possessors of supernatural power in the surrounding town and landscape and an implicit recognition of the plurality of a common regional past.<sup>37</sup> As such, the narratives demonstrate the processes by means of which trans-regional religious traditions are localized through the co-option of attributes and imagery belonging to an indigenous symbolic universe and through the narrative association of a cult figure with specific features of local topography. Evolving for a local audience, the oral narratives which we have examined served to anchor Shāh Nūr to a local physical landscape as no less to a localized network of religious figures and their representative institutions.

It is also noteworthy that neither religion nor nation form prominent frames of reference in the narratives which we have examined. Here we see both the importance of the living presence of a mixed clientele in the formation of such a multivalent oral tradition. The references which the narratives make to funerary customs are especially indicative of the two-way traffic between Muslim and Hindu practice which the cult of Shāh Nūr has at times afforded. Thus, while the former pupil of the *sādhū* is eventually

buried at the shrine of Shāh Nūr, the latter's predecessor in Aurangabad Shāh Sōkhṭa for his part transgresses the legal requirements of Islamic burial by refusing the ritual ablution and by instead being symbolically cremated in reflection of Hindu norms.<sup>38</sup> Implicit in the narratives therefore is the suggestion that the power and authority of the saint, and its quotient that is the devotion afforded him by his followers, are both more effective and more binding than those of the great traditions of either Hinduism or Islam (compare VAUDEVILLE 1987). It is, of course, a claim that has echoes throughout the religious history of South Asia.

## NOTES

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1. For a more spatial perspective relating to the shared Islamo-Christian figure Khizr/St George, see WOLPER 2000.

2. For discussion of this theme with reference to the poetic epic often described as "the Persian Quran," see MILLS 1994.

3. For parallels in this wider Indian folklore tradition, see PRITCHETT (1985) and TEMPLE (1884–1901).

4. Legends concerning Hindu queens also at times became connected with Sufi shrines. At the shrine of Rukn al-dīn in Vaijapur (Maharashtra) visitors are shown the purported tomb of a local Hindu princess known as Vaijā, whose devotion to the saint was such that in contradiction to Hindu funerary custom she begged to be buried beside the saint's tomb.

5. For other literary examples of Hindu and Muslim cross-fertilization, see MANJHAN (2000) and MATRINGE (1992). On Hindu-Muslim interaction at Sufi shrines elsewhere in southern India, see SIKAND (2001).

6. For recent theoretical advances, see ROY (1996) and STEWART (2001).

7. His older though now less widespread title is Shāh Nūr Hammāmī ("of the bath-house").

8. For a study of oral traditions of the Aurangabad saints interacting with figures from the city's royal past, see GREEN (2004). On the wider oral culture and popular religion of the region, see SONTHEIMER (1996).

9. This is implicitly suggested in an account of Shāh Nūr recorded in the early eighteenth century (SHAH NAWAZ KHAN 1911–1952: 475–77).

10. On saintly cults elsewhere shared between Muslims, Christians and Jews, see AYOUB (1999) and CANAAN (1927).

11. In other versions of the story it is the master himself who is directly taught a lesson. On stories of Sufi-*sādhū* encounters in the tradition of the nearby town of Paithan, see VAN SKYHAWK (1993). For further examples of Sufi and *sādhū* competition tales, see DIGBY (2000).

12. Sharrafuddin Siddiqui, interview, 12 December 1999.

13 Textual versions of competition narratives have often been more explicit in identifying the losing of the contest with a formal conversion to Islam. With regard to Nizām al-dīn Awrangābādī (d. 1729), another of the Sufi saints of Aurangabad, such a conversion was

described in an early-twentieth-century hagiography as having been undertaken by many of the followers of a female yogi from Sholapur who was involved in a competition with him for the attachment of a devotee (MALKĀPŪRĪ 1331/1912: 1094–1096).

14. Shihabuddin, devotee of Shāh Nūr, interview, 5 September 2000. The importance of the village was also seen in an oral tradition locating all of the early meetings of Shāh Nūr and Diyānat Khān there rather than in the city's Mochiwara quarter as recounted in other oral narratives.

15. For more details of the Khandoba cult in Maharashtra, see SONTHEIMER (1997).

16. The shrine of Shāh Nūr was by no means the only Muslim shrine in the region to possess purported burial sites of Hindu figures. Compare note 4.

17. Shivaji, a Hindu devotee of Shāh Nūr, interview, 8 January 2000.

18. Such cultural common ground has a long history in the Deccan region and was earlier seen in the Islamization of local narrative themes in pre-Mughal Dakanī poetry (SUVOROVA 2000: 1–43).

19. The theme of the Sufi in the wilderness is often also found without the motif of the Hindu or forest people in traditions associated with Muslim shrine cults elsewhere in South Asia (WERTH 1998).

20. This reference to the period of the major medieval Sufi 'Abd al-Quddūs Gangōhī (d. 1537) reflects the widespread belief that Shāh Nūr arrived in India some three centuries before he eventually met his death in Aurangabad.

21. This name is an honorific of the great Sufi saint of Baghdad, 'Abd al-Qādir Jilānī (d. 1165) who enjoys great prestige in the Deccan and South Asia in general. Shāh Nūr is widely regarded as one of his descendents.

22. Dada Pir, a well-known devotee of Shāh Nūr, interview, 19 October 1999.

23. Kashifuddin Khan, *sajjāda nashīn* of the shrine of Banē Miyān, interview, 28 August 2003.

24. Comparable traditions also relate to celebrated yogis (CROOKE 1926).

25. In an unusual example of the textual tradition outdoing the oral tradition, the eighteenth-century hagiographer Bahā' al-dīn Hasan 'Urūj described Shāh Nūr making a single seventy-year underground *habs-e-dam* in the town of Ahmadpur (ZAHÜR, n. d., 2).

26. In both Hindi and Urdu common usage, the term *janglī* ("of the forest") is a pejorative term used to designate the crude and unsophisticated.

27. The site of one of the most important fortresses in the Deccan, Daulatabad lies twelve kilometres outside Aurangabad. It has been closely linked to the city of Aurangabad since the latter's foundation.

28. The tiger, sometimes with its rider carrying a snake whip, was a common feature of this story type, while tigers more generally have a long association with Sufis in South Asia and are often seen lying docile at the feet of Hindu and Muslim ascetics in Indian miniature paintings. The North African traveler IBN BATTUTA claimed to have met a Sufi near Madurai in south India with a tame lion at his feet (1985, 262). An anonymous nineteenth-century European visitor to Aurangabad similarly remarked on local traditions associating tigers with the guardianship of saintly shrines (ANONYMOUS 1836, 191).

29. Maqsd Ali, devotee of Shāh Nūr and Mānpūrī Prasād, Daulatabad, 28 February 2000.

30. A literary version of the wall rider story connected with the medieval North Indian Sufi Khwāja Gurg was also recounted in the hagiographical *Asrār al-majzūbīn* (DIGBY 1994b, 106).

31. This network of narrative topography was also reflected in the topographic arrangement around Aurangabad of the graves of the subordinate "deputies" (*khalīfas*) of the saint Nizām al-dīn Awrangābādī (d. 1729), whose shrine is also located in Aurangabad.

32. This is a reference to the first incarnation of Aurangabad that was founded in 1610 in the name of the Nizam Shahs of Ahmadnagar by their Ethiopian general Malik 'Anbar.

33. Dada Pīr, interview, 19 October 1999.
34. Anonymous devotee, interview, 11 November 1999 and Bashir Nawaz, interview, 20 January 2000 respectively. The avine story is also told with regard to both the shrine of the Sufi saint Rājū Qattāl at nearby Khuldabad and the Siva temple established by a semi-legendary female *sādhū* at the nearby Hindu pilgrimage centre of Mahaishmal. Such malevolent female saints and goddesses are also a common feature of the religious landscape of the Tamil south (BAYLY 1989: 132–35).
35. Shihabuddin, an elderly devotee of Shāh Nūr, interview, 5 September 2000.
36. Sharrafuddin Siddiqui, interview, 12 December 2000.
37. This also seems to be the case with regard to the famous hybrid god/saint of Bengal, Satya Pīr (STEWART 2000).
38. Combined Hindu-Muslim funerary practices are also a feature of the cult of the Sufi Faqīrswāmī at Shirhatti in Karnataka (SIKAND 2001: 14).

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