



Jürgen Wasim Frembgen. *The Friends of God—Sufi Saints in Islam: Popular Poster Art from Pakistan*

Oxford and Karachi: Oxford University Press in co-operation with the Museum of Ethnology, Munich, 2006. 168 pages, 48 color plates, with notes, appendix, bibliography and a list of figures. Hardcover, US\$99.00; ISBN-13: 978-0-19-547006-2 and ISBN-10: 0-19-547006-0.

FREMBGEN'S thoroughly academic and nearly devotional interest in Sufism lends itself perfectly to a study of very contemporary interest, demonstrating by the example of Pakistan the great importance of (normally banned) religious Islamic imagery in a modern world overwhelmed by secular audio-visual stimuli. Frembgen calls Pakistan "a heartland of Islamic mysticism" (ix) within the Muslim world, while one could consider Pakistan with its "'path of love' as distinctive and especially alive in its popular manifestations" (ibid.) *the* heartland. The locally and particularly strong Sufi "movements of devotion and divine rapture focusing on spiritual experiences" also exist in parts of India, where one finds similar expressions in Hindu mysticism. In both the Islamic and Hindu worlds of the subcontinent a huge production of religious posters serve the great need for spirituality, which manifests itself in particular in the annual pilgrimage to the tombs of the leading saints, when their death is commemorated. Called *ʿurs* in Pakistan, these festivities regularly occupy the minds of hundreds of thousands wanting or resolved to participate—as also witnessed many times by Frembgen. In Pakistan, the important centres of such devotional movements are mostly in the provinces of Punjab and Sindh, whose "local cultures in particular are deeply permeated and shaped by Islamic mysticism" (1). The saints' posters help to keep attention on the saints' tombs and their offspring alive, so that the *ʿurs* may continue to be well attended.

As described in the book's first chapter, there are a number of Sufi schools or orders called *tariqa* ("way") providing directives in seeking spiritual truth, *haqiqat*, and "to achieve *tauhid*, the unity underlying the whole of creation," with often ecstatically expressed love for God constituting "one of the most important stages of spiritual development" (5). In Pakistan the *tariqa* of the Qadiriyya, Naqshbandiyya, Suhrawardiyya, Chishtiyya, and Qalandariyya dominate, all of them founded in the distant past—in the Islamic middle ages. "Some of them, such as the Naqshbandis, are particularly inclined towards learning and praying, also spreading reformist ideas in modern times" (2), while others such as the Qalandaris stick to more ecstatic practices in the course of rather peripatetic life styles.

The annual *ʿurs* (mostly dated according the Islamic lunar calendar) next to the relevant saint's tomb is "a public event celebrated in a densely ritualized way full of erotic imagery within an 'arena of sensuality' created by dimensions such as vision, touch, smell, taste, and the auditory field" (11). As masses of pilgrims attend the

major *‘urs*, there is then the need of an effective central authority and organization, which looks after the adequate provision of food and lodgings and provides the chance for everybody to come forward and present gifts and wishes to the leading offspring of the saint and to receive blessings in return. These gifts provide much income to the saint’s offspring who have to do their best in preparing good food in huge kitchens furnished with very large cauldrons, assisted by a small army of cooks and helpers. Hundreds of animals, most of which are donated, are ritually sacrificed for the occasion. Praying, preaching, and recitations from the Quran or *qawwali* music are continuously broadcast from countless loudspeakers; groups of men are dancing here and there, and finally the ceremony ends with blessings to everyone who manages to reach the platform or stand where the leading male offspring presents himself and receives great respect and honor from the pilgrims.

Frembgen has structured the catalogue in a chronological sense. Thus the presentation of posters starts with those of the earliest of the saints, not all of them buried in Pakistan. These saints are led by Khizr, “a timeless holy figure mentioned in the Quran and considered to be particularly associated with the river Indus and generally with water” (13). His tomb lying on an island in the Indus was destroyed by a flood in 1976 and has since been rebuilt. Interestingly, his annual *‘urs* takes place in March or April, and thus has no fixed date in the lunar calendar.

The focus is then placed on the very prominent patron saint of Lahore (and the province of Punjab), namely the Chishtiyya Sufi Sayyid Ali ibn Uthman al-Hujwiri (d. 1072), popularly called Data Ganj Bakhsh, meaning “the master bestower of treasures” (p. 19), or simply Data Sahib. Due to the location of his tomb in Lahore “the whole town...is popularly referred to in Punjabi as *Data di Nagri*” (21), meaning “Data’s Town” (21). His posters often show him or his tomb together with the founder of the Chistiyya order, Muin ud-Din Chisti, who enjoys a particularly high veneration. Frembgen has chosen three of his posters (figs. 16–18), with two of them also showing his famous tomb at Ajmer in Rajasthan, India.

Muin ud-Din Chisti is overshadowed by the most famous Sufi saint, Abdul Qadir Jilani (Gilani), who founded the Qadiriyya order in Baghdad, where he is also buried (d. 1166). He is frequently shown in posters surrounded by many saints of the eleventh-to-twentieth centuries—by thirty-two saints in one of the two published posters (figs. 8 and 9), and by fifty-seven saints in the other. “This type of assembly is an imaginary one which could also be characterised as a ‘timeless conclave’, which is known as *mehfil-e auliya*’ (assembly of saints) or *darbar-e auliya*’ (royal court of saints)” (30). In two posters (figs. 12 and 13) the saint is also shown on horseback and sitting on a flying throne recalling a flying carpet “surrounded by fairy-like winged angels” (45).

In the province of Sindh, Sayyid Mohammad Usman, known as Lal Shahbaz Qalandar (d. 1274), has a province-wide importance similar to that of Data Ganj Bakhsh in the Punjab. He is “a pivotal figure of the antinomian Qalandariyya” and was a great miracle-worker who had wandered from northwestern Iran into Sindh, where he earned his epitheton *Lal Shahbaz*, referring to the color red and a falcon. According to a legend, the saint “practiced severe ascetism sitting for a year in a big cauldron over a fire by which his skin turned red” (64), and it was in the shape

of a falcon that he managed to save a friend from a bad pagan ruler. Frembgen knows of twenty posters of the saint, and three of them are presented in the book (figs. 23–25), showing him and his tomb in Sehwan Sharif. In two of the posters the saint is seen dancing in divine rapture.

In the chapter titled “The Qalandar Heritage” (70–81) Frembgen then discusses the great, but often underestimated, importance of the Qalandariyya movement in the South Asian continent, referring above all to the saint Sayyid Abdul Latif (d. 1705/06), “better known as Barri Imam (‘the guide in the wilderness’)” (70), whose tomb is near Islamabad, and a few saints of the 19th and the 20th centuries. One of them, Mama Ji Sarkar, died as recently as 1991, thus being “an example for the ongoing reality of the particular *majzub*-type of sainthood and of the ‘intoxicated path of the Sufi way’” (80).

In the latter part of the book Frembgen deals with two prominent saints buried in Multan, an important center of Sufism since the twelfth century. One of them is Shams Sabzwari or Pir Shams (thirteenth/fourteenth century), a Nizari Ismaili missionary who, according to legend, “implored the sun to come lower from the sky in order to heat the fish” the saint held in his hand. “Henceforth the sun burns mercilessly on the inhabitants of the city never fully retreating to its original distance” (88). A poster (figs. 33) shows that miracle, while another (fig. 34) represents the saint together with his tomb. Even more famous in Multan is the Suhrawardiyya saint Rudn ud-Din (d. 1335), whose monumental, fortress-like tomb “is rightfully called the most conspicuous masterpiece of early Muslim architecture in Pakistan” (92). The image (fig. 35) showing the saint and the tomb is artistically the most elaborate of the forty-eight posters in the book.

Posters of more recent Qadiriyya saints and several mystics without specific ties to a Sufi order are presented in the last part of the catalogue. Most prominent among the latter is Shah Abdul Latif Bhittai (d. 1753)—“the mystic and poet of Sindh” (p. 117) whose tomb is at Bhit Shah near Hyderabad. He had a past as a Yogi, and therefore is seen on posters (figs. 47, 48) in a tightly crouched position in front of his domed tomb, which rises “from an island in the midst of the lake at Bhit adorned by lotus flowers” (page 120, with reference to fig. 48).

In Chapter Four, Frembgen complains of the “general lack of scholarly interest” in these posters, “mainly due to an aesthetic condemnation of them as ‘kitsch’, which is a pure Western notion” (127). He then discusses the antecedents of the posters, which “go back to the religious painting in Iran as early as the fifteenth century,” that is, to illuminated manuscripts of the late Timurides in Herat. According to his statement, the collection of Pakistani posters of saints in the collection of the Museum of Ethnology in Munich comprises 191 objects, out of which 48 pictures were chosen, all belonging to the second half of the twentieth century. Towards the end of the chapter one learns about the relevant terms and uses of the posters, as they “help to ‘manufacture’ personal charisma” (136), “demonstrate the bond of the *murid* with his *pir*” and “strengthen his [the *murid*’s] system of values as well as the solidarity with other followers of that saint.” Frembgen finally refers “to the iconoclastic tendencies of rigid scriptural Islam” with their growing impact on present-day Pakistan.

In the “References to the Saints” (pp. 139-141) one finds their known or presumed life dates in both the lunar and (Gregorian) solar calendars and bibliographical notes. One may have wished to find also the exact (real or traditionally fixed) date of the death of the most prominent saints in order to inform oneself about the date of their annual *‘urs*, constituting such big events.

The bibliography is very comprehensive, including two books, two exhibition catalogues and five articles by Frembgen on the subject or related to it. One misses his important book on the material culture of the dervish (FREMBGEN 1998, see KLIMBERG 2003). The “List of Figures” gives the size (for example, 30 cm to 45 cm) and the date of the acquisition of each poster (between 1988 and 2004) after stating the inventory number.

The book presents a very balanced picture of the topic, providing much information on Sufism complete with the most important terms, and presenting a good choice of relevant posters with sufficient annotations. There is only a small mistake worth mentioning, as the “small town” of Chisht is in fact a village and is located not north, but east of Herat on the Hari-rud river. The lack of information on the important economic sides of the *‘urs* festivities has to be accepted as Frembgen’s “legitimate” refusal to deal with anything but spiritual values and traditions in the given context. The book is well designed, the color plates are well printed, and thus the general impression is excellent. It is a most welcome publication on a subject generally treated—if at all—in an inconsiderate way.

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