

Research Project Description

Sufi heritage in Sindh, Pakistan: Discourse, Representations and Performance

By: Rafique Wassan

ESKAS doctoral student (2015)

With Prof Dr Britta Sweers- Professor Cultural Anthropology of Music

Interdisciplinary fields: Anthropology, Ethnomusicology and Culture Studies

Institute of Musicology, University of Bern

Introduction

Anthropology of art, literature and performance broadly deals with the cross-cultural study of the diverse forms of cultural expression and production. The tangible and intangible forms of cultural production are an important area of interest for anthropologists to explore and understand the cultural context of how diverse communities and cultural groups create meanings, memories, symbols, ideas and expression through art, music and literature.

This doctoral study project attempts to explore the Sufi literary and music tradition of Sindh in Pakistan. Sindh province in Pakistan has a rich tradition of Sufi poetry, folklore, and music tradition. The Sufi shrines in Sindh offer a learning opportunity to anthropologists to study the everyday folklore practices, aesthetics, art, culture and performance. Over the years, the Sufi literary and music tradition of Sindh formulates an important source of socio-political imagination and cultural expression which has helped to promote the values of humanism, peace, equality, religious tolerance, harmony and syncretism. Given its plural ethos, the progressive writers, intellectuals, cultural and literary activists and organizations in Sindh Pakistan critically and socially engage with and use the Sufi literary music heritage as an alternative discourse and counter-narrative against religiosity, extremism and radicalization in the conflict ridden society in Pakistan. Based on the Sufi critical heritage narrative, progressives, intelligentsia and political activists mobilize the people to promote peace and fight against fundamental tendencies in society. The Sindhi cultural identity is advanced through the Sufi literary and music heritage authenticity and legitimacy.

This interdisciplinary research study project grounded into anthropology, ethnomusicology, cultural and heritage studies approaches will contribute to explore the discourse, representation and performance in the cultural politics of Sufi literary and music heritage in Sindh. Specifically, it will contribute to the exploration and analysis of cultural context of peace and pluralism in Sufi literary and music heritage.

Research Study Area

Sindh is the southern province in Pakistan which has longstanding socio-cultural and political history rooted into the pre-partition Indo-Pak subcontinent in South Asian region. The archaeological and anthropological records indicate the growth of Indus civilization in ancient India which also includes the present parts of Sindh region. Moen-Jo-Daro, one of the major

cities of Indus Civilization is located in the Larkana district of Sindh. As part of the great civilization of the ancient time, Sindh has gone through the different historical periods and have been experiencing the diverse socio-cultural and political course of history in time and space. The major ancient indigenous religions in Indian subcontinent such as Hinduism, Buddhism and Jainism have also influenced this region and the many old temples of these religions are found in present Sindh, especially in Tharparkari area. Then, the Islam came to Sindh after the Arab invasion in 712 AD. The various local dynasties ruled in Sindh from 11th AD – 15th AD. Afterwards, the Mughul Empire in India annexed and ruled over Sindh under Delhi Sultanate. After Mughuls, the local Sindhi dynasties again ruled the Sindh and finally the British took over in 1843 and their rule continued under the great British Empire in India. This whole course of history from ancient pre Islamic eras to partition of India into two separate states, India and Pakistan, have influenced in shaping the anthropology of Sindh in terms of cultural contact, assimilation, diffusion, migration, religion, language, arts, beliefs, indigenous knowledge systems, folklore, oral literature, poetry, music and especially the Sufi literary (poetry and music) tradition.

Study Context

The Sufi literature, music and syncretic shrine culture in Sindh reflect diverse cultural and folklorist patterns of life especially in the semi urban and rural settings. The cultural politics, spiritual power and political economy are also the integral features of shrines. The elements of power, authority and spirituality define the cultural ideology and economy of shrines.

The Sufi culture is symbolic of indigenous and local folk religious identity and culture and portrays the diversity of social life. It is culturally diverse and indigenous in terms of its peculiar and rich tangible and intangible cultural heritage, symbolism, syncretism, belief system, folklore, arts, poetry, Sufi literary and music tradition rooted into the values of coexistence, tolerance, peace, harmony, multiculturalism and pluralism. The devotees belonging to different sects, castes and creed equally revere and pay homage to the sufi saint shrines without regard to their religious affiliation.

Anthropologically, the most striking feature of syncretic Sufi literary and music heritage and culture in Indian sub-continent in general and Sindh in particular is in terms of promoting, preserving, conserving and transforming the ethos of religious tolerance, interfaith harmony, love, pluralism and humanism. The continuity of the classical Sufi literary (poetry) thought is reflected in the contemporary art and literature in Sindh. The literary and cultural organisations, both private and public, promote and celebrate the Sufi culture in different forms i.e. publications, Sufi musicians and music festivals, annual anniversaries of Sufi saint shrines, conferences, seminars and award ceremonies. Most importantly, the cultural heroes of Sindhi national identity are Sufi saints.

For the students of anthropology and culture studies, the Sindh province in Pakistan offers a cultural landscape and symbol of many shrines and rich Sufi poets and music tradition. In the rural areas and towns of Sindh, Sufi music tradition is the common cultural and social feature associated with the shrines of Sufi poets and folk saints. At every Dargah or shrine, the Sufi fakirs (singers) are likely to be seen to perform and sing the rhythmic and enthralling mystic poetry of Sufi poets such as Sachal Sarmast, Mehdi Saen, Gamdil Fakir, Bedil Fakir, Rakhial

shah, Budhal fakir, Shah Abdul Latif Bhitai, Bullah Shah, Janan Fakir Chann etc. In addition to Muslim sufi saints, the singing fakirs sing the chants of Hindi mystic poets such as Kabir and Meera Bae. The Hindi mystic Baghti tradition is also being popularised by these fakirs during shrine festivals and cultural events. Significantly, many shrines of the popular Sufi poets such as the Sachal Sarmast, shah Abdul Latif Bhitai, Janan Fakir, Shah Inayat , Rakhiyal Shah, Budhal Fakir have the formal and institutionalised tradition of music and raagis (singers) inherently associated with and performing only for the concerned shrine. This is how the historically institutionalised sufi literary tradition through the sufi raagi fakirs is known after the particular name of the shrine of the sufi poets and saints such as Daraazi fakirs or Sachal ja fakir, Bhitai ja Fakir or Bhitai jo raag etc. Likewise, many popular sufi singers in Sindh earned their name and fame in singing and music in relation to their association with the concerned sufi poets and shrines. For instance, the internationally acclaimed and popular Sufi singers Sohrab Fakir and Motan shah earned the popularity by singing the rebellious and unorthodox poetry of Sachal Sarmast.

On the one hand, the aforementioned context presents the rich cultural Sufi tradition as a social pattern of life in Sindh. On the other hand, it is pertinent to note that many socio-economic, political and demographic changes especially the post partition Sindh in Pakistan have also affected its socio-cultural life in various ways. Politically, these changes in the newly created Pakistani Muslim state surfaced gradually in the form of political and cultural identity deprivations among the federating units or provinces especially in Sindh, Balouchistan and the then East Pakistan (Bangladesh). Most importantly, the new formation of the identity of Pakistani state was made on religious ideology and the Islamist groups tried to define and control its ideological frontiers. On the question of Pakistani identity, Nadeem F. Paracha explains that ‘in the late 1960s, an intense public debate erupted between intellectuals belonging to Jamaat-i-Islami and those belonging to various progressive literary movements². He further explains that the progressives defined the Pakistani culture and polity as a fusion of various ethnic, religious and sectarian expressions which they insisted could be harnessed only through the imposition of social democracy and granting of democratic rights to the ethnicities. On the other hand, Maududi, the Leader of Jamaat-i-islami tried to transcend the progressive idea of culture of Pakistan by describing his own understanding of Pakistani Islamic ideology. Not only did he reject the progressives’ emphasis on ethnic, religious and sectarianism pluralism, he also accused the progressives and leftists for using arts such as music, dance, painting and theatre like a Trojan horse to infiltrate and change Pakistan’s Islamic complexion³.

The second serious blow and threat to progressive and plural ethos in newly created Pakistani state was witnessed during the military regime of General Zia-ul-Haq (1979-88). This military regime era in Pakistan is considered as the most retrogressive and violent one especially against the liberal, secular and democratic forces of Pakistan. During this era, popularly known as militarization and Islamization era, played havoc with the plural, diverse and tolerant culture of Pakistan. During Zia’s military rule, the society in Pakistan faced Rafique extreme levels of polarisation in terms of ethnicity, sectarianism and terrorism. The anti-women and anti-art and music policies by the regime turned common citizens and society into an isolated and polarised entities. Unsurprisingly, the impacts of this era are still continuing in one way or the other squeezing the secular space in society.

Statement of the Research Problem

Sufism or mystic tradition in the context of Asian societies and cultures has been scholarly explored broadly in relation to religion, philosophy, worldview and practice. In Muslim societies, the origin of Sufi mystical tradition is linked with Iraq, Persia and Turkey and its cultural diffusion to Indo-Pakistan in South Asian region. In the non-Muslim Indian context, Sufi ideas and worldview have been connected with the religious concepts and practices of, Sadhus, Sants, Bakhti devotional movement, Guru Nanak's Sikh devotional ideas, Hinduism, Buddhism and Jainism performed by ascetics. Carl. W. Ernst (1997)⁴, the renowned research scholar in the field of Sufism, explains that the modern study of Sufism started to begin in the colonial period by European/American scholars in relation to study the non-Christian religions. He explains that the two books *The Dervishes* and *Oriental Spiritualism* written in 1868 by American diplomat and translator John P. Brown reflect the illustration of strange oriental custom practiced by dervishes. The political interest in the study of Sufi orders or brotherhoods by colonial administrators in Muslim societies during colonial rule further helped to develop the research in the field of Sufism.

Historically, the tradition and practice of Sufi literature and music in South Asian context has essentially been associated with the socio-political meanings and expressions. In this sense, the very notion of 'Sufi literary tradition' challenges the socio-political power relations especially in terms of religiosity and communalism. Against this conceptual backdrop, the main purpose of this study is to contextualize, explore, understand, and analyse the discourse and representations of plural, syncretic and secular voice and space in the Sufi literary and music heritage in Sindh province of Pakistan. The much focus of the study is to analyse and document the contemporary literary, art and cultural activism in Sindhi society around the use and appropriation of Sufi cultural symbolism and practice in the form of micro cultural politics. The social and ethnomusicological analysis of Sufi musicians and bands in the promotion of peace discourse through Sufi music heritage engagement is an important dimension of the study. How it is being used, contested and related with the question of social change in the conflict prone Pakistani state and global power politics in the region. Significantly, how the Sufi discourse of peace makes sense and relevance with the issues of religious extremism in terms of transculturalism and globalisation especially the political engagement by the Sindhi Diaspora in North America and Europe.

Objectives of the Study

1. This interpretive anthropological study will attempt to explore the following key study objectives;
2. To explore, analyse and document the discourse, representations and performance of Sufi heritage
3. To explore and document Sufi music repertoire and context of performance
4. To explore and document the use of the socially engaged activist and cultural identity dimensions of Sufi literary and music heritage
5. To document the role and patronage of Sufi musicians in the promotion of Sufi music in Sindh with specific Sufi Shrine cases
6. To explore and analyse the institutionalization of Sufism in Sindh, both formal and informal

Methodology

Study is based on qualitative research methods using the interdisciplinary theoretical and methodological approaches. To look into the discourse and representations, analysis of visual and social media will be conducted in addition to the fieldwork with intellectuals, writers, custodians and musicians of Sufi shrines in Sindh. A visual documentary based on fieldwork research is also planned as part of the use of visual research methods.

References and Notes

1. Tharparkar is the district in Sindh. It is also famous for the Desert, cultural diversity and sharing border with the Indian Rajasthan.
2. Nadeem F Paracha, Smoker's Corner: Lost in Transition, daily Dawn, September 16, 2012.
3. Nadeem F Paracha
4. Carl W. Ernst, Sufism- An essential introduction to philosophy and practice of the mystical tradition of Islam, Shambhala Publications,1997