

The Tasawwuf of ethnicity: Barlewi and Deobandi manifestations in South African Sufism.

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1. Introduction

Tasawwuf (Sufism) as the much cited central element of Muslim communities, has been studied and characterised from various approaches since the early twentieth century. While struggles for territorial sovereignty, political autonomy and access to resources have featured as key elements of these researches, there is no one model of which has explained the religious landscape influenced by Sufism or other Islamic movements which has given sufficient credence and consideration to the element of ethnicity. Commentators have not easily linked the religious affiliations and persuasions of their subjects with their ethnic background. The closest they have come is to examine considerations of class but class and ethnicity are in no way interchangeable. For many scholars when they describe the “religious” there is no mention of the “ethnic” and this serves both to imply that there is no rational and comprehensible bases for a representation of the beliefs and actions of participants based on ethnic

affiliations. Ironically a homogenising label of convenience simultaneously masks the complexities of the social and cultural processes at work, and limits our capacity to understand the communities' religious experience. In a desire to understand the Sufistic experience in universal terms the individual society and their particular experience is overlooked.

My primary focus on ethnicity relates centrally to the problem of the labels and categories used to describe the manifestation of Sufism in South Africa. Where religion matters most in this context is in respect of people's interest in maintaining (or defending) boundaries between themselves and others.

Collective identity, like a tapestry of cultural threads, is woven out of perceptions of shared ancestry, common interest, outlook, culture and needs. Each "thread" in weft and warp is taken to demonstrate unambiguous evidence of difference.

Typically the social dimensions of religion; the ways in which people use religion as a badge of identity to define themselves versus others, operate with the same force and effect as other factors of ethnic differentiation, and especially language, in creating discrete social categories.

In this respect it seems less important to differentiate between the religious and other elements used in the construction of social division than to recognise the potential negative impacts of a community's strong symbolic and pragmatic attachment to notions of "us" and "them". This is not to deny the powerful force of religion in relation to how it can be used to fuel phases of hostility, sustain division, legitimate causes, motivate adherents within society by emphasis on and a construction of an unambiguous sense of collective identity and shared past, present and future. Here, it is the more general belief in exclusive and immutable difference between peoples which must be understood as the critical socio-cultural issue. It is also the starting point for recognising the problem of ethnicity.

2. Ethnic Muslim South Africa

Given the history and the sheer diversity of ethnic South Africa, there is considerable variation in the relationships between ethnicity and religion among its constituent peoples.

This brief study postulates that after 1994 there is a fresh desire to identify with a mother community as is evidenced by a study of some of the salient features of

the Sufi groups prevalent amongst the Barelwi and Deobandi schools in South Africa.

Adherents to the Sufi tariqahs amongst the Barelwis, it is observed, are made up largely of Urdu-speaking Muslims. The Deobandis on the other hand attract disciples from the Gujarati-speaking Muslim communities. There is a direct correlation between language use and ethnicity amongst Muslims in South Africa. Urdu however is used across the board as the religious language of the Muslim community.

We shall attempt to describe each in turn here.

3. Sufi groupings amongst the Barelwis

3.1 Chisti Nizami Habibi

Name: Chishti Nizami Habibi Soofie Order

Origin and Nature: In the year 1895, Khwajah Habib Ali Shah, the Sufi saint of the Chishti Nizami Habibi Soofie Order in India, sent his disciple and spiritual successor, Shah Ghulam Muhammad Siddique, to South Africa to propagate Islam in general and the Chishti Order in particular. Known as Soofie Saheb, within fifteen years, he established 11 Khanqah's, the main one being at the side of the Umgeni river in Durban.

Khalifahs: The Khanqah is served today by his sons, Shah Ghulam Muhammad, grandson Irshad and other members of the Sufi Order. A leading khalifah is Mawlana Abd al-Rauf of Westville Mosque.

Language: Urdu is the predominant language. However English is also used by local scholars

Ethnic affiliation: The khanqah attracts persons who have been described in the ethnographic writings on Muslims in South Africa as “Urdu-speaking”. Here Urdu is the dominant language although there would be some Gujarati speakers as well.

3.2 Sarwari Qaderis

Name: Sarwari Qaderi Order

Origin and nature: The founder of the Sarwari Qaderi Order is Sheikh Sultan Bahu (RA) (1630-1691 AD). His teachings have been disseminated by Sheikh Faqir Nur Muhammed Sarwari Qaderi who is succeeded by his son Faqir Abdul Hamid Sarwari Qaderi (74).

Khalifahs: Shaikh Saeed Aly Chopdat was appointed Khalifa of the Sarwari Qaderi Order in South Africa in 1982 and is presently in charge of the running of the Order.

Language: Predominantly urdu

Ethnic affiliation: From Urdu-speaking community

3.3 Qadri

Name: Qadari Rizwi

Origin and nature: The Qadri order in South Africa is known as the Qadri Rizvi and is represented by the Imam Ahmed Raza Academy which was established in 1983. The order was established by Shaykh Abdul-Hadi Al-Qaderi Barakaati a disciple of Mufti Maulana Shah Mustapha Raza Khan al-Qaderi an-Noori Radawi.

Khalifahs: Mawlana Abdul Hadi and Mawlana Abdul Hamid Palmer are senior khalifahs of this tariqah.

Language: Urdu

Ethnic affiliation: from the urdu speaking community

Qadri Attari

Hadrat Mawlana Muhammad Ilyas Attaar Qadri is the founder of a trans-national movement called Dawat-i-Islami, and the Shaikh of this tariqah. This silsilah is growing rapidly in South Africa.

Khalifahs: Mawlana Abdun Nabi Hamidi is the senior khalifah of this tariqah.

Language: Urdu

Ethnic affiliation: Of the Barelwi silsilahs this tariqah is ethnically the most varied with adherents from all ethnic groups. There are many Urdu speaking disciples.

3.4 The Chistiyyah

Name: There are two branches of the Chistiyyah in South Africa: the Chisti Nizami Habibi (see above) and Chisti Sabri.

Origin and nature: The well known representative of the Chistis in South Africa was Badsha Peer whose mausoleum is venerated in Durban to this day. In 1943 Ebrahim Madaree brought the Chisti Sabiri silsilah to South Africa. The present Shaykh of the silsila who is based in India is Pir-o-Murshid Sajjada Nasheen Hazrat Sayed Muhammad Shah Chisti Sabiree Jahangeer

Kambalposh. Locally, the senior khalifah of this tariqah is Ebrahim Badruddin Sahib.

Language: Urdu is the predominant language

Ethnic affiliation: Members belong to the Urdu speaking community.

4. Sufi groupings amongst the Deobandis

4.1 Disciples of Mufti Maḥmūd al-Ḥasan al-Ghangohī

Origin and Nature: Mufti Maḥmūd al-Ḥasan of Gangohi and of Deobandi is the founder of this Chisti silsilah. He was the most senior preceptor of Hadrat Shaikh Mawlānā Muḥammad Zakariyyah Khandlewi.

Khalifahs (Vicegerents in South Africa): The Pandor family of Hazeldene and Palmridge, Mufti Muhammad Saeed Motara and several others.

Language: Urdu with English translation

Ethnic affiliation: Gujarati predominantly

4.2 Disciples of Hadratjee Mawlana Maseehullah Khan

Name: Also known as the Jalalabadis. After a town in Uttar Pradesh (UP), India.

Origin and Nature: Originates with Hadhratjee Mawlana Maseehullah Khan, a Khalifah of Mawlana Ashraf Ali Thanwi. This group prefers soft zikr and emphasis is placed on adherence to sunnah. The strongest manifestation of the continuation of the mission of “Hakimul Ummat” (The Sage of this Ummah), Mawlānā Ashraf ‘Alī Thanwī

Khalifahs : Dr Ismail Mangera and Dr Hansa are the foremost disciples.

Language: English and Urdu. Words of Mawlānā Thanwī and Hadratjee are often first quoted in Urdu. Visitors almost always speak in Urdu with translation provided.

Ethnic affiliation: Majority Gujarati speaking. Popular amongst the business classes.

4.3 Disciples of Hakim Muhammad Akhtar

Name: Akhtari

Origin and Nature: Pakistan. The Akhtari order is an offshoot of the Chistiyyah, however, their mode of zikr is influenced by the Naqshabandi mode in that there is no excessive loudness and nor are the adhkar and awrad done in a group.

Founder Shaikh: Hakim Shah Maulana Muhammad Akhtar of Pakistan. He is a preceptor of the late Shah Abrār al-Haq of Hardoi, a caliph of the revered Mawlana Ashraf ‘Alī Thanwī and previously of Mawlānā Pūlpurī in whose service he spent the better part of his life.

Khalifahs (Vicegerents in South Africa): Several spread nationally and internationally including prominent persons and scholars such as Mawlana Fazlul Rahman ‘Azamī, Muftī Rada al-Haq, Mawlānā ‘Abd al-Hamīd Ishaq, Mawlānā Yunūs Patel and others.

Regular weekly and monthly gatherings and programmes by Khalifahs for men and a great deal of emphasis placed on female participation. Large popular support.

Language: Urdu as dominant language in prose and especially poetry

Ethnic affiliation: Mainly Indian of Gujerati origin. However, there are a few African Muslim murids. Are able to attract disciples from Pakistan since the Shaikh is base in a suburb of Karachi.

4.4 Khanqah Shaikh Zakariyyah

Name: Khanqah Shaikh Zakariyyah

Origin and Nature: India. Founder was Hadrat Shaikh Mawlānā Muḥammad Zakariyyah Khandlewi.

Khalifahs (Vicegerents in South Africa): Mawlana Ebrahim ibn Abdur Rahman Mia, an active disciple, has established a khanqah in the name of his sheikh in Lenasia.

Base in SA and extent of disciples: Khalifahs spread nationally such as Mawlana Nasim Meetha. His son-in-law, Mawlana Mohammed Wadiwala is also one of his leading khalifahs.

Language: Mostly English. However, Urdu is employed when any foreign guests are received. Ethnic affiliation: This is the ethnically the most diverse group present amongst the Deobandi. Together with the mostly Muslims of Gujarat descent, there are indigenous persons, people of European descent as well as foreigners of many shades and hues.

4.5 Disciples of Shaikh ‘Abd al-Ḥafīz Makkī

Origin and Nature: Mawlana Abdul Hafiz Makkī of Pakistan, a resident of Makkah al-Mukarramah and a senior preceptor of Hadrat Shaikh Mawlānā Muḥammad Zakariyyah Khandlewi who spent the last days of his life in Madinah.

Language: Urdu

Ethnic affiliation: Gujarati and Pakistanī. Able to attract Arab disciples due to fluency of language.

4.6 Disciples of Mawlānā Zulfiqār Naqshabandī

Origin and Nature: Mawlana Zulfiqār Naqshabandī. Mawlānā is, at the moment, a resident of New York who hails from Pakistan and is a preceptor of Mawlānā Ghulām Nabī

Khalifahs: Maulana Ebrahim Bham.

Language: Mawlānā is eloquent in English and intersperses his discourses with Urdu poetry and litanies.

Ethnic affiliation: Attracts a wide range of disciples especially from the educated class. In SA has predominantly Gujarati disciples.

4.7 Disciples of Mawlānā Lutfullāh ‘Abbāsī

Origin and Nature: Mawlānā Lutfullah ‘Abbāsī.

Khalifahs: Maulana Muhammad Mia of Lenasia and his father the late renowned Hafiz ‘Abd al-Rahmān Mia.

Language: Urdu and Arabic.

Ethnic affiliation: Gujarati

5. Conclusions

Describing the Muslim community Ebr.-Vally observes that “very powerful linguistic, territorial and traditional distinctions prevail within the Muslim community. Behind the apparent cohesion there are quite deep linguistic and territorial divisions (2001:152). This study has shown that religious differentiation between the followers of the Barelwi and Deobandi traditions have strong ethnic associations. Urdu speaking and Gujarati speaking Muslims being the

descendants of indentured labourers and passenger Indians respectively, represent two very distinct ethnic groupings who adhere to different and often competing expressions of Sufism in South Africa.