



HAL
open science

“Sindhis are Sufi by Nature”: Sufism as a Marker of Identity in Sindh

Julien Levesque

► **To cite this version:**

Julien Levesque. “Sindhis are Sufi by Nature”: Sufism as a Marker of Identity in Sindh. Deepra Dandekar; Torsten Tschacher. Islam, Sufism and Everyday Politics of Belonging in South Asia, Routledge, pp.212-227, 2016, 9781138910683. halshs-02464387v1

HAL Id: halshs-02464387

<https://shs.hal.science/halshs-02464387v1>

Submitted on 15 Mar 2020 (v1), last revised 3 Apr 2020 (v2)

HAL is a multi-disciplinary open access archive for the deposit and dissemination of scientific research documents, whether they are published or not. The documents may come from teaching and research institutions in France or abroad, or from public or private research centers.

L'archive ouverte pluridisciplinaire **HAL**, est destinée au dépôt et à la diffusion de documents scientifiques de niveau recherche, publiés ou non, émanant des établissements d'enseignement et de recherche français ou étrangers, des laboratoires publics ou privés.

Julien Levesque, “Sindhis are Sufi by nature’: Sufism as a marker of identity in Sindh’, in Deepra Dandekar & Torsten Tschacher (eds.), *Islam, Sufism and Everyday Politics of Belonging in South Asia*, London: Routledge, 2016, p. 212-227, ISBN : [9781138910683](https://doi.org/10.1080/9781138910683)

‘Sindhis are Sufi by Nature’: Sufism as a Marker of Identity in Sindh

Julien Levesque

When ‘the land of Shah Latif bleeds again’, ‘can Sufism save Sindh?’ Thus asked an opinion article following a recent attack on a Shia *imāmbārgāh* in the northern Sindhi town of Shikarpur which left more than 60 people dead. For this commentator as for many in Pakistan, Sindh had so far been relatively spared by communal and sectarian violence thanks to its ‘Sufi ethos [which] has long been cherished as the panacea for burgeoning extremism in Pakistan’ (Akhtar 2015). Except for a few cases of communal violence in the years leading up to partition, and a few cases of sectarian violence such as the massacre of 116 Shias during a Muharram procession in Therhi in June 1963,¹ Sindh is generally thought of as a province where various religious communities coexist peacefully. But the omissions in this overly simple portrayal – such as the ethnic and sectarian violence in Sindh’s urban centers – in fact reveal the extent to which a certain reified conception of Sindh’s culture – rural, peaceful, and traditional – is associated with a certain form of Muslim religiosity or Sufism, understood as a quietist search for divine union. The depiction of Sindh as a ‘land of Sufis’ has become a cliché repeated *ad nauseam* by Sindhis themselves as well as by non-Sindhis, including Karachi’s Muhajirs. Political leaders and activists have no scruples referring to it, whether it is common nationalist workers who, during my fieldwork, wanted to impress upon me that they, Sindhis, are ‘Sufi by nature’, or the former Sindh Culture minister, Sassui Palijo, when she declared in January 2011, that ‘Sindh has remained relatively calm and peaceful for decades because of the overwhelming influence of Sufi teachings spread by great Sufi saints and poets’.² With such statements, people reiterate a long discursive tradition that can be traced to colonial writings on Sindh around the time of its conquest by the British in 1843.

1 Little known because poorly documented, this event is still commemorated by some Shia organizations. See for instance <http://worldshiaforum.wordpress.com/2012/12/26/therhikhaipur-massacre-49th-anniversary-of-the-first-large-scale-sectarian-attack-in-pakistan>, accessed 16 December 2015.

2 <http://www.dawn.com/news/600047/sufism-keeps-sindh-away-from-extremism-sassui> (accessed 16 December 2015).

Anthropologist Oskar Verkaaik has coined a term, ‘the ethnicization of Islam’, to describe the articulation, in Pakistan, of ethnic identities with certain approaches or practices of Islam. He argues that ‘Islam has become [over time] the main language with which ethnicity is produced [in Pakistan]. Islam is now the single-most important boundary-marker between various ethnic categories’ (Verkaaik 2007, 87). One aspect of Verkaaik’s argument is that since identity affiliations in Pakistan all revolve around Islam in one way or [p. 213] another, Pakistan’s nation building process has been successful in placing Islam at the center of political debates on ethnicity. Another aspect of his argument highlights the association of certain approaches to Islam with certain ethnic groups, as the title of his article suggests by mentioning ‘Sindhi Sufis’, ‘Muhajir Modernists’ and ‘Tribal Islamists’. When it comes to Sindh, Verkaaik writes that ‘a separate Sindhi tradition of Islam was formulated and defended on the basis of refashioned, local, mystical traditions’ (Verkaaik 2007, 91). This ‘ethnicization of Sufism’ consists of the conscious reference to Sufism as a characteristic or as an essential trait of Sindhi identity, as illustrated by Sassui Palijo’s public statement, the previously quoted opinion article or the assertion made to me by nationalist activists. Claiming one’s religiosity of being Sufi has become a way, in certain social contexts, of asserting one’s Sindhi identity. Hence, the discourse of ‘ethnicized Sufism’ in Sindh has played, like any identity discourse, a performative role in reshaping social boundaries.³

But far from happening without contestation, this process in fact places Sufism at the heart of the ‘struggle over representations’ (Bourdieu 1991, 221), in which various social groups, each with its own particular position in the relations of power within a given social field, vie for imposing their own ‘di-vision of the social world’ (Bourdieu 1991, 190). The Sindhi identity discourse on Sufism, shaped in large part by the nationalist leader G. M. Sayed,⁴ is itself pinned against Pakistan’s official nationalism, which initially sought to promote the Urdu language and Islam as unifiers so as to transform Pakistan’s social, cultural and religious diversity into a single nation made of abstract citizens (Ayres 2009; Devji 2013). Yet the fluctuations in the positioning of the state towards cultural and religious diversity—from Ayub Khan’s nationalization of shrines to Zulfikar Ali Bhutto’s accommodation of religious diversity to Zia ul-Haq’s Islamization policy—also structured the definition of Sindhi identity by determining what is subversive (‘anti-Pakistan’) and what is acceptable. The idea of Sindh’s identity being grounded in Sufism, in spite

3 French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu has defined identity discourses as performative in the sense that they ‘claim to bring about what they state’ (Bourdieu 1982, 140).

4 Born on 17 January 1904, Sayed Ghulam Murtaza Shah (1904-1995), more commonly known as G. M. Sayed, was one of Sindh’s most prominent and controversial politicians whose career spanned from the early 1920s to his death on 25 April 1995. Heir to the spiritual lineage of Sayed Haider Shah Sanai Kazmi, G. M. Sayed played a significant role in Sindhi elite politics and at the forefront of the Pakistan movement in Sindh, but he left (and was expelled from) the Muslim League in 1946. From then on, he remained critical of the central authorities of Pakistan, which cost him years in prison and house arrest. In 1973, G. M. Sayed called for Sindh’s independence and founded the Jiye Sindh Mahaz (Long Live Sindh Front), forebear of about a dozen Sindhi nationalist parties that exist today. On G. M. Sayed’s life, see for instance: Korejo 2000.

of the common usage it has gained, is also hotly contested by some representatives of Sufism in Sindh.

This chapter thus questions the place of Sufism in Sindhi identity construction in independent Pakistan. The first part examines the construction and diffusion of the now-dominant Sindhi identity discourse in which being Sufi is presented as an essential trait of being Sindhi, from its colonial roots and to its formalization by G. M. Sayed. The second part of the paper turns to the ‘contested nature of Sufism’ (Shaikh 2012, 188), or Sufism at the heart of the ‘struggle over representations’ in Sindh.

Sindh as a ‘land of Sufis’: the diffusion of a common identity marker

Sindh has long been termed a ‘land of Sufis’. This discursive tradition can be traced back, at least, to colonial writings of the second half of the nineteenth century. In 1851, Richard Burton observed: ‘There is nothing more remarkable [p. 214] in Sindh than the number of holy men which it has produced, and the extent to which that modification of Pantheism, called *tasawwuf* throughout the world of Islam, is spread among the body of the people’ (Burton 1851, 198). In the following decades, the Sufi poetry of Shah Abdul Latif Bhitai⁵ served as learning material for Sindhi for British officials to be posted in Sindh, while the figure of Shah Latif increasingly came to symbolize the religious specificities of Sindh (Boivin 2015). In the first half of the twentieth century, Sindhi Hindu scholars, often influenced by the Theosophical Society – such as Jethmal Parsram, author of a 1924 book named *Sind and Its Sufis* – also stressed what they saw as Sindh’s peculiar blend of the philosophy of Advaita Vedanta, or non-duality, and the Islamic conception of *wahdat al-wujūd*, inspired by the Andalusian philosopher Ibn ‘Arabī. As ‘the land of Sufis and of Saints’ that ‘bears a holy flower [which] will give its fragrance freely to all who seek’ (Gulrajani 1979, 3), Sindh, to these authors, is characterized by an inclusive and tolerant religiosity expressed in the poetry of its Sufi poets, from Qazi Qazan and Abdul Karim Bulri to Sachal Sarmast and, most prominent of all, Shah Abdul Latif Bhitai. This conception allowed for the formulation of an essentialized conception of Sindh’s cultural uniqueness at a time when a new Sindhi Muslim elite was struggling for the constitution of Sindh as a separate province.⁶

The idea of Sindh as a place marked by outstanding religious tolerance found its way into the political realm and Sindhi nationalist discourses after Pakistan’s independence. The major

5 Shah Abdul Latif Bhitai (1689-1752), a sayed, Sufi and poet, is now eulogized as ‘Sindh’s national poet’. The compilation of poetry, the *Shāh jo Risālo*, is considered by many to be the highest expression of ‘classical’ Sindhi poetry. On Shah Latif’s life and poetry, see: Sorley 1940.

6 Sindh was made a part of the Bombay presidency in 1847 and became a province in 1936. This came about as the result of more than two decades of mobilization by Sindhis (Hindus at first, then Muslims), a ‘struggle’ in which an idealized vision of Sindh’s cultural uniqueness was first put forward (Khuhro 1982b; Khuhro 1982a).

thinker behind Sindhi nationalism, G. M. Sayed, whose work gave theoretical grounding to a vision of Sindh as a 'repository' of mysticism, in fact first expressed this idea in the 1940s, when the movement in favor of the creation of Pakistan took shape in Sindh. In his draft inauguration speech at the Annual Session of the Muslim League held in Karachi in 1943, G. M. Sayed described Sindh as a 'centre of spiritual knowledge', thanks to which, in the 'New World Order' that would follow World War II, 'Sind [would] have its own place and a part to play by giving a special message to the world based on the unassailable and ineradicable teachings of Islam which took firmer root here through Savants and Saints of Islam in Sind' (Sayed 1943).

Hence, by 1943, G. M. Sayed had already formulated what would later become central to his thought, namely, that Sindh's past as 'repository' of mysticism now endows it with a mission to spread peace throughout the world. The next major step in the crystallization of this idea was the publication in 1952 of a nationalist reinterpretation of Shah Latif's poetry, which, to him, contains both a description of the essential characteristics of the Sindhi people and an exhortation to collective mobilization (Sayed 1996).⁷ But the idea really comes through in one of his later works, G. M. Sayed's most controversial book, *Jān Ditho Āhe Mūn* (literally: how I saw), published in 1967 after a decade of intensive political and cultural self-questioning by Sindhi intellectuals (Sayed 1986).⁸ The previous year, G. M. Sayed had established an organization called Bazm-e Sufia-e Sindh (Society [p. 215] of the Sufis of Sindh), which organized conferences and cultural events and also provided a platform to reflect on Sindh's identity and politics. An outcome of these conferences, the reflections found in *Jān Ditho Āhe Mūn* expose G. M. Sayed's peculiar conception of Sufism. Stating that 'it is a fact that the Valley of Sindh has always been an island of tolerance for conflicting faiths and cultures' (Sayed 1986, 4) and that Sindh has 'a truly generous respect for mankind', the Sindhi leader then writes that Sindh possesses a 'message of love' (Sayed 1986, 6). This book attracted much condemnation for its religious views on Islam but more importantly because asserting, in the context of Pakistan, a Sindhi identity whose essence is found in the Sufi spirit of brotherhood and love for humanity stood against Pakistan's founding principles, in which the right to a separate state rests on the adherence to Islam.

G. M. Sayed's thought relies on an equation of Sufism with mysticism which implies three elements. The first is that all religions are considered equal. None has a superior claim to truth.

7 G. M. Sayed first published his book *Paighām-i Latif* in Sindhi in 1952, brought out by a cultural institution, the Sindhi Adabi Board. An English translation, *Shah Latif and his Message*, was later published and is now available on the Internet at <http://www.gmsyed.org/latif/Shah%20Latif%20and%20his%20message%20-%20G%20M%20Syed.pdf> (accessed May 24, 2015).

8 The original Sindhi book came out in 1967. It's English translation which was first published in 1986 and later republished in 2012 by Fiction House in Lahore, under the title *Religion and Reality*. Page numbers cited here refer to a PDF version available online at <http://www.gmsyed.org/religion/Religion%20and%20reality.pdf> (accessed May 24, 2015).

Stressing the unity of spiritual yearning beyond exoteric and ritualistic differences, G. M. Sayed writes ‘that all religions, philosophies, ideas and branches of learning are parts of that Omniscient Being called God’ (Sayed 1986, 6).

The second and most striking feature of G. M. Sayed’s religious thought is his evolutionary approach. In spite of his lack of formal education, G. M. Sayed’s thinking reveals a firm belief in basic tenets of modernity, among which is the positivist idea of the linear progress of history according to a ‘law of evolution’. Religion, like humanity, thus evolved from primitiveness to higher stages, from polytheism to trinity to monotheism (Sayed 1986, 14). It ensues that Prophet Muhammad’s revelation is not the final prophecy but that Islam is nothing but a step on this evolutionary progression (Sayed 1986, 6).

The third aspect of G. M. Sayed’s conception of Sufism is his rejection of the rituals of popular piety, such as shrine and saint worship or the use of amulets, as mere superstition. He strips Sufism off its popular practices and manifestations and restricts it to a highly individualized quest for the ‘contented self’ (or *nafs al-mutma’inna*), to be pursued through strict morals and restraint on desires so as to subdue the baser self (*nafs*). His condemnation of institutionalized religion and its rules does not amount to a total rejection of moral values, but to an ethics in which self-control replaces the master-disciple relationship. The rejection of religious authorities (he attacks ‘religious imperialism’) and the stress on the necessary individual examination of moral rules are features shared with Islamic reformism, as Oskar Verkaaik has pointed out, terming G. M. Sayed’s thinking ‘reformed Sufism’ (Verkaaik 2004b; Verkaaik 2010). The Sindhi leader also positions himself against established custodians of Sufi shrines (*sajjada nashīns*), described as degenerate power-holders who exploit their followers and have gone into moral decline (Sayed 1996, 100).

If G. M. Sayed believes that individual and popular practices have to be reformed, he also believes in the capacity of Sufism or mysticism to enact collective reform toward upliftment, awakening and liberation. It is here that [p. 216] spiritual guides – not *sajjada nashīns*, but Sufis, that is, mystics on the path of divine union – have a role to play: in showing the way to collective liberation. In one of his books, G. M. Sayed plainly states that the ‘salvation of Sindh lies in following the teachings of mystics’, among others ideals, namely secularism, socialism and nationalism (Sayed 1991, 187).

Some uses and reformulations of Sufism in the context of Sindh’s politics have attracted scholarly attention (Verkaaik 2004b; Verkaaik 2007; Verkaaik 2010; Boivin 2011; Boivin and Delage 2010). These works have mostly highlighted G. M. Sayed’s appropriation of Sufism and

Shah Abdul Latif into a nationalist rhetoric which Zulfiqar Ali Bhutto and his Pakistan People's Party countered with their own 'political spirituality' (Boivin and Delage 2010, 192). To portray himself as part of Sindhi cultural traditions, Bhutto paid allegiance to another saint, Lal Shahbaz Qalandar, whose shrine is located in the town of Sehwan Sharif. Oskar Verkaaik opposes G. M. Sayed's internalized, ascetic mysticism to the effusive, intoxicated *faqīr* of Sehwan Sharif (Verkaaik 2004a, 20–55). We should also mention here Sarah Ansari's research on Pir Pagaro and the two Hur insurrections (Ansari 1992). These works have tended to focus on 'vernacularized Sufism' in order to displace the Orientalist conception of Sufism that centered on the Arab and Persian tradition (Boivin 2015, 58). As a result, they sometimes overlooked the dominant or orthodox groups so as to throw light on practices and forms of Sufi religiosity that stood outside the norms of 'classical' Sufism. Hence, they seem to convey the idea that Sufism in Sindh is essentially a mystical tradition that rejects or accords little importance to the *sharia*, while allowing for transgressive behaviours, such as the use of drugs and music to attain states of trance.⁹ By leaving out the dominant and orthodox and stressing the vernacular and marginal, they feed into a narrative of Sindh that highlights the specificity of its 'Sufi essence', a shared religiosity that brings Sindhis together beyond their identification as Hindu or Muslim. But it should be noted that Sufism in Sindh has also been impacted by reformist movements, and that most Qādirī and Naqshbandī shrines in Sindh observe strict rules on their premises: Naqshbandīs do not, for instance, practice *samā'*, or meditative musical session. Besides, mausoleums of Sufi saints appear through these works as the main *loci* of Sufi practice, whereas *khānqāhs*, where *pīrs* teach their *murīds*, play a role as important, though not as visible. If the shrines of Lal Shahbaz Qalandar and Shah Abdul Latif Bhitai host the largest pilgrimages and are therefore often taken as representative of Sufism in Sindh, many find their practices highly heterodox – which is why some find it more appropriate to speak of 'shrine culture'.

The portrayal of Sindh as a 'land of Sufis' is thus inscribed in a long discursive tradition to which colonial officials, Sindhi Hindu writers, Sindhi Muslim politicians, and foreign scholars all contributed. It tends to highlight the central role of mausoleums in the religious practice of both Hindu and Muslim Sindhis, while lauding the peaceful, tolerant and 'syncretic' character of Sufi religiosity in Sindh. In order not to fall prey to the Sindhi identity [p. 217] discourse on Sufism, I attempt in the following section to put Sufism in the context of some of the debates – or, to use Bourdieu's terms, the 'struggle over representations' – that surround it in Sindh.

9 The rituals observed in Sehwan Sharif have come to embody the mystical traditions of Sufism in Sindh in the media (<http://tribune.com.pk/story/610616/steeped-in-ancient-mysticism-passion-of-pakistani-sufis-infuriates-taliban/>, accessed December 16, 2015) and in some academic writings (Frembgen 2012).

Sufism and the 'struggle over representations' in Sindh

The diffusion of Sufism as a marker of Sindhi identity does not go unchallenged. If images of shrine culture have spread in mainstream Pakistani media as symbols of 'traditional' Sindh, the conception according to which 'Sindhis are Sufi by nature' still seems mainly located within a certain educated middle class, particularly sensitive to the Sindhi nationalist imaginary.

G. M. Sayed's writings gave a formal and explicit shape to the association of Sufism with Sindhi identity. They inscribed Sufism in a nationalist historical narrative that highlighted the continuous occupation of the lower Indus Valley by one people, the Sindhis, and the constancy of their culture from the days of the Harappan civilization. But if G. M. Sayed is seen as the *rahbar*, or 'founder', by Sindhi nationalists, it could be argued that his books in fact synthesized and condensed the work of a whole generation of Sindhis engaged in a broader process of identity construction during the 1950s, 1960s and 1970s, that drew on popular culture to craft a set of identity markers. While elected representatives saw their power increasingly curtailed (Tahir 2010, 141–314; Talbot 1998, 125–147), a new generation of Sindhi Muslim men educated in Sindh, notably at the University of Sindh founded in 1947, came to age and aspired to non-manual jobs and an urban lifestyle.¹⁰ When the One Unit scheme, which merged all administrative units of West Pakistan into a single province, was implemented in 1955, the political elite and this new Sindhi-speaking middle-class increasingly felt threatened for the future of their culture and language. Writers and students, who not only feared for the sake of their culture but also for their own career, opposed resistance to the One Unit and to Ayub Khan's regime. One of the major voices of Sindhi writers and students against One Unit was *Rūh Rihān*, a literary journal banned twice because of its political stance.¹¹ As its editor Hamid Sindhi (1939-2012) told me in an interview:

[The struggle against One-Unit] was also a struggle for the liberation from the inside. [...] You can call it 'sufiana', whatever it is... In those days, we all also used to follow these ideas: a Sufism sort of life, as Latif. We loved Latif, why? Because he preached Sufism. [...]

We were not complete Sufis, but definitely concerned about our future. The youngsters in our movement were concerned about future because they don't have

10 I would be tempted to use Hamza Alavi's term 'salariat', coined to describe the anti-colonial elite in British India, if it weren't for its connotations salary (Alavi 1988, 68). The social strata I point to does not only include government officials but also independent professionals (such as lawyers and doctors) who do not necessarily receive a monthly salary. This also fits in with the emphasis laid by most scholars of nationalism on role of the intelligentsia in national movements (Kedourie 1961; Dieckhoff and Jaffrelot 2006).

11 *Rūh Rihān* notably published the poetry of Sindh's most renowned contemporary poet, Shaikh Ayaz (1923-1997).

the jobs or they don't have any shelter or cover, so they joined so that we should have a share.¹²

In an interesting twist, Hamid Sindhi conflates his literary and political engagement against One Unit with emancipation – both spiritual and collective, but [p. 218] what appears clearly in these few sentences is that this struggle was also about securing one's future job. Young Sindhis' opposition was thus sparked by the perception that Ayub Khan's modernist economic program didn't accord much space for Sindhis. In many ways, Hamid Sindhi's social trajectory reveals the anguish and frustration felt by a generation of young Sindhi students who gained access to higher education but found difficulty in materializing the career they had been promised. Born Abdul Hamid Memon in 1939, he studied law but was mostly active as the editor of *Rūh Rihān*, a magazine which constituted a bridge between the two groups that were at the forefront of the mobilization against Ayub Khan's rule in Sindh: writers and students. He joined public service in 1970 and like many Sindhis who had voiced their opposition to One Unit, led a successful career as a government employee when a Sindhi, Zulfikar Ali Bhutto, was at the helm of affairs.

Hamid Sindhi's *Rūh Rihān* brought together all the symbols and references used by students and writers, both in their writings and in their mobilization. These tended to depict Sindh as a rural, mystical and peaceful society, characterized by its holy men and heir of the Indus civilization, yet presently at the mercy of its landed elite, urban capitalists and the Pakistani military. This imaginaire of Sindh as a rural, mystical and peaceful society was also nourished by the activity of cultural institutions established after independence: the Sindhi Adabi Board (or Sindhi Literary Board) in 1951,¹³ and the Sindhi Academy at the University of Sindh in 1962 which would later become the Institute of Sindhology. These institutions produced extensive documentation on the literature and traditions of Sindh, inspired by colonial ethnography (the name 'Sindhology' directly refers to Egyptology or Indology). Drawing on the 'popular' as the reservoir of Sindhi culture (Chatterjee 1995, 73), they produced typified categories of people, each with their own myth of origin, dress and traditions, as displayed for instance in recreated village scenes at the Sindh Museum in Hyderabad or in the Lok Virsa Museum in Islamabad. This scholarly, institutional study of Sindh 'folklorized' Sindhi culture in that it enshrined traditions, practices and items in a distant rural past, embracing their disappearance at the hands of a more 'modern' lifestyle while transcribing oral traditions on paper. The process of folklorization, 'in which a social group fixes a part of itself in a timeless manner as an anchor for its own distinctiveness' (Rogers 1998, 58), essentialized the identity of Sindhis, entitling them to a sense of

12 Personal interview with Hamid Sindhi, Hyderabad, March 2011.

13 On the Sindhi Adabi Board, see Schimmel (1961).

property over specific cultural expressions which then could act as identity markers. Among the identity markers that came to represent Sindh, the reference to Sufi spirituality occupied a prominent place. This appears clearly in an exalted poem by Hyder Bux Jatoi, peasant leader and nationalist, published in 1954 and entitled *Salām Sindh* (Jatoi 1988, 147–51). Jatoi mentions three most prominent Sindhi poets, Shah Abdul Latif, Sachal Sarmast (1739-1829), and the Hindu, follower of Advaita Vedanta, Sami (1743-1850), whose words, to many, exemplify Sindh’s ‘Sufi culture’ (Joyo 2009). [p. 219]

Hī sūfīan jo des ā, latīf jī zamīn hī;
This is the country of Sufis, the land of Latif;

Hī sāmī wāro āstān, makān-i ‘ārīfīan hī;
This is Sami’s place, the abode of mystics;

Sachal jo hit darāz āh, sāz āh dīn hī;
Here is Sachal’s dargah, this religion is music:

Hite ā dīn ‘ishq o uns, ā balad amīn hī!
Here, religion is love and affection, the land of peace!

Hit ā bashar birādārī, hite na zāt pāt ā!
Here mankind is our brotherhood, there is no caste system here!

Ae sindh tū mathān sadā salām ā salāt ā!
O Sindh, may prayers and peace always be upon you!¹⁴

Thus, by the time G. M. Sayed wrote his books and spoke of Sindh’s ‘message of love’, there had been two decades of literary effort, research and political mobilization that highlighted Sindh’s glorious past and created a reified picture of Sindhi society based on typified categories rather than on observation. But this collective imaginary in which Sufism was one the main markers of Sindhi identity was also located in a certain layer of society, among the generation who gained access to higher studies thanks to educational reforms initiated from the 1940s onward. This new Sindhi middle-class aspired to an urban modern lifestyle and felt the need to sacralize through its poetry, short stories and articles a fantasized traditional rural way of life from which it was gradually severing its links.

The following generation, conversely, experienced growing ethnic and sectarian conflicts. During the 1970s, Bhutto gave the Sindhi middle-class what it most wanted: opportunities in the public service. But the period of Zia ul-Haq’s rule curtailed these openings once more. With the development of colleges and universities in Sindh, a greater number of young people, mostly men, found their way into higher education. That is where, for many, they were introduced to

14 Author’s translation.

G. M. Sayed's writings, as campuses constituted the bastions of nationalist groups. But the political socialization of this generation of Sindhi students was made through the experience of violence on campuses and on the streets: whereas the previous generation had worked on constructing a reinvented collective imaginary, this new generation was more militant. The leaders that emerged stood out more because of their capacity to rally activists than because of their thoughts and reflections. Often born and raised in villages, these men, like their predecessors, feared for their future – not only their professional future, but also their physical existence, as martial law allowed for strict repression of ethnic movements while ethnic riots and killings exerted a strong polarizing tension in Sindh. Not willing to abandon the freedom gained with higher education, these men often settled in towns after their studies but kept a strong connection with their village, where they married and left their wife and children. Their expenditures in the city were often borne in part by [p. 220] village relatives or by a rent coming from land produce.¹⁵ This generation had to face the discrepancy between the idealized Sindhi society – rural, mystical, peaceful – and the actual Sindh of the 1980s, marked by violent conflict blamed on Muhajir invasion and Punjabi domination. It is mostly by people of this generation, whose members are today at the head of Sindhi nationalist parties, that I was told repeatedly that 'Sindhis are Sufi by nature'. G. M. Sayed's heritage was more than apparent in their intellectual development: when I asked them to elaborate, they systematically equated Sufism with secularism and universalism, echoing G. M. Sayed's conception of mysticism.

The growth of sectarian violence from the 1980s¹⁶ fuelled the perception that Sindh's 'Sufi culture' was threatened by extremist understandings of Islam. Sindhi nationalists like to praise how perceptive G. M. Sayed was when, in a speech made at the Congress of the People for Peace in Vienna in 1952, he advised world powers not to support existing regimes in Muslim countries and warned them of the danger of religious fanaticism.¹⁷ For Sindhi nationalists, the spread of sectarianism and communalism in Sindh is seen as a deliberate strategy by the Pakistani establishment, orchestrated to subdue the province. The various compromises (or outright support) made by the Pakistani state to the demands of religious groups – such as the exclusion of Ahmadis from the status of Muslim in 1974 or Zia ul-Haq's Islamization policies – are taken as confirmations of G. M. Sayed's warning. Fighting against religious extremism thus stands as one of the priorities of Sindhi nationalist groups. On the occasion of the 'Freedom March' organized in March 2012 by Sindh's major nationalist party, Jiye Sindh Qaumi Mahaz, its leader, Bashir Khan

15 Muhammad A. Qadeer correctly describes one of the particularities of Pakistan's middle-class: the maintenance of its connection to the village and the possession of land (Qadeer 2006: 127-130).

16 See for instance: Abou Zahab 1999.

17 This speech, made by G. M. Sayed at the Congress of the People for Peace, in Vienna on 12-19 December 1952, was reprinted by the Sindh United Party in April 2015.

Qureshi (1959-2012), pinned the responsibility for the spread of sectarianism and extremism on Punjab and Pakistan. But he first placed himself in the lineage of the Sufi tradition of *wahdat al-wujūd* by a direct reference to the tenth century Persian mystic Mansūr Hallāj, hanged for his beliefs:¹⁸

Arso thio āhe ta mansūr jo āwāz purāno thī vio āhe
For years, Mansur's voice has seemed distant

Hik bhero warī nāin sar-i dār o rasam khe sīngāran ghurān tho
Once more, let me ornate the scaffold and the rope¹⁹

After dramatically declaring himself ready for martyrdom, Bashir Qureshi then stated:

Pakistan came into existence as a result of hatred and hypocrisy born out of a wrong conception of religion. This is why its existence has not only been the cause of hatred and destruction for the whole world but has also allowed Punjab to take over the economic, domestic and foreign policy of the country. Thus extremism [*intahā pasandī*] and a terrorist mentality [*dahshatgardī warī soch*] have been fanned here, whose victims are not only the whole world and humanity but also Sindh, which, in spite of [p. 221] hosting different religions for centuries, has preserved its tradition of tolerance [*ravādārī waro ravāyyo*].²⁰

Bashir Qureshi thus denounces the sectarianism and extremism that threatens Sindh, the 'land of Sufis' which so far had kept its 'tradition of tolerance' intact. To illustrate his point, he mentions the forced marriages of young Sindhi Hindu women with Muslim men and takes the example of Rinkle Kumari, whose case was then widely debated in the Pakistani media. After disappearing from her home in Mirpur Mathelo, in northern Sindh, in February 2012, Rinkle Kumari converted to Islam and married a Muslim man in the nearby shrine of Bharchundi Sharif, whose head *sajjada nashīn*, popularly known as Mian Mitho, happened to be the local elected member of National Assembly, sitting in the ranks of the Pakistan People's Party majority. Rinkle Kumari's family maintained that she had been abducted and forcefully married. The case gathered wide media coverage as the Supreme Court of Pakistan stepped in. But Rinkle Kumari's family, supported by Hindu community organizations and human rights organizations, reproached the Supreme Court not to have investigated whether the conversion was forced or not (Sirmed 2012). Sindhi nationalist parties were among the few political groups that openly supported Rinkle Kumari and the Hindu community. They organized rallies outside the press club of Hyderabad

18 Mansūr Hallāj (c. 857-922) was hanged for having declared '*anā'l haqq*', 'I am the Truth', to express his experience of divine union. He was relying on a theme commonly used by Sufis, namely the idea that the outcome of the spiritual quest leads the mystic to find in him/herself, in his/her heart, what s/he was looking for. On Hallāj, see Massignon (2010). On Hallāj in Sindhi poetry, see Schimmel (1962).

19 Bashir Qureshi quotes a Sindhi translation of a couplet by the Persian poet Hakim Saeed Kashani Mansur Sani (or 'Mansur the second'), assassinated in 1071.

20 Speech in Sindhi and Urdu by Bashir Khan Qureshi, late leader of Jiye Sindh Qaumi Mahaz, Karachi, 23 March 2012.

and in Mirpur Mathelo to demand effective protection of religious minorities and request the return of Rinkle Kumari to her family. The case of Rinkle Kumari drew attention to the difficulties of minorities in Pakistan and is symptomatic of what Sindhi nationalists denounce, namely a climate of heightened sectarian and communal division which has led a number of Hindu families from Sindh to leave for India (some speak of the largest wave of Hindu emigration from Sindh since 1948).

A year later, another case of communal conflict brought Sindhi parties to mobilize in support of the Hindu minority. On 8 October 2013, in the southern Sindhi town of Pangrio, the body of Bhuro Bhil, a Hindu man of 28 years who had died in a car accident, was exhumed by a crowd of several hundred Muslim people.²¹ Arguing that burying Muslims and Hindus in the same cemetery was contrary to *sharia*, several people had first warned Bhuro Bhil's family against laying him to rest in the Haji Faqir graveyard, and finally took upon themselves to unearth the body after the family had gone ahead with the funeral with the support of a local landowner. This event brings together various social dynamics pertaining to caste conflicts – some lower caste Muslims are not allowed either to be buried in some cemeteries – and to land ownership – according to the *Herald*,²² those who initially opposed Bhuro Bhil's burial were part of a group of land grabbers that illegally occupy a part of the graveyard (as it regularly happens in Pakistan).

Yet most of the media coverage of the event highlighted the communal dimension of the affair, which is also what prompted Sindhi nationalist parties, as well as NGOs and advocacy organizations, publicly to take [p. 222] position on the issue by condemning extremism and calling for the unity of all Sindhis, whether Hindu or Muslim. This is what the picture that circulated a few days after the desecration on social media was meant to tell. The picture of Bhuro Bhil's new tomb on which Jiye Sindh's flag had been put up carried the following comment: '*Bhūro Bheel be hik Sindhi.....!!!*', 'Bhuro Bhil is also a Sindhi'. Sindhi nationalist parties also took part in the 'Long March' that was organized over three days from Mirpur Khas to Hyderabad. One of the cadres of Jiye Sindh Qaumi Mahaz, Dr Niaz Kalani, joined the meeting at the start of the march and spoke to various TV reporters. Several dozens of activists had come along with him and carried flags of Jiye Sindh, which now stood among the slogans of the event's organizers like the Bheel Intellectual Forum – '*mulk men intahā pasandī khe khatam kayo vanjī*', 'stop extremism in the country'. As in the case of Rinkle Kumari, Bhuro Bhil's exhumation was taken by many as a

21 In contradiction with the Brahmanic norm followed by higher Hindu castes, lower castes in Sindh bury their dead, generally in the same burying ground as Muslims. The cemetery is often built around the shrine of a local Sufi saint, worshipped by both Muslims and Hindus. Here, the graveyard is named after the local saint Haji Faqeer: 'Haji Faqeer Auliya Qabristan'.

22 This article by the *Herald* has the merit of replacing the communal event into larger structural dynamics. But it pays scant attention to the communal dimension, although it was amply covered by Sindhi newspapers, who directly named the clerics and groups responsible for kindling local agitation (Ahmed 2014).

symptom of the erosion of Sindh's 'Sufi culture' at the hands of the growing sectarian and communal polarization. On 23 November 2013, on the occasion of the fortieth day of mourning (*chahlam*), a Sindhi nationalist group convened a 'Sindh Inter Faith Conference' for the unity (*yakjati*) of Sindhis. It took place in Hyderabad in the suitably named Besant Hall, dedicated to Annie Besant, the president of the Theosophical Society from 1891 to 1933, which so significantly influenced thinkers such as Jethmal Parsram and G. M. Sayed. The party leader, Riaz Chandio, denounced a state 'conspiracy against Sindh's Sufi way [*mat*]' and praised the Sindhi loyalists ('*halalion*') who realize that 'Bhuto Bhil is a true son and heir of this soil'.²³

Sindhi nationalist parties thus see themselves as defenders of Sindh's 'Sufi culture' against a rising extremist and sectarian Islam that, according to them, is diffused with the support of the Pakistani state. But the two events that we related—Rinkle Kumari's conversion and Bhuro Bhil's exhumation—in-fact paint a more complex picture. In both cases, those Muslims engaged in communal conflicts are led by religious figures who draw their spiritual authority from the Sufi tradition. In the case of Rinkle Kumari, Mian Mitho and the *pīrs* of Bharchundi Sharif, an important Qādirī shrine²⁴ in the northern district of Ghotki, play the central role. The implication of the *pīrs* and disciples of Bharchundi in various movements for the defense and promotion of Islam is nothing new—and Mian Mitho proudly projects the *dargāh* of Bharchundi as a center where people come to convert to Islam.

Behind the crowd that exhumed Bhuro Bhil's body also figures a local cleric who belongs to a Sufi order. Pir Ayub Jan Sarhandi, a *naqshbandī mujaddidī*²⁵ *pīr* and a member of the Barelvi movement Ahl-e Sunnat wa'l Jamaat, was one of the religious leaders who stirred up local tensions. His name appears in various cases of conversions in the 2000s in the Thar region. In April 2008, for instance, he converted in one go 270 Bhil men and women (<http://www.dawn.com/news/300339/mirpurkhas-more-than-270-embrace-islam>, accessed 16 December 2015). He generally boasts having converted more than [p. 223] 10,000 people to Islam in the course of his life. He is also mentioned in accounts of forced conversions, along a *modus operandi* very similar to that employed for Rinkle Kumari (Dharejo 2009). Pir Ayub Jan Sarhandi is bitterly opposed to Sindhi nationalists, whom he accuses of being 'Indian agents'. He denounces G. M. Sayed's thought as a threat for Sindh, as in this speech pronounced at the 'urs of Pir Sayed Mahbub Ali Shah in Havelian (Khyber-Pakhtunkhwa):

23 Speech in Urdu by Riaz Chandio, leader of the nationalist group Jiye Sindh Mahaz, on the occasion of the 'Sindh Inter Faith Conference & Chehlum of Amar Bhooro Bheel', 23 November 2013, Besant Hall, Hyderabad.

24 Bharchundi Sharif is in fact affiliated with the *qādirīyya rashdiyya*, a Sindhi branch of the Qādirī *tariqa* headed by Pir Pagaro.

25 The *naqshbandiyya* is one of the four prominent Sufi orders found in South Asia. It was reformed in the seventeenth century by Shaikh Ahmad Sarhandi, who was described as *mujaddid* because of his efforts to renew the faith. Pir Ayub Jan Sarhandi thus belongs to the *naqshbandiyya mujaddidiyya*.

In Sindh, there are two ideologies. The first is that of G. M. Sayed, an ideology full of violence [*mār-dhār*], hatred, atheism [*ilhād*], associatism [*shirk*], innovation [*bid'at*]. The second is that of the Naqshbandi tariqa [*khwāja-i khwājagān*], the everlasting Saint Shah Muhammad alias Ibrahim Jan Faruqi Sarhandi.²⁶

The contrast between the Sindhi nationalist discourse and the statements of Bareilvi *pīrs* like that of Ayub Jan Sarhandi bring to light the 'contested nature of Sufism' and the 'struggle over representations' that takes place between differing visions of Sufism and Sindhis. On the one hand, nationalists invoke a Sufism stripped of its Islamic character and its ritual practices in order to promote the idea of a cultural essence of Sindh that allows for the peaceful communion of various religious groups within the single entity that is the Sindhi nation. Let us not naïvely deduct that Sindhi nationalists are free from all forms of prejudice when it comes to religious minorities. They are in fact very much the product of their society. Their lack of knowledge and interaction with Hindus is often plainly visible and many activists and sympathizers seem content with repeating that 'no one may distinguish Hindus from Muslims in Sufi shrines in Sindh' (which is debatable). One must then take the Sindhi nationalist discourse on Sufism for what it is: a performative discourse, which asserts the unity of Sindhis regardless of their religion in order to bring about this unity. This discourse also plays a role of identification between 'loyal Sindhis' who share the same vision. On the other hand, Bareilvi *pīrs* involved in the events we mentioned build their spiritual and temporal authority upon a Sufism that posits itself within the ambit of Islam and that is inscribed in a long tradition of political engagement, a tradition much transformed with the rise of sectarian violence in the past decades, as documented by Philippon (2011).

The most elaborate development of this position against G. M. Sayed's thought and his 'ethnicized Sufism' were made by an important conservative intellectual, Maulana Muhammad Musa Bhutto. At the time of its release in 1967, G. M. Sayed's book *Jān Ditho Āhe Mūn* caused a stir in Pakistan. *Fatāwā* and aggressive reactions targeted G. M. Sayed as he not only attacked the political foundations of Pakistan but ignored one of the most crucial tenets of Islamic dogma: the belief in the finality of Muhammad's prophecy.

Maulana Musa Bhutto, a Naqshbandi Mujaddidi 'ālim associated with the Jamaat-e Islami, wrote several books to counter G. M. Sayed's influence [p. 224] directly. Although his main concern is to set straight the misconceptions (*ghalatfahmiyan*) about Islam that have spread among the Sindhi youth because of G. M. Sayed, he sometimes leaves the ground of theology to

26 Speech in Urdu by Pir Ayub Jan Sarhandi, on the occasion of the 'urs of Pir Sayed Mahbub Ali Shah, Havelian (Khyber-Pakhtunkhwa), June 2012. The speech is available online at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Rv-hBsfNtw> [accessed 24 May 2015].

respond to G. M. Sayed's political vision of Sindh and attempts to analyze the Sindhi leader's personality.

In 1990, Musa Bhutto published a direct response to G. M. Sayed entitled *Islām par I'tirāzāt kā 'Ilmī Jā'iza* ('A learned examination of objections on Islam'), in which, after summing up Sayed's ideas, he looks at several philosophers and personalities (such as Toynbee, Gandhi, or M. N. Roy) and examines the concept of *wahdat al-wujūd* and the life of major Sufis, like Bāyazīd Bistāmī and Junayd Baghdādī (M. M. Bhutto 2002). When I interviewed him in Hyderabad, Musa Bhutto expressed a strict criticism of G. M. Sayed's conception of Sufism. According to him, G. M. Sayed argues that God has no reality but is a human creation and that prophets, far from carrying a divine, revealed message, were nothing but wise men of their time.²⁷ Prophets' teachings are therefore neither eternal nor complete but human experiences, as a result of which new religions can be founded on the basis of today's experiences. Maulana Musa Bhutto accuses G. M. Sayed of instrumentalizing the message of Sufi saints to establish a new religion in which man is worshipped.

Whereas G. M. Sayed indeed asserts that 'a Sufi should not necessarily be the follower of any particular theology' (Sayed 1986, 4), Musa Bhutto reclaims Sufism as an Islamic tradition. He therefore justifies the rituals that G. M. Sayed rejects: the ban on eating pork cannot be ignored on the pretext that it is a pre-Islamic tradition. A similar line of argument can be applied to the circumambulation around the Kaaba in Mecca. Referring to Shaikh Ahmad Sirhindi, the reformer of the Naqshbandī *tariqa*, he insists on the necessity for Sufism to remain within the bounds of *sharia*. Arguing that any form of mysticism that pulls one away from the *sharia* and the prescriptions of Islam is non-Islamic, Musa Bhutto refutes any resemblance between the conception of *wahdat al-wujūd* and the philosophy of Vedanta which, he claims, allows anything to be the object of veneration and leads to polytheism. Musa Bhutto believes that the concept of *wahdat al-wujūd* has been misused to justify the veneration of new idols in the name of Islam.

Musa Bhutto shows respect and admiration for G. M. Sayed, acknowledging the quality of his books on Sindh's past, but expresses puzzlement at Sayed's unorthodox views on Islam. He writes: 'In the matter of explaining religion, G. M. Sayed is either really completely victim of misconceptions or he intends to strike a blow on Islam with wrong interpretations' (M. M. Bhutto 2002, 58). In a letter addressed to G. M. Sayed in 1989 (M. M. Bhutto, n.d., 26–28), Musa Bhutto wonders what can be the causes for Sayed's persistent opinions and suggests a few reasons. He first considers G. M. Sayed's emotional personality, which made him unable to control his

27 Personal interview with Musa Bhutto, Hyderabad, November 2011.

feelings, unlike other seasoned politicians. He also blames G. M. Sayed's association with the Theosophical Society, which influenced his thinking into considering all religions equal. [p. 225] Although Musa Bhutto embraces Sufism as an Islamic mystical tradition, his writings illustrate the fact that not all Sindhis consider Sufism to be one of the foundations of Sindhi identity.

Conclusion

The place of Sufism in Sindhi identity construction after 1947 is far from being univocal. The wide diffusion of Sufism as a symbol of Sindh in the public arena may first mislead the observer into thinking that a consensus exists, but a finer analysis reveals that the reference to Sufism can work as an identity marker only so long as it acts as an 'empty signifier' (Laclau 1996, 36–46), potentially all-inclusive for Sindhis. The success of Sufism as a symbol of Sindh indeed relies in many ways on a non-polemic, consensual definition of Sufism as a quietist search for divine union that condemns the accumulation of wealth by the living representatives of saints. However, while nobody seems to reject Sufism as such, there are debates over its concrete meaning and its relation to Sindhi society.

The proponents of the idea of Sufism as a characteristic of Sindh and Sindhi identity believe that Sindh possesses a specific 'Sufi culture' which has ensured the peaceful coexistence of various religions throughout time. They often share similar social trajectories, being members of the educated middle class and having made their political socialization in the same environment, the campuses of the universities and colleges of Sindh. Formulated by G.M. Sayed, this conception is borne by Sindhi nationalist and autonomist groups, who see themselves as the protectors of Sindh's 'Sufi culture' and promote an identity discourse that stands in opposition to Pakistan's unitary nationalism by putting forward an alternative understanding of Islam. This conception meets strong contestation from some representatives of Sufism in Sindh, and notably from members of the *naqshbandiyya mujaddidiyya* such as Muhammad Musa Bhutto or Pir Ayub Jan Sarhandi.

Not simply an opposition of discourses, these two conceptions translate on the ground into competition between groups that seek to impose their 'principles of di-vision of the social world', as can be seen in the examples of Rinkle Kumari and Bhuro Bhil. Nationalists identify the 'loyal (halālī) Sindhis', the true sons of the soil who may be Hindu or Muslim, in opposition to those who have come under the influence of the extremism that they see as promoted by the state or, worse, who have become actors for the state. Mian Mitho and Pir Ayub Jan Sarhandi posit themselves as flag bearers of Islam and dismiss the nationalists as 'Indian agents'—that is, not entirely true Muslims. Thus, the 'struggle over representations' around Sufism and Sindhi identity

brings out two competing performative discourses, each rooted in certain social groups. Nevertheless, Sufism is now widely used as a symbol of Sindh in various public arenas and in the media – much beyond nationalist circles. What now needs to be better understood is the plurality of meanings and understandings of Sufism that have permitted this diffusion – a process [p. 226] through which the idea of Sindh as a land of Sufis lost much of its subversive dimension.

N

o

t

s

i

m

p

l

y

a

n

o

p

p

o

s

i

t

i

o

n

o

f

d

i

s

c

o