

**SHRINE ETHNOGRAPHIC EXPERIENCE**

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**Linguistic Anthropology 363**

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## Introduction

As part of the course on Linguistic Anthropology, studying shrines for me was an ode to Everett's (2010) work with the Piraha people. I thought so because of my position as that of being an outsider to shrine spaces. Despite their presence within my own city, shrines embody a life of their own, unknown to those who never visited them. During this study, I aimed to understand the use of language in sacred spaces, where language included signs, symbols, written text/inscriptions, verbal language, and spatiality.

Initially, I chose Bibi Pak Daman, the mausoleum of Hazrat Ruqayyah bint Hazrat Ali (RA), as the subject of my photo ethnography. Located between Garhi Shahu and the Railway Station area in the old part of Lahore, legend has it the shrine houses the graves of six ladies from the Prophet's (PBUH) household. (Government of The Punjab, n.d).

However, as it was closed off to visitors due to ongoing construction, I could only manage to look at the life around the shrine. The market exhibited Shia symbolism with pitch-black *chadars*, engraved jewelry, and decorative items. Additionally, petals of roses, fresh sweets, and even items of daily use could be used (see section Photographs: Part III). A system of *langar* (a free communal kitchen, often located around shrines) and *daig* (large pots of cooked food) was also situated around me, with visitors distributing food and many locals stuffed in local shops, helping themselves to freshly cooked rice. My experience was not entirely pleasant; however, its very strangeness reminded me of the purpose of this study.

My next visit was to Darbar-e-Ghousia. Dedicated to Syed Tahir Allauddin, a descendant of Syed Abdul Qadir Gillani, also known as Ghous-al-Azam, this shrine was constructed by the chairperson of Minhaj-ul-Quaran International as a tribute. (Silsalah-E-Qadriah, n.d). Located in

Township, the shrine spans over an area of 20,000 square yards. The architecture of this shrine matches that of the Ghous-al-Azam to symbolize the synonymous spiritual status of both individuals. The project is currently under the *sahabzadgaan* (sons) of H.H. *Pir Sahib* (Silsalah-E-Qadriah, n.d).

Unlike Bibi Pak Daman, Darbar-e-Ghousia was not crowded. There was no market around except for a lone shop selling flowers and souvenirs. As the shrine was located on the main road, amid the traffic, there was little room for passersby and pedestrians to roam around. Within the shrine, I was surprised to see young women, seemingly in their twenties, reciting Quran in their designated section. My presumption about shrines being reserved for a certain age bracket was taken down at that point.

The caretaker was not too excited to see me as I approached her by briefly introducing myself and my purpose for visiting. She mentioned interacting with several students before me who had visited the shrine for research and hence declined the formal interview in light of past experience; she feared the misuse of information and lack of confidentiality.

### **Methodology**

To understand the linguistic and symbolic underpinnings of shrines, I conducted this photo-ethnography, where I captured the architecture of the shrine along with symbols and inscriptions that appeared to be sacred. To make this project extensive, I talked to three people: the shrine caretaker, a fellow 22-year-old female student, and a professor of Religious Studies.

I could only briefly converse with the caretaker, Shahida (alias), a middle-aged woman, since formal interviews and audio recordings were prohibited. When I asked for a proper way of

seeking permission for the interview, she mentioned it was only obtained after *Pir Sahib's* consent which was impossible since the *Pir* did not interact with any women (personal communication, May 28, 2023). Hence, I only gained permission to take notes.

Later, I interviewed Menahil, a fellow student who visited Bibi Pak Daman, among other shrines outside Lahore. I inquired about her experience and the nature of the *kalaam* used at the shrines she visited, if any. She offered the rich view of an outsider who has experienced shrines in a highly personalized capacity.

Lastly, I conversed with a professor of Religious Studies for his insight on different Sufi practices in shrines. Since I needed guidance on some terms, I found it best to consult an expert to elaborate on what these terms may mean, especially in the specific context of my study.

## Findings

### Account of Scripts

**Table 1**

*Darbar-e-Ghousia Entrance*

No.	Location	Language	Description
1	Entrance	Persian	<i>Ya-Ghous-al-Azam Dastageer</i> (O Ghous-al-Azam, the Helper)
2	Entrance	Arabic	Variations of <i>durood</i> (an invocation made by saying particular phrases to compliment the Prophet)
3	Women's area (corridor)	Arabic	Names of companions and holy figures: <i>Usman, Hassan, Abdul Qadir</i>
4	Women's area (room)	Arabic	Top, clockwise: <i>Imam-ul-Mursaleen Khatam-un-Nabiyyin Rahmat-ul-il-alamin Shafii-ul-muznibiin Sayidna Muhammad al-Mukhtaar</i> (The leader of all Prophets, Seal of the Prophets, Mercy to the worlds, intercessor for sinners, Master Muhammad, the Chosen One) Center: <i>Sayyidina Muhammad Sallallahu alaihi wasallam</i> (Our Master Muhammad, peace be upon him) Bottom, clockwise: <i>Rasool Allah sallallahu alaihi wasallam</i> (The Messenger of Allah, peace be upon him)
5	Women's area (room)	Arabic/Urdu	The poster depicts family trees and lineage of the saint, linking him back to yet another holy figure, Ghous-al-Azam. The diagrams indicate the status of Syed Alauddin as the descendant of Ghous-al-Azam to establish sacredness. On the extreme left in the middle, a box dictates the <i>Wazaif Qadriya</i> , a five-step guideline containing specific verses to be recited at a specific time (e.g., after a prayer).

*Note.* Should there be any discrepancies, it must be noted that the translations above are not intended to be exact, and the interpretation of the text is based on my own understanding.

## The Kalaam

When I asked the shrine caretaker about the *kalaam* of Darbar-e-Ghousia, she mentioned the *kalaam* of “Ghous Pak,” not indicating further what it entails (personal communication, May 28, 2023). However, using this information as a reference point, I read the details of the *kalaam* myself and discovered a few themes.

Firstly, the reference to wine and intoxication in Qaseeda Ghousiya (Aziz, 2014) can symbolize divinity and union with God. The resulting spiritual ecstasy is almost akin to intoxication. The second theme is the high praise of the Prophet (PBUH) and the saint. The saint’s status is compared to those of his followers. In this case, status is determined by the degree of closeness to God. The third theme makes references to miracles to signify the dignified status of the saint. These miracles include the extinguishing of fire, or the crumbling of mountains had the saint revealed his secrets. The fourth theme is courageousness, where the saint calls upon his followers to worship and love God without restraint. Perhaps, these restraints could mean worldly affairs and material realities that may prevent one from becoming one with God. This courage also extends to seeking knowledge till one attains an exalted status.

The question I set out to ask regarding the nature of the shrine’s *kalaam* implied the presence of one or even its utility. This raised exciting concerns regarding how the term is perceived. I was told that a *kalaam* could mean many things ranging from the overall teachings of a saint to their specific writings (H.A Ghani, personal communication, June 1, 2023). Hence, the term is open-ended, contextual, and almost living. Not all shrines have a specific *kalaam*, and not all saints produce their own writings. Some people may take it to mean the miracles of the saint or a description of their attributes (H.A Ghani, personal communication, June 1, 2023).

Even if the shrines had their specific *kalaam*, visitors may not be familiar with it or interested in reciting it. As Menahil said,

“The interesting part about my experience with shrines is that I have never recited or discovered a *Kalam* specific to that particular shrine.”

Visitors may have completely different reasons for visiting, independent of the *kalaam*.

“I have a very deep connection with the sea because, well, (face softens) I was raised and born and raised in Karachi. It feels like a spiritual experience just to have the water float over the sand and (quickly switches to the next thought) anyways.”

I presume the quick switching from one thought to another indicates the urge to dampen personal experience in an attempt to be perceived more objectively. Here the value of visiting a shrine is found in memory and nostalgia, a yearning almost.

## **The Practice**

Different sects of Islam hold different views of shrines. The Wahabi school of thought is associated with rejecting all acts that imply shirk or polytheism. Such acts may include visits to tombs and veneration of saints. The emphasis is on the fundamental teachings of Islam as per the *Quran* and *Sunnah* (traditions of Muhammad), free from adaptations and innovations (Britannica et al., 2023). As Menahil indicates,

Well, my family isn't exactly interested in shrines because my father's side of the family is...uh, they belong to a strict tradition of *Wahhabi-Wahhabism*, and most people or most *Wahhabi* practitioners don't exactly believe in the practice of going to shrines because they feel as if it's not a part of the religion and that it's an extra addition. Some of the stricter sects believe that it's almost as bad as *shirk* but a few degrees lower.

I asked a professor of Religious Studies about the various Sufi schools of thought (H.A Ghani, personal communication, June 1, 2023). He told me that as far as Sunni shrines are concerned, there are three primary schools: Naqshbandi, Chishti, and Qadari.

Each has different practices where Naqshbandi opts for a specific synchronous chant (zikr) of words such as “*Allah Hoo* (God is)” and “*La Ilaha* (No God (But Allah)).” The *Pir* would start the first chant, and the followers would continue. In contrast, the Chishti practice *qawwali* while the Qadriya school leans toward *wazifa* (H.A Ghani, personal communication, June 1, 2023).

I inquired about additional practices since Darbar-e-Ghousia is associated with the Qadriya School of Sufism. I was told that *wazifa* would be an excerpt, a verse, or a prayer given to the followers for recitation by the *Pir* or *sheikh* of the shrine. The recitation varies on account of the intention or purpose of the prayer. Followers are given guidelines for the time and count of recitations (e.g., before or after prayer, how many times a day, how many days) (H.A Ghani, personal communication, June 1, 2023). In the case of Darbar-e-Ghousia, visitors had to write their names down on a register when entering the shrine. They would be handed a rosary with instructions on what to recite as well as its frequency. Upon leaving, each visitor had to write a count of *tasbeeh* against their names. As indicated in the earlier sections, *Wazaif Qadriya* was the *wazifa* for this shrine.

### **The Saint**

When looking at shrines, one can't help but ponder over the characteristics of the saint. Who is the saint, and what attributes granted them that status? In addition to a virtuous character, a saint is often one who has directly experienced God in some capacity. A list of miracles is often cited to indicate the saint's spiritual position.



As referenced in Qaseeda Ghousiya, the recited *kalaam* may constantly highlight the saint's miraculous ability or *karamat* (Aziz, 2014). To shed light on this, Menahil told me about Abdullah Shah Ghazi's miracles that account for his elevated status:

Abdullah Shah Ghazi is rumored to have stopped the sea...Abdullah Shah Ghazi is known to have prevented Karachi from sinking. Karachi is several thousand feet under the sea level, not above it. Um, and he is said to have stopped the sea waves from coming to destroy the city of Karachi. And it is said that his presence still keeps the city at bay and has the city recover from tons of storms every single year, which is why a lot of people visit him.

### **Conclusion**

Although the visit to Bibi Pak Daman was not as elaborate as I had wished, I encountered a humbling incident that reminded me of my foreignness in my own land and Everett's (2010) feeling of alienation.

A lady scammed me into wearing a thread around my wrist, which I accepted, thinking of it as part of the ritual. Soon after, she began demanding money persistently, after which a trail of other women approached me with the same demand. I realized that my attire, despite it being *shalwar kameez*, indicated my place as an outsider. The clean, ironed lawn shirt was an anomaly amidst the well-used clothing of the regulars. My student card hanging around my neck indicated my status as a visitor and hence, an ideal target since it was clear I did not know the ways of the shrine. This incident made me think of the symbolic value of attire, mannerisms of speaking, gait, and other physical signs which ascribed me identity markers (level of education, social class, religious practice, etc.) and, consequently, determined how I was perceived in this space.

This experience helped me realize how sacred spaces are not entirely divorced from the culture around them. With each visit, people bring a bit of themselves to the shrine. Some bits

may be pleasant, and others may be unpleasant from a personal lens. Nevertheless, the importance lies in not elevating shrines to a status where they are assumed to be what they are not. They are sacred spaces but not isolated from the people who make them up.

Additionally, the experience with Darbar-e-Ghousia showed me another instance of shrines being adapted to a specific context. Here, the shrine was organized, but it was also heavily controlled by hierarchies. More than a special message, this shrine's uniqueness lay in its lineage and descent, which was heavily emphasized. Hence, the descendants running the shrine become inaccessible due to their exalted status. Unlike Bibi Pak Daman, this shrine's experience centered more on the saint than the people.

Learning to take from this experience was challenging as I constantly reevaluated my position relative to others. This photo-ethnography demanded me to forgo objectivity in its conventional sense, as making meaning and sense out of symbols could not be distilled from my interpretations. Navigating spaces as the "other" is a nuanced experience where you may be blessed with a fresh perspective and be presented with profound yet uncomfortable confusion.

## Photography

### Part I: Layout

#### Image 1.1

##### *Darbar-e-Ghousia Entrance*



*Note.* The entrance on the left is for women, while the entrance on the right is for men.

#### Image 1.2

##### *Public Announcement*



*Note.* The sign prohibits any irrelevant persons from staying about in the shrine area. No business transactions, smoking, drinking, and substance use allowed. Only the main entrance is

to be used, or else a legal investigation will be carried out against anyone who violates the instructions.

### Image 1.3

*Donation box for shrine construction*



### Image 2.1

*Cooking area for Daig*



**Image 2.2**

*Stove for Daig*



**Image 3.1**

*Stairs leading to the courtyard*



**Image 3.2**

*The courtyard and the designated section for diya (oil lamps)*



*Note.* During class discussions, many students shared how trees were common to most shrines and specific plantations of trees in the courtyard support that observation.

**Image 4.1**

*A showcase for Diyas*



*Note.* This is an inside view of the section for diyas present in the courtyard.

**Image 4.2**

*Diyas scattered around with remnants of oil*

**Image 4.3**

*A thali of diya*



**Image 5.1**

*Shelf containing copies of the Quran and siparay, inside the women's prayer area.*





## Part II: Sacred Symbols

### Image 6.1

*Boards at the entrance*



*Note.* Names of different holy figures are written on each board alongside variations of *durud* on the top.

### Image 6.2

*Board at the entrance*



**Image 6.3**

*Metal Plate: Ibn-e-Ali Hassan (left), Sayiddna Affan-bin-Usman (right)*

**Image 6.4**

*Metal Plate: Abdul Qadir*



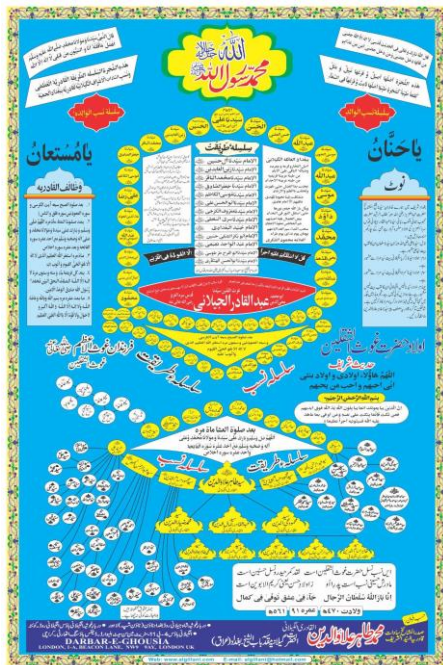
Image 6.5

Metal Plate: Muhammad (SAW)



Image 6.6

Shajrah Shareef



Note. The poster by Darbar-e-Ghousia (2018) is displayed at both the entrance and in the shrine area in the women’s section, Darbar-e-Ghousia, Township. Since my own pictures were unclear, I have used the image from the website.

### Part III: Bibi Pak Daman

#### Image 7.1

*Top view of the street leading to Bibi Pak Daman*



*Note.* When asking for directions, a shopkeeper gave me the minaret of the mosque as a reference point.

#### Image 7.2

*The nearby graveyard*



**Image 7.3**

*The marketplace next to the graveyard*

**Image 7.4**

*The market*



**Image 7.5**

*Jewelry, toys and miscellaneous items*



**Image 7.6**

*Jewelry and decor*



**Image 7.7**

*Freshly made sweets*

**Image 7.8**

*Rose petals given by one of the shrine caretakers*



## Transcription

### Notation

- (Emotion, movement, pauses)
- [Interviewer's words mid-speech]
- *Non-English terms*
- **Emphasized Words**

### Full Transcript

Int: Okay, so can you tell me about your experience with the shrines you've visited? Umm, if there was any *Kalam* you interacted with or read about and generally how it all made you feel?

M: The interesting part about my experience with shrines is that I have never ever recited or discovered a *Kalam* specific to that particular shrine. However, I have had a long-standing history with shrines. It's something that my family... Well, my family isn't exactly interested in shrines because my father's side of the family is...uh, they belong to a strict tradition of *Wahhabi-Wahhabism* and most people or most *Wahhabi* practitioners don't exactly believe in the practice of going to shrines because they feel as if it's not a part of the religion and that it's an extra addition. Some of the stricter sects believe that it's almost as bad as *shirk* but a few degrees lower. My mother's side of the family experiences shrines in mostly a cultural position (high pitch). However, they do believe in some interesting lore for instance, one of the reasons when I went to *Bibi Pak Daman* in Lahore, one of the reasons why I (quick breath) felt like I could connect with that particular place is because of my grandmother, who used to read us this particular...(gestures with hand) it was this one tiny little white book. It was a book of *wazife*. Uh, basically, you read those particular stories, you distribute a certain kind of *shirini* or something sweet and after reading those stories for a particular amount of times, uh, because you



remember these particular people or remember these particular Bibiyaan or particular holy women or even saint-like women, although the concept of saints does not exist in Islam (slight pause) per se. If you read those stories for a certain number of times during a certain time of the day and distributed a *shirini* afterwards, then whatever hardship you're praying for or whatever deep, pure desire you have or whatever difficulty you're going through will vanish because you've remembered them and this remembrance is close to god as well, um, because these people were godly people. Um, (looks up for a moment) one of the reasons why I like *Bibi Pak Daman* was because this shrine was dedicated to the Bibiyan. This shrine was dedicated to...this is a (slight pause, thinking) I would not attribute a certain sect to a particular shrine. However, this was supposed to be a Shia shrine and I do feel as if the practice of Shia culture is more exuberant and is more emotional than say...um, anything that happens in the Sunni sect, and I feel like shrines are something that don't solely belong to the Shia sect but this particular place felt as if, um, (tone softens) it could welcome me as a woman and for the most part it felt very **safe**. I enjoyed it. One of the reasons why I wanted to go to Bibi Pak Daman was, this is going to sound weird (makes eye contact, smiles), but I felt as if the place had been calling to me for a very long time and for some reason every time I made a plan to go with somebody else, even...um.. (pace quickens) I've never made a plan with men to go to that place, (pace slows) but every time I would want a female friend to go with me, it would somehow end up canceled so I decided to **just go alone**. It was very nice. There's a bazaar surrounding the place, and the graveyard is actually **pretty beautiful** (smiles). However, my experience with shrines goes back to both the city of Karachi and both the city of Multan. Multan **is** the city of shrines to the point where there's a myth floating around that says that if there were any more shrines in that place, then you'd be able to perform pilgrimage in Multan (raised pitch), which is odd but okay, (gentle

smile) we'll give them that. Ummm, I don't visit a lot of those shrines, but most of them are visible when you cross the streets, and most of them are visible when you go across the main streets.

One of the main shrines there, or the biggest *darbars* you could say, are Shahrugh-ne-Aalam. It's a place for tourists as well. You see mostly touristy people being there, not necessarily very religious people there. However, the most interesting experience I've had is the shrine of, in Karachi, (pauses to think) not Bahadur Shah Zafar, (lets out a laugh) what am I doing? Um, Zakaryia? (makes eye contact) Abdullah Shah Ghazi's *Mazar*. Is that the one? [Int: I think so.] Yeah, that's Abdullah Shah Ghazi's *Mazar* (thinks and talks to herself) Shahrugh-ne-Aalam-yeah (back to me). Yeah, that's Abdullah Shah Ghazi's *Mazar*. Abdullah Shah Ghazi is rumored to have stopped the sea.

I have a very deep connection with the sea because, well, (face softens) I was raised and born and raised in Karachi. It feels like a spiritual experience just to have the water float over the sand and...(quickly switches to the next thought) anyways. Abdullah Shah Ghazi is known to have prevented Karachi from sinking. Karachi is several thousand feet under the sea level, not above it. Um, and he is said to have stopped the sea waves from coming to destroy the city of Karachi. And it is said that his presence still keeps the city at bay and has the city recover from tons of storms every single year, which is why a lot of people visit him. However, there's one thing to be noted at Abdullah Shah Ghazi's *mazar*, which is that it is one of the most crowded places I have **ever seen**, to the point where claustrophobia seems like a colorless word in front of it. Um, one of the things that I noticed when I first visited *Abdullah Shah Ghazi's mazar* as a child was that I thought they had escalators on those and there are a lot of stairs you have to climb to go at the very top (gestures to the top), and you only get a few minutes because you

have to be pushed back down. I felt as if there were escalators there but turns out there were just so many people constantly moving up and down that the stairs, the very static stairs, seem to give the effect of a million people moving up and down. I did not, **unfortunately**, have a profound experience other than getting to eat sweet sugar-filled things at the Mazar, especially because there were so many people and (gentle smile) I was also getting scolded by my parents. Um, but a lot of people **really dress up** to go to these Mazars because they feel like they need to have a certain presence in front of Abdullah Shah Ghazi, who was a saint, I guess. Umm..it's very interesting because you have to pay to put a *chaadar* on top of the grave as well, and we are not really sure where that grave goes, but I remember studying that the Mazar itself is a very political place, and it had, I think it was Pervez Musharraf who had interest in its renovation and a lot of other political entities within Karachi. Karachi has been suffering at the hands of many political entities like MQM or PPP, and some of these parties had vested political interests in these shrines. Umm, I think that's about it.

Int: Thank you so much for sharing your experience!

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