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DEVOTIONAL LITERATURE OF THE PROPHET MUHAMMAD
IN SOUTH ASIA

by

ZAHRA SYED

A master's thesis submitted to the Graduate Faculty in [program] in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts, The City University of New York

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Zahra Syed

This manuscript has been read and accepted for the Graduate Faculty in Middle Eastern Studies
in satisfaction of the thesis requirement for the degree of Master of Arts.

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ABSTRACT

Devotional Literature of the Prophet Muhammad in South Asia

by
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Many Sufi poets are known for their literary masterpieces that combine the tropes of love, religion, and the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH). In a thorough analysis of these works, readers find that not only were these prominent authors drawing from Sufi ideals to venerate the Prophet, but also outputting significant propositions and arguments that helped maintain the preservation of Islamic values, and rebuild Muslim culture in a South Asian subcontinent that had been in a state of colonization for centuries. The continued practice of both ritualistic and literary veneration of the Prophet became a key factor in this preservation and rejuvenation of Islamic beliefs and customs. An examination of these practices, along with the study of the public ceremonies held in honor of the life and birth of the Prophet, the *mawlid*, the works of Sufi poets such as Muhammad Iqbal who built off of the works of renowned Sufi *shaykhs* and became one of the most influential South Asian men of his time, this work sets out to show how both genres of devotion were key to the rebuilding of Muslim sentiment and culture in colonial and post-colonial South Asia.

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Introduction

Through the examination of the representation and celebration of the Prophet Muhammad from the 1700s onwards in South Asia, it is evident that not only were Sufis significant in the rebuilding of Islamic societies after the easing of Western dominance, but they also took on the task of preservation of the diverse culture of Islam. As there are innumerable forms of venerating the Prophet popularized by Sufis, this paper will be placing a focus specifically on the vast literature dedicated to the uplifting of the Prophet, and use of said literature in commemoration during days of historical significance, such as the birth of Muhammad (PBUH). In my study of this literature, I am looking for how Sufi devotion was transmuted as it spread across different parts of the world. Though I will be focusing on South Asian countries with large Muslim populations, such as Pakistan and India, I anticipate looking into the origins of this literature stemming from other parts of the world where Islam and Sufism are deeply rooted (such as Egypt, Iran, and Yemen). Along with the study of the public ceremonies held in honor of the life and birth of the Prophet (a custom that will be examined in detail throughout this essay), the works of Sufi poets such as Muhammad Iqbal – a scholar who dabbled in several different languages (though heavily favored the Persian of the elite society of colonial India) – is a concrete source of how notables advanced their political causes using Sufi ideals and produced tangible results. Using both the generalized veneration-focused practices of the Muslim mystics, and the more physical written works of scholars, this work sets out to show how both genres of devotion were key to the rebuilding of Muslim sentiment and culture in colonial and post-colonial South Asia

Background

Sufism – or Islamic mysticism – arose in the 10th century. Though there is no concise definition for the term “Sufi,” Robert Rozeňnal’s explanation captures the essence well: “neither a sect nor a cult, it is best understood as a spiritual quest, experienced and expressed via an interpersonal teaching network centered on the fundamental master-disciple relationship.”¹ Sufis originated as strong proponents of long bouts of worship and austerity to the point of shunning materialistic aspects of life. Later on, another aspect of Sufism emerged that included eloquent poetry describing one’s union with and love of God.² In the Sufi prose that will be the focus of this essay, the unbounded love for God, and the need to connect to the Divine on a spiritual level often extended to the Prophet Muhammad.^{PBUH} Though there are many practices used for this reverence, one of the most palpable mediums is the literature, both oral and written. Articulate poems were created in abundance throughout the colonial and post-colonial periods. The lyrical qualities of these poems were a key aspect to the celebrations of the birth and life of the Prophet (simply referred to as *Mawlid un-Nabi*) where other exercises were added to the base of the prose.

Before looking into the minutiae of the *mawlid* it is important to understand the etymology of the term. Lois Faruqi examines four different definitions of this word, whose root comes from the verb *wulida* or “to be born.” True to its root, *mawlid* means “‘the event of birth’ or ‘the place of birth.’” The second meaning that is looked at in the article is an extension: the *mawlid an-*

¹ Robert Rozeňnal, *Islamic Sufism Unbound: Politics and Piety in Twenty-First Century Pakistan* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan US, 2016), 2. This concept of master-student is an important aspect of the poems I chose to look at by Muhammad Iqbal. As seen above, Iqbal was heavily influenced by several of his predecessors and did not shy away from showing it if his constant references to Jalal ud-Din Rumi are anything to go by.

² Christopher Melchert, “Origins and Early Sufism,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Sufism*, ed. Lloyd Ridgeon, 3–23. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014).

nabi, or the birth of the Prophet. The third and fourth meanings are the focus of this essay: “the celebratory event connected with the Prophet’s birth or other important occasions; and 4) the aesthetic forms or genres which enhance such celebrations.”³ In other words, the *mawlid* as a genre. Faruqi expands the definitions, explaining the different roles and purposes that this form of veneration may take on.

The *mawlid* as an event is not necessarily restricted to the Prophet, but may function as a celebration honoring saints, a newlywed couple, or just “an expression of thanksgiving on the part of the individual or group organizing it. As such, it represents thanks to Allah for an outstanding personal achievement, birth of a child, recovery from physical illness, escape from injury or disaster, or political and military success.”⁴ On the other side of the same coin, a *mawlid* may also be used as a sort of placation where the individual(s) hosting the event seek divine intercession for treatment for an illness, “mercy for the deceased,” or aid in ensuring success for a particular effort. The next two potential roles are to educate and provide “moral edification.”⁵ While the *mawlid* is technically used to refer to a gathering, what is recited during this gathering often draws from the Qur’an and/or hadith. These recitations (*na’ tiyya*), “impart knowledge of the Prophet’s biography,” and the “poetic content of its performance” is something that Sufi poets often used to convince their Muslim brethren to engage in different actions such as fighting colonialism, or the common invocation to come “back to the Qur’an! Back to Muhammad.”⁶ This calling was, and continues to be, a crucial aspect of Sufi literature as both the adducement of the higher powers of God and his prophets, coupled with the authority that

³ Lois Lamyā'al Faruqi, "The Mawlid," *The World of Music* 28, no. 3 (1986): 79.

⁴ Faruqi, 79.

⁵ Faruqi, 80.

⁶ R. A Nicholson, "Introduction," in *The Secrets of the Self*, Muhammad Iqbal, x.

authors seized when trying to move their audiences in a stimulatory manner was what preserved much of the Islamic traditions postcolonialism.

The practice of the *mawlid* (celebrating the anniversary of the Prophet on his estimated day of birth) paired with the poetry produced in the intersection of Sufis, love, and the Prophet, has been a source of research for decades. Published in 1951, G. E. Von Grunebaum and Clifford Bosworth dedicated a book to the topic of Islamic celebratory rituals, particularly Ramadan and mystical practices. The authors argue that despite the fact the Prophet (PBUH) repeatedly reiterated that he was “made of the same clay as every other man,” and susceptible to death just the same, he was lifted to near heretical heights within a few centuries.⁷ The authors attribute this development to the religious rivalry between Muslims and Christians. As the Christians spoke of the supernatural abilities of Jesus that the Qur’an confirms, Muslim opponents sought to provide a mystical flavor to their champion. These Muslims tended to be Sufis who were initially persecuted for their beliefs. Eventually, however, these same Sufi opinions started to bleed into “popular feeling,” and within 500 years became accepted more widely. Von Grunebaum makes his case by using the example of the mystic ‘Abdalkarim al-Jili (d. 1424), who apparently stood “unopposed when he called Muhammad as the Perfect Man...The Prophet is ‘loved and adored as the perfect image or copy of God,’” despite the fact that just a few centuries earlier “the leader of the conventicle that professed belief in the divinity of the Prophet was executed as a heretic.”⁸ Nicolas Lo Polito looks into al-Jili in depth, and explains the 15th-century author’s statement further by using the paradoxical concepts of the “Transcendence and Immanence” of God as his basis. Because the Prophet Muhammad was the receiver of the “Word of God,” he “therefore

⁷ Gustave E. von Grunebaum and C. E. Bosworth, *Muhammadan Festivals* (London: Curzon Press, 1988), 67-69.

⁸ von Grunebaum, 69-70.

acts like a mirror, producing in himself an image of God.”⁹ This is a notion that Muhammad Iqbal, a well-known Sufi poet, drew upon for his own works. Von Grunebaum argued that though the Sufis, whom he generally seems to lump with “Shi’ites” because both sects did and said things that were not seen as acceptable to the Sunni majority, were sometimes persecuted for their beliefs, they were “the strongest spiritual force among the people”¹⁰ by the tenth century – a sentiment that is supported by Caesar Farah who holds that Sufi writers were the “spiritual teachers of the Muslims” due to their contribution to Arabic literature.¹¹ As the teachers, Sufi individuals and groups were successful in either partially stopping cultural change in regards to religion (bringing back ideals and practices that were at the core of their beliefs, such as characterizing the Prophet as the “perfect man” and model for society), or endorsing it (shedding less than favorable customs such as the creation of an elitist society).

Besides speaking of the changing attitudes towards Sufistic regard of the Prophet, the author speaks critically about the aspect of *auliya/wali* in the Qur’an and Hadith, then dives into a discussion of the public ceremonies held in honor of the *Mawlid an-Nabi* (the birth of the Prophet). Grunebaum claims that the origination is not found in any written sources, but “according to the Sunnite historians and theologians, the first *maulid* celebration is that arranged by Muzaffar ad-Din Kokburu... in the year 1207.”¹² These *mawlids* were “heavily influenced by

⁹ Nicholas Lo Polito, *Abd Al-Karim Al-Jili: Tawḥīd, Transcendence and Immanence* (PhD diss., University of Birmingham, 2010), 43.

¹⁰ Gustave E. von Grunebaum, *Medieval Islam* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1954), 137. This is not the same book as the one that reviews Islamic practices, but the argument about how the Sufis were regarded and what their role was in remains the same between both works.

¹¹ Caesar E. Farah, “The Prose Literature of Ṣūfism,” in *Religion, Learning and Science in the ‘Abbasid Period*, eds. M. J. L. Young, J. D. Latham, and R. B. Serjeant, 56–75. The Cambridge History of Arabic Literature. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990).

¹² Von Grunebaum, *Muhammadan Festivals*, 73.

Sufi and folk-loristic practices.”¹³ In a passage of Ibn Khallikan’s (d. 1282) *Biographical Dictionary*, the medieval historian discusses the lengthy and grandiose way that the “brother-in-law of the famed Saladin” (r. 1174-1193) celebrated the birthday of the Prophet from inviting and housing hordes of Sufis, *qaris*, preachers, and poets from all around Mesopotamia from the first month of the Islamic calendar (*Muharram*) until the third month, *Rabi ‘ul awal*. Though von Grunebaum mentions that there is no concrete source that pointed to the first public celebration, it seems that it was “an established custom” by the late 15th century as discussed in the *Travels* of Ibn Jubayr.¹⁴ Aviva Schussman looks at the legal particulars, giving valuable historical information on the route of such ceremonies. She draws heavily from von Grunebaum’s work and claims that one of the earliest *mawlid*s, occurring after the first under the rule of Nur al-Din, “was very picturesque and subject to both Christian influence (torchlight processions) and Sufi influence (dhikr ceremonies).”¹⁵ These Egyptian ceremonies “became a festival of the entire Muslim world” as they spread from Saladin’s Cairo “to Mecca and subsequently to North Africa, al-Andalus, India and the Ottoman empire.”¹⁶ Due to its versatility, the practice spread until it seeped into the public and was adopted by non-royal people, and is one that may take place in a common household. There were and still are no concrete rules, and the spiritual reward was too great a prize to be ignored.

As a testament to the rich history of the annual *mawlid* celebrations that go back to the earlier Islamic periods, the practice continues today worldwide. According to El-Sayed El-Aswad’s, it is

¹³ Aviva Schussman, “The Legitimacy of the Mawlid al-Nabi (Analysis of a Fatwa),” *Islamic Law and Society* 3, no. 2 (1998): 216-217.

¹⁴ Von Grunebaum, *Muhammadan Festivals*, 73.

¹⁵ Schussman, 216-217.

¹⁶ Schussman, 217.

“one of the most popular holidays.”¹⁷ While there are cultural differences among the regions that celebrate the Prophet Muhammad’s birthday, there is almost always an undertone of “spiritual, religious, social, and economic components.”¹⁸ El-Aswad gives a brief description of the general protocol of the Prophet’s birthday, looking at the difference between sects.

During the Prophet’s anniversary, streets, homes, mosques, are colorfully decorated. The mawlid procession, performed during the day, consists of participants and adherents of Sufi orders carrying banners and flags, chanting poetic verses (madih) praising the Prophet. Food, beverages, money, and other goods are donated for charity. At night, Quranic recitations, invocations (dua’), lectures, and narratives about the Prophet’s life are delivered. For the Shi’a, the Prophet’s birthday ends the mourning state of Ashura [which] commemorates the martyrdom of Imam Husayn. The Prophet’s birthday ceremony is a festive occasion. The black flags, representing the mourning of Ashura, are replaced with green ones— green being the beloved color of the Prophet. Loudspeakers carried by young men spread the chants of the procession. Tents for the Sufi orders and visitors are set up. Service (khidma) is voluntarily offered, with tea, food, and gifts (nafaha) given to the needy and visitors as signs of blessing, unifying people together in this unique congregation.¹⁹

Though the fundamentalist sects of Salafism and Wahhabism acknowledge these processions and celebrations as innovations, El-Aswad writes that there are Muslim scholars who counter that the Prophet’s birthday is a substantial part of Islam.²⁰ Despite the religious controversies surrounding the topic, the devotional literature that was crafted by a series of poets was a significant part of the history of South Asia and continues to be relevant in modern day.

The na ‘tiyya genre of devotion

While *mawlids* are very common in this day, it took decades for this Sufi practice to leak into a more private setting. In order to understand and explain how the tradition originated, a

¹⁷ El-Sayed El-Aswad, “Mawlid/Maulid,” in *Encyclopedia of Islam and the Muslim World*, Macmillan Reference USA (Farmington Hills, Mich.: Gale, 2016), 2nd Edition, 2:710.

¹⁸ *ibid.*

¹⁹ El-Aswad, 2:710-711.

²⁰ El-Aswad, 2:710.

colloquial story that has been used to pinpoint the origin of the *na 'tiyya* traces the start back to when the Prophet first came to Medina. The “people became wild with extreme joy,” and his arrival was colored with “the loud voices” of kids that:

got together...and chanted the following welcome poem: ‘The full moon is shining on us from the area of gardens. We must offer thanks (to Allah) so long as anyone prays before Allah. O’ the one sent to us, you have come with commands which we shall obey You came and graced Madina, we salute and welcome you, ‘O’ the best caller (towards Allah).’²¹

This story has been passed down for generations with some variation. For example, some accounts claim that it was the return from the Battle of Badr when this event took place. It is often used as the justification for the recitation of *na 'tiyyas* and the use of a tambourine (*dhol*) to accompany the poetry as the Prophet did not stop the *ansar* (helpers) from singing and beating the musical instrument (which should thus make the act permissible). This anecdote seems to be universal, as Marion Holmes Katz speaks of the same “classical textual tradition”²² in her study of *mawlid*s in Yemen. She uses this narrative to relate the practice of the *qiyam*, a practice in the celebrations (looked at in further detail later on). Though this story may be challenged due to lack of concrete sources, it prevails in the folk-loric sense. This is because of the undeniable love and happiness that stems from the children and women of Medina at the presence of the Prophet. This jubilation carries onto the religious celebratory events where the latter portions of the *mawlid* there is a hope that Muhammad (PBUH) makes a spiritual appearance. The Sufi conviction of unbounded love for the divine and His prophets is something that operates as a beacon of hope and a practice of thanksgiving. This is seen in the renowned poem of the *qasida*

²¹ “The Prophet Muhammad (S) Enters Madina,” *Al-Islam.org*. <https://www.al-islam.org/islamic-stories/prophet-muhammad-s-enters-madina> (accessed December 18, 2018) (Tala-Al Badru Alaina Min Thanayatil Wadai Wajaba-Shukru Alaina Ma Da'allaha Da' Ayuhal Mab-Uthu Fiina Je'ta Bil Amril Mutai Je'ta Shar-Raftal Madina Marhaban Ya Khaira Dai).

²² Marion Holmes Katz, “Women's Mawlid Performances in Sanaa and the Construction of ‘Popular Islam,’” *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 40, no. 3 (2008): 467-484.

burda, whose disabled author was physically healed from the blessing of the Prophet after writing this lengthy poem solely meant to praise Muhammad (PBUH).

There are many different tones that a scholar can take when discussing the topic of *mawlid*s. As we saw above, Aviva Schussman adopted a legal perspective to discuss a variety of *fatwas* that dealt with the matter of celebrating the anniversary of the Prophet. Many others have taken an interest in the role and participation of women in these ceremonies, while still others have looked at the vernacularization and application of the label “popular religion.” While Marion Holmes Katz does not look at the area of the world in which we are focusing on, she brings to the table valuable insight on the nexus of women, and religion, be it a more orthodox version, or a popular adaption. Tanvir Anjum on the hand, does dabble in the same shade, but does so with a heavy lens of popular religion. Robert Rozehnal looks at specific individuals known as the *Sabris* from the Chishti Sufi order which he describes as “the final links in this chain of spiritual authority.” Lastly, Annemarie Schimmel seeks to understand Muslim piety through the study of the veneration of the Prophet. There are several other authors who have created well researched works, but the ones listed previously are primarily focused on the literature and practice of the Sufis that is the bulwark of this essay.

The role of women in *mawlid*s is a hot area of focus in this topic. Von Grunebaum mentions that “One of the intellectual ancestors of Wahhabism, Ibn Taimiyya in a *fatwa* tersely condemns the introduction of new festivals such as that celebrated ‘during one of the nights of the First Rabi‘ ... the participation of women was criticized with especial vigor by his contemporary, Ibn al-Hajj.”²³ Katz, on the other hand, looks further into the topic and finds a “relationship between

²³ Von Grunebaum, *Muhammadan Festivals*, 76.

women's religious practices and the constitution of Islamic orthodoxies." Looking at the Yemeni city of Sanaa, she draws some interesting conclusions, writing that the *mawlid* is an avenue where "issues of ritual purity and mosque access" are sidestepped. The author argues that the *mawlid* "provided a religiously meaningful framework for women's sociability and could be incorporated into the life-cycle occasions that punctuated women's lives."²⁴ She goes deeper into this by explaining that the birth, wedding, or death could occasion the hosting of a *mawlid*. While men in the field of creating prominent devotional literature outnumber their female counterparts, there are women who are celebrated for their work, notably Rabi'a al-Basriyya. The role of women is very significant as they are oftentimes the ones hosting the *mawlids*. This sort of an event has an appeal as there is no need for men in the religious sense, and women are able to take charge in a way that is generally denied to them in the more traditional setting of a mosque. This is one of the reasons that the practice was able to quickly seep into the lifestyles of the Muslim population of South Asia before, during, and after the hold of colonialism. The spread of Sufistic information and sentiment became much easier as women were religiously allowed to have intimate gatherings and were free to discuss different topics that went along with the theme of pleasing God. While the Prophet Muhammad was the model for the Muslim community, his daughter Fatima was and is highly revered and held as a guide for women to follow. Thus, the inclusion of Fatima in either the literature or the conversations that take place during the breaks of a *mawlid* is not uncommon.

²⁴ Katz, 476.

Annemarie Schimmel opines that “Sufism was more favourable to the development of feminine activities than were other branches of Islam.”²⁵ In her article about the nexus of women, Sufism, and literature, Vanzan describes the intimate details of the lives of several noteworthy female Sufi poets. She starts off with possibly the most known of these women, Rabi’a al-Basriyya, then goes into “Three outstanding representatives of Indian Muslim women,” including Jahanara Begum (d.1681), and Shah Jahan Begum (d.1901). Jahanara Begum was born to Shah Jahan, the Mughal emperor of India. She left behind several works relevant to her status as a Sufi poet including, “two Sufi treatises, the *Munes al-arvāh*, an anthology of the Chishtiyah Sufi order to which she had been attracted first, and an account of her initiation in the Qādiriya Sufi order with a biography of her master, Mullā Shāh.”²⁶ Her hold of power was a surprising one as she was promoted to “lady in chief” of the harem at age 17 after her mother’s death, “personally arranged the wedding of two of her brothers,” and never married.²⁷ Significantly for the topic of this essay, “The princess remained endlessly engaged in sponsoring the construction of religious buildings: from the complex in Srinagar (mosque, madrasah and khānqāh) to the outstanding portal in Agra’s mosque, each of these architectural works speaks of Jahānārā’s self-assertion and manifests the princess’ political ambition.”²⁸ Her poetry was an interesting mix of the two worlds which she circled in, especially the epitaph she composed at the death of her imprisoned father:

²⁵ Anna Vanzan, “Weaving with Needles And Pens: Sufism, Self-Affirmation, and Women’s Poetry in the Indian Sub-Continent,” *Pakistan Journal of Women’s Studies = Alam-e-Niswan = Alam-i Nisvan* Vol. 20, no. 1, 2013: 1-17.

²⁶ Vanzan, 2.

²⁷ Vanzan, 3.

²⁸ Vanzan, 3.

He is the Living, the Sustaining Let nothing but green grass to spread on my tomb
because it is enough to cover the humble the annihilated poor (faqīra) Jahānārā disciple
(murīd) of the Lord of the Chistī daughter of the victorious Emperor may God's light
glow on him.²⁹

Though Jahanara preceded Shah Jahan Begum by several centuries, both women were powerful women that left behind a legacy of Sufi literature. The latter was part of an interesting and “unusual lineage of female sovereigns who controlled Bhopal’s state destiny for more than a century.”³⁰ Shah Jahan Begum adhered to Sufi philosophy as can be seen by her *ghazal* which exclaimed:

If all the good people of the world were really good God's glory would be even greater
but the stink from the hypocrites' prayer rug reaches the soul For the ones who love to
pray there is another space do not believe the enemy's words that show you the cup of
wine O censor who rebuke the ones who drink wine I am going toward the sanctuary, but
my heart longs for God My heart goes toward one direction, but my soul goes to the
opposite one How will I be able to present myself to God?

O my Friend, my only remedy, source of my affliction
My only desire is my beloved Lover undoubtedly I am Šāh Ğahān, the crown bearer of
India a part from my Friend, I have no other master in this world, nor other passion.³¹

Both these elite women wielded a unique amount of power and “turned to the Sufi paradigm, in which women were respected as equals on the spiritual plane. It was this aspect of Sufiism that allowed the women to express through spoken word and inscribed text what they wished to say and thus be publicly heard.”³²

As the real focus of Tanvir Anjum’s work is the analysis of Islam and vernacularization in reference to *mawlıds*, the discussion of women in this setting is very brief. The author refers to

²⁹ Vanzan, 4.

³⁰ Vanzan, 9.

³¹ Vanza, 10.

³² Vanza, 13.

the practice of *mawlid*s as an adaption/adjustment of Islam and has a theory similar to that of Schussman that held: “Islam absorbed a large number of pre-Islamic pagan customs which Muhammad and his first followers had vehemently resisted, including some customs connected with the cult of the dead that are practiced around graves and tombstones. As mentioned, some elements of the celebration of the Prophet’s birthday are connected with His grave, apparently reflecting the belief that he was born and died on the same date.”³³ Anjum argues that there is a crucial difference between popular religion and vernacularization, as he contends that the practice of celebrating the Prophet’s birthday is not “folk Islam” or “popular religion” as many scholars seem to dismiss it. Instead, the conception of such is testament to two things: 1) the crucial flexibility of Islam as a faith, and 2) the prevalence of an elite Perso-Arabic population that held tightly to their languages in order to stand apart from the masses.³⁴ Schussman, on the other hand, chalks up the practice to “a reflection of a twofold popular need: the need to celebrate and the need for saintly personage whose life and death might serve as a focus for the celebration.”³⁵ Schusmann’s article does not have the purpose of explaining the rise of the *mawlid*s, but instead to analyze *fatwas* relevant to the ritualistic practice of commemorating the Prophet. She veers into her essay with a few paragraphs on the background explaining that the first official celebrations took place in Fatimid Egypt and hews over the “two noteworthy phenomena” of the ceremonies being connected to “some prominent Shi’i personalities” and the fact that the participants consisted of “only the ruler and dignitaries” during this time.³⁶

³³ Schussman, 215.

³⁴ Tanvir Anjum, “Vernacularization of Islam and Sufism in South Asia: A Study of the Production of Sufi Literature in Local Languages,” *Journal of the Research Society of Pakistan* vol. 54, no. 1, 2017, 191.

³⁵ Schussman, 215.

³⁶ Schussman, 216.

Anjum is able to articulate his argument in clearer terms as he explains that the mass conversions of areas that were not included in Arabia were partly due to the fact that the local populations saw the potential to “accommodate and adjust in varied socio-cultural backgrounds” and attempts to exhibit “how Sufis challenged the Arabo-Persian linguistic hegemony by producing religious literature in vernacular languages and dialects.”³⁷ The author reasons that Sufis have historically been labeled the agents of vernacularization of Islam through various means such as “the production of Sufi literature in local languages.”³⁸ This argument is supported by Caesar E. Farah in his chapter on “The Prose Literature of Sufism.” In it, he explains that later Sufi writing was “weak and devoid of the richness of ideas and expressions [as] writers employ rarely used terms and references. Grammar also suffers, and the use of incorrect sentence structures and trite expressions is frequent. This is a conscientious effort of Sufi writers to communicate with a nearly illiterate audience of a much reduced level of comprehension.”³⁹ In the same vein, Anjum reminds readers that a majority of Muslims are non-Arab who live away from the Islamic heartland of Arabia as “Vernacular Islam explores the creative adaptations of Islam in fringes or peripheries of the Muslim world.”⁴⁰ Interestingly, a lot of Muhammad Iqbal’s work was composed in Persian, and he was undoubtedly part of the “ruling elite” that Anjum refers to as the *ashraf* which adhered to “Turco-Persian cultural expressions,” if one takes into account his level of education and extensive influence. Because of this *ashraf*’s desire to uphold cultural exclusivity, they separated themselves from the rest of the

³⁷ Anjum, 190, 192.

³⁸ Anjum, 191.

³⁹ Caesar E. Farah, “The Prose Literature of Sufism,” in *Religion, Learning and Science in the Abbasid Period*, ed. M. J. L. Young, J. D. Latham, and R. B. Serjeant (The Cambridge History of Arabic Literature. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 57.

⁴⁰ Anjum, 190.

Muslim population.⁴¹ In his foreword to *Asrar-I-Khudi*, R. A. Nicholson writes that Iqbal's choice to write in Persian was a good one because it would reach a wider Muslim audience.⁴² Whether the language used by the Sufi author is one from the ruling elite, or a local one, it seems that there was always an effort for it to reach a wider audience. This is because much of this literature had an urging of some sort embedded into it (i.e., call to action, call to return to the religion, etc.). History shows that this method of appeal was rather successful.

The making of the genre

In the time of the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH), Hassan ibn Thabit served as his poet in Medina (d. 674 AD). The role of this *Sahaba* “was in a certain sense that of a journalist who poetically noted down the important events that happened in the young Islamic community. He was there to denigrate the Prophet's enemies and to extol the brave deeds of the Muslims.”⁴³ Traditional accounts on the man hold that he was in his 60s when he converted to Islam, and lived to be well over 100. Due to this advanced age, he was not able to partake in physical battles, and thus “employed his talent” of poetry on “behalf of Islam”.⁴⁴ This earned him the title of the “poet laureate” of the Prophet. Many of his poems survive today and make references to the *Nur-e-Muhammad*, the light that radiated from Muhammad [PBUH], a theme that was adopted by later dedicational poets, along with “repeated allusions to [the Prophet's] miraculous

⁴¹ Anjum, 192.

⁴² R. A Nicholson, “Introduction,” in *The Secrets of the Self*, Muhammad Iqbal (London: Macmillan and Co., 1920), x-xvi.

⁴³ Annemarie Schimmel, “Poetry in Honor of the Prophet,” in *And Muhammad is His Messenger: The Veneration of the Prophet in Islamic Piety* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1985), 179.

⁴⁴ Carl Brockelmann, “4. Ḥassān b. Thābit”, in: *Brockelmann in English: The History of the Arabic Written Tradition Online*. <http://dx.doi.org.ezproxy.gc.cuny.edu/10.1163/2542-8098_breo_COM_S112040>

birth and his hoped-for-intercession.”⁴⁵ The parallel of the role of the Sufis who endeavored to uplift this tradition of venerating the Prophet through poetry after the clutches of imperial forces slackened was not lost to the Islamic world as an especially celebrated poet would be referred to as either the “Hassan of his century,” or the Hassan of the place of practice i.e., the Hassan of Hind.⁴⁶

As mentioned above, there are several different genres of literature surrounding the Prophet. A significantly used and widespread form is the *na‘tiyya*, which is a poetic recitation that praises the prophet and “is a devotional genre frequently encountered in South Asian Muslim settings.” The *na‘tiyya* “consists of recitations of poems in praise of the Prophet Muhammad, and also of other Islamic authorities, such as ... the family of the Prophet and their descendants.”⁴⁷ Jalal ud-din Rumi is generally hailed as the one who established the *na‘tiyya* form of poetry. Schimmel discusses several different lines from his works, claiming “Everyone who has ever listened to the *na‘t-i sharif* that is sung, in a melodious tune ... will feel how deeply Rumi loved the Prophet.”⁴⁸ Rumi emphasized that in order to reach God, the faithful must reach Muhammad first.⁴⁹ This is a sentiment shared by many Sufi poets, mostly through the form of trying to mirror the Prophet who is the model of society. The *mawlid*s and *na‘tiyya*s are one of the ways to gain the favor of God.

⁴⁵ Annemarie Schimmel, “Poetry in Honor of the Prophet,” in *And Muhammad is His Messenger: The Veneration of the Prophet in Islamic Piety* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1985), 179.

⁴⁶ Schimmel, 179.

⁴⁷ Schimmel, 179.

⁴⁸ Schimmel, 203.

⁴⁹ Schimmel, 202.

The *Na'tiyya* Form of Devotional Literature

The *na'tiyya* is often performed on 12 Rabi' ul Awal, considered the birth date and month of Muhammad by most, when household or public celebrations known as *Mawlid un-Nabi* are organized. At these *mawlids* men and women – in segregated locations for the most part – gather around the reciter, known as the *na'tiyya-khawan*. This individual starts the function off with a reading of the Qur'an then leads the crowd into a collective recital of the *darud* which is a blessing to the Prophet that Allah instructed to send.⁵⁰

O, Allah! Send blessings upon Muhammad and upon the family of Muhammad as You sent blessings upon Abraham and upon the family of Abraham; indeed, You are praiseworthy and glorious. O, Allah! Bless Muhammad and the family of Muhammad as You blessed Abraham and the family of Abraham; indeed, You are praiseworthy and glorious.⁵¹

Finally, the *na'tiyya khawan* switches to *na'tiyya*, and others chime in. At public *mawlids* the *na'tiyya-khawan* resumes the role of leading the others in the recitation, but in privately-held gatherings of friends and relatives, the role of the leader may be passed around. After reciting an unspecified number of *na'tiyya*, everyone stands for the collective blessings sent to the Prophet. Katz makes a connection between the practice of standing in honor of the Prophet's birth during the recital of his life story -- known as the *Qiyam (salaam)*, in Urdu – and the classical tradition of the women gathering and singing “Tala ‘al Badr ‘alayna” to greet the Prophet on the

⁵⁰ Allah and His Angels send blessings on the Prophet, O you who believe! send your blessings on him, and salute him a thorough salutation.” (33:56)

⁵¹ Though there is a verse in the Qur'an where Allah commands Muslims to send blessings to the Prophet, the exact manner or words for sending blessings is unspecified. Thus it is derived from a hadith in Sahih Bukhari where Ka'b bin Ujrah is said to have asked the Prophet the best way to send blessings, and the *Salat- e- Ibrahim* or *Darud Ibrahim* was the response. There are actually many different forms of *darud*, and it is up to the *na'tiyya-khawan* which one(s) are recited, and a variety may be used in the same *mawlid*.

<https://www.ummah.com/forum/forum/islam/general-islamic-topics/197860-salat-al-ibrahimiyyah-durood-ibrahim>.

“occasion of his *hijra*.”⁵² It is believed that the Prophet makes a spiritual appearance as the members of the ritual stand to welcome, send blessings, and plead for Him to intercede on their behalf. Katz makes the connection between this and the actions of the women of Medina when they greeted the Prophet on the occasion of his *hijra*, writing that the moment of the *salaam* “is widely understood as the moment of the Prophet’s literal (i.e., spiritual) or figurative arrival at the *mawlid* ceremony.”⁵³

There are several prominent themes that are common in *na‘tiyya*. Some scholars argue that the most significant one is the “*Nur e Muhammad*” in the Sufi sense. To Sufis, the base of Allah’s creation was *nur*. Everything was created from this light, and thus the concept proposed by Abu Bakr ibn al-‘Arabi, was that “Muhammad existed before creation.”⁵⁴ Another use of *nur* is the description of the illumination/radiance of the Prophet. Schimmel gives several different examples in various languages, first referring to Pashto popular poetry that speaks of how “the rose petals blushed from shame when the radiantly beautiful Messenger entered the garden, so that the flower’s color is derived from his beauty.”⁵⁵ This radiance also led to the belief that “thanks to his pure, luminous nature he did not cast a shadow,” and his beauty was so great that being witness to it was unbearable to those that beheld it, but paradoxically had the ability to heal the blind. A nineteenth-century Urdu poet wrote “Your light was in Joseph’s beauty, o Light of God; It healed Jacob’s blind eye so that it became well.”⁵⁶

⁵² Katz, 469.

⁵³ Katz, 473-474.

⁵⁴ Faruqi, 81.

⁵⁵ Schimmel, 35.

⁵⁶ *ibid.*

As Lois Faruqi had used a very musical eye to inspect the topic of the *mawlid*, there are some exceptional themes that she focuses on. Some of these themes include the performers, the audience, the musical content, movement, and – of course – the literature. She makes an interesting point that while there may be two categories when discussing the participants of a *mawlid*, (the performers and the audience), “the boundary between them is never rigidly defined.”⁵⁷ This is because when members of the audience are stimulated, they may “spontaneously join in as performers,” or when a performer may back away to allow another individual to take the role. Even when there are soloists, there are often a few of them so that “leadership [may] rotate among members of” a group of independently functioning performers.⁵⁸ This gives all the participants the chance to take on the role of both the listeners and the reciters in a single event. An important element of this structure is that “the performers do not think of themselves as professionals, but as participants in a community event.”⁵⁹ Faruqi takes this further and reasons that because there are technically no professionals, there is no expected compensation. This fits the idea of happily not being compensated for working plays into the fact that “payment for any religious activity or service is frowned upon in Islamic culture.”⁶⁰ There are two reasons behind this taboo, being paid for performing at a *mawlid* would reduce the individual to something akin to a musician, and two there is a perceived spiritual reward that is usually considered sufficient (along with a meal or some refreshments). However, while this may be true in some cases, there is no doubt that *na‘tiyya khawans* (or professional *na‘tiyya* reciters), are not rewarded heavily and often monetarily for their efforts. Should a reciter, or an event not

⁵⁷ Faruqi, 81.

⁵⁸ Ibid.

⁵⁹ Ibid.

⁶⁰ Ibid.

be one with a high profile, they are often rewarded with gifts and items. Putting aside the matter of the performer being relegated to a position of musician, the generosity of the hosting individual/group becomes a source of pride. Because they were willing to pay to hold a remarkable *mawlid*, they had chosen to spend their money for good and hope to be spiritually rewarded doubly. The *na'tiyya khawan*, on the other hand, is earning money in a desirable way – by venerating the Prophet. They are earning worldly materials while expanding their good deeds.

Though there is a general agenda that is followed when performing a *mawlid*, there are countless variations to this celebration. These differences are not restricted to public occasions but may be in the same families as men and women are separated. Some may choose to execute the *salaam* in a circle facing the other members, while others face forward in rows. In other words, there is no strict organization of the function. As long as the *na'tiyya* themselves are being recited correctly, most other variations are accepted. Faruqi discusses the standard prose and poetic genres, as they contain certain elements. The content of the literature includes 1) recounting the events of the biography of Muhammad (PBUH), 2) praising him, 3) reciting the Qur'an, and 4) “invocations of blessings and supplicatory prayers.”⁶¹ The anecdotes of the Prophet, she argues, are probably the chief category of literary content. This is a curious observation because it seems that there is always an undertone of purpose in a *mawlid*. Whether it is as simple as gaining heightened spiritual standing or something as serious as pleading for the intercession of an ailing individual, there is usually a reasoning behind the ceremony. Thus, I believe that the “invocations and supplicatory prayers (*du'a*)”⁶² portion of the service is the most anticipated. The prayers made in this setting are oftentimes coupled with a line similar to “in

⁶¹Faruqi, 82.

⁶²Faruqi, 82.

honor of your Beloved.” This addition to the *du’a* is done with the hope to increase the chance that the unbounded love God has for the Prophet will be an added reason that He will respond positively to the prayer. This immeasurable love that Allah has for Muhammad (PBUH) is a motif that is heavily endorsed by Sufi ideals. Schimmel touches on this subject as well when analyzing the names of the Prophet. A Sufi shaykh known as Jami (d. 1492) heavily speculated about the name of Muhammad (PBUH), and after some interesting theories, he came upon the proposition that the *a-l-m* of Qur’an 2:1 signified the love between “God (*alif*) and Muhammad (*mim*). The *l*, a cipher for the uniting power of love, could also be interpreted as a sign of Gabriel, the angel of revelation.”⁶³ While there is a general acceptance that God loved his last prophet as he was chosen to receive revelations, Sufi love goes beyond what the orthodox originally held. Von Grunebaum reasons that it is “true, every prophet is given a miracle – Moses threw his staff and it turned into a snake; Jesus blew life into a bird of clay – but Muhammad’s miracle is the fact of the Revelation, the Book itself, a miracle superior to those of his predecessors in that it is permanent while theirs were passing...He will intercede for the faithful on the Day of Judgment, but only *by permission of the Lord*.”⁶⁴

For most Sufis, being the *Mustafa* (the chosen one), is just further proof that Allah loves Muhammad above all else. This is clearly seen in many different *na’iyya*, such as “Shah-e-Medina” or “Shah of Medina” where the female author announces:

Shah of Medina, Waali (ruler) of Yathrib
 All prophets seek answers at your door,
 All splendors are from your life’s essence
 The world is cultivated from your blessings.
 Everything else is just imaginary images.
 The world was made for you,

⁶³ Schimmel, *And Muhammad is His Messenger*, 118.

⁶⁴ Von Grunebaum, 68.

the blue sheet of sky was spread out.
Without you, the world would be empty.
You ornamented worldly gatherings
You lit a path for history,
Shah of Medina, Shah of Medina.⁶⁵

As this poem shows, Sufis believed that the world was made specifically for Muhammad (PBUH), not just the other way around. Because of this sentiment, there is an aspiration to appease the Prophet so that God will be happy. If Muhammad (PBUH) is happy, then so is Allah. As per Rumi and Shams-i Tabrizi (d. 1248), “no one can reach God unless he comes first to Muhammad, for the Prophet is the way through which the faithful can reach God.”

In the same vein, an old *hadith* gives Muhammad (PBUH) the grant to intercede on the day of Judgement where “God gathers all mankind on a hill. The sun draws closer to them and they are overwhelmed by fear and grief. Finally they agree to seek someone who could intercede with God on their behalf.” Starting with Adam, they go from Prophet to Prophet who admits that an sin they have committed and exclaim “*nafsi, nafsi*, I myself, I myself” until they come to “the Messenger of God, the seal of the Prophets” who “lifts his head and says ‘O Lord, *ummati, ummati*, my community, my community!”⁶⁶ In an anecdote, Rumi refers to this selective intercession, “for he minded that the Prophet restricted his intercession to the believers and did not intercede for everyone on earth.”⁶⁷ This *hadith* became a source of debate as the Mu’tazilites school argued that it contradicted with the principle of God’s justice, but the Qur’anic title given to the Prophet – “Rehmat al il Alameen” (mercy to the worlds, 21:106-107) – helped make “the whole belief in his intercession a pivotal part in Muslim religious life” and reflected “the

⁶⁵ <http://www.islamiclyrics.net/saira-naseem/shahe-madina/> While I used the Urdu transliterated version, I mostly translated on my own because I wished to have a more direct translation rather than the poetic version that this author went for.

⁶⁶ This lengthy *hadith* is narrated by Anas ibn Maalik.

⁶⁷ Schimmel, 85.

conviction that Divine mercy manifests itself in and through the Prophet.”⁶⁸ This dependence on the Muhammad (PBUH) for intervening on the behalf of the worth members of his community manifested itself in trying to please him. For some, this came in the form of appeasement through *mawlid*s.

The traditional Arabic style of the ode (or *qasida*) was used in one of the most famous pieces of devotional literature. This is “essentially panegyric, other materials pertaining to the Prophet’s life or to pious themes may be included.”⁶⁹ It is dubbed “the great masterpieces of early Arabic poetry” and was first recited by Ka‘b ibn Zuhair who after “slandering the Prophet,” was “moved by fear, [and] recited the long poem in his presence.”⁷⁰ This *qasida* “describes the separation from his beloved,” and the arduous journey through the desert, then shifts “from the description of a burning hot noon in the desert to picture the poor widow who lifts her arms in distress because the news of her son’s, that is, Ka‘b’s, death has just reached her.”⁷¹ Ka‘b then “turns to the prophet, apologizing for his mistakes, and asking for forgiveness. Muhammad was so impressed by this poem that he cast his own mantle, the *burda*, on Ka‘b’s shoulders, thus granting him forgiveness.”⁷² Not only did this ode become a model for later poets to write their own works, it became a basis to add to and splice, a practice that helped the late 13th-century poet Muhammad al-Busiri earn the title of the “Hassan of his century.”⁷³ This ode, called the *Burda*, continues to be used today in *mawlid*s and is often one of the *salaams* recited towards the end of the gathering. However, the contemporary *Qasida Burda Sharif* has taken centuries to

⁶⁸ Schimmel, 85.

⁶⁹ Faruqi, 84.

⁷⁰ Schimmel, 178.

⁷¹ Schimmel, 179.

⁷² Schimmel, 180.

⁷³ Schimmel, 181.

form and was preserved in the works of Sufi poets who contributed to the ode through the method of *tashtir* or splitting.⁷⁴

Though *na`tiyya* is created with the desire to venerate the Prophet by commenting and complimenting, there are other beliefs that are attached to this genre. The *burda* is a perfect example where the man most associated with the creation of this form of *na`tiyya*, Sharaf al-Din al-Busiri, was a man who unfailingly believed in the healing touch of the Muhammad (PBUH). According to the traditional story, the stroke that had debilitated al-Busiri had stricken while in Alexandria. Some acquaintances suggested that as a “scholar of Arabic and poetry,” he “compose and ode in praise of the Messenger of Allah as a means of intercession through his exalted person...no one who draws near the exalted Prophet and believed intercessor is ever disappointed, and no one who seeks intercession through him except that he will attain what he sought after!”⁷⁵ The poet was paralyzed after a stroke and dreamt of the Prophet casting his mantle over him, evidently happy with the constant praise al-Busiri showered on him through his poetry. The mantle cured his paralysis, and the *burda* has been passed on for generations with some expansions. Hassan al-Busiri has become a significant figure and is often regarded as the “patriarch” of Sufism. Besides the significance of the initiator of the *burda*, the idea that this devotional literature is powerful enough to heal the sick is a Sufi belief that has penetrated postcolonial South Asian society. In his translation of the *burda*, Abdul Aziz Suraqah writes that

⁷⁴ Ibid.

⁷⁵ Sharaf al-Din al-Busiri and Abdul Aziz Suraqah, “The Burdah: The Singable Translation of Busiri's Classic Poem in Praise of the Prophet,” in *The Burdah: The Singable Translation of Busiri's Classic Poem in Praise of the Prophet*, trans. Mostafa Azam (Al-Madina Institute: Mustafa Azzam, 2016), VIII-IX.

the *qasida* “stands as an enduring testament to the power of poetry and its transformative effect on the soul.”⁷⁶

Despite this widespread circulation of *na‘tiyya*, composers and authors of *na‘tiyya* are “convinced that it is next to impossible to do justice to his greatness, or to describe his beauty and mildness in appropriate words.”⁷⁷ This is visible in many different *na‘tiyya* and is even in different Urdu variations of the *qasida burda*. In it, the *na‘tiyya khawan* sings

There will be no one as you, nor was there anyone like you.
Someone asked Joseph what was the beauty of Mustafa like
We found no likeness on the earth or in the sky.
They are the reason for living, they are the best worshipper*⁷⁸
In any era, they are the highest person
It is religion and life what you have said

Because Yousuf ibn Ya‘qub is said to be astonishingly handsome in Islam and “generally accepted as the paragon of human beauty,”⁷⁹ for him not to be able to find a suitable example to illustrate the beauty of Muhammad (PBUH), shows the extent of the elevation that the last Prophet is allocated by poets. In fact, the trope of comparing Muhammad (PBUH) to preceding prophets is common, and always results in him being superior to any other individual save for Allah. While some poems are specific in who the different parties are, others are just general comparisons, where he is given an absolute title such as “the Prophet of prophets” or “the sultan of the prophets.” Schimmel calls this “a favorite topic of earlier writers; not only is the wisdom of all prophets contained in Muhammad but also their beauty.”⁸⁰

⁷⁶Sharaf al-Din al-Busiri and Abdul Aziz Suraqah, “The Burdah: The Singable Translation of Busiri’s Classic Poem in Praise of the Prophet,” in *The Burdah: The Singable Translation of Busiri’s Classic Poem in Praise of the Prophet*, trans. Mostafa Azam (Al-Madina Institute: Mustafa Azzam, 2016), VII.

⁷⁷ Schimmel, 176.

⁷⁸ There is no equivalent of a formal “you” in English.

⁷⁹ Schimmel, 35.

⁸⁰ Schimmel, 35.

In another excerpt from the *burda* that speaks of the unmatched personality of the Prophet as well, the *na' t Khawan* writes:

One day, the leader of the people asked Gabriel,
you have seen the world, tell us what are we like?
Gabriel stated, oh our beloved, oh dear sir,
by God, there is no likeness of you.

As Gabriel is said to be very old, he has seen an innumerable number of people to whom he could compare the Prophet. However, the poet states that because there is no one like Muhammad (PBUH), the angel is left without an answer. These concepts of the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) being above the rest, and having an unblemished persona is something that feeds into the notion of the Perfect Man.

The tradition of the *burda* endures because of the efforts of the early Sufi poets who added to the original *burda* of Busiri. Annemarie Schimmel claims that it is “a true compendium of a medieval prophetology...each of them contains certain articles of faith and statements about the Prophet that were central to the medieval Muslim world view. That is why the poem became so immensely popular.”⁸¹

Another particular trope that was given rise to by Ibn al-Farid (d. 1234) – an Egyptian Sufi poet, is the longing to journey to the holy cities of Islam. Al-Farid was one of the first to voice his adoration and yearning for Medina, but was soon followed by countless other poets who longed for the cities of Mecca and Medina, so that “the topic became predominant in poetry after the thirteenth century.”⁸² By using the *qasida* form of poetry, poets made descriptive works about journeying to the abode of the Prophet. Despite the arduous traveling, poets like the Sindhi

⁸¹ Schimmel, 181-183.

⁸² Schimmel, 189.

Shah Abdul Latif (d. 1752), even the “Arabian desert could seem to turn into silk and brocade, caressing his feet.” Latif wrote a poem where the camel is representative of his “restless soul” which is “driven to the beloved Prophet, who ‘is sweeter than honey and more fragrant than musk,’ and the radiant moon is asked to kiss his feet to express the traveler’s loving thoughts.”⁸³ The line of the famous poem “the eternal youth of heaven does not cause an excitement in me, I don’t listen raptly to the story of the *hoors*, I am a lover, I love the door of the Messenger”⁸⁴ caused the Pakistani *na‘tiyya khawan* and television personality Aamir Liaquat Hussain to hum on the permissibility of a Muslim rejecting the heaven as can be seen by his adjustment of the line to “the eternal youth of heaven does cause an excitement in me, I listen raptly to the story of the *hoors*, I am a lover, I love the door of the Messenger.”⁸⁵ Regardless, if the concept of the beauty and wisdom of Muhammad (PBUH) and the *nur-e-Muhammad* is the most significant theme, then the yearning and love for the city of the Prophet is a close runner-up.

Na‘tiyyas have been associated with South Asian Islamic reforms such as the Ahl-i Sunnat va Jama’at (or the *Barelvi* tradition), which “is one of the movements of Islamic reform and revival that emerged in nineteenth-century colonial India.”⁸⁶ The founder of this movement, Ahmad Riza Khan Barelwi (1856-1921), was a renowned writer of *na‘tiyya* himself and was open to Sufism. The followers of this reform movement “often place the Prophet Muhammad at the center of their devotional practices” and believe that the “Prophet continues to have a spiritual presence of his own manifest as pure light (*nur-i Muhammad*) and is capable of mediating between Muslims and God,” through the concept of “*hazir-o-nazir* (present and

⁸³ Schimmel, 190.

⁸⁴ Walli Muhammad Khan, “Pegham Saba Layi hai Gulzar –e Nabi Say,” 1930s.

⁸⁵ Islamic tv. “Pegham Saba By Dr Amir Liaquat Hussain,” *YouTube video*, 6:41. June 15, 2017.

⁸⁶ Patrick Eisenlohr, “*Na‘t*: Media Context and Transnational Dimensions of Devotional Practice,” in *Islam in South Asia: In Practice*, ed. Barbara Metcalf, (City: Press, Year), 101.

observant).”⁸⁷ This emphasis on the devotion and veneration of Muhammad (PBUH), and other saints is a “mystic practice” in its essence and continues to be used throughout many Muslim South Asian households.

As we saw before, von Grunebaum claimed the reason behind the rise of Sufism stemmed from Christians who attested to the supernatural nature of Jesus, and the desire to get on equal footing with their rivals was enough reason for them to forego the orthodox values of treating the Prophet as a human and paint him in a more mystical light. There were boundaries, however, and this can be seen in the case of al-Busiri’s *burda* which encompasses all the ideas that the Muslims of his time valued and believed, contributing to the construction of the ideal picture of Muhammad (PBUH) in Arabic, and non-Arabic Islamic poetry.⁸⁸ He coupled this with a “careful warning to his coreligionists that all the praise that he bestows upon the Prophet so lavishly should not be confused with the veneration of Christ by the Christians, for they have considered Jesus to be the Son of God. Prophet Muhammad (PBUH), even though distinguished by every possible virtue and excelling in every conceivable noble quality, is a created being.”⁸⁹ This warning is heeded and detected in different *na‘tiyya*, such as one that claims

He is not God, he is not without God,
but he is not separate from God.
What is he, but what is he not,
This is the way of our noble beloved.

Regardless of how obscure or blurred the line may be, the majority of Sufi literature adheres to the absolute entity that is God. Despite being the reason that the world was created, and being the beloved of Allah, the Messenger is nonetheless created by Him, and is a human.

⁸⁷ Patrick Eisenlohr, “*Na‘t*: Media Context and Transnational Dimensions of Devotional Practice,” in *Islam in South Asia: In Practice*, ed. Barbara Metcalf, 102.

⁸⁸ Schimmel, 187.

⁸⁹ Schimmel, 186.

The *Qawwali* form of devotional literature

A *Qawwali* is also a traditional form of praise, as it is a “song of devotion and supplication,”⁹⁰ and has a rich history going back to the early 13th century when Sufi orders were established in the Indo-Pakistan subcontinent, which had been under Muslim rule since the early 12th century.⁹¹ These dervishes “combined various genres of devotional literature: *hamd* (praise of God), *na ‘tiyya* (praise of the Prophet), and *manqabat* (praise of revered Islamic personalities)” and “traditionally began with the words of the Prophet [*qawl*].”⁹² At the dawn of their creation, these *qawwalis* were mainly restricted to Sufi shrines, but have slowly been seeping into the public over the past century. In fact, they have become so widespread that they have penetrated into intimate get-togethers such as family celebrations, “musical concerts, commercial recordings,” and even movies around the world.⁹³ Rozehnal looks at a specific line of *qawwals* -- the Chishti Sabiri. The members of this prominent Sufi lineage “preserve a distinctive Muslim identity that is legitimized through spiritual genealogy, and experienced through ritual performance.”⁹⁴ This Chistiyya brotherhood had a very significant hand in the understanding of Islamic doctrine in South Asia since the twelfth century. The spiritual leaders of this group took on the task of using “Sufism to translate Islam for the indigenous population.”⁹⁵ Similar to what Anjum discusses, these Sufis had knowledge of “local customs” and “vernacular languages.” They built hospices

⁹⁰ Syed Akbar Hyder and Carla Patievich, “Qawwali Songs of Praise,” in *Islam in South Asia: In Practice*, ed. Barbara Metcalf, 93.

⁹¹ Katherin Hagedorn, “From This One Song Alone, I Consider Him to Be a Holy Man”: Ecstatic Religion, Musical Affect, and the Global Consumer,” *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 45, no. 4 (2006)” page number(s).

⁹² Syed Akbar Hyder and Carla Patievich “Qawwali Songs of Praise” in *Islam in South Asia: In Practice*, ed. Barbara Metcalf, 94.

⁹³ Ibid.

⁹⁴ Rozehnal, 1.

⁹⁵ Ibid

meant to feed and shelter travelers, and offered spiritual guidance and education to those who sought it at their doors. The shrines built to honor the deceased *shaykhs*, Rozehnal argues, became a “symbol of local Muslim culture and identity.”⁹⁶ Though he speaks more on how the role of the holy hot spots, which had a hand dipped deep in social welfare, a specific family from the order, globally renowned for their *qawwalis*, will be the focus of this section. The “Sabri brothers” had a variety of poems, using Sufism to create “a union-music that moves your soul and your body.”⁹⁷ A professor of ethnomusicology, Regula Qureshi argues that “[i]n *qawwali*, the drum is important because ... the rhythm is supposed to sync with your heartbeat, reinforcing what your heart is saying. And what your heart is saying is the name of God. The music is supposed to help you remember the name of God.”⁹⁸

One specific *qawwali* that seems to have become the most known of its kinds and is often sung during the invocation part of the *mawlid*s is “*bhar do jholi meri ya Muhammad (PBUH)*” or fill our laps, dear Muhammad:

Fill our laps, dear Muhammad
I will not return empty-handed
Give us blessings in the name of your grandsons (Hassan and Hussain)
You are the leader of the era dear Prophet
You are the helper of the helpless dear Prophet
We are your beggars dear Prophet
Where else can we beg for blessings?

This popularization of a dervish-originated tradition is an example of how Sufi practices bled into society and withstood the storm of colonialism.

⁹⁶ Rozehnal, 1.

⁹⁷ Bradley Bambarger, "Soaring Sound of Pakistan's Qawwali: Sufi Music's Rich Past." *Billboard* 108, no. 5 (Feb 03, 1996): 1.

⁹⁸ *ibid.*

There are interesting tropes embedded within the genre of the *qawwali* as well, the most fascinating of which is that of the yearning for one's beloved. Oftentimes, the *qawwals* take on a feminine persona which is made obvious by the use of feminine pronouns regardless of the sex of the reciter. Von Grunebaum deduces "love is the mood of the Sufi, gnosis his aim... Man's love toward God is a quality that manifests itself in the heart of the pious believer, in the form of magnification and veneration, so that he seeks to satisfy his Beloved and becomes impatient and restless in his desire for vision of Him."⁹⁹ This applies to the Prophet as well, and often the *qawwal* cuts himself completely out of the poem and sings on the love between God and Muhammad (PBUH). This is clearly seen in one of the Sabri brothers' most famous works, "A Command from the Placeless Origin":

O Last of the Prophets, you are the Kaaba [we] seek
 Within the form of everything that exists, you are present
 The signs of the perfection of the Truth [God] are made clear in you
 That essence which was hidden behind the veil was you
 It was a beautiful night and the age was full of tranquility
 The loving attraction was fully engulfed in effect
 He [God] had to call His beloved to the heavenly throne
 He longed to see him – the 'ascension' was just an excuse!
 A command came from the Placeless Origin
 Towards the final boundary [of the universe], the prophet went
 This is the miracle of the perfection of beauty
 That even the Truth [God] could not bear separation
 On the night of ascension, He called Muhammad to the Sublime Throne
 The pain of separation was intolerable even for God¹⁰⁰

The *qawwali* goes on for hundreds of more lines, and includes multiple tropes of Sufi devotion previously discussed.

⁹⁹ G. E. Von Grunebaum, *Medieval Islam*.

¹⁰⁰ Hamza Shad, "Lyrics, Translation, and Explanation of 'Balaghal-Ula Bi-Kamalihi,'" Hamza Shad, January 1, 2017, <https://www.hamzashad.com/balaghal-ula-bi-kamalihi/>.

Muhammad Iqbal's Poems

The second part of this essay will look into Muhammad Iqbal's poetry and its heavy interweaving of the devotional literature into a call for action against colonizers. I will piece through a few of Iqbal's poems that are most relevant to my thesis, such as the *Asrar-I-Khudi*, and see how a more politically active individual used aspects of Sufism to move his fellow Muslims to build character that is separate from British rule. According to Dayne E. Nix, Muhammad Iqbal in particular "perceived an attack on the dignity of Muslims as a result of the occupation and exploitation of his Indian homeland by British Imperialism."¹⁰¹ Through poetry and *khudi* (the "self" or "a particularly powerful ego"), Iqbal hoped to "restore Muslim dignity" and empower the Muslim men. At the core of *Khudi*, the poet explained was "love" – particularly, "the believer's love for God and the Prophet, Muhammad" (PBUH).¹⁰²

Love fears neither sword nor dagger,
Love is not born of water and air and earth.
Love makes peace and war in the world,
The fountain of Life is Love's flashing sword.
The hardest rocks are shivered by love's glance:
Love of God, at last, becomes wholly God,
Learn thou to love and seek a beloved...
Kiss the Threshold of a Perfect Man!
Like Rumi, light the candle
and burn Rum in the fire of Tabriz!¹⁰³

¹⁰¹ Dayne E. Nix, "Muhammad Iqbal: Restoring Muslim Dignity through Poetry, Philosophy and Religious Political Action," in *Muhammad Iqbal: Essays on the Reconstruction of Modern Muslim Thought*, ed. H. C. Hiller and Basit Bilal Koshul (Edinburgh: Edinburgh Press, 2015), 201.

¹⁰² Nix, 211-212.

¹⁰³ Muhammad Iqbal and Reynold Alleyne Nicholson, "Showing That the Self is Strengthened by Love," in *The Secrets of the Self* (London: Macmillan and Co., 1920), 29.

Staying true to the trope of yearning and the adoration of Medina, Iqbal wrote “The dust of Madina and Najaf is collyrium for my eyes,” as he is able to see “the glittering and seductive charms of European knowledge” and not be confused or deterred from his “direction.”¹⁰⁴

Al-Jili’s concept of “the perfect man” influenced the writing of the poet Muhammad Iqbal who was also a Sufi scholar moved by the works of Rumi and sought to model his life after the actions of the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH).

True to its name, *The Secrets of the Self* is a work that urges readers to look into themselves and their spirits and understand it through the prospective of philosophy and religion. In the brief summaries that Iqbal provided Nicholson, the poet refers to *khudi* as the ego and builds off of the command to “Create in yourselves the attribute of God.”¹⁰⁵ By focusing on becoming the “highest form” of the individual – the ego – “the individual becomes a self-contained exclusive centre.”¹⁰⁶ However, in order to attain this form, one must come nearer to God, for “the greater his distance from God, the less his individuality.”¹⁰⁷ Consequently, “he who comes nearest to God is the completest person...he absorbs God into himself...into his Ego.”¹⁰⁸ He expands this idea in his later chapters, entreating his audience to never stop desiring, for “desire is the emotion of the self” and without this emotion, “is death to the living.”¹⁰⁹ Iqbal argues that “the object of science and art is not knowledge,” but rather “science is a means of establishing the Self. Science and art are servants of Life.”¹¹⁰ Thus in order to develop, humans must be in a state of tension. He implores his fellow colonized Muslims to understand that their

¹⁰⁴ Schimmel, 241.

¹⁰⁵ Iqbal and Reynolds, xix.

¹⁰⁶ Ibid.

¹⁰⁷ Iqbal and Reynolds, xix.

¹⁰⁸ Ibid.

¹⁰⁹ Iqbal, 24.

¹¹⁰ Iqbal, 26.

state is not one to become comfortable with, they should want more because without that want, they are not walking the path to bring them closer to God.

In his third and fourth chapters, Iqbal expands his belief that the Muslims of India should not be content with their political state, and takes on a more religious tone. *Showing that the Self is Strengthened by Love* explains that harboring loving is an integral part of absorbing God because “Love of God at last becomes wholly God.”¹¹¹ In this chapter, the poet writes of his love for Muhammad (PBUH) saying things like “In the Moslem’s heart is the home of Mohammed, All our glory is from the name of Mohammed.”¹¹² By yearning for “the happy town where dwells the Beloved,” and suggesting to his audience that they

Sojourn for a while on the Hirá of the heart,
Abandon self and flee to God.
Strengthened by God, return to thy self
And break the heads of the Lát and Uzzá of sensuality¹¹³

From the same token, Iqbal seeks to show that “*the Self is weakened by asking.*” He warns the people who have reaped benefits from the colonizers at the expense of fellow Indians, that:

Thy maladies are the result of indigence:
This disease is the source of thy pain.
It is robbing thine high thoughts of their dignity
And putting out the light of thy noble imagination.¹¹⁴

He furthers this with the use of analogies to show how asking affects *khudi* and warns his readers that the act of asking others for things will “put [thou] to shame before the Prophet” and to “not sully the honour of the pure religion.”¹¹⁵ The effects of this entreaty were integral to giving the “caged” Indian Muslims back the sense of dignity that he believed had been sapped from the

¹¹¹ Iqbal, 29.

¹¹² Iqbal, 30.

¹¹³ Iqbal, 36-37.

¹¹⁴ Iqbal, 38.

¹¹⁵ Iqbal, 40.

centuries of colonization. Iqbal goes further and explains just how his fellow Muslims could educate the self in three stages: “obedience, self-control, and divine viceregency.”¹¹⁶ The obedience stage refers to obeying “the statutes of Muhammad”¹¹⁷ and the “religious law of Islam”¹¹⁸ Self-control refers to regular prayer and making sure that “thou art impregnable, if thy Islam be strong”¹¹⁹ – stronger than any other form of love that one may have in their hearts (be it the love of a parent, or the love of a spouse). Being the vice-regent of God means that “He executes the command of Allah in the world. When he pitches his tent in the wide world.”¹²⁰ Through the mastery of these three stages, Iqbal believed that one could strengthen the self – an important endeavor for the people who had spent their whole lives under the rule of who the poet thought was not meant to be their sovereign.

Modern Man is another Iqbalian poem, that helped to move readers and build their dignity and identity. This work speaks more of Iqbal’s own identity, as he “struggle[d] to engage the Western world while holding fast to the values of his Islamic home.” Mark Meehan explains in his work that the poet was a unique individual, and shows that “The struggle Iqbal committed his life to engaging was between modernity (empiricism, nationalism, individualism, etc.) and Islam.”¹²¹ Some of his ideas from *Asrar-I Khudi* are represented in this work as well:

While he recognized that modernism brought significant scientific and economic benefits, he also understood that materialist gains did not equate with self-understanding. Iqbal declared, with his life and poetry, that modernism did not provide an adequate

¹¹⁶ Iqbal, 72.

¹¹⁷ Iqbal, 74.

¹¹⁸ Iqbal and Reynolds, footnote 63, 84.

¹¹⁹ Iqbal, 78.

¹²⁰ Iqbal, 79.

¹²¹ Mark Meehan, “An Islamic Response to Modernism,” in *Cross Currents* 65, no. 1 (March 2015): 79–90. doi:10.1111/cros.12111.

philosophical foundation for life. He believed that the East should resist what the West assumed to be true and that Muslims could bring the wisdom of the East to balance the science of the West.¹²²

Because Iqbal was a man that “straddled cultures and traditions” and had a life of “in-between.” By this, Meehan is referring to the fact that he was born into a family that were Hindu-to-Muslim converts, and had been educated in both Muslim and English schools. According to Bruce Lawrence, “His quest was to bridge Islam and the modern world without supporting colonialism or embracing atheism.”¹²³ When the Queen of England also took on the title of “Empress of India” in 1877, heightened the fears of “epistemicide, the literal wiping out of knowledge traditions.”¹²⁴ This was the same year that Iqbal was born, and so he was thrust into a world where the two ends of the “Islamic East and the modernist West”¹²⁵ were at war.

Asrar-I Khudi had many metaphors for the strange situation that Iqbal lived in. As a man who had been educated in the ways of both Islam and secular English views and ideals, he was able to immerse himself in both worlds, drawing from the scientific tradition to defend Islamic philosophy. Meehan discusses the symbolization of “a tiger being tamed by sheep to illustrate what the British Colonizers had accomplished with Indian Muslims”

In their stupidity they swallowed the charm of the sheep.
He that used to make sheep his prey
Now embraced a sheep's religion.
The tigers took kindly to a diet of fodder:
At length their tigerish nature was broken.
The fodder blunted their teeth
And put out the awful flashings of their eyes.
By degrees courage ebbed from their breasts,
The sheen departed from the mirror.
That frenzy of uttermost exertion remained not,

¹²² Meehan, 79-80.

¹²³ Meehan, 80. Bruce Lawrence, *The Qur'an: A Biography*, (New York: Atlantic Monthly Press, 2006), 155.

¹²⁴ Meehan, 84.

¹²⁵ Ibid.

That craving after action dwelt in their hearts no more.
They lost the power of ruling and the resolution to be independent,
They lost reputation, prestige, and fortune.
Their paws that were as iron became strengthless
Their souls died and their bodies became tombs.
Bodily strength diminished while spiritual fear increased:
Spiritual fear robbed them of courage.
Lack of courage produced a hundred diseases—
Poverty, pusillanimity, lowmindedness.
The wakeful tiger was lulled to slumber by the sheep's charm:
He called his decline Moral Culture.¹²⁶

What Iqbal is most remembered for in Pakistan today, is his call for a separate Muslim state. In his Persian poem *Rumuz-I Bekundi*, Iqbal gave up on his previous vision of a united Hindu-Muslim state, and instead “came to focus on the Muslim League, an organization of Muslim men focused on Muslim issues of independence. Iqbal believed that Islam was the unifying force that could make them a cohesive nation.”¹²⁷ Though he did not live to see the independence and partitioning of India and Pakistan, he pushed the separation of Indian Muslims, hoping that they would “finally be free to become part of the greater Muslim brotherhood of nations.”¹²⁸

In a work devoted to the examination of Muhammad Iqbal – a multifaceted individual who is often cited as being the inspiration of colonized Muslims– several scholars banded together to demonstrate just how his “Sufistic” writings transformed into a spark that set off millions of “caged” Indian Muslims who fought to push off the chains of colonialism as a result. Some of these works were adapted into the postcolonial nation-states and used for patriotic purposes such as national anthems and widely taught in schools. I will be investigating some of these literary

¹²⁶ Iqbal, 54-55.

¹²⁷ Meehan, 87.

¹²⁸ Meehan, 87.

works to provide a more concrete example of how devotional literature played a significant role in the postcolonial countries. Dayne Nix discusses how the ideals of civilization according to Great Britain (Christianity, nationalism, and democracy), were in opposition to the beliefs of the colonized peoples according to Iqbal. To the poet, “nationalism was a source of racism and disunity” and even “the cause of World War 1,”¹²⁹ and that democracy was “inconsistent with Islam” as it called for the separation of religion and politics. Iqbal crafted poems that denounced this form of governance as it threatened the “concept of unity with God”¹³⁰ – a notion especially particular to Sufism. Thus in his promotions of Sufi ideals, Iqbal alienated British values and moved his counterparts to action. An interesting point that Nix looks at in depth is the restoration of Muslim dignity through “poetic-philosophic works.”¹³¹ Iqbal composed a series which discusses the attributes of the self-empowered man with the goal of pushing others to actions. I will be looking at these works – and some of Iqbal’s other works that are used today on the national level, such as in schools or political meetings-- as primary sources (i.e., *Asrar-i-Khudi* or Secrets of the Self, and *lab pay aati hai dua* – a prayer for the success of the country).

Iqbal was part of the “‘Aligarh’ movement that brought about a paradigm shift in the consciousness of Indian Muslims and transformed their destiny.”¹³² In the anthology *Muhammad Iqbal: Essays on the Reconstruction of Modern Muslim Thought*, Riffat Hassan speaks about how

¹²⁹ Dayne E. Nix, “Muhammad Iqbal: Restoring Muslim Dignity through Poetry, Philosophy and Religious Political Action,” in *Muhammad Iqbal: Essays on the Reconstruction of Modern Muslim Thought*, ed. H. C. Hillier and Koshul Basit Bilal (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2015), 203.

¹³⁰ Nix, 204.

¹³¹ Nix, 211.

¹³² Riffat Hassan, "Introduction," in *Muhammad Iqbal: Essays on the Reconstruction of Modern Muslim Thought*, edited by H. C. Hillier and Koshul Basit Bilal, 1-11. (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2015), 1.

he “constituted historic action” and “inspired and energised millions of people.”¹³³ Using literature, he expressed the discontent of the Muslim Indians that felt that they had lost everything from political autonomy, “economic opportunity,” and cultural independence to the European colonizers.¹³⁴ By vehemently advocating the growth of a collective *khudi*, or selfhood, he gave the people a voice to challenge imperialism and “ferently believed in human equality and the right of human beings to dignity, justice, and freedom.”¹³⁵

While Iqbal has written many works, *Asrar-i-Khudi* is considered to be the most popular, and highly impactful. In the collection of poems, the author sought the “strengthening of the human personality (or individuality) which grows in increasing proximity to God. The human self, however, can be strengthened only by love, and this love is inseparably connected with Muhammad.”¹³⁶ *The Secrets of Selfhood* was aptly named, as it was meant to mobilize readers to nurture their egos by drawing a core concept of the Qur’an. In accordance with Surah At-Tin (95: 4-5),¹³⁷ Iqbal writes that *khudi* “has the quality of growth as well as the quality of corruption.”¹³⁸ As is visible by his statement that the sight of Medina cleared his vision of European bedazzlement, he fought against “the false and delusive metaphysics that overlaid the core Qur’anic teaching of the self. He wanted the Muslim *ummah* to use the power that Allah had given them, and strive to reach their limit.”¹³⁹ His literature that drew on the Qur’an and Sufi ideals moved his readers to do what he advocated for them to do.

¹³³ Hassan, 2.

¹³⁴ Ibid.

¹³⁵ Ibid.

¹³⁶ Schimmel, 244.

¹³⁷ “We have certainly created man in the best of stature; then we returned him to the lowest of the low” Qur’an 95: 4-5; Nix, 3.

¹³⁸ Nix, 3.

¹³⁹ “Toward God is your limit” Qur’an 53:42; Nix, 4.

Conclusion

The role of these poetic Sufis was significant in the preservation of the Islamic traditions that oftentimes went as far back as the life of Muhammad (PBUH) himself. Muhammad Iqbal, and countless others not only created devotional literature but used it to rally up the masses for the cause of bringing back “Muslim dignity” which they believed was weakened by the British who made the practice of religion harder. As the different pieces of literature spoken of above show, men such as al-Busiri who set models for their successors, and through the method of *tashtir*, this *burda* survives to this day. The *na‘tiyya* that exists today has been pulled from Sufi ideals that have been around for centuries, and numerous scholars have looked into this aspect of Islamic history. As Annemarie Schimmel believed, in order to understand Islam and Muslims, one must start with the Prophet Muhammad. This is evident in the first pillar of Islam which is the profession of faith that there is no God but Allah, and Muhammad is His Messenger.

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