

Preface

In Pakistan the Muslim *pīr* is a teacher of Sufi (mystical) wisdom, spiritual guide, healer, worker of miracles, hidden governor, and the object of devotion at shrines. In many areas, practicing pīrs and active shrines can be found in nearly every neighborhood, and the pīr continues to play a significant role in the constitution of identity and subjectivity in the Muslim world. My interest in the Sufi pīr developed after I arrived in Pakistan for my first fieldwork. What struck me most when I got to Pakistan and began to work in the complex urban environment of Lahore were the arguments I encountered. Whenever anyone made a statement about religious practice, and especially about pīrs and Sufism, there always seemed to be someone else around to disagree — even within the confines of a single family. Furthermore, people were intensely interested in the topic, as if something crucial were at stake in my coming to *the* proper understanding of where Sufism and pīrs fit (or why they did *not* fit) into their lives and into a broader picture of Islam and of Pakistan. It was this conflictual aspect of the phenomenon — at both personal and political levels — that pushed me into a focus on culture as a process by which individuals negotiate ambiguity and inconsistency (see Ewing 1988, 1990a). This book is based on observations of practices surrounding these Sufi pīrs that I made over the course of two years of anthropological fieldwork in Lahore.¹

I also came to know Sufis who deeply impressed me with their wisdom and with their successful negotiation and resolution of personal

conflicts involving the relationship between Sufi practice and a “scientific” orientation. Gradually, I began to take seriously the challenges they put to me concerning the foundation of my own beliefs and practices: my own positioning came into question. I had found that the interpretive strategy of “bracketing” the truth value of Sufi doctrines set me firmly apart from the people I most wanted to know and understand. As time went on, I allowed my own beliefs and values to be challenged; I allowed Sufi insights about human nature and the world to speak to me as truth. Oddly, it was my anthropological training—specifically, the taboo against “going native”—that placed the strongest barrier to this process (Ewing 1994). The whole experience was intensely challenging, both intellectually and emotionally.

In order to develop new tools for investigating the negotiation of identity and the phenomenon of conflict within the context of subjective experience that had impressed me so much in my first fieldwork, I spent several years engaged in psychoanalytic training at the Chicago Institute for Psychoanalysis. I was concerned with acquiring a knowledge of psychoanalytic theory and an experience of clinical practice in order to tackle the problem of how to look at identity as both a psychological and a political/cultural phenomenon. But perhaps the most valuable aspect of my training was learning to use myself more effectively as an observational tool—learning to focus on my own relationships with the people I worked with, reading my own conflicts and reactions as a key source of information about the other person’s concerns and intentions (see Ewing 1987). Of course, I also learned a lot about myself—my immaturities, unresolved conflicts, desires, and peculiarities—and my feelings about Sufism. I found that at the end of the psychoanalytic process, a process that is in many respects the epitome of the Enlightenment project of replacing the forces of instinct and tradition with the powers of observation and reason, Sufism continued to offer a powerful perspective, almost a temptation, that I could not fully reconcile with a psychoanalytic perspective and the interpretive constraints it imposed on my subjectivity.²

Much of my work over the next few years went toward seeking to transcend or at least reduce the gulf that has long existed between studies of the individual and psyche on the one hand and, on the other hand, anthropological studies of culture and society—most of which are founded on unexamined and, therefore, oversimplified theories of human nature and the psyche. Fortunately, many others have also been

involved in this effort, both from within anthropology, and from other disciplines. In recent years, for instance, Lacan's recasting of psychoanalytic theory has been taken up by a number of social theorists — primarily within the areas of gender theory and political/cultural theories (such as Laclau and Mouffe 1985; Žižek 1989). Many have struggled with a theoretical tension between the positing of a discursively constituted subject and the problem of agency.³ Harshly critical of Lacan and Freud, yet inspired by them, Deleuze and Guattari (1983, 1987) have brought to this endeavor a Nietzschean perspective that radically decenters the subject.

This book, then, addresses what I see as a crucial question about how to theorize the place of the individual as a subject operating in a complex social field of conflicting ideologies and cross-cutting interests. But at the same time, I seek to resolve the difficult issue for myself of how to live at the nexus of conflicting discourses — psychoanalysis, anthropology, and Sufism — all of which compete for my own loyalty and identity. I have employed two basic strategies to resolve this tension. First, I have focused on comparable (if not the same) conflicts among the people I came to know in Pakistan, recasting both psychoanalytic theory and anthropology in my efforts to develop a satisfactory model of their experience. Second, I have brought Sufi views of the nature of culture, reality, and the psyche directly into the theoretical conversation, not only as phenomena to be explained and interpreted but as explanatory models. These models facilitate the effort to move beyond Eurocentric theories and histories by undermining the barriers created by Orientalist discursive strategies.

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