

The Liminal Performances of Female-Led (Sufi) Rituals: An Anthropological in Pakistan

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Abstract : The female voice in Sufi poetry has been studied as a symbol of humility and devotion. Throughout the centuries, the Sufi shrines have also sheltered women and have served as a source of emotional strength in times of difficulty. Although women have been central to Sufi Islam, female-led rituals and performances (of veneration) are rarely studied as acts of empowerment and symbols of healing. This is especially true for rituals performed in informal spaces, which require going beyond the shrine practices. The rituals and meanings associated with Khizr Khwaja (or Sindhi Hindu god Jhelelal) among women in Punjab can serve as a useful case study to unpack some of these meanings. The paper aims to shed light on female-led rituals among women from Punjab associated with the folkloric traditions associated with Khizar Khwaja, Zinda Pir, Jhulelal or river god in the South Asian region to protect mariners from possible risks (since trade was primarily dependent on water channels) or for inducing timely rain date back to the 10th century in Sindh. However, these meanings and associations have evolved and the paper thus aims to establish a relationship between this figure and the women in Punjab by analysing the findings from an ethnographic study. It traces the historical meanings and significance attached to the divine figure and the wells (informal spaces) associated with him since the rituals performed by women is now infused solely with seeking fertility or to be blessed with a successful pregnancy, as opposed to him being celebrated for other reasons in older times. These associations beg the question of what women gain out of these rituals and making offerings to the mysterious figure of Khizr. Anecdotal evidence in the form of interviews conducted in Bhakar and Talwandi (Punjab) during the summer of 2015 helped to explore the stories related to this legend while also allowing us to witness some of the female-led ritual practices. It can be said that the symbols adopted in the ritual practices invoke liminality for women, which is a blend of opposites. The paper argues that this liminality/journey has been used as a vehicle to transcend all worldly structures of power and it symbolically emphasises the richness of feminine love/devotion and grants healing to female devotees.

Keywords : transgression, gender, liminality, ritual

Conference Title : ICARR 2023 : International Conference on Anthropology of Religion and Ritual

Conference Location : Rome, Italy

Conference Dates : February 20-21, 2023