

Muslim Spaces of Piety and Worship

Mr. Karim Jiwani

This is an edited version of an article published by in The Ismaili-UK in March 2006.

(This light is found) in houses which Allah has allowed to be raised so that His name is remembered there, where He is glorified in the mornings and in the evenings

(, 24:36)

Introduction

Differentiating space and attributing it with special meaning is a universal feature of human cultures and societies, Spaces of gathering and worship play an important role in the social, cultural, intellectual and spiritual life of the members of a community or tradition. This is particularly true in the case of the role played by such spaces in Muslim history, religious life

the collective performance of prayer and ritual, and for meeting the social needs of the emerging *ummah*(community).

Origin

Most historians agree that in the early days of Islam (i.e. in early 7th century Mecca) the original Muslim community had no specific or special place of prayer and the arrangements for communal worship were informal. According to a famous saying (*hadith*) of the Prophet, the

masjid ¹ It is only after the *hijra* (migration) to Medina, that a specific house (space) emerged and evolved, where Muslims could collectively perform ritual prayers together as well as manage the affairs of the state. Thenceforth, wherever the nascent Muslim community became permanently established in large numbers (e.g., Basra, Kufa, Damascus, al-Fustat), the mosque became a focal point for their religious and social life. In

Muslim lands, there were attempts initially to reproduce, in both form (design) and function, the first *masjid* of Medina. However, as the Muslim empire spread across geography, it came in contact with different cultures and traditions with their own forms of spaces and institutions. In addition, internal factors, such as the increasing availability of wealth and patronage, influx of new converts, the diversity in notions of piety, and the corresponding needs of the communities of users, collectively contributed to a rapid change and evolution in mosque design and usage.

Evolution of Form and Function

The first *masjid* in Medina served as both a place of communal prayer as well as a socio-cultural centre. Its functions included: communal and

delivery of homilies (*qisas*), sermons (*khutbas*) on Fridays, recitation of *dhikr*, place of retreats (*i'tikaf*) and vigils especially during the month of Ramadan - and celebration of festivals.

Mosques have also served as centres for collection and distribution of alms (*zakat*). The poor, homeless and travellers have often found shelter and sustenance there. The contracting of marriage and business agreements can also occur there². An important development with regard to the evolving form and function of mosques revolves around the emergence of practices associated with building of shrine (tomb) mosques (called *maqbara*, *mashhad* or *maqam*) over

Imam Ali ('*alayhi salam*) and Hazrat Fatima ('*alayha salam*) and of his early companions. Subsequently, with the growth and influence of Sufism, building and visiting of shrine-mosques (*ziyara*) dedicated to

sufi *shaykhs*, *pirs*, or sages for *baraka* and intercession became a regular feature of Muslim piety, devotion and religious landscape.³

It is important here also to note that even during this formative stage of Muslim history, along with the

belonging to different schools of thought and interpretation to establish their own distinctive mosques. Thus there emerged mosques that were or the Sunni communities associated with specific legal schools such as the *Shafi'i*, *Maliki*, etc.

In addition to the above functions and roles of the *masjid* in the religious domain, there also emerged significant enlargement in the use of the mosque for intellectual and educational purposes. Mosques as places of religious and ethical learning took on a more formal educational role with circles of religious scholars and students gathered to study the *hadith*, law, etc. For instance, the Fatimid Imam-Caliphs established *al-Azhar*, both as a mosque as well as a place of learning. Some mosques, such as those of Baghdad, Isfahan, Mashhad, Qum, Damascus and Cairo, became major centres of learning for students from all over the Muslim world.

Needless to say, the above evolving and expanding functions of the mosque impacted the or physical design (architectureCld.

In these various residential teaching centres, Sufis gathered to practise acts of devotion, piety and meditation. Chief among these were the performance of *dhikr* (remembrance, invocation) and *sama'* (poetry recitation accompanied by music). Also, through teachers (referred to as *shaykh*, *pir* or *murshid*

spiritual meaning, to cultivate an inner life, and to read the writings of great poets and writers in the Sufi tradition.⁹ Elaborate initiation rituals developed in which the disciple had to pronounce the *bay'a* (oath of allegiance) to the *murshid* and be invested with symbols of their entrance into the order (e.g., cloak, hat, etc.). As it was common for many Sufi *shaykhs* to be *khanaqah*), these spaces have become popular pilgrimage sites (*ziyarat*) to seek *baraka* and *shafa'a* (intercession).

Admission to such spaces is usually open to all, but this is not universally true. For instance, *khanaqahs* of the Suhrawardi Order in India are known to restrict participation to those who have given their *bay'a*, pledge of allegiance, to the *pir* or *shaykh* of the Sufi Order.¹⁰ With regard to the issue of the exclusivity of such spaces, Sunni jurists have viewed it to be a matter dependent on custom.

As with the *masjid* and other similar spaces of gathering, these largely Sufi institutions not only served religious roles, but also encompassed socio-economic functions. For example, as places to which people take offerings, the *zawiyas* and *khanaqahs* also contribute to the redistribution of social wealth. The needy and disabled are catered for and assured of food and lodging. Socio-religious activities and festivals, for instance, the anniversary of the birth of the Prophet Muhammad (*mawlid*) are also organized in these establishments at specific times of the year. While the names and functions of these Sufi institutional spaces came to resemble each other, they manifested considerable diversity in terms of location, structure, size and organization. Sometimes these buildings would be isolated but more frequently were connected with a mosque. In some *khanaqahs*, the dervishes lived in small cells while other one large room in which all the dervishes lived, studied and worked together. The architecture also varied in size, layout, and materials used, and reflected local cultural elements and manifestations. The organisation of these institutions was also not alike everywhere. Some *tariqas* lived on *futuh* (unsolicited gifts or donations) whereas others enjoyed generous patronage of the rulers and regular stipends from other benefactors.¹¹

Contemporary Role

It may be argued that the *zawiya*, *khanaqah* and *ribat* today have become less important in social life than they were up to the nineteenth century. The economic and social transformations in Muslim countries that have accompanied the emergence of centralized states, massive urbanization, and the expansion of communication systems has led to the emergence of competing institutions of socialisation. The emergence of nation states that regulate functions historically associated with traditional Muslim social institutions (e.g. mosque, *zawiya*, *khanaqah* and *ribat*

such as confiscation of the religious endowments (*waqf*; pl. *awqaf*) attached to institutions such as *zawiyas*, as for example in Algeria, Morocco, Tunisia, and Libya (during French rule), drastically contributed to the erosion of the social role of these institutions.

decline or

movements which, from time to time, have interpreted the rich and diverse practices and expressions of piety associated with these institutions, particularly the visiting of mausoleums of saints or *awliyas*, as *bid'a*

if not outright destruction - all with the ideological aim of imposing an imaginary pure and pristine Islam. Such accusations clearly reflect an attempt on the part of a dominant or vocal group to impose its own particular interpretation of Islam on what is actually a rich diversity of forms and interpretations.

In any case, Sufi orders and institutions continue to survive despite the restrictions of some modern governments and the opposition of extremist groups. They act as channels that both preserve the influence of saints of the past and encourage spiritual discipline. Furthermore, in some European and American cities where Sufi *tariqahs* are emerging and growing, one can find similar institutions (such as *zawiya* and *khanaqah*), often in private, where adherents meet regularly to perform acts of worship that closely resemble *tariqah* religious practices.

The Husayniya and Imambara

Husayniya and *Imambara* refer to spaces of gathering where ritual ceremonies commemorating the life and martyrdom of Hazrat Imam Husayn (*'alayhi salam*) are held.¹² *Husayniya* can be a temporary tent set up especially for the *Muharram* mourning ceremonies or a permanent building that is also used for religious occasions throughout the year.

the *jamatkhanas* (like other Muslim spaces of piety and worship) are multifunctional and act as the religious, educational and social centres for the Ismaili community. These functions (and forms) have evolved, as in the case of all other Muslim spaces and institutions, reflecting the changing historical and cultural contexts of these institutions as well as the evolving needs of its users. Speaking on the occasion of the foundation stone laying ceremony of the Ismaili Centre in Lisbon, His Highness the Aga Khan suggested that among the programmatic dimensions of the Ismaili Centre will be “lectures, presentations, conferences, recitals, and

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The recently built high-profile Ismaili *jamatkhana* buildings. As His Highness the Aga Khan stated at the foundation stone laying ceremony of the Ismaili Centre in Dushanbe:

These Centres serve to reflect, illustrate and represent the co
and spiritual understanding of Islam, its social conscience, its organisation, its forward

counterparts elsewhere, the Ismaili Centre in Dushanbe will stand for the ethics that uphold the dignity of man as the noblest of creation. It will bring down walls that divide and build bridges that unite. ..It is my prayer that, once it has been built, the Ismaili Centre in Dushanbe will be a place of order, of peace, of hope, of humility and of brotherhood, radiating those thoughts, and attitudes which unite us in the search for

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In terms of form or architecture of the Ismaili *jamatkhanas*, again as with other Muslim spaces depending on the cultural context, geography, materials available, technology and, of course, varieties o

throughout history. Moreover, this cultural pluralism, rather than being a weakness, remains a source of strength and inspiration for millions of Muslims around the world.

Endnotes

¹ *Sahih Muslim*

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The Shorter Encyclopaedia of Islam