Calligraphy in the World of Sufi Shrines in Pakistan

JÜRGEN WASIM FREMBGEN

Calligraphy, epigraphic ornaments and inscriptions dominate both everyday life in Pakistan in general and the visual programme of shrines of Sufi saints in particular. In the popular Sufi tradition in the Punjab and Sindh, from where the following examples were selected, Arabic script decidedly serves as a manifestation of Islamic spirituality and is accordingly perceived as belonging to the sacred sphere. In the inscriptions from contemporary popular Islam presented in greater detail here, the artists endeared for the most part to use calligraphy, although there are also texts of a more informative and functional nature.

Calligraphy in Architecture

In the low-lying regions of Pakistan, the exteriors and sometimes the interiors of tombs and adjacent buildings (such as homes of shrine attendants, devish lodges, Shi'ite assembly halls) and other sacred places connected with the life of Sufi saints are often decorated with calligraphy. At the shrines of Sunni saints, for example, one finds along with the basma formala and the profession of faith invocations of God and the prophets as well as occasionally of the chār yār, the “four friends”, meaning in this case the first four righteous caliphs. Expressions praising Allah, such as yā Allāh = yā qayṣur (“Oh, the Alive, oh, the Self-Subsisting”) can also frequently be found on religious posters, on motor vehicles and elsewhere in public spaces. In contrast, the mausoleums of Shi'ite saints are decorated with the names of the Holy Family, in other words the names Muhammad, 'Ali, Fatima, Hasan and Hussain. Invocations such as yā 'Alī madad – “Oh 'Ali, help”, addressed to the Prophet’s cousin and son-in-law and the first Imam of the Shia, as well as Persian eulogies for Imam Hussain reveal distinct links between the shrine in question and the Shi'ite denomination. However, these Arabic formulas often say more about the religious identity of the adherents and the corresponding social milieu of the deceased saint than about their actual religious affiliation, which may have been less clearly defined. This is not the case at the shrines of Sufi poets, where the faithful frequently can read the mystical verses written on the arch surfaces or cartouches, for example in Punjab.
CALLIGRAPHIC WALL DECORATION IN A DERVISH HERMITAGE

In the assembly hall next to a saint’s shrine in Sehwan Sharif (Sindh, Pakistan) the ‘Red Sufi’ Lal Shahbaz Qalandar is invoked in an inscription painted in red. His nickname is由于Crocodile’ (‘the Red one who rocks himself’) – like a child in the cradle – is the name of the ancient water deity of the Indus whose alter-ego the Qalandar saint has become.

CALLIGRAPHIC WALL DECORATION ON A DERVISH HERMITAGE

A dervish and former trance dancer who lives in a poor quarter of Lahore (Punjab, Pakistan) has had ‘True love, oh Allah’ written on the outside wall of his modest home.
FIG. 164 (above)
SUFI POSTER WITH THE TOMB OF THE PATRON SAINT OF LAHORE
Lahore/Pakistan: 2004
Hizrat Da’at Ganj Bakhsh Husaini (d. 464 H/1072 CE), whose name is written on the poster in yellow letters above the dome of his tomb, is considered, along with Lal Shahbaz Qalandar, as Pakistan’s most famous Sufi saint. The praise in the two red cartouches reads: “Bestower of treasures, blessing of the world, reflection of the splendours of God; on accomplished guide for the ignorant (and) guide on the path for the learned.”
The names listed below on the right side give his descent and on the left his spiritual genealogy.

FIG. 164 (right)
STICKER WITH INSCRIPTIONS
Peshawar/Pakistan: 1988
Stickers with religious content are pasted on objects both in Sufi shrines and mosques and in everyday life on vehicles, shop windows, machines, etc. The two wings of the butterfly contain the names Allah (right) and Muhammad (left). Below them are the Kaaba in Mecca and the Prophet’s mosque in Medina. The barma formula is written on the insect’s head and on its body the profession of faith in Kufic-inspired letters.

An unusual and original calligraphic inscription is located on an outer wall of the devotional hermitage of Baba Fizru Sain, who lives in a cemetery in Kat Lakhpat at the outskirts of Lahore. On his instructions, the young calligrapher and sign painter Muhammad Riaz inscribed hujj hujj say ALIF - “True love, oh ALIF!” (fig. 142) in red paint superimposed on ochre yellow which gives it more depth. In the interstices between the letters ‘im and ye of the saint’s name mugaddar - “Help (come) from You” has been added in black. Imaginatively and closely linked to local devotional popular practice, the calligrapher has formed the curve of the last letter of the pious Shri’ite invocation like a flame or candle, thus evoking the motif of the oil lamp which is a symbol at prayers’ graves. It refers both to the famous light verse in the Quran (24:35) and to the divine light and to the image of the moth – so popular in mystical poetry – which flutters around the lamp and is itself consumed by the flame. However, in the present depiction the number 4 which has been inscribed on the candle suggests the very special ritual context of the veneration of Lal Shahbaz Qalandar. According to a well-known saying which has found its way into devotional songs, chah chah ghai rahe bain hamisen, pujan jaamu bain di bain jaai jai jai jai jai jai jai - “Four oil-lamps always burn for you, I have come to light the fifth for the Praised One. Long live ‘Ali.”

Calligraphy inside a Mausoleum
While outside the inner sanctuary at Sufi shrines religious scrolls, placards and posters with images of saints are often hung up, in the sanctum sanctorum only ornamental and calligraphic designs are allowed in compliance with the orthodoxy avoidance of images. Thus on the inner walls of the sanctuary we find framed reverseglass paintings, posters (Fig. 143) and embroidered inscriptions, religious calligraphic inscriptions which are written directly on the wall, banners bearing inscriptions, and today often stickers (fig. 144) as well. Precious, richly decorated banners and embroideries with religious verses and names of saints embroidered on them are usually donated to the shrine. This applies in particular to the cloths on which verses from the Quran have been stamped or embroidered (chidda; qilaf) and which are placed on the saint’s tomb (fig. 143). Epigraphy is naturally found mostly on the headstone, which is often richly decorated (fig. 143). Particularly in Sindh, headstones of Sufi saints are crowned with turbans, which sometimes have an embroidered band beneath with inscriptions. All calligraphic inscriptions, pictures, etc. inside and outside the

at the mausoleum of Bulbul Shah (d. 1758) in Kasur. At most Sufi shrines where emphasis is placed on aesthetic appearance, the names of the saints and their honours are displayed in prominent places. Inscriptions are usually written in bright colours and are often framed with decorative motifs and ornaments. Today, however, there is also a trend toward mirror mosaics. The script is - with only a few exceptions - the naskhi commonly used for Urdu in Pakistan.

Since the 1980s I have found the most enchanting forms of popular calligraphy on devotional ladders, devotional hermitages and small devotional buildings frequently close to saints’ shrines in the Punjab and Sindhi. Among the most notable is the Kafi Bodla Bahar, in other words the devotional hospice (kadb) of the saint Bodla Bahar, the most famous pupil of the popular Sufi saint Lal Shahbaz Qalandar (d. 1270), in Sehwann Sharif in the province of Sind in southern Pakistan. The whitewashed outer walls of the buildings and some of the walls inside the lodge are decorated with the names of the saints and their successors and with poems invoking in bright colours. My photographic documentation shows the condition of the kadb in November 2007 (a year later this folk art already had been whitewashed). The calligraphic inscriptions extent at that time were painted in 2006 by Shalat Ali Shahzai, a follower of Bodla Bahar, who lives as a calligrapher, sign painter and singer in Dera in northwestern Punjab. Fig. 141 shows one of his inscriptions in the devotions’ assembly hall. Written zestfully in red are the words Jhale Lai - Qalandar mast: Jhule Lai - “the Red One, who rocks himself” (like a child in the cradle) - which is Lal Shahbaz Qalandar’s nickname, and the phrase following it means roughly the “encrusted Qalandar.” Next to this in green is the name Sayyid Khadijm Jalaluddin Qalandar, Bodla Bahar’s living successor who has inherited this saint’s charisma and belongs to the Sufi order of the Jalali Qalander. Calligraphic inscriptions of this type which decorate individual walls of the half-open assembly hall create a devotional atmosphere around the central fire in which the mystical quality of the Arabic script unfurls. Formulas of praise such as Jhale Lai - Qalandar mast, which the devotions repeatedly recite and exclaim in ecstasy during their ritual gatherings, also appear on the walls here. Calligraphy of this type is a harmonious expression of the world of Qalandar devotions in a very similar manner inscriptions on an oil-lamp house at the shrine of Sain Abdul Majid in Nurpur Shahjan near Islamabad and at the pilgrimage destination of Cho-tombi near Sehwann Sharif are expressions of devotion to Sufi saints.
Inscribed Water Pots

The two pots painted green bear the inscription darus, in Punjabi, which translates to "blessing of the saint". They belong to the place in the city of Jauharpur in the Punjab region of Pakistan where the 'Saint of Flowers' lives. The addition Sh. Salim is the name of a dervish who serves him.

Root Wood with "Muhammad" Written on It

Such calligraphic 'proofs of divine action in nature' are sometimes carried by periaptetic dervishes. The Malang from the coastal city of Karachi in southern Pakistan presents his root wood like a scripture.

Ceremonial Headdress with Religious Inscriptions

During a procession, the Sayyid (descendant of the Prophet) from a dervish lodge in Sehwan Sharif in the Sind region of Pakistan wears a voluminous headdress with inscriptions (invocation to Allah, profession of faith, designation of the lodge).
Calligraphy in the Context of the World of Sufis and Devishes

On their pilgrimages to sacred destinations, peripatetic dervishes often carry banners embroidered with religious inscriptions which they attach to their tent or shelter (deraw) as a visible sign of their affiliation with a particular Sufi saint. Transportable articles for daily use such as water pots (Fig. 140), which form part of the inventory of shrines, are sometimes also inscribed with the names of saints.

While in the past dervishes’ alms bowls decorated with inscriptions in Sufi lodges were presented as sacred objects like relics and presumably at times formed part of the paraphernalia of peripatetic mystics, today there are hardly any such vessels made from cocoa de mer, metal or wood decorated with calligraphic inscriptions. However, some dervishes, in particular of the Qalandar order, sometimes have unusual objects with inscriptions: during a saint’s festival in Rawalpindi in October 1992 I met a molang (deraw) who called himself Sabit-wala and carried with him an object formed from the root of the nim tree which— with some imagination — could be read as the name of the Prophet (Fig. 144). To facilitate legibility, he had fastened it to a piece of white cardboard. This proof of the divine in nature, created so to speak by Allah himself, was his ‘computer’, which provided him with answers to all his questions. Some dervishes carry with them such ‘proofs of God’, in which they believe they recognize Arabic letters in the marks in a stone, the grain pattern of a piece of wood or the veins of a leaf.

Highly symbolic calligraphy can still be found today in clothing: Along with jewellery with pendants in calligraphic forms and inscribed amulets we find different types of headgear embroidered with pious invocations which are worn as part of the ceremonies in processions (Fig. 142). Some dervishes in the Punjab and Sindh wear robes embroidered with texts on the chest; the brown shirt-like dress of a shrine attendant in Sehwan Sharif is embroidered with the words Faqir Khairmad ‘All Shah — mursad Chothe) Ummad (Fig. 144).
PIOUS DISCIPLE OF A Sufi Saint with Tattoo on his Forehead

The tattooed inscription reads 'Lala Ji Sarkar', one of the saints of the Qalandar movement who is intoxicated with God and lives in the wilderness near Islamabad, the capital of Pakistan.

FIG. 159

HOLY HORSE with RELIGIOUS INSCRIPTIONS

This horse, whose name misbah allah is written on the animal's neck and flank, is dedicated to a mythical saint from Fezwan Sharif (sindhi Pakistan).