Artefacts of Devotion
A Sufi Repertoire of the Qalandariyya in
Sehwan Sharif, Sindh, Pakistan

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Foreword by
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Foreword

The Indian subcontinent has a remarkably rich heritage of complex cultural formations. One of these lies undoubtedly in the Indus Valley, the region from which the name of India, is in fact, derived. What is nowadays known as the province of Sindh is on one level a political entity within the Islamic Republic of Pakistan; on a deeper level, it is a cultural heritage with distinctive characteristics, which is also preserved by a diasporic community in other regions of South Asia and beyond.

Historically, the depth of the Indus region's engagement with Islam goes back over a millennium, to the Arab invasion of the early eighth century. The early history of Arab Sindh is difficult to reconstruct, though we are fortunate to have some scholarly investigations of that period (McLean 1989). After the Umayyad Caliphate's imposition of authority, the Indus Valley came under the authority of the Ismailis, and paid homage to the Fatimid Caliphate centred in Cairo. Subsequently, Sindh was invaded by the armies of Mahmud of Ghazna, and it later fell into the political network of the Sultanate established in Delhi. While imperial rulers such as the Tughluqs and Mughals fitfully claimed control over the region, local dynasties including the Jams of Thatta, and later on, the Arghuns, the Kalhoras, and the Talpurs, wielded independent authority. Eventually, of course, Sindh fell under the British domination in the nineteenth century.

Linguistically, the Sindhi language preserves archaic features not found in other modern Indian languages (when written in the Perso–Arabic alphabet, it requires twenty additional characters). This rich preservation of ancient characteristics is typical of Sindhi culture in general. In terms of material culture, Sindhi features remarkable productions such as the block-printed fabrics known as ajrak (from the Arabic asraaq, 'blue'), which for centuries have been outstanding examples of textile production
linked to traditions of Sufism, or Islamic mysticism. Some scholars suggest that cultural traditions such as the *ajrak*, may be traced back to the ancient civilization of Mohenjo Daro.

In religious terms, Sindh has, in effect, defined itself as a deliberately marginal region, or perhaps better, an independent locality. In the nineteenth century, Sir Richard Burton remarked that neither the Hindus nor the Muslims of Sindh were particularly orthodox. The most popular figures in the region, such as the Sufi saint Shah Abd al-Latif of Bhit Shah, have been followed with particular devotion by both Hindus and Muslims. Shrines that draw multiple clienteles from different religious backgrounds, always a feature of the South Asian landscape, have been particularly prominent in Sindh.

In this book, Michel Boivin introduces readers to the striking architectural complex of Sehwan Sharif, a major focus of pilgrimage in Pakistan today. Unlike more ‘officially’ accepted religious centres, such as the tomb of Data Ganj Bakhsh (Shaykh Ali Hujwiri) in Lahore, or the magnificent cluster of shrines of the Suhrawardi Sufis in Multan, the monuments of Sehwan are associated above all with a figure who challenges all conventional norms in Pakistan today: Lal Shahbaz Qalandar. While he may indeed have been one of the unconventional qalandar dervishes who came from Persia and Central Asia to India during the thirteenth century, he has taken on larger-than-life characteristics since he became fervently adopted as one of the sons of Sindh. It is striking that songs invoking his spiritually intoxicating lifestyle (*mast qalandar*) were adopted as slogans during the Bhutto regime of the early 1970s, and they have remained perennial favourites until today; he has become a symbol of daring authenticity during a time of stifling conformity. In Persian lyrics attributed to him, he declares his original name, and his fearless allegiance to the Sufi martyr Hallaj: ‘I am Usman-e Marvandi, a friend of Khwaja Mansur (Hallaj); although people blame me, I will dance upon the gallows.’

It is not easy to approach a complicated religious site like Sehwan Sharif. Members of the Chishti Sufi order, a well-established and widely accepted Sufi tradition in South Asia, have told me that they cannot even go to Sehwan, despite the respect in which they hold Lal Shahbaz Qalandar; because the chaotic and undisciplined behaviour by pilgrims
performing the *dhamal* dance and imbibing intoxicants, creates an atmosphere that conflicts with their practices. Nevertheless, they do not reject in any way the sanctity of the shrine. Fortunately, anthropologists are less restricted.

Michel Boivin is a distinguished scholar of South Asian history and culture who has devoted much of his career to the study of Sindh. In this study, he draws upon a significant research project that has been operating in Sindh for a number of years, carried out by an international group of researchers, primarily French. He brings to bear a dossier that is beautifully enriched by a pictorial archive from the British colonial era, enhanced by contemporary architectural elevations documenting the physical presence of the monuments of Sehwan, and highlighted by photographs of monuments and artefacts. Of particular relevance is the material culture embodied in what he refers to as the ‘Sufi repertoire’, which ranges from portable shrines or artefacts that can be cheaply purchased by pilgrims, to the massive mausoleums dedicated to Sufi saints and other, more obscure, figures from the heritage of Sindhi religiosity. His approach is comparative, which is helpful, in so far as it draws upon examples from the Middle East and elsewhere in South Asia that can shed light upon the particular examples furnished by Sehwan. It is historical as well, which is extremely important, since—as usual when it comes to important religious centres—many of the contemporary monuments are of fairly recent origin, and they are usually linked to local religious elites. As a result, Boivin is able to document important recent shifts, such as the eclipse of a previously prominent saintly figure, Sakhi Sarwar, by a newcomer who appeals to a Pathan audience.

A number of the features of the shrines of Sehwan Sharif will doubtless remain difficult to comprehend, due to the passage of time as well as the layers of legend that separate us from the times of their origin. Nevertheless, Michel Boivin has made a major contribution to the understanding of this marvellous pilgrimage centre, in which he draws upon his extensive contacts with key figures related to these shrines, and his thoughtful observations on the significance of the monuments and the material artefacts attached to them. It is especially valuable as a documentation of living religious practice that does not necessarily flow from the official textbook definitions of religion.
In short, *Artefacts of Devotion* provides an important new perspective on a complex cultural centre of popular religion in Pakistan as it is lived today. This book will definitely be appreciated by serious students of the history of Islamic culture and Sufism in South Asia.

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