



Remembering Shahbaz:
A critical review of
*“Artefacts of Devotion:
A Sufi Repertoire of the
Qalandariyya in Sehwan
Sharif, Sindh, Pakistan”*

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BOOK REVIEW

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TO CITE THIS ARTICLE:
Damani, A.J. 2021.
Remembering Shahbaz: A
critical review of “*Artefacts of
Devotion: A Sufi Repertoire of
the Qalandariyya in Sehwan
Sharif, Sindh, Pakistan*”.
Ancient Asia, 12: 12, pp. 1–3.
DOI: [https://doi.org/10.5334/
aa.221](https://doi.org/10.5334/aa.221)

Based on four chapters, “Artefacts of Devotion: A Sufi Repertoire of the Qalandariyya in Sehwan Sharif, Sindh, Pakistan” is a fascinating volume authored by a French Scholar, Michel Boivin. First published in 2011 by the Oxford University Press in Karachi, Pakistan, the book is a publication project of ‘Centre of Social Studies in Karachi series’, developed by the ‘Centre of Social Sciences in Karachi (CSSK)’. Inaugurating with the foreword by Carl Ernst, Boivin’s work is easy-to-follow in terms of multiple aspects: the author has prioritized colloquial pronunciation of Urdu and Sindhi over a formal transliteration scheme; arguments put forth by the author employ simple grammatical construction and are extremely thought-provoking, highlighting the research gaps and the scope of further research in the concerned field; eloquent use of primary and secondary sources retain the interest of the readers throughout; an adequate amount of Sufi cant has been elucidated in their relevant contexts in the glossary provided at the end of the book.

Using the highest number of endnotes, the initial chapter of the book broadly overviews Sufism, especially in the context of Sindh—the southern province of the modern-day nation-state of Pakistan. Boivin rightly argues that academic attention on Sufism in the context of Sindh has remained rare. Generally speaking, Sufism still needs to be comprehended on various levels and, from different aspects. Having said that, Boivin’s volume, which concerns this review, can be looked upon as an effort to showcase Sufism as it appears at the site of Sehwan, Sindh, from a unique artistic perspective—a viewpoint which explores the history, social usage, interpretation, political implication etc of the objects of art which appear as the objects of devotion at Sehwan; these objects are filled with devotion and sentiments of the locals; and these objects’ production is void of almost every sort of power-core’s and royal court’s influence on art production in the Indian subcontinent. Though such objects of art may merely appear as ‘objects of (academic) study’ to many, nevertheless; they are ‘artefacts of devotion’ for both the author and, most importantly, the local masses.

Employing an approach based on a number of urban studies’ theoretical frameworks, “the core of devotion”—the second chapter which constitutes thirteen folios of the book—reflects upon the site of Sehwan as a region bounded in spatial parameters and time-constrained urban reality; a location which has been an important territorial-fit for Sufism, as the author rightly maintains. It is also in the same chapter that Boivin explores the calligraphy, inscription, architecture, and various traditions related to the origins of Lal Shahbaz Qalandar— a charismatic Sufi personality on whom extensive academic research from various aspects is required—who is not only reported to have attracted peoples’ attention during his life time, but whose shrine—located in the vicinity of Sehwan, Sindh, Pakistan—still unendingly entices millions of pilgrims from across the globe every year. Irrespective of how well Boivin has considered the diverse traditions pertaining to Shahbaz’s origin, he has failed to mention even a single Khojki manuscript source containing his genealogy. In a similar manner, the author has not cited the *ginān* which identifies Shahbaz as one of the eighteen sons of the famous *Ismāʿīlī* dignitary, Pīr Hasan Kabīr al-Dīn (d. 1449). However, thematic similarity between the Ghazals of Shahbaz and *Ismāʿīlī* *gināns* have been noted by the author briefly but correctly. Whatsoever connection scholars may have drawn between Shahbaz and the *Ismāʿīlī* Islam (and of course its Pīrs and Imāms), a worth-remembering fact is: *Ismāʿīlīs* have been prohibited to engage in any faith-related activity at any shrine, a command which is clear from the *Farmāns* of Aga Khan III (Sultan Muhammad Shah, d. 1957) to which Boivin might not have proper access (for they are restricted to the *Ismāʿīlī* community only).

The local traditions about Sehwan and its Sufi figures can best be understood, as Boivin puts it, from the lens and principles of the world of ultimate reality, *Haqiqah*—a world which concerns Sufis the most. This has been brilliantly elucidated by Boivin in the third chapter, named, “Circles of Devotion”. While arguing about the significant impact of Sufi-built legacies and traditions on the urban space, the author has, nonetheless, throughout remained critical, of the validity and competence of all such traditions. In fact, Boivin looks at many of the traditions, emerging in the vicinity of Sindh, as louder expressions of much more silenced historical interactions between Sufism and local cultures of Sindh. However, this should not mislead us; Boivin, at the same time, does well to penetrate beyond the thick fabric of the *Zāhir* (exoteric aspect) into the *Bāṭin* (esoteric aspect) of the traditions, rituals and customs found at Sehwan. It is worth stressing on this juncture that such penetrations are a prerequisite for any scholar to better understand and appreciate the complex significance which these traditions hold for their practitioners. In this

second last chapter, any reader, who is well-aware about the different Sufi traditions of Indian subcontinent (and particularly Pakistan), will surely be able to grasp the essential thematic similarities between diverse traditions attached to different Sufi figures, irrespective of the fact that sometimes these personalities are suggested as having had different spatial origins. Once again, Boivin's argument to focus on the ultimate reality or the essence, rather than what is apparent or *Zāhir*, becomes a prominent and important learning from the book. Apart from theoretical underpinnings on Sufism in Sindh, Boivin's work is an alarming call for all those authorities whose negligence have caused the shrines and historical sites at Sehwan and other areas of Sindh to deteriorate.

The most visually vivid chapter is the last one, entitled, "Artefacts of Devotion"—a name which is also a part of the title of the book—for it contains more number of pictures than any of the preceding chapters. Relics of Shahbaz, which he received inherently from Prophet Muhammad and the *Ismā'īlī* Imāms, or through his affiliation with the *Qalandariyya* form of Sufism, are introduced in this closing chapter in their *Shī'ī* and *Ismā'īlī* contexts. It is worth pronouncing that Boivin has remained considerably successful in terms of picturizing a number of important objects (such as *Gajgah*), whose vision is otherwise restricted only to a certain category of devotees such as the *Faqirs*. However, an important point to remember is that, whether Shahbaz was an *Ismā'īlī* or not, his relics are of no religious worth to the *Ismā'īlīs* now; the *Ismā'īlīs* have their faith upon a living Imam who, as per *Ismā'īlī* doctrines, in himself, is the best manifestation of the teachings of Allah and his final prophet; and as such, he is the best *yādgar-e-Rasūl* (memory of the prophet).

Overall, "Artefacts of Devotion: A Sufi Repertoire of the *Qalandariyya* in Sehwan Sharif, Sindh, Pakistan" is a must read for all those who are interested in the spread and interaction of Sufism with the local cultures of Sindh. The term 'Sehwan System', as employed by Boivin at the start of the book, is thus an adequate expression to demonstrate the complexities involved in the field with which this book is concerned; usage of such a carefully-selected term also problematizes the general assumption that the devotion found at the site of Sehwan can be fully understood with the lens of exoteric objectivity. No doubt that Boivin's own work falls short in various ways—which include but are not limited to: no particular reference to oral and written *Ismā'īlī* traditions related to the figure of Shahbaz has been made; it appears that no scrutiny has been undertaken of *khojki* manuscripts to hunt for more Ghazals accredited to Shahbaz; no translation of relevant verses from *gīnānī* literature on the subject of Sufism is a part of Boivin's study etc—however; it still remains a unique and commendable effort which sheds some light on a subject to which not many scholars turn their attention.

COMPETING INTERESTS

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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TO CITE THIS ARTICLE:
Damani, AJ. 2021.
Remembering Shahbaz: A
critical review of "Artefacts of
Devotion: A Sufi Repertoire of
the *Qalandariyya* in Sehwan
Sharif, Sindh, Pakistan".
Ancient Asia, 12: 12, pp. 1–3.
DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5334/aa.221>

Published: 05 July 2021

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