

important, steps towards the development of an alternative avenue of scholarship that might develop alternative paradigms for the study of the religious history of Anatolia and inner-Islamic plurality.

Riza Yildirim

TOBB University of Economics and Technology

PEMBERTON, KELLY. *Women Mystics and Sufi Shrines in India*. 233 pp.
Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2010.

The publication of this interesting book by Kelly Pemberton enriches the fascinating field of Sufi studies by yet another originally researched contribution. In her work, which approaches the topic from the specific angle of gender studies, the author investigates the role played by women in the complex social and ritual environment that developed in and around institutional Sufi shrines (*dargāh*), with special attention to what she perceives as the underlying tension between discourse and practice. In doing so, Pemberton's analysis weighs theoretical notions concerning historical perceptions and traditional patterns of behavior (chapters 1 and 2) against the first-hand experience acquired during prolonged and repeated periods of field-research carried out between 1996 and 2002 at two important 'establishment' shrines in the North Indian towns of Ajmer (Rajasthan) and Bihar Sharif (Bihar) (chapters 3 and 4). By pointing out the significant gap between what is claimed to be valid in principle and what occurs in everyday reality, Pemberton's line of argument questions and ultimately rejects the widespread perception that women do not and cannot play any significant, i.e. authoritative, role in Sufism. In the course of her investigation of the ways Muslim women's participation in the world of Sufi shrines in North India challenges but at the same time sustains prevalent ideals of Islamic womanhood, it emerges that in the two cases that underwent her personal scrutiny, women in different ways do indeed play important roles in Sufi shrines, even though, or perhaps exactly because, at various levels they live and act in the shadow of the male-dominated domain of spiritual transmission, discursive didactics and social interaction.

The build-up of the author's argument is reflected in the structure of the book. It sets out with an attempt to understand how the historical perception of women's role in religion, and more specifically in the context of the rituals connected with the veneration of Sufi saints, has influenced and determined the way Sufism in general, and the role played by women within it in particular, is perceived vis-à-vis normative and prescriptive Islam (pp. 30–66). Following a not entirely unprecedented line of argument, the author demonstrates how this prevalent image of marginalization emerged largely through the literature produced during the colonial period, mainly by British civil servants, Orientalist scholars and Muslim religious reformers, who, each in their own right, in their depiction of practices at Sufi shrines were

guided by their specific agenda. Pemberton here reiterates the process leading to the establishment of certain categories of identity, which if on one hand were established in order to assist and underscore the creation of an effective social and administrative control over the territory ruled by the colonialists, on the other expressed the desire to counter the perceived decline of 'moral' standards among Muslims in the Indian, namely Hindu, environment on behalf of zealous reformists. According to Pemberton, this double action converged in the 'construction and definition of essentialized notions of community identities that have endured to this day' (35), which wittingly or unwittingly determine common opinion despite being in stark contrast with the evidence of cultural practice. Thus, the colonial-era perceptions of antinomian elements in Islam, reflecting a sometimes romanticized sometimes maligned image of native patterns of devotion, significantly contributed to the drawing of a picture of Sufism and its practitioners that in many ways remains prevalent until the present day.

Like many other scholars before her (Metcalf 1984, Pinto 1995), Pemberton discusses the fundamental issue of the *pir-murid* (i.e. master and disciple) relationship that today, as in the past, lies at the core of the life and function of a Sufi lodge and shrine (*khānaqāh*). In her discussion, she stresses the underlying ambivalence emerging from the descriptions of the complex interplay between ritual practices and belief systems. Moving beyond what she perceives to be the result of scholarship focused primarily on 'institutional, formal and male-centred Sufism' (67), Pemberton reiterates the three principal models within this relationship already defined and discussed in an earlier article (2006) titled 'Women pirs, saintly succession, and spiritual guidance in South Asian Sufism' (*Muslim World* 96:61–87). The foremost and strongest of these relies on formal initiation into the order sanctioned by the vow of allegiance to the *pir* (*bai'at*), which grants the *murid* access to spiritual guidance by the former through the successive stages of the esoteric path (*sulūk*). In the second case, in which the master holds the slightly inferior status of *khalifa* or delegate of the *pir*, the former is invested by the latter with the authority of passing on the master's teachings within the institutional framework of the established *tariqa*. To these two standard patterns of relationships traditionally contemplated within the framework of institutional Sufism, Pemberton adds yet another model, which allows for an extension both of the *pir's* role and of the kind of people to be included among those invested with some kind of authority. This additional third model is described as one which qualifies the *pir*, through a somewhat loose association with the order and its spiritual authorities, with some kind of secondary knowledge used for the purpose of providing spiritual and material services to others. It is in this last, rather ambiguous category eschewing definition that Pemberton includes those women who have come to be considered as *pirs*. Extending the classical pattern of *pir-muridī* relationship to this further group of individuals partaking of an officially sanctioned authority allows her to assert that women can act as *de facto*, if not *de jure*, *pirs*. The role of

these female authorities ranges from temporary substitutes of the *pīr* at established shrines to acting as his spiritual delegates, and includes at the outer periphery also all those individuals who many 'establishment' Sufis disparagingly define as *bazārī pīrs* (i.e. those who offer their services for commercial purposes) or *bazārī ṭābib* (marketplace doctors), people with, as Pemberton puts it, 'an admittedly dubious spiritual authority' (100).

Once these categories are defined and their validity accepted, there follows what is perhaps the most original and interesting part of the research described in this Pemberton's book. It consists of the author's account of the way women, or rather specific categories of women, are perceived as participating and playing an active role in the ritual activities performed at Sufi shrines, whether this is sanctioned by the official authorities, as in the case of the Gudri Shah masters at Ajmer, or just tolerated, as in the case of women petitioners at the Firdawsī *khānaqāh* at Bihar Sharif.

The Gudrī Shāh Chishtīs represent a relatively recent, secondary lineage of the main Chishti order, that began to develop from Shaykh Gudrī Shāh Bābā I (d.1327/1907) during the final years of the nineteenth century. The name of this branch derives from the patched shawl (*gudrī*) worn by the the shaykh, who claimed discipleship to Mu'in al-Dīn Chishtī (d. 1230 CE) through the '*uwaysī*' type of spiritual relation. After his death, his spiritual descendants settled in proximity of the principal Chishti shrine of Shaykh Mu'in al-Dīn at Ajmer and established a *khānaqāh* there. The members of this spiritual family, including their womenfolk, are described as being highly educated and 'open minded' (one would think a most essential prerogative for a spiritual instructor!) and thus are described as being in many ways modern in their approach and outlook.

One of the controversial instances that characterizes the activities peculiar to the Gudri Chishti environment and which is relevant to Pemberton's investigation occurs during the annual *urs* festival celebrated on the death anniversary of Shaykh Mu'in al-Dīn in the Islamic month of Rajab. In chapter 3 Pemberton describes a specific ritual during which several women, including a number of former courtesans hailing from different places in Northern India, gather to sing love songs in a special musical assembly (*maḥfil-i rindān*). This practice is said to have been institutionalized by the third master of the lineage, Nawāb Ṣāḥib (d.1389/1970), a shaykh with a reputedly modern and open mentality who enrolled a great number of women among his disciples. The author marks that this kind of public singing performance by women has notable precedents in India, namely with Bai Tilokdi, the daughter of Tansen, the renowned musician of Akbar's court, but concedes that the debate on the lawfulness of *samā'* in general, let alone if performed by women, is a rather controversial one. Albeit restricted to separate areas inside the Gudri Shahi shrine, the women are allowed to stage their own, alternative *maḥfil-i samā'* in an environment where strict *parda* is usually observed not only by the women visitors to the shrine, but also by

the modern educated *pīrṣāde* women living in the precincts. In the eyes of the author, this ability to introduce innovative customs within the larger, institutional framework of customary Sufi practices reflects social and economic changes that have modified gender relationships, in particular in the upper middle-class environment of post-colonial India.

By contrast, the second case investigated in the context of Pemberton's research is represented by Rafat, a middle-aged woman of low-class social extraction who acts as a ritual agent and professional mediator between the spiritual ancestors of the order (*buzurgān-i Dīn*) and her clients, mainly pilgrims and local folk, at the private prayer chamber (*hujra-gāh*) of the fourteenth-century Firdawsi saint, Sharaf al-Dīn Manerī (d.782/1382) at Bihar Sharif, in the eastern state of Bihar. Women like Rafat, whose activity consists of invoking and channelling the deceased saint's power (*baraka*) and preparing amulets (*ta'wīz*) for the obtaining of specific favours for their clients, are frequently based at small auxiliary shrines attached to main shrines (*dargāh*) and hospices (*khānaqāh*) of major 'establishment' saints. As Pemberton points out, notwithstanding the important role these women play in the overall social function of the shrine, their actions remain confined to the margins of institutional Sufism, and they are often despised as mad and prone to mental imbalance, their ritual practices being perceived as local forms of magic and superstition condemned by official Islam. It is interesting, nevertheless, the parallels between the existence of a 'high Sufi culture' practised and lived by the saints, their descendants and hereditary servants (*khādīm*) in the central parts of the shrine compound, and the thriving local elements of devotional practice at the periphery. These latter in a way help to enhance and extend the charisma of the Sufi saints beyond the restricted sphere of the elite classes down to the people, a phenomenon that has undoubtedly represented a key element in rooting Sufism, and through it Islam, on the Indian soil. It is for this reason that, despite its sometimes apparently forcible attempts to provide legitimate claims for women's authority on the fringes of institutional Sufism, this book represents a valuable contribution to our understanding of the role women can and do play in the spiritual and social structure of Sufi shrines, whether officially sanctioned and embedded into the official Sufi culture, as in the case of the Gudrī Shāh Chishtis at Ajmer, or merely tolerated, as in the case of the Firdawsi shrine in Bihar Sharif. The text makes fluent and pleasant reading, supported by the authenticity of its accounts, especially in those parts where the author relates her own personal experiences (chapter 4) at the shrines. This is conveyed in that easy-flowing style that so typically characterizes first-hand accounts by sociologists and anthropologists, especially Americans, that makes little use of technical terms and the sometimes pedantic stress on correct transliteration and complicated references meant to satisfy specialized audiences.

Thomas Dähnhardt

Ca' Foscari University of Venice