Introduction

At a number of shrines in the lowlands of Pakistan, devotees of Sufi saints regularly perform a trance dance and ritual practice known as dhamāl. This sacred ritual is a characteristic feature of the devotional and ecstatic religiosity embedded in the local societieS of Sindh and the Punjab. Considering its popularity, especially among the masses of the poor and dispossessed, it can be described as ‘embodied religion’ or even as a form of ‘danced religion’ in the sense of I.M. Lewis.2 In fact, Islamic mysticism is a very complex phenomenon with many different faces. It reflects a broad spectrum between more moderate, ethically-oriented movements or schools of thought which are organized in the majority of formal, well-established Sufi orders, and others—a not so small minority—with a more ascetic, world-renouncing profile, consisting of nonconformist groups of dervishes and devotees who emphasize ecstatic experiences such as dance. Listening to samā’ (vocal spiritual music) and moving the body in rapture and abandonment nevertheless plays a role in both currents. It marks an experiential state of merging with the saint, the Prophet and God which—although debated controversially among Sufis themselves3—functions as an ‘integrating modus operandi’, particularly within the Chishti Sufi order in Pakistan and India.4

The genre of instrumental dhamāl, however, is a different kind of Sufi activity mostly practiced outside institutionalized Sufi orders. Thus it is specifically associated with the dervishes and devotees of the Qalandar movement in Muslim South Asia—a radical, provocative, but also ascetic way of life which rejects the social values and the formalism of the external world and instead strives for states of religious rapture, abandonment and ecstasy. As such, the rapturous dance is embedded in mastī-o-qalandārī which could be translated as ‘Qalandarism’5. Thus far, dervish dance and dhamāl within the context of spirit possession at the main Qalandar shrine in Sindh have been dealt with by Michel Boivin from a historical perspective, emphasizing its ancient local roots in ascetic Shivaism and other regional cults with shamanistic elements.6 Focusing on the interpretation of drumming and dancing at the shrine of Madho Lal Husain in Lahore, Richard K. Wolf formulated an argument regarding the poetics of Sufi practice from an anthropological perspective. In his M.A. thesis, Rune Selsing explored the efficacy of ritual action in the dhamāl taking place at the shrine of Shah Jamal and of other Sufi saints in Lahore.7 He specifically examined the distinct discipline of habitual dancers to attain a state of rapture and the oral and musical transmission of the related practical knowledge within a form of ecstatic Sufism which is not institutionalized. The present study also urges empirical observations to investigate dhamāl as a concrete devotional, multi-faceted practice situated in the public space; the focus here is on its complex socio-religious contexts throughout the lowland regions of Pakistan. In particular, I differentiate between three types of dhamāl performers, thereby emphasizing the diversity of embodied ritual attitudes and related aesthetic styles. To highlight this plurality, I use original quotations from a variety of performers, as well as referring to a number of side arguments which need to be studied in more detail in the future.

My initial interest in this trance dance arose from participating several times in pilgrimages to Sufi shrines where I observed strikingly different embodied attitudes amongst performers (a problem also addressed by Wolf).8 To understand this complexity of ritual actions and to interpret its various levels, which I grappled with during field research, here I draw mainly on Ronald L. Grimes’s useful distinction of modes of ritual sensibilities.9 That is, how can these differences be explained in the context of dhamāl and to which frames of reference are they related? How should distinctions in performance styles and aesthetics be interpreted? These research questions serve as a guideline and central focus throughout the present study. First, I give a short introduction to the historical context of this dance, highlighting the genesis of dhamāl and its relation to the Qalandar movement and its pivotal figure Lal Shahbaz Qalandar. Secondly, ritual space and ritual time are outlined as defining the socio-religious context of dhamāl. In the main part of the study, I describe and examine the performance and aesthetics of the dance at two selected ethnographic settings, differentiating three groups of actors (namely dervishes, dhamālis and devotees) in terms of ritual structure, techniques of the body, gestural grammar and gender-related kinaesthetic styles of the dance.10 The next section focuses on embodied ritual attitudes and leads to a final discussion of dimensions of experience and agency.

The Historical Context of dhamāl

In vernacular Punjabi, Urdu and Gujarati dhamāl (lit. ‘noisy’) means ‘wild’, ‘boisterous’ and ‘over-excited’. According to common folk etymology, this term is derived from the Persian word dam (‘breath’); hence one of the most common devotional formulas is damī dam mast qalandar—‘through your breath, O Qalandar intoxicated (by the divine)’.11 Therefore people at shrines often say that in ecstasy the rhythm of breath as well as of the heart beat should have the same rhythm as the drum beat. John T. Platt, however, claims that dhamāl comes from dham, meaning the sound of stamping or jumping on ground, and explains this term as ‘jumping into, or running through fire’.12 But, according to recent scholarship, dhamāl is most probably derived from Sanskrit dharm.13 It needs to be pointed out that the original name of Sehwan, the centre of contemporary dhamāl situated in the southern province of Sindh in Pakistan, had been Siwistan, that is to say the ‘place of Shiva’, the Hindu god who is worshipped as the ‘king of dance’ (nātarājā). Thus dhamāl appears to have been originally a ritual of mystical union with Shiva performed by the Pashupatas, a Shivaite school of ascetics, which has been later associated with the qalandar dervishes.14 As mentioned above, the latter belong
to an antinomian movement which stands in opposition to scriptural Islam as well as the established Sufi orders and apparently spread from West and Central Asia during and after the Mongol invasions of the thirteenth century, in other words at a time of destruction and chaos of war.15 It is renunciatory in character and allows anarchist individualism which also becomes apparent in peculiar costume and insignia.

‘Qalandarism’ (qalandarī) in fact denotes a free-wheeling way of life open to a variety of dervishes, some of them formally initiated into the Qalandariyya, others like the South Asian malangs only loosely associated with certain Qalandar saints. Both aspire for direct divine inspiration through ardent love of God. Their hearts enraptured by the love of God, they seem to be seeking to be drowned in him, not considering themselves responsible for what they do. Mendicant and peripatetic qalandars are known for their provocative, socially deviant behaviour directed against prevailing moral and religious conventions, thereby adopting the principle of malāmat, which means ‘seeking blame’, holding themselves in contempt in order to conceal their spiritual achievements and to fight hypocrisy. Extraordinary states of rapture and ecstasy characterize their religiosity.

According to the local South Asian Qalandar tradition, dhāmāl dālāni (literally ‘to put on dhāmāl’) or dhāmāl karnā (literally ‘doing dhāmāl’) which both mean ‘dancing’ is attributed to Sayyid Uthman Marwandi (d. 1274), better known by his laqab (descriptive epithet) Lal Shahbaz Qalandar, the famous ascetic and leading master of the antinomian Qalandariyya who is the most popular Sufi saint of Pakistan.16 In 1178 he was born in the town of Marwand or Marand near Tabriz in Azerbaijan into a family who trace its descent to Isma’il, a village close to Sehwan, in those days an important trading city and junction of caravan routes situated near the Indus River. After travelling to Multan in southern Punjab and to other parts of northwest India where he met a number of famous Sufi saints of the Sohravardi and Chishti orders, on 8 December, 1251 he returned to Sehwan with a large following of qalandar dervishes. He finally settled in this town where people venerate him to this day as a charismatic protector, healer and miracle-worker. Thus he became known by the affectionate title Lal Shahbaz which means ‘red royal falcon’, red like a ruby (lāl) which is the colour of mystic ardour and passionate love of God.

As far as the saint’s religious affligration is concerned, the Isma’īlīs in Sindh and elsewhere claim him to be one of them because of his descent from Isma’il, but this is disputed by most local authors as well as devotees who consider him either as belonging to the Twelver Shia or as a Sunni because of his name.17 Other sources point out that Lal Shahbaz Qalandar was related to the bī-shar’ branch of the Sohravardi Sufi order—bī-shar’ (‘without the religious law’) being a simplistic label often used as a reproach of heresy and non-belief by orthodox representatives of Islamic mysticism, and especially ascribed to the Qalandar movement.18 Louis Massignon, however, emphasized that a qalandar dervish was not bī-shar’, but a staunch ascetic practicing celibacy and living like a hermit.19 With regard to the local perception of the saint, Boivin argues that ‘... evidence indicates that the Sayyid lineages of Sehwan have cleansed the figure of La’l Shahbâz Qalandar of unorthodox features. Mostly attached to the Qâdiriyyah, and moreover to their very respectable status in the Sindhi Muslim society, they could have imposed a “purified” tradition of La’l Shahbâz, although one part was impossible to remove, the dhāmāl’.20

References to this dance and to ecstasy in general are found in the saint’s Sufi poetry. Thus, in his Persian ghazals Lal Shahbaz Qalandar calls himself insightfully the friend of the famous martyr-mystic Mansur al-Hallaj (d. 922) sharing his emphasis on ecstasy as a means to draw oneself closer to God.21 Therefore the last verse of one of his ghazals is quoted most often: ‘I know nothing except love, intoxication and ecstasy’.22

Another ghazal starts with the verses:

I am burning with the Beloved’s love, every moment,
At one moment I am writhing on dust and in the other I am dancing on thorns.
Come, O Beloved! Give me passion for music,
I dance in the open market, in the ecstasy of union.

In His love, I became infamous, but O pious one,
I do not mind this infamy for thy sake and I dance openly.
Although the world calls me a beggar because I dance,
I have a secret in my heart that impels me to dance.23

His God-given secret appears to refer to existential, esoteric knowledge which cannot be expressed in words. Lal Shahbaz Qalandar is said to have danced for the sake of love of Ali without restraint to the beat of the drums.24 He appears to have redefined the Sindhi samā‘ (mystical audition) by transforming an important indigenous musical ritual with shamanistic elements into a specific corporeal form of dhikr (recollection), using it also as a method of attracting people in the process of conversion to Islam.25 In line with Hallaj, he considered music and dance as a form of dhikr.26 With regard to its local origin dhāmāl thus represents a link between the Sufi tradition of Islam and Indian asceticism.27
NOTES:


3 There has been a long, controversial debate reflected in Sufi literature either arguing for the legitimacy of sama‘ and defending it, but nevertheless setting strict rules for the decorum of ‘listening’ sessions, or rejecting it outright as un-Islamic accretions. Austeres theologians and many sharia-bound Sufi masters objected to sama‘ and ecstatic whirling, being afraid that the performance of love songs would distract the listener from concentrating upon the majesty of God only. For an overview about the permissibility of music in the Sufi tradition, see Kenneth S. Avery, A Psychology of Early Sufi sama‘ (London and New York: RoutledgeCurzon, 2004), 10–25. For more detail, see Jean During, Musique et extase: L’audition mystique dans la tradition soufie (Paris: Albin Michel, 1988), 217–47.

4 Carl W. Ernst and Bruce Lawrence, Sufi Martyrs of Love: The Chishti Order in South Asia and Beyond (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002), 36. In a masterful study of qawwālī Sufī music, Regula Bureckhard Quaresi has described and analysed this sama‘ of the Chishti tradition (Sufi Music of India and Pakistan: Sound, Context and Meaning in Qawwālī [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986]).

5 Therefore also the genre of songs related to this dance and to the veneration of the famous Sufi saint Lal Shahbaz Qalandar is known as qalandri dhamālānī.


7 Rune Selsing, Without Experience no Knowledge: A Ritual Study of the Ecstatic Sufi Practice.

8 Thus I participated at the annual ‘Ifer in October 2003 (13th to 18th), October 2004 (2nd to 5th), September 2005 (22nd to 25th), August 2009 (7th to 14th), July 2010 (28th to 31st) and again July 2011 (18th to 21st). Further visits took place in November 2007 (2nd to 9th), November 2008 (7th to 11th), November 2009 (15th to 21st), November 2010 (23rd to 25th), January–February 2011 (30th to 1st), and December 2011 (15th to 16th). I reflect about these pilgrimages and related fieldwork in my ethnographic narratives At the Shrine of the Red Sufi: Five Days and Nights on Pilgrimage in Pakistan (Karachi: Oxford University Press, 2011) and Nocturnal Music in the Land of the Sufis: Unheard Pakistan (Karachi: Oxford University Press, 2012).


10 Thus, my main focus is on the dancing performers, not so much on ritual functionalities such as the drummers. For the important role of the latter, see Wolf, ‘The poetics of ‘Sufi practice’, and Selsing, Without Experience’.


13 Personal communication by Richard K. Wolf (27 July 2009).


18 Inam Mohamad, Hazrat Lal Shahabz Qalandar of Sehwam-Sharif (Karachi: Royal Book Company, 1978), 70; and Frembgen, Journey to God, 44, 66–127 (in this study the bī shar‘ is used descriptively to structure diverse religious types).


21 Halfag, an extreme lover of God and a saint of intoxication (shadh), is especially known for his ecstatic prayers (munājāt) and being gifted by divine speech (shath); see Herbert W. Mason, Al-Hallaj (Richmond: Curzon Press, 1995), 27, 16.


23 Anonymous, Qalendars Lal Shahabz, 19–20; and Mohamad, Hazrat Lal Shabzab, 9–11.

24 In addition, the dance of the Qalandar is explained by different mythic tales, see Selsing, Without Experience, 22.

25 Boivin, ‘Note sur la danse’, 161; idem, ‘Reflections’, 65; and idem, ‘Le sama‘.

26 The problem whether dhamāl can still be considered within the framework of sama‘ is discussed in more detail in Boivin, ‘Le sama‘.

27 Lack of space does not allow delving deeper into questions of the origin of dhamāl here. There might be influences or borrowings from the local Afghani diasporic community (known as Shadi), studied by Helene Bau (‘Theatre of Memory: Ritual Kinship Performances of the African Diaspora in Pakistan’, in Culture, Creation, and Procreation: Concepts of Kinship in South Asian Perspective, ed. Monika Bock and Aparna Rao [New York and Oxford: Berghahn, 2000], 243–70), or from the Balochi qawwāl exorcism ritual, studied by Jean During (Musique et mystique dans les traditions de l’Iran [Paris and Tehran: Institut Francais de Recherche en Iran, 1989]), but in my view evidence is not yet sufficient to support such hypotheses. On the other hand, musicologists such as Denis Eliau-Mete do also support the hypothesis that the Qalandar saint might have imported the gyrating dance along with shamanistic drum rhythms from his Northwest Iranian place of origin (personal communication, 17 March 2010).

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