



An Anthropological Study of Religious Economies at the Shrine of Shah Rukn-e-Alam, Multan



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Abstract Shrine is a place that has religious, cultural, and political significance, especially in Pakistani society. People visit shrines regularly and perform various religious rituals for the pilgrimage of Sufi saints and fulfillment of their needs. This paper analyses the economic underpinnings of various rituals practiced at the shrine of Shah Rukn-e-Alam, Multan. The interplay of religion and economy at shrines is a relatively under-discussed field of study. Drawing on my ethnographic fieldwork at the shrine of Shah Ruk-e-Alam, this study explores various ritualistic practices involving the exchange system, distribution, and reciprocity. For this research, I have focused on three groups of people who are involved in varied forms of exchange like reciprocity, redistribution, and market economy. This study concludes that there are multi-layered meanings of different religious economies performed at the Shrine of Shah Rukn-e-Alam, which highlight the religification of commodities and commodification of religion at varied levels.

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Introduction

Sufi shrines work in multidimensional ways; thus, their political, social, cultural, and economic implications have always been, and will continue to be, substantial ([Sultana & Ahmad, 2015](#); [Malik, 1990](#); [Platteau, 2011](#)). Visiting of sacred spots, places, and the building has traditionally been regarded as noble and often equated with purification of body and mind and achievement of merits ([Brewster, 2011](#)). The practice of visiting sacred places to attain religious merit, washing off the sins, and accomplishment of desires has been a common practice across the world since time immemorial ([Frembgen, 2012](#); [Sabra, 2013](#)). However, in Islam, visiting

shrines has sparked a great deal of controversy and a particular sect of Islam i.e., Wahabbi, considered visiting shrines as *shirk*. Despite this controversy, a huge number of people in Pakistan have a strong belief in the miraculous blessings of *Sufis* and visit shrines to seek blessings and fulfilling their desires. The Sufis are considered intermediaries between people and God, therefore, paying regular visits to the Sufi shrine is an integral part of the belief system of the believers.

The word *Sufi* has varied connotations ranging from being God's slave to God's friend. Sufi is referred as *abid* (slave,

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devotee), *Zahid* (ascetic), *dervish* or *faqir* (impoverished), *arif* (knower of spiritual truth), and *Wali* (Friend of God), *salik* (spiritual traveler), or *ashiq* (lover) ([Hassanali, 2010](#)). The shrines of *Sufi* saints are the most common public places for religious rituals ([Platteau, 2011](#); [Abbas et al., 2013](#)). People visit the shrine to offer and fulfill prayers (*mannat*) by performing different rituals ([Abbas et al., 2013](#)), and many rituals performed at *Sufi* shrines involve an economic transaction, for instance, *chadar charhana* (cover the grave of the saint through a specific piece of green/red cloth), *Phool charhana* (spreading flower on grave), *langar* (distribution of food product after fulfilling the will). Despite cultural and religious significance, many of the rituals performed at shrines have close economic insinuations. The reification of religion is relatively an under-discussed field of study, especially in the context of Sufism in Pakistan. Several studies carried out on various aspects of Sufism; however, little importance has been given to various economic aspects of rituals performed at the shrines. By drawing on insights from my ethnographic fieldwork at the shrine of Shah Rukn-e-Alam, Multan, this study explores the economic underpinnings of varied rituals performed at the shrine.

Sufi shrines have great socio-cultural importance with their emotional fellowship; these shrines remain a significant aspect of religion and social structure in Pakistani society ([Farooq & Kiyani, 2012](#)). Shrines also act as a shelter for marginalized people in terms of androgyny as a metaphorical practice ([Anjum, 2015](#)); socially distinct groups i.e., *Khusre*, *Dali*, *Malang*, Prostitutes, Singers, and Homosexuals participating in *urs* ([Azam, 2010](#)). More than providing space for marginalized people, Sufi shrines have the force of controlling the political organization of the state ([Ewing, 1983](#)) as the *pirs* occupy a prominent place

in the religious, cultural, and political life ([Malik and Mirza, 2015](#)) and zamindars, who together have been one of the pillars of the Pakistani state ([Hassan, 1987](#)). Shrine care takers (*sajjada nishins*) command tremendous respect and influence among their vast network of devotees that converts them into important intermediaries between not just God and man, but also between the state and its subjects ([Malik and Mirza, 2015](#)).

Several believers visit the shrine for economic needs gratification like getting a job, promotion in job, the vastness in the business, and avoidance of financial problems ([Abbas et al., 2013](#)). As followers need different products like *chadar*, flowers, eatables, pigeon's food, amulets, rings, and bracelets of specific rocks, etc. so some people make stalls or small shops of these products and start their businesses. Similarly, believers also perform some economic activities like sacred exchange as pilgrimage ([Werbner, 2002](#)), but such religious economies are relatively under-studied.

Religion and economics are significant institutions of a society. [Blankston \(2003\)](#) argued that religion is a social good, and people are the producers and consumers of religion. The interdependence of economy and religion is inextricable as almost all world religions involve an assortment of rituals and practices that comprise various modes of economic production and consumption. Although religion and economics both are the basic institutions of a society and remain the focus of discussion in regards to dependence upon each other from decades, however, an economic perspective is studied in relationship with religion leads towards a concern for the role of religion in economic activities ([Ensminger, 1994](#)). [Lukens-Bull \(2008\)](#) focused on globalization and the popularization of commodities, their consumptions, and contestation by giving

the idea of "commodification of religion and the 'religification' of commodities.

Another version of the economic modeling of religion uses rational-choice theory, as promoted by Rodney Stark and others. In this view, people are making rational choices about the utility functions of religion. The main idea was that Sufism has flexibility in its approach to religion, and people practice it according to their socio-cultural requirements. The people who attend the shrine tend to practice Islam according to their requirements and cultural perceptions ([Azam, 2010](#)). "Individuals act rationally, weighing costs and benefits of potential actions, and choosing those actions that maximize their net benefits." ([Iannaccone, 1997](#)). Owner sells the products more expensive than the market and implements a monopoly in each matter. "Within the limits of their information and understanding, restricted by available options, guided by their preferences and tastes, humans attempt to make rational choices." ([Stark & Finke, 2000](#)).

The shrine visitors need different products like *chadar*, flowers, eatables, pigeon's food, amulets, rings, and bracelets of specific stones, etc. The believers also perform some economic activities like sacred exchange as pilgrimage ([Werbner, 2002](#)), but such religious economies are relatively understudied. It is significant to point out that the economic transactions performed at the shrines in the form of rituals or businesses are inexhaustible. In this paper, I have analyzed a few significant religious economies performed at the shrine of Shah Rukn-e-Alam from an anthropological perspective. For this study, the respondents are categorized in three groups; Stall keepers, Shrine visitors, and *Malang* and their religious economies are analyzed as different types of economic exchanges. This study argues that shrine is not only confined to socio-

cultural significance, religious practices, political influence and eliminating discrimination but also provide space for practicing economic activities. This paper examines the relationship between belief system and economic activities carried out at the Shrine of Shah Rukn-e-Alam.

Research Methodology

The study has been conducted by focusing on qualitative and phenomenological research design to capture in-depth information and connection between economic activities and religious beliefs of people. This strategy was selected to explore detailed description of the facts and to achieve subjectivity. Information has been obtained by people involved in different economic activities at the shrine of Shah Rukn-e-Alam located inside fort *Kuhna*, situated in the center of the city near Multan Cricket Club. Data was collected by conducting ethnographic fieldwork of six months at the shrine of Shah Rukn-e-Alam. Respondents were selected using purposive sampling as the target population was only those people who were engaged in various economic activities at shrine. Semi-structured interview guide was designed for the purpose of taking an inductive nature stance. The interview guide was comprised on open ended questions along with topical and motivational probes. Informal interviews had been taken for collecting information through casual talk to save them from the hesitation of formal way of investigation along with probing and prompting technique that became helpful for trigger off the respondents in provision of their opinions. The interview guide was basically prepared in English, but for the convenience of respondents, Urdu and local languages: *Punjabi* and *Saraiiki* were used to communicate with respondents. To remove doubts, all respondents were interviewed one by one

so that they might not mystify and could easily respond as well as to bring accuracy.

Initially, the focus of this research was to explore the economics involved in various rituals performed at the shrine. However, during my fieldwork, I observed that not only shrine visitors are involved in the sacred exchange, but there were other economic activities at play at the shrine which had religious implications. Therefore, I divided my research informants into three groups: shrine visitors, stall owners/keepers and *Malang*. I interviewed 12 shrine visitors who came either to fulfill a *mannat* or to seek blessing from the saint. Out of 12 shrine visitors whom I interviewed, six were males and six females. The age group of the informants was between 20-35 years. The second group of interviewees was of stall keepers and owners. All stall keepers were men and I interviewed four-stall keepers. The last group was of *Malang* and there was a group of four *Malang*, with whom I had a group discussion.

Good rapport was built with visitors, stall keepers, their helpers and *Malangs* to gain more accurate and reliable data. Members of *Auqaf* were also informed and taken under confidence before starting research by negotiating the purpose and scope of the study. Observation was an integral part of the entire fieldwork. The economic activities, implementation of Islamic teachings, behavior of respondents, pilgrimages were observed to cross check the information and for the purpose of critical analysis. Audio recordings of each interview had been taken to prevent the issue of missing information with the consensus of respondent. The interviews, observations and important incidents were preserved by noted down in field notes.

Discussion and Analysis

Shrine is a place where fidelity is paid to a saint, therefore, it is considered as sacred. People visit the shrine to offer and fulfill

prayers. Followers of the shrine of Shah Rukn-e-Alam often visit the shrine to fulfill their wishes such as protection from ailments, educational achievement, the blessing of a male child, resolving domestic and marital problems, and to get success and for economic gratification etc. To fulfill their wishes, the shrine visitors commit an obligation (*mannat uthana*) and pay pilgrimage by bringing something to distribute among other shrine visitors (*mannat utarna*) for the fulfillment of compulsion. Similarly, many of the followers rely on committing obligations and praying for economic stability. One of my respondents, Ahmad, who was a shrine visitor said that:

We were suffering from the economic crisis. We tried many types of business and jobs but all failed. Then I came here, bequest cloth (*chadar charhai*) and commit my obligation after that we have ample and self-sufficient economy and from that time she continuously comes there and bequest to the saint.

Ahmad's comment highlights the perception prevalent among Pakistani people about giving for the sake of Allah, i.e., if you spend for Allah, He will give you more. Similarly, Sufis are believed by the visitors of shrines as agents of Allah and by seeking the blessing of Sufis and spending on the shrines of Sufis will help believers to make Sufis a source to propel their prayers to Allah. According to Muslim ideology, spending for the sake of Allah saves one from troubles, evils, and harmful effects of day-to-day lives. As it is mentioned in Quran that: "Those who (in charity) spend of their goods by night and by day, in secret and in public have their reward with their Rabb (only God and Sustainer). On them shall be no fear nor shall they grieve." (Qur'an, 2:274). Another verse in the Holy Quran suggests, "...that which you give for charity, seeking the Countenance of Allah, (will increase); it is those who will get a recompense

multiplied” (Qur’an, 30:39). The shrine visitors believe that by offering services and devotions in the form of food like *Sabeel* (stall of water/ drink) and *langar* (distribution of eatable), they get the mercy of saints and Allah resultantly give them increase in their economy as they said that: “*Aik do Gaye to Allah das dega*” God will give 10 times more of what you spend for Allah.

When I started fieldwork, it was the summer season in the month of *Muharram*. During this month many people arrange stalls of water and drink (*sharbat*) for the visitors. I saw a boy, who seemed to belong from a lower-middle-class family, standing in the shadow of a tree with big tubs full of ice and water. The boy offered me a glass of *sharbat*, which I accepted. I asked him a few questions about his stall, and he responded.

Our family arrange this stall every year in the summer for the sake of Hazrat Imam Hussain (R.A.) and *Karbala* event. We eat the whole year by seeking the blessings of these holy persons, so it should be compulsory for us to return those blessings in some way by helping other human beings and providing them with drinks on a hot sunny day. People of all creed and caste can drink from this *Sabeel* without paying even a single rupee. We self-arrange all the things like glasses, tub, and ice etc. by using self-finance. Although, we do not go to work during these days as we arrange stall here, but God fulfills our needs.

Similarly, people arrange *langar* after completion of their desired need. The shrine visitors distribute any eatable which is affordable for them to other shrine visitors. People of all socio-economic status were taking this *langar* as a sacred food and share it with others too. A very interesting incident happened at the shrine in this context. I asked a woman for giving me time for an interview

when she just came after taking *langar* in her hand. She did not understand me properly and thought that I was also asking for *langar*. After some time, she came with another bag of *langar* and handed it over to me. Many people were helping each other for taking and sharing *langar*. People did not feel any shyness or hesitation for taking these food items; but instead, they were also distributing it as sacred food (pilgrimage to *Sufi* saint) with each other. The process of distribution and redistribution is a continuous cycle at the shrines as one who take *langar* will redistribute it by arranging *langar* after fulfillment of his/her *mannat*. The above discussion depicts that *mureed* (followers) highly rely on religious beliefs and practices for the stability of their economic stipulation and perform different rituals for gratifying. In this way, these practices make a system of mutual exchange of privileges between God and people by communal correspondence.

The second group of this study is stall owners and keepers. Shopkeepers had a variety of religious and non-religious products like gems, amulets, chokers of colorful beads, trinkets, silver bracelets and gem’s rings along with trendy jewelry, Holy Quran, *Tasbeeh*, *Jae namaz* (specific piece of cloth made for offering prayer) inside the shop, while religious books, *Makhani*, portraits of animals and women, decoration pieces of *Multani* blue pottery were embellished on stalls. With the help of psycho-emotional affiliation of people, the stall keepers religify their commodities like flowers, grains, *chadar* (piece of red or green cloth printed with *Quranic* verses) etc. so that people purchase these products. Shopkeepers sold the products by increasing the prices in comparison to local markets which shows the application of rational choices of people that persuade about the utility functions of religion as depicted by [Iannaccone \(1997\)](#) that Individuals act

rationally, weighing costs and benefits of potential actions, and choosing those actions that maximize their net benefits. Since many visitors of the shrine of Shah Rukn-e-Alam come from other cities of Pakistan. The shrine visitors coming from different cities often purchase local artefacts from these stalls as they do not need to travel to other places, and they consider things purchased from stalls at the shrine as *nishani* (symbol) of shrine.

Hierarchical system prevails there they cannot even sit in a shady place. Both talked that Islam creates equality and ask to care of poor but here all people only talk about the teachings of Islam not practically practice them in their lives. Grain seller said that:

I sat their whole day and in the end of the day I must submit all the income to the owner (thekedar) and in return he gives me only 200 rupees. This income that is not sufficient, but my family manages in this amount. Besides, I do not have surety of getting this labor; the owner can hire any other laborer whenever he wants.

Lower class had a continuous threat of uncertainty about their job as well as of their survival. Authoritative people use lower class same as Marx depicted the relation of feudalism with Catholicism and capitalism with Protestantism and get maximum benefit for themselves. Same compliment was of the helper of shop named Muhammad Hussain who complains about following the orders of shopkeeper and his resistance for participating in any decision for purchase and sale of products as well as his behavior which is rude and discourteous. The shopkeeper was an arrogant man, who always remained busy on the phone, and did not like disturbance and did anything which was beneficial for increment of his business. The entire responsibility of shop was upon the shoulders of helper, and he had to be answerable if anything gets

misplaced or lost. Muhammad Hussain, Alamgir; salesman of footwear (*khusa*) and others don't show their believe on practicing rituals or praying at shrines for economic growth while unconsciously he showed reliance upon religious conviction when I asked about the security of stall at night M. Hussain said that:

We cover the stall with big plastic bags only. No one can steal anything because it is not a common market; instead it is a sacred place. When we are packing the stall we recite the Ayat-ul-Kursi due to which God protect our things.

A third group of my respondents was of *Malang*, who had different opinions regarding the economic processes of the shrines. Malang are recognized as wearing colorful clothes, smoking hashish (charas), drinking bhang (green hash), grow long hairs, wearing different articles and ornaments, such as heavy chains around their body from neck to the ankles, rings in all fingers, using choga (long loose shirt covering down to the ankles) made of colors like sharp green, red, yellow, black, and not caring much for the world ([Azam, 2010](#)). There were two types of *malangs* at the shrine of Shah Rukn-e-Alam. First type of *malangs* were those who had long hairs, chokers of colorful beads, trinkets, silver bracelets and gem's rings; they were look like typical Malang and claims for refusing all the rubbishes of the world while others were looked like common man apparently, but they too claim for being *Malang* (forerunner) of *Wali-Ullah*, but they maintain social and worldly chores along with divine duties. They called themselves *Malang* (devoted persons) and one of the *Malang*, who was my respondent said that 'Muhammad (PBUH) is the head of Sufis, and he maintained his social life as well as religious so should be done by us'. They came from other cities and were spending their time in sharing and talking about the teachings of these preachers (*Wali-*

Ullah) including Shah Rukn-e-Alam, Bahauddin Zakariya, their lifestyles and events and miracles with each other.

The majority of them, who apparently too looks *Malang*, believe on saints, religion and on God to the extent that they do nothing for economic survival and devote their lives for the sake of God and saints. They visit and stay at shrine until someone announced for arranging traveling source for them. On asking that how do they feel about being economically dependent on others? And how they run their families they said that 'you cannot understand these things until you join this path'. They told me story of "*Allah ka khata*" in which a man makes a register in the name of Allah for arranging the marriage of his daughter and God helped him from an unknown source. His strong belief upon Allah fulfills all his needs. Similar views were shared by other *malangs*, who had blind faith in Allah and without doing anything, they totally depend on merciful God. Many of them even did not get married because they thought their family life will be a barrier between their devotions as well as their relationship with sacred being. One of them told me that Shah Rukn-e-Alam did not get married because these worldly things make man astray and keep them away from the divine and he is also following his Wali i.e., Shah Rukn-e-Alam. The absence of family life makes it easy for *Malangs* to spend more and more time living in the company of *Sufi*. As their determination is good and pious so God provide them sources of traveling and fulfilling their needs. Some of their fellows resisted them and give the example of the Holy Prophet (PBUH) who maintains the chores of both worlds together. This type of *malangs* have their families and favor the lifestyle in which they take some extra time, for instance, a month or more, for religious activities and in rest of the year they perform all their social duties. From

their appearance they looked like common men but claimed for having strong association with saints, seeing them in dreams and feeling their company when they remember them. Many of them claimed to have lands of agriculture at their hometown for economic survival but manage time for visiting the shrine. According to them their devotion and spiritual link with the Sufi make them close to Allah, and Allah shower his blessings and mercies upon them as reward of the devotion of life and time that results in more production and earnings.

Conclusion

This study highlights that people have different connotation about relying on religious practices for their economic survival. As three groups were studied, each group had a different point of view about religious economies. Firstly, the shrine visitors do many activities that can be considered as reciprocity, but at the same time they functionalize "distribution" through *langar*, *Sabeel*, *nayaz* etc. Secondly, the stall owners adopt exchange system like market economy and merchants maximize their benefits through religification of commodities as well as commodification of religion. Thirdly, *Malang* is the most prominent, and marginalized group, their level of belief upon God for economic stability and the way of involvement in act of reciprocity. Although each group had varied reasons for relying upon religious activities for fulfilling of their economic needs and their level of dependence also differs from each other; however, each group has credence upon blessings of God as well as *Sufi*. Religious economies like *Sabeel*, *langar*, *nayaz* etc. play the role of distribution and redistribution as these products are shared within the visitors, and those who are givers may be takers next time. The under lying theme of different religious as well as economic

activities leads towards reciprocity, pilgrimage, and devotions results in the blessing of God upon the practitioner. At stalls, people practice exchange system like any other formal market system, adopt the strategies that became the source of profit for them and commodify the religion by provision of trendy products. By this research it has been clear that people attain economic benefit

by commodifying religion as visitors pay their gratitude for praising their God and *Sufi* for continuing their economic maintenance, stall owners religify their commodities to gain more attraction of visitors and increasing their sale, *Malangs* too came here for devoting their life to saint and such praising results in their psycho-emotional satisfaction.

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