INTRODUCTION: SAINTHOOD IN FRAGILE STATES

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Introduction

In a village square in the Chilas region of Northern Pakistan, Mazjub Baba, an elderly Muslim ecstatic, yells out: “Muslims are frogs” (Frembgen this issue). Such an outcry may not cause a stir in all places of the world. But this particular area is heavily influenced by a strict and more literal form of Sunni Islam, where this would have serious ramifications under normal conditions. Yet, in this case, the man is exempt from harm. He is tolerated but remains rather inconspicuous in the strict Sunni reformist milieu of the Chilas region. His transgressive behaviour is seen as bewildered but also perhaps evidence that he is seized by God. In the lowlands of Pakistan he would most probably have been venerated within a Sufi shrine-cult. But here, in the Northern part, his presence is more ambiguous. He is socially positioned in an ambiguous state of whether he is to be venerated as a saintly figure of spiritual closeness or denounced as a heretic: How to tell a madman from a saint or even a prophet? For now he is simply tolerated.

Jürgen Frembgen’s example points to one of the phenomena that has gained importance in recent decades in the larger Middle East, despite modernity’s acclaimed efforts at disenchantment: the adaptation and contestation of sainthood. The case of Mazjub Baba emphasises the possibilities and dangers in the life of the individual, the group or the nation when the issue of excessive behaviour or signification is raised. By taking (or being offered) a position at the pinnacle of supreme closeness, the saints often act as “threshold persons”, mediating between distinct symbolic orders (Werbner & Basu 1998: 9). In practice, this is not only a spiritual mediation between worldly and transcendental powers but also in cases of social conflict, where genealogical proximity to saints may be mobilised to legitimise status as mediating sheikhs in social conflicts (cf. Marcus 1985; Reeves 1995).

Recent events show how the very presence of saint worship in Timbuktu, Mali, causes conflict. Here new regimes of Islamic morality are imposed by Salafi-inspired groups destroying saint shrines to the protests
of UNESCO who on their part had tried to protect them by inscribing
them on their Heritage in Danger list. Across the Middle East negotia-
tions are thus taking place over who is considered a saint, which saint
offers what and why, and should saints or saint worship even be toler-
ated. These contestations over sainthood are thus not just taking place
on the outskirts of urban centres or in rural districts of Northern Pakistan.
Rather, sainthood emerges as a topic in negotiations ranging from local
tribal disputes, over national representations, to trans-national flows of
populations and media coverage.

Beyond traditional understandings of saints as people chosen by God
and acting as mediators, even national leaders often make use of con-
nections to distinct characters as consolidating figures and mechanisms,
while simultaneously maintaining an ambivalent position toward contem-
porary charismatic figures or the legitimacy of individual cults and claims
to sainthood (Haugbolle this volume; Hopgood 2005b; Navaro-Yashin
2002; Wedeen 1999). Sainthood is inherently tying to political power, but
it is also heavily embedded in negotiations of piety, propriety, and even
sanity. This is what initially spurs our curiosity in this volume: how and
with what effect do powerful individuals—state leaders, public figures,
and religious virtuosi—tie links to a phenomenon like sainthood that so
often is surrounded by precariousness and volatility? By denouncing or
adhering to a saint, or even laying claims to be a saint, people balance
a fine line between individual experiences and hopes of divine will or
proximity, and the social and political life of that claim. By way of this
introduction, we want to promote a particular perspective on sainthood
that focuses on the fragility that sainthood inhabits, with related notions
of precariousness, ambiguity and volatility, whether in the experiential
state of a madman or in the nation state.

Sainthood in Fragile States

There has been a long tradition of studying the contestation of sainthood
in the Middle East. Political science mostly focuses on the structural level
of sainthood and assesses whether current political state forms in the
Middle East are viable or not. Where negotiations of sainthood in a politi-
cal register are important to trace out in terms of claims to power, this
rarely includes subjective encounters with the saintly that do not directly
inform politics; or if they do so, then not necessarily by direct intent. We
instead argue that the field of sainthood is more productively conceived
through the interplay between structural and existential states.