



The Subject and the Ostensible Subject

Mapping the Genre of Hagiography among South Asian Chishtis

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In an essay titled “The Chishtiya of Sultanate India: A Case Study of Biographical Complexities in South Asian Islam,” Bruce Lawrence has argued that for South Asian Sufi masters, Clifford Geertz’s notion of “enacted biography” must give way to a more complex act of “retrospective biography.”¹ Sufi masters—*shaykhs* and *pirs*, that is, “saints”—were understood to inherit in some undefinable way the spiritual charisma (*baraka*) of the Prophet, whose image served them as a model for emulation. While Muhammad’s daily actions (*sunnat-i nabi*) constituted the most significant standard of righteous conduct, or *adab*, the self-image of saints was in no way based on a simple replication of his acts. Sufi *shaykhs* have patterned and continue to pattern their behavior on Muhammad, but they also develop their own images to reflect the innovators and exemplars in the *silsila* (lineages) who came before them, which is a decidedly more complex process than simple emulation of the actions of the Prophet.² Because the function of the *shaykh* is different from the Prophet, models of emulation are not as sharply defined; each *shaykh* must respond to the successful patterns of action handed down through the *silsila*, while discovering for himself what captures the religiosity that guides his heart. The boundedness of the model provided by Muhammad, with its myriad of examples in Hadith, has no precise analog among the *shaykhs*. Each *shaykh* then modifies his action in a dynamic process that constantly looks to the past but at the same moment reshapes the memory of the past. The historically observable confirmation for this dual patterning on the life of Muhammad and the lives of the *shaykhs* in the *silsila* produces a biographical tradition that is retrospective.

Lawrence further observed that at the heart of each saint’s image lay a set of complementary, often strangely juxtaposed, characteristics that revolve around the twin poles of genuine humility and extraordinary religious accomplishment. The permutations of these combined characteristics are myriad, accounting for

differences among the *shaykhs*, but in every case each characteristic is understood to multiply the profundity of the others. For example demonstrations of religious accomplishment were often translated through the disciplined display of power (*karamat*), the practice of exceptional scholarship, the observance of strict orthodoxy, or the occasional manifestation of ecstasy. Humility was frequently seen to manifest itself in actions of self-abnegation or chastity or in the performance of menial tasks, especially those charitably, but selflessly, done for others. All of this in turn serves to counter the public elevation of the *shaykh*, a good antidote to the hubris that might ensue from wielding *karamat*.³ These seemingly countervailing characteristics provide a model of piety for everyone, from layman to *murid* to later *pirs*. Unfortunately, most hagiographical models stop with the simple cataloging of these characteristics, but Lawrence was led in this essay to ask why some saints emerge from the *silsila* to dominate the popular imagination while others seem to be little more than caretakers. I will suggest that it may not be the individual as much as the model of piety itself that takes hold. The mechanism that accounts for this shift lies in the structure of hagiography itself and its dynamic perpetuation by the community.

The naive form of retrospective biography would argue that a simple cumulative model of emulation (with each *shaykh* following all the actions of his predecessors) must be rejected, because choices made by these *shaykhs* lead to different models of piety. Retrospective biography can never simply look to the past for inspiration and guidance; it must interact with the past, requiring judgments of value. As a result of these choices, a greater prominence is afforded to certain *shaykhs*, a greater recognition in the community as well as among later *shaykhs*; others of great accomplishment often languish in relative obscurity. Lawrence does not immediately accept the obvious alternative to the naive accumulation model when he refuses to attribute the popularity of the saint to a direct measure of the *shaykh's* demonstrations of *karamat* or corresponding (proportional) humility, which rest on reputation as much as anything. The answer, he suggests, is the way the memory of the *shaykh* is circulated within the community that tends his shrine, his tomb, and, with the tomb, his biographical legacy. It is this particular observation I would like to extend in an effort to isolate some of the mechanisms within the hagiographical corpus by which the community promotes the saint's memory. To see what happens to that memory will allow us to isolate some of the ways that followers synthesize the competing images of religiosity.

The Biographical Process and the Issues of Memory and Relevance

In order to get at Lawrence's questions, we might be led to ask not only what is significant about the complex image of the saint that gives rise to a following, but we may also ask a concomitant question about how that memory is perpetuated.

By what mechanism or mechanisms does it take shape and persevere? When a *shaykh* emerges to dominate, the easy assumption is that the individual was extraordinary, that his personal actions and teachings were superlative, that his personal religious accomplishments were self-evident and therefore widely acclaimed (the catalog of set characteristics is often invoked at this juncture). Most approaches conclude that the *shaykh* possesses that mysterious attraction indicated by the shorthand expression “charisma,” an indefinably vague term indicating an articulable allure or appeal.⁴ Once established, or more accurately, asserted, the biography and collected teachings are marshaled for historical reconstruction, and the life history becomes indexical to the tradition’s history. But the seemingly simple assumption that the record somehow matched the lived reality masks the complex process by which biographical images are constructed, and likewise obscures the role of religious biography in shaping the religious community itself, that is, in instantiating the ideal among the faithful. For this reason, Lawrence’s insistence on the role of the community invites us to see what drives the biographical process.

There is no reason to doubt that when a *shaykh* developed a following, he somehow conducted himself in a way that was religiously laudable, for such a figure would build his reputation over a lifetime of service. Too many would have witnessed his accomplishments to propose that the accounts were baseless. But what captures the imagination of followers is the *way* the individual is portrayed as much as the *quality* of the accomplishments themselves. It has to be the “biographical image,” the perpetrated image and memory of the person, to which people respond. Following Reynolds and Capps, the biographical image is constituted by a blending of the features of the individual life with the articulation of a religious ideal supported by those actions.⁵ The subject of a hagiography can never be portrayed without that connection, so the historical *shaykh* as glorified object is seen to embody some timeless religious truth in his action, in speech, in thought—and this is ultimately a reflection of the author’s perspective. It is generally the work of religious biography to produce this image, and it is the image that inspires his following. The memory of the *shaykh* can never be the memory of him as an individual alone, rather it is of the *shaykh* as he embodied ideals of his tradition. The memory itself, however, will of necessity reflect, or perhaps more accurately “highlight,” selected virtues and actions, those that reflect something deemed of value to the individual or community, which is another way of saying the memory will cling to and be shaped by what is deemed relevant by the author. It was perhaps Dilthey who was the first to argue this point systematically with respect to biography, for relevance is by his definition a concern of the moment, of the biographer’s here and now. Dilthey proposed that biography reconstructed the past according to issues that are immediately relevant to the author at the time of writing, a position now widely

accepted; as the issues changed, the later written history that inevitably changed to reflect new concerns. As Talal Asad has more recently argued, this discursive tradition does not simply conduct a monologue with the past but reconstitutes itself, repeatedly and continuously, in negotiation with an ever-changing present, with its new forms of authority, power, and knowledge.⁶ It is this dynamic process in which the hagiographer engages. And again following Dilthey: while engaging the past, the author seeks to shape the future; his discovery of patterns in (or imposition of them on) the actions of the biographical subject provides a template for future action.⁷ In the case of the Sufi hagiography, this template of action, captured in the biographical image, becomes typological and thus predictive. *Typological* here does not mean the static taxonomy of virtues or characteristics suggested by Digby and Schimmel. It indicates a more dynamic structure that suggests possible future trajectories of the tradition, laying down parameters of the discursive arena in which subsequent *shaykhs* can fashion their own religiosity.⁸ The hagiographer sets the limits of possibility and in some cases suggests a preferred direction; others later will take that suggestion and bend it to their own needs as the relevant issues change. In the history of Islam, one can observe this tendency from the historical record's inception to the point where we can argue it exists as a generalizable feature of all Islamic religious hagiography.

Ibn Ishaq's Sira and the Changing Fortunes of the Early Community

To illustrate the issue of relevance in the writing of Islamic biography, let us turn to the earliest sustained biographical treatment of Muhammad, the *Sira* of ibn Ishaq (A.H. 85–151 [= 707–773 C.E.]).⁹ There are fragments of earlier texts that have survived, especially among the *maghazi* war narratives, but ibn Ishaq's is the earliest extant connected chronological treatment of Muhammad's life. The text is divided into three distinct books: *Mubtada'*, *Mab'ath*, and *Maghazi*. The *Mubtada'* is the book of the beginning, the genealogy of Muhammad starting with Adam and stretching until, but not including, his advent. The second book, *Mab'ath*, begins with Muhammad's birth and ends with the start of fighting in Medina. The third book of war stories, *Maghazi*, appears to have been compiled from numerous eyewitness accounts and follows the military campaigns through to the burial of Muhammad. In its early formation, the *Sira* was probably not dissimilar to the Hadith, vignettes of proper action, which in their atomistic and anecdotal form provided the foundations for Sunna. Yet the *Sira* eventually concatenated those discrete elements into a narrative, which contextualized the actions of Muhammad and provided a model for subsequent religious biography or hagiography in the tradition. The distinction is important.

The Hadith carry a legal force, which ultimately grounds the tradition in law; they constitute a freestanding, encyclopedic compilation of proper practice and,

therefore, a model for imitation. The assumption that makes these compilations possible is that Muhammad's character was fully formed and unchanging throughout his life, thereby creating an essentialized, seamless model of perfection (although the tradition could not admit perfection on his behalf, but the closest thing to it): Muhammad is *insan al-Kamil*, the "complete man." The *Sira*, on the other hand, portrays the life of Muhammad in a chronotopic narrative, attempting not only to portray what he did (as a basis for later practice), but the meaning of his presence as prophet (*nabi*) and apostle (*rasul*). In Bakhtin's terms we can see a contrast between the epical figure of Muhammad, a timeless figure whose essential character is revealed through each and every act, as opposed to a more chronotopic narrative that situates Muhammad in a specific historical time and place. Though I am not willing to push this except to develop the contrast, it demonstrates a kind of discovery, if not maturation or development, of his character.¹⁰ The life narrative provides the framework for the first extended history of the early tradition. In its depiction of right action in context, it provides the basis for subsequent biographical treatments (an issue immediately germane to the *malfuzat* and *tazkirab* of the Sufi saints) and for establishing patterns of right action, rather than atomistic, autonomous, or discrete action. Each Sufi master will have to demonstrate the character traits similar to those that can be divined from Muhammad's actions as cataloged in the Hadith (leading to the lists such as those compiled by Digby and Schimmel). But it is the *Sira* that would seem to serve as the dominant precursor for Sufi hagiography, because it pays close attention to the historical placement of actions and the characteristics they reveal, context resolving the apparently competing images of saintliness demonstrated by each *shaykh*. That the *Sira* serves as the historical precursor, however, is not the issue; for the prominence of the text allows us to assume this easily enough (whether in a general or more specific way is immaterial, for the biographical treatment of Muhammad will by definition affect later depictions). What is significant for our current argument is the way in which the text was composed and subsequently redacted by ibn Ishaq's editor, 'Abdu'l-Malik b. Hisham (d. A.H. 213 or 218).

Guillaume's interpretive introduction reveals an urge to read the text as history, a kind of historicism that, it should be noted, occasionally loses sight of the nature of the text as a hagiographical document. He also moved to establish a sound intertextuality in a heroic effort to trace precursor texts and their contribution to the *Sira*. Based on these reconstructions, he argued that the text was profoundly shaped by contemporary political events that cannot be overtly acknowledged. The text as we have it today must be read in the light of the tragedies of Karbala' (A.H. 61) and the sack of Medina (A.H. 63), both of which occurred after the *Sira*'s original composition. Guillaume observed that by the time ibn Hisham edited the text, there was a palpable shift in tone, the editor

asserting Ansar claims to priority in the life of Muhammad.¹¹ Religious biographies, as a rule, are decidedly not about recording a history that can be reconstructed in positivist terms, although they are forced into that role willy-nilly and may contain verifiable historical data. Nor are religious biographies literary masterpieces exploring the construction of imagined religious worlds, although one can clearly profit from the attempt to apply literary critical techniques to the narratives.¹² Both of these approaches inevitably become reductionist in ways that blunt our understanding of the power of these documents—if not simply miss their point altogether—unless they recognize that the genre is inherently political and that the chronotopic narrative is itself subject to manipulation.¹³ And even though Guillaume does not set out to establish the political dimension, its inescapable presence is what he discovered, uncovering in the process one of the most fundamental features of religious biography.

Intentionally or not, religious biographies are political. They are political because the genre itself is not designed to reflect the ruminations of the author for his private consumption, but for community. The texts in this genre are automatically rhetorical, seeking to persuade others of the truth and validity of the embodied religious ideal. These texts articulate theological and practical ideals not in a vacuum but for a specific community for which they often, if not inevitably, become charter documents for theology and praxis. As charter documents these hagiographies function as an integral part of the group's canon, officially sanctioned or otherwise, as will be obvious in the Sufi *khanqah*. As canonical documents they articulate the values of the followers—or serve coercively to enforce those values.¹⁴ As articulators of value, their political power serves to organize the tradition, often implying or even spelling out an explicit internal organization of the community, according to its hierarchy of ideals. While arguably the result of extraordinary piety, the commissioning, writing, and circulation of these religious biographies nearly always serves to define what it means to be properly religious according to the tradition, providing a blueprint for instantiating the religious ideal. When viewed this way, we see exposed in the writing of the text of the *Sira* a fundamental tension in the nature of the genre of hagiography itself, and this manifests to a greater or lesser extent specifically in subsequent Sufi hagiographies.

In ibn Ishaq's original *Sira*—and here I am relying on Gordon Newby's reconstruction of the first book¹⁵—the orientation is clearly retrospective. The initial third of the biography moves to justify Muhammad's position as *rasul* and *nabi* and focuses on his connection to the line of prophets that stretched from the beginning of humanity, ultimately culminating in his person. That justification inevitably conditions the reading of the last two books of the *Sira*. The tone is one of justification, and the context is a fledgling monotheism seeking to establish itself among the other monotheistic traditions to which it is related. Ibn

Ishaq sought to adapt Muhammad's monotheism to the preexisting traditions, demonstrating how Muhammad extended them in the process of finalizing monotheism once and for all: Muhammad becoming then the *kbatam an-nabiyin*, or Seal of the Prophets. While the document seems to be confident, it still expends much energy to make the case for legitimacy, which is carried out with a rather heavy hand in the genealogical sections of the opening book and in the portrayals of the lives of other prophets, whose actions Muhammad somehow mirrored but superceded or at least brought to fruition. When ibn Hisham edited the text decades later, the religion and polity promoted by Muhammad have been firmly established and, in that dominance, no longer need to be justified, merely noted. So ibn Hisham's version of the text excised a huge portion of the first book, the *Mubtada'*, and focused on the religion of the Prophet as new pattern for action; Muhammad was *insan al-Kamil* and the model of the ideal Muslim. Justification of the monotheistic modality of Islam as a tradition—separate from the other monotheistic traditions—was no longer necessary. The text was now prospective in its orientation, and its tone clearly anticipated the future, examining, if not actually promoting, a particular internal structure for the community rather than attempting to find a place for the community among others. Guillaume's comments about the shift in tone are confirmed by the document's overall demeanor in relation to its unredacted predecessor: the text reveals an internal political struggle on a grand scale, addressing the communal features without regard to its "fit" within the other monotheistic religions. What was relevant to the community—or at least to the authors who were articulating their vision for it—shifted dramatically in much less than a century.

From this distanced perspective, ibn Ishaq's original *Sira* does what hagiographies everywhere tend to do: it demonstrates how the saint, or in this case, the Prophet, exemplified a preexisting religious ideal, adapting it to a new world, a new circumstance, through personal action and teachings, looking to the past to valorize the present. However, the later edited text of ibn Hisham functions more as a "sacred biography," again to utilize Reynolds and Capps's distinction.¹⁶ Sacred biography concerns itself with the creation of a new tradition and its organization, asserting independence from prior religious modalities, looking to the present or more immediate past to valorize the future. And there is, of course, a fine line between modifying a preexisting tradition and creating something new; they are hardly separable in many instances and can, just by some measured editing, turn a text completely from one into the other. The two versions of the *Sira* neatly capture this tension between exemplifying a preexisting religious ideal, either by a new embodiment or a shift in emphasis, and founding something arguably altogether different (figure 1). And this is the tension that prevails in Sufi hagiographies, a tension that may help to explain why certain figures, such as Nizam al-Din Awliya (d. 1325), emerge within the tradition

as more powerful and popular creators of a “new” Sufi tradition rather than simply embodying the old, even though acknowledged to be faithful to that earlier piety.

FIGURE 1.

<i>subject</i>	<i>genre</i>	<i>orientation</i>	<i>characteristics</i>
life of Muhammad	Hadith	theology and teachings	timeless religious ideal, basis for law
		practice and practical advice	atomistic and anecdotal encyclopedia
	Sira	ibn Ishaq— retrospective	revalorized old historical narrative
		ibn Hisham— prospective	dynamic new historical narrative

The Dialectic in the Biographical Images of Sufi Hagiography

In my study of religious biography over the last twenty-five years, I have observed that the dynamic nature of the hagiographical dialectic is often lost in generalities that do little more than articulate some vague connection between the biographical image of the present and those of the past. One of the most common forms is the appeal to the concept of “influence,” a general term that posits a connection but does not specify its nature, primarily because it is used to disguise the lack of clarity in precisely how the two or more participants actually relate.¹⁷ This dynamic was explicitly invoked when Lawrence argued that later saints in the *silsila* do not simply look to prior exemplars for inspiration but are defined by and define themselves in their light, starting of course with Muhammad and certainly including those following, an act that follows a trajectory not unlike that played out in writing and circulation of the *Sira*. No saintly image can be articulated without taking into account those who came before, each adding to the definition of the *pir* or *shaykh* as institution. This addition, as we might now expect, is either one of *emphasis*, wherein the preexisting ideal is highlighted, leading to some kind of reordering of priorities for those who follow, or one of *creation*, where new images of piety are established and linked to the old. As previously noted, in the naive version of this interaction within the Chishti order, every *shaykh* would be expected to carry the image of all previous *shaykhs*. Thus arguably the most famous *shaykh*, Nizam al-Din, would of necessity emulate—or at least his followers would be expected to construe his biography to demonstrate (which is a somewhat different proposition)—in some fundamental

way the actions of his predecessors, going back to the first Chishti *shaykh* in South Asia, Mu‘in al-Din Chishti (d. 1236). Yet as Lawrence recognized that nearly all of the histories of Sufism in South Asia attest, Nizam al-Din has been and still is much more celebrated in South Asia, his spiritual image more widely circulated than Mu‘in al-Din and considerably more than the two intervening *shaykhs* of the lineage, Qutb al-Din (d. 1235) and Farid al-Din (d. 1265). He eclipses those before and after.

Nizam al-Din’s popularity and scope—indeed even within the tradition itself, he is singled out with ‘Abd al-Qadir Jilani (d. 1166), who preceded him in Baghdad¹⁸—suggest that the process is not cumulative. Nor is the process the opposite, an ever-diminishing embodiment of a golden, bygone era of virtue, where the ability of the *shaykh* to capture that original inspiration weakens in every generation, as has been argued for at least one other lineage.¹⁹ The image of a saint is dictated to a certain extent by the *shaykhs* before him and can, in that discursive arena, only emerge in interaction with previous parameters. But the process also works retrospectively, for as Lawrence reasons: “Each major saint becomes a crucial, indispensable link extending the spiritual charisma—and hence the organizational longevity—of his order (*tariqa/silsila*). *Inevitably the shaykh as a shaykh reshapes the way in which his followers think about all antecedent—and also all subsequent—saints.*”²⁰

This process is dialectical, but it is of a curious sort because the images from the past, while providing a standard for the present, are incapable of resisting the change wrought by their present interpretation. The older images can help shape the present images but cannot counter any changes the present makes about their own past. Each *shaykh* will remake the entire hagiographical tradition, but some do so more dramatically than others. A later historical figure, such as Nizam al-Din, redefines what it means to be *shaykh* for all those who preceded him, in large part, we suspect, because of a greater personal charisma and, just as importantly, the efforts of his followers to perpetuate his image. Part of that charisma, which is always so difficult to identify, is actually the result of his action in revalorizing the religious ideal held dear by the tradition. One might argue that it is the further job of the saint to revalorize older images of piety, but because historical circumstances change, revalorizing is always a re-defining, not a simple revival or continuation of the past. This activity combines the same tension we saw illustrated in the *Sira* of ibn Ishaq and its redaction by ibn Hisham. Remembering Dilthey, revalorizing is a function of the present (both subject and author), making the tradition relevant for the audience, both for those who immediately surrounded the master and those who would follow the image perpetuated in the hagiography.²¹

While there is clearly a cumulative feature to the inheritance, certain *shaykhs* stand out, in part, because they have redefined the tradition, but also because

they have their images better perpetuated by their followers, magnifying the impact. Innovative *shaykhs* cross the line from exemplifying the previously articulated religious ideals to creating new ones. Less visible *shaykhs*, we might then deduce, do not tend to be as creative, serving to emulate the older ideals but not forging new ones. No doubt, in some cases, the originality may be present but insufficiently recognized or articulated to inspire followers to capture them through hagiography.²² This dual activity—the portrayal of exemplifying the old and creating a new religious ideal—gives rise to the recognition of greater or lesser *shaykhs*.

Because the standard for the *shaykh* is fluid and has to be remade for every generation, it would appear that part of what sets some *shaykhs* apart from others is their response to previous images of religiosity. The impact of the biographical image would seem to be directly proportional to the adaptation of the religious ideal to contemporary issues of everyday life and spirituality, that is, its relevance to the *shaykh's* community.²³ Those prominent figures can be easily identified by the extent of the following centered on the cult of the shrine with which they are affiliated, which inevitably includes the propagation of the saint's particular teachings, by example in hagiography and by direct instruction in personal writings, practical instructions, and miscellaneous notes taken by followers.

The corpus of hagiographical materials that preserve and perpetuate this image of piety are diverse, including the sayings and records of observed spirituality, *malfuzat* and *tazkirah*, specific instructions in *maktubat* (letters of clarification and guidance), and *isbarat* (thematic treatises by the master or his disciples).²⁴ Not all *shaykhs* intervene directly in the perpetuation of their own image, but notably Nizam al-Din personally approved at least one set of collected conversations and sayings (*malfuzat*), a compilation in five fascicles recorded by Amir Hasan Sijzi, who subsequently submitted it to the master, who then corrected it and filled in some of the gaps. The text, initially collected in A.H. 707 (1308 C.E.), was titled *Fawa'id al-Fu'ad*, or *Morals for the Heart*.²⁵ The narrative of Nizam al-Din's life, however, was perhaps best conveyed by Amir Khurd's *Siyar al-awliya*, which, although characterized as an "untidy amalgam of *malfuzat* and *tazkirah*," integrated a trove of biographical detail about the great master.²⁶ The volume of this literature serves as an indirect measure of impact. Yet in each succeeding generation's treatment of Nizam al-Din's life and teachings, the relevance gradually shifted, and the image of religiosity was once again revalorized, this time by the authors perhaps as much by the subject himself.

In keeping with Lawrence's observation that Nizam al-Din is somehow more important than others, it is notable that a few generations later a compilation of *malfuzat* of Sayyid Gisu Daraz, Muhammad Akbar Husayni's *Jawami' al-Kalim*, contains more direct references to Nizam al-Din than to Gisu Daraz's own *pir*. This text is an example of how a later *shaykh* interacted with and reshaped the

prior image, which could not resist the change but in this case apparently refused to be overpowered by a lesser, later inspiration. The record of these biographical images and their shifting memories has produced and continues to produce a gradually changing history for the Chishti tradition, as Lawrence and colleague Carl W. Ernst have outlined in their recent survey of the order. In telling that history, they found it necessary to do what many hagiographers do: they had to choose Chishti masters who revalorized and reformulated the tradition in the light of those who had gone before. Five are singled out for special treatment, precisely for the reformulating or revalorizing tendency noted above: Khwaja Mu‘in al-Din Chishti, Shaykh Qutb al-Din Bakhtiyar Khaki, Shaykh Farid al-Din Ganj-i Shakar, Shaykh Nizam al-Din Awliya, and Shaykh Nasir al-Din Chiragh-i Dihli (147–71).²⁷ Nizam al-Din Awliya is featured as the “standard bearer for Chishti spirituality” and the “foremost of all masters.”²⁸

The Subject and Ostensible Subject in Hagiography

If enduring relevance of teaching and action is what has made for greatness among Sufi *shaykhs*, then relevance must be the result of creating a new religious ideal that has adapted or transformed the old to a new era. This ideal in turn has been embodied by—or perhaps, more accurately, has been portrayed by the hagiography to be inherent within—the *shaykh*, such as Nizam al-Din. If the memory of such *shaykhs* is never free from the religious ideals so embodied, we can predict that the historical dimensions of the saint’s life will eventually yield to the dominance of the religious ideal. That is to say, the *bios* in the two-part biographical image inevitably becomes little more than a vehicle for the teachings, the religious ideal articulated and embodied. Without that religious ideal, the life itself is of little significance to the religious follower; yet the teachings have the capacity to stand independently, to be extracted from the life. The individual life, then, can only continue in service of the religious ideal, and that makes the religious ideal and its transcendent truth the “real subject” of the hagiography. The individual *shaykh* is, in some basic way, only the “ostensible subject,” providing the opportunity to articulate the religious ideal.

While the historical life may serve as inspiration for subsequent followers, lay and professional alike, and in many cases provide a model for emulation (when it can be emulated), aspiration, or meditation (when it can only be admired), it is ultimately the religious ideal that shapes the appropriation of the *shaykh* by those who come later. In retrospective biography this has been especially evident, for apart from occasional acknowledgments of particular actions of previous *shaykhs* germane to the current figure, it has always been the teachings that were appropriated and transformed. There are two very closely related effects of this appropriation. First, the more completely the religious ideals are transformed by the creative *shaykh*, the greater the change he will have worked on the

memory of those who preceded him. That newly constructed image modifies all subsequent memory of earlier figures, who can no longer resist the new direction—the change in emphasis. Second, and undoubtedly to a certain extent as the result of the first, the more distant the remove in time, the more stylized the earlier *bios* becomes. The reasons for the latter are straightforward enough. Because it is the religious ideal that controls the biographical image, any hagiography or sacred biography will reflect the ideals embraced by the immediate author, even if it is during the lifetime of or immediately after the saint. Actions that do not explicitly support that religious ideal tend not to be portrayed; actions that do will be the ones remembered, will be the ones to make up the primary record. These facts, of course, change over time.²⁹ Years later, when the religious ideal is revalorized, even slightly, the biographical detail needed to support this new interpretation may no longer be part of the group's recorded history, so the historical *bios* will succumb to the stylizing effects of highlighting, creating contours that over time will heavily elide the historical *bios* and render the image more and more consistent with the driving theological or doctrinal perspective. Any of a saint's actions that fails to support or otherwise illuminate the religious ideal will tend over time to be forgotten or misremembered, and this is a place where hagiography often departs dramatically from other forms of biography because of the overt function of hagiography to establish religious doctrine. Where biography may be ideologically driven, ideology is not automatically the primary objective. Subsequently when the religious ideal is itself revalorized by later figures, the basic materials for reconstructing the *bios* of earlier *shaykhs* are simply no longer available, and in order to illustrate the new ideal, new actions must be invented or ascribed to the older historical figure.

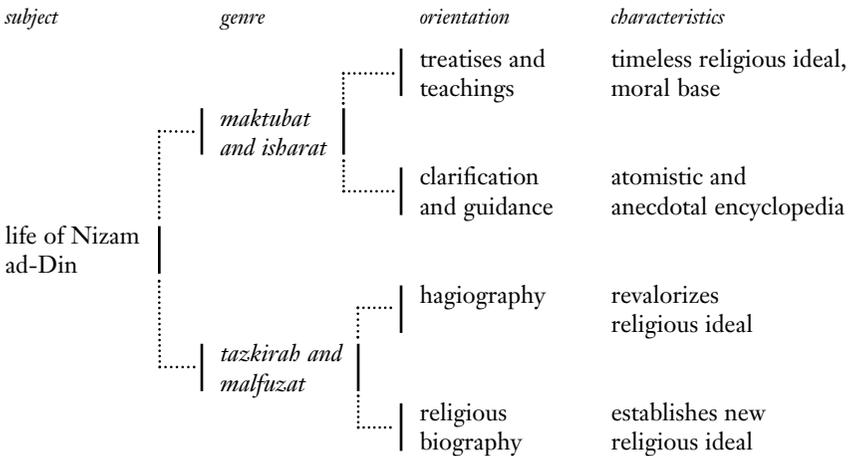
This ascription of action is, of course, the point at which we see the individual life succumb completely to the service of the religious ideal, the worldwide tendency for the narrative of the saint's life to accumulate all manner of legendary and miraculous tales and detailed stories completely unknown to the original community in which the figure lived and worked. Following this line, we can observe that the older the image of the *shaykh*, the more likely the accretion of legendary and miraculous stories. Tradition writes a new kind of history, but it is one that often has a stylizing and generalizing effect. To return once again to Nizam al-Din, one need only look at the hagiographical profile created in the *Afzal al-Fawa'id* by the poet Amir Khusro (d. 1325). Khusro was affiliated with the lineage but not central to it. As a poet and eulogizer of his not-so-intimate master, his biographical image contained numerous examples of Nizam al-Din's otherwise undocumented displays of *karamat* and other miraculous activities. Notably this text was composed while Nizam al-Din was still alive, for they died the same year.³⁰ Later authors, however, picked up and extended the legends.

It would seem to be self-evident that the more complete the hagiographical treatment, especially including the personal instruction of the *shaykh*, the more likely the *shaykh* to withstand the subsequent revalorizing, appearing in each generation to speak cogently with relevance, because sufficient material, biographical and instructional, would be available to construct a seamless new image. Yet even Nizam al-Din was subjected to this stylizing process before he died. It is even easier, later, to stylize images of older figures and manipulate them to support new religious ideals. In this process distinct figures often begin to blur into the standardized or formulaic profiles generated by the expected characteristics, such as those enumerated by Schimmel and Digby noted above. But the standard for this stylization is the more recent *shaykh*, who, if he is powerful enough, will provide a profile to which all previous masters will be made to conform. Not surprisingly this impulse to impose uniform of characteristics wreaks havoc on the historical *bios* in any kind of positivist sense and becomes itself a litmus test for measuring the saintliness of different *shaykhs*. Examples of this abound in the Sufi traditions of greater South Asia. We see, for example, early evidence of this in ‘Abd Allah Ansari (d. 1089), who first expanded Sulami’s *Tabaqat al-Sufiyya* (Generations of the Sufis) to embrace the Persian lineages, which four centuries later was dramatically expanded by Jami, whose *Nafahat al-uns* (Breezes of Intimacy) stretches to include 567 figures.³¹ There is a multitude of such writings, and each one seeks to shape the lineages and highlight the religious ideals held dear to the point of rewriting the histories in favor of a particular *shaykh*. In another significant instance, Dara Shikuh composed the *Safinat al-Awliya’* (The Ship of Saints), an encyclopedic hagiography that depends heavily on Jami but truncates entries in such a way that the presentation is pitched to “affirm ‘Abd al-Qadir Jilani as the foremost Sufi exemplar and the Qadiriyya as the paramount Sufi brotherhood, but also to undergird his own spiritual authority vis-à-vis rival claims to Qadiri spirituality.”³² Just as ibn Hisham reoriented ibn Ishaq’s *Sira*, many of the later hagiographical compilers have altered their predecessors parallel to how later saints alter images of figures in their own lineages.

We can conclude then that the subject of Sufi hagiography subtly shifts over time, from the individual who embodies a religious ideal to the religious ideal embodied, or made to embody, by the individual. The original subject (individual) gradually becomes the “ostensible subject,” and this would seem to be a generalizable feature for all hagiography and religious biography, not just Sufi. Indeed the ability of the tradition to dehistoricize its most important leaders may well be indexical to the power of the religious ideal within the biographical image. So why then do some figures seem to dominate others in the memory of the tradition, as Lawrence was led to ask in his initial essay? The secret does indeed rest with the community, and the community that manages to perpetuate

most successfully a stable memory. So an individual, such as Nizam al-Din, who retains a persona inspiring followers through the centuries, whose personal works continue to expand in circulation, can only be one whose religious ideal is so rich that it can withstand the periodic revalorizations of his hagiographers. His biographical image must be founded on a religious ideal that has remained or can be adjusted in relevance to his followers, certainly sufficient to preserve his memory above all others. The source of this continuing inspiration is more, however, than simply the life turned into a hagiographical narrative; it will include the primary material that mirrors the combined effect of the *Sira* and the Hadith. The former provides the framework within which to understand the latter, while the latter inscribes the importance of the former. By analogy it may well be that the successful hagiographies within the Sufi tradition, the narratives of *tazkirah* with their stories of exemplary behavior and extraordinary action, connected to the sayings found in *malfuzat*, are made more enduring by the isolable teachings found in the practical guides of *maktubat* and the more theologically pointed *isharat* (figure 2).

FIGURE 2.



It is no coincidence that Nizam al-Din's popularity is in direct proportion to the quantity and quality of this additional material beyond the narratives of his life. This material serves as a trove of primary sources to shape and perpetuate his and other *shaykh's* images according to the needs of the time, making him perpetually relevant. The power of the hagiography depends on the substance of the supporting theological reflection and practical instruction, the moral base of the *shaykh's* importance. The textual base is necessary but insufficient by itself to perpetuate that memory; it is the shrine, of course, that serves as the physical anchor for this memory, the focal point of his continuing physical presence,

the basis for the community to perpetuate the image. The structure of these documents makes clear that they are symbiotically bound, and it is the religious ideal that endures as the real subject of the tradition, while the ostensible subject in the person of the *shaykh*—or more importantly, his memory—remains as a historical reminder and example for the following.

NOTES

1. Bruce B. Lawrence, "The Chishtiya of Sultanate India: A Case Study of Biographical Complexities in South Asian Islam" in *Charisma and Sacred Biography*, ed. Michael A. Williams (Chico, Calif.: Scholars, 1982), 47–67, esp. 49 and 65; hereafter cited as "Biographical Complexities." The reference is to Clifford Geertz, *Islam Observed: Religious Development in Morocco and Indonesia* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1968), see esp. pp. 25–35.

2. Annemarie Schimmel has elaborated the *imitatio Muhammadi* in *And Muhammad Is His Messenger: The Veneration of the Prophet in Islamic Piety* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1985).

3. Annemarie Schimmel's and Simon Digby's lists of characteristics are summarized in Lawrence, "Biographical Complexities," 51; the combined list can be found on the following page. These characteristics become the focal point of a more sophisticated treatment in Ernst and Lawrence's survey of the Chishti movement in South Asia; see Carl W. Ernst and Bruce B. Lawrence, *Sufi Martyrs of Love: The Chishti Order in South Asia and Beyond* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002), esp. chap. 4.

4. It is notable that the essay in question here is in a volume titled *Charisma and Sacred Biography*. While many accept a Weberian notion of charisma as the operational standard, perhaps Dabashi's treatment of charisma in the life of Muhammad pushes the paradigm about as far as possible, arguing that it was Muhammad's charisma that overthrew the old order and then became institutionalized to make Islam what it is today (with predictable chapters on routinization [chap. 5], perpetuation [chap. 6], and dissemination [chap. 7]); see Hamid Dabashi, *Authority in Islam: From the Rise of Muhammad to the Establishment of the Umayyads* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Transaction, 1993).

5. Frank E. Reynolds and Donald Capps, eds., *The Biographical Process: Studies in the History and Psychology of Religion* (The Hague: Mouton, 1976), introduction.

6. Talal Asad, *The Idea of an Anthropology of Islam* (Washington, D.C.: Georgetown University Center for Contemporary Arab Studies, 1988); see also his *Genealogies of Religion: Discipline and Reasons of Power in Christianity and Islam* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993).

7. Wilhelm Dilthey, *Pattern and Meaning in History: Thoughts on History and Society* (New York: Harper, 1962); see especially the two essays "The Historical Relevance of Biography and Autobiography" (83–95) and "The Individual Life and Its Meaning" (95–112). In a very useful way of conceptualizing the problem, Dilthey argues in these essays for the orientation of the historian to the subject by seeing the past in terms of meaning (patterns), the present in terms of relevance (value inscribed by interpreting immediate experience in the light of the past), and the future in terms of purpose or, at least, intention (that leads to actions, thereby shaping the world). For a good summary

of these positions, see H. P. Rickman, *Wilhelm Dilthey: Pioneer of the Human Studies* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1979), especially the sections dealing with *Bedeutung* and *Erlebnis*.

8. The construction of this discursive arena has been outlined elsewhere; see Tony K. Stewart, "Surprising Bedfellows: Vaisnava and Shi'i Alliance in Kavi Arīpha's 'Tale of Lalamon,'" *International Journal of Hindu Studies* 3, no. 3 (1999): 265–98. The concept is heavily dependent on that articulated by Jonathan Culler, "Presupposition and Intertextuality," *Modern Language Notes* 91, no. 6 (1976): 1380–96.

9. *The Life of Muhammad: A Translation of Ishaq's Sirat Rasul Allah*, ed. 'Abdu'l-Malik b. Hisham, trans. Alfred Guillaume (London: Oxford University Press, 1955; repr., Karachi: Oxford University Press, 1987). Background materials are taken from the introduction to this text. I am indebted to Gordon Newby, who first pointed out some of the unique features of the *Sira* when we taught a class in the late 1980s on religious biography.

10. See M. M. Bakhtin, "Epic and Novel" and "Forms of Time and of the Chronotope in the Novel," in *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays*, ed. Michael Holquist, trans. Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981), 3–40 and 84–258, respectively.

11. Alfred Guillaume, introduction to *Life of Muhammad*, xxvii.

12. As John Kitchen has pointedly observed, "The attraction historians have for hagiography leads to one of the most mis-matched unions perhaps ever encountered in humanistic scholarship," for hagiography is not about factual portrayal. In the next breath Kitchen's profound indictment moves to the other most commonly adopted disciplined approach to interpretation, when he observes, "If historians in general do not deal adequately with the religiosity of the texts, those who treat hagiography as literature generally show little concern with how the religious dimension may relate to the way in which the stories are told." John Kitchen, *Saints' Lives and the Rhetoric of Gender: Male and Female in Merovingian Hagiography* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), 11. Kitchen has rightly indicted both industries, curiously enough, both represented by Guillaume's approach; but Guillaume narrowly sidesteps the critique when he sees the organization of the community as the motivating factor in the edited text. For a very sophisticated treatment of Sufi hagiography that does not fall prey to these tendencies, see Vincent J. Cornell, *Realm of the Saint: Power and Authority in Moroccan Sufism* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1998).

13. Hayden White's treatment of historical narratives is particularly germane here. See Hayden White, *Metahistory: The Historical Imagination in Nineteenth-Century Europe* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1973), and *The Content of the Form: Narrative Discourse and Historical Representation* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1987).

14. I am indebted to the work of Barbara Herrnstein Smith, which first alerted me to the complex and necessary role of value in the canon-making process; see her *Contingencies of Value: Alternative Perspectives for Critical Theory* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1988).

15. Gordon Darnell Newby, *The Making of the Last Prophet: A Reconstruction of the Earliest Biography of Muhammad* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1989).

16. Reynolds and Capps, eds., introduction to *Biographical Process*, esp. 2–8.
17. For more on this, see Tony K. Stewart and Carl W. Ernst, “Syncretism,” in *South Asian Folklore: An Encyclopedia*, ed. Margaret A. Mills, Peter J. Claus, and Sarah Diamond (London: Routledge, 2003), 586–88. *Relate*, likewise, is a term that disguises the specifics of connection and causality.
18. Lawrence, “Biographical Complexities,” 54–55.
19. This observation about the dynamic nature of the biographical image runs completely counter to the argument made by Art Buehler regarding what he calls the “mediating *shaykh*” in the Naqshbandiyya, an argument that proposes that the saintliness of the *shaykh* dwindles through time and that has an unacknowledged teleological dimension to it; see Arthur F. Buehler, *Sufi Heirs of the Prophet: The Indian Naqshbandiyya and the Rise of the Mediating Sufi Shaykh* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1998).
20. Lawrence, “Biographical Complexities,” 53–54; emphasis in original.
21. I am reminded of Frank Kermode’s essay on the literary classic, in which he argues that what makes a classic is the text’s ability to revalorize its message in each generation, an inherently political act connected to dominant forms of power. The analogy with the role of the *shaykh* is not superficial. See Frank Kermode, *The Classic: Literary Images of Permanence and Change*, T. S. Eliot Memorial Lectures 1973 (New York: Viking, 1975).
22. This important observation is consistent with Lawrence’s argument that it is the community perpetuating the biographical legacy that is responsible for the greater (or lesser) popularity.
23. There is an additional element that affects the prominence of a particular *shaykh* (or any other subject of religious hagiography): the prominence of followers. On the surface it would appear that the presence of industrious, socially well-connected, or intellectually brilliant followers who actively promote and perpetuate the life and teachings of a particular religious figure is ultimately one of serendipity, completely accidental. But I am inclined now to see the attraction of such figures as an index itself to the power of the *shaykh* or other religious leader to make the teachings relevant to the contemporary world. The greater the relevance, the more likely the teacher to enjoy this following; the more prominent the following, the more historically prominent the teacher in a mutually reinforcing symbiosis.
24. Lawrence, “Biographical Complexities,” 56.
25. Bruce B. Lawrence, trans., *Nizam al-Din Awliya: Morals for the Heart; Conversations of Shaykh Nizam ad-din Awliya Recorded by Amira Hasan Sijzi*, annotated by Lawrence, introduction by Khaliq Ahmad Nizami, Classics of Western Spirituality 74 (New York: Paulist, 1992).
26. Bruce B. Lawrence, *Notes from a Distant Flute: The Extant Literature of Pre-Mughal Indian Sufism* (Tehran: Imperial Iranian Academy of Philosophy, 1978), 28–32.
27. Ernst and Lawrence, *Sufi Martyrs of Love*, esp. chaps. 3–4.
28. *Ibid.*, 70.
29. See, for instance, the complex case of construing martyrdom, as described in Carl W. Ernst, “From Hagiography to Martyrology: Conflicting Testimonies to a Sufi Martyr of the Delhi Sultanate,” *History of Religions* 24, no. 4 (1985): 308–27.

30. Lawrence, *Notes from a Distant Flute*, 24, 36, 45. Robin Rinehart's study of the Punjabi god-man Swami Ram Tirath is the best documentation of this tendency I have encountered. See Robin Rinehart, *One Lifetime, Many Lives: The Experience of Modern Hindu Hagiography*, AAR The Religions Series, no. 6 (Atlanta: Scholars, 1999).

31. Ernst and Lawrence, *Sufi Martyrs of Love*, 48–49.

32. *Ibid.*, 51.