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Review

The Festival of Pirs: Popular Islam and Shared Devotion in South India, by Afsar Mohammad. New York: Oxford University Press, 2013. x +100 pp., $125 (hb), $29.95 (pb). ISBN 978-0-19999-758-9 (hb), 978-0-19999-759-6 (pb).

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In *The Festival of Pirs: Popular Islam and Shared Devotion in South India*, Afsar Mohammad documents the devotional practices, emotive and sensorial dimensions, narrative worlds, and changing religio-political contexts of a complex and locally renowned Muharram festival in the small village of Gugudu, Andhra Pradesh. At the centre of Gugudu's Muharram festival is the central pir, named Kullayappa (referred to alternatively and by varying groups as *Topi-wali Saheb, appa, wali*, and *piru swami*, which Mohammad translates as 'pir-god'), who is credited with bringing Islam to the village of Gugudu over 800 years ago, and to other local pirs referred to as the Holy Five. Through extensive ethnographic descriptions of the festival, the book draws a rich and compelling picture of a distinct form of Muharram commemoration and its devotionalism consisting of ritual practices and stories shared between Hindus and Muslims, both rural and urban, and across caste.

Central to the pirs's stories of origin and miracles is the fact that they are intertwined with the traditional stories of the tribulations and suffering of the Prophet Muhammad's family members in Karbala in 580, the pivotal event in the historical memory and narrative world of Shi'i Muslims around the world. Local understanding is that Gugudu is the home of the martyrs of Karbala, among which Kullayappa is the most prominent. The story of Karbala is expressed in local idiom and devotees feel the pirs are at once intimately connected to them and far removed: the pirs speak Telugu and lead lives like 'any village peasant or artisan' (p. 155) and the Prophet and his family are part of the living story and community of the village. 'This network of stories and social relations', Mohammad explains, 'constructs a community (*ummah*) and defines the religious life of the village' (p. 155). It is of particular surprise then that among Gugudu's 2,700 residents there are no Shi'i Muslims and only ten percent are Muslim. That is, until the time of the

Muharram festival (in the month of Muharram on the Islamic *Hijra* calendar, in sync with Muharram commemorations around the world), when the small village swells from 2,700 to an additional 300,000 Hindus and Muslims who arrive as pilgrims on the seventh day of Muhmarram and remain until the tenth day after receiving their final *darsanam* from the pirs. Other towns in the region are connected to the pirs too, and observe their own rituals and stories surrounding the life of the pirs. Gugudu is one node—the most significant, Mohammad's pilgrim informants tell him—on a regional Muharram pilgrimage circuit in South India travelled by Hindus and Muslims of varying sectarian affiliations.

Public rituals of Muharram reenact stories from the pirs's lives and emphasize dominant themes of *niyyatu* (personal intention) and *barkatu* (divine blessing). In Gugudu, ritual and story are intimately interconnected so that Kullayappa's hagiography, which recounts his exemplary personal and even divine qualities, is recollected through the enactment of elaborate and, in some cases, demanding rituals. Kullayappa is understood by devotees to be both an avatar of Vishnu and an Imam-like figure, as in Shi'i traditions. Devotees perform *faqiri* (a temporary ritual vow that blends Muslim and Hindu ascetic practices), moon sighting, (*pradhama darsanam*, p. 83), *nitya fateha* also called *fateha puja*, a public procession around the village (*sarigettu*, p. 87), visits to the *pir* house (making offerings and taking *darsanam*, p. 35), fasts, firewalks, re-enactments, and visits to mosques, Muslim graves, and Hindu temples. In Gugudu's Muharram devotional culture, Hindu and Muslim terminologies and key concepts derived from the broad traditions of Islam and Hinduism are imbricated seamlessly and described in language such as *fateha-puja* (p. 26), *piru-swami* (pp. 34, 55), *din govinda* (p. 41), and *ziyaratu darshanam*. In the first of many vignettes of Muharram devotional practices, we encounter a 65-year-old female pilgrim who has travelled from Tamil Nadu to Gugudu. She makes an offering at a *pir-makanam* ('pir house', one of many ritual spaces in the festival) to Kullayappa, recites the first verse of the Quran to the pir, then makes an offering of coconut to the god Hanuman, who shares the space with the pir.

Among the many compelling aspects of *Festival of Pirs* is Mohammad's careful consideration of the categories of the local, translocal, and global through the lens of the Muharram's multi-layered ritual and devotional world that is the festival of pirs, particularly in the face of increasing pressure from religious reformists. In much of contemporary South Asia transnationally-connected Islamic movements seek to displace or eradicate practices deemed idolatrous (*shirk*). Such practices are often long-standing forms of local religiosity. This is nothing new: contestations of the validity and/or permissibility of local forms of Muslim religiosity figure heavily in the history of Islam in South Asia. He suggests that 'global Islam', which he describes as conservative and exclusionary in nature and condemning of local ways of practising, and 'local Islam', which he describes as long-standing in the region,

practised by Muslims and non-Muslims, inclusive and multi-layered (p. 7), are not the most suitable frames for analysing this dynamic. He proposes thinking of the competing processes taking place in devotional life of the village in terms of 'localized Islam', a 'relatively fixed structure that upholds normative Islamic beliefs and practices' that are understood to be exclusively for Muslims, and 'local Islam' a 'repertoire of various inclusive religious practices that embraces diverse devotional traditions in one specific place' (p. 3). 'Local Islam', he argues, is better understood in contradistinction to 'localized Islam' than 'global Islam'. 'Local Islam' has a heavy emphasis on text, 'localized Islam' involves more rituals and oral narratives. This devotional landscape of the festival of pirs, Mohammad suggests, is a form of 'local Islam', that is, one that consists of a shared religiosity that is constructed around the local pir and is nonetheless part of a 'global Islamic history' (p. 19).

Through many thick and evocative descriptions based on his personal observations, participation in Muharram devotions, and interviews with devotees, Mohammad gives readers a rich understanding of how the story of Karbala is told in a local idiom. Towards the end of *Festival of Pirs,* Mohammad describes the power of the oral verses about Karbala that his mother and grandmother would share when he was a child and the collective memories that they transmitted to him. From this he reflects on the multiple meanings embedded in collective memories. The reader gets a sense of the power of the Muharram festival for those who participate in it and the feelings of community and belonging that imbue the pilgrim with an indelible feeling of wonder and satisfaction by the end of the festival. Afsar Mohammad's book also illustrates that amidst the increasing polarization that characterizes the politics of religious identity in India and South Asia more broadly—with Hindutva forces asserting primordial, irresolvable differences between Muslims and Hindus, and Muslim reformist voices denouncing shared religiosity such as is practised in Gugudu—there exist vibrant traditions of religious devotionalism constituted through a shared language of devotion and practice. *Festival of Pirs* is a brilliant and compelling documentation of such a tradition and should be read widely.