



THE GRAVES THAT COME ALIVE

IDENTITY AND COMMUNITY IN URBAN DEVOTIONAL PUBLICS

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THESIS ORGANIZATION

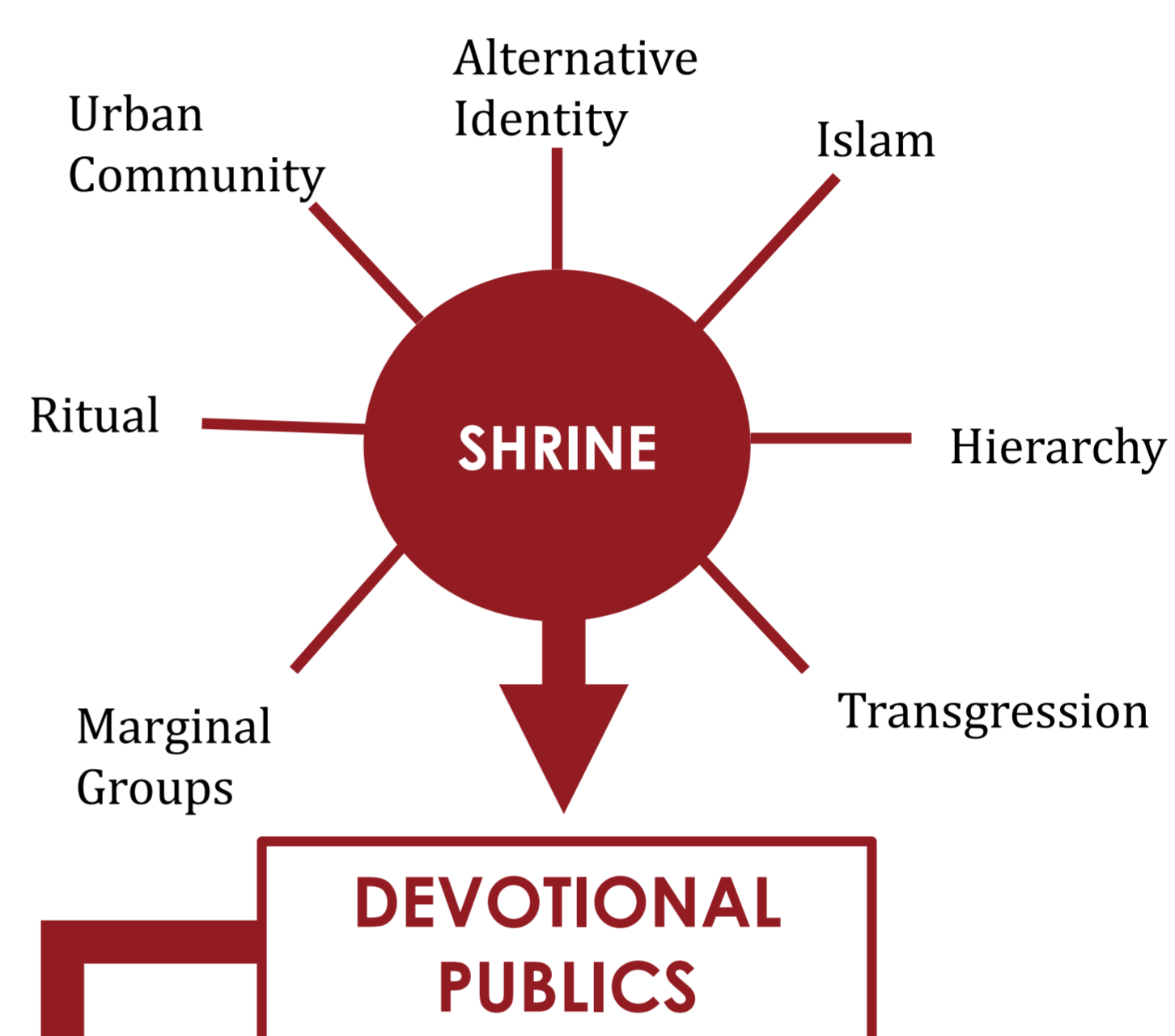
Part I

Understand the organization of devotional publics and their social structure by drawing from the ethnographic study of three shrines in the city of Lahore. Demonstrate how distinct urban communities emerge from these publics.

Part II

Explores how participation in these publics allows for the creative construction of powerful identities that can transcend caste, gender and religious boundaries. This section is based on interviews with members of two marginalized groups of Lahore – a gypsy community and a hijra (third gender) family – and non-Muslims affiliated with shrines in a number of Indian cities.

Keywords: Publics, Urban Life, Sociability, Religion, Islam, Sufi, Shrines, Community, Identity, Marginalization, Subaltern, Caste, Third Gender, Punjab, Religious Boundaries.



INTRODUCTION

This dissertation draws from theories of publics, religion and urban life to interrogate the role of religion in the urban civil society of South Asia. Specifically it looks at how participation in devotional publics associated with Sufi shrines offers a distinct form of urban community life and the possibility to forge unique identities. Due to the breadth of their appeal and mass popularity, these devotional publics are formed at the intersection of a number of urban social networks. The resulting diversity in these publics is critical to their inclusivity. At the same time, their religious orientation is a key factor in the hierarchical organization of these publics as those with spiritual standing assume leadership roles and exercise significant power. Furthermore, religious ideals can be mobilized for both inclusionary and exclusionary ends in these publics.

CONTEXT OF RESEARCH

This research grew out of a desire to understand the lives of subaltern groups in urban South Asia, beyond a narrow focus on their misery, to actually look at how they engage with and make their presence felt in public space. The rationale for selecting Sufi shrines as the site for this study was because these are institutions and spaces which subaltern and marginalized sections of society are actively creating and sustaining. While these groups remain on the periphery of other institutions of civil society and the state, they are central to the world of shrines. This is not to say that they are the only dominant actors in shrines but rather that they are active participants in their organization and in various associated rituals and practices. Furthermore, shrines are a powerful force in South Asian society and wield considerable influence in its social, cultural, economic and even political life. Therefore, shrines assume a significant role in the public life of subaltern and marginal groups and give them the possibility to meaningfully make their presence felt in society.

THEORETICAL RELEVANCE of PUBLICS

The concept of publics has been important for Western political theory as they have been considered a critical mechanism for civil society to influence politics. However, theories of publics have been inadequate when they are applied wholesale to non-Western and especially post-colonial contexts. In order to overcome these limitations, Eiko Ikegami has developed a theory of publics that is based on their relation with social networks. She demonstrates how *aesthetic publics* that emerge at the intersection of various networks promote horizontal ties and new cultural identities in Tokugawa Japan. Following her, I propose the category of *devotional publics* to make sense of a public life that emerges from religious institutions and practices. My contention is that this concept allows us a better understanding of the ways in which religion shapes identity and community in South Asian society.