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ARTICLE

"All the world at the palm of the hand": imagining history through the life of an early Afghan saint

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Abstract

In this article I explore hagiographical narratives about Khwāja Yaḥyā Kabīr (d. 1430), among the earliest of the Sufi masters to be identified as Afghan. The social memory of Yaḥyā Kabīr's life exemplifies the function of hagiography as a key arena for the production of historical knowledge, generating a vivid and specific imaginary of the past for devotees. My goal here is to present a reading of the hagiography, but first I will situate it within the discursive nexus of Persian historical writing, which often essentialized Afghans as innately barbarous while peripheralizing Afghan homelands (identified with the Sulaiman Mountains). Yaḥyā Kabīr's hagiography is both reflective of Indo-Afghan anxieties about social hierarchies and a device by which marginalizing traditions could be subverted through a highly textured portrayal of the past. As such, it exemplifies how saints' lives can index not only the hierarchies of imperial life, but also the techniques by which to escape them.

Keywords: Islamic hagiography; Persian historiography; Afghan history; Sufism; Sulaiman Mountains; Mughal Empire

Introduction

Around the turn of the fifteenth century, the armies of the world-conquering Lord of Conjunction Tīmūr passed through the Sulaiman Mountains and subjugated the Afghans living there.[1] This is close to everything that Timurid royal chronicles tell us about the aforementioned region and its peoples. The historians at the courts of Tīmūr and his successors took little interest in what was, to them, an imperial periphery located on the road to Delhi. Afghans were simply one group among the many swallowed up by the blessed apparatus of Timurid imperial might, entering the historical record through the process of being conquered. We are left with a temporally stagnant image of Afghans as objects of royal attention, not historical subjects in and of themselves. This is not, however, the only story that we can tell.

What might Afghan history seem to be if we draw upon not royal chronicles, but the hagiographies of Muslim saints? At first glance, narratives about Sufi masters and holy

[1] Sharaf al-Dīn ʿAlī Yazdī, *The Ẓafarnámah. Vol. 2*, (ed.) Mawlāwī Muḥammad Ilāh Dād (Kolkata, 1888), 14. Throughout this article, I use the term 'Afghan' to refer to people and communities who might also be identified as Pashtun. This is meant to reflect use of the term 'Afghan' within the relevant historical context, separate from the contemporary significances of Afghan as related to citizenship in the nation-state of Afghanistan. For the purposes of readability, all dates are presented with reference to the Gregorian or Common Era calendar.

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fools might appear to be thorny and problem-riddled sources for narrating the past: they often offer no clear timeline of events and devote much attention to phenomena that may seem mythical from our present broadly shared academic vantage point. Yet, as has been repeatedly demonstrated in scholarship, hagiographies and other religious sources can be valuable allies for understanding past sociocultural worlds.[2] In contexts of peoples marginalized by conquest – royalist, imperial, colonial, national, corporate or otherwise – the histories emerging from miracle-soaked pasts can be useful counterpoints to the discursive traditions of power.

I aim to demonstrate this in what follows by exploring the story of a single Sufi master. The personality in question, Khwāja Yaḥyā Kabīr (d. 1430), is remembered for a career spanning Central and South Asia, including a contentious encounter with Tīmūr's forces in the Sulaiman Mountains. Nearly 200 years after his death, stories of Yaḥyā Kabīr were put to paper as part of a sprawling compendium of Afghan political and religious history: the *Khān Jahānian History and Afghan Treasury* (*c.* 1613). The *Afghan Treasury* has received attention in the contexts of regional history, communal identity and political-religious culture.[3] My goal here is to analyse the historical imaginary of the Indo-Afghan Sufi community that grew around the memory of Yaḥyā Kabīr: in other words, to reconstruct how devotees conceptualized their own communal past in contradistinction to the marginalizing traditions of empire. I do so by focusing on the concerns evident in Yaḥyā Kabīr's hagiography. How is one to access guiding religious knowledge while marked as a barbarian? Who, or what, constitutes a religious community? What is the place of that community within the vast sweep of historical cosmography?

By presenting such questions, Yaḥyā Kabīr's hagiography offers a particular vision of Afghan history, one that came to be a valuable resource in communal struggles for position within the Mughal Empire. But such hagiographical material had uses beyond political manoeuvring. While the tales related here were recorded in the context of the *Afghan Treasury* and communal politics, they were not generated spontaneously at the seventeenth-century Mughal court. Rather, we can see them as (edited) narratives circulating among a specific hermeneutical community for approximately two centuries prior to their inscription. The members of this community would have told and retold Yaḥyā Kabīr's life devotionally, without partaking in the *Afghan Treasury's* greater project.

Before delving into the hagiography itself, I will briefly sketch some historical traditions about Afghan countries and communities prior to the life of Yaḥyā Kabīr, as well as the context in which that life was recorded. The remainder of this article is dedicated to investigating the hagiography itself. The first part of my analysis focuses on narratives of Yaḥyā Kabīr as a religious seeker, which engage the question of how one navigates the Sufi path in a socially hierarchical world. I then turn to tales of Yaḥyā Kabīr as a guiding master, which generate a granular portrait of Afghan communal spaces in the region of the Sulaiman Mountains. Such themes gesture towards the significance of religious materials in replacing discourses of temporally slack 'peripheries' with active historical space.

[2] Recent examples include Shahzad Bashir, *Sufi Bodies: Religion and Society in Medieval Islam* (New York, 2013); Rian Thum, *The Sacred Routes of Uyghur History* (Cambridge, 2014); and Teren Sevea, *Miracles and Material Life: Rice, Ore, Traps, and Guns in Islamic Malaya* (Cambridge, 2021).

[3] Examples include A. Halim, "Two Aligarh MSS of the Makhzan-i-Afghani", *Proceedings of the Indian History Congress* 5, 1941, 377–83; Nile Green, "Blessed men and tribal politics: notes on political culture in the Indo-Afghan world", *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient* 49/3, 2006, 344–60; Nile Green, "Tribe, diaspora, and sainthood in Afghan history", *The Journal of Asian Studies* 67/1, 2008, 171–211; Robert D. Crews, *Afghan Modern: The History of a Global Nation* (Cambridge, 2015), 11–13; and William E.B. Sherman, "The lost tribes of the Afghans: religious mobility and entanglement in narratives of Afghan origins", in John Ghazvinian and Arthur Mitchell Fraas (eds), *American and Muslim Worlds before 1900* (London, 2020), 87–9.

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Band of brigands, folk of saints

The narratives of Yaḥyā Kabīr's life are entwined with the region of the Sulaiman Mountains, an area historically associated with Afghans. Writing in 1903, during the period of British rule, Vasilii Vladimirovich Barthold wrote of it as follows:

> The mountainous region between the Indus and the basins of the Hilmand and the Āb-i Istāda is known as the Sulaymān mountains; the chains of this system along the frontier are called by the British the Eastern and Western Sulaymān ranges. These mountains were in prehistoric times already inhabited by Afghans, a people of Iranian stock...
>
> In their almost inaccessible mountainous homeland, the Afghans long resisted both the domination of Islamic rulers and the cultural influence of Islam; even at the end of the fourteenth century, during Timur's campaigns, the majority of Afghans were pagans.[4]

Barthold's valuation casts the Sulaiman Mountains as a site frozen in history. The inhabitants of the mountains are primordial beings resistant to changes in time. This alleged resistance is not a result of conscious decisions, but simply an accident of geography. Furthermore, the Sulaiman Mountains are seen to form the easternmost border of an *Iranian* superstructure inhabited by an *Iranian* people, creating not only a geographic frontier, but also a cultural one.

This sense of borderland was hardly unique to Barthold's times. Towards the end of the tenth century, the author of the Persian geography *Borders of the World* described the Sulaiman Mountains as the westernmost part of India.[5] In 1030, from his vantage point at the imperial capital of Ghazni, Abū Rayḥān Bīrūnī similarly understood the region as India's western frontier.[6] Bīrūnī's contemporary Abū Naṣr ʿUtbī considered the Sulaiman Mountains to be the place from where Afghans – seen as savage hill people – habitually looted the edges of the Ghaznavid kingdom. Ghaznavid expeditions to sack Afghan habitations were carried out in the eleventh century.[7] Around the time of the Mongol conquests of the thirteenth century, a dynasty of Kurdish Sayyids rose to power in the region, basing themselves out of Mastung. The Sayyids resisted Mongol sovereignty until the client-kingdom of the Kart dynasty, centred in Herat, received a mandate to conquer the region on behalf of the Mongol Empire.[8] The Karts' campaigns repeatedly brought them into conflict with Afghans, who were seen primarily as rebels and thieves.[9]

In the year 1333, the Moroccan traveller Ibn Baṭṭūṭa crossed through the Sulaiman Mountains and reported on the Afghans, referring to them as a Persian tribe, "the majority of whom are brigands". He also explained how the mountains earned their name. In ancient times, the Prophet Solomon – known for his all-encompassing dominion over humans, animals and djinns – came to the mountains and climbed them. From a high summit, he was able to see the land of India, which lay beyond the mountains.

[4] Vasilii Vladimirovich Barthold, *An Historical Geography of Iran*, (trans.) Svat Soucek, (ed.) C.E. Bosworth (Princeton, 1984), 78.

[5] *Ḥudūd al-ʿĀlam [Borders of the World]*, (trans.) Vladimir Minorsky (Cambridge, 1992), 86–92.

[6] Abū Rayḥān Bīrūnī, *Alberuni's India*, (trans.) Edward C. Sachau (Delhi, 1983), 208.

[7] Abū Naṣr ʿUtbī, *The Kitab-i-Yamini: Historical Memoirs of the Amír Sabaktagín, and the Sultán Mahmúd of Ghazna, Early Conquerors of Hindustan, and Founders of the Ghaznavid dynasty*, (trans.) James Reynolds (London, 1958), 467.

[8] Sayf b. Moḥammad b. Yaʿqūb (Sayfī Hirawī), *Tārīkh Nāma-yi Hirāt*, (ed.) Ghulām Riżā Ṭabāʾṭabāʾī Majd (Tehran, 2004), 235–7.

[9] Sayfī Hirawī, *Tārīkh Nāma-yi Hirāt*, 297–8.

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Perceiving it as a country shrouded in darkness, Solomon turned away without advancing.[10] As we have seen, Solomon's hesitation was not shared by Tīmūr, who inaugurated his forces' march on Delhi by ravaging Afghan countries.

In such histories, Afghans are seen to exist on the threshold between the civilizational entities of Iran and India, but do not meaningfully participate in the social world of either. The sole activities associated with them are brigandage, military service and rebellion. In this way, Persian chronicle traditions were part of the racialization of Afghans, casting them as the antitheses of civilized peoples through behaviours "selectively essentialized as absolute and fundamental".[11] Effectively, the spectrum of possibilities regarding what an Afghan might be was narrowed to how royal coteries and military elites thought about, and treated, people in the Sulaiman Mountains. The pervasive centrality of the royal gaze facilitated laudatory depictions of individual Afghan elites following the advent of the Lodi dynasty in Delhi in 1451, after which Afghans began appearing in texts as not merely soldiers but as kings, notables and saints.[12] Even so, on the whole, Afghans, most of whom lived distant from power, continued resurfacing in Mughal annals as a "troubling" group from the days of Bābur (d. 1530) onwards.[13] This situation was hardly unique in South Asia, Central Asia and the Middle East: Kurds, Turkmen and others similarly found themselves writing against long-standing historical traditions that highlighted their demonic natures and essential barbarism.[14]

Under Mughal rule, Afghan notables remained entrenched within the governing apparatus, alongside Persians, Rajputs, Turks and others.[15] Even so, historians at Mughal courts continued using the term "Afghan" as a savage counterpoint to their own civilized, cosmopolitan epoch.[16] Thus, while individual Afghans held land and successfully pursued careers at court, they did so against a social backdrop in which being identified as Afghan could still imply barbarity. An apocryphal account from the eighteenth century about the composition of the *Afghan Treasury* offers some sense of this. The story goes that an ambassador from the Safavid Empire at the court of the Mughal emperor Jahāngīr (d. 1627) mentioned that Afghans were the demi-human offspring of djinns and kidnapped girls, exiled by an ancient king to wander the wilds. An Afghan notable also present at the time, Khān Jahān Lōdī (d. 1631), was irritated by this remark and subsequently commissioned two men – Niʿmat Allāh Hirawī and Haybat Khān Kākar – to put the true history of Afghans to paper.[17]

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[10] Ibn Battuta, *The Travels of Ibn Battuta. Volume III: A.D. 1325–1354*, (trans. H.A.R. Gibb) (Cambridge, 1971), 590–1.

[11] Geraldine Heng, *The Invention of Race in the European Middle Ages* (Cambridge, 2018), 27.

[12] Green, "Tribe, diaspora, and sainthood", 175–83.

[13] Sherman, "Lost tribes", 87. Forthcoming publications by Sherman offer a deep and systemic engagement with the processes by which Afghans were racialized within empires past and present. I would like to extend my gratitude to him here for his having made advance copies of these works available to me, as they have been greatly beneficial and have shaped my thinking in this article. Also see William E.B. Sherman, "Mountains and messiahs: the Roshaniyya, revelation, and Afghan becoming", PhD thesis, Stanford University, 2017.

[14] See Djene Rhys Bajalan, "Şeref Xan's 'Sharafnama': Kurdish ethno-politics in the early modern world, its meaning and its legacy", *Iranian Studies* 45/6, 2012, 811–18; and Ali Karamustafa, "Who were the *Türkmen* of Ottoman and Safavid lands? An overlooked early modern identity", *Der Islam* 97/2, 2020, 476–99.

[15] Green, "Tribe, diaspora, and sainthood", 175.

[16] For a treatment of how the "Mughals sought to marginalize and vulgarize the Afghans after returning to power in the second half of the sixteenth century", see the first chapter of Raziuddin Aquil, *Sufism, Culture, and Politics: Afghans and Islam in Medieval North India* (New Delhi, 2007).

[17] The story, sourced to ʿAbd al-Raḥmān Shāh Nawāz Khān's *Mirʾāt-i Āftāb Numā*, has been cited in various studies of the *Afghan Treasury*, including Hameed ud-Din, "History of Afghan rule in India", *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 82/1, 1962, 46; and Green, "Tribe, diaspora, and sainthood", 185.

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It is in this context – the concerns of a diasporic imperial elite – that stories about Yaḥyā Kabīr were recorded in writing. While the bulk of the *Afghan Treasury* is devoted to royal history, this is supplemented by both genealogical tables and the hagiographies of 71 saints (from diverse times and places) identified as Afghans. The *Afghan Treasury* organizes most of these "friends of God" according to tribal affiliation, with five female saints from different tribes afforded a separate section. We might understand this extensive hagiographical repository as the "co-option [of sainthood] for the tribalization of Islam", ultimately aiming "to project this tribal vision of social connectivity into every corner of the Afghan past".[18] With a host of Sufi masters clinging to the branches of Afghan genealogical history, the diasporic community of the *Afghan Treasury* was well-positioned to articulate themselves not as violent savages, but as a long-standing Muslim community on an equal footing with their compatriots in the Mughal Empire.

Yet, while this argument may be convincing regarding the *Afghan Treasury's* composition and reception, does it help us attend to the text's prehistory? Though the hagiographies in the text were subjected to editorial processes – evident in the text's organizational scheme, the parallel structures of the narratives and some thematic patterning – they are also rooted in a range of times and spaces beyond the seventeenth-century Mughal court. The words we read in the *Afghan Treasury* are not untouched documents from Afghan pasts, but neither should we consider them to have sprouted from nothing in Khān Jahān's circle. Furthermore, beyond the provenance of the tales, we must also attend to their function, not merely the documentation of the past but the summoning of one – collapsing historical distances to bring the listener into intimate contact with one of God's friends.[19]

We cannot presume that Khān Jahān's intent in assembling hagiographical narratives was devotional in this manner. The *Afghan Treasury* was a courtly text, and the arguments about its deployment in collective polemics are strong ones. But where does such a conclusion leave the saints' stories themselves? Whatever the paths that bound them within the *Afghan Treasury*, they were once untethered to the cause of Indo-Afghan socio-political advocacy. How then do we explore the spaces between the text of the *Afghan Treasury* and the pasts it purportedly represents?

In the case of Yaḥyā Kabīr, we are offered some signposts in the *Afghan Treasury* itself. The text reports the saint's death in 1430, highlighting the considerable size of his following and the potency of his grave as a pilgrimage site.[20] We are told about several miracles of Yaḥyā Kabīr's saintly descendants, such as Bībī Rāstī and Bībī Shaykhzādī; however, the accounts are relatively silent about where and when they lived.[21] Perhaps more useful are details from the life of one of the *Afghan Treasury's* compilers, Haybat Khān Kākar. An official from the town of Samana, Haybat Khān belonged to an intergenerational Afghan diaspora in Punjab. He was born into a family with traditions of both royal service and religious learning: he considered his great-aunt Bībī Ṣūrat, for example, to be among the saints of Afghan history.[22] Haybat Khān seems to have had a specific attachment to Yaḥyā Kabīr's memory. In addition to the tales recorded in the hagiographical section of the *Afghan Treasury*, Haybat Khān provided narratives about Yaḥyā Kabīr in an appendix where he detailed his own family's history. He also wrote a supplication in the *Afghan*

[18] Green, "Tribe, diaspora, and sainthood", 189.

[19] Shahzad Bashir, "Naqshband's lives: Sufi hagiography between manuscript and genre", in Devin DeWeese and Jo-Ann Gross (eds), *Sufism in Central Asia: New Perspectives on Sufi Traditions, 15th–20th Centuries* (Leiden, 2018), 89–90.

[20] Niʿmat Allāh Hirawī, *Tārīkh-i Khān Jahānī wa Makhzan-i Afghānī. Vol. 2*, (ed.) Sayyid Muḥammad Imām al-Dīn (Dhaka, 1962), 738–9; 894.

[21] Niʿmat Allāh, *Makhzan-i Afghānī*, 826–7.

[22] Niʿmat Allāh, *Makhzan-i Afghānī*, 828.

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Treasury invoking "the sanctity of the family of Bandagī Ḥażrat Khwāja Yaḥyā Kabīr".[23] These elements suggest the enduring popularity of Yaḥyā Kabīr's memory and descendants in the centuries prior to the *Afghan Treasury's* composition.

With this history in mind, we can sketch a possible path for the tales about Yaḥyā Kabīr. A number of the stories are localized to the Sulaiman Mountains, here representing a historical homeland for Afghans as a whole. These supposedly first-hand accounts would have been told and retold among communities in Punjab, perhaps encouraged by Yaḥyā Kabīr's descendants and successors. Through Haybat Khān, the narratives found their way into the context of the Mughal court. Years before Khān Jahān Lōdī ever encountered a mannerless ambassador, tales of Yaḥyā Kabīr's extraordinary deeds were likely to have been circulating among a range of devotees.

The narratives that I am about to parse are thus heavily processed. They represent not one context but a multitude of times and spaces, as well as the tellers' divergent concerns. I include myself in this long, winding line of narrators. Though I am not writing a devotional text or jostling for position in the Mughal Empire, I, too, am recounting events towards a specific end. Yet there is still something shared between these narrations: the contours of Yaḥyā Kabīr's memory, which I present below.

Quarrelsome strangers and gossipy comrades

If we rearrange the information in Yaḥyā Kabīr's hagiography, we can establish a rough timeline of his life. He was born Yaḥyā Bakhtiyār into a family belonging to the Shīrānī tribe. He traced his bloodline to one Sayyid Isḥāq, a descendant of the Prophet Muhammad from the area of Osh in the Fergana Valley. Sayyid Isḥāq migrated to the region of the Sulaiman Mountains – referred to in the text as Kasī Ghar, after the eponymous Afghan progenitor – where he married a Shīrānī woman named either Shaykhī or Shanjatī.[24]

As a young man, Yaḥyā roamed as a dervish in Farmal (a lake region in the environs of Ghazni and Kabul), Ghazni, Samarkand and Herat.[25] At some point in his life, he travelled to Uch, where he spent time in the circle of the Sufi master Jalāl al-Dīn Bukhārī "Makhdūm-i Jahāniyān" (d. 1384).[26] In 1369, he visited Mecca and performed the hajj.[27] He appears to have settled in the Sulaiman Mountains after his pilgrimage, encountering Tīmūr's army there before passing away in 1430.[28] His grave at Shahr-i Aʿlā became a popular pilgrimage site, and accounts of his life were reportedly written down by members of the Suhrawardī and Chishtī Sufi orders.[29]

What does this timeline tell us? It gives us some sense of the malleable edges of Afghan identity through the story of Sayyid Isḥāq's progeny, it establishes a general map of where Yaḥyā Kabīr spent his life and it tells us about his affiliation to the Suhrawardī Order through the figure of Makhdūm-i Jahāniyān. Such data are useful for anchoring a historical narrative that accords with present standards, allowing us to locate ourselves (albeit roughly) in space and time. However, for Yaḥyā Kabīr's memorialists, this sort of narration was of secondary import. The bulk of the hagiography consists of detached episodes in the saint's career, often detailing a miracle or extraordinary event. *When* Yaḥyā Kabīr was in Ghazni is not nearly as important as *how* he was in Ghazni. The main concern is

23 Niʿmat Allāh, *Makhzan-i Afghānī*, 740.
24 Niʿmat Allāh, *Makhzan-i Afghānī*, 642.
25 Niʿmat Allāh, *Makhzan-i Afghānī*, 725–7.
26 Niʿmat Allāh, *Makhzan-i Afghānī*, 889–90.
27 Niʿmat Allāh, *Makhzan-i Afghānī*, 728.
28 Niʿmat Allāh, *Makhzan-i Afghānī*, 738.
29 Niʿmat Allāh, *Makhzan-i Afghānī*, 723.

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with how events that took place in Ghazni might generate reverence for Yaḥyā Kabīr's religious acumen.

This is not to say that the hagiography is haphazardly or chaotically arranged. For instance, the stories of Yaḥyā Kabīr's solitary wanderings as a dervish are grouped together in the text of the *Afghan Treasury*, indicating an editorial hand at work. The episodes are bookended by his birth and death. But aside from the two dates in the narratives, we are left to infer how best to arrange the chronology of the saint's life. Did he wander as a dervish before or after studying with Makhdūm-i Jahāniyān in Uch? I might argue for the former based on context clues: Yaḥyā is said to have set out for Uch from Herat, to have visited Herat alone as a dervish and to have been in search of a Sufi guide before meeting Makhdūm-i Jahāniyān.[30] Yet focusing on such questions may distract us from a key piece of data: namely, that Yaḥyā Kabīr's hagiographers did not find it critical to establish a firm chronology of his life. This signals that these narratives served a purpose beyond an impulse to chronologically document the past.

Rather, the stories about Yaḥyā's wanderings provide us with a composite image of his character. From the outset, Yaḥyā is cast as a serious youth who fasted and avoided the usual games played by children.[31] He often involved himself in sudden verbal challenges that would leave either him or his interlocuter momentarily overwhelmed. For example, while in Farmal, Yaḥyā crossed paths with the Sufi master Shaykh Muḥammad Salmān. The other man called out to Yaḥyā, "Hey dervish! However much the water swells, it will run under the bridge." Yaḥyā at once replied, "Hey sheikh! Some waters are such that they overrun the bridge and break it." Impressed, Shaykh Muḥammad then asked after the identity of Yaḥyā's master, to which Yaḥyā replied with the name of the Prophet Muhammad. This prompted Shaykh Muḥammad to spread his kilim and host Yaḥyā.[32]

During a different exchange in Ghazni, Yaḥyā was propositioned by a beautiful woman who took a liking to his youthful good looks. When she asked him to seek her hand, Yaḥyā replied that the one who married her should possess four traits: deathless life, means without destitution, ageless youth and joy without sorrow. The woman from Ghazni immediately fell at Yaḥyā's feet and became a disciple, eventually becoming a saint herself.[33] In an inversion of such moments, Yaḥyā was once reduced to tears in Samarkand by a roving holy fool who offered to provide him with a "bitter medicine" for his sins.[34] These episodes demonstrate not only Yaḥyā's abilities but also his sensitivity. More generally, they portray the ideal dervish as a figure who possesses linguistic dexterity, by which they can swiftly confront the true statements of their interlocuters with even deeper truths. They can expect to face sudden verbal challenges in the course of their wayfaring, forcing them to improvise descriptions of reality. These truths must be framed in the same manner as the challenge: a water metaphor for a water metaphor, a proposal for a proposal. Though we are exposed to Yaḥyā's skill through curated text, the argument is that this all takes place in the more uncontrolled setting of personal encounters and unplanned spoken discourse, lending the episodes a certain urgency.

The spoken word was not the only way by which a dervish might reach a desirable condition. Upon reaching the city of Herat, Yaḥyā fell ill and stopped to rest in the Friday mosque. At noon, the muezzin arrived and gave the call to prayer, indicating that

30 Niʿmat Allāh, *Makhzan-i Afghānī*, 889, 723.

31 Niʿmat Allāh, *Makhzan-i Afghānī*, 723.

32 Niʿmat Allāh, *Makhzan-i Afghānī*, 725. The text alternately identifies Yaḥyā's interlocuter as Shaykh Muḥammad Salmān and Shaykh Muḥammad's son.

33 Niʿmat Allāh, *Makhzan-i Afghānī*, 726.

34 Niʿmat Allāh, *Makhzan-i Afghānī*, 726.

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Yaḥyā should stand up. When Yaḥyā insisted that he could only pray lying down, the muezzin became enraged and dragged Yaḥyā to the mosque's staircase, beating his head against it and apparently shattering his skull. Yaḥyā would recall this as one of two occasions in his life when his ultimate aim was achieved.[35]

The character emerging from these stories is that of an itinerant who reaches a heightened state through inspired utterances and bodily mortification. At the same time, the stories do some worldbuilding. The roads upon which Yaḥyā travels are populated by scholars, apothecaries, desirous women, God-drunk dervishes, sceptics, brutes and immortal prophets. Each and every one of these might induce states of ecstasy and sorrow during random encounters. There is an additional social dimension to Yaḥyā's wayfaring, as his interactions take place largely outside royal courts and the lodges of great masters. These are mostly fleeting exchanges with strangers, but which nevertheless might leave one profoundly affected.

This is shown to change with Yaḥyā's entry into the Sufi circle of Makhdūm-i Jahāniyān. The community was based out of the city of Uch, a significant node in the political, economic and religious cross-currents of the fourteenth century.[36] Makhdūm-i Jahāniyān himself drew disciples from a wide range of locales who went on to careers in Kashmir, Jaunpur Bihar, Sonargaon, Chittagong and elsewhere.[37] Many are reported to have had massive followings in their respective destinations.

The narratives in the *Afghan Treasury* report that Yaḥyā was directed to follow Makhdūm-i Jahāniyān by the Prophet Muhammad, who came to Yaḥyā in a dream while the former was in Herat.[38] As Yaḥyā made his way across the Sulaiman Mountains toward Uch, Makhdūm-i Jahāniyān was given some news by a voice from the Unseen Realm:

> An Afghan from the progeny of Sayyid Isḥāq is coming to you. If you are capable of taking on his greatness, embrace him. If you cannot, then give over to him your own greatness and wonders, and the greatness of the fourteen families which you have attained, and make him your own disciple.[39]

Yaḥyā happened to walk into the mosque as Makhdūm-i Jahāniyān was conducting spiritual exercises. He rose as if in a trance and embraced Yaḥyā for a long time, attempting to contain the latter's power. The master's efforts were ultimately in vain, forcing him to give over that "greatness", as the voice had commanded him.

Yaḥyā underwent a period of formal religious training at Makhdūm-i Jahāniyān's hands, taking part in both solitary 40-day retreats and communal life.[40] He was also involved in some extraordinary happenings. During one monsoon season, the Indus

[35] Niʿmat Allāh, *Makhzan-i Afghānī*, 731. The other incident was when he was on a boat and did not have the necessary fare, for which he was badly beaten.

[36] For an extensive engagement with the history of Uch, see Manan Ahmed, *A Book of Conquest: The* Chachnama *and Muslim Origins in South Asia* (Cambridge, 2016).

[37] Sayyid Ashraf Jahāngīr Simnānī (d. 1405), who came to Uch from Khorasan, would go on to have a prominent career in Bengal and Faizabad; Pīr Badr-i ʿĀlam (d. 1440) of Meerut would be quite active in Sonargaon and Chittagong, where he became venerated by sailors and fishermen as a lord of the waters; Akhī Rāj Gīrī was dispatched on Makhdūm-i Jahāniyān's orders to Jaunpur and one account even relates the brief presence of Sayyid ʿAlī Hamadānī (d. 1385), a Sufi master from Hamadan who taught widely in Badakhshan and Kashmir. A report of Makhhdūm-i Jahāniyān's disciples can be found in Amina M. Steinfels, *Knowledge Before Action: Islamic Learning and Sufi Practice in the Life of Sayyid Jalāl al-Dīn Bukhārī Makhdūm-i Jahāniyān* (Columbia, 2012), 145; the reference to Sayyid ʿAlī Hamadānī is found on p. 135.

[38] Niʿmat Allāh, *Makhzan-i Afghānī*, 889.

[39] Niʿmat Allāh, *Makhzan-i Afghānī*, 890.

[40] Niʿmat Allāh, *Makhzan-i Afghānī*, 723.

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flooded and swept away several houses in Uch. Fearing destruction, the people of Uch complained to Makhdūm-i Jahāniyān that a city's people should not be drowned while such a mighty saint dwelt among them. While seeking answers in dreams, Makhdūm-i Jahāniyān was visited by the Prophet Muhammad, who informed him that in a certain part of Uch, there lay a brick that had been baked for an ascetic by the immortal figure Khiżr.[41] During the age of the Prophet Moses, this brick had become buried in the river's muddy banks due to that ancient ascetic's ablutions. If the brick was rediscovered and given to Yaḥyā, Uch would be saved from floodwaters until Judgement Day. Makhdūm-i Jahāniyān organized an excavation at the indicated place, and workers brought him the brick. When Makhdūm-i Jahāniyān handed the brick to Yaḥyā, the latter was uncertain, but Makhdūm-i Jahāniyān insisted the Prophet had specifically indicated a Pashto-speaking Afghan who would come from the Sulaiman Mountains.[42] Uttering the Basmala,[43] Yaḥyā placed the brick on the banks of the Indus where the Prophet instructed him to. The waters of the Indus were accordingly restrained.[44]

In another instance, Makhdūm-i Jahāniyān was unable to lead collective prayers due to an open wound preventing his ritual ablutions, and so appointed Yaḥyā to lead prayers in his stead. The disciples assembled and Yaḥyā commenced the prayer by reciting the first Takbir. Almost at once, he called an end to the prayer and recited the opening Takbir again. This happened three more times until Yaḥyā finally proceeded. Afterwards, some of Makhdūm-i Jahāniyān's disciples spoke among themselves, remarking that their master should have selected a deputy rather than a "distracted Afghan".[45]

Becoming aware of his disciples' gossiping, Makhdūm-i Jahāniyān gathered them together to say that they were ignorant of what had actually been happening. He explained that the first time Yaḥyā had given the Takbir, the Blessed House of the Kaʿba had been off visiting a saint somewhere in the world and had not been in its place in Mecca.[46] Yaḥyā, unable to see it, had thus cancelled the prayer. At the second Takbir, the Kaʿba had still been on the road home. At the third Takbir, the Kaʿba had reached Mecca but had not settled back into its place. Only at the fourth Takbir had the Kaʿba been properly in its place. As sight of the Kaʿba was necessary for the performance of prayer – at least, for someone of Yaḥyā's status – Yaḥyā had been acting correctly the entire time. Makhdūm-i Jahāniyān berated his disciples, ordering them not to let such suspicions take root in their hearts. He also gave Yaḥyā the title by which he would come to be known – *Kabīr* (the Great), a reference to both his religious pre-eminence and his repeated Takbirs.[47]

The moment the hagiography takes us to Uch with Yaḥyā, the stories seem to reflect more acutely his identification as an Afghan. During his solitary wanderings, neither Yaḥyā nor his interlocuters are communally marked. In contrast, the narratives set in

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[41] For a brief review with specific reference to Persian motifs, see Anna Krasnowolska, "Kheżr", *Encyclopedia Iranica* (2009), available online at https://iranicaonline.org/articles/kezr-prophet (accessed 10 October 2023).

[42] The word used in the text is "Rōhīla", referring to "a person from Rōh", a signifier for Afghan homelands. The region of Rohilkhand in present-day India takes its name from the presence of historical Afghan communities and polities there.

[43] The Arabic phrase "In the Name of God, the Merciful, the Compassionate" used upon the commencement of various actions.

[44] Niʿmat Allāh, *Makhzan-i Afghānī*, 890–2.

[45] Niʿmat Allāh, *Makhzan-i Afghānī*, 892.

[46] The Arabic phrase "God is Great", used in various contexts, including to mark points during one form of Muslim ritual prayer (*namāz*).

[47] Niʿmat Allāh, *Makhzan-i Afghānī*, 893. Makhdūm-i Jahāniyān's rebuke of his disciples (*shumā īn sukhan dar khāṭir-i khūd churā guẕarānīd ki waswāsī Afghān rā imāmat kardan farmūdand, īn chunīn khaṭar-hā rā dar dil-i khūd jāʾī nadahīd*) also includes a more general reminder not to question a master's decisions.

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Uch consistently circle back to his Afghan bloodline or his proficiency in Pashto or even the Sulaiman Mountains as a lodestone for his journeys. This is sometimes no more than an identifier, one which has the effect of reinforcing the *Afghan Treasury's* socio-political aims in the courtly Mughal context. Yet as the disciples' mutterings indicate, there is a friction underlying the deployment of an Afghan in the social world of Makhdūm-i Jahāniyān's circle. Yaḥyā's perceived error is not that of a distracted fellow Sufi. Rather, his compatriots distance themselves from him by referring to him as an inept Afghan. The person of Makhdūm-i Jahāniyān is used to correct the disciples' misunderstanding and warn against "such thoughts".

From the contrast between Yaḥyā's solitary wandering and his time in Uch emerges a specific conceptualization of the social world. Encounters on the road are by chance and fleeting, but can also be equalizing. What matters is not one's communal affiliation but simply access to scintillating discourse and powerful experience, all of which might bring one in touch with the Truth. On the road, everyone might equally be a stranger. The same cannot be said of the more structured world of the Sufi guide's community. Among Makhdūm-i Jahāniyān's disciples, the seeker is suddenly a markedly Afghan seeker who must occasionally prove their belonging in society. Though the master himself is unsurprisingly free of (incorrectly) prejudicial sentiment, the tales of Yaḥyā's training are cautionary with regard to one's Sufi comrades.

All of these tales are shot through with a shared concern: how is one to access guiding knowledge and religious truth? The two main propositions put forward in the hagiography are solitary wayfaring and structured communal training, ideally working in tandem. On the surface, this is a fairly normative answer for this context. However, the question is problematized by an awareness of social spaces as organized by hierarchies. This complication turns wayfaring into a possible escape from fellow seekers' prejudices by distilling religious experience into brief exchanges and stripping it of communal overtones. Simultaneously, formal religious training is an arena within which one must triumph over those same hostile sentiments through demonstrable prowess.

Who were the ones seeing the world this way? In light of common attitudes at Mughal courts, it would not seem strange for Indo-Afghans living in the empire to perceive their reality as such. The Sufi context mirrors the politics of imperial officials and landowning elites, creating another proving ground in which Afghan excellence can be established. We might not be entirely off-base in seeing Yaḥyā Kabīr's experiences in Uch as an anachronistic projection, displacing diasporic Afghan worries back through time and space, tinging the prejudices they faced with a certain timelessness. Instead of the static and essential barbarity of royal records, the hagiography offers us an equally immovable constant: that of religious excellence in the face of hostility, proven by reference to universally acclaimed masters.

Yet if we confine our reading to this possibility, we risk eliding a longer and more complex history. Long before the compilation of the *Afghan Treasury*, Afghans were repeatedly cast as highland rustics, good for violent activities and little else. If we hold out the possibility that the tales of Yaḥyā Kabīr's life are indeed rooted in the pre-Mughal past, we might see them as a portrait of how the racialization of Afghans – initially connected to political concerns – penetrated social spaces well beyond the royal court. The tension coiled within a person's identification as Afghan here extends past innate rebelliousness to imply religious inferiority. To counter such an accusation required a dervish who could dream with the Prophet Muhammad, walk alongside Ḥażrat Khiżr and stand for Makhdūm-i Jahāniyān; one whose presence might bring the inimical sentiments of others to the surface, only to sweep them away through miracle and mastery.

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Mountains bound up in the body

The turning point in Yaḥyā Kabīr's story is when he came into his own as a guide. Following his time in Uch, he studied further with the master Pīr Sulṭān Kānō and had several encounters with the aforementioned immortal Khiżr. While in the company of both figures, Yaḥyā was urged to begin guiding others along the Sufi path. Feeling not up to the task, Yaḥyā declined. Later, on a Friday evening, he was called to a spiritual assembly alongside the Prophet Muhammad, the Rightly Guided Caliphs, Pīr Kānō and Khiżr. When the latter two complained about Yaḥyā's refusal, the Prophet took Yaḥyā's hand and announced that whomsoever shook Yaḥyā Kabīr's hand had also shaken his. The Prophet then commanded Yaḥyā to lead God's creatures and placed a green cap from the Unseen Realm on his head. The assembly of saints congratulated "Khwāja" Yaḥyā Kabīr and they celebrated together.[48]

Taken together, tales of Yaḥyā Kabīr as a master give us a sense of his community. He is remembered as part of a constellation of contemporaneous saints living in the region of the Sulaiman Mountains, including Ismāʿīl Sarbanī, Ismāʿīl Farmalī, Pīr Baḥr Shīrānī and Ḥaydar Zarkanī. Yaḥyā's relatives also took part in shaping his society. His brother ʿAlī Dunkar became a saint in his own right, revered for trances and intense devotions that earned him his title – the Emaciated.[49] The community expanded through bonds of marriage as well, with Yaḥyā's father-in-law Ḥasan Surkh Bitanī and his son-in-law Dāʾūd Bitanī counted among his close companions. Sometimes marital bonds and Yaḥyā's role as a teaching guide were inextricably entangled. While among the Mandō Khēl tribe, Yaḥyā spent time tutoring Fāṭima, the daughter of the tribe's leader, Sardār Aḥmadak. When he asked for Fāṭima's hand in marriage, Aḥmadak replied that the saint was too old and that a marriage to one of Yaḥyā Kabīr's sons would be more acceptable. Yaḥyā summarily revealed to Aḥmadak that his name and Fāṭima's appeared together upon the Protected Tablet (a celestial writ upon which all happenings are recorded), prompting Aḥmadak to accede – and accentuating the socially transgressive potential in miracles.[50]

Beyond familial and pedagogical ties, Yaḥyā Kabīr's community grew along lines of proximity. The saint came to have companions from his household staff, such as his cook Nakbī Kararānī. He also drew devotees from among those who approached him as petitioners. Such was the case with a Tarīn woman whose son had journeyed to Mecca on pilgrimage years ago and still had not returned home. Through Yaḥyā Kabīr's power, he was delivered safely to his homeland, prompting the woman to become Yaḥyā's disciple and eventually attain saintly status herself.[51]

When and where did these religious awakenings supposedly take place? We are given some rough contours in the form of Yaḥyā Kabīr's lifetime (sometime between the middle of the fourteenth century and 1430) and the characters who commonly appear in the stories (the majority of whom are identified as Afghan). The Sulaiman Mountains are occasionally referenced by name. On other occasions, we are given a specific site in the area. Whether or not this signifies that Yaḥyā Kabīr *really* spent his career as a Sufi master in the Sulaiman Mountains is unclear. What we do know is that, for his hagiographers, it was important to situate him in a country that had come to be identified as an Afghan homeland. We can see the hagiography as part of a broader process by which the Sulaiman Mountains were drawn into ideas of what it meant to be Afghan, signifying a shared historical space for a diaspora across the Mughal Empire. Among this diaspora

[48] Niʿmat Allāh, *Makhzan-i Afghānī*, 893. For the significance of the Prophetic handshake in this milieu, specifically with respect to Sufi communities, see Bashir, *Sufi Bodies*, 4–8.

[49] Niʿmat Allāh, *Makhzan-i Afghānī*, 740. He is also referred to as ʿAlī Lāgharī.

[50] Niʿmat Allāh, *Makhzan-i Afghānī*, 735.

[51] Niʿmat Allāh, *Makhzan-i Afghānī*, 730.

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were members of Yaḥyā Kabīr's community, telling and retelling these tales, summoning the saint's memory and bringing an ancestral home with it, centralizing the space as key to communal religious history. The Sulaiman Mountains are not a mere periphery but the stage upon which such dramas, graces and miracles took place through the presence of Yaḥyā Kabīr.

In narratives of Yaḥyā's life, community is shown to extend beyond human society alone. On one occasion, Yaḥyā's sons Ṣadr al-Dīn and Maʿrūf came upon their father while engrossed in a chant.[52] As Yaḥyā worshipped, his sons perceived figures fluttering around their father, in and out of sight. When asked about the shadowy beings, Yaḥyā informed his sons that they were in fact angels.

In another instance, Yaḥyā Kabīr fell into an ecstatic trance and, in a God-intoxicated state, ran away from other human beings. His uncomprehending disciples were left behind, save for one Ḥasan Bitanī, who ran after his master. Eventually, Ḥasan came upon his master in the mountains, "sitting and occupied with God, so plunged into the world of bewilderment that he had no awareness of his self".[53] Ḥasan saw a number of deer sitting in circles around Yaḥyā in friendly attitudes. The moment Ḥasan crashed into this idyllic scene, the deer bolted. Upon Yaḥyā's return to worldly awareness, Ḥasan asked him why they deer had fled. Yaḥyā asked Ḥasan what he had eaten; the latter replied, "Mutton and bread." Yaḥyā remarked, "Why wouldn't they flee from you, when you eat their meat?"

Carnivorous habits could have other unforeseen consequences. During a group sojourn into the mountains (this one undertaken purposefully) Yaḥyā Kabīr's disciples built a fire to stave off the night-time cold. Though Yaḥyā was utterly absorbed in worship, he became aware of his disciples' desire to cook something on the flames. An onager appeared in short order and sat complacently with the Sufis. Yaḥyā Kabīr had his followers slaughter it and divide the meat among themselves, while he performed ritual prayer. After his prayers, Yaḥyā noticed there was a lion nearby and told his disciples, "A guest of yours has arrived, so look after their portion too." When Yaḥyā indicated to the lion that it should show itself, the disciples were terrified. Yaḥyā told them not to fear and simply hand over a portion of meat. The lion ate, nodded to Yaḥyā and then left.[54]

These narratives are part of a broader conversation about the consumption of meat. On the one hand, the provision of meat is a relatively common miracle within Sufi circles. For instance, the domed shrine of Ismāʿīl Sarbanī and Khwāja Khiżr in Wāzī Khwāh was said to be frequented by the two saints' spirits, who caused two lakhs of mutton to appear there each year for their Afghan, Mughal, Hazara and Nikudari visitors.[55] Another saint, Aḥmad walad Mūsā Sarwānī, slaughtered an entire herd of sheep for his guests, only to resurrect them and let them roam about once more.[56] Yet friends of God are not always shown to partake in meat themselves. While this may be in part due to renunciatory ideals, Yaḥyā Kabīr's hagiography suggests something more. Avoiding meat is shown to facilitate an intimacy with wild animals. When an animal must be slaughtered, it is ideally done in alignment with the habits of predators. Nowhere are students and disciples expected to give up meat, but their continued consumption of it impedes a fuller understanding of reality, and prevents the formation of intimate bonds with nonhuman persons. Traces of that intimacy are found throughout Yaḥyā Kabīr's hagiography. Following his death,

[52] Niʿmat Allāh, *Makhzan-i Afghānī*, 728.
[53] Niʿmat Allāh, *Makhzan-i Afghānī*, 733.
[54] Niʿmat Allāh, *Makhzan-i Afghānī*, 730.
[55] Niʿmat Allāh, *Makhzan-i Afghānī*, 722–3.
[56] Niʿmat Allāh, *Makhzan-i Afghānī*, 779–81.

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people reported hearing the lamenting cries of deer throughout the wilds of the Sulaiman Mountains. Apparently, the deer even ceased to graze for a time, mourning the loss of a friend.[57]

Yaḥyā Kabīr's connections to the world at large are shown to branch past relationships with nature as it exists; he also repeatedly reshapes material reality. One year, the Sādān canal, which irrigated the countries of Shīrānī and Sarwānī, happened to run dry. Fearing the loss of the year's crop, local farmers petitioned the Sufi Ḥaydar Zarkanī to restore the canal. Confident of the result, Ḥaydar used his miraculous powers to divert water from a different canal, which happened to be in use by Yaḥyā Kabīr's community. Immediately discerning the cause of the drain, Yaḥyā rebuked Ḥaydar. After Ḥaydar's apology, Yaḥyā used his own powers to restore water to the Sādān canal.[58] Such competitions between saints were hardly novel. For instance, the spirits of Ismāʿīl Sarbanī and Khwāja Khiżr jealously guarded their shrine, causing peoples' efforts to raise other domes nearby to repeatedly fail.[59]

In another instance, Yaḥyā Kabīr took his disciples on a retreat to the olive groves of Kōsa. While there, his disciples pointed out a dry canal to their master, who was busy cleaning his teeth with a *miswak*. Since there was no water available and the time for noon prayers was approaching, Yaḥyā got up and went towards the dry canal. Uttering the Basmala, he struck a nearby stone with his *miswak*, immediately producing a cool well-spring that still offered fresh water centuries later.[60] As with many of Yaḥyā's miracles, the provision of water is a standard act for a Sufi master in this context. Elsewhere in the *Afghan Treasury*, S̱ābit Baraych is remembered for creating a spring at Shorawak, while Mulān Khiżr was inspired to discover a well for his people in the Sulaiman Mountains.[61] The blessed beginnings of these sources of water may have played a role in negotiating water resources among surrounding communities (as can be seen in the dispute between Yaḥyā and Ḥaydar).[62]

Saints such as Yaḥyā did not restrict their influence to their immediate locality. Upon becoming aware of a Sufi in Jerusalem who had not eaten for a week, Yaḥyā Kabīr had his disciple Nīk Bakht take some freshly baked bread and fling it from where he stood in the Sulaiman Mountains. They then repeated this process with a jug of water.[63] The country of saints stretches past any one locale, and their community obeys no genealogical borders. For all that the *Afghan Treasury* is concerned with specifically Afghan sainthood, the saints themselves participate in a vaster universe.

Among the elements anchoring that universe is the Kaʿba. Yaḥyā Kabīr's relationship to the Kaʿba extends beyond his reported pilgrimage to Mecca. As mentioned above, his very name is derived from his extraordinary perception of the Kaʿba during prayer. This connection would only deepen later in Yaḥyā's life. His disciple Ḥasan Bitanī reported noticing that Yaḥyā was habitually absent from his usual lodge in the Sulaiman Mountains on Fridays. When Ḥasan complained about this vanishing act, Yaḥyā disclosed to him that he usually met up with 40 people from the Unseen Realm in Mecca on Fridays. Ḥasan, longing to see the House of God in Mecca, asked if he too might go one Friday. Yaḥyā agreed but warned Ḥasan to keep his eyes shut during the journey, which took the form of a flight.

57 Niʿmat Allāh, *Makhzan-i Afghānī*, 739–40.
58 Niʿmat Allāh, *Makhzan-i Afghānī*, 732.
59 Niʿmat Allāh, *Makhzan-i Afghānī*, 723.
60 Niʿmat Allāh, *Makhzan-i Afghānī*, 735.
61 Niʿmat Allāh, *Makhzan-i Afghānī*, 755, 778.
62 Green, "Blessed men and tribal politics", 352.
63 Niʿmat Allāh, *Makhzan-i Afghānī*, 736.

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Of course, the curious Ḥasan opened his eyes almost immediately after take-off, falling out of the air above the Registan Desert (to the immediate west of the Sulaiman Mountains). Not wishing to be rude to his Unseen friends, Yaḥyā went on to Mecca. When his compatriots learnt what had happened, they urged Yaḥyā to search for his lost disciple. Yaḥyā Kabīr found the hapless Ḥasan wandering in the Registan, and the two flew back to their mosque in the Sulaiman Mountains (Ḥasan keeping his eyes shut this time, even refusing to open them after landing). The next Friday, Yaḥyā and Ḥasan prayed together in their own mosque. Afterwards, Yaḥyā grasped Ḥasan's neck and told him to look. Ḥasan then reported, "I saw the Blessed House of God from the Sulaiman Mountains."[64]

The two collapses of space here work in tandem. The physical collapse brought about by the saint's ability to traverse immense expanses is a given for the master himself, but for the disciple, it is seen as a perplexing and incomprehensible phenomenon. The disciple here is ultimately unable to withstand the journey, lacking the discipline to complete it and terrified even after being brought to safety. Yet the master can still fulfil his student's yearning by sharing his perceptive powers, which appear to bridge an otherwise treacherous distance. The Kaʿba is a difficult goal to reach, as can be seen in the story of the Tarīn woman's son who went missing for seven years on pilgrimage. Yaḥyā Kabīr's presence eases that difficulty by enabling visitation (or at least, a form of it) from one's country.

The saint's macrocosmic interventions are bound up with his body. As he explained to Ḥasan Bitanī:

> The men of Exalted God soar like pure falcons. In a single moment, they can see all the world – from West to East to the Throne, Footstool, Protected Tablet, Heaven, and Hell – at the palm of the hand. They plunge into it fearlessly, the blade of "I don't care" in hand. Wherever they wish to go, they go in an instant.[65]

This is not meant as a metaphor, but rather, a mapping of the cosmos onto the saint's physical form. Yaḥyā's body is repeatedly distinguished from those of ordinary persons. His disciples noticed that their master's breath smelled of grilled meat, the reason for which was revealed during a heightened state. Upon seeing a breeze extinguish a lamp in his mosque, Yaḥyā began worrying that something might also put out the "lamp of his heart". He then threw up his own heart, revealed to have been burnt by his love. Upon Yaḥyā's death, his disciples produced the burnt heart and buried it with him.[66] When his blood dripped on earth or stone, it whispered the name of God.[67] The saint's physical form mirrors the world in which it exists, a seemingly ordinary phenomenon riddled with divine wonders.

The depths of Yaḥyā Kabīr's connectivity to the world around him enabled the manipulation of others' bodies as well. This is acutely illustrated in Yaḥyā's sole encounter with the forces of Tīmūr:

> It is said that the emperor Tīmūr ravaged Khorasan up to the foothills of the Kararānī, Nīāzī, and Lōdī Afghans, pillaging and plundering until they reached the Sulaiman Mountains. Bandagī Haẓrat Yaḥyā Kabīr, [who] was also in the foothills, was informed that Tīmūr had arrived. Everyone fled up the mountainside, but Bandagī Haẓrat Khwāja

[64] Niʿmat Allāh, *Makhzan-i Afghānī*, 895–7.
[65] Niʿmat Allāh, *Makhzan-i Afghānī*, 896.
[66] Niʿmat Allāh, *Makhzan-i Afghānī*, 733–4.
[67] Niʿmat Allāh, *Makhzan-i Afghānī*, 733.

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> didn't go. [His] disciples asked, "O Ḥażrat Shaykh, Tīmūr is only one-sixth of a day's walk away. God forbid that we become captives and are carried off."
>
> Upon hearing this, [Yaḥyā] gathered some dust from the earth and, reciting the Chapter of Sincerity three times, threw it toward the direction of Tīmūr's army. By the decree of Exalted God, a veil fell between Tīmūr's army and the person of Bandagī Ḥażrat Khwāja. All the Mongols went blind, unable to see anything. The troops said to one another, "We hear the sounds of people moving, but see nothing with our eyes; this is a rare condition."
>
> The situation was brought to the attention of Tīmūr, who said, "Perhaps someone from among God's friends is here, and we cannot see for this reason." Tīmūr commanded a retreat, and the army accordingly crossed back over. They had only gone a short while along the road when the people could see once more.
>
> Tīmūr ordered, "Find out from these people which person is there." A Shīrānī man from the Bōbak Khēls was captured by the Mongols and brought before Tīmūr. [Tīmūr] related what had happened and inquired as to its correct interpretation. The Shīrānī man answered, "Bandagī Ḥażrat Khwāja Yaḥyā Kabīr is in this place."
>
> Upon hearing this, Tīmūr sent his own chamberlain, accompanied by that Shīrānī man, with a horse as a gift for Bandagī Ḥażrat Khwāja Yaḥyā Kabīr. When they reached Ḥażrat Khwāja Jīō, they kissed the earth and brought the horse into his blessed sight, apologizing and saying: "We have made a terrible mistake, and beg your forgiveness." Bandagī Ḥażrat Khwāja did not take the horse, saying, "Ask for my prayers so that I might forgive you. However, don't torment the Muslims, and be very cautious of Exalted God; for tyrants are seized most severely in this world and the next."
>
> The chamberlain returned and, when he came before Tīmūr, described the greatness and might of Khwāja Jīō which he had seen, relating every detail. Upon hearing this, Tīmūr deeply regretted [the fact] that, "I remain forbidden from kissing the foot of such a friend of God."[68]

The story above is effectively an inversion of royal discourses from before Yaḥyā Kabīr's time. As the rebels and robbers of Persian chronicles, Afghans function as the instigators of violence who must from time to time be suppressed through external intervention. But here, the imperial adventurism of Tīmūr's army is shown to be the root cause of social harm. Even more significantly, Tīmūr and his forces are held to account for bringing harm to fellow Muslims. Tīmūr himself is left anxious, and the narrative comes to an end without his fears being assuaged.

In lieu of royal might being cast as a protective force, Yaḥyā Kabīr's hagiography portrays it as a dangerous phenomenon. The coming of a conquering king brings about terror, flight and captivity. It might be possible to resist such an onslaught through the presence of a Sufi master, whose abilities can overwhelm even those of a world-conqueror such as Tīmūr. Such successful defences render acts of conquest partial at best, clouding military success with the possibilities of worldly and eschatological retribution. This casts doubt on the legitimacy of kings' claims upon their conquests, bringing them to book for their "terrible mistakes". Whether there is ultimately any forgiveness for tyrants is left as a matter for beyond the page.

The annihilating earths

Taken together, the tales above render the Sulaiman Mountains visible as a site of history. They work against the easy dismissal of the area in preceding chronicles by presenting an

68 Niʿmat Allāh, *Makhzan-i Afghānī*, 737.

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array of narrative details, resisting portraits of barbarism through proofs of religious devotion. Yet the tales have a complicated relationship with the largely rural world they so often describe. They report on events two centuries before their textual inscription, forcing us to account for immense distances in time and space. Equally perplexing is the nature of the Sulaiman Mountains as it is related. It is a place where Sufi ghosts sabotage rival shrines, herds of sheep rise up from their slaughter, stones are split open with *miswak*s, the Kaᶜba might be seen from the mountaintops and conquering armies occasionally go blind.

In this article I have attempted to prove that such happenings were, at least for Yaḥyā Kabīr's memorialists, integral elements of the region's history. Though the hagiography does not provide us with what we might think of as clear evidence for events that took place in the Sulaiman Mountains, its tales show us how a particular community thought about their past. That their claims sit uneasily with our own presumptions about historical reality, at least within the confines of present academic discourses, provides a tension that is productive for our narratives today. As James Caron has noted about Afghan religious history, "the lives and concerns of non-elite rural populations" are too often occluded by the predominance of governing discourses in our own historical writing.[69] Part of working against hegemonic historical traditions means reconstructing how non-elite people understood and experienced reality, specifically in dissonance to the world views promulgated by ruling circles. The analytically bewildering nature of the Sulaiman Mountains outlined above is an opportunity for us to consider our own discursive inheritances or, in other words, to reflect upon how today's presumptions about comprehensible history continue shaping our senses for Afghan pasts.

Yaḥyā Kabīr's hagiography simultaneously shows us a world entwined with the powers of the day and a community's effort to escape that entanglement through remembrance. In place of an earth mapped according to imperial frontiers, or an age sectioned off by dynastic reigns, we are given "all the world at the palm of the hand". This is not an act free of political implications, given how the peripheralization of Afghans and Afghan countries has so often been a product of violent border-making. The tales take on a different political valence upon their inclusion in the *Afghan Treasury*, with devotional history purposed towards proving a community's belonging among an imperial courtly elite. My own investment in the stories here lies in decoupling them (at least partially) from that context, in an effort to reconstruct philosophies of history outside rulers' social circles. Doing so draws these narratives into yet another set of social-intellectual concerns about the "known unknowns" of Afghan religious history.[70]

Throughout this article, I have tried to make sense of Yaḥyā Kabīr's hagiography by tracing its socio-political and cultural entanglements. The narratives are comprehensible to me because they can be grounded in contextualized timelines and spaces, for example, the history of Afghan peripheralization coupled with the quest for position within empire. But if we take the hagiography as an indicator of Yaḥyā's own aims, he meant to achieve a seemingly dissimilar end:

> [Unification is] when one does not see oneself and achieves annihilation of self-consciousness, with nothing between "you and I"; when one emerges from the elements of oneself. Just as Exalted God dictated, "*The day the earth shall be exchanged for* [*another*] *earth*", these elemental components shall too be replaced. At such a time, one becomes a Unifier. Whenever "you and I" are not lifted away, there are seventy

[69] James M. Caron, "Afghanistan historiography and Pashtun Islam: modernization theory's afterimage", *History Compass* 5/2, 2007, 325.

[70] Nile Green, "Introduction", in Nile Green (ed.), *Afghanistan's Islam* (Oakland, 2017), 27.

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> thousand veils between you and Exalted God; so where are you, and where is God?
> O brother! Annihilation of self is the name of subsisting in God (*fanā rā nām-i baqā-st*). Without self-annihilation, there is no subsisting in God. In those moments one accepts total self-annihilation, one is a Unifier.[71]

To a certain extent, there is a measure of sympathy between Yaḥyā's self-annihilating longing and historical enterprise. In some ways, the hagiography also exchanges one earth for another, breaking down the elemental components of pre-existing discourses, replacing them with an alternate vision of reality. Yet if there is sympathy here, it is a fleeting one. My reading of the hagiography is not meant to provide an escape from the confining veils of the social world. On the contrary, my aim is to delineate them in all possible detail, so as to consider the ways in which religious material might be deployed in struggles against the historical traditions of kings, empires and other ruling bodies. From Yaḥyā's speech above, this goal might be at odds with his own yearning to subsist within the act of breakage itself, a yearning presumably shared by his followers, descendants, successors and others in his community. But we may still manage to dwell in the break, so to speak, not as devotees but as historians, attending to the ways in which the earth is perpetually being exchanged for other earths, generating a genealogy of discursive annihilations that might one day leave no elemental components for tyrants' uses.

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[71] Niʿmat Allāh, *Makhzan-i Afghānī*, 728–9. The Quranic citation is from 14:48.

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