

## **HISTORICAL ROLE OF ‘SHEEDIS’ AT MANGHO PIR SHRINE IN PRESERVATION OF CROCODILES**

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### **Abstract**

*This article attempts to deal with the animals’ lodging at Sufi shrines as a historical phenomenon sustained by various social and communal groups. It describes how communities curate and sustain animals for so long periods employing various ways and strategies. And, in investigating that, this article considers, as case study, the role of ‘Sheedi’ community to sustain the preservation of crocodiles at Mangho Pir shrine in Karachi. Therefore, this article details that how Mangho Pir shrine and ‘Sheedi’ community go hand-in-hand and side-by-side in the protection and conservation of biodiversity and wildlife. Furthermore, it also tries to examine how folklore went on changing historically though driven so by the community attached to crocodiles and shrine. However, this study attempts to demonstrate that the crocodiles at shrine not only are regarded as subjects but also a sustained part and participants of the Sufi traditions of Pakistan.*

**Keywords:** Crocodiles, Sheedi community, Mangho Pir, Folklore, Sufi traditions.

### **INTRODUCTION**

*Recent scholarship on the position of various social groups regarding Sufi shrines and animals’ status in the saints’ lives offer important backdrop.*

*Aziz (2001) has examined historically the character and nature of social groups through the practices of Piri-Muridi (Master-Disciple relationship), within the established roots and contexts of religious, social, and political aspects. Employing anthropological approaches, Rehman (2009) analyses various ritualistic practices and performances, by individuals and the involved meanings, at the Shrines of Shah Abdul Latif Bhitai (Sindh) and Waris Shah (Punjab). Khan (2015) explores dynamics of two opposite ideologies e.g. ideologies championed by the British colonial political powers and the Sufis of the nineteenth century Punjab. To him, although both, the Sufis and the political powers, considered the indigenous artisan communities and their professions for the promotion of their respective ideologies, the Sufis had been more successful in establishing and preaching their mystic practices marked by the 'Muslim identity'. They had succeeded in this regard owing to the social and cultural popularity of various Sufi institutions like the shrine (hospices), shrine architecture, and the Sufi festivals (mela). Joyce E. Salisbury (1992) considers the changing attitudes, towards animals, the process and set of factors that blurred separation, during 400-1400 years of Middle ages. They (saints) are exemplars of ideal humanity and the medieval perception of humanity. Nathan Hofer (2005) deals about the dogs' representation, in the textual field of Sufi literature that depicts dogs' surrounding ritual and social ambiguity, characterized by the paradoxes of ideas and attitudes to dogs. Dominic Alexander (2009) analyses animals and involved folklore in the medieval western saintly traditions. Through examining several literary motifs of saint-animal interaction, he emphasizes that the element of folklore remained the key in the adaptation and change of these motifs and forms of interaction. Anna Kirkwood Graham (2012) studied about the saint Francis (1181/2-1226) ideal attitudes to and interaction with animals, concluding that the position and status of animals seemed changed in a new way. He had regarded them, besides human fellows, as brothers and sisters, thus, developed spiritual kinship with non-human entities. Additionally, Pollock and Rainwater (2005), Tague (2015), Mazzeno, Morrison (2017), and Morwick (2020), Sarah E. McFarland and Ryan Hediger (2009), and Joanna Godlewicz-Adamiec and Paweł Piszczatowski (2024) all converge their studies and*

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*offer findings on the attitudes, attributes, and perspectives of blurring human-animal boundaries, empathy, human-animal subjectivity, agency, and advocacy for the animals. They demonstrate about the boundaries, clarity at times and the blurring phases too. Their findings examine the ever-prevalent empathy to the animals within the contents and themes of the past literatures. Furthermore and likewise, these scholars also agree on the subjects/perspectives of subjectivity as well as advocacy for the non-humans. Thus, this article will be a contribution in the described categories and streams of scholarships. The methodology of this study will be employing concepts of nomos and opacities within the social and cultural contexts and values of Pakistani Sufi communities. The concept of 'nomos' coined by Peter Berger is pertinent to study folklore that stresses f a society becomes able to establish its nomos successfully, there can be a unity and harmony among the various social groups regardless of social and economic differences.<sup>1</sup> And, 'opacities', the concept of Peter Berger guides to understand the old fashioned proverbial wisdom that become opaque for us after passing long times. So, the deciphering can be through finding it in the text and leading an inquiry like anthropologists do.<sup>2</sup> Then, in order to study and analyze the involved cultural memory, oral, and folkloric traditions, this methodology also considers the model offered by Alisa Valpola-Walker.<sup>3</sup> Hence, employing the said methodology, this article seeks to answer the questions why did the historical role of 'Sheedis' remain essential in the promotion and sustainability of animal-centric Sufi traditions, at Mangho Pir, and, how folklore about crocodiles have historically been a part of the belief system about them?*

*Mangho Pir Sufi shrine is a very famous and celebrated in the metropolitan of Karachi. A diverse variety of sources witnesses about the history of this shrine. But the most notable aspect of this Sufi institution is about the animals attached with this shrine. In the premises of this shrine, there is a pond which houses hundreds of crocodiles for centuries. These crocodiles are regarded very sacred, visited, and fed by devotees. Associated with the shrine as well as the crocodiles, there is a particular community of devotees known as 'Sheedis' who have their belief system based upon*

*different folklores about the association of crocs with the shrine. These folklores narrate the crocodiles as the disciples, pets, and manifestations of the entombed saint. Anyhow about the biographical details about the saint and crocodiles' attachment here are also narrated differently. Notably, the crocodiles of this shrine can eat food from meat to sweetmeat. People guess about this adaptation of food to the animals' tamed position after the passage of so many generations of them.<sup>4</sup>*

*Here, at the shrine of Mangho Pir, an ethnic group known as 'Sheedis' is historically associated. The ethnically known 'Sheedi' community believes about the enshrined saint as their spiritual patron. Mainly the community is consisted of four sub-groups that are Hyderabad, Laasi, Belala, and Kharadari. These sub-clans have been living in the provinces of Sindh and Balochistan, for long periods.<sup>5</sup> According to sources, originally from Africa, the 'Sheedis' are associated with the shrine for times prior to the arrival of the British colonialists in India.<sup>6</sup> Some writers regard them as originally transported here as slaves by Persians, Arabs, Turks, and others including colonial settlers like Portuguese.<sup>7</sup> According to the writer of 'Slavery in Portuguese India (1510-1842)', Jeanette Pinto, "it is probable they belong to one stock or group, or perhaps at least shared a common past in the city of Goa."<sup>8</sup> However, "Pakistan is home to the largest population of African-descended people in Asia, by comparison to India, Sri Lanka, and Iran. An estimated 70% resides in Sindh, the remaining in Balochistan, both are Southern provinces of the country."<sup>9</sup> Nonetheless, this community has been living as a marginalized social group, in almost all walks of life.<sup>10</sup> Apart from, being treated as marginalized community; it had to come to experience the identity crisis, consequently. Nevertheless, the community has been succeeded in doing their cultural identity endured despite of tough times.<sup>11</sup> Centering on the crocodiles, they have been able and determined to continue their animal-centric traditions up to their coming generations. For this purpose, they keep their children introduced with their traditional legacy.<sup>12</sup> However, they have been able to pursue confluence of their attachment with the shrine of Mangho Pir, the reptiles here, and their ancestral traditions of African origins.<sup>13</sup>*

## **REGARD FOR CROCODILES AND AFRICAN TRADITIONS**

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*The community has special regard for the crocodiles. They consider them sacred. As Marty Crump and D. B. Fenolio observe, "many Africans credit crocodiles with great powers." Many feel that crocodiles should be respected because they carry the souls of humans' deceased relatives, including revered grandparents. In Ghana, the crocodile symbolizes protection. Shamans in West Africa use crocodiles' livers and intestines to cast evil spells. The Konde, from the East African Rift region, used to bewitch crocodiles to kill their enemies."<sup>14</sup> Then, "Borneans used to protect crocodiles because they believed the reptiles drove away ever-present evil spirits." People from Burma (Myanmar) and Philippines had their beliefs too."<sup>15</sup> In conjunction with, as pointed out by Joy L. K. Pachuau and Willen van Schendel in 'Entangled lives: Human-Animal-Plant Histories of the Eastern Himalayan Triangle', animals remain regarded as the intermediaries and channels in the spiritual spheres. Although these animal-centric beliefs and practices are the outcome of long traditions of Sufi devotion and the pre-Islamic beliefs of animals as intermediary channels between humans and the spiritual world. And, included in these animals, shrine-based crocodiles are also believed to channel the enshrined Sufi saint.<sup>16</sup> Here, in the region, the significance of spiritual beliefs is undeniable in the conservation of shrine-based animals.<sup>17</sup> However, though there are other places too where crocodile-centered beliefs and sanctity are respected yet the 'Sheedis' make crocodiles' celebration as the most unique ever through their delicacy, intensity, more emphasis, and versatility of their contribution and experience.*

### **SUSTAINABILITY OF THE CROCODILE-CENTRIC TRADITIONS AND 'SHEEDI MELA' (SHEEDI FESTIVAL)**

*Every year, on a decided schedule in priority, the 'Sheedi' community, devotees, and other visitors have the opportunity to celebrate the crocodile festival. In particular, the 'Sheedi' community devote for at least one week to practice their traditions that involve singing, 'dhamaal' (dancing), and other rituals characteristic of typical African rhythms.<sup>18</sup> During the proceedings of this festival, 'Sheedis' display their communal ethos.<sup>19</sup> They walk procession amid drumbeating, singing, and 'dhamaal' (dance).*

*Singing includes some words in 'Swahili' language, originally African ones.<sup>20</sup> Importantly, seen amongst the participants of the procession, there is a rhythmic body language. Ghanaian musicologist and music theorist Kofi Agawu is of the opinion that African rhythm has its essential meaning of musical expression in the combination of both drumming as well as song. While studying the African part of the Northern Ewe's singing rhythm, he states "the Northern Ewe regards singing, in its essence, a group activity, which is the opportunity which manifests their 'communal ethos.'<sup>21</sup> Besides, in many African societies, drumbeating is performed by only male members but both genders perform in the dance.<sup>22</sup> It is also notable that during the proceedings of 'Sheedi' procession, spoken words seem prevailing, whole of the scene. This phenomenon can be comprehended through the scholarship of the noted British ethnomusicologist who was the pioneer in the study of traditional music of Africa, Klaus Philipp Wachsmann (1907-1984), who said "there is hardly any music in Africa that is not in some way rooted in speech."<sup>23</sup> John Miller Chernoff also aligns saying, "African music is derived from language."<sup>24</sup> Anyhow, there are devotees who claim that, during the occasion, they remain captured by the holy spirits.<sup>25</sup> The entire described phenomenon reflects not only communal values, beliefs, and ethnic heritage but also the significant elements of folklore that incorporates the crocodiles in Sufi traditions. For Eila Stepanova, content and composition of oral poetry can be examined through its cultural, traditional, or historical background. In folklore studies, it can be analyzed in the light of its sung performances. "It is difficult to separate the verbal and musical features of genres of oral poetry, because both elements jointly comprise a whole performance," marked by speech and rhythm.<sup>26</sup> Adding to, John Storey's usage of Richard Hoggart's insight is pertinent in some sense that necessitates not only the face value of a cultural phenomenon but other aspects too. His words are important here that state "we have to try and see beyond the habits to what the habits stand for, to see through the statements to what the statements really mean (which may be the opposite of the statements themselves), to detect the differing pressures of emotion behind idiomatic phrases and ritualistic observances."<sup>27</sup>*

## **ATTITUDES AND ATTRIBUTES TOWARD CROCODILES**

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*Sheedi community interacts toward the crocodiles having respectful regard. Honoring to the reptiles, the community members remain singing songs. The crocs continue to captivate the participants marked by their centrality on the occasion. However, the majesty and grandeur engulf particularly to the Moor Sahab (the peacock), the oldest amongst all. This has been given by the community. In traditional practice, community leaders call and invite ‘Moor Sahab’ or the peacock to come, out of the water pond, to the ground. He is garlanded with flowers and sprinkled, in his head, with ‘Sindoor’ (a bright reddish-orange colored powder usually worn, in the hairline, by Hindu married women).<sup>28</sup> He is treated and entertained with variety of food stuffs ranging from sweets, sweetmeat, to goat meat.<sup>29</sup> It is the popular belief amongst the devotees that as soon the chief crocodile, ‘Moor Sahab’, eats their offering, their ritual stands successful and final. And, ultimately, this perceived success of the ritual results to the peace, tranquility, and prosperity, for next year.<sup>30</sup> “All the wealth we have today is a blessing of Moor Sahab (the chief crocodile)” says a Sheedi community member. The Sheedi Mela or festival is more important than Eid for the community. The event proves for the community as a unifying force. In the festival duration, the families of the community have the opportunity to share their matters and issues to each other, even they discuss marriage proposals, and proceed to resolve family problems.<sup>31</sup>*



*Image credit- AFP*

## **CROCODILE CENTRIC BELIEF SYSTEM**

*By extending attitudes, characteristic of honor and regard, to the peacock (chief croc) bring good luck and prosperity in the devotees' lives, until the next year's day of this festival.<sup>32</sup> The devotees resolve the 'mannat' vows or pledges to accomplish services to these crocodiles.<sup>33</sup> All of these traditions also give chance to the community to undermine the socio-political and identity discrimination they experience in society and offer them opportunity to link with their ancestors' heritage.<sup>34</sup> Furthermore, these crocodiles seem to be providing a totemism to the Sheedi social group. They see arrays of spiritual connection in these animals. It can be observed in an instance. Whenever, any of the crocodiles gets expired, the community buries with respect and formalities. A place has been reserved for the interment of dead crocodiles.<sup>35</sup> So, the devotees' belief system that centers crocodiles therein does also show sorts of agency allocated to these animals. It is in a way that the animals being good luck, that they indicate the acceptance of devotees' offerings and performances. Here, the attribute of agency floats obvious. Scholars like Joffrey Jerome Cohen, Sarah E. Mcfarland, and Ryan Hediger are emphasizing on animals' agency for years.<sup>36</sup>*

## **HISTORICAL SUSTAINABILITY OF CROCODILES' CELEBRATION**

*Although evidences show that these crocodile-centric traditions were observed after the partition of India yet I will go further down the history to locate the happenings of these practices.<sup>37</sup> Historical documentary evidences demonstrate about the more than a century's following of these celebrations. This site was one of the most visited and recreational places of the colonial Karachi.<sup>38</sup> Since the earlier settlements of the British, and until their departure too, the Mangho Pir shrine was visited for picnic and adventure purposes however, for most, owing to the centrality of these reptiles residing here.<sup>39</sup> This Sufi shrine was equally venerated by Hindus and Muslims however both religious communities named the saint differently. The Muslim followers named the enshrined saint as Mangho Peer and the Hindu devotees said him as Lahu Jasraj.<sup>40</sup> According to J. H. W. Hall's book titling "Scenes in a Soldier's Life: Sindh, Beeloochistan, and Affghanistan, During 1839-43", the crocodiles were followed by people who*

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used to pray to them and offered them fresh meat.<sup>41</sup> Interestingly, the head reptile, the peacock, was portrayed and described for his position under the spotlight in the writings of the British.<sup>42</sup>

In brief, as all the above cited textual sources, by the earlier British colonists, demonstrate the status of the Mangho Pir shrine, the performances around crocodiles along with centre-staged significance of the peacock, and the African-originated 'Sheedi' community all were the acknowledged perspectives for long ago.<sup>43</sup>

### DIVERSITY OF FOLKLORES PERTAINING TO CROCODILES AND SHRINE OF MANGHO PIR

In recent times, folklores pertaining to crocodiles' presence, association, and their history, at the shrine of Mangho Pir in Karachi, are narrated in a diverse range. Some celebrate these crocs as manifestations as well as lice of the saint.<sup>44</sup> Others consider these reptiles as Baba Farid's gift to Mangho Pir. Still, there is another legend that says that the crocs were originally brought here by another saint named Mor Mubarak. There is another folklore that narrates them as the lice of Lal Shahbaz who gifted them to Mangho Pir. Diversity ranges so wide that it is also said that they are lice of Mangho Pir himself as said earlier. Some say they are disciples of him.<sup>45</sup> Then, there is also another version of the story. It says that it was originally the enshrined saint's lice buried with water of the spring, in the premises of shrine, turned into crocodiles.<sup>46</sup>

### HISTORICAL CHANGES IN FOLKLORES ABOUT THE CROCODILES AND ROLE OF 'SHEEDIS'

Historical presence of 'Sheedi' Community at Mangho Pir Shrine gives a case study portrayal about how a social group' role is essential to curate, promote, protect, and sustain animal-surrounding Sufi traditions. The Sheedis went on serving these traditions from the long ages ago, through the colonial times, and up to the present day. They endured critical phases too and made sustainable to these centuries old Sufi traditions. As a British official, Alexander F. Baillie, noted down in 1890, that the shrine used to receive an allowance of 7.5 'sees' (liters) of oil, even long prior to the first British occupation here.<sup>47</sup> Therefore, this description testifies the shrine's

long ago established prestige and celebration. It reflects that before the arrival of British colonizers the old state administration had acknowledged this Sufi institution's socio-cultural status.

The individual servants of the shrine had guided the visitors through briefing them about the traditions about crocodiles. This aspect is also mentioned by Peter Mayne, the author of 'Saints of Sindh'. According to him, the shrine guardian kept guiding the visitors with pointing again and again towards Mister Peacock, the head reptile. Mayne also points about the guardian's stance in the same context as guardian continued emphasis to offer meat first of all to him (the peacock).<sup>48</sup> About these crocodiles, Alexander narrates, "The priests and guardians do their best to preserve them, and to maintain a belief on their sanctity, reap a little harvest". Even the guardians informed the visitors about the age of certain crocs.<sup>49</sup> Then, in about 1863, when some youngsters behaved with the crocodiles unethically, there appeared a group of caretakers, belonging to the Brahmans, who served the shrine. These caretakers strictly objected the mischievous actions toward the animals.<sup>50</sup> Then, again at another point of time, the guardians of the crocodiles confronted with some British colonizers. There were some unethical and violently vicious acts committed toward crocs by some white people. And, even one of them fired a shot at a croc that made the guardian to step in. He extended a warning to the culprits.<sup>51</sup>

According to Alexander F. Baillie, in 1890, there was a prevalent folklore that said these crocodiles were the miraculous outcome of the commanded burst to rocks by the Lal Shahbaz of Sehwan who wanted to make the place holy.<sup>52</sup> Richard Francis Burton, the first British mayor of Karachi, wrote in 1851 about another folkloric narration that was popular that time. It narrates that four brother saints visited this place and performed miracles. One of them formed hot mineral spring, the second transformed crocodiles out of a flower, third made palms and date-trees out of his tooth-brush stick, and the fourth saint, Mangho, turned dead.<sup>53</sup> Furthermore, Peter Mayne, in 1956, had documented a couple of more folkloric narration about the crocs at here. To him, it was said that the, chief reptile, the peacock came here to serve the saint Mangho Pir in the thirteenth century. And, that the

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*Mister Peacock was created through a flower transformation. About the Mister Peacock, there was another narrated folklore. It stated that he was summoned from the Indus to serve the saint Mangho Pir.<sup>54</sup> Still, interestingly different from the all stories states above, about these crocodiles' origin, Maneck B. Pithawalla, former director of postgraduate research geography and geology and dean of the science faculty, university of Sindh, noted down in the words, "It seems that they have migrated from the Hub River nearby after a great flood."<sup>55</sup>*

*Hence, it can be analyzed that in the past times, even more than a century ago, concerning the presence of crocodiles at Mangho Pir Sufi shrine, in Karachi, there was not a single narration. Rather, a range of different folkloric traditions were prevalent during long earlier periods. Pertinently, despite of the diversity of folklores, the Sheedi community accommodated each and every narration however with the objective to sustain their traditions. Their communal role, at any point of time, can never be neglected and undermined. They pursued the agenda of preservation and promotion of crocodile-centric practices and traditions. This is the very role the community performed that is emphasized by Dominic Alexander. For Alexander, different social groups prefer different versions of saint-animal stories, however, elements of popular oral stories and folklore can never be undermined, at any stage.<sup>56</sup> Furthering this point, in the following paragraph, I need to point toward a couple of practices that remained part of these traditions, in past, but not seen now.*

*According to Peter Mayne, in long earlier times, people used to share the water from the nearby spring with the Mister Peacock and his family (crocodiles) but it resulted in unhappy incidents so this tradition was abandoned. Now, after the erection of wall in between, pilgrims just take bath and wash themselves in the water of spring and pray, and of course contribute in the shrine collections. Secondly, the guardian had a practice of drawing a circle in the mud/sand of the crocodile pond to offer blessings for the visitor.<sup>57</sup>*

*Notably, there seems a historical harmony in between 'Sheedi' community, presence of crocodiles, Mangho Pir shrine, memory, and*

folklore and oral traditions. So, in the following, a brief narration of a stream of concerned scholarship represents the said harmony. According to Stephen A. Mitchell, "Folklore and 'memory' (in all its different varieties) are largely inseparable, even, one might say, conceptual helpmates."<sup>58</sup> And, regarding a 'Sheedi' community's context, Astrid Erll's dictum is relevant here. For him, in past, the triggers to remembering through things, places, media such as text and image were accepted ways. But, later on scholars began to "look at the interdependence of individual and group in the collective construction of memories within a framework of conversational or group remembering – for example, when family members look at old photos."<sup>59</sup> Then, Interaction between the notion of identity of a social group's culture and folklore studies is a phenomenon of scholarly debate.<sup>60</sup> Hence, in the background of all the perspectives said above, behind the dynamics of folklore driven by the 'Sheedis' community, the role of cultural memory seems quite pertinent. They had in past, and, still up to second decade of twenty first century, have been successful in making all the forms of folklore relevant to their community values, beliefs, and other socio-cultural contexts. As Alisa Valpola-Walker notes, "One of the central tenets of memory studies is its orientation towards the present: remembering is not an act of pure preservation, but one of selective reconstruction dependent on what knowledge is available and relevant at the time of remembering. The focus of cultural memory studies is, therefore, not on the relationship between memories and the 'real' events they attempt to represent, but between memories and the communities that produce them."<sup>61</sup> And, she furthers her argument in the way that "viewing literature as a culture's memory can be a way of trying to understand how a culture forms and reforms itself – it is about observing, and understanding the nature of, cultural change. But culture and a culture's memory are not separate from other fields of social experience, such as politics and religion."<sup>62</sup> Cultural historian Alon Confino puts it in another way saying that a one can consider who remembers, what, why, and for whom the reminder is.<sup>63</sup> Alon Confino also informs that a cultural memory works as an influential element to shape a society or culture's beliefs and values.<sup>64</sup> Thus, these traditions marked by crocodiles, folklore, memory, Sufi shrine, and associated practices all

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provide opportunities of identity for the 'Sheedi' community.<sup>65</sup> As state backed education is employed to create norms, values, and legends within a society for unity purpose so a community employs suchlike tools to be united.<sup>66</sup>

### CONCLUSION

In summary, it can be observed that the historical role of 'Sheedi' community, at Mangho Pir Shrine, remained essential in the preservation of crocodiles there. The study has showed that although the community remained employing various ways of stories to celebrate and sustain the existence of the crocs yet they have been able to go through long periods spanning on centuries. The study also underscores how centering on animals, the cultural memory produced unity and identity among the community. And, how the community attributed crocodiles with the subjective traits and remained adhering to it. Finally, and resultantly, it reflects that the historical harmony and role of Sufi-animal surrounding folklore, Sufi traditions of Mangho Pir Shrine, and association of 'Sheedi' community contributed in the preservation of biodiversity here.



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