



LAHORE JOURNAL

## Mystical Form of Islam Suits Sufis in Pakistan

By [SABRINA TAVERNISE](#)

Published: February 25, 2010

LAHORE, Pakistan — For those who think Pakistan is all hard-liners, all the time, three activities at an annual festival here may come as a surprise.

[Enlarge This Image](#)



Jason Tanner for The New York Times

A camp near the festival. Pakistani Sufis have been challenged by the stricter form of Islam adopted by militants and hard-liners.

Thousands of Muslim worshipers paid tribute to the patron saint of this eastern Pakistani city this month by dancing, drumming and smoking pot.

It is not an image one ordinarily associates with Pakistan, a country whose tormented western border region dominates the news. But it is an important part of how Islam is practiced here, a tradition that goes back a thousand years to Islam's roots in South Asia.

It is Sufism, a mystical form of Islam brought into South Asia by wandering thinkers who spread the religion east from the Arabian Peninsula. They carried a message of equality that was deeply appealing to indigenous societies riven by caste and poverty. To this day, Sufi shrines stand out in Islam for allowing women free access.

In modern times, Pakistan's Sufis have been challenged by a stricter form of Islam that dominates in Saudi Arabia. That orthodox, often political Islam was encouraged in Pakistan in the 1980s by the American-supported dictator, Muhammad Zia ul-Haq. Since then, the fundamentalists' aggressive stance has tended to eclipse that of their moderate kin, whose shrines and processions have become targets in the war here.

But if last week's stomping, twirling, singing, drumming kaleidoscope of a crowd is any indication, Sufism still has a powerful appeal.

"There are bomb blasts all around, but people don't stay away," said a 36-year-old bank teller named Najibullah. "When the celebration comes, people have to dance."

Worshippers had come from all over Pakistan to commemorate the death of the saint, Ali bin Usman al-Hajveri, an 11th-century mystic. Known here today as Data Ganj Baksh, or Giver of Treasures, the Persian-speaking mystic journeyed to Lahore with Central Asian invaders, according to Raza Ahmed Rumi, a Pakistani writer and expert on Sufism. He

SIGN IN TO RECOMMEND

TWITTER

SIGN IN TO E-MAIL

PRINT

REPRINTS

SHARE

### Today's Headlines Daily E-Mail



Sign up for a roundup of the day's top stories, sent every morning.

[Sign Up](#)

[See Sample](#) | [Privacy Policy](#)

PopEater.com Ads by Google  
Advertise on NYTimes.com

### MOST POPULAR

E-MAILED BLOGGED SEARCHED VIEWED

1. [Nicholas D. Kristof: New Alarm Bells About Chemicals and Cancer](#)
2. [Gail Collins: What Every Girl Should Know](#)
3. [10 Days In a Carry-On](#)
4. [The Besieged and the Beautiful in Languedoc](#)
5. [Charting Creativity: Signposts of a Hazy Territory](#)
6. [A Sampling of Chinglish](#)
7. [The Jewish Question: British Anti-Semitism](#)
8. [Movie Review | 'Babies': Awwwww, Ewwww, Who's a Good Baby?](#)
9. [36 Hours in Houston](#)
10. [Your Money: The New Money Rules for Recent Graduates](#)

[Go to Complete List >](#)

settled outside the city, a stopover on the trade route to Delhi, started a meditation center and wrote a manual on Sufi practices, Mr. Rumi said.

Few here last week knew many of those facts but that did not seem to matter. The dancing and drumming was part of a natural rhythm of life that after nearly 10 centuries was as much about culture as it was about faith.

“It’s a festival of happiness!” shouted a cook, Muhamed Nadim, over the din, when asked what was being celebrated. “People feel comfort here.”

Vast crowds of men walked barefoot, pushing past police barricades and vendors selling fabrics and sweets. A neon sign advertising chicken with the words “Chicks, Chicks, Chicks” glowed in a second-floor window. Underneath it, brightly lit bookstores remained open, their owners gazing out at the crowds.

One of them, Naeem Ashraf Rizvi, settled easily into a conversation with a foreigner about life in Pakistan. The overwhelming majority of Pakistanis are Sufi, he explained, and despise violence inflicted by the more hard-line Deobandis, the school of thought that was supported by General Zia.

Last year was Pakistan’s worst for militant attacks since 2001, with the death toll more than triple what it was in 2006.

“Sufis have not spread terrorism,” Mr. Rizvi said, his small daughter on his lap. “We are its victims.”

The violence, he said, has damaged not only Pakistan, but also the reputation of Muslims, who he said “are seen with suspicious gazes everywhere in the world.”

He added, “We are condemning the violence, but no one is listening to us.”

For all of Mr. Rizvi’s enlightened views, his opinion veered back in a grimly familiar direction on the question of who was responsible for the attacks. It was a list of culprits most Pakistanis recite by heart: the United States, India and Britain. Outsiders are often at the center of Pakistan’s many conspiracy theories, a kind of defense mechanism that serves as a way to avoid a reality too painful to confront.

Worse than the violence, Mr. Rizvi said, was the weakness of the government, which seemed unable to accomplish much of anything. Nor was a military takeover the answer. The only solution, he said, was a revolution by the people, like the one in Iran in 1979.

But in Pakistan, where illiteracy is rampant and leaders are more focused on jockeying for power than fulfilling a political vision, that is a distant wish.

“Everyone is quiet,” he said. “They are not listening yet. They are sleeping.”

*Waqar Gillani contributed reporting.*

A version of this article appeared in print on February 26, 2010, on page A4 of the New York edition.

✉ SIGN IN TO E-MAIL

🖨️ PRINT

📄 REPRINTS

Times Reader 2.0: Daily delivery of The Times - straight to your computer. [Subscribe for](#)



## Banana smoothie

ALSO IN HEALTH »

- The pill started more than one revolution
- The high costs of fallen arches

**nytimes.com**

HEALTH

### ADVERTISEMENTS

[Vote for the collectible car of the year](#)



[Follow The New York Times on Twitter](#)

[Watch today's top videos](#)

[See the news in the making. Watch TimesCast, a daily news video.](#)

SEE THE NEWS IN THE MAKING. Don't miss TimesCast: Behind the Scenes in the Newsroom.

[nytimes.com/timescast](http://nytimes.com/timescast)

### RELATED ADS

[What are Related Ads?](#)

- » [Islam Chat](#)
- » [Islam Women](#)
- » [Islam Chatting](#)
- » [Islam Wife](#)
- » [Pakistan Woman](#)

just \$4.62 a week.

Ads by Google

what's this?

[60-75% Off Womens Clothes](#)

Brand Name Dresses, Career Suits & Church Suits with Free Shipping!  
[www.clothingfactoryoutlet.com](http://www.clothingfactoryoutlet.com)

[Kasper Suits for Less](#)

Complete Your Business Wardrobe with Low Prices on Kasper Suits!  
[www.NexTag.com/Kasper-Suits](http://www.NexTag.com/Kasper-Suits)

[Church Suits For Men \\$99](#)

Zoot/Fashion/Vested Mens Suits Group Discount Call **1888-784-8872**  
[www.MensITALY.com/Buy.Suit.Online](http://www.MensITALY.com/Buy.Suit.Online)

Related Searches

\* [Lahore \(Pakistan\)](#)

[+](#) Get E-Mail Alerts

\* [Sufism \(Religion\)](#)

[+](#) Get E-Mail Alerts

\* [Islam](#)

[+](#) Get E-Mail Alerts

\* [Defense and Military Forces](#)

[+](#) Get E-Mail Alerts

INSIDE NYTIMES.COM



U.S. »

OPINION »

MOVIES »

N.Y. / REGION »

OPINION »

REAL ESTATE »



[Hunters and Tourists Stalk Pythons in Florida](#)

### Op-Ed: Dow's Fast Crash

The risks of high-frequency trading can be easily addressed without undermining the positive role that it plays in the market.



[Films of G.I.'s That Star Average Joes](#)



[Resolved: Inmates Make Tough Debaters](#)



[Letters: All Around Us, the Threat of Cancer](#)



[Long Island City Comes Into Its Own](#)

[Home](#) | [World](#) | [U.S.](#) | [N.Y. / Region](#) | [Business](#) | [Technology](#) | [Science](#) | [Health](#) | [Sports](#) | [Opinion](#) | [Arts](#) | [Style](#) | [Travel](#) | [Jobs](#) | [Real Estate](#) | [Autos](#) | [Back to Top](#)

Copyright 2010 The New York Times Company | [Privacy](#) | [Terms of Service](#) | [Search](#) | [Corrections](#) | [RSS](#) | [First Look](#) | [Help](#) | [Contact Us](#) | [Work for Us](#) | [Advertise](#) | [Site Map](#)