
Chapter Title: Churning Nectar on the Path of Muhammad: Of Ethical Imaginaries in Kashmiri Sufi Poetry

Chapter Author(s): Peter Dziedzic

Book Title: Mysticism and Ethics in Islam

Book Editor(s): Bilal Orfali, Atif Khalil, and Mohammed Rustom

URL: <https://www.aub.edu.lb/aubpress/Pages/Mysticism-and-Ethics-in-Islam.aspx>



This work by American University of Beirut is licensed under Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives 4.0 International. To view a copy of this license, visit <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/>

The opinions, findings, interpretations, and conclusions expressed in this book are entirely those of the authors and do not reflect those of the American University of Beirut, its affiliated organizations, or members of its Board of Trustees.

For requests and permissions, contact aubpress@aub.edu.lb.

CHURNING NECTAR ON THE PATH OF MUHAMMAD: OF ETHICAL IMAGINARIES IN KASHMIRI SUFI POETRY

Peter Dzedzic

*The ego is the knotted wood of the forest—
Not good enough for making the frame of a cradle.
He who chops it down, brings it home, and burns it in the kitchen fire,
He follows the path of Muhammad.*

— *Nund Rīshī*¹

Introduction

While interest in Islam in South Asia has expanded over the past decade, the voluminous Kashmiri corpus of Sufi poetry remains underexplored in academic contexts. Given the important geographical and historical location of the Kashmir Valley as a cultural nexus between Persia, Central Asia, and South Asia, a polyvalent literary ecology informed by a plurality of literary, philosophical, and ethical frameworks developed in the late-medieval and early modern periods.² While

1. Jaishree Odin, *Lalla to Nuruddin: Rishi-Sufi Poetry of Kashmir: A Translation and Study* (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 2013), 132.

2. “Literary ecology,” a term I have coined for my own research on Kashmiri literary history, describes any milieu in which multiple literary traditions flourishing in shared geographical and historical boundaries creatively and productively interact to potentially rearticulate linguistic, intellectual, aesthetic, and poetic horizons.

the Kashmir Valley was home to expansive traditions of both Sanskritic Śaiva and Persianate Sufi literatures for centuries, an indigenous, vernacular tradition of Kashmiri, or Kāshur,³ poetry also flourished beginning in the fifteenth century with a group identified as the Rīshī Sufis. This vernacular literature, which developed at a time of historical transition in Kashmir from a predominantly Sanskritic, brahmanical, Śaiva society to a Persianate, Islamic, Sufi society, displays a fascinating array of styles, motifs, and themes also present in the extensive archives of Persian and Sanskrit literary imaginaries.⁴

Given this plurality of frameworks, Rīshī Sufi poetry is often at the heart of debates on the nature and character of Kashmiri Islam. In modern and contemporary scholarship, the uniqueness of Kashmiri Islam, defined by a purported Rīshī Sufi ethos of eclecticism, unorthodoxy, and syncretistic openness,⁵ leads to a constructed dichotomy between the “non-scripturalist” Rīshī Sufis, a syncretic phenomenon, and the orthodox narratives of normative Sunni Islam.⁶ The uniqueness of Kashmiri Islam is often identified as *kashmīriyyāt*, or the perceived, premodern communal harmony in Kashmir.⁷ Such a reading portrays the Rīshī Sufis as an unorthodox and, thus, un-Islamic community whose insights cannot be reconciled with Islamic narratives. This is a problematic assumption based on colonial frameworks and cursory engagements with the Rīshī Sufi tradition, particularly its literary archive.

In this paper, I will explore the contours of Rīshī Sufi poetry as a tradition of Islamic devotional literature inculcating unique religious and ethical visions nourished by an encounter of the Sanskritic Śaiva and Persianate Sufi imaginaries. I argue that Rīshī Sufi poetry is a multiform environment—that is, a space where the conceptual alignment of two premodern literary and religious imaginaries produces localized, unique visions of religious identity, practice, and conduct.⁸ I begin with a brief introduction to Kashmir’s literary history, followed by a survey of the theoretical frameworks guiding this investigation. I then move into a close reading of the verses of three major Kāshur poets—Lal Ded, a fourteenth-century Śaiva ascetic (d. 1392); Nund Rīshī, a fifteenth-century Rīshī Sufi (d. 1440); and Shamas Faqīr, a nineteenth-century Qādirī Sufi (d. ca. 1901). These close readings will lead us to concluding remarks on Kashmiri Sufi poetry as a site of alignment, fostering polythetic ethical and religious imaginaries.

3. I use this term in context to avoid confusion with “Kashmiri” as a general adjective. Thus, I use “Kāshur” to refer to literature written in the Kashmiri language, and “Kashmiri” as an otherwise general adjective.

4. I am indebted to Sonam Kachru and Jane Mikkelsen for their articulation of the “imaginaries” at play in early modern Kashmir. Fuller analyses of these concepts will come later in this paper.

5. Chitrlekha Zutshi, *Kashmir’s Contested Pasts: Narratives, Sacred Geographies, and the Historical Imagination* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2014), 304–5.

6. Mufti Mudāsir, “Holy Lives as Texts: Saints and the Fashioning of Kashmir’s Muslim Identity,” *Philological Encounters* 2 no.1 (2016): 289–290.

7. Dean Accardi, “Embedded Mystics: Writing Lal Ded and Nund Rishi into the Kashmiri Landscape,” in *Kashmir: History, Politics, Representation*, ed. Chitrlekha Zutshi (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018), 247–248.

8. Again, I am indebted to Kachru and Mikkelsen for these conceptualizations.

In the Garden of Nightingales: A Brief Literary History of Kashmir

Kashmir has long been a historical, geographical, intellectual, and cultural nexus linking Persia, Central Asia, and South Asia. Kashmir has long been an epicenter of a prolific and renowned culture of Sanskrit and Vedic learning, particularly in the medieval period, to the extent that it is only Kashmir and Varanasi which receive special mention as intellectual centers in al-Bīrūnī's survey of India.⁹ Kashmir was home to many great luminaries of the tradition of Sanskrit poetics and aesthetics, including Ānandavardhana, the author of the *Dhvanyāloka*, a seminal work on the theory of aesthetic suggestion (*dhvani*); Mammata, the author of an integral work on Sanskrit poetic theory, *Kāvyaṣaṣṭkā*; and Abhinavagupta, a famed philosopher and Śaiva tantric theoretician who synthesized reflections on *rasa* (aesthetic taste or affect), *dhvani* (aesthetic suggestion), and religious experience in his commentary on the *Dhvanyāloka*. The works of these and other Kashmiri intellectuals writing in Sanskrit shaped the tradition of Sanskrit aesthetics and poetics for succeeding generations of Sanskrit scholars. In addition to Kashmir being a center of Vedic study and philosophical reflection, Kashmiri authors produced literature in a variety of genres. We have examples of chronicles, such as Kāhāna's history of the Kashmiri kings in the *Rājatarāṅgiṇī*;¹⁰ of satire, such as Kṣemendra's plays; and of courtly poetry, or *kāvya*. Kashmir, "[b]etween the ninth and twelfth centuries . . . was arguably the most dynamic hub of Sanskrit literary production in South Asia, and it continued to be the site of new production even after this heyday."¹¹ This attests to the renowned Sanskrit literary culture of Kashmir flourishing in the premodern period.

Aside from this significant Sanskrit literary heritage, Kashmir was an epicenter of Śaiva metaphysical reflection and tantric practice.¹² Kashmiri Śaivas were a tantric community centered around devotion to Śiva as the primary deity. Kashmiri Śaivas developed an extensive metaphysical schema detailing the relationship of essential unity between Śiva and the created world as a play of absolute divine consciousness. This schema is rooted in a doctrine of metaphysical vibration (*spanda*).¹³ In particular, there was a prolific culture of stotra production among Kashmiri Śaiva practitioners. *Stotras*—variously translated as “hymns of praise,” “praise-poems,” “devotional hymns,” “prayers,” “devotional lyric poems,” and “hymns of adoration”—were central to the *devotional life* of many Śaiva practitioners.¹⁴ Important collections of *stotras* include the Śivastotrāvalī of the eleventh-century Śaiva scholar Utpaladeva. Many *stotra* collections have been lost or remain untranslated.

9. Michael Witzel, “The Kashmiri Paṇḍits: Their Early History,” in *The Valley of Kashmir: The Making and Unmaking of a Composite Culture?* ed. Aparna Rao (Delhi: Manohar Publishers, 2008), 83.

10. Luther Obrock, “History at the End of History: Śrīvara's Jainatarāṅgiṇī,” *The Indian Economic and Social History Review* 50, no. 2 (2013): 222.

11. Hamsa Stainton, “Poetry and Prayer: Stotras in the Religious and Literary History of Kashmir” (PhD diss., Columbia University, 2016), 59.

12. Unfortunately, space is insufficient for a detailed survey of Śaiva metaphysics.

13. Mark Dyczkowski, *The Doctrine of Vibration: An Analysis of the Doctrines and Practices of Kashmir Shaivism* (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 2000), 17.

14. Stainton, “Poetry and Prayer,” 14.

In the fourteenth century, there was an expanding influx of immigrants to Kashmir from Central Asia, particularly scholars escaping Timurid persecution.¹⁵ Gradually, with the establishment of the first Muslim dynasty in Kashmir, the Shahmirī dynasty, Persian became the dominant, elite language of the Kashmir Valley, and a prolific culture of Persianate, Islamic, and Sufi poetry thrived, earning the region the titles “Iran Minor” (*Irān-i ṣaghīr*) and “Garden of Nightingales” (*Bāgh-i bulbul*) among early modern Persianate litterateurs. Particularly in the fifteenth century under the rule of the Shahmirī sultan Zayn al-‘Ābidīn, there were court-sanctioned translation efforts between Sanskrit and Persian, including translations of the Sanskrit epics into Persian and even a translation of Jāmī’s celebrated *Yūsufu Zulaykhā* into Sanskrit.¹⁶ Through the spread of both Jāmī’s poetry and the activities of the fourteenth century Kubrawī Sufi master, Mīr Sayyid ‘Alī Hamadānī, the Akbarī school of philosophical Sufism shaped the intellectual and literary horizons of Persian literary production in Kashmir.¹⁷

Concurrently, at this moment of transition from a mainly Sanskritic culture to a largely Persianate culture, a significant body of literature in the local vernacular, Kāshur, began to take shape, particularly among the early Rīshī Sufi ascetics.¹⁸ The primary genre of this early vernacular literature, known as *vākhs* (Sanskrit: “vāc,” or speech) or *shrūks* (Sanskrit: “śloka,” verse, and “śru,” hear), was derived from meters and forms of Sanskrit prosody. Kāshur poetry was largely an oral corpus at its inception, though there are manuscripts documenting these verses in subsequent centuries. Modern collections of the early poets were compiled formally in the nineteenth century during British colonial rule.¹⁹ In the eighteenth century, Kāshur poetry became increasingly influenced by the Persian language and its poetic genres. Over time, the *vākh* and *shrūk* were replaced by the Persianate genres of *qaṣīda*, *masnavī*, and *ghazal*.

Given this history, I posit that there are six frameworks which inform the milieu of Kāshur vernacular poetry. These are:

<i>Linguistic Frameworks:</i>	<i>Sanskrit</i>	<i>Persian</i>
<i>Philosophical Frameworks:</i>	<i>Kashmir Śaivism</i>	<i>Akbarī Sufism</i>
<i>Literary Frameworks:</i>	<i>Indic</i>	<i>Arabo-Persianate</i>

There is, of course, overlap between these categories, but this division reveals the polyvalence of the various concepts and ideas which inform the imaginal world of Rīshī Sufi poetry.

The Rīshī Sufis became synonymous with the Sufi group founded by Nund Rīshī, who was both a Kubrawī disciple and, according to the hagiographical tradition,

15. G. L. Tikku, *Persian Poetry in Kashmir, 1339–1846: An Introduction* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1971), 9.

16. Tikku, *Persian Poetry in Kashmir*, 16.

17. William Chittick, “Notes on Ibn ‘Arabi’s Influence in the Subcontinent,” *The Muslim World* 82, no. 3/4 (1992): 223–24.

18. Odin, *Lalla to Nuruddin*, 4–5.

19. These integral and important aspects of orality, textuality, colonialism, and power dynamics create interesting concerns regarding textual authority and authenticity which I do not have the space to explore in this paper. I hope to expand this analysis elsewhere.

a spiritual successor to Lal Ded, a famed Kashmiri Śaiva ascetic.²⁰ It is said, “. . . Nund Rīshī accumulated a number of ardent devotees and founded the Rīshī Order of Sufis.”²¹ The choice of the term Rīshī by Nund Rīshī was supposedly a conscious one, meant to link his group with the rīshī of Kashmir’s ancient past.²² These Rīshī Sufis are also acknowledged in later Persian chronicles, pointing in some way to their historic success in the Kashmir Valley. In the *Tarih-e Ḥassan*, an important Kashmiri Persian chronicle, the Rīshī are divided into three orders: the “Hindu” Rīshī, who preceded Nund Rīshī; Nund Rīshī and his contemporaries; and Nund Rīshī’s successors, who continued as a formal order until the eighteenth century.²³ “Rīshī Sufis” is thus not a modern, colonial term, but one indigenous to the sense of communal self-identification.

Given this conscious link with pre-Islamic, Śaiva, “Hindu” rīshīs, the Rīshī Sufi order developed an image in modern discourse as a syncretic religious movement defined by *kashmīriyyāt*. *Kashmīriyyāt*, a nebulous term in Kashmiri studies, has been defined as “. . . an ethos of religious and cultural tolerance and harmony between the majority Muslims and the minority Hindus peculiar to Kashmir,” “. . . a syncretic tradition created by the indigenous mystical tradition of Kashmir,” and, “. . . communal harmony, multiculturalism, and tolerance . . .”²⁴ Such a term is still used positively in contemporary scholarship on the Rīshī Sufis.²⁵ What this reveals is a problematic dichotomy between Kashmiri Islam qua the Rīshī Sufis and orthodox Sunni-normative Islam. The reflections of the Rīshī Sufis, most noticeable in their poetic corpus, are thus shunned as non-Islamic innovations. This is an inherently problematic discourse. I posit it is necessarily more nuanced; the Rīshī Sufi corpus enacts unique moments of Islamic religious and ethical reflection.

Rīshī Sufism as Polythetic Tradition: Considering Theoretical Frameworks

Several recent theoretical interventions may help reframe the discourse on the Rīshī Sufis. In considering an analysis of the Rīshī Sufi corpus, I propose several different, though mutually symbiotic, theoretical frameworks for thinking through Rīshī Sufi poetry as a religio-literary tradition: Carl Ernst’s concept of polythetic traditions, Tony Stewart’s theory of translation, and Shahab Ahmed’s notion of Islamic identity formation. Furthermore, the concept of Kashmiri poetry as a “multiform environment,” an analysis developed by Sonam Kachru and Jane Mikkelsen, will prepare us for reading Kashmiri Sufi poetry as loci of fruitful, immanent alignment of literary horizons.

20. Odin, *Lalla to Nuruddin*, 20.

21. Accardi, “Embedded Mystics,” 249.

22. Accardi, “Embedded Mystics,” 249.

23. Mudāsir, “Holy Lives,” 294.

24. Mudāsir, “Holy Lives,” 289.

25. See, for example, the introduction to Jaishree Odin’s text, *Lalla to Nuruddin: Rishi-Sufi Poetry of Kashmir: A Translation and Study*.

Carl Ernst, an influential contemporary scholar of South Asian Islam, overturns two important intellectual categories in the conceptualization of religion since the Protestant Reformation: religions as unconditioned essences and notions of religious syncretism. Through a textual and historical analysis of *The Pool of Nectar*, which, “. . . made available to Muslim readers certain practices associated with the Nath yogis and the teachings known as hatha [sic] yoga,”²⁶ Ernst argues that neither conceptualizations of religions as static entities nor theories of influence and syncretism among stable traditions can fully explain the porous practices and narratives which have emerged. Religions, when treated as homogeneous entities, are reified and oversimplified, making any historical change or internal complexity and diversity a deviation from a perceived norm. A polythetic analysis allows for “. . . numerous examples of . . . multiplex symbols, practices, and doctrines [to] be at work in any particular religious milieu.”²⁷ The polythetic approach encourages us to move beyond the search for source, influence, and stable boundaries which are “troubled” in different contexts.²⁸ Thus, I propose thinking with Ernst’s model in identifying the Rishī Sufi tradition as a polythetic tradition, informed by a variety of linguistic, philosophical, and literary frameworks giving rise to traditions always informed by local contexts.

In addition to Ernst’s proposals, Tony Stewart’s scholarship offers a helpful employment of translation theory which may enhance this study. In Stewart’s analysis of premodern, precolonial religious identity formation in Bengal, Stewart, like Ernst, recognizes the problematic issue of essentializing religious traditions and positing syncretic influence—“. . . syncretism assumes at the outset its own conclusions . . . by articulating the inappropriate alliance of two things that in their essential form are mutually exclusive . . .”²⁹ Stewart proposes a translation theory of textual and intellectual interaction among religious groups which more accurately portrays a dynamic process of encounter while not assuming syncretistic products of static entities. Stewart posits four models of religious encounter as translation: formal literal equivalence, refracted equivalence, dynamic equivalence, and metaphoric equivalence. While literary equivalence aims for literal translations of concepts, and reflection suggests a concern for approximations of meaning, the most interesting interactions come in the latter two stages. Dynamic equivalence accounts for both overlapping semantic systems and priority of cultural contexts which give meaning to various terms. The focus shifts from a concern for relaying precise content to one of honoring social contexts. Lastly, in intersemiotic interaction, extended, metaphorical constructs become shared metaphorical worlds where constellations of reference become increasingly tangled to the point where no single discourse or construct can account for all lived experience.³⁰ Such

26. Carl Ernst, “Situating Sufism and Yoga,” in *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society* 15, no. 1 (2005): 21.

27. Ernst, “Situating Sufism and Yoga,” 21.

28. “Polythetic,” is defined in the *Oxford English Dictionary* as, “[r]elating to or sharing a number of characteristics which occur commonly in members of a group or class, but none of which is essential for membership of that group or class.” While a polythetic analysis of religions does not originate with Ernst, he shapes the model by applying it to the specific case study of Sufism and Yoga. As such, I use this as a theoretical model for analysis.

29. Tony Stewart, “In Search of Equivalence: Conceiving Muslim-Hindu Encounter through Translation Theory,” in *History of Religions* 40, no. 3 (2001): 270.

30. *Ibid.*, 278–283.

a theory of interpretation helps us move from conceptualizing religions as the cross-breeding of static entities to one of fluid porosity, a model which echoes and enhances Ernst's concept of polythetic tradition.

To complement these theoretical frameworks, Shahab Ahmed offers new ways to think about traditions, literatures, and cultures which might be classified as "Islamic." Ahmed attempts to account for both plurality and apparent contradiction in phenomena identified as "Islamic" by proposing a tripartite system of hermeneutical engagement and meaning-making among Muslims with the spatiality of Revelation as Pretext (the Unseen, the *lawḥ mahfūz*), Text (the Quranic and Prophetic revelations), and Con-Text (the various ways humans have engaged with Pre-Text and Text in various cultural and historical milieux).³¹ Such a system suggests, "... meaningful ambiguity and ... contradiction are inherent to, and arise directly from, the structural spatiality of the very phenomenon of Revelation itself."³² Such a proposal allows us to identify Rīshī Sufism not only as a polythetic tradition engaged in intersemiotic translation processes, but also as a fully and authentically *Islamic* tradition.

Lastly, these theoretical insights can be applied not only to the historical, religious phenomenon of Rīshī Sufism, but also to the literary corpus they have produced. Sonam Kachru and Jane Mikkelson's recent scholarship on the poetry of Lal Dad offers helpful frameworks for this. In the corpus of Lal Ded, Kachru and Mikkelson see an example of an indigenous, immanent comparative form of poetics which "... afford[s] the conceptual and aesthetic alignment of two pre-modern cosmopolitan literary and religious imaginaires, Sanskrit and Persian."³³ Lal Ded's Kāshur verses foster "multiform environments," suggesting to the reader, "... not to think of them as being plagued by variants but, rather, as being blessed by being sites of variants."³⁴ This opens a space for textual alignment, "... the interpretively generous and reciprocal repositioning of two thought systems ..."³⁵ This framework of multiform environments allows for an inherently productive navigation of difference—symbolic, lexical, or otherwise—in the space of a Kāshur poem.

My analysis assumes that Rīshī Sufism is a polythetic tradition marked by the creation of an inter-semiotic imaginal religio-literary landscape. As such, it is an authentically Islamic tradition, defined by a Kashmiri Con-Text with a Pre-Textual episteme informed by both Persianate Islamic and Indic Śaiva metaphysical concepts. Rīshī Sufi poetic texts serve as shared metaphorical worlds and multiform environments, becoming productive sites of navigating and integrating different imaginal horizons. With the dichotomy between Rīshī Sufism and Sunni Islam now untenable, previous anxieties "... about textual authority, and about the very nature of Islam,"³⁶ fade away. It is in this context we will pursue a close reading of Rīshī Sufi verses.

31. Shahab Ahmed, *What is Islam? The Importance of Being Islamic* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2016), 349.

32. Ahmed, *What is Islam?* 544.

33. Sonam Kachru and Jane Mikkelson, "The Mind Is Its Own Place: Of Lalla's Comparative Poetics," *University of Toronto Quarterly* 88, no. 2 (2019): 125.

34. Kachru and Mikkelson, "The Mind Is Its Own Place," 127.

35. *Ibid.*

36. Ernst, "Situating Sufism and Yoga," 42.

Our “Spiritual Grandmother”:³⁷ The Poems of Lal Ded

Having situated the Rīshī Sufi tradition, we now look at three figures and their poetic verses. The first figure is Lal Ded (d. 1392), a renowned Śaiva yogini in the lineage of the famed teacher, Vasugupta. She was known for wandering the Kashmiri hills, singing her *vākhs* to anyone who would listen. Lal Ded, an endearing term which means, “our dear granny,” was also known as Laleshwari by those writing in Sanskrit and Lalla ‘Ārifa (the woman gnostic) or Rābī‘a al-thānawiyya (the second Rābī‘a)³⁸ in the Persian chronicles. According to these chronicles, she apparently took Sufi teachings from the great Akbarī teacher, Mīr Sayyid ‘Alī Hamadānī.³⁹

Another important hagiographic note concerns her role as both spiritual teacher and mother of Nund Rīshī.⁴⁰ The popular tale in the Persian hagiographies is that Nund Rīshī, as a newborn, refused his mother’s milk and was on the verge of starving to death. It was not until Lal Ded passed by and offered her milk that he ate and was nourished. Whether or not such an event happened is of little importance; it affirms, in the communal imagination, both Nund Rīshī’s initiation as a Muslim disciple of a Śaiva ascetic and Lal Ded’s initiation as the first rīshī of the Rīshī Sufi order.⁴¹ What is also interesting is the way in which these premodern texts initiate a Śaiva yogini poetess into a lineage of famous female Islamic mystics and gnostics. Lal Ded’s works reveal a dazzling array of influences that came to define Rīshī Sufi poetry. Her verses were widely popularized and are chanted even today in Kashmiri mosques and shrines.⁴² I pursue several aspects of Lal Ded’s verses—an expressed religiosity, polythetic articulations, and ethical reflection in a multiform environment.

First,⁴³ Lal Ded, in several verses, expresses her practice as a Śaiva yogini:

*Lord! I’ve never known who I really am, or You.
I threw my love away on this lousy carcass
And never figured it out: You’re me, I’m You.
All I ever did was doubt: Who am I? Who are you?⁴⁴*

This *vākh* reveals both her Śaiva yogic practices (“I threw my love away on this lousy carcass”) and her familiarity with Śaiva metaphysical drama of the unity of Śiva and creation as expressions of a singular absolute consciousness (“You’re me, I’m You). Elsewhere, her verses admit an abiding familiarity with Śaiva cosmology:

37. These subtitles are inspired by a quote from a Kashmiri friend, Mushtaq ul-Haq Raqeeb, during an encounter in Srinagar in August 2018, “If Lal Ded is our spiritual grandmother, and Nund Rīshī is our patron saint, then Shamas Faqir is our national poet.”

38. This is an allusion to the famous female Sufi figure, Rābī‘a al-‘Adawiyya.

39. Hamid Naseem Rafiabadi, *Islam and Sufism in Kashmir: Some Lesser Known Dimensions* (Delhi: Sarup Book Publishers, 2009), 133.

40. Nund Rīshī, the second poet for analysis, will be discussed in the next section of the paper.

41. Again, according to the Persian chronicles, the rīshī are ancient. However, Lal Ded becomes the first person to initiate the new “era” of the Rīshīs as Nund Rīshī’s teacher and spiritual mother.

42. While in Kashmir in summer 2018, I visited the shrine of Mīr Sayyid ‘Alī Hamadānī for the anniversary of his death. At the base of the tomb, a visitor sat reading from a booklet of Lal Ded’s poems.

43. I am unable to analyze the full poetic corpus of any Rīshī Sufi poet. I only offer an analysis of examples which I think contribute to our understanding of Rīshī Sufi poetry as a polythetic tradition.

44. Lal Ded (trans. Ranjit Hoskote), *Lalla: The Poems of Lal Ded* (Delhi: Penguin Books, 2011), 25.

*Word or thought, normal or Absolute, they mean nothing here.
Even the mudrās of silence won't get you entry.
We're beyond even [Ś]iva and [Ś]akti here.
This Beyond that's beyond all we can name, that's your lesson!⁴⁵*

Referencing the Śaiva doctrine of absolute consciousness beyond conceptualizations of either divine transcendence (Śiva) or immanence (Śakti), Lal Ded firmly establishes her grounding in a Kashmiri Śaiva metaphysical framework. Many of her words, drawing on earlier Sanskrit poetry and philosophy, also root these verses in a predominantly Sanskritic linguistic framework. In particular, this verse seems to echo an earlier Sanskrit Śaiva stotra, found in Utpaladeva's Śivastotrāvalī:

*This is a state where nothing remains to be known,
Nothing to be done, no other yoga nor any perceptivity;
What knowledge remains is the offering of the universe to be consummated
In the fire of pure consciousness which reigns supreme.⁴⁶*

Both verses echo a Śaiva spiritual ideal of seeking union with Śiva in absolute consciousness, which is the ground of being.

Elsewhere, Lal Ded develops an ethical vision rooted in antinomian evaluations of brahmanical puritanical religious authority:

*An idol is but a lump of stone, a temple is but a lump of stone
From crown to sole, each is of the same substance.⁴⁷
O, learned Pandit! What is this to which you offer worship?
Bind your mind and your vital airs.⁴⁸*

Here, religious learning and practice without inner experience is foolish and empty. This antinomian, experience-based discourse is developed in several poems. Despite these ethical suggestions in the poems, it does not reveal a great deal of lexical or literary alignment. However, we see the expansion of these Sanskritic, Śaiva frameworks and a polyvalent, polythetic tradition emerging in other poems:

*Śiva is everywhere, know Him as the sun
Know not the Hindu different to the Muslim
If truly wise, know your own self
That alone is the way to [Ṣaḥeb].⁴⁹*

Here, we see the creation of a direct equivalence between Śiva and Ṣaḥeb, a Persianate word for God, along with a verse which may reveal some resonance between Śaiva and Akbarī metaphysical concepts of Divine unity. The lexical intermingling of both Sanskritic and Persianate concepts of deity is significant for,

45. Lal Ded (trans. Ranjit Hoskote), I, Lalla, 115.

46. N. K. Kotru, *Śivastotrāvalī of Utpaladeva: Sanskrit Text with Introduction, English Translation and Glossary* (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1985), 60.

47. I have edited Grierson's translation slightly to reflect the norms of contemporary English usage.

48. Lal Ded (trans. George Grierson and Lionel Barnett), *Lallā-Vākyāni, or the Wise Sayings of Lal Ded, a Mystic Poetess of Ancient Kashmir* (London: Royal Asiatic Society, 1920), 39.

49. Neerja Mattoo, "Syncretic Tradition and the Creative Life: Some Kashmiri Mystic Poets," in *The Parchment of Kashmir: History, Society, and Polity*, ed. Nyla Ali Khan (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), 94.

as Kachru and Mikkelson remind us, “[a]n entire literary history resides in [each] small word.”⁵⁰ Śiva and Ṣaḥeb are not merely words; they carry entire significant histories about what the deity is and how it operates in the world.

Additionally, she sings:

*I can't believe this happened to me!
A hoopoe cut off my claws with his beak.
The truth of all my dreams hit me in one line:
I, Lalla, find myself on a lake, no shore in sight.*⁵¹

The mention of the hoopoe bird here is also a significant allusion to an important symbol in the Persian Sufi tradition. It is an image not found in Sanskrit poetry, but in Farīd ud-Dīn ‘Aṭṭār’s famous work, the *Manṭiq al-ṭayr*, one of the most influential Persian Sufi *masnavīs*. Again, this simple word carries with it an entire imaginary of meaning, reference, and textual interweaving. The hoopoe is a representative of the spiritual guide, leading the birds—the readers of the text—on the path of spiritual cultivation. The cutting of Lal Ded’s claws is significant as it more closely alludes to the Śaiva yogic practice of sensory control. There is an interesting alignment occurring in this verse—the hoopoe as a representative Islamic figure is engaging in a representative Śaiva practice of yogic sensory control. Here we see the embodiment of a multiform environment where the lexical range and the archives to which they are linked flourish in creative ways. The imaginaries are rearticulated to express new ethical visions and values.

These two poems reveal the boundaries of a unique Rīshī Sufi ethical imaginary. In the former, an ethical imperative of self-cultivation is forwarded, and fixation on caste and communal boundaries is eschewed. The image of Ṣaḥeb—derived from the Arabic root ṣ-ḥ-b, which, along with its lexical variants, connotes friendship, companionship, and stewardship—adds a depth of intimacy to the poem. The poem, in its lexical and imaginal choices, performs the ethical vision it attempts to convey: differences—between Ṣaḥeb and Śiva, between Hindu and Muslim—are subsumed in the quest to know oneself. This is an ethical vision that inherently results from the polyvalent, multiform environment created by this meeting of the Sanskrit Śaiva and Persianate Sufi imaginary horizons. Such visions are developed further in the writings of Nund Rīshī.

Our “Patron Saint”: The Poems of Nund Rīshī

Our second figure of analysis is Nund Rīshī (d. 1440), also known as Sheikh ul-‘Ālam, who was the formal founder of the Rīshī Sufi order and supposedly was a contemporary of both Mīr Sayyid ‘Alī Hamadānī and Lal Ded. Again, Nund Rīshī was writing at a time of socio-political transition during the ascendance of the Shahmīrī dynasty, so his works reflect an antinomian spirit in opposition to rigid

50. Kachru and Mikkelson, “The Mind Is Its Own Place,” 129.

51. Lal Ded (trans. Hoskote), *I, Lalla*, 70.

religious authority and mirrors themes in the verses of Lal Ded. He cultivated a wide following in Kashmir, “. . . both Kashmiri Pandits and Kashmiri Muslims claim him as their spiritual guide, the former referring to him as Shazanand (one who has attained ultimate truth) and the latter calling his verses the *Koshur* [sic] Quran.”⁵² The Persian hagiographies offer a nebulous portrayal of Nund Rīshī, casting him in a number of seemingly conflicting ways as both a standard-bearer for “Islamic orthodoxy” in the Valley and as someone initiated into both Śaiva and Sufi lineages while espousing an antinomian message against the Islamic mullahs, or religious authorities.⁵³ Let us consider how a polythetic tradition is constructed in his poetic universe.

First, he roots himself in a seemingly “orthodox” Islamic identity:

*Knowledge is great, so recite the sacred word [kalima].
On following Muhammad, you will walk on the path awake.
A year of good deeds, a heap of pearls.
A feast of devotion—He is on that path.*⁵⁴

The mention and celebration of the *kalima*, here a clear reference to the *shahada*,⁵⁵ represents Nund Rīshī’s perceived location as an orthodox Muslim in the corpus. Elsewhere, we see reference to Nund Rīshī’s admiration for his Śaiva spiritual teacher, Lal Ded, with particular praise for her excellence as a tantric yogic practitioner. There are two versions of a popular verse as they developed as an oral tradition:

*That Lalla of Padmānpura—
She drank nectar by mouthfuls.
She saw Śiva everywhere.
O, Lord, bestow a similar boon upon me.*⁵⁶

or

*It was Lalla of Padmanpora
Who drank nectar by mouthfuls.
A beloved avatar she was to us, too.
O, Lord, bestow a similar boon upon me!*⁵⁷

Nund Rīshī, in the space of these verses, links himself directly to the Śaiva tradition of his teacher. There is an element of inherent canon formation occurring here. Lal Ded, as a Śaiva yogini, is incorporated into the framework of Rīshī Sufism, and thus, so are her spiritual insights and visions. Lal Ded’s consumption of nectar (*amṛta*)—an important Hindu and Śaiva image—occurs in several places in the corpus. Here, the consumption of nectar becomes a boon, a spiritual gift to be sought. That this

52. Chitrlekha Zutshi, *Languages of Belonging: Islam, Regional Identity, and the Making of Kashmir* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), 23.

53. Odin, *Lalla to Nuruddin*, 13-14, 114-15.

54. Odin, *Lalla to Nuruddin*, 106.

55. Odin, *Lalla to Nuruddin*, 78.

56. Odin, *Lalla to Nuruddin*, 79.

57. T.N. Dhar, “Saints and Sages of Kashmir,” in *Kashmir and Its People: Studies in the Evolution of Kashmiri Society*, ed. M.K. Kaw (New Delhi: A.P.H. Publishing Corporation, 2004), 195.

is the stable concern in both variants is telling, as is the fact that both variations—seeing Śiva everywhere and becoming an avatar—frame Islamic devotion within the religious imaginary of Śaiva practice. Elsewhere, acquiring this nectar becomes central to the goals of Islamic worship. The image of churning is taken up by Nund Rishī in referring to his own student:

*My Zaina churns the nectar—
He renounced samsara [the world] with honor.
The disciple surpassed his preceptor.
Bless me like that, God!*⁵⁸

Though the image of churning nectar figures prominently in several of Nund Rishī's verses, here it is framed as a matter of spiritual pedagogy. The goal of Nund Rishī in raising his student was to teach him to “churn nectar”—to churn the vital life force in Śaiva cosmology. He even wishes this for himself. The acquisition of nectar so that one may cross *samsara*, a concept of cyclical suffering and rebirth derived solely from the Śaiva imaginary, becomes the pinnacle of Islamic Sufi spiritual development. That a symbol drawn from the Sanskrit Śaiva imaginary serves as the summation of Nund Rishī's devout Muslim student is another example of the performance of this polyvalence. Churning nectar becomes the goal on the path of Muhammad, nectar, the goal of Islamic devotion.

Like Lal Ded, Nund Rishī offers an ethical vision rooted in antinomian rejection of hypocritical religious authority:

*You are Mullahs—why are you divided?
You are ready to cheat one another.
You acquire knowledge to fulfill your desires.
You get angry on seeing a guest.
You are proud that you are the chosen ones.
Not one in a thousand amongst you will escape there.*⁵⁹

and

*Caste is of no use in fancy gatherings.
Caste is not written on one's face.
Caste won't make your body parts impure.
If you perform your duties—there is no caste.*⁶⁰

The messages are clear—traditional structures of religious authority have become corrupted, and there is a need to return to a purer spirituality that is not based solely on transmitted religious authority. There is an antinomian spirit to the disparaging of caste, echoing Lal Ded's own ethical concerns with communal boundaries restricting inner contemplative experience.

58. Odin, *Lalla to Nuruddin*, 104.

59. Odin, *Lalla to Nuruddin*, 115.

60. Odin, *Lalla to Nuruddin*, 125.

It is interesting to compare the image and wording of the former poem with Lal Ded's *vākh*. Here, Nund Rīshī speaks of the need to "perform your duties," (*a'māl*), which is an Arabo-Persian word meaning acts in the world. This differs slightly from Lal Ded's call to "know your own self." These are two divergent ethical visions, drawn from different frameworks of the Kashmiri polyvalent tradition. Lal Ded is drawing from the Śaiva concepts of yogic practice as a way of cultivating true spiritual vision, whereas Nund Rīshī is drawing from rich prophetic and Quranic references to *a'māl* as acts accruing merit. These different choices skillfully reveal the range of possibilities of ethical vision based on where and when the imaginal horizons encounter.

Elsewhere, cross-pollinated multiform environments are cultivated:

*If you listen to truth, curb the five [senses]
 Otherwise, you bend the body and call it Namaz!
 If you unite Śiva with the void
 That is the inner Namaz, indeed.⁶¹*

In this critical verse, we see the intertextual overlay of an explicitly Islamic image of ritual prayer (*namaz*) and Śaiva concepts of consciousness and emptiness (*Śivasta/Śunyahas*) within a single *shrūk*. The culmination of Islamic practice, *namaz*, is framed within a Śaiva paradigm of tantric union. Here, we see the potential revelation of an intersemiotic world developing in Nund Rīshī's poetry, where practices associated with Śaivism and Islam are incorporated into a single devotional poem. This verse aligns with the ethical vision inculcated in both Lal Ded's and Nund Rīshī's verses analyzed above; there is an emphasis on personal experience and inner practice. Whereas we noticed a divergence of ethical vision above, based on the figures drawing from distinct frameworks, here there is the creation of a multiform ethical vision, one in which ritual action (*namaz*) becomes a yogic practice ("curb the senses"). New ethical visions are formed by an integration of various imaginal possibilities in the space of a few, short verses.

Nund Rīshī's verses expand the perceived contours of what it means to be a Sufi, reflecting a hybridity of themes and attitudes that would come to define the Rīshīs in the hagiographies and by later scholars. The verses become a means for navigating the imagined limits of religious and ethical vision, enacting a practice that is both wide enough to accept the "*kalima*" of Islam while striving for the tantric insights attained by Lal Ded, the beloved Śaiva avatar who drank nectar by the mouthful, culminating in an image of Islamic ritual prayer fulfilled in Śaiva tantric practice. These poems serve as archives of communal memory and imagination, allowing for the flourishing of a polythetic, multiform ethical environment.

61. Odin, *Lalla to Nuruddin*, 133. I am thankful to M.H. Zaffar for providing this alternative rendering of the verse.

Our “National Poet”: The Poems of Shamas Faqīr

The third poet I wish to analyze briefly is a modern Kashmiri poet, Shamas Faqīr (d. ca. 1901). Very little scholarship is available in English on his life and work; yet, he remains an enduringly important figure in Kashmir’s literary history. Faqīr is one of the most beloved Rīshī Sufi poets in Kashmir today,⁶² and his poetry is recited at gatherings and shrines across the Valley. He was an initiate into the Qādiriyya Sufi order and is reported to have travelled south to study with religious teachers, *pīrs*, in the Punjab and elsewhere. In imitation of his spiritual ancestors, Lal Ded and Nund Rīshī, he was also a wandering ascetic. His verses, too, reveal a wide range of ideas, concerns, and themes, and illustrate the construction of a polythetic multiform. I present here a yet unpublished translation of one of Shamas Faqīr’s *ghazals*:

*I lost my poverty in the Poverty, and no one cares about the poverty,
I followed the Śāstras that melted the iron within,
And I was left as tempered gold.
I travelled from one birth to another,
I would have told you, but you don’t pay heed.
I would have told you all that happened,
I would have told you that I came back with empty hands.
The enlightened one taught me only one lesson,
and let all knowledge and ignorance be swept away.
I thought again and again about purity,
my passion bestowed me with the vision divine.
I am you and you are me
as I attained the sixth sense (ṣaṣkal)—
It was a journey through the six forests
As I measured the soul,
As I drank the nectar,
and witnessed the divine light at the very beginning.
Where sun and the moon are one and the same,
I was blessed there with the vision divine.
My search for You took me to Emptiness (Śūnya),
The whole sky came in my lap.
I left the body and attained purity,
And I witnessed the time of Brahman.
I traveled through expanses and depths,
Following the ways of the brahmin sage.
I lived in the dream and attained both turiya (turya) and soshaph (suṣuptiḥ),
I travelled the world with full honor,
I held my beliefs and faith dear,
And offered prayers with deepest love,*

62. While Persian chronicles depict the Rīshī Sufi order ending formally in the eighteenth century, individual figures, religious teachers (*pīrs*), and poets continue to be identified as “Rīshī Sufis” to the present day.

*I served Him in the best ways.
 I extinguished the burning pyre
 and he went underground carrying the oven
 I met Lord Shiva with deep passion
 and received immortal bliss.
 Shamas Faqīr emerges by imbibing Om
 as my tongue is tied to it
 I burned myself and took control
 Of all the seven holes (senses)
 I became the pearl chain of the royal swan.⁶³*

As a modern Qādirī Sufi, Shamas Faqīr displays a stunning familiarity with Śaiva ideas and concepts. We are confronted by a dazzling array of images drawn from the local Śaiva Con-Text. In the first stanza, he explicitly refers to *Śāstras*, not the Quran, as a referent religious text. He mentions his travel through *samsaric* rebirths and his control of a sixth spiritual sense espoused in Śaivism. Most interestingly, he mentions highly theoretical concepts from Upanishadic (and thus, both Vedantic and Śaiva) metaphysics: *turya* and *suṣuptiḥ*, the highest states of consciousness in Śaiva thought. He meets Śiva (not Ṣaḥeb), imbibes the sacred Vedic mantra, *Om*, and drinks nectar before engaging in yogic practices. Interestingly, this poem almost exclusively draws from the Śaiva imaginary for its impactful and significant metaphors and allusions. Conversely, what is essential yet untranslatable is that this poem is a finely crafted *ghazal*, following all the major conventions of classical Persian literary composition, including a *qāfiya* (ending rhyme) and *takhalluṣ* (self-referent of the poet in the final verse). The poem thus represents a significant enfolding of several religious and literary frameworks, pointing toward the polythetic nature of this tradition.

Like his literary and spiritual ancestors, Lal Ded and Nund Rīshī, Faqīr continues to weave an ethical imaginary rooted in cultivating personal religious experience (with constant allusions and repetitions of the first person “I” along with the image of drinking nectar). Like the verses of Lal Ded and Nund Rīshī, he cultivates a polyvalent ethical vision rooted in both Śaiva yogic sensory control and Sufi practices of devotional prayer. His use of polyvalence as a multiform environment is overwhelming with layers of reference, symbol, and allusion. As a later Rīshī Sufi, he draws on the earlier imaginal alignments of Lal Ded, Nund Rīshī, and dozens of other Rīshī Sufi poets in-between. In his poetry, Shamas Faqīr comes to embody the churning of nectar on the path of Muhammad’s followers.

63. Faqīr, Shamas, *Kulliyāt Shamas Faqīr*, ed. Āfāq ‘Azīz (Srinagar: Nund Rishi Cultural Society, 2002), 207-208. I am thankful to Dr. Sajad Wani of the University of Kashmir for supplying his original working translation of this text. I have modified his translation in certain lines for lexical clarity.

Conclusion

Here, I have attempted to explore how the Rīshī Sufi poetic corpus constructs multiform environments rooted in a localized polythetic tradition. Rīshī Sufism is defined by the creation of an inter-semiotic religio-literary landscape and an authentically *Islamic* tradition, defined by a Kashmiri Con-Text with a Pre-Textual episteme informed by both Persianate Islamic and Sanskritic Śaiva imaginaries. Such theoretical reevaluations of the Rīshī Sufi tradition deconstruct a vision of *kashmīriyyāt* as a dichotomy between Rīshī Sufi Islam as a “syncretic” Islam and a Sunni-normative, orthodox Islam. A close reading of three Kashmiri Rīshī Sufi poets—Lal Ded, Nund Rīshī, and Shamas Faqīr—illustrates the polythetic tradition at work, producing unique ethical and religious insights at the heart of its multiform, intertextual environment. As only partial representatives of a much larger corpus, these readings just scratch the surface of the productive sites of rearticulation and imaginal encounter in Rīshī Sufi poetry. While much more work remains to be done, this initial analysis may pave the way for further studies of the Kashmiri Sufi corpus.

Bibliography

- Accardi, Dean. "Embedded Mystics: Writing Lal Ded and Nund Rishi into the Kashmiri Landscape." In *Kashmir: History, Politics, Representation*. Edited by Chitralkha Zutshi, 247–264. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018.
- Ahmed, Shahab. *What is Islam? The Importance of Being Islamic*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2016.
- Chittick, William. "Notes on Ibn Arabi's Influence in the Subcontinent." *The Muslim World* 82, no. 3/4 (1992): 219–241.
- Dhar, T. N. "Saints and Sages of Kashmir." In *Kashmir and Its People: Studies in the Evolution of Kashmiri Society*. Edited by M.K. Kaw, 189–220. New Delhi: A.P.H. Publishing Corporation, 2004.
- Dyczkowski, Mark. *The Doctrine of Vibration: An Analysis of the Doctrines and Practices of Kashmir Shaivism*. Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 2000.
- Ernst, Carl. "Situating Sufism and Yoga." *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society* 1 (2005): 15–43.
- Faqir, Shamas. *Kuliyāt Shamas Faqīr*. Edited by Āfāq 'Azīz. Srinagar: Nund Rishi Cultural Society, 2002.
- Kachru, Sonam and Jane Mikkelson. "The Mind Is Its Own Place: Of Lalla's Comparative Poetics." *University of Toronto Quarterly* 88, no. 2 (2019): 125–141.
- Kalla, K. L. *The Literary Heritage of Kashmir*. Delhi: Mittal Publications, 1985.
- Kaul, T. N. *Gems of Kashmiri Literature*. Delhi: Sanchar Publication House, 1996.
- Kotru, N. K. *Śivastotrāvalī of Utpaladeva: Sanskrit Text with Introduction, English Translation and Glossary*. Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1985.
- Lal Ded (Lalla). I, *Lalla: The Poems of Lal Dēd*. Trans. Ranjit Hoskote. New Delhi: Penguin, 2011.
- _____. *Lallā-Vākyāni, or the Wise Sayings of Lal Ded, a Mystic Poetess of Ancient Kashmir*. Translated by Sir George Abraham Grierson and Lionel D. Barnett. London: Royal Asiatic Society, 1920.
- Mattoo, Neerja. "Syncretic Tradition and the Creative Life: Some Kashmiri Mystic Poets." In *The Parchment of Kashmir: History, Society, and Polity*. Edited by Nyla Ali Khan, 87–100. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012.
- Mudasir, Mufti. "Holy Lives as Texts: Saints and the Fashioning of Kashmir's Muslim Identity." *Philological Encounters* 1 (2016): 288–312.
- Obrock, Luther. "History at the End of History: Śrīvara's Jainataranginī." *The Indian Economic and Social History Review* 2 (2013): 221–236.
- Odin, Jaishree. *Lalla to Nuruddin: Rishi-Sufi Poetry of Kashmir: A Translation and Study*. Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 2013.
- Rafiabadi, Hamid Naseem. *Islam and Sufism in Kashmir: Some Lesser Known Dimensions*. Delhi: Sarup Book Publishers, 2009.
- Stainton, Hamsa. "Poetry and Prayer: Stotras in the Religious and Literary History of Kashmir." PhD dissertation, Columbia University, 2013.
- Stewart, Tony. "In Search of Equivalence: Conceiving Muslim-Hindu Encounter through Translation Theory." *History of Religions* 40, no. 3 (2001): 260–287.
- Tikku, G. L. *Persian Poetry in Kashmir, 1339–1846: An Introduction*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1971.
- Witzel, Michael. "The Kashmiri Pañḍits: Their Early History." In *The Valley of Kashmir: The Making and Unmaking of a Composite Culture?* Edited by Aparna Rao, 37–95. Delhi: Manohar Publishers, 2008.
- Zutshi, Chitralkha. *Languages of Belonging: Islam, Regional Identity, and the Making of Kashmir*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2004.
- _____. *Kashmir's Contested Pasts: Narratives, Sacred Geographies, and the Historical Imagination*. Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2014.