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Translucent Citizenship: *Khwaja Sira* Activism and Alternatives to Dissent in Pakistan

Faris A. Khan

- 1 In recent years, the term “*khwaja sira*” has been appropriated and promoted by non-normatively gendered Pakistanis as a respectable alternative to the general public’s pejorative use of the term “*hijra*.” These attempts to empower and change the public image of gender-ambiguous subjects both coincided with and was spurred on by the Pakistani Supreme Court’s decision to grant rights and privileges to *khwaja siras* in a series of rulings passed between 2009 and 2012.¹ While community activists were primarily engaged in public advocacy, the state sought to regulate and “mainstream” *khwaja siras* through legal and policy developments, and to this end, the judiciary aimed to devise a system to manage this segment of the population.
- 2 In this paper, I draw on and develop James Scott’s theorizing on indigenous resistance to examine the practices of *khwaja sira* activists who sidestepped the trappings of anti-nationalism and dissent by anticipating potential pitfalls and avoiding any possibility of being accused of anti-establishment and anti-Islamic activities. Instead, they employed forms of identification and refusal that not only impeded potential allegations of anti-nationalism but also complicated notions of dissent through engagement in modes of participation and resistance that privileged ambiguity over certitude. Second, I argue that underpinning such a politics is the *khwaja sira* desire for partial incorporation into the state’s ambit, as citizens that are at once legally and culturally recognized and accepted, and also relatively self-governing and only partially intelligible to the state and society. It is this condition of translucency that offered *khwaja siras* the ability to maintain a degree of autonomy from state control and to evade certain forms of social and political persecution.
- 3 Drawing on the ethnographic research I conducted among both activist and non-activist *khwaja siras* in Karachi between 2011 and 2013, I suggest that many *khwaja siras* practiced and desired what I refer to as a form of translucent citizenship—a mode of

belonging which involves not only demands for equal rights from the state but also the right to remain hazy to broader publics. This condition of ambiguity allows newly recognized constituents to remain somewhat elusive, and thereby retain partial sovereignty of the kind that was enjoyed prior to state appropriation and attempts at social and economic assimilation. It can also serve as an escape from a range of oppressive structures and relations, including potential allegations of immorality and political and religious dissent. The translucent citizen views the state with skepticism, on the one hand regarding it as a paternalistic guardian and a gracious rights-granting benefactor, but on the other hand approaching it with trepidation as an overbearing and coercive authoritarian entity. Accordingly, these peripheral groups aspire to occupy a space that is neither located squarely within the state and society's core nor outside of it. Put differently, translucent citizenship combines the best of both worlds; it aims to reach empowerment through political participation, state recognition and cultural acceptance, while seeking to sustain the many freedoms encapsulated within indigenous patterns of identification and organization, through modes of resistance to fully being "seen" by the state and society.

- 4 To clarify, the key question underlying this article relates to *khwaja sira* activism and its implications for *khwaja siras'* intended positioning vis-à-vis the society and the nation. Specifically, what forms of deliberate and discursive practices did *khwaja sira* leaders engage in and what do their strategies reveal about the kind of relationship activists desired and enacted as citizens of the state and society? My use of "citizen" throughout this article should not be understood exclusively in state and juridical terms merely to reference an individual with a collection of rights and obligations. Rather, drawing from Bryan Turner (1993), I view citizenship "as a set of [characteristics and] practices (juridical, political, economic and cultural)" (p. 2) that define people as recognized members of a community and that have consequences for the flow of resources to them. Citizenship then broadly references diverse modes of recognition, membership, and belonging within a variety of collectives, which may include, but are not limited to, national, religious and sociocultural formations.
- 5 My argument in this essay builds upon the scant scholarship on gender non-conformity in Pakistan to further an understanding of contemporary *khwaja sira* politics and the forms of inclusion for which many aspire within state/society space. Much of the existing literature draws on Gayatri Reddy's (2005) ethnographic work on *hijras* in Hyderabad, India, in which the anthropologist disturbs conceptions of alternative genders as fixed categories by examining the many axes of identity and demonstrating their multiplicity. While Reddy explains the plurality and mutability of gender identity as experienced and performed by *hijras*, scholars studying the situation in Pakistan have focused on the diversity and contradictions in the colonial and postcolonial state's interpretation of gender non-normativity. Jeffrey Redding (2015), for instance, provides a legal analysis of the events surrounding the 2009 Supreme Court case to demonstrate that conceptions of gender and identity are "fluid and in flux in contemporary Pakistan" (p. 258–59). Similarly, Shahnaz Khan has argued that the colonial-era disagreements pertaining to the regulation of sex/gender variance (2016b:27) and the conflation of distinct categories of sex/gender non-normative people (2016a:226) produced contradictions that not only are alive and well in present-day Pakistan but also enable "trans* individuals to creatively negotiate and expand the spaces they inhabit" (2016b:11). Both authors' arguments parallel my claim that dominant understandings regarding *khwaja siras* (and gender non-conforming people more

broadly) are multiple and lacking in clarity. Advancing this line of thought, I argue that this state of indeterminacy is partly responsible for producing *khwaja siras* as translucent subjects, nebulous and indistinct to the wider society and the state, a condition that prominent *khwaja sira* activists wished to preserve even as they demanded rights and recognition. This condition of in-betweenness is echoed in Claire Pamment's (2010) discussion on the exclusion of Pakistani *hijras*, who according to the author, are not completely sequestered from the social order despite being peripheral subjects, partly because they challenge their social and legal marginalization by performatively subverting "normative sociopolitical codes" (p. 31–32). While the *hijras* in Pamment's text appear as liminal figures striving to carve out a "third space" for themselves through both political engagement and a critique of the hegemonic power structure, I view *khwaja siras* as subjects, betwixt and between state/society space who not only demand citizenship rights—including the right to political participation—but also indicate a desire for privacy and obscurity.

Partial and ambiguous

- 6 In Pakistan's deeply hierarchical cultural context, social, economic and political marginalization are produced through numerous vectors of difference, including, but not limited to, class, religion and sect, gender and sexuality, and caste and ethnicity. Despite the enduring debate about its proper role in national and civic domains, Islam is a pervasive presence in the everyday life of the country's Muslim majority population. Within this religious context, it is not unusual for non-Muslims (e.g., Christians and Hindus), those declared non-Muslim by the state (i.e., Ahmedis), and those who diverge from dominant Islam (i.e., non-Sunni Muslim communities and gender and sexual minorities) to be stigmatized, disenfranchised and subjected to violence. Cases of blasphemy, for instance, have taken center stage in recent years with celebrities and ordinary folk alike being accused of and punished for blasphemous speech by both the society and state.² Further, Pakistan's male-dominated, patriarchal social structure is largely characterized by gender segregation, patrilineality and the centrality of the institution of marriage. Commonplace within this gender framework is the control of women, the devaluation of feminine traits, and prejudice and violence against those who deviate from the cultural norms of morality. For instance, there are numerous reported cases of women being physically assaulted, marred with acid, or raped as retribution for individual or familial transgressions (Jamal 2006; Khan 2012; Toor 2007). Persecution also occurs along communal lines between members of ethnically and linguistically distinct communities, many of whom either experienced violent secession during partition or have been left scarred by the division of territory since the time of Pakistan's independence (Das 2001). Some of these groups continue to air grievances on account of the unfair allocation of state resources (Rahman 1996). These inequities have routinely sparked not only anti-Pakistan sentiment but also a number of separatist movements among the Pashtuns, Balochis, Bengalis, Muhajirs, and Sindhis among others (Rahman 1996).³
- 7 In harsh sociocultural and political environments, where symbolic and material resources are unequally distributed and minorities are routinely victimized, the oppressed are not likely to silently spectate and succumb to their fate. Instead, they are known to exercise agency with the aim of developing strategies that either directly

confront oppression and seek liberation, or indirectly combat injustices, in order to derive a degree of power as a means of coping and surviving. The anthropological and sociological studies that describe the significance of self-protection, survival and strategic practice for vulnerable groups of people (Gal 1991; Gaudio 2009; Goffman 1963, 1969; Levine 1988; Scott 1990) are of particular relevance to an understanding of how the disenfranchised interact with power holders under repressive conditions. Donald Levine (1988), for instance, states that non-elite speakers use ambiguous expressions to conceal esoteric knowledge for the sake of privacy or as a defensive strategy against intrusive encroachments and exploitation (p. 32–33). The stakes are raised even higher for deeply stigmatized marginalized populations that subsist in religiously and culturally conservative societies. In his study of the “*yan daudu*” (men who act like women) in northern Nigeria, Rudolf Gaudio (2009) demonstrates that his research collaborators navigated the dangers of everyday life by employing linguistic and bodily performances (e.g., innuendo and indirect speech) in order to hide meanings and promote secrecy regarding taboo subjects in an *environment* of growing religious intolerance.

- 8 Building upon these studies, this article integrates two distinct yet interrelated strands of James Scott’s theorizing on indigenous resistance. The first strand of theorizing that is relevant to my analysis of *khwaja sira* activism is Scott’s concept of infrapolitics or the disguised forms of everyday defiance and dissent in which subordinate groups participate.⁴ Scott (1990) argues that oppressed groups engage in a range of opaque acts such as rumor, linguistic tricks, euphemisms, and anonymity, because “their vulnerability has rarely permitted them the luxury of direct confrontation” (p. 136–37). Likewise, in the prevailing sociopolitical atmosphere in Pakistan, where even the most unlikely acts can be framed as unruly, dissident or sacrilegious, engaging in subtle and ambiguous acts of dissent is always important for marginalized populations. In this light, *khwaja sira* activist practices can be likened to the not so easily discernable acts of resistance that serve as weapons for the weak in the daily struggle against injustices. The examples that I draw upon in this paper illuminate how community activists engaged in practices of ambiguity whereby they concealed knowledge and evaded disclosure of culturally and religiously sensitive issues, particularly on the topic of *khwaja sira* sexuality and corporality.⁵ In so doing, they managed to maintain uncertainties about *khwaja siras* and resist being fully known, narrowly classified, and further suppressed by the society and state. This praxis also enabled *khwaja siras* to avoid potential allegations of involvement in anti-Pakistan and anti-Islam activities, thereby functioning as a crucial medium of individual and communal self-preservation.
- 9 The second perspective relevant to my analysis of the *khwaja sira*-state/society relationship is the Scottian (2009) analysis of the “encounter between expansionary states and self-governing peoples” (p. 3). Scott describes how historically, modern states attempted to incorporate non-state peoples, and how many of these peripheral groups deliberately chose to live in regions outside the state’s reach, working persistently to thwart its assimilationist tendencies (p. 4–8). Further, Scott suggests that key elements of the cultural beliefs and practices of stateless peoples (e.g., their itinerant lifestyle, “their flexible social structure, their religious heterodoxy ... and even their nonliterate, oral cultures” [p. 9]) have enabled them to evade state capture. Although Scott’s historiography focuses on the Zomia of the uplands of Southeast Asia and largely examines relations with the state, it provides a useful framework to understand the encounters between the *khwaja sira* and both the Pakistani state and

mainstream society. Until recently, *khwaja siras* had been largely ignored by the federal and provincial governments, and it was not until the Supreme Court (SC) proceedings of 2009, that the state finally showed a more sustained interest in the lives of this marginalized population.⁶ Recent attempts to incorporate *khwaja siras* into the ambit of the society and the state have been met with varying degrees of both enthusiasm and reluctance from *khwaja sira* communities. While I do not view *khwaja siras* as non-state peoples given their expressed desire for integration into national and social spheres, I see many commonalities between them and Scott's Zomia, particularly the impulse to avoid state and societal control. Moreover, not unlike the Zomia, *khwaja sira* subject positions and sociality are characterized by hybrid identities, structural malleability and geographic mobility, crucial cultural features that have accorded them a modicum of independence from the clutches of the state and its citizens. I suggest that *khwaja siras* may be thought of as occupying intermediate zones that function as discursive domains of cultural refuge within national territory. Although these semi-autonomous islands fall within the state's jurisdiction and are not impervious to normative sociocultural influences, they are guided by their own internal structure and logic, one that engages with but also resists complete cultural and political integration. From there *khwaja siras* strive to attain legal rights and privileges while remaining somewhat obscure for the body politic and also partially out of reach of the state's regulatory apparatus. This particular penchant for evasion—or what I have termed translucent citizenship—is not shared equally by all *khwaja siras*, and is less prevalent among a newer generation of middle-class, English-speaking activists who prefer to identify as “trans” or “transgender.” But even many of these younger activists tread carefully, often taking a lead from more experienced *khwaja sira* leaders in their increasingly risky but creative attempts to test the limits of society and the law.

- 10 Grounded in the techniques of ambiguity and evasion, the concept of translucent citizenship refers to a citizen-state/society relationship that is intended to generate incertitude regarding certain aspects of the lives of *khwaja siras* (e.g., their corporeal traits, sexual practices, economic activities), which in turn provides them with some semblance of autonomy. Along with safeguarding their freedoms, it is meant to offer some protection against repressive sociopolitical institutions and relations, such as the prospect of being framed as anti-national and anti-religious. In sum, translucent citizenship operates as a mechanism for sustaining partial sovereignty for peripheral peoples from complete state appropriation and social assimilation. This type of national and cultural belonging not only queers the understanding and performance of dissent but also acts as a shield against the threat of sociopolitical intimidation and violence.
- 11 While Scott's perspectives shed light on the resistance dimension of *khwaja sira* activism, social movement theory elucidates modes of participation and recognition. Together, the two facets provide a more comprehensive understanding, a fuller picture, as it were, of the concept of translucent citizenship. The notion of translucency intersects with and further develops perspectives on identity deployment, relating in particular to Mary Bernstein (2005) and Charles Tilly's (2002) theorizing on the distinction between externally projected identities that are strategically appropriated, and internally experienced ones, invoked in everyday practice. Researchers are advised not to take at face value the public claims about identity made by social movements even if they reflect a coherent social location that is understandable to intended audiences (Stephen 2001:54). While such claims may be a means to achieve movement

objectives (Bernstein 1997), they may not be representative of everyday life (Bernstein 2005:67). Likewise, the adoption of the category “*khwaja sira*” may be viewed as the strategic mobilization of a cognitive, symbolic and organizational resource that—in projecting sameness to outsiders—rendered movement constituents translucent by effacing the diversity and fluidity of the subject positions within *khwaja sira* communities. Activists deployed this culturally rooted term to achieve movement goals (e.g., attaining state-sponsored rights and protections, gaining cultural legitimacy and social respect) without intending to promote a coherent understanding of some of the critical identifying characteristics of target beneficiaries. Hence, what Bernstein refers to as “detached identities” (ibid.) may serve not merely as representational tools for gaining recognition from and inclusion into governmental and social institutions, but also as a mechanism to remain partially unknown and therefore, semi-autonomous from the same rights- and membership-granting bodies. A translucent citizen enacts a citizenship model that strikes a balance between wanting right of access to state/social institutions/services and maintaining a cautious distance from the oppressive state/society gaze. Through this lens, translucency is not merely a form of identity politics that involves representing social movement constituents to mainstream publics, but rather a performance of citizenship that combines the desire for specific forms of political recognition and social acceptance with that of misrecognition and refusal.

- 12 To summarize, translucency is a way of “being” and of “being seen” partially, inaccurately and/or in a manner that evokes uncertainties and promotes invisibility with respect to certain bodily and behavioral characteristics. It is a way of projecting oneself and of being understood publicly as a minority in a majoritarian world, one that is structured according to dominant religious, legal and cultural perspectives, particularly those regarding corporeality, sexuality and morality. Hence, as a concept, translucency is both a discursive condition and a deliberate strategy. Whether viewed as a state or a performance, however, translucency is closely associated with and produced by diverse forms of ambiguity, be it vague and unclear language (e.g., the use of multivalent identity terms such as “*khwaja sira*”), or actions that are furtively aimed at maintaining the myths and obscurities linked with a particular group (e.g., the uncertainties linked with the bodies and sexualities of gender non-conforming people). The aforementioned examples will be closely examined and analyzed in the succeeding sections of this article.

Research methods

- 13 The data and analysis presented in this article are based on the ethnographic fieldwork I conducted between 2011 and 2013 on the culture and activism of *khwaja siras* in my former hometown, Karachi. Over a period of 15 months, I examined several *khwaja sira* households, participated in the resident’s everyday activities and special events (e.g., rituals of celebration and mourning), and conducted interviews with *khwaja siras* spread across the city’s slums. In addition, I conducted participant observation at the Gender Solidarity Society or GSS (pseudonym), a community-based *khwaja sira* activist organization consisting of a core group of 9 members.⁷ I also spent 3 months in Lahore where I studied a *khwaja sira* organization made up of 11 core members.⁸ I observed both organizations’ media advocacy, attended and helped in organizing protests and meetings, travelled to different parts of the country with my activist friends, and met

with prominent community leaders from several Pakistani cities.⁹ Although my fieldwork was based in large metropolises, such as Karachi, Lahore and Rawalpindi, it incorporates the perspectives of *khwaja siras* from rural areas. A large number of my research participants were either seasonal rural-urban migrants or long-term city residents who had maintained strong ties with their natal villages. The ethnographic material discussed in this article, however, reflects events that occurred in urban settings despite involving individuals who—like the Zomia—were periodically on the move.

- 14 In the sections that follow, I provide a brief history of medieval and contemporary *khwaja siras*, highlighting—where relevant—traits that reflect their location within state/society space. This is followed by an ethnographic account of how my activist friends framed their constituents in vague terms, and how their elusive representation sheltered *khwaja siras* from the threat of sociopolitical repression and violence. In the final section, I recount an encounter between community activists and the state in which *khwaja siras* perpetuated illegibility regarding their sex/gender through subtle acts of refusal that further exemplify their orientation as translucent citizens.

A brief history of *khwaja sira*

- 15 The term *khwaja sira* (or *khwajasarai*) is rooted in medieval north India where it was used as an appellation for castrated slaves who served as attendants in the *zenana* (female quarters) of elite homes (Hinchy 2014:277–78, 2015:381–85). *Khwaja siras* were also appointed as harem guards, courtiers, administrators and military generals in the Mughal Empire and in regional Indian states (Manucci 1906:350; Lal 2005:195–96; Chatterjee 2000:64–96). *Khwaja siras* appear in the writings of Indian intelligentsia (e.g., Faiz Bakhsh 1889; Khan 1870) and European travelers until their value began to wane under the collapse of Mughal rule (Hambly 1974:130; Kidwai 1985:93). What became of them thereafter is uncertain, though K. S. Lal (1994) has claimed that many turned into *bhanda*s (traditional folk entertainers) and *hijras*, a category of South Asian sex, gender and sexual minorities, variously described as third gender, neither male nor female, intersex, “eunuchs,” etc.¹⁰
- 16 Literature from the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries indicates that *khwaja siras* were the contemporaries of *hijras* (Hinchy 2014:278). The two groups both overlapped with and diverged from one another in important ways. For instance, *khwaja siras* had a social role distinct from that of *hijras* in that they were male-identified and had a considerably higher social status despite being slaves (Hinchy 2014:278). Moreover, *khwaja siras* had largely been forcibly castrated as children (Hinchy 2015) while *hijras* engaged in the voluntary practice of ritualized genital excision during adolescence or adulthood. The fact that not all *hijras* engaged in physical emasculation (Hinchy 2014:275) is what makes the dissimilarity between the two groups even more stark. Despite these differences, however, both were self-organized around the *guru-chela* (master-disciple) social order, an adoptive kinship system through which they formed alliances with one another (Hinchy 2014:278).
- 17 The term “*khwaja sira*” regained currency in the first decade of the twenty-first century when certain groups of gender variant and sexually non-normative Pakistanis began to appropriate and promote it, primarily as a corrective to the public’s pejorative use of the term *hijra*. At the time of my fieldwork, a growing number of *hijras* had begun to

identify as “*khwaja sira*” in interactions with the general public and wished to be addressed as such by the masses. Although “*hijra*” remained widely in use in everyday parlance both within the social networks of my informants and society at large, “*khwaja sira*” quickly rose to prominence in public, activist, and state spheres, as well as in everyday speech among *hijras* in Karachi. The reemergence of “*khwaja sira*” coalesced around a series of historic rulings that were passed by the Pakistani SC between 2009 and 2012, in which third sex/gender citizens were granted a range of legal privileges and protections.¹¹ Hence, community activists’ engagement in public advocacy was in tandem with the state’s endeavor to regulate and “mainstream” *khwaja siras* through judicial and policy developments.

- 18 Not unlike the differences between the *khwaja siras* and *hijras* of medieval times, the gender and sexual minorities who celebrated these rulings diverged from popular understandings of “*khwaja sira*,” particularly with respect to sex, gender and sexuality (I discuss this gap between public perception and the realities on the ground in the following section). However, despite these differences, the adoption of the royal epithet “*khwaja sira*” by contemporary *hijras* remained, by and large, unexamined and unquestioned. Perhaps a public discussion on this topic was in part deliberately evaded by all involved parties because it would have brought to the surface uncomfortable truths regarding slavery and forced child castration in Mughal India. The silence surrounding these obsolete practices reproduced a collective amnesia among Pakistanis, including present-day *khwaja siras*, who remained blissfully unaware of the hard-to-digest details about the lives of royal *khwaja siras*. This general ignorance, in turn, enabled the somewhat easy appropriation of the term “*khwaja sira*” by sex/gender and sexual minorities in present day Pakistan.

Contemporary *khwaja siras*

- 19 Although there was no firm consensus, “*khwaja sira*” was used by many of my informants as an umbrella category that comprised of a range of subject positions and corporeal states, including three main subcategories, namely, *khunsa*, *zennana* and *hijra*. *Khunsa* refers to intersex individuals or those born with a mixture of both male and female hormonal/chromosomal and/or genital features. However, intersex *khwaja siras* are few in number and they rarely join *khwaja sira* social networks. *Zennanas* are *akva* (the state of having male sexual organs), effeminate, and situationally switch between masculine and feminine sartorial comportment in order to manage the split between their biological and chosen families. In contrast, *hijras* are either *akva* or *nirbaan* (the state of having excised one’s male genitals), and while many tend to assume a somewhat permanent feminine appearance, their performances situationally alternate between the masculine and the feminine. Common to both *zennanas* and *hijras* is their defining characteristic, a *ruh* (soul) that is believed to engender femininity in terms of embodiment and performance while shaping their culturally ideal sexual preference for masculine men. Although they engage in a variety of sexual and romantic relationships with men, many *khwaja siras* marry women and have children. In sum, *khwaja sira* subject positions are heterogeneous, marked not by stability but by fluidity, fuzziness, and multiple border-crossings that are not easily apprehended by the state and society.

- 20 Contemporary *khwaja siras* are among Pakistan's most marginalized citizens, and significant numbers of them come from lower class households, receive little or no formal education, and eke out a living primarily through begging, singing and dancing, blessing, and sex work.¹² *Hijras* and *zennanas* have an ancient system of social organization premised on the *guru-chela* (master-disciple) relationship through which they ritually forge kinship alliances with one another. Informants reported joining these networks voluntarily between the ages of nine and eighteen, thereby enjoying membership benefits, such as cultural training, emotional and material support, and income earning opportunities.
- 21 Their social structure, corporeal and sexual practices, and economic activities make *khwaja siras* liminal figures, positioned precariously betwixt and between state/society and non-state/society space. Culturally and legally, their alternative system of social stratification is neither recognized nor fully understood, their body modification and sexual behaviors remain shrouded in silence and speculation, and the majority of their income generation activities (e.g., sex work, begging, dancing) are either illegal or borderline illegal in addition to being socially stigmatized. Many of these fears, uncertainties and myths surfaced during the 2009–2012 SC litigation.¹³ Combined, their flexible identities and embodiment and their relatively nebulous parallel system of organizing and earning, situate *khwaja siras* within intermediate or semi-autonomous zones within state/society spheres.
- 22 Societal perceptions about *khwaja siras* both diverge from and overlap with the lived realities of *hijras* and *zennanas*.¹⁴ The public's diverse and conflicting understandings are interlayered either by a sense of uncertainty or complete ignorance about the corporeality and sexuality of gender-variant people. One of the most widely held cultural assumptions is that *khwaja siras* are intersex, which is considered religiously acceptable on account of being God-given. An oft-made claim is that those with functioning male genitals are *achay khasay mard* (normal men) or *khwaja sira* impersonators who don women's clothing merely to make a living through begging and sex-work. For some Pakistanis, the notion that a *khwaja sira* can possess a feminine soul or experience gender dysphoria is either beyond the pale of imagination or a psychological impossibility. This is not to say that everyone is necessarily unaware or disapproving of non-intersex *khwaja siras*—and indeed, many people from a cross-section of society see them as “naturally” feminine and sexually non-normative. These varied perceptions and attitudes, often shaped by differences in class, ethnicity, religious belief, and personal experience, not only lead the Pakistani public to variously accept, condone or condemn *khwaja siras*, but also contribute to the curiosity, anxiety and confusion that surrounds them.¹⁵ Moreover, the discrepancies between how *khwaja siras* see themselves versus how they are perceived by mainstream society, allow this marginal population to remain somewhat mysterious and out of the state and society's reach.

Naming and framing

- 23 As mentioned earlier, in the late-00s, *hijra* and *zennana* leaders began to revitalize the term “*khwaja sira*” for mainstream use. Over tea one evening at Shabnam's single-room house in Akther Colony, three members of the Gender Solidarity Society (GSS)—a Karachi based organization run by and for *khwaja siras* where I conducted the bulk of

my fieldwork—described the strategic significance of the term “*khwaja sira*.” Cigarette in hand, Payal, the GSS’s president, was seated comfortably across from me on a sofa chair, while her *chela* (disciple), Shabnam, exhausted after a long day of begging the streets, sat cross legged on a large area rug on the floor. Shazia had just dropped in for a quick visit on her way home from Cantonment Board Clifton where she supervised a group of government-appointed *khwaja sira* tax collectors.¹⁶ All three wore women’s *shalwar kameez* (loose, pleated trousers worn over a long-shirt) and light makeup, with Shabnam’s face revealing a hint of stubble through her sweat-smeared foundation. I listened intently as they explained why the GSS had appropriated “*khwaja sira*” as an organizing category for activism. Their explanation below offers evidence of activists’ purposeful generation of ambiguity through a strategic identification practice.

Shabnam: There are so many terms we could have chosen, but we chose “*khwaja sira*.”

Payal: This is what we wanted people to call us. People would always use the word “*hijra*” for us, which I didn’t like...

Shabnam: It’s not respectful.

Payal: But *khwaja sira* is a word of respect. We use all kinds of words when we’re amongst ourselves. But when we’re being respectful or when we talk to television channels, then we only call ourselves “*khwaja sira*.”

Shazia: Another reason for using “*khwaja sira*” is that it’s an Urdu word. “*Hijra*” is used in India, but in Pakistan, Muslims should say “*khwaja sira*.”

Shabnam: In olden times, they used to keep *khwaja siras* to guard the palace.

Payal: And we also have the special blessings of Khwaja Gharib-un-Nawaz of Ajmer.

17

This exchange illustrates that the “*khwaja sira*” identity category was meant to territorialize and nationalize its appropriators. As an ancient title, “*khwaja sira*” locates *hijras* and *zennanas* in national and cultural history, giving them a sedimented identity and an air of respectability. Such identities are typically primordial, employing “histories which go back well before the birth of those being identified” (Unnithan and Thin 1989:22). The adoption of “*khwaja sira*” was an act of reclaiming medieval South Asian history along with the cultural assumptions associated with Mughal *khwaja siras*. As a regal epithet, “*khwaja sira*” conjures images of a glorious Muslim past, in which those who earned the title had important social functions. Appropriating this title of honor was an “atavistic response” (Nash 2005:15) or a form of “recovery work” (Puar 1998:411) through which activists have attempted to recast into the present the reverence accorded to their imperial namesakes. Further, “*khwaja sira*” was favored as a term of address because it denotes respect and is devoid of the derogatory connotations tethered to *hijra* in many contexts. Importantly, as Shazia suggests, it provides religious and cultural authentication by grounding non-normatively gendered people in the South Asian Muslim past, one they envision as distinct from Hindu traditions. Through this politics of insertion and respectability, the members of GSS claimed cultural and national belonging as Muslims and Pakistani citizens, and that a revered Sufi Saint (i.e., Khwaja Gharib-un-Nawaz) blessed them served as further validation of their favored status in Islam.

- 24 Moreover, “*khwaja sira*” is a strategically useful term precisely because, at the time of my research, it was vague and unclear both to members of the general public and to many *khwaja siras* themselves.¹⁸ Despite its ties to an Islamic past, many people I encountered during fieldwork had either never heard it or knew little about it and its historical origins. Still others held an array of preconceived notions about its meaning,

which created the opportunity for organizations, such as GSS, to educate audiences through public advocacy. As indicated earlier, one of the term's dominant public understandings implicitly framed male-born gender variant individuals as intersex, that is, as those whose biological condition was determined by no fault or agency of their own. This cultural assumption benefited activist leaders who realized that arguments in favor of *khwaja sira* rights were more compelling when gender non-normativity was understood as a natural precondition rather than a choice. Hence, the title served to occlude somatic variations among male-born gender variant people (i.e., their *akva*/non-emasculated and *nirbaan*/emasculated states) and to perpetuate myths and ambiguities about them in mainstream society.¹⁹

- 25 In effect, the growing use of the moniker amounted to a collective strategic appropriation and maneuvering of language and history through which this marginalized segment of the population perpetuated uncertainties about *khwaja siras*, while simultaneously claiming respect, cultural and religious legitimacy, and social and national inclusion. The ambiguity ensconced within "*khwaja sira*" served to distort understandings of *khwaja sira* corporeality, and amplified the general public's confusion associated with non-normative bodies. This suggests that promoting a clear understanding of a movement's target beneficiaries is not always the goal of activist politics, particularly in sociopolitical environments where personal and communal security is paramount. In fact, as Donald Levine (1988) has argued, the very drive toward disambiguation—be it the desire to promote a clearer understanding of gender and sexuality or some other phenomena—through the utilization of rational and scientific processes, is an attribute of modernity. *Khwaja sira* politics then can be conceived of as an indigenous praxis that responds to the demands of modernity by invoking the fluidity that was characteristic of pre-modern times. Importantly, this nod to the past adapts to the present-day context, particularly to the regulatory needs of the state, to citizens' desire for civil rights and national inclusion, and to the general loss of the ability to deal productively with ambiguity. What emerges then through such a politics is a translucent citizen-subject who is at once recognizable but not fully apprehended in public and legal arenas. In effect, this is a population that is presumed to be known even though in reality it is only partially and imprecisely understood.

Translucency and security

- 26 By selecting "*khwaja sira*," a historically and culturally rooted term, as a means to become identifiable to the state and the national public, *hijra* and *zennana* activists managed to impede potential allegations of political and religious dissent. This became evident in the summer of 2011 when the US Embassy in Islamabad hosted a pride event and subsequently issued a press release expressing its support for LGBT rights in Pakistan. I was in Karachi conducting fieldwork when the public announcement of the pride celebration, an "incitement to discourse" as Joseph Massad (2002:374) would call it, sparked anti-US and anti-gay rallies in several Pakistani cities.²⁰ At the forefront of these protests were religious political parties, such as the Jamaat-e-Islami, who took to the streets to condemn the event as a form of "cultural terrorism" and "an assault on Pakistan's Islamic culture" by the US (Express Tribune 2011). In the weeks following the protests, a religious organization by the name of "Muslim Youth Forum" (MYF) launched a campaign against homosexuality by displaying anti-gay signage in Lahore. A

banner hung at a busy city intersection stated that, “There is no place for Gay and Lesbian in Islam.” Another poster recalling the US Embassy pride event demanded the immediate dismissal of the representatives of “Gays and Lesbians in Foreign Affairs Agencies” (GLIFAA) and “Gay, Lesbian and Straight Education Network” (GLSEN) from Pakistan. In speaking to the press, a representative of MYF claimed that the two groups were actively recruiting individuals to join their organizations by offering them large sums of money (Kashif 2012). The fervor created by the pride celebration continued for several months before gradually dissipating, and what became of the reactionary campaigns thereafter is unclear.

- 27 The strategic significance and utility of “*khwaja sira*” as a safety measure for staving off prospective charges of dissent is evident in the differential way in which the US embassy’s actions affected various gender and sexual minority groups in the country. Fearing that this incident would spark violence and jeopardize the safety of queer people, members of local gay and lesbian groups organized a covert Skype meet-up to deliberate over how to respond to the controversy. The conference, which I was permitted to attend, brought together activists from three major cities, who—after careful consideration—decided in favor of laying low instead of engaging in the heated mass-mediated debates surrounding the events. In contrast, *khwaja siras* were either unaware of or unfazed by this entire controversy, and even the protesting groups did not seem to view the *khwaja sira* as a part of “LGBT.” This is not entirely surprising since, at the time of my research, “*khwaja sira*” did not always translate into “transgender” in mainstream discourse. Further, unlike LGBT, *khwaja sira* was not perceived as a foreign import but as an indigenous category with deep roots in South Asian Muslim history. The language used to identify minority groups has consequences for how they are perceived, and in appropriating *khwaja sira*, *hijra* and *zennana* activists unknowingly also managed to establish distance from the negative effects of politically charged English terms, such as gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender. These terms were both understood in the popular imaginary and framed for the sake of political expediency as being solely associated with Euro-American queer subjectivities and rights activism. Unlike *khwaja siras*, the gender and sexual minorities who identified with globalized queer categories, risked their well-being and were condemned for colluding with imperialist forces believed to be working against Pakistani and Islamic interests.
- 28 Despite its limitations, “*khwaja sira*” emerged as a safe and respectable title that promoted the security of gender-ambiguous people by providing some protection against the harmful effects of social stigma and prospective accusations of dissent. Consequently, *khwaja siras* remained under the radar during this entire incident precisely due to their partial legibility, which enabled them to remain decoupled from LGBT. This was further aided by the longstanding presence and marginal acceptance of *hijras* in the public landscape—especially on the streets of small towns and urban metropolises—along with their nascent appearances in mainstream media since the late ‘00s. *Khwaja siras* then enjoyed a semi-autonomous space within state territory that afforded them a certain level of freedom and relief from oppressive structural forces.
- 29 Concurrently, “transgender” was mostly employed within activist contexts or in select forums (e.g., it was being used primarily for internal purposes within the GSS and sexual-health NGOs as the preferred English language equivalent for “*khwaja sira*” and “*hijra*”) rather than in public advocacy. In the years since my fieldwork, however, the

terms “transgender” and “trans” have progressively become more salient identity categories that are now being used as synonymous to “*khwaja sira*” by a range of stakeholders who previously did not use the term, including an increasing number of *hijras*, *zennanas*, community activists and allies, state representatives, mainstream Urdu media, and members of the general public. “Transgender” received national attention and recognition with the tabling and eventual passing of the Transgender Persons (Protection of Rights) Acts in May 2018.

- 30 But if the acronym LGBT is so problematic in the Pakistani context, as I have argued, how then did “transgender”—the “T” in LGBT—gain salience and a positive valence in the country in recent years? Precisely how this change transpired merits a systematic, independent investigation of the activities that enabled community activists to detach “transgender” from “LGB” while simultaneously linking it with “*khwaja sira*” in the public imaginary.²¹ A sustained ethnographic examination of the mainstreaming of “transgender” is beyond the scope of this article given its focus on the specific period of my fieldwork (i.e., 2011–2013).²² However, my hypothesis is that the imbrication of “*khwaja sira*” with “transgender” is partly attributable to the vagueness and multiplicity in the meaning of “*khwaja sira*” as well as to the general sense of uncertainty associated with sex/gender non-normativity in Pakistan. Moreover, this transition is indicative of a shifting political economy of language that can be ascribed in large part to the ingenuity of younger, trans-identifying activists and allies who succeeded in gradually conflating the two terms, thereby moving “transgender” to the center of discussions around gender non-normativity in Pakistan. In the following section, I describe the activist interventions that influenced the judicial construction of “*khwaja sira*,” thereby enabling gender minorities to maintain a degree of autonomy in relation to the regulatory arms of the state. In addition, I draw preliminary connections between the activist-state encounter during the 2009–2012 SC litigation on “*khwaja sira*” and the 2017–2018 legislative measures on “transgender.”

Partially incorporated and semi-autonomous

- 31 In addition to employing forms of identification that circumvented potential charges of anti-nationalism, GSS activists foiled certain state-governance techniques through acts of resistance that complicate popular notions of dissent. The hallmark of modern statehood is the creation of a “legible people” (Scott 1998:65) who can be identified, recorded, and when necessary, scrutinized (Caplan and Torpey 2001:1). In the remainder of this paper, I describe how the Pakistani state attempted to conquer the ambiguity surrounding *khwaja siras* through mechanisms of governance and control, and how, in response, GSS activists strove to thwart the state’s efforts in order to preserve ambiguity and thereby resist complete incorporation into the state machinery. Their actions demonstrate that if legibility “is a condition of manipulation” (Scott 1998:183) spearheaded by the state, then illegibility may serve as a way of escaping political manipulation (Halberstam 2011:10).
- 32 When the judicial proceedings on *khwaja sira* rights commenced in early 2009, the SC instructed the provincial governments to perform a thorough census and registration of *khwaja siras* residing in each province. These initial orders, premised on an essentialist rubric of disability, reduced *khwaja siras* to persons with a “gender disorder in their bodies,” and required the government to adopt policies similar to those already

in place for disabled persons. Then, in late 2009, the Court directed NADRA, the government's citizen identification and registration wing, to regulate "this class of the society" by mandating "some medical tests based on hormones etc." (*Constitution Petition No. 43 2009*). The purpose of this verification was to medically determine the eligibility of those registering for third sex/gender identification and to weed out potential imposters. The need to measure the hormone levels of registrants was seemingly posited on the notion that sex/gender non-normativity is induced by hormonal imbalances. These regulatory mechanisms were meant to lessen the ambiguity that surrounded *khwaja siras*, but importantly, they also highlight the state's narrow understanding of its target beneficiaries.

- 33 The court's order created turmoil within *hijra* and *zennana* networks, but eventually morphed into a robust reactionary measure. At first, activist leaders feared that an invasive medical examination would reveal stakeholders as "normal and emasculated males" and potentially result in the termination of the nascent rights and privileges being granted to them. Many others believed that the registration process would prompt punitive action against *khwaja siras* and force them into hiding. These concerns led *khwaja sira* groups to protest against the medical stipulation and to circumvent the measure under legal technicalities. In early 2010, the GSS held a protest outside the Karachi Press Club and submitted a petition to the Sindh High Court to express its rejection of the sex/gender verification test. When I met her a year later, the GSS's president, Payal, informed me that her organization, in consultation with women's rights activists, had argued that the medical requirement was discriminatory and flawed.

Everyone knows who they are and what is inside them, but no human has the right to tell another human what he or she is. But [NADRA] ... gave us unnecessary tension by saying that they'll do a medical test. A doctor will tell us what we are? Really? Well, then they should also check men and women. Why only *khwaja siras*? As for checking hormones, there are so many women whose [male] hormone levels are higher. Will the government call those women men? This is wrong!

GSS members resisted state surveillance by contending that hormone-level testing was a defective technique to gauge gender difference. Moreover, the GSS declared that the verdict was discriminatorily applied to *khwaja siras* alone instead of being extended to all Pakistani citizens. In the subsequent SC hearing, the Chief Justice repealed the sex/gender verification statute in light of the arguments set forth by community activists. Thereafter, the government was ordered to issue ID cards without subjecting registrants to medical tests, meaning that simply claiming to be a *khwaja sira* was sufficient.

- 34 This instance of disputation between the state and community activists reveals not only the judiciary's essentialist conception of *khwaja siras*, but also how the GSS's resistance effectively disrupted the state's intended means of verifying and delimiting the condition of being a *khwaja sira*. Their timely intervention helped to successfully skirt the regulation, and their calculated negotiations played a crucial role in reproducing the illegibility encasing *khwaja siras*. Their politics of ambiguity, then, offered a critical mode of resistance to the processes of governmentality that aimed to transform *khwaja siras* into knowable subjects of the state.
- 35 Here, GSS activists demonstrated an instance of refusal that circumvented and thwarted the state's regulatory procedures for policing and narrowly defining sex/gender non-normativity. In rejecting the medical requirement, the GSS neither

clarified the sex/gender traits of *khwaja siras* nor did it reveal its genuine concerns regarding the exam. Instead, the organization attacked the discriminatory state policies that unfairly targeted *khwaja siras* as subjects of medical inspection, thereby revealing the state's limited understanding of them as intersex and impotent. The GSS's mediation allowed *khwaja siras* to escape the state's gaze on their bodies, and enabled them to evade the judiciary's intended means of bringing gender non-conforming people into the state's ambit without engaging in direct and forthright acts of dissent. Although this instance of refusal utilized recognized channels of resistance, it did not question the state's misconceptions regarding *khwaja sira* sexuality and corporeality.²³ Instead, it fostered the perpetuation of the uncertainties and myths associated with *khwaja siras*. In other words, this subtle act of defiance privileged illegibility over certitude as an effective activist strategy of dissent and self-preservation. Moreover, the GSS's approach positioned *khwaja siras* as rights-demanding citizens who wished to be recognized and protected by the state, but in a manner that not only averted unsettling the status-quo but also evaded complete state appropriation. By remaining somewhat obscure to the state apparatus, these translucent subjects managed to preserve their intermediate spaces of refuge and partial sovereignty.

- 36 Importantly, despite their ideological differences, newer cohorts of English-speaking, middle-class activists have drawn inspiration from the strategies used by senior, non-English-speaking community leaders like Payal. This overlap in praxis was evident in the efforts of the stakeholders involved in the process of drafting legislation on the rights of transgender people between 2017–2018. While a detailed study of these developments is wanting, insights may be extrapolated from some of the known discussions and events surrounding the drafting of the 2017 Transgender Persons (Protection of Rights) Bill and its introduction in both houses of the Parliament, as well as from a cursory analysis of the passed act. The little-known evidence indicates that community activists contended with a host of opponents—both internal and external to *khwaja sira* and trans communities in order to produce—“transgender” as a legal category that is at once encompassing and somewhat obscure.²⁴ To what extent, then, does the praxis of this newer generation of activists align with the translucent citizenship of their predecessors? I would argue that what may appear, at first sight, to be a sharp break between the approach taken by recent activists and their elders, is really an accrual of past experience. These younger activists have drawn from indigenous knowledge and practice, forging new directions for gender non-normative Pakistanis by combining the participation-resistance model of their forerunners with their own contemporary sensibility and understanding of gender identity. As I have suggested, the recent legislative construction of “transgender” mirrors, in important ways, the earlier judicial production of “*khwaja sira*.” In so doing, it preserves an ample amount of translucency even as community activists cautiously move away from a performance of translucent citizenship in favor of greater transparency and inclusion.

Conclusion

- 37 The strategies of identification and resistance that I have described demonstrate that *khwaja sira* activists managed to achieve their objectives surreptitiously, entirely bypassing the politics of sedition and dissent. Hence, GSS activists queer popular understandings of dissent by engaging in forms of participation and refusal that are not

only subtle but also privilege the perpetuation of ambiguity over certitude. While desiring social and political recognition and inclusion, this praxis relies on an “infrapolitics” of resistance rather than merely on candid forms of protest. Moreover, by remaining hazy to the state and society, this marginal population managed to escape moments of collective hysteria, such as charges of dissent, provocation and anti-establishment activities.

- 38 Further, the actions of the GSS and several other activist organizations performed what I have termed translucent citizenship, a form of national belonging that demanded the provision of rights and state recognition but precluded absolute sociopolitical integration of the kind where peripheral peoples are turned—in Foucault’s (1995) terms—into “docile and knowable” (p. 172) subjects. In short, *khwaja siras* desired limited incorporation, which they sought on their own terms and with reservations. For instance, they pursued cultural and economic integration in so far as desiring the state and society to expand the subsistence options available to *khwaja siras*. However, they did not intend to relinquish the existing income-generation activities available to them (e.g., blessing, begging, dancing, and sex work) since they offered many freedoms and pleasures. Likewise, they wished to be identified as full citizens but did not want to be fully determined by the society and state, especially with respect to their genital and sexual characteristics and even some of their clandestine ritual and socio-structural traits and activities. The disclosure of such sensitive information would render them vulnerable to further exploitation, oppression and control. The *khwaja sira* activist praxis discussed in this article reflects a form of citizenship where the subject insists on recognition and inclusion but strives to remain relatively vague to governing bodies and broader publics. As translucent citizens, *khwaja siras* resisted complete absorption into social and national structures and managed to function as semi-self-governing networks with space to enjoy the few freedoms, pleasures and powers that accompany being a nebulous minority.
- 39 The newer cohorts of activists build upon the legacy of their indigenous counterparts by continuing to operate within intermediate zones, those liminal interstices between clarity and obfuscation, unification and independence. However, they have also introduced their own unique and innovative blend of methods and begun to shift the national public debate on gender non-conformity in the direction of greater transparency. What this increase in candor means and what its affects will be for gender and sexually non-normative Pakistanis is as yet unclear, but it certainly poses potential risks along with the prospect of propelling minority rights activism in Pakistan in fruitful new directions.

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NOTES

1. The term that appears most frequently in the archive of the proceedings was not "*khwaja sira*" but "eunuch." Given that the Supreme Court transcripts are in English, the term "*khwaja sira*" rarely appears in the text even though it had gained prominence in both activist and public discourse by the time the case had commenced.
2. Blasphemy against any recognized religion is prohibited under the Pakistan Penal Code, which stipulates penalties ranging from fines to death for those found guilty of speaking sacrilegiously. Many of the victims of blasphemy charges have been non-Muslim minorities, and a substantial number of the accused have been subjected to attacks, rioting and murder before their respective trials.
3. For instance, the Bengali language movement led to the Bangladesh Liberation War and the subsequent creation of Bangladesh in 1971, in the region that was once East Pakistan. Moreover, other regional movements, such as the Baloch Liberation Army, have been continually repressed through military operations, arrests, enforced disappearances and torture by security agencies.
4. I have offered ethnographic examples of the "infrapolitics" of *khwaja sira*s elsewhere (see (Khan 2014a, 2014b, 2016). In addition, Shahnaz Khan (2016) has alluded to *khwaja sira*s' use of such practices.
5. Unlike the aforementioned examples, this paper focuses not so much on the deployment of ambiguous speech but on other ways in which a politics of ambiguity is evident in *khwaja sira* activism. The use of ambiguity in verbal communication is a key facet of *khwaja sira* politics of ambiguity, one that I have examined in greater detail elsewhere (Khan 2016). Nonetheless, the discussion below on activists' use of the term "*khwaja sira*" arguably falls under the broader theme of language.
6. Prior to the 2009 SC case, gender non-normative people had had little interaction with the state with the exception of routine police harassment. *Hijras* were criminalized by the British colonial administration before the partition of the Indian subcontinent (Pamment 2010:34), and after independence, their activities were briefly banned by the state in the early 1960s in an effort to weed out fake *hijras* (Naqvi and Mujtaba 1997:266). The next notable encounter with the state occurred during the 1990 elections when a *zennana* was nominated by the people of Abbottabad to run for public office but did not win a seat (267). Then in 1997, Almas Bobby, a

Rawalpindi based *khwaja sira* attempted to contest a seat in the national assembly but her application was rejected by the government (Pamment 2010:36). The 2009–2012 SC case and the subsequent Transgender Persons (Protection of Rights) Act of 2018 are products of the crucial interventions made by both *khwaja sira* and trans* activists and state representatives.

7. Founded by Payal (pseudonym), a *khwaja sira* in her late forties, the GSS was the first community-run organization in the Sindh province to be registered, and in 2011 it was among the few registered *khwaja sira* groups in the country. It had been in operation in Karachi since 2009, and it functioned primarily as an advocacy group which spoke on behalf of *khwaja siras*. I investigated the GSS's activism and its daily activities, the social relationships among its members, and its ties with *khwaja sira* communities and allies (e.g., other sexual minority groups, NGOs, media outlets, etc.). By examining these relationships and accompanying the organization's members to both activist and non-activist events, I learned how the culture of *khwaja siras* factored into their activism, and the extent to which it held back and facilitated their efforts.

8. Throughout this article, I have used pseudonyms for informants and organizations in order to protect their privacy and anonymity.

9. Although the *khwaja sira* are a heterogeneous population whose differences surfaced both in everyday life and in activism, my project did not yield any compelling insights about *khwaja sira* organizing varying according to urban settings.

10. Eunuch was a classification used by the British colonizers for both *hijras* and *khwaja siras* (Hinchy 2014:277).

11. I use "sex/gender" to indicate the pervasive absence of an analytical distinction between gender and the body (Rubin 1975) in the Pakistani context.

12. In the years since my fieldwork, growing numbers of middle-class gender non-conforming people have begun to variously self-identify as "*khwaja sira*," "trans" and "transgender." However, the ethnographic examples and analysis presented in this article reflect the practices of those hailing primarily from lower socioeconomic classes.

13. Court transcripts reveal the judiciary's concern with and erroneous perceptions regarding the sex/gender of *khwaja siras* and the activities occurring within the parameters of the guru-chela system. For example, on the basis of an age-old myth, the court ordered the secretaries of the Provincial Social Welfare Departments to launch an investigation into the status of "she-male" children who are either voluntarily given away by the parents at the time of birth or taken forcefully by *khwaja sira* gurus (Constitution Petition #43 of 2009, 16/06/2009). The premise of this inquiry is predictable given the prominence of the aforementioned belief in mainstream society, but also laughable from the perspective of *khwaja siras* since gender non-conforming people voluntarily join the guru-chela system, typically in their teenage and young adult years.

14. My summarizing of the public's understanding of *khwaja siras* is based on media analysis, personal conversations with normatively gendered Pakistanis, and the experiences of *khwaja sira* informants.

15. Ethnicity emerges as an indicator of potential differences in levels of tolerance for gender and sexual non-normativity between various regional and social groups. For example, in recent years, there has been a significant rise in the number of reported incidents of violence perpetrated against and murder of *khwaja siras* in parts of the Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KPK) province in northwestern Pakistan, which has a majority Pashtun population. However, rather than being viewed as a sign of growing intolerance towards *khwaja siras* in KPK, this sudden surge in numbers should be seen as a result of an increase in the documentation and reporting of violence by local NGOs. Moreover, it would be spurious to essentialize a particular ethnic group as violent since *khwaja siras* also have many admirers and benefactors in KPK. Alternatively, not all categories of social differentiation serve as valuable measures of the degree of acceptance of *khwaja siras* since many people across the lines of class and religious affiliation believe—though

perhaps with an uneven level of conviction—that *khwaja siras* possess the dual spiritual power to bless and curse, a belief that plays a pivotal role in instilling feelings of veneration and/or fear rather than outright hate and condemnation for *zennanas* and *hijras*.

16. A handful of community members were hired as tax recovery officers in Karachi in response to a SC order to the provincial governments to create jobs for *khwaja siras*.

17. Khwaja Moinuddin Hasan Chishty (1142–1236 A.D.), also known as, Khwaja Gharib Nawaz, was the founder of the Chishty Sufi Order in India. Today, *hijras* attend the annual death anniversary of Khwaja Garib Nawaz in larger numbers because it is believed that he gave *hijras* the power to bless.

18. Please refer to endnote #8 and the discussion in the last paragraph under “Contemporary *Khwaja Siras*” where I have clarified that my understanding of the uncertainty associated with “*khwaja sira*” is based on my research findings.

19. Despite its efficacy as a framing device, “*khwaja sira*” was a contested term within *hijra* and *zennana* communities—one that brought to the surface deep rifts that have historically existed among these groups long before the turn to political activism and state/social incorporation. This absence of internal cohesion can be attributed, among other things, to ethnic and corporeal differences within and between communities of gender-variant people. The conflicts resulting from these dissimilarities emerged both in everyday life and in activism. In fact, some of the most contentious disagreements between activist leaders were related to genital excision, which split the *khwaja sira* movement into two broad factions: those who viewed both *akva* and *nirbaan* as *khwaja siras* and those who only included the latter into the *khwaja sira* fold. Suffice it to say, the *khwaja sira* are not a monolithic population and should not be viewed as such, and even their activism and deployment of the “*khwaja sira*” term was not always uniform.

20. Massad (2002) has called attention to the ways in which Euro-American organizations have sought to “defend the rights of ‘gays and lesbians’ all over the world” (p. 361) and how, in advocating on their behalf, this liberation project has increased risks and the persecution of sexual minorities on the ground (p. 384–85).

21. For the present discussion, I am able to offer some general observations regarding this change, which—to a significant degree—has resulted from a confluence of several intersecting factors: the continued significance of foreign donor-funded sexual health intervention programs that privilege the use of Euro-American identity terms; the mushrooming of a network of LGBT-led sexual health NGOs and CBOs where middle-class English-speaking gender and sexual minorities have found gainful employment; the rise in the public activism of a younger generation of “trans”- and “transgender”-identifying activists who are predominantly affiliated with sexual-health organizations; and an increase in creative, awareness-raising advocacy campaigns, many of which are products of collaborations with young entrepreneurs and social change-makers who have harnessed the power of new media beyond utilizing traditional print and television (e.g., modelling for designer labels, acting in mainstream and independent films, singing and dancing in popular music videos, staged play performances, participating in a plethora of documentaries).

22. My research encapsulates an earlier moment of activist and judicial activity, one that followed on the heels of the SC rulings of 2009–2012, and that predates the more recent developments surrounding the Transgender Persons (Protection of Rights) Act.

23. Confronting the state’s misapprehensions and uncertainties regarding *khwaja sira* sex and sexuality (i.e., the dominant understanding of *khwaja siras* as intersex and/or impotent) would have required challenging section 377 of the Pakistan Penal Code, the British colonial-era injunction that criminalizes sodomy, and possibly even the Zina Ordinance, which outlaws fornication between a man and woman who are not married to each other. In so doing, *khwaja siras* would have risked affiliation with the morally and legally condemned figure of the homosexual, a category with which they both communally and publicly disidentify.

24. The Act broadly defines a “transgender person” as an individual who is: “(i) intersex (*khusra*) with mixture of male and female genital features or congenital ambiguities; or (ii) eunuch assigned male at birth, but undergoes genital excision or castration; or (iii) a transgender man, transgender woman, *Khawaja Sira* or any person whose gender identity or gender expression differs from the social norms and cultural expectations based on the sex they were assigned at the time of their birth” (National Assembly of Pakistan 2018). This three-part definition is simultaneously revealing, inclusive and ambiguous. Although it mentions genital excision, it does so in a manner that is confusing; the phrasing, “eunuch assigned male at birth,” begs the question of what is meant by “eunuch” and how one could be a eunuch at birth. This portion of the definition could well be construed as a reference to someone with congenital ambiguities who then undergoes genital alterations through surgery. The third part of the definition employs the terms “gender identity” and “sex ... assigned at ... birth” to indicate the difference between the two concepts, but without defining sex and gender as distinct categories. Such a definition is likely to be confusing within a cultural context where both sex and gender are viewed in essentialist terms and are used interchangeably as one and the same. Likewise, the idea of sex being assigned at birth is likely to be unclear to most lay people, and not just in the Pakistani context, since sex is almost exclusively understood to be biologically determined and in no way socioculturally constructed. The assignment of sex at birth then may be misunderstood as the act of assigning the wrong sex to an infant on the basis of genital ambiguities.

ABSTRACTS

Between 2009 and 2012, the Pakistani Supreme Court granted a range of rights to gender-nonconforming people, sometimes known as the *khwaja sira*, in a series of historic rulings. While the judiciary sought to regulate this population through legal and policy developments, community activists aimed to change the public image of gender non-normative people through public advocacy. In this paper, I draw on James Scott’s theorizing on indigenous resistance to examine the practices of *khwaja sira* activists who sidestepped the trappings of dissent by anticipating potential pitfalls and avoiding any possibility of being accused of anti-Pakistan and anti-Islam activities. Instead, they employed forms of identification and refusal that not only impeded potential allegations of anti-nationalism but also complicated notions of dissent through engagement in modes of participation and resistance. I argue that underpinning this praxis is the *khwaja sira* desire for partial incorporation into the state, as citizens that are at once legally and culturally recognized and accepted, but also relatively self-governing and only partially intelligible within social and state spheres.

INDEX

Keywords: *khwaja sira*, hijra, transgender, autonomy, state, resistance, ambiguity

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