

The Cultural Formation of Religious Identity in Pakistan: A Historical and Sociological Perspective

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Abstract

This study offers a critical exploration of how Islamic identity in Pakistan is shaped by cultural and social factors. Through an exploratory document analysis of six pivotal documents, the research delves into how cultural and traditional practices, often misperceived as Islamic, influence the lived experiences of religious identity in the country. It reveals a gap between the idealized notion of Islam and its real-world application, demonstrating how cultural practices such as Sufism, the reverence for saints, and the celebration of different cultural events significantly impact religious identity. These cultural traditions, despite sometimes being criticized for diverging from fundamental Islamic principles, play a crucial role in shaping the Islamic identity in Pakistan. By examining recurring patterns and themes across the documents, this study offers an in-depth understanding of how local customs, historical contexts, and societal factors contribute to the construction and negotiation of religious identity. The findings highlight the importance of adopting a contextualized view of Islam in Pakistan, considering the cultural and historical influences on religious practices. The research concludes by suggesting avenues for future studies, including the incorporation of a wider range of sources and a focus on contemporary developments in religious identity, to provide a more comprehensive analysis of Islamic identity formation in Pakistan.

Keywords: Idealized, Sufism, Reverence for Saints, Cultural Events, Societal Custom.

Introduction:

In Pakistani society, religion profoundly influences both individual and communal identities. However, a closer look reveals a complex mix of cultural and traditional beliefs, often seen as Islamic, that diverge significantly from the core tenets of the faith. This situation gives rise to critical questions about how religious identity is formed in Pakistan and the impact of cultural and historical elements on the development of Islamic practices in the region. The prevalence of these supposedly Islamic beliefs and practices creates a divide between the idealized perception of Islam and its practical application in Pakistan. This discrepancy has considerable effects on the nation's social, political, and cultural environment. Despite the importance of this issue, there is limited scholarly research that critically analyzes the cultural shaping of religious identity in Pakistan. This study aims to address this gap by conducting a critical analysis of the cultural formation of religious identity in Pakistan. By investigating the complex relationships between cultural, historical, and social factors, this research seeks to offer a detailed understanding of how Islamic identity is constructed and negotiated in Pakistan.

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The cultural formation of religious identity in Pakistan is a complex and multifaceted phenomenon shaped by various historical, cultural, and social influences. Existing scholarly work has explored how Islamic identity is constructed and negotiated in Pakistan, emphasizing the conflict between the idealized view of Islam and its lived reality in the region. For example, Jamal Malik's study on the evolution of Islamic thought in South Asia demonstrates how local cultural and historical contexts have shaped the growth of Islamic traditions.¹ Similarly, Muhammad Qasim Zaman's research on the Ulama in contemporary Pakistan shows how Pakistani Islamic scholars navigate the intricate interaction between Islamic tradition and local cultural standards.²

The existing literature also underscores the importance of social and cultural practices in shaping Islamic identity in Pakistan. Katherine Pratt Ewing's ethnographic study of Pakistani Muslims in the United States illustrates how cultural and social practices, such as celebrating Eid and observing Ramadan, are vital in constructing Islamic identity.³ Likewise, Naveeda Khan's research on the cultural politics of Islam in Pakistan highlights how social and cultural practices, including the veneration of Sufi saints and the observance of local customs, influence the country's Islamic identity.⁴ Despite these significant social and cultural practices, many non-Islamic practices are perceived as Islamic in Pakistan. For example, the veneration of Sufi saints and observance of Urs (death anniversaries) are common practices often regarded as Islamic, yet they have been criticized for straying from core Islamic teachings.⁵ Similarly, the celebration of Milad Sharif is often seen as an Islamic tradition, despite its roots in pre-Islamic cultural practices.⁶

Another instance is the distribution of langar (food) at shrines and mosques, often considered an Islamic tradition. However, this practice originates in pre-Islamic customs and has been criticized for fostering a culture of dependency.⁷ The recitation of Quranic verses and offering of Fatiha (prayers) at social gatherings are also often viewed as Islamic traditions, but they have been criticized for reducing Quranic teachings to mere rituals rather than sources of spiritual

¹ Jamal Malik, *Islam in South Asia: A Short History* (Leiden: Brill, 2008).

² Muhammad Qasim Zaman, *The Ulama in Contemporary Islam: Custodians of Change* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2002).

³ Katherine Pratt Ewing, *Stirring the Pot of Muslim Identity: An Ethnographic Study* (University of Chicago Press, 2010).

⁴ Naveeda Khan, *The Cultural Politics of Islam: Pakistan, Identity, and Power* (London: Routledge, 2016).

⁵ Ali Asani, *The Veneration of Saints: A Historical Perspective*

⁶ Khan, *The Cultural Politics of Islam: Pakistan, Identity, and Power*, 28.

⁷ Malik, *Islam in South Asia*, 93.

guidance.⁸ These examples demonstrate how non-Islamic practices have become integrated into Pakistani society and are often perceived as Islamic. These instances serve to illustrate points, but this study is not focused on examining these particular practices or beliefs themselves. Instead, it aims to explore the mechanisms through which traditional and cultural constructs shape these practices. The emphasis is on revealing how these constructs influence perceptions rather than analyzing specific traditions or beliefs. Sufism, with its focus on inward reflection and spiritual connection with God, exemplifies how cultural actions can evolve into religious practices, deeply embraced by people and influencing their religious perspectives and personal relationships with Islam.¹

By analyzing the complex interaction of cultural, historical, and social elements, this research seeks to provide a nuanced understanding of how Islamic identity is constructed and negotiated in Pakistan. This study seeks to contribute to a more profound understanding of the cultural shaping of religious identity in Pakistan and to emphasize the need for a more context-aware and nuanced understanding of Islam in the region.

Methodology:

Research employs document analysis as a qualitative method to explore how cultural, historical, and social influences shape Islamic identity in Pakistan. Document analysis entails reviewing written materials to uncover patterns and themes that illuminate the construction of religious identity. By scrutinizing key texts related to Islamic thought, religious practices, and cultural politics, the research aims to gain insights into the cultural shaping of Islamic identity in Pakistan.

Data Collection:

The analysis focuses on six selected documents that present various perspectives on Islamic identity in Pakistan. These documents encompass foundational Islamic texts, historical accounts, ethnographic studies, and contemporary evaluations.

1. **Maududi, Sayyid Abul Ala.** Towards Understanding Islam.⁹ Sayyid Abul Ala Maududi, a prominent Islamic scholar and activist, presents a comprehensive introduction to Islam, its principles, and its practices. This influential work has shaped Islamic education in Pakistan.

⁸ Zaman, *The Ulama in Contemporary Islam*, 55.

⁹ Sayyid Abul Ala Maududi. *Towards Understanding Islam* translated by Dr. Abdul Ghani, (Lahore: Kashmir Bazar, 1940).

2. **Qureshi, Ishtiaq Husain.** *The Muslim Community of the Indo-Pakistan Subcontinent.*¹⁰ Ishtiaq Husain Qureshi, a renowned Pakistani historian, explores the history and development of the Muslim community in the Indo-Pakistan subcontinent, providing valuable insights into the region's cultural and religious identity.

3. **Parvez, Ghulam Ahmad.** *Islam: A Challenge to Religion.*¹¹ Ghulam Ahmad Parvez, a Pakistani Islamic scholar and modernist thinker, offers a rational interpretation of Islam, emphasizing the importance of science, reason, and intellectual inquiry in understanding the faith.

4. **Hussain, Adeel.** *Revenge, Politics and Blasphemy in Pakistan.*¹² Adeel Hussain, a Pakistani scholar, examines the complex relationships between politics, religion, and blasphemy laws in Pakistan, shedding light on the country's societal attitudes and cultural identity.

5. **Rieck, Andreas.** *The Shias of Pakistan: An Assertive and Beleaguered Minority.*¹³ Andreas Rieck, a German scholar, conducts an in-depth study of the Shia Muslim community in Pakistan, providing a nuanced understanding of their history, cultural practices, and social dynamics.

6. **Tahir, Tayyaba Batool.** *Elite Pakistani Men of Today: Negotiating Islam, Modernization and Culture.*¹⁴ Tayyaba Batool Tahir, a Pakistani scholar, explores the complex negotiations of Islam, modernization, and culture among elite Pakistani men, offering insights into the country's ongoing debates about identity, faith, and modernity.

Data Analysis Approach:

The selected documents were analyzed to identify patterns and themes regarding how Islamic identity is influenced by various factors:

- Cultural practices and their impact on Islamic identity.
- Discrepancies between idealized Islam and its practical application in Pakistan.
- The influence of state policies on shaping religious identity.

¹⁰ Qureshi, Ishtiaq Husain Qureshi, *The Muslim community of the Indo-Pakistan subcontinent*, (Lahore: University Press, 1962).

¹¹ Ghulam Ahmad Parvez, *Islam: A challenge to religion*, (Lahore: Idara-e-Tulu-e-Islam, 1968).

¹² Adeel Hussain, *Revenge, politics and blasphemy in Pakistan*, (Oxford: University Press, 2022).

¹³ Andreas Rieck, *The Shias of Pakistan: An Assertive and Beleaguered Minority*, (London: Hurst Publishers, 2015).

¹⁴ Tayyaba Batool Tahir, *Elite Pakistani Men of Today: Negotiating Islam, Modernization and Culture*, Ph.D dissertation, (New Zealand: The University of Auckland, 2015).

- Sectarian dynamics and minority issues within the broader Islamic framework.
- Veneration of Sufi Saints

Identifying Key Patterns and Themes :

Cultural Practices: Key practices such as the veneration of Sufi saints, celebration of Milad Sharif, and observance of religious holidays emerged as significant influences on Islamic identity, despite some criticisms regarding their alignment with core Islamic teachings.

State and Political Influence: The state plays a crucial role in defining Islamic identity through legislation such as blasphemy laws.¹⁵ Additionally, pan-Islamism significantly impacts Pakistan's national identity and foreign policy.¹⁶

Orthodoxy vs Lived Islam: While Mawdudi¹⁷ presents a rigid view of Islam as doctrinally absolute, texts like Parvez's illustrate how practices adapt to local contexts in Pakistan, creating a tension between idealized Islam and its cultural expressions.¹⁸

Religious Minorities and Sectarian Identity: The documents highlight the marginalization faced by religious minorities (e.g., Shia Muslims and Christians) within the dominant Sunni framework and the challenges they encounter while defining their identities.¹⁹

Sufism's Cultural Influence: Sufism is pivotal in shaping religious practices; its integration into local culture is both celebrated for its inclusivity and critiqued by orthodox factions. In Islam, visiting shrines has sparked a great deal of controversy, and a particular sect of Islam (i.e., Wahhabism) considers visiting shrines as shirk.²⁰

Analysis and Results :

The analysis of the documents revealed several key patterns and themes that significantly contribute to the construction and negotiation of Islamic identity in Pakistan. These findings illustrate the intricate interplay of cultural, political, and historical factors that shape both the idealized and lived experiences of Islam in the country.

Cultural Practices and Their Role in Islamic Identity:

¹⁵ Rieck, *The Shias of Pakistan*, 25.

¹⁶ Hussain, *Revenge, politics and blasphemy in Pakistan*, 76.

¹⁷ Mawdudi, *Towards Understanding Islam* 184.

¹⁸ Parvez, *Islam*, 140.

¹⁹ Hussain, *Revenge, politics and blasphemy in Pakistan*, 193.

²⁰ Tahir, *Elite Pakistani Men of Today*, 205.

A prominent theme that emerged from the document analysis is the importance of cultural practices in shaping Islamic identity within Pakistan. These practices often intertwine traditional, pre-Islamic customs with religious observances, resulting in a unique interpretation of Islam that may diverge from orthodox views.

Veneration of Sufi Saints: The works of Rieck²¹ and Hussain²² highlight the significant role of Sufism in Pakistan's religious landscape. Sufi traditions, such as honoring saints and celebrating their death anniversaries (Urs), are deeply ingrained in the cultural and religious identity of Pakistan. Despite criticisms regarding their alignment with core Islamic principles, these practices are vital to the lived experience of Islam in Pakistan, showcasing the tension between doctrinal purity and local customs.

Cultural cum Religious Festivals: The observance of cultural festivals was frequently identified as expressions of Islamic devotion, even though their origins may not strictly adhere to Islamic tradition.²³ These celebrations are vital cultural markers for the Pakistani Muslim community, helping to strengthen their shared identity.

Orthodoxy vs. Lived Islam: Tension and Negotiation: Another notable theme found in the analysis is the conflict between orthodox Islam, as described in foundational texts such as Mawdudi's *Towards Understanding Islam*, and the practical experience of Islam in Pakistan.

Doctrinal Islam: Mawdudi²⁴ and Qureshi²⁵ articulate a version of Islam that stresses strict adherence to religious texts, highlighting orthodoxy and a distinct difference between Islamic and non-Islamic practices. Mawdudi's impact on Islamic education in Pakistan has promoted a consistent interpretation of Islam as an all-encompassing political and social framework. However, this doctrinal stance often clashes with the day-to-day realities that individuals encounter in their lives.

Lived Islam: In contrast, works by Tahir²⁶ and Rieck²⁷ illustrate those everyday practices among Muslims in Pakistan—spanning local customs and social events—exhibit a more adaptable and negotiated understanding of Islam.

²¹ Rieck, *The Shias of Pakistan*, 44.

²² Hussain, *Revenge, politics and blasphemy in Pakistan*, 103.

²³ Parvez, *Islam*, 122

²⁴ Maududi, *Towards Understanding Islam*, 86.

²⁵ Qureshi, *The Muslim community of the Indo-Pakistan subcontinent*, 62.

²⁶ Tahir, "Elite", 118.

²⁷ Rieck, *The Shias of Pakistan*, 206.

While these activities are influenced by Islamic teachings, they often blend local traditions that may diverge from orthodox views.

The Role of the State and Politics in Islamic Identity: The political dimensions surrounding Islamic identity in Pakistan emerged as another prominent theme during document analysis. The state's role in regulating religious practices and enforcing laws significantly affects how Islamic identity is formed.

Blasphemy Laws: Hussain²⁸ and Tahir's²⁹ examination of blasphemy legislation demonstrates how government policies shape public perceptions of what is considered "Islamic" while promoting a particular narrative regarding religious identity. These laws have created an environment in which deviations from state-endorsed religious practices can be seen as blasphemous or un-Islamic.

Pan-Islamism and National Identity: Tahir's research underscores the influence of pan-Islamism on Pakistan's national identity and its foreign policy choices.³⁰ The government's efforts to present Pakistan as a leader in the Muslim world, especially through its collaboration with the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC), Pan-Islamism have further shaped the national Islamic identity.

Sectarian and Minority Identities The documents also reveal the experiences of religious minorities and sectarian groups within the broader Islamic context. This facet of identity formation is marked by both inclusion and exclusion.

Sectarian Identity: Rieck's ethnographic research reveals unique practices among Shia Muslims that help define their identity amid a predominantly Sunni setting.³¹ Shia Muslims express their religious identities through distinctive rituals such as Ashura commemorations; however, this sectarian division often results in their marginalization within wider narratives of Islamic identity.

Religious Minorities: Qureshi's work on religious minorities, such as Hindus and Christians, highlights how these groups work to affirm their identities within an Islamic state.³² Although there are constitutional protections for religious freedom, these minorities frequently encounter discrimination that

²⁸ Hussain, *Revenge, politics and blasphemy in Pakistan*, 88.

²⁹ Tahir, "Elite," 175.

³⁰ Ibid, 176.

³¹ Rieck, *The Shias of Pakistan*, 64.

³² Qureshi, *The Muslim community of the Indo-Pakistan subcontinent*, 114.

complicates their sense of belonging within an Islamic framework. The tension between majority Muslim practices and minority experiences brings to light the complexities of religious identity formation in Pakistan.

The Influence of Sufism on Islamic Identity Lastly, Sufism plays a crucial role in cultural practices that shape Islamic identity in Pakistan. Its mystical aspects contrast with the more orthodox expressions commonly associated with mainstream Islam.

Sufi Influence: The impact of Sufism is particularly evident through practices such as saint veneration, musical expressions during worship, and an emphasis on personal spiritual experiences.³³ These culturally rooted practices play a central role in defining many individuals' religious identities; however, Sufism's alignment with orthodox beliefs remains contested due to perceived deviations from established norms.

The analysis reveals that Islamic identity in Pakistan is shaped by a complex interplay of cultural, historical, political, and social factors. The construction of religious identity is influenced by both orthodox religious texts and local customs. A notable theme is the tension between the idealized vision of Islam and the lived experiences of its practitioners in Pakistan. Foundational texts, such as those written by Mawdudi³⁴, advocate for a uniform interpretation of Islam, but daily religious life incorporates local customs and historical influences, resulting in a unique form of Pakistani Islam.³⁵

The state's involvement with its citizens has a great impact on the formation of their religious identities. The adoption of specific norms like blasphemy laws and pan-Islamism, take different expressions of Islam and faith and reinforce a particular conception of Islam, as noted by scholars like Parvez.³⁶ This specific fact also adds to the inter-sectarian problems and tensions, alongside issues faced by religious minorities.³⁷ The impact Sufism has on cultural practices which forms part of Islamic identity is very important. Sufism is more mystical than orthodox expressions of Islam. The practice of worshipping saints and singing faith-focused songs is and will always be part of the religious identity of many people.³⁸ The documents also illuminate the issues of all sectarian and religious minorities from the geostrategic scope of Islam. Shia Muslims are positioned in a mostly Sunni society and construct their identity

³³ Hussain, *Revenge, politics and blasphemy in Pakistan*, 152.

³⁴ Maududi, *Towards Understanding Islam*, 7.

³⁵ Hussain, *Revenge, politics and blasphemy in Pakistan*, 150.

³⁶ Parvez, *Islam*, 120.

³⁷ Tahir, "Elite," 65.

³⁸ Ibid, 68.

through distinct Ashura commemorations.³⁹ This often leads to exclusion from most narratives of Islamic identity because of sectarian divides. Some other religious minorities like Hindus and Christians face the challenge of consolidating their identity in an Islamic state. These groups are protected by the constitution and discrimination is prohibited, but they also face severe scrutiny.

Conclusion:

This study contributes to the understanding of the construction of Islamic identity in Pakistan as a multi-faceted process involving intricate and interrelated socio-cultural, political, and historical factors. Islam as faith system and ideology on the one hand, and state policies on the other, both provide frameworks within which religion is practiced. However, the everyday practice of religion in Pakistan is much more complicated. The Islam that has developed in the region possesses unique characteristics because of local practices, historical customs, and political factors. There is a notable gap between the practice of Islam as taught and as it is celebrated, such as Milad Sharif, veneration of Sufi saints, and commemorative observances of historical milestones. All these elements which form part of Islam in Pakistan do not traditionally form a decisive feature of Islam. Drawing from ethnographic material, this research examines the construction of religious identity in the light of cultural practices and the lived realities of people. Islam as identity has to great extent been determined by the state, especially through legislation such as blasphemy laws and push for pan-Islamism. The implications of this for the understanding and practice of Islam in Pakistan are considerable, further fueling sectarian violence and increasing the vulnerability of religious minorities.

Due to the sociocultural factors such as religious diversity and sectarian diversity in Pakistan, it is crucial to explore Islamic identity as a concept that is contextual and dynamic. This study understands the construction of religious identity in Islam through the lens of identity formation struggles in Pakistan—a nation where religion, culture, politics, and history converge to form a distinctive, evolving Islamic identity. Considering the multitude of Pakistan's cultural, historical, political, and social influences, this research aims to provide a comprehensive framework of Islamic identity formulation, showing the necessity of context in religious identity formation.

Limitations and Recommendations for Further Research:

The scope and conclusions of the study are impacted by limitations. First, the religious practices of Pakistan were studied using a diachronic approach, with them undergoing evolution over time, adding more complexity to the identity dynamic. Moreover, the primary focus of the research was supporting

³⁹ Rieck, *The Shias of Pakistan*, 99.

scholarly work, construing personal stories or contemporary shifts regarding religion identity as peripheral, thereby subverting the narrative. The lack of focus on a specific area or group further limits the potential of understanding the dynamics of Islamic identity as it exists in different communities of Pakistan. Lastly, the ambiguity of Document Analysis as a technique leaves open an array of interpretive options which tend to erode the boundaries between objective answers and subjective opinions.

To overcome these limitations, future research could envisage adopting a more holistic method, i.e. to employ a greater number of sources, including interviews, ethnographic studies, and surveys to capture different persons' experiences and perceptions. Studies examining the regional and sectarian differences of Islamic identity would also be helpful in terms of understanding how religious identity structures may vary across Pakistan. More on the implications of emerging trends as well as developments in contemporary societies, such as digital media, on religious practice may also provide more detailed information on the nature of Islamic identity formation. A mixture of methods i.e., document analysis plus qualitative and quantitative data collection methods, could yield a more complete and rigorous understanding of Islamic identity formation in Pakistan.