

Kenneth P. Lizzio  
*Embattled Saints: My Year with the Sufis of Afghanistan*  
(Wheaton, IL: Quest Books, 2014)

With the recent election for the President and Parliament of Afghanistan and the projected withdrawal of most of the US-NATO troops at the end of 2014, the obvious question is 'What Next'? The withdrawal of Soviet troops in 1988 led to 10 years of an armed struggle for power among the anti-Soviet factions until the 1997 control by the Pashtun-led Taliban which lasted until the 2002 conquest by US-NATO forces. At no time, neither under the Soviets, the anti-Soviets, the Taliban, or the post-Taliban US-controlled government has there been stability or socio-economic development. The country exists economically thanks to the trade in opium and to the fiction that it is a UN-member State even if there are no State institutions covering all the area claimed to be Afghanistan.

Kenneth Lizzio, a US citizen, had an academic interest in Sufis – the more-or-less mystic current of Islam. He went to Afghanistan originally in 1990 as a research director for a US-government funded project to curb opium production. During the period of US-NATO control of the country, opium production has grown to the extent that Afghanistan produces over 90 per cent of opium in the world, and opium is the only export crop.

However, with one foot in the door, Lizzio returned to Afghanistan in 1991 to spend a year in the center of a leader of a Sufi order in Afghanistan, the Naqshbandis, who are also active in Pakistan and India. It is this year that Lizzio describes in the book.

The Naqshbandi order traces its origin, as do all Sufi orders, through an initiatic chain that reaches back to the Islamic founder, Prophet Muhammad. This is a mythic chain, not historical, in the same way as some families trace their origin back to the family of Muhammad.

Islam is stuck with its founder, and a critical examination of Muhammad and his times can get one into trouble. Thus, it is easier to find and then stress mystic moments in the life of Muhammad such as the Night of Power when the revelation of the Qur'an began. There were early Sufis such as Mansur al-Hallaj who proposed a direct experience of God without passing through Muhammad or the Qur'an, but al-Hallaj was killed as a heretic. A few others, such as the oft-quoted poet Rumi also could do without the Qur'an, Muhammad, his sayings (hadith) or the legal systems that grew up in Islam (the Shari'a) but he is an exception.

Thus the Sufis to be on the safe side, since they already have enough trouble with legalistic Muslim groups, stress their belonging to the Islamic family, usually practice the Islamic rituals of prayers, ablutions, and dress. They also shy away from highlighting that their techniques and beliefs owe much to the absorption of pre-Islamic Iranian thought and devotional Hinduism.

Lizzio in the hope of understanding the Sufi approach from the inside, in contrast to his earlier academic study of texts and history, became a Muslim and was initiated into the Naqshbandi order. Thus he was able to participate fully in the rituals and to come into close interaction with a Sufi leader, known by his religious name as Mubarak Sahib. The book is a useful account of his year spent largely in the Sufi center among disciples and visitors. It is not clear to me that being an 'insider' produced any insights or experiences that a good anthropologist would not have gathered. However, it may be that given the degree of suspicion and hostility to 'outsiders' an anthropologist would not have been able to approach them at all.

At the end of the study, I am left with the image of a closed, dogmatic group of people, self-satisfied as the holders of the correct avenue to Truth or God but surrounded by other Afghan and Pakistani groups financed by Saudi Arabia and led by the Pakistan Army Intelligence Services who champion legalistic forms of Islam opposed to the Sufi orders. The real problem is that all these groups are armed and hate each other. There are no prohibitions on killing one's enemy since by definition one's enemy is not a Muslim. Thus killing goes on regularly and is likely to increase.

The US troop withdrawal from Afghanistan is likely to leave a disorganized and divided society as it did in Iraq. I fear that the “embattled” Sufis (there are no saints except in the title of the book) are part of the problem, not part of the solution.

Rene Wadlow



Drawing: Cecile Wadlow