

Mountains and Messiahs: Revelation, Language, and Afghan Becomings in the 16th-17th Centuries

This project is a socio-literary study of early modern Sufi and millenarian movements on the frontiers of the Mughal Empire. Focusing primarily on the religious imaginations Bayazid Ansari and the Rawshaniyya, this project draws upon manuscript sources in order to trace the development and transformation of categories of belonging in South Asian religious discourses. The primary argument of this project is that conceptualizations of "Pashto" and "Pashtun" as, respectively, "vernacular" and "ethnicity" emerged out of heated religious debates over saintly authority, revelation, and the power of language in light of the looming Islamic millennium (1000 AH / 1592 CE). Many of the conceptualizations of language, vernacular, tribe, and ethnicity that emerged as part of early modern religious debates between figures such as Bayazid Ansari and his arch-critic Akhund Darweza have become naturalized and continue to influence frameworks of analysis brought to bear on contemporary Pakistan and Afghanistan.