

Transcript of *What'sHerName* Episode: [THE GUIDE Bibi Sahiba](#)

00:00:00 - 00:05:16

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Olivia Meikle: Hi Katie!

Katie Nelson: Hi Olivia!

OM: So let's say that you want to become the most influential, most powerful person in your country.

KN: [laughs] I definitely don't.

OM: [laughs] Yes, but let's say you did.

KN: Okay.

OM: How would you go about that? What do you do?

KN: Um... I'd become a mega-celebrity, the most influencey of influencers.

OM: So what if you were 300 years ago?

KN: Okay... seventeen hundreds.

OM: ...and in Afghanistan

KN: [laughs] In Afghanistan! Uhh...

OM: What's your plan?

KN: My plan is... ooh, have a kind of religious vision, some incredible supernatural skills.

OM: How do you, how do you gain those skills?

KN: Oh. I just have them.

OM: Oh!

KN: God gives them to me, you know, because I had a religious vision.

OM: Oh, I see. Well, I am sorry to tell you that that's not gonna cut it in 18th century Afghanistan.

KN: [laughs] What? My religious vision isn't going to cut it?

OM: You don't just get to *have* religious visions.

KN: Oh...

OM: There's a process here.

KN: Okay.

OM: There is a strictly laid out, extraordinarily systematized *plan*.

KN: Oh wait, are we really talking about a religious visionary?

OM: We are literally talking about a religious visionary!

KN: Oh! I nailed it! I'm so proud! [laughter] I mean I know very little about 18th century Afghanistan so I was really - that was genuinely a stab in the dark. Now I feel, like, validated.

OM: Well it was good instinct.

KN: Thank you.

[theme music]

OM: I'm Olivia Meikle.

KN: And I'm Katie Nelson.

OM: And this is What'sHerName.

KN: Fascinating women you've never heard of.

[theme music]

OM: Okay but the *steps*... there's none of this fly-by-the-seat-of-your-pants become-an-important-religious-figure here. There's a *list*. There's *school*.

KN: Oh! [pause] Religious visionary school?

OM: Yes. If you can get there.

KN: Okay.

OM: Do you wanna try?

KN: Yes please!

OM: Let's walk through the process of how you become the premier religious leader in 18th century Afghanistan.

KN: I'm gonna give it my all.

OM: All right, so first - elementary school.

KN: Okay.

OM: You need to learn the Qur'an, and you need to learn all of the basics: reading, writing, math.

KN: Yeah.

OM: Now when I say 'learn the Qur'an,' I mean *learn* the Qur'an. *Memorize* the Qur'an.

Next, if you do well in elementary school, which I'm sure you would...

KN: Right, yeah. Boom - done. [laughs]

OM: Then you get to move on to the Madrasa. This is, essentially, college. [pause]
Congratulations - you have been accepted into the Madrasa.

KN: Yay! I made it!

OM: And now you get to start to study the big stuff.

KN: Okay!

OM: So first you need to master Grammar and Rhetoric.

KN: No problem.

OM: Logic and Philosophy.

KN: Oh.

OM: Have you now mastered Logic and Philosophy?

KN: Yes definitely, absolutely.

OM: Next - Mathematics.

KN: Got it, no problem.

OM: The Arabic world is doing extremely advanced mathematics 500 years before Europe is. So this will be some pretty rigorous math that you are expected to master here.

KN: Okay.

OM: Next, Medicine. [pause] Just master *all of medicine*.

KN: Okay, no problem.

OM: Scripture. So you have presumably memorized the Qur'an, but now you need to know how to *interpret and understand* the Qur'an.

KN: Oh, okay.

OM: Cosmology.

KN: Ooh, okay.

OM: Ethics.

KN: All right! Cool.

OM: Chemistry.

KN: Hmm, okay.

OM: Music.

KN: Yeah.

OM: Politics.

KN: Okay.

OM: Got all that?

KN: Yes!

OM: You've now mastered all of these things?

00:05:16 - 00:10:02

KN: Yup. I mean it's taken me some time, but I got it.

OM: Well, congratulations...

KN: Thank you.

OM: You have now mastered the *external* knowledge, which means you are now qualified to begin to be taught in the *internal* knowledge of the Sufi Center.

[music]

KN: Okay... I mean I love being all knowledgeable like this, but... why do I have to know math if I'm just going to have a religious vision?

OM: Well there's your very 'western 21st century point of view' coming in.

KN: Ooh!

OM: Why would you ever presume that those things are *different*...

KN: Oh!

OM: ...and that you could begin to understand the mysteries of the *internal* world if you don't understand all of the knowledge of the *external* world first.

KN: Ooh! I like that a lot.

OM: I was gonna say - so, it seems like something that we would be pretty on board with.

KN: Yeah!

OM: You're going to spend a long, long time doing a *lot* of school.

KN: That's my thing! [laughter]

OM: The Sufi Center, which is essentially 'grad school'...

KN: Okay.

OM: ...is maybe more *my* jam than yours...

KN: Oh?

OM: ...because it is much more like a monastery or an ashram or a religious center. And now that you have qualified by learning *all the stuff*, you are now qualified to think about *yourself*. And your goal now is to *remove your 'ego self'* completely, break down and erase the *you* that is separating you from God...

KN: Oh, okay.

OM: ...and dive all the way in, to become *one with God* through this mystical practice.

KN: Oh okay! So now we've arrived at what *I* think of when I think “Sufi.” I think of, like, [Rumi](#), mystics, and ‘transcending the self,’ and the ‘oneness of the universe’ and all of that... Okay! So I just had to get there through *all the knowledge*.

OM: Yes.

[music]

OM: Now the good news is - I have two pieces of good news, first piece of good news is: education, and this process, is the main focus of your entire society. *All* of the resources of the entire community are going to be poured in to making sure you succeed.

KN: Okay!

OM: The other (and equally surprising to us now) good news is this: You're allowed to do this. *You, a girl*, are allowed and even encouraged to pursue this path.

KN: Yay!

OM: There is no gender barrier *at all* to you pursuing the path of a Sufi mystic.

KN: All the way through? Like, from the very beginning?

OM: All the way through.

KN: Same education, same everything?

OM: Completely equal.

KN: Wow! I love that!

[music]

OM: The big problem with the way we've talked about this whole thing: We have placed the goal as ‘importance and prominence and social power and standing’ - and that is the *opposite* of what anyone actually pursuing this process would have been motivated by.

KN: [laughs] Right! If they're headed toward enlightenment, the goal is enlightenment, not power.

OM: The way to become the most important and influential person is to *not want to be that at all*.

KN: Oh, to live in a culture like that again. [laughs]

[music]

OM: So, as we travel halfway around the world and 300 years back in time, our guide is professor Professor Waleed Ziad.

00:10:02 - 00:15:09

Waleed Ziad: I'm Waleed Ziad. I am an Assistant Professor in Religious Studies at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, although I am a historian by trade.

OM: I am also *thrilled* to announce that all of the music for this episode was created especially for us by two absolutely incredible musicians, [Zeb Bangash](#) and [Shamali Afghan](#). I'm so honored to share these songs, which were recorded for us in November [2020] in Lahore, Pakistan.

[music]

Waleed Ziad: So her complete name is actually Bibi Jan-i Jahan - "Life Soul of the World." She's better known as Bibi Sahiba Kalan. 'Bibi Sahiba' is actually more of an honorific or a term of respect. Kalan means "the Great". So Bibi Sahiba is how I refer to her, and that's how she really comes across in these sources as well.

[music]

Waleed Ziad: Bibi Sahiba was born in 1752, and herself hailed from a scholarly saintly family of Central Asian origin. They were Sayyids which means they were descendants of the Prophet [Muhamma]. She lived most of her life in three cities, Kabul and Kandahar in today's Afghanistan, Kandahar now unfortunately being famous as the epicenter of the Taliban, and in Peshawar which is in today's northwestern Pakistan. But her life story unfolds throughout what is today Pakistan, Afghanistan, Uzbekistan, and India. So I'll begin with her Sufi Guide, whose name was Khwaja Safiulla. And in the late 18th century he was the most renowned Sufi scholar of the Afghan empire. Then in 1793, [Shah Zaman](#), who was the newly-minted Afghan king, had actually walked on foot from the Royal Citadel to the alleyways of Kabul, so that Khwaja Safiulla would actually perform his coronation ceremony. So this is the kind of role that he had in this society. And in Kabul he set up this college in the 1770s, in the heart of the city. Now

Khawaja Safiulla had appointed over thirty deputies to manage his vast sacred scholastic network, and these included some of the most renowned scholars of the Indus Valley and Afghanistan. And among them Bibi Sahiba Kalan, 'Bibi Sahiba the Great,' was considered the highest. In the chief biographies she's described as "The first and the most perfect," "the first of the Caliphs" (or the deputies) and "the Great Deputy." In fact, he would say about her that "our physical forms are separate, but our reality is one."

[music]

Waleed Ziad: So how did I discover Bibi Sahiba?

So I was not expecting to run into Bibi Sahiba, it just kind of happened. I actually study mystical scholarly networks across Central and South Asia, especially in the 18th and 20th century. And it's a tremendous amount of fun, the research has taken me to about 120 towns, villages, tribal areas across Afghanistan, Pakistan and Uzbekistan. Why I feel really lucky is I've had the chance to actually live with Sufi communities, participate in rituals, see the practical role they play in the societies which they inhabit. And have even experienced the ways in which they have pushed back - quite successfully, mind you - against the rise of extremism in the last two decades. So amidst all of these travels, this was an entirely chance encounter.

I had read part of this book in Kabul about 200 years ago, within which I found a little brief vague reference to this 'great female scholar of Afghanistan.' In this excerpt she was referred to as "The foremost and most perfect inheritor of the preeminent religious lineage in the region's history." So I was obviously quite intrigued, but I thought the trail would stop right there. It was really not going to be more than a footnote in my work.

[OM and KN laugh]

OM: Yes, right - how often have we heard that on this podcast? Bibi Sahiba is about to *take over his life*.

Waleed Ziad: Once I got ahold of the book, it's clear it contained one of the most complete biographical accounts of a Muslim woman scholar-saint in the premodern period. Even more fortunate, it was composed by her son who himself was one of the greatest poet saints of his time. And he wrote it only fifteen years...

00:15:09 - 00:20:06

Waleed Ziad: ...after his mother's death. He was able to give us intimate details of his mother's career and her spiritual unveilings, even capturing these very personal emotional states at transitional moments in her life. He was not only her cherished son, her travel companion and her confidant - but also her disciple.

OM: And even though this is very much a [hagiography](#), you know, this is a 'saint's life,' it's *real* and *personal* in a way that's really unusual in any sort of hagiography that I have ever read.

[music]

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[music]

Waleed Ziad: Then, in fieldwork in Southern Pakistan, in a little-known but really charming ancient town on the Indus River called Matiari, I finally met Bibi Sahiba's descendants, who were kind enough to share with me the manuscripts that belonged to their forefathers. And then after that, material kept pouring in. It was absolutely fantastic. I was able to collect oral histories in five towns in Southern Pakistan and several towns in Afghanistan where her descendants and her followers had settled. And this helped fill in a lot of the biographical gaps.

The background really requires us to unwind what we assume about Afghanistan, Pakistan and I guess all of the other "stans." The idea of these 'lands of lawlessness, extremism, otherness, violence' - these are colonial tropes that have unfortunately made their way into our consciousness. And unfortunately they even define the way in which people of these regions talk about themselves, think about themselves, and their own history. So to tell her story really is a step towards unwinding a lot of these misconceptions. We're actually talking about a cosmopolitan crossroads of civilization.

So, the height of her career was in the late 18th and early 19th century and this was at a time when the four great Muslim empires were fragmenting; the Ottomans out in the Middle East, the Mughals in South Asia, the Safavids in Persia, the Uzbeks in Central Asia. But, it was not a time of 'backwardness' or decline. In place of a lot of these 'old kingdoms,' a new Afghan empire had set itself up based in these very three cities to which Bibi Sahiba belonged. And these are ancient cities - even before Islam they housed some of the most important centres of learning for Buddhism.

Kabul and Peshawar became the twin capitals of the great Afghan empire the very same year that the United States became independent. They swiftly became cosmopolitan centers - which means that then students and artists and scholars from as far as China and Istanbul travel to these three cities. These cities then hosted dozens of major colleges, and a vibrant Jewish, Armenian Christian, Shia, and Sunni community. So Bibi Sahiba was at the center of this 'renaissance.'

OM: Her world is a wildly diverse - ethnically, religiously, nationally - incredibly vibrant and 'mixed-up' kind of society...

KN: a melting pot.

OM: ...and not in all the way that we think of this.

00:20:06 - 00:25:02

OM: Yeah it is a huge melting pot of *everyone*.

KN: Yeah.

Waleed Ziad: This was also a golden age of [Sufism](#) which is the mystical dimension of Islam. And this is a really important facet of our story.

[music]

Waleed Ziad: Sufism is generally an ineffable term, in fact Sufis will always say cannot be defined, but it generally refers to a state of heightened awareness of God, and then by extension, to a very convoluted science of 'inner purification,' or what they call 'eliminating the lower or the ego self' through a range of practices from meditation, breathing, reciting the names of the Divine, seclusion, ethical conduct, social service, and in many traditions sacred movement and sacred music.

OM: While the goal and the product is this metaphysical transcendent state, the *process* for getting there is extremely formalized, and has very specific and well-laid-out practices that get you there.

KN: Interesting.

Waleed Ziad: So the most important point is that in the world in which Bibi Sahiba grew up, Sufism was an integral part of Orthodox Islam. It was not on the margins - it was a companion to Islamic law. So law regulates your 'outer life' and Sufism guides your 'inner life.' Which means in her world, you could not be a religious scholar unless you are a practicing mystic, and you could not be a mystic unless you were a religious scholar. So in this way she's very much a product of her time.

OM: So Bibi Sahiba had memorized the Qur'an by the time she was eleven.

KN: Oh my gosh!

OM: She was a superstar, standout student from the very beginning.

Waleed Ziad: She studied Islamic law, theology, Greco-Arabic medicine. And before the age of eleven, which is quite early by any standard, she even began her training in mysticism and metaphysics.

OM: As we said, there is no barrier to entry here at all. Women are *absolutely* allowed and encouraged to pursue this path, all the way to the end. But, this is also a time with incredibly strict gender segregation. Men and women *do not exist* in the same spaces.

Waleed Ziad: Her first teacher, until she was twelve, was be Peshawar's greatest scholar saint. So we can imagine that all sorts of intellectuals and mystics would have gathered at his college. In fact, the college became so popular with female students that people started to complain, lest there be any 'inappropriate mixing.' The hagiographies tell us a rather funny story that an older, very conservative college, which was based outside of Peshawar, sent a messenger over who complained about this, that "there are simply too many women at your college." The story goes that Bibi Sahiba's teacher told him to hold a piece of cotton in his hand, and then he brought up a flame to the piece of cotton, and it didn't burn. So the point of the story was to illustrate that, *Buddy, I've got the capacity to prevent inappropriate mixing - mind your own business.*
[laughter]

OM: And that's where we have the rise of this remarkable institution, the *haram sarai*.

KN: In addition to this there's another institution that's very important at this time, and this is illuminated quite uniquely by my study - in fact it really has not been written about very much before. It's called the *haram sarai*, and this is a space of spiritual training presided over by women, which existed in parallel to the male-dominated institutions of the Sufi Center, the madrasa, and the mosque. And it's essential to the diffusion of the Sufi Path. It attracts scores of women disciples, and then provides social services and even what we today call mental health services, to women and men. Because a large part of their pedagogy was actually about mental health.

Bibi Sahiba administers the *haram sarai*. She presides over the assemblies and she delivers lectures there. And the biographies actually provide some documentary evidence of its layout and its functionality - what happened there.

OM: So the *haram sarai* have their own entrances and exits, their own spaces, their own storehouses, their own financing. They're completely independent of the 'male space' within the madrasa or whatever space...

00:25:02 - 00:30:08

OM: ...this is functioning in, but they are *absolutely equal*. It is *not* a matter of 'the women are teaching the women and the men are teaching the men.' Bibi Sahiba is teaching *everyone*, from the *haram sarai*.

KN: How is she *physically* doing that if she... if they're separate?

OM: This is a very good question. One which Waleed Ziad is still trying to figure out.

KN: Huh.

Waleed Ziad: Men would stand, probably on a porch, I'm guessing, to - this where it's unclear - to receive training and lectures from Bibi Sahiba. There may have been a lattice or a curtain in between to maintain strict gender segregation. And we can get a sense of how this would work by looking at examples in the Mughal court - where you have women who are governing provinces, but it's all done from a space of gender segregation.

OM: While, I think, our instinct is to bristle at this segregation, and find it very difficult to believe that 'separate but equal' could ever be equal, when you look at the actual access and rights that women had in this space and time - they were *light years ahead* of most women in Europe. Women owned property, they're recognized as their own legal entity - that in terms of

access to power and independence, these women have it *way better* than any of the women half a world away, where the American revolution is going on, for example.

KN: Where women are not separate... and not equal.

OM: [laughter] Right.

KN: Wow. That's so interesting.

[music]

Waleed Ziad: The interlocutors between the *haram sarai* and the madrasas and the mosques - so between the female and the male spaces - were often Bibi Sahiba's sons or male relatives. They were constantly looking for creative solutions to this particular issue of segregation. One of the rather unusual and rather ingenious systems was one of "milk relatives." So for example, let's say that they need a carpenter. One of the women there would nurse children from a carpentry family, and then when the child would grow up, they would really be part of the family, legally speaking - and then they would grow up and they could provide carpentry services. So this is one of the creative solutions that they actually devised.

In 1769 she married a distant relative, three to four years her younger. And he was pretty impressive as well - he became a reputed Sufi and poet, and in the biographies actually he's generally known in reference to his wife.

[music]

Waleed Ziad: Now in the 1770s, Bibi Sahiba arrives in Kabul and Kandahar. By this time she is already a promising young scholar in her twenties. Husband and wife are both quite busy, they often live apart. Her husband's often 'on the road.' She's managing two Sufi colleges in Kabul and Kandahar, and then at the same time pursuing her own training. So they were a 'power couple' - her husband attracted a sizable following in Kandahar. Over the next two decades Bibi Sahiba educates several hundred, and in fact I should say several thousand, scholars and Sufis.

[music]

OM: There's two things here that are really hard for a modern audience to understand:

Waleed Ziad: There are several parts of her life that are actually really difficult to understand, regardless of where you live. For those who simply are not familiar with meditative practices in Islam, or let's say similar ones in the Tantric tradition, understanding her life mission and her

internal achievements and even the core of what she was teaching is near to impossible. The Sufi scholars led really rigorous lives. They train themselves to literally sleep no more than four hours a day - and if you look at the daily routine of, say, her teacher, which has been spelled out in detail, it simply doesn't make sense by today's standards.

OM [to KN]: And so we can't understand what, to her, would have been her most important achievements - because we can't even begin to understand what her *goals* were.

00:30:08 - 00:35:01

Waleed Ziad: And of course, another point which is difficult to grasp for audiences is how she was able to do what she did under the strict rules of gender segregation. At another level, for most people, as you said, it's an entirely unexpected story - and especially for the place and time in which she lived. So on one hand, her story reveals this entirely ignored, this very vibrant social and cultural scene of Afghanistan and Pakistan's chief cities, which have been really treated by people - here, there, wherever - as civilizational backwaters, due to recent years of conflict and of course systematic media misrepresentations.

OM [to KN]: But the most surprising thing for us here is that Bibi Sahiba was not unique. In fact, she wasn't even unusual.

Waleed Ziad: She was one of *many* women scholars and religious leaders in the premodern Muslim world. These days especially, all the discourse on Afghanistan is dominated by the Taliban, the idea of oppression - so the story comes to many as a surprise, and to many in the area as a surprise.

OM: We want this story to be revolutionary, to find this amazing radical voice - and she wasn't that at all.

KN: So then was she an 'insider'?

OM [to WZ]: We want to think of her as an outsider here, but was she seen that way? Did she see herself that way?

Waleed Ziad: "Outside/Inside" is actually a really fascinating way to ask this question. Because those are the very terms that are used by these Sufi networks, to talk about the 'outer knowledge' and the 'inner knowledge,' and the 'outer world' in the 'inner world.' So I think from that point of view she would be both - but from the point of view in which you're asking this question, she clearly grew up in a world where the idea of being a woman, and being a scholar and mystic, was natural. There was a space for that, and certainly for those who had the opportunity to study the

outer and the inner sciences. So we can't view her from the modern lens of being a revolutionary - she doesn't appear to be that way. It doesn't appear - at least from the sources that we have, and I will say that with a big caveat - that she's struggling to find her voice. (Remember though the sources are all male sources.) Rather her struggle appears to be an internal one, the one that mystics face - battling their own demons, the Ego Self.

[music]

Waleed Ziad: The turning point in her life was her pilgrimage to Mecca. So in 1797 Bibi Sahiba joins her teacher and 315 companions, or so the oral histories tell us, for a historic voyage through Kandahar, through Balochistan, which is now really at the center point between Iran of Afghanistan and Pakistan, and into the Indus valley to then-very-small port of Karachi (which is now over twenty million) and then there to Yemen and beyond. She was accompanied by her daughter whose name was Bibi Amat Allah; she was a young scholar and Sufi in her own right. In addition, Bibi Sahiba's two sons came along, the elder of whom chronicled the events of her physical and her internal spiritual journey.

[music]

Waleed Ziad: Within Mecca, upon completing the pilgrimage rights, her teacher Khwaja Safiulla issued Bibi Sahiba a 'diploma.' And this is her diploma for teaching mystical sciences. Her diploma was preserved. The final lines are really quite incredible, so, with your permission: "Abundant praise be to God. Although now the respected, aforementioned Guide or Teacher has no need of permission - but since it is a tradition of our predecessors that, without permission, an Elder or a Spiritual Guide cannot, in this serious matter, take a single step - thus, in written form, it is enshrined that whosoever, from all women and men that seek the path of transcendent God, can come to her service and take the Path from her, even if they have received it from this poverty stricken one."

OM: It essentially turns *all* of his thousands of disciples, the entire Sufi community, over to her.

KN: No way! Wow!

OM: This is not: *Women, you may take the Path from her.* **Everyone** may take the path from her.

KN: Wow.

00:35:01 - 00:40:03

OM: She is, in Waleed Ziad's words, "The arch-saint of the Afghan empire."

[music]

Waleed Ziad: It's an incredible document on which I can speak at length, but amongst its noteworthy points are its lack of gender specificity. Although her teacher painstakingly outlines each and every one of the degrees and spiritual attainments - possibly (this is my guess) in case any skeptic were to question her credentials. Within this document she becomes his successor.

[music]

Waleed Ziad: Now, very soon after however - on the return journey when they reach Yemen, her teacher unexpectedly passed away. Her son provides this intimate account of his mother's emotions and unveilings at this juncture, as they both stood by their teacher's bedside.

[music]

Waleed Ziad: Bibi Sahiba commissioned her teacher's shrine in Yemen, and then led the whole caravan back for a *second* pilgrimage to Mecca and Medina. During which, as related by her son, she reaches her spiritual heights, and she has a sequence of mystical visions before she reaches spiritual sobriety again. She said, "When I became attentive, I found myself to be the Ka'ba, and I perceived my four limbs as the four prayer spaces." Each time she approached the sacred black stone on the Ka'ba, a voice would call out to her, "Come, oh beloved one. Come, oh accepted one." In Medina too, quote: "At every step she received new grants." The prophet appeared to her and presented her with a green robe. The prophet's daughter, Fatima - she said - "kissed my forehead and I was drowned in her association. She asked me to be seated in the way in which an honored guest is received."

[music]

Waleed Ziad: On the return journey, her daughter also tragically fell ill and passed away in Matiari, which is a medieval pilgrimage town on the Indus river. According to the popular stories, the body was placed on the back of a camel that was to decide the appropriate burial ground. And this actually mirrors a story in the prophet's life: When the prophet Muhammad goes to Medina, many people invite him to stay with them and he doesn't really want to offend anyone, so he basically says, "I'll let my camel wander town to determine where I'm going to stay."

[music]

Waleed Ziad: In this case, Bibi Sahiba's camel stops in the lands of the noble family, who are also descendants of the prophet Muhammad and originally from western Afghanistan - and whose descendants are now very dear friends of mine and who I generally stay with while I am doing my fieldwork there. Now on this land, Bibi Sahiba commissioned a shrine for her daughter. Right next to it, she built a small college in her honor, which remains a local holy site.

So having built this institution Bibi Sahiba returned back to her native Kandahar and Kabul. Two centuries after the fact, Bibi Sahiba's pilgrimage is still remembered in the oral histories of the Indus valley in southern Pakistan. The shrine for her daughter became a way-station for years to come. And when Afghan Sufis would enter into the Indus valley, they would generally stop there, really for the next century. So in effect - her pilgrimage, the building of the shrine in the Indus valley, and the building of the shrine in Yemen, tied together this whole 'sacred geography' of Afghanistan, the Indus, and Arabia.

[music]

OM: There are two specific stories from her life that Waleed Ziad believes are especially illustrative of Bibi Sahiba's life and her character.

Waleed Ziad: So in the 1780s her teacher Khwaja Safiulla experiences a spiritual and psychological crisis. He's in turmoil. And this is really a natural part of the spiritual journey; they go through a period of turmoil. We are told that he would perform his prayers at his mosque and his college, then immediately withdraw. He would return to his place of seclusion that was actually located within the *haram sarai*.

00:40:03 - 00:45:03

Waleed Ziad: Now in his seclusion corner, Khwaja Safiulla would lament, and spend countless hours in his tortured supplications. Now, he happened to possess a sizable library of books and sacred relics. He was in a state where all these worldly possessions have lost meaning. So he ordered that the collection be immediately donated to the poor. So Bibi Sahiba stepped in, and she reminded her Sufi guide that there was a better way to handle this. She insisted that they sell the items and distribute the money to the poor. After all, the poor need money, they need clothes - they don't need books. A fair value then was determined, but - Bibi Sahiba herself purchased the items, and took them and secured them within a room in the *haram sarai*. The needy of Kabul were then summoned to the *haram sarai*, and she personally distributed her *own* possessions which were roughly equivalent to the value of the books. Thus, she preserved the priceless library.

[music]

OM: So here again we see her: practical, thoughtful, ethical, and transcendent - but not *so* transcendent that she's lost track of what it means to be human, and be hungry and poor. She's this perfect balance of all of these virtues.

[music]

Waleed Ziad: The biographical dictionaries also relate another story concerning a caravan that arrives at Kandahar, and that's led by a great Sufi poet who is of [Baloch](#) ethnicity, and his name was Khalifa Ahmad Khan Nisamani. Bibi Sahiba received a mystical intuition that Nisamani was about to arrive - so she dispatched her son, who was very young at that age, maybe nine or ten, to receive the guest, and then request a prayer from him. Her young son went outside, he greeted Nisamani, but he was confused, he was disturbed - because Nisamani had a dark complexion and appearance that he simply wasn't used to seeing in his native Kandahar. So he was a bit worried, and he went back to his mother quite ashamed, and admitted to her that on account of his different appearance, he didn't ask for his prayers. Bibi Sahiba became rather upset, and she said to him, quote, "Do not consider his physical appearance, as his heart is luminous as the full moon. When I approach - in spiritual terms - the court of the prophet Muhammad, peace be upon him, I see Nisamani seated at his feet. We are not rendered this honor."

[music]

KN: Zing!

OM: So, she is doing this anti-racist, anti-xenophobic work within her own family, but also within the community, as all of these people are pouring in from around the world - and creating a place that values those differences and respects all of these incoming minds, instead of shutting down, as many communities do when a sudden influx of refugees or immigrants appear. And she is *so* effective at doing that, that the reason we know this story is because her son *told us* the story. So it was so influential in his life that he remembered it - but also, she did this so effectively that he is willing to make *himself* 'look bad' and tell the story of the time he was wrong, to pass on that knowledge. That's remarkable.

KN: Hmmm.

OM: That is a remarkable teacher who can teach lessons that important, without so humiliating the learner that they refuse to ever talk about it again.

[music]

Waleed Ziad: She was invited to Bukhara, which is the fabled scholastic and spiritual capital of central Asia. It's now a fantastically preserved, absolutely phenomenal ancient town in Uzbekistan. And the invitation came from none other than the king himself, who was not only a follower of Sufis, but actually a licensed Sufi Guide. He spent several hours a day in teaching Sufism and in meditating. In fact, several people at the time complained that he spends *too* much time doing that, and less doing what a king is generally supposed to do. Regardless, he ends up making, basically, Bukhara into a college town. So a whole chunk of the revenues of Kabul end up going towards scholars and Sufis.

00:45:07 - 00:50:06

Waleed Ziad: Bibi Sahiba goes there with her two sons and the sources indicate that they participated in scholarly debates at the court. Now she left that great city with her sons and on the way home in 1803 she too fell ill, and passed away in a town called Mazar-i-Sharif, which is now in northern Afghanistan right below the Uzbek border.

[music]

Waleed Ziad: Mazar-i-Sharif actually means “the noble shrine,” and it is the spiritual epicenter of central Asia. And it is built around the legendary shrine associated with Imam Ali, who is the first Imam and the son-in-law of the Prophet. With Bibi Sahiba’s exalted transregional reputation, the custodians of the Shrine accorded her a saint’s funeral, which was a ritualized public event. But most important - she was given the rare honor of being buried under the second dome of the shrine complex. This is huge, this is *absolutely huge*.

[music]

OM: One of the questions we often ask in this podcast: *What did this person achieve?* And the list of amazing achievements is huge for Bibi Sahiba. But from *her* point of view, her achievement was self-realization and Divine intimacy. She achieved oneness with God - and everything else is just a byproduct of that. None of the rest of it matters at all.

Waleed Ziad: On her own terms she was a religious scholar and a Sufi first and foremost. So her achievement, really in the big scheme of things, was really self-realization, it was Divine intimacy. And then, being at the stage where she could guide others in their spiritual quest and in their day to day lives, where she could serve the people of Kabul and Kandahar.

OM: And yet, almost nobody has heard her name.

Waleed Ziad: This is annoying. [laughs] Um, she has no doubt been honored by her followers and her descendants. But, entirely ignored by the populations, and by the secular populations which inhabit the region in which she lived. It's really surprising *where and how* she is revered.

There's a book that was recently published, I think about fifteen years ago, in the most unlikely of places. It's a book in Persian, and it was published in the Khyber Agency which is right on the border between Afghanistan and Pakistan, considered according to *New York Times* and all of the other media outlets as "the most dangerous place in the world." The religious leaders there trace their lineage back to her and her teacher. They also happened to be the fountainhead of one of the most widespread religious networks in the region; this is one of the subnetworks that come out of her lineage. And for years, they were in the frontlines on the battle against the Taliban. So in this book there's a chart, and the chart shows these four great spiritual lineages. And right in the center is a circle with Bibi Sahiba's name on it at the juncture of these lineages. And this is coming from a deeply conservative place, and a place which is really the last place you'd expect this kind of thing to come out from.

And for this reason I think the story's got so much potential, because the most conservative elements of society in this region can actually very gladly accept her as a Saint, and it's an area where I think the two worlds can actually combine quite well, if it's mobilized in the right way.

[music]

00:50:06 - 00:53:25

OM: Sometimes this podcast is about discovering women who were never acknowledged, you know, reclaiming the female power and authority of these women who were sidelined. But sometimes it's just about uncovering *what was there all along*, reclaiming the *truth* about women's power and authority and women's place *in the center of society*.

KN: Hmmm.

OM: Even, maybe especially, in the times and places that we have been taught to least expect that.

[music]

Waleed Ziad: From vague memories of my family's past - larger-than-life, highly charismatic women who are public figures, poets, and revolutionaries - it seemed as I was growing up with that ideal in mind, and with that passed in mind, that contemporary discourses on Muslim

women or Afghan women were just so bloody irritating. They just don't allow for this. Yet, so many larger-than-life women show up in history, like the queens of Bhopal, who are three generations who rule over one of the richest states in south Asia, who are bossing around the people who are controlling Mecca and Medina. The sister of the greatest Mughal emperor, one of the greatest emperors of all time, was the governor of Kabul - and she was sent there originally to quell a rebellion. So really, I mean - who are we kidding? Kabul already is being governed by a woman in its heydays!

In many ways I feel that, for me, Bibi Sahiba brings a world to life that is part and parcel of who I am. I feel that she represents a world that I already knew existed - the great women under whose shadows my ancestors lived.

[music]

Credits: Huge thanks to Waleed Ziad. If you'd like to learn more about Bibi Sahiba or about the incredible music in this episode provided by Zeb Bangash and Shamali Afghan, find song lists, links, and much more information on our website <https://www.whatshernamepodcast.com/>. You can also follow us on Instagram, Twitter, and Facebook where we post lots of photos each week. If you've enjoyed this episode, we would be so grateful if you'd leave us a review on Apple Podcasts or wherever you listen. It makes a huge difference in helping new listeners find us. Our theme song was composed and performed by Daniel Foster Smith. *What'sHerName* is produced by Olivia Meikle and Katie Nelson, and this episode was edited by Olivia Meikle.