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RESEARCH PAPER

Comprehensive Methodological approach for Documenting a Living Cultural Heritage: Using Case example of Mazar of Shah Abdul Latif Bhitai, Sindh

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ABSTRACT

This article uses the notion of 'living heritage' for case of a valuable heritage site where tangible and intangible values are of importance. Outlining a comprehensive framework for documentation, the following paper highlights the multiscaled, multidimensioned nature of such heritage and what keeps it living. Using the case of Mazar of Shah Abdul Latif Bhitai in Sindh, a site of religious and cultural importance, this paper outlines methodological approach for its documentation, recording elements along with an insightful context study, inclusive of its geographic, socio-political aspects. The research process highlights the priority elements in preservation. Besides literature review and archival research, physical documentation and ethnographic documentation are prominent methods used, with triangulation outlining in-depth understanding of attached values. The method and results highlight the significance of the role of indigenous community actively involved in preservation as a key to its sustenance in the past, present and future.

Keywords: Living Heritage, South Asia, Mazar, Documentation, Sindh

Introduction

Among the main approaches to heritage conservation, the material-based, values-based and lately the community-based approaches, have been used and developed. Though developed at different times, they are all applicable today. The major distinction among these approaches becomes clear through reference to 'authorized and the unauthorized heritage discourse' (Smith 2006, p. 299). While the materials-based approach has created record of monuments globally, however, a disconnect with community linkage where present has raised questions.

The values-based approach to conservation incorporates values of community(ies) engaged with heritage as significant to its preservation. Nevertheless, some of its case studies profess the dominance of physical preservation over social connection, for example, the case of Chaco Cultural National Historical Park and its Navajo indigenous communities, in New Mexico.

For a designated heritage site, the managing authority of conservation professionals dominates decision-making for use and protection, even if in theory they are meant to be one of the stakeholders. The community does not play a dominating role in steering practices as before, due to enforced policies and is received as one of the stakeholders, and not the main interest group.

A living heritage approach lays greater focus on community. The intangible connection of community with heritage takes priority in preservation over the tangible heritage. The core community and its way of heritage protection in traditional way is given

weightage. This marks a shift in conservation, promoting involvement of underrepresented, non-western communities on World Heritage forum.

Literature Review

Growing interest in indigenous community-based approaches is an acknowledgement of their vital involvement (MacDonald 2003). Presence of ideological and political differences separates community interests from local and international organizations in the preservation process (Cox & Elmqvist, 1997). The history of beliefs and practices go back further in time to modern conservation later aligned with national or international organizations. For better potential working relation between the two conservation practices, there is a need for detailed contextual research. As each place belongs to a different space, time and culture context, researches may somewhat vary (Baird, 2013; Vecco, 2010). Local situations and management of notions change with contexts, so generalization of heritage values can create disparities (Chirikure et al., 2010). '..To apply conformity to these culturally, temporally and spatially specific ideologies as a universal basis for evaluation is to ignore the potential existence of practices that stem from different ideologies and motivations but lead to similar outcomes' (MacDonald, 2003).

Documentation of living heritage promotes people centered approach to potentially become a tool for management and conservation. 'An appropriate equilibrium is sought between heritage use (by community and in accordance with community's connection with heritage) and heritage protection (by conservation professionals), with emphasis often on use rather than protection' (Poulios 2016).

Critical contemporary research on heritage carries the notion of cultural heritage as a social construction at its center, '…resulting from social processes specific to time and place…' where culture may be seen as 'a set of processes, not a collection of things' (Avrami et al, 2000). Heritage as a cultural process, allows the past to engage with the present. This is an opportunity that a living heritage site offers, where history is not a discrete past event (Snyder, 1984). Among evolving approaches, the link of historic site to a cultural history and a cultural process, as 'continuous and connected as opposed to one that is seen as disjointed events' (Raymond Williams in: McGuigan and Moran 2014). This supports the broader definition of living heritage. Narrative form allows such investigations of social and physical phenomena within complex contexts to be holistically explained (Groat & Wang, 2002).

A holistic view and documentation of site prompts non-reductionist strategies of cultural protection (Barsh, 1999). The process of intangible heritage listing is critiqued to be selective and hierarchical (Brown, 2005), lacking comprehensive approach for documenting culture. Intangible values are seen as 'fixed and immutable rather than fluid and socially determined' (Beazley 2006:5; Byrne 2008:229). Thus, the need to recognize culture as a process part of a context rather than an object fixed in place is basic (Taussig, 1992).

Sites of living history are contextually significant described as physical 'persistences' in settlements, generators of urban form, and socio-cultural centers (Rossi, 1982). Age old rituals and practices consistently continue affiliation. The roles and viewpoints of key stakeholders guide the protection process, respecting its multifaceted view. This paper outlines a process of recording layered history and cultural process attached to a living heritage site.

A broader scope as an approach to documentation is suggested in this paper incorporating macro and micro context and site factors, becoming broadly applicable to other sites, despite their uniqueness. The case site chosen for this purpose is a provincial religious heritage, protected and managed under the Provincial Department of Auqaf and Religious Sites in Sindh (Pakistan). The reason for its selection is due to the strong role

played by various community representatives in the process of cultural preservation. Active community participation is instrumental in maintaining ownership of place and group identity. The outlined method highlights contextual factors including social, political, spatial, functional, morphological, historical and geographical in maintaining authenticity and integrity. Interrelationships between significant aspects highlight a net of established meanings and values associated with place. Together, this documentation process creates direction for sustainable preservation.

Material and Methods

The aim of a living heritage approach is maintenance and enhancement of continuity, with the core community playing a central role (Berkes, 2004; King, 2003; Poulios, 2010; M. M. Shakir, 2018). Creating a holistic view of a culture's priorities and values is elemental in their process of continuity. A background knowledge base on evolution of site and core community can create this understanding.

Studies of relationship between memory and place hint to an approach where tangible and intangible heritage interrelate (Casey, 2009; Connerton, 1989; Halbwachs, 1980; Nora, 1989), debating on meaning attached to places by people. Goncalves et al. (2003) highlight how the 'tangible can only be interpreted through the intangible' and that 'tangible and intangible heritage are two sides of the same coin'. The two are not distinctly separate from one another as the documentation processes inform both together, the intangible playing a defining role.

Table 1
Theoretical Framework

LIVING HERITAGE		TANGIBLE	INTANGIBLE
	MACRO (CONTEXT)	Region Settlement	History Representation
	MICRO (CONTENT)	Architecture Space Use	Symbolism Collective Memory – Rituals Society / Community Structure / Responsibility Poetry / Performance

Source: Author

Macro Components

The historical, political, morphological and social contexts of living heritage play an important role in keeping it alive. The macro components look at contextual parameters, while micro components at the heritage site itself, presenting a holistic documentation (Table 1).

A multi-dimensional contextual framework situates the living heritage site active through its time of existence. Apart from written history, socio-political evidences available in documents, archival material and literature, mixed methods including physical and social documentation methods may be used for outlining the timelines of site.

Layered remnants at historic site outline political and cultural evolution of place, determining the multiple roles it has played in its geographical setting. Albeit, its core source of meaning comes from its social context within which it is embedded. The macro level of site study essentially articulates the interrelationship of heritage as a memorial and living function to regional and settlement context (Boyer, 1994). If seated within a town or settlement, its formal and functional relation to site may be researched through morphological and socio-cultural evidences based on representation.

Micro components

The micro level study of site may outline the interrelation of existing and evolved social structures to current framework of practicing traditions, commemorative acts, and continued historic practices in particular places.

The social and cultural setups tied to living heritage, its physicality, contribute to meanings assigned to place (Kostof, 1991) at micro level. Ritual performances at site bring out with clarity relation of place to attached community through embedded meanings in gestures and verbal practice. They are described as structured, formalized, rule bound and repetitive rich with symbolism. Social organization and hierarchy is pronounced in ritual performance (Connerton, 1989), highlighting the active role of proximate community. The functions they play in society today point to continuity or evolution (Avrami et al. 2000:4; Smith 2006). It is essential to truly comprehend and connect with traditional practices of preservation and the local socio-cultural relations that carry this forward, acknowledging that most heritage sites and their location preservation practices are older than the field and institutions of conservation. Evolving affiliations, demands and interpretations may be documented to understand developing trend.

Important days and times of cultural significance require participant observation at site. Studied within its natural settings, it is primarily a qualitative research, 'attempting to make sense of, or interpret, phenomena in terms of the meanings people bring to them' (Groat and Wang 2002: 176). Of the mixed methods, **qualitative research** takes major focus in narrating the site's multilayered historic and socio-cultural significance.

Active sites of cultural value require keen observations, done without haste, but in good time, so that 'true meaning behind behaviours may reveal without bias', to understand 'larger social patterns' through a set of 'individual actions' (Geertz 1973). An insightful understanding can be achieved by visiting all important and related places and meeting people in key positions.

Social documentation of the living heritage site involves qualitative interviews aimed to gain varying perspectives on significance and use of place, held at site or in close proximity (Zeisel, 2006). These are characteristically interpretive, explaining phenomena holistically in narrative form (Groat & Wang, 2002). Interviews are kept open-ended and semi structured in approach allowing people to elaborate on their beliefs and viewpoints. In-depth interviews with members of the community who diligently support the living heritage, practices and site uncovered people narratives along with details of their involvement, outline the cultural values associated with place. Interviews are best conducted in the local language where articulation and expression are important to record. Participant observation of rituals performed at site daily, weekly, monthly and annually can be mapped and photographed. Interviews conducted with participants of rituals afterwards can offer a direct relation of collective memory to time and place, decoding underlying meanings attached to place.

The **physical documentation** of site and context may be undertaken through intensive photography as well as through mapping contextual, spatial, functional, and ritualistic features at three scales. These scales include the site itself, context of site or town, and the regional context, documenting all elements that link the site in symbolic meaning. Regional influence of historic sites cannot be undermined as linkages and networks keep the site active and living in coordination, reinforcing its significance.

A cultural map of the area, mapping all the related sites / cultural resources, can add to the spatial and regional understanding of place significance. Detailed mapping of each site identifies key elements, spaces, circulation and seasonal, ritualistic connectivity. Mapping of rituals highlight socio-spatial interaction elaborating time and place relations. Qualitative

mapping exercise is proposed to be undertaken along with physical maps used for engineering works. This may entail extrapolating base maps to zoning diagrams of field site showing attachment levels, significant features in function and meaning (Gottdiener, 1986). This can be an effective graphic to explain location specific details in a summarized form.

Tangible Heritage documentation involves measuring the historic site, marking associated artifacts. Intensive photography records visual details of historic and contemporary aspects manifested in physical form.

Considering conservation to be a modernist concept, questions on how historic cultural contexts relate to this can be enlightening and add to its ingrained and negotiated value at such sites. Different people from the community including young and old, men and women provide diverse views and interpretation of place linked to tradition and the present. The elder, more involved community members present the traditional legacy, while the youth highlight the meaning associated to place today (referring to case study). This highlights the evolving and living nature of the site. Alongside, diverse perspectives of people of various occupations like journalists, educationists, social workers, offer insight to a broader perspective of the role of heritage site for town, with attached aspirations and challenges. Government personnel promoting and coordinating culture and tourism present perspective on heritage site management and linked area development.

The complex, contingent nature of the built environment (Fielding and Fielding 1986: Moran-Ellis et al., 2006) emerges through a triangulation of multiple methods. While bringing out details of significance heritage and context, using multiple methods verifies, compares, debates, supports evidence and conditions, producing a more accurate and detailed analysis. Research validity and objectivity are addressed through this (Groat and Wang 2002).

A close examination of multiple spaces, literature and people supported by repeated visits can help to logically separate the different aspects that construct living heritage over time periods.

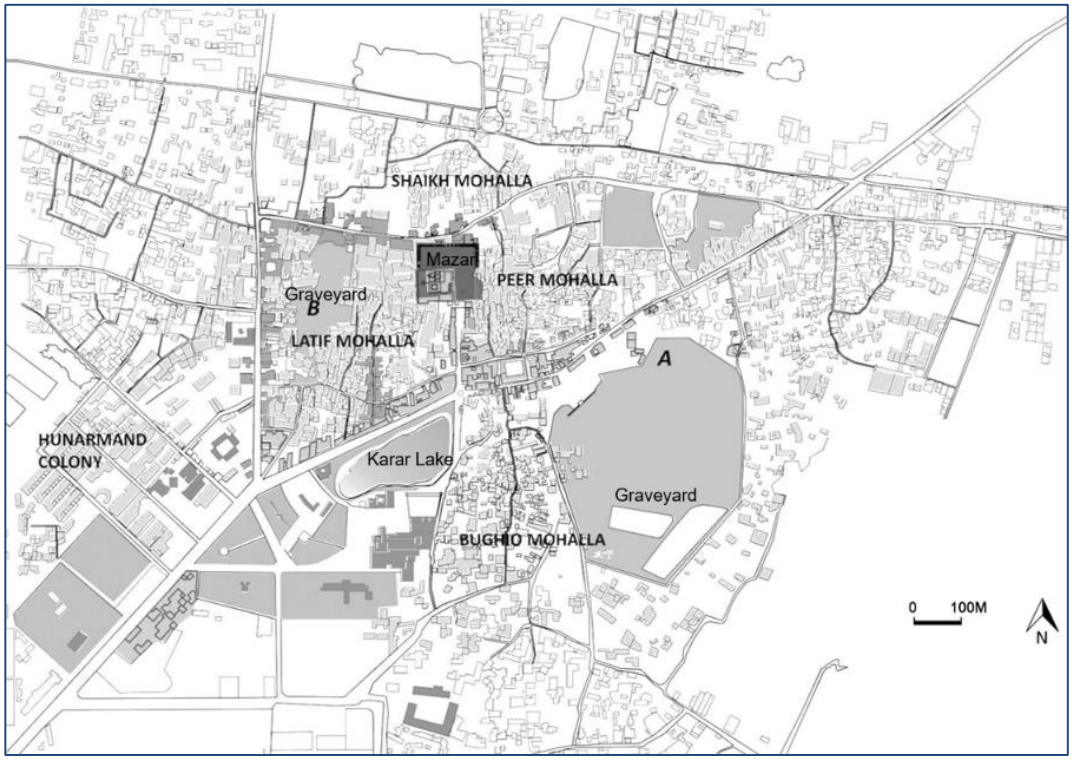

Figure 2: Mazar of Shah Abdul Latif Bhitai, centrally located in town surrounded by traditional neighbourhoods. Source: Author

Case Study: Mazar of Shah Abdul Latif Bhitai and Context

Shrines/ Tombs or Mazars are burial sites of an important person. Some are revered by local populace and are worthy sites of cultural heritage. They are representative of the 'real locus of culture of South Asians…' that individuals and groups venerate based on their personal, historic, legendary or family association (Ernst 2004). Open to receiving donations, charities and addition to structures of welfare or ornamentation, these places evolve with time. A popular local architecture, they exhibit a multi-dimensional relationship of people with place. Acting as mystic learning centers, shrines are characteristically multipurpose public spaces.

Figure 1: Bhitshah town located South of Sindh Province

Mazars make up for a substantial 48 percent of the notified heritage sites of Pakistan under the Antiquities Act 1975 and Punjab Special Premises Ordinance 1985. Mazars of religious persons or shrines are particularly regarded regionally. Shrines are characteristically individualistic and differ enormously based on their timeline, geography as well as surviving socio-cultural network and practices. The case of Mazar of Shah Abdul Latif Bhitai is unique and recognized as provincial heritage by the government. Bhitai's contributions are celebrated with a calendar of rituals at Mazar, and through the region over a three-day festival in town at his death anniversary.

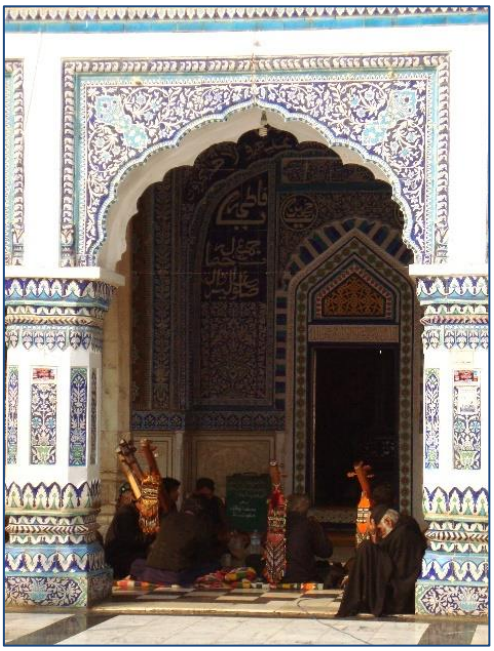

Figure 3: Daily ritual performance at mazar.

Shah Abdul Latif Bhitai is recognized to be an imminent personality due to his worthwhile contribution to Sindhi language through mystical poetry (Baloch, 2010; Sorley, 1940). Dating to the 17th century, Bhitai belonged to a lineage of Sufi saint. He travelled and settled at the *Bhit* or mound, with his followers. Today the town is called Bhitshah or the *Bhit* of Shah, named after him. It carries the history of Bhitai, his practices, later becoming his place of burial. The Mazar of Bhitai carries religious and cultural significance.

The core community at the Mazar of Bhitai are descendants of the fakirs or followers of Shah Latif and that of his family. A strong sense of custodianship exists with the heritage, regarding its care as an inherent obligation with regular rituals. Traditional practices carry the ethic as an implicit embedded conservation process. Documenting the living heritage as a process is a step to recognition of community significance and maintaining political, social and economic viability (Butz et al 1991, MacDonald 2002).

Figure 4: Mazar of Shah Abdul Latif Bhitai

Table 2
Variables of living heritage

Main Parameters	Variables	Values and documentation	Information sources
Tangible heritage	Major Historic site, with supporting physical structures in context	Physical documentation of heritage Physical evolution Significances	Satellite imagery Mapping on site Maps from Auqaf Department Mapping using written sources Labels and physical information on site Literature
Intangible Heritage	Music, poetry	Global significance of mystic poetry Popularity dimensions: reassertions; folk stories –physical markers; television programs; political influences outside town	Literature
	Customs	Significance Evolution	Informant interviews Literature
	Mela on urs	Current scale and content of mela Role of mela in economy Significance for context Evolution	Observation, mapping Estimating visitors numbers / outreach Literature
	Social groups: Family of Bhitai Musicians Fakirs / their types Visitors / their types Shopkeepers Auqaf Department	Evolution and Current role play at shrine Level of association with heritage and its revival Heritage Interpretations	Mapping activities in shrine Customs performed by each, Personal interviews-Profiling
Settlement Development	Planned interventions	Housing Cultural development	Literature Review Satellite image, mapping

	Political, power dynamics, regime paradigms affecting development Context settlement evolution in relation to shrine	Infrastructure development Social structures – NGOs, welfare organizations, education development, government organizations,	Old plans
Co-relational elements	Role of shrine in context Urban context / public realm Public space of shrine Overlapping of elements of two main parameters	Threats Potentials	

Source: Author

Table 3
Major rituals performed at Mazar

	Rituals	Social groups involved	Time period within which it is repeated
1	Performance of Shah jo Raag	Tamar / other fakirs	Daily (for 21 hours)
2	*Naqqara* (Drumming)	Mungenhar fakirs	Daily (twice)
3	*Sao Sumar*	Zakri / Tamar fakirs / Gaddi Nashin	Monthly (first Monday night of lunar month)
4	*Urs*	Culture / *Auqaf* Department Zakri / Tamar fakirs / Gaddi Nashin	Annually

Source: Author

Results and Discussion

The attached matrix shows a clear categorization of tangible and intangible parameters of the living heritage, their variables for documentation, values and significances. This section of the paper is divided into three parts, with intangible heritage as major overarching framework for the continued association to heritage, followed by the tangible heritage – the physical site, and its multidimensional 'context'. Major outcomes of research correlating methodology and findings are outlined in this section.

Intangible Heritage as a Framework for Tangible Heritage

Using literature review as a base, the documentation of intangible heritage aimed at bringing forth its translation, reinterpretation and transmission. Fieldwork included observing the process of handing over to new generations, decadent practices, varying viewpoints followed by classifying core groups in preservation and those playing a peripheral role. Oral memory and its translation to media-based commemoration in the emerging world, from written to digital mediums highlighted the nature of interpretation, adaptation of technology and new skills among core or peripheral groups.

Core Community

The mazar of Shah Abdul Latif Bhitai has several key actors involved in management of the multi-faceted heritage. Defined social status, history, hierarchy and roles reveal their association approved and denounced at two levels; the state level and community leadership.

Within the provincial government management, two departments oversee different aspects. The property, originally designated as a *waqf* property (like other mazars of saints), was claimed for state ownership and taken over by the Department of *Auqaf* (plural of *waqf*).

A traditional institution base transformed to a bureaucratic government mechanism with the intention to reduce political strength of local landlords associated with mazars over local populace (Malik, 1996, 1997).

The Department of Auqaf manages physical upkeep of such properties through contract-based process, with its employees having little traditional knowledge and cultural belonging. The Department of Culture celebrates 'culture', commemorating through a three-day festival in town including many cultural activities like recitals, exhibitions, market of local cultural goods, local sports etc. The insertion of the Department of Auqaf is representative of a major paradigmatic socio-political change in attitude toward mazars and their custodianship. Initiated through legal cases during the British colonial rule, the Department consolidated after Independence. Clear boundaries of space, time exist in the operation and management of traditional and government institutions with unspoken but accepted 'difference' in attitude.

Interviews highlighted the socio-political tussle, accepted domination in their identified zone of operation. Fakirs, *Gaddi Nashin* and family form traditional group. Both groups have distinct activities, audiences and mannerisms. A socio-political sensitivity exists with clear viewpoints and narratives. This demarcates an intricate balance that can sway to bring out prejudices or social injustice. How can attached modern 'government' or authorized systems respect, support and promote sustainability? The answer to this is contextually specific.

At historic groves, the changing political context plays a major role determining cultural, religious processes ascribing hierarchical importance to groups, families and individuals in their contribution to continuing legacy. To declare the mazar as material heritage only, with little regard to community, would create a major 'ideological distance' between the interests of local community and the assertive agency (Alcom 1995:15).

The documentation of rituals is telling of a set of detailed actions, controlled acts of group commemoration, tied to historic place. Rituals provide a window into the socio-political context of region with specific audiences. As a distant or participant observer, mapping ritual performance can chart the spatial sequence and movement of key participants, while interviews can identify signifiers and references (Figure 5).

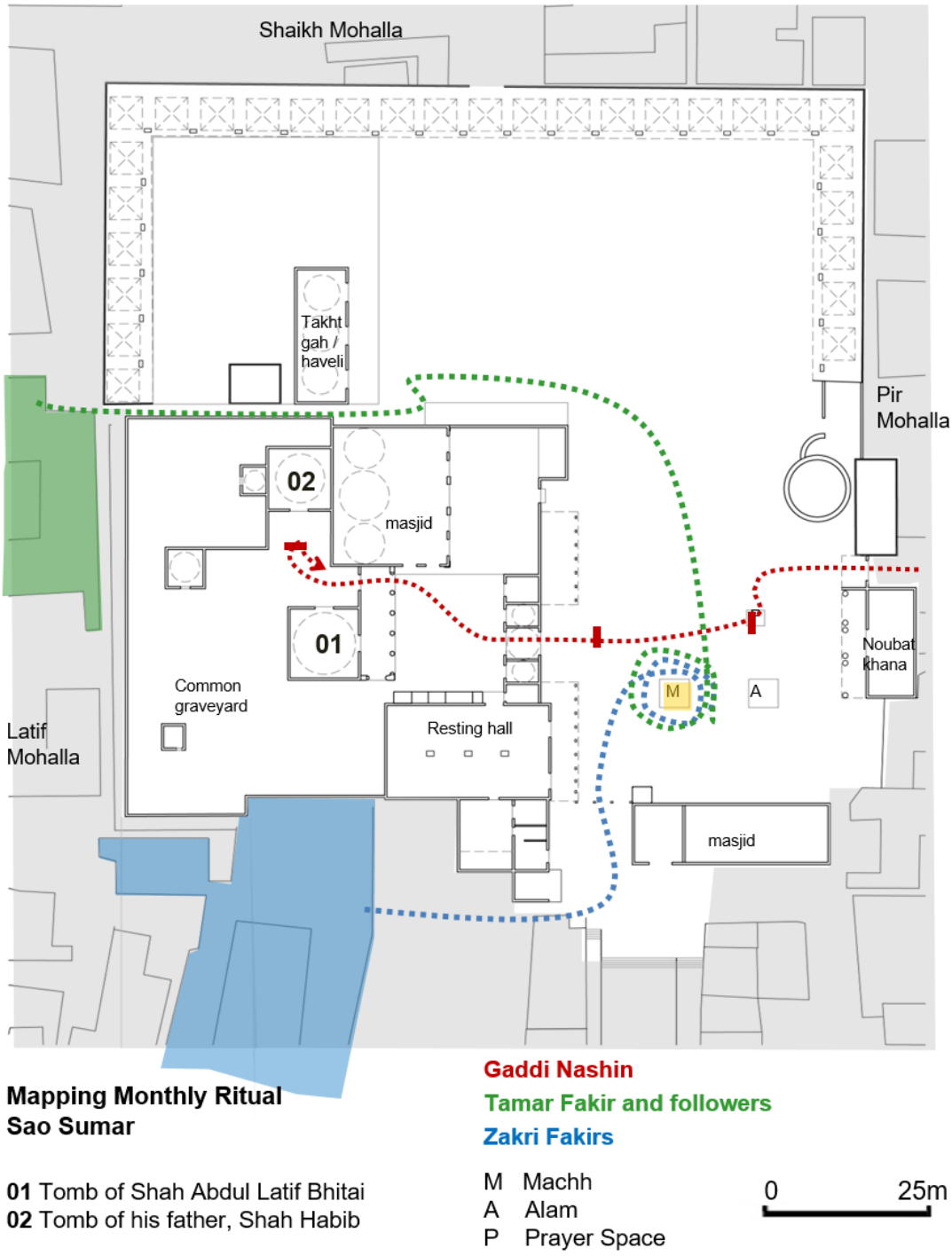

Figure 5: Mapping Sao Sumar, the monthly ritual Source: Author

Role of Context in Place Identity

Tuan (1979) articulates place as locations with a strong sense of cultural rootedness and living heritage sites align with this. Acknowledging that link in documentation, conservation or any intervention strengthens relation of past with present.

The historical context including major phases in political eras, with paradigm changes become critical points in the history of rooted cultural sites (Kostof, 1991). Traditional values may be negotiated due to adopting new practices and surrendering what

is considered invalid. 'Processes of resistance and accommodation' create this cultural exchange. The foundations of a cultural practice, belief, values change usually in relation to a broader context (MacDonald, 2003).

A geographical network of similar sites over a larger region may be less affected by changes than isolated site, continuing ritual commemoration (Refer to figure 6). Agnew (2011) identifies this as a method for analyzing place, through nodes and networks.

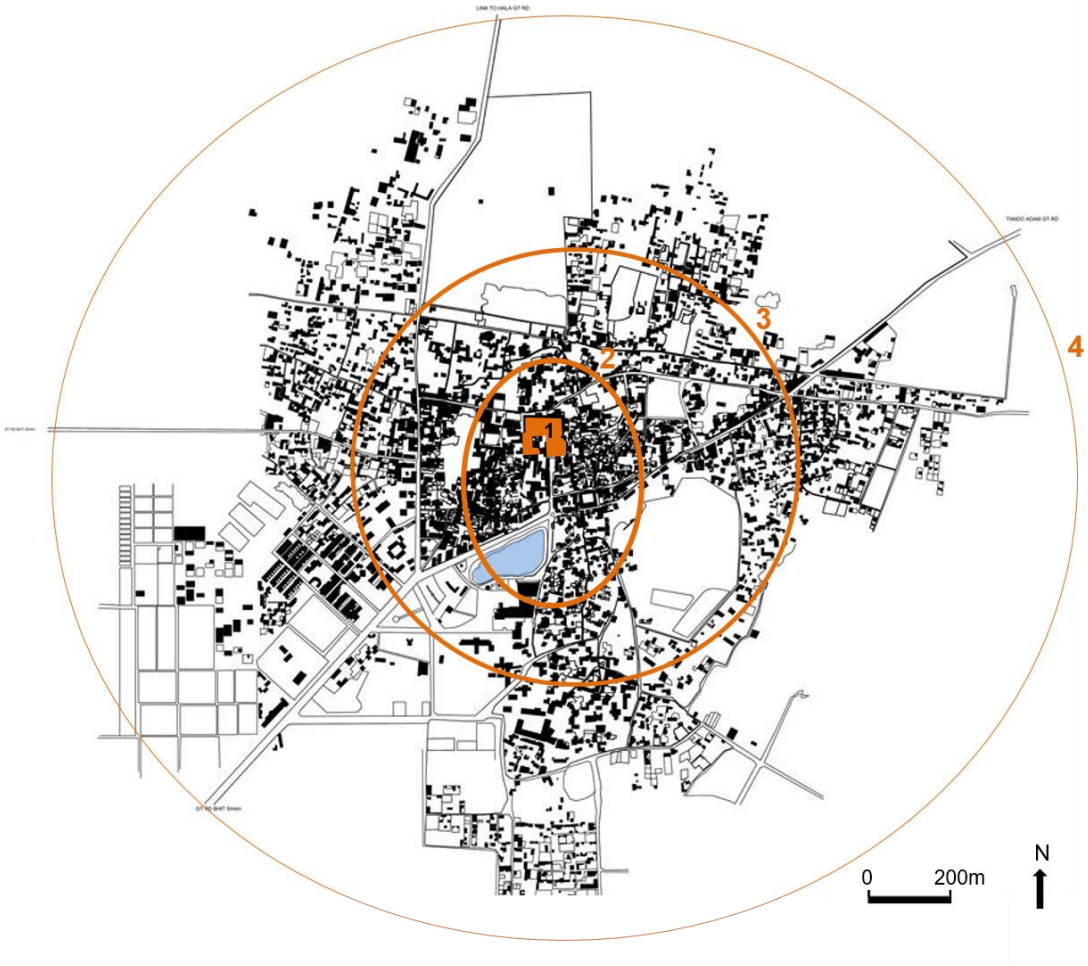

Figure 6: Sphere of influence of Mazar Source: Author

The role of the living heritage site in the city's history and geography establishes a significant context relationship. The larger public realm includes the functional relation of city and site, as city infrastructure, and public place. The formal, functional and symbolic, including city structure, morphological and landuse relation of site and town brings out the multi-level symbiotic relationship (M. Shakir, 2024). Location and connectivity gives it prominence as urban form generator (Rossi, 1982). The neighbourhoods around the Mazar belong to distinct community groups in Bhitshah (Figure 2). Pir Mohallah houses the family of Bhitai and other Syeds. The fakirs of Bhitai inhabit Latif Mohalla and Shaikh Mohalla includes later migrants to town.

The interrelation between the traditional social structure and the physical form of settlement may be correlated through morphological form and function as well as the network of cultural landuses. The everyday use and relation of site to surrounding neighbourhoods characterizes the cultural values of residents. Casual interactions with residents revealed the demarcations of public and private spaces, social spaces, norms of

privacy built into form and movement patterns of the neighbourhoods, thus the holistic cultural experience.

The mazar of Bhitai acts as the city's big open space, a civic space and a peaceful sacred public space. Among the various activities observed at the large open space of the mazar were peaceful demonstrations, campaigns, meeting point for residents and outsiders and a point of orientation. As a sacred space, it also acts as the largest imambargah of town and is a culminating point for religious processions.

Figure 7: The mazar as religious space
Source: Author

Figure 8: As recreation space
Source: Author

Figure 9: Peaceful public demonstrations at mazar
Source: Author

Figure 10: Youth campaigns at mazar
Source: Bhitshah Youth Organization

Is the mazar a well-preserved site? How can the preservation process be supported? The documentation of this living heritage site unravels actors, social groups, hierarchies and factors contributing to preservation and highlights its well knitted nature. The main actors were conscious of their importance and the value of what they are attached to. They comprehend the global and spiritual importance of their site. They often receive interested international students and scholars to share their traditional knowledge while some fakirs have performed in international Sufi music festivals and are acknowledged due to their media performances. A thorough analysis of the site points to the need to revisit the role of attached government departments like Auqaf with better recognition and respect to traditional culture. Amendments of political and social value can reduce differences between social groups and lead to harmonious relationships for better preservation and control.

Conclusion and Recommendation

Recently, local or indigenous people are being acknowledged, recognized and supported for political and cultural autonomy in institutional and public discourse (MacDonald, 2003). Supporting this view, the proposed methodology is comprehensive and overarching for site and context documentation for living heritage generally.

The case contributes to the current lack of and need for detailed contextual historical research of good conservation practice where tradition is acknowledged as a fundamental resource in the battle for control over resources. Many instances in the past show loss of controlling rights, ownership and management among local groups due to institutional changes during colonial rule or after nationalization. The transition of institutional management from traditional to bureaucratic demarcates paradigms (Kozlowski, 1985; Malik, 1996).

If community supporting conservation initiatives are to be effective and sustainable, they must be grounded in ethnographic, multi-disciplinary research. These efforts 'must confront and overcome a disturbing and dangerous tendency among governmental and non-governmental agencies to treat the idea of community as homogenous and the idea of tradition as static' (MacDonald, 2003). Respect for cultural and institutional diversity are key lessons emerging from such documentation practices. Working together to facilitate at different levels, integrating traditional and modern knowledge can offer mutual support, locally, nationally or internationally achieving better preservation, addressing local inequities. A process-based approach may be established through documentation and networking vs a project approach, facilitating roles adaptation, recognizing the implicit, embedded process in traditional practice. Community sustainability for long-term survival can be ensured through this recognition.

Better participation of community in decision-making can be effective in managing available resources through local accepted practices. The local people are 'the eyes and ears' in context, attached to a crucial sense of place and identity of major value for conservation practice.

Ignoring the local context is a major threat for conservation. Thus, its multi-pronged documentation is absolute essential in harnessing this. Further, the major challenge lies in achieving social justice and balance in power dynamics. The limitations faced in such conservation include internal conflicts over rules, objectives, and benefits.

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