

## Folk Beliefs and Religious Syncretism: Examining Polytheistic Manifestations in Afghan Society

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### ABSTRACT

This article explores the complex interplay between orthodox Islamic monotheism and various folk traditions in Afghan society, specifically examining practices that may manifest elements interpreted as polytheistic. While Afghanistan is predominantly Muslim, with a strong adherence to the principle of Tawhid (the oneness of God), centuries of cultural exchange and indigenous beliefs have fostered a rich tapestry of local customs. This conceptual study, drawing upon theological texts, historical accounts, and observations of common traditions, identifies and analyzes practices such as the veneration of saints and shrines (Ziarats), beliefs in local spirits and supernatural entities, and the use of amulets and talismans. The analysis critically discusses how these traditions, while often viewed by adherents as culturally permissible or as means of seeking blessings from God through intermediaries, can be interpreted as forms of shirk (polytheism) from a strict monotheistic perspective. The study highlights the tension and coexistence between these belief systems, underscoring the dynamic and often syncretic nature of religious practice in Afghan society. Understanding these manifestations is crucial for appreciating the nuanced religious landscape and for effective engagement with local communities.

**Keywords:** Polytheism, Monotheism, Islamic Traditions, Afghan Society, Folk Beliefs, Syncretism, Ziarats, Shirk, Cultural Practices, Religious Observance.

### INTRODUCTION

Afghanistan, a nation deeply rooted in Islamic faith, is widely recognized for its strong adherence to the principles of Islam, particularly the fundamental tenet of Tawhid, the absolute oneness and indivisibility of God [1, 3]. The Holy Quran, the central religious text of Islam, unequivocally

condemns shirk (polytheism or associating partners with God) as the gravest sin [1]. Islamic theological discourse, as articulated in various scholarly works, meticulously defines monotheism and warns against any practices that might compromise this core belief [3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10, 11, 12, 13, 14, 15, 16, 17].

However, like many societies with ancient histories and diverse cultural influences, Afghan society exhibits a complex interplay between formal religious doctrine and deeply entrenched folk traditions. These traditions, often passed down through generations, reflect a blend of pre-Islamic customs, local superstitions, and interpretations of Islamic practices that sometimes diverge from strict theological orthodoxy [18]. This dynamic interaction can lead to the manifestation of beliefs and practices that, while perhaps not intentionally polytheistic by their adherents, may contain elements that could be interpreted as such from a rigorous monotheistic viewpoint. These manifestations often involve seeking intercession, protection, or blessings through means other than direct supplication to God alone.

The presence of such syncretic elements in common traditions is not unique to Afghanistan but is a phenomenon observed in various Muslim-majority societies globally, where local customs intersect with universal religious tenets [18]. Understanding these manifestations is crucial for a comprehensive appreciation of the religious and cultural landscape of Afghanistan. This article aims to explore some common traditions in Afghan society that may manifest elements interpreted as polytheistic. By drawing upon Islamic theological texts and observations of prevalent folk practices, this conceptual study seeks to analyze the nature of these manifestations, discuss the theological perspectives on their permissibility, and highlight the complex coexistence of diverse belief systems within the Afghan social fabric. This exploration is vital for fostering a nuanced understanding of religious observance and cultural heritage in the region.

### Literature Review

The bedrock of Islamic faith is Tawhid, the absolute oneness of God, which mandates that all worship, supplication, and reliance be directed solely towards Allah [1]. The Holy Quran explicitly and repeatedly condemns shirk, which encompasses any act of associating partners with God, whether in His divinity, attributes, or worship [1]. Islamic scholars throughout history have dedicated extensive works to expounding upon the concept of Tawhid and clarifying the various forms of shirk, ranging from overt idol worship to subtle forms of reliance on created beings or objects [3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10, 11, 12, 13, 14, 15, 16, 17]. For instance, scholars like Yusuf al-Qaradawi in *The Truth of*

Monotheism provide detailed expositions on the purity of monotheistic belief [14]. Similarly, the works of Ibn Athir, Ahmad bin Hanbal, Bukhari, Bayhaqi, Jurjani, Hakim, Hamidi, Qazvini, Nasa'i, and the Ministry of Al-Awqaf and Al-Shaon al-Islamiya, all foundational Islamic texts and scholarly compilations, consistently emphasize the strict adherence to monotheism and the avoidance of shirk [2, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10, 11, 12, 13, 15, 16, 17]. Ethari (1424 AH) further elaborates on the truth of belief and its contradictions among Ahl al-Sunnah wal-Jamaa, providing a theological framework for understanding deviations from pure monotheism [3]. Khorramdel's *Tafsir Noor* also provides Quranic exegesis that reinforces the monotheistic message [12].

Despite this strong theological emphasis on Tawhid, many Muslim-majority societies, including Afghanistan, exhibit a range of folk traditions that have evolved over centuries, often incorporating elements from pre-Islamic customs, local animistic beliefs, and popular interpretations of religious practices [18]. This phenomenon, known as religious syncretism, involves the blending of different religious or cultural beliefs and practices. While adherents may not perceive these practices as contradicting their monotheistic faith, they can, from a strict theological standpoint, manifest characteristics that resemble polytheism or forms of shirk.

Key areas where such manifestations are often observed include:

- **Veneration of Saints and Shrines (Ziarats):** The practice of visiting and seeking intercession at the tombs of revered saints, Sufi masters, or religious figures is widespread in many Muslim societies, including Afghanistan [18]. While some scholars view this as a permissible act of seeking blessings from God through righteous individuals, others argue that direct supplication to the deceased or attributing supernatural powers to the shrines themselves constitutes shirk [14, 15]. The distinction between seeking intercession through a saint and worshipping the saint directly is a contentious theological point [14].
- **Belief in Local Spirits and Supernatural Entities:** Beyond the Islamic concept of Jinn, some folk traditions involve beliefs in various local spirits, fairies, or supernatural beings that are thought to inhabit specific places (e.g., trees, rivers, mountains) or influence human affairs [18]. Practices may include offering sacrifices or making vows to these entities for protection, healing, or

good fortune, which can be seen as a form of associating partners with God [1].

- **Use of Amulets and Talismans:** The wearing of amulets (ta'wiz) or talismans containing Quranic verses, prayers, or symbols for protection against evil eye, illness, or misfortune is a common practice [18]. While some consider this permissible if the belief is that protection comes solely from God through the means of the amulet, others argue that attributing inherent power to the amulet itself constitutes shirk [14].
- **Rituals Associated with Natural Phenomena:** Certain folk rituals or beliefs connected to natural elements like specific trees, rocks, or water sources, where offerings are made or blessings are sought, can also be interpreted as remnants of animistic or polytheistic practices [18].

The tension between strict monotheistic doctrine and these folk traditions reflects a complex interplay of theological interpretations, cultural heritage, and the sociological functions these practices serve (e.g., providing comfort, community cohesion, or a sense of control in uncertain environments) [18]. Understanding these manifestations requires a nuanced approach that considers both the formal religious framework and the lived realities of cultural practice.

## METHODOLOGY

This study employs a conceptual and analytical methodology, drawing upon a comprehensive review of existing theological literature and documented observations of common traditions in Afghan society. Given the sensitive nature of religious beliefs and the aim to analyze existing manifestations rather than collect new empirical data, this desk-based approach is appropriate for a nuanced exploration of the topic.

**3.1 Research Design** A qualitative, interpretive research design was utilized. This approach allowed for the in-depth analysis of texts and observations, focusing on understanding the meanings, interpretations, and implications of specific practices within their cultural and religious contexts. The design aimed to identify patterns and themes related to polytheistic manifestations within Afghan folk traditions.

**3.2 Data Sources** The "data" for this study consisted of two primary categories of sources:

- **Primary Theological Texts:**
  - o The Holy Quran [1].
  - o Canonical Hadith collections (e.g., Sahih al-Bukhari [5], Musnad Ahmad bin Hanbal [4], Sunan Ibn Majah [15], Al-Sunan al-Kubara by Nasa'i [16],

Al-Sunan Al-Kubari by Bayhaqi [6], Collection of Al-Bukhari and Muslim Sahihs by Hamidi [9], Al-Mustadrak Ali Al-Sahhein by Hakim [8]).

- o Classical Islamic theological works defining Tawhid and shirk (e.g., The Truth of Monotheism by Sheikh Yusuf Qaradawi [14], Belief is Truth by Ethari [3], Kitab al-Taffat by Jurjani [7], Manhaj of Sheikh Mohammad Rashid Reza in Al-Aqeedah by Trustee [15]).

- o Quranic exegesis (e.g., Tafsir Noor by Khorramdel [12]).

- o Islamic legal and jurisprudential texts (e.g., Al-Musawat al-Fiqhiyyah by Ministry of Al-Awqaf and Al-Shaon al-Islamiya [17]).

- o Lexical works (e.g., The End of the Strange Hadith and Effect by Ibn Athir [2]).

- **Documented Observations of Afghan Folk Traditions:**

- o Academic studies, ethnographic accounts, and sociological analyses that describe common cultural and religious practices in Afghanistan, particularly those related to saint veneration, beliefs in local spirits, use of amulets, and rituals associated with natural phenomena [18]. These sources were used to identify the "manifestations" in question.

**3.3 Data Collection Procedure** Data collection involved a systematic process of literature review and conceptual mapping:

- **Keyword Search:** Utilizing academic databases and specialized Islamic libraries (both physical and digital) with keywords such as "Tawhid," "shirk," "polytheism Islam," "Afghan folk traditions," "religious syncretism Afghanistan," "saint veneration Afghanistan," "Ziarats," "amulets Islam."

- **Textual Analysis of Theological Sources:** Meticulous reading and interpretation of primary Islamic texts to establish the orthodox definitions of Tawhid and shirk, and to understand the theological arguments against practices deemed polytheistic. This involved identifying verses from the Quran and Hadith that directly address these concepts.

- **Review of Ethnographic and Sociological Accounts:** Systematically reviewing literature describing Afghan common traditions to identify specific practices that, when viewed through a strict monotheistic lens, might be interpreted as polytheistic. This involved identifying the specific rituals, beliefs, and objects involved in these traditions.

- **Cross-Referencing:** Cross-referencing the descriptions of folk traditions with the theological

definitions to identify potential areas of divergence or syncretism.

**3.4 Data Analysis** The collected data were subjected to a qualitative content analysis and interpretive theological/sociological analysis. The analysis process involved:

1. **Establishing Monotheistic Baseline:** Clearly defining Tawhid and shirk based on the primary Islamic theological texts, outlining the strict boundaries of monotheistic belief.
2. **Identifying Folk Manifestations:** Systematically categorizing and describing common Afghan traditions that involve elements potentially interpreted as polytheistic (e.g., Ziarats, local spirits, amulets).
3. **Comparative Interpretation:** For each identified manifestation, analyzing how it is practiced by adherents (their stated intentions and beliefs) versus how it might be interpreted from a strict Islamic monotheistic perspective. This involved identifying the specific actions or beliefs within the tradition that could be seen as associating partners with God.
4. **Thematic Analysis of Divergence:** Identifying recurring themes and patterns in the tension or coexistence between orthodox Islamic teachings and folk practices. This included examining the arguments for and against the permissibility of these traditions within Islamic jurisprudence.
5. **Sociological Contextualization:** Briefly exploring the sociological reasons for the persistence of these traditions (e.g., cultural identity, social cohesion, coping mechanisms, historical continuity).
6. **Synthesizing Findings:** Integrating the theological analysis with the observations of folk traditions to construct a coherent narrative that explains the manifestations of polytheism in common Afghan traditions and their implications for understanding religious practice in the society. This analytical process aimed to provide a nuanced understanding of the phenomenon, avoiding judgmental language while critically examining the theological implications of these cultural practices.

## RESULTS

The conceptual analysis of Islamic theological texts and documented Afghan folk traditions revealed several common manifestations that, from a strict monotheistic perspective, could be interpreted as containing elements of polytheism. These practices often reflect a syncretic blend of pre-Islamic customs and popular interpretations of Islamic reverence.

### 4.1. Veneration of Saints and Shrines (Ziarats)

- **Manifestation:** A widespread and deeply ingrained practice in Afghan society is the veneration of saints (pirs, walis) and the frequent visitation of their shrines, known as Ziarats [18]. People visit these shrines to seek blessings (baraka), offer prayers, make vows, and request intercession for various needs, such as healing, fertility, success in business, or resolution of disputes. Offerings (e.g., food, money, candles) are often left at the shrines, and specific rituals may be performed around the tombs.
- **Polytheistic Interpretation:** From a strict monotheistic viewpoint, particularly as emphasized in the Quran [1] and Hadith [4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10, 11, 12, 13, 15, 16, 17], directing prayers or requests to anyone other than Allah, or believing that a deceased saint possesses independent power to grant wishes or intercede without Allah's direct will, constitutes shirk. The act of circumambulating a tomb, bowing, or making sacrifices to the saint (rather than to Allah) is also seen as a form of worship directed towards a created being, thus violating Tawhid [14, 15].

### 4.2. Belief in Local Spirits and Supernatural Entities

- **Manifestation:** Beyond the Islamic concept of Jinn, many Afghan folk traditions include beliefs in a pantheon of local spirits, fairies (pari), or malevolent entities that are believed to inhabit specific natural locations (e.g., ancient trees, mountains, rivers, springs) or abandoned places [18]. These entities are thought to influence human affairs, causing illness, misfortune, or providing protection. Rituals, offerings, or specific incantations may be performed to appease or seek favor from these spirits.
- **Polytheistic Interpretation:** Attributing power, influence, or the ability to grant wishes to these local spirits, and directing acts of worship or supplication towards them, directly contradicts the principle of Tawhid [1, 14]. Islam teaches that only Allah possesses ultimate power and control over all creation, and seeking help or protection from other entities is a form of shirk.

### 4.3. Use of Amulets and Talismans (Ta'wiz)

- **Manifestation:** The widespread practice of wearing amulets (ta'wiz) or hanging them in homes, vehicles, or around children for protection against the evil eye, illness, or misfortune is common [18]. These amulets often contain verses from the Quran, names of Allah, or specific prayers written on paper and encased in fabric or leather.

- **Polytheistic Interpretation:** While the intention behind wearing an amulet containing Quranic verses might be to seek protection from Allah through His words, a strict theological view warns against attributing inherent power to the amulet itself. If the belief is that the amulet itself provides protection, rather than being merely a means through which Allah grants protection, it can be considered a form of shirk (minor shirk or shirk asghar) because it involves relying on a created object rather than solely on Allah [14]. The distinction lies in the underlying belief and reliance.

#### 4.4. Rituals and Superstitions Related to Natural Phenomena

- **Manifestation:** Certain folk rituals and superstitions are associated with specific natural phenomena or objects. For example, tying pieces of cloth to "wish trees" or sacred trees, or performing specific actions near certain springs or rocks to bring good luck or fulfill desires [18].
- **Polytheistic Interpretation:** These practices can be seen as remnants of animistic beliefs, where natural objects are imbued with spiritual powers. Directing wishes, making offerings, or performing rituals to these objects, rather than to Allah, constitutes a form of shirk, as it implies that these objects possess powers independent of God [1, 14]. These manifestations highlight the dynamic and often syncretic nature of religious practice in Afghan society, where cultural traditions and folk beliefs coexist with the dominant Islamic monotheistic framework.

### DISCUSSION

The analysis of common traditions in Afghan society reveals a complex interplay between the strict monotheistic tenets of Islam and deeply entrenched folk beliefs, some of which manifest elements interpretable as polytheistic. This tension between formal religious doctrine and lived cultural practice is not unique to Afghanistan but is a recurring theme in many societies where universal religions interact with indigenous customs [18].

The widespread veneration of saints and shrines (Ziarats) exemplifies this complexity. While many adherents genuinely believe they are seeking blessings from Allah through the righteous individuals buried there, and not worshipping the saints themselves, a strict theological interpretation, as found in the Quran [1] and the teachings of scholars like Qaradawi [14] and Trustee [15], views any form of direct supplication or reliance on a created being, even a revered saint,

as a violation of Tawhid. The potential for shirk arises when the intermediary is perceived to possess independent power or when acts of worship are directed towards the shrine rather than solely towards God. This theological distinction is often lost in popular practice, where cultural reverence can blur into religious veneration that crosses monotheistic boundaries. Similarly, beliefs in local spirits and the use of amulets highlight the human desire for protection, control, and good fortune in an uncertain world. While Islam acknowledges the existence of Jinn, attributing independent power to other supernatural entities or relying on amulets as sources of protection, rather than solely on Allah, constitutes a form of shirk [1, 14]. The underlying intention and belief system are crucial here: is the individual relying on the object or spirit, or merely using it as a permissible means while their ultimate reliance is on God? The strict monotheistic view emphasizes direct reliance on God alone, deeming any intermediary as a form of associating partners with Him.

The sociological reasons for the persistence of these traditions are multifaceted. Folk beliefs often provide a sense of comfort, community cohesion, and a culturally familiar framework for coping with life's uncertainties, illnesses, or misfortunes [18]. They are deeply embedded in the social fabric, passed down through generations, and may be perceived as integral to cultural identity rather than as religious deviations. In rural or remote areas, where access to formal religious education or modern services might be limited, these traditional practices may also serve as primary coping mechanisms. The historical context of Afghanistan, with its long history of diverse religious and cultural influences, also contributes to this syncretic landscape.

The theological debate surrounding these practices often distinguishes between major shirk (overt polytheism) and minor shirk (subtle forms of associating partners with God, such as ostentation or relying on created objects). While major shirk is unequivocally condemned, minor shirk is also considered a serious sin that compromises the purity of Tawhid [3, 14]. The challenge lies in educating the populace about these theological distinctions without alienating them from their cultural heritage or creating unnecessary social divisions.

Understanding these manifestations of polytheism in common Afghan traditions is crucial for religious leaders, educators, and external actors



engaging with Afghan society. It necessitates a nuanced approach that respects cultural context while upholding the core tenets of Islamic monotheism. Rather than outright condemnation, a focus on education, dialogue, and promoting a deeper understanding of Tawhid in a culturally sensitive manner may be more effective in guiding practices towards greater theological purity.

### CONCLUSION

This conceptual study has explored some common traditions in Afghan society that, from a strict monotheistic perspective, may manifest elements interpreted as polytheistic. The analysis reveals that practices such as the veneration of saints and shrines (Ziarats), beliefs in local spirits, and the use of amulets and talismans are deeply ingrained cultural phenomena that coexist with the dominant Islamic faith. While adherents may not consciously intend to commit shirk, these traditions can, upon theological scrutiny, involve forms of associating partners with God or relying on created beings/objects rather than solely on Allah.

The study concludes that the religious landscape of Afghanistan is characterized by a complex interplay of orthodox Islamic monotheism and syncretic folk traditions. This dynamic highlights the tension between formal religious doctrine and lived cultural practices, often driven by historical influences, cultural identity, and sociological functions. Addressing these manifestations requires a sensitive and nuanced approach that emphasizes education and a deeper understanding of Tawhid.

Based on these findings, the following recommendations are put forth:

For Religious Scholars and Leaders:

1. **Promote Comprehensive Islamic Education:** Intensify efforts to provide comprehensive and accessible Islamic education that clearly expounds upon the concept of Tawhid and the various forms of shirk, using culturally relevant examples and language.
2. **Engage in Constructive Dialogue:** Initiate and sustain constructive dialogues within communities to discuss folk traditions in light of Islamic teachings, fostering understanding rather than condemnation.
3. **Emphasize Direct Supplication to Allah:** Encourage and educate people on the importance of direct supplication (dua) to Allah alone, without intermediaries, as the purest form of worship.

For Educators and Community Leaders:

1. **Integrate Religious and Cultural Understanding:** Develop educational programs that foster an understanding of both formal Islamic principles and the historical and sociological roots of local traditions, promoting critical thinking about their religious implications.
2. **Support Community-Based Initiatives:** Encourage community-based initiatives that promote Islamic values while respecting cultural heritage, finding ways to align practices with orthodox teachings without alienating communities.

For Researchers and Academics:

1. **Conduct Empirical Ethnographic Studies:** Undertake empirical ethnographic studies to further explore the lived experiences and subjective interpretations of individuals involved in these traditions, providing deeper insights into their beliefs and intentions.
2. **Analyze Historical Evolution:** Conduct historical research to trace the evolution of these folk traditions and their interaction with Islamicization processes over time.

By embracing these recommendations, Afghan society can navigate the complexities of its religious and cultural landscape, strengthening adherence to monotheistic principles while respecting its rich heritage.

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