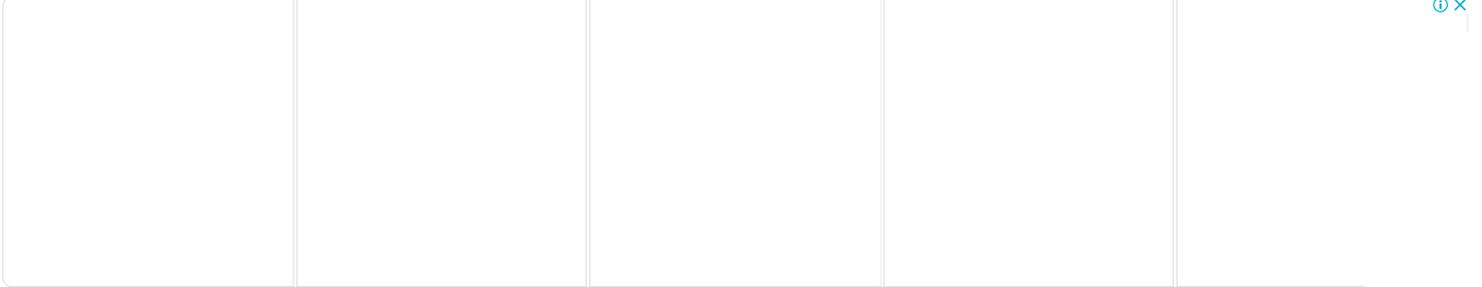


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In search of dogs and their tombs in Mirpurkhas

 by Zulfiqar Ali Kalhoro — August 10, 2018

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Stone carved graves in a derelict state

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While travelling on the Digri-Damblo road in Mirpurkhas district, one spots crumbling tombs from a distance. On enquiry from the local people is informed that the tombs belong to the Nuhanis and their 'dogs'. There are myths galore about these tombs: people believe that the Nuhanis erected tombs for their much-loved dogs in the nineteenth century during the Talpur period (1783-1843). The necropolis is 6 km from Digri town.

Several years of research on Islamic architecture, heritage, folklore, religion, hero worship, anthropology and rock art in Sindh have taught me many things. One of the most important findings from my field research is that one should not quickly make judgments about anything. Instead, one ought to rely on observation and contextualise things. One should always avoid looking at things in isolation.

It was even rumoured that one tomb was erected over the axe of a Nuhani chief!

When I first visited the Nuhani graveyard at Dambalo in Digri taluka, I also believed that the tombs belonged to the dogs of the Nuhani notables. My several years of fieldwork in Sindh revealed many interesting things and some were also related to the myth of dogs' tombs in the Nuhani graveyard. The truth unfolded when interviews were conducted with the elders of the Nuhani tribes about their dogs' tombs.

It turns out there is not a single tomb in the necropolis of the Nuhanis that was erected in memory of a dog! In order to understand the perplexing perception about dogs' tombs, we need to look at the socio-political events which took place during the Talpur period (1783-1843) in Sindh. The tombs in the graveyard belong to notables of the Nuhanis who were killed in the historic Nuhani-Bhurgari battle which occurred in 1797. In that clash, the Bhurgaris were defeated and all the notables of the family were killed by the Nuhanis but that encounter also claimed a few Nuhani notables. Prominent amongst them were Ramin Khan, Mitha Khan and Jafar Khan Nuhani. When this news reached the Talpurs of Hyderabad, who were also relatives of the Bhurgaris, they got angry and asked seven notables from different lineages of the Nuhanis to present themselves before Mir Fateh Ali Khan Talpur. A decree was issued by the ruling Mir of Hyderabad to kill all the Nuhanis who would come. When the Nuhani notables reached the Talpur court, they were instantly killed by the soldiers of the Talpurs. However, two of them survived that ambush by the soldiers of the Talpurs. After this incident, the friction was intensified between the Nuhanis and the Talpurs. The Nuhanis were a gallant and brave tribe who had earlier served the Kalhoras. They were mainly concentrated in Nali valley, Johi, Sehwan, Kai valley and other areas of Dadu district. They moved to other districts of Sindh when they were given jagirs in Mirpurkhas, Thatta and Badin by the Kalhoras.



Tombs of Nuhani nobles

After the killings of the Nuhanis by the Talpurs, things got worse when the Nuhanis announced they would not obey the orders of the ruling Talpurs any more – who apparently sided with Bhurgaris without listening to the Nuhanis' grievances.

This infuriated the Talpurs and the Nuhanis were later made to pay a heavy price quite literally. Heavy taxes and other penalties were levied on them by the Talpurs. During this conflict and friction, a myth was invented to show them as primitive people who did not know any standards of civility. And so, this slander about the Nuhanis building tombs for their dogs was circulated amongst the Talpur notables and tribes who served them. This was done ostensibly to defame the Nuhani tribe. Later this myth became so prevalent and widespread in Sindhi society of the 20th century that it became difficult to dispel. It still lives on and permeates the local populace.

There are myths about some dogs' tombs in other parts of Sindh, which are popular amongst the rural folks. One of the popular dog graves (Kutte Ji Qabar) is located in Kirthar Range, Sindh.

The necropolis of the Nuhanis is dotted with domed structures and stone-carved graves. There are four domed structures (Quba) which belong to Mitha Khan, Notak Khan, Qaisar Khan and Said Khan I. All these tombs are in a very derelict and dilapidated condition.

One of the tombs has caved in. Only the eastern wall of the tomb has withstood the vagaries of weather. All three tombs are square in plan and there is no painting inside the tombs. The pilaster of all three tombs has come off, exposing the bricks. It was about these four tombs that the myth was circulated amongst the populace they belong to the dogs of the Nuhani notables. It was even said that one tomb was erected over the axe of a Nuhani chief!



Rosette on a grave at the Nuhani necropolis

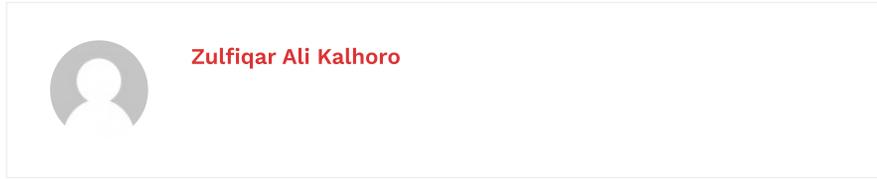
Apart from the domed structure, there are 13 dilapidated stone-carved graves in the necropolis of the Nuhanis. All the stone-carved graves are in shambles. Most of the stone-carved graves are erected over ornate stone platforms. Out of 13 graves, seven are inscribed and bear the names of Haji Shahak Khan, Ramin Khan son of Haji Shahak Khan, Kalo Khan, Jaffar Khan, Heesab Khan and Said Khan II. The grave of Yaro Khan is also located in the necropolis: he was killed in the battle against the Bhurgaris in 1797. A dilapidated stone-carved grave of Murad Khan, who was the father of Ramin Khan, is located southeast of the tomb of Mitha Khan. Both the graves are not inscribed but their descendants identify them.

The myth created by the Nuhanis' adversaries is still prevalent amongst rural folk –not only in the Digri taluka of Mirpurkhas but also in Badin and other districts of Sindh. But this is plainly rejected by the elders of the Nuhani tribes, with whom I conducted interviews.

Myths apart, this graveyard is very historic and we need to save it. The necropolis contains some lavishly carved graves. The geometric and floral designs on these graves are very similar to those seen in the graveyards of Karachi, Thatta, Jamshoro and Hyderabad. As compared to the stone-carved graves of the Bhurgaris, these are low-key in terms of decoration. The Bhurgari graves, meanwhile, are richly carved with Quranic verses.

The author is an anthropologist and has authored three books: 'Perspectives on the art and architecture of Sindh', 'Memorial Stones: Tharparkar' and 'Archaeology, Religion and Art in Sindh'. He may be contacted at: zulfi04@hotmail.com

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