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The Festival of Pirs: Popular Islam and Shared Devotion in South India

Afsar Mohammad

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Each year 300,000 pilgrims embark on a pilgrimage to the remote Indian village of Gugudu. Like many villages in South India, Gugudu is populated mostly by non-Muslims. Yet these pilgrims are coming to mark Muharram, which is observed by Shi'i Muslim communities across South Asia. In this book, Afsar Mohammad presents a lively ethnographic study of the textured religious life of Gugudu. Muharram, he shows, takes on a strikingly different color in Gugudu because of the central place of a local Hindu pir, or saint, called Kullayappa. This intense and shared devotion to the pir, Mohammad argues, represents local Islam interacting with global Islam. In the words of one devotee, "There is no Hindu or Muslim. They all have one religion, which is called 'Kullayappa devotion.'" Through his compelling fieldwork, Mohammad expands our ideas about devotion to the martyrs of Karbala, not only in this particular village but also in the wider world, and explores the intersection between an Islam with locally defined practices and global Hinduism.

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