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Umar Marvi and the Representation of Sindh: Cinema and Modernity in the Margins

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Abstract

Umar Marvi, the first Sindhi feature film made in Pakistan, was released in 1956, in the context of the One Unit, when the merger of West Pakistan’s provinces pushed Sindhi intellectuals, students, and politicians to assert themselves in defense of their language and culture. By depicting the story of a famous folk heroine heralded as a patriotic figure by Sindh’s most prominent nationalist leader, we contend that *Umar Marvi* contributed to the construction of a modern national imaginary for Sindhis in post-Partition Pakistan. This imaginary rests on a narrative that conceives Sindhis as a peaceful and syncretic folk culture continuously occupying the mythicized land of the Indus. We show that *Umar Marvi* takes part in this narrative by portraying a certain image of an idealized community and by representing a fixed, folklorized heritage while attempting to master cinema as the medium of modernity.

Keywords

Sindh, Pakistan, representation, folk tale, early cinema, South Asian cinema, nationalism, identity

Folk stories have repeatedly provided inspiration to South Asian screenwriters. From the adaptation of a legend from the Mahabharata in *Raja Harishchandra* (1913), popular theater, dance, music, and poetry have nourished South Asia's film industry since its birth. Pakistan's first major hit, *Sassi* (1954), staged the folk tale *Sassi Punnu*, one of the most famous stories of the Indus Valley which notably formed the fabric of several of Shah Abdul Latif's poems. Just two years later, another adaptation of a Sindhi romance that had also been phrased in Sufi terms by the great poet was released: *Umar Marvi* (1956), which tells the story of Umar's struggle for Marvi's unassailable heart.

Although there had already been a few productions in Sindhi,¹ *Umar Marvi* was the first long feature made in Pakistan (Image 1). It established Syed Hussain Ali Shah Fazlani, a Sindhi landlord who cast himself in the role of Umar, as the first major producer and actor in Sindhi films, and went a considerable way toward securing his status as the founding father of Sindhi cinema in Pakistan. Targeting a Sindhi audience, the film was well received both in Pakistan and India, so much so that distribution rights were later bought by an Indian distributor and Fazlani had it dubbed in Urdu and rereleased in 1963 with [p.120] minor edits.² The film was part of the first phase of Sindhi cinema, which drew inspiration from well-known stories and icons to turn them into popular silver-screen hits, such as *Sassi Punhun* (1958), also starring Nighat Sultana, and produced by Syed A. Haroon, owner of Eastern Studios in Karachi. But from the late 1960s, after a 10-year gap in Sindhi film production, the focus shifted from "traditional" stories to a more mainstream pattern of "masala" movies, influenced by the standards of the Urdu and Punjabi industry. Yet such films, like Shaikh Hasan's *Sheroferoz* (1968), A.Q. Pirzada's *Chanduki* (1969) or Yunus Rathore's *Ghairat Jo Sawal (A Question of Honor, 1974)*, while bringing in action and gangster plots, still portrayed Sindhi society in the essential traits—rural, mystic, traditional—first found in *Umar Marvi*.³

Umar Marvi was launched in March 1956, the same month as the first Constitution of Pakistan, which, by enshrining the merger of the provinces of West Pakistan, triggered the formation of cultural resistance movements in Sindh, Balochistan, and NWFP. It is during the One Unit era that the emerging Sindhi intelligentsia asserted itself against what was perceived as injustice against Sindhis: the massive inflow of refugees from India that radically transformed Sindh's demography, the separation of Karachi from Sindh, the resulting displacement of Sindh University to Hyderabad, the nonrecognition of Sindhi as an administrative language and attempts by Karachi University to withdraw Sindhi as an examination language (Ansari, 2005). The growing educated Sindhi middle class and intelligentsia, which included figures as diverse as the poet Shaikh Ayaz and peasant leader Hyder Bux Jatoy, identified with a narrative of Sindh largely constructed by G.M. Syed, a former Muslim Leaguer and future advocate of an independent Sindh. In 1952, G.M.

¹ *Ekta*, a short feature directed by Kareem Bux Nizamani, came out in 1940, followed in 1952 by two films on major Sindhi figures: Rafiq Chaman's *Pir Sibghatullah Shah* in Pakistan, a fictionalized documentary on Pir Pagara and the Hur Movement, and *Bhagat Kanwar Ram* in India, on the famous preacher and singer assassinated in Sukkur in 1939.

² It was the first Sindhi film released in Punjab.

³ Interview with former actor and producer Yar Muhammad Shah, Matiari, December 2011. See also Abdus Sattar Pirzada, "Sindhi Filmon ki Tareekh" (publication details unknown).

Syed had laid down a major aspect of this narrative by formulating a nationalist interpretation of Shah Abdul Latif Bhittai's poetry, in which he hails Marvi's unflinching faithfulness to her fiancé and her people as the epitome of patriotic resistance (Syed, 1991, 1996).⁴

This article thus explores the significance of making a film like *Umar Marvi* at the time of an emerging Sindhi national consciousness among politicians, intellectuals, and students. We contend that, by depicting the story of a famous folk heroine heralded as a patriotic figure by Sindh's most prominent nationalist leader, *Umar Marvi* contributed to the construction of a modern national imaginary for Sindhis in post-Partition Pakistan. Sindhis who in the mid-1950s felt their culture to be threatened felt compelled to forge identity markers that distinguished them from Punjabis, Mohajirs, and from a state nationalism associated with Islam and Urdu (Ayres, 2009, pp. 30–47). This endeavor led to the construction of a nationalist narrative most exemplarily [p.121] summed up in G.M. Syed's writings, which glorified Sindh as an ancient nation with a history stretching back to the Indus Valley civilization and marked by courageous heroes. This narrative conceived Sindhis as a people continuously occupying the mythicized land of the Indus and characterized by a specific, peaceful, and syncretic folk culture, the highest expression of which lay in the region's Sufi poets, and most particularly in Shah Abdul Latif Bhittai. We will show that *Umar Marvi* takes part in this narrative by portraying a certain image of an idealized community and by representing a fixed, folklorized heritage while attempting to master cinema as the medium of modernity.

Morphology of a Screened Tale

Umar Marvi has been the object of various renditions in poetry (Shah Abdul Latif), theater (Lalchand Amardinomal Jagtiani, 1925), opera (Ram Panjwani, 1949), and teledrama (in Urdu, broadcasted on PTV in the early 1990s). Although there is no such thing as an *original* version since it was transmitted orally and interpreted by different writers and performers over time, a shared version of the tale is remembered and passed on by people. The film *Umar Marvi* consists of a cinematic *adaptation* of this traditional collective matrix. Its fidelity to the morphology of the story in its popular form suggests it can be considered an attempt to produce a visual equivalent of the literary form of the tale.

According to the narrative functions defined by Roland Barthes and structural analysis,⁵ folk tales such as *Umar Marvi* are predominantly functional as they concentrate on the linear succession of events rather than on the depth of characters and situations. The storyline can be described using

⁴ The version used by the authors is the English translation by Prof. Egnert Azariah (Syed, 1996), available on the Internet at <http://www.gmsyed.org/> (last accessed on March 15, 2014). Although G.M. Syed clearly exposes in this work his conception of Sindhi nationalism, he did not call for an independent Sindhudesh until 1972.

⁵ Structural theorists of the 1960s provided a set of tools to describe what they assumed to be the structural properties of mythical narratives, including popular tales. Synthesizing the work of other major theorists, Roland Barthes proposes "to distinguish three levels in any narrative form": "functions," "actions," and "narration." He conceives a narrative as a series of units, each of them relating to a function, since, to him, "a narrative is made up solely of functions: everything, in one way or another, is significant." Barthes then defines two classes of narrative units: "functions" and "indices"; "the former are functional in terms of action, the latter in terms of being." See Barthes (1975, pp. 237–272).

a classic narrative pattern⁶ in five segments: (1) equilibrium, (2) disruption, (3) succession of actions, (4) resolution, and (5) new equilibrium.⁷ The film starts with an establishing scene (1) which shows Umar and Marvi's separated lives: Umar, having just succeeded his father on the throne of Umarkot, asks his people to support him in order to rule well. Meanwhile, the village celebrates Marvi's engagement to her fellow villager Khet. This state of harmony is soon disrupted (2) when the righteous king falls suddenly in love with the beautiful village girl. The plot then revolves around Umar's vain struggle to conquer Marvi's heart, presenting the different steps (3) of his desperate wooing: from the pacific negotiation with the villagers to the use of force to kidnap the beauty. This series of episodes leads to the climax when the tension gets unexpectedly released thanks to a *deus ex machina*: the wet-nurse reveals that the protagonists cannot get married because she breast-fed both of them. A final episode follows leading to the resolution (4) in order for the story to eventually reach a new state of equilibrium (5): all desires and conflicts are appeased. Marvi and Khet are reunited and the villains repent.

According to Barthes, this kind of strongly functional narrative conforms to the *actantial matrix* of A.J. Greimas (Greimas, 1966, pp. 28–59), in which the characters occupy codified functions in the narrative pattern with little concern for psychological realism. At the level of actions, the whole adventure can be considered from two concurrent points of view: the king and the village girl can be equally taken as “*subject*.” As the title “*Umar Marvi*” suggests, the subject really is a *double subject*. If we consider Umar as the *subject* of the story: Marvi becomes the *object* of desire, while the king is at the same time the *sender*—the one instigating the action—and the potential *receiver*—the benefiter—of the struggle for the girl's heart. From this perspective, the *quest* relies on a purely individual interest: the fulfilling of Umar's wish, whatever it might cost to the cohesion of the society he belongs to. From the perspective of Marvi's longing, she is the *subject* striving for reunion with Khet and her community, the *object*. Yet, the *sender* of her resistance is not only herself but her as part of a whole. The *receiver* is also a collective [p.122] entity: when Marvi rejoins Khet, it is not only her triumphing, but the entire village. Her will is indistinguishable from that of the community: she wants to marry Khet as planned since childhood, to return to her people, and she willingly undergoes trial when her virginity is doubted. Hence, Umar's individual desire of transgression stands opposed to Marvi's self being merged with the body of the community.

But this divergence breaks at a certain point of the story: when the wet-nurse reveals the childhood bond between the king and the villager, the characters all rally behind the rules of the community. Umar leaves aside his desire for Marvi in the face of tradition and religion: the community remains unhurt, as he realizes that honor is as important to being a king as the use of force. The moral eventually gives reason to the position of resistance of the poor heroine against an unjust power. *Umar Marvi* thus portrays a conservative social ideal by promoting, through allegory, unconditional fidelity to the community, and its patriarchal order.

That the general meaning of the story as told by the film highlights the importance of the community in guaranteeing social coherence echoes the idealized society that Sindhi intellectuals were increasingly heralding as the essence of Sindh at the time of *Umar Marvi*'s release. This

⁶ As defined by Paul Larivaille, after the Russian formalist Vladimir Propp. See Larivaille (1974, pp. 368–388).

⁷ For a structural analysis of Sindhi folk tales, see Doctor (1985).

idealization is reflected in the physical environment *Umar Marvi* produces on the screen. The generic desert features that appear in the movie—sand dunes, oases and palm trees, camels, and tents—evoke exotic surroundings, both in time, as the story takes place in the fourteenth century, and in location, since most Sindhis live along the Indus rather than in the Thar Desert. In addition, the setting is meant to be rural and traditional, and the film depicts, with little concern for historical accuracy, what the spectator recognizes as traditional village life: men sitting on charpoys, women fetching water. Hence, a fantasized traditional society of poor-yet-loyal-and-courageous desert dwellers is portrayed using common traits of village life. For instance, the usual formalities offered to a visitor turn into a farcical scene, as Phog, in search of Marvi, gets upset at the villagers’ insistent inquiries about his well-being (*khush chaak ahyo na?*) while he tries to find out where Marvi is. Another image that makes *Umar Marvi*’s environment familiar to the audience is that of women carrying pots of water on their head to collect water from the well—a scene not specific to Sindh but that invites the spectator to recognize a known rural setting.

By depicting certain features of a “traditional” setting, both estranged as an exotic desert lifestyle and intentionally familiar, the film echoes themes and figures that a new generation of Sindhi writers and intellectuals was also reappropriating. Actualizing ideas and similes in the works of the major Sufi saints—notably Shah Abdul Latif, Sachal Sarmast, and Sami—or simply referring to them, Sindhi poets sought to give a new momentum to Sindhi literature while acknowledging their literary heritage. An exalted poem by Hyder Bux Jatoi, peasant leader and nationalist, published in 1954 and entitled “Salaam Sindh,” is just one example, in which Sindh, among other defining traits as well as a listing of its constituting regions, is described as the country of faqirs (Jatoi, 1988, pp. 147–151). Many others can be found in the literary review *Mehran*, along with short stories and articles, drawings and engravings representing various typified aspects of Sindh, such as a flute player, a view of the Indus River, or Thari women carrying water.⁸ Such works gave Sindhis a national imaginary in which their society became associated with a rural way of life, faithful to the teachings of Sufi saints and bound by honor and tradition.⁹ Reducing Sindhi culture to a rural environment, this narrative ignored Sindh’s bustling urban life, leaving aside those who have constituted the majority population of Sindhi towns in the twentieth century, Sindhi Hindus up to 1947 and Mohajirs afterwards.

In this regard, *Umar Marvi*’s depiction of Sindh takes part in a larger process of folklorization—the documentation and representation of cultural references and practices that turns them into conscious identity markers. Folklorization attributes certain cultural expressions to certain groups of people, [p.123] entitling them to a sense of property over their heritage while essentializing the identity of the group. The mentioning of easily identifiable items—the *ajrak* thrown over the shoulder of Marvi’s father, the *matko* carried by the women, or the *loee*, a rough woolen shawl, that Marvi prefers over the silks she is offered—defines a cultural environment in a specific way.

⁸ The quarterly *Mehran* was published by the Sindhi Adabi Board. In the mid-1950s, it was edited by Muhammad Ibrahim Joyo and notably printed poems by Shaikh Ayaz, and articles by G.M. Syed.

⁹ An essentialized conception of “Sindhiness” widely shared to this day, whether in the idealized vision of Sindhi nationalists or in the general trend of “Sufi” music that seeks inspiration from folk singers.

Handicrafts, daily objects rebranded as traditional, therefore acquire a new significance, as their use now evokes a sense of belonging.

Interestingly, it is the growing middle class and intelligentsia of the time, a generation aspiring to an urban modern lifestyle,¹⁰ that felt the need to sacralize through its poetry, short stories, and articles a fantasized traditional rural way of life from which it was gradually severing its links. *Umar Marvi*'s significance in the context of the mid-1950s thus mirrors literary works in which rurality became a dominant facet of a longed-for, idealized Sindh. Later Sindhi films rely on a similar set of symbols meant to connote a Sindhi setting—an environment first and foremost rural, to which were added new identity markers, such as the *ajrak* and the Sindhi *topi*, that had not acquired their political charge at the time of *Umar Marvi*. For example, the film *Jiye Latif* (1990) opens with an uncontextualized scene of a villain's display of rage followed, after a depiction of the celebration of Shah Abdul Latif's annual fair (*urs*), by a shot of an old faqir singing next to a mud house. *Umar Marvi*, being the first Sindhi long feature in Pakistan, arguably played a canonic role in defining a cinematic vision of Sindh's essential character as rural, thus contributing to the construction of a national imaginary projecting the fantasy of a pure Sindhi society.

This pure society represented by the Marus displays a deep respect for its own principles of loyalty and attachment to their land and lifestyle, values hailed as characteristics of Sindhis by G.M. Syed. In his commentary on Shah Abdul Latif's poetry (Syed, 1996, pp. 41–53), the nationalist politician lists what he sees as the characteristics of Sindhis found in *Shah jo Risalo*, among which are patriotism and self-sacrifice. G.M. Syed writes his essentializing interpretation—Shah Latif's valorization of certain ethics in his poetry hardly proves the poet believed such principles to be embodied in Sindhis—with an aim of social reform and political mobilization: he hopes to raise awareness and stir Sindhis' consciousness of the need to defend their culture. *Umar Marvi* expresses no such hope explicitly, yet its projection of Sindhi society in the Marus' traditional community, both exoticized and familiar, invites a Sindhi audience to see the values of Marvi's people as their own.

That loyalty and patriotism found their way onto the silver screen in the first Sindhi long feature while Sindh's major nationalist leader was polishing his rhetoric on the basis of the same moral values drawn from the same story calls for an exploration of the film's significance in the political context of the late 1950s.¹¹ Because *Umar Marvi* was released in 1956, its advocacy in favor of traditional community and against arbitrary rule evokes the growing opposition of Sindhis to the One Unit scheme. The film suggests that interference of political power in community regulations endangers social harmony. Sindhi politicians and intellectuals in the mid-1950s voiced the same complaint when they condemned the imposition of Urdu and the dissolution of the provincial Assembly. G.M. Syed spearheaded such efforts by denouncing the central government's

¹⁰ On the role of the middle class in nationalist mobilization in Pakistan, see Alavi (1989, pp. 1527–1534).

¹¹ We rely on the distinction between meaning and significance proposed by Eric Donald Hirsch Jr. in the following terms: "Meaning is that which is represented by a text; it is what the author meant by his use of a particular sign sequence; it is what the signs represent. Significance, on the other hand, names a relationship between that meaning and a person, or a conception, or a situation, or indeed anything imaginable." Meaning therefore appears as the constant element in the reception of a text (or film) whereas significance varies according to the situation of reception (Hirsch, 1967, p. 6).

“encroaching on provincial autonomy” (Tahir, 2010, pp. 269–270). *Umar Marvi*’s moral also implies that pursuing personal interest threatens the existence of the community. The steadfastness of the Marus and their sense of collective bond appears as a counter-example to the self-serving behavior of many Sindhi political representatives, of whom, perhaps more than elsewhere, a good proportion were landlords regularly switching allegiance to maintain their power and protect their estates.

Umar Marvi’s rejection of individualism hails the solidarity of the community (*Gemeinschaft*) as opposed to society (*Gesellschaft*)—two notions defined by Ferdinand Tönnies at the turn of the twentieth [p.124] century.¹² *Umar Marvi* can thus be seen as a defense of Sindhi *Gemeinschaft* as opposed to Pakistani state nationalism that endorses a vision of the nation as a sum of abstract individuals guided by a collective interest—building a state for South Asian Muslims. The state definition of the Pakistani citizen relied on an abstract conception ignoring the religious and ethnic particularities of its population.¹³ Conversely, in G.M. Syed’s view, the Sindhi *Gemeinschaft* can be defined by concrete markers: a shared history, delineated “natural” boundaries, and a specific cultural identity (Syed, 1991). *Umar Marvi* portrays the “mechanic” form of sociability, relying on shared cultural identity, as healthier than the “organic” one (Durkheim, 1997): traditional social links ensure everyone’s happiness, while “bourgeois” individualism (Chatterjee, 2006, p. 163) is depicted as an evil, corrupting even a righteous leader.

Therefore, by its depiction of an idealized rural community, *Umar Marvi* feeds into the emerging Sindhi nationalist narrative that seeks to spark political and cultural resistance to Pakistan’s state nationalism. Whether learned—such as the work of Nabi Baksh Baloch with regard to Sindh—or popular, folklorization straddles the will to preserve a culture by documenting and re-enacting it and the resulting risk of its being relegated to a long-gone traditional past, good for museums and history books. Similarly, the film’s folklorization of Sindh can be tied to two overlapping political positions associated with ethnic nationalism. These include, on the one hand, pressing for a more accommodative Pakistani identity with greater recognition of ethnic and cultural diversity, and, on the other hand, barring outside interference in one’s culture in order to preserve the nation’s “inner domain” of sovereignty (Chatterjee, 2006). To put it simply, *Umar Marvi*’s representation of Sindhi culture holds at least two potential political interpretations: while it argues for a more inclusive Pakistan that would count Sindhi culture as part of its diverse heritage, it can also be seen as entirely opposing Sindhi culture to the Pakistani national narrative. It provides a basis for both political resistance—the one Sindhi nationalists carry out with separatist demands—and requests for accommodation, in a more autonomist line.

¹² The *Gesellschaft* is “a special type of human relationship: one characterized by a high degree of individualism, impersonality, contractualism, and proceeding from volition or sheer interest rather than from the complex of affective states, habits, and traditions that underlies *Gemeinschaft*. ... The three pillars of *Gemeinschaft* [are] blood, place (land), and mind, or kinship, neighbourhood, and friendship” (Nisbet, 1993, pp. 74–75). For the original work, see Tönnies (2001).

¹³ As expressed, for instance, in Jinnah’s famous speech of August 11, 1947, in which he describes his vision of the new Pakistani citizen. Jinnah’s non-normative conception later became a normative definition of the Pakistani citizen associated with a reformist Sunni Islam and the Urdu language. See Ayres (2009, pp. 30–47).

Claiming Modernity: The Desire for a National Cinema

Umar Marvi invites the spectator to identify with an idealized timeless community, a message those Sindhis worried about the future of their culture and their people in the late 1950s could relate to. It does so, however, by transmitting an old story through a new medium: the cinematic apparatus, which implies a specific collective experience. The cinema allowed Sindhis, who do not know each other, anonymous individuals sitting in dark spaces across the country, to share a common experience. At the same time, the process of identity recognition that *Umar Marvi* proposes calls upon other cultural references. The influence of earlier art forms such as theater, dance, and singing coincides with a minimal use of cinematic means. For instance, as Marvi suddenly wakes up in Umar's palace (53') and stands up to voice her anxiety, she occupies the center of the frame while servants, to whom she is speaking, are barely visible. She then walks up close to speak straight into the camera, as if she were confessing her inner feelings to a theater's audience. This shot particularly resembles a recorded stage play, since the angle barely changes as Marvi keeps looking away into the frame and servants turn to face the camera to speak. The scene thus places the spectator in the familiar position of watching a stage play, of which there is a long tradition in Sindhi through village theater and more formal plays written from the second half of the nineteenth century. Such indirect references connote a shared culture reshaped by cinema. This "adaptation" of folk culture in a new medium allows Sindhi identity to exist in the present—at the same time preserved and reformulated. [p. 125]

In demonstrating Sindhis' ability to make films in Pakistan, however, *Umar Marvi* is seeking more than the self-recognition that identity formation requires; the film is seeking the acknowledgment of others. Because mastering cinema gives the power to diffuse ideas and representations to a large audience, acquiring this capacity is a way of making the Sindhi voice heard among contemporary discourses. In a competitive context for recognition, a national cinematography showcasing an accomplished and powerful nation counts as a positive attribute. Legitimizing the claim to nationhood implies the necessity of asserting the nation's relevance in the present day and therefore justifies the appropriation of a medium associated with cultural modernity.

The complexity of filmmaking necessitates a collective industrial process of production in which each person has a technical competence. The attempt to control this new medium by Sindhis is an attempt to break the quasi-monopoly of Urdu on mass media and on "high" culture in the 1950s. The inclusion of cinema within the folds of Sindhi culture thus refutes the place that, according to nationalists, it has been assigned in independent Pakistan: that of a backward, rural, irrational, and unrefined culture—stigmas inverted as positive in *Umar Marvi* and other representations of "traditional" Sindh.

In addition, the film seeks to be entertaining and capture a wide audience by playing on the story's epic dimension, remaining generally faithful to the "original" plot while using scenes meant to be thrilling to the spectators, such as fights or a horseback chase. The movie also exploits the romantic potential of Marvi and Khet's relationship. It adds a comic character to the story: the role of dejected and treacherous Phog is played as a buffoon by Noor Muhammad Charlie, using all

sorts of comical tricks, including jokes, grimaces, excessive flattery, and being pushed into a pond blindfolded. The decision to include songs, music, and mixing of genres also complies with the dominant South Asian cinematic codes of its time.¹⁴ This indicates a need, in the process of cultural assertion, to strike a balance between the specificity that a Sindhi cinema should possess and the dominant codes it should command in order to gain external recognition. Just as the essentialized vision of the community must find its path between the exotic and the familiar, the ancient and the modern, paving the way for a national Sindhi cinema operates at two levels: preserving and promoting the specificity of Sindhi culture—the inner, cultural domain of sovereignty—while adopting an inter-national cinematic language—to display a command of the material side, that is, the industrial aspect of filmmaking (Image 2)

And yet, *Umar Marvi* is far from being an accomplished work in terms of technique and aesthetics. Indeed the use of technical devices is [p.126] limited: camera angles do not vary much, privileging frontal views of rather static characters. The camera movements are also rare and the editing minimal. It generally obeys the needs of the action using cuts to join two interlocutors or two successive scenes. The weak technical and artistic command even appears clearly at certain points of the film, symptomatic of the lack of means and training, which is also the reason why there is only one group dance and a few songs. The low performance of actors-dancers is striking as compared to successes of the time. For example, in the scene of Marvi's engagement at the beginning of the film, the villagers' dance seems like an uncoordinated choreography, despite the obvious inspiration drawn from sequences in Bombay productions. Another example of poor acting could be the lack of expressiveness of Marvi when she is standing with Khet in the oasis while her confidante dances, which does not attain Sabiha Khanum's sensuality in a comparable scene in *Sassi* (1954). In fact, *Umar Marvi* casts only inexperienced actors, except for Noor Muhammad Charlie. Apart from actors' performance, the set, often lacking refinement, is taken, except for the desert, as passive background environment where actions are located. The set plays a minimal narrative function as the characters do not really interact with their material surroundings. The film thus lacks dynamism because of its technical heaviness.

The fact that an early Sindhi cinema was born at a period when other film industries—especially Hollywood and Bombay cinema—were well established and had reached their respective eras of classicism is symptomatic of the difficulty for Sindhis to exist as a cultural entity in a state that negated its own diversity. The first Sindhi long feature, notwithstanding its symbolic dimension, suffers from a lack of equipment and an “insufficient number of adequately qualified people” (Kabir, 1969, p. 181) at the technical and creative levels—a predicament for Pakistani cinema in general. At a time when Pakistan already had to distinguish its cinematic production from that of India and to fight to develop its own film industry, Sindhi cinema had to exist as the production of a minority in a larger cultural entity striving to assert itself. Because Pakistani state nationalism left little room for a modern Sindhi culture, Sindhi cinema was stuck in a *mise-en-abyme* since it had to exist in the face of both Pakistani and Indian films. In an analogous way, Sindhi's nationalist

¹⁴ The songs are one of the most accomplished aspects of the movie. They were composed by Ghulam Nabi Abdul Latif, while lyrics were written by the poet Rashid Lashari, who taught Sindhi at Pakistan College, Khairpur. Both would contribute to many subsequent Sindhi films, as composer and lyricist, respectively.

discourse posited itself against Pakistani state nationalism which was already opposing India's conception of the nation. Pakistan's protectionism (Gazdar, 1997) seeking to shield indigenous production from India's film industry was probably not meant to encourage Sindhi cinema. Yet, the first Sindhi film in Pakistan was produced in "the most fruitful year of the first decade in terms of box office returns from indigenous cinema" (Gazdar, 1997, p. 52) and thus took part in the expansion of Pakistan's film industry permitted by the progressive ban on the import of Indian films.

Conclusion

Umar Marvi thus launches Sindhi cinema in Pakistan by picturing an old popular tale. Released in the politically charged context of 1956, the film takes part in a process of national reimagining sparked by a fear of cultural and political marginalization. *Umar Marvi*'s depiction of the idealized traditional community of the Marus bears the characteristics that a new national narrative sees in Sindhis—loyalty, patriotism, and self-sacrifice. The film couples these characteristics with a folklorized vision of Sindhi culture as essentially rural, announcing subsequent uses and representations of symbols with a conscious political aim. *Umar Marvi* is the first cinematographic rendition of such identity markers whose representation will fully develop in later Sindhi productions—first during the "golden age" of Sindhi cinema [p.127] in the 1970s, and into the 1980s and 1990s when such symbols are explicitly commercialized (such as in *Jalal Chandio*, 1985 or *Jiye Latif*, 1990).

Although it declares no explicit political objectives, the film's reification of Sindhi culture lends itself to strong associations with Sindhi nationalism; *Umar Marvi* can be interpreted within the context of Sindhi culture's troubled relationship with Pakistan's national narrative. Its technical poverty highlights the importance of the state in the development of a national cinema. Indeed, the role of the state has continued to shape the contours of Sindhi media since the release of *Umar Marvi*. Unsurprisingly, Sindhi cinema experienced a "golden age" during the rule of Zulfikar Ali Bhutto, when state nationalism showed greater acceptance of Pakistan's internal diversity. Later, by seeking to satisfy a public with little creative ambition, it fell prey to excessive commercialization and the restrictive policies of General Zia ul-Haq. More recently, Sindhi cinema in Pakistan has been displaced by TV productions which continue to develop a shared visual imaginary of Sindhi culture first initiated by *Umar Marvi*.

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Image 1. This newspaper ad (most likely of the film's re-release in Urdu in 1963) announces the screening of *Umar Marvi* in the following terms: “Memorable inauguration on Eid day, the true story of the land of Sindh, the first major Sindhi film that in Pakistan and India met with tremendous success and received awards, *Umar Marvi*” (“Eid mubarak ke din se yaadgaar iftatah, sarzameen-e Sindh ki sachi dastaan, pahali azeem sindhi film jisne pakistan aur hindustan mein zabardast kaamyabi haasil ki aur award haasil kiye”).

Note: The authors are thankful to Yar Muhammad Shah for providing this image.

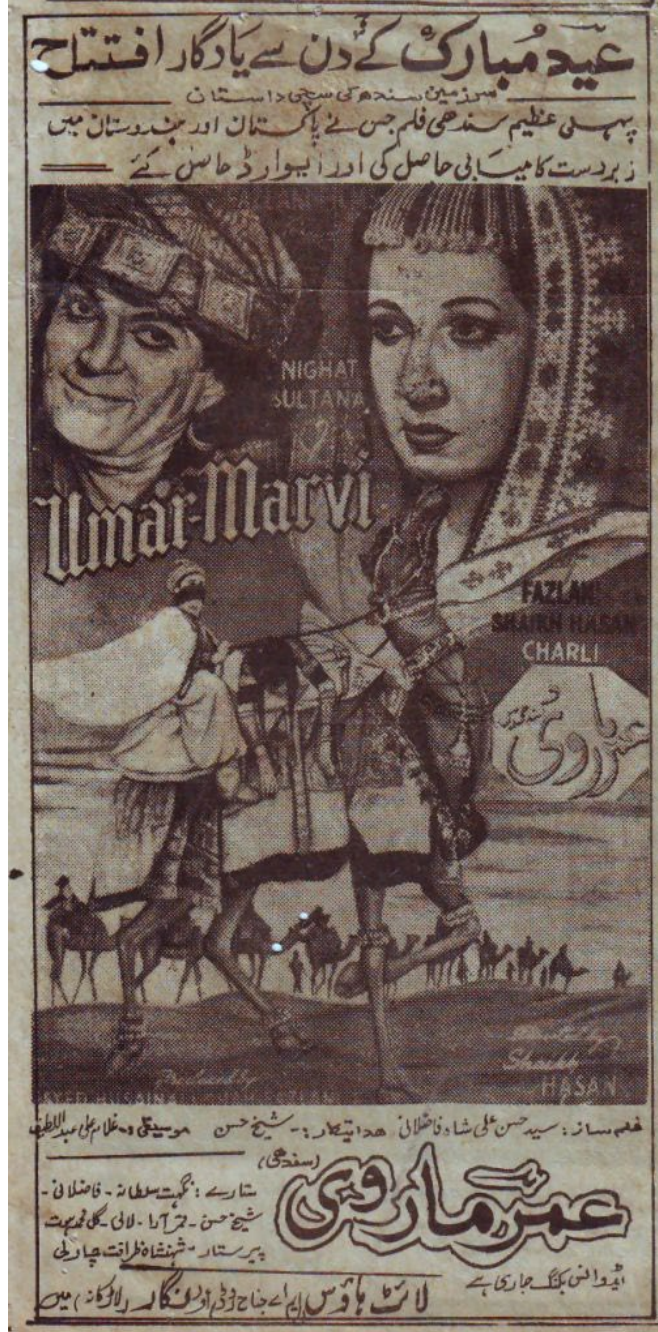


Image 2. Second cover page of the leaflet comprising the lyrics of the songs distributed at the time of *Umar Marvi*'s release.

Note: The authors are thankful to Dr Mehmood Mughal of Sindh University for providing this image.

