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# Introduction

How does a 'tribal', independent-minded and fiercely traditional people fare in the modern nation state – a group such as the Pakhtuns of the border region of Pakistan and Afghanistan. According to one commentator (Siddique 2014:16), both the Soviets and the Americans 'dealt with the plight of the Pashtun people as a military problem, not an economic and political challenge that requires a multi-dimensional resolution'. This bluntly single-minded approach led to the death and displacement of millions and turned the world's largest tribal group into one of the 'world's largest populations of displaced persons' (*ibid*). The Cold War and the succeeding so-called 'war on terror' have left the Pakhtun areas with a legacy of human displacement, violence, extremism and lack of governance.

At the epicentre of the two wars, Pakhtuns gained a great deal of negative attention from the media and academia. Yet little genuine attention has been paid to understanding Pakhtun societies both in Pakistan and Afghanistan. Even today, Pakhtuns are typically studied through a Western lens that offers a superficial, static and stereotypical view of the populace. Researchers from colonial times till today portray them as war-like, treacherous savages, barbarians, hardliners, terrorists and extremists. British colonialists took the lead in stereotypical representation of the Pakhtuns.

The colonial legacy of stereotypes remained so powerful that it shaped the Pakhtun psyche, so much so that Pakhtuns came to believe in the myths created about them (Khan 2003: 70–71). The next generation of writers and journalists, particularly during the Cold War era, represented the Pakhtuns as religious zealots.

In Pakistan, many non-Pakhtuns who wrote extensively about the region depicted them as vengeful people, Taliban sympathizers and ideological extremists.

The mainstream media in Pakistan (particularly in Urdu dramas and commercials) depict Pakhtuns in a quite biased way; holding guns, war-like, illiterate, unable to speak fluent Urdu and possessing a low intellect. Dramas represent Pakhtun culture as based upon killing, revenge and *swara* (handing over girls as compensation to the aggrieved party). Most of the racist jokes prevalent in Pakistan target the Pakhtuns, typically employing such stereotypes.

[Hanifi \(2016: 1\)](#) notes the 'voiceless-ness' of the Pakhtuns in literature mostly written by non-natives. He criticizes Mountstuart Elphinstone (1842) and Louis Dupree for presenting an orientalist picture of the Pakhtuns.

[Yousuf \(2021\)](#), while agreeing with Hanifi (2016), opines that native and indigenous perspectives should be encouraged and given space in a literature dominated by non-native writers and stereotypical images, allowing for a more authentic and unbiased presentation to emerge.

Today, despite the growing number of native researchers – many (including native researchers) still perpetuate the dominant stereotypical ideas. Yet another group of writers, mostly Pakhtuns, romanticize their culture, exaggerate the cultural values and consider *Pakhtunwali* as the 'ideal code of life'. Their work lacks critical analysis and introspection, further reinforcing the misguided perception.

What, then, is the way forward? As Adeel [Khan \(2003\)](#) writes, 'a critical look at Pakhtun actuality ... demonstrates something quite different'. In this study, I endeavour to give just such an insider's account of the Pakhtun reality.

As a Pakhtun, my experience of observing and living with the continuing legacy of colonial stereotypes was quite discomforting. I read and heard things about 'us' that I rarely came across in real life and I saw things that I rarely read in the literature. This discomfort encouraged me to write about my own community. I intended not to romanticize it as many do, and to contest the misleading notions through a more faithful presentation of empirical data.

Three major developments dating from the 1970s – the rise of migration to the Gulf, the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan and the US-led war on terror – have brought a transformation of Pakhtun areas in Pakistan as well as in Afghanistan, with far-reaching impacts on every aspect of the society, including the Pakhtun code of life, *Pakhtunwali*. In both countries, the worsening security situation has severely restricted anthropological research in the Pakhtun regions. Most recent research relies on older, outdated studies and hence fails to take account of these momentous changes. For example, the dominant perspective still portrays *Pakhtunwali* mainly as a violent code involving revenge killings in feuds that are carried on for generations, which is no longer the case.

My focus of study is a Pakhtun village in the Lower Dir district of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province, Pakistan. The village lies outside the tribal areas and the main source of income for the local people is remittances from the Gulf. The remittances have profoundly changed the village structure, resulting in an increase in the number of landholders and an erosion of the traditional social structure.

Because of these changes, *Pakhtunwali* has been transformed, adjusting to the new socio-economic and religio-political set-up. Under these changed conditions, the complex of customary practices known as *gham khadee* (sorrows and joys) has emerged as the most salient feature of *Pakhtunwali*. *Gham khadee* refers to a number of practices, ranging from participation in funerals and weddings to mutual favours among people in various matters of daily life.

The tenets of *Pakhtunwali*, e.g. *badal* (revenge), *melmastya* (hospitality), *khegarha* (doing good) and *tarburwali* (cousin rivalry), are all performed on *gham khadee* occasions. However, the prominence of *gham khadee* does not mean that other tenets, e.g. violent *badal*, have completely ended; rather, the practice of violent *badal* has decreased.

This book investigates the diverse and changing patterns of social relations among Pakhtuns, with particular attention to the ways in which social relations are guided by the practice of *gham khadee*. Given that political position among Pakhtuns is tied to honour, this book also investigates how *gham khadee* and the doing of favours help leaders build up their profiles as well as create a political following.

I take the prominence now given to *gham khadee* to be a manifestation of *Pakhtunwali* in the contemporary Pakhtun society living under the state's laws.

## The Organization of the Book

The **first chapter** describes the problem and sets up the background context for the study with a discussion of the major themes and ideas in different contexts. It provides a brief history of the Pakhtuns, the division of the Pakhtun population, *pukhto* language, issues of identity, *Pakhtunwali* and *gham khadee*.

**Chapter 2** is divided into two sections. The first section discusses my initial plans, the reasons and factors that changed my initial plans, the reasons why I chose Munjai, my different positions as a researcher and the advantages as well as disadvantages of working in a native environment. I also write about the problems that I faced during my fieldwork. The chapter further discusses the methods through which data were collected. The second section gives a short history of Dir. Later in the chapter I discuss

Reconstruction of the Pakhtun Code of Life in a Changing Pakistan

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Lower Dir followed by a detailed discussion on Munjai, the village where I conducted my fieldwork. I also provide brief information about the dress and food patterns and the routine activities of the villagers. The section also discusses the sources of income and social organization.

**Chapter 3** has two sections. The first section demonstrates how *pukhto* is done in a violent way, i.e. through *badal* (revenge killing). Revenge is taken (*pukhto* is done) in order to restore honour. Through a number of case studies, I show how people interpret doing *pukhto* in multiple ways. Later, in the second section of the chapter, I show how through ways other than revenge killing people restore their honour even in cases involving *tor* (adultery). Cases related to women are considered as extremely sensitive and any inability to take revenge is synonymous with loss of honour, but, interestingly and contrary to the existing literature, extensive *gham khadee* participation can help regain the lost honour.

Continuing my argument from **Chapter 3** where I show that *gham khadee* is the most salient feature of *Pakhtunwali*, in **Chapter 4** I introduce *gham khadee* in detail. I discuss its importance in everyday life, who carries *gham khadee* and with whom, and different categories of *gham khadee* events.

**Chapter 5** discusses the *Pakhtunwali* tenets of *badal* and *melmastya*. I show through a number of case studies how *badal* and *melmastya* are practised in non-violent ways, i.e. *gham khadee*, and how they satisfy the Pakhtun concept of *badal*. The first section shows how *badal* is practised through participation, late participation and non-participation in the *gham khadee* of others. The following section shows how people cooperate with each other during *gham khadee* occasions and how *melmastya* is practised as well as assessed during such occasions. The third section of this chapter discusses how *Pakhtunwali* and Islam, the two important identity markers among the Pakhtuns, interplay during the *gham khadee* occasions.

**Chapter 6** shows how within *gham khadee* participation *tarburwali* is practised, and how through *khegarha* and *gham khadee* political support is gained.

I briefly discuss the importance of *gham khadee* for the politicians belonging to other areas of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa using a few examples. Through the case study of a local politician, I show how *tarburwali* is practised in today's Pakhtun society and how through *gham khadee* and *khegarha* people's support can be won, influence can be increased and honour can be gained. All these are considered to be part of doing *pukhto* and help one become a good Pakhtun.

By giving a first-hand account of *Pakhtunwali*, this research shows that an ethnographically detailed account of a *Pakhtun* village can reshape our ideas about *Pakhtunwali*, which has so far been presented as a violent code.