Honor, Revenge in Socio-Geographic Space of Pashtuns

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Abstract
Honor, shame and revenge play and important social role in collectivistic communities where either there is no formal government or they inhabit geography that is remote, mountainous and not easily accessible. Most of the Pashtuns live in treacherous mountain terrain and hence generally free from governmental interference in their everyday life. In spite of outward anarchy, there is a stable social order guided by an unwritten code of honor called Pashtunwali. Honor and revenge are essential components of Pashtunwali and functionally speaking keep order and conformity in Pashtun communities.

Keywords: Revenge; traditional cultures; Pakistan; Afghanistan

Introduction

In the Epic of Gilgamesh, arguably the world's first major work of literature, the goddess Ninhursag creates the wild man Enkidu to cure the hero-king Gilgamesh of his arrogance. The two fight but eventually become friends who travel on many adventures together before Enkidu's untimely death, and Gilgamesh returns to his city—Uruk, in what is today southern Iraq, to mourn. Gilgamesh gazes upon the city walls and basks in pride for the city is both civilization itself and his claim to immortality (Dalley, 1998). In the myth, the city and urban life generally is equated with "civilization" and all that goes with it: infrastructure, power, and above all the rule of law. In contrast was Enkidu, born in the hinterlands away from cities and urban life, portrayed as wild and respected as such. It is quite possibly the earliest myth that assumes the normality and superiority of city life and people over those in more rustic environment, a condition termed urbanormativity (Thomas et al., 2011).

The distinction between cities and the countryside, and one presumes the cultural divide between the people who live in each environment, evolved over thousands of years (Thomas, 2010; Maisels, 1990). Although it is commonly assumed that modern cities and their relations with people in the countryside are a recent phenomenon, after allowing for differences in technology and culture the basic spatial and social structural relations between city and country are remarkably similar between modern and ancient cities (Thomas, 2012). An important feature of this

relationship is the use of one's environment (e.g., rural versus urban) as a source of identity (Bell, 1992).Geographic isolation can produce a culture that stresses self-reliance and is wary of centralized authority, and this can be confused for a lack of sophistication and lawlessness (Redfield, 1947). This urbanormative assumption about rural people is perhaps nowhere more evident than with the study of revenge.

The Pashtuns

Pashtuns live in South-East Afghanistan, the North-West Frontier of Pakistan (new name of the region is Khyber-Pakhtunkhwa) and Pakistani Baluchistan. They generally inhabit areas that are treacherously mountainous and rather inaccessible to outsiders. Governmental writson both the Pakistani and Afghan sides of the Pashtun belt tend to be weak or even non-existent. Pashtunsare enclosed by the:

> . . . imposing Pamirs, and the lofty Himalayas, that is drawn out and crisscrosses the mightyHindu Kush ranges. Its southern section touches the Indian Ocean, in the north
> the Oxus River separates the region from the former Soviet Republics(Wilber, 1953, p. 486).

Pashtuns cherish this inaccessibility and in the past did not allow the government to build roads and other infrastructure because many believed that an increased government presence would diminish their freedom. Scott (in Ginsburg, 2011)referred to this attitude as "anti-state nationalism," resulting in a tribal confederacy that is quasi-stateless. State organizations are certainlyfrail in the region, but Pashtuns do not live in a lawless environment. The vacuum created by governmental weakness is compensated by the *Code of Pashtunwali*,and that arbitrates day-to-day life.

The Pashtun are a traditional people, living a lifestyle referred to by Ibn Khaldun called Umran al Badawi, i.e., Bedouin Civilization (1969).This concept is similar to that founded in Western Sociology: Durkheim (2014)called it Mechanical Solidarity and Tönnies (2001) termed it *gemeinschaft*.All three concepts refer to homogeneous communities where relations are personal, withhigh *esprit de corps*, and extraordinary cooperative spirit, accompanied by a marked emphasis on conformity that can itself breed harsh punishments for violations of social norms (Brint, 2001).Of course, Pashtunwali should be seen as an ideal type that governs daily behavior, and "ideals never come up to reality. . .but they serve as important guiding principles for behavior" (Rzehak, 2011, p. 1).Pashtunwali definesamodel of

the way of life for Pashtuns, and ideal that includes the kindred spirit of the Pashtuns, a sophisticated code ofhonor, moral and ethical rules of behavior, the demand for fierce bravery, sensible actions and consultation, a system of customary legal norms and also belief in Islam (Rzehak, 2011, p. 3). Since the invasion of Afghanistan by the Soviets until the present day, Afghan society has undergone radical changes. Soviet Occupation, Mujahideen, Taliban, Al-Qaida and the US occupation have each presented considerable challenges and dangers to the traditional structure of tribal social organization.

Pashtun Culture and Revenge

Pashtunwali is an unwritten code of social practices and dispute resolution mechanisms that offer some direction in everyday disputes. One indicator of its resilience is that ordinary people continue to rely on the time-honored rules of Pashtunwali for settling their disputes. (Haring, 2010).*Jirga* is a socio-political institution that settles the dispute within the frame workof Pashtunwali (Ginsburg, 2011); it is an institutional mechanism for the interpretation and enforcement of the Code of Pashtunwali (Kakar, 2004, p. 2). One major strength of Pashtunwali is its plasticity: the code can be adjusted to realities on the ground and the changing social environment. Their decisions may at times seem barbarous to outsiders, but such decisions serve as a strong deterrent to a would-be offender in this ostensibly lawless rural region. Functionally speaking it has maintained a social orderfor centuries (Ginsburg, 2011).

Pashtunwali as a way of life for Pashtuns is a mixture of different values. *Nang*, or honor, is the keystone of Pashtun culture. Other key elements are *Sharam* (disgrace and shame), *Paighore* (derision) and *Badal* (revenge and retribution). *Sharam* (shame) encompasses the disrespect of women, family, clan, tribe and local ethos (Khattak et al., 2009). The intensity of *Nang*is determined by situational dynamic and the type of affront, and "a person who lives up to this standard is held in high esteem and will be called *nangyalai* (honourable)" (Rzehak, 2011, p. 9).The concept of honor cannot be fully understood without analyzing the concept of shame. In Pashtun culture shame has a specific meaning that does not translate well to the concept of shame in the English language. *Sharam* has three constituents: shame, taunt and revenge. *Sharam* in Pashto also means decorum and unpretentiousness. Pashtuns do not like *braggadocio* behavioras if somebody is slighted it may result in insult, and that could further escalate into retributive violence to repair honor.

It is within this cultural context that Pashtun revenge violence must be understood. In a region without effective state controls, the community must police itself through the use of informal means. Informal mechanisms develop to ensure that acts of deviance or criminality are quickly punished, even if only through social ostracism, thereby making the deviance unprofitable to the offender (Axelrod, 2009, p. 138). In environments where people can rely on a central authority there is less need for retribution *per se* as the state may attempt to rehabilitate the offender, and a balancing act of sorts develops between the desires of the victim and the role of the community at large. In contrast, the lack of such an authority necessarily lends itself to the creation of inducements to elicit conformity and minimize deviance, and such inducements are likely to require a more nuanced approach to punishment than a bureaucratic system can typically contend; law becomes a guideline around which individuals make decisions in favor of the community as a whole, not a series of sentencing guidelines (Axelrod, 2009, pp. 137-138). Revenge is thus "a targeted imposition of costs or withholding of benefits, in response to a cost-inflicting (or benefit withholding) event, that results from a cognitive system designed (i.e., selected) for deterring other organisms from imposing costs (or inducing other organisms to confer benefits) upon oneself or other individuals in whom one has fitness interests"(McCollough et al., 2013, p. 4). Revenge is often mistaken as an act of retaliation in response to a perceived wrong, but it more coomplex in its intricacies. It can occur after a considerable period of time—decades even—and thus is not simply about reversing injustice (McKee & Feather, 2008, pp. 138-9). Its motives involve a backward-looking desire for retribution but, just as important, a forward-looking strategy for deterring future deviance. (Crockett, Özdemir, & Fehr, E. (2014, p. 2279). As such, revenge and the threat of revenge may paradoxically reduce conflict over the long run (Amegashie & Runkel, 2012, p. 314).

In the absence of formal governmental and judicial services, there tributive aspect of Pashtunwali has a deterrent effect in maintaining social order. It makes a would-be offender take into account the consequences of his deed not merely for himself but also for his household and future generations. In this way revenge can be viewed as a preventive mechanism for checking impulsive behavior:

> . . .and the surety bond that any wrong will not go unpunished. Moreover, *badal* (revenge)is considered a right and the one who does not take *badal* is looked down upon, and is also liable to *paighur* (taunt)" (Sultan-I-Rome, n.d., p. 4).

Violentacts are common in those communities where the stable government is absent (Elster, 1990).Irrespective of intent, the danger of reprisal dissuades impending aggressors as the knowledge of the likelihood of revenge causes potential offendersto be hesitant about eschalating conflict (Gould, 2000).

Elster defines revenge as "the attempt, at some cost or risk to oneself, to impose suffering upon those who have made one suffer"(1990, p. 862). Revenge isan intentionally harmful act directed against a person whose actions the avenger feels caused injury based in the avenger's resentment of the offender(Rosebury, 2008). Stainton (2006) argues that revenge has the following characteristics:

1. the thing which gets revenge must be an agent who intends things, and has reasons;

2. that agent must also have the concept *revenge*, because what ultimately distinguishes revenge from merely intending to cause harm to the thing which harmed you is that it is revenge which is sought;

3. the agent must have a reason for wanting revenge, which will be some specific harm(s) or wrong(s) of which he is aware;

4. he must also intend a specific target, or cluster of targets, and he must take them to be intentional agents who were the source of the perceived harm; he must intend something to befall the recipient which he takes to be harmful to them; moreover, at least in clear-cut cases, that something should strike him as roughly proportional to the harm he takes himself to have suffered (2006, pp. 15-16).

Groups with strong solidarity and a warrior ethos typically have a strong sense of honor and retributive values if somebody is undeservedly slighted. In such machismo cultures, thethreshold for insultcan be very low, and insult could trigger retaliatory violence to recover one's lost honor. Most feuding beginswith a minor insult toone'sreputation that, if it escalates, couldresult in homicidal retaliation. Sexual indiscretions in particular are subject to extreme forms of revenge, e.g., "abduction of a maiden to marry her, seductions of maidens, adultery, runaway wives, and breach of betrothal agreements, as well as disputes over pastures"(Boehm inElster, 1990, p. 869). Retribution in honor cultures has a deterrent effect on a would-be offender living in tribal societies. If one has a reputation that one will not tolerate even a small insult, "then potential offenders are far less likely to take advantage of

you. . . After insults or offenses occur, there is great normative pressure on the insulted person to avenge himself"(Sommers, 2009, p. 39).Norms of revenge in honor-based societies apply social pressure for vengeance and convey a message to the offender that transgressions will have enormous consequences(Sommers, 2009).

Revenge in Culture and Practice

Revenge as an application of the Retaliatory Theory of Justice prohibits killing or punishment of the innocent, but this proscription is not applicable when family honor is attacked. In a honor-based society revenge may not be exacted upon the offender immediately, but rather it is the concept of shared or collective responsibility that is important and as such an important member of the perpetrator's family may be targetedin order to weaken their enemy (Sommers, 2009).This retributive justice is not guided by *lex talionis*, and instead two or three individuals could potentially be killed for one; definitely, it is not "one-for-one" justice (Elster, 1990). Sommers further elaborate shared responsibility:

> The important thing is that the injured party retaliates against someone, someone who bears a connection to the offender. Otherwise, honor is lost. Of course, the most suitable target is the murderer (as long as he is of equal status to the victim). But there is no prohibition against punishing relatives or associates of the offender, since the primary function of retaliation is to restore the reputation of the offended party. The result is that individuals in honor cultures may have radically different ethical perspectives about justice, courage, and the appropriate targets of punishment— perspectives that the language of moral responsibility cannot capture (Sommers, 2009, p. 42).

Related to *badal* is another concept called *tura*. The literal meaning of *tura* is 'sword,' butin real life *tura* refers to a demonstration of gallantry in a fighting situation. A person who fights valiantly and fearlessly is an honorable person called *turyalay* (brave). *Tura* must be in service of a just cause and be guided by far-sightedness (Rzehak, 2011). Rzehak notes:

> Escaping from the battle is seen as an act of cowardice and a Pashtun must not even turn his back to his enemy. Otherwise he will be called *dawus*(cuckold), i.e. he is compared with a man whose wife has been unfaithful. The

ideal of a fearless warrior is preached in various genres of the Pashtun folklore(Rzehak, 2011, p. 11).

Khadirn and Lindholmassert that Pashtuns are ferociously independent, strong-willed, and generally sincere in everyday interaction. The true meaning of the word *badal* is "give-and-take," but with the passage of time its meaning was reduced to "compensation and retaliation."*Badal* in Pashtun culture means reciprocity both in good deeds *(nekai)* and bad deeds *(badai).*In Pashtunwali, it is the sentiment of indebtedness that must be reciprocated at the appropriate time(in Rzehak, 2011).Pashto oral folk literature romanticizes significance of revenge, e.g.,

د پښتو کانړے په اوبو کښې نه ورستيږي

(Pashto Proverb)

(*The stone of Pashto doesn'tgetrusted in water).*

پښتون شل کاله پس بدل واخستو،وې ئې چې زر ئې واخستو

(Pashto proverb)

(*The Pashtun took revenge after a twenty years and another said that it was taken soon, hurriedly.*)

Pashtuns are devout Muslims, and for many their attachment is generally devotional and less theological. Many Pashtunswill comment that Pashtunwali and Islam are mutually compatible, but an oft quoted and famous Pashto proverb notes:

پښتو نيمه کافری دے

(*half of Pashtunwali practices are un-Islamic*)

For example, the concept of shared responsibility is not entirely consistent with the Islamic concept of Qisas**قصاص** *(Lex Talionis)* where punishment is based on the principle of individuality of responsibility and proportionality.

The concept of shared responsibility allows for a potentially substantial delay in the administration of revenge. If the present time is not yet deemed appropriate for vengeance, retaliation can be deferred and the responsibility to take revenge *(por,* literarly 'debt') can even be left to the future generation (Rzehak, 2011). "There is no limit of time or place for *badal"* (Sultan-I-Rome, n.d., p. 3), and in this sense it might

be said thata Pashtun may be wary to "forgive and forget."Not surprisingly, at times when taking revenge is not possible it is passed to future generations. There is afamous Pashto proverb:

بدل په بدل خلاصيږي

(*Retribution can end cycle of revenge*)

Nang can only be repaired by revenge whensomebody is injured. The great Pashto poet Khushal Khan Khattak describes *nang* in the following verse:

څو وانخلي له غليمه انتقام

مرد نۀ خوب کا نۀ خوراک کا نۀ آرام

(in Kamil edition, 1960, p. 554).

(*Unless one takes revenge from one's enemy, the genuine man does not rest, eats, and rest.*)

One of the key themes of Khushal Kattak's poetry is *Nang,* and hereprimands those who do not fight for honour (Khushal in Kamil, 1960).

The concept of *ghairat* is probably the most complex tenet of *Pashtunwali*. The word *ghairat* means:

1. dignity, self-esteem, pride, ambitiousness;
2. zeal, eagerness, passion;
3. bravery, courage, audacity;
4. indignation, anger;
5. Modesty (M. G. Aslanov).

Thus the concept of *ghairat* pools almost all values and rules of behaviour of the code of honour of the Pashtuns. A person to whom *ghairat* is attributed is respectfully called *ghairatman.* Such a person is not simply doing Pashto but he is anxious to do so and leaves no doubt that he does his utmost. Such a person is held in high esteem because a *ghairatman* Pashtun personifies the 'ideal Pashtun'(Aslanov, Alfred Janata and Reihanodin Hassas in Rzehak, 2011, p. 16).

According to the classification of traditional cultures by Edward T. Hall(1976), Pashtun society could be considereda high-context culture. High-context culturesare collectivistic and individuals see themselves through the eyes of the community. Much of the communicationis achieved by non-verbal cues and the meaningful use of silence. Basically, in high-context cultures messages are conveyed by inferring meaning that is explicitly not said, and "this includes the situation, behavior, and preverbal cues as integral parts of the communicated message" (Würtz, 2005, p. 274). Silence and what is not said in a conflictual situation carries a great message. Consider a situation in which a powerful individual injures the pride of a poor individual: the poor person may not say anything, but that does not mean he is not going to do anything for restoring his honor.

Arguably the worst injury on a Pashtuns' honor could be inflicted by taunt and insult. "In honour societies, one's prestige is built on the opinion of others, so where such a culture demands an aggressive response, it must be forthcoming" (Lacey, 2011, p. 81).Humiliation is a strong human emotion tied to anunwarranted discourteous or demeaningtreatment of others by the powerful(Lacey, 2011).Coleman describes humiliation as

> an emotion, triggered by public events, which evokes a sense of inferiority resulting from the realization that one is being, or has been, treated in a way that departs from the normal expectations for fair and equal human treatment (in Lacey, 2011, p. 42).

Humiliation can trigger resentment, and that could escalate to anger and retaliation (Lacey, 2011). Both Weber (1978) and Durkheim (2014) recognized the significance of emotion as an important part of socially organized life where losing face has tremendous consequences. "Shame, an emotion connected to the face, may be described. . .as a complex array of emotions, including humiliation, embarrassment, and resulting feelings of failure" (in Welden, 2010, p. 384).

Loss of face, as theorized by Goffman (1955), is incompatible with Pakhtunwali. As noted by Goffman (1955) and others,

> A person may experience embarrassment or blushing when the person perceives his/her face has been discredited in a particular encounter. Embarrassment felt by a person could disrupt the interaction, and thus, the person and the other participants have vested interest in protecting the person's face to keep the social encounter smooth. Goffman called

> this effort to maintain or to save face facework. (Cited in Kim & Nam, 1998, p. 523)

Face is lost when an individual fails to meet social expectations, either through her or his own actions or of those closely related to them (Yau-fai Ho, 1976, p. 866). It occurs "when conduct or performance falls below the minimum level considered acceptable or when certain vital or essential requirements, as functions of one's social position, are not satisfactorily met" (Ibid., p. 871).

The Pashtun people, interacting with hostile geography and decentralized social organization, had evolved a warrior ethos with the passage of time. Pickering (2011) described mountain people beautifully:

> Savage yet of rigid morality. . . Lawless yet united. Healthy yet closely intermarried. (They) are warlike, courageous, wretched, brigands, brave, lovers of liberty, half barbarian, isolated, poverty-stricken, reactionary, exponents of retarded civilisation, rude and simple, proud, vigorous, rustic, honourable, industrious, frugal, and even
>
> Short.(p. 4)

As if wishing to add to this description, Ghani Khan (Pathans,n.d.[1]) depicted the character of a typical Pakhtun in the following words:

> The Pathan has a tender heart but tries to hide it under a rough and gruff exterior. He is too good a fighter to leave his weakest part uncovered. "Don't be so sweet," he says, "that people may swallow: nor so bitter that people may spit you out." "So he covers his sweetness with bitterness, self-preservation pure and simple. His violent nature, strong body and tender heart make a very unstable combination for living but an ideal one for poetry and colour. He keeps a rough face "because he does not want you to see his soft eyes. He would rather you thought he was a rogue than let you see him weep his eyes out for his wife. (para. 27)
>
> Being direct and rather thick between the ears, every Pathan imagines he is Alexander the Great and wants the world to admit it. The result is a constant struggle between cousin and cousin, brother and brother, and quite often between father and son. This has provided his sole undoing through the ages. They have not

[1] This book was originally published in 1956 but wee accessed it online and there was no date on it. Under the APA style n.d. stands for no date. Para means paragraph.

succeeded in being a great nation because there is an autocrat in every home, who would rather burn his own house than see his brother rule it. (para. 108)

He suffers from a pronounced lack of tact and a distinct excess of practical self-expression. He would rather shoot his way out of a problem than get a headache thinking about it. He has great ambition and no patience that is why he usually dies rather young. He has a great heart and a thick head; that is why he makes a charming friend and a fine host. He has a proud head and an empty stomach that is why he is a great dacoit [i.e., a bandit]. (para. 110)

As noted earlier, Pashtun culture holds life as subservient to honor and living with dignity: the impeccable life is the life of a *Nangyalai* (Life lived honorably). Ghani Khan writes in existential spirit:

زهٔ پښتون يم، ستا د مرګه نهٔ ويرپرم

خو مي تش ژوندون اوٛ خوشي مرګ ته قار شي

(Ghani, 1986, p.339)

(I am a Pashtun and am not afraid of death, but I despisemere living for the sake of living and dying for no meaningful cause.)

Or, as the great Pashto poet Khushal Khan Khattak (1613-1689) wrote in one of his couplets,

مرګ زما په پوهه ښهٔ تر دا ژوندون دے

د عزت سره چي نهٔ وي زيست روزګار

(In Kamil[2], 1960, p. 528)

(If one is not living honorably then death is superior to degrading existence.)

Khushal Khan Khattak has written that

جهان شرم نام و ننګ دے.....کهٔ دا نهٔ وي جهان رنګ دے

(Khushal in Kamil, 1960, p. 351)

[2] Dost Mohammad Kamil edited and compiled works of Khushal Khan Khattak.

(*Cardinal principle of existence in this world is honor and have a sense of shame; Life without honor is meaningless*)

People unable to fight for their honor occupy the lowest social status. For instance, in a situation where an individual may not be capable of confronting a powerful person, it is the collective responsibility of a tribe to punish the perpetrator and restore the honor of the persecuted person (Haq, n.d.). Pashto poet Abdul Hameed Baba described this sentiment in following verse:

چې د بل ننګ و ناموس ساتلے نشي

و به نۀ ساتي ځوک خپل ننګ و ناموس

(Hameed, 1958, p. 39)

(*Those who cannot protect the honors of others will not be able to keep their honors.*)

Khushhal Khan Khattak,in his famous book of poetry *Dastarama* (Book of the Turban), wrote with a proverbial brevity about honor:

چه دستار تړۍ هزار دۍ

خو دستار سړۍ په شمار دۍ

(There are many who wear aturban but in reality, there are very few who are worthy of wearing turban).[3]

In Pashtun culture Dastar (turban) is a symbol of pride and wearing it means one has to honor the code of Pashtunwali; those who bring shame to Pashtun society should not wear it. It is said that a Pashtun wearing turban should not bow to anybody because his turban could fall from his head and that is considered a disgrace. A renowned Pashto Poet Amir Hamza Khan Shinwari describes significance of keeping one's head up in this verse:

[3] This is a popular couplet and is like proverb. One of the authors remember it from memory and does not have access to the book, therefore no page number is available.

ما کوز ورته لیمۀ کړۀ زما سر نه تیتیدۀ

شاید چې په الفت کښې هم افغان پاتې کیدم

(*I lowered my gaze in the presence of my beloved, but I couldn't bow my head. Even in affection I have to observe ettiquets of Pashtunwali*)

(Shinwari, 2000, in Preface to *Ghazawani*)

Khushhal Khan Khattak echoed the same sentiment in next verse

په خپل نام و ننګ چې راشم لیونے شم

خبردار کله په سود اؤ زیان د لک یم

(*When it comes to the protection of my honor then my rage does not care about benefits and loss of millions*.)

(Khushal in Kamil, 1960, p. 564).

In this way the turban becomes the earthly embodiment of honor.

Conclusion

Revenge is often considered the act of a lawless society, but this itself is an urbanormative assumption. The Code of Pashtunwali is not an artifact of a primitive or inferior culture, but rather a rural equivalent to the written law codes of urban societies. The logic underlying its specified behaviors do not conform to those found in urban centers because Pashtunwali has not developed within an urban environment: within the context of a mountainous rural region with little effective state control such an honor code addresses the concerns for social order that the Code of Hammurabi or the American Constitution addressed for urban societies.

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