CHAPTER 2

Belonging to the Palas Valley

Winding our way along the road up the Indus gorge, Manzar and I are about to enter Besham, the major bazaar-cum-town in this part of Indus Kohistan (Figure 2.1). In the crowded bazaar all kinds of goods and wares can be bought, but we resist temptation and leave the car for a quick lunch at New Abasin Hotel and Restaurant. The colourful, hand-painted road map on the hotel wall tells us exactly where we are right now: 170 km north of Islamabad, the country’s capital. To the west lies the fertile Swat valley, connected to Besham by the old Indus Valley Road over the Shangla Pass. Ahead of us lies another 30-kilometre drive to Pattan, our destination. Having finished our lunch, we continue along the winding road. Green oases can be seen at regular intervals on the other side of the valley. In the depths of the gorge, the greyish waters of the mighty Indus river – Abba Sin, the Father of Rivers – weave their way towards the Tarbela Dam, long the world’s biggest earthen reservoir and a major producer of electric power. The electricity goes to the urban centres in the Punjab. The water is used to irrigate the fertile Punjabi plains. But neither water nor electricity go here to this arid and sparsely populated region, although it could use both. Long completely isolated, it has for over the past thirty years become an important route for road traffic made possible by the extension of motorable roads into the remote mountain regions. From the mid-1960s, the Pakistani authorities embarked on an ambitious programme of road construction throughout northern Pakistan (Kreutzmann 1991). The most ambitious, difficult and by far the most costly of these road projects was the construction of the Karakoram Highway (KKH) – a 1,500-kilometre artery connecting northern Pakistan with the Punjabi plains. Completed in 1978, the KKH runs through some of the most spectacular and scenic areas of northern Pakistan (Allan 1989). Pakistan did not accomplish this engineering feat alone; most of it was planned and executed by Chinese
engineers and labourers, many of whom where killed during the dangerous work of blasting a road into the sheer rock faces.

Today, the KKH is a major thoroughfare for commercial trade between China and Pakistan (Kreutzmann 1995). The people in the Northern Areas, the part of the Princely State of Jammu and Kashmir that Pakistan has held since 1947, depend on it for their provisions. The colourful custom-painted trucks carrying timber or Chinese silk roll down the road, while trucks carrying diesel and wheat flour slowly climb the road leaving behind them a trail of black exhaust. Now and then the traffic comes to an abrupt halt, queues form behind roadblocks and drivers wait for the Frontier Works Organisation to open the road. Not only goods and commodities are moved along the road. Public transport is on offer from a number of small travel agencies, whose red-eyed, chain-smoking drivers edge their Toyota minibuses along the road at nerve-racking speed. There are also the slower, but painfully over-crowded NATCO buses, travelling between Rawalpindi and Gilgit. During my first trip through Indus Kohistan in a NATCO bus in 1989, the Punjabi bus driver cautioned me – the only foreigner – not to step outside when we made a brief halt in Komila, a road-side town, fearing that someone might attack me! Young boys clambered on to the outside of the bus, while the men in the dusty bazaar milled around the bus staring blankly at me. Clutching my new, shiny, but completely useless brief case I was afraid to step outside. The Kohistanis’ forbidding image scares away all but the most adventurous tourists. The plains’ people view Kohistanis as hillbillies and country bumpkins with a streak of badmaashi (‘villainy’) and jungeli (‘of the forest’, i.e., lack of sophistication). The district administrators characterise them as indolent, backward and belligerent. Visiting foreigners see them as narrow-minded Muslim zealots and brigands. Although some of these stereotypes hold a grain of truth, they fail to do justice to the Kohistanis’ virtues – of which there are many. They are concerned about their honour, they travel widely, are highly adaptive and adventurous. They are independent individualists who value autonomy and dislike subordination, values which they share with the neighbouring Pashtun and which would also be recognisable to us in the West (Lindholm 1996). They do not expect help or charity. Neither do they ask for it. Through the centuries they have been accustomed to care for themselves.

The Karakoram Highway has had a huge impact on traditional production systems and facilitated new trade networks, rural marketing systems and bazaars (Allan 1989, Kreutzmann 1991). Moreover, it has eased travel for local
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people, many of whom commute to the larger cities in the plains for work. The completion of the Highway increased emigration from Kohistan and sparked the formation of Kohistani diasporas, which nowadays are spread over the northern Punjab and the NWFP. The diasporas and the grapevine that unites them provide a channel for news and gossip but also for a long-term cultural and religious exchange between diasporas and the Kohistani homeland. In addition, Kohistanis travel widely and many spend the winter in urban areas doing menial labour or for educational purposes, including religious training in a madrassa. This means that even in the most isolated Kohistani communities, men have for some part of their life been residing outside their village and in places where they have often learnt to speak but mostly not write Urdu, the Pakistani national language. As individuals and as members of local communities, many Kohistani men have therefore had a broad exposure to non-local cultural and religious traditions and have in many instances spent time learning these traditions as workers, friends, neighbours and students in rural and urban areas far from home.

The government’s ambitious road plans were motivated not only by a concern for the economic uplift of remote regions, but equally as a piecemeal political conquest (Ispahani 1989). During the premiership of Zulfiqar Ali Bhutto, a national campaign was pursued to abolish the remaining princely states and feudal chiefdoms in the NWFP (Barth 1985). This does not mean that the effort to sneak government control in through the back door was easy. Strong tribal groups continued to resist full integration into the nation’s administrative structure. During the construction of the KKH through Indus Kohistan in the 1970s, strong opposition to the road from the resident Kohistani tribesmen forced the engineers to re-route it from the eastern to the western bank – and back again. The most persistent opposition came from the valleys on the east bank, but there was also strong opposition from the Kandia valley on the west bank, forcing constructors to make a detour at Komila. Thanks to the KKH, Indus Kohistan is now well connected with the rest of Pakistan, but not fully integrated with it. In the past the local population evaded government authority and resisted outside intervention by seeking refuge in inhospitable mountain valleys, subsisting on marginal land, and leaving the fertile plains to the sedentary Pashtun (Barth 1956a). There are few other places on earth where mountains almost 6,000 metres high would be considered ‘foothills’, as they are here in the Pakistani Himalayas. These harsh and barren mountains are the homeland of the Kohistanis (a term which means literally ‘mountaineer’).
While the mountains bind these people together, the river Indus has always been a formidable barrier and has functioned as a linguistic boundary between the west and the east banks. The communities on the west bank speak Pashtu, reflecting their historical ties to Swat and the Pashtu-speaking areas to the west. On the east bank, the villagers speak the Kohistani dialect of Shina, known as Kostyõ Shina. The exact number of Kostyõ Shina speakers is not known and estimates range from 200,000 to 500,000 (Schmidt and Kohistani 1998: 107–8). If the latest population census for District Kohistan is correct, there are about 250,000 Kostyõ Shina speakers on the east bank of the Indus. In addition, there are perhaps about 100,000 living in the diaspora communities in the towns of the NWFP and the cities of the northern Punjab. Due to the increased exchange between the east and west banks, bilingualism in Shina and Pashtu is now common. More recently, the use of Urdu as a medium of instruction in schools and in the government administration has added a third language to the polyglot mixture (Schmidt 1984). The Kohistani speakers living in Indus Kohistan are tribally organised into patrilineal descent groups. They form small, independent communities that use tribal councils (jirga) for conflict resolution. They display a strong practical and emotional attachment to the valley where they live and the homeland to which they belong and are often collectively identified by the name of their valley.

Until 1976 the east bank of Indus Kohistan was a Tribal Area of the Hazara Division. On October 1, 1976 the east bank (‘Indus Kohistan’) and the west bank (‘Swat Kohistan’) were merged into District Kohistan. Today, District Kohistan is a tribal area under provincial administration by the District Commissioner (DC). To ensure impartiality, the DC is usually a Pashtun from one of the western districts of the NWFP. The DC resides at the district offices in Dassu. His superior is the Commissioner, located at divisional headquarters in Abbottabad, about 230 km further south. The DC is seconded by two Assistant Commissioners (AC), one posted at Dassu, another at Pattan. To control the unruly population the DC and ACs have at their disposal the police and the Frontier Constabulary, a paramilitary organisation. The most recent, and the only reliable, district census is from 1998 and estimates the total population to number 472,570, all of whom belong to the Sunni branch of Islam. There is considerable migration to the lowlands and population growth was only 0.09 per cent during the period 1981–98.2
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The east-bank valleys have been left out of the many developments that have benefited the valleys on the west bank where the KKH runs. One of the biggest of the east bank valleys is the Palas valley. It covers approximately 1,400 square km and stretches out in a south-easterly direction, gaining altitude as it approaches towards the highest peaks close to 6,000m. A valley system, rather than a single valley, it is made up of two watersheds separated by a ridge, draining water into the Indus river. On topographical maps, they are often distinguished by adding the Pashtu gloss ‘Bar’ (upper) and ‘Kuz’ (lower) to form Bar Palas and Kuz Palas (Figure 2.1). The villagers themselves have not adopted this nomenclature and refer to the northern (upper) valley as ‘Dáro’, and the southern (lower) valley as ‘Palas’. By implication, a man from Dáro is referred as a Dárooch while a man from Palas is a Palsooch. To avoid confusion, the name Palas valley will be reserved for whole valley while Dáro and Kuz Palas will be used to denote the upper and lower valleys respectively. The two valleys differ in many respects. Dáro is much bigger, lacks a road through the valley and is therefore more inaccessible and has a population of about 10,000. The lower valley is smaller, is served by a jeep-road running through the full length of the valley and is more accessible. It has a population of about 30–35,000. The people are united by a common language and speak their own dialect of Kohistani Shina, Palas Kostyõ Shina (Schmidt and Kohistani 1998). They have a common history and share genealogical affiliation to either the Darma or the Khuka Manka quom – the two main tribal groups. Until the late nineteenth century, they were united by a system of communal land tenure (wesh) of considerable complexity. There is a considerable internal migration between the two valleys, primarily from Dáro to Kuz Palas. Being more traditional and concerned with protecting their ‘customs’ (dastoor), Dáro is considered by villagers in both valleys as the heartland of Palas culture.

The villagers are mountain farmers who combine pastoral animal husbandry with irrigated agriculture spread out over a huge vertical gradient. Maize is the staple crop and is grown on small terraced fields located on alluvial fans, on flood plains and developed within the oak forest. The fields are mostly cultivated by gravity irrigation. The maize is eaten in the form of thick and crusted chapattis, made from unleavened maize flour. During summer and autumn gourds, pumpkins and cucumbers are added to the diet as are grapes, walnuts and wild potherbs.
To reach Dáro, one must find a public jeep in Pattan, the nearest town. Jeep transport is irregular and the vehicle usually loaded beyond capacity. With everyone on board, the driver shifts the jeep through the crowded bazaar and then, engaging shrieking brakes, follows the narrow dirt road down to the banks of the Indus and further across the river on the huge concrete Joser Bridge completed in 1985. On the east bank, the narrow jeep road becomes even narrower as it follows the east bank of the Indus. On the other side, the river flowing from the Keyal valley spews its clear blue water into the grey, silty Indus river. On the narrow riverbank, a group of itinerant gold-washers have perched their tents, scraping out a living from panning gold. Suddenly, the road makes a sharp right-hand turn, leaving the Indus behind on its eastward journey. The jeep veers constantly and dangerously between the precipice on the left and the steep rock wall on the right, past boulders and fresh rockfalls. This is a rough and risky ride but the locals are undaunted, hanging carelessly outside the tattered jeep. After about 17 km, the road ends abruptly at the entrance of the Dáro valley. The valley itself is a dead end. When you leave the bumpy jeep trail you enter a world where time has, seemingly, stood still. As one enters the valley, one is quickly engulfed in a thick oak-forest belt. A well-worn mule-track weaves its way along the river. It is the only communication route to the valley. The trail meanders into the valley, dotted at times by wooden cantilever bridges. During summer the swollen river, the Musha Ga, inundates parts of the mule-track, forcing the villagers to negotiate the submerged track along the river. All goods and provisions must be transported on mule or horseback or carried as backpacks. There is no bazaar inside the valley, no police station, no army post or any other institutions of government. There are no doctors and only a few meagre dispensaries; people rely on herbal medicines to soothe ailments and cure common diseases. Those who fall seriously ill have to be carried out of the valley tied to a stretcher. Traversing the valley is a long and arduous trek even for a fit person: two days from the remotest villages, even three days from the distant summer pastures. The men are tough, strong and sure-footed even while wearing worn out plastic sandals and labouring under a 50-kg load. Steaming hot in summer, the temperature drops below zero during the winter with frequent snowfalls. There are none of the amenities commonly found in towns along the roadside such as restaurants, hotels, tea-stalls, tapped water and electricity.

Government officials hardly ever come here. Tourists never enter. The Lonely Planet guidebook warns tourists not to visit the valleys in Indus
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Kohistan. Out of the reach of government jurisdiction, the valleys are considered unsafe. The gun-toting villagers are emblematic of the autarchy of the valley: ‘In Dáro’, the saying goes, ‘every man is a Malik (“patron”).’ The first time I visited the valley, suspicion was on everyone’s face: Who is he? What is he doing here? What does he want from us? This scepticism of outsiders is natural to people who are accustomed to care for themselves and who have resisted attempts to control, subvert or rule them. They have a long and unbroken tradition of freedom and independence. In the old times the area was referred to as Yaghistan – ‘the land of the free’, idiomatically opposed to Hokumat, the governed or settled areas. Successive waves of conquerors never managed to subdue the Kohistanis. Pushed into these hills by more powerful and better organised groups (Barth 1956a), they were never under foreign rule.

The British administrators never set foot here. The valleys on the east bank of the Indus river – which the British referred to as the cis-Indus – were never even visited, not to mention conquered. Hidden from view, they were shielded by their inaccessibility. The British administration avoided the main Indus valley gorge because it was considered a ‘death trap’. Caravan raids and livestock rustling mostly went unpunished, fines were never paid and threats of punitive missions never effectuated. An advancing army of Imperial Forces risked being annihilated by the warring tribesmen who could take advantage of the rugged terrain. Moreover, the spread of more precise arms such as breechloaders among the Kohistani tribesmen had removed the firepower advantage the British troops (Moreman 1994).

Another reason for the non-intervention policy was to keep the area as a buffer zone against an expansionist Tsarist Russia (Lindholm 1980). When the ‘forward policy’ was given up in favour of a policy of containment (‘hearts and minds policy’), the administration sought to appease the bellicose tribesmen, subdue excessive fighting and discourage attacks on the garrison stationed in Chilas in the Gilgit Agency. Without elected leaders or powerful chiefs, the area was difficult to rule and not conducive to political bribes. In November 1934 control of Indus Kohistan was transferred from the Gilgit Agency to the North-West Frontier Province. By 1940, no outsider had been able to penetrate the area. Virtually roadless except for a meandering track located in steep precipices high above the Indus, the gorge was very difficult to traverse along the river. In 1941, the Hungarian-born orientalist and explorer Sir Aurel Stein was the first to traverse the Indus gorge from the Kandia valley, the largest and most fertile of the west bank valleys, to
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Besham (Stein 1942). Making his way along the west bank towards Besham, Stein found the gorge so steep and narrow that he could not determine his position by sighting peaks previously triangulated by the Survey of India. He did, however, glimpse Palas on the east bank and the valley is traced on the sketch map illustrating Stein’s journey. The sketch was made from Survey of India maps produced during 1921–35 and, as such, represented the official state of cartographic knowledge of Indus Kohistan at the time. For Palas, only the barest outlines of the main rivers are given but neither peaks, ridges, passes nor villages are shown. By virtue of its inaccessibility the Palas valley and the east bank of the Indus remained hidden from the imperial gaze.

INTO THE VALLEY

The Palas valley has a political system that has variously been termed ‘republican’, ‘acephalous’ and ‘anarchic’. Whatever the terms, they denote an uncentralised, small-scale polity without formal political offices or hereditary rank. A corollary of this form of social organisation is the individualisation of physical force. Attacks are often made with the intention to inflict pain, injury or death. Homicide and vengeance killings are part of the militant egalitarianism found in the valley. In the Pakistani and foreign news media as well as scholarly journals, such militancy and gun-toting tendencies have been termed a ‘Kalashnikov culture’. In the case of the Palas valley, the term Kalashnikov culture is a misnomer. Automatic weapons – and guns in general – are not only desired for their offensive qualities, but also for their symbolic association with masculinity and machismo. The younger men often embellish their guns by attaching carefully embroidered needlework made by their mothers or sisters during the winter to the handle, grip and stock. This apart, carrying arms is for many men not a matter of choice – it is a necessity.

There is no life insurance policy in Palas and it is only by maintaining high vigilance that a villager can survive. Ambushes, assaults and surprise attacks are common. Once enmities move beyond threats, insults and other verbal attacks, foreclosure and mediation become ineffective. If any of those involved are injured or killed, the revenge killings, ambushes and attacks will continue until one of the parties is driven off their land or equivalence is reached in injury and homicide. Only rarely do conflicts end peacefully. Those involved in mortal conflict wear leather bandoleers laden with cartridges and go armed with old Lee-Enfield calibre .303 rifles. Some also carry automatic guns such as the Kalashnikov AK-47 and AK-
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56. Sometimes a group of gun-toting men hurry along the mule track followed by an escort of supporters. Moving in broad daylight, they go on without rest. For added protection, some move only after dusk. A few men stay permanently indoors, hiding behind thick walls. Some bear amulets containing charms on their upper right arm. According to local belief, the charm will render a bullet harmless, either by letting it pass through the body without inflicting harm or making the attacker see double, so that he cannot aim properly.

The villagers not only form an autarchic political society and have resisted political domination, they also form a moral autarchy, acting upon unwritten rules and social norms validated and sanctioned by themselves. Their customs (dastoor) and traditional ways of handling disputes are legitimate within the community, but not outside it. Homicide in general is not reported to the police. Even when it is, the obligation to seek revenge remains. Not all forms of violence are considered legitimate, only those considered part of dastoor. Attacks meant to disfigure an opponent are illegitimate, but still have recently become more common:

Climbing up the steep and meandering track leading to my host Kabir’s house, I notice a man who is busy ploughing his fields. His nose looks odd. We trade quick glances before he turns away. From my previous discussions with other men, I recognise him as one of the victims of ‘nose cutting’ (notho doyoon). Accused of having made a pass at a married woman, Malik was branded a trespasser of privacy (kandré choor) and Hareeq, the wife’s husband, aided by two close relatives, cut off his nose and broke his leg. While the latter is traditionally considered a legitimate form of punishment, the former is illegitimate and previously was only used to punish unfaithful women. His disfigured face is a powerful reminder of the brutality of revenge. This man is forever marked. There is a blemish on his pride. His honour is tainted. The two parties are still locked in a dispute that over a period of fifteen years has left four men injured and one dead. Recently, Malik took revenge on his erstwhile enemy. Helped by two relatives, he overpowered Hareeq and cut off his nose. When the news of Malik’s action spread, his kinsmen rejoiced, others deplored it and many denounced nose-cutting as being against the local customs. But nobody knew how to stop it or prevent it from happening again.

This resembles what Thomas Hobbes describes as people’s inability to get themselves ‘out from that miserable condition of Warre, which is necessarily consequent … to the naturall Passions of men, when there is no visible Power to keep them in awe’ (1997a: 93). Without a ‘Sovereign’ with a monopoly on the use of force, the villagers of Dáro need to be constantly
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vigilant. Those who are unprepared and caught off guard may not live to regret it:

When we reach Kabir’s house, located in the upper part of the village, his father carefully removes the bullets from his bandoleer and spreads them on a shawl on the roof in order to dry them in the sun. They are lead-tipped dum-dum bullets that expand on impact, inflicting severe wounds and are intended for killing large game. Here they are not used for hunting, but to deter aggressors and enemies. The importance of strength is reflected in one of the many local proverbs: ‘Being many do not matter – being forceful matters.’ For those who are neither strong nor many, the threat of ostracism and expulsion is ever-present. Far below us a man leads his bullocks back and forth in the narrow field, making swift turns while gripping the handle of the scratch-plough. Beneath him the landscape drops sharply down towards the main river, the Musha Ga, now hidden from view in the long evening shadows of the mountains. Almost invisible, it can only be recognised by a deep rumbling sound. The steep relief of the landscape has been transformed into small terraced fields that dot the mountain slope both inside and outside the oak-forest belt. This is the middle range of seasonal habitation and the main maize-growing zone (maji ser).

Although maize yields are very poor the fields are nevertheless central objects of male antagonism and property disputes. Antagonism is deeply ingrained not only in the social psyche but in the landscape. Here and there fields are lying fallow. To put an adversary under pressure, the offended party proclaims that his fields can no longer be cultivated. With the fields ‘closed’ (shar) for cultivation people come under severe pressure in an already marginal agricultural environment. From a distance the grey and fallow fields are clearly visible, and stand out from the yellow fields of ripening maize. The fallow fields are telling reminders of the prevalence of antagonism that forces people into hiding or to leave the valley and resettle elsewhere.

A proud villager clad in a dull-grey shalwar kamiz walks among the tall maize stalks. Around his head is wrapped a colourful scarf. Looming high above his terraced fields are jagged mountains, narrow ridges and lofty peaks. The mountains are clothed with dense evergreen forests. Moving up and down the mountains in seasonal migration cycles, the villagers have an intimate knowledge of the natural environment. They also know its dangers. Hiding in the dense forests there are men waiting for the right moment to avenge their grievances. In some cases they are assisted by ‘spies’ who reveal the victim’s whereabouts or disclose his travel plans. Many men have been killed or ambushed during these seasonal migrations. Concealed in the
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landscape are histories of killings, dramatic escapes, ambushes, clashes and romantic rendezvous. No singing or music punctuates the rhythm of daily life. It has been silenced by the growing influence of religious orthodoxy.

LOCALISED ISLAM

Because of the area’s isolation, the Kohistanis converted to Islam later than their neighbouring ethno-linguistic groups. For this reason, the Kohistanis have been stereotyped as ‘lax Muslims’. Eager to prove the stereotype wrong, they have embraced orthodox Islam with more religious fervour and puritan zeal than their neighbouring ethno-linguistic groups. The first wave of religious orthodoxy swept through the valley in the 1970s when Deobandi emissaries made them give up local mortuary rites – keeping wakes at graves and making food-offerings at the local shrines – and preached against singing, music and dancing. Not long after the Tablighi Jaamaat (Metcalf 1993), a missionary Islamic movement with roots in pre-partition India, reached the valley. Today, the Tablighi Jaamaat has many followers in Palas and the movement’s representatives are accorded deference and respect:

While interviewing a group of villagers on their ownership to forest we are sitting outside a deserted school building overlooking the valley. Suddenly, the buzzing interview-situation is broken. Approaching us is a group of pious-looking men walking behind what appears to me as the leader. ‘Oh, no,’ I think as the procession comes nearer, ‘they’re coming to ask us to leave.’ Those attending have by now risen from their chairs and are standing transfixed. Having reached the platform where we’re standing they offer their blessings, embracing and shaking hands with everyone, me included. Greeting us warmly, they invite everybody for prayer in the nearby mosque. Having completed their mission, the prayer-group leaves and the villagers’ posture relaxes. My first meeting with the Tablighi Jaamaat has ended.

There was no hostility shown to me as a non-Muslim. Indeed, the men who most eagerly approached me were active Tablighi Jaamaat members who saw it as their duty to convert me to Islam and occasionally criticised other villagers for failing to fulfil their duty as Muslims. Not everyone welcomed the Tablighi Jaamaat’s austere influence on society. ‘I used to dance a lot’, a man confided to me. ‘The last time I danced was at a wedding three years ago. Now it is finished, mostly due to the work of the Tablighi Jaamaat.’ Though dancing has ceased, hidden from view in the private realm oral traditions survive, albeit in a subdued form. During the summer season, the migration to the highest meadows (maáli) provides an opportunity to sing raucous
songs, often with one man functioning as a lead singer and seconded by two or more other men. The songs may be melancholic laments of love and longing, sensual love songs or boisterous songs of joy, the latter often accompanied by rhythmic clapping. In private or in company, the women also sing and recite poetic couplets, or compose impromptu love poems or melancholy laments of unrequited love or for being married away:

ji, wo phoe thoi hilaale kalil dezi aale,  
stoi buba jumte seroj waz na hano.  
wo, khushaal be na haries,  
mi bubae khushal be dao,  
wo, jang niila loti pashi.

(the boy) Oh dear, only a few days are left to your wedding. But your father is not coming down from the fields to the mosque.  
(the girl) I have not happily accepted you as a husband but my father betrothed me to you when he spied the deep blue bank notes [i.e., the bride price].

Marrying within the family is common, with a preference for patrilateral parallel cousin marriages. There is a high frequency of polygyny, sometimes established through the exchange of marriageable women (badali). In dispute settlements, women may also be exchanged in marriage between former enemies to symbolise their reconciliation. A marriageable woman can also be given unilaterally to an aggrieved party as compensation. The married women reside with the husband’s family (virilocally). Beyond the inner family circle, they display extreme deference towards unrelated men. The hard and tedious work on the fields, mostly carried out by women, does not allow elaborate veiling and women only cover their heads with scarves. The symbolic seclusion of women (purdah) is created through the use of bodily kinesics – stepping aside, squatting, turning away and ceasing talking to create an effect of social ‘non-presence’. The women are subject to strict social control because they have the power to ruin the family’s honour (hayáa). This is especially important given the fact that romantic love and affection are most often not directed at one’s spouse or fiancé, but towards secret sweethearts and lovers. If clandestine and illicit love affairs become public knowledge, the transgression can only be cleansed by homicide. Adultery is not only a breach of local moralities, but it is also anathema to Islam.

The villagers are deeply religious and many are daily reciters of the Quran. Their religious devotion is visible in the old wooden mosques found in the larger villages. In the old days, these mosques were centres of Islamic
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learning that served to impart to students the tenets of Islam. The villagers of Palas are devout Muslims, but not of a dogmatic and extreme kind. Instead, theirs is a particular spirituality that, although austere and strict, is better described as tranquil and serene as evidenced in the vernacular religious songs and couplets. The spread of the Tablighi Jamaat has not changed this fact, although it has strengthened the influence and the social standing of the religious scholars. The Tablighi method of evangelisation through lay preachers (the name means ‘community of evangelists’) is, like the Kohistani societies they preach among, based on an egalitarian ethos. The movement has, for example, tended to favour the education of girls and criticised the local system of brideprice (bridewealth) and argued in favour of dowry. In Palas, the Tablighi influence has raised the status of women and because of this women (and children) are now accorded the same share in private and communal property as men. The movement disapproves of lavish hospitality, which anyway is still in many cases beyond people’s economic means.

The old wooden mosques, with finely ornamented and elaborate designs, are central elements of the region’s wooden architecture and bear testimony to the ethos of vernacular spirituality. In the old mosque in Shared, a village in central Dáro, the floor of the prayer hall is covered with yellow straw and the water for ritual ablution is channelled from a little stream running past the mosque. Solid wooden pillars support the flat roof covered with mud. Next to the mosque lie a small graveyard with finely ornamented grave enclosures and some graves adorned by ornitomorph stone epitaphs. The origin of this symbolism is not clear, but points to a complex mix of cultural and religious influences. Throughout history, this area has been at the crossroads of the major Asian religions. Along the Indus river, near the town of Chilas, are well-preserved petroglyphs of the enlightened ‘Buddha’, of Buddhist ‘Stupas’ as well as pre-Islamic engravings of ibex, warriors and horses (Jettmar 1980). These influences are not easily traced to the region’s contemporary Islamic art, but the presence of unusual symbolical elements such as the labyrinth (Scerrato 1983) may in some way be related to region’s pre-history. In Islamic art the principles of repetition, symmetry and change of scale are key elements of the highly elaborate geometrical designs. The Kohistani woodcarvings, on the other hand, also explore asymmetrical designs and shapes. It has been inferred that the presence of asymmetrical designs can be considered emblematic of the egalitarian nature of the society and constitutes a unique Kohistani ‘style’ (Frembgen 1999: 86–9).
EGALITARIANISM AND EQUALITY

The large majority of the Palas valley villagers are poor, but although economic differentiation is limited, there is pronounced social stratification. The large majority of the inhabitants are ethnic Shins and trace their descent from one of the Shin patrilineages (zāat). Those who cannot trace such descent are known as be’zāat, literally ‘without lineage membership’, and include agricultural labourers (Sarkhali), herdsmen (Gujar) and blacksmiths (Akhar). Collectively referred to as faqirs or kamin they do not own land, houses or property and constitute the lowest rung of society (Zarin and Schmidt 1984: 13). Organised into endogamous groups, they provide services to the Shin patrons against cash or kind. Only the Shin can own agricultural land and only they can take part in and speak to the jirga assemblies. Only the Shin hold collective title (in the form of shares) to the communal estate (land, forest and pastures) and as shareholders in this estate they are collectively referred to as the ulsi’ya. The women have no formal political power, although they too are shareholders and enjoy limited inheritance rights to privately held land. The rigid social hierarchy denies women and the non-Shin any political role. There is no traditional leadership in the valley nor informal leaders (Malik) or petty chieftains (Khan). However, over the past century there were shorter periods when influential ‘big men’ (baru musha) held sway over central Dāro. As I will explain in more detail later, this role has to some degree been taken over by the elected representatives and politicians. It would therefore be more correct to say that while the Palas valley is not an egalitarian society, it is one where we find a pervasive egalitarian ideology that masks fundamental social divisions rooted in ritual purity and as well as in a gendered hierarchy.

The men and women do not socialise in public – doing so would provoke accusations of infidelity. The public sphere is reserved for men and the women only drift past as ephemeral shadows. Because of the strict sexual segregation, men traditionally congregate outside their homes or in the communal male guesthouse (deero). The guesthouses are the remnants of mid-nineteenth-century hostilities, when ferocious inter-valley feuds pitted one Kohistani valley against the next. They offered lineages protection during the protracted feuds. Now they serve as loci for peaceful socialisation. Inside, elderly men take time off from work in the fields. Sitting on an elevated wooden platform they share the latest news and a water-pipe. Increasingly, the communal guesthouses are being replaced by the smaller privately owned guestrooms (betak), adhering to the style now found in settled
Belonging to the Palas Valley

areas. This is emblematic of the gradual change from communal to private concerns and the weakening of communal institutions. In Kuz Palas the big guesthouses have disappeared and, along with them, the communal rituals that bound the men together. This resonates with a general weakening of commensality that I will return to later.

In Dáro, the men still gather in the guesthouse to narrate stories, discuss the latest news, the maize harvest, etc. The men are excellent speakers and used to expressing their opinion in public. They know the valley, the details of past and present disputes and who said what, when and why. They offer long, detailed exegeses of what does and does not conform to the local traditions (dastoor). They sift evidence, express doubt, analyse events, compare accounts and argue over nitty-gritty details. This is not empty talk, but a vernacular discourse that is necessary to arrive at some consensus of local moralities. The use of force and infliction of physical harm should not make us overlook the importance of the spoken word in verbal contests, in challenges and ripostes. The people are acutely aware of the power of the spoken word to challenge and abuse offenders but also to demand justice in jirga assemblies or to convince judges in the Islamic ‘courts’ (Shariat) used to settle property disputes (see Chapter 4). What matters is not only ‘what is said’ but ‘how it is said’. The villagers value oratory skills and oral mastery both for its practical and aesthetic value. Local proverbs attest to the ‘strength’ of the spoken word by equating it with the harm inflicted by a bullet: ‘A word said and a bullet fired, do not ever come back.’

The spoken word is preserved in the oral corpus as songs, poetry, folktales, riddles and proverbs serving as the mnemotechnics of non-literate societies. As the men talk the water-pipe is passed around. One boy sits silently, waiting his turn to stuff the pipe with fresh, home-grown tobacco. Squatting in front of the open fireplace, another young boy lights a steady supply of resinous splinters by pushing them one at a time into the glowing embers. The splinter burns with a warm reddish colour that barely illuminates the dark room that is clouded with smoke, slowly drifting out through the vent below the ceiling. When the last splinter burns out the young boys undress and go to sleep on the floor. The elder men leave and go home to their own house.

KOHISTANI DWELLINGS

The residential unit is the house (gosht), which is usually surrounded by the terraced fields and walnut trees belonging to the family. The houses are
Figure 2.2a: House in Dáro, floor plan (Scale 1:50)

usually located at some distance from each other, but brothers who have set up separate households often live in close proximity to each other. The vernacular architecture combines familial intimacy and confidentiality with a need for separation and protection. The house’s primary function is as a shelter from the vagaries of wind, cold and snow and, during the summer, the extremes of heat. The house is not a mere shelter, but a locus of domestic life and a microcosm of their life-world. Set deeply into the steep slope, the house closes itself off from the surroundings while at the same time enclosing and protecting those to whom it belongs (Figures 2.2a and 2.2b). Building a house is a communal undertaking that requires a large amount of timber fetched from the forest with the help of neighbours, friends and relatives. The rectangular layout of the house appears simple, but masks an elaborate and sophisticated construction technique.

The framework of the house is constructed from round logs joined by cog-joints at the corners made by fitting one on top of the other, the upper resting on a shallow groove. The resulting gap is filled with stones inserted in the empty space in between the logs. When this is completed, the walls are plastered with mud and cow’s dung with the help of communal labour. The
Belonging to the Palas Valley

The roof rests on lengthways beams, supported by solid vertical pillars (thun). The term for the vertical pillar is also the vernacular term for the male household head, the one who symbolically ‘upholds’ the household. A thick door made from a single piece of wood protects the entrance to the house. The doorstep is the moral entry point of the domestic sphere. The interior of the house is centred on the open hearth, during the day primarily used by women to prepare dinners and to cook. Seating arrangements during the meals reflect rank and seniority: the household head is seated closest to the fire with his eldest son next to him, then his next-eldest son etc. On the opposite side, the most senior woman is seated and next to her the eldest daughter etc. Out of deference to her husband (if present), the daughter-in-law sits outside the semicircle (Kohistani 1998). This is also an indication of her weak position in the household and is reflected in local proverbs. Male in-laws, on the other hand are seen as equivalent of sons and accorded similar privilege: ‘People make sons by marrying their daughters’, goes a local proverb.

The flat roof is often the only horizontal workspace available and is mostly used by the women to dry and winnow the maize corn, which is...
packed and stored in skin bags and huge wooden chests inside the house. In the basement, there are beehives made from hollowed cedar logs that are inserted between the foundation wall and the beams supporting the floor. There are also animal sheds used to house goats and sheep during the night. The house is also a centre for hospitality. The better-off households often have an extra, smaller guestroom built on to the roof, which they use to entertain guests or to hold meetings of men. Hospitality is highly valued. The male visitors are treated to cups of sweet tea. If a guest has travelled far, he will be treated with liberal doses of body massage. The host will direct his sons or house-servants to attend to the guest’s aching muscles, joints and tendons. There are also servings of walnuts, fresh honey, sweet grapes, dry maize bread and much more tea. The long and arduous trek to the valley is amply rewarded.

The house is not only a dwelling but also a refuge in times of conflict. In the event of an outbreak of hostilities between opposing groups, a watchtower (gari) is added to the house. The watchtower is indicative of the severity of a conflict and signals readiness to defend one’s honour, as I discuss later. The thick walls of the house not only provide safety against attacks, but are held together by a lengthways secondary beam (teri) that increases structural rigidity and enables the house to withstand earthquakes. This is important in an area which lends it name to the Kohistan Complex, a notorious seismic zone where the ‘Indian Plate’ presses against the ‘Asian Plate’, giving rise to frequent earthquakes. Palas and the other east bank valleys are located right on top of the main collision zone, which geologists refer to as the Main Mantle Trust. There are frequent tremors and minor earthquakes but none as destructive as the earthquake in 1974 that devastated Pattan, the major town in this part of Indus Kohistan. That earthquake killed more than 1,000 people and devastated 40,000 houses and buildings.6

CONTACT ZONES

Located on a fertile alluvial fan on the western bank of the Indus, Pattan is today a buzzing town with a population of about 10,000 people. A green oasis amidst scorched mountains, it is the administrative centre of the Pattan tehsil (administrative unit of a district), of which the Palas valley is a part. It houses the offices of the Assistant Commissioner, the police station, the Frontier Constabulary fort and some government residences. The people of Palas come here on foot or by jeep to peddle their goods, buy flour, sugar, tea and other necessities and to pick up news. Many come
here to begin the journey down the KKH to visit relatives, in search of a job for the winter or, in a few cases, to flee their enemies. Some among the latter lounge in the Pattan jail, having been intercepted by the police before they could escape to the lowland. As a token of deference to the authority of the police, those who carry guns leave them with friends and relatives before entering Pattan. This is a transitional place where disparate systems of authority, exchange and legality meet. Pattan can therefore be labelled a ‘contact zone’ (Pratt 1992: 6); the space where tribal authority ends and government jurisdiction begins and where, occasionally, the two are brought into uneasy contact. 7

Here the sanctity of blood revenge meets the judiciary’s proscription of taking the law into one’s own hands. It is also a meeting-point between the valleys’ subsistence economy and the market economy of the bazaar. In Pattan the factional politics of the ‘interior’ meets the parliamentary political system of the ‘exterior’. This is the place where the local politicians hold their campaign rallies and where the aspiring politicians have taken up residence. Having built large guesthouses there, they feed and entertain visitors who pass by en route to the valley or the lowland. The strategic localisation within the ‘contact zone’ provides them with an opportunity to expand the number of political supporters.

The Pattan tehsil is among the poorest in the NWFP and scores low on every development indicator. Despite this, it does not figure on any officials’ priority list. The seclusion and inaccessibility that benefited it during the colonial period have made District Kohistan an oddity within the Pakistani nation state. The marginality of the area translates into political peripherality and an inability to secure government funds for road building. The lack of roads through Dáro and Jalkot, two of the biggest valleys on the east bank of the Indus, is not a coincidence. It is a testimony to the area’s lack of political clout. Remote and sparsely populated, Indus Kohistan was a latecomer to parliamentary politics. In 1971, Maulana Abdul Baqi became the first elected Member of the Provincial Assembly (MPA) from Indus Kohistan (Table 2.1, overleaf). Although Baqi came from another part of Indus Kohistan (Harban in today’s Northern Areas), it is a measure of the isolation of the Palas valley that Baqi was unknown to them: ‘We never knew he represented us’, a villager lamented. ‘We were totally ignorant of politics’. Not until 1988 was Baqi challenged by two candidates from the Palas valley. They both lost. In 1990, however, a Palas candidate gained a decisive victory. In order to understand why the second election
Table 2.1: Electoral politics in District Kohistan 1971–99*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Term</th>
<th>Constituency</th>
<th>MPA</th>
<th>Runners-up</th>
<th>MNA</th>
</tr>
</thead>
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<tr>
<td>1971–76</td>
<td>PF-50</td>
<td>Maulana Abdul Baqi</td>
<td>Malik Said Ahmad</td>
<td>Maulana Abdul Hakim</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>PF-52</td>
<td>Maulana Abdul Hannan</td>
<td>Hafiz Mohammad Jamil</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Malik Miskeen</td>
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<tr>
<td>1976–**</td>
<td>PF-50</td>
<td>Malik Said Ahmad</td>
<td>Maulana Abdul Baqi</td>
<td>Faqir Mohammad Khan</td>
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<td></td>
<td>PF-52</td>
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<td>Malik Jahandad</td>
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<td></td>
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<td>Hafiz M. Jamil</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Malik Miskeen</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1985–88</td>
<td>PF-50</td>
<td>Maulana Abdul Baqi</td>
<td>Malik Said Ahmad</td>
<td>Ayub Khan</td>
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<td>PF-52</td>
<td>Maulana Abdul Hannan</td>
<td>Malik Alimullah</td>
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<td>1988–90 †</td>
<td>PF-50</td>
<td>Malik Aurang Zeb</td>
<td>Malik Hizbur Rehman Gen. Fazle Haq</td>
<td>General Fazle Haq</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>PF-51</td>
<td>Maulana Abdul Baqi</td>
<td>Maulana M. Asmatullah</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>PF-52</td>
<td>Malik Kadam Khan</td>
<td>Maulana Abdul Hannan</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Maulana Ubaidullah</td>
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<tr>
<td>1990–93</td>
<td>PF-50</td>
<td>Malik Aman</td>
<td>Malik Hizbur Rehman</td>
<td>Maulana Amin</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>PF-51</td>
<td>Maulana M. Asmatullah</td>
<td>Movala Amin Baqi</td>
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<td></td>
<td>PF-52</td>
<td>Malik Farmas Khan</td>
<td>Maulana Abdul Hannan</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Malik Kadam Khan</td>
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<tr>
<td>1993–96</td>
<td>PF-50</td>
<td>Mian Noor</td>
<td>Malik Hizbur Rehman</td>
<td>Malik Said Ahmad</td>
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<td>PF-51</td>
<td>Maulana M. Asmatullah</td>
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<td>PF-52</td>
<td>Malik Sikandar</td>
<td>Maulana Abdul Baqi</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Malik Taus Khan</td>
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<tr>
<td>1996–99</td>
<td>PF-50</td>
<td>Malik Sarang Zeb</td>
<td>Malik Anwar Khan</td>
<td>Malik Aurang Zeb</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Malik Siraj Din</td>
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</table>
Belonging to the Palas Valley

was more successful than the first, we need to look closer at the prevailing system of social organisation. It is a unilineal descent system, the basis of social organisation being membership to the patrilineage (záat). All men (and all women, too) belong to a named patrilineage that can range in size from less than ten households to more than five hundred. Membership to a patrilineage defines the main kinship allegiances.

The lineage stands at the bottom of a segmentary lineage system of nested clans (taabín) and tribes (qabilá), with the phratry (quom) at the apex (see Chapter 9, Figure 9.2). There are two quom, the Darma and Kuka Manka, both of which are of about the same size, but (as described in Chapter 9) unevenly distributed among the valleys. If they field separate candidates, as they did in 1988, this will split the vote between them according to the voters’ primordial loyalties. Candidates from neighbouring valleys in the constituency compete for the same seat. Therefore, by agreeing to promote one candidate (or, in the unlikely event that one is overwhelmingly favoured by all) they stand a better chance of securing enough votes to win the constituency’s seat in the provincial assembly. This was what happened in 1990. The victory was celebrated all over the Palas valley by slaughtering bulls and goats and mounting a great feast. At many mosques, the Quran was recited in its entirety many times over as a thanksgiving.

The political campaigns are run with great fervour and, to bolster their claim to influence, the candidates have many men along with them on the campaign trail. Their hosts customarily take care of their meals and lodging requirements as long as they stay among them. As a rule, the independent candidates do not have any political manifestos, at least not in written form. They mainly make use of their personal reputation, influence or powers of persuasion to convince people to vote for them. In order to underpin the claim to influence, the candidates adopt titles implying either

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* District Kohistan was formed in 1976 by merging Indus Kohistan (Hazaray Tribal or Hazara Kohistan) with Swat Kohistan.


† In 1988 District Kohistan was separated out as a new electoral constituency and the number of provincial seats in the National Assembly increased from two to three.

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PF-51  Malik Taus Khan  Malik Siraj Khan  Maulana M. Asmatullah
PF-52  Haji Umar Khan  Malik Farmas Khan  Malik Nawab

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secular (*Malik*) or religious rank (*Maulana*). The candidates must visit each area of the constituency and make at least one personal contact in each community. Those who were not visited will feel offended and refuse to vote for him. If the candidates are not able to visit a community for any reason, they can send their agents on their behalf.

During the election campaign, the candidates have to demonstrate their economic solvency. They rent the local vehicles in large numbers, put their banners and posters on them and parade them on the local roads in large processions. They book the local hotels for as long as the elections are going on. There their supporters can eat and sleep for free, all expenses being charged to the candidates. Some candidates make secret deals with the elders of a lineage by paying a certain amount of money to them for each vote. The polling stations are established at various places depending on the convenience of the voters. The candidates buy rice, flour and cattle at each polling station in the mountains to cook meals for the voters. Different polling stations are set up for men and women to cast their votes. The candidates have their agents at each of the polling stations to prevent attacks on voters or attempts to coerce them. Women polling agents can only be appointed at the polling stations for women. The men are prohibited from going to these areas on polling day. Attempts to rig the elections are common at the women’s polling stations and therefore they are vulnerable to armed clashes between the supporters of the different political candidates. In many cases polling at these places is stopped several times before completion. The unity and disunity so typical of the valley’s factional politics influence the election results and show that primordial loyalties and genealogical affiliation play a decisive role in the final ballot.

The established politicians as well as the upstarts seek votes in return for favours, transfers, jobs or other forms of material gain or benefit. Their popularity waxes and wanes depending on their ability to attract goods and distribute them among their followers. Most of voters vote neither out of political conviction nor because of political patronage. When the politicians fail to fulfil their pledges or depart from their promises, the majority of voters desert them. There is often a mutual feeling of betrayal on both sides: the local people accuse the politicians of nepotism and embezzlement; the politicians complain that their achievements have not been duly recognised and that the voters do not understand the realities of parliamentary politics. We can sense this frustration in the Urdu inscription on the campaign poster of a candidate who failed to be re-elected:
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When the autumn came to the rose garden [i.e., when the country had bad days], it was we who gave blood [i.e., made sacrifices to keep it alive]. When the spring came [i.e., when things improved], they say, it’s not your doing.

In the anthropological sense, the politicians are best understood as political middlemen placed between incongruent political cultures. Inside the valley, there can be no formal political leadership, principally because such leadership is constrained by the notion of equality. Outside the valley, on the other hand, hierarchy and status asymmetry is implicit in the social order and facilitates the accumulation and display of wealth. The failure of the politicians to enrich anyone but themselves has made people cynical and disheartened. Some of the MPAs have been known to trade their political conviction for money and an offer of a ministerial post in the provincial parliament. For this reason, they are derided for being political turncoats (lotaa).

In their own constituencies, they usually achieve little beyond spending their parliamentary allowance on minor construction projects such as new roads, schools or basic health units (BHUs). These projects are locally referred as ‘schemes’, and are supposedly meant for community development works. Instead, they are often contracted out to influential locals as a political bribe. The work under the scheme is either not implemented, or done in such a poor fashion that the contractors can keep the major portion of the funds to themselves. So the politicians are often accused of embezzling money, an example of which can been seen related in this satirical stanza taken from a song criticising a local politician, here referred to by his official title, ‘Minister’ (wazir):

akh, wazir hano jukh the aspataal de,  
shoodo chakar the, fund botool the, hi khari de,  
ako tozrie, kacha mozi la the.

Wow, the Minister has been in the hospital for a long time now. He exhausted himself from cheating, from collecting funds and keeping it all to himself to get rich and from talking too much.

Until 1977, there were no schools in Kohistan (Schmidt and Kohistani 1998: 109). There are now approximately 120 elementary schools in the whole Palas valley. The roughly 40 school buildings in Dáro are deserted, used for storing fodder or serving as meeting halls. There are neither teachers nor pupils, a testimony to the politicians’ habit of handing out jobs as teachers.
by political patronage. In any case, most of the appointed teachers would not pass a proficiency test. This is one reason for the extremely low literacy level in the Palas valley, only 1.4 per cent according to the official estimate, compared to the district average of 12 per cent (News 1999).10

The strategic handing out of ‘schemes’ to political supporters or relatives is a problem in an egalitarian society based on the norms of social and economic equivalence. The lopsided distribution of favours, government jobs, ‘schemes’ and other economic privileges at the politician’s disposal is a source of envy and causes resentment among those not so endowed. The resentment over nepotism is one reason why politicians face problems when seeking re-election. The politicians have to spend a lot of money from their own pockets to secure votes. The seat in the provincial assembly is an opportunity to recuperate expenses rather than serve their constituencies. Once elected, the MPAs move to Peshawar, the provincial capital. This often leads them to sever their ties to the constituency and to become alienated from their electorate. The former politicians from the Palas valley have not resettled in the valley or the district. Instead, they have moved to the towns along the southern fringes of the province. There is, hence, a mechanism of social exclusion that makes the ousted politicians resettle elsewhere. This has contributed to political marginalisation and reinforced the problems of economic backwardness. The Palas villagers now look longingly across the Indus to the KKH – whose construction they opposed in the 960s. The District Headquarters planned to be located near Kuz Palas was moved to the west bank at Dassu, located 40 km to the north. Adding insult to injury, at night they can see the twinkle of electric lights across the Indus. Across the Indus river’s west bank, villagers benefit from electric power generated by two government sponsored hydro-electric plants. But in this part of the east bank, people are – literally – kept in the dark. The prospects for ‘development’ never looked so bleak. To make matters worse, the foreign NGOs that have flocked to the Northern Areas have shunned District Kohistan because of its reputation for being a lawless area inhabited by Sunni Islam zealots.11

ENCOUNTERING DEVELOPMENT

Entering Dáro, one is immediately struck by the remarkable exuberance of the valley. Its location is such that it is reached by an outlier of the monsoon, and therefore has a moister climate than the other valleys to the west and north. Beautiful flowers, lichens, plants and trees spring from the valley
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floor, watered by rain and glacial melt-water. Lizards hurry across the hot rocks with amazing speed. Inside the forest a number of elusive and rare animals can be found, animals that have disappeared from other Kohistani valleys due to over-hunting and deforestation: the endangered musk deer, rare carnivores such as the snow leopard, the wolf, the brown bear, primates such as the grey langur and the rhesus monkey, and the magnificent flying squirrel. There are also rare trees such as the West Himalayan elm and a plant new to science, the tiny Delphinium palasianum (Rafiq 1996). The forests provide a habitat for more than 130 bird species, including the world’s largest known population of the endangered Western tragopan pheasant.

It was the jijil, the tragopan pheasant, which drew the Palas valley to the attention of foreign NGOs. In the late 1980s, wildlife surveys by the English naturalist Guy Duke found 500 tragopan pairs breeding in the forests of Dáro. Under Duke’s leadership, the Himalayan Jungle Project (HJP) was launched in 1991 to protect the endangered bird. The villagers were sceptical of any intrusion into their society but also flattered by the sudden interest in their valley. The prospect of offending thousands of armed tribesmen and being chased out of the valley slowed the project down. In a region known for its aridity, it was paradoxically the rain that united the villagers and the project. In the beginning of September 1992 Northern Pakistan was struck by torrential rains which developed into a devastating flood. The worst affected area was the Hazara Division and one of the most badly hit valleys was the Palas valley. During the period 7–10 September half of the average annual rainfall fell. The heavy downpour caused violent flash floods in Dáro that wiped out most of the fields in two villages and damaged a large number of the irrigation channels and the water-mills, not to mention all the bridges along the main river. In addition, a large part of the valley’s mule-track, the only route to the KKH, was destroyed.

The timing of the flood could hardly have been worse. The disaster coincided with the maize harvest and ruined most of the maize crops. In order to avert a serious food crisis, the HJP paid for 50 tonnes of wheat, foodstuffs and other provisions and airlifted them into the valley with the help of the Government of Pakistan’s Emergency Relief Cell. The distribution of food and provisions was organised by the tribal councils (jirga). When the relief operation was completed, not a single kilo of wheat was unaccounted for. To the project managers, this attested to the vitality and authority of the tribal councils that had managed the internal distribution. To the villagers this catastrophic event underscored their vulnerability and showed that
not all forms of outside intervention were detrimental. There was also a change of heart regarding the Himalayan Jungle Project which until then had been tolerated but not welcomed by the villagers.

Following HJP’s help with organising the flood-relief operation, the villagers now pinned their hopes on HJP as a steward of development initiatives. In recognition of HJP’s assistance, the villagers coined the epithet Shahgosh meaning the ‘the man with princely ears’ as a mark of their respect for Guy Duke, the head of the project. The HJP acted swiftly to capitalise on the villagers’ sense of goodwill. To this end the HJP drew up an agreement between the project and the villagers of Dáro concerning the watershed area that was of the greatest importance in terms of biodiversity. On the day of the signing ceremony over 200 tribal elders of Dáro congregated in Bar Ser, a village half way up the valley. During the early morning hours a heavily armed emissary arrived from the Kuz Palas jirga – the tribal council of the lower watershed. He informed those present that the people of Kuz Palas resented HJP’s focus on Dáro and its negligence of Kuz Palas. If the project unilaterally signed a deal with the people of Dáro only, the people of Kuz Palas would do everything within their powers to stop the project. Only after pledging to enter into a similar agreement with the villagers of Kuz Palas at a later date was HJP able to sign the ‘Bar Palas Agreement’ with the villagers of Dáro. In return for a portfolio of rehabilitation and reconstruction schemes, the people of Dáro agreed to an instant ban on the hunting of wildlife, to the designation of the valley as a special area for conservation and development and to enter into a formal dialogue to improve forest management (Duke 1994: 13).

Initially, the high expectations for development and prosperity were fulfilled by a burst of project activity. The project made good its pledge to help the community by constructing suspension bridges across the main river, rebuilding the water mills and repairing the irrigation channels. The villagers contributed more than 10,000 man-days of labour for this purpose. A new term now appeared regularly in the discussions among the men at the guesthouse: ‘d’velopment’. But just as development was becoming a reality, the project stalled. In 1996, HJP’s parent organisation, BirdLife International, a British-based NGO, decided that they could no longer afford to carry the costs of the project and cancelled further funding. Unable to finance the planned field activities the HJP was no longer able to make good its original promises to the villagers. The villagers lost faith in the project and the initial optimism evaporated. Amidst this
Belonging to the Palas Valley

crisis, HJP lost its founding figure with the untimely departure of Guy Duke. Unaware of HJP’s financial difficulties, the villagers wanted the project to complete the work it had committed itself to. Having kept their part of the agreement, the villagers felt that the project was obliged to ‘pay them back’, equitably and reciprocally. For the villagers of Dáro a lot was at stake. The flood disaster had made them acutely aware of the precariousness of their life in the valley. They had also made sacrifices by adhering to the ban on hunting that prevented them from hunting and trapping wild animals, even those that fed on their meagre maize crop. The flood disaster had not only ravaged their valley, it had put an end to commercial timber logging that they had hoped would become a major source of cash income.

THE EMERALD FORESTS

The flood disaster was blamed on extensive deforestation in the NWFP. A ban on commercial timber logging, ‘never before even a remote possibility, overnight became a political imperative’ (Duke 1994: 10). The ban was instituted in March 1993, but did not have the hoped effect. Soon the old system of indiscriminate logging was back, disguised by what was – on paper at least – a comprehensive timber ban. To a bureaucrat, being posted to District Kohistan is considered a punishment. Only Forest Department staffs consider a posting to District Kohistan a promotion rather than a demotion. Staff who sanction or become party to illegal logging get windfall earnings that dwarf their meagre departmental salary. The local communities that engage in illegal timber logging receive a microscopic share of the real value of the timber. Most of the profits are pocketed by the timber merchants who buy the standing trees cheaply and sell them for a much higher price (Knudsen 1999b). The plunder of the NWFP’s forest wealth has become a highly contentious issue. Timber ‘scams’, illegal logging, corruption and malpractice are regularly featured in the national press, in magazines and in official enquiries. None of this has had any significant effect, primarily due to political bickering which obstructs legislative changes and departmental restructuring. The Palas villagers consider timber logging necessary for their survival. This is a view that is shared by the other Kohistani communities in the district. When the ban on logging was imposed in March 1993, it sparked a popular uprising throughout District Kohistan. The protesters blocked the KKH, rolled stones off the cliffs and fired at any moving vehicle. The protest escalated into a minor insurgency over governmental neglect and political high-handedness.
Deprived of other major sources of cash income, the inhabitants had looked to commercial timber logging as a solution to their problems and an avenue to prosperity.

As the German geographer J. H. von Thünen demonstrated in the early nineteenth century, land is devoted to the use that generates the highest potential rent. Roads lower transport costs. Rising timber prices increase profit margins. The combined effect is to move the logging ‘frontier’ further into the once remote valleys. The Palas valley offers an illustration of this: the road through Kuz Palas has promoted timber logging. Since there is no proper road, the forests of Dáro are more difficult and costly to log and the forests are therefore virtually untouched. Huge conifer forests clothe the mountain slopes. Nowhere in this part of the NWFP can contiguous forests of similar size and density be found. In Dáro the forests still hold the upper hand. Because migration is causing human settlement to dwindle, the advancing forests are slowly reclaiming the fields left fallow. To an ecologist this is an illustration of ‘ecological succession’. To a forester it is a unique example of a primary Himalayan forest. To the Dáro villagers the advancing forest is emblematic of the deep social divisions that run through the society and a depressing reminder of their inability to profit from what the forest has to offer on a commercial basis. In Dáro, infighting has for a long time held up attempts to begin timber logging, as has the lack of a proper road. The meagre prospects for commercial timber logging are the main reason why the forest has remained a communal estate. It has been owned like this since the last wesh, almost one hundred years ago.

HISTORICAL LANDSCAPES

The wesh (literally, ‘division’) is a central concern of all Palas villagers and validates their belonging to the valley and their concern with equality. The wesh was a system determining the periodic re-allotment of agricultural land, pastureland and forest among bona fide shareholders (ulsi’ya). The wesh hindered the preferential endowment of arable land by according it to the share held by the adult men. Periodic reallocation of land hindered self-aggrandisement and the development of territorial power bases by individuals or kinship groups. The last wesh was completed about one hundred years ago, but remains the authoritative source of communal property rights. There is no land settlement in Palas and therefore no written record of land ownership. The wesh therefore remains a cornerstone of property rights and a large number of property disputes originate from
contesting interpretations of the wesh or from attempting to manipulate it for personal gain:

*The last time I met Kunar was in the spring. At that time he was busy clearing the fields near his house, hoping to finish in time to sow the maize. To irrigate the fields he had erected a temporary irrigation channel of hollowed logs. The original one had been destroyed in the flash flood in 1992. Now it’s late July and we are sitting together in Ledi, the highest of the mountain meadows (maáli). As one of the poorer households, Kunar’s family barely manages to eke out a living. To make ends meet, they work as sharecroppers and tenants on their neighbours’ fields. During the winter months Kunar works outside the valley: ‘This winter I’m going to work as a shoe shiner in Abbottabad’, Kunar explains. ‘Perhaps I’ll earn as much as 45 rupees per day. I have no other choice. I am not strong enough to do heavy manual work.’* While we talk Kunar receives news that, in his absence, neighbours have destroyed the temporary irrigation channel. His neighbours, who belong to another lineage, claim that the original channel has been theirs since the last wesh. Kunar and his family have neither the right to irrigate their fields with water from the original channel, nor its temporary replacement. Kunar leaves the same evening to check the damage. For Kunar and his family the denial of irrigation water is no trivial concern. It is a matter of survival. They are not many enough or strong enough to risk an armed conflict. Their opponents know this and this is why they have dared to destroy the channel. Kunar’s only option is to disprove their claim. Everything now depends on proving ownership of the channel. If they cannot win by peaceful means, they will have to leave the valley and resettle elsewhere.

Without formal land settlement in Palas, knowledge of the last *wesh* is vital to prevent incursions and infractions on one’s landed property. The *wesh* not only form the cornerstone of local land-tenure: owning agricultural land legitimises belonging to the valley and to the community. For Palas villagers, the *wesh* is the principal expression of their connection with the landscape. It is to the institution of the *wesh* as a form of government and its demise a century ago that we turn in the next chapter.