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Cosmopolitanism on Pakistan's Frontier

MAGNUS MARSDEN

Khovar-speaking Muslims in the remote and mountainous Chitral region of northern Pakistan have been profoundly affected by movements of both local and global Islamic activism over the past thirty years. These have included the rise and fall of the Taliban regime in neighbouring Afghanistan, only a three hour drive from the region's administrative headquarters, together with the effects of violent conflict involving the region's majority Sunni and Shia Ismaili

sectarian communities. It would be easy to imagine, therefore, that Muslim life in this geo-politically strategic setting has become increasingly "talibanized" in recent years. Yet over the past ten years my fieldwork has taken me to polo tournaments played out on high mountain passes, and to night-time male-only public musical programmes at which delighted crowds have cheered local musical performers. Above all, in village homes, orchards and teashops, I have taken part in hours of conversation with my Chitrali friends, all of whom spend their days and nights in

continual exploration of the arts of conversation, interpersonal debate, and public verbal exposition. They are people who think, react, and question when they are called upon to change their ways or conform to new standards of spirituality and behaviour. Their reactions to the demands of so-called Islamisers from within and beyond their region are not necessarily dismissive or hostile. What they do believe, however, is that a man or woman wishing to live well and in tune with divine will must cultivate their mental faculties, exercising critical thought, and emotional intelligence on an everyday basis.

The vibrancy of everyday Muslim life in the region is not confined, however, solely to debates between Muslims who hold contrasting conceptions of Muslim virtuosity. Nor have collective forms of Chitrali Muslim self-understanding been "ethnified" in any simple sense. The region, rather, has and continues to be home to Muslims from a very

diverse range of ethnic, linguistic and, indeed, national backgrounds: both refugees from Afghanistan and, after the collapse of the Soviet Union, Tajikistan, have lived in the intimate setting of Chitral's villages and small towns over the past thirty five years.

Chitral is part of an expansive transregional space within which interactions between Muslims who have very different memories and direct experiences of both Soviet and British colonialism are a recurrent feature of everyday life. Known primarily today because of the ongoing search for al-Qaida militants, the "war-on-terror," and heroin cultivation, few appreciate the degree to which Northern Pakistan, Northeast Afghanistan, and Southern Tajikistan, is an interconnected region that is remarkably diverse in relation to its size and sparsely populated terrain. Interactions between both Sunni and Ismaili Muslims from Afghanistan, Tajikistan, and northern Pakistan often form a focus of discussion for the region's people in relationship to their past and current experiences of mobility in this politically sensitive space. As is the case in other transregional "Islamic ecumenes,"¹ such practices of mobility are central to the ways in which the region's Muslims reflect upon the differentiating effects of British and Soviet colonialism, as well as the nature and consequences for everyday life of ongoing forms of political and religious transformation, most notably those emerging from "sectarian" conflict, and the so-called "war on terror."

Cosmopolitanism is usually associated with educated, affluent, and highly mobile citizens. But why would the "open-endedness" of cultural vision not apply to less fortunate global citizens? This contribution follows the experiences of an Ismaili man from Tajikistan who temporarily joined the Taliban in Pakistan. His trickster-like abilities to artfully instrumentalize relationships with a variety of groups provide important insights into the workings of actually existing cosmopolitanism.

Recognizing the reflective and intellectual processes that interactions between Central and South Asian Muslims in village settings stimulate, offers an important contrast to the work of political scientists that focuses on the emergence of "transnational" or "global" Islam in the region. Analytically, this body of work partly reflects an ongoing scholarly tendency to associate "working class" labour migrants, or mobile "village Muslims," with the

emergence of new, yet nevertheless, bounded types of "transnational" religious or diasporic identities. As a result, the ways in which non-elite people embody an "open-endedness" of cultural vision, understand the spaces through which they move, and experience the types of forces that connect these are rarely explored.² The term "cosmopolitanism" is often used so broadly that its analytical value is rendered questionable. Pollock's argument that cultural versatility and vernacular identities are interrelated and not opposing dimensions of cosmopolitan appreciations of diversity, however, provides a sharper focus for its ethnographic exploration. Exploring the ways in which diversely constituted transregional settings are connected and experienced by mobile Muslims who acquire and transmit different types of knowledge and establish relationships with people from backgrounds very different than their own, furnishes the possibilities for new insights into exploring personal and collective forms of Muslim self-understanding that thrive in the muddy waters between "local" and "global" Islam.³

In the northern Chitrali village where I stayed there were no official refugee camps: the "incomers" from Afghanistan and Tajikistan to the village lived, rather, either in rented rooms in the village bazaar, or in the homes of Chitrali villagers for whom they worked as agricultural labourers. The presence of these refugees in the village was and continues to be a focus of much discussion amongst Chitralis. The "incomers" are widely accused of having introduced "simple" Chitralis to a range of moral vices, including heroin addiction and violent revenge feuds. Yet all the Chitralis I know also talk about the cultural and familial networks that connect their lives to a wide range of ethno-linguistic communities living in neighbouring regions of both Afghanistan and Tajikistan. Some Chitralis visit their Afghan friends who used to live in Chitral as refugees but, since 2001, have mostly returned to their "homeland." During the course of their travels Chitralis may also visit the holy city of Mazar-e-Sharif, and seek employment opportunities in Kabul's lucrative construction industry. Simultaneously, one-time Afghan refugees travel to Chitral in order to meet long lost Chitrali friends and to sell cheaply Afghan-bought luxury vehicles at inflated Pakistani prices. The pushes and pulls of affect, profit, and religion, thus form a focus for the ways in which the region's mountain moderns engage with the possibilities and constraints of their rapidly changing world.

Sulton's story

Sulton, for example, came to Chitral from the southern Gorno-Badakhshan region of Tajikistan in December 1999, two years after the cessation of full scale military conflict there, but during a period of great economic hardship and political uncertainty. His mother tongue is an Iranian-Pamiri language Shughni, but he also speaks Tajiki Farsi, Russian, and now also Khovar and Dari, or Afghan Farsi. On his arrival in Chitral, a member of the family with whom I stay found him on a cold winter's night outside one of the village's places of Ismaili worship. Like the Khovar-speaking Chitrali family with whom we both stayed, Sulton was a Shia Ismaili Muslim. During his first months in Chitral, Sulton frequently told the family, themselves descendants of influential pirs, that it was his search for Is-

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maili religious knowledge that had motivated him to embark on his journey to Chitral: Ismailis in Tajikistan, he said, had little knowledge about Ismaili doctrine as a result of the anti-religion policies of the Soviet Union, and he wanted to return home with a certificate of Ismaili education.

Sulton's stay in Chitral would not result in him acquiring any abstract sense of affiliation to a shared Ismaili communal identity, however. Sulton spent most of his days collecting water, threshing wheat, chopping wood, and even planting roses; yet his stay in the village was eventful. He was known as being "hot headed" by the villagers. On one occasion, for instance, he gave a village boy, Aftab, who had a reputation for being something of a loafer—largely as a result of his public attempts to meet girls, but also because of his fondness for shamelessly smoking hashish in the village lanes—a sound beating over a disagreement concerning the division of the village's scant water supplies. Sulton soon also fell out with the Ismaili family with whom he stayed: he accused them of putting him to work while teaching him nothing about religion. One evening, he fought with the family's younger brother, saying: "I have come to Pakistan to go back with something and not to be treated like your slave." He left the home, now pursued by the village police who were threatening to charge him with assault, and never returned.

On 8 September 2001, I met Sulton again; this time on the polo ground in the region's administrative headquarters, Markaz. Sulton had now radically transformed his personal appearance: when first in Chitral, like most other men from Tajikistan, he wore Western-style trousers and was clean-shaven; now he appeared bearded and dressed in shalwar kamiz. He also pointed in the direction of the group of men who had accompanied him to the ground: bearded and donning black turbans, they were, he told me, Afghan Taliban based in the city of Jalalabad; he had been working for them as a driver since he left Chitral the previous year.

If Sulton had not embraced any abstract commitment to Ismaili religious knowledge or community during his stay in Chitral, nor had he been unthinkingly talibanized by his experiences with the Taliban in Afghanistan either. Sitting underneath the cool shade of the famous Chinese Plane tree where Chitrali polo players rest their horses at half time, Sulton whispered to me that he had not become a Sunni, nor renounced his Ismaili faith. Rather, in the company of his newly found Taliban companions, he merely pretended to be a Sunni. "They don't know I'm an Ismaili, don't tell them," he told me. The dissimulation of adherence to Ismaili doctrine and practice, *taqiya*, is a marked feature of historic and present-day Ismaili experience. What is distinctive about Sulton's case, however, is that it involved an Ismaili from Tajikistan joining the Taliban, a Sunni and predominantly ethnically Pashtun movement, widely known for its deeply hostile and violent attitudes to Shia Muslims. Pretending to be a hardline Sunni in such circumstances is not a simple task, especially for a post-Soviet Ismaili: Sunni and Shia Ismailis pray in very different ways, and Sulton told me that he used to stand at the back of gatherings and imitated his Taliban bosses as best he could. I noticed these men leaning on their plush new Toyota Hilux, gazing at Sulton and myself chatting, and decided that this was not the place to linger. Instead, I returned to the polo ground and watched the equally captivating spectacle of a game between the Chitral Police and the Chitral Scouts descending into a physical brawl involving players and their uniformed supporters alike, an event that led to curfew being imposed the following day.

After September 11 I lost touch with Sulton, but often wondered what had happened to my Tajik-Ismaili friend. In March 2002 I was informed that Sulton had returned to the region. He was now said to be working in the house of a man from a one-time noble (*adamzada*) background, known as a lord (*lal*) across the region, and who owned, by Chitrali standards, a substantial amount of land in a relatively remote village to the north of the region. This *lal* was a Sunni, although he was also known throughout Chitral for expressing near blasphemous statements. He also had a well-earned reputation for being Chitral's most prolific hashish producer, and it was now rumoured that his smuggling activities had

diversified to include apricot schnapps—the production of which my former Talib friend, Sulton, was said to be investing his talents in to great effect.

The next time I met Sulton was with the aforementioned lord on a snowy afternoon in December 2005. We arranged to meet at dusk on the polo ground, where Sulton told me he felt he had become the proverbial "prisoner of the mountains": if he returned to Tajikistan he would almost certainly be arrested by Tajikistan's security forces, who were suspicious of all people who had fled to Pakistan or Afghanistan during the civil war, and even more of those who had still to return; yet, if he travelled to "down Pakistan" he feared that he would be picked up by the Pakistan police, and perhaps even sent to Guantanamo Bay. Sulton then pulled out a bottle of apricot schnapps, previously hidden down his trouser leg, and presented it to me as a gift, before bidding farewell.

Actually existing cosmopolitanism

Sulton's story highlights a type of everyday behaviour that anthropologists have long recognized as characteristic of life along frontiers. Far from being buffeted passively around by distant international events, he embarks upon complex courses of action in response to changing geo-political circumstances. His trickster-like ability to artfully instrumentalize the relationships he purposefully builds with Chitrali Ismailis, smugglers, and the Sunni Taliban is an important reminder of the social and moral fluidity of even the most apparently bounded forms of collective religious identity. Yet Sulton's story is also shot through with a sense of self that is constantly reconstructed in a world defined by its political fragmentation. He claims that his mobility is motivated by a search for the purity of Ismaili religion, but that this search can also be dangerous, leading him to sources of moral contamination.

The anthropologist Enseng Ho has described the history of the Yemeni Hadrami diaspora in relationship to a "landscape of places that closed or opened" to different categories of persons in relationship to "internal divisions" and "external rivalries."⁴ Sulton's Chitral odyssey illustrates the types of work deployed by persons who move through such shifting moral landscapes divided by colonially imposed boundaries and invested with shifting political, religious, and emotional significance both by the region's people and the wider world. A wily trickster and a sophisticated mountain cosmopolitan, Sulton strategically deploys his knowledge of this complex region of the world in order both to create and dissolve the shifting range of relationships upon which his survival currently depends. In the course of doing so he offers us insights into the making and working of actually existing cosmopolitanism.

Notes

1. Ho, *The Graves of Tarim: Genealogy and Mobility across the Indian Ocean* (University of California Press, 2006), 100.
2. Werbner, "Global Pathways: Working class cosmopolitans and the creation of transnational ethnic worlds," *Social Anthropology* 7, no. 1 (1999): 17–35.
3. Pollock, "Cosmopolitan and vernacular in history," in *Cosmopolitanism*, ed. C. Breckenridge, S. Pollock, H. Bhabha, and D. Chakrabarty (Duke University Press, 2002).
4. Ho, *The Graves of Tarim*, 314.

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PHOTO BY MAGNUS MARSDEN, 2000

Chitralis and Afghans from the Panjshir valley on the annual spring picnic day