

Ritual as Resistance and Social Control: Exploring the Contributing Aspects of *Attan* in the Uprising of Pashtun Youth in Pakistan

(Authors: Habibullah Kakar, Dr. Barkat Shah Kakar)

Abstract:

Considering the anthropological question “ritual as social order and resistance” or in the words of Max Gluckman “rituals of rebellion”, this paper seeks to find out the influence of *attan* (Pashtun’s cultural dance) on the Pashtun students activism and their nationalization. Focusing *attan* in the light of anthropological theories of ritual as “social order,” “social control,” “rebellious and reinforcing social order” and “cultural-political resistance”, this paper seeks to answer the questions like, in what kind of contexts a ritual might be used as social control and where it rises as resistance. The main argument is that traditional dance (*attan*) has paved the way for connecting the youth from diverse areas of Pakistan for asserting one of their prime identities that is “Pashtun Nationalism”

Keywords: Ritual, Resistance, *Attan*,

Introduction:

Although the notion that, history of anthropology is the history of the study of ritual, is debatable, but the role played by ritual as an analytical tool as well as cultural data itself in the development of cultural studies is evident in the history of anthropology. Being developed as a “notion” on the basis of the works of armchair anthropologists in nineteenth century to the “thick description” anthropological studies of culture semiotics (Geertz 2017), it is still under the discussion of “two particular categories of human experiences: thought and action” (Bell 2009).

The academic complex what we have regarding the ritual seems to be observable in a well known Pashtun folk dance called the *Attan*. Practiced by a troupe with musicians beating drums (in its well-known form) or with chanted folksongs by its participants dancers, the current experienced thought as well as practices in *attan* is though culturally secular in its nature but religion is also linked with it in the theorization of its origin in antiquity (Schöpke 2017). Performed around the fire in Sanzarkhail tribe (sub branch of Kakar), the *Attan* seems to be strengthening the arguments of its Zoroastrian origin.

Collectively practiced by the Pashtuns and being considered as a national dance of Afghanistan *attan* was never questioned among Pashtuns before the last three decades. After the efforts of Islamizing cultures a kind of tension is observed in Pashtun society between the Pashtun Muslim clergies and culturally oriented nationalists on the nature of *attan* as permissible or prohibited in Islam. In illiterate Pashtun society it was though on minor level but in the literate atmospheres of universities in Pakistan created a war-like and unpleasant situations.

Being considered as irreligious and un-Islamic activity by the rightist student organization Islami Jamiat Talab (IJT), but performed by the Pashtun students as a traditional folk dance, *attan* emerged as cultural-political issue in the discourse of student activism. Going through the anthropological theories of ritual, this study is an effort to explore these events, how they contributed in the Pashtun youth uprising in the name of Pashtun Tahaffuz Movement.

Anthropological Views of Ritual

Both as academically “constructed notion” and as “cultural material fact compounding the basic elements of culture”, (Bell 2009) ritual might be identified as a “moment and an arena in which meaning is cached and crystalized, in which social experience is distilled and

displayed” (Dirks 1988). In his study of Australian aborigines Emile Durkheim observes ritual and ritualization process ordering society. In his famous phrase “divinity and society are one or god is figurative expression of society” (Durkheim 2001), the totem ritualization Durkheim interpreted as the process of creating society. Similar notions are found in the works of early British anthropologist, seeing ritual as ordering society. Either the ritual expresses the anxiety for avoiding the coming danger as Bronislaw Malinowski believes or it ends up the anxiety produced by not performing the rituals as believed by Alfred Radcliffe Brown (Lessa and Vogt 1979).

In his studies of pig ritual activities in New Guinea, Roy Rappaport observes ritual as regulator of the relationship of the people in a community as well as balancing it with its natural environment. “A ritual killing of pigs,” for example “is organized if the number of pigs multiplies to the point that too much labor and food are needed to feed them” (Bell, *Ritual: Perspectives and Dimensions* 2009).

Modifying the Durkheimian theory, Max Gluckman does not see ritual as the projected social cohesion and unity of a group as Durkheim observed but considering society as “a field of tension, full of ambivalence, of co-operation and contrasting struggle”, for him, the ritual expresses the “complex social tensions rather than the affirmation of unity” (Bell, *Ritual: Perspectives and Dimensions* 2009). In the African Zulu tribal ritual of women clothing men’s cloths, Gluckman observes the gender tensions in the society. He names it ‘the ritual of rebellion’ by doing things in the ritual what is forbidden for women. The social patriarchal order is temporarily overturned for releasing the social tensions of men’s subordination of women. By releasing the social complex tensions through ritual, Gluckman sees the reinforcement of social order and solidarity (Bell, *Ritual: Perspectives and Dimensions* 2009).

The ritual thus for Gluckman has two contradictory dimensions; the conflict and order. As an activity of the subordinated women, performing things not allowed for them, the ritual has a rebellious aspect but temporarily enjoyed as a drama by the real holders (men) of the social order, the ritual is reinforcing the social values.

The social solidarity, social order and social control had been connected with ritual in the early anthropological studies of ritual, Gluckman contribution of bringing ritual from the sphere of religion and “sacred” to the socio-political culture on one hand and adding other meaning of “rabbling” to it, (Gluckman 2012) enriched its dimensions in anthropology.

In the light of post-colonial and subaltern studies the resistance, politics and ritual has rich literature in the anthropologically analyzed cultural politics. Scott Schnell explored the local Shinto shrine “rousing drum” or *okoshid aiko* festival as resistance against Japan modernization (Schnell 2015). Jeff Browitt sought out the effects of ritual resistance in the nationalization of Latin America. (Browitt 2000).

Sandra Milena Rios Oyola while finding out the resistant nature in funerary rituals in the Colombian culture of Boyaca asserts that for the funerals of adults called *alabaos* the prayers and songs are chanted for nine days. But for the children funerals locally called *Gualí*, no prayers and songs are chanted and sung. She quotes Restrepo claiming “that the roots of this tradition are located in the slavery past of the Colombian black communities, and the ‘celebration’ of death in a funerary rite of a child would mean the celebration of his/her escape from a life of slavery.” (Oyola 2015).

In the light of these considerations, the Pashtun *attan* as an aspect of popular Pashtun culture seems to be in a great need to be explored in its contributing aspects in current uprising of Pashtun youth by nationalizing them as well as by creating a resisting spirit in them. While considering the anthropological analysis of ritual as social order, social control and reinforcing

the social order in its rebellious performance, the question of resisting or opposing nature of ritual is still remained. To which we will return in the end of the discussion.

Attan and the Uprising of Pashtun Youth

After its emergence in January, 2018 the Pashtun Protection Movement known as Pashtun Tahaffuz Movement (PTM) has attracted multidisciplinary attentions for its exploration. Remaining a war zone for the last two decades, the rise of Pashtun youth from the Pashtun region of Pakistan has given birth to optimism as well as pessimism. If it is considered as conspiracy against the just military operations of war on terror on one side (Zehra 2018), it is also resembled with the volcanic eruption as a result of the suffering and unrest of the Pashtun people on the other side (Khattak 2018).

The appeared literature in magazines, newspapers, electronic and social media regarding this spontaneous Pashtun spring had deliberately focused the issues for which the rise is started. Every chanted slogan in the rallies has a vivid theme regarding the current socio-political scenario of the Pashtun region in Pakistan. The most famous chant of the rise “*dā sanga azadī da*” or “what kind of the freedom is this”, is deeply rooted with the actual social existence of the Pashtun people especially of Federally Administered Tribal Area (FATA, currently Khyber Pakhtunkhwa) and state’s policies. It therefore has given birth to the debates on the nature of terrorism, security and securitization in the Pakistani political discourses.

The efforts of explorations from both sides, the supporters of the movement and its critiques go around the concerned issues. Besides the issues based literature the question of the unity of the politically, administratively, regionally and tribally divided Pashtun youth is also attempted. Khadim Hussain observes “the collective agonies” of the Pashtun nation as a motivating force behind this unity (Hussain 2018). Khan Zaman Kakar, a young anthropologist and a pivotal speaker of the movement, considers it as a resumed anti-imperialist strategy after *Khudaī Khidmatgār* Movement in the light of ethnic political nationalist history of the Pashtuns (Kakar 2018).

Considering the current existential crises, Barakat Shah Kakar sees the victimhood, displacement and diaspora behind this united conscious rise (B. S. Kakar 2018). But going in the cultural history of the Pashtuns in one of his other essays, Kakar shares quiet a similar tune with Khan Zaman Kakar. Quoting American orientalist James W. Sapin from his book *The Way of the Pathans*, Barakat Shah Kakar strengthens his arguments of his observation of the Pashtun cultural psyche behind the unity and the rise of the movement (B. S. Kakar, Sujag.org 2018). The folkloric songs of the patriotic war heroism, sung with *rubab* (musical instrument) and *mangai* (clay pot) in *hujra* (drawing room) were used to construct the nationalist proud psyche of the Pashtun against the imperialists for centuries, was brutally disrupted by the terrorists in the name of their religion, Kakar observes (B. S. Kakar, Sujag.org 2018).

However, looking at the current literature, most of the highlighted themes in the efforts of exploration of the PTM, from war victimhood to the deprivation of the basic rights are inevitable. This is although evidently argued that in the current rise of the Pashtun youth, their culture has also a vital role. But one of the most important theme of the Pashtun culture, *attan* is always missed. It is not important just because of adding one more cultural aspect for considering PTM as a cultural resistance. But contextualizing the whole scenario in the light of Pashtuns student early activism before the PTM seems to be reflecting the anthropological contradictory theories of cultural ritual.

With increasing ratio of the Pashtun students in Islamabad and universities of Punjab, a new tension was arose between them and rightist activists of *Islamī Jamiat Talaba* (IJT)

regarding the Pashtun cultural celebrations. Conflicts regarding dances and music were although observed in the University of Peshawar in early decades between Pashtun nationalists and IJT but they were commonly perceived as the conflict between the two organizations (PSF and IJT) based on contradictory ideologies by other non-activists fellows.

After the arrival of medal class Pashtun students in the universities of Punjab and Islamabad and experiencing the continuous attacks on their cultural exhibitions on cultural days celebrated on government level, made them thinking about unity beyond politically divided organizational boundaries. The need was then fulfilled by the emergence of Pashtun Student Councils in several universities.

The Pashtun Student Council was apolitical in a sense that it has no political ideology. All their aims were to accommodate the new comers and to preserve their cultural identity. It is hard to say that what kind of agreement they had on their culture, but Pashtu as their language and *Dhol* (drum) and *attan* as their cultural expression gradually constructed as the manifesto and flag symbol of the council. As far as *attan* was uniting them with the same extreme the hatreds were shown by their opponents rightest towards *attan*. It was considered as irreligious and un-Islamic and was severally attacked by their opponents in different universities especially International Islamic University Islamabad and University of the Punjab.

Since 2011 the *attan* played a great role in creation of resisting spirit against the monopoly of the rightist extremism. It was after the attack on 21 March in 2017, when the *attan* became a just protesting expression. On the second day of the conflict on 22 March one of the Pashtun Student Council activist said in his press conference "it was the attack on Pashtun culture" (Jaamiat actually attacked Pashtun culture: Pashtun Student 2017).

Afterwards, for showing solidarity with the Pashtun students of University of the Punjab, *attan* became the expression of protests in front of press clubs in Peshawar, Islamabad and Karachi (Rehman 2018). This brought not just Pashtun students from different universities in contact with each other but successfully created *attan* as symbol of their solidarity beyond all their tribal and ideological divisions. At the same time the Pashtun profiling issue in Punjab by the Punjab police was the zenith in media (Yousaf 2017) and Pashtun nationalist circles (Khattak, The Nation 2017). Regarding the issue Human Rights Commission of Pakistan condemned the policy of some of the Punjab officials "asking the population to keep an eye on suspicious individuals who look like Pashtuns or are from the Federally Administered Tribal Areas, and to report any suspicious activity by them" (Ali and Jabeen 2017).

The disrespectful attitudes of their rival students towards *attan* in the universities, the distorted image of their culture in media thus joined each other. The death of a young Pashtun from Waziristan Naqeebullah Mehud in a fake encounter on 13 January in Karachi and the viral of his *attan* videos on social media added the strongest link to the chain of events distorting their image, which made the way for a successful long march and sit-in in coming month in Islamabad. After some days of sit-in, when the tribal elders ended the resistance, only those students remained who were experiencing resistance through the last five years in universities regarding the *attan*. The *attan* thus not just created their resisting spirit but emerged as resistance itself. It was also observed many time after public gatherings of PTM, the youth practiced *attan*.

Here; to reconsider the question of ritual nature as social order (solidarity), social control (established norms) and reinforcing the social order in its rebellious form (as observed by Gluckman), it seems to be reflecting its both aspects in the case of *attan*. Within the participants it seems to be creating solidarity but towards the opponents it raised as resistance. As far as the reinforcing aspect of its rebellious form in the case of Zulu women agricultural rites is

concerned, it seems to be not applicable because of its relation to the difference of context. The authority in the case of Zulu against whom the opposition was played, was the part of the drama. But *attan* stands up towards a clearly constructed otherness.

Conclusion

In applying cultural theories on some specific events, the cultural emics though have impediments but sometimes a cultural event catches eyes for the reflections. The *attan* as “practice” in the current Pashtun student activism and resistance has much to share with the theories of ritual. As far as “thought” are concerned with *attan* in this discourse, the analysis needs for more ethnographical and in-depth interviews data.

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