

Violence and Belonging: Land, Love, and Lethal Conflict in the North-West Frontier Province of Pakistan

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Violence and Belonging: Land, Love, and Lethal Conflict in the North-West Frontier Province of Pakistan

By Are Knudsen. Copenhagen,
Denmark: NIAS Press, 2009. xxviii +
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7694-045-4.

The Palas Valley in the North-West Frontier Province (NWFP) of Pakistan remains one of the least researched areas of the country. In fact, Are Knudsen's fascinating account on violence, identity, belonging, and land relations among the *Shin* population, the majority ethnic group of the Palas, is the first in-depth study undertaken in that remote valley since Fredrik Barth paid a passing visit to the notoriously unruly Kohistan District of NWFP in the 1950s (Barth 1956). Inhabited and dominated by what Knudsen terms an "autocratic moral community" (p xvii) and an "autarchic political society" (p 29), the central concern of the book is to establish the meaning of violence, honor, and belonging for Palas villagers when they act upon self-imposed rules and social norms that have significance and are legitimate only within the community. Certainly, the remoteness and inaccessibility of the valley contributed to this specific situation; having never been conquered by more powerful groups and thus never having been directly exposed to colonial or any other foreign rule, the native *Shin* population developed a very specific understanding of morals, honor, and justice, grounded in a localized but orthodox version of Islam.

This ambitious project builds on an ethnographic approach, and one has to commend the author for having managed to research a very sensitive subject in an exemplary and convincing fashion. Knudsen is able to uncover a real treasure of information and case study material that

enlighten the reader about the detrimental consequences of maintaining one's honor in a patriarchal egalitarian society; the social acceptance of violent behavior and even homicide; the ways in which honor and revenge threaten the livelihoods of people, households, and families involved in local conflicts; and the centrality of landed property as a common subject of dispute or as compensatory object.

Knudsen starts his account of the Palas society and its conflicts by embedding his research in the wider anthropological debate on violence, before providing a crisp introduction to the research locale and its people. This chapter describes what we need to know about Palas' history, its settlement and agricultural patterns, existing development efforts in the valley, and the levels of interaction with the Pakistani state and its authorities. Subsequently, the third chapter deals with land and land relations in the valley and sets the important context for what is to follow when introducing and analyzing the case studies. In this chapter, the author explains the way in which the current pattern of land ownership in the Palas valley has its roots in a traditional indigenous land tenure system called the "*wesh*." This system worked as a "wealth levelling mechanism, reflecting the high value placed on social equality" (p 65), in that it periodically instituted a reallocation of the available land among the *Shin*. This also established a social stratification between those who are entitled to land allocation (ie the *Shin*), and those who are not (eg agricultural wage laborers from other groups). Further, being a part of the *wesh* reaffirmed the notion of belonging to the Palas and made access to landed property an important marker of social identity. The *wesh* in Palas ended by the beginning of the 20th century, and the last round of reallocations established a dispersed land tenure pattern that still exists

today and is the source of many and often violent land disputes.

Before going into the specific nature of those prevalent disputes, Knudsen proceeds to explain the human ecology of maize agriculture in the valley as well as the nature of combined mountain agriculture practiced by the *Shin*. Given the nature of mountain agriculture and transhumance, people follow a pattern of seasonal migration that spans different agro-ecological zones into distinct activity spaces. The maize growing zone in the most productive areas of the valley used to be the "locus of group solidarity, co-operation and commensality. It is now the scene of the most violent fights, brawls and homicides" (p 77). How did this happen? Apparently, the notions of honor and masculinity that often give rise to conflict are increasingly carried out by using land as a vehicle to exercise pressure on opponents. The means to do so is to exercise a ban on cultivation enforced through arms, threatening the livelihoods of the parties involved in conflict, and, in many cases, leading to expulsion from the valley when the parties involved cannot maintain an adequate defense. Knudsen presents rich ethnographic case study material to illustrate how conflicts evolve and continue, and how land is "central to the constitution of identity and confers on villagers a sense of belonging" (p 89). This notion is further elaborated in chapter five, "Being, Longing, and Belonging," where being is "premised on being able and willing to defend landed property ... weapon in hand" (p 93). Land becomes a contentious object, an object for which one is willing to kill and be killed.

Another source of violent conflict and homicide is illicit love affairs, which usually result in the killing of both man and woman. This is illustrated by two other case studies, where conflicts about illicit love evolved into land conflicts and cultivation bans imposed by the opposing parties. Further ethnographic evi-

dence is provided in the remainder of the book, in very detailed cases on confinement based on conflict (chapter six), on magic and honor (chapter seven), and about conflicts over forest and grass land (chapters eight and nine). All these cases convey the readiness to engage in violence when notions of honor and identity are challenged. Masculinity often determines what is deemed an adequate response to those posing these challenges, with growing livelihood insecurity as the result. Fields cannot be tenured because of cultivation bans, opponents are sentenced to house confinement for their physical security, and forceful expulsion from the valley is, more often than not, the end result for the weaker party in a conflict. Revenge then leads to eviction instead of elimination, where “the evicted party

is dishonoured and has little chance of regaining its social position. In the final instance, the remaining party may appropriate the defeated person’s land, thereby erasing his source of, and claim to, belonging” (p 192). An astonishing observation is the sheer magnitude of those conflicts, leaving significant parts of the valley fallow. This is also visible in the village landscape, when those involved in conflict attach watchtowers to their houses in order to better survey their surroundings.

This book offers a historically grounded description of a society that, until recently, was geographically remote and isolated, with local systems of conflict resolution persisting, but one that, through the construction of the Karakoram Highway, was gradually brought into contact with other forms of belief

systems. Most of it is an exciting read. The empirical findings are extensive and elaborate, and the book should be consulted by anyone with an interest in contemporary realities of village life in Pakistan and the ways that honor is constructed, challenged, and translated into violence.

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