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# Doing Pashto

## *Pashtunwali as the ideal of honourable behaviour and tribal life among the Pashtuns*

### EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Various value systems are competing with each other in Afghanistan today. Our understanding of the Pashtuns, of their culture and traditional values is often overshadowed by the Taliban and their fundamentalist interpretation of Islam. This paper brings back into discussion a system of values and rules of behaviour which, for a rather long time before the rise of the Taliban, had been held sacred by virtue of tradition and which, by virtue of its imperative character, had been intended to determine the behaviour of the individual and of social groups in both everyday life as well as in exceptional situations.

In Pashto language, most of these values and rules of behaviour are summarised under the word 'Pashtunwali' which can be understood as 'the way of the Pashtuns'. Pashtunwali presents an ethnic self-portrait of the Pashtuns according to which the Pashtuns are distinct from other ethnic groups not only due to their language, history and culture, but also due to their behaviour. Since, according to this concept, Pashtuns are trusted and expected to act honourably, we can qualify Pashtunwali as a code of honour. 'Doing Pashto' means to act honourably and to be guided by the values of Pashtunwali.

Among the Pashtun tribes, these values and rules of behaviour have been transmitted orally for centuries, but as late as the 1950s, some Afghan men of letters became more and more interested in Pashtunwali when searching for the guiding principles for a modern Afghan nation. Later on, Afghan scholars started to study Pashtunwali from a folkloric point of view. Thus, written accounts of Pashtunwali appeared, offering a view from inside the culture of the Pashtuns. Some of these are written in a didactic style and many reveal the philosophy behind particular values and rules. The perspective of these accounts is featured in this paper wherein Pashtunwali is described as the ideal of honourable behaviour and tribal life among the Pashtuns. Ideals never come up to reality, of course, but they serve as important guiding principles for behaviour.

The tribal spirit of the Pashtuns is explained here in the framework of a social organisation, which follows the principle of patrilineal descent and in which groups of different size (tribes, sub-tribes, clans, and lineages) can be distinguished depending on the genealogical depth taken into account. Although the majority of the Pashtuns adopted a settled lifestyle centuries ago, the tribal spirit and other aspects of Pashtunwali can be traced to their nomadic background. Since the Afghan state originally emerged from a Pashtun tribal confederacy, Pashtun tribes were favoured with much autonomy and other privileges within Afghan society. This, in particular, explains the persistence of the tribal spirit and tribal customs among the Pashtuns.

The rules of conduct of Pashtunwali follow the dichotomy of honour and shame. Behaviour, consequently, is guided by the question as to how it is evaluated in the eyes of others according to the common understanding of honour and shame. The following values and rules of behaviour will be discussed in this paper:

- Honour of the individual and honour of groups
- Fighting spirit and bravery
- Equality and respect for seniors
- Consultation and decision making
- Willpower and sincerity
- Compensation and retaliation
- Generosity and hospitality
- Pride and zeal

A person who embodies almost all of the values and rules of behaviour of Pashtunwali and who leaves no doubt that he does his utmost to abide by them, is respectfully called *ghairatman*. He represents the ideal Pashtun.

Being an ideal of the tribal way of life, Pashtunwali also includes a system of customary legal norms (*narkh*) which is closely related to the code of honour. Since self-governance was one of the privileges which Pashtun tribes were traditionally granted in the state system of Afghanistan, customary legal norms were applied even to topics addressed by secular law. In remote rural areas, some customary legal norms remain important today and at times even Taleban leaders advise the members of their movement that they should solve disputes among the local population by applying tribal mechanisms of conflict resolution.

Whenever a commonly recognised norm is broken, the threatened group feels responsibility for taking measures against the norm-breaker in order to re-establish the previous balance and to retrieve their honour. Crimes which offend the whole community are differentiated from crimes which offend only a particular group of persons like a lineage or clan. Various habits and customs allow for avoiding a blood feud cycle and resolving a conflict peacefully. These mechanisms are based on the ideology of patrilineal descent, the tribal spirit and the code of honour as expressed in Pashtunwali. The customary legal system can vary in some details from tribe to tribe and from region to region. Variation mainly concerns the computation of the amount of blood money to be paid rather than the mechanism of conflict resolution.

It is important to stress that the society of Afghanistan, including Pashtun society, was subject to fundamental change in almost every respect during the last decades. As a result, today the ideals of Pashtunwali compete with other value systems that gained influence during that time.

The question how important Pashtunwali still is in modern Afghanistan cannot be answered in a general way. The transformation of formal and organisational aspects of the tribal life (principles of decision making, role of elders, art of warfare, inner coherence of tribal units and others) is more obvious than changes within the system of values. An evaluation of the present-day importance of Pashtunwali as a system of values requires qualitative case studies in various parts of Afghanistan that cannot be presented within this paper. It depends on every particular situation by which values the behaviour of individuals or groups is guided, but there is no doubt that among the competing value systems the ideals of Pashtunwali still continue to present an attractive and sometimes binding option today.

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## **AUTHOR BIO: LUTZ RZEHAK**

Lutz Rzehak is a senior researcher and assistant professor at the Department for Central Asian Studies of Berlin Humboldt University. He graduated from St Petersburg University, then Leningrad, USSR, in 1985 and earned his PhD at Berlin Humboldt University in 1991. Currently, he teaches languages and cultural history of Afghanistan and Central Asia. He published extensively about language development, social and cultural history and folklore of Afghanistan and neighbouring regions. In one of his major projects, he collaborated in the edition of a Balochi-Pashto-Dari-English dictionary that was published in Kabul in 2007 as a contribution to the development program for ethnic and linguistic minorities of Afghanistan.