

# VIOLENCE AND BELONGING: LAND, LOVE, AND LETHAL CONFLICT IN THE NORTH- WEST FRONTIER PROVINCE OF PAKISTAN

BY ARE KNUDSEN

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With Pakistan much in the news, Are Knudsen's *Violence and Belonging: Land, Love, and Lethal Conflict in the North-West Frontier Province of Pakistan* will no doubt attract attention both within and beyond academic circles. It is a welcome addition to the social science literature on the northern mountains of Pakistan. Knudsen's book tells a rich story of the development of disputes, vendettas, and lethal violence over time. He shows that the legitimacy of violence is evaluated and measured by the extent that it fits with local customs and values; he also reveals how 'tradition' is contentiously debated and transformed in the Palas valley of Indus Kohistan. In effect, he elegantly demonstrates a non-essentialist notion of culture which, while foundational to anthropological approaches, is today sorely needed in discussions of the political culture of Pakistan.

The book makes two important arguments. The first is that there is an affective dimension of masculinity which challenges much of the current academic understanding of the personal motivation towards violence in societies which place a high value on 'honor'. Specifically, Knudsen argues that men's concern for honor is deeply shaped by affective aspects of their relationships with things which are under a constant state of threat—land, love, and position in a peer group. The second is that in the acephalous-egalitarian social system of Kohistan and similar mountain societies, disputes that appear to be about land and land products should not be understood only as competition for material resources. Instead, such disputes are conflicts over symbolic resources because the principles that are used to determine spatial boundaries stand in a mimetic relationship to social boundaries of belonging and exclusion.

The book is closely based on Knudsen's doctoral dissertation, for which he conducted field research between 1996 and 1998 and which he completed in 2001 under the title '*Boundaries of Belongingness in the Palas Valley, Pakistan*'. The research was conducted in the Palas valley and among out-migrants from

the valley living in other parts of Pakistan (primarily in other parts of the NWFP and in the northern Punjab, particularly the city of Rawalpindi). Knudsen began his research interested in the human ecology of Pakistan's northern forests, and particularly in the relationship between land tenure systems and forest resource management. His ethnography brings this focus on human ecology into dialogue with a classic concern in the ethnography of the northern regions of Pakistan—the connection between masculinity and violence. In doing so, it provides an excellent example of the value of long term ethnographic field research in social science inquiry; as a researcher, Knudsen was willing to be surprised and to follow connections that were not anticipated in the original research design. He describes his ultimate research method as that of "follow[ing] the conflict" (pp.18, 178) through social networks of people involved in lethal conflicts on both sides of disputes. This method led him out of the geographic space of the Palas valley and out of the temporal moment of the ethnographic present, into the past of on-going vendettas through oral histories.

The book is presented in ten sequential chapters, but it unfolds in three conceptual parts with introduction and conclusion. Chapters 1 and 2 provide a concise introduction to the social, political, and economic conditions of the Palas valley. They also describe its simultaneous connection to and isolation from the broader regional context of District Kohistan and the Northwest Frontier Provinces. The concluding chapter summarizes the major themes which recur through the book. However, it emphasizes a more materialist view of the importance of resource scarcity in the production of interpersonal vendettas than is suggested by the actual substantive chapters. In fact, one of the great strengths of this book is the effective weaving of ecological-materialist and cultural-interpretive analysis to explain the social practice of lethal violence. Chapters 3 and 4 provide an overview of the emergence and transformation of the land tenure system in Kohistan known as the *wesh* (a system of periodic rotation and re-division of land usufruct rights). Together, these chapters explain why the *wesh* in Kohistan did not have an isomorphic relationship with kinship lineages, and they explain why the establishment of a land settlement in the Palas valley region effectively ended inter-valley feuding and began an era of personal and family vendettas. These chapters also explain the practice of banning cultivation as a part of the process of violent disputes; it can escalate to forced out-migration, house confinement for men, and to lethal enmity within kin groups. Chapters 5, 6, and 7 focus on case studies of specific disputes and their progression to lethal conflict and then pre-meditated killings. Taken together, they demonstrate the importance of culturally constructed affective attachments to understanding patterns of violence in the Palas valley and among emigrants from the valley. Knudsen's analysis of the factors that contribute to the progression of disputes to cultivation bans, violent conflict, and then lethal enmity emphasizes seeing people involved in such vendettas not as 'victims' or 'perpetrators' but as participants in a ritualistic process. He pays close attention to the paradox of this process—that it strengthens

men's claims of masculine cultural belonging while threatening the material conditions for actually living in the valley. Chapters 8 and 9 focus on conflicts over the resources of the oak forests and boundary grass fields as the remnants of the *wesh* system came under increasing pressure from commercial logging and commoditization of forest products. These chapters together further elaborate the importance of the idea of *wesh* allotments in establishing the boundaries of social belonging. They illustrate how multiple ideas of custom and value are used by different actors to argue their cases in disputes and demonstrate a deep ambivalence among Palas residents about the use of force to resolve disputes. Most interestingly, these chapters also explain why the practice of commercial logging in Palas valley re-introduced intra-tribal and inter-valley conflict.

Given Knudsen's considerable contributions to the fields of peace studies and the study of Islamic political movements in the Middle East, there are some issues that a serious revision of the original dissertation might have addressed. These concerns are worth noting in detail, because this book is so compelling in its main analytic points and so descriptively rich.

First, Knudsen engages rather narrowly with the current literature in Pakistan studies. While he rightly addresses the classic studies of the peoples of the northwest of Pakistan (most notably those of Fredrick Barth and Charles Lindholm) and acknowledges more recent work (such as that of Magnus Marsden), he does not speak to how his work fits with other contemporary work on Pakistan. Knudsen's explanation for this is that the Kohistani society of the Palas valley is historically and geographically isolated. However, this explanation is unconvincing on both empirical and theoretical grounds. Empirically, Knudsen provides a great deal of evidence that both institutional/ infrastructural changes and sociological changes have shaped the dynamics of lethal violence since at least the 1970s. Among the first, include the formation of District Kohistan (pp.24, 39-42,178), the institutionalization of the land settlement that altered the historical mutability of the *wesh* system (chs.3,8), and the building of the Karakorum Highway and the increased commoditization of forest products (pp. 22-23,156,161-169). Among the second, include the use of the police reports to increase the pressure on enemies in vendettas (pp.38-39,87-88,113,131), increased out-migration along the KKH route (ch.1), the increased importance of organized Islamic missionary groups to shaping the vernacular consciousness of the religious values and correctness of customs and traditions (ch.7; also pp.31-33,93, 99,144-145,155,179-180), and the use of the Islamized national legal system as a factor in mediation and dispute resolution (pp. 116-117,132,190). Additionally, much of Knudsen's analysis of vendettas is based on oral histories produced by men living in the northern Punjab due to forced or voluntary migration (chs.5,7,9)—men who having “resetle[d] outside of the valley join the ranks of unskilled laborers and the urban proletariat” (pp.182). The reader must wonder how their positions in that new Pakistani urban landscape shaped their longing for the Palas valley. From the perspective of theory, Knudsen's work could engage any of

several questions which are central to the study of post-colonial Pakistan more generally, classic ethnology of honor and kinship systems aside. These include questions about the relationship between customary law and Islamic law, the commoditization of land in previous usufruct based land tenure systems, the impact of international migration on shaping regional identities, and the question of the extent to which women are treated as subjects of the family or of the state.

Second, the approach to the relationship between Islam and Kohistani cultural traditions was perplexing. While Knudsen discusses the role of Islamic missionaries, he doesn't clarify the different doctrinal positions or forms of moral conversion that different groups might practice. It is therefore not possible to tell the difference in the text between representatives of Islamic influence in the Palas valley, such as formally trained members of the Sunni orthodoxy, activists of Islamist organizations, or participants in missionary societies, although there is a substantial literature on the differences between them. Thus, while he presents a powerful argument that vendetta violence in the Kohistan context has been constrained and moderated by the introduction of broadly 'Islamic' notions of justice and proportionality, his ultimate conclusion that “this points to a complex and multi-layered relationship between customs and normative Islam” (pp.180) feels both ethnographically and conceptually thin. Finally, the treatment of the gendered aspects of violence in this book was unsatisfactory. Knudsen's focus on the production of masculinity in vendettas—including those that include what are called 'honor killings' in other parts of Pakistan—is extremely valuable. He does acknowledge that none of his ethnographic research involved direct interaction with female interlocutors, but in the stories he reconstructs, women ultimately appear as objects of discussion only after they have been killed. This reviewer regrets that Knudsen's authorial voice did not maintain a more critical distance between what women think and do, and what men imagine that women think and do.

This book is a valuable contribution to the literature on Pakistan and the Himalayan-Karakorum-Hindu Kush mountains region. It will be of great use to scholars wishing to integrate serious anthropological studies of peoples of the NWFP into their courses. Knudsen writes in clear, approachable language, and he makes excellent use of stories to illustrate complex points about the relationship between violence and the maintenance of sociality in Indus Kohistan. References to other texts are focused on the fields of anthropology and geography/human ecology. It is well suited for undergraduate teaching as an ethnography; additionally, many of its chapters could be adopted individually. It will also be of interest in more specialized courses on society and environment or on the anthropology of violence.

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