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Polygyny in Islamic Law and Pukhtun Practice


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**Abstract:**
The Pukhtun of Swat in Northern Pakistan refer to Islam to justify the local practice of polygamy and female subordination. However, a survey of Islamic law shows its intent is far more egalitarian than Pukhtun practice. Using a mixture of case studies and statistical evidence, this paper argues that in Swat husbands take second wives mainly in a spirit of revenge, reflecting the endemic hostility between spouses that exists within this strongly patriarchal segmentary lineage organization in which romantic love is reserved for chaste extramarital relationships. The paper concludes by suggesting that an ideology of the primacy of paternal blood underlies the misogynistic attitudes characteristic of Swat, and predominant elsewhere in the Middle East and the Circum-Mediterranean region. **Key Terms:** Polygyny, Islamic Law, Patriarchy, Social Organization, Misogyny
‘I May Be A Fool, But Not Such a Fool as a Man Who Has Two Wives’

Pukhtun proverb

Introduction

In 1969, when I first visited the Pukhtun people of Swat, in the Northwest Frontier of Pakistan, some of the men I met had more than one wife. It was explained to me that this was permitted, and even favored, in Islam. But I soon realized that there was much more to the reality of polygyny than a simple religious injunction. In fact, as the local proverb I quoted above indicates, marrying more than one woman was thought to be the self-destructive act of a fool. Yet a substantial proportion of Swati men – especially the wealthier and more powerful - were nonetheless polygamous. In the following pages I explore the disjuncture between Islamic law and Pukhtun practice, and consider why Pukhtun men want to be polygynous even when they realize the practice is not only foolish, but can be downright dangerous. I’ll conclude with some speculations about some possible sources of the Swati pattern of polygyny.

Swat is a beautiful valley surrounded by the jagged, snowy peaks of the Hindu Kush Range. The rushing cold waters of the Swat River bisect the valley, and round grey river stones are used to build the tightly packed villages and the houses where extended families share cramped space. When I did my research, the population density in the Valley was high, and it is higher today. Despite the fertility of the soil, famine is always a threat, so that struggles for lands and power are a matter of life and death. No police force or government authority controls these struggles. Rather, when I did my fieldwork, the
area where I lived was organized politically and spatially on the basis of a segmentary lineage system that divided land among patrilateral relatives and so pitted them against one another. The term of reference for the father’s brother’s son – a man’s closest neighbor, nearest relative, and major rival – is ‘tarbur,’ which also translates as ‘enemy.’

Politic relationships of alliance and antagonism in this tightly packed system are flexible and adaptive, based upon a combination of two basic and well-known principles: “I against my brothers, my brothers and I against our cousins, my cousins, my brothers and I against the world” and “the enemy of my enemy is my friend.”

In this contentious setting, marriage is would seem to be primarily a political act – an effort to secure alliances in a world of potential enemies. Therefore, a simple way to account for polygyny would be that men maximize their power by maximizing their marriage relationships. However, this does not fit with the reality of polygynous marriage, which, as I will demonstrate, usually creates enmity, not solidarity, between in-laws. Nor does this explanation account for the ambivalence the Pukhtun feel about polygyny. To better understand the actual nature of polygyny in Swat, let me first consider the way it is conceptualized in the Quran and Islamic traditions (hadith), since these are the texts to which the Pukhtun themselves refer when explaining their marital practices and attitudes.

**Marriage Relationships in Islam**

It is indeed true that the Prophet Muhammad, who was an enthusiastic polygamist, practiced plural marriage for political reasons. He eventually contracted twelve official marriages, using his marital alliances to cement his relationships with rival groups and with his own followers (the first five caliphs were his in-laws). In so doing,
Muhammad exceeded his own revelation, as expressed in the Quran, that a man may marry four wives. However, although many of the Prophet’s marriages were purely political, it is often forgotten that he was steadfastly monogamous for twenty-five years, remaining faithful to his much older first wife, Khadija, an independent and successful business woman who used her money and position to support her husband’s prophetic mission. Muhammad's ambivalence toward polygamy is indicated as well in his stipulation that the marriage between his favorite daughter Fatima and his cousin Ali (the fourth Caliph) had to be strictly monogamous. The Pukhun too do not want their daughters to enter into polygynous unions, even though they may be keen to take plural wives themselves. Muhammad's complex attitude toward polygyny was also revealed in his deep affection for his favorite wife, the beautiful, forceful and intelligent Aisha, who participated in public debates, was a respected reciter of hadith and a political leader in her own right. Muhammad chose to die in Fatima’s bedchamber and was interred there, as were the first three Caliphs. Aisha’s case shows that political alliance is hardly the only reason for marriage in a polygynous household, even when the household head was the Prophet himself.

Despite the complexity of Muhammad’s example, many commentators have seen the Islamic legal permission for plural marriage as purely and simply misogynist. Yet, a closer look reveals that the family law and marriage practices ordained in the Quran and enforced by Islamic jurisprudence very often directly challenged traditional male prerogatives and affirmed the humanity and equality of women who had previously been oppressed in pre-Islamic patriarchies (Kandiyoti 1991, 1992, Tillion 1966, L. Ahmed 1992; for translations of original texts, see Roded 2008). In contrast to those earlier
traditions, Islam proclaimed that both men and women have eternal souls and are
destined to fill their God-given complementary roles in the universe: men in the public
sphere, women in the private. Most importantly, each can find individual salvation. As
the Quran states: "For Muslim men and women, for believing men and women, for
devout men and women.... for them has Allah prepared forgiveness and great reward." ix
Furthermore, "women shall have rights similar to the rights against them, according to
what is equitable." x The Quran also explicitly repudiates the previously normative
practice of female infanticide and profoundly altered the pre-Islamic legal status of
women who had been regarded as chattel owned by men, to be inherited and disposed of
at will. Under Islam, women became legal shareholders in the decedent's estate, with
their own individual rights of inheritance that could not be abrogated by their own kin or
their husbands’ family.

Many other aspects of Islamic law that may seem misogynistic when viewed in
isolation are less so when understood in context. For example, the legal rule that a
woman is entitled to only half of the amount inherited by her male relatives was more
than balanced by the dowry of goods, money and sometimes land that a girl was legally
entitled to receive from her family when she married. According to Muslim legal codes,
this dowry, augmented by a substantial bride price (mahar) from her husband's
household, became her own private property, to spend and use as she pleased - though
both were usually integrated into the common household resource base.

Women’s absolute rights to property were derived in part from the way marriage
was conceptualized in Islamic law. In contrast to the sacramental bond of Christian
family law, Muslim marriage was viewed from the beginning as a witnessed legal
contract between *equals*, transacted, bargained over, signed, sealed, and reversible, in which the woman (or her guardian) exchanged her sexuality and her reproductive capacities for a bride price and for a guarantee of permanent protection and maintenance. 

If the agreed-upon terms were not met, the contract could be legally annulled and the bride price returned to the spurned or estranged wife. Ideally, this arrangement allowed a woman considerable legal leverage in divorce cases, abrogating much of the husband's patriarchal authority. 

In sum, Islamic law changed the status of the woman "from the position of sale-object to that of contracting party.... endowed with a legal competence she did not possess before" (Coulson 1964: 14). 

The Muslim wife's jural and personal independence was graphically symbolized in her retention of her own family name after marriage, and expressed concretely in her legal capacity to earn and keep her own money and run her own financial affairs. Islamic jurisprudence therefore made wives legally independent persons for the first time in Western history, over a millennium before the same rights were granted in Europe and the USA.

However, while Islamic law gave women new rights and privileges it also took away some existing freedoms. Polyandry was wholly abolished, while polygyny was explicitly permitted. A Muslim man is allowed four wives at any given time. Of course, all men cannot take advantage of this permission; under Islam, only those with enough economic resources to provide adequately for all their wives can marry polygynously. Furthermore, a polygynous husband is religiously obligated not only to care for all his wives equally but also to pay equal attention to each. Inheritance is divided equally among all a man’s children (as noted earlier, women inherit half as much as men). In the Muslim legal system, even concubines are legally protected. A slave woman bearing her
master’s child cannot be sold and becomes free at her owner’s death. Her children are entitled to a full share in the patrimony since they are reckoned to share the blood of their father. In these ways, Shari’a law balances male powers in plural marriage and in institutionalized concubinage with guarantees for women’s rights – a point I shall return to in my conclusion. It should also be noted that in contrast to the Mormons studied by Jankowiak (in this volume), in Islam, polygyny is only ‘permitted.’ It is not enjoined. And, to repeat, it exists only within the context of a complex legal system that guarantees women in polygynous unions quite a high degree of autonomy and equality.

**Islam, Culture and Marriage in Swat, Northern Pakistan**

As I mentioned, during the period of my fieldwork, the Pukhtun believed implicitly that their religious faith and their traditions were seamlessly united. By definition, they assumed themselves to be devout Sunni Muslims, following the precepts of the Quran as best they could. Although I did not realize it at the time, this assumption was incorrect. In fact, a number of local practices enjoined by *Pukhtunwali* (the custom of the Pukhtun) flew in the face of orthodox Islamic law, particularly in regard to women’s rights. For example, Pukhtun custom denied inheritance to women, enforced strict female seclusion, appropriated women’s bridewealth and absolutely prohibited divorce, regardless of circumstances. In other words, many of the rules offered by Islam for the protection of women were overturned in practice. This coincided with the general male outlook toward women, which held that they are naturally ignorant, always treacherous, and likely to be promiscuous. Pithy local proverbs convey the masculine perspective. “Women belong in the house, or in the grave.” “Women have no noses. They will eat shit.”
The negative and fearful attitude toward women correlates with the patrilineal segmentary system in which first marriages are arranged in order to maintain the solidarity of the lineage. Men from elite landholding warrior lineages (the *khans*) very rarely marry into inferior non-landholding clans, and only reluctantly exchange their women with other elite lineages. For them the ideal wedding is with the father’s brother’s daughter – the sister of the ‘close enemy’ - the *tarbur*. Failing that, marriage is with distant groups who can – at least ideally - provide backing in cases of conflict. Female seclusion (*purdah*) is strict among the khans, who must take blood revenge in cases of seduction or infidelity or else lose their honor. Murder of women suspected of breaking *purdah* is celebrated in song and legend, and does sometimes actually occur.

Within this andocentric system, there are distinct gender differences in attitudes toward marriage. For women, marriage is the sole possible route to success and prestige. It is in marriage that all a woman’s hopes are invested, and it is in marriage that those hopes can be realized. While the woman’s road to success is narrow and hard, it is not impassible. If a woman can produce many strong sons, if she can outlast her mother-in-law and become dominant in her extended family household, controlling her sons and their wives, then she has lived an ideal life. At the same time, girls are quite realistically fearful that marriage will lead to a lifetime of subservience to a cruel husband and his demanding mother in an alien compound. But the greatest fear of a *khana* is that her husband will humiliate her by marrying a second wife (*ban*).

While girls place all their hopes in marriage, a boy’s status rests primarily on his abilities to gain allies and defeat enemies in the contentious masculine rivalries of the public sphere. Marriage is only one part of this strategy. Its purpose is to tie families
together and to produce sons who can carry on the lineage name as well as daughters who can be married off to create new relationships between men. But the marriage relationship itself is regarded as a trap for a man, binding him forever to a woman from a rival family. The wife is an enemy within the husband’s household, gaining the loyalty and love of his sons and plotting with them against him for her own ends. In this setting – suitable for a Greek tragedy - men generally avoid their homes, where women rule, and spend the majority of their time gossiping in the all-male environment of the men’s house (hujera). For them, marriage is a necessary evil – not an end in itself.

Although over time a degree of companionship, respect and conjugal love may well develop between marriage partners, affection between them can never be shown or admitted in public. Men must always refer to their wives and the wives of others as ‘the house.’ Even in private, it is considered both improper and dangerous for a man to share his thoughts with his wife, since she cannot understand his thoughts or sympathize with his feelings, but instead will exploit whatever she hears to gain advantage. In the same vein, it is believed that a man who is kind to his wife will grow old before his time, and both marriage partners are quick to point out any weaknesses or signs of aging in their spouses. Both combatants in the marital battle say, partly in jest, but partly in earnest, that they hope for the early death of the other and both sincerely fear that the survivor will "laugh over my grave." Though there are notable exceptions, marriage in Swat is a fraught relationship in which each partner struggles to maintain power and gain the upper hand. It is a kind of warfare, not a love match. But although each seeks the conquest of the other, their strategies are different. Her heart's desire is to move from a position of weakness to one of authority within the household, while a husband's hope is to free
himself entirely from his wife’s power. She wants to hold him, while he wishes to escape (for more, see Lindholm and Lindholm 1979).

**Polygyny in Swat**

So far, I have provided a very basic outline of Islamic law concerning family relations, and contrasted the legal ideal to the ways men and women actually act in Swat. Now let me turn toward a direct discussion of polygamy. As I mentioned, Pukhtun *khans* who have the wherewithal do often marry a second wife (*ban*). Their stated main motivation is not overwhelming attraction to another woman (because of *purdah* they will rarely have seen or spoken to the woman they seek to marry), nor is it a desire to maximize alliances with other lineages (although a second marriage forges a bond with the new wife’s family, it irremediably strains the tie with the family of the first) but rather the desire to defeat and mortify an aggressive and demanding first wife by taking a second one. As I wrote in 1982: “Women, as incoming wives, seek to retain their lineage honor and to gain a position of dominance in their new home. For men, the task is to subdue the wife or, failing that, to humiliate her. The husband has the trump card in this battle, since he can take a second wife, thereby shaming the first and all her lineage” (Lindholm 1982: 60).

In Swat, voluntary polygyny (as opposed to the compulsory polygyny resulting from the levirate) is more or less confined to the elite *khan* class whose first marriages are arranged as a way to cement alliances, and who can afford the expense and tribulation of arranging a second for themselves. When I traced the marriages of the leading clan in the village, the *Malik khel*, I discovered that, over the five previous generations, 115 *Malik khel* men married 150 times: 21 had two wives, seven had three. *Six* These were by far the
majority of polygynous unions in the village. In contrast, the poor and landless do not have the same political ambitions as the elite, and can barely support even one wife, so that polygyny among them is rare and is almost always the result of the levirate. There is one exception. Poor men who are widowers may sometimes marry a widow with sons, thereby adding some helping hands to the family. A khan would never enter into such a marriage, as it would mean bringing a rival bloodline into his household. For the same reason, adoption does not occur among the khans.

As the proverb I cited at the beginning of this paper indicates, the Pukhtun khans very clearly recognize the potentially destructive consequences of polygamy. They know that a second wife is a financial burden (a strict moral prohibition on divorce means a deposed first wife must be cared for in perpetuity), that polygamy causes animosity from his first wife’s family, and, worst of all, creates a never-ending uproar in the household (since in the cramped environment of Swat the jealous and quarrelsome co-wives usually share the compound space and the cooking facilities). The answer, according to conventional wisdom, is for a man to marry once more. “This is because the two wives will make his life so miserable that he hopes to drive them both from his home by bringing in yet a third woman, and starting all over again with just one wife. In this, he will be encouraged by his first wife, who wishes nothing more than her rival should be shamed as she has been shamed” (Lindholm 1982: 146).

But this solution worked only in the past – if it ever worked at all. Today men cannot afford to maintain three wives, and instead the problem of internal fighting is ‘solved’ when one of the wives (usually the first) permanently returns to her natal household, either voluntarily or because her husband does not invite her back after one of
her visits to her parents (the husband must give his wife permission to leave his compound, and to come back into it). In the village, nine women had suffered this humiliating fate, five among the *khans*, and four within the more numerous servant groups. These disgraced women lost their status and became de facto servants in their own families. This was the destiny of the mother of one of my friends, who never again entered her husband’s compound after he took a *ban*. She raised her children in her own father’s house. Her sons returned to their natal village when they reached puberty, where they were treated with respect and eventually inherited their share of their patrimony. Their father also arranged good marriages for the daughters of his exiled wife. In this way, he fulfilled all his obligations towards his first wife’s children.

However, this is not always the case. The children of less favored co-wives often have difficulty claiming their rightful inheritance from their fathers, and, if they remain home, are thought to be in danger of being ‘accidentally’ killed by their vengeful stepmothers (young orphans also generally stay with the families of their maternal uncles until they are old enough to defend themselves against paternal relatives who want them out of the way). I do not know for certain of any actual cases where children were killed or threatened, but from experience I do know that the sons of repudiated first wives are resentful of their fathers, and tales of the *ban’s* natural hatred of her stepchildren are the common stuff of folktales and gossip. Nonetheless, custom (and self-interest) demands that exiled boys must return to their natal household when they reach puberty. Resentful or not, it is to their advantage to support their father in any struggle with lineage rivals. Furthermore, as seen in the case I just described, the father retains authority to arrange marriages for all of his daughters. These marriages establish important alliances, and
also bring in money as bride price. So even in marriages where a co-wife has ‘returned’
to her own family there are still instrumental ties between the spouses if children are
involved. Although fathers might dislike the children of repudiated wives (a dislike that
is usually reciprocal) the relationship is still one of mutual advantage. Similarly, a
mother’s status derives in large part from the successes of her children, which can only be
achieved through the father’s intercession. The same uneasy combination of antagonism
with allegiance, so characteristic of the segmentary system, pertains for the children of
co-wives as well. Real siblings are certainly emotionally closer than stepbrothers, who
often squabble, fight and sometimes even kill each other. However, on other occasions,
all unite in defending family honor, from which they gain their own.

Within this context, antagonism inside a polygamous family is increased by the
sense of honor that is characteristic not only of Pukhtun men, but of Pukhtun women as
well. For a khana, the greatest insult possible to herself and her lineage is the arrival of a
second wife, and she will do anything to redeem her own reputation, while the incoming
ban will battle with equal vigor to achieve domination. Overt fighting, as well as the
covert use of magical spells against rivals, are women’s weapons. Because the incoming
wife is bound to be attacked, mahar is sometimes larger for a second marriage than for
the first, further increasing the fury of first wife. Also, second wives are very often from
a lower social order than the first, since fathers are reluctant to send their daughters into a
situation bound to be full of conflict. xxii Only the promise of a higher social status or a
big bride price can overcome paternal reluctance. But any disjunction in status also is
deeply felt as an affront to the first wife and her lineage. Finally, incoming ban are
usually much younger than the first wife – another slur in this age-graded society where
elders are due deference. In revenge for all these insults, the first wife may sometimes attempt to reclaim her mahar - a legal action that is in accord with Islamic law, but very disgraceful within Pukhtunwali. In other instances, the enraged first wife flatly refuses to ‘go home’ to her parents and causes so much strife that the man may be the one obliged to flee his village, leaving his rejected wife and her children under the uncertain care of his father and brothers.

This was the case in another instance of polygamy that I know well. The husband was the charming but prodigal son of a powerful clan, which had arranged his marriage with a woman from another very prestigious lineage. His wife was strong figure in her own right, intelligent, intransigent, and perfectly capable of returning his blows with her own. The marriage was full of insults and tension, with the wife often gaining the upper hand. The furious husband gained his revenge when he surreptitiously married a young girl from an inferior non-khan group, whose parents were willing to take the risk of putting their daughter into a contentious situation for the sake of gaining some of her suitor’s high status. But the first wife refused to allow the new girl into her home and was supported by her husband’s family, who were ashamed of the lowly background of the ban and angered by the husband’s irresponsible behavior, which threatened a strategic marriage alliance. The embittered first wife kept her house and raised her children in the village of her in-laws, while the husband moved away, living first with his new wife in reduced circumstances, and later migrating to find work outside the valley.

In other cases, taking a co-wife may actually be physically dangerous for the husband, since a repudiated woman can be tempted to revenge her honor by means of poison. For this reason, polygynous men who die of ‘cholera’ are often thought to have
been murdered by their jealous first wives. This was what was said about the death of one of my closest friends. He was the handsome only son of a wealthy khan, well known for his generous nature. Unlike the case of the reprobate I recounted above, his prestige, character and authority made him a good catch, even for a second wife, and he married a ban from a respectable lineage. Soon thereafter, he died very rapidly of cholera-like symptoms (also the symptoms of arsenic poisoning) without having had any children by the second wife. Rumors spread, but nothing was said publicly, both because of a lack of proof (cholera is common in Swat, and people die of it regularly) and because no one wished to arouse the enmity of the first wife’s family. She continued to live in her husband’s village, raising her only son to be his sole inheritor.

Of course women would prefer not to have to resort to such extreme measures. Their best hope to avoid the shame being dispossessed by a co-wife is to bind their husbands to them emotionally, so he will have no desire to bring another woman into the household. Women have a number of magical strategies they employ to accomplish this. For instance, a Pukhtun girl is taught by her mother to always speak first to her husband when he arrives home and to sleep with her hand behind his head. Such commonplace acts, it is believed, will make him accustomed to her presence, keep him attached to her, and allow her to extend her authority over him. Some women resort to more excessive magical measures, such as putting the water used to wash the body of a dead leatherworker in the tea of her husband (for more on the symbolism of this, see Lindholm 1981, reprinted in Lindholm 1996). A man who drinks this concoction falls helplessly in love with the woman who has administered it; she can then render him begherata (without honor). Besotted by love, he will not restrain her natural inclinations to
promiscuity, and may even become a *bedagh* (passive homosexual). Several men in the village were pointed out to me as examples of this degrading process. In these narratives, a woman triumphs over her husband and defeats her rival *ban*, but she also destroys her own heritage, as her sons are disgraced by her behavior and their father’s emasculation. Hers is a pyrrhic victory, at best. In this setting, no true triumph is possible for either party, since women need their husbands to gain honor; men need women as the wombs of the lineage. Yet both still fantasize about impossible alternatives (see Lindholm 1981 for more).

Ironically, the same conditions that are said to cause male impotence can also lead to its opposite – a high birth rate, as the rival wives enter into a competition to see who can produce the most sons. By having more children, one wife can dominate the household and perhaps eventually drive the other wife to her natal home in shame. As a result, polygynous households in the village are said to be more prolific than monogamous households. My census records offer empirical confirmation of this belief.

To recapitulate, my cases have shown that, in Swat (or at least in the village I know best) there are a number of possible trajectories that may occur in a polygamous marriage. A man may force his humiliated first wife into a lonely exile; or, if she is strong enough, he may be forced into exile himself; if the co-wives stay within his compound, the whole family will suffer from their constant bickering. Children of different wives are at odds with each other and are maltreated by their stepmothers. In the worst cases, the outraged first wife may even poison her husband. The outcome of a polygamous marriage is generally miserable for all parties, and is sometimes tragic. I only know of one man with two wives who was, if not happy, at least peaceful. When he
was obliged by the levirate to marry his dead brother’s wife, he coped with his new responsibility by treating both women absolutely equally, as Islam requires. He accomplished this by spending all of his time safe in the refuge of the local men’s house. Meanwhile, the two women, abandoned to their own devices in their shared compound, became quite good friends.

Despite the well-recognized perils of polygamy (which are really only the amplified perils of monogamy), my informants told me that men take the risk because of their dislike of and desire to dishonor their first wives. Attraction to a younger, more pliable, woman is certainly a factor, but it is not given as a major cause. And the apparent political reason (to increase a man’s alliances) is nonsensical, since polygyny alienates the first wife’s family and the second marriage is most usually to woman from an inferior clan. Evidence for revenge as a motive for polygyny is mostly anecdotal, but it is borne out by one empirical finding. As I mentioned earlier, among the Swati khans the favored marriage is parallel cousin marriage to the actual FBD (father’s brother’s daughter – the sister of one’s ‘close enemy, the tarbur). This marriage pattern – common throughout the Middle East - “has the effect of diversifying the agnatic group, and creates small nuclei within.” xxv In FBD marriage, agnates are turned into affines, and lines for fission are drawn between the closest of patrilineal relatives. As a result, it becomes “almost impossible to isolate a solidary in-group, and groupings are continually being activated or redefined through struggles that may even pit members of the nuclear family against each other.” xxvi The animosity of these intermarrying tarburan is heightened due to their rivalry over rights to the abutting plots of land they farm. It is precisely this
endemic conflict that FBD marriage is supposed to mute, but instead the result is usually
the opposite, increasing the rivalry and jealousy among the cousins.

According to local discourse, FBD marriage is notoriously prone to polygyny
since both partners are from families of equal status and are also inherently in conflict
with one another. This combination is said to lead to virulent hatred within the household
that drives the husband to seek a second wife in order to humiliate the first and to shame
her lineage. xxvii Tracing FBD marriages suggests that this folk wisdom is actually
correct. Among the 115 Malik khel marriages in the previous five generations, four out
the eight men who had real FBD marriage took second wives, while 19 of 107 who did
not marry their FBD took a second wife. In the present generation, two of the three men
marrying real FBD have married another wife, while only two of 39 who did not marry
FBD have become polygynous, one involuntarily by levirate. As mentioned, these
polygynous marriages are within same khan group, who all have relatively equal access
to resources, so it would seem that it is the contentious marital relationship itself that
drives these men to seek second marriages, despite all the unhappy consequences of
taking that course. xxviii

Romance and Patriarchy

Of course, there are gradations in the attraction and affection a polygynist feels
for his wives. It is recognized that a man will naturally be drawn toward a younger, less
prestigious and more pliable ban, a woman who was not forced on him by his parents’
matchmaking. But a young woman’s subservience is hardly eternal. As her husband
ages and weakens, she is likely to assert herself more and more against him. So, even in
polygynous marriages with younger, more dependent women, romantic idealization
erodes as the conflicting interests of wives and husbands inevitably drive them toward perpetual war with one another. Another factor undermining the potential for romance in marriage is the fact that men can gain honor by pursuing sexual affairs with women in rival lineages. Such affairs are celebrated much like victories in war, and, if discovered, can result in death for both partners - though usually the woman is the one who suffers (yet another reason for female chastity). Less dangerous (and much more common) for the *khans* are sexual affairs with girls belonging to dependent groups in the neighborhood, who have little power to resist - although a woman may try to coerce her lover into marriage by arriving at his compound gate carrying his infant child in her arms. This strategy, while compelling, is so shameful for the girl that it is practiced only by the most humble and desperate. More likely is maintenance of the affair clandestinely; though ‘everybody knows’ that such and such a boy or girl is actually the bastard offspring of the local *khan*.

However, the pervasive absence of romance in marriage does not mean that idealized love does not exist among the Pukhtun. Quite the contrary. Romantic love is highly elaborated in the Pukhtun belief system. But it must be for a mysterious stranger or for a woman who is betrothed elsewhere and so unavailable as a marriage partner – or even for a boy. As is the case elsewhere in the Middle East, Pukhtun lovers fall in love from a distance. In general, sexuality is downplayed and the emphasis is on the spiritual qualities of the beloved and the deep yearning of the lover. As the great warrior poet Khushal Khan Khattack wrote to his beloved:

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“Your curls are a swing, / Your forelock a snare, / Your face a lamp/
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That draws the moth….. /If the world asks about my sickness/ And the one who has stricken me asks not, / Then what use are all the others?” (Khattack 1965, in Lindholm 1982: 223).

Similar sentiments are evident in quotes from the work of the great Pukhtun Sufi poet Rahman Baba, who is in love with God, not a human being:

“Intoxicated by love/ My consciousness has vanished…. “I want to give the world to my beloved/ Lest I myself become desirous of it…. “How can a person ever claim/ To be in love, when first of all/ He worries about life and name?/ That man is not in love at all…. “Oh God, grant me a true friend who, / Without urging, will show me his love” (Baba 1977, in Lindholm 1982: 226, 238, 241).

Under the influence of the mystical religious ideal of love, the ideal romance in Pukhtun verse and myth cannot be consummated, for consummation means the end of the quest and the loss of the ideal. This is because in sexual union the Pukhtun see domination and subordination. Sexual penetration is an act of power; submission is acceptance of inferiority. This unequal duality destroys the essence of the hoped-for relation, that is, complete reciprocal mutuality and fusion. Since sexuality affirms separateness and hierarchy, romantic lovers cannot truly reach the ideal – that role can only be filled by someone who is not sexually available, but who offers a higher form of relationship (for more, see Lindholm 1982). Therefore, true love must end in the death of the chaste lovers, following the plot of the classic Persian story of Layla and Majnun, where the lovers are only united when the roses growing on their graves intertwine.

Of course, in real life, such chaste relationships are rare indeed. Yet, a compromised reality does not mean the ideal has vanished. It is only hard to realize. But
the dream cannot be sought or even imagined in marriage, since the marriage relationship is so intrinsically contentious and since sexual intercourse is so tainted by imagery of domination. For the same reasons, polygynous marriage also does not meet the ideal. The best men can hope for in marriage is the forlorn fantasy of an affectionate and subservient co-wife who will replace his assertive first wife and who will never become assertive herself. Women have the more plausible dream of becoming matriarchs in their own homes. But this hope is offset by fear of the humiliation that would result if a vengeful husband brings a co-wife into the house.

To reiterate, patriarchal attitudes and motivating social structures among the Swat Pukhtun tend to negate Muslim legal protections for women. Polygyny is pursued by khan men primarily as a way to punish and humiliate their proud first wives, who, as Pukhtun khana themselves, refuse to submit meekly to their husbands. Only secondarily is polygyny a quest for a younger, more attractive and more pliable partner. Even then it is bound to fail, since the interests of husband and wife are inevitably at odds. As the insightful Pukhtun author and aphorist Ghani Khan writes, “Every Pukhtun thinks he is as good as anyone and his father rolled into one. He is stupid enough to try this sort of thing even with his own wife. She pays for it in youth, he in old age” (Khan 1958: 47).

**Conclusion: Sources of Misogyny**

In this final section, I want to venture outside of my tiny fieldwork site and speculate about some possible causes for the patriarchal attitudes that prevail not only in Swat, but elsewhere in the Middle East (and the Mediterranean), despite Muslim (and Christian) legal restraints against the oppression of women (for some classic studies on women’s conditions in the Middle East, see Papps 1993, Al-Khayyat 1990, Friedl 1991,
Evidence indicates that women in the Middle East today are working harder, contributing more, and gaining little or no appreciation, status, or affection for their efforts. This is so in urban environments as well as in the countryside. As I have shown, the analysis of Islamic texts and jurisprudence confirms that it is not the message of the Islam, which is mostly positive about women’s rights, that is at the core of present-day misogynistic attitudes toward women. What are the actual causes for the marked disparity between law and practice? Here I will enumerate two – one historical and the other cultural.

The negative orientations toward women and marriage in the current Middle East are possibly a result, at least in part, of the transformations that occurred when Islam grew from its original tribal base and became an imperial venture, expanding governmental authoritarianism, eroding Bedouin egalitarianism, and undermining the rights and powers of women. The Persianized Abbasids, who vastly expanded the authority of the central government in the early Islamic centuries, also interpreted the edicts of their religion in a way that radically compromised women's independence, as symbolized by the fact that the terms for woman, slave, and sexual object become synonymous. Crucial in the development of this negative attitude was the widespread practice of taking concubines by the conquering Muslim armies, which undercut the authority and autonomy of their legitimate wives. For these new Muslim elite "acquiring a wife was a much more serious undertaking than stocking up on concubines who could be discarded, given away, or even killed without any questions asked. A wife had her legal rights to property settlement. She had `family connections'" (Abbott 1946: 67). Under these circumstances, slave women were increasingly preferred as consorts while
their independent freeborn sisters were relegated to seclusion and marginality.

Contemporary Middle Eastern attitudes toward women, revisionist critics say, reflect the spread of this imperial patriarchal history of enslavement and denigration (see L. Ahmed 1992, Kandiyoti 1991, 1992). In other words, Muslim legal rules protecting the legal status of women were eventually trumped by an emergent culture of female inequality that was born from conquest.

But this historical change is, I believe, undergirded by an even more fundamental source for a negative attitude toward women, derived from the existence of a cultural notion of patrilineality founded on blood inheritance that was ratified and enhanced by Islamic precepts. Although it is quite possible that marriage and kinship among the pre-Islamic Bedouin had many aspects of matrilineality embedded within it, these were wholly eliminated by Muhammad’s Islamic revolution. For example, the Quran allowed men to divorce their wives with ease, but prevented women from doing the same. This was a change from pre-Islamic practice in Arabia, where Bedouin women had the freedom to change mates as they pleased. In Islam, fornication (zina) was redefined to include formerly accepted patterns of temporary, female-initiated sexual relationships or wife ‘leasing’ that were cited by al-Bukhari as common in pre-Islamic Arabia. In these relationships the mother of a child could have some freedom in choosing the man she wished to designate as her child's father – in other words, pater was distinguished from genitor. Under the patrilineal blood ideology of Islam, these practices became capital crimes. Fundamental to the worldview promoted by nascent Islam was the ideology that the pater and genitor must be the same man: inheritance, honor, and lineage identity are all derived from the actual transmission of a father’s blood to his offspring. How this
particular belief (by no means universal among patrilineal peoples) arose in the first place is a matter for debate, but what it entails is an obvious and disturbing “structural contradiction between a patriarchal system and the physical reproduction of lineages” (Hammoudi 1993: 8). Women, whose wombs are the actual sources of the lineage, now become mere vessels carrying on the male bloodline.

Across the Middle East and the circum-Mediterranean area (not just among Muslims), men have tried to overcome this contradiction by portraying women, who are actually central to the male social order, as weak, stupid, and useless. At the same time, the danger of women is recognized and feared; her sexuality engenders the lineage, but her promiscuity can destroy it. Even within marriage, a woman’s allure can draw her husband away from where his first loyalties should lie: to his lineage. Middle Eastern customs of veiling, isolating and denigrating women are defensive reactions to women’s hidden structural and erotic power. As the feminist novelist Nawal El Saadawi has written, in the Middle East: “If anyone needs protection it is the man rather than the woman” (El Saadawi 1980: 100). It is ironic that Islam, while ratifying women’s rights, also ratified a patriarchal blood ideology that inevitably undermines those rights, even though in principle the latter is separable from the former.

Endnotes:

i I revisited the Valley in the early 70s, and then did my anthropological fieldwork there in 1977. Most of my account here will necessarily be from the male perspective since I did not have direct access to women, due to the institution of female seclusions (purdah). However, I did learn something about their lives and thoughts from my wife, Cherry Lindholm, who accompanied me on my 1977 visit and was able to spend time in the women’s quarters. (For her account of Pukhtun families from that perspective, see Cherry
Lindholm 1982) I thank her very much for her help in this article, and I am grateful, as ever, for the openness and honesty of my Pukhtun friends, who were kind enough to treat us as their guests.

ii This is despite the fact that, at the time, a kingship did exist in Swat under the rule of a religious figure, the Wali. However, his reign rested very lightly on the region where I worked. See Lindholm 1982 for more.

iii The term of address is the much friendlier ‘vrør’ – ‘brother.’

iv Many commentators have argued that this system is a figment of the anthropologist’s imagination. I agree that the pure pattern of complimentary opposition does not exist in actual fact. Nonetheless, the Pukhtun themselves understand and enact their relationships in reference to the ideal patterns implicit in the segmentary worldview. In Weberian terms this is an ‘ideal type’ of action orientation, transformed according to circumstance, but still shaping choice and consciousness.

v Though Ali was also famous for his many ‘temporary marriages.’ For more on the practice of temporary marriage as it exists today among Shi’ites, see Haeri’s classic study (1989).

vi For similar attitudes among Palestinian Bedouin, see Al-Krenawi, et. al., (this issue), who conclude that polygynous men (as well as women and children in polygynous families) say they would prefer monogamy if they could choose over again.

vii Aisha’s participation in the Battle of the Camel, in which she was on the losing side against Ali, may well have played a major part in discrediting further female political activism (Spellberg 1991).

viii For examples, see Mernissi (1991, 1975). As she writes: “The whole Muslim social structure can be seen as an attack on, and a defense against the disruptive power of female sexuality” (Mernissi 1974: 14).

ix Quran 33:35.

x Quran 2:228, see also 4:1.

xi In Iran a woman's virginity is explicitly referred to as 'her capital' (Haeri 1989: 67).

xii For some of the ways in which women's absolute rights over their mahar gives them a capacity to negotiate for their own benefit see Mir-Hosseini (1993).

xiii It is worth stressing that the Muslim recognition of women as contracting free agents was a great advance at the time, especially when compared to the chattel status of women in European Christian society.
where, until the 20\textsuperscript{th} century, the wife's property was permanently joined to that of the husband, meaning that in effect the wife was a legal appendage of her spouse. In contrast, Muslim family law specifically denied the primacy of the conjugal unit under male authority "in favour of equality of rights on the part of all concerned" (Hodgson 1974 Vol. I: 341).

xiv For this reason, men avoided having children with their concubines.

xv Rustic innocence about religious precepts has recently been challenged by a new generation of madrasa-educated mullahs and other religious figures (often lumped together as Taliban), who have informed the Pukhtun that \textit{Pukhtunwali} and the edicts of Islam do not necessarily coincide. However, when I did my fieldwork, the confrontation between theology and practice was far in the future. My description will remain located within the ‘ethnographic present’ of that era, now vanished forever.

xvi In the village where I worked there were only two legal divorces in a population of nearly 2,000.

xvii These negative attitudes do not extend to a man’s mother, who is unstintingly honored and loved. The greatest tragedy of a Pukhtun’s life is the death of his mother.

xviii Marriage is also sometimes arranged with respected religious figures and mediators, who are reckoned the status equivalents of the \textit{khans}. While in the field, I also heard that marriages had been recently organized with merchants, bureaucrats, and other successful non-Pukhtuns. As one man told me: “In the old days we married for honor. Now we are modern. We marry for money.”

xix For comparison, in a survey conducted with 202 Bedouin women in the southern Negev region (Cwickel and Barak 2003, referred to in Sa’ar 2007), 35\% of the respondents reported that they were part of a polygynous marriage, and 49\% said that they had grown up in a polygynous family. The slow decrease in polygynous unions appears to be a worldwide phenomenon. For another example from Botswana, see Solway (1990).

xx In the present generation there were five cases of widow remarriage among the \textit{Malik khel} out of a population of 313. Out of 802 \textit{khans} from weaker lineages there were two widow remarriages; out of 215 religious figures there were two; while among the 753 members of the servant \textit{khels} there were nine. Unfortunately, I do not know which, if any, of these cases constituted polygynous marriages.
It is perhaps worth noting that in the Middle East generally, adoption is almost unknown. I believe this is due to the prevailing patrilineal ideology that is found also in Swat.

This is in contrast to the situation described by Al-Krenawi, et. al., (in this issue), where second wives are often of a higher status than the first.

I learned about these measures from my wife Cherry, who was told about them by the village women.

Anthropologists are always plagued by the impossibility of making empirically verifiable generalizations on the basis of a small, but deep, local sample. This paper is no exception, but I believe that my findings are quite typical of the region and of the rural Pukhtun generally. As one of their own proverb states: “The Pukhtun are like rain sown wheat. They all came up at the same time. They are all the same.”

Peters, 1967:274.


A Darwinian explanation might also point to the close genetic match and some innate antipathy between the two partners. However, the same rate of polygyny and discord does not hold for other, equally closely related cousins.

It is true that these marriages are mostly among the relatively wealthy khans who can afford a second wife. Still, it is significant that even in this group, those who marry FBD have a much higher rate of polygyny than their lineage mates.

I have discussed the relationship between homosexuality and romantic love in Middle Eastern classical literature in Lindholm 2005: 251-55.