Social Structure in the Southeastern Hindu-Kush: Some Implications for Pashai Ethno-History

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The Hindu-Kush and Karakoram mountain regions of Central Asia are among the most interesting but little known ethnographic areas of the world. Most of our information concerning these regions comes from British explorers and amateur ethnographers who travelled through many of the high mountain valleys during the middle and late 19th century (Biddulph 1880, Robertson 1896). More recently, European ethnologists and linguists — especially scholars from Scandinavia, Austria, and Germany have organized expeditions with the purpose of gathering data relevant to proto-Indo-Aryan language and culture. It has not been until very recently that a few anthropologists and linguists whose interest is focussed on the analysis of ongoing social, cultural, and linguistic systems have conducted research in this region. Although the European ethnologists are mainly interested in ancient folk-customs and beliefs for cultural reconstructions, the data gathered by social anthropologists also have implications for the history of the area. The purpose of this paper is to reassess conclusions concerning the ethno-history of the Pashai speaking peoples — one of the ethnic groups located in the Hindu-Kush region.

The Pashai speaking peoples are Muslims of the Sunni branch who inhabit a series of side valleys in the Kapisa, Laghman, Nangrahre, and Kunarah provinces of Afghanistan. Although no accurate census figures are available at this time, most scholars estimate that about 100,000 people speak Pashai (Humlum 1959: 5). In general, subsistence is based on mixed herding and agriculture. Herding has mainly a transhumant pattern. In the winter the goats, cattle, and sheep are stalled in permanent villages and taken to the high moun-

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tain pastures to graze in the spring and summer. Although this pattern is found in many Pashai speaking areas, as well as most of the Hindu-Kush and Karakoram region, there are also many differences between various Pashai valleys.

Pashai is classified by linguists as an Indic language of the Dardic branch. It has linguistic borders with several other languages. It borders Persian in the Northwest; Pakhto in the Southwest, South and Northeast; and the Nuristani languages of Ashkun and Kati in the North.

Of the few researchers who have conducted investigations among the Pashai speaking people, the Norwegian linguist, GEORG MORGENSTIERNE, has published almost all of the available material concerning this group. Based on distributional and linguistic evidence, MORGENSTIERNE concludes that the Pashai speakers once held main portions of the Kabul and Kunar Valleys. Further he feels that the present-day Muslim Pashai are descendants of the Hindu-Buddhist civilizations located in the ancient kingdoms of Kapisa and Nangrahah (1967: 11; 1944: vi). Thus the contemporary tribal and peasant mountain people who speak Pashai are the degenerate remnants of once higher civilizations swept away by invasions of Pakhto speaking Afghans. Echoing MORGENSTIERNE, KARL JETTMAR states that "... the ancestors of the Pashai tribes lived in the central region of the classic Gandhara culture before they were expelled to the mountain valleys south of Kafiristan" (1959: 86). While historical records indicate that the population of the Pashai area converted to Islam fairly recently, MORGENSTIERNE feels that this in no way means the religion of the immediate pre-Islamic period was similar to that found in neighboring Nuristan. The Nuristanis were converted to Islam in 1896 and before that exhibited a set of pagan rituals and beliefs that are in some ways strikingly similar to ancient Indic and Iranian religion. In contrast to the pre-Islamic religion of Nuristan, MORGENSTIERNE feels the paganism of the Pashai people was more a debased form of Hindu-Buddhism (1967: 12).

Thus MORGENSTIERNE states there is a basic cultural difference between the Pashai and their Nuristani neighbors to the north. The Nuristanis are the direct descendants of early Indo-Iranian tribes who migrated from Central Asia into the Indian sub-continent and the Middle East at various times during the second millennium before Christ. They have, therefore, inhabited their mountain valleys since ancient times "...and have never belonged to the community of civilized Indian peoples" (MORGENSTIERNE 1944: viii). In contrast, according to MORGENSTIERNE, the Pashai people migrated to their present location from the main river valleys to the south and at one time formed the population of societies with complex civilizations. MORGENSTIERNE feels, the difference between the Nuristanis and Pashais with regard to the development of music and poetry may be a manifestation of the different historical roots of the two ethnic groups. The rich heritage of the Pashai in ballads and songs may be a retention of aspects of Buddhist-Hindu civilization. In comparison to this relatively rich tradition, the "stunted poverty" of Nuristani poetry stands in strong contrast (1944: vii).

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1 See, for example, LENNART EDELBERG's film These were Kafirs.
Such a comparison is obviously fraught with danger. In the first place, there are as yet no systematic analyses of Pashai and Nuristani music, but even if there were it would seem difficult to control ethnocentric bias. However, in this paper I will not pursue this kind of argument. Rather, I will develop an alternative hypothesis to Morgenstierne’s based on comparative social structural, linguistic and other data. In constructing this hypothesis I will use both information gathered during field work among a Pashai tribe in 1968, and published and unpublished material on various Nuristani and Dardic societies in the area.

To the east of Nuristan in the state of Chitral there are a few inaccessible valleys inhabited by the last remaining pagans of the Hindu-Kush. These people called the Kalash (not to be confused with the Kalaša of central Nuristan) speak a Dardic language quite different from the various Nuristani languages. Their religion, while similar in many ways to the religion of pre-Islamic Nuristan (Morgenstierne 1932: 167) has important differences as well. Jettmar feels that it is even more archaic than the paganism of Nuristan in the pre-conquest period (1959: 88). Yet the Kalash speak a Dardic language similar to Pashai. Scholars have never suggested that the Kalash are degenerate remnants of a Hindu-Buddhist civilization. Jettmar, for example, feels that the Kalash, as well as many other Dardic groups of the Karakoram, retain many cultural elements of the pre-Aryan population. In fact, he argues that the pre-Aryan population of the Hindu-Kush and Karakoram probably formed one link in a continuous chain of mountain cultures stretching from the Caucasus to the Himalayas (1961: 93).

Whether or not there was a common cultural heritage linking the mountain areas of west and central Asia, I think we are safe in assuming that during the various invasions of Indo-Iranian speaking peoples into the Hindu-Kush and Karakoram regions, there was a mixture of populations, and although the Indo-Iranian languages dominated, the cultural and social systems of the immediate pre-Islamic period resulted from a synthesis of the pre-Indo-Iranian and Indo-Iranian systems. The picture that emerges, is thus a complex one. In some cases, invading Indo-Iranian groups may have either exterminated or completely submerged the previously existing people; in other cases they may have formed alliances on a more or less equal basis with pre-existing tribes, and in yet other instances the indigenous people may have retained their independence while adopting Indo-Iranian languages. But in all these cases new social and cultural patterns developed from a synthesis of the previous systems as emerging politico-ethnic groups came to terms with new physical and socio-cultural environments. Thus the cultural heritage of the eastern Hindu-Kush and Karakoram has Indic, Iranian, and pre-Indo-Iranian roots. We will probably never be able to reconstruct the details of what happened during and after the Indo-Iranian invasions, but I feel that subsequent archaeological and

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ethnographic research will support either this general picture, or at least one similar to it.

JETTMAR's research supports this hypothesis for the Dards of Chitral and Gilgit (1961, 1967) and there seems little difficulty in applying it to Nuristan as well, but does it work for the Pashai? It seems to me that Pashai ethno-history is more complex than is generally accepted. I feel that the evidence now available supports the argument that the social and cultural systems of the pre-Islamic, mountain Pashai tribes resulted from the kind of synthesis outlined above. Thus the religion of the Pashai hill tribes may well have been more similar to the paganism of the Kalash than to a form of degenerate Hindu-Buddhism.

What evidence supports this hypothesis? First, there is the linguistic position of Pashai. MORGENSTIERNE's argument that the existence of such words as waig-and- 'wind' and poinis- 'leopard' indicate a pre-existing state of civilization (1967: 11-12) does not appear to me to be particularly compelling. The relationship between Pashai and other Dardic hill languages suggests at least the possibility that it, as well as other Dardic languages, were brought into the Hindu-Kush and Karakoram by Indo-Aryan migrations before the Kapisa and Nangrahar civilizations were destroyed by the Afghans.

The distribution of physical traits among the Pashai population supports the argument that their social and cultural systems represent a synthesis of pre-Indo-Iranian and Indo-Iranian socio-cultural elements. If the argument advanced in this paper is correct, the population of the Hindu-Kush and Karakoram should show evidences of a diverse biological background. Nothing definitive can be said until physical anthropological studies based on modern genetic analysis are completed, but even the most superficial observations show a high degree of biological heterogenity among the Pashai speaking population. This diversity is found not only between and within isolated valleys, but within families as well. It has been known for some time that such heterogenity usually indicates a population with a diverse biological background — a situation that agrees with the argument advanced in this paper.

Carving motifs provide further support for my hypothesis. There are two kinds of motifs in the Hindu-Kush and Karakoram. One is composed of carvings of scrolls, leaves, and flowers and has been identified as an offshoot of Gandharan art. The other pattern is comprised of simple straight lines, lozenge designs, and spirals. JETTMAR links this latter pattern to the carvings of Nuristan and feels that it represents the actual local tradition (1961: 83). Carvings of window shutters in the Pashai villages of Darra-i-Nur, Aret, and Korungal are of this latter pattern. If the Pashai were expelled from the central region of "classic" Gandharan culture then their wood carving should show evidences of the Gandharan style. That it is more similar to the indigenous style indicates a common cultural heritage with other Dardic speaking peoples of the eastern Hindu-Kush and Karakoram.

Finally, there is the problem of distributional data. That the Pashai speakers generally inhabit side valleys, and in many cases only the upper parts of these, is one of the main reasons for MORGENSTIERNE's conclusion that they
once inhabited the main areas of the Kabul River Valley system, and were forced into their present location by invasions of more powerful Afghan neighbors (1944: vii). However, careful study shows that the distribution material does not completely support this argument. For example, if the present Pashai speaking peoples were pushed into side valleys by successive Afghan invasions, one would expect to find a particular pattern to the way valleys are settled. There should be a gradation as one goes up a valley in the length of time populations have been there. The latest inhabitants should be found towards the bottom and the earliest towards the top. But in some valleys the actual case turns out to be the opposite. In the Oygol Valley, and in the main Darra-i-Nur Valley, the latest inhabitants are located in the highest areas. In both these valleys, according to local tradition, the latest inhabitants came from areas across major mountain divides and, after much fighting, forced the original inhabitants down the valley leaving the upper section to the invaders. This tradition is shared by the people living throughout the Darra-i-Nur area. The Sum who inhabit the highest village in Oygol Valley and the Çugani, who hold the highest two villages in the main Darra-i-Nur Valley are acknowledged throughout the area to be the most recent inhabitants of the area. According to Sum traditions, they migrated over the main mountain range that separates the Oygol Valley from the Saw Valley. Today there is much social interaction between the inhabitants of these two valleys and the people in both places acknowledge kinship obligations. The same situation is found with the Çugani of Šemal and Kañdak in Darra-i-Nur. They claim to have come from Kordar, a village located in a side valley high up the Peč. According to TANNER, who visited the area in the 1870’s, the villages of the Aret Valley, the settlement of Šumast, and the inhabitants of Šemal and Kañdak all claim to have come from Kordar and all reckon close kinship (TANNER 1879, 1881).
In certain locations it is clear that Pakhto has replaced Pashai as the major spoken language and in some instances this has been correlated with conquests of the Pakhto speaking Sopi tribe. However, as I have indicated, the situation is more complicated than this. But even if it were not, there is still no evidence indicating that the areas which have successfully fought off the Sopi invasions (e.g., Arct and Sumašt) are peopled solely by the descendants of refugees fleeing from the Afghans. The possibility remains that the ancestors of the Pashai hill tribes occupied the area where they are presently found before the expansion of the Afghans.

The argument so far has been based on the kind of data cultural historians working in the area usually employ in their reconstructions. However, material derived from social anthropological analysis also provides support for the hypothesis developed in this paper. The social anthropological approach is based on the idea of pattern or order among the elements which comprise social systems. Through both analysis in single societies and careful comparisons of a limited number of closely related societies (Eggan 1954, Southall 1965) social anthropologists identify the structural-functional relationships which link the entities of social structure. By viewing custom in its social context it is possible to see how aspects of custom fit into a larger pattern. This has important implications. If social life is systematic, then when one aspect of the structure changes there should be related changes among other aspects. Thus there should be a pattern to the similarities and differences among societies in a particular area, and it should be possible to identify the differences that represent variations from a common pattern and those related to differences in basic structures. In the following analysis I shall identify two lineage structures in the Hindu-Kush/Karakoram region. The best example of the first is found among the Pakhto speaking tribes, while the second is the basic lineage structure of the various Nuristani societies. Although among the Dardic speaking people both structures are found, in Indus Kohistan, where the Afghan pattern exists, there has been a history of contact between the Dards and the Afghans, while the Dardic areas where the Nuristani structure exists have usually been more isolated from Afghan influence. Therefore, it seems probable that the Nuristan pattern represents the earlier tradition — one which stems from the pre-Indo-Iranian and Indo-Iranian synthesis. I will try to show here that the lineage system of the Sum and other Pashai tribes for which I have information represents a variation of the Nuristan pattern. This provides added evidence that the Pashai have in general the same cultural heritage as the other Dardic speaking people, and are not the descendants of lowland Hindu-Buddhist civilizations.

The Afghan lineage system is best described for the Yusufzai of Swat in two publications by Fredrik Barth (1959a and b). At first glance the Yusufzai lineage system appears similar to classic segmentary systems such as the Tiv and the Somali. From the apical ancestor Yusuf to living heads of extended families there are upwards of seven levels of lineage segmentation organized in nesting series. But such appearances are deceptive. As Barth has shown, lineages among the Yusufzai of Swat do not act as political units in opposition
to one another as is the normal case in segmentary systems. Rather, political alliances are made between units structurally far apart in the genealogical charter and "...the opposition between close collateral segments is maintained at all times" (Barth 1959b: 19). The nesting series of lineage segmentation defines a set of political councils which provide arenas for political competition. The reason lineages are not related in terms of segmentary opposition is because of rules regarding inheritance, certain ecological features, and a system of land distribution that periodically rotates arable land among lineage segments (Barth 1959b: 10-12). The combination of these elements produces perpetual rivalry between close agnatic collaterals and makes it strategically advantageous to choose political allies from lineages structurally distant in the descent system (Barth 1959b: 19-20). The result is a two-bloc system of political alliances that permeates the Swat valley.

Lineages are not exogamous. Marriage follows the normal Sunni prohibitions and are arranged between potential partners in terms of strategic political considerations of the moment (Barth 1959a: 35-40). Therefore parallel cousin marriage does not usually occur due to the normal opposition between close collateral agnates (Barth 1950a: 40).

Thus Barth has demonstrated how certain elements in the Yusufzai social system form a pattern. Each aspect is understandable in terms of the larger system. This pattern, however, is radically different from that found among the tribes of nearby Nuristan.

From Richard Strand's material on the Kom of eastern Nuristan (1970a, 1970b) and Alam Nuristani's data on the Kalasha of central Nuristan, we now have a detailed understanding of the lineage systems in these two tribes. Although there are important differences between the two, there are underlying similarities as well and, therefore, it is possible to isolate a basic Nuristan lineage pattern.

The Kom are organized in a ramifying agnatic descent structure. Each branch is denoted by suffixing the term -dar 'agnatic descendants of' to the name or nickname of the apical ancestor. Thus, for example, the Dümüdar is a branch composed of the descendants of Dümü. Within the genealogical structure any male is a potential node in the lineage system and the agnatic descendants of many male form a potential branch, but in fact, only certain males in the genealogical system are recognized as apical ancestors (Strand 1970a).

There are two levels of lineage segmentation. The more inclusive of these, called by Strand "maximal lineages", were until recently exogamous. Male members of maximal lineages call one another lōdbro 'agnate'. Women of the lineage are called fīžimi 'daughters of agnates' by their male agnates, and in turn call them talkār (Strand 1970a).

All members of maximal lineages have the jural obligation to support one another against enemies outside the lineage. If an individual is wronged by a person who is not a member of his lineage, all his agnates should mobilize in a single group of supporters to punish the offense. Although mutual support is an obligation that links all agnates, in fact the strength of such obligation tends to
diminish as the genealogical distance between agnates increases. In reality, close agnates are expected to give support to one another, while more distant agnates will not usually be jurally sanctioned as long as they do not take an active part against the offended person. In situations where an outside threat cannot be met by a small group of close agnates, more distant lineage members are expected to give active support, and it is possible for a conflict to escalate until it involves whole lineages in opposition (Strand 1970a).

Most maximal lineages are segmented into minimal lineages. In some instances maximal lineages are internally structured in terms of a "spinal cord" model. For example, the Dūmūdāra maximal lineage is subdivided into the Meregāra, Maligāra, Turugāra, Granmyodāra, and "pure" Dūmūdāra. Other lineages are fully segmented into minimal lineages, with no individuals belonging to "pure" lines. Finally, there are relatively small maximal lineages that have no recognized minimal lineages. Thus as Strand emphasizes, no lineages have more than one level of segmentation below the level of the maximal lineage. In other words, Kom lineages are not ordered in terms of a nesting structure (Strand 1970a).

This has important implications in other areas of Kom social life. Gellner in a recent discussion of segmentary lineage theory has pointed out the relationship between the density of segmentation and the ability of a segmentary structure to function effectively in maintaining order. According to Gellner:

... it is difficult to see how a society with very few nestings — say a large tribe with only one step between the total tribe and the extended family — could possibly function as a segmentary society, that is to say maintain some degree of order by means of the balancing of groups. There would only be a large number of small sub-groups belonging to a large one, but not organized in any intermediate groups. Hence, if any conflict arose involving more than two of the minute groups, but less than the total groups, there would be no pre-arranged alignments to keep the peace through balance. The number of possible alignments would be too great and too unpredictable. Either such a society would not function at all and be genuinely anarchic, or some principle other than segmentary fusion and fission would be involved (1969: 50).

Among the Kom, lineages are politically corporate in a way they are not among the Yusufzai. This, coupled with a low density of segmentation makes the maintenance of social order in Kom society problematical. That the social role "peacemaker" is strongly institutionalized in the Kom social system (Strand 1970b) and that complimentary filiation provides a network of cross-cutting ties (Strand 1970a) is consistent with the form of the lineage structure. Also consistent with the lineage structure is the nature of political arenas. Unlike the Yusufzai in which the segmentary structure defines nesting sets of political arenas, among the Kom political decisions are made during community conferences (gramviri). The right to participate in such councils is based on residence in a town or hamlet, and does not depend on descent (Strand 1970b).

Although Kalaṣa social structure differs from the Kom in important ways, there are basic underlying similarities as well. For our purposes it is not
necessary to discuss in detail the differences between the two social systems. Here it is sufficient to note that Kalaṣa descent groups, like those of the Kom, have two levels of segmentation, descent groups are both exogamous and politically corporate, the status of peacemaker is crucial in the maintenance of order, and political decision making takes place in village councils whose membership is based on residence rather than descent (Nuristani s. a.).

If we compare the Afghan and Nuristan lineage systems, the following differences stand out: Afghan lineages are organized in a nesting segmentary system with many levels of segmentation, while Nuristan lineages have few levels of segmentation and are not structured in terms of nesting models; Afghan lineages are not politically corporate, while Nuristan lineages are; and finally, Afghan lineages are not exogamous, while Nuristan lineages are. These differences are in turn related to other structural differences, i.e., differences in the organization of political councils, differences in peacemaking institutions and differences in the structure and function of complimentary filiation.

The literature on the Dards of the Hindu-Kush and Karakoram indicates that the Nuristan lineage pattern is the most widespread. Only among the tribes of Indus Kohistan is a variation of the Yusufzai pattern found. Here rights to land were, until very recently, based on a system of periodic reallocation among lineages similar to the Yusufzai system. Further, lineages are neither politically corporate nor exogamous. Related to this is a set of village councils in which membership depends on lineage representation and the existence of a two-bloc system of political alliances (BARTH 1956: 28-39).

Among the Dards of Swat Kohistan, the lineage system appears more similar to the Nuristan pattern. Rights to land are held individually and there is no system or reallocation based on lineage divisions. In general, lineages have few levels of segmentation, but this is especially marked for the Torwali where there seems to be only two levels of segmentation (BARTH 1956: 72-73). Unlike the situation among both the Yusufzai and the tribes of Indus Kohistan, lineages are politically corporate. There is no information concerning whether or not lineages are exogamous, but BARTH does report that among the Gawri there is no preference expressed for lineage endogamy (1956: 66). Similarly there is no two-bloc system of political alliances and membership in lineage councils depends on residence rather than descent (BARTH 1956: 61-63, 72-74).

Although there is little information on the lineage systems in the Karakoram region, JETTMAR's data suggest that tribes of this area exhibit variations of the Nuristan pattern. Thus, for example, in Haramosh, a side valley of the Gilgit system, there are only three levels of lineage segmentation. At the highest level are groupings called roms which, according to JETTMAR, formed units for defense in time of war (1961: 84). Roms are in turn divided into what JETTMAR calls “nations”. However, no information regarding the function of groups at this level of segmentation is given. Finally, “nations” are divided into dabbars. These groups were formerly exogamous, and seem to be the basic unit in the lineage system. The members of dabbars trace descent patrilineally to an apical ancestor seven to nine generations from living persons (JETTMAR 1961: 85).
Unfortunately, there is no information given regarding the relationship between the lineage system and political organization. However, Jettmar does mention that feuds sometimes break out between descent groups – a situation that indicates lineages are probably politically corporate (1961: 89).

Among the Pashai of Darra-i-Nur and adjacent valleys, the lineage system represents an extreme variation of the Nuristan pattern. The information given here comes from the Sum, a tribe in which I conducted field research in 1968. Sum lineages have two levels of segmentation. At the highest level are groups called ūnas. These are in turn subdivided into what are called tōpos. Both ūnas and tōpos are denoted by suffixing -de 'agnatic descendants of' to the apical ancestor which defines the descent group in question. Informants stated that in former days marriage between members of different descent groups was forbidden, and even at the time of my research such marriages were considered shameful. Yet descent groups are not important in political conflicts. They neither define the major arenas for political competition as in the Yusufzai system, nor form political units as in the classic Nuristan pattern. The major political arenas, like those of the Nuristan tribes are village councils in which membership is defined by residence rather than descent. However, political alliances are based on cognatic kinship, not on descent.

A comparison of Sum lineages with both the Nuristan and Yusufzai descent systems leads to the conclusion that they represent a variation of the Nuristan pattern. While the Sum descent system is similar in several ways to the lineage system of the Nuristan tribes – e.g. few levels of segmentation, lineage exogamy – it is in no way similar to the Yusufzai pattern. This, along with the other evidence mentioned earlier in the paper, seems to provide support for the contention that the cultural and social system of the pre-Islamic Pashai, as well as the other Nuristani and Dardic speaking people of the Hindu-Kush and Karakoram resulted from a synthesis of the pre-Indo-Iranian and Indo-Iranian systems.

There is a major problem with my argument that remains to be dealt with. I have contrasted the Nuristan and Afghan lineage systems; but is this difference a basic socio-cultural difference or is it related to differences in ecological pressures? At present the necessary data to test this possibility are not available. Although there are Pakhto speaking groups in Afghanistan that are found in the same general area and at the same elevation as Nuristani and Pashai groups, there are practically no ethnographic data available concerning them. However, what little information there is indicates that at least some of the differences in the lineage systems are not related to ecological factors. For example, in the mountains above the upper parts of the Trig animation there are three villages of Pakhto speaking Šinwari tribesmen located a short distance from two Nuristani villages. The Šinwaris were brought into the area following the conquest of Nuristan by Abdur Rahman, Amir of Afghanistan, in the late 1930s. See Keiser (1971) for a more detailed discussion of the relationships between Sum lineages and political organization.
19th century. Detailed information from the area is not yet available, but I did gather some data during a short field survey in 1968. Although both the Šinwaris and Nuristanis utilize the environment in essentially the same manner, the lineage systems of the two groups are different. The Šinwaris are part of a highly segmented lineage structure that encompasses the entire Šinwari tribe. In contrast, the lineage structure of the Nuristani villages is similar to that of the Kom and Kalaša. Thus at least in terms of levels of segmentation the difference between the Nuristani and Afghan lineage structures does not seem to be related to differences in ecological factors. However, more research must be completed among the Afghans of the high Hindu-Kush region before anything definitive can be concluded.

The main purpose of this paper was to demonstrate that the kind of material gathered through social anthropological analysis has implications for the ethno-history of the Hindu-Kush/Karakoram region. Specifically, I argued that comparative social structural data, as well as other kinds of material, suggest new conclusions regarding the ethno-history of the Pashai speaking people. The societies of the Hindu-Kush/Karakoram region exhibit the kinds of similarities and differences that are so important to comparative analysis in social anthropology and future research in the area should advance social anthropological theory. However, such research will also have important implications for cultural historians and should be taken into account in their work.

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