

CHAPTER I

Introduction

This book is a study of what it means to live a Muslim life in the Chitral region of northern Pakistan – a large Muslim populated area in one of the most turbulent regions of the Muslim world, yet virtually unknown in academic and popular literature. My fieldwork was conducted approximately fifty miles from the Afghan border, thirty miles from refugee camps where hundreds of Afghans lived during and after the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, and a twelve-hour drive from *madrasas* (Islamic seminaries) and paramilitary training camps that are now widely known to have been connected with the emergence of the Taliban government in Afghanistan. The book's focus is on two localities in Chitral, a village and a small town. Its chief concern is with the commitment shown by many Chitral Muslims to the living of intellectually vibrant and emotionally significant lives in the region. By documenting this critical dimension of their everyday lives it seeks to illuminate aspects of Muslim life both within and beyond South Asia that are not fully accounted for in the otherwise sophisticated body of anthropological work on Islam and Muslim societies. Chitral people value verbal skill and emotional refinement to a very high degree. They are also people who think, react and question when they are called upon to change their ways or conform to new standards of spirituality and behaviour. The levels of commitment shown by Chitral Muslims towards the living of intellectually engaged lives is especially striking because it is maintained in the face of attempts made by Islamising Muslim reformers and purifiers from Pakistan and beyond to homogenise and standardise religious thought and practice throughout the region.

CHATTING, PLAYING AND PERFORMING: MUSLIM
 LIFE IN CHITRAL

I made my first visit to Chitral in 1995, and over the course of the next eight years my fieldwork among the Khowar-speaking people of this remote and

Cambridge University Press

0521852234 - Living Islam: Muslim Religious Experience in Pakistan's North-West Frontier

Magnus Marsden

Excerpt

[More information](#)

beautiful mountain area took me to exuberant week-long polo tournaments played out on dusty poplar-lined polo grounds, and to night-time male-only public musical programmes at which delighted crowds cheered touring performers combining exquisite Persianate verse with penetrating contemporary satire. I first went to the region as an eighteen-year-old school leaver in order to teach for twelve months at a small fee-paying English-medium school in Rowshan village located in the north of the region: this village became one of the two field sites documented in this book. In September 1996 I started my undergraduate degree course in Cambridge, and over the course of the next three years, I made three further three-month visits to Chitral.¹ Between April 2000 and September 2001 I conducted eighteen months of 'formal' PhD fieldwork in Chitral. In addition, having completed my PhD I made three further visits to Chitral, between March and April 2002, February and March 2003, and June and October 2003.

Much of the material presented in this book was collected during my eighteen months of formal PhD fieldwork, yet it draws deeply on the experiences, memories and reflections of the earlier visits I made to Chitral. The relationships I established during my prolonged stay in the region were diverse: some of them were structured around my status as a foreign researcher, yet many of the people whose views, attitudes and lifestyles I explore in detail in this book had known me since my post-school days and corresponded with me for up to five years before I started the formal research on which this book is based. Many of my Chitral friends, indeed, had encouraged me to work on a PhD about Muslim life in their region, and we spent much time sitting in the houses and gardens of the village discussing which dimensions of Chitral society they thought it would be interesting for me to explore. Above all else they were concerned with the growing influence that an array of 'Islamising' forces were having on the nature of Chitral life. It was the Afghan Taliban, Pakistan-based Islamist political parties and their activists, and Chitral-folk who had themselves adopted strict interpretations of Islamic thought and practice, and were often referred to as the 'bearded ones' (*rigishweni*), who were the focus of many of these discussions.

During my initial stays in Chitral I also set about learning, with the help of village people, the Khowar language. Some of my friends claimed they

¹ During these visits I stayed with my friends in the region, conducted research for an undergraduate dissertation in social anthropology, and worked as a translator for a team of academics from British and American universities engaged in a research project on the geography of the region.

Cambridge University Press

0521852234 - Living Islam: Muslim Religious Experience in Pakistan's North-West Frontier

Magnus Marsden

Excerpt

[More information](#)*Introduction*

3

could not understand why I wanted to learn such a ‘useless’ (*faltu*) language, and that I would be much better off teaching them English. Yet when I did achieve a degree of fluency, I was also often told that the form of Khowar I spoke, like that of Rowshan people themselves, was its purest and most authentic form, and was unlike that spoken by Chitralis from other towns and villages in the region that were more influenced by non-Khowar-speaking ‘outsiders’ (*nagoni*). Indeed, I would often be asked by my friends in the village to repeat words, phrases and pieces of poetry before their friends from other villages and small towns in Chitral. They particularly appreciated when I, as they did, responded to their questions with pieces of poetry I had memorised from other friends and audiocassettes I had bought in the bazaar. My friends also sent long letters written in English, and sometimes Khowar, telling me of the goings-on in Chitral, and, after the introduction of a relatively reliable source of electricity to the region in 2001, we chatted on the World Wide Web and established email contact.

My long-established connections with Chitral people meant that I was able to interact with a wider array of people than usually possible for male anthropologists working in rural Muslim societies. During the early visits I made to Chitral, I lived with a family in Rowshan and I attended weddings, funerals and musical gatherings, not only in the village in which they lived but also in many other surrounding villages and valleys. By the time I returned to conduct my PhD fieldwork, I had come to be treated as a brother and son of the family with which I lived. As a result, I was able to sit and converse – alone and with other family members – with the wives, mothers, sisters, daughters and nieces of the household, as well as with young and old women in many other houses in the village. This unusual situation of being allowed access to women’s worlds and conversations prompted me to make the gendered dimensions of Chitral village Muslims’ responses to the teachings of ‘reformist’ Islam central to the arguments presented in this book.

Rowshan village itself is surrounded by high snowcapped mountains and mountain pastures which are green in spring – a time of year loved by many Rowshan people when they take their family and friends on ‘picnic tours’, at which they cook meals of rice and meat, listen to local and Indian music on cassette players, and challenge each other to games of cricket and ‘polo without horses’, a local variant of hockey. Rowshan’s small and dusty village bazaar, with its concrete shops, old tea-houses and dusty minibus stand is described by most villagers as ‘dirty’ (*gandah*) and ‘rubbish’ (*bakwaz*). Yet villagers invest greater energies into beautifying the inner lanes of the village itself – they often plant rose bushes along the

Cambridge University Press

0521852234 - Living Islam: Muslim Religious Experience in Pakistan's North-West Frontier

Magnus Marsden

Excerpt

[More information](#)

village paths, have a great love for cultivating 'delicate' (*nazuk*) flowers in their gardens, and, in the late spring months, delight in absorbing the 'intoxicating' perfumes of the Russian Olive tree (*shunjuur*), a much loved feature of Chitral's landscape. The beauty of the landscape is not lost on Rowshan villagers: my friends often told me how they were lucky to live in the most beautiful village not only in Pakistan but also in the world. Yet, for many Rowshan people, the mountains in which they live also have a darker and less appealing side. It is the dry mountains in whose shadows (*chagh*) they live, villagers often claim, that lie behind the negative features of village life that, as I explore in the following chapters, are a source of great anxiety to the villagers: 'We', I was often told, 'are mice in the world's darkest hole (*duniyo safan sar chui guch*); living in these mountains it is only inevitable that there are people who have thoughts that are narrow and bad.'

The villagers whose lives I document here also have extensive experience of city life in Pakistan, and frequently compare the merits and demerits of 'city' (*shahar*) and 'village' (*deho*) life. During my extensive stays in Chitral, besides living in the village, I also travelled in minibuses with migrant workers living in Pakistan's major cities, and stayed with young men from Chitral in hostels in Peshawar University, where they were studying for Masters degrees in subjects such as sociology, political science and international relations. Indeed, my friends and I from Rowshan especially enjoyed experiencing Chitral life in Pakistan's major cities, and we spent much time visiting groups of Chitral men and boys who worked in carpet shops in the five star hotels in Islamabad, Karachi and Peshawar. It is not only to Pakistan's cities, however, where Rowshan people like to travel – they enjoy making 'tours' and 'expeditions' to villages they describe as being even 'remoter' (*pasmandah*) and more 'traditional' than their own. My Chitral friends and I would often spontaneously decide to visit a village in the region known for being especially 'remote' and 'interesting' (*dilchaspi*): to reach such villages we would endure long and painful journeys on narrow mountain roads sitting in overloaded cargo jeeps atop bags of wheat and tins of ghee and listening to local music cassettes.

During my early stays in the region I thus came to recognise the important role that music, poetry and travel played in the living of a Muslim life in Chitral. There was rarely a minibus or jeep journey I made during which local music – usually comprising a solo male voice accompanied by the Chitral sitar and the deft beating of local drums – was not played loudly on the vehicle's cassette player. Indeed, often some

Cambridge University Press

0521852234 - Living Islam: Muslim Religious Experience in Pakistan's North-West Frontier

Magnus Marsden

Excerpt

[More information](#)*Introduction*

5

of the passengers in the bus would sing along with the music. They would often translate and interpret (*tarjuma korik*) the songs for me. These were mostly about the simultaneous experience of the pain and delight of love, but my friends also compared their own understandings of the songs' deep (*kooloom*) and complex (*pechida*) meanings with one another. Not all in the region, however, I soon discovered, were equally moved by the words and sounds of this music. Heated discussions often took place in the confined space of the minibus between men who wanted to listen to Khowar song, and the 'bearded ones' (*rigishweni*) who chastised their fellow countrymen for listening to music. These men claimed that it was un-Islamic and said that it should be replaced by cassettes of Qur'anic recitations. Yet what I recognised as critical was the flourishing of this musical life in the face of Islamisers' objections. Indeed, many of the evenings that I spent in the village itself were with young men of my own age who would gather in the evening to play the sitar, beat drums, sing and dance. We would also often travel many miles on dark nights, along precipitous roads and in battered jeeps, in order to attend musical programmes in other villages in the region.

My friends and I greatly enjoyed attending these musical programmes, and I had long wanted to experience first hand the performances of a particularly famous group of musicians who call themselves, in untranslated English, the Nobles. Their music was recorded on cassettes that were listened to with great enthusiasm in jeeps and houses throughout the region. When in January 2001 I was invited to attend a Nobles programme in Markaz, the small town that is the second locality I focus on in this book, I was excited, and, for the next eight months I became a regular presence at the Nobles' programmes – they even arranged and recorded programmes at which 'Mr Magnus from Britain, the researcher of Khowar culture and language' was the Chief Guest, and gave me the honour of being a life member of their group. I was always invited to attend their programmes, would make long journeys with the musicians of the Nobles to the many villages where they performed, and became close friends with many of the Nobles and their entourage.

Life in Chitral, though, was more than about music, dance and relaxing with friends. The importance of a good education and the struggle to learn was something very much on the minds of many village people, and in Rowshan I spent a great deal of time teaching my friends' children. Nearly all of the villagers wanted their children to learn English, and, over the years I spent in Rowshan, many parents sent their children to receive English lessons from me. I also gave English classes at schools in the village. It was not only the village's children and their parents who were interested in my

Cambridge University Press

0521852234 - Living Islam: Muslim Religious Experience in Pakistan's North-West Frontier

Magnus Marsden

Excerpt

[More information](#)

knowledge of English – young Rowshan men and women also often asked me to help them with their education and thinking. Some of these folk were well educated, and they would often ask me to read the essays they were writing in preparation for their MA degrees and civil service examinations. These men repeatedly told me that they were worried that their writing was too critical for the ‘narrow-minded’ civil servants from Pakistan’s major cities who would mark their exam scripts. Talk of such concerns took place not only in classroom situations but was, rather, a feature of everyday life: we would often go on long walks in the summer along mountain paths to nearby villages known for their sweet and juicy mulberries and apples. As we walked we would discuss the ideas of, amongst others, Rousseau, Kant and Adam Smith, and they would tell me about their reading of Islamic scholars and thinkers, including Ibn Khaldun and more contemporary Islamic scholar-politicians, such as the founder of the Islamist Jama’at-e Islami party Mawlana Mawdudi. Indeed, even my friends who lacked extensive formal education were always active in searching out people whom they thought I would find knowledgeable (*ma’alumati*) and witty (*namakin*), and such folk were themselves often poets who regularly read their poetry at formal recitals (*musha’ira*).

I also discovered that there was a great love for holding public events in the village, and that the performance of public disputation was an important feature of daily life. Yet whilst these gatherings were said to be ‘fun’ (*mazah*) by the villagers, they also had a serious dimension. I attended many public events – especially school ‘programmes’ – at which speeches were given; indeed, I was also often invited to speak in both Khowar and English about the importance of education. These speeches often initiated great discussion amongst my friends after the events when they went to the bazaar and returned to their houses.

Thus, a great deal of my time was spent in discussion with the villagers as I taught them English, played with their children, attended the weddings of their friends and relatives, helped them water their crops, went to their houses for meals and, in the long cold winter months, sat with them around wood fires nibbling dried fruit and, infrequently, enjoying a local glass of home-brewed red wine. Some of this discussion was part of a sociable exchange of views and ideas that took place when men gathered in shops, tea-houses and guest houses in the village. Cracking jokes, laughing loudly, and slapping hands were all part of these discussions. In the households of the village, women – old and young, educated and uneducated – also often vocally participated in conversation with their family members and relatives who visited their homes. Yet, many of the

Cambridge University Press

0521852234 - Living Islam: Muslim Religious Experience in Pakistan's North-West Frontier

Magnus Marsden

Excerpt

[More information](#)*Introduction*

7

discussions I had were close personal exchanges with my friends, and with the men and women in the houses in which I spent much time. In the evenings after having watched television with the family with whom I lived, I would retire to my room or, in summer, to my rope bed placed outside in the cool orchard, to take a rest. There one of the brothers or sisters of the house would often join me, and we would sit and chat until I fell asleep. During these exchanges we spoke in hushed voices, made sure that nobody was sitting outside the room listening to our conversation, and the discussions we had were often about sensitive topics. These moments of hushed talk alerted my attention to a key theme explored in this book: the role played by anxieties about the status of the hidden and the open in the living of a Chitral Muslim life.

Most of my friends were serious about their faith – they prayed regularly, sent their children and relatives for religious education in schools in the village and religious colleges (*madrasas*) beyond, and they were knowledgeable about Islamic doctrine and teachings. Yet, at the same time, they often did and said things that both I and my Rowshan friends found surprising. Some of them enjoyed drinking locally produced alcohol, whilst others smoked hashish. They were also often critical of the region's 'men of learning and piety' (Khowar *dashmanan*; Arabic *ulama*) and of many politicians and public figures in Pakistan whom they associated with Islamising policies. Rowshan people's deep knowledge of Islamic doctrine and respect for Islamic practice convinced me that the wide spectrum of opinion and ways of being Muslim that I encountered in Rowshan were certainly not a result of some people in the village being ignorant of normative Islam or current Islamising trends. Nor were these village people just eccentric holdouts swimming against the tide of an inevitable trend towards the sweeping away of non-standard or 'liberal' forms of Islamic belief and behaviour in the Frontier, and my exploration of the active and critical intellectual life of Chitral people is intended to document this. Thus, the complex nature of Muslim subjectivity and thought that I found in Rowshan encouraged me to reflect on where Chitral Muslims locate religious and spiritual authority.

The diverse array of illiterate and literate small holders, operators of small businesses, as well as educated middle-class people with professional qualifications who are the focus of this study, are aware that they are living in a world where hostile stereotypic views of Muslims are pervasive and influential. Chitral Muslims have lively and creative minds, live emotional lives, and are deeply concerned about being swallowed up by an essentialising discourse that stereotypes Muslims as 'fundamentalists' driven by

Cambridge University Press

0521852234 - Living Islam: Muslim Religious Experience in Pakistan's North-West Frontier

Magnus Marsden

Excerpt

[More information](#)

a desire to wage 'holy war', and precipitate a 'clash of civilisations' (Huntington 1993). The perceived threat has been further intensified by the events of 11 September 2001.² People in Chitral feel that they have ideas and approaches towards Islam that are novel and important, they think that their ideas and opinions should be heard by commentators in the wider world, and their awareness of hostile global stereotypes of Muslims sharpens the ways in which they reflect on being Muslim.

AIMS OF THE BOOK

My account of the critical responsiveness of Chitral Muslims to 'Islamisation' has two major goals. First, it seeks to contribute to the anthropology of Islam in the contemporary world by exploring the ways in which people lead a Muslim life in Chitral, and how they contribute in their daily lives to the form the 'Islamic tradition' takes in the region.³ Second, it seeks to make connections between the anthropology of Islam and debates in anthropology concerning intellectual creativity, emotional modes, ethics and morality, and personhood. These are dimensions of Muslim life that have been only partially explored by anthropologists of Islam: it is often assumed that because Islam is a religion of submission that whilst the relationship between the intellect (*'aql*) and faith (*iman*) is important for Muslims there is little place for the expression of individual creativity in the living of a Muslim life, and that morality in Muslim societies is a ready-made and uncontested category simply deriving from a single set of scriptural codes.⁴

More generally, whilst the term 'Muslim societies' is used a great deal in both scholarly and more popular works, and its usage is sometimes contested, there are real though very dynamic concerns involved for people in places like Chitral in conceptualising the settings in which they are living as 'Muslim societies'. This is not least because of the long tradition of Islamic scholarly debate concerning what is required of Muslims to make and keep their 'society' a 'truly Muslim' one, and the term society itself is certainly one with analogies in Arabic and Persian, and the word frequently used in to refer to the concept of society in Urdu, *mua'shira*, is the focus of many of the discussions I encountered in Khowar.

² For one anthropologist's reflections on 11 September 2001, see Tapper 2001.

³ I employ the phrase 'Islamic tradition' following Asad 1986. Asad questions anthropological writing that either essentialises or disintegrates Islam (Starrett 1998: 7).

⁴ On individuality in South Asian Islam, see Jalal 2000.

Cambridge University Press

0521852234 - Living Islam: Muslim Religious Experience in Pakistan's North-West Frontier

Magnus Marsden

Excerpt

[More information](#)*Introduction*

9

By focusing on the place that intellectual creativity plays in the living of a Muslim life in Chitral, I also seek to further the anthropological understanding of the relationship between 'local' and 'global' Islam.⁵ A number of recent studies have sought to highlight the ways in which relatively recent converts of the Muslim world are resisting the Islamisation of their lives (see especially Masquelier 2001), and many studies have emphasised how conflict and debate is an inherent feature of Islamising processes (e.g. Kurin 1993).⁶ Yet global Islam remains too often depicted as an irresistible force behind the homogenisation and 'perfection' (Robinson 1983) of Muslim identity and practice in both academic and popular accounts of the Muslim world (Kepel 2002; Naipaul 1981; Robinson 2000).⁷ I therefore draw on recent anthropological accounts of cultural globalisation in an attempt to ask the degree to which Chitral Muslims defer to authoritative calls for commitment from purist, reformist or modernist Muslims.⁸ I seek to argue against simplistic formulations treating local Islam as inherently vulnerable to global trends and forces in contemporary Islam. Moreover, I show that Muslims living in a village and a small town in a remote and poor region of Pakistan are critically engaged in debate on the shape of Islam and the current state of the Muslim world. Chitral Muslims are engaging in this culture of debate in a way that is regionally distinctive and builds on older social forms and institutions in Chitral.

My account is focused on life in Chitral, but it raises questions that bear on broader debates in anthropology and the social sciences. Social scientists are now documenting and theorising the importance of new and critical

⁵ The historian Francis Robinson has argued that 'mass reform movements have emerged which shattered any sense that there might be equilibrium maintained between the high Islamic and custom-centred traditions' (2000: 5). For a critique of Robinson's historical formulations, see Das 1984. Anthropologists have long theorised how to write about Islam in a way that both reflects diversity but also captures the religion's universal features. See Abu Lughod 1989; Ahmed and Donnan 1994; Arkoun 2001; Asad 1986; Bowen 1998; Eickelman 1982; El Zein 1977; Geertz 1968; Gellner 1981; Gilsenan 1982; Donnan and Stokes 2002; Hefner and Horvath (eds) 1994; Gilsenan 1990b; Lindholm 1995, 2001; Street 1990.

⁶ I use the term 'Islamisation' to refer to activities by Muslim organisations, movements and persons which seek to promote changes at both the collective and individual level in Muslim thought and behaviour in line with their visions of the formal requirements and doctrines of Islam.

⁷ Indeed, recent studies in the Arab-speaking Muslim world tend to assume that 'revivalist' Islam is the most powerful dimension of Muslim thought and identity in the contemporary Muslim world. On the 'Islamic revival' in Cairo for instance, see Hirschkind 2001; Mahmood 2001; Starrett 1998.

⁸ For anthropological discussion of globalisation, see, especially, Appadurai 1993; Ferguson and Gupta 1992. On the study of contemporary globalisation in its historical context, see Hopkins 2002 (ed.), Hopkins 2002a, 2002b. The importance of recognising global processes in even the most 'out-of-the-way places' (Tsing 1993) has been an important focus of much recent anthropology, see Tsing 1993 and Pilot 1999.

Cambridge University Press

0521852234 - Living Islam: Muslim Religious Experience in Pakistan's North-West Frontier

Magnus Marsden

Excerpt

[More information](#)

debates in Muslim-majority states and Muslim communities in many parts of the world.⁹ The intellectual life of village Muslims, however, has only very rarely been the focus of anthropological research.¹⁰ Indeed, the predominantly rural societies in which much of South Asia's and other Muslim populations live continue to be stereotyped as intellectually barren, rendering Muslim villages as places of non-thought. These stereotypes partly reflect old tensions in anthropological work concerning the relationship between images of the city and village in the Islamic tradition. More specifically, they also reveal the widely held assumption that villagers are deficient intellectually, and, once educated, will inevitably 'Islamise' because Islam is a faith of codes, rules and book standards, which has further tended to narrow anthropological attempts to understand the intellectual life of rural regions of the contemporary Muslim world. Nowhere has this been more apparent than in both popular and academic accounts of Pakistan's Frontier province, where the use of the term 'Talibanisation' has conveyed a view that Muslims in the region do not think but, instead, just somehow become 'fundamentalist' and Taliban-like (Kepel 2002; Rashid 2000). This is why I focus on the ways in which village and small-town Muslims in my field sites think, reflect, and debate the circumstances of the world around them, and make active and varying decisions about what kind of Muslim life to lead.

Whilst some Chitral people described in this study are relatively wealthy and educated by local standards, many are illiterate or at best educated only as far as primary school level. Yet these folk often call themselves 'intellectuals' (*hushiyar*) and creative people of emotion, and do not think that it is only formally educated Islamic purists or 'modern' secular people who have the capacity to live rational, discerning, intellectually acute and morally sophisticated lives. At the same time, however, levels of education are rising in Chitral, and Chitral people are becoming more literate and more knowledgeable about formal textual Islam. Yet these changes are not leading to a one-dimensional progression towards a single, all-powerful

⁹ See Eickelman and Piscatori 1996 on contemporary debates about religion and politics in the Muslim world. On these issues amongst Southeast Asian Muslims, see Hefner and Horvatic 1994. On 'political Islam', see Kepel 2002; Nasr 1999; Roy 1994; and for an anthropological critique of the concept, see Hirschkind 1997. On the shape of Muslim politics and identity in Muslim communities outside the Muslim world, see Kepel 1994, 1997.

¹⁰ On anthropological writing on the importance of practice and ritual in 'village Islam', see, for instance, Bowen 1989, 1992b; Loeffler 1988. In the wider world it is often assumed that there is little intellectual activity in Pakistan. V. S. Naipaul has recently commented that Pakistan 'is not a book-reading country, it has no intellectual life. All you need is the Koran and a ruler with a big stick' (Naipaul quoted in A. Robinson 2002: 17).