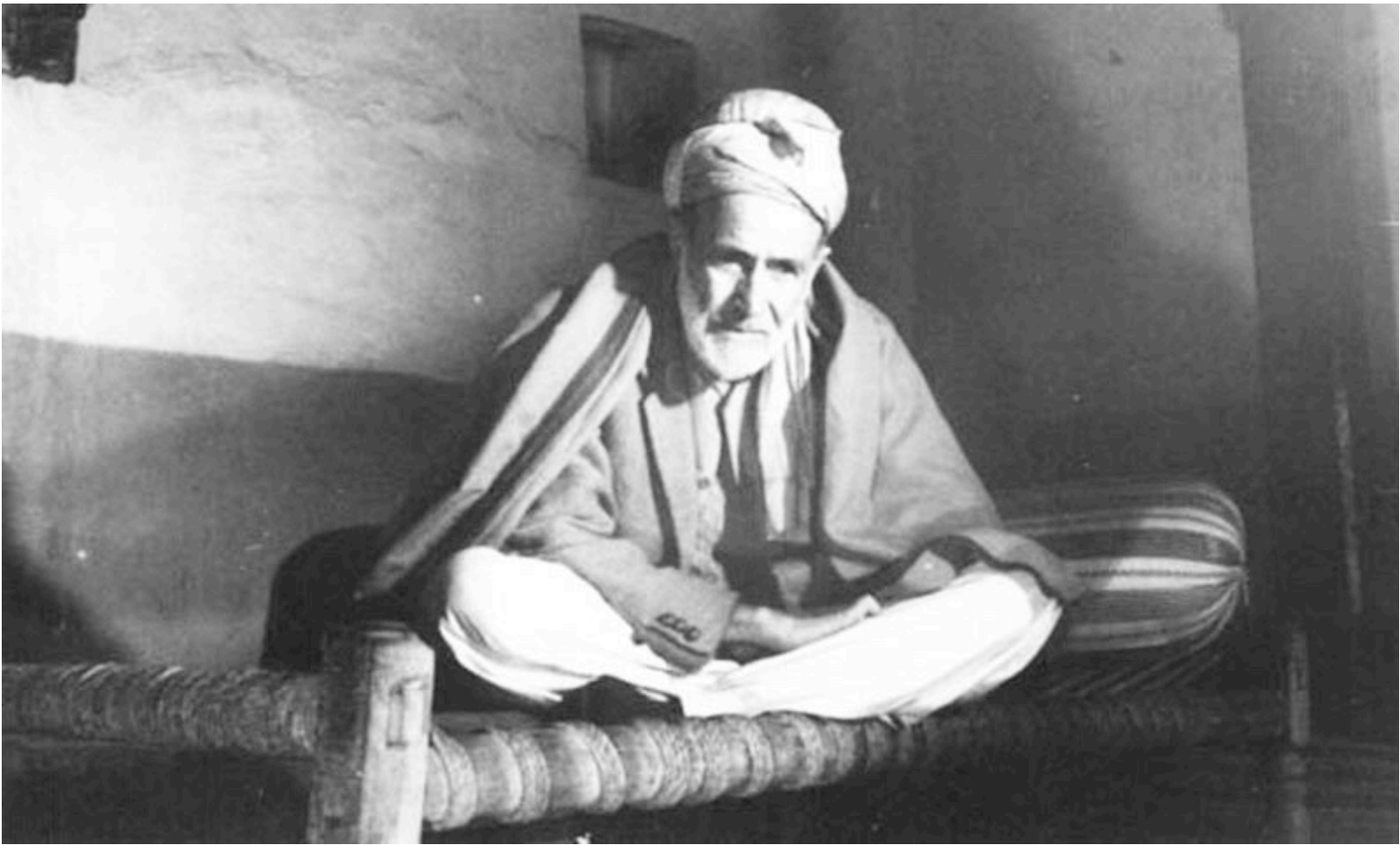


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# The Lives of Amir Hamza Shinwari

## James Caron



Amir Hamza Shinwari at home.

وايي اغيار چې د دوزخ ژبه ده - زه به جنت ته د پښتو سره ځم

Outsiders say it is the language of Hell –  
But I; it's to Heaven, with my Pashto, that I go

In 2013 at the School of Oriental and African Studies at the University of London—better known as SOAS—students started a Pashto learning circle in the evenings. It was meant to address the dearth of Pashto on the pages of our university curriculum, caught forever on the borders between power. In the age of colonialism, SOAS did pioneering work in the philology of the empire's frontier language; but this discipline began declining even before the empire dissolved. In the Cold War, Pashto fit uncomfortably in SOAS' specialty, Area Studies: neither Middle East nor South Asia it straddled the Afghan and Pakistan border and US and Soviet spheres of influence. In the post-2001, post-Area Studies, neoliberal university era, it has become a hard sell: it is difficult to make a market case; while contemporary security studies rarely invite knowledge in Pashto, or any local languages.

The Pashtun heartland, forever garrisoned on the borders of empires, has always been more interesting to power as a problem rather than as an asset, and has always been ruled by languages and cultural formations that aren't local: first Persian, then English and Urdu, and now, all of the above plus the nonhuman languages of big data that drive military and the intelligence machinery. Pashto might be seen from all of these perspectives as an impenetrable Language of Hell. For me, who first came to the region as a researcher but was received by families there like a well-loved

stepchild, these evening sessions in London were personally important. It was a small attempt to pull a place that is deeply meaningful in my life out of the metropolitan imagination that sees it as always some *more important place's* borderland. For me, it was an attempt to recenter its selfhood: to point at Heavens the British public scarcely imagined, and to get there in Pashto itself. So we would review grammar for an hour, and then we would move on to literature or public culture. The first thing we discussed was the poem containing the "Language of Hell" quote, substantially modified and rendered in a recent music video by the band "Ismail and Junaid." We watched the video, and we also read the original. Here *it* is:

تل به په لار د مېړنو سره ځم - یمه پښتون د پښتو سره ځم  
د ملیت نمره د پرځې په څیر - ستا د دې شوخو پلوشو سره ځم  
دا چې خرد هم په ملت څاروي - زه دې همداسې لېونو سره ځم  
پام کوه زه هغه نظر نه یمه - چې به په دود د سپېلنو سره ځم  
وايي اغیار چې د دوزخ ژبه ده - زه به جنت ته د پښتو سره ځم  
راستیدي چې نه شي وخت خو نه یم - خو د حالت د تقاضو سره ځم  
لا خو مې ستر په لمرڅاټه پراته دی - نه لکه لمر د پرېوتو سره ځم  
کړمه جهان چې د پښتون ځلمي - د خپلو پیغلو حوصلو سره ځم  
وړم مستقبل ته د ماضي روایات - زه د خپل حال د ولولو سره ځم  
خو چې راغونډ په یو مرکز یې نه کړم - هرې ټپې ته د جرگو سره ځم  
حمزه سفر که د حجاز وي نو هم - زه د پښتون د قافلو سره ځم

*I will travel with the brave and virile –  
I am a Pashtun; so with Pashtuns I  
go*

*Like the cresting sun of nationhood –*

*With your teasing, joyful rays will I go*

*They, who give up even a little for  
nationhood – It is with such insane  
fanatics that I go*

*Take note, I'm not the evil eye – That  
with talismanic rue smoke, I dissipate  
and off I go*

*Outsiders say it is the language of  
Hell – But I; it's to Heaven, with my  
Pashto, that I go*

*I can't go backwards, and I'm not in  
Time either – But along with the need  
of the day, I go*

*My elders lay eastward where the sun  
rises – But I'm no sun that, sunk in  
the west, off I go*

*Into a Youth the Pashtun world  
formed me – Led by fresh-faced  
optimisms, I go*

*I carry stories of the past into the  
future – Through twists and turns of  
my present, on I go*

*Unless I gather everything up into one  
center – From district to district, with  
jirgas will I go*

*Even if I, Hamza, make pilgrimage to  
Hijaz – It'll be with a caravan of  
Pashtuns that I go*

How should we read this poem? In setting it up for the students, I could have given a nationalism-centered narrative as a context. The poem was composed in 1954 by Amir

Hamza Shinwari, one of the twentieth century's towering giants of Pashto poetry. He is regarded as not only the master of the neoclassical Pashto *ghazal* tradition, but as a leading voice of Pashtun nationalism. In 1954, Pakistan was coalescing as a highly-centralized authoritarian state, with its normative citizen an Urdu-speaking, modernizing, pan-Islamic cosmopolite. In such a context, one might imagine this poem reflected regionalism; ethnonationalism; aspirations for the empowerment of identity and of roots that the nation-state denied. Meanwhile, Afghan nationalism was at a height across the border, and the Afghan government leveraged calls for 'Pashtunistan' as pressure in its foreign policy. In commonplace views, if the Pakistani nation-state denied Pashtun regional aspirations, it was because those aspirations were inherently anti-unity in the eyes of a centralized, authoritarian state, and they also fit too easily into a countering nation-state discourse.

I could have said all that but I did not. Without any such priming, the students did register some of the original poem's nationalism in Ismail and Junaid's video; but mostly they noted a sense of wistfulness. It is indeed the dominant note in the video, but I think it is there in Hamza's original poem too, along with a sense of being caught in the middle of time and space and feeling fundamentally alienated in each. The musicians picked up this note and crafted a video that, in a trend of similar work in the early 2010s, laments the loss of youth along with a fictive secular Pashtun national past: a cohesive traditional society now

fractured by a culture-blind security state on the one side, and a violent religious counter-hegemony on the other. But then, what was this loss for *Hamza*, who should exemplify that golden age?

In what remains I want to explore all the themes above from the vantage point of a

context (drawn largely from Qabil Khan's excellent work, *Amir Hamza Khan Shinwari: Life and Works*). We might call his a borderland life; though we will see that it is more appropriate to call it a life into which borders grew, a life reoriented along with social geography.



Mazar of Amir Hamza Shinwari and the borderland horizon

marginalized frontier, rather than a nationalist center: a self-internalized image of 'Pashtun' as 'Borderland Other'; a resistance to this image through the countervailing one of a Pashtun geography as salient in itself; and the fracturing of older geographies generally. And, I want to end by exploring the tentative optimism of Hamza's last lines: the possibility of recreating lost geographies not through *abstract idealized nationalist community* like the nation-state presumes, but through *intimate* community. I want to do all this through an exploration of Hamza's life and

## Sufism

If later in life Hamza wrote poetry about being dislocated in time and space, he also did write poetry that located him in much larger geographies. One of these geographies is defined by genealogies of sufism. Take Hamza's famous devotional poem "*Be-Khabara*", performed by his compatriot Rafiq Shinwari and dedicated to the man who was *murshid*, or a spiritual guide, to both: 'Abd al-Sattar Shah Badshah. In this poem the lineage of Sattar Shah, whom Hamza calls *Fakhr-i 'Ilm*





Right: Abd al-Sattar Shah, Hamza's murshid. Top left: Hamza. Bottom left: Tahir Shah Bukhari'

and *Bacha Jan*, links to that of the Chishti sufi order: this poem's 'Mahbub-i Ilahi' refers to Nizam al-Din Awliya (d. 1325), saint of the Delhi court. It also invokes Nizam al-Din's spiritual ancestor Mu'in al-Din Chishti (d. 1236) who migrated from Afghanistan to his current resting place in Ajmer, India. Tracing the Chishti lineage here, there, and everywhere in between brings into focus a vast web of shrines, pilgrimage routes, and burial places: a spatial awareness that cuts across administrative spaces and that still lives in the minds of devotees. Sattar Shah himself wandered across and beyond what are now the fringes of South Asia: Kashmir, Afghanistan, Iran. A man searching for a *murshid*, he found his own place in these networks.

In his doctoral work, Waleed Ziad describes how, since the eighteenth century, entrepreneurial scholars and holy men, or sufis, left the chaos of imperial decentralization in the Indian plains for comparatively better circumstances in what we now call the Afghan borderlands. They gradually built networks based on face-to-face relationships of intimate spiritual connection with each other and with local populations, forming an archipelago of hospices, libraries, and schools in the areas between Peshawar and Bukhara. Sufi orders came to have commercial and diplomatic roles: caravans would not travel from one minor ruler's territory to another without the supernatural protection, the diplomatic finesse, or the social intelligence that these scholar-trader-saints provided. In an era of political

anti-centralization, their networks produced whatever geographical and cultural unity existed. As Ziad argues, in the eighteenth century, sufi ethics emanating from Peshawari networks later provided socially-legitimate models of kingship in places like Bukhara, places that are usually narrated as centers of state formation. In other words, the places we now call the margins constituted the center, rather than the other way around. The very *idea* of 'borderland' makes no sense in such a situation.

## Fragmentation

As of 1907, these networks existed, but the Kingdom of Afghanistan and British India were consolidating into separate sovereign territories, with separate cultural centers of gravity. In that year Hamza was born in Lwargai: a small town in Khyber Agency that traditionally supplied credit and mule contracts for cross-border trade, and that hosted sufi educational institutions. But new transformations were unraveling the networks that made this region into a salient space all its own. Customs of communal harvest were being replaced by wage labor as imperial political economy spread; while borderland capital was increasingly reoriented toward twin poles of Kabul or Punjab, bypassing borderland hubs like Lwargai.

From 1900 to 1930, the Afghan monarchy also co-opted sufi networks into its own hierarchies, eventually folding them into official bureaucracies. On the British side, in the centrally-administered Tribal Areas there was an intertwining of sufi politics into the much

more local politics of *maliks*: rural elite partners in indirect imperial rule. By the mid 1920s, other prominent sufi centers started aligning themselves with local offshoots of either the Muslim League or the Indian National Congress: all-India political parties. Whether pro-empire or anti, this further shifted sufi politics toward colonial centers. Intellectual production by sufis, in what was now a borderland, still crossed the border but negotiations here are emblematic. A set of famous versified sermons by Hamza's *murshid*, Sattar Shah, circulated on both sides, but they needed to pledge allegiance to different local, politically-significant *pirs* depending on which side of the border one stood: a far cry from the time when it was rulers who sought the favor of, and were determined by, networks.

Hamza came to work as a railway ticket salesman in Peshawar. His knowledge of these new routes shaped his life more than the old ones did, and even religious geographies were easier to trace if they coincided with new imperial pathways, both infrastructural and cultural. A keen theater student, Hamza ran away from home in 1928 and hopped a train to Bombay, stayed with an Afridi trader there, and searched for openings in the young film industry. His brother was sent to fetch him soon after, but they took the opportunity to visit the Chishti shrine at Ajmer Sharif in Rajasthan on their way back. There, they fell in with a *qawwali* troupe, at first for safety; but the brothers also accompanied the troupe for a period of wilderness meditation. They continued on to Delhi, touring a circuit of

sites in the Chishti lineage before returning home. Back in Khyber, in 1930 Hamza accepted *bay'ah*, or discipleship, with Sattar Shah, who encouraged him to compose poetry in Pashto, rather than in the Urdu that Hamza had previously adopted. But the southeastern pilgrimage circuits attracted Hamza, more than the ever-more-fragile ones straddling the ever-more-salient border between Afghanistan and British India. He returned on pilgrimage to Ajmer and Delhi in 1931, traveling with several companions including a Punjabi woman practitioner of miracles named Mai Jalandhari. This was the first of many return trips to Delhi, and Hamza took *bay'ah* with various *murshids* there.

### Reorientation and massification

As Hamza outgrew the intimate face-to-face networks of his native region, his devotional practice gradually emphasized sufism's disembodied, rather than intimately-transmitted, lineage: its historical texts, more than its living practitioners. Figures like Ibn 'Arabi and Khwaja Farid visited Hamza in his dreams; and his trips to Delhi were increasingly aimed at philosophical study. And Hamza's travel was inseparable in another way from a growing emphasis on sufism as mass-reproduced text. He was unable to break into the film industry but he did work in the radio in Delhi, writing early dramas. This built up his media connections and by 1938 his poetry was in hot demand among an early generation of *qawwali* singers on All-India Radio's Pashto broadcast. Just as earlier sufis did not separate professional and spiritual life

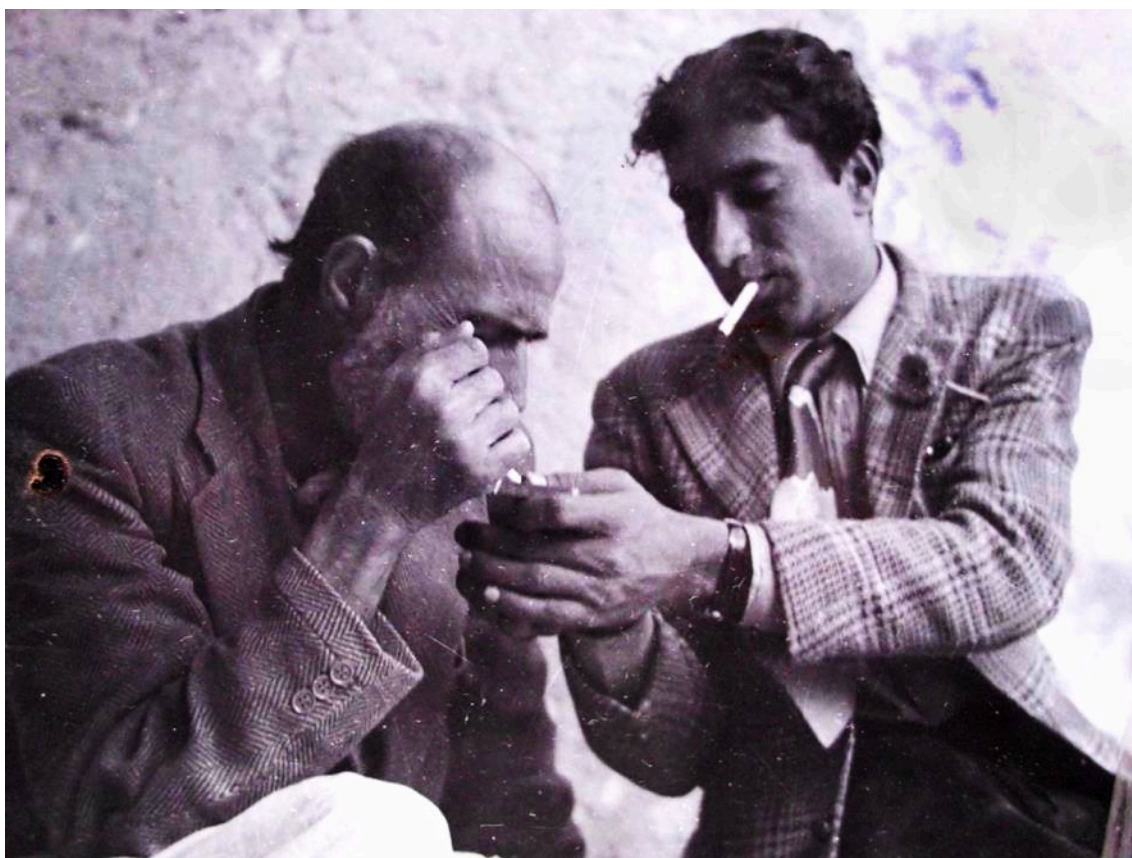
in the networks of their decentralized age, neither did Hamza in this imperial age with its own networks of people and technology.

And then, disembodied Pashto sufism began returning from the regional metropole of Delhi, to reconfigure culture in a newly-constituted borderland, one with increasingly securitized and localized social institutions that looked to India if they looked anywhere beyond the horizon. It was Sattar Shah and Hamza who first introduced both *qawwali* and the Urdu-style *musha'ira*, or poetry rally, to the Tribal Areas; the latter also took on a sufi color, as they held the first one in honor of the poet-saint 'Abd al-Rahman. Mass-mediated Pashto sufism received a boost during the Second World War, as the Pashto branch of All-India Radio, under the scholar Maulana 'Abd al-Qadir, filled an imperial demand for non-political programming. The formal neoclassicism of Hamza's growing poetic school, and its focus on contemplative sufism, was a deliberate counterbalance in the media against more radical developments in Pashto sufism, like the insurgent borderland networks of Faqir Ippi, who diverted tens of thousands of British troops even in wartime; or the activist committees of the fiery Communist Deobandi scholar Maulana 'Abd al-Rahim Popalzai, *mufti* of Peshawar. It even counterbalanced the poetry of Ghani Khan, who would become the other towering figure in modern Pashto poetry, and who applied textual sufism to more anarchic purpose: taking aim at all tradition, while being sharply antiauthoritarian toward empire, state, malik, and organized religion.

## **Dissolution: reconstituting local encounters as activism?**

Since 1936 the NWFP had been governed by the Indian National Congress, in concert with the Khudai Khidmatgar movement built by Ghani Khan's father, 'Abd al-Ghaffar Khan. This mass movement folded subaltern agency into politics through multiple kinds of public

discipline in a quasi-sufi *bay'ah*: the pledges were to God, in a movement that served Him via service to humanity irrespective of caste or creed. The movement was built through painstaking activism that incorporated local intimacy of preexisting bonds and built new ones, reaching far into everyday life and individual senses of selfhood.



Left: Amir Hamza Shinwari. Right: Progressive Urdu poet Ahmad Faraz

outreach. The movement's rallies and festivals transformed village public spaces called *hujras*, and some sufi centers like Ziarat Kaka Sahib in Nowshera fused with this activism. The scholar Safoora Arbab's ongoing doctoral work shows how its songs transformed popular Pashto literary culture and were internalized; and individuals pledged nonviolent sociopolitical

When Pakistan was formed in 1947, they were seen as a threat to the new Muslim League government's central authority. In the run-up to independence Ghani Khan formed an armed group parallel to the nonviolent Khudai Khidmatgars called 'Zalmay Pukhtun', or 'Pashtun Youth', to defend against violence from Muslim League workers.



And in Pakistan's first use of military force to extend bureaucratic centralization and state sovereignty, the early provincial Muslim League government under Qayyum Khan *cracked down brutally* on movement rallies. The movement's networks were dismembered, root and branch, as were more radically leftist ones. In this era, Pakistan shifted from its colonial past only to consolidate a Cold War

by Hamza and his colleague Maulana 'Abd al-Qadir, who also founded the government-sponsored Pashto Academy in 1955, this was a provincial part of the rise in Pakistan of what *Saadia Toor* calls the "Establishment writer": part of a worldwide trend, Toor argues, in which US funding promoted quietist art through national governments and local cultural organizations.



A page from Hamzah's diary.

clienthood with the US, and even intellectuals' libraries were ransacked. Amid all this, the hybrid modernist, sufi-inflected mass-media presence established in Delhi was successfully reimplanted in Pakistan. By the 1950s Hamza published his first anthology, one of sufi poetry. Meanwhile, the government sponsored at least two literary periodicals of good quality in attempts to fill the cultural vacuum left by its intervention in the Pashto public sphere. Led

It is hard to overstate the trauma that results from dismantling political movements that are so organic with social institutions. Since the Khudai Khidmatgar movement had its bases in everyday public space like the *hujra*, this assault on the movement, and the policing that ensured it would not return, broke everyday public space itself in the Frontier. There was a sense that independence brought only dispersal, a total loss of the society that the anticolonial movement so laboriously built. By Khudai Khidmatgar movement stalwart and socialist poet 'Abd al-Akbar Khan Akbar:

*If liberty means starvation and stark  
nakedness I hate it.*

*What type of a windstorm was it*

*Which blew off and scattered my  
gathered harvest?*

*Who planted wild grass in my garden  
of roses?*

*Probably we are not destined to*

*Enjoy the blessings of freedom*

*Not a flash of it, not a grain of it.*

*What sort of freedom is this?*

No longer were movement writers, or indeed their more radical communist colleagues like the poet and religious scholar Kakaji Sanobar Husain, connected to outward-facing grassroots movements. Instead, in the early 1950s Kakaji and others formed a circle of alienated progressive writers, the Ulasi Adabi Jirga, and in a politically savvy move they invited Hamza, with his nonthreatening reputation, to serve as the founding president. It seems that it was this new circle of intimate face-to-face links that was transformative for Hamza and his nationalism, in a period when Pashto served as clientelistic government propaganda if it were allowed any mass-media audience whatsoever; and that too was mistrusted in a period of increasing Urdu hegemony and political centralization.

Here the mobility of Hamza's Pashto letters, and its ability to reshape local worlds, came to reconstruct those same worlds that were dismantled. In a situation where mass media presence was impossible, the Ulasi Adabi Jirga took a cue from Hamza's earlier sufi outreach with Sattar Shah, sponsoring live literary events, reconstructing oral worlds of cultural activism in spaces where the abstract nation-state did not live. The memoir of activist Ajmal Khattak makes it clear this was a proxy for political activity in an age when political organization was impossible. Hamza's

meaningful intimate community is defined by the Language of Hell and its face-to-face circles, even as he is also a citizen of a modern 'Islamic-Republican' nation-state that holds little place for his former geographies:

*Into a Youth the Pashtun world  
formed me – Led by fresh-faced  
optimisms, I go*

*I carry stories of the past into the  
future – Through twists and turns of  
my present, on I go*

*Unless I gather everything up into one  
center – From district to district, with  
jirgas will I go*

*Even if I, Hamza, make pilgrimage to  
Hijaz – It'll be with a caravan of  
Pashtuns that I go*

Does the line about 'Pashtun youth' recall Ghani Khan's Zalmay Pukhtun; and do 'jirgas' recall the Ulasi Adabi Jirga—both linked across the twists and turns of the present through similar modes of face-to-face activism in conditions of repression? Maybe, but even if this 'wordplay' is actually just coincidence, the relegation of Pashto activism to intimate realms of face-to-face interaction awakened specific modes of political thought for Hamza and his colleagues. We begin to understand wistfulness and loss, but we also some of the particular dimensions of Pashto as intimate solidarity in Hamza's *optimistic* vision for an alter-nationalism. This vision would not exist if not for its birth in otherness, repression, and social loss, but it draws on deep social memory of older face-to-face networks,

preserved in disembodied poetic space that still recalls even earlier eras of intimacy.

Would a rise of Pashto and Pashtunness to a status of hegemony in an imagined community—the aspiration often ascribed to Pashtun nationalists—even appeal to Hamza? Could new sorts of political society be built on these foundations, once freed from the authoritarianism that gave rise to them; or, paradoxically, do they need that repression to be thinkable? I do not know; nor is it for me to say. But either way, if Hamza's vision is still relevant to the youth of the Peshawar Valley, as it is to at least some, could his alternate politics *still* be possible? If Hamza's milieu has the potential to continually disregard the borders drawn over its history, moving further each time until it can even deeply move the youth of the same metropole that once helped consign Pashto to Hell, as I think I saw it do, might it encode something that is both a language of Hell *and* a way out of it? At the least, might it not be important to recount intimate lives in detail, and translate poetry, for a society that is usually fed only objectified static images of Pashtuns? ■

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