

Gham-Khadi: The Reciprocal Exchanges, Obligations, Everyday Spendings and its Correlation with Corruption

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Abstract



In Pakhtun society, the social, reciprocal and obligatory nature of gham-khadi knits and strengthens social ties, associations, and friendships through different types of gift-exchanges. Non-compliance to the code of gham-khadi often means social death. Thus individuals feel obliged to carry out these reciprocal practices for their social existence and to remain part of the social system. The same pressure is seen operating in bureaucracy where gham-khadi is used as a justification to socially legitimize corrupt practices. Using an anthropological lens, this article argues that the guiding social code of gham-khadi also makes its way to the public offices and plays a facilitating role in actions related to corruption. Gham-khadi is frequently exercised within the bureaucracy to an extent that it overrides the official code. Being part of the social collective, bureaucrats practice gham-khadi in their offices in similar ways as they practice it in their daily social life. The article expounds ways in which public offices and state services are used by bureaucrats as means to fulfill their social reciprocal obligations that come under the discourse of gham-khadi. Data for this article was collected through a multi-sited ethnographic study in three sub-districts (tehsil) of the two of the four central districts of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa including Peshawar, Charsadda, Nowshera, Mardan and Swabi. Data was collected through participant observation, key informants and semi-structured interviews using purposive sampling.

JEL classification: G32, M14

Keywords: [gham-khadi, reciprocal obligations, Pukhtunwali, bureaucracy, corruption, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa]

Introduction

Literally meaning death and wedding, *gham-khadi*, is a compound term, widely used for the reciprocal exchanges and obligations among Pakhtuns on wedding and funeral ceremonies. Generally, the term extends beyond just weddings and funerals to include all situations of loss and grief (*gham*) and those of happiness and joy (*khadi*). *Gham-khadi* constitutes such social practices in which happiness and sadness are considered to be indissoluble and are celebrated communally (Ahmed: 2005). Largely observed within the networks of reciprocal social obligations, the *gham-khadi* events are locally understood to be a woman's work (ibid). However, it is argued that *gham-khadi* as a system of reciprocal obligations is not just limited to women and domestic space but one that penetrates across different spheres functioning as a guiding code for all. Ideally, *gham-khadi* is believed to knit and strengthen social ties, associations, and friendships. It is hence considered indispensable for the very fabric of social bonds among Pakhtuns. The article attempts to delineate this code vis-à-vis bureaucratic practices with a focus on its usage for social legitimization of corruption; including informal regular strategies used by individuals as well as bureaucrats to exert pressure, extort benefit, or reflect their supreme status. The sense of social obligation underlying *gham-khadi* at times supersedes the personal choice, exerting social pressure on performance irrespective of an individual's capacity to carry out such practices. The cultural inscription of *gham-khadi* coincides with the multiple and diversified understanding of corruption. The article expounds social and ritualistic aspects of reciprocity through the acts of gift-giving, money exchanges, exchange of visits on different occasions, and paying back favors; all of these are seen in congruence with the practices of corruption. Multiple and competing demands are imposed on the people's time, energy, finances, and responsibilities on the occasions of sorrow and joy through *gham-khadi*. The same are seen replicated within bureaucratic system and interestingly with the same emphasis. The obligatory nature

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of *gham-khadi* for social existence overrides the official and moral code here and facilitates corruption.

Data for this article was collected through a multi-sited ethnographic study carried out in three sub-districts (tehsil) of the two central districts, of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province between Fall 2015 to Fall 2017 with intermittent visits until the end of 2020¹. The main sites however were offices of the land officials from where the petitioners were followed to their village and homes after building rapport. The main project aimed at holistically studying practices and perceptions of corruption in the post-colonial land administration. This article focusses on one of the key aspects of the social embeddedness of corruption, that is, *gham-khadi*. Given the sensitive nature of research and to ensure confidentiality, name of the villages and sub-districts (*tehsil*) have been omitted. Additionally the two districts out of the four central districts, Peshawar, Nowshera, Mardan and Swabi, where the research was conducted are not specified. This is done to avoid drawing any inferences about the respondents and cases presented in this paper. Data presented in this article was collected through ethnographic tools of participant observation, key informants and semi-structural interviews using purposive sampling. Data was analyzed systematically using thematic analysis.

Literature Review

Pre-existing literature establishes that the conceptualization of corruption has largely been mired in contestation (Gallie, 1956). Much work has been done to conceptually explore the topic (Navot, 2014; Philip, 2015). Academics have found it extremely challenging to reach a conceptually robust definition that could reflect the exact nature of corruption. This is primarily because of the association of corruption to aspects of morality; since morality at its core is understood to be subjective and culturally bound, hence comprehension of corruption also then varies relative to each context (Rose, 2017). However, Johnson's Dictionary of the English Language, Vol. 1, which explained corruption along the lines of wickedness, loss of integrity, and principles, reflected the first-ever attempt in modern literature to systematically define corruption. Conceptualizing corruption along with the value judgment instead of elaborating on specific situations in which a particular action might be deemed as corrupt, prompted academics to delineate the concept further. Academics sought corruption to be constituted of distinct substantial concepts. Brooks (1970) defined corruption within the conception of intentional neglect of performance or duty while Nye (1967) defined corruption as behavior that deviates from the formal duties of a public role because of some private, pecuniary, or status gains; merging the public and private domains. The struggle to conceptualize and define corruption reflects the varied meanings and understanding associated with the concept of corruption. The academics have tried to be more specific over time, and the most widely accepted definition of corruption remains the one presented by the International anti-corruption NGO Transparency International (TI, 2017b) which is, "the abuse of entrusted power to private gain." Academics, however, unanimously agree that different definitions have different applications in different organizations and systems (Rose, 2017) relative to the cultural context. The cultural inscription has thus been considered significant in the understanding of this paradigm; a buzzword corrupt culture was introduced to unravel some cultural practices that otherwise might not be considered corrupt (Srirejeki, 2020). Understanding the importance of cultural relativism is important where a certain practice for instance gift-giving might be proclaimed as a gesture while in other cultures is deemed as a bribe. Associated with the general moral orientation of the inhabitants of any country Srirejeki (2020) iterates on three complexities inherent in the link between culture and corruption. Firstly, any understanding of corruption must have a cultural context; for it is not one concept that would fit all. Secondly, the literature lacks enough empirical support to show linkages between corruption and culture; certain practices which are deemed as corrupt in a particular culture might not be followed by all the inhabitants. This leads to the third complexity which prohibits designating the culture of any nation as corrupt in totality and instead prompts that core cultural values must be embraced to dismantle the negative patterns that assist in corruption. This also hinted at corruption being used as a reciprocal exchange practice (Torsello, 2015). The idea of reciprocity as conceptualized by Sahlins (2017) identifies three forms of reciprocity that characterize the social exchange theory of anthropology; 1) generalized, 2) balanced, and 3) negative. The first two are largely deemed as positive patterns of social behaviors that reflect affection, and care, while the third negative reciprocity entails extortion, or barter; reflecting impunity

¹ Data was collected by the first author who has language expertise and an access to the male-dominated offices.

and personal profit. In this context, corruption was also seen as a form of social exchange where in each culture and society certain established patterns of negative reciprocity exist which can be characterized as corrupt. Certain informal practices like *guanxi* (personal connections) in China are also deemed corrupt regular strategies used by individuals to exploit or manipulate formal rules by enforcing informal norms in formal contexts (Ledeneva, 2008). Thus, the above literature aptly reflects the complexities inherent in the conceptualization of corruption over time. It also prompts the cultural understanding of the concept to understand it in true essence.

***Gham-khadi* and its Correlation with Corruption**

Gham (death) and *khadi* (wedding) is a term widely used for the reciprocal exchanges and obligations Pakhtuns practice during wedding and funeral ceremonies. The term *gham* however includes all situations of loss and grief those of illness, accidents with injuries, loss in business and any feud or conflict between two groups which creates a complicated situation that may result in harm or loss. Same is the case with the term *khadi*, it basically refers to a wedding, but includes all occasions of happiness and thus includes birth of a child, circumcision, performing pilgrimage, building a house or a hujra, buying a car even home appliances (typically among the poor and middle class), establishing a new business and getting a government job specially of a higher rank.

Gham-Khadi strengthens kinship, friendship and other forms of social associations across geographical boundaries. It operates as interconnected reciprocal obligations, exchanges and dependencies which make society a collective whole with links and bonds interwoven like a web. The reciprocal obligations include visiting each other occasionally and on occasions of *gham* and *khadi* particularly. During these visits the hosts are required to provide the best hospitality as per their economic position and his' as well the guest's social status. The guests however are expected to bring fruits on occasional visits and when they visit a sick person. It is also expected to give some cash to children (if any) in the host's family. They may give some money to the sick person and/or a combination of cash and seasonal fruits or some grocery items mostly sugar and beverages.

On weddings, the relatives are desired to bring gifts or/and give some cash which depends on the status, the closeness of the relationship and earlier exchanges. Close relatives are sometimes asked for a specific item of household use such as furniture, home appliances and utensils or of personal use like jewelry etc. Both on funerals and weddings, the hosts arrange food for the relatives and all the other guests. On funerals, food arrangements last for three days for stay over as well as visiting guests. This includes the three meals of the day, tea and snacks. Tea or cold drinks are offered to all guests, lunch is arranged for visitors coming for condolence in the afternoon while dinner and breakfast for the stay over guests. It is important to note here that despite guests' reluctance to eat and to avoid unnecessarily burdening the grieved family; food is arranged Food avoidance on funerals is observed also because of the various taboos associated with food consumption from the house of the deceased.

The case of weddings is different; a typical wedding lasts for three days with different functions on each day. Weddings usually are held over weekends. The functions on the three days are termed as *mehndi*, *baraat* and *walima*. *Mehndi* may be celebrated separately by the bride and groom's family or together. Following the patrilocal pattern of residence in a patriarchal and patrilineal system, the groom's family along with their relatives and friends, on *baraat*, visit the bride's side to bring her along to the groom's home. People from the lower and middle class arrange for transportation, some collect some fare too, but relatives and friends prefer and are desired to bring their own cars, mostly on rent. On the last day of this three days long event, all the friends; relatives including relatives from the bride side; all people of the adjacent *muhallas* in case of urban centers and all fellow villagers as well as the surrounding villages in case of rural areas, are invited for a reception arranged by the groom and his family. The meal of the reception again is in keeping with the social status of the groom or his parents. The poor arrange one course one dish meal usually brown rice, the middle class add beef to the rice and sweet rice as dessert while the rich arrange lavish meal with assorted meat dishes prepared in a variety of ways and some with vegetables followed by a dessert. In cities people prefer to hold marriage ceremonies in wedding halls where the groom's family is charged per head depends on the pre-selected menu. A good reception more dishes and in an (expensive) marriage hall symbolizes the social status of the groom and his family. A good reception entails one arranged in an expensive wedding hall, with multiple courses of meals and assorted dishes and all these are symbolic of the social status of the groom and his family.

Gham-khadi itself and the reciprocal exchanges associated with it involve huge spending. A good portion of the income of every family and/or individual is used to maintain *gham-khadi* with relatives, friends and neighbours. People are aware of these expenditures and express at times how difficult it is to manage *gham-khadi*. They often complain that *gham-khadi* costs a lot of money (*pa gham-khadi dere paise lagi*). They also find it difficult to follow the obligation of *gham-khadi* and would say, “*gham-khadi* is very difficult to maintain (*gham- khaidi der gran kar de*). Some people especially those who believe in Wahabi version of Islam consider it as forbidden (*haram*) but few among them despite this belief still practice *gham-khadi* primarily due the social pressure.

Funerals and marriages are particular cases of *gham-khadi* which require excessive spending. The hosts must arrange food to hundreds of people while the guests spend time and money in traveling, transportation and on gifts/sympathy gifts. In case of death, local people are required and desired to cook food and bring it to the family of the deceased. There are different traditions in different areas, the most common one is that people would bring tea and *parathas* in the morning and they contribute a certain amount per household which is used for soft drinks and tea for the visitors coming to the *hujra* for condolence (house built adjacent to home used for hosting male guests, it also works as a community center). The landlords however contribute reciprocally several thousand ranging from 10,000 to 25,000 rupees for the funeral expenses within their families.

Wedding receptions, and the food provided to guests during the wedding ceremonies at home and in the *hujra* costs substantial amount of money. This coincides with the Pakhtun value hospitality [*melmastya*] which also is closely linked to the social status and *izat* (honor/respect) of people that is why people struggle to give as good a reception as they can, sometimes even go an extra length and spend beyond their means. Some of the poor and the middle-class people thus try to add at least beef to the rice for both, wedding receptions and funeral meals, in an effort to leave a good impression on guests. Food served during *gham-khadi* has a central symbolic status. Interestingly people who do not or could not attend a reception or a funeral would inquire about food from those who have attended the ceremony, “How was the reception/food?” The lower-class people especially on weddings and sometimes on funeral as well inquire “Was there beef in rice?” (*ghwakha ye pake achole wa*)”.

Siyali (competition) another value of *Pukhtunwali* also plays an important role. It is always operating in the everyday life. Every individual makes an effort to have a better life, car, finances to hold a reception better than others etc. All these act as markers of social status and position. Each person is constantly competing on several fronts and attempting to show off that s/he is wealthy or wealthier as well s/he is a good man/woman having a good character and personality. The ones from the poor class and those with limited resources try to follow these standards even if they are unable to afford given their meagre resources by taking loan. It is not just the reception, marriages entail other costs. Finances to construct a new house or a portion or a room in the house as per the family’s economic status, to buy furniture, home appliances, jewelry, and other dowry items including variety of clothes the most expensive of which are used during the wedding ceremony. People from the poor and middle class take loan or buy things on installments. Those from the upper class whose resources shrunk with the passage of time and do not have income sources other than land, sell a piece of land to bear the expenses of the wedding. This shows the social importance of spending of money on *gham-khadi* because selling inherited land is also considered as a shameful and is inferred as one’s weakness. It is considered as selling bones of deceased ancestors. Land provides the basis of the social status. But not throwing a big reception as per the set norms of the society brings perhaps more shame and disgrace to one’s social status in the society.

Gham-khadi and all the practices and exchanges are reciprocal which are governed by yet another important value of *Pukhtunwali*, *badal*. *Badal* means to pay back or to reciprocate. *Badal* is also used for revenge of any kind. Pakhtuns will remember any act of insult, misbehavior and misconduct, harm of any kind, and a murder and thus will avenge it whenever there’s an opportunity. It works on the tit for tat basis. An insult, any unpleasant situation and murders are avenged in the same manner. It is a moment of pride when someone succeeds in taking a revenge of any of the wrong doings done to him in the form of an insult, any harm or murder of a family member. They proudly tell it to the people in their close circle and sometimes publicly, depending on the nature of the disputes and its dynamics as well as the position of both the parties, that he got his revenge from [*badal*]. People commonly would say, “I have taken my revenge from him” (*badal me te waghash*). For minor instances in daily conduct, people express joy in a tit for tat exchange. They also share the

joy with their close social network who knew about the misconduct and will proudly say, “see how I took my revenge from him (*sanga badal me te waghasht kana*)” followed by “he will always remember it! (*tolu mar ba ye yaad saati*). The Pakhtun value *peghor* (taunt) compels *badal*. Someone who gets insulted or is caught in any of the above mentioned shameful situations where he is found weaker, receives taunt [*peghor*] from people around him. *Peghor* is made when there is a situation of competition, quarrel or rivalry. For instance, A who has not yet avenged B for misconduct/insult/murder or any of the acts mentioned above, is caught in another such situation with C. C in this case will use *peghor* to safeguard himself. He would ask A to first take *badal* from B and only when he has taken revenge from him indulge in quarrel with others. This implies that if he is brave and daring enough, he should get his *badal* first and then quarrel with someone else. Such provocations and taunts (*peghor*) are taken seriously and may convert a minor contention into a serious conflict. In such situation, sometimes the *peghor* giver is even murdered first and then *badal* for the earlier enemy is taken. Person A, thus ends up having two enmities.

Badal in *gham-khadi* and in everyday conduct is paying back whatever one receives from someone, a kind of balanced reciprocity. People however usually give back gifts of more value or more money than they have received. If not they will try to give at least the same they received but never lesser. A gift is desired to be paid back in the same type; kind for kind, money for money. Same is the case with visiting each other, giving respect and protocol/honor (*izat*) to visitors/guests, and helping friends and family in hard times and rainy days. The big man, elites and politicians, expect and receive *badal* of the help they extend and services they provide in shape of subservience, obedience, respect, protocol, support and votes from those they have helped.

The bureaucrats besides the protocol expect and receive gifts of different kinds, meals and logistic supports. *Badal* is reciprocal and if the receiver does not pay back, the giver keeps a record of it for the next time. Interestingly people remember whatever they give and then compare what they receive and as such act accordingly in the subsequent events and interactions. Which indicates that *badal* requires constant performance and is conditional. Even for weddings, some people will invite a few guests only to reciprocate their invitations. People say that we have been attending their weddings/receptions [*waduna*] so now it is time for us to repay and invite. There were a few individuals we came to know who did not hold a reception [*da wada dodai*] on their wedding, received wide condemnations. One such person who had shifted to city and did not arrange a reception went to his village after the death of his first newborn child for burial. , Even on this occasion of grief, he was told by one villager that another fellow when informed about this person’s arrival and purpose of his visit remarked that why should they dig a grave when he did not invite them for his reception. A family in one of the villages did not contribute in the communal expenses of burials and funerals on the same pretext. When the head of the same household died, the villagers denied digging the grave and did not give them the stone slides which are used to cover the grave. In villages, people contribute per household for these stones and keep a stock for ready use. Same is the case with funeral prayers and condolence gatherings which last for three days. If someone does not attend funerals, he will be socially isolated and will not be extended any help if someone dies in his family. This does not only make it difficult for non-compliers to carry out the funeral activities but brings shame to the family because support from co-villagers and relatives as well as a large number of visitors for condolences on funerals symbolize honor [*izat*] and social status of the family.

Given this comprehensive and detailed background of the role and importance of *gham-khadi* and related Pakhtun values, we now proceed to its correlation with and the facilitating role it plays in the practices and perceptions of corruption in the public offices. Bureaucracy and bureaucrats are no exception as after all they family, relatives and friends and are part of the social collective. They, like others, comply with the code and take great care of all these socially embedded values of Pakhtun society. They are expected to provide special protocol, state services pertaining to their own office and facilitate access to other offices especially to their social network. The more they oblige people the more they receive respect and protocol when they visit their families and areas of their residence.

Bureaucrats have an edge that being in power people ignore them if they do not follow the norms of the society till they get retired. For them *badal* is meaningful after their retirement. Thus bureaucrats who go by the norm of the society get the desired protocol after their retirement but those who do otherwise are ignored by people to the extent that they even avoid greeting them. Bureaucrats thus show great hospitality to people especially from their social circle coming to their office, provide

them easy, speedy and out of the way access to state services. These people, at times request the bureaucrat to give them unauthorized favors and at the same time ask him not to provide a service to any of their rivals or such services that may benefit another competing member of the society. In such cases of illegal favors, people often use a Pashto proverb. They would say, “*mung la ba ba pa sapar sanda khejai*”. Literally this means making the buffalo climb the roof of the hut (*sapar*). A hut is usually made of wood, branches, grass and straw. There are no brick walls and it is a weak temporary structure made of wooden pillars and beams. Climbing to its roof is not possible for anyone thus making a buffalo climb it up refers to impossibility of an action. This means that the bureaucrats sometimes has to do things that are otherwise impossible or illegal to oblige a person. This is done either by relaxing a process and procedure or breaching a rule or the law. In such cases, the argument is that anyone in the office will do work if it is legal. A friend, relative or any other social connection should be able to do that is illegal, to go out of the way for them. This is what the relationship is for-is the usual justification.

On the other hand, salaries of the bureaucrats never suffice these reciprocal obligations. *Gham-khadi* thus works for people as a tool to get an easy access to the state services. The bureaucrats who oblige people around them by extending unauthorized state services, as favours justify their actions using the wider framework of *gham-khadi*. Bureaucrats also manage the resources required for *gham-khadi* through corrupt practices in their offices which they cannot manage through the salaries. Resultantly the Pashtunwali codes of morality supersede and replace the impersonal Weberian model of bureaucracy based on Western values and official codes of conduct. *Gham-khadi*, the Pakhtun value thus plays an active role in facilitating corrupt practices and providing a justification for corruption in the bureaucracy; all guised as the practices of *gham-khadi*.

Conclusion

To conclude, the article delineates the codes of gham khadi in its true essence; the norms, traditions, and values ingrained and practiced under *gham-khadi* facilitate normalization of corrupt behavior in public offices. Pakhtun identity is closely knit and woven through these codes which are mostly followed to uphold their image and identity. Closely associated with the notions of shame and honor, *gham khadi* is expressed in multiple forms ranging from the exchange of gestures, emotions, gifts, and services. *Badal* is another traditional code that complements *gham khadi*. These acts of reciprocity largely align with the understanding of corruption. The article establishes that *gham khadi* might be a constant, indissoluble and indispensable feature of members of Pakhtun society and pressurizes them into carrying out the *gham khadi* codes. It is argued that of *gham-khadi* necessitates compliance; overrides individual's autonomy and does not remain limited to the social life rather penetrates into professional space exerting the same pressure there. The individuals retain limited power whether to practice *gham khadi* or not; people who do not or are not able to keep up the reciprocity are condemned by the other fellow members and sometimes even socially isolated. The informal visits, meetings, and celebrations at times of happiness and sorrow indoctrinated with the rule of giving and taking are often perceived as burdensome even by people themselves. The article explores replication of such practices in public offices and attempts to establish that such binding nature helps in understanding of corrupt behaviors; gift-giving gestures to coax a private gain, flattery done to develop a social link, reciprocity done to equal the scores for any future profit. Non-compliance with such codes often means a social death for the people of the Pakhtunsociety, who then are obliged outside their will to carry out such practices. *Gham-khadi* in its different forms makes its way to the offices of bureaucrats. Bureaucrats being members of the social collective practice it in their offices in similar ways. The state services become favors and gifts they exchange for earning social capital, returning favors and gifts (*badal*) and informal earning through corrupt practices. *Gham-khadi* thus plays a determining and facilitating role in practices of corruption in the public offices.

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