

RELIGIOUS FOLK ART AS AN EXPRESSION OF IDENTITY: MUSLIM TOMBSTONES IN THE GANGAR MOUNTAINS OF PAKISTAN

Objects of sepulchral folk art are, first of all, evidence of popular piety and expressions of religiosity. They may also have significance in addition to their obvious cultic function of keeping alive the memory of the deceased. In the course of the present article it will be argued that religious folk art can be regarded as reflecting a personal or collective identity.

Alongside inscriptions and fine floral ornaments the schist tombstones (*sinākhāt*) found in cemeteries in the Gangar mountains of the Hazara District in Pakistan have engravings depicting the attributes of men, women, and children as well as Islamic and occupational symbols. Nowhere else in the Islamic world, to my knowledge, can one find such a varied repertoire of different motifs combined in a single local tradition.

In looking for comparative material, the famous Chaukhandi tombs in Lower Sindh and parts of Baluchistan come to mind (they have been studied by Salome Zajądacz-Hastenrath¹). These stone tombs date from between the fifteenth and nineteenth century and are often richly decorated with representations of weapons, headgear, horsemen, and animals, in the case of men, and jewelry, in the case of women. Most of the deceased seem to have been nobles of various local Baluch tribes. Representations of jewelry and headdresses on funerary monuments are also found in Turkey and — much poorer in technique and design — in Egypt.² Referring to Egyptian tombstones of fairly recent date Schienerl comments that they “were rather costly and therefore were restricted only to a comparatively small group of rich and influential people.”³ The same holds true for the Chaukhandi monuments, but not for the cemeteries in the Gangar mountains, where ordinary villagers are buried in finely decorated tombs. Similar interesting material from Iran has been published by Alfons Gabriel from Iran (unfortunately without illustrations),⁴ where tombstones also have individual characteristics (I will come back to these later).

THE SETTING

The Gangar (sometimes written Gandghar or Gandgar) mountains form a small range running north-south between Ghazi/Tarbela in the west and Haripur in the east. Concerning the schist deposits in the area only some brief references can be found in the gazetteers of the Hazara District; the existence of a mine in the main village of Sirikot is also mentioned.⁵ Watson's gazetteer of 1907 says: “Coarse slate [= schist] is found in several places, and it is in much demand for tombstones, but it is not suitable for roofing purposes.”⁶

The Hindko-speaking population consists mainly of Pakhtun from the Mishwani and Tarkheli tribes and smaller groups of Awan, Gujar, and Qureshi. Sirikot, at the upper northeast end of the range just at the pass leading down to Ghazi, is inhabited by Mishwani.⁷ This tribe is said to be descended from one of the sons of the famous saint Sayyid Mohammad Gisudaraz (d. 1422), who was married to a Kakar woman. Mishwani also live in the nearby villages of Umarghana, Kundi, Gadwalian, Galey, and Sumbal. Salamkhand is the chief village of the Tarkheli tribe. It is situated on the western slope of the Gangar mountains. The Tarkheli, a subgroup of the Utmanzai, acquired a reputation as robbers in the nineteenth century. As Watson remarks, “Salam Khand was the headquarters of the robber bands that in pre-annexation days, when the Sikh rule was relaxed, used to harry the surrounding country.”⁸ These stray notes are virtually all we know of the local history and ethnography.

STONEMASONRY IN THE GANGAR MOUNTAINS

Engraved schist tombstones are found in several villages between Ghazi in the west and Keroch in the east. I surveyed the area on three short trips (October 1992, November 1993, May 1994) and visited the cemetery

of Salamkhand, by far the largest, three cemeteries of Sirikot, one in Ghazi, and smaller ones in Umar-khana, Galev, Kandauna, Keroch, and near Barwasa.

The engraving, called *čitarkari*, is done by professional stonemasons and blacksmiths in Sirikot and Salamkhand (no doubt some laymen have also occasionally tried their hand at it, as suggested by engravings of poor quality). They call themselves members of the Qureshi *zāt*. In Sirikot the only blacksmith who still made *čitarkari* has recently given up working on schist. The last remaining craftsmen who still produce richly decorated tombstones are three brothers, named Abdul Hakim, Abdur Rahim, and Misri Khan, who live in the somewhat remoter village of Salamkhand. All three are above the age of 50. Their main occupation is forging tools and making metal vessels, but stonemasonry is still more than a side-line business for them as orders for tombstones come in regularly. They told me that their father Abdul Wafar and grandfather Bostan also combined the two crafts.

The schist (*čep*) is first cut in the required shape, a traditional rectangular form with a semicircle at the top resembling a mihrab niche. Then straight lines are drawn and carved with the help of a ruler, creating zones for ornamentation. Regular floral motifs are sketched with a handmade pair of dividers (*gulhār*) or with metal stencils and, as with other ornaments, afterwards engraved with chisel and hammer. Finishing a tombstone takes approximately three days. In the 1970's the price of a tombstone was about Rs.150. The decorative designs are chosen by the client in consultation with the stonemason.

DESCRIPTION OF THE TOMBS

The elongated mound of earth above the grave is in many cases raised by one or two pedestals built of horizontal layers of schist, which are vertically framed by decorated slabs (figs. 1, 4). Smaller rectangular pieces with a semicircle attached to a long side usually mark the ends of the grave. Often the graves are encased in rectangular slabs, connected at the corners with nailed iron sheets. Some modern graves, for example in Ghazi and Sirikot, are solid cement structures. In Sirikot's *tor mukhey* cemetery I found several cement tombs with new marble headstones, but the footstones still made of schist. Elaborate tombs with several pedestals are a sign of wealth and high social status.

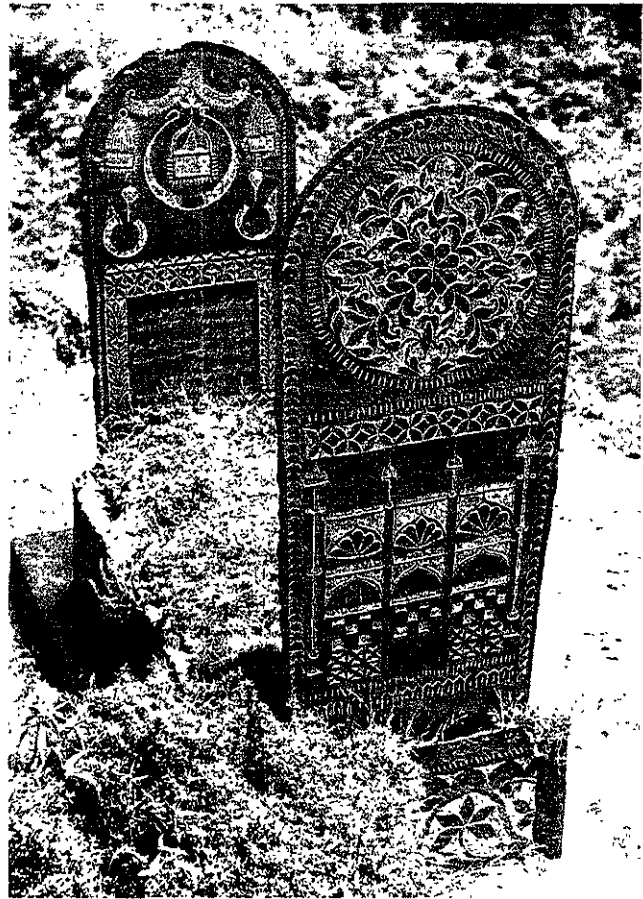


Fig. 1. Grave of Amir Shah's mother (d. 1939) in the Azimar Baba cemetery in Sirikot.

There are four possible positions for the tombstones at both ends of the grave: they can be lined up in one row, stand face-to-face (fig. 1), or stand at right angles to each other (fig. 4). In Afghanistan and parts of the North-West Frontier Province the face-to-face position is used for the grave of a deceased male and the right-angle position usually indicates the grave of a woman, but my informants vehemently denied that this was the case in the Gangar mountains. They explained that it was simply a question of making the beautifully engraved front of a tombstone visible from the small footpaths. A review confirmed that there was no relation between the different positions and the sex of the deceased, which is usually indicated in the inscription on the headstone. Probably an earlier custom lost its meaning in modern times.

Most of the tombstones I examined dated from the 1940's to the present. The earliest dated tomb I saw

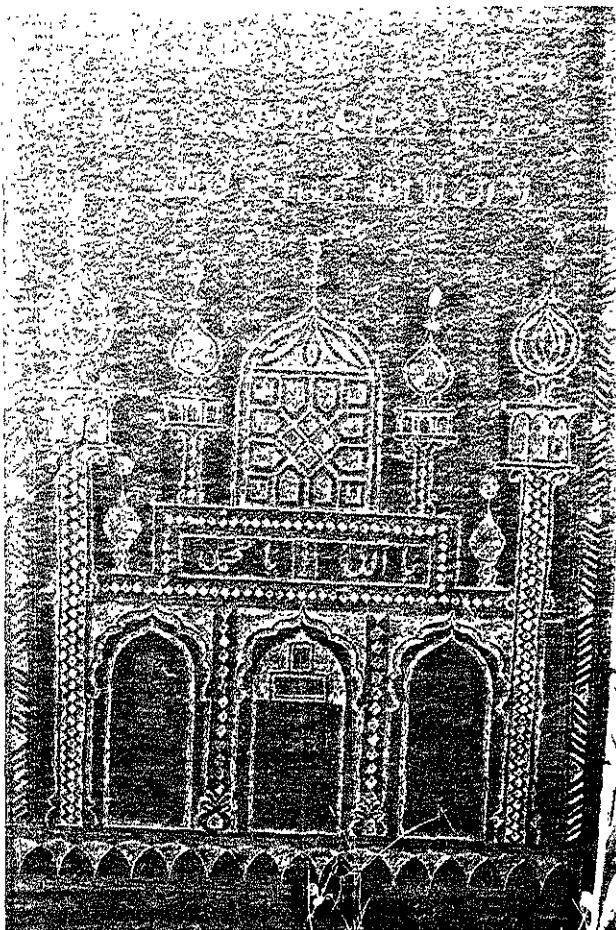


Fig. 2. Tombstone in Salamkhand depicting a domed mosque in the Mughal style with the indication of the mihrab.

belonged to a male from Sirikot: it was dated 1311 H (1893) (fig. 7). Some undated tombs may be even older, but because of the rate of decay village graveyards seldom have funerary monuments dating from before the nineteenth century.

THE ICONOGRAPHY OF THE TOMBSTONES

Islamic Symbols. Frequently representations of mosques can be found in combination with inscriptions or floral ornaments. The architectural structures are of the typical Indo-Islamic type adapted from Mughal art with a central dome and sometimes two smaller flanking domes, two or four minarets with the characteristic pavilion-like chatris on the top, and three arched entrances (figs. 1, 2). Depictions of the mihrab, hanging lamps, and the invocations *Yā Allāh* and *Yā Muhammad* complement these beautiful represen-



Fig. 3. Tombstone from the grave of Abdul Wafar (d. 1962) in Salamkhand.

tations, which also show details of architectural decoration.

In addition to these clearly recognizable mosques as symbols of official Sunni Islam, there was a particular tombstone with the depiction of a domed building with a lattice window and mosaic work on the outer wall. The tombstone stands just a few meters away from the only important shrine of the Gangar area, in the westernmost cemetery of Sirikot on the road from Ghazi. This monument, which is depicted on the tombstone, is the mausoleum of Hazrat Suleiman Shah, a saint locally known as Landa Baba, whose dates and Sufi allegiance are both unknown.

Two other symbols of Islamic orthopraxy are a ewer (*kuzah*) used for ablution before daily prayers and a prayer mat (*musallā*), a motif always combined with the ewer (fig. 3). Both are fitted into the semicircular upper end of the tombstone, with the ewer at the top

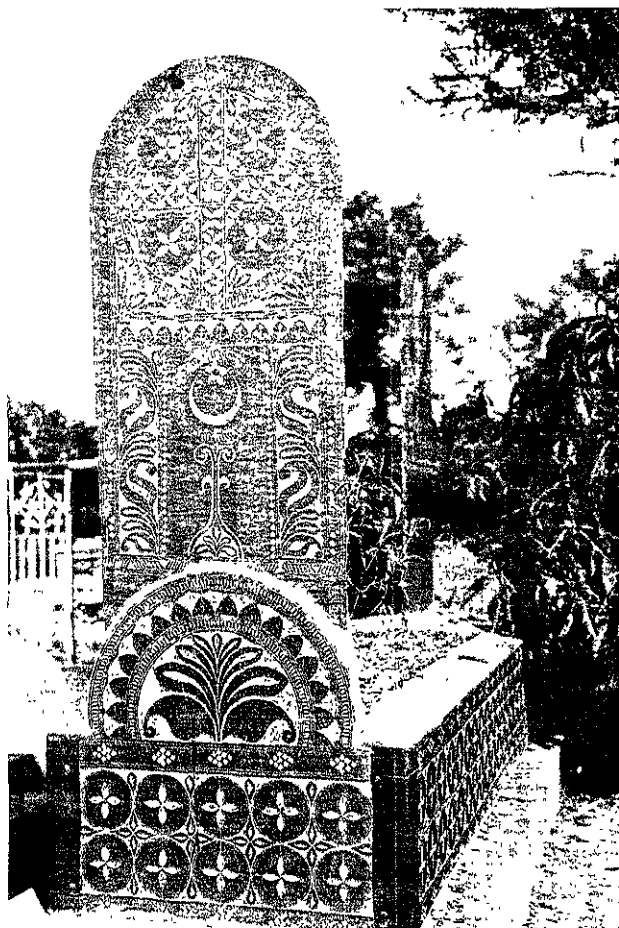


Fig. 4. Grave of Hajji Saif-ud-Din Khan (d. 1986) in the main cemetery of Ghazi near the Tarbela dam (h. 137 cm, width of head stone 42 cm)

and the prayer mat below, nearly always in a horizontal position. An exception was found in the cemetery of Salamkhand, where on one tombstone, probably engraved by a layman, *kuzah* and *musallah* are shown side by side on the lower part. The ewer has typical elements found in every representation. The body of the vessel, resting on a foot, has a round shape made by dividers and is filled with a central floral ornament; the neck is contracted in the middle; the handle often slightly curved on the inner side, and the S-curved spout sometimes ends in a threefold leaf ornament. The prayer mat has a rectangular shape and is filled with stylized floral ornaments or a checkered pattern technically resembling chip carving decoration; one of the short sides either leads into a cupola form or a two-stage niche to indicate the mihrab.

An excellent example of high-quality stone masonry

and the typical repertoire of Islamic symbols is found on a tombstone in the cemetery of Salamkhand, erected by the three brothers mentioned earlier to commemorate the death of their father Abdul Wafar in 1962 (fig. 3). In addition to ewer and prayer mat, the rosary, glasses, and walking stick of the old man are depicted. On the back side is the representation of a mosque. On other tombstones we occasionally find a rosary as a symbol of Islamic piety and the importance of prayer; walking sticks are also frequently combined with religious motifs. In some cases a comb is shown as well, symbolizing the proper combing of the beard modeled after the Holy Prophet, and thereby also a preparation for the ritual prayer. Another Islamic symbol, which is usually embedded in floral ornaments, combines the star and crescent; it is sometimes found on tombstones in the Gangar region (fig. 4).

Strikingly similar depictions of religious motifs appear on Iranian tombstones. Gabriel writes: "A rosary chiseled on a tombstone shows the special piety of the deceased; a razor that he trimmed his beard like the Prophet; a comb that he combed his beard before saying the prayers; a small prayer stone that he used to press his forehead on it [during the prayer]. It has not been investigated if the one or the other symbol is used more frequently in a respective area. In Isfahan the comb seems to be especially popular."⁹

Floral and geometrical ornaments. An estimated 50-60 percent of the Gangar tombstones have symmetrically depicted floral decorations. These are a true expression of local folk art, though not as indicative of identity as might appear at first sight. Geometrical patterns are clearly of less importance than floral ones. They are used to form round, semicircular, rectangular, rhomboid, or elliptical frames for floral ornaments and inscriptions or to accentuate borders in the form of zigzag or broken lines, waves, or rhomboid chains. The symmetrically depicted floral motifs show most of the forms characteristic of the repertoire of folk ornaments in Southwest Asia: rosettes (often in a stylized hexagonal form), flowers in profile, arabesques in various shapes, *boteh* motifs, and trees of life (figs. 1, 4, 6, 9, 15).¹⁰

A very peculiar geometrical motif found variously in Sirikot and Salamkhand shows a head-like serrated circle on top of a triangular form which is structured in rhombs and filled with small crosses or points (figs. 5, 6). This interesting motif is obviously of a quite different style than the ornaments already mentioned



Fig. 5. Tombstone from the Landa Baba cemetery in Sirikot.

and probably belongs to an older tradition not developed in the Gangar mountains, but in an area further west, from where the Tarkheli and Mishwani migrated sometime after the fifteenth century. In the main cemetery of Hangu (near Kohat) at the Pokh Jamaat mosque I found a grave (dated 1930) encased in rectangular slabs of schist with exactly the same ornament. Remarkably, headstones of tombs in the Suleiman mountains have a very similar form with a serrated circle on the top resembling the symbol of a sun. The Gangar tombstones in figures 5 and 6 show that the sun motif is combined with a triangular-shaped cosmic mountain, a symbol also known from wood-carvings in the Swat valley and from Iranian and South Indian *qalamkār* block-printed cotton cloth (seventeenth to nineteenth century) frequently used for mosque curtains.¹¹

The richness of floral representations on schist compares with the variety of designs and inventiveness

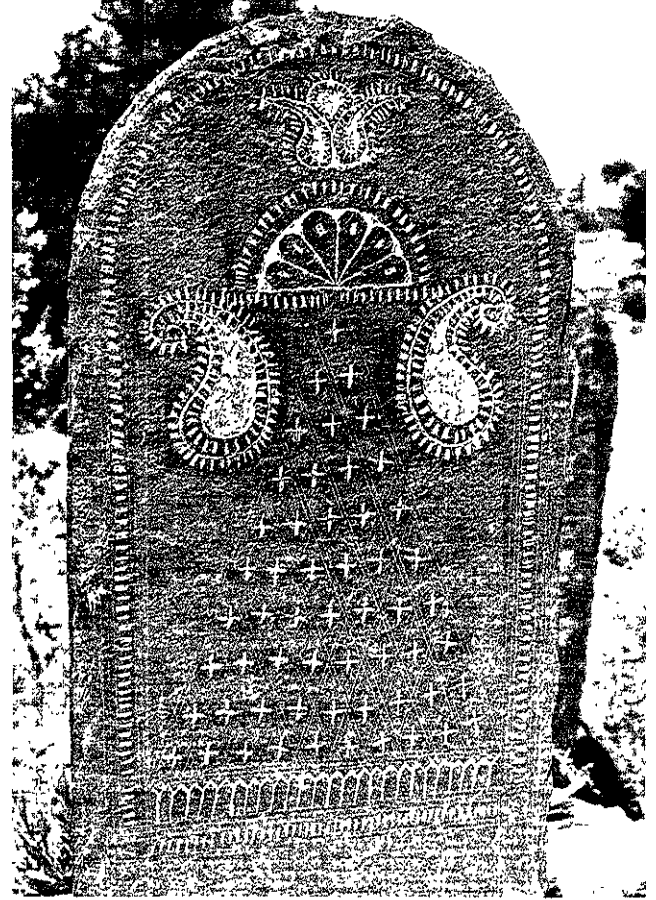


Fig. 6. Tombstone with distinctive *boteh* motifs in Galey.

found in the wood carvings of the Swat Valley. In Islamic art, floral ornaments are interpreted as being of religious importance because they express the idea of the paradise garden. This must hold good especially for Gangar sepulchral folk art, because tombstones signifying death clearly refer to the hereafter. In this sense the floral and closely connected geometrical ornaments are really expressions of Islamic identity.

Male Symbols. In Chaukhandi sepulchral art, as well as in Iran, men's tombs are frequently decorated with pictorial representations of weapons and other personal attributes of the deceased.¹² The same is the case with the Gangar tombs, where martial symbols like a sword, axe, rifle, knife, and powder flask are shown (fig. 7), combined with depictions of the prayer mat or floral ornaments. In some cases next to the weapons a set of cosmetic instruments (*lum-tarâs*) may appear, referring to the importance of personal



Fig. 7. Man's tomb from the Landa Baba cemetery in Sirikot dated 1311 H.

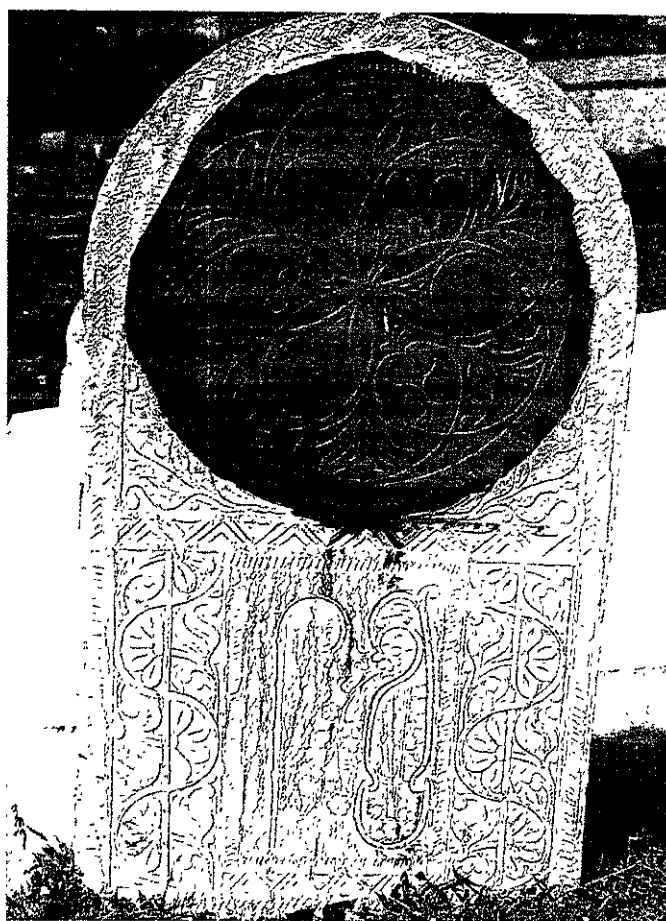


Fig. 8. Tombstone from the grave of the lute player Jahangir Khan (d. 1948) in Sirikot.

hygiene based on the model of the Prophet's sunna.

On the *Lāndā Bābā kabristān*, the westernmost cemetery of Sirikot, I saw a curious tombstone marking a man's grave; it had representations of a ewer, prayer mat, hand mirror(?), spatula, and two wooden amulets for cows and buffaloes.¹³ An extraordinary tombstone reflecting the identity of the deceased stands in Sirikot's easternmost *tor mukhey* cemetery near the roadside: it is a beautiful depiction of a *rubāb* (shortnecked lute) on the grave of one Jahangir Khan (d. 1948), "who loved playing the *rubāb* in his whole lifetime," as it says in his epitaph. Unfortunately, the stone was white-washed in the beginning of 1994 apparently to push the depictions of lute and walking stick into the background (fig. 8).

In the same cemetery purely occupational symbols were found, in addition to the sickles frequently

depicted on tombstones in the Gangar area. The graves of the cobblers Saleh-ud-Din (d. 1946) and Gul Ahmed (d. 1949) are decorated with three cobbler's tools to signify their profession (fig. 9).

Female Symbols. Weapons are the gender-specific symbols of men; jewelry is the corresponding symbol for women. These motifs are also found in sepulchral art in the Near East, Iran, the Pakistani Chaukhandi complex, as well as the Gangar tombs.

Many of the headstones for women's tombs are decorated on the upper semicircular part with ornaments representing the set of jewelry given to the lady at the time of her marriage.¹⁴ The main piece is always a large necklace with or without pendants, which has an amulet in its center (fig. 10). Above the necklace are either two crescent-shaped amulet pendants or

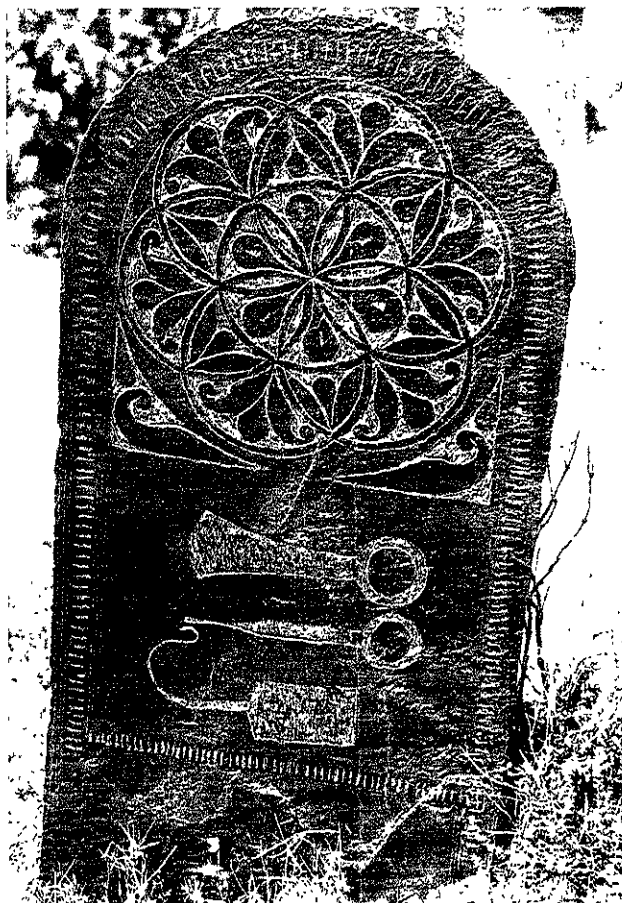


Fig. 9. Tombstone from the grave of the cobbler Saleh-ud-Din (d. 1946) in Sirikot's *tor mukhey* cemetery.



Fig. 10. Tombstone of Miskin Shah's mother (d. 1953) in the Azimar Baba cemetery in Sirikot.

armlets; there are earrings at both sides and sometimes a pair of armlets below. The lower part of the tombstone has a cartouche or rectangular space with the epitaph (figs. 1, 10).

Personal identity is represented in depictions of a sewing machine beside a tea pot and a tea cup and a pair of scissors with a piece of sewing on two tombstones in Sirikot (*Lāndā Bābā* and *tor mukhey* cemeteries).

Symbols of children and youth. An interesting pictorial representation found on another headstone of a grave in Sirikot (*Lāndā Bābā* cemetery) belongs, according to the epitaph, to a girl named Hassan Pari, a daughter of Abdul Razaq; she died in 1954. Above this inscription is a baby's rattle, a necklace, and a pair of armlets. On a gravestone at *tor mukhey* cemetery I saw a very similar arrangement, but with a modern wristwatch

framed by the necklace (fig. 11). The rattle seems to indicate that the deceased was a child; the jewelry indicates her sex. Representations of rattles are frequently seen on children's tombs in the Gangar mountains. As infant mortality is quite high in rural Pakistan, usually not much fuss is made over an infant's funeral. It can be assumed, therefore, that the decorated tombs belong to somewhat older children, say, between the age of four and the beginning of puberty.

Extraordinary pictorial representations can be found on two boy's graves in a small roadside cemetery between the villages of Barwasa and Salamkhand. They are heartbreaking expressions of their parents' grief and disappointed hopes as well as witness of the deceaseds' identity as school boys. The headstone identifies the grave as belonging to the young Mohamad Akbar, son of Shamroz, a pupil in the fourth class,



Fig. 11. Girl's tombstone in Sirikot's *tor mukhey* cemetery.

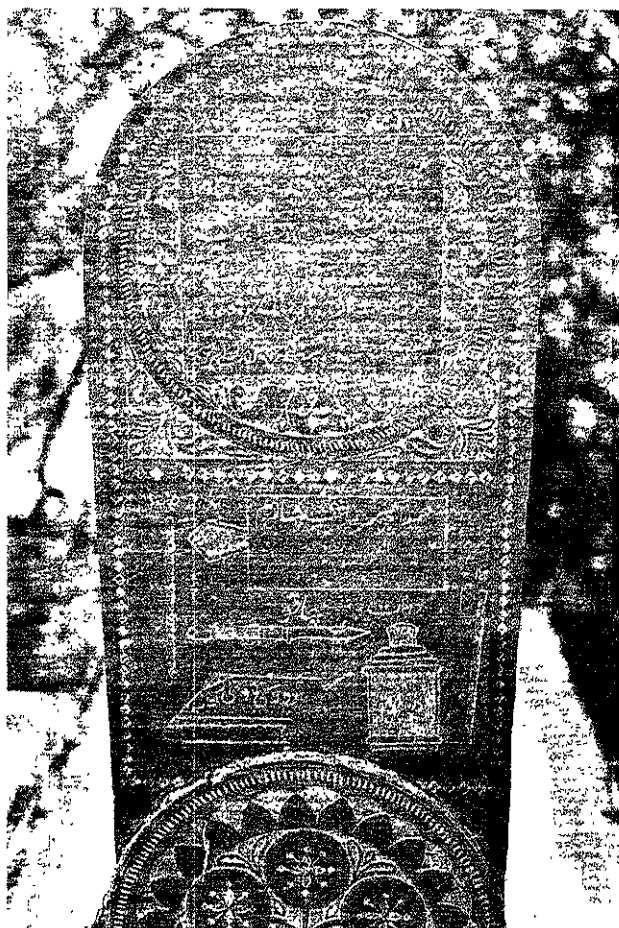


Fig. 12. Tombstone of the young Mohammad Akbar (d. 1965) in the cemetery near Barwasa.

who died on 25 March 1965 (fig. 12). Below the epitaph are beautiful depictions of his slate, pencil, ink pen, ink pot, knife, and Urdu textbook, all accurately labeled. A nearby tombstone of Mohammad Shafiq (d. 1987) is decorated with book, knife, pencil, ink pot (with English label), wristwatch, and fountain pen (fig. 13). The tombstone for a boy's grave in the cemetery of Umarkhana has a pocket flashlight as well as a wristwatch and knife.

It is important to note that in a wider sense slate (*takhti*), pen (*qalam*), and inkpot (*dawat*) belong to a religious context: during the *maktāb* ceremony, when a boy is sent to school, these items made of silver are laid in front of the child in addition to a Qur'an.¹⁵ The young school boy then solemnly writes the *basmala* formula on the slate. The widespread Islamic symbols of *qalam* and *al-lauh al-mahfūz* (the well-guarded tablet) both refer to the creation of the Holy Qur'an by God himself.

Symbols of Dignity and Old Age. Walking sticks (*harri*) used by old men like the one on the tomb of the stonemasons' father frequently appear on Gangar tombstones, usually in combination with Islamic motifs like the ewer, prayer mat, and rosary (fig. 3). They have the typical European cane shape with rounded handle and are depicted in the lower part of the slab (fig. 8). Walking sticks are commonly used by the older generation of the Pakistani upper class, and their manufacture provides a good source of income for Kashmiri craftsmen in Murree and neighboring villages.¹⁶ The walking stick was used by Pakistan's founder, Qaid-i-Azam Mohammad Ali Jinnah; Sayyid Ghulam Mustafa Shah says of this object in his eulogy: "A walking stick adds to the personality of men and gives them poise, balance, assurance, stay and even prop. ... Throughout history the walking stick has been considered as a hallmark or symbol of good manners.

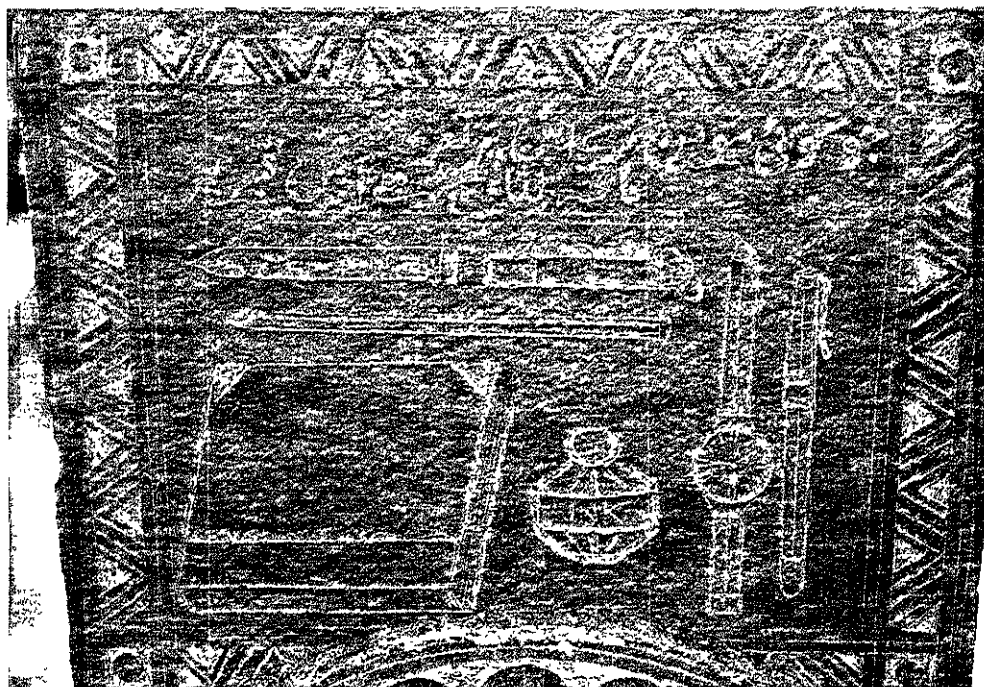


Fig. 13. Detail of the tombstone of the young Mohammad Shafiq (d. 1987) in the cemetery near Barwasa.

distinction, strength and authority."¹⁷ Concerning its symbolism in present-day Pakistan he adds: "The walking stick in various forms was used as an election symbol and it generally won. The walking stick has a real meaning for the politician and most of them take to its likeness."¹⁸ These walking sticks are often used by respected elders to draw sketches on the floor to explain and demonstrate something.

Another symbol of old age is the representation of a pair of spectacles shown on the tombstone of Abdul Wafar in Salamkhand (fig. 3).

Symbols of Hospitality. Other attributes found on tombstones include symbols of hospitality like teapots, teacups, spoons, and basins for washing hands. They are surrounded by floral ornaments and sometimes combined with an axe, walking stick, or with jewelry (figs. 14, 15). Hospitality is, like the martial arts, considered one of the most important values of Pakhtun culture; its symbols are an expression of ethnic identity shared by men and women.

The sepulchral folk art of the people living in the Gangar mountains represents Indo-Pakistani Muslim culture in a local context. The iconography of pictorial representations on the tombstones shows what kinds

of objects are perceived to be important by the villagers. One can find an interplay of religious, ethnic, and personal identities in these objects. Sunni Islamic orthopraxy with its stress on ritual prayer is regarded as an essential part of Pakhtun culture, just as the martial arts and hospitality are considered fundamental Pakhtun values. Particularly meaningful are the symbols of sex and age often seen on the tombstones; they document the status of these social categories in a traditional rural community. Besides this expression of social identity, certain motifs reflect how the bereaved families honor the memory of the deceased. Sometimes the decorative attributes added to the epitaph amount almost to a portrait. In some cases they highlight characteristics that were part of the person's life history and thereby express identity. They are not, however, so intensively concerned with human destiny as, say, the examples of European Catholic folk art represented on votive paintings called *Martern* in Bavaria and Austria, which feature personal tragedy and opportune rescues.

Among the population of the Gangar mountains, as generally in South and West Asia, the group and its communal ethics seem to be valued more highly than the individual. A vivid example for the reflection of group identity within the religious category of



Fig. 14 Woman's tombstone with symbols of hospitality in the Azimar Baba cemetery in Sirikot.

material culture are the Twelver Shi'a's *ta'ziya*, *'alam*, *muhri namāz*, and paintings which are closely interwoven with rituals and customs. In both cases, in the Shi'a ritual objects as well as in the Gangar tombstones, religious folk art expresses the way groups see themselves. If unifying religious symbols are shown in public as during the month of Muharram they support the feeling of "us" against "them" to a remarkable degree.

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NOTES

1. Salome Zajadacz-Hastenrath, *Chaukhandidgräber. Studien zur Grabkunst in Sind und Baluchistan* (Wiesbaden, 1978).
2. Peter W. Schienerl, "Muslim Tombs and Cemeteries: Their Importance for Jewelry Research." *Ornament* 7,1 (1983): 10-



Fig. 15. Tombstone with rich floral decorations and symbols of hospitality in the Landa Baba cemetery in Sirikot.

13. Grave steles of dervishes decorated with the peculiar headgear and attributes of the respective Sufi brotherhood constitute a distinctive genre of Ottoman funerary art, comp. Hans-Peter Laqueur, "Dervish Gravestones," in Raymond Lifchez, ed., *The Dervish Lodge: Architecture, Art, and Sufism in Ottoman Turkey* (Berkeley, 1992), pp. 284-95.
3. Schienerl, "Muslim Tombs and Cemeteries," p. 11.
4. Alfons Gabriel, *Religionsgeographie von Persien* (Vienna, 1971).
5. *Gazetteer of the Hazara District* (Lahore, 1883-84), p. 12.
6. Watson, *Gazetteer of the Hazara District, 1907* (London, 1908), p. 77.
7. J.M. Wikeley, *Punjabi Musalmans* (Lahore, [1915]), pp. 155-56; H. D. Watson, *Gazetteer*, pp. 27-28, 139.
8. Watson, *Gazetteer*, p. 243 (cf. pp. 25-26, 140, 151).
9. A. Gabriel, *Religionsgeographie* (Vienna, 1971), pp. 118-19; my translation.
10. Cf. D. M. Srinivasan, "The Tenacity of Tradition: Art from the Vale of Swat," *Aramco World* 48, 1 (1997): 8-15 (on p. 9, the author shows a tombstone from Mingora/Lower Swat valley with a leafy branch).
11. Johannes Kalter, ed., *Swat: Bauern und Baumeister im*

- Hindukush* (Stuttgart, 1989), pp. 128 (fig. 171), 148, 151 (fig. 219-220); Jay Gluck and Sumi Hiramoto Gluck, eds., *A Survey of Persian Handicraft* (Tehran, 1977), pp. 186-88, 194; Robyn Maxwell, *Textiles of Southeast Asia: Tradition, Trade and Transformation* (Melbourne, 1990), p. 344.
12. Zajadacz-Hastenrath, *Chaukhandigräber*, pp. 47-56; A. Gabriel, *Religionsgeographie* (Vienna, 1971), p. 119.
 13. Jürgen W. Frembgen, "Amulette für Rinder: Ethnographisches Material aus Afghanistan und Pakistan," *Baessler-Archiv*, N.S. 37 (1989): 401-14.
 14. The question of the documentary value of these depictions of jewelry will be dealt with in a forthcoming article.
 15. I am indebted to Hugh van Skyhawk for drawing my attention to that detail.
 16. H. Gardezi, *Crafts of the Punjab*, vol. 1, *Murree Hills* (Lahore, 1986), pp. 86-90.
 17. S. Gh. M. Shah, "On Walking-Sticks," *Sind Quarterly* 11,1 (1983) 1-7; esp. pp. 2, 4.
 18. *Ibid.*, p. 7.