



The Impact of Islamization on Pashtun Society: A Case Study of District Loralai, Balochistan

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ABSTRACT

Islamization in Pakistan, especially during General Zia-ul-Haq's regime (1977–1988), reshaped social, cultural, and political life. In Pashtun society, tribal codes such as Pashtunwali interacted with Islamic reforms, altering leadership, education, gender roles, and conflict resolution. This study focuses on District Loralai, examining how madrassas, mosques, mullahs, and religious parties transformed traditional structures. Using qualitative method, field observations, interviews, and secondary sources, the research explores localized effects of Islamization on identity, authority, and daily life. Findings contribute to understanding how Islamization reshaped tribal societies and inform policy and educational reforms in Balochistan.

Keywords: Islamization, General Zia-ul-Haq, Pashtun society, Pashtunwali, District Loralai, Madrassas, Mosques, Mullahs, Religious Parties

Introduction

Islamization refers to the growing influence of Islamic principles on governance, education, and culture in Pakistan (Nasr, 2001). Initially secular, Pakistan shifted toward Islamic identity with the Objectives Resolution (1949). Islamization intensified under Zia-ul-Haq, expanding madrassas, reshaping laws, and strengthening religious authority (Haqqani, 2005).

Pashtun society, traditionally guided by *Pashtunwali*, honor, hospitality, asylum, revenge, and jirga, experienced major changes. In Loralai, tribal elders (maliks) lost influence to mullahs and madrassas, gender roles became more restricted, and Islamic identity overtook tribal identity (Ahmed, 1980; Siddique, 2014).

Problem Statement

Islamization has transformed Pashtun society in Loralai, particularly in social unity, cultural change, gender roles, education, leadership, and conflict resolution.

Significance /Justification of the Study

This study highlights how Islamization reshaped daily life, leadership, and identity in Loralai. It shows the growing influence of madrassas and mullahs, and the decline of tribal authority. Findings will help policymakers, educators, and researchers design culturally sensitive reforms in Balochistan (Rahman, 2004; Critelli, 2010).

Research Questions

1. How has Islamization changed Pashtun social, educational, and political systems in Loralai?
2. How has Islamization influenced gender roles and family life in Pashtun society?

Limitation of the study

This study focuses only on Loralai and Limited prior research and data. Besides, time and resource are constraint and sensitivity of religious topics may restrict responses.

Literature Review

The Geographical and Socio-Cultural Overview of Pakistan

The Islamic Republic of Pakistan is located in South Asia. It shares its borders with India, Afghanistan, Iran, and China. According to the United Nations, Pakistan's total area is approximately 796,095 square kilometers. The length of its borders with neighboring countries includes 2,912 kilometers with India, 2,430 kilometers with Afghanistan, 909 kilometers with Iran, and 523 kilometers with China. In accordance with the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (1982), Pakistan claims a 200-nautical-mile exclusive economic zone, 12-nautical-mile territorial waters, and a 24-nautical-mile contiguous zone for immigration, customs, and security matters. Pakistan is home to five major rivers: Indus, Ravi, Chenab, Jhelum, and Sutlej. Its key natural resources include arable land, coal, natural gas, limestone, iron, salt, and chromite (Ali, 2013).

Ethnic Composition

Pakistan's population is ethnically diverse. The Punjabis form the largest ethnic group, comprising 44.2% of the total population. They are often divided into Jats, Rajputs, and Arain castes. The Pakhtuns (also known as Pashtuns), make up 15.4%, mainly residing in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa. They consist of various tribes and lack a central governing authority. Sindhis, primarily found in Sindh province, constitute 14.1% of the population and are grouped into occupational and caste-based communities. The Baloch, who make up 3.6%, are mainly based in Balochistan and are divided into eastern and western tribes. Other ethnic groups include the Siraikis, who are dispersed across multiple regions (Nevers, 2007).

Urdu is the national language and holds official status. English and Urdu are used for business and governance. Punjabi is the most widely spoken language, used by 44.2% of the population. Other major languages include Pashto (15.2%), Sindhi (14.1%), Siraiki (10.5%), Urdu (7.8%), and Balochi (3.8%). Smaller linguistic communities include Hindko speakers in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, Farsi-speaking Hazaras in Balochistan, and Brahui speakers in Balochistan and Sindh (Malik, 2012). Ethnic identity in Pakistan is closely linked with language and region. Although Urdu has been promoted as a unifying language, it is the mother tongue of only the Muhajir community. Some groups view the national promotion of Urdu as a threat to their ethnic identity, job opportunities, and political rights (Malik, 2012).

Religion

Pakistan is predominantly Muslim, with 96.3% of the population adhering to Islam. Of these, approximately 95% are Sunni, and 5% are Shia. Minor religious communities include Hindus (1.6%), Christians (1.6%), and others such as Sikhs and Bahá'ís (0.3%). The Ahmadiyya community, which makes up 0.2%, is not recognized as Muslim under Pakistani law (Ali, 2013).

Historical and Political Background

Since independence in August 1947, Pakistan emerged as a geographically divided state with its West Wing (Punjab and Sindh) and East Wing (now Bangladesh) separated by over 1,600 kilometers of Indian territory. The country faced major challenges, including absorbing Muslim migrants from India, managing ethnic and economic disparities, and forming an effective government and a sense of national unity (Babar, 2017). The deaths of founding leaders, Muhammad Ali Jinnah (1948) and Liaquat Ali Khan (1951), were followed by periods of political instability marked by short-lived governments, alternating between civilian rule and military coups. Initially, the Constituent Assembly served as the legislative body responsible for drafting a constitution and governing the state until a formal constitution was implemented (Smith, 2017).

Islamization as state policy (Nasr, 2001), intellectual reform (al-Faruqi, 1982), and cultural revival (Roy, 2004), Tribal codes (*Pashtunwali*) historically guided identity and justice (Caroe,

1958; Spain, 1962). Islamization shifted authority from maliks to mullahs (Haqqani, 2005). Zia's Hudood Ordinances reinforced patriarchal norms, restricting women's mobility and education (Kennedy, 1988; Jahangir & Jilani, 1990).

Literature Gap

Most studies focus on Punjab or Khyber Pakhtunkhwa; little research exists on localized impacts in Loralai.

Methodology and Theoretical Framework

Methodology

The research design for this study follows a qualitative interpretivist approach, which emphasizes understanding social realities from the perspective of participants. This method is suitable because Islamization is not just a political or religious process but a lived experience that reshapes identity, traditions, and daily life. By focusing on narratives and observations, the study aims to capture how residents of Loralai perceive and respond to these transformations in their social and cultural environment.

The population includes residents of District Loralai who have direct knowledge or experience of Islamization. A purposive sampling strategy was adopted to ensure that participants represent diverse perspectives, including madrassa teachers, students, religious leaders, elders, and community members. Six madrassas were studied in detail to provide a deeper understanding of how religious education institutions influence social norms, leadership, and identity formation in Pashtun society.

For data collection, both primary and secondary sources were used. Primary data came from field observations, semi-structured interviews, informal discussions, and visits to madrassas and mosques, allowing the researcher to directly engage with community practices. Secondary data included reports from the Directorate General of Religious Education (DGRE), Wafaq-ul-Madaris publications, academic articles, and newspapers, which provided broader context and validation of field findings. This combination ensures a comprehensive analysis of Islamization's impact on Loralai's Pashtun society.

Theoretical Framework

The Segmentary Lineage Theory helps explain how Pashtun tribal society was traditionally organized. In this system, tribes are divided into clans and sub-clans, and leadership is based on lineage and respect within the community (Evans-Pritchard, 1940; Barth, 1959). Elders, known as maliks, guided decisions through the jirga, a council of elders. However, during Islamization, this authority shifted. Mullahs and madrassas began to replace maliks as centers of power, showing how religious authority gradually overtook tribal leadership in places like Loralai. In simple words, this theory shows how Islamization changed leadership from family-based elders to religious leaders.

The Islamization of Knowledge Theory explains how education and learning were reshaped to follow Islamic principles (al-Faruqi, 1982). Under Zia-ul-Haq, madrassas expanded rapidly, becoming not only schools but also centers of moral training and community influence. This meant that young people in Loralai were taught mainly religious subjects, shaping their identity, social behavior, and political views. In easy terms, this theory shows how Islamization turned education into a religious-centered system, strengthening the role of mullahs and promoting Islamic values over tribal traditions or secular ideas.

Data Analysis and Results

In Loralai, inclusion patterns shifted as madrassas and mosques became the main centers of authority. Where tribal elders (maliks) and jirgas once held power, religious institutions increasingly shaped decisions, community life, and political mobilization. This rise of religious

authority marked a clear transformation in how Pashtun society organized leadership and social order.

The empowerment outcomes of Islamization included greater influence for mullahs, but also reinforced restricted gender roles and reduced the authority of maliks. Women's mobility and participation in public life became more limited, while religious leaders gained prominence in education, politics, and conflict resolution. This shift redefined empowerment in ways that favored religious elites over traditional tribal figures.

Underlying these changes were mechanisms such as madrassas, mosques, and religious parties reshaping identity, politics, and justice systems. Over time, this led to a broader transformation: tribal identity rooted in *Pashtunwali* gave way to a stronger Islamic identity. This transformation altered cultural values, social norms, and political behavior, embedding Islamization deeply into the fabric of Pashtun society in Loralai.

Conclusion and Recommendations

This study highlights how Islamization has deeply transformed Pashtun society in District Loralai. Traditional structures such as *Pashtunwali*, jirga, and malik leadership have gradually lost influence, while madrassas, mosques, and mullahs have emerged as dominant centers of authority. These institutions reshaped identity, politics, and conflict resolution, embedding Islamic values more firmly into everyday life.

The findings also show that Islamization produced mixed empowerment outcomes. While religious leaders gained power and influence, gender roles became more restricted, and women's participation in public life declined. Education shifted toward religious-centered learning, reinforcing conservative norms and reducing the space for secular or tribal traditions. Totally, Islamization in Loralai represents a transformation from tribal identity rooted in *Pashtunwali* to a stronger Islamic identity. This shift has redefined social values, cultural practices, and political behavior. The study contributes to understanding how localized Islamization processes reshape traditional societies and provides insights for policymakers and educators seeking culturally sensitive reforms in Balochistan.

Recommendations

Based on the findings, several recommendations can be made to address the impact of Islamization on Pashtun society in Loralai. First, policymakers should strengthen educational reforms by balancing religious and secular education. Madrassas should integrate modern subjects such as science, technology, and social studies alongside religious training to ensure students are prepared for broader social and economic participation.

Second, efforts should be made to promote gender inclusion. Programs supporting women's education, vocational training, and community participation can help counter restrictive norms reinforced during Islamization. Local NGOs and government institutions should collaborate to create safe spaces for women's empowerment while respecting cultural sensitivities.

Finally, there is a need to strengthen community leadership by encouraging cooperation between maliks, mullahs, and civil society actors. Reviving aspects of *Pashtunwali* such as jirga-based conflict resolution, while integrating Islamic principles of justice and forgiveness, can create a balanced system that respects tradition but also adapts to modern needs. These recommendations can help build a more inclusive, resilient, and culturally sensitive framework for Pashtun society in Loralai.

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