

Chromatic Boundaries

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Described in colonial accounts as ‘the Frontier-Town’, Peshawar is to this day a relatively cosmopolitan place, as well as an employment, educational and cultural regional hub. Migration and mobility across social spaces permeate the city with historical continuities and spatial interconnectedness; an ideal location for a doctoral student, like me, enquiring about the experiences and significance of borders and border-crossing.¹

The extent of such spatial and temporal frictions can initially be gauged using a recurrent statement in my field notes – “We are all Afghans” – an assertion that assumed different connotations depending on the context and meaning attributed to it by the speaker. A professor of business management at Peshawar University, for example, told me “we are all Afghans” is invoked in reference to the extent of migration experienced in the subcontinent, and especially that of Pushtun tribes in the area spanning from the Hindu Kush to the Indus. The Yousufzai, of which he is a member, left what is now Afghanistan in the 15th century and ‘conquered’ Swat (a valley and a district in the North-West Frontier Province of Pakistan), in turn displacing Kohistani inhabitants to the upper banks of the Indus (Malik, 2000). Named Shah Jehan after the Mughal emperor whose rule extended across parts of today’s Afghanistan, Pakistan and India, the professor recalled how, when he was a young boy, caravanserais would go through his village in the Peshawar valley during their annual migration to India. They would leave goods that they were trading (as a complementary activity to pastoralism: see Pedersen, 1994) and would collect payment upon their return.²



Some would also leave their pregnant wives, only to pick them up on their way back, months later; others would have different households along the route. As suggested in colonial accounts, in fact (Holdrich, 1910, pp. 9-10), some nomadic migrations reaching as far as Australia (Davies, 1932):

There was an easy road, from Mesopotamia through Persia to Northern Afghanistan or even to Seistan and not a very difficult one to Makran; and so it came about that migratory movements, either compulsory or voluntary, continued throughout centuries, ever extending their scope...³

“We”, in the context of an informal chat with a fellow academic, meant “we Pushtuns in Pakistan”, and his analysis was a historical one. At times though, “we are all Afghans” assumed a strictly political meaning in relation either to the historically shifting border distinguishing Pakistan and Afghanistan, or vis-à-vis historical practices of ethnic differentiation by different Afghan rulers. The Pakistani director of a gender-awareness NGO in Peshawar, working with Afghans, told me: “*We are all Afghans, you know, it is only recently that we have been considered Pakistanis, in the future we’ll see*”. “We” again meant “we Pushtuns in Pakistan”, or perhaps “we” inhabitants of the NWFP (North-West Frontier Province), but the comment in this case referred to citizenship, sovereignty and the future, as opposed to history, people and places.

The Durand Line, arbitrary vis-à-vis social formations and shifting areas of governance, still constitutes, arguably, an unsettled Frontier (Nichols, 1999). In others cases, “we are all Afghans” would acquire a ‘domestic’ ethnic-relations perspective: two Afghan NGO directors, who migrated to Pakistan in the early 1990s, are recorded in my field notes as staunchly arguing against a division of Afghan citizens (“we”) into Pushtun, Tajik, Uzbek, etc.: “*Why do you want to separate us, we are all Afghans...*”

Different perceptions of legal and ideological borders are a primary line of enquiry for a researcher interested in migration. Migration laws, in fact, are based on the principles of sovereignty and nationality, which define areas of jurisdiction and belonging on the basis of the territorial fixity sanctioned by borders.

Such ontology is, however, highly problematic when it comes to Afghanistan, for three interrelated reasons grasped through the examples cited above: the extent of historical migration of its population and the integration of Afghanistan in regional and global circuits and flows, creating a tension with territorially based types of social order; the historically and socio-economically arbitrary nature of Afghanistan’s borders, affecting state-society relations; and the existence of different overlapping forms of authority, creating multiple claims over people and land.

Further, in “the world of movement” (Turton, 2005), characterising the current world-historical moment, these tensions are clearly not confined to Afghanistan.

What is the relation between the salience of sovereignty and borders in matters of migration, and the existence of a variety of spatial practices that do not necessarily coincide with national borders? There is *no* universal relation, in fact. Borders are social

institutions, and as such acquire different meanings and implications depending on their significance vis-à-vis particular individuals or social groups. In other words: borders are flexibly porous, depending on historically shifting structural and subjective refractions. As I realised early in my field research, I could not simply take borders, and their legal implications, as a fact. Rather, I needed to explore and negotiate their heterogeneous effects, in context.

Despite being an alien, as much as a European diplomat or an Afghan immigrant, in fact, my *burgundy passport* and the *colour of my skin* seemed to affect my personal boundaries in Pakistan as much as, if not more than, the type of Entry Visa that legally defined my status there. Such chromatic combination, in fact, distinguished 'me', or rather how 'I' was seen by different people and 'regimes', from the overwhelming majority of the population around me. My '*gora*'-ness ('white/fair'; also, generic term for Western foreigner), i.e., my nationality as defined by my skin colour, would open doors precluded to most Pakistanis, even those with higher economic status than mine. My bag would not be frisked at the entrance of five-star hotels; nor I would be checked while crossing the bridge at Attock, the border between Punjab and NWFP, in my journeys in and out of Peshawar. I got away with speeding tickets along the highway (unfortunately only one out three times that I was stopped) in exchange for a chat, and I had privileged access to upper-level bureaucrats, or 'influential people's' *hujras* (public spaces within villages or houses where visitors can stay to rest or sleep). Sometimes I was at an advantage even in respect to 'higher'-legal-status Europeans: our landlord hesitated to rent the flat below to a French diplomat because she happened to be "black", something that presumably rolled her back in the chromatic pyramidal scheme.

Conversely, I would always be checked on my way out of Pakistan because "*all Italians bring hashish*", as a guard at the Wagha border (between India and Pakistan, spelt 'Wagah' by India) once asserted while triple-checking my intimate parts. This was not true in all circumstances, though: when travelling together with a UNDP officer in and out of Pakistan, in fact, my *Italianness* and consequently my condition as a likely smuggler counted less than her status, and we were usually let through borders with a big smile. Impromptu guides told me of several places, in particular certain mosques and some bazaars; market prices would rise almost everywhere at my arrival; people would blow me kisses or shout "*Angrez* (Englishman)!" and laugh at me in groups. The actions of those around me seemed to be taken on the basis of an assumption built upon a categorisation of myself on the basis of 'objective' factors, such as the colour of my skin. My own perceptions and imaginations (partly consequent to the situation described, partly a-prioristic) about who 'I' was and who 'they' were defined, and modified over time, my literal and motivational boundaries. It seems to me that discovering, challenging, rejecting and finally adopting one's social and material boundaries in a foreign place is one of the most emotionally intense activities related to migration.

More directly related to the objectives of my stay in Pakistan – my doctoral field research – one of the limitations of my chromatic status was the impossibility of wandering

independently, i.e., without compulsory police escort, in the Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATAs), which hosted the majority of registered refugees in Pakistan, at least until the beginning of the current repatriation drive. FATAs are administrative units of Pakistan, which are distinguished from the rest of the country for their legal status, a legacy of colonial times. FATAs enjoy a great degree of autonomy in respect to most Government of Pakistan (GoP) laws. Their territories are outside the jurisdiction of state police; each agency has its own *Kassadars* (tribal militia); fiscal rules do not apply; authority is exercised through tribal governance systems, with the figure of the Political Agent as the only link between domains thus administered and Islamabad, etc. Despite FATAs being separated by a border from the rest of Pakistan, in many aspects they seemed well integrated with adjacent territories.

The Agency border that I had the opportunity to observe most was the one uniting/separating Khyber Agency and/from Peshawar District. Hayatabad, originally an outpost used for colonial expeditions into the Frontier and simultaneously an initial defence line of the Settled District, is now an integral part of Peshawar, with modern housing and a number of facilities, an area with a very large Afghan population housed in refugee camps or in private houses, depending on economic status, with dozens of NGOs and self-help schools, home to the Commissionerate for Afghan Refugees (CAR), etc. At the very end of Hayatabad the Khyber Agency begins; from Saddar, the bazaar in Peshawar's cantonment, it is only a 20-minute bus ride. Such demarcation is an administrative and legal one, but to me it by no means implied a neat separation, or a restriction on the movement of either people or goods. Kharkana (what the *Lonely Planet Guide* calls "Smuggler's Bazaar") straddles this ambivalent line. Buses transport workers and goods to and from various Peshawar city bazaars. Anybody travelling to Afghanistan through the Torkham frontier will find it necessary to cross from here.

Economic rationalities seemed a primary engine behind such cross-border movements. Other than bazaars and labour markets, tourists constitute a source of income for many 'tribals' and are source of bi-directional cross-Agency-border movement – or at least were, until the beginning of 2002 when visitors' numbers dropped dramatically (following Operation Enduring Freedom and the American invasion of Afghanistan). Baba Ji (and probably many others like him), an older gentleman with a perfect English accent famous among Japanese tourists, would come every morning to Saddar and poach travellers in Arbab Road. While offering them *kava* (Peshawari green tea), he would try to exchange the produce of his land for used tennis shoes or T-shirts. Asif, a Pakistani teen, would pretend to be an Afghan refugee selling Afghan knives (in reality made in Punjab) as a marketing strategy for European 'clients': "...they like to buy Afghan things". 'Tourist guides' would offer, in the streets or through hotel receptions, trips to Darra to shoot Kalashnikovs (AK-47 machine guns) or bazookas and visit the 'famous' arms factories,⁴ or would invite people to their guest houses in Khyber where "you can do whatever you want: there is no police, you know..."

Further, the existence of different regimes (or, rather, the non-applicability of GoP laws in areas where tribal authority is the main source of legislative, judicial and executive power) can in itself be a significant cause of cross-Agency-border traffic. Tourists, staff of humanitarian agencies and University of Peshawar students (as recorded in my field notes, but probably other people too) would cross such a 'line' to buy alcohol, *charas* (cannabis resin), or magazines with scantily clad (if at all) women, and various types of pills to enhance virility. Kharkana, as almost every other bazaar I visited, encompasses products that are both "traditional"⁵ as well as products derived from contemporary global compulsions.

Many aspirant journalists or writers would cross the border to write a story: Afghanistan, as a field from which to mine a 'story', is in fact a cause of migration that follows the seasons of 'global' audiences.⁶ Peshawari residents would go (while wealthier car-owners would send their 'staff') to Landi Kotal to change their car tyres, cheaper because import duties are absent in FATA, but difficult to 'smuggle' into Peshawar District given their size. Conversely, several *bicyclewallas*, fast-peddalling between cars, would carry boxes from the Agency into Peshawar; I was told these were smuggled car parts and electric appliances, to be sold in various parts of the city or further 'smuggled' into Punjab.

The border between NWFP and Punjab, in fact, is another major crossing point and one that is heavily guarded, at least along the main Grand Trunk Road. Via Attock bridge, smuggled car parts and small appliances are carried inside refrigerators or washing machines; drugs are transported by bus, with transporters being tourists, teenagers looking for quick money, and women, because less likely to be searched; or transported in fast cars by what a perhaps jealous highway policeman described to me as "very, very good drivers". Once reaching their final destination, such goods need to find outlets in bazaars or be deposited in cargo holds of ships, in order to reach countries where drugs are consumed, and in turn, final consumers, etc. They need to cross other types of relatively porous boundaries, whose significance, in relation to the value of smuggling and the incentives it generates, is perhaps as important as that of the Durand Line.⁷ As suggested by a member of a Pushtun tribe settled 'across' the Line, cited in Glatzer's study of war and boundaries in Afghanistan: "What can Pakistan offer, what can Afghanistan offer, it is the border between them that we are living off" (2001, p. 6). This reflection seems an appropriate one for these 'internal' borders as well.

Economic rationalities on their own, however, cannot explain such cross-border movements since, despite these activities being open to anyone,⁸ including myself, not everybody is involved in them. I recall my personal interaction with that border and conflicting rationalities I faced. For foreigners, recognisable legally by the colour of their passport, and visually by that of their skin, that barrier indicates areas where the national government does not assume responsibility for personal safety, unless under police escort. The big sign at the end of Khyber Road, stating that foreigners must register and identify themselves, constituted for me, however, first and foremost a mental rather than a material barrier, given the facility with which I could have crossed it. I was tempted to get into Khyber Agency admittedly

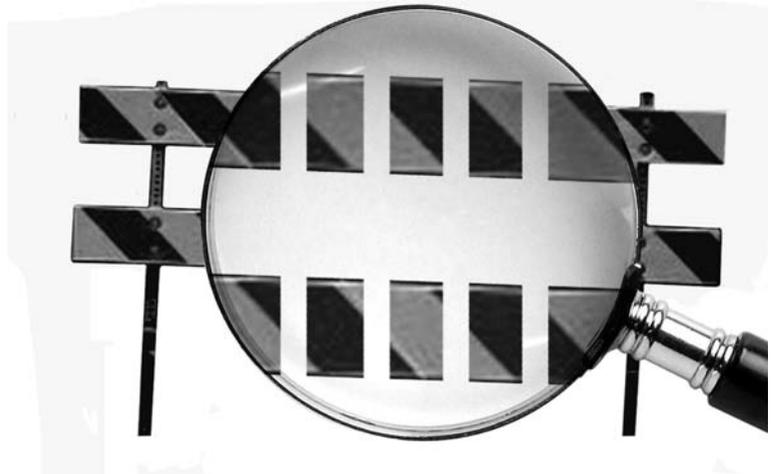
because of the ‘excitement’ caused by the possibility of crossing without authorisation, thus being able to wander without compulsory police escort, and because of the motivational effect of the thousand stories I had heard about those who, especially before 2002, had been able to wander across FATA and into Afghanistan almost without any problem.

While people like ‘me’ could trek from Kurram Agency into Afghanistan’s Paktia Province, or from Bumboret (in the Kalash-inhabited valleys of Chitral) into Nuristan Province, the ongoing military campaign was preventing me from doing so. Clearly, the changed historical context had in turn changed, for some, the meaning of the border.

By the end of my field research, I had crossed that border three times. The first time, I ‘accidentally’ stayed on a bus when it crossed the Agency border, but disembarked after a few yards, gripped by fear of the unknown. A few weeks later I crossed it again, on foot, ‘innocently’ strolling through Kharkana, but felt intimidated and hurriedly crossed back. The third time, I capitulated to formal procedures and crossed the Khyber Pass with a police escort (for which I had to pay Rs 100) on my way to Kabul. My perception of constraints/opportunities within what I perceived as the ‘context’ of my research, as well as my status, physical appearance and personality, all defined the rationale that made me *accept* the border as a line of ‘separation’ – despite its porosity.

Through these field notes, I want to suggest the difference between the subjective (though structurally patterned) implications of crossing a border/traversing a regime, and the material experience of doing so, which varies from individual to individual.

Pre-existing structural conditions that may be geographical, social or political define the context in which border-crossing takes place. Fiscal, legal and governance regimes create heterogeneity in contiguous geographical areas, and in turn open up what might be termed “arbitrage opportunities”, “competitive trade advantages”, or “incentives”, in financial, political economy or neo-institutionalist terms respectively. Contingent enabling conditions,



such as the ease of access and lack of comprehensive enforcement, or the size and type of product to be exchanged, may reinforce or constrain such opportunities. Subjective experience, further enhancing or constraining the possibility of taking advantage of opportunities at the individual level, is in turn dependent on economic status, gender, age, as well as personality, desires and motivations. The result is a complex, dynamic and socially flexible 'porosity' that simultaneously unites and divides cartographies, territories, people and goods.

Border-crossing blurs the distinction between one's conditioned perceptions and imaginings and embodied actual events; and it brings to the fore the overlapping nature of structural and subjective dimensions co-determining human activity. As fixed entities, borders neatly demarcate areas of sovereignty and citizenship: they distinguish between internal and external displacement, 'Refugee' and 'Internally Displaced Person', citizen and alien. Borders *define* a status.

However, borders are also dynamic social processes, *sets of practices and discourses* (Paasi, 1999); "*political membranes and markers of the success of the state-building enterprise*" (Goodhand, 2005, p. 192). Materially and motivationally affecting human settlement and displacement, they contextualise migration within wider historico-geographical processes. Borders *produce* social transformation.

Migration and mobility across the 'Frontier-Town' of Peshawar is a confirmation that boundaries are continually shaped by human activity, even as they shape it.

Notes

1. This article is based on thoughts and encounters occurred during my field research in Peshawar, conducted at different times over the period 2002-04.
2. A practice that is still alive: I accompanied one of 10 brothers (sons of one man and two wives) engaged in shoemaking and trading, on one of his trips collecting money for shoes he had delivered to various outlets in the Northern Areas some time before.
3. It is interesting to note continuities in migratory patterns to this date. For example, see http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/not_in_website/syndication/monitoring/media_reports/1800572.stm. See also Rajaram Kumar and C. Gundy-Warr, "The Irregular Migrant as *Homo Sacer*: Migration and Detention in Australia, Malaysia and Thailand", in *International Migration*, Vol. 42, No. 1, pp. 33-64 (2004).
4. Almost every tourist I met had gone, or planned to go, to that town because, as most travellers told me, "It is something you must do while here – it is in all guidebooks and stories about the wild Frontier..."
5. Chakravarti (1976, pp. 37-38) presents a report of trade between British India and countries along its North West boundary in 1874. *Charas* figures as the fifth principal import from Kabul after silk, fruits and nuts, wood, and dyes other than indigo.
6. I encountered many journalists in Pakistan, as well as travellers keeping blogs (one of which mentions me, without my knowing that my conversations with them were part of their own research: see <http://www.erwinvoogt.com/overland/opdrachten/opdr26.html>); I also met several aspiring authors.

7. This and sections of earlier paragraphs draw upon my article "The Flexible Porosity of Borders", currently under revision, and scheduled for publication in *Political Geography* in 2008.
8. In drug smuggling, for instance, a fixed price is put on quantities and destinations: Rs X per kilo from source to Peshawar, Rs X+Y to Punjab, Rs X+Y+Z to Karachi, etc., regardless of who actually transports the goods from point to point.

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