

**Cultural Dynamics of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa: Traditions, Challenges, and Resilience in Contemporary Pakistan**

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**ABSTRACT**

*This article presents an overview of the cultural situation in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP), the province in the north-west of Pakistan, and assesses the new trends in 2024-25. The paper investigates the ways in which traditional Pashtun culture, norms and social structures have changed in response to various contemporary issues such as climate-related disasters, economic transformations and modernity. On the basis of recent research and field-based observations, this article examines the resilience of KP cultural heritage and spotlight emerging trends that signpost adaptation to changing environment. The results indicate that KP maintains a high level of cultural continuity due to its commitment to adhering to Pashtunwali while also showing great fluidity in response to environmental, technological and social influences. The role of digital media and youth in transforming expression of culture in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa has also been elaborated by this study. The study also summarized that youth and digital media played an important role in the transformation of cultural expression in KP. Social media, music websites and viral art groups are all creating new environments where tradition is welcomed by modern creative urges. Even classic forms of poetry (like chaar bayt and tappa) are being digitized, seducing the multi-wavelength local as well as global listeners. Similarly, village craftsmen are also experimenting with different types of crafts, which mixed traditional skills and materials with contemporary designs that maintain purchasing assets to market the goods, and will not subtract their cultural identities. Furthermore, the influence of education and urbanization on gender roles and family relations is examined. While the extended family remains significant, in cities nuclear families are developing and women are more involved in education, cultural aspects and business. The KP culture remains stuck with its historical other, even when it appropriates elements of modernity at strategic level witnessing an active preservation/sedimentary dichotomy. Finally, this paper demonstrates the necessity of policy intervention and community practice in the preservation of cultural heritage. 5 Festivals, art exhibitions and heritage tourism have become an established culture expression and transmission form that is adding to social integration and economic development. In the face of these current challenges, the culture of KP remains a resilience culture of adaptation and serves as a potential model for sustainable cultural survival in an age when society transform more quickly than ever before.*

**Keywords:** Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, Pashtun culture, Pashtunwali, cultural resilience, climate adaptation, traditional knowledge

**INTRODUCTION**

Ethnically, culturally and politically one of Pakistan's most unique regions due to its almost entirely non-Punjabi population and deep rooted traditional values. The strategic position of the province—located on the border with Afghanistan as well as in the Hindu Kush-Himalaya-Karakoram range system—have also contributed to its culture that is influenced for centuries by cross-border interactions, trade routes and geopolitical interest.

KP's cultural scene has faced no small amount of challenges in the recent past thanks to environmental disasters and economic pressures. In August 2025, a flash flood in Buner district killed more than 300 people, as well as damaging homes and infrastructure (Alegría, 2025). These eco-catastrophes affect deeply also the cultural practices, community solidarity, traditional knowledge systems. This article is a study on how KP's culture identity faced and adapted to these challenges while maintaining its purity of style.

Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP) province situated in the North West of Pakistan is one of the most culturally diversified and historically rich provinces of the country. At the intersection of South and Central Asia, it has been historically influenced by migration, trade and cultural exchange due to its position on the ancient Silk Road as well as being a neighbor to China in the north, India in the south east, Afghanistan to Iran at west. At the heart of all this is Pashtunwali, the traditional code of life for Pashtuns, which governs social relations, resolving conflicts, hosting a guest with honor and community solidarity. In the era of modernity and institutional change, despite the players that undermine Pashtunwali, it still acts as a formational cultural paradigm shaping identities of governance and everyday social passages in KP (Aziz et al., 2025).

Beyond normative social codes, cultural identity of KP is manifested in the wider range of linguistic composite, oral traditions, folklore, poetry and music as well as esoteric/sacred/secret modes of handicrafts and performative arts that serve inter alia for the perpetuation of communal memory and intergenerational continuity. Recently, culture has been increasingly acknowledged as a strategic resource for social cohesion and sustainable development. Provincial interventions during 2024-25 have focused on culture preservation, heritage tourism and institution support for arts and crafts as a tools of economic regeneration as well identity reinforcement (The Nation, 2025).

The sensitivity of minority cultures in KP, or the province's fragility to modern forces, is further indicative of how precarious cultural diversity has become. The Kalasha of Chitral, recognized along with their unique belief system, rituals and festivals are confronted by existential threats associated to the impact of climatic variability and anthropogenic changes opening vistas for tourism commoditization and socio-religious accommodation. New international coverage insists that, though legal and advocacy pressures have also grown in recent years, the long-term survival of Kalash culture is still unsure without continual institutional and community support (Le Monde, 2025).

However the cultural continuity within KP is confronted by severe and multiple challenges. Post-merger structural changes have ensued in KP following the assimilation of the previously Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA), resulting in discord between informal indigenous practices and formal state apparatuses in the form of governance, legal and administrative systems. Modern day research indicates that while modernization has created new governance models, traditional cultural norms continue to heavily influence how the public views of authority, legitimacy and social order – and are in need of locally appropriate and culturally sensitive policies (Munir et al., 2025). The simultaneous persistence of traditional values and institutional reform in the society reflects the negotiated nature of cultural change in transitional societies.

In light of increasing literary needs concerning cultural resilience rooted in tradition under the pressures of modernity, this article seeks to make a contribution by situating KP as an example of how traditional societies negotiate the tension between (inertia and) agency.

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

### **Cultural Foundations and Traditional Norms in KP**

Pashtunwali, the native code of conduct, which governs social behavior, dispute, hospitality, honor and collective responsibility in Pashtun society, holds a dominant place in the socio-cultural milieu of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa. While modernity and institutional reform are reshaping everyday life, Pashtunwali remains influential, scholars stress. Pashtunwali has been cited to be rooted in communal identity and intra familial relations yet is progressively figured through these ties as younger generations access education, media and transnational influences (Aziz, Ali, and Khan 2025). Such privileging of normative tradition finds resonance in anthropological and sociological accounting of Pashtunwali as cultural heritage and adaptive system. Khan (2024) suggests that key tenets of Pashtunwali – jirga (collective decision making) and melmastia (hospitality) – continue to inform systems of local governance that the state has proved unable to supplant, underscoring the significance of culturally grounded policy solutions.

### **Cultural Preservation and Heritage Initiatives**

According to the literature, recent efforts are being applied in the province to preserve tangible and intangible cultural heritages. Preservation of the cultural heritage of KP is now institutionalized and legal, and there are efforts towards giving more emphasis to local music, festivity, archeology, and other forms of cultural heritages as identity and developmental factors. In the Nation (2025), articles are published about efforts to preserve the cultural heritages through the use of cultural tourism and art promotion as strategies for the sustenance of the local economies and the cohesion of the communities' societal structures and functions. It conforms to the trend of the discourse regarding the relevance of the preservation of the cultural heritages not only as element of continuity of identity but also as factors of socio-economic sustainability of the communities concerned.

### **Challenges from Structural and Political Transformation**

The integration of Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA) into KP Provinces can be regarded as one of the most groundbreaking political transformations over the past few decades, even impacting cultural patterns. Munir, Khan, and Ali (2025) examined the governance transformation process after integration, through the use of indigenous traditions and norms. From the findings by the authors, it is conclusive from the endeavors by the legal system to promote a homogeneous system of governance that indigenous cultural systems are acting as an intervention mechanism for the way people interpret governance and justice, thus indicating an indication of a policy versus cultural divergence difference. Furthermore, they also show the existence of religious complications. According to the author, Khan (2024), the religious leaders of the KP province are seen to be “interstitially caught” between their traditional environment and modernization since they construct cultural perceptions to guide their attitudes, gender, and participation level within society.

### **Environmental Stress and Cultural Resilience**

Lately, environmental and climatic issues have appeared as a relevant area of research that cuts across cultural continuity. It has been recognized that climate change and its impacts, such as floods and climate-

related extremes and changes to living patterns, have the potential to impact both material and intangible cultural heritage. As described by Khan (2024), there has been a role played by indigenous knowledge systems such as pastoral and agrarian societies with respect to environmental and climatic change.

### **Gender, Culture, and Social Negotiation**

The issue in respect of gender within the cultural construct of KP has been researched recently and though it includes how cultural practices enable or disinhibit women's autonomy. While Pashtunwali culture is the base of community identity, it involves patrilineal ideology, which leave no room for women to come out from their houses. This issue is investigated by Aziz et al. in their article "Passing the Torch: Women's Empowerment and Resilience in the Pashtun Community" four years.

This literature highlights the importance of contextualizing cultural continuity not as homogeneity, but as one that is contested and negotiated among different social groups. This is consistent with more general approaches to feminist cultural studies that view tradition and agencies as being co-constitutive.

### **Minority Cultures and Cultural Diversity**

The culture of the minorities within the KP province, specifically the Kalash of the Chitral region of Pakistan, illustrates the vulnerability yet tenacity of cultural traditions that have localized patterns within the larger sociopolitical setting. Global news reports from the Le Monde publication of 2025 convey the attempts by the Kalash to retain their distinctive mode of religion, the festival cycles throughout the seasons, and the way of life.

Though it is not necessarily the core area of research concerning the cultural dynamics of Pakistan, the significance of the work relating to the Kalash culture is deeply rooted in themes of survival and commoditization of culture.

### **Synthesis and Gaps**

Taken together, the body of research regarding the cultural dynamics at KP has pointed to the following three themes:

1. The persistence of traditional norms, like Pashtunwali, to a certain extent, as they still affect society and governance (Aziz et al., 2025; Khan, 2024).
2. Novel challenges associated with structural change, environmental pressures, and globalization; these are intertwined in complex ways with cultural systems (Munir et al., 2025; Shahzad et al., 2025).
3. Resilience and adaptation strategies that utilize indigenous knowledge, community assets, and policy assistance to cope with continuity in the face of change (The Nation, 2025).

Nonetheless, there is still some shortage in the existing literature on the topics of longitudinal research on cultural change, the role of digital media in the transmission of cultural knowledge, and the relationship between culture and the aspirations and economic mobility of the young. Furthermore, there is some shortage in literature linking the impact of cultural heritage policy with the measures for the well-being of the community.

## **METHODOLOGY**

This study uses a mixed-methodology combining:

- **Literature review:** Recent journal articles, government reports and news from 2022-23 about the culture of KP were included in this study.
- **Field notes:** Ethnographic field notes concerning cultural praxis, festivals, and daily life in several communities in KP.
- **Key informant interviews:** In-depth interviews with cultural leaders, opinion-makers and community members about the maintenance and change of culture.
- **Case studies** — D tested and analyzed in-depth way processes of culture particular, as reactions to climate disasters, traditional craft transformation and page 74 social formation.
- **The fieldwork** was conducted during the period between January 2024 and September 2025, focusing on both rural and urban areas to encompass a wide diversity of cultural expressions in the province.

The detailed methodology is;

**Field notes:** The ethnographic field notes form a prime part of the empirics for such a research and hail from extended and participant observation with diverse social groups spread across Khyber Pakhtunkhwa. The field notes include descriptions from the daily cultural praxis, such as social interactions, family ties, gendered spaces, means of subsistence, and informal governance, along with attention to cultural festivals, exhibitions, and events such as seasonal events, religious gatherings, and culturally organized fairs, where reproduction, negotiations, and transformation of Pashtun cultural values take place.

The field notes are also recording the rhythms of everyday life, observing in homes, marketplaces, hujras, mosques, institutional settings, as well as public spaces. These are supplemented with conversations, as well as participant observation, which enable a nuanced analysis of how tradition is lived, negotiated, and constructed to respond to the contemporary forces of the socio-economic environment, modernization, as well as other external factors. Taken together, the field notes present a richness of the contexts, which enable analysis informed by lived experiences in the KP cultural landscape.

**Key informant interviews:** Interviews were conducted with key informants from diverse social strata in Pakistan. The research participants included social influencers from areas such as culture, art, religion, and education, as well as social members. This research aimed to gather information from responses related to experiences with cultural dynamics in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa.

The design of the interviewee mapped out the views on cultural maintenance, the dynamics of intergenerational transfers, and the forces driving cultural evolution, including education, migration, exposure to the mass media, economic developments, and governance initiatives. The interviews conducted between the interviewer and respondents allowed both the tradition carriers and the culture modifiers to air their views on the interpretations of norms, values, and practices. The qualitative findings that originated from the interactions facilitated a comparative study of the way culture was being sustained or transformed in different social circles in the context of KP.

**Case studies:** The current study used qualitative case study approaches to investigate particular cultural processes and transformations happening within chosen communities across the region of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP), and these case study designs have been utilized to understand how a certain cultural practice and formation react to modern changes, such as climate change disasters, economic stress, and a modified social structure.

Particular attention has been given to the response of the community to climate-related occurrences, such as floods, landslides, and adverse weather conditions, and how these affect traditional modes of living and community functions. Some other case studies have been based on the role of modernization on traditional crafts and the manner in which the craftspeople incorporate indigenous knowledge and creative expressions in coping with the market forces, mobilities of the population, and advancements in technology. Thus, the process of social formation, bonding, and resilience is described in the various cases.

**Fieldwork duration and scope:** The field work carried out in relation to this study has been carried out over a long period of time, ranging from January 2024 to September 2025, which has offered enough flexibility to work in-depth in a field setting of this study, allowing cultural practices, which occur in different cycles of time, to be observed. This has made it possible to achieve coverage of cultural patterns surrounding seasons, faith calendars, farm cycles, as well as festivals, in a sociocultural setting of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP), which has made it possible to establish trust in field work to attain in-depth work in ethnography.

The study was purposively conducted in both rural and urban areas to embrace the diversity in cultural practices in the province. The rural field sites included villages and small towns, which are still characterized by customary practices, kinship-based structures, and traditional subsistence patterns. In other places, modernization, migration, education, mass media, and economic diversification have influenced the province, so the study included district headquarters, large cities, among other areas, to showcase how culture is differently rearranged.

Through the investigation of multiple sites along the rural-urban continuum, the research was able to identify the patterns of cultural continuity and change, focusing on the contrast as well as the connections that exist between the different social spaces. Through the multi-site investigation, the study was able to achieve a well-rounded understanding of the way in which the Pashtun cultural values, traditions, and identity of the people of the KP province continue to be negotiated and shaped by the demands of the modern world. Overall, the temporal and spatial variability of the fieldwork added strength to the analytical rigor of the research.

## **FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS ON CULTURAL FOUNDATIONS OF KHYBER PAKHTUNKHWA**

### **Pashtunwali: The Ethical Framework**

Pashtunwali is still the foundation on which KP's cultural humanism stands and it gives a code of ethics to even social communing, dispute resolution, inter-personal dealings. Recent evidences show that despite the new socio-economic fabric introduced by urbanization and modernization, fundamental theory of Pashtunwali is still defining community life in the province. Key elements of Pashtunwali that demonstrate ongoing relevance include:

- **Melmastia (hospitality):** The tradition of generous hospitality toward guests remains strong, with recent studies noting its adaptation to contemporary contexts, including support for climate disaster victims.
- **Panah (asylum):** The concept of shielding the displaced has been demonstrated in societal reactions to displacement due to flash floods in 2025.
- **Badal (justice/revenge):** The idea of justice remains traditional, but inclusively alongside the formal legal process there are emerging readings that refer to customary practices.

### **Social Structure and Kinship**

Jirga (council of elders) system as a major forum for local dispute resolution even today operates in rural areas. New research suggests that jirgas have also been influential in organizing community responses to the effects of climate disasters in 2024-2025, proving themselves adaptable to more recent problems (Amnesty International, 2025).

Most family heads are still men, however; economic necessity and education have weakened gendered adult roles in some areas. Extended family support systems remain important social safety nets, as highlighted by the spontaneous response of families in Buner district following flash floods in 2025 when distant relatives also played a pivotal role in responding to needs created by emergencies.

### **Music and Performance**

Attan (national dance in Afghanistan and KPK) while the traditional based rabab instrument, which remains high in demand, as it is modified with modern developments but still having its local identity. These dynamic traditions were on display at the 2024 Peshawar Cultural Festival, which included a mix of traditional and contemporary talent – from Pashtun musicians who have continued in the old ways to their hip-hop-inspired fusion counterparts.

### **Crafts and Material Culture**

Textile manufacture, especially weaving, as well as embroidery, is an important cultural tradition besides being an utmost income source. Field observations: (2024-2025).

Traditional designs are still in vogue in modern times. However, to cater to the requirements of the said market (and this is for yet another generation forthcoming) they have developed new designs, patterns, and products while maintaining traditional lines as yet. Woodcraft, metalwork, ceramics: the foundation principles related to artisanry in this country. Sure, our local artisan class, which we still use to this very day, realizes they can't handle the INCHES ONCE more with this mad demand for SPEED over comfort! This artisanry is said to have been taken up by yet another younger lot to keep/save their ancestral skill sets from dying out.

### **Climate Disasters and Community Resilience**

The culture and social fabric of communities has been profoundly affected by the environmental strain on KP emanating from more frequent and severe climate-induced disasters. The August 2025 flash flood that killed over 300 people in Buner district was both a vivid reminder of the frailty of traditional settlements and the cultural contingency responses of resilience. One resident of Buner: “There was this flash flood

which came from the mountains. I have never seen such a disaster in my whole life living in Buner. It was terrifying. My friend who was with me that day, his house was under water. He lost 18 members of his family in one day” (Alegría, 2025). Reportage from KP by Amnesty International between April 2024 and January 2025 illustrated how communities employed long-standing support systems to cope with disasters brought on by climate, as extended family ties and tribal affiliations permitted some communities to better organize in the face of such emergencies and the means to rebuild (Amnesty International, 2025a).

### **Traditional Ecological Knowledge**

Traditional knowledge systems associated with weather forecasting, sustainable resource management and farming practices are being revisited as communities adapt to environmental change. In 2024, fieldwork observed how indigenous weather prediction is combined with contemporary meteorological data to enhance community preparedness for extreme events. The work of Khan et al. (2024) on multi-century precipitation variability over northern Pakistan has brought forth the importance of traditional ecological knowledge for long term climatic understanding and for cultural adaptations in KP.

### **Education and Changing Aspirations**

Expansion of education in KP brought new challenges to traditional social fabric, especially in the sphere of gender role in the family and intergenerational relations. Fieldwork monitoring in 2024-2025 recorded rising female participation in education, albeit with substantial regional differences. The covariation of education attainment and culture is reflected in the study of education and conservation attitudes in case of endangered species such as the Indian pangolin in western Pakistan, wherein education was positively associated with conservation friendly views (Ahmad et al., 2025).

### **Migration and Cultural Identity**

Both the indigenous and foreign populations of KP have been shaped by internal as well as international migration while local structures of power and patterns of consumption have been altered by remittance economies. 2024 community interviews with returnees exposed multifaceted cultural identity negotiation practices that were a mixture of traditional practices combined with those encountered in other places. The 2025 assessment on climate induced displacement in Pakistan, highlighted the fact that environmental disasters forcing people to migrate has introduced new threats to cultural sustainability as displaced populations from KP are working out ways to safeguard certain key cultural practices in provisional settlements (Amnesty International 2025).

## **DIGITAL TECHNOLOGY AND CULTURAL TRANSMISSION**

### **Social Media and Cultural Expression**

The recent proliferation of digital connectivity in KP has proved to be an opportunity for new spaces of cultural expression and preservation. Fieldwork in 2024-2025 confirmed the emergence of Pashto content creators on YouTube and TikTok in particular, sharing traditional music, poetry and tales with diasporic and global audiences. These digital platforms also facilitated the spread of culture across generations, as youth from these communities engaged with traditional content in numerous new formats. But there have been worries that the cultural authenticity is being lost and that the culture is being commercialized.

### **Digital Documentation and Preservation**

The rate of cultural heritage recording and digitization has multiplied manifold. Various initiatives have been started in 2024-2025 to preserve the threatened language, knowledge, and history. Activities such as these recognize the importance of culture preservation and the need to fast-track social changes.

### **CONCLUSION AND FUTURE DIRECTIONS**

From this investigation, it becomes clear that the cultural stratification of KP has witnessed a fascinating continuity and an adjustment amidst the challenges of “modernity.” The core principles of Pashtunwali “continue to govern society as a code of ethics, even though some of its traditional patterns are adapting to face a new set of challenges.” Climate change-induced disasters, including the “devastating floods” witnessed in 2025, have stretched the “community resilience” while, at the same time, “lending evidence to the adaptability of indigenous social systems.” The “jirga system, tribal bonds, and individual responsibility” have proved to be a robust bridge connecting the “relief efforts” while, at the same time, “indigenous social systems are adjusting to encompass a new set of ideas and methods.” The following are some of the “issues” against which a “research focus” is emphasized:

1. The consequences of climate change over a period of time for the culture and knowledge system of KP.
2. The evolving role of digital technologies in the preservation and transmission of culture.
3. How young people, especially those with the ability to connect with education and the digital age, negotiate cultural identities.
4. Chances for traditional forms of governance in ensuring sustainable development and climate resilience.

Analysis of the relationship between tradition and adaptation in KP can not only unveil the way in which the cultures manage the challenges of the present era but can also reveal the role of these systems in shaping culture.

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