

The social life of rumors: uncertainty in everyday encounters between the military, Taliban and tribal Pashtun in Pakistan

Abstract

In the aftermath of 9/11, with the U.S.-led invasion of Afghanistan, the Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA) in Pakistan have been the site of immense violence and destruction, including U.S. drone attacks, ground military operations by the Pakistan Army and retaliatory attacks by different factions of Taliban fighters. Using uncertainty as an analytic and ethnographic concept, this article traces the social life of the rumors, conspiracy theories and stories that float around this violence. I draw attention to their multiple and, often, contradictory effects; rumors simultaneously breed fear and confusion, help forge intimacy, and provide certainty and coherence. Moreover, rather than subvert power relations or simply critique the powerful, I suggest that rumors and conspiracy theories provide the means through which tribal Pashtuns live and make their way in a social world in which they remain unequal but are coeval participants.

Key words

Taliban, Pakistan army, Pashtun, uncertainty, rumor, conspiracy, Tribal Areas, US imperialism

Author biography

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Introduction

“Do you know what my cousin told me? He told me that his friend had been kidnapped by the Taliban and held hostage for a couple of months”, recalled Zar Ali. After the friend had been released, he met the cousin and recounted that he had been held in a mountain cave for several weeks in one of the valleys in Waziristan, part of the Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA) situated along the Pakistan-Afghanistan border. “A Taliban guard use to stand at the entrance of the cave – a tall man, his face always veiled. Further down in the valley, there was an army patrol. The soldiers had a clear view of the cave and the Taliban guards that would stand there”. Viewing this as evidence that the army is complicit with the Taliban, Zar Ali continued, “the friend told my cousin that not only could the army see them, the guard would even signal to them to keep an eye on the cave when he went for a break”.

In Lahore, at a tea stall close to the university where they were studying, I was sitting with Zar Ali and several of his friends. They were all in their early twenties and from different Pashtun tribes in FATA.¹ Like many other tribesmen, most of them blamed

Fieldwork was supported by the project “Tolerance in Contemporary Muslim Practice: Political Theory Beyond the West”, funded by the European Research Council. Earlier versions of this article were presented at a workshop on civil-military relations at Yale University in 2017 and, in 2018, at the weekly social anthropology department seminar at the University of Manchester. I am grateful for the generative

both the Pakistan army and the Taliban for the violence in their villages, and often claimed, similar to Zar Ali, that they were in cahoots with each other. Asim, in particular, was a vocal critic of the army and I was not surprised when he chimed in: “this is how it is: a new Great Game in which we [Pashtun tribes] are being massacred. America is playing Pakistan and the army is playing America for money”. Sadiq, who was sitting across from Asim, had been silent throughout the conversation up to this point but now remarked in a quiet tone, “why do you always talk of the army this way?”. Asim sneered in response, “of course you would say that, now that you have family in the army ... me, I would never be like this. The blood of so many in my family is on their hands ... Taliban, army, it is all the same”. Sadiq, who was angry enough not to back down, retorted, “but your family continues to send all the children to army schools, so why this pretense that you want nothing to do with the army?”.

The conversation I have described above captures many aspects of my broader interactions with, and experiences of conducting, fieldwork among tribal Pashtuns who have been displaced from FATA. Since the US-led invasion of neighboring Afghanistan, Pakistan has experienced significant unrest and violence; it is estimated that since 2005 more than 59,000 people have died in terrorist attacks across Pakistan. A significant portion of these attacks have been in Khyber-Pakhtunkhwa (formerly the North West Frontier Province) and in the Tribal Areas. In addition, the Tribal Areas have been the site of US drone attacks and ground operations by the Pakistan army targeting the Taliban. Since 2004, somewhere between 2500 to 4000 people have been killed by drone strikes, many hundreds from military operations and more than one million have been displaced from the tribal areas.² During the time of this fieldwork, from 2011 to 2013, some of the villages in the Tribal Areas were evacuated for ground military operations against the Taliban. Driven out of their homes, many were sent to camps set up for Internally Displaced People, while others went to live in cities such as

discussions at both venues. I would especially like to thank Samar Al-Bulushi, Ilana Feldman, Sahana Ghosh, Radhika Gupta, Farhana Ibrahim and Humeira Iqtidar for helping refine my argument. Any shortcomings are, entirely, my own.

¹ I use the term “tribal” to distinguish between Pashtuns who, through their official domiciliary status, are residents of FATA and those who belong to other parts of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa. I am mindful of the epistemological problems with the term; the colonial distinction between “settled” and “tribal” Pashtuns was arbitrary, linked more to practicalities of governance and geopolitical concerns of buffering British India from the neighbouring Afghan and Russian empires. More broadly, in statist discourses, rather than signifying some innate difference or qualities, the term “tribe” often denotes a particular relationship with the state – that is, a refusal to come under its ambit of control (Scott 2009). However, the continuing use of structures of legislation and governance based on this distinction, such as the Frontier Crimes Regulation, gives it ethnographic and political relevance. Many Pashtun from FATA self-identify as “tribal”, and do so in order to differentiate themselves (and their treatment by the state) from other Pashtuns. Pashtuns who are not residents of FATA also distinguish between themselves and “tribals” by pointing out differences in dispositions, practices and norms. My use of the term here is not to suggest that any of these qualities are innate. Rather it is to reflect that these constructed differences are relevant in everyday and political contexts.

² Figures for drone attack casualties are taken from The Bureau of Investigative Journalism (https://www.thebureauinvestigates.com/projects/drone-war/charts?show_injuries=1&show_strikes=1&location=pakistan&from=2004-1-1&to=now, accessed December 8, 2018). The estimate for military operation casualties has been taken from the Pakistani newspaper, *The Dawn* (<https://www.dawn.com/news/1119392>) and the displacement figures are based on the United Nations’ estimate, reported by the *Voice of America* (<https://www.voanews.com/a/tribesmen-displaced-pakistan-anti-militant-operations-demand-repatriation/3850777.html>).

Lahore, Rawalpindi and Karachi, where their family members and relatives were already based.

It was amongst these latter groups, specifically those who had moved to Lahore, that my fieldwork was situated. Although many of the evacuated villages have since been reopened and I have been able to visit family homes of my interlocutors, the conspiracy theories and events I describe in this article are from the time of my original fieldwork in Lahore. The majority of my informants were men: some of them were young, aged between twenty and thirty, while others were middle-aged. A large proportion, especially among the young, were college and university students. After completing primary school in nearby towns in the Tribal Areas, they had attended secondary institutions in larger towns in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa – usually living with extended family – and had been able to gain admission in colleges in Lahore through seats reserved for provincial quotas. Others worked in the transport industry, ranging from rickshaw driving and trucking of wholesale goods to spare parts and scrap metal businesses.

As reflected in my opening vignette, there existed amongst my informants immense resentment against the establishment – the state and the military – for its treatment of the Tribal Areas and Pashtun tribes. While our conversations usually focused on current events – drones and ground operations, and the strategic participation of the Pakistani military in the so-called Global War on Terror (GWOT) – their distrust and antagonism was based upon enduring histories of marginalization conducted by the state, as well as a sense of their position within larger geopolitics in the region.³ If my younger informants have grown up against the ever-present specter of American drones, my older interlocutors remain haunted by memories of violence and disruption brought on by the Afghan-Soviet war.⁴ War brings its own share of troubles, but life in ordinary times for the inhabitants of Tribal Areas is never without difficulties and disruption either. Recent violence has led to wide-scale evacuations and a heightened sense of insecurity, but lack of education and health infrastructure and few employment opportunities have meant a constant struggle for survival. In most biographical sketches, stories of war and destruction seamlessly blend in with incidents of premature deaths and migration brought on by economic hardship.

The mistrust of the military, and the Pakistani state more broadly, was visible in the rumors and stories that Zar Ali had shared. And, as had transpired in this instance, such rumors were often sutured to conspiracy theories about nefarious American interference and interests in Pakistan and Afghanistan. Laced within these accounts, the military appeared in collusion with the Taliban and as enemies of honorable tribal groups. Rumors and conspiracy theories collapsed the boundaries between the military, the Taliban and, at times, America, but also separated them from tribal Pashtuns. Yet, there were also ruptures in these neat divisions. As apparent in the exchange between Asim and Sadiq, there were families that were against the army and refused any association with them, yet still sent their children to schools run by the military. At the same time, if one probed further, both the Taliban and the military appeared in other guises and

³ For a history of the marginalized status of FATA and differences in legislative structures, see Marsden and Hopkins, *Fragments of the Afghan Frontier*, 23-49; Nichols, *Frontier Tribal Areas 1840-1990, History of Pashtun Migration*

⁴ For Pakistan's role in the Afghan resistance, see Ahmed *Thistle and Drone*; Rashid *Descent into Chaos, Taliban*

forms. In recounting their experiences, many young men spoke of how they had once been attracted by, or had been a part of, the Taliban groups in their villages, while others spoke of relatives and friends who were allied to the movement. Amongst the same group of men, the military was also often a source of opportunity, offering a career path, stable income and social influence.

This article traces the social life of rumors and conspiracy theories – the work they do and the effects they have – to draw out the relations, tensions and contradictions in interactions between tribal Pashtuns and the Pakistani army. The analysis is led by ethnography, but draws upon, and makes interventions into, existing literature on rumors and conspiracy theories. In the last two decades, a wide body of literature has developed that takes rumors and conspiracy theories “seriously” and, in particular, uses them as sites for theorizing power inequalities and for insights into micro-histories of violence and marginalization. Within this framing, both sets of literatures have tended to treat rumors and conspiracy theories as a response to, and critique of, the powerful by those that they marginalize.⁵ Rumors, especially in the seminal work of the subaltern school, have been viewed as a response to power but with the capacity to subvert power relations.⁶ In this article, I acknowledge this aspect of rumors but also draw attention to their multiple and, often, contradictory effects. Following the social life of such forms as they circulate amongst tribal Pashtun groups, I show how rumors simultaneously breed fear and confusion, help forge intimacy, and provide certainty and coherence. Moreover, I highlight how rumors allow tribal Pashtuns to critique the powerful, in this case the Pakistan army and the Taliban, but also mystify and obscure connections between them. Rather than subvert power relations, I suggest that rumors provide the means through which tribal Pashtuns live and make their way in a social world in which they remain unequal but are “coeval” participants.

Taking such an approach also positions me to question notions of epistemic difference which is inherent in much of the recent work on conspiracy theories. I take cue here from Stef Jansen who argues that much of anthropological research takes a cultural relativist approach and views conspiratorial thinking as forms of cultural critique, epistemic practices of the “cultures” from which they emerge. “Detecting ‘reason’”, he writes, “in the seemingly paranoid thinking of (often marginalized) ‘others’, they [anthropologists] valorize it as alternative, sometimes resistant knowledge production”.⁷ Jansen concludes that to think of conspiracy theories in this manner – as

⁵ West and Sanders (eds) *Transparency and Conspiracy*; Fenster *Conspiracy Theories*; Marcus (ed), *Paranoia Within Reason*; Tanner “Conspiracy of the Invisible Hand”; Olmsted *Real Enemies*; Singh, “Conspiracy Theories in a Networked World”; Sutton “The Foreign Finger”; Knight, *Conspiracy Theories in American History*; Boyer, “Conspiracy, History and Therapy at a Berlin ‘Stammtisch’”; Allen “Sincerity, Hypocrisy and Conspiracy Theory”; Berg and Presskorn-Thygesen, “Conspiracy Theory: Truth Claim or Language Game”; Boltanski, *Mysteries and Conspiracies*.

⁶ Guha, *Elementary Aspects of Peasant Insurgency*; Bhabha “Of Mimicry and Man”, “Spirit of Calm Violence,”; Taussig, “Cultures of Terror”, *The Nervous System*; Arnold, “Touching the Body”; Chandravarkar, “Plague Panic and Epidemic”; Perice, “Rumors and Politics in Haiti”; Sökefeld, “Rumors and Politics in the Northern Frontier”; Brittlebank, “Tales of Treachery”; Kumar, “Beyond Muffled Murmurs of Dissent?”; Stoller, “In Cold Blood”; Cox, “Rumors and Risings”; Turner, *I Heard it*; White, *Speaking with Vampires*

⁷ Jansen, “Conspiracy Theorizing,” 6

instances of epistemic practices of “others” – is to “deny coevalness”.⁸ I argue that this “denial of coevalness” is also present in the growing literature on the rise of conspiratorial thinking in relation to American imperialism.⁹ Although this literature is insightful in demonstrating the nature and effects of US activities abroad, it also tends to treat conspiracy theories as critiques from “others”, those on the outside. In other words, it views conspiratorial thinking as a response of those left confounded by the workings of US power. In this article, I draw upon this literature to analyze my ethnography and acknowledge the ways in which imperial and state practices have fuelled conspiratorial thinking. However, at the same time, I argue that conspiracy theories amongst tribal Pashtuns are not evidence of being on the outside – a bystander to the workings of power – but of participation and engagement with imperial practices, especially that of uncertainty.

I. Uncertainty as analytic and ethnographic practice

The broader context in which this ethnography is grounded is one of uncertainty; that is, a sense that all is not known about the workings of power and of the powerful, and how they act upon the world. I treat uncertainty both as an analytic concept and ethnographic practice, allowing myself to be led by its dynamics in the stories and rumors I recount, and to analyze its value in terms of the circulation and effect, rather through some definitive truth content.¹⁰ Uncertainty, here, can be likened to what Taussig describes as “cultures of terror”, which are “based on and nourished by silence and myth in which the fanatical stress on the mysterious side of the mysterious flourishes by means of rumor and fantasy”.¹¹ While all societies thrive upon fiction taken as real, “what distinguishes cultures of terror is that ... reality and illusion, certainty and doubt becomes ... a high powered medium of domination”.¹² This certainly resonates with the pervasiveness sense of uncertainty in Pakistan. As much as uncertainty stems from the looming presence of the military in the country’s politics and unaccountable authority, it is also fuelled by the opacity of US imperial power and its silent and not-so-silent interventions in the country.

Recent work has not only drawn attention towards the invisibility through which US operates in its imperial domains, but also on the “dialectic of visibility and of opacity, the play of display and disavowal in contemporary American power”.¹³ In this respect, one can argue – and history has certainly taught us – that this uncertainty is often an intended objective within the power politics of US empire; that is, part of a set of practices of evading visibility and thereby avoiding detection and responsibility as a

⁸ Fabian, *Time and the Other*. See also Briggs, “Theorizing Modernity Conspiratorially,” 176

⁹ c.f. Walton and Mitchell “Ethnographic Experiences of American Power in the Age of War on Terror”; Walton “Hungry Wolves, Inclement Storms”; Mitchell *Paranoid Styles of Nationalism after the Cold War*; West and Sanders (eds) *Transparency and Conspiracy*. See also Hellinger “Paranoia, Conspiracy and Hegemony in American Politics”; Harding and Stewart “Anxieties of Influence”

¹⁰ c.f. Mahmud, “The World is a Forest of Symbols”

¹¹ Taussig, “Cultures of Terror,” 469

¹² Taussig, *Shamanism, Colonialism and the Wild Man*, 121. See also, Taussig, *Nervous System*

¹³ Walton and Mitchell, “Ethnographic Experiences of American Power in the Age of War on Terror”, 87. See also Khalili, *Time in the Shadows*; Walton, “Hungry Wolves, Inclement Storms”; Mitchell *Paranoid Styles of Nationalism after the Cold War*; McGranahan and Collins (eds) *Ethnographies of US Empire*.

concrete actor on the ground.¹⁴ These tactics are not the domain of imperial powers, but often mimicked by the Pakistani state when dealing with the U.S. – playing the empire at its own game, so to speak, with the potential to “disturb power relations and the inviolability of the imperial self” – but also in its dealing with the public.¹⁵ The international and nation-wide reaction to the news that Osama bin Laden had been in hiding in the military city of Abbotabad; did they know or are they that incompetent?; is illustrative of how uncertainty and general sense of chaos can allow the state to escape culpability.

Similar to what has been noted in contexts of panic and terror, uncertainty provides germane ground for rumor and conspiracy and, at the same time, their flow adds to the larger sense of anxiety and ambiguity.¹⁶ Amongst tribal Pashtuns in Lahore, uncertainty manifested itself in both a hesitance to trust anyone and, simultaneously, to share, in hushed tones, the most shocking rumors and conspiracy theories. During fieldwork, I was often treated with suspicion and many people would question my reasons for interviewing them and would openly state that they did not want to confide in me. “In such times, it is hard to trust one’s own brother, let alone a stranger”. Yet, often the very same people who were initially reluctant to speak to me, would share all kinds of stories that they had heard of the misdeeds of the army, or knowledge about the local presence of American spies. There were occasions where people who had willingly spoken to me on previous occasions would suddenly cut all contact, even going to such lengths of switching their mobile SIM cards. I could only presume that this was because they may have heard a rumor that I was reporting back to the army or, worse, was a spy working for foreign powers. As time progressed, working in this context of uncertainty, I, too, started to behave and feel similar to my informants. I began to feel paranoid about the true intentions and identity of everyone I spoke with. On more than one occasion, upon learning from others that they had heard that someone I had spoken frequently with had been sent (never clarified by whom) to keep an eye on me, I considered breaking of all contact. At the same time, to create a sense of commonness – “a spontaneous intimacy” – I often shared rumors I had heard when interacting with others.¹⁷

Using uncertainty as an analytic and ethnographic practice required me to be led by the accounts I was given and, operating in the same uncertainty, I was never sure of their intent or purpose. My informants knew this too, and it was through the telling and retelling of rumors that we navigated our way around social relations. Rumors and conspiracy are not a critique from the outside, but are generated as social agents navigate an uncertain terrain, and the work that such ideas do is not a domain in which the empire or the powerful are always in control.

II. The duality of rumors

Rumors, as I suggested above, arise in contexts of ambiguity – often as an attempt to create meaning – but also add to the larger sense of insecurity in which they occur. This

¹⁴ Ho, “Empire Through Diasporic Eyes”, 230-33

¹⁵ Bhabha “Of Mimicry and Man”. For this effect of rumors on British authorities in Tribal Areas, see Sökefeld “Rumor and Politics on the Northern Frontier”

¹⁶ Taussig, “Cultures of Terror”; Perice, “Rumors and Politics in Haiti”; Sökefeld, “Rumors and Politics in the Northern Frontier”

¹⁷ Perice, “Rumors and Politics in Haiti,” 2

aspect has been the point of focus in much of the work on rumors by the subaltern school, as well as in research centered on South Asia more broadly. Conceptualizing rumors as the mainstay of those that are marginal to structures of power, authority and knowledge, these bodies of work have predominantly focused on their capacity for subverting power relations.¹⁸ In his seminal work on rumors as insurgent communication, Guha argues that rumors generate panic among subaltern and elite groups, but affect them differently.¹⁹ Amongst the elite, rumors transcend meaning and are difficult to comprehend while, amongst subalterns, they create a sense of cohesiveness and community. Guha goes on to show how this panic has subversive capacities, disturbing the power of the elite. Similarly, Bhabha has also read rumors as subversive, and as opening a multi-vocal space where power relations can be turned upside down. In his analysis of rumors prior to the 1857 uprising against the British in India, Bhabha argues that the panic caused by rumors amongst Indian subalterns affected the British colonizers, generating parallel waves of panic and leading to an undermining of power relations.²⁰ Sökefeld has used a subaltern framework to analyze the circulation of rumors in the Tribal Areas in Colonial India and has argued, similar to Bhabha and Guha, how they caused confusion for the British colonial officers and destabilized their control.²¹

Although the next two sections deal with questions on how rumors affect power relations in my ethnographic context, I first want to focus on their uses and effects amongst tribal Pashtuns. Just as Guha argues that rumors can create cohesiveness amongst subalterns, I argue that rumors in Lahore were often clarifying and provided a sense of coherence and control in uncertain times. Following Shibutani, who argues that rumors are a problem-solving strategy; and Kapferer, who views “all certainty as social”; I show how the transmission and circulation of rumors provided knowledge that helped my informants cope with uncertainty.²²

In discussions of life and happenings in the Tribal Areas, I frequently encountered rumors that army personnel and foreign spies disguise themselves as the Taliban to create trouble in the region. There were various versions of these rumors, but most of them followed the same narrative: that a group of men sporting long beards and hair, with black shawls were later “found out” as imposters. For instance, Yasser Ali, who came from a village in South Waziristan, recalled a story that his cousin (who lived in the same village but was now in Karachi) had told him. One evening, a group of ten or fifteen men arrived in their village and demanded that all households needed to give them their weapons or “pay a fine”. The men were tall, with long flowing hair and beards, with their faces half-covered in black cloth. Some other young men from the village got suspicious at why their faces were covered, demanding that they first revealed who they were. Yasser said, “some of the men would not even look you in the eye, kept looking down, that’s not the way of a Pashtun”. The men refused and, after a heated argument, one of the villagers forcibly tried to remove the cloth of one of the men’s face. A fight broke out and the veiled men tried to flee. The villagers ran after them, chasing the men out of the village. As they were searching for them in the surrounding area, they found a heap of discarded clothes, wigs and fake beards. Later,

¹⁸ Ghosh, “Role of Rumor in History Writing,” 1236

¹⁹ Guha, *Elementary Aspects of Peasant Insurgency*

²⁰ Bhabha, “Spirit of Calm Violence,” 334-335.

²¹ Sökefeld, “Rumors and Politics in the Northern Frontier”

²² Kapferer, *Rumors*, 264; Shibutani, *Improvised news*

they saw an army jeep, filled with men in uniforms, coming from the same direction that the veiled men had run. Similarly, other rumors were of incidents where army vehicles were found to contain wigs, beards and civilian clothing or that close inspection of dead bodies after encounters between the army and Taliban revealed that one of the fighters was a “foreigner” (meaning American).

These rumors were sometimes used to criticize the army and deployed as evidence of the veracity of conspiracy theories being discussed. However, often they were narrated without offering any conclusions, inviting the listener (in this instance, me) to follow and figure out the implications. Recent literature on conspiracy theories in different parts of the world has emphasized their role in providing an avenue for expressing “skepticism towards centralized power” and, in particular, in challenging claims of transparency in the workings and politics of the state and international institutions.²³ In a similar sense, these rumors about the Taliban articulated skepticism towards the claims made by the Pakistani state and army, and of the motives of international powers. They provided space for what is otherwise a marginalized group to stake a claim and were a means for participating in, and producing insight into, the political process.²⁴ Writing about conspiracy theories about Blackwater in Pakistan, Iqtidar underscores the need to give serious consideration to the content of such narratives.²⁵ She argues that such conspiracy theories acknowledge the “sedimented” history of US involvement and intrigue in the region. In a similar sense, rumors about the Taliban amongst tribal Pashtuns nodded towards the rooted histories of US presence and influence in the region and, in particular, drew attention to changes in its position and stances. During the 1970s, it was with funding from the CIA that the Pakistani intelligence (in particular the Inter Services Intelligence agency) recruited and trained *mujāhidīn* to fight the Soviets in Afghanistan. At the time, those involved in the resistance, including tribal Pashtun, were hailed as heroes and saviors. Three decades later, the US has returned to the region to fight the groups that it had helped set up.

Paralleling the dual aspect identified by Guha, rumors here criticized and questioned the powerful, but also provided a means for developing a sense of commonality amongst tribal Pashtuns. The latter was particularly visible in the ways in which the exchange of such rumors aided in forging intimacy – a feeling of shared suffering and experience – amongst Pashtuns from different tribal affiliations and villages. As in the Tribal Areas, Pashtuns in Lahore predominantly depended upon networks and socialized within their own clans. However, working and studying in the city brought them in frequent contact with Pashtuns from other villages and tribes who had also relocated from the Tribal Areas. In colleges and universities in particular, all students from the Tribal Areas often stuck together. This was both a matter of choice and circumstance. As a small minority in a predominantly Punjabi environment, coming together helped them in tackling everyday racism and discrimination, “tribals” were viewed as wild and dangerous. Meanwhile, they were often treated as one group from the university administration and were frequently allotted to the same floor and made to share rooms in hostels. In these spaces and moments of increased interactions, rumors were a currency for familiarity. A rumor about an incident in one village would

²³ Fenster *Conspiracy Theories*, 9. See also West and Sanders (eds) *Transparency and Conspiracy* West and Sanders “Power Revealed and Concealed in the New World Order”; Schrauwers “Through a Glass Darkly”; Kendall “Gods, Markets and the IMF”

²⁴ Tanner “Conspiracy of the Invisible Hand”; Olmsted *Real Enemies*

²⁵ Iqtidar “Conspiracy Theory as Political Imaginary”

lead to someone else in the group sharing a similar rumor circulating in their own area and clan. Here, no analysis or implications ever needed to be said aloud. The exchange of rumors was enough to suggest that each knew what the other was implying and what they had experienced.

One evening, when I took a rickshaw driven by a tribal Pashtun to interview another young man displaced from the Tribal Area, the driver decided to stay back and listen. The driver belonged to Mohmand Agency, and the interviewee was from Kurram Agency and although both recognized the tribe of the other, they knew little else about the respective areas. The interviewee told me that after an incident of firing in a neighboring village (it was never clarified who was fighting), a group of boys went to inspect the damage. They discovered some bodies. Underneath wigs of flowing hair, the dead men had shorn blond hair. Almost immediately, the driver interjected and told another story, an incident his friend had narrated. Here too, some boys from a village in Kurram Agency discovered some bodies of men with long beards. However, a closer inspection revealed that men were not circumcised (the implication being that they were not Muslims). Nothing more was said, but both the driver and my interviewee looked at one another and nodded. Then, after a moment of silence, the driver mentioned how a Punjabi customer in his rickshaw had recently said to him that the problem in FATA was that Pashtuns were too friendly with their counterpart tribesmen in Afghanistan, and not loyal to Pakistan. The man from Kurram Agency responded with an angry shrug and said that if only others knew what Pashtuns like them had heard and witnessed.

The exchange of such rumors allowed tribal Pashtuns to stake a claim and to make their presence felt in national politics – if only to themselves – and to have, however fleeting, moments of intimacy with others who were in the same situation. In a context of uncertainty and insecurity, as the example above illustrated, rumors were a way to seek support and to gauge if others felt in similar ways. But they were especially useful because they could also be dismissed and withdrawn if needed. On another occasion, when chatting with a group of students from the Tribal Areas, I mentioned a rumor that one of them, Rashid, had told me to another person present who I did not know well. I had not even finished when Rashid interrupted me and, in a dismissive tone, remarked “Ah yes, I had even forgot I told you this. My relatives tell me so many different stories, I sometimes don’t even remember ... one hears so many things that they get all mixed up and you never know what is the real story”. I was surprised by Rashid’s reaction since he had been vehement that this particular story proved the army’s duplicity. When I ran into him again, a few weeks later, he told me that he suspected that the person I had been narrating the story to was a spy for the military. “You can’t trust anyone”, he said, “not even Pashtun” and then advised me to be careful. Rumors here, as Perice notes in the context of violence in Haiti, serve as a “backdoor out of speaking” and are “part of a poetics of distance and nearness”.²⁶ They create moments of familiarity and intimacy which can, when needed, be taken back.

III. Coherence and clarification in rumors

Rumors in Lahore were not confined to happenings in the Tribal Areas. There were stories afloat of spies and informers – sent by the army or by foreign powers – amongst tribal Pashtuns. Neighbors, relatives and friends were suspected of reporting to the army

²⁶ Perice, “Rumor and Politics in Haiti,” 4

of selling information to foreign agencies, such as the CIA and Blackwater. Equally, rumors and stories circulated about the treatment of tribal Pashtuns at check posts in the Tribal Areas and in cities. Since 2009, when Lahore was hit by a wave of suicide attacks, army check posts have been established in different parts of the city, especially near the cantonment areas. Although all people and vehicles passing through are nominally checked, men identified as Pashtun – either through their National Identity Cards (NIC) – are often questioned at length and, sometimes, undergo extensive personal and vehicle search.²⁷ Personal accounts of such treatment and stories heard about the experience of others were regularly shared and circulated amongst family and friends.

Like rumors about the duplicity of the army or the Taliban in villages, such stories of incidents at check posts created a sense of commonality and shared suffering – at the hands of the army and state – amongst my informants. Rumors such as these were not only told in person, but also circulated through mass SMS and Whatsapp messages. In the time that I was conducting fieldwork, most people that I interviewed routinely received three or four messages a day informing them of mistreatment and, at times, arrests at particular check posts. Taussig reminds us that it is in the “coils of rumor, gossip, story, and chit-chat that ideologies and ideas become emotionally powerful and enter into active social circulation and meaningful existence”.²⁸ Amongst tribal Pashtun, it was precisely through these mechanisms that marginality and the tyranny of the state were experienced. Messages on mobile phones were a way in which the power of the state made itself felt in their daily lives and decisions – if they are picking up tribal Pashtun today, shall I step out? What is the best route to take?

Describing the circulation of rumors in Haiti, Perice argues that rumors may generate terror but are also a form of oppositional discourse that “seek to maintain the mystery and shoot events through with messianic hope”.²⁹ In this respect, they create spaces where speakers and listeners can maneuver around the dissimulations of power, circulate stories and struggle to carve out social knowledge of ‘the way things are’.³⁰ In my ethnographic context, rumors did not shoot events with hope but they sometimes did turn around to be viewed as practical knowledge for escaping the terror of the state. “All certainty,” Kapferer claims “is social” and in situations where rumors are believed as true, they become information.³¹ For tribal Pashtuns in Lahore, these stories provided a sense of coherence and control, even as they confirmed their own sense of marginality. Rumors and stories about check posts and roads were deployed to make mental maps for navigating the city and what places to avoid at what hour. Dropping me home in a car borrowed from another student, Hassan – from a small village in Mohmand Agency – took a complicated route, full of many back turns, but which was surprisingly faster in the end. Hassan smiled when I remarked on this and said that “I know the city at the back of my hand, we avoided all the check posts ... you might have been born in Lahore but I know all its routes”. In similar ways, I often heard others recount how they moved around in the city based on the stories they had heard before or the messages received on the day. In particular, for Pashtuns who had arrived recently from the Tribal Areas, these rumors were a way of familiarizing themselves

²⁷ National Identity Cards indicate the place of birth.

²⁸ Taussig, “Cultures of Terror,” 494

²⁹ Perice, “Rumors and Politics in Haiti,” 9

³⁰ Ibid

³¹ Kapferer, *Rumors*, 264

with the city – giving them bearing and direction in a new environment. “When I think of finding my way in Lahore, I see all the check posts and barricades I might need to cross, then I think of all the stories I have heard, then I plot my way based on that”.

Just as rumors worked to provide practical knowledge on living in the city, conspiracy theories about duplicity of the army, the Taliban and the US were often clarifying and provided form and meaning to sudden disruption and chaos. As discussed earlier, conspiracy theories about the ulterior motives of the US were common amongst tribal Pashtuns. Such conspiracy theories, however, are not limited to Pashtuns but circulate generally in urban Pakistan.³² As argued by others, populist rhetoric in Pakistan is filled with claims that the US has created the Taliban and that is part of a “new great game” to control the region. Much of this rhetoric dovetails with the claims of Pashtun, although it rarely questions the army, rather, its focus is on the threat that this presents to the national integrity of Pakistan, calling their country “collateral damage” in America’s games. Tribal Pashtun who had been living in Lahore are familiar with this rhetoric and often use the same terms, such as “new great game” or “collateral damage”, but to describe their own position. These understandings of contemporary geopolitics were often then used to make sense of, and give meaning to, their own situation and experiences of violence in their village. This was particularly visible in interactions between older and recently-arrived migrants from the Tribal Areas.

The description of one incidence of violence, told by a mother and her son, provides an illustration. The son, Khalil Khan had been living in Lahore for some years, having arrived in 1990 from a small village in Mohmand Agency. His parents had continued to live in the village, but had to leave when the war started. When I went over to meet them, I learnt that they had decided to leave after the family home had been attacked. The account that I heard was largely recounted by the mother with interjections from Khalil Khan, who had not been present at the time. One night, in the summer of 2012, a group of men, with long beards and guns on their shoulders, appeared at their door and demanded that they be let in. On entering the house, they announced that they will be staying in the courtyard and that arrangements should be made to feed them. “They had come to our house uninvited but they were polite men. We did not know them, but their accent was not foreign either,” recalled the mother. “They stayed for a week, we gave them food but they kept the courtyard clean.” When they were leaving, they warned the brother that they should be careful: this day, next week, you will be attacked by the army. The family did not pay much attention to this, but to their horror, their house was attacked as predicted. “I was standing outside in the open field with the children, and the girls (daughters-in-law) were cleaning inside,” said the mother. Suddenly, there was a rain of bullets that came from nowhere. The mother started running with the children towards the house, but there was a huge bang and, for a while, everyone was blinded by dust and smoke. When it cleared, they saw that a huge “rocket had fallen on the house”.³³ The people inside had managed to run out just in time and no one was injured, although two women and a small girl had reduced hearing after the incident. The house, however, was completely destroyed.

³² Akhtar and Ahmed, “Conspiracy and Statecraft in Postcolonial Pakistan”; Iqtidar, “Conspiracy Theory as Political Imaginary”

³³ The English word “rocket” is used in Urdu to denote any kind of propelling weapon, ranging from tanks shells to drone missiles.

When the mother narrated this event, unlike Khalil Khan, she mentioned neither the Taliban when referring to the men who had come to the house, nor the army in relation to the attack. Instead she had used an abstract *wōh* (them) throughout the narration. When probed about who had come to the house, and who had attacked it, she looked confused and remained silent. In the meantime, Khalil Khan interjected, “of course, the Taliban had come and the army had known this and chose to attack when they left. “It was their usual drama,” he said. The mother, listening to this explanation, then said, “yes, he is right; that’s what they were up to ... we have no say in what is done to us”. “Besides”, she continued, “there is no difference between them, they come with their guns and do what they want. We are left with nothing”. Later, when asked whether it was a rocket or drone that had landed, she remarked, “when you are running away from a rain of bullets, you do not look to see what they are and who is firing ... the Taliban, the army, it is all the same.” It seemed that the only way left to make sense, amidst the senselessness and chaos of violence, was through the categories and images provided by conspiracy rhetoric.

IV. Mystification and tricksters

In a broader culture of uncertainty, I have discussed up to this point how rumors and conspiracy theories do not have a single effect. Following their social life, as they move between Tribal Areas and cities, I have unraveled how, as much as rumors and conspiracies are mechanisms through which terror, fear and uncertainty are spread and experienced in everyday life, they are also deployed to navigate these ambiguous terrains. Rumors clarify and constitute a source of political analysis and useful knowledge, while also offering a “backdoor out of speaking” – deniability when required. Underlying many of the accounts, whether rumors about happenings in the Tribal Areas or treatment in the cities, is a sense of endemic mistrust and skepticism of centers of power. Conspiracies and rumors criticize the army and the Taliban, unsettling official and state-supported explanations and distinctions, yet their circulation also mystifies. That is to say, rumors construct such players as a discrete and homogenous group with specific purpose and intent and, most importantly, separated from everyday society and relations.³⁴ Within the broader culture of uncertainty, where the sense that no one adequately knew who anyone else was prevailed over most encounters and relations, this kind of mystification allows for connections and overlaps between, supposedly, opposing groups. In other words, the army and the Taliban are imagined both as far away and separated entities, while also encountered in everyday life.

Although almost all tribal Pashtuns were critical of the army and maintained a clear separation from it in discussion, they also interacted with its personnel or the institutions linked to it within their daily lives. Those involved in the transportation business, especially trade and trucking on highways, depends on contacts among, and relationships with, lower-level military officers that are often assigned to manage check posts. Similarly, as the opening vignette suggested, many young men have attended military-run schools, often the only available option in the Tribal Areas. Given the lack of other opportunities, state employment is viewed as a path to upward mobility, some have managed to enter occupy junior positions within the bureaucracy, usually through the quota system in which a percentage of seats are reserved for candidates from each

³⁴ Piliavsky, “A Secret in the Oxford Sense”; Gambetta, *The Sicilian Mafia*

province and a few have also entered military service. Equally, others in villages have gone across the border to resist US forces in Afghanistan, or become part of local groups that fight against the Pakistan army. Some have not been involved in the fighting but, as a way to earn money, have driven vehicles for different groups active in the area; for instance, the father of one of my informants has worked, at different times, as a driver for an international aid agency and for local gangs resisting the Pakistan army. These connections coexisted with the larger critical stance and hostility towards the army and Pakistani state and, as the opening vignette to this article illustrated, were sometimes a source of tension. Yet, it was often possible for these opposing positions to be held simultaneously due to the mystification – an obscuring of connections – that occurred in daily life through the circulation of rumors and a constant sense of uncertainty.

During my fieldwork, one of the most vociferous critics of the Taliban that I met was Fayyaz, a twenty-two year old student at a public university in Lahore. He had arrived from a village near Razmakh, one of the few towns in South Waziristan, and often talked about the destruction that had resulted in that the “false” war between the Taliban and the army. Discussing how his village had become all rubble and stones, he mentioned that the Americans were so immoral that they even sent drones to funerals. A year before, he had been attending the funeral prayers of his cousin when the congregation was attacked by a drone, resulting in the death of five people. Fayyaz, luckily, had escaped with minor injuries. On hearing his account, I mentioned that I had read that the Americans often launched drone attacks on the funerals of Taliban fighters, as a strategy for targeting their associates. Fayyaz was silent for a few seconds before retorting, “and who are these Taliban anyway?”. He went on to reveal that his cousin was part of a group of men that had wanted to fight the Americans. Some men had come to the village school and said to the boys there that they will train them to become professional but all his cousin had been made to do was patrol the village at night, and report back to the men. Fayyaz then said, “you know, you have heard stories on how much money is pumped into the Taliban, they basically have the same equipment and training as the army, my cousin was not that”. Days later, when the topic of his cousin came up again, he said, “I just went to my brother’s funeral, not of a Taliban ... we live in such clouded times that even death is not clear”.

Rumors mystify by building images and entities that divorce daily experiences from larger positions and beliefs about how the world works. Experienced through stories of the duplicity between Pakistan and the US, the Taliban are imagined as a discrete entity that are distanced from their daily interactions. Similar to Fayyaz’ account, I often found that people belonging to clans that had refused any interactions with the Taliban or the army inside their villages engaged with them outside. For instance, after an incident in a village near Sarrakhwa in Mohmand agency where some locals were killed in (what I was told) was a “fake” encounter between the army and the Taliban, the villagers decided to ban both groups – whoever they are or sided with – from their area. However, for some of the men from the village, who were involved in trading and transport of fruits, various kinds of interactions continued outside the village. Gul Khan and his family transported apples grown close to South Waziristan for sale in Rawalpindi; the fruit had to be transported within a day so that it was fresh enough to fetch an optimal price. Given the time pressures, smooth running of the operation was essential and the men relied on the acquiescence of local government officials and soldiers at check-posts to pass freely. Here, these personnel were not viewed as representatives

of the state or military power, but as friends they had done business with for years. Extortion rackets were also present, and demanded payment for the parts of the road they claimed they owned. Gul Khan would pay the largest racket each month and ask them to deal with the rest. He told me that these days they just paid the Taliban and they handled the others. When I asked how it was possible for them to continue business, he shrugged and responded that, in this time of uncertainty, it was hard to tell who was whom. “All kinds of people call themselves the Taliban ... people we deal with, we have been dealing with them for years ... now they call themselves the Taliban. If they were America funded, like the ones who came to our village, they would not be standing with broken rubber slippers on the road. They would be in a SUV”.

Mystification, in a context of uncertainty, opens spaces for transgression of stated boundaries, giving room for contradictory positions and for multiple possibilities.³⁵ This lent a trickster quality to social relations and, more generally, to the environment, where neither the narrator nor the observer could ever be fully sure of the intent behind what was said and how it was interpreted. This required caution about what was said and to whom, but uncertainty also meant that one could say one thing and mean another. My informants often thrived on this uncertainty, for it allowed them to hint towards aspects that would normally be unacceptable. For instance, one could use uncertainty to defy the usual codes of kinship and clan solidarity. Once when I mentioned to a rickshaw driver that his cousin had told me that the Taliban had threatened him that they will kidnap his father, he initially looked surprised but then laughed. He then told me that he had heard otherwise: it were their other relatives, who the cousin had been in business with, who had threatened him. Nothing more was said on the matter and we started to talk of other things but, as I was leaving, he said, “We live in troubled times, no one knows what is going on ... for all that is happening, one’s own family could just become the Taliban”. I was only left to guess whether he was implying something about his extended relatives, or the cousin I had mentioned, or it was just a general comment. Neither could he have been certain how I interpreted his comments.

Young tribal Pashtuns often played with uncertainty and the trickster opportunities it opened in more light-hearted ways as well. Echoing, in many ways, the stories they told of pretense and role-changing, they often used the uncertainty that existed around them for their own interest and amusement.³⁶ In college campuses and classrooms, where they were often treated with suspicion and fear, some of my informants would often deliberately add to the mistrust around them. Zar Ali, for instance, laughingly told me how he had misled a group of girls in his class into thinking he had once been part of the Taliban. “I would say things like, ‘if you had seen me a year ago, you would never recognized me, I had long hair and beard and kept my face covered’”. Seeing my confusion, on why he had done that, he laughed more, “just to see their faces ... also, I think it added to my mystique. Many of them came to me afterwards to ask me what I meant, what it was like, I kept them guessing”. Similarly, Asim shared stories of alternating between being a “uneducated tribal” and an international development practitioner. When his family had been forced out of their village, they had gone to live with their cousins, who were already settled in Rawalpindi, instead of living in IDP camps that had been set up for displaced people. But his mother would send him to the

³⁵ c.f. Marsden, “Muslim Cosmopolitans,” 217-220

³⁶ c.f. Marsden, “A Tour Not so Grand,” 69-70

camp each week with vouchers to collect the ration that they had been allotted. The queues for the ration were long, and he often to use to wait hours for his turn. When he could spare time he would wait; “the army distributors would see me as just another uneducated tribal, at their mercy”. However, on other occasions, he would ask his friend who was a driver for an international aid agency to take him. “My friend would bring the company car and I would sit in the back, wearing a suit .. the same guards who would otherwise belittle me would salute me and I would go inside the office and say I am collecting ration to give to some helpless family”. If my informants had been forced to live with uncertainty, they also sometimes found ways to play it back on others.

In this article, I have deployed uncertainty as an analytic category and as ethnographic practice to investigate the effects of rumors and conspiracy theories. I have highlighted, that in an environment of uncertainty, such accounts have multiple and, often, contradictory effects. Rumors spread panic and fear, adding to the larger ambiguity and confusion about whom to believe and whom to trust, but the telling of rumors also sutures together trust, familiarity and moments of solidarity. The circulation of stories and accounts on the Taliban and the army mystify, obscuring connections and interactions that tribal Pashtuns depend on for daily living. By rethinking the role of rumors negotiating everyday in uncertain contexts, I have unsettled what is, at times, a neat separation between the powerful and powerless. Rumors confirming the complicity of the army and Taliban, or conspiracy theories on the collusion between the army and U.S. are reminders of the incorporated histories of imperial interference and, at the same time, forms of criticism of the obscurity and lack of transparency in the workings of power, both in national and international forms. Yet, these accounts are not criticisms “from the outside” but produced through engagement and interactions in a social world imbued with uncertainty. Uncertainty may be an intended or unintended consequence of imperial interventions and state actions, but it is a state in which tribal Pashtuns find their way through the circulation of rumors and conspiracies, and the consequences and results of this are a domain which neither the empire nor the state are in control. Tribal Pashtuns are marginal to structures of power and authority, but they are “coeval” participants in a world of uncertainty.

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