

Kinship: Idiomatic

Afghanistan

The study of any aspect of women in Afghanistan poses two important constraints. First, there are no reliable data about the population of women or any substantial sociopolitical studies of women covering the whole spectrum of ethnic, tribal, and religious groups in the country. Second, there are some 17 ethnic groups in the country, whose customs and traditions regarding gender role and kinship relations differ widely, making a generalization about “Afghan women” arduous and onerous to substantiate.

This entry concentrates on the rural women of the majority Pashtuns in Afghanistan. As well as being the majority (62.72 percent, Wak 1998, 47–8), Pashtuns have also been traditional rulers and one of three tribal groups (the other two are the Baluch and the Turkmen) in Afghanistan. For Pashtuns, as well as most other tribal societies, gender is of particular significance and hence roles assigned to men and women are clearly defined. Pashtuns are patrilineal; cross and parallel cousin marriages are common.

The tribal social organization, as opposed to the ethnic, is rigid and well specified. Most ethnic groups in the country are “social groups” and members of the same ethnic groups in two or more different areas of the country, by adapting to local customs and norms, might differ even among themselves. However, this is not the case with tribal groups whose belief in the same ancestry, attachment to the same tribal land, speaking the same language, and adherence to the same religion make them easy to study – even when they are or have been away from their original tribal land. The patrilineal kinship of the Pashtuns does not generally allow for other types of non-blood relationship. Thus idiomatic or affinitive kinship, if any, is restricted to a very small number of households of educated and enlightened Pashtun families. Within such families women, on the basis of Islamic community and spirituality, can establish affinity and close relationships. Thus two, usually middle-aged, women through the Dari term *khwāher-khawnda* (declared sisterhood) can establish close relationships and open up to one another and share experiences of life. The *khwāher-khawnda* relationship is not confined to lineage or tribe. It may be struck with women across ethnic

and even religious boundaries. By visiting and entertaining one another such women can even affect the behavior of their children who may develop warm feelings and more respect toward one another than toward their own cousins. Often children of such mothers end up marrying one another and thus bring the two families even closer in a consanguineous relationship.

Another instance of idiomatic kinship is sharing *tay* breast, or *tee rawdel*, feeding from the same breast. If for some reason a mother cannot feed her newborn or young baby and another woman offers to feed her child with her own, the two babies as they grow, and their families from the time of fulfilling this need, form a bond of friendship and affinity. For marriage purposes these children are regarded as true siblings and are not permitted to marry one another. The *tay* siblings will remain very close throughout life and this closeness may encourage other members of the their families to marry; thus milk kinship, like *khwāher-khawnda* is a way of forging marital links with people with whom a family is not connected patrilineally.

Such idiomatic relationships are exceptional within the all-enveloping patrilineal kinship system and the majority of women adhere to the common sanguinity rules.

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