



Ju-Hong Yun and Pashai Language Committee, *On a mountain there is still a road* (Eastern Region Community Development Project of SERVE Afghanistan)

Peshawar, Pakistan: InterLit Foundation, 2010. 406 pages, b/w drawings, appendices, indices. Paperback, \$20.00. ISBN 978-969-8343-44-6.

PREVIOUS collections of proverbs are available for the main languages of Afghanistan, Pashto (BARTLOTTI and KHATTAK 2006) and Dari (WILSON 2002), but this book of proverbs in the Pashai language (also known as Pashayi and Peshai) appears to be the first published collection of proverbs from a minority language enclosed within Afghanistan. The language is listed in the Ethnologue as “Pashayi, Southeast,” ISO code [psi], with 54,400 speakers, 150 km east of Kabul. The editor, Ju-Hong Yun, is a Korean who worked together with the Pashai Language Committee, producing a variety of written materials in Pashai and conducting literacy courses in the local language. Their efforts were recognized when they were awarded the UNESCO Literacy Prize in 2009.

The book is based on a collection of 171 Pashai proverbs, each presented in a two-page spread. First, each is illustrated by a drawing, almost all by local artists. Then each is explained by an illustrative story and explanations of its meanings and applications. (For each proverb, all of this is given first in Pashai, then in English, then in Korean, each filling a quarter of a page.) The explanations are not simplistic, but show the possibility of multiple interpretations and applications. For example, for the proverb, “Grasp death, you can be content with pain,” there are two different explanations given. First, “If you exaggerate your need, you’ll get what you want”; and second, “Think about a bigger problem and smaller problems will vanish in your mind.” Proverb scholars are sadly used to authors giving only a single explanation for each proverb; in contrast, here only 19 of the 171 are given with only a single explanation.

For many of the proverbs, similar ones from a variety of sources are cited. For example, for the proverb “When one gives flowers to a buffalo, it will just eat them,” parallel proverbs are cited from Dari, Korean, the Bible, and Burmese. However, the book wisely does not involve itself in speculation about where and how these similarities arise. In some cases, a proverb with a similar meaning but a different form is used to illustrate the meaning of a Pashai proverb. Some of these parallel proverbs are labeled “Afghan proverb,” but with no identification of the specific language, for example, “You can’t cover yourself with someone else’s pajamas.” However, this proverb is found in neither WILSON’S (2002) Dari proverb collection nor BARTLOTTI and KHATTAK’S Pashto volume (2006); the reader is intrigued but only partially enlightened.

I compared these 171 Pashai proverbs with published lists of proverbs from the two main languages of Afghanistan, 100 proverbs from Dari (Afghan Persian) (WILSON 2002), and 1,350 proverbs from Pashto (BARTLOTTI and KHATTAK

2006). Pashai is not linguistically close to either of these two languages, so common linguistic origins are not an adequate explanation of any shared proverbs. Of the 100 Dari proverbs, 21 are very similar to those in Yun's book. In comparing the 171 Pashai proverbs with the 1,350 Pashto proverbs given by BARTLOTTI and KHATTAK (2006), 33 are very similar, comprising just over 19 percent (comparisons of similarity being subjective).

Books such as this that document proverbs from less-documented languages enable us to compare with other proverb collections from the area. This shows us how widely spread some proverbs are in the region, such as "Too many butchers spoil the cow/sheep (the animal dies ritually unclean)," found in all three of the Afghan languages compared.

The book has an appendix with translations of the proverbs and their meanings into Pashto, a national-level language in Afghanistan. Following that there is an explanation of the Pashai spelling system, which uses Arabic script. A thematic index, listing 141 abstract themes found in the proverbs, such as "arrogance," "debt," and "selfishness" are also included, plus a useful index of key words that were used in the proverbs: "blood," "frog," "nose," "snake," and so on (there are around three hundred key words).

The validity of proverbs to determine cultural values is debated among proverb scholars, with many voices asserting that significant elements of cultural values and world views can be understood by studying a people's proverbs, while others maintain that this is not true. Without addressing the ultimate issues related to this topic, a study of the proverbs in this book leads a reader to a few conclusions about Pashai culture. For example, hospitality and family obligations are affirmed. Also, it may be a sad reflection of the recent history of Afghanistan that there are multiple proverbs about guns and fighting: for example, "A bad wound by a gun will be cured, but the wound by a bad word won't be cured." In addition to proverbs overtly about guns and war, one of the proverbs is explained by a reference to war: "Where there is a cloud, there is also rain.... There was a war going on in a certain place where a family was living. The mother would not let her children go outside... their mother quoted this saying and said, 'You could be hurt or shot by a gun in the war.'"

It is interesting to note how proverbs can be updated. Today, Pashai has the proverb "An unloaded gun makes two people afraid." In 1876, THORBURN published a Pashto proverb reflecting an older form of military technology "Of the broken bow two persons are in fear" (1876, 408). Similarly, Pashai has "A bad wound by a gun will be cured, but the wound by a bad word won't be cured," which is a more modern form of the Pashto proverb "The wound of the sword will heal, but not that of the tongue."

Each of the proverbs is illustrated with a brief story illustrating how the proverb might be used in the Pashai community. Many of the stories begin with a setting of two people in a village, a scenario that easily sets up a story showing different behaviors and contrasting outcomes, leading to the application of the proverb.

Proverb scholars of the international scholarly community, not the editor's intended audience, may wish to know more detail, such as an explanation of how many proverbs had been collected and why these 171 were chosen for inclusion,

none of them mentioning “God,” “Allah,” “religion,” “mullah,” and “prayer.” The reader is not told which groups of people use proverbs, and in what circumstances, and so on. But for a book prepared for a popular audience, this is a rich source of data for those who study proverbs or the peoples of Afghanistan, conveniently translated into multiple languages. The book is for sale in Pakistan, but the Inter-Lit Foundation website ([http:// http://www.interlitfoundation.org/](http://http://www.interlitfoundation.org/)) can handle special orders.

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