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**Negotiating Pakhto: Proverbs, Islam and the Construction of
Identity among Pashtuns**

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*Negotiating Pakhto:
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The aim of this study is to describe and analyse the ways in which two themes, *Islam and pashtunwali*, are expressed in Pashto proverbs. The 27 million Pashtun (Pakhtun, Pathan) people are the dominant ethnic group in Afghanistan and in Pakistan's North West Frontier Province. "*Pashtunwali*" or "*pakhto*", "the way of the Pashtuns", is a code of honour embracing the customary law, morality, ethos and notion of ancestral heritage associated with "being Pashtun" and "*doing pakhto*".

Islam and *pakhto/pashtunwali* are important criteria of Pashtun ethnic identity and competing forms of moral authority; they represent distinct domains of discourse and alternative frames of reference. This study explores these alternative discourses, contexts in which meanings are contested, and strategies used to negotiate meaning and achieve social ends, through an analysis of one folklore genre. The present study is the first ethnographic analysis of proverbs and proverb praxis among Pashtuns.

The research is based on a study of approximately 1000 Pashto proverbs (from a 12,000 text database) with referents to Islamic and *pashtunwali* "key words". The study combines literary analysis, taped "hypothetical situation" interviews, and participant observation from the author's fourteen years in Peshawar, Pakistan.

The thesis is that proverbs express the primary symbols of Pashtun culture, and are used by actors to negotiate notions associated with Pashtunness and Muslimness. This "thick description" of Pashto proverbs demonstrates that 1) Pashto proverbs contain many references to core symbols associated with the discourse of Islam and *pashtunwali*; 2) Pashto proverbs and proverb performances involve the use, manipulation, and negotiation of meanings associated with core symbols of Muslimness and Pashtunness; 3) Proverb performances are a rhetorical expression of *pashtunwali*, a way of "*doing pakhto*" in the verbal arena; 4) Proverbs are bound up with the construction of Pashtun identity.