

## Context and Culture

# Of Hunters and Hunted (1): Falconry in Afghanistan from classical literature to colonial sources

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Unbeknownst to many, Afghanistan has a rich historical heritage related to falconry. Photographs dating from the 1950s to the 1970s offer a relatively recent glimpse of Afghan falconers with their birds. However, those ancient traditions of Afghans practising falconry – embodied in literary works such as the *Baznama*, *The Book of the Falcon*, by Pashtun poet Khushal Khan Khattak – may now be on the verge of extinction following decades of war and turmoil. Ironically, however, the country still plays a central role in falconry practised by foreigners as a provider of both hunters and prey. Afghan falcons are sold into the international (and illegal) trade in raptors, supplying Gulf countries, while falconers from the region come to Afghanistan to practise their favourite pastime. In this first instalment of a two-part report, AAN's Fabrizio Foschini looks at the roots of Afghans' fascination with falcons and other birds of prey through references from local and colonial literature.

*Part 2 will look at how Afghan falcons are trapped and sold abroad and how wealthy Gulf Arabs, keen to hunt in Afghanistan, are also involved in conservation programmes for the birds that their falcons capture.*

*A personal memory as an introduction to the topic*

I was made aware of Afghans' fascination with falconry some fifteen years ago in a rather accidental way. Back then, I was carrying out field research in Badakhshan for a project on oral history, travelling in winter to take advantage of the locals' comparative immobility in that frozen season and so able to conduct my interviews at ease. I often got stuck in one village or other due to heavy snow that made roads impassable, even for people like me, travelling either on foot or horse. It thus happened me to have to put up for a few weeks at a *mehmankhana* (guesthouse) in the comparatively cosmopolitan little town of Ishkashim, where I joined the company of other seasonal travellers from various parts of Afghanistan, mostly *Mashraqi* (eastern) Pashtun traders.

When you are stranded far away from home and family, snowed in by a six-month winter, you come to appreciate a good story being told around the evening stew and before the board game of *carambole*. After a

few nights and unable to compete with the veteran storytelling skills of my companions, I resorted to that ample reservoir of good stories by the Italian 14th century author Giovanni Boccaccio, brought together in his *The Decameron*. Out of all the stories, I picked for an impromptu translation that of the noble but poor Federico degli Alberighi and of his beloved falcon, whom he willingly sacrifices to feed an unexpected guest, a widow he devoutly loves but who – alas! – had in fact come to see him to beg for the falcon alive, for her ailing child.

Considering the often spicy corpus of *The Decameron*, mine was a rather prudish choice made in order to navigate safer waters and avoid giving unpleasant impressions about old Italian society to my Pashtunwali-abiding audience. What I could not have foretold was the great success that my tale would reap (I was afterwards compelled to write down an abridged version in Dari.) The interest from my public was elicited not only by the flawlessly *ghairatmand* (honourable) behaviour of the novel's protagonist, but by the very subject of falconry, which spurred an immediate reaction in the form of a salvo of quotes from Khushal Khan Khattak and possibly other (and unknown to me) Pashto poets. Though my friends in Ishkashim were more partridge-fighting enthusiasts, I suddenly realised that they, like many Afghans, nurtured a deep fascination for both falcons and falconry alike.

*A book and a symbol: Khushal Khan Khattak's Baznama*

*The nature of the falcon is in my pride  
You see, it fits every type of game!*

Previously, as a student of Afghanistan, I had only been marginally exposed to the subject of Afghan falconry. The existence of an excellent and unique translation and study of the *Baznama*, the *Book of the Falcon* by eminent 17<sup>th</sup> century Pashto poet Khushal Khan Khattak (1613-1689) in my native language was probably the main reason for this.<sup>[1]</sup>

The book's fame is largely due to it being a major and early literary work in Pashto. The choice of Pashto was a conscious one, explicitly pointed out by the author (he is reported as having composed another work on falconry in Persian that was subsequently lost):

*Persian art, that of the falcon*

*But I versified it in the Afghan language*

This came at a time when Khushal Khan's commitment to the struggle for Pashtun independence from the Mughals was at its highest. The book, consisting of 47 'chapters' – actually poems of different lengths – was written in less than a week in 1674. Khushal Khan was busy entreating for tribal coalition-making in order to overcome the forces of the Mughal emperor, Aurangzeb (1658-1707) – against whose rule he had rebelled – and for this purpose was travelling to Swat to convince the Yusufzai to join ranks. The text opens with a powerful contextualisation of this literary enterprise during political events that were to shape the author's life:

*Today, that by two years I passed sixty*

*With this oppression and this pushing against us*

*Of Aurangzeb's Mughals who advance from India*

*Greedy to grab our people*

*And it is four years, and maybe five*

*That on Pashtun steel his rush is crushed*

*And a vane desire of revenge urges upon him*

*Day and night your Khushal is on the alert.*

*To help the Mughals: gold, and lands and riches*

*To me the force that the Almighty gives!*

*Wanderer without a home, without quarter*

*Roaming the mountains alone like an ibex*

*Two lanterns has the night, the third am I*

*Hence, what time is left to me for hunting?*

*Yet, no other ghost lingers before my eyes*

*The love of falcons brought me to the Swat valley.*

His work is also remarkable for its particular style and for treating the subject of falconry, an all-time favourite for treatises throughout the Middle Ages and into the modern era, in poetic form. The main text is in the form of a *mathnavi*, where couplets feature end-rhymes, while several *ghazals* interrupt the text in order to deal with specific topics.

When compared to that most famous of all falconry treatises, the prose-written *De arte venandi cum avibus* by Frederick II of Hohenstaufen, or even to geographically closer precedents who had likely been read by the author, such as the 11th century Persian language treatise, *Baznama-ye Nasavi*, Khushal Khan's text appears much less schematic: there is no classificatory introduction, and the chapters, although each concern a specific subject, are not organised in regular order. Chapters describing the value and characteristics of several species of falcons and hawks are intermingled with others devoted to the cure of maladies, proper nutrition and training.

In particular, the text delves into all sorts of remedies and attention to be given to the falcons: how to get rid of sickness or parasites, how to entice and teach them to hunt, how to feed them the proper way (also according

to Ayurvedic concepts) and make sure they defecate regularly. Peculiarly, not only is all this done in verse, but also with great verve:

*Lots of guano, steady speed!*

*(the falcon) Enjoys water, twists and twirls!*

The falcon owner or carer is urged to take up a personal and devoted role in providing for his bird's well-being, such as, for example, extracting glands from the necks of wolves and cows, which:

*You grind them well with your teeth*

*'Til a yellowish water comes out*

*Let it dry and then for four days*

*Twice a day mixed with minced food*

*You give them, and a tasty omelette*

*Of mice and dried rabbit flesh*

*And a potpourri of young gadflies*

*Well-boiled in cow butter*

Khushal Khan Khattak was evidently fond of falcons, and this fondness led him to use the bird as a poetic metaphor in all contexts. Besides the *Baznama*, falcons reoccur in many lines of his poetry, describing a red that is like the falcon's talons are the hands of the brave Afghans after battle with the Mughals or separation from the beloved that tears the poet's heart to pieces as the falcon tears apart a quail. Khushal even imagines himself as an old expert falcon, happily swooping down on those "pretty plump partridges," the Afridi maids (which suggests that I may have been more liberal with my choice from *The Decameron*), but also that the eyes of his lover, like two falcons, pounce upon his heart, that poor pigeon!<sup>[2]</sup>

If Khushal Khan Khattak is exceptional in his love of falcons and his use of them in symbolism and metaphor, still, these birds are no strangers to the literature originating in or around Afghanistan. Indeed, falconry may well represent one of the oldest motifs to have appeared in literature in the territory in and around present-day Afghanistan. There is a story of a falconer from Balkh, for example, guilty of having offended his master's wife by teaching parrots to slander her and punished by a falcon who subsequently blinds him, which appeared as early as 400-200 BCE in the Panchatantra-related corpus of tales. It was later popularised throughout the world in the Arabic derivation, *Kalila wa Dimna*.<sup>[3]</sup>

The region to the east of the Iranian Plateau, known in medieval times as *Khorasan*, was likely to have been one of the world's earliest cradles of falconry as a favourite pastime among elites and ruling classes. We know this

to be true due to the many Persian words in the falconry lexicon of the eastern Arab world, whose inhabitants would eventually become even more passionate about hunting with falcons than their eastern neighbours.

Indeed, falcons and hawks were not as central to classical Persian literature as they would later become to Arab poetry. However, some of the earliest and most important falconry treatises to appear were composed in Persian (such as Nasavi's aforementioned *Baznama* from the 11<sup>th</sup> century) and there are references to falcons interspersed through the works of major Persian poets, such as Fariduddin Attar and Omar Khayyam, and more relevant for Afghanistan, Jalaluddin Rumi Balkhi. For him, the falcon came to symbolise the human soul, able to rise up when unfettered and which returns to God, the falconer; the prophets are God's own falcons launched to communicate with humanity.

There is also a much more transcendent and timeless symbol at play when dealing with falcons, which has justified the enduring fortune they found in Afghanistan and elsewhere. Among the animals that can be kept and trained, falcons offer a unique living demonstration of dexterity and regality, of hunting skills – which, through the ages, have easily been equated with battle prowess – and 'noble' demeanours. This explains why these birds have evolved from the totemic value they held in ancient societies to heraldic and aristocratic symbolism.<sup>[4]</sup>

The practice of falconry has thus been associated with status and power among the region's courts for centuries. Falconry was similarly held in the highest esteem and practised by the ruling classes in Mughal India, a major source of influence on Afghans during Khushal's time, as well as on Khushal's own life.

Zain Khan Koka, the scion of an Afghan family who distinguished itself under the Mughals in the 16th and 17th centuries, riding with a falcon. Source: Pinterest.

Khushal Khan Khattak's passion for falcons may have partially derived from his persona as an indomitable, independent leader, no matter that he may have been in dire straits or under pressure from powerful enemies – an early model for the 'king-unto-his-own' Afghan khan that, in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, would be popularised by British diplomat Mountstuart Elphinstone's remarks on what he perceived to be the extreme independence, characteristic of this nation. But falconry may also have been one of the last few courtly pleasures Khushal did not have to relinquish when he became the wandering rebel banished from his home and family (the Mughals replaced him as chief of the Khattak tribe with one of his own sons, who subsequently became his sworn enemy). His attachment to falconry may simply have been the very human reaction of an old man trying to cope with the loss of privilege and trying to face increasing struggles with undiminished dignity.

Khushal Khan's combination of treatise-style learning and poetical form as well as his larger-than-life personality are quite unique and certainly self-aware. Throughout his *Baznama*, packed as it is with practical medical remedies and dietary advice, a number of meditations are also found, usually in the form of short ghazals, which offer a break from the text. They alternately compare a passion for falconry with the pursuit of a more meaningful way of life, the experience of the hunt and its teachings with war and life itself, and even the proud temper of the falcon with the poet's own. These may be in line with pre-existing traditions of mystical symbolism rooted in the imagery of Sufi-influenced poetry or the conventional association of falcons with ruling power. However, Khushal's typically concrete and passionate approach to his poetic creation also suggests a very personal, if not autobiographic, meaning for the writing of such a book at such a time in his life.

*Falconry in modern Afghanistan*

*Difficult art, that of rearing falcons  
In Kabul maybe you will learn it*

Khushal's verse, reproduced above, shows how, in his time, the still-to-be Afghan capital held first place in falconry across the region. Besides being the seat of a Mughal governorship and thus a cultivated and refined city, Kabul found itself open to influences and knowledge related to falconry proceeding from different geographic and cultural areas.

A dominant model portrays Afghanistan as located at the convergence of three main cultural-political areas: the Iranian Plateau, the Indian subcontinent and Central Asia. Without judging its overall validity, we can concur that the country sits at the confluence of three major areas of interest, at least for falconry and the traditions connected to it. Hawking has indeed been common, in the flat, barren expanses of western and southern Afghanistan with their Khorasanian traditions, and the steep valleys south of the Hindu Kush, where Khushal divided his time between war and hunting. It has also been practised in the hills to the north of the Hindu Kush, where the steppe tradition of falconry had spread from Mongolia to the historical region of Turkestan which encompassed today's northern Afghanistan.

Looking for historical records of falconry practices in modern Afghanistan, it must be remembered that most travellers, especially during the 19<sup>th</sup> century and the first decades of the 20<sup>th</sup>, were chiefly interested in information that might have political or military relevance, or customs particular to Afghanistan that differed starkly from those of neighbouring countries. Hence, falconry was not a subject that elicited more than an occasional passing note.

It is difficult, for example, not to argue with the laconic comment by that pioneer of Afghan travelogues, Mountstuart Elphinstone, that "Afghans do not have falconry except in the east." At the time, in 1809, he had never travelled west of Peshawar or Multan, so how would he know what went on in the western half of the Durrani Empire, for example around Kandahar or Herat?

The Kashmiri Mohan Lal travelling across Afghanistan in the service of the British in the mid-1830s reported, for example, two instances of hawking in western Afghanistan. In the hills outside Herat he had a meeting with the chief of the local Hazara tribes, who was out hunting with falcons. Moreover, heading south of the city through Adraskan district, he mentions an area called Basha – though a scholar of Persian, Mohan Lal apparently failed to notice that this name means 'sparrowhawk'. He reported that it was a green plain where hawks abounded and that it used to be a favoured hunting spot for Timur Shah (r 1773-1793), the son of Ahmad Shah Durrani. It seems likely that Timur liked to hunt there when he was governing Herat for his father or at any rate before he moved the Afghan capital from Kandahar to Kabul.<sup>[5]</sup>

Lal's travel companion and patron Alexander Burnes, while on his way to Kabul in 1836, did write down a few observations on falconry, but only when passing through Sindh (*Cabool, A Personal Narrative, 1843*, p.35, 50-51), where the local Talpur rulers were exceedingly fond of hawking. A few years later, British diplomat and explorer Richard Burton, deployed to a garrison in Sindh, also had ample opportunity to enjoy falcon-hunting with the last of the Talpur rulers, experiences he wrote about in *Falconry in the Valley of the Indus* (1852). Until only recently, the Talpurs had been vassals of the Afghan rulers and no doubt shared many of the cultural traits of the courts in Kandahar and Kabul. Burton's work is organised as a collection of anecdotes following his conversations with a native prince and his entourage on what could have conceivably been a single day trip of horse-riding and hunting with falcons. The numerous technical details about falcons and hawk species – their characteristics, origins, training, etc. – are at first interspersed within the text, but gradually come to constitute separate topical chapters around which the text is construed, as in the classical forms of falconry treatises.

This text offers a unique insight into falconry practices most likely similar to those of contemporary Afghanistan, at least to those in Kandahar, which enjoyed a closer connection to Sindh. A typical feature, for example, something which Burton found so peculiar that he suggested it be adopted by European falconers, was the practice of the falconer literally throwing the falcon into the air to enhance its acceleration. More

generally, the broad use of short-winged raptors, such as goshawks and sparrowhawks, able to catch their quarry on the ground, connects to other data on falconry and hawking in Afghanistan. Indeed, as shown in a rather dramatic engraving in the book, goshawks were also trained to attack mammals as big as chinkara gazelles, by plunging their talons into their eyes.

Painting by  
James  
Rattray  
portraying  
two  
hawkers  
from  
Kohistan  
at the  
times of  
the British  
occupation  
of Kabul  
(1839-41).

As for Kabul and its surroundings, the British occupation of 1839-1841 also produced some sources. Among a series of paintings left by James Rattray, one has for its subject two Kohistani hawkers engaged in conversation with a number of raptors resembling sparrowhawks on their wrists (and head). To the British officer and painter, we are also indebted for a lengthy description, probably the most complete besides Burton's treatise on Sindh, of Afghan practices when capturing and training falcons:

*The wild falcon is caught in nets, and regularly harnessed in leg and breast strings, hood, bells, and wing-straps. Its eyes are then sewed up, and it is placed on a perch in a dark room. For two or three days it is starved, and then crammed. About the seventh day one stitch in the eyelid is unfastened, and if it proves tractable, and on a dead quail being shown to it, it alights on the fist of its instructor, and afterwards comes to be fed at the call, 'beea' (come), its education is nearly accomplished. Its eyes are then quite unsewed, and should it strike a quail thrown up in the air, and bring it to its master, it is considered fully trained, and makes its début in the field forthwith.*

Rattray also noted that it was customary to set free the raptors at the end of the hunting season; it could happen that the same bird be recaptured and employed for hunting by the falconer in successive years.

British officer Harry Lumsden, stranded in Kandahar for a year in 1857-58 due to the Indian Rebellion, reported that during the winter, Afghan ruler Dost Muhammad Khan sent him saker falcons which had been trained to hunt hares in collaboration with the *tazi*, the Afghan hound (Journal of the Asiatic Society of Bengal, March 1907, Vol III, n°3).<sup>[6]</sup>

Amir Abdul Rahman Khan (r 1880-1901) remarks in his memoirs that in his youth he was usually accompanied when travelling by several falcons, and we know from other sources that he kept up this hobby at his court in later years. In the early twentieth century as well, there are a number of references to falconry. At the Afghan court, a character repeatedly associated with this pastime is Prince Nasrullah. The Briton, Doctor Gray, in his memoirs, *At the Court of the Amir*, portrays the prince hawking for partridges.

Prince Nasrullah Khan portrayed throwing a goshawk at partridges. Copyright FHT. Source:

falconryheritage.org

Nasrullah's brother, Amir Habibullah (1901-1919), was also an avid hunter, going as far as elephant-riding in order to shoot ducks around Afghan reservoirs and lakes. M.E. Bell, an American who served as an engineer in Kabul for ten years, recalls him carefully tending a falcon on his wrist while out hunting. In all likelihood, given that Habibullah was also an enthusiast of European technology and introducing new habits at court, he will likely have neglected falconry for more 'modern' types of hunting.

It is thus possible that falconry at the Afghan court experienced a period of decline during this era, which saw the introduction of modern hunting guns, much like what reportedly happened in neighbouring Qajar Iran. As in Iran, [where falconry lingered](#) as an attribute of noble status among tribal chieftains in remoter areas, such as among Kurds and Lors, in Afghanistan it is likely that the comparatively larger class of rural khans, maliks and arbabs perpetuated the tradition during this age of transition. It is they who are featured prominently in a comparative wealth of photographic evidence from all corners of the country from the 1940s to the 1970s, certainly too vast to be treated here. Surely, rural falconers suited the lens through which foreign visitors to Afghanistan were keen to see the country: a land of ancient customs unspoilt by globalisation and modernity.

Afghan falconer with sparrowhawk, early 1950s. Photo from the exhibition by Yvonne von Schweinitz in Munich, 2014-15. Source: [versicherungskammer-kulturstiftung.de](#)

By contrast, few written academic studies have appeared concerning falconry in Afghanistan in that era. A German zoologist who lived in Afghanistan between 1963 and 1974, Gerd Kühnert, left a study of the hawking practices he witnessed and participated in, in his *Falknerei in Afghanistan* (1980).

A peculiar account of falconry in 20th century Afghanistan is also that told by Sirdar Muhammad Osman. A descendant of Amir Sher Ali's family exiled to India after the second Anglo-Afghan War (1879-1881), he was born in Dehra Dun and became a famed naturalist and conservationist of the Indian Himalayan foothills. However, he also resided for long periods in his ancestral homeland in the 1940s and 1950s, working for the Helmand Valley Authority. His book of recollections about his experiences there is titled *Falconry in the Land of the Sun* (2001). It details practices that seem to have been particular to Afghanistan, such as using eagles as quarry to be hunted with saker falcons, after these had been trained on buzzards.

The decades of conflict and upheaval that racked Afghanistan from 1978 onwards brought a radical decline to the local practice of falconry. However, war in Afghanistan did not create hurdles for the lucrative international (and illegal) trade in raptors, which became increasingly fed by birds smuggled out of the country. Then, in the 1990s, a new type of falconer appeared in Afghanistan: wealthy Arabs from the Gulf countries, who discovered in it a favoured hunting destination. All this will be the subject of the second part of this report on falconry in Afghanistan: hunting, smuggling and conservation.

*Edited by Emilie Cavendish and Kate Clark*



## References

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- 1** *Il Libro del Falcone*, edited by Daniele Guizzo and Gianroberto Scarcia, volume 55 of the series *Eurasiatica*, Ca' Foscari, University of Venice, 2001. *The Baznama* has since also been published in English by Sami ur-Rahman (*The Book of Falconry*, Islamabad, 2014). A previous English translation by a local scholar, dating back to the 1930s, had limited circulation. Excerpts from the text given here are based on the Italian translation and the Pashto text (the Italian edition includes the original text).
- 2** This, at least, is the rendition of his poem known as 'The Maidens of the Adam Khel Afridi' by HG Raverty (Selections from the Poetry of the Afghans, 1862, p203 – available online [here](#)). Dupree's *Afghanistan* offers three alternative English translations of the same verses (p83-86).
- 3** The collection of fables with animals as heroes, likely originating from the Sanskrit Panchatantra, had already reached European countries by the late Middle Ages through its Persian and Arabic renditions, while at the same time, travelling to the Far East via Indonesia.
- 4** Traces of a 'totemic' value attributed to these birds seem to linger even in an orthodox Muslim society such as Afghanistan: the prefix 'baz', (hawk), especially in combination with 'Muhammad', is still a favourite among both Pashto and Dari speakers (as well as other groups). 'Shahin' (falcon), on the other hand, is a relatively common unisex name in Afghanistan and other countries of the region.
- 5** the text of Mohan Lal's *Travels in the Panjab, Afghanistan and Turkistan* is [available online](#).
- 6** For more on this, see our earlier report, '[From Tazi to Afghan Hound... from hunter's friend to silken-haired pet](#)'.

## TAGS:

**falconry**

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