

## Celebration on the Birth of a Second Child Through 'ATAN'

By Shaikh Muhammad Ali

One of my colleagues invited me for dinner celebration. He was recently blessed with another son in August, 2008. I was told that the celebration will include the Pakhtoon dance known as 'Atan' as well and knowing that ethnically he is a Pukhtoon / Pashtoon <sup>1</sup>, I accepted the invitation immediately.

### **The history of 'ATAN'**

“Dance has been an important part of most cultures from their earliest times. Dancing serves as a social, spiritual, artistic, and emotional expression in different parts of the world. It is a part of celebrations, ceremonies, entertainment, and teaching in different cultures across the world. Before the introduction of written languages, dance was one of the primary methods of passing stories and rituals down from generation to generation. of committing knowledge to memory, and of learning precision movements, such as swordsmanship” <sup>2</sup>.

“While many other art forms; music, painting and poetry, can be traced through human history by physical artifacts, dance, on the other hand is difficult to trace. Dancing relies on the direct communication of the 'vocabulary' of movement and stories from person to person, which is similar to oral history and story telling. This vocabulary of movement is used by dancers and choreographers to describe or imitate the natural world (both living and inanimate objects), or to express common themes and emotions. Some movements are universal and recognized by people around the world, while others are unique to the region or people to which it belongs”<sup>3</sup>.

Pukhtoons possess a rich culture with all the ruggedness on the one hand and all the softness, romance and beauties on the other. The Pukhtoon dances have been defined as a symbol of courage and heroism by the British and present the desire and readiness of a tribe to go into a battlefield for Jihad. With heavy and insistent drumming, the dancers who are usually male move with uniform rhythm and steps. They dance usually in circles or columns holding different items of daily

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life (swords, guns, handkerchiefs, etc (any colorful cloth).) in their hands and mix the crude sounds of their possessions with the rhythm of drums and *surmay*<sup>4</sup>.

Both sexes dance the Atan, a national and ethnic dance in which dancers with arms raised, folded at the waist, step in a slow, rhythmic pattern around a circle. Atan is performed in same-sex groups during weddings and other celebrations. I have come to learn that there are about 32 variations of the Atan.

### **Back to the story**

My love for ‘Atan’ started when I was pretty young and would see the Pathan dance in ecstasy whenever he would be happy and was celebrating a happy occasion . This love came close to fruition when I accompanied a second battalion of medical students (mostly Pathans) to Cuba again this time in July 2008. This year round I accompanied them to Jose Maria Aguillar School of medicine in Matanzas city, Cuba.

For all the three nights I was there, the Pukhtoon scholars would gather during Mirianda time and dance their hearts out on the ‘Atan’. There were about 14 boys who would do this while two were exceptionally good and would outperform all the others. Their timing was as good as professionals and they would swim their way through the dance and their movements were as smooth as silk and would flow like pure water in lush springs.



The writer with Mohsin and Kausar, the Atan Duo in Matanzas, Cuba

And now I get back to the real story of the invitation that took me down memory lane. I reached there at around 9:00 p.m. It was almost a full moon that night and some friends of the host were already sitting there on Qaleens (Rugs).

It was a typical 'all male' gathering, typical for any Pukhtoon party or wedding gathering. where women would tend to remain indoors They hailed from different corners of Pakistan, including Zhob, Chaman, Muslim Bagh, Quetta, Loralai, Peshawar, Waziristan, Bannu, Hangu, Kohat, Malakand, Darra Adam Khel, and Charsadda, to name a few. They belonged to different tribes, namely, the Afridi, Kakar, Achakzai, Wazir, Dawar, Bangash and Khattak. Soon the Pukhtoon music started and some of boys started to dance Atan. The crowd clapped, as more boys joined the dance.

It seemed as if they all had natural talent for Atan. The movements came natural to them and they danced with compassion and serenity. Surprisingly, the Pukhtoos being classified as a warrior race but none was found to be aggressive and they all were as civilized as they could be. Or was it because most of them were M. Phil or PhD students at the university?

Dinner was served around 12:15 a.m. which, of course, comprised of a goat sacrificed earlier and Nan (Fine) and about 40 of us sat down and ate solemnly. As soon as the dinner was over, they all rose and were ready to dance again. It was already 12:45 a.m. when I had to beg leave with a consideration in my mind that I happen to be the only non-Pukhtoon among these fierce yet extremely hospitable people who can even die while defending the honor of their guests.

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Notes:

<sup>1</sup> Pukhtoon / Pushtoon are both commonly used terms to define the Pathan

<sup>2</sup> *The lonely planet*, Pakistan, John King, Bradley Mayhew, David St. Vincent, 5<sup>th</sup> edition, July 1998.

<sup>3</sup> ibid

<sup>4</sup> A flute which is played sideways

<sup>5</sup> ibid