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WEARING FLOWERS: PERSONAL ADORNMENT AND EVERYDAY AESTHETICS IN TANGIR VALLEY, GILGIT-BALTISTAN

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ABSTRACT

This paper discusses the practice of wearing flowers in caps among men in Tangir Valley, Gilgit-Baltistan, focusing on personal adornment and everyday aesthetics. Based on ethnographic observations, key-informant and semi-structured interviews, and photographic documentation, the study explores how men use fresh flowers (Pharu) to adorn their woollen caps (Khori) and the meanings they attach to this practice. I also discuss how flowers evoke memories of their youth and experiences in mountain pastures among the elderly shepherds. The paper also examines changing preferences in personal adornment, including the earlier use of bird feathers, and the place of flowers in local beliefs and decorative traditions. The findings suggest that wearing flowers expresses men's aesthetic preferences, while for some it also carries personal memories associated with pastoral life.

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Introduction

Tangir Valley lies about 82 km west of Chilas town in Diamer District, Gilgit-Baltistan, Pakistan (Fig. 1). From Lorak, the valley's first village, to Koranga Bala, the last, one comes across a variety of flowers, plants, and trees growing within and on the outskirts of villages, in the side *nullahs* and along the Tangir River (Fig. 2). I often came across men wearing fresh flowers in their traditional woollen caps. The cap is locally called *Khori*, while the flowers worn in it are known as *Pharu*. I was fascinated by this custom and wanted to learn why men wore flowers in their caps and what significance these flowers had for them.



Fig. 1. A view of Tangir Valley, Gilgit-Baltistan (Photo by the author, 2009).

I remember my first visit to the Tangir Valley in the Diamer District in 2000. Before Tangir, I had visited Chilas, Gobarabad and Darel in the Diamer district. I never thought that Tangir would be such an amazing and verdant valley. Moreover, I knew very little about its culture, history and heritage until my first visit to Tangir introduced me to many interesting facts about the valley. During my visit, I met many oral historians of the valley. Among them, I was impressed by the knowledge and enthusiasm of Master Saeed-ur-Rahman of Faruri village. He was the headmaster of the primary school in Faruri. His interest in the history and heritage of Tangir and Darel valleys was unequalled. I met him several times (Kalhoro, 2021).

In this paper, I use personal adornment to refer to wearing fresh flowers in woollen caps to enhance one's appearance. I also examine how men in Tangir appreciate beauty in their daily lives, particularly through their choice of flowers. Agriculture and livestock raising are important sources of livelihood in Tangir Valley. During summer, shepherds take their livestock to the mountain pastures, locally called *Ayar*, where they spend considerable time grazing their herds. I visited several of these pastures and side valleys during my research in Tangir.

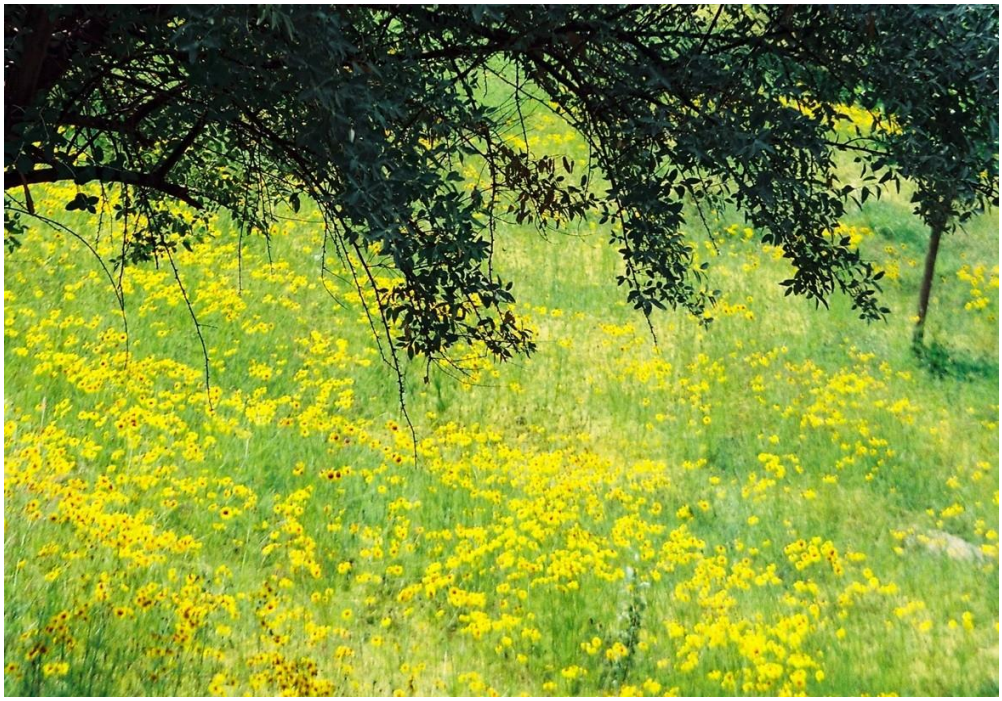


Fig. 2. A landscape covered with yellow flowers in Tangir Valley, Gilgit-Baltistan (Photo by the author, 2000).

In Tangir, men wear flowers in their caps mainly for their beauty. I documented not only personal adornment but also floral representation in the decorative art of Tangir. While studying the historic wooden mosques, houses and funerary monuments of the valley, I noticed many floral designs carved on wooden pillars, doors and other architectural elements.

Literature Review

Flowers have attracted the attention of anthropologists who have studied their use in religious ceremonies, social customs, personal decoration and art. Goody (1993) explored the history of flowers, particularly how societies cultivated, exchanged and used them. "Every people has gained pleasure in weaving flowers into garlands and crowns and gathering them in bouquets" (Blondel, 1876, as cited in Goody, 1993, p. 1). Goody (1993, p. 2) noted that flowers are part of culture and are used for decoration, medicine, cooking and maintaining social relationships. His discussion is relevant to Tangir, where I observed men wearing wildflowers in their woollen caps and documented the use of flowers in older customs and traditional decorative art.

Studies from India provide useful information on the use of plants for personal adornment. Mehra et al. (1975) documented how plants were used for decoration, while Francis (1984) studied the various plant species used as ornaments. Both studies discuss the use of flowers, leaves and other plant

materials. However, they focus more on the plants used for adornment than on the experiences and preferences of the people who wore them.

Miller (2005) examined clothing as part of material culture and its role in everyday social life. His discussion is relevant to the Tangiri practice of decorating woollen caps with fresh flowers, which men wear as part of their daily dress.

Lata et al. (2024) documented the Fulaich festival among the Kinnaura communities of Himachal Pradesh, where flowers collected from the mountains are used in ceremonies associated with local beliefs and the remembrance of deceased relatives.

Several researchers have written about traditional headwear in Gilgit-Baltistan. Malik (2012) studied women's caps and ceremonial headdresses, describing their decoration and importance in local traditions. Haider et al. (2021) documented traditional woollen textiles in Baltistan and noted that men decorated their caps with flowers, while women used jewellery or flowers to adorn their headwear. Mir (2016) discussed traditional men's caps in Gilgit-Baltistan, including the practice of decorating them with bird feathers. These studies help compare the different ornaments used on traditional caps in Gilgit-Baltistan.

My earlier research on decorated wooden coffins in Tangir and Darel documented the floral and geometric patterns found on funerary monuments (Kalhoro, 2008). In my later research, I also studied the wooden funerary monuments of Tangir and Darel, mainly their decorated grave railings (Kalhoro, 2019b). In another article, I discussed the practice of wearing flowers in caps among Tangiri men, highlighting shepherds, local beliefs and decorative traditions (Kalhoro, 2020). The present paper builds on that work through an ethnographic examination of personal adornment, everyday aesthetics, and memories associated with pastoral life.

Ethnographic Research Methods

This paper is based on my ethnographic research conducted in Tangir Valley, Diamer District, Gilgit-Baltistan, during visits in 2000, 2001, 2004, 2007, 2009 and 2019. I used key-informant interviews, semi-structured interviews, direct observation and photography to document the practice of wearing flowers in caps among men and to understand the meanings they attach to this form of adornment.

In my conversations with key informants in Tangir, I asked about the local customs of personal adornment, including how men decorated their woollen caps in earlier times. These discussions helped me learn about the use of bird feathers and flowers and how men's preferences for these ornaments have changed over the years. Semi-structured interviews helped me understand men's preferences for wearing flowers and their experiences of this practice. I also spoke with elderly shepherds about the flowers they saw while grazing their livestock in the mountain pastures of Tangir.

Ethnographic Findings

The Khori and Pharu: Personal Adornment and Everyday Aesthetics

As I travelled from one village to another in Tangir Valley, I frequently noticed men with fresh flowers tucked into their traditional woollen caps (Fig. 3). The flowers worn in traditional caps vary with the seasons. In early spring, people wear *Muyo*, followed by roses. In the mountain pastures, *Shalung* and *Punar* are commonly worn. At the beginning of autumn, when people return from the mountain pastures to their villages, they wear *Lahoor*, *Gaboro* and *Gaburi* in their caps. Some Tangiri men wear flowers during their everyday work.



Fig. 3. The author (second from left) with shepherds, two of whom are wearing flowers in their traditional woollen caps in Tangir Valley (Photo taken in 2001).

Unlike bird feathers, which can be kept for a long time, fresh flowers quickly lose their freshness and must be replaced. I photographed several men wearing these floral ornaments in different villages of Tangir, including Mushke, Faruri, Phapat, Dabas, Sobo Kot, Khami Kot, Koranga Bala, Koranga Pain, and Darqali Bala (Figs. 4–7). These photographs helped me document a custom that I frequently observed during my fieldwork.

I noticed that they chose flowers mainly for their beauty. I was interested in how they appreciated these flowers and used them to decorate their everyday dress.

Shepherds, Flowers and Memories of the Pastures

Wildflowers grow abundantly in the high mountain pastures of Tangir during summer. These grazing grounds, locally called *Ayar*, are used by shepherds who take their livestock to the mountains during the warmer months. Shepherds become familiar with these flowers through their seasonal movements and prolonged stays in the mountains.



Fig. 4. A shepherd wearing flowers in his traditional Tangiri cap in Tangir Valley (Photo by the author, 2001).



Fig. 5. A man from Mushke village, Tangir Valley, with a flower tucked into his traditional woollen cap (Photo by the author, 2009).



Fig. 6. An elderly man wearing a traditional woollen cap adorned with a flower in Dargali Bala village, Tangir Valley (Photo by the author, 2009).



Fig. 7. A man wearing a traditional woollen cap adorned with flowers in Dargali Bala village, Tangir Valley (Photo by the author, 2019).

One of the most captivating places I visited in Tangir was Satil meadow, located at the head of the valley. I visited Satil several times. I was amazed by its vast pastures and surrounding mountain landscape. During summer, Satil serves as a communal grazing ground for the people of the Gabbar area of Tangir. The meadow is surrounded by side valleys containing different varieties of flowers, plants and trees. In winter, heavy snowfall makes the road to Satil impassable.

Two mountain routes lead from Satil towards neighbouring valleys. One passes through Chhachhi Nullah, where three lakes are located, and continues towards Phundar Valley. The other leads towards Dahi Mal village in Gupis, near the Yasin River, through Bathret Nullah. This route passes through Pai Nullah and Chileli before entering Baro Bathret, which leads towards Dahi Mal in Ghizer District. There are two valleys known as Bathret: Baro Bathret (large Bathret) and Biyalo Bathret (small Bathret). They meet at Miro Das, a beautiful place surrounded by mountain scenery. Both valleys contain several lakes. These mountain routes were also used by travellers moving towards Yasin, Chitral and beyond in earlier times (Kalhoro, 2026). Wildflowers grow abundantly in all these places.

I also learned that shepherds have given local names to different parts of these pastures.

When the young shepherds return from the pastures, the senior and retired shepherds talk with them about the flowers, plants, trees, streams, lakes and landscapes they saw when they were young shepherds moving with their herds through the pastures. Social memory for Tangiri shepherds serves as healing. The senior shepherds pluck flowers from the village landscape and place them in their caps, recalling the days they spent in the pastures of the side valleys and the Satil meadow in Tangir.

In Tangiri Shina, the lower end of a side valley is called *Chuno* or *Durore Bekh*, while the middle section is known as *Majeno Bekh* and the upper section as *Shashe Bekh*. Shepherds move their herds through these areas at different times of the year, depending on the availability of grazing grounds.

I found these local names very interesting because they reflect the knowledge shepherds have acquired through their experiences in the mountains. These names make it easier for them to identify particular places and discuss their movements through the pastures. Their familiarity with the mountain landscape also includes knowledge of the flowers, plants and trees growing in different areas.

I documented the local names of several flowers and trees growing in Tangir Valley. Flowers such as *Gaburi* and *Lalari* are known by their traditional names, while Sazin and Jonji refer to trees. Shepherds recognised these plants and used their local names when discussing the vegetation of different pastures. Flowers reminded them of their younger days when they grazed livestock in these mountain pastures. Even after giving up herding, some elderly shepherds still wore flowers in

their caps. While talking to them, I noticed how fondly they remembered the mountain pastures where they had grazed their livestock for many years.

While some men wore flowers simply because they liked their beauty, for these shepherds they also recalled familiar places and earlier days of their lives. I realised from these conversations that not everyone in Tangir wore flowers for the same reason.

From Feathers to Flowers: Changing Practices of Adornment

In the past, men in Tangir decorated their woollen caps with pheasant plumes, locally called *Lesh*, and duck feathers, known as *Deng*. They admired these feathers for their beauty and often wore them for long periods, as they lasted much longer than fresh flowers.

However, I no longer saw men wearing pheasant plumes. This tradition of wearing plumes is disappearing from some villages and has completely vanished from others. Fresh flowers were a popular form of decoration among Tangiri people. Today, men mainly wear fresh flowers in their woollen caps for their beauty, while the older customs survive in the memories of local people.

Floral Motifs in Tangiri Material Culture

I have studied several historic wooden mosques, houses, funerary monuments and defensive towers, locally called *gharis*, in different villages of Tangir Valley. The woodcarvings on these buildings are very impressive. I observed many floral and geometric patterns on their wooden pillars, doors and other architectural elements. Lotus and sunflower motifs are among the most prominent designs. They also show the artistic skills of Tangiri woodcarvers.

Floral designs are equally noticeable on wooden funerary monuments. In my earlier research on the decorated wooden coffins of Tangir and Darel, I discussed these carvings and the funerary customs of the two valleys (Kalhoro, 2008). I also studied the carved wooden grave railings of Tangir, which feature floral and geometric motifs (Kalhoro, 2019b).

Flowers thus appear in different forms in Tangiri cultural life. Fresh flowers adorn the woollen caps of Tangiri men, while floral motifs decorate wooden buildings and funerary monuments.

Apart from self-decoration, flowers were also used in decorating the houses' pillars, a custom that is also found in other valleys of Gilgit-Baltistan and among Dardic communities in Indus-Kohistan, Swat-Kohistan and Dir-Kohistan. This is a pre-Islamic custom which is still prevalent in some of these regions. In Tangir valley, this was done to ward off evil spirits and remind the demons to return to their places. Tangiri people used incantations telling the demons to return only when certain flowers hung on the pillars were in bloom. During the festival of *Lesh Bash* (a celebration of gathering crops), the head of the household struck the pillars on which flowers were hung with an axe.

Although the festival of hanging flowers on the houses' pillars is no more celebrated in Tangir, the tradition of keeping the flowers in the caps continues (Kalhoro, 2020).

Discussion

What interested me was how a familiar woollen cap became an object of personal decoration by adding a fresh flower. The shepherds I met in Tangir knew the mountain pastures through their seasonal movements with livestock. Their knowledge was acquired through years of moving between villages and summer pastures. For some elderly shepherds, the flowers they wore in their caps were familiar from the places where they had spent much of their younger lives. This association was evident in my conversations with men who had stopped herding livestock.

I was also interested in the conversations between younger and retired shepherds. When the younger men returned from the pastures, the older shepherds asked them about the places they had visited and the flowers and plants they had seen. These conversations brought back memories of their own journeys through the mountains. Their accounts helped me understand why the same ornament could be appreciated for different reasons. For some men, flowers were simply attractive, while for retired shepherds they could also recall the years spent grazing livestock in the mountains.

Miller (2005) examined clothing as part of material culture and everyday social life. His discussion is relevant to the changes I learned about in Tangir. Elderly villagers told me that men once decorated their woollen caps with pheasant and duck feathers, known locally as *Lesh* and *Deng*. These feathers lasted much longer than fresh flowers. During my study, however, I did not see men wearing feathers. Flowers had become the more familiar ornaments. The woollen cap continued to be worn, but the decoration had changed. The accounts of elderly villagers were especially useful because they described a practice that I could no longer observe myself.

Goody (1993) examined the different uses and meanings of flowers in societies. In Tangir, I documented an older custom in which people hung flowers on house pillars to ward off evil spirits. This custom was associated with *Lesh Bash*, a festival connected with the gathering of crops.

I have also documented the festivals and customs of Punial Valley in general and Singul in particular since 2001. One of these is *Duman Khai*, celebrated in the second week of November after harvest. During this festival, the head of the household gently strikes the right pillars of the house twice with an axe and says in Shina, "*Sho kha sho pia te nakhey bo*" (you ate well, drank well, now leave our home). These words are addressed to a demon. He then strikes the pillars again and says, "*Peshon pho nelto waps wa*" (return when the Peshon flowers grow). I documented this custom in my earlier research on Punial (Kalhoro, 2019a).

The custom associated with *Lesh Bash* in Tangir was no longer practised during my visits, although men still wore flowers in their caps. The older custom was connected with beliefs concerning spirits,

while wearing flowers in caps was mainly a form of personal adornment. I therefore do not see the continued wearing of flowers as evidence that the older beliefs have survived unchanged.

I also noticed floral designs on the wooden buildings and funerary monuments that I studied in Tangir. Lotus and sunflower motifs appeared on carved pillars, doors and grave railings. These were the work of local woodcarvers, whose designs I documented in different villages. The flowers worn in caps and the floral patterns carved in wood belong to different forms of decoration. I found no evidence that one practice developed from the other. I observed that flowers appeared in both everyday dress and the older wooden architecture of Tangir, although their uses differed.

Conclusion

Wearing fresh flowers in woollen caps is a familiar practice among men in Tangir Valley. I observed men wearing flowers while going about their daily activities in different villages. My conversations with these men showed that they wore flowers mainly because they liked their beauty. The traditional woollen cap, locally called *Khori*, continues to be decorated with fresh flowers, known as *Pharu*.

My conversations with elderly shepherds revealed another reason for wearing flowers. Many remembered the mountain pastures where they had spent their younger days grazing livestock. When younger shepherds returned from these pastures, their conversations reminded the elderly shepherds of their own experiences. Some retired shepherds continued to wear flowers in their caps. For them, the flowers recalled places they could no longer visit as frequently as before.

I also found that the ornaments used in woollen caps had changed. Elderly villagers remembered the earlier practice of wearing pheasant and duck feathers, locally known as *Lesh* and *Deng*. Although the ornaments had changed, the custom of decorating woollen caps remained familiar in the villages I visited.

Flowers were also associated with older customs in Tangir. I documented the practice of hanging flowers on house pillars to ward off evil spirits during *Lesh Bash*. This custom had disappeared, but wearing flowers in caps continued. I also observed floral motifs on wooden mosques, houses and funerary monuments. These carvings were the work of local artisans and differed from the fresh flowers worn by men.

What interested me most was that men did not all wear flowers for the same reason. Some appreciated their appearance, while elderly shepherds also associated them with memories of the mountain pastures. My conversations with villagers helped me understand these differences. Wearing flowers in woollen caps remains part of everyday life in Tangir, even though some older forms of decoration and customs involving flowers are no longer practised.

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