

Traditional Games in Ancient Art: A Study of Gandhāra's Visual Legacy

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Abstract

Gandhāra, largely corresponding to the ancient Peshawar Valley, reflects a rich blend of cultural influences expressed through stone and stucco sculpture. Gandhāran art portrays not only religious and princely themes but also everyday social activities such as music, dance, and physical exercise, offering insight into the socio-economic and cultural life of the region. Many of these traditions have survived with minor changes and continue to shape the cultural practices of the Peshawar Valley. Traditional games such as Mukha (archery) and wrestling or Kabaddi are depicted in Gandhāran relief's panels, highlighting the importance of physical strength and recreation in ancient society. Despite modifications over time, these games remain practiced today, demonstrating strong cultural continuity.

Key Words: Baggi Gandhara, Peshawar Valley, Mukha, Kabaddi, Parzawel, Ghurr Sawari Tangha

Introduction

The Gandhāra region, particularly the Peshawar Valley, occupies a distinctive position in the cultural and artistic history of South Asia. Owing to its strategic location and interaction with various civilizations, Gandhāra developed a rich material culture that reflects not only religious and political life but also the everyday social practices of its people. Gandhāran art, renowned primarily for its Buddhist imagery, also provides valuable visual evidence of secular activities such as dress, ornaments, tools, transportation, leisure, and recreational pursuits. Among these, traditional games and sports form an important yet often overlooked aspect of Gandhāran visual culture (Nawaz 2016:1& Zwalf 1996:14).

The Peshawar Valley has preserved a number of indigenous customs and traditions that differ in many respects from other regions of Pakistan. These include traditional food, clothing, utensils, marriage and funeral rituals, as well as games and sports,

many of which have survived in modified forms into the present day. A careful examination of Gandhāran relief panels reveals that several of these traditional games were not only practiced in antiquity but were also considered significant enough to be immortalized by Gandhāran artists in stone (Muhammad & Petrochenkova 2012:150).

Games such as wrestling or *Kabaddi* (locally known as Parzawel), archery-based games like *Mukha*, horse riding (*Ghurr Sawari*), and chariot or cart racing (*Tangha*) are depicted in various sculptural panels, coins, and reliefs from the Gandhāra region. These representations highlight the physical strength, martial skills, and recreational interests of ancient society. Although many of these games have gradually declined due to social change and modernization, their basic structure and cultural significance have remained intact over centuries, continuing as part of the living traditions of the Peshawar Valley (Muhammad & Petrochenkova 2012:150–152).

This article aims to explore such traditional games as reflected in Gandhāran art and to establish a cultural continuity between ancient visual representations and contemporary practices in the region. By analyzing selected games such as *Mukha*, *Kabaddi* or wrestling, and horse riding, the study seeks to establish how Gandhāran art serves as an important historical source for understanding leisure activities and social life in ancient Gandhāra. The most important games which are still part of our modern society are as under:

1. *Mukha* / Archery

Archery was a favored royal sport in ancient times, with figures like Jotila and Siddhartha excelling in competitions to demonstrate martial skills. Siddhartha famously strung a heavy bow and hit all targets, winning Yaosodhara. Relief panels (Acc no 02712 and see fig :1) often depict archers with bows, arrows, and quivers, with arrowheads shown as conical or barbed (Tauqeer 2014:46-47)

Mukha is a popular indigenous traditional sport deeply rooted in the cultural traditions of the modern districts of Swabi, Buner, and Mardan of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, Pakistan. It is not merely a game but also a symbol of community bonding and local heritage. The sport is contested between two teams, with each team consisting of ten players. The captain within the team is held by the *Wazir*, who is responsible for organizing the players and making strategic decisions during the match, while the remaining team members are known as *Pakhai* and actively participate in gameplay. A central feature of *Mukha* is the target, a wooden object locally referred to as the *Boot*. This target is carefully placed on top of a tall, specially constructed pole that measures between fifteen and twenty feet in height. Hitting the Boot requires great precision, skill, and focus. Players attempt to strike the target from a fixed position called the *Panakai*, which is situated at a distance of about fifty to sixty feet from the pole, adding to the challenge of the game. Traditional equipment plays a dynamic role in *Mukha* (see fig:2 & 3). The bow used is typically handmade in Bajaur and is known locally as the *Bajawri Lenda*. It reflects the craftsmanship and indigenous knowledge passed down through generations. The arrows are made from bamboo and are longer than those used in the past, allowing for better reach and accuracy. Together, these elements make *Mukha* a distinctive

and respected traditional sport that continues to preserve the cultural identity and sporting spirit of the region (Yousafzai 2009:40-41, Muhammad & Petrochenkova 2012:153).

2. Wrestling or *Kabaddi*

Wrestling, Kabaddi, locally called *Parzawel*, is one of the oldest and most tough traditional games of Pakistan, especially in the Khyber Pakhtunkhwa region. Gandharan artists also depicted physical activities such as wrestling scene. The Peshawar Museum displays three wrestling relief panels with (Acc nos. 02739, 02740, and 02738 see fig: 4) . The sport is a true test of physical endurance, speed, balance, and strength, requiring players to be both mentally alert and physically fit. It is often played during local festivals, village gatherings, and cultural events, where teams from neighboring villages compete against one another. These matches foster a strong sense of unity, pride, and healthy competition among the participants and spectators alike.

The game follows simple yet demanding rules. A clear boundary line divides the playing area between the two teams. During play, an attacker from one team crosses into the opponent's territory with the aim of touching one or more defenders and then returning safely to his own side. Success in this move earns his team a point. However, if the defenders manage to catch and hold the raider before he crosses back over the line, the attacker's team loses a point. This balance of attack and defense makes *Kabaddi* (see fig:5) an exciting and powerful sport that reflects the traditional values of courage, teamwork, and softness (Muhammad & Petrochenkova 2012:155, Iqbal J 2002:377 , Yousfzai 2009:37-38).

3. Horse riding / *Ghurr sawari*.

Six relief panels depicting horse-riding scenes from the *Maitryakanayaka* Jataka (Acc. Nos. 03073, 03069, 03067, 02714, 00418, 02754 and see fig no:6) are in the Peshawar Museum. Accession No. 02714 shows two scenes, though the right side is damaged. The Bodhisattva *Maitryakanayaka* is carved on horseback, holding the reins in his left hand with his right hand outstretched. In front of the horse, a figure wearing a short dress and holding a club is depicted as the guardian of the after world (Marshall 1909-10: Pl. XVII; Zwalf 1996: 139: Pl.13). Horse riding is royal hobby from ancient times and this is attested from the coins of Indo-Greek rulers such as Menander and Polyxenus as well as those of the Indo-Scythian ruler Azes I, frequently depict kings riding on horseback (Bopearachchi & Aman ur Rehman 1995:124, 136 and 172), indicating the importance of horsemanship in the region. Horse racing is believed to have been introduced to the subcontinent by Alexander the Great in 326 BCE. Scenes of horse riding and related activities are also commonly found in the relief panels of Gandhara art, further highlighting the cultural significance of horses in ancient times. Although horse racing was once a popular sport, its importance has gradually decline. In the recent past, horse-racing competitions were commonly held in the Swabi district, usually on public holidays. These races were locally known as *Dor*. A *sulkie*, a light two-wheeled cart similar to a *baggi* or *Tangha* (see fig no: 7) was attached to the horses during the races. Traditionally, these events took place on the main roads of Swabi, however, due to increased traffic and modern road conditions, such races are now rarely organized (Muhammad & Petrochenkova 2012:152)

Conclusion

The study of traditional games as reflected in Gandhāran art highlights the close

Online ISSN

3007-3197

Print ISSN

3007-3189

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relationship between artistic expression and everyday life in ancient Gandhāra. Sculptural reliefs, coins, and other visual sources demonstrate that activities such as *Mukha* (archery), wrestling or *Kabaddi*, and horse riding were integral to social life, emphasizing physical strength, martial training, and recreation. These depictions confirm that Gandhāran artists did not limit their focus to religious themes alone but also documented popular cultural practices of their time. Despite social change and modernization, many of these traditional games have survived in modified forms in the Peshawar Valley and its surrounding regions. Their continued practice reflects a strong cultural continuity that connects present-day society with its ancient past. Gandhāran art thus serves as an important historical source for understanding the recreational life, social values, and cultural traditions of the region, offering valuable insight into the enduring legacy of ancient Gandhāra.

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Online ISSN

3007-3197

Print ISSN

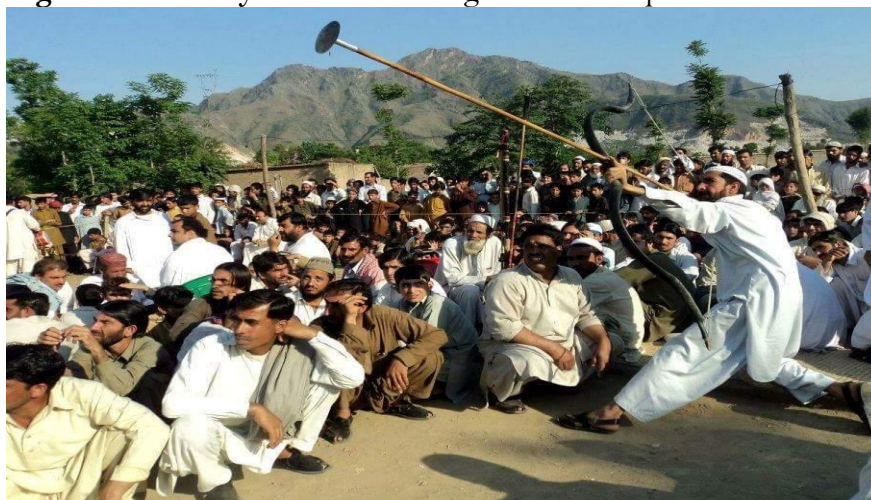
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Figures



Fig:1 The Archery scene is showing in the relief pannel



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Fig: 2 Tarditional Game Mukha is in Progress



Fig:3 The player throwing Arrow (*Mukha*)



Fig:4 Wrestling Scene from Gandharan Relief Pannel

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3007-3197

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Fig:5 Modern day *Kabaddi*



Fig: 6 Horse Riding scene showed by Gandharan artist

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3007-3197

Print ISSN

3007-3189

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Fig: 7 *Modern day Horse Riding scene and Modern Tangha*