

The Origin of the Yusufzai Tribe: Myth and Reality

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Abstract

The origins of the Pashtun tribes are shrouded in mystery. The lack of information on the topic allowed certain religious clerics of the seventeenth century to fill the gap with unverified claims of linking Pashtuns with Bani Israel and other Semitic races. With the passage of time, the Israelite origins of the Pashtun tribes became very popular among the masses. However, modern historical, linguistic, and scientific research proved that these claims of the early writers were based on their subjective desires instead of reality. This paper intends to trace the origin of the Yusufzai tribe from ancient sources of history and recent linguistic and genetic study. The article reveals some unexplored literary sources and recent scientific information on the origin of Yusufzai to reach an authentic conclusion.

Keywords: Yusufzai, Origin, History, Linguistic, Genetics.

INTRODUCTION

Yusufzai, one of the major Pashtun tribes, constitutes most of the land aristocracy in Mardan, Swabi, Malakand, Dir (both upper and lower), Swat, Shangla, Buner, and Torghar districts, and some villages in Batgram, Mansehra, and Haripur districts of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa. The Yusufzai tribe is known for its history, culture, linguistic preeminence, and strength. Their language, Yusufzai Pashto, is considered one of the two largest and standard dialects of the Pashto language.¹

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In contemporary history, the Yusufzais are known for their resistance against the Mughals and other colonial powers. They also resisted the authority of Nadir Shah of Persia in 1738. Similarly, they fought the Sikhs in their tribal capacity. They also fought numerous of battles against the English colonial forces till their withdrawal from the subcontinent.² Today, the tribe constitutes the major portion of the population of the Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province.

In his book 'The Way of the Pathans,' Spain writes, "So pure have the Yusufzais kept their blood lines and so rigorously they have obeyed the Pathan Code that they are universally acknowledged by other tribes as being the most blue-blooded Pathans of all"³ The same admiration for Yusufzai is also found in a verse by Khushal Khan Khattak, as he says:

يوسفزيه مير افغان دي

هم د توري هم د خوان دي

The Yusufzais are the royal Afghans both in hospitality and fighting.⁴

Elphinstone asserts that the Yusufzai are the most numerous and powerful of all the eastern Pashtun tribes. The Eastern Afghans have been called *Bar Durani* by Ahmad Shah Abdali, who live in the Peshawar plain and adjacent mountainous valleys to its north and east.⁵ In the



following map, the red colour represents the Yusufzai majority areas on the eastern side of the Durand Line.

Figure 1 Yusufzai Tribe, Naval Post Graduate School, n.d.

The Yusufzais' population has been estimated variously by various writers in the past. In the early seventeenth century (1613), they were predicted nine lacs by Nimatullah Harawi. Elphinstone estimated their numbers including peasants as seven hundred thousand. He writes that the Afghan reckoned them as nine hundred thousand, but their

Tribe	Sections	Major Sub-sections
Yusufzai	Akozai	Abazai (Fatehkhel, Kamalkhel, Iliaszai), Baizai (Abakhel, Azikhel, Babuzai) Khadakzai , (Abakhel, Akakhel, Ibrahimkhel, Madokhel) Khwajazai (Adinzai, Malizai (Dir), Nekbikhel, Sibujni, Shamizai, Shamozaizai) Ranizai (Alikhel, Bahramkhel, Khwajakhel, Madikhel, Sultankhel, Usmanikhel)
	Ilyaszai	Ayeshazai (Yakhel, Khadinkhel, Musarakhel, Khakizai) Gadizai (Hasankhel, Bahramkhel, Alisherkhel, Sinkhel) Nasozai (Makhozai, Panjpao) Salarzai (Ayubkhel, Malikhel, Manizai)
	Esazai	Akazai (Azizkhel, Bartkhel, Paindakhel, Taswakhel) Hasanzai (Mandokhel, Kalakhel, Kakakhel) Madakhel (Hasankhel, Bazakhel, Bazidkhel, Musakhel, Busikhel)
	Malizai	Chagharzai (Ismailkhel, Basikhel, Firozai) Daulatzai (Mandizai, Barkazai, Ismailzai) Nurizai (Alisherkhel, Abazai, Isorizai)
	Mandanr	Usman (kamalzai, Amanzai) Utman (Akazai, Katazai, Alizai, Sadozai, Razar (Manizai, Malakzai, Akozai, Khwazai) Khazarzai (Shamozaizai, Yusufkhel, Umarzai, Gadakhel) Mamozai (Akakhel, Bobakhel, Khanikhel)

'villeins' are more numerous than them who work as laborers for them. H.G. Raverty pegs their population at 200,000 households, which is in line with Nimatullah and Elphinstone' sestimates.⁶ Presently, the total population of Yusufzai majority districts is

about 12 million which has a key role in the politics of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa Province. The following table shows major sections and subsections of Yusufzais:

Table 1Figure 2Section and Sub-Sections of the Yusufzai, (Shah, P. M., n.d. p. 678-724)

Historical Background of The Tribe

The name Yusufzai in its present form has been for the first time recorded in *Bāburnama*, while generally it is still pronounced as Esapzai. Asb or Asp means horse in Indo-Iranian languages and the ethnonym reveals some type of association with the horses. The horse has been a symbol of prestige and veneration in many ancient cultures or religions. The pictures and wooden statues of horses are still found in the graveyards of Dardic people in the north of Yusufzai territory of Swat and Dir.⁷ Following is a brief account of ancient and historic literature which indicates the early existence of the tribe even before the Christian Era.

Avesta

The origin of the surname *Asp* can be traced back to the time of Zoroaster, the ancient prophet of Bactria. The Avestan literature records numeral personalities with the surname Aspa or Asp, like Haechataspa, Vishtaspa, and Jamasp.⁸ Ahmad Ali Kuhzad considers Aspa to be a royal dynasty, famous for nobility and expertise in horse domestication and cavalry.⁹ Similarly, the historical city of Balkh, Arabic Umm-ul-Bilad (the mother of cities) is called Zariaspa in Persian. Moreover, a tribal group known as Ariaspans who supported Cyrus in his regional campaign are dubbed by him as "the Benefactors."¹⁰ From the above paragraph it can be easily concluded that the word Asp (horse) was a popular name at the time found in the names of persons, people and places.

Sanskrit

The Sanskrit term *ashva*, and Prakrit *assa* means horse. *Ashvak* (Sanskrit: अश्वक) (as a group of people has been mentioned in old Sanskrit literature, who allegedly lived in Kunar and the Peshawar Valleys. Pāṇini styled the Aspa of Kunar and Ashvaka clans of Swat valleys as Ashvayanas and Ashvakayanas respectively. The name Aśvaka or Assaka

also seems to mean someone connected with the horses i.e., the rider, dealer, or worshipper of the horse. According to Hindu traditions, the Aśvakas were the resident of eastern Afghanistan and their population reached up to the bank of the Indus River. Swat and Peshawar valleys of ancient Gandhara were their major urban centres.¹¹

Greek Sources

Herodotus talks about a group of people in Caspatyrus, a city in Paktyica, who resembled Bactrian in colour and were distinct from their black neighbours of India in their bravery and culture.¹² Another Greek writer of the second century, Arrian, mentions *Aspasioi* as a tribe of great numerical strength and wealth between the Kunar and Swat valleys who resisted Alexander in 327–326 BCE. The tribal forces were defeated by Alexander. As a result, 40,000 of their men were made captive and 230,000 of their oxen were taken as war booty.¹³

Arab Sources

The *Asbazi* (اسبذی) as a tribe has also been discussed in several Arabic chronicles. The Arab sources reveal that the people of this tribe were posted by the King of Persia in Bahrain for administrative purposes. It is further explained that they were good equestrians and belonged to Persia.¹⁴ Other historical sources also confirm the existence of Aspazi (Arabic: اسبذی) as an ethnic and religious group in Bahrain. Even during the life of prophet Muhammad, a leader of them met the Prophet in Medina. The following Hadith of Sunan-I-Abi Daud informs us about his deal of Jizya payment with the Holy Prophet:

حَدَّثَنَا مُحَمَّدُ بْنُ مِسْكِينٍ الْيَمَامِيُّ، حَدَّثَنَا يَحْيَى بْنُ حَسَّانَ، حَدَّثَنَا هُشَيْمٌ، أَخْبَرَنَا دَاوُدُ بْنُ أَبِي هِنْدٍ، عَنْ قُتَيْبِ بْنِ عَمْرٍو، عَنْ بَجَالَةَ بْنِ عَبْدِةَ، عَنْ ابْنِ عَبَّاسٍ، قَالَ: جَاءَ رَجُلٌ مِنَ الْأَسْبَذِيِّينَ مِنْ أَهْلِ الْبَحْرَيْنِ وَهُمْ مَجُوسٌ أَهْلُ هَجَرَ إِلَى رَسُولِ اللَّهِ صَلَّى اللَّهُ عَلَيْهِ وَسَلَّمَ فَمَكَثَ عِنْدَهُ، ثُمَّ خَرَجَ فَسَأَلْتُهُ مَا قَضَى اللَّهُ وَرَسُولُهُ فِيكُمْ؟ قَالَ: شَرٌّ قُلْتُ: مَهْ قَالَ: الْإِسْلَامُ أَوْ الْقَتْلُ، قَالَ: وَقَالَ عَبْدُ الرَّحْمَنِ بْنُ عَوْفٍ قَبِلَ مِنْهُمْ الْجَزِيَّةَ، قَالَ ابْنُ عَبَّاسٍ: فَأَخَذَ النَّاسُ بِقَوْلِ عَبْدِ الرَّحْمَنِ بْنِ عَوْفٍ، وَتَرَكُوا مَا سَمِعْتُ أَنَا مِنَ الْأَسْبَذِيِّ. ابني داوود:

(3044)

Abdullah Bin Abbas narrates that a person from the Asbazi people of Bahrain, who was the Magian of Hajjar, came to the Holy Prophet. He stayed with the Prophet for

a certain time and then came out. I inquired of him: "What is the decision of God and his messenger about you? He said, "Evil! I asked: What? He said: "Islam or murder. (Later) Abd-ur-Rahman Ben Auf informed us that the Prophet had accepted Jizya(tribute) from them. Ibn Abbas says, "So, the people took the saying of Abd-ur-Rahman Ben Auf and left what I had heard from the Asbadhi."

9th century Arab historian Al-Baladhuri, in his work, Futuh-ul-Baldan, writes that at the time of the Prophet, al-Mundhir ibn-Sawa (the son of Abdallah ibn-Zaid al-Asbadhi) governed the Arabs there on behalf of the Persians. The surname of Al-Asbadhi is explained to be a resident of al-Asbadh, a village in Hajar, while others assert that the Al-Asbadhi were a religious sect in Bahrain who worshipped horses.¹⁵

Al-Baladhuri further informs us that the prophet wrote a letter to the people of Bahrain, asking them to accept Islam and pay the tithe; if they refused, then tax would be incumbent upon them. The Arabs accepted Islam, but the Magians (*the Asbadhi*) and Jews did not change their religion and agreed to pay a tax, which was one dinar on every man. Al-Baladhuri goes on to say:

"The Prophet received 80,000 dirhams from the Jews and Magian of Hajar, a sum of money greater than the Prophet had ever received before or since." The Prophet gave a part of it to his uncle, al-Abbas. On this, the hypocrites among the Arabs remarked, " The Prophet pretended that he would accept poll tax from none outside the 'People of the Book', but here he is accepting it from the Magians of Hajar, who are not the 'People of the Book'."¹⁶

These Arab sources of the early Islamic period have great importance for the existence of the Esapzai as a tribe, though these sources only mention a small diaspora of them in the Arab world. It is more likely that *Aspazai* became Esapzai with the passage of time and then Yusufzai after the Islamic influence in Mughal Era.

The Ghaznavid Era

The literature of the Ghaznavid era provides very little information about the Pashtun tribes and their land. Hudul Alam, an anonymous work of 982 CE, only mentions a king in Ninhar (Ningarhar) who converted to Islam, and he still had several Afghan,

Hindu, and Muslim wives.¹⁷ Al-Utbi describes Afghan and Turkish King Mahmud's clashes. According to Utbi, the Afghans, who made their homes in the mountains' cliffs and summits, used to attack the Sultan's territories. The Sultan once decided to attack and destroy their dwellings and departed from Ghaznī. He pretended that he was going somewhere else but suddenly attacked them and put many of them to the sword.¹⁸

Alberuni, in his well-known work, *Alberuni's India*, mentions that different Afghan tribes live in the western frontier mountains of India and have expanded to the Indus Valley.¹⁹ Ibn-e-Battuta, one of the famous Muslim travelers of the Fourteenth Century, refers to Kabul and the Sulaiman Mountains as the principal settlements of Afghans.²⁰

All these works of pre-Islamic and post-Islamic eras prove that Pashtun settlement on the western bank of the Indus is from time immemorial and the idea of Pashtun migration to Peshawar or other parts of Pakhtunkhwa with the Ghaznavid or Ghorid conquests is based on very weak assumptions.

Mughal Sources

Babur Nama, the chronicle of Mughal Emperor Zahiruddin Babur, has considerable information about Pashtun tribes and their residence. The Yusufzai, like many other Pashtun tribes, suffered from the expansion of the Mughal Empire; however, Malak Shah Mansur, the then-chief of the tribe, tried his best to find a peaceful solution rather than war.

The horrible treatment of Babur towards the people of Bajaur further increased the sense of insecurity among the Yusufzais, who saw themselves as the next target of Bābur incursion. On January 8th, 1519, Malik Shah Mansur paid a visit to Babur's camp at Bajaur to pledge his loyalty to the king in exchange for his good will. Babur treated him with respect and conferred the *Robe of Honour* upon him, but the political and economic conflict between the two parties remained unresolved, and Babur returned him with a written threat to his tribe (Yusufzai).

On the 21st of January, Babur proceeded to Swat to attack the Yusufzais. On his arrival at the confluence of the Panjkora and Swat rivers, Shah Mansur paid him another visit to calm the situation. On this occasion, Babur expressed his wish to marry Shah

Mansur's daughter in order to secure the tribe's goodwill, as Babur writes in his memoir: "In order to conciliate the Yusufzai horde, I had asked for the daughter of one of my well-wishers, Malik Sulaimān Shāh's son, Malik Shāh Manşūr, at the time he came to me as an envoy from the Yusufzai Afghān"²¹

The marriage took place within a week. On January 30, Malik Taus Khan, Shah Mansur's brother, led his niece to the court of the King in Bajaur, but the matter of tax remained unresolved, so on May 23, 1519, Shah Mansur visited Kabul and finally reached an agreement on May 31, 1519. Shah Mansur agreed to pay Babur 6,000 *kharwars* of rice as a tax on the agriculture production of Swat and Bajaur. Babur gives no details of receiving this heavy tax, but it is clear that Babur was not satisfied with this treaty. Shah Mansur, despite his desperate efforts, was unable to prevent Babur from assaulting his tribe. On the 29th of September 1519, Babur attacked the Yusufzai of Hashtnagar at the instigation of Dilazak, but only recovered a small amount of grain since the inhabitants had already stored their food in secure locations.²²

The above discussion from Baburnama proves that the Yusufzai were in position in Swat Valley and some portions of Peshawar Valley before the establishment of Mughal control in the region. Similarly, at that time, they were unable to challenge Babur's authority, so they tried to find an amicable solution to their conflict with Babur.

Abul Fazal

In his work *Ain-i-Akbari*, Abul Fazal describes the strength of the Yusufzai clan and their persecution by Akbar: "The whole of Swat Sarkar (Buner, Swat and Bajaur) is the domain of the Yusufzai clan. Under the present imperial rule of the unruly inhabitants of this country, some have been put to death, others imprisoned, while some happily dwell under their tribal rule."²³

Ain-i-Akbari also refers to an early conflict of Yusufzai with the Mughal ruler of Kabul, Mirza Ulagh Beg II (r.1460-1502). He says that the tribal forces of Yusufzais attacked Kabul in which a great number of them were killed and the remainder settled in Lamghanat and later on shifted to Hashtnagar.²⁴

This account of Yusufzai's conflict with Mirza Ulagh Beg has been further elaborated by Mullah Nimatulla Harawi and Akhund Darwiza in their books written in

1613. They claim the assassination of seven hundred Yusufzai elders, including Malak Sulaiman Shah, the father of Malak Shah Mansur Yusufzai, after being invited to a feast by Mirza Ulagh Beg around 1470 CE. After this massacre, the remaining horde was allowed to migrate to Hashtnagar under the leadership of their young chief, Malik Ahmad Khan (son of the late Malak Sultan Shah).²⁵

The above incident of Yusufzai genocide and migration cannot be verified by any contemporary source. Bahadar Shah Zafar Kakakhel, *a modern writer of Pashtuns History* raises his concern about the authenticity of these events.²⁶ It seems that the story has been copied from ancient myths. A similar story has also been described by Herodotus about the Scythian (Saka), a nomadic tribe who conquered Media in 653 BC, when its emperor, Cyaxares, was busy in his campaign against Assyria. For twenty-eight years he was unable to overthrow the hegemony of Saka, and at last he resorted to a stratagem. He invited all the principal leaders of the Scythians to a banquet (feast) and massacred a great number of them after they were intoxicated with wine.²⁷ The remainder of the Scythians were ousted, and they took shelter with the king of Lydia.²⁸ Finally, the Saka turned back to Southern Russia via the Caucasus.²⁹

Akhund Darwiza and Mullah Nimatullah Harawi (1613)

The origin of the Pashtun tribes, and particularly the Yusufzai, has been for the first time discussed in detail by Akhund Darwiza and Mullah Nimatullah Harawi. In their works, *Makhzan-e-Afghania* and *Tazkira*, published in 1613, these authors claim that the Yusufzais are descended from Yusuf, the son of Mand, the son of Khashay, the son of Kharashbun, the son of Saraban, who was the eldest son of Qais Abdur Rashid, the progenitor of the Afghans. They have further described that the Mandanr section of the tribe is basically the offspring of Yusuf's brother Umar through his only son Mandanr. It is stated that Umar lived in Hasan Abdal, but after his death, his wife and son were shifted to Qandahar by his brother Yusuf. The progeny of Mandanr were also counted in Yusufzai because Mandanr became an orphan at a very young age and was brought up by his uncle Yusuf.³⁰

Indeed, it appears that a deliberate fabrication was made to establish a division within the tribe, thereby withholding direct lineage to their eponymous ancestor, Yusuf, and rendering one portion of the tribe inferior to the other. The claim of a legendary

ancestor, Yusuf, is based on speculation, as contemporary DNA research suggests that the nearest common ancestor of the tribe existed several millennia ago in the steppe region of central Asia.

Linguistic Study

The Pashto language has a close connection with other Indo-European languages. The lexical similarities in the basic vocabulary of all these languages bring them close to a common identity. The terms used for close relatives like father, brother, mother, daughter, and counting words like one, two, three, etc., have very little variation in the various languages of the group. Words for refusal like no, not, nor and terms for fresh like new, neo, and novel start with "n" in almost every Indo-European language. The lexical similarities in the Aryan languages imply that the forefathers of these nations lived in close neighbourhoods in the past and had a common language called Arik.³¹

The linguistic similarities of Pashto and other Indo-European languages suggest that Pashtun tribes are an inseparable part of Aryan people. Their language, Pashto, has very little in common with Semitic languages like Arabic, Hebrew, and Aramaic, which have recently expanded to their country after the expansion of Islam in the region.

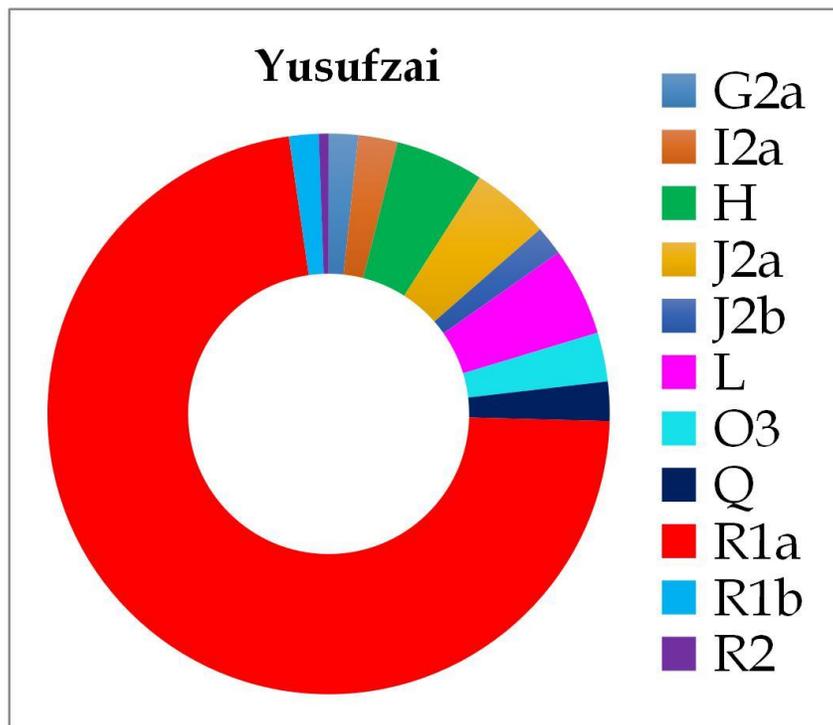
Genetic Research

Genetic studies have shown that a significant proportion of Pashtuns, specifically the Yusufzai tribe, have Aryan ancestry. Research has identified that around 70% of the Pashtun population carries the R1a1 haplogroup, which is distinct from the J1 and J2 haplogroups found predominantly in Arab and Hebrew populations. Multiple studies have also confirmed that the majority of Yusufzai individuals belong to the R1a1 Y haplogroup. Several Ph.D. scholars have investigated the haplotypic diversity of the Yusufzai population across Swat, Dir, Buner, Swabi, and Mardan. One such study focused on the Yusufzai tribe of Mardan and revealed that R1a1 was the most common haplogroup among them, accounting for 54.6% of the population.³²

A research study was conducted in 2017 to investigate the genetic origin of the Yusufzai population in Buner and Swabi districts. The study analyzed 177 samples and identified the presence of the R1a1-M17 haplogroup in 128 of them.³³ In a subsequent study conducted by Inamullah in 2018, a higher proportion of the R1a1 haplogroup (80%) was reported in Yusufzai samples collected from Swat and Dir districts. This finding

indicates a strong genetic association between the R1a1 haplogroup and the Yusufzai population.

Haplogroups are genetic lineages that are passed down from one generation to the next and can be used to trace ancestry and genetic diversity within and between populations. The R1a1 haplogroup is found in various populations across Eurasia and is associated with the spread of Indo-European languages, which are believed to have originated in the Pontic-Caspian Steppe region. The prevalence of this haplogroup in the Yusufzai population suggests a possible ancestral connection to these ancient migrations and linguistic origins. However, further research is needed to understand the historical and cultural implications of this genetic finding in the context of the Yusufzai population.³⁴



Proportion of R1a1 haplotype in Yusufzai Samples (Tariq, 2017.p. 180)

The R-M417 (R1a1a) haplotype is a widely distributed haplogroup in Eurasia, most notably in Eastern Europe, Russia, south and central Asia, where it is prevalent.³⁵ It is estimated to have originated between 22,000 to 25,000 years ago. Notably, none of the Jewish haplogroups were found in the Yusufzai population, indicating that there is no genetic ancestry connection between the two populations.³⁶

The R1a1 and R1b1 are two major haplogroups of the Aryan people around the

world. R1a1 is mostly found in Bengalis, Indians, Sindhis, Punjabis, Pashtun, Tajik, Kirgiz, Kurd, and the Russian population of Asia, along with certain nations of Eastern Europe. While the R1b1 haplogroup is dominant in the Aryans of western Europe, North and South America, and Australia. The R1a lineage is believed to have originated in the Eurasian Steppes north of the Black & Caspian Seas. This lineage is thought to descend from a population of the Kurgan culture, known for the domestication of the horse (circa 3000 B.C.E.). These people were also believed to be the first speakers of the Indo-European language group. This lineage is found in central & western Asia, India, and in Slavic populations of Europe.³⁷

The genetic and linguistic research also shows that the Yusufzai have three common features with the ancient Saka or Scythian. Firstly, both the Sakas and Yusufzai (Esapzai) get their nomenclature from horses. Secondly, both have a story of their massacre by a king who invited them to a feast. Thirdly, the DNA study of Saka and Yusufzai verifies that both tribes are genetically connected with each other. The genetic research on the remains of Scythian people has found that the majority of them belonged to Y-haplogroup R1a1a1 (R-M417) and R1a1a1b2 (R1a-Z93).³⁸

Conclusion

The origin and growth of the Yusufzai tribe have been thoroughly discussed by both orientalist and vernacular writers. The various scholars may have their own various assumptions about their origin, but the Semitic theory has lost its validity after scientific scrutiny. Different local and Greek sources mention them in their present domain of Swat and Peshawar valleys. Therefore, the stories created in the seventeenth century about their Semitic origin and growth are in clear contradiction to the linguistic and modern genetic research on the origin of the tribe. From the detailed study of the history and scientific literature, it is concluded that Pashto is an Indo-European language. Similarly, the majority of Pashtuns, particularly the Yusufzais, are predominantly Aryan. They share their haplogroup R1a1 with the present population of South Asia, Central Asia, Russia, and Eastern Europe. Modern genetic research has proved that this haplogroup was also

common in the *Saka*, the ancient nomadic tribe of the seventh century BCE. In short, the Yusufzai belong to the vast Aryan family, spread from north Asia to South Asia and Eastern Europe.

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