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PHOTOSTAN

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Karachi is the financial and industrial capital of Pakistan, a metropolitan city by the Arabian Sea. It is home to 15 million people, mostly recent rural economic migrants as well as an Urdu-speaking population that migrated during the partition in 1947. The south of the city has around 100 km of coastal belt on which a 5.5 km long public beach (called Clifton Beach and commonly known as Sea View) is a leisure place for people from lower-income backgrounds. The landscape is dominated by decorated camels, horses, quad bikes with LED lights and wheel carts offering snacks catering to thousands of customers every day. There are more than 50 photographers spread out along the beach attracting customers with photo albums and tiny point-and-shoot cameras. Khan Muhammad displays sample images: double exposures shot with the high-rise *Dolmen Mall* in the background, a woman on a decorated horse, with a woman at the beach. Each type of photograph has a different rate, ranging from 50 to 100 Pakistani



Rupees (PKR). 'If a customer wants a photo with a girl, or a double exposure, it costs more money,' Khan explains. The girl in the photo is picked randomly off the internet by the photographers, though they make sure she looks like a traditional Pakistani girl: wearing the traditional dress (*Shalwar kameez*) with a modest long covering scarf (*dupatta*). There are hardly any Westerners visible in public spaces, after 9/11, but it is very common nowadays to spot a Chinese person. Many Chinese workers have moved to Pakistan for work: related to the development of Chinese-funded projects such as the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) or the Thar Engro Coal

Power Project. Khan added a photo of a Chinese woman in his photo samples to attract customers. He knows how to make people pose in order to fit right in the photographs they desire. However, one photograph per customer doesn't make him good money. Like all the photographers at the beach, he tricks customers by taking multiple photographs of them and then by demanding more money for the prints. In the past, he would use a polaroid camera and make more money, but now he is dependent on the print shops. There are around 20 print shops on wheel carts at the beach that print for these photographers. Khan uses Bashir Ahmed print shop, a boxed



structure on a wheel cart that has place for one person to sit with an old laptop, a printer and displays of photographs on all sides. The number of the owner of the cart is displayed in big letters, which can be used as a WhatsApp number to send or receive photographs for print.

Just across the Clifton neighbourhood, 45-year-old Abdul Rehman wanders around the city in search of customers who want to have photographs taken. He is on the lookout for day labourers who want a glamorous photograph of themselves. His samples include photographs with pristine landscapes, heavy motorbikes, flowers, hearts, and guns. I stumbled upon him while

having a chai at a tea shop in the local area, when he was negotiating with two brothers who work as waiters. One of them asked to be in *shalwar kameez*, the other wanted to be a fighter who holds a gun, while both pose next to a heavy motorbike. The background is a green landscape with a lake. Rehman takes cash in advance and brings the printed photograph to them on the next day. He cannot read or write, but taking advantage of the digital, he points his finger on the desired photo, which also has a number, and takes another photo next to the portraits so that the person who will photoshop and print has the necessary information. In the past, there were photographers who would





wander, mostly at tourist spots or during the Eid celebrations, with their analogue cameras, mobile backdrop, and fake wooden gun. But with the arrival of camera phones, itinerant photographers reduced in numbers, and Abdul Rehman is an exception.

He does it for a living during winter, while during summer he sells ice cream. A 40-minute taxi ride to the suburbs of Karachi, to Karachi District West

that borders the Balochistan province, takes one to Moach Goth, an informal settlement with an Afro-Indian/Pakistani population, the ethnic Sheedi Baloch community. For the last decade, 52-year-old Muhammad Ali Baloch has run the photo studio *Al-Musawir Digital and Modelling Photo Studio* ('*Al-Musawir*' means 'The Artist') in the area, on the crowded dirt road *bazaar*. His usual customers request passport-



sized photographs for bureaucratic purposes. In the past he would have a coat and a tie for customers but now he adds those in Photoshop. A hand-printed picturesque background stays unused in his studio. It consists of a painted river, a hut, trees and a flowerpot. Baloch also offers to photoshop individual portraits into a traditional Baloch family portrait. He combines the individual photographs of each family member, and then he photoshops traditional Baloch dresses on them. It is not often that they wear traditional dress in daily life. The parents of a child who was fasting for the first time during the month of Ramadan brought him to the studio to be photographed. Baloch added a

food table in front of him, a train and a framed montage of the child, all in Photoshop.

Moach Goth provides strong support for the Pakistan People's Party (PPP), founded in 1967 by Zulfikar Ali Bhutto who was later sentenced to death by military dictator General Zia-ul-Haq. His daughter, late Benazir Bhutto, who became the first female Prime Minister of Pakistan, was later assassinated in a suicide attack in 2007, whilst campaigning for the 2008 national elections. Abdul Qayum, the information secretary of PPP's youth wing for the constituency PS-112 Karachi-XXIV in Moach Goth, comes in as a customer and



requests Baloch to take a photograph of him with Shaheed Benazir Bhutto. Baloch quickly photoshops Qayum next to Bhutto with a backdrop of the PPP's flag. He told me that his dream of meeting Bhutto was never fulfilled, so he gets the photograph framed to place it on a wall in his house.

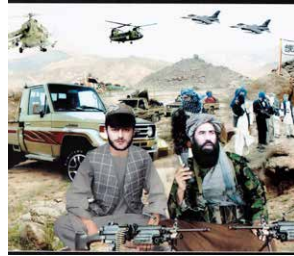
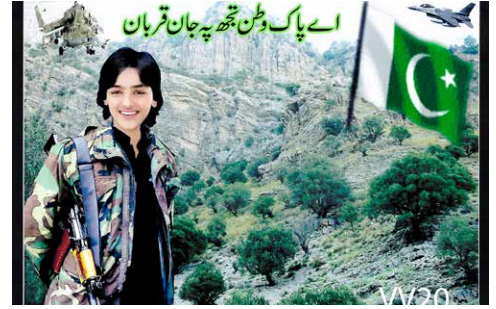
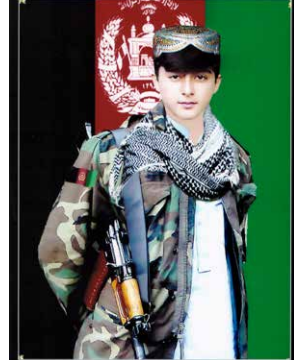
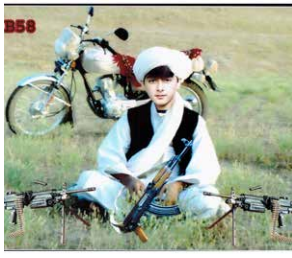
The city of Quetta is located 700 km north-west of Karachi, in the province of Balochistan. Quetta has a population of a million people. The province borders Afghanistan in the west and Iran in the southwest. In the heart of the city, the four-story shopping plaza, Baldia Plaza, was once a hub of photo studios that offered montage-like photographs on its first floor. Out of forty studios,

twelve have survived until now and use digital montage techniques.

32-year-old Mehdi Hassan was a child when his father started *Sajjad Shah Mehdi Hassan Color Photographer*, a small studio in one of the corners of the Baldia Plaza. Mehdi learnt all the analogue techniques from his father as a child, using physical props such as wooden guns, fake flowerpots, and cut-outs of Bollywood film celebrities. Mehdi took over the studio after his father's retirement, and moved to digital quite easily, learning the skill of Adobe Photoshop. He uses a small entry level point-and-shoot camera and all four walls of his shop display photo samples, printed in 5x7 inches,









In the background, there is an image of Asfandyar Wali Khan, who is the current president of the party. An Urdu inscription at the top states '*Watan ya Kafan*', which translates to 'either the country or the coffin'

There is another photo sample with Urdu typography that declares '*Pakistani Fauj, Bakamaal Mard*' ('Pakistan Army - Brilliant Men'). On the left side, a customer can be photoshopped with a suit and tie. On the right side, there is a portrait of Raheel Sharif, the former Chief of Army Staff, from 2013 to 2016. The bottom of the photo is a montage of army tanks, fighter jets and a rocket launching into the sky. In the middle, there is an eagle with Pakistan's flag

printed on it.

Another sample includes a Taliban soldier with a gun and a dead US Soldier lying next to him. The white flags placed in the background state, 'There is no deity but Allah, Muhammad (pbuh) is the messenger of Allah.' (flag of Taliban) The template allows for customers to be photoshopped as a Taliban warrior.

Mehdi says that most of his customers are not native to Quetta city, but are visitors from rural areas, or Afghanistan, or labourers who work in coal mines in Balochistan. All the photo samples in the studios reflect the political outlook of Balochistan. There are portraits of Ahmad Shah Massoud, the guerrilla



commander during the resistance against the Soviet occupation, or of Nawab Akbar Khan Bughti, a Baloch tribal leader who was later in his life involved in the armed struggle for autonomy of Balochistan and was then assassinated -either by General Parvez Musharraf or the current Prime Minister of Pakistan Imran Khan.

Just 2.5 km from Baldia Plaza is the Hazara Graveyard in the Marriabad neighbourhood that is inhabited by Hazaras, a Persian Dari-speaking ethnic group who have been victims of persecution in Afghanistan since the 1840s and who then migrated and settled on the outskirts of Quetta. The majority of Hazaras practice *Shia Islam* and have been victim of terrorist attacks by Islamist militant groups. The Hazara graveyard is a memorial of graves of people who were killed in such targeted attacks. Asef Ali Mohammad is a photographer from this community who has documented the aftermaths of the Hazara genocide with his camera. He gave me a tour of the graveyard, where each grave of a victim has been marked by a portrait photograph. 'The graveyard looks like a photo gallery,' he says, 'where family of the deceased bring out a portrait photograph from the home of a victim and display it on the tombstone.' He told me that most of the photographs are printed on paper that fades due to the harsh sunlight. To deal with this, some people either have photos on ceramic photo tiles,

or, in some cases, they use laser etching that makes the photograph of the martyred permanent. Asef says that the act of changing photographs each time that it fades away is an ongoing protest, a grief the family has to go through as a reminder, and that a permanent method of photographs shows the permanence of the protest and grief.

Next to the grave is a gallery of photos of the deceased, placed on both sides of the walkway. The photos are displayed in iron frames, painted in blue and locked. The key to the lock is kept by the family members who replace the photograph every time that it fades away. The gallery was built organically by individual members of the community who lost their loved ones in terrorist attacks. 'When you are a minority and a victim of terrorism, there is a lot of scrutiny from the government who keep on asking about showing proof and documents of the deceased, and the gallery is like a massive elaborate protest showing that these were the people who became victims,' say Asef. According to Islamic tradition, a photograph of a human or animal is forbidden in places of praying. It was also forbidden to place them on the graves, but Asef says that once the community started protesting, photographs were used as proof. 'The use of photographs became larger than the religious tradition, hence they also ended up on graves.' says



Asef.

He points out that all photographs are of male members of the community. In most cases the victims are men as they are more in public spaces where attacks happen than women. However, there have been incidents where attacks were committed on Hazara women. In June 2013, an attack with an explosive device on a bus carrying female students of Sardar Bahadur Khan Women's University in Quetta killed 14 women from the community. Asef says that the community and families practice *purdah* for women to hide their faces, hence there are no photographs of female victims displayed in public spaces like the graveyard. A panaflex print in memory of the deceased with their photographs and names is displayed at *Chowk Shahuda* (Martyr Chowk) in the neighbourhood. Kaniz Raza was one of the victims of the bomb blast. Her photograph is also displayed at the chowk, but her face is cut out. Asef says that the print was made mostly by the members of the community, and that they removed the face themselves to respect the woman's *purdah*.



Citizens of Photography: the Camera and the Political Imagination



The PhotoDemos project is an empirical anthropological investigation into the relationship between “representation” through everyday images and “representation” through politics.

The PhotoDemos Collective is a group of six researchers.

The names of the researchers and the countries in which they researched are: Naluwembe Binaisa (Nigeria) Vindhya Buthpitiya (Sri Lanka) Konstantinos Kalantzis (Greece) Christopher Pinney (Bangladesh, India, and Nepal)

Ileana L. Selejan (Nicaragua) Sokphea Young (Cambodia)

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More information on <https://citizensofphotography.org>

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