

THE MAKING OF A FALSE CLAIM: THE POLITICAL AND HISTORICAL CONTEXT OF THE *SHAGHALAY* MIANGUL IN SWAT

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Abstract

The present research examines the intriguing and politically charged episode of the emergence of the so-called Shaghalay Miangul' or 'False Miangul' in initial years of Swat State. The study aims to explore the historical circumstances that gave rise to this figure, the motives and strategies of the key individuals who supported or opposed him, and the broader socio-political dynamics that his appearance set in motion. Central to this inquiry is an analysis of the roles played by Sayyid Abdul Jabbar Shah and the Nawab of Dir, both of whom sought to exploit the pretender's claim to the Miangul lineage for their respective political ambitions. Drawing upon primary archival material and later secondary sources, this research reconstructs the sequence of events surrounding the episode and situates it within the wider historical context of inter-tribal rivalry and shifting leadership. Ultimately, this work contributes to a deeper understanding of Swat's early twentieth-century political landscape and its complex patterns of legitimacy, power, and manipulation.

Keywords: *Shaghalay*, Mianguls, Miangul Abdul Wadud, Abdul Jabbar Shah, False, Pseudo, Swat.

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Introduction

Research on the princely states of the Indian Subcontinent embraces a wide range of themes and perspectives. The princely states, varying greatly in size, governance, culture, and historical experience, represent a complex and multifaceted field of study (Bangash 2015: 13). Scholars are required to examine them through political, social, cultural, and economic lenses and also their colonial interaction and post-colonial transformation (Bangash 2015: 14). Given this diversity, it is evident that the princely states cannot be understood through a single interpretive framework. Each state possessed its own internal dynamics, leadership traditions, and patterns of engagement with British paramountcy. As such, to cover every dimension of their histories, ranging from the intricacies of court politics to the lived experiences of common people, would be an enormous undertaking. No single researcher or study can claim to address all aspects of these entities. Instead, scholarship must necessarily be selective and thematic, focusing on representative cases, particular periods, or specific issues. The richness and diversity of the princely states thus continue to invite new research and reinterpretation, ensuring that the study of these polities remains a dynamic and evolving field within South Asian historiography.

In the case of the former princely State of Swat, which existed as a semi-autonomous political entity from 1915 to 1969,

the historical developments have attracted the persistent interest of historians and scholars. At the same time, a number of significant episodes in the history of Swat State remain obscure or inadequately explored. This obscurity results from the scarcity of contemporary records, the absence of systematic documentation, or the limited preservation of archives from the period when such events actually occurred. Consequently, a number of interesting aspects of Swat State's still lie in darkness, awaiting critical examination and the discovery of new sources that may illuminate them further. In this context, the emergence of a 'False Miangul', a figure who claimed to be of the ruling family of Swat and subsequent disappearance from the historical scene, constitutes an intriguing but underexplored incident. Together, these events highlight the pressing need for further investigation, supported by primary and secondary sources, to develop a clearer and more nuanced understanding of Swat's historical landscape.

Tracing the Origin and Usage of the Name *Shaghalay* Miangul or False Miangul

The individual historically referred to as the 'False Miangul' and 'Pseudo Miangul' (in English) was in fact Amir Mohammad, also written as Amir Mohd in contemporary British sources (Hay 1934: 5). Amir Mohammad claimed to belong to

the Miangul family¹, the ruling family of Swat State from 1917 to 1969, the founder of which was formally recognized with the title of Wali by the then British Empire.² The Pashtu term ‘Shaghalai Miangul’ or ‘Shaghalay Miangul’ (**Pashtu: شغالی/شغالی**) which roughly translates to ‘the pretender Miangul’, ‘Pseudo Miangul’ or ‘the False Miangul’ was employed by the Mianguls to distinguish him from the legitimate descendants of Akhund of Swat.³ Over time, the Pashtu name gained wider circulation among the general populace and entered in both oral and written accounts of the period. British archival sources and later historical writings, translated ‘Shaghalay Miangul’ into English as the ‘False Miangul’ (Barth 1985: 185).

The claim of the so-called False Miangul and his mother to be associated with the ruling Miangul family of Swat constitutes a significant episode in the broader context of legitimacy and contested succession within the State’s early twentieth-century history. Both mother and son sought to

¹ The descendants of the Akhund of Swat are referred to as Mianguls in English and Miangulan in Pashto.

² In 1926, when Miangul Abdul Wadud was formally recognized by the British as the ruler of Swat State, the official title ‘Wali’ was introduced. The same title was subsequently adopted by his son, who ruled from 1949 to 1969.

³ The Mianguls of Swat trace their ancestry to Akhund Abdul Ghafur, popularly known by various names such as the Akhund of Swat, Saidu Baba, Akhund Sahib, Sahib-i-Swat, Swat Sahib, Pope of Swat, and Swat Babaji. For details, see Jalal Uddin, Abdul Basit Mujahid, and Kausar Parveen, “Langar of Akhund of Swat: Assessment of its Different Facets,” *Journal of Asian Civilizations*, Vol. 47, No. 1 (June 2024), Taxila Institute of Asian Civilizations, Quaid-i-Azam University, Islamabad, 53.

establish a genealogical link to the senior branch of the Miangul lineage, and allegedly descended from the Akhund of Swat. In this regard, Miangul Abdul Haq Jahanzeb, the last Wali of Swat provides a key account of the background to this claim in his autobiography, which sheds light on the origins of the dispute. He writes:

“The story behind this was as follows. Whereas my grandfather married only one wife, his brother, the senior Miangul [Miangul Abdul Hanan], married several: the mother of Said Badshah of Sayyid family from Bara Bande in Nikpi Khel; the one of Khushwakht family who was mother of Amir Badshah; and a third wife, the daughter of a local person. That makes three – but he also kept another woman, a concubine whom he did not marry. But after he died, there was a child produced by this woman – several years later. Yet she claimed that she had this son by him, the senior Miangul” (Barth, 30-31).

This narrative provides an interpretive framework through which the origins of the False Miangul’s claim can be traced out. According to Miangul Jahanzeb’s account, the woman, whose name remains unrecorded in available sources, was not legally married to the senior Miangul,⁴ yet later asserted that she had borne him a son posthumously (Barth 1985: 185).

⁴ The term ‘Senior Miangul’ (Pashto: Mashar Miangul) was used for Miangul Abdul Hanan, one of the sons of the Akhund of Swat. As he was the elder brother of Miangul Abdul Khaliq, the Pashto term mashar (meaning elder) was applied to him, which was later rendered in English sources as Senior Miangul.

Apart from the local traditions, the British archival sources provide valuable insight and serve as the earliest verifiable documentary evidence regarding this episode. One of the earliest reference about this event is recorded in official North-West Frontier Provincial Diary in November 1915, marking the initial recognition of the phenomenon by British administrators observing the region. This archival document reports that “a new complication is said to have been introduced into the quarrel by the appearance with the ‘King’ [Sayyid Abdul Jabbar Shah] of a youth who claims to be the son of Said Badshah, son of the Akhund of Swat who was murdered by his nephew Gul Shahzada [Miangul Abdul Wadud] some years ago” (North West Frontier Provincial Diary for the week ending the 20th November 1915). This Confidential Diary further adds that “at the time of the death of Said Badshah there were stories of a son of his being in existence, and they have cropped up occasionally since, but this is the first time that anyone has actually appeared in Swat to claim his rights” (North West Frontier Provincial Diary for the week ending the 20th November 1915). This extract is of great importance, as it represents the first documented instance of an individual publicly asserting descent from the Miangul family and attempting to establish a legitimate claim to his rights within the family. However, an important point to note here is the discrepancy in the identification of the so-

called False Miangul as recorded in different historical sources. The Confidential Diary refers to the claimant as the son of Said Badshah, whereas other sources, discussed afterwards in this article, identify him instead as the son of Miangul Abdul Hanan and not Said Badshah. This inconsistency is significant to be highlighted here because it reflects the ambiguity that surrounded the identity of the False Miangul from the outset.

Further confirmation regarding the identity and background of the False Miangul is found in the work of W.R.Hay, the former Political Agent for Dir, Swat and Chitral Political Agency during 1930s.⁵ According to Hay's account, the claimant identified as Amir Mohammad was a rival Miangul who claimed to be a son of Miangul Abdul Hanan and had been the son of a low-class woman who was Abdul Hanan's concubine, and was said to have been born of another father four years after Abdul Hanan's death" (Hay 1934: 5). Hay's testimony not only dismisses the legitimacy of Amir Mohammad's claim but also provides details that directly contradict his claimed genealogy. This account also indicates that the claimant's mother was of non-elite social status and that the alleged birth occurred several years after the death of Miangul Abdul Hanan, rendering the

⁵ It is worth mentioning that W. R. Hay's work, 'Monograph on Swat State', as noted in its Preface, was developed from official files available in the office of the Political Agent, Malakand, and was further informed by a series of conversations with the Wali himself. See Fredrik Barth, *The Last Wali of Swat* (1985), 90.

claim genealogically impossible. The emphasis on the mother's low social background and the implausibility of the birth timing serves to delegitimize the claimant.

Further valuable evidence concerning the background of the so-called False Miangul is provided by Abdul Ghafur Qasmi in his work published in 1940, which is among the earliest known written accounts dealing with the ruling era of Miangul Abdul Wadud. Qasmi's observations are also noteworthy because they were recorded relatively close to the events in question and thus preserve a near-contemporary reflection of the political and social perceptions prevailing in Swat during the formative phase of Miangul Abdul Wadud's rule. In his account, Qasmi sheds light on the background of the claimant by asserting that "He [Sayyid Abdul Jabbar Shah] even gave a barber's son the name of Mian Gul and made him stand by his side" (Qasmi 1940: 25). His description that the claimant was 'a barber's son' highlights the social implausibility of the genealogical claim. It reinforces the notion, also supported by British administrative reports, that the False Miangul did not belong to the Miangul family by birth, but rather that his assumed identity was politically constructed. Abdul Ghafur Qasmi's account, when read alongside British written sources and Miangul Jahanzeb's later autobiography, helps to triangulate the historical authenticity of the episode and situates the emergence of the False Miangul within a broader contest over authority, sanctity, and the right to rule in Swat.

The State of Political Affairs in Swat at the Time of the False Miangul's Emergence

It is essential to contextualize the political background of Swat at the time of the appearance of the so-called False Miangul. The early years after Swat State formation marked a formative phase in its political evolution, characterized by shifting alliances, emerging leadership claims, and competing visions for the governance of the nascent state. Sayyid Abdul Jabbar Shah's rise to power in 1915 followed a series of local power negotiations among tribal elders and religious figures, reflecting the fragile and contested nature of political authority in Swat at the time. Understanding this political background is therefore indispensable for assessing the motives, support networks, and broader implications surrounding the appearance and subsequent elimination of the False Miangul from the historical scene.

In the mid of November 1915, Sayyid Abdul Jabbar Shah and his close ally, the Sandakai Baba were "endeavoring to effect the complete supersession of the Mianguls", for they saw that the two brothers were "the one great obstacle to the complete subjection of Swat" (North West Frontier Provincial Diary for the week ending the 13th November 1915). Both these figures perceived that as long as the Miangul brothers retained their spiritual influence and the allegiance of significant tribal sections, the project of establishing an undisputed kingship in Swat could

not be realized (NWF Provincial Diary for the week ending the 13th November 1915). The attempts of Sayyid Abdul Jabbar Shah and the Sandakai Baba to neutralize the Mianguls must therefore be viewed within the broader contest between emerging centralized leadership and traditional religious influence that defined Swat's political landscape during that formative period. In such backdrop and prevailing circumstances, the episode of the so-called 'False Miangul' surfaced. The North-West Frontier Provincial Diary ending on 20th November 1915 thus stated about the "new complication" that was "introduced into the quarrel" between Abdul Jabbar Shah and the Mianguls. The "appearance with the 'King' of a youth who claims [claimed] to be the son of Said Badshah, son of the Akhund of Swat" was a strategy initiated by Abdul Jabbar Shah (North West Frontier Provincial Diary for the week ending the 20th November 1915). In this context, the term 'King' clearly referred to Sayyid Abdul Jabbar Shah, who at that juncture was endeavoring to consolidate his authority in Swat. The introduction of the alleged claimant, later identified as the False Miangul, was a deliberate political maneuver orchestrated by Abdul Jabbar Shah to destabilize the influence of Mianguls. The rumours about the existence of such a boy had circulated since 1912 and surfaced occasionally thereafter (Rome 2009: 82). However, this was the first instance in which an individual actually appeared in Swat to assert that

claim, now actively supported and promoted by Abdul Jabbar Shah.

Abdul Ghafur Qasmi provides further corroboration of Sayyid Abdul Jabbar Shah's manipulative role in the emergence of the so-called False Miangul. According to Qasmi, "He [Abdul Jabbar Shah] even gave a barber's son the name of Mian Gul and made him stand by his side" (Qasmi 1940: 25). The account reinforces the deliberate nature of Abdul Jabbar Shah's political maneuvering and using of religious symbolism and popular sentiment for political ends. Interestingly, when the rule of Abdul Jabbar Shah in Swat came to an end in September 1917, the Pseudo Miangul continued to remain associated with him for some length of time. W.R.Hay while commenting on the fall of the Sayyid states that "the Swatis were growing impatient with the lack of success of their King," a sentiment that was intensified by his failure to demonstrate effective leadership in military affairs. He had "proved himself far from a success as a leader in the field" and was unable to organize "anything in the nature of a standing army," a prerequisite for decisively expelling the Nawab's forces from Swat (Hay 1934: 6). Furthermore, doubts concerning his religious orthodoxy and the rumors surrounding his personal beliefs also "began to make him unpopular" (Hay 1934: 6). These internal weaknesses were compounded by the political activities of the Miangul brothers, who were actively working to weaken his authority and regain

their influence. In light of these circumstances, the tribal leaders, having promised to accept Miangul Abdul Wadud's leadership, formally demanded the Sayyid to leave Swat. Consequently, he was escorted out of the country on 4th September 1917. Notably, the False Miangul accompanied him during this withdrawal. However, shortly thereafter, the Pseudo Miangul went to Adinzai and settled in Dir (Hay 1934: 6).

The political role of the Nawab of Dir in the later phase of the False Miangul's career further reveals the intricate web of regional rivalries and power struggles that characterized Swat State and its neighboring princely entities. After the expulsion of Abdul Jabbar Shah from Swat, though the Pseudo Miangul initially accompanied him but subsequently withdrew to Dir State. It was during this period, following the consolidation of power by Miangul Abdul Wadud as ruler of Swat State, that *Shaghalay* Miangul's presence was once again exploited for political purposes. The sources indicate that after his retreat to Adinzai, the Pseudo Miangul became a tool in the hands of the Nawab of Dir, who harbored deep hostility toward Miangul Abdul Wadud. The Nawab's strategy appears to have been to use Amir Muhammad's fabricated claim to the lineage of the Akhund of Swat as a means of undermining the political authority and weakening the influence of his rival. The Nawab's involvement in perpetuating the false claim underscores the extent to which external actors interfered in Swat's internal affairs, viewing its

leadership disputes as opportunities to extend their own sphere of influence. As sources record, Amir Muhammad “was used by the Nawab of Dir to annoy the Miangul until he was murdered” (Hay 1934: 6).

The last Wali offers an insightful and authoritative internal perspective on the emergence and manipulation of the False Miangul episode as well. His account not only attributes the initial fabrication of the claim to Abdul Jabbar Shah but also highlights the subsequent exploitation of the situation by the Nawab of Dir for his own political ends. According to him, in order “to reduce our position further in my father’s absence,⁶ Abdul Jabbar Shah also supported a rival to our property, the Shaghalai Miangul or ‘False Miangul,’ and he brought this man out into the open, and supported his claim to his share in the property” (Barth 1985: 31). His words indicate that the entire scheme was part of a deliberate political strategy employed by the Sayyid. Despite these efforts, as Miangul Jahanzeb notes, “Nobody took much notice and it made no difference” (Barth 1985: 31). The lack of public support for the False Miangul

⁶ The absence from Swat refers to the exile of Mianguls to Dir State. In November 1915, Sayyid Abdul Jabbar Shah was successful in driving out the two Mianguls out of Swat. for details see North West Frontier Provincial Diary for the week ending the 27th November 1915, File No 47-55, (Confidential Diaries), Bundle No. 4, 1912-1918, List No.1, Deputy Commissioner Peshawar File, Directorate of Archives. During exile, the Miangul brothers and their families settled on their lands at Dalbar area. See also Akbar S. Ahmad, *Millennium*, 116.

demonstrates that the local population remained largely loyal to the legitimate Miangul line. However, the pretender's story did not end there. When the Miangul brothers returned from exile from Dir State, the Pseudo Miangul was allowed by the Nawab, to settle on the lands of Mianguls in Adinzai area of Dir State. This was a calculated political gesture by the Nawab aimed at troubling and irritating the Mianguls. This firsthand account elucidates two critical dimensions of the episode: first, the initiation of the False Miangul scheme by Sayyid Abdul Jabbar Shah as a means to weaken the Miangul family's standing and second, the subsequent manipulation of the same pretender by the Nawab of Dir, who transformed him into a tool of political provocation against Miangul Abdul Wadud.

The Final Phase of the False Miangul Episode: Decline, Displacement and Death

The three principal accounts, those of W. R. Hay, Abdul Ghafur Qasmi, and Miangul Jahanzeb, collectively provide important evidence not only regarding the origins and nature of the False Miangul's claim but also concerning the circumstances surrounding his eventual death and the persistence of his family's assertions thereafter. Together, these narratives offer a multifaceted understanding of how the episode evolved from a local dispute over legitimacy into a politically sensitive matter that extended beyond the lifetime of the original claimant. In this regard, W. R. Hay provides one of the most contemporaneous

accounts of the measures undertaken by Miangul Abdul Wadud to bring an end to the protracted episode of the so-called False Miangul. His writings offer valuable insight into the political maneuvers and covert strategies that characterized early state formation of Swat. According to Hay, the False Miangul remained an active source of contention for several years following his initial emergence. Despite Miangul Abdul Wadud's increasing consolidation of power, the claimant continued to attract sporadic attention and was at times exploited by rival actors seeking to undermine his growing influence. Thus "an attempt was made to poison him in 1916, and after Gul Shahzada's [Miangul Abdul Wadud] rise to power he retired to Adinzai where he was used by the Nawab of Dir to annoy the Miangul until he was murdered, probably at the Miangul's instigation in 1925" (Hay, 1934: 5). This account provides a sequential detail, suggesting that efforts to eliminate the False Miangul began as early as 1916, only a year after his claims were first recorded. The alleged poisoning attempt marks an early indication of Miangul Abdul Wadud's determination to neutralize potential threats to his nascent authority. Ultimately, the False Miangul was murdered in 1925 and the matter was resolved through his eventual elimination. Abdul Ghafur Qasmi, writing in 1939, provides a brief yet significant reference to the fate of False Miangul as well. His account, though concise, confirms that the episode culminated in the claimant's death. Qasmi states

succinctly that, “afterwards the pretender, commonly known as Shaghli Mian Gul [Shaghalay Miangul] was executed” (Qasmi 1940: 25). His remark is particularly noteworthy because it represents one of the earliest indigenous written acknowledgements of the claimant’s death. However, Qasmi’s account is strikingly brief as he provides neither contextual explanation nor specific details regarding the manner or circumstances of the execution.

According to the last Wali of Swat, the episode did not conclude with the mere discrediting of the False Miangul during the reign of his father, Miangul Abdul Wadud, but rather continued to resurface intermittently, even after the political landscape of Swat underwent a fundamental transformation with the merger of the State into Pakistan in 1969. The Wali provides a revealing account of how his father ultimately dealt with the claimant. He recalls that his “father gave money to someone, and had him eliminated” and “his children are still there, and even now, after merger, they again claimed that their father was a Miangul and their grandfather was Abdul Hanan. But the government took no notice of it” (Barth 1985: 30-31). Wali Sahib statement also offers profound insight into the methods of political consolidation employed during his father’s formative rule. It suggests that the False Miangul, having posed a continuing threat to the legitimacy of the Miangul family, was physically eliminated. Furthermore, Miangul Jahanzeb’s

admission that the claimant's descendants continued to assert their lineage claims even after the merger of Swat with Pakistan demonstrates the enduring potency of genealogical identity in local consciousness and the symbolic power attached to the name 'Miangul and the title of 'Wali'.

Conclusion

The episode of the so-called 'False Miangul', locally remembered as the *Shaghalay* Miangul, stands as one of the most politically symbolic and instructive episodes in the first quarter of twentieth-century history of Swat. The very term 'Shaghalay', meaning fabricated or false in the local vernacular, emerged as a label of distinction to separate this pretender from the authentic descendants of the revered Akhund of Swat. His claim to belong to the Miangul lineage was constructed and publicly advanced to undermine the hereditary legitimacy of the true Miangul family, particularly Miangul Abdul Wadud, who was then beginning to consolidate his influence over the State. The origins of this episode trace back to around 1915, when Sayyid Abdul Jabbar Shah, seeking to strengthen his fragile rule, deliberately brought forward a young man as the son of Miangul Abdul Hanan and thus one of the legitimate heir of the Akhund of Swat. Abdul Jabbar Shah's strategic intention was to weaken the Miangul brothers by confusing the population with a rival claimant who could symbolically contest their right to leadership. By 1917, as Abdul Jabbar Shah's authority collapsed, the *Shaghalay* Miangul

accompanied him into exile. Shortly thereafter, he reappeared in Adinzai, within the territory of the Nawab of Dir. There, his false claim found new political utility: the Nawab, a known adversary of Miangul Abdul Wadud, used him as a pawn to disturb the Miangul family's growing influence. In a calculated move, the Nawab even settled him on lands that belonged to the Miangul family, turning his very presence into a source of political provocation and harassment. As Miangul Abdul Wadud's position strengthened upon his return from exile and his consolidation of power in the subsequent years, efforts were made to neutralize this lingering threat. The *Shaghalay* Miangul whose influence had by then dwindled and whose claim was widely discredited, was eventually removed from the political scene. In retrospect, the rise and fall of the *Shaghalay* Miangul reveal much about the nature of politics in the frontier principalities of the period. His existence was not born of genuine descent but of political necessity, a constructed figure molded by rival ambitions. From his initial creation by Sayyid Abdul Jabbar Shah to his later exploitation by the Nawab of Dir, his life exemplified the manipulation of Miangul lineage as a tool of power. It demonstrated that while political actors could temporarily manufacture claims and exploit religious sentiment, such fabrications could not withstand the strength of genuine leadership rooted in history and popular confidence.

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