

AFGHANISTAN IN THE CLASSROOM

by Audrey Shalinsky



Afghanistan, a beleaguered nation of many different ethnic groups, has been the central focus of our war on terrorism, although it is worth noting that none of the September 11th hijackers were actually from Afghanistan. Teachers and students have many questions. Why has Afghanistan been a country filled with conflict and warfare for so many years? How do the various ethnic groups differentiate themselves? What do they have in common? How difficult will it be for these different ethnic groups to become a modern nation?

My own research in Afghanistan began the summer of 1975, when Afghanistan was not a central player on the world stage. It was difficult to explain then why I was interested in Afghanistan. Most Americans did not know where the country was. I became interested in the area because of the Soviet Union's control of Central Asia at that time. I wanted to know how Uzbeks and Tajiks were changing under these circumstances. I was interested in how the different ethnic groups cooperated and competed and how families worked.

At that time, U.S. citizens could not do intensive anthropological field research in the Soviet Union. My professor suggested I research the same peoples but on the Afghanistan side of the border. I arranged to live with a family in Kunduz, in a neighborhood dominated by Central Asian ethnic groups. I gained enough rapport with the people that I was able to see the neighborhoods, their family life, and their experiences from the inside. I attended weddings, picnics, *buzkashi* (a male sporting event in which teams on

horseback battled over an animal carcass), and intimate family meals. The family I lived with took care of me in sickness and in health, clothed me appropriately, included me in family activities, allowed me to write constantly, and asked me questions about the United States. Overall, my fieldwork provided the personal transformative experience that cultural anthropologists traditionally have sought as a "rite of passage" into the discipline.

Recent History

Afghanistan received public attention in the world news in 1978 when a governmental change took place that eventually led to the Soviet invasion, long lasting civil war, millions of refugees, and the Taliban government that became a symbol for harboring evil especially after the horrific events of September 11th.

During the 1950s and 1960s, Afghanistan was officially neutral, but it became an arena for competition between the Soviet Union and the United States during the Cold War. Development projects and modernization, funded by both sides, proceeded at a rapid pace in Afghanistan, creating more educational opportunities as well as economic transformations. Many people in Afghanistan became increasingly concerned about the future of their country. By the mid-1960s, new political parties had emerged alongside the ruling monarchy, offering multiple and differing agendas for the future. Among these parties were some who sought to transform their society along Soviet lines, and others who wished their society to be governed by the laws

and structures found in the Qur'an, Islam's holy book. In 1978, some of the parties who favored a Soviet style of government staged a coup d'etat, overthrowing Daud, who was both President and Prime Minister and a cousin of the former king. Daud himself had disestablished the monarchy in 1973. Even as these people



initiated a series of programs to change the traditional society in Afghanistan, they were opposed by their old enemies, the people who sought to create an Islamic state.

The Soviet Union invaded Afghanistan in 1979 to support their allies who at that time controlled the government. However, more and more people in Afghanistan joined in fighting the invading Soviet forces until the entire country was engulfed in civil war. The Soviet Union withdrew its forces in 1988, but civil war continued. In 1992 those groups who had fought the Soviet-style agenda of the government gained partial control. Chaos and turmoil, however, continued in many regions as local factions tried to retain autonomy. In 1996 the Taliban took power, promising to restore order and stability to Afghanistan, as well as to create an Islamic state.

Hence, within a year after I came back from my fieldwork in 1977, major change in the Afghan government had taken place. As a consequence, I had to cut off correspondence with my consultants (informants) in Afghanistan. I was able to get back in touch with the family with whom I had lived when they arrived in Pakistan in 1984. I decided to go to Pakistan in 1990 to see the profound changes that had taken place in these people's lives. They were people very much in transition, living in overcrowded and alien conditions, primarily in Karachi, Pakistan. Since these were for the most part urbanized middle-class people, they had been able to leave Afghanistan with some funds. After they crossed the border, they usually did not go to the camps where refugees received aid from international agencies. Some of the men were able to move back across the border into Afghanistan and join in the fighting against the Soviet Union and the Soviet dominated Afghan government. Other people simply waited and tried to migrate to other countries.

Afghanistan thus is a country that for over twenty years has not known peace, a place where people have in many ways lost any sense of normalcy. A U.S. government report on humanitarian emergencies in 1996 listed four million Afghans (about 20% of the population) at risk for

not having basic necessities of life, such as food and water. The report listed extensive land mines as a major problem and assessed the health care system as poor, non-existent in many areas, and marginal in Kabul, the capital. The infant mortality rate was 153 out of every 1000 babies born, perhaps the highest in the world.

Anthropologists and Afghanistan

I have taught the Middle East and Central Asia for over 20 years to students who come primarily from a mountainous Western state, far removed from the rugged mountains of Afghanistan. There are about a dozen academically trained anthropologists in the United States who have worked in Afghanistan, most of them conducting fieldwork in the late 1960s during the Monarchy or in the 1970s. One colleague worked in Afghanistan during the period after the Soviet invasion, and another worked with refugees in Pakistan in the 1990s much as I did in 1990 as a follow-up to my original study. Although many studied nomads, some did not. Our fieldwork pattern was traditional: the lone researcher living with and studying his/her ethnic-geographical group. Although most of us returned to the U.S.A. to teach in universities, one taught at a prep school, one worked in the foreign service in Pakistan, and one is a political activist. Two have Afghan nationality or background. Three are women.

Some of these anthropologists who have given recent public talks have told me they try to distinguish between the Taliban's policies and the Islamic or Afghan tradition. One commented, "Obviously, human rights violations, especially those involving women and opponents of the Taliban government, require great attention and response. At the same time, I have argued against those who try to equate the Taliban's policies and activities with 'fundamentalist Islam' or 'Afghan traditionalism'."

Anthropologists who have worked in Afghanistan want to place cultural behavior, political leadership, ethnicity, the position of women, and religious ideology within a broader historical and political context, setting Afghanistan in the context of its Middle Eastern and Central Asian neighbors.

The sections below are designed to help teachers and students discuss issues, but they also reflect the way anthropologists approach these topics.

Women and Veiling

The Taliban are notorious for the oppression of women. Veiling itself, however, and modest dress generally are not unique to the Taliban. Modest dress is not even unique to Muslim societies, and the Taliban did not invent veiling in Afghanistan. The style of veil I was given by “my family” to wear in 1976 was in common use in Afghanistan then and is the same as shown on TV today. It is referred to as

the *bourkha*. We called it *chadri* in Afghan Persian and *piranji* in Uzbek. Both words usually are translated into the English word, “veil.” The veil was worn long before the Taliban came into power.

Modest dress in Muslim countries varies by group, class, and region as does the extent to which women go into the public arena. On a trip to Jordan in the 1980s, I observed women at universities wearing modest dress and covering their heads. Students mentioned not having to worry about appearance and the importance of being judged for their ideas. In some cases, modest dress is a form of political resistance to western domination. Fadwa E. Guindi, former president of the Middle East section of the American Anthropological Association, highlighted the complexity of veiling when interviewed by the *Chronicle of Higher Education* (January 28, 2000) about her recent book, *Veil: Modesty, Privacy, Resistance*:

Q: “You say that Western observers sometimes suffer from hysteria when they see a woman in a veil. What’s to get upset about?”

A: “The veil immediately conjures up submissiveness, backwardness, invisibility, seclusion, harem, even sexual orgies—which is a contradiction in a way. Whenever there is a political crisis, the veil takes precedence in the [Western media’s] thinking. So, with the Taliban, right away, the media says: ‘The women are oppressed, they are being

asked to veil.’ This is what I mean by hysteria. It’s not rational. It happened also in the Gulf War.... The veil is the theater of resistance. When the Taliban, for instance, are trying to consolidate themselves, they insist that the women veil. Well, they already were veiling. But what the Taliban is trying to do is to establish their own power over the women”

The point is not the veil, but the social and political context surrounding it. Afghan women vary in their experience with veiling depending on region, ethnic group, and social class. They undoubtedly vary in their opinions about veiling. Whether veiled or in other forms of modest dress, or in styles more familiar to the West, women are concerned with participation in education, health care for themselves and their children, and the future of their society.

In some places in the Muslim world, women have donned modest dress to facilitate their involvement in these issues. In Kunduz, Afghanistan, in the 1970s, when I would accompany women, they would put on the same enveloping veils we have seen in the news recently and go to the government health clinic to make sure their children received inoculations. In fact, the government encouraged participation by the women in this program by providing them with a free bag of wheat. Girls from the ethnic group I studied were attending high school wearing modest school uniforms and headscarves. The uniform and scarf ensured their ability to attend school. The Taliban, on the other hand, sought to eliminate the complexity of veiling and required all women to be completely covered from head to toe. They also severely restricted Afghan women from participating in their society, preventing them from working and attending school, for instance. Another way to think of this is by looking at choice or what social scientists call “agency.” The Taliban apparently attempted to prevent or control the exercise of women’s agency and, in many respects, men’s too. The focus of our attention should not be on veiling per se, but on Afghan women’s participation in their society.



Ethnicity

Afghanistan is a country containing many different ethnic groups. In fact, one of the challenges for the government in the 20th century and even today is dealing with these groups who often spread across national boundaries with people more loyal to their co-ethnics in other countries than they are to the nation-state or their fellow citizens. By population, the most significant ethnic group is the Pashtuns. The Pashtuns are found in southern and eastern Afghanistan primarily and cross the border region into Pakistan. In historical literature on Pakistan, they are called Pathans. The former king of Afghanistan, Zahir Shah, who lives in Italy, is a Pashtun. So are most of the Taliban, especially the leadership. The Pashtun historically have always been the largest ethnic group in Afghanistan and the politically and economically most powerful. No other ethnic group has been able to sustain political leadership in the country. However, the Pashtuns are divided into many lineages or subgroups who do not always get along or agree with one another. This complicates the post-Taliban governmental situation considerably.

Taliban is not the name of an ethnic group. It actually comes from Arabic, meaning "to seek." It also refers to "students" in Persian and related languages and refers to those men who were trained in all-male religious schools. Their origin within Afghanistan is primarily in the south around Kandahar. *Al Qaida* ("the base" in Arabic) refers to a network of cells that owe loyalty to the charismatic leader, Osama bin Ladin. Generally these are not people from Afghanistan. They are trans-nationals who come from all over the Muslim world to train in Afghanistan and then return to their native regions with new ideologies and strategies. Their origins range from Egypt to Chechnya to the Philippines.

The Northern Alliance is partly the remnant of the resistance forces that fought the Soviet Union and controlled the government of Afghanistan from 1992–96. Many people in the Northern Alliance are from the northern part of Afghanistan and ethnically are Tajiks and Uzbeks. Tajiks and Uzbeks are Central Asian peoples. Tajik is a language closely



Photo shows veiling well before the Taliban

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related to Persian, the language of Iran. Uzbek is a language related to Turkish. The Pashtuns, Tajiks and Uzbeks are all Sunni Muslims; that is, they practice the predominant type of Islam.

There are many other ethnic groups in Afghanistan. An important group in Central Afghanistan are the Hazaras, who are primarily Shia Muslims. Shiism or Shia Islam is the type of Islam practiced in Iran and found in significant minorities elsewhere. It is important to know about the Hazaras when one wants to understand media speculation about the possibility that Iran will seek to undermine the interim Afghan government.

Conclusion

People in the United States now know where Afghanistan is. The people I knew in Kunduz, Afghanistan do not live there anymore and most have not been there since the 1980s. What I observed in the 1970s has been gone for many years. The family I stayed with there now lives in the Washington, D.C. area. Those who were children then have their own children now. Some in the community I studied are scattered from Saudi Arabia to Uzbekistan. Perhaps one of the most important lessons we can learn about Afghanistan is that although its history and society are rich and complex, it is not a distant or a remote place. No place is in the world as we know it today.

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