

## REDISCOVERING THE FILM SERIES *FACES OF CHANGE:* *AFGHANISTAN*

by Jennifer Lacroix



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I recently screened *Kabul Transit* (2006), a new film created by David Edwards and team, at Williams College. The film, utilizing unique editing choices, portrays contemporary Afghanistan – Kabul, in particular. The film showcases children running with cigarette lighters and tours a Canadian army base (complete with video games, color television, cable channels, and a make-shift “store” where soldiers can buy power bars, chips, and souvenirs to take back home to the family). This is quite the juxtaposition to the Afghanistan that Norman Miller brought to life in the classic *Faces of Change* film series of the early 1970s.

The *Faces of Change* series was originally created with funding from the National Science Foundation to showcase five different “cultures” or countries at five different altitudes. The selected countries for this interdisciplinary project were Bolivia, Kenya, Afghanistan, Taiwan, and the Soko Islands off the China Coast. The objective of each of the film crews was to study five identical themes – rural society, education/socialization, the rural economy, the role of women, and political/religious beliefs – in each of the aforementioned five geographic locations. Norman Miller, now a retired professor from Dartmouth College, oversaw the original production and direction of the series. Wheelock Educational Resources, of Hanover, New Hampshire, distributed the films. Film Essays and User Guides were also created to accompany each of the films. These educational resources proved helpful for K-16 teachers who chose to use the films in their classrooms.

Although all five of the series of films are clearly valuable and an excellent tool for replicating the field experience for students who might not otherwise get to “see” some of these areas of the world, there is one series that stands out – Afghanistan.

Until September 11, 2001, the country of Afghanistan, vertically sandwiched between Iran (to its West) and Pakistan (to its East), sitting below Turkmenistan,

Uzbekistan, and Tajikistan, and barely stretching a shoulder to touch a tip of China, was probably more known for its textiles (the Afghan blanket) than anything else... except, maybe, poppy fields. Then Afghanistan was broadcast on every media network across the United States and beyond, suddenly front and center news.

Ethnographic documentary films are an informative way to explore both physical and socially constructed concepts of culture. The ethnographic research in the *Faces of Change: Afghanistan* series was conducted by Louis and Nancy Dupree, an American team of anthropologists who had formerly taught at Duke University. By illustrating the complex relationships between Afghan individuals and their society, the Duprees examined the social construction of identity and the multiplicity of experiences individuals navigate in various social landscapes. Harvard educated Louis Dupree (deceased), the lead anthropologist for this particular film series, first visited Afghanistan in 1949 and again in 1950-51, where he gained access to an area of Northern Afghanistan called Aq Kupruk. He was approximately 320 miles northwest of Kabul. This is the area where most of *Faces of Change: Afghanistan* takes place.



The five-part film series visually demonstrates what life in the early 1970s was like in this particular region of Afghanistan. Most of the films are observational in style, at times involving only some sub-titles so as to create a more authentic experience for viewers. The filmmakers, David Hancock and Herbert DiGioia, no doubt made a lot of these decisions as co-directors in charge of both camera and sound respectively. Both Hancock and DiGioia are well known in the field of visual anthropology for their contribution towards early observational cinematic style. For more information on the filmmakers, see the Spring 2006 article by Anna Grimshaw in *Visual Anthropology Review* (Vol. 22, Issue 1, pp. 34-45).

#### USING THE FACES OF CHANGE SERIES IN TODAY'S CLASSROOM

The entire *Faces of Change* series is available through Documentary Educational Resources ([www.der.org](http://www.der.org)). The following are some examples of lesson plan objectives and questions relating to the Afghan series.

#### Lesson Plan Objectives

Students will:

- Investigate the level of agricultural technology at the time, and compare it to today's levels
- Examine the role of the worker/laborer: Who is working (i.e. age, sex, etc.)?
- Explore the role of music, in particular the role of flute playing and singing
- Observe the interactions between various peoples from both different labor roles as well as economic divisions
- Look at the role of dress as a function of lifestyle

#### Before the Film

Teachers should ask students to discuss some of their preconceived notions regarding Afghanistan. What pictures come to mind? Where do they come from? How do the media impact these "pictures" or stereotypes?

- Following the discussion, have students jot down five questions they have about Afghanistan or Afghans in general.
- Have students think about their relationship to either rural or urban societies.
- Students could also think about their personal relationships to family and friends. If they have a



sibling relationship, what are some of the dynamics involved with it?

#### During the Film and/or After the Film

Due to the fact that there are five different themes explored in each of the films, teachers may choose to divide exploration questions according to each of the films as exemplified here:

#### Main Films (30-40 minute format)

##### Rural Society: "An Afghan Village" (44 minutes)

- What role do wheat and sheep seem to play in this village? What are some of the major resources in your village/town/city?
- How do you think the filmmakers gained access to this community? Is it important for researchers to establish rapport before conducting an ethnographic study? How would you go about building friendships if this were your assignment?
- What observations can you make about this area based on this visual survey?
- What questions would you ask a native Afghan, if you could, about the observations you have made from the film?
- What do you think has changed (or not changed) since the 1970s?

##### Education: "Naim and Jabar" (50 minutes)

- The teacher may want to remind students that these films were made pre-Soviet and pre-Taliban invasions; with this in mind, how are the aspirations of the two friends in the film, Naim and Jabar, depicted?

- How do the boys express their feelings about school, family, and friends to the filmmakers? How do their views change during the course of the film?
- Describe your school setting: Is it rural or urban? How many students are in your class? What qualifications did you have to meet (if any) in order to attend your school? Do you sometimes take your schooling for granted? Why or why not?
- If you could be involved with the reshaping of the educational structure in today's Afghanistan, what would you choose to include? Why?
- The original User's Guide notes that when any marriageable women between the ages of 13 and 40 was present, it was necessary to stop filming. Therefore, footage of these unveiled women, even if obtained, could not be used. How does this correlate to the modern images of Afghan women that you see today? Are the women still "hidden?" What may/may not contribute to this?
- What are your views regarding the role and status of women; attitudes toward children and child-bearing; work processes; marriage and family; and child development?

#### Support Films (15-minute format)

##### Rural Economics: "Wheat Cycle" (16 minutes)

- How do the filmmakers depict the importance of wheat cultivation in northern Afghanistan?
- What are some of the steps required in the process of growing and harvesting wheat?
- How are different agricultural and economic processes (i.e. reaping, threshing, winnowing, and milling) demonstrated? [Teachers may want to review these vocabulary terms on the board]
- What do you know about the pre-industrial agricultural process? How does this compare to how you get your food?

##### Women: "Afghan Women" (17 minutes)

- Do you see a lot of women in the series at large? Why do you think the producers decided to have a separate segment for the role of women as a theme?



- Do you think that the regular film team – all male – was allowed to film this segment? Why or why not?
- How do you think the film team for this piece (Nancy Dupree and Josephine Powell) gained entrance into this private community of women? Do you think it may have been difficult to do? Why or why not?

##### Belief Systems/Political Integration: "Afghan Nomads: The *Maldar*" (21 minutes)

- The *Maldar* refers to the mixture of faith and distrust that has kept nomads and sedentary people separate yet interdependent over the centuries. Based on this, what observations or speculations can you make in regards to this un-narrated footage?
- What are the roles of the wealthier nomads passing through a community?
- What are some of the political views of the nomads who are portrayed in the film?
- Can you think of a social group in American culture that would be similar to the nomadic groups seen here?
- Can you identify the transvestite in the film? What role might the transvestite serve in Afghan rural society? What evidence exists of his economic position? [Note to teacher: this scene occurs about 34 minutes into the film: it is the scene with the Jeshn "dancing boy" who dances to entertain the crowded teahouse.]

*Note:* DER is currently working to secure funding to restore and provide wider access to the *Faces of Change: Afghanistan* film series. Plans include an interactive website that teachers can use to download the digitally revitalized films as well as to access lesson plans and other contemporary resources.

*Jennifer Lacroix is a Special Projects Director at DER.*