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THE SILK ROAD The Making of a Global Cultural Economy

by Richard Kurin

Significance of the Silk Road

The Silk Road spanned the Asian continent and represented a form of global economy when the known world was smaller but more difficult to traverse than nowadays. The network of trading routes known as the Silk Road stretched from China to Japan in the East and to Turkey and Italy in the West, encompassing Afghanistan, India, Pakistan, and the other lands of Central Asia, and linking the ancient Mediterranean world to the empires of China. For thousands of years, highly valued silk, cotton, wool, glass, jade, lapis lazuli, metals, salt, spices, tea, herbal medicines, fruits, flowers, horses, and musical instruments moved back and forth along various portions of the Silk Road. Each item has a history, many connected to contemporary life. Consider, for example, stringed-musical instruments. In Central Asia, *faqîrs* or Muslim mystics still play a one-stringed instrument called quite simply the “*ektâr*.” “*Târ*” means string, and the “ek” or “one” string is taken metaphorically to refer to one God. In Iran there is the *dutâr* (literally “two strings”) and in India, the multi-stringed *sitâr*. The terminology is linguistically related to the Greek term “cithara,” the Arabic term “qitara,” and our English term “zither,” all referring to stringed instruments. A short lute with four pairs of strings developed in 15th century Spain and was called the *guitara*. By the 19th century, it had been transformed into a six-stringed instrument with other modifications and

came to America as the guitar, the key instrument of folk and country music, and in electrified form, of rock ‘n’ roll.

The Silk Road provides us with a symbol for complex cultural exchange. For contemporary cellist Yo-Yo Ma, the Silk Road answers the question: What happens when strangers meet? Historically along the Silk Road when strangers met in bazaars, courts, oases, and *caravanserais* (caravan rest houses), they shared and exchanged their goods and ideas. They traded the finest goods produced by their respective native master artisans and created new things—instruments, songs, food, clothing, and philosophies. The historical Silk Road teaches us a lesson—the importance of connecting different peoples and cultures together as a way of encouraging human creativity. “Now, more than ever,” Yo-Yo Ma observes, “we cannot afford not to know the thoughts, the habits, the ways of life of other people.” The famed musician has illustrated this lesson by forming a Silk Road Ensemble including artists from Central Asia, East Asia, the Middle East, the United States and Europe. The Ensemble uses a variety of musical instruments from Europe and Asia to bridge different musical languages and cultures. “Our goal is to make innovation and tradition sit down together,” explains Yo-Yo Ma.

The Silk Road Project includes concerts around the world, commissions of new musical pieces, educational events, and publications. The

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project will continue through the summer of 2002, with the Smithsonian Folklife Festival on the Mall, and beyond.

Where Was The Silk Road?

The Silk Road was actually a network of thousands of miles of land and sea trade routes traversing regions of Asia, connecting markets and centers of cultural production in China, India, Central Asia, Iran, and the Middle East, and extending to those in Europe, Japan, Southeast Asia and Africa. Specifically, the roads were those taken by caravans and extended out from the old city of Chang'an, which was the capital of China until 1215, when Genghis Khan established a new capital in Beijing. Chang'an (also called Xi'an since the 19th century) was the world's largest city in the year 1000 A.D. Silk Road routes beginning in Chang'an extended to the Buddhist center of Dunhuang, diverging both to the north and to the south of the Taklamakan Desert, running through the Central Asian market towns of Kashgar, Samarkand, Bukhara, and Tashkent, crossing the Persian plateau into Baghdad, and ending at the eastern shores of the Mediterranean Sea in the Levantine towns of Antioch and Tyre and in the Anatolian ports such as Constantinople (Istanbul).

Extending from these roads were many terrestrial and maritime extensions, eastward from China to Korea and across the East China Sea to Japan and its old capital, Nara. Routes turned northward from China to Mongolia, southward from China into Burma and then into what is now Bengal, southward from Central Asia through Afghanistan, the Buddhist site of Bamiyan, the mountain passes into Kashmir, Pakistan, and India; and northward from the Persian plateau through the Caucasus mountain regions of Armenia, Azerbaijan and Georgia. Silk routes also ran alternatively southward along the Persian Gulf, north to Basra, and west into the Arabian Peninsula, then north through Turkey to Istanbul, and across the Mediterranean into the Balkans, or to Venice. From these points, the network extended still further, to the coastal towns of South India and along the East coast of Africa past Zanzibar and across North Africa and the Mediterranean to Morocco and Spain, and north through the Balkans to Romania and Western Europe.

The Silk Road developed because the goods traded were quite valuable and useful, worth the trouble of transporting them great distances. Roads were generally in disrepair. Caravans had to brave bleak deserts, high mountains, extreme



heat and cold. They had to face bandits and raiders, imprisonment, starvation, and other forms of deprivation. Those going by sea braved the uncertainties of weather, poorly constructed ships, and pirates. Yet luxury goods traveled in both directions along the Silk Road, and included silk, spices, tea, precious metals, fine artwork and crafts—goods that were in demand and commanded high prices and often courtly rewards. While many items were traded along the Silk Road, it was silk that had an exceedingly long history and was among the most valuable of goods traded.

Silk Production

Silk cultivation and production is such an extraordinary process that it is easy to see why its earliest invention is unknown, and its discovery eluded many who sought to learn its secrets. Silk is made from the secretions of certain kinds of worms. These secretions dry into a filament that forms a cocoon. The origins of silk making as well as the methods for unraveling the cocoons and reeling the silk filament are shrouded in legend and mystery. In the Yangzi Valley in South China, 6000-7000 year-old silk cloth fragments and a cup carved with a silkworm design suggest that silk was cultivated from the time of the first Chinese farming villages. Dated fragments of silk fabric have been found in the southern coastal region (Zhejiang Province) from 3000 B.C. (5000 years ago), and a silkworm cocoon found in the Yellow River valley of North China from ca. 2500 B.C.

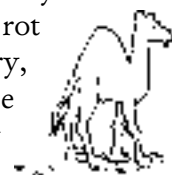
There are several types of silkworms in Asia. One of the native Chinese varieties has the scientific name *Bombyx mori*. It is a blind, flightless moth that lays about 400 eggs in four to six days and then dies. The eggs must be kept at a warm temperature. The worms or caterpillars hatch and feast on chopped up leaves of the white mulberry tree 24 hours a day for about five weeks, growing about 10,000 times their original weight. When large enough, in three to four days, the worms produce, through their glands, a liquid gel that dries into a thread-like filament, wraps around itself, and forms a cocoon. The amazing feature of the



Silkworms and cocoons shown in a specially woven frame used by sericulturalists in India. photo ©Jean-Luc Ray, the Aga Khan Foundation. Courtesy Smithsonian Institution.

Bombyx mori is that its filament, generally between 600-1200 yards long, can be unwrapped. If seen in cross-section, its filament is round (others are flat) and very strong. To “unwind” the filament, the cocoons are boiled. This kills the pupae inside and dissolves the gum resin or seracin that holds the cocoon together. The cocoons may then be soaked in warm water and unwound, or be dried for storage, sale, and shipment. To make silk, the cocoon filament is unwrapped by hand and then wrapped onto reels. Several filaments are combined to form a silk thread. An ounce of eggs produces worms requiring a ton of leaves to eat, resulting in 30,000 cocoons producing about 12 pounds of raw silk. The silk threads may then be woven together, often with other yarn, and dyed to make all sorts of products. The Chinese traditionally incubated the eggs during the spring, timing their hatching as the mulberry trees were coming to leaf. Typically, silk production was women’s work, intensive, difficult, and time consuming.

Silk has long been considered a special type of cloth; it keeps one cool in the summer and warm in the winter. It is good at holding color dyes and drapes the body particularly well. It is very strong, resistant to rot and to fire. Early in Chinese history, silk was used for clothing the Emperor, but its use eventually



extended widely throughout the society. Silk proved to have other valuable uses—for making fishing lines, paper, and musical instrument strings.

Naming The Silk Road

The term “Silk Road” in modern usage grows out of the fascination with cultural diffusion, particularly in 19th century Germany and England. The term was first used by the German geologist, traveler and economic historian, Baron Ferdinand von Richthofen. In a paper published in 1877, he coined the term “*Seidenstrassen*” or “Silk Roads” in referring to the Central Asian land bridge between China and Europe. Richthofen conceived of Central Asia as a subcontinent—a region that not only connected distant civilizations, but also provided a source of cultural creativity in its own right.

Richthofen’s formulation paralleled those of others who were discovering and articulating a variety of trade, migration, and cultural diffusion routes connecting Asia and Europe. European scholarly explorations of the region and debates over its connections to other lands and civilizations were lively, coinciding with important empirical findings in linguistics, archaeology and biology.

Three Silk Road Periods

The Silk Roads were used continuously for millennia, promoting the exchange of goods but also culture including poetry, literature, art and music. Conventionally historians refer to three particularly intensified periods of exchange.

The first period (206 B.C. to 220 A.D.) involved trade between the ancient Chinese Han Dynasty and Central Asia, extending all the way to Rome and Egypt.

The second period (618 A.D. to 907 A.D.) involved trade between China during the Tang Dynasty and Central Asia, Byzantium, the Arab Umayyad and Abbasid empires, the Sassanian Persian empire, and India, coinciding with the spread of Buddhism and later the expansion of Islam as well as Nestorian Christianity into Central Asia.

The third period (13th and 14th centuries) involved trade between China, Central Asia, Persia,

India, and early modern Europe, enabled by Mongol control of most of the Silk Roads.

Some add a pre-Silk Road period during which silks from China and India made their way to ancient Greece and perhaps Egypt. For example, near the Valley of the Kings in Egypt a female mummy was buried with silk in 1070 B.C. Others add a modern Silk Road period beginning in the 19th century with the “Great Game”—competition between Britain and Russia for influence over Central Asia—and extending through today.

From Han China to Rome

Under the Han dynasty (206 B.C. to 220 A.D.), silk became a great trade item, used for royal gifts and tribute. It also became a generalized medium of exchange, like gold or money. Civil servants were paid in silk. Chinese farmers paid their taxes in silk.

The Chinese traded silk widely, but closely guarded the method of silk production from outsiders. Sericulture (the raising of silkworms) traveled eastward, first with Chinese immigrants to Korea in about 200 B.C. and then to Japan in the third century A.D.

By the first century B.C., silk had traveled to Egypt and Rome, though the Romans did not know how it was made. Coinciding with the development of ruling elites and the beginnings of empire, silk became associated with wealth and power—Julius Caesar entered Rome in triumph under silk canopies. Regarded as “delicate” material, silk was associated with female apparel; in 14 B.C. the Roman Senate forbade males from wearing it, to no avail. Over the next three centuries, silk imports increased, especially with the *Pax Romana* of the early Emperors that opened up trade routes in Asia Minor and the Middle East. Roman glass made its way back to China, as did asbestos, amber and red coral. The Romans increasingly spent wealth on silk, leading to a drain of precious metals. Several warned of its deleterious consequences. Yet silk became a medium of exchange and tribute, and when in 408 A.D. Alaric



the Visigoth besieged Rome, he demanded and received as ransom five thousand pounds of gold and four thousand tunics of silk.

Tang Silk Road: Connecting Cultures

Silk continued to be popular in the Mediterranean even as Rome declined. In Byzantium, the eastern successor of the Roman state, silk purchases accounted for a large drain on the treasury. How silk making came to the “West” is unclear though legend has it that silk worms were smuggled out of China by two Nestorian monks and brought to Constantinople (Istanbul). Under Byzantine Emperor Justinian I, Constantinople became a center of silk production, its cloth used throughout Europe for religious vestments and aristocratic dress. The Persians too acquired the knowledge of silk production.

A second Silk Road developed under the Tang dynasty in China (618 to 907 A.D.). Though Central Asians had learned silk cultivation, Chinese silks were still in demand given their exceptional quality. The Tang rulers, like their Han ancestors, needed horses for their military. The best horses were in the “West,” held by nomads of the steppes and the people of the Ferghana, in what is now Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan. The Tang traded silk for horses, 40 bolts for each pony in the 8th century.

The growth of silk as a trade item both stimulated and characterized other types of exchanges during this era. Caravans and ships carried silk, but also gemstones, precious metals, and other goods. Not only did materials move, but also designs and motifs as well as techniques for weaving and embroidering silk. Chinese silk weaving was influenced by Central Asian, Persian Sassanian and Indian patterns and styles. For example, Chinese weavers adapted the Assyrian tree of life, beaded roundels, and bearded horsemen on winged horses from the Sassanians, and the use of gold wrapped thread, the conch shell, lotus, and endless knot designs from the Indians. During the Tang dynasty, cultural exchange based upon silk reached its apex.

Cultural exchange went beyond silks. Curative herbs, ideas of astronomy, and even religion moved along the Silk Road network. Arabs traveled to India and China; Chinese traveled to Central Asia, India, and Persia. Buddhism itself was carried along these roads from India to Tibet and into China. Islam was carried by Sufi teachers and by armies, moving across the continent from Western Asia into Persia and Central Asia and into China and India. Martial arts, sacred arts like calligraphy, tile making, and painting also traversed these roads. The Tang capital city of Chang’an became a cosmopolitan city, peopled with traders from all along the Silk Road, as well as monks, missionaries, and emissaries from across the continent.

Mongol Silk Road (Marco Polo)

The transcontinental exchange diminished in the later Middle Ages, and in Europe knowledge of the East receded in memory, as did the connection of European history to its own ancient Greek and Roman roots. The Christian Crusades to the Middle East and the Holy Land, from 1096 to the mid-1200s, brought many Europeans and Muslims into contact, and the Moorish influence in Spain rekindled European interest in Asia. The Moors brought silk production to Spain and Sicily in the 11th century. Through Arab scholars, Europeans gained access to Indian and Chinese advances in medicine, chemistry, and mathematics, and also access to ancient Greek and Roman civilizations that had survived in Arabic translations and commentaries. The availability of this knowledge helped fuel the Renaissance in Europe, with the growth of trade and cities, guilds, arts, and scholarship. Mediterranean city-states, like Venice, Genoa, and Barcelona, prospered creatively and commercially.

One Venetian, Marco Polo, traveled across Asia by land and sea over a period of 24 years beginning in 1271. The tales of his travels spurred broad European interest. He told of the Mongols who under Genghis Khan and his successor Kublai Khan had taken over China and expanded their dominion across Asia, into Central



Asia, India, Persia, and Asia Minor. Marco Polo narrated fantastic tales of the lands he had visited, the great sites he had seen, and the vast treasures of Asia. He was one of several European travelers of the time; others included emissaries of the Pope seeking alliances with the Mongols.

The 13th and 14th centuries were characterized by considerable political, commercial, and religious competition between kingdoms, markets, and sects across Eurasia. The Mongols, whose empire extended from the Pacific to the Black Sea, were, through a mixture of hegemony and brutality, able to assure a measure of peace within their domains, a *Pax Mongolica*. They were also quite tolerant of diversity in the arts and religion. Their ancient Mongolian capital, Qaraqorum, hosted 12 Buddhist temples, two mosques and one church. Kublai Khan hosted European, Chinese, Persian, and Arab astronomers and established an Institute of Muslim Astronomy. He also established an Imperial Academy of Medicine, including Indian, Middle Eastern, Muslim, and Chinese physicians. European, Persian, Chinese, Arab, Armenian, and Russian traders and missionaries traveled the Silk Road, and in 1335 a Mongol mission to the Pope at Avignon reflected increased trade and cultural contacts.

While silk was still a highly valued Chinese export, it was not the primary commodity of this "third" Silk Road. Silk production was known in the Arab world and had spread to southern Europe. Silk weavers, relocated from Constantinople to northern Italy, energized the development of silk tapestry as Renaissance art. Europeans wanted pearls and precious gems, spices, precious metals and medicines, ceramics, carpets, other fabrics, and lacquerware. All kingdoms needed horses, weapons, and armaments.

Commercial trade and competition was of great importance by the 15th century with the growth of European cities, guilds, and royal states. The trade in silk and other goods helped fuel the commercial transformation of western Europe. French King Charles VII and the Dukes of Burgundy participated strongly in the silk and luxuries trade. Markets were established in Bruges, Amsterdam, and Lyon. But trading overland with

China, Persia, and India was neither the most reliable nor most economical means for European rulers to acquire silk and other luxury goods.

With the decline of Mongol power and the rise of the Ottomons, control over trade routes was vital. Indeed, the motivation behind Portuguese explorations of a sea route to India and East Asia was to assure safer and cheaper passage of trade goods than could be secured by depending upon land caravans subject to exorbitant protection fees or raiding by bandits. The Ottoman Empire, which held sway over much of Central Asia, controlled the land routes and prevented direct European trade with the East. Indeed, it was the search for a sea route to the East that led Columbus westward to the "New World." After Vasco de Gama found the sea route to India, other European explorers opened up direct shipping links with China. Overland contact between Western Europe and Central Asia decreased dramatically.

From Japan to Jersey

European rulers wanted to control their own silk trade through its direct production. The Italian silk industry was emulated by the French, centered in Lyon in the 1500s. The English developed their own silk industry, tried silk cultivation in Ireland, and even in the New World. King James I was a silk enthusiast. Mulberry trees and silkworms went with settlers to Jamestown, Virginia in the early 1600s. Refugee French Huguenot artisans were encouraged to inhabit the new colony. Silk cultivation was successful but only for a time, and was followed with other attempts later in Georgia, among the 19th century Harmonists in Pennsylvania and even the Shakers in Kentucky. Still, imported silks showed the long reach of an international trade. Silk kerchiefs were imported from India and worn by cowboys in the American West who called them bandannas, a variant of the Bengali term *bandhânî* (binding).

By the mid-1800s silk weaving was industrialized with the invention of new looms and synthetic dyeing processes, allowing for mass-



Afghan nomads make their annual trek from lower Badakhshan Province to the rich grazing lands of Shirwa Valley for the summer. Photo © Ali Naemi, The Aga Khan Foundation.



produced lines of silk clothing and furnishing. Raw silk was shipped from cultivation centers to design and production factories to meet the demand of the period. This extended to the United States, as raw silk was imported from Japan, dyed in the soft waters of the Passaic River, and distributed through companies headquartered in Patterson, New Jersey—dubbed America’s Silk City. Silk as a valuable traded commodity both epitomized and played a major role in the early development of what we now characterize as a global economy.

Silk Road Stories

Just as there was not one Silk Road, nor one historical period or product, there also is not one story that conveys the essence of the Silk Road. Scholars working on the Silk Road have found a variety of stories to tell.

J. Mark Kenoyer, an archaeologist at the University of Wisconsin, digs every year in Harappa, the ancient Indus Valley site. He has found sea shells, lapis lazuli, carnelian and other beads that indicate contact with other major urban centers in Arabia, Mesopotamia, Baluchistan, Central Asia, and possibly even China. For him, the Silk Road reaches way back, to somewhere around 2500 to 3000 B.C. The same land and sea routes that may have carried ancient silk also carried beads as trade items. Following the beads is a way of ascertaining cultural contact and of understanding the growth of various centers of civilization.

The global stretch of the Silk Road is well illustrated by the story of porcelain. Many Americans keep their “china” in cabinets attesting

to its value. But how many think of it as Chinese? Chinese porcelain made its way around the world. Yankee clipper ships brought it to New England. Europeans imitated it and still do, as with Delftware from The Netherlands. Calling fine ceramics “china” is something Americans share with Turks. Indiana University folklorist Henry Glassie has done extensive studies of porcelain and “çini” in Turkey. One type, the ubiquitous blue and white-ware, originated in Jingdezhen, China. Jiangdezhen was an important center of ceramics manufacture; it was located in south China just north of Guangdong (Canton). Under the Song Dynasty (960-1279 A.D.), some 700 artisans turned the rich kaolin clay into vases, plates and other types of ceramics for the Emperor. (The blue color, however, came from cobalt mined in Persia.) When the first Mongols invaded China in 1126 A.D., the Song rulers fled their northern capital and went south to Hangzhou in Jiangxi Province; the royal potters fled to nearby Jiangdezhen.

Under the Mongol Yuan Dynasty (1271-1368), the fine blue and white porcelain was traded along the Silk Road to Turkey. The Turks found their own way of imitating and producing the porcelain. Interestingly, Chinese designs were replaced with new visual elements. Plates featured Islamic calligraphy with phrases of the Qur’an [Koran] crafted in elaborate styles. Floral arrangements of fruits, flowers, and leaves encoded images of spiritual significance. The tradition is still vital. Glassie, conducting field research in the major Turkish center, Kutahya, reports thousands of potters at work. Their art is visionary, as the resulting plates become objects of meditation and reflection.

For Ted Levin, a Dartmouth ethnomusicologist and Silk Road Project curatorial director, the Silk Road tells a tale of musical invention, diffusion, and continual transformation. Levin and his colleague Jean During of the Aga Khan Trust for Culture have studied *maqâm*, a classical, learned musical tradition that spread through Islamic Azerbaijan, Persia, Transoxania, and western China, influencing the music of the



Indian subcontinent. This is a tradition as complex and sophisticated as the Western classical tradition, only predating it by hundreds of years. While it continues as an art or courtly music, it also adapts to new settings. Levin has found this music in the United States among Bukharan Jewish immigrant musicians from Uzbekistan playing at community functions in New Jersey and restaurants in Queens, New York. Here, the musical tradition is possessed with a new vitality, symbolizing the identity of a people in a new home.

Similarly rich stories can be told of a variety of Silk Road commodities. Richard Kennedy, Smithsonian cultural historian and curator of the Smithsonian Folklife Festival Silk Road program, likes the paper story. He notes how paper, first made by the Chinese, was then picked up by the Arabs and eventually brought to Europe in the 1400s, enabling the revolution in printing, one of the key innovations of the modern era. Rajeev Sethi, the Folklife Festival sceneographer, is enamored with the movement of design motifs—trees of life, supernatural winged beings, vines, and stars that traverse the Silk Road expanse.

Polo

My own favorite Silk Road story is that of polo. Scholars trace its origins to somewhere in Central Asia, around 600 B.C. There are many variations, including a rather sophisticated version played by Chinese women during the Tang dynasty. American polo is derived from the game viewed by British soldiers on the northwestern frontier of 19th century colonial India. There, the game known as *bushkashi* is still a raucous, physical exercise of competitive horsemanship. Two large teams play against each other. The field might be a large meadow, with an area or pit designated as the “goal.” A goat or calf carcass is the “ball.” Horsemen from one side must scoop up the carcass, ride around a pole or designated marker, reverse course, and drop it into the goal. Players use their skill as horsemen and a repertoire of hand-held armaments to either aid or attack the carcass carrier. This is a wild, rough and tumble game in which injuries are common. The social purpose may be sport, but the game teaches and encourages



Ensemble Sabjilar members: Sergei Charkov, Anna Burnakova, and Slava Kuchenov. © Ted Levin 2000, Khakasia.

excellent horsemanship skills, precisely those needed to attack caravans, raid towns, and rout opposing forces. Watching the players, you can easily visualize the horsemen descending upon a Silk Road caravan loaded with luxury goods intended for far-off rulers and capitals. In recent months, Afghans celebrated their liberation from the Taliban regime with games of *Bushkashi*.

While polo also evolved as a sport in central Asia, it was Victorian Englishmen who turned it into the game that Americans know today. We think of polo as a sophisticated game requiring upper class connections and money to maintain special “ponies” and their stables. Interestingly enough, the story continues. Today, Afghan immigrants to the U.S.A. play a form of “Macho-Polo” that combines the structure of the formal game with the attitude and style of the original. Polo is a fine example of how meanings and practices can be transformed as they move across cultures and time periods, certainly a wonderful Silk Road story.

The Silk Road Today

Today, the Silk Road region, particularly Central Asia, is of immense interest to political and civic leaders, religious figures, corporate entrepreneurs, and a broad international public. The Silk Road skirts the underbelly of the old Soviet Union. Georgia, Armenia, Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan,



Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, and Krygyzstan were part of that Russian Empire. Other states like Afghanistan and Mongolia were closely related to it. The collapse of the Soviet Union brought new, often competing systems into the region. These new nations are home to ancient cultures. They face a tough question—what type of nations should they become? Should they reform the communist polity and economy they inherited? Should they embrace a Western, capitalistic democracy? Or should they develop new forms of the national state adapting Western and Soviet practices to those of local significance?

Today ideal visions collide with rancorous political factions, rebel movements, the lack of strong civic institutions, and the intransigence of old power holders to keep the region in flux. Even long established nations like China face internal challenges, both with changing political realities and ethnic minorities like Muslim Uighurs and Buddhist Tibetans seeking autonomy. The civil war in Afghanistan between the Taliban and its opponents, the Northern Alliance and various Pushtun tribes, has brought some of these conflicts into American consciousness. Hearing of Silk Road sites—Balkh, Kabul, Kandahar, Jalalabad, the Khyber Pass—on the nightly news has brought history into the present. The future of national stability and viability in the region is unknown.

So too is the issue of how to deal with religion in Central Asia. Should the Muslim majority states of Central Asia incorporate religious law and practice into civil practice? Should they be theocratic? How much diversity both within Islam and among other groups should they accommodate? Should they separate religion from the secular state? Parties from Turkey, Iran, Saudi Arabia, and Pakistan have offered competing visions of the relationship between Islam and the state. These questions emerged dramatically in Afghanistan. When the Taliban, at the behest of al-Qaeda, blew up the Buddhist statues of Bamiyan, the whole world cringed. These statues represented a truly ancient symbol of the Silk Road, and in their contemporary state stood for an appreciation of a commonly shared, though diverse, cultural heritage

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Economic uncertainty has also followed independence from the Soviet Union. Nations struggling to build their own economies must develop local markets, industries and infrastructures, while at the same time participating in an increasingly globalized world economy. Some local entrepreneurs seek to rebuild economies based upon a traditional repertoire of deeply ingrained Silk Road commercial skills. In Pakistan, for example, instead of caravans of decorated camels, beautifully painted trucks in caravan ply the Karakoram Highway, moving trade goods between that nation and China. Transnational corporations seek the development of natural resources, particularly oil, in Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, and western China. The Silk Road of old will literally become a high-tech pipeline—a slick road, moving the valuable commodity of



oil across the region to the rest of the world.

Some leaders such as the Aga Khan, an international humanitarian, philanthropist, and leader of the Muslim Ismaili community, see the rebirth of these societies in terms of building an infrastructure that allows for civic and economic development. He and his organization are developing new institutions—universities, hospitals, medical schools, and financial organizations. At the same time, they are encouraging a contemporary revival of traditional knowledge, architecture, and artistry embedded in Central Asian history that will allow local citizens the opportunity to flourish. Given the needs in the region, the work is of immense scope and the prognosis—healthy economies for an educated and skilled citizenry—admirable and hopeful, though far from certain today.

Richard Kurin, Director of the Smithsonian Center for Folklife and Cultural Heritage, is a cultural anthropologist who has done much of his fieldwork in India and Pakistan.

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Magazines

Calliope. February 2002 issue is devoted to the Silk Roads. For more information, see <http://www.cobblestonepub.com/pages/callsilkroads.html> In addition, *Muse*, *Click* and *Ask*, the three magazines published by Carus Publications in conjunction with *Smithsonian* magazine, will have Silk Road topics included in their Spring issues. For more information, see <http://www.musemag.com>



TEACHER'S CORNER: THE SILK ROAD BIG MAP

compiled by Betty Belanus and Merrill Feather

The Smithsonian Folklife Festival's Silk Road Program will offer educators a wealth of first-hand experiences with contemporary practitioners of the arts and the skills that made the ancient trade route famous.

This map activity, written by John and Anne Watt of Primary Source, is excerpted from the kit, *Silk Road Encounters*, a project of the Silk Road Project, Inc. made possible by the Ford Motor Company with additional resources provided by the Asia Society. Designed for elementary grades through high school, this activity will help students create their own large-format map of the Silk Road, which can serve as the basis for further study, both historical and contemporary. Since many of the countries along the Silk Road have been in the news recently, this map can have multiple uses.

You can order free-of-charge the whole *Silk Road Encounters* kit, which includes a teacher's guide, source book, CD sampler of Silk Road musical instruments, a set of 11 slides, and a 30-minute video. Order from: <http://teachers.silkroadproject.org> You can also download the text of the teacher's guide and source book from the web site. Those unable to attend the Festival can make a virtual visit to the Silk Road trade routes via the Internet or through Folkways Recordings at <http://www.folkways.si.edu>.

This "Teacher's Corner" will require three to four class periods. For this activity, refer to the Silk Road map on page 2.

BIG MAP ACTIVITY

Overview

Using a projected map outline, students will generate an oversized rendition of the Silk Road trade routes from Europe to East Asia. Students will then apply elements such as political and topographic features, the Silk Road, products of the regions, and the travel routes of key travelers. Students may continually add

information to the map, and the map may be used as a reference tool throughout the teaching unit.

Objective. Students will

- locate and map key topographic features along the Silk Road.
- identify and map the Silk Road, key cities, and trade products.
- generate and use a map key.
- gain an understanding and appreciation of the terrain along the Silk Road.

Materials

- overhead projectors
- overhead transparencies of a simple outline map of Europe and Asia, preferably with rivers but no writing. The transparencies can be made by copying a reproducible map onto an acetate transparency in a copy machine. See suggestions in reference section for places to find maps. Use one transparency per projector.
- tape
- permanent markers
- colored pencils
- one poster board or 3-foot by 5-foot piece of butcher paper for each student
- atlases
- reference materials (texts or Internet access)

Procedure

1. Set up as many overhead projectors as possible. Each overhead should be arranged to project the map image onto butcher paper or poster board that has been taped to a smooth wall surface. Center the image so that it fills the entire paper, then tape the transparency to the overhead projector's surface to avoid slippage.

2. Have students work in pairs to trace the outline of the map and rivers using permanent markers. Avoid jostling the overhead as it is difficult to realign



- geo-physical features, including deserts, mountains, plateaus, and bodies of water
- political features, including key cities, empires, or countries
- The Silk Road routes as they extend from Europe to East Asia
- Silk Road products of key regions (use symbols placed along the routes and a product key, attached separately to keep the map uncluttered)
- routes of famous travelers of the Silk Road regions
- a key for the mapped features

Older students can include additional information, such as animals, crops, mineral deposits, cultural monuments, or majority religions. Consider working on the maps intermittently through a larger unit, adding layers of information each time. Maps can be used as reference tools throughout the study period.

Extensions

Have students make up a list of ten questions that can be answered by using their Big Maps. For example: "What is the name of an oasis city on the Southern Silk Road." "What desert did Chinese caravans heading west first encounter?" Exchange questions among students to review their knowledge and test the accuracy of their maps.

References

Bonavia, Judy. 1999. *The Silk Road: From Xi'an to Kashgar*. Revised by William Lindesay and Wu Qi. Hong Kong: Odyssey.

This travel guide has exceptional illustrations and maps for use with middle or upper grades.

Major, John. 1997. *The Silk Route: 7000 Miles of History*. Harper Trophy.

This is a good review for young children of the geographical route, major cities, and products that were moved along the Silk Roads.

Stanford Program on International and Cross-Cultural Education (SPICE). 1993. *Along the Silk Road: People, Interaction, and Cultural Exchange*. Stanford University.

This curriculum resource contains excellent maps for use in creating the "big maps."

Travel the Silk Road Via the Web

The Asia Society, dedicated to teaching and learning about Asia: <http://www.AskAsia.org>

The Silk Road Foundation contains maps, timelines, and extensive bibliography on travelers and cities on the Silk Road: <http://www.silk-road.com/wysiwyg://main.286/>; <http://www.silk-road.com/artl/silkhistory.shtml>. On the history of silk.

The China Page has good reference maps: <http://chinapage.com/silksite.html>

<http://library.thinkquest.org/13406/sr/> Contains a map that links Europe and Asia through trade.

<http://www.schirmer.com/silkroad/timeline.html>

Provides a timeline of events.

Hear the Silk Road on Folkways Recordings

"The Silk Road: A Musical Caravan" is a 2-CD sampler of the extraordinary range of instrumental and vocal music from Iran, Japan, China, Turkey, Afghanistan, Mongolia and a host of other Central and East Asian countries. The recording will be available this spring through Folkways Recordings.

Other Folkways Recordings of interest to educators include:

Bukhara: Musical Crossroads of Asia (SF 40050); *Tuva, Among the Spirits: Sound, Music and Nature in Sakina and Tuva* (SF 40452); *Classical Music of Iran: The Dastgah Systems* (SF 40039); and *Richard Hagopian: Armenian Music Through the Ages* (SF 40414). Each of these recordings includes extensive liner notes placing the music in historical, geographic and cultural context. You can search the Folkways catalog on-line or order recordings at: www.folkways.si.edu or call: 1-800-410-9815 in U.S. and 202-275-1143 internationally.

Betty Belanus is an education specialist and Merrill Feather an intern in the Smithsonian Center for Folklife and Cultural Heritage.



SELECTED WEB RESOURCES ON THE MIDDLE EAST

by Margaret R. Dittmore

The Middle East is a large region stretching from Morocco in the west through Pakistan in the east and from Turkey in the north to the Gulf of Aden in the south. This diverse region includes many people of different ethnic backgrounds, sets of beliefs and ways of life. The following list of annotated web sites will touch on that diversity, but emphasizes the religion of Islam and the Muslim people who practice it. Once again, the Internet provides teachers and students alike with access to primary sources and teaching/study materials not often available in schools or even smaller colleges and universities. Below are some examples:

GENERAL RESOURCES

Middle East Network Information Center (<http://link.lanic.utexas.edu/menic/>) Also referred to as UT-MENIC or MENIC. Launched in 1993 by the Center for Middle Eastern Studies, University of Texas at Austin, it is an excellent gateway to a wealth of resources on this region. Access information by broad subject headings such as ancient history, news and media, and society; by country, ranging from Afghanistan to Yemen; or by research resource headings, such as historical records and resources. Includes a section on outreach to both the community and educators nationwide and on K-12 Educational Resources (see below).

Middle East Studies Internet Resources (<http://www.columbia.edu/cu/lweb/indiv/mideast/cuvm>) Compilation of resources by subject specialists at Columbia University. Gateway to a large number of sites with information about Islam, Middle East and North Africa, covering historical and current events. Organized by region, country and subject. Also includes sections on images and graphics, news sources, electronic journals, and newspapers.

Library of Congress Country Studies (<http://lweb2.loc.gov/frd/cs/cshome.html>) Online versions of books previously published in print between 1988 to 1998 by LC's Federal Research Division. Each study includes a description and analysis of a country's historical setting and its social, economic, and political systems and institutions. Check the "Research Completed" data at the beginning of each study to verify timeliness. See also the 2001 volumes of **The World Factbook** (<http://www.cia.gov/cia/publications/factbook/>), a somewhat similar series produced by the U.S. Central Intelligence Agency.

Internet Islamic History Sourcebook (<http://www.fordham.edu/halsall/islam/islamsbook.html>) Great site with a large number of links to Islamic history as well as some art, religion, and culture. Organized chronologically beginning with pre-Islamic Arab world and continuing to modern times and events. Includes primary source material (much in translation), secondary articles, reviews, and topical discussions, and other web sites and resources. A part of Paul Halsall's **Internet History Sourcebook Project**.

Encyclopedia of the Orient (<http://i-cias.com/e.o/index.htm>) Offers short descriptions and links to longer articles about the Middle East and especially North Africa for high school students and teachers.

ABZU: Guide to Resources for the Study of the Ancient Near East Available on the Internet (<http://www-oi.uchicago.edu/OI/DEPT/RA/ABZU/ABZU.HTML>) An excellent gateway to a vast array of exciting sites on this topic. See also **Egypt and the Ancient Near East: Web Resources for Young People and Teachers** (http://www-oi.uchicago.edu/OI/DEPT/RA/ABZU/YOUTH_RESOURCES.HTML). Both are projects and publications of the Research Archives of the Oriental Institute, University of Chicago.

(continued on next page)



TEACHING STRATEGIES/RESOURCES

Middle East Network Information Center (<http://link.lanic.utexas.edu/menic/>) Very wide offerings for K-12 educators and students. Its homepage has sections on Services for K-12 Educators and Students, including online resources, teacher workshops, exhibits, and a resource center from which materials can be borrowed. The section on K-12 Education Resources includes more teacher resources, interactive sites for K-12 students, organizations with catalogues of educational resources, and a sample section of online lessons and lesson plans.

Teaching Islamic Civilization with Information Technology (<http://www.albany.edu/jmmh/vol1no1/teach-islamic.html>) Published in the *Journal of MultiMedia History* 1(1), Fall 1998 by Professor Corinne Blake. A critical review and selection of primary materials on the Internet and on CD-ROM for teaching Islamic civilization and a discussion of methods and issues related to incorporating them into courses. Includes sections on the religion of Islam, Islamic literature, Islamic art and architecture, and miscellaneous tools (maps, etc.).

Teaching Middle East Anthropology (<http://www.aaanet.org/mes/teach.htm>) A number of course syllabi (outlines, materials used, grading methods, etc) on this topic contributed by college and university faculty. Also includes selection of ethnographic films and bibliography of better known ethnographies, writings, and samplings of recent articles and books. Site is part of MESNET, produced by the Middle East Section of the American Anthropological Association.

Islam for Children (<http://atschool.eduweb.co.uk/carolrb/islam/islamintro.html>) A clearly written and well illustrated presentation of Islam, Muhammad, the Qur'an, the Five Pillars of Wisdom, festivals, mosques, Islamic art, family and daily life, etc. Part of the RE Agreed Syllabus for Oxfordshire, England students learning about world religions. See also **Islam UK** (<http://www.bbc.co.uk/religion/religions/islam/introduction/index.shtml>) produced

by the British Broadcasting Corporation for a concise introduction aimed at an older group. For advanced students and teachers, see Professor Godlas' **Islamic Studies, Islam, Arabic and Religion** (<http://arches.uga.edu/%7Egodlas/>), a scholarly overview with links to a variety of other sites, including September 11 and its aftermath. (Be sure to read the *Chronicle of Higher Education's* review of it. The link is towards the end of the webpage.)

History/Social Studies For K-12 Teachers (<http://www.execpc.com/~dboals/boals.html/>) Click on Non-Western history and then on Middle East for a wide assortment of sites ranging from prehistoric times to current events. Offered to promote the use of the Web and assist K-12 teachers in locating and using these resources in the classroom.

Teaching About Islam and Muslims in the Public School Classroom 3rd edition (1995) Produced by the Council on Islamic Education (CIE) and available for purchase or print-out (53 pages) at their website (<http://www.cie.org>). Very useful for anyone interested in this topic. The CIE website also includes a number of other good teaching units and information for educators as well as for publishers, parents and students. Very good resources both for teaching non-Muslims and for increasing educators' awareness of needs of Muslim students.

A number of teaching videos have companion websites with lesson plans, activities and the like. Among these are: **Islam: Empire of Faith** (<http://www.pbs.org/empires/islam/>), which accompanies the PBS video series by same title and **Meet Sa'ud** (http://www.amideast.org/meet_saud), which accompanies *Young Voices from the Arab World: The Lives and Times of Five Teenagers*. Videos available at sites.

Teach Yourself a New Language (<http://menic.utexas.edu/menic/hemispheres/online.html>) Take a look with your students at a few of the languages spoken in the Middle East, including Arabic,



Hebrew, Turkish, Assyrian/Aramaic and Tamazgha or download **Glyph Tutor** and learn to read Egyptian hieroglyphs. Students can also see their names or other text written in hieroglyphics at **Your Name in Hieroglyphics** (http://www.horus.ics.org/eg/html/your_name_in_hieroglyphics.html). Check out **Marhaba: Welcome to the World of Arabic** (<http://mec.sas.upenn.edu/arabic.html>), an introduction to the Arabic language and civilization for grades 4-8 conducted last year by the University of Pennsylvania's Middle East Center and the School District of Philadelphia. Finally, see **Arabic Contributions to the English Language** (<http://www.arabicstudies.edu/A-Epage.htm>), a short list of common English words that are thought to be of Arabic origin.

The material culture of the Middle East and of Islam is rich and varied and has a strong aesthetic appeal for many. A clear, concise introduction to Islamic art and architecture is offered at the BBC website (<http://www.bbc.co.uk>). Once at the site, type "Islamic art" in the search box in the upper right hand corner. Also look at **Islamic Art** through the Los Angeles County Museum of Art (http://www.lacma.org/Islamic_art/islamic.htm), at Islamic metalwork through the Smithsonian's exhibition **Fountains of Light** and accompanying online guide for educators (<http://www.asia.si.edu/edu/onlineguides.htm>), and at its architecture, calligraphy, coins, and oriental rugs as explained by the Islamic Arts and Architecture Organization (<http://www.islamicart.com/index.html>). **Religious Beliefs Made Visual: Geometry and Islam** (<http://www.askasia.org/frclasrm/lessplan/1000030.htm>) offers good classroom exercises in the patterns that are so popular in this tradition. (Please Note: What should be a number one in the last email address (1000030.htm) is actually a lower-case letter l.)

Margaret R. Dittmore is head of the John Wesley Powell Library of Anthropology, Smithsonian Institution Libraries.

MONGOLIA EXHIBIT

The Smithsonian's National Museum of Natural History will host "Modern Mongolia: Reclaiming Genghis Khan," an exhibition produced by the University Museum, University of Pennsylvania, for a six-month period beginning in early July 2002. Curated by Dr. Paula Sabloff, the exhibition features the political evolution of Mongolia during the past century, from traditional to Soviet-dominated, to an independent democracy beginning in the early 1990s. The exhibit highlights museum collections, archival documents, historical and modern photographs, and video presentations. Genghis Khan's regime established the foundations of independence, representative government, and human rights that have served Mongolia for the past 800 years.

ANTHRONOTES RECEIVES AWARD

AnthroNotes has received the Society for American Archaeology Award for Excellence in Public Education: "For presenting archaeological and anthropological research to the public in an engaging and accessible style, and for encouraging the study of these disciplines in the classrooms across the nation." *AnthroNotes* began publication in 1978 and today has a circulation of about 9,000 educators across the United States and 50 countries. It also is available online at <http://www.nmnh.si.edu/departments/anthro.html>



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

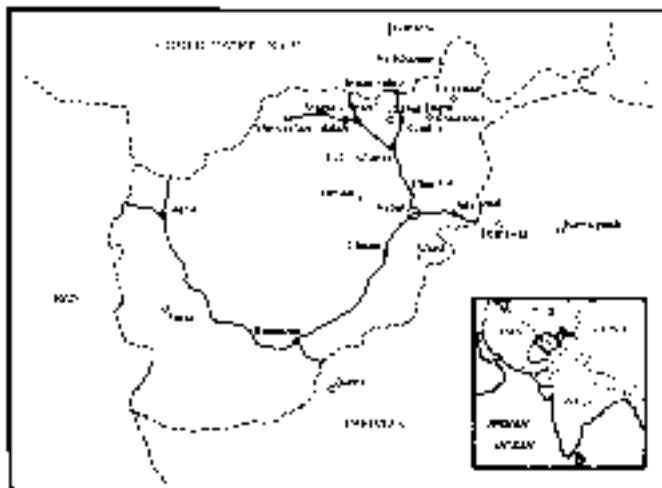
horseback battled over an animal carcass), and intimate family meals. The family I lived with took care of me in sickness and in health, clothed me appropriately, included me in family activities, allowed me to write constantly, and asked me questions about the United States. Overall, my fieldwork provided 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
© Audrey Shalinsky 1977

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.

Audrey Shalinsky is chair of the Department of Anthropology at the University of Wyoming.

AnthroNotes offers in-depth articles on current anthropological research, teaching activities, and reviews of new resources. *AnthroNotes* was originally part of the George Washington University/Smithsonian Institution Anthropology for Teachers Program funded by the National Science Foundation. It is published free-of-charge twice a year.

***ANTHRONOTES* has a three part mission:**

1. To more widely disseminate original, recent research in anthropology in order to help readers stay current in the field;
2. To help those teaching anthropology utilize new materials, approaches, and community resources, as well as integrate anthropology into a wide variety of subjects; and
3. To create a national network of anthropologists, archaeologists, teachers, museum and other professionals interested in the wider dissemination of anthropology, particularly in schools.

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