The Anthony Hyman Memorial Lecture

School of Oriental and African Studies

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What is ‘Afghan culture’?
An anthropologist reflects

2008

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I

I am honoured to have been asked to give this, the 6th Anthony Hyman Memorial Lecture, to commemorate someone I was glad to count as a friend as well as a colleague, and whom we all miss now, as much as ever.

I first met Tony in the 1970s, but I think my first major engagement with him was when we were both among the founding members of the Afghan Refugee Information Network (ARIN), formed in early 1980 in response to the refugee crisis following the Soviet invasion. I’m delighted to see a number of other early members of ARIN here today.

II

My own involvement with Afghanistan is now forty years old; between 1968 and 1972, Nancy Tapper (now Nancy Lindisfarne) and I lived there for something over a year, mostly doing ethnographic research in a small community of semi-nomadic Durrani Pashtuns who moved between villages in Saripul and summer pastures in the Hazarajat mountains. [Nancy took most of these slides, the good ones anyway]. We had a six-month return visit planned and funded for 1979, but we were never able to go back and have lost touch with our former hosts.

Nancy wrote a PhD thesis on marriage and social organization among our Durrani hosts; and her 1991 book Bartered Brides: Politics, Gender and Marriage in an Afghan tribal Society has become a standard ethnography.

One of our main bodies of field data was about 100 hours of tape-recorded narratives and interviews. It has always been my intention to publish an edited collection of these recordings, on the model of Akenfield (Ronald Blythe’s classic 1969 account of an English village), with the provisional title of Afghan Village Voices. Now I am retired, I am working hard to complete the book.

Of course I have been asking myself: Will such a book be a historical curiosity – like Akenfield? – or will it have some relevance to the Afghanistan of 2008? Has everything of interest and importance in Afghan rural society changed beyond recognition, or are there some continuities, some features of life 35 years ago that would be recognizable today?

Over the last year, I have listened again to the narratives of the villagers on the tapes; and at the same time I have been reading through reports of recent field research in rural areas, for example by people working for the Afghanistan Research and Evaluation Unit. I have been struck by the continuities … by how little in rural life appears to have changed, or perhaps, how much has returned, after decades of violent disturbance, to patterns similar to those of the past.
Now, it is undeniable that, after 35 years of invasion, war, drought, famine, exile, death and destruction, not to mention radical transformations in the external world, not least in technology – after all this, life today in Afghanistan has changed radically. Many argue that the changes have been irreversible, and that ‘reconstruction’, for example, should not attempt to restore an ‘old Afghanistan’ that is gone for ever.

Yet there is a general assumption too that there are certain basic elements, patterns of life, important and deep-rooted, that have survived, have indeed re-emerged in recent years; and there is a tendency to label these with the term ‘Afghan culture’.

As Nancy Dupree, one of my predecessors at this lectern, wrote, recalling earlier upheavals that have shaken Afghanistan in the course of its long history:

“Although conflict often inflicts irredeemable physical damage, the massive displacements accompanying such destruction can also strengthen a people’s determination to preserve cultural traditions that affirm their national identity in the midst of disruption”

III

I found myself recently labelled ‘a well-known expert on Afghan culture’ – this was the reason my name was given as a reference by somebody applying for a research grant. I didn’t know whether to be flattered – because I didn’t know what it meant.

The last time I gave a lecture to such a large audience was about ten years ago, when I addressed the British Institute of Persian Studies on the theme of ‘Behind the Curtain: Conspiracy Theories in Iran’. It was only after the lecture was over, that I discovered that half the audience had come, not to hear me do a sociological analysis of conspiracy theories, but because they hoped that someone was going – at last – to reveal actual British conspiracies against Iran.

Today, I only hope that you haven’t come here expecting me to answer the question I have asked – What is Afghan culture? I am not; who am I to say what Afghan culture is? Rather, I hope to draw to your attention some of the ways in which the question is complex, difficult and ambiguous, and how it might be addressed.

Consider the following collection of very different uses of the term culture:

(1)

“The state shall devise effective programs for the promotion of science, culture, literature and the arts”

“Culture, media and sport round out the sector strategy by developing the full citizen … Preserving and enhancing Afghanistan’s culture is vital to the cohesion of society, for social and economic recovery and for creating strong community based institutions that allow communities to work together.”

“A nation stays alive when its culture stays alive”

2 Afghan Constitution, Article 47.
4 Plaque at entrance to Kabul Museum
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(2) “We are taking steps to develop the culture and preserve the customs, traditions and national characteristics of various ethnic groups.”
“The Taliban state that … the real aim of the foreign invaders is the control of Afghanistan and the annihilation of the local culture.”
“We are not opposed to education … We support schools that are in accordance with Afghan culture and Sharia law. Boys and girls should not study together.”

(3) “Gender relations often have to be viewed in the context of traditional Afghan culture.
Afghan culture is rooted in a code of honor, symbolized by the behavior of women. While this may be manifest in great respect for women and recognition of their rights and status in Islam, it can also lead to deep repression.”
“Rural Afghan women … identified culture as the number one constraint [on their lives] … Women often spoke of chafing under cultural constraints and the control imposed by husbands or village leaders.”

(4) Cultural/traditional practices that hinder social progress
Promote Afghan culture: Afghan literature, poetry, history, music
A dependency culture on donor funding
Underdeveloped advertising culture [several times]
“Culture of impunity” – mentioned 9 times as a major obstacle to the extension of the rule of law
“This culture of impunity has to stop. I can live with undue influence, because it is part of this arrangement we have. But we cannot tolerate and protect criminals, or the whole arrangement will lose its moral existence.”

(5) Ministry of Culture, Tourism and Youth
Ministry of Information and Culture
Ministry of Culture and Youth Affairs

Compare the UK, where the latest – controversial – version is:
Ministry of Culture, Media and Sport.

We see a wide range of meanings given to ‘culture’ – and there are others I could have quoted.

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5 Najibullah to Gorbachov 20 July 1987, quoted in …
7 Taliban commander in Musa Qala, reported by Aziz Ahmad Tassal, IWPR ARR No. 264, 21 Aug 07.
9 Human Security and Livelihoods of Rural Afghans, 2002-2003 US AID, 2004, p.45; and a dozen other references to ‘cultural constraints’ on women’s access to markets, credit services, health centers, voting, courts.
11 Countering Afghanistan’s Insurgency: No Quick Fixes, International Crisis Group, Nov 2006; and in many earlier ICG reports.
12 President Karzai, quoted in The Independent Tuesday, 11 March 2008.
I think we can boil them down to three – and see the ways they are evaluated in the literature on contemporary Afghanistan:

1. ‘High culture’: Heritage, museum culture, arts, literature.
2. Traditional local values, beliefs and practices.
3. Institutional ways of operating.

Let’s look a little closer at these:

1. **High culture**: civilization, artistic and intellectual heritage, represented by art forms, literature, monuments, museums … I should say that few anthropologists specialize in the study of this High Culture, which is the business of other academics and practitioners. This high culture is typically viewed positively as a national resource to be celebrated, respected, preserved and promoted; it may also become subject of attention in World Heritage terms.

In some countries, elements of a promoted High Culture may be associated primarily with either an educated urban elite or a specific – dominant – ethno-linguistic group. Hence the recent controversial remarks of our own Minister of State for Culture, Media and Sport, Margaret Hodge:

> “The audiences for many of our greatest cultural events – I’m thinking in particular of the Proms but it is true of many others – is still a long way from demonstrating that people from different backgrounds feel at ease in being part of this.”

Many High Culture national monuments are religious; some are pre-Islamic, some are Islamic mosques and shrines (such as this famous shrine of Hazrat Ali in Mazar-e Sharif).

2. **Traditional values**, beliefs and customs/practices. Many Afghans and foreign observers, strongly associate this local culture with Islamic values, if not with Sharia; others, again both Afghans and outsiders, question this association, and point to alternative interpretations of Islamic sources which appear to condemn certain elements of ‘traditional culture’.

There are some positive views of this area of ‘Afghan culture’, particularly in relation to hospitality, politeness, food, family solidarity. Since 2001, many observers and researchers have reported that the main reason why foreign troops (and the rest of the expatriate crowd in Kabul and elsewhere) are not succeeding in winning Afghan ‘hearts and minds’, is their cultural insensitivity: they break down the doors of private houses, they enter houses and mosques wearing boots, they don’t know, and/or don’t respect Afghan ‘culture’ …

But there are also negative evaluations of certain elements of this ‘Afghan culture’, notably patriarchal values and institutions, which are widely regarded as an impediment to change, to the introduction of human rights etc. Such ‘cultural constraints’ are reported again and again as reasons (excuses) for not implementing or encouraging change, e.g. in opportunities for women.

3. Finally, **institutional culture**: culture as way of working, associated with contemporary institutions, government, etc. Negative evaluations include constant references to the now cliché’d ‘culture of impunity’ (in the police and legal system), to the Kalashnikov culture of the Mujahidin, a pervasive culture of violence, drug culture, dependency culture … Others talk of new forms of culture that need to be introduced, such as ‘advertising culture’, culture of accountability …

IV

How do anthropologists understand ‘culture’? Anthropologists of my generation typically, though not exclusively, did field studies in rural populations in non-industrial countries. We were motivated by a
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desire to understand and then to respect local cultural practices, which we often compared favourably with those of city-dwellers. We were also often blind to, or biased against, local government organizations, particularly after we learned how corrupt they were; and we were also suspicious of those promoting universalist values and ideals, such as Human rights, introduced from outside by modernity/westernization.

Inevitably, while doing our field research, we experienced ethical dilemmas, sometimes intense, where our sympathies with our hosts as friends clashed with our own personal values. E.g the case of a Durrani woman eloping with a Hazara man, described and analysed at length in Bartered Brides.

A classic anthropological definition of culture is learned social behaviour; human nature plus – what distinguishes humans from animals (though the study of animal ‘cultures’ is now well-established), as well as what distinguishes different human groups from each other. Many anthropologists consider culture in the sense of beliefs, values and customs to be the main focus of their study, and their main business is to record, classify and analyse these elements of ‘culture’ – often called the ‘natural history approach’

Nancy Dupree’s definition encapsulates these common understandings:

“Culture embraces those shared ideas, beliefs, emotions and customs that mould behaviour and place value on creative artistic expressions, such as art, music, literature, architecture and relationships with the environment. It defines the way people live, and the way they utilize material and non-material resources. It encompasses all members of society – men, women and children, old and young. It embodies individual and community aspirations. It influences decision-making. Having a strong sense of one’s own culture permits individuals to develop an inner strength that inspires them to reach out for more fulfilling lives for themselves, their families and their communities.”

Implicit in this, and all the meanings we have reviewed earlier, is that culture is given, handed down (like tradition), hence shared and agreed, clear-cut and consistent, and fixed, hard if not impossible to change; as a prime value, positively to be respected, preserved, reconstructed; or (negatively) an obstacle to change and improvement; And that it is beyond politics, the competition and disputes of individuals as well as domination by individuals or classes.

But anthropologists and others have for some time had serious problems with this view. It begs numerous questions. The main one is: whose culture? Who is defining what is, for example, Afghan culture – or for that matter British culture? Men or women? The old or the young? City-dwellers or country folk? Working people or landowners and aristocrats? Which ethnic group? If we can identify who is defining ‘culture’, do we know whether the others agree with this definition?

Another problem is that all ‘cultures’ (i.e. value systems) are liable to include inconsistencies: clear statements of values, together with their opposites – Pashtuns, for example, are reputedly both warlike and peaceful people – and when it comes to competing political parties, with different programmes and policies, which of them represents the national culture?

In the last several decades, in anthropology and related academic disciplines, the conventional, ‘natural history approach’ to culture, description and classification, has given way to a rather different

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approach, one which understands culture (customs, values, etc.) to be the opposite of the conventional view, and insists on examining people’s statements about culture as examples of political rhetoric.

Instead of studying customs, traditions, values and beliefs and how they are learned, shared, and passed on, anthropologists now examine how people in a society continuously challenge, negotiate, redefine accepted notions of culture … how, in other words, culture, custom, and their meanings are in fact constantly changing, and intensely political.

However, culture in the conventional sense is now “vigorously appropriated by indigenous people and a plethora of ethnonational groups in search of sovereignty and self-determination in this new cultural world.”¹⁴ This is culture seen as an essential, authentic, fixed tradition; every people has a culture, which they inherit.

Anthropologists and others are tempted to support and reproduce this illusion. But it confuses an ideal that is aspired to by nation-builders, with empirical social realities. It begs the question, has any state ever had such a unified shared culture. A classic case in point – now once again being debated thanks to our PM – is: what is ‘British (English?) culture’, what is the British way of life? What are British values? Who has the right to define them, and what happens to those who disagree?

In state politics – whether nation-building, or among competing political parties in a parliamentary democracy – it is clear that the notion of ‘culture’ is deeply implicated; aspiring politicians, political leaders, ministers, heads of state and government, all resort to rhetorical statements about national culture.

But this culture, as anthropologist Edmund Leach wrote of myth and ritual over half a century ago, is “a language of argument, not a chorus of harmony”.¹⁵

V

Opinions about ‘Afghan culture’ tend to polarize:

Some observers believe it to have broken down irretrievably:

“During his six-week journey across the country, [Rory] Stewart had observed the slipping away of culture in Afghanistan, how, as he wrote in his book, ‘religion, language, and social practices were becoming homogenized, and how little interest people took in ancient history.’”¹⁶

“Ronald E. Neumann, the former United States ambassador to Afghanistan, said … decades of war and insecurity have warped the country’s culture … ‘You have a corruption of the entire culture of Afghanistan by 25 years of war.’”¹⁷

This pessimistic view of where things are leading reminds me of a gloomy prediction by our Afghan host in summer 1972

“Our history books say that we shall not reach the year 1400. Shortly before it is due, the end of time will arrive. The mullahs can’t agree on whether it is the solar or lunar calendar …

¹⁴ Sally Engle Merry, ‘Law, culture, and cultural appropriation’, Yale J of Law & the Humanities 10, pp. 584-5
they are no use, and we have no sheikhs or saints or prophets to guide us now. The sheikh of
today, curse him, is no sheikh; if he can find a lie, he won’t tell the truth; if he can find
haram, he won’t do halal … These sheikhs say one thing but have another in their hearts.
God knows what is in their hearts. The world is coming to an end …
“Our books say that at the end of time, truth will be lies, people will abandon right and do
wrong, brothers and fathers and sons will fight each other. That is the way things will be, they
say – but look around now! Not one person in ten prays. The world is coming to an end.”

1400 lunar began in late 1979, shortly before the Soviet invasion
1400 solar begins in 2021 ...

For others, what is most striking is both the survival of Afghan culture and the degree of uniformity:

“Contrary to many common assumptions, the various ethnic groups such as Pashtuns, Tajiks,
Uzbeks, Hazaras, Turkmens, Baluchs, Nuristanis and others have evolved into a mix of
Afghans with a fairly common culture, psychology and ethos. For example, Pashtuns from the
eastern and western parts of Afghanistan have more in common with Tajiks and Uzbeks from
the north than with the Pashtuns of Pakistan. A more accurate conclusion may be that
although they are ethnically diverse, the Afghans have mingled into one distinct identity,
historically, politically and socially. It is this distinction that prevented Afghanistan from
disintegrating, as has been the case in ethnically divided countries such as the former
Yugoslavia.”

“Although a number of ethnic groups straddle the nation’s boundaries and similarities with
adjacent populations can be noted, Afghans are noticeably distinct from their neighbours and
take pride in their uniqueness. It was their determination to remain true to the essence of their
cultural ethos that enabled the Afghans to endure years of economic and social hardships with
fearbearance and courage. The nation was utterly traumatized, but the culture survived.”

Nancy Dupree also believes in strength in diversity,

“The principle that there is strength in diversity aptly characterizes this nation comprised of
peoples with so many different backgrounds. Variations in cultural expression exist not only
between its disparate groups, but with groups of common origin as well, depending on the
geography of their settlement areas. Differences also distinguish rural and urban populations,
within which members of various social classes cherish their own customs and value systems.
Yet there is also an overriding belief in a wide range of common cultural values that function
as cohesive bonds to keep the nation united around its own recognizable identity.”

I would imagine this view is widely shared by people in this room.

V

The final selection of slides from the north in 1971-2 need a commentary to hint at the politics of
culture at the local level

Buzkashi is political at two levels:

20 Ibid.
1. Manifestly, between the competing horse-owners, local khans – or (see Azoy’s book *Buzkashi*) national leaders.

2. But there is also debate over whether, being associated primarily with the north, it counts as a national sport, a jewel in the national cultural crown.

Wrestling is of course inherently competitive; so are many other popular sports, dog-fighting, patridge-fighting – and kite flying. Kite-flying was banned for a while in Pakistan, while the *Kite Runner* film has been banned in Afghanistan (though for other reasons than the kite-fighting) …

Music is inherently non-political, isn’t it? Well, on the day this picture was taken (1968) in a teahouse in Sangcharak, when the singer started a certain ballad, half the café walked out: he was singing about rivalries between two powerful local chiefs.

As for the politics of marriage, read *Bartered Brides* on how intensely political every marriage and wedding in our community was. When we investigated the background and circumstances, and the meanings of every item of the celebrations – who came and who didn’t, the amount and quality of food, the dancing, the size and quality of the trousseau. All the participants had a good time – but they were highly sensitive to every item as an indicator of the relative power in the village of the main protagonists.

VI

I haven’t attempted answer the question, any more than I would answer the question currently being much debated here, What is Britishness?

I would draw your attention to the online Yahoo! listserv Afghaniyat.com, which in its early years (2001–2) hosted a lively debate on the meaning of Afghan-ness, on, in short, Afghan culture and identity.

I hope I have managed to convey how the notion of ‘culture’, far from being politically neutral, is likely to be intensely contested. Current anthropological approaches see culture as a dynamic, changing, flexible collection of values and practices and of changing and negotiated meanings given to individual items of culture – for example, to the burqa or chadri, now widely regarded by outsiders as irretrievably part of ‘Afghan culture’.

Just as we react skeptically to any suggestions put forward in the current search for ‘Britishness’, so too, if someone insists that there is or should be one ‘Afghan culture’ that is fixed, unchanging, bounded etc., than I suggest that Afghans and outsiders can profitably ask some basic questions: who is making such statement, what interests do they serve?

In this matter, as in so many others, we miss hearing what Tony Hyman would have said, with his deep knowledge and wise understanding of Afghan affairs.