

"Trouble in Birgilich and the Politics of Truth "

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[For the meetings of the Central Eurasian Studies Society,

Boston, MA. Oct. 2-5, 2003.]

From late fall, 1966, to summer, 1968, I was doing field work in the Bamian valley and its environs, the provincial capital of Bamian province, Afghanistan. As part of that research I recorded a number of conversations that I want to make available to other scholars (in a relatively unpolished form). Even if the things I heard cannot be taken literally they provide clues as to the nature of social life and affairs at that time, and also, in some cases, even earlier. But in order for them to make sense to others they need some interpretation -- or at least to be situated in a particular discursive universe so as to eliminate some of the possible misreadings (Eco 1990: 28, 60).

Here I summarize and comment on a longer discourse about a struggle between a family of wealthy and influential sayyeds (putative descendants of Muhammad) and some of their weaker neighbors. It is about rural politics; contrary to the surmises of some (Paul 1980) rural affairs are political affairs pure and simple. Here we encounter the devices used to prevail in an ongoing official dispute as well as the tactics of officials who need to get disputes settled. As in all politics official claims and official solutions are never quite what they seem. [L]ies and other forms of deception are dispensed as needed (Bailey 1991:66).

The precipitating event in the story takes place in the valley of Birgilich, just off the road between Shibar and Bamian. It is a fight over bushes. In the Hazarajat, where winter temperatures are severe and can last for weeks, the scattered clumps of thorn bushes growing in the mountains are collected for fuel, and as some communities have less thorn bush in their highlands they may attempt to collect bushes in places claimed by other communities. This was the situation of this fight. The following is a paraphrase of the account by Mir Gholam Hasan, who was a mir, a representative of several households in Shibar to the government.

Three men from Jawzaar [a community in a tributary valley of Birgilich] went up into the mountains above a portion of Birgilich claimed by a notable family of sayyeds to collect bushes. These men had often gone into these hills to collect bushes at night but in this instance they went up during the day. They were caught up there by some of the leading figures of the sayyed community. There was a fight and the leader of the Jawzaaris, Ali Jam, was seriously injured in the head.

The men from Jawzaar went to the local government office, the alaqadari of Shibar, and complained against the sayyeds of Birgilich, claiming that the sayyeds had attacked them and seriously injured Ali Jam. The alaqadari sent the police out to look into the situation and examine Ali Jam's condition. When they returned they brought some of the sayyeds back and imprisoned them at the alaqadari.

The alaqadaar in Shibar tried to settle the dispute, but without success. The wrangling went on for a year. I did everything possible to settle this dispute [by mediating between the two sides]. The several mirs representing other communities in Shibar also joined in the fracas until virtually all the mirs of the region were somehow involved in the negotiations.

One factor that made the dispute more intense and drew wider circles of people into the affair was the sectarian enmity between the two sides. The people from Jawzaar were Ismailis while the sayyeds were [Twelver] Shi'as. The dispute attracted support from Ismailis and Shi'as from all over Shibar. As funds flowed in from the surrounding populations, the Ismailis had the advantage. The Jawzaar Ismailis themselves numbered about 150 households whereas the sayyeds of Birgilich had about 20 households, and in Shibar generally there were more than 1000 Ismaili households versus only 700 Shi'a households.

Eventually, the dispute was formally passed on from the alaqadari to the governor's offices in Bamian. Even then, however, there was no progress. The struggle continued for about two years. Every week we went day after day to Bamian. Then we would come back to the alaqadari, then go to the governorship in Bamian. I was on the side of the people of Shibar whereas Shah Gholam Hosayn [an old nemesis and one of the sayyeds] was on the side of the Birgilich sayyeds. Several of us -- Mir Ahmad Jan and some others -- went to Bamian and made a petition. We paid maybe 60,000 afghanis [in bribes] at first. This was important for all of us, because if these sayyeds could get away with this they would have extended their power over everyone here. So we helped the Jawzaaris. We paid out a lot of money in bribes, and so did the sayyeds. They assessed their households for money. In the end they were impoverished.

Year after year we came and went over this argument. Then after some time the sayyeds took some sheep, a cloak [chapan], and several of their elders went to the house of arbaab Ali Jam, and they proposed to settle the argument. Still, Ali Jam refused to settle.

After all this money was spent a new h?kem [subgovernor], Jan Muhammad Khan, came to Bamian and he was assigned to settle it; he was the brother of the King's chief clerk. Then several elders from the sayyeds went to him and said, "These people -- Ali Jam and the others -- actually stole our cow. It was a lie. Jan Muhammad told them they had to settle it, and he proposed a compromise. Why don't you write that you looked all over and you couldn't find your cow? You can say our cow just disappeared. Maybe a wolf has eaten it or something. You could bring a horn or a bone and show that it disappeared. If you do this, I will let you go. Do this so I can get it over with. I want to settle this dossier." So everyone went back to the al'qad'r? and there they had to answer more questions. They wrote that "This cow was not stolen by these people and they took some bones to the government. The owner of the cow said that it hadn't disappeared but was eaten by wolves. And he said, "These men are not thieves. In fact, there was no cow -- the whole thing was a farce. Now everyone was lying. The whole point was to get free of the government. When the matter

went back to Bamian the sayyeds said, Yes, a wolf ate our cow. So the whole thing was finished. The Birgilichis and Sayyeds were both let go.

It took more than two years and it cost a lot of money, but J?n Muhammad Khan settled it. Now, thank God, people are free from this trouble. But it cost a lot. Both sides spent a lot. There was no punishment for either side in this final argument. The bribes from the two sides came to 8,000 afghanis. The side that loses the argument loses its bribes. The sayyeds lost a great deal because they had also been put in jail, and they turned out to be liars.

Actually Ali Jam and the others did this intentionally. They intended to have an argument so they could get free from the Sayyeds. The sayyeds were very cruel and oppressed them. They would make them work on their land if they owed them money, and they would use their cow to plow. Before this the Jawzaaris would take bushes at night. This time they went for them during the day. Before this these people were very <sup>?</sup>jez [poor, weak]. Later when they had become knowledgeable and wise, then other people came to their side, like the people of Shibar. When they knew these people [Ismailis] would be on their side, they went and took the bushes so that we should be free from them.

Also they thought that I would help them. But before they went up the hill to take the bushes they didn't let me know about it. They had decided it among themselves. This 100 houses had decided to do this, so that we can be free of these sayyeds.

Now, with the little space/time here I want to comment on what

Mir Gholam Hasan's statement reveals about the situation in Bamin in the 1960s.

- The sayyeds were, as Mir Gholam Hasan says, notable for their dominance of the local population, and in fact the Jawzaaris were clients of the mir the Shah Gholam Hosayn mentioned in the story whom they disliked. That he was Shi'a and they Ismailis, and that the Birgilichi sayyeds were broadly resented for their abuses (of which Mir Gholam Hasan had many illustrations) was perhaps the reason the dispute engaged so many people.
- But what held the Jawzaaris under their domination? Whatever the means of subjection were they were informal and must only be surmised. What we do know is that the sayyeds were well-to-do. This may have partly been because sayyeds were venerated for their religious services. Not only did they lead in prayers and preach and teach but also, in response to popular demand, some of them wrote charms to protect people from harm or to heal them from a malady. Also they were believed to have the power to devine: Once I met a man who searched for a sayyed who might devine for him whether his sick wife would live or die; if she was going to die anyway he didn't want to bother taking her to town to see a doctor. So sayyeds enjoyed special eminence and often received gifts in expression of thanks or petition for the services they provided to people under stress. Some sayyeds were, in fact, regarded as pirs as saints endowed with special powers because of their special access to God and thus their spiritual influence. Also, most sayyed families were well connected, as they mainly intermarried, so that the sayyeds and other notable religious families were linked around the country by affinal relations. Such connections laterally to other eminent figures and vertically to dependent populations enabled the members

- of eminent religious families to take on roles of leadership. Like some eminent religious families elsewhere a member of the Birgilichi sayyeds sometimes served as mediator between feuding tribes; in the 1830s when Charles Masson (1842: 437 ff., especially 448) passed through an eminent sayyed in Birgilich was trying to arrange safe passage for a group of Pushtuns through Sheykh Ali territories. So there was nothing unusual about the Birgilichi sayyed mentioned in this story, Shah Gholam Hosayn, acting as mir for the households in his neighborhood.
- Notice how local politics worked there: the mirs were official intermediaries between the local communities and the government, but their first preoccupation in this case was to resolve the dispute informally. This was because the costs in bribes, once a dispute came into the hands of the officials, were so large. In fact, the bribes were considered necessary by the local people in order to ensure that their side would get a fair hearing. Several officials explained to me that their refusal of a bribe (a gift) would have been taken as a sign of bias against the giver. No one believed they could get a fair hearing without paying out substantial amounts to the officials who handled their case.
  - That the sayyeds were weakening as the acrimonious proceedings drug along seemed to be evident in their attempt to persuade Ali Jam to give up on his claims against them and in their attempt, in their approach to the new official, to change the story from a fight about bushes to a claim that Ali Jam and the others had stolen their cow. They were trying to direct the problem back upon Ali Jam and his friends. Could they have thought that the new hakem might not understand the reasons for the fight over bushes? Perhaps they supposed that an urban bureaucrat would not understand a fight over bushes and a fight over a stolen cow would sound more authentic.
  - But the new hakem, in seeking a compromise, created yet another story. The argument, he proposed, was actually over the disappearance of a cow, not a theft of one. This was a long way from the original issue of rights to bushes or a fractured head. It was now a farce all around. We wonder why the hakem was so eager to get the matter over with. Was he under pressure from higher authorities? Why did he feel it necessary to change the story? Whatever was his situation, by that time everyone—even Ali Jam, perhaps—was ready to find a way out. The lost cow story worked, even if it was a complete fabrication, because no one could bear to carry on. And perhaps because all sides were broke.
  - In the end Mir Gholam Hasan reveals that the falsification was actually already intrinsic to the first fight. What originally seemed accidental—the sayyeds catching the Jawzaris collecting bushes on their mountain—turned out to be deliberate. So the Ismailis of Jawzaar were actually the ones picking the fight. The bush collecting was itself a kind of subterfuge, aimed at prompting the sayyeds to pick a fight that would occasion a furor that would engage the rest of the community in Shibar so they could extricate themselves from the control their mir, Shah Gholam Hosayn, had over their affairs. It was round about way to break the bonds of dependency. For Shah Gholam Hosayn it was a great loss and thereafter he blamed Mir Gholam Hasan for it.

So the truth, whatever it was -- as Ali Jam's friends told it when they went to the alaqadari, or as the sayyeds told it when they rebutted their accusations, or as

the sayyeds told the hakem about a stolen cow, or as the hakem changed it to a lost cow and recorded the official record, or even (to question our own version) as Mir GholamHasan recounted it to me -- was lost, overlain with a series of fabrications.

It has become common for us to use the word "myth" to refer to narratives that are not "true". What this usage fails to reveal is that all the narratives that organize social life -- including, at least sometimes, the official record -- are more or less fabrications that enable social life to go on. As Fredrick G. Bailey (1991:34) puts it,

Much of our untruthful "reality" is voluntary makebelieve ...Everyman's truth is what he and others negotiate it to be. Politics is, as we say, the struggle to define situations, but the definitions of particular situations, even when the various actors have their own take on what is going on, are in each case, convenience fictions, like the story of the lost cow.

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