

VII

CONCLUSION

SUMMARY OF THE ARGUMENT

THE first chapter posed some questions about the mosaic of religious groups in Bamian and the succeeding chapters developed a series of arguments which, taken together, appear to answer them.

First, *why are the religious sects of Bamian distributed in a regular way?*

The answer seems to lie in economic and political influences emanating from outside Bamian. Due to Tagaw's easily controlled agricultural wealth and its strategic position at the heart of the basin where trade lines converge, its populations have been more strongly influenced by the Sunni-dominated trade network of the nation than the highland populations. As national trade grew with the improvement of transportation and communication Tagaw's wealth became increasingly absorbed into the national trade system, and its populations became oriented toward a cash economy, and toward Sunnism. It is not known, however, how the formerly Imami populations of Tagaw were actually succeeded by Sunnis. Perhaps they converted to Sunnism to gain better opportunities in the national market, or perhaps they were pushed out of the heartland by Sunnis who immigrated to take advantage of attractive opportunities in Tagaw. In any case, the transformation that took place in Tagaw did not occur in the surrounding highlands where the populations are less accessible to foreign economic influences and where agricultural production is more modest. Consequently, the highland populations, existing primarily by subsistence activities, are only marginally integrated into the national economy. And they are not Sunnis, but Imamis and Ismailis.

The political influences from outside Bamian have also affected social alignments in the basin. The populations of Bamian have socially differentiated primarily in terms of their relation to the Sunni ruling institution and the opposing Imami religious sect. The populations on Tagaw are those most accessible to Sunni influence and have identified with Sunnism, while most of those in the highlands have expressed their differences with the Sunni institution by identifying with Imamism. Among those living in Shibar and Kalu, however, some have refused to identify with either Sunnism or Imamism, and have become Ismailis.

The Ismailis dwell in a frontier zone where the influences of external power groups have historically been weak. In terms of larger political influences, they are distributed in an area marginal to three political centers—Kabul, Afghan Turkestan, and Hazarajat. In terms of a smaller range of political influences, the sect lies between the Sunni-controlled lowlands of Bamian and Ghorband, and between two centers of Imami influence, Kabul and Yak Awlang. In this historically inaccessible and intransigent area the third bloc has congealed, loyal to a religious authority dwelling in its own highland territories. Ismailism therefore can be regarded as a kind of frontier polity which, to express its independence and interests both from Sunnism and Imamism, has formulated its social distinctiveness as a different religious sect.

Why are factional differences expressed in religious terms? The reason for this is implied above. Political blocs within the basin have formulated their distinct identities in terms of their relationship to each other and in terms of the categories with which the power centers have become identified. The divisions within the communities of Shibar are formulated in religious terms because sectarian categories are the overriding social distinctions in the society and because the ecological setting in Shibar is more favorable to internal division.

Why do communities in Shibar divide while those elsewhere in Bamian do not? Fission among community members actually does take place throughout Bamian, but only in Shibar do ecologic circumstances allow those losing a dispute to remain on their lands. Inherent in Bamian's communities everywhere contradictory tensions act both to pull its members together and to rend them apart. Dissenting persons in these communities generally either must acquiesce to community opinion or leave home, and their emigration enables their communities to retain the appearance of social solidarity.

The strength of this kind of solidarity, however, varies according to the different ecologic circumstances of each community. Ecologic conditions in Shibar are most conducive to a breakdown in community solidarity because of the importance of rainfall agriculture, which unlike irrigation agriculture, requires little group solidarity. Nevertheless, even in Shibar a community does not allow dissident persons to remain on their lands unless they are situated where the natural water supply is abundant and accessible. Division can take this form in such communities where factioning without spatial relocation is a feasible option.

How does conversion take place if it is said to be impossible? Conversion of individual families and small groups takes place under the circumstances described above, and represents an attempt on the part of disputing persons to realign themselves to another group of sharing kinsmen. Such a social realignment for tactical reasons eventually becomes expressed in ideological terms so that the disputants become reckoned as kinsmen of the new group and their former kinship ties are discarded.

SOME GENERAL APPLICATIONS

This solution seems applicable to two problems of ethnic and religious grouping elsewhere in Afghanistan. One of these is the lack of congruence between ethnic and religious identities in Afghanistan. Generally the ethnic and religious criteria of social identity coincide so that a Hazara is assumed to be Imami, a Tajik to be Sunni, etc. This coincidence is not perfect, however. While most Afghans are Sunnis, there are also Imami Afghans and Ismaili Afghans.¹ Whereas most Hazaras are Imamis or Ismailis, there are Sunni Hazaras as well—the Deh Zinat Hazaras of Badgis (northwest of Mazar-i-Sharif) and their relatives, the Tatars.² And people known as “Tajiks,” the second largest ethnic category in the country, are not all Sunnis: in eastern and northern Afghanistan and elsewhere in Central Asia Tajiks are Sunnis; but in western Afghanistan (e.g., Ghorian) and Iran they are Imamis, and in the Pamir Mountains “Tajik” groups (called “Mountain Tajiks” or “Pamir Tajiks”) are Ismailis (Fig. 11).

A complete explanation of this irregularity is impossible now, but it is interesting to note that the territorial locations of these various kinds of groups suggest that ethnic and religious alignments in Afghanistan as a whole approximate the pattern we have delineated for Bamian. The several kinds of Sunni populations control the economic centers of Afghanistan; the different kinds of Imamis occupy marginal lands, either mountainous regions (as in Hazarajat) or desert lands (as in western Afghanistan, e.g., Ghorian); and the different kinds of Ismailis occupy the most remote lands of the Hindu Kush-Pamir mountain range between the centers of Sunni and Imami influence. Such a distribution is due partly to the nature of the varied landscape itself, which provides shelter to the different interest groups, and partly to the sectarian nature of the Afghan state.

The other problem to which our analysis may apply is the relation between race and cultural identity in Afghanistan. Many ethnic groups are believed to be racially distinct and therefore easily distinguishable by phenotype as well as culture. In Bamian, racial type, while grossly related to ethnic identity, is not a precise criterion. The Hazaras, though generally Mongoloid, are not all phenotypically distinct and some persons calling themselves “Tajiks” look very Mongoloid. The relations therefore between racial type and cultural identity are rather loose. Some persons, despite their racial appearance, have passed from

¹The Afghan Ismailis apparently keep their faith very secret, for I know of no one outside the sect who is aware of their existence. I am told that they are a wealthy community of Pushtu-speaking occupational specialists in eastern Afghanistan. They should not be confused with the Roshanis of several centuries ago (Caroe, 1958).

²In Ferrier's day (1830s) the Tatars were known as “Tatar Hazaras” or “Hazara Tatars.” The Tatars I encountered often identified themselves as initially as Tajik, but eventually explained that they were Tatars. None of them, however, identified themselves as Hazara of any type. The Tatars generally have strong Mongoloid features, like the Hazaras.

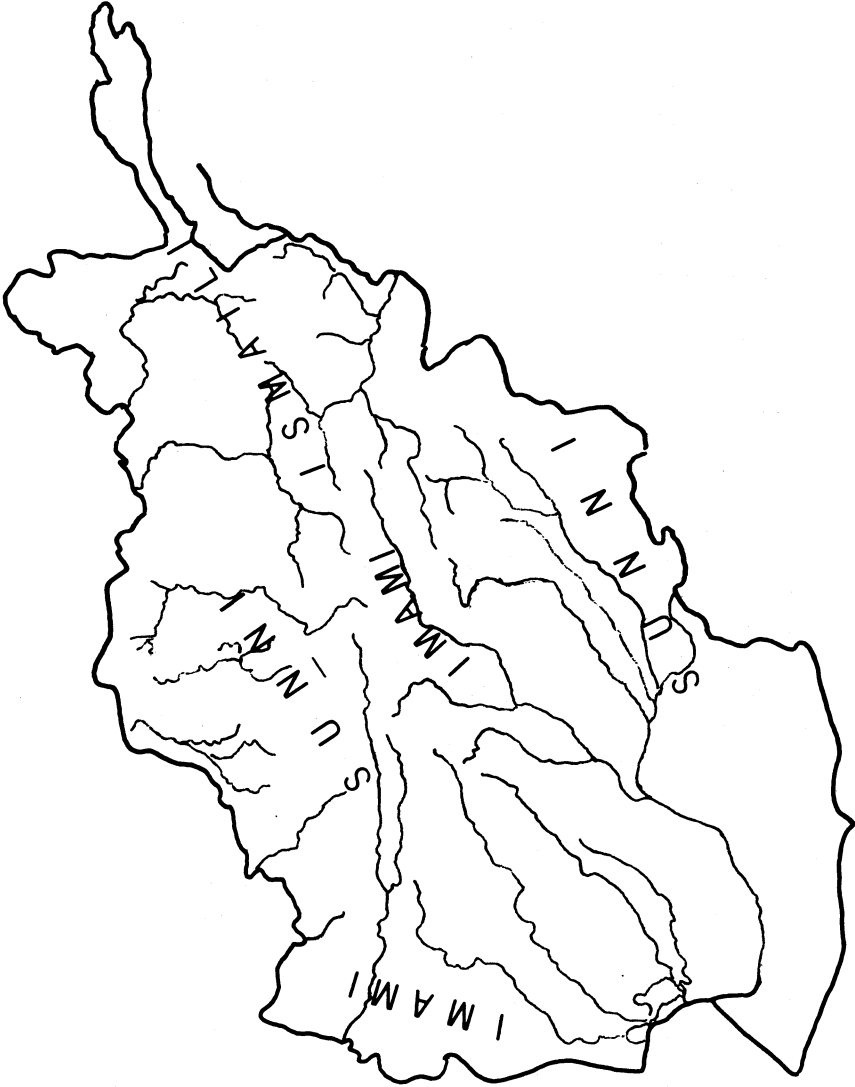


Figure 11. The general location of sects in Afghanistan.

one cultural group to another. As one Hazara said of a sibling of an ancestor, "Dahla became Tajik" (see Bacon, 1958:6, 7, 18). Presumably, a Hazara 'becomes Tajik' by identifying with Sunnism and becoming absorbed into the Sunni Tajik population.

The phenotype of an individual would seem to deter such passing if he strongly evinced characteristic racial features and if the society tolerated no intermarriage between racial groups. In Afghanistan Sunni men sometimes marry non-Sunni women, but Hazara men rarely marry Sunni women. Hazara men may in rare circumstances convert to Sunnism and marry Sunni women. Presumably, in such cases the racial identity of these men eventually becomes lost. If not clearly Mongoloid in appearance, the (former) Hazara may himself eventually be regarded as a Caucasian as well as Sunni. If not he, then his children would more certainly be recognized as full members of the Sunni society; they would be more easily considered Caucasian and Sunni, for they would betray fewer distinctive racial features and be fully socialized into Sunni culture.

Not only have individual Hazaras become Tajiks but even whole groups of Hazaras in some areas may have made this transition. The Tatars of Turkestan were once known as Hazara Tatars (Ferrier, 1857) and bear strong Mongoloid features, but today they call themselves "Tajiks" and are Sunnis. Also, there are populations calling themselves "Tajiks" in Jalmesh and Ghandak whose appearance and kinship terms suggest a Mongol ancestry; unlike most Tajiks they terminologically distinguish between elder and younger siblings, a trait commonly found among Hazaras and Mongols (Bacon, 1958).

THEORETICAL CONCLUSIONS

Implicit in the argument of this study has been a broad claim: that the ethnic and sectarian groups forming the rural mosaics of the Middle East and Central Asia, and specifically of Afghanistan, are not merely different cultural groups transmitting their characteristic traditions from the past, but are also political units existing in tension within their socio-political contexts.

Such political units have been identified by various terms. Easton (1959) has distinguished rural and minority interest groups in a plural society from national political systems, calling them "parapolitical structures." This distinction is merely one of relative power (see Bailey, 1968). Similarly, Barth (1969*a*) and Abner Cohen (1969) have employed the term "ethnic group" and suggest that ethnicity is merely a form of political grouping:

Ethnicity is . . . basically a political and not a cultural phenomenon, and it operates within contemporary political contexts and is not an archaic survival arrangement carried over into the present by conservative people (A. Cohen, 1969:178).

Both Barth and Cohen believe that ethnicity may be distinguishable by different kinds of cultural criteria, e.g., race, tribe, caste, language, etc. Therefore the more general term "interest group" is preferred.

Interest groups have two features vital to their existence. First, they share some common economic and political interests and consequently stand together in opposition to other groups and the state. In urban contexts well-to-do interest groups maintain their identities to protect vital economic monopolies (A. Cohen, 1969), while underprivileged groups coalesce to guard what common economic and political interests they share (Morse, 1965; Gonzales, 1970). Similarly, in rural settings minority groups congeal to protect mutual concerns, especially to avoid the increased costs, such as taxation and conscription, of articulating with the national structures.

The second vital feature of interest groups is their cultural distinctiveness. Minority interest groups typically congeal around ethnic and religious customs that characterize their distinctive identity. They are therefore relatively difficult for a ruling institution to control. Abner Cohen (1969:3) has pointed out that ethnic and religious interest groups are especially suitable for evading governmental pressures, for a state can only at great cost control the customs of marriage, kinship, friendship, and ritual among its citizenry. And it is just such customs that can become the social forms around which informal political interest groups congeal.

There is characteristically a tension between an interest group and other similar groups in its field of social relations, but the most decisive tension is that between the group and the state. Bailey has pointed out that interest groups

are partly regulated by, and partly independent of, larger encapsulating political structures; and . . . so to speak, fight battles with these larger structures in a war which for them seldom, if ever, ends in victory, rarely in dramatic defeat, but usually in a long drawn stalemate and defeat by attrition (1968:281).

The nature of the ruling institution affects interest groups in three ways. First, it influences the degree to which they may remain discrete, solidary units. Abner Cohen has noted that in some African nations tribesmen who immigrate to the cities become less committed to tribal loyalties while in some other countries they become more tribalized. The difference, he suggests, is a consequence of the different poses which the African states take toward their minority groups.

The degree to which interest groups can develop in a society depends on the type of state system that prevails in that society. Some states permit a high degree of political "pluralism," by allowing the formation of a wide variety of formally organized interest groups. Other states are less

tolerant . . . , but do not prevent the formation of *informal* interest groups. Yet other states do not tolerate even such informal interest groups and do their utmost to suppress them (A. Cohen, 1969:3).

Second, a state's structures affect the cultural identities of interest groups. Since an interest group, in order to remain apart, must identify itself in distinctly contrastive cultural terms, its cultural identity often appears as a kind of complementary opposite to the identity of the state. Thus, the cultural categories around which a state coalesces defines the terms in which the interest group will express its distinctiveness. As cultural identities of the wider society change, the distinctive cultural features of an interest group may have to adjust also. Abner Cohen (1969) has described how the Hausa of Sabo, Ibadan, reformulated their distinctive characteristics in order to maintain their social identity. In a somewhat different way the categories of social identity in Afghanistan have changed. At one time the identities of political groups were defined in terms of patrilineal descent groups: Hazaras versus Afghans versus Tajiks versus Uzbeks, etc. But as the coalition of Afghan tribes grew into a ruling institution, the disposition of the rulership toward Sunnism—expressed in its application of Sunni (i.e., Hanafi) interpretations of Islamic law in the courts and its appeal for popular support as a Sunni coalition—endowed it with a Sunni identity, though it was still dominated by Afghans. Opposition to the rising Sunni power was expressed in the antithetical sectarian categories of Imamism and Ismailism. Thus, superimposed upon patrilineal descent loyalties there were sectarian loyalties: Sunnis versus Imamis versus Ismailis.

The third way in which state structures affect interest groups is in the location of rural interest group territories. Since the administration and control of interest groups entail costs as well as benefits to the ruling institution, cost-benefit factors set functional limits on the state's ability profitably to control these groups. In rural areas these limits appear as the territorial boundaries forming the interest group mosaic. Thus, the mosaic of rural interest groups traces certain social frontiers of the national administration (see Gellner, 1970).

Such has been the conception of interest group structures employed in this analysis. The interest groups of Afghanistan are not merely traditionalistic, conservative groups which, owing to geographic isolation, have been bypassed by the progress of history in the larger society. They are also political and economic groups whose traditional customs and religious identities help protect vital concerns.