

“Affairs in Bamian during the reign of King Amanullah”

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“The Establishment of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Afghanistan  
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The task and the approach

During the reign of King Amanullah, as Mahmoud Tarzi was developing progressive policies and Muhammad Wali Khan Darwazi was establishing the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in Kabul, affairs in Bamian were proceeding along similar lines; and in the later Amanullah period, when the government lost control, Bamian was similarly without effective social order. In the early period, both in Kabul and in Bamian the institutions of government were gaining strength and becoming ever more effectively enforced, while in the later period in both places certain elements of opposition disrupted public affairs. As our information on affairs in Bamian during the time of King Amanullah is fairly limited, I offer here some notes on the topic based on information collected while I was doing anthropological field work in Bamian during a twenty-two month period in 1966-1968.

Anthropological field work entails participating in the lives of people in order to understand the issues and concerns that preoccupy their lives and affairs. We look for the customary activities and perceptions that are natural to them, through which they understand and deal with their problems. That is, anthropologists are interested in culture, the everyday perspectives and activities of human beings. But this interest in customary behavior confronts the problem of how individuals can practice their customs

and also act in original ways: How can folks reflect the ways of thinking and acting of their times and at the same time be creative agents? The way individuals act as independent agents in customary ways is a fundamental problem in anthropology, for we regard individuals as carriers of “culture” and activators of “culture” even as they are creative agents acting according to their own lights. Human beings are creative agents as they also reflect and reproduce the perspectives and practices of their times.<sup>1</sup>

No individuals better illustrate this point than the main figures in our conference. King Amanullah, Mahmud Tarzi, and Muhammad Wali Khan reflected the progressive movements of their times, and yet nothing about those movements stipulated that these eminent leaders should take the decisions they took or develop the policies they developed. In the way that they carried on their affairs they reflected the influence of the great movements of their times – the Islamic modernization project of Al-Afghani, the reforms being instituted in Turkey, the constitutional movement in Iran, the independence movement in India, and so on -- but at the same time they were creative agents of their own, acting in distinctive ways to deal with the particular situations they confronted in Afghanistan. By dint of their own imaginative responses to specific situations they deflected the course of affairs, and so created history.

This is why anthropologists find specific events to be of special interest, for events reveal trends and developments even as they are animated by individuals playing out their own interests. Individuals exercising their own imagination shape the course of affairs in culturally significant ways. In this paper I recount some of the events and

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<sup>1</sup> On the relation between culture and individual makers of history see Marshall Sahlins, 2004, Apologies to Thucydides: Understanding History as Culture and Vice Versa (Chicago: University of Chicago), and William H. Sewell, Jr., 2005, Logics of History: Social Theory and Social Transformation (Chicago: University of Chicago).

developments in the province of Bamian during the Amanullah period. These events and developments were recounted to me by people I came to know in Bamian in the 1960s. Some of the events expose social conditions of the time and others suggest trends and developments at work in the region more generally. Even if these stories cannot be taken as historically perfectly accurate, they can be read as narratives of what my friends thought was significant in their own past, in this case in the Amanullah period. The events were various. Some marked important turns of affairs; others were less significant but nevertheless revealed the nature of social conditions at the time. The stories indicate that as the regime in Kabul, led and animated by visionaries like King Amanullah, Mahmoud Tarzi, Abdul Wali Darwazi was gaining strength, the provincial government in Bamian was likewise exerting an effective and growing influence on the province. And later when the government's control broke down in the capital, Bamian was being similarly wrought by a breakdown in social order.

#### Advance of state institutions in Bamian

Let us consider first the rising presence of government institutions in Bamian. In the Markaz of Bamian I met a man who claimed to be the grandson of a famous arbāb of the Fuladi valley. Fuladi is a large fertile tributary debouching into the southwestern end of the Bamian Markaz. According to my friend, his grandfather was so powerful that “wherever he went he took a hundred men” with him. Whatever the actual number of those associated with him – we needn't take the number literally – he must have been the paramount figure in a notable coalition. And this was not just a lot of men; it was a lot of men with their horses, for at this time travel was largely by horseback. Consider what the movement of such a force across the landscape meant to the local inhabitants. Wherever

they went they and their horses had to be provided for: food and shelter for so many men and horses would have been a severe burden. This was, that is, a ranked society, highly stratified, one person, the arbāb, being preeminent, with a substantial body of allies, and a subject population that had to provide for them; those at the bottom of the hierarchy would have been grievously repressed.

Social stratification of this sort among the Hazaras was not new: about as far back as we can go into the past, notable figures, usually called mirs, held commanding positions over the population of an area.<sup>2</sup> They collected tribute, provided protection, led in war, if necessary. What makes the arbāb story interesting is that as of the early twentieth century such dominant figures should not have existed, for three decades earlier the great mirs, the paramount leaders of the Hazara “tribes,” had been crushed in the Hazara-Afghan war (1891-1893).<sup>3</sup> Any Hazara leader who could have been even a minor threat to the state was dealt with: some were killed, others imprisoned in Kabul; many Hazaras were enslaved. By 1900 the formidable coalitions of the Hazaras had been broken, their hierarchies of power emasculated. So, the news that a powerful arbāb was in place again in Bamian in the 1920s is interesting. That an eminent political figure was able to mobilize such a large force indicated that the hierarchy of pre-war times had been reconstituted. A dominant political leader was again operating in Bamian.

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<sup>2</sup> The best general work on the Hazaras, which provides an extensive bibliography, is S. A. Mousavi, 1998, The Hazaras of Afghanistan: An Historical, Cultural, Economic and Political Study (Surrey, England: Curzon); the major ethnographic reports on the Hazaras published since then are Kristian Berg Harpviken, 1996, Political Mobilization among the Hazara of Afghanistan: 1978-1992 (Oslo: Institutt for Sosiologi, Universitetet i Oslo), and Alessandro Monsutti, 2005, War and Migration: Social Networks and Economic Strategies of the Hazaras of Afghanistan (New York / London : Routledge).

<sup>3</sup> M. Hasan Kakar, 1971, Afghanistan: A Study in International Political Developments, 1880-1896. Kabul: privately published.

Elsewhere in the province, on the eastern extremity of the Bamian basin, the situation was apparently similar, according to another story recounted to me. An older man from a line of eminent mirs was listing for me the names of previous notable figures of the region. A Mir Abbas of Kalu, he said, controlled all of the region from Kalu to the Shibar Pass in the Amanullah period. He was notoriously cruel. Indeed he was eventually killed by an angry mob of his own subjects. It was a thousand men, my friend said, that rose up against Mir Abbas; they surprised and overpowered his bodyguards and stabbed him to death. This reference to a mir notable for his cruelty and his demise at the hands of such a large number of his own subjects suggests that Mir Abbas was the supreme figure in the eastern regions of Bamian, perhaps as powerful as the arbāb of Fuladi. He appears to have been able to act with little regard for his subjects.

Such was the situation in Bamian in the Amanullah period according to these stories. But something else was going on: The great Hazara coalitions were in fact giving way to a new political presence in the region, the government. We know this from what happened to the two powerful men already mentioned. My friend from Fuladi said his grandfather, the arbāb who could muster “a hundred men” to his side, had occasion to meet King Amanullah. But when he met the King he was insolent; he refused to show proper deference. This may have been early during the King’s reign, a time when Amanullah had not yet consolidated his position; we know that early on some groups were slow to accept the new King. Whatever the specific context, the eminent arbāb of Fuladi felt no need to demonstrate due respect to the new king – another indication of his supposed power at the time. It was a fatal mistake. His insolence angered the king, and

he was clapped in prison. There he remained until his death. The arbāb's power, however great it seemed to be in the early 1920s, did not measure up to that of the King.

And that is a situation worth noting. For no similar locally powerful figure ever arose again in Fuladi. Likewise, on the other end of Bamian, the demise of Mir Abbas in Kalu marked the end of great mir dominance there. The mirship as a local institution of social control was forced to give way to the rising power of the state. The state was taking more responsibility, exerting more influence, on local affairs. After the time of Mir Abbas and the arbāb of Fuladi the leaders of local communities in Bamian were gradually forced to deal with the government. Local leaders gained their positions through the authorization of the government. The "mirs" of Bamian (whom the government preferred to call maliks) became weaker and the communities they led smaller. The trend was toward less powerful "mirs," each of whom represented ever smaller numbers of clients as the government became more able to enforce its policies in the province. The demise of the Fuladi arbāb in the west and the mir of Kalu and Shibar in the east represented an ineluctable trend: the state was exercising its writ over the province with ever greater effect.

It was an advance of the rule of law. The government was establishing, advancing, and enforcing its claim to rule. A governor had been assigned to Bamian for many years, but now, in the Amanullah era, a governing body was forming around the governorship. Other officials, military and administrative, were now assigned to the province, bringing a more effective system of administration and social and political control. The establishment of the rule of law meant more than an increased number of government personnel on the ground: it meant the more effective and consistent

application of rules, regulations and policies established in Kabul, rules that were encoded in written directives that were to be applied without prejudice to all the citizens of the region, as elsewhere in the country. Personnel to apply and enforce directives, written rules and regulations to guide their administrative activities – these were effectively bringing Bamian under the authority of Kabul.

This was the time, during Amanullah's reign, when the first alaqadār of Shibar was established. He came alone. And he was not welcome. At first he took a room in Shumbul but then after a while relocated to Bolola, again in only one room. Eventually, he established himself with some support personnel in Shumbul. The government would finally build a compound where he could bring his family and where the gendarmes and other support personnel could be housed. In the 1960s the alaqadāri consisted of a house for the alaqadār's family, and other buildings for the gendarmes and the two clerical assistants assigned to alaqadāri.

This was the government's first line of contact with people of eastern Bamian. It was the only alaqadāri in the province Bamian in the 1960s and presumably was the only one in Amanullah's time. The reason for locating it at the top of the Shibar pass was presumably to facilitate traffic through the pass, for in that time it was the critical link between Kabul and the territories of northern Afghanistan.<sup>4</sup> And it was, and still is, a difficult pass, especially in winter when snows make it often impassable. Also on the lower side of the pass restive Sheikh Ali tribesmen were famous for interrupting traffic. Such was the burden of the alaqadār in Shibar – to make sure the pass was kept open.

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<sup>4</sup> When the Salang tunnel was completed in 1964 the Shibar Pass lost its strategic importance as the main route of access to the northern regions.

For the local population, however, the presence of the *alaqadār* opened up new possibilities. Here was a government official who could be approached for help on many kinds of issues. Disaffected individuals frustrated by their inability to gain redress through traditional means could now approach government officials for help.

Admittedly, to do so constituted a sharp break with the local community. It entailed a huge risk, for the outcome of such a strategy was always problematic and in any case one faced ostracism from his family and neighbors. Even in the 1960s virtually everyone in Shibar opposed any attempt to involve the government when there was a dispute: close relatives, neighbors, in-laws, virtually everyone around would be offended by such a move. But the very presence of a government officer in Shibar and a large contingent of officials in the Markaz of Bamian effectively announced the readiness of the government to be involved in local disputes. They constituted a new and different route of redress otherwise unavailable to a person seeking help in a local conflict. So some folks took advantage of it. For them the government constituted a alternative, another possible avenue of political leverage. The new presence of the government, then, was a vehicle of change. My impression in the 1960s was that growing numbers of people were turning to the government for help in disputes. It was a trend already set in motion in the time of King Amanullah.

#### The breakdown of order during the Kalakani period<sup>5</sup>

Such were the indications of the growing strength of the Kabul administration within Bamian, a growth in control that reflected the deliberate attempts of the

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<sup>5</sup> A recent account of affairs in Kabul in this period is Robert McChesney, 1999, Kabul Under Siege: Fayz Muhammad's Account of the 1929 Uprising (Princeton: Marcus Weiner).

Amanullah regime to develop more effective administrative institutions throughout the country. But as we know, there were other trends, ones that would eventually overturn Amanullah and frustrate the ambitions of Tarzi and Darwazi. Fissive trends were likewise at work in Bamian, but to a different effect, for the Hazaras of this region, unlike some other elements in the country, were loyal to Amanullah, even in the worst times. With the ascension of Habibullah Kalakani to power in Kabul an internal struggle was created in Bamian because the government forces came under Kalakani's control. My contacts from Fuladi told me that because the Hazaras refused to accept Kalakani many of them were forced to flee into the mountains. In Fuladi, however, one person stayed behind and tried to negotiate with the forces of Kalakani. Eventually he persuaded them that the people of Fuladi would consent to their authority. It was a kind of surrender under duress and his behavior subsequently created much discussion and division among the Fuladi citizens. In the opinion of my source this one man saved Fuladi, as it could have been disastrously ruined by the Kalikanis. Eventually, when Nadir Khan came to power he was punished, but only minimally, as it was understood that his action was taken under duress. In this event we have an example of how one person's ingenuity, acting as a creative agent, shaped the course of affairs for the residents of his community.

Another event, less socially momentous, took place in Shibar during the Kalakani period. Khan Jan was an elderly man I met in Shibar who had actually gone to fight on behalf of Amanullah during this period. He and several other men were dispatched by the pir of the Ismailis, Sayyed-e Kayan, to help the forces of Amanullah in the Kabul area. They were given a large amount of money in the form of silver coins – those minted by the czar in Russia – which were sewn into several belts worn under their shirts;

altogether the silver weighed as much as thirty pounds. They set off by horseback. In the area of the Unai Pass they stopped for tea, but while they were there several men started leading off their horses. Khan Jan and his friends ran after them but because they were so weighted down with silver they could scarcely run. Unable to recover the horses they turned back to the tea house and discussed what to do. Soon someone else came along who said they knew who had rustled their horses and for a price would bring them back. This caused more discussion because they were unsure if they could trust these strangers. Eventually they agreed, and so followed the men out side of town. In an isolated place, however, the men turned their guns on them and demanded their money. The result for Khan Jan and his friends was that they lost everything. They lost their horses and their silver, and they missed the war.

Humiliating as this event was for them, it may have saved them from an even worse disaster, because the pro-Amanullah forces in Kabul were forced to flee. Folks in Shibar heard that as many as 600 soldiers were coming to Shibar but in fact far fewer ever reached the area. When the Kalakani forces forced their way into the area the people of Shibar had to flee into the mountains. It was a difficult winter.

This event, however momentous for Khan Jan's and his friends, was nevertheless of little consequence to the war, but it reveals something of the social situation in Bamian during this unstable period. Local populations, owing to the pressures put upon them, were in some cases – as in Fuladi – conflicted over how to deal with the looming issues of the moment. And in the absence of government, of the rule of law, there was blatant lawlessness. None of this surprises us of course, for not only was governmental control now absent, but also missing were the customary local means of social control that might

have contained lawless behavior in other circumstances. But this was a time when most of the mechanisms of social control were without effect.

### Conclusion

The trends in Bamian during Amanullah's time seemed to track with what was going on elsewhere in the country. The rising power of government in Kabul under King Amanullah in the early 1920s was represented in Bamian in the form of an enlarging bureaucracy in the Markaz and in the establishment of a new *alaqadāri* in Shibar. But there was also an evident loss of social order, in Bamian as well as elsewhere in the country, when the Amanullah administration was overturned under Habibullah Kalakani in 1928-1929; this was manifest in the experience of Khan Jan and his friends on the way to war.

In fact, those conditions, the attempt to foster a more effective central government, even as serious challenges to the whole system were lurking in the countryside, are familiar to all of us, for they are the conditions in place at this very time. The world we have described in Amanullah's time seems again to be as real and vivid now as it was then. We pray that God will enable the country to avoid the course of events that marked Amanullah's reign.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> The reference here is to the Taliban who at the time of writing were interrupting traffic into Kabul from several directions. The most important recent work on the Taliban is, Robert Crews and Amin Tarzi, editors, 2008, The Taliban and the Crisis of Afghanistan, (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University). It provides extensive guidance to the relevant literature.