

4. Trouble in Birgilich

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Anthropologists today see "culture" as reproduced, constructed in social interaction. It is not so much received ready-made from the past as it is a fund of meaningful forms—words, images, gestures, monuments, etc.—that actors may deploy or invoke (or ignore) according to their interests in defining situations. "Reality" in this sense is constructed, piecemeal, as people engage socially (Barth 1993). In this interactive process people may even deliberately, consciously, construct a "reality" that no one believes in—what Fredrick G. Bailey calls a "collusive lie" (1991:34, 35). Collusive lies are the public conventions that groups agree to live with, for whatever reason, whether or not everyone agrees with them or is wholly committed to them. In such cases, individuals have particular reasons for joining in the collusion; collusive lies are merely negotiated agreements for practical purposes. Underneath the conventions that collectivities agree to comply with are individual understandings and private motives. This situation allows individuals to have agendas that are concealed in public interaction. In this article I examine an affair in which a contested issue is resolved by an agreement that no one believed in and in which, it turns out, some people had intentions that were concealed from the rest. Subterfuge infected the whole business.

A DISPUTE IN SHIBAR

The affair took place in the 1960s in east-central Afghanistan, well before the several wars that disrupted the region in subsequent years. This article can be regarded as a mere memoir of a society now long passed. I describe the affair in three parts: first, a few notes on the social context; then, a summary of the events as told to me; then, some interpretive comments on the story. I conclude by returning to the topic of how social realities are constructed, and in particular of how social affairs in the course of daily events are fraught with ambiguity and sometimes subterfuge.¹

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THE CONTEXT

The story was told to me in 1967 by Mir Gholam Hasan, a man who served as *mir* on behalf of several households in the region to the government. A *mir* was a representative of a group of communities to the local government. They were usually chosen by consent of both sides, but because the *mir* himself could read and had special access to officials and other notables, he had certain advantages over his client communities. Sometimes a *mir* could become so dominant that he could make excessive demands on his clients.

The critical event was a fight over bushes. In the Hazarajat the scattered clumps of thorn bushes growing in the mountains are vital fuel. In many communities one of the important tasks is to stockpile bushes for winter, when cold temperatures are severe and can last for weeks. Because some communities have less thorn bush in their neighboring highlands, men and boys may range far and wide in the search for bushes; at the same time the owners of well-stocked mountains can be protective of what they have.

The fight took place in the highlands above the valley of Birgilich, which lies just north of the road between Shibar and Bamian in east-central Afghanistan. In this valley and its environs Ismailis and "Twelver" (*Ithnā Ashariya*) Shi'a populations were interspersed, usually in separate communities. The fight occurred between a group of Ismailis from a tributary valley known as Jawzar and the Shi'a Sayyeds who presided over affairs in Birgilich.

The Ismailis complained of abuses by the Sayyeds, who in any case had substantial leverage over their Hazara neighbors because of their special status as a sacred lineage within the Shi'a community. Also, many of them studied Islamic subjects and, as religious specialists, led in collective prayers and preached and taught among the Shi'a; some of them, in response to popular demand, wrote charms that putatively protected from harm or healed from illness. Also, Sayyeds were thought by some of the common people to have the power to divine. (Once I met a man who was searching for a Sayyed who might divine 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 all the way to town to see a doctor.) As a result of these special services Sayyeds enjoyed respect and often received gifts from the common people. Some Sayyeds were, in fact, venerated as *pirs*—that is, as having special powers because of their putative access to God. Also, most Sayyed families were well connected in the wider social world, as they often intermarried with other notable families. Such connections—laterally to other eminent figures and vertically to dependent populations—enabled the more powerful Sayyeds to acquire wealth as well as exert influence on public affairs.² A Birgilich Sayyed had for many years been the *mir* of the people of the valley, including the Ismaili communities of the tributary valley of

Jawzar. At the time of the fight that person was named Shah Osayn. As it would turn out, the whole matter was in a sense about him.³

MIR GHOLAM HASAN'S STORY

Three men from Jawzar went up into the mountains to collect bushes above Birgilich [whose vegetation was claimed by the Sayyeds]. These men had often gone into these hills to collect bushes surreptitiously at night, but in this instance they went up during the day, and they were caught up there by some of the leaders of the Sayyed community. There was a fight and the leader of the Jawzaris, Ali Jam, was seriously injured in the head.

The men from Jawzar went to the *alaqadārī* [the local government office] of Shibar, and complained against the Sayyeds of Birgilich, claiming that the Sayyeds had attacked them and seriously injured Ali Jam. The *alaqadār* 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 *alaqadārī*.

The *alaqadār* in Shibar tried to settle the dispute, but without success. The wrangling went on for a year. We [the mirs of the region] did everything possible to settle this dispute. 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 it was the sectarian enmity between the two sides. The people from Jawzar were Ismaili, while the Sayyeds were Shi'a [i.e., Twelvers]. 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 Jawzari Ismailis themselves numbered about 150 households whereas the Sayyeds of Birgilich had about 20 households, and in Shibar generally there were more than 1,000 Ismaili households versus only 700 Shi'a households.

Eventually, the dispute was formally passed on by the *alaqadār* 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 *alaqadārī*. Then we would go to the governorship in Bamian. I was on the side of the people of Jawzar, whereas Shah Osayn [although mir of the Jawzaris] was on the side of the Birgilichi Sayyeds. Several of us, including Mir Ahmad Jan and some others, went to Bamian and made a petition. We paid maybe 60,000 *afghanis* [Afghan unit of currency] 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 Jawzaris. 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.

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

After all this money was spent a new *hakem* [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 changed their story. They went to the new *hakem* and said, "These people, Ali Jam and the others, actually stole our cow." It was a lie.

Jan Muhammad wanted to settle this dispute, 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 this case over with. I want to close this dossier." So everyone went back to the *alaqadārī* and there they had to answer more questions. They wrote, "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. They didn't steal my cow." In fact, there was no stolen cow—the whole thing was a farce. Now everyone was lying. The 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 Jawzaris and the Sayyeds were both let go.

It took more than two years and it cost a lot of money, but Jan 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 80,000 afghanis. The Sayyeds lost a great deal because some of them had been thrown 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 of 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 cows to plow. Even though the Jawzaris had previously taken bushes at night, this time they went up there openly in broad daylight. . . . They wanted to be free from these Sayyeds. Previously these people were very *ājez* [poor, weak]. Later, when they had become knowledgeable and wise, and knew that other people would come to their side, like the people of Shibar and others, then they knew these people were for them, so they went and took the bushes so that they could be free of the Sayyeds.

Also, they thought I would help them. They wanted me to serve as their mir, not the Sayyeds [i.e., Shah Osayn]. 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. These hundred houses had decided to do this, "so that we can be free of these Sayyeds."

INTERPRETIVE COMMENTS

Note that the mirs in this story—the official intermediaries between local communities and the government—tried at first to resolve the dispute informally. This was because the costs in bribes rose as more officials became involved. In fact, I was told by government officials as well as the local people that bribes were considered necessary by the local people in order to ensure that they 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, implying that they had already decided against the giver. No one believed he could get a fair hearing without paying out substantial amounts to the (poorly paid) officials who handled their case.

In this dispute the Sayyeds seemed to be weakening as the acrimonious proceedings dragged on. This was evident, first, in their attempt to persuade Ali Jam to give up on his claims against them, and later in their attempt to change the story from a fight about bushes to a quarrel over a stolen 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 regard a fight over a stolen cow as more authentic.

But the new hakem, in seeking a compromise, created yet another story: he proposed that the problem be stated as the disappearance of a cow rather than its theft. In such a case no one would be at fault. Whatever the reason for the fight, the hakem's proposal took the case a long way from the original issue of rights to bushes or a fractured head. We do not know 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 his situation, by that time everyone—maybe even Ali Jam—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. And now—at least, as the hakem proposed it—no one was at fault.

Even so, it turns out that falsification was already intrinsic to the affair from the beginning. What originally seemed accidental, the Sayyeds

catching the Jawzaris in the midst of a theft of their bushes, was actually a deliberate provocation. The Ismailis of Jawzar 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, which would engage the rest of the community in Shibar, thus enabling the Jawzari Ismailis to extricate themselves from the control of their Shi'a mir, Shah Osayn. It was a roundabout way to break the bonds of dependency. So there were several narratives of "reality" in this affair. There was the story told by Ali Jam's friends when they went to the *alaqadārī*; there was the story the Sayyeds told in rebuttal. There was the story about the stolen cow invented by the Sayyeds when they went to the *hakem*; there was the story of the lost cow (possibly, the *hakem* said, eaten by wolves—very unlikely in summer), the report placed in the official record. And there was the story about the secret plan of the Jawzaris to extricate themselves from Shah Osayn.

A subterfuge theft that prompted a fight that was supposed to create a regional donnybrook and humiliate the Sayyeds in order to break their control over their Ismaili clients was, therefore, as Mir Gholam Hasan said, a farce all around. Whatever really happened, what is accessible to us now, is a series of fabrications.

ON THE SOCIAL CONSTRUCTION OF REALITY

As Fredrik Barth puts it, when people "work" to construct their realities they create situations that have multiple and contrary realities (1993:4). Societies are disordered systems, "where . . . such relatively determined connections as there are will generate processes and angles at odds with each other, producing innumerable large and small incoherencies in culture and in the body politic" (1993:5).⁴ Mir Gholam Hasan's tale focuses on an obvious instance of reality construction, that is, the fictitious story created by the *hakem*. But there was another instance of reality construction here, one working at odds to and hidden within the public rigmarole. When the Jawzaris secretly hatched a plan to create a situation that would prompt a fight, they were conceiving of a new reality: that conditions were right to wrest themselves free of Shah Osayn. As Mir Gholam Hasan put it, "Previously these people were very *ājez* (poor, weak). Later, when they had become knowledgeable and wise, and knew that other people would come to their side, . . . then they knew these people were for them, so they went and took the bushes. . . ." The Jawzari plan was another construction of the situation in Shibar. Narratives like the Jawzari's scheme to start a fight over bushes and the *hakem's* fabricated story about a lost cow make situations understandable; they help people organize social life—even, sometimes, the official record.

NOTES

1. This report is part of a larger project to make available to other scholars my interviews in Bamian during the period of my field work in 1966–1968 and in subsequent interviews with Hazaras elsewhere.

2. Like eminent religious families elsewhere, a member of the Birgilich 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 Hazara territories.

3. Hazara Sayyeds are mentioned frequently in the literature: Bacon 1958:25, 32; Ferdinand 1959:16, 17; Harpviken 1996; Monsutti 2004; Mousavi 1998:26; Poladi 1989; Schurmann 1962:104.

4. This analysis has been enabled by Barth's distinction between the way meanings are deployed by actors and the way they are deployed by observers. Those who act invest their behavior with meaning through intentions that are culturally informed, whereas those who observe must impute to the behaviors of others their own culturally informed presumptions. As Barth puts it, "To the actor, the event of own behavior is an act by virtue of the intent that shapes it. . . . To other parties, . . . event becomes act through interpretation, through the way its purposes and entailments are understood at the time of its manifestation" (Barth 1993:158–159). This difficult but original and creative work has been strangely ignored. Steedly's review of anthropological writings on Southeast Asia (1999) omits any reference to it, even though she mentions the companion piece by Unni Wikan (1993); Clifford Geertz (2000), who cites many other works on Southeast Asia, makes no mention of it.

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