Over the millennia a wide range of peoples from diverse cultures have come to this land now called Afghanistan where four great civilizations meet. The centrality of Afghanistan as a zone of intercommunication has attracted empire builders, conquering armies, men of intellect, missionaries, pilgrims, traders, artisans, and political exiles from Rome to China, as well as nomadic tribes from across the Oxus River. Afghan culture blossomed out of this medley of assorted reciprocal interactions.

For the purposes of this discussion, culture embraces those shared ideals, beliefs, emotions, and customs that mould behavior and place value on such creative artistic expressions as art, music, literature, and architecture. Culture defines the way people utilize their material and non-material resources, and it is important to note that the measure of being cultured in Afghanistan, where close to ninety percent are non-literate, need not be equated with being well read. Those who follow the prescriptions of etiquette command considerable respect.

The variations evident among individual pieces of Afghanistan’s cultural mosaic add to the lively appeal of the overall image. Many are vestiges of other cultures and the differences have long been cherished. Yet, a search for unifying indicators reveals that despite pride of origin, despite episodes of friction, despite plays for power, and despite self-serving ethnocentric panegyrics, a sense of belonging, of being Afghan, is evident among the general public.

**SOME TRADITIONAL CULTURAL PATTERNS**

Honor is the rock upon which social status rests. Afghans are well known for their vigorous defense of individual honor, especially when deviant female behavior is an issue, for women are upheld as the highest standard by which morality is judged. Customs such as seclusion and veiling developed, in part, to protect family honor, as did the practice of setting aside shielded living, learning, working, and entertaining spaces for women.

Indigenous architecture ensures such privacy. Exteriors present anonymous surfaces with no distinguishing embellishment, while interiors strictly divide spaces for guests from secluded living quarters. Courtyard façades were typically decorated with carved Kashmiri-style woodwork around windows and doors, and rooms for entertaining guests were once adorned with ornate pressed-stucco decoration that were visual expressions of the respect with which guests are always welcomed. Sadly, the stucco and woodwork have largely fallen out of fashion and are no longer utilized by modern architects.

Variations of clothing distinguish ethnic groups, identified by intricate embroidery that expresses individual and group identity, social and economic status, stages in lifecycles, and changing sociopolitical trends. Specific designs proclaim places of origin; even turbans take on

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distinguishing characteristics depending on the arrangement of the folds. During the 1970s, when peace prevailed and road networks expanded, turban caps were selected more for their pleasing colors and designs than as declarations of origin. After the massive population displacements that followed the 1978 coup d’état, however, refugees arriving in Pakistan once again donned turban caps bearing their home village designs to affirm their identities.

Love of poetry is pervasive throughout Afghanistan. Literates hold in reverence the renowned classical poets from Iran and India as well as those from Central Asia. In addition, because of robust oral traditions, many non-literates are well aware of much of their literary heritage. Pashtu poetry, although often neglected in the past, now enjoys a considerable reputation. It must be noted, however, that almost all Afghans are adept at composing verses and that poetry readings are a highly popular form of entertainment throughout the country.

Folktales and folk songs are enjoyed by rural and urban populations alike and are largely unbounded by identification with any single group, except for those stories that strengthen the historical exploits of local heroes. Other folk stories and legends fall into several categories, such as those related to the heroes of Islam or those with moral messages. These tales perpetuate existing societal values, without protest, and are important for socialization of children. They promise rewards and warn of punishment. Humorous, joke-like stories are also very popular.

Although frowned upon by many conservatives, music is another deeply embedded feature in the culture, and it has many regional variations. Social occasions are inevitably enlivened by music; bus drivers keep tapes of assorted regional selections to suit requests from passengers; mothers sing songs to give children a sense of security by clearly emphasizing place and group. The numerous genres of classical music, closely tied to Indian music and instruments that were once popular at court, are now enjoying a revival among many youthful students.

Except for renowned Afghan carpets, flat-weave pieces, and embroidered wall hangings, displays of paintings or photographs were rarely employed in domestic decor, although western wallpaper dotted with a plethora of framed photographs in the Victorian manner enjoyed a short vogue among the elite during the 1920s. The magnificent mosaic tile work and ornamental brickwork patronized by Ghaznavid, Ghorid, and Timurid royalty during earlier centuries never became part of the popular culture, although a few modern mosques and mausoleums in cities have utilized some of the ancient techniques and designs. Nevertheless, Afghans treasure the spectacular examples that survive in places like Herat, Balkh, and Mazar, to which considerable preservation and restoration efforts have been devoted.

Afghans are justly famed for their hospitality. Any excuse to get together will do, whether it be for births, engagements, weddings, to mark changing seasons, or to welcome and bid farewell to travelers and honored guests. Family picnics in gardens or on the banks of rivers also express the genuine love Afghans have for the natural beauty of their environments. Generally speaking, such festive occasions are typically celebrated by family outings, visits to the homes of relatives and friends, new sets of clothing, and the consumption of vast quantities of seasonal delicacies.

More organized public festivities, such as those that take place in Mazar on Nawruz, 21st of March, the Afghan New Year, are often held in association with religious shrines. Both Sunni
and Shia from all walks of life—men, women, and children—traditionally flock to major shrines to enjoy a wide range of entertainment, from story-tellers to carrousels, and seasonal delicacies such as fried fish served with crisp, deep-fired swirls of pastry soaked in sugar syrup.

CREATING A NATIONAL CULTURE

When Afghanistan emerged as a modern nation-state after 1880, it was confined within borders drawn by outsiders. New architectural styles were borrowed from Central Asia and the West, educated men and women adopted Western dress, and nascent secular schools were opened. But the reforms introduced in the 1920s by King Amanullah were summarily rejected by tribal revolts in 1929, resulting in the expulsion of the reform-minded king and the installation of a new dynasty that lasted until 1978. Pursuing more cautious reforms, the new rulers set out to cultivate moderate nation-building activities that would strengthen attitudes focused on gaining national unity and loyalty for the monarchy.

Among other things, road systems and urban services expanded, causing a surge in rural-urban migration. Many group-identifying symbols began to fade as a result. The government also introduced official national holidays to mark days of political significance, such as Labor Day, Students’ Day, Mothers’ Day, and Farmers’ Day, which rewarded superior animals, fruits, and vegetables. These festivities were complete with official parades and public speeches lauding the government.

The role of radio as a medium for promoting nationhood was extensively exploited. Radio Kabul was inaugurated in 1940 and by 1966 it had supplanted the traditional role of the nomads as the primary distributor of news in the countryside. Radio and tape recorders also played a part in establishing a place for women in the public sphere. Early female radio broadcasters must be credited with lessening the stigma attached to female voices being heard outside family circles and for breaking down reservations towards music in general.

Several changes in Afghan theater took place. Traditional provincial theater groups added comic skits, making merciless fun of urbanized pseudo-sophistication, to their standard acts starring acrobats and strongmen. The Kabul Theater largely staged translations of Russian and American works. Afghan Films, on the other hand, produced some striking films exploring the strains accompanying shifting norms of social behavior, especially those associated with more frequent socializing opportunities between young men and women.

Other changes in the social life of Kabul’s young middle class also fostered the growth of popular music. It became fashionable to hold engagement and wedding parties in hotels rather than at home. This eventually gave rise to a plethora of huge luxurious wedding halls featuring loud trendy bands, many of which specialize in variations of jazz or hot rock in addition to occasional compositions based on Afghan folk and popular music.

Artists failed to experience the same surge in popularity as the musicians. Early urban art work was fundamentally eclectic, following various styles from bucolic English pastoral scenes to Picasso without assimilating recognizable Afghan characteristics. Some leading artists in Herat revived the tradition of Timurid miniatures and they enjoyed a short period of popularity, as did
the sensitive portrayals of life in the high mountains of the Wakhan Valley by a Kirghiz artist, and the dynamic renditions by a farmer from Aibak of epic battles described in the *Shah Nameh*. But on the whole, artists failed to win public support, for it never became fashionable to collect Afghan art. In the countryside, on the other hand, numerous tea houses, mosques, and the exteriors of trucks were decorated with exuberant folk art. These mostly disappeared during the war years.

The search for an Afghan literary image was caught up in a mixture of nostalgia for the past, glorification of nature, and fervor for social reform. India’s Rabindranath Tagore and Tudeh Party writers in Iran became the most notable sources of inspiration, but there was little sustained effort to promote Afghan writers. Currently, however, many male and female authors are attracting enthusiastic readers, aided by a colossal increase in private publishing houses.

The Kabul Museum was inaugurated in 1931 and became the depository of finds made by numerous archaeological missions. Gradually it came to hold one of the world’s most opulent collections of ancient art, but it sat in isolation and few efforts were taken to utilize its superb resources to strengthen knowledge of Afghanistan’s past among the general public. Interest in the restoration of ancient monuments was brisk, but in some areas monuments were pulled down, without remorse, to make way for parks and broad avenues.

The trend in domestic housing turned almost exclusively to Western models in the cities, capped by the Microrayan housing complex in Kabul that was begun in the early 1960s in the image of architecture throughout Central Asia that was neither aesthetically nor culturally appropriate. More recent grandiose styles imported from neighboring countries violate the typically Afghan dislike of ostentation. Afghan architects have yet to find a style expressing Afghan values regarding space.

Two points must be emphasized. First, the modernizing efforts of the ruling elite and the urbanized populations that followed their lead were so decidedly Western-oriented that many traditional values held sacrosanct by the majority of the population were brushed aside. Second, the cultural innovations that were undertaken were mostly confined to the cities, thus widening the rural-urban divide.

ASSAULTS ON THE CULTURE BEGIN

The *coup d’état* in 1978 led to a Soviet occupation that lasted until 1989 from which millions fled into exile, where the young had few opportunities to learn about their history. Political parties based in Peshawar (the *mujahideen*) took up the reins of government in Kabul in 1992, but internal factional infighting kept the country in chaos making way for a period of doctrinaire ultra-conservatism under the Taliban from 1996 to 2001. It was during their reign, in March 2001, that the colossal Buddhas at Bamiyan were dynamited and popular sculptures at the museum were smashed to bits by government officials. During this period of unrest, archaeological sites across the country were systematically plundered while the museum was looted and gutted by rocket–fire that felled the roof.
We shall never know what has been lost through this clandestine looting. Most seriously, these destructive activities removed the possibility of reconstructing the history of the sites. Works of art are not produced in a vacuum: artifacts must be studied *in situ* if the dynamics of the cultures from which they sprung are to be understood. This is no longer possible at many sites.

More happily, the diligent museum staff packed and moved unique objects to places of safe haven in Kabul where they remain in bank vaults awaiting the construction of a secure museum building on land adjacent to the current building. Meanwhile, the erstwhile dilapidated museum building, once an empty shell, now stands transformed. The halls and galleries are now filled with newly excavated objects from the Buddhist site at Mes Aynak south of Kabul, as well as looted objects returned by museums and dealers abroad. Significantly, the museum has initiated several outreach awareness-raising activities, including visits by school children (see Latify et al., this volume).

**TIME FOR ACTION**

As the National Museum of Afghanistan emerges from its empty, soot-encrusted shell with its graceful arched corridors and sweeping marble stairs gleaming with new promise, it is time to release it from its traditional position of quiet isolation. It is time to enable it to project its rightful image as the visual manifestation of the national heritage. It is time to make sure it reaches out to imbue citizens with pride in their past accomplishments and inspire them with a desire to protect their heritage.

Such thoughts occasioned the decision to gather experts from around the world to share ideas on how to invigorate the cultural environment in Afghanistan. Foremost among the issues to be addressed was the need to generate an ambience that would be open to creative ideas from all quarters, private and official, that was imaginative, flexible, and realistic, focusing on ideas that can be realized rather than grandiose ideals beyond the possibility of realistic achievement. Major issues for consideration would include the following.

A pragmatic national strategy incorporating both short-term and long-term objectives is a primary requirement. But, as we have seen too often, strategy plans which may look impressive on paper repeatedly fall short of their objectives because of lackluster leadership. Unless highly motivated individuals are put in charge who are adept at policy-making and management, as well as entrusted with sufficient implementing powers, little can be expected. This requires more than the ubiquitous committee that meets periodically, talks, and then does nothing. What is needed is a governing High Council for Culture, headed by a Commissioner or some such prestigious title, keenly involved and delegated with the power to make decisions binding.

But first, such a body must know what is involved, what needs protection, what needs support and, most importantly, who is involved. This requires not only coordination, but genuine cooperation to undertake another priority that would be to conduct a national survey of cultural assets and properties. This should include the availability of those human resources with artistic skills as well as those experienced in excavation, conservation, management, and protection. This monumental task would need the input of expertise from many disparate agencies and groups, especially those internationals who have been involved in excavations for decades who
have not only the technical skills but, significantly, a deep feeling for the culture. Here the maintenance of a constantly up-dated database is essential (see Fisher, this volume, p. 8).

Furthermore, the endless variations that characterize the cultural heritage touch all parts of the nation. Actors in every development sector need to be aware of this. Of the twenty-five ministries currently functioning, at least half should be associated with the High Cultural Council in some manner. It must not be forgotten that in the 1950s it was a road-building project that brought to light the incomparable site of Surkh Kotal from which the key to the Kushan language was revealed. Today the extensive infrastructure that will inevitably accompany the anticipated expansion of mineral extraction should remain uppermost in everyone’s mind. Difficult choices will surface; priorities must be set.

Having established a dynamic governing High Council for Culture to set priorities and avoid irreparable cultural damage and losses, it then becomes critical to build the capacity of departments and institutions so as to enable them to implement and manage projects with sensitivity. Competent planners, archaeologists, conservationists, supervisors, monitors, accountants, and database experts are essential or else brilliant ideas will lie stymied, momentum will be lost, and few projects will materialize successfully. Training components, therefore, need to be built into all projects, beginning with on-site experience under the tutelage of local and foreign experts, continuing with advanced studies abroad with the assistance of international partners.

Here it is well to introduce the intangible heritage that cannot be neglected. Artists, musicians, artisans, weavers of wool and weavers of silk, embroiderers, bead workers, jewelry makers, and lacquer workers, among others, should receive their due share of attention, particularly in the provinces, for Kabul is not all there is to Afghanistan and never has been. Provincial folk artists are a case in point. Some of the most vibrant folk art that once decorated mosques, teahouses, and trucks are almost nowhere to be seen today. Equally regretted is the absence of the exuberantly decorated horse carriages that enlivened the streets of Herat and Mazar. Commissioning artists to decorate neighborhood mosques and teahouses is one possibility, being mindful to avoid artificial, purely touristic enclaves. Outstanding traditional skills, particularly those related to the conservation of monuments, also warrant encouragement.

Not to be forgotten are the institutions, like the former Historical Society, that brought together poets, authors, playwrights, and folk tellers through their magazines and publications, which provided a symbiosis between cultural traditions and innovations. Photographers, film, radio, television artists, and writers, in addition to increasing numbers of advocacy groups within the maturing civil society, are now dynamically active in novel ways. Their output increases daily, providing exciting prospects, but too many operate with little encouragement except from a few radio and television visionaries who lead in innovative directions.

Not all efforts should be concentrated under the aegis of a High Cultural Council. Communities must also be aware of their key role in protecting cultural properties. Monuments that fulfilled meaningful roles in community life best survived recent decades of conflict. Unless communities are encouraged to take pride in and accept responsibility for the monuments in their vicinity, deterioration will continue no matter how much conservation work is undertaken. To this end,
community action groups dedicated to generating commitment need to be provided with awareness-building learning materials along with technical support. Here the Ministry of Education and the Ministry of Higher Education must recognize their responsibility to include cultural issues in curricula, starting from grade one, and to lead in the production of a wide range of complimentary learning materials.

The issue of awareness-raising is critical, complex, and massive, starting at the very least by dispelling the commonly held perception that museums are simply storehouses for dusty cases full of dead objects. The distribution of easy-to-read learning materials that will motivate people to learn more about their heritage would seem to be an eminently realistic goal now that printing facilities in Afghanistan have developed so phenomenally, as have media networks. To require new projects to include the production of awareness-raising materials as an obligatory component would not seem to be too onerous.

Over the years the National Museum has gratefully received numbers of looted objects from institutions, dealers, and individuals, here and abroad (see Latify et al., this volume, p. 6; Simpson, this volume). These are highly appreciated. To capitalize on what appears to be an increasing inclination on the part of holders of looted objects to return them, it might be beneficial to consider the feasibility of setting up a clearinghouse in Afghanistan to gather information about the location of illegally acquired objects, set up tracing mechanisms, identify genuine missing objects authoritatively, and formulate policies related to their return. At the very least this would enable scholars to study objects while exploring methods for their retrieval. This would build on similar efforts previously undertaken abroad that were not sustained.

And finally but not least, none of the above will be sustainable without the revision of the Afghan Antiquities Law.