



WILEY-  
BLACKWELL



A · M · E · R · I · C · A · N  
A N T H R O P O L O G I C A L  
A S S O C I A T I O N

---

Review: [untitled]

Author(s): M. Nazif Shahrani

Source: *American Ethnologist*, Vol. 11, No. 1 (Feb., 1984), pp. 196-198

Published by: [Blackwell Publishing](#) on behalf of the [American Anthropological Association](#)

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/644374>

Accessed: 04/04/2011 15:57

---

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of JSTOR's Terms and Conditions of Use, available at <http://www.jstor.org/page/info/about/policies/terms.jsp>. JSTOR's Terms and Conditions of Use provides, in part, that unless you have obtained prior permission, you may not download an entire issue of a journal or multiple copies of articles, and you may use content in the JSTOR archive only for your personal, non-commercial use.

Please contact the publisher regarding any further use of this work. Publisher contact information may be obtained at <http://www.jstor.org/action/showPublisher?publisherCode=black>.

Each copy of any part of a JSTOR transmission must contain the same copyright notice that appears on the screen or printed page of such transmission.

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact [support@jstor.org](mailto:support@jstor.org).



*Blackwell Publishing* and *American Anthropological Association* are collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *American Ethnologist*.

<http://www.jstor.org>

tion of structure at both individual and group levels. The central concern, then, is with the construction of meanings—or questions as to how the “fiction” of celebration is achieved. The text, however, is less questioning than illustrative.

The body of the book is divided into five sections, each concerned with a theme to be discovered in celebratory culture: (1) material objects, their significance; (2) ritual process, its paradoxical nature; (3) language; (4) religion; and (5) sociation. Each section begins with an explanatory essay that defines analytical terms and their relationships to sociocultural phenomena. Then follow descriptive articles in which a wide range of celebratory forms in several (mostly American ethnic) cultures is covered.

Essays present a number of statements on celebratory themes. We learn that ritual objects are transformational and that, combined with certain behaviors, they structure meaning and negotiation of the worlds within which they occur. We learn that festive language is a symbolic repertoire facilitating both the identification of users with, and the allocation of powers within, their universe. We are presented with the concept of “sacra” and with discourse on its place in the schema of ritual culture. Invoked are the concepts of “sociation” and “sociability” and the distinction between them earlier formulated by the sociologist Simmel. In some respects, *Celebration* is, if not a catalog, then a guide given to detailing a range of concepts and analytical formulas developed over the years to facilitate fuller understanding of rituals and their social significance.

Although there is some unevenness, most of the essays are well written. And all are concerned with presenting the twin views that (1) festive ritual (celebration) is necessary to the sustained well-being of the social body, and (2) ritual carries out its mission through a sort of deception. Things are what they are, but they are also much more; once defined, ritual objects and performances become charged with a power that is creative but also dependent on allocations and commitments from the social body. The overriding thought through the collection finds unity at the objective heart of particular celebratory behaviors and also as their underlying and most general motive. All of the nondescriptive essays undertake statements on the nature of unity, and here a qualitative difference shows between the anthropological and the folkloristic. Whereas MacAloon, Turner, and Myerhoff present well-reasoned and comprehensive (if contestable) arguments, the folklorists are less convincing in their general statements. Perhaps this is nothing more than the result of concern and practice.

The criteria of social unity and the analysis of those cultural processes through which the dialectic linkage between fragmentation and harmony occurs have been central to the work of Turner and other anthropologists with an interest in ritual symbolism for some time. Over the years, certain assumptions on the nature of this unity and the dialectic through which it is preserved

have achieved ascendancy among us. The folklorists are less certain in their approach to the “meta-social.” And while it is satisfying to have a book that states and illustrates that celebrations are a species of “meta-experience” that simultaneously obliterates and revitalizes us, it would have been interesting to plumb the uncertainties of the folklorists who hint at a less than uniform interior universe. Turner’s methodology dominates the book and has, as a matter of fact, been elsewhere usefully criticized (*Social Science and Medicine* 15B (3):379–386, 1981). He writes with fervor, and in this has set a tone not only for this book but for much that is written on the subject. One wonders sometimes if “inner meanings” are truly as important as they are made out to be.

It is perhaps too much to ask of the editor in this case that he emphasize contrastive perspectives, especially when the spirit of the exhibition that stimulated the book itself assumed a sort of unity of mankind, expressed in certain intentions that precede the occurrence of ritual objects and performances. And the encouragement to readers to perceive themselves as sharing a set of interior regulations with the rest of the world’s peoples may more than justify the absence of a critical inquiry. In any case, this is an interesting and quite informative book. The written text is suitably complemented by photographs, and it could be a useful selection for both the interested lay reader and for classes concerned with the understanding and analysis of ritual culture.

***Buzkashi: Game and Power in Afghanistan.* G. WHITNEY AZOY. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1982. xi + 147 pp., figures, illustrations, notes, index. \$17.50 (cloth).**

M. NAZIF SHAHRANI  
Pitzer College

Few things in Afghanistan have drawn as much attention from foreign journalists, explorers, writers, filmmakers, diplomats, tourists, and researchers as the spectacular and exotic equestrian game of *buzkashi*. However, a systematic study and analysis of the game and its sociological significance in Afghan society remains problematic. Misinformation, exaggeration, distortion, and misunderstandings abound concerning the game itself and its role in the understanding of other aspects of Afghan society. *Buzkashi*, the first serious, book-length anthropological attempt at a study of the game, unfortunately has done little to clarify the problems surrounding our understanding of *buzkashi* and, particularly, its relationship to power politics in Afghanistan.

The focus of Azoy’s study, as the subtitle of his book indicates, is “game and power in Afghanistan.” Two types of *buzkashi* are distinguished: *tudabarai*, what Azoy calls the “traditional game,” played in rural settings during *tooi* (“wed-

dings and circumcision festivities") under the sponsorship of local strongmen, the khans, with the outcome (i.e., scoring) considered "volatile and violent"; and *qarajai* buzkashi, a "modern sport," with complex rules, teams, systematic scorekeeping and a predictable outcome, sponsored by the government and played during "calendric, religious and patriotic" holiday festivals (p. 7). Some ethnographic omissions notwithstanding, the description of how the game and sport of buzkashi is played is the most useful part of the book.

I find Azoy's discussion of relations between the game and sport of buzkashi and political processes in Afghanistan, the principal focus of his study, far less satisfactory. Azoy contends that buzkashi serves not only as "a metaphor for chaotic, uninhibited and uncontrollable competition" (p. 3) which characterizes Afghan rural politics dominated by the khans, but also provides "an arena for political process" (p. 11) in both local and national contexts. For Azoy, what makes life in Afghanistan "like buzkashi" ("at least sometimes," but then spectacularly so) is the absence of "truly corporate" groups and institutions which clearly define leadership and authority. With government control seldom running "beyond the few paved roads . . . the only reliable security lies . . . in self-help coupled with reputation [of the khans]" (p. 25). As a result, public affairs in Afghanistan, we are told, have a "spectacularly bellicose quality," and "only by means of success and spoils, . . . can a man gain reputation and thus authority over supporters" (p. 23). What makes buzkashi particularly relevant to politics by reputation is the fact that "the locus of authority is a problem at all phases of buzkashi" (p. 20). Since buzkashi exists as a metaphor for uncontrollability, Azoy then argues, "What better public opportunity could there be for the demonstration of control?" (p. 21). It is in this context that the author is tempted to reverse F. G. Bailey's well-known simile of "politics is a competitive game" to "competitive game [of buzkashi] is politics" (p. 17) and then turn his attention solely to the "buzkashi process itself."

The most serious problem in this study, in my view, concerns Azoy's conception of the notion of khan and the nature of local political leadership, particularly in northern Afghanistan. He has taken Barth's model of the Swat Pathan khan and inappropriately applied it, lock, stock, and barrel, to the ethnographic context of non-Pashtun populations in northern Afghanistan. The fact that the author has found Barth's model of a Pashtun khan applicable to the rest of Afghanistan is understandable since it appears that his major informant, host, and patron during his fieldwork in Kunduz was a Pashtun khan, a member of a relatively small but politically dominant Pashtun colony in the region. While it is likely that the Swat Pathan model may have been applicable in the case of the Pashtun segment of the population studied—although even this is not demonstrated in this work—all the recent avail-

able ethnographic studies from the Kunduz area (Barfield, Shalinsky), and other parts of northern Afghanistan (Beattie, Canfield, R. Tapper, and Shahrani), strongly militate against the relevance of a Pashtun conception of khan among Uzbeks, Kirghiz, Turkmen, Tajiks, Wakhi, Hazaras, and other non-Pashtun groups. In fact, in these communities behaviors such as public bellicosity, overt competitiveness, claims to "control and authority," etc., are likely to bring disrepute and shame rather than "name" and reputation. Most Uzbek and Tajik khans in the north do not live in castlelike compounds, do not keep private mullahs, and certainly do not have their own arsenals in order to obtain spoils or to defend them (at least not since the beginning of the 20th century). Azoy apparently chooses to ignore the remark of an Uzbek horseman who told him, "Once we had the power. . . . It's the turn of the Pushtun [sic] now" (p. 12). If, indeed, the non-Pashtun khans have begun to behave like their dominant Pashtun counterparts in the Kunduz area, the issue is not addressed in the book.

*Buzkashi* gives this reader the clear impression that the author has very little detailed ethnographic data to offer on Uzbeks and other non-Pashtun groups. Indeed, much of Azoy's information on Central Asian khans and the chaotic politics of northern Afghanistan appears to be based more on accounts by Marco Polo and a number of 19th-century European (mainly British) explorers than on the more recent anthropological studies in the area. Only two references to recent works on northern Afghanistan can be found in the book. Better ethnographic data on the principal groups playing buzkashi (the Turkic and Tajik people) would clearly argue that secular local leadership in the form of khan, *bai*, *aqsqaqal*, etc., are based not only on acquired and contractual loyalties (of the Barthian model) but also on certain categorical loyalties (e.g., kinship, language, ethnicity, sect). It would then become clear that the most crucial local leadership issue among these groups is not *control* and *ultimate authority* but rather politics of reputation, which involve subtle means of exercising influence through persuasion and mutual respect. Also, the fact that local people draw clear distinctions between pretenders to local leadership (those who claimed authority by virtue of their ties to the government), such as *arbabs*, *rais*, and some "buzkashi khans," and those who had the interest of their community more at heart than their personal access to spoils, would be apparent.

The shallowness of Azoy's ethnography is further revealed by such absurd statements as, "with the decline of nomadism, the horse [in northern Afghanistan] no longer exists as an ecological necessity" (p. 14), and that in the Afghan vernaculars "there are . . . no names for vaguely defined classes [of land owners and landless]" (p. 29). The book is riddled with similar errors of fact, translations, and interpretation of native words and concepts, and little attempt is made to provide quantitative data of any kind on the wealth of khans, the occurrence of all-pervasive violence,

or even the frequency of buzkashi games played in any given locality. It is not clear what specific place in and around Kunduz this study took place.

The claim that what happens in a buzkashi game has a direct *causal* bearing on the political power and authority of its sponsoring khan is soon discredited by such disclaimers as, "It is impossible to measure precisely the effects of . . . [the conduct of buzkashi] *tooi* . . . on the game of real life politics" (pp. 81, 130). Azoy attempts to explain away this problematic issue simply by referring to Turner's formulation of "frame of ambiguity" (p. 130). I have no doubt that buzkashi plays a significant role in the dynamics of local political processes in northern Afghanistan, but I believe that the relationship between game and power is dialectical rather than strictly causal. In Afghanistan it seems that the khans make buzkashi possible rather than the other way around. This fact is best illustrated (chapter 4) by the central government's decision to produce and sponsor its own games of buzkashi. Here the powerful state attempts to use the game as a vehicle to demonstrate its authority rather than to earn it. But once it is made part of the expected role of the sponsor, the occupants of that status strive to fulfill its role, whatever the consequences. The success or failure in managing a game of buzkashi is, therefore, likely to provide significant information about the *styles of leadership* rather than to make or break leaders (local or national). Azoy cites a successful buzkashi *tooi* staged by an Uzbek khan and another unsuccessful one by a Pashtun khan which are, I believe, more indicative of the differences in the styles of local leadership between the Uzbek and Pashtun communities than anything else. It is unfortunate that the author's insistence on establishing a causal link from the direction of the buzkashi game to power politics has prevented him from exploring how various styles of local political leadership are unravelled during the process of the buzkashi game.

The final chapter of *Buzkashi*, "A Goat Between Two Lions," is an attempt to analyze the current political and military crisis following the Marxist coup of 1978, which Azoy characterizes simply as the greatest buzkashi game of them all.

I find Azoy's *Buzkashi* to be a skillfully written but impressionistic study of what he terms "politics of impression management" in Afghanistan. He uses some important models from the works of such luminaries in the study of play, social drama, and symbolics of power as Bateson, Goffman, Turner, Geertz, and Cohen. Unfortunately, he often uses them to shape his data more than to explain them. The book raises great expectations; yet for a study with such potential, especially at this time when there is an urgent need for solid data and sober understanding of social realities in Afghanistan, it is a disappointment.

**Culture and Morality: The Relativity of Values in Anthropology.** ELVIN HATCH. New York: Columbia University Press, 1983. 163 pp., bibliography, index. \$27.00 (cloth), \$12.50 (paper).

LEONARD B. GLICK  
Hampshire College

In a chapter of this instructive, if somewhat elementary, introduction to the history and current status of cultural relativism, Elvin Hatch assigns primary credit for the salient role of this doctrine in American anthropology to the man to whom we seem to assign credit (or responsibility) for just about everything, Franz Boas. Hatch suggests that the doctrine's widespread acceptance during the halcyon years between about 1920 and 1950 can be attributed to a climate of opinion that inclined many people, not just anthropologists, to growing skepticism regarding traditional notions about the superiority of Western civilization. But soon after World War II, he says, a "growing disaffection" set in that continues to the present day and seems unlikely to be reversed.

Hatch cites a number of contributory factors, among them a postwar "flush of optimism" that led to renewed faith in the idea of progress and the widespread conviction that despite all the questions raised by Auschwitz and Hiroshima, Western civilization had something positive to offer the world. In line with this were the assertions of Linton, Kroeber, and others that cultures could be judged according to universal standards and that the definition of "primitive" coincided for the most part with moral standards that were by universal criteria deficient, even though they might be entirely understandable in particular cultural contexts. Finally, as it became increasingly evident that most people were seeking changes in their *material* conditions of life, it was almost inevitable that *cultural relativism*—even the well-intentioned anthropological variety—would come to be associated with reactionary ideology and arguments about maintaining people in a state of fictional "purity." Thus, Hatch believes, cultural relativism—or more specifically, that aspect known as moral relativism—is no longer entirely serviceable as an anthropological principle; and one of the purposes of his book is to present an updated version that he suggests should prove generally acceptable. However, for reasons that I outline, the book can be endorsed as an attractive introductory text but not as a substantial contribution to the complex, perhaps unresolvable, debates that continue to develop around the concept of relativism.

Early in his book Hatch notes the customary distinction between ethical (or moral) and cognitive relativism and indicates that his subject is only the former; but, he adds, "the two are so closely related that the latter will continually reappear as the discussion proceeds" (p. 5). That is indeed the case, but largely in the sense that cognitive considerations remain in the back-