NOMADS
Stopped In their Tracks?
Afghanistan: Socialism and Tribesmen

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What is commonly held to distinguish the "indigenous peoples" of "the Fourth World" from others is their situation as aboriginal ethnic minorities, whose cultural identity, political autonomy, and control of resources and territory are progressively being undermined by a state apparatus controlled by a culturally distinct and dominant ethnic group. Such a perspective only constitutes one particular aspect — although a very significant one — of a more general problem which concerns the conflict between state power and state policies on the one hand, and the attempts of local groups to preserve and defend their identity and autonomy on the other. While conflict between state and non-state types of social and political organization frequently takes the form of interethnic opposition and oppression, it may also transcend ethnicity and involve parties belonging to the same ethnic group. The inhabitants of local communities may be exposed to oppressive interference, which threatens their whole way of life, from a state controlled by a political elite belonging to the same ethnic group. In such instances the oppressed should be allowed the same rights that are promoted with regard to those peoples, who are conventionally considered "indigenous."

If the discussion of the problems concerning the right to preserve cultural, social, and political identity is associated only with the category of "indigenous peoples," and if these peoples are identified exclusively within the context of interethnic oppression, it will obscure the fact that there are other peoples and groups, who for some reason fall outside this category, but who nevertheless face the same problem.

The Example of Afghanistan

Both the history and current situation of Afghanistan illustrate the need to reconsider and extend the concept of "indigenous peoples." The case of Afghanistan exhibits conflict between an expansive state power and local communities striving to preserve their autonomy and way of life as interethnic conflict. This kind of conflict transcends the political differences between successive regimes, be they monarchist, republican, or socialist. While it can be either accentuated or limited by the specific policies of particular governments, such differences do not account for the conflict itself; instead they are an inherent feature of the political structure and process in Afghanistan. Moreover, the case of Afghanistan demonstrates that although the conflict between state and local communities constitutes the basic dimension of their relationship, the interaction between state and local communities at the same time contains a fundamental ambiguity, which stems from the same organizational and cultural features that generate the opposition to state authority [Christensen 1981, 1983]. Finally, it demonstrates that while the majority of the population may agree to defend their way of life against interference from the state, as is the case in the current resistance struggle against the regime in Kabul and its Soviet allies, this does not mean that there exists a consensus, even within the separate ethnic groups, in conceptualizing the cultural tradition being defended.

Interethnic Conflicts vis-a-vis the Conflict between State and Local Communities

Afghanistan is a country of pronounced ethnic heterogeneity where differences in terms of language, culture, religion, and even physical appearance serve to distinguish the various ethnic groups from each other [cf. Dupree 1973:57 et passim]. No single ethnic group constitutes the numerical majority of Afghanistan's approximately fifteen million inhabitants. The Pakhtun, of whom there are about six million in Afghanistan, and a roughly equal number across the border in Pakistan, are the largest ethnic group in the country and have been politically dominant for more than two hundred years.

The dominant position of the Pakhtun within Afghanistan dates back to the middle of the eighteenth century, when a Pakhtun monarchy was established in the power vacuum left by the dissolving empires of Safavid Persia and Moghul India, who had previously competed in their effort to gain influence over the area.

The resistance struggle has entailed a strengthening of Muslim ritual, stressing the common identity of those who oppose the regime in Kabul and Soviet forces of occupation. ©Christensen
However, contemporary Afghanistan only emerged at the end of the nineteenth century, when it was created as a buffer state between the rival empires of Czarist Russia and British India. This period also marks the establishment of an Afghan state based on a bureaucratic state apparatus, which was able to exercise a greater degree of control over the country's population than any of its predecessors [Kakar 1971, 1979]. The extension of state authority during this period by the ruler Amir Abdur Rahman (1882-1901) reinforced the dominant position of the Pakhtun vis-a-vis the other ethnic groups.

Like everybody else, the Pakhtun were subjected to the harsh, repressive policies of "internal imperialism" [Dupres 1973:xix] pursued by the state, but at the same time these policies entailed the expansion of the Pakhtun from their traditional settlement areas in eastern and southern Afghanistan into areas previously dominated by non-Pakhtun. Here the Pakhtun managed to acquire control of agricultural land and pasture, and also frequently trade [cf. Ferdinand 1962, Tapper 1973]. The result is a situation where the Pakhtun have invaded the areas of other ethnic groups, acquiring control of land and trade, and often the state governing apparatus as well. Thus, non-Pakhtun ethnic groups feel subjected to a state dominated by Pakhtun, which largely works for the interests of Pakhtun [Anderson 1978]. The establishment of the present Peoples Republic in Afghanistan has not altered this situation; Pakhtun constitute the majority of members of the revolutionary party which seized power through the military coup d'etat in April 1978.

For the Pakhtun in rural areas, however, the state emerges in a somewhat different light. While they are highly conscious of the Pakhtun identity of successive Afghan rulers, and have exploited opportunities provided by the state to better their own position, they too exist in a permanent state of opposition to the various regimes that have tried to control them. The Pakhtun have always been a major, if not the major, obstacle to the establishment of effective government authority in Afghanistan. Both their numbers and the fact that many Pakhtun live in mountain areas that are difficult to control contribute to this state of affairs, but the most important factor is that Pakhtun tribal society is basically incompatible with centralized government administration.

State and Tribe — The Ambiguity of an Inherently Antagonistic Relationship

The organizational framework of Pakhtun society is constituted by a segmentary lineage system. Patrilineal descent from a common ancestor place all Pakhtun within a single ramified descent system, which divides them into several distinct tribes like the Durrani, Ghilzai, Jaji, Mangal, Safi, Mamund, and Mohmand. Each tribe contains subgroups on various genealogical levels down to that of the household, which constitutes the primary political and economic unit of Pakhtun society. The descent system is at the same time a system of territorial groups. This pattern of localized descent groups is maintained by the inheritance system, since rights to land are transmitted between men through patrilineal descent, thereby creating local communities where the landholding group ideally consists of cousins.

Since the encompassing descent system makes no distinction between genealogically senior and junior lines, it confers the same status on all its members — that of being Pakhtun tribesmen. However, the idea that all male Pakhtun are equal (suit) because of their common descent is linked to notions of honorable behavior (pakhtunwadi), which place a high value on the maintenance of personal independence and autonomy [cf. Barth 1969], that in relation to fellow tribesmen or to outside powers such as the state. In the eyes of the Pakhtun, it is not enough that the individual is a Pakhtun merely through descent. To preserve his status as a real Pakhtun tribesman he has "to do Pakhto." To realize these values he must maintain the autonomy and integrity of the household (korane) by protecting and controlling the women, the house, and the land belonging to it — three categories which are united in the same concept of honor — namus.

If the namus is injured, whether through violation of property rights or of the integrity of household members, it can only be restored if the aggrieved party seeks redress through compensation or retaliation. Aggression and offense require a response from those offended in order to restore social balance and equivalence. This fundamental principle is expressed in the term for revenge — budal — which also has the meaning of "exchange."

In contrast, state authority rests on the opposite principle where "... the right to control force has precipitated out of society at large to rest exclusively with government" [Sahlins 1968:6]. State authority attempts to impose administration and courts, and to introduce new procedures for settling conflicts which differ radically from those of the tribal society [Chani 1978:269; Rose 1904:2]. State authority is accompanied by attempts to impose taxation and conscription which appear equally repressive and contribute to the resentment with which the Pakhtun tribesmen view the state.

Despite this antagonism the various states, be they Afghan, Moghul, Sikh, British, or Pakistani, which have tried to gain control over the Pakhtun yazghis/an ("Land of Rebels") [Caroe 1958:347] have all managed to exercise some influence by other means than direct military repression. As a result of the intense political rivalry and competition for local leadership, which characterizes Pakhtun tribal society [cf. Barth 1959; Ahmed 1980; Christensen 1981], there will always be those who find it advantageous to ally themselves with the regime in power. Such alliances do not necessarily entail wholesale acceptance of state authority. They are more likely to be motivated by tactical considerations concerning the support which can be derived from the state in the competition with local rivals, and the followers that can be attracted by acting as middleman between them and the state authorities. However, at the same time, too close an association and identification with an expansive and repressive regime, such as the present one in Kabul, may compromise the leader, who may be considered be-namus ("without honor") and a mere tool of the government. In such a case, his fellow tribesmen will no longer support him as allies and followers but will instead desert him and join his rivals.

When Cultural Identity has Multiple Meanings

The ambiguity which pervades Pakhtun relations with the state is in a sense paralleled by the fact that while
most Pakhtun, together with the rest of the Afghan population, agree to defend their way of life against the present regime in Kabul, there is no consensus, even among the Pakhtun themselves, concerning the cultural tradition which is to be defended.

"For Islam, honor, and homeland" (Islam de para, namus de para, wolan de para) are the categories usually employed when Pakhtun refugees or guerrillas explain their opposition to the regime in Kabul and the Soviet forces of occupation. Islam usually constitutes the first and most important category and is often the sole reason stated. Since at the same time all Afghans refer to the resistance struggle as jihad ("holy war"), it would appear that Pakhtun and the rest of the population share an attitude concerning the nature and goals of their struggle. But although the label "Islamic" expresses the Afghan self-image and thus gives the impression of unity and consensus, it does at the same time gloss the ideological and political diversity of the Afghan resistance, as well as the plurality of ideas concerning the precise meaning of the Islamic tradition.

Islam does not contain any distinction between a religious and a secular sphere of life, but instead strives to create a total way of life based on the guidelines, directives, and prohibitions which are given by God in the Koran or are contained in the legends of the life of Mohammed, the so-called hadith.

The presence of both of the major Muslim sects, the Sunni and the Shi'a, provides the basic diversity within Islam in Afghanistan. The adherents of both are constituted by culturally diverse ethnic groups, who consequently practice distinct versions of a Muslim way of life. All of these versions contain elements which deviate from or even contradict the message of the
Koran and hadiths, but people experience this condition very differently, and the practical consequences which they draw also vary considerably.

Such differences of opinion concerning the relationship between what is understood as proper Islam and the existing social order can be found within all sections of the Afghan population, and is also present in the attitudes which people hold with regard to the increasing "modernization" and "westernization" of Afghan society.

So, instead of providing unity of belief and a shared unequivocal conception of society, Islam provides a forum in which social and political matters are commonly understood and discussed. The concepts and symbols of Islam have always been sufficiently ambiguous to allow differing interpretations of their meaning and thus to allow mutually divergent political views to be seen as religiously legitimate by their exponents and followers.

Afghan history contains many examples of political confrontations based on different interpretations of Islam. One of the most pertinent concerns the expansion and consolidation of Afghan state authority, which took place during the reign of Amir Abdur Rahman (1882-1901), and which in addition to harsh military and administrative measures also involved a religious policy which entailed the propagation of a new interpretation of Islam. The main feature of this interpretation was the attempt to provide state authority with religious legitimacy by defining the good Muslim as identical with the good subject who accepted this authority [cf. Ghani 1978]. Through a combination of repression and rewards the state managed to gain the support of a number of prominent religious personalities who promoted its version of Islam, but at the same time it was rejected by others, who proclaimed the ruler heretical, and who thereby lent religious legitimation to the extensive popular resistance against the attempts made by the state to expand and strengthen its control.

The situation today exhibits certain parallels to that of the reign of Amir Abdur Rahman. Ever since it seized power by the coup d'état in April 1978 the new revolutionary regime has strived to appear Muslim. Its decrees and other official proclamations have all been introduced by an invocation of God, and like its nineteenth century predecessor, it has repressed and eliminated part of the religious establishment while at the same time attempting to ally itself with other religious figures who were willing to provide the regime and its policies with religious legitimation.

Extensive popular opposition to the new regime demonstrates that this policy has been an almost total failure, and that most people instead identify themselves with the resistance and consider it the legitimate representative of Islam. However, while Islam thus provides the symbols and rituals which define the common identity of the resistance against the regime in Kabul, the ambiguity of its categories at the same time provide room for differing interpretations which serve to define and maintain the disunity among the various resistance organizations and groups, who disagree with regard to both the way in which the struggle should be fought, and to the kind of society and government which they want to create in a liberated Afghanistan.

Conclusion
Both the ethnic minorities conventionally considered "indigenous peoples" and a people like the Pakhtun constitute societies without a state, and thus societies against the state which claims authority over them. Both should be allowed the same rights to preserve their way of life. But, despite the existence of an inherent opposition to state authority and state interference, the culture and way of life of such peoples should not be construed as homogenous and unequivocal entities. They may contain internal organizational and cultural features which generate the kind of factionalism and ambiguous relations with states, which the Pakhtun share with most, if not all, the other tribal societies throughout the Middle East and North Africa.

This also implies that the ideology of such peoples cannot be conceived of as constituting a culture in the sense of a consistent conceptual system. Instead ideologies should be understood as systems with inherent ambiguities and dilemmas which are resolved in different ways by the members of the society. Since these different versions of the cultural tradition are always associated with and defined by specific interests, which they in turn serve to legitimate, and which are not necessarily shared by all members of the people concerned, the question of "indigenous rights" cannot, in my view, be separated from political considerations.

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