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CULTURE, HERITAGE AND GENDER IN AFGHANISTAN

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This paper seeks to map out the main problems regarding the preservation of heritage in Afghanistan, taking into account various local constructs of gendered identity. Basing myself on Charles Lindholm's and Akbar S. Ahmed's pioneering articles, I will argue that colonial policies of the British Raj helped mould a contradictory Afghan model, interiorised by the Afghans themselves, quite in the keeping of Imperial politics elsewhere as described by Benedict Anderson. The icons produced by the Empire contributed to a set of impracticable founding myths in which women are conspicuously absent, with far reaching consequences today, even within World Heritage policies of which a critique will be offered in the present paper. The management of the Anatolian site of Catalyuk will be offered as a possible example to follow in the region. This article is based on field work intermittently carried out in Pakistan and Afghanistan between 2001 et 2006 [1].

What does cultural heritage mean in Afghanistan

The criteria used to define cultural heritage in Afghanistan are as complex as the proliferating narratives that make up Afghan identity: they reflect a heavily politicized construction of history founded on the viewpoint and priorities of the formulating agency. First and foremost, it is very hard to talk about a national culture in an essentially pre-state tribal society where ethnic allegiance far dominates any identification with some kind of nebulous nation and its still more incomprehensible past. Then, social standpoint is paramount. The last king of Afghanistan, Zahir Shah had quite a different perception of what constituted Afghan history and culture from the notions put forward by erstwhile Communists or the Taliban Little case is made to take into account the perspective of the dominating rural population (over 80% of the total) which remains until today largely illiterate and hardly aware of what is happening outside their area, in view of the absence of electricity and therefore basic modes of

[1] Carol Mann. 'Traditions et transformations dans les vies des femmes afghanes dans les camps de réfugiés au Pakistan' *(Traditions and transformations in the lives of Afghan women living in Pakistani refugee camps in the NWFP)* Doctoral dissertation, Ecole des Hautes Etudes en Sciences Sociales (EHESS), Paris 2006.

communication[2]. Rulers of the late 19th century may nationally be consensual historical figures recognized by urban and rural alike, but supplanted by local heroes. Women in Afghan history seem to have all but disappeared from official accounts, especially since in 1989.

In the period between the toppling of the monarchy (1973) and the founding of the Afghan republic until the retreat of the Soviet troops, the emphasis on human rights allowed urban women to be introduced into positions of power as ministers, judges, lawyers doctors and reinstated female figures (amongst them a number of poets) in official Afghan history such as Rabia Balkhi the 10th century poet after whom the largest maternity hospital in Kabul was named. (Moghadam, 2003). The Civil war and the increasing domination of the Fundamentalist ethics heralded the evacuation of women from any kind of historic or cultural narrative. This means that the recognition of women's contribution to culture is inexistent, but this is largely because any form of female activity, from embroidery to bringing children into the world is deemed a private matter, the property of the males of the clan into which she has married. The Taliban only turned the existing difficult situation into a form of organized police control repression where compromise was no longer possible. (Hatch-Dupree 1996)

The milestones of Afghan culture may simultaneously provide a form of glorified genealogy and a subsequent set of ideals for the ruling class, yet has a different signification for the vast rural majority. (Dupree 1973) The latter do not relate to the kind of history that has visible vestiges, but to intangible religious and tribal constructs. Thus shrines retain an importance museums will never have. Adherence to culture ultimately determines personal identity, verified by a pro-active stance in daily affairs. Being a (male) Pashtun (i.e. a member of the dominant ethnic group) is not as much about relating to an improbable historic past, but a form of publicly recognizable honourable behaviour according to stern, aggressive pre-Islamic tribal principles where vengeance looms powerfully. It has to be said that most of the non-Pashtun rural population relate to comparable principles, especially regarding the domain of respectability and the inferior position of women. Since Fundamentalist politics have been ruling Afghanistan, the past has been reconfigurated to fit into modern, globalized political Islam where belonging to the Umma, the world Muslim community, is at least, if not more, important than any kind of national affiliation.

These class-based historical constructions problems find their roots in the cultural policies of the British Raj, reimported into Afghanistan by the Pashtun of the Durrani clan elite that largely grown up in the frontier region around Peshawar. A word about the frequently confusing terminology. In the Pashto language, the term 'Afghan' is synonymous with 'Pashtun' and refers to some sixty or so tribes belonging to the world's largest segmentary

[2] With the notable exception, since 2006, of mobile telephones which can be found in remote areas deprived of electricity and basic commodities.

lineage society, with varied forms of social organization, principally studied by Fredrik Barth, Akbar S. Ahmed and Charles Lindholm. The term Pathan is Hindi and was used by the British Raj, to progressively differentiate and separate the selfsame people living on either side of the Durand line, an artificial and ineffectual frontier they had established to separate British possessions from Afghanistan, which Lord Curzon had called "*a purely accidental geographic unit*".

In their characteristic 'divide and rule' policy in the colonies, the administrators of the British Raj reinforced cultivate features that would distinguish Pathans from other ethnic groups. Thus Pashto language and culture were given a quasi-academic format by British scholars that served Raj's all-encompassing civilization project. A hitherto largely oral and fragmented culture was transformed through the diligence of the administrators into a unified expression built on Victorian norms of cultural coherence and ethnographic stratification. Grammars, dictionaries and poetry books were published during a phase called the Pathan Renaissance, appropriated by a grateful local elite. Yet these did not include female expression of any kind, not even the local popular culture that includes the landays, the haiku-like poetry tradition traditionally composed by women, nor the emotion rituals analyzed by Benedicte Grima where women improvise and perform epic-like poetry. Thus Pashtun culture was and still is being presented as a quintessentially male culture, praising virility and an aggressive honour-based conduct. This construction, reinforced by an identification with the martial qualities of Ancient Greece which the British also sought to appropriate, furnished generations of British colonial officers with a form of renewable validation of their manliness at a time when gender roles back home were progressively being questioned and undermined.

There was an urgent need to place these potential allies (at least on the British side of the Durand Line) right on top of the list of deserving allies of a superior breed, if possible with a non-Muslim, indeed purely Western pedigree. This lead to the elaboration of another great Raj myth which trickled into contemporary Afghan self-image and to this day most guide-books and popular articles: the supposedly Greek/Parthian origin of the Pathans, supported by Sir Olaf Caroe, the last administrator of the Raj and writer of an authoritative 'History of the Pathans'.

A famous story by Kipling makes this pedigree clear, *The Man Who Would be King* (1888), where, in front of a group of incredulous Afghans, the hero declares: *You're white people, sons of Alexander, and not like common, black Mohammedans… I'll make a damn fine nation of you*. Besides, the military needed more vigorous endorsement of their own strategy at the frontier and needed extra symbolic validation of their enmity against their main competitors in the Middle-East, the Ottoman Empire (which was supported by the Muslim population in British India)

Nascent ethnography gave this proposition something of a scientific basis, a kind of reasoning the French colonialists were also using in Algeria, in the political glorification of Kabyls to oppose the dominant Arab population. Pierre Bourdieu notes that the ethnological alibi was used by colonial purposes and summarized the dangers of shaky identitary constructs used to give coherence to ill-defined ethnic communities *: « In a reconstruction based on fantasy, even the best kind of ethnology can be used as an ideological tool leading to idealization* » (Bourdieu 2003)

The rural Pashtuns themselves did not share such opinions about their own lineage. Even today, older Pashtuns (who, a generation or two ago sometimes had 'Israel' as their middle name) despite being the most devout of Muslims, frequently admit in private to believing the ancient local tradition which upholds that they themselves are descended from Hebrews, the *Beni Israel*»[3]. as one of the 'Lost Tribes. They share structural features with Middle-Eastern nomadic groups, possibly Ancient Hebrews, which may indicate early migration from the area. This orientalist discourse was also upheld by Victorian missionaries eager to discover living examples of Judeo-Christian religious lore, as Edward Said explains: *The Orient was a place of pilgrimage… the Romantic idea of restorative reconstruction (natural supernaturalism) is the principal source* (Said, 1978).

Despite the three Anglo-Afghan wars, the ideology imported from Peshawar to Kabul was a polished version of what the British had proposed rather than the rugged quasi-Biblical rural model, compounded a little later by the secularist influence coming from Kemalist Turkey. The court identified far more with the poetic glories of the Pathan Renaissance than the rough tribal mores of the Pashtunwali, the pre-Islamic code. The only serviceable aspect of Khyber lore which has been willingly retained is the reputation of apparent invincibility. The cultural achievements as redefined and formulated by Victorian academia lent itself to reformatting in order to establish apparent Pashtun superiority over other local ethnic groups, in this case Tadjiks, Hazara or Uzbek. In a kindred frame of mind, Pashtun origins needed to be rethought as being as local and home-grown as the Moghuls, so the Persian/Aryan pedigree was cultivated, especially after 1934, when Hitler became Chancellor of Germany. The Afghan-German friendship treaties turned Afghans into bona-fide representatives of the 'Ur-Rasse', much to the delight of German and Austrian anthropologists who subsequently made frequent journeys to Afghanistan. If certain affinities with Ancient Greece were permissible, any kind of to Hebrew ancestry was henceforth evacuated from the official elite discourse, even Muslim references began to slip. The privileged began to name their daughters Mina or Anahita whilst the majority of rural girls continued to be called Wahida, Latifa or Mariam today as before. Nevertheless, the 'Bani-Israel' continues to be part of popular rural folklore, retaining

improbable compatibility with Fundamentalist Muslim practise and patriarchal custom. It turns up in the most unlikely circumstances. An informer told this writer that he once heard leader Mollah Omar validate the Taliban enterprise through purported Jewish ancestry: in his speech he claimed legitimacy for the Pashtun divine mission, as descendants and representatives of the Chosen People of God.

These cultural attitudes were reflected in museum and conservation politics.. The Museum of Peshawar, previously known as the Victoria Memorial Hall, erected in 1907, sports the largest collection of Greco-Buddhist Gandhara art in the world painstakingly excavated by Victorian architects, thereby proposing a quasi- Western genealogy to a Muslim group particularly hard to rule. As Benedict Anderson masterfully explains:
The sacred old sites were to be incorporated into the map of the colony and their ancient prestige (which, if this had disappeared, as it often had, the state would attempt to revive) draped round the mappers (Anderson 1985)

When the Kabul Museum was created in 1919 in the Bagh-i-Bala palace overlooking Kabul, it consisted of manuscripts, miniatures, weapons and art objects belonging to royal families. It was built by progressive king Amanullah, a close friend of Ataturk. Then through various ambitious excavation projects, starting in 1922 with the French DAFA (Délégation Archéologique Française en Afghanistan), the collections were immeasurably enriched and emphasis was placed on Bactrian, Greek and Greco-Buddhist art. The collections were built up archaeological digs financed by foreign powers which at the same time involved the restoration of sites. Up till these interventions, antique buildings and remains had, as in Egypt, served as quarries for local population. These new cultural policies served the purpose of elaborating a national history based on a (pre-selected) shared past and a collective stakehold in its varied cultural expressions. Until today, such efforts are at the heart of any nation building process.

It has to be stressed that in all these cultural efforts in literature and preservation of history, women are absent, save for the fourteen-year interlude of the Democratic Republic of Afghanistan. This is continuous with an attitude inherited from the Raj. Despite efforts to improve health and living conditions of the women of British India, they in fact reinforced gender and social stereotypes, compounding local institutionalized inequality with conservative Victorian prejudice. The same could be said for the present day blanket human rights principles that were introduced in the Afghan refugee camps in Pakistan by the UNHCR as from 1980 and forms the ethical backbone of the present-day Afghan constitution, where the gender equality that figures prominently on paper is totally ignored in a reality where the

Fundamentalist values of political Islam dominate, only superficially watered down by global market considerations.

UNESCO and the Politics of World Heritage

In the midst of these contradicting viewpoint, UNESCO's world heritage convention has tried to enforce universal criteria that best safeguard what it deems a patrimony that is no longer national, but the property of the planet.

These are the first three 'operational guidelines' for the selection of sites deemed to fit into this category

To represent a masterpiece of human creative genius;

To exhibit an important interchange of human values, over a span of time or within a cultural area of the world, on developments in architecture or technology, monumental arts, town-planning or landscape design;

To bear a unique or at least exceptional testimony to a cultural tradition or to a civilization which is living or which has disappeared 4.

These criteria, however worthwhile, beg the following questions: who is to define what constitutes a masterpiece, who decides which cultural traditions are worth inscribing into a universal patrimony and therefore within national history, and finally who defines culture within a given country? These seemingly intangible values pose serious social and political problems regarding the autonomy of the signatory countries. Certainly the latter may not destroy, alter or dispose of these 'masterpieces of creative genius', whatever they may be, but also must present them in a way that is coherent with what could be called a universal packaging of cultural history, restored according to sometimes debatable criteria[5], flanked by some kind of museum. In many parts of the world, the relative expense lavished on conservation of what may be locally irrelevant sites contrasts with the sheer poverty of the local population that has not been educated to visit, relate or derive the slightest collective sense of ownership and consequent pride towards them. This lies at the basis of the destruction of the monumental Buddhas in Bamyan, masterpieces of Greco-Buddhist art in March 2001. The then Taliban ambassador to Washington Sayyid Rahmatullah Hashimi publicly declared that the decision had been taken after a Swedish expert proposed to restore the statues. When the Afghani head council asked his team to provide funds to feed children, they refused and purportedly answered, "No, the money is just for the statues, not for the children". This

[4]UNESCO: Wolrd heritage. Criteria fopr selection, 2005 revised. http://whc.unesco.org/en/criteria/ UNESCO

[5] For instance, the scouring of cathedrals like Notre-Dame in Paris restores such monuments to a pristine condition in which has never existed, as these presently bone-white statues were originally painted in strong colours, typical of medieval clerical architecture.

(further corroborated by renewed offers of money), Hashimi said, and not religion reasons prompted the destruction of the statues [6] The situation may well have been different if these had been vestiges from Biblical times with which the traditionalist Pushtun Taliban truly identify.

To this one might add a continuation of Imperial politics in that the West had visibly chosen to give greater value to pre-Islamic art, thereby hinting at the superiority of the past over what could be interpreted as an inferior present. World Heritage may be constructed as some kind of central imperial power with moral rights over the rest of the planet, annexing as its ideal cultural showcase what are rated as today's Wonders of the World. As elsewhere in the pre-Christian world, religious reference at Bamyan as with the pyramids at Gizeh or the Acropolis in Athens would have been totally evacuated, the hordes of pilgrims of yesteryear (and much of the local rural and village population) replaced by busloads of tourists, villages razed to create photogenic "vistas" and the by–now standardized cafeteria/postcard/souvenir shop unit. Benedict Anderson's comment on the restoration of monuments in South East Asia in the early XXth century remains relevant:

Museumized this way, they were repositioned as regalia for a secular colonial state (B. Anderson, 1985)

These moral issues are capital if heritage is to be preserved, all the more when the sense of belonging to a historic nation is weak. Furthermore, the growth in this part of the world of Fundamentalist Islam implies a literal reading of Quranic texts which includes the prohibition of any form of representation that forebodes ill for the preservation of non-Islamic artworks, something which needs to be considered in places such as war-torn Afghanistan, Iraq and even North Western Pakistan. Does this imply, as Lynn M. Meskell has suggested in a recent paper, that the UN may send military forces to protect World Heritage against their rightful owners ?

As exercises in nation-building, preservation politics are doomed without a long term local participation and the inclusion of a gender perspective. As women as women in Afghanistan (unlike Iran) are excluded from the public arena any involvement with national heritage (museums and sites) is all the more impossible.

There are alternative possibilities, such as the innovative heritage management undertaken at the large Anatolian Neolithic site at Catalhöyük, Turkey, under the aegis of archaeologist Ian Hodder, who has included the local population in the excavation and preservation processes as well as in the interpreting of finds. Professor Hodder has insisted that women participate in an equal capacity to the men in their community, a difficult task in this deeply conservative

Afghani Ambassador Speaks At USC by Sahar Kassaimah, IslamOnLine.net, http://www.islamonline.net/english/news/2001-03/13/article12.shtml.

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region. As a result, through the presence of local female interpreters and archaeologists, the women have been producing their own exhibitions to show their understanding of ancient customs as well as modern craft interpretations of their own. This has empowered them morally and financially and given them the possibility of transmitting a sense of heritage to the children they are bringing up, all the more that the main divinity in this location appears to have been some kind of female fertility goddess with whom some kind of historical and symbolic filiation has been made possible, despite the constraints of religion.
This kind of example could successfully be brought to Afghanistan, on sites such as Bamyan and places where excavations are taking place.

Furthermore, crafts need to be reconsidered in Afghanistan and elsewhere as expressions of female artwork, especially weaving. The fact that women were and remain instrumental in the making of world-famous Persian and carpets is generally ignored but should be reinstated, as they also should be for the embroidery of the sumptuous medieval church vestments on display in many Western Museums, such as the Musée du Moyen-Age in Paris. In the Herat area, women had been in the habit of adding novelties to the repertoire of decorative elements in their traditional carpets: thus an elephant or camels may emerge in the midst of flowers. From the Soviet intervention onwards, female weavers from the Herat, Baluchistan and Turkmenistan regions have been particularly creative, especially area in introducing elements of war as decorative motifs in the carpets in a most original way. Buds blossom into grenades, birds turn into fighter bombers, rows of Kalashnikovs stand like trees in vivid blues and reds. In the refugee camps of Pakistan, businessmen were prompt to see opportunities to make money and a debased version of such carpets have been produced mainly as mats and rugs to fit into journalists and aid-workers suitcases. This living tradition as well as the vibrant poetry and landays still composed by women need to be recognized and preserved before they are totally replaced by mass-market Chinese productions that are already invading bazaars and TV media, which are turning women into passive consumers of neutered global productions, stunting their skills as creators and transmitters of culture. These need to be fitted into museums and educational programmes to display cultural continuity or disruption, as the case may be, but more than anything else, to show the local population as well as future visitors that culture is a continuous process, not a fossil from a dead past that will only be kept alive through the active contribution of local communities, especially their mothers and daughters. UNESCO and World Heritage deciders need to fight against the constraints of invasive global capitalism if they truly wish to fulfill their mission.

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