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Excerpt

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I. Contexts

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Personal background

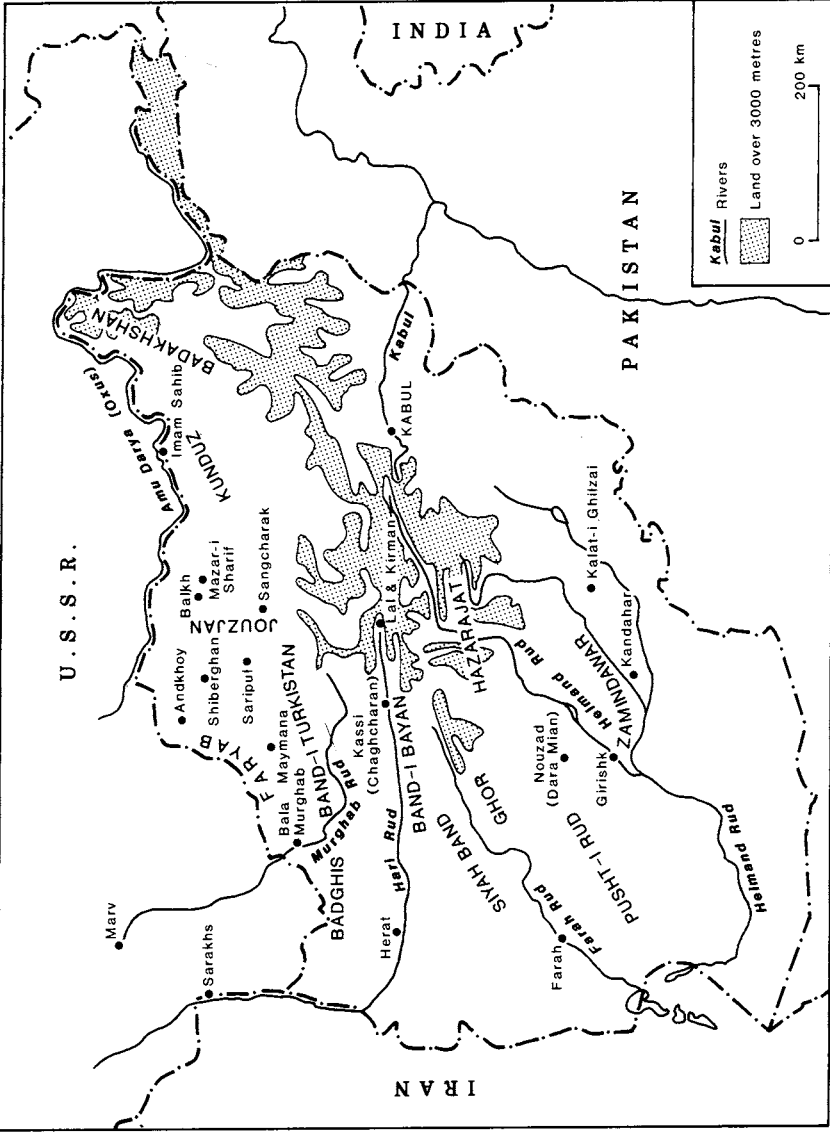
Aims and circumstances

The fieldwork on which this study is based began when RLT and I travelled in western Afghan Turkistan for a month in 1968. When we returned to Afghanistan in 1970–1972, our primary aims were ethnographic. The first was to describe a people (the Durrani Pashtun) and an area (western Afghan Turkistan) little known to anthropologists or other scholars (see Map 1).¹ I was keen to examine further the role and organization of women in sexually segregated societies (see N. Tapper 1968; 1978), while RLT was particularly interested in aspects of the pastoral economy and in the forms and contexts of inter-ethnic contact between the Pashtuns and others in the region. The present study reflects our initial intentions, and its focus – the construction and meaning of marriage – has proved one way of uniting our interests in terms of an institution of central concern to the Durrani Pashtuns themselves.

Late in 1970 we travelled overland to Kabul and soon acquired permits to begin a one-month survey in Afghan Turkistan. Our object was to visit sections of the Ishaqzai, who were politically and numerically the dominant Durrani tribe in Jouzjan and Faryab provinces, with a view to finding one group with whom it would be convenient (for us, for them and for the authorities) to settle. In due course we decided to seek out one of the many Ishaqzai subtribes which conduct a mixed economy, combining pastoral nomadism with settled agriculture, in the Saripul region of Jouzjan. After meeting considerable objections from local officials, by mid-March we had settled in a camp of the Maduzai subtribe of the Ishaqzai, now in spring pastures some ten miles from their winter villages and farmlands.

At the time of our fieldwork there was no doubt in the minds of the local officials or others in Saripul about where and with whom we were staying. However, even in the best of times circumstances change, and we could all imagine situations in which it would be prudent for the Maduzai to forget our visits. ‘Maduzai’ is not their real name; this, the names of the Maduzai settlements, and

Map 1 Sketch-map of Afghanistan



the names of their neighbours, are all pseudonyms. So too, of course, are all names of individual Maduzai and other local people. Maduzai fears concerned their relations as members of a subtribe with the Ishaqzai Khans and rapacious government officials about which I have said very little. Rather I have focused on matters largely internal to the subtribe which, they reckoned, other Afghans would find commonplace and of no great political concern. In the worst of times circumstances change beyond anyone's imaginings. This book is far less relevant to their present situation than any of us could possibly have known then. Its detail may, however, have an unexpected virtue: there is a great concern among Afghans now that, for the sake of their children, they recover all the materials they can about their lives and culture as they were before the Soviet invasion. I hope they will find this book a useful addition to the libraries they create.

The fieldwork

At the same time that we joined the Maduzai, we hired an assistant, Yusuf, an Uzbek from a prominent local family, whose knowledge of the area, acquaintance with the Maduzai, and connections in Saripul and elsewhere proved invaluable. Choosing an Uzbek assistant (and one who spoke Pashtu) was, to a degree, provocative – we justified our choice in terms of Yusuf's profession as a cook whose talents the Maduzai also appreciated. In fact the choice proved a splendid one: Yusuf helped us to expand our network of contacts far beyond the subtribe and, through him, we gained a perspective on ethnic relations in the region, and in the country as a whole, which was quite different from that which we learned from the Maduzai. Yusuf's presence, like our own, of course, had an impact on the people and the events I discuss. From the Maduzai point of view, however, in most contexts, Yusuf was simply assimilated to the category of non-Durrani servant, of whom there were many; our presence was far more anomalous.

During the first ten days of our stay with the Maduzai, Hajji Abdullah, the leading man of Section III of Lineage A (see p. 79f.), acting with the tacit approval of the Maduzai Khan, was our host. However the Khan soon began to fear that his enemies, in order to do him harm, would trouble us or our belongings. Once the Khan had declared us unwelcome, we had no alternative but to seek another group who might have us. While we were thus occupied, Hajji Abdullah's wife, Hajji Nanawor, perhaps the most influential Maduzai woman, who occupied a pivotal position between the two main Lineages (A and C) of the subtribe, mentioned our plight to her sister's son, Hajji Ibrahim, with whom she had just made the pilgrimage to Mecca. Hajji Ibrahim, leader of Lineage C, the headman of Sinjit village and the principal rival (not enemy) of the Maduzai Khan, seized the opportunity we presented to enhance his own prestige and reveal the Khan as weak and fearful. Declaring that he and his numerous sons could easily guarantee

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our safety, he offered to become our host; after one short visit to his camp we moved in to join him. Certainly this was a coup against the Khan, whose resentment of our presence showed itself intermittently throughout our stay. However, it would be a travesty to impute simply instrumental motives to Hajji Ibrahim; he and his family went to very great lengths to make our stay pleasant and productive. It is impossible to acknowledge adequately our debt to them.

Our hosts and their kin proved astonishingly willing informants and shared with us intimate details of their lives from the start. All men and nearly all women of the group were bilingual in Afghan Persian (Dari), the lingua franca of northern Afghanistan, and Pashtu, their mother tongue. The Maduzai used the former when talking with non-Pashtuns, including ourselves. As a consequence we tended to work in Persian, in which RLT already had fluency and I a rudimentary knowledge. Later, our understanding of Pashtu became reasonably competent, though we rarely conversed in the language. The Persian used by the Maduzai was strongly mixed with Pashtu syntax and vocabulary, and it proved relatively easy to identify Pashtu idioms, for which the Persian was often a literal translation. However, it must be said that the Maduzai's own fluency in Persian made us sometimes negligent about such linguistic cross-checking.

As the time of the spring migration to the mountains approached we wondered how we could cover both aspects of their dual economy, and we considered separating. However, this would have proved unacceptable to the authorities and, as we had permission from Kabul to go on the migration, we chose to do so and hoped to be able to study the villages and local agriculture some other time. In May, after further difficulties with the local authorities, Hajji Ibrahim took complete official responsibility for us and agreed to take us on the trek to the mountains of the Hazarajat. We moved daily for over twenty days, passing through the lands of many different ethnic groups.

Soon after our arrival in the mountain pastures, a most shocking breach of Durrani marriage rules occurred (see p. 61f.) and preoccupied our hosts and ourselves in the following weeks. This case confirmed my earlier decision to focus less on a study of women *per se* than on the topic of marriage. By this time it was clear that marriage formed a clearly delineated indigenous category; it was an institution of central importance to all aspects of social organization; and it was also the topic most likely to offer direct insights into gender constructs and relations.

In late July, the return migration began and a month later we were back in the Maduzai villages near Saripul, where we began a study of the social and agricultural activities there until our departure in September.

The following summer, in June 1972, we drove through the centre of the country from Herat to Kabul. We already knew of the disasters – a series of droughts and poor harvests aggravated by speculation and hoarding during the very severe winter. Pastoral nomads in the remote north and northwest of the

country were starving (v. Barry 1972 and cf. Balland and Kieffer 1979) and no nomads from Turkistan had come to the summer pastures that year. Although official permission to travel to the disaster provinces, which included Jouzjan, was restricted, we were able to be in Saripul villages of the Maduzai by the last week in July.

We left the Maduzai in September 1972, never dreaming that we might not easily return again. We planned further research in Saripul town itself for 1979, but the political events of 1978–1979 precluded it. Since that time, we have been able to gather only the most meagre, general information on Saripul and its inhabitants. The Maduzai, like other Pashtuns from Turkistan, have left the area to become refugees: some have certainly gone to Pakistan, though it is likely that many others returned to their southern Afghan homeland after the Soviet invasion of their country. For us it is a personal tragedy to have lost all contact with the Maduzai and it is made much worse by the knowledge that this silence hides the far greater tragedies that they must have experienced.

For RLT and myself the Maduzai were an engaging people with whom it was easy to establish a considerable rapport. I think this was particularly related to two considerations: the security their Durrani identity then afforded them, and their experiences in a very heterogeneous ethnic milieu. This combination seems to have encouraged a good-natured tolerance of cultural differences which made them willing to accept both our account of ourselves and our work, and our foibles as they emerged in daily life.

Our contact with the Maduzai throughout the fieldwork was intense. To avoid becoming a serious economic liability to our hosts, we set up on our arrival a quasi-independent establishment managed by our Uzbek assistant. However, this consisted only of our 'guest-room' – a small canvas tent – and a two-person mountain tent for sleeping. When we were in the Maduzai village, we lived in Hajji Ibrahim's guest room within his compound. Sometimes during the migration, to avoid being conspicuous to his enemies, he insisted that we stay in his tent. In effect, in neither camps nor villages had we any privacy during our waking hours. Indeed, the cultural difference in attitudes to privacy was for us the most exhausting and stressful aspect of the fieldwork.

Throughout the fieldwork we maintained a standard of living similar to that of well-to-do Maduzai. Soon after our arrival our hosts asked us to don Durrani clothing, which we did, wearing it throughout our stay. On the migrations we travelled as did the Maduzai with horses and camels, but the Landrover we ran in the villages and spring pastures clearly set us apart. Indeed, in a limited way it afforded us a status comparable with the regional tribal leaders and helped us to gain access to this elite. The car also provided us with a most acceptable way, initially, of reciprocating the hospitality and friendship we were shown by the Maduzai: we fetched water for the camps and ferried friends from camp to camp and into Saripul town, and later we made regular trips to local and regional

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shrines as well. Apart from the car, we had little other paraphernalia: two tape-recorders, two cameras and a small medical kit.

Methods and materials

Our field materials were recorded in serial diary notebooks, maps, plans and genealogical charts, extensive tape-recordings and photographs. A constant ideal of our work was that we should manage a daily discussion of our activities, although we often did little more than share the most important tidbits of gossip picked up during the day. While neither of us spurned any information we could collect, in practice our respective areas of expertise soon became quite clear. I concentrated on issues concerning women, domestic organization and all aspects of marriage. I worked with both women and men but rarely left the camp or village. RLT, on the other hand, collected virtually all the material we have on pastoral and agricultural production and exchange, and on the wider political and ethnic relations of the Maduzai. He worked mostly with men and travelled much more widely throughout the region. There were important areas of overlap, both in terms of what we learned, particularly on the politics of the subtribe itself, and also in terms of the people who helped us most (see Tapper, N. and R. Tapper 1989).

Both of us relied heavily on our closest friends: both men and women of our host's own large household and the household of his brothers Agha Mohammad and Gul Mohammad, and those of his father's brothers, Sultan and Akhtar Mohammad; the Sinjit village 'headwoman' Kishmir and one of her nephews of Section II of Lineage C; Jumadar, a prominent man of the faction of Lineage C opposed to our host; the members of Anar Gul's household, permanent clients of Lineage C; in Chinar village my closest contacts were Hajji Nanawor, the leading woman of the village, and women close to her household, while RLT gained much information from her son and his close cousins, and from the eldest son of the leading man of Lineage D.

The picture of the Maduzai I draw here is, of course, a composite one; my ambition is to present marriage from as many perspectives as possible. To this end, I have tried to be scrupulous in cross-referencing the text to link case studies with other more formal discussions of, for example, household standing and Maduzai history, so that readers can themselves independently trace the differential materials from which this ethnographic collage has been fashioned.

The range and depth of information we collected was due to the willingness of the Maduzai to help us 'write a book' about them and their way of life. The contrast between fieldwork among the Maduzai and our earlier study of the taciturn Shahsevan nomads in Iran was striking (see R. Tapper 1979) and we have become convinced that, to a large extent, the Maduzai openness with us was related to features of their competitive and individualizing society. A person's ability to give a convincing account of him/herself was an important element in

the management of social relations. The Maduzai valued articulateness and fluent, humorous conversation and they were well used to giving their own personal interpretations on all aspects of social life. We were an eager audience and they shared these interpretations with us – often competing with others to gain our sympathy and even support on particular issues.

Given that we had come to the Maduzai with a keen interest in the nature of political discourse, the situation we found ourselves in was something of a field-worker's dream. Had we wanted on the other hand to collect detailed 'hard' data on household consumption patterns and nutrition, for example, the difficulties would have been virtually insurmountable. Equally, it should be said that we were so overwhelmed by the Maduzai willingness to talk about themselves that we were undoubtedly less sensitive than we might have been particularly to non-verbal areas of culture and action.

The Maduzai employ idioms of patrilineal descent and trace genealogical links as explicit devices to explain both social relations among themselves and with other Durrani groups, and residential patterns at all levels. In turn, residential patterns were a concrete expression of these idioms. Groups of close agnates often lived in adjacent houses in the villages and tent camps, while factional divisions within the subtribe were frequently expressed in terms of spatial divisions of the village settlements. The collection of genealogical and census materials on the subtribe was relatively easy and provided an organizational framework in terms of which we initially collected other materials.

However, as we shall see, patrilineal descent was only one of several idioms which the Maduzai used to discuss social relations. These alternative idioms – particularly those which referred to relations based on bilateral kinship, on the one hand, and to political action sets on the other – were of no less practical importance in Maduzai social life, but they were less consciously articulated as principles of social organization; rather, they were implicit in speech and action.

As outsiders remote from Maduzai struggles to control local resources, we were harmless and indeed became resources ourselves: our time and attention became one measure of the interest or importance of someone's views. At first, we did not understand that, although individuals sought to control information about themselves and their households, most of this information was already in the public domain. In fact, there were few if any real secrets: what was important was the presentation and interpretation of certain kinds of information. Within days of our arrival we learned of many major scandals, past and present, which were to preoccupy our hosts and us for the rest of our stay; only much later did we understand that these were not revelations at all, but attempts to preempt alternative interpretations of the same events.

The substantive information which we used to create the statistical bases of the study was, to a great extent, of the same order as the 'revelations' and treated in the same way by the Maduzai. Their own attitudes to the importance of certain

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kinds of information made the collection of materials and comments on household wealth, for example, relatively easy. That is, although individuals tried to keep details of the circumstances of their own household from others, members of competing households were keen to discover and discuss those same details. Moreover, field boundaries could be walked and sheep on a hillside counted, while the sheep of a brideprice and the wealth of trousseaux were publicly displayed. In other words, estimates of household wealth were the stuff of everyday life; our interest in such issues was not regarded as untoward, but natural, and indeed, far less threatening than a similar interest expressed by a member of a rival household. We collected accounts of household wealth directly from the household members concerned only in the case of our closest friends. Otherwise, the information came from others and is, as their information was, an interpretation of many different clues. In this respect, our estimates are probably comparable in accuracy to those made by the Maduzai themselves.

The collection of accounts of marriages involved similar interpretative licence on the part of both our informants and ourselves, but it was easier, in large part because of the importance of marriage among the Maduzai and the prominence they gave to wedding rituals. Details of marriage arrangements, events at a wedding and the people involved were readily recalled, and we learned to link the dating of events, and, for instance, information on household composition, to accounts of marriage. In fact, this strategy was successful enough for us to more or less realize our ambition and solve the problem of defining statistical bases for the study by collecting total samples of information – on the subtribe as a whole for marriages, and on all the households of Lineage C for household composition, landowning and wealth.

There was virtually no disagreement among the Maduzai themselves concerning the areas where we collected such systematic material: there was little room for debate about who married whom and when, or how many of the sheep of a particular household had died, or been stolen or taken by wolves. What was contested was the explanation of these facts – both their causes and their likely consequences. In the book, a key concern has been to relate the available, agreed upon, 'objective' information with the variety of interpretations which surrounded such facts, and with the significance the Maduzai attributed to them. I have tried to look at things the other way round, and to consider whether or not there were patterns in the interpretations the Maduzai offered, and whether or not such patterns could be related to the uncontested facts, as the Maduzai saw them.

In this respect, it is notable that there were some aspects of daily life where the Maduzai tolerated little interpretative licence. There were too many empirical measures to allow much scope for bragging or deception about the various indices of household wealth, or household composition, or the jobs people did. Equally, there were other areas, particularly those related to religious discourse and activities, where dissent and disagreement were strongly discouraged and

stigmatized. In these latter areas, there was often remarkable uniformity in people's comments, and alternative interpretations were stifled by pious references to the equality of all Durrani and the unknowable will of God. But there were yet other areas, particularly concerning the internal relations of households and the meaning of marriage prestations and forms, where self-presentations were constantly contested by others. Indeed, marriage ceremonies and the character of relations constructed through marriage were the principal arena of practical politics: they held the greatest fascination for the Maduzai and for me.

The importance of the household as an institution among the Maduzai also benefited us. Our intimate association with Hajji Ibrahim's household automatically created an identity for us and suggested the sympathies and insights we would have into the affairs of the subtribe, which the members of other households had an interest in either confirming or disputing according to their own relationship with Hajji Ibrahim. We were also lucky in that one aspect of our dependence on Hajji Ibrahim – which had considerable bearing on our fieldwork – was publicly defined in an incident concerning tape recordings which occurred only a few weeks after our arrival at his camp in the spring pastures.

Tape recorders were not, in the early 1970s, a standard item of household equipment: indeed, besides ours, there were none in the Maduzai settlements. We first introduced the tape recorders when I decided to see if it would be acceptable to record music at a wedding being held in our camp. The women at the wedding agreed to the idea with some delight. Then, quite unexpectedly, a heated row broke out between two of them, and was captured on tape. The women were very concerned that the swearing and personal comments would be heard by men, and I promised that I would not let this happen. However, children told the men what had occurred, and Hajji Ibrahim, among others, was greatly amused and curious to hear the recording. I refused and angered him greatly in doing so; RLT and I began seriously to fear that I had jeopardized our stay. Fortunately for us, the quarrel was allowed to pass when, after three very tense days, Hajji Ibrahim was called to mediate after a shooting incident in a nearby camp. Thereafter, because I had been able to keep my promise not to let anyone listen to the tapes without the speaker's permission, our tape recordings gained a privileged status and neither men nor women hesitated to make tapes for us on any subject. Much later, even Hajji Ibrahim laughed at my unintended challenge to his authority and praised us both as better Muslims than the Maduzai because, unlike them, he said, we always kept our word!

Indeed, the tapes took on an authority of their own. For instance, even a brief account of the 'brothel' in the village is on tape (see p. 236). It was made by friends who were quite determined to make us understand that we should not visit Majid the pimp and they insisted that we tape their story: it was their way of emphasizing its import and truthfulness – at the time we still believed the