

IS AFGHANISTAN ON THE BRINK OF ETHNIC AND TRIBAL DISINTEGRATION?

Bernt Glatzer

In: William Maley (Editor): *Fundamentalism Reborn? Afghanistan and the Taliban*. London: Hurst & Co., 1998, pp. 167-181.

ISBN: 0814755860

Introduction: The ethnic system

Afghan society is usually labelled as 'tribal', a notion which is not the same as 'simple' or 'primitive'. Afghan society is complex, the product of thousands of years of imperial policies, of conquests, of state building and political decay, of far-reaching spiritual, artistic and social achievements as well as of destruction and chaos. Studying complex societies involves identifying lines of structure and order, finding models or threads in order not to get lost in a sea of confusing phenomena and events. Not only do outsiders wanting to understand a society use simplified models; local people too use mental social maps to find their way through their own society.

Gender and age are primary dimensions of such social maps; locality and sources of livelihood are other ordering criteria. In ecologically well-defined mountain areas, the valleys and river banks may be used to categorise a population further. In open areas with little economic variation—note in this respect that 70-80 per cent of pre-war Afghans were peasants—other social categories gain importance, for example kinship group and tribe or ethnic grouping. This does not mean that tribal and ethnic structures are the necessary outcome of a given demographic, economic and geographic setting, but once tribal and ethnic structures are culturally available and acceptable and part of the historically-given arsenal of social institutions, they are quite practical to structure an economically rather homogeneous population in a vast area with little infrastructure.

Anthropologists and demographers have tried hard to count the ethnic groups and tribes of Afghanistan, with widely differing results. The most serious attempt to list the ethnic groups in Afghanistan to my knowledge is that of Erwin Orywal and collaborators.¹ They list 55 ethnic names in Afghanistan. Orywal also cautions that ethnic groups and identities are local categories (*emic*). They are relative, variable and dynamic.² Orywal has listed the following ethnic groups in Afghanistan: Arab (Arabic speakers), Arab (Persian speakers), Aimaq, Baluch, Baluch (Jat-Baluch), Brahui, Eshkashimi, Farsiwan, Firuzkuhi, Gavarbati, Ghorbat, Gujar, Hazara, Hazara-Sunni, Hindu, Jalali, Jamshidi, Jat, Jogi, Kirghiz, Kutana, Maliki, Mawri, Mishmast, Moghol, Mountain-Tajik, Munjani, Nuristani, Ormuri, Parachi, Pashai, Pushtun, Pikraj, Qarliq, Qazaq, Qipchak, Qizilbash, Rushani, Sangliche, Shadibaz, Sheghnani, Sheykh

¹ Erwin Orywal (ed.), *Die ethnischen Gruppen Afghanistans: Fallstudien zu Gruppenidentität und Intergruppenbeziehungen* (Wiesbaden: Dr. Ludwig Reichert Verlag, 1986).

² Ibid, pp. 9, 18f, 73ff.

Muhammadi, Sikh, Taheri, Tajik, Tatar, Taymani, Taymuri, Tirahi, Turkmen, Uzbek, Wakhi, Wangawala, Yahudi, and Zuri.³

A closer look at this list reveals the problematic side of ethnic categories: Aimaq, Firuzkuhi, Jamshidi, and Taymani are listed together, but according to most locals and to most authors Firuzkuhi and Jamshidi are sub-categories of Aimaq. Taymani usually deny that they are Aimaq and many of them feel affinity with the Pushtuns, whereas their Pushtun neighbours deny them Pushtun status. The Pushtuns of Badghis call all Sunni Persian speakers 'Aimaq' which is annoying to local Tajiks who are Sunni Persian speakers but fiercely object to being categorised as 'Aimaq'. Self-categorisation and ascription by neighbours differ and often cause dissension. 'Jat', for example, is a derogatory term for non-pastoral migrant groups with a similar connotation to 'Gypsy' in Europe. These people instead use distinct ethnic names such as Ghorbat, Shaykh Mohammadi, Musalli or the terms of their occupation.

To facilitate discussion of the ethnic complexity of Afghanistan I propose the following definition of 'ethnic' deduced from modern anthropological usage: by 'ethnic' I understand a principle of social order and of social boundary based on the identification of oneself and of others with social units or categories which combine the following properties: (a) they comprise both genders, all age groups and transcend generations; (b) they are believed to have distinctive cultural qualities by which the members of that unit would differ from comparable neighbouring units; (c) members identify themselves and their families with the past and future of that unit; (d) members and neighbours give them a name (*ethnonym*); and they are not sub-units of other ethnic groups.

It is important here to note that ethnic categories and systems are part of the regional culture; they can be observed but not defined by outside analysts. Ethnicity is a phenomenon of social boundaries. An ethnic group cannot be identified or characterised only from within. Ethnic groups identify themselves in contrast to other groups. Analytically speaking, ethnicity is not a quality of a social group, but a relation *between* social groups.⁴ Ethnic identities keep changing over time. The pioneer of the *ethnos* theory, S. M. Shirokogoroff, stated as early as 1935 that ethnic units are *processes*, not static phenomena.⁵ The speed of such processes varies geographically and leads to unequal developments even within an ethnic group. It seems that those processes tend to accelerate in times of turmoil and violent conflict.

The present civil war in Afghanistan has frequently been analysed as an *ethnic* war: the Pushtuns against the Tajiks, Hazara and Uzbek or others, each of the groups fighting separately under its own commanders and military structure. The predominantly Pushtun Taliban are believed to aim at printing their ethnic stamp on all other ethnic groups of the country, and non-Pushtuns are supposed to fight against Pushtun dominance and against their ethnic marginalisation. Although there is a grain of truth in this view, such a simplification is of little help in evaluating the present situation in Afghanistan and the chances for a peaceful future.

³ Ibid. pp. 18-19. This transcription has been simplified and alphabetically ordered by the author.

⁴ This point was introduced to international discussion by Fredrik Barth, 'Introduction', in Fredrik Barth (ed.), *Ethnic Groups and Boundaries: The Social Organization of Cultural Difference* (Boston: Little, Brown & Co, 1969), pp. 9-38.

⁵ S. M. Shirokogoroff, *Psychomental Complex of the the Tungus* (London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trubner, 1935), pp. 12-23.

The main ethnic groups in the Afghan conflict

The Pushtuns. There is no doubt that the Taliban polarised the country between a predominantly Pushtun south and east, on the one side, and on the other the centre and north where Pushtuns are only a minority. Pushtuns are estimated to account for between 40 per cent and 60 per cent of Afghan nationals. There are no reliable figures for the total population, and estimates range between 15 and 20 million. Thus the minimum number of Pushtuns in Afghanistan (40 per cent of 15 million) is 6 million, while the maximum (60 per cent of 20 million) is 12 million. In Pakistan the figures are equally unreliable; the last Census (1981) counted 11 million Pushto-speaking Pakistanis.⁶ The Pushtuns subdivide themselves into thousands of tribes along a genealogical charter which they use as a basis of unity and solidarity as well as of fission and conflict. Due to their explicit and elaborate tribal system and possession of their own language and code of ethnic values and norms (*Pushtunwali*), ethnic identity for Pushtuns is straightforward and rarely questioned by themselves or others, although interethnic fluctuation takes place.

The Tajiks. The Tajiks are the second largest group in Afghanistan. Calling them an 'ethnic' group involves stretching the usual ethnic definitions. There is no recognisable cultural, social or political boundary between them and the others. Groups of people called 'Tajik' live all over the country: in the larger cities they form majorities or important minorities. Most of the people in the provinces north of Kabul up to Badakhshan are called Tajik and in almost all Pushtun provinces there are important pockets of Tajiks. Their social groups are organised along local lineages, village clusters, valleys and occupational groups. When asked what people they are, most Tajiks answer by naming their valley, area, or town. 'Tajik' is mainly an analytical term, used by others to designate those who do not belong to a tribal society, who speak Persian and who are mostly Sunni.⁷ There seems to be an increasing tendency of non-tribal Persian speaking Afghans to identify themselves as 'Tajik' when speaking to outsiders.⁸

The Hazara. The Hazara are another ethnic group whose members play a major role in the civil war. They are now estimated to number 1.5 million. A majority adhere to the Imami Shiite confession ('Twelver Shia'); minorities among them are Ismaili and Sunni.⁹ The Hazara speak their own Persian dialect, Hazaragi, and are geographically concentrated in the Central Afghanistan highlands, in an area called the Hazarajat.¹⁰ Sizeable groups live also in various parts of northern Afghanistan, and in the major cities, particularly in Kabul, in the poorest sector of the society; as well as in Quetta

⁶ *Statistical Pocket Book of Pakistan 1991* (Karachi: Federal Bureau of Statistics, 1991), pp. 76, 84. The Census of 1981 contains statistics of languages, not of ethnic groups.

⁷ In northeast Afghanistan there are also Ismaili Tajik (Islamuddin Sawez, 'Anpassung und Abgrenzung—Die Tagik', in Orywal (ed.), *Die ethnischen Gruppen Afghanistans*, pp. 284-289).

⁸ The western Afghan Shia Persian speakers are referred to in the literature as 'Farsiwan': see, for example, Louis Dupree, *Afghanistan* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1980), p. 59. There is obviously no clear ethnic boundary between Tajik and Farsiwan. At least nowadays, there are educated Herati Shia Persian speakers who call themselves 'Persians' (not Iranians) and 'Tajik' (Rameen Moshref, personal communication); compare also Robert L. Canfield, 'Ethnic, Regional, and Sectarian Alignments in Afghanistan', in Ali Banuazizi and Myron Weiner (eds.) *The State, Religion and Ethnic Politics: Pakistan, Iran and Afghanistan* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1986), pp. 75-103 at p. 78.

⁹ The latter are not to be confused with the Sunni Hazara of Badghis, also called Qala-i Nau Hazara, who are usually counted among the Aimaq or as a separate ethnic group closer to the Tajik than to the Central Afghan Hazara.

¹⁰ In official publications of the Hezb-e Wahdat, the most powerful political party among the Hazara, their country is called Hazaristan (*Wahdat Newsletter*, vol.6, no. 63, August 1997).

(Pakistan) and Mashhad (Iran). The Hazara are identified by the other Afghans as one ethnic group recognisable by their prevailing Central Asian phenotype. Before the war I found the Hazara reluctant to name themselves 'Hazara', maybe because in Kabul Hazara has the connotation of 'very poor' or 'coolie'. The war has changed this attitude; decades of independence from Kabul have led to a remarkable ethnic self-confidence.

European anthropologists who visited the Hazara before the war even questioned their ethnic unity.¹¹ A large block among the Hazara are the Sayids, who form their spiritual and political élite. The Sayids believe themselves to be descendants of the Prophet Mohammad and thus separate themselves from the commoners. The latter subdivide themselves into many tribes and clans but without an overarching genealogy. Modern Hazara nationalists claim descent from Chinggis Khan, thus hoping to raise the social status of the Hazara within the Afghan value system of social groups.

A unifying factor is their popular dislike of Pushtuns. The Afghan Government in the 1880s and 1890s subdued the Hazara with a Pushtun army and allotted the best agricultural and pastoral land to Pushtun clans and chiefs. From that time until 1978, Pushtuns intruded into the Hazarajat as administrators, merchants, money lenders, landlords and nomads—in short, as persons who came to extract resources from the Hazarajat but who gave little in return. The Hazarajat liberated itself from the communist regime in 1979; one of the free Hazaras' first actions after that was to deny all Pushtuns access to Central Afghanistan. As a consequence Pushtun nomadism suffered a dramatic decline because it depended to a large part on summer pastures in that part of the country.

The former mosaic of political parties among the Hazara reflects their initial lack of unity, their parties ranging from ultraconservative mullah-networks (Shura-i Ettefaq) to moderate conservatives and to modern Islamist radicals (Nasr), and even to Maoist parties. Pressure from Iran, which supported most of the Hazara parties, and pressure from their adversaries in the post-1992 civil war drove them together politically. Today we hear only of the pro-Iranian Hezb-e Wahdat ('Party of Unity'). The recent successes in Wahdat's battles against the Taliban in Ghorband, Wardak and Mazar indicate a Hazara unity which never had existed before. If this tendency continues the Hazara may become the first major ethnic group in Afghanistan which is able to act as a coherent unit.

The Uzbek. The fourth important ethnic group are the Uzbek (Uzbek, Özbek, Uzbek) of North Afghanistan. They speak their own Turkish language, adhere to Sunni Islam, and are ordered in tribes and clans. Most pursue agriculture and sedentary animal husbandry. Their numbers equal roughly those of the Hazara. One part of the Afghan Uzbek are an autochthonous population, living in North Afghanistan for centuries, who were ruled by their own begs and amirs before the Afghan state extended its control to the river Oxus. The other part of the Uzbek population migrated into Afghanistan after the expansion of the Tsarist Empire and again during the Sovietisation of Central Asia. These Uzbek immigrants did not fuse with the autochthonous Uzbek, but formed a sort of distinct ethnic group under the name of *muhajerin* ('refugees').¹² Before 1978 the

¹¹ Lucas-Michael Kopecky, 'Die Saiyid und die imamitischen Hazara Afghanistans: Religiöse Vergemeinschaftung und Ethnogenese', in Orywal (ed.), *Die ethnischen Gruppen Afghanistans*, pp. 165-203.

¹² Audrey Shalinsky, 'Uzbek Ethnicity in Northern Afghanistan', in Orywal (ed.), *Die ethnischen Gruppen Afghanistans*, pp. 290-303.

Afghan Uzbek were known as relatively docile citizens, although anti-Pushtun agitation which had an ethnic target but hardly an ethnic base did exist. During the Soviet-Afghan war, some of the Uzbeks sided with the pro-Soviet government or rather with the pro-minority policy of the new government and were militarily organised under Rashid Dostum's Jawzjani militias; others sided with the Mujahideen, mainly under the Harakat-e Enqelab of Mawlawi Mohammad Nabi Mohammadi, whose leaders, but not commanders, were almost exclusively Pushtun.¹³

The examples of the four largest ethnolinguistic units in Afghanistan may demonstrate that ethnic 'groups' are not organised into opposing political or military blocks. With the exception of the Hazara, who recently succeeded in joining their forces under Khalili's Hezb-e Wahdat, none of these groupings ever had developed a decision-making institution which could express the will of the whole ethnic 'group', or at least of the larger part of it, and which could lead such people to any concerted political or military action. The Pushtuns are said to have ruled the country for 250 years. In fact it was not *the* Pushtuns, but Pushtun rulers. The latter governed a wide range of different people, but never all the Pushtuns, not even a majority of them, and the actual day-to-day administration was left mainly to non-Pushtuns, to a Persian-speaking urban élite.

The tribal system

The term 'tribe' needs further clarification because it is often confused with 'ethnic group'. In this context tribes are sub-units of ethnic groups. In Afghanistan tribes are based on the notion that their members share a common ancestor through agnatic descent. An individual may be a member of many tribes, each of which is a sub-unit of a larger one. Tribes have 'brother' or 'cousin' tribes, which are situated on the same structural level and define lines of conflict or of solidarity, depending on whether they feel threatened by a common enemy or whether they compete for material or symbolic resources. Tribes are not cultural units; the markers of tribal boundaries are genealogical and sometimes also geographical. This does not exclude notions of qualitative difference ('my tribe is better than your tribe'); such comparisons rest on identical scales of value, not on feelings of cultural difference or strangeness, as in ethnic relations. In the following description and analysis of the tribal system I use the Pushtun model which is more elaborate than that of other ethnic groups.

Local folklore has it that all Pushtuns are descendants of one ancestor, even if there is no agreement about the common grandfather's name. Some call him Qais Abdurrashid; others say he was Daru Nika or Khaled bin Walid—the legendary general of the army of the Prophet Muhammad. The name of the common ancestor is less important than the Pushtuns' sense of belonging to *one* huge kinship group or super-family. Their common ancestor had many sons, grandsons, great-grandsons and so forth, each being the ancestor of one of the innumerable branches and sub-branches or tribes and sub-tribes, clans and sub-clans down to the local lineages and families. The ordering principle of each tribal subgroup is identical to that of the larger group. There have been attempts to codify the Pushtun tribal system, the most famous being the *Makhzan-e Afghani* of Nimatullah, written in the early seventeenth century. Such genealogies list thousands of tribes together with legends and anecdotes about their origins and how they joined or

¹³ Olivier Roy, *L'Afghanistan: Islam et modernité politique* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1985), p. 175.

split.¹⁴ The tribal charter is based on patrilineality, but in some conspicuous cases this principle is set aside for notable exceptions. Some of the more famous and powerful tribes such as the Afridi or Ghilzai are connected to the rest of the Pushtuns by adoption or by female links. Adventurous or romantic stories usually adorn these deviations from the patrilineal rule in the genealogical books. Adaptations to social and political realities were always possible as the tribal system was managed in a flexible manner.

In principle, one has to be born into a tribe, but Afghan pragmatism allows exceptions. Through consensus of the tribe, outsiders may be allowed to reside in their area. If that person and his family honour the tribal code of behaviour the newcomers may be accepted as members after a generation or two.

A few words about terminology. People, ethnic groups and tribes are called *qawm* in Pushto and in most other languages in Afghanistan. This reflects the traditional notion that ethnic groups and tribes are structured equally, that is, by genealogical links. Sub-tribe or clan is *khel* in Pushto, but it may also be called *qawm* as any tribal unit may be a tribe or sub-tribe at the same time; it depends on whether it is seen to be from the root of the tree or from above. A sub-tribe or sub-clan of a *khel* is also a *khel* down to the village level. A common suffix of names of larger tribal units is *-zai* (for example, Mandozai, meaning 'Son of Mando'; the plural form is Mandozi, 'Sons of Mando'), and *-khel* for the sub-units. Some *khels* have grown to such an extent that they became recognised as tribes of their own, such as the Sulaimankhel, a branch of the Ghilzai. The suffix *-zai* indicates in most cases a southern or western origin (for example, the Yusufzai of Swat originate from Kandahar), whereas most of the eastern tribes lack the typical tribal suffix, such as the Afridi, Mohmand, Zadran, Jaji, Mangal, Shinwari, as well as many smaller tribes of Khost such as the Tanai, Saberi, Lakan, and Ghorboz.

Most of the tribes in Afghanistan are neither corporate nor political entities, yet the tribal system has always served as a blueprint for political alliances. Political entrepreneurs found kinship and tribal links most convenient as a basis for alliances or confederations in order to challenge even imperial powers and to secure areas of freedom and independence for their people. The Confederation of the Ghilzai Pushtuns in the early eighteenth century succeeded in conquering Ispahan and dethroning the Shah of Persia, but their ephemeral tribal cohesion did not allow them to run the empire for more than two years. A few decades later their Pushtun opponents, the Abdali Confederation later renamed as Durrani, established the first Kingdom of Afghanistan, and conquered the lands between Herat and Delhi. After two generations their political power was exhausted, the fissive forces inherent in every segmentary tribal system became stronger than the cohesive forces, and the kingdom and the confederation disintegrated, a striking example of the working of Ibn Khaldun's law of the rise and fall of empires.¹⁵

There is a dilemma in tribal societies: the very tool which enables tribal leaders to establish powerful political entities, the charter of segmentary solidarity, is also

¹⁴ Khwaja Nimatullah b. Khwaja Habibullah al-Harawi, *Tarikh-e Khan Jahani wa makhzan-e Afghani* (Dacca: Asiatic Society of Pakistan, 1960-1992) vols. I-II. Dorn issued a translated version in 1829 under the title *History of the Afghans* (London: Susil Gupta, 1965). Another, more handy, genealogy is Hayat Khan, *Hayat-e Afghani* (Lahore: Sang-e-Meel Publications, 1981), originally translated into English by Priestley in 1874.

¹⁵ Ibn Khaldun, *Muqaddimah*. The standard translation is by Franz Rosenthal, *Ibn Khaldun. An Introduction to History: the Muqaddimah* (New York: Bollingen Foundation, 1958) vols. I-III.

instrumental for segmentary division. Once a charismatic leader who masters the instrument of segmentary alliances loses influence or dies, the divisive character of the segmentary tribal system will gain the upper hand. Tribal systems usually do not develop institutionalised political power which could tolerate fluctuations in the abilities of individual rulers.

The Pushtun ideal of equality is based on the tribal system. The idea is that all Pushtuns are born equal as children of one common ancestor; social and economic inequality, which of course exists, is not given by nature or birth but is supposed to be individually achieved, and is open to be questioned any time. The tribal order discourages social hierarchy, but it defines social nearness and distance. Pushtuns use their tribal order to mark lines of conflict and solidarity. If I see two men fighting I must side with the one who is 'closer' to me, that is, the one with whom I share the nearest common patrilineal ancestor. In the Pushtun tribal areas in eastern Afghanistan and northwest Pakistan we find a sociopolitical division into two opposite factions: the Tor Gund and the Spin Gund. Here is an example from Khost in eastern Afghanistan: the Saberi, Jadran, Chamkani, Tanai, and Mandozai are named Spin Gund in opposition to the Tor Gund, comprising the Mangal, Ismailkhel and others. Today this dichotomy has become practically obsolete, but people clearly remember which tribe belongs to which *gund*. The recent violent land dispute between Chamkani and Mangal, however, is between two opposing *gund* and the sympathies of the Saberi who are not part of the conflict lie with their *gund* fellows, the Chamkani.

Tribes are localised to various degrees. The Ghilzai, for example, are scattered all over Afghanistan; thus there is no proper Ghilzai land. Yet there are areas where Ghilzai and certain of their sub-tribes predominate. Other tribes, such as the Afridi, have a clearly-defined homeland. The latter is true for most of the eastern tribes along the Afghan-Pakistani border. Tribal land is subdivided along tribal subdivisions. Therefore belonging to a tribe means having access to the land of that tribe. There are also landless tribals, for example those who have sold their inherited land to another member of their tribe. If a member of a tribe loses ownership of his land, he retains at least his right to reacquire land if he regains the necessary means. Localised tribes also own common and undivided property, for example pastures and forests which every member has an equal right to use. A member of a tribe knows that he defends his own security and future of his family when he defends his tribe's land.¹⁶

Those tribes who inhabit a coherent area are also able to define and enact a common policy. Even where influential persons (*khan*) or commanders have emerged, decisions of importance for the whole community are reached at community councils (*jirga*). According to tribal equality, every free and experienced male person of the tribe has the right to attend, to speak and to decide. Only *jirgas* on very high levels (provincial or all-tribe) need a system of representation. For example, when the tribes of Mandozai and Ismailkhel sent a joint *jirga* to Peshawar in order to attract international aid, they nominated two representatives from each sub-tribe to participate.¹⁷ *Jirgas* traditionally have neither leaders nor chairmen. The participants prefer to sit in circles in order to

¹⁶ For a comprehensive account of the legal aspects of the tribal system in Khost see Willi Steul, *Paschtunwali: Ein Ehrenkodex und seine rechtliche Relevanz* (Wiesbaden: Steiner Verlag, 1981).

¹⁷ At that time (1991) I worked with the Danish Committee for Aid to Afghan Refugees, an NGO which was approached successfully by that *jirga*.

avoid any dominant position. Decisions are only reached through consensus. Therefore discussions last until everyone is convinced or until it becomes clear that there will be no consensus. Once a decision is reached at a jirga, it is binding on every participant.

During the anti-Soviet war a new political term came into use in Afghanistan: 'shura'. This is the Arabic term referring to the first meetings of the Muslim community (*ummah*). The word 'jirga', on the other hand, is derived from Mongolian and lacks religious connotations. Other differences between jirga and shura are the more representative character of a shura, a relatively permanent membership, and more regular intervals of the meetings. Jirgas in contrast meet *ad hoc* when a problem arises.¹⁸ Tribes traditionally have their own militia, called 'arbaki' or 'lashkar', consisting of young unmarried men who are not experienced enough to participate in jirgas or shuras, but who are strong and loyal enough to sanction the decisions. The classical sanction for not adhering to a decision of a jirga or shura is for the arbaki to burn down the house of the offender, and the worst sanction is expulsion from the tribe and tribal land.

I have mentioned leaders. A closer look at them reveals that their power is rather limited. Whereas tribes and their divisions are relatively stable and dependable, tribal leadership is not. Political leaders can hardly build their power on the tribal structure alone because it is egalitarian. They have continually to convince their followers and adversaries of their superior personal qualities and have to procure and redistribute resources from outside their tribal realm; the followers expect from them material or symbolic advantages. In times of political chaos people demand from their leaders security. Followers may be quickly disappointed by a khan or commander and may switch overnight to another big man; there is no institutional safety net for tribal leaders.

In a tribal setting one can gain power by (a) controlling tenants; (b) attracting many regular guests through lavish hospitality; (c) channelling resources from the outside world to one's followers; (d) demonstrating superior rhetorical gifts and regular sound judgements in the shuras and jirgas; and (e) gallantry in war and conflict. All these qualities are transitory and have constantly to be reactivated against ever-present competitors.

In spite of the proverbial unpredictability of tribal leadership, the tribal system is an element of stability and resilience in times of turmoil and when state authority has disappeared. It provides safety, legal security and social orientation in an otherwise chaotic and anarchic world. Where the tribal system is functioning smoothly, the Taliban have not dared to touch it: they continue instead the pre-war practice of Afghan governments of letting peripheral areas (that is, the largest part of the country) be ruled by local authorities and institutions. In the post-communist period, my experience was that in areas where the tribal system was dominant (for example in Khost) the return of refugees and the rehabilitation of the local economy proceeded smoothly.¹⁹

Although tribal structures are present all over Afghanistan, they do not function everywhere as well as in some areas in the east, because the tribal system and the ethnic

¹⁸ For a good analysis of the Afghan shuras see Lynn Carter and Kerry Connor, *A Preliminary Investigation of Contemporary Afghan Councils* (Peshawar: ACBAR, 1989).

¹⁹ Bernt Glatzer, 'From Refugee to Resident: Effects of Aid on Repatriation', in E. Eide and T. Skaujord (eds.), *From Aid During Times of War to Aid for Reconstruction and Development: Seminar Report* (Peshawar: Norwegian Afghanistan Committee, 1992), pp. 161-168.

factor are only two of many ordering principles in Afghan society. In the predominantly Pushtun south and southwest of Afghanistan, tribalism plays an important role, but the tribes are less localised; most communities and political units are multi-tribal. There a tribesman with political ambitions recruits followers from among his own family, lineage, clan and tribe, but there are limits to this strategy because southern Pushtun tribes live dispersed over very wide areas, with little infrastructural means of being brought together. Hence a man seeking political leadership beyond his village will try to make use of additional or even alternative social structural elements and try to combine as many as possible, for example networks based on locality, economy, sectarianism, Sufi orders, religious schools, political and religious parties and so on.

Tribalism and ethnicity are often lumped together and blamed as the main factors leading to turmoil, war and the breakdown of state order, or to the failure to re-create such an order. I have tried to explain that the tribal structure of Afghanistan is rather a factor for stability, even if it does not provide the basis for durable political leadership. The ethnic principle, on the other hand, is neither a factor for stability nor necessarily for instability. Ethnicity is a phenomenon of social boundary-making, an awareness of sharing a set of cultural values within one group versus another. Members of an ethnic group share a feeling of 'we' versus 'they'.

Ethnicity and tribalism: dangers and opportunities

After this outline of Afghan ethnic and tribal principles, I shall now assess their inherent dangers and implications. As mentioned already, a high degree of ethnic dynamism is observable in Afghanistan; that is, ethnic and tribal boundaries and identities are not fixed since time immemorial, but are often a matter for negotiation. Whether social action is based on ethnic criteria depends on opportunities and tactics and may change quickly. In his public speeches the Pushtun Gulbuddin Hekmatyar initially stressed his attachment to pan-Islamism and the Muslim ummah. Boundaries between Muslim states should be made obsolete, he argued. Later, during his recruitment campaigns in Pushtun areas, he appealed to the ethnic solidarity of the Pushtuns.

During the anti-Soviet war in Afghanistan and later the guerrilla war against the pro-communist regime in Kabul, the frontline divided almost all ethnic groups and the larger tribes. In all those groups there were (a) sympathisers and collaborators of the socialist regimes; (b) fierce enemies of these regimes; and (c) people who decided to wait and see who would prevail. Many families strategically placed one family member among the communists, placed another one or two among the Mujahideen of various parties, and sent yet another as a refugee to Europe or USA while the rest of the family set up their household in a Pakistani refugee camp. Of course the family members all kept in touch with each other.

During the early years of the war foreign observers and Afghan intellectuals on both sides of the front expected a prompt end to tribalism and ethnicity. Some hoped for the 'achievements of socialism' and for the 'brotherly help of the USSR' to transform Afghanistan into a supra-ethnic class society and eventually into a harmonious socialist union; the others expected the grand jihad against the formidable common enemy to do the job of creating one Afghan nation. As the war dragged on, it became obvious that the Kabul regimes and the Mujahideen were divided into numerous hostile factions. It

also became obvious that ethnicity and tribalism were contributory factors to this process, but not the most important ones. In early 1980 the Sunni Mujahideen had formed about 100 different parties who ran sixty offices in Peshawar. During the following year the Pakistan Government forced the Mujahideen to unite and acknowledged only seven parties, who were given some administrative tasks with respect to the millions of Afghan refugees in Pakistan. The rest of the parties had to close their offices in Pakistan. The seven parties issued identity and ration cards, thus forcing the refugees to make a choice between one or another of the parties. Even more relevant was the Pakistani policy of distributing military equipment and money for the Mujahideen exclusively through the seven parties. The Shiite Mujahideen formed another eight parties, who found support in Iran. Over the years Iran succeeded in unifying most of them; today the only two significant Shia parties are the Hezb-e Wahdat, which unites the great majority of the Hazara, and the Harakat-e Islami of Asif Mohseni, which appeals more to the urban Shia and is independent of Iran.²⁰ The Soviet-installed governments, and the army and civil service of Kabul between 1978 and 1992, were divided into hostile factions as well. Two presidents, innumerable ministers, generals and other dignitaries were killed in factional fights.

Ethnicity and tribalism are often held responsible for Afghan disunity. Indeed practically all of the conflicting parties and groups, including the Taliban, show a certain emphasis towards one or another ethnic group. This, however, is no proof that ethnic divisions are the cause of political cleavages and violent conflicts. Every Afghan belongs to an ethnic group; thus a quarrel between two Afghans who by chance do not belong to the same ethnic group may easily be misinterpreted as ethnically motivated.

A closer look at the history of the present conflict reveals that ethnicity was an epiphenomenon in the Afghan war.²¹ Or as Canfield puts it, 'Contrary to what might be supposed, the actual operating units of socio-political coalition [...] are rarely genuinely "ethnic" in composition'.²² The undeniable fact that the parties do have a recognisable ethnic stamp has mainly to do with the local background of their founders and their leaders rather than with their ethnic identity. If that local background has a demographic majority of one ethnic group, it is most likely that the closest companions of the founders and leaders will belong to the same ethnic group. They will prefer to recruit from the same area and use the local language, creating a barrier to those unfamiliar with that tongue. Olivier Roy gives the example of the Persian-speaking Nurzai Pushtuns of southwest Afghanistan who initially joined the Jamiat-e Islami (which is mainly Tajik because Persian is the language spoken in that party), whereas the Pushto-speaking Nurzai opted for the Harakat-e Enqelab.²³

Due to its primordial connotations, ethnic identity, more than other social orientations, has a strong emotional content, leading to particular aggressiveness when conflicts arise. Organisers and leaders of conflicts use ethnic and tribal emotions and the feelings of honour and shame connected with them as a tool or weapon as efficiently as a Stinger or Kalashnikov. Although the national unity of Afghanistan is on the agenda of all these groups, ethnic arguments are increasingly deployed in political agitation and

²⁰ Jonathan Lee, personal communication.

²¹ See Roy, *L'Afghanistan: Islam et modernité politique*; Canfield, 'Ethnic, Regional, and Sectarian Alignments in Afghanistan'.

²² Canfield, 'Ethnic, Regional, and Sectarian Alignments in Afghanistan', p. 76.

²³ Roy, *L'Afghanistan: Islam et modernité politique*, p. 178.

there is a visible tendency towards ethnicisation of the conflict. Anti-Pushtun sentiments among Persian and Turkic-speaking minorities in north and west Afghanistan were fomented and turned against the Taliban as a last resort to activate morale and unity among the northern opposition forces, a tactic which backfires because it alienates Pushtun groups who hitherto participated in the Northern Alliance and encourages them to switch sides. The Taliban too did not do enough to avoid anti-Hazara agitations and killings in Kabul in May 1997 after some Taliban fighters were killed in Mazar-e Sharif, thus boosting the anti-Taliban feelings among the Hazara and other minorities who fear a similar fate.

Another important factor which has a strong impact on the events in Afghanistan is the perception of the Afghan conflict by foreign powers and media who understand this war as an ethnic one. As a consequence warlords of specific ethnic backgrounds are preferred and pampered, thus reinforcing the ethnic factor.

In October and November 1996 I carried out a survey about popular concepts of locality, ethnicity and tribe of about 100 peasants, artisans, traders, and students who recently came from different parts of Afghanistan to Peshawar and intended to return soon. To my surprise all of them without exception stressed the importance of Afghan national unity incorporating all ethnic minorities. A partition of Afghanistan, be it on ethnic or other lines, was seen as a terrifying prospect to be avoided by all means.

To sum up I do not see Afghanistan as being on the brink of ethnic or tribal disintegration, but agree with my interviewees that the breakup of the country along ethnic lines holds real dangers. Ethnically-motivated aggression is on the rise in Afghanistan as elsewhere in the world, but there are also strong countervailing forces. The awareness of national unity has increased considerably during the last twenty years; this fact easily gets blurred in the daily news from the battlefield. Ethnic groups, including the Pushtuns, are not organised political entities who would be able to pursue a strategy of separation, and tribes have proved in recent years to be a stabilising factor rather than a disruptive one. Even the Hazara, who at present show the highest degree of internal political integration, feel strongly that they are Afghan nationals. What they fight for is the preservation of their local, cultural, and religious autonomy, not disintegration.

The future of Afghanistan will rather depend on whether the protagonists continue using ethnicity as a psychological weapon which invariably backfires against those who use it. It will also depend on Afghanistan's neighbours and on the regional powers who not only continue to fuel the Afghan civil war but also make things worse by applying ethnic criteria when choosing their 'friends'.