

Cultural heritage and national identity in Afghanistan

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ABSTRACT *An innate sense of the essence of their culture sustained Afghans through 24 years of conflict and displacement. Although they continue to cherish the diversity of regional differences, individuals cling tenaciously to their national identity, upholding traditional values and customs that distinguish them from their neighbours. From the beginning of the twentieth century, attempts to foster unity through nation-building activities in mostly urban areas met with mixed success; the latest attempts to cast Afghans in a puritanical Islamic mould met with disaster. Years of discord stretched taut the fabric of the society and national traits once honoured hallmarks of the culture were compromised. Yet the fundamentals of the culture remain strong, changed in some ways but readily recognisable as uniquely Afghan. Current expectations aim to engage various cultural elements as bonding vehicles to hasten reconstruction and strengthen peace.*

Afghanistan's canvas is small: in area about the size of France and in population barely 25 million. Nevertheless its terrain is spectacularly varied, with mountains rising over 7000 metres, broad rivers feeding fertile valleys alternating with inhospitable deserts. Travelling around this landscape is difficult, for roads are sometimes so poor that neither horse nor donkey can climb the precipitous trails. Thus, individuals often live and die in their home valleys unaware of others around them.

Yet over the millennia a rich diversity of peoples has come to this land because it occupies a pivotal position at the hub where four great civilisations meet. This centrality of place as a zone of intercommunication has attracted conquering armies, men of intellect, missionaries, pilgrims, traders, artisans, nomads and political exiles. Some merely passed through; others stayed and settled. Whatever the manner of their coming, all contributed to Afghanistan's heritage. It is in this reciprocal interaction of diverse influences that the medley of Afghan culture germinated.

How then should an Afghan identity be defined in the context of this complex ethnic mosaic? The following discussion will touch briefly on some traditional cultural attributes that characterise Afghan society. An overview of efforts made to foster a sense of cultural unity follows, before noting the assaults that have buffeted the culture over the past two and a half decades. Finally, a few ideas for

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the future.

But first, what is meant by culture? For the purposes of this discussion culture embraces those shared ideas, beliefs, emotions and customs that mould behaviour and place value on creative artistic expressions in such fields as art, music, literature and architecture. It defines the way people live, the way they utilise both material and non-material resources. The measure of being cultured in Afghanistan, where close to 90% are non-literate, need not be equated with being well read. Those who observe the rules of accepted behaviour and follow the prescriptions of etiquette are highly respected. Moreover, because of vibrant oral traditions many non-literates are well aware of their heritage.

The cultural variations evident among individual pieces of the ethnic mosaic add richness to the overall culture. Many are vestiges of other cultures introduced from adjacent countries at various times during their long history. Groups holding different spiritual beliefs in Afghanistan today—Sunni, Shia, Ismaili, Sikh, Hindu and Jew—and those inhabiting different regions have long cherished these differences. Yet, in spite of the current emphasis on ethnicity, fuelled in large part by outsiders for political purposes, the search for unifying indicators reveals that, despite pride of origin, despite episodes of friction, despite plays for power, despite self-serving ethnocentric panegyrics by individuals, a sense of belonging, of being Afghan, is evident among the population at large.

A glance at Afghan history affirms an oft-repeated pattern of alternating periods of fission and fusion. Afghans may quarrel happily among themselves, but they stand together and assert their pride in being Afghan when outsiders threaten. A sense of national identity does exist, elements of divisiveness notwithstanding.

Some traditional cultural patterns

Honour is the rock upon which social status rests and the family is the single most important institution in Afghan society. Individual honour, a positive pride in independence that comes from self-reliance, fulfilment of family obligations, respect for the elderly, respect for women, loyalty to colleagues and friends, tolerance for others, forthrightness, an abhorrence of fanaticism, and a dislike for ostentation, is a cultural quality most Afghans share.

The position of women is central to these values. In this patriarchal society women are the standards by which morality is judged, and they carry the responsibility of passing on the values of the society to younger generations. Many of these values are implicit in the rules of etiquette which emphasise respect for elders and guests, such as always standing in welcome, exchanges of prescribed greetings, appropriate dress, and, above all, decorum and deportment, which are as crucial for males as for females. The criteria for appropriate behaviour may vary from group to group and often within each group, or even within extended families, but central to the rules of etiquette are those designed to uphold honour. The society as a whole places much emphasis on etiquette. Consequently, dignity is one of their more visible traits.¹

Many of the rules for proper behaviour concern male–female relationships which require separate protected living, working and entertaining spaces.

Indigenous domestic architecture, for instance, is inward-looking, facing onto courtyards; exteriors present anonymous surfaces to outsiders. Dislike of ostentation, another prominent characteristic, is evident in architectural patterns. Whitewashed interiors are generally sparsely furnished except for displays of Afghan carpets. Carved and pressed stucco adorn the walls of rooms where guests are entertained in traditional homes. Many doors and windows display intricate carving executed by Kashmiri craftsmen and their Afghan apprentices.

Modesty in dress is observed by the majority. Here, however, rich variations distinguish ethnic groups.² The distinctive embroidery that adorns many types of clothing is an exuberant art that individual groups proudly display as symbols expressing individual and group identity, social and economic status, stages in the lifecycle of individuals and changing sociopolitical trends. Headgear is probably the most diagnostic item of clothing. Even turbans take on distinguishing characteristics depending on the arrangement of the folds.

Love of poetry is pervasive throughout the society. The ideal personality type in Afghanistan is the warrior-poet: brave in battle, eloquent at the village council. In poetry and literature distinctions exist between non-literate, mostly rural, and literate, largely urban, populations. For the literate the Persian-language literary tradition stretches back many centuries and holds in reverence the great poets of Iran and India as well as those from Central Asia. Highly respected women figure prominently among those writing in the Afghan area. Their poetic voices have pleaded for the right of women to be seen as individuals freed from society's inequities since the 10th century and therefore are treasured as models for Afghan women today. Some wrote in Pushtu, in the tradition of Pushtu poetry which, although often neglected, also enjoys a considerable reputation.

While treasuring the poets of the past, a great many gifted Afghans try their hand at writing poetry and poetry readings or *mushaira* are a popular form of entertainment. The Jalalabad *mushaira*, held to celebrate the blossoming of orange groves, as one example, is an eagerly awaited annual event.

Folk tales and folk songs are enjoyed by rural and urban populations alike, among both literate and non-literate, and are largely unbounded by identification with any single group, except for those that declare and strengthen the historical exploits of local heroes. Other folk stories and legends fall into several categories, such as those related to the heroes of Islam and those with moral messages. These tales tend to perpetuate existing societal values, without protest, and are important for child socialisation. They promise rewards and warn of punishment.³ Humorous joke-like stories are very popular. The Afghan who comes up with an appropriate joke to fit a particular moment is greatly admired.

Music is another deeply embedded feature in the culture having many regional variations. Happy occasions, notably engagements and weddings, are inevitably enlivened by music; bus drivers keep tapes of assorted regional selections to suit requests from passengers; mothers' songs give children a sense of security by clearly emphasising place and group. The rich genre of classical music, closely tied to Indian music and instruments, had devoted patrons at court. Cities such as Herat are noted for their musical traditions.⁴

Nevertheless there is a deep divide in attitudes towards talented amateurs and professional musicians, many of whom belong to hereditary musical families

with long distinguished histories. Many came in the 19th century at the invitation of the court. These professionals live in separate sections of cities like Kabul and are by and large regarded with low esteem. Professional musicians have always suffered from the condemnation of the orthodox religious establishment who, harking back to pre-Islamic days when singing and dancing girls were much in demand, contend that music has a corrupting influence on the emotions of men and women. The Qur'an contains no clear injunction against music and the Prophet Mohammed himself is known to have entertained musicians. Yet controversy over the lawfulness of music has raged over the centuries, leaving subtle mental reservations that affect the society's contradictory attitudes toward music and musicians.

Afghans are great socializers. Any excuse to get together will do, whether it be for births, engagements, weddings or sombre mourning rituals, to mark the changing seasons, to welcome or bid farewell to travellers, or to honour guests. Each of these occasions is associated with the preparation of special regional and seasonal dishes; Afghans are justly famed for their hospitality.⁵ Nonetheless, they best enjoy family outings that are often accompanied by music of some sort. Family picnics in gardens or on the banks of rivers are also a measure of their genuine love for the natural beauty of their environment, an enduring national characteristic common to all. Generally speaking, therefore, festive occasions eschew set ceremonial performances and are popularly celebrated by family outings, new clothes, the consumption of vast quantities of seasonal delicacies and spirited socializing among family, friends and guests.

Public traditional festivities, such as those that take place on Nawroz, 21 March, the Afghan New Year, are held in association with religious shrines at Mazar-i-Sharif and Kabul sacred to Hazrat Ali, cousin and son-in-law of the Prophet Mohammed, fourth Caliph of Sunni Islam and first legitimate imam in the Shia tradition. Both Sunni and Shia from all walks of life, men, women and children, flock to these shrines to enjoy the wide range of festivities, from storytelling to carousels, and, of course, the Nawroz specialty of fried fish and *jelebis* (crisp pastry soaked in sugar syrup.)

Afghans have a profound belief in the humanitarian, egalitarian teachings of Islam. They do not make an issue of being Muslims, of exhibiting proof of their muslimness, and abhor any tendencies toward fanaticism. This is the pillar on which Afghan culture rests.

Of all the assaults that have battered Afghan society over the past two decades, the rise of fanaticism and the creation of an atmosphere of intolerance have caused the deepest resentment. The self-appointed arbiters of morality who sought to impose their dogmatic codes of ultra-conservative beliefs on Afghanistan's culture did so with the connivance of outsiders. As an eminent Afghan intellectual commented: 'Are we heathens in need of conversion? We are already Muslims and do not need their version of the Shariat, which is foreign, not Afghan.' Most Afghans are clearly conservative, but fanaticism is an aberration.

Creating a national culture

The basic, truly Afghan cultural patterns as described in the foregoing discussion

took root over millennia, while the ebb and flow of internal disorder and external invasions and pressures dominated the political scene. When Afghanistan emerged as a nation-state in 1880 it was confined within borders drawn between 1904 and 1907 by outsiders. New imperatives brought new ideas espoused by the Mohammadzai monarchy.

Authoritarian, centralised control became the ideal of the ruling elite who looked beyond the borders for inspiration. New architectural styles were borrowed from Central Asia and the West;⁶ educated men and women adopted Western dress; nascent secular schools were opened; and Kabul acquired a decidedly urban mien.⁷ The rest of the country, largely untouched by happenings in Kabul, regarded these changes with disapproval and finally, in 1929, expressed their displeasure by expelling King Amanullah (1919–29). His successors, a collateral branch of the Mohammadzai, returned with an avid determination to win loyalty for the institution of the monarchy through cultivating nation-building attitudes focused on national unity.

To this end, constitutions were written, a parliamentary system was introduced, secular schools took precedence over religious instruction, the Afghan Tourist Bureau, established in 1958, brought remote areas into contact with foreigners, the road system expanded and, with the growth of urban industries, rural–urban migrations intensified. Populations interacted as never before. Many group-identifying symbols began to fade as a result, particularly in matters of dress. It became increasingly difficult to identify a man's place of origin by his headgear, to take just one example, for choices were often made simply for the appeal of colour or design.

In Kabul as well as in the provinces the government introduced official national holidays to mark days of political significance for each regime: Independence Day remembered when Afghanistan won control over its foreign affairs for the first time in 1919; Republic Day celebrated Mohammed Daoud's overthrow of King Zahir in 1973. Labour Day, Students' Day and Mother's Day were also noted with parades and laudatory speeches. Farmers' Day fairs on Nawroz at which prizes were awarded for the best animals, fruits and vegetables added a secular dimension to the traditional religious celebrations at Mazar-i-Sharif and Kabul.

The role of radio as a medium for promoting nationhood was extensively exploited. Officially inaugurated as Radio Kabul in 1940, the name was changed to Radio Afghanistan in the 1950s. By 1966 its effectiveness was strengthened by two powerful short-wave and medium-wave transmitters. The young female broadcasters at Radio Afghanistan must be credited with lessening the stigma attached to female voices being heard outside family circles, and for breaking down reservations towards music in general.

The cassette tape recorder created a revolution in communication, as well as an explosion in popular music. It was not unusual in the 1970s to hear the voices of popular singers blending with the tinkle of camel bells as caravans passed across the countryside. It is estimated that there were some 500 000 radios in Afghanistan by 1976, or one radio for each 36 persons. Private studios in Kabul recorded young singers and instrumentalists, numbers of whom became as famous as their counterparts elsewhere in the world, and thriving businesses

burgeoned as local and imported tapes were eagerly sought.

Other changes in the social life of Kabul's young middle class also helped foster the growth of popular music. It became fashionable to hold engagement and wedding parties in hotels rather than at home. Many such occasions featured jazz bands, most of which imitated American and European groups, although some did begin to develop improvised compositions taken from Afghan folk music.⁸

At the inauguration of Kabul Radio it was announced that radio programmes were to 'reflect the national spirit' and 'perpetuate the treasures of folklore'. Although there was enthusiasm in some circles for collecting and publishing such collections, these efforts were not evident elsewhere in the entertainment sector. Afghan films and the Kabul *Nandary* (theatre) leaned towards translations of Russian and American works, with Western music setting the mood. Chekhov was very popular, but *The Glass Menagerie* and *Desire Under the Elms* were received with mixed reviews. Many Afghans felt that it would be more meaningful to encourage original materials representative of Afghan attitudes and ideals and resented the tendency to ignore indigenous cultural experiments.⁹

Even the traditional provincial theatre, *sirkas*, changed as acrobats and strongmen gave way in the 1970s to set musical numbers, by both men and women, that reflected the cinema music of Iran, Pakistan and India. Short comic skits evolved into full-length social dramas that upheld traditional values while making merciless fun of urbanised pseudo-sophisticates.

Artists failed to experience the same surge in popularity as the musicians and actors. The work of urban artists was fundamentally eclectic, following various styles from bucolic pastoral scenes to Picasso and Grandma Moses without any assimilation of recognisable Afghan characteristics to satisfy Afghan cultural values. Some leading artists actively sought to revive the traditions of the Timurid school in Herat. Official patronage of talent in the provinces brought to prominence two Kirghiz artists from the Wakhan and an elderly gentleman from Aibak whose work celebrated epic heroes. But generally, artists failed to win public support. To collect Afghan art never became fashionable among Afghans or even foreign tourists, so it was a discouraging road for most artists. Efforts to open an art gallery to encourage artists did not materialise at this time.

The search for an Afghan literary image was caught up in a mixture of a nostalgia for the past, glorification of nature and a fervour for progress and social reform. Although many respected poets and authors writing in both Dari and Pushtu during the decades between 1900 and 1978 looked back to the ancient poets, Maxim Gorki and John Steinbeck vied with Mahmud Beg Tarzi, Rabindranath Tagore, and Iranian leftist Tudeh Party writers who became the most notable sources of inspiration. International conferences were frequently held to honour the literary giants of the past, but there was little sustained activity between these highly publicised affairs to encourage writers.

The Kabul Museum, inaugurated in 1931 to house archaeological finds excavated by foreign archaeological missions which had begun their scientific researches in 1922, was renamed the National Museum of Afghanistan in 1965. In 1973 the National Archives was established, although it had not opened to the public when the current upheavals began in 1978. Provincial museums were

established at various times during this period.

By the 1970s the National Museum had become one of the world's most opulent depositories of ancient art. Furthermore, it had other unique distinctions that should have been utilised to deepen an awareness of the heritage among the population at large. The displays presented a remarkably complete visual record of the cultural history of the Afghan area for 100 000 years, from the prehistoric to the ethnographic present, and, since the objects were excavated from Afghan soil, the collections truly represented the cultural heritage of all Afghan peoples.

Yet few initiatives were taken to utilise this superb resource to encourage Afghans to take pride in their heritage, to strengthen their knowledge of Afghanistan's past. As with music, heritage subjects were not included in any meaningful way in the school curriculum. School children were rarely taught about the richness of their past; field trips to museums or historical sites were not part of school activities. Few mature adults ever visited the museum. The articles on history and archaeology that appeared in government publications were written by scholars for scholars and reached few among the general public.

Historic monuments received mixed attention. In Kabul some fine examples of late 19th century and early twentieth century buildings were restored, such as the Bagh-i-Bala palace and another palace restored to house the National Archives. A large mosque in downtown Kabul was redecorated with glazed tiles in the ancient manner. Many other buildings, however, were callously destroyed in the rush to give Kabul a modern face. Other historical buildings were used as barracks for police and military personnel or for warehouses and consequently rapidly deteriorated.

Interest in restoration work in the provinces was also brisk, although, as in Kabul, surrounding areas were often razed to make way for parks and broad avenues.¹⁰ In Kandahar in 1930 an elaborate mausoleum replaced the simple tomb of Mir Wais Baba, the 19th century Pushtun hero who won independence from Safavid Persia in 1709 and shrines sacred to the Prophet Mohammed were adorned with glazed tilework. The most ambitious programme was undertaken in Herat, where a tile workshop was established in 1943 in order to refurbish the 15th century Timurid Friday Mosque with tiles made in the traditional Timurid manner. It still functions, as does the workshop in Mazar-i-Sharif for the continuing redecoration of Hazrat Ali's shrine in that city.

From the 1930s onwards the trend in domestic housing turned almost exclusively to Western models in the towns, capped by the Microroyan housing estate in Kabul, begun with Soviet assistance in the early 1960s. These massive five-storey apartment blocks designed in the image of Soviet architecture throughout Central Asia were neither aesthetic nor culturally appropriate. Traditional crafts once used in architecture, such as carved stucco and wood decoration, all but disappeared.¹¹ Regrettably, the creativity of these craftsmen slowly faded and was replaced by the dull uniformity of cement.

Two important points must be noted. First, the modernising efforts of the ruling elite and the citified populations that followed their lead were so decidedly Western-oriented, so steeped in admiration of all things Western, that many values held sacrosanct by the majority of the population were brushed aside. Second, most cultural innovations were confined to the cities, thus widening the

rural–urban divide. Kabul largely lost touch with the countryside where the traditional lifestyle continued with only superficial changes. In their fervour for modernisation, policy makers lost sight of the fact that the vibrancy of a society is maintained by keeping a balance between welcoming the new while treasuring the old, that innovation and continuity imbue a society with that sense of identity essential to keep a nation strong.

Assaults on the culture begin

Conflicts over values erupted during the 1970s. The thousands of Afghans, men and women, who returned from studies abroad carried with them expectations that broadened the already widening gap between Kabul and the rest of the country. Clashes with conservatives developed, a *coup d'état* ended the reign of the Mohammadzai and made possible the Soviet invasion from which millions fled into exile. The country slid into chaos, leading to a period of doctrinaire ultra-conservatism under the Taliban, followed by the current uncertainties in which an interim government struggles for national unity.

The Soviets, with effective administrations limited to large cities, attempted to Sovietise the society. Afghan intellectuals were deliberately mobilised and charged with injecting the culture with the ideological objectives of the new regime.¹² Literature sank into the doldrums.¹³ Art, dressed in the garb of socialist realism, was further distanced from Afghan ideals. A gallery was finally opened where works by some leading artists were hung, but a great amount of space was given to European canvases in the Victorian style that had been confiscated from the homes of the ruling elite after the monarchy was toppled in 1978.

Among many other issues, encroachments on family decision making and on roles for women violated sensibilities regarding honour that were as intolerable as the physical bombings of villages. Refugees fled to Pakistan and Iran where their combined numbers rose to over six million, the largest single refugee population in the world.

Torn from their protected home environments, the mostly rural refugees settled in kin-related groups for whom the preservation of cultural values was paramount. Upholding family honour and maintaining a good reputation in the eyes of the foreigners surrounding them was essential. Sadly, to many among the *mujahideen* (freedom fighters) who exercised power over these refugee populations, presenting the proper image meant imposing the strictest rules of physical and psychological seclusion on women, causing considerable strain.

Three generations of refugee children grew to maturity in exile with little knowledge of the wonders that exist in their homeland. Artists and musicians found it difficult to survive.¹⁴ Writers and other intellectuals, finding little in common with their rural compatriots in exile, stagnated or resorted to writing virulently anti-communist works, endless descriptions of torture or poignant accounts of the agonies of exile. Happily, after some years the quality of their works improved. True to their culture much of this corpus of new literature is written as poetry.

No one in the early days could have foreseen that peace would be so elusive. Over the 25 years of conflict qualities that formerly served a cohesive function,

such as loyalty and tolerance, weakened; mistrust, nepotism and cronyism threaten many relationships.¹⁵ Nevertheless, Afghans are readily recognisable as being distinct wherever they are encountered, at home or in public. That the refugees have adhered so strongly to their cultural values is remarkable. Their determination to remain true to the essence of their culture is innate. The nation is traumatised, but the culture still lives.

Meanwhile, inside Afghanistan, the society was battered by war, a failing economy and a general atmosphere of opportunism. The issue of looting and plundering of archaeological sites and museums which has caused so much world-wide concern is symptomatic of a new-found lust for money regardless of the propriety of its sources. Other contributing factors were the absence of responsible governments, consequent breakdowns in law and order, the staggering effects of three years of drought and the decline of the economy in general. National traits previously held inviolable were thus eroded by basic survival needs that became so imperative they surpassed all other considerations.

New and old archaeological sites all over Afghanistan were plundered to garner objects for the international art trade. Sometimes these illegal activities were organised by local officials or commanders, either working on their own or in collaboration with, even directed by, Pakistani dealers. At Ai Khanoum, the world's easternmost Greek city that flourished from the 4th–2nd centuries BC, illegal diggers used bulldozers to burrow far below the surface. At Mir Zaka, in Paktiya province, a treasure of 200 kilograms of silver and gold objects, described as the largest ancient coin deposit in the history of humanity, was recovered by a well organised community effort and spirited out of the country.¹⁶ Even Islamic gravestones were not spared, as they find a ready market in Iran. New sites untouched by archaeologists are being plundered as this is written. The spoliation of sites continues because there is neither the capacity nor the determination to protect them.

The list is endless. We shall never know what has been lost through these clandestine activities. Equally disturbing is the fact that these destructive acts remove the possibility of reconstructing the history of the sites. Works of art are not produced in a vacuum; artefacts must be studied *in situ* if the dynamics of the cultures from which they spring are to be understood. This is no longer possible at many sites in Afghanistan.

Archaeological research ceased soon after the war began in 1978. Since then few protection or conservation efforts were undertaken. The Society for the Preservation of Afghanistan's Cultural Heritage (SPACH), formed in 1994, did initiate a few modest projects to arrest the deterioration of some of the more vulnerable monuments. The 12th century minaret at Jam was stabilised. Some repairs at the 15th century Timurid complex in Herat and a 16th century mausoleum in Ghazni were carried out. Apprentices at the tile workshop at the Friday Mosque in Herat were supported. Awareness-raising materials were produced and advocacy for the protection of cultural properties was conducted among the authorities, commanders and communities. SPACH's major efforts, however, were directed toward securing the looted National Museum and in taking stock of what is left of the museum's collections.¹⁷

The massive looting of the National Museum epitomised the sense of loss of

heritage many Afghans felt. An estimated 70% of the collections disappeared between 1993 and 1996 when various factions of the Mujaheddin fought for control of Kabul.¹⁸ No losses were reported after the Taliban took over.¹⁹ In fact, numbers of moderate Taliban officials were supportive. Even their supreme leader, Mullah Omar, from time to time issued edicts mandating protection of the cultural heritage, specifically mentioning objects dating before Islam.

They were not, however, so accommodating regarding other aspects of the culture. Hardly any facet escaped their disapproval. They enforced their puritanical attitudes toward dress, music, and entertainments of any kind in a manner that was aggressive, irrational, dogmatic, intolerant, fanatic and ostentatious, in contradiction to accepted codes of behaviour. One of the saddest manifestations of these policies was the sight of female beggars in the streets of Kabul. Until recently, begging in any form was totally outside the Afghan cultural experience.

In the closing months of 2000 it was evident that hardliners within the Taliban regime were gaining the upper hand, exerting greater influence under the direction of their foreign Arab 'guests'. Deftly wrapped in the mantle of Islam, their machinations were designed to diminish the Afghan identity. Small changes, such as changing the name of Radio Afghanistan to Radio Shariah in October 1996, were subtle indications. The destruction of the Bamiyan Buddhas was the final dramatic message.

The saga of the destruction at Bamiyan began in July 2000 when Mullah Omar, following the advice of the Supreme Court and the Council of Ministers, ordered the department of religious police (The Ministry for the Prevention of Vice and the Promotion of Virtue) to determine the appropriateness, according to Shariah law, of the National Museum's holdings. Thus began the political exploitation of the heritage which was to prove as menacing as its commercial exploitation, if not more so. Events moved rapidly. On 6 February 2001 orders were given to destroy an unspecified number of offending objects in the museum; on 26 February Mullah Omar issued an edict mandating the destruction of all non-Islamic objects; on 8 and 9 March the Bamiyan Buddhas were dynamited.

Mullah Omar seemed to be unconcerned that his edict negated those he had previously issued mandating the protection of the cultural heritage. There can be no more telling proof that he and his associates no longer exercised control.

But even this was not enough. On 17 March the Minister of Information and Culture, Qadratullah Jamal, goaded by his hardline cohorts, personally continued the iconoclastic campaign by smashing to bits with a sledge hammer some of the museum's most popular sculptures.

Eight months later Mullah Omar and his 'guests' were ousted. Their bid for power proved futile; for Afghanistan the cultural losses were irretrievable. Afghans at home and around the world were devastated. Many may be weak in their knowledge of history, but the Bamiyan Buddhas were treasured by all. Some described their feelings after the destruction as equal to what they might feel on losing a beloved grandfather. Over the past many years Afghans had endured with fortitude the traumas of war, drought, displacement, a collapsed economy, inept governments, and a disrupted society. Now they felt the meaning of their sacrifices had been taken from them. They felt betrayed.

A wide open future: how to best capitalise on potentials

That war and economic distress combined to jeopardise the cultural heritage is not a phenomenon unique to Afghanistan. The current global interest in Afghanistan, however, presents unique opportunities. A multitude of options present themselves for which the Ministry of Information and Culture is responsible. Some of the more pressing actions under consideration are to:

1. Create an atmosphere that is open to ideas, from the private sector as well as from government. Dare to think imaginatively, with flexibility, and realistically.
2. Formulate a realistic national strategy that incorporates short-term and long-term goals and objectives for the revitalisation of all aspects of cultural development. The torrent of proposals now being fielded for Afghanistan tends to reflect the thinking of outsiders sitting half the world away, telling the Afghans what they 'should do', instead of looking at what they 'can do'. Abstract plans full of excellent theory are less than helpful. What is needed are step-by-step guidelines for specific action based on current realities.
3. Establish a central body to receive ideas from Afghans as well as outside experts and donors. It is important for the Afghan authorities to be seen as managing their own strategy. The current state of affairs in Kabul, where a plethora of interested parties plan alone, flying their own flags and staking out their own fields of influence is unacceptable. There is plenty for all to do, all are welcome as long as there is a willingness to work amicably in the spirit of co-operation and co-ordination.
4. Conduct a national survey of cultural assets and properties, including the availability of human resources in conservation and protection management, as well as artistic skills. This would include maintaining a database.
5. Set up an inter-ministerial mechanism for the regular exchange of information so that heritage protection issues can be incorporated into the national reconstruction strategy, and into specific project schemes. These would include Information and Culture, Planning, Finance, Education, the Academy of Science, Industries, Tourism, Law, Customs, and the Municipality, among others. It is important to formulate guidelines that reflect an appreciation of the fact that heritage properties, in conjunction with their surrounding environments, have links to the entire socioeconomic well-being of the nation. All actors need to be aware of this, as the tendency now is to forge ahead rapidly on reconstruction projects with single-minded enthusiasm. Cultural properties may well be damaged or lost as a result. Longer-term co-operation would include working with the ministries of education and higher education to ensure heritage subjects become part of the school curriculum.
6. Establish a body for research. This would include employing information technology as a tool for research. Only a few Afghans excelled in research in the past, and fewer understand the discipline today. The private sector should become involved in linking IT technicians and technology with research in cultural fields. Producing awareness-raising materials of all sorts for schools, communities and the public at large, as mentioned in item 14

- below, would be a major activity of such a research body.
7. Build the capacity of various departments and institutions to enable them to manage and implement projects. This requirement is usually overlooked, although an efficient administrative structure with competent planners, supervisors, monitors, accountants, database experts and computer operators, is essential. Otherwise brilliant ideas will be stymied, the momentum lost, and few projects will ever materialise.
 8. Build training components into every project. Foreign experts should agree to include on-site training as a part of their assignments.
 9. Ensure that artists, musicians, artisans and cultural properties in the provinces receive their fair share of attention. Kabul is not all there is to Afghanistan, and never has been.
 10. Revive former institutions, such as the Historical Society, along with their magazines and publishing programmes. Encourage these institutions to bring together poets, musicians, authors, playwrights, film, radio and TV artists and writers so as to develop a symbiosis between cultural traditions and innovation.
 11. Revive traditional skills, particularly those necessary for conservation.
 12. Design a series of radio programmes covering all aspects of the culture, including historical dramas.
 13. Support folk artists by commissioning them to decorate neighbourhood mosques and teahouses, being mindful to avoid artificial, purely touristic, enclaves.
 14. Involve communities in the protection of cultural properties. Living monuments that fulfil meaningful roles in the lives of communities best survived the past decades of conflict. Unless communities are encouraged to take pride in and accept responsibility for their monuments, deterioration will continue no matter how much conservation work is undertaken. To this end, community action groups to generate commitment, including practical and financial support, need to be formed and provided with awareness-building materials.
 15. Revise the Antiquities Law and take appropriate steps to ensure its enforcement.
 16. Set up a clearinghouse for the reception of recovered looted or illegally excavated objects. Illegally excavated objects should be accessible to scholars for study and some system of regular distribution of information about these objects should be established. Another activity of the clearing house would be to identify missing objects from the museum and set up tracing mechanisms. The clearing house should also formulate policy and devise methods for retrieving objects known to have been looted from museums. Indications are that many looted objects remain in Afghanistan. This is a controversial subject about which UNESCO issued new guidelines after the destruction of the Bamiyan Buddhas, but they are anything but clear. Efforts to persuade dealers and collectors to return museum objects can be explored, following the generous precedents recently set in Tokyo and London.
 17. Search for sustainable funding sources, both inside and outside Afghanistan.

The refugee experience proved that relying exclusively on outside funding raises the spectre of dependence, which saps the deeply ingrained pride in self-reliance which has sustained the Afghan society through many crises.

Notes

- ¹ N H Dupree, 'Etiquette, in Afghanistan', *Encyclopaedia Iranica*, m vol. IX, fasc. 1, 1998, pp 50–54.
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