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Afghan Social Structure and the Development Process
Power and the Rural Scene

There are elements of the Afghan culture and social structure that can both foster and act as barriers to the development process. In some cases, potentially positive elements, if ignored or mishandled, can become grossly negative. Understanding the roles of power in the society is one of the keys to understanding the potentials, and potential hazards, for any particular development project.

To understand the roles of power in Afghan society it is useful to begin by examining the basic unit of organization in the society, the family. To some degree, the values associated with power at this basic level are repeated as the focus broadens to the more complex social units.

The Family

The family unit within rural Muslim society has been roughly described as being extended, patrilineal, patrilocal in residence, patriarchal, endogamous and occasionally polygamous. The family unit is the basic unit within the social and power structures and its characteristics tell much about the associated values and the total society. Most action and organization at the village level is focused on the household unit of a patrilineage, and households within a community are linked in the same manner. The household is the unit to which the most basic loyalties are attached. It is the most immediate unit of which responsibility is attached for any one member's action, i.e., group responsibility in blood feud.

Extended Family: This type family contains more than two generations found in the simple or nuclear family unit of our society. The extended family is usually defined as an economic unit with combined resources and "eating from one pot." Commonly, the extended unit contains the husband and wife, unmarried daughters, unmarried sons, married sons with wives and children. There may be other members of the older generations also present, products of family units dissolved through death. It is the responsibility of the children (the sons) to take care of the parents in old age.

This family unit is large and extended for protection and power: economic, political and physical. Commonly, the wealthier and more politically powerful households will remain intact while poorer units will fragment and partially disappear, sometimes through out-migration.

Patrilineal: This refers to the focus on the male line of descent, the father, for inheritance, and social identification in a society where your position or status to a great extent is prescribed by your kin-group. The emphasis on males is reflected in the rules of inheritance where a son takes a share of the father's estate equal to two daughters' shares. Commonly at the rural level, where this means the division of land, a daughter will not take her share, by custom or through a desire not to alienate brothers to whom she will turn for support if there are problems in the household into which she marries.

Patrilocal Residence: This refers to the pattern of residence a newly married couple follows, in this case, with the father of the husband, the male line.

Patriarchal: The extended family is based on the patrilineage which lives together and places the authority role, in the ideal, with the oldest male, assuming he is still physically able and mentally fit. It is a system which equates age with knowledge and wisdom. If the extended household unit does not separate at the death of the patriarch, or before, the oldest son commonly fills the authority role.

Endogamous: This refers to the pattern of marrying within some socially defined unit. To further solidify and strengthen patri-kin ties, the extended unit tends to be to some degree endogamous where possible. There is a commonly preferred marriage pattern with fathers-brothers-daughter, the first cousin of the patrilineage.

Polygynous This is the pattern of marriage where a man can have more than one wife at any given time. The limit in Islam is four, all of which should be treated equally. This pattern of marriage is not common, rarely reaching a maximum of 10 percent of the married male population. The usual reasons for taking more than one wife include: The first wife being the choice of the kin-group, family disharmony, desire to expand and strengthen the family unit, a wife unable to produce a male offspring, and the leverate (the expectation that the wife of a family member will remain within the kin-group, after being widowed, by remarriage to the dead husband's brother or other close relative).

At first glance, this list of the characteristics of the Afghan Muslim family may appear academic. The point is that the principles and orientations of the social organization (the inward focus and near isolation of each individual unit, the central, paternal authority) are to be found repeated in the society at virtually any level.

All of this is not to imply that patri-units at any level from household to tribe will not politically and physically fragment over some issue of importance. But the

importance of the details of the kin structure and unity of any given area cannot be overemphasized as it relates to a particular development project.

The fragmentation of the extended family unit, noted above, may generally result in the breakdown of some traditional values relating to kin group loyalties, authority, marriage choice and a broader range of contacts, dependence, perhaps trust, and generally meaningful social intercourse than previously possible or necessary. The increase in frequency of the independent nuclear family, the fragmented extended unit, is sometimes positively associated with social and economic development. This should be considered with mixed feelings. The traditional extended family may be focused inward, relatively socially isolated, limited in world view, dominated by traditionally oriented elders who have difficulty in making changes in crops, for example, or life-style. On the other hand, institutions other than the extended family at the rural level are undeveloped that could have the effect of disciplining and mobilizing the fragmented units which are to some degree impotent vis-a-vis development in terms of the fragmented resources, land and other wealth, at their disposal.

The Village

The extended patrilineage described above may be geographically expanded through a region, by fact or fictitious patri-ties, in the form of clans or tribal groups who associate themselves with a common ancestor. Some villages, for example, may see themselves as simply a large extended unit of patri-kin.

It is difficult to generalize for Afghanistan as a whole, the local power structure will vary somewhat by ethnic group and region. The basic principles will be roughly the same. Power can be equated with two elements, wealth in land or animals and a large kin-group willing to support the individual.

For settled communities of farmers, the power structure will generally vary by land tenure patterns. In an area of subsistence agriculture where many households have small and nearly equal amounts of land, the power will be fragmented among a number of households, usually focusing on recognized leaders of larger and slightly wealthier kin units, perhaps clans, scattered through the area.

In areas where most landholdings are concentrated in a few hands, power and control of resources (water) will also be concentrated. For example, in the Helmand the khan is a landowner around whom a village is organized. The village will be referred to by the khan's name. The residents generally will be the khan's sharecroppers, farm laborers, servants, relatives or individuals with some other type of political

ties. In some cases, the khan will be the administratively recognized village headman or malik. If he does not fill the role himself, one of his political subordinates will. In some cases, the khan will be the mirab or watermaster who controls the irrigation water distribution usually for an area larger than one village. If a khan does not fill the mirab role, he will have a major voice in the selection.

Under such a structure, the system of patronage for sharecroppers, farm laborers and other small landowners in the area may be highly developed and complex, being the basis for local political affiliation. The patron has the responsibility to look after the interests of those who work for and politically support him. The ideal qualities of a patron, as landowner or khan, are roughly the same as those noted below for a governor, e. g., generous, moral, empathic.

A khan has obligations to those who support him, but he also has broader obligations to the community as a whole, being a man with worldly goods. Ideally, he will be pious and in the name of religion will perform religiously-defined good or pious acts (sawab) for the good of the community as a whole or for needy individuals, e. g., build a mosque, fountain, or some other community facility, aid the poor and destitute, support the mosque perhaps with firewood, or pay a lion's share of the expenses for maintaining the community prayer leader, or mullah.

It should be noted that in the Helmand at least, and probably in other developing agriculture regions of the country, the stereotype of the conservative village leadership (the khan) blocking development does not hold true. The leaders in farm mechanization, adoption of high-yielding varieties of grain with fertilizer and land development have generally been the khang.

Community Cooperation: There is a tradition of and numerous indigenous institutions that are based on community cooperative action to meet the needs of the community. They include the building and maintenance of indigenous irrigation systems, systems of water distribution, pasture use and changes in cropping patterns as they relate to systems of land fallow, mosque building and maintenance, trail or road building and maintenance. A specific example of this is from a village study in the Herat area where, "... the property-owning heads of households meet annually to determine each property owner's tax for the upkeep of the water system" two korez systems "... they annually contract with specialists to dig out the wells and underground tunnels, leaving to each farmer-landowner the choice of contributing either money for this work or his own labor to assist the specialists." Further, "The village also corporately recruits and employs various specialists (blacksmith, barber, shepherd, and carpenter) to cope with village needs."

This is not to suggest that cooperative efforts and institutions are never used and manipulated for personal gain by those with power or that cooperation does not break down in the face of inter-kin-group disagreement or hostilities. But the element of community cooperation is strong and may be expressed in religiously-defined or sanctioned terms, religion being the commonly expressed basis for legitimate action. The power structure, as suggested, must function within the context of these cooperative institutions and values.

Although there are the various and numerous examples of indigenous institutions of cooperation in the society, a related but nearly opposite hypothesis could be supported when the traditions of memorable events are examined. The villager and nomad, vis-a-vis the endemic shortage of valued resources (land, animals, water, women) have a long history of inter and intra group conflict, feuds and fission. The point is, relative to a particular project, regardless of the indigenous institutions in the area, and the homogeneity or heterogeneity of the ethnic-kin composition, there remains a need to know present political relations between the groups of whatever level. A cooperative socio-political environment cannot be assumed.

Government-Village Relations: The authority and power of the central government and its civil servants are recognized as legitimate, but feared at the village level of society. These two systems of organization, the governmental structure vs the village structure, can be viewed as representing subcultures, in a sense, of Afghan society, each with its own set of values and rules, frequently in conflict.

In theory the Government takes a strong, authoritarian hand in ruling the rural areas. In fact, the elements of physical distance, geographic barriers, and social distance between the rulers and the rural-ruled, combine to allow the varieties of local indigenous systems of power to rule in most everyday situations. Only when deviations from the bureaucratic rules and laws by the rural folk are made obvious to the civil servant, are action and conflict necessary. Informally, this potential seems to be recognized by both groups and embarrassing encounters are avoided whenever possible. The civil servant will remain to some degree ignorant of the local scene by remaining in his office, which he will probably prefer in any case. In some cases, because of inexperience, lack of knowledge of the local political scene, or fear of action vis-a-vis the local power structure, inaction and ignorance may appear the wisest choice for a young administrator. This pattern of relative social isolation is reinforced by the fact that at the woleswali level (district) the civil servant has no transportation furnished for his job.

The villager will attempt to maintain community privacy by turning to the civil servant only as a last resort for his problems, if even then. When face-to-face contact does occur, this mutual attempt to maintain distance will frequently result in a kind of formalized, almost ritualized exchange, each party playing the role designed not to result in government involvement in local affairs. Development projects, of course, require a slightly different set of relationships and expectations between the parties.

Where the government does become involved in local affairs, the role of authority is generally expected and frequently played in a near pure-type manner. This may include complete inflexibility of the authority after a decision has been made and stated, and the possibility of physical punishment or a few days in jail for disagreement or noncompliance with the decision. The role of the civil servant-ruler is expected to be paternalistic, not very respectful, ideally fair but in fact unpredictable because those attempting to predict, the villagers, are uncertain as to the set of rules being used in a particular case. Fairness is expected to be relative to the situation. A pre-decided government action to build a major road or canal across land, for example, may not be fair to the

individual landowner. The settlement of a dispute between a member of the local indigenous power structure and a person without power or wealth, if it ever comes for arbitration, is not likely to be unbiased.

There are several qualifications necessary for the above statements. The respect or lack of respect for the villager will depend on at least two interrelated things: the personal characteristics and the role of the villager in the local political context (subsistence farmer or landowning khan) and the potential of this villager to cause trouble or make life easier for the civil servant. The sense of some sort of reciprocity will be a strong element in the relationship. The uncertainty of the rules on the part of the average villager stems not only from ignorance but also from the fact that the rules may not specifically cover his case, which requires civil servant interpretation and the personal elements noted. In the case of laws, based on interpretations of the Quran, being interpreted by local judges, there is the added problem of not being able to argue against the decision which might bring into question the individual's religious orientations.

Central Government

Following roughly the same line of organization, in theory the Government of Afghanistan is a highly centralized structure. In fact, for most activities the local provincial and smaller administrative units have a great deal of freedom to function independently up to the point where local conflict of some sort brings the issue to the attention of the central authorities. This potential of negative attention frequently leads to lack of decision, hedging and passing the buck, especially at the lower administrative levels, when major issues are involved. Thus to some degree, administrative units have a good deal of independence and power which they are generally reluctant to use, given the unstated rule of local indigenous autonomy of the villages below, and the desire not to attract the negative attention of those above. Probably the role in government which is given and exercises the most power is the provincial governor. The role of governor, as idealized, is near the pure-type paternalistic-ruling role associated with the Muslim world. The ideal characteristics of the role, noted below, can also be found in the Arabian Nights, that ancient document of traditional stories which reflect the core values of Muslim society.

There may be stories circulating among the folk about a popular governor illustrating his crafty intelligence, honesty, morality, fairness in judgments, sternness in his punishments, generosity to the needy and willingness to go to great trouble to learn the real problems of the people, e. g. , going into the markets in disguise to personally catch the dishonest merchant. Although this pattern is beginning to change in recent years with the move toward a slightly more complex and impersonal bureaucratic structure, in part fostered by the shorter tenure of office for governors

in any one location, such positive traits were being attributed to a new governor of Kandahar by villagers in the neighboring province of Helmand. An unpopular governor will have the opposite traits and stories circulated, especially on dishonesty, immorality, and lack of interest.

Personality and Power: The above outline is generally a description of the roles and institutions of power with which a development project must work. They cannot be ignored but, for any particular project in any particular area, should be researched, understood and taken into account at the planning stages. A final important point is that knowledge of the institutional framework is not enough but information about the particular individuals filling the roles is necessary to make predictions of possible outcomes. The personality characteristics of the individuals to some great extent determines their effectiveness in filling the roles and makes them more or less legitimate in the eyes of those with whom they deal. Everyone knowing the expectations will induce the role incumbent to attempt to meet them but sometimes the individual personality characteristics get in the way. The eldest member of a family may be a fool and other members of the extended unit will attempt to reduce or bypass the role defined authority. The same may be true of other authority roles. In development we do not like to base a project on a personality but on a role through which a number of persons may pass. At least on the rural level, if not also the bureaucratic, the personality of the individual and the family characteristics which give him authority from outside the role limits, the individual is commonly a key to success or failure.

Ideally, bureaucratic structures are based on formality, rules, impersonality and the interchangeableness of parts. The rural Afghan scene is nearly the antithesis of this in relation to interpersonal relations. The Afghan bureaucracy falls somewhere in between these extremes, again relative to the situation. If a civil servant is not acceptable first as a person, or his personal, family and ethnic characteristics are unacceptable, to some degree he is not acceptable in the civil servant role. Also he must relate to the rural folk as an individual first, or not at all. Contacts about projects should be face-to-face contacts, primarily, where the individual villager is being responded to as a total personality, not as a narrow role category of simply a potential project participant. One writer has noted this as being a reason for the general lack of success in impersonal propaganda campaigns and not focused within the range of the villagers' context of rules for life, religion. He is not open to impersonal appeals from strangers. He simply does not listen. This personal orientation of a small-scale society (a society based

on kin ties, with very limited social contact outside a very limited group, all of whom the individual knows personally or are relatives, all of whom face the same problems, have the same livelihood, with limited views of the world) makes project planning and programming difficult on a national scale. The point is that it must be a definite part of rural projects at the implementation stage if they are to succeed.

Some Conclusions

The principles of social organization, authority and power are relatively consistent through the society. To understand the acceptance and the expectations of the role of governor at the rural level, it is important to first understand the basis and nature of authority within the extended family. They are related. The patriarchal-paternal nature of rural social structure is reflected in the roles and expectations of government officials and leaders at the national level. The fact that there is considerable freedom of action for individuals at all levels makes the strictly defined system workable.

The significance of this presentation to projects like Rural Development, for example, has been noted at various points in the text. The system of relationships between villagers and the government is not conducive to planned change. Outside a system of government dedicated to an absolute authoritarian role with the power to police and coerce, planned change must be based on some degree of accurate information about local conditions and a cooperative effort between the parties involved. The present system generally includes neither. Probably the initiative for change in the relationship rests with the government although the local power structure will resist any major shifts to their disadvantage. It is not likely that village level activities of the sort presently being carried out by RDD will make any great changes in the social structure. The activities are being instituted within the context of past and present expectations. In other areas of the Muslim world, where villagers have periodically been pulled into the decision-making role, where their demands for projects are politically sensitive among civil servants who may be criticized by area representatives in a National Assembly, there have been some changes at least in the characteristics of those chosen to deal with government. Younger men, still of the right kin group, with insights into the modern world through education and outside experience, function more effectively vis-a-vis the civil servant than their more traditionally oriented, older kinsmen. Where government services are to be gotten through effective contacts, a shift does occur. There are some clues that this change in characteristics of village level contacts is beginning in some areas in Afghanistan. This is not to say that village authority is making a major shift under these circumstances, but that a middle man emerges. With this emergence comes a greater diffusion of power and authority.