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Afghanistan's Islam

Nile Green

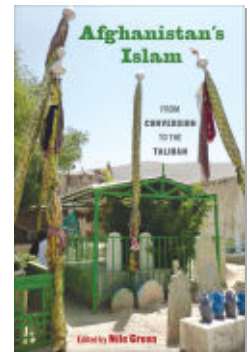
Published by University of California Press

Green, Nile.

Afghanistan's Islam: From Conversion to the Taliban.

University of California Press, 2016.

Project MUSE. doi:10.1353/book.63381.



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[Access provided at 19 Jul 2022 14:42 GMT from Geneva Graduate Institute]



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Afterword

Alessandro Monsutti

August 2004: I am back to Dahmarda-yi Gulzar. I had spent time there in the second half of the 1990s when I conducted fieldwork for my Ph.D. This small valley overlooking the left bank of the river Arghandab, which flows down to Qandahar, is part of the district of Jaghori in Ghazni province. It is bordered by mountains and closed downstream by a gorge. It is virtually an ethnic and religious enclave for the Shi'i Hazaras and is surrounded by regions populated mainly by Sunni Pashtuns. During my stay, I meet my old acquaintance Liaqat 'Ali. I go with him and his wife to the tomb of one of their relatives, who in summer 2001 had been killed by Pashtun nomads when he took some sheep to a summit above Dahmarda. Like any other burial in the region, the grave is marked by only a few stones. But this one is also topped by colored banners known as *'alam*. Liaqat 'Ali's wife turns her back on me and squats. She seems to scratch the ground near the *'alam*. Does she perform a quick ritual? Does she collect some soil that is blessed by its proximity to the *shahid*, the martyr? I do not dare to explicitly ask Liaqat 'Ali to explain to me how the burial place of a simple shepherd is in the process of becoming a shrine.

During my previous stays there, Dahmarda had been the scene of deep internal tensions. Two factions struggling for local preeminence had come to arms. In 1996, several skirmishes and targeted killings had caused the deaths of a dozen men.¹ But these events are not invested with a broader political significance: they do not echo what my interlocutors in Dahmarda and elsewhere see as their long history of marginalization by the Afghan state. For many of them, there is no real rupture between the Muhammadza'i dynasty in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries and the Taliban of recent times. And for many of my interlocutors, Pashtun nomads

have always been a proxy for successive governments in Kabul given the task of keeping the Shi'i Hazaras in a state of political and economic subjection. Any feud over grazing rights between local sedentary farmers (who pool a few sheep and take them to higher-altitude pastures not far from their settlements) and nomads (who seasonally bring their herds to the central region, spending winters in the lowlands) must be placed in this sensitive historical and political context.

Between the sixteenth and the nineteenth century, the region of Hazarajat, in central Afghanistan, largely escaped the control of the great regional empires of the Mughals and Safavids. It was only during the second reign of Amir Dust Muhammad, from 1842 to 1863, that the central powers in Kabul extended their control over Bamiyan and imposed taxation on some peripheral areas of the region.² But it was the series of campaigns launched under 'Abd al-Rahman Khan between 1891 and 1893 that eventually put an end to the autonomy of Hazarajat.³ These campaigns were accompanied by a whole series of massacres and atrocities and a profound religious polarization between Sunnis and Shi'is, the former being associated with the rulers in Kabul, the latter being seen as resisting the central power. The conflict led to a number of population transfers: whole regions (especially in what is now Uruzgan province) were emptied of their population and occupied by newcomers. The former inhabitants went abroad (to British India, Iran, and Russian Central Asia) or to the north of the country (to Mazar-i Sharif, Shulgara, Chahar Kint, and Dara-yi Suf). To this day, the painful memory of these events is recalled and kept present in political songs.⁴

The subjugation of the Hazarajat region by 'Abd al-Rahman not only disorganized the social fabric of the Hazaras. It also opened up the region to Pashtun nomads, whose seasonal presence has ever since been perceived as the visible sign of inequity.⁵ Relations between the two communities have always been difficult, with their religious divide compounded by their divergent economic interests. The Pashtun nomads are not only herdsman but also traders. As a consequence, moneylending and commerce gradually gave them ascendancy over the Hazara farmers, who were sometimes forced to sell their possessions to repay creditors or to become tenants on land that they previously had owned.⁶

According to the anthropologist Robert Canfield, religious labels have been highly prominent in Afghanistan and have often overlapped with ethnic designations.⁷ The religion of the Hazaras marks them off from the Sunni majority without drawing them closer to their fellow Shi'is. In fact, the Shi'is of Afghanistan are subdivided into quite different groups because of their history, socioeconomic conditions, religious traditions, and identity markers. As a result, they can never really be said to have formed a single cultural, social, and political entity.⁸ There are well-established and fairly prosperous Shi'i communities in several Afghan cities, such as Herat, Qandahar, and Kabul. But such town dwellers do not want to be associated with the burdensome connotations—geographical remoteness, cultural

backwardness, political marginality, material poverty—that have long been attached to the label “Hazara.”

During the whole of the twentieth century, the Shi‘i Hazaras felt they had been treated as second-class citizens by the Afghan state. Hazarajat was shaken by a number of revolts, most notably one in the second half of the 1940s led by Ibrahim Big, *bacha-yi gawsawar* (son of the cow rider), who fought against a tax on clarified butter that the Hazaras had to pay on every animal in their possession, even on horses and donkeys that could not be milked. Popular tales recount the exploits of honorable bandits (*yaghi*) such as Yusuf Big, who fought against arbitrary rule and reputedly eluded the authorities for nineteen years in Shahristan before finally being captured and executed.⁹ Several other figures are also celebrated as heroes who rose up against government oppression, including Fayz Muhammad Katib (‘Abd al-Rahman’s secretary who wrote an account of the bloody conquest of Hazarajat), ‘Abd al-Khaliq (the young man who assassinated King Nadir Shah in 1933), Sayyid Isma‘il Balkhi (an important Hazara religious scholar who was imprisoned between 1949 and 1964).¹⁰

After the communist coup in 1978 and the ensuing war in the 1980s, Hazarajat regained its old autonomy. The region was largely spared by the occupying Soviet forces and witnessed only a few major military operations. Nonetheless, factional struggles often took a deadly turn, and wrenching internal tensions led to major changes in sociopolitical structures. In a first phase, young clerics, often of humble origin, were trained in Iran and returned to supplant the old tribal and religious elites. Then a process of unification took place around the ethnic discourse of the Hizb-i Wahdat, a powerful political movement that came into being in the late 1980s.¹¹ The war thus saw the emergence of a new elite and a new political consciousness that spurned any return to the status quo ante. Previously excluded from power, the Hazaras desperately sought national recognition and international attention. Their hopes were raised enormously in the post-9/11 climate that brought about American intervention and the fall of the Taliban. Their role in Afghanistan’s post-Taliban governments appears greater than at any time before. Today their political leaders refuse to accept a return to the old power structures, but they are aware of how fragile their achievements are.

For many Hazaras today, their painful history mirrors the tragic destiny of Imam Husayn, the grandson of the Prophet Muhammad who was killed in Karbala in 680 by the forces of the Umayyad caliph. During the Hazaras’ years of war and forced displacement, the commemoration of this event during the month of Muharram has grown in importance.¹² In the Muharram sermons (*rawza*), the sufferings endured by the Hazaras are constantly compared with those endured by Husayn and his family. The thirst that tortured the imam’s companions and the prevention of their getting water from the Euphrates is compared with the blockade that the Taliban imposed on Hazarajat from the summer of 1997 to the autumn

of 1998. The profanation of Husayn's body is paired with the tragic end of 'Abd al-'Ali Mazari, the Hazara leader who was captured and killed by the Taliban in March 1995. More generally, the fate of the sacred victims of Karbala is compared to the various massacres suffered by the Hazaras, such as the one in Afshar Mina, a district of Kabul, in January 1993, perpetrated by troops allied to the Tajik leader Ahmad Shah Mas'ud, or the one in Mazar-i Sharif in August 1998 at the hands of the Taliban. Recent political and military events thus echo the sacred history of Shi'ism. Hazara believers become guilty of nonassistance, for which they must atone. They mourn their martyrs and relive their sufferings to the point of lacerating their own bodies. They suffer for Imam Husayn but also express their readiness to fight for a return to justice.

Articulated around the evocation of past injustices and protests against exploitation, Shi'ism has thus served as the language of political mobilization among the Hazaras. Since the 1980s it has been both a tool of resistance against the central power in Kabul and against domination within Hazarajat. Through the example of the Hazaras, the brief points made in this afterword illustrate several of the themes that this volume has explored in more general terms. The various chapters are organized chronologically from Afghanistan's initial Islamization to the present period. As such, the chapters offer a historical journey through Afghanistan's Islam from the eighth century to the post-2001 reconstruction efforts conducted under the guidance of a U.S.-led international coalition. In this way, we see how multiple and multiplex Islam has been across time and space. Sufism, state-sponsored Islamic institutions, transnational networks of activists, women's religiosity are all facets of how Islam has been experienced in Afghanistan. Both elites and subaltern groups have made appeals to Islam; it has been a means to legitimize central power and a vector of rebellion; it has shaped the circulation of ideas and control of material resources. Islam may have been a unifying factor, but it has also been used to create boundaries between groups.

As Arezou Azad's chapter has demonstrated, if what is today Afghanistan was transformed by the arrival of Islam, then Islam was also transformed by the pre-existing social and cultural context. In his chapter, R. D. McChesney has described the materiality of religion through the allocation of resources, thus revealing the underlying economy of Islam. Whereas Jürgen Paul has analyzed the close association developed between Naqshbandi Sufi leaders and the Timurid ruling class in Herat during the fifteenth century, Amin Tarzi has shown how the establishment of official Shari'a courts under 'Abd al-Rahman Khan helped the state to achieve legitimacy during the nineteenth century. At that time, Shi'i Islam was positioned in a structural opposition to the central state; Shi'ism was an expression of subversion.

Whereas Waleed Ziad has examined the circulation of knowledge between the different polities of India and Afghanistan at the end of the eighteenth and beginning of the nineteenth century, Sana Haroon has documented the violent

expressions of religious activism among Pashtuns much before the late twentieth century in order to show the inadequacy of accounts conceived in terms of tribalism for grasping the multiple forms of political mobilization. With case studies spanning more than five hundred years, Nushin Arbabzadah, Ingeborg Baldauf, and Sonia Ahsan have each shown how women have striven to render their social and political engagements intelligible in Islamic terms and, in so doing, have gained a place in the public landscape despite often adverse conditions. For his part, Faridullah Bezhan has explored the vibrant political debates that revolved around the modernist notions of nationalism and constitutionalism in the mid-twentieth century. But times had changed by the 1980s, as Simon Wolfgang Fuchs documents through writings produced for the anti-Soviet *jihad*. Although the Afghan resistance was far from ideologically unified, Islam became the primary idiom of politics.

Through an emphasis on scholarship focusing on written sources in languages used in the territory of Afghanistan, and a concomitant emphasis on an ethnographic approach that documents what people say and do in their own terms, the preceding chapters have revealed the ancient and multiplex genealogy of political Islam. As Nile Green pointed out in the introduction, although Afghanistan is often described as an ethnic mosaic, it may also be seen as a religious mosaic. As much as and even more than in the past, today Islam is a contested arena, even though most actors claim to have a monopoly on purity and truth. Now, even more than a few decades ago, references to religion structure the very field of political expression in Afghanistan. Through the exploration of Afghanistan's Islam in its *longue durée*, the various contributions to this volume have ultimately shown its modernity. If in the past Islam has been a vector for establishing state legitimacy and expressing tensions in collective society, in Afghanistan today Islam has to be understood in its plurality within the public arena, where its various forms coexist with similarly plural normative models of state and society introduced by foreign troops, United Nations agencies, and nongovernmental organizations.

