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**ANTHROPOLOGY AND THE REPRESENTATIONS OF  
RECENT MIGRATIONS FROM AFGHANISTAN**

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*The April 1978 revolution in Afghanistan and the subsequent armed intervention in the country by the Soviet Union in December 1979 prompted millions of Afghans to migrate to Iran and Pakistan. About 200,000 of these migrants were resettled in Europe, the United States, Canada, and Australia. Thousands of others have moved to the Gulf States, India, Russia, and Turkey. This paper provides a critical analysis of selected writings by anthropologists regarding these Afghan migrants. With minor exceptions, these writings are passionately political, narrow in scope, anti-Russian, and designed to embarrass the USSR and the Revolutionary Government of Afghanistan. The author argues, however, that the vast majority of Afghans who left Afghanistan were economic migrants and suggests that the anthropological analysis of recent migrations from the country needs to be framed in historical processes, global capitalism, and the Cold-War competition between the United States and the Soviet Union.*

Anthropologists often bemoan their perceived lack of impact on public policy and discourse. In the case of Afghanistan, as I will

demonstrate, the opposite is true. Anthropologists are products of the ideological environments in which they live; the writings on recent migrations from Afghanistan by anthropologists are framed by passionate politicized discourse.

Ethnography can be seen as a means by which anthropology, or the systematic study and understanding of the human condition, is achieved.<sup>1</sup> Ethnographic writings on Afghan migrants have tended to fall into two categories: macro- and micro-specialist writings. Both forms, I propose, are framed by political opposition to the Soviet Union and the post-1978 revolutionary government of Afghanistan.

The study of spatial and social movements of people has been an important dimension of anthropological discourse. The migration of millions of people within and from Afghanistan during the 1980s and 1990s offered a unique opportunity for anthropologists to study center-periphery relations and to gain new insights into population movements produced by regional and global political, economic, and historical processes. In addition, these population movements provided the potential for informing our anthropological understanding of the adaptation processes of diverse ethnic groups from Afghanistan who found themselves in new, challenging socio-cultural environments in Iran, Pakistan, Europe, the United States, and elsewhere.

In this paper, I argue that the politicization of the study of Afghan migration has resulted in a missed opportunity and therefore produced meager theoretical and ethnographic contributions to the understanding of migration and population dynamics, Islam and social movements, social change, and tribe and central government relations in Afghanistan. As part of its main argument this paper offers an assessment of selected aspects of writings by primarily North American anthropologists about migrants who left Afghanistan after the 1978 takeover of the government by the Peoples Democratic Party of Afghanistan (PDPA), locally called *Khalq* (masses). This change in government marks a profound discursive shift in the anthropology of Afghanistan, making it unambiguously and viscerally political. Descriptive texts produced in pre-revolutionary years were replaced by undisguised anti-Afghanistan discourse and *jihad* (agitation, struggle) promoting anti-revolutionary political rhetoric.<sup>2</sup>

In the following sections, the dominant paradigm in which Afghan migrants are characterized as political refugees rather than economic migrants is examined. This will be followed by background

information to situate these migrants and ethnographic accounts about them within a larger geo-political context. Against this backdrop, the paper explores the engagement between Western anthropology and these migrants. Particular emphasis is placed on the ways in which anthropology becomes politicized in contexts of ideological warfare.

### **Political refugees or economic migrants?**

Anthropologists consider most Afghans in the diaspora as refugees. Moreover, in most cases, they discuss Afghan migration as a phenomenon removed from its larger regional and global contexts. Absent is the recognition that this massive displacement was a local expression of global, postcolonial processes driven by capitalism and the ideological, political, and economic competition between the former Soviet Union and the United States.<sup>3</sup>

The millions of migrants who left Afghanistan are part of what Appadurai (1996:6) calls the combination of “diasporas of hope, diasporas of terror, and diasporas of despair” all entangled in the contradictions of modern, industrial, global capitalism. Thus, to understand the predicament of the Afghan migrants we need to understand the bigger game and the larger players. Obviously we all share in the pain, trauma, and tragedy of every Afghan migrant who has suffered, but the primary structures and agencies responsible for creating this suffering and pain will not be found in Afghanistan, Iran, or Pakistan alone.<sup>4</sup>

In the 1980s, goaded by intensive U.S.-sponsored propaganda, millions of Afghans crossed the borders of Afghanistan into Iran and Pakistan. Precise numbers of displaced Afghans are unavailable, but some estimate that one quarter to one third of the population left the country. Approximately 3.2 million Afghans migrated to Pakistan and 2.3 million to Iran (Christensen 1995:105).<sup>5</sup> About 200,000 migrants, including the Afghan political and economic elite, merchants, and highly skilled professionals, notably medical doctors, resettled in the United States, Canada, Europe, and Australia. The latter migrated in accordance with their own means and abilities as well as the needs and inclinations of the modern world powers which hosted them. Some 4,000 Afghans were moved to Turkey from Pakistan, and about 20,000 currently reside in India. With the downfall of the revolutionary *Khalq* government in 1992 and with the ascendance of the *taleban* movement in 1994, another

sizeable number of intellectuals and members of the former government bureaucracy fled Afghanistan, primarily to Pakistan and Russia.<sup>6</sup>

For the past 15 years Afghan migrants have been considered the largest displaced group in the world (Colleville 1997b) prompting one writer to call Pakistan “Mujahiristan” [*sic*], land of the refugees/migrants (Barton 1984:21).<sup>7</sup> While the Afghan exodus became the focus of much international political, academic, and humanitarian attention, there is little published information about the large numbers of people who experienced dislocation within Afghanistan, especially since 1992. The Danish anthropologist Asgar Christensen (1995) provides one of the more useful descriptive accounts of the status, problems, and prospects of these migrants, especially those in Pakistan. The categories “refugee” and “migrant” are ambiguous. According to the 1951 UN Convention relating to the Status of Refugees, a refugee is an individual who

owing to a well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, or membership of a particular social group or political opinion, is outside the country of his nationality and is unable or owing to such fears, is unwilling to avail himself of the protection of that country (UNHCR 1997:51).

Though widely used, this definition is a subject of continuous debate by legal experts, policy makers, and scholars (see, for example, Adelman 1988; Beyer 1981; Harvey 1999; Kay and Miles 1988; Kunz 1981; Shaknove 1985; Stein 1981). Its analytical utility for ethnographic research is limited. The definition presupposes social categories and cognitive and emotional conditions that are extremely difficult (even impossible) to capture, track, and verify. In using such definitions the ethnographer is forced to accept whatever an informant wishes to claim without a realistic venue for verification. Moreover, the definition is essentially built upon the European model of “Civil Society” and Eurocentric notions of “freedom,” “race,” “politics,” “religion,” and “nationality,” making its universal application tantamount to a form of Western colonialism. This definition and its derivatives, such as that used by the Organization of African Unity, serve as poor guideposts in describing Afghan migrants’ experiences.

In this paper, I suggest that the vast majority of Afghan migrants qualify as “migrant,” an economic category, rather than “refugee,” a

political category. In either case, these categories are contingent on the structure and history of the political economy of Afghanistan, Pakistan, the region, and global capitalism. This position is consistent with current academic debates, the general consensus about the patterns of large-scale population movements, and conclusions drawn from my ethnographic research among these migrants (see Abu-Sahlieh and Aldeeb 1996; Bhabha 1996; Hastedt and Knickrehm 1988; Hein 1993; Howell 1982; Malkki 1992, 1995; Masquelier 2000; Shacknove 1985; Richmond 1993; Shami 1996; Zetter 1984).

Mass migrations were familiar features of the pre-Islamic and Islamic history of Central and South Asia, and the Iranian Plateau. These migrations were crucial components of the evolution of a centralized polity in Afghanistan. The country is situated at the confluence of these three culture areas. For centuries what is called Afghanistan has been a corridor through which various populations, including armies and nomadic groups, have regularly moved back and forth.<sup>8</sup>

The present borders of Afghanistan were imposed by Persian, British, and Russian colonial governments during the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. The borders with Iran, Pakistan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan are straddled by a variety of ethnic and tribal groups. Movement of people across all but the northern borders continues virtually unimpeded by governments on both sides. Even during the height of Soviet control of Central Asia, people crossed the northern borders on a regular basis. But the border that divides the Paxtuns of Afghanistan and Pakistan is the most disregarded. Paxtun nomadic caravans regularly traverse between Afghanistan and the Indus plains in Pakistan (Sweetser 1984).

### **Global context of Afghan migrants**

Over the past 50 years, events in Afghanistan can be seen as a continuation of the “Great Game” played in the 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries between Russia and Great Britain that thwarted prospects for the development of institutions conducive to a non-insular political economy. While the players have changed—Russia and the United States—the goals, strategic advantages in the market, and the approaches (money, weapons, and local blood) remain the same. Weak state systems in the region including Afghanistan and Pakistan are dispensable clients and tools used by the big players and continue *necessarily* to be the local

settings for the production of mass population movements within and across their borders.

During the Cold War, U.S. and Soviet efforts to embarrass and dishonor each other destabilized Afghanistan and resulted in the eventual collapse of its center. Globalization, Cold-War competition, a destabilized Afghanistan, and unrestricted population movement across Afghan borders form the basis for understanding mass migration from Afghanistan to the neighboring countries of Iran and Pakistan during the 1980s. It is significant that during the decade preceding the revolution in Afghanistan, thousands of Afghan men migrated to Iran and later settled in the Persian Gulf region.<sup>9</sup> Employed as manual laborers in construction projects and in port facilities, the migrants sent home large amounts of hard currency, causing serious inflation in Afghanistan. The changed focus in relations with its neighbors and heightened internal economic and political instability sparked the 1978 revolutionary overthrow of the central government.

The former USSR, while the main supporter of the new revolutionary regime, was unable to control the increasingly independent-minded and nationalistic central government, dominated by Ghalzi Paxtuns; it invaded the country in December 1979. The Russians killed President Hafizullah Amin and installed Babrak Karmal, a non-Paxtun, as head of government. After the introduction of Soviet military forces and the ensuing civil war, millions of Afghans migrated to Pakistan and Iran.

The United States has been implicated heavily in events in Afghanistan for some time; most significantly it organized and encouraged armed rebellion against the 1978 revolution in Afghanistan. U.S. efforts in creating anti-Afghanistan terrorists intensified particularly after the introduction of Soviet troops (Stork 1980), a development which might even have been encouraged by the United States to “set up” and “bleed” its Cold War adversary (Hitchens 1991). In addition to creating and subsidizing the armed opposition, the U.S. Central Intelligence Agency, through its elaborate propaganda network, encouraged the massive exodus of migrants from Afghanistan to embarrass the Soviet Union and the government it supported in Afghanistan.<sup>10</sup> Clearly, despite rhetoric to the contrary, the United States was motivated by factors other than helping Afghanistan save itself from the “ungodly” Russians and to regain its “freedom” and “independence.”<sup>11</sup>

The United States spent billions of dollars to recruit, pay, train, and equip large numbers of Afghan migrants to sabotage public projects, civil sector infrastructure, and implement hit and run operations against Soviet and Afghan forces (Weiner 1990). It has been alleged that the U.S. assistance to the various anti-Afghanistan terrorists took “the form of ‘refugee relief’ through established agencies like CARE and the International Refugee Committee (both of which have records of collaboration with the CIA in Indochina), and through *ad hoc* groupings like the Afghanistan Relief Committee, headed by Americans associated with the Asia Foundation, an alleged CIA conduit which had a large presence in Kabul in the ‘60s” (Stork 1980:25). The U.S.-sponsored anti-Afghanistan insurgency used “the refugee camps as bases for recruitment and training” (Castle and Miller 1998:158; Goodson 1990). These bands of saboteurs were romantically popularized by various Western journalists and propaganda machines as “*mojahedin*” (plural of *mojahed*, agitator, struggler; those engaged in *jihad*), “Holy Warriors,” “Freedom Fighters,” and were, together with their Central American counterparts, hailed by Ronald Reagan as the “moral equivalent of our founding fathers.” The anthropologist Robert L. Canfield (1984) and sociologist Olivier Roy (1985) refer to them by the misleading but spicy label of “resistance.” By using these labels for the U.S.-sponsored terrorist gangs and anti-revolutionary rhetoric in their writings, anthropologists not only distorted but blatantly misrepresented what was truly happening in Afghanistan.

Academics, journalists, and other individuals and groups who had personal and ideological axes to grind with the Soviet Union and the leftist *Khalq*-controlled government of Afghanistan, and who had lost their access to the country, portrayed the migrants with powerful images of victims and survivors of a yet-to-be-adequately-documented anti-Islamic “genocide” (Klass 1988:129) and “holocaust” (Klass 1985:28; Revel 1985:22) that caused millions of Afghans to disengage themselves from local society and to move to Iran and Pakistan.<sup>12</sup>

The United Nations and numerous governmental and private agencies from Europe and North America undertook elaborate relief projects for the vast number of Afghan migrants in Pakistan. An extensive network of largely politicized non-governmental organizations (NGOs) appeared in various parts of Pakistan where these migrants were settled (Baitenmann 1990). Iran did not allow such programs, except for UN relief efforts. To my knowledge, not a single Western anthropologist

has visited and written about the Afghan migrants in Iran. Even the UN publications contain comparatively little by way of information on Afghans in Iran.<sup>13</sup> The United Nations and some NGOs have produced a voluminous literature dealing with various facets of Afghan migrants' life in Pakistan that contains a wealth of descriptive information about social and cultural conditions among these migrants.<sup>14</sup>



### **Western anthropology and Afghan migrants**

After World War II, Western anthropologists began conducting research in Afghanistan. Archaeologist Louis Dupree, a man with a lengthy career in the U.S. Armed Forces, was one of the first. He excavated a number of sites in Afghanistan in the 1950s and 1960s and published highly respected archaeological reports. Dupree was a prolific writer who, in addition to archaeology, wrote extensively about various aspects of social and political life in Afghanistan. However, he never spelled out the ethnographic bases for these writings. Stationed in Kabul, from 1959 to 1978, as a representative of the American Universities Field Staff (AUFS), Dupree developed extensive contacts with Afghan government officials and academics. As a result of these contacts, and his association with a variety of Western universities and funding institutions, he became a virtual clearinghouse for social science research in Afghanistan.

In 1978, Dupree was arrested and briefly detained by the revolutionary government of Afghanistan. Accused of being a CIA agent, he was expelled from the country (Dupree 1980a, 1980b). It is difficult to assess the full impact of this episode on Dupree and other researchers whom he helped gain access to Afghanistan. It is likely, however, that Dupree's expulsion affected his views and perceptions of the revolutionary regime and the predicament of the Afghan migrants who had moved to Pakistan. He identified so intensely with Afghanistan that during one of his testimonies before the U.S. Congress he thanked the committee for giving him the opportunity to "speak for my people, the Afghans" (U.S. Congress 1986:99).

After 1978, Dupree's publications and public statements contain passionate condemnations of the revolutionary government in Afghanistan, its policies, and its practices. Dupree was recognized widely as an "expert" on Afghanistan, and it is difficult to over-estimate his impact on U.S. and other countries' policies toward Afghanistan. "In the United States, he was a consultant on Afghan affairs to the State Department, the Peace Corps, the National Security Council, the Central Intelligence Agency, the Agency for International Development and the United Nations" (Humphrey 1989:S 4649; Narvaez 1989:D22). He was "an advisor on Afghanistan to the governments of West Germany, France, Denmark, Sweden, Norway, England and Australia" (Humphrey 1989:S 4649; Narvaez 1989:D22).<sup>15</sup>

Dupree (1979:5) reported that by August 1978, three months after the *Khalq* takeover of the Afghan government, over 165,000 persons had migrated to Pakistan. However, the first organized attempt by anthropologists to address the Afghanistan revolution, two sessions at the 1980 annual meeting of the American Anthropological Association in Washington, D.C., did not focus on the migrants. Of the 17 papers presented in these sessions, none addressed the Afghan migrants.<sup>16</sup>

After the *Khalq* takeover in 1978, only anthropologists who had previously worked among various groups in Afghanistan conducted research among or wrote about the Afghan migrants in Iran and Pakistan. Very little new ground has been broken in the anthropology of Afghanistan since 1978. In the past 20 years, only three anthropologists have completed their doctoral dissertations on Afghan migrants.<sup>17</sup> During this same period, only a handful of articles by anthropologists on Afghanistan have appeared in the mainstream academic journals in North America and Europe, and, of these, only two focus on Afghan migrants. For the first time in at least 30 years, *Anthropology News* (2000:36) contained a brief, 12-line note about Afghanistan under the title “Afghanistani [*sic*] Women’s Plight.” It announces an Afghan-American anthropologist’s plea “for more American action against the rulers of Afghanistan,” “the monster it created for the sake of oil and gas.”

It is remarkable that the otherwise politically robust and vocal North American anthropology has been so silent about social and political conditions in a country where the Cold War had gained some heat before it expired and where a kind of mirror image of Vietnam was taking place. In an earlier era, discussion and debate about the moral pros and cons of the Vietnam War and anthropologists’ collaboration with the CIA in the war effort was a regular feature in the *Newsletter of the American Anthropological Association* and the *Anthropology Newsletter* (predecessors of *Anthropology News*). This prompts the questions as to why organized, institutional anthropology was silent when the Soviet Union invaded Afghanistan? And why was it silent when the United States and its allies, in response, introduced the means which, together with Russian contributions, directly caused the destruction of the political economy of Afghanistan? An exploration of the answer to these questions is beyond the scope of this paper. However, they are important questions to raise and the answer would likely include some treatment of anthropology’s construction as a discipline spawned by Western colonialism. The discipline, with a stall in the global capitalist market,

was not really a bystander in the Cold War. Its protestations of the Vietnam affair were more a function of being housed in the losing country than a stable (independent of supply and demand) commitment to lofty moral and ethical standards.

### **Portrayals of Afghan migrants by “anthropologists”**

I have already introduced the context and some of the ways in which portrayals of Afghanistan and Afghan migrants by anthropologists have been politicized since the 1978 revolution. In this section, I explore specific examples from macro- and micro-specialist ethnographic writings. Macro-specialist writers, who expatiate with broad and general strokes on a variety of Afghan issues (see, for instance, Dupree 1975, 1979, 1980a, 1980b, 1988) fail to capture the important interrelationships that exist among the various socio-cultural phenomena. Micro-specialists, on the other hand, have tended to be too narrow in focus, seldom making generalizations or comparisons with respect to the larger socio-cultural and historical complexities within Afghanistan and the larger region. What these two forms of writing share, however, is the sharp political turn both forms took after the 1978 revolution; their writings, I shall argue, are framed by anti-Russian and anti-Afghanistan government political passion.

#### The macro-specialists

I consider Dupree as the leading macro-specialist and limit my remarks regarding macro-specialists to his work.<sup>18</sup> While one of his early works (1975) provides a useful description of population dynamics in Afghanistan, his post-1978 publications on Afghanistan became highly politicized. For example, without citing any documentation, he states that “by mid-August (1978), over 165,000 refugees had flowed from Afghanistan into Pakistan” (Dupree 1979:5). Referring to the anti-Afghanistan government activities into which many of these migrants were recruited, he states that:

The *real* problem is the Durand Line of 1893 which separates Afghanistan from Pakistan. The border has always been a sieve. During the Baluch Insurrection of 1973-1977, thousands of Baluch fled to Afghanistan. Guerrillas drifted back and forth with impunity. Certain

Afghans can do the same today, no matter how seriously the Pakistanis attempt to block the incursions (Dupree 1979:5).

This statement is intended to justify the continued anti-Afghanistan activity originating in Pakistan by the "Freedom Fighters." However, the counterpart of the Baluch Insurrection in Afghanistan never existed. As early as the summer of 1978, the governments of Pakistan and Egypt, in collaboration with and substantial material support of the United States, had on their soil, established numerous training camps for anti-Afghanistan insurgent groups. The three governments were blatantly interfering in the internal affairs of Afghanistan, in violation of numerous international conventions and norms. Elsewhere, Dupree issues the following bleak prediction:

If enough Afghans leave for potentially volatile Pakistan and Iran, the Soviets gain a strategic plus. Then, settlers from the European Soviet Socialist Republics (not from Soviet Central Asia, which would invite trouble) can be transplanted to Afghanistan. In effect Afghanistan would become the 16<sup>th</sup> SSR. Unconfirmed reports in Pakistan media indicate that about 30,000 Russian families recently arrived in northern Afghanistan. The process may have already begun (Dupree 1983:136).

Clearly, as noted earlier, this rhetoric has an impact on policy makers for governments who were actively engaged in the affairs of Afghanistan and Afghan migrants. Three months before Louis Dupree died in early 1989, after UN negotiations, the Soviets withdrew from Afghanistan. It is unfortunate that in this and in subsequent publications Dupree (1979, 1983, 1988) saw Afghan migrants *only* as victims of Russian communism and specific alleged violent local conditions in Afghanistan. He fails to appreciate the importance of the larger regional and global political economies and their role in the anthropological conceptualization of Afghan migrants as victims. This tendency to blame Soviet aggression alone for the massive exodus from Afghanistan characterizes much of the other anthropological writings on Afghan migrants.

### The Micro-specialists

In this section I review selected works by what I call micro-specialists. In particular, I take issue with the ways in which anthropologists have seemingly used reports from local consultants in an uncritical and misleading manner. I also analyze some local concepts deployed in this literature to describe Afghan migrants.

Audry C. Shalinsky (1979) conducted her doctoral dissertation research during the pre-revolutionary 1970s in an Uzbek household that had originally migrated to Afghanistan from Central Asia after the October 1918 revolution in Russia. After linking up with some of her former informants who had migrated to Pakistan in the 1980s, Shalinsky writes about Afghan migrants. She uncritically accepts their claim that they migrated to and from Afghanistan strictly for religious reasons. She asserts that these migrants are modern versions of the *mohajerin* (plural of *mohajer*, migrant), followers of the Prophet Mohammad who migrated with him to Medina in anticipation of a more hospitable political environment. In so doing, she lends credence to the activities of the various U.S.-sponsored saboteur bands, as a righteous and engaged in a just, even “holy” *jihad*, against the legitimate government of Afghanistan.

Perhaps caught up in her passion to condemn the Russians and the Afghan government they supported, her report about conditions in post-revolutionary Afghanistan contains glaring contradictions and ethnographic errors. For example, she states that the revolutionary government introduced heightened military and political measures making movement difficult; on the other hand, she describes the ease with which these migrants could move out of Afghanistan (Shalinsky 1984:55). Furthermore, she reports uncorroborated and internally inconsistent claims such as this one:

Property, household compounds, and furnishings have been confiscated by the government in many cases. The household heads frequently have made *giraw* contracts before leaving (1984:55).

A *geraw* contract, a form of equity mortgage in Afghanistan, involves an exchange in which money is lent to the owner of real estate—house, land, etc. Until the debt is paid in full, the lender has the right to use the property or, as Shalinsky neglects to mention, the

borrower (who retains legal ownership of the property for the duration of the contract) uses the property and pays rent to the lender on a regular basis. The rent paid is the equivalent of the interest for the loan and the real estate serves as security or collateral in the exchange. These contracts may be recorded with the government for a fee or arranged privately between the lender and the borrower. To clarify one aspect of this matter in Shalinsky's report, let us ask, how can individual "household heads" whose "household compounds have been confiscated by the government" make "*geraw*" contracts? And if the confiscation takes place after a *geraw* contract has been entered, after a few instances like this, putting out money for *geraw* contracts would be indeed an unwise and very risky business investment. Was the government selective in these alleged confiscations? What criteria were used in these selections? Or, was the practice of alleged confiscation by the government of migrant "household compounds" universal?

Shalinsky's report contains no answers to these important questions. She exacerbates the contradictions in her report by adding that:

The government considers the property to have been abandoned by anti-regime people since leaving the country is a counter-revolutionary act. The *mahalla* [the administrative name for the enclave of the city of Qunduz where Shalinsky lived with a household in 1976], which is a particularly good area of the town near a water canal, is now the home of provincial political officials and party members (1984:56).

She does not substantiate this important claim which contradicts her own report and the Afghan government's official policies and regulations and the realities encountered by many migrants who have returned to Afghanistan over the years.

Some Afghan migrants (including merchants, physicians, and members of the former government) that I have interviewed state that they sold all their property, including "household compounds" at current market rates before leaving for Pakistan. In many cases the buyers were Afghan Hindus or Sikhs. I know of a number of cases where Afghan migrants who had arranged *geraw* contracts in the 1980s paid off their debts and released their properties from *geraw*. Many of these

individuals continue to reside outside Afghanistan. The government of Afghanistan did not confiscate their properties. The only exceptions to this, that I am aware of, are the holdings of some of the members of the former royal family, a few high ranking officials of former governments, and some members of leading Sufi families who were involved in anti-Afghanistan terrorist activities. However, vast amounts of household properties were either sold by dislocated Afghans at discounted prices, abandoned, or destroyed by the warring militia of the so-called Islamic parties after the collapse of the central government, and the capture of Kabul by the “Freedom Fighters” in 1992.

The conditions Shalinsky describes are more amenable to movement than those in pre-revolutionary Afghanistan. The author does not document a single case of religious or political persecution with any evidence besides an unnamed individual’s claim. Shalinsky and other anthropologists carelessly use the catchwords “communist,” “Marxist,” and “unbelievers” in referring to the revolutionary government of Afghanistan. They use these labels uncritically and parochially; this serves to bolster their portrayals of the revolutionary government of Afghanistan as anti-Islamic and evil.

The dubious veracity of the claims of these anthropologists is problematic, but it is not the main issue here. The larger issue is their seemingly blind acceptance of negative accounts conveyed to them by their local consultants and anti-Afghanistan propaganda. Anti-Afghanistan government propaganda abounded. The various anti-Afghanistan political groups produced and distributed thousands of tapes dealing with the themes of *jihad*, martyrdom, and other assorted pro-“Freedom Fighters” and anti-Afghanistan propaganda. Every group produced and distributed these free tapes to the various migrant camps (at least in the registered camps and neighborhoods) where they controlled the distribution of food, cash, health care services, and other migrant benefits. Some of these tapes, playing on the themes of *jihad* and martyrdom, contained passionate accounts of death, sacrifices, heroic behavior, and gender role transcendence that war and battles required of early Muslim men and women.

From an “unregistered (Uzbek) community” of migrants, Shalinsky (1993) mentions women who regularly listen to these tapes “which remind them of their own dead kin, the extraordinary circumstances of Jihad, and their transformed lives” (1993:661). From these propaganda tapes and with the aid of an interpreter, she concludes

that there is indeed a *jihad* underway in Afghanistan and, a *jihad* that is portrayed as the symbolic equivalent of the battle of Uhud in 625 AD which the Muslim forces lost! It would have been anthropologically interesting to engage reflexively the producers of, and the listeners to, these tapes about the contradictions that exist between the so-called *jihad* of the Afghan *mujahedin* and the allusion to a lost battle in one of the tapes Shalinsky (1993) transcribes in her article.

In another example, M. Nazif Shahrani, a Western-trained Uzbek Afghan anthropologist, began his career as a micro-specialist, but the 1978 revolution in Afghanistan transformed him into an Islamist macro-specialist. He has been a zealous opponent of the government of Afghanistan since 1978, especially when Paxtuns led that government. His doctoral dissertation, written with a micro-specialist perspective, is a useful account of the pastoral Kirghiz adaptation to closed frontiers in the Afghan Pamirs. However, there is little by way of systematically locating the Kirghiz in the dynamics of the surrounding state structures and historical processes that brought them to the Afghan Pamirs in the 1940s. It is curious that there is no mention of the “criminal” record Rahmanqul, their local leader, left behind in the former Kirghiz-SSR and China before coming to Afghanistan (FBIS 1978). It is likely that Rahmanqul and his Kirghiz followers migrated to Pakistan fearful that the new revolutionary government of Afghanistan might turn him over to the Kirghiz-SSR authorities. In the summer of 1982, the entire group “together with several thousand other Turkic-speaking Afghan refugees in Pakistan” (Shahrani 1994:52-53) was airlifted to Turkey for permanent resettlement (see Shahrani 1984, 1994; Aktar 1984). For a while Alaska, their first choice, was considered as a possible destination for these Afghan Kirghiz migrants in Pakistan (Shahrani 1994:52; Stickbower 1982).

Shahrani has also written on the role of Islam in the configuration of the polity of Afghanistan and on the articulation of the so-called *jihad* activities in response to the 1978 revolution in Afghanistan. He considered this Afghan “*jihad*” (“Holy War” to him) as an “anti-colonial war of liberation” (Shahrani 1994:53), overlooking the glaring fact that the inspiration, weapons, wages, organization, and management of this affair for “liberation” were provided by the colonial powers. Shahrani was a staunch supporter and sympathizer of the non-Paxtun migrants and political groups in Pakistan that were engaged in terrorist activities inside Afghanistan. He perceived himself as “an



honored guest” (Shahrani 1994) among them. He apparently had expectations to play a direct role in the government that was planned for Afghanistan by the “Freedom Fighters” (1994:60-61). In 1989, Shahrani, who conducted “intensive research among the ordinary Afghan refugees in the camps” and had “some contacts with the leadership of the various Mujahideen organizations,” went to Pakistan with plans “to work with the newly formed Islamic Interim Government of Afghanistan (IIGA), to help with the planning for the reconstruction of Afghanistan” (1994:61).<sup>19</sup> Perhaps misled or duped earlier by the “Freedom Fighters,” Shahrani abruptly realizes that he had been rejected by the ones he glorified for ten years as “Holy Warriors.” He mournfully states:

This long-held, comfortable and cherished feeling of being in the field at home, however, was shattered during my attempts to work with the emerging bureaucratic elite of the Afghan Mujahideen. To them, the fact that I have spent nearly half of my life in the United States studying, working, and now raising a family, make my commitment and loyalties to Afghanistan (and, for some of them, to Islam) suspect (Shahrani 1994:61).

Presumably, his relationship with these U.S.-sponsored terrorists has been since redefined. Writing about Afghan migrants in Pakistan, Shahrani states that “we must also adopt an ethno-methodological stance that considers self-definition of the refugees themselves.” (1995:189). In this “self-defintion,” he argues, that we should use either of the “two alternative terms for displaced people, widely used, by both Persian and Pashtu speakers in the country...the Persian words *panahandah*...and *awarah*” (Shahrani 1995:189). *Panhanda* in Farsi (Persian) means one who seeks or has sought refuge or asylum; *awara* (in the Farsi dictionary Shahrani uses) stands for “vagrant, homeless, tramp, refugee, evacuee, vagabond.” My edition of this dictionary includes “wandering (about)” as an alternative meaning for *awara*. Some of these labels are clearly disparaging and would be highly unusual for self-reference among the Afghan migrants.

David B. Edwards (1986a) also claims that the Afghan migrants in Pakistan see themselves as having sought “*panah*.” He argues that the concept of *panah* is used by Paxtuns in Pakistan and suggests that

Afghan Paxtun migrants have sought “asylum” with their tribal counterparts across the border. This raises a number of ethnographic questions. What would be the status of non-Paxtun migrants *vis-à-vis* the Paxtuns of Pakistan? Do they see themselves seeking *panah* with (Pakistani) Paxtuns? If we assume that the Afghan migrants are “refugees” (and I don’t make that assumption), the host and asylum giver to these migrants would be the state of Pakistan, not the tribal Paxtuns across the border from Afghanistan. All Afghan migrant camps in Pakistan are under the direct control of the national government of Pakistan, not any tribal group, nor any provincial government. Moreover, the Farsi concept of *panah* is not a feature of *paxtunwaley*, Paxtun charter for appropriate behavior, and Paxtun social structure. Paxtuns use the term *nanawaty* (as a component of *paxtunwaley*) which means giving refuge or asylum to a specific someone or group that is sought actively by someone or a group. Shahrani’s term, the Farsi *panah*, is used throughout Farsi-speaking societies, but is rarely, if ever, used among Paxtun migrants in Pakistan. During my ethnographic research among Afghan migrants in Pakistan the term *awara*, in reference to first and second persons, was not used. On very few occasions it was used, on a third person basis, in reference to the homeless, poor, criminals, outlaws, and the mentally ill. And if Shahrani is correct (as he could be about the use of *panah* among some non-Paxtun Afghan migrants), it is then understandable that these migrants would prefer a “self-definition” that includes Shahrani’s *panahandah* and “refugee-warrior” (1995:191), both marketable labels with which to camouflage their real motive for moving to Pakistan—improved economic status. While I have not heard the “refugee-warrior” (*mohajer-mujahed*) self-reference among the Afghan migrants, the appellation clearly echoes the farcical “Refugee”-“Freedom Fighter” anthem.

Inger Boesen (1985, 1986), while contradicting Edwards’ use of the concept of *panah*, considers *paxtunwaley* as the major device used by Afghan migrants in Pakistan, without realizing that there are hundreds of thousands of non-Paxtun Afghans whose culture and social relations have no grounding whatsoever in *paxtunwaley*. Boesen’s chief interest, however, is in the practical daily problems Afghan migrants face.<sup>20</sup>

### **An anthropological response from “within” to the literature**

I have been keenly interested in the causes and patterns of population movements across the borders of Afghanistan for a very long time. When I was growing up in Afghanistan, I remember my male elders talking about Peshawar as an exotic and modern place. In those days Peshawar radio broadcasts included musical programs that sounded more cosmopolitan, alluring, and more corrupting compared to the fare from Kabul Radio. As a ten-year-old youngster I overheard a Paxtun Jabarkhel adult male say “*te ka pexawar ta zay, gheen de dabelay*” (loosely translated, if you are going to Peshawar, may you be able to indulge in worldly pleasures). As I grew up, I learned that the phrase itself and variations on its theme, were parts of my Paxtun popular male adult discourse in Eastern Afghanistan. When the USSR invaded the country in 1979 and millions of Afghans moved across the border to Pakistan, mostly to Peshawar and vicinity, I thought about this Paxtun saying in attempting to sort out the massive exodus and to make anthropological sense of what had befallen the country of my birth.

During the summer of 1980, I visited Pakistan and carried out ethnographic research among Afghan migrants in Peshawar and vicinity. I conducted a series of in-depth, open-ended interviews with men and children who had recently arrived from Afghanistan and were settled in the Naser Bagh refugee camp which later in 1982-83, was designated as the camp for widows and orphans (Nunez 1984). I had no problem gaining access and establishing rapport with my interviewees since some of them were relatives and most of them belonged to the Paxtun tribal groups of eastern Afghanistan, one of which (the Jabarkhel) includes my patrilineage. In addition, I interviewed a number of mostly urban non-Paxtun Afghan adult males in the city. These interviews took place in the Dean Hotel, the Green Hotel, the general area of Sadr Bazar, and in the Takal area, where some newly-arrived Afghan migrants resided. It became apparent that the vast majority of my interviewees were enticed by the various anti-Afghanistan propaganda machines and networks to leave the country. They were convinced that the “refugee” status in Pakistan offered them improved material living conditions and even opportunities to migrate to Europe or the United States.

Anyone with adequate local cultural and linguistic competence could tell that the various makeshift hospitals for Afghan migrants contained staged “injuries” and “patients” who narrated fantastic, often

contradictory, tales of “brutality” in Afghanistan. In speaking of cultural and linguistic competence, being a “native” was not really the asset or level of competence that I have in mind. The advantage I am thinking of involves essentially a set of intellectual and disciplinary tools with which to remain above parochial interests and to constructively second guess the ethnographic fare, as an “anthropologist” always should.

Many migrants, mostly from Kabul, claimed to be victims of torture by electric shock. These individuals, mostly males in their thirties, were eager to chat. I observed several instances in which these men approached Westerners, especially journalists, for conversation. They maintained that they were ordinary businessmen or low-ranking military or civil employees of the government of Afghanistan. They would invariably draw attention to a small tattoo-like impression on their hands allegedly resulting from an electric shock. In my interviews with some of these individuals, I wondered what made ordinary and common citizens so important that caused the state to inconvenience itself in such a measured and costly way. The most frequent answer was that they were suspected by the government of Afghanistan of “anti-Russian feelings and opinions,” arrested, interrogated, tortured, and then released without further action before coming to Pakistan.

I did not once hear the Farsi or Paxtu verbs for “asylum,” “bolt,” “elude,” “escape,” “flee,” or “migrate” to describe journeys to Pakistan. Some of the adult males talked vaguely about the countryside being full of anti-personnel toy mines that caused death and injury to children. However, I did not see a single child with mine injuries nor hear about a specific child who had been killed by mines. None of the children interviewed recalled seeing or experiencing this either. The stories about toy mines reminded me of the use of these devices by the United States armed forces in Southeast Asia during the Vietnam War. My subsequent ethnographic research in Pakistan during 1983, 1988, 1996-97, and in the United States over the last twenty years, support my initial ethnographic findings and conclusions. It was in such an atmosphere of vicious anti-Afghanistan propaganda, unbelievable stories, and contradictions that many Western anthropologists, finding or imagining themselves locked out of Afghanistan and/or desiring to be engaged in a “Holy War” with the Russians, began to write about Afghan migrants in Pakistan.

### Conclusion

The studies briefly reviewed here do not enhance the “anthropology” of Afghanistan and mass migration. Addressing the Afghan migrants as “refugees” and ignoring the larger context after a brutal encounter with the West, a valuable opportunity was missed for making contributions to anthropological knowledge. These writings are reminiscent of the colonial habits of constructing “natives” and “their problems.” We are repeatedly told that these migrants have been terrorized, tortured, militarily attacked, and disconnected violently from family and friend. Little systematic documentation or reliable and impartial validation for these assertions is offered.

This is not to claim that none of these migrants have experienced these calamities and incurred psychological and emotional pain. No doubt many Afghan migrants have gone through and survived violence and the loss of family, friends, and material possessions. Let us remember that two superpowers fought on their home turf and turned it into rubble, wiping out its fragile political economy. And obviously thousands of migrants have suffered and incurred unimaginable loss, but this does not mean that the migrant status in itself creates an inevitable and universal psychological and economic condition.

Portraying Afghan migrants as victims and as a “problem,” depicting them as a victimized community with “problems,” and framing them in “self-definition,” psychological suffering, themes of *jihad*, *mohajerin*, *pana*, *paxtunwaley*, and “Freedom Fighters” has been anthropologically unproductive. Condemning communism, the Russians, and the *Khalq* Revolutionary Government of Afghanistan has not carried us far towards a sound anthropological understanding of the recent migrations from Afghanistan. There is an urgent need for anthropological research (not necessarily by “natives” alone), both in the direction of understanding the consequences of the Afghan migrants’ predicament, and for the purpose of locating the full context and scope of the local, regional, and global political and economic arrangements and historical processes that have produced and continue to produce massive numbers of Afghan migrants and refugees from and within Afghanistan.

### NOTES

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1. In this paper the occasional interchangeable use of anthropology and ethnography is merely situational but always cognizant of the distinction and relationship between the two.
2. Most writers often misleadingly translate *jihad* to mean only “Holy War.”
3. Clifford (1994) provides an excellent overview of “diaspora” that is applicable to the case of Afghan migrants.
4. This important point is overlooked in the writings by anthropologists on Afghan migrants. Examples will be discussed later in this paper. Barfield’s (1984) observations on migratory processes in northern Afghanistan are, however, an exception.
5. Edwards (1986a:313), using a somewhat stereotypical understanding of Paxtun society and culture and dubious evidence, concludes that the Paxtuns “comprise 50 percent of the Afghan population generally and perhaps 80 to 90 percent of the refugee population” in Pakistan. If his estimates are accurate, it would mean that close to three million Paxtuns out of roughly 6-8 million had left the country, dramatically altering its demographic configuration and the balance of ethnic politics both in Afghanistan and Pakistan, especially if these migrants remained permanently in Pakistan. However, large numbers from all Afghan ethnic groups that had migrated to Iran and Pakistan continue to return to Afghanistan. Again, precise numbers are unavailable, but the Paxtun prominence in the country since 1978 and the domination of the Paxtuns in the *taleban* movement (1994-present) do not support Edwards’ assertion.
6. Western scholars and the media awkwardly refer to the Islamic movement that is presently dominant in Afghanistan—individually and collectively—as the *taleban*, plural of *taleb* (male student, seeker [of knowledge]). In Farsi and Paxtu when the noun is used in its singular form, gender distinctions are made. Referring to the movement and to its members collectively as *taleban* (plural, male and female), *taleb* (singular, male), and *taleba* (singular, female), is grammatically correct. English renditions and transliterations may correctly use “Taleban” for the movement and the plural male, female, and any combination of the two, “Taleb” for singular male, “Talebs” for plural male, “Taleba” for singular female, and “Talebas” for plural female.
7. The correct form is *mohajeristan*, land of migrants, refugees.
8. The historical record is replete with instances of voluntary and involuntary large-scale population movement throughout the region. During the late 15<sup>th</sup> and early 16<sup>th</sup> centuries, the ancestors of the Yusufzi Paxtuns moved from

southwestern Afghanistan and, after having been driven out of the valley of Kabul, they settled in the valley of Swat, in what is now Pakistan. During the reign of Shah Abbas I (1587-1629 AD), the Abdali vassals were expelled from Qandahar in southwestern Afghanistan to Herat and northeastern Persia. The 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> century history of the Iranian Plateau is marked with forced population movements as well (Perry 1975). Segments of numerous tribal groups were exiled to western Afghanistan from Persia during the Safawid rule. In 1738 thousand of Ghalzi Paxtuns were exiled to Mazandaran in Iran, while the Abdalis were moved back to Qandahar by Nadir Shah Afshar who also transplanted large communities of the Qizilbash from Persia to Afghanistan. The largest of these communities are located in Kabul and its vicinities. About a century ago large numbers of Ghalzi Paxtuns were forced to migrate to northern Afghanistan by Amir 'Abd al-Rahman. During his reign (1880-1901), the Kafirs of eastern Afghanistan were forcibly converted to Islam and their land was re-named Nuristan, land of light. In 1892 'Abd al-Rahman's armed forces brutally suppressed the Hazara of Central Afghanistan forcing thousands to seek refuge in Baluchistan and northeastern Iran.

9. I first learned of this in autumn 1977 from economist M. Ishaq Nadiri who had just returned from an economic survey of the Persian Gulf region. I am unable to find published data on Afghan migrants in the Gulf during the 1970s.

10. Clearly the U.S. government sought to retaliate for its defeat in Southeast Asia by the Vietnamese forces that were supported by the Russians.

11. Robert "Bud" McFarlane, National Security Assistant to President Reagan, summarized U.S. policy towards Afghanistan in a TV interview with John McLaughlin (John McLaughlin's One-On-One 1986:2-1):

McLaughlin: What's the U.S. Policy towards Afghanistan? Is it to fight to the last Afghan? In other words to bleed the Russians really as being our prime objective?

McFarlane: Well our policy is well defined. It is basically that we don't seek any territory of our own, but we do insist that the Soviet Union not interfere in Afghan affairs. And that if Afghanistan wants to be non-aligned, that is fine with us.

McLaughlin: Do we want the rebels to win?

McFarlane: Well we don't want the Russians to win. We want to be supportive of the rebels, and to the extent we can, that is in our interest

12. Speaking before a U.S. Congressional Committee, Charles Wilson, Representative from Texas, a most zealous anti-Russian and the leading supporter of U.S. aid to the terrorists declared: "In our lifetime, the only thing that can compare with the genocide that is being attempted in Afghanistan by the Soviet Union is, of course, the holocaust in the late thirties and the early forties in Europe" (U.S. Congress 1987:4). However, Wilson's dramatic imagery and powerful sentiments are in fact structured by affairs and places far removed from 1930s Europe and closer to home—the Vietnam holocaust. In an

interview with Harry Reasoner on the “60 minutes” TV program (in which the U.S.-sponsored bands of anti-Afghanistan saboteurs are dubbed “Charlie’s Boys” and Wilson is riding a white horse among them) Representative Wilson tearfully states:

But, Harry, there were 167 funerals in my district, and I went to some of them. And—[interviewer injecting: Out of Vietnam?]-Yeah. One hundred sixty-seven boys from east Texas, from my little congressional district, 167. And they did not have anything to do with it, either. And I love sticking it to the Russians. And I think most Americans do. They need to get it back, and they are getting it back. They (‘Charlie’s Boys’) are digging for the last stand at Gardez, and they (the Russians)’re going to lose. And I love it” (CBS NEWS 1988:5).

In this “last stand” “Charlie’s Boys”, along with their U.S. and Pakistani supporters were soundly beaten and driven back to Pakistan by the armed forces of the legitimate government of Afghanistan.

13. Billard (1985) provides a rare glimpse into the situation of Afghan migrants in Iran during the early 1980s.

14. See for example the journal *Refugees*, the UN series *The State of the World’s Refugees*, and the series *Repatriation and Rehabilitation of Afghan Refugees* published by The Swedish Committee for Afghanistan (1993).

15. Along with Saudi Arabia, these countries were the chief supporters of the anti-Afghanistan insurgency operations based in Pakistan. They contributed vast resources to maintain the Afghan migrants in Pakistan. After his expulsion from Afghanistan, Dupree moved his base of operations from Kabul to Peshawar. Like several other Western anthropologists, he claimed to have traveled with the U.S.-sponsored terrorists inside Afghanistan. Interestingly, in an entry written for the *Encyclopaedia Iranica* about Dupree, anthropologist David B. Edwards (1996), while citing Narvaez (1989), does not mention Dupree’s association with the government of Norway, the Peace Corps, the National Security Council, and the Central Intelligence Agency. Other Western anthropologists who were not officially forbidden to conduct research in Afghanistan, perhaps following Dupree’s lead, began criticizing the 1978 Afghan Revolution and glorifying the U.S.-sponsored armed opposition to it.

16. Thirteen of these papers were published (Shahrani and Canfield 1984). Dupree (1984) wrote one of the two introductions to this book. For an incisive review of this widely known and referred to publication see Ghani (1985). The volume contains only passing references to Afghan migrants. But two chapters, (see Tapper 1984), are devoted specifically to women, making this the first instance where women’s status and rights in Afghanistan were raised in a public anthropological forum. Also, women are the focus in general academic (Howard-Merriam 1987) and UN coverage, such as *Refugees* (Colleville 1997a). Before the 1978 revolution, there was little mention of women’s status and human rights in Afghanistan by academics, journalists, or in UN publications.



17. Omidian (1992) and Shorish-Shamley (1991) researched health care and folk medicine among Afghan migrants resettled in the United States. Edwards' (1986b) dissertation data were collected from Afghan migrants in Peshawar on issues indirectly related to migrants and migration. Edwards, who published on Afghan migrants, had visited the country earlier and was attracted to the Afghanistan of the 1950s and pre-revolutionary 1970s.

18. Dupree was the first Western anthropologist to write on the post-1978 Afghan migrants (1979). He had earlier written briefly about patterns of rural-urban and seasonal migration (1975). This early work provides a brief but useful description of population dynamics in Afghanistan.

19. What Shahrani calls the "Islamic Interim Government of Afghanistan" (IIGA) was officially known (and self-designated) as the "Afghan Interim Government" (AIG). The arrangement was initiated, managed, supervised, and funded by the CIA and the governments of Pakistan and Saudi Arabia.

20. Centlivres and Centlivres-Demont (1987, 1988a, 1988b, 1994) provide sketches of Afghan migrants' (especially women's) local adaptive responses in Pakistan and their impact on the labor force of that country. Glatzer (1979) and Pedersen (1992) describe briefly local conditions of Afghan Paxtun nomads confined to Pakistan because of the unstable conditions in Afghanistan. All four of these European anthropologists are sympathetic to the politics of the so-called *jehad* against the legitimate government of Afghanistan. Omidian (1992, 1994), Omidian and Lipson (1992, 1996), and Lipson and Omidian (1992) have focused on Afghan migrants in California. These works, based on research undertaken initially to assess the feasibility of establishing health care systems for Afghan migrants in Northern California, conclude that building these systems would not be feasible. Other than glimpses into the phenomenon of aging among the Afghan educated elite and their "less educated and more traditional relatives," two conclusions are drawn: most of this elite are unemployed and dependent on the State of California, and the community is distrustful of outsiders including and especially the researchers.

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