

THE KIRGHIZ AND WAKHI OF AFGHANISTAN

Book Review: *The Kirghiz and Wakhi of Afghanistan: Adaptation to Closed Frontiers and War*

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In the field of anthropology M. Nazif Mohib Shahrani's book, "The Kirghiz and Wakhi of Afghanistan: Adaptation to Closed Frontiers and War" is a comprehensive ethnography that competently explains some of the intricacies of the Afghan culture through an examination of two ethnicities, namely, the Kirghiz and the Wakhi. This book review explains the essence of Shahrani's work and its importance for the field of anthropology.

Shahrani's book is a good introduction to anthropology for a person who is new in this field because of the logical manner the author treats the subject. He does not assume that the reader has any prior knowledge of the region and hence introduces the subject with a comprehensive, easy to understand historical overview and a geographical orientation before delving into the socio-economic intricacies of the Wakhi and the Kirghiz tribes of Afghanistan. Shahrani then describes the socio-cultural practices of both the ethnicities in detail following it up with an update concerning the ways the changed geopolitical circumstances impacted their way of life and how they managed to cope with the changes. The book was first published in 1979 focusing primarily on the cultural and ecological adaptation of the Kirghiz, a nomadic tribe and the Wakhi, agriculturalists in an area known as the Wakhan Corridor, a region that borders on Afghanistan, Pakistan, China. The high altitude and cold climate of that arid region became a focal point during the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan that changed the political dynamics of the situation where the two tribes found themselves forcing many of them to flee into Pakistan and Turkey.

Shahrani's geographical backdrop tells the reader of the importance of the Wakhan Corridor in the Afghan Pamir mountain range as an ancient trade route that served as a highway for "traders, political emissaries, invading armies, refugees, pilgrims, explorers, adventurers, missionaries, and travelers long before the Christian era" (Shahrani, 2002, p.19). The indigenous

people of the Wakhan area known as the Wakhi lived in settled villages on both sides of the rivers Amu Darya and Sarhad speaking a unique Wakhi language, an Indo-Iranian dialect adhering to the Ismailia (Shia) sect of Islam. However, the continuous strife, raids and conquests through the Wakhan Corridor decimated the indigenous population leaving only about a “6000 Wakhi living in about 700 household units” (Shahrani, p.46). This inconsiderable Shia population had always been under pressure to convert to the majoritarian Sunni beliefs of the rest of Afghanistan and its authorities thus increasing the degree of difficulty for the small sect to maintain their identity.

In this miasma of cultures, a tribe of the Turkish origin known as the Kirghiz driven away from Chinese Turkistan also populated the Wakhan area adopting Sunni Islam as their religion in the 16th century (Shahrani, p. 47). The Soviets too drove away this minority tribe in early 20th century and Shahrani claims to have estimated to “1,825 persons, living in some 333 *oey* (family, household) units” (Shahrani, p.49). The closure of the silk route and the frontiers under the new Westphalian regime robbed both the communities of their influence and restricted their movement only to within the Wakhan area. This has led to a new set of challenges for the tribes to cope with.

Very impressive in Shahrani’s study is the detailed description of the Wakhi social system which according to him revolves around the principle of “the agnatic descent and kinship” (Shahrani, p.55). Instead of claiming a common ancestry, the Wakhi claim that the members of their society came from six different agnatic descent groups. In each of these cases the consanguineal nature of the ‘ancestral identities served as totemic symbols for each group to declare their relative importance in the social interaction amongst the community. Descent rules between the various groups are highly definitive with a distinctive feature governing

intermarriage. “Endogamy is a prevalent practice amongst the Wakhi with cross marriage being permitted only between certain groups” (Shahrani, p.57). Patriarchal powers abound in the first three groups, but the next three have a mixed concept of decision making wherein both the senior-most male or female member of the *khoonkhlaq* (family) being allowed to collectively take decisions. The first three groups are considered as *asl* or true, noble of high quality of blood while the last three are considered as *ghareeb* or poor by the Wakhi society. Shahrani states that “a *Khoonkhalq* is a patrilocal agnatic descent group that is generally endogamous and corporate” (p. 69). A *khoonkhalq* may have two or more joint patrilineal families comprised of three to five generations with a residence pattern which is distinctly patrilocal and not matrilineal or avunculocal or bilocal or neolocal. The Wakhi are agriculturalists who use simple plow-animal technique to till the land. An inconsiderable part of land-rich Wakhis engage themselves in pastoralism. Both the sections manage the ecosystem of their region in which agriculture and pastoral activities co-exist.

The Kirghiz, on the other hand, are nomadic people who have adapted to the high altitude bitterly cold climate of their region to engage themselves in herding animals, such as yak, sheep, goats, Bactrian camels and horses that can sustain in the harsh environment and the ill effects of Hypoxia (Shahrani, p. 88). The Kirghiz unlike the Wakhi have no formalized rules for endogamy or exogamy except that sexual relations are not permitted between immediate blood relatives (Shahrani, p. 158). There is a very high incidence of “bilateral first cousin marriages” within an *oruq* (family group) (Shahrani, p. 158). In some parts of the world, such a practice could be termed as incestuous for example in the United States, in some states, marriage between first cousins is considered as incest and forbidden by law. The affinal relationships such as the *Damaad* or the son-in-law are common to both the Wakhi and the Kirghiz with each having a

say and relative standing in the society as also family matters. Both the tribes have patrilineal leanings rather than matrilineal heritage owing to their Islamic roots where the male dominates as a figurehead of the family. Kirghiz nomadic camps act as independent social units which in some cases belong to the same “patrilineal descent group” (Shahrani, p. 148). In such cases the camp becomes a cohesive political unit and fictive kinship does exist between camps having the same patrilineal descent group.

The closure of borders and the adoption of the centralized nation-state model in Afghanistan by the colonial powers had a wide ranging impact on the socio-cultural practices of the Wakhi and the Kirghiz community. Closing the borders restricted the nomadic lifestyle of the Kirghiz who then had to resort to intensify the land use in a type of pastoral involution. Since land was controlled by the Wakhi, the Kirghiz had to depend upon them for agricultural products. The historical agricultural independence of the Wakhis too changed as the increased demand was difficult to sustain and this led to the Wakhi becoming dependant on the Kirghiz for pastoral products. This resulted in economic interdependence between the two communities (Shahrani, p.187). This changed the Kirghiz nomadic existence to a more settled life. While the economic interdependence was a forced issue, the socio-cultural divide between the Sunni Kirghiz and the Shia Wakhi remained. When the Soviets invaded Afghanistan, the Kirghiz were further oppressed and had to flee to Pakistan and Turkey for survival. Three major changes took place within the Kirghiz society with the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan. Firstly, almost all the Kirghiz had to relocate from their traditional abode to Pakistan and Turkey that severed their longstanding cultural ties with their region. Secondly, in both these countries, the Kirghiz were thrust into an alien environment with each new setting having its own socio-cultural dynamics. In Turkey, the Turkish government located the Kirghiz in Kurdish regions for political reasons.

Thus the Kirghiz suddenly had new neighbors with whom they had to develop new social equations. Thirdly, the Kirghiz had to give up their pastoral nomadic existence for a more settled lifestyle in the refugee camps of Pakistan and Turkey.

Despite the relocation to far off lands, the Kirghiz adapted quite well to the changed circumstances. Many of those who relocated to Turkey managed to make use of the better economic opportunities that Turkey provided and this created a new class of prosperous Kirghiz households that had imbibed a range of the Turkish values. Better economic avenues translated into better health and therefore the Kirghiz population in Turkey increased with falling mortality rates. Some cultural changes had to be imbibed because of the changed circumstances. Traditionally, the Kirghiz community never had the centralized leadership with each camp having its own leader. However, having been relocated to a specific area in Eastern Turkey, the community had to adopt a more centralized model of leadership with one leader being designated to speak for the community. Nevertheless, the cultural traditions related to marriage were continued.

Sharani's case study is an excellent reading for those who wish to understand the basic anthropological methodology. The author combines the historical facts with the personal experience and the quantitative analysis arrived at from study of anthropological surveys of the region carried out by him and other scholars. In my opinion, Shahrani's anthropological part of the study is professional and objective. Shahrani's anthropological analysis on the effects of Hypoxia on the pastoral communities is, however, dated as other anthropologists have come out with better supported rationales. The author's musings in the preface and the epilogue to cover events after 9/11 however stand out jarringly. His concepts of geopolitics appear to be naïve when he proclaims that terrorists were not created by Afghanistan but by U.S., the Israeli and

Indian policies. In such pronouncements, the author betrays personal bias to Islamic ideological leanings which rob this otherwise superlative professional work in anthropology some of its credence.

In conclusion, I agree that Shahrani's analysis is quite objective regarding the current policies in Afghanistan. The anthropological study makes the reader aware of the diverse cultural divide and differences that exist in Afghanistan and how these necessarily have to be taken into account before trying to impose an external solution. To my mind the West led by America is erring grievously in trying to install a western style democratic structure in the deeply traditional Islamic society which has for centuries existed as a loose federation of tribes each with its own area of influence, laws and culture and therefore an Afghan style federated political structure may be more viable as Shahrani recommends.

References

- Shahrani, M. N. (2002). *The Kirghiz and Wakhi of Afghanistan: Adaptation to Closed Frontiers and War*. Seattle: University of Washington Press.