

# The Pashtun Tribal System\*

by  
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## Introduction

We have inherited a somewhat fuzzy usage of the term '*tribe*' and '*tribal*' from early British anthropology. '*Tribe*' was often used in a rather derogatory manner for relatively small ethnic groups who lived as 'underdeveloped' (formerly called '*primitive*' or even '*savage*') minorities, far from the majorities' cultural and social mainstream. No wonder that the term '*tribe*' became obsolete in many continents, and former objects of anthropological investigation are nowadays less ready to accept labels for their respective ethnic groups which seem derogatory to them.

However, in the usage of English in the north-western parts of Subcontinent and in West Asia the term '*tribe*' or in its equivalents in the local languages ('*qawm*', '*qabila*', '*il*', '*tayfah*' etc.) has no derogatory connotation. To the contrary, it is used with pride as a marker of nobility. Belonging to a tribe means to be of distinguished and old ancestry, to belong to genuine people, to be dependable. As a *tribal* one is bound by a network of primordial obligations on the solid basis of well structured genealogical ties. Such notions are linked to pride and honour, not to inferiority. Arab rulers would be deeply offended if their tribal background was questioned, Afghan dignitaries and intellectuals increasingly use their tribal names as a second name, a similar tendency is noticeable in Pakistan, e.g. Ghulam Ishaq Khan, a former President of Pakistan preferred to appear in tribal costume on official occasions.

This encourages me to come to the rescue of the useful anthropological term '*tribe*' under the condition that it is well defined and free of all connotations of simplicity, primitiveness, exoticism, or periphery. '*Tribal*' may also be applied to certain aspects of highly complex and technically developed societies, e. g. in Central Europe or in the Indian or Pakistani Punjab. I consider '*tribe*' as just one of the many interwoven structural components of a given society, no matter how complex and 'developed'.

I suggest the following definition:

By *tribe* I understand a social segment based on a genealogical concept of social structure. According to such concept the society is segmented by a principle of descent from a common ancestor or from common ancestors. Tribes (i.e. segments in a tribal system) are constituted by the people's notion of being distinct from others through sharing closer common ancestry. Like an ethnic group, a tribe is always constituted vis à vis one or more equivalents. On a higher genealogical level different tribes may join into one segment in relation to another segment which is made up of tribes who are genealogically closer to one another than to the tribes of the first segment. Since tribes are social segments *per definitionem*, there have to be at least two tribes on each level.

Often the terms *clan* or *lineage* are used instead, but the latter two have unilineal descent and - usually - exogamy as a defining criterium which is not obligatory with *tribe*. In addition, most of us associate with *clan* and *lineage* small and more or less localized social units, so it would sound odd to be used for categories like the Pashtun Durrani which count several million members.

Many authors define , or at least characterise *tribe* as a **political** unit. I would prefer to omit this as a defining criterium because at this point of the discussion, I use *tribe* merely as a structural concept, as a principle of social order, rather than to define "real" social groups or acting political units. When it comes to tribes "out there" the interesting question whether or not "*tribes*" are political units, should not be blocked *a priori* by a definition, but should be the subject of research and analysis.

At this point I want to stress that the tribal system is usually not the only structural principle of a tribal society. The example of the Punjab (both Indian and Pakistani) makes it clear that tribe or tribal structure is only one guideline of social orientation in a complex network of different principles and patterns of the social landscape. The society or societies in which Pashtuns live are not much simpler. In Afghanistan which recently has sunk into chaos and turmoil and where tribes have gained considerably in importance, the tribal system is only one component within a much more complex social and political web. This is true as well for areas populated homogeneously by Pashtuns. The tribal system does or did not only reside in remote and backward areas but permeated and still permeates all levels of the society from the nomad camp up to the royal palace, from the remote mountain village up to the university and to the head quarters of the armed forces.

## The "largest tribal society"

Pashtuns are said to having developed the world's largest tribal society<sup>1</sup>, and in local thinking the tribal system even encompasses all humanity, as Barakhan, one of my informants, an Atsakzay nomad of Badghis, Northwest Afghanistan, has put it:

"When God created the animals and humans he first created one ant and his spouse, then one buck and his goat, one ram and his sheep ... finally one man and his wife, and from these ancestors sprang the tribes (*qawm*) of the ants, of the goats, of the sheep and finally the tribe of Adam. The offspring of the first ant became the grandfathers (*nikagan*) of the various tribes (*qawm*) and subtribes (*qawm* and *khel*) of ants ..., as Adam's sons became the *nikagan* of the peoples of the world (*qawm*), and their sons the *nikagan* of the tribes (*qawm*) within these peoples. One of Adam's sons or grandsons was Ibrahim, the *nika* of all nomads."<sup>2</sup>

An equation of animal and human society is what one might expect from a pastoral nomad, but the main structural elements in this statement are shared by pastoral, agricultural and other Pashtuns: the notion that the divine tribal order unifies **and** divides all human beings or even all creatures. The unifying cognitive ordering concept of tribe is clearly laid down in the Qur'an:

Men, we have created you from a male and a female, and made you into nations and tribes, that you might get to know one another. The noblest of you in God's sight is he who is most righteous. God is allknowing and wise." (XLIX, 13)<sup>3</sup>

Local folklore has it that all Pashtuns are (mainly) patrilineal descendants of one founding father, even if there is no agreement about the apical ancestor's name. Some call him Qays Abdurrashid, others say his name was Daru Nika, or Baba Khaled (Khalid bin Walid - the legendary general of the army of Prophet Muhammad). The name of the common ancestor is less important than the Pashtuns' belief of belonging to **one** huge kinship group or family. The common ancestor had many sons, grandsons, great-grandsons and so forth, each being the ancestor of one of the innumerable branches and sub-branches or tribes and sub-tribes, clans and sub-clans down to the local lineages and families. The ordering principle of each tribal subgroup is similar to that of the larger group, yet the segments do not have a fixed or repetitive number of subdivisions such as many Turkish tribes who have a binary system of segmentation. The common Pashtun ancestor is said to have had four sons: Sarban, Bitan (alias Batni or Sheykh Beyt), Ghurghusht and Karran, the latter was adopted. Sarban had two sons: Sharjnun and

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<sup>1</sup> To my knowledge this often repeated stereotype was first formulated by J. Spain in his *The Pathan Borderland*. The Hague: Mouton, 1963, p. 17.

<sup>2</sup> From an interview in 1970

<sup>3</sup> *The Koran*. Translated with notes by N. J. Dawood. London: Penguin Books, 1995, p. 516.

Kharshbun; Bitan three sons: Isma'il, Ashbun, Kajin, and one famous daughter: Bibi Matu; Ghurghusht had three sons: Danay, Babay and Mando; Karran was blessed with two sons: Koday and Kakay. From all these sons and grandsons of Qays Abdurrashid or his aliases sprang the thousands of tribes, subtribes and local lineages of the Pashtuns.<sup>4</sup>

There have been many attempts to codify the Pashtun tribal system, the most famous being the *Makhzan-e Afghani* compiled in India by Ni'matullah in the early 17th century. This genealogies lists thousands of tribes and relates anecdotes and legends about the tribes' origins and how they joined or split.<sup>5</sup> The tribal charter is based on patrilineality, but in some conspicuous cases this principle is set aside for notable exceptions. In principle, one has to be born into a tribe, but Afghan pragmatism allows exceptions. Through consensus of the tribe, outsiders may be allowed to take residence in their area. If such outsiders and their offspring honour the tribal code of behaviour and succeed to intermarry with the tribe they may be accepted as members after a generation or two.

### **Cherchez la femme: The Ghilzay case**

Some of the more famous and powerful tribes such as the Afridi or Ghilzay are connected to the rest of the Pashtuns by adoption and/or by female links. In the genealogical books adventurous or romantic stories usually adorn these deviations from the patrilineal rule. Adaptations to social and political realities were always possible as the tribal system was managed in a flexible manner.

An example is Bibi Matu the Mother of all Ghilzay who embodies the genealogical link of that grand and famous tribe to the rest of the Pashtuns:

The story begins with an account of the non-Pashtun Kings of Ghor (western Central Afghanistan) and why one Shah Hossain, a Prince of that dynasty had to flee to the pasture lands of Sheykh Bayt, a son of Qays Abdurrashid, the apical ancestor of the Pashtuns. The text is taken from Bernhard Dorn's classical translation of the *Makhzan* done in St. Petersburg in the early 19<sup>th</sup> Century:

"...Shah Hossain, leaving his father, came alone, and in a miserable condition, to the village of Sheikh Batni [a synonym of Sheikh Beyt], and presented himself to him. the marks of felicity being engrossed on Hossain's forehead, Sheikh Batni allowed him to reside among his tribes, made him his friend, and evinced paternal

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<sup>4</sup> Khwaja Ni'mat Ullah b. Khwâja Habîb Ullah al-Harawî: *Tarikh-e Khân Jahânî wa makhzan-e Afghânî*. Ed. by S. M. Imâmuddîn (Dacca: Asiatic Society of Pakistan, Publ. No. 4, 2 vols) 1960-1992.

<sup>5</sup> Khwaja Ni'mat Ullah's grand national genealogy (see footnote no. 4) written in the 17<sup>th</sup> Century AD. is considered among literate Pashtuns as the classical one. B. Dorn issued a translated version in 1829 under the title *History of the Afghans* (repr. by Susil Gupta, London and Santiago de Compostela 1965). Another, more handy genealogy is the *Hayat-i Afghan* by Hayat Khan, translated to English by H. Priestley, Lahore, 1874 (reprinted by Sang-e-Meel Publ., Lahore 1981).

affection towards him. He would not occupy himself with worldly affairs, but gave himself up entirely to devotion, austerity, reading the Koran, and devout meditation; and by this integrity and prudence everything was well administered. Destiny bringing on an eventual display of affairs, Shah Hossain, conformably to human nature and youth, paid his addresses to the daughter of Sheikh Batni, Matu by name; and matters gradually went so far, that they, by mutual consent, but without the sanction of either father or mother, proceeded into intimacy, that, a short time after, the symptoms of pregnancy appeared, and the case no longer admitted of concealment. The damsel's mother becoming aware of it, assailed her daughter with reproaches: she, perceiving that there was no remedy, but by the adoption of a speedy resolution, informed Sheikh Beyt of it, and said to him: "Before the secret come to light, and reach the ears of our relations, we must give our daughter in marriage to that young man." The sheikh, however, objected: "That youth is no match for us, as I am entirely unacquainted with his former condition and origin: how could I then consent to it?" To this the mother replied, "Truly, his dignified appearance bears sufficient evidence of his nobility." The sheikh still refusing his consent, his consort closely examined Shah Hossain about his origin and family: in reply to which he declared: "My ancestors were princes and rulers in the province of Ghor: if you do not believe it, despatch a confidential person to ascertain the truth of this statement." The lady, overjoyed at this declaration, reported it to the sheikh, who despatched one Kaghdoor, with a letter of Shah Hossain to Ghor, in order to obtain a faithful account of his origin. The messenger, on his arrival, duly ascertained the truth of his statement, as to his noble descent, and returned with written documents... the messenger made his report of Hossein's noble origin to the sheikh, whose mind, previously clouded with distress, brightened up. In a propitious hour they married Bibi Matu to Shah Hossain who soon after married also Kaghdoor's daughter. After a certain time, Matu was delivered of a charming and auspicious boy, who, being the fruit of a clandestine amour, was called Ghilzye: -*Ghil*, in the Afghan language, signifying a "thief"; and *zye*, "born, a son." <sup>6</sup>

This legend of the Ghilzay is one of many examples when the written genealogies try to cope with the fact that Pashtuns are obviously of heterogeneous origin, and that the tribal structure is not left to a strict patrilineal principle alone, but is open to convenient arrangements.

The notion of a non-Pashtun origin of the Ghilzay has not only stimulated the fantasy of local genealogists but also that of western historians who consider it likely that the Ghilzay tribe represents the survivors of the medieval Turkish tribe of Khalaj, who joined a Pashtun tribal confederation or formed one of their own.<sup>7</sup> Even the *Makhzan* hints at a Turkish ancestry of the children of Bibi Matu by counting among Shah Hossain's forefathers Turkish princes.<sup>8</sup> Ni'matullah's *Makhzan* reports more than 63 instances when the rule of patrilineal descent is broken either by statements that a tribal ancestor was of unknown origin but adopted by a Pashtun, or by female links, sometimes by a combination of both.

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<sup>6</sup> Bernhard Dorn: *History of the Afghans. Translated from the Persian of Neamat Ullah*. London, Santiago de Compostela: Susil Gupta, 2<sup>nd</sup> Ed 1965 (1<sup>st</sup> Ed 1829-1836). "Book the Third", p. 47f.

<sup>7</sup> Bosworth, C. E.: Khaladj. in: *The Encyclopedia of Islam*. New Ed. IV. Leiden: Brill 1990 (1978)

<sup>8</sup> Dorn, op. cit. III, p. 46p.

### ***qawm, khel and -zay***

A few more words about terminology: People, ethnic group and tribe are called *qawm* in Pashtu and in most other languages in Afghanistan. This reflects the traditional view that ethnic groups and tribes are structured in a similar way, i.e. by genealogical links. Subtribe or clan is *khel* in Pashtu, but it may also be called *qawm*, as any tribal unit may be seen as a tribe or sub-tribe at the same time, depending on the level of ramification it is viewed from. Thus a subtribe or sub-clan of a *khel* is also a *khel* down to the village level.

A frequent suffix of names of larger tribal units is *-zay*, e.g. Mandozay, meaning "Son of Mando", plural form Mandozi, "Sons of Mando", and *-khel* for the sub-units. Some *khels* have grown to such an extent that they became recognised as tribes of their own, such as the Sulaimankhel, a branch of the Ghilzay. The suffix *-zay* indicates in most of the cases a southern or western origin (e.g. the Yusufzay of Swat originate from Kandahar), whereas most of the eastern tribes lack this typical tribal suffix, such as the Afridi, Mohmand, Zadran, Dzadzi (Jaji), Mangal, Shinwari, as well as many smaller tribes in Khost such as the Tani, Saberi, Lakan, Ghorboz etc.

### **Tribes as social and political groups and factions**

Most of the tribes in Afghanistan are neither corporate nor political entities, yet the tribal system has more often than not served as a blue print for political alliances. Political entrepreneurs found kinship and tribal links most convenient as a basis for alliances or confederations in order to challenge even imperial powers and to secure areas for their clients.

There is a dilemma in tribal societies: the very tool which enables tribal leaders to establish powerful political entities, the charter of segmentary solidarity, is also instrumental for segmentary division. Once a charismatic leader who masters the instrument of segmentary alliance loses influence or dies the divisive character of the segmentary tribal system will gain the upper hand. Tribal systems do not usually develop institutionalised political power which could tolerate fluctuations in the abilities of individual rulers.

The Pashtun ideal of equality is based on the tribal system. The idea is that all Pashtuns are born equal, and are children of one common ancestor; social and economic inequality, which of course exists, is not given by nature or birth but is achieved individually, and is threatened and open to change at any time.

Whereas the tribal order discourages social hierarchy, it defines social nearness and distance. Pashtuns use their tribal order to mark lines of conflict and solidarity. If I see two men fighting I am supposed to side with the one who is “closer” to me, i.e. the one with whom I share the nearest common patrilineal ancestor.

In the Pashtun Tribal areas in East Afghanistan and Northwest Pakistan we find a socio-political division into two opposite sections: Tor Gund (‘white faction’) and Spin Gund (‘black faction’). The following example is from Khost in East Afghanistan: The Saberi, Dzadran (Jadran), Tsamkani (Chamkani), Tani, Mandozay etc. are named Spin Gund in opposition with the Tor Gund, the Mangal, Ismailkhel and others. Today this dichotomy has become practically obsolete, but people clearly remember which tribe belongs to which *gund*. The recent violent land dispute between members of the Tsamkani and the Mangal, however, is between two opposing *gund* and the sympathies of the Saberi who are not part of the conflict lie with their *gund* fellows, the Tsamkani.

Tribes are localized to various degrees. The Ghilzay, for example, are scattered all over Afghanistan; thus there is no proper Ghilzay land. Yet, there are areas where Ghilzay and certain of their subtribes predominate. Other tribes, such as the Afridi, have a clearly defined home land. The latter is true for most of the eastern tribes along the Afghan-Pakistani border. Tribal land is subdivided along tribal subdivisions. Belonging to a tribe therefore means having access to the land of that tribe. There are also landless tribals, e.g. those who have sold their inherited land to another member of their tribe. If a member of a tribe loses ownership of his land, he retains at least his right to re-acquire land if he regains the necessary means. Localized tribes also own common and undivided property: pastures and forests which every member has an equal right to use. When a member of a tribe defends the land of his tribe he defends his own security and future of his family.<sup>9</sup>

Those tribes who inhabit a coherent area are able to define and enact a common policy. Even where influential persons (*khan*) or commanders have emerged, decisions of importance for the whole community are reached at community councils (*jirga*). According to tribal ideal of equality, every free and experienced male person of the tribe has the right to attend, to speak and to decide. Only *jirgas* on very high levels (provincial or all-tribe, which is very rare) need a system of representation. When the tribes of Mandozay and Ismailkhel sent a joint *jirga* to Peshawar in order to attract international aid, they nominated two representatives from each sub-tribe to participate.<sup>10</sup> *jirgas* traditionally have neither leaders nor chairmen. The participants prefer to sit in circles in

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<sup>9</sup> For a comprehensive account of the legal aspects of the tribal system in Khost see W. Steul, *Paschtunwali: Ein Ehrenkodex und seine rechtliche Relevanz* (Wiesbaden: Steiner) 1981.

<sup>10</sup> At that time (1991) I worked with the NGO (Danish Committee for Aid to Afghan Refugee) which was approached successfully by this *jirga*.

order to avoid any dominant position. Decisions are reached only through consensus. Therefore discussions last until everyone is convinced or until it becomes clear that there will be no consensus at that time. Once a decision is reached at a *jirga*, it is binding for every participant.

During the anti-Soviet war a new political term came into use in Afghanistan: *shora*. This is the Arabic term referring to the first meetings of the Muslim *ummah*. The word *jirga* is derived from Mongolian and lacks religious connotation. Other differences between *jirga* and *shora* are the more representative character of a *shora*, a relatively permanent membership, and more regular intervals of the meetings. *jirgas* in contrast meet *ad hoc* when a problem arises.<sup>11</sup>

In southeastern Afghanistan tribal and/or local communities maintain militias, *arbaki* or *lashgar* called. *Jirgas* can also summon ad hoc militias, even if their constituencies are tribally mixed. Such militias are made up of young unmarried men not yet experienced enough to participate in *jirgas* or *shoras*, but strong and loyal enough to sanction the decisions. The classical sanction for not adhering to a *jirga's/shora's* decision is the house of the offender to be burned down by the *arbaki*, and the worst sanction is expulsion from the tribe and tribal land.

I have already mentioned leaders, a closer look at them reveals that their power is rather limited. Whereas tribes and their divisions are structurally stable and dependable, tribal leadership is not. Political leaders can hardly build their power on the tribal structure alone because that is egalitarian. They need continuously to convince their followers and adversaries of their superior personal qualities and have to procure and redistribute resources from outside the tribal realm, for the followers expect from them material or symbolic advantages and in times of political chaos people demand from their leaders to provide security. Clients may quickly be disappointed by a *khan* or commander and may switch overnight to another one, there is no institutional safety net for tribal leaders.

In a tribal setting one can gain power by

- (a) controlling tenants,
- (b) attracting many regular guests through lavish hospitality,
- (c) channelling resources from the outside world to one's followers,
- (d) superior rhetoric qualities and regular sound judgements in the *shoras* and *jirgas*, and
- (e) gallantry in war and conflict.

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<sup>11</sup> For a good analysis of the Afghan *shoras* see: Lynn Carter & Kerry Connor, *A Preliminary Investigation of contemporary Afghan Councils*. (Peshawar: Paper prepared for ACBAR, 52pp) 1989.



All these qualities are transitory and have constantly to be re-enacted against ever-present competitors.

In spite of the proverbial unpredictability of tribal leadership, the tribal system provides an element of stability and resilience in times of turmoil and when state authority has disappeared. To the Pashtuns it means relative safety, legal security and social orientation in an otherwise chaotic and anarchic world. Where the tribal system is well functioning the new radical Islamist rulers of Afghanistan, the Taliban, have not dared to touch it, instead they continue the practice of earlier Afghan Governments to let peripheral areas (i.e. the largest part of the country) be organised by local authorities and institutions only loosely connected with the state rulers.

In the post-war time (after 1992) I have experienced that in areas where the tribal system was dominant and intact (e.g. in Khost) civil order and security were faster restored and rehabilitation of local economy and the return of refugees went more smoothly than in areas where the tribal system was not functioning anymore.<sup>12</sup>

Although tribal structures can be found all over Afghanistan, they do not have everywhere the same ordering and organising quality as they do in the East of the country, and even there the tribal system is only one of various ordering principles within the society. In the predominantly Pashtun South and Southwest of Afghanistan the tribes are less localized and most communities and political units are multi-tribal. Here tribal structure is an organising factor too, it allows people to form solidarity groups when the need arises, creates bonds of social cohesion over long distance, and it structures the attachment of locally dispersed people and groups to the rest of the Pashtuns. It helps for example nomads to claim obligations of mutual help from sedentary farmers in different areas of Afghanistan.

### **Tribes, politics and history**

In the anthropological literature *tribe* is often seen and analysed as a politically organised or politically acting unit.<sup>13</sup> No doubt, the Pashtun tribal system does have an eminent political relevance, although only in exceptional cases do Pashtun tribes form actual social groups or organisations which are able to act collectively as political units. Whether Pashtun tribes today are in a state of decay under the onslaught of modernism,<sup>14</sup> whether

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<sup>12</sup> Bernt Glatzer, "From Refugee to Resident: Effects of Aid on Repatriation" in In: E.Eide & T. Skaufjord (eds) *From Aid During Times of War to Aid for Reconstruction and Development. Seminar Report* (Peshawar: Norwegian Afghanistan Committee) 1992, pp161-168.

<sup>13</sup> cf. Richard Tapper: Introduction. In: R. Tapper (ed): *The Conflict of Tribe and State in Iran and Afghanistan*. London etc. Croom Helm and St. Martin's Press, 1983: 1-82.

<sup>14</sup> Louis Dupree: *Tribal Warfare in Afghanistan and Pakistan: A Reflection of The Segmentary Lineage*

the tribal *khans* fail to "tie the knot of the tribe"<sup>15</sup>, or whether the underlying segmentary lineage structure was never more than just an "ideology of social relations"<sup>16</sup> is another question, but as a matter of fact in most cases tribes do not have observable organisations which could enable them to perform collective actions *as a tribe*. Where they are able to act collectively they are only small groups, e.g. populations of a single valley or of a cluster of villages as the above mentioned Mandozai and Ismailkhel. In some cases the organisational weakness of Pashtun tribes may be due to recent detribalization which Evans observed among the Safi.<sup>17</sup> Two centuries ago, the pioneer of Afghan anthropology, Mountstuart Elphinstone, had observed the phenomenon of political inconsistency of Pashtun tribes when he struggled with describing and analysing the Ghilzay confederacy:

"The system of government which I have described is so often deranged ... that it is seldom found in full force; and must, therefore, be considered rather as the model on which all the governments of tribes are formed than a correct description of any one of them. There is probably no case where some link is not wanting in the chain of authorities, which ought to descend from the Khaun to the heads of families...The whole constitution is also sometimes overturned...frequently the chiefs are neglected, and every subdivision, every quarter, and even every family, throws off its dependence ... and acts according to its own interest and inclination."<sup>18</sup>

In the same chapter Elphinstone stressed also the interesting fact that when tribes formed viable constituencies it was instigated by the royal court's policy which tried to extend its influence by organising local populations along tribal lines and by pampering local big men as tribal chiefs:

"On the whole, it is generally observable that the tribes most under the King's influence are most obedient to their Khaun, though there are some striking exceptions to the rule". (ibid. p. 217)

"striking" here is to be understood literally: Elphinstone had in mind cases when tribes succeeded in organising themselves in such an efficient way that they managed to invade well established empires. This was the case in 1722 when a Ghilzai army under their chieftain Mahmud succeeded in conquering and usurping the throne of Safawid Persia. Yet the Ghilzai rule of Persia lasted only till 1729, it was so shortlived mainly because the Ghilzay lacked any organisational basis to sustain an imperial rule. In 1749 the rivals of

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System. In: Ahmed & Hart (eds): *Islam in Tribal Societies: From the Atlas to the Indus*. London: Routledge..1984: 266- 286.

<sup>15</sup> Jon Anderson: There are no khans anymore: Economic Development and Social Change in Tribal Afghanistan. *The Middle East Journal*. 32, 1978: 167-183.

<sup>16</sup> Dale F. Eickelman: *The Middle East: An Anthropological Appraisal*. Englewood Cliffs; NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1981: 104

<sup>17</sup> Jeffrey H. P. Evans: *The Social Structure and Organization of a Pakhtu Speaking Community in Afghanistan*. (Ph.D. thesis; Durham), 1977: 3.

<sup>18</sup> Mountstuart Elphinstone: *An Account of the Kingdom of Caubul*. 2 vols.London: Longman 1839 (1<sup>st</sup> ed. 1815), vol.2, p. 215f.

the Ghilzai, the Abdali - another Pashtun tribal confederacy - where more successful: On their home ground they forged together the larger part of Pashtuns and neighbouring ethnic groups to an intertribal confederacy which became known as Afghanistan. As the Ghilzay experienced before, the Abdali (later "Durrani") rulers could not rely on their own tribal organisation, but from the beginning (1749) had to base their rule on state institutions which they found in the former Safawid and Moghul provincial centres of Herat, Kandahar, Kabul and Peshawar. The higher the tribal chief Ahmad Shah Abdali (later Durrani) rose to royal power and the more successful he was in conquering neighbouring territories the more he got estranged from his tribal basis. Eventually he had to resort to purchasing loyalty from tribal chiefs who owed him their position. These tribal chiefs in turn became soon alienated from their own tribal basis because they were more loyal to the king and more oriented toward the royal court than to their local followers. In this way an urban élite emerged which up to this day is culturally, politically and economically remarkably distant from the mainly rural Afghan population. When the ever widening gap between the ruler and the ruled became deep enough the bond of social and cultural cohesion, *asabiyah*, the tribal solidarity, as Ibn Khaldun named it, broke and the kingdom sank in anarchy leaving the rulers to be overthrown by their rivals who could muster a stronger tribal following (*lashgar*) - the classical Ibn Khaldunian scenario.

Yet, in one important respect the Pashtun example does not corroborate Ibn Khaldun's model:

It were not the Pashtun tribes who set out to overthrow a dynasty, but it were the political leaders (such as Mahmud or Ahmad Shah, later Dost Muhammad, Abdurrahman and Nadir Shah, the father of Zahir Shah) who made skilful use of tribal networks, of tribal identities and solidarities (*asabiyah*) to gain a devoted following, to raise to supreme power in a state. Once such leaders ascended to supreme power the tribal structure had little to offer for sustaining power and for running the state, and the rulers had to find or to create alternative institutions outside the tribal network, the more successful they were in this respect the more they became severed from their tribal basis.

This does not make tribal structure politically obsolete. Outside the sphere of the state, in the central, western and southern hinterland of Afghanistan where even under the Taliban state power hardly ever reaches, the tribal system is still the main structuring and ordering principle of the local society. The tribal system consists not only of a the patrilineal model of an ever ramifying society, but also of rules of solidarity and conflict resolution, of social forms how to gain and loose political power, and of a very elaborate code of honour and shame: the *pashtunwali* which is linked with historical memories of the tribes and lineages.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> More on *pashtunwali* in B. Glatzer: Zum Pashtunwali als ethnischem Selbstportrait. In: R. Kößler und G.

## **Tribes in the recent Afghan war**

Tribalism, and ethnicity are often lumped together, and both are blamed as main factors of turmoil, war and of the break-down of state order, but there are reasons to assume that the tribal structure of Afghanistan is rather a factor of stability, even if it does not support durable political leadership.

As mentioned before a high degree of ethnic and tribal dynamics is observable in Afghanistan. Ethnic and tribal boundaries and identities are not fixed since ages, but are often a matter of negotiation. Whether social action is based on tribal and ethnic criteria depends on opportunities and tactics and may change quickly. E. g. the Pashtun party leader and warlord Gulbudin Hekmatyar initially laid a stress in his public speeches on panislamism and the Muslim *ummah*. Boundaries between Muslim states should become obsolete. Later, during his campaigns for recruitment in Pashtun areas he appealed to the ethnic and tribal solidarity of the Pashtuns who should defend their identity and honour against the rest of the world.

During the guerilla war against Soviet troops in Afghanistan and against the pro-Communist regime in Kabul the front-lines cut through almost all ethnic groups and the larger tribes. In all those groups there were (a) sympathisers and collaborators of the socialist regimes, (b) fierce enemies of these regimes, and (c) people who decided to wait and see who would be the winner. I know many families whose strategy was to place one member among the communists, another one or two among *the mujahedin* of various parties, and to send yet another one as a refugee to Europe or USA, while the rest of the family set up their household in a Pakistani refugee camp. Of course the family continued communicating among all its members.

During the early years of the war foreigners and Afghan intellectuals on both sides of the front expected a soon end of tribalism and ethnicity. Some hoped for the "achievements of socialism" and for the "brotherly help of the USSR" to transform the society into a supra-ethnic class society and eventually into a harmonious socialist state, the others expected the grand *jihad* against the formidable common enemy to do the job of creating one Afghan nation.

During the long war it became obvious that the regimes in Kabul and the *mujahedin* were divided into numerous hostile factions. It became also obvious that ethnicity and tribalism

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Best (Hg): *Festschrift für Christian Sigrist*. (in press).

were additional factors but not the most important ones. In early 1980 the Sunni *mujahedin* had formed about 100 different parties who ran 60 offices in Peshawar. During the following year the Pakistan Government forced the *mujahedin* to unite and acknowledged only 7 parties who were given administrative tasks for millions of Afghan refugees in Pakistan. The rest of the parties had to close their offices in Pakistan. The 7 parties issued identity and ration cards thus forcing the refugees to make a choice between one or another of the parties. Even more relevant was the Pakistani policy to distribute military equipment and money for the *mujahedin* exclusively through the 7 parties.

The Shia *mujahedin* formed another eight parties, who found support in Iran. Over the years Iran succeeded in uniting most of them, today the significant Shia parties are the two wings of the Hizb-e Wahdad which organise the great majority of the Hazarah, and the Harakat-e Islami (Mohseni) which appeals more to the urban Shia and is relatively independent of Iran.<sup>20</sup>

Between 1978 and 1992 the Soviet-installed governments, the army and the civil service of Kabul were divided into hostile factions as well. Two presidents, innumerable ministers, generals and other dignitaries were killed in factional fights.

Ethnicity and tribalism are often held responsible for the Afghan disunity. Indeed practically each of the conflicting parties and groups, including the Taliban, show a certain emphasis towards one or another ethnic group. This, however, is no proof that ethnic and tribal divisions are the cause of political cleavages and violent conflicts. Every Afghan belongs to one of the ethnic groups and every Pashtun belongs to one of the tribes, thus a quarrel between two Afghans who incidentally do not belong to the same ethnic group or tribe may easily be misinterpreted as ethnically or tribally motivated.

A closer look at the history of the present conflicting parties reveals that ethnicity and tribalism are an epiphenomenon in the Afghan war.<sup>21</sup> Or as Canfield puts it :*"Contrary to what might be supposed, the actual operating units of socio-political coalition...are rarely genuinely 'ethnic' in composition."*<sup>22</sup> The undeniable fact that the parties do have a recognisable ethnic stamp has mainly to do with the local background of their founders and leaders rather than with their ethnical identity. If in that local background exists a demographical majority of one ethnic group or one tribe it is most likely that the closest companions of the founders and leaders will belong to the same group. They will usually recruit from their home area and use the local language for internal communication thus creating a barrier to those unfamiliar with that language. Olivier Roy points at the example

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<sup>20</sup> Jonathan Lee, pers. comm.

<sup>21</sup> see O. Roy, op. cit.; Canfield, op. cit.

<sup>22</sup> Canfield, op. cit., p 76

of the Persian speaking Nurzay Pashtuns of Southwest Afghanistan who initially joined the Jamiyat-i Islami which is mainly Tajik because Persian is the Language spoken in that party, whereas the Pashtu speaking Nurzay went to Harakat-e Enqelab.<sup>23</sup>

## **Outlook**

Due to its inherent primordial connotations ethnic and tribal identity is connected with strong emotions and therefore easily leads to particular aggressiveness when conflicts arise. Organisers and leaders of conflicts use ethnic and tribal emotions and instrumentalise the feelings of honour and shame connected with it as a most effective tool or weapon. Although Afghanistan's national unity is on the agenda of all conflicting groups ethnic arguments are increasingly used in the political agitation. There is an obvious tendency towards ethnization of the conflict. In October and November 1996 I carried out a survey on popular concepts of locality, ethnicity and tribe among peasants, artisans, traders, and students who recently came from different parts of Afghanistan to Peshawar and intended to return soon. To my surprise all of them without an exception stressed the importance of Afghan national unity incorporating all ethnic minorities. A partition of Afghanistan, be it on ethnic or other lines, was seen as a terrifying perspective to be avoided by all means. In 1998 and 1999 I continued the survey with the same questions and noticed an even increased longing for national unity and a deep fear of ethnic disunity. The Taliban were praised on the one side for their success in pacifying the larger part of the country, but were criticised at the same time for their ethnically imbalanced attitude and for their administrative shortcomings. On the other hand, tribal identity was considered by most of the respondents not as a fissive but rather as a stabilising factor in present day Afghanistan, as an ordering social principle of rural Pashtuns which provides them with a stable social orientation in a chaotic world.

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## **End Note**

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<sup>23</sup> Roy, op. cit, p. 178