
Thomas Barfield, *Afghanistan: A Cultural and Political History*

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**Thomas Barfield, *Afghanistan: A Cultural and Political History*,
Princeton Studies in Muslim Politics, Princeton: Princeton
University Press, 2010, xi+389 p., ISBN 978-0-691-14568-6.**

M. Jamil Hanifi

[1] The destabilization and military occupation of Afghanistan by the United States over the past three decades has triggered the hasty production of a large corpus of writings about the political and socio-cultural dynamics of the country by Euro-American academics, travellers, journalists, and aid and development workers.¹ Anthropologists who have contributed to these writings have become instant 'authorities', 'experts', 'specialists', and 'old hands' about the country. Thomas Barfield is one of the most visible members of these groups. He has been referred to as 'one of America's foremost authorities on Afghanistan' and an 'old Afghanistan hand' and has been 'asked to occasionally advise policymakers' (p. x). The targeted audience of this book is the American occupation machinery of Afghanistan. 'Deploying diplomats, soldiers, and aid workers in particular should pay attention...to [t]his fascinating survey of Afghanistan' (Ronald E. Newman, U. S. ambassador to Afghanistan, 2005-2007, book jacket). The volume is replete with playful and nonchalant banter sprinkled with metaphors and musings that speak to its primary audience—rooms full of American military personnel in a hurry to go to 'war' in Afghanistan.

¹ A shorter version of this review is forthcoming in TAJA. The reviewer has published a review essay about this book in *Critique of Anthropology*, 31(3): 256-270, 2011.

[2] The book is 'presented with a story line' by a writer who is 'addicted to narrative (master or otherwise) as any opium smoker is to their pipe. It is useless to chide him for privileging his own interpretations in his own book. It will not stop or even embarrass him' (p. 15, brackets in the original). To those who might question his interpretation of Afghanistan, the author emphatically says: 'This is mine' (p. 16), get your own—a defiant postmodern 'I did it my way' anthem. In this review the author's narratives will be received provided they contain cultural and historical validity. He should not be privileged to distort, invent, or misread the cultural, historical, and social realities of the subject. Virtually every page of this book contains variations of these features.

[3] The author plaintively states that during the early stages of the occupation of Afghanistan '[t]ired clichés passed as insights, and few policymakers thought of consulting any Afghans who could not speak English' and '[t]here was, in any event, little appetite for real engagement in Afghanistan after 2002 because the Bush administration was preoccupied with Iraq' (p. x). To remedy this situation, he aspires to an outlook on Afghanistan that fuses its emic conception by a native Afghan who cannot 'speak English' with its etic interpretation by an Afghan-speaking American authority, i.e. Thomas Barfield, able to really engage Afghanistan. But few pages later and throughout the book this rhetorical gesture drifts into a blunt rejection of the natives' 'boringly self-evident' (p. 32) emic view of their culture and a boastful etic offering of a 'cogently analyzed' Afghanistan modelled after the 1815 colonial handbook *The Kingdom of Caubul* by Mountstuart Elphinstone (p. 32).

[4] Chapter 1 offers two conceptual frameworks for the narratives of the book. Barfield outlines abstract selections from Ibn Khaldun's ideas (pp. 56-63) about the relationship between the kinship based solidarity ('*asabiya*) of desert dwelling nomadic Bedouins and the differentiated and hierarchical social organization of city life and urban civilization ('*umran*) in North African. He says nothing about the latter and overlooks the wider context of Ibn Khaldun's model in the sub-Saharan trade and political economies bordering the northeastern shores of the Mediterranean Sea. Anecdotal examples from the culture of sedentary rural non-Pashtun communities are cited. The book contains nothing about the nomads of Afghanistan. Force fitting random features from the present day cultural and social realities housed in the highlands and steppes surrounding the Hindukush mountain range into a complex model about the ecology of nomadic and settled communities in the deserts of 14th century North Africa produces no new or meaningful anthropological or historical knowledge about Afghanistan.

[5] It is proposed that as inheritors of the Turko-Persian and Turko-Mongolian political traditions, rulers in Afghanistan created governing machineries 'with dual organizations' (p. 88). 'Administration was placed in the hands of 'men of the pen', literate Persian speakers familiar with government, while military commands were allocated to 'men of the sword' (p. 88), *i.e.* tribal Pashtuns. Barfield suggests that this strategy 'produced a synthesis that was the political foundation' (p. 88) of Afghanistan. No ethnographic evidence is offered in support of this important categorical claim. The author is correct about the cultural identity of the 'men of the pen' being Persian (and non-Pashtun) in Afghanistan but he offers no cultural and historical specificity about this glaring non-Pashtun feature of the Afghan state even when such reality is blindingly available in his own writings. For example, Barfield and the sources he exploits, repeatedly mention the presence of Qizilbash, Sayyid, and other non-Pashtun groups without grasping their cultural distinctness and prominence in the state apparatus of Afghanistan, especially at its historical centres (Kabul and Kandahar in particular) from the earliest days to the end of the twentieth century. As for the identity of the 'men of the sword' in Afghanistan being Pashtuns, the cultural, political, and historical realities of the country contradict Barfield's conclusion.

[6] Chapter 2 narrates political events that preceded the Anglo-Afghan War of 1839-1842. Chapter 3 summarizes political dynamics in Afghanistan during and in the aftermath of this war to the end of the 19th century. Chapter 4 offers accounts of the appearance and disappearance of various governments in Kabul during 1901-2001—from the reign of Amir Habibullah to the fall of the Taleban regime. Chapter 5 narrates the decline and eventual collapse of the central government of Afghanistan during the 1980s and 1990s and its subsequent occupation by the Euro-American military forces during the first decade of the 21st century. There is really nothing new here, including the woeful understatement of the role of the United States in the destabilization of the state structure of Afghanistan and the surrounding region.

[7] The 'anthropological approach of this book' (p. 2) is difficult to discern. Other than citing (but not applying) E. B. Tyler's classic definition of culture (p. 31), there is nothing anthropological about this book. Even Tyler's definition is betrayed as a 'sociological' definition of culture (p. 31). The book is replete with uncritical and distorted invocations of formal academic concepts such as state, tribe, nation, nation state, political elites, without explicit conceptual clarity and cultural and historical specificity. No local language sources are used. Incompetence in Farsi and Pashtu is evident in virtually every instance of attempted use of local cultural and linguistic constructs and their English language counterparts. The absence of a glossary of local terms is probably a

symptom of this deficiency. The author's claimed ethnographic 'field work' and knowledge about Afghanistan seems to have been received through the anti-Pashtun filters of two non-Pashtun urban Afghan intellectuals: 'Awsif Nawsiri' (a strained and highly unusual phonetic rendition of Asef Naseri—his 'host and friend in Kunduz Province for making [his] research in the 1970s possible' and for 'providing so many expert insights on what [he] was observing' (p. x-xi) and Neamat Nojumi, a writer and member of one of the American sponsored non-Pashtun mujahidin terrorist gangs of the 1980s and 1990s. Both these individuals were at one time or another members of the Northern Alliance, host to the American occupation of Afghanistan.

[8] Barfield's narratives about Afghanistan are assembled from specific and generalized cuts and pastes from a selection of English language (mostly political science and history) secondary sources. A mysterious and unexplained pattern of modification of borrowings from these sources by the author, many with substantial consequences for the academic integrity of the book, runs throughout the volume. Here are a few examples. In discussing ethnic diversity in Afghanistan, the author quotes Abdul Wali Khan as saying during the 1970s: 'I have been a Pakistani for thirty years, a Muslim for fourteen hundred years, and a Pashtun for five thousand years' (p. 20). But the original source uses 'Pathan' not Pashtun. The two labels contain significantly different cultural and historical content. Abdul Wali Khan was a well-educated prominent member of the Pakistani Pashtun political elite. This kind of modernist chronology and the use of the label 'Pathan' are out place in Afghanistan. The author states that during winter 1842 Akbar, son of Dost Mohammad, had a '*tribal council* reaffirm that the exiled Dost Muhammad remained the true king' (p. 125, emphasis added). The original source by M. E. Yapp states: 'Akbar then summoned (in Kabul) the chiefs (including his father-in-law, Mohammad Shah Khan; urbanite Qizilbash and non-tribal Kohestani leaders) and '*ulama* and declared that Dost Muhammad was the true king'. A 'tribal council' is out of place in the political culture of the Persianate city of Kabul. But more importantly, for Barfield, the *jirga*, Pashtun tribal sodality for conflict resolution, (and its Kabuli invention, *loya Jirga*), appear in virtually all context of political conflict and instability throughout Afghanistan from 1747 to the present. The 'jirgafication' of all things Afghan is a major component of the author's imaginings of Pashtun dominated Afghanistan. On page 158 it is stated that Amir 'Abd al-Rahman 'referred to his country as the 'God Given State of Afghanistan'. Asta Olesen's 1995 book is cited as the source for this phrase. Olesen has not used such a phrase in her published writings. The author states that 'Pashtuns famously proclaimed that they fought for three things, *zar, zan, zamin*' (p. 185). This popular

euphemistic Persian language triangle of Zs is widely used in Persia and Persianate Central and South Asia but not among Pashtuns. The book contains multiple uses of the construct 'bloody tanistry' (pp. 88, 102, 107, 135). But the source cited does not use 'bloody' as the qualifier for tanistry. The *hanafi* school of Islamic jurisprudence is mistakenly labelled 'Hanifi school' (p. 200) and indexed as 'Hanifi legal school' (p. 374).

[9] Like most Western scholars of Afghanistan Thomas Barfield's is trapped in the ideology of Afghanophilia in which, depending on the level of cultural competence of the author, every form of identity in Afghanistan is either conflated with or differentiated from 'Afghan' and Pashtunophobia, a syndrome in which Pashtuns (especially Ghalzis for Barfield) are the chronic disrupters and opponents of the state and other outsiders. Throughout the book 'Afghan' and 'Pashtun' are conflated and interchangeably used without the realization that Pashtuns seldom identify themselves as 'Afghan'. This is perhaps partially caused by the highly contested and variant meanings of the label 'Afghan' throughout the region's cultural and historical landscape and the author's inability to recognize and address this contested local cultural complexity.

[10] Pashtun political domination of Afghanistan is the master narrative of this volume; it invades all spheres of Afghanistan. Pashtuns are the 'professional rulers' and 'hereditary elite' (p. 3) of Afghanistan. Pashtunwali is invoked repeatedly as the causal agency of the behaviour of Pashtun tribes and the alleged Pashtun rule and rulers of Afghanistan from 1747 to 2001. But this is done with a confusing and contradictory understanding of this concept. To Barfield Pashtunwali is a 'code of conduct' (p. 25), a 'code of principles thoroughly rooted in the primacy of maintaining honor and reputation' (p. 59), a 'code of behavior' (p. 138), a 'code of honor, which placed a great emphasis on personal autonomy and resistance to state power' (p. 185), 'the cultural code of the Pashtuns' (p. 261), the 'obligation of hospitality' (p. 268), a 'mind-set' undergirded by 'political autonomy' (p. 286). However, ethnographically understood, Pashtunwali is a complex system of cultural values and orientations (including instincts and reflexes) that articulates the charter for Pashtun identity and social behaviour. This charter consists of three interconnected features. *Pashtu loral* (having Pashtu) through patrilineal descent; *Pashtu kawal* (doing Pashtu) through behaviour such as being generous, sharing food and space (*melmastia* which literally means hosting guests), giving refuge and protection in political, social, and physical spaces under one's control (*nanawatay*), taking revenge (*badal*, balanced reciprocity), maintaining honour (*nang*), avoiding shame (*sharm*); and *Pashtu wayal* (competence in speaking Pashtu as one's mother or first language).

[11] No king, amir, ruler, ruling elite, and ruling dynasty of Afghanistan discussed in this book exhibited all these features—especially *Pashtu kawal* and *Pahstu wayal*—simultaneously. The last of these dynasties (Musahiban, 1929-1978) are disqualified as Pashtuns by what the author himself states: 'the old Persian-speaking Muhammadzai elite was displaced by eastern, mostly Ghalzai, Pashtuns' (p. 226). Based on ethnographic and historical record there is nothing culturally, linguistically, and behaviourally Pashtun about the Sadozi and Mohammadzi dynasties of Afghanistan. Nothing qualifies these dynasties as Pashtun except their own tactfully constructed claim in which the numerical majority and cultural prestige of Pashtun tribes and tribal culture is manipulated in order to dominate Afghanistan and keep Pashtuns at a safe distance from the Persianate centre of the kingdom of Kabul. Starting with Mountstuart Elphinstone, Western Orientalism incorporated and reproduced this tactfully constructed invention in locations of centralized power in Afghanistan. Barfield's book is the latest inheritance of this cultural and historical shadow play. The 1773 official court history of Ahmad Khan Abdali, *Tarikh-e Ahmad Shahi*, by Mahmud al-Husaini (reprinted, Moscow 1974) contains no reference to Ahmad Khan as having, doing, or speaking Pashtu. The words Pashtu and Pashtun are not mentioned in this official history of the founder of the so called Durrani empire. Nor is there any textual reference in this book that connects Abdali, Durani, Sadozai, or Ahmad Khan's numerous looting forays into India and Khorasan to Pashtu, Pashtun tribes, or Pashtunwali. Ahmad Khan Abdali was born in Multan, raised in Herat, and groomed in the Persianate court of Emperor Nadir Shah Afshar (1738-1747). Ahmad Khan Abdali's sons were named: Suleiman Mirza, Timur Mirza, Chehab Mirza, Sanjar Mirza, Yazdan Bakhsh Mirza, Sekandar Mirza, Dara Mirza, Parwaez Mirza. These constructs are out of place in the teknonymic traditions of Pashtuns and Afghanistan in general.

[12] Farsi (called Dari since 1958) has been and continues to be the lingua franca of Persianate Afghanistan as a state, as a polity, as a political economy, as a market, as a territory, and as the subject of Western academic discourse. All ethnic groups in Afghanistan except *Farsiwans* (Persian speakers, including Hazaras, Tajiks) must learn Farsi in order to actively participate in the civil and political society of Afghanistan. Pashtu and Pashtunness are distinct from the label 'Afghan' and marginal to the Afghan state and the Persianate kingdoms of Afghanistan. Thus, no matter how the domination of Pashtuns in Afghanistan is imagined and articulated by Western scholars, the linguistic form and meaning of the construct *de Pashtun dwalat* (Pashtun state)—the taken for granted (explicit or implicit) core of their engagement of Afghanistan, does not occur in their writings because it is inconsistent with local cultural and

historical realities. These realities reject Barfield's master narrative—Pashtun domination of Afghanistan—and the secondary sources he exploits.

[13] The final paragraph of this book summarizes its main thrust and motives. Writing as though he was the spokesman for General David Petraeus, Barfield lectures the Pashtuns of Afghanistan to follow the example of the Pakistani Ghafar Khan (a follower of Mahatma Gandhi) and become development-oriented pacifists who would not resist military occupation and local culture cleansing projects undertaken by imperial America (p. 350). Using the template of Ghafar's movement, the author commands the Pashtuns (or is it Afghans!) of Afghanistan to give up their history, become detribalized pacifists, and submit to the American occupation that Barfield and his book serve so well.

[14] Despite these shortcomings, Thomas Barfield may be complimented for the mere attempt to impose a theoretical framework on the theoretically barren Western scholarship of Afghanistan. The deficiencies of this tome are fundamentally a reflection of the overall austerity of this scholarship. Exposing this condition can hopefully set in motion a more culturally informed and theoretically robust cycle of anthropological and historical engagement of Afghanistan. As noted by Ambassador Newman this is a book made for the American occupation forces in Afghanistan. Barfield's prefacing of his own book with the emphatic 'this is mine' blast symbolically echoes the American imperial insistence on plodding through Afghanistan with bombs, bayonets, and distorted understandings of the cultural and political content of the 'Human Terrain' of Afghanistan reproduced in this popular handbook for empire.