

SOME ASPECTS OF FAMILY LIFE IN AN AFGHAN VILLAGE

BY

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This article is the result of an investigation carried out in July 1976 in Afghanistan. The article attempts to give a description of the woman's role in the household with special reference to the work distribution among the women and between the women and the men. Further, it includes a description of the way the women manage pregnancy, delivery and upbringing of their children. Finally, the article includes a sample of local poetry, collected from the women of the village.¹

The place selected for study was the village of Sangona in Panjšir, situated on the Panjšir river in the municipality of Rokha. At this place the river runs through a fertile valley, surrounded by high, bare mountains. The link between the village and the outside world is a gravel road joining the asphalt highway between Kabul and Mazar-i-Sharif at a point north of Charikar. Badakhshan and Nuristan are within a few days' walk. The people in this area are Tadjiks and speak Dari.

The village consists of about 100 households. The main occupation is farming of wheat and maize and growing of mulberry trees. These commodities constitute the basic nourishment supplemented by dairy products from cows and sheep. The way of living is based mainly on consumption of local products, but a certain amount of trade with the outside world takes place. Dried fruit and cheese are the main export commodities. Besides, labour

¹ Information was collected through interviewing. Although I had prepared questionnaires at hand, interviewing actually had to take place as conversations (without interpreter).

is "exported" to Kabul. In these ways the means to import a few necessities are obtained.

The family, whose guests my husband and I were, is part of an extended family. The household consists of an elder brother and his wife, a younger brother who mostly works in Kabul, his wife, and two small children, and the elder brother's eldest son and his wife. The two brothers own the property jointly, whereas the son has no share thereof. He also works in Kabul, when work is available, but otherwise the family supports him and his wife. The elder brother is clearly the head of the household and his wife the superior among the women.

The house they live in is arranged in such a way that each couple has one separate sleeping room. The rest of the house is used in common. There are two living rooms, a bigger one for the men and their guests and a smaller one for the women, the children and their guests. The smaller one is used by the entire household as eating- and living room when they are alone. It is necessary to have two rooms, because the women are not allowed to be present when strangers, i.e. men from outside the village, are visiting the men. During the daily work, e.g. when collecting the mulberries, the women can move freely around the village without being veiled, because the male villagers are not considered strangers.

The household duties are distributed among the members of the household in such a way that the eldest wife is in charge of the distribution of tasks among the others, and she does not do much hard work herself. The second wife does all kinds of jobs, but if the eldest wife has to leave the house, the younger one will be entrusted with the keys and becomes responsible for the house-keeping. The third wife has only been married for a few months and therefore she does only a few easy jobs. This special treatment lasts for the first year of marriage; it is based on the assumption that the young wife (15 years old) will not like her husband, if she is made to work hard right from the beginning.

There is a sharp distinction between men's and women's work, and it is considered humiliating for a man to do women's work. Only a few jobs are shared between the two sexes. The women do all house work, prepare the food and look after the children.

Besides they work hard for two or three months in the summer gathering mulberries, *tūt*, which they spread on the flat roofs to dry. During the summer the women also take care of the livestock in the pasture up in the mountains. The animals of all the families in the village are in the pasture for the entire summer, and most of the households send one of their women up there. These women live together looking after the animals, milking them and producing butter and cheese from the milk. In preference, the household sends one of the elder wives; this is to avoid separating the young wives from their men—it is assumed they miss them. Throughout the time in the pasture the women will have a man from the village with them for protection. The men from the various households supersede each other, and each man stays in the pasture for a few days; more or less according to how many cattle he has. Sometimes, however, the families are not able to send a woman to the pasture to look after their animals. In that case an agreement is made with the other women to look after the cattle, but then the cattle-owner will only receive a fixed amount of dairy products from each animal—from a cow 16 lb. of butter and from a goat or a sheep 2 lb. What the cattle produce in excess of this will serve as payment to those who do the work.

In the month of July the men harvest the wheat. When the crops have been gathered in, they start preparing the soil for the next crop, the maize which is sowed immediately after this. The vineyards need constant care during the summer, and men and women help each other to gather the various kinds of fruit. When summer is over, the women clean the whole house; one of the men's jobs in this season is to grind the mulberries and press the powder into lumps.

In the winter the women do some sewing, e.g. embroidery work to sell or clothes for the family. In the three winter months the men do no real work: they eat, sleep and go to the mosque; this is, in part, due to the fact that the fields are covered with snow. In the spring the women clean the house again: all the walls are painted, everything is washed, pillows and cushions are emptied of their cotton stuffing, which is taken out and replaced. The greater part of the year when the cattle are in the village,

the men collect food for them, whereas the women do the feeding and milking.

Most of my information about pregnancy, childbirth and the care of the children I got from the 70-year old sister Bebi-zahara of our host. Several other women were present and nodded their approval of her answers.

In the district here investigated, the failing of menstruation is considered the certain sign of pregnancy. As soon as the woman realizes that she is pregnant, she has to eat as much as possible. She eats different things depending on whether she expects a boy or a girl. Her knowledge of the sex of the child is based on the position of its head. If the head is on her right side, it will be a boy, and in that case she must eat lots of meat and fish. If the head is on her left, the child will be a girl, and she must eat a lot of vegetables, green pepper being especially wholesome.²

During her pregnancy the woman is only allowed to do light work, she should not carry heavy things and has to take a nap during the day. Sexual intercourse stops 40 days before the birth, but some women continue their sexual activities, if their husband insists. There is no doctor, nurse or midwife, *dāi*, in the village, so the woman examines her abdomen herself together with her friends. When the head is pointing downwards, they prepare for the birth.

During the birth the pregnant woman's mother assists her. If her mother is dead, her mother-in-law will take care of her. At the time of delivery the woman is squatting, the mother sitting behind her in the same position and pressing downwards on her abdomen.³ They do not know of any drug to ease the pain, and

² Henri Massé, *Croyances et Coutumes Persanes*, tome 1, Paris 1938, p. 33, tells that if the stomach grows biggest in the right side, it will be a boy, if the left is biggest, it will be a girl. The same belief (See Michèle Nicholas, *Traditions Populaires Turques, concernant les Naissances*, Paris 1972, p. 71) is found among Turks, where also the Islamic tradition exists that the right side is lucky and favourable, and for that reason male, the left side unlucky and unfavourable and therefore female. — For the women in Kabul it is not the stomach which is significant, but the feet. The child will be a boy, if the right foot swells, a girl, if the left foot swells.

³ In Ria Hackin et Ahmad Ali Kohzad, *Légendes et Coutumes Afghans*, Paris 1953, p. 174, it is said that most of the female members of the family attend the

in the event of serious complications the mother and the child will die. According to their estimates two women in the village die in childbirth each year. When the child has been delivered they cut the umbilical cord, press out the blood, and bind the cord with a piece of cotton at approximately one handsbreadth from the child's stomach. Afterwards they wash the child in warm water and wrap it tightly in shawls. The placenta is buried in the ground because it is *šarma*: something to be ashamed of.⁴ Even if the woman has been torn during delivery, they do nothing, but let the wound grow together as best it can. After the birth the woman stays in bed for two or three days.

In order to let the village know that the delivery was successful the father fires shots; provided the baby is a boy. If he fires one shot it is a sign that the family will slaughter one goat to celebrate the birth; if he fires two shots, they will slaughter two goats. The mullah will sing from the mosque if it is a boy; if it is a girl nothing official will happen. Six days after the birth the child is named.⁵

Forty days after the birth sexual relations with the husband are resumed.

If a woman aborts during the first months of her pregnancy, only the closest relatives will hear about it. They hurry to bury the foetus in the ground. After aborting the woman must stay in bed for two or three days and is only allowed to eat hot food. If a child is born crippled in one way or another, they say that it will always die in the course of the first 5-10 days.⁶

birth; the informant of R. Hackin is from the Logar Valley. From the same source she has got the information that the midwife uses the pressure on the stomach to provoke a delivery, if it is belated. She states that the woman is lying on mattresses or a *čārpāy* (bed). In Kabul the woman lies on her back during the delivery. Michele Nicolas, *op. cit.*, p. 88 tells that some of the Turkish tribes used a special chair, but now it is not in use.

⁴ I have the information of another custom concerning the placenta from Jāghōri in Hazārajāt. Here the placenta is thrown into running water, a stream or river. Cf. Michele Nicolas, *op. cit.*, p. 92-93; some Turkish people bury the placenta in the ground, but a few throw it into running water, in the belief that the mother then will get abundant milk.

⁵ Dupree, *Afghanistan*, Princeton Univ. Press 1973, p. 192, says that the child usually gets its name the third day.

⁶ Dupree, *op. cit.*, p. 192, says that girl babies reportedly have died from neglect.

Until her milk starts, the woman feeds the child on butter, perhaps mixed with sugar.⁷ Once breast-feeding has begun the mother will simply feed the child whenever it starts to cry. In the first 40 days after the birth the mother must avoid certain kinds of food, e.g. apples, apricots, mutton, very cold things and sour things. After these 40 days she may eat anything. Breast-feeding lasts 24–30 months, depending on whether the mother is expecting another baby. If the milk stops they use sheep or goats' milk diluted with water, or they may even let another woman breastfeed the child, if they can find one who is willing. Another solution is to use milk powder and dummies, only these things are seldom available. In the first two years the child will live exclusively on breast milk, with perhaps occasionally a small supplement of butter and sugar; later on it will eat all kinds of food.

As soon as all the practical work in connection with the delivery is over, the baby is swaddled like a mummy, in a tight shawl, leaving only its bottom free, so as to allow the baby to relieve itself without hindrance, and the hands of the baby are tied to its sides at the same time. Only three times a day, at 6 a.m., noon, and 8 p.m., is the baby unwrapped, each time, however, only for a few minutes.⁸ The baby must stay wrapped up in the shawl for 40 days, because otherwise, they believe, it will not sleep. On seeing the movements of its own hands, the baby will get frightened and start crying, which again will prevent its mother from working without hindrance. They do not use nappies, instead they change the cotton mattress underneath the child. In the first 40 days⁹ they do not wash the child, because, if they did, the child might become ill. They do not cut the child's nails or hair either in the first year. Once this has been done they take along the nails and the hair to the mullah, so that he can blow upon them; finally they bury them under a rosetree, *dar axt-i-*

This could obviously also be the case concerning the cripples, but no information about this possibility was offered.

⁷ Cf. Henri Massé, *op. cit.*, p. 40: "beurre avec des semences de pélalet" or "farine, beurre et sucre".

⁸ Cf. Dupree, *op. cit.*, p. 193, and Henri Massé, *op. cit.*, p. 41. It is a common custom also in Kabul to swaddle the child.

⁹ 40 days is a recurrent space of time, known also elsewhere in the Orient.

gul.¹⁰ The reason for this special ceremony is *čāq meša*: "it (the child) will be healthy".

For toys the children use quite primitive small rag dolls, without arms and legs, only with a head and a body and a few clothes. The dolls are called *gūdi*. The grown-up women will sometimes play with the children and fondle them, but quite often the men will also occupy themselves with the children. They often apply make-up (*sorma*) to the babies' eyes to make them beautiful and *faidā dāra*:¹⁰ "it is useful".

In connection with the inquiry about children's care I asked the women if they use to sing lullabies for the babies. The above-mentioned Bebi-Zahara sang two samples of lullabies for me, and this again incited other women to start singing. Hereby the opportunity arose to collect some samples of local poetry. On my request they repeated the poems slowly, so that I could take them down in phonetic transcription.

Three of the women were the leading singers, and while they alternately performed, the rest of us were listening. These three women are all married to men from the village, they were born there themselves and their age is between 30 and 40 years. The poems they sang were *dobayts*¹¹ which they said originated in their village. With the exception of the lullabies (no. 1 and no. 2) and the wedding-song (no. 13) none of the songs have any specific *Sitz im Leben*.

Poems from the village of Sangona.

1. *lalū kona baččē ma*
 ollololui baččē ma
 ollololui baččē ma
 xaw mēkona haččē ma

My child falls a sleep
 oh my child

my child is sleeping.

¹⁰ np.: *fā'ede dārad*. The "sorma" is protecting the eyes against certain inflammations.

¹¹ Some of the *dobayts* are in a slightly different form to be found in *Namunai fo'klori xalkholi Afğontiston, Rubotiyot va surudho*; Dušanbe 1966.

2. ay bačča j̄ān-e-man-ī
 nur-e čašmān-e-man-ī
 gōš kun arf-e-ma-rā
 tu qadldān-e-man-ī.

Oh child you are my soul
 you are the light of my eyes
 listen to my song
 you know the value of me.

3. sabzīna ma-rā ba xod yād begi
 sawyād ma-rā az sar-e dewāl begi
 imšaw ke ma-rā j̄āy-e dega mēfrušan
 tā āmadan-am xod-rā tū bedār begi.

Remember me, Sabzina, in your heart
 take my souvenir from the top of the wall
 this night when they are selling me elsewhere
 keep awake until my coming.

4. rafiq j̄ān az yamat gašte-am sel
 rawān kun qāyaz-e andoxte-am del
 do ašk-e-man rawān as musle bārān
 zi āb-e-dide-am tar mēšawa gel.

Darling friend, from sorrow over you I have got
 consumption
 send a letter, my heart I have lost
 two tears of mine are running like rain
 from my tears the earth grows wet.

5. dam-inja šista-am delgīr-e zārom
 ahwāl az hāl-e mādarjān nadārom
 nadārom farsate peš-at beāyom
 badast-e kārwan peiyām dārom.

Here I am sitting crying my heart out
 knowledge about my mother's health I have not got

I have not time to come to you
with a caravan I have received a message.

6. bačča goft:
ba kelke anguštari dāri ba man čī
ba del sat muštari dāri ba man čī
ba rūy-e sinat do anār-e širīn
barāye digarān dāri ba man čī.
doxtar goft:
ba kelke anguštari dārom awal tō
ba del sat muštari dārom awal tō
ba rūy-e sinom do anār-e širīn
barāye digarān dārom awal tō.

The boy said:
For your little finger you have a ring, for me what?
for your heart you have a hundred buyers, for me what?
on your breast you have two sweet pomegranates
for others, – for me what?

The girl said:
For my little finger I have a ring, but first you
for my heart I have a hundred buyers, but first you
on my breast I have two sweet pomegranates
for others, – but first you.

7. siāy-e surma ba čašmān-e xod kun
nazar bāyār-e sargardān-e xod kun
agar az man bedidi bebafāi
bekaš xanjar sarom qorbān-e xod kun.

Put the black paint around your eyes
look at your desperate friend
if you see infidelity in me
draw your knife and make my head your sacrifice.

8. širīn yār jān bahār šod-as kai miāi
waxt-e gul-e lālāzār šod-as kai miāi

wāda ma o tō dam-e bahār būd o gozašt
i barf-e safēd siā šod-as kai miāi.

My sweet darling, the spring has come, when are
you coming?
The time of the tulips has come, when are you coming?
The meeting between you and me a short time of the
spring was and is gone
the white snow has gone black, when are you coming?

9. čašmān dāri siātar az bāl-e magas
usne dāri delruwāy-e hamakas

-- --

Yoy have eyes blacker than a fly's wing
you have a beauty which ravishes every man's heart

-- --

10. qorbān-e amū rōz-e ke dar yak bāy budēm
mānande gul-e gulāb dar yak šāx budēm
šāxak bešikast čī sar nogunsār šodēm
az hāy-e kodām banda gereftār šodēm.

(May I be) sacrificed for that day when we were in a
garden
like the rosewaterrose we sat on a bough
the little bough broke, how we fell head downwards!
because of whose anger did we fall into troubles?

11. šīrīn yār jān da xāne šīstan tākai
tō pīr šeda-i da dāna šīstan tākai
waxt-e xōš-e aiōm jawānī begozašt
bebuda ba entezār šestan tākai.

Sweet darling, sitting in the house, how long?
You have grown old sitting in the window, how long?
The happy days of youth have gone by
how long it has been to sit waiting.

12. rōz-e ke sarom dard kona nāla konom
 rox-rā taraf-e kodām begona konom
 begona agar jawāb-e sardom bedeha
 -- -- --

The day my head is in pain I cry
 to which stranger shall I turn my face
 if the stranger gives me a cold answer
 -- -- --

13. ba me tu mērawī bāz sabz-e gandom
 do čašmān-e siāy nūrat begardom
 do čašmān-e siāy nūrat či bāša
 ma qorbān-e gul-e rūyat begardom.

To me you come after the wheat has grown green
 I walk around the black brilliance of your two eyes
 the black brilliance of your two eyes, it is not enough,
 I walk around (you) a victim for your flowery face.

Notes to the poems.

1. lalū, np. lālā or lāy-lāy (Junker and Alavi not in Steingass)
 -ma: pers. pron. np. -man. — baččē: bačče-ye. xaw:
 np. xāb.
 mēkona: np. mikonad.
2. jān-e-man-ī: ezafe is usually pronounced as *∂*. arf: np. harf.
 qadldān: np. qarddān.
3. sabzīna: name? or darkhaired?
 begī: np. begīr.
 dewāl: np. diwār.
 dega: np. digar.
 mēfrušan: np. mīfrušand.
4. qāyaz: np. kāyaz.
 zi: az.

5. dam-inja:inja.
šistan: to sit, also in Steing.
-om: np. -am. pres. 1. sing.
7. bebafai: np. bewafa'i: infidelity.
8. wada: np. wa'deh: rendez-vous. Cf. Abd-ul-Ghafur Farhadi:
Le persan parlé en Afghanistan. Paris 1555.
App. Les quatrains populaires de la région de Kabol.
no. 28.
9. usne: beauty (cf. ḥosn) cf. Farhadi. Op. cit. no. 21.
10. amū: ham-ān.
az hāye: hāy = anger?
11. da dāna: in the window.
12. begona: np. bigāna.
13. This is a wedding song. The wedded pair is sitting on a mattress, 20 people are singing, 2 are playing the drums, and one person a stringed instrument, one person is dancing. Everybody else is watching. After this the bride will put the veil over her face. The greatest man in the village go to her, place maybe a 100 afghanis by her and lift the veil to look, after him all will come, put some money and lift the veil, while the man is singing this song to the bride.

THE QUALITY OF NASAL CLUSTERS IN PRASUN

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Georg Morgenstierne, NTS 15 (1949) p. 210 § 50, has stated correctly that in Prasun a nasal is assimilated not only to a following unvoiced plosive, but also to a following voiced plosive or *z*. Thus we get such forms as *wūtu* 'road', *wuču* 'five', *wōzu* 'holly-oak'.

The vowels of Prasun have been declared by Morgenstierne to present many a baffling problem, but as with our experience with other languages, I feel that with careful analysis the uncertainties are by no means as great as they may at first seem. In the case of the present set of phenomena under discussion I believe that we may bring a further point of clarification to the observed vocalisms of Prasun. If one studies the words descending from the above-mentioned features attentively, one notices a rather large proportion of front vocalisms. These vocalisms become readily justified if one supposes that in a great many cases the vowel was fronted by the neighboring nasal cluster, which subsequently has been resolved according to the above rule.

Specifically it seems that this fronting occurs whenever the vowel does not follow a labial element, i.e. a segment which we may characterize as [+round]. In the above examples it will be noted that a labial element clearly precedes the vocalism, and in almost all such cases we have a very clear idea of the ancestry of this labial element.

Examples where fronting has occurred are as follows: *lätəm* 'tooth', *žlūtu* 'leopard', *etərə* 'entrails', *wyöidə* 'to laugh' (**khand-*), *ügl* 'finger', *iškyöp/b* 'bridge', *üštyobu* 'tree'.

Since these vowels appear to have been fronted in this specific