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War and Boundaries in Afghanistan:
Significance and Relativity of Local and Social Boundaries[1]

This paper endeavours to describe and analyse notions and practices of locality, of local boundaries and of social boundaries before and during the recent war in Afghanistan. Has the war led to decisive changes in these notions and practices? Since the present turmoil in Afghanistan is conceived of by a large group of the combatants as a *jihad,* the question also arises whether notions of the Islamic frontier, the line between *dar ul- Islam* and *dar ul-harb,* also become relevant. Which local and social limitic structures have resisted the war? Is the war fought along those boundaries? Or have there been structural changes?

In fact the war has brought about new "real" (i.e. physically observable) boundaries, as well as eliminating old ones. Outside the country and even outside the Asian continent, Afghan boundaries have been expanded and narrowed again. In the refugee camps of Pakistan or Iran, and in European, American and Australian suburbs people became more conscious of local and social identities and differences were sharpened, levelled or re-defined, depending on the context. At the same time a new and strong all-Afghan identity developed which hardly existed one or two decades ago.

The data I have collected so far point clearly to the interactive and cognitive aspects of locality and of both spatial and social borders or boundaries. Social boundaries, such as ethnic and tribal structures, are by no means congruent with local ones; instead there is a complex and changing interrelation between the two.

The Soviet-Afghan war and the subsequent intra-Afghan conflict have caused a major displacement of populations over vast areas and long distances. Afghans were forced into a high degree of spatial mobility. About five million Afghans went on the move and had to learn from experience how to see their home area from a distance. At the same time, they had to produce new localities at great distances from their homes.[2] New social and local relationships had to be established, old ones were reflected on and perhaps revised.

In recent years I have been surprised at how easily and quickly my interview partners were able to answer geographical questions and to talk about locality and localization. They were conscious of spatial attributes and borders and could actively deal with such categories. My field notes from before the war reveal much more vagueness when talking about territoriality, boundaries and space.[3]

Such terms as *manteqah* (area), *jay* or *dzay,* (place) *mamlakat* (territory of a state), *watan* (home area, *Heimat*), *hadud* (boundary, limits, end, transition), or *sarhad* (frontier), are now part of daily talk and are used in a sophisticated manner. Most informants were easily able to define these terms.

Let us begin with the term *manteqah*: It has a range of meanings. Its fuzziness and flexibility make it comparable to ”*area*” or ”*place*”. It is a relative term and depends on the context. It may be used for a quarter of a village or for the whole of Afghanistan. The same term is also used in a more absolute sense to denote an area above the village level but below the level of an administrative district. In this sense *manteqah* is considered as naturally given, with unchangeable physical and metaphysical features which remain intact even when the *manteqah* is depopulated. If not depopulated, manÔeqah is a primary social space, the preferred framework for communication and economic transactions. Often *manteqah* is perceived as congruent with *watan* (home, see below) by the inhabitants. A *manteqah* is unchangeable in quality. This is strongest at the centre of the *manteqah*, although the size of a *manteqah* is considered to be fixed and not negotiable. One may conquer but not divide a *manteqah*.[4]

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[2] See Pierre Centlivres & Micheline Centlivres-Demont: ”State, National Awareness and levels of identity in Afghanistan from Monarchy to Islamic State.” *Central Asian Survey* 19, 2000: 419-428.

[3] Bernt Glatzer: ”Pastoral Territoriality in West Afghanistan: An Organization of Flexibility”. In: Michael J. Casimir & Aparna Rao (eds): *Mobility and Territoriality: Social and Spatial Boundaries among Fishers, Pastoralists and Peripatetics*. New York, Oxford: Berg, 1992: 293-306.

[4] Fréderic Roussel, head of the international aid organization ACTED, found this concept of *manteqah* important enough to draw a map of the *manteqah*-s of Eastern Afghanistan in order to find a more even and equitable local principle for the distribution of international aid in Afghanistan (Roussel, Frédéric & Marie-

Another locality related term is the Pashtu *dzay* or Persian *jay* which can best be translated by English "*place*". It is a distinct geographical point or mark by which any local or even social unit can be located. Space or territory is not an essential quality of *dzay/jay*; hence, e.g., *jay-namaz* (lit: "place of prayer") is a prayer carpet, and *dzay* can also be a well (*tsa*) that marks the centre of a pasture area with undefined boundaries.[5] A nomad informant belonging to the western Pashtun tribe of Atsakzay told me that the *dzay* of the Atsakzay is a shrine (*ziyarat*) in Spin Boldak, a town between Kandahar and Quetta, 600 km south of the place of the interview. The man had never been there, nor did he know any member of his tribe who had ever visited Spin Boldak, but he had a notion that this was the place his tribal ancestor hailed from. This is the spiritual focus of all Atsakzay, an imaginary fixed point they think and talk about when tribal pride and unity is at stake. Like most other Durrani-Pashtun tribes, the Atsakzay live scattered all over western and northern Afghanistan, and their sense of tribal unity centres on two focal points: the apical ancestor Atsak (like Barak among the Barakzay or Ishaq among the Ishaqzay), and the place of their real or imaginary origin. The cohesive force of the two focuses is independent of physical presence. One is reminded of the Holy Kaaba as a localized spiritual centre of a religious and social community which is basically not conceived of as a localized or spatial entity.

The Pashtu and Arabic term *watan,* inadequately translated as "home area" or "home land" has an emotional quality close to the German *Heimat,* a geographical and social area where I feel at home, where I belong, where my family and my relatives live, where I can rely on the people, where I feel security and social warmth. The term also has the connotation of something treasured and vulnerable, something which has to be defended like the female members of a man's family. This may be the reason why in pre-war times Afghan nationalist politicians and ideologues tried to extend *watan* to the whole of Afghanistan, a notion that did not become popular at the time; *watan* is usually a smaller local region where one person knows the others face to face, and where one has an intimate connection to the social and physical environment. Only in diaspora, when Afghans feel far away from home can Afghanistan melt into one *watan*, and any fellow Afghan becomes a *watandar*, one who shares the same *watan*. As a rule, the *watan* expands physically with the distance between a person and his *watan*.

Pierre Caley: *Les 'manteqas': Le puzzle souterrain de l'Afghanistan.* Ms. of an unpubl. article. no date. 18pp, ca. 1994).
[5] See Glatzer op. cit.

Today, when millions of Afghans have been forced to experience seeing their country from far away, the equation "Afghanistan = *watan"* is gaining popularity. The internationalist phraseology of the communist regimes and the pan-Islamic ideology of the Taliban are unable to prevent this development.

The terms of locality discussed so far do not include the notion of boundaries as defining lines. The same is true for the term *mamlakat* or "territory of the state". Although Britain, Russia and Persia drew boundary lines around Afghanistan during the 1890s, until the 1970s the popular notion of a state was as a field of political gravity centring on the state capital (*paytakht*), the seat of civil and military power. The centre was surrounded by areas of decreasing administrative intensity where state power was balanced by local political autonomy. The peripheries were called *yaghistan* "land of the wild", or *sarhad* "frontier", where only the strongest could survive - very close to popular ideas of the American western frontier in the 19th century. Here again the recent war has caused drastic change, with about five or six million Afghans crossing the international boundaries of their country and experiencing the practical reality of 20th century state boundaries.

The case of the boundary between Afghanistan and Pakistan, the "Durand-Line",[6] is an interesting example of recent changes: Until recently the border was only one drawn on maps, while on the ground there are neither fences nor border posts, apart from at Torkham and Chaman/Spin Boldak, where asphalted roads cross the border. There are innumerable trails and motorable dirt roads along which travellers used to pass from one country to the other without stopping and without knowing which country they were in. The British colonial administration established, or rather tolerated, autonomous tribal areas along the border which have survived till the present day. Pakistan maintains checkposts only far inside its territory, along the border between the tribal and the settled areas. Until 1978 it was Afghanistan's official policy not to recognize the Durand Line but to claim that Pakistani areas inhabited by Pashtuns ought to be either united with Afghanistan or granted independent status as "Pashtunistan". This Pashtunistan Policy received popular support from Pashtuns in Afghanistan. However, from 1990 to 1993, when working with an aid agency for rehabilitation projects inside Afghanistan, I noticed a remarkable change. Together with Afghan colleagues I frequently had to cross the border by dirt roads. Every time we travelled East-west, in the middle of a hilly plain void of any noticeable land marks my Afghan

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[6] Named after Algernon Durand, the British officer who headed the British Afghan Boundary commission during the 1890-s (A. Durand: *The Making of a Frontier*. London: John Murray, 1899).

colleagues would suddenly break out in joy, start praying, laughing and singing, telling me they were now in Afghanistan. For a traveller like me the only visible sign of the international boundary was the way approaching truck drivers would pass by. They all insisted in changing from driving on the left to driving on the right exactly at the Durand Line (Pakistan and India inherited left-hand driving from the British *Raj*). The traditional notion of *mamlakat* as a centre-defined area, smoothly fading out at its peripheries with vast areas of transition to the neighbouring *mamlakat* was giving way to the idea of a clearly defined national territory. The fact that the centre of the old *mamlakat* had ceased to function or was no longer recognized by the majority of Afghans may suggest some possible explanations. Afghans saw the centre of their *mamlakat* occupied by an alien force and had stood-up to defend the rest of it. The ends (*hadud*) of Afghanistan were no longer a distant horizon but became reified as a line which demarcates what is ours and what is alien, like the boundary of an agricultural field which one owns only as long as one is ready to defend it.

The boundary also became a tactical resource in warfare, a line beyond which one's enemies cannot follow, and the crossing of which offers security for oneself and one's families while offering the chance to find supplies for continuing warfare. In pre-war times contenders for local political power (*khan*) were successful if they managed to allocate scarce resources garnered from outside their immediate political realm, i.e. from the political centre of the *mamlakat.* During the Afghan-Soviet war, when the former centre became isolated from the rest of the country, the new political elite, the guerrilla commanders and party functionaries had to seek resources from elsewhere - from across the border in Pakistan and Iran. The border served as a filter for power. Only those who had the skills of crossing the border and gaining access to the Pakistani or Iranian suppliers of weapons, ammunitions and food and to international agencies, usually via Afghan brokers, could acquire a position in "liberated Afghanistan", as the non-communist territories of Afghanistan were called.

At the same time, the tribes living along the Durand Line succeeded in expanding unofficial international trade. To this day Pakistan is flooded with industrial goods of East Asian origin, arriving in Afghanistan via Pakistan and smuggled back to that country. As Barth observed long ago, this boundary is not the end of anything but stands as a resource right in the centre of local political and economic systems;[7] or as an Afridi from the Khyber Pass told me in

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[7]   Fredrik Barth: "Introduction" In: F. Barth: In: F. Barth (Hg.) *Ethnic Groups and Boundaries: The Social Organization of Cultural Difference*. Bergen etc. 1969: 9-38.

1998: "What can Pakistan offer us? What can Afghanistan offer us? It is the border between the two that we are living off."

Tribal Boundaries

Like any complex society, the Afghans divide and order themselves along a multitude of different social categories that may contradict one other and often apply simultaneously depending on the circumstances. An important structuring principle is the tribal system that covers about two thirds of the population. Although the tribal principle is clear and unambiguous, it by no means forms "real" social groups. Instead it is one of the recruiting principles of corporate and of conflicting groups, though never the only one. It draws ordering lines over a large part of the society and defines boundaries within ethnic units. To understand this, some comments on the Pashtun tribal system may be useful.

The "largest tribal society"

Pashtuns are said to have developed the world's largest tribal society[8], and in local thinking the tribal system even encompasses all humanity. As Barakhan, one of my informants, an Atsakzay nomad of Badghis, north-west Afghanistan, puts it:

> "When God created the animals and humans he first created one ant and his spouse, then one goat and his nanny-goat, one ram and his ewe … 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 (*nikahgan*) of the various tribes (*qawm*) and subtribes (*qawm* and *khel*) of ants …, as Adam's sons became the *nikahgan* of the peoples of the world (*qawm*), and their sons the *nikahgan* of the tribes (*qawm*) within these peoples. One of Adam's sons or grandsons was IbrahÍm, the *nikah* of all nomads."[9]

An equation of animal and human society is what one might expect from a pastoral nomad, but the main structural elements in this statement is shared by pastoral, agricultural and other Pashtuns: the notion that the divine tribal order both 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 all-knowing and wise." (XLIX, 13)[10]

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[8]   To my knowledge this often repeated stereotype was first formulated by J. Spain in his *The Pathan Borderland.* The Hague: Mouton, 1963, p. 17.
[9]   From an interview in 1970.
[10]   *The Koran.* Translated with notes by N. J. Dawood. London: Penguin Books, 1995, p. 516.

Afghan genealogists do not refer directly to this Koranic verse; instead, we see here a common structural principle of West-Asian societies which seems so obvious that local genealogists hardly feel obliged to seek Koranic sanction. An evening in a Pashtun *hujrah* ("guesthouse") or sitting with guests in a nomad tent makes it clear from the beginning that tribal distinctions are more a means of communication ("*that you might get to know one another*") than of social separation.

Local folklore has it that all Pashtuns are descendants, mainly patrilineally, of one founding father, even if there is no agreement about the apical ancestor's name. Some call him Qays 'Abd ur-Rashid, others say his name was Daru Nikah, or Baba Khaled (Khalid ibn al-Walid - the legendary general of the army of Prophet Muhammad). The name of the common ancestor is less important than the Pashtuns' belief that they belong to a single 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 subtribes, clans and subclans 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. The common Pashtun ancestor is said to have had four sons: Sarrban, Bi'tan (alias Ba'tni or Sheykh Bey't), Ghurghusht and Karran, alias Karrani, the last of whom was adopted. Sarrban had two sons: Sharkhbun and Kharshbun, alias Sharkhbun; Bi'tan three sons, Ismail, Ashbun, alias Warrshbun and 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 'Abd ur-Rashid or his aliases sprang the thousands of tribes, subtribes and local lineages of the Pashtuns.[11]

There have been many attempts to codify the Pashtun tribal system, the most famous being the *Makhzan-e Afghani* compiled in India by Ni'mat Ullah Harawi in the early 17th century. This genealogy lists thousands of tribes, relating anecdotes and legends about the tribes' origins and how they joined or split up.[12] The tribal charter is based on patrilineality, but in some conspicuous cases this principle is set aside for special cases. In principle, one has to be born into a tribe, but Afghan pragmatism allows exceptions. A consensus among the members of one tribe living in a particular area, may allow outsiders to take residence in that area as "neighbours" (*hamsayah*). If such outsiders and their offspring honour the tribal code

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[11] Khwajah Ni'mat Ullah b. Khwajah Habib Ullah al-Harawa: *Tarikh-e Khan Jahani wa makhzan-e Afghani* . Ed. by S. M. Imam Uddin (Dacca: Asiatic Society of Pakistan, Publ. No. 4, 2 vols) 1960-1992.

[12] Among literate Pashtuns Niþmat Ullah's grand national genealogy (see note 9), written in the 17th century AD, is considered 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, easier to use genealogy is the *Hayat-i Afghan* by Hayat Khan, translated into English by H. Priestley, Lahore, 1874 (reprinted by Sang-e-Meel Publ., Lahore 1981).

of behaviour and succeed in intermarrying with the tribe, they may be accepted as members after a generation or two.

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

Most tribes in Afghanistan are neither corporate nor political entities, yet the tribal system has more often than not served as a road-map for political alliances. Political entrepreneurs found kinship and tribal links most convenient as a basis for alliances or for 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 an instrument of segmentary division. Once a charismatic leader wields the instrument of segmentary alliance loses influence or dies, the divisive character of the segmentary tribal system impedes any smooth transition of power. Tribal systems do not usually develop institutionalized political power which could tolerate fluctuations caused by the different abilities of individual rulers. Every political pretender has to build-up and maintain his personal and individual clientele and his own political network .

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 laid down by nature or birth but is achieved individually. It is precarious and open to change and loss at any time.

Whereas the tribal order discourages social hierarchy, it defines social nearness and distance. Pashtuns use their tribal order to demarcate lines of conflict and solidarity. If I see two men fighting I am expected 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 north-west Pakistan we find a socio-political division into two opposing sections: Tôr Gund ("white faction") and SpÍn Gund ("black faction"). The following example is from Khost in east Afghanistan. The Saberi, Dzadran (Jadran), Tsamkani , Tani, Mandozay etc., are named Spin Gund in opposition to 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*. For example, the recent violent land dispute between members of the

TsamkanÍ and the Mangal is between the two opposing *gund,* and the sympathies of the Saberi, who are not part of the conflict, lie with their fellow *gund* members, the Tsamkani.

Tribes are localized to varying degrees. The Ghilzay, for example, are scattered all over Afghanistan; thus there is no proper Ghilzay land. There are, however, areas where Ghilzay and certain of their subtribes predominate. Other tribes, such as the Afridi, have a clearly defined home land. The same is true for most of the eastern tribes along the Afghan-Pakistani border. Tribal land is divided 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 his family's future.[13]

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 the tribal ideal of equality, every free and experienced male person of the tribe has the right to attend, to speak and to decide. Only *jirga*-s at 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 to attract international aid, they nominated two representatives from each subtribe to participate.[14] A *jirga* traditionally has neither leaders nor chairmen. The participants prefer to sit in circles in order to avoid any dominant position. Decisions are reached only through consensus, and discussions therefore continue until everyone has been 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.

In south-eastern Afghanistan, tribal and/or local communities maintain militias known as *arbaki* or *lashkar*. A *jirga* can also summon ad hoc militias, even if its constituency is tribally mixed. Such militias are made up of young unmarried men not yet experienced enough to participate in *jirga*-s or *shora*-s, but strong and loyal enough to enforce the decisions. In the classic sanction for not adhering to a *jirga*'s or *shora*'s decision, the house of the offender is burned down by the *arbaki,* and the worst sanction is expulsion from the tribe and tribal land.

Differences between eastern and western Afghanistan

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[13]   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.
[14]   At that time (1991) I was working with the NGO Danish Committee for Aid to Afghan Refugee, which was successfully approached by this *jirga.*

There is a difference in the congruence of local and tribal ascription between east and west Afghanistan. East Afghanistan has a much higher degree of conformity between local and tribal units, whereas in the western Afghan plains there are no areas that are attributed to certain tribes, although Afghan rulers in the 19th century tried their best to create tribally homogeneous areas in west Afghanistan .[15]

The outcome of my recent interviews with eastern Pashtuns reveals clearly that people from eastern and south-eastern Afghanistan define their social identity much more along **local** categories, whereas my informants from south and west Afghanistan (I also went to Quetta for interviews) stress their tribal and ethnic identity first and foremost. Even if taking into consideration the interview situation and the fact that respondents always reflect the assumed knowledge or ignorance of the interviewer, the difference between a primarily local social identity in the east and a primarily tribal and ethnic identity in the west is striking.

Interestingly, this does not mean that tribal structures in the East are weaker than in the west of Afghanistan - if anything the reverse. At least among the Pashtuns of Kunar and Paktya (east Afghanistan), I could observe a renaissance of the classic tribal system with all its typical political patterns in a form thought to be disappearing since the emergence of the modern Afghan state in 1890. Other ethnic groups, too, have recently experienced an increase in the relevance of patrilineal descent groups for defining identities. The tribal system as Mountstuart Elphinstone described it in his ”*Account of the Kingdom of Caubul*” in 1815 become reality again in many Afghan provinces.[16]

The eastern Pashtun tribes and clans are clearly related to a place and also to a space, e.g. to a valley, even if a large number of the tribal members live elsewhere and may never have seen that place. Tribal and local names are often identical, and even on a conceptual basis informants often had difficulties in distinguishing between patrilineal descent and locality. In the explicit Pashtun code of honour (*pashtunwali*) one of the central terms is *namus,* the defence of which is the holy duty of a Pashtun. This *namus* encompasses both the female membership of the clan or tribe and the territory on which the clan or tribe live. During the Afghan-Soviet war the warring parties extended the term *namus* to the whole territory of Afghanistan.

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[15]   Christine Noelle: *The Interaction Between State and Tribe in 19th Century Afghanistan: The Reign of Amir Dost Mohammad Khan (1826-1863).* (PhD thesis) U.C. Berkeley 2 vols., 1995.
[16]   Mountstuart Elphinstone: An *Account of the Kingdom of Caubul.* London: R. Bentley, 2 vols., 1815.

It is tempting to draw a causal connection between the orographic profile of east Afghanistan and the local definition of social groups or between the unlimited openness of the western plains and the lack of congruence of local and social boundaries there. One could also take the higher population density of eastern Afghanistan as a determining factor. However, in fact such a simplistic geographical or demographic determinism should be avoided. Other factors must also be taken into account, such as history and the wider political context, for example the eastern Pashtun tribes' proximity to Kabul and to the former colonial power which encouraged volatile social groups to occupy definable and administrable local units and discouraged spatial mobility. Another, and more anthropological, method to approach an answer is to observe on the ground how tribal and local boundaries are maintained in daily social interactions. What are the social conditions that ensure, reproduce and change those boundaries? Secondly, how are those boundaries made use of and how are they circumvented?[17]. My data include strong hints that one of the reasons this neat-looking local-social system in eastern Afghanistan is so sustainable is in fact its demographic flexibility and the porosity of all boundaries. The local and tribal lines are drawn, they are fixed and unchangeable - but people can slip through the fixed lines. Thus ecological and demographic changes and inequalities can be balanced without changing the grid lines of tribe and space. I collected a considerable number of genealogical manipulations that occurred when people shifted from one tribe to another. Even the official genealogies of the Pashtuns, such as the 17th century *Makhzan-e Afghani* are treasures of stories and anecdotes about how the rigid genealogical principle was outwitted through the ages.[18]

In east Afghanistan armed conflicts between the tribes, either on matters of personal revenge or about access to scarce resources, occur frequently though not on a very large scale, but local and tribal boundaries remain stable. The people of Khost, for example, have a very warlike reputation. During the war the fertile basin of Khost was abandoned for about 10 years. Yet when the population returned, everyone went to her or his place, and there were hardly any conflicts over land or boundaries.

In **west Afghanistan,** which I know well from earlier research, the situation is paradoxical: on the one hand localities such as villages, towns, and even nomad camps are very heterogeneous as regaards their tribal and ethnic composition, and for many generations tribes

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[17]   cf. Barth op. cit.
[18]   See note 11.

and clans have not formed corporate or jointly acting groups in any conflict; but on the other, ethnic and tribal identities are clearly more pronounced than local identities.

Far from the sphere of the state, on the western plains and central western hills rarely reached by state power even under the Taliban, the tribal system is still the main structuring and ordering principle of the local society. The tribal system consists not only of the patrilineal model of an ever more ramified society, but also of rules of solidarity and conflict resolution, as well as social forms of gaining and losing political power.

One factor may be the high percentage of pastoral nomads in west Afghanistan, for whom a territorial fixation or definition would be impossible to maintain, but the high spatial mobility of farmers and other sedentaries is also important. The Afghan-Iranian wars of the 19th century had completely disrupted earlier settlement patterns. The high mobility is not only spatial but also occupational: nomadization and sedentarization is a frequently used two-way road.[19] During my observations in west Afghanistan since 1970 I have seen waves of sedentarization as well as of nomadization. In such a Heraclitean situation of *panta rhei*, local boundaries and identities can only be maintained if independent from physical local determinants.

Tribes in the recent Afghan war

In spite of the notorious unpredictability of tribal political organization on the ground, 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 works well, the new radical Islamist rulers of Afghanistan, the Taliban, have not dared to touch it. Instead, they continue the practice of earlier Afghan governments in allowing peripheral areas (the largest part of the country) to be organized by local authorities and institutions only loosely connected with the state rulers.

In the post-war perid (after 1992) mx experience has been that in areas where the tribal system was dominant and intact (e.g. in Khost), civil order and security were restored more rapidly and the rehabilitation of local economy and the return of refugees proceeded more smoothly than in areas where the tribal system had ceased to function.[20]

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[19]   See Philip Salzman: "Introduction". In: P. C. Salzman (ed): *When Nomads Settle: Processes of Sedentarization as Adaptation and Response.* New York, NY, Bergin Publishers, 1980: 1-20.
[20]   Bernt Glatzer: "From Refugee to Resident: Effects of Aid on Repatriation". 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: 161-168.

Tribalism and ethnicity are often blamed as central factors of turmoil, war and the break-down of state order, but there are reasons to assume that the tribal structure of Afghanistan is actually a stabilizing factor, even if it does not support durable political leadership. This stability is maintained by considerable ethnic and tribal dynamics. Ethnic and tribal boundaries and identities are not fixed since time immemorial, but are often a matter of negotiation. Whether social action is based on tribal and ethnic criteria depends on opportunities and tactics, and these may change quickly. For example, in his public speeches the Pashtun party leader and warlord Gulbudin Hekmatyar initially emphasized on pan-Islamism and the Muslim *ummah*. Boundaries between Muslim states were to become obsolete. Later, during his campaigns for recruitment in Pashtun areas, he appealed to the ethnic and tribal solidarity of the Pashtuns, who must defend their identity and honour against the rest of the world.

During the guerrilla 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) sympathizers and collaborators with 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 sent yet another as a refugee to Europe or the USA, while the rest of the family set up their household in a Pakistani refugee camp. Of course communicating between all the family members continued.

During the early years of the war, foreigners and Afghan intellectuals on both sides of the front expected a rapid end to tribalism and ethnicity. Some hoped that the "achievements of socialism" and the "brotherly help of the USSR" would bring about a supra-ethnic class society and eventually a harmonious socialist state; 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 also became clear that ethnicity and tribalism 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, recognizing only seven 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 seven 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 of distributing military equipment and money for the *mujahedin* exclusively via the seven parties.

The Shia *mujahedin* formed another eight parties, who found support in Iran. Over the years Iran succeeded in uniting most of them, and today the significant Shia parties are the two wings of the Hizb-e Wahdad which organize the great majority of the Hazarah, and the Harakat-e Islami (Mohseni), which appeals more to the urban Shia and is independent of Iran.[21]

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 and many ministers, generals and other dignitaries were killed in factional fights.

Indeed, practically all the conflicting parties and groups, including the Taliban, show a certain slant towards one ethnic group or another. This does not, however, prove 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, so that a quarrel between two Afghans who happen not to 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.[22] As Canfield puts it: *"Contrary to what might be supposed, the actual operating units of socio-political coalition...are rarely genuinely 'ethnic' in composition."*[23] The undeniable fact that the parties have a recognizable ethnic stamp has more to do with the local background of their founders and leaders than with their ethnic identity. If in that local background there is a demographic majority of one ethnic group or one tribe, it is most likely that the closest companions of the founders and leaders will belong to that 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 this language. Olivier Roy points to the example of the Persian-speaking Nurzay Pashtuns of south-west Afghanistan. They initially joined the Jamiyat-i Islami, which is mainly Tajik, because Persian is the language spoken in the party, whereas the Pashtu-speaking Nurzay went to Harakat-e Enqelab.[24]

Due to notions of common origin and ancestry ethnic and tribal identity is capable of rousing strong emotions and can therefore easily lead to particular aggression when conflicts arise.

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[21]   Jonathan Lee, personal communication.

[22]   See Olivier Roy: *Afghanistan: From Holy War to Civil War.* Princeton, NJ: The Darwin Press, 1995. cf. also Glatzer, 1998: "Is Afghanistan on the Brink of Ethnic and Tribal Disintegration?" In: William Maley (ed): *Fundamentalism Reborn? Afghanistan and the Taliban.* London: Hurst & Co, 1998: 167-181.

[23]   Robert L. Canfield: "Ethnic, Regional, and Sectarian Alignments in Afghanistan". In: Banuazizi, A. & M. Weiner (eds): *The State, Religion, and Ethnic Politics: Pakistan, Iran and Afghanistan.* Lahore: Vanguard & Syracuse Univ. Pr. 1987: 76.

[24]   Roy, op. cit, p. 178

In the political arenas of Afghanistan, ethnic and tribal emotions are often resorted to and instrumentalized, the feelings of honour and shame connected with tribe and tribal boundaries proving to be a most effective weapon.[25]

Conclusion

The author of the present article sees Afghanistan as a complex fabric of interlaced social and local categories. The focus of the article is on boundaries that are created, maintained and rearranged to differentiate and order these categories. The foremost example of this is the tribal category. The examples given may demonstrate that spatial borders and ethnic or tribal boundaries neither define social groups on the ground nor limit social actions, but are rather used as lines of orientation within an environment that to most actors on the Afghan scene seems complicated, ever-changing and threatening.

The ongoing conflict in Afghanistan has profoundly shaken the whole of society and pushed a third of its population into exile, subjecting all social categories that had been established before the war to a severe test. Today it is becoming evident that in wide areas of Afghanistan the tribal system has survived and been strengthened or else has re-emerged where it had almost disappeared during the pre-1978 modernization phase. The intrasocietal boundaries which the tribal system helps to draw are being re-utilized as a framework of social and political orientation and used to stabilize social, political and economic interactions much more than to fragment society.

Among Pashtuns in east Afghanistan, local and tribal boundaries are more closely interlinked than in the western part of the country, so that it becomes difficult to decide whether fields of social interaction and politics are based primarily on a local or on a tribal foundation. My informants themselves were not always able to differentiate between the two categories. Political players and conflicting partners refer at one and the same time to categories of solidarity, honour and shame - linked with tribe - and to categories of physical resources - linked with territory, place and space. As one of the central terms of the eastern Pashtun code of honour, *namus*, connotes protection of one's female relatives as well as of one's land and territory, the notions of tribe and land merge into each other. Whereas physical features such as mountains, rivers and deserts do shape boundaries of localities that are hardly open to manipulation, the corresponding tribal structure is only rigid as a social principle, whereas in

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[25] On the role of ethnicity in the Afghan turmoil see Bernt Glatzer: "Is Afghanistan on the Brink of Ethnic and Tribal Disintegration?" In: William Maley (ed): *Fundamentalism Reborn? Afghanistan and the Taliban.* London: Hurst & Co., 1998: 167-181.

practice the boundaries it draws are porous. It allows people to move across the tribal lines and to adjust to demographic changes without questioning the lines as such. During and after the recent war this tribal system was put to the test and proved to be the only stable social and political institution in many areas of eastern and southern Afghanistan, all the other institutions associated with the modern Afghan state since 1880 having fallen apart.

In west Afghanistan the relationship between humans and land is much more volatile. Here tribe is an exclusively social category, land ownership is individualized, and tribal land is thought of as a distant place of common origin which plays no role in daily social life. The war has not fundamentally changed this pattern. Masses of people were dislocated and relocated, and in recent years their bonds with particular localities have weakened even further. The present severe drought is once again shaking up the population, driving hundreds of thousands to the big cities like Herat. The network of tribe provides the main line of orientation in an increasingly chaotic social environment. However, new corporate groups on a tribal basis are not discernible.

It seems that the main warring parties, such as the Taliban and the remnants of the "Islamic State of Afghanistan" in the mountainous north-east, play the ethnic card as a last resort to gain followers and explain to them why the war should continue. However, my ongoing surveys with Afghans from both eastern and western Afghanistan reveal that ethnicity is becoming more and more unpopular, and that a national feeling is on the rise. Most of my informants in recent years have been unwilling to talk about their ethnic affiliation, and have expressed the opinion that it was ethnicity which broke up Afghanistan. Even the Pashtuns' sense of ethnic unity between the tribes on both sides of the Pakistan-Afghan border is weakening. Most informants from east Afghanistan consider Pashtuns from beyond the Durand Line as first and foremost Pakistanis. Thus this border is increasingly acknowledged as a clear line and not just an undefined frontier where the influence of one state wanes and that of another gradually begins. Over the last few decades, the direct confrontation of most Afghan families with the world beyond the international border has brought about a new sense of being Afghan, along with a strong, almost unanimous, opinion that they can only survive as Afghans, and not as Pashtuns, Tajiks, Hazarahs, etc. Even federal models of a future Afghanistan face very strong resentment. There is an immense fear among Afghans of all educational levels that Afghanistan could break up along ethnic lines, and that one's own family might be drowned in the turmoil and chaos that would inevitably ensue. Even Taliban I

spoke to were by no means convinced that the Muslim *ummah* could be a substitute for a national state.

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