



PASHTUN TRIBAL DYNAMICS

PASHTUN TRIBAL DYNAMICS

Copyright © 2009 Tribal Analysis Center, LTD

All Rights Reserved



About Tribal Analysis Center

PASHTUN TRIBAL DYNAMICS



And that is called paying the Dane-geld; but we've proved it again and again, that if once you have paid him the Dane-geld you never get rid of the Dane.

Rudyard Kipling

All we have to decide is what to do with the time that is given to us.

J.R.R. Tolkien



Introduction

The dynamics of Afghanistan's ethnic groups evolved from the history of the conflicts deeply rooted in the customs of one of its dominant ethnic groups, the Pashtuns. Their history, values, customs, attitudes, loyalties, animosities, and greed – when combined with conflicts between and within tribes have resulted in the development of similar attributes within the other ethnic groups to make Afghanistan one of the most unruly “nations” on the face of the planet. Sitting at the “Crossroads of Asia,” Afghanistan has experienced invasions, migrations, and the “Great Game” played by outsiders determined to make history in Afghanistan before studying any of the complex enigma that player after player has tried to drag into a modern nation state, complete with a strong central government. It has become “The Graveyard of Empires” that was so well described by Seth Jones – because the players in this “Great Game” were anteing before reading any of the rules required for successful participants. All of the defeated, damaged players departed Afghanistan wishing that they had studied Pashtun tribal dynamics long before entering the game.

While claiming a common ancestor, language, and religion, the Pashtuns are generally egalitarian and rule themselves in their separate tribes and clans through councils composed of the leading men of each family. Their deliberations are open and are never settled by a vote that would create clear winners and losers, but they discuss and argue the issues presented before them until a consensus is reached. The reason for seeking consensus is simple. In order for a winner to emerge, there must be losers and those individuals, and their loyal followers, will normally take up arms to recover lost honor from those who won in the council. These are honor-bound people who will fight to maintain or recover their “lost face” in what may become endless wars under their chivalry code they call Pashtunwali that requires *badal*, or revenge. With each revenge attack came the cultural requirement for additional *badal* and these people went from claiming a common ancestor to a nearly uncountable number of separate divisions as animosities

drove them apart at a rate that far exceeded the rates of assimilation of smaller elements back into the larger, more protective tribes in a political and military process described accurately by Louis Dupree as fission and fusion.¹ Both have managed to replicate themselves at nearly every level of Afghanistan's governance, regardless of the ethnic group involved. Over time, fission has resulted in a highly fragmented Pashtun ethnic group with the organizational charts of tribes more resembling the Human Genome Project than a genealogical chart. And all of these tribes vary in the intensity of their internal animosities that resulted in more fission than fusion over time. For example, the Barakzai and Popalzai are fairly cohesive, especially when compared to the more fractious Mahsuds, and the tribal behavior of each tends to follow the numbers of divisions in their organizational charts. This statement is probably axiomatic when Pashtuns are considered: The greater the number of tribal divisions, the more violence is seen from the tribe.

The reason for the impact of Pashtun values on the entire country, as well as the adjacent nations, is simple. Pashtun tribal power has been the single predominant political force in the development of Afghanistan and Pashtun region, for a cohesive nation-state has yet to emerge around the multiple ethnicities having separate languages and dialects. Complicating this human admixture, the violence and lack of general cohesion that is symptomatic of the Pashtun tribes has spread throughout the region and the politics of Afghanistan, Pakistan, and to a lesser extent, cohesive nation-state by comparison. Even a strict communist government failed to bring order to these turbulent tribes and ethnic groups which, itself, divided into factions that eventually fought one another.

As the predominant ethnic group, the Pashtuns provided Afghanistan's monarchs from 1747 through 1973 when the king, Zahir Shah, was overthrown by his nephew, obviously another Pashtun, who was deposed by a series of communists, again all Pashtuns. Only for brief periods in 1929² and after the communists were defeated in 1992 were Afghanistan's Tajiks able to claim control of the national government only to stimulate civil wars, one of which is still occurring as additional Pashtuns, the Taliban, seek to take control from a government composed of coalition of multiple ethnic groups.

Afghanistan's Pashtuns have nearby reinforcements, bases, and sanctuaries from which to operate within nearby Pakistan where a boundary imposed on the region by British military power separates the Trans-Durand Line tribes from those living to the west. While the tribes are similar, and in many cases are the same tribe simply separated by the border between Afghanistan and Pakistan, there are substantial differences between the two groups of Pashtuns. Many differences were caused by tribal interactions with the governments of their respective countries. In today's Pakistan during the British colonial period, the tribes were generally left to their own devices unless they engaged in violence, but in Afghanistan the tribes were split, manipulated, and forced into internal migrations that left tribes scattered and lacking well defined tribal boundaries that allowed for sound tribal governance instead of having multiple local leaders and scattered clans. Regardless of their location and status, Pakistan's Pashtuns have at all times played an important role in the tribally-based politics of Afghanistan and periodically serve to increase the clear dominance of Pashtun strength within Afghanistan. This connection is strengthened by the fact that Afghanistan has residual claims to Pakistan's Waziristan region and Bajaur Agency. Afghanistan's Pashtuns, especially the Durrani Confederation, support the concept of forming a Pashtun national homeland, *Pashtunistan*, essentially annexing land from Pakistan's national territory to join the Pashtuns on either side of the Durand Line into a single nation.³

Pashtuns are also like most other nomadic tribes in that they follow Ibn Khaldun's⁴ observations that explain the conflict between the nomads and those members of related tribes that become sedentary and develop communities. In a nearly timeless cycle, during periods when resources were

1. Dupree, Louis, *Afghanistan*, London: Oxford, 1980, pg. 344. Dupree provides multiple pages of charts labeled "political fusion and fission in Afghanistan, 1747-1880."

2. Runion, Meredith L., *The History of Afghanistan*, Westport: Greenwood, 2007, pg. 93.

3. Schofield, Victoria, *Afghan Frontier: Feuding and Fighting in Central Asia*, London: Tauris Parke, 2003, pg. 259.

4. http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ibn_Khaldun accessed 16 November 2009.

scarce the nomads raided into villages to take what was needed, even if they were from the same tribe. The Pashtuns may consider themselves to be members of a single kinship group, but they show no hesitation when it comes to raiding to collect resources. Over time, these tribes developed a reputation for theft and raiding that was seldom equaled by other groups in the region. Along with this negative reputation, the same Pashtun tribes conducted heroic resistance to any potential conqueror and have worked hard to avoid integration into a single state governed from Kabul.

Throughout the centuries, these aggressive tribes developed cultural characteristics that valued courage, manly vigor, and warlike attitudes that combined with religious piety to create a hierarchy within the tribe's components based on those with the greatest amount of these attributes forming the tribe's "khan khel," or the group with the highest level of social status. Those groups, normally the tribe's sub-tribes, were rank ordered according to the levels of the attributes possessed by each. This cultural characteristic was quite significant and the khan khel of the Popalzai tribe, the Sadozai, was the source of Afghanistan's first monarchs.⁵ The Barakzai's khan khel, the Mohammadzai, later provided kings for the Afghans for approximately two centuries. The khan khel concept is important as it determines which of the leading families of a tribe will have the greatest prestige and equal influence in determining the courses of action taken by the tribe. This statement also probably is axiomatic when Pashtuns are considered: The greater and more historic the influence of the khan khel; the more stable the tribe. In the case of the Barakzai and Popalzai tribes that were sufficiently influential for their khan khels to provide monarchs for the Afghans, most of the current members of these tribes tend to support the current national government rather than any of the insurgent groups that are bedeviling Afghanistan.

Parallel to the stability brought to the tribe by the khan khel concept, these same stable tribes are among the most resistant to any efforts by outsiders to conquer them or to press them into a larger community of tribes to form a nation, unless it was under their direct control. This is in spite of their view that they are all connected through a common ancestor and the basis of their organization is one of kinship. Paradoxically, while viewing themselves as united through a carefully memorized genealogy and somewhat common language into extended family systems, they also may belong to a group of local tribesmen who are hostile to adjacent tribesmen even though the opposing groups may be connected to one another by direct blood ties.

These often hostile extended families that have repeatedly raided one another for scarce resources normally retain their overall tribal identity but frequently split into groups that are essentially political rather than tribal because of their shared enmity. Identified as Spin (white) or Tor (black), these subgroups from the same tribe seem to have formed because of mutual hostility found within the same tribe.⁶ In this situation, the tribe seems to be midway into the "fission" process described by Dupree that is more likely to result in the formation of a new tribe rather than reconciliation and the "fusion" that would allow the antagonists to reform in a unified tribe. This process seems to be yet another Pashtun constant: the invariable presence of growing hostility within a tribe frequently fuels a secession process that results in the creation of new tribal entities. *Badal*⁷ ensures that defensive aggregations of tribesmen form to defend one group from the revenge killings that all concerned know will be coming once the violence starts.

The secession of portions of the tribe, subtribe, clan, or extended family group, regardless of what these are called, seems to have propelled the descendents of a common ancestor into hundreds of separate tribal entities over the past 5,000 years of Pashtun tribal existence. But within this secession process the driving force seems to be related to inheritance and succession conflicts between sons and cousins of the same family. Limited arable land has created a relatively unique inheritance situation complicated by membership in a religion that allows multiple wives and numerous resulting sons desiring an inheritance from a father.

5. Noelle, Christine, *State and tribe in Nineteenth-century Afghanistan: The Reign of Amir Dost Muhammad Khan (1826-1863)*, London: Curzon, 1997, pg. 16.

6. <http://www.pukhtunwomen.org/node/163> accessed 15 November 2009.

7. *Ibid*, pg. 126.

Many cultures resolved this exact problem through the development of primogeniture, or an inheritance system through which the eldest son gains the property that previously belonged to the deceased father, a man who gained his own property from his own deceased father, the grandfather of a very large number of paternal grandsons, all cousins, who have an equal claim to the family land. In this nearly unique cultural situation, the tribesman may exist in a strange love-hate relationship even with his closest kinsmen and cannot trust his paternal cousins, all of whom have an equal ambition to possess as much of the shared grandfather's land as possible. In this situation, yet another Pashtun axiom emerges, *Taborwali*⁸, or "cousin enmity". In most Pashtun clans, there is great mistrust – and frequent violence – between paternal cousins and this is a major factor that leads to secession "movements" within the tribes that develop as sides form into family feuds that may continue for decades once initial casualties are taken. Here, again, *badal* plays a role to ensure that once violence starts it will continue, possibly for generations.

Built into this often violent culture some form of governance must exist to reduce the anarchy that would be a constant factor in its absence. Tribal leadership is normally vested in khan and maliks, leading members of the tribe, who represent their extended families in jirgas, or councils, whose consensus decisions govern that portion of the tribe within the jirga's span of control. These leaders are recognized and accepted by the individual families they represent because of an interconnected series of prestige factors, such as extensive land holdings, personal wealth, a heroic reputation during war, honor from extensive for Islamic learning and knowledge, descent from heroic or highly religious ancestors, but the positions they encumber are only nominally hereditary and sons may move into a deceased father's position that is theirs to hold or lose, depending on their capabilities. The separate jirgas with an entire tribe assemble and are responsible for the selection of a "chief", who is more a "first among equals" than an actual overlord in most situations. The authority of an individual khan or malik while in a chieftain role varies from tribe to tribe, but in general these tribal leaders are only able to wield influence rather than any actual authority over a tribe. The greater the levels of the prestige factors held by the individual leader, however, the closer his influence will be toward actual authority, but the individual tribesmen is heavily governed by his own fierce individualism and may be influenced but he is seldom compelled by any power other than a tribal jirga's consensus decision and the tribal *arbakai*⁹ warriors available to enforce it.

Contrary to much of the literature that depicts the Pashtun as a religious fanatic, the average tribesman looks more to Pashtunwali than Shari'a as a guide. While he is religious, his Islam is closely influenced, if not blended, with folk-Islam and superstitions that are derived from four Sufi schools that were adopted directly by the Shamanistic Afghans well before the arrival of Muslim armies that conquered the region. He is generally contemptuous of the mullah and tells marvelous jokes regarding the greed of this religious guide that normally emerges from the lower strata of Pashtun society. The power of the mullah begins to emerge during periods of warfare or social turbulence when this skilled orator is able to influence those attending his mosque that the tribe is facing dual threats, normally an outside military force that poses a threat to the tribe that the mullah is able to magnify into an even greater threat against Islam, itself. Once the mullah is able to rally a sufficient number of followers, he leads them into conflict against the khan and malik class of the tribe, displaces them by killing or driving them off. But if the mullah is able to gain control of the tribe's governance, he must find a way to continue the turbulence that brought him into power because the tribesmen gravitate to the secular authorities by abandoning the mullah.¹⁰

8. Beattie, Hugh, *Imperial Frontier: Tribe and State in Waziristan*, Richmond, Surrey: Curzon, 2002, pg. 120.

9. <http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=18754057> accessed 12 November 2009.

10. <http://www.tribalanalysiscenter.com/freePDF/Mad%20Mullahs.pdf> accessed 15 November 2009. This is a full study of the mullahs activity to displace the secular maliks of their common tribe.

This gives rise to yet another constant found within Pashtun culture. During times of peace, the tribesmen tend to look to traditional systems of governance, based on the khan khel's leading families. When tension develops within the tribe or it is affected by treats of attack, the clans of the tribe quickly shift from their traditional leadership to leaders with proven competence. This tribal tendency results in mullahs gaining control of tribes since he is able to gain access to a large, propaganda susceptible audience that was predisposed to believe his claims.

The actual influence of the mullah is normally based on his position in the village's hierarchy and his ability to interpret customary tribal law within a Shari'a context for the jirga's participants. But he is also skilled at tribal intrigue within the continuous conflict that occurs within the Pashtun tribes and the tribesmen generally participate in the feigned crisis situation when it suited his material and social interests. At the same time, the Pashtun tribesmen are the ultimate cynical realists who will drop his support for the mullah and shift back to the secular maliks and khans when it appears that the mullah's movement is losing power and eventually may lose. This situation illustrates two additional constants in Pashtun sociology: First, there is a constant balance of power struggle occurring between the malik and khan class against the usurpers from the mosque. Second, Pashtuns are naturally fence-sitters¹¹ and will wait until a clear winner begins to emerge before moving rapidly to what he perceives to be the winning side. Within this complex situation, there is a continuous struggle between the generally secular maliks and khans against the mullahs who generally emerge from the lower, less prestigious subtribes and clans of a particular tribe as they seek to retain, or gain, the loyalty of the rural Pashtun tribesmen against the other. During turbulent times when dangers are a more common threat, the mullah has a distinct advantage as the rural Pashtun tends to turn quickly to seek religious support.

This tendency tends to vary from tribe to tribe, as do all things affecting Pashtun social behavior. For example, the Yusufzai tribe of northwestern Pakistan is reportedly prone to turn very quickly to superstitious and religious beliefs when under threat.¹² Nearly the opposite condition is reported among the Achakzai Durrani tribe of southeast Afghanistan and southwestern Pakistan and the Achakzai are generally secular and had numerous men fighting to support Afghanistan's communists.¹³ But as soon as the external threat to the tribe and, by extension, to Islam the mullah loses his trump card and his supporters tend to erode in the direction secular governance through the maliks and khans. In this situation, there is yet one additional constant in Pashtun tribal behavior: The tribesman seldom will follow the intricacies of Muslim shari'a if it tends to lead him away from what he views as his best material interests.

Those Pashtun leaders who appear to be strong advocates of Shari'a intend to create a new, revolutionary form of government for Afghanistan based on Islamic law are religious leaders (or like Gulbuddin Hekmatyar, an opportunist) using Islam as a political tool to gain power in the country. These men, including the senior leadership of the Taliban, are opportunistic revolutionaries seeking to impose a new form of government on the country, not to deliver some superior form of Islam to the Afghan population. Knowing from the country's long history that the malik vs. mullah cycle draws supporters to the mullah side of the equation during warfare, all of the Taliban leaders cynically declared themselves to be mullahs in the hope of drawing the rural Pashtuns to their side in their unending conflicts. This tactic has proven to be remarkably successful and demonstrates that the rural-based Taliban leadership understands the tribal dynamics of the rural tribes far better than the urban-based government and has managed to attract large numbers of highly individualistic tribesmen to the Taliban Movement and the other simultaneously occurring parallel insurgencies. How long this support will continue for the "mullahs" probably will depend on which side appears to be winning the extended conflict before the rural tribesmen either settle in for the long haul with the Taliban or shift to support the government and its Coalition allies.

11. Kilcullen, David, *The Accidental Guerrilla: Fighting Small Wars in The Midst of a Big One*, New York: Oxford, pg. 53.

12. Strachey, Sir John, *Hastings and the Rohilla War*, London: Oxford, 1892, pg. 24.

13. <http://www.tribalanalysiscenter.com/freePDF/Pashtun%20Cultural%20Factors%20Limiting%20Warlord%20Development.pdf> accessed 22 November 2009.

This individual tribesman occupies a unique position within his equally unique, oftentimes nearly communal, society. As a fiercely independent person whose responses to sets of circumstances are clearly circumscribed by the traditional laws of his culture under Pashtunwali, he is also quick to rely upon a series of layered support, protection, and compulsion that limits the number of options available to him in his daily interactions with his social environment. Within his social setting, the tribesman is influenced by his immediate family, the extended family – the primary controls over his personal behavior – and then to the clan, sub-tribe, and the tribe’s leadership. His personal identification generally remains within this social setting and any contact, or even control, from the urban-based government from Kabul through the provincial governors and down to the district level is buffered through those same tribal levels before any orders or decisions arrive at the individual level. Within these layers of tribal support and control, the individual tribesman has some form of insulation from the national government that is generally antagonistic toward the rural tribes and their violent tendencies.

Within this frequently violent social setting the tribesman’s actions and loyalties are influenced heavily by these symbiotic layers to which he is bound that also binds him to his tribal supporters. In order to retain tribal protection and support, he is required to obey the dictates emanating from the jirga that governs his behavior and requires his loyalty, personal service, and during times of physical danger to the tribe he is required to risk his life in defense of the group to which he is so closely connected. In return, the jirga system provides protection for the individual tribesman from personal enemies and mediation between the tribe and a far away government that seeks taxes, work parties, and often conscripts for a national army. Under this democratic form of local self-government, the tribesman is closely governed by his own relatives within a system that also provides protection as it requires service. Governing jirgas also have the authority to provide for village defense against raiders and can order out all able-bodied men as a “lashkar,” or war party, that is raised specifically to destroy those opposing the consensus decisions of the jirga.¹⁴

The jirga system of governance within Pashtun society is a powerful political tool for social control within the squabbling tribes and their constituent subtribes and clans. These councils, composed of the leading members of each family within the group the jirga governs, have been a function of Pashtun society for multiple centuries and have both parliamentary and judicial functions. For example, in their parliamentary role a multi-tribal jirga was called in 1747 when the powerful leaders of the Durrani Confederation assembled to select a leader. Their selection of Ahmad Shah Durrani led to the creation of a powerful, aggressive nation that has dominated Afghanistan for most of the time since then.¹⁵ At the other end of the governance spectrum, local jirgas are convened to develop the financial means to fund the construction of public works in a village, such as a mosque or hujra (a form of combined community center and guesthouse) or to prevent a family feud. This broadly constituted system is also quite flexible.

The customary approach to resolving an issue involves a group of concerned villages or parties to a dispute approaching a malik or khan with their problem. This consultation stage may result in resolution of the problem because a malik’s personal prestige may carry a great deal of weight because of his personal position within the tribe’s hierarchy. If the issue cannot be resolved, the malik, or the parties involved, may call for a jirga to be convened. The jirga at the village level is generally composed of a fixed group of elders who are representatives of their extended families. Generally, this council will have a member representing each family that may be affected by the results of the discussion. Their decisions are not made by voting, but are the result of tolerant patience with dissenting opinions. The jirga makes no attempt to examine facts as would be the case in similar situations in the west, and they make no attempt to discuss right and wrong in a particular dispute. Due to the nature of the jirga membership being drawn directly from the village from where the dispute or need arose, the facts related to the case are generally well known to all of the participants. Instead of determining

14. See <http://www.khyber.org/articles/2004/EasytoWinaWarHardtoWininaJirga.shtml> accessed 22 November 2009.

15. Bahl, Taru and M.H. Syed, *Encyclopedia of the Muslim World*, New Delhi: Anmol Publications, 2003, pg. 27.

guilt or innocence, jirgas function best to prevent or resolve conflict.¹⁶ The reasons are simple and form another constant within Pashtun culture: the emergence of a clear loser in any Pashtun deliberation will resort to violence in order to preserve or recover “lost honor.” This is why jirgas work toward conflict resolution through consensus; they know well that violent tribesmen resort to hostility quickly. They rely upon traditional and customary law and Shari’a, often guided by a mullah, to ensure that their deliberations are fully accepted as fair and reasonable by all sides during disputes. Under normal circumstances, having the mullah as an adviser to the jirga helps keep the religious side of the tribe under secular control, but his participation within the jirga gives him additional leverage within the tribe that he uses to its fullest extent when an external threat emerges to threaten the tribe.

Regardless of the outcome, a jirga decision is binding and nearly always recognized within the community served. The elders composing the jirga also supervise the village’s local security force, generally called *arbakai*, which may be engaged to ensure compliance with the results of the jirga. Open defiance may result in burning the house of the defiant or they may be exiled or ostracized completely from the village. Either form of punishment is quite severe as they result in ostracism from the layers of protection the tribesmen depend upon to survive – and for this reason the results of a jirga are nearly universally respected.

These vital institutions that have evolved over centuries of efforts to develop some forms of peaceful existence within the tribes, most of which were both nomadic when times were good and raiders when there were shortfalls in the items needed for survival. After the creation of a Pashtun monarchy that sought to stabilize the tribes, there were several factors within their very sociology that made individual warriors aggressive. Lacking any form of reasonable inheritance rules, those sons succeeding a deceased father were quickly involved in the formation of family alliances and betrayals as generally only the strongest and most clever survived to claim what land and wealth were available to the family.¹⁷

In addition to acquiring sufficient land and animals for survival, Pashtuns are able to progress toward increasing social status that allowed them to become khans and maliks and serve in a leadership position only through enhancing prestige factors that are admired in their society. Most of these factors were acquired by experience and the aging process, such as religious learning and piety, but two important factors were readily available to those daring enough to try for them. Prowess as a warrior and the accumulation of wealth were two highly admired prestige factors and raiding provided a short-cut to increased social status. Bravery in warfare became a highly admired characteristic among the Pashtuns and their folklore, music, and customs are often associated with martial stories. For example, their most admired epic poets were also their legendary warriors, Ahmad Shah Durrani, the great Rohilla leader in India – Hafiz Rahmat Khan, and Krushal Khattak.¹⁸ With these examples, it is no wonder that the average young Pashtun saw conflict as a ready means to escape the poverty and boredom of herding. Loot became a motivating factor, particularly among the smaller, more isolated and poverty stricken tribes. Another Pashtun axiom is associated with this behavior: Those tribes, subtribes, and clans that were troublesome due to their raiding behavior during the 19th century remain problems. For example, old British narratives of all sorts mention the Afridi subtribes and the Mahsuds, the very tribes that are actively involved in fighting Pakistani forces today. The prospects of obtaining loot encouraged

16. Idris, Khan, *Jirgas: Pashtun Participatory Governance*, Williamsburg, VA: Tribal Analysis Publishing, 2009. This is a series of case studies related to a jirga in a Yusufzai village in Pakistan.

17. Saikal, Amin, *Modern Afghanistan: A History of Struggle and Survival*, London: I.B. Tauris, 2004, pg. 4.

18. There is a serious connection between Pashtu songs, actually their prized poetry, and leadership personalities. In 1887, James Darmesteter studied their songs and concluded, “... the literary poet, who can read ... who has composed a Divan. Every educated man is a *Sha-ir*, though, if he be a man of good taste, he will not assume the title. Writing Ghazal was one of the accomplishments of the old chiefs. Hafiz Rahmat, the great Rohilla captain, and Ahmad Shah, the founder of the Durrani empire, had written Divans, were ‘Divan people.’” “Afghan Life in Afghan Songs,” *Science*, Vol. 10, No. 246, October 21, 1887, pg. 195. Amazingly, Hafiz Rahmat was viewed as an equivalent of Ahmad Shah Durrani in 1887 and poets affiliated with the Pashtuns disseminated his poetry and stories about his death at the hands of the British down through the generations in a culture having revenge as a major tenet.

raiding, kidnapping, and looting by tribes restricted to high valleys who looked with envy and jealousy at the tribesmen living in the settled areas. Ghani Khan, the son of Abdul Ghaffar Khan who led the Red Shirt Pashtun pacifists, explained the motivation of the poverty-stricken highland Pashtuns succinctly: “The Pathan loves to steal because he hates to beg.”¹⁹

And one of the reasons the raiding behavior continues? In most cases, the organized governments dealing with these raiding Pashtun war parties decided to pay them off rather than fight them. This was equivalent to the “Dane-geld” referred to by Kipling and while the payment of bribes and giving in to blackmail became an effective part of tribal diplomacy, it did little to modify the raiding behavior, regardless if the bribes were called “subsidies” or “development.” One additional Pashtun constant is the emergence of additional internal conflicts over the distribution of the government-provided subsidies, payments that may have institutionalized the raiding behavior instead of preventing it.

Land, itself, is a reason for the raiding behavior of tribes. The larger, more stable tribes were able to claim the best land for themselves long ago and this left the smaller, weaker tribes restricted to infertile valleys where water is quite scarce and conflicting claims are made regarding water claims and irrigation rights. Boundary markings are frequently lacking, often depending upon watercourses that are subject to change, and the lack of formal land records add to tension over land ownership in a culture in which men must possess land to be a member of formal tribal organizations, such as the *jirga*.

Land division at the time the tribes conquered or were granted land was determined according to the status and merit possessed by key leaders at that time. Normally, one-half of the land possessed by the tribe is allocated to the *shamat*, communally-owned grazing land that is shared, and the remainder is divided downward the tribal hierarchy until the individual family head receives his portion, his *daftar*.²⁰ It is the possession of this land that allows the family head to participate in tribal deliberations. As mentioned previously, Pashtuns do not practice primogeniture and the land is normally divided equally among the sons who compete for extra shares at the expense of their siblings. Dispossessed Pashtuns are left with little choice other than raiding to recover his lost social status within the tribe – or migration far from his tribe and his lost honor since he is unable to participate as an equal in the tribe’s governance. During the 18th and 19th centuries, these landless Pashtuns served as mercenaries, many within India where they were able to create relatively stable chieftaincies of their own, to recover their lost social status. Large numbers of these Pashtuns accompanied Ahmad Shah Durrani on his multiple invasions of India in search of loot. Many of these men were unable to return to their home areas as entire subtribes seem to have been assimilated into other, larger tribes as these unfortunate and dispossessed Pashtuns added additional grievances to their collective identity.

The land situation was substantially worsened within Afghanistan as fellow Pashtun monarchs began a series of attempts to weaken the tribes that eventually might endanger their own primacy in Kabul. The tribe first to feel the growing impact of the country’s kings and his Kabuli supporters was the enormous Barakzai tribe. Ahmad Shah Durrani was from the *khan khel* of the Popalzai tribe, a smaller tribe, and he ordered the Barakzai to split into two parts, creating a new Durrani tribe, the Achakzai. While probably intending to prevent the Barakzai from displacing his heirs, Ahmad Shah Durrani’s Popalzai soon lost the monarchy to the Barakzai, anyway. A Barakzai king, Abdur al-Rahman, or the “Iron Amir,” ordered mass internal migrations of Pashtuns during the 1880’s, movements that scattered some subtribes far from their own tribes and dispersed tribesmen into

19. Khan, Ghani, *The Pathans*, Peshawar, 1947. This small book is filled with excellent descriptions of the individual Pashtun tribesman and factors that created his behavior patterns.

20. Leach, Edmund R., *Aspects of Caste in South India, Ceylon, and North-west Pakistan*, 1960, pg. 127.

scattered enclaves having little, if any, military and political power of their own.²¹ Seeking to divide and rule the violent Pashtuns from his seat of government in Kabul, the Iron Amir destabilized the tribes significantly and placed them into locations where they began to force traditional owners of lands to leave in what can only be described as “ethnic cleansing” that left bitterness toward Pashtuns within the other ethnic groups that remains today. But these migrating Pashtuns claimed new lands that entered into the inheritance cycle again, remained scattered, and were generally ignored by Kabul’s bureaucrats, including the communists, Taliban, and the post-2001 government of Hamid Karzai.

This system of land ownership has resulted in long-running familial and tribal land claim conflicts that were worsened during seemingly endless war and drought cycles that forced land owners to migrate only to find upon returning their lands occupied by armed squatters reluctant to give up their claims to agricultural land without a fight. The situation is worsened with the current judicial corruption and the Taliban system of quick justice that normally can be expected to award land to supporters. The conflicting claims lead to violence, casualties, and potentially endless blood feuds created by the Pashtunwali requirement for revenge. Equally serious, one of the sides in any large blood feud will gravitate to the Taliban while their antagonist will seek support in the opposite political direction as entire families, clans, and subtribes oppose one another in fighting significant battles as feuds become politicized.

Well before Mohammad Daud overthrew Zahir Shah and the Saur Revolution left the communists running Afghanistan, Leon Poulluda’s excellent essay written in 1970²² explained the external factors that made the internal Afghan situation even worse. Poulluda wrote:

“To the internal conflict-laden and centrifugal elements of Pashtun tribal society there must be added a number of external factors which have tended to accentuate these traits ... the extensive poverty of the land on which most of the Pashtun tribes dwell. The broken, mountainous terrain and climatic extremes tend to emphasize rugged separation. Geopolitical position placed Afghanistan for nearly two centuries in the path of the expanding Russian and British empires. Intervention by these two great powers for their own strategic purposes exacerbated the dynastic and tribal quarrels leaving behind a heritage of disunity and conflict. This disruptive process was made easier by the weak authority structure within tribes which resulted in shifting loyalties and uncertain dynastic alliances.”

In this way, their internal social, economic and political tribal dynamics interacted with constant dynastic quarrels and with attempts at foreign intervention and kept the Afghan pot boiling. The results are plainly reflected in Afghan history, a history in which disunity and conflict are the recurring themes.”

Poullada then explained the five basic conflict situations he saw in Afghanistan:

*“First, since the blood feud tends to expand to involve families and clans who wield political power, this type of conflict often results in retrogressive, acrimonious, and divisive action in the governmental structure. Perhaps the most glaring example of this was the feud between the present Musahiban family and the Charkhi family which resulted in the assassination of Nadir Shah, father of the present king.”*²³

21. Lee, Jonathan L., *The Ancient Supremacy: Bukhara, Afghanistan, and the Battle for Balkh, 1731-1901*, pg. xxiv.

22. Poullada, Leon B., *The Pashtun Role in the Afghan Political System*, Afghan Council of the Asia Society, 1970. Poullada’s excellent essay is widely quoted through the remainder of this essay.

23. At the time Poullada wrote study (1970), Zahir Shah was the king of Afghanistan.

“The second type of tribal conflict situation with political overtones is intra-tribal, i.e., one involving rivalry between subunits within the same tribe. Although bound by kinship ties, most Afghan tribes are far from internally united. The Ghilzai tribe²⁴ is a good example. Though the tribe is one of the largest, most warlike and potentially one of the most powerful tribes in Afghanistan, its proverbial disunity has kept it from rising to national power. Its most aggressive khel, the Suleiman Khel, is distrusted and feared by the other khels.”

“The Saddozai²⁵-Barakzai competition for power in Kabul is another good example of intra-tribal conflict.”

“The third fundamental tribal conflict situation which has cast its pall on Afghan political development is inter-tribal antagonisms between tribes of the same ethnic stock. This has been most marked among the Pashtun tribes themselves even though (or perhaps because) one of them, the Durrani, has provided the ruling stock of the country for over two centuries. While conflicts between Pashtun tribes has been more the rule than the exception in Afghanistan, the most powerful rival Pashtun tribes involved in Afghan history have been the Ghilzai and the Durrani... the Ghilzai have never taken well to “civilization” or settled ways. They have remained to a large extent nomadic, aloof, and warlike. They had a brief history of unity, glory, and foreign conquest in the 18th century under Mirwais and his son. During this short hegemony they did not hesitate to apply merciless pressure on their Durrani rivals. However, in the incessant dynastic quarrels within the Durrani tribe which followed Ahmad Shah’s death, the powerful Ghilzai tribe remained for the most part a contemptuous spectator, aloof in its tribal isolation, never sympathetic to any Durrani dynasty, but unable or unwilling to challenge its power directly. Only during the foreign wars, particularly against the British, did the Ghilzai figure prominently, joining with the Durrani and other Afghan tribes to repel the foreign invader. But most of the time the Ghilzai loomed ominously in the background ready to pounce whenever outside intervention stirred up its latent aggressiveness or internal weakness made the central government an easy prey. Thus, for the most part the Ghilzai have remained an indigestible lump in the Afghan national stomach.”

“A fourth type of conflict situation which has affected political modernization in Afghanistan has been inter-tribal antagonism between tribes of different ethnic, linguistic, or religious backgrounds. Politically, the most important of these conflicts is, of course, the antagonism between Pashtuns and non-Pashtuns. Ever since Ahmad Shah possessed himself of the Afghan kingdom the non-Pashtuns have felt deprived of prizes of honor. They have resisted Pashtun hegemony, sometimes trying to ignore Pashtun governors and administrators or by displaying repugnance and apathetic lack of interest toward national goals and objectives which they have rightly or wrongly felt are really intended for the benefit of the ruling Pashtun classes. At times armed revolts and insurrections among the Hazara, the Uzbeks, and even the Tajiks have taken place. To many non-Pashtun tribes the very term denoting national citizenship, Afghan,” has been synonymous with “Pashtun.” This sense of tribal affiliation has struck at the very roots of all efforts to build a united nation-state. Moreover, intermarriage and social and economic mobility which would tend to alleviate the tensions between Pashtuns and non-Pashtuns have been strongly impeded by tribally-inspired restraints.”

“The fifth and final overarching conflict situation of great political significance cuts across the inter- and intra-tribal antagonisms. This is the fundamental conflict between any central authority which seeks to impose national unity and the centrifugal forces of a tribal society as a whole whose ideals and way of life depend upon untrammelled freedom from external restraints and demands. If there has been one thing upon which all Afghan tribes seem to agree over the ages, it has been resistance to any exertion of a sovereign central power which seeks to replace or destroy the tribal authority structure. Thus, even the Durrani rules in Kabul, who had become sedentary, domesticated and “civilized” could never count on undivided loyalty and support of their own tribe, to say nothing of support from the Ghilzai and many other tribes who continued to dwell in what Carleton Coon has aptly termed the “Land of Insolence.”

24. The Ghilzai are best viewed as a “confederation” or a “super-tribe.”

25. The Saddozai are the khan khel of the Popalzai tribe.

“Historically, this conflict manifested itself in a constant state of tension between the central government in Kabul and the various centers of tribal and rural power. During certain periods the push and pull ... achieved a balance, the tribes remain quiescent and the central government could make limited progress towards building a united nation. But periodically the balance was destroyed, either by outside causes such as foreign interference or by an attempt by one of the antagonists to push its power too far into the domain of the other. Then there would be violent confrontations ranging from local disturbances to civil war. To a large extent the very existence of the central government depends on maintaining this delicate balance with tribal power. The tribes in Afghanistan have rightly been termed “king-makers and breakers.”

“In this finely balanced equation the power and the skill of the ruler of the central government has, of course, been a crucial element. Whenever a strong ruler, i.e., who commanded not only military strength but even more important one who was expert in tribal diplomacy and who understood the internal dynamics of his own country, sat on the throne, the tribes tended to be quiescent, brooding in their own hills. But as soon as the perceived weakness or vacillation on the central government, the tribes would rise in defiance.”

“Thus the relative power of the tribes and the central government shifted as the contestants utilized, more or less skillfully, their sources of strength. The interaction of these two centers of power, seeking to encroach on each other’s domain, resulted at times in a precarious temporary balance which in turn fell into disarray and plunged the country into internal strife until a new balance was found. If we look at the history of Afghanistan we find ample support for this interpretation because the political dynamics of Afghanistan at least since 1747 consisted of a balanced tension between the power and authority of the central government on one hand and the tribes on the other.”

“This tension has been dynamic and variable rather than static and stable. During the reigns of strong amirs²⁶ like Ahmad Shah, Dost Mohammad and Abdur Rahman, the center of gravity of power and influence shifted in favor of the central government. These amirs were successful rulers because they were adept at maximizing the elements of government strength and at exploiting tribal weaknesses. On the other hand, whenever weak or inept amirs occupied the throne, tribal power expanded, dynastic quarrels flourished, brigandage increased and the writ of the central government was not honored in the land. But tribal power was never completely even during the reigns of the three great amirs. Ahmad Shah funneled off excess tribal aggressiveness in constant foreign wars, Dost Mohammad utilized it to repel the British, and Abdur Rahman, who faced major revolts during his reign, manipulated it by using one group of tribes to defeat another. It was Abdur Rahman, however, who recognized the ultimate futility of this game and who decided that the vicious cycle could be broken only if the central government developed its own independent army with sufficient strength to command tribal obedience and impose eventual submission. This he set out to achieve most energetically and he recommended to his successors that they carry on the task. His son, Habibullah, did so only half-heartedly and his grandson, Amanullah, not at all.”

Obviously, Leon Poullada’s noteworthy insights that were written in 1970 appear to describe the situation being experienced in Afghanistan in 2009 and serves as an excellent rebuttal to anyone stating that Afghanistan’s history shouldn’t be applied to the modern political situation. Today’s analysts attempt to understand the political situation in Afghanistan while viewing the continuing conflict through a lens that is both fogged and distorted by considering religion as a major factor while ignoring the cycle of violence between Kabul’s central government intention to create a stable nation-state while minimizing the tribes. Historians and Poullada provide convincing evidence that the primary source of conflict in Afghanistan developed in 1747 with the selection of Ahmad Shah Durrani as the leader of the most powerful “confederation” of the Pashtun tribes. As he began to

26. Tom Barfield points out that these strong amirs ruled Kabul following the withdrawal of foreign forces that relied upon weak rulers when they were present in Afghanistan. Ahmad Shah ruled following the death of Nadir Shah, the Persian ruler, Dost Mohammad returned to the throne after the British withdrew from Afghanistan, and the same situation resulted in Abdur Rahman arriving on Kabul’s throne. Foreigners tend to rely upon weak rulers, a factor that may explain the some of the current situation.

consolidate his power, Ahmad Shah knew that the greatest threat to his monarchy involved his Pashtun relatives composing other, competing tribes. In order to minimize this threat, he began work to weaken the tribes and began by ordering the huge Barakzai tribe to split to create the Achakzai tribe.

This process of weakening the Pashtun tribes continued under the stronger monarchs in Kabul as internal migrations were ordered to disperse the tribes into widely separated regions of Afghanistan where a single charismatic leader would be unable to attract their loyalty and unite them against the monarchy. This process is clearly visible when the locations of tribes in Afghanistan are compared to Pashtun tribe locations in Pakistan where the British colonial authorities generally left the Pashtuns to govern themselves. Afghanistan's tribes are generally widely scattered across the entire country, as ordered and manipulated by Abdur Rahman, and their aggressiveness was used in warfare, often against Afghanistan's other ethnic groups. For example, Ahmad Shah Durrani maintained nearly continuous raids into India where the Mughal Empire was slowly collapsing. Abdur Rahman ordered Pashtun raids into Afghanistan's northeast regions with the obvious goal of converting the Kohistanis to Islam, but also keeping the participating tribes occupied with fighting and loot while dividing and separating them as much as possible.

Weak monarchs in Kabul experienced a rejuvenation of tribal power. Amanullah learned the hard way that traditionally-minded tribes can force the abdication of an amir in Kabul as the Pashtuns objecting to his plans to modernize the country assembled into a powerful tribal coalition that was soon more powerful than the central government. Into the political vacuum created as Amanullah departed Kabul arrived non-Pashtuns, the Tajiks, and this precipitated a civil war that lasted until the Pashtuns were once again controlling Kabul's throne.²⁷

This scenario repeated itself during the period following the defeat of Najibullah's communist government as Burhanuddin Rabbani and Ahmad Shah Masood, both Tajiks, assumed control of Kabul's central government. Within a very short period, Pashtuns surrounding Gulbuddin Hekmatyar and their allies were attacking Kabul²⁸ in yet another civil war, a pair of facts that present one more Afghanistan constant: Civil wars result when non-Pashtuns rule or attempt to gain control of the central government. Unfortunately, when viewed through Pashtun eyes the current Afghanistan situation appears to be non-Pashtuns and their foreign allies gaining control of the country. Social gravity is gradually drawing the Pashtuns, especially the rural tribes, toward maintaining a neutral position, at best, or rallying to the Taliban, in the worst case. Additionally, the more the "foreigners" work to ensure that the recent presidential elections are fair and legal, the greater the gravitational tug on the Pashtuns.

While Abdullah Abdullah is the son of a mixed marriage between Pashtun and Tajik ethnic groups,²⁹ he is far from being a "bridge" between these two generally antagonistic groups. Abdullah's father was a Pashtun, but he has chosen a political career that is closely associated with the Panjshiri Tajiks who were instrumental in the creation of the Northern Alliance that opposed the Taliban – nearly exclusively a Pashtun organization. When viewed through Pashtun eyes, American, European, and United Nations support for a run-off election in which Hamid Karzai would have emerged a clear winner over Abdullah is a thinly veiled ploy to depose Pashtun and declare the Tajik Afghanistan's president. This suspicion is well buttressed by repeated media reporting of the Obama administration's intent to "dump Karzai" and the president-elect's visit to Jalalabad – complete with a well-documented session with Gul Agha Shirzai before meeting with Hamid Karzai.³⁰ Pashtuns live within conspiracies and clearly believe the "dump Karzai" scenario is real and is designed to install a Tajik as Afghanistan's president as the western allies of the Afghans manage to score points and provide recruits for the insurgent movement.

27. Rasanayagam, Angelo, *Afghanistan: A Modern History*, London: I.B. Tauris, 2003, pg. 22.

28. Clements, Frank, *Conflict in Afghanistan: A Historical Encyclopedia*, Los Angeles: ABC-CLIO, 2003, pg. 107.

29. http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Abdullah_Abdullah accessed on 22 November 2009.

30. <http://www.time.com/time/world/article/0,8599,1896399,00.html> accessed 22 November 2009.

Added to the tribal and ethnic group complexity as seen through Pashtun eyes, Abdullah Abdullah had a Pashtun father, but he chose to follow his mother's people, the Tajiks. In Pashtun society, genealogy follows the father and the traditional, rural Pashtuns – those most likely to tilt toward the Taliban – probably view Abdullah as a traitor to the Pashtuns. This is a very unhelpful factor when connected to the consistent western efforts to force a run-off election upon the Afghans.

There are several valid additional axioms which can be derived from a close examination of Pashtun tribal culture and society that have been continuous factors having a major impact on Afghanistan's frequently violent politics. Leon Poullada again gets it right:

- “The Pashtuns have a fierce sense of individual independence coupled with a paradoxical sense of individual dependence on the kinship group.”
- “Pashtun tribal society is characterized by a very high degree of distrust, violence, and conflict.”
- “Pashtun tribal society is noted for its lack of political unity. When projected on the national political scene, the Pashtun love of freedom, lawlessness, fanaticism, and pride has made it extraordinarily difficult to integrate the Pashtun tribes into a national fabric which must also include non-Pashtuns.”³¹

The unending and irrational fixation on the creation of a strong central government is simply a repetition of similar efforts by Mohammad Daud even before overthrowing Zahir Shah. In 1955 he began to form a strong national army that was involved in overthrowing him in 1978 to provide a series of leadership personalities having the same goal. The names Taraki, Amin, Karmal, and Najibullah were associated with repetitive attempts by Ghilzai Pashtun communists to build a strong central government. They were followed by non-Pashtuns Mojdeddi and Burhanuddin Rabbani, and Ghilzai Pashtuns Hekmatyar and Mullah Omar, who also sought to create the same strong central government in Kabul. Given the history of Afghanistan's past as a guide into the future, it seems highly probable that the current attempt to create a strong central government following similar attempts that consistently have failed since 1747 will also suffer from a very significant lack of success.

Modernization and centralization are the real targets of the Taliban and its allied insurgent groups that are well-rooted in the rural tribal system that must lose their authority in order for the successful creation of a strong central government in Kabul. The tribal leaders know this well since numerous generations have experienced this same dynamic equilibrium between state and tribe. Both sides also know that Amanullah's departure from Kabul's throne in 1929 serves as a warning of the undesired consequences associated with the constant tension between state and tribe. Serious civil war resulted as non-Pashtuns – the Tajiks under Habibullah Kalakani – gained control of the country in the power vacuum that resulted with the overthrow of Amanullah by the tribes. There are unanswered questions related to the challenge made against the Pashtun, Hamid Karzai, by the “Tajik,” Abdullah Abdullah, but there are real fears among the Pashtuns that they could be dominated by the very non-Pashtuns who were their victims for so many generations. The American partnership with the non-Pashtuns of the Northern Alliance in 2001 that resulted in the complete defeat of the Pashtun Taliban serves to reinforce Pashtun fears that the Americans and the Coalition work constantly to build a strong central government that opposes Pashtun interests. This part of Pashtun tribal dynamics is based on several centuries of state versus tribe – with state interests represented by Kabul and its series of foreign supporters that worked against the tribes.

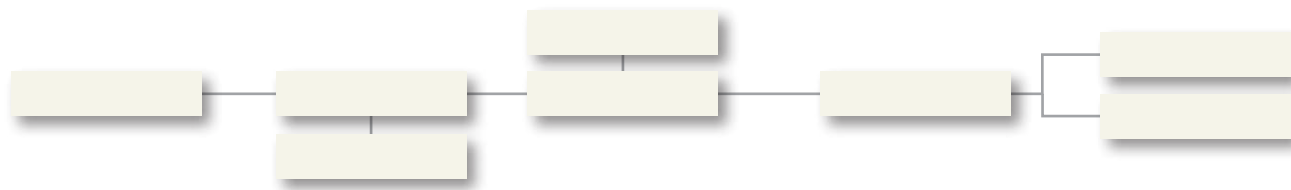
Next we examine individual characteristics of the Pashtun tribesman.

31. Poullada, pg. 25.

TRIBAL ANALYSIS CENTER

Traditional anthropological research conducted among tribes inhabiting remote areas where insurgents and criminals operate has become increasingly difficult to implement. Studies carried out among people living in small-scale societies now are nearly impossible due to the physical dangers associated with the civil and religious unrest found in those areas. Swat, for example, has become so dangerous that Frederick Barth's studies only could be repeated at the risk of the investigator's life. Similar research is not feasible among Burma's Rohingya tribes located on both sides of the border with Bangladesh, as well as with the Pashtuns in Afghanistan's interior and within Pakistan's Federally Administered Tribal Areas, where even Pakistan's army enters with reluctance.

Given the difficulties of conducting direct fieldwork in conflictive areas, the Tribal Analysis Center utilizes an indirect approach. Using multidisciplinary research, we seek to collect and analyze data obtained from a wide variety of sources, both current and historical. In the absence of new ethnographic fieldwork to update our base of knowledge, the Tribal Analysis Center compiles and summarizes existing research and documents on tribal societies, combining this material with contemporary press reports and articles. We assume that much can be gleaned from well-informed observers who are not anthropologists, ranging from journalists and travelers to government officials.



Please visit us at:
www.tribalanalysiscenter.com