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Crypto-Colonial Independence Rituals in Afghanistan

M. JAMIL HANIFI and SHAH MAHMOUD HANIFI

COLONIAL AMBIGUITIES AND CONTRADICTIONS

Although not fully colonized, there is increasing recognition of the various ways in which Afghanistan was enmeshed in the colonial domain of British India and the larger imperial and global processes that shaped it during the nineteenth century. The blurry vision of an isolated mountain kingdom and inward-looking tribal society resulting from the haziness of traditional colonial historiography has been clarified by recent treatments of Ottoman-Turkish, Russo-Soviet, German, French, American, pan-Islamic and other international actors' impact on Afghanistan in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. These and other studies shed considerable light on how Afghanistan has been materially, intellectually, geographically and geo-strategically enmeshed in a variety of colonial and imperial processes, as well as how the global forces of nationalism, developmentalism, humanitarianism and Orientalism have been historically articulated in the country.¹ Less explored are the domestic effects of colonialism on Afghanistan, a scholarly lacuna partially if not primarily explained by a general elision of the historical and cultural experiences of colonialism from traditional nationalist historiography and popular historical consciousness. Therefore, with Afghanistan's imbrication in global historical processes becoming increasingly evident to the international scholarly community, and the full impact of colonialism and imperialism still aggressively shielded from the people of Afghanistan by the ruling apparatus of the country, we propose to examine domestic historical and cultural processes in modern Afghanistan using the concept of *crypto-colonialism*.

¹ See, for example, Ahmed, *Afghanistan Rising*; Bayly, *Taming the Imperial Imagination*; Crews, *Afghan Modern*; Fluri and Lehr, *Carpetbaggers of Kabul*; Fuoli, "Colonialism and State Building;" Green, "The Afghan Discovery;" idem, "The Road to Kabul;" idem, "Trans-Border Traffic;" Gregorian, *Emergence of Modern Afghanistan*; Hanifi, ed., *Mountstuart Elphinstone*; Hannun, "States of Change;" Hopkins, *Making of Modern Afghanistan*; Leake, *Defiant Border*; Manchanda, *Imagining Afghanistan*; Nunan, *Humanitarian Invasion*; Schinasi, *Afghanistan*; Wardaki, "Knowledge-Migrants;" Wide, "Around the World;" idem, "The Refugee;" idem, "From Patriot."

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK AND HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

The concept of crypto-colonialism is a heuristic device developed by the anthropologist Michael Herzfeld to theoretically account for national culture production in territorial states that emerged in colonial frontier zones, including his primary concerns, Greece and Thailand. In Herzfeld's own words, crypto-colonialism is:

The curious alchemy whereby certain countries, buffer zones between the colonized lands and those as yet untamed, were compelled to acquire their political independence at the expense of massive economic dependence, this relationship being articulated in the iconic guise of aggressively national culture fashioned to suite foreign models. Such countries were and are living paradoxes: they are nominally independent, but that independence comes at the price of a sometimes humiliating form of effective dependence.²

By not admitting the fact of external political domination, the crypto-colonial process obscures and puts constraints on the country's self-determination National freedom, too, can become the expression of a subjugated condition; this paradox is the key marker of crypto-colonialism.³

With crypto-colonial consciousness, it becomes clear how Afghanistan's independence in fact generated new forms of dependency, and how the rulers and elite political classes of independent Afghanistan, while claiming to speak for a unified nation and on behalf of a single national culture, in fact routinely and often ruthlessly suppressed domestic cultural and political heterogeneity while remaining inextricably subordinated to the external agencies of Euro-American cultural tastes, industrial technologies and military capital.

Some of Herzfeld's inspiration for the crypto-colonial analytical paradigm comes from Thongchai Winichakul who developed the *geo-body* concept to account for the discrepancy between the historical and cultural space of Thai-ness and the geographical parameters of the modern nation-state of Thailand.⁴ A similar disparity exists between the historic spread of Afghan-ness and the territorial confines of modern Afghanistan wherein upon independence a small number of elites pressed older identities into new national conspicuously urban service in and around Kabul especially.

In basic terms, the process of demarcating Afghanistan's borders began with the Russians in the north in the 1860s and culminated in 1893 with the Durand Line agreement marking the boundary with British India. Afghanistan's border history is in fact much more complex due to borders with Iran and China and because the actual demarcation of all these international borders extended well into the twentieth century, with various border contestations still evident today. The borders were produced at different times by different combinations of international agencies

² Herzfeld, "The Absent Presence," 900–01.

³ Herzfeld, "The Conceptual Allure," 183–4.

⁴ Winichakul, *Siam Mapped*.

over different geographies, and as a result they are administered unevenly and differently on both sides of the border in all areas. The most substantive and enduring challenge to the integrity of Afghanistan's borders has been advocacy for an independent Pashtunistan. The key points are that the territorial inception of Afghanistan occurred under colonial auspices and the progressive bordering of the country, and the defense of those borders, has come with substantial fiscal incentives for rulers in Kabul.⁵

It is commonly asserted that Afghanistan achieved independence from British India after the Third Anglo-Afghan War in 1919. This war had none of the intense kinetic energy of the First World War, rather, it was a small-scale, concertedly limited affair involving a few border skirmishes leading to approximately a couple dozen total casualties. It is notable for a single aerial bombing of Kabul where rulers had made a strategic calculation to sacrifice the British subsidy to pursue their own foreign relations with other states. Independence from the British subsidy and international diplomatic yoke allowed foreign capital and western cultural practices to rapidly penetrate and become symbiotically rooted in the shallow and vulnerable Afghan state structure. In this way, independence amplified pre-existing crypto-colonial effects as Kabuli political elites began to aggressively craft a national culture in terms that were familiar and appealing primarily to a global audience. Crypto-colonial cultural production is evident in Afghanistan in a number of areas, and our focus here is national independence rituals.

A CULTURAL HISTORY OF INDEPENDENCE RITUALS 1920s–1940s

Independence festivals known locally as *Jashn-e Esteqlal* (sing. Persian, hereafter Jashn/s) in Afghanistan involved scripted public events that mimicked European models of national identity celebration. The earliest Jashns during King Amanullah's reign were held at a new amphitheater and parade ground roughly twenty miles west of Kabul in the district of Paghman that became a royal resort and subsidiary national capital with branches of government maintaining satellite offices very much along the lines of a Hill Station in British India. A series of French-produced postcards from 1925–27 provide abundant visual evidence for Paghman serving as a site of crypto-colonial national identity production.⁶ These postcards and other photos readily available online reveal Paghman to be defined by European built forms, cultural and spatial logics and practices that vividly reveal the Kabuli political elite to be obsessively seduced with the accoutrements of

⁵ For more on Afghanistan's boundaries see, for example, Balland, "Boundaries;" Hanifi, *Connecting Histories*; Hopkins, "The Bounds of Identity;" Khan and Effendi, *The Durand Line*.

⁶ See https://www.phototheca-afghanica.ch/index.php?id=501&tx_browser_pi1%5Btx_phototheca_domain_model_collections.title%5D=3&cHash=debd1a5d7c528e57cde45-ba706f410c6 (accessed on 19 December 2020). For more on photographs during Amanullah's reign, see Dupree and Seraj, *The KES Collection* and Dupree (photographs by Louis Dupree), "Victoriana Comes to the Haremserai," 111–14; Edwards, "Unruly Images;" idem, "Exiles, Diplomats and Darlings;" and idem, "Photography and Afghan Diplomacy."

modernity they had pursued since at least the late nineteenth century, but especially so in a seemingly unrestrained manner immediately upon independence. A replica of the Arc de Triomphe (*Taq-e Zafar*, Shelf of Victory in Persian [not *Kaman-e Zafar* or Arch of Victory]) welcomed visitors to Paghman where there were other new mimetic modern monuments including one for an Unknown Soldier (*Sepahi-ye Gumnam*, Lost Name Soldier in Persian [not *Sepahi-ye Na Ma'lum* or Unknown Soldier]) associated with the 1880 Battle of Maiwand, and another for those killed in the Third Anglo-Afghan War, as well as a balconied theatre that provided space for official costume balls where Amanullah “dressed up” in tribal garb in lieu of his much preferred western sartorial regime.⁷ The construction boom in Paghman in the 1920s reproduced European modernist aesthetics with stylistic uniformity emphasized to such an extent that the mosque resembled other state buildings and private villas giving the whole complex a prefabricated alpine tourist resort feel. An extensive photographic record indicates that Paghman was designed to attract foreign capital and serve as the primary location for the re-composition of national identity in Afghanistan using an array of new global material currencies including architecture, clothing and automobiles, and social practices such as military parades, agricultural fairs and sporting events, particularly during Jashns.

In his consideration of the expanded size and new functions of the British Legation in Kabul after Afghan independence, Maximillian Drephal addresses the role of sports, particularly cricket, field hockey and tennis, in Jashns in the 1920s–1940s. Elsewhere Drephal uses the concept of coloniality to describe the expansion in size and functionality of the British Legation in Kabul in the decades immediately after independence. Those insights allow for a vision of coloniality in the Jashns themselves that can also be productively viewed as a form of ruination or imperial debris as developed by Ann Stoler to describe the durability of colonial effects in the present.⁸ Our preference for crypto-colonialism as a frame of reference for Jashns is inspired by the underlying concept of the geo-body and the emphasis Herzfeld places on national identity construction especially in capital cities.⁹

After Amanullah’s downfall, annual Jashns were moved from Paghman to Kabul. During the nearly full week-long Jashn celebrations of the 1930s, a photograph or two of the King and various Ministers at Jashn events with a brief caption would typically appear without discussion on the covers of the Kabul daily newspapers *Anis* and *Eslah*. Attention to Jashns in the annual compendiums or *Salnamas* of the prominent monthly *Kabul* magazine is scarce. The 1935–36 edition carried two pages of photos and two pages of text related to that year’s Jashn, and the 1940–41 edition included six pages of Jashn photos without narrative elaboration.¹⁰ The Jashn celebrations consumed considerable material resources

⁷ Wide, “Astrakhan, Borqa’, Chadari, or Dreshi.”

⁸ Drephal, “Contesting Independence;” idem, *Afghanistan and the Coloniality of Diplomacy;* Stoler, “The Rot Remains.”

⁹ Herzfeld, “Crypto-Colonial Dilemmas.” For further comparative insight for Afghanistan, see idem, “Thailand.”

¹⁰ The 1935–36 *Salnama* carried two pages of photos and two pages of text including captions and the Jashn schedule, while the 1940–41 edition included six pages of Jashn photos with captions but no narrative elaboration. See Anjuman-e Adabi, *Salnama-ye*

and disrupted educational and administrative routines for royal displays designed to engage international state actors and private entrepreneurs. The crypto-colonial cultural constitution of Kabuli political elites explains the general absence of routine textual or visual celebrations of Jashns for the population-at-large in and beyond Kabul using state publications in the 1930s and 1940s.

For political elites in Kabul, competing patronage dynamics involving primarily Europeans (mainly French, Germans and Italians, but also Turks) in the 1920s and 1930s gave way to rival sets of alliances and dependencies routed principally through the United States and the Soviet Union in the 1950s and 1960s. The rituals of independence celebrations are an archetypal case of crypto-colonial continuity between and beyond these periods.

In broad measure, beginning in the 1930s Jashns increasingly incorporated foreign government and international corporate exhibit elements. A major US corporate presence in Afghanistan began in 1946 with the Morrison-Knudsen Company's first contract to build large industrial dams at Kajaki and Arghandab as well as related infrastructure including irrigation canals for new agricultural settlements such as Marja and Nad-e Ali designed to sedentarize Afghan nomads in the Helmand river basin in southern Afghanistan. Between 1948 and 1953 a series of US Congressional Acts and Presidential initiatives spawned a wide range of new governmental agencies designed to use public diplomacy and technical cooperation as foundational platforms of US foreign policy that assumed exponentially higher domestic and global profiles during the Second World War and as the Cold War heated up.¹¹ By 1956, Morrison-Knudsen (MK) had significantly expanded its work in Afghanistan, MK's base at Lashkar Gah was known as "Little America," and the company had become the lynchpin of the official US presence and foreign policy posture toward Afghanistan.¹²

CULTURE AND POWER IN JASHNS DURING 1950S AND 1960S

The 1956 Jashn was especially well-documented photographically by the American James Cudney who arrived in Afghanistan in 1953 to work at the Afghanistan Institute of Technology (AIT) that was supported by the University of

Kabul, 1935–36 and Pashtu Tolana, *De Kabul Kalanay*, 1940–41. The first Persian title of this publication was *Salanama-ye Mojala-ye Kabul* from 1932–41 when it shifted to the Pashtu *De Kabul Kalanay* until the late 1950s when its Pashtu title was modified to *De Afghanistan Kalanay* that lasted until the late 1970s. The important point about the title changes during the lifespan of this valuable periodical is that despite the insertions of Pashtu titles, the content remained 99% Persian with rare Pashto text inserted infrequently and awkwardly).

¹¹ I am referring to the US Congressional Smith-Mundt Act of 1948 that created the United States Information and Educational Exchange Program and President Truman's 1949 Point IV Program that led to the 1950 Technical Cooperation Administration. For Morrison-Knudsen and the Helmand Valley Project see United States Congress, Committee on Banking and Currency, *How to Obtain Financial Aid*.

¹² For Arnold Toynbee's reference to Lashkar Gah and MK's work as a "piece of America inserted into the Afghan landscape," and more on the Helmand Valley Project, see Cullather, "Damming Afghanistan."

Wyoming through an International Cooperation Administration (ICA) grant. Cudney soon began to work directly for ICA photographing MK work in Helmand, in the context of which he became the official photographer for the Afghan King Zahir Shah.¹³ In addition to smaller exhibits for AIT and US corporations including Pan Am, Philco and Craftool at the 1956 Jashn, the Helmand Valley Project had a large dedicated exhibit that was full of Cudney's photographs. Cudney's photos were also the means by which the Afghan Government portrayed its own national work in the Ministries of Mines, Agriculture, Education and the Press, at least.¹⁴ The 1956 Jashn was a photographic celebration of crypto-colonial national development projects where US technologies, corporations and specialists were both a conspicuous and invisible but nevertheless dominating presence.

The 1958 Jashn is also very well documented by Cudney's photos that allow us to see the Helmand Valley Project exhibit now with its own dedicated permanent building wherein table top and room-sized models of dams with flowing water, electrical grids with flashing lights, and manicured agricultural landscapes occupied the space.¹⁵ This Jashn also boasted an illuminated national map with small lightbulbs indicating MK and modernist infrastructure development projects in the Helmand River Valley basin and smaller US projects elsewhere in the country. The next year the Fairchild Aerial Survey Corporation began taking aerial photographs and preparing maps of the entire country using the ground based Shoran radar system to establish a triangulation grid.¹⁶ The aerial photographs and larger cartographic infrastructure produced by the Fairchild Corporation formed the crypto-colonial basis of national maps produced by the Institute of Cartography that was a part of Afghanistan's Ministry of Mines and Industries through the 1970s.

The 1968 Jashn was organized specifically to appeal to Afghanistan's trade partners, and the United States took full advantage of this opportunity to leave a strong commercial, political and cultural stamp on these Afghan national proceedings.¹⁷ Considerable human and material resources were mobilized

¹³ International Cooperation Administration, *Pictures of USOM/A Participation in Jeshan Fair, Kabul*, communication from Kabul, 29 November 1956, United States National Archives and Records Administration II, College Park, Maryland (NARA II), and Meridian International Center, 'Photographic Diplomacy.'

¹⁴ International Cooperation Administration, *Pictures of USOM/A Participation in Jeshan Fair, Kabul*, communication from Kabul, 29 November 1956, NARA II.

¹⁵ International Cooperation Administration, *Photographs: Jeshyn Exhibition of Helmand Valley Authority*, communication from Kabul, 24 September 1958, NARA II.

¹⁶ United States State Department, communication to US Collector of Customs *License for Fairchild Aerial Surveys Inc.*, (numbers 24550 [9 April 1959], 3423 and 3424 [13 August 1959], Central Decimal File # 489.1182 – Fairchild Aerial Surveys, and Fairchild Aerial Surveys 'Making a Map of Afghanistan (Prepared for the American Society of Photogrammetry)', *Afghanistan* 15 (1960).

¹⁷ United States Information Service, *U. S. Participation, Kabul International Fair*, communication to United States Information Agency, Washington D.C., 28 September 1968, NARA II.

through the main US Air Base in Europe in Wiesbaden, Germany, the Agency for International Development (USAID), the United States Information Agency (USIA) headquarters in Washington, and the United States Information Service (USIS) offices in Kabul and New Delhi, India. Multiple US Government and corporate funding streams, architectural consultants from the US, India and Kabul, imported materials and local labor combined to construct a large semi-permanent pavilion, an open air theater seating 450 people on fixed benches, and a children's playground.¹⁸ The US pavilion was dominated by a space exploration exhibit, but it also included exhibits dedicated to fine arts, US elections, the Helmand Valley and other US aid projects that highlighted modern agricultural technologies, educational institutions, programs and opportunities, asphalted roads and airports with concrete runways. The joint Pan Am and Ariana Afghan Airlines exhibit featured staff who mingled with the crowd of 280,677 visitors to the pavilion during the course of the national independence festival that had now more explicitly than ever before become a crypto-colonial celebration of American material and cultural agencies.¹⁹

The United States Air Force Band in Europe "The Ambassadors" was the main emphasis in the open air theater. The Ambassadors drew 6,000 people over many shows in addition to notable private performances for 400 local and international dignitaries at US Ambassador Neumann's residence and a Royal Command Performance. One Jashn day when festivities concentrated on Ghazi stadium north of the grounds called *chaman-e huzuri* at the eastern end of the Jada-ye Maiwand modernist thoroughfare in Kabul, forty nine resident American pre-school children performed a Cowboys and Indians skit replete with the former's covered wagon being overtaken by the latter's lassoes, bows and arrows that concluded with the ceremonial gifting of a Native American Indian Head Dress from the child performers to the Afghan Queen. On another Jashn day at Ghazi stadium, a Peace Corps Volunteer named Bill Plummer organized an American basketball team for a special royal performance, and this team went on to win the international basketball tournament that now featured in Afghan national

¹⁸ United States Information Service, *U. S. Participation, Kabul International Fair*, communication to United States Information Agency, Washington D.C., 28 September 1968, NARA II. The playground generated the following voluntary proclamation from an anonymous local man to enter the record: "You Americans must love children. You are the only people who provided anything for them."

¹⁹ Afghan state and private pavilions were organized by or dedicated to the Ministry of Information and Culture, Ministry of Mines and Industries, the Afghan Carpet Corporation, Afghan Textile Company, Afghan Construction Unit, the Afghan Air Authority and Tourist Organization, the Karakul Institute, various educational institutes and Pashtunistan in addition to a Turkoman tent. In terms of international actors, new pavilions were constructed by Pakistan, India, Saudi Arabia, Iran, West Germany, Czechoslovakia, and the USSR, while Poland, Yugoslavia, Turkey, France, Japan, Indonesia, Switzerland exhibited their wares in smaller pre-existing buildings, for which see *ibid*. For early air transport in Afghanistan, see Van Vleck, "An Airline at the Crossroads."

independence rituals.²⁰ Basketball was becoming a key crypto-colonial arena to advance US interests in Afghanistan as the subsequently and still intersecting careers of Thomas Guttierre, Hamid Karzai, Ashraf Ghani and Zalmay Khalilzad indicate.²¹

Motion pictures replaced photographs as the popular medium of choice at the 1968 Jashn, and two film showings each night at the open air theater resulted in 21,000 total viewers. Films dealing with space travel highlighted a schedule that also included films about a mosque in Washington D.C. and Zahir Shah's visit to the United States in 1963. Crypto-colonial effects appear in the first Afghan film produced in 1967 titled *Like an Eagle*. This film is about a young girl in Paghman who is inspired to run away from home to experience Kabul's modernity through a Jashn. It is not clear where *Like an Eagle* was shown during the 1968 Jashn, but its thematics were an organic fit within the proceedings and, we argue in conclusion, a crypto-colonial product.

Films were a primary weapon in the information arsenal the US deployed in pursuit of its political and ideological objectives in Afghanistan that began in 1950 as a Campaign of Truth against Soviet lies.²² The primary targets for the film campaign were Zahir Shah and his uncle the Prime Minister Shah Mahmud, other high ranking government officials involved in policy making, educators and students in Kabul where showings for audiences between 300–2000 occurred at Habibiya High School (known then as the American School, largely due to the efforts of the American Principal Howard Larsen), AIT, the teachers training high school, and the Ministries of Mines, Agriculture, Defense and Health. The films celebrated the application of modern industrial technology to various kinds of agricultural production, livestock farming, and transportation, and provided introductions to American geography, politics and society. Plans for expanding showings to additional audiences and locations were activated, and the utilization of jeeps for mobile showings was discussed at length en route to implementation in subsequent years. In 1951 the State Department coordinated with an MK cinematographer named Harry Lutton to produce a color film “showing many parts of Afghanistan that should acquaint people here with their own country, increase their pride in it, and inform them concerning the magnitude and importance of the (Morrison-Knudsen Afghanistan) dams and irrigation projects.” With this abbreviated historical background we see *Like an Eagle*, and the Jashn it celebrates, as crypto-colonial products.

The utility of crypto-colonialism as an analytical framework is that it accounts for an abundance of imperial projections in modern Afghanistan beyond singular expressions such as the US at Jashns and MK in the Helmand valley during the Cold War, or European architectural and archaeological projects in preceding decades. It allows us to understand how education, health, the military, politics,

²⁰ United States Information Service, U. S. Participation, Kabul International Fair Kabul, communication to United States Information Agency, Washington D.C., 28 September 1968, NARA II.

²¹ Ballard, “The Wizard of Kabul;” and Coll, *Directorate S*, 190–91.

²² For the various media and mechanisms of distribution designed for certain spaces and target groups see Hanifi, “The Battle for Minds.”

administration and other public sectors in “independent” Afghanistan have been systematically subjected to a wide global assortment of crypto-colonial influences. Crypto-colonialism continues today in self-sustaining dialectical fashion operating in and between local displays of state power and representations of national identity in Kabul especially and elsewhere in the country, and in multiple metropolitan settings as well as international discursive, political and military engagement of Afghanistan.