

PEASANT'S PILGRIMAGE:
A BALLAD FROM AFGHAN TURKISTAN
by
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In this short article I examine the structure, content, and meaning of a ballad from northern Afghanistan, in which the singer narrates his experiences on pilgrimage to the shrine of 'Alī at Mazār-i Sharīf. After a discussion of the background to the ballad and how it came to be recorded, the text of the ballad is given in both the original Afghan Persian and an English translation with notes. The concluding commentary shows how the tight structure and style of the ballad add to its effectiveness as a personal document of an emotional event. The article attempts a modest contribution both to the understanding of the experience of pilgrimage and to the interpretation of oral literature.

BACKGROUND

The ballad was recorded in August 1968, during the course of a brief ethnographic survey of Afghan Turkistan by Nancy Tapper and myself.¹ In Kabul, before our survey began, we met the ethnomusicologist Mark Slobin, who had just completed fieldwork on the musics of northern Afghanistan (Slobin 1976); apart from giving us valuable information about the region, he advised that towns in the north abounded with musicians, singers, and story-tellers, from whom we could acquire interesting insights and introductions into the culture of different groups there.

During the ensuing month-long survey of the north, we collected many recordings of local ballads and narrative poems or verse stories, mainly in the province of Jauzjān. Among them was this ballad, recorded in the town of Saripul.

We arrived in Saripul during the preparations for the annual Independence Day Celebrations (Jashn-i Istiqlāl - that year being the 50th anniversary). The provincial Governor's office in Shiberghān had provided us with a guide, and we were introduced to the local Sub-Governor and the Commandant, who welcomed us warmly and, being preoccupied with preparations for the Jashn, instructed our guide to take us where we wanted. We asked if anyone knew of story-tellers; after some discussion, the name of Hasan was brought up; the only difficulty was that he was in the town jail, but this proved no problem, since it

meant he was easy to locate, and the Commandant at once gave orders for him to be brought out to perform for us.

We sat down in one of the newly-constructed though not yet occupied booths (kāmp) on the Jashn-ground, while Hasan duly sang for us, before being taken back off to jail. Embarrassed by the way Hasan had been used for our benefit, we asked some discreet questions about him, including why he was in jail and how long for, but the answers were not forthcoming. As a result, we know nothing about him other than what we observed - that he was an elderly man with few teeth, which made his words sometimes hard to understand - and what he himself mentioned in his stories - that he was poor and came from Shāh Chinār, a Hazāra village north of Saripul. He called himself a kissa-khān, the normal local term for storyteller or ballad-singer. Hasan sang five ballads for us. The first began with an expression of loyalty to Muhammad Zahir Shah, and went on to recount some stirring events in local history. The second related a famous provincial buzkashī game (cf. Azoy 1982). The third was a wry account of Hasan's privations during a long and fruitless search for a lost donkey. Fourth was a version of the well-known tale of the champion wrestler Bunyād Pahlwān. Fifth was this account of Hasan's pilgrimage to the shrine of 'Alī at Mazār-i Sharīf; this was different in form and content from the others, and does not belong to any of the genres of religious song or tale described by Hoerbürger (1969), Slobin (1976, esp. 46f., 58f.), or Sakata (1983).²

In 1971 and 1972 we returned to Saripul to carry out research on Pashtun nomads and their place in regional economy and society.¹ During the months we were in the vicinity of Saripul, we did not find the opportunity to follow up our earlier encounter with Hasan, to pursue the interpretation of his stories. We planned to return in 1979-80 with a project on ritual and society in Saripul town itself,⁴ but political developments prevented this, and the current tragic situation of Afghanistan makes it unlikely that any follow-up will ever be possible, so I thought to publish the story as recorded, with a literal translation and annotation that leave crucial problems unresolved: especially, Hasan's own background, his reasons for the pilgrimage he described, and further details of the objects and rituals at the shrine.

SARIPUL, MAZĀ-I SHARĪF, AND THE SHRINE

Saripul is the administrative center of the district of that name, a market-town of about 20,000 inhabitants and seat of a Sub-governor with nominal jurisdiction over 10-20,000 square kilometers of rough country inhabited by about 150,000 people from many different ethnic groups. The majority of people in Saripul town and vicinity are Uzbek Turks, but there are numerous communities of Arabs and Tajiks, as well as more recently arrived Hazāras and Pashtuns.⁵ The region as a whole is dominated by khans of the Durrānī Pashtuns who arrived around the turn of the century. All are Sunni Muslims except the Hazāras, who are Shiite (Ithna 'Ashariya, or Imāmi as they are known locally) and here form about ten percent of the population, as they do in Afghanistan as a whole. The Hazāras who settled near Saripul town, in villages like Shāh Chinār, originate in the mountainous central Afghan region of the Hazārajāt (see Canfield 1973). They arrived here after the conquest of their homeland by the Amir 'Abd al-Rahmān in the 1890s. Industrious cultivators and rug-weavers, they have established close economic and social contacts with their neighbors of other ethnic groups, but they retain their distinctive identity, perpetuate ties with their relatives in the Hazārajāt, and have a local khan of some influence.

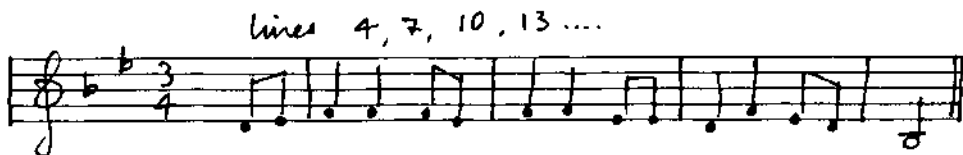
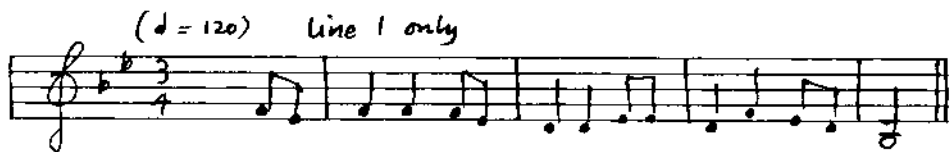
Mazār-i Sharīf is the major city of northern Afghanistan, close to the ancient Balkh, and about 200 kilometers by road from Saripul. In 1968 the road via Shiberghān was still a dust track, many hours' journey by motor vehicle and perhaps three days on foot; the shorter, more direct route through the steppe could take considerably less time. Hasan does not state which route he took, but he clearly went on foot. The city of Mazār owes its existence and its name to the shrine of 'Alī, cousin and son-in-law of the Prophet Muhammad. The historical and mythological background and the architecture of the shrine are described elsewhere and need not be repeated here. A useful account is that of Nancy Dupree in The Road to Balkh, where she also describes the annual forty-day spring Tulip Festival (Melah-i Gul-i Surkh) at Mazār, including the raising of the standard (Janda Bālā Kardan) at the New Year (Naurūz, March 21st), which is the most elaborate public celebration in Afghanistan, attended by thousands of pilgrims, and (in the 1960s) presided over by the Governor, who leads prayers and reads a Royal Message.⁶

It should be noted that the shrine at Mazār-i Sharīf, far from being confined to Shiite pilgrims, with their special regard for 'Alī, is a national pilgrimage center for Sunnis too. It would be interesting to discover the differences between Sunni and Shii pilgrims in the meanings they attach to the pilgrimage. Some of the meanings for the Shiite Hasan are evident in his account. In northern Afghanistan (as elsewhere in the Muslim world), 'Alī is not merely the most powerful "Saint," next only to Muhammad in ability to intercede with God; he is a culture-hero, with his magical sword Zulfiqār and the flying horse Duldul (elsewhere ascribed to Muhammad), and his mythical adventures and conflicts with infidels and dragons are recorded all over the landscape in minor shrines, marking his victories, miracles, stopping places, watering-places, and so on. Any remarkable geological formation is likely to be attributed to 'Alī, for example the Band-i Amīr lakes in the Hazārajāt, or the water springing out of a cliff-face at Angusht-i Shāh, south of Sangchārak in the province of Jauzjān. 'Alī is known by various names and titles, such as Murtazā, Haydar, Sakhī Bābā, Sakhī Jān, Shāh, Amīr al-Muminīn, Mushkil-Kushā. When there is so much evidence of his activity in the countryside round about, it is not odd to Afghans that 'Alī should be buried here, so far from the central places of Islam at Mecca and Medina. Even Afghan Shiites, who may have visited 'Alī's "other" tomb and the associated shrines at Najaf and Karbalā in Iraq, find no contradiction in his ubiquity.

The language of the ballad is the Afghan Persian (Dari) common to Tajiks, Arabs, and Hazāras in Afghan Turkistan, with peculiarities of local pronunciation and inflection which I have tried to reproduce in the transcription. Long vowels (ā, ī, ū) are marked as they occur, sometimes inconsistently (e.g., mā = "I"). The story was transcribed in some haste soon after recording, with the help of our guide, a Pashtun from near Kabul who was fluent in Persian but unfamiliar with the local dialects and accents. As a result, and also because we were too embarrassed by the first encounter to ask for Hasan to be released from jail once more to help with this strange task, there remain some uncertain words and phrases. I have given alternative hearings and meanings; a few words we were not able to decipher at all.

With the exception of line 34, all the lines group into rhymed triplets, which then follow the pattern A B B A C D A B B C E (34) B B F F. The melody of the ballad

was almost identical from line to line: the major variation was in the first half of the first line of each triplet, as follows:



From about line 22 the tempo quickened, and the lower notes of the melody tended to disappear.⁷

The ballad was sung very rhythmically, with no accompaniment, though Hasan was clearly used to accompanying himself on *duṭār* or *dambura*,⁸ in the absence of which he "strummed" on his staff. The meter is highly regular: ()

I have marked the long beats on each line, which come invariably, even at the expense of "natural" syllable values, sometimes splitting diphthongs and even single vowels (e.g., *ha'iīn*, *khā'āk*).

THE BALLAD

1. Asi-i jāyám Sāripúl ást, jāy-nishínúm Shāh chinār (bis)
My place of origin is Saripul, my residence Shah Chinar
2. dū shaw má dām rāh kadém, shāw-i dīgār shār-i Māzār
I spent two nights on the road, the next in Mazar city
3. subhush hám, [subh u shām?] ístādeh-ám bár zikr-i ān
pārvardigār
and in the morning (morn and eve?) I stood in devotion
to God
4. bazarán sāhat rasídúm ma dar zánjír-gāh-yi wú
early (?) I arrived at his chain-place⁹
5. hūsh-i mán há'irān shūd dār gumbaz-í [b]ālā-yi wú
I was awe-struck at his high building
6. yek nazár kárdim taráf-í kaftar ú qúbbahā-yi wú
I cast a glance towards his dove(s)¹⁰ and dome(s)
7. bāz qadām rá mānda [rāh-mānda?] ráftim ba sar-í
khisht-ā-yi wú
then I went back (tired?) onto (towards) his bricks
8. kash-ki ghulām-ísh mishudím má khā'ak-í pá-hā-yi wú
would I were slave to the dust of his feet
9. rū-yi khúd-rā, mālidúm chānd gasht ba-[ha]mú
dārgāh-yi wú [ba-muddar-gāh?]
I wiped my face¹¹ several times on his threshold
10. che-qadár áz rāh-i dūr mardum amádá be-shumár
how many numberless people came from far away
11. tā az Kábúl ū az Hérāt tā az múlk-í Qandahār
even from Kabul, Herat and the land of Kandahar
12. kasī hást fārzand-talāb wá kasī hám [y]émā¹² ba-kār
there are some asking for children, and some needing
peace
13. kur ū shāl hár dū danā-yísh būd walé hájat talāb
blind and lame,¹³ both of them, were pursuing
their requests
14. che qadár khálq-hā-yi Khúdā ba jamáyat bē-hisáb
how many of God's creatures in a numberless
congregation

15. bāzī chāl-yāk dāuru mékhúrdand ammá tá nīm-i sháb
some did forty-one rounds,¹⁴ even till midnight
16. pe'ishtár ráftim ū guftúm "lā ilāhá il-allāh
earlier I went and said "there's no God but Allah
17. "mā ba-tú sé arzū dārim, yā Sakhī múshkil-kushā
"I have three wishes for you, O Sakhi,¹⁵ solver
of problems
18. "moulada fáryād ham berásíd ba-[h]amú rúz-i qazā"
"may my cry reach the Lord¹⁶ (O Lord receive my
cry?), for the (same) day of judgment"
19. zer-i pāy kárdum nazár kí khisht didúm nákhsh ū nigár
I glanced under my feet, where I saw the pictured
bricks¹⁷
20. ba-tahájjib mā'andím má, guftum "yá Párwardigár
I stood amazed, I said "O God
21. Sakhī, ba-tú má arzū dārum, mārā hám ájat ba-kār"
"Sakhi, I beg you, I too have things to ask"
22. chust ū chálák ra'uftúm dár peshak-í díg-ā-yi wú
very quickly I went in front of his cauldrons¹⁸
23. chandī zīyárat kardum má áz har sunn-í gúsh-ā-yi wú
I made several pilgrimages from all sides of its ears¹⁹
24. yak nazár kárdim ba zímín ba sunn-í pāy-ā-yi wú
I glanced at the ground, towards its feet
25. bazarán sáhat shumáridím omá gúsh-ā-yi wú
early (?) I counted . . . (?) its ears
26. mā shumárim habdah ámad hasht budák pāy-ā-yi wú
I counted, they came to 17, its feet were eight
27. mā fidá-yí hamchū díg ú májíd ú kár-ā-yi wú
I am devoted to that cauldron, and to his mosque and
his works
28. dūyum dárwāza rasídím, būd Qur'án-khán bē-hisáb
I came to the second doorway,²⁰ there were numberless
Koran-reciters
29. sayyid ú mullā ū talíb, hamagí ájat-taláb
Sayyids, mullahs and students, all praying for their needs

30. kur ū áśá, chub ba-dístá, didim ū jígá-r-kabáb
I saw blind and lame with stick in hand, and, awe-struck,
31. ba-miyán-í gumbaz-ásh díđum qabr-í dígar bŭdá
I saw in the middle of his building there was another
grave²¹
32. ba-miyán-í ráŭz-a-yásh, múshkil-kushá Háýdar bŭdá
in the midst of his sermons (?) was Haydar, solver
of problems
33. walwasí-yí [nawáséh?] Mustafá, dāmād-i Pēyghāambar bŭdá
he was . . . ('Ali), son-in-law of the Prophet
34. munkirān-ísh rá zi khŭg ū khi'rs kām tár mē-bīnŭm
his disbelievers I see as fewer (lower?) than pigs
and bears²²
35. hájat-taláb ráftum ū má dár jāy-nishín ū jā-yi wŭ
I went, pursuing my requests, to his place and residence
36. pŭsh-i bákhnāl bŭd ū áwár hamchŭ dár bālā-yi wŭ
there was a cover, velvet and smooth(?), even on top
of him
37. ruyi khód-rá mālídŭm chānd gasht ba-mŭ qŭlf-hāyi wŭ
I wiped my face several times on his locks²³
38. chānd rakát khāndŭm namáz dām bālā-yí khísht-hā-yi wŭ
I prayed several times over his bricks
39. yak nazár kárdim da bālā sunn-i chírágh-ā-yi wŭ
I glanced upwards towards his lamps
40. ma fidáyí ūn gul-há [?] ū bryrāgh ū qŭbb-ā-yi wŭ
I am devoted to his flowers (?) and flag and dome(s)²⁴
41. bāz namáz-á khā'andŭm dár gumbaz-ásh háýrān shudím
again I prayed and I was amazed at his building
42. har taráf kárdim nazár dú dida bār gíryān shudím
I glanced in all directions, and both my eyes were
full of tears
43. se hájāt-í ki dāshtŭm dár ūnjā tálābān shudím
the three requests I had, I made them there²⁵
44. bāz ham zíýarat kárdim má aqz gumbazásh bírŭn shudím
again I made a pilgrimage and came out from his
building

45. tū gushā-yī kulli jā-ī yā Amír ál Mo'manín
you are Conqueror of All Places, O Lord of Believers,
46. kull-i mūshkíl-rā kushāí, yā Amír ál Mo'manín
you are Solver of All Problems, O Lord of Believers.

COMMENTARY

The vocabulary with which the singer-pilgrim describes his emotions is limited: hayrān, ta'ajub, jigar-kabāb, fidā, giryān, "amazement," "awe," "fear" (lit. "liver-roasted"), "devotion," "weeping," are direct but extremely simple terms. The experience of the pilgrimage is, however, communicated with great effectiveness through the style and structure of the ballad.

The anthropologist Victor Turner suggested a framework for the analysis of pilgrimage, using concepts of "liminality" and "communitas" which he elaborated in other contexts too. Despite the shortage of background information in this case - we are ignorant not only of Hasan's motives for the pilgrimage but of other relevant factors such as whether he went alone or in a group and whether he combined his pilgrimage with a marketing expedition in the city - there is enough in the ballad itself to show the applicability of some of Turner's suggestions. For example, whether or not Hasan was in a group, his pilgrimage was clearly an intensely personal act, analogous to a mystical quest.²⁶ Further, as Turner says,

Towards the end of a pilgrimage, the pilgrim's new-found freedom from mundane or profane structures is increasingly circumscribed by symbolic structures: religious buildings, pictorial images, statuary, and sacralized features of the topography, often described and defined in sacred tales and legend. (1978:10)

Hasan's narrative is clearly patterned, in the first place, by the architecture of the shrine and the passage of the pilgrim through the gateways to the tomb and out again. At another level, the ballad is given a subtle and intricate structure by the elements of sense and rhyme. As we have seen, all the lines but one group into rhymed triplets. The first triplet, introducing the whole story by referring to Hasan himself, his origins and his

journey, is balanced by the last, describing the pilgrim's exit from the shrine and final eulogy to 'Ali. In between, there is a progress from lines 4 to 27, followed by a relatively static phase from line 28 to 43.

After the first, many of the triplets also group into pairs according to sense and/or rhyme. Both of these factors clearly link triplet 4 to 6, describing the pilgrim's arrival at the shrine and his first reactions, with triplet 7 to 9 in which he performs his first ritual abasements. The two following triplets (10 to 12 and 13 to 15) describe the other pilgrims and their rituals. In the next two (16 to 18 and 19 to 21) Hasan tells us of his prayers and requests to 'Ali. In the rhymed pair of triplets, 22 to 24 and 25 to 27, Hasan describes the cauldron in the entrance room of the shrine. Up to this point, the pilgrim's progress has been marked in the ballad's structure by a coincidence and agreement of sense and rhyme.

From this point on, however, the structure becomes more complex, adding to the drama and meaning of the narrative. The elements of sense and rhyme no longer coincide, which seems to mark out the rites of the main shrine chamber as timeless and "liminal." Thus, triplet 28 to 30, describing the second gateway, the entrance to the main shrine room, flows naturally into the following triplet (31 to 33) in which Hasan sets eyes on the tomb for the first time; but this latter triplet is linked by sense with the next (35 to 37) to form the climax of the whole story - and it is structurally significant that they are separated by the one line in the ballad (34) that does not rhyme or otherwise group with any other but rather makes striking reference to a contrast between true believers and the two most taboo'd creatures that Muslims know. The triplet 35 to 37, however, does seem again to pair with the following triplet (38 to 40), at least in sharing the commonest rhyme in the ballad. But the latter triplet is linked by sense (Hasan recounts his prayers at the tomb) with the one after (41 to 43), which is in turn associated by rhyme with the final triplet of all (44 to 46). The finality of this last pair of triplets is further emphasized in that, while all other rhymes in the ballad are based on the back vowels ā and ū, these last (and the lone line 34) are based on the front vowel ī. This new rhyme expresses, as no words could, the emotional transformation which the pilgrim has experienced.

Further sides to the story and its structure would no doubt be revealed by a more detailed analysis, for example, of the features of the shrine that are mentioned, the order in which they appear, and their relation to each other - but the information available to me, either in the ballad or in other sources, does not warrant attempting this. The brief analysis that has been possible, however, does demonstrate that while the emotional vocabulary employed may be simple, the ballad is constructed in a fashion which communicates, at another level, the depth and impact of the pilgrim's experience.

NOTES

1. This survey was funded by grants from the Central Research Fund of London University and the Nuffield Foundation.
2. Slobin (1976:61-64) gives another version of the Bunyād Pahlwān story, and we collected two more, as yet unpublished. Hasan's story of the search for the donkey was in melody and content very similar to, though considerably longer than, an item recorded in 1973 by Bernard Dupaigne of the Musée de l'Homme, sung by "Said Hayder Topalang, an Hazara amateur singer and woolen carpet salesman from Shah Cenar near Sar-i-Pul," that is a fellow-villager of Hasan's; see Dupaigne (n.d.: side B, track 1).
3. This research was supported by the School of Oriental and African Studies and the Social Science Research Council, U.K. The description of the region which follows is given in the "ethnographic present" of 1968-72.
4. Saripul town has its own shrines, see Bivan (1966).
5. On the ethnography of Saripul, see R. Tapper (1984); Jebens (1983); N. Tapper (1973).
6. See Yate (1888:279-81); Adamec (1979:410f.); von Niedermayer (1924:65-66); Byron (1937:285f.); Dupree (1967:49-56); Slobin (1976:145f.); Einzmann (1977:90-93); Wiebe (1980:97-108). For pilgrims' experiences at Muslim shrines in Pakistan, see the analyses of Kurin (1983) and Pfleiderer (1981). On all these matters see Beattie (1983).

7. We did not hear this particular melody on any other occasion while in Afghanistan, and it does not figure on any of the dozen or so commercially available records of Afghan music, including those by Sakata, who has made a special study of Hazara music; see Sakata (n.d.) and (1983).
8. Standard lutes in northern Afghanistan, see Slobin (1976).
9. Refers to the chains and locks on the iron railings around the tomb, a common feature of tomb-shrines, see Einzmann (1977:98); see also line 37.
10. There are thousands of white pigeons (?doves) at the shrine, and various legends associated with them.
11. I.e., kissed; see also line 37.
12. Either yeman/yamīn, an oath; or imān, faith; or (most likely) amān, peace.
13. The shrine is particularly noted for miraculous cures of the blind and the lame.
14. I.e., circumambulations of the shrine, forty being the custom.
15. Sakhī = 'Alī; the city of Mazār-i Sharīf is popularly referred to as Sakhī Bābā, or Bazār-i Sakhī Jān.
16. "Lord" probably refers to 'Alī.
17. On the paintings, see the picture in Wiebe (1980), and the account in Dupree (1967:52).
18. There is only one cauldron, bronze and immense, in the main ante-chamber; Dupree notes its similarity to the one in the Herat mosque.
19. "ears" = handles.
20. The second doorway, leading to the main shrine-chamber.
21. The main tomb of 'Alī, referred to as Haydar and Mustafā.

22. Pigs and bears may once have been common in Afghanistan, but now they are so rare that most country people confuse what they have heard of the two; both are harām, but the "pig" is the one that stands upright and can talk like a man, as well as being the most taboo form of food for a Muslim.
23. See notes on lines 4 and 9, above.
24. "flag" - not the janda standard, but probably the pendants attached to the tomb inside; gubba too may not refer to the dome(s) of the shrine, but to the objects at the top of the standard poles, see Beattie (1983:147).
25. Hasan does not tell his audience what his three requests were.
26. "If mysticism is an interior pilgrimage, pilgrimage is an exteriorized mysticism." (Turner 1978:7).
27. Turner (1978:10).

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