

*Monica Bulaj*

**Thematic session I: Setting the stage - The hidden light of Afghanistan.**



*The valley of the Panj close to Ishkashim where a bridge allows crossing the border between Afghanistan and Tajikistan. The wide valley floor merges with the flat scree slopes on which the settlements and village lands of Tajik Ishkashim and Afghan Sultan Ishkashim are located. Photograph © Monica Bulaj April 2010*

Seven months of walking and hitchhiking, of riding on trucks and horses and yaks. Without ever being ‘embedded’, but sharing the hunger, fear and weariness of Afghans. Living with Afghan families and staying in their homes. From the Iranian border to the Wakhan border with China, deep in snow, with a notebook and a Leica. Ready for the irreducible intimacy of each new encounter.

Balkh, Pansher, Samanghan, Herat, Kabul, Jalalabad, Badakshan, Pamir Khord, Khost. Zig-zagging constantly in order to avoid the Taliban and bandits, following the complex geography of security that all Afghans know so well.

I wanted to see things as they really were: not through the bullet-proof glass of an armoured vehicle, not as an embedded journalist, but as an Afghan sees things on the street. I wanted to feel people’s fear, to be as vulnerable as they were. And without ever losing hope that all this will someday end.

Kabul, at night, in winter. Its archipelagos of illegal villages, without sewers or electricity, where children get up at 4 in the morning and walk long distances to fetch water in heavy water cans. The Sufi ceremonies, the magic rituals that make up for the lack of medicine, the villages full of opium addicts because there is nothing else to kill the pain. Brides sold for debts; the male hammams, or bathhouses; the 21st century Afghan warrior body-cult in gyms; the new epidemic of self-immolation; the anti-personnel mines that continue to increase exponentially instead of decreasing.

What do we know about all this? What do we know about the clandestine Shiah rites, or the death threats nailed at night by the Taliban, on the doors of those who dare to send their daughters to school? Who talks about the survivors of kidnappings - the country's most thriving industry? What do we know about the juvenile prisons where female adolescents are incarcerated after escaping from forced marriages? Or the shelters, where these young women seek refuge from the revenge of their clans or their own families?

Who cares about the Kuchis, the last nomads, the very lowest of the low: without pasturelands, reduced to miserable existences, living in the cities in squalid hovels or tents, where half the newborn babies do not survive the winter? But all Afghans are in danger of becoming Kuchis, a displaced and dispossessed people, perched on their bundled belongings, waiting for an escape that never comes.

Yet, in spite of all the horror and misery, the fear and degradation, the Afghan people still laugh and play passionately, make music, and dance and sing joyously. Here is the smiling barber who interpreted Osama bin Laden in a TV series. Here a small neighbourhood theatre full of serious-looking Afghan men who are betting on the outcome of a 'battle royal' between opposing armies of baby chicks. And here other men laugh and joke while watching the ritual camel-fights.

The families of Taliban who are fighting on the frontlines, the village chiefs who are now repentant killers, the children who had to behead a hostage as their initiation rite, the nomad girls working as prostitutes, the hopeless fight of the Kirghizians on the arid mountains of the North.

And the female continent. Women: their dreams, sexuality, emotional geography, expectations, their fight against depression and their striving for self-fulfilment in a repressive tribal context.

In the 'bright garden' of Afghanistan, I followed its paths instinctively, finding centres of hope in the most hopeless places, in the darkest depths of despair.

Kabul, 2012



*Agricultural fields are tilled in the vicinity of Ishkashim. The ploughing takes place in spring. Only a single crop can be cultivated here, therefore there is no pressure on the timing as the plant growth period is sufficiently long for the ripening of the main crops - wheat (*Triticum aestivum*) and barley (*Hordeum vulgare*) on irrigated fields. Photograph © Monica Bulaj April 2010*





*The tomb at Bozai Gumbaz is an important stage along the main route between Sarhad-e Wakhan and the Little Pamir. From here the northeastern route turns to Chakmaktin Köl, the southeastern to the Wakhjir valley and pass, the western route towards Langar and Sarhad-e Wakhan as well as towards Irshad-e Win. Strategically this place commands the major access routes and was selected by Soviet troops during their ten-year-long occupation for a military post. On the right a line of corroded barbed wire marks the outer limits of that post since they left in 1989.  
Photograph © Monica Bulaj April 2010*



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*Metal water kettles and pots are prime household tools for preparation of the basic liquid food item: saltish milk tea (širčóy). The elevated platform (dildung) contains an opening to the fire below in a 'tanduri' style mud oven. The inner mud walls are used for the preparation of the staple food flat breads (dildungi). The Wakhi daughter-in-law is responsible for the provision in this house in Sarhad-e Wakhan. Photograph © Monica Bulaj April 2010*



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