Malang, Sufis, and Mystics: An Ethnographic and Historical Study of Shamanism in Afghanistan

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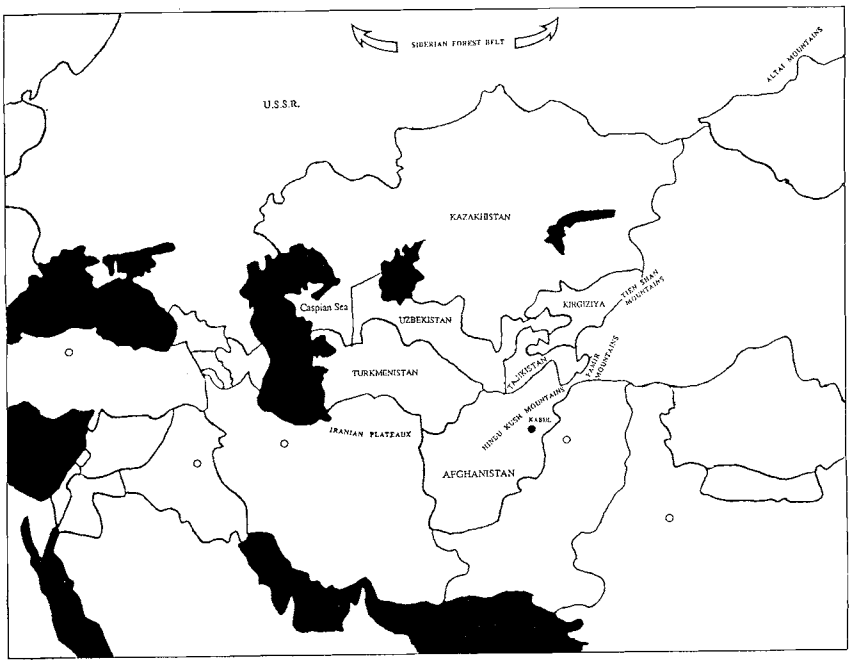
Demographic and historical factors in Central Asia have produced an ethnic and cultural homogeneity, which overrides ecological diversity and artificial political boundaries imposed by nineteenth-century Western imperialism (KRADER 1963, 2). Ethnographically, Afghanistan belongs to the Central Asian region (Map 1), an area extending southward from the Siberian forest belt to the Iranian plateau, and southeastward to the Pamir mountains of northern Afghanistan, the Tien Shan range, and the Hindu Kush. The last mountain range constitutes the " Great Divide " between Central and South Asia (FRASER-TYTLER 1950, 3).[1] From west to east, Central Asia includes all the territory from the Caspian Sea to the Mongolian steppes, including the Altai mountains (KRADER 1963, 1–4; OSHANIN 1964, 1–2).

The population of Afghanistan[2] is overwhelmingly Muslim: 80% Sunni and 19% Shi'ite.[3] But in Afghanistan, as elsewhere in Muslim Central Asia, Islam has had to come to terms with shamanistic elements derived from earlier beliefs and practices.

In Central Asia, shamanism was once prevalent among the Turkic peoples, originally occupying the area of the Altai mountains. By the sixth century the Turks had invaded the Central Asian steppes, bringing with them their shamanistic beliefs along with cults of ancestors, stones, mountains, and the earth goddess Otukan (KRADER 1963, 131). Such beliefs seem to have been shared by the Uzbeks of the Oxus delta, and the Mongols and Turkmen (KRADER 1963, 131; *CAR* 1959, 109–110). The concept of Tanggri, the heaven or sky deity, along with associated shamanistic beliefs, was brought to Central Asia by the Hsiun-Nu. These people originally occupied the Mongolian steppes

Asian Folklore Studies, Volume 49, 1990: 275–301



Map 1. Afghanistan and Central Asia

to the northwest of China but, in the middle of the sixth century, were able to conquer the Central Asian steppes and defeat the Hephthalites of Afghanistan (GROUSSET 1970, 23, 86; KWANTEN 1979, 33, 45). SCHURMANN (1962, 249, n. 51) reports that the term "Tanggri" still appears in the phrase *Tanggri ta' ala'*, used in the present Ghorat region of Afghanistan to describe the omnipotent God of Islam.

Despite the Muslim hegemony which was established over a large section of Central Asia after the seventh century, many shamanic practices survived. Nineteenth-century Russian ethnographers reported the presence of shaman-sorcerers and exorcists in Tajikistan (modern Soviet Central Asia), who employed human skull caps, drums, smoke, and animal blood in their rituals (*CAR* 1959, 114). Similarly, the Uzbeks and Kazakhs, up until the nineteenth century, had religious specialists who beat sacred drums and were adept at divination and healing. Among the Kazakhs these specialists were known as ***baqshi***. They were said to have been able to communicate with ***jinn*** (spirits, from Arabic), who acted as their familiars, helping them to cure illness, foretell the future, and combat the malicious influence of evil spirits. Following the Kazakhs' acceptance of Islam in the nineteenth century, such shamanic practices were taken up by the mullah, or Muslim reli-

gious guides (KRADER 1963, 132; *CAR* 1957, 16–17).

The Turkmen also had many shamanistic beliefs, several of which persist in Afghan Turkestan. Among the Kirghiz and Uighur, shamans were known as *bakhsi*. While curing illness and foretelling the future, they used to beat drums, enter into trances, and invoke Allah, Adam, Noah, and other members of the " Biblical-Koranic pantheon " (KRADER 1963, 132). Ecstatic shamanism was also present among the Kafirs of the Hindu Kush (ROBERTSON 1970 [1896], 402). Further east, in the region of the Karakoram, shamans were known as *bitan*, *daiyal*, or *dinyal* (CRANE et al. 1956, 469; LORIMER 1979, 263). They too beat drums; they also manipulated sacred juniper leaves, entered into violent trances, and communed with spirits believed to reside in stones and in certain trees.

Central Asian shamanism in general has received much attention from ethnographers, but there has been very little research on the shamanic configuration in Afghanistan. There are a few brief remarks in the book of the British author, Pennell: *Among the Wild Tribes of the Afghan Frontier* (1909, 38–40; 237–239). A useful source on Afghan shamanism is *Afghanistan of the Afghans* (1928, 78–109) by the Afghan author, Ikbal Ali Shah. But Shah does not make any distinction between mullah and shaman. DUPREE's general ethnography, *Afghanistan*, contains a few brief remarks on Afghan shamanism (1973, 106). The only work devoted entirely to shamanism in Afghanistan is the article "A Muslim Shaman of Afghan Turkestan," by CENTLIVRES, CENTLIVRES, and SLOBIN (1971).

As a preliminary step towards filling the gap in the ethnography of Afghan mystical beliefs, this paper focuses on Afghan shamanism as an essential part of the religious beliefs of the Afghan people, and integrally related to their dominant religion, Islam.

It is true that shamanism is usually associated with " marginal-hunting cultures " lacking complex technical and social organization (HULTKRANTZ 1978, 52). But its presence within a society economically based on agriculture and animal herding, and religiously monotheistic, such as that of Afghanistan, is not unusual. Shamanism excludes neither other magico-religious elements nor necessarily belief in a theistic Supreme Being (ROGERS 1982, 53). As ELIADE (1972, 8) points out, " we frequently find the shamanic (that is, ecstatic) experience attempting to express itself through an ideology that is not always favorable to it." Indeed, shamanic beliefs in Central Asia have shown a remarkable ability to persist alongside major religious traditions, not only Islamic, but also Buddhist (HEISSIG 1980, 7). From Islam's point of view, its traditional tolerance for *adat* (from the Arabic for " custo-

mary practices ") has enabled it to accommodate shamanism as well as other indigenous cultural practices and beliefs (KRADER 1963, 121).

THE CONCEPT OF SHAMANISM

The student of shamanism, whether in Afghanistan or elsewhere in Central Asia, must come to terms with the imprecise and indiscriminate use of the term " shaman " in the ethnographic literature. Some anthropologists (e.g. SPENCER 1968, 396), unjustifiably in my opinion, question the validity of the concept itself. Before examining shamanism in Afghanistan, therefore, it is necessary to establish a minimal definition by which to distinguish a shaman from other Afghan religious practitioners.

The term " shaman " is derived from the Tungusian word *saman* or *vaman* (LAUFER 1917). It is now widely used by anthropologists to refer to a basic configuration of beliefs and practices which appears cross-culturally among geographically distant societies (ROGERS 1982, ix; FURST 1976, 6). This basic configuration finds different expression from one culture to the next.

ELIADE (1972, 4) points out that a shaman is a magician, healer, psychopomp, priest, mystic, poet, and performer of miracles. Not every magician, priest, miracle-worker, or healer, however, is a shaman. Similarly, not every shaman is a healer (HULTKRANTZ 1978, 36). In other words, one seldom finds a shaman in any given culture engaged in all activities associated with shamanism. As HULTKRANTZ (1978, 35) writes, it is difficult to define shamanism according to the precise professional functions of its practitioners.

ELIADE (1972, 4–5) defines a shaman as one who uses specific techniques of ecstasy, but shamanism, he writes, does not " exhaust all varieties of ecstatic experience." For example, the Sufi orders, or *tariqat*, found in many parts of Central Asia, including Afghanistan, use a number of techniques for inducing *hal*, " ecstasy," and *fana-fil-haq*, " mystical union with the divine." These techniques include music, rhythmic dancing, seclusion, and, most frequently, *zikir*, the repetition of mystical formulae (BURKE 1973). Sufi mystical states, however, cannot be equated with shamanic ecstasy, which necessarily involves contact with particular spiritual entities rather than with an all-enveloping Godhead. As HULTKRANTZ (1978, 42) correctly points out, in shamanism " we never find mystical union with the Divinity so typical for the ecstatic experiences in the ' higher ' forms of religious mysticism." Where Sufi *hal*-evoking techniques do appear in connection with shamanic rituals, as is frequently the case in Afghanistan, their purpose is to gain control of particular spirits rather than to ob-

tain mystical union with the divine.

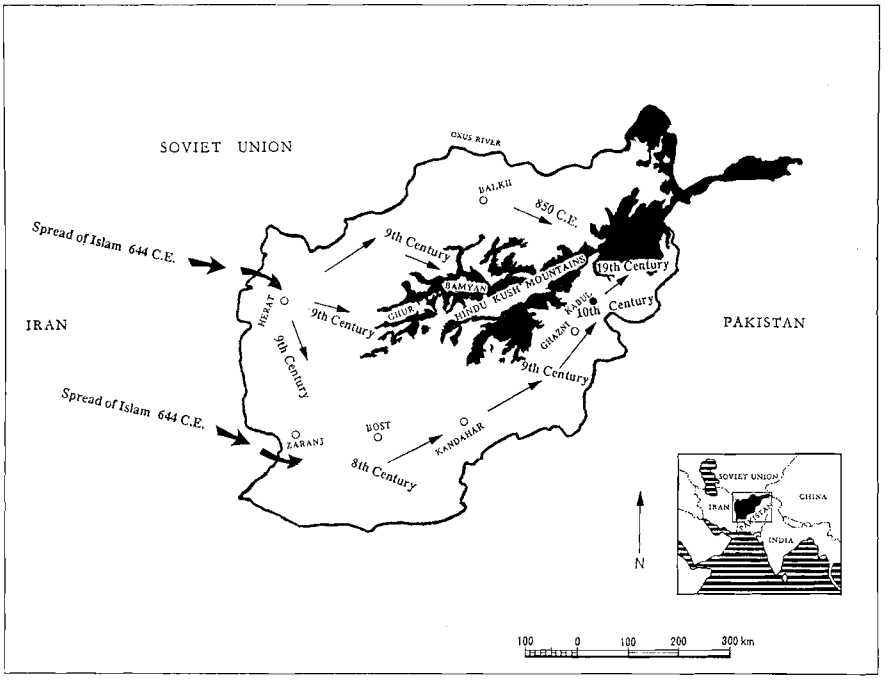
In this paper I shall distinguish a shaman from other religious specialists in Afghanistan according to a cross-culturally recurring and interrelated configuration of elements. These include beliefs in the presence of helpful and harmful supernatural entities, supernatural causes and cures for illnesses, spirit or soul loss, and the belief that some people, through the practice of ecstatic techniques, are able to interact with and so establish control over, particular supernatural beings (GILBERG 1984, 21–27).

A shaman's diagnostic, healing, or mystical abilities stem directly from his control over particular supernatural beings (ROGERS 1982, 6). The role of spirit-helpers, therefore, is a crucial element in the shamanic configuration. As HULTKRANTZ (1978, 40) writes, " the ecstatic who attains the other world without the help of spirits is certainly no shaman." On the other hand, the simple ability to contact spirits does not in itself, I believe, justify calling the practitioner a " shaman." There must also be present other distinctive traits: unique ritual paraphernalia, a specialized mystical language, and operational procedures such as working for a fee (GILBERG 1984, 21–27).

The data presented in this article were collected in Afghanistan over a period of twelve months between 1977–1980. As an Afghan myself I had the unique opportunity to familiarize myself with this aspect of Afghan religion. Even before the Soviet invasion of the country in 1979, however, political circumstance made it impossible to move outside major cities. My investigations, consequently, were restricted to the major cities of Kabul, Jalalabad, and Mazar, and to the towns of Charkar and Istalif. In these places I was able to meet twelve religious specialists, mullah, Sufi, and *malang*.

PRE-ISLAMIC ELEMENTS IN AFGHAN COSMOLOGY

Before Islam reached Afghanistan the population followed several religious traditions, some imported (including Zoroastrianism, Hinduism, and Buddhism), others indigenous (Map 2). Of the indigenous religions we know most about the cult of Zhun (Zun), because it was described in some detail by a Chinese Buddhist pilgrim, Xuan Zang, who visited Afghanistan shortly before the Arab invasion (BOSWORTH 1984, 4–7). Based on the worship of a golden idol with ruby eyes, the cult of Zhun (widespread throughout Zamindawar and Zabulistan) survived for two centuries after the arrival of Islam. The idol was housed in a temple, in front of which stood the vertebra of a giant reptile, locally believed to be that of a dragon. The priests of Zhun seem to have possessed shaman-like abilities, for Xuan Zang describes them



Map 2. The spread of Islam in Afghanistan

as having powers to control demons and other supernatural forces and being able to both heal and harm people (BOSWORTH 1984, 6).

Scholars have noted several similarities between the religion of Zhun, the shamanic religions of Central Asia, and the pre-Buddhist, dragon-god religion of Tibet (BOSWORTH 1984, 7). The dragon (*luus*), or *azhdar*, survived in Islamic Afghan cosmology through its association with Caliph Ali, celebrated in this country as the " dragon-slayer." Afghans identify a number of geological formations as the remains of dragons slain by the Caliph and miraculously petrified by God. The most famous of these *azhdar* is located near Bamyan (Bamiyan), the ancient Buddhist sanctuary complex (Map 2; Fig. 1). The dragon of Bamiyan is a 270-meter geological formation with a deep fissure, called "Ali's sword-cut," running lengthwise across it (Fig. 2). The American archaeologist-ethnographer DUPREE (1976, 5) reports the remains of thousands of goat horns and bones, apparently deliberately placed in the fissure; he interprets these as evidence of the pre-Islamic religious significance of goats for the Afghan people.[4]

When one religion supplants another it is not uncommon for the saints and culture-heroes of the new faith to be depicted as vanquishing

FIG. 1. Bamiyan, the ancient Buddhist sanctuary complex.

FIG. 2. The *azhdar* of Bamiyan, a geological structure locally believed to be the petrified remains of a dragon slain by the Prophet Ali.

FIG. 3. A ziarat, decorated with banners and goat horns.

FIG. 4. The town of Istalif, built around a ziarat over which grows a giant tree seen in the center.

FIG. 5. The mosque of Shah-i-du-Sham-shera; the banners of the ziarat itself are visible in the background.

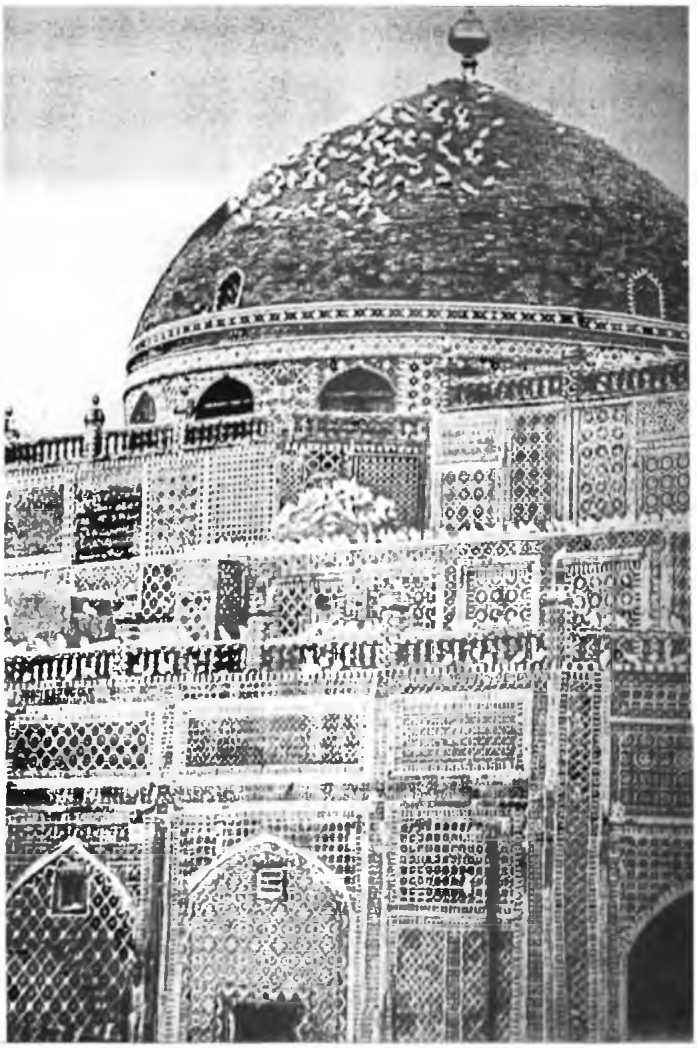


FIG. 6. The mosque built atop the ziarat of Mazar-i-Sharif, locally believed to be the burial place of the Caliph Ali.

FIG. 7. A *malang* smoking datura in a water pipe.

FIG. 8. An Afghan mystic during *zikir*.

FIG. 9. An Afghan *malang* employing *pat-gari* divination; the patient's bedding can be seen on the far left.

those of the old religion. Thus, for Afghan Muslims, Caliph Ali, hero of the new Islamic faith, slays the pre-Islamic dragon-god.

Following Afghanistan's conversion to Islam during the seventh century C.E., many of the preexisting shamanistic beliefs and practices were incorporated into the framework of Muslim cosmology (SMITH et al. 1973, 170). The ecstatic techniques associated with Islam's mystical Sufi tradition must have lent themselves particularly well to the assimilation of indigenous shamanistic practices (KAPELRUD 1967, 90).

In modern Afghanistan pre-Islamic practices, frequently now with Arabic names, are often found alongside orthodox Muslim customs (DUPREE 1976, 1). Present-day Afghan ascetics, although certainly Muslims, are undoubtedly the spiritual heirs of the shamans of the past. Thus, for example, these ascetics use ecstatic techniques, communicate with spirits, and foretell the future while in trance states.

When a famous ascetic dies, his grave may become a ziarat, or shrine, believed to be endowed with mystical potency, as were the ancient cult-centers of the past. Frequently such shrines become centers of pilgrimage. Ziarat-worship in Afghanistan is clearly part of the inheritance of a wider Central Asiatic ritual complex associated with shamanism (*CAR* 1957, 16–17; *CAR* 1958, 6–8; *CAR* 1959, 110–111; CZAPLICKA 1914, 201; HEISSIG 1980, 8–10, 103–104). During Islamic times, both in Afghanistan and elsewhere in Central Asia, unsuccessful attempts have been made to suppress the cults revolving around such sacred shrines (DUPREE 1976, 1; *CAR* 1959, 110–111; *CAR* 1957, 16–17). But their continued existence clearly reflects the tenacity of such beliefs and practices.

Ziarat consist of a stone cairn, decorated with *togh*, or cloth flags hung from long poles (Fig. 3). These flags are placed there so that the shrine can be visible from a distance. Most Afghan ziarat are decorated with goat horns, which are placed atop the long flagpoles, or on separate poles of their own, or, alternatively, they are embedded in the earth around the stone cairn. Unlike the shrine flags, the significance of these goat horns is more difficult to determine. In present-day Nuristan (northeastern Afghanistan) goat horns appear as an emblem of prestige, signifying the number of feasts given by a particular individual, and so signifying his rank (EDELBERG and JONES 1979, 114). There is also a separate tradition in Afghanistan which links horns with warriors. In the *Shah Nama* (The Epic of Kings), written in the court of Mahmud of Ghazni during the eleventh century, warriors are referred to as *gow*, bulls, and described as being "possessors of horns," which meant that they wore horn-decorated helmets. Even

today in Afghanistan there is a common expression, *shakh dar at ra beyar*, used when challenging someone, which means " bring out your horned one," or, in other words, your most powerful person.

There is also in Afghanistan a tradition associated with Sikandar-i-Shakh-dar, "Alexander-with-Horns" (linked with the historical Alexander the Great, who invaded Afghanistan in 326 B.C.E.). Sikandar-i-Shakh-dar is believed to have had power over demons and spirits and to have built a magical wall from an alloy of seven metals, thus preventing the invasion of *ajuj* and *majuj* (a race of demons inhabiting a realm parallel to this world). This merging of a master of spirits (Alexander-with-Horns) with a historical figure (Alexander the Great) may signify the process, as detailed by Weston LA BARRE (1970), by which the shaman as ancient master of spirits is merged with the culture heroes of the more complex religious traditions.

The ancient religious significance of the goat in Afghanistan is clear, as we have already noted, from the various ritual goat-burials unearthed by archaeologists (DUPREE et al. 1972, 12–13, 81–82; DUPREE 1973, 215). Indeed, these finds have been interpreted as signifying the presence of a Central Asiatic goat-cult dating back to either the Neolithic (DUPREE 1973, 264–266) or the Bronze Age (SHAFFER 1978, 81–83). The discovery at Teshik-Tash of a Neanderthal burial site on the banks of the Oxus River,[5] in which several pairs of goat horns had been arranged around the body, suggests that goat horns had ritual significance at an even earlier date (GOWLETT 1984, 107). The present-day association of goat horns with ziarat may well reflect the tenacity of pre-Islamic elements.

Ziarat are sometimes housed in mud huts, at other times simply surrounded by high walls, usually with a single-gated entrance. At night, Afghans claim, candles may mysteriously shine over the ziarat. (Several times I was shown distant flickering lights as evidence of this supernatural phenomenon.) Such shrines are found in both rural and urban places, atop mountains, and in the midst of bustling cities. The town of Istalif, to the northwest of Kabul, is built entirely around a hilltop ziarat (Fig. 4), vivid evidence of the continued importance of such shrines in the popular religious life of the country.

Ziarat in cities, because they may not be moved or demolished, are sometimes found right in the middle of major thoroughfares. A good example is the Ziarat-i-Shah-i-du-Shamshera, " Shrine of the King with Two Swords," in Kabul. Here, according to legend, is buried the headless body of a warrior. The head itself is entombed in another ziarat eight kilometers distant, at the place where the warrior is said to have been decapitated. This latter shrine is called Ziarat-i-

Shah-i-Shaheed, " Shrine of the Martyred King." According to tradition, the headless body of this warrior continued to fight and slay *kufar*, or " infidels," until it finally fell at the site of the Ziarat-i-Shah-i-du-Shamshera. During the 1920s, when the city's road system was being expanded under the direction of King Amanullah (r. 1919–1929), attempts were made to relocate the Ziarat-i-Shah-i-du-Shamshera. But ominous signs, such as spades and picks being covered with blood when removed from the earth, workers striking their own feet with their picks, and European bulldozers mysteriously breaking down while being used to demolish the outer walls of the shrine, convinced all involved that the Ziarat-i-Shah-i-du-Shamshera could not, and must not, be removed. Subsequently, the King not only ordered that the road be so laid out as to bypass the shrine, but also had a mosque (Fig. 5) built to commemorate the miracles of this holy place. Even today this shrine remains one of the most important in the city.

Another shrine, located in the middle of one of Kabul's busiest highways, likewise proved immovable. In the 1970s, an Afghan friend proudly told me, Soviet engineers were unable to move a single rock from this place, even though they had bulldozers and heavy machinery at their command (SIDKY 1989).

Pilgrims regularly journey to ziarat to pray and to make offerings. Ziarat are said to be charged with supernatural power; it is also believed that spirits dwell in them. During my stay in Kabul I noted that many families came to such shrines on Thursday nights to offer food, burn butter in clay lamps, and distribute money to the poor. On this night, it is said, God allows spirits and ghosts to roam the earth, and on numerous occasions entire processions of phantom figures, clad in *kafan* (" white burial shrouds "), have been reported.

In times of crises people turn to the ziarat for assistance. They tie ribbons to the flagpoles, nail them into the ground, or wedge them between the rocks which make up the cairn, asking favors from the supernatural inhabitants of the ziarat as they do so. Pilgrims frequently take away with them a little dust from these shrines, using it as a charm against evil spirits. They may also take with them a few leaves plucked from a nearby tree, which later they use to make potions said to be capable of curing illness (SHAH 1928, 98–99). The dust from the shrine of Sayid-Mehdi-i-Atish-Nafas, the " Mehdi with the Breath of Fire," near Kabul's airport, is said to provide infants with immunity from the whooping cough and to be able to cure those who already have that disease. Parents bring their infants to this shrine, where they are made to eat a pinch of dirt. Afterwards, the shrine-keeper gives the child a charm to be worn around its neck. Similarly,

bricks from the shrine of Kwaja Musafer, "the Holy Traveller," on the roadside between Kabul and Paghman, are famous throughout the country for their ability magically to repel the scorpions which infest most Afghan homes. These bricks are collected by the shrine-keeper, who, for a fee, blesses them and gives them to the pilgrims. The latter, on reaching home, grind the bricks into powder, sprinkling a little over each room, or else sewing some into tiny cloth bags, to be placed on shelves. My Afghan friends and informants insisted that their homes remained scorpion-free so long as, each year, they brought bricks from the Ziarat-i-Kwaja-Musafer.

Thousands of people from all across Afghanistan visit the ziarat at Mazar (Fig. 6). Locally this place is believed to be Caliph Ali's true burial site. His grave is said to have been discovered during the thirteenth century, when several elders in the city of Herat (about 800 kilometers to the south) simultaneously dreamt that the Caliph was buried here rather than at Kerbala in Iraq. When the King was informed of the elders' dreams, so the legend goes, he led an excavation party to Mazar, which uncovered a stone tablet at the exact spot specified in the dreams. On the tablet was an Arabic inscription stating that this was indeed the resting place of Hazrat-i-Ali, "Ali the Prophet."

How Ali's body came to be buried in Afghanistan is explained in the following legend related to me by Mustufi Ahmad, an Afghan theologian:

> When Hazrat-i-Ali was murdered by the accursed Yazeed, the prophet's followers, in order to protect his holy corpse from desecration by his enemies, assembled five coffins, which were loaded on the backs of five white camels. One of these coffins contained the *hazrat*'s body, the others were decoys. Each camel was sent off in a different direction, the one containing the blessed corpse of Ali being the one to reach Afghanistan. Here the prophet's body was secretly interred. This sacred spot remained hidden until God chose to reveal its location to the faithful in dreams.

The keepers of the Ziarat-i-Mazar-i-Sharif, reminiscent of the shamans of the past, operate as diviners, foretelling the future through their dreams or while in trances. Also, the shrine is famous for its power to cure blind and crippled people. There are numerous reports of such people being entirely cured after attending the annual *Jinda-Bala-Kardan*, or "raising of the flags," a festival held on the first day of spring.

People are able to communicate with the supernatural inhabitants

of ziarat, so Afghans maintain, through their dreams (FERRIER 1976, 451). Thus, Muhamadulla and Enayatulla, two brothers and famous musicians of the town of Charkar, related to me how they were able to recover the body of their abducted sister, which official investigators had failed to locate. The brothers prayed at a ziarat and, that very night, they told me, spirits appeared in their dreams telling them that their sister had been murdered and that they should have the authorities conduct a house-to-house search along a particular street. Following this advice, the unfortunate girl's body was discovered and the murderers arrested.

Whereas the various ziarat we have described thus far are all associated with the names of specific Muslim holy men or heroes whose bodies are believed to be buried at these places, there are others that are said to contain sacred relics, such as locks of a prophet's hair, or articles of his clothing; still others are of uncertain origin and affiliation. It is clear that some of the ancient ziarat date from pre-Islamic times and may have been Buddhist temples or centers of local fertility cults (DUPREE 1976, 4, 7). My informants told me that some of these places have been *tabaruk*, or " sacred," for as long as anyone could remember.

Related to ziarat worship is the " cult of stones." In Afghanistan, certain sacred stones traditionally have been believed to be the dwelling of *div*, a category of indigenous spirits. In Nuristan, where the people were not converted to Islam until the nineteenth century, the worship of sacred stones was an integral part of their shamanistic religion (ROBERTSON 1971 [1896], 376, 380, 399–402). Outside Afghanistan, in nearby Hunza (now part of northwest Pakistan), spirits called *boyo* have traditionally been associated with upright " ancestor stones," which some scholars interpret as pre-Islamic altars (JETTMAR 1961, 81). In fact, the association of such sacred stones with shamanism is found among peoples living all over Central Asia, from the Turkmen of the Oxus delta and the Kazakhs of Soviet Central Asia, to the Kafirs of the Hindu Kush and the inhabitants of the Karakorum mountains (*CAR* 1958, 6–8).

THE SHAMANIC CONFIGURATION IN AFGHANISTAN

The Muslim mystics and mendicants of modern Afghanistan, some of whom are referred to as *malang*, others as *dervish* and *sufi*, practice, as we have already noted, a variety of ecstatic techniques which have clear affiliations with shamanism. The healing and magical powers possessed by these individuals are either inherited (CENTLIVRES et al. 1971, 162; DAMES 1913, 157), or acquired through discipleship under established mystics (SIDKY 1989). Although such individuals operate

under various Muslim titles, and conduct their rituals in the idiom of Muslim mysticism, they can easily be distinguished from orthodox religious practitioners because of their appeal to spirits and employment of ecstatic techniques. Afghan shamans occasionally claim to be Sufis; indeed some may even belong to one of the many organized Sufi *tariqat*, or orders of mysticism. (In Afghanistan, several of these, according to DUPREE [1973, 103], have sprung up around indigenous customs and traditions.) But the majority of these practitioners belong to the category of *malang*, and constitute an ill-defined and heterogeneous collection of people, adhering to no specific *silsila*, or " common tradition." Within this broad category, however, there are some groups of practitioners who are united by a common mystical tradition, which has been handed down from generation to generation.

The term *malang* has different meanings from one region of Afghanistan to the next. At times the word is used to refer to *madaree* (stage-magicians), *fakir* (either beggars or holy-men), *qalandar* (wandering Sufis), *jadoogar* (sorcerers who, in some instances, are indistinguishable from shamans), *charsi* (hashish addicts), *divana* (possessed madmen), and, finally, *palang dar libasi malang* (literally, " tigers in *malang* clothing ": impostors and charlatans). DUPREE (1973, 107) describes the Afghan *malang* as follows:

> They are holy men thought to be touched by the hand of Allah. Some go about naked, moving with the seasons; others dress in women's clothes; still others wear elaborate, often outlandish, concoctions of their own design. Usually Afghan, Iranian, Pakistani, or Indian Sufi Muslims, malang travel from place to place, fed, honored, at times feared by local populations, or at least held in awe. Often, they spout unintelligible gibberish, words they claim to be from Allah or a local saint. At other times, they quote the Qor'an, usually inaccurately.

Some *malang* are immediately recognizable by their distinctive dress and accoutrements: a long robe, chains and bead necklaces, a wooden or metal bowl called *kaj kol* that they hang over their shoulder, and a staff called *asah*. *Malang* sometimes carry an ornamental metal ax, both to signify victory over supernatural beings, and for personal protection.

Prior to the 1973 Communist coup in Afghanistan, and the consequent departure of large numbers of people from the country, one could find numerous *malang* wandering the city streets and rural areas, busily dispensing charms, curing disease, and performing other services

for the benefit of their clients. Even in 1979, when I last visited the country, there were a few *fakir* and *malang* roaming the streets of Kabul.

The Role of Spirits (*jinnd*) in Afghan Cosmology

All Afghan shamans, irrespective of affiliation or title, acquire their powers through the control they exercise over supernatural entities called *jinnd* (from the Arabic *jinn*, a demon [Langton 1949, 4]). In Afghanistan there is a near-universal belief in *jinnd*, malevolent spirits that haunt buildings, graveyards, and lonely highways, and attack humans. These spirits, despite their Arabic-derived name, include among their numbers such pre-Islamic Afghan supernatural entities as *al* and *div* (Schurmann 1962, 253–254).

There are two categories of *jinnd*: white and black. The white *jinnd* are seen as benevolent, the black as violent, wrathful, and cruel (Shah 1928, 89). They are said to be able to cause humans to suffer in many different ways. Taking the form of snakes and scorpions, it is said that they bite and sting people. They are believed capable of frightening people so badly that their victims' souls flee from their bodies. Reportedly they can seize people, causing them to suffocate. They are believed to be able to enter a victim's body and so make him or her insane. They are said to haunt houses, and to play all kinds of mischievous tricks on people. Finally, many natural diseases, which fail to respond to normal medication, are attributed to the actions of such *jinnd*.

In Afghanistan snake bites and scorpion stings are invariably attributed to the activities of malicious *jinnd*. For this reason the treatment of such wounds always includes supernatural, as well as natural, remedies. In 1979, in the town of Charkar, I attended the ritual healing of a young man who had been stung by a scorpion. His family members were greatly concerned because, so I was told, it was not uncommon for people to die from such stings. They immediately dispatched a boy to the bazaar to summon a *malang* known for his ability to cure such scorpion stings. The healer, an old, white-bearded man dressed in a dirty robe and carrying his *asah* staff, soon arrived. He had his patient sit down in a chair. After examining the sting, the *malang* sat down on the floor in front of the young man. He produced a knife and an old safety-razor from the pouch strung around his shoulder underneath his robe, placing them on the floor in front of him. Picking up the knife and feeling its edge with his thumb, he placed the blade against his patient's skin, about twelve centimeters above the sting. Pressing the blade so as to indent but not break the skin, with a downward motion, he began to stroke the afflicted leg. As he mani-

pulated the knife, the *malang* recited magical formulae and, at the end of each one, blew on the afflicted spot. This treatment, which lasted about five minutes, was said to neutralize the venom. Finally, using his safety-razor, the *malang* made a small incision just below the sting and caught the resultant flow of dark-colored blood in a ceramic cup. After allowing the wound to bleed for about a minute, the *malang* applied a wad of moist tobacco to it, then bound it with a piece of cloth. Tobacco, the healer told me, draws out all kinds of *zahr*, or toxins.

The patient seemed greatly relieved by the *malang*'s administrations, which clearly combined both physiological and psychological procedures. Later I learned that he had made a complete recovery, with no further complications. Some *malang*, I was told, cure scorpion stings and snake bites without bleeding their patients; otherwise their techniques are identical to those I have just described.

When *jinnd* are thought to have frightened peoples' souls from their bodies, Afghans say demons have made "their souls depart" (*arwa koch kardan*). Victims experience severe melancholia, weight loss, and a yellow complexion. If untreated, it is said, they may eventually die. The remedy for such soul-loss includes taking the patient to a particularly potent shrine, or else seeking charms and incantations from a powerful *malang*.

Jinnd giriftan, literally, "to be seized or gripped by *jinnd*," is a chronic problem, according to my informants. The seizure is said to occur at night, when people are sleeping. A victim will awaken suddenly to find himself unable to move, speak, or even utter a sound. The only way to break loose from the spirits' hold, it is said, is for the victim to force himself to recite the Muslim credo: *la-ila-ilala-Muhammad-rasul-i-Allah*, "there is no God but Allah, and Muhammad is his Prophet." This utterance, my informants told me, compels the malicious *jinnd* to relinquish their grip and depart immediately.

People in whose bodies *jinnd* are said to have taken up residence, froth at the mouth, suffer convulsions or facial contortions, undergo personality changes, and may permanently lose their sanity. The remedy for such spirit invasion is to take the victim to Ziarat-i-Meally-Sahib in Jalalabad, famed throughout Afghanistan for its power to expel demons and cure insanity. Here, bound in chains, the patient is confined to a dark stone cell, where the spirit will shortly be exorcised. The rite of exorcism is performed either by the shrine-keepers, or else by mullah specially hired by the victim's family. The ritual begins at night with the exorcists fumigating the victim's cell with burning *espand* (wild rue seeds), said to purify the place of all evil influences. The exorcists then begin to recite selected passages from the Koran, or

even the complete Book, over the victim (this is referred to as *khatm-i-Quran*). Such recitation frequently continues late into the night. Finally, they flog the patient with willow branches while calling upon the malicious *jinnd* to depart.

When *jinnd* haunt houses, they are said to manifest their presence through poltergeist activity, such as moving objects, pelting people with small stones, and ringing unseen bells that temporarily paralyze all those who hear them. I was shown two houses (both in Ayeen-Gary, the ironworkers' quarters in old Kabul), where such spirit activities were said to have taken place. Both buildings were said to be *gerang* (literally, "heavy") or, in other words, infested by malicious spirits. The newly-arrived occupants of one of the houses, an informant told me, awoke one night to find themselves in the courtyard, along with their sleeping mats and all their belongings. This was the work of *jinnd*, my informant said. Thereafter nobody dared to spend a night in this house. But at the time of my visit it was being used as a non-residential grade school. Since *jinnd* operate only at night, my informant remarked, they did not disturb the children or teachers.

A second house in the same neighborhood was the site of stone pelting by *jinnd*. In a ground-floor room was a small shrine, dedicated to Aburahman-Padsha-i-Jindha (Aburahman, King of the *Jinnd*), whom the household members honored as their tutelary spirit. Annually they offered *nazir* (usually *halva*, or sweet rice-pudding) to the spirit, later themselves consuming the offering. According to the household head, only members of the family may partake of the *nazir*. But on one occasion some of the foodstuff was mistakenly given to some guests. "For the next three nights," the family head told me, "our house was pelted by clay pellets which seemed to appear from nowhere." Nobody was actually struck by a pellet, he said, but windows were broken and the noise was intolerable. The police were summoned, but still nobody could determine the source of the flying pellets. Only after the spirit had received a second *nazir* (provided at the recommendation of a *malang*), during which the family rigidly observed the restrictions against non-members eating the foodstuff, did the pelting cease.

Jinnd, so Afghans believe, inflict people with a number of different diseases. Indeed, as DUPREE (1973, 106) points out, the Afghan concept of *jinnd* is the equivalent of the European "germ." Usually persistent illnesses that do not respond to Western medical treatment are ascribed to the action of malicious spirits. In this event ritual action, it is believed, is necessary to effect a cure. Often the patient may have recourse to a shrine, or seeks the services of a *malang*. The latter

may dispense *tawiz*, or charms, which consist of magical spells or verses from the Koran written on a piece of paper and sewn into cloth bags. The patient wears this charm around his neck or pins it to his shirt.[6]

The Initiation of an Afghan *Malang*

Some *malang* acquire their powers over *jinnd* after spontaneously suffering " supernatural madness," a state known as *jalali shudan*. Others use drugs to achieve their supernatural powers. Yet others become apprenticed to a practicing *malang* for several years, after which they acquire their powers through the performance of a special initiatory ceremony.

Those who have become *jalali* may be seen to be conversing, apparently with invisible spirits. Such men may wander naked, roaming the hills and countryside as if in a state of intoxication. These " holy mad-men " are often thought to have powers both to cure and to harm people. The psychological crisis which impels such people to become what my informants called " the companion of spirits " seems similar to that described for neophyte shamans in Siberia (Czaplicka 1914, 174) and elsewhere (Wallace 1966, 145–152; Rogers 1982, 25).

To contact the " other-world," one *malang* told me, you have to use datura.[7] Widely used among shamans in many different cultures (Furst 1976, 134–145), *Datura metel* (a member of the Solanaceae family), is a powerful hallucinogen containing anticholinergic alkaloids which block the action of acetylcholine on the peripheral cholinergic receptor of the brain, as well as affecting the central nervous system (Shader and Greenblatt 1972, 103–105, 113). *Malang* who achieve their shamanic powers through the use of datura first take this drug during an initiatory rite. This involves the repeated chanting of *du'a*, ritual formulae (in Persian or Arabic), believed to be imbued with magical power. Mixing the datura with tobacco, the initiates inhale the drug through a *chilam*, or water pipe, at the conclusion of their several-hours-long recitation (Fig. 7). Thereafter the *malang* uses the drug whenever he wishes to converse with his *jinnd* familiars.

Men who wish to acquire the powers of a *malang* through instruction from an established practitioner generally apprentice themselves for several years.[8] In return for gifts, personal services, and money, a master-*malang* will impart his knowledge to a disciple by familiarizing him with the ways of the spirits (teaching him how to harness the powers of some and how to contend with others), explaining to him the uses of medicinal drugs, and tutoring him in the performance of healing rituals. When the master-*malang* deems his pupil ready, he gives his *izen*, or " permission," for him to prepare to " master the demons "

(*taskheer-i-afreed*), and so, finally, to obtain occult powers for himself. These powers are obtained after a period of initiation called *chilla ne-shastan*, " the forty-days recitation," or more commonly, *qasida pukhtan*, meaning " the completion of the formulae."

Initiation involves a combination of physical seclusion (*khilwat*), the recitation of ritual formulae (*zikir*), and fasting (*ruza*). Although the initiation is known as " the forty-days recitation," the number of days required for its completion, referred to as *wazeefa*, varies from twelve to forty, depending upon the powers the initiate hopes to achieve (SHAH 1928, 87). Initiation takes place in a cell in a mosque, in a cave, or else on a mountainside far from human settlement. Of all these places, a cave is regarded as the most suitable because, it is said, it was while meditating in a cave that the Prophet Muhammad received the divine revelations of the Koran.

When the initiate and his master have chosen the appropriate site for the initiation, the master instructs his pupil to draw seven circles on the ground, one within the other. When he performs the *zikir*, the initiate must sit at the center of the innermost circle. Such circles are believed to be barriers against spirit invasion; for each one of the seven the initiate has been taught special formulae which, when recited correctly, simultaneously force particular *jinnd* into submission and protect the initiate himself from supernatural harm.

During *zikir* (Fig. 8) the initiate recites, a stipulated number of times without interruption, passages from the Koran, magical formulae, or simply the name of Allah. Such recitation, it is said, compels the *jinnd* to materialize before the initiate, who is instructed to look down, but also to focus his peripheral vision on the boundaries of the outermost circle. Here, it is said, the spirits first appear.

The *jinnd* manifest themselves to the initiate, beyond the outermost circle, in the form of animals, dwarfs, and giants. Some of these horrifying apparitions simply sit and stare at him, others taunt him, trying, by means of tricks and illusions, to have him leave the safety of his circles. To repulse these spirit hordes clambering to cross his magic circles, the initiate must continue unwaveringly to chant the appropriate formulae. It is said that even a momentary pause may allow the spirits to breach the magical barriers, and so to kill him.

As the initiate continues his recitation, he passes through various mental states, during which he may feel himself to be dying, to be burning up in flames, or to be wasting away. These are all illusions said to be created by the malicious *jinnd*.

Each time the initiate encounters a particular rank of *jinnd* and is able to withstand its supernatural assaults, it is said that he has suc-

ceeded in enslaving that particular spirit. Subsequently, he will be able to use the powers of this *jinnd* in his shamanic practices. Enslaving the more powerful *jinnd* entails for the initiate a longer period of recitation and a greater psychological ordeal (see SHAH 1928, 87–89, where he also reports that a *malang* who has managed to control such spirits can use them either to help a client or to harm an enemy, in the latter case " by causing his house to be burned, or bringing some severe or fatal disease or even insanity upon him ").

The dangers inherent in the initiatory procedures, as just described, were vividly related by the *khalifa* (" spiritual leader ") of Charkar, who told me the following story:

> Abdul Wali, one of our townsmen, decided to achieve mystical powers by performing the *qasida* ritual. He shut himself in the *burj* [tower] of his father's *qala* [fort] and began to recite verses from the Koran. He did this for three days. On the third day everyone in the *qala* heard agonizing screams; it was Abdul Wali crying out that he was on fire. He said that a bearded dwarf, wearing a black turban, had come into the *burj*, pulled out a small piece of cotton from his pocket, and began to fluff it by tearing off pieces. The cotton seemed to increase by some devilish device (*shaytanat*) and soon filled the entire room. Then, scowling at Abdul Wali, this demon pulled out a box of matches and set the cotton on fire. Flames engulfed the *burj*. When the door leading to the *burj* was finally opened by Abdul Wali's uncle and brothers, there was no fire; but Abdul Wali was in a state of hysteria, beating his own chest and head as if to extinguish flames. The *jinnd* had beguiled the foolish man. Despite all efforts to calm him and stop him from running off, he broke loose and jumped out the window, shattering both his legs. The poor man rarely spoke any words afterwards, and was in a state of melancholia until he died a few months later. The doctor from Kabul was unable to determine why Abdul Wali had died.

Malang who successfully complete the more dangerous phases of the initiation rite, and so are able to command exceptionally powerful *jinnd*, are said to have the ability to appear in people's dreams, to fly, and to be present in two places at the same time (SIDKY 1989). Afghan shamans with such great supernatural powers no longer bother with social affairs, nor do they work for clients. Their concern now, it is said, is only for the spiritual welfare and equilibrium of society as a whole. Such men live in seclusion, or else move about the country-

side as if " in another world." These most powerful *malang* are known as *qudp*, a word which roughly translates as " axis " or " pole." In Sufi circles this term is used to designate a spiritual leader. But in reference to an Afghan *malang* the term implies an individual with immense occult powers, a potent human link to the supernatural realm. (Here in the United States, I have heard Afghan refugees attribute the invasion of their country by " Godless conquerors " to the failed powers of the *qudp*.)

The majority of *malang* function as healers. Many Afghans, both townsmen and villagers, resort to these traditional curers, either because they are unable to afford modern, Western-derived, medical treatment at a government clinic, or because such medical assistance is simply unavailable, or else again, because it has failed to effect a cure. *Malang* are even summoned to treat commonplace ailments such as headaches, earaches, etc. One of my informants told me that, as recently as the 1960s, one could find *malang* who went from house to house, supposedly extracting small roundish pellets from the head, ears, and nose of those afflicted with headaches. Such *malang* began their administrations (called *khas-kasheedan*, literally, " to extract objects ") by reciting particular formulae, after which they would appear to extract pea-like objects from their patients' bodies, place these in a glass of water, and later dispose of them in a stream or river.

People who experience a chain of inexplicable misfortunes, such as the loss of livestock, sudden illness, or a series of deaths in the family, may suspect that they have fallen prey to occult forces, possibly sent by an enemy. I was told of several methods used by *malang* to bring harm to a client's enemy. One was to bury porcupine quills under the path along which the intended victim is likely to walk. While burying the quills, the *malang* calls upon the *jinnd* to bring chaos and bloodshed to the victim's household. (Presumably these quills, by the magic of homeopathy, are seen as sharp-pointed weapons acting against the victim, although this was not an interpretation I received from my informants.) Another method for bringing harm to a victim is for the *malang* to place a piece of lamb's fat, wrapped in a cloth, near a *tandor*, or clay oven. As he does this he repeats incantations commanding the *jinnd* to have his victim waste away in the same manner as the fat melts in the heat generated by the oven.

Somebody who suspects himself to have become the victim of a supernatural attack, such as just described, will summon his own *malang* to counteract these maleficent forces. The *malang* so commissioned must first identify the person responsible. For this he resorts to divination. Placing a piece of *pat-gari*, or alum crystal, on hot coals, he

recites incantations and requests both the spirits and saints to reveal the face of the malefactor in his melting crystals (Fig. 9). Removing the *pat-gari* from the coals, the *malang* asks his client to look carefully at the melted crystal, to see whether it reminds him of the face of any particular person. If the patron is able to identify somebody, that person is deemed the malefactor. Now the *malang* may prescribe charms, or else he may perform magic to counter the harmful magic.

Conclusion

Afghanistan seldom appears in the ethnographic literature of Central Asiatic shamanism. The fact that the majority of its people are Muslims seems to have blinded writers to surviving shamanistic practices. But in this paper we have seen that Afghanistan, as a geographical extension of Central Asia, has shared quite naturally in that area's wider shamanistic traditions. Vestiges of ancient shamanic elements, as we have seen, are especially found in association with the ziarat, or sacred shrines, and in the beliefs and practices of Afghan ascetics like the *malang*. Thus, while the majority of modern Afghans are Sunni Muslims of the Hanafi school, beliefs and practices derived from Central Asian shamanism clearly constitute an important part of the total cosmology of both rural and urban populations.

NOTES

1. My thanks are due to Dr Anthony R. Walker at the Department of Anthropology, The Ohio State University, for his editorial assistance through numerous drafts of this paper.

2. The estimated population of Afghanistan prior to the Russian invasion was approximately 14 million (Smith et al. 1973, 167, 178).

3. The remaining 1% of the population adhere to Judaism, Zoroastrianism, Hinduism, and Sikhism.

4. Another *azhdar* (also locally believed to have been slain by the Prophet Ali), is to be found near the city of Kabul. This geological structure occupies a hilltop overlooking an immense valley that has served as the burial grounds, or cemetery, for the inhabitants of the city since pre-Islamic times.

5. Teshik-Tash is located on the Soviet side of the Afghan-U.S.S.R. border.

6. Another charm dispensed by *malang* is known as *totka*. This consists of spells of various kinds, written on a piece of paper. To obtain its benefits, the charm has to be burned, and the ashes sprinkled on the patient. Similar to the *totka* is yet another charm, known as *showyez*. It too consists of spells or passages from the Koran written with ink on a piece of paper. The patient is instructed to soak the charm in a glass of water and then to drink the magically-potent decoction.

7. Although writers such as Pennell (1909, 239) have stated that Afghan mystics use *chars* (*Cannabis sativa*) in order to enter into communion with supernatural beings, and to foretell the future, etc., I was personally unable to meet anyone who claimed to

use *chars* in a ritual fashion. But this drug is commonly used for recreational purposes.

8. The data presented here were gathered from four informants (Sufis and *malang* claiming to have undergone initiation), and were cross-checked against details given to me by Bacha-i-Khalifa Sahib, the renowned *khalifa* (spiritual leader) and mystic of the town of Charkar.

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