

Poster in an Afghan refugee's shop in Chitral, Pakistan, 1987, just over the border from Afghanistan. Masood, his head superimposed onto a reprinted Indian film poster, holds off the Soviet army and air force. Above Masood's image is a poster of President Zia of Pakistan, who supported the Afghans against the Soviets.



STORY & PHOTOGRAPHS
BY WHITNEY AZOY

Masood's Parade

ICONOGRAPHY,
REVITALIZATION,
AND ETHNICITY
IN AFGHANISTAN

what happens when, after two dozen years of chaos, a society begins to get its political act together? What values are left? What symbols are celebrated? What new heroes are pressed into the service of revitalization?

Afghanistan — at least part of it — responded on April 28, 2002, with a parade, Kabul's grandest in decades. Phrased as a 10-year anniversary celebration of Islam's victory over communism, the march featured amputees and Scud missiles, poetry and errant parachutists. Most of all, it commemorated a dead man, the iconic martyr Ahmad Shah Masood. His portrait, ubiquitous



TOP: Posters of Masood for sale at a Kabul kiosk. The larger portrays Masood as genial and relaxed. BOTTOM: Masood the formally seated statesman, complete with testimonials

that day in a dozen variations, both bolstered and challenged national identity. It also recalled a Philadelphian's contributions to symbolic anthropology. At issue: Would the post-mortem cult of Masood revitalize Afghanistan or wreck it?

"Revitalization" was a favorite phrase of eminent scholar Anthony F. C. Wallace, for many years associated with both the University of Pennsylvania and Philadelphia's Eastern Pennsylvania Psychiatric Institute. Working at the nexus of anthropology, psychology, and religion, Wallace traced the response of societies to extreme upheaval: "Under circumstances of anomie and pervasive factionalism, a new religious movement is likely to develop, led by a prophet...and aimed at...creating a new and more satisfying culture."

War-torn Afghanistan qualifies all too aptly as Wallace territory. Indeed, "anomie" seems a bloodless word to describe recent Afghan experience. First (late 1970s) came three Marxist coups followed by a Soviet invasion. Then a homegrown jihad resistance (1980s) that, against all odds, succeeded in ousting the invaders. Then Wallace-style "pervasive factionalism" among the victorious *mujahedeen* leading to Taliban ascendancy (mid-1990s). Then hijacking of the Taliban by Al-Qaeda (late 1990s) and American military intervention after 9-11-01. And now an effort at "national" government intent on peace and inclusivity, but with a reach barely stretching beyond Kabul and under attack even there.

Enter a Wallace-style "prophet"...except that he had been there all along — until his assassination in the prologue to September 11.

Ahmad Shah Masood began as an obscure engineering student and died a legend. Between 1975 and September 9, 2001, he was essentially at war — first as an Islamist rebel against Kabul authority, then as leader of his native Panjsher Valley in the anti-Soviet jihad, and finally as the last significant anti-Taliban commander, whose control had shrunk to 5 percent of Afghanistan. By that time, late summer 2001, Osama bin Laden and his non-Afghan Al-Qaeda associates were calling the Taliban shots. Only Masood stood between them and total domination of Afghan territory. His Al-Qaeda assassination, coordinated with the attack on America two days later, was intended to achieve 100 percent control.

The assassination (a suicide bombing) succeeded; the larger strategy backfired. Masood's forces, dominated by ethnic Tajiks, hung together and were soon championed by Operation Enduring Freedom. This superpower support enabled Tajiks to "liberate" Kabul from the Taliban, whose ranks had consisted overwhelmingly of ethnic Pushtuns. Thus the liberation of Afghanistan also signaled an ethnic confrontation: Tajiks versus Pushtuns, with other ethnicities (e.g., Hazaras and Uzbeks) also jockeying for position. True,

ISLAM AND ICONOGRAPHY

Rigorously monotheistic, Islam does not welcome iconography. God is utterly beyond all human conception and never represented pictorially. Nor, traditionally, is the face of Prophet Mohammed.

Representing life forms, especially humans, has sometimes been condemned as behavior that blasphemously mimics divine creation itself. In this reasoning, now considered extreme, the act of portraiture borders on the assumption of godly powers; the artist thus risks being



An early 2001 poster of Osama bin Laden ("Holy Warrior of Islam") from Peshawar, Pakistan.

guilty of *shirk*, the worst of Muslim sins. Given such concern, much early Muslim art foregrounded the safer forms of calligraphy and geometry.

In later centuries and particularly with the appearance of nation-states, political iconography has become widespread in Islam. Pictures of kings, amirs, and presidents abound. Most elaborate, in my experience, was the iconography generated by the regime of Hafez al-Assad, dictatorial ruler of Syria from 1970 until his death in

2000. As the tyrant aged, he was accompanied in public portraiture by his elder son and heir, the swaggering paratrooper-playboy Baseel. When Baseel wrecked his sports car and died in 1994, Hafez turned to younger son Bashir, and pictorial propaganda followed suit. A mild-mannered and apolitical optometrist, Bashir needed instant image transformation. The task was addressed iconographically by picturing the new heir (Bashir) next to his father (Hafez) with the deceased elder brother (Baseel) hovering in gossamer approval over their shoulders. Local wags referred to the resulting display as "Father, Son, and Holy Ghost."

Political iconography is least visible in areas dominated by restrictive cults, such as Wahhabism in Saudi Arabia. This same movement guided Afghanistan's Taliban, whose leader, Mullah Mohammed Omar, was never formally photographed. Even at the peak of Taliban power, no effort was made to take, less still propagandize, Omar's portrait.

Osama bin Laden appears to represent an iconographic contradiction. Despite his Wahhabi roots and expressed desire to purify Islam — and despite efforts by some authorities to curb his popularity — bin Laden posters are available across much of the Muslim world.

Masood is regarded as a prophet by his fellow Tajiks. His image and message are constantly evoked in areas under Tajik control. But the other groups link his memory less with national revitalization than with regional disequilibrium.

Hence the special interest in Afghanistan's victory parade in the spring of 2002. After years of destruction and despair, Kabul was poised to celebrate. It was 10 years to the day since the last remnant of communist rule had been toppled. Islam had won — and survived subsequent Taliban distortion — but would the celebration be revitalizing or divisive? Would its symbolic expressions bring Afghans together or, yet again, tear them apart?

The day began with a 5 a.m. frisking at the Tajik-run Ministry of the Interior. Only those ex-pats with press cards, obtainable at the Tajik-run Ministry of Foreign Affairs, were eligible. Anthropology and journalism are close cousins (despite elements of mutual disdain). Trained as an anthropologist, I masqueraded that morning as a reporter rather than try to explain my real trade. (Afghans, understandably, find it difficult to distinguish anthropology from espionage. Suspected of the latter during fieldwork, I had been expelled by another regime in 1978.) The press was searched — and then searched again at the parade grounds by Tajik-run Ministry of Defense personnel. It was, after all, a supposed journalist who blew himself up and killed Ahmad Shah Masood.

Crossing Kabul at dawn provided a reminder of existing Masood iconography. His posters and photographs were everywhere on the north side of town. Government buildings, traffic roundabouts, rickety teahouses, and humble shops — as often as not these were festooned with images of the martyred hero. They came in different sizes and moods. Some were no bigger than postcards, stuck in the molding of a window. The largest Masood image downtown was only then being elevated to the wall of a six-story building; it fully shrouded the top two floors.

Equally diverse was the range of iconographic mood. All told, I counted five Masood pictorial temperaments, five categories of emotional imagery. One poster showed the head and shoulders of a grinning, easygoing Masood identified as "the beloved Afghan national leader, the martyr Ahmad Shah Masood." (Significantly, the word for martyr — *shaheed* — is seldom excluded in such representations. "Martyr," for Muslims, transcends all other sense of identity. No one is greater in death than he who has died for God. As such, the title of martyr is typically appropriated by supporters of victims on *all* sides of intra-Islamic conflict. Al-Qaeda sympathizers call Masood's assassin a martyr — and Masood an "infidel.")

This happy-style Masood poster bears one of his now-famous "sayings" (*sakhnaan*) in Persian: "Our intent is only the



CLOCKWISE (FROM LEFT): Displayed in a Kabul shop window, Masood prays with fellow *mujahedeen*. While most Afghan carpets are traditionally geometric, Masood iconography has assumed woven form. Intense and questing, this image of Masood typifies his most remembered qualities.

defense of Afghanistan, the defense of Islam, the defense of our oppressed people, and the exaltation of our country. There's never been anything else." Another poster depicts a calm, almost majestic Masood — a second dimension of iconographic temperament — seated formally with folded hands in an upholstered chair. Below the picture are one-line testimonials to him from an eclectic array of sources including Zahir Shah (the former Afghan king), British scholar Bernard Lewis (charmingly misidentified as a "great French philosopher and thinker"), and the *Wall Street Journal*.

Such quotes — both from Masood and about him — accord with Wallace's "formulation of a code" as an important element of revitalization. Some clear, concise, and consistent message is necessary to sustain what Wallace calls a "transfer culture" between the objectionable (religiously illegitimate) past and the yet-to-be-realized utopian ideal. Masood's message: Sacrifice everything to the struggle

(jihad) because, until it's won, nothing else matters.

The holiness of this struggle is reinforced by various images of Ahmad Shah Masood at prayer. One shows him in a horizontal row of worshippers, kneeling with upturned palms like any other pious Muslim. Here is a third Masood: reverent and unguarded before God. This poster bills him as "The Martyred Holy Warrior" and continues: "He knew that the basis for opposing external enemies is the struggle against impure attitudes and enemies within oneself." Here Masood's memory revitalizes a key message from Prophet Mohammed regarding the dual nature of jihad. The better known, more observable, but "lesser" struggle is against non-Muslim aggressors such as the Soviets. The lesser known (in the West) but more difficult and ultimate struggle for Muslims is against Godless elements inside themselves.

Hence Masood's legendary preoccupation with the cause. Nothing, it is said, "intruded on his mind." Even marriage and

parenthood, encouraged in Muslim scripture and Afghan tradition, were deferred into middle age. Other leaders postured and were distracted by glitzy fantasies; not Masood. As such, his plans were unencumbered by ego, always a step ahead, and never too busy for mundane detail. The story is told of an Islamist gathering in Pakistan during the mid-1970s. It seemed that the movement was going nowhere. People were impatient, frustrated. While others wrangled and wished in vain for (then) unavailable weapons, Masood sat to one side. "You could tell that his mind was on something else," one participant told me

years later. "I asked him what it was, and he said, 'Sleeping bags. If we can't get guns, let's at least get sleeping bags. They can be gotten now. God willing, the guns will come.'"

The guns did come, but not the clear victory Masood sought. Years, then decades passed without resolution. Total commitment became tinged with sadness, and thus emerged a fourth iconographic mood: Masood beyond normal consciousness, lost in thought, bearing a sorrow too great for other men. Posters of this sort outnumber all others. In one of them he looks past the camera: lips parted, brow deeply furrowed,



TOP: President Karzai, closely followed by Defense Minister Fahim, opens the April 28 parade.

BOTTOM: An enormous image of Masood, mounted with an honor guard on a mobile float, presides over the parade.



and eyes in search of something beyond ordinary contemplation. The caption reads, “Masood, Prince of Free People.”

In odd moments before the April 28 celebration, I had roamed Kabul photographing and collecting Masood iconography. New variations on the pictorial cult seemed to appear almost daily. Posters from the 1980s of Masood dressed as Rambo were no longer available, but now the bazaar offered pile-woven Masood carpets. Nothing, however, had prepared me for the parade.

Like everything else in recovering Afghanistan, the victory anniversary was billed as a “national” event. It was held at the same spot, directly in front of Kabul’s biggest mosque, where national reviews used to take place in the preconflict 1970s. Presiding, at least in theory, was Hamid Karzai, then chairman of the Afghan Interim Authority. A Pushtun, Karzai had been installed by the December 2001 Bonn Agreement which, in turn, was brokered by the United States. Pushtuns had always ruled Afghanistan. “Afghan” and “Pushtun” had initially been synonymous. Pushtuns still constituted a plurality within the ethnic hodgepodge, amounting to about 45 percent of the total population. Only a Pushtun, U.S. policy makers figured, could possibly lead the new Afghanistan. Karzai had been feted in the White House and worldwide ever since December. This April national celebration should have been Karzai’s parade.

It began that way with Karzai’s jeep leading the way. Directly behind him, however, was the real power, defense minister and

erstwhile Tajik warlord Mohammed Qassem Fahim. Tajiks still controlled the three “power” ministries: defense, interior, and foreign affairs. Fahim, not Karzai, controlled the Tajik troops who controlled Kabul. And Fahim had been the deputy of Ahmad Shah Masood.

So Karzai, the head of state, sat mum while Fahim, supposedly his subordinate, delivered the day’s only speech. It was a politically correct speech, urging national unity and discouraging regionalism. Likewise, both national languages — Persian and Pashto — were employed equally by a cadre of Radio Afghanistan announcers providing amplified snatches of poetry as background for the parade. The language of words, however, was no match for stagecraft and the sheer power of iconographic image. And just as they had taken Kabul, the Tajiks took hold of this parade.

The emotional stage was set by a procession of amputees: first, men who lost arms, then men who’d lost legs, then men whose bodies were bent at odd angles and who could barely propel themselves. Their stoic appearance — dressed in hospital gowns, revealing no trace of self-pity, and somehow moving themselves along the pavement — stirred the crowd to an exquisite pitch of pride, sorrow, and gratitude. But what to do with that energy? We were uncertain whether to cheer or cry or keep silent.

That uncertainty didn’t last long. Suddenly all the pent-up energy burst forth into one prolonged roar from the crowd.

The amputees had been prologue for the day’s most compelling vision: a flatbed float with a 25-foot-tall, waist-up portrait of Masood, surrounded at the bottom by a uniformed sample (both men and women) of those who’d served under him. The portrait passed the reviewing stand, dwarfed it, and then was turned abruptly to face it, staring down at the VIPs. There it stood all morning long, as if Masood himself were reviewing the parade.

Here was an Ahmad Shah Masood I’d not seen before, at least not iconographically. Not only was he bigger than ever — and infinitely bigger than any of his survivors,

Posters of Masood and Karzai side by side on a police truck. Masood’s, as usual, is larger.



BOTTOM RIGHT PHOTOGRAPH: DON NORTH, NORTHSTAR PRODUCTIONS

including Karzai — but his posture and expression were different. He was erect, arms folded, hands hidden in the folds of his tan jacket. He was looking slightly to his right, his eyes directly on the crowd, his gaze exactly level. So was his mouth: expressionless, disciplined, relaxed, completely in command. Temperamentally, he was Masood No. 5. I asked the man next to me what this new Masood expression meant. Literally, the question was phrased, “What does Masood’s face say?” His reply: “Masood has finally won.”

Then came the military detachments, one after another. Then units of police and firemen. Many carried pictures of Hamid Karzai, and none showed him the least disrespect. All,

FOR FURTHER READING

Azoy, Whitney. *Buzkashi: Game and Power in Afghanistan*. Second edition. Prospect Heights, IL: Waveland Press. 2002.

Wallace, Anthony F. C. *Religion: An Anthropological View*. New York: Random House. 1966.

A Masood supporter with posters. Masood’s parade float in the background.

however — every one — carried pictures of Masood. Sometimes pictures of the two men were displayed side by side. Whether by chance or conscious intent, Masood’s was always fractionally bigger. Balloons briefly held Masood aloft before their lines got tangled. Parachutists displayed Masood as they descended before being blown off course. One man perched on the VIP parapet toting Masood on a placard. He stayed there for the full two hours, never saying a word, never resting his arms. It was Masood’s parade.

As Anthony Wallace notes, revitalization movements are characteristic of Islam. One function of such movements, he says, is “resolution of group identity dilemmas.” For a quarter century Afghanistan has been devastated by identity dilemmas of two sorts: ideological and ethnic. The great contribution of Ahmad Shah Masood was that he, arguably more than any other individual, helped resolve the ideological dilemma. He led two Holy Wars: first against Godless (Soviet) Marxism and then against extremist (Taliban) Islamism.

Sadly, however, his death and subsequent post-9/11/01 events have left unresolved, indeed have highlighted, the chronic Afghan dilemma of ethnicity. Masood’s legacy of charismatic leadership, so powerful among his ethnic kin and so celebrated among expatriate admirers, is regarded with equal suspicion and even enmity by other groups, especially Pushtuns. Many regard Masood iconography as divisive propaganda. Few Masood images are on display in Pushtun cities like Kandahar. Events like the April 28 parade indicate that Wallace-style revitalization movements, while suited to small and homogenous populations, may work less well in large, ethnically complicated contexts.

Whitney Azoy received his doctorate in anthropology from the University of Virginia. He has been involved with Afghanistan since 1971 as a foreign service officer, research anthropologist, four-time Fulbright scholar and professor, National Geographic filmmaker, scholarship director, and refugee relief worker. His 1982 book *Buzkashi: Game and Power in Afghanistan* describes rural political dynamics and their relation to government structures. It is now available in an expanded second edition from Waveland Press. He was last in Afghanistan in May 2002.

