

Segmentary lineage system and health among the Pashtun of Afghanistan

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Abstract

Emerging trends in health problems and failing public health policies generally and in epidemic or pandemic situation in particular cannot be understood without an appreciation of underlying social structures. The understanding of the organization and social structure of the Pashtun society in Afghanistan is allowed by ethnographic research carried out within the family and lineage, physical and political places within which the crisis induced by the TB epidemic is expressed in the violence of a social drama. And it is not the underlying social structures who should be changed, according to the Author, but the public health policies. In this specific case it is the international health policies for the distribution of therapies that need to be changed. Recognising the roles of husband and wife in the tribal context, i.e. the constellation of related expectations, as well as the specificity of the crisis situation within the lineage, requires a different and contextual health policy.

Keywords: Pashtun, segmentary lineage system, TB, health policies, epidemic

Afghanistan literally means “land of the Afghans”. But the multiplicity of national and above all international actors involved in the mega-picture of the media, which all of us “Internationals” delude ourselves into knowing, would better define those lands as *Globalistan*. There is no one missing on the Afghan scene. And everyone plays their own role, more or less visibly, apparently following well-defined schemes and plans, often exasperating the part they have been assigned in international conferences or that they have assigned themselves. In fact, the social actors act as a *canovaccio*: the roles and parts are distributed and written, or rather redistributed and rewritten, continuously: as happens in the *Commedia dell’Arte*, in this case in a *Drama of Art*. And this plot acting takes place not only in the headquarters of the great directors but above all on site: within lineages, clans and tribes, between lineages, clans and tribes. In this action, the social actor learns to be himself in the Afghan context, at the same time defining himself politically at home and establishing and re-establishing his social organization and structure.

Afghanistan is certainly not lacking in crisis¹, and the crisis caused by the tuberculosis epidemic, especially for women, is particularly intense; it is perhaps one of the major crises in the health sector that the Afghan family is facing.

Emerging trends in health problems and failing public health policies generally and in epidemic or pandemic situation in particular cannot be understood without an appreciation of underlying social structures. Evidently, it is not the underlying social structures who should be changed, but the public health policies.

“How come a man speaks about the problems of the Afghan woman?”, this may be a spontaneous question in this context. The answer is simple: it is difficult for anyone to do research in Afghanistan; and, since as Senior Advisor of the Judicial Reform Commission I was able to set up a social network to conduct research in the field, the World Health Organization asked me to lead a project on the condition of women in Afghanistan in relation to the tuberculosis epidemic².

I carried out several research programmes during that period³. One such research led me to address the “social drama” of tuberculosis. As we all know, the social drama of Victor Turner’s anthropology shows that in particularly critical conditions, right at the height of the crisis, society offers the researcher the opportunity to thoroughly investigate social dynamics, to fully analyse the social system⁴.

The research group I directed was made up of twelve people, including doctors and anthropologists; two of them were women. To have two women in the research team, I had five months of bitter discussions with the National Tuberculosis Programme. I was subject to all kinds of pressure, even non-political pressure, because the rejection of my request to have even one woman in the research team was categorical. I had started with a request for six women in the group. And only when they found that I had suspended funding and would not conduct the research, when

¹ In the year 143 of the Hegira, reports the *Tarikh-i-Firishta*, of Muhammad Qasim Firishta (1560-1620), the Afghans invaded Peshawar with warriors from the tribes of Ghor, Kabul and Khalji. When they were asked what the situation in Kohistan was, they would answer: “Don’t call it Kohistan (lit. “lands of mountains”), but Afghanistan (lit. “lands of lamentation”), because besides cries and cries of pain nothing else can be heard there”.

² This project has resulted in an intervention of applied anthropology and significant changes, in the following year, in the approach to the distribution of medicines to a considerable number of women with TB.

³ I conducted fieldwork in Afghanistan from November 2002 to December 2003, working closely with the Judicial Reform Commission, established in November 2002. I directed and conducted extensive research on formal and informal institutions active in dispute resolution processes together with this institution and other Afghan and international national institutions (Kabul University, Unicef, Who etc.). Much behind-the-scenes work has been developed in order to initiate different kinds of research, research made possible after setting up structured and efficiently organised social networks, able to guarantee security and physical integrity to researchers.

⁴ See Turner, V. W., 1957, 1974, 1979, 1980.

they realised that mine was not a bluff but a convinced decision, however radical, did the local institutions give in, albeit partially. And I welcomed these two women into the group, who did not have an easy life despite all the protection I was trying to give them. Why this? There is a specific role for the Afghan woman; and it is not so much a role of simple submission: the issue is much more complex. The West does not have many tools to understand what happens in social and cultural situations such as Central Asia.

Already the notion of *burqa* elaborated in the West leaves the researcher on the ground confused. In Afghanistan it is not even known what the West wants to call the *burqa*: the term is never used locally. It is a foreign term, and this is interesting. When we translated in *pashtu* and *dari* the complex questionnaire I had developed to support some interviews⁵, the translators were perplexed when faced with the word *burqa*: it was a term to be translated absolutely into *dari* and *pashtu*. Outside international circles, very few women in Afghanistan would have understood what it was about. The international committants insisted to leave the term *burqa* unchanged in the questionnaire: it is, after all, the only term that everyone thinks “they” know – this is how the members of the International Agencies expressed themselves – beyond any doubt as Afghan, as it is now part of the global dictionary. I decided to please the commissioners – it was impossible to break down the dogma of the *burqa* – and I gave the researchers instructions to translate the term *chadri* by voice during the talks.

Very few women in Afghanistan know what a *burqa* is. The term used to indicate this ‘integral veil’ is *chadri*⁶. The woman uses the term *chadri* to define that cage, a real cage in her perspective, that sort of ready-to-wear caravan, which has little to do with clothing, and which is in the West called *burqa* with conviction. The *chadri* is not strictly considered a piece of clothing; rather it is considered part of the domestic equipment, as a wardrobe or a household appliance can be: it is not clothing. Therefore, whoever leaves the house, wears it, carries it with him or her as one can carry an umbrella, which is not even considered clothing in the West. The *chador* is the veil, and this is certainly part of clothing. But the *chadri*, what we erroneously know as the *burqa*, is part of the individual defensive system: it is an instrument of defence, which allows one to move in anonymity and which has very little to do with the Western conception of clothing. What we call the *burqa* is in fact sometimes worn by men in Afghanistan: some may understand that it is a man wearing it, but they may not always dare to lift the *burqa*. So, covered by the *burqa*,

⁵ In reality, in my conception of fieldwork, the questionnaires were just a trojan horse to allow for the start of a dialogue with women with TB, otherwise unconnectable in other ways, to be explored in depth according to opportunity and situation. Health institutions had to be dribbled down to counter the monopoly they exercised over the management of women with TB.

⁶ For a detailed and exhaustive discussion of the concept and role of *burqa*, *chadri* and *chador*, see Baghaï, A. 2008, pp. 203-220 and 2011, pp. 115-130.

“terrorists” or more simply those who do not want to be recognized, can also move around. One moves incognito, just as in the 15th-18th centuries in Venice with the *bauta*. This is what the *bauta* was for: it was the mask of the individual non-identification *par excellence*, worn by those who had a gallant encounter or wanted to engage in illicit actions, if not criminal ones, or actions that needed the utmost confidentiality and the guarantee of incognito. In fact, the *burqa* can be used by men, not least because it allows to hide weapons with a certain firepower. In short, sometimes a good assault rifle, the Kalashnikov, is hidden under the *burqa*.

But what happens today in a country like Afghanistan? It is a country that has lived through almost four decades of uninterrupted civil war. This leads to high states of stress: for example, there is a high level of psychosis, neurosis, an inability to sleep on the part of almost all the women I have known. These are known psychological mechanisms, which we have also discussed with psychiatrists: the man fought for months, and still fights today, and the woman received only the effects of these fights, suffered them, was “agitated by the bombardments”. But men are also traumatized, boys even more, children have removed and remove. It is a social situation of strong tension, still expressed in such terms today.

Therefore, in this already particularly critical climate, traditional social structure and organisation act in an extremely defensive manner.

Afghan society is a multi-ethnic society, unlike what can be considered in the West, and it is a multi-religious society. Many ethnic groups move on this stage and there is not a single Islam: there are heterodox Islam as well as Orthodox Islam. For most of the international actors it is one, but for the local social actors – Pashtun, Tajik, Uzbek, Hazara etc. – these are fundamental distinctions. There is a part of Afghanistan that is not Islamized and does not feel particularly Muslim, both in the north and in the far south-east of the country. Even in the areas where the source of the Taliban world is considered, one can find a deeply critical attitude towards Islam. It is therefore a society that is currently, and has been for centuries subject to a powerful process of arabisation and Islamisation; one leads to the other and vice versa. Islamisation is in fact an arabisation and arabisation is Islamisation.

As far as the structure of the Afghan family is concerned, for example, this means that there has been a shift from traditional, and little documented, marriage patterns to a different marriage pattern, in the wake of that followed in part of the Arab world and in the contexts of Arabisation of a particularly Saudi matrix. Thus some groups have proceeded to favour forms of marriage between parallel patrilineal cousins: in the community, the expectation is established that the young man will try to marry his father’s brother’s daughter. In fact, the daughter of her father’s brother expects her cousin to make a proposal of marriage to her; this is also done in order to avoid, for example, the fragmentation of land ownership and to allow her to be left within the patrilineal domain. Afghan societies are patrilineal lineage societies, i.e. the lineage is passed on by male lineage. There are patrilineal societies in which the

position of women is at the same time isomorphic with respect to the West, both in the practice of daily life and under the *corpus juris* aspect of land ownership and inheritance; but in Afghan society this arabisation-Islamisation has transformed patrilineal society into lineages, strengthening the principle of hierarchical authority focused on the male gender, institutionalising it, i.e. recognising it even outside emergency contexts. The differentiation of matrimonial patterns, therefore the transition to preferential marriage with the parallel patrilateral cousin, has led and serves to establish alliances already in the premarital phase between large segments of lineage and clans, called in pashtu *kheil*, or even between tribes, *qworaneh*.

Thus, the marriage between a man and a woman today is based on a series of political and even economic actions. This breaks, among other things, with the Afghan tradition, very evident in the poetic, literary and singing production, where there is a continuous reference to flirting, to the dynamics of man-woman affectivity⁷. A production that approaches, in some ways, visions that we could define in our literature as “romantic or neo-romantic”⁸. This poetics has been cancelled out by the current logic of arabisation and political alliances.

Thus, the girls are already engaged long before marriage, so that lineages and clans can enjoy periods of tranquillity in their daily lives, periods of mutual trust, and thus facilitate socio-political and family processes that could also lead to pacifications at least within districts or territorial communities, even if they are simply limited to one district.

What happens in this new situation? It happens that a marriage commitment of this kind between two lineages entails guarantee transactions: i.e., on the one hand, the promise is made that this young girl will one day pass to the other clan through marriage; on the other hand, the other clan is required to provide guarantees of a mainly economic nature or concerning land exploitation. This entails, for the clan that will accept the woman, a considerable effort. We are thus witnessing processes of indebtedness of lineages and clans in order to meet the costs of alliances entered into through marriage. Marriage alliances cost in economic terms, quantifiable in “five to six thousand Euros” at the minimum. It should be borne in mind that the salary of an Afghan judge, for example, or of a general of the national army, is around thirty-five Euros a month, according to data referring to the period 2003-2005. This figure yearly increases: immediately and in proportion to the cost of living, the cost of marriage also increases. The value of marriage is at the basis of the economy; in fact, it represents the possibility of political stabilisation of the social system. It is as if marriage were not only an economic unit, but a unit of measure of stability and the potential for peace and well-being in the territory, a stage for social and political

⁷ Muhammad Hayat Khan in his *Hayat-i-Afghani*, 1874, reports wonderful legends about the origin of the Afghans, all aimed at representing Afghanistan as a land of fighters.

⁸ See Bausani 1968, pp. 257-275.

action, describable in the language of the agnatic kinship. Therefore, capitalizing “six thousand Euros”, if we calculate salaries of thirty-five Euros per month, implies a considerable commitment on the part of the lineage segment. All the more reason, it is an effort that absorbs the energies of the whole lineage or its significant segments, especially when plots of land are involved in the stipulation of marriages; even when these plots are confided to the family that is being formed.

Certainly, the *imperium* on this land is not recognised, but the *possessio*, i.e. the right to use the land for more or less defined periods of time; but the tribe, and consequently the lineage, as holder of the *imperium*, commits itself to the political responsibility of asserting the rights of *possessio* to those who benefit from it. It is a land system that is in some ways complex but very clear in its founding principles: in Afghanistan land is neither saleable nor buyable, i.e. it is not subject to monetary transactions of any kind. There are extraordinary aphorisms, and one of them reads: *Ya patei da, ya kunatei da*, “The land is like the genital apparatus: you don’t buy it, you don’t sell it; you have it by nature or it is given to you as present, or you conquer it by force”. These are the three possibilities of relationship with the land that human beings have. And none contemplates the possibility of buying and selling it, and it must always and in any case be defended.

I have researched for a long time in this area. I tried, for example, to buy land in some parts of south-east Afghanistan, and whatever I offered, the idea of alienating the plot of land was absolutely unthinkable for those I considered potential sellers. Even offers of \$15,000 per hectare were refused, which seemed to me very high for completely isolated plots⁹.

The sale of land is not conceivable, and the acquisition of a plot of land requires above all political alliances and not only financial availability. Even ownership can only be achieved through a series of important alliances between lineages, or between them and government institutions, alliances made and guaranteed through marriages. There is, after all, no land registry. The Government is preparing to implement it today, but I doubt that it will succeed in the near future, for as many specialists as it can commit.

The relationship between lineage and land is at the very heart of social structure and organisation, and social and political balance is achieved through this complex alchemy: the relationship between women, land and money¹⁰. The land registers will struggle to subsist because the order is given by this delicate alchemy between matrimonial alliances and non-saleability of land: matrimonial alliances which are alliances between lineages and the establishment of relationships of

⁹ When a “monthly salary of an Afghan General/Monthly salary of an Italian General” report is drawn up, it is as if for one hectare of any land, isolated and uncultivated, not buildable, an offer of 3 million Euros was refused.

¹⁰ See Palmisano 2005b, pp. 185-208, or Palmisano 2006.

equality or of superordination and subordination between them, in the contextual definition of the social structure.

So, what happens to the betrothed woman? Once married, the woman joins another lineage, which is the lineage of her husband, since these are patrilineal societies with a prescriptive patrilocal residence, i.e. societies in which the newly formed couple goes to live in the groom's father's house. Only there can he reside, and in no other place. There is no neo-locality in Afghanistan, except in an urban environment. The exercise of patrilocal residence, after all, guarantees the political-strategic potential that lineages and clans are able to exercise. The woman enters a new family, and this new family, for having obtained her presence in that clan, in that *qala*, is economically as well as politically committed¹¹.



Photo 1. *Qala*. (Photo: A.L. Palmisano)

¹¹ No one is able to see what is happening in a *qala* from the outside. The *qala* is the construction that represents the identity of the local group and the group of descendants. It takes the architectural form of a square or rectangular settlement. It is surrounded by high, sturdy clay walls with watchtowers. Its size varies from a few hundred square metres to several hectares, in relation to the economic conditions of the *qworaneh*. The length and height of the perimeter walls, the number of rooms inside, the workmanship of the walls, demonstrate the well-being of the inhabitants, i.e. the economic power and the solidity of their social and political networks. The high and robust walls, which enclose a garden as well as a well-cultivated garden, and the towers or turrets at the corners, finally, allow a valid defence against external attacks.

Inside the *qala* the life of the Afghan woman develops in this way. The same is also true in the city, where the walls are also high, always well built and maintained with care. Outside of them the woman goes out surrounded by that other sort of wall that is the *chadri*: a sort of shield, a protection. Rather than forcing the woman inside them, in the Afghan perspective, the walls prevent the outside world from entering the world of the lineage, except after having agreed on alliance strategies.



Photo 2. *Qala*. (Photo: A.L. Palmisano)

In the *qala*, the woman who has been betrothed, and who potentially comes from a not entirely known outside world, is already called *palai*. The term used to designate this woman means “pawn”, the same term used for the game of chess. Or, when she is an adult and already married, she is initially referred to as a *suara*, “horse”, again as in the game of chess. After all, the horse is able to jump over obstacles and enter the opponent’s line-up, placing itself in optimal positions to “checkmate the king”. It is only later on that she will be called – considered – *mirokha*, an adult married woman, by all members of the lineage. Therefore, this woman is the only person belonging to a segment of lineage that is situationally of a different origin, and it is another segment of lineage with which the father of the family is competing, because it is the segment of lineage of his brother. The

reasoning implicit in the action of the head of the family, as sometimes expressly stated, is the following: “I have a brother and I have a son; this brother has a daughter; this daughter of my brother comes into my house through my son. But I am always potentially in competition with my brother, by definition; in Afghan society, both my brother and I, in fact, have political ambitions of leadership in the lineage to which we belong by birth”. This is the segmental principle of headless societies: and many Afghan tribes are headless societies, organised in segmentry lineages. A very particular organisation, as well known¹². There are no permanent central instances in these tribal societies; there are therefore no instances to which the legitimate monopoly on the use of force and physical sanctions against members of the community is delegated, except in periods of exceptionality, such as war.



Photo 3. Group of *qala* inhabited by a *qworaneh*. (Photo: A.L. Palmisano)

In the Afghan tribe, therefore, there is no one who can legitimately impose sanctions on anyone; the central body is absent, even if in social and political processes there is the principle of centralization, that is, the political and legal institutionalization represented by the figure of the *Khan*. We find instead these

¹² See for example Barth 1959, 1969.

lineages that we call segmentaries, which have an organisation of extraordinary complexity and an ability to reach and maintain juxtaposed balances that are very fluid, very dynamic, so that one lineage, finally, “weighs” politically as much as another of equal genealogical distance from the apical ancestor. As long as the weights of the two lineages are equal, nothing particularly interesting happens for the scholar of crises; on the contrary, when one of the two lineages begins to have a greater political weight, conflict breaks out, to bring everything back to a presumed situation of equilibrium; a balance conceived, obviously, in the Afghan perspective of the segmentary lineage society. Sometimes the acquisition of three wives in one lineage and five in another is enough for the “political weight” of the two to be different, in the double perspective, for the future potential of generating heirs as well as for the actuality of the established alliances. It immediately triggers the perception of a need to rebalance interclanic or intertribal relations in political terms, sometimes in political-military terms. Therefore, any intervention from outside cannot but lead to a situation that is locally understood as potentially conflictual. In order to avoid conflict, it is useful to start careful analyses that lead to the formation of alliances, even before the balance is perceived as disturbed, with those clans and tribes that might have this perception. But the number of women in marriage is limited.

This married woman, therefore, is conceived as a “horse”, as someone who has jumped over the wall and entered her husband’s lineage. She somehow represents the other; she structurally represents “an enemy at home”. For this enemy at home “I paid a lot”, “I worked a long time to get six thousand Euros”, perhaps some properties were even pawned – not sold but given in sharecropping or rented -, with all the risks that this entails. All this means that the son of the “father” of the *qala*, i.e. the one who brought this woman he married into the house, will have to migrate to Pakistan or elsewhere to find work, i.e. funds. In short, this son must recover “six thousand Euros” as soon as possible. Otherwise, the other son, probably the cadet, will not be able to get married. Therefore, the younger brother will put enormous pressure on the older brother to make the lineage fall into the liabilities. One of the best activities, potentially the main one, to recover the “six thousand Euros” is opium trafficking. Almost everyone is a warrior in Afghanistan; many are exceptional fighters; anyway they are highly training in this field¹³. War and guerrilla warfare are considered potentially profitable activities. And besides, today’s Afghanistan is populated by mercenaries who fight for all flags, as well as for their own. But if mercenaries under more or less Western flags work for 10,000 to 20,000 dollars a month, Afghan warriors fight for 100 and even less dollars a month. But, like their Western colleagues, they claim rights, more or less explicitly recognized by local warlords or managers of international security holdings, on the distribution of the loot. From a

¹³ Muhammad Hayat Khan in his *Hayat-i-Afghani*, 1874, reports other wonderful legends about the origin of the Afghans, all aimed at representing Afghanistan as a land of fighters.

local perspective, the question of what is and what is not a right comes into play, and to what extent we can talk about obligations and duties: while the hiring of the Internationals is signed with an actual contract, the hiring of the locals is regulated on the basis of the word given by the warlord, sometimes not even pronounced. Therefore, it is possible that this young bridegroom may engage in activities of this kind in Afghanistan, activities which, however, are not considered illicit from a local perspective; and not even from an international perspective, apparently. But more often he is likely to engage in migration, i.e. go abroad, especially to Pakistan, where wages are undoubtedly higher than in Afghanistan. The young man will thus be able to “recover wealth” for his family, and give back to his father what has been confided to allow his marriage transaction, thus allowing his younger brother to continue his political and social career, i.e. marriage, to become one day, perhaps, his adversary.



Photo 4. Outside of the *qala*, woman “within the *burqa*”. (Photo: A.L. Palmisano)

What happens finally? When this woman who has been brought into the *qala*, who has been introduced into the new family, into the new lineage, falls ill, the “horse” becomes expensive for everyone. The treatment is in fact very expensive. Certainly, the International Community, through the World Health Organization, has decided to allow the treatment of tuberculosis free of charge, and the medicines are in fact free. Why has the WHO done this? Tuberculosis is spreading all over the world,

particularly in Central Asia, even more so in Afghanistan, but in Afghanistan, unlike in the rest of the world, the number of women dying compared to the number of infected women exceeds the number of men dying compared to the number of infected men. Female mortality from tuberculosis in Afghanistan is significantly higher than that of men. This is the only case worldwide: in the case of tuberculosis, in all other countries the mortality rate of men is higher than that of women. The WHO could not explain the reason for these figures and therefore commissioned research¹⁴.

But treatment is only apparently free in Afghanistan. It is then appropriate to tell from an Afghan perspective what happens within the family in which a woman has been declared suffering from tuberculosis.

Let us follow the crisis, the disaster, from the perspective of this married woman and her husband. First of all, married women are suffering from tuberculosis not in their father's house, but in their husband's father's house. It is in this very particular context that we understand what is the configuration of the structure of the Afghan family and the dynamics of its organization. Let us analyse this perspective: the woman now finds herself in the *qala*, that is, in the group of residence that coincides with the group of descendants called *kheil*, lineage or clan, or *qworaneh*, tribe; she is ill, her presence has already cost economic sacrifices to everyone, and now it will cost even more. If it is true that medicines are free, to go to the medical dispensary the woman has to travel a certain number of kilometres, more likely tens of kilometres. This applies to all rural areas, and 78% of Afghanistan is rural area. Therefore, this woman should undergo DOTS-type TB treatment and then travel to take medication. DOTS therapy consists of a few stages: for the first two months, she takes medication under medical supervision every day, and in the following six months, at least once a week. If this woman lives only a few kilometres from the pharmaceutical dispensary or clinic, the therapy involves only the cost of the journey, although she will not be able to travel alone. No woman can travel alone in Afghanistan. After all, even for a man it is an adventure to travel alone. Travelling in Afghanistan means that you have to face the problem of arriving safely to your destination, and more frequently you prefer to travel in groups. The sick woman therefore travels with her husband, or perhaps with her husband and brother, perhaps even with her father. This involves a very high cost, just to go and take medicines. If the sick woman is forced to stay overnight near the health centre, complications arise. Unlike what happens to a man who might find a relative or friend and be hosted by the latter, giving and receiving hospitality for a woman is particularly complex. Women sleep together with other women even when married, and men sleep together with other men even when married. There is a very clear separation between men and

¹⁴ See Palmisano 2005a.

women, even within married life. I am referring here, in the analysis, to an initial phase of the illness, to the full extent of the crisis and not to the crisis already exhausted and resolved: personal physical security is therefore required for the sick woman and health security for the other women of the host *qala*. But organising such logistics requires resources and security guarantees that not all Afghan families can afford and provide. It is difficult to organise an overnight stay for a man and a woman together; not all houses in fact have two or three rooms. So a temporary separation is created inside the room because the women sleep on one side and the men on the other; but since there is a “stranger” who does not belong to the family group, the matter becomes really delicate. Since the woman still has to stay overnight in the vicinity of the clinic to undergo treatment, and the overnight stay involves additional expenses, this will cost two people instead of one: the husband cannot do otherwise, he must accompany her. In addition to the travel costs, therefore, the cost of an overnight stay for at least two people must be calculated, always staying in a risky environment.

Treating these sick women therefore becomes very expensive, compared to treating sick men. This creates a dynamic of particular conflict between the woman and her husband’s mother. In fact, the mother-in-law obtains continuous requests and incessant pressure from the younger son who wants to get married. He can speak to his mother in these terms: “Six thousand Euros have already been spent on this woman; now I am waiting for my brother to pay back the money to the lineage so that I too can get married; but his wife is beginning to be ill; at this rate, I am not getting married next year, not even in three years, not even in five years!”. So, the dynamic between daughter-in-law and mother-in-law leads to a high level of conflict within the *qala*. Moreover, since these are societies within which the possibility of social and political action for women is limited to the *qala*, i.e. since the mother-in-law only is able to express authority and power within the *qala*, all the more so now that she is elderly, it is evident that the situation of the newly-arrived daughter-in-law who has been in the lineage for years, even if she already has three, four or five children, is extraordinarily weak: her structural position within the social networks established in the *qala*, the adoption *kheil*, is vulnerable.

The only “friendships” she has, the only multi-layered relationships, with a high emotional content and a high frequency of interaction, are resolved in her husband, they end with her husband. Unlike what can generally be assumed in the West, in fact, in Afghanistan there is an almost obsessive understanding between married men and women. For the husband, the wife is the icon of being there in the world. Even more, she represents the quality of his political existence: she is the receptacle not so much of his children as of his honour. Conversely, for the wife, there is no world outside of her husband, except through him; with the sole exception of her father. So, the union between the two is really intense: a man and a woman

who probably would like to meet more often in intimacy, who would also like to sleep together and who sometimes have no choice but to meet semi-clandestinely even when married¹⁵.

It is a difficult social and political situation, in general, especially for the wife but also for the husband: intrafamily relationships are under great stress.

The husband is in what Gregory Bateson called a “double bind situation”¹⁶. The same communication within the Afghan family is structured by double bind. In the crisis situation proposed by the disease this is particularly evident.

The husband is torn by the dilemma of choosing between unconditional support for his wife and his duties to his patrilineage. The latter has made it possible for him to marry that very woman and represents the primary source of his political and economic possibilities. The husband is the first to worry about his wife’s health: he has already received “six thousand Euros” for his marriage and will not be able to count on any other support of this kind until all his brothers have had the same chance. So, if for no other reason than this, the husband is interested in his wife’s health. On the other hand, the demands within his family, within his patrilineage, are pressing and multiple. On the part of the father and brothers, but especially on the mother’s side, the demands can be formulated in these terms: “Don’t spend too much money on her, we have already spent a lot”. Therefore, the man is pulled simultaneously by two sides, or parties, in opposition: whatever action he takes, he is wrong. He does not have many possibilities to choose for the best and whatever his choice, he carries with him the responsibility of what will happen, either for one or the other; especially in the direction of facilitating his wife’s chances of recovery, a possibility considered already minimal. Whatever choice is made, it is a source of pain: the man is in a situation of double bind.

The woman is also in a situation of double bind. On the one hand, she wants to feel well, to recover her health; on the other hand, she knows that the better she can feel, the more her husband will have committed working time and economic resources taken from the lineage, and will find himself in conflict with his family. This is very painful for her. It is significant to see how this woman does not care so much about herself as about her relationship with her husband and children, the only relationships that mean anything to her. And the woman would like everything but to weaken this situation of strong affection in return. In the terminology of the double bind, the situation is such that one is forced to make a choice between these two

¹⁵ The sharing of numerous situations of a certain complexity allowed me to listen to surprising confidences, at least for me, of many Afghan friends, always pronounced with a strong sense of irony and self-irony.

¹⁶ See Bateson 1969-1972, but also Bateson, G., Jackson, D.D., Haley, J., Weakland, J.H. 1956. Before the reader reaches quick and misleading conclusions, I would like to point out that this double bind situation, even if it is an enhanced double bind situation, in the Afghan family does not imply schizophrenia: in fact, I have never found any form of concealment in intrafamily communication.

strategies, each of which leads to a mistake. And, even in the awareness of this, it is necessary to react. So how does the sick woman behave? The strategy of response to the disease, once the diagnosis is known, is to move as little as possible, reduce consumption – starting with nutrition, which is totally modified with the immediate exclusion of meat, the most expensive product – until starvation.

If there are no particular events from the outside, paradoxically the positive intervention is carried out by the *mullah*. From him we could expect particularly conservative and perhaps even oppressive positions towards women; but the *mullah* is actually more interested in maintaining the newly formed family than in supporting the dynamics of lineage. Although he is unable to provide medical advice of any kind, the *mullah* is a great connoisseur of local situations, especially situations described from an ego-centred perspective. He knows exactly what is happening to that husband and what is happening to that wife. He also knows what is happening to that father, whose daughter is sick in another *qala*. The father of the girl who now lives in the other *qala* already knows what the daughter is going through once she has contracted tuberculosis; and he suffers in an attempt to help her. He may also be willing to fight that *qala* to try to get her out of that situation. The girl's brother may also be involved in helping her, because he is the one who is taking advantage of the "six thousand dollars", which came through his sister, to build relationships that will allow him, or have already allowed him, to get married. If the marriage between the sister and the brother-in-law ends with the death of the sister, the lineage of the brother-in-law could also demand that brideprice back.

In the presence of such deep, highly emotional ties, the "closed field" offers no chance of escape for anyone; neither for the woman nor for the man. It is also for agnatic and co-agnatic situations of this kind that migration may appear to be a rare winning solution: the opening to a wider world, albeit in the uncertainty of a social and political action that will develop in little or no known contexts.

The DOTS therapy is therefore mildly effective, not for pharmacological reasons but for purely socio-anthropological reasons: even if it is free, it always costs the sick woman's adoptive family too much.

Tuberculosis is a disease with a slow course, and this allows the reinforced structuring of this double bind situation; a situation that involves an erosion of interpersonal relationships within the lineage. The tension of the whole family around what is happening to the woman, the man, lasts for months; the torment between husband and wife lasts for months.

The two really love each other; just as fathers and mothers love their daughters who have left the *qala* of origin to reach the residence of their husband's lineage. Solidarity is present, as are the principles of loyalty to the original group. And the son, moreover and above all, must reciprocate the affection and care received from the mother. And everyone finds themselves caged.

Marriage with the parallel patrilineal cousin is a preferential marriage; and even if for some reason it is not achieved, clan endogamy takes priority over other forms of marriage, and the dynamics described may vary but not in their structure. An alliance between lineages is always sought: even if the son sometimes talks to his father, confiding to him his wishes and preferences. And in the name of this alliance, competition and potential rivalry between the brothers themselves and between father and son persist. Above everything and everyone, therefore, emerges the priority of the political and historical continuity of one's lineage, of one's own group of residence and descent. And to this group the married woman belongs only partially.

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