

Politics of the Past: Archaeology, Nationalism, and Diplomacy in Afghanistan, 1919–2001

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Abstract

This research report provides edited excerpts from my PhD thesis, “Politics of the Past: Archaeology, Nationalism and Diplomacy in Afghanistan, 1919–2001,” submitted to the Department of Archaeology, University of Cambridge. The aim of the thesis was to assess the relationship between nationalist agendas and the discipline of archaeology in Afghanistan from 1919 to 2001. The material collected from the Rockefeller Archive Center (RAC) contributed to Chapter 5 of the thesis, which focused on the political period 1946–1978 in Afghanistan, when Afghan leaders began to open the country to international archaeological teams. At the RAC, I was particularly interested in uncovering material pertaining to a travelling exhibition of artefacts from the National Museum of Afghanistan, which opened at Asia House in New York City in 1966. The following segments also draw on archival material from the JFK Library in Boston, Massachusetts and the National Archives in Delhi, India. The material collected from the RAC helped demonstrate how Afghan leaders used archaeology to build diplomatic relations with key allies, including Japan and the United States, during the 1960s.

Overview

Afghanistan was one of many states across the Asian continent that were swept up in the broad wave of nationalism and pan-Islamic movements following the disintegration of the Ottoman Empire after World War One. Gaining independence from British imperial control in 1919,¹ Afghan political leaders stridently endeavored to forge a nation among an ethnically, linguistically, and religiously divided people, while also attempting to assert that nation-state against British influence in the new world order. Archaeology proved to be one means of promoting these political agendas. Afghan leaders turned to foreign archaeologists to develop Afghanistan's archaeological discipline by signing a diplomatic cultural agreement with France in the 1920s and further agreements with strategic allies from the 1950s onwards, including India, Italy, Japan, and the U.S. The country's archaeological sites and collections housed at the National Museum of Afghanistan in the capital of Kabul served as potent national symbols that helped bolster national pride and assert territorial boundaries against foreign influence and intervention. Consequently, successive twentieth-century political leaders embraced archaeology and the National Museum as symbols of the Afghan nation, which they propagated through state-sponsored material to national and international communities.

Decade of Democracy (1960s)

In 1963, King Zahir Shah forced Prime Minister Daoud into early retirement, ending the "Decade of Daoud." In its place rose the so-called "Decade of Democracy," an era of hastened social reform in the 1960s. During this period, King Zahir Shah oversaw the promulgation of the 1964 Constitution, which was known as the "birth of democracy in Afghanistan." The constitution was intended to lead the country into a period of greater governmental accountability and citizen participation in order to build national pride and unity.² The document was drafted by a Constitutional Advisory Commission composed of 26 members, drawn from a range of economic, political, religious, and social life, and

unprecedentedly included two women.³ The constitution granted greater rights to political parties and minority groups while barring royalty from holding political positions.⁴ This reform allowed the Communist People's Democratic Party of Afghanistan (PDPA) to form in 1965, which had been hitherto suppressed under Daoud's tight grip; its establishment would have profound political ramifications in the decades ahead.⁵ Yet for many Afghans, the 1964 Constitution "signaled the end of authoritarian rule and established the framework for a parliamentary democracy," as well as inaugurated an era of greater inclusiveness.⁶

International Travelling Exhibitions and Diplomatic Relations

While the museum collections were being promoted at home with support from UNESCO, Afghanistan's prized antiquities were also drawing crowds abroad. Temporary exhibitions were employed to showcase in other countries Afghanistan's rich heritage and national independence and promote cultural exchange. As a report on the National Museum of Afghanistan noted, international exhibitions "have often taken place on the occasion of the Independence Day."⁷ Following World War Two, the National Museum Director Ahmad Ali Kohzad organized several small exhibitions abroad: in 1946 in Calcutta for the Conference of Asiatic Countries and in 1956 at the Cultural Festival of African and Asian Countries in Cairo.⁸ By the 1960s, Afghanistan had signed friendship treaties with eighteen countries to promote cultural relations.⁹ As part of this agenda, the National Museum's collections travelled to Italy, Japan, and the U.S.¹⁰ These locations were all key states with which Afghanistan sought to build stronger foreign relations. While Italy was one of the first European states to sign a treaty with Afghanistan in the 1920s, Japan and the U.S. took longer to develop diplomatic relations. However, they proved to be valuable allies as Afghanistan opened further on the world stage in the mid-twentieth century.¹¹

Afghan-Japanese Relations

Afghanistan and Japan shared close diplomatic ties, signing a treaty of friendship in 1930 and establishing legations in 1933–1934. In *Seraj ul-Akhbar*, a government-sponsored newspaper in Afghanistan dated 1911–1919, its founder Mahmud Tarzi described Japan as an alternative model of progress to Western ones, notable for maintaining its customs and monarchy.¹² In Afghan schools, children were taught, incorrectly, that Afghanistan and Japan gained independence at the same time, and should be viewed as a model of progress, as well as the countries shared historical link to Buddhism along the “Silk Road.” The “Young Afghans,” a progressive movement modelled on the “Young Turks,” had been encouraged by Japan’s victory in the Russo-Japanese War in 1905, which saw the defeat of imperial power by a small Asiatic one.¹³ As foreign secretary, Mahmud Tarzi had attempted to forge diplomatic relations with Japan in the 1920s, but the Japanese delayed diplomatic engagement following advice from the British.¹⁴ Tarzi also personally translated a five-volume account of the Russo-Japanese War.¹⁵ Diplomatic relations with Japan stopped in 1946, as one of the defeated Axis powers, but resumed in 1955. In 1959, the Afghan Prime Minister Mohammed Daoud Khan visited Japan. King Zahir Shah and Queen Humaira visited Japan in 1969, and the Japanese Emperor Akihito and Empress Michiko made a reciprocal visit in 1971, visiting Aï Khanum, Bamiyan, Kabul, Kunduz and other sites.¹⁶ Impressed by their visit to Bamiyan, the Empress penned a poem:

There at Bamiyan
Under a moon faintly red
The great stone Buddhas,
Their sacred faces shattered,
Are still awesomely standing.¹⁷

In 1963, collections from the National Museum of Afghanistan travelled to Tokyo for a ten-day exhibition, drawing over 80,000 visitors, before travelling to Osaka and Nagoya.¹⁸ The new Director of the National Museum, Ahmad Ali Motamedi, who accompanied the exhibition, “stated that Japanese newspapers expressed

their admiration for the profound thinking, resourcefulness and skill with which the exhibited arts were created.”¹⁹ The Japanese people were particularly impressed by the relics from Bamiyan, just as their empress had been, in part owing to Japan’s shared Buddhist heritage with Afghanistan. The newspaper article continued,

A piece from the wall of Bamiyan’s statue on which two birds are painted, for instance, received the name of beauty. This piece was highly admired in the cultural circles of Japan and recognized as probably the most valuable piece of Afghanistan’s ancient arts in the exhibition.²⁰

The article also reflected on the importance of cultural relations between the two nations and anticipated further exchange to come: “The uniqueness of the exhibition was reflected in the fact that the collections could provide new inspiration for archaeologists and historians interested in the study of Afghanistan’s culture, and other ancient civilizations of the Middle East.”²¹ The exhibition also resulted in an unintended type of cultural exchange: the National Museum director married a Japanese woman, Haruko Tsuchiya, who subsequently published a book on the National Museum in Japanese.²²

Afghan-U.S. Relations

Spurred by competition with the Soviet Union during the Cold War, the U.S. expanded economic aid, along with cultural and educational activities in the 1950s–1960s.²³ In 1958, the Afghan Prime Minister Daoud Khan and U.S. Secretary of State John Foster Dulles signed a cultural exchange agreement on behalf of their respective nations, leading to numerous exchanges over the next two decades.²⁴ The following year, U.S. President Dwight D. Eisenhower paid a brief visit to King Zaher Shah in Kabul, discussing concerns over the Cold War, U.S. mediation in Afghanistan’s relations with Pakistan and Iran, and development aid.²⁵

King Zaher Shah and Queen Humaira made an official visit to the U.S. in September 1963, the first visit by an Afghan monarch, and were received by President John F. Kennedy. As a diplomatic gift, King Zaher Shah presented the president with a second-century, Gandharan-style stucco Buddha head from Hadda.²⁶ Alongside the state visit, the White House emphasized in a planned press release with Afghan officials that the U.S. “places great importance on Afghanistan’s continued independence and national integrity,” highlighting the continued importance Afghanistan felt about asserting its independence on the world stage.²⁷ In order to promote the U.S. tour, *Afghanistan News* also ran a series of articles featuring the royal couple, linking the monarch’s interest in Afghanistan’s progress and heritage.²⁸ Indeed, the monarch took an active interest in promoting Afghanistan’s cultural heritage with foreign governments, including the U.S. and India. In 1970, he personally closed a UNESCO-sponsored Kushan conference in Kabul, attended by world-renowned archaeologists.

John D. Rockefeller 3rd sent a letter to King Zaher Shah on 10 July 1964 following their meeting during the state visit the previous year. He wrote,

You will remember that when you were here in our country, we talked about an exhibition of Afghan art being shown in the Asia House Gallery. This idea has progressed very well, and we are pleased indeed at the prospect of having the privilege of displaying some of the art treasures of your great country.²⁹

Director of Asia House George Washburn had earlier written to the Afghan Deputy Prime Minister Ali Ahmad Popal on 27 May 1964 about how the exhibition would be a valuable form of cultural exchange between the two nations. He said,

The cultural history of Afghanistan is little-known in the United States, and this exhibition will help greatly to inform our people of the importance of your country at the crossroads of Asia. Moreover, it will be a valuable follow-up to the visit to America of Their Majesties last year.³⁰

Beginning in 1964, the exhibition, which included Afghanistan’s most prized archaeological collections, went on an international tour to prominent museums in Europe and the United States. Accompanied by the then-Director of the

National Museum Ahmad Ali Motamedi, the exhibition opened at the Asia House Gallery in New York City in 1966, before continuing to the Los Angeles County Museum and the Smithsonian Institution in Washington, DC.³¹ Of the nine site-based collections presented in the exhibition, the first originated from Mundigak, a Helmand Civilisation site excavated by DAFA (La Délégation archéologique française en Afghanistan) in the 1950s;³² the following seven from pre-Islamic sites, including Bamiyan and Hadda; and the last from the Italian excavations at Ghazni.³³ The exhibition clearly focused on the pre-Islamic past, demonstrating the impact of French excavations during the 1920s–1940s on the development of the discipline of archaeology in Afghanistan.

The travelling exhibition proved to be a valuable means to promote Afghanistan's archaeological developments and national prestige abroad. The collections were widely promoted in state-sponsored material, including guidebooks and postcards.³⁴ In the Asia House exhibition guidebook, King Zaher Shah wrote as the royal patron of the exhibition, "It is with much personal satisfaction that I welcome you to this exhibition of the arts and artifacts of Afghanistan, depicting the rich and diverse cultural heritage of this ancient nation."³⁵ Privately, John D. Rockefeller 3rd wrote a letter to Afghan Prime Minister Hashim Maiwandwal, relaying the impact of the exhibition in the U.S.,

We wanted you to know that this exhibition, its newspaper and magazine reviews and these educational programs are increasing American understanding and appreciation of your country. I know that this will help to further cordial relations between our peoples.³⁶

As Washburn had written to the deputy prime minister of Afghanistan, the exhibition did indeed prove to be another important opportunity to build diplomatic relations between Afghanistan and the U.S.

Summary

As this report has shown, the material collected from the RAC provided evidence that the discipline of archaeology was employed by King Zahir Shah's administration to help promote diplomatic relations with key allies, including Japan and the United States, during the "Decade of Democracy" in the 1960s. The use of archaeology by successive Afghan governments to promote diplomacy was one important theme of the thesis. These diplomatic relations were essential for establishing Afghanistan's equal footing in the world order following "independence" from British control of the country's foreign affairs in 1919. Diplomatic tours often resulted in new cultural exchanges, such as the 1963 Afghan royal tour to the U.S., which led to the travelling exhibition of the National Museum of Afghanistan's collections in 1966. As the letters from John D. Rockefeller 3rd and Washburn indicate, the exhibition inspired greater cultural awareness and understanding between Afghanistan and the United States.

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- ⁴ Ibid.: 576.
- ⁵ Barfield, T. (2010) *Afghanistan: A Cultural and Political History*. Princeton, Princeton University Press: 211-213.
- ⁶ Olesen, A. (1995) *Islam and Politics in Afghanistan*. Richmond, Curzon Press: 206.
- ⁷ National Museum of Afghanistan. (1960) Report on the National Museum of Kabul, Afghanistan, Tokyo. 7 September 1960. Correspondence: Kabul Museum, 1961, 1963-1968, Box 28, Folder 250, Asia Society Exhibition Files, FA258, RAC.
- ⁸ Dupree, N.H. (1974) Archaeology and the Arts in the Creation of a National Consciousness. In: Dupree, L. & Albert, L. (eds) *Afghanistan in the 1970s*. New York, Praeger Publishers: 209; Report on the National Museum of Kabul, Afghanistan, Tokyo. 7 September 1960. Correspondence: Kabul Museum, 1961, 1963-1968, Box 28, Folder 250, Asia Society Exhibition Files, FA258, RAC.
- ⁹ Afghanistan News. (1963b) Afghanistan Promotes Cultural Relations. *Afghanistan News*, 73(6): 13.

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- ¹⁰ Dupree 1974: 209; Report on the National Museum of Kabul, Afghanistan, Tokyo. 7 September 1960. Correspondence: Kabul Museum, 1961, 1963-1968, Box 28, Folder 250, Asia Society Exhibition Files, FA258, RAC.
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- ¹² Amin, H. (2007) *Afghan-Japan Relations: Lands Under the Rising Sun*. Tokyo, The Islamic Embassy of Afghanistan in Tokyo: 14.
<http://www.afghanembassyjp.org/pdf/afghanjapanrelations/afghanjapanrelations.pdf> (accessed 5 May 2019)
- ¹³ Ibid.: 15.
- ¹⁴ Ibid.: 14.
- ¹⁵ Magnus, R.H. & Naby, E. (1998) *Afghanistan: Mullah, Marx, and Mujahid*. Boulder, Westview Press: 100.
- ¹⁶ Amin 2007: 28-30.
- ¹⁷ Ibid.: 30-31.
- ¹⁸ Kabul Times. (1963) Afghanistan's Ancient Relics Receive High Admiration in Japan. *Kabul Times*, 6 Nov.
- ¹⁹ Afghanistan Council. (1965) Memo. Afghanistan Council. Box 26, Folder 236. 20 May 1965, Asia Society Exhibition Files, FA258, RAC; *Kabul Times* 1963.
- ²⁰ *Kabul Times* 1963.
- ²¹ Ibid.
- ²² Amin 2007: 29.
- ²³ Poullada, L.B. & Poullada, L.D.J. (1995) *The Kingdom of Afghanistan and the United States: 1828-1973*. Omaha, University of Nebraska: 177-184.
- ²⁴ Meridian. (2011) *In Small Things Remembered: The Early Years of U.S.-Afghan Relations*. Washington, DC, Meridian International Center.
- ²⁵ Brinkley, D. (2002) Eisenhower in Kabul. *New York Times*, 12 Jan; A15.
- ²⁶ Gift of State presented on 5 September 1963 to President Kennedy by King Zaher Shah of a second century CE, Gandaharan-style Buddha head statue from Hadda. Dimensions: 16" x 6" x 5". Head of Buddha. (1963) Head of Buddha. Gifts from Head of State. MO 95.91, JFK Library, Boston (JFK).
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- ³⁰ Washburn, G. (1964) Letter to Deputy Prime Minister Ali Ahmad Popal. Box 28 Folder 249, Asia Society Exhibition Files, FA258. 27 May 1964, RAC.
- ³¹ Knox, S. (1966) Rare Treasures of Afghanistan Are Shown Here for First Time. *New York Times*, 13 Jan.
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- ³⁴ Royal Afghan Embassy. (1963) *This is Afghanistan*. Royal Afghan Embassy. London, Rowde & Co.: 15.
- ³⁵ Rowland 1966.
- ³⁶ Rockefeller, J.D. 3rd (1966) Letter to Afghan Prime Minister Mohammad Hashim Maiwandwal. Box 28, Folder 248, Asia Society Exhibition Files, FA258. 4 Feb 1966, RAC.