



Notes From the Field

A personal view from the ground in Afghanistan by

Sarah Chayes

Kandahar, September 23-29, 2005

Beloved friends, new and old:

Yesterday, Nurallah was sitting on a strip of carpet on the edge of an opened gunnysack, which was piled with dried rose blossoms. He was sorting them, pulling off the leaves and bits of stems and sweeping the dried magenta petals into a separate pile. All of it dusted with a pollen of crumbled blossoms, redolent of flowers and sharp dried clay. I watched him, trying not to fall for the symbolism of the scene.

Nurallah was one of Zabit Akrem's bodyguards – Zabit Akrem, my friend the police chief who was murdered last June. Nurallah is tall and skinny and straightforward, and is not, as he put it, “ashamed of working.” That is rare, in this country, among men who have lived by the gun, as he did in a way, in the police department. Now he is sorting roses; I hired him. Some of his former comrades laugh at him as he rides his bicycle through town on his way home in a village out the old road to India and across a landscape of dried vineyards. He doesn't mind. “The only thing I'm ashamed of,” he tells me, “is having to put my hand out and ask someone for money.” It's not much, hiring Nurallah; I haven't been able to do any of what I wanted to do for those five heartbroken bodyguards, or for Zabit Akrem's adorable daughters and bereft wife – largely because, though political leaders are long on speeches in homage of the dead, they are rather shorter on concrete signs of solidarity with those whom the dead left behind. We are a small tight group of the people who loved Akrem, clinging to each other. Shafiullah, the young cousin who was his right hand man, and who now circles around Kandahar like a man amputated, missing half of himself, comes by just about every day to sit with me while I mold our crazy soaps. Thank God for Shafiullah.

Anyhow, Nurallah was sorting rose blossoms. This is what I want to tell you about for a while: our crazy soaps and the notion behind them.

The idea is quite simple, really. If Afghanistan is ever to kick the opium-cultivation habit, there have to be other sources of a reasonable income. Farmers certainly don't get rich off of opium. It is complex to grow and a genuine trial to harvest; and once farmers have paid their debts there are no fabulous riches left. The fabulous riches go to the traffickers and the government officials who provide safe-conduct. But opium does offer a decent living. And little else, for the moment, does.

My thought was this: Kandahar has been famous for its fruits for millennia. Grapes marked down as the region's tribute to the Sumerian court in Babylon. Pomegranates sung in the verses of 12th century Persian poetry. It is another irony: that this iron-hard, rocky, unforgiving land brings



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forth such jewels as these: the tiny oblong grapes, a translucent greenish gold, which are lovingly packed amid straw in wooden crates, or the pomegranate seeds like rubies, or “Kandahar Roses,” which grow almost wild here, need hardly any water, and are, in fact *Rosa damascena*, the precise variety used to make the rose oil that is a foundation for any fine perfume. And my thought was that the enormous market for high-quality natural skin-care products that has burgeoned in the US and Europe has emerged while Afghanistan was at war, and in no position to get a piece of it. So that is what we are trying to do, in our tiny way: make soaps and bath/massage oils from local products: almond oil, apricot kernel oil, and get this – pomegranate seed oil. It is golden and heavy, and takes wrinkles away in a single night. Cumin oil, a deep, vibrant green, from the same black cumin I slept amongst that awful night in Khakrez on the eve of Akrem’s burial. Anise oil, a lighter green, deliciously sweet. My guys extract these oils from the seeds with the help of the hand-crank seed oil press Karim and I drove down from Kabul in May. It is good exercise for them, if a bit boring and low in productivity. We should have an electric press coming soon.

We have a line of six soaps. It was impossible to extract them from the metal sugar bowls we were using as molds, and so, in a brainstorm, I decided to shape them all by hand, to look like lumps of marble – also a local specialty. Pomegranate is a deep red, of course. Anisette is colored yellow with licorice root, which grows wild here, and has whorls of purple, from something called alkanet root, a huge fleshy smelly black thing with skin like layers of paper, that reacts like litmus: red for acid, blue for base. In our soap, it usually settles into a bluish purple.

I’ve learned about all of these things over the past five months. I’ve learned that rose blossoms are already a cash crop here, they are grown and dried in homes in a village in Shah Wali Kot District, currently one of the most dangerous. We have six six-foot high sacks of them in our basement now. Next spring we will have to go to the village to persuade the people to sell us the flowers fresh, so we can distill them the very morning of harvest. Here, women have traditionally distilled rose water, but in clumsy stills that don’t capture the precious essential oil. We do, but just a thin film on the top of our pyrex tube, for about a cubic yard of roses, which Nurallah has painstakingly sorted over several days. Then he and Karim clean the anise seeds, or the cumin...and I am left remembering the fairy tales about the princess who was locked up in a storeroom with huge mounds of grain, forced to separate the millet and rye from the wheat, and received help from the Ant King and all his subjects. We have yet to train the ants around here. But now I have glimpsed the travail at the heart of these tales. I learned about madder root, another coloring, used in carpets. We pound it to powder to get the red of our pomegranate soap and the pink of our Kandahar Rose soap. Castor beans grow on scraggly trees all over town; the leaves look like marijuana leaves. Everyone asks if I can’t use poppy seed. I rather think that would be counter-productive: increasing the market for opium byproducts! But I’m tempted to

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make one batch of poppy soap just to see how it comes out.

Yesterday I met with a half a dozen grape-growers from Panjwayi District, another ill-famed place. I went out about 6 weeks ago to meet with their “shura,” their district council of elders, and we had a fabulous day; discussing their needs – very simple really, a summer session for training the teachers at the village schools, a couple of medical professionals for the one clinic in the district. And their grapes. They grow big green ones with seeds, for making into fat raisins almost like dates – those are the ones I’m interested in, because then we can make jam from the grapes and oil from the seeds. I promised to come back when they were in season.

So yesterday, there was a big huge provincial shura at the governor’s residence, about opium. A friend from Panjwayi came by to give me a card to get in: my name was Nur Ali, and I was from Panjwayi. The British and Canadian ambassadors were there, a gaggle of UN people, etc. Distinguished guests got up one after another to make speeches; it went on from 9:00 till 3:00. On the foreign side, what the talking added up to was: “Just Say No.” Only Nancy Reagan was missing. On the Afghan side what most of the speakers tried to convey was: “We’re happy to say no, but we need some things to make that possible. We have a water problem; we need the Dahla Dam Reservoir dredged. We need markets for our fruits. Etc.” At the end, the new, tousled young governor got up as though he were at an American rock concert: “Are we going to stop opium?” “Yeah!” “I can’t hear you! Louder!” “YEAH!”

The whole exercise was pretty embarrassing. Especially since the elephant in the room, about which I have been hearing considerably from members of the international community recently, was ignored: the manifest involvement of various members of provincial administrations in the trade. It’s not just that they are investing in the product, but they are also making political decisions based on these investments, for example, naming district officials who will look the other way, and killing people, when necessary, to keep roads open. The entire international community is up in arms about this; I’ve been hearing about it from all sides since I got back. It seems a little self-contradictory, folks are telling me, to be spending billions on eradicating opium, with President Karzai issuing fulsome bans, while at least two southern governors are quite apparently involved in the trade. But such things don’t get spoken about in open meetings like yesterday’s.

Meanwhile, here we are, at little Arghand Cooperative, DOING the kind of alternative livelihoods project all the foreigners were boasting about putting so much money into, and for the moment, as usual, we are relying entirely on private donations from the US and Canada for our start-up money. We have not seen a penny of the millions that the governments claim to be investing. The Canadian foreign ministry rep. down here told me the other day that he might be able to find a little bit of money for us – no promises – but only if we were able to demonstrate



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an immediate one-to-one correlation: this many acres of poppy replaced with the same number of acres of rose bushes. I took a breath and decided it was no use my trying to learn subterfuge at this late stage (I could easily have had my friends plant poppy, then dig it up for the benefit of the Canadian cameras) and I wrote a very un-diplomatic letter to this diplomat explaining why that was an unrealistic goal.

Some days later, we went to the stark plain in the lee of a spine of hills, where Panjwayi farmers make “Awjush” or “Boiled water” raisins from their huge grapes. They make a hole in the clay ground for dipping the grapes by the basket-load into boiling water (a wood fire heats the water in the hole) plus two chemicals they mine themselves from the hills, then they spread them out on a packed-earth floor to dry in the sun. For the past two days, we have been struggling with their reject grapes. I wanted to provide a market for those fruits that are difficult to sell otherwise. But we have found them so rotten, that after two and a half days and one night sorting and cooking the few decent ones down with delicious-smelling big-crystal sugar and a touch of cardamom and some of our own rose water, we have about 100 bottles of jam, which if we sell for 30 AFA each, about 60 cents, we JUST make up our raw materials cost. No labor. At what my salary should be, it would make pretty expensive jam. So we’re going to try again, with freshly-cut grapes from a garden.

Sunday the 18th was the parliamentary election – or part of it, anyway: the part where people go to polling stations and fill out their ballots and get their fingers marked with indelible ink. For Westerners, this exercise IS the election, and as soon as it was over, all the foreign journalists who made their first flying visits to Kandahar in months disappeared. But, as an actual event, the election is only now heating up. For, the all-important counting process has only just begun. And that, as even we Americans know so well by now, is where the rubber hits the road. In Kandahar, this counting process is taking place – a further irony – in the stadium where the Taliban used to execute people or cut off their hands.

Ballot boxes arrived from all over the province in open-backed pick-up trucks like my red one, steering wheel on the right hand side, stick-shift on the left. The trucks parked by the stadium grounds for several days, their drivers wondering when they would get to go home. Every candidate has the right to send a certain number of “observers” to the counting process. At night, there is very little interference with the activities of these observers. I have heard the boxes were unsealed for several days. I have heard of a number of late-night visits. I have heard that “observation” has often amounted to a bargaining process. “Oh, you counted 57 votes? Make it 100.” I have heard of a full ballot box winding up in someone’s back yard. I have heard of several ballot boxes filled with slips that all had the same name on them, written in the same ink. Or another with two names checked off. Again, remembering our own recent experiences, we should not laugh. At the counting, if there was a discrepancy between the number of votes in the



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box and the number that was signed in by the polling station supervisor of plus or minus 50 votes, it was no problem. That happened on every box. None of these things did I see, personally. But the expressions on the faces of the people who have told me the stories have been even more eloquent than their words. The latest is that the biggest cheaters have begun crying the loudest against the cheating of others. The old plague on both your houses syndrome. I may have done it, but so did everyone else. This is part of the persistent blurring of all distinctions that I have seen around here. Akrem was killed in a suicide bombing, the interior minister – and he alone – continues to insist on this, though I have brought a ream of contrary evidence. Blur the distinctions, and it is impossible to sort the wheat from the chaff.

And these details don't even address the issue of who was allowed to run in the first place. The Bonn Agreement, which drew the blueprint for the post-Taliban nation-building process in Afghanistan, was very clear that notorious war criminals should be barred from the political process. Kandaharis are well aware of that. The first Loya Jirga, or Grand Tribal Council that designated Hamid Karzai as interim president of the country broke that explicit rule, and delegates were vocal in their disappointment – “We wanted to put the warlords in jail. But they were in the Loya Jirga with us, so now we can't. They used to have a hundred followers; now they have thousands.” That was the verdict of one Kandahar delegate, expressed in a study group discussion I ran six months later. Nevertheless, most Afghans conceded: This Loya Jirga is a first step. We can't make a democracy in a day. Next time, it will be better; the warlords' power will be reduced. But next time, the Constitutional Loya Jirga, they were all there again, seated in the front row. And, now during these parliamentary elections, dozens of well-known criminals ran. Despite the existence of expat-guided electoral commissions whose job was to vet and exclude inappropriate candidates. From my perspective, anyway, this election has proven to be the final stage in the process of legitimizing the warlords and reinserting them into the Afghan political structure.

Ask any Kandahari what he or she thought of the election, one word is on everyone's lips: “A joke.” Turn-out was well below the 50% I heard reported on the BBC. Note that the “poll” that was supposedly done consisted of Gallup employees taking the questionnaires home and filling them out themselves, at \$1 a crack. “This election was all decided in advance,” say most people. “We turned out in droves to vote for Karzai last fall. But he didn't keep any of his promises. So what's the use of voting this time?” The sense that the political process has been hijacked also played, as did, in the villages, an intimidation campaign by “resurgent Taliban.” Afghans are severely traumatized. It is easy to scare them.

“This whole election was a fraud, and the whole thing should be cancelled,” said one candidate. “You should say that!” I urged him. “What do you think I am, crazy?” he shot back. “And make enemies of President Karzai, of President Bush and Tony Blair, and the whole United Nations?”

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You think I want to commit suicide?”

And so I am left musing about the question I am so often asked by Westerners: “Do you suppose these people really understand what democracy is; do you suppose they are ready for it? Do you suppose we should be trying to impose our notions on them?” And I am confirmed in my sense that Kandaharis, the ordinary people, know exactly what democracy is, and they are starving for it. But far from giving it to them, far from standing behind the people, protecting them from the predators in their midst, we have been reinforcing these predators, and so doing have been obstructing democracy.

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