Central Asian Cultural Intelligence for Military Operations

Turkmen in Afghanistan

Summary of Key Issues

- Turkmens in Afghanistan number 200,000 out of a total population of around 23 million, accounting for just 0.87% of the population. They have had a disproportionate impact on the Afghan economy, with the highly sought-after carpets and pelts made from the wool of their *karakul* sheep among Afghanistan's most important exports.

- The Turkmens live along the northwestern Afghan border with Turkmenistan. Most are semi-nomadic farmer-herdsmen living in rural areas, although there is a concentration of Turkmen shopkeepers and craftsmen living in Herat and a few small towns in the area. For many decades, the border between Afghanistan and then-Soviet Turkmenistan was sealed, and the Turkmen communities on either side of the border developed independently.

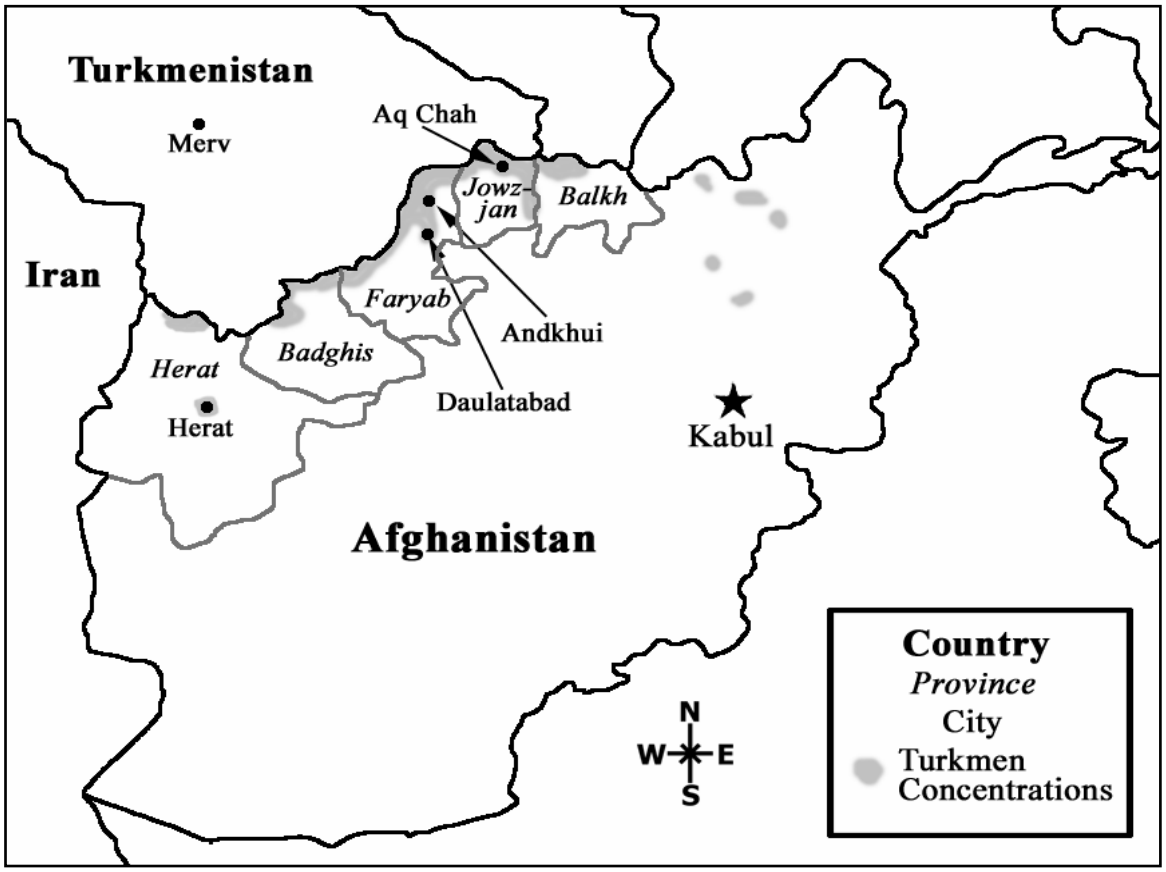
- Afghan Turkmens are loyal first to their extended family, then their clan, and then their tribe. There are 12 Turkmen tribes in Afghanistan alone. Loyalty to the Afghan state, if it exists at all, falls at the bottom of this list.

- Because the Turkmen population in Afghanistan is so small, Turkmens have often aligned themselves politically with the Uzbeks, who speak a similar language and have similar cultural traditions.

- The Turkmens are Sunni Muslims of the Hanafi school. The Hanafi *sharia*, or law, coexists with a tribal law known as the *Dab* or *Dap*. Turkmen society has traditionally had no leaders. Although *iashuly*s, or elders, do help guide decision-making, in the end all adult males in the group must consent to any decision made by a family, clan, or tribe.

- Turkmens speak Turkmen, a Turkic language closely related to Turkish and Azerbaijani, and more distantly to Kazakh, Kirghiz, and Uzbek. Most Afghan Turkmens are bilingual in Dari.

Turkmen Ethnic Group



The Turkmen (also Turkoman) ethnic group in Afghanistan numbers an estimated 200,000, or 0.87% of the population, making it one of Afghanistan's minor ethnic groups. Turkmens live in Badghis, Balkh, Faryab, Herat, and Jowzjan provinces, mostly in rural areas along the northwestern border with Turkmenistan, though there is a concentration of Turkmens in the city of Herat and other small towns of the region. Many observers lump them together with the more numerous Uzbeks and the Kirghiz, who like the Turkmens speak Turkic languages and are descendants of horsemen. The Turkmens have had a disproportionate impact on the Afghan economy, as their fine-woven carpets and pelts made from the wool of the *karakul* sheep are traditionally among Afghanistan's most important exports. The Turkmens' Ahal-Teke horse is valued by them for its swiftness in battle and sport.

Turkmens are known for their toughness and ferocity, but also for their great hospitality to strangers. The Iranians and others in the region remember still the Turkmen slave raids, where they would ride up to 100 miles a day through the Karakum (or Garagum) Desert, an activity that continued until the late 19th century. Despite their spirited resistance, they fell to foreign conquerors in the late 19th century: the Russians in 1886, and the British-backed Afghan Emir in 1888. This was perhaps inevitable given the inability of the many Turkmen tribes to unite even before a common enemy.

In Afghanistan alone, there are 12 Turkmen tribes. The most important of these are the Ersari, concentrated in or near Aq Chah (also spelled Aqcheh) and Daulatabad; the Tekke, in Aq Chah and Herat, and the Yamud in Herat. Other major tribes are the Chakra (Andkhui, sometimes spelled Andkhvoy), Lakai (Herat), Mawri (Daulatabad), Saroq (Andkhui), and Tariq (Herat). Each tribe has its own carpet pattern, and subtle distinctions in the way clothing and headgear are worn distinguish members of clans and tribes from one another.

Ethnic Description

Physical Appearance

The Turkmens originally migrated centuries ago from Mongolia. Like other peoples from that region, they tend to have high cheekbones, yellowish-brown skin pigmentation, and dark eyes. Although their hair is naturally straight and black, adult male Turkmens traditionally keep their heads shaved. However, intermarriage with other ethnic groups means that some Turkmens may not share some or any of these characteristics.

Turkmen male, leading a balky camel.

Cultural History

In the eighth century A.D., a people from Mongolia known as the Oghuz, speaking the precursor to today's Turkic languages, migrated west from Mongolia to the steppes north of the Aral Sea, and as far west as the Ural Mountains. In the tenth century, some Oghuz tribes spread south into Persia (modern-day Iran) where they encountered Islam. Those Oghuz tribes who accepted Islam came to be called Turkmens, although the term itself is of obscure origin. In the eleventh century, some Turkmens migrated west into the Middle East, the forefathers of today's Turks and Azerbaijanis.

In the 13th century, the Mongol invasion pushed the Turkmens out of Persia, so they migrated north and settled around oases in the Karakum (or Garagum) Desert of modern-day Turkmenistan. During the next several centuries, the Turkmens formed the tribal groups that still exist today. The Turkmens were semi-nomadic, supplementing their sheep-herding and cultivation around the oases by raiding the Persians to the south for slaves to sell in the Uzbek market cities of Bukhara or Khiwa, or by serving with the armies of the Uzbek khans.

The Russians expanded into Central Asia in the late 19th century. They were defeated in their first foray in 1879, but took Merv (now called Mary), the heart of the Turkmen homeland, by 1884. When the Russians defeated an Afghan army at the Panjdeh oasis in northwestern Afghanistan March 1885, the British objected to the Russian intrusion into their sphere of influence. The Russians and British held a conference in September 1886 to determine the border, which still holds, between Afghanistan and Turkmenistan (then part of Russia.) The bulk of the Turkmen range went to Russia, but a significant strip became the northwestern borderlands of Afghanistan.

Afghan Emir Abdur Rahman led an army to the northwest of Afghanistan in 1888 to impose his authority over this region, incorporating Afghan Turkmens into Afghanistan. In the 1920s there was a massive exodus of Turkmens from Turkmenistan to Afghanistan caused by the Soviets, who imposed collective agriculture over Turkmenistan, leaving many landless

and starving. In 1928 the Soviets sealed the border between Turkmenistan and Afghanistan. In the 1930s Nadir Shah, the modernizing leader of Afghanistan, sent the Afghan national military to subdue these new Turkmen populations in Afghanistan. By the 1960s, the Turkmens were taking part in elections and other aspects of Afghan national life.

Centers of Authority

Description

Turkmens give their loyalty first to their extended family, then their clan (a grouping of extended families), and finally to their tribe (a grouping of clans). There are 12 Turkmen tribes in Afghanistan.

Turkmen families, clans, and tribes have no leaders. The oldest man in each extended family is known as an *iashuly*, or elder. The *iashuly* enjoys great prestige, and helps to settle disputes with other families. Particularly distinguished *iashuly*s may even represent the clan to outsiders. However, the *iashuly* never had any authority or privilege, and he must make any decisions only with the consent of all adult males in the family. Under special circumstances, the *iashuly*s of one or more clans may meet at a special assembly known as a *maslakhat* at which important matters are considered, especially relating to punishment of crimes or resource disputes between clans or tribes. Similarly, there is a tribal chief known as a *beg*, who represents the tribe to outsiders, but his powers too are purely advisory as he can make no final decisions without the consent of each of the clans.

History

For centuries, Turkmen clans or tribes organized only intermittently, for the duration of a raid of 1,000 or more horsemen under a military leader known as a *serdar*, or to defend territory from outsiders under a military-political leader called a *khan*. The office of *serdar* was given on an *ad hoc* basis, while the office of *khan* was awarded at an inter-tribal assembly known as a *jum-gurie*. A *khan* was conceived of as a servant of the tribes, rather than as a leader in his own right, and his status could be revoked at any time. While the authority of a *serdar* or a *khan* extended so far as to be able to order men into situations involving certain death, it dissolved with the end of the raid or the passing of the danger of foreign invasion. This impromptu and temporary delegation of authority proved inadequate for dealing with European conquerors at the end of the 19th century, when sustained Russian and Afghan (backed by the British) military campaigns overcame the Turkmens despite their fierce, but disorganized, resistance.

Rule of Law

The traditional tribal law of the Turkmens is the *Dab* (also spelled Dap), which stipulates strict standards of loyalty to family, clan, and tribe, obligates close relatives to avenge the death of a family member, and requires generous hospitality to visitors. All Turkmen males are of equal rank, and thus there has never been any basis for the emergence of a leader with the authority to give orders. All major decisions are made by a meeting (*maslakhat*) of elders, based on the *Dab*, and consented to by all male adults of the group.

Equally important to the *Dab* is the Hanafi *shariah*, or Islamic law. The *shariah* requires Muslims to follow five tenets: praying to *Allah* (God) five times a day (*munz*), fasting during the Muslim holy month of Ramadan (*rojay*), donating 2.5 percent of income to the poor

(*zakat*), defending Islam through struggle (*jihad*), and making a pilgrimage to the holy city of Mecca (*haj*).

Role of State vs. Role of Ethnic Groups

Turkmens in Afghanistan give their loyalty first to their extended family, then their clan, and then their tribe. There were some indications in the 1970s that the Turkmens were developing a sense of national belonging, shown by such evidence as increased participation in national elections. Even at that time, however, national allegiance remained secondary to more traditional loyalties. After more than 20 years of civil war, it is doubtful that there are even vestiges of national feeling among the Turkmens.

Cultural Attitudes

Group/Tribe/Clan

The twelve Turkmen tribes in Afghanistan base their identity on descent from a common male ancestor. Some of the tribes can trace their genealogy back to the eleventh century, and outside researchers have corroborated these genealogies with other historical sources.

Tribes are made up of several clans, and each clan is made up several extended families. Loyalty to the family, clan, and tribe is a paramount cultural virtue. So far as possible, Turkmens prefer to marry within the same clan, and ideally a male should marry his father's brother's daughter. However, such matches are not always possible and some Turkmens do marry outside their clan, and occasionally even outside their ethnic group.

Conflict Resolution

A grievance against a family, clan, or tribe may be avenged by a raid on livestock, while a murder can only be avenged by the death of the killers, or in more ambiguous circumstances, by the death of somebody from the offending clan or tribe. Such a revenge killing fulfills the obligation of both sides and restores peace.

Complicated disputes, particularly over resources, are worked out at a special council of one or more clans called a *maslakhat*. The *maslakhat* is attended by the *iashuly*s, or elders, of each extended family involved. Though the *iashuly*s may arrive at a solution to the problem, the solution must still be agreed to by every adult male involved in the dispute. If the *maslakhat* does not reach a decision that satisfies all parties, a second meeting is held three days later. If the second *maslakhat* does not reach a satisfactory solution, the matter is put off for an indefinite period of time. Every decision must be unanimous among all adult males involved, but small dissenting minorities normally bow to social pressure and agree to the majority decision.

Other Ethnic Groups—Pashtuns

Turkmens are known for fiercely defending their territory and interests, but they have also proved willing to pay a small amount of tribute and lip service to a foreign ruler so long as they are generally left in peace. For instance, they joined with the Uzbeks in resisting the rule of the Pashtun-dominated Taliban because the Taliban demanded changes in their lifestyle, just as they would resist any foreign power that interfered in their affairs. However, their resistance was not against the Pashtuns themselves, just the strict control of their affairs the Taliban demanded. They would probably acquiesce to a Pashtun-dominated government, provided it only minimally intruded into their lives.

Other Ethnic Groups—Uzbeks

The Turkmens consider themselves culturally related to the Uzbeks, whose language is similar and who share a nomadic horse-riding tradition. Because the Uzbeks are much more

numerous in Afghanistan (about 1 million Uzbeks versus only 200,000 Turkmens), and a more influential force in national politics, the Turkmens tend to align themselves politically with the Uzbeks. In the most recent instance, ethnic-Uzbek warlord Abdul Rashid Dostum controlled most Turkmen territory in northern Afghanistan in the mid-1990s before falling to the Taliban and has again taken control of the region since the Taliban's ouster in 2001. It is likely that this is due more to acquiescence on the part of the Turkmens than active allegiance, but it is clear that they considered rule by an Uzbek more palatable than by the Pashtun Taliban.

Neighboring States—Turkmenistan

Turkmens in Afghanistan feel some connection with their brethren across the border in Turkmenistan. Turkmenistan maintains a consulate in Herat, the main urban center for Turkmens in Afghanistan, and has assisted with the construction of a telephone connection between Herat and the cities of Ashgabat and Mary in Turkmenistan.

However, the depth of the relationship is limited. Many Turkmens in Afghanistan are the children or grandchildren of those who revolted against the Soviets in the 1920s and subsequently fled, and have little patience for what they see as the collaborationists who stayed behind and participated in the Soviet government. Moreover, for nearly 65 years, the border between the former USSR and Afghanistan was tightly sealed, during which time Turkmen society in the Turkmenistan SSR and Afghanistan evolved in different directions. Turkmens in Turkmenistan are more urbanized, settled, and have to some degree replaced old tribal loyalties with patriotism for the state of Turkmenistan, while Turkmens in Afghanistan retain to a much greater extent the old nomadic and tribal traditions. Language, too, divides them, as the Turkmens in Turkmenistan used the Cyrillic alphabet from 1920s until they adopted a Latin-based alphabet in the early 1990s, while the Turkmens in Afghanistan continue to use Arabic script.

The border between Afghanistan and Turkmenistan is now open, and trade between the two countries increased upwards of ten percent a year in the late 1990s.

Regional Powers—Russia

Turkmens in Afghanistan have very negative views towards Russia. In the late 19th century, Russian invaders conquered the Turkmens and other central Asian peoples with a ruthless military campaign that included slaughtering their livestock and poisoning their wells. Turkmens have not forgotten these atrocities. Nor have they forgotten the 1920s, when the Soviet Union collectivized agriculture in central Asia. Twenty or more central Asian tribes, including Turkmen tribes, rose up against the Soviet Union in the Basmachi Revolt (named after the Russian word for bandit, or *basmach*). When the revolt was brutally put down, tens of thousands of Turkmens fled across the border into Afghanistan. Turkmen hatred for the Russians was so great that when the USSR inserted ethnic-Turkmen teams into Turkmen areas of Afghanistan to win converts to communism in the late 1940s, the locals did not hesitate to turn their fellow tribesmen over to Afghan authorities. Although the small size of the Turkmen minority prevented it from being a major player in the guerilla war against the Soviet invasion in the 1980s, Turkmens did participate, for the most part under Uzbek leadership.

Language

History

The Turkmens speak Turkmen, a language from the southern branch of the Altaic language family. Turkmen is closely related to Azerbaijani and Turkish, and more distantly to Kazakh, Kirghiz, and Uzbek. Turkmens in Afghanistan use the Arabic alphabet, while those in Turkmenistan use a Latin-based alphabet. Of Afghanistan's two official languages, most male Afghan Turkmens are bilingual in Dari, while few can speak Pashtu.

Dialects

The largest Afghan Turkmen dialect is the Ersari dialect. Another main dialect of Turkmen is Tekke (also called Chagatai or Jagatai). Other Turkmen dialects in Afghanistan are Salor, Sariq, and Yomut. Dialect differences are considerable, although not so much as to make them unintelligible to speakers of other dialects.

Religion

The Turkmens are Sunni Muslims who follow the Hanafi *shariah*, or school of theological law. Founded by an early Muslim scholar in Iraq named Abu Hanafi, the Hanafi school emphasizes belief rather than practice. Thus, Hanafi Muslims tend to be tolerant of variants in practice or doctrine found among other Muslim groups.

Traditionally, however, the nomadic lifestyle of the Turkmens hindered the establishment of correct Islamic practices. As there were few trained clergymen, worship tended to be led by local chiefs or wandering Muslim preachers. The Turkmens still mix Islamic rites with some pre-existing pagan rituals, such as making pilgrimages to the tombs of honored ancestors.

Nevertheless, the five pillars of Muslim faith are observed: belief in Allah and that Muhammad was his prophet (*iman*); praying to Allah five times a day (*munz*), fasting during the Muslim holy month of Ramadan (*rojay*); donating 2.5 percent of income to the poor (*zakat*); and making a pilgrimage to the holy city of Mecca (*haj*). Because this final tenet, the *haj*, is beyond the means of most Turkmens, those who have made the pilgrimage are accorded heightened social status and respect.

The Five Pillars of Islam

- ***Iman*, belief in Allah, and that Muhammad was his prophet.**
- ***Salah*, praying to Allah five times daily**
- ***Zak.at*, donating 2.5 percent of income to the poor.**
- ***Sawm*, fasting during Ramadan, the holy month.**
- ***Haj*, making a pilgrimage to the holy city of Mecca at least once.**

Customs

Greetings

An acceptable way to greet a Turkmen male is with a handshake, and if the greeting is friendly one can also place the left hand over the other person's right hand. Men do not normally touch unrelated women when greeting them.

Visiting

According to a Turkmen proverb, guests are more honored than grandfathers. And grandfathers are very honored, so it should be no surprise that Turkmens are renowned for their hospitality. Traditionally, even a stranger could expect food and lodging for at least one day and one night. Today, a typical invitation is for a meal, and even poorer households do their best to serve an elaborate feast for a guest.

Gifts

It is customary to bring a small gift when visiting a Turkmen home for the first time. Knives and spicy food are considered offensive gifts, but toiletries, clothing, sweets, or token items from the United States are acceptable.

Cultural Do's and Don'ts

Elders: Elders are greatly respected in Turkmen culture, and there are a number of rules one must follow to show proper respect for elders. Such rules may be relaxed or even unnecessary for someone only somewhat older than oneself, but are quite strict if the age difference is great. Anyone senior to oneself is allowed to pass through a door first. The most senior at a meal serves himself from the common tray first, and also says the after-meal prayer. The most junior member of the group may pour water for the others during the meal. When two Turkmens meet, the junior is obligated to give the first greeting, but must wait for the senior to initiate further conversation. It is rude to ask someone older than oneself about his health or family unless he has first made such inquiries. Deference to elders is generally greater among rural Turkmens, and in some communities it is even rude to smoke, sing, or joke around someone older than oneself. A junior should always be modest and reserved around his elders.

The Opposite Sex: Islamic cultures tend to be sensitive about sex and gender differences, and Turkmens take this to an extreme, especially in rural areas. For instance, in a traditional Turkmen wedding, the sense of shame associated with sex is so great that brides and grooms do not even attend their own wedding ceremony, instead sending representatives to hear the Islamic teacher declare them married. Although men who have known each other for a long time may make jokes obliquely referencing sex, under no circumstances should an outsider make such a comment. A remark, no matter how vague, about the physical appearance or sexuality of a man's wife, daughter, or sister is considered offensive. Pre- or extra-marital sex is likely to be punished on the spot by execution of both parties.

Directions: Turkmens consider it rude not to give an answer when asked for directions or other information, and are likely to give an inaccurate or untrue response rather than admit they do not know. Thus, a good strategy is to ask more than one person if a first answer seems doubtful.

Lifestyle

Role of Family

The extended family is the basic unit of Turkmen society in Afghanistan. Husbands hold complete authority over wives, daughters, unmarried sons, and other dependents. All married men, however, are of the same rank, so a father cannot command an adult married son, even if that son is living in the same home. The oldest man in the household is known as an *iashuly*, a term that might translate as elder, and which has overtones of wisdom and respect. Although the *iashuly* is considered the head of his household, he cannot make decisions unilaterally, but must consult all adult males in the family before deciding on a course of action.

Role of Women

Turkmen women enjoy somewhat more freedom than women in other Muslim societies, although this may not be apparent to outsiders as females must cover their heads and remain silent in the presence of visiting strangers—a practice more strictly observed in rural areas than villages or towns. Under everyday circumstances, however, Turkmen women do not wear veils or practice seclusion, and they are permitted to learn craft skills that in other Muslim societies would be considered "men's work."

Marriage

Turkmen marriage customs are quite different than among other ethnic groups in Afghanistan. Marriages are often arranged by a matchmaker, or *sawcholar*, although this is more common in rural areas. The *sawcholar* matches the bride and groom based on social status, education, and other factors. Most importantly, they should be from the same clan, and marriages between first cousins are preferred, although marriage between more distant relatives is also common. Marriage to a stranger from another clan or even tribe is rare but not unheard of, especially among poorer households. Marriage to a non-Turkmen is quite rare in rural areas and highly disapproved of. Both must consent to the marriage.

The family of the groom must pay a brideprice, or *kalong*, to the bride's family. Traditionally, the *kalong* consisted of 100 sheep or goats given to the bride's father, and 10 sheep or goats to the bride's mother. The actual composition of the *kalong* was negotiated and could vary, however. For instance, a horse or camel could be substituted for 10 sheep or goats. Now the *kalong* is likely to consist of money and perhaps other gifts. However, the actual value of the bridewealth does not vary with household income, so a poor family may have to save for a long time to buy a bride for a son.

The actual wedding takes place about a month after the payment of the brideprice, with the particular day varying as some days are considered unlucky for ceremonies. On the wedding day, the bride and her relatives travel to the house of the groom's family, with the bride riding a specially decorated camel on the trip. Upon her arrival, the bride is led to a special tent for a "bride capture" ceremony. The exact details vary in different regions, but in general the bride's female relatives defend the bride while the groom's relatives "raid" the

tent to capture her (centuries ago, this was not a symbolic ceremony, but the actual way a man took a wife). After that, the females talk while the men and boys are entertained by wrestling and horse racing. Winners receive small cash prizes awarded by the groom's father.

The wedding ceremony itself takes place in the early evening. Because marriage is associated with a sort of shame having to do with the loss of sexual purity, the bride and groom do not actually attend the ceremony themselves, nor do close relatives. Instead, a representative of the bride and the groom, along with some witnesses, are sent to gather separately with the Islamic religious teacher who performs the ceremony. Afterwards, the representatives and witnesses return to the house of the groom's family, and a great feast begins. Typical foods are meats, sweets, and *ekmek*, a ceremonial sweet bread. At the feast, the bride and groom share the heart of one of the animals sacrificed for the meal. After the feast, the bride and groom are led away to a special tent where the relatives of the bride perform a brief ceremony charging the groom with treating the bride well. Then the bride and groom are left alone for two or three days to consummate the marriage. After this time, the newly-wed wife must wear her hair in one large braid rather than two small ones as a sign that she is no longer a virgin.

An unusual custom among the Turkmens is a period of separation following the wedding. During this time, the new wife returns to her family. It is common—perhaps expected—for the groom to visit his bride secretly at night, but if he is caught he is beaten by her family members and the length of separation is increased. On the first and second anniversaries of the wedding, the relatives of the groom visit the bride's family to request the return of the bride, only to be turned down. On the third anniversary, their request is granted, and the bride again returns on a specially decorated camel, and bearing a small dowry consisting of clothing, jewelry, carpets, household utensils, and perhaps a camel or cow. She is now part of the groom's family.

In stark contrast to other Afghans, elopement brings no shame to a Turkmen family. Indeed, if a Turkmen boy and girl marry without their parents' knowledge, upon the couple's return to the community, both families must work out a suitable *kalim* and dowry on the spot.

Divorce is exceedingly rare among Turkmens, and occurs only in extreme circumstances.

Passage into Adulthood and Establishing an Independent Household

Turkmen boys and girls are considered to be adults upon their 14th birthdays, although there is no special ceremony to mark it. Most women marry in their mid-teens, men in their late teens or early twenties. Marriage is traditionally followed by a three-year period of separation for the bride and groom, although this custom is no longer followed quite so strictly. Thus, a couple often does not have children until they have been married for four or five years. Large families with several children are typical among Turkmens.

After marriage, a man's father will buy him a separate *yurt*, a large tent, for the new nuclear family. However, the man's family will continue living near his father in a state of semi-

independence. It is not until a man's children are old enough to assist with the farming or herding that the family becomes fully independent. When this time comes, the man's father gives him his inheritance—usually a share of the herd—and the man will then move away to form his own household.

Death and Inheritance

When a man's son is married and has children, he is old enough to form an independent household. His father then gives him his share of the inheritance (usually part of his herd), and the son moves away. The father attempts to so divide the inheritance that each son receives an equal share as he becomes independent. However, the youngest son and his family are obligated to remain part of the father's household until his death, ensuring that he is taken care of in his old age. The youngest son then inherits what remains of his father's property. Should the father die prematurely, his estate is divided equally among his remaining dependent sons.

A Turkmen tradition is keeping the "death days." After a family member dies, a memorial meal is given to mourners on each of the first seven days after the death. The family also eats a memorial meal on the tenth, the 28th, and the 40th days after the death. The family thereafter has a memorial meal every year on the anniversary of the death. To honor the deceased, the next child of appropriate gender born in the family is given the name of the deceased.

Games

An important aspect of Turkmen society is its particularly rugged version of the Afghan game of *Buzkashi* (literally, goat-grabbing). *Buzkashi* is a sort of polo, but with few rules and a dead calf taking the place of a ball. Older Turkmen remember a time when, instead of a calf, an unlucky prisoner-of-war was used. The Turkmens' horse, the Ahal-Teke, is known the world over for its speed and is ideally suited for the game. There are two *Buzkashi* seasons: the first between the spring planting and when the first shoots appear; and the second in late summer, after the harvest has cleared the fields until the first snow falls.

Clothing

The Turkmens wear distinctive clothing, particularly headgear, serving to differentiate them from the other ethnic groups in Afghanistan. Like other Afghans, Turkmens wear long gowns, often of local red silk. They sometimes wear the usual baggy Afghan pants, but sometimes forego it in favor of fitted pants more suitable for horseback riding. They wear sheepskin coats, even in summer. In cities, some men may wear western clothing.

Man in traditional clothing, including *karakul* cap.

Hairstyles/Headwear

As with the men of many other groups in northern Afghanistan, especially other Turkic speakers, Turkmen males keep their hair shorn, shaving their heads about once a month. The men wear turbans or tall, warm hats made of sheepskin and known as *karakul* caps. The women's hair is always tied back and hidden under a peaked turban or head shawl, but on special occasions a woman may wear tall (sometimes two feet high) hats adorned with silver ornaments. Young girls may keep their hair uncovered. Slight variations in the style of headgear serve to differentiate one tribe from another.

Footwear

Turkmens generally wear leather boots. The boots can be one-quarter to one-half leg in length, soft or hard soled, some with high heels, all depending on whether they are for working, walking, or horseback riding. Rural Turkmens cover their soft-soled walking shoes with leather over-shoes removed when entering a residence, while urban Turkmens use rubber versions manufactured abroad. Some wear the rubber over-shoes by themselves.

City Scene: Women in Traditional Clothes, Men in Western Clothes.

Jewelry

Turkmen women love to wear silver jewelry—rings, bracelets, armbands, necklaces, anklets, pendants, etc.

Diet

The traditional Turkmen diet consists of curdled milk, hunks of wheat bread, and lamb cooked until tender enough to pull from the bone with the fingers. This is still eaten, but other typical dishes now include herb-seasoned pastries and pancakes, shish kebobs, fried meat pockets, porridges, and *plov*, a rice pilaf with dried fruit and occasionally beef. Yogurt, melons, and pumpkin are also common ingredients. In rural areas, a sheep's head is sometimes served to very honored guests. Tea is drunk with every meal.

There are certain ceremonial foods served on special occasions. *Petir kethmek* is a hard bread that Turkmen women bake on Thursday evenings (the beginning of the Holy Day). Several loaves of this bread are cut into eight equal sections, with sections then delivered to kinsmen living nearby. This bread is in honor of deceased ancestors, as feeding a nearby family member symbolically satisfies the appetites of the dead who can no longer eat for themselves. *Ekmek* is a sweet bread served at weddings and other occasions. Mutton fat mixed with brown sugar is another sweet delicacy.

Cultural Economy

Most Turkmens are semi-nomadic farmer-herders, with a few earning a living as shop-owners or craftsmen in cities. It was the Turkmens who bred the fat-tailed *karakul* sheep that is prized throughout Afghanistan for its hardiness and its intricately-patterned coat. Turkmen craftsmen use the *karakul*'s wool in pelts and in renowned carpets, woven especially in the town of Daulatabad, that are sought after by collectors throughout the world. Turkmens are also known for their silver jewelry. Turkmen carpets and jewelry are among Afghanistan's biggest exports. Turkmens are sometimes employed to gather the nuts of the pistachio trees that grow easily in the foothills on the Afghan border with Iran.

Cultural Geography

The Turkmens are descended from nomadic horsemen and semi-nomadic herders. For such people, there was no concept of "border," although they tended to range between Khiwa in the north (in present-day Uzbekistan), Bukhara in the east (also in present-day Uzbekistan) Herat in the south, and Ashgabat in the west (in present-day Turkmenistan). Thus, the traditional Turkmen homeland spanned not just most of Turkmenistan, but also Iran's northeastern border region, Afghanistan's northwestern border region, and parts of southwestern Uzbekistan. This homeland was centered on the oasis town of Merv (also called Marv or Mary, located in present-day Turkmenistan).

Though the present-day border between Turkmenistan and Afghanistan was determined in September 1886 at a Russo-British conference, the Turkmens had no reason to pay it particular heed until the mid-1920s. At that time, the new Soviet government attempted to collectivize agriculture in its central Asian territories, inspiring the Basmachi Revolt by the peoples of the region. To prevent revolutionary Turkmens who had fled across the border into Afghanistan from reentering into Turkmenistan, the Soviet Army sealed this border in 1928.

Subsequent changes imposed by the Soviets on Turkmens in Turkmenistan, such as using the Cyrillic alphabet, served to further divide them from their brethren in Afghanistan and Iran. The border between Turkmenistan and Afghanistan is open today, but considerable differences remain in Turkmen culture on either side of the border.

Within Afghanistan, the Turkmen are concentrated along the northwestern border with Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan in the Badghis, Faryab, Jowzjan, and Balkh provinces. There is also an enclave along the border with Turkmenistan in Herat province, as well as a concentration of Turkmens within Herat itself. Of the three largest tribes, the Ersari is the only one native to Afghanistan, located in and around Aq Chah (also spelled Aqcheh), and Daulatabad. The Tekke, located in Aq Chah and Herat, and the Yamud in Herat, fled from the USSR in the 1920s. Of the other major tribes, the Chakra are located in and around Andkhui (also spelled Andkhvoy, or slight variations thereof); the Lakai, Herat; the Mawri, Daulatabad; the Saroq, Andkhui; and the Tariq, Herat.

Culture's Effect on Warfare

According to centuries-long practice, when faced with invasion, the Turkmen clans or tribes under attack would elect a war leader, or *khan*, at an inter-tribal assembly (*jum-gurie*). The *khan* organized the men of the tribes into a large body of cavalry, sometimes more than 1,000 strong, to meet the invasion force. By tradition, each clan or tribe sent one-fifth of its men, with those remaining behind obligated to supply the fighters with food and other supplies. If the battle turned against the Turkmens, they gathered their families and few possessions, and retreated into the forbidding Garagum Desert where foreign armies did not dare to follow. Then, the *khan* organized raids against the invaders, continuing them until the foreign army tired of the constant harassment and moved on. Although the *khan* commanded his horsemen with life-or-death authority, his power dissolved with the passing of danger.

Turkmens mounted on Ahal-Teke horses

A number of cultural aspects gave the Turkmens the advantage with this strategy of warfare. The initial cavalry assault and later lightning-fast raids were made possible by their swift and imperturbable Ahal-Teke breed of horses. Alexander the Great is said to have owned one of these fine horses. The Turkmens were well practiced in these types of warfare. Turkmens learned conventional cavalry tactics through employment as mercenaries by rulers in Uzbekistan and Persia. Even during peacetime Turkmens honed their raiding skills on overnight slave raids carried out against Persian villages.

Urban vs. Rural Culture

The majority of Turkmens in Afghanistan are rural semi-nomadic farmer-herders. However, there are a few Turkmen urbanites, who tend to make a living as shopkeepers or craftsmen. The main urban center for Turkmens in Afghanistan is Herat, but they also live in smaller towns like Andkhui, Aq Chah, Daulatabad, and Maruchak.

Rural Habitations

Except for the minority living in Herat or other towns, most Turkmens continue to live in *yurt*s, a cone-shaped portable house well-suited for their semi-nomadic lifestyle. A Turkmen *yurt* is built of a lattice-work frame made from very light wood, the more easily to transport it. The wooden frame is covered by either gray felt made of sheep wool, or reed matting, with a wooden frame door as an entrance. Turkmen *yurt*s are often highly decorated: woven bands of many colors tie the wooden framework together with a series of intricate knots, designs may be sewn into the felt covering, and the wooden door may feature elaborate carvings. In northern Afghanistan, there are entire villages of *yurt*s. Although the *yurt*s can be moved, they are substantial enough that the Turkmens use a tent known as a *chapari* if they will be living in an area for only a few weeks. The *chapari* is made of poles covered by gray felt or reed matting held in place with mud.

Turkmen with his yurt and Ahal-Teke horses. Note walls made of reed matting and tied with woven band. Decorated doorway includes portrait of Turkmenistan's president.

Influence of Diaspora

The government of Turkmenistan has initiated some contacts with the Turkmen in Afghanistan, maintaining a consulate in Herat and assisting with the construction of a telephone connection between Herat and the cities of Ashgabat and Mary in Turkmenistan. However, the Turkmen societies in Turkmenistan and Afghanistan sharply diverged in the years from 1928 to the early 1990s, when the border between them was sealed. Relations between the two societies are still tenuous.

Turkey has shown some interest in establishing cultural and political contacts with the Turkmens and Uzbeks of Afghanistan, who are Turkic in origin. So far, its ambitions to create a "pan-Turkic" region appear to have had little practical effect.

Holidays

Religious holidays in Afghanistan are celebrated according to the lunar calendar, and other holidays such as Independence Day, and New Year's Day are celebrated based on the solar calendar. During many holidays, Afghans usually visit friends and families, prepare lavish meals, and attend special prayers.

Secular Holidays

The Victory of the Muslim Nation is April 28, Remembrance Day for the Martyrs and Disabled is May 4, and Independence Day (*Jeshen*) is August 19. Independence Day marks the end of the Third Anglo-Afghan war, and the grant of independence from Britain. Although Afghanistan was never a formal British colony, Afghanistan's foreign policy was governed by Britain.

New Year (*Nowroze*), is the first day of spring. The Taliban repressed celebration of New Year, although it has reappeared in post-Taliban Afghanistan.

Islamic Holidays

The ninth month of the Muslim calendar is Ramadan (in Arabic) a period of obligatory fasting that commemorates the Prophet Mohammad's receipt of God's revelation, the *Quran*. Because the lunar calendar is eleven days shorter than the solar calendar, Ramadan revolves through the seasons over the years. Fasting is an act of self-discipline that leads to piety and expresses submission and commitment to God. During this period, Muslims cannot eat from sunrise until sundown.

Id al Fitr, a three-day feast and holiday, ends the month of Ramadan and is the occasion for new clothes and much visiting between family members. Many start out the festival by wearing new clothes, and going to prayer at the mosque. Afterwards, people visit or entertain their friends and families. Children usually receive gifts or money called "Eidi."

Ramadan is followed by the beginning of the *haj* pilgrimage season during the twelfth month of the lunar calendar. At least once in their lifetime both men and women should, if economically able, make the *haj* to the holy city of Mecca. The beginning of the *haj* is marked by the holiday of *sawab*. The *sawab* is a day for seeing off pilgrims who are leaving on the *haj*. On the *sawab*, hostilities are frequently suspended to allow people to cross factional lines to see off friends and relatives. As pilgrims embark on the *haj*, they are usually driven to their points of departure in highly decorated vehicles.

Id al Adha, the feast of sacrifice, marks the end of the *haj* month. This holiday occurs on the tenth day of the twelfth month of the Islamic (Hijra) calendar. The day commemorates the Prophet Abraham's devotion to God. According to the Muslim tradition, Abraham was willing to slay his son Ismael as a sacrifice. Ismael was never killed, however, as Allah provided a lamb for the sacrifice. Muslims who performed the *haj* sacrifice a lamb, and the meat is given out to the poor.