

The Bamiyan Buddhas: An Afghan Tale

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In the beginning, they were the Bamiyan Buddhas: the Western Buddha statue, 55 meters high, and the Eastern, 38 meters high, carved for decades since 550 A.D. from porous sandstone cliffs, the intricate details modeled in clay mixed with straw and coated with stucco.

Xuanzang, the legendary traveling monk of the early Tang dynasty who journeyed to India in search of Buddhist manuscripts, saw them in all their – colored – glory in the 7th century.

Then, with Islam taking over these high central lands of Afghanistan, local Hazara folklore slowly turned them into the Romeo and Juliet of the Hindu Kush.

They became “Solsol” (“year after year”, or, more colloquially, the prince of Bamiyan) and “Shahmana” (“the king’s Mother”, or colloquially a princess from a remote kingdom). As lovers, they could not be united as a couple in this world; so they chose to turn into statues and stand close to each other forever.

And then, twenty years ago, after a millennium and a half of living history, the Taliban blew them up.

Killing Romeo and Juliet

Solsol and Shahmana lived since their inception among the Hazaras, who speak Dari, a Persian dialect with numerous words of Mongol and Turk origin. The Hazaras are partly descendants of Genghis Khan’s troops who infiltrated these mountains in the 13th century. Hazaras – who I had the pleasure to meet mostly in Kabul in the early 2000s – remain essentially Mongols, but linguistically Persianized, having adopted the old agricultural tradition of the Iranian mountains.

The Hazaras are diametrically opposed by the Pashtuns – who had an extremely complex ethno-genesis before the early 18th century, when they coalesced into great federations of nomad tribes. Their code of conduct – the *Pashtunwali* – is straightforward, regulating most of all a mechanism of sanctions.

The number one sanction is death: this is a poor society, where sanctions are physical, not material. Islam added moral elements to *pashtunwali*. And then there are juridical norms

imposed by hereditary noblemen – which function like the carpet tying the room together: these come from the Turk-Mongols.

The modern Afghan state was created in the late 19th century by **Abd-ur-Rahman**, the “Iron Emir”. He pulled that off via a “Pashtunization” of the region that was locally known as the north of Turkestan. Then he integrated the Hazaras in the central mountains via bloody military campaigns.

Hazara lands were opened to Pashtun nomad tribes – who featured not only shepherds but also merchants and caravan entrepreneurs. Increasingly plunged into debt, the Hazaras ended up becoming economic hostages of the Pashtuns. Their way out was to emigrate to Kabul – where they hold mostly menial jobs.

And that brings us to the heart of the problem. Hazaras are Shi’ites. Pashtuns are Sunni. Pashtuns consider themselves the owners of Afghanistan – even as there’s persistent, major infighting among Pashtun groups. Pashtuns simply detest the Westphalian concept of the nation-state: most of all they see themselves as an empire within an empire.

This implies that ethnic minorities are marginalized – if they can’t find some sort of accommodation. Hazaras, because they are Shi’ites, were extremely marginalized during Taliban rule, from 1996 to 2001.

The Taliban rolled out en masse from Pakistani madrassas in 1994: the overwhelming majority were Pashtuns from rural areas between Kandahar and Paktiya. They had spent many years in camps scattered along the Pakistani tribal areas and Balochistan.

The Taliban became instantly successful for three reasons:

1. Implementation of Sharia law.
2. Their fight against the lack of security after the 1980s jihad instrumentalized by the Americans to give the USSR its “own Vietnam” (Brzezinski’s definition), and the subsequent warlord anarchy.
3. Because they incarnated the return of the Pashtuns as the leading Afghan force.

No reincarnation?

All of the above supplies the context for the inevitable destruction of Solsol and Shahmana in March 2001. They were the symbols of an “infidel” religion. And they were situated in Shi’ite Hazara land.

Months later, after 9/11, I would learn from Taliban officials close to ambassador Abdul Salam Zaeef in Islamabad that first they blew up “the little one, which was a woman” then “her husband”; that implies the Taliban were very much aware of local folklore.

The destruction process started with the legs of the Great Buddha: one of them was already cut at the knee and the other at the femur. It took them four days – using mines, explosives and even artillery. The Taliban forced local Hazara youth to drill holes in the statues: those who refused were shot dead.

Yet that was not enough to kill oral tradition. Even the young Hazara generation, born after the smashing of the Buddhas, still delights in the tale of Solsol and Shahmana.

But will they ever reincarnate as living statues? Enter the usually messy “international community”. In 2003, Unesco declared the site of the Bamiyan Buddhas and the surrounding caves a “World Heritage Site in Danger.”

Still, Kabul and Unesco can't seem to agree on a final decision. As it stands, Solsol will not be rebuilt; Shahmana, maybe. On and off, they resurrect as 3-D holograms.

What happened so far is “consolidation work at the Eastern Buddha niche”, finished in 2015. Work at the Western Buddha niche started in 2016. A Bamiyan Expert Working Group gets together every year, featuring the administration in Kabul, Unesco experts and donors, mostly German and Japanese.

Ishaq Mawhidi, the head of the Culture and Information Department of Bamiyan, is sure that “90 percent of the statues can be rebuilt with the debris”, plus fragments of smaller statues currently preserved in two large warehouses on site.

The Afghan Ministry of Culture correctly argues that reconstruction work will require a formidable team, including Buddhism scholars, archeologists specialized in Gandhara art, historians, ethnographers, historiographers specialized in the first centuries of the first millennium in Afghanistan.

It will have to be eventually up to wealthy donors such as Berlin and Tokyo to willingly finance all this – and justify the costs, considering Hazara lands barely have been granted with working roads and electricity by the Kabul central government.

It's always crucial to remember that the Bamiyan Buddhas blow up is a crucial case of deliberate destruction of world cultural heritage – alongside appalling instances in Syria, Yemen, Iraq, Libya and Mali. They all connect, directly and indirectly, to the causes and consequences of imperial Forever Wars and their spin-offs (never forget that the Taliban initially were fully courted by the Clinton administration).

The Buddha of Dushanbe

In the end, I never managed to see Solsol and Shahmana. The Taliban would not issue a travel permit for foreigners under any circumstances. After 9/11 and the expulsion of the Taliban from Kabul, I was negotiating a safe passage with Hazara fighters, but then something bigger came up: bribing a Pashtun commander to take a small group of us to Tora Bora to see the Empire B-52 Show against Osama bin Laden.

Instead of Solsol and Shahmana – either standing up in their niches, or blown up to smithereens – I finally managed to see the next best option: the reclining Buddha of Dushanbe.

Afghanistan may be the “graveyard of empires” – the last act being enacted as we speak. And, to a certain extent, a graveyard of Buddhas. But not neighboring Tajikistan.

The original [Buddha of Dushanbe saga](#) was published by Asia Times in those heady 9/11 days. It happened as my photographer Jason Florio and myself were waiting for days for a helicopter to take us to the Panjshir valley in Afghanistan.

Eighteen years later, like a Jorge Luis Borges short story, it all came down full circle before I traveled the Pamir highway in late 2019. I went to the same museum in Dushanbe and there

he was: the 13 meter-long “sleeping lion”, found in the Buddhist monastery of Ajinateppa, resting on pillows, in glorious *parinirvana*, and fully restored, with help from an expert from the Hermitage in St. Petersburg.

Somewhere in unknown spheres beyond space and time, Solsol and Shahmana will be benevolently smiling.

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Featured image: Smaller 38 meter “Eastern” Buddha (Public Domain)

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