

**Back from Afghanistan
Embroidery project in Laghmani
Pascale Goldenberg – July 2005**

To go or not go

Let me start right at the beginning, because I had to stand my ground before the trip started: Firstly, the consulate in Bonn did not return my passport and when I called them I was just told that the consul had no interest in letting me make the trip (most likely because I wanted to travel on my own). This made my DAI colleagues become aware of possible dangers (DAI: Deutsch-Afghanische Initiative e.V., Freiburg), whereupon they advised me not to go now, but instead to postpone my plans for a few months. This, however, could not have been possible for Gert and me to organize, considering the plans we had made for this year. If I had postponed my plans I could have cancelled the trip from the start.

This is why at the board meeting I solemnly promised that I would submit to Afghan customs and that I would not dare causing any provocation. Then the DAI exerted pressure on Bonn and after some weeks of waiting my visa eventually arrived (on Thursday, the very day Cementina, the kidnapped Italian, was freed). Barely three days later, on Sunday, I was finally able to go.

One of my priorities was to go to Laghmani, not only because of the embroidery project I had started two years ago (including six months of preparation), but also because of the commitment of the many nice people who had worked with us. I felt that the time had come to get to know the women as well as seeing whether my vision of Afghanistan was in line with the reality.

My attitude left no room for fear of possible dangers.

A little bit of prehistory

Laghmani is a village about 70 km north of Kabul. In 2003 and 2004 the DAI established a center for women there where not only tailoring courses took place, but also literacy courses for about 100 widows, that took six months. At the conclusion each participant was given a sewing machine. The DAI reckoned that through their newly gained knowledge, these women would be offered commissioned work which would help them finally to become independent.

In the last six months of this two-year project, I offered an additional program that put emphasis on the revival of hand embroidery. We employed an embroidery instructor who showed the women a textile technique that, in principle, is very traditional in Afghanistan. By utilizing these various techniques (that the women could learn again in Laghmani) they were able to create new patterns based on traditional models.

I established some guidelines: The embroidered work had to be (8 x 8) rectangles; the whole square was to be filled out and embroidered with the material supplied (material and thread from Germany).

From summer 2004 onwards we bought the finished squares that arrived in Freiburg step by step.

My idea (which I put into effect immediately) was the creation of some kind of patchwork with traditional patterns where both embroidery and patchwork techniques complement each other. In this way the embroidered squares can serve perfectly as eye catchers. The result are symbolically effective pieces of patchwork, linking together not only two techniques but also two cultures.

The pieces of patchwork that were made right at the beginning were quite convincing (out of consideration for the poverty of the women they were made solely from remnants). Thanks to the active and continuous support of my friends in Freiburg, not only book wrappers and bags are created but also pillows and blankets that serve as impulses.

Textile in Afghanistan

Afghanistan has a very rich textile culture. People knot, knit and felt. Apart from a pronounced embroidery tradition one can find various sorts of patchwork, partly the kind we are familiar with, but also in a patchwork combination with embroidered ribbons. I had learned this from the specialist literature that stresses the importance of embroidery and patchwork as well as their various ways of utilization.

I could see this in the bazaars of Kabul in various boutiques which, however, were visited exclusively by foreigners. It was a real pleasure for me to see the combination of thread colors, the materials as well as the perfection with which the techniques were applied and also the recurring improvisation. Unfortunately, there were only two occasions which I could enjoy and could buy in abundance (I bought some embroidered works including a Turkmenian women's coat and three pieces of traditional patchwork).

Out in the country (Laghmani) I heard that the techniques of traditional embroidery are not used anymore. They are not appropriate for daily usage – as is the case here - since the women have too little time to spend on this. Whereas in the European culture patchwork and embroidery are merely a hobby, the Afghan women cannot afford leisure time activities; they do not even know the meaning of recreation.

The women regularly brought me their embroidered products of earlier times (which included table cloths, other sorts of cloth, scarves, little bags, etc.). As a matter of fact I asked them to do this because I wanted to see what they had already embroidered. But soon I noticed that the women were interested in offering them for sale. So I bought some works including articles that had been started but never finished and two worn-out Burkas ('Chadri' – as it is called there; the word Burka as known here is of Arabic origin). By the way, the women of the village never go out without their Chadri, not even the younger ones. Actually there is a lot to tell about this Chadri...

Getting to know the women

My primary goal when I went to Laghmani was to get to know the women personally. I also wanted to see how they did with the two-week course (in which half of the participants are girls and the other half adult women including widows).

Our plan was to show the women (they all can sew as well as embroider) technical solutions on how they could complete the embroidered squares with other sewing techniques (patchwork) in order to produce things like pillows, bags and little blankets. We also wanted to help them not only find their own way of embroidering but also to establish a little sales network in their own country so that they could gain financial independence in three to five years.

At the same time I discovered that the visions of a nice European could not meet up with the daily life of these women. They are too busy worrying about their survival. This makes it almost impossible to start a bigger project for the future without concrete and lasting support and having someone on site.

What the women need first is a proper team spirit: They are still individually oriented, although they all know each other (they are related to each other). Secondly, they do not have the opportunity to sew clean enough; the movement of Chinese sewing machines is basically erratic and ironing is a very tiring task.

For the most part the women are not allowed to leave their village or their houses (seven of them could not even leave the house in order to receive their money). Only two women out of 30 were allowed to go by taxi to the next small town, which is 15 km away. There we offered the finished embroidery products for sale in a women's center (the two more "liberal" women were Jila, who is not married yet because she refused three marriage proposals, and Khaleda who is a widow). We brought the sewn products to the center (a cover for the Koran, a utensil, a bag, a small blanket and a pillow during the first week; three book covers for the Koran, two little blankets and one medium-sized blanket at the end of the second week). Although the selling of our first product was a success, it was still a humble one and not convincing enough to provide the women with the impetus they needed. It had been naïve of me to think that they would find it exciting to design products, carefully work out the techniques and establish a sales network.

The embroidery itself

The embroidered squares delivered so far were, with few exceptions, made of one single color. Therefore some works appeared dull and not exciting enough. That is why on the very first day in the class room I emptied out a bag full of embroidery thread in various colors. I asked them to choose between five colors which they thought would correspond to their taste. The women took much delight in setting up a series of colors that were successfully done without any exceptions. So I really have to say that they have a very good feeling for colors.

I asked them to use three to five different colors from now on for every square, which also meant that they "played" with the colors on the surface. They should also feel free in the designing of it.

The squares made according to the new model show a high potential of individuality. Many women have found their own way of embroidering (within a well-founded and collective tradition) which I think is of high value.

This can by no means be taken for granted when you know how embroidery was dealt with in the past in Europe and for the main part still is: For centuries women have only worked according to strict instructions. They had to stick to the pattern provided and were not allowed to make a wrong prick. Improvisation is a strange word in this respect.

In Afghanistan, in Kabul to be precise, I saw many embroidered works in the three weeks I was there (these were made within the various projects for women, of which embroidery is a part). These are masterpieces as far as the technique is concerned; however, the pattern is repetitious. I do not think it desirable to foster such serial work. In contrast, the first freely designed squares made by the course

participants proved to be adequate improvisations, although they are not yet perfect in their technique. They can be viewed as little pictures. In this way, this project differs from others in principle.

I even feel that this method of embroidering is a kind of therapy: for a few hours the women get the chance of feeling independent by being occupied with the colors as well as with themselves. This activity has also a meditative character, thus enabling them to concentrate on the picture and at the same time forgetting the cares of daily life.

The embroidering itself seems to work out well, although some progress is needed in the technical design. Actually this is also a quiet positive point: after all, I wanted to revive some old techniques instead of losing them.

However, there were women who still wished to do serial embroidery (one single shade with geometrical patterns that are strictly arranged and differing slightly from each other), and we wanted to offer a variety of works for sale in Germany anyway. We therefore thought it appropriate for the women to produce differing kinds of embroidered work: single squares full of character (the so-called improvisations or little pictures), small series of four to five squares as well as series of larger size with just one pattern. For sale we offer both individual squares as well as squares in series, many of which have been sold already.

I would like to make some pictures of completed works and gather them in a folder. I shall also start working on a catalogue containing the most beautiful of the squares and imagine that they will serve as models for future orders. The way it looks now, I shall continue buying the embroidered squares and put them on the market until we find other on-site development concepts.

As far as marketing here is concerned, we need some imagination. I have some ideas myself, too: In autumn, for instance, I shall announce the advertisement for the suitcase textile exhibition called "From Women for Women", where at least one embroidered square has to be integrated in every piece of textile. That is why I hope the two cultures will get even closer to each other.

The lunch breaks

The participants in the course always looked forward to the lunch breaks. They did not even want to postpone the breaks to half an hour so as to conclude the workday. We had hired a cook; I had taken some pictures of the various kitchens in order to demonstrate the Afghan cuisine.

The break gave us the opportunity to ask each other questions and to converse with each other. Each day there was a new topic to talk about, for example:

What do the mothers wish for their children's future?

What do the girls wish for themselves?

Can the widows marry again and do they want to?

Do the mothers wish to have more children? How many and why? Do the husbands decide or do the wives have a say, too?

We also talked about how many times they had sex with their husbands, whether they were gentle and tender or rather rude and violent, too, sometimes.

Contraception for women as well as for men was another topic we talked about. On this occasion someone said that the utilization of condoms causes the men backaches!

At the same time the women asked us questions about our own married lives.

Gert (my husband) had had a very good idea, namely that I should take a picture of our four children with me. When I presented my four sons lined up like an organ pipe the women gave long comments in which they expressed their enthusiasm. But then they asked me why I had stopped having more children, because I do not have a daughter. All of a sudden they started pitying me. In Laghmani there is a family with fourteen daughters; the husband wishes to have a son...

Weeda the translator

Through Christine from Freiburg I got to know Weeda and her family. Weeda, her husband, Wali, and her two little children, three and five years old, returned to Kabul on Mai 1st, 2005. Munich was their home before that (apparently they did not feel much at home there). Now they are trying to start a new life. Wali is a technical specialist in the orthopedic branch (he produces artificial limbs). Weeda has started learning hairdressing in Kabul.

Thus Weeda served as an interpreter during the time I was there. Although she is 20 years younger than I we made a wonderful team. But sometimes the work was very hard for her – more than it was for me. Afghan women talk so much and comment on things without coming to an end.

Since the women have given Weeda a warm welcome, we decided that in future times she should pay the women their money directly, from woman to woman. Actually two men had done this job so far. But in some cases they were not allowed to see the women directly, which made the business very complicated. Therefore the DAI will employ Weeda. For me this seems to be a solution par excellence. Besides, through Weeda we can stay in contact with the women. In fact, communication is a very important part of the project. When Weeda and the women meet together, the most important point is not the purchasing of squares. The meeting rather serves as an exchange of two communities (Weeda lives in town and has been in Europe – the women reside in the country). Both sides benefit from that.

About money

I want to mention something about the question of money, since time and again there are people who want to know by whom such a trip is paid.

I beard the costs of flight, visa, lodging as well as for driving in Kabul and the country myself (one of the rules of our organization is that the work for a project is done on honorary basis, which means that each member must bear the costs for a possible trip to Afghanistan him/herself).

The DAI paid for the project, i.e. for the driver (car plus gas), translator, the course room, the wages for the cook, the food (including the pieces of wood) and eventually for the printed materials.

How I felt there

In Kabul I lodged with Nasir's relatives (he himself lives in Freiburg). The family consists of seven persons – parents and the five adult children (aged 18 to 24).

I was not able to talk to the father and the three women (the mother and the two daughters), as they could not speak English.

Communication with the sons was easier (as far as my English allowed). Besides, most of the time they were at home and the eldest son was the driver anyway. With the women I communicated with non-verbal signs and gestures, whereby I learned some Farsi words by repeating them.

There were only few occasions on which I could help with the housework (for example I never thought something like "Today I will cook something French for you"). However, I insisted on washing my own laundry (i.e. pumping water out of the fountain, and if necessary heating it up on the stove in the yard) which seemed pretty odd to them. I did not let them help me, so they were only witnesses of my daily washing routine.

Fortunately, I had a room of my own (which belonged to the older sons who let me have it). Consequently, during my presence, the whole family slept in the living-room. This was also the place where everybody had had his or her meal. The dish was served right on the ground on a waxed piece of cloth that was spread out. There were no chairs anyway, you always sit on the ground on those mats on which they also sleep. Thus, for three weeks I only sat on the ground (which was the case in the course room, too) without having much exercise. But it was not until I was at home that I realized how many of my muscles had lost their tone.

In Kabul with Nasir's relatives, as well as in Laghmani I felt at home. I didn't bother about the Afghan daily rhythm that was different from that of my life in Freiburg. I even had the impression that in some way or other I adapted the Afghan behavior, for example, discussing an issue from different points of view, which means never coming to an end, postponing decision-making for tomorrow or the day after tomorrow, starting something without finishing it and enjoying breaks (something I never allow myself in Freiburg).

Afghan men are very friendly and charming, but the way they behave towards women (wife, mother, daughters and sisters) has confused me more than once. Finally, at the end of my trip I took the liberty of talking to the sons about this, but they could not understand what I meant. Obviously, this is normal in the Islamic world: Women basically exist in order to serve the men. The women took this for granted, however. It would be out of question for them to say anything against it.

After three weeks I missed home, but I didn't mind staying there for some weeks, either. I would have liked to have got to know other Afghans, too; those who start tackling the future trying to compensate for decades of terror and standstill. These include Afghans who stayed there as well as those who returned just as Weeda and her family did. I could feel the enormous potential of vitality and initiative. In Laghmani, however, I had the impression that autonomy for women could only be imaginable after three generations. At the end it pained me to say good-bye to the women. To leave them was somehow to leave them in the lurch.