

**Travel diary 2, embroidering project in Laghmani (Afghanistan)
and more
May 2006
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This is the report of my second journey to Laghmani (Afghanistan) to look after the embroidering project. The DAI e.V. in Freiburg (Germany) supports the project and I am its head. Those who do not know the first travel diary (July 2005) and want to know about the beginnings of the project can ask me for it.

Let us begin with the “and more” and the struma patients

Four years ago, within the framework of the women’s project in Laghmani, doctor Shala Rahel could find out about the health situation of women. Last year, I myself saw that quite a number of people in the three parts of the village of Laghmani – Kala-i-kona, Sufian and Kakara – suffer from an enlargement of the thyroid gland. It’s mainly women who are affected, but also children (both boys and girls) as well as men.

This distinct problem with the thyroid gland (hyperthyroidism) is widespread in Afghanistan, the land of mountains, and can be attributed to a lack of iodine. As a great number of the embroiderers is affected I asked Anne Hermes, a nurse and also a member of the DAI e.V. who had already done project work in Afghanistan twice before, to accompany me.

Before our departure, we drew up three stages of treatment:

- The preventive measure to protect the adolescent population; here, it is vital to inform the people about the use of iodined salt.
- The medicinal therapy with the problem of specific and repeated blood tests.
- Surgery.

Only the first stage seemed realistic for us to be put into practice.

Anne had contacted all the international health organizations to finally find out that they knew about the problem but had not given it priority and therefore had not stepped in; this meant that we could not fall back on any previous experience.

On the job, i.e. in Laghmani and during a few days Anne met the women who suffer from a struma (goitre) and asked them about symptoms. We learnt that a major part of the population were replacing the normal table salt by iodined salt which is only a little more expensive. A publicity campaign on the radio and on TV says that one is going to be more intelligent with iodined salt. (This may even be true, as in extreme cases of lack of iodine, the intellectual performance can be reduced.) We were surprised that the connection between lack of iodine and thyroid complaint was not known among men. The affected women were much better informed, but not satisfactorily enough. None of them knew that iodined salt is an absolute must for the adolescent generation to prevent thyroid complaints.

Anne took advantage of the meetings with the women to talk about the importance of iodined salt as well as the consequences of thyroid dysfunction. She especially appealed to the women of childbearing age to use iodined salt in order to prevent possible consequential damage to their children. Some of the affected women were already receiving medical treatment, but they obviously were not given specific thyroid medication. Until Anne’s departure she managed to organize blood tests to analyse the thyroid hormones for 11 affected women (chosen from the younger ones) in Kabool.

In the meantime the results have come in, 10 women will receive medicinal therapy over a longer period before a decision for surgery will possibly have to be taken. This will have to be decided by the doctors in Kabool. Meanwhile, Anne will stay in contact with Khaled, her representative in Kabool, who organises for the patients to be looked after.

“and some more”: In-service training for teachers

In Laghmani itself and about 10 km further on in Balaghel there are two schools that were built by the DAI e.V. in recent years. The responsibility and the commitment for them are still immense. Thanks to Anne’s initiative we could speak with the women’s representative, the school representatives, with the headmasters, the female doctor of the Charikar hospital (10 km from Laghmani). All this took days and hours on end. With 2 female teachers and 4 male teachers we could finally lay down the programme for an in-service training for teachers.

The objective is to be able to perform first-aid in school, if need be, but mainly to obtain enlightenment about hygiene, (especially concerning the latrines), about the prevention and treatment of regionally common illnesses such as malaria and tuberculosis; the programme for the teachers’ training also includes knowledge of oral rehydration in case of diarrhoea, deworming, dental hygiene, nutrition and vaccination.

The teachers will be expected to pass on their “health-knowledge” to the students in school, in the hope that a comprehensive knowledge and understanding will lead to changes in their behaviour.

We learnt that parliament had enacted the order to spend the first five minutes of the school-day speaking about hygiene (correct washing of hands, washing of food before consumption etc.).

In Laghmani we learnt that this order is put into action every morning, embedded between a verse of the Koran, the singing of the National Anthem and instructions for a safe way to school.

The way is paved already!!!

Our six teachers are being taught by two female doctors, for 2 lessons 3 times a week for 2 months.

The two headmasters of Laghmani and Balaghel have committed themselves to employing these teachers as specialists for health education after their in-service training.

The embroidering project: We meet again, we meet new women and how contracts with them are made

In Kala-i-kona, Sufian and Kakara we – Weeda, the interpreter and I – had to deal with up to 300 women. In no way was I prepared for this and it was often more than I could cope with. Until then, up to 80 women had officially embroidered.

Among the 300 were women who had officially embroidered, that means I knew them personally from the previous year, or women to whom Weeda had distributed embroidery cottons and from whom she had bought embroidered squares.

But among the 300 were also women who claimed and maintained they could embroider and who wanted to do so within the project.

First of all, in groups of 8 to about 25 women, they had to listen to what the DAI is and that Germans and Afghans work together in the projects; then they were informed about the step-by-step procedures which are essential for the functioning of the embroidering project, i.e. the

steps that must be kept to from the time when the squares have been bought from the women until they are sold – and about how time-consuming and expensive all these steps are.

There were two pages about all this that I had written down and which Weeda lectured on repeatedly. All this was to be an appeal to the women to work more seriously and produce persistently good quality and to do their very best.

Moreover, I had decided to pay the women in a different way; up to then, they had been paid the moment they delivered the squares. For different organisational reasons, the women will be paid for their last batch when they deliver the next one. This leaves me time to work out the payment at home in Freiburg and Weeda won't have to do it on the day of collection because there is usually utter chaos and one can't deal with numbers at the same time. The embroidery women have been informed about this new procedure and agree to it.

I have treaties with a great number of unmarried girls between the ages of 12 and 20 although the quality of their embroidering does not yet meet the standard. This is to be seen as part of my own 'policy'. By supporting the girls financially I want to contribute to giving this traditional technique a chance so that it won't get lost in the future. It is my personal, deliberate (maybe naive...) attempt to revive these dying techniques.

The payment before my departure

I had chosen the two days preceding my departure to handle the payment in the 3 locations of Laghmani in order to give the women as much time as possible to do their embroidering. All the women who had embroidered squares could bring them to me to sell them, including the women with whom I hadn't made a treaty. There were more than 6000 squares, and this was definitely the last time for so many squares to be collected!

All the women who had treaties did indeed bring their document with them, none of them had forgotten to do so. I was overwhelmed as to how seriously they were taking their treaty. Some had even put a plastic wrapper around it for protection.

During these two days there was further consulting if it seemed necessary to me; 8 women had to hand in their treaty because their embroidered squares were sub-standard. The quality made me decide to give them no further chance. This seems to be a harsh and severe measure, but with such a large number of women I just wouldn't know what else to do. If they don't keep to the rules while I'm there, how can it possibly work later on when I'm not there?

What I might do differently another time and ideas for the future

The choice of women under the aspect who is good enough at embroidering, i.e. with whom can I make a treaty, was very difficult for me, sometimes even seemed unjust, because the "new" women who hadn't done any embroidering for 20 years simply need time to really get into this again. For the next time, I see the solution like this: all the women will have had information about a new procedure for acceptance. (Two months in advance to give them a chance for a warm-up practice.) The next time when I'll be there, two days might be planned for the women to embroider on-site. At the end of these two days, a decision could be taken about who will get a treaty.

In this small region, the DAI looks after 45 foster-children who are supported with a regular sum of money every month; twice a year, the respective families are being visited to find out

about the development of the family and whether financial help is still necessary. If the financial situation of the family has improved, the monthly contribution by the DAI will be withdrawn and given to another child on the very long waiting list.

In order to be really just, I would have to act according to this concept, i.e. I would not only have to take into consideration the quality of the embroidering, but also the financial situation of the families concerning the number of squares I buy from them. This would mean to check the situation in the families regularly, at least once a year. According to European standards all the families are needy, but a distinction of some sort has to be made. This would mean mammoth work, time-consuming and expensive (the interpreter being indispensable) and I'll just have to think about it some more. A simplified inspection of the family, whether the embroiderer is a widow with a large number of children, might be enough for a decision.

I would have liked (and had planned to do so) to take photos of the women, be it their faces or their hands, and to make a catalogue from them, but my digital camera broke down with a software problem just before I had to leave and I could only take a cheap camera with me. Apart from this I wouldn't have had time for the photos anyway. I deeply regret this, because I had the impression that the women would be less reluctant to have their photos taken than the previous year (the struma patients were all willing to have their photos taken by Anne). It is certainly a good idea to have a photo which shows the embroiderer and I am quite sad not to have had the time and opportunity. I'll have to plan and take the time on my next visit.

When receiving their pay, the embroiderers are asked to sign a receipt but they can neither read nor write and only about 5% of the women manage to sign. I would like to employ a female teacher who spends enough time with every woman until she is able to give a signature. I don't really care about the receipt so much, but about the self-confidence the women would gain. Many of them can't even count their money...

In the art scene there is a term "Plein-Air" which means a casual meeting of kindred spirits who work at the same time. In Kalaikuna there's a new park with a wrought-iron fence around. I can imagine to invite all the embroiderers for a day (they would have to know about it well in advance) and to display embroidered cloths on the fence. They could all have a look and study each other's stylistic elements and every woman might say something about her work; one could stay, linger, eat and drink... have a lovely party!

"Authorities", i.e. men, might also be invited. I know well that the women would only come in their tshaderi (name of the Afghan Burka) but if they came at all I'd consider this to be a great success. I'm sure they would gain a huge amount of self-confidence.

Here are some new experiments:

- the embroidering of triangles (the size of two squares) and of ribbons
- two new specially dyed embroidering cottons have been created

One is a line by Isabelle Girodet, a French woman and a specialist for natural dyes. She created this line especially for the project; the second is a line with Procion, American chemical dyes, which has been created by friends in Freiburg. Here, the colours merge into one another. The squares that have been embroidered with these cottons (one of the lines each) have turned out to especially striking, but as to the time-consuming and expensive dyeing procedures I don't believe that a profitable result can be achieved in the future. These squares are beautiful but economically completely unprofitable.

At my suggestion Holle Voss, textile artist from Hanover who works with silk-screen print, has made larger squares, the non-dyed areas of which were embroidered in Laghmani. The

combination of silk-screen print and embroidery comes out very lively and after an evaluation and consulting with Frau Voss we'll see if we can do further work in this field.

Miscellaneous

It looks as if the women loved this new and unexpected way to earn some money (I could have made treaties with more than 300 women). It is a completely new experience for those who have never had a possibility to earn money themselves. Apart from this – and by asking around - my feeling that they enjoy embroidering very much proved to be true. Still, one has to be cautious and must not judge this activity as some kind of hobby in the European way.

My misgivings that the men could snatch the money from the women and get on the wrong side of the law didn't prove true. The women themselves decide what the money is spent on. Of course they give money to the men for the shopping. According to the tradition they themselves can't go out to the shops. The money is normally spent on food, fire-wood, a gas cylinder. Unfortunately none of the women has invested in something bigger such as a calf. Maybe because there wasn't enough money, or because more food had to be bought during the winter. Doctor's fees were also paid for with the money. The non-married girls who embroidered with us can keep the money for themselves. I could see the lovely clothes they had bought (denim jacket)!

I can imagine, and I hope that women – at first maybe accompanied by a male person – go to the bazaar in Charikar (with their money well hidden away) to buy something for themselves. This new financial source which belongs exclusively to the women could help build self-confidence and might be seen as an open door to the world.

All the husbands I met were rather pleased when their wives embroidered. Others wanted me to let their wives embroider, even when I hadn't accepted them. My apprehensions that husbands might be unhappy or frustrated because their wives earned money, even more money than they themselves, were unfounded.

In Kabool I found time – and I thoroughly enjoyed it – to look for the traditional Turkoman patchwork quilts in the district of the antiquarians. I found and acquired nearly 10 of them. Although bought privately they are still of significance for the project, because they will be put at the disposal for private functions. With three patchworks, together with several hand embroidered tshaderis which I acquired last year, I gained the positive experience that these exotic, in Europe not very well known objects attract a lot of attention. Exhibitions which have these objects on display have a great appeal. Public functions which want to include the embroidering project in their programme are offered to display these special pieces. I have made a CD in which all these pieces are explained, including their size. The opportunity of lending is often seized indeed, as the pieces are enrichment for every exhibition.

During the last hour of our square-collecting in Kakara, Latifa, a new but no longer very young embroiderer handed in beautiful squares, among them one with the outline of Afghanistan, and in the small area within the outline she had embroidered, well legible in Farsi: “ German-Afghan Initiative”. On yet another square there was a bird with widespread wings and the heading: “Safe travel”. I was deeply moved and thanked her in the name of the

DAI. Then I asked her if I could take her photo and after a moment's hesitation she agreed. Latifa herself can neither read nor write, but her husband can. After I had taken the photo I asked around who else wanted their photo taken. None of the 22 women would agree spontaneously and I didn't insist.

Even though the stay in Kalaikuna, Sufian and Kakara was very stressful it still proved to be worthwhile and made sense. I believe that the project is on the right track. It may not yet have arrived, but its development is positive. There are no major problems and I believe that the project will work in the future. I do hope that the new methods for the collection of the squares and the payment will be accepted.

The women know that the project will only work as long as I can cope. I myself have planned 3 to 5 years of my time – and that of my family – to find a further solution for the women and their embroidery (maybe in the Haute Couture?). Two years are over already, and the solution has not emerged. I myself would like to wait and see if the quality of the embroidering will yet improve, then I'll spend time in search for an appropriate successor for the management of the project. Well, everybody, I'm open for all concrete suggestions, and ready to discuss them with you!

In Kabul I had the opportunity to meet Frau Lien Heidenreich who will be there for another two years. She works as the deputy of the Goethe Institute and I could present the project and the competition "Threads connect women". She showed interest in the plan for an exhibition. As the possibilities of a presentation within the institute is very difficult (due to heavy security measures, the institute is difficult to access for the public) I thought about going ahead with this event in cooperation with the Alliance Francaise which is accommodated in the High School Esteqlal, where French is also being taught, and public access is not so difficult there.

General impressions

Again I was very happy to be the guest of a typical and traditional family. This year, the tshaderis (Burkas) which last year had hung on a nail next to the entrance, had disappeared. During my stay I could witness the day when the 20 year old daughter went to school for the first time in her life. What a huge success after so many years of suppression and moving around! Finally she had found her peace of mind and with it the desire to go to school. She asked her father for permission.

Tradition plays an important role in Afghanistan and will do so for a long time to come. One example is that all the couples I met, be it in the country or in towns, had been married according to the tradition, i.e. the parents had arranged for the young people to be married. Usually these arrangements are made between members of the extended family, between cousins, for instance, but sometimes also outside the family. In these cases, the couple will not have met before the wedding day.

The young generation in Kabul (and in other big towns – so I was told) study English very hard, and in the streets you'll be addressed at any time. Where the older generation does not dare to address a foreigner or even have eye contact, the younger generation is forthcoming, even daring, and addresses you cheekily in English.

Kabul remains extremely dirty and dusty, even if a few streets have been surfaced with asphalt; this time I encountered the city by rain, when in a few minutes dust turns into mud.

It's difficult to say which is better! For the population nothing much has changed, the wages are still disgracefully low (a disgrace for the government), so low that nobody can live on them. In order to survive, several jobs have to be performed, among them thieving. If women are actually found in paid jobs, then as teachers or nurses.

I left Afghanistan at the small and dirty airport with last glimpses on landscapes, soil and dust, occasionally interrupted by green valleys winding like snakes through the mountains. Then the no-man's-land, "the white-out", the thick layers of white clouds. After a couple of hours the sky opens above green forest and accurately outlaid fields. The plane is landing in Frankfurt, its airport gigantic, clean and cool in marble.

People are people, be it in Afghanistan or Germany; otherwise, I would have thought I had arrived on a different planet or in another age.

- European competition – exhibition "Threads connect women"
Ask me for information
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