

Report of the winter journey 2006/07

The first journey in winter

It had to be winter. It was inevitable. I just could not plan it for the lovely spring months of 2007. The European travelling exhibition "Threads Unite Women" which runs parallel to the embroidery project and for which I am responsible will start at the beginning of June 2007 (at full blast!!) at 10 exhibition places until the end of the year. Should you want to learn about the route, just ask by e-mail or look it up at www.deutsch-afghanische-initiative.de. Such an exhibition, with 222 exhibits selected by a jury, takes an awful lot of work. Therefore... no time for Afghanistan until...

Still, even when there are no major problems, it is vital to look after the project and to be present regularly. Apart from this, Weeda, the former representative in Kabul and go-between for the women, has moved away from Kabul. Leiluma now attends to the project. After long years in Germany she has returned to Kabul to start a new life there.

How on earth can one leave one's family during Christmas time and spend Christmas in a Muslim country? Many of my friends and relations just could not understand it and warned me against going. But I was hard pressed for time, had to juggle with my husband's appointment book in order to make sure that someone was there for the children. Believe me – I would have liked to be with my family.

As people shiver

Kabul is situated 1800 metres above sea level, Laghmani in the Shomali plain even higher than that. I had been cautioned against the bitterly cold winter and had planned accordingly from woollen underwear to fur jacket. The Afghans wear hardly more than on warm or hot days and walk barefoot in plastic sandals through the snow. They shiver and shiver all day long; this they accept as if there was nothing they can do against the cold and the shivering. In the friendly family Hashimi with whom I usually stay when I'm there, the women went barefoot all day long, coughed with chronic bronchitis all the time, and although they have socks in their chests they would not wear them. The metal entrance door was, just as on warm days, wide open all day long, and as the windows don't shut properly anyway, there was a permanent draught with the result that the temperature in the house went down to between three and five degrees Celsius.

Only few rooms were warmer: the tiny kitchen where the women do their cooking (in a fire hole on the floor) and the living room, where they sit, eat and sleep. In this fairly big room there was a tin metal stove –bokhori- which worked exclusively with sawdust. I was surprised and impressed to see what a lot of heat a fairly small amount of sawdust can produce for 10 hours.

There was also some sort of rack, covered with a thick quilt which reaches down to the floor on all four sides. This rack sometimes served as a table (it actually looks like a table) but it basically has a completely different function: a tin with embers is being placed under the quilt and rack. The people (mainly men) who do not have anything to do during the winter time, spend long hours sitting between seat-cushions and the quilt. In this way the lower parts of the body remain warm, but the back will have to do with a temperature of three to five degrees Celsius. When there are visitors everybody will sit around this "sandali".

Firewood remains extremely expensive in Afghanistan and most people just cannot afford heating. This I had to experience repeatedly in Laghmani. For these people there is only the

possibility to warm themselves up between 10 am and 3 pm on the outside wall by the sun – in case it is shining.

These numerous sentences about the cold show how disconcerted and shaken I was to see how people are cold and get sick from the cold, but do not do anything against it or simply ignore it.

Winter in Afghanistan also means snow which I simply hadn't thought of. Well, on the day of my arrival the plane could land, which is not often the case at that time of the year. There had been snow for a couple of days but we went on our way to Laghmani nevertheless. This is when I was most frightened ever in Afghanistan. Basically, on my first two journeys to Afghanistan, I had thought it to be highly risky to be in a car (although the performance of the drivers had improved between 2005 and 2006). But in this kind of snow which turns into sheer ice between 4 o'clock in the afternoon and 10 o'clock in the morning, the stretch of road between Kabul and Charikar will turn into a battlefield. Of course they don't have winter-tyres, and the tyres they have are completely worn. The dangers due to these tyres are then topped by the typical power struggle of the Afghan drivers. The day after, I announced that embroidery in itself was a beautiful thing, but not if you have to take such risks. Then we took a day's break.

Never again shall I go there in winter!

The reunion with the women and the remuneration of the first consignment

The first two days were dedicated to the remuneration of the women. Since the spring of 2006 a new system of remuneration has been introduced: The cloths, embroidered with squares, are being collected by Leiluma and Khaled and sent to me. I myself am the one to open, register, count and price the squares. According to this list I will know which amount of money will have to be sent to Kabul by the treasurer. (In the meantime, the DAI has an account with the Kabul Bank, and it's just great not to have to carry the money on your body any longer). All this information is collected in an Excel-chart which is sent to Kabul. Khaled can then withdraw the money and prepare an envelope with the pay for each woman. When I arrived in December I knew exactly how many the women would get for the cloths that had been collected in October. What I did first and on the following two days was hand out the money to the women. Without having had a notion of the necessity it was exactly the right moment to do this because everybody was preparing for the Id-feast, an additional financial challenge. For quite a while I felt that had been the best thing I accomplished that year.

The second round

Then the second round had to start with a certain steadfastness because the Id-feast was coming; the women could not be visited during these days, and nobody else would be at my disposal either, neither the two drivers nor the interpreter. None of my Afghan friends had thought of mentioning that my stay would be in the middle of this feast.

What I had to do was collect the cloths and comment on them systematically in order to make the embroiderer understand what I think is interesting or, on the contrary, boring in her work. This is the most demanding and exciting activity of the project: to guide into a direction and at the same time leave room for the development of the embroiderer's potential. For me it is vital to make sure that the embroiderers find their own style and cultivate it.

During these days, for the sake of fairness, there was a test for women and girls in a part of Laghmani where nobody had embroidered for the project before. They had asked for this test. In the other parts of Laghmani where women regularly asked me whether they could also

embroider I remained pigheaded and only let girls take the test. The younger ones are ten years old and they are considered girls until they marry.

The test went like this: on the first day, the material (cloth, embroidering cotton and frame) are dealt out and I tell them what all this is about (which they already know) and what the DAI is (they only know that this institution is in Germany). The girls will then be allowed to embroider at home, but only one half of a square. With this they return the next day. Then they sit in a room together and complete their square so that I can see if the same girl had indeed embroidered the first half. There are now 207 girls and women who embroider with a treaty.

Id al-Adha, Id-feast or sacrifice-feast

In the Muslim world the Id-feast, also called the Great Feast, is of similar importance as Christmas is in the west. The motive for this feast is a story from the Koran: God calls upon Abraham to sacrifice his son as a token of obedience. But at the very last moment God renounces the sacrifice and has a sheep sacrificed instead of the boy. This story is remembered with the purchase of a sheep by many families on this day. The sheep will be butchered according to the religious rules and eaten together. A third of the meat will go to the needy, another third to relations, and the remaining third will be eaten by the family. (from KNAURS encyclopedia ISLAM).

The procedure was rather like that, but not quite so: For four days the Afghans visit each other within their families (I have always wondered how they know that someone is actually at home!) Sumptuous plates with fancy cakes and cookies, similar to what we have at Christmas are always offered to the visitors, together with tea, of course. Meat was eaten also for breakfast, in a soup (sheep knuckle soup!); like so many other families, the family Hashimi cannot afford to have a whole sheep butchered, and so pieces of meat were bought at the bazaar as the occasions demanded.

During these days I kept aloof – I had plenty to do anyway: assess the prices for all the cloths that I had collected and fill envelopes with Afghani accordingly. For each embroiderer I had to lay down anew the number of squares she would be allowed to embroider. As the overall number of squares is getting immense (I can sell about 4000 squares per term – more are not compatible with my everyday life and my family) I had to take restrictive measures: The ‘new’ women and the very young girls are only allowed to embroider ten squares, the older girls who have been with the project for a while may embroider 20 squares. This was very distressing because they had embroidered 30 or even more squares previously. This is also a great pity for the project because the embroidering of some of them is so excellent that nobody would believe it had been done by such young girls. I have also taken into consideration whether more than one in a family or just one have a treaty. If there were more than one I let the mothers be the ones to embroider the same number of squares as before. The mothers are the ones to support and feed the family, the girls keep the money for their squares to themselves.

During these days I also prepared a bag with cloth and embroidering cotton for each of them. This work is usually shared between a few and takes two days at home in Freiburg.

During these days, Saddam Hussein was hanged. As a person from the Occident I felt shame for the fact that the time of the important Id-feast had been chosen for the execution. Even if he wasn't approved of by many people in Afghanistan, he was a Muslim and with such, solidarity goes without saying. Was this provocation really necessary, did it have to go this far? In this way we'll never get together.

The third round and good-byes

The women were paid a second time within ten days, that means they got as much money as they usually get in half a year. It also means that they'll get their next pay not until July and will have to make do for a long time. Will they manage the money well? They were given the material and were told how many squares they can embroider. Competition among the women is serious, which they sensibly accept and know well that so many participate. The rule is: Those who do not embroider well will have the number of squares reduced by ten, and if this process continues, the treaty will be cancelled. This was indeed the case with 12 women. It was terrible to tear their treaties to pieces. Only two admitted they were not good enough.

You may get the impression as if Leiluma and I went from one woman to the next one, but that is not the case. What we actually do is that we meet at someone's place every day, in the living rooms of women who volunteer to have the meetings at their house. All the women from the respective part of the village will come there. In the part of the village called Qala-i-kona we were at Shabana's place. For one and a half years she has now been the village elder although she is still quite young –maybe 22. There have always been village elders and their councillors in Afghanistan; traditionally, this was an assembly of men. But not long ago the ministry for female affairs decreed a female council for each community or part of a village. Should there be “women's problems”, Shabana will be approached and she'll try to find a solution. Should she not be able to find one, Shabana will then consult with the male councillors.

Furthermore, Shabana has recently worked as a teacher for 22 months in a part of a village. The teaching project was realized by USAID. Shabana taught 25 girls between 12 and 22 years of age, 5 days a week for 2 hours. She taught reading, writing, maths and Koran studies. The students were young women who never went to school and never will, because they are either too old now or the distance to the nearest school is too long.

After talks with Shabana it turned out that there is still need and demand for this kind of teaching in this and other parts of Laghmani after the end of the USAID programme. In the DAI we have decided to repeat the programme in this successful form and with the existing teaching aids in every part of Laghmani. The respective 5 salaries for the 22 months will be financed with the profits from the sale of the squares.

Generally the women's embroidery technique is steadily improving, but also their motives are improving in liveliness and character. Again and again I am stunned to see women without any formal education, refugees for two decades who had to fight for their survival, who had to encounter terrible tragedies and who hardly have any contact to the world beyond their villages, to see these women and their artistic potential. What an amount of imagination and artistic freedom they are able to express! And how, based on their tradition, they can still create ways of contemporary expressiveness in their embroidering.

In my opinion, people in Europe should experience this and learn from it.

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