

Pascale Goldenberg's 4th travel account Summer 2009 in Afghanistan

Producing this travel account has taken ages; I would have liked to have completed it faster and I had intended to combine the report with photos which would have been nice.

But unfortunately too many demands lamed my intentions for a long time.

There are many people who follow the development of this project in detail, so I did not want to just dispense with this report. I am presenting it a little differently to the last one, the style reflects the notes I made during my trip and says: this has got to be done in a hurry as the 5th report is also waiting, no YOU are waiting!

The most important piece of news is the initiation of a 2nd embroidery project in West Afghanistan.

30. July 2009

Landed in Kabul punctually at 06:00 hrs, sometimes there are perfect wings! I am often asked how to fly best to Kabul, there is the possibility of flying directly from Frankfurt, the flight takes exactly 7 hours. There are other possibilities but these contain stopovers.

Khaled and Jahed, the 2 eldest sons of my host family await me at the airport and tell me that we will quickly drive home as I have to be back at the airport a 09:00 hrs to fly on to Herat with Rateb. We are stopped by a police control on the way. The police look through the front window where Khaled and Jahed are sitting, then look onto the back seat where I am sitting alone. They let us drive on without any delay saying "Ah, they are driving their mother around". So I was immediately identified as an Afghan woman who pleased me. My precautions prove to be successful: when I leave Freiburg I am dressed as an Afghan woman, just without the veil. I am dressed in a long-sleeved Tunic which reaches just below the knee, long soft trousers and sandals without socks. I put the veil on upon leaving the airplane as it is mainly to hide my hair.

My sojourn in Herat

I will be spending more or less a week in and around Herat, as guest of Rateb and his family. Rateb has moved back to Afghanistan after living in Germany for decades. The family is very hospitable, I communicate with the women using my hands and I speak English with the eldest daughter who will soon be writing her A-Levels (High-School-Diploma). Rateb is responsible for the DAI-projects in and around Herat, whereby "around" can mean a distance hundreds of miles. You can take a closer look at these projects on the DAI Website (www.deutsch-afghanische-initiative.de). On this visit I mainly aim to initiate a new embroidery project. Rateb has already smoothed the way. There is a settlement of Hazaras who have returned from Iran in Sharak, near Herat. In this small, growing town (Sharak means "little town"), there is a women's centre with an extensive offer of courses; the DAI, along with "Terre des femmes" have been aiding this centre financially for years. Managing this centre is the very young, but extremely energetic and efficient Aqila Nazari. Due to her and with Rateb's effort, it was possible for the first patterns to be embroidered. The time had come to make acquaintance with the women. We met 3 times in order to establish a trusting atmosphere and determine the general conditions for the new project. We discussed the price to which the two types of embroidery, the Keshide (a colorful needlework similar to

the Venetian Tapisserie) and the Kandaharidusi (similar to the Tshadris - the veiling, completely in white) are to be acquired.

The needlework should be conducted with silk thread only, being sponsored by the Madeira Thread Company. The women have next to no traditional patterns any more, having sold all their belongings during the poverty of wartime for a few Afghans. So I sent them a collection of photographs of traditional patterns upon my return.

The women basically do not embroider for themselves any more; they even consider this handicraft to be old-fashioned, finding the industrially embroidered fabrics more attractive, no different as in Laghmani.

The Hazara women are much shyer than I had expected (having received a wrong impression through Mrs. Nazari). We learn that those women that were evacuees in Iran are much more self-possessed but can no longer embroider. Those women that remained in Afghanistan during the war are the opposite. As the women are so timid, I do not even ask if I can take a photograph upon leaving.

In the meantime, regular deliveries of needlework are arriving from Sharak. You can look at these in a web album (google "picasa Pascale Goldenberg"). The embroidery can be ordered through me by mail.

I was driven around a great deal, always accompanied by Naim the second DAI man on site, a young and very diligent man. At this stage allow me to tell a few anecdotes:

We are on a day-trip and are invited by the Shura-man (the Shura is a group of the village eldest) to lunch. His son is present and helps serving. I ask of the Shura-man, how many children he has and he replies. "Only this one. After a few minutes, a man from the village says "but you have got daughters as well, haven't you?" to which he answers "Yes, eight, but they don't count" !!!!!!!

We visit the Gebrail School to inspect the buildings; as there are still holidays, only the caretaker is present. Upon leaving, a small, delicate girl comes towards us alone and asks us where she can register for the first class. She is so unbelievably self-confident and independent. She lets me take a photograph of her, and then we leave the school area and meet again two very young boys with school satchels, who also ask where they can register for school!

The trip to Shotordaran (which means "those that own camels") where semi-nomads live (who no longer own camels), is extremely awesome. Nearly all adult men are en route in 2 groups with their animals, several hundred miles away for the summer. I walk around the village, accompanied by 2 children and look at houses containing several rooms, all with turrets. I watch women weaving yards of black goat hair for tents. Then I return to the house of the village eldest. His wife, Djamaleti is very agile and exudes great intelligence and balance. She spontaneously tells us that she is very fond of her husband but that he is very lazy. I mention the felt rugs we are sitting on and we talk about the different techniques; she no longer knots Kelim as it is no longer fashionable and no-one is willing to pay realistic prices. But she still knots felt rugs and so-called shepherd's cloaks, "Shapan nomadi" for personal use. The felt is so thick and strong that it looks like industrial felt. It is unbelievable hard work, it would be very interesting to spend a week with her and document her stories. It makes one want to be an Ethnologist! She tells us how hard life as a nomad used to be and

how happy she now is to have a roof over her head. Djamaleti had 3 daughters as well as her sons. All her sons survived, but none of the girls. When life is very hard, then decisions have to be made as to who should be given preference or better said who should be saved and who not!

Sojourn in Kabul and the Shomali-Plain

My stay in Kabul which was too short for the amount of work that had to be done there was dominated by a daily drive to Laghmani. Khaled drove accompanied (because we are women, because the car could break down, because we have a great deal of money with us.....). Both Friday's are workdays and in between I spend 2 days in Kabul calculating all the wages for the collected embroidery and preparing these according to the individual pieces of work. I am accompanied by Frozan, my translator every day. The jobs I have to tend to are:

Greeting the village eldest of 2 of the 4 villages in which embroidery work is done: Qala e-kona, Kakara, Sufian pain and Sufian bala,

Paying the embroidery collected in the spring,

Collecting the new pieces of embroidery, consultation and conducting a surgery,

Calculating the wages for the recently collected embroidery,

Conducting qualifying examinations,

Assessment of the alphabetization programme,

Making more payments and notifying those who can no longer participate.

Frozan the translator

Lailuma who was engaged as a translator during my last 2 visits could not assist me this time. It was very difficult to find a female translator who could translate from German or French. I conducted at least two dozen fruitless telephone calls with the German and French embassies before leaving Freiburg, also with the Goethe Institute and the Centre Culturel Français. Only via a German friend who is acquainted with an Afghan family in Germany and two other collaborators in Kabul, was I able, with a great deal of persuasion, to assure the services of Frozan, a teacher from Kabul who teaches French at the Malalai school (an Afghan-French school). She still had school holidays and the prospect of speak in French and of course earning some money convinced her to help us. The Shomali plain does not have the best reputation and parents do not really like to see their daughters (32 years old) going out into the big wide world with strangers. She was actually very wary, but after spending a day working together, was completely forgotten. It was a revelation for her to get to know the villages close to Kabul with their loving inhabitants. A few days later she confessed to me that she had never been more exhausted in her life than on the first evening of our trip. I am sure that the exertion of meeting with strange new people, the long drive and the fresh air of Laghmani contributed a great deal. But she is sure that she wants to return there!

Paying the Embroiderers

The first two days are reserved for paying all the women in all the villages, for the embroidery work which was delivered in the spring, as well as the teachers of the alphabetization programme. A sum of 12.900 USD is paid out during these long days! Our treasurer transferred the money for me who worked out very well, the money was at my disposal (Thank-You)!

Occasionally photo's, even portraits are made of the sewing women. This is still off-limits and women and girls do not know how to react, that is if they are permitted to be photographed (meaning, do the men allow it) and also if it involves risks. I do not insist on anything, just occasionally mention that the buyers in Europe would be happy to be able to connect a face with their acquired embroidery. I always promise that the women/girls get copies of the photos and that they will never be published in Afghanistan.

Collecting the new pieces of embroidery, advising and conducting a survey

The next few days are full of exchanging experiences as during this time the new embroidery work was collected from the sewers in the 4 villages and commented upon. These days and hours are the highlight of my trip because I have direct contact with the women. The main focus is the attempt to advise the women what I expect: creative embroidery full of character and technically well made. So I speak to every single woman and girl.

In the late Spring I examined the delivery more accurately than usual and made notes for each sewer, so I had a guideline for my comments and also the new sewing that was shown me. I deliver comments to each delivery, but these reach the sewers offset (that is, after the next delivery). These comments are recited by Lailuma). Such a direct exchange is essential for positively advancing this project. I do not want to bind the sewers to a certain embroidery skill, rather I want them to concentrate on their own style which is a tightrope walk between independent work and the demands of the European market. So, the cloths are spread out individually, each is commented on and a little discussion develops between us.

The overall quality of this order I found to be far below the level of the spring delivery. Upon enquiring, I learnt that from June onwards, there is so much garden and farm work that the women have very little time left. The result is that they hurry the embroidery work in addition to the fact that there is always someone ill or a death in the family, keeping the women from working.

I take the chance to ask each woman: how many children are still living at home? How old are they? Does the woman have relatives within the embroidery project? What does the husband do for a living? Do they own land? The answers are more devastating than I would have expected; only 2 out of 10 men have regular work, the others are daily laborers. There are many children. I realize for the first time that the best sewers are 30-40 years old and single!

Calculating the wages

I then spend 2 days in Kabul, inspecting each piece of cloth to be able to work out the wages for each sewer. At this point I also decide who can deliver more work or who less or who must even leave the project. I make use of my spring comments, whereby I noted, e.g. "is she adult, has the sewing not improved, then finished and also the survey just conducted, because principally mothers with many children are allowed to sew more. We also have a rule that unmarried sewers (young girls) are not permitted to sew more than 20 squares

every 3 months. But then again I hear that Fatema for instance, against all Afghan conventions, as a young girl is not permitted to do any housework any more, but must as sole earner of the family, spend all her time sewing. (the father is diabetic and has an amputated leg). So, it is impossible not to make exceptions along with the sad realization that a mother of many children does not nearly embroider as well as a single woman. It is these single sewers that keep the project financially stable (they have visibly more time and inner peace than the mothers). A poor piece of work involves the same amount of time and effort in sorting and sending and paying the supervisor on site as a good piece of work. Poorer pieces are sold cheaper though and it takes longer to find a buyer. Pieces of good quality are usually sold straight away and secure the wages for the whole project. An unmarried woman in Afghanistan is basically supported by her family (she just stays at home with her parents); usually it is this daughter who later cares for the elderly parents. As the brothers stay at home with their families (the wife always moves in), the aunt is taken into demand. She has no sort of pension as the women who receive a dowry in form of jewelry upon marriage. What a dilemma!

The second payment and test

The next 2 days are used for paying the women. For this I had estimated a sum of money, a little higher than the spring sum. Once again, around 12.000 USD were paid out in wages.

The dreadful stage of informing women of their termination of work had arrived. Having described this scenery once before, I will not go through describing this distressing situation again. Simply, 20 sewers were taken out of the contract. The only small consolation for 5 mothers with many children was a unique child sponsorship for 1 year due to a direct donation of € 1.000 which I received from a Swiss lady. I was permitted to dispose of the money as I thought appropriate, yet discussed my plan with her before leaving. I have promised the women that in their stead others will be given a chance, as many as have to leave which unfortunately is not a consolation for the women who have been given notice.

Material was distributed, whereby the sewers were permitted to choose their own packages. I noticed that nearly everyone chose white materials. They explained to me that the peaceful background served better conditions for better sewing. The quality of the material was not the main condition (although also very important), but rather the color. When I explained that Europeans prefer colorful backgrounds, some women sacrificed themselves by selecting colorful pieces of material.

The last 2 days in Laghmani are spent conducting tests. Anyone was permitted to participate. Two days beforehand we explained each village how this was to take place:

Everyone wanting to participate is given an embroidery frame, a piece of material and embroidery yarn. The participant was to embroider up to half a square at home and bring it with her on the test-day. Everyone had heard how hard the qualifying examination is: only 5 women per village are accepted. The women came in big numbers, up to 80 women from the village Qala-e-kona. Upon arrival, I immediately analyzed the quality of the half-square and could decide who could be given a chance. This way I could quickly send a lot of women away (who stayed anyway, not wanting to miss the spectacle, even as an audience). In the meantime the other sewers continued embroidering in a circle. I walked around and "dismissed" several other women. This went on for 2 ½ - 3 hours until only about 10 women were left and the final decision was made.

There are 6 women in Sufian Bala, in Sufian payan there are 5, in Qala-e-kona there are 7 and in Kakara 10 employed women. In the village of Kakara no more than the 10 turned up and as they embroider better than the women in other villages, I couldn't have only accepted 5 new women anyway.

At present there are 20 new women and girls who participate in embroidering for this project.

The alphabetization programme

Having Frozan at my side as a skilled educator, meeting the teachers and visiting the lessons was possible on a completely different level. Frozan was very enthusiastic about the 4 completely differently aged and skilled teachers. Each one was able to motivate the girls to attend class in their own individual way. The meeting between Frozan and Shukria, the alphabetization teacher in Sufian bala was a very special situation: she had worked as a teacher for 7 years until staying at home to raise her children. She has experience and one can feel it. Frozan is thrilled with her aplomb and her strong awareness that girls must learn to read and to write. We attended lessons whereby after a while Frozan took over the supervision to test the girls. All of them could read and write fluently and in that classroom I could not hold back my tears because it was so unbelievable!