

# Norbert Hirschhorn: Sew beautiful clothes by tearing them to pieces

By Norbert Hirschhorn

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Afghanistan, March 1974, Nawruz, the Spring festival. I'm in a small village north of Kabul and I've been 'honored' to be the sponsor of a local buzkashi scrum.

Buzkashi is Afghanistan's national sport: part polo, part rugby, part body-check hockey, and mostly mayhem. Tough men on wiry ponies grapple with the 'ball' - the headless carcass of a calf or goat - and try to throw it into a scoring circle for the goal. Usually there are teams; in this village game on a soccer pitch it's every horseman for himself. The men hold whips between their teeth, ready to beat back the others who try to wrest the carcass away. Oh, my job as sponsor is to pay a local farmer for the goat. Afterward, I am further honored by being put on a mean-looking pony, but not for the photo-op I expect. The horse takes off down the dirt road with me holding on for dearest life. Somehow I get it to turn around and as it races back toward the cheering crowd I scream, "I don't know how to stop!" Not to worry, the horse knows. As I climb down I wonder if I'd I fallen off would the Afghans have laughed? Surely not, their obligation as hosts wouldn't allow that discourtesy. Whatever. I know for sure that they were testing my pale American manhood. It was then I understood: these are one tough, resilient people.

They have to be. Poor, landlocked, Afghanistan is at the crossroads of Asia - bordered by Iran to the West; Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan and Tajikistan (formerly in the Soviet Union) to the North; China to the East; Pakistan to the East and South. Great armies have crossed through this rough-mountainous country seeking riches and empire: Persian King Darius and Alexander the Great riding East; Genghis Khan and Tamerlane going West; Soviet Russia invading from the North; the Taliban from the South.

As an indication of the ferocious battles that have marked its history, the great mountain range down the country's spine is named Hindu Kush: "Killer of Hindus." After two inconclusive 19th century wars between Great Britain and various Afghanistan warlords, the 1893 Durand Line was drawn to mark the border between what is now Pakistan and Afghanistan, splitting the powerful Pashtun tribe in two, among others; a gerrymander that contributes to much of today's conflict.

Afghanistan was once a great locus of learning, culture, music and poetry, but the many wars have left it devastated. Afghanistan now has the highest infant mortality in the world: 25 percent of newborns do not survive to their first birthday. Its main export is heroin. Afghanistan has a reputation as the graveyard of foreign soldiers. In the first Anglo-Afghan war (1839-1842) a contingent of 16,000 British troops and civilians trying to evacuate the country were slaughtered by tribesmen; only one survived. The Soviets fared little better between 1979 and 1989. In their invasion to support a Communist regime against Islamic mujahideen ("strugglers"), they lost 15,000 troops; but in so doing managed to kill over a million civilians and drive 5 million more into Pakistan. The mujahideen warlords then fought among themselves, destroying great swaths of Kabul and leaving more villages desolate until defeated by the ultra-fundamentalist movement known as the Taliban. In their five years of rule (1996-2001) the Taliban brought some peace, but at the price of a strict and brutal reign. They outlawed women's education, music, television, cinema, poetry, even buzkashi.

I spent periods of time in Afghanistan as a public health advisor between 1973 and 1976, optimistic years. World travelers and hippies crossed the region in total safety, seeking adventure and some fine hash. We held picnics, undisturbed, in what would become killing fields a few years later. I visited the Bukharan Jewish synagogue in Kabul. We watched the nomads come into town with their sheep, horses and wagons - the women, unveiled, were the active traders on market days. The beautiful gardens of Bagh-e-Babur and the Kabul Museum revealed the cultural glories of the Buddhist, Hindu, Zoroastrian and Islamic periods. We wandered through the markets of used American clothing (a designer label jacket sold for three dollars), ate wonderful lamb sausages (wrapped in papers, I was amused to

discover, that had been recycled from our discarded reports), and great slabs of tandoor-baked flatbread. New hotels and residences were under construction, restaurants and fast food joints opening up. Things seemed hopeful that the "Great Game" wars between the western powers would be a thing of the past. No such luck. We Westerners are back in force now, our adversary the Afghan Taliban aligned with the shadowy non-nation called Al Qaeda. If there are any lessons to be learned from the past, it is that the Afghans are unconquerable, but desire nothing less than any of us - the chance to conduct their lives peaceably, and do well for families. As fellow humans, long engaged with these people, whatever we can do to help, we must.

The Sufi poet of Afghan descent, Mawlana Jalaladin Muhammad Rumi (1207-1273), believed passionately in the use of music, poetry, and dance as a path for reaching God; and in the universal message of salvation through love. His poetry and teachings were always against factionalism and use of religion to divide humans. As he wrote: "The lover's nationality is separate from all other religions./ The lover's religion and nationality is the Beloved (God)./ The lover's cause is separate from all other causes./ Love is the astrolabe of God's mysteries." No naïf, he himself experienced the bitterness of exile when his family fled the Mongol invaders: "I have known pigeons who fly in a nowhere./ and birds that eat grainlessness./ and tailors who sew beautiful clothes/ by tearing them to pieces."

Norbert Hirschhorn, a poet and retired physician, lives in London. He taught at the University of Minnesota and headed the Division of Family Health in the Minnesota Department of Health. His column appears occasionally on these pages. His e-mail address is [bertzpoet@gmail.com](mailto:bertzpoet@gmail.com). His web site is [www.bertzpoet.com](http://www.bertzpoet.com).