

LINDISFARNE-TAPPER, NANCY and TAPPER, RICHARD (2025): *The Piruzai of Afghanistan: A Visual Ethnography*. In association with White Horse Press. Winwick (Cambridgeshire). XII + 381 pp., 380 photographs, 5 maps, 2 diagrams, ISBN: 978-1-917813-00-6 (hardcover) £40, 978-1-917813-01-3 (e-book) £20.

The book is a historical source. After more than 50 years, the authors, now renowned (and retired) anthropologists, present to the readers (and viewers) photographs – with contextualising texts – they took during their anthropological field research in the Northern Afghan Hindukush during the years of 1971 and '72.

The Piruzai, a section of the Eshaqzai-Durrani Pashtuns, were semi-nomadic flock breeders and farmers, who penetrated into the Northern Hindukush and the foothills only in the 1920s. They established themselves in their own villages in the Sar-e-pol valley (west-south-west of Mazar-e Sharif) beside other ethnic groups in the neighbourhood. Their spring pastures were located in the steppes to the north-east of the villages. And in summer, the central high mountains of the Hindukush nearly 200 kilometres further south were generally used as summer pastures. However, after the time of the fieldwork, politics changed the situation of the Piruzai drastically. During the Soviet occupation, the families seem to have left the Northern Hindukush, first as refugees to Pakistan and later to return to the Helmand area where they originally have come from.

The book is arranged in 13 chapters. The well-reading accompanying text gives some information/explanations. However, the main attraction of the book are the 380 coloured and black-and white photographs, which reflect different aspects of daily life of the Piruzai.

The 'Introduction', complemented by two maps, depicts the background of the book, of the research of the authors and the Piruzai people, with whom they lived. The following chapters cover the yearly cycle of activities and areas the hosts include in their search for livelihood.

In springtime, when the steppes in the north-west become warmer and greener, many extended families sent part of their members to pasture their flocks there. The sheep were kept for milk (mostly buttered), but also for hides, wool and meat.

Spring was also the time of engagements and weddings, with all their ceremonies and the opportunity for bigger parties with eating and dancing. As presented in a later chapter, the time after harvest was another period for marriages.

When the steppes become too hot and dry in May, several members of the extended families set off for the mountain pastures in the south, which they used during the summer. Whereas shepherds accompanied the flock, the family members with the household utilities, tents, etc., loaded on camels, moved as separate groups, first over roads through farmed valleys passing villages, later on small tracks through gorges, climbing steep passes towards higher areas.

The trek to the summer pastures is described in three chapters. Pictures and text give a vivid description of the area, the difficulties and pleasures of the journey, the contact with locals, and so on.

After around three weeks, the group reached the area of their early summer pastures. Separate campsites of few closely related families were set up in the high valleys. The sheep, which arrived with the shepherds, could now be milked regularly. The milk, in part freshly consumed or as cheese and yoghurt, was mostly converted into butter and later *ghee* (clarified butter) and *krut* (the sour dried milk protein made from whey) for winter. The sheep were sheared and the wool mostly processed into felt.

In the mid of July, the hard summer work had been done – celebrated by a feast –, and the families prepared themselves for the return journey. The sheep were kept with the shepherds for another month or more on pastures even higher up.

On the return trek, which was carried out in a more relaxed way, the pack animals could graze on the stubble fields after harvest was done in the villages the nomads had to pass. As in spring, the cooler hours of the days were used to avoid the heat during daytime. In one of the villages they passed, Piruzai had acquired vineyards some decades ago and the group stopped for harvesting and making raisins.

After the return journey, the authors had to leave their hosts to go back to London. The winter 1971/72 was very severe and long and the Piruzai lost a high number of their flock. Thus, the families had decided not to go on the summer migration, when the anthropologists returned in 1972 to continue their fieldwork. Over the summer, they stayed in the villages.



In the lower Sar-e-pol valley, the Piruzai owned farmland and lived in three villages - in mud compounds and partly in tents. The villages possessed mosques, where the elders prayed and hold their gatherings (jirga). The mosques served also as (religious) schools for young men.

The women did look after the household, cow milking and milk processing, but also weaving. Men cared for watering the (remaining) animals from wells and pursued farming activities, as watering the fields or the threshing, for example. (As there are no pictures of harvesting the grain crops, we do not learn whether the women participated in this laborious activity.) Some landowners had given land to non-Piruzai sharecroppers who got part of the harvest for their work. Also, the selling of some of the products on the market in Sar-e-pol were done by the men. (On the picture taken on the market, only male persons are visible – as sellers or customers).

The last chapter assembles several portraits of Piruzai men, women and children, which were taken during the stays and did not have found their way into the book in the previous chapters and contexts.

The picture part is supplemented by acknowledgements and further readings, giving the titles of other outcomes of the fieldwork of both authors.

The book calls itself a 'visual ethnography', as it concentrates on photographs, mostly of splendid/good quality, and tries to make, what is shown, understandable by short text – also to the non-expert reader. Pictures have their benefits – and some limitations. (The authors are aware of them). By contrast to the textual ethnographic studies that dominate academic publications, here, the reader/viewer gets a visual impression of the area, the living space and some activities, for example, and does not depend on the good description of the author and his own imagination. Nevertheless, pictures cannot show all aspects that are important to understand the context. Despite explanations, they are limited to material aspects of the (for most of the readers) unfamiliar world. And, of course, to the selection of the photographer and of those who might mind that a picture is taken.

As a photobook of good quality, the hard copy is heavy by weight (more than 2.3 kg), because of that not a bedtime reading. For the western reader, the book is a peephole into a foreign, now drastically changed world and for those who visited the area in former times maybe a remainder of own experiences. For those presented, it is a legacy. It can be hoped that one and the other copy finds its way

also to the people whose parents, grandparents and elder relatives look at us from many pages of the book.

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