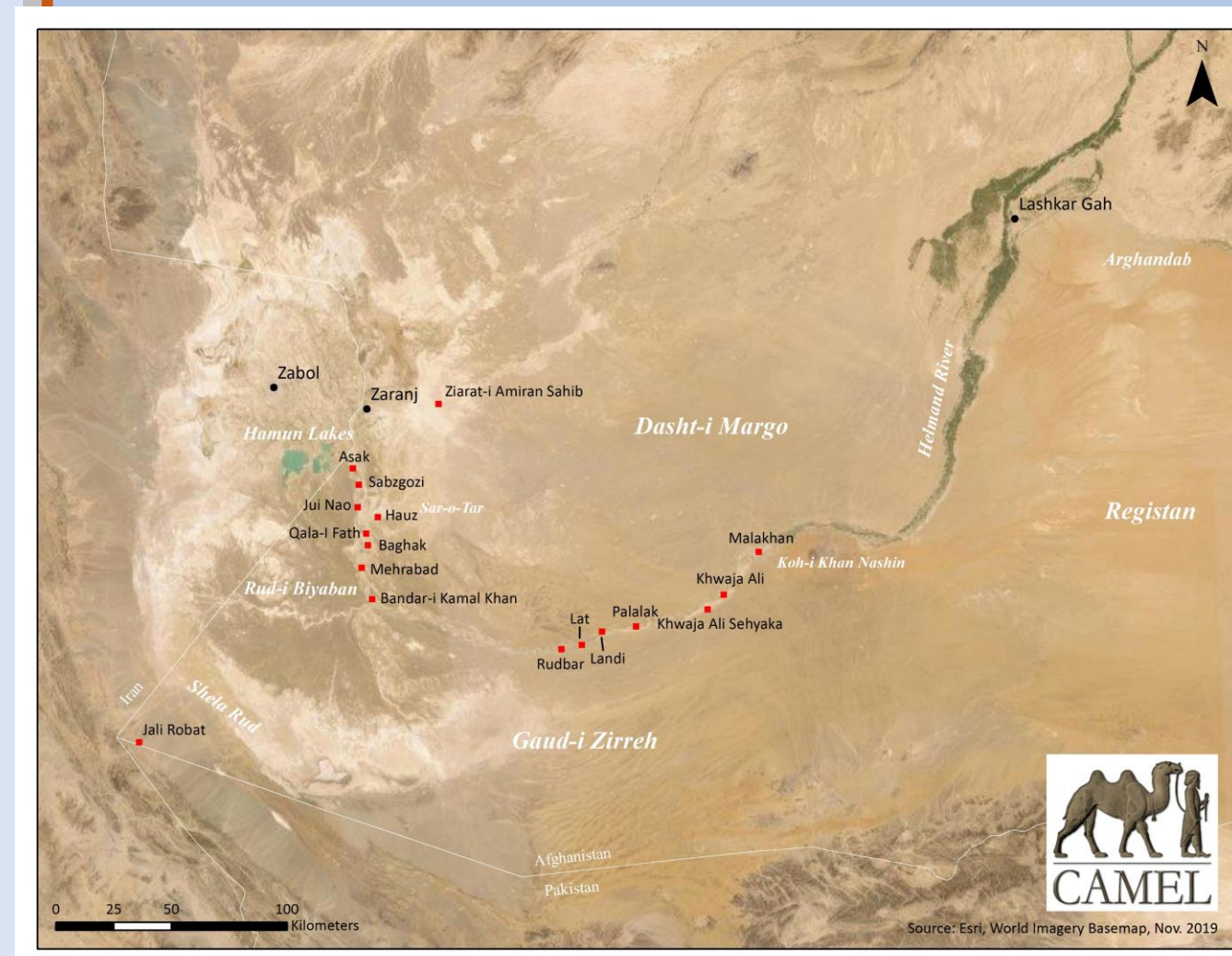


Where are the Helmand Baluch located?

- Ethnographic component of the Helmand Sistan Project, 1971-1979, which surveyed archaeological sites in southwest Afghanistan from Lashkar Gah to the Hamun Lakes
- Lengthy field seasons of 1-3 months from 1972-6 near several villages (Khwaja Ali Sehyaka, Lat, and Hauz) allowed for in-depth ethnographic work there. Other villages were surveyed for shorter periods.
- Archaeological survey along the length of the Helmand River allowed comparisons between villages and collection of region-wide data



The Helmand Baluch

Recovering G.R. Amiri's Lost Indigenous Ethnography of Southwest Afghanistan

Who was G.R. Amiri?

Ghulam Rahman Amiri grew up in Kabul in an upper class Pashtun family. He graduated in history and geography from Kabul University in 1962. In 1970, became Director of Excavation for the Institute of Archaeology of Afghanistan. Amiri served as Afghan representative to the joint Helmand Sistan Project, 1971-1976, from which he contributed numerous academic articles in both Dari and English. After the Soviet invasion of 1979, he was elevated to the role of Minister of Tourism for Afghanistan. He later ran afoul of government policies, was jailed, then forced to flee the country. Amiri eventually emigrated to Denmark, where he passed away from ALS in 2003 and where his wife and most of his children and grandchildren still live.



Relations of production

Land was owned by a mere 4% of the population, a set of local village and town khans. Farmers worked for these landowners and gave a majority of their harvest to them. From the farmer's share also went a 25% land tax paid to the landlord, payments to the local clergy and government personnel, craftspeople such as the blacksmith, carpenter, and barber, purchase of the seed, and rental of animals and tools from the landlord. Common practice was for 6 farmers to work a plot of land together, a system called *pagao*. In those cases, each took home less than 5% of the overall harvest, rarely enough to sustain a family. Amiri properly labeled this a serfdom mode of production.



The Canals

- Digging ordered by khans using farmer corvee labor
- Dams constructed using piles with bags of brush to raise level and draw off water
- Shared canals are dredged each year by farmer corvee labor for khans
- Process requires 2 weeks-2 months
- Farmers dredge their own canals off main canals
- Wealthy can buy their way out of dredging by paying the khans



Agricultural/Pastoral Production

Farming done with simple manual tools of wood and metal. Threshing done at khan's place at a cost to the farmer. Land is often marginal due to wind erosion and incursion of sand dunes. Traders come from elsewhere annually to purchase excess crops.

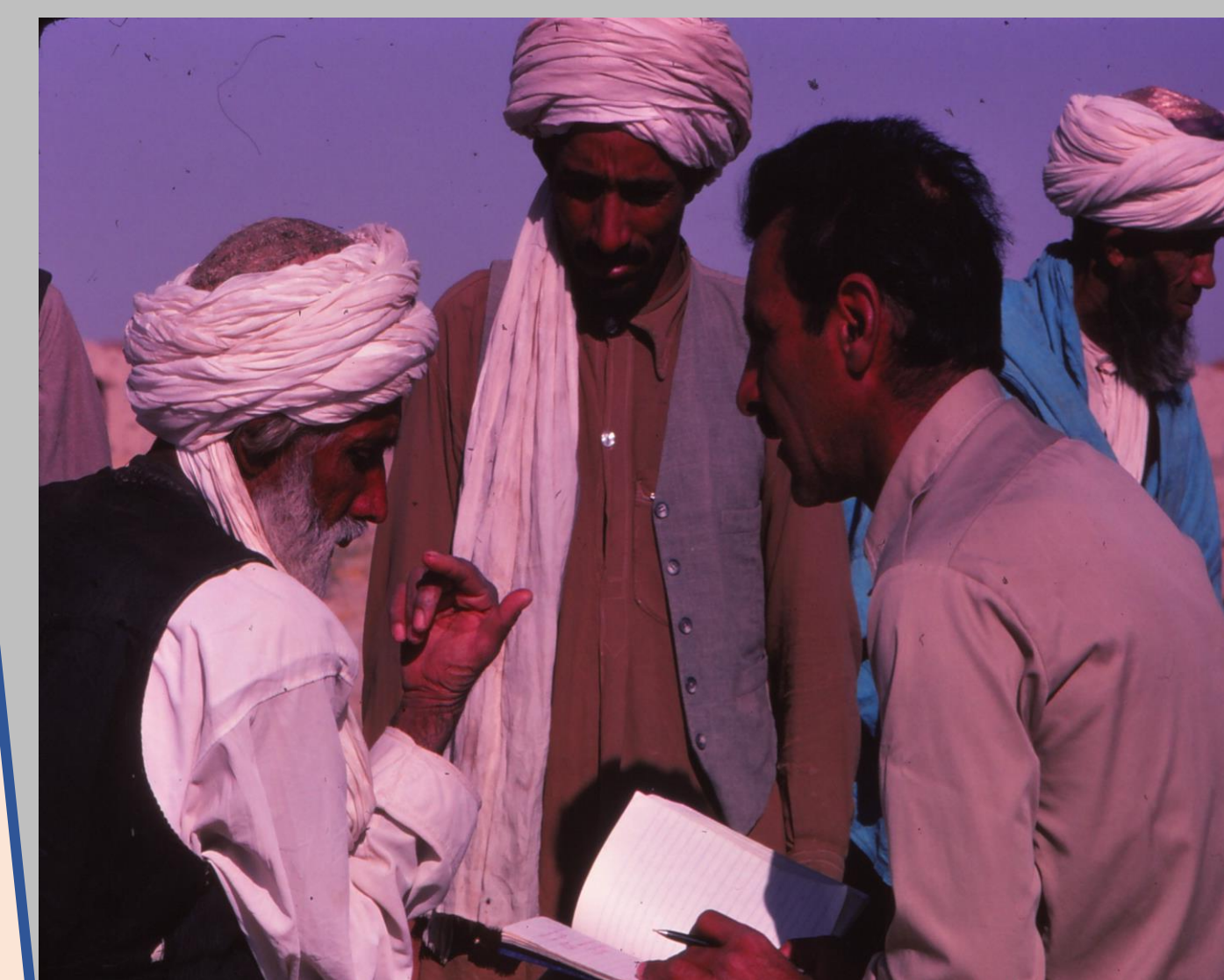
Key crops: wheat, barley, lentils, and vetch
Garden crops: onions, melons, and squash
Transportation: donkeys, camels, and horses
Milk, meat, wool: cows, goats, and sheep
Hunting: Afghan hounds

Why lost?

- Amiri's book was written and published in Dari in 1977. Soviet invasion cut off access to the work outside Afghanistan. No further ethnography has been possible there because of 40 years of warfare.
- Because of contemporary political sensitivities and ethical concerns, Amiri's book is highly self-censored.
- Notes by William Trousdale on the 1981 English translation filled in pieces that Amiri was unable to include.
- Finally proceeding to publication in 2020

How is it indigenous?

- Indigenous or native ethnography of Baluch peoples was unheard of in the 1970s. Writings by westerners Spooner, Swidler, Pastner, were primarily studying Baluch in Iran or Pakistan
- The few Afghan ethnographers such as Nazif Shahrani and Ashraf Ghani were trained at western universities (U Washington, Columbia). Amiri's degree was from Kabul U with very brief graduate stints at Ohio U and Harvard.
- "Indigenous ethnography" is a problematic term: many have noted that shared nationality does not erase differences in caste, class, ethnic group, or educational attainment. This is true of Amiri's work, an urban, educated Pashtun working in low income Baluch villages where education and literacy was minimal.



Education

- Amiri's survey indicated about 3% of children were attending school
- The lone school for girls ended at 3rd grade with no women teachers
- Two schools in Qala-I Fath area served 18 villages, some as far as 17 km away
- Post-6th grade education was paid for by the family and therefore out of reach of 90% of Baluch families
- Students speak Baluch but textbooks all in Dari
- Very difficult to attract and retain teachers



Smuggling

Because of remote location, central government commissioned local khans to guard border with Iran and Pakistan. These same khans control trade across border. Regular incidents of violence occurred as khans fought each other, Iranian groups, and robbers. Amiri noted 27 vehicles crossing the border on a single day in 1976. Products included opium, Indian tea, agricultural products, and Afghan workers moving west, metals and textiles heading east.



Housing

- Reeds, brush, and tamarisk
- Mudded in winter for warmth
- Open in summer for breezes
- Could be moved in 1-2 days
- Rugs inside for sleeping
- Khans lived in mudbrick compounds
- Pastoralists in skin tents

A product of its time

G.R. Amiri was a leftist intellectual and highly critical of the wealth disparity and economic injustices of the region. Yet, he was also embarrassed by the lack of progress in economics and social conditions there.

"The share of the peasants in the produce is negligible, so that they cannot assure themselves of even the lowest standard of living, as the peasant is always considered superfluous by the landlord."

"The farmer himself is also a great traditionalist and remains very backward, so that whenever he is confronted by an attempt to change his ancient ways and customs he remains intransigent, even when this change might improve his way of life or his agricultural techniques."

"The burden of corvee labour, which is one of the principal factors in feudal oppression, is still laid by the landlords on the shoulders of the peasants."

"50% of Baluch families live tedious and monotonous lives in rustic houses."

"The landlords as a whole believe that if they take one unnecessary step towards the well-being of the farmers, the farmers will consider this a sign of weakness in the landlords and will not support the landlords' interest."

Other sources of income



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