

Khaled

In the past, when everything was still fine in Afghanistan, I taught mathematics at the university in Kabul. Later, in 1978, came the coup of the Afghan communists, the invasion of Soviet troops at the end of 1979, and then the whole further decline of Afghanistan in the time since then. At that time, there was only one university in the country. The teaching was more like that of a German secondary school. The students attended "classes". What we taught was also more like school material. What went beyond that I had learned in Germany in the first year of my studies. There were lectures and exercises. In the exercises, I gave tasks that the pupils – pardon students – solved themselves. This was something completely new for the students. Until then, the lecturers had always given them something to learn by heart.

One of my students was Khaled. He came from the area north of Ghazni and, like all students from the province, lived in the dormitory. He was looking for contact with me. I invited him to our home. He came and complained about the food in the dining hall. It was much too fatty, he said. "I have liver!" he complained. In fact, in Afghanistan, rice is cooked with a lot of animal fat. That makes the rice reusable. For us, this takes some getting used to. Khaled couldn't stand it, he said. We didn't cook fat. He came to eat more often now. Finally, we offered him to stay with us in a room in an outbuilding so he could escape the fatty food more often. He could work and study at a desk that was on the second floor in the hallway of our house. During the day he came more often, but he did not stay overnight. Khaled's consideration for his liver went far beyond avoiding fat. He drank only water and no tea. Tea also damaged his liver. Finally, we had him examined by a German doctor who had married into Afghanistan. She found absolutely nothing wrong with Khaled's liver.

When Khaled came to eat with us for the second time, he suddenly began to hastily assign all his classmates to the existing political parties. At that time, there were two communist parties – affiliated to Moscow. There were Maoists, which disintegrated into a chaos of splinter parties. And there were Islamic groupings. What was amazing was that almost every female and male student belonged to a party. Only one married fellow student could not classify Khaled. He himself was a strict Muslim and hated communists.

We had not asked Khaled about the political orientation of his fellow students. It contradicted the view I had of my duties in Afghanistan. Afghan politics were none of my business. I was a foreigner and had to stay out of it.

Of course, we talked about Afghan politics anyway. The ideas that students held were unbelievably naive. In Germany, I had witnessed the munificent '68s. What activists of this movement delivered as theory was often outrageous. But what I heard politically from Afghan students undercut everything I had experienced in Germany.

"If our party were in power, it would finally do something for the farmers." – "What do you want to do for them?" – "Haven't you seen how they live and work? It's torture, isn't it?" – "Yes, they have it hard. But how are you going to help them?" – "Every farmer must get a tractor." – "And where are you going to get the tractors?" – "We have a good man. He knows what to do. He could explain it to you. He must come to power."

In Germany, it was a minority of students who actively joined any groups. Others sympathized. Many had nothing in mind with any direction. In Afghanistan, all students were followers of some direction.

I now realize that I was observing part of the change from a tribal society to a client society. The majority of students came from the countryside, where they lived by the rules of their tribe and families. As a young boy, one learned from one's father, uncle, and grandfather what position one's

family held within the large family and within the clan – which other family one was at enmity with and on whom one could rely. Young men had already participated in gatherings of the large family and the clan and knew the rules, who was allowed to speak and how. Girls were married into another family and had to fit in there. When it came to disputes with other clans, women and girls were loyal to "their own". Men and women had clear judgments about the people in their sphere of life. They had strong emotional relationships with all of them. Some one loved or they were very sympathetic to one. Others one hated and distrusted. Let's accompany a student from the province, to his start of studies in Kabul! There he moves into a dormitory. In one room, twelve students live in bunk beds. The roommates come from completely different areas. It is almost impossible to communicate with many of them. They have different mother tongues – Uzbek, Dari or Pashto. Our newcomer is very lonely. He would like to feel sympathy for one or the other. Or would it be better to hate them all?

After a few days, an older student approaches our newcomer. He looks familiar to him from somewhere. Right, he is from the same area. Our newcomer had seen him from afar at a wedding party months ago. The older student tells him that Afghanistan is a backward country. If one could decide to go the same way as the progressive, powerful Soviet Union, everyone could live as modern and well as the people in Russia or in the Uzbek Soviet Republic. That made sense. But for our newcomer, it is even more important that he is no longer totally lonely. The elder takes him to a group of students. They treat him as one of their own. They are sympathetic. He quickly learns that there are other students who have twisted views and are not to be trusted. The strong feelings he had felt back home for the members of other families and clans, they now apply to the supporters of the groups at the university. He feels deep sympathy for the friends in his own party. Distrust and hatred are directed against political enemies.

Other newcomers are approached by others. One girl stands by as the lecturer she attended explains to a group of female students after class that Islam needs to be renewed. She said that what the mullahs tell people and what they live by has corrupted the religion. One must live again like the Prophet and his companions. Then Islam would be strong and respected again and the unbelievers could be put in their place and converted.



It may be that the transition from a tribal society to a client society looks different in other areas of life than at the university. Think of work colleagues in a government agency or business people! But many students are likely to have found their political home in ways or similar to those described here. When students visit their parents back home, they live the tribal life there that they know from before. Tribal society and client society are not very different. They can coexist and coexist with each other.

What was Khaled's point when he listed the political dependencies of his fellow students for me? He was offering himself to me as my personal spy. Many teachers in Afghan schools keep such a student. He tells them what the other students are saying about him and how other colleagues are doing in class. In return, the student is rewarded with good grades. I did not make use of this opportunity.

Khaled continued to come and eat with us and complain "I have liver." Sometimes we would come home and he would sit at his desk on the second floor and study. We also accompanied him a few times to his home, staying overnight and visiting nearby Band-e-Mahmood, a reservoir built a thousand years ago by the great Sultan Mahmood of Ghazni as a drinking-water reservoir for his magnificent capital city of Ghazni. The reservoir had been enlarged in the twenties of the twentieth century. Mahmood's dam was still impressive.

At that time, many tourists came to Afghanistan. Anne Marie, my wife, had met a German couple who had come from India in their VW bus and were on their way home. They needed some more Afghan money, but only had large DM bills with them. Anne Marie offered them to change bills and took the compatriots to our house. There she discovered that much of our money was missing - not only DM, but also dollars and Pakistani rupees. Furious, she accused Khodabakhsh, our cook. If she talked to me about it, we will fire him.

We didn't do so. Anne Marie's actions forfeited any possibility of solving the case, provided Khodabakhsh had stolen. But that seemed unlikely. The good man had been working for us for two years. Nothing had ever gotten away, although he had plenty of opportunities to steal something. Instead, we included Khodabakhsh in further investigations and agreed that every visitor should move around in our house as before. A wide variety of guests came to the house. I also brought along assistants from the university who went through students' exams written in Dari with me. The only new thing was that now before and after each visit we counted the money that was in my desk in my room. We even wrote down the registration numbers of the banknotes. And so, we soon figured it out: It was Khaled. Of course, from his desk it was two steps to my room. The door was always open.

Yes, but how to continue? I turned to my Afghan colleague Prof. Kakar. He cursed about the false bigot Khaled. But then he shook his head. "There is hardly anything to be done. If one of the German colleagues is robbed by his cook, I'm happy to help. You can go to the police with that. I've been on the force for thirty years. Not a single student has entered my house in that time. You mean well. You want to know about your students, how they live, under what conditions they study. I understand that. But that is the problem here. Khaled speaks Pashto and the police probably do too. You don't understand what they are talking about. Khaled can bribe the policemen. He has the money he stole from you. And suddenly you're in a completely different case. You'll be accused of inviting students to your house for espionage. So, don't go to the police! I will not go there with you either. If you want, I can talk to Khaled. I can tell him, that we are both Muslims, and that both of us have to obey the commandments. But I don't expect much from it."

We had another way out. We didn't need a new idea for it. We simply continued as before. We waited for Khaled to come after us again.

We had bought a Swat chest. Such wooden chests were made in the Swat Valley, in the north of Pakistan. You can take them apart and put them together. All you have to do is fit wooden pieces into each other properly. Beautiful patterns are deeply carved on the front of Swat chests. Since there was a large colony of foreigners in Kabul, many Swat chests were brought to Kabul. There they were placed in trading yards. They could be purchased at affordable prices. Such chests first had to be carefully cleaned and then rubbed with floor wax. This work took several days. A brother of Khodabakhsh carried them out on the veranda. From the large dining and living room, a door led to the veranda. We placed a flower pot with a large cactus in front of the porch door. Thus, the escape route from the living room through the veranda was sufficiently secured.

Khodabakhsh called me at the university. Khaled was back, he said. I hurried home. Khaled already came down from his workplace to the living room for dinner. I hurried to my desk and found out how much money had been taken out again. Then Khodabakhsh and I entered the dining room through the only unbarricaded door and stood next to Khaled who was sitting there. I told him what amounts of DM, rupees and dollars he had in his pockets. He made only a brief attempt to deny it. When we suggested that we could force the money out of his pockets, he gave up and admitted everything.

We handed him a list of all the money he had stolen so far. He signed a confession in several copies in which he admitted to have stolen these amounts and promised to pay them back. We promised to give him all the papers with the confessions as soon as we got all the money back. I announced that I would send one of the confessions immediately to a friend in Germany. He would then get this confession back as well – but with a certain delay because of the postage.

We did not carry out the shipment to Germany. The belief in this was to prevent Khaled from seizing the promissory bills by force.

It took Khaled maybe two months. Then he had paid everything back. He complained that we demanded more dollars back from him than he had stolen, but realized that certain mistakes crept into such transactions and, under the circumstances, were to his detriment.

Khaled successfully completed his studies without the story about him becoming known. Almost fifteen years later, I worked for an aid program for Afghans in Peshawar, Pakistan. I often met Khaled there. He worked there at a high school for Afghan refugees and was praised and respected as a good teacher.