Untold Stories: Oral Histories of Afghanistan’s Cultural Heritage

With Shaharzad Akbar and Joanie Meharry

To many, Afghanistan is a war-torn country doomed to conflict. For those who have discovered its true identity and potential, however, there are many stories to be told about it besides war. Shaharzad Akbar and Joanie Meharry are two young women who are up for this task. They met at the Next Generation Dialogue on Afghanistan – U.S. Relations: Development, Investment and Cultural Exchange organized by the Hollings Center, and they decided to organize an oral history project to document efforts to preserve Afghanistan’s cultural heritage. The Hollings Center supported this project through its Small Grants Program. Below readers can learn about the project and read a fascinating interview with Akbar and Meharry about their experiences in the field and how the project influenced them.

The Story of “Untold Stories”

Shortly before the exhibition Afghanistan: Crossroads of the Ancient World went on display at the British Museum in March, 2011, Carla Grissmann – a stunning and stoic woman who had spent a better part of her life protecting Afghanistan’s cultural heritage – passed away. With her went innumerable untold stories about the protection of the country’s cultural heritage from those tremendous years of political turmoil during the Soviet occupation, Mujahideen civil war, and Taliban era. Joanie Meharry had interviewed her in person once in her London flat two years earlier, but not on a recorder and certainly not on video. She regrets not having recorded that interview because anyone who knew Grissman knew what a tremendous loss it was for the recent history of Afghanistan’s cultural heritage. This experience inspired her to undertake the oral history project.
Shaharzad Akbar, on the other hand, was interested in researching Afghanistan’s cultural history because she saw it as an opportunity both to learn oral history methods but perhaps more importantly to learning about the cultural heritage of her own country.

Akbar and Meharry conducted five interviews in total with people who have made significant contributions to the field of cultural heritage in Afghanistan. Three interviews were conducted with Afghan cultural specialists: Omara Khan Massoudi, Director of the National Museum; Omar Sultan, Deputy Minister of the Ministry of Information and Culture; and Abdul Wasay Najimi, an architect for the Aga Khan Trust for Culture (Babur’s Garden) and a professor at Kabul University. Two interviews were conducted with international specialists: Laura Tedesco, who at the time of her interview served as Cultural Heritage Program Manager for the United States Embassy to Afghanistan; and Nancy Hatch Dupree, Director of the Afghanistan Center at Kabul University. The first three interviews were conducted in Dari and the latter two in English.

Due to time and budget limitations, as well as manifold security issues, Akbar and Meharry limited their field work to Kabul. They then created a list of potential respondents/interviewees and arranged interviews with the five individuals per their availability and interest in the project.

They published four interviews in Dari in 8 AM, the major daily newspaper in Afghanistan. The fifth interview, by Mr. Najimi will be soon released. In English, they have published the interview with Mr. Sultan with the Popular Archaeology website, and are currently coordinating the publication of the remaining interviews. The first video, Who is the Museum Director? was released in December on the Kabul at Work website. The video of the interview with Nancy Hatch Dupree will be released shortly, and the remaining videos will be released throughout the year.

Akbar and Meharry are hoping to publish a Dari/Pashtu and English booklet of these interviews provided they can find interested publishers. They will also present the project interviews at universities in Kabul at the beginning of spring 2012 term.

Akbar and Meharry responded to Sanem Güner’s questions on some of the up close and personal details of their project.

Güner: Joanie, as an American, how did you become interested in Afghanistan and its cultural heritage?
Meharry: There was a sense of purpose that was punctuated by a series of defining moments. While studying political science as an undergraduate, I was assigned Jason Elliot’s adventuresome travelogue, *An Unexpected Light*. Another student who had been given the book remarked in passing, “It makes you want to go to Afghanistan, doesn’t it?” It certainly does, I thought, so I began wading my way through all manner of books on Afghanistan.

Then in the summer of 2008 I went to visit the Hidden Treasures exhibition at the National Gallery of Art in Washington, DC. Somewhere between the 20,000 pieces of Afghanistan’s Bagram ivories, Tepe Fullol bronzes, and Bactrian gold, I decided I needed to understand how modern politics interacted with this ancient culture. I was already planning to start an MSc in Middle Eastern Studies in the United Kingdom that year. And as an American, with thousands of my compatriots fighting in Afghanistan, it could be a way to contribute, to some degree, to the redevelopment of the country's national identity.

The following March, I was invited on a trip to Afghanistan by Turquoise Mountain Foundation, a Scottish charity. There I met with the American cultural heritage specialist, Nancy Hatch Dupree, affectionately known as "Afghanistan's grandmother" for her decades of dedication to cultural work. "You know what we need," she dangled in front of me, "we need a work horse to document the history of the National Museum of Afghanistan." So in 2009 that's what I did.

Güner: What were your expectations and what were the realities when you went into the field to interview people for “Untold Stories”?

Meharry: I had expectations in broad strokes, and then let the spaces fill in as I went along. I knew that with such a project it was important to get to know the people in the community, build trust, listen, and be patient and flexible - and that all of these components would be entirely different things to grapple with in practice. The reality is far more complex than any book has ever adequately captured. For everyone has a story to tell, and what you cannot fully expect but quickly come to realize are the range of human qualities and experiences embodied in nearly everyone you meet. You can detect hints of this in the interviews.

Güner: Shaharzad, how did hearing the stories about the survival of Afghanistan’s cultural treasures affect you as an Afghan?

Akbar: I found this project and the interviews truly inspiring. The main take-away for me as a young Afghan who has grown up in periods of great instability was the value of preservation and importance of having a vision. Many development and other initiatives in Afghanistan are implemented in a spirit of emergency and without much thought given to their sustainability. Many of us Afghans currently think about daily survival, and fear planning for the years to come. Uncertainty has become a defining
element in our personal and social lives, and influences the programmes and initiatives targeting the development of the country. As a development worker, I witnessed and suffered from the lack of vision affecting development programmes. In interviewing the cultural specialists for this project, I learned about the difficult history of Afghanistan from a different perspective, and I was inspired by the perseverance and dedication of the people who tried to save and/or saved the cultural heritage of Afghanistan, amidst war and destruction, never losing hope for a better future, and never undervaluing the importance of cultural heritage because of emergency, war or destruction. Their commitment to cultural heritage of Afghanistan, their hope and belief in a better future, and their courage in protecting what was important to Afghanistan and to them, never losing sight of history and the possibility of a better future, has inspired me to think more positively about future of Afghanistan and hopefully work more passionately to preserve the treasures of my country for coming generations and a better future.

**Güner:** What particularly memorable experiences did you have while conducting the oral history project?

**Akbar:** For me, every interview is memorable in its own right. I learned new things in every single interview and felt inspired by them. My visit to the museum, I must admit with embarrassment, was my first visit in many years. Speaking to Nancy Dupree was awe-inspiring in light of what I had heard about her and read from her. But the most touching moment for me, was in Babur’s Garden. When Mr. Najimi was narrating his visit to the garden during the Taliban period, I was visualizing that description and comparing it with the current state of Babur’s Garden, and my heart was overwhelmed with both joy and concern. I felt grateful for the reconstruction of the Garden, and as a woman, for the ability to visit this historical place freely in such a beautiful day. I was also worried at the prospect of future instability and its likely impact on something that was rebuilt with so much effort and hard work. Destruction takes less than an hour, but the effort to rebuild this garden and the love that was behind it could not be easily matched. Babur’s Garden in that moment symbolized to me every home, street, and structure that had been rebuilt or built with hope in the past 10 years and the fragility of all these monuments in the face of war and destruction.