The Ecology of Rural Ethnic Groups
and the Spatial Dimensions of Power

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What mechanisms influence the locations of rural ethnic groups? Some authors have suggested that such groups are distributed merely in respect to ecological conditions. Political tensions between competing societies, however, also have a dimension that influences spatial locations. To illustrate this, the locations of the rural ethnic groups in a region in central Afghanistan are analyzed. In this case, variations in ecological adaptation do not adequately account for some of the spatial groupings. Effective distance, however—a time-cost measure of the degree of separation and accessibility of different locations—is advanced as the primary factor, for it controls the degree to which the various local groups have been able to interact profitably with each other and the outside. The history of the area is presented to indicate that political alignments manifest locational controls on social relations in this region.

I

In the Middle East and Central Asia there exists a curious pattern in the rural locations of religious groups: the dominant sects, those locally considered “orthodox,” are found in the central places, usually lowlands, while diverse “heretical” groups having uncertain or variable loyalties occupy marginal territories such as mountains, deserts, and marshes. The Atlas mountains of the Maghrib, for example, harbor Ibadis; the mountains of the Levant, Imamis and Ismailis, Druzes and Nusairis, and several Christian sects; the Iranian plateaus, Ismailis, Yezidis, and Ali Alahis; the Elborz mountains of (Imami) Iran, Sunnis, Ismailis, and Babis; the Yemen mountains, Ismailis and Zaidis; and the Hindu Kush-Pamir range of Central Asia, Ismailis and Imamis. Similarly, the Sahara desert safeguards Kharejites, the Bekaa basin of Lebanon Metwalis, the arid lands of Mauritania Ghoufs. And the swamps of lower Iraq protect Mandaeans (Planhol 1959). Some of these sect groups have moved into the margins for safety. The Kharejites of the Mzab, for example, were driven out of Tiaret, Algeria, for their stubborn adherence to their sect; after several unsuccessful attempts to settle in the Sahara, they finally stayed in the Mzab, a region so unsuitable for social habitation that they cannot support themselves without outside subsidization (Bourdieu 1961). Also, certain Ismaili groups have made it a policy to evangelize in mountain regions where they felt the residents could better withstand pressures from central rulerships (Lewis 1967). But, in other cases, sectarian categories seem to serve outlying populations as important categories of political disidence, for they convert according to their relations with the outside. This is clearly indicated, for example, in the history of the Berbers of the Maghrib, who have repeatedly converted to heretical sects so as to contrast with the dominant cultures ensconced in the lowlands. In the ancient past they adopted Christian heresies (Arianism, Donatism, etc.) vis-à-vis the Roman Church to express their resistance to Roman rule. Later they resisted Islam under Christian banners. Then, when finally subjugated, they soon became Kharejite Muslims in opposition to the Sunni...
Arabs holding the central rulerships. When some of their own Kharejite groups rose to prominence in the dominant centers the mountain dwellers once again broke away and identified with other Islamic sects, Ismailism in the eastern Maghrib (i.e., the Fatimids), Sunnism in the western Maghrib (i.e., the Almoravids and Almohads) and even novel religious movements in the Rif Atlas (Basset and Pellat 1960). Religious loyalty for these tribes was merely a badge of political identification, expressing their dissidence from the dominant rulerships whose political domains impinged upon their own. Whatever historical factors have brought this pattern about, the result is that marginal location in the Muslim world is rather consistently associated with religious heresy.

The geographic pattern in the Middle East and Central Asia is the specific interest of this study, but the pattern is not really unique to the Muslim world; only elsewhere the identities of marginal groups are commonly marked by ethnic distinctions without the support of precise sectarian differences. In Southeast Asia, for example, marginal territories harbor a similar mosaic, but of ethnic categories: Senoi and Semang, Jakun and Karen, Chin and Kachin, "Mountain" Mon-Khmer and "Mountain" Cham, Lahu, Lisu, etc. (cf. Lebar et al. 1964). And similarly, in Latin America, the mountains, deserts, and rain forests hold a diversity of Indian tribes (cf. Redfield 1941; Colby and van den Berghe 1969). In these places, the same kind of relationship seems to exist between marginal location and political disidence, the identities being not primarily sectarian but ethnic; here marginal location is associated with ethnic diversity. In general, then, the spatial pattern is similar, but the categories of identify differ according to circumstances. Where the crucial political categories are religious, the marginal populations are heretical; where the crucial political categories are nationalistic or ethnic, the marginal populations are ethnically distinct. For the purpose of this study such groups are similar, whatever cultural terms—ethnic, linguistic, regional, or religious—become the shibboleth of their political discreteness (cf. Barth 1969:34). I shall speak of them generically as rural ethnic groups. A rural ethnic group, in addition to being marginally located, is a group of people having a common economic and political interest, because of which they stand together in opposition to other groups and the State (cf. Bailey 1968:281; A. Cohen 1969), and a common sense of cultural identity validated by ethnic and/or religious customs (Barth 1969; A. Cohen 1969; Colby and van den Berghe 1969; Cohen and Middleton 1970; cf. Y. Cohen 1969).

II

What processes control the locations of rural ethnic groups? A common view is that ethnic groups are located in respect to ecological variation. Barth has pointed out that the locations of three ethnic groups in Swat, West Pakistan, are controlled by variations in natural conditions and the competition between groups for desirable territory. To explain the locations of cultural groups in Swat he introduced the concept of ecologic niche—"the place of a group in the total environment, its relations to resources and competitors" (1956:1079).2 In terms of the natural properties of Swat, he found that Pathans utilized lands producing two crops per year, Kohistanis lands yielding one crop per year, and Gujars marginal lands permitting pastoral nomadism and transhumance. In terms of the political relations of the groups, he noted that the Pathans were strongest and occupied the lands suitable to their own economic and political requirements; they, however, left open other areas which were occupied by the other two groups. He concluded that

The distribution of ethnic groups is controlled... by the distribution of the specific ecologic niches which the group, with its particular economic and political organization, is able to exploit... if different ethnic groups are able to exploit the same niches fully, the militarily more powerful will normally replace the
weaker ... [And] if different ethnic groups exploit the same ecologic niches but the weaker of them is better able to utilize the marginal environment, the groups may co-reside in one area... [1956:1088].

Apparently inspired by Barth's concept of "ecologic niche" some anthropologists have assumed that ethnic groups are distributed in relation to natural conditions alone. A recent publication, for example, states that in a certain region the

most fundamental reason for [rural] multi-ethnicity is ecological adaptation... There have always been environmental niches within which multiple adaptation develops. Open savannah can support both sedentary agriculture and... pastoralism; lakes and rivers can support fisherfolk. Such multiple adaptations are utilized unequally by groups within the same area so that differential ecology supports different or differentiating ethnic units ... 

There are some difficulties with this latter formulation. For one thing, unlike the ordinarily precise boundaries drawn between these groups, the natural variations predating variant ecological adaptations phase into each other and sometimes change only gradually, as in north China (Lattimore 1951). Nature seldom obliges man with neatly bounded ecological regions. This phasing process is an unresolved issue in studies of cultural ecology, for such studies assume as a frame of reference a neatly bounded, uniform ecological zone. Rappaport has pointed out that

The concept of the ecosystem, though it provides a convenient frame for the analysis of interspecific trophic exchanges taking place within limited geographical areas, does not comfortably accommodate intraspecific exchanges taking place over wider geographic areas. Some sort of geographic population model would be more useful for the analysis of the relationship of the local ecological population to the larger regional population of which it is a part, but we lack even a set of appropriate terms for such a model [1967:19].

But there is a better reason for questioning the view that the "environmental niches" of rural ethnic groups are essentially natural, purely a matter of economic adaptation. It is that political considerations also affect the locations of rural ethnic groups. It is in this sense that Barth's "ecologic niche" must be understood: relations with competitors—in spatial context—are as important as those with natural resources. Rural ethnic groups do not retain their discrete identities merely by carving up the natural landscape differentially according to different adaptive possibilities. They retain their identities in respect to socio-political incentives. What has not been sufficiently recognized is that such incentives have a spatial dimension analytically quite apart from purely ecological matters. Anthropologists have neglected spatial controls on social relations, assuming perhaps that this was a subject on which they may suitably remain naive. This article is an attempt to show that an understanding of spatial processes is necessary for the solution of at least this anthropological question.

III

Bamian, a poly-ethnic, poly-sectarian region in the mountains of central Afghanistan, shall furnish the example. Bamian is a basin shaped valley having a central plain surrounded by rugged highlands ranging in altitude from 9800 to 17,000 feet (Fig. 1). It is a marginal territory. Spatially it is marginal to four drainage basins. Its own waters flow into the Kunduz-Oxuz river basin but it is cut off from this expansive natural region by abrupt mountain ranges, through which the narrow Shekari gorge is the only natural outlet. The other encircling mountains are watersheds for three other great rivers: the Kabul-Indus, the Helmand, and the Band-i-Amir-Balkhab. Not only by topography but also by climatic conditions is Bamian isolated, for during two or three months of winter all the passes, except Shibar (which is supplied by a government snow-plow) are snowbound, and in spring and fall it is sometimes isolated for several days by impassable fords and washed out bridges.
Figure 1. Population distribution in Bamian.
Bamian is, moreover, politically marginal, for it lies between three historic centers of power, Afghan Turkestan, Kabul-Koh Daman, and the Hazarajat (Fig. 2).

The settled populations number about 15,000 people and are entirely distributed alongside the rivers and streams of the basin. They are differentiated according to two kinds of cultural criteria: ethnic categories and religious sects. The religious sects are variants of Islam: Sunni, Imami, and Ismaili. Membership in these sects is the most significant criterion of social differentiation. Members of different sects do not intermarry, except in rare instances when a Sunni man will take an Imami wife. They do not form cooperative agreements, such as grazing their sheep and goats in common flocks. They patronize different flour mills. Away from the market center (Markaz) where cash transactions are made, they patronize different occupational specialists. They do not borrow from or lend to each other. They do not converse freely, and usually they veil their comments to each other in vapid generalities; sometimes they are downright hostile. Different tea shops in the market center cater to different religious groups, Sunnis or Imamis; none of them will serve a known Ismaili. The primary units of social differentiation in Bamian are therefore religious. Religious ascription functions as a kind of ethnicity, but on a higher, more inclusive level (cf. A. Cohen 1969:4, 5).

Persons do not readily indicate their sect membership but they do typically express allegiance to different saints whose sectarian loyalties are generally known. Other signs of religious identity are subtle and complex. Members of different sects perform the prayers somewhat differently (the Ismailis only in secret), do their ablutions differently, swear by different ancient doctrinal authorities, and sometimes take distinctive names (as “Sakhi” among the Sunnis, “Hosayn” among the Imamis, etc.).

Also, their ethnic identity is a clue. There are six kinds of ethnic categories, reckoned as patrilineal descent groups: Tajiks, Afghans (a few recent settlers), Hazaras, Sayyeds, Afshars, and Arabs. The ethnic categories “Tajik” and “Afghan” imply the sectarian category “Sunni”; “Afshar” implies the “Imami” sect; and “Hazara” and “Sayyed” imply either the “Imami” or “Imaili” sect. This correlation between descent group and sect identity is so close that when informants have mentioned instances of Hazaras converting to Sunnism, they say they have “become Tajik.” The Arabs, who live primarily by smithing, are an exception to this rule, for they belong to different sects, depending on the sect of the community in which each Arab family resides.

The ethnic distinctions are belied by certain apparent affinities among these populations. These groups are said to be distinguishable (in addition to their religious observances) by their place of residence, physical appearance, and dialect of Persian (Hazaras speak Hazaragi). But the clues of physical appearance and dialect only roughly apply. Racial differences between the Tajiks and the Hazaras, the two largest and racially distinct populations, sometimes are not clearly distinguishable. Hazaras are said to be physically distinguishable by their Mongoloid appearance: high cheek bones, epicanthic eyelids, and sparse beards. The other populations with whom they intermarry—Sayyeds, Afshars, and Arabs—also often have Mongol features. Some Hazaras, however, especially those from the chiefly families, are not clearly Mongoloid in appearance; instead, they have heavy beards and less evident of the typical Mongolian eyelids and high cheek bones. The Tajiks, in contrast to the Hazaras, are believed to be Iranian in appearance: full beards, browner skin, larger noses. In fact, however, some persons calling themselves “Tajik” have rather strong Mongoloid features. The relationship between phenotype and descent group identity is therefore not really precise (cf. Van den Berghe 1970:10). Similarly, a strong Hazaragi accent did not always reveal Hazara identity, for I met several persons who called themselves “Tajik” in whose speech Hazaragi influences were unmistakable. What did seem to correlate with
Figure 2. Historic socio-political centers in eastern Afghanistan.
Hazaragi was the speaker's place of residence. Hazaragi is more detectable in the mountainous perimeter, and standard Afghan Persian ("Dari") more common to the central plain. There was also a differential in the use of Hazaragi according to sex and social rank. Women in the mountains betrayed more of a Hazaragi accent than men, and poor men more than rich. In general, then, Hazaragi correlated with restricted contact with the central plains and the national society.

In contrast, therefore, to the sharpness of the ethnic categories, the racial and linguistic criteria that are said to be the clues of ethnic identity actually phase across the landscape. There is a contrast between what people call themselves and what, in terms of their actual material and historical connections, they really are. Some characteristics phase into one another with respect to their spatial locations, suggesting that these populations are materially interrelated. Other characteristics—the politically important ones—draw distinct lines between people, suggesting that they are very different.

A person's home territory is an indicator of his religious identity because sectarian loyalties trace across the landscape in a regular pattern. On the central plain, known as Tagaw, reside the Sunnis (i.e., Tajiks and Afghans). In the highland valleys and glens encircling Tagaw (except on the northern side of the basin where habitation is impossible) dwell Imamis (Hazaras, Sayyeds, and Afshars); and in the eastern highlands, Shibar, sometimes amidst the Imamis, are the Ismailis (Hazaras and Sayyeds).

This regular distribution of sect groups has not always been as it is now. Apparently, a century ago Bamian was entirely populated by Imamis. In 1838 when John Wood passed through Bamian, there seemed to be no Sunnis in the central valley, as his first mention of them was at Sayghan after leaving Bamian (Wood 1847:206). Masson (1842) and Lal (1834) indicate that about this time there was at most a contingent of Sunni soldiers from Kabul at the center of the valley.

Whether the populations of Bamian's central lowlands converted from Imamism to Sunnism (i.e., "became Tajik") or whether Sunnis from elsewhere supplanted the former Imam populations is not clear. Either alternative seems possible. What was known as the "Persian Famine" and a subsequent epidemic of cholera in 1871-73 is said to have almost depopulated much of western Afghanistan and Afghan Turkestan (Government of India 1910:vi). Possibly it affected Bamian and provided room for Sunnis to immigrate at a time when Sunni power was more effectively extending into the area. The possibility, however, that some of the Imam residents converted to Sunnism should not be discounted. Even though most Muslims insist that conversion from one sect to another is almost, if not completely, impossible, I encountered in Bamian several cases of conversion in the memory of living persons. What Wood wrote of the Imam Hazaras' pattern of conversion in Sayghan may have occurred in Bamian: "The Hazara . . . are incorporated with the [Sunnj] Tajiks, whose protection they purchase by an outward compliance with the orthodox religion [i.e., Sunnism]" (Wood 1847:206).

In addition to the sectarian change in the lowlands, during the same period, there has been a similar change in the eastern highlands of Shibar. But there the trend has been to Ismailism. In these cases the trend has unquestionably occurred through conversion. The situation in this region is extremely complex, for conversion seems to have taken place only in certain kinds of ecological settings and even though the overall trend has been toward Ismailism, conversions have moved in both directions (Canfield 1973).

The locations of these sect groups and the encroachments made by Sunnism and Ismailism into this once wholly Imam territory are my problem. The specific questions are these: Why do Sunnis reside only in the central lowlands, Imamis only in the surrounding highlands, and Ismailis only in the Shibar highlands? Why has Sunnism encroached only in Tagaw and Ismailism only
in Shifar? How can locational factors—the lowlands for Sunnis, the eastern highlands for Ismailis—affect the processes of cultural identity formation? There is another closely related question which unfortunately must await a separate study: What factors allow Imamis and Ismaillis to live interspersed among one another in the eastern highlands?

IV

One of the factors influencing the sect group locations in Bamian is ecological adaptation. The primary adaptation of the sedentary farmers in Bamian is to irrigation grain farming. The best land is in the central part of the basin where surface water is plentiful and a long growing season ensures a good yield. In the highland valleys surrounding the central plain, however, yields are smaller and less certain because the growing season is much shorter; also, water in some places is inadequate and in a few others over-abundant. At the highest altitudes, where a shorter growing season does not allow wheat, barley is grown. Other economic activities supplement irrigation grain farming, varying in accordance with the different natural conditions in the basin. At Markaz in the heart of Tagaw, there is a small market where merchants and artisans do business for cash. Also in this vicinity potatoes are raised for cash. Poplar trees are raised as a cash crop throughout the basin where climatic conditions permit, mainly in Tagaw and in the warmer portions of the highlands. In the highlands, animal husbandry is an important secondary activity. Each household has from five to ten sheep and/or goats that are grazed near the house in spring and fall, and are stall fed in winter; during summer they are pastured in the mountains by the women and children. In the eastern highlands dry cultivation is an important activity in addition to animal husbandry. Ecological factors in the basin are therefore closely related to sect location, for in the central lowlands there is a relation between Sunnism and the economic bias toward a cash economy. The central lowlands more than any other part of the basin are economically linked to the national commercial system. This system of commerce is controlled by Sunnis centered in the Kabul-Koh Daman valleys and in Afghan Turkestan. The conclusion seems unavoidable, therefore, that the economic system has engulfed Tagaw and influenced the religious allegiances of the resident populations.

But ecological relations in Bamian cannot fully explain the pattern, because they do not everywhere vary with the sect group locations. Irrigation grain farming is everywhere the primary adaptation. Economic production for cash in the central lowlands is, for most people, only a secondary subsistence pattern. And more seriously, the general location of the Ismailis does not correlate with variations in ecological adaptation.

Another factor is therefore influencing the sect locations in Bamian, namely the degree of their spatial accessibility to, or isolation from, one another and the outside. Locational and regional theorists call this spatial accessibility-isolation variable "effective distance."10 Distance causes social interaction to decay (Dodd 1950; Morrill 1970a) and thereby affects information flows (Soja 1968), perception and decision-making (Gould 1963; Wolpert 1964). Effective distance, as distinct from linear distance, is the distance between groups in terms of travel time and cost.11 Because it expresses the costs, and hence the pay-offs, of social interaction in spatial context, effective distance may be used as an indicator of general socio-political connection between localities. Effective distance across land mainly varies in respect to political circumstances, natural conditions, and transport technology. A political boundary or a hostile territory effectively lengthens distances. Residents of West Berlin, for example, may be effectively closer to Bonn than to East Berlin.12 And where there is political insecurity effective distance is lengthened by increased transport risks (Hartshorne 1950). Natural conditions such as terrain and ecology, as they influence transport costs,
also control effective distance (Whebell 1969; Zipf 1949). The most common natural barriers to transport and communication flows are mountains, deserts, rain forests, and marshes. Also, distance in terms of transport costs varies according to the means of transport, whether by camel or horse, oxcart or truck, barge or plane. In transport costs, peasants of north China were once effectively closer to Mongolian pastoralists nearly eight hundred miles to the north than to Chinese cities scarcely a tenth of that distance to the south: pasture-fed camels could transport grain across the Mongolian steppes more cheaply than stall-fed oxen could haul it to the city (Lattimore 1956). As different technological means significantly affect relations of distance, the development of transport technology has been a decisive factor in culture change. Deutch has shown that early European nations developed in association with “basic communication grids linking rivers, towns and trade routes in a flow of transport, travel and migrations” (1953:172). Elsewhere, the domestication of the camel and the horse supplied improved means of spatial control (Hitti 1970:22; Lattimore 1951:58ff.; Secoy 1953). For the control of distant regions, road building was a preoccupation of early empires (Andreski 1968), just as aircraft, motor vehicles, and ships are of modern nations. Similarly, for the modernization of the third world, the improvement of transport networks is crucial (Johnson 1970; Taffe et al. 1953:503; Murphey 1956:17). Mackenzie indeed has claimed that “changing spatial distance, as measured by time and cost, is perhaps the most important factor in human affairs today” (1968:220). Transport technology, however, does affect the world unevenly. In modern societies, distance relations are complicated, the effective distance between points varying in accordance with several alternate means (and costs) of travel. Some residents of St. Louis, for example, are by plane hardly further from Chicago than they live in driving time (but not cost) from their offices. In the less technologically developed areas of the world, such as the Middle East and Central Asia, the main corridors of transport and communication may be as elsewhere foreshortened by improved technology, but away from these corridors the means of transport have scarcely changed for centuries. In such regions, places are effectively more distant because they are both costly and time-consuming to reach. Correspondingly, rulership and administration is more difficult. These are the frontier zones where the residents to some extent resist central rulerships (Thomas 1925; Whittlesey 1939; Lattimore 1951, 1962; Hartshorne 1950; cf. Planhol 1959:80-81; Gellner 1970; Lehman 1963). Because distances between localities in these areas are effectively longer, the populations appear shattered into a crowded patchwork of rural ethnic groups. Hartshorne once remarked, concerning a comparable place in Europe, that “anyone traveling ten miles across this cultural landscape boundary between Silesia and old Poland, feels that he has traveled farther than from Chicago to Silesia” (1933:204).

Thus, although other bounding mechanisms operate in urban settings, effective distance sometimes serves in rural areas as one mechanism by which localized corporate groups remain apart. In places where political tensions, natural barriers, and/or transport facilities limit social articulation, the categorical distinctions between competing societies express the approximate limits of profitable corporate identification for the members of these societies. Spatially discernible rural ethnic group boundaries demarcate zones of contrast in localized interests.14

V

This framework enables us to understand the locations of Bamian’s sect groups. I argue that effective distances in Bamian have significantly controlled the alignments of Bamian’s residents, drawing them into three sections whose political alignments are expressed as different religious allegiances. To
support this argument I will describe the effective distances influencing spatial relations in Bamian, and then the historically repetitive patterns that evince these spatial controls on social alignments.

Effective distances in Bamian spatially divide the resident populations into two main groups, those residing in a large bloc on the central lowland of Tagaw, and those pocketed in the smaller isolated highland valleys who together outnumber the lowlanders. The rugged topography impedes access to the highlands and limits the ability of highlanders to relate to the outside. Even today, travel off the main roads moves on foot or by donkey. In terms of walking distance, some highlanders are almost as far from Tagaw as the Tagaw residents are, in motorable distance, from Koh Daman. Highlanders are even further isolated in winter by the severe snowfalls, for some of them scarcely can leave their houses for three months. The word kohband (mountain bound) describes them socially as well as locationally, for it connotes social backwardness and religious prudishness. Tagaw, in contrast, has always been linked to the outside, and due to the improvement of transport and communication facilities has for a century been growing closer to the centers of trade and administration. In the nineteenth century, Amir Abdul Rahman improved the road over the Shiber pass in order to establish Bamian as a base for controlling the Hazarajat. In the 1920s and 1930s, the Kabul-Bamian road was progressively improved for motor transport. In the 1950s and 1960s, an improved road through the Hajigak Pass opened it to motor transport, and a paved road as far as Charikar shortened the Shiber route to Bamian. These improvements mainly affected the centrally located populations because all trade routes converge on Tagaw. Today trucks move through Tagaw the year around and there is a daily bus connection between Tagaw and Kabul. A telephone line following the road, constructed in the 1950s, also links Tagaw with Kabul. Local residents, however, in 1968 were scarcely using the newly introduced, costly twice-weekly airplane flights into Tagaw from Kabul.

Bamian’s political history supports the view that differences in the spatial accessibility of its different parts correspond with differences in the political interests of its residents. Moreover, changes in the accessibility of certain regions correspond with the encroachments of Sunnism and Ismailism into the basin. Owing to Bamian’s physical characteristics the stronger powers impinging on it have affected its populations unevenly, the Tagaw residents being more influenced by outside pressures than those in the surrounding highlands. By the early nineteenth century Tagaw had come under Kabul control, but the highlands were essentially independent. In the latter part of the century, even though Tagaw was quiescent, many of the highlanders probably participated in the two major risings against the Amir of Kabul (Kakar 1968). Similarly, in 1929 when Bache-Saqaw took the rulership of Kabul, the Tagaw populations acknowledged his authority quite early but the highlanders rose up against him.

The spatial contrast was identified with a sectarian contrast. The Kabul rulership was already committed to Sunni (Hanafi) traditions of administration and jurisprudence, and in the Hazara-Afghan War (1891-93) when the Amir of Kabul tried to mobilize a force for the invasion of the Hazarajat, he explicitly drew upon Sunni loyalties.

For the first time, the Kahn-e-Mulla of Kabul, in consultation with other mallas, declared religious war against the Hazaras...In 600 proclamations which the Amir distributed throughout the country, the Hazaras and all the Shias [Imamis] were declared to be kafir [infidel]. The task of inciting the Sunnis was entrusted to the Sunni mallas...stipendiary mallas were ordered to accompany the tribal levies, and preach ghaza [a holy conquest] [Kakar 1968:213].

For the first time all the Sunni population rallied to the Amir. It increased his power and prestige, and infused a sense of unity among his subjects [Ibid.: 227].

The Hazaras, on the other hand, who still held the highlands of central Afghanistan
and the strategic places within the Hazarajat, coalesced as an Imami bloc.

Never in the past had the Hazaras been so united among themselves as they now were against the Amir. In an assembly . . . Timur Shah a sayyed descendant of Imam Musa Reza, was elected as their Khalifa for the purpose of religious war against the Amir. . . . The Hazaras declared "We will fight for one true God and his prophet, and for Ali against these Kafirs and allies of Kafirs" [Ibid.:218].

When the Imamis were finally defeated Sunnism became the unrivaled "orthodox" faith of the nation. Imamism persists, but by the tolerance of the Sunnis, as a heretical faith. Like the religious situation in another Muslim setting,

conformity to . . . [the official credo of the state], however perfunctory, was the token and pledge of loyalty. Orthodoxy meant the acceptance of the existing order, heresy or apostasy its criticism and rejection [Lewis 1953:62; see also Lambton 1956].

To be Sunni in Afghanistan is in some sense to be identified with the ruling institution and with the Sunni sources of authority on which its administrative system partially depends. To be Imami is to be identified with the resistance that once warred against, and even now remains isolated from, that ruling institution.15 Religious allegiances today express the same opposition between lowlander and highlander and between Sunni and Imami. Natural politico-economic centers, now firmly held by the Sunni administration, are bases from which the government exerts its influence on the less accessible regions of the country; accordingly, many of these central places, including the Tagaw of Bamian, are now occupied by Sunnis. The marginal territories, however, are occupied by Imamis, who, although militarily quenched, maintain their separateness by sect endogamy and an emphasis on religious observances.

Changes in the spatial patterns of religious client groups in the last hundred years suggest a reason why Ismailism has developed in the eastern highlands. The residents of Bamian have traditionally venerated saints as part of their religious worship. The saints provide theological guidance for the populace and also, through their aids, collect and redistribute their religious contributions. When the Imamis rose up against the Sunnis these saints were highly influential in the mobilization. Today the client networks associated with these saints now function as organizations of social support for this now-underprivileged minority. The saints employ their great wealth and influence to arrange loans or to intercede for persons having difficulty with the government, and they provide hospitality for their clients, most of them poor. These networks of religious clientage are of course submissive to the government, but they continue to have great strength and, as a consequence, attract the government's wary surveillance. What is significant for this analysis is that in the last century the locations of these saints and their respective client groups have changed as other changes in alignment have taken place. A century ago presumably all these saints were Imamis. There were two saints within the basin exercising great influence, one at Birgilic and one at Markaz. Outside the basin the saint at Yak Awlang to the west was also influential. The saint at Kayan, however, was probably only newly established. The encroachment of the Sunni influence into Bamian was associated with the decline of the saints within the basin and an increase in the influence of the saint at Kayan (a descendant of the former one) championing Ismailism. The reason for the decline of the Imami saint at Birgilic is not known, but the Imami saint at Markaz was imprisoned and his family scattered for his insolence during the time of Amir Amanullah (1919-29). Today the residents of the Markaz area are of course Sunnis and venerate Sunni saints, in their case saints residing in Koh Daman and Kabul. The Imami populations today venerate saints also residing outside the basin. Two are the most influential, one in Yak Awlang and the other in Kabul. Their client groups in Bamian divide roughly in the eastern highlands, those west
of that area generally (but not exclusively) relating to the saint at Yak Awlang and those east, to the one in Kabul (Fig. 3). It is in the zone between these two catchment areas that Ismailism had developed, expanding from its center at Kayan in the Hindu Kush highlands. It seems natural to conclude that Ismailism has developed in this area because its isolation leaves the residents relatively free to develop independent or ephemeral coalitions. This area has historically remained at the frontiers of all three centers of power, and until the Kabul government was able to establish secure administrative posts in it, the residents were independent of outside control. They are still recalcitrant. Considered more heretical than Imamism, Ismailism is religiously as well as spatially more “far out.” Hence, the degrees of Islamic heterodoxy can be related to the geographical range of Sunni and Imami influence. Ismailism, the greater heresy, has appeared in the frontier zone beyond the reach of both.

In Bamian therefore the sect groups are identifiable in respect to their accessibility to the dominant socio-economic system of Afghanistan. The mechanisms by which they have differentiated religiously have resulted from their different degrees of accessibility to the Sunni government and the Sunni controlled national economic system. The growing presence of the Afghan-Sunni rulership during the last hundred years has been in association with the changes in religious affiliation. The residents of Tagaw came most closely under its economic and political influence and eventually became associated with its religious identity. Those in the eastern highlands, in contrast, felt, on one hand, threatened by the growing influence of Sunnism in Tagaw and, on the other hand, isolated from the Imami sect that once dominated the entire region. To protect their local interests some of them identified with a sect that contrasted with both, Ismailism. The result is that the groups whose material interests for locational reasons primarily conflicted with Sunni interests have identified with Imamism; those whose material interests have for locational reasons conflicted with both Sunni and Imami interests have identified with Ismailism. Since the material interests of these groups diverged in respect to their accessibility to the dominant society, their identities express their effective distances from it.

VI

The case of sect locations in Bamian suggests that effective distance serves in rural areas as a means by which rural ethnic groups remain distinct. The controls on effective distance—political and natural conditions and transport technology—place spatial constraints on inter-societal articulation. Where the localized interests of groups divide, cultural boundaries form because the groups tend to express their different interests in culturally contrastive terms. Their social distinctions thus develop spatially in respect to their accessibility. Changes in the spatial controls on group relations, i.e., in their accessibility, may result in their realignment and perhaps in adjustments in their identity. There is therefore a spatial dimension to inter-societal relations, to rural ethnicity. The locations of competing social groups in a region are influenced not only by their ecological adaptations but also by distance controls on their socio-political relations.

Anthropologists have generally ignored spatial controls on social systems, as if all social interaction took place on an unchanging plane. Or rather, as if there were no plane at all: no distance, no centers of power, no marginal zones. As a result, they have been indifferent to the limits on political power imposed by distance and to changes in those limits due to distance reducing technological improvements. The argument here, on the contrary, has been that spatial variables must be included in our conceptual scaffolding if we are to understand certain kinds of societal variation.
Figure 3. Locations of Imami and Ismaili client groups in east-central Afghanistan.
NOTES

1 The fieldwork on which this study is based was made possible by Foreign Area Fellowship Training Grants in 1966-67 and 1967-68. I am indebted to John W. Bennett for discussions that led to certain crucial insights in this paper, and to Chris L. Jung for bibliographic guidance. They and Edward Montgomery, Patty Jo Watson, William Schorger, and Edward Robbins, by commenting on previous drafts, saved me from many errors.

2 There are epistemological difficulties with importing a biological concept into the study of human social organization but they are too extensive to be dealt with here. A forthcoming book by John W. Bennett may clarify some of the problems.

3 Certain anthropologists have already argued that the social structure of groups must be related to their political as well as ecological contexts (Barth 1956; Wolf 1956; 1966; Uboeri 1962; Sahli 1964, 1968; Harding 1967; Irons 1969; Adams 1970; Goldschmidt and Kunkel 1971).

4 Compare the following statements: “There have been practically no attempts to correlate spatial configurations with the formal properties of other aspects of social life” (Levi-Strauss 1963:533). “The man who enters this field [anthropology] will find... that anthropologists have by no means supplied all the data he desires. The anthropologist who studies the politics of primitive peoples is likely to stop just where the political geographer becomes most interested. Tribal customs are described in detail, but the areal aspects of politics are likely to be given only vaguely, if at all” (Jones 1959:243). “In a sense, all social scientists are historians and use the temporal dimension as a framework within which to examine the political, social and economic behavior of men. But few feel comfortable trying on the geographer’s special shoes, and, beyond an occasional location map, hesitate to examine developments in the dimension that is his particular concern” (Gould 1964:123). Some exceptions besides those to be mentioned, are Hammel (1964), Yoshida (1963), Lee (1966), Carneiro (1961), Skinner (1964) and the Soviet anthropologists (see Brik et al. 1969 for a review).

5 Both Babur (sixteenth century) (Beveridge 1922) and Masson (nineteenth century) (1842) described great hardships in traversing Bamiyan’s snowbound passes.

6 In addition to the peasantry, who are the concern of this study, there are also Afghan nomads; these during summer pasture their flocks in the highlands (cf. Ferdinand 1962).

7 For descriptions of the doctrinal differences between these sects see Gibb and Kramers 1953.

8 For the best treatment of the cultural features of these groups see Schurmann (1962), but with the correctives in Ferdinand’s review (1965). For more on the Hazaras see Bacon (1951a, 1951b, 1958) and Ferdinand (1959).

9 Not only individual Hazaras but even whole groups of Hazaras may have converted to Sunnism. The Tatars of Afghan Turkestan were once known as Hazara Tatars (Ferrier 1857) and bear strong Mongoloid features, but today they call themselves “Tajiks” and are Sunnis.

10 For other implications of spatial separation, besides the other references cited here, see Hall (1966), Kummer (1972), Ardrey (1966).

11 There are many methodological problems which have been extensively discussed by geographers and regional economists. For recent general treatments and related problems see Perilliou (1966), Morrill (1970b), and Berry and Horton (1970). For further bibliographic guidance into a massive literature see Ohlsen (1965, 1970) and Claeson (1968).

12 Owing to tense relations with sedentary populations, nomads who migrate along a prescribed route may be effectively more distant from some areas near their route than to more distant places along it. The concept of distance decay for nomadic peoples, however, has not been adequately dealt with. The best I have found is Morrill (1970b), which is based primarily on Barth’s seminal case study of the Il-rah in south Iran (1959).

13 A hierarchy of central places develops partially in respect to the natural landscape. Classical central place studies schematically assume a uniform plain (Thunen 1826; Weber 1929; Christaller 1966; Loesch 1954), but recent studies have stressed the failure of such idealized patterns to represent real conditions; high friction areas render idealized formulations practically useless (Whelch 1969; Chapman 1970; Carter et al. 1970; cf. Christaller 1966:196, fn.). Central places actually develop in areas balancing—in terms of effective distances—the location of natural resources, political pressures from the outside, and already entrenched capital investments (cf. Isard 1956, 1960; Whittlesey 1959; Myrdal 1957).
Geographers have had difficulty relating spatial processes to the processes by which groups develop a sense of identity. See, for example, Wallis (1926), Whittlesey (1935, 1939), Harshorne (1950), Gottman (1951, 1952a, 1952b), Jones (1954), Pounds and Ball (1964), Dickinson (1970, esp. pp. 54-57, 86-89). Soja (1968:233) admits to a fuzziness in this aspect of his analysis but fails to resolve it. The difficulty has been a weakness in the otherwise insightful discussions of boundaries and frontiers; see Harshorne (1933, 1939), Jones (1959), Kristoff (1959), Ad hoc Committee on Geography (1965).

Because of the emphasis of this paper, this description ignores important ethnic distinctions among the Sunnis. The Sunnis controlling dominant positions in government are generally Afghans, but Tajiks also hold many lower eschelon positions. Until recently, Uzbekis, who are also Sunnis, have not played a significant role in government. Among the Afghans there have been differing degrees of loyalty. The government for many years was dependent on the southern and eastern tribes, nomadic as well as sedentary, and did not conscript or tax them. However, after the Russians began to provide capital intensive military equipment (1957), the government has instituted reforms that have sometimes offended these groups. As education has fostered a growing sense of nationhood among the many ethnic and religious groups, educated persons pay less notice to ethnic and religious distinctions. Still, Imamis in government generally experience difficulty in moving upward, and scarcely any Ismaili, except those few elected to Parliament, holds any government position.

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