

Professor Akbar Ahmed, *The Thistle and the Drone*

Comments by Professor Crispin Bates, 17 June 2013

Centre for South Asian Studies, University of Edinburgh

I read first Professor Ahmed's first book *Social and economic change in the Tribal Areas, 1972-1976* (Oxford University Press 1977) along with Ernest Gellner's study of Berbers in the Atlas Mountains of Morocco in the late 1970s when I was a novice Ph.D. student at Cambridge University. As a historian working on the history of tribes and peasants in colonial central India, I was keenly aware of the need to equip myself with an understanding of anthropological insights into the nature of tribal society and in the 1970s the pioneering research of Ahmed and Gellner (along with that of Marshall Sahlins) was central to the field. Based upon close participant observation, they were the most richly detailed and influential anthropological studies on the society of tribal peoples in their time and are still considered as key points of reference by researchers.

Academic research has moved on since the 1970s, and Professor Ahmed has published a great deal more since himself. However, with *The Thistle and the Drone*, Professor Ahmed has once again produced a timely study that is crucial for understanding tribal societies in marginal areas of the world in the present day. It is an extraordinary achievement. Rarely I have encountered a book that so fully justifies, and indeed exceeds, the plaudits provided by the publisher. This is an immensely valuable and important book, not only academically but also politically, which needs to be read.

From the outset, the book brilliantly reveals the very different culture of Muslim tribal lineage systems based upon honour [*nang* in Pukhtu] in Africa, the Middle- East, South and South-East Asia – the differences between these areas and those subject to taxes and rents [*qalang*] and governmental control – and the alienness and complete lack of mutual comprehension between the tribal peoples and the

Americans and others currently engaged in military operations and development work in these areas.

There are in particular many striking examples and anecdotes illustrative of *Pukhtunwali* – the Pukhtun code of honor that prevails in Kyberpukhtunqwa, Waziristan, and the large area of (southern) Afghanistan in which the Pukhtun peoples are to be found: areas of which the author has an intimate personal knowledge.

The fact that Islamic values are commonly subordinated to tribal values is underlined repeatedly in the book. Thus 10 out of 18 of the 9/11 hijackers came from a single tribe in Yemen. This argument explains why it is that the Pakistan Terik-e-Taliban, the Afghan Taliban (which are actually divided into two major factions), and similar extremist groups can commit such sacrilegious and heinous as the suicide bombing of mosques, or the shooting or blowing up of bus-loads of female school and University students - as happened in June 2013 in Quetta in Baluchistan. Such acts are completely anathema and heretical in the eyes of devout, orthodox Muslims.

The fact that the conflict in Afghanistan is driven so much by tribal rivalries, rather than any larger ideological agenda is underlined in one survey, quoted by Professor Ahmed, in which a majority of Afghans interviewed in one tribal area confessed to having never heard of 9/11 and having no idea what and for whom the Americans were fighting in Afghanistan.

Not mentioned in the book, but equally relevant and important, are the parallel struggles going on in the tribal areas of central India – versus the government of India rather than the USA. Maybe there can be seen parallels also in the Maoist insurgency in Nepal – which was strongly supported amongst so-called ethnic minorities.

One anxiety I felt is the risk of Orientalism in this approach: of seeing tribes as a characteristic moment in the evolution of civilised society – the infamous ‘stadial’ theory of colonial times. For the most part this trap is deftly avoided by a careful reliance upon the self-

description of so-called ‘tribals’ themselves. However, one is tempted to ask how really uniquely different are these ‘tribal’ peoples from everyone else. Their societies are described as ‘organised anarchies’, driven by inter-familial completion, and complex codes of honour and revenge, that is enacted with extreme and conspicuous acts of violence. However, similar characteristics can be seen in many other parts of the non-Muslim, non-tribal world, including the Americas and Europe. Pukhtuns are not the only people who consider the possession and use of firearms a normal part of daily life, and honor systems (such as *amuerta* amongst the Sicilian mafia) are to be found elsewhere too. To what extent do the subjects of Professor Ahmed’s study present a similar set of cultural characteristics, problems and dilemmas? Thus, is it really the case (as suggested) that Mullah Omah, the Taliban leader in Afghanistan, refused to hand over Osama Bin Laden to either the Americans or to representatives of other Muslim states solely due to the binding law of tribal hospitality? This will no doubt remain an issue of contention, since the answers provided run the equal risk of ‘Eurocentrism’ and of interpreting the behaviour of others in abstract terms that are meaningless within the societies concerned.

The one thing the peripheral communities described in this book do have in common, as Professor Ahmed points out, is that all of them appear to have been uniquely disadvantaged by the rise of powerful centralised states, both during and following the era of European colonialism. It may thus be argued even though they might not all fit into exactly the same sociological categories and systems of belief, they do share a commonality of experience, which dictates their bitterly adversarial relationships with the outside world.

The ‘thistle’ of the book’s title derives from a short story by Leopold Tolstoy (*Hadji Mourad*) concerning a military campaign conducted by Russia in central Asia in the nineteenth century: the tribesmen of this region being likened to thistles by a Russian officer (one of the characters in the story) owing to their intractable character and the fact that you could not attempt to uproot them without being pricked. The ‘Drone’ of the book’s title refers to the now familiar high tech,

remote-controlled, flying missile platforms, which are now being deployed in large numbers by the USA, and now also France and Britain, in places as far-flung as Afghanistan, Mali, Yemen, Somalia, and Pakistan.

The counter-productive effect of the practice of warfare through the use of drones is especially well brought out in the book. The number of drone strikes rose significantly after 2010 in parallel with the drawing down of American ground forces in Afghanistan. Ground intelligence is poor, possibly due to the reduction in American personnel, but also due to the rupture in co-operation between the American and Pakistani military and intelligence services. In the absence of good information ‘signature strikes’ (strikes based upon aerial observation of behaviour that looks to be suspicious) and ‘double-tap’ strikes (designed to eliminate not only targets but those who subsequently rush to their aid) have been authorised with horrific consequences. Strikes have targeted funeral processions and family compounds, placing large numbers of innocent civilians in the firing line. One example is an airstrike in March 2011 on a compound in Datta Khel, North Waziristan. According to Pakistan intelligence numerous Taliban leaders were attending, but according to local sources it was simply a meeting of local tribal chiefs being held in an attempt to resolve a mining dispute. The aerial bombardment slaughtered 44 people. One was a member of Hafiz Gul Bahadur's Taliban faction (who happened to be a local tribal chief), but others were civilians and tribal chiefs unconnected with the Taliban and who hitherto had no dispute with the Americans, but whose kinsmen were subsequently added to the ranks of their bitterest enemies. Thousands took to the streets in protest marches in Islamabad, Karachi, Lahore and Islamabad, and the US embassy and consulates offices were forced to close.

Drone strikes after 2004 numbered only a few per year and a majority succeeded in taking out alleged militant leaders of one sort or another. However, the number of strikes rose sharply from 36 in 2008 to a peak of 122 in Pakistan alone in 2010, only a few of which succeeded in taking out a militant leader of any sort. Accurate statistics are hard

to find, but according to the UK's Bureau of Investigative Journalism, an award-winning independent not-for-profit organisation, between 2,548 and 3,549 people have been killed since the strikes in Pakistan began, the majority in and around the one region of Waziristan. Of those, up to 890 were civilians, including 168-197 children, with some 1,177-1,480 injured. Of those killed only 55 people who had been confirmed as 'high-value' terrorist targets.

One individual interviewed in Waziristan by Professor Ahmed and his team of researchers said "Every day for us is like 9/11". This is not much of an exaggeration, bearing in mind that drone strikes have been combined with strikes from aircraft and helicopter gun-shops, making aerial bombardment, or the threat of missile strikes from drones hovering invisibly above a normal part of daily life.

The use of drones has raised urgent arguments and debates on issues of accountability: especially since hitherto most of these strikes were covertly authorised by the C.I.A., in consultation with the White House, rather than by the Pentagon: by men in suits rather than by men in uniform. Muslim tribal societies are targeted simply because as 'possibly sympathisers with Al Qaeda' this is approved by the American Patriot Act of October 2001. In this sense they are unique. But one wonders how long it will be before the definition of 'possibly sympathisers and supporters' begins to be drawn wider and non-Muslim tribal peoples living on the periphery become targets too.

Professor Ahmed's book suggests that what these peripheral people need to be granted is not democracy and development (defined in western terms), but a measure of autonomy. Most tribes on the margins of centralised states encounter rarely enjoy any benefits from government control, which in their experience only exploits them. For this reason, their demands for autonomy amount to little more than a demand for the rights of freedom, liberty and justice afforded to people everywhere else.

But how practical is this policy? The policy was first tried with some measure of success by the British colonial Government of India of

Lord Curzon, who at the beginning of the twentieth century granted tribesmen on the north-west frontier freedom from interference provided that they guaranteed security in the border areas of India and Afghanistan. This was a system which Professor Ahmed inherited when he served as the Political Agent in Waziristan back in the 1907s, but which has now fallen into disarray. Worse still, the assassination of tribal leaders has left many of these regions far more chaotic than they were before, with few salient points of authority remaining with whom negotiations can be attempted.

The question must also be asked as to whose interests would be served by a negotiated solution. Clearly the tribal peoples described by Professor Ahmed might benefit, and there could be a reduction in the number of retaliatory terrorist attacks that threaten daily life, most particularly in Afghanistan and Pakistan. However, military engagement remains the preferred the solution, for powerful economic as well as political reasons. Clearly there are many in the USA and in Pakistan who benefit from the maintenance and continuation of a state of war. One wonders therefore how seriously the powers that be will consider the important and extremely valuable solutions that Professor Ahmed proposes.
