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## The burqa comes off

Louis Dupree

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*Kent Hawley*

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## THE BURQA COMES OFF

by Louis Dupree

Kabul

September 9, 1959

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Phillips Talbot  
Executive Director

One of the most important events in the history of modern Afghanistan occurred just as we arrived in Kabul. With no previous public announcement or official proclamation, H.R.H. Prime Minister Sardar Mohammed Daud, H.R.H. Sardar Mohammed Naim, other members of the Royal Family, the Cabinet, and high-ranking Army officers appeared with their wives and daughters on the second day of Jeshyn (August 24-30), the week-long celebration of Afghan independence. The faces of the women were exposed for all to see, "the equivalent of being naked," my wife put it. The Jeshyn crowds, which included representatives from all over Afghanistan, cheered. Just 30 years ago, King Amanullah of Afghanistan toppled from his throne because he issued firmands (royal commands) which decreed the equality of women, abolished the burqa, and established mixed schools. Amanullah lost his kingdom because the mullahs (religious leaders) were against him on this issue, and because he did not have the support of the Army. Afghanistan was one of the few modern Muslim countries in which the custom of purdah had the aura of religious sanction.

Purdah is the isolation of women from all men except their immediate male relatives. The burqa, or choudry, a sacklike garment which covers the entire body from head to toe and has an embroidered latticework permitting limited vision, veiled

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women from male contact whenever they left the family compound. (Incidentally, with the steady increase in the number of motor vehicles in Kabul, the limited vision allowed by the burqa makes crossing a street extremely hazardous.)

Nothing in Islamic Law supports purdah. Indeed, the Prophet Muhammad tried to alleviate the harsh lives of the nomadic Arab women, but custom proved stronger than religious reforms. The origins of purdah are obscured by legend and rationalization. Some say it is to protect pretty women from the lustful glances of evil men. Others contend the burqa maintains the equality of women, for all women look alike in a burqa. This is not entirely plausible, however, for the more wealthy women can afford relatively chic burqas, if such a thing is possible. Probably the real reason for purdah and the burqa can be traced to the days when strong men openly and freely stole women. Husbands and fathers had to keep their women under lock and key because they were valuable economic assets. Wives cost money, daughters were worth money, and at times, marriages brought about favorable political alliances. This function of purdah is all but lost in modern societies, but customs die hard, especially if supported by the most conservative of institutions in any society-- religion. The role of woman in Islamic societies is definitely subordinate to that of man, but this is true in many cultures because of woman's child-bearing function.

Earlier efforts have been made by the present regime to integrate women into some aspects of Afghan life, especially outside Afghanistan. Women who accompanied their husbands overseas never wore the burqa outside Afghanistan. Two or three years ago, several girl singers and announcers were tested on Radio Kabul. The initial flurry of protests soon died down and now several women work on the radio staff. Two years ago a delegation of Afghan women attended a conference of Asian women in Ceylon, the first Afghan group to do so. Within the last year, a woman has been sent to the United States as a member of the Afghan UN delegation, and another to the Afghan Embassy in Washington.

LOUIS DUPREE has specialized in the Indo-European-speaking areas of the Middle East and Central Asia with emphasis on Afghanistan and Iran. He was graduated in 1950 from Harvard University which also awarded him the M.A. degree in 1953, and the Ph.D. in 1954. Among the anthropological field trips he has made are two to Afghanistan for the American Museum of Natural History, and one to Iran for the University of Pennsylvania. Dr. Dupree has served as Associate Professor of Middle Eastern Studies at the Air University and, at the time of his appointment to the AUFS in 1959, he was Associate Professor of Anthropology at Pennsylvania State University. In the same year he was also elected a Research Associate of the American Museum of Natural History. Among his published works are four monographs and over 50 articles and reviews. Dr. Dupree's schedule for the AUFS called for a series of reports on Afghanistan and adjacent areas.



Several tests were conducted prior to the 1959 Jeshyn celebration, mainly under the supervision of Cabinet Minister Sayyid Mohammed Qasim Rishtiya, President of the Press Department. Some four months before Jeshyn about ten women were sent by the government to work as receptionists and hostesses for Ariana Airlines. Obviously, they could not wear burqas in this work. They were accepted. Two months before Jeshyn a class of girls finishing the sixth grade were asked if they wanted to work in the Kabul china factory. "Positions are available if you want them," they were told. Forty girls volunteered and all obtained letters of consent from their parents. They worked alongside men and were accepted with only the mildest of protests. Unveiled women operators were also employed by the telephone exchange before August 25, 1959, the date of the great public unveiling.

Prime Minister Daud, chief architect of the plan to remove the burqa, planned his actions as carefully as he would a military campaign, because he fully realized the dangers involved. According to his close associates, he had been contemplating such a move for two or three years. The Muhammedzai family had learned its lesson well. No firmans were issued this time, so the ultraconservative mullahs had no specific decrees against which they could protest. Daud, himself a career officer and Minister of War, realized that only the co-operation and support of the Army could insure the success of such a bold step. About a month before Jeshyn, the Prime Minister called in his generals and informed them that the Royal Family, including His Majesty King Mohammed Zahir Shah, wished to abolish the burqa at all costs. "How can we progress when six million of our people are kept in the darkness of pardah?" he is reported to have said. He told the generals that they must be in the forefront of the movement to remove the burqa, that during Jeshyn, members of the Royal Family, the Cabinet, and high-ranking Army officers would appear before the public with their wives unveiled. This would indicate official approval of such behavior but would not necessitate official action. The generals were further encouraged to appear with their wives often during Jeshyn and in the weeks following so the public would get used to the idea.

In the two weeks since Jeshyn more and more Afghan women are seen in public without their burqas, especially when visiting friends at night. They usually go in pairs, or accompanied by their husbands or another male relative. A rather common daytime sight is several women, some with burqas, some without, walking down one of Kabul's fine sidewalks. Unveiled women, always accompanied by a male relative, flock to the local movie theatres. Several Afghan women have also appeared for the first time at official functions held at the new annex of the Hotel Kabul. No incidents have occurred to mar this transition period.

Another reason for Amanullah's failure 30 years ago was the lack of an educated class to support progressive economic and social reforms. An Afghan source estimates that only 1,000 Afghans were "educated" (i.e., literate) in 1929; now approximately 500,000 Afghans are "educated."

Ultraconservatism exists in certain families, but within these families the younger generation tends to be progressive and does not hesitate to disagree with their less-educated parents and grandparents. Some Kabul residents "from the villages" (i.e., large landowners in the provinces) say they intend to wait "one or two weeks more" before allowing the women in their family to go about unveiled.

One key reason behind the unveiling of women is economic. Afghanistan needs more and more educated people if it is to continue with its economic development. The Government realizes it cannot count on foreign aid forever. Jobs go begging in government offices because no qualified personnel can be found. I know of one office which has 25 vacancies. Educated women will soon be stepping into many of the clerical jobs. Up to now, almost all household servants have been men. Women can easily and efficiently move into these positions, thus freeing large numbers of men to join the labor force in Afghanistan's expanding economy.

My wife and I were fortunate in being invited to a popular public eating place by some Afghan friends on the night of September 4, when more history was made. For the first time unveiled women sat down in a public restaurant to eat with men. The chief instigator was an Army general, who appeared with his wife and dined with us and an Afghan couple, a businessman and his wife. Friday night had been chosen purposely because Friday is the Sunday of the Islamic world and large crowds always gather in public places. Word had spread, and soon five other women came with their husbands and sons to eat or to have tea. All the women wore the costumes accepted for the transition period: no facial makeup, dark glasses, head scarf, a duster or raincoat or a dress tailored to resemble a coat, and gloves. Some wear the dark glasses indoors, most do not. Since that time we have attended dinners in private homes at which mixed couples have eaten together for the first time.

Several observers estimate that up to 20 per cent of Kabul's women now go unveiled in public. This figure is probably too high at the present time, but it reflects the general optimism that the removal of the burqa is permanent, and that soon burqas will be seen only in museums.

Louisa Argyre