

THE HAZARA

Monika Bulaj

Introduction by Janine di Giovanni

It was 2009. We had left early that rain-soaked morning, long before daybreak, loading our jeep in Kabul with plastic containers of water and petrol, spare tyres and food. I brought a sleeping bag in case we broke down on the twelve-hour journey; my driver had a gun to ward off bandits and kidnappers. We were going to Bamiyan, where Genghis Khan had tried to destroy every living thing and which is the ancient home of the Hazara Shias, the third largest ethnic group in Afghanistan.

The road was bumpy, uncomfortable, endless. Mile after mile of vast earth and sky, mud houses; women in burkas working the fields in the rain. Part of the sense of remoteness and isolation is deliberate: Bamiyan lies between the immensity of the Koh-i-Baba mountains and the Hindu Kush, making the Hazara less vulnerable to enemies.

Throughout history, the Hazara have been persecuted, scorned, outlawed, forced from their lands and religiously and ethnically cleansed. In the 1990s, the Taliban committed atrocities against them in the central and northern parts of Afghanistan, and killed their leader, Abdul Ali Mazari. Then in March 2001, they destroyed the Hazara's vast and ancient Buddhas to world protest. But the Hazara survived and the people I met once I reached Bamiyan were not victims. They were proud, resourceful, fierce in their own way.

When I was introduced to the then governor of Bamiyan Province, Dr Habiba Sarabi, a former minister of women's affairs in Afghanistan, she told me that even though she was the daughter of an illiterate mother, she was encouraged to read and write. She was mocked as she walked to school alone, her books tucked under

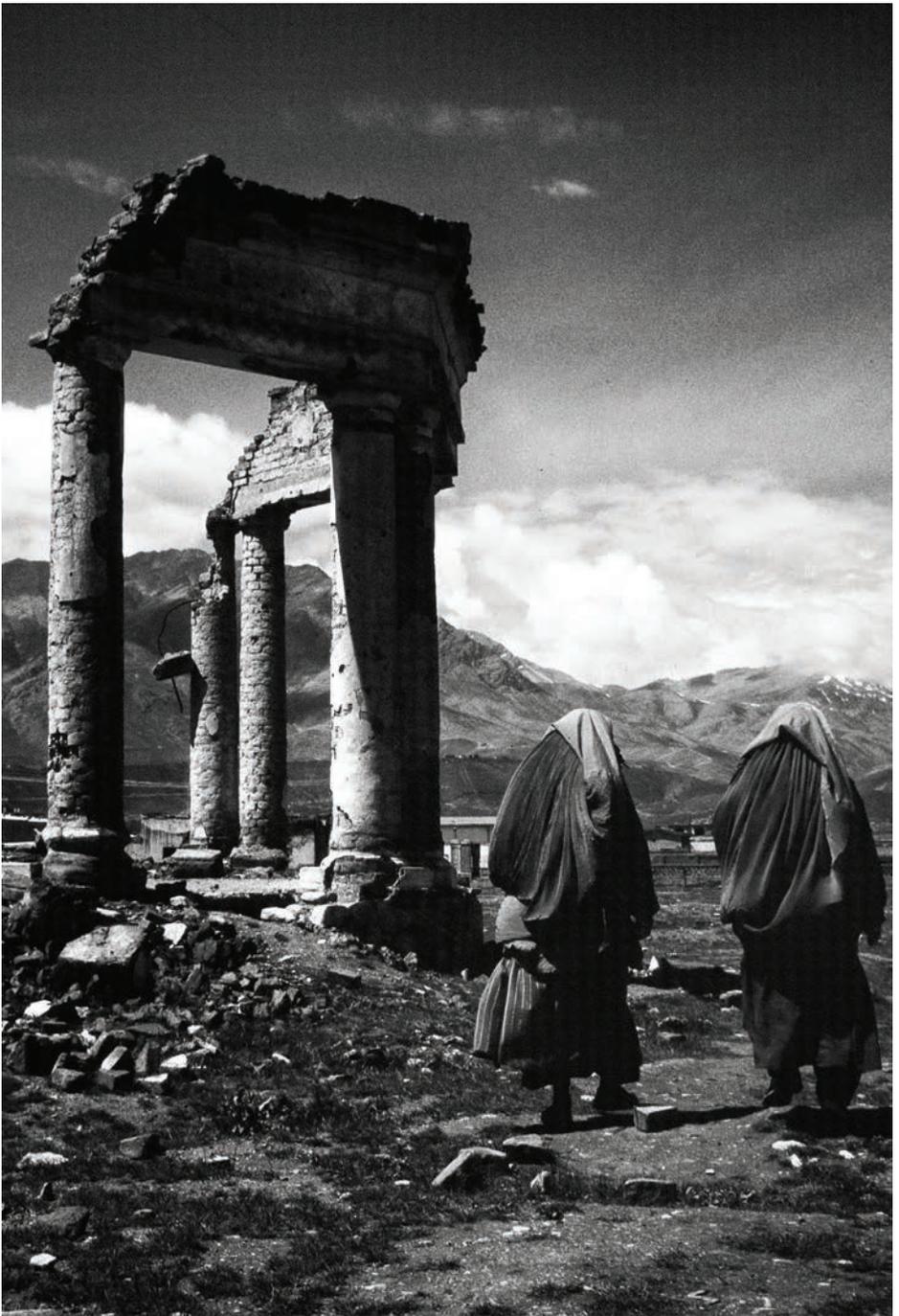
her arm. But she fought for her education, and she fought for her daughter to have an education, which was denied during the Taliban years. Later, she introduced me to other Hazara activists who were fighting for their rights and their place in Afghanistan.

To document the Hazara in these photographs, Monika Bulaj travelled through places like Herat, Mazar-e-Sharif, Bamiyan, Jalalabad, Faisalabad, Balkha and Kunduz in 2009 and 2010, capturing the Hazara's daily life. She photographed them against the stark and sometimes terrifying beauty that surrounds them: mountains and forests; bleak landscapes and trash-filled cities. There are women praying in Shia mosques; Hazara men with their beloved birds; the ancient Shia rituals performed during holy days. There is Hazara family life and the sorrow of the refugee camps; the blank, closed faces of the opium-addicted Hazara men near Herat; the ancient ceremonies of the dead. She follows the children at school; the families in shared taxis; the Hazara quarters of Kabul.

Her work reminds me of the late Eve Arnold, the first woman to join Magnum Photos in 1957, who also travelled alone into challenging territories. Arnold spent years tracing China, then a closed country, in the 1960s, going deep into remote areas by train and bus, solo except for her cameras. Bulaj's granular depiction of the Hazara is as important as Arnold's images of the forgotten people in Mongolia.

Bulaj chronicles the Hazara ancestors, their heroes, but also gets to the heart of their dilemma: they are still frequently targeted by those who wish to destroy the building of democracy in Afghanistan. On 22 April 2018, an Islamic State terrorist blew up a voting registration centre in a western Kabul neighbourhood predominantly occupied by Hazara. About fifty-seven people, including children, were killed and more than a hundred were injured.

The Hazara are trying to become important forces in local elections and produce new leaders who can develop the practices of democracy and overcome the traditions of ethnic and tribal competition. Through Bulaj's work, we see the Hazara – ancient, battered, but strong – emerging. ■



Two Hazara women walking close to the ruins of Darul Aman Palace, which was built by order of King Amanullah Khan in the 1920s. Khan introduced the first modern constitution to Afghanistan in 1923, which guaranteed equal rights for men and women, and promoted the education of women as well as compulsory elementary education for all. This constitution was abolished after Khan's forced abdication and the palace has since been through several cycles of damage, destruction and reconstruction.



Ziarat-e-Sakhi, Kabul. Shia Muslims (Hazara and Pashtun) beat themselves with metal chains on one of the holiest days of the Shia year, Ashura, observed on the tenth day of Muharram.



Hazara women pray, Kabul.



Women entering a Shia mosque, Kabul. Shia mosques are frequently the target of terrorist attacks, especially during the month of Muharram and during Nowruz.



Charahi Qambar, a refugee camp on the outskirts of Kabul. More than 7,000 internally displaced Afghans live here, originating from provinces such as Helmand, Kandahar and Ghazni.



Street view, Kabul.



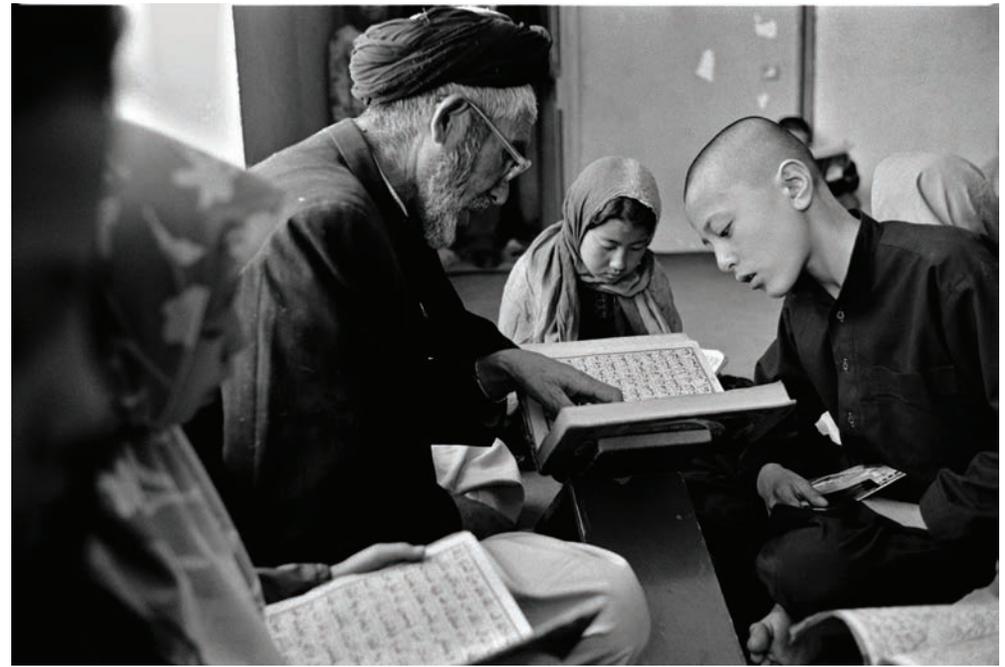
Boys playing with kites close to Sultan Mohammed Khan Telai Mausoleum, Kabul.



The sepulchre believed to be of Ali ibn Abi Talib, Blue Mosque, Mazar-i-Sharif.



Hazara neighbourhood, Kabul.



A madrasa (Islamic school) for Hazara children, Kabul.



Fatima Ahmadi, a Hazara university student, 2009. A year after this photograph was taken Ahmadi started working as a journalist for Afghan TV. She now lives in Europe.



At dawn in Kabul, women and children await the nocturnal procession of thousands of Sunni men mourning Husayn ibn Ali, the grandson of the Prophet Muhammad, killed at the Battle of Karbala in the year 61 AH (AD 680).



Hazara children look out over a Shia neighbourhood, Kabul.



The nocturnal procession of thousands of Sunni men in mourning during Ashura, Kabul.



Bird market, Kabul.



Hazara women during the celebration of Ashura, Kabul.



The nocturnal procession and ecstatic prayers of thousands of Sunni men in mourning during Ashura, Kabul. The suffering of Husayn ibn Ali and his family inspires piety among both Shiites and Sunnis; the Shiites practise self-flagellation, the Sunnis practise *dhikr*, a series of devotional acts in which short phrases or prayers are repeated in remembrance of Allah.



Hazara walking through the Bamiyan valley, close to where the largest of the two statues of the Buddha once stood. The statues dated from the sixth century AD, and were destroyed by the Taliban in 2001.



Boys playing near the Sultan Mohammed Khan Telai Mausoleum, Kabul.



A Hazara man embraces a sacred pole raised during Nowruz. Ziarat-e-Sakhi, Kabul.



A Hazara patient at the International Committee of the Red Cross Orthopaedic Centre, Kabul.



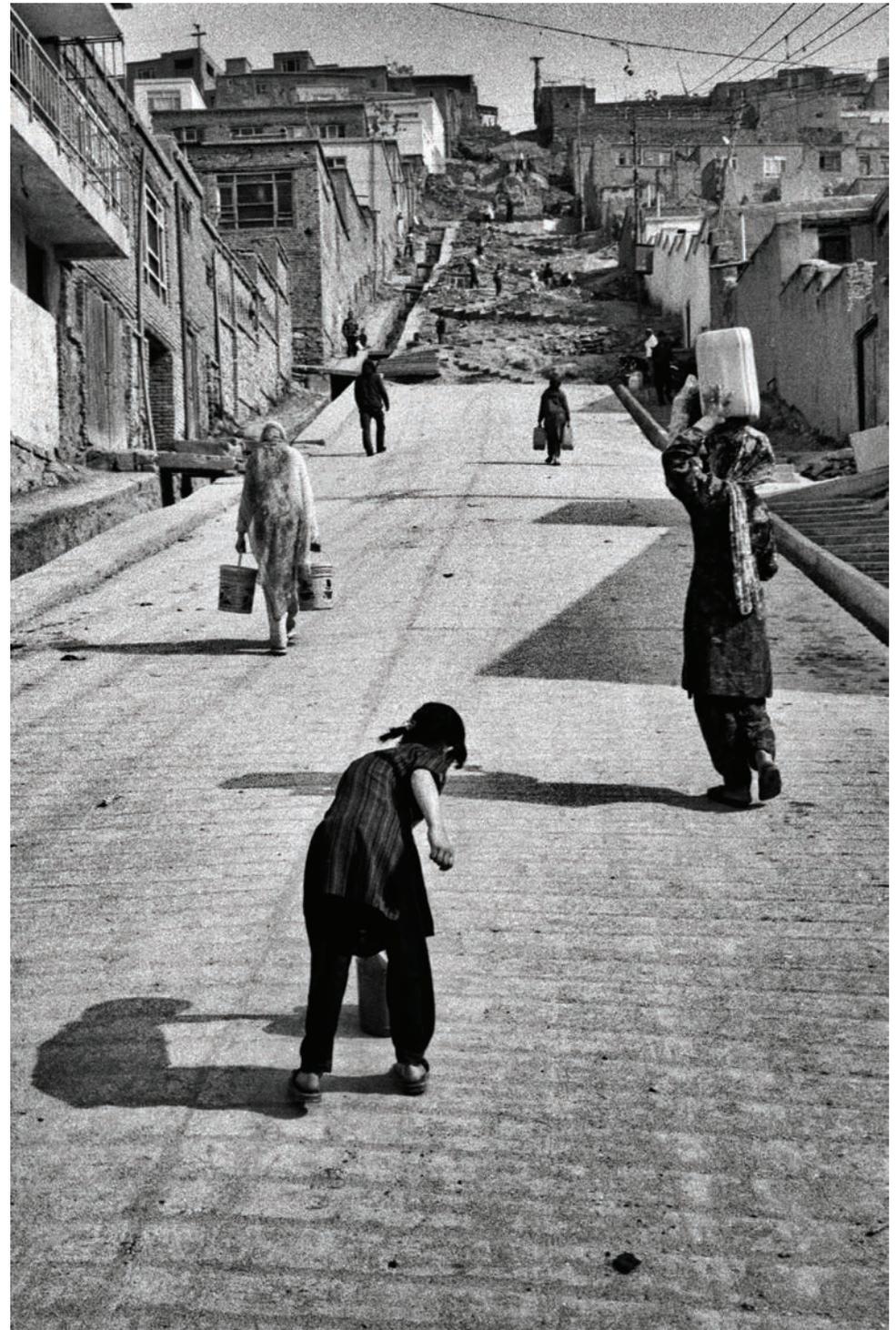
Boys playing by the Sultan Mohammed Khan Telai Mausoleum, Kabul.



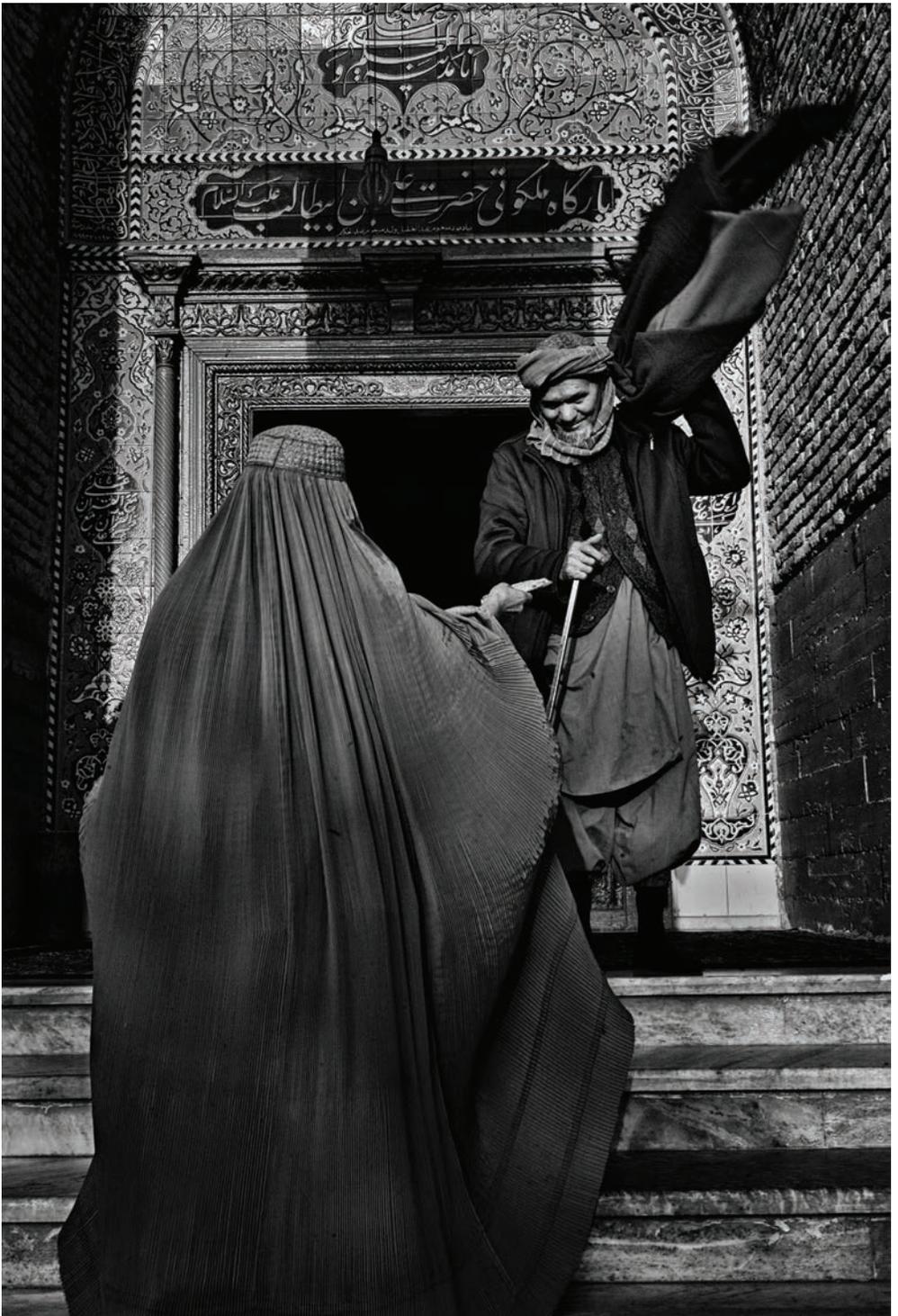
Chindawol Heights, a Hazara neighbourhood. During Ashura, Shiite children beat their chests while wearing green tunics.



28 April 2009, Chindawol, Kabul. For the first time in sixteen years, the public celebration of Mujahideen Victory Day was cancelled and a curfew was imposed by President Hamid Karzai in response to an attempt on his life during the previous year's celebrations. Mujahideen Victory Day pays tribute to the mujahideen rebel forces who overthrew Mohammad Najibullah's socialist government in 1992. The holiday evokes a sense of heroic patriotism in some Afghans and memories of the devastation of civil war in others.



Women and children walk long distances to fetch water, Kabul.



Ziarat-e-Sakhi, Kabul.