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**Synopsis:** Kilburn’s article provides interesting insights into the dynamics of Afghan society from the point of view of someone who has worked closely with Afghans. He does not see Afghans through westernized lenses and avoids value judgements. Based on his intimate knowledge of Afghanistan, he offers suggestions on how the international community can really help Afghanistan. Sometimes he falls into the trap of seeing Afghanistan as an honourable, tribal society along the lines of Levi-Strauss’ noble savage.

**Quotes: “**Afghan society, being tribal, is built upon the foundations of family bloodlines and trust. The tribe almost always sticks together, since they are family. Family is virtually everything in Afghanistan. Trust is the other building block of the society. While the Afghans may trust family immediately, outsiders need time to earn the trust of the tribal members.

Because of the structure of Afghan society, time in Afghanistan is not about minutes and seconds; it is about relationships. If the person they are conversing with is important to them, then they will invest time in that relationship. If the person they are talking to is to be trusted, then it is only proper to demonstrate to them the importance of that trust. To an Afghan, the relationship is more important than being on time for a meeting – especially if that someone is not as important in the larger scheme of things. To an Afghan, time is not money. Rather, time is relationship building, about building and maintaining trust.”

**“**Howeverthey have adopted ideas and customs from other cultures, and adapted them to suit living uder an Islamic culture in a forbidding land. Throughout their history, they have resisted the imposition of foreign ideas, but have gladly embraced foreign ideas that have thrived in their culture. Therefore, to be successful in our dealings with the Afghans, the SAT members had to resist the tendency to impose ideas, and, instead, had to lay out a menu of options, allowing them to take what they wanted.

Afghans are proud, yet humble individuals. They are intelligent; they are hard-working; and, most importantly, they are a sovereign people. In my dealings with the Afghans during my year in the country, I learned that to be successful, one must propose an idea or a way of doing something, and then wait. The Afghans would think about things, and then come back to you with a viewpoint as to how to adapt the concept to their circumstances. The next step was to help them implement their concept, slowly building their capacity to sustain the process so that it became their way of doing business. This manner of doing things requires time, and it means that any given individual cannot implement a lot of concepts in one brief year. However, if one were to implement the processes and procedures properly, and build their capacity, the Afghans would be both willing and able to implement follow-on concepts with ever-lessening support.”

“Afghanistan is not so much a country as it is a patchwork of competing tribes. Putting a government together here has nothing to do with the effectiveness of the appointees. Rather, it consists of ‘buying’ the support of various tribes and ethnic groups by making sure they are represented in the government at various levels. The Durranis have stayed in power, and continue to stay in power, not by force of character, but by sharing government positions with other tribes who can either help them, or must be kept close for other reasons. Afghans believe in the philosophy, “Keep your friends close, and your enemies closer.” Although the West complains that many warlords and war criminals are in government, there is a reason for that. It has either to do with alliances, or keeping somebody close enough to keep a watchful eye upon them. The international community will not change these realities of Afghan politics. The tribal culture is too entrenched, and centuries of invasion and war have taught them that their culture is one of their strongest survival tools.”

“Social and human capital development is much more difficult, much slower, and, with respect to the long-term health of the country, is much more important than infrastructure. The international community is too focused upon reconstructing Afghanistan – i.e. building buildings. In other words, the international community has to stop trying to rebuild Afghanistan, and start rebuilding Afghans.”