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Brandon Hensley
Eastern Illinois University

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New Age, Old Discourse: *National Geographic*, Orientalism, and Coverage of Afghanistan in

the 21st Century

Brandon Hensley

Eastern Illinois University

Abstract

This paper explores *National Geographic* magazine's coverage of Afghanistan in 2002. In total, 7 of the 12 issues from 2002 have articles about Afghanistan regarding the war, continuous hardship and unrest, and an Afghan woman refugee with green eyes who was on the cover in 1985 and disappeared until 2002. Through a critical examination of these articles as textual representations of the Orient, I intend to draw upon Said's framework of Orientalism to explore how the discourse in *National Geographic* coverage of Afghanistan is embedded in a hegemonic reproduction of the indigenous other and the West's "benevolent" role in stabilizing and assisting those in the region.

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For more than a century, the yellow-framed cover of the *National Geographic* periodical has captured the imaginary of the “other” for American consumption and interpretation. Darling-Wolf and Mendelson (2008) acknowledge, “More than any other publication, *National Geographic* magazine has taught Americans about the world around them” (p. 286). During its long history in the United States, the National Geographic Society has positioned itself as one of the foremost educational and scientific mass media companies (Abramson, 1987; Lutz & Collins, 1993; Schulten, 2000) garnering a widespread readership that is now international in scope, with editions published in 25 different languages (Darling-Wolf & Mendelson, 2008).

Along with its storied tenure, *National Geographic* has amassed a reputation for being a credible lens through which to view cultures, especially those abroad. The magazine has given extensive coverage of the Phillipines (Tuason, 1999, Hyndman, 2002), South Africa, and the Middle East (Lutz & Collins, 1993, Steet, 2000), to name a few. The focus of this paper is on coverage of the Middle East, Afghanistan in particular, during 2002. This was a pivotal year in the United States, with the memories of 9/11 still fresh and the ‘War on Terror’ being fought (initially and to the present day) in Afghanistan.

By examining articles on Afghanistan that appeared in 7 of the 12 issues of *National Geographic* magazine during 2002, I intend to explore a continuing Orientalist discourse vis-à-vis predominantly Islamic countries that has not changed since Edward Said’s (1979, 1997) seminal work on Orientalism. Drawing upon Said’s exegesis as a framework, this paper will review the texts, critique their underlying reconstruction of Orientalism and use

of “othering” strategies, and discuss the sociocultural implications of reinforcing Orientalist discourse in the 21st century.

Islam, Refugees, and War: *National Geographic’s* Afghanistan in 2002

In 2002, Afghanistan was first depicted in the January issue of *National Geographic*, within the article “The World of Islam.” The picture introducing the article is taken in Afghanistan, with the caption reading, “Worship and study go hand in hand in Bamian Province, where classes meet in a mud-brick schoolhouse” (Belt, 2002, p. 77). A group of schoolchildren (all boys) is shown sitting on the floor of a thatched mud structure with straw and dirt strewn about; apparently this school has no desks. They are all pouring over tattered textbooks, with one of the boys standing up, presumably reciting a passage to the teacher (who is not visible in the photograph).

Right away, the reader is met with a “classroom” environment that is starkly different from even the poorest of school districts in the U.S. The children appear tired and resigned in the dark hut where they are studying. The scene is so markedly different from the prototypical American classroom that it invites an “othering” of the children, a juxtaposition that positions Afghans primitively. This image marks the continued implementation (in 2002) of an Orientalist lens that has essentially remained unchanged after a century of reproduction. As Jansson (2003) notes:

Construing the Orient as savage, backward, and premodern permitted the Occident to conceive of itself as cultured, progressive, and modern. In this way, the Orient is “othered” in order to produce a privileged occidental identity. The discourse of Orientalism produces a *binary* that privileges

European [and American] culture over the culture of the Orient and occidental identity over oriental identity. (p. 351, emphasis added)

The Belt (2002) article includes a map of the Middle East that folds out, with brief captions for each of the predominantly Muslim countries. Under the Afghanistan caption, Belt notes, "Executions are common; women have virtually no rights" (p. 79). Belt goes on to mention that Muslim nations such as Afghanistan "are poor and increasingly demoralized by their position in the world. Few Muslim societies enjoy the range of civil liberties that Western nations take for granted..." (p. 85).

These statements, attributing violence, inequality, and oppression to the Islamic world are steeped in Orientalism, coinciding with the "orthodox working coverage of Islam" (Said, 1997, p. 154) that pervades such discourse. Afghanistan is not singled out in this article, rather it is collapsed into the barbaric, ubiquitous community of the "world of Islam", a monolithic grouping that is inferior, yet large and powerfully problematic (Said, 1997).

Afghanistan's next appearance in *National Geographic* is in the February 2002 issue. The article, "Central Asia Unveiled," once again features a photograph from Afghanistan, this time in Kabul, the nation's capital. Edwards (2002) describes the central figure (flanked by men who are out-of-focus) in the accompanying caption: "A woman's face emerges in Kabul, newly liberated from repressive Taliban rule. Yet wary eyes expose suspicion forged by war and a region's volatile history" (p. 108).

All readers can see of the woman is her wrinkled face, brown eyes, and blue burka. Once again the introductory image fosters an "othering" of the woman, exotically dressed

and mysterious. The woman's expression also invites a sense of fear and distrust in the environment.

The central focus of Edwards' article is on the seven "Stans" that make up the region: Afghanistan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Pakistan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan. Before devoting two pages to each nation, Edwards states, "After 23 years of conflict Afghanistan is the neediest of all, a gutted shell of a state with millions of land mines embedded in its earth" (p. 110). This depiction of Afghanistan as the neediest country in the region is a blunt promotion of Eurocentric ideals, especially the notion that Third World nations need the help of the West to "turn themselves around" (Shohat & Stam, 1994).

Edwards attempts to lend credence to his assertions, noting, "Experts say it will take at least a decade to rebuild Afghanistan merely to its spare 1960s development level. And many more years to bring it into the 21st century" (p. 113). By bringing "expertise" into his analysis, Edwards upholds Western thinking in solving the Afghanistan "problem." As Said (1997) suggests, such "expert" assertions are comprised of geopolitics and economic interests on a massive scale, aided by a dominant structure of knowledge production that reifies modernization as the only viable option.

Regarding Edwards' article, it is important to ask what/whose interests are being served by rebuilding Afghanistan and ushering it into the 21st century. By modernizing Afghanistan, is the intent to transform it from an "inferior" nation into a mini-America? While Edwards does not explicitly state this as the end goal, he certainly leads readers to a narrow interpretation of Afghanistan as a "foiled democracy" (p. 112) in need of American aid, modernization, and Western culture.

Afghanistan again emerges in the April 2002 issue of *National Geographic*, this time as a cover story. The focus in this edition is on an Afghan refugee. The woman, completely covered in a purple *chadri*, holds a picture of a young girl with radiant green eyes, a picture of herself from a 1985 issue of *National Geographic*. Under the picture is the word "Found," in red letters, indicating the woman's "return" after 17 years of exile. The bright *green* eyes of the young girl gaze directly at the reader in a photograph on the Contents page, and under the heading "Special Report," the caption says, "Her eyes have captivated the world since she appeared on our cover in 1985. Now we can tell her story" (p. iii).

The story, written by Newman (2002), focuses more on her eyes (which are decidedly more European than Middle Eastern) than her struggle: "Her eyes are sea green. They are haunted and haunting, and in them you can read the tragedy of a land drained by war" (p. ix). It would seem, according to Newman, that it is easier to read tragedy from green eyes than the overwhelming majority of brown eyes found in the region. Newman urges the reader to "consider this photograph of a young girl with sea green eyes. Her eyes challenge ours. Most of all, they disturb. We cannot turn away" (p. x).

Do her eyes challenge "ours" because they are more like those of a white person? Why are "we" unable to turn away from her, while millions of other Afghanistan refugees are virtually ignored? The woman's name is not mentioned until several paragraphs into the article and her age is unknown because, as Newman points out, Afghanistan is "a place where no records exist" (p. x).

The only record readers are left with, then, is the *National Geographic* story. It is a story of the woman, Sharbat Gula, hiding in caves, trekking across mountain ranges, and moving from one refugee camp to the next. According to Newman, "It is the ongoing

tragedy of Afghanistan. Invasion. Resistance. Invasion. Will it ever end?" (p. xi). Maybe not, but readers sympathetic to Gula's green eyes can *help*. At the end of the article is a call to send donations to the National Geographic Society's Afghan Girls Fund: "Many women in Afghanistan want the same thing for their daughters that Sharbat Gula wants for hers: an education" (p. xii). This value-laden statement assumes that Sharbat and other Afghan women want to have children that are *educated*--a staple of Western civilization—and there are no ways to accomplish this except through outside help.

By contributing to the fund, readers can trust that *National Geographic* will develop these *uneducated* (and therefore uncivilized) women into properly educated democratic citizens. This blatant politicizing of knowledge and culture reflects Said's (1997) observation that the West (and particularly mass media outlets) press alternatives onto the Oriental other in an attempt to Westernize and "bring civilization" to the other (sometimes with "well-meaning" intentions).

As a follow-up to Newman's article, the August 2002 issue features a brief paragraph in response to a reader's question in the Forum section about whether Gula has been compensated for her images on the magazine's cover. The *National Geographic* editor responds, exemplifying the backhanded benevolence Said (1979, 1997) outlines:

We've provided Sharbat and her family with medical care and other forms of assistance. But they've asked us to respect their privacy by minimizing the specifics we share about that help. Her family has lived a quiet, simple life—they want it to stay that way. Sharbat's children aren't the only ones who need help. We've created the Afghan Girls Fund to provide educational opportunities for the young women of Afghanistan. Sharbat knows this, and is delighted.

Contributions can be made online at nationalgeographic.com. (p. x, original emphasis)

The last article to mention the fund in 2002 is in the October issue, aptly titled "Investing in a Brighter Future." The article cites the 4,100 readers who have contributed more than \$450,000 to the cause. From these donations, "the Society is setting up a center in Kabul to feed, educate, and provide vocational training for several hundred girls ages 12 to 17 who now scavenge for food and beg on Kabul's streets" (p. xxx). Again, the inferior nature of the other is stressed while the benevolence of the white, middle-class *National Geographic* readership is celebrated. The projection of negative traits (such as beggar) onto the other only furthers the production of a specific Oriental identity that is deficient and needy.

Shifting focus, the June 2002 article examines the war on Afghanistan's soil, and is titled "Long Road Home." In this piece, Lois Raimondo explains her overall purpose: "Camera in hand, I set out to document the "collateral" consequences of the war, to find Afghan people and their stories" (p. 86). Terrorism and stereotypical caricatures of Muslims (even her translator, who she grew close to) abound, as she provides a personal account/interpretation of working in a war-torn country full of death and decay: "'Have you seen many people die?' I asked Masud. He exploded in anger: 'This is new for you. War, death, and dying is our way of life.'" (p. 87).

Raimondo recycles the familiar stereotype of the shouting Arab, quick to anger, and supplements her writing with photographs capturing men with turbans and faceless, veiled women; Northern Alliance soldiers marching across the desert with antiquated tanks;

young boys hiding in a Taliban barracks converted to a school, cloaked men praying with guns nearby; and the last picture—a man riding a donkey through a war trench.

Although Raimondo praises the Northern Alliance for their help in assisting U.S. troops, the pictures portray people that are exotic others rather than allies, still hopeless and “behind the times.” The story hails “progress” in Afghanistan in terms of the war against the Taliban, but still permits and perpetuates surveillance, suspicion and fear of Afghani people, even if they are on the “right side.” Raimondo ends the article in precisely this way, stating, “Before I left for Afghanistan, an American friend gave me a gift, six simple words of encouragement... “Be smart. Be brave. Be afraid.”” (p. 105).

The final article on Afghanistan in 2002, entitled “A New Day in Kabul,” appears in the December edition of *National Geographic*. The words and images of the article are conflicting, reflecting at once a cautious optimism and a masked cynicism. While the first photograph is an image of Afghan girls (faces showing) playing volleyball, the very next page provides a wide-angle shot of Kabul, dilapidated, with destroyed buildings and makeshift shanties.

On the second page Edward Girardet (2002) ominously notes, “Life resumes amid ruin and rubble downtown, where new taxis, tea shops, and stopgap reconstruction signal a return to *normalcy*. Yet residents must tread cautiously in this city still laced with land mines—both figurative and real” (p. 92, emphasis added). Girardet, equates modernization and commercialism with normalcy throughout the article, praising the cities rebirth as well as the “onslaught of new cars, hotels, businesses, and investment” (p. 95), great beacons of Westernized culture.

However, all is not well in Afghanistan's capital: "Freedom quickly translates into chaos on Kabul's streets, now clogged with yellow-and-white taxis, UN four-by-fours, and the military vehicles of international security forces" (p. 95). These security forces (mostly from the US) appear to be the main stabilizing force in an inherently unstable and problematic region. Girardet asserts that the struggle for Afghanistan's assimilation into Western ideals is nowhere near fruition, because of the danger still posed by the "enemy": "Recent terrorist attacks in Kabul and elsewhere prove that political violence is an ongoing threat" (p. 97).

The only answer seems to be constant international involvement (which has dwindled down to mostly US involvement) and continued war against the terrorists. Quality of life is secondary to securing the area, and serious concerns are overlooked, as Girardet acknowledges: "Sewage is simply dumped into water channels, polluting wells. Water shortages, poor hygiene, and piles of garbage are boosting the dangers of cholera and dysentery" (p. 97).

Crucial infrastructure issues aside, Girardet still believes "For countless Afghans Kabul's renaissance represents a golden opportunity that cannot be squandered" (p. 97). Even with countless innocent victims, poor quality of life, and ever-present military involvement, Girardet seems to believe that justice and happiness will prevail. Afghanistan apparently *needs* security forces, rigged elections, money from the US, and media companies such as *National Geographic* to shed light on the everyday "realities" of war, death, poverty, and malnourishment, all in the name of a new, Westernized, democratic-appearing Afghanistan.

Discussion: Implications of Orientalism in the 21st Century

Seven years after the publication of the aforementioned articles, American forces are still in Afghanistan, with a troop increase of 30,000 on the way to an eventual “withdrawal” scheduled for late 2011. In many ways, things are the same for the people of Afghanistan as they were in 2002, and prior to that. The nation still has critical infrastructure problems that have not been resolved. Elections are still widely considered rigged and unfair. Deaths of soldiers and civilians continue. Poverty and unrest pervade life in Afghanistan. The US media coverage of Afghanistan, rooted in Orientalism, Eurocentrism, and Western bias is relatively unchanged. Said’s (1997) words that “the same battery of concepts and goals keep turning up. Little is changed” (p. 151) ring true in the 21st century.

The reproduced, embedded and deep-structured role of Afghanistan as Oriental other has—in the case of the *National Geographic* articles I examined—worked to override alternative and positive representations of the mostly Islamic nation and its peoples. Even when the authors and editors of *National Geographic* expressed possibilities for hope and change in the region, those expressions were restrained and contingent upon the help of the West (especially the US), and in some instances upon the assistance of the National Geographic Society itself (i.e. the “found” Afghan refugee and the education fund). As Lutz and Collins (1993) argue in their seminal critique, *National Geographic* magazine is “not at all about the non-western world but about its appropriation by the West, and *National Geographic’s* role in the appropriation” (p. 2).

The Society’s role as credible interpreter of cultural others has been a longstanding one, due to the magazine’s iconic photographs, stories, and unparalleled staying power. According to Darling-Wolf and Mendelson (2008), “*National Geographic* magazine has

positioned itself squarely between educational and entertainment media outlets. Doing so has actually elevated its ability to be a highly believable arbiter of knowledge—speaking with scientific authority” (p. 292). It is precisely this derived credibility that has enabled the magazine to function as a vestige of American colonialism and Orientalist discourse.

As Steet (2000) discusses in her examination of *National Geographic's* historical depiction of Arabs, the Orientalist lens employed by the magazine has been rigid and unwavering:

A century of so little change regarding the representation of the Arab world in *National Geographic* is disturbing if for other reason than that one would have liked to think that certain stereotypes and assumptions eventually die of old age. (p. 154)

Drawing upon Lutz and Collins (1993), the continuity of value-laden assumptions, stereotypes, and Orientalist systems of knowledge has perpetuated a Western dominant and hegemonic worldview in mass-mediated accounts such as those published by *National Geographic* magazine. As Said (1997) aptly questions, “Is it scholarship? Is it evidence? Is it neither?” (p. 152).

Additional questions to add include: How can Orientalist coverage of nations such as Afghanistan be challenged/resisted/changed? Is it possible to conduct scholarly inquiry and to collect “evidence” outside of Orientalism? What are the future directions for fostering dialogue and understanding among ‘the West and the Rest’ that transcend binaries, stereotypes, and hegemonic Western conceptualizations? Tangible, immediate answers to these questions are hard to come by, and certainly need the interdisciplinary

attention of scholars in critical/cultural studies, media criticism, rhetorical theory, sociology, anthropology, and communication studies (among others).

If any sort of demise of Orientalism were to occur, an integral component would seem to be a turn toward critical reflexivity by any Westerner/researcher/reporter studying cultures that have historically been interpreted narrowly and through Orientalist lenses. As Ruby (2000) asserts, "To be reflexive is to... systematically and rigorously reveal their methods and themselves as the instrument of data generation and reflect upon how the medium through which they transmit their work predisposes readers/viewers to construct the meaning of the work in certain ways" (p. 152).

These "certain ways" are hegemonic Western systems of knowledge (re)producing constructs that privilege Orientalist discourse and normalize it at the cultural, institutional, and societal levels. Media companies such as the National Geographic Society have served as bastions of Orientalism and Western colonialism, and this deep-structured discourse is still alive and well into the 21st century. However, the reclamation of identity by the Oriental other is not a lost cause. Malkki (1992) suggests, "identity is always mobile and processual, partly self-construction, partly categorization by others, partly a condition, a status, a label, a weapon, a shield, a fund of memories..." (p. 37).

By focusing critical lenses on the reification of Orientalism, its tenets, and its outlets/voices, scholars can challenge those reproductions and strive for the inclusion of subaltern voices, an "incitement to discourse" that Said (1997), channeling Foucault, believes is necessary to cultivate a community of understanding and equitable coexistence. Even if this scholarly dialogue is a decidedly Western-biased enterprise, it is a step in the right direction, toward unmasking Orientalism and exploring alternative interpretations.

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