



Blue-eyed and white-turbaned, Ahmad, the Tajik camel driver, urges his troop of sandy-colored beasts into a dusty field alongside the Kabul River. Last night he and his fellow camel drovers had rested in a nearby caravanserai—the men in a mud-walled hut, the double-humped Bactrians in the courtyard. Now it is 6 a.m., and they have risen before dawn to offer their camels to the early customers at the Mas-Lakh—Kabul's fascinating Animal Bazaar.

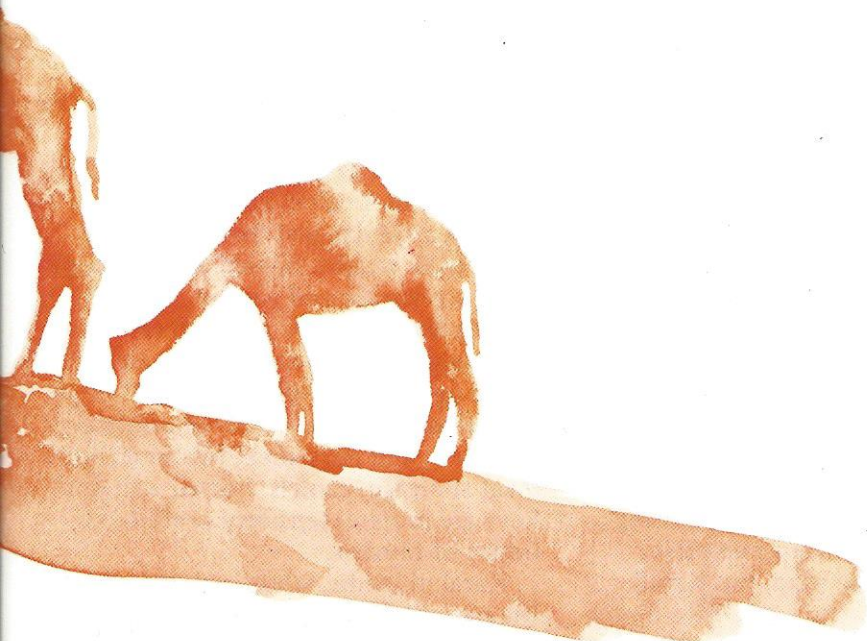
Ahmad and the other Tajik tribesmen have journeyed a long way with their

camel herd from their home in Faizabad, in the northeastern corner of Afghanistan on the other side of the massive Hindu Kush mountains. From there, where the frontiers of China, Russia, India, and Pakistan come together, the camel train picked its way up the Hindu Kush slopes, trekked through cloud-level mountain passes, plodded across the highland plateaus, and descended along the steep-walled river valley to Kabul. The march took 16 days.

Because Ahmad and his companions could ride their camels much of the way,

HOOFING IT TO KABUL'S ANIMAL BAZAAR

BY JACK GOLDFARB



their journey to the Mas-Lakh was easier than most. Many drovers and herdsmen walk over a thousand miles with their cattle, buffalo, sheep, donkeys, or goats to sell them in the Afghan capital where they fetch the best prices. Not to overdrive their flocks, some herders often trek two or three months before they reach Kabul.

In this exotic land where there are no railroads and the only navigable waterway is the remote Amu Darya River (the historic Oxus), which forms the boundary with the Soviet Union, transport

today is a strange mixture of jet planes, medium trucks, and the age-old caravan.

Caravans have been converging on the strategic crossroads of Kabul since ancient times when travelers and goods plied the Great Silk Route from Europe to China and the Central Asian trade lanes from Persia to India. Along these roads came the legendary conquerors and explorers of the past: Alexander the Great, Marco Polo, Genghis Khan, Tamurlane, and Babur.

Today in Afghanistan, primarily a pastoral country, two million out of a

16 million population are still constantly on the move. These nomads not only search for grazing lands but many earn their livelihood as "traveling salesmen." The merchandise they offer is "imported" through border-crossing points at a discreet distance from the nearest customs posts.

Smuggling entire herds of livestock from neighboring countries and leading them hundreds of miles along the backroads, often traveling at night, presents no great hazards if one is to judge by the quantity of "duty-free" quadrupeds that turn up for sale in the Mas-Lakh market any morning.

But the majority of the animals munching breakfast in the rough-hewn troughs and slaking their thirst on the Kabul River embankment have been bred in the widely-diverse regions of Afghanistan: cattle and oxen from mountain-ringed Nuristan near the Khyber Pass, fat-tailed *chari* sheep from Turkestan in the North, Dromedary camels from Kandahar, at the edge of the southern Desert of Death, shaggy goats and white donkeys from the storied Bamiyan Valley in the center of the country.

With a backdrop of vestigial city walls astride Kabul's barren hills, and a rising complex of Russian-built apartment houses just across the road, the Kabul Animal Bazaar presents a primitive hinterland scene in the heart of modern Kabul. It is a nomad encampment with only the black goat-hair tents missing.

Keeping their animals in disciplined order with shepherd's crooks and trimmed twigs are the herder descendants of the Aryan, Mongol, and European peoples who time and again invaded the craggy mountains and wild deserts of this rugged land. Dressed in motley combinations of colorful *lungi* turbans, third and fourth-hand suit jackets, pajama-like trousers, flowing capes, and buffalo-leather *chapli* slippers, the tribesmen wait for sharp-bargaining buyers to show

a calculated "disinterest" in their livestock.

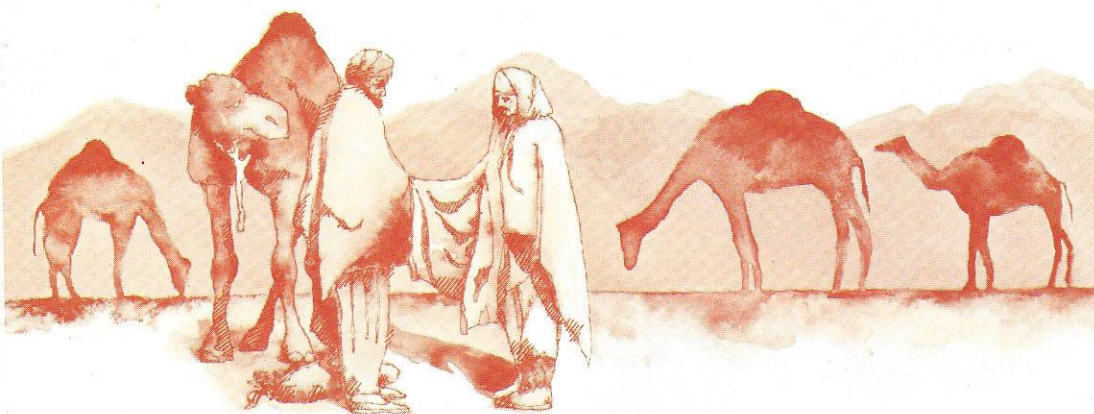
The buyers are butchers, slaughterhouse owners, farmers from nearby villages, Mess Officers shopping for military kitchens, and ordinary citizens who swarm to the market, especially just before religious festivals. At those times, families buy whole animals and divide them according to custom. One-third is set aside for their own use, one-third for other relatives, and the last third is donated to the poor. If one family cannot afford to purchase an entire animal, as many as seven families often pool the cost, each redividing its share the same way.

Though the buyers are mostly city dwellers, they are shrewd determiners of an animal's worth. No pig in a poke is bought here. (In a poke or out, pigs are taboo in this Moslem country.) Sheep and goats are dangled by their legs to judge their weight, horses' and donkeys' teeth are scrutinized for age, and camels are put through their paces to see how well they walk and carry. Most animals are bought for eating. But, even though red camel meat is considered a delicacy by many, and horsemeat fills in during a meat shortage, camels, horses, and donkeys are more extensively preferred as beasts of burden.

Karakul lambs, whose valuable fur is the nation's most prized treasure, are seldom seen in the Mas-Lakh. The government exercises strict controls on the marketing and export of the two million karakul skins sold abroad—mostly to the U.S.—each year.

But fat-tailed, comical-looking *dumba* sheep, whose wool is far coarser, are in great demand for their excellent butter and the tender mutton which Afghani housewives salt away in bumper batches for the harsh winter.

The ritual of bargaining at the Animal Bazaar begins with the buyer and seller goading each other to name an opening figure. When an amount is reluctantly



suggested, the other party goes into histrionic shock. He recovers quickly, however, to declare further negotiations are a waste of time.

Buyer then itemizes animal's numerous defects. Seller extols infinite merits. Cagey interval follows with buyer going through motions of imminent departure.

With a groan of martyrdom seller quotes "last price." From this point on, haggling begins in earnest. As buyer raises and seller lowers, each figure is prefixed by sworn vow of "absolutely final." When bid and asked eventually arrive within close range, seller retires to consult with fellow tribesmen. Both parties now sense closing price. Grudgingly, dolefully, they agree. Afghan paper currency, called *afghanis*, change hands in thick sheafs. The transaction is sanctioned by a *Barakat*, an invocation of divine blessings, and a handshake says Amen. Buyer and seller may now even venture a smile, each convinced he has gotten the better of the deal.

A "sales tax" of a few *afghanis* per animal is paid to the Mas-Lakh concessionaire who leases the field from the government. To cover his over a million *afghanis* annual rent, an impressive number of animals have to pass through this livestock exchange. They do.

For those customers unwilling to walk their purchases home on a tether, little

trucks and gaily-colored horse-drawn *gadis* stand by to cart them.

In between *Barakats*, the animal traders wander off to the *samova*, an adjacent, mud-brick teahouse, where two shiny brass samovars are kept steaming by the bearded proprietor, the *samo-varchi*. Scores of floral-painted teapots line the shelves, and the pungent smell of lamb soup fills the snug room. The tribesmen sit cross-legged on the floor, pouring tea from the *chinaki* teapots, and devouring crumbly slabs of goat cheese and chunks of flat, crusty *nan* bread.

Chattering in a medley of Pashto dialects, the herdsmen, their weather-beaten faces softened in the dim light, huddle in clannish groups.

A tall, aquiline-nosed herder stands up and says good-bye to his friends. Beneath his long, multi-colored coat, and fastened close to his body is a bulge of *afghanis*, the profits from the two bulls and dozen sheep he has sold on this trip.

After his ten-day walk in from Bamiyan and three-day stay in Kabul until all his animals were sold, he longs to be back with his wife and children in the nomad camp in the distant green valley.

But he will be seeing his family very soon. He is boarding the 4 p.m. jet flight to Bamiyan and he will be home 45 minutes later. ☸