

Job^{of a} Lifetime

Danianne Mizzy

Preserving Afghanistan's present and past

If you are one of those people who can think on your feet and seize the moment, then Shaista Wahab's brand of special collections work might be your job of a lifetime. Wahab is a cataloger and the curator of the Arthur Paul Afghanistan Collection at the University of Nebraska-Omaha (UNO) Library. Comprising more than 12,000 titles in 24 languages covering all subject areas pertaining to Afghan life and culture, the Paul Collection is the largest collection of Afghan materials in the West. It is dedicated to the preservation of Afghanistan's history and cultural heritage for current and future generations of scholars.

Capturing history

It seems like fate brought Wahab to Omaha and ultimately to the helm of the Paul Collection. Born in Kabul, Afghanistan, with degrees from Kabul University in history and the University of Delhi in library science, Wahab followed her sister to Omaha after the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, unaware of the existence of UNO's Center for Afghanistan Studies or the Paul Collection. She found work at the UNO library in October 1981.

From a nonprofessional position she has risen to the rank of professor, making unique contributions to the Paul Collection and to Afghanistan's historical record along the way. The first of these was the Afghan Oral History Project. "In the early 1980s," Wahab said, "a lot of Afghan immigrants were coming here as a result of the Soviet inva-

sion. I wanted to record their experiences on audiotape while their memories were fresh. I started the project with the support of the library administration, and I called it the Afghan Oral History Project. I sent letters to Afghans and non-Afghans, people whose lives had been changed as a result of the invasion of the Soviet Union, asking them to participate in the project. A good number of them agreed." Her team collected 24 hours of unique personal experiences in English, Pashto, and Dari (Afghan Persian), the tapes of which reside in the Paul Collection.



Shaista Wahab, cataloger and curator of the Arthur Paul Afghanistan Collection at the University of Nebraska-Omaha.

Afghanistan unveiled

This was far from the last special project for Wahab. In 2002, she got a call from the Asia Foundation. She chuckled as she recalled, "They told me that they had a project training Afghan women to be journalists. I get that kind of call all the time, so I asked what material they wanted to help with the project. They said, 'We want you to go to Afghanistan.' I said, 'I can't believe it. Why do you want me to go?' They replied, 'Well, we did some checking—you have done some oral history projects, and you have a history background. We want you to train the women in collecting oral history interviews and help create a documentary.' I was surprised, but they insisted, so I agreed."

She continued, "It was my first trip back after 23 years. For about four weeks I was working with the French media and the journalism stu-

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dents to film interviews of Afghan women. I didn't expect to leave Kabul, but the students, the French journalists, and I traveled to five different provinces and collected something like 65 interviews. This culminated in a documentary called *Afghanistan Unveiled*. It was well received, and I think it was a really good project."

Archiving Afghanistan's constitutional convention

The next time the Asia Foundation called proved just as much of a surprise. "In November 2003, I got a call from the Asia Foundation asking if I was willing to help with the constitution," Wahab explained. "I didn't know in what area or what aspect of help they needed. They replied, 'We need an archivist to compile the archives of the Loya Jirga' [the constitutional convention]. They wanted me to get ready in ten days. The university and the library have been very supportive. The moment the projects have come, they have told me I can go if I want to."

Wahab spent five weeks of nonstop work at the Loya Jirga. "All the meetings were held in heated tents outside the Kabul Polytechnic Institute. One tent was devoted to the archives and the library. When I got there they had an archivist and they had documents in piles in folders.

These were letters and commentaries by Afghan citizens writing comments about the draft constitution that had been distributed in the villages. I organized all those and then prepared for the constitutional committee to start work on December 14. We were a resource for the delegates and the press. I tried to get them current issues of the newspapers and also collected legal documents from the Ministry of Justice and copies of the old constitution of Afghanistan. There were computers with Internet access that they could use as well for e-mails and news. I hired some photographers to get visual documentation of the entire proceedings. Once I saw what kind of documents we were getting, I prepared procedures for all the different formats like video tapes, CDs, paper documents, and photographs. All of us were working long hours, seven days a week, but we got all the procedures in place before I left. I was really pleased to have been part of the whole thing."

Special collections, special challenges

When I asked Wahab about working with special collections, she observed, "It is a challenge for special collections librarians to look for different aspects of how they can enrich their collection. We can make it more challenging and more interesting by gathering unique materials. For example, the oral histories that I did are unique to this library only. It is history, but if it hadn't been collected then . . . memories fade, people have passed away. One more thing that I did was to compile a bibliography of titles in the collection. Some feel that bibliographies are outdated. You can go to our online catalog and find the titles that we have because most of them are cataloged. But I thought a bibliography would serve a unique purpose, especially for scholars, and would publicize the collection. I, myself, sometimes use the bibliography because it is arranged by subject. Volume One is Pashto and

Dari titles and Volume 2 English and European titles."

Special collections cataloger and curator

Where:

Arthur Paul Afghanistan Collection at the University of Omaha-Nebraska

For more information, visit: library.unomaha.edu/information/collections/apac.php3

. . . and special services

Wahab explained that she splits her time pretty evenly between cataloging and public service. "The collection is used by university students and faculty,

but we also get national and international visitors, mainly government officials, writers, and scholars who come to use the collection. A lot of scholars and writers will send me the table of contents of their books and tell me what they are thinking about writing. They will ask me to suggest, for each chapter, what to use. I will send back a bibliography recommending sources. By the end, when they are done with the research, they often give their papers to the library. We have gotten a lot of good personal collections that way."

There is one last special project to tell you about. Over the years, Wahab received many requests for a book to help learn the Dari language. At this point, I think it will come as no surprise for you to learn that she wrote it herself and found a publisher. UNO and the field of Afghanistan studies has one very special librarian in its ranks. ■