

CHASING THE DRAGON

NARCOTICA

essay

416 pages | 17 euros

Publication date: 2007

Clandestine worlds, meetings, corruption and violence on the drug traffic routes, in the most global of markets. Six years were spent «chasing the dragon» among opium growers and crack houses in Bogotá; on the airplanes of the anti-drug police who spend every night controlling the Caribbean sea as well as under the burqa of an elderly female Afghani heroin addict. From Tagikistan to Colombia, from Pakistan to Liberia, from Guinea Bissau to Myanmar. Alessandro Scotti's pictures form an extraordinary, exciting, painful and sincere action movie.

Alessandro Scotti (1971)

is a journalist and a photographer. He was recently appointed Goodwill Ambassador to the UN. He has worked in more than 20 countries.

His articles and images were published in many magazines in Italy and abroad.

Chasing The Dragon

Alessandro Scotti
Isbn Edizioni
(pp. 11-21)

CONTACTS

Barbara Griffini (Berla & Griffini Rights Agency) griffini@bgagency.it
Sara Sedehi (Isbn Edizioni) sara.sedehi@isbnedizioni.it

PREFACE

My backwards journey along the drug routes had just begun. During the following six years, it would lead me to the four corners of the globe. At the time, though, I had just about entered the second stage, having completed the first part of my job in Colombia. Then, as often happens, an apparently trivial event made me take stock of what I was doing.

The UN organized an exhibition with the pictures I had taken so far in that country. It would be held in the Museo del Chicó, a quaint little building surrounded by a luxurious garden. Sort of a rare sight in Bogotá: in Colombia, an old faithfully restored colonial mansion like that one can be problematic to defend.

I was not involved personally (actually, I hadn't even thought about it), but apparently the authorities were worried about what guests would turn out, as I realized on the afternoon prior to the opening. We had been working on the exhibit design for two days when I noticed a massive deployment of forces outside our windows: armed men in uniform, dogs, rifles...

The people I worked with tried to reassure me. «Nothing to worry about, they're just the anti terrorist squads: they are going to surround the building and inspect it before the opening. Then they will be taking position in the garden, all along the perimeter, and will be staying there as long as the guests are on the premises».

Moments later, one of the soldiers glanced into the installation room. The frames were already hanging on the wall, uncaptioned, and their arrangement was meant to create a gradual introduction and contextualization for the harsher images. I had figured that the violence in some of the pictures might be disturbing, non so much for locals as for foreign visitors: I believed that people living in Bogotá, having experienced drug traffic for decades, would be more familiar with the painful and aggressive quality of some of those documents. And that was what happened, but not the way I had expected.

The soldier checked for a second on his colleagues ransacking the garden, and politely asked us if he could come search the room with his German Shepherd.

He walked around for about twenty minutes; he strolled along the exhibition path and peered at each image, as his dog dutifully followed him on a leash. He was our first, albeit informal, visitor, and I watched him linger over every picture.

Most of the subjects in the pictures were colleagues of his; therefore, his fastidious curiosity seemed only too reasonable.

Once he reached the far end of the hall, he said to me: «Excuse me, may I ask you a question?» He used the over-polite tone soldiers are often mocked for.

«Sure».

«Is this a collection of pictures from World War II?»

«No», I said, surprised. «I took these just a few months ago...»

«And where? Where did you take them? In Afghanistan? Or maybe Iraq?» Clearly, he saw those as symbols of a country at war. And a country at war, especially a long-lasting war, is always light years away.

«Not at all!», I said. «Don't you recognize those places?»

«No, sir. Should I?» he replied, equally surprised.

«I should say so. Many of those pictures were taken here in Bogotá».

«But sir... these are war scenes...»

«And I can assure you that that is your country». He walked closer to one of the pictures, trying to capture some details in the uniform of the portrayed soldier. «Those are your colleagues. You could have been one of them...»

The man gave me a sceptical look. Then he smiled nervously and tugged at the leash. «Thank you», he said, «and have a nice day».

Colombia is a country at war, as are many of the countries where this journey took me. That man, though, showed me the power of adaptation, which makes abnormal things look normal, or at least plausible. It also showed me that this strategy is both a virtue and a necessity which helps us survive, by keeping at a distance all that feels unpleasant or emotionally unacceptable, as if it belonged to a different world: a perceptual anesthesia necessary for living.

Ovidio and his *Metamorphoses* came to mind. Cephissus and the nymph Liriope consult Tiresias about their newborn son Narcissus' future: the soothsayer says that the child will live until he recognizes himself. As soon as man sees and recognizes himself, his life is no longer the same.

Today, objective representations of reality are no longer trusted to be veridical, and rightly so; however, the search for documentary images still represents a unique opportunity for living and establishing relationships. The image can be a trigger for us to transcend our own «visible horizon», a barrier formed by our experience and our culture, which only lets us see what we are willing to acknowledge.

The following pages are an account of a six-year day-to-day experience: during that time, we challenged the idea that the economist John Kenneth Galbraith called «conventional wisdom» and defined as «the natural tendency of man to associate truth with convenience, i.e. whatever does not affect his own interest, well-being and ease». Throughout those years, I had the chance to get insights into the finer subtleties of drug trade and its implications, and I was able to express opinions and propose solutions. More importantly, though, I had the opportunity to pursue a shared experience: a complex *mélange* of temperatures, scents, humors and fatigue which connotes life and its main characters. This opportunity could only be seized, or at least aimed at, by laying down some rules. First of all, I would have to try and ignore any political and moral considerations that might arise in this field more easily than in others.

Everyone has their own recipe for neutrality: mine was to cling to an idea which had fascinated me for years, and which I bumped into, again by chance, at a dinner

at some friends' house. Sitting at our table was a young surgeon, as excited about his profession as anyone who feels invested with a mission. I never saw him again, but that evening he told me about his obsession with «cleavage planes». It happens sometimes: you meet someone so tormented with some subject that you, the listener, become enthralled by it as well. The young surgeon was talking about the septa that separate human internal organs. Septa are paths that a surgeon has to follow to reach the sick area without causing any damage on the way; they are planes between two membranes, which leave enough room for passage and fall back into place, unharmed, when the hand or probe retracts.

I have been looking for them since that evening, across fourteen countries, along the routes of a legendary, myth-loaded business, in the belief that collecting information inevitably means interfering. One should at least worry about the traces and effects that are necessarily left behind. I don't think I was ever able to find those «cleavage planes» the surgeon referred to, though. And I soon realized that all I would take back home was experience, not truth. My only possible approach would therefore be that of a wayfarer.

For a traveler, the objective is the destination; what separates him or her from the target is, at best, unimportant, if not a hindrance. The wayfarer, too, has a destination – not always, though, and not necessarily – but all that matters to him or her is what will be found along the way. Country after country, the meaning of this search has become to meet people and to be willing to pick up whatever I was presented with, so that I could see it, recognize it and rescue it from oblivion.

There was a price to pay, though.

In 1972, in a discussion on photographs of agony, John Berger wrote: «It is generally assumed that its purpose is to awaken concern. The most extreme examples [...] show moments of agony in order to extort the maximum concern. Such moments, whether photographed or not, are discontinuous with all other moments. They exist by themselves. But the reader who has been arrested by the photograph may tend to feel this discontinuity as his own personal moral inadequacy. And as soon as this happens even his sense of shock is dispersed: his own moral inadequacy may now shock him as much as the crimes being committed in the war. Either he shrugs off this sense of inadequacy as being only too familiar, or else he thinks of performing a kind of penance». For those who have experienced and portrayed such moments of agony, this possibility is unavailable. Making up is difficult.

Drugs, drug trade, terrorism and organized crime have become as much part and parcel of culture at large as they have remained connected to local subcultures. If, as the German scholar Wolfgang Schivelbusch wrote, «every society has the pleasure-giving and intoxicating substances that it deserves, needs and can take», then attempting to learn about those substances means approaching and trying to get to know the context they belong to.

Schivelbusch referred to 19th Century artificial paradises. That vision was in time outdone by contemporary reality, which is dominated by induced needs, at once besieged and devoid of both material and cultural means to withstand the pressure of intoxication. The territory where this journey takes place was identified by Baudrillard, who wrote about Mandeville: «A society functions thanks to its vices, or, to a lesser degree, its imbalances: it does therefore not depend on its positive qualities but on its negative qualities». That is what need to be looked into when we attempt to

understand the reality that surrounds us. That is where the restless swarm of consumers described by Zygmunt Bauman hovers around, in a «liquid modernity» in which community has been replaced by individuality.

This book is, in my view, a record of experiences and emotions which shows that seeing and traveling have become inseparable. Because drugs create dynamic and extraordinarily changeable scenarios by interacting with history and culture, the direct relationship between reality and popular film, music and literature has been constantly present to my mind. I realized that every group strives all the more towards culture-evoked myths – both in its outer appearance and in its actions – when it is psychologically repressed.

Colombia looks to the North, the United States, with a mixture of jealousy and bitter pride, as it is considered the «backyard of the White House». At the same time, it is a country where children can be given names such as Usnavy or Onedollar, albeit pronounced the Latin way. A place like this, where staged reality is as tangible as true reality, requires a change of perspective: a vision of experience must be reached through experience itself.

«All that the public knows about drugs, as well as their opinions, originates from the media», writes the German sociologist Günter Amendt. The same was true in my case: cinema, literature and TV feed on war at least as much as war feeds on pop culture. The same is also true for the soldiers in Kabul, where the Friday market stalls are packed with DVDs celebrating heroic deeds in invented battles. It is equally true for the petty traffickers evoking Scarface all over the globe. It is true for the rhetoric used in the descent into hell of Christiane F. and many other junkies I met along the way. It is true for Michele Schiavone's villa, seized by the police after his arrest in 1998, which had been inspired by Tony Montana's mansion. It is true for the reverse periscope of the surveillance aircraft scanning the Caribbean Sea for traffickers at night, and that of the Colombian navy submarines, doing the same job beneath them.

Maybe grim prospects becomes more tolerable if they are «projected» onto a film universe, loaded with heroic connotations. Movies such as *Apocalypse Now*, *Rambo* or *Scarface* belong at least as much to social imaginary as recent history does. They outweigh facts, and in some cases have even replaced history in the memory of those who did not witness it firsthand. In reproducing it, experience is modeled on the shared image that evokes it, that image being what our observation presents us.

Music was the constant accompaniment of this book: elating, desperate, sometimes intoxicating music. It was a tool for opposing the system, the poor yet strong voice of the outcasts: Latin music celebrating the narcos, Jamaican music glorifying outlaws and Rastafarians, African music about the global market and the Mob.

Time was my only indispensable luxury. A rare luxury, for which I am indebted to the people who supported this project. Time has convinced me, beyond any reasonable doubt, that every individual is involved in the issue I examine in this book. It has taught me that the lack of tools for tackling that issue results in a cascade of events: discrimination, alienation from the social context, disruption of already precarious economic balances, jeopardizing of community survival mechanisms.

What I was most pleased about was being able to make my contribution to a preliminary form of dialogue between two distant contexts, in the belief that debate is the only plausible approach to problems whose solution is still far from evident.

Everything is blue under the burqa (pp.151-164)

People call her «The Old Lady»: she is only about forty, but someone that age can be considered old in Afghanistan. She arrives with a friend. In fact, all I see is two pairs of battered feet deliberately shuffling along the ground in old Kabul. Their plastic sandals are all that emerges, alternatively, from under the blue pleated flounces of their burqas, these incredible ghost disguises. The two ladies chatter together as they walk, and do so in the special way their outfit imposes: one hand holding the lower part of the burqa keeping it tight and doubled over so it does not sway or graze the floor on the uphill slope, the other hand carrying a plastic bag. They don't turn their heads while talking; they look ahead, slightly craning their necks forward to look beyond the fabric grille that covers their faces. The road is steep.

This area is popular among heroin addicts; they stock up at the market and go get high in the mud houses perched on the flanks of the mountains. Many of them shoot the stuff into their veins; about as many smoke it. The Old Lady belongs to the smoker group.

She used to be married, as a young woman of course (probably when she was 15). Then her husband, an egg seller, fell seriously ill and farsightedly decided to summon a friend, his neighbour at the market. They had become friends sharing that crowded space day in, day out. For that reason, the Old Lady's husband instantly thought of him when he found himself in need. He called him to his bedside: «I haven't got much left to live», he said. «You can have my house, as long as you promise to take care of my wife».

He died soon afterwards, and the Old Lady ended up as the mistress of a man she barely knew, as if she was a mortgage on a 500 square feet apartment near the market. The man has a wife; he also has a house. Both live outside of town though, and a pied-à-terre in Kabul can always come in handy, especially now, at a time so full of uncertainty, when travelling is unsafe and rents in the capital have gone sky-high. The Old Lady wishes she could send him away, but he has found a smart way of defending his human and real estate assets with a limited investment: as little as five dollars a day. That is, the price of three heroin doses.

He provides the funds and sees to it that the money is correctly spent; she smokes and washes his shirts. Looks like a fair enough trade-off. But the destitute Old Lady, who had never tried the big H before, is now unable to back out of it. She would like to, but she can't. «Plus», says her friend, «with all due respect, who would want someone like you now?» «Shut up and mind your own beeswax», says the lady, who may well be old but still has plenty of spunk.

We all have tea together at a common acquaintance's house. Our communication is problematic, but the Old Lady can get herself across. By local standards, she is by no means shy: as she talks, she drinks and munches candy with her face uncovered, and the front part of her burqa wound around her head like a turban. Her friend is still hiding behind her pleated veil: she lifts the hem to bring the cup to her lips, but has to buck every time to avoid spilling hot tea all over herself.

It is time for their dose, and both are beginning to feel the craving. Our common acquaintance will not have anyone do drugs in her house, so we end up on the roof of the building. It is one of those flat roofs, a sort of terrace with floors and parapets in

rammed earth. The terrace is crisscrossed by clotheslines: the owner's wife uses it to hang the washing out to dry.

Only the Old Lady and I climb up to the top, with her leading the way for me: in her plastic sandals, she treads on a wooden board connecting the end of the stairs to the terrace, balancing herself by swaying her burqa from side to side. «Come on!» she gestures at me, then she crouches in the sun, right beside the parapet. Kabul sits amid a vast plain, surrounded by a belt of rugged mountains. The place where we are now is perched atop one of the flanks. Beyond the Old Lady, right beneath her, I can see the whole city; behind us, more houses crawling uphill. She has crouched in a corner, so nobody can see her from the topmost houses. There is no interpreter to help us now: gestures are our only means of communication.

She produces a little white paper packet from inside her petticoat, and starts the preparation, using the floor as a support. Every now and then she looks around, especially towards those houses above. She motions for me to squat: «Down! Down!» Her open hand moves steadily, her palm facing downward. I sit down next to her. «Want some?» she asks knowingly, by reaching me the open packet. «No, thanks», I silently reply, by putting my hand on my chest and bowing slightly. «Come on!», she insists with a smooth tempting gesture, as I put my hand back on my chest and bob my head again, smiling back at her.

While our gestural communication is anything but complex, a discreet formality is retained: a sophisticated form of courtesy which becomes more essential to relational culture the further east one goes.

«I'll do my thing then»; her hand with the packet moves back to her uncovered face, as her gaze is still directed toward the houses on top. With a swift move, she lowers her burqa and suddenly her hand pops out from below, grabs me by the wrist and pulls me gently towards her.

I get a little nervous, as I know I am about to break what is considered an absolute taboo here. The Old Lady tugs at me again and says something softly, which I don't understand. I lower my head down to the ground level; she holds up her skirt a little, and I let it slide past my eyes. With that furtive move, my vision changes: the strong heat of the sun penetrates the fabric. Everything is blue inside the burqa.

The violent glare burns the woman's face through the grille. There is a surreal light all around us, as bright and lively as the cloaks in Pontormo's paintings. The Old Lady is crouching, and I am lying on my back. I can't help smiling: she is so worried that her neighbours might see her shooting up that she doesn't even wonder what they will think of a kafir, a Western infidel, tucked underneath her dress with a Canon camera. My smile is too difficult to explain without words, so I desist.

She picks up her foil sheet, a broken box of matches and starts smoking. After two whiffs, our plaited blue tent is invaded by the sweetish smell of heroin; she inhales slowly, taking long pauses between drags, so that the smoke keeps circulating under the burqa. Such a thick haze builds up that sunbeams penetrating the burqa grille become visible in the short airspace that separates me from her lined face. All outside sounds are muffled.

We keep still for a few minutes, until we hear loud voices and agitated steps. The Old Lady's expression changes for a second. She stops smoking and listens attentively, her pointed glance towards the fabric grille. Then she suddenly uncovers her burqa, releasing a cloud of smoke and exposing me again to the blazing sun. «Ameri-

cans!» she says: no gestures this time. She jumps to her feet and makes for the wooden board and the stairs.

My eyes have gotten used to the dimmed light inside the burqa, so when I lean over the parapet and look down in the street, it takes me a few moments to clearly focus things in the sun. «Those aren't Americans», I turn around towards the stairs and say to our common acquaintance: «Will you reassure her, those guys are Britons, no problem...»

They are British soldiers from Isaf, the NATO International Security Assistance Force. There were clashes and confrontations between Americans and civilians in Kabul a few weeks ago. It all broke out when an AFV collided with a car on the road entering the city from the north. The accident, badly handled, caused many deaths among Afghans and sparked a revolt. The commanders of the multinational force consequently resolved to invest more in their relationship with the population, and invited the British soldiers to patrol on foot. Now they are less threatening, they try to be friendly with kids and wave at people while walking around... but it doesn't look like it's working out. The incident with the Americans is still fresh in the memory, and the women tell their children to get back home. How could these people ever tell an American from a Briton, an Italian from a German in the street? I realize that the Old Lady cannot possibly understand what I just shouted at her: she is already out of sight, at the bottom of the stairs. I will never see her again.

A couple of days later, I get a permit to work with the Americans. As is the case among people with different origins and nationalities, hierarchies and privileges also apply among the Americans who work here. It is not like one of those old-fashioned armies with NCOs, officers and troops (by the way, those are ubiquitous too, even in Kabul): in this army there are intelligence people, armed guards of dubious origin, and PMCs, or mercenaries. I have my first Italian lunch in Afghanistan with them. Every expat who stays in Kabul for at least a couple of months soon finds out that the best-stocked «war supermarket» in the country is Ciano's: a place with prices in euro, where the Italian owner from Livorno sells imported pasta and fresh cheese, among others.

There are at least three expatriate supermarkets, but Ciano's is beyond compare. Apparently, Ciano landed here soon after the allied troops, and his headquarters is a storehouse on the outskirts of the city, a sort of hangar enclosed by walls and protected by guards with guns drawn. It looks like the ammunition depot of an advance guard: more coveted and protected than a strongbox. Afghans have no access to it, and shopping there is an experience in its own right. Cured meats, ravioli, cheese, iPods, all kinds of pistol holsters, fingerless leather gloves and balaclavas: a limited choice of everything an expatriate in a war zone could possibly need or wish for. Products that would be hard to find in Europe are readily available here: across from the pasta sauces, there are some air-tight blast-resistant packages for hauling fragile goods. Alcohol, though, is what has contributed the most to making Italian food so popular among expatriates from all over the world, both in Afghanistan and in all other Muslim countries I worked in.

Italian food is best accompanied by some good wine, and the Italian ritual of aperitivo is a big favourite in places with a boring nightlife. It is often Italians who take it on themselves to preserve world-renowned traditions, whether or not they are locally banned: in Kabul, at Ciano's, you can always find a crate of wine and some illegal beer,

even when the strictest restrictions are in force. According to expats in Teheran, the Apostolic Nunciature in Iran is a major alcohol provider: being exempted from import restrictions on the wine used during the Mass, the Vatican diplomatic mission tends to be generous, if discreet, with the expat community. However, in Kabul as in Teheran, you need connections for that, and you need to be able to prove you are Italian. That is why Italians are usually very popular among foreigners and locals alike. And that is why the American mercenary sitting next to me kindly buys me lunch: cavatelli with chicken sauce.

«You are from Italy, right?», he asks me while I'm eating. «You don't know anyone at Ciano's by any chance?

«Sure», I answer.

«You know, supplies have been running low lately. The Afghan government has banned all imports of alcohol because of some scandals that occurred in the last months. Apparently, even some of the containers headed to foreign embassies were held up at customs. But I think there's something left at Ciano's...»

«So it seems... a couple of friends went there a few days ago».

«Do you think we could drop by the store together once, maybe later or tomorrow? You are Italian... the bottles are off the shelves, they keep them in the backroom now, but they won't say no to an Italian...»

«No problem».

The chicken sauce cavatelli came out of a brown plastic bag leaning on the windshield of the mercenary's Toyota. The car is parked in the middle of nowhere; we are in this wide expanse of dry ground and rocks, waiting for a slippered Tajik pilot in an old Russian helicopter to fly us back home with the troops after a day in the scorching sun. The American is the group supervisor: a former soldier, he is now employed by the Blackwater company to work with the National Interdiction Unit.

Blackwater, a sort of private army owned by an ex-marine turned into a businessman, can provide trained men for any kind of mission: paratroopers, snipers, tankers... It is based in North Carolina, and supplies support forces to American troops, both in Iraq and Afghanistan. This has a number of advantages: the Blackwater men (just like those from DynCorp and other companies on the American market), being civilians, are not subjected to the same limitations as regular troops: they are excluded from the casualty statistics, are independently armed, can by-pass hierarchies, may be exposed to situations unacceptable for the regular army, and do not submit to the same recruitment rules as the other soldiers. Even more importantly, they represent huge business interests, at least as much as the packaged cavatelli that I am given for lunch. That pasta is produced by a private company and paid by the Government for the thousands of men deployed here, and its cost is charged by Blackwater for each of the contractors on the field (you don't call a mercenary a «mercenary» in their face, but a «fixed term contractor»). As I recently found out, Blackwater was asked by the U.S. Congress to account for a number of civilian deaths during gunfights involving some of his contractors, presumably drunk. That suddenly reminded me of our visit to the supermarket, and I felt partly guilty. But I was immediately reassured: the events being investigated into had taken place in Iraq.

In the middle of that desert, I examine the bag of cavatelli with curiosity. It is the first product of the «shock economy» that I have ever come across. Naomi Klein has coined that label: she believes that a catastrophic event provides extraordinary oppor-

tunities for economic development, leading to privatization of immediate needs.

My shock economy bag contains a full lunch, complete with a toothpick, a miniature Tabasco bottle, some freeze-dried coffee, a tooth-cleaning chewing gum. Everything is perfectly aseptic and dehydrated. Just add water and a chemical reagent in the bag will warm the pasta up. Printed on the bag are the menu, production date and expiry date: my cavatelli were cooked exactly eight years ago. I try to figure where I may have been when this Halliburton employee, in Texas, was draining the pasta and adding the sauce. I have certainly never eaten anything so old; then again, it does not taste bad at all.

Just as soldiers wear each their own facings, Blackwater contractors display their logo on their bulletproof jackets: a black cat paw print. The man with a paw print and two pistols on his jacket explains the situation as he eats his cavatelli: «When we came, many of the police here couldn't even read or write. We had to start from scratch». That is how the National Interdiction Unit was born: two-hundred-fifty selected men, assembled in an underground base just outside the city. From that bunker under the mountain, field operations are coordinated. British police, U.S. DEA agents and Blackwater contractors help them in particularly tricky situations. They are counted on to counter drug trafficking, since Nato denied its support to anti-drug operations in Afghanistan.

My interlocutor's colleagues are strapping men, one of them with a handlebar moustache, another with a pretty-boy face, red freckles and a cluster of granates hanging from his jacket. All of them wear surfer-style shades. Even the luckier Afghans from NIU wear them, Big-Jim-style. I am going to leave the National Interdiction Unit bunker with them on an anti-drug operation in the city. Before setting out, I notice they are all busy arranging ammunition, rifles, granates and bulletproof jackets. I ask one of the contractors for a spare jacket. «Courtesy of Blackwater», he says, «but make sure you don't get shot in the face». «There's my camera for that», I answer with a wry smile.

The operation turns out to be a failure. The dealer didn't bite. He pocketed the advance money and used it to pay for his own sumptuous wedding, after which he chose to take to the hills with his new spouse rather than showing up at the meeting. Bulletproof jackets, weapons, explosives, tons of opium, traffickers eluding the DEA and walking off with the dough: pretty much everyone makes money out of opium and the war in Kabul. But how does all that cash get in and out of the city?

The harvest is done by September in Afghanistan. Opium is already stocked in warehouses, and refineries are running full tilt. Chemists are a hard find during this season, from Herat to Jalalabad. Anyone who knows what is a chemical solution and can perform a pH test is worth his weight in gold this year. Traffickers pay good money. This is the way money flows are measured, both within and without the country: they are seasonal, just like the crops.

In Kabul's market, a patchwork of stalls selling dried fruit and stolen satellite phones, there is a blind alley that leads to the hawala district. Hawala are informal Afghan banks which handle any kind of money, whether legal or illegal. They are more reliable than a Zurich vault, and more discreet than a priest in a confessional. Their reserves are highest in September, when lots of cash is needed for peasants, transport, security and refining. At that time of year, deposits in foreign banks are drained. Hawala's job is to move assets, and hey, they are no crooks: they'll do it for anyone.

And they'll require solid guarantees. While I'm waiting for my turn, a man in slippers walks in; within five minutes he's out, with a million dollars cash in his hands.

A million dollars in 100 USD bills, in a white plastic bag. A little boy notes down the sum on the yellowing pages of a big book. Perhaps that money will be used to build a mansion, or to pay a major food importer. Perhaps... I ask him: «Aren't you afraid of getting robbed as soon as you're out in the street?» He sounds piqued, even angry: «Everyone knows me and respects me! Nobody can touch me», is his reply.

© Isbn Edizioni srl, Milano 2007
(Special thanks to Giorgio Testa)