WAR AND WHAT REMAINS:
EVERYDAY LIFE IN CONTEMPORARY KABUL, AFGHANISTAN

by

Anila Daulatzai

A dissertation submitted to The Johns Hopkins University in conformity with the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

Baltimore, Maryland
October 2013
Abstract

This dissertation explores everyday life amidst war and occupation in Kabul, Afghanistan. It is based on more than three years of anthropological fieldwork conducted between 2006 to 2008; and 2009 to 2011. The lives of Afghans in Kabul unfold not only in a space constituted by violence but at the intersection of several moral projects. The current moralizing projects of war and humanitarianism have followed a succession of regimes of violence, including: the Taliban regime (1996-2001), the Kabul Wars (1992-1996), and the Soviet War and Occupation (1978-1989). The ethnography that forms this dissertation focuses at the points where the moral projects intersect in the lives of Afghans and aims to explore the conditions under which Afghans negotiate these projects, and the associated competing logics and practices. Widows and orphans are subject positions that come out in greater frequency in a space constituted by serial war and humanitarianism, thus the lives of widows and orphans figure prominently. A widow-run bakery, monthly food ration distribution sites of an international NGO for the most vulnerable widows of Kabul, a newly opened University, and Ministerial offices for the families of Martyrs are institutional sites where I conducted the bulk of my ethnographic field research but are also the settings where the moralizing projects converge. I aimed to pay particular attention to the lives and aspirations of Afghans and how they inhabit a space marked by extraordinary events. I use the theoretical framework of ordinary ethics as it allowed me to attend to what Afghans do and say in everyday action and ordinary language. This work can make a contribution to the emerging body of literature on ordinary ethics in offering a lens to understand how people subjected to extraordinary and serial uncertainty and violence cultivate sensibilities and pursue ethical
aspirations as a way of becoming ethical subjects within the everyday, despite the fact that the everyday is in itself subject to extraordinary contingencies. In this regard, my dissertation offers insights into ordinary ethics and the ethical striving of widows, an orphan, state bureaucrats and families of police killed in the line of duty.
Acknowledgments

If you see goodness from me, then that goodness is from the Creator. If you see weaknesses or shortcomings, I ask the Creator and the people to forgive me for that. Thank you Kabul, thank you world.¹

A few institutions, and many generous individuals made this dissertation possible. First, I thank the institutions that financially made this work possible and then the individuals across the world and throughout my life who have given me unwavering support in general, and for my work in Afghanistan, in particular.

Long-term research on Afghanistan has been largely impossible since 1978. I thank the US National Science Foundation, the Wenner-Gren Foundation, and the Fulbright-Hayes Commission for not only making my fieldwork years in Kabul possible but for more generally enabling the possibility for it to be imagined that Afghanistan can and should be studied with far greater support and care than was previously possible.

Jane Guyer and Niloofar Haeri of the Department of Anthropology at the Johns Hopkins University supported this dissertation from day one, never wavering in their support and commitment to my work. Their positivity, professionalism, steadfastness and 'staying with' my work as well as contributing to my development as a scholar of Afghanistan were critical, especially when coming back from a rather challenging and extended fieldwork experience in Kabul. I thank Emma Cervone, Sidney Mintz and Deborah Poole for their encouragements throughout my time at Johns Hopkins. In addition, although they have since moved on from Johns Hopkins, I thank Donald Carter,¹

¹ Taken and only slightly modified from Yasiin Bey, formerly known as Mos Def, in his track “Champion Requiem” from The New Danger Album.
Pamela Reynolds, and Hoon Song. They are remarkably generous and gracious individuals and scholars. Outside the Department of Anthropology at Johns Hopkins - Sara Berry, William Connolly, Siba Grovogui, and Beverly Silver have always been generous with their time and unconditionally receptive to my work. I thank them for their random, yet always critical engagement, and for their all around pleasantness during my years at Johns Hopkins.

Colleagues at Hopkins who made Baltimore and graduate studies not only possible, but for a moment or two, actually enjoyable: Hussein Agrama, Citlalli Anaid Reyes Kipp, Roger Begrich, Christopher Kolb, Vaibhav Saria, and Bhrigupati Singh. Aaron Goodfellow is undoubtedly the brightest mind and most generous person I have met in my years at Hopkins. His mentorship, guidance, and regular critical engagement with my work were crucial to the development of this dissertation and its eventual completion. He has constantly challenged my thinking and has shaped my imagination of what it means to be an engaged and solid anthropologist and teacher. I imagine I will always write wondering, "What would Aaron think?" I am honored to have had the benefit of his brilliant mind engage with at least part of my dissertation before institutional madness prevented a fuller engagement. I cherish his thorough and constructive criticisms and careful reading, always.

Becky Daniels, Richard Helman and Melody Walker really cannot be thanked enough. All the Swiss chocolate in the world would still simply not be enough. Their support and commitment to working meticulously and with a felt sense of care made life far less hectic than it could have been. Richard Helman and Melody Walker navigated the
institutional crazy of Hopkins for me and never failed to make up for my failures and incompetencies.

At UCLA: Michael Cooperson, Sondra Hale and Mary Yeager were professors and/or mentors I was fortunate to have at a different institution, yet their traces have marked me in ways that make me a better scholar. They had no reason whatsoever to have encouraged me as they did during my studies at UCLA. I have benefited immensely from their intense curiosity and infectious quest for knowledge, and in many ways, this dissertation is a product of what they instilled in me.

At the University of Zürich: Much gratitude to Pia Kumar and Shalini Randeria for making my time in Zürich possible, productive, and quite enjoyable. To all the inspiring students of Anthropology I was honored to teach while I was in Zürich - particularly Nikola Bagic, Lynn Huber, Fatima Moumouni, Luana Rebholz-Chaves, Noha Mokhtar, Anjuli Ramdenee, Salome Schaerer, Jago Wyssling, and Ayla Zacek - I have learned more from each of you, of this, I am sure - thank you. A special thanks is in order for my lovely colleagues at Zürich for their kindness, humor, intellect and support: Carlo Caduff, Rohit Jain and his beautiful family and Evangelos Karagiannis. Shalini Randeria’s brilliance and her commitment to moving ideas forward in a stubborn environment is a remarkable thing to witness. I am grateful to her for her support, encouragements and mentorship post - fieldwork in Kabul and since then.

Hussein Agrama, Kaushik Ghosh, Andrew Gilbert, Aaron Goodfellow, Andrea Muehlebach, Alessandro Monsutti, Junaid Rana, Shalini Randeria, Mubbashir Rizvi, and Vaibhav Saria put the human back in the disciplinary practice of anthropology. Vivek Bald and Inderpal Grewal must be thanked for who they are and their limitless generosity
each and every time I met them. I am inspired by their work and even more, by their
caracter and grace. I thank each of them for giving me hope for a different kind of
scholar, and another kind of world.

Philosopher and musician Bob Marley has said: "My home is in my head". I have
spent much of the last ten years living and/or teaching in Kabul, Zürich, and Baltimore.
'Home' has certainly been in my head yet an amazing group of dear ones made it possible
for me to feel at home in their company. Throughout my more than three years in Kabul I
committed to taking periodic short breaks. I stayed with dear friends who became family
and family who became less distant across the sub-continent. They not only offered
hospitality, but made me feel at home wherever in the world I was. Each of them
expected nothing from me and instead offered me profound comfort and warmth.
Aligarh: the soulful, beautiful and extended Khan family at Saman Zaar made Aligarh a
place of sweet memories and far too much laughter; Calcutta: Rishiraj Pravahan and his
beautiful family are reminders that embodied Gandhian ethics are not anachronistic but
alive and not only relevant but one of the few things that make sense; Kohat: Masood
Khan Khalil, Ayesha jaan, Sikander jaan, Zarooon jaan, Haider jaan, my sweet Memoona
Auntie and Bashir Khan Khalil for the endless laughs, joyful, unforgettable Ramazan and
Eid celebrations, and truly infectious love; Lahore: Shahid, Mehr and the entire Butt
family who never quite entirely grasped my work in Kabul, but nevertheless, were so
amazingly loving, generous, helpful and hospitable; New Delhi: elegant Subhag Singh
and my lovely sweet BP Singh Uncle, both never failed to make me smile, eat well and
watch cricket all day long. I thank the entire beautiful and strong Daulatzai and Khalil
families spread across Khyber Pakhtunkhwa for taking care of me, never doubting my
abilities and commitment and always showing me love, strength and faith - contemporary
Khudai Khidmatgars.

In Kabul: I thank the administrators and workers of the WFP Bakery Project, CARE Afghanistan, particularly Frozan Rahmani and the ladies in the HAWA program for allowing me to conduct my fieldwork alongside them. In addition, I thank the administrators in Afghan ministerial offices who went beyond their duties to help a student understand. I hope to one day again soon sit with all the families in Kabul who trusted me enough to share what they shared with me and read to them what I have written. They never turned down any one of my thousand questions, never expected anything in return, and endured my frequent appearances in their lives with amazing grace. Afghans have taught me far more about what it means to be human than I was prepared for as a student of anthropology. I imagine I forever will struggle with what I was fortunate to learn during my time in Kabul. Sher Alim and family, Masooda Faqirzada, Qais Munhazim, Mirwais Masood and family, and Wali Qaderi and family, made it possible for my everyday life in Kabul to be amazingly productive, and remarkably engaging. They helped me with everything and anything I needed, without any hesitations or expectations. I will never forget my days in Kabul and these angels who cared for me and made my time there what it was. I thank Sharif Fayez and Muhammad Shariq for their steadfast commitment to the higher education of Afghans.

Gratitude and endless blessings to my students at the American University of Afghanistan and at Kabul University for making me believe that they would actually change Afghanistan, if not the world.
The Amani family has always been a source of rejuvenation and comfort. I thank them for their boundless encouragement and love. The Begrich family and Roswita Brengmann have embraced me and provided me immense love and support for my work in Afghanistan. Their love of life, learning and unconditional commitment to each other is a beautiful thing. I thank Jennifer Lynn Perez for her loyalty, her grace, and for never ceasing to be anything but beautiful. My fellow Kabuliwalas - Taran Khan and Asad Hussein - have always made me feel like I have known them for a hundred years. Kabul was more alive with them there and I cannot ever imagine Kabul without them. They made me believe that at least two other kharijis in Kabul were there for something otherwise.

Roger Begrich walked with me through every stage of my training, fieldwork, and dissertation writing – my co-traveler. His friendship, humility, acute critical mind and sabr made this dissertation. He never stopped believing in me, my work in Afghanistan, and has given everything of himself to make me stronger, better prepared, and truly alive for this world. I am blessed.

My siblings never liked that I chose to do fieldwork in Afghanistan but understood exactly why I had to be there. Their integrity, intellect, boundless humor and commitment to self-less service made them the greatest teachers for me throughout my life. I thank them for everything I am and will be. They are the light in this world. My parents, the truest revolutionaries, are in each word I write and everything good that I do. Their unflinching commitment to non-violence and to raising four children with this ethic in a world that they knew all too well as a profoundly violent one is only one indication of their self-less wills, enormous hearts and courage of conviction. They taught me that x
no army that uses weapons can ever justify its existence in this world, much less its violence. The topic of this dissertation stems from this fundamental commitment to the ethic of non-violence. I will never be as strong and elegant as they have been in life, but I will never stop trying. I dedicate this dissertation to them - *staray mashay.*
# Table of Contents

## 1. Front Matter

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Title Page</td>
<td>i</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Abstract</td>
<td>ii</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Acknowledgments</td>
<td>v</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Table of Contents</td>
<td>xii</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

## 2. Text

1. Introduction: Ordinary Ethics and Extraordinary Violence | 1
2. War, Humanitarianism, and Modern Subjectivity in Kabul  | 23
3. Widows, Endurance and Landscapes of Suspicion        | 54
4. Afghan Publics: Gender, Gesture and Ethical Practice in Kabul | 107
5. Orphanhood and the Art of Not Being Cared For         | 129
6. The Living Dead: Official Declarations, the Afghan State and Everyday *Shahidan* | 167
7. Conclusion                                           | 211

## 3. References

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Bibliography</td>
<td>216</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

## 4. Curriculum Vita

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>224</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
This dissertation explores everyday life amidst war and occupation in Kabul, Afghanistan. It is based on more than three years of anthropological fieldwork conducted between 2006 to 2008; and 2009 to 2011. It aims to attend to the lives of Afghans amidst the current war and occupation, but also to what has remained from previous contemporary wars and occupations. The lives of Afghans in Kabul unfold not only in a space constituted by violence but at the intersection of several moral projects. The current moralizing projects of war and humanitarianism have followed a succession of regimes of violence, including: the Taliban regime (1996-2001), the Kabul Wars (1992-1996), and the Soviet War and Occupation (1978-1989). This recent history of violence, as well as the contemporary war and occupation, has created the kinds of circumstances where moral confusions, existential uncertainties and unpredictability have flourished. This dissertation focuses on the lives of widows and orphans as they mediate the uncertainties and contingencies that war and occupation bring - as they aspire to make lives that are livable despite the profound uncertainty.

Given the multiplicity of moral projects underway in Afghanistan, the ethnography that follows focuses at the points where these moral projects intersect in the lives of Afghans and aims to explore the conditions under which Afghans negotiate these projects, and the associated competing logics and practices. Widows and orphans are

---

2 The bulk of the research was conducted during largely uninterrupted residencies in Kabul from November 2006 - December 2008 and from November 2009 to July 2011. It also includes ethnographic materials collected during three-months of fieldwork in Kabul in 2003.
subject positions that come out of war and humanitarianism, and thus the lives of widows and orphans figure prominently. A widow-run bakery, monthly food ration distribution sites of an international NGO for the most vulnerable widows of Kabul, a newly opened University, and Ministerial offices for the families of Martyrs are institutional sites where I conducted the bulk of my ethnographic field research but are also the settings where the moralizing projects converge. Each chapter revolves around a protagonist who reveals the uncertainties and contingencies that emanate from everyday life in Kabul. Focusing on particular individual lives within the sites where the bulk of the ethnographic field work was conducted not only allowed me to see the intersection of the multiple moralizing projects but these sites also allowed me to hear people’s responses to them. Afghans I came to know configured themselves in these sites using logics that made sense to them, meanwhile, also inhabiting the subject positions assigned to them by modes of subjectivation inherent to these moralizing projects.

A theme that repeats itself throughout this dissertation is doubt and suspicion. Considering that Kabul itself, as well as the specific sites in Kabul that make up the ethnography, are currently the meeting ground for a multiplicity of moral projects and emergent forms of mediations at the register of the everyday, it should hardly be surprising that the presence of suspicion, and the maneuvering through multiple agendas is so readily in attendance. However, if we add to the contemporary moralizing projects, a very recent history of war with another foreign occupier (the Soviet Union), the Kabul wars, and refugee life in Iran or Pakistan, the doubt and suspicion that was already existent is compounded. During the Soviet Occupation, Afghans never were sure who was complicit with the Soviet occupiers and who was supportive of the mujahideen.
During the Kabul Wars, Afghans massacred one another – nobody was certain who one really was anymore - and everybody even close kin (and sometimes, especially kin) were not spared from doubt and suspicion. Refugee life in Iran and Pakistan posed its own regimes of surveillance as in both countries, Afghans were criminalized and had to endure rather humiliating treatment. These are all contexts in which the ‘truth’ could not be recognized, spoken openly, and evacuated from everyday life altogether, as is the case today, in contemporary Kabul.

I trace how doubt and suspicion manifests itself distinctly in different domains in the lives of Afghans. In the official nation-building and development arena, doubt and suspicion appear as corruption. In both of the projects for the most vulnerable widows of Kabul where fieldwork was conducted, everyday suspicion is morphed into part of the official discourse of corruption. In the domain of everyday forms of relatedness, the household, kinship networks and specifically friendship - doubt and suspicion manifest as betrayal. Lastly, in the realm of knowledge production it manifests as suspicion regarding the epistemological bases for a claim on knowledge. How do I come to know what I know? Write what I write? What are the bases for the claims I make in this dissertation and how is it to be trusted?

Another theme that is repeated throughout this dissertation is the notion of the ordinary, as the ground for remaking one’s world in the aftermath of violence. The extraordinary nature of the durational aspect of the successive wars and occupations, and violence in general, is critical to gaining an understanding of the lives of Afghans who inform this dissertation. Yet how does one descend into the ordinary as the grounds for a remaking of life and world when the extraordinary is the scene in which one must
constitute the ordinary? This dissertation revolves around this question, yet the goal is not necessarily to find an answer to it. The case of Afghanistan certainly can make a significant contribution to an understanding of the possibility (or impossibility) of a descent into the ordinary amidst ongoing and extraordinary forms of violence.

**Why Widows?**

This dissertation takes the category of “widow” not only as a site from which to address the social realities faced by the many women in Afghanistan whose husbands have disappeared or died as a result of war and prolonged conflict, but as a way to explore and understand modern subjectivity. Talal Asad is the scholar whose work most fluently attends to the violence legitimated through the workings of the modern liberal state as the governance of killing and death dealing alongside practices of compassion and care. Both the violence and the practices of ‘humanitarianism’ have been dispersed throughout Afghanistan, both historically and spatially, for decades. Millions of women in Afghanistan have been made widows as a result of violence authorized by the modern liberal state and then targeted to be ‘cared for’ by the very same yet distinctive modes of subjectivation that have constituted the making of contemporary Afghanistan, and thus, modern subjectivity.

Thus, while studying widowhood, my work offers reflection on ‘legitimated’ and (otherwise) forms of violence, ‘humanitarianism’, as well as the logics and practices of care and compassion that accompany them. This dissertation will also explore the varied institutions that ‘care’ for widows - including international aid institutions, the Afghan family, Kabuli society and the Afghan State. In referring to widow as a ‘category’ or a ‘site’, the intent is not to privilege the discursive formulations of “widow” while largely leaving the
experiential aspect of life as a “widow” unattended. The heart of this dissertation struggles to convey the experiential texture of the lives of widows (and their families) in Kabul. In order to consider the more and less subtle social practices that mediate the lives of widows, this dissertation is framed around the various moralizing projects underway in Kabul and the obligations that inform them. Framing the dissertation in this way allows for a richer exploration of the multiple ways lives are inhibited, inhabited and forged in Kabul and allows me to more specifically attend to the manner by which multiple moral projects intersect and are experienced by Afghans amidst the extraordinary forms of governance in contemporary Kabul.

While the care and protection of widows (and orphans) occupies a special concern in Islamic societies; particular (secular and liberal) notions of care also guide the specific modes of intervention by international aid agencies operating within Afghanistan. With respect to Afghan women who have been widowed, the concept and practice of “care” thus emerges as particularly salient, and provides a lens which brings into focus otherwise disparate actors and influences, such as family, the legal structures of the state, and the humanitarian efforts of international aid agencies. I use the domain of care as a lens through which to investigate how widows are reconfiguring life worlds that are reshaped by war and humanitarianism. This dissertation thus explores how formal and informal kinship networks, international aid agencies, transnational governmentality, and the convergence of the Afghan state with traditional legal and Islamic structures converge and diverge around what each of these institutions understand as form (s) of moral and ethical obligation to Afghan widows (and their families).
In this section, I will briefly summarize what I aim to accomplish in the remainder of this introductory chapter. In the following sections I attempt to address what I have seen as a general failure to acknowledge the decades of violence that have been leveled upon the people of Afghanistan. I make some preliminary comments about what it may mean to acknowledge Afghanistan, and specifically, how anthropology may assist in this task. Then I introduce ordinary ethics as the analytical framework from which I attend to the everyday ethical mediations and aspirations Afghans inhabit as a mode of engagement with the moralizing forms of governance that have structured their lives. I sketch how I believe my work can contribute to the literature on ordinary ethics.

Following the section on ordinary ethics, I will offer an overview of the chapters that constitute this dissertation, with a brief introduction to the fieldwork settings. I then mediate on doubt and uncertainties and how they became present as forms of life in my ethnography. Lastly, I address the issue of doubt in relation to knowledge production with regards to a series of problematics I have routinely encountered as a researcher of Afghanistan. A challenge that anthropologists face in any field-site is how both historical and contemporary anxieties map onto them as a person, with differing consequences. This requires a different kind of work and vigilance, however, as it has greater stakes (for self, and others) when conducting fieldwork in a geographical space that has been subject to such vastly different regimes of violence in such a short time – each coming not only with its unique practices of violence, but also practices of disseminating suspicions and uncertainties that have come to mark the space in profound ways. In this section, I try to
clarify assumptions that I have consistently been subject to since I began researching in Afghanistan seventeen years ago.

**Acknowledgement and Suffering**

An ethnographic study of contemporary Afghanistan will necessarily have to account for the impact of violence on the experiences and the social worlds of Afghans. My interest in subjectivity is guided by a compulsion to enable the conditions for the possibility of acknowledging the suffering of Afghans. My understanding of acknowledgement and suffering follows the work of Veena Das, who on her part is influenced by Stanley Cavell:

“One could say: Acknowledgment goes beyond knowledge. (Goes beyond not, so to speak, in the order of knowledge, but in its requirement that I do something or reveal something on the basis of that knowledge.) . . . The claim of suffering may go unanswered. We may feel lots of things—sympathy, Schadenfreude, nothing. If one says this is a failure to acknowledge one’s suffering, surely this would not mean that we fail, in such cases, to know that he is suffering? It may or may not. The point, however, is that the concept of acknowledgment is evidenced equally by its failure as by its success. It is not a description of a given response but a category in terms of which a given response is evaluated. . . A ‘failure to know’ might just mean a piece of ignorance, an absence of something, a blank. A ‘failure to acknowledge’ is the presence of something, a confusion, an indifference, a callousness, an exhaustion, a coldness” (Cavell, 1969).

In the case of Afghanistan, it is not about the *absence* of knowledge, as Cavell speaks of in the above quote. From philosophical expositions on the war in Afghanistan by Talal Asad (2007, 2010), Judith Butler (2006), to anthropological reflections from Leila Ab-Lughod (2002), Saba Mahmood and Charles Hirshkind (2002), to critical political analyses and commentaries on the current war on Democracy Now, the Colbert Report, even a Hollywood blockbuster (Charlie Wilson’s War), the New York Times, the New Yorker and countless other venues – there was certainly no absence of knowledge of the roots of the Afghan conflict (Szeman, 2011). Yet I claim, through using Cavell’s
exposition on acknowledgement and suffering, that there remains a “failure to acknowledge”, and a “presence of something” that allows this failure. Scholar Imre Szeman speaks not of a failure to acknowledge, as I do, but a “failure that lies not with the limits of expression, but with some deeper (and thus much more difficult to address) failure and trauma of the political at the present moment” (Szeman, 2011). I am not sure that the failure to acknowledge is only a failure of the political, as Szeman states, I believe that while it is constituted, for some (myself included) as a failure of something, to others, it may be marked by the success of something else. Perhaps it is the failure of a globalized humanity, as it is currently constituted, to adequately recognize how it has been beckoned to participate in enabling the possibility for the practices of the violence that mark the contemporary moment. I am unclear what form (s) this “presence of something” takes. Throughout this dissertation I do hint toward affects and moralities that may be subsumed under the forms of life this presence takes on and how it is given sustenance and aspirational momentum by a series of political projects that I can only locate as part of the moralizing fiber of the space of violence of the contemporary.

What it May Mean to Acknowledge

I do not wish to imply that the only subjectivity Afghans can inhabit is one marked by suffering, and even less do I intend to suggest that Afghans are merely traumatized victims. Acknowledging their suffering means lending an ear to their pain. My plea is simple: the lives of Afghans — men and women alike — need to be situated within larger social, historical, political, and economic webs of significance, and not only within a narrow grid of tropes such as the suffering Afghan woman, culture as a deterministic
explanatory device, and/or Islamic fundamentalism (lest understandings be gridlocked).

But as we zoom out to incorporate these larger scale contingencies, we simultaneously need to zoom in and carefully focus on the social worlds and the experiences of Afghans; the ways in which the decades of violence, humiliation and uncertainty are mapped onto the lives of Afghans need to be studied in detail, as must the ways in which these lives are rendered dependent on international and institutional interventions. When I am thus searching for ways to acknowledge the suffering of Afghans I am not typecasting Afghans as victims. Rather, I am asking what it might mean to acknowledge suffering.

**Ordinary Ethics**

In elaborating on the lives of widows and orphans, I hope to convey a sense of ordinary ethics amidst war through exploring the various ethical projects that are underway in Kabul City. In doing so, I consider the ethical practices that are suspended, created, finely tuned, mutated, and/or decayed amidst war and the serial and everyday uncertainties that accompany it. In working with the definition of ordinary ethics as suggested by Michael Lambek as he links ordinary ethics to ordinary experience, I hope to expand the way ordinary ethics can be imagined so that the human condition is understood as constitutive of more than something that is ‘inevitable’, accidental, or usual (as implied by Lambek in the following quote) but rather crafted and deliberate (as in war and occupation): ‘ordinary experience encompasses the inevitable cracks and ruptures in the actual and the ubiquity of responses to the ever-present limits of criteria and paradoxes of the human condition, hence the attempts in everyday practice and thought to inhabit and persevere in light of uncertainty, suffering, injustice, incompleteness,
inconsistency, the unsayable, the unforgivable, the irresolvable, and the limits of voice and reason (Lambek, 2010)’. Ordinary ethics would then entail an exploration of the everyday practices (and ethical aspirations) that unfold amidst the extraordinary.

My ethnography rests at the register of the ordinary and how Kabulis enact their projects of making their lives livable, intelligible and recognizable to themselves, a way to live honorable³ lives in the midst of the uncertainties that come with war, and that incessantly punctuate their lives in very ordinary ways. In trying to attend to the lives of Afghans as experienced during the steady streams of violence that have shaped their worlds, I do draw inspiration from the work of Veena Das through her contributions on partition and other ‘critical events’ that continue to shape the everyday lives of her informants and friends in India. Das enters her work through the ordinary. In linking ethics and everyday life to the ordinary, Das persuasively writes:

“I will argue for a shift in perspective from thinking of ethics as made up of judgments we arrive at when we stand away from our ordinary practices to that of thinking of the ethical as a dimension of everyday life in which we are not aspiring to escape the ordinary but rather to descend into it as a way of becoming moral subjects. Such a descent into the ordinary does not mean that no attempt is made to work on this ordinary in the sense of cultivating critical attitudes toward one’s culture as it stands, and also working to improve one’s conditions of life but that such work is done not by orienting oneself to transcendental, objectively agreed upon values but rather through the cultivation of sensibilities within the everyday” (her emphasis, Das, 2012).

Das continues to speak of moral striving towards what she calls an “eventual everyday from within the actual everyday” (Das, 2012). Yet I wonder, as in some ways she does, how does one descend into the ordinary when the extraordinary is the scene in which one must constitute the ordinary. The ordinary, as possibility, is appropriate in the aftermath

³ By saying ‘honorable’, I am not referencing the literature that ascribes onto Afghans a particular static honor. I do not think that there is anything uniquely honorable about Afghans but there are particular ways that honor is recognizable to Afghans, especially when contextualized within decades of war and humanitarianism – honor is contextual, as is dignity.
of violence, as in the critical events that marked India and the lives of her informants. As a mode of “being with” (Berlant, 2011) Afghans as they remake their life worlds amidst ongoing and recurring violence, how can we imagine the ordinary as possibility considering the conditions of violence that constitute the ‘actual everyday’ for Afghans in Afghanistan? How does one descend into a scene also constituted by violence and modes of subjectivation that figure the descent itself? How does one redeem self in this context and live a life that is livable, intelligible, unhinged by context for self and others? I do not have the answers to these questions, but I offer them as they are questions that not only inform the pages of this dissertation and in far too many ways linger still yet unattended, but also my everyday.

I quote at length here, from Das‘ Life and Words: Violence and the Descent into the Ordinary. It is a quote that illustrates nicely why I find something encouraging about the modes of inquiry she pursues. It is not only because my work also wrestles with questions of violence (and what remains) that makes her work appealing. More importantly, it is because it resonates quite significantly with regards to where I want to place the weight of my inquiries. Das describes the task of writing an ethnography of violence as “one that is not seen as bearing an objective witness to the events as much as trying to locate the subject through the experience of such limits” (Das, 2007). I have never considered it my task to detail the horrors of the violent events that made women widows; children orphans; or fathers, brothers and sons shahidan (martyrs/witnesses). I leave that important task to someone else. Instead I have tried to describe the contingencies that shape the everyday lives of widows and orphans so as to enable the possibility to imagine what it means to be living, and dead in Kabul. I say living, and
dead - because what is important in this landscape is not only how one lives one’s life, but how deaths are honoured (or not) by those who are still left in this world. I continue with the lengthier quote from Das:

“It is not only violence experienced on one’s body in these cases but also the sense that one’s access to context is lost that constitutes a sense of being violated. The fragility of the social becomes embedded in a temporality of anticipation since one ceases to trust that context is in place. The affect produced on the registers of the virtual and the potential, of fear that is real but not necessarily actualized in events, comes to constitute the ecology of fear in everyday life. Potentiality here does not have the sense of something that is waiting at the door of reality to make an appearance as it were, but rather as that which is already present. The ethnographic task here is to describe how feelings of skepticism come to be embedded within a frayed everyday life so that guarantees of belonging to larger entities such as communities or state are not capable of erasing the hurts or providing means of repairing this sense of being betrayed by the everyday” (Das, 2007).

The emphasis I chose here is on the ordinary, despite the extraordinary nature of what transpires in Kabul – on how lives are shaped in the midst of the extraordinary – on, to cite Kathleen Stewart, ‘what a life adds up to’, what a life becomes and potentializes for itself not only due to the most powerful international actors and schemes- but despite them.

**Overview of Chapters**

I argue that careful studies of both Afghan men’s and women’s subjectivities are required to identify the institutions, experiences, events, and structures which make up their everyday lives. Careful accounting for the inner workings of subjectivities and their contingencies can be found in Veena Das’ work on violence and social suffering in India (Das, 1995a, 1995b, 1998, 2000; Kleinman et al., 1997). The manner in which she details how drastic events or circumstances are folded into the everyday relations of individuals are, I believe, of great importance for understanding the predicament of contemporary Afghanistan. Das’ idea of the ordinary not as something primarily uneventful, but as that
which is recovered from the rubble of tragic circumstances, might thus be helpful in making sense of the predicament of women (but not only women) in Afghanistan today (Das, 2000).

Each chapter that follows offers a unique means to access how ethical life is constituted in Kabul amidst war and occupation. The Afghan State, international aid regimes and actors, Afghan familial networks, Islamic tradition and authority and Afghan publics are the contexts around which everyday life is being negotiated. Recent anthropological initiatives aiming to explore ‘ordinary ethics’ will be enhanced through an attentiveness to situations, such as Afghanistan, where what constitutes ‘the ordinary’ has either receded very far from people’s experience and memory or altogether has been absent in, as is the case for the millions of Afghans who were born during the last three decades, who have become heirs to war and what it brings. The Afghans who make up this ethnography, including war widows and orphans offer a striking case of a population that has lost the criteria and the context that shaped their lives, materially and otherwise, yet have managed to endure despite the uncertainties presented by successive wars and occupation.

The first chapter that follows this introductory chapter aims to offer a rehearsal of the rationales and justifications for the invasion and subsequent occupation of Afghanistan. I will establish what I understand to be at stake anthropologically in visiting the war rhetoric for the current war in Afghanistan. I will then introduce the theoretical framework that I refer to as ‘moralizing forms of governance’ that I have found most suitable alongside exploring ordinary ethics to enable a productive engagement with my ethnographic material. I aim to explain the moralizing forms of governance in Kabul vis-
à-vis war and humanitarianism and in doing so explain why I believe it becomes necessary to demarcate the ‘moral’ from the ‘ethical’. I primarily engage with the work of Talal Asad in presenting the justifications of violence by the modern liberal state and how ‘humanity’ has been summoned in these justifications. Further on in my discussions around humanitarianism and humanity, I include Faisal Devji as a main interlocutor. By using the work of Devji I turn away from analyzing the rhetoric of modern liberal state violence and turn toward analyzing the rhetoric of the Taliban militants and the trope of ‘humanity’ that they have offered to justify their violence. I do this in order to engage, even if cursorily, with not only the violence of the modern liberal state but also the violence of the militants (using Devji’s parlance) such as the Taliban – both which have rendered humanity a trope, and both have rendered Afghans as “killable”.

The women who have been widowed whose lives inform Chapter Three have little choice but to aspire towards rebuilding a livable life- the ground for what, may constitute an ordinary life (or an imagination of an ‘ordinary life), within the ongoing space of global enactments of violence and humanitarianism. In addition, their imagination of how the ordinary could be remade is highly contingent upon the prescriptive nature of the programs for widows for how they should recompose a life. The Bakery Project and the longest run program for urban vulnerable widows in Kabul are the prime settings for Chapter Three (the first ethnographic chapter) that aims to elaborate on the everyday lives of widows as they intersect with the institutional contingencies of the these two aid projects in which they are involved.

I demonstrate the incommensurabilities of aid projects with the everyday experiences of widows struggling to attend to the needs of their family while navigating
the discourses of self-sufficiency as promulgated by the aid projects and their donors. My ethnography of a ration-distribution project for vulnerable widows demonstrates how such a project fosters suspicion as part of a normative landscape of mistrust and uncertainty in Kabul. My work will elaborate how mistrust and suspicion permeate everyday social relations, in institutional settings where corruption is a permanent threat, and furthermore how uncertainty at such a scale necessarily intensifies anxieties and vulnerabilities in the space of the domestic, thus affecting social networks and customary forms of support in families and neighborhoods.

Chapter Four introduces the re-making of Kabuli public life in a context inundated with Islamic, secular and other influences. Instead of focusing on the chaderi (burqa) as the primary indicator that informs gender in Kabul, I explore the gesture of the handshake and the performative investments and stakes that surround this quotidian practice. The handshake dilemma allows for an unpacking of the uncertainties and anxieties that surround the performance of gender in Kabul.

Chapter Five offers an exploration of orphanhood. The chapter centers on the life of a young man who was orphaned at a young age and his ethical practices of self-preservation amidst kinship obligations, Islamic obligations of fellow Afghans towards him, neo-liberal practices and discourses of self-making and nation-building emanating from his direct involvement with international aid institutions, and modes of subjectivation that have defined his life thusfar, as a young man serially growing up in war. His life does not fall comfortably in the available narratives as it reveals how resentment, suspicion, betrayal and helplessness around kinship obligations and modes of care perform different forms of violence and thus an aspiration for fundamentally
isolating forms of relatedness in the life of this once orphan.

The final chapter is an ethnographic elaboration of the Afghan State as it makes itself present in the after-lives of shahidan (martyrs/witnesses) and the lives of the families as they engage with the religious, bureaucratic, and affective entanglements generated by its layered deployment in Afghanistan.

**Fieldwork Settings**

My fieldwork was enabled through a series of social and professional relationships with Afghans I met in Kabul in various institutional settings. One location was a widow-run bakery run by the World Food Program. Another setting through which I met many widows and their families and also Afghan aid workers, was through the international NGO CARE, specifically, through their Humanitarian Assistance for Widows of Afghanistan (HAWA) Program – the longest standing project for the urban vulnerable widows of Kabul city. A third setting was through my teaching, both at Kabul University and at the American University of Afghanistan (AUAf). Each relationship unfolded under unique circumstances and contingencies and thus each was constituted quite differently, as are all relationships. I was the less talented but faithful co-worker and friend in a widow-run bakery; a teacher and reluctant hand shaker in another; a teacher and mentor who was studying ‘other’ widows and orphans; and a friend and co-navigator with families of police who were killed in a suicide attack as they embarked on a journey through the matrices of the Afghan State ministerial offices to get their haqq (right) as families of shahidan (martyrs/witnesses).
Throughout this dissertation I try to describe how the everyday in Kabul is felt as betraying, but also as offering potential forms of life to something else, in the lives of those I came to know and learn from. The forthcoming chapters were written prior to an understanding of how they would link to one other. However, a clear link emerges, which in many ways, does not surprise me. The foremost feeling living in Kabul over the past five years was the overwhelming sense of being betrayed, or on the verge of being betrayed. I just thought it was some form of malaise that I had to get over, to overcome. Never in my life have I doubted anyone or anything as much I did during my days in Kabul. On too many occasions I wrote of this in my field-notes: ‘what is this? How did this happen? You got to be kidding me. Seriously?’ Each of these expressions had been used repeatedly in separate and multiple entries. I do not paint myself as saintly but I just could not imagine how time after time, despite my meticulous forms of care to insure sensibilities were taken into account and appropriate forms of dignity attended to- I was deceived, and if not deceived, feeling that I would be at any moment. It was the greatest impediment to fieldwork in Kabul, with no exaggeration.

I begin this task by breaking into two a longer citation of Talal Asad’s elegant description of suspicion. I use the first half in this section, and will continue with the second half later in this introduction:

“To take people in familiar situations innocently is to live without suspicion. It is to read people literally, to take their behavior as unproblematic, as harmless. To do a literal reading of texts (of what people say and do in their ordinary life) is not, of course, to repudiate figurative language; it is to be so familiar with the relevant grammar that one is unconcerned with the need to fix meaning. On the other hand, to ask suspiciously about the real meaning of the verbal and behavioral signs displayed by people one knows is to enter into the world of symbolic interpretation. And while hermeneutics doesn’t necessarily spring from hostile suspicion, it always presupposes that what appears on the surface is not the truth and seeks to control what lies beneath. Through interpretation, it converts absences into signs. A form of official hermeneutics—an official suspicion about meaning—has flourished in the United States since
September 11 as part of the war against terror: namely, the interrogation of captured Muslims by U.S. officials. Here fear, uncertainty, and the ambiguity of signs are part of the space of violence to which I referred above. More than that, they are its precondition, for they allow state power to penetrate the density of ordinary life” (Asad, 2007).

I used to believe that suspicion and doubt were affects reserved for the powerful - and thus I refused to enact suspicion, on anyone. Yet this ethical mode of inhabiting the world actually became a problem for me, as for the first year in Kabul, I was actually the object of suspicion and doubt because I was not suspicious of anyone. “What is wrong with her? Who is she? She trusts everyone all the time, why does she not know that she should not do that and that she should be careful?” My first year of fieldwork I was told no less than fifty times that I should not be so trusting as I did not understand Kabulis. Kabulis painted each other as un-trustworthy and their advice would always end with, “don’t even trust me”, revealing that they suspected that they would betray our friendship, and in doing so, even themselves. I never knew what to do with such advice, but the inevitable happened - over-time I became suspicious, is that just what happens in Kabul? Is this one of the ‘benefits’ of long-term ethnographic fieldwork – participant observation, and all the other ‘virtues’ of the anthropological method over others? This was not some uncertainty that results from the dynamics of my inter-personal skills with my informants, or as a result of they not trusting me. It was a skepticism and uncertainty that I came to observe that inflected almost every single relationship I witnessed, much less every one that I was a part of.

Everything and everyone slips and slides about trying to make life livable and to live according to what self and others consider dignified, but how does one do that when certainty has been evacuated? I realized that certainty in the future, in words, in kin
relationships, and in people in general, was another casualty, and is perhaps the thing that
died that re-dies and is felt everyday by every Afghan – which is such a grand thing to
say, considering the duration of violence and extent of the casualties that have transpired
over the last three decades. How do you write an ethnography of uncertainty when the
only thing you are certain about is the pervasiveness and embedded-ness of uncertainty in
everyday life?

**Fields of Suspicion**

In general, struggles of varying scales arise during stages of the lengthy processes
of engagement with one’s anthropological field-sites, informants and materials. The
preparation for the fieldwork, the fieldwork itself combined with the intense and solemn
engagement with one’s field-notes while concurrently changes are occurring in the lives
of informants after the official return from the field, are in themselves conditions that
create tensions, dilemmas and ambiguities of all sorts. Most resolve themselves, but some
stubbornly persist and beg to be attended to. Whether one likes it or not, there are
conditions that are simply not within one’s reach to resolve- but which one can at least
attempt to clarify.

In this dissertation, I explore the uncertainties and doubts that have come to
constitute modern subjectivities in Kabul, primarily through the lives of widows and their
families. However, in this section I specifically explore the uncertainties and suspicions
that surround me with my work in Afghanistan over the past seventeen years. Since I
resolutely refuse to engage in questions of ‘identity’, the uncertainties become mapped
with whatever meanings those who are uncomfortable with uncertainties wish for them to
become. I will not attend to all the certainties and all the suspicions, but those that never fail to annoy.

I consider the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq to have fundamentally altered what it means to be a modern subject – whether in Baghdad, Fallujah, Ghazni, Kabul or Los Angeles – we all are implicated in the space of violence that defines the contemporary, and we are all participants in the new regimes of war, albeit in distinct ways. Conducting anthropological fieldwork in a ‘war zone’ as a single female would not have been the form of engagement that would prove the easiest, but it certainly was the one that most suited my sensibilities. Although I have cultivated a somewhat refined sense of recognizing state created uncertainties that filter into everyday life, whether in Kabul, Los Angeles, or Peshawar, Pakistan - this refined sense of recognition has never prevented me from having to do the very taxing and careful work of attending to suspicions almost before they are actually registered as such – to anticipate them and/or respond appropriately (where possible).

I continue with the second half of Asad’s description of suspicion that I referred to earlier, as I believe suspicion relates to what I am trying to convey:

“Roland Barthes once claimed that “traumatic images are bound up with an uncertainty (an anxiety) concerning the meaning of objects or attitudes. Hence in every society various techniques are developed [that are] intended to fix the floating chain of signifieds in such a way as to counter the terror of uncertain signs.” But Barthes did not note that authority seeks sometimes to eliminate uncertainty in signs, at other times to create it. Had he done so, he might have acknowledged that uncertain signs do not in themselves cause anxiety or terror—it is suspicion about their meaning that may do so” (Asad, 2007).

I am compelled to remark on my self in relation to my work in this section, primarily because if I do not, it becomes too easy to have suspicions and anxieties fix meaning, as
has happened on far too many occasions. In the absence of a fixed certainty (and frankly, even in its presence) the interpretations stand for something other than they are.

_Zai-ness_

On far too many occasions my work is only associated with my name - meaning my family name ending in _zai_ (a clear indication one is Pashtun), and not with the analyses I offer or the rigorous and extended academic training that made field-work even possible in the first place. My family name - Daulatzai - gets read as the sole prism through which my work on Afghanistan is sometimes read and understood (or not understood). What I will say to those who know better – is that although the analytical and epistemological decisions I have taken have little to do with a Pashtun ‘identity’, surely the dissertation carries traces of legacies of anti-imperial struggle and Pashtun ‘subjectivity’ belonging to the geographical areas from which I hail that certainly pre-date the events of September 2001, and even the Soviet Occupation. What I get wrong, or the omissions in this dissertation should not be attributed to my being a Pashtun and enacting some sort of Pashtun agenda – whatever that may look like for some. If I miss something or get something wrong, it is the fault of my scholarship, not the fault of my _zai_-ness.

Yet I did not do research in Afghanistan out of a need to discover my roots, or out of a motivation to connect with my ancestral heritage and I certainly did not go to a ‘war zone’ to sort out some late-onset adolescent ‘identity crisis’ or a pre-mature ‘mid-life crisis’, for that matter. I embarked on this project as a result of an attunement to fundamental injustices and dispossession in this region that I became acutely aware of
because of the geographical places from which my family hails. This is not the same as saying I do my research where I do because my family is from these places, as saying this is missing the point entirely.

**America and Pakistan**

The two geographical spaces I have spent most of my life in – the United States and Pakistan – have governments who, in my lifetime, have whole-heartedly and steadfastly participated in creating the conditions of violence and uncertainty that constitute everyday life in Afghanistan today. Although at a much smaller scale, but no less rigorous, I thought it appropriate that I aspire, through my work, to whole-heartedly and steadfastly participate in acknowledging (in the very small ways that work of this nature can) what successive United States and Pakistan governments have done to the people of Afghanistan. I write sincerely with all the Afghans I have come to know as a mode of engagement with their life worlds, a gesture of *dosti* (friendship) and *khidmat* (service), a mode of being with them. My hope is that my work allows for a more complicated understanding than currently exists of the scale of what ordinary Afghans have endured and continue to endure as a result of decisions made elsewhere.
As stated in the introductory chapter, my dissertation aims to attend to the ordinary ethics that inform everyday life in Kabul. While I invest most of my efforts in relating the ethical and affective practices that inform the life worlds of Afghans, as I came to understand them, considering the scale of the current geographies of violence in Afghanistan – it is critical to attempt to situate the moral and ethical claims that animate both war and humanitarian practice in Afghanistan. In resting the bulk of my efforts on ordinary ethics, I am not implying that there is a distinct boundary from the larger scale processes of war, occupation and humanitarianism from the more subtle movements that animate everyday life. Instead, I am saying the “space of violence” (Asad, 2007) and the “humanitarian space” (Fassin, 2011) are the same – spatially, yet also experientially and thus affectively, for Afghans. Furthermore, through my ethnography it becomes fairly clear how the larger scale processes of war and humanitarianism and the more subtle ordinary ethical practices fold into and out of one another – thus offering insight into the precariousness and uncertainties that constitute modern subjectivity.

**Anthropological Stakes**

As I lay out the frame-work that will allow me to capture the scale of the uncertainties that constitute everyday life in Kabul, I will be rehearsing the justifications used both for the invasion and the subsequent occupation of Afghanistan by the US as well as the justifications for the ongoing violence by the Taliban. I review the war
rhetoric in order to demonstrate moralizing aspects of the rhetoric, which requires that I go back to seminal documents such as a letter to the UN by John Negroponte announcing the invasion of Afghanistan as well as the radio address given by Laura Bush one month into the invasion. Tracing the discourses back to these documents serve to illustrate how the war was initially defined – under Bush, as both a war of self-defense, and a humanitarian war that would bring democracy and freedom to Afghans, particularly its women. Later under Obama, the discourse shifted from democracy and freedom to security. I don’t invest myself in this task only to reveal hypocrisies evident early on in the war rhetoric in the lead-up to the invasion.

The stakes, anthropologically, that I find most relevant to my ethnographic material circulate around two points. First, I think the case of Afghanistan can significantly add to the anthropological literature on humanitarianism, as the war rhetoric (both by the US and by the Taliban) and the aid apparatus summoned both humanitarianism and gender in the tactics of war in ways that rendered them as tropes. Thus I consider war and humanitarianism as moralizing forms of governance in the lives of Afghans in Kabul. The second claim that I believe is anthropologically critical, is actually related to the first. By casting this war as a humanitarian exercise, and Afghans, particularly women, as specific objects of humanitarianism and care, the full force of the culpability for the suffering of Afghans lies with the Taliban. I am not interested in only assigning blame, and even less interested in defending the Taliban. Resting the weight of the suffering of Afghans on the Taliban regime allows for two very dangerous things to occur: first- it truncates the duration of the suffering of Afghans and; second- it allows the genealogy of the suffering to be re-inscribed elsewhere. Thus, historical accuracy, in
terms of duration and genealogy are critical in the ways I will anthropologically explore Afghanistan.

Laying the weight of the suffering on the five-year Taliban regime (1996-2001) allows the United States, with Pakistan and Saudi Arabia, to be excused from their central roles in organizing, funding and arming the mujahideen in the 1980s. Furthermore, it allows a world committed to ‘humanity’ to be pardoned for failing to intervene in Afghanistan in the early 1990s after the Soviet Union was defeated when under every definition Afghanistan was a humanitarian crisis, only for the international community to ‘intervene’ a full decade later in 2001 on ‘humanitarian’ grounds. It also allows the United States and Pakistan to be excused from the violence inflicted upon Afghans by their Frankenstein – the Taliban.

In a similar enough vein, while Talal Asad demonstrates the shared logics of suicide bombing and the violence of the modern liberal state, I use the momentum gained from his analysis to make a more elementary point. It is not only that the logics of and justifications for violence (‘self defense’) and what it is for (‘humanity’) that fail to morally distinguish US mediated violence in Afghanistan from the violence of the Taliban insurgency, it is that the space of violence in Afghanistan in and of itself actually shares the same genetic material – that of a modern liberal state, the US.

Asad states: “I stress that my concern here is not to blame the West but to substitute the idea of a historical space in which violence circulates, in which our wider aims are too often undermined by our own actions, for the simple agentive model that many commentators employ, in which rational democrats in the West react defensively to

---

4 It is not only about arming and funding, but also about what work those specific arms and funding enabled with regards to the consolidation of power after their intended purpose was achieved.
destructive terrorists from the East” (Asad, 2007). My argument differs slightly from Asad’s, as with regards to Asad’s specific argument, it may not be important to assign blame. However, in my work, perhaps part of what it means to anthropologically explore uncertainty in the lives of Afghans is to understand the affective architecture that has been structured in relation to doubt and skepticism in their lives as a result of their experiential attunement to being deceived. Thus assigning blame is perhaps not a priority, but acknowledging it and tracing it may be necessary as a way to further explore how larger scale deceptions get mapped into personal histories and kinship relations as part of my presence as an anthropologist in this historical and contemporary space of violence.

I don't bring in these points in this manner in order to offer an already well-advocated inversion of the existing war rhetoric. What is at stake anthropologically for me is to register an acknowledgment of and allegiance to the signatures that authorized these successive decades of violence upon Afghans. This dissertation is a way of anthropologically attending to the durational feature of the suffering and the experientially formed precariousness that issues from this that has structured the lives of Afghans. To date, this has not been done. Most scholars across disciplines are certain to mention the length of the conflicts in contemporary Afghanistan, but no serious attention has not been paid to what this has done to the everyday ways that Afghans relate to one other, their own selves, and to uncertainty. My aim in this dissertation is to attempt to make a contribution to the task of not only acknowledging Afghanistan, but exploring what it is that needs to be acknowledged with regards to ordinary ethics and everyday life amidst serial wars and occupations.
Such an acknowledgment alongside the existing moralizing discourses and expansive forms of governmentality around democracy, freedom and security may make it possible to anthropologically attend to the humiliation, resentment, incomprehensibility, and the affective residue that remains from having been deceived that ordinary Afghans reveal to us as so clearly constitutive of modern subjectivity. I turn to ordinary ethics as a way to explore how it is that Afghans embark on everyday endeavors of making life livable. Afghans pursue ethical lives in the most ordinary moments yet amidst being perpetually rendered subjects in need of moralizing discourses (such as democracy, human rights, and gender equality) alongside the relentless modalities of modern war and death dealing instead of being acknowledged as people who have been subject to unremitting, calculated wars and societal disruption on a profound scale.

Thus, although I have conducted fieldwork in Afghanistan during the contemporary war as it has unfolded throughout the country – the lives of Afghans who inform my ethnography have been disrupted and shaped by wars (and what war brings) for decades prior to this one. My dissertation aims to capture how uncertainties are not only ontological (and/or those just brought on by the Taliban) but are amassed experientially through serial wars and foreign occupations.

15 Mizan 1380

On two different registers I hope to situate the events of September 11, 2001 slightly differently. First, while many before me have expended energy focusing on the spectacular nature of the events of September 11, 2001 – I think it is critical to rest as
much energy, if not more, in exploring what was enabled and made possible because of what happened on that day. Secondly, I do not merely shift the perspective from one date to another - looking at September 11, 2001 to the events that began on 1380 Mizan 15 (7 October 2001) – as many of the widows and families I came to know in Kabul trace their struggles to the Soviet Occupation and the Kabul Wars of the 1990s. I adjust the focus from the extraordinary forms of violence, as witnessed by the world on September 11 and too many other days, to forms of violence that are just as spectacular, or more, if we consider the scales and duration of the forms of violence. Furthermore, I aim not only to shift the perspective to consider other forms of violence, but also to attend to the different registers upon which violence does its work - the more subtle workings of violence- the everyday ways in which the uncertainty that canvasses spaces of violence embraces relationships – with oneself, others, this world, and aspirations for the next.

**By way of background**

*Just*’ war or just war?

I rehearse the contours of critical arguments by Talal Asad, but also others to emphasize the moralizing projects that have been declared with regards to the latest US -led war in Afghanistan (beginning 7 October 2001) - a punitive war, it was understood as the ‘just’ war, the war that ‘made sense’ (as compared to the War in Iraq that began in 2003). According to just war theory, which is premised on the notion that a war of self-defense is ‘just’ – the Afghan war was not only ‘just’, even though attacking Afghanistan violated international law, it was also a humanitarian war, according to these logics. This quote taken from a letter written by Richard Ryan, then President of the Security Council
of the United Nations – sent on October 7, 2001, the day the bombing (in this millennium) of Afghanistan began, reveals the dual rationales at work—self-defense and humanitarianism:

“In response to the armed attacks that were carried out against the United States on September 11, 2001, U.S. Ambassador to the United Nations John D. Negroponte reported that U.S. armed forces have "initiated actions designed to prevent and deter further attacks on the United States. These actions include measures against Al-Qaeda terrorist training camps and military installations of the Taliban regime in Afghanistan…...In carrying out these actions, the United States will continue its humanitarian efforts to alleviate the suffering of the people of Afghanistan. We are providing them with food, medicine and supplies” (2001, http://www.globalsecurity.org/military/library/news/2001/10/mil-011008-usia09.htm).

I use Asad to underscore what I refer to as the moral edifice of the war rhetoric. I will elaborate shortly on why I specifically prefer the use of ‘moral’ over ‘ethical’ in describing the justifications for the invasion of Afghanistan in 2001 and its subsequent and ongoing occupation. A quote from the much remarked upon radio address by Laura Bush, given on November 17, 2001 (42 days into the bombing of Afghanistan), is equally revealing and reminder of the rhetoric used in this war:

“Civilized people throughout the world are speaking out in horror -- not only because our hearts break for the women and children in Afghanistan, but also because in Afghanistan we see the world the terrorists would like to impose on the rest of us. All of us have an obligation to speak out. We may come from different backgrounds and faiths -- but parents the world over love our children. We respect our mothers, our sisters and daughters. Fighting brutality against women and children is not the expression of a specific culture; it is the acceptance of our common humanity -- a commitment shared by people of good will on every continent. Because of our recent military gains in much of Afghanistan, women are no longer imprisoned in their homes. They can listen to music and teach their daughters without fear of punishment. Yet the terrorists who helped rule that country now plot and plan in many countries. And they must be stopped. The fight against terrorism is also a fight for the rights and dignity of women” (http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/?pid=24992).

The predominant rhetoric, even accepted by self-proclaimed ‘progressives’ and critics of George Bush’s regime, claimed the war on Afghanistan as somehow a more legitimate, justified form of violence, but more importantly as a “morally advanced” (Asad, 2007)
form of violence than the kind committed by those who orchestrated the attacks on the US in September 2001. Furthermore, the war on Afghanistan was not only promoted as the war that would ‘liberate’ Afghan women but the war that would bring democracy and freedom to Afghanistan and subsequently make the world more safe and secure. Thus, I use ‘moral’ (as opposed to ethical) to distinguish the constitutive underpinnings that were offered, largely unquestioned, judged as qualitatively superior and thus moralizing. There were other vocabularies available to use as justifications, rooted in other logics (ie. imperial aspirations) with regards to the war in Afghanistan, that were made to appear altogether irrelevant, in the face of such morally debased inhumanity. Asad emphasizes the ‘morally advanced’ argument I am trying to make here:

“I am also struck by the ingenuity with which so many politicians, public intellectuals, and journalists provide moral justifications for killing and demeaning other human beings. What seems to matter is not the killing and dehumanization as such but how one kills and with what motive. People at all times have, of course, justified the killing of so-called enemies and others they deem not deserving to live. The only difference is that today liberals who engage in this justification think they are different because morally advanced. The very thought has social implications, and it is therefore that thought that makes a real difference. Liberal thought begins from the notion that everyone has the absolute right to defend himself, in the full knowledge that the idea of defense is subject to considerable interpretation, so that (for example) liberation from the oppressor in Iraq becomes part of defense for both the American occupier and the insurgency” (Asad, 2007).

Asad ends with an example of the Iraq War yet his point is just as relevant to the war in Afghanistan. The Taliban insurgency and the NATO occupying forces, led by the US, share the same language of ‘liberation from the oppressor’ and ‘self defense’ as logics that animate both of their campaigns of ongoing violence in Afghanistan. I am very hastily commenting on the war rhetoric surrounding the current war in Afghanistan and how this war made political rhetoric morally productive, yet I believe that even hasty

---

5 I have wondered why Asad would not have used the example of Afghanistan, which actually seems a more than, or at least, as fitting example as Iraq.
commentary captures how the war rhetoric is morally productive. As opposed to a just war or a humanitarian war – the Afghan war was made to be both, according to the justifications that were presented. Although my task in this dissertation lies elsewhere it is important to situate it as the rather relevant ‘background’ and larger scale processes to the more subtle practices of everyday life in Kabul.

This dissertation aims to rest on the ordinary ethics and aspirations of Afghans for what constitutes a livable life yet at least some reflection of the moralizing justifications, sentiments and claims that inform the current occupation are necessary, if simply even by way of reminder of the competing claims for what kinds of violence and upon whom becomes possible and under what logics. As the prevailing logic around the world went, even though invading Afghanistan violated humanitarian law - decisive military action was acceptable because the military that was doing the invading was modern enough, liberal enough and powerful enough and the targets illiberal enough, uncivilized enough, and thus “killable”, even as civilians (Asad, 2007). I particularly highlight Asad’s “morally advanced” argument in the context of a modern liberal state leading the bombing on Afghanistan as I believe it really does demand a different set of questions not only about the types of violence that become legitimated (but also that it is legitimated in the first place) that I believe must be attended to, specifically with respect to Afghanistan, but also elsewhere, with far more care than I can give to it here.

‘Moral’ and ‘Ethical’ Distinctions

Since I will be using ‘moral’ and ‘ethical’ throughout I would like to clarify how I understand the relationship of my work to these two terms. Didier Fassin contends that
while more recent philosophical scholarship does not distinguish between the two concepts, recent anthropological scholars are split in that - based on their work and the philosophical traditions from which they hail – some feel there is something at stake in making the distinction, while others feel that making a distinction is not necessary (Fassin, 2012). I do distinguish between ‘moral’ and ‘ethical’ and their derivative words (moralizing, morality, ethically, ethics, etc.) and my subsequent usage throughout this dissertation will aim to reflect the marked distinction that I have come to understand as related to my work.

Historically, anthropology has engaged with morality as its object of investigation, primarily understood through Durkheim: “all morality appears to us as a system of rules and conduct” (Durkheim, 1953). Thus, morality is seen as a set of rules or norms (based on authority - whether religious, political, etc.) that structure how individuals within societies regulate behaviour and systematically understand obligations (Fassin, 2012). Thus in seeing religion as a moral force, for example, Islam could be seen as the moral force that structures Muslim societies and allows a code and set of rules and vocabulary by which behavior and obligations are read through, a prescriptive template so to speak. However, Asad (through Macintyre (via Aristotle) and Foucault’s ethical turn) have encouraged anthropologists to see the study of religion and religious subjects not only as a set of formulaic codes that structures societies and/or of individuals or subjects that mechanically align their behaviors but as something far more compelling - as a process that enables an agentive ethical religious self to discipline mind and behavior towards the pursuit of an ethical life. A self-questioning, reasoning and engagement based on an understanding of one’s place in the world is a continuous ethical practice and
process - a labor in quest of the ethical life. Thus a religious subject is not only in a state of being, but a state of becoming. Ethnographers following a certain intellectual lineage understand ethics “as the subjective work produced by agents to conduct themselves in accordance with their inquiry about what a good life is” (Fassin, 2012). The aligning with or allegiance to an intellectual lineage is not what is of prime importance for me, although by citational power alone, it becomes clear where the theoretical aspects of my work draw inspiration. It is the stakes – political and other - particularly as related to my ethnographic work in Kabul and to debates that I believe the empirical material speaks to that are critical in any distinctions that need to be made.

In discussing the political rhetoric that justified the invasion and subsequent occupation of Afghanistan, I use ‘moral’ as opposed to ethical. By referring to it as ‘political rhetoric’ my intention is not to dismiss it simply as ‘politics’ or as ‘rhetoric’ or as ‘political rhetoric’. Although I distinguish the moralizing projects of war and humanitarianism from the ethical projects of Afghans, I hope to actually reanimate the political in relation to morality and ethics that Fassin and others he cites (Englund (2008) and Anderson (2011)) believe have been untethered, and even ‘neglected’ in recent anthropological work on moralities and ethics: “the analyses of local moralities and of ethical subjectivities seem to have specified the moral and the ethical to the point that they often become somewhat separated from the political, as if norms and values could be isolated from power relations, or sensibilities and emotions from collective histories” (Fassin, 2012). I believe it becomes necessary to explore why the justifications for war were effective, persuasive, and permissible. Although this exploration exceeds the feasible capacities of this dissertation, such an exploration would have to take seriously
the underlying moral sentiments as well as practices from which this political rhetoric gained life - the moral sentiments that innervate the practices of war, as related to Afghanistan. I maintain that the moralizing claims of both arms of the political rhetoric that justified the invasion and subsequent occupation of Afghanistan – the just war as well as the humanitarian war – are appropriately subsumed within a Foucauldian theoretical disposition on the governing of others. The ordinary ethics and ethical subjectivities of Afghans that I explore attends to the ethical governing of the self as Muslims alongside “modes of subjectivation” (Foucault, 1990) to the resolute uncertainty that is contained by the moralizing projects of both war and humanitarianism, as well as that which exceeds it. Framing my ethnographic work in this way allows me to focus more acutely on everyday life in Kabul. Meanwhile the wedded moralizing projects of war/occupation and humanitarianism, are re-invested with the political, and its clear connections and convergences at the register of the ordinary, where Afghans pursue (although not always smoothly) ethical aspirations that not only are legible to them, but more critically, seem livable.

**Humanitarianism and Care as Moralizing Forms of Governance**

I cite from both Asad and Fassin as their work speaks to the forms of governance that have come to be hallmarks of a modern liberal state – the legitimacy and capability to kill in parallel with performing acts of compassion. I understand practices of compassion enunciated through languages of humanitarianism and care as significant to warrant some reflection with respect to contemporary Afghanistan, even more so when the dissertation is organized around the moral and ethical projects underway in Kabul.
Asad states: “I suggest that legitimate violence exercised in and by the modern progressive state - including the liberal democratic state - possesses a peculiar character that is absent in terrorist violence (absent not because of the latter’s virtue but because of the former’s capability); a combination of cruelty and compassion that sophisticated social institutions enable and encourage” (Asad, 2007). Echoing the same sentiment as Asad, Fassin, although not attributing this combination to the modern liberal state, but to a less specific formation he calls “contemporary politics” - Fassin almost identically states: “this dialectic of repression and compassion lie at the heart of contemporary politics must elicit questioning from a moral anthropological outlook” (Fassin, 2012). I proceed with placing my work alongside the works of Asad and Fassin in seeing humanitarian practices of care and compassion as moralizing forms of governance that work in tandem with the violence of the modern liberal state.

Institutionalized forms of ‘care’ are part of the landscape of governance that Afghans, of all segments of society, have to navigate through daily in Kabul. Recent anthropological literature on humanitarianism and care is useful (Bornstein and Redfield (eds.), 2009; Pandolfi, 2008; Malkki, 1996; Feldman, 2007; Feldman and Ticktin (eds.), 2010; Fassin and Pandolfi, 2010; Ticktin, 2006), but only to a limited extent, in conceptualizing how subjectivation to moralizing forms of governance produces certain kinds of subjects in the context of contemporary Kabul. Understanding humanitarianism and care as enacted in Kabul through the expansive regimes of governmentality allows a focus not only on the varied processes of subjectivation that enable certain forms of life, but also allows a particular kind of exploration into that which is also disabled.
Furthermore, such a focus manages to capture how war has implicated humanitarianism and care into its landscapes of violence.

**Humanitarianism as Trope/Sentimentality**

With regards to Afghanistan, very early into this specific war, it was shown quite clearly how direct military action folded humanitarianism into its mission, so as to portray the war as ‘just’ and as a humanitarian one – thus collapsing the critical divide that humanitarianism erected for itself, particularly in contexts of war (Donini et al, 2004). Thus although the Afghan war was portrayed as a humanitarian war by the US, at the onset of military action in 2001, humanitarianism was rendered a trope. Critical development specialists have detailed since 2001 how events in Afghanistan, directly after the departure of the Taliban from Kabul, left little to no room for humanitarianism – the NGOs, the UN, donors, are all ‘belligerents (Donini, 2009, 2010; Stockton, 2009)’ – meaning all, with the exception of Switzerland (and maybe, India)⁶ have supported the Coalition forces and the Afghan government, with the result that Afghans as well as the Taliban insurgency came to not distinguish between aid workers and Coalition soldiers.

Donini comments:

‘There is no humanitarian consensus in Afghanistan and very little humanitarian space. Both have been trampled by political expediency and by the disregard by all parties to the conflict for the plight of civilians. Civilians are dying because of conflict and insecurity. Thus, there is no humanitarian consensus that would define the basic operational requirements of humanitarian agencies, no clarity on humanitarian needs, and an extremely politicized environment where aid

---

⁶ I say ‘maybe’ India, because although India did not send troops to Afghanistan, India’s historic relationship with Afghanistan has been too closely mediated by India’s animosity with Pakistan. Afghans, especially in Kabul, have a rather antagonistic relationship with and thus disregard for the Pakistan state. To contrast this, Afghans in Kabul generally view India quite favourably – the popularity of Indian cinema and Indian cricket team matches are the most simple demonstrations of this, and more nuanced demonstrations are comments laced throughout everyday conversations - positive comments about India, and quite frequent Pakistani bashings.
agencies are pressured into supporting the Coalition and the government’s political and military agendas. As a result, there is little understanding of, and respect for, humanitarian principles by the Taliban and other insurgents who tar the UN and NGOs with the occupiers’ brush. Moreover, there is at best limited interest or support for principled humanitarian action by Coalition forces, major donors, and the political UN, whose emphasis is on the co-optation and militarization of aid or, failing that, on its displacement via for profit actors (Donini, 2010).

Although it is quite clear that humanitarianism is political, the Afghanistan case has proven that too much else was at stake for humanitarianism to be regarded as something that could be salvaged through ethical practice. I agree with Donini’s assessment of humanitarianism in Afghanistan and it resonates with what I have seen as well as described elsewhere: “Institutions once thought of as distinct—the state, NGOs, and international organizations—are now understood as woven together in an expansive conglomeration of management, control, and social engineering. In Kabul, as well as elsewhere in the world, such vast institutional assemblages involved in the work of ‘regime change’ and ‘nation building’ take on a peculiar role as they work to assist an occupying force” (Daulatzai, 2006). Curiously, Afghanistan was portrayed as a humanitarian war although humanitarianism is understood to be altogether non-existent or if so, sparingly present. Thus, leaving humanitarianism to be only a trope - political rhetoric and strategy coupled to a very specific political agenda (i.e. American imperial aspirations) – thus not even aspirational in relation to humanitarianism, and thus only moralizing. I have argued elsewhere that: “anxieties about the specter of ‘Islamic fundamentalism’ and ‘customary’ Afghan patriarchy - particularly as they pertain to what is perceived as the oppression of women - have to a large extent eclipsed possibilities of attending to the suffering which geopolitics, war, and occupation inflicted (and continue to inflict) upon the people of Afghanistan” (Daulatzai, 2006); and elsewhere: “although feminist (-inspired) writings have served an important role in keeping discussions of
Afghanistan alive, they have largely obfuscated the history of war, violence, and subjectivity, particularly and paradoxically, as they relate to women in Afghanistan” (Daulatzai, 2008).

The US military campaigns in Afghanistan have been centered around ‘winning the hearts and minds’ of Afghans yet it is clear that it has been the hearts and minds of Americans that had to be won throughout the war - thus the dual nature of the rhetoric - a ‘just war’ and a ‘humanitarian war’. Thus a rather inelegant but unequivocal enactment and demonstration of the cruelty and compassion that Asad signaled as the peculiar and distinct marker of liberal modern state violence, that was permissible, and not only permissible but largely demanded considering the well broadcasted absolute inhumanity of the Taliban. Yet it was not Afghans who needed to be convinced of who and what they have been up against, it was Americans – thus demonstrating the mobilizing of ‘humanity’ and only the sentiment (and sentimentality) of humanitarianism, without the actual practices that define humanitarianism. I move forward with this point by engaging with the more recent and general anthropological work on humanitarianism and ‘humanity’ as its object of inquiry by taking into account the unique context of Afghanistan.

**One Possible Genealogy of Humanity**

In this section I will briefly elaborate on how the modern liberal state has the distinctive ability to define how humanity is constituted, and what can be done in its name- specifically violence, war and occupation - an imperial project based on humanitarianism, or at least the sentimentality attached to it. The work of Thomas Laquer
traces a genealogy of humanity as an object to the 18th century when humans became constituted as ‘humane-compassionate, sympathetic, ethical (Laquer, 1989, 2009)’. Laquer introduces the idea that humanity is a sensibility, a feeling, in essence- an ‘ethical sentiment’. Building on the work of Laquer, Ilana Feldman and Miriam Ticktin propose that the affective architecture of humanity is not only composed of sentiments of compassion and sympathy but also fear and insecurity:

“The inhumane is not only a threat to humanity, however. Sometimes it is a threat that defines humanity…Humanity is frequently “defined by its breach” (Teitel, 2004), as when cruelty shapes understandings of the humane or when the “essence” of human being is clarified by some people’s subjection to the most degrading and devastating conditions. The inhumane has also been central to the universalist reach of humanity. Part of the reason that human rights, for example, are so widely seen as globally relevant and important is the horror that violations of these rights evokes in people. To a certain extent, then, humanity is less about a claim to global connection (though it is that also) and more about the identification of universal threats. One of the paradoxes of the centrality of threat to defining humanity is that it is most often other human beings who are identified as the source of this threat. Humanity is linked to sentiments not only of sympathy and compassion but also fear and insecurity” (Feldman and Ticktin, 2010).

Thus, portraying the Taliban as distinctively uncivilized, illiberal and inhumane (without any mention of the historical circumstances of their birth) - a threat to security, and a threat to humanity- was central to the rationale for bombing and then subsequently occupying Afghanistan for more than a decade. The Taliban threat to Afghan women was the rationale for initially bombing the country, and the threat to international security has been the rationale for continued bombing and the ongoing occupation. The security and stability of Afghanistan for Afghans has never been of concern outside what its stability meant for international security7.

7 The 1990s is the decade that proves that the security and stability of Afghanistan for Afghans was never of any concern for the US and much of the rest of the world, despite the seminal roles played by international powers in the 1980s in rallying Afghans to fight a war that would secure the US as the next imperial power.
Talibanization: Here, There, Everywhere

The Taliban have become infamous for their inhumanity - a reputation that carries forth to universally understood references in popular TV serials in the US, and internationally. Since the ousting of the Taliban from the capital in 2001, the term Talibanization has come to be widely used to refer to puritanical forms of religious conservatism and/or religious extremism, particularly (but not exclusively) as related to Islam. It is interesting to note the emergence of “Talibanization”, and the various ways in which a wide range of state and non-state actors throughout the world deploys the term. For example, in Nigeria, “Talibanization” is used to refer to advocates of Shar’ia law, in India to right-wing Hindu activists, and in the U.S.A. to tea party enthusiasts, while in Pakistan and Afghanistan, a wide range of initiatives in popular and consumer culture (fashion, music, etc.) are posited as responses to Talibanization. It is also interesting to track uses of the term “Talibanization” contemporarily and investigate what deploying the term enables, particularly in the militarized context of Afghanistan and Pakistan. As an antithesis of democracy, human rights and women’s rights, “Talibanization” is understood as a threat to freedom, democracy, modernity, etc. However, “Talibanization” is a signifier for what? Exploring the term and its uses with regards to intended affects as well as the spectral presence of Talibanization as a threat will quickly reveal how it has been used in the lead up to the invasion of Afghanistan and its subsequent occupation.

The Taliban does not only produce a ‘sensibility, a feeling’, as Laquer used to describe humanity, they produce an affect\textsuperscript{12} of inhumanity, of morally debased misogynistic injustice (more morally debased, of course, than the everyday misogyny that has come to be less remarkable, even permissible, around the rest of the world).

In the next section, I engage with the critical work of Faisal Devji, more specifically his work on the aspirational thrust of violence at the heart of what he calls militancy, which includes militant groups such as Al-Qaida and the Taliban. I use Devji’s analysis of humanity and humanitarianism as I believe that Devji’s analysis of the aspirations of militant violence works well with my engagement with Asad’s work on the violence of the modern liberal state in framing both war and humanitarianism as moralizing forms of governance in Afghanistan.

I have previously outlined how human rights, democracy and women’s rights have been used as justifications for the invasion and subsequent occupation of Afghanistan. These discourses were strongly present in each program of each NGO, UN and development organization, and any governmental program that received funding from any international organization or State had to include them (or funding would certainly be discontinued). Afghans have literally been bombarded with these moralizing forms of governance and this development talk. Before I commence my engagement with Devji’s work, I offer a colorful expression that circulates in the same discursive space as these developmental regimes and associated moralizing discourses, particularly democracy. I offer this with the purpose of trying to attune the reader to the landscape and the

\textsuperscript{12} An affect, afterall is a much more visceral reaction, it is an intensity and has a different durational aspect than a sentiment, which is more fleeting.
cacophony of discourses and expressions (and their associated affects), as a beginning to understanding the intensities that gain life in Kabul. In addition, I hope to provide one expression that demonstrates how Afghans are providing commentary in their everyday lives of the moralizing forms of governance that they are being subjected to.

_Afghans on States of Democracy_

*Da mor kussy* is undoubtedly vulgar, yet is a quite elegantly vulgar formulation that when used in context, effectively captures how many Afghans think of the project of ‘democracy’ (*mor* is the Pashto word for mother; *kuss* is a word in Dari/Pashto that is the most vulgar way to refer to the female genitalia, *da mor kussy* is a state, condition-“democracy”). This formulation, is one of many examples, of cultural production and linguistic artfulness that is also deeply reflective of the way Afghans have come to think, digest and produce political commentaries of the contemporary. Simultaneous with the existence of such formulations, Afghans are living in a space saturated with Afghans of all walks of life who capitulate and use their talents to serve the international aid apparatus for temporary economic security.

To the best that I can capture the valences of the vulgar formulation, as I have heard it: *Da mor kussy*, is a temporal-spatial affectively charged condition of being immersed in a discursively hyper-mediated, suffocating zone of human rights speak, neoliberal sweet-talking good governance, market logic style democracy. It is a condition where it becomes logically normative that Afghans are made to feel that something is wrong with them and they are not morally (or otherwise) advanced enough for this world because of the state of contemporary Afghanistan - without any allegiance or even
mention to the historical forces that created the conditions for this state to be possible in
the first place. In essence, \textit{da mor kussy}, clear social commentary on the project of
‘democracy’ - is a state of profound “mother-fuckery” or “fucked-up ness”. Thus the
liberal, modern subject (\textit{khariji}, foreigner and/or \textit{dakhili}, Afghan/ native) who works for
a foreign NGO (or a country with troops active in Afghanistan), as a UNDP human rights
and democracy project officer, drives in an armored car to and from work with a personal
local Afghan driver, earns a salary in dollars or euros, works on ‘gender’ awareness
programs, and anti-corruption schemes and/or in certain circles speaks about how
Afghanistan is ‘backward’ – is a \textit{damorkuss} – “a shameless mother-fucker”. A \textit{damorkuss}
knows that he/she is one and recognizes others who are.

The gendered nature of this formulation (it is as it is mostly applied to males, and it is the female organ, and the mother) makes it an even more revealing and provocative expression of what Afghans who use this colorful phrase think of the shallow, overly sentimental, moralizing modes by which ‘gender’ has been bandied about by donors and their gender consultants as requisite experts for bringing \textit{da mor kussy} to Afghanistan. \textit{Da mor kussy} in a nut-shell captures the bomb it, occupy it, and then feel all warm and fuzzy about ‘reconstructing’ what you were responsible for disabling decades ago in the first place outlook of the condition of contemporary Afghanistan. It is also most importantly about being able to fuck that which gave you life – a clear reference to two things: 1) the Afghans who fuck their country (a female nation) by working for foreigners and a humiliating foreign aid regime; and 2) to the US for fucking the country which saved them (in the 1980s) and in doing so, provided them with a different form of life.

Afghans, in some cases, gave every male in their families to fight the Soviet Union, only
to be left to kill each other, and/or be killed themselves by the US or allied troops or the
stooges the US hand-picked, armed, financed and gave ultimate power to over the lives of
Afghans and the Afghan State until today. From democracy or da mor kussy, I turn
towards an engagement with the work of Faisal Devji and the war rhetoric of the Taliban.

**Humanity as Object, Humanity as victim**

Faisal Devji has been one of the few scholars to offer an analysis of what he refers
to as “militant” violence. Devji’s work offers an understanding of ‘humanity’ and
‘humanitarianism’ in relation to contemporary global politics. His work takes humanity
as object, but does so in such a way as to reveal not only the hypocrisies of the discourse
of humanitarianism, as used by modern states and other transnational forms of
governmentality (NGOs, etc.), but also as related to the discourses used by militants.
Devji’s analysis demonstrates that the logics of militant rhetoric also summon humanity
as justification for violence. However what distinguishes the rhetoric of the modern state
from the rhetoric of the Taliban is that the rhetoric of the former victimizes humanity
while the later aims to redeem and remake humanity. Devji’s work further demonstrates
not only the hypocrisies in how humanitarianism is promoted by modern states and
humanitarian aid agencies (NGOs, UN, etc.), but how its practices betray the actual
morals of those who seem to promote it, as part of what I earlier called ‘moralizing forms
of governance’.

---

13 I will use the phrase ‘militant’ violence in this section, not because I agree that all forms of ‘militant’
vViolence are the same, but simply to be able to offer a more focused engagement with the relevant aspects
of Devji’s work to the thread I am pursuing here.
His work analyzes Al-Qaida, the Taliban and militant rhetoric in relation to humanity itself, and not inhumanity, as is done with the modern liberal state rhetoric. Devji’s analysis is original yet shares a mode of inquiry similar to Asad. Asad, as previously explored, demonstrates that modern liberal state violence is informed by the same logics as militant suicide bombers, as is not a more morally advanced form of killing. Devji’s work makes a distinction between humanitarianism as practiced by transnational forms of governance and promoted in the logic of the modern liberal state and militant rhetoric. While both promote in their rhetoric a search for humanity – one, is as agent and object (militants), and the other as victim to be rescued (‘humanitarian interventions’ and humanitarianism):

“…from environmentalism to pacifism and beyond, such a politics [a global politics] can only be one that takes humanity itself as its object, not least because the threat of nuclear weapons or global warming can only be conceived of in rather human rather than national or international terms. And so militant practices are informed by the same search that animates humanitarianism, which from human rights to humanitarian intervention has become the rhetorical aim and global signature of all politics today. This is the search for humanity as an agent and not simply the victim of history” (Devji, 2008).

A poem, written by a Taliban militant (and subsequently translated into English), entitled ‘Humanity’ reveals the ways in which humanity is understood, as aspiration, in the expression of a Taliban who calls himself Samiullah Khalid Sahak. This poem does not focus on the inhumanity of the foreign occupiers, but portrays a sense of shame that the Taliban militants themselves have lost their humanity14. He prays to Allah to adorn them with it once again.

14 I am understanding Sahak’s “we” as the Taliban, and not as ordinary Afghans.

45
Humanity’ by Samiullah Khalid Sahak

Everything has gone from the world,
The world has become empty again.
Human animal.
Humanity animality.
Everything has gone from the world,
I don’t see anything now.
All I see is
My imagination.

They don’t accept us as humans,
They don’t accept us as animals either.
And, as they would say,
Humans have two dimensions.
Humanity and animality,
We are out of both of them today.

We are not animals,
I say this with certainty.
But,
Humanity has been forgotten by us,
And I don’t know when it will come back.
May Allah give it to us,
And decorate us with this jewellery.
The jewelry of humanity,
For now it’s only in our imagination
(Strick van Linschoten and Kuehn, editors, 2012).

Devji, through citing Arendt, reveals what is at stake when all sentimentality is removed from humanitarianism and humanity: human beings have to express the shame for being a human being, which the Taliban militant expresses in the poem entitled ‘Humanity’. Arendt states: “For the idea of humanity, when purged of all sentimentality, has the very serious consequence that in one form or another men must assume responsibility for all crimes committed by men and that all nations share
the onus of evil committed by all others. Shame at being a human being is the purely
individual and still non-political expression of this insight” (cited in Devji, 2008). Asad
makes a similar point:

“All constitutional states rest on a space of violence that they call legitimate. In a liberal
democracy, all citizens and the government that represents them are bound together by mutual
obligations, and the actions of the duly elected government are the actions of all its citizens.
When the government acts against suspected terrorists and inferior military opponents, everyone
is (rightly or wrongly) involved in the space of violence. There may be criticism by particular
citizens of the government’s actions on moral or legal grounds, but until these are conceded
constitutionally by the government, all citizens remain bound to the space of violence that its
representative government inhabits” (Asad, 2007).

The poem by the Taliban militant expresses the shame and seems to be expressing a form
of taking responsibility of the space of violence that Devji, Arendt and Asad reveal as an
ethics underlying the relatedness between violence and humanity. In doing so, the
militant accepts the universal responsibility for ‘all crimes committed by men’,
something modern liberal states, fail to do. Humanity, as aspiration, and as expressed in
this poem, demonstrate that both modern states who orchestrate ‘humanitarian
interventions’, and invade nations in order to save ‘humanity’, and militant violence both
summon ‘humanity’ in their justifications for violence. It is critical to note who/what is
victimized, and who/what is agent and object in the discourses of the modern liberal state,
NGOs and other ‘humanitarian’ actors and that of militants. I am limited by the
parameters of the topic of this dissertation to elaborate here further, as I would like, and
feel necessary. I briefly engaged with the work of Devji in order to engage with the war
rhetoric of the Taliban insurgents to demonstrate that they are also enacting moralizing
forms of governance of their own that involve both war and humanity. Thus it is not only
the US/NATO forces that are actively involved in producing the space of violence that
constitutes contemporary Afghanistan, but also the Taliban.
I have demonstrated through the work of Asad and Devji, as applied to the war rhetoric of the US and the Taliban, that both have participated in the troping of humanitarianism/humanity. I mean to convey by this formulation is that humanitarian speak and humanitarianism is revealed not only for its empty promises, but for the fact that its focus to save another victim (‘humanity’) or to redeem it alongside profound acts of violence and war in the same civilizing mission manner ultimately betrays itself and reveals its complicity in the inhumane project that is contemporary global politics. Asad’s work clearly demonstrates that: “The violence at the heart of liberal political doctrine makes this clear……some humans have to be treated violently in order that humanity can be redeemed” (Asad, 2007). Similarly the rhetoric of the Taliban, as analyzed by Devji, ‘humanity’ must be redeemed in the justifications used by the Taliban for their profound acts of violence in Afghanistan. My point in engaging with the war rhetoric of the US and the Taliban was to reveal that both regimes of violence have deemed Afghans as killable.

**The Ultimate Gesture of Hospitality**

Thusfar, I have articulated what I understand as the moralizing forms of governance- war and humanitarianism, that constitute everyday life in Kabul. In drawing my distinctions between the ‘moral’ and ‘ethical’ and the space of violence that includes both war and humanitarianism, I have briefly included the moralizing logic of violence used by the Taliban insurgents that also structures the lives of Afghans in rather significant ways. Afghans are caught between the moralizing violence of both the foreign troops and Afghan National Police and Army fighting alongside them, and the moralizing violence of insurgents, primarily the Taliban. Devji argues that the violence of the insurgents and the violence of the foreign forces is a form of conversation, a shared
language of violence. Devji analyzes militant documents, websites and released statements to find that the militant mission is not aspiring to convert non-Muslims to Muslims or some form of millenarian Islam but to reveal to the world the humiliation and shame of Muslims that results from the practices and policies of the US and its allies, precisely in places such as Afghanistan. Devji analyzes the violence of the militants as pedagogical – “to school these unbelievers in the forgotten language of ethics….the language of violence, then, belongs to the infidel as much as it does the faithful, allowing one’s vice to compete with the other’s virtue in such a way as to bring the ethics and principles of humanity back to political life in the most spectacular of ways” (Devji, 2008). Thus, according to Devji, the violence of the insurgents in Afghanistan would also be what I have described as a moralizing form of governance, but a form that differs from the violence of the foreign troops. In rhetoric, the former is aspirational towards redeeming humanity, to its core, while the latter seeks to save a victimized humanity from a political illiberal enemy:

“…the search for humanity, or rather the attempt to realize it, lies at the heart of militant action. While Al-Qaeda’s terrorists may begin by identifying Muslims with the passive victims who embody humanity in the discourse of human rights and crimes against humanity, their aim is to transform this humanity from the inside, not least because their sacrificial practices deny the possibility of any position external to it. These militants are not interested in saving Muslim victims by humanitarian missions, but in remaking humanity itself by abandoning the technical language of humanitarianism and human rights- which is invoked in their rhetoric only to be considered hypocritical” (Devji, 2008).

Thus, according to Devji’s analysis, the logics and practices of both the foreign forces and of the Taliban insurgents are enacting practices of violence upon one another as a form of conversation in the setting of contemporary Afghanistan.
Regardless of whether one agrees with Devji’s analysis of militant justifications for violence or not, the reason I pursued this line of inquiry is to demonstrate that in the logics and practices of the modern liberal state and the Taliban militants, both have decisively rendered Afghans as killable. By way of reminder, according to Asad’s logic of the violence of the modern liberal state, for humanity to be redeemed, some humans have to be killed (Asad, 2007). Yet, I ask: why must Afghans be those who again, die and suffer, be made widows and orphans, for either a saving or a remaking of a humanity that supposedly belongs to the entire world? Is this then not the ultimate gesture of hospitality? I will return to this question of hospitality and what I mean by ‘the ultimate gesture of hospitality’ after a brief historical reminder.

**Brief History Lesson Interlude/Reminder**

Ordinary Afghans have had to host a war they really have little to do with (except that they are also part of what constitutes a globalized humanity). The United States, Pakistan and Saudi Arabia are collectively responsible for the creation of the Taliban. Throughout the 1980s in the fight against the Soviet Occupation, these governments and their well-paid affiliates in Afghanistan and Pakistan hand-picked the men who were to become the

---

15 I do not mean to implore the tired ‘cultural’ explanations of hospitality (*melmastia*, in Pashto) or *nanawatai* (sanctuary or protection) of Pashtuns as ethical obligation, and forms of life in Pashtun life worlds - as was regurgitated limitlessly by cultural ‘experts’ on the eve of the invasion of Afghanistan. The convenience of the explanation was some quaint version of this: since Pashtuns offer as part of *Pashtunwali* - generous hospitality and sanctuary – it is culturally prohibited for Osama bin Laden to be given over to the US. He is a guest and/or someone who has asked for sanctuary, Afghans (particularly Pashtuns, considering *Pashtunwali* was being summoned as an explanation) are his host and/or their houses refuge and thus are obligated to not hand him over. Of course, what this ‘cultural’ explanation allowed, was that the actual reasonable terms offered by the Al-Qaida leader at the time regarding the transfer of Osama bin Laden to an appropriate court of justice, could not be part of the discourse, but instead, eclipsed by these ‘cultural explanations’. What quickly followed was the portrayal of a ‘morally justified’ and ‘reasoned’ invasion of Afghanistan. I, in no way, wish to add to this line of ‘cultural expertise’.
present-day Taliban. They were armed with sophisticated weapons (weapons that remained even after the Soviet Union left) and financed quite generously to serve the interests of the United States, Pakistan and Saudi Arabia. The Taliban are not people Afghans picked to represent them, to be the most powerful, and the most-well armed. Thus they bear no responsibility for their presence and their mission in Afghanistan, yet Afghans are at their mercy, and the mercy of those who created the Taliban who now want them eliminated. Afghans have had to play host to a battle between two one-time friends. What can a host do when its guests fight with the most devastating of weapons that put the lives of ordinary Afghans at risk?

Acknowledging Afghanistan

Earlier I asked what it might mean to consider the current war in Afghanistan as the ultimate gesture of hospitality by Afghans who have been forced to play host to one of the grandest scenes of violence of the contemporary moment. This is a clearly not a war over clashes of civilizations, but in Taliban rhetoric, and Devji’s analysis of it- a fight to redeem a common, globalized humanity – a war that aspires to exterminate violence and end the immoral, oppressive and humiliating treatment of populations for political and economic gain. In the logic of the modern liberal state – according to my analysis of the US war rhetoric through Asad’s work- is a justified war against an illiberal and uncivilized enough enemy. The war thus aspires to either redeem humanity (Taliban rhetoric) or save it (US war rhetoric) through enacting profound acts of violence with the most sophisticated and the most ordinary of technologies.
How would it look to anthropologically attend to this sacrifice made by Afghans? It is a distinctively different kind of sacrifice, as it is not the willful, agentive sacrifice as were other historically and contemporarily classified sacrifices from the region – to name a few, the sacrifices of Pashtuns who as *Khudai Khidmatgars* resisted non-violently against the British Empire, or the Afghans who gave their sons, brothers and fathers to fight the Soviet occupying forces, or the Taliban or Al-Qaida militants who kill themselves as part of ‘martyrdom operations’ in Afghanistan. How do you account for the kind of sacrifice that is imposed by others yet endured by Afghans? This is a question I cannot answer in the confines of this introduction or even in the pages of the dissertation that follow, but I offer the question as a mode of attuning to what it may mean to acknowledge Afghanistan.

**Background to the Background**

Previously in this chapter I reflected on the moralizing justifications used for the current war and occupation of Afghanistan and spoke of September 11, 2001 and 15 Mizan 1380 (October 7, 2001). However my intent was not to privilege the contemporary space of violence over prior histories of violence and conflicts. I find great difficulty in giving a background, because it seems inadequate when trying to summarize the historical events of violence of contemporary Afghanistan relevant to the lives of the people who inform my ethnography, as it is a background that in itself needs background. The lives of those whom fill the pages of this dissertation are remaking their lives in the space of the current war and occupation that began October 7, 2001. Yet their lives were marked by other “critical events” (Das, 1995) that transpired in Afghanistan. Many of the
widows I met were widowed prior to 2001, during the Soviet Occupation or the internal war in Afghanistan in the 1990s that followed the Soviet departure in 1989. Many of them had been multiply displaced, internally and to neighboring Pakistan and Iran prior to 2001. Many others were too majbur (helpless) to flee and thus remained in Kabul and in other provinces of Afghanistan during the years of occupation, internal war and Taliban rule. Those who managed to flee grew up in an increasingly hostile exile in Pakistan’s refugee camps and urban centers and were forced to return in 2002 to an Afghanistan many of them could not even actually recognize anymore. The background in itself is layered.

The pages of this dissertation intend to acknowledge the layers and attend to how living amidst cumulatively layered scenes of violence produce modes of being and a knowledge of and relationality to this world that issue forth from experientially being a subject in and subject to this context. Certainly in contexts not subject to continued violence an a priori knowledge also produces doubt and skepticism with regard to one’s place in the world. My aim is not to measure quantitatively or otherwise the levels of uncertainty produced in scenes of violence versus other places less besieged with violence, but instead to offer glimpses of the way in which uncertainties ground everyday life in Kabul.
Karte-e-Naan

The area I call Kart-e-naan is one of the poorest, most devastated, yet most densely populated neighborhoods in Kabul. Although 15 years ago it was one of the up-market areas of the city, with Kabul University nearby, and was spared by the Soviet occupation and the war against it that lasted 10 years, during the Kabul Wars in the 1990s much of the neighborhood was destroyed. Bakery X sits amongst the bombed-out skeletons of buildings inhabited by squatters, rows of battered homes and heaps of rubble left by war. The neighborhood is also home to two schools for girls run by international NGOs, a Shiite Mosque, and a lively bazaar.

Bakery X is open from sunrise to sunset, seven days a week, and is part of what I am calling the Urban Vulnerable Bakery Project (henceforth, the Bakery Project) run by a large international aid organization. The Bakery Project was launched in 1996 in response to the multifarious effects of prolonged conflict and violence, drought, and the ensuing widespread food insecurity experienced in the urban centers (Kabul, Mazar-Sharif, Kandahar) throughout Afghanistan. The project beneficiaries in these three urban centers consisted of 28,938 households including 27,978 cardholders and 960 bakery workers and their families (897 of the most vulnerable women and 63 men). The project is designed to provide subsidized bread to the urban poor, while specifically targeting the

---

16 There is no place in Kabul called kart-e-naan. There is a kart-e-chahr (fourth quarter), kart-e-seh (third quarter), etc. I am using kart-e-naan (bread quarter) as a pseudonym to mask the actual locale.
more vulnerable groups - primarily orphaned children, widows, other female-headed households, the disabled and the elderly.

The international aid organization sponsoring the Bakery Project provided the fortified wheat flour and the iodized salt used in the making of the bread. The beneficiaries of the project are selected according to criteria established by the Bakery Project administrators, and are given ration cards which they present daily at the bakery to get the bread which is fortified with micronutrients at 22 percent of the market price. While poor urban households are beneficiaries of the project, that is, ‘customers’ of the bakery, it is primarily (but not exclusively) widows who make the bread. Fourteen women plus a supervisor are employed in the bakery, working in two daily shifts, seven days a week. The first shift begins at 4.00 a.m., with women preparing bread until 9.00 a.m., when the second shift arrives. The second shift works until 3.00 p.m., or later if necessary. Each shift is comprised of seven women who work together in a very small space rotating tasks—weighing the ingredients, kneading the dough, rolling it out, and shaping it into the long flatbreads (resembling skateboards) which make Afghan bread distinctive, then poking holes in the dough to allow air to escape, and then sliding it into the wood oven with a long paddle to bake until it is reddish-brown.

Bakery X in Kart-e-naan had 357 card-holders at the time I worked there as a baker and approximately 1,800 pieces of the long flatbreads were made per day at this bakery. The women who qualified to buy the bread at reduced rates received five pieces of bread a day, paying the equivalent of 11 cents in total for all of the five pieces.

In addition to the meager but steady income provided to the bakers, each woman
can take home two pieces of bread per day. All of the women working in the bakery live on the outskirts of Kabul, and walk up to 1.5 hours a day to get to work. The bakers represent the major social groups in Afghanistan: three are Pashtun, two are Hazara, seven are Tajik, and two are Uzbek. The oldest one is 62, while the average age of the women is 34. The 14 bakers have come to Kabul from Panjshir, Konduz, Qandahar, Parwan, Ghazni, Bamian, Taloqan, and elsewhere in search of work. Three of the women came to Kabul between 1997 and 2000, during Taliban rule, while the others arrived with the fall of the Taliban and the massive influx of international aid that accompanied the US invasion. During the 24 years of conflict, none of the widows had ever left Afghanistan\textsuperscript{17}, but each had been displaced several times.

\textit{Bakery}

I worked as an ethnographer in Bakery X during the summer of 2003, fulfilling the shift duties of a baker. At 25, Hila was the youngest of the bakers there at the time, and she often worked nine-hour shifts. She worked several extra hours a day - more than the others - because the community had decided that she needed to earn a little extra money, considering her special circumstances. She began working for the Bakery Project four months before my arrival. Hila was a cheerful young woman, always animated, and always looking out for others best interests. She made it her daily duty to prepare the large pot of \textit{qahva} (green tea) and to supply refills throughout the shift in the bakery; if somebody complained about back pain and wanted to prematurely rotate to another task in the assembly line in the bakery, Hila immediately volunteered and followed with a

\textsuperscript{17} With the exception of the supervisor who went to Pakistan for three months, but subsequently returned.
friendly taunt of that person. It was unanimously agreed by everybody in the bakery that she is the chief instigator of the laughter there, and that she has a remarkable gift for sarcasm. She stuck out, not because she was the youngest, but primarily because she joked about everything. Nothing was off limits.

Before my stay there, I knew little about what to expect from working with a group of widows. Whatever prior expectations I held, they certainly did not include laughing and joking with the women as I did while in the bakery.

**Hila’s Family**

After working in the bakery and random work-related interactions with Hila for two weeks or so, we shared a tea together at the end of ours shift. I began to ask her specific questions about her family and her support network in Kabul. She started talking to me more specifically about events surrounding her family. Without any prompts from my side, she first recounted how many of the men in her family, which was followed by her recollections of the circumstances surrounding their deaths.

The youngest of her three older brothers died fighting in Mazar- Sharif in 1997. Another brother died due to unspecified illness in 1990, and a third brother was killed by a bomb blast in 2000. She never blamed any person or group in particular for her brother’s deaths. Rather, she commented that everywhere the family migrated to escape the fighting, fighting followed them.

The ‘official’ cause of her father’s death, which took place two years before we met, was unknown. This is not uncommon in Kabul, where the quality of health care is extremely low and the cost of reliable health care prohibitively high. In the place of
verified medical causes of death, there are often found culturally based illness narratives. For instance, Hila described how her father had been suffering from severe chest pain before he died because he missed his sons so much. Hila understands that he died because *dilesh tang shod* (literally, ‘his heart tightened’). She expressed how her father was especially depressed and quiet after her last surviving brother died in 2000. This eldest son of his was killed in a random rocket blast, and a deep sadness had overcome her father upon the unbearable realization that all his sons had died before him. Hila articulated that the cumulative loss finally became more than her father could bear, and in Hila’s opinion that ultimately resulted in his death.

**Pre-emptive widow**

One day during an extended conversation with Hila, I asked about her husband and if he had been a relative\(^{18}\) as she had never mentioned anything about him to me, even though other women in the bakery would often speak about their married life. Hila looked at me and began crying, as she said in Dari: ‘I am a widow, dear sister, but I was never married.’ I was confused, and initially thought I had misunderstood her. While Hila used the common word for widow, *zan e baiwah* (in Dari), widowhood is also expressed with a range of terms that literally mean ‘woman without (protection, husband or male head of household)’ or ‘vulnerable woman’ (as mentioned earlier). As I continued to listen, I came to realize that her statement was not linguistically confounding. She was not merely expressing her current status as a female head of household. By using the term

\(^{18}\) Marriages in Afghanistan are usually arranged, and often with a distant relative, or a relative of a relative. It is a common question to inquire whether the person you married is from your family or your *qaum* (any form of solidarity – whether through shared descent, blood relatives, ‘ethnicity’ and/or historical circumstance).
*zan e baiwah*, she was making a profound gesture toward her relationship to loss, as well as to her particular perspective on the future.

Surviving the deaths of her three brothers and her father had left Hila alone to care and provide for herself and her mother. She cannot leave her mother since there is nobody else that could care for her. All her mother’s brothers had died during the wars, and her father’s family - who would customarily assume the responsibility of care for her mother according to normative Afghan kinship structures - are too poor to care for another household member, much less both of them. Hila said that she had lost all the men in her life. She had tried to get married several times, but the prospective grooms, or their families, could not afford to provide for both her and her mother. Hila therefore imagines she will never be married. The widows working in the bakery, and her neighbourhood *wakil* (chosen representative) and female elder, had thus presented her to the project administrators as a *zan-e bi-sarparast* (literally, a woman without a guardian), and thus deserving of a job. Hila, however, understands herself not only as a *zan-e bi-sarparast*, thus fulfilling the minimum requirements set by the Bakery Project, but more specifically a *baiwah*, a widow. Although never married, Hila has become a widow by classification, not due to the death of a husband, but due to the death of the possibility of marriage.

*Elasticity of meaning for ‘Widow’ in Kabul*

I found in my research that there is a common word for widow (*zan e baiwah* or *baiwah* and *kundda*, respectively) as well as different expressions that translate as ‘widow’ in both Dari and Pashto which were used interchangeably, but which may have
slightly different connotations\(^{19}\). My understanding of the different expressions for ‘widow’ stem from the multiple possible reconfigurations of family and networks of care which have resulted from war and displacement in Afghanistan. In some cases, households are composed of multiple widows who reside together with one or more males who act as the primary wage earner and/or head of household(s). However, also prevalent in Afghanistan are households where only widowed women reside with their children. Yet women whose husbands have migrated elsewhere in search of work, sending back remittances from Pakistan or Iran or somewhere else in Afghanistan, constitute another possible household arrangement. Sometimes households chose not to mention that they get remittances in order to secure benefits from the aid programs, which often target female-headed households specifically as their objects of intervention. The presence of the aid community introduces a series of actors and actants into domestic life, which only further complicates an already complex set of contingencies in the lives of Afghans. Customarily, affinal kin absorbs women who are widowed in Afghanistan in most kin arrangements. However, kin structures and expectations have been drastically reconfigured due to the human and material losses of war and displacement. In the ensuing perilous economic situations it has become common for women who have been widowed to be turned away by her affines and to be absorbed by her agnates.

\(^{19}\) In her work, Elaheh Rostami Povey (2003) found that the expression *zanane bi sarparast* (translated by Povey as “women without a male head of household”) was determined to be derogatory in Iran and thus was changed by some NGOs to *zanan sarparast* (literally, women- headed household). In Afghanistan, a very different dynamic exists between need and terminologies. Thus, *baiwah* in the context of Kabul, despite the plethora of ‘gender’ and women’s rights organizations, *baiwah* remains not only a kinship category but also a category of vulnerability, and thus an aid category. Furthermore *zanane bi sarparast* in Kabul translates as “women without a guardian”, not a gendered guardian as Povey found in Iran.
**Logics and Practices of Claiming Bewagi (widowhood)**

I have found in my research with widows that certain logics guide the choice of using or withholding the word ‘baiwah’, for oneself or another woman. For example, widows or anyone advocating\(^{20}\) on their behalf, use *baiwah* and *baiwah wo bichaara ast* (literally: she is a widow, poor thing; a way of expressing her vulnerability over others) or *nachar wo baiwah ast/ nachar kundda da* (she is a widow in need, or forced by necessity), commonly use these formulations when they engage with NGOs, as it is up to the widow and those who advocate on her behalf to make the case for why she is more vulnerable than another. I have been in scenes where widows literally advocate for self and others that result in intense screaming and crying scenes in front of aid staff. Later in this chapter, as I ethnographically explore another aid program for widows, I offer more details around the suspicion and uncertainties that surface immediately with regards to who is a widow, and who may not be - the suspicion and uncertainty is always present, and is always enacted and responded to in quite dramatic, and often humiliating, fashion.

**Back to Hila**

In the case of Hila and her mother, they could not be taken in by either her agnatic or affinal kin. To understand Hila’s predicament it is necessary to trace the lines of demarcation used by international aid organizations to categorize the experiences of Afghan women. The figure of the war-destitute, dependent, and subjugated widow has emerged as the paradigmatic object of intervention for the many aid agencies that

---

\(^{20}\) When I say ‘advocating on their behalf’ I refer to scenes I have witnessed, and participated in, where a neighbour, other *baiwah* or other third ‘neutral’ party speaks to others trying to convey how ‘vulnerable’ and ‘truly needy’ a *baiwah* is, over another woman, or more specifically, another claiming she is a *baiwah.*
currently work in Afghanistan. While this is related to the ways in which images of women as powerless victims circulate in discourse on Afghanistan, which ultimately impacts discourses and policies pertaining to development and state-building there, it is also grounded in demographic circumstances: among a total population of nearly 24 million Afghans, more than 3 million are young and middle-aged women who have been widowed by war, with 300,000 of these women living in Kabul itself. It is estimated that one in eight households in Afghanistan is now headed by a widow (UNFPA, 2002).

The World Food Program operated between 78 and 86 bakeries throughout Afghanistan also run by widows providing subsidized bread to identified beneficiaries. In the city of Kabul alone, there were 34 women run bakeries with more than 13,000 - mostly female-headed - households as beneficiaries (78, 216 including family members of card-holders) (WFP, 2004). The Bakery Project and its focus on women in general, and widows in particular, is considered to be exemplary among the international community’s reconstruction efforts in Afghanistan. While women are considered to be severely disadvantaged in all aspects of life in Afghanistan, widows are seen to be suffering even further grievances. The international community considers the alleviation of women’s suffering, and improvements in their roles in Afghan society, to be the most urgent task at hand in rebuilding the country. This priority is informed by contemporary scholarly and humanitarian discourses that evolve around the victimization of Afghan women, employ culture as a deterministic explanatory device, and use Islamic fundamentalism as represented by the Taliban to strategically and summarily account for all forms of distress in Afghanistan (Abu-Lughod, 2002; Hirschkind and Mahmood, 2002). These clichés or tropes have not only governed representations of contemporary
Afghanistan, but have now moved into the domain of everyday life and are thus impacting the social worlds of Afghans. I would contend that the predominant mode of engaging with the suffering of Afghans, and Afghan women in particular, has been through an understanding of gender which is inflected primarily by static impressions of Afghan patriarchal culture and/or a particular rendition of Islam while failing to account for how gender has been inflected by violence, war, and occupation and subsequently what work war and its accompanying forces have performed on social institutions, family structure, and individual subjectivities in Afghanistan. Hence, Hila’s access to the bakery was gained through this category of widowhood as defined by the Bakery Project, which was, in turn, creatively engaged with and transformed by her community. But would she still articulate her predicament through vocabularies of kinship, or as that of a classificatory widow if the figure of the widow did not epitomize the image of suffering, international aid organizations associate with the oppression of women in Afghanistan? What role does this picture play in mitigating or extending her suffering? Did the institutional scripts guide her to assume the place of a widow or did her conception of herself as a pre-emptive widow coincidently overlap with these same scripts in ways that allowed her to benefit financially? Or, more generally, what are the impacts on the possibilities for social reconstruction in Afghanistan of an analysis that conceptualizes women as victims, and ultimately, men and ‘culture’ as criminal? If international aid institutions included a more comprehensive agenda and commitment to livelihood development for Afghan males (those who would perhaps be prospective grooms for Hila) or Afghan families (instead of exclusively women), would this increase her prospects for marriage or at least enable Hila to imagine that possibility?
**Romancing Resistance**

In an article on widowhood in post-conflict Sri Lanka, Darini Rajasingham-Senanayake (2004) raises important questions concerning the inability of many development initiatives to account for the massive reconfigurations of family and kin structures that result from a situation of prolonged political violence. Such reconstitutions of family structures occurred in Sri Lanka due to the fact that many young widowed women have become heads of households replacing their deceased husbands as principal income earners.

“Unlike in Afghanistan where the situation of women has unambiguously deteriorated due to conflict and the victory of the Taliban, in Sri Lanka the evidence suggests that, despite many women’s experience of traumatic violence and displacement, some changes to the gender status quo wrought by armed conflict might have empowered women whose freedom and mobility were restricted by patriarchal cultural mores, morality and convention in peacetime” (Rajasingham-Senanayake, 2004).

According to Rajasingham-Senanayake, the new position in the family provides these women with spaces of empowerment, and contrasts with the predicament of women in post-conflict situations around the world who remain in or return back to status quo positions within patriarchal structures.

“While for some women there has only been trauma, for others the conflict has provided windows of opportunity for greater personal and group autonomy as well as experiments with identity and leadership. Certainly this has been the case for many displaced Tamil women, many of whom have lost husbands and sons in the conflict. It is, therefore, important that relief aid should be conceptualized to sustain women’s empowerment and leadership roles that initially arose as an effect of conflict within an altered family structure” (Rajasingham-Senanayake, 2004).

Rajasingham-Senanayake’s claims about widows and post-conflict reconfigurations of family structures are very interesting and certainly pertinent also to Afghanistan, but I contend that it might be important to furthermore interrogate how empowerment is constituted, and put in relation to agency. Following Lila Agu-Lughod’s (1990) work on ‘the romance of resistance’, I would caution against the assumption that notions of
empowerment and agency can necessarily be ascribed to new or changing roles for women and particularly women who have been widowed, even if the new roles entail greater freedom of movement and economic independence.

I use Rajasingham-Senanayake’s work in Sri Lanka not only because it is on widows and war, but also because it is indicative of an entire genre of writing in feminist studies that collapses empowerment and agency with resistance, a fetishizing that is far too common in development aid discourses, especially in Afghanistan, and especially aimed at women. In this section I hope to engage Talal Asad’s important work that exposes the allure of both agency and empowerment and the ways that this has allowed for problematic understandings by feminist scholars, and others, in addressing the pressing struggles of women in Afghanistan. I will engage with is work and others primarily through my work in the bakery. I briefly situate my work with this quote from Asad:

“The anthropological use of ‘resistance’ has been rightly criticized for underestimating the strength and diversity of power structures. I am worried less by what has been called ‘the romance of resistance’ than by the more inclusive category of ‘agency’ presupposed by it. Of course ‘resistance’ occurs in everyday life and it is often important to outcomes when it does so. My concern, however, is that our fascination with ‘resistance’ itself comes from larger, supporting ideas. The tendency to romanticize resistance comes from a metaphysical question to which this notion of ‘agency’ is a response” (Asad, 2000).

Although Asad is ‘worried less by what has been called ‘the romance of resistance’, I necessarily have to be more worried and attend to it specifically, considering how ‘resistance’ has been made to be quite relevant with regards to women in Afghanistan, specifically with regards to the Taliban, and the bakery where I did my fieldwork in 2003, a different time altogether in the history of post-Taliban Kabul. From here, I will weave back into the bakery ethnography to specifically discuss the romancing of
resistance and then turn the discussion to reflect on the bakery with anthropological notions of agency, working through the work of Talal Asad, Saba Mahmood and Amira Mittermaier.

**Decree Number Eight**

UN officials accompanied by foreign dignitaries frequently visited the bakery where I conducted fieldwork. On every occasion, the bakery project was presented as a unique site where women of Afghanistan had been given control over their lives, thus enabling them to stand up against the oppression of the Taliban. The international aid community considers the Bakery Project a highly successful example for interventions directed at improving the lives of women in Afghanistan. The project has been operating since 1996, that is, it was put in existence as the Taliban came to power. Despite the edicts the Taliban had issued against women working outside their homes, or against Western aid agencies, the bakeries were permitted to operate in Afghanistan. Decree number eight, released on 19 July 2000, takes on particular importance as it states that ‘any previous edict in this regard is null and void’ – decree number eight thus nullified any prior decrees that existed on women’s employment. Number eight banned the employment of women in foreign agencies and NGOs with the exception of the health

---

21 From September 1997 until August 2001, the Taliban had issued at least 43 documents regarding female employment (Fielden, Azerbaijani-Moghadam, 2001). There were constant tensions between the WFP and the Taliban over the widow run bakeries. In December 1998, the Taliban, through their Ministry of Justice, issued a decree stating that ‘poor widows are allowed to go out from their houses to work’.

22 Decree # 8 is actually part of a series of interactions between the international aid community and the Taliban. The sanctions on the Taliban by the UN Security Council on 14 November 1999 (Resolution 1267) were subsequently strengthened on 19 December 2000 (Resolution 1333), are certainly significantly related to the decree and its implementation. Many in the aid community believed that the sanctions made the Taliban less compromising (Fielden, Azerbaijani-Moghadam, 2001). However, the Taliban exactly did compromise and negotiate, despite the sanctions against them, for the Bakery Project to continue.
sector. The Bakeries were to be shut down in July 2000, when negotiations between the Taliban and the WFP began. The WFP wanted to conduct a survey of the current beneficiaries of the project, as WFP as well as others, believed that the poorest households of Kabul were not being reached by the project. The Taliban forbade female surveyors to work with WFP (according to decree #8, as WFP was a foreign agency) to conduct the survey although females were needed to conduct the survey in accordance with what was considered appropriate forms of gender interactions by the Taliban. The WFP and the Taliban convened a series of meetings in June 2001 that were described as ‘tense’. The Taliban had seemingly accepted the inevitability of the closure and meanwhile had appealed to Islamic countries for aid while defending its position. The Taliban not only requested Islamic countries, but Islamic NGOs to consider funding the bakeries, and appealed to Osama bin Laden to provide the full funding for the bakeries so that women who were widowed and orphans would not lose this critical survival line. Furthermore, it was the Taliban that requested the negotiations to be extended in the hope of bypassing the deadlock. "The Taliban has asked the WFP to carry on negotiations for a few more days," spokeswoman Christiane Berthiaume said at its headquarters in Geneva. UN spokesperson Rashid Khalikov was asked about the relationship between the Taliban and the UN, he commented: ‘not very easy, but we continue to talk to them and it is our intention to continue to talk to them because we have a humanitarian imperative - we have to provide assistance to those who need this assistance and of course we have to find a solution to our problems in terms of access and other issues related to the environment [facing the relief community] in Afghanistan (UN, 2001)’(my emphasis). Ultimately, the Taliban agreed for females from the Ministry of Public Health to administer the surveys
for the beneficiaries of the Bakery Project. The survey was conducted, the beneficiary lists were updated and the Bakery Project continued.

**Manufacturing Resistance**

Remarkably, the Bakery Project became known in the international aid community as a space of resistance, where what was seen as the otherwise suppressed spirit of feminism defied the repressive regime of the Taliban (WFP, 2002). The unique success the Bakery Project administrators had in negotiations with members of the Taliban, on the other hand, is largely noted only with respect to highlighting the oppressive nature of the Taliban in implementing an understanding of *Sharia law* that would not permit the bakeries to continue. The fact that the Taliban had uniquely authorized females to continue to bake bread in the bakeries for widows and orphans of Kabul was largely and conveniently excluded, while the international aid community portrayed as diplomatic, reasonable and ‘humanitarian’: “The bakeries were a rare exception to the ban on women working - but their relationship with the Taliban was fraught with constant tension…. No one is sure why the Taliban chose to let the bakeries keep operating” (The Frontier Post, 2001).

What is celebrated with much dramatic zeal is that the Bakery Project female bakers were courageous and bold and stood up to the Taliban:

---

23 A point to be noted is that the Taliban did monitor the bakeries to make sure female beneficiaries were picking up the bread from the bakeries, and not males (on their behalf). Once they verified this, the Taliban had little problem that female bakers were baking bread for female beneficiaries. The Taliban objected to female surveyors being employed by the WFP for the survey, a different objection altogether – as the surveyors would be working in the mixed male and female environment of foreign NGOs that the Taliban prohibited, and which was the impetus for decree #8. Yet the story was spun quite differently.
“They [women bakers] did not give in to despair; they battled in secret for their right to choose; they fought for their war ravaged people and their hungry children and they fought for them against the very law of the land” (WFP, 2004).

Furthermore, there is a remarkable silence about the daily circumstances of the widows’ lives and about the fact that most of the women had very little choice in the matter, because the survival of self, family, and others was at stake. Praising the alleged resistance of the women working at the bakeries - reminiscent of what Abu-Lughod has criticized as the ‘romance of resistance’ (1990) - is starkly at odds with the meanings that the women working in the bakery themselves gave to their role as neighborhood bakers. As I found in my research, the widows working at the bakeries appreciated the project because it provided them with a job, and because it allowed them to feed their children and often to support other family members, as well as to assist other widows in the neighborhood by making low-cost, fortified bread.

**Forgeries of Resistance**

The widows sometimes asked me to translate the conversations among the official visitors, and were usually somewhat annoyed to hear that their daily work was celebrated as a heroic political struggle. As a matter of fact, some of the widows even wondered why they were not treated with more consideration by international organizations, especially since they were presented to visitors as heroines of resistance against the forces of oppression. Why couldn’t aid institutions address the struggles they faced daily to survive, for example, by increasing the salary the widows received from the bakery? One of the bakers expressed herself with tears: ‘One day we are heroines for them, the next day something else, at the end we are useless.’ Another baker continued by saying,
‘they know nothing about our lives yet they tell our stories on our behalf’, while other bakers found it disturbing that the visitors never tried to speak with them and only wanted to take their photographs.

‘Becoming’ Widow - The Force of Words

On one occasion when high-level US State Department officials visited Bakery X, my fellow bakers asked me to do a line-by-line translation of what the visitors were saying about us. This was slightly unusual to me, as the widows appeared to have become blasé about the weekly stream of visitors and their enthusiastic gestures of solidarity that ranged from nods of pity, thumbs up and big smiles. The particular group of visitors who came that day were fixated on me, as I was rolling the dough - they commented on how sad it was that I was so young and yet already a widow. The State Department officials asked the Afghan colleague who had escorted them to Bakery X, Rishtiya, what my story was. Risthiya knew that I was a student of anthropology from the United States who was doing research. I had spent more than six months in correspondence with the Bakery Project administrators prior to the commencement of my fieldwork in the Bakery to gain access and permission to work there. In addition, Rishtiya was the Bakery Project administrator who gave me an extended orientation prior to my work in the bakery and was the one who had personally introduced me to the bakers when I began my work in the bakery.

Although Rishtiya may not have quite understood my project or what I was doing as a student of anthropology, she did know who I was and what my intentions were in the bakery. I looked down as the visitors asked Rishtiya about me as I wanted her to do what
she felt most comfortable doing in this slightly awkward situation. As I became more focused than usual on my bread rolling technique. Rishtiya told the State Department officials that I was more recently widowed than some of the other women and that the Taliban brutally killed my husband and left me alone to care for three children. The Taliban took away the present and tried to take away the future for many women like me, said Rishtiya. She continued by explaining how she hired me immediately because in my application I told them that after my husband was killed, my mother-in-law started to beat me. In addition, I was going to be married to my brother-in-law, against my will (of course), unless I could not get a job and take care of my children and move (rather, escape) to Kabul.

Rishtiya continued speaking about how the Bakery Project was especially rewarding for women like myself whose lives would have been entirely destroyed by the senseless Taliban if it were not for projects like the one she administered. In her explanation to the State Department officials, I noted that Rishtiya had used the word Taliban and empowerment more than ten times each. I stayed quiet and only started translating to the other women (as I was now a widow myself) when Rishtiya finished telling the visitors ‘my story’. I translated what Risthiya told to the officials from English into Pashto while another fellow baker translated my Pashto version into Dari. The bakers started laughing hysterically and then asked me why I would not want to marry my brother-in-law and speculated that it must have been because I was in love with someone else - perhaps one of the State Department officials in front of us, who could then rescue me and take me to America. The officials noted our laughter, one of them said “I am so touched, just overcome with emotion” to see Afghan women smiling (the
other officials nodded vigorously in agreement) and that the Bakery Project was a real success, Afghan women (and widows, at that) were laughing.

**The Power of Empowerment**

A week or so after I was made a widow by the force of Rishtiya’s words, I met Rishtiya in the bakery as the day was coming to an end. She gave me the customary warm greeting and then apologized and said she was extremely sorry that she told the visitors that I was a widow. She explained to me that she was not sure what she should do and then she said she did what came to her by habit- she began talking about the Taliban and about women’s empowerment. She explained that this had become second nature when dealing with foreign visitors from the United States. She had to answer their frequent repetitive questions about life under the Taliban and anytime she had tried to slightly complicate their understandings of contemporary Afghan history, they always brought the conversation back to the Taliban. Slightly embarrassed, Rishtiya also revealed to me that this particular delegation from the State Department came for funding purposes. She went on to qualify that it was only mid-way through her creative rendition of my life story that she remembered this fact and accentuated the details of the fiction she was recounting in a calculated effort to provide the visitors with the type of story that made the Bakery Project appear especially successful in its mission to help a beneficiary like myself.

The celebration of the alleged feminist resistance of the widows at the bakery implies that the most salient forces which women in Afghanistan would want to oppose are Afghan men, and traditional social structures and institutions. In maintaining such
perceptions, international aid institutions are pitting widows against Afghan men or a misogynistic, patriarchal cultural environment\textsuperscript{24}, and are thus glossing over the possibility that their own presence in the lives of Afghan widows (as well as women in general, and men and society at large, for that matter) could be experienced as that of a force that needs to be negotiated, and perhaps even opposed. Obviously, the widows working at the bakery are happy that they have a job and that they can feed their children. Yet what about the impact that the prioritizing the improvement of the conditions of women’s lives has on the society as a whole (and by extension of that, on women, including widows)? As Hila’s experience demonstrates, it was the undoing of kin obligations of care (not misogynistic males enacting some form of patriarchy) which prohibited her father’s family from assuming responsibility for her and her mother. The premature deaths, not only of the four members of her immediate family but also of her maternal uncles, in conjunction with paralyzing poverty, eventually culminated in Hila being forced to find a job that would feed herself and her mother. But even in a ‘liberated’ Afghanistan this was not a choice that was made freely. She had to submit to the conditions under which the Bakery Project Program allowed her to work in the bakery—she had to become a widow.

Hila’s story is not unique. The priorities of the international aid community to help Afghan women have created circumstances under which it is much more difficult for men than for women to find paid work. As a consequence, many families are now provided for by women (Azarbaijani-Moghaddam, 2004; Dupree, 1998). Men are not only left unemployed—but they have to live in an environment that is controlled by foreign agents

\textsuperscript{24} Leila Ahmed has shown that representations exclusively privileging heroic and explicit forms of resistance are implicitly endorsing explicitly imperialist sentiments, in that ‘the unstated message . . . is often, just as in colonial days, that Arab men, Arab culture, and Islam are incurably backward and that Arab and Islamic societies indeed deserve to be dominated, undermined, or worse (Ahmed, 1998)’.
who consider Afghan men to be inherently misogynistic and anachronistic (an all too familiar story of colonialism and neocolonialism)\textsuperscript{25}. It therefore needs to be considered that the ways in which the international community determines the conditions of possibility under which Afghans—men and women alike—can or cannot make ends meet might not primarily be perceived as liberating, but maybe as stringent, limiting, and arbitrary.

Furthermore, the mapping of a gendered political consciousness over the everyday concerns of women sets up a dichotomy between the oppressed, voiceless woman on one side, and the heroic, autonomous figure of the resister on the other. The maintaining of such a dichotomy, and the exclusive celebration of only certain forms of resistance, ultimately discounts the everyday struggles of women like Hila, and other ordinary women who have lost their husbands—Afghan women in general—and moreover represents a misreading of the complex forms of agency they enact. I take my understanding of agency from Talal Asad, who defines it as ‘a complex term whose senses emerge within semantic and institutional networks that define and make possible particular ways of relating to people, things and oneself’ (Asad, 2003, 2008). For Asad, as I understand him, to locate ‘agency’ is not primarily to attempt to locate moments in which individuals act to change their lives, but to examine and analyze the structures of possibilities that exist in which one is able to act. It becomes important to look at how relations are formed, situated, and sustained rather than define singular actions by individuals as agentive.

\textsuperscript{25} The presence of the ISAF forces and the international aid community has drastically skyrocketed the cost of living in Kabul. The dependence on a steady income has thus increased dramatically, which further exacerbates the pressure of making a livelihood in an already stressful environment.
Saba Mahmood further complicates Asad’s notion of agency, relating it to her work on women in a non-liberal Islamic movement in Cairo (Mahmood, 2004). In addition to providing an ethnographic account of the Islamic Revival in Egypt, she applies Asad’s notion of agency to open up ways of analyzing modes of women’s agency that are not reduced to the language of resistance or subversion of norms. Her work challenges feminist assumptions about women’s self-determination that see the voluntary limitations to which the women in the Islamic Revival movement submit themselves as misguided or false consciousness. Mahmood thus raises questions about why women’s self-determination should be understood only in terms of particular, ‘enlightened’ ideas about freedom or liberty, and not also in terms of the liberty to submit oneself to other, for example, religious, norms and values. I do find her insights useful because they call into question feminist assumptions about what is good for women who are considered to be living under conditions where their freedoms are curtailed by religious or social norms. A feminist herself, Mahmood raises questions about the difficulty to resist patronizing women who adhere to different notions of liberty than oneself—a sentiment which Lila Abu-Lughod succinctly expressed with regard to Afghanistan: ‘even after “liberation” from the Taliban, [Afghan women] might want different things than we want for them’ (2002).

Afghan Women and ‘Politically Prescriptive Projects’

Before I put the work of Asad, Mahmood and Mittermaier in more direct conversation with scenes from my ethnographic work in the bakery in Kabul, I do want to set out by saying that what Mahmood refers to as ‘feminism’s dual character as both an
analytical and politically prescriptive project (Mahmood; 2005, 2009)’ almost too obviously and neatly demonstrates the role of feminism as part of the moralizing forms of governance in the lives of Afghans (both male and female) that I spoke of in the introduction. It becomes even more apparent with regards to how the bakery project was purposively portrayed as a site of resistance against the brutal Taliban (who came to represent Afghan male patriarchal norms) and simultaneously a humanitarian project by the international aid community (a re-insertion of the political into the ‘humanitarian’). Mahmood critically analyzes that focus on locating women’s agency and resistance in Muslim societies as simply constituted in opposition to male dominance and patriarchal norms:

“Even in instances when an explicit feminist agency is difficult to locate, there is a tendency to look for expressions and moments of resistance that may suggest a challenge to male domination…agency, in this form of analysis, is understood as the capacity to realize one’s own interests against the will of custom, tradition, transcendental will, or other obstacles (whether individual or collective). Thus the humanist desire for autonomy and expression of one’s self-worth constitutes the substrate, the slumbering ember that can spark to flame in the form of an act of resistance when conditions permit…. the positing of women’s agency as consubstantial to relations of domination, and its concomitant naturalization of freedom as a social ideal, I would argue is a product of feminism’s dual character as both an analytical and politically prescriptive project” (Mahmood, 2009).

When I selected the bakery as a fieldwork site, I was completely unaware of the celebrity of the Bakery Projects. I was simply aiming to locate a place where I would be able to interact for long periods of time with women who were widowed in Kabul. The experience of working with the women allowed me to explore, albeit momentarily, and conceptually, what it may mean to be humiliated by moralizing forms of governance underway in Kabul, that aim to ‘save’ Afghan women. The Bakery Project itself, and even more so, the women themselves who have been widowed and who find their lives
reconstituted in the wake of the ‘liberation and reconstruction of Afghanistan’ reveal that it might also be important consider what might be disabled (rather than enabled) when widows inhabit the spaces created by the new economic opportunities which foreign NGOs offer. Through our interactions and what they shared in the in between spaces of the laughs, the vexing visits from diplomats and the dough, I was able to explore with them what it means to live a livable life, an ethical life amidst pain, everyday struggle and social suffering. I now turn to pain, agency and ethics as I engage with the work of Asad, Mahmood and Mittermaier.

_Tropes of Resistance and of Self-Cultivation_

Agency and resistance are seen as tropes and have been complicated through the work of Asad and Mahmood, and in doing so Mahmood has offered self-cultivation as a mode of ethical practice in the project of the making of the Muslim self. Following in this thread, Mittermaier refers to self-cultivation as a trope. Self-cultivation privileges intentionality and in doing so eclipses other modes of religiosity – ‘being acted upon’- in Mittermaier’s parlance, the less seemingly intentional forms of religiosity. In this section, I do not intend to demonstrate how something came to be understood as a trope, but instead, I would like to briefly offer an outline of my thoughts with regards to pain, agency, submission and suffering in relation to ethical practice. I will do this first by referencing the relevant arguments of these scholars, and then lead back through my interlocutors in the bakery in Kabul.

Although Mittermaeić’s work focuses on the ‘imaginal world’ (Chittick, 1989) and divinely inspired dreams and visions in a Sufi community in Egypt, it also speaks to the
unpredictability, uncertainty, and partial self authorship that are critical to understanding ethical modes of being a Muslim. I wish to weave Mittermaier’s insights on agency and ethics of the self with those gained through my understandings of the work of Asad and Mahmood to understand the lifeworlds of my interlocutors in the bakery. I emphasize what Mittermaier refers to as an ‘ethics of passion’ particularly in relation to suffering and ‘being acted upon’:

“a number of anthropologists have similarly described an ethics of passion…. which can have multiple meanings: it can be an ethics that accounts for emotions and affect; an enthusiastic ethics; or an ethics that encompasses suffering and being acted upon. In the latter sense, an ethics of passion is also an ethics of relationality, one that recognizes that humans are always embedded in webs of relationships. The ethics of passion that emerges from my interlocutors’ dream stories not only undoes the notion of a unified subject but also draws attention to the role of an Elsewhere in constituting the subject, and with it to elements of unpredictability and contingency” (Mittermaier, 2012).

Mittermaier’s work attends to the ways Muslims submit to the will of Another (and/or others) from Elsewhere (meaning of this world, and otherworldly origins). Building upon the work of anthropologists of religion, she articulates how submission in itself can be agentive. Mittermaier speaks of witnessing, as the verb used in her fieldwork, to underscore that it is God ‘who makes a believer see’. In Arabic, the root system has forms, the fourth form (ashhada) of the root (sh-h-d) means being called upon as a witness: “far from being a strengthened, self-cultivated self, in this context the ideal pious self is a medium, a witness….in the witness – and in the dreamer - action and passion, seeing and being made to see, acting and being acted upon converge (Mittermaier, 2012)”.

I center not on the dreamers, but on the witness as medium, thus as I understand Mittermaier, suffering and being acted upon are not passive modes of being a victim (or a Muslim victim, according to Devji’s argument), but with regards to my interlocutors in the bakery - submission to the will of God is an ethical agentive form of being Muslim.
Asad has much to say in this vein of thought that I believe is quite relevant. In his work on agency and pain he references sacred narrative traditions of the Passion of Christ and the Martyrdom of Hussain. He speaks of the participants involved in re-enacting scenes from these ritual dramas: “in submitting themselves to suffering (in some cases to self-inflicted wounds) they seek in part to extend themselves as subjects. This is done not in a random way but in relation to a specific narrative tradition. How helpful is it, therefore, to be always offered a choice between two mutually exclusive options: either an agent (representing only herself) or a victim (a passive object)?” (Asad, 2000). Asad speaks of pain and suffering as agentive and encourages ways of exploring the ways that different traditions allow a subject to inhabit a world that is ultimately painful:

“When we say of someone that they are suffering we commonly suppose that they are not agents. To suffer (physical or mental pain, humiliation, deprivation) is, so we usually think, to be in a passive state – an object not a subject. We readily allow that pain may be a cause for action (a movement to end suffering, say) but do not normally think of it as action itself…Yet one can think of pain not merely as a passive state (although it can be just that) but as itself agentive”(Asad, 2000).

Asad’s work is useful in understanding how the women in the bakery articulated not only their humiliation each time a visitor came to the bakery, but in other ways as well. In fact, it was not only about humiliation, but it was an active submission to experiences of suffering that has come to constitute modes of inhabiting everyday life in Kabul.

The women I worked with in the bakery would often and repeatedly speak of how important *sabr, hawsala, burdabari, shakibai, taab, heimat* (forebearance, patience, having courage, etc.) were to controlling their humiliation and pains and what they used to calm self and others in the bakery in periods of duress. In addition to laughing and making light of the situation when delegates came to visit the bakery, the women also
clearly expressed humiliation and anger at how unfortunate they were to have to tolerate such things and would repeat out loud at least one, or a combination of the following: *khuda shaed ast, khuda aazr ast, khudawand maibena* (in Dari) and *khuday shaed da, khuday aazr, khuday har sa weeni* (in Pashto) – God is witness to everything, God sees everything – in effect, that they obtained a sense of comfort from uttering and knowing that God is witness to that which they have to endure. Their submission to God, as Muslims, was something they referenced daily in the bakery, as well as in our interactions outside the bakery. When a less fortunate beneficiary would come to pick up her bread as they would recount her misfortunes to me, the bakers would repeat *Khuda mehreban ast* (Dari) and *Khuday bashonkai da* (Pashto) – God is kind – meaning that God has graced them with a better situation and/or that even though the particular woman is suffering, God is ultimately graceful and kind. My field notebooks from the bakery are filled with expressions of my own that remind me of my amazement at how loyal they were to their experiences of pain and suffering, in the sense that they accepted them. They figured that this all must be for a reason, as that would be the only logical way of explaining everything that they have endured. We would tease one another about each other’s specific predicaments and who had it worse or was particularly *beechaari* (unfortunate) - sometimes it would be me, as I was the less talented of the *naan* bakers, and/or because I had to write so much in addition to my tasks at the bakery. The women always referred to their trials and struggles as a test or as their fate, as part of God’s plan that they had to continue to endure with strength: *khudawand mara intihaan mekunad, een da gasmat ma ast* (Dari) and *da pa gasmat ka mu da* (Pashto) – God is testing me and this is my fate.
In my attempts to de-fetishize the manufactured resistance of the women that was part of the moralizing forms of governance (in the form of humanitarianism) and to shift towards a focus on the ordinary ethics of the women in the bakery, my aim is not to fetishize Islamic religious practices but to articulate the quiet everyday ways the women in the bakery pursued their ethical aspirations of endurance in the face of often utterly exhaustive circumstances. A willful submission to God was what enabled these women to understand their experiences of suffering, including the humiliation that they often experienced, as not primarily of their doing, but ultimately (co)-authored by God, and thus endurable. The women, including Hila who was not ever married, on many occasions expressed that they were beechaareha (unfortunates) as they were compelled to work, a symptom of their beechaari-ness. As discussed earlier, widows not only have a special place in Islamic tradition through moral/ethical practices to be cared for, but also customarily, Afghan kinship norms, that are now by no stretch normative as a result of decades of war, were that the dead husband’s family would take care of the widowed woman. The duration and nature of the wars, the droughts and profound social vulnerability and uncertainty that came with them resulted in these women being marginally helped (occasional fruits brought to them, sometimes firewood, but all rather inconsistent and random) by affinal and agnatic kin who themselves were vulnerable in different ways. In addition, they felt forced to work in order to care for self and children. Furthermore, the women were spoken of as if some great zahmat (trouble, effort) was being expended to help them have better lives, which they repeatedly expressed their discomfort with. They all seemed to have grown accustomed to not having a functional State and thus did not imagine that a State could provide for widows and orphans, as
Islamically prescribed. They had no expectations at all from the State, in fact. However, they all expressed that they could not imagine that international aid program had as integral to such vulnerability projects a mandate for women who were widowed to work - an imagination which was quite logical for the women to have.

In speaking on pain and suffering as agentive, I believe Asad’s thoughts are useful in understanding the ordinary ways the women in the bakery navigate contingencies, vulnerabilities, and the durationally exhaustive forms of pain stemming from historical and contemporary moralizing forms of governance, both war as well as humanitarianism’s compassion:

‘What a subject experiences as painful, and how, are not only culturally and physically mediated, they are themselves modes of living painful relations. The ability to live such relationships over time transforms pain from a passive experience into an active one, and thus defines one of the ways of living sanely in the world. It does not follow, of course, that one cannot or should not seek to reform the social relations one inhabits, still less that pain is ‘a valuable thing’. My point is that one can live sanely or insanely in a painful world, and that the progressivist model of agency diverts attention away from our trying to understand how this is done in different traditions (emphasis not mine, Asad, 2000)’.

I hope that in my explorations of the Bakery Project and the practices that surround it, I have been able to divert attention away from fetishizing caricatures of Afghan women as resistant to the Taliban and empowered with liberal ideals of agency, and re-invest attention into how it is that ordinary women who have been widowed have to navigate ‘sanely’ in a world that has demonstrated to them, that it is not only a painful and always humbling one, but at times, a humiliating one as well.

Background to 2003

A fleet of weapons, soldiers, technology, development planners, gender consultants,
and other foreign ‘experts’ from around the world, with shiny SUVs and big expense accounts in tow, descended upon Kabul in 2002. Since then, the population of Kabul has increased almost fivefold to four million, not only because of the presence of the aid and military community, but also due to forcefully repatriated refugees from Pakistan and Iran who came to Kabul to actualize their dreams of a dignified return to their *watan* (literally, homeland) (Daulatzai, 2004; Turton and Marsden, 2002).

Among the forcefully repatriated refugees are the hundreds of thousands of young adults who were born in the refugee camps of Pakistan and who had never before been to Afghanistan—a circumstance which has been described as ‘a reconnecting of people deemed to be Afghans with a place deemed to be Afghanistan’ (Fielden, 1998). In addition, many Afghans from villages throughout the country were sent to Kabul to take advantage of the presence of the international community by earning much needed salaries to support their families. In fact, many of the women in the bakery came specifically to Kabul in search of humanitarian projects for the vulnerable. Thus, displacement and migration continues to be a familiar feature of life for many Afghan families. So while none of the 14 bakers had ever left Afghanistan, each narrated undertaking multiple journeys, frequently resulting in loss, including accounts of family members dying (usually young children and the elderly, but not exclusively), as well as descriptions of untreated illnesses haunting them, and stories of miscarriages occurring due to the hardships of their journeys.\(^{26}\)

\(^{26}\) Considering the impossibility of conducting long-term research in Afghanistan, which persisted for more than two decades, the available (but nevertheless limited) scholarship on Afghans has concentrated on the 4–6 million refugees in Pakistan and Iran (Abbasi-Shavazi et al., 2005; Centlivres and Centlivres-Demont, 1988; Centlivres-Demont, 1994; Dupree, 1990; Edwards, 1994; Hoodfar, 2004; Khan, 2002; Khattak, 2004; Marsden, 1999; Tober et al., 2006; Turton and Marsden, 2002).
Since housing prices skyrocketed with the arrival of the international aid and military missions (rent for a rather thread-bare four-bedroom home went from $400/month to an astounding $10,000/month), the returning refugees and those Kabulis evicted from their houses for inability to pay rent have become squatters in the skeletal remains of the buildings destroyed during the devastating Kabul Wars of the 1990s. To the dismay of many Afghans, commanders and representatives of the former warring factions—many who are well-documented human rights abusers—were appointed as ministers or governmental positions by the occupying forces and the Karzai government. The residents of Kabul watched with anxiety, fear, and loathing, as this cast of foreign and indigenous characters first settled in, and then took over the city.

Although decades have passed since the Soviets occupied Afghanistan, for many Afghans the thick international presence of military and humanitarian forces, combined with the lack of significant changes in their life circumstances, is eerily reminiscent of that earlier era of occupation. In addition to feeling neglected, many Afghans are sensing betrayal from the international community at large (Stockton, 2004). As one foreign correspondent who was based in Afghanistan from 1999 to 2002 noted: ‘Almost lost

Although such research has been vital to understanding the subjectivities of the long-standing Afghan refugee populations in neighboring countries, there has been little to no work on those who stayed behind—the 18 to 20 million Afghans who somehow, and for varying reasons, managed to stay in Afghanistan, or could not afford to leave. The fact that they remained in Afghanistan does not imply that they were not uprooted. Up to 3 million Afghans have been internally displaced, that is, had to flee to another part of the country, many of them several times. Due to the problematic nature of the official UN definition of what constitutes a refugee, internally displaced persons (IDPs) do not get the care and assistance that ‘official’ refugees can receive. IDPs fall out of the realm of legal responsibility and ‘care’ of the international community. Due to the different legal and institutional investments of states and the international community towards refugees and IDPs respectively, the predicament of IDPs—although resonant with the hardships of refugee life in many ways—often fails to be comparable to the latter. However, the ongoing research on Afghan refugees who remain outside of Afghanistan, as well as work on refugees who have repatriated, are certainly topics of critical importance and concerns which I will take up elsewhere.
amid all this were the voices of Afghans, particularly Afghan civilians. The whole world was talking about Afghanistan, but there was little evidence that it was listening to Afghans and their view on unfolding events’ (Clark, 2004). This same pattern plays out with international aid agendas for Afghanistan, for which Afghans are rarely consulted as experts or asked about their needs. This has ultimately led Afghans to feel dispossession, shame, and the sense of not being relevant enough for the world.$^{27}$

**Closure of the Famed Bakery Project**

My ethnographic work in the bakery project took place in the summer of 2003. By the end of 2004, as I kept in frequent email and phone contact with Rishtiya, other administrators of the Bakery Project and the Director of the aid organization, I was informed of rumors circulating that the UN was going to close down the project by May 2005. I was surprised as the Bakery Project had received so much recognition and praise,

$^{27}$ Political scientist and Afghan specialist Barnett Rubin has called Afghans ‘a people with a history of being deceived and disappointed by both their rulers and the outside world’ (Rubin et al., 2004). Rubin’s work in general (1988, 1995, 2000, 2002a, 2002b) raises important questions about the spectral presence of indifference and neglect felt by Afghans manifested and accumulated over the decades due in large part to their unmitigated suffering despite and because of the international strategic meddling into their affairs. Afghans often express how they are marked, collectively and/or individually, by neglect and indifference, yet such neglect is also noted by policy analysts, such as James Dobbins of RAND, the former special envoy for Afghanistan, who calls Afghanistan ‘the least resourced, large-scale American reconstruction program ever’ (Rubin et al., 2004). Despite being relevant for strategic purposes, money for the reconstruction of Afghanistan is low, causing many Afghans to wonder what the intentions are of the considerable international presence in Kabul. From January 2002 through the end of February 2004, donors pledged $7 billion, committed $5.4 billion, but actually disbursed only $2.9 billion of aid to Afghanistan (Rubin et al., 2004). Rubin et al. note that the various studies done by the RAND corporation, the IMF, many US strategic think tanks, and CARE (a non-governmental organization) have all found that compared to other recent post-conflict countries Afghanistan has received far less aid, which is a statistic difficult to understand considering the significant strategic value and importance placed on reconstruction by the major super powers. In 2002 and 2003, Afghanistan received only $67 per person/year in foreign aid, which is much lower than past conflicts: Kosovo ($814), East Timor ($256), Bosnia ($249). Even those countries referred to as paradigmatic cases of donor neglect—Haiti ($74) and Rwanda ($114)—received more in aid per capita, per year, than Afghanistan in 2002 and 2003 (Rubin et al., 2004).
especially internationally. I returned to Kabul in November 2006 and met with the new Director of the aid organization and past administrators of the Bakery Project, as there had been a significant change in staff in 2005 that brought in completely new people. The Bakery Project was in fact phased out in the end of 2004 and completely closed down by March 2005. Two main reasons were provided for closing the Bakery Project in UN documents, as well as in conversations I held with the administrators: 1) women unable to cope with ‘market forces’; 2) corruption. The following statement comes from a UN Evaluation Report in 2004:

“The bakeries may have been justified at the time of their conception, during the Taliban regime, when cities like Kabul were filled with IDPs and urban poor whose homes and means of livelihood were destroyed during the war, many of whom were widows with no means of livelihood because women were not permitted to work outside the household. WFP previously acclaimed the bakeries a success because they enabled a number of poor widows to earn an income by baking subsidized bread for distribution to large numbers of urban poor…. WFP’s main emphasis was on supplying subsidized bread to the urban poor as opposed to employment generation for widows…..Since 1999, there has been no urban assessment or baseline. Infrequent card validation contributes to weak targeting. Mission visits confirmed that cards are openly traded on the market, especially in non-poor neighborhoods….After ten years of operation in some cities, the women have not yet mastered the business side of the enterprise and could not survive on the market…WFP should disengage itself from the women’s bakeries and seek alternative ways of addressing urban vulnerability through linkage with ongoing skills training and cash-based employment programmes….the emphasis should be on transferring the necessary business skills and equipping the workers to cope with market forces” (WFP, 2004).

My fieldwork 2003 in the Bakery Project took place at a time when Afghans were, in general, more hopeful about the possibilities of what the new war and renewed international attention could do for their future. By 2006, when I returned for a far longer period of fieldwork, the disenchantment I described earlier had set in and was not subtle at all. In May of 2006 (before my arrival) large-scale anti-American riots erupted throughout the streets of Kabul, instigated by a US military vehicle pummeling Afghan pedestrians. Too much resentment had accumulated against the war/humanitarian
regimes in Afghanistan, and the riots were an expression of that omnipresent resentment. Meanwhile, by the end of 2006, the Taliban was re-constituting itself as an insurgency movement against an occupying force and began making more concerted efforts to target Kabul to show it could infiltrate an internationally guarded capital city. I arrived in late 2006 to my new field-site, the Humanitarian Assistance for the Widows of Afghanistan (HAWA) project, the largest running humanitarian feeding program for the urban vulnerable.

**Flows of Suspicion: Corruption and Kinship in Kabul**

Trust is spoken of with regards to Afghanistan as if it was the ground upon which the occupation and reconstruction efforts were sown, in the first place. Yet, as I argued in the introduction, uncertainty and suspicion are felt in every relation, affects that have settled in, as permanent inhabitants of the city of Kabul. I will focus on the discursive omnipresence of corruption throughout Afghan society – from the individual to the household, and in the relation between state and international actors – in order to point towards the dangers this omnipresence poses to what may be called the social.\(^{28}\)

In particular, I will try to elaborate in the following on how the social institution of kinship can become affected by contingencies set forth not only by local context, but also by discourses and sentiments resonating from places far away, from where aid and military occupation come to Afghanistan, but also movements in more local contexts.

This section thus aims to connect the prevalent discourse of corruption and its attendant affects and sentiments – doubt and suspicion – with the necessarily complicated and encumbered relationships constitutive of kinship anywhere, already. Exploring the affectively charged city of Kabul offers insights into how layers of uncertainty and suspicion, stemming from decades of war, movement and international attention, may permeate everyday forms of relatedness differently. Here, I explore the affects and subsequent sentiments that connect what are constituted as the ‘global’-ness and ‘local’-ness of Afghanistan. For this, I draw from my ethnographic research in distribution sites where monthly rations for vulnerable widows were provided by an international aid agency.

The atmosphere of international aid in Afghanistan – from the very moment a decision is made to give assistance to the moment the aid is delivered – is saturated with suspicion. This air of suspicion is most notable in – but by no means limited to – the issue of corruption. Speeches of heads of state, ambassadors, ministers and specialists – both foreign and Afghan – continually refer to the potential and actual threats of corruption when discussing financial assistance for the reconstruction of Afghanistan. The international community reiterates that due to the inherent potential for corruption, only a limited amount of aid money can be routed directly to the Afghan state with the greater portion being delivered through international agencies tasked with assisting the Afghan state’s ‘building capacity’ to effectively enforce structures to deter corruption (Waldman, 2008). A January 2009 article in the New York Times about Kabul comments:

“On the streets here, tales of corruption are as easy to find as kebab stands. Everything seems to be for sale: public offices, access to government services, even a person’s freedom. The examples mentioned above — $25,000 to settle a lawsuit, $6,000 to bribe the police, $100,000 to secure a job as a provincial police chief —
were offered by people who experienced them directly or witnessed the transaction (Filkins, 2009)".

However, a survey conducted by the Asia Foundation 2006 found that although “the public perception of corruption as a national problem was widespread (…), people’s actual experience of having encountered or engaged in corruption was lower” (The Asia Foundation, 2006). Ordinary Afghans, moreover, note the presence of corruption not only in transactions between Afghans but they accuse the international community of outright theft and serial corruption and relate this to the lack of progress being made in Afghanistan – despite the billions of dollars being put into the country. Afghans often comment on the living arrangements and the fancy cars of foreigners in Kabul, while joking that under-qualified foreigners with limited experience serve in Afghanistan as high-level consultants for payments of sometimes more than $1,000/day.

Such ordinary statements lay bare not only a sense of disappointment in the progress made by the international community but also the level of corruption which many Afghans perceive to be an inherent part of the foreign presence – and a reason for the latter’s failure in Afghanistan thus far. An Asia Foundation survey concludes that “the perception of the prevalence of corruption tends to strengthen as the distance of the institution from people’s daily lives increases” (The Asia Foundation, 2008).

This section questions the possibility of gaining any distance from institutions in daily life by showing how present the effects, practices and discourses of aid institutions

---

are present in the lives of ordinary Afghans. Thereby the discourse on corruption\(^{32}\) can be seen as authoritative, indicating how the ensuing flows of doubt and suspicion, as cognate sentiments of corruption, have a direct impact on social and family relationships.

**Discourses on Corruption**

Since the military occupation began in 2001, numerous studies on corruption in Afghanistan have been conducted, but they hardly discuss the impacts of the discourse of corruption on *the* social lives of Afghans\(^{33}\). In general, these studies are formulaic, repetitive and often include normative analyses of the causes, mechanisms and consequences of corruption. In order to gesture towards what I consider relevant for the study of the effects of corruption and suspicion in Afghanistan, I offer three critical observations about the genre of corruption studies.

First, the mentioned studies begin usually with the World Bank’s definition of corruption (“the abuse of public position for private or group benefit”) and refer to indices of corruption, such as the quasi-official Transparency International ranking to describe contemporary Afghan society. They, moreover, favour the language vital to the neoliberal projects, such as ‘transparency’, ‘empowerment’, ‘good governance’, ‘accountability’, ‘judicial reform’, etc. Afghanistan is thus cited as having dropped from 117\(^{th}\) rank out of 159 countries surveyed in 2005 to the 176\(^{th}\) position of 180 countries in

\(^{32}\) See Monique Nuijten and Gerhard Anders (eds), 2007; Taussig, 2007; Taussig, 1999.

\(^{33}\) The following studies should be mentioned: Asian Development Bank, 2007; Torabi and Delesgues, 2007; Delesgues, 2007; Gardizi, 2007; Leonardo and Robertson, 2009; and World Bank, 2009.
2008. Such numbers are frequently cited and furthermore promoted as significant forms of knowledge on corruption in Afghanistan, and therefore on Afghanistan at large\textsuperscript{34}.

Second, many of the studies on corruption highlight that ordinary Afghans regard the burgeoning aid community as profoundly corrupt and thus suspicious. However, it is noteworthy that these studies treat the suspicion and unfavorable perception of the international aid community by ordinary Afghans (i.e., the supposed beneficiaries of the aid) rather dismissively, while extensive discussions and analyses focus on acts of corruption committed by Afghans in different capacities. This reveals that corruption is seen as an Afghan issue and that the manner in which Afghans perceive the international aid community (and its forms of corruption) are not regarded as important enough to be explored\textsuperscript{35}.

Third, rather than elaborating on Afghan experiences of corruption the studies merely catalogue vernacular terminologies and perceptions of the prevalence of corruption\textsuperscript{36}. Citing evidently uniquely Afghan practices – questionable hiring and promoting practices or procurement processes, ‘warlordism’, bribe-taking and bribe-giving, nepotism and political patronage – they discuss corruption to explain the ‘Afghan’ context\textsuperscript{37}. Gardizi\textsuperscript{38}, for example, presents the terms most commonly mentioned

---

\textsuperscript{34} See the criticism of Anders and Nuijten (2007).

\textsuperscript{35} It is noteworthy that the suspicion and unfavourable perception of the international aid community by ordinary Afghans (i.e. the supposed beneficiaries of the aid) are treated rather dismissively by the cited studies, while extensive discussions and analyses focus on acts of corruption committed by Afghans in different capacities.

\textsuperscript{36} The fact that the perceived prevalence of corruption in Afghanistan is higher now than during the Taliban, mujahidin or Soviet periods, as Delesgues (2007), does not mean that there is more corruption occurring now, but that the discursive omnipresence of corruption has led to a hyper-vigilance, i.e. corruption is now more likely to be noticed, reported or alleged.

\textsuperscript{37} The contemporary discourse on corruption is tied to the neo-liberal project and is dominated by diagnostics that favour a criminalising language, exclusively targeting low-income countries considered to be underdeveloped. Part of the neo-liberal agenda rests on exposing states as ‘weak’, ‘collapsed’, ‘failed’ or
(in Dari and Pashto) by Afghans to describe corruption. However, she only considers the legal and economic, but not the social impact of corruption, and her study does not address the history of such practices and how they may be embedded in larger power relations. Against the void left by corruption studies which fail to give serious attention to affects and subsequent sentiments of Afghans, my contribution aims to see corruption and its accompanying sentiments – doubt and suspicion – in more subtle, layered, and complex ways. What does the omnipresence of discourses of corruption do to forms of sociality and relatedness in Afghanistan? One such set of relations that is impacted by the hyper-vigilance towards corruption are the relations between the staff members of an aid program and the program’s beneficiaries, as I will show next.

**HAWA, The Aid Project**

The program for food ration distribution to women who have been widowed and their families began in Kabul city in 1996 to address the profound food insecurity throughout Afghanistan that resulted from consecutive wars, conflicts and droughts. The goal of the feeding program is to maintain or improve the nutritional status of women who have lost their husbands and their children – the population identified as the most vulnerable to malnutrition in Kabul city. By providing monthly rations of 50 kg of fortified wheat flour, 4.5 liters of vegetable oil, 5 kg of red beans and one packet of...
iodized salt to every beneficiary, the program aims to assuage malnutrition and increase household food security. The program began in three of the economically most challenged districts of the city, and was later expanded to five districts of Kabul. The selection criteria for beneficiaries have changed during the course of the thirteen years of operation; currently they are as follows:

- the beneficiary’s husband is dead or has been missing for more than one year;
- the beneficiary has at least two children under the age of 16;
- she has no sons over age 16 or she has a disabled husband or son - and/or is not in a position to earn an income;
- she is not receiving assistance from immediate relatives or any other organization;
- she is living in a poor household with no valuable assets;
- she has not remarried;
- she is residing in one of the five districts identified by the program;
- the household has no productive assets.

A potential beneficiary would have to apply to the program by having an application filled out and endorsed by her community’s wakil [community or neighborhood representative] – attesting to the fact that she is a widow. The application is then submitted to the aid agency staff, who send a team to the woman’s home to assess her socio-economic status. The teams are composed of one male and one female. While the female member talks to women, verifies information, and observes the assets inside the house, the male team member speaks with the neighborhood wakil and with shopkeepers, and neighbors outside the house. If the applicant satisfies the criteria, if her living conditions match her application profile, and if the information she submitted is
sufficiently corroborated with reports from the neighbors, wakils and shopkeepers, she is provided with a ration card to present at the next distribution.

Initially 10,000 widows were beneficiaries of the aid program. Including the people living in their households this amounted to approximately 50,000 of the most vulnerable inhabitants of Kabul city being assisted by the aid program. The various phases of the feeding program incorporated initiatives that the aid agency believed would complement the aims of the program – including nutrition classes, income-generating activities, and micro-savings programs. Due to the aid agency’s efforts to thwart dependency by the widows, and to funding fluctuations, the number of beneficiaries was gradually reduced in 2007 to 3,000, and then to 1,800 in 2008. Currently the recipients are classified into two categories: 1,200 vulnerable and 600 extremely vulnerable widows.

In each of five districts of Kabul in which the program was operating, rations are distributed once a month. Regardless of my time of arrival at the distribution site, I was always met by a sky blue wave of orderliness as the widows stood in groups

40 The most prevalent colour for the chaderi [burqa] worn by women in Kabul city is sky blue.
Approximately seven to ten aid workers participated in the monthly distributions. A supervisor was always present as was a staff member with a bull-horn who organized the women according to their neighbourhood wakils. The rest of the staff would busily scrutinize the women to ensure they were actually eligible to receive rations. Each of the staff members was instructed to be highly vigilant and to repeatedly question, re-question, and verify all the women’s family information.

To begin, each person had to present an ID-card issued by the aid program. This took some time since there were three aid workers manning the first verification point. The first aid worker checked the name on the ID-card and matched it with the organization’s records to make sure that no one was presenting fake or altered credentials. Once checked, the i.d. card was passed on to the next staff member who would ask the following questions in rapid-fire succession:

“What is your father’s name? What is your husband’s name? How many years have you been a widow? How many children do you have? How many sons do you have? How old are they? Do any of them work? Who else is living in your house?”

The answers were cross-checked with field data collected during the aid organization’s latest field survey, and a hole would be punched in the ID-card for the respective month if everything checked out. The card was then handed to the next staff member who continued with verification questions as she fingerprinted the widow. Once past this first round of scrutiny, the women were sent twenty feet away to another staff member who wrote a number on the back of the widow’s hand after again checking all her documents. One inscribed the women were sent to yet another staff member, who asked the women to lift their chaderi to verify that the woman standing before them was indeed the woman on the ID-card. The aid worker then confirmed whether the woman was really a widow,
and whether her card was punched, that the widow’s finger was inked from fingerprinting, that a number was scrawled on her hand, and that the widow had answered a sufficient number of times all the questions about the composition of her household and the details of her married life. Only after all these steps had been completed were the women allowed to approach the final check-point, where two men from the aid program reviewed everything once more. After this final check, the women were led to a wheelbarrow containing their monthly rations.

It is clear that the distribution of the monthly rations to the widows was a highly ordered, controlled and regimented affair. I would like to bring attention to the profound ‘air of suspicion’ which permeates the whole endeavour. Throughout the process of biopolitical scrutiny the women are continually forced to prove – against the underlying suspicion that they will somehow try to cheat the system – their widowhood and to furthermore demonstrate that they are the most vulnerable widows in Kabul and thus entitled to the rations.

Mutual Suspicions – Interactions between Staff and Beneficiaries

The few days a month allocated for the distribution of the rations are taxing for the aid agency staff. They have to sit for more than five hours in Kabul’s harsh winters and its bright hot summers. They also have to navigate between assisting and being deeply suspicious of the women they are trying to help. The aid agency staff is committed to ensuring that the rations end up in the hands of the most needy of Kabul city, but they are extremely anxious that their efforts might be derailed by falsified documents and forged identities. Every time they travel to a distribution site, the aid staff of the food
distribution program expresses its hopes that the dramas which inevitably unfold in the space of the distribution site may somehow be avoided.

However, at each distribution there are always a few women who are informed that they no longer have access to the monthly rations. Since some women are told “Your card has been cancelled”, at the distribution site, their card is taken and the word ‘cut’ is scrawled across her hand in English. Arguments frequently ensue about the conditions that rendered the woman ineligible – that is, no longer considered vulnerable enough to receive aid. Often, the aid staff tries to tell the woman that they did not personally cancel her benefits, but that “the office” cancelled her card – gesturing towards some nebulous, random system operating elsewhere which rendered her ineligible. In many cases, the woman would then offer unsolicited summaries of her life, of the struggles she has had, the sicknesses she and/or her children have faced, who has helped her (and who has not), and always a listing of the men she has lost in her family. In an emotional and public outburst, the widow often ends up sobbing. The aid staff thus has to negotiate between trying to assess the validity of the information given to them by the widow and the information in their lists and field-notes about the reasons the card was cancelled. In many cases, the aid staff verifies the address of the widow and tells her they will make a surprise visit to her house – ‘survey mikonim’ – in the course of the next few weeks, and

41 It is interesting to note that this was devised as a strategy by the aid staff to deal with the complaints of the widows whose cards were cancelled. The aid staff found that when they told the widows that their cards had been cancelled randomly, at the office by a computer, insinuating (and often outright stating) that it was through an act of Allah, they would not be upset. However, if the aid agency tried to explain in a systematic fashion to a widow why it is that they deemed her to be less vulnerable than another widow who got to keep her card, the widows would protest and vehemently argue that they were more deserving of the monthly rations than the next widow.

42 Since the past ten years, Afghans have been so inundated by NGOs conducting surveys that the word ‘survey’ has become a part of both colloquial Dari and Pashto. In the context of the widow programme,
she is granted the rations that day. Survey in this context has come to mean to check if one is lying or being *chalaak* [clever/cunning].

As the women makes it to the second round of verifications of her identity and vulnerability, each widow is told the next distribution date, according to the Afghan calendar. The distribution dates are not written down or posted anywhere, because according to the aid organization more than 90% of those who receive rations are illiterate. Each widow is told individually at the verification table and then while the widows talk amongst themselves, they confirm the dates with one another as they talk amongst themselves. Another reason for personally informing each widow about the distribution dates is the attempt – although futile – to keep the information out of the ears of the ‘entrepreneurs’ who show up at each distribution site, standing just a few feet away from where the women to get their wheelbarrow full of rations and entice the women to sell their supplies to them. These ‘entrepreneurs’ go from distribution site to distribution site in the city of Kabul, from aid agency to aid agency, capitalizing by buying the food distributed to the vulnerable and selling it at almost double the rate to shopkeepers or in their own stores.

Selling her rations to one of these vendors is one of the ways that a widow can get her card cancelled. In the eyes of the aid agency, if a woman is seen selling her rations to these ‘entrepreneurs’, she is accused of ‘corruption’ and the next month she is informed her card was cancelled. The logic of the aid agency staff is not only that a widow is engaging in ‘corruption’ by selling her rations and her card must therefore be cut, but that

---

‘survey’ not only implies a series of questions being asked, as is typical of surveys, but a verification of information, a corroboration of facts presented by the widow to the aid agency.
if a widow is selling her rations for cash, she must not be one of the most vulnerable widows in the city of Kabul.

It may be important to investigate how it is that specific practices come to be seen as evidence of corruption and/or how certain groups of people – such as widows – become defined as more or less susceptible to corruption. However, what I have observed repeatedly is that everyone in Kabul accuses and is accused of corruption – thus a haze of suspicion seems to permeate the entire social terrain. Such suspicion is not only left unquestioned but the sentiment is maintained and perpetuated by the ubiquitous ordinariness of discourses on corruption.

I offer one example from this aid program: The wakils from a district of Kabul refused to cooperate with the aid agency when the agency’s staff wanted to independently identify the most vulnerable widows in the district, rather than relying on the information provided by the official representatives. The aid agency’s supervisor initially told me that the wakils had their own criteria for identifying vulnerable widows, but that the agency had to adhere to the criteria laid out in the guidelines orienting the program for widows. Her next sentence was more revealing, however, as she told me the agency had no trust in the wakils as there were so many cases where wakils had listed family members and friends (or people who had bribed them) as the most vulnerable and thus eligible to receive the agency’s assistance. I later attended a shura where wakils were furious that such allegations of corruption were being waged against them. The wakils said that they had no trust in the aid agency’s staff as they heard many accounts of the agency’s staff...

---

43 I argue elsewhere against this logic and have learned from the widows that it is precisely her extreme vulnerability that forces her to sell her rations at rock-bottom prices due to an urgent need for cash on hand. See Daulatzai (2006).
Denying Kinship

Many widows depend on the rations provided by the discussed aid program for their own survival, as well as for the survival of relatives living in their households. Engaging with the sentiments of mistrust and suspicion is thus part of a livelihood strategy, or even a survival technique. In the following, I want to show how such a scenario can also corrupt the most intimate spheres of social life.

Five years ago, Soraya met the criteria set by the aid agency to qualify as a beneficiary in the widow program. She continues to qualify as a beneficiary despite several major reductions of the number of vulnerable widows supported by the program. She gets monthly food rations that make it possible for her to feed herself and six other members in her household. Soraya is in her late sixties.

I first met her in the spring of 2007 while she was picking up her monthly rations at the distribution site described above. She invited me to her house once I explained that I was conducting anthropological research on widowhood in Kabul. On the way to her
house she described how she tries to give updated information to the aid agency on the changes in the status of other women who have been widowed in her neighbourhood. The monitoring team comes once a month to her neighbourhood and Soraya lets them know who has moved, bought new clothes, jewellery, new furniture, or any piece of information women may not necessarily volunteer to the aid agency workers who come periodically to monitor its existing beneficiaries. She insists she knows everything that needs to be known about widows: “Widows are *chalaak*, but I will teach you their tricks”, she promised. I went to her house and was greeted by her eldest married daughter who was visiting from another part of Kabul, her daughter-in-law Humaira, and Humaira’s four children – all under the age of seven – who live with Soraya. I was told by Humaira that her husband (Soraya’s son) was away from Kabul doing manual labour in a construction site for a few weeks.

On my fourth bi-weekly visit to Soraya’s house I noticed a man I had never seen before entering the adjacent room. He was in his mid-thirties and I assumed it was Soraya’s son. Since I had never seen the man I asked Soraya who he was. She told me that he was actually a distant relative’s son, who was orphaned when he was about ten. Because Soraya was a widow with no sons, her relative had asked her to take care of the boy as her own. According to Soraya’s explanation, she had informally adopted him. Informal adoption had become a common practice over the decades of war and conflict in Afghanistan, so it was reasonable for me not to question what Soraya was telling me. A few minutes later Soraya left the room and Humaira came to talk to me. I had become friends with Humaira, her daughter-in law, over the past three visits and she would talk to me about her family life. She was particularly happy that day as her husband had
returned. The kids loved spending time with their father and vice-versa; his return was a big relief for her. I was engaging in small talk when her husband summoned Humaira to the adjacent room – I could hear him asking Humaira who I was. It is customary in Afghanistan for an unrelated male not to enter a room when females are present. Humaira began telling her husband who I was and how often I had come to the house – and I gave him permission to join me in the guestroom, so I could try to describe my work and most importantly, assure him of who I was. I explained my work and how I met Soraya until he seemed satisfied. I then began asking him basic questions about his job, and he talked about his childhood and about how he was treated, especially as he his father’s only son. What he was saying contradicted what Soraya had told me about how she had informally adopted him from a distant, widowed relative who had other sons to feed.

I always tried to trace other women in the families of those I was working with who had been widowed as to gain an understanding of the wider kinship network(s) in which the women I was working with circulated. Thus wanting to follow up on the information Soraya had provided, I asked him if he was still in contact with his brothers and his mother. “Brothers? I don’t have any brothers. As I said, I was the only son of my mother and father. And mother? Of course I am in contact with my mother, we all live together”, was his straightforward answer. Only then did the contradiction become apparent to me.

I paused while Soraya’s son sat puzzled. I apologized saying that I must have misunderstood his mother. He asked what I thought his mother said. His wife, Humaira, answered for me and revealed that she heard how her mother-in-law had told me that he was not her son. She quickly followed this statement by trying to defend her mother-in-law: “I think she thought Anila Jaan would tell the aid agency that they should not help
us if your mother had a son who was your age,” she said. In rhetoric fashion her son then said twice, “She said I was not her son? What else is left?” It was clear that he was disturbed his mother would make such a statement in order to secure benefits for the family. He summoned his eldest son to go and get his papers that were kept safely in their Qur’an. He wanted to prove to me through his documentation that he was in fact her son.

I picked up each of the identifications he presented, yet did not check them, as it was not my job and, more importantly, because it was clear that nobody other than her son could have had such a reaction.

He was hurt that his mother would make such a statement, but it also seemed that her denial of such an intimate kin relation represented a more fundamental questioning of his status – or of his ability to provide for the family. Humaira had told me much earlier that it had been very difficult for him to find work. He had been unemployed for five years – ever since they came back from Peshawar to Kabul. He had been an engineering student in Pakistan, yet in Kabul he was not able to get more than sporadic jobs doing manual labour at construction sites.

Two weeks later I visited Soraya’s house again. As usual, I asked about everybody in the household and she told me that her son was still upset with her. She then began defending herself:

“Why does it matter if I lie like I did? I am trying to protect us. I make sure food is available for all of us to eat everyday. Is that not more an indication of what kind of mother I am than something I say?”

Soraya had not only hurt her son because she had implicitly challenged his ability to provide for her and the family, but moreover, she had denied the kinship relation between her as a mother and him as her son. The precarious economic situation and the grid of
suspicion that permeates the bio-political regimes of scrutiny guiding the work of aid agencies had compelled Soraya to deny a fundamental social relation: the kinship ties between a mother and her son.

From the perspective of the aid agency, Soraya’s betrayal of her son would qualify as an act of corruption and render her ineligible for benefits, but there is more at stake here: it is the social that was corrupted and not just Soraya. The suspicion, which permeates the interactions between the aid agency and its recipients, had crept into the family. By saying ‘crept into the family’, I am only referring to forms of suspicion and doubt as resonating out from aid institution and reconstruction discourses in Afghanistan. I do not mean to suggest that the family is a sacred space free from betrayals and suspicions. I am fully aware and appreciative of the work by anthropologists of kinship who have carefully detailed how suspicions, betrayals and violence are not anomalies to kinship relations but are inherent in kinship.

In the course of the following weeks, I observed that after the son had found out that he had been denied by his mother, he felt that he had to reclaim his place in the family, primarily through his role as the breadwinner, while Soraya in turn performed exaggerated displays of motherly love to regain her status as his mother. However, the corruption of the social had occurred much earlier; not in the aftermath of the son’s discovery that she was denying their kin relations, but in the very fact that she had to do so.
The Social Production of Kinship

Soraya’s example should not be read as an extraordinary case – or, for that matter, a general one – but as an attempt to begin a study of the social by tracing a flow of sentiments. In this case, I traced the sentiments of suspicion and mistrust from the highly politicized landscape within which aid agencies work to an Afghan household in a poor locality in Kabul. Although my investigation picks up the flow in Kabul as it weaves from an aid agency through to a household, Kabul is not necessarily the only resonance point for such sentiments, especially considering the vast global networks involved in the reconstruction of Afghanistan and critical appreciation for the notion that intimacy itself produces its own suspicions.

Soraya’s experience of kinship and its possible consequence shows how the affects and sentiments inherent to the transnational aid and intervention apparatus are not contained therein. Rather, they get absorbed into ordinary forms of sociality and relatedness among the population at large.

When I was observing the aid staff of the same aid program for widows as they were checking the beneficiary cards, asking verification questions and finger-printing the widows. One widow handed her card and she was asked: “Sakina jaan, how many sons do you have?” “One,” answered Sakina. “How old is he?” She answered confidently: “Twenty, but shukr al-hamdilallah [thank God] he is in jail.” There was a wave of laughter among the surrounding widows as well as among the aid staff. “He is in jail and you say shukr alhamdilallah?” “Yes,” she said matter-of-factly, “now I can get my
rations without a problem$^{44}$." She produced a document from her *wakil*, verifying that her son was in fact in jail. One woman denies a fundamental kin relation with her son and another woman expresses gratitude to God that her only son is in jail. What might this say about the way contingencies and affects of uncertainty and doubt intersect, compound one another and affect forms of relatedness in ordinary, everyday ways in Kabul?

---

$^{44}$ The woman expressed that her son is of more use to her in jail than outside. If her son were not in jail, she would not qualify for the feeding program and, in all likelihood, her son would be one of the thousands of young unemployed Afghans in Kabul city struggling to make a living in a country and city with extreme unemployment rates.
'Agar chaderi bpushin, gender qaar mee shay'.

"If you wear a burqa, gender will get mad", my driver said to me while I was putting on my chaderi (burqa) as we approached Jalalabad (a city on Afghanistan’s east side) on our way to Torkham, the main border post between Afghanistan and Pakistan. ‘Gender’ in Sher Alim’s seemingly innocuous statement emerges as a person - a form of life which has feelings, which gets happy and also gets angry, and which prefers females not to wear a burqa: ‘Gender’ will get mad. This chapter hopes to mark the traces of ‘gender’ in the everyday lives of contemporary Afghans, as a result of their interactions with the concept, the word, and ethical, pedagogic and proxemic practices that often accompany it.

Throughout the 1980s and 1990s and into the first decade of the 21st century, ethnographic fieldwork has been largely impossible in Afghanistan. In essence, for 30 years Afghanistan was lost to anthropology and Anthropology was lost to Afghanistan and it is an aspiration of mine to contribute to a rapprochement between the two. Not only have three solid decades passed in which no anthropological studies were conducted in Afghanistan, but they were decades of war, prolonged conflict, natural disasters, massive and serial migrations and thus profound social transformation. Thus as I understand, initial inquiries into Afghanistan require fundamental reconsiderations of the analytical or conceptual toolset for anthropological research. For the purposes of the scholarly concerns I take up in this chapter- for example, how are gender and kinship in
contemporary Afghanistan performed, considering that both women’s and men’s roles have shifted dramatically throughout the almost 30 years of unrest and calamity?

In asking this question, I am thinking along the lines of Samuli Schielke’s work that criticizes self-cultivation as entry point to understanding everyday life in Egypt, where differing forces inform sensibilities and ways of living an ethical life (Schielke, 2010). Although Kabul certainly does not have the religious diversity present in contemporary Egypt, the hopes and aspirations of Afghans for living a life that is livable and ethical, gain inspiration from Islam, but also from elsewhere. Schielke’s point that I find useful is that something gets lost when the focus is only on self-cultivation as it does not capture the ambivalences, ambiguities, disorder, and varied aspirations that constitute contemporary life. In this chapter I explore Islamic practice and in doing so hope to capture the ambiguities, anxieties, frustrations and aspirations attendant in pursuit of an ethical life in Kabul. In focusing on everyday life and practices of self-cultivation that emphasize intentionality and deliberate action, I try to resuscitate the analytic potential of gender from an analysis dominating the literature on Afghan women that relegates gender to a trope. While my larger dissertation project centers on the ordinary lives of widows and their families in Kabul city, it also regimes of governmentality interpolate the lives of Afghans in Kabul. ‘Gender’ has been central as rhetoric as part of the justification for invasion and war, but also central as ‘humanitarian’ and aid practice in Afghanistan. In this chapter I attempt to sketch ‘gender’, the word, as it travels, and more importantly, how gender as performative is tied to Islamic ethical practice in contemporary urban Kabul.

45 Although I do find this point productive, I do not agree with all of what Schielke argues in his article, primarily that there is too much Islam in the anthropology of Islam. I would agree with Mittermaier that there actually is not enough Islam in how the anthropology of Islam is currently constituted and/or currently approached.
I now return to Sher Alim, my driver, whom I introduced at the outset of this chapter. Sher Alim had been my personal driver for more than a year. Prior to assisting me with my anthropological fieldwork, he worked with an Afghan-American female who headed the Gender Studies Institute at Kabul University. Sher Alim is in his mid-fifties, a father of seven children, and a retired government administrator. He finished tenth class education and has attained relatively higher education than a majority of his fellow Afghans. Thus although Sher Alim has a fairly good education level as well as a very particular exposure to the word ‘gender’ with his prior employer, his understanding of the concept of ‘gender’ entirely resonates with the somewhat widespread understanding of ‘gender’ amongst Afghans throughout Kabul City. ‘Gender’, the word, which is used in both Dari and Pashto in its un-translated English form is largely attached with negative connotations as a result of it being associated with the vast military and humanitarian moralizing forms of governance in Afghanistan, and as a consequence of the careless manner in which gender has been ‘mainstreamed’ into ministries (and the colloquial languages of Afghanistan), often alienating men. The point being, in essence, that programs on ‘gender’ exclusively target women.

Gender is a term that circulated widely well before the exit of the Taliban from Kabul city. However, since the entrance of US and international forces and missions in Afghanistan after 2001, ‘gender’ and ‘gender mainstreaming’ have become terms with a presence that is particularly evident. What is ‘gender’ in contemporary Afghanistan? Who defines it, who has defined it, and how - as a concept - does it defy it’s own deployment, as I will argue here? A main contention in this chapter is that gender as ‘mainstreamed’ and understood in the context of the current international occupation of
Afghanistan supports normative understandings of gender roles propagated by a liberal secular project, and practiced and embodied by international gender consultants. I seek to inquire what effect the privilege implicitly assigned to liberal secular gender practices among the international aid community may have on different modes of being a Muslim in Kabul. In speaking of ‘modes of being a Muslim’ in Kabul I certainly do not mean to make any normative pronouncements of ‘modes of being Muslim’ (thus unintentionally essentializing normative Islamic practice, or simplifying the vastness of experiences of being a Muslim in Kabul) but instead invite a discussion about certain ways of being Muslim, which pose fundamental challenges to certain liberal secular imaginations of gender justice.

Many Afghans have come to be suspicious of ‘gender’ and its assumed significance because of the ways in which the word has come to be associated with international initiatives to raise ‘gender awareness’ in Afghanistan, and as a consequence of the stale international presence – both military and civilian - which endorses and sustains 'gender awareness' and 'gender mainstreaming.' Over the last decade, Kabul has been stage to large protests, stemming not only from the direct outrage related to incidents involving the killing of civilians by NATO forces, but indicative of a simmering anti-foreign sentiment resonating throughout Kabul city as a consequence of the frustration with the international occupation of Afghanistan. Afghan National Police and Army have been infiltrated by insurgents, everyday life in Kabul has been put to a standstill as insurgents took over the capital city on several occasions, suicide bombings are increasingly common and deadlier than before in the capital city, and shopping centers and grocery stores in Kabul frequented by foreigners are bombed (assumably
targeting civilian aid workers rather than soldiers, as foreign troops are based 40 kilometers north of Kabul city). There is little to no distinction made by most Afghans between military occupation and the international aid regimes as well as those Afghans who work (conspire, in Taliban parlance) with them. In understanding the social terrain of contemporary Kabul, it is thus important to lay out these aspects of everyday life, suicide bombings and protests, uncertainties, ambiguities and how they fit into the larger social imaginary of Kabul and the affects, such as suspicion-held by ordinary Afghans towards those who came to reconstruct their country.

I argue in this chapter that the relation and adherence of the international aid community in Afghanistan to a simplified notion of feminist ethics tied to specifically Euro-American forms of secularism constitutes a contradiction inherent to gender consulting in Kabul. Although many if not all of the international gender consultants in Afghanistan espouse concern and solidarity for Afghan women, their practices (of gender mainstreaming) exclude or negate the possibility that advancement for women in Afghanistan can also be pursued in non-secular ways. These exclusions or negations do not usually occur as overt positions against Islam but occur in subtle and often elusive ways, which render them more challenging to recognize and identify as problematic. Yet, it is my intention to attempt to reveal - through an examination of the simple gesture of a handshake - the complicated range of effects this privileging of liberal-secular notions of gender equity may have, not only on gender relations, but on modes of being Muslim in Kabul. I further argue that secular-liberal feminist aspirations have unanticipated and often radical consequences on females in Kabul, who just may have very different conceptualizations (inspired by and related to what are locally understood to be Islamic
notions of modesty) of what constitutes being a female (and a feminist), in Kabul.

Furthermore, the grafting onto Afghan females of a secular-liberal mode of female ethics betrays the principles of social justice that likely motivate the embracing of such ethics by the international gender community in Kabul in the first place. I am interested here in the potential betrayals which occur, or which are felt to occur, between many Afghan females and those whom they feel an obligation towards - themselves, their families, their faith, and their Creator. By centering my reflection on the emerging population of Afghan males and females working among international consultants and the terrain they may negotiate existentially and transcendentally, I am trying to articulate an understanding of a world where clear-cut unambiguous ethical practices are frustrated by tensions and ambiguities that exist as part of the contemporary landscape. These anxieties are not only between forms of ethics which privilege the cultivation of piety as Muslims and those which privilege liberal secular notions of feminism, but other modes as well. If my attempt is successful, it may be realized that what is at stake with the imposition of a particular (secular liberal) gender order for many Afghans is more than a more equitable civil society.

In exploring the gesture of the handshake, I do not see it as a way to sedimentize a particular form of personhood that the political constellations make available, but to rest on a gesture that allows us to see how not only how the ethical gets invested with the political, but how Muslims in contemporary Kabul navigate dilemmas related to body comportment, self and ethical practice.

In the last chapter, the lens of self-cultivation was not an appropriate one at all to account for the ways that women in the bakery inhabited pain as agentive while
understanding that they were not the sole authors of their predicaments, regardless of what those who came to save them profess. In this chapter, I will be looking at embodied practice and the deliberate, continuous, and conscious cultivation of outward behavior that is in consonance with their inner state of piety. Thus, the lens of self-cultivation is quite relevant in this chapter as I undertake an exploration of Islamic modes of self-making in Kabul.

That the liberal-secular normativity of most Western and many non-Western feminists can run counter to the needs of women has been demonstrated by Saba Mahmood in her work on the Women’s Mosque Movement in Cairo (2005). Mahmood shows that liberal-secular feminism analytically restricts women’s agency to a tight opposition between freedom and oppression. She argues that enabling women’s agency might mean more than just – or even something different than - overcoming customary forms of gender segregation. Building on Mahmood’s analysis and applying her critical framework to Afghanistan, I will try to show that the disappearing of gender segregation in everyday interactions in Kabul as a consequence of the international aid effort and its emphasis on gender mainstreaming, causes great discomfort (rather than a sense of liberation). The international aid community in Kabul explains such discomfort among Afghans as the result of archaic customary practices which need to be overcome in order to advance gender balance, women’s liberation, and societal progress.

I will argue, however, that the disappearing of gender segregation in everyday interactions in Kabul is perceived as a challenge to and implicitly questions Islamic notions of modesty, religion, and piety. The discomfort and ambiguities experienced by many Afghans as a result of new forms of proximity between men and women in daily
life (as a consequence of international aid efforts in Kabul) should not be seen as
remnants of archaic and exploitative gender relations, but as a consequence of
fundamental ethical and discursive practices which are tied to what it means to be
Muslim and Afghan. In discussing one simple practice – the act of shaking hands in
greeting – I will try to show that what may be at stake for Afghans, both men and women
alike, is the curtailing of ethical practices and thus the questioning of fundamental aspects
of being by the presence of ‘gender’ in Kabul.

A new university opened in Kabul in 2007. Its campus sits discretely, roughly ten
miles west outside the city center near what remains of the former royal palace on
Darulaman Road. It certainly is interesting symbolically, with regards to both time and
space, to open a new hub of learning in Kabul city, literally in the shadow of the former
palace. Darulaman road leads one to the outskirts of Kabul, yet it still manages its share
of daily traffic, and the NATO troops and military humvees which careen down the two-
way road manage to leave a cloud of dust for traffic and pedestrians to digest. Along the
road are a host of ministerial offices, a few fast-food restaurants, the old Soviet Cultural
Center (now quarters to some of the city’s heroin users), a large and certainly impressive
Shiite seminary, one of the top hospitals in Kabul city, and since 2007 – the American
University of Afghanistan. The new university is awaiting its first graduating class in
2011 in order to be eligible to be officially declared an internationally accredited institute
of higher education in Afghanistan.

The nearby Darulaman Palace was built in the 1920s by King Amanullah Khan -
known in Afghan history as the ‘reformer’ king, who ruled from 1919-1929 and who is
most famous for his ‘secularization and modernization’ campaigns. He attempted to
institute choice to women with respect to wearing the veil, opened several co-educational schools, and spoke out against polygamy. His wife, Queen Soraya championed female education, unveiled herself in public, and received an honorary degree from Oxford University. Queen Soraya and King Amanullah traveled throughout Europe in 1927, and upon return continued and intensified their modernization programs. Their efforts, however, invited tremendous opposition from religious and regional leaders. Historian Louis Dupree comments: “conservative forces at home, purportedly aided by the British, began a campaign condemning his personal life and his modernization programs as un-Islamic” (Dupree, 1973). Photographs were circulated of Queen Soraya shaking hands with non-mahram males and even having her hand kissed by the leaders of France and Germany. Mahram in Islam signifies someone with whom marriage is forbidden (a father, brother, uncle) and in front of whom one does not have to observe hijab; non-mahram would basically be an unrelated male or distant relative to whom which marriage is possible, and in the presence of whom hijab must be observed. The reformer king and his queen thus had resentment soar among conservative religious leaders in Afghanistan, and Amanullah had to flee his palace and eventually went in exile to Europe.

His Darulaman palace is now a bullet-ridden, faded, burnt-out shell that stands as ruin and reminder of the struggles for power that have marked Afghanistan’s recent history. The palace was ruined by a fire in the late 1960’s, restored to use in the 70’s to house the Ministry of Defense, set on fire again in the late 70’s as part of the Communist coup and once again attacked in the 1990s. Somehow Darulaman palace, until to today, managed to keep its promise of standing as an embodiment of contemporary Afghanistan’s hopes. Extensive rehabilitation and fund-raising plans have been
underway since 2003, with German architects yet spear-headed by expatriate Afghans, to reconstruct the building to house the parliament. The palace stands in waiting (as does most of Afghanistan), and embodies that hope and promise to be actualized. The Darulaman Foundation website states:

“Reconstruction of the Darul-Aman building as the parliamentary building has been a conscious selection to assist in the country’s attempts at democracy….The reconstruction of the Darul-Aman Palace is to contribute to the history of Afghanistan as an initiative undertaken by Afghans in exile to reconstruct their country. The foundation symbolizes the unity of all Afghans. In order to establish and develop a parliamentary democracy, the country needs a building which is linked to its past. The Darulaman Palace is a reminder of the first attempts at renewal and at opening up the country under King Amanullah (Darulaman Foundation (http://en.darul-aman.net/)).”

The fragmented history of Darulaman palace presented here may seem inconsequential, yet it resonates in uncanny ways with articulations and affects of Islamic discursive traditions (Asad, MacIntyre) that are enacted in the shadows of the broken down palace less than a mile away in the recently built American University of Afghanistan, and elsewhere in Kabul city.

The fees at the university are extravagant for ordinary Afghans- $5000/year, thus most of the enrolled students are Afghans from middle and upper class families and/or Afghans working for non-governmental organizations (NGOs) or the UN. Many NGOs as well as the UN subsidize a large percentage of the education fees of employees who are students while many other students receive rather generous financial assistance to cover a large share of their tuition costs. The University is a co-educational institute with a much higher proportion of male students. Although the medium of instruction is English, as required for the international accreditation - Pashto and Dari can be heard drifting in and out of the classrooms. In December 2007, most of the almost two hundred
students ranged in age from eighteen to thirty-eight years, with a majority in their mid to late twenties. Currently, there are over 400 students enrolled in the University. The average age for undergraduate students is somewhat higher at this university but for Afghanistan in general it is not uncommon to have older undergraduate students - largely as a result of years of disrupted education due to war and serial migration.

The university offers both university preparatory classes as well as under-graduate studies in three fields: humanities and political science, computer sciences, and business administration. Female students for the most part dress in stylish Pakistani *shalwar kameez* or longer length tunics and sweaters with jeans while a majority of the males dress in western clothes. A majority of the instructors at the university are born and educated in the United States; in 2007, when the incident I will just relate took place, only two of the instructors were of Afghan origin, but also educated abroad. I was one of the two.

One day, Zaroon, one of my students, hurriedly approached me before class, pointed out an unfamiliar face in the back of the class and asked if his friend, Sikandar, could sit in on the class session for the day. Sikandar came as a prospective student and was visiting select classes to get a sense of the caliber of courses offered at the university. I granted the permission and after a lively two-hour class session in which Sikandar had actively participated, Zaroon brought him to me for a formal introduction. Sikandar extended his hand forward. I was caught off guard for a moment, but then quickly, albeit awkwardly offered a limp handshake in return. It is commonly considered inappropriate in Afghanistan for non-related males and females to engage in any physical proximity – even in the form of handshakes. The physicality entailed in the gesture of the handshake
is already a challenge to what are locally perceived to be Islamic notions of modesty. It was for this reason that the photographs of Queen Soraya shaking hands with foreign dignitaries (leave alone getting her hand kissed!) caused great attention in Afghanistan at the time. The modesty of the queen was at stake, put into question by the royal couple’s embracing of foreign forms of ethics.

In contemporary Kabul however, international aid agencies have completely altered the ways men and women navigate through their daily lives – and are put into proximity with each other. The agenda of women’s empowerment and gender mainstreaming of the aid effort has resulted in many aid agencies hiring females rather than males. Economic pressure has thus forced many families to consent to women sharing public spaces with men – and in particular with foreign men who are perceived to be unaware of and insensitive to Afghan notions of modesty. Many women in Kabul are thus constantly negotiating spaces and movements that potentially put their modesty at stake – which can impact their social reputation, but more importantly their very own notions of comfort and self.

Immediately after the introduction with Sikandar I went to my office, slightly irritated. Was I troubled by the fact that I had actually extended my hand or was I upset that I was faced with something that I did not expect in Kabul? I pondered over why I had first hesitated for a fraction of a second, but then acquiesced to the handshake. In the moment between my initial hesitation and the acquiescence I had made the assessment that although Sikandar was a young male and not mahram, he was after all a student and thus, in my hasty assessment - it was halal (permitted) to shake his hand. In my logic, it is intention that counts in matters pertaining to Islam, and since the only potential
relationship between Sikandar and myself was teacher and student— it was permissible to shake his hand. I sat in my office for a few moments in silence, relieved that I had not only managed to make a spur-of-the-moment assessment in the milliseconds between my initial hesitation and my acquiescence, but that my assessment was actually coherent and in line with my notions of what was permissible in the context of my notions of piety and modesty as a Muslim. What irritated me was that this incidence had occurred in Kabul, a place where I usually do not in any way have to contend with my personal notions of piety being compromised. A few moments later, Bilal, one of my students, came into my office. Students often visited me during office hours as well as directly before or after class, yet this time Bilal came with an unexpected concern. “You did something very bad Ustad” — you should not have given your hand to Sikandar.” It was also not extraordinary that Bilal was giving me advice or being straightforward, as I had cultivated a relationship with the students who took my classes that allowed them to critically challenge texts, ideas, actions, and myself— as long as it was done in a respectful and productive manner. I listened to the student and then began to explain to him why I was content with my behavior. I tried to assure him that he should not worry. “It is just that your intentions may be clean Ustad, but we do not know what kind of person Sikandar is, many of us do not know him and since we cannot judge his intentions in trying to shake your hand, you should not have given him your hand. You know, there are many cheap boys in Kabul.” I agreed with Bilal that I in fact could not judge what Sikandar’s intentions were in extending his hand to me, but I contended that the fact that I did not know his intentions did not make my decision wrong in the eyes of Allah.
A few minutes after Bilal had left, Omar, another student, came to my office with the same concern: I should not have shaken Sikandar’s hand. Omar’s reasoning, however, had nothing to do with what Sikandar’s intentions were, but rested on the fact that since I was a female that it was my responsibility to uphold the integrity and halal-ness of the space of the classroom, being that it is a non-segregated space. Neither of the students left my office convinced with my answer, yet both left my office uncomfortable that their female professor was put in a socially awkward position that questioned her piety. I was troubled that my action had caused two students to be upset, yet was still convinced that I had acted in accordance with my subjective notions of piety. There were many other instances in Kabul, before and after the one just detailed that I did not acquiesce to a handshake with a male, and they usually involved non-Afghan males. A main reason for why I acquiesced this particular time, as stated previously, was that Sikander was a younger Afghan student, and my authority as an older person and as the instructor of the class rendered the handshake halal in my assessment. However, what nevertheless troubled me this time was that Sikandar was Afghan, and I did not expect him to offer his hand. I was caught off guard. What I would like to focus on here is not the relation between expected notions of piety versus enactments of piety that butt up against - whether intentionally or unintentionally - the normative displays of piety, or for that matter the precise Islamic jurisprudential evaluation of the hand-shake. Rather, I think it is important to comment on the fact that this handshake caused me uneasiness in relation to obligations I have to myself in the cultivation of an ethical self based on Islam. Throughout my three years in Kabul since 2007, I was both spectator to and participant of the infamous hand-shake dilemma – between foreign males with Afghan females, foreign
females with Afghan males, and Afghan males with Afghan females. I witnessed the little drama unfolding, often awkwardly, between Afghans and non-Afghans, and amongst Afghan males and females. In fact, the need to shake hands and the tactics required to avoid shaking hands are articulated as a rather common nuisance among Afghan females who work in the international aid community setting in Kabul. I have witnessed Afghan women in offices who are about to meet a non-Afghan male maneuver to preempt the handshake by exaggerating an alternate greeting form (placing their hand over their heart), which not only serves the function of the greeting but which indicates their wish to not shake hands. I have also seen Afghan females purposefully carry items in their hands when they go into a meeting to make a handshake physically impossible or to show up late for the sole reason of avoiding the handshake ritual that often transpires at the beginning of a meeting. There is in fact, a host of techniques used to either impede the handshake altogether or to do a quick, abridged, and usually fumbling version of the handshake to get through with the whole prickly affair as soon as possible. The vast array of ambiguity articulated around such a mundane form of sociability as the handshake is remarkable, yet to me it signals the discomforts which arise from liberal secular forms of governance as instituted largely by the abundance of NGO and UN jobs in Kabul.

Much of my ethnographic data on the hand-shake I collected from Afghan females, and thus I understand to a greater extent, many of the anxieties faced by Afghan females in Kabul city, as opposed to those of Afghan males. For example Maryam, a twenty-five year old friend, who works as an accountant intern for an American NGO, and is engaged to be married in the coming weeks. She is a bit shy yet she has a strong personality. In her office, the weekly meeting with her American male supervisors was
when she had to encounter their handshakes. She would acquiesce to the hand-shakes and her logic as to why she did this was that she did not want to make her bosses feel uncomfortable or embarrass them publicly if she refused to shake their hands. A month later, an Afghan male colleague of Maryam’s began greeting her every morning with a salaam and a firm hand-shake. She was much more uncomfortable as she was surprised as to why this young Afghan male colleague would put her in such an uncomfortable position. She again, was reluctant to embarrass someone, but she herself felt quite anxious and upset daily about the handshake. Two weeks after the initial handshake extended by him, the Afghan male colleague asked if she wanted to start a romantic affair with him. She was stunned not only because everyone in her office, including this particular Afghan hand-shaker, knew that she was engaged to get married, but because she could not understand what she could have done to make him think she was interested in him. She refused his proposal for an affair and asked him how he could think of her like that- his answer was simple- if you were not interested, then why did you shake my hand everyday for two weeks?

Maryam’s experience in her office with her Afghan male colleague is similar to the experiences of so many young Afghan females, including female students in Kabul University, who describe a handshake attempt by an Afghan male as a sort of litmus test to see if the girl is ‘azaad’ or free, meaning the kind of girl who would be open to the idea of having a relationship outside of marriage with a male. If a girl acquiesces to a hand-shake, it is read by Afghan females as either a marker that she is a shy and thus weak girl who does not want to embarrass a boy, and thus her acquiescence is a sign of vulnerability and she is therefore easy prey to be coerced into a relationship with a boy-
OR the girl who acquiesces to a hand-shake would be seen as ‘azaad’, or the licentious type of girl.

However, refusing a hand-shake can also prove consequential. In August 2010, I was approached by a group of four American male teachers at the American University of Afghanistan, where I was currently teaching and as they all offered their hands at the same time, I did an exaggerated hand on my heart gesture and left their four hands suspended in mid-air. It was an awkward few seconds, but then I explained to them that I was the Anthropology lecturer and I tried to turn what just happened into a teaching moment. Weeks later, after I was not invited to several faculty social functions, I was told by many of my students and two female professors that most of the faculty of the university believe I am a Taliban sympathizer— their evidence? I am Pashtun AND I refused to shake their hands.

Maryam’s acquiesce and my failure to acquiesce to the hand-shake with the four American professors reflect a glimpse of the spectrum of consequences which result for a female in Kabul from a possible hand-shake with a male.

**Beyond Kabul**

This dilemma of shaking hands for Muslims is not just an issue debated in Afghanistan, and even in Afghanistan it is not just tied to the present contemporary context. For example, a German documentary film on the life of Mohammad Atta, the alleged ringleader of the 9/11 attacks, discusses Atta’s studies in Hamburg, Germany. His professor was interviewed in the documentary and commented there that Atta was a diligent, inconspicuous student. After the final examination in 1999, Atta shook hands
with the male professor who was congratulating him, yet refused to shake the hand of another professor present in the room, who was female. Atta’s reported refusal to shake the hand of the female professor figured in the documentary as a brief moment offering a glimpse on Atta’s nature as a Muslim fundamentalist, which was otherwise hidden by his appearance as a diligent, inconspicuous student.

In Utrecht in 2006, a Muslim female teacher was fired for refusing to shake hands with a man. The school said she was seen shaking hands with men before so she was actually discriminating against men by deciding whose hands she would shake and whose hands she would refuse to shake. In Stockholm in 2010, the Swedish unemployment agency was found guilty of discrimination for firing a Bosnian Muslim man from a job training because he refused to shake hands with a woman who interviewed him for an internship.

Closer to Afghanistan, is Pakistan- in 1996 the final of the 6th World Cup Cricket tournament was played in Lahore. The Sri Lankans beat the Australians and at the award ceremony when Mark Taylor, the captain of Australian’s team came on stage to receive the runner-up trophy he extended his hand to the then Prime Minister of Pakistan, Benazir Bhutto. Benazir however did not shake his hand. She joined her hands together and when he still did not get it, she put her hands in a namaste style greeting. This failed handshake was talked about for days in Pakistan and Afghanistan—while many praised Bhutto for performing her duty as a Muslim, others simply joked about the awkward moment shared by both Bhutto and Taylor.

More recently in November 2010, when the Obamas went to Indonesia : Michelle Obama extended her hand to Indonesian information minister Tifatul Sembiring. He tried
to avoid it but she persisted. On Facebook and Twitter the Minister was highly criticized by thousands of Indonesians for shaking her hand and for being a hypocrite. Mr. Sembiring tweeted back that Mrs. Obama had made it impossible for him to avoid touching her hand, stating: “I tried to prevent [being touched] with my hands but Mrs. Michelle held her hands too far toward me [so] we touched.”

As I tried to show with the historical example of Queen Sorraya, the gesture of the handshake is not just a dilemma of present times, but has been an issue triggering heated debates and emotional reactions in earlier decades as well. During the Soviet occupation, men and women who were demonstrating and/or performing allegiance to the communist regime greeted each other with handshakes then known as a communist salaam, and by addressing each other as raafiq – comrade. The gesture was at the time employed in overly conspicuous ways to indicate allegiance to communism and was met with fierce criticism by its political opponents.

A few months after the awkward moment that had occurred when Sikander had extended his hand in greeting, and within two weeks of each other, both Omar and Bilal separately approached me and told me that I should no longer worry about the incident with Sikandar and the questionable handshake. “It was halal. Sikandar started studying at the university months ago, and many of us have been observing him, he is clean. He is a good Muslim boy, he does not miss any of his prayers and Islam is very important to him, from his heart, so it was halal when he shook hands with you”, said Bilal. Omar offered similar comments yet he was far more harsh than Bilal: “You got lucky this time Ustad, because Sikandar is a clean boy, but you did not do your duty as a Muslim female.” Again I want to outline what I feel is critical here. It is not just the variety of
expectations of a female to enact her piety that is interesting but the fact that the handshake was declared retroactively *halal* by the two male students. The intentionality of my action was not the most important aspect here - but the relations that were articulated amid the words and practices which constitute what Talal Asad calls a ‘discursive tradition’: That local notions of modesty as inspired by Islam cannot simply be put on the register of a set of rules to be followed or disregarded – as something that relates to ethical practices this local notion of modesty is a field of highly contingent negotiations. People involved in moments like the one I related – the men and women pondering over whether or not to extend their hands in greeting, the men and women considering whether or not to respond with a handshake - are not simply actors in a drama where the oppression of women, as manifest in limited female mobility, is overcome by the tearing down of customary forms of gender segregation. Much rather than equal rights for men and women, what is at stake is the possibility for Afghans to navigate their lives according to their own notions of what constitutes a pious and ethical life. Rather than expanding female agency, the overcoming of gender segregation as enforced by the international aid effort’s secular-liberal feminist agenda might actually curtail the agency of Afghan women who have to negotiate their sense of comfort and their ethical practices in the face the sheer economic necessity to have a breadwinner in the family.

In the effort of being culturally sensitive, the international aid community in Kabul has recognized the important role Islam plays in the daily lives of Afghans, just as the NATO forces claim that their agenda of winning the “hearts and minds” of Afghans include the reaching out to mosques and imams. It is my contention here, however, that
what is being recognized in these efforts is *Islam as a faith*, but not *as an ethic which guides the ways people chose to lead their lives*. The US army is supplying Qur’ans to mosques and NGOs offer their employees time to pray, but the fact that the enforced abandoning of gender segregation in public live poses massive dilemmas for Afghans as they are cultivating their ethical selves is far from being acknowledged by the international aid community.

The phenomenon of ‘gender’ as a thing circulating through the city of Kabul, as well as the enactments of piety and the discursive formulations that can surround a handshake bring into light the micropractices that I feel are elemental to navigating the contours of what may constitute gender in contemporary Afghanistan. Being attentive not only to expectations, but also to the mundane forms of sociability between males and females may be critical in considering the way gender relations are de-stabilized and simultaneously remade in the unfolding of everyday life in contemporary Afghanistan. I myself admit my failure in this chapter to offer a diagnostics of the handshake dilemma I presented. I am fully cognizant that it *must* be explored what it may mean for gender relations as they unfold in Kabul city that two male students approached a female teacher and that her intentions in the handshake gesture were not the prime concern but that because another male student was found only later to be pious that the handshake was declared retroactively *halal*, or permissible in the eyes of the male students- and that a male’s piety, in essence triumphed a female’s piety. Yet for the purposes of this chapter, my aim was quite simple- an attempt to gesture toward re-establishing the grounds for an investigation of gender as an analytical concept and to step away from the thingness of ‘gender’ in Kabul city. My suspicion is that resting on such micropractices and what they
may mean not only for gender relations but more importantly for the variety of ways that norms are lived, inhabited, aspired to, and realized by males and females may help in understanding emergent subjectivities in Kabul city.
Orphanhood and the Art of Not Being Cared For

5

Espand

It was a typical May morning in traffic on the main road of Qalai Fatiullah (a main district of Kabul city). Young boys are seen throughout Kabuli streets with a small tin can that contains charcoal and an herb, which is burned to ward off the evil eye, espand. It is one way for young boys to make small change as they weave their way in and out of the traffic-filled streets of Kabul reciting prayers onto weary passengers while the herb pops in the tin cans and burns smoke. Espand has a very particular smell as well as the distinct ability to fill up a space with smoke fairly quickly. A young boy of about ten years old approached our car window that May morning. The car window was cracked open to let just enough air into the car to allow one not to suffocate but also sufficiently closed enough to keep out the dust typical of a summer day in Kabul. The young boy started circling the tin while flipping his wrist and reciting a prayer, as is common when using espand. I looked at him and shook my head as he was trying to position the tin to direct the smoke to enter into the horizontal sliver of the opened car window. My driver and I knew what he was doing and we both told him to stop as we did not want the car filled with smoke.

Usually when a boy doing espand comes up to the car, you nod your head and acknowledge his prayer and you send him on his way with our without a small payment. However, this espand experience was a bit different. The driver gestured to the boy to go away and I verbally told the boy that I did not like the smoke. The boy did the
unexpected- he swiftly positioned his tin at our window, inhaled, and then blew the smoke in through the slight window crack and started running- the run you run when you know you have done something you should not have. My driver pulled the car over immediately while opening the doors and windows to relieve the car of the smoke- it was almost instinctual for him. Yet I opened my car door and started chasing the boy- perhaps anthropological instinct for me. I passed the shop of a tailor whom I knew who told me, ‘please sister, he is an orphan, please let him be, this is how he is always, poor thing, he is an orphaaaaaaaaaaaaaaannnnnnnnn’- the last word extended, perhaps due to my imagination, the physics of sound, or both- *yaatim (orphan)* -resonating through the streets of *Qalai Fatiullah*. Other shop-keepers I ran past in chase expressed similar sentiments, pleading me to have sympathy and compassion for him while I (seemingly) mercilessly continued after the *espand* boy-‘rahm-e-dil dasta bashe’ (have mercy on him). In this chapter, I choose not to focus on the singular act of this particular mischievous young orphan *espand* boy, or the mischievous act of an anthropologist as I chased him through the windy streets of Kabul- the chase narrative offered as illustration of part of the social terrain, including obligations of care that form part of the what constitutes what I consider ordinary ethics in Kabul.

*Abundance of Compassion*

Many scholars, with much sophistication, have written on the witholding of compassion towards scenes of vulnerability as well as the aesthetics of compassion in different contexts, including Lauren Berlant’s analysis of compassionate conservatism in the contemporary setting of the United States and what she understands as a rehearsal of
republican ethics that produce registers of subjectivity from which she proposes affective responses find root (Berlant, 2004). Yet what happens in the opposite case, where it is not compassion that is lacking, or suspect (as in Berlant’s portrayal of contemporary United States) as actually compassion or the performance of compassion (for orphans in Kabul) is in abundance, or is at least, the norm? The normative nature of compassion in the cultivation of particular subjects in Kabuli society thus becomes a point of interest here.

I hesitate to pursue this path of investigation for fear that it may seem that I advocate for less compassion towards orphans in Kabul (or anywhere for anyone, for that matter), or worse- that I advocate for a society that blames the individuals and not the structural violence (and in this very case of Afghanistan, global structural violence in the forms of war and humanitarianism which produces certain subject positions). I most definitely would not want my exploration of the work of compassion and care in the life of a once orphan in Kabul to be read as part of a republican ethos, a neo-liberal anti-welfare position, or equally corrosive, an overly sentimental, moralizing, grossly inappropriate liberalism, as has been witnessed with respect to the ‘women’s situation in Afghanistan’.

I focus here on what may be produced cumulatively throughout a life in a landscape beset with contingencies when a seemingly harmless affect of sympathy and what appears as an obligation to kinship is embodied in a young orphan- what forms of life and modes of relationality issue forth? What potential subjectivities emerge when one is cognizant that one is the socially demarcated recipient of societal mercy? The sentiments behind what the tailor and other shop-keepers said to me as I was in pursuit of the young boy- ‘poor boy, he is an orphan’ resonate with the hundreds of other
circumstances where I was witness to and architect of the sympathetic treatment of orphans in Kabul over the past three years. How does an affect like sympathy, rooted in Islamic ethical treatment for orphans, contribute to the cultivation of a certain kind of a self? How may Kabuli society (and perhaps Afghan society, in general), in embodying a particular Islamic ethics in caring for orphans (by exercising mercy upon them), be seen by the subjects themselves (orphans) as yet another part of a continuing production of regimes of care in their lives and on their bodies?

What I mean to say here, is although care for widows and orphans has a complete different genealogy and ethics based on religious practices of care (than the moralizing regimes of war, humanitarianism as well as refugee regimes that Afghans have been subjected to over decades) in that it has it’s own logic and own ethical economy -in the lives of orphans, however, it has the potential to be reminiscent of the processes of subjectivation and care that constitute the cruelty and compassion (Asad, 2007) of both war and humanitarianism that have structured the lives of Afghans for decades.

Refusals of Care

My aim in this chapter is to explore, through the life of a young man in Kabul, how everyday life becomes the scene of ethical striving but a striving that is not according to formulaic criteria about caring for others, it is about a purposeful striving and cultivation of the self that is motivated by not allowing oneself to be cared for by others. Recent work by anthropologists have explored notions and practices of care across faith and ideological traditions as well as how cultivating sensibilities in line with caring for others is a form of ethical practice (Hamdy, 2012; Muehlebach 2012). Mauss’
seminal work demonstrated that giving and receiving gifts are not only performative acts but are ritualized obligations of care upon which the fulfillment of reciprocity conferred dignity to the participants. Yet with the recent attention in the discipline to ethics and self-cultivation, there has been less attention to an anthropological exploration of what it means to cultivate oneself as a compassionate and graceful recipient (as opposed to giver of), a cultivating of oneself to be allowed to be cared for. In this chapter instead of focusing on the giving of care to self and others as ethical practice, or in cultivating oneself as a compassionate recipient, I explore what it may mean to cultivate a life for oneself that refuses to be the recipient of care that is given by others.

Introduction to Jabar

Jabar is a young man in his late twenties who was orphaned at age eight and assumed the role of head of his family. He crafted a life since then that has aimed to exempt himself (and his immediate family) from subjection to the moralizing disciplinary forms of governance that have structured the lives of Afghans over the last three decades. But in aiming to do so, he has exempted himself altogether from anything that resembles forms of care by others onto him. Michael Lambek writes that one of the questions addressed in his edited volume on ordinary ethics is: “whether and how ordinary ethical sensibilities are coarsened or heightened with respect to broad social forces such as consumer capitalism, media advertising, inequality, violence, and specific forms of discipline” (Lambek, 2010). In this chapter, as well as throughout this dissertation, I contend that violence and the uncertainties that came with it have and do still fundamentally alter not only the forms of possibilities for relatedness to self and others,
but also the impossibilities. Serial violence and uncertainty have further complicated how it is that care and kinship are performed as ethical practice in everyday life. This chapter aims to focus on the quotidian ways that ethics of care are enacted, exaggerated, and/or accepted only to later be denied.

**Layout of Chapter**

I continue with an introduction to Jabar, his family and wider kin network. I will sketch his life story as unfolding alongside the tail end of the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan (until 1989, when his father died), to the Kabul wars of the early 1990s (which forced him and his family to flee to Pakistan), to almost 15 years of life in Pakistan as a refugee, then as a returnee to Afghanistan with the fall of the Taliban to his studies in Kabul while working for an international aid organization during the current war and occupation. As I narrate Jabar’s life, as I came to know it, I refer to particular ‘critical events’ (Das, 1996) in the history of contemporary Afghanistan that serve as the background from which his life unfolds. To do justice to Jabar’s life narrative means that the historical thread needs to be taken seriously, as through Jabar’s life we can begin to comprehend how the durational aspect of the violence- the wars, conflicts and migrations had distinct modes of subjectivation under which each specific disciplinary regime produced a certain kind of subject position but also cumulatively have manifested in a particular mode of engaging with the world. This chapter demonstrates how the durational aspect of violence as present in the everyday lives of Afghans takes hold in the quotidian performances of care and relationality, and thus Jabar’s story interrogates whether a ‘descent into the ordinary’ in Das’ language, is even possible in a space that is
still constituted by profound violence, or whether it is a descent into an ordinary-meaning a certain formation of the ordinary as the ordinary, at least for now, is an impossibility.

‘Not Orphan’ and ‘Not Widow’

Jabar and his family thus far can be read as a complete renunciation of the labels of ‘orphan’ (and similarly for his mother, a renunciation of the term ‘widow’). He is a young Afghan man who necessitates the desire to recite almost daily that he did everything on his own (mother, brothers and sisters are included as part of what constitutes ‘own’) without the help of extended kin, fellow Muslims, and/or any charity, or help by the Afghan, Pakistani States and/or any international actors. He has created a presentable narrative of his life that in essence reflects that he never willfully allowed himself and his mother and siblings to be subjected to the discourses and associated forms of governmentality in the context of Afghanistan that would customarily ensue from the loss of one’s father at the age of eight years old. What does this mean - considering that Afghanistan is a society deeply rooted in kinship and lineage - when a young man declares endlessly that he did ‘it’ on his own? What may ‘it’ mean anthropologically (to endure, thrive?), more specifically as reflecting on the varied ways war, conflict and serial migration reconstitute kinship- for a society known to be structured around kin and obligation to kin- for a young male to constantly have to declare- that he and his mother and siblings did everything alone (everything meaning endured, survived and in certain relative ways thrived) throughout the decades of war,
refugee life and ongoing conflict—without help from anyone (extended kin, fellow Muslims, Pakistani state, Afghani state, national and international NGOs)?

**Hustlin**46

Jabar had learned to hustle people before he was ten years old. He was the eldest son of his father’s second wife. The eldest male son is a birth and gender status endowed with a particular obligation of care in the absence of a father in Afghanistan. Jabar was a *yaatim*, an orphan, who was responsible for his mother, three sisters (one older and two younger) and one younger brother. Although Jabar was only eight years old when his father died, he immediately assumed the role of head of the household and thus according to the more colloquial definitions of widow he never considered his mother a widow, as she had someone to provide for her, a *sarparast* (guardian) to economically provide for her and protect her. Any child (even the eldest male child as Jabar was) who does not have his/her father in this world is considered an orphan, but Jabar resented that he and his siblings were considered orphans. His mother had decided shortly after her husband’s death, that although she was young, still in her 20s- she was not going to re-marry, despite the aggressive urgings of her affinal and agnatic kin.

Millions of children were orphaned during the serial wars and the infrastructure destruction that accompanied war that made simple illnesses deadly. Jabar’s mother recounted seeing too many women who were widowed who remarried, only for her

---

46 ‘To hustle’ and ‘hustler’ have many meanings and connotations, most negative. In speaking about Jabar, the definitions of ‘hustler’ most apt are: someone who is resourceful; someone who does whatever it takes to make money, even if deceptions are involved; someone who immediately figures out the weaknesses of another and exploits those weaknesses; someone who exhausts social relations to get ahead; someone who knows how to gain the advantage in a situation; someone who manages to stay afloat; someone who has completely thought out everything he says and makes sure his bases are covered; someone who in the toughest of situations will endure, if not prevail, at whatever cost.
children from the dead husband to be humiliated by the step-father. She certainly did not want her children to be treated badly by any man who did not see her children as his own. This was a decision made by his mother that Jabar would recite over and over. Thusfar his life was highly structured around the fact that his mother decided not to re-marry, preserving the dignity and honour of Jabar and his siblings was the prime reason. He repeatedly called this the ‘biggest sacrifice’ that thus had to be acknowledged constantly, if not honoured throughout his life- a sacrifice not through a giving up of her life but giving up the possibilities that come from a married life.

Household expenses needed to be covered thus as the eldest son Jabar had learnt to make the actual mathematical calculations and deliberations regarding daily and monthly expenses and what could be juggled and postponed, and what absolutely could not. He also learned quite well how to make the kind of calculations that did not have to do with numbers, but had to do with words, sentiments and obligations. In essence, he learned to hustle people. He recounted many stories of hardship in his childhood, which began only after his father died. Based on his own accounts, it is safe to say that he spent his early years figuring out how to push relationships (whether with shop-keepers, co-workers or friends) to their limit, meaning to get just enough out of each transaction as to not spoil the relation entirely. He admitted he made many mistakes and lost the trust of many people as he had taken things too far, a calculation he took into consideration the next time he was hustling someone. He never told people he needed to borrow money from them, as that would make him look like he could not provide for his family, or worse- make it seem like his mother wanted him to accept help from anyone. His family
wanted neither pity nor help or for anyone to see them as needing or wanting, even if temporarily.

In fact, his family took enormous pride in being able to say that through the thick and thin of being ‘not a widow’ and ‘not orphans’, they did not need to borrow or ever be ‘in debt’. His mother, brother and Jabar himself would repeat this to me often. Jabar learned to extract money from people and situations without letting it be known that he was or his family was in need, even though they clearly were. Jabar may have felt that he hustled people, but did not realize the words that many people he thought he hustled would say as he would leave the scene of the hustle. ‘Son of a widow’, ‘yaatim’ (orphan) followed by ‘bichaara’ (unfortunate one) and other similar phrases, which indicated or evoked a sense of pity as well of remorse for a life/personality which could have been so much more, if not for the descent into orphanhood.

Even though Jabar was now almost 30 years old, and thus certainly should not be looked at as a yaatim (orphan) any longer, his neighbors all still used these words when they complained about how rude, disrespectful and proud they thought he and his brother were. It is common in Afghanistan to look at and judge the actions of an orphan boy in the context of his life as an orphan, a boy without a father, thus without someone to give him the guidance and supervision that a young son needs from a male elder. In Afghanistan, the Islamic definition of an orphan of a child without a father then has a particular gendered relevance for orphan boys in Kabul- who lack a direct male figure in the formation of their personalities. Many in Afghanistan believe that an orphan boy, particularly the eldest, needs to be treated more delicately as he is someone who has faced an even more difficult time by not having a father and by having to provide for the
family and thus who needs to be treated with extra kindness, patience and compassion. If a young orphan boy does something socially reprehensible, often those who witness the act refuse to scold the boy if the boy is known to be an orphan. Perhaps this stems out of the Islamic duty to be merciful, caring and generous to widows and orphans. A verse in the Qur’an compares a person who is harsh to an orphan with a non-believer:

“See the one who denies the religion, then such is the man who repulses the orphan with harshness and does not help feed the poor” (107:1-3)

Although this is only one of the many instances in the Qur’an and Ahadith (accounts of the sayings and deeds of the Prophet Muhammad) that specifically urges kindness and patience towards orphans, throughout everyday speech and action in Kabul, care and generosity towards orphans is an embodied ethical practice, instinctual. For example, as pedestrians and commuters alike rush through the traffic-filled streets of Kabul, often lined with young children weaving through the stopped cars asking for small change- if the word orphan is even uttered in the child’s plea for change- without hesitation, money is given to the said orphan. This demonstrates the clear performative force of the word *yaatim* (orphan) in Kabul.

In the context of contemporary Afghanistan, where millions of women were widowed and millions more children were orphaned, it is important to consider the obligations of care surrounding orphans and how these obligations figure into the formation of ethical subjects in Kabul City. Sympathy towards orphans, notwithstanding, is often also combined with severe competition for resources, fear, distrust and suspicion amidst the various wars and occupations in Afghanistan and lives as refugees. Thus
sympathy resides in the same axis as suspicion, distrust and fear in Kabul city, and all are present in the biographies of many young Afghans.

**Predatory Kin**

Jabar’s mother’s brothers were other elder male figures in his family who could have potentially served as father figures in his life, as would be the case in Afghanistan considering the family is the center of social life. Kin relations get made and re-made in every society, but in the context of conflict, it becomes important to explore the ways war, serial conflicts and resultant prolonged economic hardships restructure kin obligations of care. However since these brothers of his mother’s financially cheated Jabar and his mother within a year after his father died they were not trusted and were kept at a reasonable distance. Jabar described them as being particularly heartless as they were cheated and taken advantage of by his maternal uncles precisely because his mother was vulnerable and would not suspect them of trying to cheat her when she just became a widow.

Similarly on his father’s side, who had sons from his first wife (and Jabar’s mother’s co-wife), cheated them out of land that was his right. Jabar had to go to the place of his birth, in northern Afghanistan, repeatedly, in order to claim the land what would have been rightfully his after his father’s death. Yet the courts ultimately ruled in favour of his half-brothers, who were older than him. Jabar and his mother got some of the land, but certainly not what they were expecting. To this day, they claim his half-brothers used *wasita* (personal connection that can be beneficial, social capital) which was gained through help from his father’s brothers and their sons to sway the court
decision in the favour of his step-brothers. Jabar appealed the decision and had to make frequent trips to the north to face judges and participate in community *shuras* (meetings of elders and respected people in community) regarding the land.

Ultimately, Jabar was beat up by his half-brothers and their extended kin in the north for persistently pursuing the land issue and he was hospitalized for more than a week. Thus his mother’s brothers and the entire mother’s side, his father’s brothers and their families and his step-brothers, including his *amboq* or his mother’s co-wife were all seen as untrustworthy and shameless as they all took advantage of their vulnerable situation when his father died. Thus these extended family members were either not talked to entirely or only talked to at completely superficial levels during religious festivals and/or weddings.

**No Longer in this World**

It was almost twenty years since Jabar lost his father and thus twenty plus years learning how to navigate in the world as an orphan (or in his account of himself- not orphan). Jabar’s father was described as a businessman. He was portrayed as rather successful and he was described by Jabar as someone who traveled to Dubai at a time when few Afghans did- “He went to Dubai before anybody even knew what Dubai was”, recounted Jabar and his mother with pride, on separate occasions. His father took a second wife, which itself is a sign of wealth in Afghanistan. Jabar became a young orphan in Kabul in the background of the Soviet departure from Afghanistan. His father died of *falj* (paralysis)- it is unknown as to what caused the paralysis and what was the underlying disease- he simply is described as having died of *falj*. His family fled Kabul
shortly after his father’s death for Pakistan, as the Kabul Wars of the early 1990s were underway.

Refugee Life

Jabar spent his early teens into the initial years of his twenties as a refugee in Pakistan in a poorer district two hours outside of Peshawar, the urban provincial capital of now Khyber-Pakhtunkhwa. After his father’s death, Jabar’s mother sold item after item- tVs, carpets, electronic devices in order to pay for everyday family expenses. Jabar’s mother told Jabar that she did not want him to work in any demeaning jobs in Pakistan. Jabar would do odd jobs on the street but could barely make enough money to feed his family. His mother absolutely forbade him to work weaving carpets or making bricks, jobs that many Afghan young children had to do and which are viewed as demeaning work, or work only done by the poorest and most desperate children. He began lying to his mother and would tell her vaguely that he was working with an artist meanwhile he would spend his days weaving carpets, like many other poor Afghan refugee orphans and children in Pakistan to enable him to bring enough money to put food on the table. He was attending a Pakistani public school but was a rather undisciplined student as he was studying as well as providing the only source of income for the entire household. In Pakistani public schools, students learn Urdu as well as English, a skill that would later prove marketable for the millions of Afghan refugees who would eventually return to Kabul gaining employment with the international aid and military apparatus.
Returnee

At the age of 18 Jabar began teaching beginning English courses in a private institute in Peshawar. In 2002, at the age of 21, Jabar returned to Afghanistan alone to seek a job there amongst the many aid organizations. Jabar spoke English well enough to qualify him for one of the scores of jobs created by the literally thousands of NGOs which began working in Afghanistan after the exit of the Taliban from Kabul city in Fall 2001. Jabar went to Afghanistan alone, again- like many other young Afghan males, sending remittances to his family in Pakistan meanwhile waiting for greater job stability to thus enable him to bring them all back to Kabul. His initial salary was $US300/month, an improvement from his salary as an English tutor in a private English course - his last job in Pakistan- where he was paid $US180/month. He was based in Charikar, just outside Kabul and lived with four other Afghan males who, like himself, returned to Afghanistan alone to work for more lucrative aid salaries, while their families remained in Pakistan. Within a year, Jabar had proven himself indispensable to the German organization he initially started working with and he was given more responsibility, much greater salary, and a transfer to Kabul. By the end of 2002, he was earning close to $US1000/month (which by the end of 2008 increased to approximately $US2200/month).

At the end of 2002, after a year of living and working in Afghanistan alone he called his family from Pakistan to join him in Kabul. Jabar had a relatively well paying job and it was clear it was largely due to his sufficient English skills that enabled him to work for foreigners. He was in his twenties and had completed ten years of school in Pakistan. In 2007, when he was twenty-six years old, the German NGO he was employed with supported him in enrolling in the newly opened American University of
Afghanistan. His job paid 50% of his tuition costs and the University, through financial aid, covered the rest of tuition costs since he was the only male wage earner in his family. He was able to obtain the highest quality of higher education available in Afghanistan free of cost.

**Exaggerating Academic Potential**

In 2007 Jabar found out that I was offering assistance to students interested in continuing their higher education and he approached me to help him apply for scholarships, mainly to study in the United States. Jabar did not want to let anyone know he was applying. I informed him that I would not let anyone else know but that I wanted to personally meet with his mother to make sure she was supportive of his decision to apply for this scholarship. I did this with each student who asked for assistance, but I felt it was especially necessary to explain the process to his mother and obtain permission from her since he was the only male in his household (his brother was studying in India, at the time). He officially asked me to help him with his scholarship application and his mother gave me the requisite permission to assist him in the extensive process.

In the early stages, she asked me what chances I thought he had and I told her I could not answer that but all we could do was to focus on making his application the strongest possible. She asked me how many other students I was helping with the same application and I gave her a vague answer indicating in the most polite way possible that it was not something she should worry about, as her focus should be on supporting us in making Jabar’s application the strongest we could make it. She then asked me ‘you are not helping him because you see him as an orphan, right? It is only because you help any
student you think is talented?’ I had to assure his mother that I did not see him as an orphan and was assisting him because he was a talented student.

Over the course of the year I spent much time in their house where I helped with every single part of the very lengthy application process, I was confronted with this same question on no less than ten different occasions by his mother, brother, sisters and Jabar himself and I found myself having to be increasingly defensive about why I was assisting him and on some occasions, I found myself over-stating how academically talented he actually was, simply to detract from the possibility that I was helping because I saw him as an orphan or his mother as a widow.

**Giving Word**

I came to know the individual members of his family quite well and was thus invited to the equivalent of a pre-engagement ceremony of his youngest sister, the Afghan term for the ceremony is *lafz* (which means ‘word’ but translates into ‘giving word’ meaning the family of the groom and the family of the bride agree to marry through an exchange of words). His youngest sister, Palwasha, studied until sixth class in Pakistan and when she came to Afghanistan in 2002 the stated intention of the family was to enroll her in school in Kabul so that she could finish the equivalent of high school. The attestation process for Afghans who studied in Pakistan is a fairly lengthy one, requiring multiple visits to Pakistan and over a dozen signatures, stamps and verifications in order to get the equivalency in Afghanistan and be allowed to continue studying in Afghanistan without interruption or without having to repeat years of study.
Many Afghans, male and female alike lose considerable time in their studies and frequently have to repeat years as a result of this lengthy bureaucratic process. As with most bureaucratic processes, the claim can be easily made that it is really unnecessarily taxing and discouraging, especially if one considers that millions of Afghans have spent their school years in Pakistan. Jabar never even began the attestation process for Palwasha, as she herself had little to no interest in completing more education than she already completed. She was nineteen and already spent a few years longing to be married and yearning to start a family. Her two older sisters were already married with seven kids between the two of them. This information about his sisters is offered here only because another important part of Jabar’s narrative was that he did his duty as the head of household to make sure his sisters got married. He was thus happy to announce Palwasha’s pre-engagement even though she was rather young and she had less education than her two older sisters because he felt he had completed his obligation to his youngest sister.

According to Jabar’s accounts, and those of many other Afghans, once a female leaves her affinal kin, her agnatic kin are completely responsible for her happiness and care. He provided for her and felt he did everything he could to make sure she never felt like an orphan. He announced on many occasions, especially surrounding the preparations for her lafz ceremony, that he managed his obligations to all of his sisters and to his mother and this was possible even though his mother did not re-marry. As mentioned earlier, Jabar frequently mentioned the fact that his mother did not re-marry although she was quite young (in her 20s) despite forceful urgings from her affinal and agnatic kin to re-marry. His mother commented on several occasions (but not ever in
direct reference to herself) that a woman who loses her husband (becomes a widow) and who has children with that man should never marry again if she values the dignity and honour of her children. She was convinced that no widow could possibly re-marry AND have her children not feel compromised and disrespected by the relation to a step-father. She also believed that re-marrying a woman who has been widowed and has children can easily be seen as an act of charity – and she did not want herself or her children to feel like beneficiaries of charity.

Curious Kin

Prior to Palwasha’s lafz ceremony, I was reminded on three or four occasions, by different members of Jabar’s immediate family that I would be meeting many people, including Palwasha’s future in-laws and other extended family from their side and that I was to give as little detail as possible about who I was and under no condition mention that I was assisting Jabar with a scholarship application to study abroad. I was simply to state that I was his teacher at the University. I had little to no problem with this and it did not even occur to me to think about how many times I was told this by almost each member of his immediate family and the reasons for this. I had already met the half sisters and the amboq- co-wife in local kinship terminology - as they lived only blocks away and they came over on a few occasions when I was visiting Jabar’s home. I was told in general that they were very tricky girls, and warned that I should not give any information to them about my personal life and especially, should not indicate in any way that I was assisting Jabar with a scholarship to study in the United States. I was cautious anyway yet I heeded the multiple warnings about the nosy half-sisters and amboq.
The older brother of these nosy half-sisters was in India studying for a Bachelor’s degree while Jabar’s younger brother (from his own mother) went to India as well through a scholarship for Afghans from the Indian Government. So there was a certain amount of equivalence as one male from each of his father’s wives had left outside of Afghanistan for studies, and both went to India. Jabar was planning to outdo his half-brother (and even his own brother) by attempting to study in America. America would not just be a mark that the eldest son of his mother succeeded, but the mark of success in the aspirations of most young males in Kabul (into Pakistan and perhaps beyond). Unbeknownst to me, yet as far as Jabar was concerned, far more than the scholarship was at stake.

**Getting Coached**

On every occasion, including at the *lafz* ceremony, two of the half-sisters asked me endless questions about Jabar and his abilities as a student and whether I thought he could get a scholarship to study abroad in the future. In addition, a neighbor of Jabar, who was a close friend of his mother, had introduced herself to me one evening and told me she heard from Jabar’s mother that I was his teacher at University. She asked me if Jabar was trying to get to America.

I was coached by Jabar and Palwasha not to discuss the scholarship at all as the half-sisters and their mother (the *amboq*, or co-wife) were very jealous of Jabar and his family and they would *nazar* the process—meaning, give the evil eye, thus poisoning the process through black magic. In addition, I was told that if I told them that I was assisting with a scholarship, they would manipulate me into helping their brothers (Jabar’s half-
brothers and main rivals) with scholarship applications as well. Thus Jabar and his family made it appear that they were concerned to not put me in an uncomfortable position of having to consent to assisting Jabar’s half brothers with applying for scholarships simply because they were his kin, yet this was not the reason at all that they did not want me to mention any scholarship. This information about the half sisters, co-wife and neighbor will be relevant later in gaining an understanding of the narrative they were given by Jabar and his mother about who I was.

_I Did it... ‘On My Own’_

Out of more than 2,000 applicants, many who were sons and daughters of Ministers and from influential Afghan families, four were selected. Jabar was one of them. It was an extremely rare private scholarship opportunity and it supported and mentored the students once they were selected until the day they graduated. Shortly after he received news of his award, I heard independently from his neighbors, his mother, brother, sisters and fellow classmates that he announced to everyone that the scholarship I helped him with he unfortunately did not get, but that he applied for another scholarship completely on his own and that is the one he received. The teacher in me who gave countless hours of hard work, dedication and sheer time over the course of more than a year to support him as he developed his entire application, wanted to dismiss Jabar as a manipulative, arrogant and proud hustler. However the anthropologist in me was forced to think about what was at stake for Jabar in his necessity to declare that he was successful and that he did it ‘on his own’.
We were successful in presenting Jabar and his life circumstances to the scholarship board so he could obtain a prestigious scholarship despite the fact that there were literally millions of other kids who were orphaned and who also spent their lives struggling to make a living on the streets of Pakistan as refugees (meaning, his story was not such a unique one for an Afghan). Our goal with the application essays was to demonstrate that he was uniquely worthy but not by relying on the words ‘refugee’ and ‘orphan’. These were categories of vulnerability that conjured certain imaginations of a life that summoned pity. We succeeded in getting the ‘not orphan’, ‘not refugee’, son of a ‘not widow’ a golden opportunity that he, like every other Afghan, did deserve. However, we somehow failed to honor the experiences, the dignity and the compassion of the other as we did this. Or perhaps we did honor those things but the problem is we succeeded, and by the success, Jabar felt that what was unrelenting support for him and his family during the application process, now turned into a debt, after he was selected. Das speaks of the distinctions between gift, charity and debt and how the smallest of gestures can suddenly turn one into the other in the hearts and minds of those involved, thus resulting in feelings of shame and of being pitied. As a pre-emptive act, in case he was selected, Jabar and his mother already put in place a series of alternative narratives (alternative as they bared little resemblance to my own experience) in place.

*Widow Anthropologist*

I came to discover that Jabar had told everyone from the outset, including the neighbors and his half-sisters and his mother’s co-wife, that his family was actually taking care of me and being compassionate as I was a *beechaari* (unfortunate one) who
was left in Kabul all alone. I was a single female working in Kabul and had a family that did not really care for me (or they could not logically have allowed an Afghan female to be in Kabul alone). Thus they were extending care to me as I had no family whatsoever in Kabul who could support and protect me. Of course, it was true that I was alone and single in Kabul and doing research. However, this is not how my narrative was given. Furthermore, and more problematic, my family was portrayed as dead-beats and uncaring and Jabar’s family presented themselves as having to make up for this lack of care by asking me to come over to eat with them. When I heard this version on multiple occasions, it was a real affront considering it was through phenomenal difficulties that I managed to arrange to come to their house each time I did to review every aspect of the application. It only then became clear to me why Jabar and his family repeatedly rehearsed each meeting with the half-sisters and other extended kin at the lafz ceremony and other social settings and virtually scripted my lines for me.

His family had crafted an entirely different account of why I was a frequent visitor to their house- I was dependent on them. I found it rather revealing that Jabar chose to compare my circumstances in Kabul as a single female to his conception of a widow (vulnerable, alone, no guardian) as he convincingly explained to relatives and neighbors why I was visiting their house once a week, and closer to the deadline of the scholarship, more frequently. It was important to Jabar and his family to highlight any vulnerabilities I had in order to remove the possibility that anyone would actually believe I was enacting some form of care upon them and that they were possibly the recipients of my care.
I wanted to meet with Jabar to discuss why he and his family would disrespect my family as they had. More specifically, why it was so important for them to make it appear as if they were caring for a female ‘neglected’ by her family. And even more so, why he could not just be a graceful recipient of his haqq (right), as reparations (or something like it) from a teacher who was in Kabul, (albeit, single and female), and trying to do her part to get the acknowledgement that she believed Afghans deserved. We never met again. I thought I was being very straightforward yet sensitive and repeated to all my students always, and Jabar and his family, especially- that every Afghan who wants to study abroad should have it paid for entirely by the United States, Saudi Arabia and Pakistan as reparations, to start with. I used the word haqq (right) as I did not know the word for reparations in Dari at the time. Yet despite not knowing the precise word, I circumscribed my ethical aspiration as a teacher in Kabul. I had made it very clear that it was my duty to help any student who wanted to pursue higher education abroad, not out of pity, but out of a sense of debt that was owed. I still am not sure what went wrong. I spoke to a more than a few Afghans who knew Jabar, and some who did not, and remarkably, before I was able to get to the punch line- meaning how he and his family actually spun my role and who I was, each of the Afghans I shared this story with, actually anticipated the punch line before I delivered it. I always asked in astonishment, particularly to those who knew him – ‘how did you know? Did he tell you he was doing this?’ I was repeatedly told that it was a classic story, so predictable a narrative for an eldest male orphan. It was clear Jabar’s actions were a familiar repertoire in Kabul. His ability to craft himself and his family as not recipients of care was a mode of being, not the only mode of being, but a mode of living a livable life amidst serial violence and serial humanitarianism and the
attendant forms of care. Some say I helped too much, and that made his family feel obligated to me, as if they owed me something - just as Mauss had described receiving a gift as being loaded with the obligation of debt. I am not sure that was it, though.

**Moral Economies**

When looking at alliances and networks and the various economies at play in times of war- it is important not only to look at formal and informal economies, and cash and or debt economies but also toward moral economies and the ways war, migration and occupation have necessarily complicated the different stakes people have in relating to or NOT relating with one another. Jabar’s story is not offered to reveal that Afghan society has broken down or that kinship in its entirety has been ruptured, or that kin relations and social networks are no longer as central to Afghan society as they were prior to war and occupation. Jabar’s story is offered in order to begin to consider the stakes in Afghanistan and how the grander moralizing projects of war and humanitarianism have made elemental transformations in the intimate spheres of relatedness and the forms of relationships people aspire to build, maintain, and deem possible and how these are ultimately linked to one’s aspirations as an ethical subject.

It becomes critical to delineate the nature of the stakes in order to gain an understanding of the ways forms of relatedness unfold in Kabul. Yet this is not a straightforward task as connected to this task would be demarcating what constitutes normative kin relations in Kabul as well as what is ethical or what living with respect to obligations, a livable life may look like in Kabul. Instead of attempting the task of demarcating what
may constitute normative kin relations in Kabul, I continue with Jabar in describing his aspirations with respect to cultivating himself as a particular kind of ethical subject.

**Jabar Giving a Fictional Account of Himself**

Throughout his life as a young *orphan* in Kabul, to a young *refugee* in Pakistan to a *returnee to Afghanistan* sending remittances to his family in Pakistan to a young man working for a foreign aid organization, made him resent altogether any form of care as he felt it was part of the regimes of care- the humanitarian aid and refugee regimes he and millions of Afghans have continually faced. Thus whether it was the normative Islamic ethic of care for an orphan or my gesture of solidarity for Afghan students seeking a higher education- Jabar came to see all forms of care as part of the processes of subjectivation that he has had to face from a very young age because he grew up in a country whose people were bombarded with cycles of war, forced migration, degraded lives as refugees and foreign occupations- including the more recent occupation extending for more than a decade that incorporated the military and political occupation of the country with a massive international aid and development apparatus. Jabar’s account of the scholarship he was awarded denied that anybody helped him at all in the process. He earned it, and he earned it ‘on his own’, and this is what was important to Jabar as he announced to others that he was a recipient of the scholarship. Almost as (or even more) important to Jabar than the fact that he received the scholarship was his declaration that he did it ‘on his own’.

Upon hearing multiple second-hand accounts of his announcement- from his classmates and his family and neighbors- all verifying his declaration that he did it on his
own- I immediately thought of the repeated times he had put down his extended family in front of me. He berated them and often declared how his mother and siblings and himself struggled and did everything on their own, without any support from anyone. For the first time, I doubted his accounts of his extended family. If he could announce to everyone, including to his own mother, who saw with her own eyes how much time and effort I invested into his application process, that he earned the scholarship ‘on his own’- then perhaps his extended family did actually support him and his mother and siblings throughout their difficult years of widowhood and orphanhood (or not widowhood and not orphanhood, in Jabar’s formulation). Perhaps they were not the dead-beat, predatory and selfish extended family that he portrayed them to be.

I contemplated contacting his amboq and his half-sisters, who lived a few blocks away from me. I contemplated this for some time as I thought it necessary to verify if Jabar’s accounts of his father’s side of the family, in Northern Afghanistan, and his mother’s side, who largely remained in Pakistan, were true. Yet I hesitated to do this as verifying would potentially harm his standing with them. Yet more relevant was that I came to the realization that what was important was not the veracity of Jabar’s account-whether he was actually supported or not and to what degree by his extended family members. What mattered more was the very fact that central to all accounts of himself was the recurring declaration that he did everything ‘on his own’. The fact of how much or how little his extended kin (or myself) helped Jabar and his immediate family was not the issue but why he felt he needed to portray them in a certain way, why he needed to give an account of himself in a certain way and furthermore the various deliberations and practices that went into cultivating a particular ethical self is what interests me.
The claim and relevant explanations to support the claim can be made to demonstrate how Jabar’s actions and behaviours and subsequent narratives about those actions are part of a Foucauldian project of cultivating an ethical self. It would make sense to employ Foucault’s purchase here in explaining the life of a young Afghan male, and his own ethical aspirations, amidst the multiple forms of governmentality and regimes of disciplinary power (not to mention their accompanying discourses) that constitute the landscape of contemporary Kabul. However, when I rehearse various elaborations of Jabar’s ethical self-cultivation and the precise ways he actively and consciously fashioned himself and the image of himself as the dutiful son and dutiful brother (and hence dutiful guardian of the household) amidst the fact that his father was no longer in this world, at the end of the Soviet Occupation, and at the beginning of the Kabul wars, amidst life as a refugee in neighboring Pakistan, amidst a return to Afghanistan that once again was under foreign occupation- it becomes all too clear that it is not enough.

It is easy to claim and subsequently demonstrate how Jabar had ethical aspirations of his own- a fashioning of himself as dutiful amidst the other multiple and layered historical processes of subjectivation- a remaking of himself as a particular kind of subject, a particular kind of self that did not have to do with the categories of orphan, refugee or recent returnee but the being and becoming of a dutiful son and brother. Yet to understand how Jabar’s ethical aspirations and self-cultivation intersects with the aspirations of others and makes forms of relationality possible or impossible (as is more relevant in his case) is more challenging. The ethical substance, in Foucauldian terms, of his aspirations is not only related to being the eldest son of his father and the duties and
obligations that accompany that birth position but also related to a narrative of doing this on his own. How does this ethical project impinge on or fold into what it may mean to be a son, a brother, a step-brother, a nephew, a fellow Muslim, a student, or a friend and/or shape the conditions for the impossibility of such forms of relatedness? More important questions perhaps are what can be learned about the types of relations people aspire to cultivate and to maintain and the kinds of people they aspire to be in contemporary Kabul. Furthermore, what is to be said about the kinds of projects that are pursued when the necessity for empirical truth is removed from ethical cultivation and fragments of fiction seem central to the crafting and progress of such projects. Foucault, in The Order of Things, asked the following questions, which seem along similar lines: “What is our own era? And how are we to constitute ourselves as subjects in its conditions?” (1994).

Instead of seeing Jabar and/or Jabar’s family as unique or abnormal, it becomes important to consider what it may mean about ways that people relate with one another, or chose not to relate with one another, when central to this young man’s narrative is the proclamation that he did everything on his own- that all extended kin betrayed him- in essence, kinship failed yet he succeeded not because of kinship but despite it.

In the next section, I rehearse possibilities for why Jabar found it so important for it to be known that he did things on his own. However, in giving these explanations, I am not positing that it is one or the another because in all likelihood it has been given life by more than one thread of influence.
Overlapping Logics of ‘on my own –ness’- Neo-liberalism in Kabul

Since Jabar returned to Kabul from Pakistan, he has worked only in the field of international aid and development in Kabul- an industry infused with the discourses, practices and logics of neo-liberalism. The logic of the markets has enervated everyday life in Kabul and governs over the more intimate zones of life- including the logics of obligation and care. In the newly reconstructed Afghanistan, widows are not cared for by the Islamic Republic (the State) and although the bulk of the care of widows is done by fellow Muslims- widows are encouraged to care for themselves. This shift of the care from the State to individuals is the classic marker of neo-liberalism. How this is relevant to Jabar is that while he was engaged in literally crafting neo-liberal development policies in his everyday professional life, he has been constantly exposed to and engaged in neo-liberal and republican discourses and ethos of self-responsibility. An example will shortly follow which exemplifies Jabar’s taken for grantedness of the new regimes of care offered by the occupation and the accompanying development and aid regimes. This is not to say that Jabar wholesale bought into the logic of the languages and practices of the occupation and reconstruction projects in Kabul- but the logics did make their mark on how he understood what it meant to be successful and responsible- self-sufficient, a donor and not a recipient of anyone’s mercy, generosity or assistance, in any form. One example, however does exemplify how Jabar was influenced by the logics of neo-liberalism.

In the following chapter on shahidan (martyrs/witnesses) and the Afghan State, I explain in detail how through Jabar, I came to be involved in a survey commissioned by the Ministry of Interior and the German NGO he was working with, to assess how best
the Ministry could support women who were widowed when their husbands were killed in a suicide attack targeting a busload of police academy cadets and their teachers. At the conclusion of the four days of meetings with the women who were widowed and families of the police cadets and instructors martyred in the suicide attack, I met with Jabar and gave him the information I gathered. Fifteen out of the sixteen widows were not willing or interested in engaging in any form of employment. Each of the widows asked me if consenting to hypothetically work was merely a pre-condition made by the Ministry in order to be considered for their rightful compensation (which was not linked to employment). If that was the case, they would consent to work, but ultimately would not actually work. The widows of the police instructors, who had older sons (in their teens and early twenties) asked if instead of getting work for them (the widows), if their sons could get jobs. I explained to Jabar their predicaments as I came to understand them. He was disgusted to find out that all of the widows (except one) had no interest in working: ‘Who do they think they are? They want be cared for and dependent on others?’ This is the problem of Afghanistan, everyone just wants charity’. His questions were rhetorical but I nevertheless gave a defense to the position of the widows and their right in Islam (as ones who have haqq (right, entitlement) to Zakat (alms collected by the State and fellow Muslims), and that it thus was not to be understood as charity. His reply was: ‘if I knew you would get emotional and get attached to these families, I would never have referred you to the Ministry of Interior. It is not about their haqq (right, entitlement), it is about the program that the Ministry of Interior and the German Government is creating for them, and they need to work, that is it. They need to work to build this country and it is their duty to not be dependent and lazy, there is no other option for them’. I asked about
the request from the widows who wanted jobs for their sons, his reply was clear- ‘No, this is part of a gender program and it is only for the widows themselves, for the widows themselves to work, not their sons or whomever they want. Their sons should be working anyway’.

It was clear as he repeatedly clarified his position how astonished he was that I did not share his opinion. He even went so far as to comment that I was raised in the United States and should know better the value of hard-work and how important work is for these widows, especially. I let him continue defending his position and then asked him: ‘When your father left this world (I made sure to use this formulation and not ‘when your mother became a widow’ or ‘when you became an orphan’) and if you had been only three or four (and thus could logically not work)- would you have wanted your mother to work?’ His reply was simple- ‘

Shukr alhamdilallah (thanks be to Allah), my mother had me and I was not four, I was eight years old and I managed everything so that she never had to work (outside of the house) a day in her life. Don’t compare my mother with these women’, he said, but what he meant, was with these widows.

Incommensurabilities with Islam and Neo-liberal Logics of Care

Jabar’s candid responses with regards to ‘work’ and the necessity for these women who had been widowed to have to work vividly reminded me of the affect which pervaded politics as a youth in the 1980s in the United States under Ronald Reagan- the affect that corresponded to the idea that social welfare made people lazy. Now, I was standing in Kabul trying to shake off the blast to my past as I realized how pervasive, thorough- in essence, the sheer longevity, brilliance and embeddedness of the logics and
practices of the neo-liberal project and how these practices were structuring in significant ways the families and lives of widows I came to learn from in Kabul. Their very idea of expectations, obligations, aspirations and forms of relating to themselves and others, Islamically (and in other ways), as the widows of martyrs was shown to be incommensurable (and perhaps even anachronistic) with the programmatic mandates and prescriptions of the international aid community, the Afghan State (which largely buckled to the demands of the donors) and those who implemented these programs.

I embarked on explaining the dangers of the new forms of liberalism so widely promoted by international aid practices in Kabul to Jabar. My explanation to Jabar regarding what I understood to be at stake in the positions he was aligning with—not only the ideological stakes, but also more importantly, what was at practically at stake for the lives of the widows and families of the martyrs, and beyond was anemic, at best. Although it was unnecessary, as a gesture to ease the feeling of sheer helplessness, I wrote a ten-page report on findings and my recommendations based on the four-day visit with the widows and families of the martyred and officially submitted the report to the German NGO, the German Government and the Afghan Ministry of Interior. They continued their project of offering employment (they selected the specific jobs since the widows I spoke did not indicate what work they were willing to perform), as a form of sustainable care offered to the widows of the martyred by the Afghan State and the German Government47.

47 The funeral expenses of the martyrs were also covered and in a few cases of instructors who were martyred in the suicide blast, the Ministry of Interior had additional compensation. This is detailed in the forthcoming chapter.
Neo-liberal Market Driven Pedagogical Models

Jabar’s posture on the necessity of work for the widows of the martyred was not only formed as a result of his employment as a development practitioner for an international aid organization in Kabul. As an undergraduate student at the then newly opened American University of Afghanistan (AUAf), he was further exposed to the rationale of neo-liberalism through pedagogical practices intrinsic to the philosophy behind establishing the AUAf. The AUAf offers two-degree options for the entering undergraduate students- Information Technology (IT) and Business

As of 2010, there are 22 public universities in Afghanistan and 18 private universities registered with the Afghan Ministry of Higher Education, with the private universities opening after 2003, including the AUAf. Frequent advertisements on television as well as billboards hung throughout Kabul City targeted at the millions of young Afghans, similar to Jabar who had spent decades of their lives in Pakistan or Iran are encouraged to believe that the way they can best serve and build their country is as future businessmen/women and/or as information technology specialists.

Another Possible Genealogy for ‘On my Own’

Another possibility to explain Jabar’s necessity to declare ‘on my own-ness’ is to simply declare Jabar an egomaniac, manipulative and an ungrateful and proud hustler. The term used repeatedly by his neighbors, co-workers and classmates was ghairati-

48 Within the first semester and after extensive discussions with the then Dean of Students at AUAf, an additional degree program in Social Sciences was added at the AUAf. In 2010, this option was subsequently removed and in 2012 replaced with a Bachelor degree in Political Science and Public Administration.
which essentially means proud, egoistic and/or self-righteous\textsuperscript{49}. These terms are actually quite accurate in describing Jabar yet I believe that a fuller explanation is may still be appropriate.

The decades of war, migration and occupation created widespread uncertainty and financial instability amongst Afghans of all classes and political affiliation. Throughout I have used the phrase moralizing forms of governance to reference the multiple processes of subjectivation as part of serials wars and humanitarianisms that Afghans have endured and continue to endure. Jabar and his immediate family attempted to skirt these processes, whether in Pakistan as refugees or in the very fact that they never considered themselves orphans and widow. To performatively submit to these categories meant that they had to then submit entirely to the processes of subjectivation that ensued, a submission they calculated as too costly. They willed to be otherwise, to use a Povinellian term, even if that meant spinning a tale so they were portrayed as they wanted to be (i.e. otherwise), not as they actually were (orphans and a woman who was widowed).

\textit{Self Narrative as Allegory for Nation}

Similar to Jabar, many Afghans also resent the fact that they have been rendered so dependent on the ubiquitous aid and development apparatus – a dependency that makes many Afghans have to repeatedly swallow their pride. These continual everyday humiliations and potential humiliations do not reside in distinct zones from the quotidian

\textsuperscript{49} Meanwhile, \textit{beghairat} is a harsh offense to give to someone. It literally means someone who does not have \textit{ghairat}, or dignity. So in Afghanistan one must find the balance between being someone with dignity (meaning not \textit{beghairat}) but not being too proud as to be considered \textit{ghairati}.
forms of relatedness between kin and others. As I have struggled to render Jabar’s life, the ethnographic data appropriately speaks to ordinary ethics - the minutiae of everyday life and how gestures, words and action are threatened by the uncertainties that pervade Kabul. Are offenses and everyday insults weighed differently by an individual such as Jabar as a result of living life in scenes of perpetual violence, and at that - being responsible for himself and family? Does an insult then take on a different meaning, with layers of significance that inform calculated actions of Jabar - preemptive ways of relating to others? Another way of stating this is: does the certainty of betrayal and humiliation pre-empt the modes of and possibilities for relating to others? Das speaks of the “notion of the social as the domain of unfinished stories that can lie undisturbed for many years and then suddenly come alive in moments of tremendous violence” (Das, 2012). In Jabar’s case, it is not about a dormant social that gets beckoned in moments of threat or violence, but that the threat itself is what constitutes the social as a result not of an episode of violence but as a result of a life that itself has been constituted by the specter of violence and occupation. With regards to my mentorship and friendship with Jabar and his family, these were forms of life and relatedness that became impossible to sustain given that at every turn he was expecting to be betrayed and worse, humiliated. In the public domain of Kabul, self-respect and honor become significant and necessary to maintain, even in some cases, if only as aesthetic, considering the humiliation and insult that are produced as normative forms of life in war and occupation. What do these quotidian practices of relating to others while maintaining the integrity and honor of the other, or not, say about the ordinary as possibility? My exploration of Jabar is not intended to be a judgment on him (or his family), but an engagement with the
possibilities of modes of being that issue forth from being ‘not an orphan’, and growing up under the conditions that constitute the modern subject in Afghanistan. Das explains the place of the unethical as related to an exploration of ordinary ethics:

“thus the possibility of speaking of ordinary ethics allows us to think of the unethical as growing within the forms of life that people inhabit – it is, thus, not a matter of eliciting opinions about what behaviour is considered ethical or unethical, or of cataloguing cultural practices on which we can bring judgment from an objective, distant position but rather a mode of seeing how forms of life grow particular dispositions…”(Das, p. 136, 2013).

To call Jabar’s actions towards me and my family unethical misses the point entirely, I believe. When understanding Jabar through the analytics of ordinary ethics, it becomes clear that his actions were not simply a form of social obligation – Jabar fulfilling his societally demarcated obligation of an elder orphan son to his mother and siblings. It was about how he could perform these obligations YET appear as if he did it on his own.

As I recount this narrative of Jabar, I cannot help but notice how Jabar’s narrative in uncanny ways mirrors the narrative of the nation of Afghanistan. Afghanistan national myth, but also a myth which has become internationalized, is that it is the graveyard of Empires - it is a myth of independence. The national myth of independence as most nationalist narratives go, is just that, myth. Afghanistan has never been independent and has always relied heavily on foreign aid for development and stability. Historically it has never been able to sustain itself, even considering its vast mineral and natural resources. Yet generation after generation of Afghans, millions who were born in refugee camps in Pakistan and Iran and never set foot in Afghanistan (if at all, only until their twenties), have had this national myth of independence recited to them and engrained. I am unsure as to whether the narrative of the life of Jabar, a once orphan, whose ethical aspirations
and self-fashioning center around a myth of independence, and Afghanistan, a once orphaned conflict, and its myth of independence are pure coincidence or if the latter created the conditions of possibility for the former to be not only myth, but lived aspiration.
“It is hard to say or write anything about the tragedy of 27 Jawza 1386. It was a memorable tragedy and a huge crime… a very tragic and heart-rending incident. Senior faculty of police academy who were poor (faqir), sympathetic to this nation (dilsouzi bah milat) and country (keshvaar) and always worked for the development of this nation were martyred in this incident… this one incident took our real teachers and your sons took away. This tragedy that was executed by ungodly hypocrites (monafiqueen) lead by ISI and Taliban killed and injured more than 70 poor people. Children, mothers, fathers and families of the victims collected pieces of their beloved ones from the steel wreck. The way of struggle of the people of God will be continued and those ungodly hypocrites should know what Allah says in Koran about them. “There is illness in your heart that cannot be cured.” Now you are like this that you cut in pieces these God’s people and kill innocent people. In another place, Allah says, translation “You should know, that your eyes and hearts haven been covered and your punishment is to big and painful.”… Oh, blind hearted hypocrites, the history and people of resistance curse you and this will be your destiny. Death to you oh hypocrites! And unlimited prayers of this Muslim nation (milat musliman) to these respected martyrs of history (shahidan bozorg tarikh).

referenced: Surah Baqarah chapter 9, Surah Baqarah chapter 6”
- Ministry of Interior, Police, published in 1386

This is an excerpt (translated myself, original in Dari) of text that precedes state obituaries in an official Ministry of Interior special publication commemorating the deaths of 23 police cadets and instructors in a bombing that took place in Kabul in 1386 Jawza (June 2007). The excerpt is offered as an entry point to ethnographically trace shahidan (witnesses50, in Dari)51 as a lived category, a state bureaucratic category, a religious

50 A more detailed explanation of why shaahid is defined here as ‘witness’, and not the more common, ‘martyr’, will be clarified later in this chapter. For now, I use ‘witness’, as it more accurately portrays an Islamic genealogical understanding of shaahid. In addition, by relying on an Islamic genealogical
category- and the affective and material obligations and investments that issue forth from the deployment of the term *shahidan* across and between these categories. I base this chapter on my ethnographic exploration with families of *shahidan* from the June 2007 suicide bombing along with representatives within government ministerial offices – primarily Ministry of Labor, Social Affairs, Martyrs and Disabled (MoLSAMD), the Ministry of Interior (MoI), and the Land Distribution Office of Kabul Municipality.

**Ethnography of the State**

Particularly over the last decade, anthropologists have used the discipline’s distinctive methodologies and concerns to produce detailed and sophisticated ethnographies that have gone far beyond more functionalist approaches to the State. Policy studies, historical studies and political science accounts have largely dictated the shape of recent scholarly literature produced on the Afghan State. Too many others who have written on the Afghan State classify it as ‘failed’; ‘weak’; ‘fragile’ - as an a priori object of investigation, with collectivities of un-governables questioning the legitimacy of a centrally organized state. The necessities (and allures) of policy oriented studies on Afghanistan lend themselves more easily to the discourses and epistemological concerns of the disciplines of political science and policy studies- and thus ‘failed’, ‘weak’ and ‘corrupt’ are rather common descriptions for the Afghan State. Departing from the policy oriented (security experts) and international relations approach, my aim is not to dispute

understanding, the concept of *shaahid* I employ extends beyond limited renderings of *shaahid*, one that is not overly invested in the Taliban movements perspectives or the Afghan State’s, but one that instead extends across the spectrum of Islamic history, practice and belief and within the lives of those I met in Afghanistan. This will hopefully become clear later through my discussion of Talal Asad’s treatment of *shaahid*.

51 *Shuhada*, the Arabic plural, is also used in Afghanistan.
or offer proof that the Afghan State is in fact ‘failed’ or ‘fragile’ according to rather normative criteria and classification schemes. Gupta has pointed out that these apppellations usually arise from analyses that assume the normative ideal state as a Western liberal democratic one (Gupta, 2006). Furthermore, in the Afghan context - analyses tantamount to the fetishizing of tribes in Afghanistan as uniquely challenging the centralized state in fundamental ways reifies the idea that the center-periphery tension is an exclusive dilemma reserved for non-liberal and non-European contexts, such as Afghanistan, which is clearly not the case. Gaining momentum from the critical anthropological literature on the state, I hope to offer a more subtle exploration of Afghan State practices and logics and an articulation of how the presence of the Afghan State is felt in the everyday lives of its citizens than has been previously acknowledged.

My theoretical leanings, as gained from the more recent ethnographic work on the state (Rose (1996, 2010); Ferguson (2002); Trouillot (2001, 2003); Das and Poole (2004); Gupta and Sharma (2006)) incline me towards an understanding of the state as a ‘lived fiction of late modernity’ (Trouillot, 2001) that is constituted as much by its weakness, frailties, failures and its territorial and theoretical margins as it is by its successes, and power. Das and Poole propose an anthropology of the margins that ‘offers a unique perspective to the understanding of the state, not because it captures exotic practices, but because it suggests that such margins are a necessary entailment of the state, much as the exception is a necessary component of the rule (Das and Poole, 2004)’. This is not to dismiss the unique historical circumstances of successive wars and occupations over the last three decades in Afghanistan that resulted in a dismantling of state infrastructure, but instead demands one to be far more attendant to accounting for how everyday life in this
extraordinary context interpolates state processes, practices, and logics, but also vice-versa – how ‘state effects’ (Trouillot, 2001) interpolate everyday life. These processes, practices and logics have shifted spatially across the current occupation (and ‘reconstruction’) of the country and have become more dispersed than in other contexts where transnational forms of governance flourish.

The transnational forms of governance and the institutional logics and practices that inform them currently serve state functions in Afghanistan thus producing ‘state effects’ that need to be ethnographically explored far more than they have in the Afghan context. Gupta and Ferguson have observed that “a liberal democratic state and a totalitarian state might actually look alike at the level of everyday practices of the state bureaucracies” and further urge anthropological investigations “to critically interrogate the assumption that cultural difference is epiphenomenal to the functional and structural characteristics of the state”. Afghanistan, according to its constitution, is an officially declared Islamic Republic. This point, in general, is relevant to this chapter, but also more specifically in the context of an international occupation whose agenda ultimately shapes the contours of the logic and practices of the Afghan State (per very specific criteria that enables or disables funding mechanisms). State practices and logics will be explored here not only at the discursive level of how the state constructs the deaths of the police to the milat musliman (Muslim nation), but in what the families’ expectations of the State are and the manner by which the State ultimately fails to (in most cases), attend to (in a few cases) its obligations yet simultaneously holding in abeyance its outstanding promises to the families of the shahidan. The nature of the obligations become relevant not only because they are from an officially declared Islamic Republic but because they are
obligations the state repeatedly - both publicly and privately - claims it will uphold. These repeated claims enable an imagining of the obligations as a form of life to the families of the shahidan as well as offers a picture of the material and social expectations on the state that inflects the disciplinary practices of the state.

This chapter is an ethnography of shahidan in Kabul. My understanding of shaahid comes through my friendship with a family who lost a loving husband, friend and father in a hamle intihari \(^{52}\) (suicide attack, in Dari) in June 2007 in the center of Kabul. Although the ethnography is focused around this particular family, it resonates with the lives of the twenty plus other families I met who lost someone in that specific attack, and perhaps with the lives of families of other shaahidan as well. This chapter, thus, is an account of the shape that lives take that does not so easily fit into the neat, trite narratives of the Global War on Terror, or the wars that came before, to Afghanistan. In addition, this chapter hopes to offer what shaahid has come to mean in a context of serial wars and serial occupations as a lived category in this world for the families of those killed. Understandably, the existing presence of war and foreign occupation comes alive in the ambiguities that form around how shaahid is deployed contemporarily.

\(^{52}\) Similar to the distinction between terrorists and freedom fighters, is the distinction between referring to these attacks as ‘suicide attacks’ or ‘martydom operations’. Throughout this chapter, I refer to them as hamle intihari (hamle is attack, intihar is suicide, in modern Arabic and in Dari, as opposed to more classic term qatl al-nafs (murder of the self)) not as an embrace of Afghan State rhetoric or worse – modern liberal security discourses that perpetuate the idea that terrorism and such attacks are only products of nonliberal places like Afghanistan - but because this is what Afghans in Kabul say when they refer to these attacks. Although the phrase hamle intihari reflects and/or consolidates state and liberal discourses that perpetuate the idea that terrorism and such attacks are only products of nonliberal places like Afghanistan - but because this is what Afghans in Kabul say when they refer to these attacks. My choice to use hamle intihari is not a statement in support of modern liberal discourses and the moral high-ground they so comfortably inhabit. This is an important point of clarification, which becomes even more relevant in the context of the other forms of equally deliberate, authorized, and permissible yet far more devastating forms of violence occurring daily in an occupied Afghanistan. I use hamle intihari simply as a gesture towards capturing the linguistic form chosen by ordinary Afghans.
Furthermore, an obvious point I feel must be made more explicitly is that running through its religious, bureaucratic and lived manifestations- shaahid is affect and affective.

This chapter departs from the current literatures on shaahid, that exclusively focus on investigations of the supposed intentions of those who carry out the suicide attacks as well as analyses of the construction, instrumentalization and dissemination of ‘martyrologies’ (biographies and eulogies of the suicide bombers) by politically motivated groups, primarily for recruitment purposes. States are also equally (if not more) invested in constructing shahidan as a way of mapping nationalist agendas upon the bodies of the dead, and towards the future recruitment efforts of police, army and civil servants to fight those who resist the state. The State as instrumentalizing the lives (and deaths) of people is no different in Afghanistan and perhaps necessarily more cunning (and with more at stake) considering its international occupation (and attendant convoluted intentions and liberal discourses, particularly as related to security). In state parlance, they refer to shuhada as ‘martyrs’, as the state believes (or wants other to believe that they believe this) that the soldiers or police are loyal to the cause of the nation and thus gave their lives for the nation. Yet largely ignored are those who are killed in these suicide attacks, aside from the bombers who according to Islamic practice, also are shuhada beyond the charade that surrounds their deaths by the State and those who act on and against its behalf.

The perpetrators of the attacks are constructed as shuhada who intentionally orchestrated their deaths for a religious cause in martyrologies circulated in newsprint, radio addresses and on web pages throughout the world. These spectacular shuhada not
only dominate in the various media consumed by the general public, but scholarly media as well—thus fundamentally mediating (and limiting) the ways of becoming *shuhada* are imagined and understood.

The trope of the religiously-inspired activist suicide bomber, particularly in the contexts of Iraq, Palestine and Afghanistan, has entirely eclipsed the everyday *shaahid*, the ordinary *shaahid* who becomes *shaahid* not based on Islamic millenarian or nationalist aspirations and practices but on a decidedly non-activist embodiment of Islamic ethical practice, a way of living life as a Muslim outside the margins of the State and non-state actors. Quantitatively speaking, there are more civilians and/or civil servants who are killed in these suicide attacks (thus rendering them *shuhada*) than there are suicide attackers (who are also constructed as *shuhada* by their organizations), yet the seemingly distinctive horror-inducing\(^{53}\) spectacle of the suicide attackers and their alleged motives make them the archetypal figure of the *shaheed* in contemporary social and political rhetoric, part of an ‘Islamic “culture of death”’\(^{54}\).

I hope to offer a more subtle reading through the family of a *shaahid*, of the extraordinary death of an ordinary Afghan, as another way to explore becoming a

---

\(^{53}\) In his text *On Suicide Bombing*, Talal Asad associates the distinctive revulsion to yet obsession with suicide attacks (as opposed to other forms of deliberate violence in liberal democracies) with the state of horror as related to Judeo-Christian notions of killing and dying. Asad partially explains this through the works of Mary Douglas and George Bataille, and partially through the notion of the paradox of gift and suffering as related to the Crucifixion: ‘in Christian civilization, the gift of life for humanity is possible only through suicidal death; redemption is dependent on cruelty or the sin of disregarding human life’. Asad believes that the distinctive horror to suicide attacks by liberals is remarkable considering the genealogy of modern secular thought itself. The sacrifice and compassion of Christ, the giving of his life for the sins of humanity, despite liberal secular disdain for such religious zealotry, echoes into modern secular thought, and western forms of nationalist thought as well, thus informing the visceral state of horror to the scene of suicide attacks: ‘The genealogy of modern humanist sensibility joins ruthlessness to compassion and proposes that brutal killing can be at once the vilest evil and the greatest good (Asad, 2007)’.

\(^{54}\) As Talal Asad critically refers to the similar crafting of a figure that comes out of an *Islamic “culture of death”* that in the imagination of liberal discourses somehow has a distinctly different relation to violence and death than other forms of orchestrated violence.
shaahid in contemporary Kabul. In doing this, I hope it reflects a consideration of how life in a context subject to serial wars (and that which comes with war) and occupations forges modes of being and relationality that offer critical ways of understanding what it means to be human in the contemporary space of violence. These modes of being and relationality necessarily reveal the vulnerabilities, resignations yet also elegant resoluteness derived from unremitting struggle that inform the human condition in Kabul - that perhaps are emblematic of, a testament to, a witness (shaahid) to - modern subjectivity. In addition to offering my understanding of an ordinary shaahid in Kabul, I make a contribution towards an anthropology of the Afghan State.

**Shaahid as Witness, Shaahid as Martyr**

I use the definition of shaahid as ‘witness’, and not the more familiar translation – ‘martyr’, for four reasons. Although philologically, ‘witness’ and ‘martyr’ derive from the same root in Arabic, contemporary social and political formations have privileged the use of ‘martyr’ and in doing so have eclipsed the classical Arabic designation of shaahid as ‘witness’. Shaahid as used in the Qur’an is connoted more suitably with ‘witness’. I use shaahid as ‘witness’ not as mere deference to classical Arabic, but to problematize the static monochromatic understandings of shaahid, particularly as attached to places such as Afghanistan. Defining shaahid as ‘martyr’ limits and marks religious subjectivities to actors in deliberate scenes of violence only – thus either in the form of a suicide bomber sacrificing his/her life for the Muslim ummah (supra-national collectivity of Muslims) or as a nationalist sacrificing his/her life for a national (yet not necessarily millenarian) cause. Furthermore, Talal Asad traces the notion of ‘martyr’, as associated
specifically with sacrifice, as residing more within what he refers to a ‘Christian and post-Christian tradition’ than with Islamic tradition\textsuperscript{55}. Others believe the definition of ‘martyr’ for \textit{shaahid} comes out of what is referred to as Shi’ah internationalism -the very specific relationship of Shi’ah Islam to martyrdom that became internationalized in Palestine and Lebanon. These are not mutually exclusive and thus both Christianity and Shi’ah Islam can be related to how \textit{shaahid} came to be understood as ‘martyr’.

Furthermore, in addition to the above stated reasons as to why I feel \textit{shaahid} as ‘witness’ captures the complexity of the term that is not fully realized by defining it as ‘martyr’ – the use of ‘martyr’ also does not attend to the broader categories for \textit{shuhada} in Islam that have nothing to do with voluntary self-sacrifice for a cause.

Shi’ah Muslims in Afghanistan define \textit{shaahid} as ‘martyr’ as Shi’ah Muslims have a very different investment in the term than when it is used by the Taliban (and other non-state actors) and/or the Afghan State, for those who die in battle. My intention is not to preclude the use of \textit{shaahid} for those who want to embrace it as ‘martyr’ or in relation to martyrdom, but instead to enable the possibility for \textit{shaahid} to be seen otherwise- as this is closer to my ethnography.

The families of the shahidan who inform my ethnography were very explicit, on multiple occasions, in stating the reasons why their husbands, sons and/or brothers joined

\textsuperscript{55} Talal Asad remarks that \textit{qurban}, or the concept of sacrifice, is not relevant in the context of the Arab Muslim world, yet this is actually entirely different in Afghanistan where \textit{qurban} is actually used quite commonly in everyday language for sacrifice – animal sacrifice (\textit{Eid-e-Qorban}), from one person for another (usually mother to son), for love, for nation, etc. common expressions in dari and Pashto that show the presence of the idea of sacrifice in afghan society- \textit{jar di shom} (Pashto); \textit{qurbanet shawam} (Dari); \textit{sadaqait shawum}, which is similar to \textit{Qurbanet beram} (Dari, literally: I may be sacrificed for you, or figuratively: I love you); \textit{sadqa shama} (Pashto); \textit{qurban shama} (Pashto); \textit{Bala Dai Wakhlama} (Pashto); \textit{Jar Dai Shama} (Pashto); \textit{Qurban Shoma} (Dari); \textit{Sadgai shoma} (Dari); \textit{Bala ita Bigiro} (Dari). In addition, many historical and contemporary Pashto songs open with the phrase ‘\textit{Ya Qurban}’ (Literally, sacrifice but figuratively: my love, my life).
the police academy. The reasons all revolved around limited employment opportunities for young males and/or to address the immediate economic needs of the family. This clearly was not *jihad*, was a point the families made clear over and over again. The families would refer to the fight against the Soviet Occupation in referencing a prior era in Afghanistan understood as the universally accepted *jihad*. Thus according to what I learned from my informants, without *jihad*, there is no martyrdom – thus there are no martyrs, but witnesses⁵⁶.

**Palestine and Afghanistan- Witnesses to Struggle**

Talal Asad makes an intervention that seems obvious enough - yet which actually becomes important – when one reads current studies on martyrdom: “If one is to talk about religious subjectivities, one must work through the concepts the people concerned actually use” (Asad, 2006). Afghans refer to all who have died as a result of one of the recent wars in Afghanistan (Soviet War, the internal war in Afghanistan, resistance to five-year Taliban rule, the War on Terror and occupation of Afghanistan) as *shahidan*. Asad makes the same point about Palestinians, which partially explains why the term ‘witness’ is used over ‘martyr’: “Actually, Palestinians, when employing a religious vocabulary, call all their civilians who die in the conflict with Israel *shuhada* – including innocents killed in Israeli operations against militants and stone-throwing boys shot by the Israeli army….What matters according to this usage is neither personal motive nor political expression but the fatal effect of a violent encounter with the occupying enemy. The violent death of all Palestinians in confrontation with Israelis, so one might suggest,

⁵⁶ Anthropologist Roxanne Varzi (2006) makes a similar point, however, in the other direction in the context of Iran, where there was martyrdom, and thus no witnesses, only martyrs.
is regarded as a sign that they have died as witnesses (shuhada) to their faith…as such, the shahid’s death constitutes a triumph rather than a sacrifice” (2007). The struggles in Palestine and Afghanistan are different in many regards, but similar with regards to the longer-term nature of the occupations and serial wars, which has had much bearing on the ways shaahid is deployed and why ‘witness’ becomes more suitable in the Afghan context as well.

**Discursive Religious Tradition**

In Afghanistan, the discursive religious tradition, with respect to how shahidan is employed (and in other regards), should not only be shaped by those who are the most vocal and/or who can more successfully monopolize the concept of shahidan- whether they be Shi’ah Muslims or the Taliban movement, or the Afghan State - but by all those who live their lives in reference to Islam in Afghanistan. Those who justified the fighting against the Soviet Occupation and the Soviet backed State, those who justified the massacre of other Afghans in the Kabul wars in the 1990s, those who justified the violence and oppressive tactics of the Taliban rule, those who justify the violence and complicity of the current Afghan State, and the anti-state actors who actively resist the foreign occupation of Afghanistan while simultaneously contesting the legitimacy of the US-backed Karzai, and those who are Shi’ah who have a distinctive reference to martyrdom in their living as Muslims - have all been part of fashioning the discursive religious tradition as they deploy shahidan in Afghanistan. Furthermore, these categories of actants are also not mutually exclusive as a mujahideen who actively fought and resisted the Soviet occupation, and survived- today, may have a fundamental suspicion
and anger towards how \textit{shahidan} is bandied about now. The terms \textit{shaahid} and \textit{shahidan}, have become contested altogether as they have become contingent on far too much to be straightforwardly held and (or) withheld. For some Afghans, the appellation of \textit{shaahid} should not be only about how one died, but how one lived ones life. Thus the above mentioned assemblages of actants that designate only the more recognized conflicts in contemporary Afghanistan cannot be seen as the sole architects of the discursive religious tradition, but part of a genealogy of how \textit{shahidan} is understand historically and contemporarily. The contestations around the term should not be dismissed as only overt political statements in favour (or against) a particular regime and/or occupation, and/or version of Afghan State, or version of Islam - but should be read as far are more subtle elaborations on what it means to be a subject in a space so significantly shaped by violence.

My ethnographic data attends to the ordinary Muslims who strive to live their lives as Muslims in the path of Allah alongside the violence that has punctuated their lives for more than a generation, and for the younger in Afghanistan, their entire lives. I thus use ‘witmess’ as it more fittingly captures the quiet, everyday ways of living life as a Muslim in a space of violence, that I came to know in Kabul. Although I have stated why I use \textit{shaahid} as witness in general, but also particularly in the context of the lives of those whom I met\textsuperscript{57}, moving forward, I will use the formulation ‘\textit{shaahid/shaheed}\textsuperscript{58} as a way

\footnote{57 Although I did conduct research with widows in a predominantly Shi’ah district of Kabul- \textit{Dashte Barchi}- none of the families of the \textit{shaahidan} from the \textit{hamle intihari} that figures prominently in this chapter were Shi’ah Muslims. I am not privileging a Sunni understanding of \textit{shaahid} over a Shi’ah one, but instead rooting my judgments in my ethnographic material. I would imagine that Shi’ah would use ‘martyr’ over ‘witmess’ regardless of their position to the State (and its investments in deploying the term), precisely because of the centrality of martyrdom to Shi’ah Muslims.}

178
to capture the precarity of the ways the term is deployed in different spaces as well as the affective entanglements generated by its layered and ambiguous deployments in Afghanistan. Using *shaahid/shaheed* throughout this chapter recognizes its potential to be ‘martyr’ but is also a gesture towards capturing in written form the ambiguities that flow through the term each time it is uttered, as was the case when I conducted my fieldwork.

*Breaking Bread*

I arrived at Miriam’s house at 730 am. She was preparing *chai* (tea) while her daughter-in-law was laying out the *dastarkhan* (a tablecloth spread on the floor) and a usual Afghan breakfast for us - fresh *naan* from the neighborhood bakery and *kaymak* with Miriam’s homemade *moraba* (traditional Afghan bread, cream, fruit jam, respectively). Her two youngest children, and two grandchildren were asleep and her eldest son, Zakir, had already left the house to go to the Ministry of Interior (MoI) office in downtown Kabul. His mother told me that Zakir left the house quite early as he wanted to ensure that he was the first one at the Ministry when the office doors opened – “he leaves the house so early everyday and comes back feeling completely discouraged”. Over the previous three months, Zakir narrated to me how he had dedicated the majority of his days to collecting each of the twenty-two required signatures needed by the Land Distribution Office of the Kabul Municipality. Obtaining the twenty-two signatures was only one sub-step of a series of many to be completed by families of national police officers who died in the line of duty and who want to claim a plot of land (which is their

---

*58 Only when I use the singular formulation, as in the plural, it is the same* shuhada* (Arabic) and/or shahidan* (Dari). I only use *shaheed* when it very clearly refers to an ‘official’ designation by the Afghan State for compensation to the families.*
entitlement) as set by laws of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan for families of
officially declared shahidan. It has been an unnecessarily frustrating and humiliating
process that Zakir described as forcing him to daily recite that his father is
shaahid/shaheed - which in some ways Zakir still does not accept. Zakir has often stated
that he does not feel his father has left this world and Zakir never thought it possible to
move forward to make a different life without his father in it. In Islam, having the title
shaheed applied before one’s name brings honour upon oneself and family. For Zakir it
certainly is an honour, yet he also feels that having to utter shaheed before his father’s
name repeatedly in order to claim what is entitled to him as a living survivor of a
shaahid/shaheed has degraded the title of shaheed and his father’s name, since the title
shaheed precedes his father’s name.

59 In Islamic eschatology, when a person meets the criteria to be designated a shaheed, they are
immortal. Thus, although the individual is no longer in this dunya (the physical Universe as contrasted
to the Afterlife, akhira), the realm known as barzakh is where the shaheed resides, in the in-between
realm between this world and the next.

60 A distinction needs to be made about the shifting valences of the term shahidan in present-day
Kabul, especially when one takes seriously the contemporary archive of violence in Afghanistan.
Different from the shahidan of this contemporary moment in Afghanistan (US and international
occupation, Taliban insurgency), the shahidan of previous conflicts were intensely ideologically
invested in their roles as army, police, and/or civil servants. Whether someone was an atheist and pro-
Communist; Muslim pro-communist; atheist, anti-imperial pro-mujahideen; or Muslim anti-imperial
pro-mujahideen - ideology (including religion) played a significant role in the way they perceived
their presence in the struggle. The shahidan from the mujahideen era (ending, in my definition, before
the Afghan internal war (Kabul Wars) in 1992 when the honorable association with the term
mujahideen was largely lost as Afghans massacred Afghans) became an elevated, more noble form of
citizenship. In contrast, the survivors of the shahidan from the June 2007 suicide attack made it clear
to me that the struggle and striving their shaheed was invested in was different than shahidan of other
times (usually referring to mujahideen period). Now it was the struggle to make a life, a respectful life
for oneself and family despite the political and religious rhetoric that abounds. Afghans have grown
tired and entirely suspicious of how terminologies are used (and abused) for political expediency and
the benefit of others (often foreign States). The families rendering of shaheed was void of the
nationalism and politics of previous shahidan and was rooted in Islam, Islamic ethical practice
distilled from an Islam invested in a particular political posturing. The figure of the heroic police
cadet, or heroic soldier, that the Afghan State (no different than any other State) upholds, has no
traction whatsoever in the lives of the families of these shahidan. In their quiet and resilient ways,
they embrace and embody the everyday deprived Afghan who endured and struggled and made a life
for self and family, against the backdrop of a Soviet occupation and war, a brutal internal war,
27 Jawza 1386

I first met Zakir, his mother, his wife, his son and his younger siblings in December 2008, 18 months after his father Mirza had left this world, which is the customary formulation used to denote that someone has died. The formulation ‘shaheed shod’ is also used when an individual dies under the conditions by which Islam would render him/her a shaahid/shaheed - shaheed shod literally means ‘when he became a martyr’. Mirza was a police officer and teacher for new cadets in the Afghan National Police Academy. He died in a spectacular explosion, a hamle intihari (suicide attack) that took the lives of 35 people- including ten cadets, thirteen police cadet instructors, a bus driver, and bystanders in the center of Kabul on 27 Jawza 1386 (17 June 2007). The bus of cadets and instructors was leaving to the site of their daily training exercises at 8:15 AM, when either a young boy claiming to be an orphan seeking alms from the bus driver...
(a rather common scene in Kabul) or a young man dressed in a military uniform entered the bus and subsequently detonated a bomb strapped to the chest\textsuperscript{62}. The suicide attack was so powerful it sheared off the roof and the sides of the bus and scattered shards of glass and metal for miles, injuring more than 50 people as well. It was the deadliest attack since the exit of the Taliban from Kabul in 2001. Due to the magnitude of the losses and that it took place in the heart of the capital city, the suicide bombing made both national and international headlines. I passed the site of the attack two hours after the blast…\textit{Inna lillahi wa inna ilayhi raji’un} (We are from God, and to Him we return) - prayers to the \textit{shahidan}, and ‘Kabul jaan’ were the first words in my field-notes for 27 jawza 1386. It was unknown to me at the time I passed the blast that I would meet and eventually befriend the families of these \textit{shahidan}.

\textit{State and Anti-State Pronouncements}

In national news announcements- as the spokesperson for the Taliban claimed responsibility for the \textit{hamle intihari} (in Taliban parlance- \textit{istishhad}\textsuperscript{63}(martyrdom operation) and boasted about the Taliban movement’s reach, it’s ‘successful’ attack and ability to gain access to the police center in the capital city. President Hamid Karzai, without delay, referred to the dead as \textit{shahidan}, announced that the Afghan State was

\textsuperscript{62} There are different versions of this story depending on who tells the story. The Ministry of Interior uses the ‘orphan version’, the Taliban uses the ‘imposter police’ version- each version is invested in a particular idea of the presentation of self of the suicide attacker. According to the 2006 edition of the \textit{Layha} -the Taliban code of ethics of war- ‘\textit{mujahideen} are not allowed to take underage boys (boys with no visible facial hair) onto the battlefield (rule 19, \textit{Layha}, 2006 edition)’ -thus clearly contesting the MoI version of the story. The Taliban use the ‘imposter police’ story as an attempt to demonstrate the extent of their infiltration tactics as well as trickery (\textit{chalaaki}) in carrying out this ‘successful’ attack. The Taliban movement began infiltrating the Afghan National Army (ANA) and Afghan National Police (ANP) in rather substantial ways by 2010.

\textsuperscript{63} Taliban use this term to indicate that it is clearly religiously justified, and not a suicide attack, which is widely understood as unIslamic.
organizing (and would pay) for the *jinazah* (Islamic funeral) for each killed police cadet and instructor that would transpire in a matter of hours (according to Islamic practice). In addition, Karzai also announced (later officially through presidential decree 5330) that a special fund would be created to provide for the families of the *shahid* as they were killed while in the line of duty and while serving and defending their fellow Afghans from ‘the enemies of peace’. Zakir recounted how he heard this speech by Karzai on the television within hours of his father leaving this world, his siblings becoming orphans, his mother a widow, and he the head of the household as the eldest son of a *shaahid/shaheed*. Despite the disarray and grief, within minutes the mothers, wives and sons of the other police instructors and cadets were calling each other, making sure that all knew about Karzai’s public announcement of his intention to uphold the *farz* (religious (Islamic) obligation) to care for these families. The wives and mothers encouraged each other to go to the Ministry of Interior to claim their right as families of the *shahidan* from this suicide attack. The fact that the president was publicly announcing a special fund created specifically to care for the families of the young cadets and their instructors who were serving their country and in the words of Karzai, “rebuilding it, making it more secure”, made it an exceptional circumstance where the Ministry of Labor, Social Affairs, Martyrs and Disabled (MoLSAMD) and the Ministry of Interior (MoI) could actually fulfill their *farz* to the families of the *shahidan*. According to figures from the US and NATO allied forces, as well as the Afghan MoI, at least 307 Afghan police, army or intelligence personnel had been killed before this explosion in 2007. Yet, for most of the survivors of these 307 *shahidan*, there was no special program to provide them with the care that would help them navigate the world
without their brothers, fathers and husbands. The families of the shahidan from the 17 June 2007 explosion were special, they were going to be taken care of by the Afghan State as ordered by Karzai’s Presidential Decree 5330, to the respective ministries (LSAMD (Labor, Social Affairs, Martyrs and Disabled) and Interior).

The Ministry of Interior

I initially met Zakir, his mother and family in December 2008. I will now describe the somewhat unusual conditions under which I came to be introduced to his family. I was conducting the bulk of my fieldwork with widows and their families whom I met through the international NGO CARE and their Feeding Program for the Urban Vulnerable of Kabul, primarily aimed at widows (as described in Chapter 3). I was in Kabul for two years prior to 2008 and a student (Jabar from Chapter 5) from the University (who was aware of my long-standing research project with widows) asked me if I would be willing to assist the Ministry of Interior in determining how to best support the families of the shahidan of the 27 Jawza 1386 (June 17 2007) suicide bombing. Jabar, the student who requested my assistance was working for a German NGO at the time that was partnering with the Afghan Ministry of Interior, as one of the special programmes created to support the families of this particular suicide bombing. The German Government was the foreign government who had made the most significant investment in the re-structuring and training of the Afghan Police force and thus created a special
program with the Ministry of Labor, Social Affairs, Martyred and Disabled and the Ministry of Interior to assist these families.\textsuperscript{64}

I was given a list of the names of the shahidan and their ‘addresses’– which were not quite addresses with house numbers and street names (as street names and house numbers are not common in Afghanistan). More precisely, it was a list of the districts in Kabul where the houses were located and descriptions to aid in finding each house (for example, next to the bakery with a green door, facing the cemetery and next to the kite shop, find shopkeeper Abdullah at the corner general store and he will escort you to front door, etc.).

Prior to beginning this task, I met Jabar in order to better understand what the German NGO and the MoI expected from my visits with the widows and their families. He instructed me to administer a survey instrument, review the results and make recommendations for how the widows and families can be best supported. We would have a debriefing at the conclusion of my visits to the houses of the shahidan in which I would make my recommendations. After my meeting with Jabar and despite my confidence in his understanding, I decided to also meet an administrator in the MoI to hear from them what they expected of the visits. I wanted to be certain that I understood the extent of what the State was able and willing to offer to the families before I made any kind of indication to the families that the State would help.

\textsuperscript{64} German involvement in police training dates back to the 1960s and 1970s when the national civilian police force in Afghanistan was built, receiving training from both East and West Germany. In 1989, after the Soviet withdrawal from Afghanistan, Germans built a training academy in Kabul but the venture soon came to a halt with the Kabul Wars of the 1990s. Building on this historical friendship, in 2002, the interim government (at the time) of Afghanistan requested the German government to renew its commitment to this decade old stalled project of rebuilding the Afghan National Police. Germany pledged an initial 10 million Euros in 2002. In 2007, a complementary European Union Police Mission to Afghanistan (EUPOL) was established as part of expansive international efforts towards the rule of law and police reform in Afghanistan.
From over a decade of work with Afghan refugees in Pakistan and with Afghans in Kabul during an international occupation, I became very sensitive to seeing the build up of anticipation and hope (sometimes unintentionally, often falsely) and the feelings of betrayal and disappointment of Afghans that followed. I wanted to get a sense of the most and the least that the State was able to do for these families before I went to meet with them.

When I met the administrator of the MoI in charge of this programme, he very bluntly instructed me to ‘survey konin’ (do a survey). I advised him that a survey instrument was an absolutely inappropriate methodology to gain the information that was ultimately sought after. He did not seem very interested at all in such methodological details. I assured him that I could still get the desired information yet use more sensitive methods considering I was meeting the families of shahidan yet he quite adamantly insisted on using the survey instrument – a confidence that could only have been gained by a bureaucratic over-reliance on surveys. On the other hand, my insistence was not rooted in a loyalty to the methodological superiority of the discipline of anthropology. Part of my insistence had to do with my sensibilities for the families of the shahidan and the imaginable inappropriateness of a survey instrument in that particular context. The other part of my insistence came from years of frustration at the remarkably low quality of research conducted in Afghanistan precisely because of an over-reliance on the results

---

65 As mentioned in an earlier chapter, ‘survey’ became a word that became part of both the Dari and Pashto languages as a result of the development work in Afghanistan, where it became the standard methodology to quickly assess population needs. In the case of widows enrolled as beneficiaries in the CARE program, ‘survey’ was understood to mean something different by the widows. ‘Survey’ to them meant that someone was going to come to their house unannounced to check and see if they were telling the truth to the aid organization about how needy and vulnerable they were. However, the way ‘survey’ was used by the MoI administrator implied that the MoI wanted me to do a standard needs assessment of the widows of the shahidan of the June 17 2007 (27 Jawza 1386) suicide attack.
of poorly designed surveys. I wanted to inform a state bureaucrat (particularly one that was so habitually inclined towards surveys) that in this particular context of the families of the shahidan but also in the general context of Afghanistan- surveys were a phenomenal waste of resources at best, and inappropriate, at worst.

I glanced at the survey instrument and read the first question: ‘when did you become a widow?’ followed by ‘how old are you?’ The third and fourth questions were as surprising: ‘what kind of work are you most interested in doing?’, followed by a list that included tailoring, jam making, baking bread, embroidery, and/or cleaning offices or university buildings. After reading only the first three questions of the pre-set survey, I knew I absolutely could not use the survey and tried to encourage him to allow more anthropological modes of inquiry to obtain the same, if not, more useful information. He continued to insist on using the survey while I began to systematically demonstrate how rather insensitive and unacceptable the questions were. He became particularly embarrassed by the first question, ‘when did you become a widow?’ since the exact date and even the precise time of the suicide attack was well-known AND that in all probability the women became widows at the exact same moment, if not within insignificant seconds of one another. The administrator eventually capitulated and added that no matter what methods I used, he needed specific information on the specific kinds of jobs the widows wanted and were willing to begin immediately.

It took four complete ten-hour days for me to meet with just half of the families on the list. These four days were unquestionably the most difficult four days of fieldwork I faced in more than three years conducting field-work in Kabul. Most of the cadets who were killed were in their early-twenties while the instructors were in their late forties and
fifties. The widows of the cadets were all under twenty and six of the seventeen widows were pregnant with their first child when their husbands became shahidan (one miscarried upon news of the hamle intihari, another went into pre-mature labour, the child ‘s leg got caught in the birth canal and the baby was born disabled). At each of the houses of a cadet, I met the mothers as well as the widows of the shahidan, and in most houses, the siblings as well. Each family introduced me to their shaahid/shaheed and exposed the neglect they felt from the Afghan State. Each widow and mother (and sometimes brothers and father) detailed to me how they had to fight to gain any of the promised compensation and/or obligatory form of care from the Afghan State, care and compensation which would be compulsory for an entity declaring itself an Islamic Republic (but especially for those who had a presidential decree to be cared for). It was a full eighteen months after the hamle intihari, yet they were still embroiled in processes of the State.

I eventually met with 27 out of the 31 families of cadets and cadet instructors who became shahidan over a period of ten days. Each family recounted the day of the suicide blast, shared pictures of their son or father and each recited how painful it was to have to relive that day over and over as they became ensnared in the bureaucratic processes and sub-processes I previously detailed that were required to obtain the official declaration of shaheed status and to pursue both financial and land compensation as entitled to them by the Afghan State.

Over the next two and a half years, I kept in frequent contact with some of the families of the shahidan from this hamle intihari. I went to the Afghan Ministerial and Land distribution offices with them as well as without them in order to understand how
the Afghan State was responding to this Islamic obligation (and, presidential decree) to the families of the *shahidan* of the June 2007 suicide attack. The families I was able to keep better contact with were the families of two police cadet instructors, one of which was Zakir and his family.

*The Ministry of Labor, Social Affairs, Martyrs and Disabled (MoLSAMD)*

According to Minister Amina Afzali of the MoLSAMD there are 80,600 ‘officially’ declared *shahidan* in Afghanistan- the bulk of these 80,600 *shahidan* were during the *Mujahideen* period (from 1978 to 1988). Ministry figures estimate that 224,850 individuals are currently covered under the 80,600 ‘official’ *shahidan* (average of 2.79 individuals per family). To be eligible for support through the MoLSAMD as the family of *shahidan* (or in MoLSAMD terminology, Martyrs Survivors (MSs)) one must be the un-remarried wife, husband or unmarried daughter(s), son(s) under the age of 18 or being engaged in pursuing education, disabled or have a constant illness preventing one from working or bound to completion of military service (if over the age of 18). In addition, the father, mother, or unmarried sister(s), brother(s) under 18 are also included under family of *shahidan*.

Zakir was twenty-two years old in 2008 and married, thus because he was over 18, he would not fall under the official classification of survivors of martyrs (MSs) and thus would be ineligible to get monthly compensation from the government. Zakir says he goes to the ministerial offices daily because he has to get his mother and his younger siblings their *haqq* (right).
Since the *Mujahideen* period, the Afghan State has not regularly declared *shahidan*, due to the series of wars that followed this period and the almost complete collapse of state infrastructure that accompanied them. I am referring here only to an ‘official’ designation by the Afghan State. Despite the Afghan State’s halt in registering *shahidan*, both Dari and Pashto speaking Afghans have continued to use to refer to those who are no longer in this world as *shahidan*. For decades, Afghans came to live life in absence of a State, and/or in the absence of a State that was legible to them. The ‘official’ designation becomes necessary only to claim entitlements and rightful compensation and has nothing to do with how *shahidan* is used (or withheld) in everyday language.

In 2006, the Ministry of Martyrs and Disabled merged with the Ministry of Social Affairs to become the Ministry of Labor, Social Affairs, Martyrs and Disabled (MoLSAMD). The Ministry of Martyrs and Disabled (prior to the merger) and now, the MoLSAMD, has been the least funded of the sixteen government Ministries since the Taliban exit and subsequent foreign occupation of Afghanistan in late 2001. The minister frankly acknowledges that her ministry is clearly not funded as the other ministries have been by foreign aid and for this reason MoLSAMD has not been able to fulfill it’s obligations to the families of *shahidan* in any consistent manner despite the billions of dollars of aid that has poured into Afghanistan.

During the course of my meetings with the Minister, she would spend a significant amount of time trying to encourage me to use my good English skills and any social capital I may have to push the World Bank or the European Union, or some other bigger spenders in Afghanistan to fund the MoLSAMD. She proposed a social protection study on widows and orphans as the staggering numbers would get the international
community in Kabul to pay more attention to the MoLSAMD. I told her that I would certainly speak to anyone who would listen in the aid community, but that despite my better than average English skills, I was rather useless as I was quite radically unconnected in the ways that were critical for her and her ministry (I was unaware at that time that the World Bank was already embarking on a reform of the pension system in Afghanistan. Unbeknownst to me at the time of our meetings, the Minister was encouraging me to push them forward on an initiative that had already been set in motion).

The Minister always commented on the thread-bare and dreary halls of the Ministry. I read my field-notes for the days I spent at MoLSAMD and see that no matter what time of day I visited the Ministry I wrote of how the building itself was unkempt, unattended to and that its appearance alone somehow captures the broken down, haphazard nature in which the Afghan State attends to (or fails to attend to) the obligations it has to the millions of shahidan, surviours of shahidan and disabled in Afghanistan.

The Ministry building is tucked in between the concrete jungle of Microrayon, a region in the northeast of the city center near the airport that is best known for the Soviet housing blocks built in the 1970s. Microrayon, which during the Soviet occupation housed its civil servants and was a ‘little Moscow’ and the most westernized part of the city, is remarkable considering it’s history and proximity to Wazir Akbar Khan and Shahr-e-now (New City), areas of Kabul that now house and dine the foreigners and foreign restaurants and shopping zones (including the famous koche-murgah (Chicken Street)) and the city center. There is very little to no traffic of foreigners in today’s
Microrayon, which makes it rather appealing as a place to live for Afghans, and to an aspiring anthropologist. Today Microrayon is visually worn and houses middle class Afghans.

The inside of the Ministry building is washed-out with stained walls, old carpet in some areas of the common halls, and no carpet in others, a dusty plastic flower arrangement sits in the corner of a room, hardly visible and if so, not adding any aesthetic value to the always depressive, always cold and always dark ministry. Every other ministry had been given significant amounts of money to upgrade the physical building and the office space. The MoLSAMMD did not ever have electricity when I visited, except for in the Minister’s office space. Each time I entered the MoLSAMMD office I was immediately asked ‘sister, what are you doing here?’ In no other space in Kabul or office (much less ministerial offices) was I asked this question with such audible concern as if I was somehow in the wrong place and in an unsafe place altogether. I was always told that I should not be there and that they would not be comfortable if their sister was in this ministry unaccompanied.

*Matters of Principle, and Politics*

The Minister states that in principle the Afghan State cannot discriminate in who gets declared an ‘official’ *shaheed*, thus, a member of the Taliban\(^{66}\) and a member of the Afghan National Police (ANP) could both be declared a *shaheed*, if their families go

---

\(^{66}\) It would be highly unlikely that the family of a Taliban would seek any recognition or support from the central State since the Taliban movement, in quite significant ways, completely denounces the legitimacy of the Karzai government due to it’s profound reliance on *kafirs* (unbelievers)- according to Taliban understandings of the close relationship between Karzai and foreign States. In addition, the Taliban have their own structures for caring for families of those who have been killed in martyrdom operations.
through the process of filling the required verification forms that prove to meet the
Islamic criteria for what constitutes a shaahid/shaheed.

As the Minister stated, in principle - a member of the Taliban, a member of the
Afghan National Police (ANP) and a mujahideen from the 1980s all can receive the
designation of a shaheed if the appropriate process is followed and proof established of
the specific conditions under which the person died. In practice, however, the Minister
acknowledges the political considerations that are clearly involved in the special
programs and presidential decrees that create the possibility for the obligations of the
State to the family of the shaahid/shaheed to actually be met. The fact that most of the
80,600 ‘officially’ registered shahidan are from the Mujahideen period most obviously
demonstrates the politicizing of not only who is declared a shaheed but who actually gets
support through the specially sponsored programmes that allow the obligations of the
State (to protect and provide for the families of the shahidan) to be met.

67 This is noteworthy that in principle the Afghan State would not exclude who can or cannot have access to
rights as a citizen. A pro-state communist, an anti-state mujahideen, an anti-State Taliban, a staunch
nationalist or an indifferent civil servant are entitled to certain rights by the State, rights available not just to
those who do not pose a threat to the state’s idea of itself.

68 There is much voiced dismay by ordinary Afghans to the way the terms mujahid and shaheed are bandied
about (especially by the State), but not only, and who becomes labeled a hero (particularly in light of the
contemporary history of Afghanistan and in the context of an occupied Afghanistan). People often express
strong disapproval for how mujahideen who fought honourably (according to Afghan notions of honour)
for the cause of Islam against the God-less Soviet occupiers, are disrespected when others who garner no
popular respect or admiration (and in fact are viewed as murderers, human rights abusers, and allies of the
United States and occupying forces) are referred to as mujahideen. Ahmed Shah Massoud and more
recently Burhanuddin Rabbani are exemplary of the contentious debates around who is called a hero,
traitor, mujahideen and/or shaheed. Both Massoud and Rabbani were praised by Afghans for their
commitment and roles in defeating the Soviets yet both were also responsible for orchestrating and carrying
out the murders and indiscriminate slaughter of Afghans during the Kabul Wars between 1992 and 1996
that destroyed the city – thus tarnishing their roles and thus diminishing the respect that Afghans had for
them in their seminal roles against the Soviet occupiers. Both were subsequently targeted and assassinated
by suicide attacks claimed by the Taliban (Massoud in 2001, Rabbani in 2011) and both have been given
national hero status by Hamid Karzai. The date of Massoud’s death, 9 September, is declared a national
holiday and Rabbani was given the title of ‘Martyr of Peace’. Massoud and Rabbani are polarizing figures
who conjure up the greater affect of outrage that exists in Afghanistan as to how militia men, and former
leaders turned cold-blooded killers (propped up, heavily financially supported and armed by foreign
**Official Designations**

The verification forms required by the Ministry include: a *waseqah khat* (literally, letter of confidence) signed by the *wakeel* (representative) of the neighborhood of the *shaahid/shaheed* who must verify the identity of the dead, that the dead is related to the family who claims entitlement from the State, as well as substantiate the circumstances in which the person died – thus a death certificate, a *werasat khat* (legal inheritance letter) and a *wakalat nama* (power of attorney). Getting the designation of an ‘official’ *shaheed* enables the families of the ‘officially’ declared *shaheed* to demand the State to fulfill its Islamic obligation by paying a monthly allowance to the widow and each of the dependent orphans (under the age of 18) and giving a piece of land to them, as the living widow and orphans of the *shaahid/shaheed*.

**A Separate Issue of Land**

To make the claim for land - an additional process requiring the previously mentioned 22 signatures is required\(^{69}\). The Minister as well as the Land distribution officers claim that there have been only a handful of special programs (usually gifted by foreign and Islamic Republics), that have earmarked funds specifically for land distribution to families of *shahidan*. Thus unless one of these special programs is initiated or underway, the completed forms are put in a standard manila folder and tossed into a

---

\(^{69}\) Land acquisition administrators claimed that for *shaheed* of a special government programme (as were the *shahidan* of the June 2007 suicide attack, under Presidential decree 5330) - these 22 signatures as well as other legal documents were not required, as their names were given on a list by the MoI and forwarded to both MoLSAMD and the Land Distribution Office. This, however, is in contradiction to accounts of the families of the *shahidan* I spoke with, all of who went through the prolonged process and sub-processes regardless of presidential decree.
pile of literally thousands of files of families of officially designated *shahidan* (from decades ago and more recently) who are waiting for their entitlements (including cash and/or land) from the State as survivors of an ‘official’ *shaheed*.

By August 2011, four years and two months after the suicide attack—of the 31 cadets and cadet instructors who became *shahidan*, four of the families were getting some form of monthly allowance from the Afghan State. None of the families had received any land. On several instances I made both general and specific queries about these particular *shahidan* cases. Administrators in the land distribution office told me very bluntly that, of course, it is their ‘*haqq*’ (right, entitlement) to get land, but that the Afghan State simply did not have land to give. In the specific case of Zakir and his family, Zakir’s father was born in Kabul yet he hailed from Uruzgan province— a province renowned for sweet ruby red pomegranates and poetry but now only seen as the site of the ‘Taliban insurgency’ and thus had the highest concentration of international military forces and outright war. The land distribution office in Kabul offered Zakir and his family a plot of land in the heart of Uruzgan. Zakir tried to explain that his father was born in Kabul and only rarely visited Uruzgan Province, but the office insisted that that was the only place they could give land to Zakir and his family.

*Not enough land in Afghanistan*

When I spoke to the Land Distribution Office of Kabul Municipality in general about the process, they showed me three ten feet tall bookcases, each with four shelves, with each of the shelves stacked with piles of completed files from the families of *shahidan*. I was told very clearly and with a felt sense of remorse, by Mirwais, the thirty
something administrative officer in the Land Distribution Office: ‘sister, you know how many decades of wars we Afghans have seen? You meet widows and orphans in every corner, village and in every family, even in Kabul city. Afghanistan has so many people who are officially declared shahidan but even millions more who did not even bothering going through the official process of getting the State to declare their family member as a shaahid/shaheed. Afghans know what the State has not been able to fulfill it’s obligation due to war, but they still refer to their loved ones as shaahid/shaheed, because we are Muslims and we know who died in which ways and how Islam defines who is a shaahid/shaheed’. Mirwais then looked at me and said very matter of factly, ‘sister, we calculated the official number of shahidan (much less the unofficial), and there is not even enough land in all of Afghanistan, even if the Afghan State was to respond to every single completed application, even IF there was a special fund, a special program, a presidential decree for each of them, there is not enough land in all of Afghanistan to distribute to the shahidan of our country’.

At the time of this particular meeting with Mirwais, I had spent most of my days for more than two years meeting with widows and orphans (many were families of shahidan from the different wars in Afghanistan) – cooking, eating, making mile long kinship charts in between, laughing, learning - yet somehow it was not until Mirwais’ brutally elegant formulation that I realized the extent of what war has done to Afghanistan. I have what I always considered to be a healthy suspicion of statistics and its uses, but perhaps it was unhealthy as how could I have not calculated until now (at least abstractly) how many witnesses (even more witnesses than there is land), to what Afghanistan has endured? Dari, somehow in this conversation, made more sense than it
ever did to me. People say that there comes a time as you are learning a language that is not your own when your relationship to the language fundamentally changes, and it suddenly belongs to you. It was the moment I realized that I had understood viscerally, linguistically and even statistically what Mirwais said to me.

**Piecing Together a Puzzle**

I came back to Mirwais’ office the next day as a few days earlier he had agreed to allow me to review some of the completed and archived files of families of the *shahidan*. These files made his office fit the stereotype of the state bureaucrats office of any developing country – stacks of yellowing files haphazardly heaped behind his desk (but quite photogenically framing his daily work space), piles of seeming institutional neglect. When I arrived the next morning, there was an elderly *khaala* (kinship term, but also a respectful term for an elder unrelated woman) yelling at Mirwais. From where I was standing, I could not hear what she was saying. Mirwais’ assistant waved for me to come forward. The *khaala* had a strong Herati (Western border of Afghanistan) accent. She had apparently submitted all the required documents, including the signatures more than two years ago in Mirwais’ hand. She mentioned a few times that “her husband was a *mujahideen* when being a *mujahideen* meant something”. She was waving a paper in her hand and telling Mirwais it was useless, completely useless. She started cursing at him (the kind of cursing that sticks as you know the object of the yelling knows that the person doing the yelling is in the right): “May God show you these days that you showed me and may God never ever show you any good days in your life. May He bring this feeling of helplessness to you and may the feeling remain with you always.” At the time I
witnessed this, I did not have know the details of her case at all, but it was clear she was fed up, just exhausted. Frankly, despite not knowing the particulars of her situation, I was surprised at the abuses she hurled at Mirwais. She said she wanted him to feel as helpless as she was feeling, which is the opposite of what I had expected her to say (“May you never have to feel this feeling of helplessness”). Mirwais kept telling her that he was sorry, very sorry but that she needs to wait and be more patient. She surprised all of us in the office as she began to tear apart the original document she was holding in her hand. Mirwais tried to stop her after the first tear and tell her not to continue destroying it as she and her sons had already made the efforts and got each of the requisite signatures. The khaala continued, tearing the document into smaller and even smaller pieces, she ripped and ripped and ripped the form, crying and screaming at Mirwais. Why did you make us do this? Why? She asked why at least ten times as she continued to tear the document apart. She took the unevenly sized pieces of paper that remained in her hand and threw them on the floor and turned to leave out of the office. She looked at me as she was leaving and saw that I had tears in my eyes, “Cry for me daughter, you cry for me and please pray for me also as these people, this government, they have forgotten how to cry. From the top it is dirty so until the end it is dirty”.

Mirwais, his assistant and I silently gathered all the pieces of paper scattered around the office floor. He politely told his assistant to try to put it together again with tape while he would begin introducing me to a few of the files. His assistant was surprised that he was being asked to do something that maybe was impossible, or a waste of time, or both. I tried to lighten the semi-awkward moment that surfaced from Mirwais’ request by telling the both of them that I was in no rush and that I was rather skilled as a
child at making puzzles and that I could help. It took us more than an hour, but we managed to get the more than fifty pieces back together again. Upon seeing our work – Mirwais graciously smiled. While the assistant and I were putting the pieces together, Mirwais had managed to do something remarkable as well, he located the khaala’s file in the huge stacks. He took our taped together document and carefully placed it in her file.

The office was a busy one on the second floor of the Kabul Municipality in the center of Kabul. It was small but it always had a steady stream of people coming in asking for various forms, signatures, meetings, etc. Although it was already my third cup of tea, Mirwais ordered more. He began to open one of the few files he had randomly selected from the stacks to review with me. He began telling the story of the family and the shaahid/shaheed of the family, how old he was, number of children, etc. I stopped him and politely told him that what would be more interesting for me would be to learn from him about the processes and procedures that a shaahid/shaheed’s family had to undertake from the point of view of the Afghan State.

Mirwais knew that I was frequently meeting some of the families of the shahidan from the June 2007 suicide attack. He was in the office the first time I accompanied Zakir and his mother as well as the family of another shaahid/shaheed. It was unanimous from the point of view of the families that the process for acquiring the land that they were entitled to as survivours of shahidan was degrading, frustrating, and they were now sure, fruitless. Years had passed since the suicide attack and the presidential decree (that should have made them a priority, a smooth and speedy process) for the families of the June 2007 shahidan to claim their plots, yet no land had been given to any of them.
In defense of an Anthropologist in Kabul

As Mirwais began to show me an older file, he explained the changes over the years in the requirements for the family of a shaahid/shaheed: “One year ago we changed the number of required signatures from twelve to twenty-two. We also changed the price of this official form for the signatures, it used to cost 10 afghanis and now it costs 50 afghanis”. As I was piecing back together the original document torn apart from the elderly khaala, I did notice that there were far less signatures on her form, I did not count them but there were less than the twenty-two signatures that Zakir and his family had to obtain. “Whose signatures are now required on the forms and what required an increase of the ten signatures, did laws change?”, I asked. The time that I had thusfar spent talking to families and administrators, each time I heard mention of these signatures, I assumed that the required signatures would be from specific Ministries (MoI, MoLSAMD, etc.), from the bank, attorneys, etc. However, the signatures required were from the arbabs of each of the twenty-two farthest apart districts throughout Kabul City. Families of the shahidan had to get signatures from the arbab of each of these districts who would sign the document attesting that the family had no land in that district under their name. “For someone who has their own transportation, this process only takes a few months. However if they are a less financially capable family, it takes up to a year as you need to travel to the farthest districts in Kabul and then you have to find the arbab, which is also not easy and takes so much time”, explained Mirwais. He seemed entirely sympathetic to those who did not have transportation as the process was even more of a journey from unknown district to unknown district, in search of its arbab. “So the only purpose of this form with twenty-two signatures is to make sure that they do not already
have land in their name? So they have to be less well off as well as proven heirs of a shaahid/shaheed for the state to fill its obligation to them”, I asked?. “After accumulating so many files that the State could not answer (meaning could not give land), we decided to add this step of need, who was more needy because they did not have a house of their own”. I was a bit confused, as historically and currently, Afghan civil servants (including the police) are not known for having generous or even sufficient salaries. In fact, quite the opposite, they are infamous for their very low salaries. Thus unless it was inherited land (which was not impossible), they were not really making the pool of applications fewer in any significant ways. I pushed Mirwais a bit on this point for clarification. I also reminded him of the land dispute issues in Kabul, but throughout Afghanistan where decades of war and forced migration (as related to war) made it very unclear to know legally who actually owns what plots of land. Mirwais did not say anything for a minute, or so. ‘Sister, you have learned a lot from the families of the shahidan, you have sat with them and listened and I see that you really want to understand. You do not want to write an article for a paper that says we are corrupt, you do not want to put us on the news to show the world what kind of a State we are. You want to understand, and that takes a lot of effort and patience. Allah will reward you for listening, I am sure. Allah will reward you for this, insha’Allah. My driver (who accompanies me inside offices where there are predominantly males) interjected at the moment and told Mirwais how much time I spend a day (for years) only speaking to widows, orphans of shahidan. ‘She is a teacher at the University, she wants only to learn. She is not a native Dari speaker and learned the language from speaking to me and to the families of the shahidan everyday. She can work for the UN and make so much money with her knowledge, but instead she teaches
Afghan students at the university in the evenings and talks to widows and orphans all day. She drives with me everyday in my simple Saracha (most common everyday car in Kabul) and she writes in her notebooks, everything. Allah will reward her, I know. She has a dil-pak (clean heart), she does not want to make trouble for you, trust me’. In these few sentences, my driver hoped to address every suspicion anyone would have of me (my less fluent Dari, my seemingly journalistic inquisitiveness (she is a teacher, that is just what they do), my ordinary means of transportation (she is not part of the international aid community who drive around in super fancy cars, thus she is not here in Afghanistan to make money). My driver is of the opinion that if he is older than the person he is speaking to and he is speaking well of another, there is greater potential for trusting his opinion because of his age. He may be correct in a general way for how things have worked or should work in Afghanistan. However, it does not work in the context of contemporary Kabul where everyone is suspicious of everyone, regardless of age.

Mirwais politely acknowledged my driver and continued, “I told you to come today because my supervisor (who has been here for 30 years and whom you met months before) does not work today. When he first met you with Zakir’s family, he said to not give you any information because you ask too many questions every time you come. He is suspicious of everyone and thinks you will give our office a bad name for not helping Zakir and his family and other families. I do not agree with him, one knows whose heart is clean. I feel that I must now tell you how we in this office think of this land distribution process. I think it will make you understand this office better”. He closed the file that he had in his hand and began speaking: “We have files here from 30 years ago sister. I understand the document with the signatures and the complete archived files as
promises – promises that I have to believe the State will one day fulfill, *insha’Allah*. The affect from the files is clear. “The entire process is a process in *sabr* (patience)- you have to meet the *arbab* you do not know and tell them you are a son or brother or father of *shaaahid/shaheed*. You have to utter in front of representative who you do not know, that your loved one is a *shaaahid/shaheed*, which is honorable. We increased it from twelve signatures to twenty-two because more signatures means a longer time, and thus more time to keep a person with hope. Once they get three signatures or five signatures, it gives them something to wake up to do- something to take care of, to do what is needed. You need something to do and the process makes your relationship with Allah stronger. We added ten signatures because we realized that this process is a process of hope, even if it is only temporary. If they get angry, and talk about the State that it is corrupt and it only helps families with *wasita* (personal connections), fine – they are not so entirely wrong, maybe. But I think it gives them something else to talk about than mourning”. I asked him if the whole process was created to be intentionally long and repetitive, he said it was. I also asked him about trust and confidence in the State and if he and his colleagues worry that people will lose trust in a State when the first time in a very long time they are living with State who is trying to function in their lives. Mirwais acknowledged that families of the *shahidan* (and made his first reference to the *khaala* who earlier ripped up the document) potentially lose trust- “of course they may lose trust in a State but they should not lose trust in Allah, who sees everything they are facing, *Allah mehreban Ast*”. “Every government takes care of the *shahidan* that best represents their cause. In Najibullah’s time, special apartment blocks were made and an apartment was given to a family of a *shaaahid/shaheed*. Most of the *shahidan* they gave land to were
Communists (not mujahideen), and only after his government did the State start giving to mujahideen (which is the case now, as a lot of government offices are filled with former mujahideen). In this government, nobody has built a block of apartments, yet they should as there are so many more shahidan with these daily suicide attacks”.

I had many more questions and just did not know where to start. Kaka jaan (my driver) was nodding to everything when Mirwais was speaking. Kaka jaan was a former civil servant and he recognized the portrayal of the State that Mirwais was offering to me in a historical context. Kaka jaan looked at me and told me that I was getting the right information now and that I better write faster.

**Back to Zakir and Family**

I began this chapter narrating a day I went to visit Zakir and his family. I spent much of the morning speaking to Zakir’s wife, his mother and youngest sister, who was nine at the time. Zakir returned after two and said his day was largely a waste, as so many other days had gone, as the Ministry of Interior could not help with the land issue. As mentioned earlier, the Land Distribution Office offered land to Zakir’s family, but it was a plot of land in Uruzgan (as his father hailed from Uruzgan, although was born in Kabul), which is the main battleground of the Taliban insurgents and foreign troops and thus without doubt, the most insecure place in all of Afghanistan. Added to the already blaring disincentive was the fact that neither Zakir nor any of his living family members had ever visited Uruzgan. Zakir told me that completing the signatures was the most frustrating process and he felt everyday that he was begging for something, not like someone who was claiming something that was his by right. He says he does not use
shaheed in front of his father’s name anymore when he is in front of a government office or any official as he believes it degrades the meaning of shaheed (and his father’s good name) when you say it and then are asking for something – you lose the honor, the respect that the word should elicit and maintain. Zakir and the accounts of the other sons and family members of the shahidan from the June 2007 hamle intihari were similar in their expressions of frustration and humiliation. The outcome differed greatly from what was intended of the process, as revealed to me by Mirwais. The administrators of the Land Distribution Office of Kabul Municipality were curators of an ethical practice that brought neither land, honor, nor sabr to the families of the shahidan.

Retiring the Dead

Although Zakir and his family have yet to be offered a plot of land in Kabul, after almost two years after the hamle intihari, his family started getting a monthly payment from the Afghan State. He was in contact with the brothers of many of the cadets who had died, as well as the sons of three of the instructors, and he expressed gratitude that he and his family were getting a monthly payment from the Afghan State, as only three of the other families were receiving anything from the State.

I visited them at least once every two weeks and one visit coincided with the day they received their monthly payment by the Afghan State for the families of shahidan. The bank slip stated that it was deposited from the Ministry of Interior to the account of Zakir and his family. I was curious why it was the Ministry of Interior, and not the Ministry of Labor, Social Affairs, Martyred and Disabled. I half- heartedly asked Zakir and his mother, and they both said they believed it was from the Ministry of Interior.

205
because Zakir’s father was a police and it was a special program (Presidential Decree 5330). Their answer made sense, but on subsequent trips as I was reviewing the stack full of documents, I came across the word motaqayed, which is the official designation for pensioner. I began to more closely read the documents and upon verification with the Ministry of Interior, which at the time was responsible for retirement funds of government servants- I came to realize that although Zakir’s family got an official and public statement from Karzai that his father is a shaheed, on paper, he is a retired police officer, a pensioner receiving his monthly pension. I came to find the same documents and designation of motaqayed for three other families of the shahidan from the June 17 2007 suicide attack. Besides becoming shahidan in the June 2007 suicide attack, another thing these four shahidan had in common was that they were all instructors (thus older in age).

I had extended conversations with administrators in the relevant Ministries and it became evident why these four were receiving a monthly payment, and other cadets were not. There were no funds in the MoLSAMD to continue to pay these families as shahidan, thus although none of the instructors had reached retirement age by the time they became a shaahid/shaheed, papers in the Ministries were altered so that they either had reached retirement age\(^{70}\) (for the older instructors) or the number of years they had actually served as Police was increased to make them eligible for early retirement (which was the case for Zakir’s father). Under strict confidence, Ministry official told me that the

---

\(^{70}\) Birth certificates are not being common at all in Afghanistan and if obtained, based on rather arbitrary phenomenon. I had gone to the office when relatives of my driver were obtaining their taskeera for the first time. They were two girls who were twins, the administrators un-twinned them, making one three years older than the other… my driver would joke ‘anything is possible in Afghanistan Anila jaan. How old do you want to be, what new name do you want to have?’
State had to do something for these families even though the MoLSAMD did not have the funding to honor the State’s obligation. None of the four families of the instructors knew why they were getting the payments while others were not. The ministry administrator justified the handling of these *shahidan*: ‘We had to make them retired so that they could receive what was promised to them by Karzai. There was no other way. For the other families we still need to find something. The money was just not in the right place at the right time so we had to manage things differently. I am a Muslim and Allah knows my intentions for changing their status on paper to *motagayed*, now at least these few families will get a salary every month indefinitely. I am satisfied.’

*Social Protection and Pension Reform in Afghanistan, World Bank Style*

Overlapping temporally with my work centered around meetings with families of the *shahidan* and Ministry officials, the World Bank had embarked on a $7.5 million pension reform project of their own in Afghanistan. According to the World Bank documents, the objectives of the project were as follows:

‘help finance the costs associated with modernization of the public pension system administration and design and implementation of a basic safety net pilot program. The project would support specific objectives of the Afghanistan National Development Strategy (ANDS) toward implementing a *modern and financially sound pension system* and developing a targeted safety net scheme…Furthermore, the grant will contribute to strengthening program planning and administration in the Ministry of Labor, Social Affairs, Martyrs and Disabled (MoLSAMD).’ (emphasis my own)((World Bank, 2009b)

The Afghanistan National Development Strategy (ANDS) is *the* key government document for development and poverty reduction for 2008-13. According to President Hamid Karzai, in the forward he penned to this expansive 288-page document, he declares:
“This strategy has been completed after two years of hard work and extensive consultations around the country. As an Afghan-owned blueprint for the development of Afghanistan in all spheres of human endeavor, the ANDS will serve as our nation's Poverty Reduction Strategy Paper. I am confident that the ANDS will help us in achieving the Afghanistan Compact benchmarks and Millennium Development Goals. I also consider this document as our roadmap for the long-desired objective of Afghanization, as we transition towards less reliance on aid and an increase in self-sustaining economic growth”.

For my objectives here, it is necessary to engage with a limited but focused gaze towards these key development and government issued documents as related to the ethnographic material presented in this chapter thusfar in order to give the institutional texture and larger landscape of discourses within which the lives of Zakir and his family and the families of the other shahidan reside and slip past. There are a few remarkable aspects of the ANDS and more specifically the World Bank Pension Reform Project (that aims to support the ANDS), that are worth mentioning.

As I met with innumerable Ministry officials from mainly the MoLSAMD and Ministry of Interior, as well as others (albeit less frequently) to discuss the State obligation to the shahidan, they were both foreign as well as Afghan administrators who cited documents such as the ANDS, almost verbatim. Anthropologists, with much sophistication, have shown that this is common in other development contexts (ferguson, mosse) yet it takes on a very different kind of urgency and warrants special attention in the context of Afghanistan, where such documents not only form part of the development aid universe but literally are the fulcrum point around which the entire re-structuring of State policy, and in this case obligations to its citizens pivot. The development documents as well as the state building discourses played too prominent a role in interactions with administrators within and outside of the Afghan ministerial offices. Afghans working in NGO and government offices spoke with fluency in these aid discourses yet
unfortunately merely uttered institutional voices and logics, allowing their own, more significant experiential knowledge, to be eclipsed or worse, rendered entirely irrelevant.

‘Modernization’

The World Bank Pension Administration and Reform Project aims to completely overhaul the MoLSAMD thus enabling it to distribute pensions in a regular and reliable fashion. The $7.5 million project includes a half a million dollars in much needed renovations to the dark halls of the MoLSAMD offices, an entire decade after all other line ministries have been renovated, a few times over. The World Bank document states as part of the ‘modernization of the existing pension system’:

“Based on the record consolidated on electronic media, and process specifications to be defined, a census of retirees will be conducted (including Kabul and the provinces); it will help verify legitimacy of existing payments and clean database from the ghost payments and duplicate records; it will facilitate assessment of the outstanding stock of pension liabilities towards existing retirees and their survivors. A robust life certification mechanism will be designed and implemented in parallel to the census as a mandatory new element of the pension program to ensure quality of pension records going forward”. (italics added)(World Bank, 2009b)

On several other documents related to the World Bank project to reform the pension system, it uses the phrase ‘ghost pensioners’ or ‘ghost payments’ referring to pensioners who do not exist yet are receiving payments. The documents use the typical development discourses related to corruption and mention the millions of dollars that are wasted being paid out to pensioners who in fact are dead, and thus not eligible to receive pensions. The clear message being promoted is that the current system is corrupt and that a ‘modernization’ will root out such practices, leading to an efficient, effective, ‘financially sound’ and ‘modern’ pension system.
The World Bank pension reform documents are offered, particularly as related to the ‘ghost’ payments and pensioners, in parallel with the lives of the families of the *shahidan*, as presented earlier. The pension reform seeks to ‘clean’ the pension database of cases like Zakir’s family and the three other families of the *shahidan*, the ‘ghost pensioners’ (in World Bank parlance) - pensioners that are not even alive yet who receive money from the State- that number in the thousands, in their estimate - the living dead, as I have referred to them in the title of this chapter.

I have thus tried to ethnographically trace *shahidan* as a lived category, and as a state bureaucratic category - and to discuss the affective and material obligations and investments that issue forth from the deployment of the term *shahidan* across and between the domains of state and everyday life. By delineating these categories, I do not mean to imply that the bureaucratic and everyday life are mutually exclusive – as they clearly flow into and out of each other, informing one another – creating a nexus of expectations, uncertainties, and disappointments that transcends any particular household, or ministerial office, for example. This chapter thus reads across spatial and temporal parameters (from government offices to family homes, and across several generations of wars and *shahidan*) to reveal the imbrications and in between spaces that signify the zones where expectations, obligations, and practices of the State coalesce - thus making them more legible. Towards the end of the chapter, the State is seen as legitimated in the eyes of its citizens, yet simultaneously part of a repertoire of being and becoming perpetually undone (‘corrupt’, ‘failed’, ‘collapsed’, ‘reform-worthy’) in the eyes of its donors.
Conclusion

In this dissertation, I set out to attend to the ordinary ethics that inform everyday life in Kabul, Afghanistan. I have tried to situate the lives of Afghans who informed my ethnography within the intersection of a multiplicity of moralizing projects inherent to the current war and occupation, but also historically, in earlier wars and occupation that were brought to the country.

I aimed to explore the manner in which the lives of Afghans are rendered in particular ways by violence and/or the specter of violence and the uncertainty and doubt that has accompanied serial war and occupation. Since widows and orphans are subject positions that became prominent as a result of both the war and humanitarian efforts, they figured prominently in my ethnography. Although I conducted the fieldwork amidst a current and ongoing war and occupation, I did also tune into the ways past wars and occupations have formed the subjectivities of those I came to know in significant ways as well. The Afghans who inform this ethnography were widowed and orphaned during different historical periods of contemporary Afghanistan, which offers a durational aspect to the ways Afghans have incorporated uncertainty and doubt in the ways they navigate the world.

I have paid particular attention to the lives and aspirations of Afghans and how they inhabit a space marked by such extraordinary events. I use the theoretical framework of ordinary ethics introduced by Michael Lambek, and developed further by Veena Das as it allowed me to attend to what Afghans do and say in everyday action and ordinary
language as a way of capturing ethics in practices and discourses, as opposed to ethics being judged a priori on conventions and/or norms and values.

I believe my work can make a contribution to the emerging body of literature on ordinary ethics in offering a lens to understand how people subjected to extraordinary and serial uncertainty and violence cultivate sensibilities and pursue ethical aspirations as a way of becoming ethical subjects within the everyday, despite the fact that the everyday is in itself subject to extraordinary contingencies. In this regard, my dissertation offers insights into ordinary ethics and the ethical striving of widows, an orphan, state bureaucrats and families of police killed in the line of duty.

I have focused on widows and their families, as women who have been widowed by the serial wars that have come to Afghanistan, exemplify the paradox of modern political subjectivity. I used the work of Talal Asad to elaborate on the modern liberal state and the cruelty and compassion that lie at its core. Women who have been widowed in Afghanistan are thus an embodiment of both the cruelty of the violence of the modern liberal state, and the compassion of the modern liberal state vis a vis humanitarianism. Widow is thus a paradoxical subject position because it vacillates between two principles- the legitimate destruction of life and the reverence for life. The legitimate destruction of life is enabled through war that created the conditions of possibility for a woman to be widowed and the reverence for life is enabled through the practices of care for widows by humanitarianism in Afghanistan. My research focuses on ordinary ethics and the cultivation of an Islamic agentive self as unfolding amidst war, social suffering and foreign occupation in Afghanistan.
I included the work of Faisal Devji to engage with the logics of what he refers to as militant violence. His analyses of militant rhetoric ultimately reveal a collusion between the modern liberal state rhetoric and militant rhetoric in that both justify violence for the sake of humanity. Furthermore, both militant rhetoric and modern liberal state rhetoric have deemed Afghans as killable.

Islamic ethical practice figures prominently, not only as self-cultivation- as in the handshake dilemma, but as agentive through endurance and submission to the will of God. Widows in the bakery and the police officers who were killed in the suicide attack – strive to live in the path of the One who created them- an ordinary ethical striving based on duty to family and the submission to the will of God as an ethical agentive form of endurance and not based on tropes of resistance or on sacrifice to nation, as other accounts would have us believe. The bureaucrats working in the Land Distribution Office of Kabul Municipality aspire to fulfill the obligations of the State under the very impossible circumstances posed by the sheer number of officially declared martyrs in Afghanistan as a form of ethical striving. Yet are they fulfilling the obligations of the State in forging the dead as retired pensioners or are they fulfilling their duties as one Muslim to another? Through the life of Jabar, a once-orphan, I reveal the durational aspect of a life subjected to serial regimes of governmentality and how this young man’s ethical striving is based not necessarily on truth, as Foucault’s writings on ethics of the self emphasize, but an aspiration based at least partially on fiction and myth.

The lives of the Afghans who fill this dissertation do not fit so easily in the narratives thusfar made available to us – of the resisting Afghan widow against a brutal Taliban, or of a police officer who sacrifices himself for his nation, or of an orphan who
comports himself as a grateful recipient of care, or of the straight-forward corrupt state bureaucrat. The lives of those I came to know in Kabul ultimately unsettle each of these tropes and reveal the ordinary ways they navigate a world that they have come to understand as not only painful, but also, humiliating.

Apart from contributing to the emerging literature on ordinary ethics, my dissertation contributes to anthropological literature on war and conflict, particularly as related to long-term serial wars and occupation. Thirdly, I hope my dissertation will be a major contribution to the contemporary anthropological literature on Afghanistan. Between 1979 and 2001, long-term ethnographic fieldwork has been largely impossible there. In essence, for 30 years Afghanistan was lost to anthropology and Anthropology was lost to Afghanistan. Not only have three solid decades passed in which no anthropological studies were conducted in Afghanistan, but they were decades of war, prolonged conflict, natural disasters, massive and serial migrations and thus profound social transformation. Since 2001, social research in Afghanistan has largely been guided and dictated by international aid needs and programmatic evaluations. I hope my dissertation can contribute to a much needed anthropological literature on Afghanistan that aims to account for how the profound social transformations that have transpired over the last 35 years of wars and occupation have fundamentally altered the possibilities of relating to oneself and others.

The ordinary, as possibility, was a theme throughout this dissertation. I have not answered the question of whether the ordinary is possible, or not, but those whom I came to know in fundamental ways unsettled the very idea of the ordinary as possibility amidst the extraordinary. The scene for which the ordinary must be constituted is one
that itself is constituted not only by the ongoing specter of spectacular forms of violence
but by the uncertainty and suspicions that have cumulatively gained life in Kabul. I have
attempted to present these challenges to the ordinary, not as unsurmountable, but as part
of what it many mean to acknowledge the ongoing struggles and endurance of Afghans
who are still in this world.
Bibliography


Englund, Harri. "Extreme poverty and existential obligations: beyond morality in the


Feldman, Ilana, Miriam Ticktin (eds.) In the Name of Humanity: The Government of Threat and Care, 2010.


The Taliban, Layha, 2006.


Trouillot, Michel Rolph, Chris Hann, Lszl Krti, and MichelRolph Trouillot. "The


Curriculum Vitae

Anila Daulatzai was born and raised in Los Angeles, California. She received her Bachelor of Science degree in Biomedical Sciences from the University of California, Los Angeles. She obtained Masters degrees in Public Health, specializing in International Health, as well as in Islamic Studies from the University of California, Los Angeles. After her graduate studies at UCLA, she began graduate studies in Anthropology at the Johns Hopkins University in Baltimore, Maryland. She has taught at the University of California and the Johns Hopkins University in the USA, Kabul University and the American University of Afghanistan in Afghanistan, and at the University of Zürich in Switzerland.