

PREFACE

I am fortunate to have conducted research in interesting, though also stressful, times, and this experience has done much to shape this book. The insurgency in southern Afghanistan was just beginning to spread as I started my study of Istalif, a small town north of Kabul. With instability growing in the region, questions arose for me and my informants: Would the area again turn violent? Could the international military forces guarantee security? Why had the Afghan government, despite massive amounts of international aid, failed to create a stable state capable of providing basic services? These questions, and uncertainty about the future, cast a pall over my conversations with Istalif residents about local politics. Thus, while this book is anthropological, beginning at the most local level, looking at politics in one community and within the families of that community, the individuals were always considering how their decisions fit into the politics of an increasingly unstable Afghanistan.

Because the tumult in Afghanistan is now more than thirty years old, what I present here is just a snapshot of life in one part of the region, during a time of relative stability, within a much longer period of political and military upheaval. While I argue that life in Istalif was stable and free of violence while I was there, I make no claims that it will stay that way, and sadly, I will be a little surprised if it does. Therefore, I have written this ethnography in the past tense.

Unlike other ethnographies, I include interludes between the chapters to convey some of the emotions of fieldwork that get lost in more formulaic writing. Istalif was a beautiful, mysterious, scary place, and leaving out these emotions would ignore both my own lack of certainty about much of what I saw and the uncertainty of my informants, none of whom was ever entirely sure which way the political winds were blowing. In addition, while Afghanistan has received an immense amount of international attention in the past ten years, the accounts coming out of the region (with a few notable exceptions) often rely on stereotypes and generalizations. Regardless of how they describe

Afghans—as unruly, ungovernable tribes or passive victims—these accounts miss the great human diversity that gets brushed over in casualty counts and tribal mappings. With the interludes I hope to provide a more human account of the people of Istalif—those who befriended me, protected me, told me fascinating stories and even more fascinating lies, tried to swindle me in the bazaar, and taught me a great deal about life.

The writing process also varied somewhat from the norm. I first visited Istalif in the summer of 2005 on an exploratory trip, visiting several towns with important bazaars across northern Afghanistan, but I collected most of the data from Istalif between August 2006 and February 2008. I then returned to Boston to begin the writing process. In the spring of 2009, with Afghan presidential elections looming, I returned to Kabul to conduct other, related research. The rest of this book was completed in Kabul between the spring and fall of 2009.

Being in Kabul and so close to my field site was both a blessing and a curse, because I could easily get on the phone with informants or go up to the town to check on specific details. This proximity led me to check and recheck facts, perhaps a little too much, while thinking through new angles. During this period I did little additional research. Instead, I looked at how Istalif had changed, asking whether the changes fit my theories, and exploring how I could apply what I had learned to understanding issues across Afghanistan. Ultimately, though this process slowed the writing, I hope it has made my work richer and more accurate.

During the long writing process I have been supported by, worked for, or worked with several institutions. First and foremost, the Anthropology Department at Boston University was always supportive, especially considering the issues around conducting research in Afghanistan. In Kabul, the American Institute of Afghanistan Studies provided me with my initial home in Afghanistan and colleagues with whom to think through many of my questions. I also spent time working with the Turquoise Mountain, the Aga Khan Trust for Culture, the Afghanistan Research and Evaluation Unit, and the United States Institute of Peace, all of which have helped me understand the community of Istalif and Afghan political life, even if my work with them was not specifically for this project.

Among the individuals who helped me, the most important was Sediq Seddiqi, who tutored me in Dari and accompanied me during much of my early research. Ester Svensson was immensely helpful, explaining many aspects of pottery production. Thomas Barfield, Charles Lindholm, John Dixon,

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Finally, my family provided the grounding and support that made such a project possible.

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All the names of informants, except recognizable, national-level political figures, have been changed.