

PREFACE

The history of Afghanistan's bitter years of war can be told in many ways. It can be told as the story of poorly armed insurgents battling powerful armies. It can be told as a proxy war of superpowers and the meddling of regional rivals. It can be told as the story of fundamentalist ideologies struggling for the soul of a nation. *Caravan of Martyrs* chronicles the war in Afghanistan in relation to the sacrificial violence that has defined and dominated each stage of the conflict. The forms of sacrifice discussed in these pages are not just symbols or ancillary rites: they are the means by which the struggle has been articulated and carried out. As such, they have been generative of the conflict, and they have had their own transformative effect on how the conflict has evolved stage by stage over forty years.

Sacrifice has an important and long-established place in Afghan culture. As in other Muslim nations, Afghans remember the story of Ibrahim's sacrifice each year in their celebration of the Eid-i Qurban, the Feast of the Sacrifice, and, as long as anyone can remember, animals have been ritually slaughtered so that men can try to make peace among themselves and avoid losing their sons in feud (figure 1). These traditions live on, but they have been eclipsed by other forms of sacrifice that do not allow for surrogates or substitutions—sacrifices in which the victims are human beings. In some cases, they have been victims of war on whom the designation of martyr has been conferred after the fact. In other cases, they have been individuals judged guilty of moral crimes who have been executed in public spectacles of punishment and scapegoating, expiation and shaming. Most recently, the victims have assumed, or had thrust upon them, the role of burnt offering by means of a suicide vest or truck bomb.



FIGURE 1. Sheep sacrifice, Kunar, Afghanistan, ca. 2015. Photograph courtesy of Shahmahmood Miakhel.

This is a history not just of Afghans and Afghanistan. It is a history as well of outsiders, all of whom in their own ways have escalated the conflict and raised its stakes. The most important actors in this telling of Afghanistan's story are Arabs, far fewer in number than the Soviets and Americans who occupied the country but, in the end, perhaps more influential than either. Soviets and Americans affected the war from without and created the conditions within which the battle was joined. But Arabs—Afghan Arabs, as they came to be known—transformed the struggle from within, and they were instrumental in determining how and why the battle would be fought. Sacrifice was the catalytic agent they used to change the terms of battle and to turn the war in Afghanistan from a national struggle into the incubator for a global jihad.

The Afghanistan I write about in this book is not the same place that I first came to know forty years ago, nor is this the book I imagined myself writing, or would have wanted to write, when I set off on my journey. But it is the book that I have needed to write because it tells a story that has to be told. It is not a happy story, and it offers little in the way of hope or redemption in the end. But it is a true story, as true as I can make it out to be and as I perceive its truth, and it is a story that I have felt compelled to tell to do some kind of justice to what I have discovered in my travels in Afghanistan and Pakistan over many years.

My first awareness of Afghanistan came when, as a ten-year-old child, I received a postcard from my globe-trotting grandmother postmarked from Kabul. The city, she wrote, is “a *fascinating*, exciting, gay, colorful, *dirty*, *dusty* city—teeming with hundreds of different races, so one sees strange sights which are very exciting and all sorts of fun.” The postcard showed a line of camels, and, when my grandmother got back to the United States and came for a visit, she told me of sitting up all night on the balcony of her hotel watching caravans unloading their wares in the bazaar below. That was in 1962. The next year, the Book of the Month Club delivered to our suburban home a copy of James Michener’s *Caravans*, and I was hooked.

Most Americans now cannot imagine how a country like Afghanistan could inspire a lifelong fascination. Those who were fortunate enough to visit Afghanistan before it was ravaged by conflict are more likely to understand it. I had my chance in 1975, two weeks after graduating from college, when I flew to Luxembourg and then traveled overland to Kabul by train and bus, which in those days was a long but not overly dangerous journey. Indeed, one of the friends I met in Kabul had ridden on horseback most of the way from Herat. I taught in Kabul for two years, and, though the caravans no longer ambled into the center of the city during the night, as they did during my grandmother’s visit a dozen years earlier, there were still plenty of camels and nomads to be seen in the countryside.

I have used the word *caravan* in the title of this book knowing that it might provoke some critical reactions. There is, after all, no more durable stereotype of Afghanistan and the Middle East. That is presumably why my grandmother could purchase such a postcard in the first place and why Michener chose the word as the title for his novel of a liberated American woman who takes up with a band of nomads in the Afghan hinterlands. Nowadays, Westerners have far more immediate and vivid images of Afghanistan, and, though some might believe that the society has regressed, no one thinks it is standing still. To the contrary, it is now imagined as a world apart for new and disturbing reasons. Today, the stereotypes attached to this beleaguered nation are of a very different sort, and, although many of those images still cast the place and the people as exotic, they no longer enchant.

I decided to use *caravan* in my title, regardless of its Orientalist associations, because it is a term used by the particular men I am writing about, who have used it in the same way I do: to signify the idea and image of people on a journey who are connected by a common purpose. I first encountered the expression *caravan of martyrs* (*shahidan-u karavan* in Pakhtu, *karavan-i*

shahidan in Dari Persian) in a magazine published by one of the Islamic political parties in exile that arose in Peshawar, Pakistan, in the wake of the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan. The magazine was one of several devoted to commemorating the martyrdom of Afghans who had died fighting the Soviets. I came across the term a second time in researching the work of Abdullah ‘Azzam, sometimes referred to as “the father of Global Jihad,” who founded al-Qaeda in order to recruit and train Muslims from other countries to fight the Soviets in Afghanistan. One of the important works ‘Azzam wrote to justify his mission was called *Join the Caravan*. In a similar vein, Osama Bin Laden used a 2007 video message to “the youth of Islam” to inform them that it was their duty “to join the caravan.”¹ More recently, while researching the uses to which social media are put in forwarding the cause of jihad (see chapter 7), I found the term used in a variety of comments and memes uploaded to the Internet by jihad devotees (figure 2). I would argue that, for these ideologically motivated users of the term, it is precisely the stereotype of the caravan that appeals. Edward Said warned Westerners to be wary of how we perpetuated images of the East that refused to recognize the modernity and diversity of Muslim societies, but he did not anticipate how that very quality and sense of an unchanging common journey and purpose might serve the purposes of men determined to wage war against the West and to persuade their co-religionists that the only identity that mattered was that of believer.²

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In acknowledging the help I have received along the way, I should begin with the grandmother who sent me the postcard and the mother who subscribed to the Book of the Month Club. Would Afghanistan have loomed so large in my life if I had not first discovered the place at so young an age and from such consequential people in my life? Of my teachers, it is to Aram Yengoyan, Sherry Ortner, and Bill Schorger that I owe the deepest debts. Of my graduate student colleagues, the late Bill Kelleher is the one who helped me most to recognize the potential of anthropology as a way of seeing the world. In my two previous books, I have taken space to acknowledge many other debts of gratitude. Rather than repeat those names, I refer anyone interested to those books. The debts I owed then I still owe now, and the gratitude I felt then still holds strong today. But because this is a book on sacrifice and martyrdom, I need to repeat a couple of those names: those of Sayyid Bahuddin



FIGURE 2. "Caravan of Martyrs" Facebook meme.

Majruh and Hakim Taniwal, both of whom were good men who believed in Afghanistan and were willing to take risks in working to heal their country. Both died: Majruh at the hands of an assassin in 1988, and Taniwal in 2006, when he was serving as governor of Khost, by a suicide bomber of the sort I am trying hard to understand in this book. Both deserved the gratitude of their country, and both are missed by their friends and admirers. I have dedicated this book to Hakim and to Naqib Ahmad Khpulwak, who was teaching his class at the American University in Kabul the evening he was struck down by a suicide attacker in August 2016. Everyone who knew Naqib respected and admired him, and he too is deeply missed by his family and friends. Unfortunately, I never had the opportunity to meet Naqib. My dedication is a small gesture of respect to a man who—like Hakim—had other options but chose to help his countrymen.

I do not know how common it is for anthropologists to make one good friend in the field and to maintain that friendship for as long as Shahmahmood Miakhel and I have maintained ours, but that friendship has been not only

the bedrock of my “fieldwork practice” but also an important and abiding part of my sense of who I am and what matters most to me. Shahmahmood has been with me in my explorations of Afghan culture almost from the start, not only on the interviews I conducted in and around Peshawar in the early 1980s but also in my study of the Kachagarhi refugee camp, where he lived at the time. Since then, he has accompanied me on many journeys in Afghanistan and elsewhere, and we remain colleagues, collaborators, and close friends. Whereas my life has proved relatively stable, with a long-term position at a liberal arts college in the United States, Shahmahmood’s has taken him from the refugee camp to a taxicab in Washington, D.C., to a deputy ministerial appointment in Kabul, and most recently to the position of Afghanistan country director for the U.S. Institute of Peace. For all the help he has given me in understanding Afghan culture, as well as for the tolerance and forbearance he has shown in the face of my often-slow acquisition of insight and unintended slights, I owe Shahmahmood the deepest debt of gratitude, and I likewise acknowledge that my sense of just how important are the notions of debt and gratitude comes from him.

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good fortune to end up, through all the uncertainties of the academic job market, at Williams College, which has provided me with wonderful colleagues and students to assist my intellectual and material well-being. Finally, I offer thanks to my wife, Marketa, and our two children, Vilem and Tobias. My absences during the writing of this book have been more mental than physical, but they have still been real, and I appreciate their support and love more than they know or might have believed when I was nodding my head at their conversation while drifting among the still unwritten chapters of this book.

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