

ONE

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*Sacrifice*

THEN TO NOW

*Nuristan, 1976*

As I try to reconstruct the trajectory that has led to this book, my mind returns to the night I was stung by a scorpion by the side of the road on my way to Kamdesh. It was the summer of 1976. I was teaching English in Kabul and had taken a few weeks off to trek with two other young Americans with jobs in Kabul. I was living in a hotel down the street from the school, and Wakil, an Afghan who worked at the hotel accompanied us on the trip. He was taking us to his home in a mountain hamlet near the head of the Kamdesh Valley, in the region of Nuristan close to the border with Pakistan. We had hired a car and driver to get us to the town of Kamdesh, which was at the end of the motorable road. By evening, after an early-morning departure from Kabul, we had made it most of the way to our destination, but when the driver noticed storm clouds ahead, we decided to stop for a few hours. I found a smooth spot on the ground, wadded my jacket under my head, and immediately fell into a sound sleep.

It was still dark when the driver woke us. He wanted to drop us off before sunrise so that he could make it back to Kabul by evening. When I sat up, I felt a sudden, stabbing pain in my knee. The lump inside my jeans felt hard at first, but as I pulled my pants down, it popped, leaving a cold smear along the inside of my calf. I felt a burst of sharp stings, like a million tiny splinters piercing every centimeter of skin from ankle to groin. By the driver's flashlight, I saw the pincers and crushed carapace of a large black scorpion, its innards dampening my leg.

My companions helped me into the Land Rover, cramming themselves into the rear compartment with our packs so that I could stretch out on the back seat. After what seemed like an hour but was probably less, the headlights revealed a sign with a large red crescent painted on it—a first-aid clinic. The driver ran to knock on the door. When he returned he was accompanied not by a doctor or medic but by a man in a large black turban. There was no doctor in residence, so the driver had been sent next door to the house of a mullah, who now looked at me blankly through the window of the car. He opened the door and positioned himself so that he could take hold of my injured leg without displacing the mass of black cloth that wound around his head. Then he started quietly chanting phrases that I later realized must have been verses from the Qur'an, blowing jets of cool air onto my leg and gently massaging my knee and thigh.

At first, even the sensation of his breath against my leg felt like more shards of glass being rubbed into the skin, but gradually the pain eased. After a while, he pulled himself out of the car and told the driver that the pain would soon go away. In fact, my upper thigh already felt better. My knee still throbbed, but the pain was now bearable. Maybe this was because of the mullah, but I also vaguely recall that one of my American friends offered me some antihistamine tablets, and I might have taken one of those while we were driving. At the time, it did not really matter why the pain had abated. I was able to walk without too much soreness by the middle of that morning and managed to continue the trip on foot, with only a short layover in a teashop in Kamdesh.

I did not yet know that I wanted to be an anthropologist, but this was my introduction to fieldwork and the start of a career-long effort to get behind the gaze of the man in the black turban. The next year, I was back home starting graduate school. I planned to return to Wakil's village in the high Hindu Kush to conduct my dissertation research. I knew that it would somehow involve Islam. In the event, my plans were never realized. It would be another nineteen years before I returned to that part of the country, and I would have to look elsewhere for the research project that would make me an anthropologist.

As I was finishing my first year in graduate school, on a beautiful spring day in Ann Arbor, Michigan, news came over the radio that military officers in Afghanistan had killed the sitting president and proclaimed a new state dedicated to freeing the peasants and workers from feudal bondage. Over time, the allegiance of the new rulers to the Soviet Union came into focus,

but their message of ending oppression and sharing the wealth never took hold. By summer, the country was in open revolt against the new regime. The match that lit the blaze had been struck in the Kamdesh Valley I had visited two years earlier. The first newspaper reports attributed the violence to anti-communist “freedom fighters” intent on defending their country against communist aggression, but gradually it became clear that no matter who had ignited the rebellion, it was mullahs and other religious figures who had taken charge, and I wondered whether the mullah who had treated my leg was involved. The war forced me to reimagine what it meant to be an anthropologist. The prospect of study in a secluded mountain village was looking more and more distant, but, to a young researcher, studying a war of geopolitical consequence had its own appeal.

As you get older and try to make sense of your life, you inevitably read backward to your starting point. You look for telltale signs to confirm that who you have become was who you were meant to be, and what you have done was what you were meant to do. *Buud, na buud* (it was and it wasn't) is how Afghans say “Once upon a time.” At the time, I imagined my trip to Kamdesh leading me toward a traditional anthropological career of fieldwork in a picturesque locale. Instead, it led me into a war zone and a conflict that continues forty years later, a conflict in which my own country became directly involved and sacrificed many of its own young people. One of them, Army Staff Sergeant Eric J. Lindstrom, was killed in combat near the village of Barg-i Matal, where we had spent a peaceful week hiking and swimming in the river thirty-three years earlier.<sup>1</sup>

Remembering the time before the violence and disruption, searching for pathways from then to now, I started to think back to the sacred words the mullah recited over my leg, words that had the power not only of representing a divine truth but also of conveying it materially, the mullah's breath a slipstream carrying sacred energy to heal an affliction. Until I started working on this book, that memory was not something I thought much about. Now I see that encounter as something irretrievably distant, a connection of a sort that is difficult to imagine in the present. Whether or not he was directly involved in what was to come, the mullah was at the epicenter of a conflict that has reshaped our world, a conflict justified, if not inspired by, the words he recited over my leg. At the time, they were words of healing; later they were turned to other purposes.

There were additional lessons to be learned from that night, lessons that it would take me some time to absorb. One had to do with the enormous gap

that existed between the boulevards and pizza parlors of Kabul, the hippie hotels and tourist shops selling off the nation's heritage item by item, and the vast expanse of country beyond—a world of villages without electricity or running water, schools, or services. A representative from that world had gazed down at me on the backseat of that borrowed car, and it was that world that reacted with revulsion and outrage when the Marxist cadres announced that they were going to redistribute land and no longer allow the observance of traditional customs that had shaped rural Afghan society for generations. But, more immediately, what the mullah showed me when he sat beside me in that car was that modernity—in the form of medical care—coexisted in this world with the certainty of miracles, that God's presence in human affairs was not an abstract idea to be reflected on but a force to be reckoned with.

*Peshawar, 1984*

Anthropology found its footing as an academic discipline in the second decade of the twentieth century, when Bronisław Malinowski stepped ashore on the Trobriand Islands, set up his tent, and started taking notes. The discipline has changed since Malinowski's day. As the people traditionally studied by anthropologists have been displaced by economic, political, and ecological circumstances beyond their control, anthropologists have refined their methods in attempts to understand the diverse adaptations that humans have come up with to thrive when they can and survive when they must. One methodological response has been *multi-sited ethnography*, which attempts to capture the reality of people's lives in an era of migration and displacement.

The world is also a more violent place now than it was in Malinowski's time. Or maybe it is simply that, in the past, anthropologists were protected by their color and citizenship from the violence that afflicted the people they sought to study. Between roughly 1965 and 1978, a number of anthropologists managed to produce very good field studies in Afghanistan, with few mishaps beyond blisters and sunburns. I first lived in Afghanistan, working as an English teacher, when some of these anthropologists were still in the field. I entered graduate school with the idea of finding my own remote mountain village to study. With the outbreak of war, however, it became obvious that research of the sort I had envisioned was no longer feasible. Instead of working in a mountain village in the Hindu Kush, I found myself doing my dissertation research in the hot, dusty city of Peshawar, Pakistan, which had

become the base of operations for many of the mujahidin parties organizing the resistance against the Marxist government and its Soviet sponsors.

Peshawar was utterly different from Kabul. There were restaurants in Kabul where you could order hot dogs and hamburgers. There were two discotheques, where Afghan couples danced next to expatriate couples, and out on the streets you could see Afghan women with hair uncovered, wearing blouses and skirts with sheer stockings. Women who dressed this way were a minority but not remarkable. The school where I taught was filled every day with young students, boys and girls, who were eager to learn English, and it was not a stretch to see Afghanistan as a nation on the move, a nation where the then rarely questioned promises of modernization were on the verge of being fulfilled.

By the time I arrived in Peshawar in 1982, the city was overrun with Afghan refugees. The population had doubled or tripled, and the vast majority of the refugees were from rural villages almost untouched by the modernizing efforts that had seemed so encouraging in Kabul. Most of the people on the streets wore country clothes. They were almost entirely men, and they had the manners of people unused to city life. When women appeared in public, they wore burqas and huddled together or walked a few steps behind their men. One of the most obvious differences between Peshawaris and Afghans was that the Afghans on the street rarely seemed to move very fast or to be traveling anywhere in particular. Most of them seemed unsure where they were going, how long they were likely to be there, or what to do in the meantime.

As it turned out, most of the Afghans were going to be there for a very long time. My own stay would be shorter, just over two years. I did not know at the time how long the Pakistan government would allow me to remain in country. I had been given a permit by one ministry to do research in a refugee camp, but when I arrived I was told that I would have to apply for a second permit from a different ministry. Not getting that second permit right away turned out to be a lucky break, because it allowed me to set my sights on a more interesting question, though vaguely defined and less clearly ethnographic in the Malinowskian sense: figuring out what the hell was going on in Peshawar. There were presumably any number of embassy analysts and undercover operatives trying to do the same thing, but to the best of my knowledge and for quite a long time, I was the only above-board, academically credentialed (or nearly), independent researcher in Peshawar who was interviewing mujahidin commanders and party leaders, visiting party headquarters and mujahidin training camps.

Perhaps because I was intimidated by the complexity of events in the present, I found myself oriented toward the past, specifically toward understanding the origins of the various Islamic political parties that had set up shop in Peshawar. Some were run by madrasa-educated mullahs, some by the heads of Sufi orders, some by former university students. None of these were people I had been aware of during my two years in Kabul. If I had been aware of them, I would not have considered them likely candidates to be running political parties, and I wanted to understand how it had come to pass that these people were now so much in the news and so clearly in charge; how it was that the war going on nearby was being called a jihad and that all the main actors in it were calling themselves mujahidin (though the American government insisted on calling them “freedom fighters”); and how it was that all these previously obscure leaders were claiming legitimacy for their efforts based on religious principles and aspirations that seemed to have little relationship to the democratic ideals espoused by my government, which was the one supplying them with most of their money and guns.

In a city swarming with refugees and in an effort to understand a phenomenon that we are all still trying to make sense of more than thirty years later, I developed my own fieldwork style, one that was part Malinowski, part Jimmy Olsen tracking down stories for the *Daily Planet*. It was immediately clear that this ethnographic research was not going to fit any model that I had read or heard about in graduate school. There was no “there” there, or, rather, there were so many “theres” that you could not keep all of them straight. There was no village surrounded by fields, no handful of characters who all knew and interacted with one another and whose interactions I could try to parse and explain. It was probably to my advantage that my graduate program did not require or even offer a course on research methodology. (The faculty apparently assumed that, after having read so many ethnographies, students would have absorbed by osmosis how to do field research—and if they did not have the wherewithal to figure it out, they were probably in the wrong line of work.) I can only imagine that if I had had a set idea in my mind about how to do fieldwork, based on the expectation of studying some well-organized community, I probably would have been overwhelmed by the incommensurability between what I had been taught and where I had landed.

One of the great virtues of anthropology is that it allows its practitioners to make it up as they go along. Other disciplines among those referred to as the social sciences try to conform to the model developed in the natural

sciences. Anthropology, at least the variety I incline toward, recognizes that whatever theories you start out with will have to be reconceived as you get enmeshed in the research. The idea of testing a hypothesis is simply unrealistic and naive given the disparate and unpredictable nature of experiences you are likely to participate in, people you are likely to encounter, and events you are likely to witness.

In Peshawar, I set out to meet and interview Afghans whose ancestors had been involved in past jihads. My goal was to find out what Islamic politics had been like before in order to see if I could establish some connections to what it had become. History has always mattered to me—not so much the kind traditionally practiced by historians, which is to say accounts of notable people and events, but rather the *stories* embedded in history and the social realities those stories revealed. I hoped those stories could tell me about the way Afghans conceived of their own past and how it reflected the cultural values they espoused and the moral contradictions they grappled with.

Much of my first year was spent interviewing tribal elders and the sons and grandsons of Sufi mystics and Muslim clerics who had fought in earlier jihads. In the course of these interviews, the words *shahid* (martyr) and *shahadat* (martyrdom) kept popping up, but they were always on the fringes of what we were talking about, terms for the quotidian outcomes and local tragedies of historical battles now overshadowed by current struggles. My immediate concern was piecing together the names and affiliations, the events and chronologies, and trying to figure out how Afghans themselves made sense of the relationship of tribes and Islamic leaders and the state, how they knitted it all together into something like a history, and how that history helped them understand current events.<sup>2</sup>

Martyrdom was not the explicit focus of my field research. It was always in my field of vision, because it was a factor in how people dealt with grief and how they understood loss, but it was not what originally attracted my attention. One minor incident that brought martyrs and martyrdom forward in my thinking happened one day more than a year after my arrival in Pakistan, when I had finally received clearance to work in a refugee camp. I was sitting in the guestroom of an Afghan refugee living in the Kachagarhi camp, on the outskirts of Peshawar. While waiting for tea to be served, I noticed a magazine lying in the wall niche where the Qur'an was usually placed, and I started leafing through its tattered pages. The magazine commemorated members of Hizb-i Islami, the most radical of the Afghan resistance parties, who had died fighting the communist government. Some of those honored were

rank-and-file mujahidin, others front commanders and subcommanders killed in battle. Others, dressed in sport coats, seemed to be students.

The articles that accompanied the photos told a story, or several stories. One was of the ordinary men who had been killed in the battle against the government, but the story that merited greater attention and importance was that of the university students who had joined the movement while still in school and had been arrested, imprisoned, and eventually executed. These students had larger photographs and more fulsome tributes than those awarded to front commanders, even though many of the front commanders had fought in combat against the Marxist regime while some of the students had done little more than hand out fliers on the street.

The fact that a whole magazine was devoted to martyrs, and the way their portraits were organized and arrayed, led me to pay more attention to martyrdom. It was still, at this stage, more a curiosity for me than a research focus, but I asked for and was given that magazine to keep. Then I started looking for others of the same sort, all of which I still have. (I analyze the content and imagery of such magazines in chapter 3.) Today, of course, such magazines are no longer novelties; they even seem somewhat quaint and outmoded among the proliferation of jihadist websites and social media apps that highlight tech-savvy videos of martyrdoms and beheadings of unbelievers. In 1982, however, the magazines signaled an important new stage in the cultural politics of Islamic resistance, one that would influence developments not only in Afghanistan but throughout the Muslim world.

### *Kunar, 1995*

If my interest in martyrdom was awakened by a magazine, my broader interest in sacrifice—and how sacrifice and martyrdom are connected—stems from a trip to eastern Afghanistan in 1995. The Soviets withdrew from Afghanistan in 1989, and the various mujahidin parties had been fighting among themselves for power ever since. Eastern Afghanistan was experiencing an uneasy peace when I arrived. The parties were not openly fighting, mostly because they had divvied up power and spoils among themselves. One controlled the border crossing at the Khyber Pass. Another controlled the airport at Jalalabad. A third controlled the customs house in the city center. Five or six had set up tollbooths on the Kabul highway from which they taxed every car and truck passing between Jalalabad and the capital.

I was with my friend Shahmahmood Miakhel, who had arranged for us to travel with a former jihad commander named Abdul Wahhab to the Pech Valley, near the headwaters of the Kunar River. Abdul Wahhab provided a Toyota Hilux pickup truck and four well-armed men for our protection. Toward the end of our journey, we stopped for the night in Shahmahmood's village of Mangwal, on the eastern side of the river. After food and conversation, we bedded down on wood-and-rope *charpai* beds in the garden outside Shahmahmood's father's compound. Two men stood guard while the rest of us slept. It was a moonless night, and when one of the sentries returned to our encampment and tried to wake one of the other guards so that he could be relieved, the man rose from his bed with a start, grabbed the Kalashnikov under his pillow, and started screaming that we were under attack. All four of the guards seized their guns and started shouting. No one could see anyone else in the dark, and I rolled off of my bed onto the ground, making myself as small as I could manage while tensing in anticipation of the first shot. After an interval that was probably only seconds but felt much longer, the commander's voice rose above the others', restoring order. The shouting stopped, but talk took its place, punctuated by bursts of laughter before we all drifted back to sleep.

It was a minor incident, but it showed the fragility of peace in a land where so many men were armed and there were few to trust and many to fear. People were under tremendous strain to survive and keep their families safe. Although the communist enemy was gone, old animosities were still alive. Enmities in Afghanistan can be patched up, but they never completely heal, and it was one of those enmities from the war years that kept the commander and his men on edge on that moonless night.

The next morning, as we all sat drinking milk tea and gradually rousing ourselves for our onward journey to Jalalabad, Shahmahmood's father suddenly appeared from inside the compound pulling a sheep with a rope around its neck. The beds were pushed back into a circle. Shahmahmood's father matter-of-factly recited some prayers while stroking his beard, then calmly cut open the sheep's carotid artery, spilling its blood on the packed earth. Shahmahmood and I shared a look, nothing more, but I knew we were thinking the same thing: it was sheep's blood on the ground, but it could have been ours. That day the sheep was our *qurbani*—our sacrifice—for having stayed alive another day. That moment remains my own most significant experience of the power of sacrifice to ritualize and thereby exert some

control over the wellsprings of fear at our own pending deaths that, from time to time, bubble up into consciousness.

The focus of most anthropological studies is meaning: what people say and what they mean when they say it, what they express in nonverbal ways, and the media through which they express it. Often neglected (because difficult to verbalize or measure) is the power of emotions: how emotions connect to meaning and how they bind people to the central symbols of their society. The divide between meaning and emotion is, of course, an artificial one. As Eva Illouz notes, “Emotions are cultural meanings and social relationships that are inseparably compressed together, and it is this compression which confers on them their capacity to energize action.”<sup>3</sup> Such compression occurs most regularly and reliably in the context of ritual, where cognition, affect, evaluation, motivation, and the body are all simultaneously fused, resulting in the release of energy. No ritual has the capacity to release more of this energy than the ritual of sacrifice, in particular the sacrifice of living things. Sex is a mystery that can simultaneously delight and terrify us, but death on its own offers little in the way of beguilement. It mostly just terrifies us. Sacrifice seeks to achieve some leverage over that terror by putting death in our hands, allowing us to set aside and tidy the place where it happens, determine its timing, and assert its meaning. In so doing, we also harness, to some degree at least, the emotions it elicits.

I do not know whether Shahmahmood’s father knew what had happened the night before he slit the throat of that sheep. It was an act he had performed many times before and would perform many times thereafter. I do not know whether he knew that he could have lost his eldest son hours before. Nor do I know whether the men we were with that day, men who had witnessed so much killing, had thoughts anything like mine. I had spent a long time among Afghans by that time, but I was a neophyte in their world of guns. I can only assume that they had had many closer calls. A better-prepared anthropologist would have thought to ask what they thought and felt about the whole affair, but I did not. Maybe I was still in shock myself, but the moment also seemed strangely private to me, a moment when I was lost in my own reflections, my own intimations of mortality. I did not speak of it even with Shahmahmood until much later.

I have said that death does not beguile, but maybe that is not entirely true. Maybe part of the attraction of sacrifice is that it brings us close to death—a place where some part of us desires to be or at least to know—letting us see into the abyss while keeping us far enough back to avoid falling in. Then

again, maybe I am overthinking or attributing the wrong features to sacrifice. My own response to the act was personal and existential in character (how was it that I survived?) rather than religious (thanks be to God), and this seems an important fact to note. Just because it is a ritual and because it is framed by the recitation of religious verses does not imply that its power derives from or is exclusive to religious belief. To the contrary, it might be said that religion takes its power from the ritual act of sacrifice, not the other way around. It is through the appropriation of this act that particular religions gain much of their emotive power and their meaning, but sacrifice itself stands apart as an act that can be replicated, borrowed, and embroidered for different purposes by different bodies.

### *Kabul, 2003*

I returned to Kabul on the second anniversary of the beginning of Operation Enduring Freedom, the U.S. attack on Afghanistan in response to the September 11, 2001, attacks. October 7 is not as memorable a day as September 11, and there were no ceremonies in Kabul to mark the date. For Kabulis, it was just another morning, and the streets were crowded. That is the first thing that struck me on my return—the traffic. It had been twenty-six years since I had last seen Kabul. Back then, I thought that I would be returning soon, but it did not work out that way, and the city I finally returned to was very different from the one I had left.

In the mid-1970s, the streets were crowded only on holidays, when people came in from the provinces to witness the government-sponsored festivities. On any ordinary day, there was never much traffic to speak of. In the two years following the Taliban's collapse and the arrival of the Americans, things had changed dramatically, and not all for the better. Take taxis, for example. According to one estimate, there were forty thousand taxis crowding the streets of Kabul in 2003. Many were right-hand-drive cabs brought in illegally from Pakistan. Even if you removed all the other vehicles—the trucks and the motor rickshaws, the prewar Mercedes minibuses, the Toyota Land Cruisers favored by expatriates, the Datsun pickup trucks formerly used by the Taliban police for their patrols, and the armored personnel carriers bearing the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) peacekeepers who had replaced them—the taxis by themselves would have created tie-ups, because there were no functioning traffic lights and only ineffectual traffic police at most of the intersections in the city. In 1977, there had been more

horse-drawn tongas than motorized vehicles. It is not just nostalgia that makes me think so: home movies shot by foreigners living in Kabul before the war show that the streets were empty, and the waters of the Kabul River, which by 2003 had been reduced to stagnant pools, still flowed fast and clear from the snowmelt in the mountains. The city had only half a million people then. By 2003, the number was closer to four million.

Kabul has always been dusty, and even the smallest wind whips up the silt of its worn-down hills. The dust hangs in the air all day, mixing with the diesel smoke; it settles at night, until the morning traffic sets it back in motion. When an inversion layer thickens the air, you do not want to go outside. Most of the foreigners who lived in Kabul in the years after the U.S.-led invasion, including the foreign businessmen who were making Kabul briefly into a boomtown, did not have to go outside—or not for long. They lived and worked in high-walled compounds with air conditioners, which were powered by generators when the electricity was down. When they had to travel, they moved in tightly sealed SUVs with drivers. The government elite lived and moved around in the same fashion.

When I came back to Kabul in 2003 to shoot a documentary film, I was staying not far from where I had lived when I was teaching English. But with the exception of a few places like Chicken Street, where all the tourist antique shops are located, and my old school itself, long since boarded up, not much of the neighborhood looked familiar. The compound we stayed in belonged to a wealthy Muhammadzai family, distant cousins of the former king. When the communists took power, the Afghan secret police (KHAD) confiscated the property. When the mujahidin came to power in 1992, their security service occupied it, and when the Taliban took charge, they gave the property to their Directorate for the Propagation of Virtue and Prevention of Vice. One of the buildings in the compound became a prison where they detained low-level “criminals” who had been picked up for minor offenses, such as trimming a beard or buying a video.

The walls of the building were covered with the scratched initials and messages of prisoners, and, out back, a foul smell still wafted from the pit latrine, though it had not been used for years. Snooping around the building, we found pots and pans left behind by the Taliban and even a fragment of a poem in Persian folded and pushed into a hole in the compound wall:

In my pen, no healing ink, only blood  
On the walls of the oppressor . . .<sup>4</sup>

That was one reminder of the Taliban. Another was the strands of magnetic tape fluttering from electric lines in the streets, flung there by the morality police when they found a taxi driver listening to a forbidden Bollywood cassette tape.

But these seemed like distant reminders. The three of us making the film hired a driver to transport us around the city. In 2003, the security situation was very different from what it was to become in the following years, and somehow it seemed that the presence of the camera gave us permission to enter just about any place. Perhaps because they had been deprived of movies for so long, people appeared happy to see our camera. Perhaps they had just become used to cameras from all the news crews that had come and gone following the departure of the Taliban. Or perhaps they just did not know what to make of us—a middle-aged American man, an Afghan woman, and a young American cameraman. Whatever the reason, we never worried about our safety, whether we were filming in the currency exchange market in downtown Kabul, a shrine on the outskirts of the city, or a tiny factory making candied almonds deep in the center of Shar-i Kohna, the Old City.

When I returned a year later to teach a class on oral-history research at Kabul University, the situation was already more tense. While shooting the film, we had heard complaints from women students at the university who told us that the American soldiers treated Afghans like “wild animals,” and they joked that, for all the talk of empowering Afghan women, all they had seen so far were useless projects to teach them how to do things like bottle pickles.<sup>5</sup> I did not know if the complaints were fair, but the frustration was obvious. Foreigners seemed more oblivious. With the exception of the drivers and cooks and office staff they saw each day, foreigners were largely unaware of what was going on outside their tightly sealed cocoons.

That sense of separation began to evaporate, however, when the Taliban attacks became more frequent and immediate. In late August, shortly after I had arrived back in Kabul, a truck bomb went off a few blocks from where I was staying (figure 3). The target was the headquarters of DynCorp, Inc., which provided security for many of the top foreign and Afghan officials, including President Hamid Karzai. The blast had apparently been timed for the end of the workday, when DynCorp employees walked across the street from their office compound to their housing compound. When I reached the site of the blast a few minutes later, the tangled skeleton of the vehicle was still on fire, and a crowd had gathered to stare at the wreckage. I heard that a



FIGURE 3. Car bomb, Kabul, Aug. 2004. Author's photograph.

second bomb had been planted in a parked car nearby that was intended to go off a few minutes after the first, but for some reason it never detonated.

There was some dispute as to whether the driver of the truck had survived. A spokesman for the Afghan interior ministry said that the remains of the truck's engine had been found three hundred meters from the site of detonation and consequently that it was likely the driver had been killed in the blast. The Taliban spokesman, however, refuted this assertion, telling the press that the driver had used a remote-control device and had survived. The point is worth noting because, a year or so later, the Taliban spokesman would have taken the opposite tack, emphasizing the willingness of the bomber to blow himself up. Suicide bombing was the basis of an explicit strategy first championed by Osama Bin Laden in a February 2003 video that

encouraged “martyrdom operations against the enemy.” That same message was picked up by the Taliban, which began to initiate its own attacks, partly in emulation of similar attacks by insurgents in Iraq.<sup>6</sup>

Only two such attacks occurred in the first year after Bin Laden’s video and three the next, but in 2005 there were twenty. The number shot up to 105 in 2006 and to 140 in 2007. Since that time, there have been, on average, around 100 attacks each year. The first wave of suicide bombings appears to have been carried out principally by Arabs; Afghans and foreign commentators familiar with Afghanistan initially observed that it was highly unlikely that Afghans would ever participate in such attacks, which were contrary to their cultural sensibilities. However, as the numbers climbed, it became clear that it was not just foreign fighters who were strapping on suicide vests and chauffeuring bomb-laden cars and trucks to their appointed destinations: Afghans and Pakhtuns from across the Pakistan border were in fact responsible for the majority of these incidents.<sup>7</sup>

I have been around Afghans long enough to appreciate both their common sense and the pride they take in not being told by others what to do. Self-determination is a cornerstone of their cultural ethos, and the fact that Bin Laden and the Taliban were both championing suicide bombing seemed to me an insufficient reason to explain the fact that people were deciding to follow that course of action. Though there were undoubtedly some suicide bombers who were coerced or brainwashed, I could not believe that this was true of all of them. The decision to become a suicide bomber was still an individual one for most, and it was one that would have been unthinkable in the past. So why now?

#### MAKING SENSE OF SACRIFICE

The central question that has arisen out of my preoccupation with the war in Afghanistan—the question that is central to this study—is how it happened that men (and sometimes even women and children) would come to consider it a good thing to strap bombs onto their bodies, walk into crowded places, and trigger the bombs, knowing not only that they will lose their own lives but also that they will take with them a large number of strangers. That such things happen now gives those of us who have long worked in Afghanistan a feeling of horror and sadness. These events, which utterly contradict anything I would have imagined when I first set out on my journey of discovery,

have made me question how much I actually knew about Afghanistan in the first place.

If the framework I have constructed over the course of two books and twenty years to explain what I call the moral fault lines of Afghan culture has any validity and utility, it must be able to help explain the unsettling reality of suicide bombing, and it must do so, first of all, in terms that make sense to Afghans themselves. This book differs from my earlier ones in its approach, but it shares with them the sense that understanding the present requires understanding the past. In keeping with that dictum, I begin by trying to get a fix on what sacrifice has meant and what it means today, and how it has been expressed from before the war until the present day.

Suicide bombing did not begin in Afghanistan. Incidents of intentional self-destruction took place in Sri Lanka and Palestine years before the first bomb went off in Afghanistan. But the fact that a phenomenon appeared in one country before it appeared somewhere else is not necessarily relevant to understanding the development in any given locale. Suicide bombing was not something that existed when I conducted my first research in the 1980s. It was not even imaginable, and it is insufficient to say that it was imported from someplace else. Techniques for constructing a detonator or sewing explosives into a vest might have been brought in from Palestine or Iraq, but, first, the idea of blowing oneself up had to find local adherents: it had to seem like a reasonable idea to some group of people. To assume that it was imposed on Afghans by others would be to deny them agency, whereas much of Afghan history pivots around the struggle for agency. Nevertheless, the role of outside actors cannot be ignored. In viewing Afghan culture as dynamic, it is necessary to understand that it has not changed on its own; isolated though it might have once seemed to Americans, it has been part of a global economy and subject to regional and international social and geopolitical forces for millennia.<sup>8</sup>

In coming to terms with the act of killing at the center of this study, it is important first of all to know what to call it. It is usually referred to as terrorism, but this term defines the act solely by its effect on others. *Suicide bombing* and *suicide bomber*, though imperfect, have the advantage of equivalence to the terms that Afghans themselves use, the most common of which—*intehar* (for suicide bombing) and *intehari* (for suicide bomber)—is a linguistic borrowing from Arabic that perhaps reflects the association of the act with its having been brought to Afghanistan by Arabs.<sup>9</sup> Terms I try to avoid here are “terrorism” and “terrorist.” I do so not to deny that acts of suicide bomb-

ing create terror but because these terms prioritize the strategic objective and experiential consequences for others over the act itself and subsume the person responsible for the act within the outcome of his action. For the purposes of this study, I want to maintain the focus on the act itself and what leads up to it, rather than on the consequences of the act. This is not to deny that suicide bombing causes death and destruction and that it has the effect of terrorizing those who survive the act. It is simply to maintain an analytic division between the causes of the act, the act itself, and the consequences, a division the terminology of “terrorism” and “terrorist” erases.

My approach to the study of suicide bombing has been strongly influenced, first, by the work of Natalie Davis on the rites of violence in sixteenth-century France (1973). It was in reading Davis’s seminal article that I first became attuned to the symbolic dimensions of violence (the “violation” that is inherent in acts of violence) and to the importance of not reducing violence to its instrumental effects. A second work to which I am indebted is Alan Feldman’s *Formations of Violence* (1991) on sectarian violence in Northern Ireland. Feldman’s work brilliantly demonstrates the importance of understanding the forms and relations of violence in and of themselves and of tracing how those forms change over time and how they change society and social persons in turn. In focusing on forms of violence rather than ends, I am concerned with the cultural logic that informs the act. Here, I have also been influenced by the work of Marshall Sahlins (1979) and the importance he ascribed to understanding what he has termed “the structure of the conjuncture” within which actions take place, particularly actions that mediate relations across cultures.

Sahlins introduced that expression to locate the analytical task of making sense of moments in which disparate aspects of history, myth, and ritual come together and collide, with sometimes catastrophic results. His example was the meeting between Captain James Cook and the Hawaiian islanders, a meeting that began with the Hawaiians’ viewing Cook as their returned god, Lono, and ended with his death at their hands when he failed to follow their script. Although such episodes of cultural clash bring together elements that had not previously been in contact, creating unpredictability, they do not consist entirely of randomness and contingency. The “structure” of the conjuncture is provided by the codes, customs, and cultural understandings that people carry with them and apply to the problem the conjuncture has presented to them. These are not just clashes: they are also ritual moments, or moments of conjoined ritual. Cook, after all, was as determined to make

the Hawaiians behave in what was for him and his officers the appropriately subordinate manner as the Hawaiians were to make Cook behave like a god.

#### A SIMPLE MACHINE

My approach to understanding the evolution of suicide bombing in Afghanistan follows Sahlins' model in its focus on ritual as the form through which the structure of the conjuncture is mediated. The ritual that I set out to understand, which I see as central to understanding the evolution of suicide bombing, is sacrifice. I am, of course, not the first anthropologist to find broad significance in this ritual. Sacrifice has a long history in anthropology; in fact, it could be argued that it was the enigma of sacrifice that brought anthropology into existence. That is to say, it was the inadequacies of earlier explanations of sacrifice (and of other mysterious, seemingly universal cultural forms like the incest taboo) that led scholars in the later part of the nineteenth century to come up with more sophisticated and empirically grounded modes of investigation and generalization in order to make sense of this ubiquitous but not easily definable or explicable cultural form: what it was, where it came from, and what diverse forms it took in the various cultures of the world.<sup>10</sup>

For all the effort so far expended, however, the meaning, nature, and function of sacrifice remain elusive. Part of that elusiveness might derive from linguistic indeterminacy. *Sacrifice*, after all, is one of those umbrella terms that can be used to describe everything from the story in Leviticus of the casting out of the scapegoat to purify the village of disease to the human-devouring ritual complex of the ancient Aztec to the act of a batter in baseball hitting a fly ball to deep right field in order to advance a base runner. Sacrifice explains the action of a mother who quits her job to raise her children, and it is invoked at every nation's parade to honor those lost in war. A firefighter who dies of smoke inhalation while putting out a blaze in an empty warehouse is praised for his sacrifice, and giving up a chess pawn to corner a bishop goes by the same name. The word is also used in reference both to the 2,996 people who died on the morning of September 11, 2001, and to the men responsible for their deaths.

The vagueness of the term does not account for the continuing interest in sacrifice. Rather, that vagueness is a surface effect that demonstrates the magnetic attraction of the concept and the abiding sense that there is something

important lying buried beneath the layers of language and the multiplicity of usages. Like many of my peers in academia, I believe something is worth discovering there, though I am also cognizant of the danger that I may only add more confusion to what is already a tangled web of partial solutions. Scholars have tended to add more stories to the stack rather than clear out the clutter that makes it difficult to get to the bottom of the pile. Our stories, more often than not, have been of the “just so” variety or—again, as Afghans say—*buud, na buud*: it was and it wasn’t. These stories come in the form of explanations of how our ancestors moved beyond the state of nature through various acts of collective violence.

One work that went against this theoretical obsession with uncovering the historical roots of religion and culture in an original act of sacrifice was published in 1898 by Henri Hubert and Marcel Mauss and translated into English as *Sacrifice: Its Nature and Function*.<sup>11</sup> Mauss is most renowned for another work—*The Gift* (1924)—written in the last years of his career. *The Gift*, one of the most influential works in anthropology, is credited with providing the discipline with much of its intellectual foundation. *Sacrifice* has not enjoyed as much fame or had the same sort of influence. However, it might be argued that, rather than *The Gift*, with its focus on precapitalist modes of exchange, *Sacrifice* has the most to teach us about the trials and tribulations of the contemporary world.<sup>12</sup>

Hubert and Mauss take as their starting point sacrificial rituals described in ancient Vedic and biblical sources, but they do not assume any evolutionary connection between these early examples and what comes later. As students and disciples of the sociologist Émile Durkheim, they are more interested in discerning the commonalities of ritual practice across time and space and developing propositions that could explain those unities in terms of both form and function. Given the authors’ preoccupation with ancient texts and ritual forms, much of the book is of limited relevance to my project; however, its theoretical approach embodies features of signal importance. For Hubert and Mauss, the primary role of sacrifice is to establish a pathway between the sacred and the profane worlds through the mediation of a victim whose destruction gives this relationship material form. Creation of a communicative link between the profane and sacred realms demonstrates the reality of the sacred. A second feature is the tripartite structure of both the rite (entry, act, and exit) and the division of responsibility (among the *sacrifier*, the sponsor of the sacrifice, to whom the moral benefit of the act accrues; the *sacrificer*, the person who carries out the sacrifice; and the *victim*, the individual or

object offered up and destroyed in the sacrificial act). Despite the set nature of the ritual's structure and personnel, the act could nevertheless be employed for diverse purposes, among them the fulfillment of an oath, expiation of a sin, and initiation of an individual to a new status, depending on how the parts of the ritual were arranged:

According to the end sought, according to the function it is to fulfill, the parts of which it is composed can be arranged in different proportions and in a different order. Some can assume more importance to the detriment of others; some may even be completely lacking. Hence arises the multiplicity of sacrifices, but without there being specific differences between the various combinations. It is always the same elements that are differently grouped or developed unequally.<sup>13</sup>

Because the elements of the rite can be arranged in different proportions and orders, it can be employed toward, at the one extreme, "inducing a state of sanctity" or, at the other, "dispelling a state of sin."<sup>14</sup> The ritual can bring about such different effects because the pure and impure are not conceived as dichotomous but rather as aspects of religious reality that can be exerted for good as well as for evil, depending on circumstances:

Thus is explained the way in which the same mechanisms of sacrifice can satisfy religious needs the difference between which is extreme. It bears the same ambiguity as the religious forces themselves. It can tend to both good and evil; the victim represents death as well as life, illness as well as health, sin as well as virtue, falsity as well as truth. It is the means of concentration of religious feeling; it expresses it, it incarnates it, it carries it along. By acting upon the victim one acts upon religious feeling, directs it either by attracting and absorbing it, or by expelling and eliminating it. Thus in the same way is explained the fact that by suitable procedures these two forms of religious feeling can be transformed into each other, and that rites which in certain cases appear contradictory are sometimes almost indistinguishable.<sup>15</sup>

There are obvious difficulties in applying this analysis to understanding the role of sacrifice and the rise of suicide bombing in the Afghan conflict. It is, first of all, not always possible to delineate a ritual structure in the acts of sacrifice I examine; indeed, the act is often perceived as sacrifice only after the fact. In such cases, sacrifice is less a ritual than a retrospective process of recognition and bestowal of status. Likewise, the demarcation of roles—of sacrificer, sacrificer, and victim—appears to break down or be nonexistent in many of the situations I examine, such as in cases that involve explicit self-

sacrifice. Nevertheless, Hubert and Mauss's work provides an invaluable starting point for my analysis, most importantly in the way they identify in the consecration of the victim the reality of violence (an object once alive is now dead) and understand that it is this act of killing that establishes the reality of the sacred and its tangible and immediate relation to the world of profane affairs.

In adapting and applying the concept of sacrifice to the Afghan conflict, I build upon but also simplify the lessons of Hubert and Mauss. As theorists have always done, I borrow an idea or an image from one domain of experience to make sense of what eludes ready explanation in a second domain. Even in this digital age, theory building is an analog process, and we make strides by extending what we already know and understand into areas that we do not yet know very well and do not at all understand. This is a metaphorical process, and "paradigm shifts" arise from a combination of new facts, new ways of perceiving those facts, and new insights that bring into focus the underlying patterns that are there for the seeing in the right light.

The analogue on which I base my theory of sacrifice is the simple machine. Like other simple machines, such as levers, screws, and pulleys, sacrifice converts, directs, and amplifies energy. Parts can be added to the basic structure, the energy produced can be directed along different channels to different ends, and that energy can be enhanced by the manner in which it is contained and released. In viewing sacrifice as a machine, I do not imply an instrumental or functionalist view of ritual process. Machines do not always fulfill the purpose for which they were originally intended, and that original purpose does not always prove the best use of a machine or foresee what unintended uses it might be put to or what the consequences of its use might be. If all of this is true for the machines that we consciously and incrementally invent, how much more true must it be for machines that no one invents, but which are happened upon or borrowed from someplace else? In this sense, I see the uses to which sacrifice might be put—whether it be the promotion of what Durkheim called "mechanical solidarity," what Marxists might call the "mystification" of power relations, or any other possible purpose—as an appropriation, and one that is likely eventually to fail, given that any particular ritual can tap but will never exhaust the energy on which sacrificial rites feed.

The energy that fuels this simple machine is the act of giving something up, most significantly manifested in the act of killing something or someone. There are sacrifices that do not involve—or only minimally involve—the act

of killing, but all involve an act of giving something up, and it seems reasonable to suppose that the energy released by the act of sacrifice is proportional to the closeness of the relationship between the thing given up (or the individual killed) and the ones who remain behind. The energy released by human sacrifice can be so great, in fact, that it can explode through the container meant to hold and channel it, and that possibility must be accounted for. All machines do break down over time. But the life of a machine can be extended through proper maintenance and care. It will break down faster if it is poorly maintained and overused. Likewise, if the ritual vessel that contains the energy released is not strong enough to hold it—if, for example, the violence inflicted appears unjust or arbitrarily applied—the energy can escape from the container, damaging the machine and indiscriminately spilling the residual contents of unsuccessful sacrifice (doubt, recrimination, and anger) out into society, with sometimes devastating results.

The machine I am imagining has just a few parts. These parts can be found anywhere, and when the machine breaks down, it can be readily rebuilt. Because of its simplicity, the machine can also be retooled to other purposes, particularly by a ritual engineer with a good understanding of the basic functioning of the machine. Then it can become a very different machine from the one it used to be, and it can be used to achieve very different ends. If, in the beginning, sacrifice was used to assuage grief, it can be transformed into a mechanism for bringing grief to others. As we will see, its force can be amplified to such a degree that it can also bring about levels of destruction that would have been unimaginable when the simple machine of sacrifice first entered human culture.

Just as physical machines require a means for harnessing and directing the energy released, so too with sacrifice. One might say that the energy is released by the machinery of sacrifice in two stages. The first stage, which involves the act of killing, happens within the container of ritual; the second, which involves the act of witnessing and absorbing the ritual, completes the transformation of a biological process into a social process. The act of killing thus creates the combustion, but the pistons that convert that energy into dynamic form are, first, the actions and words that accompany the act and, second, the perception by those witness to the act of what has taken place and the stories they tell about it. This second stage is the less predictable and more dangerous. The operators of the ritual attempt to follow the instructions and carry out the ritual as exactly as possible. They seek to demonstrate that they are the only ones entitled to conduct the ceremony and that they are doing it as prescribed by law and tradition. But the spectators of the ritual act might

judge otherwise. They might notice mistakes or question the validity of the rite. A lot depends on circumstance. Do those conducting the ritual seem to know what they are doing? Are they using the right instruments and using them in the right way? Does the victim evoke loathing or sympathy? Do the members of the audience feel as though they are watching something they are part of, or something that is being imposed upon them? In most cases, the machine functions as it is supposed to, but the possibility of failure must be accounted for and remembered.

In my metaphoric model, the “sacred” can be thought of as the “surplus energy” that comes from engaging in a collective action, the experience of which seems to the participants to be greater than the sum of its parts and to come from somewhere else. Because we do not know what to call that surplus, we give it a name that associates it with something that we do not control, that comes from without, and that is inexplicable and therefore wondrous. That surplus can be greater than the force of arms, as people will fight to control its source in order to possess its power. To a great extent, that is the story told in this book. It is also the story of how something that begins simply and constructively becomes, through the efforts of those who would have that power for themselves, something both incomprehensibly complex in its workings and tragic in its consequences.

The language of sacrifice I am using here might seem quite different from that of Hubert and Mauss, but the similarities are more important than the differences. Following their lead, I see the role of sacrifice as communicative and affirmative of the role of the sacred in the everyday world, in this case the everyday world of violence and loss. That violence can be transmuted into sacrifice is what makes the sacred real and loss thereby manageable. Like Hubert and Mauss, I also believe that, though sacrifice has certain recognizable and standard components, it is mutable and can be deployed toward different desired ends. Where my conception of sacrifice would seem most to differ from theirs is in their specific concern with formal rituals. My notion of sacrifice is more sweeping and often makes no reference to a particular ritual act or to individuals who fulfill in any obvious way the ritual roles of sacrificer, sacrificer, and victim. However, I see these differences not as deviations but as adaptations of the original theory that help us to understand contemporary adaptations of sacrificial ritual.

Martyrdom is the most important of these mutations for understanding the conflict in Afghanistan. Although it might appear that the idea and ideal of martyrdom have a certain permanent and ineluctable quality—a person

gives “the last full measure,” and those he leaves behind honor his passing in a culturally appropriate fashion—the certainty and finality we assume to be inherent in death and its remembrance are, in fact, illusory.

Defining a death as an act of martyrdom has at least as much potential for introducing doubt and finitude as for creating certitude, both for those who are part of the society that has come up with that designation and for those of us on the outside who are trying to make sense of the act. What is martyrdom, after all? How is it constituted as a true act of sacrifice, and who has the authority to make that determination? Do you have to die fighting, or can you die on the way to the fight? Is it necessary to have made a prior commitment to fight in order to be judged a martyr? Are you a martyr if your intention is simply to gain fame for yourself as a brave warrior, or if your motivation is specifically to die?

These are matters for which there are no definitive answers, even from experts of various sorts. Questions of meaning provide extensive room for uncertainty, debate, and political maneuvering. Many of the most common answers to the simplest of these questions go back to scripture, which means that only Islamic authorities can provide accurate answers. However, the scriptures themselves are subject to multiple interpretations, and there is no certainty as to who has the authority to deliver these interpretations. Besides, people do not always want experts to tell them the answers when they have answers of their own. The net result is that martyrdom is both an ideal and a problem, and it is in the widening crevasse between experience and ideal that many of Afghanistan’s most intractable problems have their origin.

Martyrdom is only one form of sacrifice. Another is the act of collective killing in which a “public” led by an “authority” (whether formally recognized as such or not) strikes down one or more of its members who have been judged guilty of a crime. Although the adjudication of the crime might be a legal matter, the public act of punishment can rightfully be considered a form of sacrifice, or, more specifically, of scapegoating. I will argue in chapter 4 that the Taliban adopted this form of sacrifice at a juncture when the machinery of sacrifice associated with martyrdom (a machinery that had helped to maintain the authority of the mujahidin parties during the Soviet occupation) had broken down due to infighting among the parties that had claimed the right to determine who was a martyr and which martyrs were more worthy of honor than others.

The Taliban period represents a time when martyrdom was eclipsed in importance by scapegoating rituals, but this was not the end of martyrdom.

Even while the Taliban regime was relying on acts of collective violence to solidify its legitimacy and power, so-called Afghan Arabs led by Abdullah ‘Azzam and Osama Bin Laden were actively changing the way that martyrdom would henceforth be understood and deployed. No longer satisfied with the retrospective conferral of status on the dead, they affected changes in the sacrificial machine that made the martyr the willful agent of his own demise. Or, to use the terms of Hubert and Mauss, the martyr would henceforth take onto himself the roles of sacrificer, sacrificer, and victim, accruing to himself, as well as to the leader and group he represented, the moral benefit of his act of self-sacrifice. This was the pivotal moment in the history of sacrifice in Afghanistan, and it laid the groundwork not only for September 11 but also for the subsequent alterations and manipulations to the machinery of sacrifice that have been undertaken since that cataclysmic event, including most especially the advent of suicide bombing, the subject of the final chapters of this book.