
Lindholm, Charles
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Boston University

CHARLES LINDHOLM
Boston University

Making a virtue of necessity is perhaps the most important lesson an ethnographer has to learn, and David Edwards has learnt it brilliantly. Unable to pursue his planned research in Afghanistan due to the ongoing warfare there, he was obliged to remain in the refugee camps of Pakistan. There dispossessed Afghan men, seeking to retain some purchase on their past, told stories of great heroes and epic battles of the last century. Edwards provided an audience for these narratives and uses them as the centerpiece for his striking portrait of this much brutalized society.

In concentrating on the stories and not on the actual lives of his informants Edwards uses the techniques of a rapidly burgeoning genre of anthropological research, one which often ignores ethnographic particulars. This is not the case here. The reader who wants to find out about the organization of a saint's entourage, or the various possible types of charitable donations in Afghanistan, or about a wide array of other concrete ethnographic details, will discover answers in this book.

And while much narratively-oriented anthropology is self-consciously atheoretical, Edwards hopes to reveal the inner structure of Afghan society by his comparative analysis of the stories of three exemplary heroes of the nineteenth century: Sultan Muhammad, a Pashtun khan whose tale is one of bloody revenge; Abdur Rahman, the "iron emir" of Afghanistan, whose pursuit of political authority led him to commit acts of extreme cruelty; and a saint, the Hadda Mulla, who claimed spiritual ascendance over his fellow Muslims. Each story, though different in form, is about the same topic: the struggle for power and glory among egalitarian individualists, and the high price that must be paid to gain even momentary victory. Pursing respect, Sultan Muhammad kills his best friend and blinds his own mother; pursuing domination,
Abdur Rahman is hated by his subjects as a tyrant; pursuing sanctity, the Hadda Mulla is derided by those whom he has not been able to save from ruin.

Edwards analyzes these tragedies as expressions of the internal contradictions and mutual incompatibility of three moral structures that can motivate heroic action among the Afghans: the warrior code of honor, the Muslim concept of mystical power, and the requirements of secular rule. These ethical models are then placed within the larger context of colonial intervention.

The final chapter is an account of a rebellion in Swat, Northern Pakistan, in 1897. Warriors, saints and rulers provide different versions of what occurred, and they are compared to the "official" British version, shown here to be yet another self-validating narrative. Edwards ends his own tale by inventively recording vitriolic postings from the internet about a recent rebellion in Swat to show that the arguments of the nineteenth century remain heated today.

The whole book is well structured, gracefully written and convincingly done. I envy Edwards' ability to convey the central ethical options of Pashtun men so skillfully. His argument has a wider application as well, since the tensions he describes are characteristic of the whole Middle East. Unfortunately, Edwards does not develop any theory about the conditions favoring the rise and maintenance of these ethical modes, and so leaves his thesis dangling. And, though he tries to avoid doing so, he nonetheless concludes that the present Afghan morass is an inevitable consequence of the deep "moral fault lines" which render the culture incoherent and prohibit the formation of a civic society. More attention to history and to the actual lives of ordinary men (and women) might have made this conclusion less compelling. Nonetheless, in this fine book David Edwards has raised disturbing and important questions about the very nature of culture and of morality.