

“WE WENT TO THE HILLS”:
FOUR AFGHAN LIFE STORIES

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Abstract

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This dissertation examines four Afghan life stories for prevalent micro-historical perspectives on shared Afghan macro-historical experiences. The introduction explains my background, motivations and objectives for conducting life history research in Afghanistan in 2004 and 2005. The first chapter outlines an approach applied to examining life stories that addresses three interrelated questions: first, how the narrator’s presentation is related to the memory of the actual events narrated (*biographical chronology*), second, how a narrative image/s of a person’s past is established in relationships to individually significant audience/s (*narrative self / audience*), and third, how interrelationships between the individual life and the socio-historical context are expressed by troubling or valued dimensions of the past (*existential orientation*). My examination focuses upon significant historical and interpersonal concerns as they manifest across individual life narratives. Each chapter begins with background on the circumstances of the interview, followed by the interview transcription, and concludes with an extended analysis of the life story. I conclude with ethnographic interpretation of each life story in light of recent Afghan history and speculating about the meanings of violence and the limits of trauma for contemporary understanding of Afghan culture and history.

Dedicated to Trinh Nguyen,
love of my life,
whose presence inspires
and makes each trial worthwhile.

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Introduction: An Individual Life, A Historical Period **and Life Narration**

A) Conducting Life Story Interviews

An early motivation for conducting research based on individual Afghan life stories was to counteract and complicate sensationalistic and simplistic accounts common in the US, especially after 9/11, that depict Afghans in terms of troubling caricatures. The media often presents Afghans as variations on four themes: religious zealots, brainwashed terrorists, misogynist polygamists, or desperate victims. Popular focus on disparaging generalizations or melodramatic exceptions fosters the perception of a primitive and anachronistic ‘other’ kept at a cultural and ethical distance. David Edwards observes in *Before Taliban* that since the Soviet Afghan war “Western attempts to understand Afghans and Afghanistan since the outset of war in 1978 have centered largely on stereotypes and personifications.”(2002:16)¹. On top of these cultural caricatures, public attention is dominated by hot bottom political topics presented as discrete problems that necessitate solution or management, and reveal little about the everyday realities of the ‘ordinary’ Afghans international interventions aim to promote, convince or defeat:

¹ David Edwards writes two pages later “Because the impression of Afghanistan in the West has centered on around a series of sensationalized stereotypes, my objective is to provide an alternative set of biographical representations.” This is very close to my own objectives in this work but a significant difference is that I do not focus on important political figures or large political processes but on relatively weak ‘ordinary’ people who takes stands, acting and reacting, to political and cultural, hoping to add ethnographic context to popular caricatures in the West.

examples include the rise of political Islam, the history of factious, regionally based leaders (warlords) the role of NATO and the US on national affairs, and the prevention of poppy production. Having lived and worked in the region for five years, first as an English teacher and then as an international development worker, before I began this research or decided to become a cultural anthropologist, I sought cultural and historical analysis that focused on individual experiences and perceptions.

In this work four life narrative interviews are translated from Dari to English and presented in close to their original form, with minor edits for ease of readability. An object from the beginning has been to have Afghan voices accompany my own, while also attending to my influence on the research process. My examination interprets the micro-political meanings of shared macro-historical experiences by examining four autobiographical accounts for indication of cultural processes and evidence of interpersonal concerns. Attention is given to the interview dynamics as an Afghan informant addresses me, a white, male American ethnographer, during an enormous, American-led military intervention (2005), but the focus is on the obligations and expectations of narrators addressing interpersonally significant communities in life reflection. Following Butalia's work on India's partition I ask, "If there is a way in which people's stories, notwithstanding all their problems (as a historical source), can somehow expand, stretch the definitions and boundaries of history and find a place in it." (2000:10). As four 'ordinary' Afghans narrate struggles to secure life, well-being, integrity, and autonomy, amidst great insecurity, their stories present actions and reactions, nostalgias and anxieties, hopes and frustrations, as articulations of political

discourse and cultural processes. It is hoped this study contributes useful ethnographic background to an enormous intervention that increasingly speaks of ‘winning the hearts and minds’ of the Afghan people. While there are no policy recommendations, I trust the discussions that follow contain indirect and direct implications for policy thinking and cultural exchange in the region.

I often refer to the past three decades of war in Afghanistan in the singular because at practical levels the continuous instability generated by political violence is more relevant for most Afghans than the frequently changing political justifications of conflict. Greater attention is given to the Soviet Afghan War (1979 – 1989) for a variety of reasons.

Macro-politically, the configuration of warring forces that emerged out of this conflict catalyzed the conflicts to come: the civil war between Mujahedin parties (1989 – 1995) later morphed into the troubling national grassroots movement of the Taliban (1995 – present) and inspired the international formation of Al Qaida. Micro-politically, the disruptions of everyday life caused by the Soviet Afghan War set in motion a new set of material struggles and interpersonal tensions in the lives of ordinary Afghans for the years to follow. (Rashid 2008, 2002 and 2001) This analysis explores the meanings of this lesser analyzed level of the war’s impact, particularly the life-defining intersubjective struggles and emotional dramas of individuals evident in life stories.

Prior to beginning to record an interview I told each informant that I wanted to write a book about recent lived Afghan history. I explained that the book would not focus on powerful historical figures or the dominant political or military events, as many authors have aptly done in the past. (Rashid 2003, 2001, Rubin 2002, Dorronsoro 2005, Mardsen 98, Nojumi 2002, Misra 2004, et al) Instead my goal was to present the experiences and perspectives of ‘ordinary’ Afghans across a lifetime amidst insecurity and conflict. I asked that they recount their life stories emphasizing how their lives have been affected by conflict since the Soviet intervention, and to include all kinds of memorable experiences, defining moments or daily routines, bad and good, recounted in as much detail as possible. In 2005, at the time of this research, I found many Afghans were comfortable and interested in speaking with an American ethnographer about their experiences during the Soviet War. Most were still optimistic that American-assisted efforts to oust the Taliban were succeeding and that projects aimed at economic and national development would soon begin to lessen daily struggles. From most accounts and discussions with Afghan friends near the time of this writing (2010), this optimism has since steadily eroded. I discuss how my nationality affects the interview dynamics mostly in the specific context of each life story, as this varies greatly from individual to individual.

Explaining the interviews, I asked participants to begin with early childhood circumstances and family background, their education and vocation, and to continue to narrate their lives as each saw fit and as memories returned to mind. Informants were

encouraged to speak as long and freely as they chose. When a narrator spoke without my prompting them with questions, I generally let the ‘interview’ proceed without interruption. Sometimes I asked my informants to clarify or expand on something they said, but for the most part I tried not to redirect with questions or comments. The object was to elicit a summarized account of an individual’s life recounted in a manner close to how the narrator chose to present it. In some ‘interviews’ the narrator clearly led the process, speaking freely and in detail with little prompting, and I asked questions only in the end, or as I felt something was wanting in an episode drawing to a close. In roughly seventy percent of over one hundred life story interviews I conducted, the interviewee completed the narrative in between forty-five minutes and one hour forty-five minutes, I take this consistency in the duration to be one indication amongst many that most Afghans felt a loose sense of a sufficient time to present an adequate image of their past, at least for the purposes I described. I found the most valuable interviews were personally-oriented and close to monologues, with the speaker and his life at the center of the narrative, and my assistant and me present as an attentive audience.

Circumstances in Afghanistan at the time of these interviews (2004 – 2005) were not easily conducive to repeated interviews, especially outside of Kabul: security and economic concerns, both my own and those of interviewees, made one time meetings more practical. After a single sitting it appeared that most thought that enough had been said about their lives. Overtime and my efforts to the contrary, I determined it was unnecessary and possibly inappropriate to encourage interviewees to continue much beyond their own sense of completion. Particularly with Afghans with whom I did not

have a preexisting relationship, I sensed that after an hour, or two at most, many felt the process was basically complete, 'good enough', at least for the moment. It was usually very clear to me when an Afghan began to wrap up an interview and in most cases when I pressed them to continue it rarely became productive. In multiple sitting interviews with people I did not know well, many grew bored and restless, sometimes anxious, by the process.

In interviews with people I knew well - friends, work colleagues or my students from Kabul University - influences entered interviews that were not conducive to this project, either attention-seeking, or something of a personal nature between us, or spoke without restraint with a sense that anything recounted was useful. I found it advantageous to keep my personal involvement with interviewees to a minimum: Greater detachment seemed to lend a centering presence to narratives. Admittedly, I find this still difficult to explain, but a certain formality of relationship resulted in interviews with more formal structure in self-presentation, one that I found both more easily re-presentable and culturally revealing. As I read life stories for addressing significant local audiences, the more familiar the narrator was with me, the more difficult it was to tease out other interpersonal dimensions at play. I had many interviews to choose from, but the diversity of perspective and background of the four presented here, as well as their manageable length and relative coherence, all contributed to their selection. Many interviews and friendships excluded here inform and reinforce my interpretations of the life stories to follow. I intend to make more extended use of these additional interviews in a different project. The four life stories included here provide for analysis the broad contours of

autobiographical presentation while also useful as they are passionately stated and relatively unencumbered by extraneous detail or self-conscious correction.

As I use a variety of terms to refer to the interviews solicited, re-presented and analyzed here, a brief discussion of these forays into life and oral history seems warranted. These accounts are basically spontaneous summarizations of individual pasts. They are primarily chronological presentation of transformative and memorable experiences, at a particular juncture in the life of each speaker, with an undefined time limit. I refer to these variously as interviews, narratives, life narratives, sometimes biographical chronologies, etc, but I prefer to call these simply 'life stories', to emphasize their subjective and self-fashioned qualities. (Biehl, Good and Kleinman 2007: 10, Kondo 1990: 48) Referring to these accounts as narratives emphasizes a temporal movement from the past and towards the present and future. Occasionally I refer to these narratives as life histories, but these are not as in depth or as extensive as the term 'life history' usually indicates. There should be little expectation of anything resembling a complete life history, not that a representation of an entire life is even remotely possible. My aim is not a life depicted in rich verifiable biographical detail, but examination of the autobiographical moves and life-defining concerns of individual Afghans, as they create a version of their pasts, in the peculiar circumstances of these encounters.

Identifying interviewees for this research was usually done through friends and colleagues. Afghans disinclined or deemed inappropriate to interview either removed themselves or were eliminated by my contacts before we ever met. Afghans sharply

antagonistic to the US intervention were both unlikely to be asked or unwilling to interview, and of course this influences the qualities of ethnographic information available to me. Meanwhile, I avoided southern regions where Afghan contingents (primarily the Taliban) that are vociferously anti-American are active. As far south as I went to collecting interviews was Ghazni. Many Afghans easily understood and most appeared comfortable with the idea of narrating their life story to me. Many who agreed to interview welcomed the opportunity to talk about their pasts and to voice their trials and occasional triumphs, despite extremely trying circumstances, to a sympathetic American researcher. Often Afghans expressed uncertainty about how their lives might relate to or have bearing on the course or record of Afghan history. The majority of Afghans I interviewed was illiterate, and most thought their own role in the course of Afghan affairs to be minimal or irrelevant. The first and fourth interviewees presented here, that is Ustad Mohammad Alim, a seventy year old high school principal, and Jamila Afghani, a thirty year old activist for women, are both highly educated by Afghan standards. The second and third interviewees presented, Nor Mohammad and Haji Bomani, sixty-five and forty-five years old respectively, were active Mujahedin throughout the Soviet conflict and are functionally illiterate.

Older Afghan men in particular initially resisted focus on their own individual wartime and life experiences. They often began assuming my interest in and limited knowledge of the macro-political or military history of the region. When this occurred, I tried to remind them that my concern was in the fabric of their own particular pasts, that is memorable events and formative experiences as they returned to mind. Women, I find,

more readily kept their narration focused on their own pasts and family lives, often saying that they were uninformed about political issues and were uninvolved in public affairs. Butalia observes in *The Other Side of Silence* “From the women I learned about the minutiae of their lives, while for the most part men spoke of the relations between communities, the broad political realities.”(2000:12). I find this observation from the South Asian context borne out as well in the interviews I conducted. Roughly one third of the interviews I conducted were with women, typically activists or educators, as other Afghan women were not easily available to interview and very rarely spoke at length or comfortably if made available. The one woman presented in these four life stories, Jamila Afghani, speaks in detail about her struggle with family to pursue an education and to work as a women’s activist. The three men presented keep their narrative more focused on the social and interpersonal dimensions of their political involvements, especially during the Soviet Afghan war, and far less on family life than Jamila. This gendered inclination towards micro-political / macro-political issues can be observed in these narratives, and is evident here despite the fact that Jamila has a MA in International Relations from Peshawar University.

All interviews took place with one of the two research assistants, the majority with an exceptionally talented young man and dear friend, Ramin Ahmadi. Ramin understood how to comfortably encourage Afghans to speak about themselves about the issues and interests of this research. I remember one interview with an elderly farmer who was having a hard time understanding my explanation of the interview and Ramin said, “Imagine we are making a movie about your life, tell us the interesting stories you would

put in this movie.” In response this white-bearded villager stopped his diatribe on the failures of Afghan political leadership and the manipulation of the country by Pakistan and began to talk about his childhood and wartime experiences. Ramin’s influence on this research is great and I discuss him and his contributions in detail in the third interview because he has a significant relationship with this interviewee. His idea about a movie turned out to be a simple and effective way of explaining interest in first-person accounts of significant episodes from their pasts and we integrated this into our introduction. Admittedly, it is curious that it proved useful considering few Afghans have access to television or movie theatres, but indicates the unexpected influence of this modern medium as a recognizable example of first-person stories from daily life. As I develop across the analysis to follow, much that is labeled modern and materially unavailable in daily life still has a powerful influence on the imaginations, aspirations and fears of ordinary Afghans.

B) My Motivations and Background

A personal motivation for this work is to present the resilience and character of the many Afghans I have known over nearly two decades of my life. I first went to the region in 1990 for two years as a Peace Corps volunteer in southwestern Pakistan, in the province of Baluchistan, where I was a teacher in local high school that was close to the Afghan border. The local population where I taught was almost equally divided between Pashtun

and Baluch students, the two major ethnic/tribal groups in the area that straddle the Afghan/Pakistan border. After Peace Corps, I remained in the region for another two and a half years to work on an Afghan repatriation program, a project jointly managed by the IOM and UNHCR. Between 1992 and 1994 I traveled to refugee camps across western Pakistan to assist the transportation arrangements of Afghans who were returning to their homes, often working with refugees who had been displaced by war for more than a decade. My official work was to provide financial and logistical assistance to small poor communities as they planned their repatriation to their pre-war villages. Journeys home typically involved families traveling for two days to a week, in the back of an open truck on destroyed roads under a desert sun, as a civil war continued unabated. For some, these journeys home were prohibitively expensive, and for all, entailed dangers. Through satellite radios and offices across Afghanistan our objectives increasingly became contributing real time information about security en route, and the original purpose to ease the costs of transportation and to lessen the financial burden of repatriation became secondary to security concerns.

After my official work in these Pakistan-based refugee camps was complete, I would almost always be invited for tea and dinner. Often I felt obliged to refuse because the lavish meals I was inevitably offered were beyond the means of many in refugee camps. Afghans are fabulously hospitable, a very 'ordinary' Afghan cultural attribute rarely evident in media or scholarship, yet abundantly evident to anyone who has lived in the region. I would remain to hear stories nostalgic of village life before the Soviet war, or of harrowing journeys across the war-torn countryside to the relative safety of Pakistan,

or of the unending tedium of life in refugee camps. I have repeatedly been moved by the honor, grace and tenacity many Afghans continued to demonstrate after three decades of tremendous hardship and loss. This project originates from this time when I had the unusual good fortune to meet Afghan villagers from across the country as they prepared to return home. As it turned out, for many the homecoming turned sour, the fighting between the Mujahidin parties escalated (1989 – 1995), gave way to the draconian cultural intolerance of the Taliban regime (1995 – 2001) and, at the time of this writing, political and economic insecurity continues after a nine year insurgency (2001 – 2009). Lessons imparted in casual encounters, after ‘the real work’ was completed, are a significant source of background to my commentary on these narratives.

The original proposal for this research project was conceptualized as a graduate student of cultural anthropology at the Graduate Center, CUNY in New York City in 2003 and 2004. At the time I proposed a question that addressed theoretical and experiential issues at the intersection of trauma, violence and creative practices, as they relate to the discipline of anthropology and the social sciences more generally. In early interviews before life stories became the focus, I found it difficult to explain my research objectives as they made little sense outside of their theoretical or disciplinary context. When informants thought my research objectives were uncertain, unclear, or worse, irrelevant, they were reluctant to speak. When my questions became overly focused or targeted, interviewees appeared confused, or became guarded. I remember an early interview that was going well until I asked about the Taliban and suddenly silence ensued. It was clear

that Afghans asked themselves why I was in the country, traveling the countryside, and asking questions.

For centuries Afghanistan has been located at the crossroads of empires, either delicately navigating between or being violently crashed upon by larger, wealthier nations. A result of this long history of international intrusion and geographic isolation is that many encounters with strangers can begin with respectful but guarded suspicion. During my work as a teacher and then later under the auspices of the UN and IOM, I had something to offer Afghans. Almost fifteen years later, the political climate had changed dramatically. As I conducted my field research I had to reckon with the uncomfortable reality that I had little of tangible worth to offer to my informants.²

Given the vulnerability and poverty of most Afghans I sought to interview and a long and recent history of foreign interference in Afghan affairs, it was important to be able to explain my presence and research in a manner that was easily accepted, both as socially relevant and politically non-partisan. Circumstances made it easy to create false expectations or raise suspicions. Over time, more practical and simpler concerns took precedence over the original ones. It became apparent that Afghan life stories were an effective and, more significantly, an available medium for conducting ethnographic research in contemporary Afghanistan. In a context of rapid social transformation in

² There are two limited things I would suggest, very tentatively, that the collection of this research offered to some Afghans who were so predisposed: first, some Afghans, like some people everywhere, like to be listened to, and life story interviews provided a context for Afghans to review their life before an attentive audience, and a related second, most Afghans have a sense that the circumstances of their lives were extreme in suffering and hardship and value the possibility that this personal and national past might be communicated to others.

which my national origins are deeply implicated, the concerns, interests and comfort level of those I engaged increasingly guided my research. My ethnographic interests gravitated towards the existential and interpersonal concerns Afghans volunteered as I sequestered stories of their pasts.³ Meanwhile, presentation of entire life stories helped to lessen my influence on the research. As fieldwork progressed, it became clear that a great many Afghans wanted others, perhaps particularly Americans, to know what they and their countrymen had experienced during this extended geopolitical conflict. Most Afghans felt that their lives had transpired under extenuating circumstances, often appeared honored by interest in their pasts, and occasionally seemed to appreciate the geopolitical irony of an American conducting ethnographic research on the history of political violence at the time.

Conducting life story interviews solved a variety of research problems. With the US military fighting an insurgent war at the same time that I traveled the countryside conducting interviews, it was important that my research be obviously detached from US military concerns and from the various sides in contemporary Afghan politics. Afghan history approached through individual life narratives made it possible to explain my research in unambiguous terms that Afghans easily understood and felt capable of addressing. Unstructured life story interviews left Afghans with significant control of the interview process and free to speak about their lives however they saw fit. Collecting information without asking many questions lessened distrust. I did not identify specific groups or ethnicities for potential participation, in part to minimize suspicion of ulterior political preference. Explaining my work as writing an oft-neglected perspective of

³ I discuss this in greater detail in the first chapter on methodology.

Afghan history from individual experiences honored narrators and respected the realities of tumultuous pasts. It opened a space for Afghans to do something that they do well, tell stories, and talk about something they are naturally interested in, themselves and their struggles during difficult political and economic circumstances.

Vincent Crapanzano writes provocatively in the first paragraph of *Imaginative Horizons*, “The individual has always been something of an embarrassment in anthropology.”(2004:1) and emphasizes the importance of imaginative processes in cultural analysis. I am engaged in an effort to speak of culture through analysis of the creation of life stories. I explain a method of examining individual memories of the past in the first chapter that avoids becoming a psychological or social structural study. Afghan life stories are a source for observing individuals as they present images of their pasts in complicated relationships with valued or antagonizing audiences and for demonstrating cultural processes as they emerge at micro-political levels. In *Sensory Biographies* Desjarlais writes that he takes a “ ‘person centered’ centered approach to cultural phenomena... by attending carefully to how a person or two within a specific social setting live out and make sense of their lives, anthropologists can effectively address the ways personal and interpersonal concerns of individuals relate to social and cultural processes....”(2003: 4-5). Cultural identity at a group level assumes common

characteristics and mutual sources of identity across a group of people who share the identity. However micro-political and interpersonal dynamics do not function or manifest in individuals in the same manner as for social structures and group identities. I do not suggest that attention to either individual or cultural identity is comparatively more analyzable or useful, but I do wish to call attention to a tension at the center of this project: that is movement between cultural and historical generalizations that originate out of and reflect off of individuals and their particular life stories. My bias within the four chapters that form the body of this work is towards the singularity and particularity of individual reflections on and adaptations to circumstances. Sometimes this becomes a source for generalization, perspective and inference about Afghan cultural processes and historical experiences. Or to paraphrase Butalia's explanation of her work with oral histories from the political partition of India, "the generality of Partition exists publicly in the statistics and history books but the particular, which is harder to discover, exists privately in the stories told and retold inside in so many households."(2000: 3).

In the work that follows I focus on the qualities and turns of memory in biographical chronologies and examine the existential preoccupations of individual narrators in relations to the macro-political events of the period recounted. I keep life defining concerns and intersubjective tensions at center stage, discussing individual decisions, perceptions, and reactions to changing life circumstances: the large historical stage is minimally set as necessary to contribute meaning and context to an individual's life trajectory. Le Goff writing about the emergence of 'lived history' explains "...biography does not oppose the individual and society but treats them as mutually illuminating, and

politics does not deal with the old political history but with the new problematic of power.”(1992: x). Presentation and discussion of individual narratives is a platform for considering dimensions of Afghan culture that emphasizes the qualities of lived historical experience. As a cultural study that emphasizes the particularities of the micro-political, I ask what the experiences and perspectives of an individual’s life story reveal about the evolving dispositions of people in changing relationships to a place and time. Similarly, Urvashi Butalia writing about India explains the generality of Partition exists publicly in history books but, “The particular is harder to discover: it exists privately in the stories told and retold inside so many households in India and Pakistan.”(2000: 3). Based upon four life narratives, and drawing upon lessons learned from years of work in the region and over one hundred additional interviews, I suggest interpretations of the Afghan historical experiences as they emerge in individual depictions that follow.

One reason I choose to work with life stories is belief that an individual, and a life time of suffering and acting, can be related to and felt at immediate personal levels in a manner less available for historical periods, national communities, social structures or political chronologies. One object of this manner of qualitative analysis is to enable the reader to sympathetically and critically listen to these narrators and their stories in a manner striving towards, yet necessarily falling short of, personal engagement. A grand hope is the reader might try to imagine sitting with the subject, listening to, not an 'other', but ‘another’, like stories told by an Afghan neighbor from across the street. Or perhaps that a reader might imagine himself in the place of the Afghan whose life story is being narrated. Theoretical detachment or cultural systematization form part of the discussion,

but are secondary to wishing to evoke an emotional and tangible engagement with accounts of loss, occasional success, and mostly ‘struggling along’, reconstructed here. (Desjarlais 1997: 24) Delving into and grasping these individual life stories is an approach to a culture and history not understood as a systematic whole or a succession of causally related events, but as a sympathetic yet critical engagement with the autobiographical accounts of life experiences of people united primarily by sharing national borders across difficult times.

Chapter 1 – Reading Life Stories for Intersubjectivity

“The eye you see is an eye
Not because you see it;
It is an eye because it sees you.”

(Antonio Machado, Trans Alan Trueblood, 1982: 177)

A) Life Narrative in Contexts

I began examining life narratives asking what aspects of the process of life story narration emerge repeatedly, first in terms of the structuring and styling of autobiographical presentation, and second in terms of the meanings, depictions, and attitudes towards defining historical experiences and cultural discourses. Over time, consistent themes and topics emerged, and though they took distinct forms, I found they also often coalesced around shared, life-defining struggles, concerns and anxieties. Examples of prevalent themes in life stories include assessment of the Soviet Afghan war, evaluation of poverty and unemployment, interest in standing amongst one’s peers and community, expectation and disappointment with national political initiatives, uncertainty about security, and reaction to the US intervention. I selected the four life stories that follow because recurrent concerns and popular discourses are passionately addressed from contrasting perspectives and based upon disparate life experiences. For example, each speaker narrates reactions to life-threatening situations under dissimilar political circumstances.

Or another example, each narrator is challenged by gender norms, either personally or at cultural levels, but with very different expectations. All four describe a strong interest in education despite very different educational experiences. I discuss various micro-historical perspectives on recurrent themes by comparing and contrasting interviews. I pursue analysis that remains attentive to the particularities of each speaker's narrative while establishing the grounds for historical and cultural generalizations. The result is a heuristic approach that identifies and evaluates individual articulations of life-defining concerns and that are related to the greater popular Afghan context.

The four chapters that follow each focus on an individual life story and are broken into three sections. The first section is a brief introduction with background on the speaker and the setting of the narrative. The second section is a translated transcription that closely follows the actual interview with minor editing for ease and clarity of reading, and interrupted intermittently by my observations about changes in the physical comportment or vocal register of the speaker. The third section concludes with an extended discussion and interpretations based on the individual's account and placed within the larger historical and cultural context. In first half of this chapter I make some observations about how Afghans generally appeared to engage the life narrative process. I continue speculating about how the process of memory in autobiographical self-presentation and its bearing on the interpretive method I apply. The second half outlines theoretical sources and interpretative strategies that explain and justify the analysis in the chapters that follow. I begin this second half contrasting the idea of a record of the past known in its factual, literal entirety, I label this the biographical chronology, against the

highly abbreviated record of a life story created from a series of memories. I explain the interpretative and necessarily situation-specific relationship of a narrative image to a narrative audience as I apply these concepts to my reading of these life stories. This is followed by a brief discussion of an existential orientation, all of which become more specifically developed in examining and contrasting life stories.

The political and military influence of the US on Afghanistan obviously has been and remains incomparably greater than the influence of Afghanistan on the US. This is true despite Al-Qaida groups training in the region to attack the US mainland, Taliban insurgents fighting US soldiers and the horrific destruction of the 9/11 attacks. Portrayals of Afghans in the US often include a sense of threat to Americans, a real political concern but one that offers little, and mostly detracts from, an appreciation for cultural background and historical experiences. While no Afghan has been implicated in the 9/11 attacks, nearly one hundred thousand mostly US and a smaller number of NATO soldiers are contentiously stationed on Afghan soil, fighting a small number of insurgents.⁴ Perhaps surprisingly, despite the great disparity in political power between the two countries, my experiences suggest that in personal, informal encounters individual Americans are more distrustful of an individual Afghan, than individual Afghans are

⁴ My point here is not at all an objective assessment of real or perceived threats but to observe the difference in cultural histories, perceptions and presentations of national identities in these two countries as they have bearing on the interview context.

distrustful of an individual American. Admittedly claims of this nature are difficult to substantiate, but merit mention as I think they are present in the dynamics of these interviews. I ask an American reader to begin imagining an Afghan and his American assistant coming up to you and asking to record a version of your life in an interview setting. Given the larger political context of the encounter an initial reaction might be curiosity, perhaps openness, but for many I suspect, also mixed with unease and distrust. In these interviews my identity for many Afghans is primarily as an American. All the following four Afghans basically knew about me apart from my nationality was that I was a white, male researcher and teacher at Kabul University. Afghan uncertainty and distrust about the interview process was something I struggled to lessen. The influence this has on my research is discussed in general terms below and specifically in my comments on each life story in the chapters to follow.

Many Afghans begin expressing honor at being asked to present their life story for research purposes. Many informants appeared to appreciate having their person and past taken seriously, listened to, and possibly documented. In most cases, I do not believe this willingness, and frequent eagerness, was disingenuous. At a material level, interest in the interviews is also likely influenced by the fact that I come from a country of great material wealth and power, which becomes associated with hope of potential benefit as a result of participation. At a broad political level, many Afghans treat these interviews as an opportunity to correct their sense of cultural misunderstandings between the West/US and Afghanistan or Islam. In the case of Nor Mohammad and Jamila, the second and forth interviews presented here, one motive I sense in these interviews is to explain

differences in Afghan culture that each in various manner believes the West misunderstands or might rectify. On the other hand, in the case of Mohammad Alim and Haji Bomani, from the first and third chapters, a motive of the interview, albeit from very different political expectations, is to justify Afghanistan's place in the illustrious fold of international geopolitics as an equal, peaceful and respected partner.

Beyond the more empirically neutral observation that everyone has a unique past which might be recounted if requested, a starting point of the method I apply to reading these interviews is that many people, in varying forms, are already undisciplined historians of their pasts. Most people are not as fundamentally concerned about objectivity, synthesis or application, as the professional historian, but nevertheless are/keep/have some manner of record of their lives: considered from one direction, the structure of stories from the past help to make sense of the world, while considered from another direction, how sense is made of the world helps to structure stories remembered and told about the past.

Michael Jackson drawing upon Hannah Arendt writes, life stories:

are authored not by autonomous subjects but by the dynamics of intersubjectivity, in which initiatives are often frustrated and desire transformed. Yet unlike material objects, which are also produced in the course of human interaction, stories always convey this two fold sense of the human subject as both the actor and sufferer (Jackson 1998: 23, from Arendt 1958:184).

As the keeper of a self amongst others, a notion of a distinct albeit changing person exists whose history is kept and what I explain later as a narrative image takes shape in evolving intersubjective relationships to social worlds inhabited over a lifetime. Many people are engaged in a lifelong process of understanding a world in which they are acted upon, often suffer from, and sometimes act on, the circumstances they are thrown. A life

story briefly outlines clues to narrator's sense of self in that world. I picture a minimalist pencil sketch of face, perhaps even with a few lines missing from the portrait, that nevertheless, completed by the imagination, is sufficient to indicate a unique facial expression and to suggest a disposition. As a lifetime of memories becomes emotionally and mentally masticated across a life, some episodes are available to memory to be recounted to others. I would add that interest, perhaps urgency, in narrating one's past can be greater amongst those who have lived under extenuating, especially unjust or unfortunate, circumstances.

The life story narrator tells a story with himself at the center, both as subject and object, sometimes protagonist, sometimes antagonist, of his presentation. He is both a living archive and an unprofessional historian of his own past. Each of us is, keeps and organizes a subjective record of significant memories, a life-long product of some manner of self-fashioning, based upon our past experiences. The emphasis here is upon life stories that anticipate locally significant audience/s and interact with challenging cultural discourses. In the process of recounting their lives, most people separate their lives into large manageable units, roughly dividing the past into stages, e.g. childhood, school years, early adulthood, etc. Afghan life stories typically refer to periods of relative stasis ruptured by political and personal upheaval, e.g. the time of King Zahir

Shah, the pre-war years, the Soviet war years, life under Taliban, displacement in Kabul or as a refugee in Pakistan, etc. Each narrative is a self and socially constructed assortment of memorable episodes from an individual past, and is usually accompanied by summarization and interpretation of the experiences recounted. A starting point of analysis is to explicate what these life narratives demonstrate beyond a string of unrelated episodes, randomly chosen and spontaneously recreated, one day to this ethnographer. Catherine Kohler Reissman observes “To the sociologically oriented investigator, studying narratives is additionally useful for what it reveals about social life—culture “speaks itself” through an individual’s story.”(1993: 5) And a few pages later she explains:

Like weight bearing walls, personal narratives depend on certain structures to hold them together. Stories told in conversation share common parameters, although they may be put together in contrasting ways and, as a result, point to different interpretations. Events become meaningful because of their placement in a narrative (1993: 18).

The pursuit of identifying structures in these narratives, uncertain and also unavoidably my own creation, identifies patterns memory takes on the contours of a path I suggest is loosely already present in the mind of these narrators: a path that guides and enables the recounting of particular dimensions of a life, excludes vast expanses of a past, and reflects aspects of a particular cultural and historical past.

This project queries life stories at two distinct levels. The first is a cultural phenomenologically-oriented examination of the autobiographical process of self-presentation through life narration. The second considers the narrator’s stated place in, interrelationships to, and explanations of, the historical and cultural context of his past.

For my purposes the cultural phenomenological analysis serves as an interpretative approach to the experiences and the interpersonal meanings of historical events and prevalent discourses. I anticipate the outlines of this method has application in non-Afghan circumstances, and occasionally I make comparative speculations mostly to the American cultural context, but the method is explained primarily as it has bearing on the narratives I have collected and examined, and focused on the four life narratives that follow. Hayden White, drawing on Barthes, writes at the beginning of *The Content of the Form*:

Far from being a problem, then, narrative might well be considered a solution to a problem of general human concern, namely, the problem of how to translate knowing into telling, the problem of fashioning human experience into a form assimilable to structures of meaning that are generally human rather than culture specific. We may not be able fully to comprehend specific thought patterns of another culture, but we have relatively less difficulty understanding a story coming from another culture, however exotic that culture may appear to us (1987:1).

Important questions regarding Afghan genres of life narration, my influence as an American researcher, interviewee expectations of the interview or the veracity of these accounts are discussed either as Afghans address these issues within their narratives or as they have bearing on my interpretation. Greater attention is given to Afghan intersubjective concerns and interpersonal obligations, because these are defining of the narratives and of Afghan cultural sensibilities. Kathleen Stewart writes of narrative, “But whatever its presumed motives or traceable effects, and whether it takes a relatively authoritative, monologic form or more open, dialogic form, narrative is first and foremost a mediating form through which ‘meaning’ must pass.”(1996: 29). As the meanings of past experiences pass through the life narratives of historically insignificant actors, focus

upon interpersonal dimensions of life stories complements Afghan historical and cultural analysis.

An interpretative contention I return to is that these life stories can be productively read to contain an incomplete reflection of narrative image/s or center/s that significantly prefigure our encounters, become re-presented during the interview, and stand in relationships to relevant communities and past events. Hayden White, summarizing a large body of emerging work concerned with narrative in the social sciences and the humanities, argues, “All of this can be taken as evidence of the recognition that narrative, far from being merely a discourse that can be filled with different contents, real or imaginary as the case may be, already possesses a content prior to any given actualization of it in speech and writing.”(1987: xi) In the case of these life stories, I suggest one approach to examining this ‘content’ is identifying what I variously label a narrative center, narrative image, or narrative self, and interpreting associated qualities and characteristics as evident in narrative performance. This is not an argument empirically for some psychically or otherwise existing reality or singular sense of self, but it is a manner of interpreting interpersonal dynamics and micro-political concerns present in individual narratives for historical and cultural insight. In *Crafting Selves* Dorinne K. Kondo writes “identity is not a static *object* but a creative *process*; hence *crafting* is a lifelong – occupation.”(1990: 48), and continues explaining how selves are crafted over time with, in her case, emphasis on relationships to work environments. Efforts here are to describe the crafting of narrative selves or centers as they emerge in relationships to narrative audiences and are indicative of significant intersubjective dramas. I do not

mean to suggest fixed identities, but to indicate the relationship of a narrative self to a narrative audience as an important influence on the processes of Afghan autobiographical presentation.

I briefly venture a bird's eye conceptualization of differences between sight and memory as it has bearing on the interpretative method more explicitly developed in the remainder of this chapter. If the empirical tradition could be said to begin oriented towards physical entities in space across measurable increments of time, the effort here might be more accurately explained in somewhat reversed terms, as oriented towards temporal sensibilities evident in individual narration of experiences across the span of a life. A preponderance of spatially oriented language and preoccupation with evidence of causal relationships complicates examination of temporal experience in life narratives or social life. The life narrator is often said to travel back across time and return with an account of significant experiences that exemplify his past and with relevance to the present. Descriptions of memory employ a host of spatial images like 'traveling back', 'searching the past', and 'returning to the present' carrying 'the objects of memory' for a process that seems more inherently temporal than literally spatial in orientation. An incommensurate mix of spatial and temporal metaphors appears to confuse examination of memory, both in popular perception and in theoretical application. I make no claim

here to remedy perennial questions regarding the nature of memory, space and time, but direct attention to differences in temporal and spatial perception, here understood primarily in terms of memory and sight, as it has bearing on this analysis. Consideration of mixed metaphorical sources serves to indicate some limitations of spatial images to describe a process more fundamentally temporal in nature and likely effect expectations of this analysis.

I begin with a simple example to demonstrate a concern. As in all 'observation' across either a temporal or spatial distance, the observer's perspective and/or location enables what is visible and what remains unseen. In spatial terms, standing before a tall wall blocks one from seeing what is on the other side. This basic observation demonstrates a difference between temporal looking back (memory) and spatial observation (sight): the precise moment and location of looking across the past influences memory differently than for spatial observation. Compared to sight memory is less determined by what physically lies before the eyes at the moment of remembering and is less determined by the arbitrary location of a body in space or time. In other words, what one physically sees with the eyes at any given moment is determined by where one happens to stand and what physically lies before the observer: in contrast, what memory 'sees' scanning the past is determined by a vast array of factors, two of which are one's precise physical or temporal location at the time of gazing back over the past. What factors affect an individual's ability to locate 'memorable' experiences as a life narrator scans his past? No empirically precise answers exist, only manners of addressing the question that are interpretative of specific circumstances and individual meanings in particular contexts.

The perspective of the life narrator is a highly edited culmination and consolidation of a lifetime of experiences, funneled in some form through the concerns of the present, but I propose that the present for the life story narrator is better understood as period of life and a style of perceiving the self, a centering presence in the midst of continuous flux, and neither a moment in time nor an isolated now. The narrative center underpinning memories of a past, incomplete, partial and lacking the permanence of a physical object, nevertheless can be qualitatively interpreted as a focal point of analysis.

Related to this abstract claim, the use of memory by non-professional participants and observers is often a source of criticizing, sometimes dismissing, oral and life history, because it is said to lack the detachment or objectivity expected of the professional historian. Butalia writes about her use of oral narratives:

Working with memory is never unproblematic. I am deeply aware of the problems that attach to method I have chosen. ... But to me, the way people choose to remember an event is at least as important as what one might call the 'facts' of that history, for after all, these later are not self-evident givens; instead they too are interpretations, as remembered or recorded by one individual or another (2000: 8).

Only occasionally do I speak of veracity of accounts and then as a manner of interpreting the motivations and meaning of presenting events in a life story for the narrator. Ricoeur usefully warns about reproaching memory too strongly:

against the tendency of many authors to approach memory on the basis of its deficiencies, even its dysfunctions... It is important, in my opinion, to approach the description of mnemonic phenomena from the standpoint of the capacities of which they are a "happy" realization. To memory is tied an ambition, a claim – of being faithful to the past. In this respect, the deficiencies stemming from forgetting... should not be treated straight away as pathological forms, as dysfunctions, but as the shadowy underside of the bright region of memory, which binds us to what has passed before we remember... For, as will be shown,

testimony constitutes the fundamental transitional structure between memory and history (2004: 21).

Despite the reality and complexity of all that has been forgotten and excluded from a life story this 'happy memory' Ricoeur elsewhere refers to, is here treated simply as the fact that a memory of a life and past exists. I ask about the process memory takes in an account of the past, examine the life-defining concerns and cultural discourses, consider the inclusions and exclusions, for what these indicate about the narrator's character. Examination of individual ethical attachments to significant communities and interpretations of historical context offers an expanded sense of Afghan history at the time of these interviews. (2004 and 2005)

B) The Contours of a Method: Biographical Chronology, Narrative Self/Audience, and an Existential Orientation

Human plurality, the basic condition of both action and speech, has the twofold character of equality and distinction (Arendt 1958: 175).

A sincerely engaged life story is likely a personal and self-reflective occasion for the narrator. As narration increases in momentum the more ordinary relationship of the past to the present grows partially reversed. As a narrator becomes invested in recounting his life, a series of past experiences and defining memories, ordinarily the quiet background to the demands of daily life, briefly move to the foreground, while the immediate

exigencies of everyday life are temporarily placed at the periphery of consciousness. Life narration engages the speaker in a peculiar process of focusing attention on what the narrator would appear to know most intimately, his significant life experiences and a sense of self in the past. A fundamental distinction is often made about how memories are said to return to mind and become voiced in narrative, one mostly reconfirmed in ordinary experience and this analysis. Sometimes attention wades with uncertainty into murky waters, struggling ‘against the stream’ to retrieve mostly forgotten, or partially submerged experiences. Life narrators often express surprise by what returns to mind revisiting the past. At times a memory appears to return with its own volition and becomes recalled with little effort, often accompanied by strong emotions. Paul Ricoeur referring to this fundamental distinction at the very outset of his long phenomenological journey in *Memory, History, Forgetting* writes, “the Greeks had two words *mneme* and *anamnesis* to designate, on the one hand, memory as appearing, ultimately passively...the popping into mind of a memory; and on the other, the memory as an object of a search ordinarily named recall, recollection.”(2004: 4). When the effort to retrieve a past appears to flow freely as if with a passion and force of its own in these interviews, I label this a *narrative freefall*, and I consider its implications and emotional associations for explication or interpretation of sections of interviews.

Another strategy is to carefully consider places where the narrator’s presentation wanders far from the question posed, or similarly, where an explanation suddenly strays widely from the topic at hand. I term a *wandering response* places in an interview where a significant assertion or description is noteworthy for its insertion, despite the direction of

the speaker's previous narration or the subject of a question posed. These responses are analyzed for what they indicate about a speaker's interest in these topics, processing of a life concern, or desire to address particular audiences. As I studied these interviews, I found that unusual deviation from a topic or an odd tangent from an interview trajectory were often related to other curious responses or recurrent concerns.⁵ Often these tangents revealed more about 'who' the narrator is than many statements that fit more squarely into the life narrative process. The idea of a wandering response begs questions of intention.

For the purposes of my explication, I have determined it is not especially important whether my interpretation is intended or unintended by the speaker or, similarly whether the motivations or interpretations I indicate are judged conscious or unconscious. I briefly submit four reasons why I avoid seeking to establish intentionality, explanations that also significant to my reading of interviews. First, while the focus of this study is on individuals and their life narratives, it is not a psychological study. My goal is not to explain aspects of the speaker's individual psyche, but to explore the relationship of an individual's life narrative to the greater Afghan historical and cultural context. Second, a theoretically clear line that divides oppositional or contrasting notions like conscious and unconscious, or intentional and unintentional, is rarely sharp in practical, real world application. Third, assessing the presence of rapidly changing historical experiences or differently understood cultural heritages for individuals requires consideration of how social structural or cultural continuities are carried across time or become redirected by

⁵ This might be considered in manner similar to that of the Freudian slip.

individuals, intentionally or not. A sharp distinction between that which is conscious from that which is unconscious on the part of the speaker distracts from observing cultural continuity and discontinuity. The simplest reason is, I rarely have any way of establishing which side of the distinction the speaker is on. Thus, the fact or appearance of digression is often significant, but whether there was intention in the digression is minimally entertained.

An individual remembering his past synthesizes and re-presents the defining events and memorable experiences of his life before another. An overly literal reading of 're-member' begins to usefully illustrate the interpretative approach taken: 're-member' might be thought of as identifying the primary appendages of a past, the 'members', and arranging them to make an image, a picture, of oneself, in a past. For a narrator to conceive, 're-member' and meaningfully locate his person in the course of events that have taken place over his life, an extremely limited number of events and experiences are chosen from innumerable possible life episodes and compressed into manageable, comprehensible units. The process follows a basic function of language, simply making experience communicable, and here is examined for aspects of a character 'who' selects, edits and presents a story of his life. An engaged audience to a life story, as I suspect is generally true about most interested encounters with others, engages what is 'known' by virtue of being presented by the another, piecing together an image of a particular character and unique individual, and set against a vast unseen background excluded from the narrator's presentation. This process is disabled by unexamined or misunderstood differences in cultural heritage or sharply divergent lived historical experiences, and this

project works to enable informed engagement with these four life narratives as manner of appreciation for the greater historical and cultural experience. Here ‘known’ does not mean a factually accurate account that corresponds to what literally occurred, but refers to those things made available by/to memory as part of the speaker’s self presentation. I seek to engage these life stories listening *to* what is said *for* hints at a composite picture: that is, observing what is emoted, considering what is withheld and implied, and completing what is unsaid yet somehow present. Again, the object is on the narrator’s attitudes and assessments of the greater socio-cultural and historical realities, an attempt to relate what is specifically articulated as indicative of a larger context. It is impossible to know what lies beyond the synthesis provided in each of these life stories and a gap remains between the actual event, the lived experience and the memory recalled. Understanding others in this manner involves reflecting their experiences and sentiments off our own, supplemented by a willingness to empathetically imagine the life world of another.

Hannah Arendt makes a distinction in *The Human Condition* between the ‘what’ and ‘who’ of another that inspires this manner of reading life narratives. The ‘who’ of another, ethereal and partially hidden, casts a shadow observable in the twists, turns, details and preoccupations of a life story and the qualities of its presentation. Arendt explains:

In acting and speaking, men show who they are, reveal actively their unique personal identities and thus make their appearance in the human world, while their physical identities appear without any activity of their own in the unique shape of the body and sound of their voice. This disclosure of ‘who’ in contradistinction to ‘what’ somebody is – his qualities, gifts, talents, and shortcomings, which he may display or hide – is implicit in everything somebody

says and does. [...] Its disclosure can almost never be achieved as a willful purpose. [...] On the contrary, it is far more likely that the “who”, which appears so clearly and unmistakably to others, remains hidden from the person himself (1958: 179).

The effort here is to present through life story transcription, description, and analysis an amorphous confluence of intangible qualities as they appear in a particular setting and time. I pursue this ‘who’ of another through interpretation of the meanings of self-presentation in part through observation of the narrator’s physical mannerisms and emotional dispositions complemented by informed attention to the cultural context into which an individual’s life passes. It is a style of knowledge and understanding of another facilitated by an attitude of friendship and openness, admittedly idealized and fluid attitudes towards relating to others. Arendt again, “The revelatory quality of speech and action comes to the fore where people are with others and neither for or against them – that is, in sheer human togetherness.”(1958:180). Arendt to my mind overstates the case when she says in the quote above the ‘who’ ‘appears so clearly and unmistakably’ to an observer, yet points to the possibility that detachment and separation from the life and culture of the narrator opens perspectives sometimes less evident in the narrator’s own life world. A few lines later she writes, “nobody is the author or producer of his own life story. The stories reveal an agent...Somebody began it as is its subject in the two-fold sense of the word, namely its actor and sufferer, but nobody is its author.” (1958:184). This process of re – imagining the ‘who’ of a distant other from self-narrated life stories engages the interpersonal dynamics of these four individuals as they present historical disappointments, changing social commitments and practical life decisions across challenging circumstances.

A central contention of this work is that we all carry an image of our past that is closely intertwined with a sense of self here examined for what memories of individual reactions to and assessments of macro-historical circumstances indicate about social dynamics in micro-political contexts. To paraphrase Ricoeur from the opening lines of *Memory, History, Forgetting*, “in the spirit of Husserlian phenomenology... priority has been given to the assertion expressed by the well known adage that all consciousness is consciousness of something....Is not memory fundamentally reflexive, to remember something is at the same time to remember oneself?”(2004: 3) As a life story becomes recounted, memory is guided by a notion of a centering character to which memorable experiences return. I find Heidegger contributes to a Husserlian reading, memory’s recounting of a life story is not a dispassionate attempt to empirically grasp the truth of experiences, a past or a person, memory is both a faculty and an agent that *cares* about the truth and the intersubjective standing of the character whose life is recounted. People have not just the ability to remember the past but create/have/are images of themselves as a product of a past that enters a sense of self. Heidegger writes early in *Being and Time*, “Dasein is a being that does not simply occur among other beings. Rather it is ontically distinguished by the fact that in its being this being is concerned about its very being.Dasein understands itself in its being in some way with some explicitness.”(1996:10). By my reading a sense of an individual’s past has an image that is shaped by and draws upon events and experiences that occur over the course of a life, mediated by the concerns of the speaker at the time of the narration, and indicates an ‘orientation of care’ the speaker has for himself, a past, present and a future. As a being ‘concerned about its

very being', what Heidegger also calls 'care', the structure of the life narrative appears guided and influenced by the issues and qualities of this concern for the life and person it presents and a sense of 'who' this care is directed towards. Heidegger writes "Dasein tends to understand its own being in terms of that being to which it is essentially, continually, and most clearly related, - the "world"(1996:14). The idea of an existential orientation here refers to the most troubling issue in the speaker's individual relationship of care for himself, in his social world, that emerges over the course of his life narrative. This is a form of cultural phenomenology that approaches cultural processes at individual experiential levels through the words, gestures and concerns of life story narrators. (Desjarlais 2003: 6)

In broad brushstrokes this approach identifies three factors I felt pulling on the narrative process of the majority of the life stories I collected: I label these a biographical chronology, a narrative self/audience, and an existential orientation. Biographical chronology is relatively straightforward and refers to the presence and influence of the actual events and experiences on the life story. It presumes a linear and 'commonsensical' conception of time in which the speaker's life is a series of moments succeeding one another, the entirety of which are the events in the life of the narrator. An overly literal and precise example of a biographical chronology would be a film

recording a person's life from birth until the moment of life history interview, capturing a record of 'all' that occurs in the life of a protagonist. Imagining such a record begs a question or two of perspective. Would a hypothetical camera be more effectively placed on the head of our protagonist in an attempt to see the world as he sees it or better placed at some distance from our subject, capturing him in his immediate surroundings and filming actions and reactions to circumstances? As an ethnographer I suspect the latter, but the point is to acknowledge that despite all the modifications, omissions, fictions, and possibly additions that the life story narrator inserts into his account, the biographical chronology simply refers to an actual string of events and associated experiences. While enormous quantities of empirical data and detail are lost in a life story as compared to a hypothetical film of an entire life, my initial interest is to ask what is gained and lost by an autobiographical, highly subjective life story, as contrasted against a notion of an 'exact', empirically precise record of an actual life.

Examining a literal record of a biographical chronology in its entirety, that is the course of an entire adult life, is practically impossible and impossibly tedious. To watch a film of Nor Mohammad's entire life, the second interview presented here, through in its entirety only once would require sixty-five years and thus necessitate dividing the film into sections, childhood, becoming a mechanic and driver, the Mujahedin years, the post Soviet way period, etc, assigning them to several people to watch and summarizing of periods in the life of the protagonist. Nor Mohammad has edited the periods of his life for us. A hypothetical film would offer little about how the protagonist experienced his past and virtually nothing about how he would choose to represent his past and self to

himself or another. As with a study of any historical period, the presentation and study of a life necessitates synthesis of the ‘longue duree’, often into a chronological narrative that defines, isolates, summarizes, orders and explains memorable experiences and significant events. Regardless of how its effectiveness or accuracy is judged in an empirical, verifiable sense, this is what the narrator does creating a life story. As the narrator of a life story simultaneously selects, creates, structures, performs and interprets his biographical chronology, the greater past is forgotten and incomplete. The biographical chronology refers to the impossibly cumbersome succession of actual events that in fact occurred but remains mostly meaningless outside of synthesis, interpretation and summarization. It is the empirically ‘real’ historical trajectory of an individual through time, unfeasibly expansive without a process of determining relevant parameters.

A relationship between a narrative image and narrative audience indicates a method of interpreting the construction and content of a life story for qualities of underlying interpersonal concern, one I find particularly productive in the Afghan context. The narrative image is conceived as a pre-reflective presence that contains an orientation towards, as well as emerging out of, the memory of the actual events and experiences of a life (i.e. the biographical chronology). It is mediated by the specific ways the speaker interprets his life trajectory or engages an existential orientation before particular others. The narrator of a life story carries a loosely defined image of a self into the interview, which is given a partial form through the narrative presented. The narrative image can be interpreted in a relationship to the speaker’s expectation of an audience to his life.⁶ A life

⁶ Arendt writes “Action and speech go on between men, as they are directed toward them, and they retain their agent-revealing capacity even if their content is exclusively “objective”, concerned with the matter of

story's narrative image pulls memory towards recalling and emphasizing certain events and perspectives, and enables the exclusion or forgetting of those events and experiences that do not fit that image of self at the time. The speaker's evolving sense of self in the world, as imagined before his perception of valued audience/s to this self, (e.g. audience could be a parent, a family, a group within a community, possibly an enemy or before God) influences the course and manner of presentation. Each of these interviews is read for an interpretation of audience/s that can be inferred from the interview itself and productively located in the context of the narrator's social world.

Vincent Crapanzano in *Kevin: On the Transfer of Emotions* draws on Freud's analysis of jokes to make an observation about a third interlocutor in self-presentation that has bearing on the approach adopted. He writes, "The telling of a joke is triadic. It requires a speaker, a butt of the joke, and an audience. Freud's observation is culture-bound." And continues a few sentences later, "Here, with the joke, Freud has laid out the complex exchanges that occur, I believe, in every communication." (1996: 868) I argue, that at least for interpretative purposes, the narrative image of a life story anticipates significant audience/s in addition to my own audience. These additional audiences are communities who might verify and, far more significantly, meaningfully judge a character and a past narrated, while in some manner references and draws upon significant actual life experiences. Simply, the narrator cares about how he will be perceived by communities he considers most relevant to the perceptions or aspirations of his life and this plays a

the world of things in which men move, which physically lies between them and out of which arise their specific, objective, worldly interests. ... Most action and speech is concerned with this in-between, which varies with each group of people, so that most words and deeds are about some worldly objective reality in addition to being a disclosure of the acting and speaking agent. We call this reality the "web" of human relationships, indicating by the metaphor its somewhat intangible quality." (1958:183)

decisive role in a life story. A narrative image, as I intend it, is quite distinct from the popular psychological idea of a self-image, usually used to indicate a positive or negative 'self-image'. Instead narrative image here refers to an underlying perception of oneself as a particular being amongst others with a unique past and distinct character, and here interpreted as a centering presence in life narratives. The narrative image/s refers to a set of dispositions and self-understandings carried into the interview that, at least for interpretative purposes, influences the processes, events and qualities of self-presentation and informs the life story narrative. As a centering image, it is not meant to indicate a singular, unchanging self, but to usefully indicate an uneven stasis that occurs in most self-presentation.

The third influence is what I term the narrator's existential orientation (sometimes understood as an existential project/s or crises) and refer to the speaker's orientation and disposition towards a fundamental concern/s for/in the past and/or future that can be felt influencing the course of memory at the time of narration. The existential project (not necessarily one) refers to the issue, dilemma, desire, or concern that can be read preoccupying and structuring the narrative presentation. In the majority of these interviews with Afghans, it is an ethical tension or struggle in an individual's relationship to his immediate social world that enables memory to organize the narrative presentation and often overlaps with what I identify as a narrative image and audience. It is less conceptually premised upon interrelationships between a narrator and his valued life audiences and more of an individually preoccupation that is often more introspectively oriented. Based on my observations, it usually appears in these narratives without

apparent conscious reflection or preparation. I find what is recounted and why it is remembered often appears in relationship to a pressing, life-defining ethical preoccupation/s. As I examine these accounts, I work to explicate how the shape and coherence of each narrative circles around central dilemma/s.

To summarize, a life edited retrospectively and chronologically is more than a random succession of life episodes. Memory of a past is both guided and inspired in a life-long process of remembering, excluding and forgetting. An existential orientation is a dilemma with greatest 'gravitational' pull on the concerns of memory at the time of narration. This effort at interpretation of the life narrative process here begins to disentangle these three interrelated questions: first and minimally, how the narrator's presentation remains close to the memory of the actual events narrated (i.e. to the biographical chronology), second, how his or her presentation establishes an narrative image of a self in a relationship to a particular audience (i.e. narrative self / audience), and third, how the narrator's concerns and obligations indicate a relationship to a specific social and historical context, revealing of a relationship between the life story and the speaker by what he is troubled by and values.

Again, to begin with an existential lowest common denominator as a starting point and with implications that have bearing on this analysis, many people in some fashion have reflected on the course and meanings of their lives. In the Afghan context this is rarely made explicit, publicly presented, or given a particular structure, making these interviews both odd, yet possible. The life narratives I have collected and present here are not the only versions these individuals could provide: the narrator's perception towards me as an interviewer, his or her cultural/religious expectations, the political context and time/period of our encounter, etc, influence the narrative and, at times, these various influences may be significant. I discuss in my comments on interviews the significance of my presence as an American researcher on the course of each narrative. With this influence in mind, these narratives can be read as descriptions of selves and pasts, with a vague and partial image of a life imagined towards uncompleted closure, and within a contest of particular social concerns. Freely acknowledging the many contingencies and uncertainties that make the versions of each life narrative far from an ideal or conclusive form of the speaker's self-definition or sense of self, I also assume that the narratives I focus upon here are not uniquely contrived or invented specifically for the purposes of our interview. For interpretative purposes, the narratives presented are treated as mostly sincere accounts of the speaker's life. By this I mean they reflect a good faith attempt by the narrators to recount their lives for the purposes I have described in my introduction. Despite innumerable shortcomings, they present dimensions of an ongoing process of life reflection that occurs separate from and prior to my brief, largely anonymous, encounter with narrators. Again, by honest I am not referring to their factual veracity, or any necessary correspondence to the events or character they present, only that they are

accounts of the speaker's memory and a narrative character recounted at the time of this interview to an American researcher.

An indirect assessment of a related concern is to suggest most of the 'ordinary' Afghans I spoke appear disinclined to deception to the point of complete fabricating an intentional fiction for a life story. Addressing this concern at a disciplinary level, I am concerned that the 'reflexive turn' in anthropology is sometimes turned too far, that recognition that the anthropologist influences the ethnographic encounter can become ground for study confined to the specific dynamics of an ethnographer and his subjects, an issue that would apparently be even more relevant in the present Afghan - American geopolitical circumstances. Or stated even more strongly, and a little playfully, self-reflexive cultural analysis taken beyond corrective measure becomes reflexive paralysis of cultural analysis. Ambitious politicians, self-created artists or conniving merchants may self-consciously invent for their publics. Justifiable sensitivity to the duplicitous, contrived or manipulative nature of many political figures and public institutions applies more readily to those for whom persuasive or aesthetic public presentation is decisive to their professional personas or integral to the functioning of state and commercial institutions, and applies less decisively in circumstances in which there is little clear professional, institutional or material benefit to be gained from deception. This is not a claim in any sense for the verifiable truth of these narratives. Deception and misrepresentation occur in all manner of self-presentation. Nor is this to say that the Afghans presented here do not have public lives or invent themselves, in fact the complementary concepts of a narrative image and narrative audience assumes the invention of self before others to be a

defining concern of this study. The point I wish to make is that the invention of self that is certainly present began long before our encounter and while affected by the meanings, expectations and symbolism of my presence, it is also inadequately understood primarily in terms of the dynamics, both personal and political, of this American encountering these Afghans. Approached from another direction, I found the life history interviews conducted on different occasions and under different circumstances by my students from Kabul University contained similarly recognizable characters and voiced related existential concerns, episodes and experiences, albeit with some changes in the qualities or emphasis places on the issues presented.

To conclude, in ethnography, as in most discussions of political identity, more is usually made of difference and less of similarity. The ideal to my mind would be to expand a reader's ability to accompany these life narrators with a critical sympathy and cultural and historical sensitivity, just as one might engage in listening to and thinking about a friend. Such an ideal is clearly contrived. Feeling familiar with these anonymous strangers hailing from a distant land and seemingly alien, at times enemy, culture involves an imaginative stretch. Afghanistan is where the conspiracy and training to destroy the World Trade Center occurred and where today American and NATO soldiers continue to fight and die in an insurgent war that is now surpassing the Soviet Afghan war in duration though with far lesser fatalities. In the larger picture though I would say that the notion that Afghans, or even certain Afghans, are enemies is as contrived as thinking of them as friends, both are distinct possibilities in any real life encounter with one another. But in the present geopolitical climate association with Afghan culture is

significantly mediated by political expediency and popular media portrayal preoccupied with problems, distance, and sometimes antipathy, with little that would encourage easy, casual, ordinary, or friendly encounter. Thus, this contrary exercise attempts interested engagement with and informed analytic attention to narratives from ‘ordinary’ Afghans, not treated as some distant cultural “other”, but by “another”, as one might listen to a friend, beginning to imagine a place and time through an individual, and not primarily as an object or extension of macro political preoccupations and anxieties. Imagine listening to these people sitting in your living room, as in fact I have had the good fortune of sitting in the homes of many, and ask how their stories sound and feel. The manner in which we listen and engage another is at least in part a product of how we imagine the distance between us and the person and context of another life.

Chapter 2 - Ustad Mohammad Alim – Allegiances Divided

Interview Conducted – July 22, 05 by James Weir and Ramin Ahmadi

Conducted at Bala Murghab High School, Principal's Office

I Introduction

A) Micro and Macro Politics

Ustad (an honorific meaning respected teacher or master) Mohammad Alim is a chemistry teacher and principal of Bala Murghab High School, a position that he held thirty-three years before this interview, but one more disrupted than not by war and the absence of a central government. The town of Bala Murghab is the provincial center of a province by the same name in a remote area of northwestern Afghanistan. It is an unusual ethnic island of Pashtuns surrounded by Uzbeks, Tajiks and Turkmen. The Turkmenistan border lies thirty kilometers north of the town. I sketch the history of this region below, as I find its community and location significant to this life story. Ustad Mohammad Alim is a Pashtun about sixty-five years of age at the time of this interview. I was introduced to him through mutual friends employed by Ockenden International, a British NGO that had been working quite effectively in the region for three years. A year

after this interview Ockenden International was forced to leave Bala Murghab because of security threats due to increased Taliban activity and at the time of this writing I suspect Mohammad Alim's work, school and life is again threatened by mounting political instability.

Mohammad Alim requested that we pick him up at his home and bring him to his high school office. All the other interviews I conducted in the region took place in a guest room of the interviewee's home or occasionally under a tree, but Mohammad Alim asked that we interview at his place of employment. En route to pick him up the driver whispered to me, as if telling a joke, that Mohammad Alim was a communist, and appeared to assume I would share in his disdainful amusement. Meanwhile, several people told me that this same young driver, at the time working for a British NGO, was a former Taliban driver, and then observed me to gauge my reaction. The driver did indeed wear a large black turban, a garment associated with the Taliban and rare in Bala Murghab at the time. During the three weeks he drove Ramin and me around Bala Murghab he was outgoing and jovial with us. It is quite likely he, like many Taliban, is not an ideological supporter of the movement but made practical decisions to secure employment and maintain family in rapidly changing political circumstances, decisions others in his community nevertheless feel a need to tell me. My sense is their revelations of his Taliban past to me are not intended to warn me of danger but to disparage this man's past work associations and character before an American. En route to this interview a 'former' Taliban drove a well-known 'former' communist, myself, an American researcher, and Ramin, my young Kabuli research partner, in a UN vehicle

used by a British NGO to a government high school in a very remote town; a curious juxtaposition of political pasts of which all were aware and not as unusual as one might assume from a distance.

During this interview Mohammad Alim sits in his office behind an aging, wooden desk, empty except for a small blue plastic globe and a few dog-eared government papers. Small student chairs with attached wooden desktops line the walls of the room. Two ancient metal file cabinets border his small frame on either side of his desk. Three office clerks and a janitor / guard sit by the door sipping tea, sometimes appearing disinterested in the interview, and at times listening attentively. People casually stroll into the room during the interview, notice me with surprise, and discretely leave. Nobody interrupts us despite having come to see Mohammad Alim. From outside an exuberant classroom full of young children can be heard repeating a lesson in unison after a teacher.

As an adolescent in the early 1970s Mohammad Alim excelled as a student and was sent on a scholarship to a prestigious high school in Kabul. Forty years later he begins narrating his student years, recounting bewilderment at finding mature girls sitting beside him in classes and educated women freely standing before young men as teachers. “It shocked me!” he declares. Summarizing tumultuous student life in the early seventies in pre-war Kabul, he says, “In short, my time as a student was a time of slogans, of ‘long live this and that’ and ‘death to so and so’”. Many sources confirm Kabul high schools and universities were a hotbed of political activity, pitting revolutionary Marxists against conservative Islamists and a smaller contingent of anti-royalists in the years preceding the

Soviet invasion.⁷ Halfway into the narrative I ask which side he was on, in part because others have already told me, and his response begins a significant change in the emotional tenor of the interview. I have tried with limited success to find former Afghan communists from outside of Kabul willing to talk about their experiences. Ustad Mohammad Alim volunteers a conflicting array of explanations for joining and later leaving the Khalq faction of the Afghan Communist Party (PDPA), first saying that he became a member “to go along with the flow of things and for the sake of partying with my buddies.” A little later he explains he joined the Khalq party because communism was required to replace an archaic feudal system in the countryside and an undemocratic monarchy in the capital. Becoming aroused, he explains, “The poor were abused: people’s wives, daughters, children and property were freely taken by the powerful, and, God knows, this continues to this day!” Minutes later he says students are very emotional and he fell under the influence of communist propaganda. And still later he says he left the communist party because he learned the Khalqis were out to kill him.

Mohammad Alim begins and concludes asserting his perception of himself as a ‘white bearded (pious) elder of the community’ and a popular ‘representative of the people’.

Ustad Mohammad Alim was a principal at this same high school and a young local leader in the Communist Party in Bala Murghab when the Soviet Afghan War began. Although he left the Communist Party, and a powerful position as the District Administrator in Bala Murghab, to ‘join’ the Mujahedin, his early political affiliations press upon his

⁷ David Edwards writes in *Before Taliban* “...a new generation of secularly educated Muslim activists had risen up in Kabul at roughly the same time that the Marxist parties has begun their activities. For the students (he) recruited in the late 1960s and early 1970s had regularly faced off against the Muslim student activists in classrooms, in cafeterias, and on the streets during sometimes bloody political demonstrations. President Daud had been more afraid of Muslim activists than of Marxists ones....” (p. 76)

narrative and appear to remain a challenge to his standing in the community, despite his claims to the contrary. In 2005, at the time of this interview, he explained his high school was staffed entirely with former Khalqi communists from this period, despite being in a community where the vast majority fought for or supported the Mujahedin against the Communists. He is careful to explain the political passions of the late sixties and early seventies while emphasizing his present indifference to their underlying motivations. Ustad Mohammad Alim expresses an interesting array of perspectives about his participation with the communist party and his misgivings about his later involvement with the Mujahedin against the Communist government. Over the course of the interview it becomes apparent that he struggles to establish distance from the political causes that inspired his youth and to detach himself from his community's memory of his political past, but his equivocations belie his success. As a young man a breach opened in his political purpose, social position and day-to-day stability that remains a life-defining fissure. This might be safely said of all Afghans of his generation but the micro-political ramifications of this period take myriad forms for individual Afghans. The country's macro-political circumstances have changed dramatically, the turmoil of the pre-war years transformed into chaos based on very different issues, but the interpersonal relationships between the two sides from this period remain divisive, especially among an older generation of respected elders in small, rural communities, where 'everyone knows everyone'.

B) Background on the Town and Province of Bala Murghab

Ustad Mohammad Alim hails from the small town of Bala Murghab (translated “Upper Bird-water”), the administrative center of Murghab district of Badghis province, located in remote northwestern Afghanistan. The town straddles both sides of a worn dirt track that serves as the only ‘direct’ motorized vehicular conduit connecting the west to the north of the country. The town center, a kilometer-long strip of motley, one-story, mud-walled shops, tea stalls, and kebab stands, is located alongside the region’s only major water source, the Murghab River, in what is otherwise barren desert hills. Murghab district consists of about forty-two small villages located within a twenty-mile radius of the town center and the entire district has an estimated population of two hundred thousand. The town is a twelve-hour truck journey (270 km) northwest of Herat and a twenty-hour truck journey (430 km) southwest of Mazar-e Sharif, the two major cities in the north and west of Afghanistan. The town center is about fifteen kilometers south of the Turkmenistan border. Just outside of town the dirt road becomes multiple tracks that trucks take across the desert. As one track becomes too sandy or full of deep holes vehicles are forced to find a new course. Outside of town no one is assigned to work on this major artery between two regions of the country; local children wait with shovels, occasionally filling holes with sand, and collecting money from passing travelers.

In a sparsely populated country, remote with limited to non-existing infrastructure, Bala Murghab is isolated even by Afghan standards. When I mentioned to Afghans I had conducted interviews in Bala Murghab, most were surprised and often uncertain about its

exact location. Villages consist of clusters of mud-walled houses located alongside irrigation canals that allow water to reach farmland and human habitation. Most villages in the area are named after the small man-made canals that water adjacent farmland. Villages consist of from ten to at most a hundred families. Just beyond the irrigated green lowlands that hug a meandering river, uninhabitable, dry brown and rolling hills offer just enough vegetation in the spring and summer to sustain a constantly roving herd of goats. Nomads bring herds of goats and camels to graze the surrounding hills in the late spring and early summer when the sparse vegetation peaks. Bala Murghab is an important seasonal gathering place for nomads.

During the reign of Afghan King Amir Abdur Rahman Khan (1880 – 1901) Bala Murghab was a sensitive national border region close to the southern flank of the expanding Russian empire. King Abdur Rahman Khan forced the inhabitants of the region, the Jamshidi, out of the area, concerned that their sympathies lay with Russia, and resettled the area with Pashtun tribes from southern parts of Afghanistan. This policy was enacted in several areas of northern Afghanistan to defend borders and ensure nationally dominant Pashtuns had settlements in underrepresented areas. A century later this remains a source of ethnic tension. Today Bala Murghab is an oddly placed enclave of Pashtuns surrounded to the north and east by ethnic Uzbeks and Turkmen and to the south and west mostly by ethnic Tajiks and other Persian speaking communities.

During the Soviet Afghan war (1979 – 1989) the area was a site of intermittent conflict between Soviet and Afghan government forces and the Mujahedin. Bala Murghab's

proximity to the Soviet border made it easy for Soviet forces to launch offensives in the region and retreat across the border to what is now Turkmenistan. Unlike the few urban areas of Afghanistan, the Soviets rarely sought to establish a large permanent military presence in rural regions like Bala Murghab. Or more precisely, they occasionally tried, generally failed, and soon gave up. It is important to bear in mind when reading Ustad Mohammad Alim's account that that Mujahedin resistance in this area was substantial, with a small but highly visible group of government supporters/employees/communists, and the majority of the residents were sympathetic or supportive of the Mujahedin.

During the Mujahedin civil war (1992 – 1997) the Bala Murghab region was located on the border between two of the most powerful commanders of the time. To the southwest forces loyal to Ismail Khan, a Tajik and powerful Mujahedin commander, had a firm hold over Herat and nearby provinces in the south and west of Afghanistan. To the northeast forces under General Rashid Dostam, an uneducated Uzbek and a former general in the Afghan Communist Army, had control. Rivalry between the two resulted in frequent conflict for the residents of Bala Murghab. A majority of the inhabitants sided with Ismail Khan and nominally with his party, Jamiat-e Islami (despite its being a mostly Tajik party). When Dostam and his Junbesh (Uzbek) party took control of the area in 1997, virtually all the residents were forced to leave as refugees, resettling mostly to camps in Herat, with groups going to Iran, southern Afghanistan and western Pakistan. Substantial numbers were killed trying to escape.

Less than one year later, (in 1988) Taliban took control over the area. The Taliban drove Dostam and the Uzbeks out of the area and the displaced Pashtun population from Bala Murghab began funneling back into the region. By November 2001 the Northern Alliance with the support of the US military defeated the Taliban, Hamid Karzai took control of the interim administration in Kabul, and many of the remaining displaced residents of Bala Murghab returned to the area. Bala Murghab's tumultuous history is background to Mohammad Alim's efforts to be accepted as a leader and educator amongst a community mostly at odds with his political past.

II The Interview

My name is Ustad Mohammad Alim. I am one of the white beards (rish safid) of this region. I am a teacher and principal here in Bala Murghab High School. First, I welcome you to our district and to this school. I am glad we are sitting here having this conversation.

(Mohammad Alim begins narration with an unusual air of confident resolve. Most Afghans appear more tentative at the beginning of an interview, and confidence and purpose develop, if at all, as investment in their life story develops. My sense is he mentally prepared for this occasion after being

informed of my interest to interview him and before we met. Meanwhile, taping him makes this a moment of public speaking.)

When I was a child, there was no war in Afghanistan whatsoever.⁸ Afghanistan was a safe haven of peace and security, but now as an old man I have not known peace in so many years. As a boy I went to primary school in Bala Murghab, and then switched to a high school in Kabul when I was fourteen years old. I was a very good student and the government gave me a scholarship. There was absolutely no war in Afghanistan, but it was a time of political demonstrations, rallies and strikes, especially in the later years of King Zahir Shah's reign. Today when I look back I understand that Zahir Shah was actually a good king and that he was gradually preparing Afghanistan for democracy. My first job was working for the government as a teacher at this school when President Daud came to power. Over time things changed, Daud became more involved in political relations with the Soviet Union, and this led to the military coup that overthrew him.⁹

My father was a mullah but he was an open-minded mullah. He was very supportive of our education. My grandfather was both a judge and mullah here in Bala Murghab and he spent his time in the company of intellectuals. My father was influenced by this.

⁸ Despite popular perceptions and media depictions of Afghanistan's history as wracked with war and of a culture that is inherently violent, before the Soviet invasion, the country had been largely at peace, with occasional internal tensions, for most of the 20th century.

⁹ These first few sentences contain issues that define this narrative. Similar life narrative summarization occurs in each of the life stories presented here and most of those I collected, supporting my contention that a narrative image preexists the life story. He has also begun an implicit defense of his own political decisions, that is his initial support of the communist Khalq party, and his later decision to leave the communist government and join the Mujahedin resistance against the Communists. Today he understands both sides of this conflict to have been deeply flawed, he thinks the king was the best option of that time, and he explains he was already working for the government when the conflict began.

Unlike other Mullahs, my father took our education very seriously. We had no serious obstacles to our studies, except poverty. My father was poor; he did not have much land or cattle so we had to work while going to school. Today two of us are principals of schools and others work for NGOs or as doctors.

So when I got to Kabul as a student I found the living conditions there were very different from what I had known here in Bala Murghab. I was astonished to see young women going to school. Even more surprising was that we had female teachers. It shocked me! This did not exist here in Bala Murghab. The level of freedom that women enjoyed in Kabul, the way they dressed, worked, went to school, everything was different.

Jimmy Weir - What was it like to go from this village to school in Kabul?

We had the best teachers at my school (in Kabul). My chemistry professor left a lasting impression on my life. He would talk about elements, gases, compounds like they were his friends and neighbors, he would show us chemistry practically, it was not just an abstract thing. I also had a great trigonometry professor. My problem was that I did not have a solid foundation to build on. I had not received a proper primary education here in Bala Murghab. The first grade is the foundation of education and the different grades develop upon each other like the steps of a ladder. If you have a good primary education, you can do well in the secondary school, if you have a good secondary

education it enables you do well in high school, and so on and so forth. I did not have a good foundation, but I was a good student.

I was in eighth grade when the demonstrations started in Kabul. This was during the time of King Zahir Shah. Our school was a vocal participant in these demonstrations. When things heated up our school was closed and some students were expelled. I had to leave Kabul because of these frequent, often wild demonstrations, and I transferred myself to Hanzala High School in Badghis.¹⁰ Then in ninth grade I transferred to the teacher training college in Herat as a second year student.

Jimmy Weir - How did these demonstrations begin?

On the surface, the demonstrations were about different things, like the quality of food, school uniforms, or the living situation in the dorms, but now when I think about it, they were all strongly politically motivated and orchestrated. The students might come up with excuses like “we don’t have good buildings or good food” but in reality foreign hands were very active in steering the students’ emotions and causing them to take to the streets, both from the left and right. My schoolmates were very naïve people; they were not smart enough to figure out this conspiracy.

¹⁰ An Afghan colleague who has listened to this interview suggests it is more likely he was asked to leave, perhaps because of his own involvement in these demonstrations.

Many of the demonstrations claimed to be against the royal regime. The students and organizers were vehemently against the ruling royal family. Students are always very emotional and we were very influenced by the propaganda. The propaganda was that the royal family was oppressive and exploitative, that they were not elected, and have imposed their rule on us for decades. The demonstrators wanted a republic and a representative and non-exploitative government. People were becoming very critical with emotions running high. I usually agreed with these ideals myself, but now I realize that the King Zahir Shah of forty years before was actually the most progressive figure for generations to come.

*The demonstrations and strikes were staged by both the right and left. The Muslim Brotherhood and the Communists organized these demonstrations. The main Communist party was the Democratic Peoples Party of Afghanistan (the PDPA). They had two publications called *Khalq* and *Parcham*. These two publications eventually led to their splitting into two different parties, known as the *Khalqi* and *Parchami*. They taught and organized people around Marxism. The party had a leadership committee whose main mission was to spread Marxism and Communism. They were very disciplined and hardworking. They also had a very sophisticated network for recruitment. Even when I was young, I knew that these organizers were so strong that the government would never be able to stop them. In those days, the *Ikhwani*¹¹ (Muslim Brotherhood) had supporters such as *Gulbuddin Hekmatyar*, *Habibur Rahman*, etc. The left was stronger when it came to leadership, discipline and organization. But on the community level, because the*

¹¹ *Ikhwan-ul Muslimin*, or the Muslim Brotherhood, though he appears to referring to several groups that were “Islamist”, associated with the right, and against both the communists and the King.

Ikhwani was working under the banner of Islam, they had broad social appeal and support from regular people. In short, the Brotherhood was relying on people, the masses, while the communist organizers were dependent on outside support and government positions.

The Brotherhood and the Communists had a common foe: they were both against the royal family, but they hated each other more than they disliked the royal regime. Their fiercest confrontations were against each other. The Brotherhood supporters were accusing the Communists of being godless infidels and the Communists were calling the Islamists “Satan’s brotherhood”.

(Now, as he shifts back to describing his own life, his voice and manner grow suddenly subdued.)

Anyway, as a student I transferred from Kabul to Herat. In Herat, I found some chaos too, some sporadic demonstrations and strikes here and there. In short, my time as a student was a time of slogans, of “long live this and that” and “death to so and so”

When President Daud came to power I was a teacher right here at this school, that was thirty-three years ago. There were some organizing and demonstrations here in Bala Murghab. We had some Khalqis, some Parchamis, and a few Muslim brotherhood people; but it was really small compared to what was going on in Kabul.

(Up to this point he has spoken as if describing events that occurred around him; a teenager from the remote countryside encounters the strange play of the politics in the capital city. The only indication of his own active participation in the events he narrates is when, referring to the communist demonstrators, he says “*I usually agreed with these things myself.*” I mention in the introduction that he was a member of the communist party but he has not revealed this yet. His tone changes from historical detachment to impassioned description as he narrates his own participation in political affairs.)

Jimmy Weir - Which side were you?

(There is muffled, almost conspiratorial, laughter around the room.)

Well, there are two ways to get involved in a party, one is to be ideologically inclined and make an informed and well-reasoned decision and the second is to go along with the flow of things and for the sake of partying with your buddies. I was unknowingly a Khalqi in the second way. In fact, this school that you are sitting in right now and right here is full of Khalqis. I lead this school and I have gathered around myself teachers who are all former Khalqis. But today, I really regret what we did. The Russians betrayed our country, our nation and us.

(He is intense and animated here. His eyes bulge and his hands swipe the air adding emphasis to his words. His voice modulates between hushed whispers and

loud declarations. He has the demeanor of a vigorous old school teacher. He is a powerful orator, perhaps a quality learned from his father and grandfather, both Mullahs, educators like himself, or perhaps learned as a Communist leader. This dramatic shift in the emotional tone of the interview begins a period of what I label a narrative freefall with implications which I discuss below.)

I really resent this ideology right now and I am against the harsh and absurd policies the Russians tried to impose on us. It took some time before we realized that the Russians were betraying our country. When we realized this, we escaped, we went to the hills, and then I personally fought against the Russians with my group. First we realized that the Russians had broken the party into two pieces, the Khalqi and Parchami, and soon I understood that Russians were bad and treacherous. For example, they arranged for Taraki to be killed by Amin, and then they killed Amin. Soon I realized that the Russians were playing games with us like we were children. They were out to destroy our country and once we understood this most of us withdrew from our jobs. I was a Khalqi, some of my teachers here are still Khalqis, but they are clean and honest Khalqis, they are not people who have betrayed their country. I was the district administrator here in Bala Murghab when I left the government and party, and joined forces against the Russians. I escaped with my comrades to a mountain, near Painerak. But once we were with the Mujahedin nobody really trusted us and we did not try to get close to any parties there. We had to compromise with all the sides, but really we were not loyal to any side.

Jimmy Weir - So you were part of the Khalqi-Hezb-e Islami Mujahedin party?

(That is, were you both in the communist party and in the most conservative, Islamic resistance group, two groups in vicious war. It is intended and understood as a joke and room erupts in hearty laughter.)

Yes, yes.

Jimmy Weir - As a young student what inspired you to join the communist party?

Basically, I agreed with what the Khalqis and Parchamis were against and how they understood this society. As they were calling it, we were against the exploitation of peasants, workers and the poor by lords and capitalists. King Zahir Shah's period (1933 – 1973) was a government of lords and tribal chiefs. I could see that these big landlords were exploiting our people. The poor were abused: people's wives, daughters, children and property were freely taken by the powerful, and, god knows, this continues to this day. The poor live with so many pressures and problems. We wanted a new solution for these old problems. The left was speaking about oppression and exploitation; they were confronting the landlords, khans and tribal chiefs. I saw that my country had a feudal system and we wanted to create a new system that was for the people. But when I saw how 'this people's' system worked in practice, when I saw what the Soviets were really

doing and how their system functioned, it turned out to be something very different from what I expected.

What made you shift your loyalty?

(This question too strikes a chord as it hints at a sensitive accusation. The intensity he musters suggests significance to his life.)

When I was in high school, the political parties were working among the students. People were working to change our minds in favor of their own party's interests. To some extent these people were influencing our minds, but to a certain degree the realities of our own society were influencing our ideas. It made us keen to rescue our society from the cruel rule of the landlords and khans. We could see what was going on in other counties. We knew our country was really backwards economically, technologically and educationally. The goal of the left was to create a society where the peasants, servants and other poor oppressed people can live free of the lords' oppression. I agreed with this. The second reason I joined them was that they were carrying out extensive political and psychological propaganda to recruit us.

It was much later that I saw that their words did not match their deeds. Ideologically, I did not want to become a Marxist or a Communist. I am an Afghan, this is my country, and I am a Muslim. After a while I could see Marxism was saying things that ran against

the faith of Islam, and inside the Communist party internal strife grew and this made us distance ourselves from the mainstream party. Party members started killing each other in the name of the Khalq or Parcham. For example, some Parchamis would direct Russian forces to kill Khalqis at will. I assure you that Mujahedin did not kill as many Khalqis as the Russians killed. You see, the Russians created this party, and when they could not control it, then they did everything in their power to smash it into pieces. The Russians sided with the Parchamis and started exterminating the Khalqis and all the others. This was the Russian policy.

But the Khalqis were strong, this is why the Russians were frightened. For example, a majority of the armed forces were loyal to Khalqis and so were many of the police. In addition, we had great support amongst the masses. But the Russians only embraced Parchamis and started destroying the Khalqis, and they began at the head. Had I not escaped, they would have killed me too. That is why I escaped. The Russian forces with the help and direction of the Parchamis began to beat on the Khalqis, more than they fought the Mujahedin. Some Khalqis could compromise and keep their positions in the government, but many had to flee. There was very big difference between what the leaders said they believed in and what they did.

Jimmy Weir - How did Khalqis mix Marxism with Islam?

For me, it was not acceptable at all. Some of us, unknowingly, well, we had not digested, or comprehended Marxism properly. Unknowingly, we joined them. But later, when we studied Marxism, we found out that it was in complete opposition to Islam, and thus it was not acceptable to our people. At this point, we said we made a big mistake. The majority of a country can never accept a minority of people with a different ideology. An ideology that people will not accept, people do not approve of, is doomed to fail. First, it was an emotional period when we joined them, but later when we studied, we read their books, we woke up and realized that this is something that our people will never accept.

Jimmy Weir - What happened after you ‘went to the hills’?

Until Babrak Karmal became the president, I was the principal of this school.¹² When Karmal came to power, in addition to being the principal, I became the district administrator of Murghab.¹³ Then the opposition between Khalq and Parcham really began in earnest. I was worried that the Parchamis, with assistance from the Russians, would have me arrested and killed. After a while, I think it was about two and half years, I decided to escape. It was not only me, but all my buddies who were in the same position. I was the district administrator here when I escaped.¹⁴

¹² Babrak Karmal rode into Kabul on top of a Russian tank on December 27, 1979, marking the beginning of Soviet occupation.

¹³ This suggests his support for the party enables his professional advancement when his party takes control.

¹⁴ It is unclear whether he left the communist party to join the Mujahedin to protect himself from the Parchamis or because he had problems with the Soviet presence, actions and ideology. He gives both reasons.

Before I escaped to the mountains, (joined the Mujahedin) I established contact with some people I knew there and I befriended some others. When I went to the mountains, I was very well received. Many Mujahedin turned out to welcome me. They sacrificed lambs, and gave things as alms to celebrate my coming.¹⁵ I was very well known and this was a big gain for them. I was the district administrator, and many other armed men came with me, it was a big loss for the Russians.

Soon after I left, the Russians started heavy bombardment of the area we had been in. I remember that in one day, soon after we left, twelve people were martyred in this area. When the bombing was over, the people around us had suffered heavy casualties. The people here decided to hand me over to the Russians, but before they could do it, I made a narrow escape to another place where I had contacts with a different commander. I remember at this time a helicopter came close by over our heads and began firing at us. There was nowhere to hide, so I threw myself into a ditch. By the time the firing was over and I got up, the helicopter had fired almost sixty rockets and they were lying all around me.

But later, gradually, I could see the Mujahedin did not trust me, despite their initial welcome. They did not threaten or intimidate me. I was not killed or tortured, many others went through these ordeals. My buddies and I remained there. We would

¹⁵ In Afghanistan when something good occurs to someone, a promotion, a significant raise, one is expected to share the benefit by buying things for one's immediate circle, ice cream, a dinner, and especially to make a donation to less fortunate people in your immediate community. It is very close to going out for a drink to celebrate, except that it is expected that someone needy or less fortunate benefits as well.

regularly receive their zakat (alms), but really I knew they did not trust us. And we had material problems, I had not taken anything when I left, we were dependent upon them to help us. But we were also worried about them; in the eyes of the Mujahedin, we were Khalqis, which meant we were Kafirs (non-believers) and at any time a Mujahed could go crazy and put us to death. Fortunately, I had some supporters amongst them. We were protected because my father and grandfather were Mullahs; the Mullahs supported me because they knew my family. I had established contact with some of these Mujahedin leaders beforehand; I had prepared things before with them and then we left. If I didn't have contacts with people who were close to my father and grandfather, the Mujahedin would have killed me right away.

Towards the end of the Soviet time I remember the weather was really cold, I was under a lot of pressure, and somehow I got TB so I had to go to Iran. In Iran I was under treatment for almost four years. The Mujahedin would not help me when I went to Iran. As I have said, in their heart they did not really like me, and in my heart I really did not like them. So I had no way to pay for medical help. I went to Mashad¹⁶ and I tried to get medical help but I was turned away. Finally I found this one doctor in Iran. I took him aside and I said to him, "As a teacher and fellow educated man, I expect you to help me." I told him, "I am a science and chemistry teacher and I have trained many doctors like you, please save my life!" The doctor said "You are lying." He said he wanted to ask me some questions to verify my story. I said, "I am very sick, I cannot speak well right now. Write your questions on that piece of paper and I will write out your

¹⁶ Mashhad is the nearest city in Iran, and houses a large Afghan refugee population despite efforts by the Iranian government to disperse them to different cities.

answers.” The doctor wrote his questions on a paper and I wrote the answers. The questions were things like, “What is an acid?” I wrote back, “All the compounds that have OS are acids.” He wrote down a series of chemistry questions and I wrote down all the answers. He said “I see you are indeed an educated man and teacher, I believe you.” He gave me a letter, and hospitalized me to undergo all the laboratory tests.

I was in bed for twelve months. Over the next four years, I had to check in with the hospital every six months and then they would prescribe more medicine to me. This is how I saved myself, without anyone’s help except my education. This happened about the time when Dr. Najibullah announced his national reconciliation program, around 1989.¹⁷ I was alone in Iran this entire time; my family was in Bala Murghab, near Painerak, a mountain. I have eight brothers, so one of them took care of my family. When I recovered I came back to Bala Murghab, I started doing small business, trading medicine on the mountain, and doing some farming. I had some cattle. My life was not bad. The area was good, with good weather, and good land.

Jimmy Weir - Today, do the people here in Bala Murghab know you were part of the communist party and how do those who were Mujahedin and against the government (the vast majority) treat you?

¹⁷ The Soviet Army had left and the Afghan communist government remained in power under the leadership of Najibullah. There were attempts to establish a power sharing agreement between former Mujahedin and the Afghan Communist government but they all failed.

Yes, of course, they all know, this is a small community. They treated us really badly for a long time, especially the Mujahedin treated the Khalqis badly. They would not give us jobs, even if you were a professor. I got this job because the people said, "This man has an extensive education." Many people went to talk to the governor about me. They insisted that I should become the principal of this school. They needed me so I got this job. Now in Bala Murghab, I am the most influential man. Whenever there is an event, I always go, when a minister comes the people call on me to represent them and when there is a meeting, I go and defend my people's rights. If I call on others from all over Bala Murghab and beyond they will come to see me. The people trust me and they know that I am working for their interests.

(When the discussion turns to political matters his manner becomes noticeably charged, here he speaks in a forced, dramatic whisper. But when our discussion becomes autobiographical and about things not overtly political, his tone becomes much less emotional.)

There were very few Parchamis here. The people love and respect the Khalqis who are here with me at this school right now. Whenever someone has ambitions to run for office they first come to me to ask for my support.

(Our local escort from the British NGO Ockenden, a former Khalqi teacher at this school, who has remained silent until now, whispers something to him, and then he says this in a declarative, almost legalistic, manner.)

One other thing I want to mention is that I did not rob, steal or confiscate people's houses, cattle or property. I did not take people's wives, daughters or sons. Since Mujahedin did all these things, the people have come to trust me more.

Jimmy Weir - How was your life during the Taliban period?

The darkest period I have seen is during the Taliban time. I was absolutely miserable during this time. I started my own home school. People paid me to teach their kids. Some Taliban would come and ask me why I continued teaching? I would tell them "This is how I get my salary to live by, please don't disturb my business."

Everybody approves or disapproves of a group based on his own experiences and ideas. From my point of view, the Taliban were against progress, against education, against female employment and female education. It is true that the Taliban established better security than when the Uzbeks were here. This is their only positive point, relative security. But the Taliban were backwards and they were destroying our society. They were linked to some truly dangerous terrorist organizations. The common people could not see how potentially dangerous the Taliban were.

I knew the danger that they posed. The Uzbeks might have killed a hundred, five hundred or even one thousand people in Murghab, but if the Taliban were to stay they would have killed us all. A group that keeps the people uneducated and illiterate, they are actually killing the whole society from the inside out. I say the most destructive force our society has ever seen were the Taliban. (This is repeated with great passion.) The Taliban were against education, against progress and they were linked to dangerous thieves on an international level without us even knowing it. Many people just thought the Taliban were good Muslims; they went to the mosque and prayed five times a day, so how could they be dangerous? But I knew their danger. They were the worst group ever to come to Afghanistan.

Jimmy Weir - Most people will not speak out as forcefully and honestly as you express your ideas if they are against others who are powerful. Do you think you could be in danger because of this?

A danger exists all the time. Maybe I will be assassinated one day, who knows? Do you know the story of Madam Curie who first detected radioactive waves? Her husband would say to her, "Leave this work! What you are doing is dangerous." But she responded, "I am working for the well-being of future societies. If something happens to me, it is of no matter." I am basically doing the same thing, I know it is dangerous, but

whatever I say is for the well-being of our society from my own perspective and if I am to be hurt or assassinated because of what I say, then let it be.

Over the last four years I have been in direct opposition to the gun holders. All these gun people, including those who are Naibzada's¹⁸ gunmen, were against me. The reasons that I have survived, is number one, I have the full support of the people, and two, I trust that the situation is going to shift in the interest of democrats. Now, the world and the international community are promoting the democrats here. Things are a little better and it is safer to say these things. I have always been speaking like this. For example the governor is a good man, Enayatullah Enayat, who had conflicts with Dostum and the Uzbeks. Now I see the situation is getting more favorable. The reason I am not really afraid now when I say these things is because of these changes in conditions for the betterment of the people.

Jimmy Weir - What do you think of the current situation and direction of Afghanistan, things like the presence of foreign soldiers, the national elections, and the Karzai government?

Fortunately, all the international forces, our international friends, rescued us from unimaginably horrifying prospects and an imminent disaster. The presence of Al Qaeda was an enormous danger for Afghans. And thus I welcome and love these forces that

¹⁸ Nearly everyone I interviewed expressed fear and bad experiences with this notorious local criminal.

rescued us from these monsters. If ISAF (that is, the NATO forces in Afghanistan which includes the American forces) and American forces go away, the situation in Afghanistan will definitely turn for the worse. Their presence is a need and necessity under the current circumstances. Without them, the Taliban will come back, Al Qaeda will come back, with their deadly agenda to eat Afghans alive. I am very optimistic about the international forces and future of Afghanistan. I welcome all the civilized and educated people who come to Afghanistan to serve the Afghans, I respect them and I see their presence as an absolute need. I have mentioned and supported them in my speeches, I fully support the international forces and so do my people.

This will be a very good memory for me, sitting with you here today, a teacher, an educated man, with interest in the well being of our country. Thank you for coming here.

Jimmy Weir - You should write a book about your experiences.

I already teach 8 classes. I study and prepare for hours every night, a teacher must be ready for classes. Maybe one day if I have time.

End of interview

III Commentary on the Interview

A) A Weave of Macro and Micro Politics

One reason I begin with Ustad Mohammad Alim's life story is because for the unacquainted reader it provides useful background on the pre-Soviet War period. On a personal note, he interests me because I imagine had I been born in Afghanistan, of Mohammad Alim's generation, and gone to school, I would have likely become a communist supporter. As a teenager and young adult he participated in both sides of political rivalries that gave rise to three decades of conflict. As a life-long educator he appears to appreciate the importance of this period for the country's macro-historical narrative. As a prominent member of a small, rural community his past associations and public stands inevitably press upon his position in this community. His life story integrates his present-day knowledge of how history played out with memories and motivations from when he first became a political actor and before he could know the outcome, true of all life stories but likely pulling more forcefully on those who are active in movements that dramatically influence the course of history. He introduces his life observing that peace and national stability, the nostalgic backdrop of his youth, have not returned since childhood. This historic reality and associated sentiments frame the beginning of many Afghan life stories, often stated by an older generation with a sense that despite hope peace appears unlikely to return in this lifetime.

Mohammad Alim begins his life story, “I am one of the white beards (rish safid) of this region”, an indication he considers himself a respected elder of his community and a pious Muslim. Self-evaluation of his leadership role is repeated many times in different forms in his narrative. In much of Afghanistan respected older men, 'white beards', might be allowed to teach girls, but young men are expected to teach only boys. Both boys and girls attend his high school, a rarity in rural high schools in Pashtun communities. He continues atypically welcoming me to his district, a government-designated political unit, whereas most Afghans welcome me as a personal host, or perhaps on behalf of their family and their immediate community. Unlike anyone else I have interviewed, he asks to be picked up at his home and brought to his high school office to conduct this interview. I suspect he wants to be seen with an American, as this might be a source of some prestige or potential power. It is also possible that having me come to his home would awaken suspicion of political collusion, but in over twenty interviews conducted in the region all others took place in or just outside of interviewees' homes. Both explanations, on the surface very different, indicate an unusual sensitivity about his status and it is possible that both are at play. Clearly his past as a communist leader is more sensitive than most others I interviewed. Ustad Mohammad Alim concludes the interview in a manner similar to how he began, asserting, “I am an influential man.... I go and defend my people's rights.... The people trust me and they know that I am working for their interests.”

In the midst of describing his education and childhood, he says, “Today when I look back I understand that King Zahir Shah was actually a good King.”, an odd claim especially at

this early stage, with a significance only apparent in light of the entire narrative. Later he explains his opinions about the King have changed and that he actually demonstrated against the King as young man. King Zahir Shah lost power to his cousin and Prime Minister, Daud Khan, in a bloodless coup in 1973. Of the few contemporary royalists (that is those who advocate the return of the King to power) in I have met in Afghanistan, many have a relationship or at least a tribal affiliation with the King's family, but this is not the case for Mohammad Alim. King Zahir Shah, who lived in exile in Italy from 1973 to 2003, has at times been presented as a potential alternative to warring parties in Afghanistan, but Mohammad Alim is not suggesting that the King or a monarchy be returned to power, and his political perspectives indicate this is something he would be highly unlikely to advocate. His present assessment of King Zahir Shah, followed by the explanation that he was already working for the government when the war began, seem to address concerns about his standing in this community. In light of the entire interview I suggest this interpretative paraphrase of this curious part of his introduction, "When I consider the Soviet conflict in light of what I know today, I would not align myself with either side of this conflict. My political sympathies now would lie with the King, who was deposed in a coup that created the circumstances that eventually led to the Soviet conflict. Today, after so much conflict, we still have not had a stable and trusted leader like the King. *I may have made a mistake to support the Communists but the Mujahedin were worse.*" (Italicized for emphasis) Nostalgia for a time before changing political circumstances became havoc for the country and put him at odds with most of 'his' community, and I suggest contributes to his positive assessment of the king.

Political instability has prevented most Afghans from pursuing long-term goals, placing enormous limitations on their ability to choose life pursuits in a manner and direction of their choosing. In interviews and conversations Afghans, both educated and uneducated alike, describe education as the most tangible example of ‘what might have been’ had the country been politically stable. They often provide detailed accounts of obstacles and efforts to attend school. Mohammad Alim claims he and all his brothers, though already doctors and employed by NGOs, would have gone much further educationally and professionally if circumstances permitted. He explains, “I have eight brothers, and despite all these years of conflict, we are all educated in different fields of study, and this is due to my father’s encouragement. If the revolution had not taken place I am sure we would have all gone even further in school.” Mohammad Alim emphasizes his father was open-minded despite being a mullah, addressing a popular perception amongst Afghans that mullahs are close-minded, conservative, and disinterested in, if not antagonistic to, state-sponsored, secular education. When assessing the country’s macro-political prospects Afghans often speak with conviction about the necessity of education for children and the country. They explain the brutality of the past three decades as a result of limited education amongst the general population. Many place particular emphasis on the lack of education amongst mid-level Mujahedin commanders during the Soviet Afghan war, and later almost all levels of the Taliban leadership. In a passionately voiced assessment of the Taliban near the end of the interview he says, “A group that keeps the people uneducated and illiterate, they are actually killing the whole society from the inside out.”

For Mohammad Alim and ambitious Afghans who were not born into wealthy, land-owning families, education was and is one of limited options for advancement in social hierarchy. In recent decades four alternative means of realizing ambition and wealth have emerged; joining a militia, learning English or computers to work for an international organization, producing or transporting opium/heroin, or seeking a government office that enables the collection of bribes, all seriously disruptive of traditional and/or national authority. Mohammad Alim justifies his influence as a product of his advanced education and his position as a principal in an important state institution. Perhaps this explains why he welcomes me to his school and his district rather than as his personal guest or guest of his family. He presents himself as deserving a unique respect and assistance because he is among the small circle of the enlightened (*roshan fikr*)¹⁹ in this community. The meanings and uses of education figure in prominently at many junctures in his narrative. When he is sick with TB in Iran, education saves him, not by what he figures out or solves, but by establishing social capital with a fellow educated man. He explains that his education and his family descent from two generations of mullahs are why the Mujahedin recruit him instead of killing him, though I suspect his education also makes him suspicious in the eyes of the Mujahedin. One group does seem ready to kill him and he narrowly escapes. Allying himself with the Mujahedin is not enough for them to trust him or to support him when he is sick, and he expresses concern that they might kill him at any time. Many years later he is offered his job as a principal of the local high school again, despite, he explains, misgivings within the community, because they need his unique skills.

¹⁹ A term commonly used to suggest a ‘modern’ orientation but one also used by “leftists” or “communists” to refer to themselves.

Towards the end of this interview, he compares himself to Madame Curie, explaining an educated person must accept risk in the service of a greater good. While he portrays his education as enabling him to get out of a variety of problematic, often dangerous, circumstances, his education also enables him to make decisions that put him at odds with many in his community.

Despite being a former communist and progressive Afghan principal who later voices contempt for the Taliban and, in particular, their position on women, Mohammad Alim's first memory as a student in Kabul is astonishment at the liberties of urban women. The public role of women in the capital city and in "the West" has an impact on Afghans that is difficult to over-estimate and important to appreciate. I remember an Afghan friend from Kabul who told me he joined the communist party as young man primarily out of dissatisfaction with the role of women in traditional Afghan society, explaining that he was in love with the woman that he wished to marry and he could not support a political group that would not allow this. Mohammad Alim learns to accept, eventually promote, the participation of women in public life, perhaps this plays a part in his later openness to 'other' radical ideas such as 'communism' or 'western democracy'. For conservative Afghans, particularly Pashtuns, from the countryside, where the separation of women from men in public defines daily life, reactions to women in public without purdah (covering) interrelate, viscerally I suspect, with a variety of political issues that recur in various manner in each life story. At personal, more micro-political and experiential levels, I suspect some Afghans who first interact with women from outside the immediate family awkwardly experience lust as a frustrating affront to pride. At a macro-political

level many perceive women in public life as an offense to Islam and evidence of ‘Western’ corruption. In these personal accounts of daily life I often find macro-political stands interrelated with micro-political circumstances, but these more personal and emotional reactions are often excluded from formal political discussions, particularly true when sensitive gender expectations interrelate with significant macro-political tensions. I call attention to Afghan assessment of gender issues as it arises in these narratives because it is an important irritant in Afghan perceptions of Western culture as well as to Western perceptions of Afghan culture.

Mohammad Alim summarizes his high school and college years, “In short, my time as a student was a time of slogans, of “long live this and that” and “death to so and so”, a retrospective claim to a time of pointless passions and purposeless politics. Nevertheless his position during the period is important to his peers, while at a macro-political level the divisions that took form precipitated three decades of war. Mohammad Alim begins speaking about political tensions in educational institutions and Kabul as a young man as if he were merely an observer. Only after a question over half way into this interview does he explain he was active as a student and district leader with the communist party. Mohammad Alim has been actively for and against each of the three major political forces in the country until the Taliban, that is first for the Communist Party, then the Mujahedin, and today, when the King is irrelevant he declares his respect for a ‘democratizing’ King. Almost three decades after the Soviet War began we sit in a high school staffed entirely by former Khalqis. Many former communists remain in the Afghan educational system largely because they had more formal education than most

other sectors of society and were already entrenched in educational institutions as political circumstances changed. They are an incongruently more politically and culturally progressive group, and as such, antagonize more conservative, Islamic, and former Mujahedin elements. As a teacher at Kabul University at the time of this research, I found the majority of professors of the social sciences were former Marxists. The communist party is no longer a viable presence, at least not at high political levels, but the resistance it spawned, the Mujahedin parties and the young university leaders from the period, remain contemporary power brokers mostly threatening stability. I would paraphrase Mohammad Alim's attitude towards his student years to say, 'It was a highly politicized period in which naïve and emotional people, often quite young, got involved in issues they did not adequately understand and became manipulated by outsiders.' He indicates a shared sense of responsibility when he says Afghans acted foolishly, and includes himself, but also emphasizes that powerful outsiders manipulated 'us'. I find many Afghans characterize this period in terms of Afghans being manipulated by outsiders and to my reading minimize Afghan instigation of the violence that became endemic after the Soviet retreat. Mohammad Alim's questioning of both sides of these defining times is likely a result of having stood on multiple sides of political conflicts.

In a society with strong ties to Islam, how did an Afghan communist, from at least two generations of Mullahs, stake out a position on Islam? Or how did an Afghan who still considered himself a Muslim understand his engagement with Marxism? Mohammad Alim does not clearly identify his own stand on the relationship of Islam and Marxism,

instead stipulating what “Afghans” would not accept. He frequently makes a distinction between what the Afghan people think and his own beliefs, which usually diverge. He first says he joined the party, not because he agreed with them ideologically, but because this is what his friends were doing and ‘we’ wanted to ‘party with our buddies’. He continues passionately expressing clear agreement with basic Communist views on how to address pressing social problems in Afghanistan, insisting these problems remain. Elsewhere he explains he was tricked and emotionally manipulated. Still later he emphasizes how the goals of the communist party were well suited to correct the shortcomings of this feudal and tribal society. He concludes saying he left the Khalq Party because he knew they were going to have him killed. The Soviet military occupied Afghanistan, asserted themselves into the highest levels of government and sought to change the economic system, but for the majority of ‘ordinary’ Afghans the primary macro-political concern was that they were atheists and kafirs (non-believers) undermining Islam. The Mujahedin leadership portrayed the war first as a protection of Islam and second as defense of the nation. As the war progressed, insecurity grew, two thirds of the population became displaced, one in ten people died due to violence, and insurgents and criminals usurped the influence that traditionally went to tribal elders and village Mullahs, the meanings and political objectives of Islam grew increasingly ideological, prescriptive and, at times, aggressively defensive.

The compromises and decisions, actions and reactions, ‘ordinary’ Afghans make are insufficiently understood in terms of the ‘defining’ macro-political issues yet, when

viewed from a distance, this is mostly what emerges and becomes discussed.²⁰

Mohammad Alim does not state his changing political positions either in terms of change in his political ideals or regret for past associations that may have become damaging or corrupt, positions taken amid full-scale war and great insecurity. He explains his positions in terms of changes in his appraisal of what his community could accept, while he becomes distrustful of the communist party leadership, and joins the Mujahedin despite evident dissatisfaction with them. I selectively quote a few statements about his association with the Khalq faction of the communist party: “When we studied Marxism, we found out that it was in complete opposition to Islam.... And we realized that this is something that our people will never accept.” “But today, I really regret what we did.” “I was unknowingly a Khalqi.” “I have gathered around myself teachers who are all former Khalqis.” “I really resent this ideology right now.” “We are clean and honest Khalqis, not people who have betrayed their country.” “Then I personally fought against the Russians with my group.” “Had I not escaped, they (the Khalqis) would have killed me too.” “At any time a Mujhahid could go crazy and put us to death.” “We had to compromise with all the sides, but really we were not loyal to any side.” My attention to his conflicting array of explanations is not meant to criticize Mohammad Alim for being inconsistent, but to observe macro-political stands intersecting, often clashing, with micro-political and interpersonal concerns that I develop further below. Three decades later, Mohammad Alim refers to his friends and fellow teachers as ‘We Khalqis’, long after any organizational structure or formal political role for the party exists. He expresses continued respect for communist ideas, which he appears to associate with the US and the

²⁰ This is somewhat akin to De Certeau’s description of the differences between tactics and strategies but as they might apply to reading a life story and in more overtly politicized sense that De Certeau’s reading of everyday life in a Euro-american context.

‘democratic’ international forces in the country at this time. And it remains uncertain whether he left the Khalq because of ideological differences or because they were out to kill him.

Mohammad Alim frequently makes direct and indirect reference to political issues, staking out political positions from the very beginning of the interview even while describing his early education. The first half of the interview largely presents the country’s political circumstances since his youth in a manner that seems designed to lessen potential judgment of his early political affiliations. The second half of the interview more overtly presents his political past and positions in a manner that has clear implications for the lives and perceptions of his community. Despite persistent claims to the contrary, many things indicate he stands at some distance from his local community. His far superior formal education, while making him a potential asset to his community, sets his thinking apart, and he says as much. His time living alone in Kabul as an adolescent, then Herat, makes his early life experiences fairly unusual among the residents of this rural community. He frequently describes his own ideas as quite different from those in his community. For example, late in the interview he says, “The common people could not see how potentially dangerous the Taliban were. I knew the danger that they posed.” Referring to NATO and US forces in Afghanistan he concludes the interview saying, “Fortunately, all the international forces, our international friends, rescued us from unimaginably horrifying prospects and an imminent disaster... I welcome and love these forces that rescued us from these monsters (Al Qaeda). I welcome all the civilized and educated people who come to Afghanistan to serve the

Afghans, I respect them and I see their presence as an absolute need. I have mentioned this and supported them in my speeches.” Unflinching support for NATO and US troops was not nearly as contentious in 2005 as being a Communist leader as a young man but it is an important public stand. At the time of these interviews a large majority of Afghans were optimistic about the potential of the international intervention to improve the country’s political circumstances and their lives, though few would be as effusive in their praise. Much that Mohammad Alim says indicates he is troubled by the way his political past and affiliations affect his status in his community and can be read to address the local elders and power brokers, seeking the acceptance and respect of those who might be at odds with his past.

In most cases the Afghan accounts of the past I collected are more retrospective of interpersonal concerns than introspective or psychological in orientation. Admittedly my not being Muslim, Afghan or close friends with the interviewees included here all might contribute to greater retrospection than introspection. After years of warfare Afghans often seem as distrustful of unknown Afghans as non-Afghans although the qualities and meanings of this distrust of course vary. An existential orientation, as I use the term, refers to an issue that centers, often threading together, episodes and explanations of life narrative. The ongoing interpersonal ramifications of his association with the communist party and his later decision to break away to join the Mujahedin are the political parameters of what I label an existential orientation of his life story. His desire to be respected as a local leader and community elder pulls on his life story despite presentation of his views and associations that would strain easy acceptance by his

community. In this small, rural town, his past is very well known. Aligning himself with the Communist Party put him on the unpopular and losing side of this most divisive issue in recent history. He describes a ceremonious reception by the Mujahedin when he left his government position but emphasizes the Mujahedin did not trust him and he did not like them. Even while he was serving as a member of both a communist party and then participating with the Mujahedin at different times, each were also trying to kill him while he associated with each. His past political life remains a defining ethical concern because in this small community everybody knows his past political life, and during this important period, in the minds of most in this community, this ‘trusted leader’ was on the wrong side of this most divisive issue. His background as the son and grandson of recognized Mullahs might make it easier to excuse his political past. In most Afghan life stories I observe an existential orientation emerges in terms of a troubling relationship with others within a significant community. In other words, the existential projects I identify primarily have interpersonal and inter-subjective qualities. It emanates out of an individual’s concern about his standing or relationship to the most significant group of potential observers to his life, often peers, community or family, and sometimes a notion of god or a national or tribal/ethnic community.

B) On the Advantages and Disadvantages of Memory for Life Analysis:

Memory and Audience

In these narratives I insert brief observations in interviews to indicate how an interviewee's bodily comportment or vocal tone changes at particular junctures in his life story. When an abrupt change in the speaker's tone and manner of speaking occurs I ask if it indicates a shift in the speaker's emotional involvement with the topic at hand. I label as 'narrative freefall' a meaningful change in the narrator's manner of speaking in which he appears to cease searching to structure his words and working to recount his past, instead becomes carried along by his words and memories, speaking with interest about something he recalls freely and feels strongly. In the Afghan examples I consider it typically appears to indicate an unresolved entanglement with a significant local community and often an effort to set straight misperceptions others have about the narrator's past. Minimally, it indicates a speaker's concerned involvement in the topic. Sometimes, it might indicate a section of interview that has been pre-rehearsed and performed in the past. The visual and auditory dimensions of interviews are steadily lost as original encounters become disembodied voices on digitized recordings, translated into English, and re-presented here out of context as text with analysis. A 'narrative freefall' is often more evident in the visual and auditory qualities present in the personal encounter or on a recording and reveals an apparent shift in the affective register of the speaker. I do not intend for the term to refer to any emotional shift in the demeanor of the speaker. For example, the term does not refer to the changes in tone and quality that might accompany the sadness of, say, speaking about the death of a loved one. Rather, I use the term to suggest a shift in the speaker's desire to communicate the topic at hand and a useful place to consider why the affective sensibility around an interview topic has changed with interview and its bearing on a life story.

As I conducted these interviews I tried to create circumstances in which the speaker felt control over the process, free to identify topics and episodes of importance to his life story. When I feel this occurs I leave the speaker to carry the subject forward as he or she sees fit. The life stories I include are from interviews in which the narrator appears compelled to narrate parts of a life story rather than searching for things to include. A precondition to a narrative freefall is likely that the speaker feels basically secure about the interview process. The typical interviewee begins at least a little anxious about me as an American researcher, possibly uncertain about my real motivations and worried about how his words might be used against him or misused. Those interviews that felt overly stifled by fear of our encounter or hindered by uncertainty are not presented here. If the narrator appears to trust and sincerely engage the interview process, generally a precondition to my making use of it, then the next level of the speaker's concern tends towards his performance, with attention slowly shifting from Ramin and me to how the interview will be perceived by some more generalized notion of anticipated audiences already present in the life of the narrator. Many interviewees begin at least a little uncertain about what to say, whether it will be considered interesting or how I, or some unknown audience, will judge it. If a basic trust is established and the interview is engaged in good faith, then a third level of concern turns towards the experience and perception of his past before a valued audience of personal concern. These levels of concerns are not mutually exclusive.

In most interviews, especially those conducted in a rural setting like Bala Murghab, several other people sat in the room. I spent much effort trying to get Afghans to sit for private interviews thinking that without the influence of prying ears Afghans would be more self-revealing. In rural settings in particular, it was nearly impossible to arrange. An Afghan isolating himself could awaken community suspicion and probably felt awkward for most. As a foreign/American guest I was brought to a public space open to visitation at any time. My presence was a curiosity and sometimes a concern. When I arrived in an unrecognized and unfortunately ostentatious (often UN labeled) vehicle, unescorted and unarmed, people frequently came to visit as I entered a village and continued appearing as news spread that an American researcher had arrived. If a guest came to visit during an interview it would be unacceptable and most likely never occur to the host/interviewee to ask him to leave and come back later. Contrary to expectation I am now convinced that the presence of community members inspired narrators and my expectation that sitting privately would yield greater introspective self-revelation was a Western conceit less applicable to the Afghan context. In Afghan culture I find a sense of at least narrative self emerging in interviews less as a private individualized ego and more as a placeholder in a social web of obligations, responsibilities and interests with various communities, a character determined by interrelationships and attachments to specific significant social groups. A focus of this analysis is the various ways this can be observed and explicated in interviews. The others present for a majority of interviews is only the literal audience. It might be said that Afghans are speaking publicly, even in private.

In the interviews I deem most valuable often abrupt changes in tone occur. As my interest becomes evident and, more significantly, people warm up to the process and become vested in their self-characterization, purpose and focus on the course of memory contribute to the development of a narrative center. A sense of the interviewee's 'care' about the character emerging encourages his self-revelation of issues of interpersonal and existential concern. The speaker's focus seems to shift from preoccupation with me as ethnographer to anticipated judgments of his account of the past. Often a qualitative shift in the speaker's tone and mannerism can be felt as he taps into the emotional energy of an unresolved issue and evinces a desire to address the issue. Unresolved life tensions pulling on the course of the life narrative define what I call an existential orientation of the narrative. Needless to say this process occurs imperfectly, in a halting and uncertain manner, and here is a method for examining life stories, not a claim to static personal and interpersonal reality.

Scholarship on memory often disparages its fluid, flexible and frequently fictional nature, emphasizing how individuals or political groups bend memory to suit self-interest.

Personal memories from non-professional observers or participants are critiqued for lacking objectivity or being unverifiable. Meanwhile the lives of 'ordinary' marginalized or impoverished people rarely have significant archival records to reference. The experiences of people in conflict zones are difficult to access. Concern about fabrication and invention, justifiable to a point, can prevent consideration of personal memories and life stories as sources for historical or cultural analysis. In the case of at least these life stories I am convinced that they are based upon and reckon with real events. Though, I

acknowledge a wide gap remains between their occurrence and recounting. In the previous chapter I describe one relationship of the life story to the actual events as a relationship between a narrative self and a biographical chronology. Practically speaking, at least for my purposes here, it would be a laborious waste of time to distinguish what in fact occurred as Ustad Mohammad Alim describes it against what he has invented. The act of selecting a series of life experiences is creative even if absent fiction. Considered from one direction, if all that Mohammad Alim said were shown to be verifiably true, his life narrative is still a creative and highly subjective act as he selects, edits and interprets his experiences to another in a highly abbreviated narrative. Considered from another direction, even if he invents, embellishes or fails to remember accurately, his life story is a depiction and an assessment of a past before others.

While I appreciate that the memories that make up a life story include fabrication, exaggeration and forgetfulness, I still wish to suggest, first, that most people feel, in some fashion, both a public obligation and a personal commitment not to stray too far from events as they transpired. Ricoeur calls this the ‘happy memory’, contrasting it “to description (of memory) motivated by suspicion or by the excessive primacy accorded to phenomena of deficiency, even to the pathology of memory.” (2004: 37). At a more interpersonal level I suggest most Afghans feel more practically concerned about being caught in a lie and feel less idealistically obliged to tell the truth. This parallels a second premise of this work; the individual life story is conceived in a relationship to an anticipated community(s) that the speaker envisages as the valued observers and, more significantly, potential judges of that life. This anticipated audience helps to restrain

fabrication and reveals attachments and obligations to a public image before significant communities. For Mohammad Alim an audience is also literal, several people sit in the room during the interview and at least one is also a former fellow communist party member and long-time friend. Reading life stories as addressing a valued audience(s) reveals qualities of character, social obligation and existential concern. Character and existential concerns, dispositions and sensibilities, while inherently unverifiable, are not therefore unreal, though difficult to demonstrate.

Mohammad Alim does not appear to struggle creating a narrative when I begin to engage him with questions and turn on the recorder. Memories of past concerns return to mind with relative ease and often with emotional passion. I contend Mohammad Alim's audience is an image of his respected peers and the elders of his community, people who know him best and interact with him on a daily basis. More importantly, they are the people whose evaluation of his public persona has the greatest social and practical implications on his life, and the only ones, apart from God and family, who would know where the truth of this life re-creation lies. An image of a community sitting as audience and judge is not only hypothetical. The process of framing, articulating, affirming, accepting, regretting, reinterpreting or mourning (and rarely verifying) past experiences interrelates an individual's evolving perspectives and dispositions towards the past within a wider historical and cultural context. As I have demonstrated, Mohammad Alim's charged and sometimes contradictory explanations of his past political affiliations are one indication that these are issues of continuing importance to his sense of place in his community. An example is Mohammad Alim's interest in extolling the virtues of King

Zahir Shah. In the first sentences of the interview he avoids a clear identification with the Communists during the Soviet War, despite his actual association with both sides of this conflict. Much of his life story can be read to alluding to how this affects his acceptance as a leader in this community. His claim of deep community respect is challenged by his persistent attention to their perception of him, where the majority of influential Afghans in Bala Murghab would be at odds with his political past and are far more reserved about embrace of the 'West's' institutions in the country.

Chapter 3 - Nor Mohammad – Father, Driver, Gunrunner

*Interview conducted on July 13, 2005, by Jimmy Weir and Ramin Ahmadi,
at Jami Mosque, Herat City, Herat Province*

I Introduction

I met Nor Mohammad on a backstreet of the old city of Herat. One morning Ramin, my research assistant, and I had free time so we decided to visit the exquisite Jami Mosque, a UNESCO World Heritage Site, in the center of old city. Earlier that day Ramin and I had discussed trying to interview strangers that we met in public settings, thinking to approach shopkeepers, taxi drivers, and food servers. After some deliberation we agreed it was unlikely Afghans would trust two strangers, one an American, as we stopped them unannounced in the course of their daily affairs and began prying into their pasts and wartime experiences. Until this point in field research all our interviewees were selected and prearranged through a wide network of colleagues and friends. We had only two weeks in Herat, but after three days we found our contacts exhausted and without another prearranged interview for two days. Feeling a little like awkward tourists we meandered to the mosque on an unusually hot morning, navigating by two towering minarets that overlook the city. Suddenly thirty to forty young girls between the ages of five and eleven took recess from class, bursting onto the dirt alley before us. Dressed in school

uniforms, loose black dresses with white headscarves, the girls joyfully gathered around a confectionary shop, excited to be out of class and eating candy. I began to take pictures when Nor Mohammad, the interviewee here, walked up with a big grin, said, in English, “Hello, very cute!” and then continued on his way. Ramin and I deliberated for a moment and then caught back up to him. We explained our research and asked if he would interview with us. He accepted without hesitation and we agreed to conduct the interview in the cavernous insides of the nearby Jami Mosque, a good, traditional place for men to meet, reflect, and discuss things, safe under benign religious influence.²¹ Unlike most interviews, Ramin and I knew nothing about Nor Mohammad when we began. Usually contacts provided basic background about interviewees before we met.

Like Mohammad Alim from the previous interview, Nor Mohammad speaks at length about his life circumstances, especially as a driver before and during the Soviet War, before revealing the exact nature of his involvement, carrying weapons for Hezb-i Islami, the most vitriolic anti-western Mujahedin party. The lack of an overlapping social network and absence of advance notice of this interview seemed to give Nor Mohammad license to voice opinions he expects are at odds with my own. Juxtaposing this life story with Nor Mohammad against the previous life story from Mohammad Alim is instructive. At the time of this interview Nor Mohammad was a sixty years old. He is an ethnic Tajik from the most productive agricultural region of Afghanistan, the Shomali Plain, located about eighty kilometers north of Kabul. Mohammad Alim during the previous interview was about sixty-five years old. He is an ethnic Pashtun from a very remote agricultural village in the far north of the country, a two to three day journey by truck and taxi from

²¹ Dr. Margaret Mills from personal communication.

Kabul. By Afghan standards Mohammad Alim's past was unusual: he was openly communist in his early life, received an advanced formal education, and heads a state-institution in a small rural community where he has passed most of his life. Meanwhile much about Nor Mohammad's life circumstances is relatively commonplace: he is a former Mujahid, illiterate and displaced to a city where he has a limited social network and contends with serious economic struggles. Mohammad Alim and Nor Mohammad come from a similar generation of Afghans experiencing the same periods of Afghan history at close to the same stages in their lives. Both are intelligent, articulate and reflective, yet each arrives at political perspectives on roughly opposite poles of the Afghan political spectrum.

Nor Mohammad's father was a teacher and died when the son was still quite young. After only a year of schooling Nor Mohammad quit school to work as a mechanic's assistant earning 'two to four rupees a day'. After several years he was promoted to driver. Driving is a highly respected occupation in this mountainous and desert country, land-locked and bereft of the most basic infrastructure. Truck driving provides essential, sometimes life-sustaining, goods and services while being capital intensive and dangerous. His driving experiences across the breadth of Afghanistan shape his life. Despite practically no formal education, Nor Mohammad says he functions in eight languages and speaks four fluently. Many Afghans speak several languages. His manner is spirited, and his narrative is laced with colorful images. In my experience Nor Mohammad's often poetic style of speech and casual use of metaphors are fairly typical of rural, mostly uneducated, Afghans, while Mohammad Alim's factual and

informational style of speaking is comparatively rare, especially outside of cities. The attitude Nor Mohammad takes towards Ramin and me resembles an old school teacher lecturing children, his tone is far more didactic than Mohammad Alim's was in the previous interview who is a life-long educator. Mohammad Alim assumes my consensus with his opinions and explanations of recent Afghan history while Nor Mohammad speaks at me from across a divide, stridently instructing me about a worldview he expects I will fail or be disinclined to grasp. His demeanor appears to say, "Heed my words. I was there, an active participant in the events I describe and you claim interest in. I don't think you'll ever really understand the spirit of these times or what motivates the Afghan people but I am going to tell you about some of it as best I can."

As the narrative develops his demeanor emboldens. Describing time as a political prisoner of the Soviet military leads him to criticize non-Afghan and centralized sources of authority outside of Islam. Nor Mohammad emphasizes the unique, almost predestined continuity of Afghan culture and the primacy of Islam for Afghans and Afghan history. His worldview and his manner of speaking draw on informal sources closer to local vernacular and tea conversation. In contrast, Mohammad Alim's worldview and speaking style are products of a prestigious high school and then a college education. His sense of Afghan political history is secular, event-based, and chronological. Nor Mohammad claims sympathy with the stated intention of my work but appears to distrust my ability and interest in presenting the history in which he narrates his participation: anxiety about my cultural background combined with interest in telling his story define his attitude and manner of recounting his life story. By the

interview's end he is charged to slightly confrontational about his opposition to Western values and US intentions in Afghanistan. At least at the time of these interviews (2005) his sharp criticism of Western influence on Afghanistan was a minority perspective. My object in selecting each of these life stories is very minimally to indicate how any individual is 'typical' or representative of a group of Afghans and more invested in examining how life concerns and overlapping macro-historical experiences are expressed and interpreted by four individuals from distinctly different backgrounds and perspectives. In concluding comments I develop how his description of his experiences with poverty and war, combined with distrust of the 'West', reveals a notion of an antagonistic Western 'other' as a significant audience. This audience can be felt influencing not only the interview dynamic and his narrative image, but I argue, a sense of identity that far precedes our unexpected encounter.

II The Interview

I explain to Nor Mohammad that I am starting the recorder and announce "This is an interview with Nor Mohammad on July 13th, 2005." To my surprise Nor Mohammad responds in English, "Yes, correct." Then I say into the microphone "We are in Herat Mosjid", which he stridently corrects, "No, no, Jami Mosjid, in Herat". Technically, he is correct, though I have heard many others refer to this most famous mosque in Herat, and perhaps all of Afghanistan, as Herat Mosjid. Nor Mohammad corrects me several

times in our casual interactions, often when I am speaking to my research assistant in English. He is eager to display his basic knowledge of English; even this meeting has occurred after he self-initiates a comment to me in English on a back street of Herat. Perhaps uncertainty about me makes him keen to attend to what I might assume he does not understand. Correcting me establishes a paternalistic attitude towards Ramin and myself and the interview process as a whole. After a brief introduction to my project and explanation of the interview, he begins.

Jimmy Weir - Where are you from?

I am from Char Dah-e Qorband, in Parwan province near Bamian, north of Kabul. I moved here to Herat eight years ago. The situation in Parwan province became very hard for my family. The war between the Taliban and Masood became intense and was coming closer and closer to my home. Things got difficult. We could not find flour. We had no food. Life became impossible there, so we left for Kabul.²²

The weather was very cold in Kabul. We could not afford firewood and it was wintertime, so we went to Kandahar. The situation in Kandahar was not good, the price to rent a house was too high, and the landlord wanted all the rent money in advance, so

²² Before 9/11 and the subsequent US military invasion of Afghanistan, Ahmed Shah Massood and his Jamiyat –affiliated military forces in the north were the only remaining resistance to Taliban’s complete control of the country.

we had to leave. Also, my children don't know Pashto. This was hard for them.²³ We came to Herat, and now eight years have passed since we came here. (He locks eyes with me as emphasis to the following words.)

Sometimes I can find a job and often I can't. I make just enough money to pay the rent. The days go by, and we pass the nights. We exist. I'd say we are not really living life, but we continue to exist. We pass through this life, we maintain ourselves with what little we have. We don't think much about being happy. We don't think about what we will eat or drink or wear. We can't think much about the future. We have just enough to live and this has to be good enough for us.

(His tone, body language, and eye contact suggest performance and comparison. He appears to imply unlike your people, affluent Americans, who can afford to think about the future, and even unlike my research assistant, wealthy Afghans from urban centers, his life is a day by day struggle with survival.)

Right now, when we met, I was walking from the customs area back home (about 1 1/2 miles away) because I didn't have the money to rent a car. (He laughs.) Then I saw you. I am a driver, and I used to travel around the country with tourists, I can speak English a little, so I said hello. I didn't study this in school of course, but I can get by, I can ask and answer simple questions in English, nothing more, I understand Russian much better.

²³ He and his family are Dari / Persian speaking ethnic Tajiks.

Jimmy Weir - Did you go to school when you were young?

When I was in first grade, I was eight years old, and my father passed away. My father was a teacher. I had two sisters and a younger brother. As a young boy I would work and make three or four rupees a day, very little, but enough to help with the expenses of the family. When I became a little older, I started working at a mechanic's shop, and became a mechanic and from there I became a driver, and now it is thirty-four years that I am a driver.²⁴ I am sixty-four years old. After my father died, I had to work so I couldn't go to school. I am illiterate. It's too bad. I really had a talent for school. For example, I can communicate in slang in eight languages, even though I have almost no schooling. I speak Pashto, Uzbeki, Hazaragi, Urdu, English, Russian, Baluchi and of course Dari. I am a traveler and everywhere I go I learn the language a little.

My father passed away during the reign of Zahir Shah. From that time until now we are traveling, sometimes we are in one place, then another and another. In Afghanistan all people are like this, migrants and poor. We never remain united, you don't like me and I won't like you. For two days we may be together and we can be good to each other, but when one of us finds any advantage, then you don't know me and I don't know you.

(He again laughs heartily; as if saying this mild impropriety made a grand joke.)

²⁴ In Afghanistan being a driver is generally a higher order occupation than being a mechanic. It is expected that a driver be a mechanic also, since the odds of breaking down where there is no mechanic, tools or parts, is quite high.

I am the only provider for the six people of my family, the rest of my family are jobless and sleeping at home. I have two daughters and three sons.

Before the revolution I first went to Kabul to become the apprentice to a mechanic. Then I became a driver and I used to drive tourists around the country. I have been to twenty-nine provinces of Afghanistan. We had a mini-bus and we would take the tourists to Minar-e Jam, Bamian, Herat, Ghazni, and all kinds of tourist places.

I remember once during Daud Khan's government, around 1975,²⁵ I brought seventeen French tourists, all women except one man, who was their manager, to Hazarajat.²⁶ We stayed at a hotel in Bamian²⁷ and rested one night. At 10:00 AM we met in the middle of the city and got ready to go to Band i Amir.²⁸ We found one woman was missing. We all looked for this woman, but we couldn't find her. The police were notified. After about three hours they found her dead on the ground behind the Buddha sculpture.²⁹ She had been strangled; they said they could see a hand print around her neck. She was about forty or forty five years old. It was the work of someone from the group because they did not rob her. Her camera, money and watch, all this was still with her. They investigated me too and I said, "I don't know about it, I am only the driver." The French were kept

²⁵ Dawood Khan took power from the King Zahir Shah in 1973 through a coup. He remained Prime Minister until the communist government took power in 1978, which soon precipitated the Soviet invasion in 1979.

²⁶ The Hazarajat is the remote mountainous region in the center of the country populated by an ethnicity known as Hazaras. The Hazaras have a long history of being discriminated against in the country. They are mostly Shia while the vast majority of the country is Sunni. They also have distinctive facial characteristics, they look central Asian or Mongolian, making them easily recognizable. Famously the Bamian Buddhas that were destroyed by the Taliban were located in the Hazarajat. Before the war, the Hazarajat was a popular tourist destination for the hardy, often hippy, traveler.

²⁷ Location of the famous Buddhas destroyed by Taliban.

²⁸ A famous tourist destination where an unusual geologic structure creates an unusual lake.

²⁹ This is the same Buddha Sculpture that the Taliban infamously destroyed in (to world condemnation.)

there and they were investigated. I had a job the next day. I was driving some Polish people that were visiting. They could speak Russian. They were happy I could speak Russian but I had to explain that we hate the Russians.

(He beams a grimacing smile as he says this.)

Jimmy Weir - How did driving change for you once the war began?

Once the revolution³⁰ began, everything was different. The Soviets had control of the cities but the countryside was controlled by the Mujahedin. People were afraid of the Mujahedin so no one would steal. But there were military check points everywhere, especially in the Hazarajat, and the different Mujahedin groups would fight with each other, and take big tolls from vehicles passing through their checkpoints, but aside from this there was no inconvenience. There was very little theft, and if there was, it would be from people who were bringing weapons from Pakistan.

Jimmy Weir - Can you tell us what it was like to be a driver during the Soviet times?

³⁰ The war with the Soviet Union which began in 1978/79.

During the Soviet occupation, we would bring rice, flour, and wheat from Pakistan.³¹ We would travel in groups of ten to twenty trucks. We had to hide so the government forces could not catch us but we also needed to be strong enough to defend ourselves against people who tried to rob us. Many groups would try to rob us. We had to take hidden routes because on the main routes the government forces would stop us. We would travel from Pakistan to Ghazni and then travel towards Band-i Aaw. There is a territory called Siah Khak (Black Dust). One time when we reached this area the government forces began bombing us. We had to drive very fast to escape. When this began I was in an area of flat ground and there was no place to hide. The planes were dropping bombs and I just kept driving until I reached a place with some trees. There was a lot of dark dusty wind and I knew that now the planes would lose me so I came back to the road and drove until I reached the base of a tall mountain. There in the shadow of the mountain, I stopped the truck. The planes were going around in this dusty air and bombing the area. They couldn't find me, but they did hit close to two or three of the other trucks and a few people who were sitting on top of the cargo got injured and one truck caught fire.

This is the way it was for drivers. We would move with our lights very dim until eight in the morning, and then the government forces would wake up and come back and then they would start to bomb us again. We would hide again until the darkness of the night and again during the night with very little light we would start moving. We would have someone on the roof so he could watch for planes. When he banged on the back of the

³¹ He still is still avoiding identification as a gunrunner, though gunrunning is mentioned in the previous sentence and becomes an important part of this interview. I think he is still deciding what he thinks is appropriate to tell me.

truck we would know when to stop. Then we would turn off all the lights again and stop until the plane, even a commercial plane, was gone. For about six months a year we would bring food items from Pakistan to areas under control of the Mujahedin in these kinds of conditions.

Jimmy Weir - Why were they bombing you?

They would bomb us because they didn't want things to get to the Mujahedin, they thought we might be carrying weapons. We would bring these things to Bamian through the valleys in the mountains. From Pakistan, Angur Adah, we would come to Afghanistan. From the valley of Lahore and Ghazni to Dar e Shekaary, we would come over Khujja Muree and from there we would come to Wardak, and then Jelgah, and on to Hazarajat. There were Mujahedin in those valleys where they had their check posts. We would go from one mountain valley to the other until we reached Bamian. From Bamian we would go towards the province of Parwan and the city of Pul-e Khumri. There was a mountain by the name of Kampirak and Karwan. During King Amanullah Khan's time, there was a caravan path there for camels and pack animals. During Soviet times the route was fixed so trucks could drive on it. We could not take the Salang pass because communists were there.³² We would take the food and things there and then people

³² The Salang pass is a feat of road engineering built by the Soviets in the 1950s and 1960s. This harrowing mountain road crosses the Hindu Kush mountain range at altitudes of 15,000 feet. It is the main means of land transit between the north and the south of Afghanistan and thus of great strategic value. The Soviet

would use donkeys and carry it to different places avoiding government forces. People who had the means would take it to Mujahedin territories and fetch a high price.

The Soviets tried quite hard to stop our vehicles. It was not the helicopters that we were so afraid of, it was the jets.

(Until this point, his tone has been mostly steady, detached and didactic. He has been speaking as if telling a long story that requires patience and careful explanation so the uninitiated might follow. Here his voice becomes noticeably excited and grows somewhat agitated for the rest of the interview.)

We could easily escape the helicopters to safety but the jets were fast and could hit their targets precisely. Also the drivers all carried rockets, RPGs, and Kalashnikovs, so when we knew that a helicopter was coming, we would get ready and try to hit it. I remember our guys hitting two or three helicopters. They stood at a high point and hit the tail part and that caused it to fall. We would stop our trucks and our guys would sit behind rocks and try to hit the planes or helicopters. Then we would begin traveling again after the planes were gone. We were all Mujahedin so we always had weapons while traveling. We were worried about both the Soviet forces but also the other Mujahedin groups because they would try to steal our weapons.³³ We would fight with them if we thought we could, if they looked strong we would just try to escape. If we saw people from the Wahdat (ethnic Hazara) party, we would just fire at them. We are Shomali (Tajiks from

forces controlled the pass. As a result, for the Mujahedin and others carrying goods from Pakistan to the north of Afghanistan, alternate routes were necessary such as the one Nor Mohammad describes here.

³³ He almost acknowledges carrying weapons but it is unclear whether these are cargo or for self-defense..

the Shomali plain north of Kabul) *people and we were not afraid, we would just fire at them. But if there were too many of them then we would stop and let them take our weapons or whatever we had with us, we wouldn't care at that point. I can't hear very well today because of shooting RPGs (rocket launchers).*³⁴

*I hit a tank once, but I never hit a plane or helicopter. I was standing on the road to Chahrdeh-e Qurband, I was a commander for a group of men and on our side were about seven hundred guys. We were waiting for the government forces. One tank was in the front and other jeeps were behind it. I fired at one tank and it went to pieces. We took some Russians hostages. We took the pictures from the wallets of those we killed. Often we found the Russians had pictures of their wives with them. I had some of those pictures for some time but I lost them because of traveling so much.*³⁵ *In Chahrdeh-e Qurband we made tunnels and rooms under our gardens, and we would put our children in there at three in the afternoon, and then we would sit in our strongholds and wait until nine at night. The planes would come and bomb us so their ground forces could pass by us and go to Bamian, but we hid and then we would hit their ground forces. We hit their tanks many times; the destroyed tanks are still there. I have pictures of my six-year old boy standing on top of a burned-out Russian tank. (Spoken with evident pride.)*

We made these trips from Pakistan during the six months of summer when the snow did not close the routes. Sometimes we might get attacked in four different places during one

³⁴ Again he emphasizes the threat posed by fellow Mujahedin groups as well as threat of the Soviet and Afghan army. The mostly ethnic divisions between the Mujahidin groups later become the source of civil war.

³⁵ Another curious reference to 'foreign' women and violence and an offensive to the Soviet dead.

trip, sometimes only once, many times not at all, it varied. Usually the Mujahedin would tell us when we could travel on a route safely. We had everything we needed in our trucks, small stoves, dishes and toilet stuff. Sometimes we could make a round trip in eight days (from Pakistan and back), but we never knew, other times it could take fifteen days, sometimes much longer. The Komaz (Russian) trucks were very big and strong, they would keep going unless the road collapsed from under it or they rolled over. We were experienced drivers so we were not afraid. These trucks could go through any gap, climb steep hills. We drove the Komaz like we were in the movies.

Sometimes if we were attacked in big open areas from the air we would drive the trucks around in circles and create dust so we could not be seen. They would try to hit us from helicopters and then they would leave. During the night we would pass from Ghazni to Sheshgaw and then Wardak. The government communist forces often had contacts with the Mujahedin so sometimes when we got to an area where there were government forces, we would wait and soon they would just go away. Usually we would rest during the day and drive with low beam lights during the night. The Mujahedin would tell us which areas to cross and where it was safe. Sometimes we would stay in one place for a night or two until we were told it was safe to travel. Other times we could get stuck for several nights without food and water, nothing, we would just wait and find food and water in the next place. Those were the revolution times!

(He says this with emphasis, marking another increase in the energy of his narrative.)

There are guys around my age who were in my place who don't have white hair like this, they are still young, but me, all my hair is white now.

One time the Communists caught me and I was a political prisoner for six months. Sometimes at night they would put rockets on my back and make me carry it to the front. I should have been killed but Allah decided it was not my time so I didn't get killed. Some of my Mujahed brothers found out I was a prisoner and they captured a few Communists and they traded me for them. They took one Communist commander, a few of his people, and a GAZ 66 truck, and then traded them for me and another. I was a prisoner in Band-e Ghor, near Pul-e Khomri, for those six months.

Jimmy Weir - What happened to you while you were in jail?

In jail they would come during the night and ask who I was and which group I was with. We would say that we are independent. We would say we are doing Jihad for God's happiness. They would bring bats and beat us a lot.

(He becomes silent for a moment and then he speaks in a distant, monotone manner.)

They would take our feet and hit us 20 or 40, 20 or 40, 20 or 40, times with bats, and say "Tell us who you are with or we will kill you."

(He pauses and stares at a point in space. He squints as if he is looking across time at a difficult moment, appearing briefly unaware of his surroundings. It would be a substantial provocation to say to a Soviet interrogator to say, "I am doing Jihad for God's happiness." The answer evades the question and suggests a fight to death in the name of God. After swallowing a sob, he reemerges noticeably more animated and impassioned.)

We always figured we would be killed; from the day we took a gun and began the jihad we counted ourselves as dead. If we were scared of getting killed why would we have picked up guns? We decided when the Russians came we would defend our land, Islam, and this country. As long as we are alive and have our heads we promised to defend Islam. If we are killed, it's an honor for us, we are not afraid of getting killed. We didn't do this for money, we don't work for Pakistan or for any other group from anywhere else. Germany or France does not pay us to be here. We are doing Jihad only for Allah and for our families, for the ones who cannot defend themselves, so they can sleep in peace, that's why we are fighting. They would torture us, and let me tell you, (He says this under his breath, as if mumbling a prayer or a curse.) far from the honor of this mosque and far from your honor³⁶, those rooms where we were kept were not fit for human beings. They

³⁶ Margaret Mills observes that this is the proper formula to say when describing something impure, sinful or ugly and invokes a protective force.

smelled worse than a barn. They were full of the waste of cows and donkeys, and it was so hot, only God knows.

In the mornings they would take us out into a yard and put a big piece of wood in front of us and tell us to chop. I had not worked like that in my whole life; still there are the marks where my hands were rubbed raw and splinters bit into my hands. I would chop wood until the late afternoon time. They used the wood for cooking and making tea. After we said our late afternoon prayers, we would again enter that barn room until the next morning. They would let us out just at the time of prayers. After prayer they put us back in the room. Our cloths were so dirty that no living thing would come near us. Scorpions could not bite me because my clothes were caked so hard with animal waste.

After six months, things changed. One day the Russian commander who had put me in jail said, "Bring me the driver!" A soldier brought me to him and the commander said, "This is not the driver I meant. He said that I looked different. He couldn't recognize me. His soldiers told him that I was the driver. The commander told me, "We are going to exchange you for one of our commanders and some soldiers that your people have taken prisoner." He said, "Even if you were Hekmatyar himself we would have to let you go because this Russian commander is so important to us."³⁷

³⁷ Hekmatyar, leader of Hezb e Islami, was arguably the most powerful Mujahedin commander during the Soviet times, largely because he received more weapons and support from the CIA and Pakistan. Predictably for those who were familiar with his political views, he turned against the US. He was a significant spoiler as the Mujahedin sought to establish a government in Kabul after the communist government fell. (1992 – 1995) Today he is still considered a potent threat to safety and stability in the region.

They brought me to a big river. On one side were the communists and on the other were the Mujahedin. They brought the Russian commander and his six people to one side of the river, and they let me go to the other side of the river. I was alone; there was another prisoner but he was from another party so that poor guy had to remain behind. They brought me across to the side of the white beards (old, respected leaders). When I got out of there after four months I had been wearing only one pair of clothes and they hung on me like dry wood over my skin. My beard and hair was matted like an unkempt sheep. People looked at me like I was a wild animal.

Then they took me to some location and there they cut my hair and beard.

One Mujahed started crying when he saw me. He took off his clothes and gave them to me. I was there for the night and then from Pul-e Khomri I got in the car and came home to Char Deh Qurband.³⁸

(Here, he pauses, becomes emotionally choked up, nearly crying. He struggles to say these last two sentences. The kind and generous gesture of one Mujahed for another in this vulnerable moment carries more emotion for him many years later than anything else he said.)

³⁸ Throughout this interview there is the loud reverberating echo off the tiled walls of the mosque of cars and trucks driving by just outside.

Jimmy Weir - What did you think about in prison?

I thought it was certain that I would be killed, because they were our enemies, and by killing us they would rise up in their ranks. But mostly I felt sorry for my family. I was thinking that my family would be left in the desert with no one to take care of them. But then I would tell myself that Allah has created us, and whether I am there or not Allah will take care of my family. He has control over our destiny. I was thinking that in our own place, Chahr Deh e Qurband, it snows for six months. The mountains have lions, tigers, and foxes, and during those months they don't come down from the mountains, but still they manage to live. Allah gives them something to live by, so I prayed it would be the same with my family, Allah would give them food.

I got out of prison and I went back to my family. After a while I had to start taking driving work again. During the Soviet times we carried mostly weapons and sometimes food.³⁹ Sometimes when there were not enough weapons we would bring food. When the Americans gave us Stingers we brought a lot of them in. With the help of Americans, especially with the Stingers, we caused the defeat of Russians. In the province of Parwan there was a young man, he looked a little like you, his name was Sayed Babu, he shot down seventeen planes in one night with a stinger. I was with one group of the Mujahedin, Hekmatyar's group.⁴⁰ He was not much in Bamian. He was more based in

³⁹ This is the first time gunrunning is freely admitted though many hints have been dropped.

⁴⁰ At this point it is clear he is no longer concerned about being safe in this interview. Hekmatyar is a widely acknowledged enemy of the US and if he is willing to tell me this then he is clearly not too worried about me.

Parwan, Baghlan, and Ghazni. Pul e Khomri was under control of Afghan Communists. Russians were in the cities and towns, but outside the cities, these areas were controlled by Mujahedin.

I remember once during the Taliban time, the Hazara people took over our region, and they robbed our homes and everything we had. One day I had a load of grass seed and I was driving through Kandahar. There was a guy around your age who was the manager of buses on the Kabul route, his name was Morad. I asked him, "Morad jan, what's going on in our region?" He said, "Hazara people have taken our region, and no one knows who is alive and who is dead. They killed everyone." I became very depressed thinking about my little sons and my daughter. When I am sad I get diarrhea, so I got sick. I had to finish my delivery and then I went to see my family. They were alive but the situation was bad and for about three months we survived by eating grass. There was a lot of fighting so nothing could be brought into our area. On the mountains tops were Taliban and in our area were the Hazara forces. Every night the Hazaras would knock on the door and would insist on being our guests. We would say, "Brother, you have taken everything, you have already eaten all our food, and everywhere you have check points, how can we afford to have you as guests?" They bothered us a lot. Finally, the young guys from our area got together and attacked them a few times. Some of our men were injured but we got our territory back. Then Taliban entered the region and we left.

We took the mountain road and came to Kabul. We could not stay there so then we went to Kandahar. We had no money for rent and every place was very expensive, and my

family didn't know Pashto, so I came to Herat. It has been eight years that I am here. Sometimes I have work and sometimes I don't. I can't go back because I don't have money. I have a good house in my region. We have a saying, "Where you went, and what you did, means nothing." (An interesting comment in the midst recounting a life story suggesting all these accounts of the past amount to nothing now.) If I go back, for a week or ten days some people will come as friends and sit with us. Some would come as enemies and want to see what I have. I have to have at least a glass of tea and some sweets to give to guests.

(The call to prayer begins thundering from the central prayer area of this enormous mosque. Here in a stonewalled side room off the main prayer area the echoing sound is stirring. He indicates he should go soon to pray but it is clear he has already decided the interview is to be wrapped up. He has abruptly brought things up to the present, skipping almost entirely any mention of his life during the Taliban period. He concludes in much the same manner that he began, with an account of the displacement that brought him to Herat. His manner indicates that he feels he has said enough.)

Jimmy Weir - What were your ideas about the Soviets when they first came to Afghanistan?

We were thinking that Russians invaded our lands, but they can't take it from us, because our people will never take orders from outsiders. In the end our people will rise up against them. We were thinking that very soon, in a very short time we will organize ourselves, and with the help of Allah, defeat the Russians. We had only one big problem when the war began, we did not have weapons to fight the Russians. We started our uprising against the Russians with shovels and spades. Engineers started the uprising even before the Mullahs. Engineers would assure us that it was 100% certain that the Russians were going to be defeated.⁴¹ Our grandfathers have defeated the Russians and the English many times before. Britain was the most powerful country in the world, but here, in this country, their teeth were broken and they ran home. We thought soon the Russians will be broken too, and they will leave as well, but we all have to help. Pakistan was very helpful to us. If Pakistan had not helped us we would have become captives like the people of Bokhara.⁴² The people of Bokhara were not helped by the Afghans and other Muslim countries, and the Russians came and got their country. For our people, Pakistan helped us, so then we could come and go and fight freely.

Jimmy Weir - What did you think about the fighting between the different Mujahedin groups after the Soviets left?

⁴¹ Heckmatyar and several of the Mujahedin leaders were trained as engineers or had different university degrees created a new group of Islamist who were not traditional clergy.

⁴² Present day Uzbekistan, most of which became part of the Russian Empire in the latter part of the 19th century and then later became part of the Soviet Union.

When the Mujahedin began to fight with each other after the defeat of the Communists it was because of the hand of outsiders. These outsiders would not allow the people who could make the future, do something and work. They had a plan to make the Mujahedin fight against each other.⁴³ Even though the Mujahedin knew that we are all Afghans, and we all just freed our land, but still there was the hand of outsiders. The foreign countries wanted Afghanistan to be controlled like Somalia, they didn't want Mujahedin or other well-known groups to build something with their own power. They would make one group fight with the other, even though all these groups were open-minded people. But inside their groups were people who made them fight with each other, so they would not be able to choose their own fate.⁴⁴

If the Mujahedin could have chosen their own destiny they would have shaken the world. Why? There would be three powers: the power of unity, the power of Islam, and the rules of the Koran. These three powers, if they were together, could save the world. Outside influences didn't let these forces get together because these people of the pharaohs have been told by their fathers and grandfathers not to allow, under any condition, Islam and the Muslims to be united. Use money, witchcraft, anything you can to stop them. Islam is like opium, if one becomes addicted, everyone will become addicted to it. If our book, God, and the people come together, the world will not be able to rest. Others had to put friction between us, to divide us into groups, and in the end we are in pieces. Our people are forced to ask for the help of other groups. In the end they will trick us, saying they

⁴³ In many interviews Afghans deny any responsibility for many of the events that have transpired in the country.

⁴⁴ In many respects these more political ideas he expresses here in the end of the interview are by my thinking ideologically derived from the positions of Hezb e Islami Heckmatyar.

are going to help us, but in the end they would not let us be united. These outside groups will have the control, and our people will follow them, and then they will tell us, these people, "We will free you." That's all.

(Again, he concludes the interview, but I try to continue.)

Jimmy Weir - What did you think about the Taliban?

There was a foreign hand in the Taliban's regime too. There was a group of Taliban who stood only for Afghanistan, but they were not allowed to keep power and to stay united. The good Afghan Taliban lost power in the beginning. Then the Taliban became people who came from Pakistan and other foreign countries and we had to obey the other countries. Do you pay attention to who controls the leaders of our country now?⁴⁵ We, our country, had good people. Taliban had people who worked for our country. They wanted us to be a free and united country. Since the world was created we Muslims have had a lot of power. Muslims have made many of the things that have been invented in the world. In some of the sporting events of the world Muslims are still the winners. But many don't want us to be independent and fear us. Many countries that are now playing the drums of friendship, in their hearts they are against us.

Today in Afghanistan we are in need of economic help, people need food, wheat, oil, and rice, before we need schools built that have no teachers, and cinemas, and bringing the

⁴⁵ Most likely a reference to the US and /or Pakistan.

agriculture of opium for us. Why don't they dig wells so we poor and weak people can use the water? Why not help the people who come from Iran and Pakistan (referring to returning refugees) make a home and begin a farm? What can we do with schools buildings if we can't eat it or drink it? What are they doing for us? Now there are scenes of naked heads and legs in this country. These things are not acceptable and we won't let this influence us. Finally, when it reaches the highest point, then again there will be an uprising against it. Now, it doesn't matter how much you sit with them and go around with them, finally an Afghan will think of where he is from and what he is doing, and he will think maybe I was tricked. This country can never be dominated by foreigners, or follow strangers. People have been tricked. Afghans are like Koawk bird, maybe you can capture him but you can't train him, and when you let him go, he will go to the mountains.

Jimmy Weir - What is your idea about the present situation?

It's like a dream, like a movie, in my opinion, and it's going to change quickly. Because in all countries, the traditions of its' own people operate better, other people's traditions can't replace the traditions of the people and if they do it can only be for a short while. Like this water, this mineral water you drink, (Holding up my water bottle suggesting the modern West is as vacuous as this expensive, now useless, empty bottle.) for a while it's full, and when it's empty then nothing can be made of it, it is just an empty, useless bottle.

This country, in the end has its fellowship and membership with Islam. No outside group or people can rule it, at any time, very quickly we will rise to defeat those who try to control us. Then the outsiders will go back to their own lands and hit their heads, and ask why it's not working. All the people here have Islamic ideas; no one can change their opinion. Only for a while it may appear they have changed, but then it quickly becomes obvious that they can't be changed.

Thank you for coming from other countries to help us. We will try to let people all the people know that you are here to help us.

(I give him a little money for his time and I invite him to come to eat lunch with us after his prayer. He says he should go home but thanks me heartily. I give him my contact information with some vague unrealistic hope he might contact me in Kabul. I find his feisty honesty quite appealing.)

End of interview

III Comments on the Interview

A) The Place of Poverty and Power in a Past

After three decades, continuing warfare and unrelenting poverty remain the two most substantial realities on the Afghan political and social landscape. At macro-political levels war and poverty reinforce each other. War disables production, destroys infrastructure, devours capital, and displaces people, creating uncertainty and deprivation in daily life, all of which can nudge people into compromising positions. In a myriad of quickly changing local and national political circumstances many Afghans become unavoidably located on one side or another of civil conflicts, regional actors or the Taliban, by virtue of their ethnic, tribal and family backgrounds or place of residence. For example, Nor Mohammad explains, “If we saw people from the Wahdat (ethnic Hazara) party, we would just fire at them. We are Shomali (Tajiks from the Shomali plain north of Kabul) people and we were not afraid, we would just fire at them.” He is later displaced from his home by fighting between Pashtun Taliban and Masood’s Tajik forces, the latter is his own ethnicity but by party typically enemy of Hezb-e Islami, the predominantly Pashtun Mujahedin party he was a member of. At micro-political levels the emotional dispositions of those forced to live for decades with violence and poverty likely tends towards anxiety, resentment, distrust, isolation or resignation. As the Soviet war morphed into a protracted civil conflict and then Taliban rule, economic insecurity grew even more entrenched. Trust or hope in a political or economic future not governed by survival and simple self-interest appeared increasingly unrealistic and repeatedly contradicted by life experiences. Individual decision-making in the context of an extended period of macro-political conflict responds, at least in part, to the specific

insecurities, associations, and expectations generated by the changing circumstances of instability.

Nor Mohammad's experiences with power and poverty dominate his account and I consider how these two realities become depicted and appear to influence his understanding of Afghan history and his assessment of the contemporary political circumstances. Power in his case refers to his experiences with primarily non-Afghan (i.e. Soviet, American, NATO, Western, to a lesser degree Pakistani, possibly Iranian or Saudi influences) forces that challenge life expectations and his fellow Afghan Muslims. Power also refers to his inclination and sense of potential to resist their imposition. Poverty requires somewhat less contextualization but I consider how it influences characterization of his present and past. Nor Mohammad divides his life story into three distinct periods. The early period is his childhood up to the beginning of the Soviet war. The middle period is the Soviet war up to the time he is forced to leave his village eight years prior to this interview. The later period is the past eight years living in Herat, which roughly coincides with the rise, demise and resurgence of the Taliban. This periodization could be roughly applied to the lives of most mature adult Afghans.

The Soviet war marks a substantial change in daily life and political circumstances that all Afghans variously share. While the Soviet war was undeniably challenging, it is also associated with pride in acting upon circumstances and hope frustrated by a failure of Mujahedin forces to unify over the course of the war, despite great effort, sacrifice and loss. The next major transition begins with the retreat of the Soviet military and the

beginning of a civil war between Mujahedin parties, a dramatic change in macro-political circumstances with little improvement in life circumstances for many, often worsening of the economic and security situation, especially in cities. After a brief period of optimism after the Soviet retreat beginning in 1989, civil war engulfs the country and a growing sense of disappointment, frustration and distrust of Afghan political leadership deepens. The Taliban ascendancy is the next most significant macro political change, a period of diminished armed conflict and criminal activity, but greater economic stagnation and harshly restrictive, particularly for women and educated urban dwellers.⁴⁶ Nor Mohammad's portrayal of the early period, roughly his childhood into early adulthood, and the later period, the previous eight years living displaced from his home village in the city of Herat, is largely characterized by reactions to poverty. This contrasts sharply with his portrayal of the middle period, his years as a gunrunner and Mujahid, which celebrate pride in heroic action and successful endurance of the hardships of active warfare against a vastly superior military and a morally bankrupt culture. As he says to his Russian speaking Polish passengers on his tourist bus, years before the Soviet war, "I told them I speak some Russian but I had to explain that we hate the Russians."

I begin this interview simply asking, "Where are you from?" Nor Mohammad replies concisely naming and locating his home village. He continues volunteering how

⁴⁶ All generalizations about Afghanistan are limited and exclude many.

economic circumstances and political violence have forced him to relocate three times in the past eight years. He explains his family had to leave his home village because “The war between the Taliban and Massood was coming closer and closer to my home and we had no food.” He offers few additional details about his life during Taliban rule except that they had to move. He attempts to resettle his family in Kabul but “The weather was very cold and we could not afford firewood.” They move further south to Kandahar where it is warmer in the winter but “The rent was high and my family could not speak Pashto.” His response moves out in more encompassing circles from the location of his birthplace to the circumstances of three relocations and then into this intriguing existential - poetic reflection on ‘life’. Speaking as if reciting a poem, locking eyes with me for emphasis, he explains,

The days go by, and we pass the night. We exist. I’d say we are not really living life, but we manage, we exist. We pass through this life, we maintain ourselves with what little we have. We don’t think much about being happy. We don’t think about what we will eat or drink or wear. We can’t think much about the future. We have just enough to live, and this has to be good enough *for us*.

His words appear to move him as this existential depiction of family life challenges my question and almost the assumptions of a life story. Nor Mohammad explains ‘things Afghan’ to me, ‘where he is from’, with his life and observations as example. As this response wanders from a direct answer to the question posed, his tone, body language, and eye contact indicate comparison of his life against an image of my life. Voicing a perspective underlying much of the interview, he intimates that “Unlike your people, affluent, likely decadent Americans, who have the luxury to plan for the future, (and even unlike my research assistant, a wealthy Kabuli,) life absent a modicum of security is not

life”, with a somewhat implicit confrontation, “So what have you come here to ask us about?”

If Nor Mohammad were telling his life story to another Afghan in similar economic circumstances to himself it is unlikely poverty would be given the attention it receives here. He likely anticipates I might be of financial assistance or employment in some unforeseen way in the future. I do give him some money at the conclusion of our meeting.⁴⁷ I interpret his reply to “Where are you from?” to begin saying “We are poor and displaced.” Absent the means to plan for the future, he calls this merely “existing”. In the Heideggerian terms proposed in the first chapter he lacks the ability to ‘care’ for himself and his family, thus, by his own reckoning he does not ‘really live life’. He concludes this first response returning to the circumstances of our meeting just minutes before explaining he was walking home after failing to secure work. The immediacy of this reality likely makes poverty more present in his narrative. He continues on a more self-affirming note and lighter note, explaining that he used drive tourists around before the war and that he speaks some English and better Russian. Despite economic weakness he also presents himself as a worldly, capable, once powerful man. At this early stage I suspect he reckons with how the interview will proceed and mulls over how much of his past he cares to reveal in this unanticipated encounter with an American, his urbane Afghan partner, and a digital recorder freezing an account of his life. Again, in light of the entire interview I suggest that Nor Mohammad understands the overall interview to

⁴⁷ I never offer money to conduct an interview and only on rare occasions do I offer money when I sense the need is great.

be an unknown American asking, “How do you live?” and I paraphrase his response in cultural existential terms to be:

“If by ‘to live’ you mean to have a place where one is secure and settled, then we don’t really ‘live’ anywhere. The insecurities of our lives don’t amount to living. I don’t ‘live’ because our future is always so uncertain: we never know whether we will have the basic requirements of life, food, shelter, and work. We just get by, with the barest minimum. It would be more accurate if you asked me where we are situated or located while this life passes us by. To live means some manner of security and confidence in the future, and we don’t have this. Nevertheless, this has to be good enough *for us* and we will persevere.”

At existential levels, statements like the quote I began these comments with about the passing of life and inability to plan for the future reveal an Afghan Islamic, often Sufi inspired, sensibility that this life is brief, fleeting and unreal, compared to the afterlife as a Muslim and pride as an Afghan. There is a quality here similar to the last stanza in much Sufi poetry in which the body of the poem alludes to the cryptic insights of the mystic’s ‘truth’ but concludes that for the uninitiated these words and the worlds they refer to will remain a mystery, only those already versed in the mystic’s way of life can understand this reality. There is a poetic sensibility here and elsewhere in this interview that is striking, but not especially unique to Nor Mohammad. Many Afghans I interviewed entered into variations on a similar kind of existential poetic reflection about the transitory and uncertain nature of this life while indicating an indirect pride in their ability to endure the material trials of poverty and political instability of this world. An implication across Nor Mohammad’s life story is that a Westerner will not understand what he has to say because life in the West is so different and at odds with the life he has lived.

If cultural styles of thought can be divided into poetic / metaphoric and rational / informative, casual Afghan speech often exhibits striking poetic qualities. I struggle to translate effectively this ‘poetic’ style of thought into English and to present it in these interviews, but feel limited conveying these poetic dimensions across language and culture. Many Afghans interject quotes from Sufi poets in the course of ordinary speech and can recite a large number of poems by heart, very often without having ever attended school. The casual conversations of many Afghans are influenced by a Persian poetic and philosophic literary tradition in which people seek to philosophize, instruct, or entertain with one another with a description, insight, or turn of phrase that is mostly aesthetic and metaphoric in impulse rather than factual and informative in intention. Often it seems more likely that an Afghan without a formal education shifts into these periods of poetic existential revelry, absent a clear literary reference, than those who have a formal secular education and an example emerges comparing Ustad Alim’s interview with Nor Mohammad’s. Mohammad Alim’s language lacks the use of local color and rich metaphor that permeates Nor Mohammad’s interview while Mohammad Alim is more historically informed, fact oriented, and structured in his descriptions and explanations of the past than Nor Mohammad.

Nor Mohammad's description of driving tourists around the country before the Soviet War carries a nostalgia that resembles, through different example, how Mohammad Alim began his life story. Mohammad Alim began, "When I was a child, there was no war in Afghanistan whatsoever. Afghanistan was a safe haven of peace and security, but now as an old man I have not known peace in so many years." Afghans of an older generation often appear a little haunted in these interviews remembering when the country was at peace and the future could be anticipated with optimism. They react differently from Afghans younger than thirty-five who have never known the country at peace. For over three decades an extraordinary variety of power brokers have repeatedly promised, and failed, to consolidate power. As this cycle of attempts and failures to stabilize the country takes another sputtering form with US/NATO presence and the Karzai government, it should be borne in mind how many times Afghans have watched the promises of powerful political parties become the political foundations for new formations of insecurity. As another political system seeks to assert dominion, yet remains sorely dysfunctional, ineffective and often corrupt, uncertainty, evasion and misuse are not unreasonable responses to circumstances.

Nor Mohammad inexplicably inserts a detailed account of an incident when a French woman on his bus is killed despite it having little obvious bearing on what is presented before or after. I generally presume episodes and comments presented in a life story reveal something of importance about the speaker's personal past or his sense of lived history, but I am at a loss to attach a clear explanation to the inclusion of this episode. As the life narrator scans the past for memorable events some come to mind with no greater

obvious justification than that they are memorable. Broadly speaking, the fact of an event being memorable is a truism about anything recounted in these narratives: after all, the narration of something that happened in the past and recounted in the present is simply what it means to present a memory. 'Being memorable' however connotes more than the mere fact that a memory occurs. I generally assume the inclusion of an episode in a life story, remembered and included in the manner represented, discloses something significant about the 'who', in the Arendtian sense, of the character, or the narrative image and life of the speaker. By character I offer this tentative definition, the dispositions and processes of meaning making by which an individual evaluates his life. I often assume that the inclusion of a memorable incident, especially if out of the flow of the narrative, is indicative of something about the character of the narrator, but there is nothing certain about this, exceptions and inexplicable inclusions abound, and much must allude me. In most cases my interpretations of episodes are based on relating it to something said or inferred from elsewhere in the narrative, by comparing to other life narratives, or by relating it to an aspect of Afghan culture or history about which I feel privy. In some instances the meaning or significance of an episode for the life or character of the speaker appears clearly. At other times an episode defies easy interpretation. By my reading the incident Nor Mohammad recounts with the French tourists defies easy or clear interpretation though it made a lasting, detailed impression over three decades later, coming to mind at this moment in the interview.

Nevertheless, considering the entirety of Nor Mohammad's narrative in light of Afghan culture, I suggest a few, tentative interpretations. As in most encounters with strangers,

Nor Mohammad sought points of connection between his life and my own to establish his credibility and authority to speak, likely a little more important to interviewees with whom I have no prior associations. The episode with French tourists informs me of time spent working with foreigners and says among other things “I am a worldly man.” similar to an American saying to an Afghan he meets, “I worked with an Afghan once.” or “I had an Afghan neighbor.” This episode is probably one of the last times he had casual interactions with Westerners (except for time spent in a Soviet prison) and this encounter with me may remind him of these early experiences with tourists. As an Afghan driver he could have been held responsible and there is a good chance he was under scrutiny. It is worth recalling he approached me as I took pictures of ‘cute’ school children on a side street of the historic old city of Herat. The fact that he has a past with ‘Westerners’ helps to strengthen, even anticipates, some of the strong opinions he states towards the end of the interview. This incident of a killing on his bus would be memorable, in part, because for an Afghan man to drive a vehicle full of foreign women would be quite strange. The situation might likely evoke a mixed sense of being sexually titillating, morally threatening, and a responsibility to protect these foreign women. Most rural Afghan men neither see nor interact with women outside of their immediate family and many consider the freedoms of Western women scandalous. Nor Mohammad strongly expresses his discomfort with Western gender norms clearly towards the end. Finally, Nor Mohammad might be indirectly criticizing Western culture by suggesting that this kind of thing happens when women are left unattended by men and foreigners can be subject to the same kinds of violence now associated with Afghans.

B) The Gravity of the Present

While explaining the difficulties of driving during the Soviet war Nor Mohammad first mentions that he could have been suspected of gunrunning without stating that this was in fact his cargo. If he and his fellow drivers carry legal goods, they could presumably take official government routes, with ordinary customs and checks, and thus avoid government attack or reprisal. To see large convoys of unidentified trucks on remote, unauthorized routes would awaken suspicion of gunrunning or at least aiding and abetting the Mujahedin and his descriptions suggest he was carrying something more contraband than food. Responding to why the Soviet Military might bomb his convoy, a noticeable change in emotional tenor occurs, one resembling Ustad Mohammad Alim's answer to the question about his political associations in the previous interview. For each, clear identification of political association during the Soviet conflict initiates a new phase of more motivated self-revelation and greater emotional detail about life circumstances.

After Nor Mohammad clearly identifies his cargo as supplies, though not yet guns, for the Mujahedin, he continues with four short 'war stories' from the Soviet period. In each he and his group survive or succeed a life-threatening situation, usually being bombed from the air, through a combination of perseverance, skill and luck. He concludes each episode by stepping out of narrative time and relating the episode to the present. Two conclusions indicate how his body remains affected by warfare and two proudly express

wartime accomplishments. The pattern most Afghans follow (not unique to Afghans but near the nature of narration) in recounting episodes in a life story is to narrate a sequence of events in the past that builds, sometimes unevenly, towards an episodic culmination and concludes with a statement about the implication or relationship of this past to the present or a possible future. I suggest the term the ‘gravity of the present’ to refer the way the present pulls on the narration of the past events. From one perspective, I read life stories for a glimpse into the speaker’s process of connecting the past to the present context. From another direction, I consider the process of memory editing the past through the lens of present day concerns.

After describing how frequently he had to engage in fighting he concludes the first ‘war story’ explaining he cannot hear very well today because of the deafening noise of the many rockets he shot. The second episode describes a Mujahedin ambush of Soviet forces and ends describing pictures of his young son sitting atop a destroyed Russian tank. In the third account about the difficulties of driving during the Soviet period he finishes with a claim outside of time, “ We could go through any gap, climb steep hills. We drove the Komaz (Russian-made trucks) like we were in the movies,” examples of heroic acts beyond the ordinary constraints of physical limitation. He concludes the last section above saying his hair is so white due to the hardships of the Jihad. In the first and fourth incidents his body bears the burdens of warfare as result of years of the fighting. In the second the photo of his young son sitting proudly on a tank (I imagine it prominently displayed on the wall in his guest/living room) is a snapshot of his heroism and his masculine legacy captured for future generations. In the fourth he drives like a

character from a Bombay action movie. Of these four memories from the Soviet war, two celebrate success and accomplishment, while two indicate the lasting detrimental effects of the war on his health. The sacrifices associated with wartime successes make victory more honorable. Without putting himself in danger, he would have less to proud of. In all four examples, he and his fellow Mujahedin are to be honored for both their successes and their sacrifices.

Assessment of the Soviet war experience, especially in light of present-day American intervention, is a defining macro and micro-political concern for most Afghans. The tone and selection of Nor Mohammad's wartime memories serve to demonstrate the respect the Mujahedin continue to warrant. As his narrative approaches his present it seems he thinks the greater political circumstances have changed but slightly, Afghans remain challenged by an unrelenting cultural and military assault. Despite changing political regimes vigilance remains required in defense of continuous threats. Most Afghans, as people everywhere, value the continued sense of autonomy of their cultural identity, some take this as an issue crucial to their individual identity, and the necessity of Afghan autonomy defines Nor Mohammad's narrative self. Practically for many, continued association with an armed militia is economically necessary, but in the confluence of political aspiration, cultural autonomy and economic expediency, self-identification takes on myriad influences. Apart from poverty and the expectation or reality of external threats from the West or nearby countries, there is little promise of political or economic improvement. This insecurity likely contributes to a sense of feeling threatened. For most former Mujahedin, success on the battlefield ended in political quagmire at a

national level, a diminishment of status in local village life and an uneasy adjustment to extreme poverty for family. The Soviet War experience as active Mujahedin remains an important source of meaning, adventure and power in Nor Mohammad's self-presentation, influencing the stands he takes about the meanings of being Afghan and entering his interpretation of present day political circumstances.

Nor Mohammad's time as a Soviet prisoner is given a sparse description, he simply explains that he was taken prisoner and then traded in a prisoner exchange. Had he not been asked to elaborate, he would have left this apparently significant experience with this restrained description. Perhaps he begins emotionally reticent about revisiting the experience. I asked him what happened to him in prison and his response begins a new emotional tone that is carried to the conclusion of the interview. In a colorful description of his clothing in prison he says, "Our clothes were so dirty that no living thing would come near us. Scorpions could not bite me because my clothes were caked so hard with animal waste." He describes forced labor and torture, and becomes agitated, at one point tearful, recounting a fellow Afghan who offers him clothing when he is released from prison. After talking about prison time he becomes charged and somewhat confrontational. Experiences of torture and political imprisonment would likely influence one's political commitments and self-identity. For Nor Mohammad, months of

imprisonment with expectation of being killed would seem to provide time and motivation to think about the meanings of his political engagements, the obligations of his faith and the threat posed by ‘Western’ others: these become his primary subjects for the remainder of the interview.

Nor Mohammad’s forceful, agitated demeanor as he describes torture, prison and Jihadi experiences suggests to me that these experiences deepen his emotional investment in the Mujahedin cause and his convictions about associated worldviews. Many Afghans variously share similar life-threatening experiences and suffering from human-inflicted sources including torture, loss of family, material deprivation, forced combat and inaccurate rockets. Extreme experiences, especially those that originate from politicized or social sources, are likely to lead people who are already politically engaged or religiously motivated either towards a more galvanized commitment or towards apathy and resignation. Or more simply, extreme challenges are unlikely to leave one with the same convictions or expectations as before the challenge. When corruption and chaos dominate macro-political life and insecurity and deprivation characterize family life, circumstances are fecund for manipulation of those with little power. As Afghans acted to protect family and self, this often capitalized on preexisting, social divisions, (family, tribe, ethnicity, religion, nation, etc) which grew more ideological as stability became a distant memory and dangers drew close to home.

My asking what Nor Mohammad thought about in prison begins an unapologetic and emotionally charged defense of the entire jihad, continuing onto perspectives on the

contemporary Afghan situation and concerns about Western influence. His previously reserved and didactic tone turns into an impassioned and unrestrained flow of words. I consider this shift the beginning of a narrative freefall, as he no longer seems to search the past or struggle to remember, but speaks effortlessly and with strong conviction. The story and its meanings appear to ‘take him over’, and he begins to freely proffer opinions that he understands to differ with my own. His life story addresses me both as a symbolic and literal Western/American audience. It appears he has determined that I pose no challenge in his future, though he does not think that I am sympathetic to his political perspectives. His desire to speak his sense of the truth supersedes uncertainty about who I may be and address his fears about my background. The narrative freefall begins a more self-revealing shift. He addresses political or social dynamics that have bearing on the dynamic between Nor Mohammad and myself, topics important enough to provoke a spirited soliloquy. The dramatic turn the interview takes here is most evident in the register of his voice and physical mannerisms. I describe above some of the auditory and visual aspects of this turn, but it is also evident in the nature of the content and the positions he stakes out.

He begins to wrap up by returning to his family’s problems, explaining he cannot return to his village birthplace until he has the financial means to host guests. Home is a way of life that requires the material means to engage neighbors in a respectable manner. The call to prayer begins thundering from the central prayer area of this enormous mosque. In this stone room off the main prayer area its melodious plea for followers to gather for prayer is stirring. Nor Mohammad says he should go soon to pray but it is clear to me he

feels he has said his piece and has already decided the interview is basically complete. He abruptly returns to the present, skipping almost entirely any mention of his life during the Taliban period. He concludes in the same manner he began, with an account of the displacements that brought his family to Herat, indicating he has said his piece. The process of asking Afghans about their life stories often has this recognizable trajectory: their distinct introductions hint at life-defining concerns, a collection of episodes and comments form the body of the life story with occasional moments of narrative crescendo, and a moment occurs, often unexpected to me, but clear to me in the speaker's mannerisms, when the interviewee decides to conclude. All autobiographical accounts must remain unresolved yet gesture towards closure, creating a center that I identify as an existential orientation for the sake of explication. His decision to bring the interview to a somewhat abrupt conclusion does not seem to be due to being pressed for time. In Nor Mohammad's case he has already explained that he does not have work today and is headed home. Most Afghans I interviewed did not appear too busy to take time for the interview and it does not seem to be fatigue or frustration that ends the interview process. In fact Nor Mohammad's energy appears to increase as his life story and political concerns become intertwined. It would seem that speaking about a life that spans over six decades has the potential to be quite open-ended and expansive in detail, episode and reflection, but in most cases this was not the case. When an interviewee decided his narrative is complete, continued questioning from my side rarely resulted in significant reentry into the life story. I asked a few more questions as I had grown fond of him, intrigued by his stories and appreciative of honesty, but I was aware of his wish to conclude.

Reading these life narratives to identify the speaker's idea of a narrative audience or existential orientation simultaneously asks both how and to what extent my American audience can enter the dynamic of the narrative as well as how the narrative addresses issues and concerns that lie beyond the specific interview. Or in other words, to what degree is the speaker's narrative specifically addressing present circumstances, his own and/or expectations of me, and to what degree is the speaker narrating a character and past that is a cumulative perspective on an entire life, albeit presented to an American in a particular place and time? The two cannot be neatly separated and both are inevitably present. The notion of a narrative audience as I apply it refers to a group of observers to a life the speaker considers personally important and influences the qualities of self-characterization in the life story. This work tends to favor interpretation or explication that focuses on the life story understood as cumulative perspective on an entire life as made evident in the selection of life episodes. These life stories are read as a sketch of 'who' the speaker is and asks how a particular individual past is edited and carried into the present.

My research assistant and I physically sit across from Nor Mohammad as he speaks, asking questions and recording, but Nor Mohammad knows virtually nothing about us

apart from our national identities, our physical attributes and our occasional nods or questions. I have said a few things about myself as an introduction to this interview. I have explained I teach at Kabul University and have spent four years living in Afghanistan and Pakistan in the early nineties. I have introduced this project and explained my research interests. Beyond what I have said with my words, inevitably our style and manner of speaking and body, dress and movements relay to him vague, qualitative information. While in all these interviews it could be said that the narrator's perception of me as an American affects the course of the interview, in Nor Mohammad's case I make a far stronger claim that his notion of the West and his image of a Western audience exceeds the moment of our literal encounter and substantially influences his notion of Afghan-ness, his self-image, and his self presentation. Additionally, this same concern is also affected his perception of the social identity of my assistant, indicating the importance of this idea of West as addressed also to my educated, Kabuli research partner.

Throughout this interview Nor Mohammad offers several specific examples to demonstrate the character of Afghans and a few vague critical generalizations about American/Western culture. For example, early in the interview he compares his own family's displacement to the situation for all Afghans, "In Afghanistan all people are like this, migrants and poor. We never remain united, you don't like me and I won't like you. For two days we may be together and we can be good to each other, but when one of us finds any advantage, then you don't know me and I don't know you." Or later in the interview his experience as a prisoner is applied to all Afghans saying, "Afghans are like

Koawk bird, maybe you can capture him but you can't train him, and when you let him go, he will go to the mountains." Characterizing Western efforts in Afghanistan he says "What can we do with schools buildings if we can't eat it or drink it? Now there are scenes of naked heads and legs in this country." As he concludes the interview he says about the West "No outside group or people can rule us, at any time, very quickly we will rise to defeat those who try to control us. Then the outsiders will go back to their own lands and hit their heads, and ask why it's not working." Nor Mohammad's image of 'being Afghan' is a product of life in which his image of the West as audience/adversary is as a threatening antagonist, an image not suddenly formulated but created over the course of his life. The process could be said to begin with his first perception of non-Afghan 'others', one that over time became a sense of a threatening 'West', intertwined with the causes and issues, actions and suffering, threats and rhetoric that have defined his most significant actions in life. For that relatively small but influential group of Afghans who understand the US as an existential danger to Afghan Muslims, the difference between the past Soviet threat and the present American threat is largely a question of nuance. The sentiment of the anti-Soviet Jihad morphed into an attitude towards NATO and American influence. This is both despite and somewhat complicated by general Afghan recognition that the US contributed significantly to the Mujahedin resistance in the Soviet war. The Soviet or US threat appears as a materially advantaged and culturally troubling assault on Afghan autonomy, cultural values and Islam, even if the association of Soviet and US ideologies seems a little stretched, at least by non-Afghans. For many Afghans US assistance to the Mujahedin was a matter of American self-interest and expediency, not friendship, as many once wrongly believed, and now

understand more sharply. This reasserts the sense that Afghans are on their own, despite appearances that suggest otherwise.

Nor Mohammad's account of Afghan history substantiates an image of the Afghan people as possessing an enduring ability to ward off all threatening adversaries. A mythic image of fiercely independent warriors becomes substantiated by the truly surprising, at least to Westerners, of the historical successes Afghans have had against the British and Russian colonial armies in the nineteenth century and the retreat of the Soviet military in the second half of the twentieth century. He asserts confidence that the Afghans will not allow any opposing group, in particular a non-Muslim country, to dominate his people. History has proven this in the past, in his own life the Mujahedin, his fellow Afghan Muslims, united to prove it again. He explains if Afghans and Muslims faithfully join the cause, this unity can prevent any force from taking over a Muslim land. It is likely he draws on the words of a fiery mullah preaching after a Friday prayer, if Afghans are unified as Muslims then everything is possible. This account of being Afghan addresses me as an American with the perception that the eventual audience to this interview is a potential adversary seeking to control and corrupt his fellow Afghans. My primary focus here is not the factual and chronological history of an event or a period, instead the qualities of perception and emotion, attachment and disappointment, Afghans hold about the past experiences in the present. Those Afghans, like Nor Mohammad, who feel the circumstances of the Soviet Jihad have changed little are responding in part to a powerful pride felt during this period, complicated by unrelenting poverty, while an enormously powerful international presence is seen daily,

but mostly unfelt, breeding a sense of resentment and insecurity that easily translates into multiple levels of feeling threatened or challenged. This is complicated by an anti-materialist cultural value, well developed in Sufi literature, that rejects affluence as corrupting.⁴⁸

To conclude, I interpret the most significant audience to this interview to be Nor Mohammad's notion of a Western audience (something which clearly prefigures our encounter) before which he presents perspectives on his life, Afghan culture and history, through the episodes and opinions recounted in his narrative. For Nor Mohammad, his notion of a Western audience supersedes his knowledge or judgment of me or anticipation of audience to the research project I describe. Nor Mohammad's self-definition as an individual and an Afghan reflects off his notion of the West as a materially powerful threat and political adversary before which he posits an opposing, both collective and individual identity, that is historically supported, spiritually/culturally superior, existentially distinct and politically resistant. In this interview I embody in my physical presence a larger audience to his life long struggle for his own and for Afghan autonomy against the multi-faceted threat posed by threatening 'Wests'. I symbolize a threat, while over the course of the actual interview I am tangibly an amusing presence that he instructs, anticipating my misunderstanding and the potential for future manipulation. In broad-brush strokes, the following is a cultural sketch of 'who' Nor Mohammad is, in the Arendtian sense discussed in the first chapter:

⁴⁸ Margaret Mills from personal correspondence.

I am an Afghan, a Muslim, a fighter, and a man displaced. I am a driver and a father. I know that in most places people settle, but this is something we Afghans have neither the luxury to afford nor the recent history to allow. We have had to fight off invaders throughout our history. Afghans are different from you and your people, we are a proud, independent, pious people. There is honor and freedom in being able to return to the mountains to take refuge, people can't hold us down or make us serve their purposes. But it makes for a difficult and unstable life, exhausting, and absent many of the pleasures you take for granted. Those of you who might want to take away our freedom and lifestyle should understand who we are and then they will know that they will fail.

To conclude, Nor Mohammad's presentation of poverty is in part an evocation for sympathy, but absent the weakness that might be associated with pity. It implicitly challenges the material wealth of the West, acknowledging a basic unequal distribution of wealth and might at a global level. If Nor Mohammad were to narrate his life to an Afghan whom he thought to be as poor as his family, there would be less emphasis on the place of poverty in his life. At a broader existential level the pride and bluster of his description of his years as a mujahid carries a sense a satisfaction and pride in having seized control over circumstances and respect for his/their successes. As I have suggested above, a depiction of poverty, a desire for sympathy, a hope for monetary benefit and a challenge to my culture, all play a part in his self-presentation. In this interplay of narrating how he acted upon and was acted upon over the course of his life, the emotional legacies of the Soviet war intersect with his perceptions and expectations of the contemporary Afghan political landscape.

Chapter 4 - Haji Bomani – A Local Leader, a Lost Generation, and the Marginalized Majority.

Interview conducted July, 2005

Conducted at Haji Bomani's House with Ramin

in a village on the outskirts of Ghazni city

I Introduction

A) Overview of the Interview

Haji Bomani told me he was eighteen when he heard the Soviet military has invaded Afghanistan and Communists have taken power in Kabul. Soon after, a small group of men secretly came to his village in the middle of the night. Their leader, a man who called himself Commander Mujahid, asked the men to gather in a mosque, explaining that a dark shadow has been cast over Islam and Afghans, and the time has come to begin a Jihad against the Soviet occupation and Afghan communists. All the brave young men of Afghanistan were pressed to join the effort. Haji Bomani joined the resistance that night, leaving his family and home, and traveled in the back of a truck to a camp hidden

in “a very wild, mountain stronghold”. Haji Bomani continues his narration by describing how this loosely formed group began to establish contact with local communities for donations to sustain them. As a young man from a poor respected village family, with ties to the nearby city of Ghazni, he was assigned missions in the city. His rural background made him more easily trusted than those with an urban background, while his knowledge of the city, amongst their mostly rural-based insurgency, was useful. Within a few years he became a leader of about fifty men and he gained local fame as an effective artilleryman, able to shoot crude rockets with unusual accuracy. During the interview he boasts about himself often, but only through the opinion of others, “They all said I could find the Soviets.” Nearly everything narrated in his life story can be related to the decision he made one night to resist the Soviet invasion. Most of his life story is one account after another of dramatic wartime experiences, of successful and failed attacks, of friends dying beside him, and of his own narrow escapes. He recounted these stories with unusual detail, mentioning the name and often describing the character of each fellow Mujahid with whom he fought, most of whom were martyred over two decades earlier.

Early in his narrative Haji Bomani frames the ethical circumstances of his participation in and departure from the Mujahedin cause. He fondly recounts the respect his community had for the Mujahedin at the beginning of the war, reiterating that the people had a “very deep and sincere faith in the Mujahedin”. Describing how it felt to be a young Mujahid he says, “We were only small kids... but the elders kissed our hands ... and loved us a lot... and we became happy” and concludes, “There was a unique unity.” This stands in

sharp contrast with his disappointment a decade later when the Mujahedin turn guns against each other in a bloody struggle for power, territory and money. He explains concisely, “It was God’s blessing that we did not enter into house-fighting (internal conflicts) like the other groups.” indicating a popular Islamic sense that it is God’s grace that prevents sin, more than individual will. Haji Bomani, like Nor Mohammad from the previous interview, holds the service that he and his fellow Afghans gave to repel the Soviet military in high esteem but, unlike Nor Mohammad, is at pains to disassociate himself from the subsequent civil war, as the Mujahedin become governed by 'warlords', funded by 'criminal activity', and fight 'house to house', against fellow Afghans and Muslims. His narration first moves abruptly from pride in the early years, to his later disappointment in the Soviet Jihad, without any mention of his ten years as an active Mujahid.

Haji Bomani expresses regret about a youth spent at war instead of more sustainable and life-fulfilling projects: he imagines a past pursuing an education and building a business. Assessing his life near the end of the interview he compared himself to a rocket that did not explode, 'dungaie' in Dari, a 'dud' in English, a missile shot but failing to realize its purpose on contact. Meanwhile, he provided detailed descriptions of many friends and fellow Mujahedin killed in battle beside him, indicating being deeply troubled by this honorable sacrifice turned sour. His body wears the wounds of war: he explained his heart often races uncontrollably and he frequently has severe headaches. Nor Mohammad and Mohammad Alim, both mature adults when the Soviet war erupted, begin their life stories nostalgic for a time in their youth when the country was at peace.

Haji Bomani, over fifteen years junior to these two men, by contrast begins his life story recounting a time when the Soviet Jihad was still honorable. Maturing into adulthood as a Mujahid is an important generational difference from an older generation of Afghans who were basically adults when their involvement began. Unlike Nor Mohammad, and to a lesser degree Mohammad Alim, Haji Bomani is preoccupied 'by what might have been' in the absence of war, but more troubled by 'what was', the collapse of the Jihad into a civil war without purpose and end between Afghan Muslims.

Reflecting on his life, he says it would have been better if his death had occurred while he was a young man and the Jihad was still righteous and honorable. Despite physical ailments and the loss of friends in battle, the greater source of suffering is disappointment with the infighting, corruption and power-mongering that came to define the cause that he and his friends literally gave life to and for. The image of his life as a dud, stated by a man locally famous for his ability to fire rockets, conveys an attitude toward recent Afghan history shared by a politically marginalized majority of Afghans who were in their teens or twenties when the Soviet war began: of a life as a young adult committed to weathering circumstances and defending family, community, religion and nation, and then later having to stand by and watch this 'sanctified' cause devolve into a violent struggle between Afghans for power and wealth, and become corrupted by non-Afghans. At micro-political levels, the failure of the Mujahedin to cease fighting and share power after Soviet military retreats is a lingering frustration shared by most Afghans that challenges trust in future Afghan political projects. At a macro-political level, the political leaders and parties from this time remain a great obstacle to future peace,

national unity and economic prosperity. Both the emergence of the Taliban, and the continued threat of civil war lead by ‘warlords’, (Afghan ‘commandants’) with regional, ethnically-based supporters, have significant roots in the tensions between Mujahedin groups from the Soviet era. Ethnic tensions were rife, though mostly manifesting in a localized manner, before the Soviet Afghan War, but by the end of the war these divisions had become heavily armed, ethnically-based fiefdoms dependent on war booty and international largesse and demanding greater autonomy, privilege or power. I find a great many Afghans share Haji Bomani’s disappointment in the post-Soviet war Mujahedin parties and leadership. I will not attempt to predict here how this frustration will manifest itself in future politics, but examine how experiences during the Soviet War era and afterwards create and remain a complicated emotional background for individual Afghans engaging contemporary micro- and macro-political and social realities. Haji Bomani’s depiction of great pride in the early years Soviet Jihad, as well as his later disappointment, is poignant, articulate, and life-defining, a sentiment conveyed by a great many Afghans of his generation.

B) Ramin and Haji Bomani: Urban and Rural Identities

Most of the interviews I collected were conducted with my dear friend and invaluable research associate, Ramin Ahmadi, whose contribution critically, professionally, and personally is enormous, only the most tangible of which was translation. I was

introduced to Ramin through a close Romanian friend who worked with Ramin and understood we shared a mutual interest in Sufism. Ramin and I began research together by visiting Khanaqahs (Sufi religious gatherings) and interviewing Sufi Pirs⁴⁹ in Kabul and Ghazni, but found it difficult to reconcile the teachings Sufi Pirs wished to impart as Islamic mystics with the information we pursued as social science researchers. The Sufis we spoke with expected us to listen passively to their mystical teachings or occasionally sat in impervious silence as we asked them what they seemed to deem were invasive and inconsequential questions. Sufi Pirs who appeared to us to be charlatans were often most eager to entertain us and to display us as international attention to their devotees; those who seemed most sincere were disinterested in being the objects of a research project. I remember one popular Pir in Kabul suburb who had me place his hand on his chest while clearly flexing his pectoral muscle and explained to me this was the beating of his God-filled, love-inspired heart. Another Sufi Pir in Ghazni, who had written literally thousands of poems, sat alone in a dark shrine, mostly blind and no longer able to write, and refused to speak about anything of biographical nature. Meanwhile, despite my strong personal, cultural and literary interest in Afghan Sufism, my early research efforts left me with the sense that it evaded the social realities of a history mostly shaped by war and deprivation. In peaceful and stable circumstances I might have maintained a research focus on Sufism, but as an oral history project at Kabul University I was helping to facilitate grew, I found myself drawn into its orbit.

⁴⁹ Sufism is a mystically and poetically oriented, informal practice of Islam, one that is very popular and culturally significant. It is very different from the legalistic, conservative and culturally repressive interpretation of Islam associated with the Taliban. Pirs are Sufi teachers and respected as advanced mystical practitioners of Islam.

This interview occurs on the outskirts of Ramin's hometown of Ghazni. The interviewee here, Haji Bomani, is a close friend of Ramin and his family. Ramin was fond of saying that Herat (the city where the second interviewee, Nor Mohammad, was settled) is the birthplace of poets but Ghazni (at the time a two-day dangerous car journey on the ring-road from Herat through volatile southern regions) is the city where poets come as old men, to die and be enshrined. To provoke him I asked him once "Doesn't that give your beloved hometown a morbid quality?" He replied, amused, "They honor my city by dying here." Ghazni is an ancient city, once the center of the Ghaznavid Empire, which in the tenth century stretched from North India across Afghanistan and included much of present-day Iran. Ghazni, one of five major Afghan cities, is strategically located between diverse ethnic populations from the north, the south and central regions of the country. Afghans from across the country make pilgrimages to Ghazni's ancient tombs to offer prayers and alms. Two precariously leaning minarets and a giant, mud-walled fort loom over the city, a constant reminder to residents of a distant, more glorious past. The city is famous across Afghanistan for the harmony of relationships between otherwise factious ethnic and political groups at national levels.

Ramin's family has been successful cloth merchants in Ghazni for several generations. Before coming to work with me, Ramin was a close assistant to the governor of Ghazni. He joined this research as an interim job while he applied to universities in the UK. Ramin was mature far beyond his twenty-seven years at the time of these interviews: decades of political upheaval have forced many Afghans to mature quickly. Despite his young age he was already a well-respected figure in his home city of Ghazni as well as

among Afghan political and expatriate circles in Kabul: evident in the great lengths people went to entertain and accommodate us as we visited various offices and homes in Ghazni and Kabul. Ramin is a self-trained scholar, an enthusiast of Persian literature and an aspirant to political office, though he lacked a formal education at the time of this research due to a frequently non-functioning national educational system. He has since nearly completed a BA in political science in England. He chose to work with me in part to find some reprieve from the personal and political pressures he was under as an overburdened assistant to an important Afghan governor of a militarily strategic province. We quickly became fast friends. Before coming to Ghazni, Ramin and I had spent three months traveling to conduct interviews in northern and western areas of Afghanistan, as well as different neighborhoods in Kabul. In other locations identifying good interviewees was a burdensome task involving a mix of chance and careful follow-up on a loose network of contact, but in Ramin's hometown selecting potential interviewees was quite easy, as he had a good sense of who would be good interviewees and he was already well-trusted by many. Ramin was quite excited to conduct this interview and it was very evident that he and Haji Bomani appreciated each other. I suspect Ramin understood that Haji Bomani would speak freely and that his past was full of great daring, danger, and difficulty. I also think he saw this as an opportunity to learn more about the life of respected friend, to communicate admiration and extend the friendship, and to ask Haji Bomani questions that were unlikely to occur in the course of ordinary life. As it turned out, not many questions were required to get Haji Bomani talking about his past.

On our first morning in Ghazni, Ramin insisted we wake early to drive to Haji Bomani's home a short distance from the city center. Haji Bomani lives about five miles outside the city but the road is difficult to traverse. Ramin wanted to be sure Haji Bomani was still home, which meant arriving in time for morning prayer, just after sunrise; otherwise Haji Bomani, a local leader and shopkeeper, would likely be away until evening and difficult to track down. Few Afghans have phones so we set out to his house without giving him advance notice. The area between Haji Bomani's village and the edge of Ghazni city is eerily deserted. It is a former war zone, absent vegetation, and littered with rusting arsenal, abandoned tanks and crater holes. The only signs of life visible from the city's edge at this early hour were the distant silhouette of camels and nomad tents on an otherwise flat desert horizon. I was sleepy, nodding off a time or two as we drove at a snail's pace for a mile or two through an open, dirt area that began just as the last city structures ended. I woke to see the ubiquitous painted stones and flags that mark the various stages of the painstaking slow and dangerous process of demining. We were on a dirt track crossing a minefield. Mine fields are commonplace across Afghanistan and especially on the outskirts of cities. Local residents often know where they are and are careful to avoid these areas or to remain on clearly marked paths; children, of course, are less vigilant. Visible paths are established through mined areas as possible. If demining teams have mapped the area and resources permit, rocks are painted so people, especially newcomers, can easily identify mined areas. Suddenly awake, I expressed

concern to Ramin about driving on a small dirt track through what was clearly a minefield. Ramin shrugged it off, explaining as long as we stayed on the tire tracks it was safe. He then suddenly stopped the car, pointed to a large painted stone and suggested this might be a good place for me to urinate, as we both laughed.

The edge of the city of Ghazni, like many towns and cities in Afghanistan, marks an abrupt beginning of a very different physical and social space. The outskirts of urban areas were frequently mined during the Soviet War, as this was where government authorities lost control to the Mujahedin hidden in the countryside. Often these areas were cleared of visual obstacles, including vegetation, and mined to prevent the Mujahedin from approaching the city without detection. Battles and ambushes occurred more frequently on the edges of the city. During the Soviet War the Communist Government authorities clearly controlled the cities, at least by day, but the countryside, especially by night, was rarely under government control. Haji Bomani's narrative has many references to the importance of the urban / rural divide. For many Afghans the difference between the countryside and the city is much more than a physical delineation. It suggests a temporal divide unevenly associated with traditional and modern life styles, and for rural or conservative Afghans the 'modern' is often more associated with moral laxity than material progress. There is a well-established folk genre in which the 'city-slicker' tries to dupe the simple villager, but in the end generally fails. A sharp political and cultural distinction between the city and countryside dates back hundreds of years, and is significant in the writing of Ibn Khaldun,⁵⁰. Images of country and city life are further complicated by the particular changes that accompany modernity and three

⁵⁰ From personal communication with Dr. Margaret Mills.

decades of conflict in which foreign forces are based in cities and an active insurgency is dispersed in the countryside. For more 'conservative' Afghans the difference between the village and the city easily slides into a notion of urban spaces falling under Western influence and associated with lax sexual mores, corrupt moral values and, more generally, the loss of what is essentially Afghan. For Haji Bomani, as for most Afghans, this is complicated, but nevertheless the various meanings of rural, village life and the potentials and dangers of urban life can be heard echoing in his life story.

Historically in Afghanistan, the seat of power has only nominally been in Kabul, the mostly tribal and/or ethnic power base of Afghanistan was and continues to be in the countryside. At the very outset of this interview Haji Bomani identifies himself as a villager, whose father was a 'white beard', and whose family practiced traditional handicrafts. Being a 'white beard' signifies respect for age and piety: this is how Mohammad Alim introduced himself. Haji Bomani explains he had 'modern' interests in a formal education and engine mechanics as a young man, but his rural, artisanal father disallowed these pursuits, insisting the son make money for the family, a similarity to Nor Mohammad who quits school to earn money at a very young age. The space between the city of Ghazni and the Mujahedin camps 'hidden in the hills' is significant in several of Haji Bomani's war stories.

Approaching Haji Bomani's village, Ramin and I soon reached the end of this barren no man's land and suddenly descended into a valley thriving with trees and carefully cultivated farms. In most of Afghanistan, where the reach of the village irrigation ends,

an abrupt end of vegetation marks the beginning of arid desert. We arrived outside Haji Bomani's house at six in the morning. Behind closed doors our arrival inevitably sets women and children in motion scurrying to prepare food and tea for the unexpected arrival of guests. Most interviews occur in the guest room of homes where the activity of women can be heard behind the scenes, preparing what will soon be consumed, but the wives and all but prepubescent girls remain unseen. After a few minutes we were graciously welcomed into a large guest room and seated on the floor with pillows and tea. Within minutes his son brought us Afghan pancakes with honey and sweet hot milk, a lavish breakfast by Afghan standards.

A deaf villager came to visit while we were eating. This man we learned lost his hearing early in the Soviet conflict after being tortured by Soviet soldiers. It is quite possible he was tortured for information about Haji Bomani and his group of insurgents. Haji Bomani was amongst the group of Mujahedin that freed him from prison. After a brief, apparently urgent discussion, his full attention returns back to Ramin and me. Ramin explained to me later that the room we were in is the center of village decision-making and, despite being part of Haji Bomani's large mud-walled house, it was practically a common area for the community to meet and discuss public affairs. Haji Bomani's respect as an informal leader of his community has origins in his leadership of a small band of Mujahedin during the Soviet war. Haji Bomani expressed honor at being asked to present his life story as a way of contributing to the documentation of Afghan history. He explained that during the Soviet War foreign reporters often came to interview, but

since then no one has been interested in their situation. After a friendly breakfast we began recording.

II The Interview

Besmillah e Rahman e Rahim, (In the name of God, the most compassionate and the most merciful) my name is Allah Bomani and I would like to share with you some stories from my life. Besmillah e Rahman e Rahim. When I was a kid we were village people and I had a white-bearded father. Our economic situation was very weak, and we were doing different kinds of crafts for work, such as tinsmithery, chapli (leather Afghan sandal) sewing, tandor (local clay oven) making, until I became about fourteen or fifteen years old. We came from the area where the potters live. I very much wanted to go to school, but my father was against my education. My father's finances were weak and he pushed us not to pursue our education. He said that every penny that we earn from work is needed for the family. I had two strong interests when I was young, the first was school and the second was to become a mechanic.

When I was 18 years old, the revolution took place. I remember sometime after, in the middle of the night, Commander "Mujahid" came to our village with a group of Mujahedin. We were gathered together in the mosque and he spoke to us. He wanted us to join them. He said that a dark shadow was cast over Afghanistan and Jihad was

obligatory now. We should fight the Russians to defend Islam and to defend Afghanistan. These activities were secret and that night I decided to leave with them. We traveled for about four hours and twenty minutes in the back of a truck down a terrible road. We went to a mountain called Torgan, it is a very wild, mountain stronghold. Even in my dreams I had never seen such a mountain. I saw they had a base there, with rooms and tunnels they had dug for hiding. There were others already there.

These Mujahedin were from around Ghazni and many knew my family. My uncles were iron and tinsmiths: the people of Ghazni respected us. So they sent me to the city to ask the people to donate things, cooking pots, glasses, tea, and other supplies. Ten or fifteen others joined me and we went to a mosque in the metal working area of Ghazni. We talked to the people and told them the time had come to begin Jihad and we explained the difficulties we were facing. At that time people had a very deep and sincere faith in the Mujahedin. One person brought us half a ser of dry tea (one ser is seven kilos) and another brought us some bread and some others brought us teapots; whatever they could from their homes. They brought all these things and we loaded it up on donkeys and carried it to the base. We worked at the base and as long as we were there, we had our food from the villages all around. We sent four people to one village and four to another, by turn they were bringing us food. Over time we got more disciplined and we started our regular operations.

When we began we did not know fighting tactics and we were very emotional, but we were not afraid of the dangers of fighting. We were divided in two groups, one was asked

to remain to defend the base and do missions in the countryside, and the other, mostly city boys, were sent as guerillas to Ghazni. All my life I had lived on the outskirts of Ghazni city, and I knew the city well, so I was chosen for missions in the city. We came to the areas of the city like Khoja Hakimsahib, Godol, etc, and we began our city operations. In the beginning we had one pistol for every two or three people. My group had eight Pakistani pistols when we entered the city center. In small groups we waited for the government people and as soon as we saw one, we pointed the gun at him and told him to move quietly towards the Qabila (Mecca, the direction of prayer, to the west in Ghazni) inside an alley about ten meters' distance. We ordered him not to move and warned him that if he touches his body, we will shoot him. We told them, "If you continue working for the government, next time we will kill you." We really scared them.

We continued these operations until we had increased our connections throughout the city. The more powerful or dangerous people with the government were taken care of by our higher leaders. We took care of the small ones. We developed strong contacts from inside the government. Over time more and more people wanted to join us. We vowed to hold guns to our shoulders until the Russian forces went back to their country. When the inter-party conflicts started (The Soviet Army left and the infighting between the various Mujahedin groups began years of civil conflict.) we decided that Jihad was no longer obligatory. It was God's blessing that we did not enter into house fighting (internal conflicts) like the other groups.⁵¹

⁵¹ Haji Bomani's narrative here makes an odd yet significant temporal jump. Haji Bomani began by detailing his involvement in the honorable early years of the Soviet jihad and then suddenly jumps to explaining his separation from the highly destructive civil war ten years later without mention of the decade of active fighting in between. With little prompting, he describes below his years as an artilleryman in the

We were sent several times to Pakistan for the trainings where we were trained on how to use different guns. My own specialization was using the RPG 7 rocket and the BM 1. I was mostly trained to use heavy artillery and I soon became famous among the friends and colleagues. They all said I could find the Soviets.

(He does not pause as he transitions from one episode to another, just a drawn out mumbled, uuuhhhh, then setting upon each new episode curious monotone zeal, evincing in my mind both being eager and troubled by the narration.)

I remember one interesting time. It was the anniversary of the beginning of the Soviet war and the BM rocket was new for the Mujahedin. Sayed Qadim was our commander and he told me to take a BM and target Bala Hesar (A strategic hill in the middle of the old city where government forces were based.) from Janal Bagh (A garden area below this hill with a lot of trees and close to a river). We did not have much experience or training yet about how to use this new weapon, but my commander wanted to see what it could do. We went and found a place to set up the BM. When we set out there were twenty-five of us, but when we got to the place to site our target, we sent the others back, and three of us remained behind. We knew that once we shot the rocket, things would become dangerous and they would come looking for us.

Soviet conflict in great detail, but here he first skips over his war time years entirely. At this early stage in his life story, the ethical circumstances that are contrasted and frame this period are the honor of joining the Mujahedin and the dishonor of their descent into civil conflict after the Soviet conflict. Once these ethical bookends are clearly established he can begin to narrate in detail the daily life and death issues that shape the period in between.

One person carried the ammunition, one person scouted out the target, and I was to sight and shoot the rocket. When we were ready I shot two shells towards the hill. Afterwards, I called on the radio to ask where our shells hit. We got no answer so we decided to pack up. Suddenly two very dangerous helicopters appeared over us in the sky. I quickly took off the BM legs and hid it inside a water channel. I was young and very energetic back then, although it was very heavy. We began running to the line of trees but my commander, Sayed Qadim, was hit with an RPG (A rocket shot usually by a single person from what looks like a large gun.) and the other man, named Najmudin, was shot in the brain. They weren't killed but they were badly hurt.

Now I was alone with these injured men. There was some grass and other kinds of plants, so I drew this over us to hide. I had an RPG with me and I thought, "If the helicopter lands to take these bodies then I have to stay here and defend them." I was very scared, hiding while the helicopters flew overhead, and the entire day was spent badly. My mouth was hot and dry. When the helicopters left, I put the injured men on my shoulder and carried them by turns. I took one a short distance, put him in a safe place and then returned back to take the other one, until I got them near a village called Azad.

I went to find the commander of another group. His name was Agha e Hoshor and his people were hidden underground. I went down and shouted but nobody could hear me because the noise of a helicopter was drowning out my voice. Finally, I found Agha e Hoshor and asked him to give me one of his men named Shah Agha. Together we went and carried the injured to the village. That night we found a car and fearfully we drove

them to Wardak. If the Soviets found us with these injured men they would know we were Mujahedin. Those two poor men were both martyred later that day. Yeah, both of them were martyred that day. One of them became martyred near Katawaz on the way to a hospital in Pakistan. The Mujahedin fight against government kept getting hotter over time.

(I am struck by his emotional detachment as he narrates his effort to save his two dying friends. He speaks in a rushed, matter-of-fact manner as he describes carrying their injured bodies to safety. The concluding statement, "The fighting was getting more intense." grounds and justifies, at least rhetorically, the inclusion of the episode. It marks a transition from one episode to another. It seems to serve to return him emotionally from his entry into this memory back to the present circumstances of our encounter and presents a position on the period, while also expressing his loyalty to friends and the urgency of removing evidence.⁵²)

On a different occasion, in this very village where we are sitting right now, thirty Mujahedin were sitting here together having tea when some villagers came running up and said they heard the sound of tanks coming. The villagers panicked and said, "The village is small. They will attack us because you are here." They told us to leave and escape quickly from the village right away. We went towards Bakawol (a nearby village) but five of us who were in the back of the group were suddenly surrounded by the tanks in village of Lashmak before reaching Bakawol. There was a pottery workshop here and

⁵² Personal communication with Dr. Margaret Mills.

three people came out of this factory and told us they counted forty-five tanks and hundreds of armed soldiers. The villagers said "You have to give yourselves up." I said "We will never surrender!" These three guys said, "Well what else can you do then? You only have three RPG rounds to fire and two Kalashnikovs".

We were surrounded at 5:00 AM and they started searching the houses. They used metal detectors to search through sacks and in the ceilings and walls for weapons and such. I had a friend called Faroq. He was very worried and frightened. Suddenly he fired at the soldiers for no reason but he was too nervous and he was not able to hit any of them. The fighting started and it continued from early morning to 6:00 PM. We were only five in Lashmak village. Helicopters were over us, shooting at us and there were soldiers and tanks on the ground. We had to use our ammunition very sparingly. We shot the RPG every few hours and mostly tried to use grenades. In some cases we threw their live grenades back at them. At times it was body to body fighting. The three potters who asked us to surrender were martyred. A bomb hit the roof of their workshop and killed them all. The soldiers got close and were throwing grenades at us. Faroq was injured by a grenade. We put Faroq into a Tandor oven and put a piece of wood over him so they could not hear him moaning. We knew that he was having a very hard time being in there with his injury. We continued until evening and at 6:00 PM the tanks gave up and they retreated. The feeling for the jihad and commitment to fighting was different back then.

Ramin: Were these Russians?

If they had been Russians, they would have flattened the village from their unit (a military hill in Ghazni) or from Bala e Hesar with BM40 (An advanced Russian weapon, which fires 40 destructive shells all at one time.). They were Afghan internals', but they had four helicopters and they also used a lot of force. There were jets also in the sky, but not bombing jets. The helicopters were bombing us badly. Uggghh.

Let me tell you the story about an attack on our base. It is one of our most bitter memories although there are a lot of stories like this. One day the Mullah came on the loud speaker and announced that a lot of tanks and troops were headed towards our Khogyani base (a village outside the city of Ghanzi). Some people got these reports from inside the government. The Mujahedin had a lot good people inside the government. This was still early in the war and our most modern weapon was the Eleventh bullet gun. (An old Italian gun) The mountains are very high in this area and we needed long-range weapons to fight. They asked us for twenty to thirty Mujahedin with Eleventh bullet guns to go defend the base. We went to Khogyani base. It was winter and most of the Mujahedin from this base were home for rest and many were in Pakistan. There were only about fifteen to twenty soldiers at their base. They asked us to divide up at different locations with our guns around the base. We found spots in the gullies and ravines of the mountain.

I was with a small group up about two hundred meters on the mountain. We made our ambush there. Usually we did not target regular soldiers as much as we targeted a sort of Afghan communist called Watanparast (Literally homeland worshipers, these were tribal militias that were hired as mercenaries by the communist regime.) The Watanparast wore special military uniforms and they were volunteers. Though they had different clothes, they usually wore old and worn uniforms so we could not differentiate them from other soldiers. They came very close. They knew we would be waiting there. They called to us "Sons of Pakistan, surrender yourselves!" we called back to them "Sons of Russians, surrender yourselves!"

Suddenly the fighting started. From up on the mountain we saw one jeep with a large rocket attached to the back and a tank coming close it. They were trying to get the tank and the missile up to the area called Merza Khil where they could view the entire area and shoot down at us. We would fire on them when they tried to move. Their artillery experts were very skillful and they targeted each of us who shot at them from behind rocks. Our guns could hardly reach to where they were, but we had to keep bothering them so they could not get to Merza Khil. It was very difficult and we spent the day very badly. It was 2:00 pm when it began and it continued until 9:00 pm. We became very anxious and disturbed. Two of our men were injured. When they left at 9:00 it was completely dark. We tried to return but we lost our way home. Finally we reached our base. I will never forget that day, we did not have weapons that could reach them. Still they retreated, after they lost several people.

During all these times, there were some things working against us that we did not understand at that time. One was Pakistan. We thought that the Pakistan military was helping us. Often we would go to Pakistan for training or weapons. The Pakistanis opened a map for us and told us that there were two bridges in Ghazni city and they said we should bomb the bridges by any means possible. The Pakistanis told us to destroy our own bridges because the Russians used them. The Russians had special military vehicles that could easily be used to make bridges but we did not know this at that time. We were illiterate and emotional and we did not understand what the Pakistanis were really trying to do. They did not want us to be strong. We had heard that Jihad is Farz (obligatory) and we thought they were helping us with our Jihad. They told us to destroy every school and bridge and to kill the teachers. Today we have great regret when we remember this period. But Al hamdullah (Thanks be to God) until now, Inshallah wa rahman, (By the support of the kind God) we walked very carefully and we did not do what they wanted. Today when I think about those orders, I figure it was not to our benefit. Orders like this were common but they were to our disadvantage, they were meant to harm of our country and our economy. A teacher is the light of a community.

(Haji Bomani describes the Afghan government soldiers calling his fellow Mujahedin “Sons of Pakistan”. Recalling this provocation appears to lead him to explain the Mujahedin relationship to Pakistan and to transition to speak about education while changing the direction of his narrative.)

The second thing working against us was the relationship between different Mujahedin groups. We were not unified in the beginning, over time we developed better relations with other groups, at least here in Ghazni, but our lack of unity hurt us. The KGB played with us. They had a lot of guns and under cover sent some people with ten or twenty Kalashnikovs to infiltrate Mujahedin groups. They would get these guys to tell one group that another group was preparing to attack them. They would tell one group that another group had joined the Russians. They would tell one group where the weapons of another group were stored. They would direct us to their weapons. It was very painful for us when we saw that some of the Mujahedin commanders were fighting with each other for ten Kalashnikovs. When we sat together we would be friendly again and sit around one table to eat, but still fights hurt our efforts and our people, sometimes we destroyed entire villages fighting each other.

I remember one example. Habib was a Mujahed, but he surrendered and joined the government. One day his mother came to us with baked bolanis (a very popular meat pancake) and told us, "My son wants to help you capture the government checkpoint". This was a very big checkpoint called Char Dewal e Abdur Rahim in Qala e Khoja. This fort had lookout towers on each corner and thick, high mud walls all around it. She explained his plan for our attack on the building and how he would prepare things. We got ready. We did not have much equipment like the big ladders and things that we have now. We tied two or three wooden ladders to each other to get over the wall. Everybody in my group was excited to be the first to climb the wall and enter the post. This boy,

Habib, had made one way clear for us so we could approach the post without being seen. We snuck up to the corner of the fort.

There was one Mujahed called Pakol. He said that he wanted to be the first to climb up and go over the wall. He got his Kalashnikov ready and started to climb up. The walls of this fort had walls about a meter thick. When he got near the top they grabbed Pakol's hair, pulled him up and threw him onto the roof. They tried to cover his mouth so he could not yell but he managed to cry out, saying, "It's a trap!" It turned out they had set an ambush for us. They were government people. We heard a series of gunshots; they shot Habib in the legs with over twenty bullets.

My specialty was rockets, I immediately started firing rockets at sections of the fort but I could not shoot where Pakol was, I was afraid that my rockets might kill him. There were soldiers on either side of him shooting at us. There was another rocket launcher with us named Hazrat Sabz who was martyred right beside me that day. The area was soon ablaze, a living hell, with shooting and fire, smoke and dust everywhere. It was a very dangerous night for us. The attacks and shells came from everywhere. We were shooting while we were running and we entered a garden area and ran until we came to the third section of the city. We spent our day there. The people in this area were very cooperative with the Mujahedin, even the women helped us. To leave the area the next morning some of us wore Burqas to look like women, and some of us disguised ourselves as sick patients. On this street of Khoja Ali where we had to pass, there were Mujahedin on one side and on the other side were government soldiers. Hmmm.

(He mumbles “hmm” quickly and quietly to himself, almost unaware that he makes this guttural sound, and then continues quickly. I am not sure what to make of this transitional utterance.)

Another memory of mine was inside the city of Ghazni, we went to the city center and conducted a night operation. The next day we went to see what happened. The incident happened close to the bank. A few days before someone had told me that a Watanparast named Bachai Maino was following me. I did not know him but I saw someone several times and I thought to myself “This must be him.” I went to the bank, up to the second floor, then I turned around and went back down. On the way down, this man caught me by the arm and he asked me “Where are you going, boy?” I told him “I wanted to see the bank manager but he was not there”. I continued down and out of the bank, but he stayed right beside me. I came to a place where there were tinsmith shops. About five years earlier, I worked there for a tinsmith. I bravely walked into my old master’s shop. My master was not there but a small boy was there. I asked him where the master was. The boy told me that the master had left for somewhere. Later I learned that they had come there for several days to find me. They had beaten some of the tinsmith guys and pushed them to know more details about me, my place and how to find me.

This man came after me, took out his pistol, pushed it into my chest and said, “Put your hands on your head”. I said, “Is everything okay?” Some shopkeepers gathered. They knew me, one of them was Bazgol and the other one was Ashraf. He asked me again

“What are you doing?” I told him I was in the bank and I went to shop and I am a farmer of Karize Farqah, the water source for the army. The garden is close to here and my father was responsible for the garden.” I told him I was bringing sacks of wheat to sell to the Army Division. He asked my name. I gave him the name of my brother’s brother-in-law called Ghulam Rabanni. He opened the notebook and wrote my name. There was a butcher shop there that used to belong to our relatives, which is now an ice cream shop. My relative in the shop was getting very anxious and he was wondering what he should do. I was thinking fast, trying to come up with a plan. I had one pistol and one grenade. I decided I would use the grenade to kill him and myself.

There was a soldier who was guarding the bank and the man who held me told the guard to watch me. He told me not to move from my place. I told him okay. I could see this guard was becoming concerned about the people gathering on the road. This man went to the house of the chief of police which was close by. As he was crossing the road, a Russian jeep came out of the police chief’s house. He started talking to people sitting inside the jeep and pointing his finger towards me. There were two Russians in the jeep. I was becoming very worried standing there and I decided to use the grenade to kill all of them if they came to arrest me.

Then an old tinsmith named Khalifa Naqs, may God always keep him healthy, quickly brought me a bicycle and told me to take it and ride it very quickly. He said “Go through the Qarabagh station way.” It was the shortest way to get outside the city. The old man told me “Don’t look back, there are two possibilities; either he will shoot you or you will

escape.” I got on the bicycle, the man by the jeep did not see me right away, and the guard was busy talking to the crowd. I got on the bike and tried to remain calm. A little way from me there were some “watanparast” (homeworshippers) with 11th bullet guns, but they did not see me get on the bike. I tried to calmly say “Sallam” to them as I rode by. They replied ‘Sallam’. I rode up to the courthouse. There was a yard there and I quickly rode into it. At this point, the men in the jeep saw me and came to the edge of the field and yelled after me to turn around. I decided to try to get to another road just across this yard. I was sure that if I could get to that road they would not be able to catch me. There are wood sellers there now. One of the government soldiers took out his pistol and threatened me. At that time, the government was very well armed and when they attacked all their military fired at the same target. I quickly took out my own pistol and shot at them while riding off. They ducked and then made a sign of regret with hands for losing me. After that incident, I was unable to enter Ghazni city center, I knew they would recognize me. I had to stop being a guerilla and I started using heavy weapons and especially rocket launchers. Mmm.

On another day, I was at a Sufi shrine called Sayed Jafar Agha. One or two people from the different Mujahedin groups would gather there. It was a place just to sit and pass the time. So one day while we were sitting outside, we saw a horse had escaped from one of the houses in the area of Eidgah. There was an old woman running after the horse, trying to catch it but from the hill of Balahesar government guys were shooting at the horse with a weapon called Char Mella (a heavy gun that shoots four bullets at one time). This poor woman was crying out in fear and running after her horse. It was a destroyed

area, probably mined, and nobody walked around here. The woman hid herself behind walls and after the shooting stopped, she would come out to get the horse but again they started shooting. We had a commander called Rozi Khan, later he was martyred by the Russians. He was from Noghai village of Ghazni. He was very friendly and teased me a lot. He called me Kolalak.⁵³ I said “Yes.” He said to me “Can’t you target Balahesar today with a rocket?” The rocket was quite new for us and I said, “It may not reach there.” He told me, “We’ll trust in God. Let’s go!”

We went up on a hill and there was a mosque called Kohistani’s mosque. From the mosque, I could see some of the guys with uniforms coming up to the weapon and taking turns shooting at the horse and this woman. Under God’s view, I yelled “Allah Akbar” and I fired, and my rocket directly hit the Charmellah weapon. The Charmellah exploded and the shooting stopped. I quickly packed, put the rocket on my back like a piece of wood under my shawl, and ran down the hill. When I reached to Khoja Hakim, people were sitting there, and they cheered for me. A woman came up to me, blessed me, and gave me a bowl of water to wash my face. She told me, “My son, don’t be afraid”. She showed me an underground route and told me “Go this way”. I came back to my commander and he gave me one hundred incentives (some money) and much praise. My family’s economic situation was very bad. I bought a carton of ghee (cooking oil) and brought it home. Ustad Halim (a very famous Mujahedin commander in Ghazni who was killed during the Jihad) also praised me and bought me a kilo of dates. Under God’s view, a government soldier who defected from Balahesar hill that evening came and asked, “Who launched the rocket?” People pointed me out and told him that this is the

⁵³ This means he is from a family of potter, one of the trades Haji Bomani’s family practices.

rocket man of Waghaz (name of their base). He said, "That rocket hit the target very precisely."⁵⁴

On another occasion I remember Ustad Halim came to me. He did not have his rocket launcher in his base and asked me "Will you be an artillery man for one firing for me?" I told him, "I have some rockets, I will use one and if my commander gets upset, you should give me one back." He accepted. I did not have my commander's orders but I went with him anyway. Ustad Halim was with Hezb-e Islami. He was a very smart commander. We belonged to Waghaz district's frontier, belonging to Mahaz-e Millie of Pir Gailani. My uncle who worked at the Department of Police as a cook brought a report that the home worshipers have gathered to come up and attack Ustad Halim's house. The shrine of Qarzdara Pir (close to city center) is near there. There is a water channel and a garden there. Ustad Halim brought me to a place and told me to hide in the channel. I hid myself in the channel and waited. A tank came full of gunmen. There was a regional post and the tank reached there and I became impatient. I got very excited and in a loud voice yelled "Allah Akbar" and fired the rocket at them. The rocket hit the bottom of the tank and it was destroyed. This tank was a big loss for the government and most of the Mujahedin from the other gardens attacked the tank once it was hit. There was only one road in the middle of a canyon and they could not escape.

⁵⁴ One has to assume that large numbers of local people in the area could watch this process of antagonizing an old Afghan woman by firing a gun a long distance across the city. To have an old Afghan woman abused in this reckless and public manner by foreigners and communists would be very insulting to Afghans in the local community. This story is also an example of the ethical abuses observed that so many Afghans included in life stories.

During the war people in this area usually just ate tea and bread, but they would give us Mujahedin their good food like broth and Ishkana (a sort of gravy made from the water, oil, onion and eggs). In the evenings, when we went to the areas of Godol and Qala i Ahangaran, elders came and kissed our hands. We were only very small kids. They called us Ghazi (People who fight the invaders/infidels.). They showed us great respect and loved us a lot. We became happy. We were young, practically boys, and holding a gun gives one a thrill. Jihad had an excitement itself. There was a unique unity amongst the people.

(The emotional qualities of his narration change significantly here as the content changes. While he narrates wartime experiences he speaks very quickly, presenting each account with little emotion and virtually no pause between, sometimes just a drawn out grunt. These wartime experiences seem to easily return to his memory and require little conscious reflection to recreate but I sense anxiety still attached that lends speed to the narration.)

We faced many difficulties and pressures. It is a miracle how much I walked and ran during Jihad. It was a very difficult time. I saw many friends die. Sometimes I was very hungry and often very cold. It became a dream for us to walk inside the bazaar of our city in Ghazni and it was our great desire to be able to see the freedom of Afghanistan. We achieved this dream. The Russians were finally defeated and left. It was a great honor for us. But it soon became a terrible pity that our Kabul was destroyed and our brothers started fighting each other house to house. Outside hands helped to destabilize

the movement and to damage the holy Jihad of Afghanistan. They gave the Jihad of Afghanistan a bad name. The Jihad in Afghanistan was the best. It defeated the world's superpower by the help of God and with cooperation of our friends. We started with nothing.

I remember in the beginning I had only muzzleloader, I could shoot only one bullet at a time. We carried a long piece of wood for cleaning the gun after nearly every shot. I remember one time I fired it and the gun broke in half. The bullet cut the gun into two pieces.

Now our country has become peaceful Alhamdu –lalah. But, we have nothing, nothing, we need education and reconstruction. Our country should be rebuilt. We should have schools. Our kids should not suffer. Twenty-five years of war means an entire generation has been spent in terror. When I came to the city center of Ghazni, people told me to go to the municipality to register for getting a shop. I did not understand what this meant. I did not know the meaning of municipality. People had to explain this. I thought, “We are the government because we freed the country.” It took us a long time to obey the law.

Jimmy Weir: What were you thinking in the beginning of the Jihad? Did you think the Afghan people could defeat a force as powerful as the Soviet and the Afghan government?

In the beginning we spent every night in the mosque and we had all our prayers in the mosque. In the evenings the mullahs preached about the jihad, they said that everyone who took one step on the true path of Jihad was equal to someone else who spent sixty years doing their daily prayers. We were anxious and excited in the beginning of the Jihad. Our elders told us the enemy had come and were trying to take our country and we had to stop them. The mullahs and white beards preached, "Fight and you will succeed, or you will find your success in the next world." The people had a great respect for those of us who joined the Mujahedin.

Today, I regret not being martyred during this war, like so many of the people I knew. As young men we spent our energy and youth on this battle, today we are idle and ill. When you shoot a missile and it does not explode when it hits its target, we say it is 'Dangaie (a dud, a waste)'. People like me have become Dangaie. (Laughs) Sometimes my heart hurts, or other times it skips or races. When we heard that the enemy had come to take our country, we felt angry and desperate. It became our great dream to walk freely through the city bazaar again. When we heard the music of singers like Hamahang, we felt a great longing to have our country back. When our women went to the city and came back telling us stories about how the Russians and the government soldiers walked about freely, how they ordered our people around, threatened and killed people, I knew we could not stop until we died or they were defeated. I wished the carpet of war had never rolled across our land and prayed that God would erase war from the entire world.

Soon after we had begun, our contacts brought us reports that the Khad⁵⁵ had all our details, they had our names, pictures, home addresses, they knew about our activities. After this we knew we could never go home. As long as they were here we could not go home because then they knew how to find us. If they caught us alive, they would have tortured us badly and kill us. We saw people who were killed carrying only one kilo of tea to their homes right outside the city. They said they were supplying the insurgents.

During most of the war we really had no hope of getting Afghanistan back. If there was an operation by the government in an area like our village with twelve houses, fifty tanks surrounded us with planes and helicopters from above. We could not fight them directly. When Najib became the president of Afghanistan, he changed this policy and said that fifty tanks should not be used to go after one soldier. He said, "Whenever the government does this then ten more volunteers will come and join against the government." He really did say this. A lot of Mujahedin came from this area you are in now and so the government often sent tanks here. We had no choice but to fight or to hide and enter the tunnels.

We did not expect to succeed, we had no hope, but what else could we do? When the country was finally liberated and the Russians left, I became very happy. After the Mujahedin took control of Kabul, the real Mujahedin, those who fought only for the freedom of the country, gave up fighting and stayed at home. Right now when I go to a department to file a petition, people take my petition, reject it, then throw it back at me.

⁵⁵ The Afghan government's secret police force who feared by many.

*These are the very same people I conducted operations against during the Russian time!
We become a little desperate and hopeless.*

We are older now and our youth has been wasted. We can't work in the government because we could not follow our education. We have not been able to build our businesses. During the war my family mostly cared for and supported fifty Mujahedin. I had two brothers working in Saudi Arabia; I spent all the money they earned on the Mujahedin. We were under a lot of economic pressure. Today, nobody praises us for our actions. Nobody respects us for the trouble we experienced for this country. The truth is we bore the pains and the suffering of this country. Now people call us criminals and warlords.

(He has grown more emotion in this previous section, an almost pleading tone that I do not believe is directed particularly at me, but to those whose judgments matter more to him than myself, yet expressed to me in encounter. In the following section his tone returns to the very quick, monotone depictions that carried him through his earlier narration of specific memories of wartime episodes.)

I remember another story when the district of Jekhato was under attack by Khogyani Mujahedin. The government sent tanks up to support their troops. We set an ambush near the gate of Mowye Mobarak. The tanks were coming and we were positioned right on the edge of the city waiting for them. When I saw their convoy coming I began

targeting my rocket. I could not see that the other artilleryman I worked with was right behind me. When I shot the blaze of my rocket burnt his face. His name was Abdur Razeq. He was martyred that day.

It was a big tank and as soon as I shot it, it stopped. It did not burn and I don't know whether they left and escaped or what happened to them. Next to me, there was another rocket expert named Attagul from Rowza village. He had a small destructive rocket. It made a very frightening noise when you shot it. He targeted a truck, the shell hit the truck bed and went right through it. These two vehicles were left stuck on the road and the others had to stop coming but the fighting continued. We spent the night in Kareze Firqah. That day, we lost three and thirteen others were wounded.

We could not really escape, there were mountains on one side, on the other side they could see us if we tried to go down. We hid ourselves in the corner of a channel. The enemy hit the channel and we lost two more. Nobody could stand against their shells. They had very accurate maps and technicians with them. A Mujahid named Udud who was my good friend was trying to look outside of the channel at the enemy when a shell came and hit his legs and broke him into pieces. All my body was blackened with smoke and blood. This is what I want to tell you. We did not expect to succeed or remain alive.

(He pauses here and appears to reflect on what it is he is doing here, now, with me, and what it is he wants to say.)

I remember this Mujahid who was preparing to have his wedding. The day before his wedding he went to get ammunition from Qala e Ahingaran (a place close to this village). He was killed on the way home and was returned back for his wedding as a dead body. The food they made for his wedding was eaten at his funeral.

(He sighs after this, and he appears to be withholding a tear. The feeling now is that this has all been very difficult to say, that both the act of recounting, and by extension, his life as a whole, have left him drained, tired and remorseful. But there has also been an emotional release in telling all these stories. He appears stoic while he says all this, but with a well of emotion just beneath his steady demeanor. He pours tea for Ramin and me as I ask this question.)

Jimmy Weir: How did the Jihad change over the course the war for you?

As I mentioned before, the KGB tricked people and spread rumors and paid money to some people including some Jihadi commanders. Fifty million Afghanis was a lot of money and they paid the commanders to fight against each other. Someone called Najib of the KHAD sent me a message saying he would pay me fifty million Afghanis if I brought ten people on the top of a mountain. He also told me that they would help me to leave the country. I would be free to go and leave the area. I did not accept this but other people did. Another change was the loss of many Mujahedin, many died, and some

of them got weak. The new people who came later and joined the Mujahedin were quite different people with different thoughts. They played two roles. They were with the Mujahedin but were also working against Mujahedin and wanted to ruin the reputation of Mujahedin. They were taught to do so. When we saw these things, we quit and left our groups. The Mujahedin failed to take control because the KGB agents messed things up.

Jimmy Weir: If you were teaching children like your son here about this important period of Afghan history, what would you want to say about it?

My message would be that the country is like namos⁵⁶, it is lovelier than a mother. The arms of your homeland are the arms of your mother. A person should know the value of his soil. If I go to Pakistan for a couple of nights, when I return back, I kiss my earth in Chaman before I enter the country. When a person experiences such trouble defending something it becomes very precious to him. Young people must learn to work for the country.

The young people today need to have respect for those who have knowledge because they are a bright light for the society. One educated person can make hundreds of people understand things better. One doctor can help hundreds of people to be healthy. Bad things happen because of darkness and ignorance. Mohammad succeeded because of his

⁵⁶ 'Namus' is embodied honor. The women of a family embody the men's namus, and this is also very connected to the land. From Margaret Mills personal.

morality, his good sense and intelligence. For example, at night if we turn off the light and try to walk in this room, we will put our foot on many things and damage them. If there is light, we can see everything. The young should get a good education, become doctors or engineers, and serve not just themselves but all of God's creatures. God is powerful and he knows who is good and bad. Life does not return, it comes to a person only once. I personally think that one does not complete his mind until the age of forty. At forty, he starts regretting what he failed to do, why he did not get an education, but praise to a person who makes a medicine to cure others. Although he benefits himself he also works for others. An unskillful and uneducated person cannot do anything for others.

Jimmy Weir: What was your life like during the Taliban?

There was a very big campaign for the Taliban in the media and among the people. People said that white pigeons come out of the Taliban guns instead of bullets. People are uneducated in Afghanistan, so they quickly fall under the influence of such stories.

When the Taliban came, we delivered all our guns to them and we took a letter from them which confirmed the submission. Life was difficult but they did not disturb me because my appearance was close to theirs. I prayed and had a beard.

(He laughs apparently at the hypocrisy of this judgment.)

At that time, I had a cosmetic shop and they made me take down the photos of people. They said that even the plastic covers of the powders should not have photos. They did not allow women to shop without a husband or a male family member. They tried to stop food from getting to Hazarajat and our house is located on the road to Hazarajat.

We had a very big family so we needed a lot of food and fuel but it was difficult to obtain during their time. Once Javid, my twelve-year-old son, went to town to fuel for the stove. On the way, a Talib boy punched him in the nose with his fist and he bled a lot. He said we were smuggling food to Hazaras. Today, the boy who hit Javid, my son, is a simple porter, and I often remember this when I see him now. We suffered seeing Arabs and other unknown Pakistani and Panjabi faces ruling over us. We often asked, "Did we fight this war to have these people ruling us?" It was painful for us but we had empty hands and we could not do anything. We did not have any orders as well to do anything against the Taliban. Those who were in the north and the frontiers resisted them in the mountains.

Jimmy Weir: You feel very strongly about education. Why did you stop your son from going to school during the Taliban?

The Taliban used the schools. As soon as the boys became about fifteen, they gave the boys black turbans and sent them to fight against Mujahedin. We preferred to stay away. This was the only reason that I did not let them attend school. I feared that the Taliban might take them to fight. We also had economic problems during that period but I helped them to continue studying. I hired a private teacher for them. Boys like guns, and they might have wanted to go, because they don't understand.

Jimmy Weir: So you quit the Mujahedin as soon as they came to Kabul?

We were illiterate people and we cannot do anything and cannot be useful in any administrative affairs. Jihad and the freedom of Afghanistan from Russians was our responsibility. We thought that if we succeeded our leaders who were professors would come and make a strong, stable government and we could freely live in peace. Other hands were at work to start internal conflicts. We removed ourselves when the war was over. We did not want to be involved in killing our own people.

Jimmy Weir: What do you think about the current situation?

What about it?

Karzai, foreign forces, the elections, etc?

Very good. The internal conflicts finished and Mr. Karzai came. The only happiness that we have from Mr. Karzai is that he is a social person. He holds kids in his arms and take pictures with them. This is a very good temperament. The second is the improvement of education. The third is the elections. On behalf of my village, I had the votes of a thousand people and went to Gardez and choose Haji Mawlana as a representative for our area for Mr. Karzai. We expect more from him but he is an active person. Now we have the flag of Afghanistan all over the world again and this is an honor for us. When I see Karzai in the universities of other countries, I become so joyful that even tears appear in my eyes and I say thank God that we have such a person in our country.

Now, about the foreign forces. The foreign forces are necessary in Afghanistan right now. If they are not here people will start eating each other in this country and the same fighting and conflict will start. The foreign forces are necessary until the idea of fighting is out of people's mind and until people are working and finding jobs and there are factories and until people are on the straight way. People have some special ideas about the foreign forces but in my opinion, if the foreign forces leave Afghanistan today, people will start eating (fighting) each other.

Jimmy Weir: I would gladly listen to you all day. I have learned much from you.

Thank you for giving us time. This is the whole history of a human being's life.⁵⁷ One can see different hot and cold conditions. During Jihad, we had some foreigners and journalists come. French journalists and Arabs and others who took a lot of photos of us and asked us questions. After that period, nobody has given us the chance to talk about the past. Now, with the help of Ustad Ramin I could meet you and I am very happy now. You are the first to show interest in us for a long time.

Jimmy Weir: Thank you so much.

Would you like to go anywhere for a picnic, or for a walk, or sightseeing, or if you want any special food? This is your own house, let me know.

End of Interview

III) Comments on the Interview

⁵⁷ Implied, I think, he treats the narration of a life as a unit, a whole, a contention I make a several places in my comments.

A) **Generational Differences and Overlapping Interests**

This interview continues a pattern at least partially present in each interview included here and found in varying form in the majority of life stories I collected: concerns central to the entire life story emerge in the first few sentences of an interview. Haji Bomani begins by explaining that his family came from a community of poor, rural villagers, engaged in artisanal trades. The trades his family practiced have been steadily displaced by the importation of mass produced, factory products: plastic and synthetic shoes have replaced the traditional leather sandals (chapli) his family made, pots and pans made in China have become more common than tin utensils shaped over a fire and local pottery has given way to the importation of ceramic and glass goods. Describing his father as a “white beard” indicates a rural form of authority, one far less relevant in Afghan cities. He presents his family heritage and background as respectable, but also as to be losing ground as the his world quickly changes. Many aspects of traditional Afghan life are steadily displaced by some emergent form of ‘modern Afghan’ life, but not without some serious pockets of cultural resistance in the powerful, more conservative countryside. As subsistence gives way to reliance on commercial goods, the economy for the poorest remains mostly unchanged while also grows increasingly dependent on the ability to purchase commodities. Acknowledgement of this process has a substantial role in this narrative and can be felt in the qualities of his self- and life assessment at the time of this

interview. It is also voiced by many members of the older generation from village communities.

His brief self-introduction contains two interrelated themes that underpin his self-presentation: first, life goals have been thwarted by difficult circumstances and second, a related, vague sense that his past is being made obsolete by changes occurring over the course of his life. Haji Bomani explains his youth in terms of a failure to realize his two great interests, pursuing an education and becoming a mechanic. Poverty and traditional values, embodied by his father's interdiction, stop him from realizing either, and soon after the Soviet War makes both pursuits impossible. Assessment of his youth through unrealized interests can be heard echoing in a later depiction of his life as a dud, a missile fired, but unable to realize its purpose. Beginning with explanation of his family as poor and engaged in artisanal trades displaced by manufacturing, implicitly acknowledges our differences. Meanwhile, Ramin comes from a family of wealthy merchants from the city and it is likely Ramin and he first met through Ramin's father. My education, nationality and research inevitably suggest a more urbane, affluent and modern background: differences visible upon arrival. We drove a small, white Toyota, a car sorely inadequate to the unmaintained roads of the Afghan countryside. Ramin and I are clean-shaven, and wear slacks and shirts. Haji Bomani has a big, bear-like physique. A man with a soft demeanor, he sports a long, untrimmed, salt and peppered beard, a meticulous white shalwar kamiz⁵⁸ and a large, grey turban.

⁵⁸ The Afghan national dress that is very baggy pants and long, loose shirt.

During the interview his five-year old boy wanders freely in and out of the room, climbing on and off his father's lap at whim. The eldest boy, an eleven year old, sits quietly by his side and appears respectful and attentive throughout the interview. To my eye, he appears to have begun enacting the role of a senior son. A daughter of about nine or ten eavesdrops behind a door mostly unseen, occasionally beaming a mischievous smile into the room, playfully hiding when I look her way. Once the domestic responsibilities of preparing food for a guest are complete, girls can often be heard lingering and giggling behind doors to overhear what the men discuss. As Haji Bomani's introduction seem to acknowledge our different backgrounds, I imagine he intends his life story to say to his children, "My life was like this. I have done what I had to do. But your life is to be different. Learn to speak and read like these men, our guests, become a doctor or a teacher, and, enshallah, you will not have to endure what I have had."

Chatting over breakfast before the interview, Haji Bomani asked me about enrolling his son in a US college and about educational opportunities for his son in Kabul. He is keen to secure a solid education for his son despite limited financial means and to provide for his children what was denied him by his father and economic circumstances, and I represent to him this possibility. I explained I would help however I could, but worry whether the expectations of my anticipated influence exceed any I can actually do.

Afghans treat hosting a guest as a near religious obligation. Great effort and expenditure are made to ensure guests are comfortable and well nourished. I am unarmed and therefore vulnerable. I am not associated with an international organization. I speak reasonable Dari. Few Afghans have met Americans, while all are keenly aware of the

substantial role the United States plays in the country. Hosting serves a variety of social functions. The most substantial is an opportunity to extend social networks that might engender future opportunities. A guest hosted one day is expected to return a favor in the future if requested, an informal, interpersonal form of insurance in circumstances where macro-politically insecurity is enormous. Hosting also provides an opportunity to evaluate the intentions of someone unfamiliar to an area. As an American I am assumed to be powerful and could possibly be collecting clandestine information. After the initial responsibilities of hosting are met, a meal, fruit and tea are served, Afghans usually ask me a series of political and personal questions about the US and my life. In a harsh, mountainous and desert environment, with very limited formal media sources, questioning of travelers while hosting provides a means of gathering information and garnering outsider perspectives. As an example, while traveling on buses, mostly in Pashtun regions of Pakistan, I was almost invariably asked to stay in the home of a fellow traveler. While I recognize an obligatory sense of hospitality and politeness is being enacted, its being culturally established rarely makes this social ritual feel contrived: I am repeatedly impressed by what appears to be genuine curiosity about my background and views. In my experience, most Americans are far less curious about non-Americans, and are more likely to assume from the outset suspicion or apathy toward an Afghan in the US. Admittedly, the hospitality I receive makes me feel a sense of debt, an intended micro-political reversal of dynamics in which my national origin clearly carries the greater macro-political power. In the circumstances of these interviews I have little opportunity to return these favors. An unabashedly partial motivation informing this work is a long-standing sense of returning an obligation for the years of hospitality I have

received from Afghans, often at times when I felt vulnerable. Haji Bomani confirms my hope when he expresses appreciation for the serious attention given to him and his past, essentially saying the witnessing and representing of the Afghan past is a contribution to him and his people.

Though Haji Bomani and Ramin hail from different backgrounds and generations their fondness for one another was quickly evident. From casual conversations before and after the interview and from separate discussions with Ramin outside the interview, it is clear that Haji Bomani and Ramin hold one another in high esteem and both are committed to similar political ideals. One significant similarity that permeates each of their worldviews is the ways they are both inspired by Sufi practices of Islam. Haji Bomani belonged to one of the two Mujahedin parties, Mahaz-e Milli, led by the Sufi Pirs, his by Pir Gailani. Haji Bomani's pious yet lively manner and openness to non-Afghan sources suggest Sufi influences and Ramin has confirmed this in our conversations. In his account of rescuing an old lady and her horse from Russian taunting, Haji Bomani mentioned passing time at a Sufi shrine when the account began. Haji Bomani is illiterate and unable to study written literature, but like many Afghans he likely knows Sufism through oral recitation, a keen memory, and the teachings of a respected Pir. While Haji Bomani's interest in Sufism is of a more popular and rural kind, praying at shrines and sometimes poetically interpreting life, Ramin has a more intellectual and literary sense of Sufism. Ramin's casual speech is beautifully peppered with the insights of twelfth and thirteenth century Sufi poets, in particular Maulana Jalaluddin Rumi, which he insightfully applies to nearly any situation.

The mutual appreciation Haji Bomani and Ramin have for one another is due in part to their respect for their very different yet influential locations in powerful social networks. Ramin, my research assistant, is highly literate and worldly. By the age of twenty-seven he has travelled to the US with the Governor of Ghazni and lived for extended periods in Iran and Pakistan. He speaks impeccable English, his keen mind combined with a helpful and cheerful disposition endear him to influential circles. An ambitious, worldly young man from the city, Ramin has become comfortable in and capable of thinking and speaking with international and government power centers. Haji Bomani sees in Ramin a sensible, emerging voice in a more enlightened and modernizing Afghan future and likely a possible networking source. Ramin sees in Haji Bomani the high respect of his village peers and his influence on and knowledge of traditional, more conservative political communities. In Afghan cities modern influences and the power of the state are present in a weak, often corrupt, fashion but the most significant sources of social, economic and military power remain in the countryside. Based on my observations and work experiences, very local representatives of power still grounded in small communities often have a sincere commitment and responsibility to their local constituencies, while most power outside of local community networks are held at a suspicious distance. My sense is that Haji Bomani's narrative evinces a genuine commitment to his community as a local leader. Ramin appreciates Haji Bomani's position with rural audiences overlapping with his roots in Ghazni city, while Haji Bomani respects Ramin's grasp of international affairs and his potential in an emerging generation of Afghan leaders.

The meanings and changes associated with ‘Western/modern’ values and influences are issues that all but the most physically isolated Afghans inevitably have stands on. Many life decisions, e.g. education, employment or political association, inevitably stake out positions on the meanings of change and continuity in unstable circumstances, where both carry powerful constituencies. Haji Bomani neither valorizes his own village roots nor denigrates the lifestyles of urban modern culture, most tangibly evident in the nearby city of Ghazni, yet acknowledgments of the differences recur in his accounts. He is interested in sending his son to school in the US and respect for Ramin’s skills and potential influence on a new generation of Afghans before the interview. His narrative indicates hope that there will be a different future emerging, of which he feels limited knowledge but also tentatively welcomes. Near the end of the interview he expresses appreciation for Afghanistan’s reentry into international affairs represented by President Hamid Karzai, saying, “Now we have the flag of Afghanistan all over the world again and this is an honor for us.” Haji Bomani is not resisting change or Western influence, but if pushed it is likely he has some doubts, not openly expressed here. In part, because he seeks to strengthen his relationship with Ramin and me by providing an interview that is detailed, colorful and favorably received.

Nor Mohammad’s concern about Western influence in the previous interview come to define his self-presentation. Towards the end of his interview in a passionate depiction of the contemporary geo-political situation he said, “Many countries that are now playing the drums of friendship, in their hearts they are against us!” Mohammad Alim from the first interview embraced Western democratic influence, even hoping to lead a vanguard

that ushers in a new future as quickly as his fellow Afghans can accept it. He concludes his interview “I welcome and love these forces that rescued us from these monsters. If ISAF (NATO forces) and American forces go away, the situation in Afghanistan will definitely turn for the worse.” I do not seek a conclusive stand or definition of a complicated, sometimes overworked academic dichotomy between the traditional and the modern, in the quickly changing flux of the Afghan context. The effort is to observe the tangled intensities of Afghan and Western values and actions meeting expectations or demands of the traditional and the modern as they enter individual perspectives on the political world or self-identity. The meanings and potentials, the threats and opportunities, posed by ‘Western modernity’ in its many, mostly absent, oft-promised, manifestations, are something about which most Afghans have very varied yet strong opinions and stands. Haji Bomani’s positions are complicated, as are most Afghans’, in that he is a villager with significant ties to the nearby city of Ghazni, he has brothers providing financial support from Saudi Arabia and he was an active member of a Mujahedin group based all around the country with significant international ties to the US. He began unequivocally identifying his youth and family background with village life then concludes by welcoming some changes bringing Afghanistan into a version of a modern political world.

B) Audience and Evaluation of the Past

After a brief description of his life before the Soviet invasion, Haji Bomani abruptly jumped into outlining the circumstances of his early involvement in the Soviet resistance. Haji Bomani's description of becoming a Jihadi at a young age included curious details that sounds to me like the memories of being a boy who leaves home to find the world beyond his village more awe-inspiring than he ever imagined. He explains he traveled through the night for 'four hours and twenty minutes' with other volunteers, jostled in the back of truck to a place he could not even imagine 'in his dreams', a mountain that is 'strong and wild'. Escaping his father's restrictions he became enmeshed into a secret world of adults, as he learns to fight for God, nation and his community, against vastly more powerful infidels. As he presents it here, the decision to join the Mujahedin occurs the night Jihadi recruiters come to his village and nothing indicates he needs to ponder the decision very long. Like many other former Mujahedin I interviewed, his description of joining the Mujahedin sounds less like a decision that required sustained deliberation, and more like a situation that necessitated 'right' action as a young Afghan and Muslim man. Honorably defending his people as a youth is replete with adventure, respect and respite from the restrictions of family life.

Despite coming from marginal, often impoverished circumstances, Afghans like Haji Bomani 'went to the hills', to confronting vastly more powerful forces. Immediately they are beset with practical requirements. The need for food, tea, shelter, and warmth must be addressed. For the Mujahedin to exist in harsh and arid mountains, lines of support from nearby communities must be established. Recognition of his family as village artisans, with knowledge of the city, suits him to garner provisions from nearby villages

and lead campaigns in town. As a young Afghan villager, Haji Bomani is more associated with a family unit, represented by a senior male, his father, and less as an distinct personality. This changes as he gains recognition as an artilleryman and leader of a small band of Mujahedin. An appealing aspect of Haji Bomani's interview is his inclusion of pragmatic and unglamorous details. Few former Mujahedin I interviewed spoke in detail about mundane matters like procuring food and supplies during the Soviet Jihad, although I often asked. The Mujahedin always required a significantly larger network to support those who actively fought in the insurgency. His responsibility for others might contribute to his inclusion of practical matters. He concisely summarizes an early section of his narrative describing the organizational and logistical requirements of maintaining themselves in deserted mountains, "Over time we got more disciplined and we started our regular operations." His accounts, at times detailing extraordinary battles, are equally preoccupied with protecting an old Afghan lady harassed by Russians, carrying two dying Mujahedin to a Pakistan hospital, being badly outnumbered, manipulation by fellow Jihadis and especially, receiving the accolades of his local community. He and his fellow soldiers are sometimes scared, jittery, thirsty and exhausted, self-depictions that were rare from former Mujahedin.

Haji Bomani speaks passionately about the honor and commitment of his fellow Mujahedin in the early years and regretfully about their later failures, both appear to pull strongly on his sense of the past. Haji Bomani's descriptions lack the sustained bravado bordering on bluster that Nor Mohammad maintains. Nor Mohammad in the previous interview describes driving like an action figure from 'the movies', shooting helicopters

and tanks from the back of his truck, evading planes by creating dust storms by driving in circles and hiding in the shadows of a mountain. These descriptions are intended to impress and though I believe they are based in real events, they also ring of hyperbole. Haji Bomani recalls the names and often the character of the many Mujahedin who died beside him, while Nor Mohammad's accounts lack the precise detail and names of fellow Mujahedin that generously pepper Haji Bomani's descriptions. Nor Mohammad is older and has been a driver all his life, both of which could contribute to making his memory of people and places less precise. Despite this, I am less concerned in my analysis about the loss of memory, somewhat unavoidably so, and more interested in meanings and implications of the foci of memory. Haji Bomani remembers the hardships of battle and loss of friends as this continues resounding into the present in his memories of this past. By contrast, Nor Mohammad's concern about Western/American influence on Afghans leads him to impress upon me the continuing challenge a unified Afghan resistance poses. Unlike Haji Bomani, Nor Mohammad appears to think the basic circumstances of the Soviet War have changed mostly in style and name since he was an active Mujahid, and perhaps for centuries. His accounts of the longer Afghan history are of people continuously besieged and successfully resisting more powerful foes when united. Nor Mohammad is historically mired in a sense that the dynamics of the past continue mostly unabated in the present, while Haji Bomani is troubled by historically specific failures that ushered in a new phase of conflict and instability. The differences between these two perspectives are an important divide in popular Afghan interpretations of the Soviet war period.

I reiterate a central methodological approach to examining each of these life stories; Afghans remembering and reviewing their past can be read addressing various personally meaningful audiences. Minimally, I argue that these four Afghan life stories can be usefully read as speaking to different, personally significant communities and addressing ethically challenging life concerns, something I find reconfirmed by numerous other interviews. Anticipating an audience, a narrator reckons with the realities, limitations and interests of his self-presentation in a relationship to overlapping obligations to people and experiences in the past, present and anticipatable futures. Afghan life stories are most often structured around decisions or events in which the narrator's engagement with his social world changes significantly, setting a new, or at least altered, course for life. Most Afghans likely seek to present their past in a positive light, but this usually does not invite complete fabrication. But even this claim begs a question of audience, a life in a positive light to whom? One limit to invention is the memory of others, a memory of the past recognizable in the present and some anticipated future. A desire to be seen in the 'most positive light' is circumscribed and tempered by a desire to be honest with oneself before others, at least in most cases. The weave of an individual's memories of fundamental reorientations to his world combined with the ordinary details and patterns in everyday life color the patterns that become the fabric of a life story, patterns likely emboldened by the difficulties of the Afghan historical experience. Changes in the

patterns of everyday life are typically narrated in terms of changing ethical or, to a lesser degree, material positions in the social and political world Afghans inhabit. Mundane aspects of everyday life are unavoidably under-represented in life stories: this is an unfortunate reality of the ethnographic potential of this medium, but retrospective sense of a life before others is presented. In the life stories I find rich and revealing, fundamental ethical and interpersonal relationships are recounted as they return to mind, become emotionally recalled and are retrospectively evaluated, to myself, possibly others in the rooms, *and* personally significant audience/s the narrator anticipates of his/her life, revealing aspects of the character and qualities of the intersubjective concerns of the narrator.

The concerns of these three men for significant communities are worth contrasting as they open small apertures on a wider socio-cultural landscape. All three say as young men they expected and accepted dying in defense of fellow Afghans. Haji Bomani explains that as a Mujahid his motivation was to make his community safe for children to attend school and for women to 'walk freely through the bazaar'. In three separate episodes he details the reactions of particular women to his actions with evident pride, something both Mohammad Alim and Nor Mohammad do not and seem unlikely to explain as life-defining. Haji Bomani's emphasis on the opinions of women and young people and other relatively powerless members of his community distinguishes him from Mohammad Alim who makes frequent reference to the powerbrokers in his community and the greater political circumstances in which he acts. Mohammad Alim and Haji Bomani treat the idea of 'service' to Afghans, in particular their local communities, as a

strongly felt personal calling and a life long project. However, Mohammad Alim pursues respect and authority within more formal power structures and without expecting the ideological agreement of the very people he wishes to defend. Nor Mohammad states his motivation more broadly as defense of Muslims and Afghans. Haji Bomani pursues popular recognition of his authority through the respect and agreement of his local community, whom he devotes himself to defend and promote.

Unlike Ustad Mohammad Alim and Nor Mohammad, Haji Bomani never mentions significant geographic or intellectual separation from his community. Mohammad Alim leaves his remote village in northern Afghanistan as a boy for an elite school in Kabul. The capital city and its associated 'urban' values impress this intelligent and politically active young teenager. His advanced education separates him from traditional sources of authority and enables him to contribute a unique set of skills in a remote community increasing requiring bureaucratic literacy, something for which Haji Bomani also expresses great social respect and personal disappointment at being unable to do. As a driver Nor Mohammad spends long periods away from home. In fact I suspect Nor Mohammad's separation from his home community and his deeper sense of alienation contribute to making his interview more concerned with larger, more distant audiences, particularly the threat the West holds to Afghan identities. All three men hold the value of education in high esteem but Mohammad Alim is unique because he is highly educated. Haji Bomani expresses his interest in education repeatedly in terms of enlightening and assisting his community, saying concisely, "A teacher is the light of a community." Haji Bomani's actions and decisions are made in concert with the thinking

of the majority in his community while Mohammad Alim sees himself as someone setting a course for a very different future.

Haji Bomani's commitment to his community is restated several times during the interview. He remains a Mujahid, usually in hiding on the outskirts of his community, throughout the entire Soviet war. He kisses Afghan soil upon his return from nearby Pakistan after only a few days away. He chooses not to be exiled or to become a refugee despite being identified by the Afghan government as a recognized insurgent, actively pursued and offered a large sum of money to leave the cause. He is the only brother who remains behind during the entire war effort while the other brothers work in Saudi Arabia, sending him money to support the Jihad at home. For the purposes of this analysis it is not important whether Haji Bomani made a personal, intentional commitment to remain near and defend his village community or whether life circumstances give rise to and slowly galvanize this commitment. I suspect at some point early in the conflict his family held a jirga (council) to decide who should remain with the women and children of his family near the village and who would go to Saudi Arabia for family income. This was reported as a common occurrence in many other life stories with former Mujahedin. While the struggle was for Afghans and Muslims as a whole, what emerges across his narrative is a primary commitment to his very immediate community, most tangibly to the women and children, and a great interest, even a need, to be appreciated for acting honorably before them.

Juxtaposing the life experiences and political perspectives of these two Mujahedin, Haji Bomani and Nor Mohammad, is useful. Haji Bomani is about forty-six years old while Nor Mohammad is about fifteen years his senior. Haji Bomani became independent of his family and matured into adulthood as a Mujahid while Nor Mohammad's father died when he was a boy, forcing him to work and take a responsible role in his family at a very young age. Both emphasize the limitations poverty creates in their youth. Nor Mohammad had significant autonomous life experiences before the war began. He was already mature, well traveled, and it seems politically opinionated, when the Soviet war came to dominate his life. In his characterizations of the Afghan people he emphasizes the nomadic nature of his people. This is probably also an effort to justify and accept a lifetime of experiences traveling across the country for employment and because of war. In a curious yet relatively common paradox, Nor Mohammad, who has traveled all over the country, worked in close proximity with Westerners, and speaks eight languages including Russian and a little English, ultimately has a far more conservative and insular sense of the uniqueness and necessary continuity of the Afghan people and the inevitability of conflict between the West and Afghan cultures. Nor Mohammad thinks that some fundamental aspects of the Afghan people will never change and that outsiders need to leave the Afghans to their own customs and traditions. To paraphrase his own example, 'the Kowk bird, like the Afghan, may be captured, but he can't be trained, and when he gets away, he will return to the mountains.'

On the other hand, Haji Bomani describes his positive impressions about the Karzai government and the presence of international forces in Afghanistan, expressing joy in

seeing the Afghan flag flying in countries all over the world. Haji Bomani, despite greater ties to his village and a less worldly past, presents himself as being far more open to influences that are not Afghan or Muslim. He speaks to me about sending his son to the West for an education. He values Afghanistan's connections to the outside world, most notably the West, and sees Afghanistan in need of adapting many of the 'enlightened' practices that exist outside his country. In this respect he is much closer to Mohammad Alim. While Haji Bomani mentions the names of many people who fought with him, particularly the names of people who died beside him, and including comments about each man's character, Nor Mohammad mentions almost no one on a first name basis and very rarely describes the character of people he includes. Haji Bomani speaks with a sense that each martyr is still a respected loss. Considering that over twenty years have elapsed since many of these deaths occurred, it is significant that he remembers the name and the character of each martyred Mujahid. I suggest that one existential orientation of his life story is this attachment and involvement with his local environs and his interest in representing and protecting the welfare of his community.

The meanings of joining and then leaving the Mujahedin are instructive because of Haji Bomani's great pride in its beginning and deep disappointment in its end. Most former Afghan Mujahedin speak proudly about the beginning of the jihad, explaining that with pitchforks, ancient muskets, and the help of Allah, they confronted the world's most powerful, mechanized military. This is both a vibrant cultural trope and, to a lesser degree, a historical reality. Few Afghans describe the tangible matters of day-to-day getting by in much detail, even when asked as I often did. Haji Bomani's narrative is

unusual because he includes some of the practical and unglamorous aspects without my prompting from the beginning. The honor of the defining battles of his life during the Soviet conflict must also address the historical judgments of others, particularly those most significant of his sense of himself and his past. This is another example of the ways in which the expectation of an audience to a life shapes three interrelated processes, first, the creation of the life narrative, second, an underlying narrative self that partially emerges, and third a related overarching image of a life conceptualized as unity. In my own words I suggest this summarization of one significant message of his narrative:

We (the Mujahedin) began with next to nothing and we eventually defeated a superpower. But in the process we lost much, far more than the lives of those who were killed in battle. The fighting that occurred between the Mujahedin was dishonorable and I am terribly disappointed about this. I am thankful that that the situation is better today, but for myself I am at a loss about what I am to do after spending so much of my adulthood in battle. I am illiterate. I do not understand what a government does and am not accustomed to follow laws I do not understand. All my life the government has been our enemy and we fought against it, then suddenly we are expected to recognize the laws of the state, and it does not really register.

This difficulty readjusting to political life after so much conflict occurs at two significant levels: first is the simple fact there was no acceptable centralized authority throughout the war, a little since. At more personal and local levels, those who suddenly claimed to represent central authorities after the war often were previously enemies, former government employees and sometimes active in the communist party, an example of which is Mohammad Alim from the first interview, but I also heard this stated in other interviews. My paraphrased summarization of Haji Bomani again:

We were the authorities as long as we were fighting. Once our cause ended, and even worse, became deeply compromised, we also lost our power and pride to those very people we struggled against and to Afghans who had become corrupt and greedy. This is difficult to accept.

Haji Bomani retains an ethical stand he felt obliged to take at a young age, and never expresses regret about his basic orientation in terms of everyday life and the greater political circumstances. He says, "We vowed to hold guns to our shoulders until the Russian forces went back to their country." In the previous interview Nor Mohammad says even more strongly, "We always figured we would be killed; from the day we took a gun and began the jihad we counted ourselves as dead... As long as we were alive and had our heads we promised to defend Islam." To take up a cause with such certainty, conviction and commitment, in circumstances very unlikely to succeed, and to watch it slowly disintegrate is arguably the most significant experience of lived, popular Afghan history. Haji Bomani presents these two major life decisions in quick succession, first to join and then to leave the Jihad, despite the ten years of life that passed in between. I suggest the early emphasis he places on this indicates the ongoing significance of these decisions. He wants distance from this later period of conflict when the ideals and intentions of the Mujahedin parties become marred by corruption and ultimately self-destruction. Perhaps the most revealing indication of Haji Bomani's sense of the past is that he says he wishes he had died during the jihad. He describes the present as if he is caught today in a kind of living death, and this is said before his children. He is *dungaie*, a dud, a waste, he has been spent, his energies and youth dissipated in battle, that both was highly honorable at the time and now seems utterly pointless. He and fellow Mujahedin won the war only to lose control to fighting Afghan parties and eventually to another group of foreigners. The history of the jihad and his own life parallel each other, in an emotionally driven sense of his present-day evaluation of his life. A glorious past

has fallen into troubled times and disuse and he describes himself as a failed remainder of this past.

Chapter 5 - Jamila Afghani: Rebel from Within

Interview Conducted – June 10, 2005

Conducted at NEC Office, Kabul, Afghanistan

I Introduction to Jamila's Interview

Jamila and her life story moved me more than any Afghan I interviewed. She has a beatific smile and a disarming sensitivity that drew me into her narrative despite the somber nature of her accounts. Her demeanor has an ethereal quality, one that reminds me of a handful of people I have met who have taken a spiritual practice until it seems to permeate their temperament. Jamila takes her faith very seriously. Or perhaps what is arresting about her character is a result of her living with pain since infancy as a result of severe scoliosis and polio. She walks with a noticeable limp and one leg is in a metal brace. As the interview progressed it was apparent that even sitting is taxing. Despite severe physical and gender restrictions her tenacity in pursuing an education and working for the welfare of Afghan women is remarkable. As our live encounter became a recording, translated, made into text and commented upon, qualities of her demeanor grow faint. Nevertheless her life story remains a bold example of the obstacles Afghan women face, told by a woman who has persevered with unusual success, at least up to the time of this interview, against unrelenting physical, political and gender-based adversity.

Jamila was born into a wealthy Pashtun family from the city of Ghazni, the same city that Haji Bomani lives near, discussed in the previous chapter. She has an MA in International Affairs from Jinnah University in Peshawar and a degree in Ayurvedic medicine. As an example of the nature of her ambition and abilities, she learned Arabic in a year so as to be able to read the Koran, with plans to translate the Koran into Persian because she is dissatisfied with current translations. Another example: this interview was conducted entirely in English though she had only briefly visited an English speaking country. She is the director of an Afghan NGO called Nor Educational Clinic and a leading figure in a consortium of NGOs that work on women's issues in Afghanistan. Dr. Margaret Mills, a close friend, an exceptional scholar, and an important advisor, first put me in contact with Jamila Afghani. Dr. Mills was organizing a conference at Ohio State University that brought seven Afghan women activists to the US. She asked me to interview each participant as background for the conference and Jamila was among the seven. Based on interviews and conversations, the NGO community focused on Afghan women's welfare appears to be a small, tight knit, highly committed, though at the time underfunded and besieged group. When I mentioned Jamila to expatriate friends in NGO circles many were effusive in their praise. Jamila's leadership as an activist on Afghan women's issues is recognized and respected by concerned Afghan and international audiences. During a three-day conference at Ohio State University I watched Jamila speak to a riveted, mostly American, audience about the situation of women in contemporary Afghanistan and have seen her on Afghan TV in interviews and on discussion panels. She is a unique Afghan woman in her willingness to openly, sharply, yet respectfully, confront Afghan men in public forums. The clarity and force of her

carefully examined views and well-constructed arguments inevitably discomfort many Afghan men who expect women to be publicly submissive and subservient. Her abilities and successes also make her vulnerable to attack.

This interview was conducted in the center of her sprawling office. As we interviewed, the office was bustling with people and cluttered with the paperwork of an active NGO. I suspect all meetings she has with men have to take place in public before her staff, so their observations can protect against potential accusation of invented impropriety. Her office and the Ministry of Women's Affairs are the only two Afghan offices I have seen where men were clearly directed by a woman: Jamila's authority during my brief visit appeared warm, gregarious and well-received. Jamila speaks freely and has much to say. Unlike the three men included here, she has had previous experiences telling her life story to others as part of her effort to demonstrate the plight of Afghan women. Despite being an unmarried woman near her thirtieth birthday, Jamila had refused all marriage proposals her family puts before her. The right to refuse a family's wedding proposal is not a right most Afghans, particularly women, have. Her outspoken stands against the cultural values of her family, and most Afghans, as they pertain to the role of women are carefully couched in the teachings of the Koran and Islam. Nevertheless many in her family believe she does not accept her proper role in the family and society because of the menacing influence of Western sensibilities. Towards the end of this narrative, just two months before this interview, she describes a disturbing confrontation in which her family seeks to seclude her from public life and confine her to the home. After an emotional, yet highly articulate justification for her public activities, she concludes, "If I

am not allowed to do my own work, I will commit suicide.” Struggles of this nature, actual and, I argue, especially anticipated, define her life and have shaped the careful yet forceful character she presents in public. At the time of this writing the Taliban’s resurgence inevitably threatens Jamila’s activities, possibly her life, while I have heard her family remains her greatest impediment.

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As an American man engaging gender in Afghan culture, my identity, as both a male and American, keeps me at a complicated distance. After six years of work in the region I have never had an unimpeded friendship with an Afghan woman who has not lived for extended periods outside the country, by which I mean one where we might comfortably talk about things not work-related or meet outside of a professional settings, and this is largely true of the vast majority of Afghan men. I have very occasionally worked with Afghan women colleagues. Our relations were warm and professionally unimpeded but concern about the perceptions of others remained paramount. An American man spending time with Afghan women outside of professional circumstances would be deemed questionable and likely become scandalous. In Kabul before the war, middle to upper middle class women were far freer to dress and associate as they chose, another indication of the many cultural changes brought about since the Soviet war. I have had close Afghan male friends with whom I often discussed the situation of women and asked

about their experiences. I have occasionally spoken to Afghan American women friends at length about these issues. As part of this research I have interviewed over thirty women and their perspectives enter my observations. Though I often tried it was rare that rural, mostly illiterate women were made available for interviews and the few times they were, their interviews felt stifled, fearful and mostly unproductive. I remember being permitted to interview two middle-aged Afghan widows from a village outside of Bala Murghab, where Mohammad Alim the first interviewee is from, and finding the women boisterous, joking about my finding them men to marry and intrigued about my recording device, but unwilling to talk seriously to me about their pasts, despite the encouragement of senior Afghan family members sitting near by. My sense was not only that speaking revealingly to unknown, foreign man was overwhelming, but that they thought they had nothing to say of use to my purposes.

I am not only kept physically separated from women's worlds, as an American I am thought to come from a culture that antagonizes Afghan culture through a very different set of gender norms and behaviors. The majority of Afghans, men, and to a somewhat lesser degree, women, believe the restrictions placed upon women in Afghanistan are guided by Islamic virtue and precepts and Afghan culture, and must be maintained to counter Western promiscuity and self-involved materialism. Many Afghans, taking cues from movies, dress, popular rhetoric and local radicals, judge gender relations in Western culture as highly promiscuous and morally bankrupt. For example I heard Afghan men often explain or at least question me about their impression that American men have sex at whim with American women, and it appears at least the younger male generation is

caught between finding this exaggeration titillating and wishing to separate themselves, and vigilantly protect 'their women', from such rampant immodesty and immorality. In related social issues that have culturally similar meanings, many Afghans believe that American treatment of the elderly and commitment to family cohesiveness are sorely lacking. Afghan images of the nature and qualities of sexual relations in the West emerge out of commonplace misrepresentations in Western popular media, become encouraged by local radical rhetoric, grow complicated by macro political tensions, and are sometimes enriched by active imaginations. Unfortunately this becomes a volatile mix that many Afghans believe women and youth must be protected from. Related to this, for many Afghans the presence of foreign soldiers on Afghan soil, contentious in itself, becomes far more emotionally charged in daily life as a threat posed by foreign soldiers to Afghan honor before fellow Afghan women, though at macro-political levels it would rarely be addressed as such. There is of course also the real threat of home invasions abuse of power that threatens Afghan men.

Much as the Burqa limits the sight of a woman wearing it, the garment blinds those outside to what happens behind it, in ways both intended and unintended. Western media accounts of likely true but extreme cases of violation or a movie like *Taliban* rightly make Western audiences disgusted by the sometimes barbarous treatment of women, but it would be wrong to think these examples are typical of family life or to discount the men of an entire culture based only on these, undeniably troubling, but unrepresentative events. Meanwhile the images of Abu Ghraib linger in the mind nearly every Afghan. I often find Americans react to the seclusion of Afghan women informed by what to me

appears to be an often self-righteous sensitivity, assuming appalling abuse akin to slavery with subsequent judgment amounting to disdain of an entire people. The sharp differences between Afghan and American gender norms leave little room for cross-cultural understanding and become emotionally and micro-politically interrelated with a host of macro-political issues. In my judgment in daily interactions, different normative gender expectations between Afghans and Americans are more destructive to Afghan popular sentiment than US 'boots on the ground' or the insurgency. These different sets of gender expectations antagonize Americans and Afghans in ways that are often misunderstood, highly sensitive and viscerally felt. I had to make a concerted effort to keep my own at times sharp and emotional judgment of gender norms in Afghan society at bay, though towards full disclosure this was by far the most difficult part of my interactions and experiences living in Afghanistan. I try to confine my analysis to how significant misunderstandings incur visceral reactions that disable more balanced and informed examination, though at times I allow my judgments, both positive and negative, to be clear as well.

A troubling issue that recurred in interviews, especially with women activists, is accounts of Afghan men who, when confronted about their ability to 'control' 'their' women, reacted at times by confining women to home and sometimes with physically abuse. In Jamila's life story her family seeks to 'seclude' her from public work to 'protect' both Jamila and her family from a bad reputation and 'people talking'. The fact that words like 'control', 'seclude' and 'protect' are intertwined to describe the relationship between men and women begins to indicate some of the qualities of the sharp power disparity that

is assumed by a great majority of Afghan men and many Afghan women. Afghan men generally perceive the confinement and separation of women as providing ‘protection’, either from physical harm or from the intangible harm of a potentially lustful gaze. In a society where the rule of law is basically absent, where women fetch a high price to marry and where conflict seems interminable, the need to protect women is real. Examples of respect for and protection of women come to mind that I suspect would surprise many non-Afghan observers. As I moved refugees in Afghanistan (1992 – 1994), Afghan militia groups ceased fighting to allow trucks of mostly women and children to pass, even when families were ethnic enemies. In my travels with white, Western women in India, Pakistan and Afghanistan, groping of foreign women in public crowds, a regular occurrence in relatively liberal Indian and Pakistani cities, did not occur in more conservative Afghan cities. Meanwhile I have heard many accounts of women abducted during the war, and thought to be taken to other countries where they are sold into servitude. In some interviews women spoke of husbands or fathers who succumb to public pressure and end up restricting women, often in an extremely violent manner. I frequently found it difficult to contain my reactions, with sometimes a repressed sympathy for the woman narrating and a sharp anger emerging for the man responsible. What I heard indicates that quite often whether a man believes in the cause of the purported dishonor is a distant second to maintaining his public display of control before others, and regardless of the reality of compromising claims. There were many cases of a woman is accused of an inappropriate action and acted upon, sometimes violently, without seeking to determine veracity. This is a particularly unfortunate demonstration of the significance of reading life stories for relevant audiences to reveal of qualities of

Afghan interpersonal dynamics. I consider how related issues manifest in Jamila's life and discussed in different form in the three previous life stories to contribute hopefully cross cultural sensitivity to this important subject. It is important to keep in mind while engaging Jamila's narrative that anticipation of accusation of impropriety is a life-defining concern and of central importance to all Afghan women who challenge widespread gender restrictions.

II Beginning of Interview

Where were you born?

I came into this world in the city of Kabul in 1976 and I was just a few days old when the regime of Sardar Daud Khan collapsed.⁵⁹ From the very beginning my life has been influenced by political changes in my country. I don't remember much from my childhood. I was only one, maybe one and half years old, when I got polio. From that point on I could not play like the other children. My cousins and my brothers, my nephews, I remember watching them running around, but I had to sit still. Most of the

⁵⁹ On April 27, 1978, a PDPA (the Afghan Communist party) coup, known as the "Saur Revolution", brings Taraki of the Khalq party and Amin to power. Prime Minister Daud and his family are killed. This is the time most Afghans understand to be the beginning of the revolution although the Soviet Union does not officially bring military forces in for another 1 and ½ years.

time I was by myself in the yard counting the planes that went over in the sky while the other children played nearby.

I remember the time of Babrak Karmal, and Amin. There were lots of clashes and fighting in the country during that time. I am someone who never enjoyed her childhood. First, because of the disabilities, because I got polio, but the other is because my childhood was full of big political changes and big fighting. One result of this though is that as a young girl I became very interested in education. It gave me something to do. Since most of the time I felt lonely, I started playing with books, and it became my habit. After a while my family realized that I was more relaxed and happy when I was studying. But my father was very against girls going to school. When he agreed to my going to school he said I could only go through class four and then he would ban me from going to school.⁶⁰

Can you talk about going to school as a young girl?

I remember one really horrible day. I was going to school. It was winter and as usual my polio made life difficult. Whenever it was cold I had a hard time walking. But I was so eager to go to school. It took me a longer time to get there so I would try to leave home when the sun was just coming up. This one day I was walking down the hall of my

⁶⁰ She, like the interview with Ustad Mohammad Alim, has just summarized the main issues of the entire interview in these first few sentences.

*school early in the morning, the school was quiet and empty, and I could see smoke coming from the door of my classroom. There must have been fighting the night before, I don't remember much, I was so young. When I came into the room I saw this dead body on the floor, I could see it was someone I knew and liked. I was shocked. I ran out of my class, shouting.*⁶¹

*I was wearing beautiful green bangles that day.*⁶² *They were given to me the day before and I was very proud of them. I ran into a corner of the compound and I broke my green bangles, one by one, I was so disheartened. I took a rock and hit each one, breaking them off my wrist, and then I crushed them, grinding them into smaller and smaller pieces with this rock.*

What were you thinking as you broke those bangles?

I remember concentrating on those lovely green bangles lying there in the dirt. I don't know why I did this, even now it hurts to think of this time. I remember those green, glass pieces in the sand, and how much I liked the color, and crying and crying. I remember the dead body on the ground. I remember that guy was one of our school captains, he was working with the army, he was a really nice person, and he was always especially

⁶¹ In many interviews people began their narrative by talking about first time they saw a dead body.

⁶² Bangles are glass bracelets, green is the color of Islam. Women in India break their bangles when their husband dies to represent the idea of the loss of color in life. Married Hindu women break their bangles when their husbands die, a symbol of mourning. (Margaret Mills)

*kind to me. In the cold weather when it was difficult to walk, he would hold my hand, and take me to my classroom, and after school he would help me back home. I felt really bad about this kind man who was killed in my classroom. I felt miserable, why were my people doing this to each other without any reason? I got the bangles just the day before. Later, my teachers came and soon the police arrived. They took the dead body out of the class. It was the first time I saw a dead body.*⁶³

I have so many stories like this that I should share. (She pauses with a thoughtful, inward look.) Should I share them or not? (She says as if addressing herself.) I am sharing! (Said with a sudden burst of almost giddy excitement.)

What role did your father play in the Soviet conflict?

My father was always involved in his export / import business. He was like a king, he was one of the richest men in Afghanistan. But he never supported either side during the war, neither the Mujahedin nor the Communists, and this was the one good thing about my father. He was against the Communist government and the Russian invasion but he never supported any of the Mujahedin parties. From the very beginning to the end my

⁶³ It is noteworthy that Leila, from a different interview, makes reference to her new dress, which she covered with dirt when the Soviets came to her village, and here Jamila describes her bangles as part of memory of her experience of seeing a dead body for the first time. Dust on one's head and clothes is also a mourning gesture. (Dr. Margaret Mills)

father remained neutral. He always said that in the end none of them would be successful.

Unfortunately, my younger uncle became involved with one of the parties, against the wishes of my father. My father was impartial. But my uncle joined this one Mujahedin party and he hid it from my father. My father was a dictator, he was a very harsh person. So my uncle had to hide his involvement. But after a while some people in the government found out about what he was doing and they arrested my uncle and sent him to Pul-e Charki prison where he was in jail for twelve years.⁶⁴ After this my father used all his time trying to get him out of prison. He spent all of his money, and he neglected his businesses. My father was very close to my uncle; he was the younger of only two brothers and this uncle was like my father's son.

From this time our family had many difficulties. When I was young my family really had all the resources in the world, but we could not enjoy it. But as the war went on, my family lost all our wealth, my uncle was put in jail, my auntie was crying all the time, my mother was very upset, and my father just continued this mission to free his brother. I remember these things now, little by little.⁶⁵

⁶⁴ Pul-e Charkhi prison is large, old, Soviet-constructed prison located on the outskirts of Kabul. A large number of political prisoners were tortured and killed here. In 2007 it was in the news as the site of prison riots and demonstrations.

⁶⁵ She has begun her narrative recounting how the Soviet war disrupts her childhood and family life, but from this point forward her family replaces the war as the primary antagonist to all her life pursuits.

As a young person what did you think about the two sides to this conflict, the Mujahedin and Communists? Who did you think was right and wrong and why?

It was always very clear to me who was right and who was wrong in this war. The Communists were wrong and they were Kafirs. (Non-believers) They were not following the teachings of Islam and they were killing Muslims. It was very clear to me that the Communists and the Russians, and the two Communist parties, the Khalq and Parcham,⁶⁶ were very bad. When I was young my family taught me this. I could not really analyze things yet because I was really young. But as I got older I studied this more and I understood what I was told then is true.

But being so strongly against the Communists was a problem for me as a young schoolgirl. I was always a really good student and Communist and government supporters were always asking me to join their youth group. They were called Beshar Hang⁶⁷. Once I told my family that someone asked me to join this Communist youth group and my father became so angry. He said I must quit school. I told my family I would never join this group, and after a big struggle I was eventually able to return to school, but I never told my family again when the Communists tried to talk to me.

There were lots of ways we were pressured to join the Communist party and government. In Kabul it was all very open but in villages it was hidden; there they had to do their

⁶⁶ The two main opposing factions of the Afghan Communist Party, generally referred as the PDPA.

⁶⁷ This is a communist youth group sponsored by the Soviets.

propaganda in a hidden way. One thing they did was offer scholarships to students to go to Russia.⁶⁸ Many smart, young people went to the Soviet Union in this way. And they would give people gifts, books about Marx and Lenin, flags, things like that. I remember my principal saying to me one day, (She adopts a sugary sweet, ironically pleading tone here.) "You are such a smart and good young lady. You should join the Beshar Hang and then we could send you for polio treatment. You would enjoy yourself and have many opportunities." When they said these things I would just start crying, I had no words, I would just cry and cry and then after some time they would say I could go. I had a very clear idea that they were wrong, they were bad. When they had events at school I would not attend school that day. When they asked why I did not come to these events, I would say "I had pain in my leg.", but I was lying to them, my leg is really paralyzed and numb, I can't feel pain in it. (A big, mischievous grin, she is clearly amused by this act of duplicity she played on them.) In Kabul there was a lot of open pressure to join the Communist party.

After the Russians leave the country, and Najibullah takes over, how does your life change?

When the Russians left we were really happy. But the war was not over, and we did not know what would happen. Still the Mujahedin were fighting with President Najib's (the

⁶⁸ More about scholarship programs to go to Soviet Union for education.

Afghan Communist) government and they were coming closer and closer to Kabul.⁶⁹ They were firing many rockets into the city and there were bombs and life was really tense, much worse even than when the Russians were in Kabul. The economic situation for the people of Kabul became worse day by day. Just for a piece of bread, we had to wait a long time in front of the bakeries. It was a really difficult time. Life in Kabul became very insecure.

Personally, I still think President Najibullah was a good person and I liked him a lot. Maybe from a religious perspective, or from the idea of my family, I was supposed to think he was bad. I remember praying to God as a young girl that this big, tall, fat, handsome guy would be our president. (She sounds here like a young girl, giggling, as if she is describing a crush she had as a teenager and remembers fondly now as an adult.) Then when he took power I was really happy. I had decided he was good. He would come to our school and talk. He would explain how “Now that the Russians are gone this is our country again.” I liked what he had to say.⁷⁰

By the end of the Soviet time (1988) my family had all left Afghanistan except for me and my father and mother in Kabul. I was really all alone. My father tried to stop me from going to school many times. I was getting old and he said I should stop attending class,

⁶⁹ The Soviet Army began leaving in April, 1988 and this continued for 10 months. However, the Afghan government of Najibullah remained in power until April 19, 1992. During this period Afghan government forces continued fighting the Mujahedin parties, but these parties also begin violent power struggles amongst themselves.

⁷⁰ On the streets of Kabul today the street children sell two kinds of posters and calendars, one with pictures of Massoud, the famous Mujahedin commander from Punisher who was killed two days before 9/11. These are always pictures of him in his army fatigues, in some harsh mountainous terrain, directing his men and carrying weapons. The other are pictures of Najibullah and his family, the former Communist president and director of the secret police, in casual clothing, posing with his family, or relaxing in some garden. Among Kabul urbanites, these two are competing heroes.

especially with the war and with the Communist government in power, but most of all because I was a girl, and getting older. But I had such a good weapon. I would just start crying. I really like crying. Even now I pressure my family by crying.

As a young girl I would take my report card to my family and say proudly, "I got all A's, hey, I am in first position." On my report it was written, "Bravo, a great and intelligent girl." But my family would just say, "Tell me something new, you always get this." And my heart was broken. My family never really supported my education or my work.

I got three big blessings from Allah: first, my teachers always supported me, even if my parents did not, second, I have good friends, and third, I have had caring doctors. The doctors have helped me in so many ways. They were saying that, "This disability will always be in your life" but they showed me how to live with it.

I remember my uncle would pressure my family a lot to stop me from going to school. He came to my house so many times. He would say to me "You have become a Kafir (non-believer), you have become Communist." And then he would ask my father, "Why are you letting your daughter go to school?" Then my father would tell me not to go to school. Until Class Seven I studied with great difficulty. When the Soviets left Kabul, things became very unstable, and we left for Pakistan again.⁷¹

⁷¹ For the residents of Kabul when the war with the Soviet Union ends and the Afghan Communist Government fails the fighting in Kabul becomes far worse than it has been during the Soviet War. It is after the Soviet War that Jamila's family is forced to become refugees in Pakistan. This is same period that Haji Bomani leaves the Mujahedin in disappointment.

What was your life like in Peshawar?

We were very rich in Afghanistan but in Peshawar, Pakistan we were very poor. We had to leave everything behind when we left Kabul. We lived in this one house with many people. The house was full of people. My father had lost all his money and property. People took his property in Afghanistan and sold it many times over while he was away. His cash was frozen in the bank because the government had learned that my uncle was with a Mujahedin party. My older brother had a little money, so he started a small shop. (She adopts a tone of joyful, dreamy nostalgia and looks into the distance as she speaks here.) I remember as a young girl in Afghanistan we had so much; if grapes came to the house, we got huge stacks of grapes and trucks full of apples, and we distributed them to everyone. In Peshawar I would stand outside our house expecting huge stacks of grapes, my eyes would search for the apples and grapes to come to our house, but they did not come anymore.

But my family still had a reputation, they knew business and they were able to rebuild things a little. As usual I was interested in getting an education but my family would not let me. Once we got to Peshawar my brothers would not allow to me go to school. We were living near Rabbani and we had such a fear of Hekmatyar.⁷² (This, despite the fact

⁷² Rabbini and Hekmatyar were the leaders of the two biggest Mujahedin parties and the major parties to the civil war. At this time Hekmatyar's followers are killing Afghans, including women, who are felt to be too close to the Western NGO community in Peshawar. This is the leader of the same Mujahedin party Nor Mohammad was in.

that at least her uncle supported Hekmatyar.) *Hekmatyar was killing Afghans who worked with Westerners or did not dress in a strict conservative manner. There were many bombs in the city and they were killing especially girls who went out in public or worked with NGOs. One day I was wearing fingernail paint on my toes and I went out to get vegetables. When I was on the street I looked down and saw I had paint on my toes. I got really scared and ran back home. (She laughs.) We knew Hekmatyar would kill girls if we were wearing the wrong clothes. At this time I could not convince my family to let me go to school.*

So secretly I joined an IRC⁷³ English class near my house and I went everyday for two or three months without telling the men in my house. The men were going out for business each day. I had good relations with my sisters-in-law so they knew but I did not tell my brothers. My sisters-in-law were really worried. They would say, “Look we are not responsible, we will not answer for this when the men find out.” I would say to them, “Look, this is on my shoulders. Just say I went shopping or something if they come home.”

Were you ever worried that your family might physically hurt you?

⁷³ I.R.C., or the International Rescue Committee, is a New York based American NGO that had very large education projects in Peshawar and elsewhere with Afghan refugees at this time.

I was scared of the men in my family, but thank god, the men in my family have never physically hurt me. For a few months I was sneaking to class but it made me very anxious. Everyone in my house lived in fear of my father, he was a dictator, and this fear of my father controlled everyone.⁷⁴ My mother did not stop me but she did not encourage me either. She would not support my education against the wishes of my father. So after a time I decided I had to tell my family about my schooling. I did not like tricking them and so I made this plan. I picked my brother who I was closest to. I explained that, “I have this pain in my legs and many other problems. I am all alone at home all day long. I am unable to do the shopping. I am not able to do a lot of the physical work around the house. The school I want to go to is very near. I need to learn English and Urdu.” And I really emphasized that at school we learn about Islamic issues.

After much pressure the men accepted it. My father said nothing. Since I have polio they think I can't do much else. I can't cook or clean or do heavy work. But I was always worried that if I had to ask my family for money for school they might stop me.⁷⁵ I never wanted them to have any reason to stop me from going so I had to figure out a way to get money for school. I started making flower hair clips and I would sell them to shops in Sada market⁷⁶. I would sell many of them to my sisters and in-laws. They would say “Why are you charging us?” I would say “This is what they are teaching us in school.”

⁷⁴ Many women I interviewed speak of their fathers as dictators, as feared characters, and yet often simultaneously with a certain respect, even while they disagree with how they tried to control the women in the family.

⁷⁵ Had Jamila been a physically healthy woman it seems unlikely she would have been allowed the freedoms she describes and would have been more likely subjected to physical abuse.

⁷⁶ An enormous, sprawling market complex in Peshawar.

I would lie to them. In this way though, I would pay for school. I did not ask my family for any money. Soon I had a very nice business.

Later I had a friend who was good at baking. We joined together to buy and prepare things. We would sell these cakes we made in the market and use this to pay for school. It was a difficult time, but I believed only education could help me. My temperament is different from my family. They are proud and like money. I would always save any money I had. I was simple and wanted education.

I did a year-long course in English at International Rescue Committee (IRC). Then I joined a Pakistani school in University Town.⁷⁷ Then I went for matriculation exams and I got the highest score. I was accepted at the Jinnah School for Girls, the most famous college for women. I studied four years of university there and got a degree in International Relations.

My family came to accept my going to school. I was not asking for anything. I was not giving them any reason to stop me. I found my own way. They saw I would always keep trying to go to school. It was really important to me that I did not give them any reason or excuse for stopping me. I would dress carefully. I would wear my hijab, my face was always covered in public. I did not have many friends. I was going alone. They could not say I was with bad girls. I was just interested in my education. My second brother would create problems. Although he is also very open-minded, and he admitted me to

⁷⁷ A section of Peshawar where foreigners and wealthy Afghans lived. Many NGO offices were based here.

school in the beginning, but when he saw me succeeding, he wanted to stop me from going to school and later he tried to stop me from working in public. He and his wife created so many problems for me.

Despite all this today I am a women's activist. I am not the disabled Jamila, I am leader for twenty five hundred women. I am active in many other areas and groups for women. I have scoliosis. There is gap between the spines in my back. There is a lot of pain. But still I am doing all this work and I don't need pain medicine any more. I used to take a lot of pain medication. Now I can go to sleep at night because I am happy and so tired from my work. I am involved in so many groups. I am on TV, and very active. But still it is a difficult thing for my brothers to see me in public like this and still they try to stop me.

What does your family think of your public work and the recognition that you receive?

I think they are jealous of my success. My brother even says that we are afraid that some day people will pass and point at him and say, "Who is this guy? He is the brother of Jamila." My brother would talk with my father and say "People are saying that your daughter is making money for the family." So one day this past spring they decided to

have a family jirga (meeting) about me.⁷⁸ My brother called all my relatives and they sat together and decided that they should not let her work in public anymore.⁷⁹ They all decided not to let her go outside. “We will pay her money, she can start a madrassa and she can do Koranic education in the house.” They decided, “She should not go to conferences in Western countries ever again. She is disgracing our family.” They created such a bad situation for me.

Together they made this decision. Then they called me in and said this is our decision, “We will all pay you five thousand Afghani a month. You are not allowed to go out of the house. You should start a madrassa inside the house.”⁸⁰ (She gasps emotionally, recomposes herself, and continues clearly suppressing more emotion.) It was really difficult to lose all that I had been struggling for. Here I am running this NGO, Nor Education Clinic. I am doing a lot of work with the Afghan Women’s Network, a network of seventy NGOs. I speak in public and on TV about women’s issues. It is a big job that I am doing. (She speaks emphatically as she looks around the office.)

My relatives from my village said, “If you cannot control her then we will arrange a marriage for her.” They said, “She must sit at home because she is disgracing us, she should not go out.” (She becomes choked up and her eyes grow wet.) It was a really difficult for me, but I had to reply to them.

⁷⁸ This interview occurred about three months after this family meeting.

⁷⁹ Just above and here, she suddenly shifts into the third person here to refer to herself.

⁸⁰ At the time this is almost two hundred dollars.

(Her manner changes abruptly, her tone suddenly becomes firm, her expression stoic, and her attitude defiant. These next words are spoken as if she were speaking directly to her family again, as if they are sitting here beside me, she fixes her eyes on a spot on a chair beside me. She reenters the episode in such a realistic manner it makes me uncomfortable, as if I have disappeared and her family is present.)

I said, "Ok, until now you have let me go on with my education, ok, and let me have a standing in my society, ok, if you are not happy with my job, ok, I will leave it. But please answer some of my questions, that I should be satisfied and understand. Ok, have I ever, ever done something wrong, something that has brought disgrace to your family?"

Everyone said, "No, no." "Have I ever done something that is outside of your moral limitations?" They said, "No, no". "Ok, you understand that if I close the door of this NGO, and I come and sit at home as you wish, what do you think happens to the twenty-five hundred women who depend on our projects? These women have a small candle at their home because of our work. Do you think this is just, to blow out this small candle of hope in their homes? You will have to answer to God. Do you think that God will accept this? This work is more than we can do in a madrassa. In a madrassa we are teaching people to recite the Holy Koran, but only recitation of the Holy Koran can not make a difference in a life, for Islam to make a difference in life one must do more than recite the holy Koran. To make a difference in life, to be a good Muslim, we must do social activities, help the people, and as well as understand the Holy Koran. You must both

understand your religion and act upon it. OK, if you have any bad comments about my behavior, tell me what it is.”

Someone said, “People are saying that your daughter is earning for your family. They say you have five brothers in the family and still they make her work outside.” I said “OK, bring those people, and let me bring them to my office. For the last five years I have never charged any of the women I work with any money. I myself am a volunteer. Allow me to explain this to them. The Koran allows me to go outside. If I am working for myself, Islam allows this. Islam allows women to go outside and work for themselves. Khadija, Mohammad’s wife, was a successful businesswoman, and she helped support the Holy Prophet. Why should I be like a beggar going to my brothers with my hands out, if they are happy, they will give me money, and if they are not, they can slap my face? I cannot accept this! If I am not allowed to do my own work, I will commit suicide. If you can not accept this you should answer to God, for me and the twenty-five hundred women who we support.”

My elder brother, he was talking a lot in the beginning but he became quiet. So then I said to him, “Why are you sending you daughter to school? Why are you trying to get your daughter into the best school? Why this prejudice for me? I am also like your daughter, I am so young. And you are the person who admitted me to school in the beginning, then why stop me now that I am helping poor women? If I have committed some wrongdoing then tell me what it is, but if not then why stop me? Why this unjust

decision for me?” And then my father stood up and said “OK, nobody cannot stop her, let her be.” (She takes a long pause to recompose herself.)

So this was a big night for me. (It is clear her reenactment of this scene is over. Her tone shifts dramatically now. She sounds relieved and at least a little proud of herself.) And thank God, thank God, thank God, after I was done speaking everyone was quiet. They could not justify their decision. I was very emotional, I had a very emotional speech that night. But it was really logical. And in the end my father said, “I cannot stop her”. I said to my father, “You have five sons. Who has respected you more than me? Whose has cared for you more than me? Who has kept your honor and dignity more than me? Show me. You have five sons, five sons, they have their own problems and mistakes, so far I have done nothing to disgrace your honor and reputation.” and he said, “This is true.” Then my youngest brother, he supports me, he said that “Those people who are trying to do this are trying to keep Jamila in a kind of jail.” He said, “If she does not accept this then nobody should force her. I will kill each and everybody who tries to stop her.” He is my good friend, always I share with him, I tell him about my life, I tell him I am helping such and such a lady, he has a very soft heart, he says “I support her, nobody can stop her.”

The next morning I got up very early, before everyone else. I got dressed, put my purse on my shoulder and got ready to go. And I said, (Speaking with an attitude of proud defiance) “Khuda Hafez, I am going to work.” And everyone was staring at me.

Whatever people are saying, I cannot stop my work. It is better that I commit suicide. It

is very clear for me. Things have been mostly good since then. Thank God, thank God, thank God, after that winter I have not had any problems. Now sometimes my family is asking about me and my work.

Now at least my family understands my work is honorable. They were trying to stop me out of prejudice and bigotry, now they are thinking that I will go higher. I am happy that now they understand. And I am really happy that I can open a door for the females in my family. The other women in the family are pushing their girls, all my nieces are going to school, and the family is saying, "Look at Jamila, she has a disability, but still she got a good education and now she is doing so many things." I have become a model for other girls. They are saying, "She is doing so much, even a man cannot do it. Such a good example of womanhood even a man cannot do it."

You know I have adopted four daughters and one son. Three of them are my brother's children. My brother's wife died, and she left behind her children, and the youngest was six months old, and nobody was there to take care of them, although their grandma and my mother are alive. But I am very soft hearted, even in my management of this NGO, I am very soft, though this may be wrong for managing, but I love these kids, and I took them, even though I was doing my Masters degree at the time. Now they are grown up. Two of these children are my students' children. They were in an orphanage. I love them. They are ages fourteen, thirteen, nine, seven and two.

The eldest, she is fourteen, she says “Mama, you have opened the door of education for me, but please do one thing, please do a love marriage. If you do a love marriage, then we can do it ourselves. If you are doing love marriage then we can do it too.” She is only fourteen years old, but she is thinking she should marry according to her own understanding and interests. She thinks she should like her husband and he should like her and she believes it should not be a marriage between two strangers. In my family we have many unsuccessful marriages. All my sisters and brothers are unhappy in their marriages. One day this woman is sitting beside my brother and my father says, “Ok now this is your wife.” I don’t agree with this. So I joke with my children, “OK”, I say “I will go in the street and hold a sign that says ‘I am looking for a love marriage.’” Although it is joke it is a lesson. This young girl already understands she does not want to have an arranged marriage, and she is asking for it to be different, and they see me as an example.

Your family must put a lot of pressure on you to get married?

You know, I am under a lot, a lot of pressure to get married. All the time, disgusting men, my family brings for me to marry, (laughing and disdainful) all of them are more prejudiced than my own family. How can I adjust to such close-minded people in marriage? If people propose from my field of work, my family does not accept. They do not like people of such an environment. In our country, culture is ruling, not politics, all

the people are saying that politics is changing culture, but really here the problem is that culture is dictating to politics.⁸¹ If I get married I will come under the hand of a man. If I ask for a divorce, then I will lose all respect. If I fight with the person everyday, I will lose everything. Sometimes I really want to get married. People are gossiping, “Oh that young lady, she is not married.”⁸² If I marry and serve one person, or one family, is this enough? No. If I can live like I do and help lots of people, which one is better? This is better. Then I just ignore all the pressure.

For example, my mom was saying last week I should get married. I said “Mom, I cannot marry an animal. I am sorry, (Smiling mischievously, as if to say, “I know I should not say this, but this is really what I think.”) but I do not like these animals. They are not human beings. They don’t understand the rights of a wife, or the rights of a human being.” And she says, “Ok, you have somebody in mind.” I say, “I do but you will not accept it.” She was in the mood of communication. Maybe after some time she will accept my wishes. All the time she is worrying that my marriage time is passing.

But I don’t want ever to directly oppose my family. This is really important to me. I am not the sort to openly go against my family’s wishes. I don’t want to go off with one person, say “Hey, this is the man I want to be with.” and go off without my family’s approval and leave my family because they do not accept my decision. I know women do

⁸¹ Many progressive and activist minded Afghans, especially women, explain the problems in Afghanistan as ‘culture’ problems, old, outdated ways of thinking that are maintained against the welfare of people and women. It is also frequently explained, as Jamila has just done with her family, that a proper understanding of Islam would liberate women from harmful cultural standards. Jamila constantly reiterates in public-speaking engagements that arguing for the proper teachings of Islam is a powerful and positive argument for women rights.

⁸² She is 30 years old, quite old to be an unmarried woman in Afghanistan.

this but it is not for me. I am a leader and example now. I don't want people to point at me and say, "Oh, one day you will be like Jamila if you act like that." We must convince people of women's rights and set an example. This is not only my life I am living. This is not the life of one person.⁸³ This is the life of many women. I will be patient, I will wait. I will struggle. I hope things will change. Slowly, slowly, gradually my family will become convinced. It will work.

So this is all my life. Believe me I have suffered a lot, all my life I was unhappy, as a teenager, as a youth. Now I am an old woman, my friends say I am young, but you know inside I am old, I have had lots of hardships. But I am pleased I could open a door, not only for my family, but for people of my area, and for the people in the provinces where I work I can open doors.

End of interview

III Comments on the Interview

A) Difficult Experiences: Life Defining or Traumatizing

⁸³ This is very similar to the point that Ustad Alim makes towards the end of his interview when he tells the story of Madam Curie, that he must continue what he is doing for the long term benefit of the people, even if endangers him.

Examining these interviews for dominant micro-political issues in lived popular Afghan history and culture raises the question: how do a series of memorable life experiences interweave both the utterly unique and commonly shared in accounts of the past? One objective of this analysis is to disentangle the interlacing of macro-political history with micro-political concerns. Jamila's life story combines elements common to a majority of Afghan women of her generation, while some aspects are distinctly her own. Jamila is one of seven Kabul-based women activists I interviewed and for six of these seven women struggle with family to attend school and work publicly dominates their narratives. I conducted an additional, estimated thirty life story interviews with women in Herat, Ghazni and Kabul. The women made available to me for interviews were typically educated and many worked for NGOs on women's or social justice issues, which most likely indicates a degree of tolerance for these activities within their families, making them both unrepresentative of Afghan women and apparently well-positioned to speak about the situation of Afghan women. For publicly active Afghan women from urban centers, struggle for an education and paid work are common, while in the rural countryside educational opportunities for girls have been mostly nonexistent and work opportunities outside of home are rare. The exigencies of war, forced displacement and conservative gender expectations weigh differently on all Afghan women. In Jamila's case, a lifetime of physical pain from polio and severe scoliosis is relatively unusual, and her tenacious effort to attend school and later to work publicly, is exceptional.

Jamila's life story continues a pattern I observe in each interview included here: the first sentences introduce concerns that define the entire life story. I find this curious and I call attention to this in each interview for two reasons: first, because it helps confirm my contention that a sense of a past and an image of a narrative self 'preexist' and underpin these interviews, and second, because it serves to justify examination for a narrative image in a relationship to the narrator's significant audience/s. She begins 'I came into this world into Kabul...' evoking a near mystical notion of her birth with an image of a crossing from one world into another. She immediately grounds the occasion of her birth in political events saying "...and I was just a few days old when the regime of Sardar Daud Khan collapsed." Her birth coincides with the fall of one Afghan government and the usurpation of power by Afghan communists, precipitating the Afghan Soviet War. She explains how as a young girl polio forces her to sit quietly on the playground while children run and play around her. Lonely and physically disabled, she distracts herself by focusing on distant things. Her mind wanders skyward, to count the passing of planes, revealingly not the natural world of clouds, as political intrigue and deadly battle erupt across the country. Lacking reference to any specific time, this image of isolation and self-amusement conveys a sense of her childhood, at least from her adult perspective. In the second section of her introduction she characterizes her youth, again repeating the concerns of the first with slightly different examples. She reiterates how ill health, political turmoil and social isolation define her childhood. She mentions the two Soviet-sponsored leaders that take power from the leader mentioned in her first description, Barbarak Karmal and Amin, whose coup against President Daud eventuated in the Soviet Invasion. Childhood, she laments, should be a time of play and freedom, but ill health

and war make this impossible. She concludes by explaining her family was against her school attendance even as young child. Her disability also enables, she explains, making her preoccupied by interests different from her peers: unable to play she becomes keenly “interested in education” and “playing with books”.

Unlike the three previous Afghans, Jamila’s entire life has passed amidst unstable political regimes and active warfare. Afghans of a younger generation persistently characterized their lives as trapped by an ill-fated destiny. Jamila is unusual in that she speaks of life circumstances as pressing her towards what she considers higher goals, education and activism. Unlike the previous three interviewees, Jamila has presented versions of her life in public settings. While her life story may be more self-consciously fashioned, this does not significantly alter my reading for a narrative image of herself before other audiences to her life. Her staff, my research assistant and I are literal audiences here inevitably influencing her narrative, but an image loosely cohering is not limited to us, meanwhile at times Jamila expresses what appears to be genuine surprise at what she remembers. Similar to Nor Mohammad from Chapter Three, Jamila’s response to the first question, “Where were you born?” goes beyond the question, to convey things as self-introduction that state life preoccupations that remain across her narrative. Her self-introduction and her entire life story explain a life-long struggle to remain in school and later to work publicly as an activist: life realities that would justifiably evoke sympathy and to demonstrate endurance to most audiences. After a brief depiction of the circumstances of her youth she continues with memories, observations, episodes and experiences, that expand upon an image that pre-exists our chance encounter, addressing

concerns that both include and exceed all she really knows about me, my nationality and gender. In what follows I explain how her identification and attitude towards life-defining memories are productively understood as guided and inspired by two anticipated audiences, first her family and second, those to whom her life is an example, Afghan women generally.

Jamila continues with an account I title "The Story of Seeing a Dead Person and Crushing the Green Bangles". I assume an experience of this nature returns to Jamila's memory in detail because it holds a meaningful place in her image of her past and retains life-defining status across nearly two and half decades of forgetting, excluding and life-editing. As the outlines of her character take partial form through a mostly chronological series of past experiences, a recurrent question is what particular episodes, here assumed as parts to a narrative whole, indicate about the narrative image of the interviewee. To begin I suggest that some experiences never end but continue resounding into the present from the time of their occurrence. At one side of the psychological spectrum conceptually relevant to this study, some unforgettable and difficult experiences are traumatic. These experiences become 'stuck' in the psyche and influence behavior and emotions in a 'pathological' manner long after their occurrence. At a more ordinary and

less troubled side of the psychological spectrum, some significant or difficult life experiences enter the psyche to shape the contours of a self-definition.

As I have said, my impression is that the four individuals included here are not well understood as traumatized by the life experiences they narrate. Haji Bomani appears 'haunted' by some of his wartime experiences, by which I mean they linger as troubling, but not as trapping, in the manner trauma indicates. Nor Mohammad, I suggest, is not psychologically traumatized but rather somewhat historically 'caught' interpreting the world through a political sensibility that took form during the Soviet War. Mohammad Alim's life story is motivated by a desire to reclaim the trust and authority he likely sees diminished as the political landscape defeated the stigmatized cause he locally represented. My sense is that if Americans were forced into circumstances akin to recent Afghan history, the numbers visibly traumatized would be significantly higher than in the Afghan case. Although I am not a trained psychologist to my eye few of the many Afghans appear demonstrably traumatized.⁸⁴ If this is true, why they are not is an important cultural question given the experiences most have had with violence, poverty and displacement. In my observations of Afghans and their life stories I suggest it is less the nature of the event that explains trauma and more the expectations that individuals have about their life, their fate and the interpersonal world, particularly as they relate to difficult experiences, that contributes most to making some events life defining or traumatic. I consider how difficult memories contribute to a narrative image of self and

⁸⁴ I am in no manner suggesting that no Afghans are traumatized. I have one friend in particular, a musician and an educator, who was clearly 'traumatized', or psychologically troubled in a manner that he and all his friends understood to be a result of specific life experiences. My effort here is understand how, in this case these Afghans, live with truly difficult experiences without beginning assuming the logic of trauma.

place in their life stories, without assuming that they are inherently deleterious to that sense of self or traumatic for the narrator. Rather, life memories are evaluated as placeholders in the narrator's sense of the past and as outlines of a narrative image.

Examining how past events are incorporated into a narrative image asks how the influence of an event could be located on a continuum between the past event making or being made something in the life of the narrator. In other words, does the narrator make an experience a significant aspect of his interpretation of his past or does the experience of an event press upon the narrator in a manner that marks a change in narrator's perception of his past and sense of self? The question is whether the relationship between the event and the life of the narrator is one of incorporation in an active sense or recognition and acceptance in a passive sense. In Jamila's case does she make the experience of seeing a dead body in her classroom as a girl, an early, very detailed life episode, significant to her self-interpretation, or does this event emerge upon self-reflection as significant to the person she has become? Admittedly it is a 'chicken or egg' question, or in existential terms, it could be understood as a psychological version of the 'existence or essence' debate. No objective measure exists for a definitive answer, which does not make the question, posed within individual life stories, pointless or beyond informed and reasonable interpretation. This distinction between active or passive incorporation of an experience into a life is grammatically tidy but in the vagaries of self-interpretation and introspection things are rarely as sharply defined as the grammatical rules applied to them. Nevertheless the qualities, details, and structure of the narration of a past event contain clues about how the presentation of the event opens

to interpretation of this elusive but important distinction between how an event depicted may have taken hold of the narrator's life (i.e. in psychological terms a little closer to the logic of 'trauma') or how an event has been taken hold of and been processed by the narrator over time (i.e. a little closer to the mode of 'healthy' incorporation of difficult experiences into a life). Similarly, it is impossible to know to what degree the depiction of a past episode is an accurate description of a life-defining or memorable experience or to what degree it is the altered product of a mature sensibility reinterpreting a childhood experience through adult concerns and suited to a particular audience. In each case, again, it is most likely always an indeterminate mix of both and the mixture of construction with correspondence to actual events remains open, and not a primary focus here.

Jamila's inclusion of 'The Story of Seeing a Dead Person and Breaking the Green Bangles' acknowledges a focus of this research as I have explained it to her. It demonstrates the war's abrupt entry into her life as a young girl. Through this troubling memory she seems to say to a researcher, 'Let me tell you how bad it was! This is something really troubling that I saw when I was still an innocent young girl.' Her depiction also reveals aspects of the young girl's character. She is eager to attend school, leaving at sunrise every morning and walking to school despite physical pain. She is

emotionally attached to this man who holds her hand, helping her to and from school on cold days. This young girl who later becomes a committed activist for women's rights indicates an emerging political sensibility when she says, "I felt miserable, why were my people doing this without any reason?" Jamila recalls herself as a girl concerned about the larger historical and social context of the incident, expressing both distrust and compassion for 'her people'. Her young mourning turns its distress towards her own dress. Struggling to regain possession of her emotions she destroys an object of self-adornment, crushing green glass shards into the sand. She says with poetic poignancy, "I remember those green, glass pieces in the sand, and how much I liked the color, and crying and crying. I remember the dead body on the ground." The green bangles linger in her memory suggesting qualities of her emotional state at the time. The authorities come to sort things out, but this man was himself a school authority, until his violent death in her classroom. Before the event she is an eager schoolgirl, happily showing off the beautiful bracelets she had been gifted the day before. After the event, loss and frustration make her question 'her people', revealing anger mixed with sensitivity for others that borders on the self-destructive. Her description suggests a reordering of her perception of the world, her place in it and an attitude of defiant purpose that galvanizes over time. A similar sensibility recurs again in an incident narrated in detail towards the end of this interview where she concludes an argument with her family by threatening to kill herself if she is not allowed to continue her work publicly. Ironically, despite this early memory of violence at school, most of her life story does not revolve around experiences with political turmoil, but instead attending school in the face of family opposition.

In many life stories Afghans include an experience at a young age with the violent death of someone they knew by hostile, human acts. In most cases the narration carries an impression that the speaker's sense of self and place in the world are altered. This is particularly true of interviews with women and, to a lesser degree, young men. I suspect for many Afghans, the experience marks the first of many times in which the life of loved one is threatened, maimed or cut short due to unnatural causes. It is worth observing that it is estimated that one in ten Afghans have died as result of violence since the outset of the Soviet War. Older men who were active Mujahedin recount their first experience with violent death less frequently and with less emphasis than women and younger men. For older war veterans the first experience is likely worn indistinct by the many times death was close at hand. A sense of stoicism and bravado likely keeps older Afghan men from portraying to me the loss of someone close with such evident sadness and loss. Jamila's account of seeing a dead body in a classroom is an early example of a childhood burdened by war. Her description conveys fear and anxiety created by the event combined with an abrupt realization that the warfare she hears about outside the safety of her family and classroom is deadly and near. The episode also inevitably confronts the young girl with the existential reality of death.

As she concludes this early experience of seeing a dead body she abruptly shifts out of the narrative, saying in an excited, high-pitched tone, "I have so many stories like this that I could share.". She appears momentarily startled to recognize her life might be rehashed as a series of such dramatic events. Her voice quickly deadens as she asks

herself, “Should I share them or not?” She appears uncertain about whether she may have done something wrong, perhaps considering whether she has been self-indulgent or culturally inappropriate, weighty concerns for an Afghan woman speaking to an American man. After a brief inward-looking pause, she decides she has said nothing inappropriate, that this is in fact useful, both to me and to a potentially wider audience interested in Afghan women and their war experience. Stepping out of the narrative to transition, shaking off the clinging weight of this memory while she considers where she might be headed with her life story, she then resumes with a light, airy manner, addressing me directly again after a pensive moment, “I am sharing!”

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Jamila describes her father as she remembers him as a child, “He was like a king, he was one of the richest men in Afghanistan. But he never supported either side during the war, neither the Mujahedin nor the Communists, and this was the one good thing about my father.” Neutrality in an insurgent war in the close-knit culture of Afghanistan is difficult to nearly impossible to maintain. Neighbors and extended family generally know what fellow neighbors and villagers do and say publicly about defining political issues. Privacy of political opinion is not highly valued or much tolerated, which is not to say things are not done in secret. Compared to an American context, social respect for personal ‘space’ and privacy of political or religious opinion are not well established as

aspects of good etiquette. Of course, things are done in secret, but a façade of transparency is necessary. Acting in secret is different from a social expectation that individuals be given the space for private political lives. Jamila explains her father's neutrality as a positive attribute but a man of his wealth and influence would be under great pressure to take a side. Many Afghans who did not actively participate in the Soviet conflict claim neutrality but to most this means not publicly supporting or physically fighting for a Mujahedin party. For urban Afghans in particular it was safer not be too openly public outside of family and immediate community about one's support for either side. Her youngest uncle violates her father's order to remain neutral, aligning himself with the most radical Mujahedin group, Hezb-e Islami, and is arrested. Crossing her father's wishes is depicted as a serious breach, something she herself does in her narrative several times as well but always with trepidation. Her father's efforts to release his brother preoccupy the family for the remainder of the Soviet conflict, bringing the family from wealth to poverty and causing great emotional distress. She explains "But as the war went on, my family lost all our wealth, my uncle was put in jail, my auntie was crying all the time, my mother was very upset, and my father just continued this mission to free his brother."

Afghans almost inevitably had preference for one side of the conflict and social pressure would necessitate a position be made evident to neighbors and relatives. The practical matters of daily life often required dealing with both sides of the conflict. If the Mujahedin came to a house one night requesting food, it would be uncivil and likely dangerous to turn them away, and I have often heard of this as a frequent occurrence

during the Soviet conflict. Haji Bomani explains an early responsibility as a young Mujahid was to threaten government workers to support, or at least turn a blind eye to, the Mujahedin. Meanwhile if a Soviet or Afghan government soldier came to a home, evidence of support for the Mujahedin would be dangerous. However, these two scenarios do not meet on equal terms. The Mujahedin generally operated near their home communities with limited institutional support. They were both freer to act with impunity, carried a greater sense of a shared social commitment and knew the local social hierarchy. The Afghan government or Soviet soldier came to most communities as a stranger, typically unwanted, claiming to be acting on behalf of the government and nominally the rule of law. Jamila's father said in the end neither side would win, which she interprets as an insight into the course of recent Afghan political affairs. It is very possible this stand was taken to protect his business wealth and to cover for covert activities. Jamila would not easily know if her father secretly provided financial support for the Mujahedin and he would certainly be under much pressure to do so. He would have to appear to support the government as he sought the release of his brother from the Afghan government. Many young men I interviewed expressed uncertainty about the intricacies of their fathers' political allegiances and actions, often indicating a sense that much happened behind the scenes within a family. A young daughter immersed in state-run schools, sometimes suspected by her family of communist sympathies and often at odds with her family, is not likely to be privy to the political secrets of senior men.

Afghans generally consider it inappropriate to reveal much information about the women in their family and particularly to a foreign man. In Jamila's narrative her mother has, at

best, a minor influence on struggles with the men in her family. She explains her mother did not offer much support in family confrontations. Jamila says more about her mother than most Afghans I interviewed. Based upon my many informal discussions with close male friends and occasionally activist women, in many families the power of especially older women, while indirect and unequal to men, is still quite substantial. Their role is not as subservient as their public persona requires and western media portrayals indicate. They are influential but rarely openly assertive before men from outside the family.⁸⁵ I say this to counter the impression of many Western observers that Afghan women are powerless and nearly enslaved. The reality is complicated. Many men and women explain the influence of women within families as substantial and highly valued although often confined to domestic issues or with a power applied indirectly but nevertheless effectively. Jamila does not indicate her father has much of a role as a caregiver or role model. In many interviews and discussions Afghan women in particular describe fathers as strict authority figures, often labeled tyrants or kings. Jamila variously describes her father as a 'king', a 'dictator', and a 'very harsh person'. She also respectfully acknowledges he was 'impartial' in at least the Soviet conflict, insightful about the ultimate course of the war, and highly devoted to his younger brother. After narrating an account of finding a dead body in her classroom and then her uncle's imprisonment as instances of the war's entry into her life, the remainder of her life story becomes preoccupied with struggles with her family to tolerate her two life projects, first to attend school and later to be allowed to work. Despite Jamila's successes in school, as a public

⁸⁵ An excellent poetic demonstration of this claim is Sayd Bahodine Majrouh's edited volume *Songs of Love and War: Afghan Women's Poetry*, 1992. Another example is *Veiled Threat: The Hidden Power of the Women of Afghanistan* by Sally Armstrong, 2002.

spokesperson and director of a large NGO, the possibility of forced seclusion remains threatening and near.

B) Family, Educators and the Evolution of an Existential Orientation

For Jamila's parents apprehension about the influence of a secular, public education turn out to have been well founded. Educators and the values associated with secular and state-sponsored schools have replaced the influence of her parents and of 'traditional' Afghan culture, particularly as they apply to the role of women. As a young girl she was apparently an exceptional student, the kind of child teachers would be inclined to lavish attention upon. Her physical disabilities make her someone for whom it is easy to feel sympathy and her charismatic personality endears her to many. Given the lack of support she receives at home, it is not surprising that her teachers influence her in a manner expected to be the province of her family. After explaining her family's disregard for her good grades she continues "I got three big blessings from Allah: first, my teachers always supported me, even if my parents did not", and followed by blessings of good friends and doctors. As her unusually keen ability to think critically is nurtured by educators with a worldview very different from her parents, she learns to accept some ideas that her conservative, formerly affluent, parents already feared.

From her parents' perspective Jamila is likely thought tainted by a non-Afghan worldview generally associated with the 'West'. Conservative Afghans fear an anti-Islamic perspectives and sensibilities infiltrating Afghan society through overt and subtle forms some of which include Western organizations, the media, sexualized images, scandalous dress, secular education, urban centers and vaguely, 'things modern'. As some ill-defined version of modernity grows near and poverty and violence remain pervasive, some believe that if Afghans are not actively protected from the influence of immoral sources they will fall victim. A sense that society, and particularly youth, must be protected from vice and transgression is common to all social orders, but as commercial aspects of Western culture grow pervasive and desirable, reactions to it, both accurate and fabulous, sometimes become virulent. For many Afghan men, women who defy humble seclusion from the public and unquestioned submission to male 'authority' violate the honor of the male family members as protectors of the 'weaker' gender and caretakers of 'their virtue'. Some Afghan men feel they must vigilantly resist a public role for women, lest they succumb to the weaknesses inherent to their gender. At macro-political levels Afghan concern about Western culture and military forces in the country becomes entwined with awareness of very different gender sensibilities that are viscerally abrasive to each other, leading to ill-defined but sharply felt fears and senses of danger.

Conservative Afghan resistance to female education and western-sponsored institutions is often justified as preventing promiscuous behavior or lust developing between the genders. The feeling of lust and acts of promiscuous behavior, while more clearly separated in secular Western sensibilities, are closely associated on an Afghan spectrum

of wrong and right behavior. That said, I remember as a young Irish Catholic boy being told bad thoughts were nearly as wrong as bad acts. I suspect a similar attitude remains pervasive in Afghanistan as it applies to lust. An important difference though is that amongst conservatively minded Afghans lust is typically judged more a failure of a woman and the social order that enables it and less a problem for the man who experiences it. A similar, albeit more extreme example, of this manner of thinking is blaming rape on a woman's behavior. I remember one interview with an otherwise sensible and worldly Afghan man who explained a fairly pervasive fear that International NGOs and Human Rights Organizations were Western havens for Afghan women to escape their husbands and the responsibilities of family life and marriage. The implication of such milder statements of impropriety is that more scandalous acts occur. Meanwhile, as I suggested, many Afghans assume that Westerners causally have sex at whim without emotion or respect for one another. I submit that for a rural Afghan man to suddenly find himself in New York City in the summer is somewhat experientially analogous to a conservative Christian American man suddenly finding himself in a strip club, with the possibility of being both simultaneously enticing and abhorrent. In an already tense macro-political context, an often exaggerated and sometime accurate reading of Western sexual mores reinforced by Western media and advertising, combines with a stringent sense of appropriate attire and contribute to tensions and false expectations when Afghan women seek a basic right to act on their own volition, as "Western" women do.

Jamila is deemed unnecessarily confrontational as she works tirelessly on women's welfare and empowerment in a country that is male-dominated, politically unstable, lacking rule of law and the fifth poorest on the planet. Her accounts detail careful evasion or resistance to her family's efforts to isolate her and curtail her public activities. The most striking is narrated near the end of the interview when her family attempts to stop her public work. After narrating a lifetime of struggles, even threatening to kill herself to 'prevent' her forced seclusion, she nevertheless concludes her life story saying,

But I don't want ever to directly oppose my family. This is really important to me. I am not the sort to openly go against my family's wishes. I don't want to go off with one person, say hey, 'This is the man I want to be with,' and go off without my family's approval and leave my family, because they do not accept my decision. I know women do this but it is not for me. I am a leader and example now.

There are clear limits to how much and in what manner she will resist the expectations of her family. As a child she also had to evade pressure from school authorities to participate in communist or government-sponsored events and resist her parents' attempts to stop her education. As an adult she must remain ever vigilant against attacks on her character from different directions while remaining a public spokesperson on this most sensitive of issues. Jamila's existential orientation takes form as she negotiates, sometimes forcefully resisting, and other times delicately evading or simply crying, her way through opposing cultural limitations, institutional authorities and especially family members that would otherwise curtail her actions and quiet her voice. Her resistance takes the form of informed intellectual positions: she argues first empirically asking "What have I done wrong?" and second, "Islamic principles encourage me to do what I

do.”⁸⁶ I list a few examples to demonstrate this uneasy balancing of expectations from various sources.

Explaining her thoughts about the two sides of the Soviet conflict she says, “When I was young I just accepted what my parents told me but as I matured and I studied these things I understood what I was told then about the Soviets and communists is true.” She describes the communists variously as “non-believers (Kafirs), wrong, killing Muslims, and bad.” She learns to trust in the power and necessity of her maturing intellect to validate or disprove what she has been told. She believes that cultural values must stand the test of reason and informed Islamic scrutiny, stating emphatically, Afghans are oppressed, not by politics, but by culture. By this she means Afghans wrongly justify the need to isolate and seclude women based on Islam when in fact these are misguided aspects of Afghan culture. She describes the difficulty of going to government schools run by communists when her family opposes their administrators and their values. One time she reluctantly tells her family about communist overtures to her at school. Her father becomes irate and once again bans her from school. After this the young girl determines these overtures must remain hidden from her family. She explains several times she must lie or at least hide something in order to continue her education. She laughs as she recounts these incidents but they remain lasting memories, deemed worthy of multiple inclusion in her life story because such incidents have the potential to derail her life efforts. Meanwhile Communist educators praise her, offering her scholarships and even to cure her polio, if she agrees to join a youth branch of the communist party. Her response to these tempting offers is to cry, unwilling to openly defy her government

⁸⁶ Margaret Mills observation from personal correspondence.

teachers yet unable to join them. She cries quite strategically when her verbal appeals fall on deaf ears. In some respects the entirety of this life story can be read as an articulate and effective plea for sympathy for herself and Afghan women before an American audience, and I sense, though perhaps this in my own self-involved expectation, an associated hope that a powerful outside force might intervene and redress troubling circumstances.

Jamila's resistance to gender restrictions creates an opportunity and motivation for her conservative countrymen to malign her character. Given the inherent power disparities between the genders and the likelihood of attack on her character, or worse, in any manner her many adversaries deem expedient, she cannot allow herself even the most insignificant of moral compromises. Finding a path between two contrary sets of authority, as a child between parents and teachers, and later between pervasive social expectations and her own contrary values, requires occasional acts of minor manipulation. Though she accepts these insincere moments as necessary, she is also troubled by her minor acts of duplicity. The significance, I suggest, is not that she did these things, but that she remembers and bothers to recount them in a life story. To tell a 'white lie' bothers a highly ethical and deeply religious sensibility while these struggles could easily prevent her from her two life goals. Her laughter as she says these things likely suggest unresolved conflicted feelings. A lifetime of navigating between different authorities defines an existential orientation of a disadvantaged, yet persistent resistance to an environment that fosters a woman's dependence, seclusion, servitude and silence.

In an episode recounted near the end of the life story Jamila's family calls a meeting (jirga) to announce that her visibility in public and income disgrace the family and must cease. She pleads with her family for justification, "That is, in public, is there anything that I have done that brings shame on the family?" to which there is reluctant acknowledgement that nothing could be perceived this way. She continues more broadly, "Have I ever done anything morally wrong?" I paraphrase her argument, 'I am acting in a way that is extremely virtuous, almost the opposite of being immoral. This is not about my behavior but about the nature of what I do. The Koran and God emphasize the necessity of work for those less fortunate. I am acting as the Koran teaches us.' Her response is strong and effective. These men have to claim to be acting in a manner based on Islam, however falsely understood that might be in reality. She turns their claims upside down to say, 'I alone act piously because I am working for the benefit of others as the Koran teaches us to do.' I suspect that the passion and force of her delivery is as responsible for its reluctant acceptance as the strength of her argument.

Jirgas are councils held to discuss contentious issues, a decision-making institution recognized across Afghanistan. Participants are expected to talk, reason, and convince each other of their positions. When a situation is deemed to require a jirga the outcome is thought uncertain. As a decision-making and consensus-building institution, the jirga is

basically democratic and inclusive in orientation. Some voices carry greater authority but all participants can speak. Jirgas occur from the family level to the highest political level. After Jamila's demands justification for this decision, someone must respond. One brother says that others are talking and making the embarrassing claim that a woman earns money to support the family, a slur for a family once accustomed to great affluence. She responds saying simply this is untrue, she takes no money for her work, explaining her work is pious and proper and points to Mohammad's first wife and first convert who was a successful businesswoman as an example for her life. She concludes a very well reasoned response with the only threat she possesses, "By the way, if you stop me, I will kill myself." I remember subduing an emotional gasp as she said this. When I asked if she felt threatened by physical violence I did not expect her to respond that she threatened her family with physical violence against herself if denied the opportunity to work in public view. I am not sure what to call this move. It seems related to honor and I imagine it is heard as a serious threat. Female self-immolation and suicide as a response to family abuse is quite common in Afghanistan. I am reminded of Sartre who says, we are all free because we are free to kill ourselves. A sympathetic younger brother follows saying, "You are trying to imprison her. I will kill whoever tries to stop her.", another strong assertion to make to family. Her father concedes. She explains, "The next morning I got very early, before everyone else. I got dressed, put my purse on my shoulder and got ready to go. And I said, "Khuda Hafez, I am going to work." And everyone was staring at me. Whatever people are saying, I cannot stop my work. It is better that I commit suicide. It is very clear for me." Her response is a rare, articulate,

brave albeit desperate, rebuttal before her family, one that pushes all the right buttons, and demonstrates a defining dynamic of her life.

Jamila is caught between obligatory respect for the social institution of family and personal resentment at their power to obstruct her life projects. A lifelong struggle with her family to attend school and work becomes an existential orientation of her life. Positioned between respect and resentment, her family is one of the two significant audiences to her self-presentation in this life narrative. As a child her family is an inescapable antagonizing audience she struggles with over these issues long before she fully understands why she feels justified. As she becomes an adult a sense of the justice of her cause becomes clear. She recognizes as a second audience the many other Afghan women who are caught in situations like her own, and far worse. Her life as a model before Afghan women is a motivating protagonist of her life's efforts. She lives anticipating an attack on her personal character and professional work that could be used by others to prevent her education and work, a destructive storm hovering ready to wreak havoc at any moment on her public life.

When one considers that her professional goals work against the troubling gender norms of Afghan society, that her life has passed amidst war, and that her body has been in pain since infancy due to polio and scoliosis, it is significant that the greatest threat to her well being and freedom comes from within her own family. Speaking with caustic amusement about her family's pressure for an arranged marriage she says, "You know, I am under a lot, a lot of pressure to get married. All the time, disgusting men, my family brings for

me to marry, (laughing) all of them are more prejudiced than my own family.” As an audience to her life story her family slides between various guises in her narrative: contentious enough to be a frequent adversary, close enough to be a potential confidant and influential enough to be a harsh judge. The sharp, emotional inclusion of incidents where she must hide something or confront the family reveals the anxiety and resentment attached to them. She is engaged in a lifelong effort to present and fashion herself in a manner that preempts any future justification for preventing her public activities. She concludes by explaining her life lived before an audience of Afghan women in very literal terms, “This is not only my life I am living. This is not the life of one person. This is the life of many women. I will be patient, I will wait. I will struggle.”⁸⁷ Some women, in the most troubling circumstances, realize they live with men who are ruining their lives and denying their freedom in intolerable and often violent ways, but few have come to the realization this mistreatment is unjustified or have examples in their own lives of successful resistance. Most have not had the opportunity to process this mistreatment with the sort of background and confidence that Jamila possesses. Jamila’s life is lived practically and professionally before this audience of other Afghan women, to serve as an example of Islamic resistance to a pervasive system of gender inequality.

⁸⁷ This is very similar to the point that Ustad Alim makes towards the end of his interview when he tells the story of Madam Curie as an example that he must continue what he is doing for the long term benefit of the people, even if endangers him.

Conclusion: Culture and Violence

I contend that the most significant contemporary influence on Afghan culture is a three-decade experience of great political violence and personal insecurity. I have demonstrated how this historical reality enters the micro-political perspectives and interpersonal sensibilities of four 'ordinary' Afghans. To conclude, I speculate about the meanings of violence and the limits of trauma for contemporary interpretations of Afghan culture and history. I briefly revisit each interview to offer concise conclusions to be drawn from ethnographic analysis of these four particular life stories.

Of the hundred plus interviews I conducted, nearly all were with Afghans who were forced from their homes at least once due to war. Three of the interviewees included here briefly mention family displacement due to conflict, and do so in a mostly matter-of-fact manner. Nor Mohammad is different in that he begins and concludes his life story emphasizing how he was forced to resettle three times before settling in Herat, a city quite far from his home village. I suggest he is careful to attend to being displaced because, at the time of this interview, he continues living far from his village community and because the physical reality of his family's displacements helps him to convey a personal sense of alienation and complain to American about his circumstances. Over the past thirty years, two thirds of all Afghans have been displaced from their homes for significant periods due to war. Forced displacement often involved dangerous escape on foot across deserts and mountains that could take weeks, with family members in tow and

all life's possessions on backs. One third of all Afghans became refugees in Pakistan and Iran during the Soviet Afghan conflict, where, once relocated, existential and practical concern shifted from avoiding bombs and bullets to procuring food, shelter and work. Most Afghans have had at least one family member killed due to conflict or an estimated one in ten have been killed as a result of violence. As of 1994 and just prior to the formation of the Taliban, approximately 1.8 million Afghans had been killed out of an estimated national population of between twenty-five and thirty million as a result of war since 1978.

The macro-political history of the country over the past forty years is likewise tumultuous. Since the overthrow of Afghan King Zahir Shah in 1973, or in words closer to the subject of this work, in the living memory of an older generation, Afghanistan has been subjected to the aggressive imposition and violent disintegration of five, presently teetering on a sixth, remarkably different political systems. For forty years the country was governed as a monarchy under King Zahir Shah (1933 – 1973). In 1973, Prime Minister Daud, the King's cousin and former Prime Minister, ousted the King in a bloodless coup, replacing the monarchy with a republic, and making himself President (1973 – 1978). Daud lost power five years later in a violent coup staged by communist Afghan leaders, and soon after the Soviet Military marched into the country to prop up a highly unpopular communist government (1978 – 1988). After a ten-year war, the Mujahedin, with substantial American, Saudi and Pakistani support, caused the Soviet military to begin to retreat in 1988 and soon after defeated Afghan government forces. The seven victorious Mujahedin parties, a creation of US and Pakistan initiatives, failed

to share power and fought a highly destructive civil war (1988 – 1995). After nearly two decades, an autocratic grassroots theocracy with Pakistani support, the Taliban, established a draconian cessation of armed conflict and a relatively successful rule of law (peace?) over most of the country (1995 – 2001). After the Al Qaeda attacks on the World Trade Center, the US military and the Northern Alliance of former Mujahedin parties abruptly forced the Taliban from power in Kabul. An experiment in democratic nation-building is tenuously held in place by NATO, primarily US, and Afghan forces, while a deadly insurgency grows more violent (2001 - ???). A shared macro-political experience for every Afghan over the age of fifty is living for a period under a monarchy, a republic, a communist government, ethnically and regionally-based warlords, the Taliban theocracy, and, at the time of this writing, an internationally instigated democracy amidst insurgency. I suspect the diversity and violence of political regimes that have come and gone in late twentieth century Afghanistan is an almost unparalleled national experience.

This history compelled me to ask two interrelated ethnographic questions: first, how has long exposure to fundamental insecurity and violence entered into and qualitatively affected contemporary Afghan cultural processes and social sensibilities, and second, how to begin to effectively present and analyze the individual and subjective meanings of this multifaceted historical experience to non-Afghans. As I began to consider the place and meanings of violence in recent Afghan history, I assumed as I observe many do, that long exposure to war and violence created a significant degree of collective and individual trauma. Over time however, I found the associated expectations mostly

unsubstantiated in life narratives and my daily encounters. Cathy Caruth suggests trauma should be understood as “the story of a wound that cries out, that addresses us in the attempt to tell us of a reality or truth that is otherwise not available.” (1996: 4) I found most life stories were not preoccupied by experiences with war and violence, as I expected, but were much more focused upon disrupted relationships, individually significant frustrations and violated interpersonal worlds. The pathological dimensions associated with trauma suggest a dispositional and experiential response to suffering and violence emotionally carried over time, but that was rarely evident in life narratives and actual encounters. (Kleinman and Desjarlais 1995: 178) I recall only two Afghans I interviewed who both easily appeared and quickly acknowledged being emotionally troubled by experiences in a manner that might easily be interpreted as traumatic. The first was a friend of fifteen years, a teacher and musician, who explained that he had his property in Kabul forcefully taken by his wife’s family, and he lived in fear, I suspect made complicated by shame and disappointment, that they would hurt him if he returned to Kabul. Despite a three and a half-hour, very detailed and often rambling interview, I could never fully decipher the circumstances. My sense was he hid or suppressed some aspect of the situation he narrated in a very confused and convoluted manner. The second was a young poetess, university student, and activist, who refused a marriage proposal from a villager-become-Mujahedin commander ten years previous. She had been pursued by him since and was forced to live in hiding to avert abduction and harm. The last I heard she finally was able to resettle in Thailand as the UNHCR determined her long-term asylum. Even for these two, explanation of reaction to potentially traumatic

experiences was not based directly upon wartime events, but as a result feeling violated by individuals each knew well.

As I considered the place of trauma in Afghan culture it required an interpretation of reaction to difficult experiences not expressed by most informants and not evident in my daily encounters, despite many speaking of circumstances that could easily be judged traumatic. For example, Jamila's description of finding a dead body in her classroom as young girl could have become a traumatizing experience, but her detailed, articulate and lucid recounting of the experience, combined with her life successes as a student and activist and the qualities of her self-presentation, do not suggest long-term traumatic effect. I increasingly became more sympathetic to Kleinmans and Desjarlais's observation that accounts of trauma, especially in non-Western circumstances where Euro-American psychological interpretations are applied, can problematically transform a person and group who have experienced violence, first into victims, an image of innocence and passivity, and then into people traumatized, people "stuck" with an emotional pathology (1995: 176).

In media accounts and popular discussions I find three pervasive assumptions exist regarding the place of violence in Afghan culture. First, Afghans are traumatized, suggesting that they are stuck repeating patterns of irrational behavior because of a long personal history of exposure to suffering and violence. I found this is a commonly stated assumption amongst international humanitarian workers in Afghanistan, although it appeared to me most came to this conclusion before they had arrived in the country, and

often used it to explain aspects of Afghan culture they found vexing. Second, Afghans have become socially predisposed to use violence as a means to settle problems or to meet needs, a result of years without a stable central government to monopolize violence to enforce 'peace'. Those who worked in embassies or on political affairs tended to assume this explanation. A third explanation is that violence is somehow endemic to the culture. This is sometimes called the Balkanization of culture, a view that some cultures are naturally or inherently predisposed to act violently. It is often used to justify non-intervention or evade identification of responsibility and was often applied to the conflict between Bosnians, Serbs and Croats in the former Yugoslavia (Woodward 1997: 20). From the assumption that some cultures are more disposed to violence, it often follows that they should be left alone to carry their inherent propensity to violence to its 'natural or inevitable' conclusion, or else they should be brutally subdued. The first and second assumptions I find have limited explanatory use and the third is problematically essentializing in manner denies greater geopolitical realities, in this case the Cold War and persistent international meddling.

One appeal of these explanations is that based known historical events and many individual experiences, they sound commonsensical. The assumption is that since Afghans have a recent history of living with, being subjected to, and often acting violently, for over three decades, Afghans must be or have become violent.⁸⁸ These kinds of cultural expectations and historical interpretations are more significant for what

⁸⁸ The Kleinmans make a similar basic observation about suffering. "There is no singular way to suffer; there is no timeless or spaceless universal shape to suffering.... The meanings and modes of the experience of suffering have been shown by historians and anthropologists alike to be greatly diverse." I think this observation is demonstrated in the four life stories that follow. (1997: 2)

they enable than for what they fail to accurately describe. They draw a neat line that separates and clearly defines a troubled aspect of Afghan 'identity', one that is generally judged distinct from other individual and cultural identities. Attributing to another a propensity to violence suggests irreconcilable differences while claiming a position of superiority. This violent and unruly 'other' is explained as 'pathological' as a result of experience or a troubled disposition that is 'endemic or intrinsic' to Afghan identity. In either case the predisposition of the Afghan 'other' is towards violence, typically with a subsequent assumption that 'we' are predisposed toward 'peace', or some other vague positive attribute. These typifications encourage a simplistic engagement with complicated history or avoid other social and political realities, including economic circumstances, historical grievances, political manipulations or cultural misunderstandings.

As I gathered and studied a large collection of life stories asking how the experience of war becomes integrated into life narration and specifically demonstrated in four accounts, I find in most cases the suffering associated with the physical challenges of war was depicted as secondary to the daily difficulties of limited resources, disrupted communities, and future uncertainties. In considering the place of conflict in Afghan culture I have determined that interpersonal experiences with insecurity and violation are more meaningful than the events associated with trauma or physical violence. With this in mind, I suggest by insecurity the threat posed by circumstances to the integrity, stability and expectations of people in relationships to valued communities. Similarly, by violation I intend the experience of something that interrupts and prevents the ability to

care for self, family and significant communities in a manner desired and expected. This clearly includes but is not confined to physical violence. Evaluation of the place of violence in light of these more culturally and socially situated terms productively moves analysis beyond the threat and effects of political violence, an inherent disposition, or the emotional or cultural disturbances expected to result from such events. If the violations associated with political violence and armed conflict are understood more broadly in terms of the inability to (take) care for selves amongst communities, in its many economic, political, cultural and ethical forms, then the harm to the body by brute force, or experiences with physical violence, emerge as only one form of violation amongst many. I find disruptions or challenges to positions in, relations to, and maintenance of, valued communities are assessed by Afghans as the most troubling and lasting aspects of living through this extended period of macro-political disruptions and physical violence and I describe the meanings this takes in specific contexts. The most substantial result of three decades of violent conflict is the many ways this has pushed Afghans into or out of significant communities and resulted in challenged interpersonal relationships. For most Afghans a basic sense of trust in the cohesiveness of family, community and fellow Afghans has been seriously weakened as a result of three decades of conflict

Much as I expected trauma to be reconfirmed I anticipated that life narratives would focus on the physical hardships or personal losses experienced during three decades of conflict: hunger, injury, ill-health, loss of loved ones, or forced displacement were all harsh realities in the lives of practically everyone I spoke to, but to my surprise these experiences were rarely central to their life stories. Instead many life stories were

defined by incidents of injustice or personal violation that had occurred in the course of daily life. These life stories suggest that for something to have felt life-defining, Afghans had to have expectations and trust in a manner that was close to home and interpersonal. Examples come to mind from interviews not included here. A highly successful young scholar, the first from a nomadic (Kuchi) tribe to receive a formal education, is forced from an important research position before the Soviet invasion at the preeminent Kabul social research institution because his professor says he is not sufficiently 'Marxist'. He explains he read Marx with the same intellectual curiosity he read the Bhagavad Gita and Dao Te Ching and recounts this rejection by a respected senior scholar as more painful than the following ten years when he lived in literally nomadic exile herding sheep across routes cut off by warzones, with an occasional magazine to peruse. Or a battle-hardened Mujahid of ten years says his worst wartime experience was seeing his commander viciously beat up an old man because it confronted him with the cruelty of his own party leaders. He recalls throughout his interview the many friends killed or injured beside him in battle with far less emotion than he recounts seeing an old villager abused by his leader. Or a woman describes her arranged marriage to an older man as more devastating than long periods of hunger, during which her family was forced to subsist on bread and tea, while rockets rained aimlessly on Kabul. These stories of violated moral worlds defined many of these life stories, and judging from the narratives, left the longest lasting and most painful impressions on these narrators.

As Afghans narrated their life stories, experiences with forced displacement and physical violence were usually mentioned only in an abbreviated form, and when I probed for

details, these incidents were often recounted in a dispassionate and generalizing manner. Most Afghans apparently did not see much purpose in speaking about these kinds of physical hardships in depth. However difficult these experiences may have been as they occurred, most it appeared did not dwell on these times or recreate their lives in terms of physical hardship or personal loss. Individuals reflecting on their life stories presented their pasts in terms quite different from the generalizations that might statistically and politically capture the history of a locality or the country. When experiences such as the death of a loved one due to violence or displacement from home were recounted, they rarely defined the narratives. Instead, the defining elements in most of these life narratives, emphasized in summaries, framing statements as well as detailed episodes, were personal moral dilemmas and eyewitness observations of abuse or disrespect. The critical issues involved intersubjectivity, what Michael Jackson defines as “-the ways in which selfhood emerges and is negotiated in a field of interpersonal relations, as a mode of being in the world.”(1998: 28). I read life stories focused on and expanding upon the central intersubjective dramas that emerge. As individuals contend with the insecurities created by conflict I find that either a sense of greater attachment to or separation from significant communities appears to have most bearing on life narratives.

Let me briefly review my interpretations of the intersubjective dramas of the four particular life stories included here and indicate historically situated lessons to be drawn. For Ustad Mohammad Alim, the first interviewee, his life story suggests a frustrated interest in being a trusted leader in a small community troubled by his communist past. I suggest two observations can be drawn from his interview. First, at local interpersonal

levels former government supporters from the Soviet War era, rarely ideological communists and often still government bureaucrats, continue to stand in tense relationships with former Mujahedin, especially amongst an older generation in smaller communities. Second, and variously evinced in all four interviews, for many Afghans expectations of current government initiatives are inevitably associated with the frustrations and failures of past governments. Nor Mohammad, from the second interview, indicates a continuing attachment to a Mujahedin identity that took shape as a gunrunner during the Soviet war. I maintain, as efforts at nation-building and stabilization continue, the Soviet war experience must be given respect for the enormous sacrifices and losses a great majority experienced. Apart from the infamous and destabilizing presence of Mujahedin warlords (leaders), many who fought and survived, lost prestige as they matured and now try to sustain families mired in poverty, while highly visible international expenditures of enormous resources have little effect. I find this loss of power and purpose at personal and existential levels contributes to attachment to the past and frustration with the present American presence. In the third life story, Haji Bomani describes his early pride as young man in the Soviet Jihad (early 1980's), and later disappointment when the Mujahedin fought each other in destructive civil war (early 1990s). Haji Bomani reacts to experiences similar to Nor Mohammad, but with a fundamentally different historical interpretation. He explains an attitude to recent history prevalent amongst a marginalized majority of his generation. His deep frustration with the civil war between Mujahedin parties, even saying it would have been better if he died young when the Jihad was still honorable before others, indicates a desire to detach himself from the later Mujahedin and a great respect for the fighting in the early years of

the Soviet war. He expresses guarded optimism about current political prospects. The fourth narrative, from Jamila Afghani, an inspiring young women's activist, draws upon very different experiences with lessons clearly quite apart from the previous three. First, I suggest family tensions throughout her life reveal the complex realities of negotiating gender norms. I find the struggles of many women, and the anxieties of conservatively minded men, about the rights and roles of women, need to be appreciated at micro-political levels and included in macro-political assessments. Creating greater public opportunity for women is complicated because it becomes associated with Western influence and Marxist policies, and both are vexing issues for many Afghans. Again, in each of these four cases, as in many not presented here, it is not experiences with physical violence and war, but senses of personal and community violation and insecurity that create the intersubjective dramas that dominate life stories.

The greater historical and geopolitical injustice, the three decades of persistent warfare and tremendous insecurity that the 'ordinary' Afghan has simply endured, was never expressed as an injustice that defined a life, nor was it ever mentioned in an interview as a historical 'injustice' inflicted upon an individual life or the country generally. When one considers that essentially a Cold War tension between two distant and powerful nations, the United States and the Soviet Union, precipitated, supplied and enabled thirty years of

armed conflict between Afghans, the injustice of the origins and the continuation of this conflict take on tragic geopolitical proportions. This is not to suggest that Afghans can be exonerated for what they have inflicted on one another, but the responsibility for the injustice of this history of violence clearly stretches far beyond national borders. The greater geo-political circumstances of the conflict were not addressed in the personal life narratives of most Afghans, even while they enter so many aspects of the physical, social and political world Afghans inhabit. In these life stories the injustices that were most significant were local, immediate and interpersonally important. Scant mention was made of the country's historic misfortune of being location between other warring nations.

To conclude, for nearly everyone I interviewed war has had devastating effects, loss of family members, forced displacements, and close personal experiences with the injured, but (by my reading) the narratives and dispositions of Afghans rarely indicate a sense of self or collective identity that seems adequately understood in terms associated with the pathology of trauma. Instead, most Afghans exhibit a tenacious ability to maintain dignity, in trying circumstances, and hope, despite solid justification for despair. In speaking of dignity and hope I do not mean to belittle the tremendous suffering most have experienced, or to lessen the psychological and physical wounds of the past. These life stories record experiences with conflict, loss, and poverty reveal how these experiences are re-membered, revisited, lived with at the time of our encounter. As trauma and victimization have not been the most significant dimension of these life stories or the defining spirit of their presentations, both respect and accuracy require

presentation and commentary aware of dramatic suffering, occasionally heroic action but, more ordinarily, 'struggling along'. Attention to the importance of interpersonal struggles and dynamics in the lives of 'ordinary' Afghans yields interpretations of their micro-historical experiences that I hope contribute useful perspective for engaging contemporary cultural processes and continuing efforts to move beyond conflict towards stability.

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