Editorial

An Overview of the Contemporary Ethnography of Afghanistan

This special issue represents the first collection of ethnographic articles specifically about post-2001 Afghanistan, opening a new chapter in the history of the country's ethnography. Long and multifaceted, that history deserves a thorough compilation and bibliography beyond what can be undertaken in this brief editorial. The promising current of anthropological research in Afghanistan in the 1960s and 1970s was diverted by over 30 years of political turmoil, invasion, resistance and civil war, during which many anthropologists either continued or began their work in the refugee communities of Pakistan and Iran or in Afghan diasporic populations around the world.

Following the fall of the Taliban government in 2001, anthropologists have cautiously returned to Afghanistan and have begun to carry out on-the-ground fieldwork in the country again, while research in the diaspora has continued apace. New resources (notably the Internet) and methodologies, as well as continuing instability, have also made it possible and necessary to consider how we might anthropologically study Afghanistan 'from a distance'. The contributors to this issue, as well as other anthropologists of Afghanistan, are understandably preoccupied with political and juridical transformations in the country and with the effects of the war and the NATO-led intervention. Three of the articles in this issue (by Billaud, Kucera and Akbar) reveal that questions relating to gender and Afghan women are a major thematic preoccupation for contemporary researchers, and it is probably no accident that these authors are themselves women. This is not surprising, given the symbolic importance that the 'woman question' has taken on in the foreign intervention in Afghanistan, although its fetishisation is eloquently dissected here by Billaud and Kucera.

The issue opens with a reflection on returning to Afghan field sites after several decades' absence. Pierre Centlivres and Micheline Centlivres-Demont, a husband and wife team who conducted extensive fieldwork in northern Afghanistan before the wars and later with refugee communities in Pakistan, document their visits to Afghanistan after 2001 and the social changes that they observed. Their article illustrates the altered perspectives made possible

by studies spread out over space and time. An example is the couple's increasing awareness of the constant cross-border mobility of their Afghan friends, rather than a neat narrative of exodus and return; they surmise that they had simply failed to notice that this had always been the case. They reflect also on the personal experience of revisiting the field as older anthropologists and on the bonds forged with their informants through the experience of sharing different stages of their lives and migrations. Such a longitudinal perspective is particularly interesting from the point of view of political anthropology, as it shows how the administrative changes that Afghanistan has witnessed over the years throw into question any notions of primordial political organisation – even of a concept as basic as 'the village'. Instead, these changes demonstrate adaptation to the regime of the day.

Next, Julie Billaud presents a fascinating exposition of how a 'culture of modernity' and 'good governance', as well as narratives of progress, freedom, enlightenment and rationality, are being introduced in Afghanistan in the post-2001 period. Among these, the discourse on women's rights in particular has been enshrined as one of the leading justifications for and benchmarks of a positive outcome to the NATO-led intervention in the country. But this article reveals that these narratives are being promoted through technologies of power and bureaucratic practice with a largely ritualistic, symbolic and performative dimension, and that much of what passes for progress in women's rights in Afghanistan today amounts to window dressing. Indeed, Billaud's case study of a gender empowerment workshop in Kabul, in which participants are encouraged to write down positive phrases, suggests that this aspect of the 'war on terror' is being fought with tactics not much more sophisticated than those of the traditional Afghan *ta'viz-nevis* or amulet writer.

Irene Kucera's piece vividly evokes the methodological challenges and dangers of fieldwork in Afghanistan today, including, for example, the ethical and security pitfalls of social scientists' deployment with military units in Human Terrain Teams. She then considers the alternatives. Drawing on the theoretical innovations of other anthropologists of war-torn regions and political violence, she outlines the possibilities of a 'distance approach' to the study of the Afghan war. Avoiding fieldwork in Afghanistan itself, this involves examining a variety of sources, including media reports and interviews with refugees. It also involves documenting and confronting the often biased or outright fabricated pieces of information (or 'factx') that are produced to legitimise one or another party to the conflict or to promote a particular interest. It is distance, Kucera argues, that brings into focus the connections and contradictions between these various claims, using the politicisation of Afghan women's rights issues as an example.

Agnès Devictor and Camille Perréand's article is another example of using an innovative methodology, this time from visual anthropology, to 'read' one episode of conflict in Afghanistan. This involves the analysis of an extraordinary archive of battle footage filmed by Youssouf Janessar, the field cameraman

of Ahmad Shah Masoud, during the anti-Soviet *jihad*. This rich visual resource owes its very existence to the war and to Masoud's perception of the importance of its documentation on film. The images captured by Janessar give us a unique insight both into fighting strategy and into the visible and cultural aspects of warfare, including, among other details, the dress, posture and communication of the fighters and the commander's interactions with his men.

Shaharзад Akbar represents the hope that we maintain for the future of Afghan ethnography. As a 'native' researcher trained in the West, she can move seamlessly between the world of Western academia and her own country. She also builds a bridge between the experience of her middle-class life in the capital city and that of people living in a distant province with a different lifestyle and dialect. In her Notes from the Field essay, Akbar reflects candidly on both the challenges she faced and the cultural resources that she was able to draw upon when working in Badakhshan. She recounts her own and her informants' mutual confronting of stereotypes and the compromises that she made. It is also encouraging to note the areas in which she, as a young female researcher, refused to compromise – a stand that nonetheless did not impede her work. Her piece is a reminder of Afghanistan's great cultural heterogeneity and of the process of discovery that its own citizens undergo when they travel through their country.

In short, the anthropology of Afghanistan is undergoing a resurgence of activity and an increasing thematic diversity, particularly as a young generation of scholars establishes itself. There may also be a growing popular audience for their work, if not necessarily a politically innocent one. A recent *New York Times* book review column, entitled 'Afghanistan: What the Anthropologists Say' (November 2011), considered how the kind of local knowledge that anthropologists gather may assist the international military intervention. Despite this activity and interest, however, it is somewhat surprising that few initiatives have been undertaken to bring together anthropologists of Afghanistan beyond the level of panels at larger disciplinary or regional studies conferences.

It is our hope that this special issue will stimulate further conversations and gatherings, both face-to-face and Internet-based. Perhaps then the voices of anthropologists, with their profound and mostly sympathetic engagement with the communities they study, will indeed play a more significant role in promoting a deeper knowledge of Afghanistan and in this way contribute to peace and stability in the country.

– Zuzanna Olszewska, editor