

Qaum:

Conceptualizing Potters in the Afghan Political Arena

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In Afghanistan international military forces, government agencies and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) have all struggled to grasp the nuances of local political alliances, feuds and hierarchies. Examples abound of international military forces and NGOs claiming to bring democracy to local communities and instead simply reinforcing traditional power structures. These range from tribal leaders using development funds to install wells in their front yards to the way that local warlords have been able to ‘pass on information’ to American troops about ‘Taliban activity’ in order to induce American air strikes on their own personal enemies (Tanner 2002, 313 and more recently Straziuso 2008).

The purpose of this paper is two fold, first to try to understand and classify one specific political group, the potters of Istalif, and to use this example along with other ethnographic accounts to complicate and reinvigorate the debate over exactly how local politics in Afghanistan actually function outside of the major urban centers.¹ I will suggest that while in many ways local politics in Afghanistan appear to be a classic case of segmentary opposition, in fact, by using Fredrik Barth’s understanding of ethnicity as a boundary marker, we can see how flexibility allows the potters and other groups to create manipulable definitions that they use to differentiate themselves as a political group.

Too often current political analyses of Afghanistan tend to reduce politics to a struggle between insurgents and the state or, at other times, tribe and state. They do this even while recent studies point to both the failure of state building at local levels and the diversity of informal political structures that still dominate politics outside urban centers (Nixon 2008). Occasionally more detailed accounts will break the tribes into sub-tribes and lineages, but the ethnographic record shows that political organization in Afghanistan is more complex than this. While tensions between tribes, lineages and cousins often encourage the anthropologist to look at Afghan politics as structured through segmentary opposition, this overly simplified understanding of the political environment ignores the historical diversity and dynamism of politics in Afghanistan.

Particularly in the 1960s and 70s, accounts demonstrated an array of changing political structures. Thomas Barfield showed how among the Arabs of Afghanistan self-interest was weakening the corporate clan (Barfield 1981). Pierre Centilivres and C-J. Charpentier studied the guild system in the town of Tashqurghan, showing its parallels and marked differences with the South Asian caste system (Centilivres 1972 and Charpentier 1972). Whitney Azoy studied how the traditional khan-based political systems were interacting with government among the Uzbeks (Azoy 2003), while Schuyler Jones and others were demonstrating the intricate political systems found in Nuristan (Jones 1974).

My research suggests that if anything, twenty-five years of warfare and limited state penetration has further complicated these diverse systems. Now in addition to traditional elders and state officials in Istalif, the small town where I conducted research from the summer of 2006 to the spring of 2008, there are international troops parking their tanks in the bazaar. Watching from a distance are warlords, who all seem to have turned in some, but not all of their weapons, and a wealthy new landowning group, who earned their wealth as refugees abroad and are at odds with traditional tribal structures. In the meantime, mullahs and other religious leaders compete for influence with NGOs that are handing out vast sums of cash, sometimes upsetting delicate local balances and at other times simply reinforcing traditional hierarchies. Particularly for young men, trying to gain financial

¹ This paper lays the groundwork for my understanding of local political structures that I am using in a doctoral dissertation for the Anthropology Department at Boston University.

independence and potentially start families, this political landscape can be extremely hazardous.

Individuals constantly call upon and mobilize a multitude of dynamic, embedded political groups. Many times these groups fit into a hierarchical, segmentary pattern, but closer study reveals that alliances and the boundaries that define political groups are constantly shifting and redefining themselves based upon a variety of incentives. In Istalif political groups can be arranged by profession, lineage, ethnicity or geography and ultimately, it is the context of a political situation that shapes the way that political groupings form. This paper will begin by looking at one ethnographic case that demonstrates some of the patterns political alliances follow. The informant is a young potter and his allegiance to the pottery *qaum* is his primary political affiliation.² In the context of town politics, which I was most interested in and which was the primary preoccupation of most individuals in Istalif, a variety of *qaum* that are only occasionally associated with professions are the most important organizing elements. The second part of this paper will then look at precisely how the pottery *qaum* is defined. It will argue that while there are a series of markers that distinguish the potters from other groups, in fact, these boundaries are manipulable. Using Barth's approach to ethnic groups, this paper will conclude that to understand local politics it is more important to focus on the ways in which groups differentiate themselves from each other than to attempt to create precise classificatory definitions.

Pottery and Politics

The following is an excerpt from a long conversation that I had with one young potter about politics. The conversation touched on numerous topics, but focused on the potters as political actors and particularly the concept of *qaum*.

"I am a kulal...I am from Kulalan, from Istalif, of the qaum of the kulals...Istalif is our land, country [watan]...My qaum is the Tajiks...I am an Afghan...I am from the qaum of Merza Mohammad...I am a Yusefi." –Aziz

Aziz is a young potter of about twenty-five who lives in Istalif, but also owns a mini-bus that he drives back and forth between Istalif and Kabul, when not working with his father and brother making pots. He has maternal relatives in Kabul and often spends a couple days a week there, but he is still considered in Istalif as something of an informal leader among the younger generation. This is partially his affable and witty nature, but also has much to do with the fact that he is the leading *qari* among the potters. He is also one of the most active political players, constantly sitting in the bazaar, gossiping, negotiating and getting involved with anything that is happening in Istalif. In the quote above, Aziz references at least six categories of political groups to which he claims membership based upon profession, local identity, ethnicity, nationality, lineage and clan.

First Aziz says that he is a *kulal*. This potentially has two meanings. He could mean it in the sense that he is a potter by profession (*kesb*) or he could mean that he is from

² *Qaum*, occasionally transliterated as *qwam* or *qawm*, comes from Arabic, but is used in Dari as well as Pashto and Urdu. In the case of the potters it is probably easiest to translate as clan, but its definition is more intricate than that. I discuss the various meanings of the word and the resulting implications later in the paper. Clan can also be a problematic term, but I use it here to refer to the potters as a corporate patrilineal descent group. For more on the complexity of clan in the Afghanistan see Tapper 1983.

the pottery clan (*qaum*), which is the more common of the two usages among the potters. He is not clear because these two categories tend to overlap and potters only differentiate the two when necessary.

He then says that he is from the neighborhood (*gozar*) of the potters or Kulalan, which is also made up of people from other *qaum* as well, but is dominated politically by the potters. Istalif itself was traditionally made up of thirteen *gozars* (Barfield and Szabo 1991, 197), though following the destruction of the village by the Taliban some *gozars* were not resettled, while other areas of land which had been uninhabited were built upon. The result is that *gozar* divisions are no longer as clear as they once were. These *gozars* are still politically important and when one person from Istalif asks another where they are from, they generally respond by naming the *gozar* in which they were born.³

Aziz then identifies himself as from Istalif in general, which is how he would typically respond if someone in Kabul asked where he was from. Though in Kabul they will occasionally answer even more generally and say *Shomali*, meaning from the Shomali Plain, north of Kabul, which Istalif rises above. More rarely they will refer to the area as *Koh-e Daman*, ‘skirt of the mountain.’⁴ Aziz then specifies where in Istalif he is from by stating that he is of the *qaum* or clan of the potters.

Later in the conversation he again uses the word *qaum*, but referring to ethnicity, another possible use of the word. Ethnicity, of course, is also a problematic term and some of the difficulties of working with this concept will be addressed later in the paper, but there are several relevant points about Aziz’s claim that he is a part of the Tajik *qaum*. First, Tajik is something of a residual category in Afghanistan, used for most Farsi speakers who do not fit into other ethnic groups. As Louis Dupree pointed out Tajiks usually refer to themselves by the region or valley they are from, unless they are living in a region dominated by another ethnic group (Dupree 1980 [1973], 59). In 1815, Mountstuart Elphinstone commented, “The name of Taujik [sic] is rather loosely used. It is sometimes applied to all persons mixed with the Toorks or Afghauns, who are not sprung from those stocks, or rather whose race is unknown” (Elphinstone 1815, 310).

This is certainly the case of Istalif, which is an almost entirely Tajik town,⁵ but located on the edge of the Shomali Plain, one of the more ethnically diverse regions in Afghanistan. Ethnicity is rarely discussed in Istalif, unless it is to contrast themselves with other groups, particularly the Pashtuns and the Hazaras who live in nearby villages. The major exception to this is recollections of the Taliban era. Most Istalifis discuss the Taliban not as a religious group, but as a group of southern Pashtun invaders. They often point to the fact that they could not communicate with the Taliban leaders because the southerners did not speak Dari. During this era many young men went to the Panjshir Valley and joined Ahmed Shah Massoud and his largely Tajik forces in their fight against the Taliban. Even though these Northern Alliance forces were multi-ethnic, Istalifis tend to speak of them as a united Tajik force.

This moment of Tajik unity, however, did not last. While Massoud is still considered a hero by most Istalifis, Istalifis view Panjshiris with some suspicion.

³ Complicating the issue, some *gozars* are the primary residence of one *qaum*, while most are not.

⁴ Most nineteenth century European accounts favor the term *Koh-e Daman* for the area (e.g. Burnes 2001 [1842] and Vigne 1843).

⁵ There are a handful of Pashtun families in town and a Hazara village in the district of Istalif, but it is located further up the valley.

Following the United States air strikes on Kabul, the Panjshiris led the attack on Kabul. As the first armed forces in the capital, the Panjshiris were able to exert a disproportionate amount of influence, particularly during Hamid Karzai's transitional government. Consequently, today Istalifis blame the Panjshiris for much of the corruption in government and the failure of government aid to make a significant economic impact on the town.

Aziz contrasts Tajik ethnicity with his nationality as an 'Afghan', which historically was used as a synonym of Pashtun, but today is used by many to refer to anyone originally from Afghanistan. While most analysts are quick to point to the deep divides in Afghan society, it is important to point to the fact that many young Afghans in particular do feel a sense of national identity. In Istalif this is partially due to the proximity of Istalif to the capital and partially a result of the distance, geographic and social, separating Istalifis from other Tajiks, who primarily live north of the Hindu Kush. The shared experience of defeating the Soviets in *jihad* also continues to have resonance and strengthens traditional links that most Afghans perceive between being Afghan and being Muslim (Barfield 2005). While national identity is still very weak, for Aziz it remains a meaningful category.

Later, while talking about some of the divides among the potters, Aziz says that he is from the *qaum* of Merza Mohammad who is the eponymous ancestor of the Merzaji lineage of potters. The major lineages among the potters will be discussed later in the paper, but the Merzaji line is the dominant lineage of the potters and includes the traditional head, the *malik*. Potters not from the dominant Merzaji group rarely refer to their lineage. Finally, he says that he is Yousefi or descended from Abdul Yousef, his grandfather, which is not a typical political claim, because potters rarely identify themselves by their extended families. Aziz's position, however, is unique. Abdul Yousef had four sons, three of whom are still influential members of the pottery clan, and several daughters who married, creating alliances, particularly with one economically powerful family in Kabul. As a result the descents of Abdul Yousef compose a particularly influential extended family within the dominant lineage. While the *malik* is from the same lineage, he works to maintain good relations with Aziz and his family since they are important political allies.

It is important to note the manner in which Aziz scales up and down political affiliations based upon the context in which he is speaking. *Qaum* most often refers to the pottery clan itself, but it can mean everything from extended family to ethnicity and, on occasion, even nationality. In Kabul, Aziz's *qaum* is the Istalifis, during the *jihad* he was an Afghan, and confronting the Taliban, he was a Tajik.

It would be tempting at this point to conclude that this is a simple case of segmentary opposition and that Aziz chooses his allies based upon a formula that calculates social distance and the external force that is to be opposed. Yet as we have seen, many of the definitions that Aziz uses are not entirely stable; neighborhoods do not have clear boundaries, for some, ethnicity matters little, professions are rarely fixed and lineages are not important for all individuals. Two other things prevent us from concluding that this is merely a case of segmentary opposition. The first is that political alliances are surprisingly unpredictable; young men may cooperate with neighbors and friends more readily than with kin, cousin marriages occur, but are not the rule and potters often make alliances outside of their *qaum*. The second issue is that the term *qaum* itself is unstable. In fact it is manipulable and often contested. The distribution of resources and the instability of the

political landscape mean that it is profitable to be a member of the pottery *qaum*. This in turn means that the concept of who is and is not a potter is contested,

Since Aziz is a young potter, who is very much involved in the politics of the community, he uses *qaum* most often to refer to the potters as a clan capable of collective political action. This reinforces his own position among the potters including his rights to work as a potter and to find a suitable wife among the potters. This also emphasizes the position of the potters in relation to other groups in town with whom they are competing for governmental and developmental resources. Membership to the *qaum* is thus defined by shifting, manipulable boundary makers. The next section of this paper will look at how certain boundary markets continue to make the notion of the pottery *qaum* dynamic.

The Potters of Istalif

For the anthropologist or anyone else entering the town of Istalif, identifying the potters of Istalif is not a difficult task. The potters make and sell pots and commonly perceive themselves and are perceived by others as a generally endogamous clan. They live, for the most part, in a neighborhood called Kulalan or ‘place of the potters’ and anyone walking down the street could point you towards the store, workshop or house of a potter.

The longer I stayed, and the more I came to understand the political and social nuances of the town, however, the more it became apparent that this simple definition is flawed. I discovered that not all potters make pots – some do not even know how. The marketing of pots is dominated by potters, but they do not have exclusive control. The lineages and basic myths about the origins of the potters are known only by certain elders and ignored by the younger generation. Some people have been potters, but are no longer considered members of the *qaum*. The potters tend to work together as a political unit, but this system breaks down with alarming regularity.

I responded to this definitional crisis by furiously making genealogical charts trying to separate out the ‘real’ potters from the ‘fake’ ones.⁶ What I found after a few months, however, was that I was misunderstanding the intricacies of the phrase, “*O kulal ast*” or “He is a potter.” More importantly, I was missing the complex and fluid manner in which political and social units, such as ‘the potters’ are embedded within each other in Afghan society. As if avoiding any static definition, these groups are at varying times based upon descent, social hierarchies, locality, ethnicity, religion and even profession.

For a term that is so difficult to define, the implications of who is and is not a potter, are serious. Potters have certain rights, such as working in the pottery industry or sharing in certain forms of international aid, that other groups are denied. Similarly, membership to the pottery clan grants less formal privileges, such as attending feasts or assistance in forming marriage alliances.

To understand how the potters maintain their political group within this dynamic system, it is important first to consider the five markers that create the context for the potters as political actors: 1) the production of pots, 2) the marketing of pots, 3) a shared hierarchy, 4) descent and marriage practices, and 5) a shared mythology. Each of these concepts is essential in establishing the boundaries of the pottery clan, but individually they fail to give us a

⁶ This is a question the potters themselves are intensely interested in since recent aid from governmental and non-governmental sources has been delivered to specific, but often poorly defined groups.

comprehensive definition. I will then discuss flexibility of these markers and the challenges of the concept *qaum* in the second section of this paper.

The Production of Pots

The most obvious way of identifying a potter is someone who makes pots, though even this needs some clarification. Pot production has multiple steps. First, the potters gather clay from a hill just south of town. Young men then clean the clay and mix it with *gul-e loch*, a plant similar to a bulrush or cat o' nine tail, and water, mixing it with their feet for up to four hours. They then knead approximately ten pound slabs of clay and using kickwheels, they throw from the hump, pressing outwards with their hands. They leave the pots outside in the sun until they become leather-hard. Generally it is the women who then cover the pot with a slip, decorate and glaze it. Finally the men fire the pots in large updraft kilns that hold approximately one thousand pots.

This process demands a certain degree of cooperation. It takes multiple men to gather clay, and pack and unpack a kiln. The throwing process is much more efficient if one man is sitting on a kickwheel, while one or two others are preparing the clay. In the largest workshops, there will be two men on separate wheels while three or more others prepare the clay. In general, workshops have between two and eight potters working in them, though the optimum number is three or four. It is, however, only necessary to have this many men at certain phases of the process. As a result there is a significant incentive for economic flexibility. In most families, one of the younger men will work in a shop or as a laborer during the day, but he will also be available to help his father and older brothers during the mornings, assisting in phases that demand extra labor. The result is that in a typical pottery family, only one or two men will work fulltime making pots, while another two or three will help them when the process demands. If a family has more men in it some of them may not take part in production at all.

The production process also leads to the tendency for the eldest son to be the most skilled potter in the family. He is the first one to begin helping his father and he will work on the kickwheel most often, while his younger brothers are relegated to preparing the clay. There are exceptions to this pattern, but it is not uncommon to find a potter who cannot actually make pots, particularly when he is the youngest in the family.⁷ As the less skilled potters become older, often their immediate families will stop making pots entirely.⁸

Women assist in the production of pottery, primarily by glazing and decorating the pots. Men will also take part in this aspect of production, but they consider it primarily as the job of the women. Women also will occasionally make objects with the clay using molds, but they never use the kickwheels or take part in firing. This sexual division of labor is rarely discussed and when I inquired about it most potters would shrug and say that working with the kiln or the

⁷ There is also a group of potters who are skilled *pustin duzes* or skin sewers, who make leather and fur jackets. In these cases their fathers are potters, but their mothers or wives are from families of *pustin duzes*. For Afghan refugees in Pakistan, pottery production was not possible, but *pustin duzes* worked for Pakistani merchants. This led some of these potters related by marriage to work as *pustin duzes* despite the tendency to inherit profession patrilineally. Politically and socially, these men are still potters, but from a professional viewpoint, they are *pustin duzes*.

⁸ There is a sense among the potters that there is an optimal number of workshops in town and that production should not exceed a certain level of demand. This level has shifted significantly over time. It was much higher in the 1970s, but then dropped precipitously after the Soviet invasion. The tendency for only the oldest one or two sons of a potter to continue producing pots for their entire lives is an effective regulating mechanism for insuring that production stays within certain limits.

kickwheel was simply men's work. Some younger potters make the point that women sometimes marry exogamously and so teaching them how to make pottery is a waste of time. There is also the belief that the secrets of pottery making need to be preserved and if a woman learns them she may teach her husband's family how to make pots. This jealous guarding of the secrets of pottery making allows the potters to maintain their monopoly on the pottery industry.

Of course the Istalifi potters are not the only potters in Afghanistan though they distinguish themselves from other potters using several methods. Currently, Istalifi potters produce all of the glazed, non-imported, handmade pots I could find in the Kabul bazaar, however, there are several other groups who work with clay similar to the Istalifi potters. For example, most of the unglazed, earthenware pots in the Kabul bazaar come from Laghman. These pots are significantly less expensive and are used more for domestic tasks, such as carrying water or making yogurt. Another group is the *tandoor sazis* or tandoor oven makers who work with clay as well, but use a coarser clay and fire at much lower temperatures. The *tandoor sazis* claim to form a patrilineal descent group, but they do not act as a corporate political group as the Istalifi potters do.

Thus, while Istalifi potters may dismiss others in town, saying, 'He is not a potter since he cannot make pots,' in reality, this marker is not that clearly defined.

The Marketing of Pots

The second most visible way to identify an Istalifi potter is by going to the pottery shops in the local bazaar. The Istalifi bazaar has approximately two-hundred shops along two streets that intersect to form an L. All of the twenty-five pottery shops are scattered along the street running east-west between the boys' school and the town mosque.⁹ The street running north-south between the boys' school and the river is composed primarily of small grocery shops and several *chai khanas* or tea houses. Shop owners in the pottery section tend to sit outside their shops, talk with each other and share lunch. They watch over each others' shops if a potter has other business to attend to and there is a tendency for relatives to have shops close to each other.

Older potters rarely sit in the bazaar, though they may stop in their shops to check on their sons on their way to the mosque. Instead there is a group of young men who are the primary figures in the bazaar. It is often the younger sons who are in charge of running the shops and most older men look down on the work, though increasingly potters are realizing that they make their largest profits by selling to international visitors to the town (generally NGO workers and the occasional tourist) and as a result in several families now, one of the sons has learned very basic English greetings and they are the ones that usually run the shops, particularly on Fridays. This is adding to inter-generational tension as young men gain economic and social capital by forging relationships with foreigners who often return to shops with which they are familiar.¹⁰

While not all of the pottery shop owners are potters, most of them are. The approximately twenty-five percent of the pottery shops that are run by non-potters have established close relations with the potters over the years. For example, one Sayed in the bazaar

⁹ These numbers fluctuated some during the period of research both because several new shops opened and several shut, but also because of an emerging trend of expanding shops.

¹⁰ Security changed constantly over the course of this study. When conditions were at their worst, most of the international community in Kabul had travel restrictions and there were few internationals visiting Istalif. At other points when security was better, Istalif was one of the few popular destinations for the international community, since it is only about an hour and a half by car.

owned a pottery shop even though he came from a family that traditionally worked in Istalif's numerous orchards. His brother, however, had married a potter's daughter and this Sayed began to work with his brother's father-in-law, selling his pots. Eventually his business expanded and he now sells from several different potters and jokes that he has become an honorary potter.

There are other aspects of the marketing of pottery in which the potters are not involved. Merchants in Kabul sell Istalifi pottery, but no Istalifi potter has yet opened a store in Kabul. Instead they sell directly to those merchants who come to the bazaar, occasionally taking pots into Kabul. The potters realize that their profit is reduced by not selling directly to customers and they have attempted to change this. For example, on the road between Kabul and Charikar, just north of Istalif, there are twenty-two pottery stores. Originally these were owned by merchants, not potters, but potters now own at least a share of three of the shops.

A few potters have even left pottery production entirely to focus on marketing. Two brothers, who originally worked fulltime as potters, now have a shop in the bazaar along with a bakery and basic goods store. They have also purchased a car and own a fifty percent share in a pottery store along the road to Kabul, about five miles south of Istalif. These men have established relations with merchants in Kabul and will drive pots to Kabul instead of waiting for the merchants to come to Istalif.

Business relations, such as the examples discussed above, often follow kinship patterns, but there are numerous exceptions to this rule. Many younger potters, in particular, often work together. For example, one particularly poor potter, who often does not have enough money to purchase clay and glazes is given these by a friend of his, to whom his is unrelated. In turn, the poor potter sells his pots exclusively at his friend's shop. Certainly there are economic reasons for this relationship, but both could potentially find more advantageous relations elsewhere, but their relationship seems to be built primarily on their closeness to each other.

Also complicating matters is the fact that pottery stores do not simply sell pottery. While most Afghan customers primarily purchase pottery, international customers also purchase replica rifles, hats, cloaks, baskets and other souvenirs.¹¹ Over my two years in Istalif there was something of a marketing revolution. When I first arrived there was only one shop selling both pottery and such souvenirs (Istalifis use the English word 'antiques' to refer to all these various items, even though few are). Over the course of the next two years, however, more and more pottery shops purchased a sizable stock of souvenirs aimed primarily at international visitors. At this point, many pottery stores have just as many other items as pots and several potters are becoming professional shop owners.

Even more than with the production of pots, the marketing of pots is a complicated process involving both potters and non-potters. Thus, while marketing pots is a core economic activity of the potters, alone it is not an adequate means of identifying a potter.

Social and Political Hierarchy

Within the pottery community there are important hierarchical structures that serve as another means of understanding the potters. With very few exceptions, extended families are headed by the eldest male, though he will often make decisions in consultation with his adult

¹¹ My dissertation will go much deeper into the economics of these shops, but the primary point here is that the profit margin on a few sales to foreigners is so great that it justifies maintaining a stock of these items even if the majority of customers are not interested in them.

sons and with the more influential women of the house.¹² Such men are often referred to as *resh-e safeeds* or ‘white beards,’ while more influential women are called *pech-e safeeds* or ‘white hairs,’ though neither of these are formal categories. Similarly, potters will use the term *ustad*, which means ‘master’ or ‘teacher’ to refer to a skilled potter as opposed to a *shogard* or ‘student,’ for a boy who is just learning the trade. This is also an informal distinction, however, and there is no ceremony that marks the transition from apprentice to master as there is for other local craftsmen who use the same terms.¹³

Pottery families are grouped by lineage, though these lineages are most important for a few specific powerful families. The heads of these lineages, along with a few other older men from important families compose a very informal council that meets when issues arise after Friday or evening prayers at the mosque. When international troops or NGOs come to town and want to talk with the *shura* or village council, it is usually these men with whom they speak.¹⁴

Finally, the acknowledged head of this group and of all the potters is the *malik*. The position of *malik* is patrilineally inherited, though there is some flexibility in this system. Potters often make the point that if the *malik*'s son is not competent or does not have the support of the people, he can be replaced by another community leader. Political rumors among the potters swirl constantly and the *malik* must work to keep all the major families satisfied in order to preserve his own delicate grasp on power. In Istalif the *malik*'s position is technically a geographic one and one *malik* is expected to rule each *gozar*.¹⁵ The *malik* is often called the bridge (*pul*) between the potters and the government. He meets regularly with the sub-governor and is responsible for validating national identification cards and other documents for the residents of Kulalan. He also has less formal duties such as hosting feasts over Eid and he is responsible for collecting a few dollars a month from each family to pay the local mullah and to help with the maintenance of the mosque.

Until this point the *malik* of Kulalan has always been a *kulal*. Approximately a year before my arrival, there was an apparent move by a weaver, who had also gained some notoriety as a low-level militia leader to attempt to take the position of *malik* from the potters. The potters, however, rallied around the current *malik* and were able to sway enough of the non-potter residents of Kulalan to their side to insure that the current *malik*, who is a potter, retained his position. This occurred primarily through deal making and negotiations between heads of families, but two young potters told the story with much more bravado, indicating their feelings of the importance of maintaining political supremacy in the area: “We asked him, ‘What is your last name? Is it *kulal* (potter)? Then how can you expect to rule Kulalan?’”

¹² Occasionally two brothers will share responsibility after the death of their father. There appears to be a much lower rate of fission following the death of the head of the family among potters in relation to other groups in town. This is due to the economic incentive of maintaining an effective number of adult men in the pottery workshop.

¹³ For other examples of a formalized apprenticeship system in Afghanistan see Charpentier 1972.

¹⁴ Many of the international groups in Afghanistan assume that every community has an organized council or *shura*. The *shura* among the potters is weak and poorly defined, and there is evidence that it is to a certain degree a construct of government officials and international groups. As Jolyon Leslie and Chris Johnson point out, “for all their folkloric status, many Afghans question the extent to which *shuras* really existed prior to the assistance community’s need for organizations to engage with” (42, 2004). Istalif does have two more formal *shuras*, one of which is a biweekly meeting between all of the *maliks* in town and the sub-governor, and the other is an elected council that administers National Solidarity Program aid. In theory both these groups organize politics and development in town, but in practice both are ineffective.

¹⁵ In practice one *malik* often heads several *gozars* and a couple *gozars* do not have one clear *malik*, relying instead on the protection of the *maliks* from neighboring areas.

Descent and Marriage

Since the pottery profession is inherited patrilineally, the potters also form a descent group that is reinforced through intermarriage. According to the tales that the Istalifi potters tell, they are organized into four lineages descended from Sayed Mir Kulal, who originally brought pottery to Istalif from Bukhara (I discuss this further in the next section). In actuality very few of the potters can name the son of Sayed Mir that they are descended from and few know their genealogy past three or four generations. Merzaji, the lineage that the *malik* is a part of, is the most coherent branch and accounts for around a third of all the potters in Istalif. The potters in this branch occasionally refer to themselves as from the Merzaji. Another third of the potters are from two smaller lineages, the Sahjis and the Merajis. These potters almost never refer to their lineage, but their genealogies may be traced back five generations. Finally, the rest of the potters are from scattered families who can rarely recount more than three generations of ancestors and do not claim to be a member of a specific lineage. I found no remaining genealogical evidence of the fourth lineage descended from Sayed Mir.

While lineages organize the potters to a certain degree, most social ties are reinforced particularly through marriage. The potters do not have a coherent set of marriage rules, but do have several clear preferences.¹⁶ Potters emphasize the fact that it is best to marry endogamously, though many of them marry into Istalifi families who are not potters. Occasionally, someone will marry into a family that is from one of the villages near Istalif or even Kabul, though in this case it is usually a family that has left Istalif. There is also a tendency for the eldest son in the family to marry the daughter of another potter, while his younger brothers are more likely to marry non-potters. This seems to be a strategy by the family, attempting to first solidify relations within the community and then to extend influence by creating alliances outside the clan.

The clearest marriage pattern, however, is that families tend to arrange marriages with other families with whom they already have a history of arranging marriages. Often times a man will marry his mother's brother's daughter or his mother's sister's daughter. Similarly, two brothers may marry sisters or a man may marry the sister of his brother-in-law. In each of these cases, young men in particular emphasize the fact that marriage negotiations are drawn-out, complicated affairs. Even after the couple is engaged, the engagement may last multiple years as wedding arrangements, brideprice and other details are all disputed.

This is a period of great tension and danger for the son-in-law. If the father-in-law breaks off negotiations, or if the man has trouble raising the brideprice, it can seriously damage the man's reputation. The result is that it is often times safest to arrange marriages with groups whom a family has negotiated with before. There are likely to be fewer surprises and more people related to both groups who would mediate if problems arose, pressuring the father-in-law to accept a lower brideprice. In addition to this, in a society with such strict separation of the sexes, a man is much more likely to have associated with his maternal kin or the women of other families related closely by marriage than with any other females. All these marriage tendencies reinforce social ties among specific families.

¹⁶ One point here is the difference in the manners in which various generations describe marriage practices. Younger men tend to emphasize the fact that men may marry whom they choose and that the elders are only in charge of the formal negotiations. On the other hand, older potters tend to claim that they are the one who make decisions about marriages between families, tending to emphasize the importance of endogamy more than their sons do. For both groups, it seems that this is a bit of wishful thinking and according to many of the anecdotes I collected, women are more influential in the decision making process than the men give them credit for, and marriages are compromises between all of these parties.

It finally must be mentioned that some potters have not returned to Istalif since its destruction by the Taliban. Some potters have settled in Kabul and found other professions. They still retain close social ties with their relatives in Istalif and the potters in Kabul are still considered good marriage partners. These families often return to Kabul to celebrate Eid and other holidays or to take part in marriage or funeral ceremonies. Istalifi potters in Kabul may not produce or market pottery, but they are still part of the pottery lineages.

Shared Mythology

Finally, the potters share a mythology that tells the story of their arrival in Istalif approximately four-hundred years ago.¹⁷ While several versions of this story exist, they are fairly consistent and agree on the more central points. The potters, they say, are all descended from Sayed Mir Kulal, who was originally from Bukhara. During a time of fighting and political upheaval in Bukhara, Sayed Mir Kulal and a group of followers traveled south to Balkh. Some of his followers stayed in Balkh and that is why there are still potters today in Balkh, but Sayed Mir continued south, looking for the perfect place to live and make pots. Eventually, he arrived in Istalif and, finding fertile land for orchards and plentiful clay, he settled there with his followers. In Istalif, Sayed Mir had four sons and all of the potters today are descended from one of those four sons.

In some versions of these tales, the potters are the actual founders of Istalif, though this is clearly not the case since the town pre-dates Emperor Babur. Other tales from the potters emphasize their religious connections with the rest of the community. For example, in some versions, Sayed Mir Kulal came with Eshan Sahib, to whom the famous shrine that sits on top of the hill above town is dedicated. This version is particularly interesting because Eshan Sahib is considered by Istalifis to be a significant figure, while only the potters venerate Sayed Mir. In other stories, Sayed Mir was the teacher of Bahauddin Shah Naqshband, who then went on to give his name to the Naqshbandi Sufi order.¹⁸ Although there are variations, all of these stories emphasize the uniqueness of the potters and their important position within the town.

Despite the powerful shared history that these stories provide, it is difficult to argue that they create binding ties. First, the potters tell these stories only occasionally, usually at my instigation, and the younger generation had little interest in recounting them. While the tales were better known by the older generation, the *malik* was still considered the primary repository of group history. Often times older men would say, ‘Ask the *malik* to tell you these stories, he knows them better than I do.’ A few of the men would dismiss the stories entirely and say, ‘Those are foolish things that the *malik* talks about.’

¹⁷ I have serious reservations about the claim of the potters of having been in Istalif for the past four-hundred years. Many nineteenth century accounts of the village provide detailed descriptions of the village, some considering some economic and political aspects, but none mention the potters as an important group (e.g. Burnes 2001 [1842], Vigne 1843 and Wood 1976 [1872]). In the summer of 2008 I worked with Délégation Archéologique Française en Afghanistan and the Turquoise Mountain to set up a small scale archeological dig scheduled for the fall of 2008, primarily as a training tool for young Afghan archeologists. Hopefully the results from excavations near some of the older kilns will give us a clearer picture of the actual age of Istalifi pottery.

¹⁸ Some versions of this story suggest that the Naqshbandi order received its name from the verb *naqsh kardan* or to etch since it was Bahauddin Shah who was the first to etch carvings into his pots after Allah etched his name into all of Bahauddin’s pots after a problematic firing. These myths were further reinforced when a group of potters on a UNESCO funded trip actually went to Bukhara and visited the shrine of Sayed Mir Kulal and brought a piece of his ruined kiln home with them.

It is unsurprising that the *malik* is the guardian of this shared history since he, of all people in the community, had the most to gain by perpetuating the idea of the potters as a fixed political and social unit from time immemorial. He clearly enjoys telling the tales and anyone visiting him for longer than a few minutes, including potters who had left Istalif, is sure to hear one. So while the potters possess a shared mythology, this is only called about in very specific contexts, by certain individuals, who stood to gain the most by perpetuating them.

Political Groups Istalif

As the sections above outline, there is no simple formula that identifies the potters as a political or social unit. I never met anyone who was considered a potter who only had one of five core markers of the potters, but at the same time, very few potters fit neatly into all five. Instead they are invoked at different moments. But is this simply a semantic argument? Perhaps the concept of being a potter does not translate neatly into English? I believe a closer look at the politics of the town, especially the importance that most potters attach to who is and who is not a potter, reveals that the answer to both of these questions is no.

The pottery clan is one of the most politically organized groups in town; they promote public works projects, petition ministers in Kabul and feud with other groups over rights to the local shrine. The potters have lobbied several NGOs to secure aid that their neighbors often did not receive and the *malik* has worked to cultivate relations with both former warlords and commanders of the international forces that patrol the area. The potters are such an influential group that it often creates resentment among other groups in town. Yet the potters as a political group are embedded in multiple other groups and individuals invoke the rights and fulfill the obligations of membership to the pottery clan only under certain circumstances. Potters will therefore use these five markers at varying moments in order to exclude or include different individuals in the pottery *qaum*. The markers themselves are used to justify these political statements. Thus, the manipulable nature of the definition of the group has major political significance. This becomes clearer when we consider the term *qaum* in this context.

Understanding *Qaum*

This confusion over the precise definition of the potters is indicative of larger challenges in defining local political structures in Afghanistan. Terms for similar groups and positions vary across time and from region to region. The same term may be used in different places to represent very different things. Perhaps the most elusive concept in Afghan politics is the *qaum*.¹⁹ In different parts of the country and in different contexts, *qaum* can mean ‘tribe’, ‘people’, ‘ethnic group’, ‘clan,’ ‘lineage’ or even ‘profession.’

A review of some of the ethnographic work done in Afghanistan demonstrates these differences. The phrase itself appears often in the literature, but it is rarely discussed. Among the Pashtuns of the south, who are the most tribally organized of the ethnic groups in Afghanistan David Edwards translates *qaum* as tribe (e.g. Edwards 1996, 50 and Edwards 2002, 336). In contrast to this, Max Klimburg suggests that in Nuristan tribe and *qaum* are not directly related concepts: “There were and are no “tribes” in Nuristan, but for

¹⁹ The debate over the meaning of *qaum* does not take place simply among academics. On multiple occasions while sitting around with a group of men I raised the question of what they thought *qaum* meant. On several occasions these conversations became heated debates over when the term *qaum* should be used.

some time one has spoken of different *qaum* (Arabic for “nation,” “tribe”)... Each of the two *qaum* constitutes, in a wider sense, a loose political federation or community, with many subgroups forming specific nuclei” (Klimburg 1999, 62). Olivier Roy attempts to distinguish the two by using tribe “for the *qawms* [sic] having traditional rights and customs, a system within Islam of autonomous values... and a complex of specific institutions” (Roy 1990, 12).

Specifically among the itinerant threshers, peddlers and sieve makers that Asta Olsen studied, *kesb* or profession and *qaum* “became practically indistinguishable in daily use” (Olsen 1994, 46). This, however, seems only to be the case in “small *qwams* [sic] [that] were directly associated with specific professions.” This is not always the case in Istalif or most of Afghanistan. While one is born into the pottery *qaum* and the pottery profession (*kesb*) simultaneously, this is only true of some professions in Istalif (most notably the potters, the weavers, the *pustin duzes* and the barbers). Some professions are not *qaum*, such as the farmers and masons in town, and some *qaum* are not professions, like the Sayeds. The guild system found particularly in Tashqurghan, studied both by Centilivres and Charpentier organizes craftsmen in an even more formal manner than *qaum* in Istalif (Centilivres 1972 and Charpentier 1972). The guilds, however, in Tashqurghan in the 1970s appear to have been more stable, with formal hierarchies, than the more dynamic *qaum* in Istalif.

Olsen attempts to find a more generalizable term, arguing that one’s *qaum* “refers to his ethnic/tribal unit and for non-tribals to their ethnic and locality characteristics.” She adds that “*qwam* affiliation is neither an absolute nor an unchanging category... Since reference to *qwam* affiliation is used to define a person’s identity in the social world, it may be invoked in a segmentary fashion either to stress the shared identity of two parties or, depending on circumstances, to stress their lack of common bonds (Olsen 1994, 45).” In her study of state and tribe in nineteenth century Afghanistan, Christine Noelle takes the argument one step further and claims that in conceptualizing *qaum* difference is more important than similarity and that *qaum* is “overwhelmingly used as a mark of distinction vis-à-vis outsider” (Noelle 1997, 107).

Barnett Rubin adds that the construction of *qaum* is solidified by the state through practices such as making *qaum* a line on each identity card (Rubin 2002, 25). This is certainly a factor and to it we can add that more recently international forces and NGOs in Afghanistan are also assisting in this process.²⁰ This is not to suggest that we should overextend this observation and claim that a *qaum* is simply a construct of the state or colonial powers as was done in debates over the ‘tribe’ in the late 1960s and early 70s.

A closer look at anthropological debates over the concept of ‘tribe’ provides some insights. Before the late 1960s the debate over ‘tribe’ was primarily between evolutionary or neo-evolutionary models (e.g. Sahlins 1968) and more structural models, particularly those derived from Evans-Pritchard’s work on the Neur. Morton Fried and a panel of anthropologists at the 1967 Annual Spring Meeting of the American Ethnological Society attacked the validity of the term tribe on all levels emphasizing an increasingly state-based, constructivist model for understanding tribes (Fried 1968 and 1975). Post-modern anthropologists have particularly embraced this concept (e.g. Crehan 1997).

Such state-constructed models, however, are particularly difficult to apply in Afghanistan. Historically the Afghan state’s power has rarely extended very far beyond

²⁰ This is clearest in the distribution of aid. Several aid groups have come directly to the potters and most have worked closely with the *malik* which has further strengthened his power.

Kabul. Particularly over the twenty-five years of Soviet occupation, civil war and Taliban rule, state penetration into Istalifi life was sporadic at best. Instead, the point that Rubin helps us understand is that one of the occasions during which the category of *qaum* does become more relevant and politically powerful is when the *qaum* engages with the state or international groups. A *qaum*, however, also becomes a political category when faced with a challenge from another *qaum* or any other external, or occasionally internal, force. *Qaum* is an elusive and adaptable category, but it tends to solidify in any context when something outside of the group applies political pressure.

As Fredrick Barth pointed out about ethnicity, a term that raises similar issues, *qaum* “depends on the maintenance of a boundary” (Barth 1988 [1969], 14). This boundaries generally appear stable, but in actuality, “cultural features that signal the boundary may change, and the cultural characteristics of the members may likewise be transformed...yet the fact of continuing dichotomization between members and outsiders allows us to specify the nature of continuity, and investigate the changing cultural form and content.” Thus the pottery *qaum* does not depend on specific traits, such as making pots or a shared mythology, as much as it depends on the use of these traits to create a divide between potters and non-potters. Each of these markers can be used to establish a political boundary, but it is these boundaries that truly shape the political environment in Istalif. By studying these boundaries and interactions between groups, rather than trying to find stable definitions and political typologies, we can study trends in Afghan politics despite the diverse array of local political forms.

In his study of buzkashi, primarily among Uzbeks in the north, Whitney Azoy states: “*qaum* refers to the whole hierarchy of segmentary descent groups extending upwards from the nuclear family to the ethnic totality. The ultimate weakness of such descent groups for guaranteeing social relationships has led, however, to a wide range of usages...This vagueness of the definition reflects the inherently situational nature of *qaum*. Lacking truly corporate group structure, they are organized instead around central khan individuals.” (Azoy 2003, 28-9) These observations about *qaum* among the Uzbeks are insightful in how it helps us conceptualize the idea of *qaum* in Istalif, but also demonstrates how in a different context *qaum* comes to have different implications. The phrase *qaum* in Istalif similarly extends “upwards from the nuclear family to the ethnic totality”, but this system is not as weak among the Istalifis as it was among the Uzbeks that Azoy studied. While the Uzbeks organized around central khans, making the *qaum* weaker, the *malik* and other major figures among the potters have not consolidated enough political or social power to weaken the potters’ corporate group structure.

There are several reasons for the strength of the pottery clan in relation to local elite, but the clearest are the fact that most potters gain income from a similar source and that successful potters do not generate much more income than less successful potters. Similarly, only a decade ago the Taliban burned down the entire town leading to an economic leveling as each family fled with only what they could carry.

To understand Afghan politics we must study how local conditions shape how *qaum* and other concepts are manifested in very different settings. In some places their power is waning, but in others, redevelopment money has actually solidified them. What is necessary is that we understand *qaum* as embedded and dynamic political groups that respond to the political and economic pressures of each separate setting.

Conclusion

Individual political action in Istalif is a rare thing. One would never go to petition the sub-governor of Istalif without bringing several male relatives and elders from the community. Instead politics are a group process, but as we have seen, even simply defining the groups is a challenge. Particularly considering the general instability of the country, local politics can be a slippery thing to try to grasp.

Ultimately, the potters, very similar to the phrase *qaum* itself, are unstable. When ethnicity or the town is under attack, the concept of *qaum* expands outward against the threat. In contrast, internal divisions, arguments about the division of resources constantly threaten to break the clan into lineages or nuclear families. Today, however, the primary struggle in Istalif is over how resources are allocated within the town. Young male potters remain loyal to the *qaum* because it provides them with economic opportunities and allies in the forming of marriage alliances.

This is not a stable system and alliances are constantly changing, but this also seems to be precisely why the *qaum* has so much power. The potters have adapted to their political situation. When the Soviets came they were Afghan Muslims, fighting the infidel together. Later when the Taliban attacked, together with the Panjshiris they were Tajiks. Now as they struggle to rebuild their homes it is clear that both their attempts to maintain of a monopoly on pottery production and to secure aid from NGOs they have the incentive to work together as a pottery clan. This is not to say that these loyalties and groups did not exist before these incentives, but the political situation and the distribution of power has led political groups at different times to solidify in different manners.

Istalif is in one of the more stable parts of Afghanistan. It has received more than its fair share of development money and there is a deep distrust of the Taliban insurgents. Yet, even here discontent over the shortcomings of the Karzai government and the international presence in Afghanistan has grown. Potters in Istalif have an incentive to work together as a *qaum*, but due to the failure of the state-building process and corruption within the government, they have no incentive to work with other groups as citizens of Afghanistan. The Bonn Convention's de-emphasis of political parties and Karzai's own refusal to create or join a party has further denied the potters a vehicle into the national political process (Rashid 2008, 258). Both NGOs and international military have delivered lump sums of aid on the local level, further promoting the struggle between clans, but have rarely engaged meaningfully with individuals in the local political process.

Each town in Afghanistan has a very different balance of traditional leaders, wealthy landowners, religious figures and former warlords. There is an incredible assortment of political hierarchies around the country as the rich ethnographic record from before the Soviet invasion reflects. As the potters and our brief look at the concept of *qaum* demonstrates, however, these political groups are constantly adapting to new situations and incentives, and redefining boundary lines in order to increase their own share of the wealth pouring into the country. To understand how groups are responding to these conditions it is necessary to look at how these groups define themselves in opposition to other groups. The potters are one of a dozen of *qaum* in Istalif, yet the way that they interact with other groups and carefully define who is a member of the group reflects of clear pattern of political processes. Yet, until the Afghan government and the international community make a more serious attempt to understand how local politics function, international military forces and NGOs will continue to inequitably distribute funds, empower former warlords and de-legitimize the Karzai government.

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