POTTERS AND WARLORDS IN AN AFGHAN BAZAAR: POLITICAL MOBILIZATION, MASTERLY INACTIVITY AND VIOLENCE IN POST-TALIBAN AFGHANISTAN

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ABSTRACT

Deteriorating security conditions, the resurgence of the Taliban and a corrupt national government have raised serious questions about the persistence of violence and the relationship between the state and stability in Afghanistan. This dissertation is based on eighteen months of ethnographic research in Istalif, a small town in the Shomali Plain, with a strong craft industry and a long history of violence, including its complete destruction by the Taliban. In the town there was a high degree of political tension, disputes over land and a tendency towards factionalism. Simultaneously, local politics remained non-violent. What created this seemingly paradoxical situation? This study describes not only how local politics in Afghanistan have shifted during the post-Taliban period, but how strategies of inactivity can lead to a political theater that masks tensions and suppresses violent conflict.

Political power in Istalif was fractured and centered on certain categories of leaders, such as elders, religious figures and warlords. The dissertation looks initially at several lineages of
potters who formed a guild-like group that cooperated politically and economically using the idiom of kinship. Often, however, these ties broke apart. Alternate sources of political and economic power caused individuals to balance loyalty with attempts to establish semi-covert networks of outside allies.

Looking at the wider arena of town politics, the dissertation then analyzes how groups strove to portray themselves as powerful, while avoiding public and violent conflicts that revealed the actual limits of their power. Simultaneously, the people in the town and government officials perpetuated a fiction of the state as bounded and rational, denying the ambiguous nature of state-rule based upon patrimonial networks. This fiction encouraged international donors to continue to inject aid into the area in the hopes that Afghanistan would not become a ‘failed state,’ despite the fact that this Westphalian conception of the state misunderstood local political realities. This work argues that the case of post-Taliban Afghanistan demonstrates how local political arrangements can re-frame understandings of the state and violence, and disguise the ambiguous nature of power in order to manipulate relationships with external forces and preserve peace.