

of hindsight. However, these are certainly *not* the issues our reviewer has chosen to discuss. Otherwise, the time and effort wasted in reading and responding to Frembgen's opinions would have been profitable and intellectually stimulating. Unfortunately, it has been neither.

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AFGHANISTAN

EDWARDS, DAVID B. *Heroes of the Age: Moral Fault Lines on the Afghan Frontier*. Comparative Studies on Muslim Societies 21. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996. xv + 307 pages. Maps, illustration, glossary, bibliography, index. Paper US\$20.00; ISBN 0-520-20064-0. Cloth US\$50.00; ISBN 0-520-20063-2.

The book under review deals with the narrative world of Afghan tribesmen living on the Pakistani side of the border. Most of the people Edwards interviewed for the stories analyzed in this volume fled to Pakistan as a result of the 1978 Marxist revolution in their homeland. Yet the stories that people chose to tell the author do not deal so much with their displacement as they do with the moral fiber of Afghan society. As Edwards notes in his introduction, they are "stories in which men of quality are tested, and by dint of their single-mindedness, their courage, and their capacity, demonstrate the qualities of person and action by which greatness is achieved" (1). They are thus heroes in the strictest sense of the term.

All of the heroes dealt with in the book are historical personages who have made a lasting impression on Afghan society, either locally or nationally: a tribal khan (Sultan Muhammad Khan), the prince who became Afghanistan's king (Amir Abdur Rahman Khan), and a Muslim saint (Hadda Sahib). Chapters 2–4 deal with narratives about or by the individuals in question. Chapter 2, for example, examines the life history of Sultan Muhammad Khan as told to the author by the khan's son, Samiullah, while chapter 3 examines a *firmān* (proclamation) written by Amir Abdur Rahman, who ruled Afghanistan from 1880 to 1901. Edwards historically and ethnographically contextualizes these oral and written narratives by teasing out the implicit meanings embedded in them. In chapter 4 the author presents another sort of narrative, one that crosses the boundary between history and myth; namely, miracle stories about the local saint Hadda Sahib. In each case, Edwards seeks out interrelated themes that emerge from these very dissimilar genres to expose a common set of concerns in the Afghan worldview: gender relationships, territorial rights and imperatives, honor and royal duty, the relationship between myth and history, the role of kinship in daily interaction, the appropriate social etiquette required for dealing with friends and enemies, and the interdependence of politics and religion.

The author deftly explores the way the above themes crisscross in the narratives and how they constantly return to the issue of moulding a moral social order. However, this moral code, Edwards argues, contains ambiguities that he sees as contributing to the ongoing political conflicts in Afghanistan. Building upon Hayden WHITE's (1981) argument that narrativity's function is to moralize reality, Edwards demonstrates that stories embody the codes by which humans construct behavioral patterns. Yet beyond this, Edwards clearly demonstrates that the narratives, when properly read for their implicit meanings, hint at the "deep structure" (217) of the Afghan conflict. He convincingly suggests that the narratives analyzed convey profound moral contradictions, such as the tendency in the story of Sultan Muhammad

for honor to serve as a basis for individual action as well as display a “potential destructiveness for social and political relations” (217). In the autobiography of Abdur Rahman, his use of Islam and honor to legitimate claims to righteous kingship surpassed the moral premises of his own rule in the end. Finally, in the case of the Mulla of Hadda the narratives about miracles attributed to him were an essential ingredient in the establishment of his own authority as a religious leader, yet they also evidenced his ultimate vulnerability. As Edwards states, “The greatness of the man and of his claims to authority served to magnify his potential weakness, a weakness that in all three cases was represented in terms of exposure—of the great man being unveiled for all to see as counterfeit and insubstantial” (217–18).

These contradictions, he contends, have hindered the construction of a coherent civil society in Afghanistan, especially during the last century, the period that bore witness to the emergence of an Afghan nation-state and the demarcation of political borders. Moreover, the process of nation-state formation required the establishment of a centralized state bureaucracy invested with new forms of authority and control over the Afghan citizenry. All of these factors are suggested in Edwards’s stories, but he does not assume that political strife can be reduced to narrative texts; rather, he convincingly concludes that the narratives provide rich data for understanding how Afghan moral codes undergird political culture. Unfortunately, the inherent contradictions embodied in the stories Afghans tell have aided in their country’s ceaseless political turmoil.

Heroes of the Age is an innovative and well-written book by an anthropologist who has spent a great deal of time in the society about which he writes. Aside from demonstrating the value that narratives contain for anthropological theory, this book outlines a viable method for reading history from an alternative vantage point, one that accounts for the fact that “actions are premised on moral grounds” (219). As such, it will be of lasting importance not only for specialists interested in Afghanistan’s history and culture but also for folklorists, anthropologists, and historians in general.

REFERENCE CITED

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