

BOOK REVIEW

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Book review of *Afghan Village Voices: Stories from a Tribal Community*, edited by Richard Tapper and Nancy Lindisfarne-Tapper



Mary Beth Wilson 

Book details

Richard Tapper and Nancy Lindisfarne-Tapper (eds).
Afghan Village Voices: Stories from a Tribal Community
London: I.B. Tauris & Company; 2020.
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Afghan Village Voices: Stories from a Tribal Community is a book filled with rich details that were gathered by the editor, Richard Tapper, and his fellow researcher Nancy Lindisfarne-Tapper, during their ethnographic field visits to Afghanistan in the early 1970s. They first visited Afghanistan in 1968, seeking to identify a nomadic group they could compare to a nomadic Turkic-speaking group they had studied in Iran. After some preliminary research in Afghanistan, they decided to focus their attention on Pashtun nomads who had moved north from southern Afghanistan a half a century earlier, and in the late winter of 1971, they found a community to host them: the Piruzai. The Piruzai are a Pashtun Es'haqzai sub-tribe of 200 families that were both semi-nomadic and involved in village-based farming when the research was conducted. The two spent months living with the Piruzai, spending time with them in their spring camps, in the mountains, in their villages, and on the paths between. The editor's objective was to "accurately describe the world of the Piruzai and capture something of the depth and colour of their lives", and that is exactly what they have done with this book.

Tapper and Lindisfarne-Tapper's book takes the reader on a journey, a journey that is filled with interesting stories, nuggets of information, and insights that can only be gained from engaging and living with a community over a period of time. It provides snapshots of the rules and traditions of land ownership, pastoralism, irrigation, and land use of the Piruzai. It also presents stories that illuminate marriage, death and the afterlife, and the world of *jinn*s ("God's creatures who live in a parallel, invisible world") as seen through the eyes of members of this community, and a variety of story tellers of different ages and genders are included.

This information is shared with the reader through stories as they were told to, and recorded by, Tapper and Lindisfarne-Tapper, without adding much of an analytical lens for the reader or trying to guide them towards what should be extracted from a story. The editor explains his preference for letting the community members' words tell their stories and traditions, and I highly recommend all readers delve into this (in Appendix 3) before they begin reading the book, as it provides more insights for the reader into what they are about to read and to what extent the Piruzai and their stories and traditions can be seen as representative of the sub-tribe and beyond this community.

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While I appreciate the editors' desire to present the stories they were told without overlaying them with their own analytical lens, there were times when I would have liked a bit more guidance as a reader, and this despite having lived, worked, and conducted research in Afghanistan for many years. I can imagine that someone with limited experience in, or knowledge of, Afghanistan also longs for a bit more analysis than is provided, guidance that might bring together some of the disparate pieces of information shared into a more coherent whole, but perhaps this longing for more coherence is misplaced.

That being said, for those with a strong background in Afghanistan seeking to understand the history and/or culture of Afghanistan, this book is a treasure trove. For those without this background, there are stories where such knowledge is not a pre-requisite for you to enjoy and learn. So do not let this prevent you from picking up the book and enjoying it, but do not expect a fully guided journey.

Within the book, there is actually something for everyone. For geographers, there are maps and figures that provide details of the area of study, migration paths taken by the Piruzai from their villages to the winter-spring camps, a village plan, an irrigation canal diagram, and more. For historians and those who study family lineages, the prologue dives into details about the Piruzai and different lineage groups and relationships in the sub-tribe, and there are multiple community members who expand upon the meaning and usefulness of different family connections. For those studying migration, there are stories of the challenges some community members faced as they migrated from the south of Afghanistan to the north. For those interested in politics, there is a chapter that looks at ethnic politics and elections in Sar-e Pol Province. For those interested in rule of law and conflict resolution, there are stories that explore different kinds of conflict, from the family level to lineage feuds and beyond, along with how these conflicts were negotiated and attempts to resolve them, be that locally or interacting with the government system of justice at the time. These stories also highlight the lack of trust in the government that existed among the Piruzai and, possibly more widely, something that continues for many Afghans to the present day, and a desire to utilize customary law as often as possible.

There are multiple chapters committed to the topic of animal husbandry and agriculture, providing explanations for what crops were grown and how, and the local community members share advice for how to care for the sheep, camels, and horses that were part of Piruzai livelihoods.

The chapter on the marriage market discusses the three stages of marriage, bride prices (both open and fixed) and

their negotiations, exchange marriages, the practice of *bâzi* (a form of pre-marriage conjugal visits), elopements, infidelities, divorce, and widowhood. Stories of different types of marriages and family structures also provide insights into household relations and management.

For those interested in religion, there are stories that explore the Haj, holy celebrations, shrines, exorcism, and more. Childbirth, death and the afterlife, and different diseases are also discussed, including different cures for diseases, such as the skin cure, which involves herbs and a heated skin of an animal believed to assist in curing people of different diseases. Additionally, the Piruzai explain different charms, curses, and their understanding of the world of spirits.

The book is filled with stories I believe are very informative and will be very useful to researchers interested in the history of Afghanistan and current day events there. And while the index of people and places is helpful, I would advise that readers read through the chapter titles and subtitles and do a bit of digging on their own, as the index is not as extensive as it could be, which means the specific term or practice you might be looking for might not be in the index but is discussed in the text. For future editions of this book, I would call for a fuller extension of the index of subjects to help highlight all of the different topics and terms covered.

While some of the stories were relatively dry for me, walking the reader through a complicated lineage, for example, other stories had me fully engaged and unable to stop turning the pages. I, therefore, do not guarantee that everyone will want to read the book cover to cover, but I am convinced that most everyone will be able to find stories that speak to them and their individual interests.

This unique insight into one community in Afghanistan at what was then a time of calm in the country is something to be valued in and of itself, for what it can tell us about the Piruzai community and for the detailed picture it draws of this community in an Afghanistan before large-scale conflict engulfed the nation. This kind of perspective is particularly poignant in the current moment, when another change in government has taken place, the effects of which remain to be seen. This book helps remind the reader of the humanity in a country that is often spoken of solely in geo-political terms. I would highly recommend that social science researchers interested in Afghanistan pick up a copy of this book and add it to their reading list and bookshelf.

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Author's contributions

The author read and approved the final manuscript.

Author's information

Dr. Mary Beth Wilson had been engaged with Afghanistan since she lived and worked there starting in 2006. Since leaving Kabul, she has regularly conducted research on and in Afghanistan and wrote her doctoral dissertation on the impacts of participatory development on aspects of human security and empowerment in a community of Khulm District in northern Afghanistan: *Impacts of Participatory Development in Afghanistan: A Call to Reframe Expectations* (Berlin, Klaus Schwarz Verlag; 2013). She is currently a Senior Monitoring & Evaluation Specialist with Chemonics.

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