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Where do nomads bury their dead? Necro-ostracism, statelessness, and the pastoral/peripatetic divide in Afghanistan

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This article proposes that stigmas connected to social categories of exclusion prevalent during life extend into dealings with the dead, here referred to as 'necro-ostracism', in the context of death and burial of Muslim nomadic populations in urban Afghanistan. Based on qualitative fieldwork carried out in Kabul, Herat, and Mazar-e Sharif, it explores how the unequal status of pastoral and peripatetic nomads, mediated through a combination of legal status and social stereotypes, renders one group integrated and protected and another stateless. This status in life crosses over into people's differential and often unclear status in death, creating conflicts and problems associated with burial decisions for families based on their general social position in society. This positioning was exacerbated after the US-led armed intervention in 2001, when access to land, particularly state-owned as well as agricultural and pasture-land, became a potent political currency in Afghanistan. Land grabbing – even of cemeteries – became a lucrative source of income and way to establish political loyalties. Taking an approach that focuses on inter-community negotiation, the article considers how the different statuses of these structurally similar communities is navigated in the interaction between nomadic communities and burial gatekeepers.

Imagine walking around town with the dead body of your loved one and not being able to bury them. When Hedayat's[1] grandfather died, his family began its meandering search for his final resting place, taking his remains to their neighbourhood graveyard in Khushal Khan Mena, in western Kabul. Neighbours there resisted. They started to fight with them about the decision to bury him there. They denied him a place in the community, even among the dead. On this dreary winter day in Kabul and under pressure to bury within the Islamically prescribed short time period after death, Hedayat's family set out to search one cemetery after another, until they finally buried him far outside the city in a public graveyard in a part of town known for its prison: Pul-e Charkhi.

Over the course of my field research in Kabul I learned that this experience was increasingly common among certain nomads, such as Hedayat's family, who belonged

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to a community of peripatetics. Finding a place to bury their dead was one feature of a deeper struggle to negotiate social acceptance. Faking their identities or burying their dead in areas where people did not know their community affiliation were common practices to navigate discrimination and exclusion. However, not all nomads faced the same level of hostility. A representative of Kuchi nomads in Kabul told me that they tapped into their long-standing ties with settled communities in places they used as either summer or winter pastures to bury their dead.

What was so different between these two groups of nomads? After all, both of them were semi-nomadic with social lives anchored part of the year in particular places. Why did the remains of a peripatetic nomad elicit such strong feelings of rejection among settled communities, while the Kuchi nomads' remains were rather seamlessly integrated into the cemetery of settled Afghans?

To answer these questions, we must follow how emotive and affective imaginaries of the living, of how purity and danger associated with human populations (Douglas 1982), map onto the dead. My ethnographic field research was carried out in phases (2013-2014, 2015, 2021) at a time when the Afghan government and international organizations strove to extend civil rights and political representation to nomadic people (De Weijer 2007; Foschini 2013; R. Tapper 2008; Wily 2009).[2] However, these attempts were premised on an implicit conceptual split between pastoral nomads, who practise animal husbandry, and peripatetic nomads, whose principal resources are derived through other human populations (Olesen 1994; Rao 1982*b*; 1986*a*; 1987*b*). One group, the (former) pastoral nomads, was acknowledged by Afghans as nomads and possessed an electoral constituency, protection through the constitution, as well as access to ID and voter cards; the (former) peripatetic nomads, by comparison, were stateless without any formal rights or legal protection, as they were categorized by other Afghans neither as co-citizens nor as nomads, despite their migratory practices.[3] While the peripatetics' legal status slowly began to change in the late stages of the most recent Republican period in Afghanistan with the availability of national ID cards (Hossaini & Ruttig 2020; Schmeding 2015), they still lacked acceptance in the national and regional imaginaries of belonging; ostracism persisted, as the case of exclusion from cemeteries shows.

Entrenched social stigmas are neither static nor unchangeable – and are often leveraged when economic and political pressures come to bear on society. Another argument that this article makes is that necro-ostracism became a salient feature of the peripatetic nomads' experience of after-death care only within the post-2001 war economy. After the establishment of the US/internationally backed Afghan Republic in 2001, access to land, particularly state-owned as well as agricultural and pasture-land, became a potent political currency in Afghanistan. Land grabbing and distributing land to political networks transformed into a lucrative source of income and a means to establish political loyalties. Nomadic communities were not immune to the consequences. Access to land – or lack thereof – is furthermore intimately tied to access to burial grounds and thus subject to sociopolitical pressures, which led to severe consequences for one group of nomads who were already located at the margins of society.

In the following, I am attending to the social stigmas and differences upon which these legal differentiations were built through a focus on instances of community ostracism of human remains. This article discusses how the differential treatment of nomadic populations engages concerns about the dead and the living, and how the

treatment of the dead – presumed or actual – feeds back into a social imaginary and practices of Othering. I suggest that stigmas connected to social categories of exclusion prevalent during life extend towards dealing with the dead, what I term 'necro-ostracism'. Jieun Kim's concept of necrosociality (Kim 2016) has focused discussions onto how social relations are negotiated, reaffirmed, or negated through bodily remains and graves. While Kim focuses on acts of care towards the dead to achieve a 'good death', I widen the lens to include instances in which communities must actively negotiate their status as they grapple with the ostracism of their dead. Much literature on the politics of death and necropolitics has centred on states' involvement in the relationship between the living and the dead (Mbembe 2003). However, in many parts of the world, including Afghanistan, dealing with the dead is still a question decided by communities, in what Osman Balkan has referred to as 'everyday necropolitics' (2023: 27). The internal politics of a community of the living impacts the ability to care for the dead.

Equality and social differentiation on burial grounds

The pastoral and the peripatetic communities endeavour to bury their dead both in a way befitting Muslim burial practices and in Islamic cemeteries that are shared by the wider nomadic, settled, and sedentary community. In principle, a Muslim can be buried anywhere as long as proper last rites of washing (*ghusl*), shrouding (*kafan*), and prayers (*namaz-e janazah*) are performed on the body of the deceased (Halevi 2013). However, Islamic burial grounds have developed worldwide with shared characteristics such as a burial orientation of graves facing the Kaaba in Mecca and an ideal of permanence through burial in perpetuity in which relocation of bodies is discouraged. While most Muslim graves are often simple in design, emphasizing humility and equality in death, research into burials in Muslim-majority contexts has shown how not all (dead) bodies are treated equally (Zengin 2019). This line of research points towards the ways in which a (dead) body is also demarcated as black, female, saintly, working class, queer, or any other social designation, which influences their treatment (Engelke 2019: 34). Bodies are 'heavy symbols' and, as such, they can become mobilized in political displays of allegiance (Verdery 1999).

The dead 'make social worlds' in the manifold ways in which they delineate social attachments and belonging (Lacqueur 2015: 1): the dead 'are the guarantors of land and power and authority, [and] mirror the living to themselves' (Lacqueur 2015: 4). Burial has therefore been linked to social stratification and processes of place-making in which narratives of identity, communal ties, and power structures are negotiated (Balkan 2015). Historians have long asserted that cemeteries are 'lenses into the divisions of society, how minority communities self-segregate and/or are set apart by the dominant powers', because placement of burial signified belonging to 'diverse ethnic, religious, and national populations who lived side-by-side (and worked, played, and even married together) [but] were definitively separated in death' (Minkin 2013: 634).

This division is noticeable not just among those already buried in cemeteries, where historians and archaeologists decode their layouts, but also among the deceased and yet-to-be-interred, encountered by anthropologists. As Balkan observes in his study on 'burial out of place', postmortem practices make visible how people assert membership in groups on the level of the family and religious or national belonging (2023: 38). Death is thereby 'a productive and generative moment' (2023: 36) that lays bare the various

allegiances and attachments, as well as social hierarchies, within which the dead and the living alike are emplaced.

Approaching the topic from these affective and communal ties makes the question of how nomadic and semi-nomadic communities are positioned vis-à-vis belonging, soil, and burial even more vexing. Aspects such as land ownership, relationship to settled communities, and last resting places are in their case not necessarily pre-determined through the connection to land that continual residence creates. Archaeological research has addressed the question of nomadic burial in Eurasia through analysis of burial sites and assets that were buried alongside the dead, for instance in burial sites of the Golden Horde (Aitkali, Zhuniskhanov & Rakhmankulov 2023; Chkhaidze 2017; Fedorov 2023). However, surprisingly, literature on nomadic burial practices in the twenty-first century is still largely lacking in Afghanistan, despite the broader regional literature on Iranian and Bedouin nomadic burial (Alehassan & Ilbeygipour 2021; Kressel, Bar-Zvi & Abu-Rabi'a 2014; Mortensen 1996). This literature describes changes of burial customs with the advent and adoption of Islam and differences to burial customs of settled Muslim communities. However, it does not bring up any nomad-settler conflict around burial per se. Nothing seems to be inherent in the condition of nomadism that would suggest that a nomadic community would have trouble burying their dead.

However, this suggests that the trouble to bury is linked to the overall position within society – being ostracized vs being embraced for their particular nomadic status – which feeds into the (in)ability to leverage state structures and systems of support in their favour in case of problems such as the ostracization of the dead. To gain an understanding of how different nomadic (or previously nomadic) groups were emplaced within this social stratification and how this positioned them to bury their dead in Afghanistan, we need to take a closer look at how these identifications changed in the post-2001 environment of state building and neoliberal development restructuring.

Changing nomadic identification: the rise of a political class

The establishment of the new Afghan government and the influx of international aid and development organizations alongside US and NATO armed forces in 2001 brought about the politicization of nomadic identities (R. Tapper 2008). Aid organizations and policy-makers expressed a keen interest in improving the lives of pastoralists and securing their rights (De Weijer 2005; 2007; Samuel Hall 2012; van Engelen 2006). As these minority categories were inscribed through the state into Afghanistan's constitution, laws, and institutional frameworks, they also offered opportunities for political identities to be crafted. In a manner similar to other humanitarian and governance interventions, these actions went beyond categorizing existing groups. They actively contributed to shaping new identities as individuals adjusted their self-perceptions to align with the expectations set by international agencies and national authorities (Nguyen 2010: 11).

One such term that offered new opportunities was 'Kuchi', deriving from the Persian '*kuch kardan*', which means 'to decamp, [or] move to another place' (Steingass 1892: 1059). Strictly speaking, the term itself was not new – indeed, it had been used for particular Pashtun nomadic groups in the past (S.M. Hanifi 2008: 26), but it had not been a generic term with which all pastoralists identified in Afghanistan.[4] Anthropologists, such as Richard Tapper, who conducted research among pastoralists in

the 1960s and 1970s, recalled that 'nomads identified themselves most clearly by either ethno-linguistic or economic criteria, without reference to nomad mobility' (2008: 98). They defined themselves as livestock-owners (*maldar*) – because of their *occupation* working with animals – and not as nomads – because of their *mobility*. Even though anthropologists differentiated along autonyms (which varied widely) and exonyms, and only a fraction of pastoralists referred to themselves as 'Kuchi', the term was often used by non-nomads (Afghan and foreign) to refer to nomadic populations with varying valences.

Once it was elevated to a national category, the term 'Kuchi' presented multifaceted opportunities within the post-2001 Afghan government. Afghanistan's 2004 constitution explicitly granted Kuchis rights to education, participation in local councils, and emphasized livelihood development.[5] Both state and non-state entities actively embraced this developmental mandate. Ministries established 'Kuchi Focal Points' to integrate Kuchi concerns into project planning.[6] While initially managed by the Ministry of Borders and Tribal Affairs, the Independent Directorate of Kuchi Affairs (IDKA) emerged in 2006 to streamline co-ordination between Kuchis and state institutions, establishing offices across thirty-one provinces to facilitate Kuchi access to governmental bodies.[7]

Moreover, NGOs engaged Kuchis through urban poverty initiatives, material support, and mediation between nomadic and settled communities (Giustozzi 2020; Wily 2004; 2009; 2013).[8] Notably, Kuchis were issued specialized ID and voter cards, and allotted ten seats in the lower house of parliament, allowing them to vote nationwide at specified polling stations for Kuchi candidates. Additionally, the president directly appointed two Kuchi seats in the upper house. A savvy politician-businessman such as Hashmat Ghani, who had become wealthy through family inheritance-based land ownership and transport company business executed through the Ghani Group LLC of which he is the founder, styled himself as 'Grand Council Chieftain of the Kuchis'. His brother, President Ashraf Ghani (2014-21), also capitalized on the Kuchi connection for electoral campaigning (Amirzada 2014).

The term 'Kuchi', despite its prevalence in official documents and legislation, lacked a clear definition. Its meaning was presumed to be universally understood, yet its usage was often confusing and at times contradictory. The term encompassed more than just active pastoral nomads; it included recently settled and even long-sedentary former nomads and their descendants, some of whom had never engaged in animal husbandry.[9]

These nomads did not face any trouble burying their dead. They usually either owned land or had user rights to land, which enabled them to bury in these areas. Their life cycles were anchored in places of summer and winter pasture and within particular communities. This is also described in accounts of pastoral communities from the 1960s and 1970s,[10] such as in Klaus Ferdinand's description of the winter encampment in Laghman in eastern Afghanistan, where he stayed during the winter of 1965/6 with the Tara Khel of the Sohak tribe. Some lineages within the tribe were sedentary, whereas others migrated (Ferdinand 2006: 93). Ferdinand details how 'there would be at least one small mosque in the individual lineage areas [in the winter encampment], as well as a place where dead persons are prepared for burial. Each lineage would also have its own part of a communal cemetery' (2006: 99). These descriptions are mirrored in Richard and Nancy Tapper's ethnographic accounts from Afghanistan's northern provinces, where they lived in villages together with Piruzai nomads:

> Each village has its own separate graveyard. The Khârkash graveyard is beside the track linking the two main villages. Konjek's is on the edge of the steppe, beside the perimeter canal. In both, there are recent shrines, over the graves of murder victims. Piruzai who die away from home, usually on the migration trail, are brought back for burial; but if it is more than a day's journey away they are interred in one of the small Piruzai graveyards in the mountains (R. Tapper & Lindisfarne-Tapper 2020: 426).[11]

This description lays out how the pastoral nomadic groups with whom the Tappers researched had continuous and unproblematic access to cemeteries without facing any necropolitical violence. It also describes practices of transporting nomadic dead back to the villages which functioned as bases for the communities. While much has changed in terms of land rights in Afghanistan since that time, and many social ties connected to land-use rights eroded during the decades of conflict (which also brought about renewed conflict between Hazara and pastoral nomads on land access: see Murtazashvili & Murtazashvili 2021: 151-62), pastoral nomads reacted to my questions about burial with incredulity. From the parliamentarian whom I interviewed on top of his mansion while servants brought tea and bodyguards manned the entrance, to the migratory pastoralists who came through Kabul during Eid to sell meat for the festivities, none of them reported trouble burying. Of course, they would be buried in cemeteries connected to the areas where they were anchored through their migration to summer or winter pastures or where they still owned land – those were the places, after all, that they considered their home and origin. For them, burial rights had not changed.

When I asked Kuchi representatives who were active in politics whether the rights that they had secured for pastoral nomads could be extended to peripatetic nomads, they rejected not only my question, but also the very comparison of these two different nomadic groups altogether. All interviewees from the political Kuchi sphere, which includes Kuchi parliamentarians, ministerial focal points as well as IDKA officials, insisted that Kuchi and peripatetic people such as from Jogi or Chori Frosh communities were very different from each other. Even a comparison in and of itself would be unacceptable, as one Kuchi parliamentarian put it:

> We cannot compare or join Kuchis with Jogis. They have different customs, a different culture. Kuchis are braver and more honourable. Jogi men are at home, their women go outside. They want an easy life … A lot of them fight a lot … Many times, they are in police stations because of the fights. There should be a team to help them, to give them courses in how to better themselves.[12]

Unlike the Kuchi, who were portrayed as a national community embodying a nobel Afghan heritage, the Jogi were characterized as requiring civilizing in the form of police interventions and moral re-education. In this perception, which was widely shared within Afghan society, pastoral nomads were the object of orientalist and romanticized fantasies of a free and dignified life (Pope Rockett 2012 [1953]: 115), which only gradually changed in the course of the wars, in which the nomads either joined the urban poor in newly established refugee camps, or flourished economically as lorry owners who built up profitable transport businesses and started working with the international troops after 2001. The peripatetic groups, however, were generally ignored by the state. Just because one nomadic group had gained political rights and the ability to access political processes did not translate into a willingness by the same group or the state writ large to extend these rights to other nomadic groups.

The other end of the political spectrum: displaced and stateless

Until the outbreak of armed conflict that started with the April coup in 1978 (*Inqilab Saur*) and the following invasion of Afghanistan by the Soviet Union, anthropologists primarily studied both pastoral and peripatetic nomads as part of broader academic efforts to socially and economically map various populations. However, in the post-2001 context, these groups resurfaced in the literature as internally displaced populations, drawing the attention of the international aid community (Hennion & Nicolle 2011). What distinguished peripatetic communities from other groups, whether in informal settlements/IDP (internally displaced people) camps or among settled and nomadic populations, was their general lack of recognition as Afghan citizens eligible for an Afghan national identification card (*tazkera*) (Hennion & Nicolle 2011; UNHCR 2013). However, this situation has gradually evolved in recent years with NGOs lobbying for peripatetics to receive access to national recognition as citizens.

Anthropologists have coined the term 'peripatetic' to describe specific groups that strategically utilize movement to access diverse economic resources (Berland & Rao 2004; Rao 1987*b*; Rao & Casimir 2003). The livelihood of these peripatetic nomads derives not from herding but from craftsmanship, door-to-door sales of cloth and bracelets, performance, and begging (Olesen 1982; 1985; 1987; 1994; Rao 1979; 1981; 1982*a*; 1982*b*; 1983; 1985; 1986*a*; 1986*b*; 1986*c*; 1987*b*; 1988; 2004; Rao & Casimir 2003). Their spatial mobility ranges from moving between regions to seasonal migrations between urban centres. Their strategic approach involves a combination of mobility and non-subsistence commerce, emphasizing 'labor, customers, and skills/goods' (Rao 1987*a*: 3). This calculated mobility strategy among Afghan peripatetics serves as an adaptive means to access diverse markets and clientele (Rao 1987*a*: 4).

Afghan peripatetic communities are predominantly endogamous, and while writing about them has drawn comparisons to Roma and Sinti in Europe (Günther 2008), they assert different ancestries and ethnic identities. Nevertheless, their position in society is comparable: they occupy a marginal status, often facing disdain and existing in a liminal space, acknowledged by Afghan society yet not fully integrated or accepted within it (Bogdal 2011). This position is reminiscent of the Simmelian stranger, who is simultaneously an insider and outsider with an oscillating relationship to settled communities of nearness and remoteness (Simmel 1923). The trader and middleman par excellence. Simmel, however, describes this position as a positive one, while the relationship between peripatetic nomads and settled villagers and townspeople was 'shot through with tension and highly volatile' (Rao 2004: 285; see also Simmel 1971; Sway 1981).

The cognitive category of 'Jat' illustrates this societal position. Applied to peripatetic groups despite their rejection of the term due to its disparaging implications (Rao 2004: 274),[13] 'Jat' encapsulates a broad yet negative image. This derogatory label ranges in supposed characteristics and activities, from religious deviance to moral depravity. Those branded as 'Jat' are often perceived as unclean, sexually promiscuous, or involved in prostitution (J.M. Hanifi 2008). Those stigmatized by this label are also perceived as hostile and criminal, with allegations including child kidnapping and necrophilia (Rao 2004: 274-82). Moreover, the term 'Jat' implies a foreign, specifically Indian or Central Asian, origin. Its usage extends beyond direct application to peripatetics; it serves as a general slur against non-peripatetic Afghan women who are deemed to deviate from accepted cultural norms in their appearance or conduct.[14] An Afghan non-nomadic

friend told me that sometimes 'you're like a Jat!' ('*misl-e Jat asti!*') was used against women in his family if they were judged to be too carefree in their speech or dress.

These stereotypes and accusations were part of the everyday experience of many of my peripatetic interlocutors. An incident that was often referred to in casual talks and in interviews that I conducted was the case of one peripatetic woman who abducted a child and reportedly wanted to eat the corpse. Some suggested that this might have been in an attempt to gain supernatural powers.[15] Non-peripatetic Afghans shared their prejudices with me openly when I told them about my research into the political representation and status of nomadic groups in Afghanistan's society. In one of the camps, I witnessed a discussion among two middle-aged women: a female IDP originally from Baghlan province asked a Chori Frosh woman whether it was true that they did not bury their dead but would eat the corpses instead. After responding to the question, the Chori Frosh woman told me: 'People think all of these things about us. But they are not true. I hear things like that all the time'.[16]

An international NGO worker who had previously worked with peripatetic Jogi communities in the northern city of Mazar-e Sharif recounted similar experiences:

> They are seen as kind of sub-human here. When I first started my research on them, everyone at the office started laughing at me, asking: 'Why do you want to deal with them? They are bad, they would do anything for money, like prostitution and they don't bury their dead, they eat their dead'. I was like: 'What?', and they said: 'Yes, they don't have a burial spot. They're not Muslims'. And this is coming from colleagues who work in an NGO, who are educated'.[17]

In these encounters and conversations, a recurring theme was the belief that peripatetics refrained from burying their dead – either due to a shortage of burial sites or due to purported practices of endocannibalism.[18] Initially, I dismissed these claims as exaggerations, possibly reflective solely of the social divide and isolation these groups experienced from settled communities. Yet as I encountered more instances of peripatetics unable to bury their deceased in preferred cemeteries, I began to question whether existing biases also translated into practices of exclusion from graveyards.

Burial interrupted

In a visit in the summer of 2021 to a camp in Pul-e Safed in Kabul, where many peripatetic Jogis lived, the son of the *wakil-e guzar* (locally elected representative) of the area told me: 'My father is our *wakil* and head of the community. When someone passes away, they will get buried in the same place where he got buried'. Another man then chimed in, saying, 'Yes, that's true, but we have a lot of problems with burial. The place [cemetery] does not belong to us'. The two men alluded to ownership of a place that in many countries in the world would be considered a public space – cemeteries are often situated on public land, with the ownership held collectively through a municipality or the state. However, in post-2001 Afghanistan, even these places have become contested.

A conversation in another camp, this time among Chori Frosh community members, showed that this was a cross-cutting concern for various peripatetic groups. We sat in a little one-room house with a courtyard and doorway built by a local politician next to the Chori Frosh tent encampment. He was known by the Chori Frosh community as 'the parliamentarian', who came during election time to buy their support through dispensation of food items or to mobilize the community for demonstrations. In exchange, he helped them access national ID cards through access to a laptop every once in a while. Community members were jaded about the relationship to centres of

power that only used them for their own advancement. 'What has he really done for us?' Wahid Agha, a young man in his twenties, asked with a tired smile. Their actual problems remained unaddressed, such as the problem of burial:

> *Wahid Agha*: In the past, there were two places where we used to bury our dead. One of them was in Sarak-e Naw, the other one was close to the mountain. When my grandfather died, that's where he was buried. We have around 1,000 or 2,000 graves and the graves are in these two locations. Now, the situation is a bit difficult. People have taken the area, put a fence around it, and claimed it for their own families. Even the one close to the mountain as well. Whenever someone dies, it's quite difficult for us [lit.: 'a little bit difficult for us']. In the past we used to bring the dead from Kunar, from Jalalabad, even the ones from Pakistan. But now it is difficult, because the area has been taken over by these people.
>
> *Interviewer*: How was that decided that they got to own this place? Is it because it is a public place for burial?
>
> *Wahid Agha*: In the past, it was a community cemetery and everyone was allowed to bury there. But one group/family/*qawm* lives around the place where the cemetery is located in Sarak-e Naw, and it is they who put up the fence, and even put some security guards there. So, whenever we come there to bring someone who is deceased, they do not allow us to bury them there any more. They say, you do not belong here, to us. And why? Because they have the power and they took hold of that area. They have influence in the government, and that's why they were able to take that area … They have literate people among them and they have connections to ten parliament members. They are politically strong in that area.[19]

Seen from the vantage point of the community's position within the wider society in Afghanistan, it might be tempting to believe that these are problems that peripatetic communities have experienced continuously, though Wahid Agha argued that this was a recent development. While there is no literature or written records that I could access to establish what relations between peripatetics and non-nomadic groups had been in terms of burial practices, Asta Olesen, an anthropologist who had conducted ethnographic research among several peripatetic groups in the 1970s, shared with me unpublished field research notes pertaining to funeral practices, which supported Wahid Agha's arguments. None of the peripatetic groups that Olesen worked with at the time indicated any challenges in burying their dead. One group (*musalli*/grain threshers) had 'long-lasting relations in the villages where they lived most of the year in Laghman, and in some cases assisted in funerals in same functions as barbers'. Another community had 'very hostile relations to nearby settled community in their summer area in Serai Khoja, being accused of polluting the local *karez*, which was their main water source. No mention of challenges related to burial – but then the group I was working among all lived in a Sheikh Mohammadi-dominated village in Laghman during winter, so they may have had their own graveyard there'. The third group that Olesen researched mentioned that

> in Kabul they buried their dead in their own section in the graveyard of Tapa Maidan Jan. [They] also demarcated [a] Ghorbat burial place in Charikar and Jalalabad. Some mention of the government allocating the place for various groups to bury their dead – and that to be buried at a lower place of the graveyard is 'bad'.[20]

Olesen's observations are also congruent with memories shared by Afghan scholar Mohammad Jamil Hanifi, who did not recall ever hearing about a peripatetic community experiencing difficulty in burial when he lived in Kabul between the 1940s and 1960s. Quite the contrary, he remembered peripatetic women working as nurses attending to pregnant women and helping with washing the bodies of the dead (*mordashoyha*) in Kabul's Formoliha neighbourhood.[21]

These notes and observations correspond to the memories of the members of peripatetic groups whom I interviewed. They stated that the problems only started about a decade into the NATO military intervention in Afghanistan. The Global War on Terror resulted in an increased prevalence of multiple forms of necropolitical violence – conventional warfare was supplemented with the power of drones to obliterate bodies of Afghan 'Military Age Males', who were considered acceptable to be put to death, 'less than life', and 'disposable' (Allinson 2015; Mbembe 2003: 27; Pugliese 2020). Apart from a change in the technological forms of violence during the wars in Afghanistan, burial and forms of commemoration such as grave visitation and prayer at graves became contested, as Arabs (alleged al-Qa'ida fighters) and Afghans were buried side by side and started receiving visitors who sought to benefit from martyrs' miraculous powers (Li 2012; Schmeding 2023: 65).

While contestations surrounding graves as shrines has received scholarly attention, the more subtle impact of the war economy and ideological shifts on the domains of the dead during the past decades has remained unexamined. In the case of peripatetics, their experience of necropolitical violence against their communities was intertwined with another aspect of the war economy: the inflated value of land, and its seizure through power brokers (Adelkhah 2013). Stories of ostracization from cemeteries usually went hand in hand with a context of seizure of land by powerful persons who lived in the vicinity of the burial grounds and who extended their influence over the land, to the exclusion of groups of people like the peripatetics who were already marginalized and had little political power to fight back.

Cemeteries: seized, owned, and sold

Worldwide, cemeteries are usually located on communally or nationally owned land. In many instances, the government, a committee, or a local mosque community will hold responsibility for it (Afiouni, Haapajärvi & Debost 2019-20; Minkin 2020). But in Afghanistan, the post-2001 era land grabbing – the phenomenon of land seizure and redistribution – became so endemic that not even cemeteries were spared.[22] As Huma Saeed argues in her study of transitional justice and economic harm:

> While lucrative lands were the prime targets of land grabbers, nowhere in Afghanistan was safe from the scourge of land grabbing. The powerful have seized thousands of acres of land belonging to mosques, schools, kindergartens, industrial parks, cinemas, cemeteries, refugee and teacher settlements, historical sites and lands belonging to the minority groups (2023: 128).

Although land grabbing existed in the early 1990s at the end of President Najibullah's tenure, and progressed under the Mujahidin and Taliban regime of that decade, it became a defining feature of post-2001 Afghanistan under President Karzai (Saeed 2023: 126).

Land grabbing assumed a pivotal role in fostering patronage relations and consolidating political alliances within the networked state post-2001 (Sharan 2022). The influx of international aid catalysed a surge in real estate prices across urban centres in Afghanistan, particularly in the capital Kabul. This surge was propelled by the conversion of old houses into accommodation for expatriates, the establishment of new townships for affluent Afghans, and the consequent heightened demand for property.

An illustrative case of this trend is observable in central neighbourhoods of Kabul like Qala-e Fatullah. Here, land values experienced a staggering escalation, rising from USD 60,000 to 80,000 for a *jerib* of land during the first Taliban regime (1996-2001) to

an astonishing USD 1.2 million by February 2012 (Miszak & Monsutti 2014).[23] Notably, this opportunity for property acquisition was not solely leveraged by established residents; members of the Kuchi community, particularly Kuchi MPs, actively engaged in the appropriation, occupation, redistribution, and sale of land to capitalize on its inherent political leverage (Foschini 2013; Giustozzi 2018; Schmeding 2025). Despite the conflicts with the central government arising from these actions, such acquisitions solidified loyal voting blocs within their respective constituencies.[24]

In stark contrast, peripatetic communities faced significant challenges in terms of land ownership. The absence of property rights among these peripatetic groups stemmed from both their socioeconomic impoverishment and the lack of official identification documents. Until relatively recently, the pervasive absence of identity cards (*tazkera*) rendered it impossible for peripatetic households to purchase or claim property.

A 52-year-old member of a peripatetic Jogi community residing in Kabul's Zainuddin camp articulated the precarious situation: 'If the landlord wants to, he can throw us out any time. It happened several times that we stayed on the street without anything. No home, no nothing'. Another peripatetic day labourer from the same community underscored the centrality of land when discussing their community's struggles in burying their dead: 'You can't understand any of this if you don't understand questions of land – it's all about land'.[25]

The challenge faced by peripatetic groups to obtain access to land, whether for habitation or burial, correlates with the transformative shift in land valuation. The sudden escalation in the perceived value of land within the context of the war economy intensified competition among various social groups. While certain Kuchi nomadic communities held a distinct advantage due to their political affiliations, national acknowledgement, and accrued wealth, peripatetic groups such as the Jogi or Chori Frosh communities, who already existed at the societal periphery, encountered exclusionary barriers impeding their access to land resources.

Fighting for burial

How did peripatetic groups address their restricted access to burial sites? The responses varied among groups, from attempts to bury in multiple alternative locales that were still held communally, to negotiating their way into otherwise restricted burial grounds. However, with the pressure to bury their dead within the Islamically prescribed short time period after death, and continuing exclusion from formerly accessible burial grounds, some communities became desperate. Within the Chori Frosh community, in which I conducted research over several years, individuals resorted to drastic measures, demonstrating a readiness to engage in physical confrontations to ensure burial:

> *Community member*: It started four years ago [2017] during Ramadan, 20th of Ramadan to be precise. The cemetery at the mountainside belonged to no one, but somehow, the person was rich, he made a fence around the place and called it his. My great-grandfather was buried there more than 100 years ago, my grandfather will go there to pray, because his father was buried in that place. Someone who died was with us and we were not allowed in. We took the dead body there and buried it. But afterwards their elders came and argued with us and told us that we cannot come to bury our dead there any more. A few times we have gone to dig the ground but they did not allow us to bury.
>
> *Interviewer*: So that was traditionally the place where you would bury the people. Have you found a new place to bury them? What are you doing now?'
>
> *Community member*: We cannot bury here in the cemetery in Karte Naw. But the one close to the mountain, there are certain areas that have been walled with bricks. But there are some other areas

> there without walls and without fences and when we have a dead body here, we send a few people to dig there. Only a few people, because no one should really understand that they are digging a grave. If someone sees them, they should just think that they have come to pay their respects or are praying [for the dead]. [They do it secretly] but for the burying, when we have a dead body, the day we go there, we will go with 200, 300, 400 people, so that when they see so many people they will be afraid to approach them. We have been ready to fight to bury our dead.
>
> *Interviewer*: Has it come to any fights?
>
> *Community member*: A lot. Many times we had [physical] fights. Even heads were broken. We attacked each other with shovels.

Apart from physical altercations, there is another violence at work here. In the context of marginalized communities, the concept of 'necropolitical violence', as articulated by Banu Bargu (2016; 2019), manifests in multifaceted ways. On the one hand, necropolitical violence can mean the wilful desecration or mutilation of a corpse, which, it has been argued, is 'to erase it from culture and from the human community: to deny the existence of the community from which it came, to deny its humanity' (Lacqueur 2015: 4). However, necropolitical violence encompasses a wider spectrum of actions that range from overt acts that directly target bodies of the deceased, to the destruction of local cemeteries, and extend to even more subtle forms, such as the deliberate 'delay, interruption, or suspension of the conduct of funerary rituals' (Bargu 2019: 18).

Within this spectrum, the inability to provide proper burial for the deceased represents a distinct and poignant form of necropolitical violence. By disrupting the conduct of funerary rituals, those who wield necropolitical violence against marginalized communities perpetuate a cycle of disenfranchisement, alienation, and disempowerment, which in itself constitutes a subtle yet insidious form of violence. The ontology of the corpse is crucial here for understanding the lengths that individuals and communities go to not only to achieve a proper funeral, but also to care for the deceased – even though the person has died, the corpse is not merely a thing, and many affinitive ties bind it to the world of the living. In this sense, treatment of the dead has emotive power (Laqueur 2015) and is always as much political as it is social: '[C]ontestations over corpses – where and how they should be buried and what they signify – are also contestations over the boundaries of political communities' (Balkan 2023: 28). The instance of death led here to political negotiations and became a key expression in boundary making (Minkin 2013: 636). While the term 'ostracism' denotes a mechanism of ignoring and excluding members of a community – often also described as a 'social death' (Rudert, Greifeneder & Williams 2019; Williams & Nida 2017) – in this case, however, the ostracism extended from the living to also include the dead. The enduring social and political marginalization faced by the peripatetic communities set the stage for the post-2001 changes. This period saw an intensification of land grabbing, leading to increased exclusion – not only of the living but also of the dead.

The question then in this case becomes: what are the political communities – for both the living and the dead – and where do the boundaries lie between them? In the case of Afghanistan, the question 'Where do nomads bury their dead?' needs to be countered with another question: 'Which nomads are we talking about?' For some, like the Kuchi political elite, there was no problem at all in burying their dead, as they had access to land and political influence. They were even the ones who in some cases seized the land. For others, like the various peripatetic nomads, burial became a problem to be solved – if necessary, with violence.

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NOTES

[1] In line with broadly accepted anthropological practice, I am anonymizing my interlocutors with pseudonyms, particularly when it pertains to sensitive information such as personal information regarding burial. I have retained all viable information such as place names and community names that indicate communal and sometimes classed belonging.

[2] I conducted field research over the course of several years, returning to communities repeatedly. In 2013-14, I conducted six months in situ research in Kabul, Parwan, Nangarhar, Ghor, and Balkh, which included primarily gathering of documents, qualitative semi-structured interviews, informal conversations, and participant observation in nomadic community spaces. Interviews were conducted with nomadic representatives such as parliamentarians, ministerial officials, NGOs, and UN bodies interfacing with nomadic populations, pastoral and peripatetic nomads, as well as former, now settled nomads. For a few months, I partnered with an NGO that worked with displaced former nomadic groups in internally displaced people (IDP) camps in Kabul in which many former pastoral and peripatetic nomads were living. I conducted semi-structured interviews among peripatetic as well as pastoral nomads inside as well as outside of IDP camps. In 2015, I returned to conduct research on peripatetic communities in Mazar-e Sharif and Kabul, which included additional qualitative interviews and a quantitative survey of the communities. In July/August 2021, I returned to conduct additional interviews with Kuchi parliamentarians, politically unaffiliated Kuchis, as well as with peripatetic communities that I had known from years prior.

[3] In Afghanistan, public perception categorizes (former) pastoral nomads and political Kuchi as nomads while excluding peripatetic nomads, despite their migratory economic strategies. This reflects a culturally entrenched definition of 'nomadism' that goes beyond mere movement. 'Nomad' in this context is imbued with class, ethnicity, and national connotations, resulting in a value-laden interpretation that influences how most Afghans perceive and categorize these groups. Peripatetics are – even when acknowledged as a mobile or migratory group – excluded, not only from being nomads but even by many Afghans as national equals, as Afghan co-citizens. This dichotomy, which values one group over the other, has become codified in law, transforming social exclusion into legal discrimination. The disparity in land ownership rights between pastoral nomads and peripatetics is intrinsically linked to the latter's status as a stateless community, and its exclusion from the 'nomad' category. Some may wonder, then: why discuss both under the umbrella term 'nomad'? The comparison of these groups, based on their migratory practices or history, allows us to examine the divergent cultural lenses through which they are viewed, evaluated, and engaged. The long-standing academic debate over whether peripatetics should be included in the 'nomadic category' provides valuable insight. This scholarly discourse, which began in the 1970s and 1980s, has grappled with the inclusion of peripatetic groups alongside pastoralists in nomadism research (Berland & Salo 1986; Rao 1982*a*: 12). The concept of 'nomadism' often exists in a productive tension with various occupations and degrees of

settledness. Historians and anthropologists studying nomadic populations have argued that nomadic status is not necessarily tied to mobility. In his seminal study of Afghan nomads, anthropologist Klaus Ferdinand describes a continuum from migratory to settled nomads, encompassing both landless and landowning groups (Ferdinand 2006: 30, 111, 126). This continuum aligns with other theories of sedentarization (and even re-nomadization), such as Salzman's adaptation and response model (Salzman 1980). Historically, 'pastoral' nomadic groups in Afghanistan have often engaged in income-generating activities beyond pastoralism. Depending on their economic circumstances, they may take up casual labour, or trading, or even illicit activities such as smuggling and arms trafficking. The Carlsberg Nomad Research Project, one of the largest scientific missions studying nomadic communities in 1970s Afghanistan, included research on both pastoralists and peripatetic communities, as well as documenting their interactions (Ferdinand 2006; Frederiksen 1996; Olesen 1982; 1985; 1994; Pedersen 1994). This article takes up this comparative lens to highlight the divergent trajectories of migratory communities in Afghanistan, particularly in the post-2001 Republic era.

[4] Archival sources that Shah Mahmoud Hanifi analysed delineate three terms (Kochis, Lohanis, and Pawendas) as Pashtun 'trading tribes' or a 'socially and economically diverse class of nomadic tribal carriers' who transported commodities between Kabul and Peshawar valleys, regions, and markets. This terminology emerges from colonial archival sources from which Hanifi quotes these exonyms. Hanifi himself problematizes the usage of terminologies in trying to disentangle the various traders who were active in this area, with Lohanis as a 'recognized tribal segment' and Kochis and Pawendas 'as commercial classes' (S.M. Hanifi 2008: 26-8).

[5] Article 44: 'improve education of nomads'; Article 140: 'Participation of nomads in these local councils shall be regulated in accordance with the provisions of the law'; Article 14: 'The state, within its financial means, shall design and implement effective programmes to develop agriculture and animal husbandry, improve economic, social, and living conditions of farmers (*dehqanan*), herders (*maldaran*), and settlers (*eskan*) as well as the nomads' livelihood (*kuchian*). The state shall adopt necessary measures for provision of housing and distribution of public estates to deserving citizens in accordance with the provisions of law and within financial possibilities' (transliterated additions from the phrasing of the Persian original of the constitution).

[6] Ministries with Kuchi focal points were, for example: Ministry of Rural Rehabilitation and Development (MRRD) or the Ministry of Agriculture, Irrigation, and Lifestock (MAIL).

[7] Interview with IDKA director in Kabul, 15 December 2013. Excluding Nuristan, Panjshir, and Daikundi. Interview with Mohammad Dawood Sherzad in Kabul, 12 October 2013.

[8] Organizations such as the Agha Khan Foundation, Cooperation for Peace And Unity (CPAU), or USAID-funded projects like the Rebuilding Agricultural Markets Program (RAMP) or Pastoral Engagement, Adaption, and Capacity Enhancement (PEACE) have engaged Kuchis on security issues, conflict resolution, or pasture access. See https://www.acted.org/en/partners/cooperation-for-peace-and-unity-cpau/; http://www.solidarites.org/en/; https://www.usaid.gov/node/51036; and PEACE Report 2011: https://cmep.org.uk/projects/peace-project/.

[9] The parliamentarians who took the Kuchi seats in parliament were, as can be expected, not nomadic in any direct sense: all except one (of the six parliamentarians I interviewed) had never lived a pastoral nomadic lifestyle and mainly pointed towards the ancestry of their fathers or forefathers who were nomadic herders, or to their relatives whom they still claimed to be nomadic and in touch with. Furthermore, the ethnic implications of the term 'Kuchi' were significant, given its strong association with certain Pashtun nomads. While pastoral nomadism is practised by various ethnic groups in Afghanistan – including Baluch, Aimaq, Turkoman, Khirgiz, Arab, Uzbek, and some Hazara and Tajiks as well (Barfield 1993; Callahan 2012; Kakar 1979: 123, 129, 130; Pedersen, 1994: 81; Shahrani 2002; Soelberg & Jäger 2016) – the majority of Kuchi parliamentarians were ethnic Pashtuns, predominantly from eastern and southern Afghanistan. This political construct of Kuchi identity has been compared to the concept of *qawm* – a flexible term denoting various forms of solidarity groups, from kinship to village, tribal, or ethnic affiliations (Foschini 2013: 3). This comparison highlights the malleable nature of Kuchi identity in the political sphere.

[10] Anthropologists and ethnographers researched pastoral communities in Afghanistan and the Afghan-Pakistani border region between the 1950s and 1970s, with a focus on the economic system of pastoralism and nomadic lifeways. See, for example, Balikci (1981); Balland (1991); Balland & de Benoist (1982); Ferdinand (1962; 2006); Glatzer (1977; 1981); Jentsch (1973); Pedersen (1994); Salzman (1971); Tavakolian (1984); Tavakolian & Balikci (1982).

[11] This volume is based on interview transcripts and field research notes from the 1970s. Their original research insight had been published prior in N. Tapper (1973; 1991) and N. Tapper & Tapper (1982).

[12] Interview with Wolesi Jirga (Lower House of Parliament) parliamentarian, Nazir Ahmadzai, Kabul, 2 November 2013.

[13] The collective category – while useful in tracking the overall connotations that non-peripatetics ascribe to them – obscures that there is a complex terminological jungle of names and labels used in Afghanistan for different nomads. Most groups were referred to by names that indexed their main source of income, such as Cheghelbaf/Ghalbelbaf (both 'sieve maker'), Chori-Frosh (trans.: Choori Foroosh, bracelet sellers; Bangriwal or Bangudi-Forush in Pashto), or Shadibaz (monkey players). Names like Jogi are harder to trace, though some groups, such as the Shaykh Mohammadi pedlars, were named after their claim of ancestry to Sheikh Mohammad, reverently referred to as Sheikh Rohani Baba, the spiritual father.

[14] Rao observed that in the 1970s 'Jat' was a frequently used swearword (2004: 275).

[15] Interview with doctor, Kabul, 8 October 2013; interview with UN employee, Kabul, 26 January 2014; talk with Afghan colleague, Kabul, January 2014.

[16] Incident in an IDP camp, Kabul, 2014.

[17] Conversation, Kabul, 2013.

[18] Those stereotypes are also written about in the press, as stories told to children so that they might stay away from peripatetics because they might abduct or eat them (see Afghan Voice Agency 1395/2016).

[19] Conversation, Kabul, August 2021.

[20] Online communication with Asta Olesen, 7 October 2022.

[21] Phone interview, 4 April 2024.

[22] In the case of Afghanistan, 'land grabbing' remained for a long time a reality without a definition, as Huma Saeed observed in her study on housing, land, and ownership in Afghanistan. Saeed traces one of the first comprehensive definitions of land grabbing in Afghanistan to a 2014 UNAMA report, which states:

> [L]and grabbing is defined as the use, control, occupation, or ownership of land by one without a bona fide right … Land grabbing includes, but is not limited to, occupying, using, controlling or claiming ownership of the land of others, whether state or private, by force or intimidation; illegally obtaining title to state or private lands through fraud or force, or as political or economic patronage or reward; obtaining title to property legally owned by a wife, sister, or daughter through inheritance; and occupying unoccupied lands (UNAMA 2014: 38; quoted in Saeed 2023: 129).

[23] A *jerib* is a traditional unit of land in the Middle East and southwestern Asia. 1 *jerib* equals 2,000 square metres/0.2 hectares or 21,760 square feet/0.4942 acres.

[24] The acquisition of land by Kuchi politicians stands in a wider pattern of Kuchi investment in and seizure of land at the expense of non-Pashtun, non-nomadic former owners. Ownership of pastures and farmland has been fiercely contested in many parts of the country, often at the expense of minority groups such as the Hazara.

[25] Discussion with Jogi/peripatetic day labourers, Kabul, August 2021.

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Où les nomades enterrent-ils leurs morts ? Nécro-ostracisme, apatridie et division entre pastoralisme et itinérance en Afghanistan

Résumé

Le présent article avance que l'exclusion de catégories sociales stigmatisées de leur vivant s'étend aussi aux morts. Il est question ici de « nécro-ostracisme », dans le contexte de la mort et des funérailles de populations nomades musulmanes dans les villes d'Afghanistan. Sur la base d'une enquête qualitative menée à Kaboul, Herat et Mazar-e Sharif, l'autrice explore la manière dont les inégalités de statut des nomades pasteurs et itinérants, médiée par une combinaison de statut juridique de stéréotypes sociaux, fait que l'un de ces groupes est intégré et protégé et l'autre est au ban de l'État. Ce statut dans la vie se retrouve dans un statut différent, souvent flou, dans la mort, source de conflits et de problèmes au moment des décisions relatives aux funérailles, en fonction de la position sociale générale des familles dans la société. Il s'est exacerbé après l'intervention armée des États-Unis en 2001, quand l'accès aux terres, en particulier aux terrains appartenant à l'État et aux terres cultivables et pâturages, est devenu une puissante monnaie d'échange politique en Afghanistan. L'appropriation de terres, y compris de cimetières, est devenue une source lucrative de revenus et un moyen de s'attacher des loyautés politiques. Suivant une approche centrée sur la négociation intercommunautaire, l'article examine la façon dont les différences de statut de ces communautés similaires du point de vue structurel sont abordées dans les interactions entre les nomades et les gardiens des lieux de sépulture.

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