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Edwards, D. *Caravan of Martyrs: Sacrifice and Suicide Bombing in Afghanistan*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2017.

David Edwards' *Caravan of Martyrs* (2017) is a thought-provoking and sophisticated piece of scholarship. As an anthropologist who has been travelling to Afghanistan since the 1970s, Edwards is well-acquainted with the time before the gruesome wars brought destruction and cultural dislocation to the country. His anthropological frame of reference makes Edwards uniquely qualified to write such a book and to address phenomena that have soundly confounded western observers/politicos.

A continuation of his overall research on Afghanistan—such as his superb *Heroes of the Age* (1996) and *Before the Taliban* (2002)—but within a diachronic framework, Edwards' latest work focuses specifically on suicide-bombings, a ghastly development unknown inside Afghanistan until relatively recent times. As Edwards explains, this violent act is the latest permutation of the ever-evolving cascade of violence the country has witnessed, beginning with the Soviet intervention within the country and the ensuing "jihad" sponsored by the US and its allies, continuing through the period of Taliban rule and the 2001 US invasion, down to the present chaotic and appalling military and political circumstances.

Edwards dispenses with vacuous terms such as *terrorist/terrorism* in favor of "suicide bomber/bombings," focusing on the act itself, "or the logic that informs the act" (p.17), rather than its effects on victims/survivors, where the term *terror* is more appropriate. Here, Edwards is operating within the ideational/symbolic/structuralist anthropological perspective that prioritizes cultural dynamics as the primary force behind human action (p.17-18). Although interesting, this perspective has the interminable drawback of excluding/deemphasizing material forces and conditions that have concrete effects on sociocultural events. In the case of Afghanistan, these forces constitute the unceasing flow of massive quantities of arms, cash, information, and foreign personnel from around the globe that have powerfully shaped local conditions. This does not imply that Edwards is unaware of these factors—he clearly states that the impact of global and regional forces "cannot be ignored" (p. 16)—but rather that his theoretical focus is the internal/ideational realm and how local cultural dynamics/agency have affected outside impositions and intrusions. This perspective can also inadvertently lead to the "valorization" of the phenomenon under consideration (*i.e.*, suicide attackers as motivated by inexorable/enigmatic cultural forces) and the trap of "moral relativism" (*e.g.*, suicide attacks solely appraised in terms of local valuations), although, again, Edwards (p. 215) is cognizant of these issues.

Drawing on classic sociological/anthropological works, Edwards approaches sacrifice/martyrdom as a "communicative process" or pathway between the sacred and profane that is "materialized" through the corporeal destruction of the offered victim, thereby "demonstrating the reality of the sacred" (p. 25) and making it more manageable and subject to manipulation by the architects of such events. Edwards treats sacrifice like an energy-generating "machine," the output of which can be harnessed toward various ends and appropriated by specific agents. As such, the purpose of sacrifice can be transformed from an original restorative or distress-assuaging event (as it was, for example, among the Aztecs), to a harbinger of grief, as in the case of Arab suicide-bombers (or kamikaze pilots during WWII).

Edwards correctly points out that conceptualizations of sacrifice/self-sacrifice/martyrdom mutate under particular sociopolitical and military contexts. This is an important observation. Martyrdom has a long and ancient history in Afghan religion/culture, where martyrs, whose graves are venerated, are attributed hallowed statuses and miraculous powers. But over time, the

notion of martyrdom has metamorphosed. Before the grisly war beginning in 1978-1979, martyrdom was a status retroactively conferred upon the deceased by the community, rather than being actively/consciously sought by individuals. Edwards skillfully analyzes the process of how, following the war, the authority to define the act of martyrdom/sacrifice and its purpose, as well as who was or is not a martyr, was appropriated and employed variously by different actors operating in the Afghan theater.

First, it was the ideologues of the anti-Soviet Pakistan-based religious factions, the *mujahedeen* (the so-called wagers of *jihad*), who used the concept of sacrifice/martyrdom to legitimize their bloody enterprise (chapter 3) and produce a new ethos supplanting an earlier one based on honor/kin loyalties. Through this usurpation, they portrayed themselves as the sole authorities/arbitrators that determined who would or would not go to paradise as a martyr; (e.g., an Afghan fighting for the *mujahedeen* qualified for entry into paradise, while one fighting for the communist Kabul regime did not). In so doing, they coopted the “aura of sacrality” (p. 66), which they could not legitimately otherwise have claimed, as it had been a derisory, failed, and discredited notion inside Afghanistan before the war.

According to Edwards, the *mujahedeen* construal of sacrifice/martyrdom gave ordinary Afghans a rationalization and course of action in the midst of the suddenly-descending, unprecedented, and inexorable violence. But here we must remember that many of the young *jihadis*/would-be-martyrs, recruited mostly from the refugee camps in Pakistan, took up arms not necessarily out of a desire to become martyrs (being a heroic survivor of battle was preferable), or overwhelming zeal to fight communists/infidels, but out of the more mundane necessity of ensuring that their families in Pakistani refugee camps received international humanitarian aid, typically commandeered by *mujahedeen* parties (with Pakistani/ISI collusion) and made contingent upon participation in the *jihad*. Whatever the case, this particular construal of sacrifice/martyrdom—culturally puissant or not—fell out of favor not only as a result of the Soviet departure (1988-1989) and subsequent collapse of the Kabul regime (1992) but also because of the discrediting depravities/predatory atrocities of the *mujahedeen* themselves in the aftermath of those events.

Of particular significance for Edwards in explaining the appearance of self-destructing bombers in Afghanistan at present is how sacrifice/martyrdom was transmuted by the ideologues of the Arab mercenaries (the so-called “Afghan Arabs”) who came to Afghanistan to die for Allah during the Soviet period. According to Edwards, the local impact of these foreign fighters was massively disproportional in relation to their actual numbers (p. 103). Asserts Edwards, these individuals are the key players in the story of Afghan suicide bombers, not the *mujahedeen*, and not the Taliban who supplanted them. The latter, in fact, shifted focus from self-sacrifice to communal scapegoating in the form of choreographed public executions/punishments to achieve social control through fear.

In particular, Edwards analyzes the efforts of Palestinian-born Abdullah Azzam, *Al Qaeda* creator operating out of Pakistan, and his wealthy associate/successor, Bin Laden—who transformed martyrdom/sacrifice into something no longer posthumously granted by the community or by some self-proclaimed authority. Instead, they recast it as a combined ritual-military enterprise, with the prospective self-annihilator becoming “the willful agent of his own demise,” simultaneously operating as “sacrificer, sacrificer, and victim” (p. 25), whereby the suicide-bomber and his sponsors alone accrue the act’s moral benefits. In this case, the sponsors of such suicide attackers (who fund and provide logistical support) become merely enablers rather than instigators.

Martyrdom understood in these mystical terms and made a requisite rather than an option for believers was submitted as a novel narrative for construing a future (p. 123) to be actively sought by candidates pursuing spiritual transcendence. Unlike the traditional Muslim mystics' efforts to gain spiritual transcendence/bliss/union with Allah through austerities, Azzam proffered a perverse but easier avenue toward the same objective, and one well-suited to the instant-gratification needs of his intended audience, the alienated/purposeless/failed youth of Arab consumer societies in the Middle East (p.128), who were (are) provided with a new moral purpose in life—to die for their God. It is important to remember that this conception of sacrifice/martyrdom was articulated in sermons/speeches in electronic recordings in Arabic, exclusively targeting an Arab-speaking audience (p. 97), not Afghans, the majority of whom are illiterate and do not understand Arabic.

For Edwards, this transformation of sacrifice is pivotal, especially after Bin Laden (by 1996, a *persona non grata* in the Middle East forced to return to Afghanistan for sanctuary) further retooled it and shifted its focus to a global arena. This was his strategy for remaining relevant at a time when memories of the near-mythical “Afghan *jihad*” among Arab Muslims was swiftly waning. For Edwards, this formulation not only explains the actions of the Arabs who perpetrated 9/11 but also the advent of suicide bombers in Afghanistan in the subsequent period, when ISIS (aka Daesh) arrogated this ideological construct.

Edwards' elucidation/theory of the sacrifice/ritual machine makes greatest sense in relation to the Arabs in the Middle East and the 9/11 attackers. As such, this work is a significant scholarly contribution. The case becomes thornier when extended to Afghanistan, where it is suggested that martyrdom operations are driven by the same ardor and internal logic that drive Arab suicide-killers operating in and out of the Middle East. Edwards does acknowledge that the story of suicide bombers “has never been just about Afghans” (p.129-134) but nevertheless insists that the phenomenon is explicable in terms of his theoretical model (p.129).

The data for Afghanistan suicide-bombers—mainly in the form of “confessions” of failed or captured would-be bombers (however reliable such confessions may be)—partially support Edwards' model (chapter 6). However, these narratives, as provided by Edwards, also suggest that potential bombers are lured under false pretenses, enticed by cash, kidnapped/forced under death threats, drugged, and subject to other forms of violence, such as homosexual rape by predatory *madrassa* operators. The recruiting agents (who, like, mastermind Bin Laden himself never martyr themselves) are instigators who prey on the destitute, weak, and naïve while vying for cash, power, and/or legitimacy by sending innocents to die. This is as much a bizarre case of child abuse as it is one of enabling martyrs in some grand/virtuous cause.

This is not to say that indoctrination by predacious martyr-operation architects does not convince a few to voluntarily obliterate themselves for God as their goal in life. (This was also true of *some* Aztec sacrifice victims and *some* kamikaze suicide pilots.) However, we must not overlook the many involuntary recruits (p.134). Thus, it becomes problematic to explain this ghastly phenomenon *solely* in terms of a posited potent internal logic/cultural dynamic—*i.e.*, the “deep structure in the ritual of sacrifice” (p. 211). Here, the other relevant parts of the story are the less empyrean but concrete global material/information flows and forces that underlie such grief-inducing violence by bringing in architects of rage, indoctrination specialists/handlers, arms/explosives/ammunition, and lots of cash, without which no martyr operation would be possible anywhere. These criticisms, however, should not detract from the immense significance

of Edwards' study. *Caravan of Martyrs* skillfully elucidates a key dimension of an otherwise enigmatic development—perhaps not the *entire* picture, but indeed a substantial part of it.

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