DECEPTIVE SANCTITY: The Geopolitics of Shrines and Concealed Antiquities in Afghanistan

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LEGENDS OF "FAKE SHRINES" IN AFGHANISTAN

In July 2017, I walked with a local man along a ridge outside his village in Bamiyan, Afghanistan. During our walk, we came across a small mound of earth marked by a pole with green flags and strips of cloth tied to it, indicating it was a martyr's grave from the war. I asked my companion who the grave belonged to. "Most of these places are not martyrs," he said. When the Soviet Union withdrew from Afghanistan in 1989, he explained, they could not take all the country's antiquities with them. Instead, they buried them underground and raised a green flag, assuming locals would not disturb the soil out of respect for martyrs. He mentioned that the foreigners had made maps of these sites before leaving, and that in recent years, they had begun returning to excavate the buried artifacts. He then pointed to another location in the valley, saying, "The Americans also buried some historical objects there. They built a 'martyr structure' around it, arrived in helicopters, dug them up, and took them." Local thieves who knew about these fake shrines, he said, had also been digging them up at night.

I encountered this legend several times during my ethnographic fieldwork in Afghanistan, which I conducted in 2017 and 2019. My research examines

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cultural landscapes and place-making practices in Afghanistan. During fieldwork, I walked with local residents around landscapes of cultural significance and documented memories and narratives about these places. The legend took a familiar form each time I heard it. My companions and I would walk past a shrine or mound with a green flag fluttering from a poplar stick. When I asked about it, they would tell me that nobody was buried in the soil at all. Instead, they said, the grave was fabricated by foreigners who knew that the local people revered martyrs and would not disturb the soil where they had been buried. The "intelligence" (*hūshiyārī*) of these outsiders was demonstrated by their specialist knowledge: they recorded the hidden antiquities on a map or in a book, and returned with advanced technology to recover and excavate them.

I mostly heard this legend around shrines and archaeological sites in Balkh and Bamiyan. However, it appears to have proliferated widely around the country over the past two decades and is shared by Afghans of different ethnic groups.[1] It is shared by men and women around their homes, farmers walking through their fields, and NGO workers in their offices. Some people drew on the legend to explain the events they witnessed, such as a helicopter landing at an old shrine or foreigners digging up the earth and taking antiquities away. The identity of the foreigners also varied with each telling. People described them to me as English, Soviet, American, and German. Some merely referred to them as "foreigners"

Figure 1. A roadside martyrdom site in Bamiyan, 2017. Photograph by Shamim Homayun.

(*khārejī-hā*) or as "intelligent" (*hūshiyār*) people from "past times." Sometimes, the thieving outsider was a malicious conspirator who used crafty schemes to exploit simple locals. The foreigner sometimes also adopted the role of a trickster, echoing other well-known tricksters in Afghan storytelling who use pretended sanctity to deceive pious folk.

Local suspicion around foreign exploitation resonates with what the anthropologist Zeynep Oguz (2023) describes as "speculative undergrounds." Oguz writes of the suspicion among many Turkish citizens that foreign oil companies are concealing vast oil reserves, or that Western powers are plugging oil wells, thereby obstructing production and holding Turkey back from economic prosperity. The underground is a space of curiosity, driven by desires and anxieties that often take on a geopolitical tone. The legend of fake shrines also echoes the anthropologist David Sutton's (2018, 86) research on concealed objects of value in Greece. Sutton expands on the notion of "findables" (*vresímata*), observed by Charles Stewart (2017, 116–17) on the Greek island of Naxos, to refer to objects hidden in the earth by previous generations that are known through oral tradition but currently unavailable. These findables take on multiple forms, including antiquities, treasures, minerals, and edibles. In Greece, the sites of occult materiality remain unknown, and discovering them requires access to specialist knowledge or liminal experiences. In the legend of fake shrines, by contrast, the location of buried treasure is not generally in dispute—although many Afghans do believe that hidden wealth might be uncovered through dreaming or by consulting mullahs.

The growing anthropological scholarship on conspiracy theories offers an avenue to understand the appeal of legends about findables. These legends speak to public anxieties around geopolitical deception, concealed natural resources, an unequal world order, and an environment of social mistrust. Outsiders—whether foreign oil companies, archaeologists, or military forces—are often thought to employ superior technology and secretive knowledge to trick locals out of their rightful wealth. In much popular writing on Afghanistan, the dismissal of local perspectives on geopolitics as mere "conspiracy theories" has fed into stereotypes of an irrational society. Cultural backwardness has, in turn, been used to validate the discourses of progress and development that justified military occupation (Abu-Lughod 2013; Martin 2014; Monsutti 2013). However, recent anthropological scholarship has sought to challenge these notions of irrationality and instead examine how conspiracy theories constitute "productive practices through which concrete sociopolitical effects are created" (Saglam

2024, 266). Along similar lines, Magnus Marsden (2021, 45) argues for increased anthropological attention to "lived geopolitics," the everyday ways people navigate life amid competing geopolitical powers and projects.

Recently, some scholars have also turned to examining conspiracy theories as a folkloric genre, drawing on concepts such as ostension—the expression of legend in everyday life—to understand how conspiracies thrive in a local community (Fivecoate and Kitta 2025). A key insight from this work is that folktales and conspiracy theories thrive when they resonate with a group's identity and reinforce its values, while also providing an outlet for examining these values. This article thus puts aside the question of whether foreigners are actually fabricating shrines to conceal antiquities. Instead, it explores what this legend might reveal about everyday Afghan concerns around knowledge and exploitation, especially when vast wealth, thought to lie beneath the earth, is exploited by outsiders while locals languish in poverty.

FOREIGNERS AS TREASURE HUNTERS

Although stories of buried treasure have long been told in Afghanistan, we might trace the specific connection between foreigners and treasure hunting to the early nineteenth century. Between 1833 and 1838, an English officer named Charles Masson traveled widely in Afghanistan and conducted amateur excavations of Buddhist stupas (Errington 2017). Masson was also interested in objects found around many graves and shrines. He surveyed more than a hundred archaeological sites in Afghanistan, beginning in Bamiyan and then exploring Kabul, Jalalabad, Bagram, and Wardak. He collected thousands of ancient coins and other artifacts unearthed from mounds, graveyards, stupas, and the Kabul bazaar. Masson's finds eventually made their way to London and are now primarily held by the British Museum.

European travelers acquired a reputation for scouring ruins and shrines in search of treasure. Joseph Pierre Ferrier (1856, 435), who traveled through Afghanistan following the First Anglo-Afghan War, writes that the Baluch of Sistan saw these Europeans "as castaways, deriving their origin from genii, in league with the devil, who has taught them how to make gold, and as having the power of the evil eye, and of being able to find hidden treasures." According to Ferrier, the Baluch believed Europeans had access to the unseen realm because they saw them scouring old ruins, places that locals would widely consider inhabited by jinn. This reflected how people viewed other marginal figures, such as mendicant dervishes (*malang*), who also dwelled on the edges of society around ruins.

A similar curiosity existed among Ottoman Muslims, who also saw European classicists and travelers digging around ruins and removing antiquities (Stewart 2003, 488). Some locals believed these modern visitors descended from the ancient Greeks and Byzantines, who had once lived in the region and had hastily buried their treasures as they escaped the Ottoman conquest. The ability of European antiquarians to read ancient inscriptions was taken as evidence of this ancestral connection.

During the mid-nineteenth century, a legend appears to have existed in Afghanistan—heard by Masson himself—about "cunning" foreigners who used trickery to steal antiquities from Buddhist ruins (Masson 1841). According to this legend, a cunning man from Delhi once asked an Afghan where he was from. The Afghan replied that he hailed from Darunta, a village in eastern Afghanistan and the site of numerous Gandharan stupas. The cunning man asked if he knew of the Nandara Stupa, which lay near the village, to which the Afghan replied that he did. The cunning man offered him 5,000 rupees if he could bring him a certain stone on the eastern side of the stupa that was first lit by the morning sun. The Afghan returned home, went to the Nandara Stupa, and removed the stone at sunrise. He carried it to Delhi and gave it to the cunning man in exchange for 5,000 rupees. The cunning man then took a hammer and broke the stone before the Afghan, revealing a stash of gems and jewels hidden inside. "You fool," the cunning man said, "if you had not been so simple, you would have been richer than the wealthiest king on earth" (Masson 1841, 83).

This legend appears to have been current in other parts of the country. Charles Edward Yate, who traveled widely through Afghanistan between 1885 and 1888, describes a version of this legend around the Khwaja Abu Nasr Parsa shrine in Balkh. Yate (1888, 257–58) writes, "I did not go into [the shrine], but I asked some bystanders if there was any inscription in it, and I was amused to be told in reply that formerly there was one, but that the English had carried it away." Yate inquired as to whether any Englishmen had come to Balkh to carry it away. The locals responded that a *ressaldar*, a native captain in the British Indian army in Peshawar, had paid another man a thousand rupees to retrieve it. It is important to note that this legend flourished at a time when local understandings of antiquities were shifting. Stones and inscriptions, which many locals saw as ritual objects, became increasingly seen as economic commodities. Foreigners, thought to have specialist knowledge to discover antiquities and discern their value, thus duped locals out of valuable treasures, lying in plain sight.

To what extent locals drew on these legends to interpret twentieth-century archaeological excavations remains unclear. In 1922, modern archaeology

in Afghanistan began with the establishment of the Délégation Archéologique Française en Afghanistan (DAFA; French Archaeological Delegation in Afghanistan) (Hammond and Allchin 1978). Foreign archaeologists excavated sites across the country for the following five decades, often places of ritual or folkloric significance (Dupree 1957). Although these archaeologists tell us little about how locals made sense of their surveys and excavations, it seems that many locals drew on legends to explain the specialist knowledge and technology used to unearth antiquities. One narrative, prevalent in the northern and central parts of Afghanistan during the 1960s, was that foreigners possessed a special kind of binoculars or field glasses (*chapa-dūrbīn*) that had X-ray vision, allowing them to find treasure, locate water, or see through the walls of private houses.[2] These suspicions later thrived during the war in Afghanistan as archaeological landscapes were militarized.

THE LANDSCAPE OF UNKNOWN SHRINES

I heard this legend again while walking with a local friend and research participant through the Buddhist caves in the Fuladi Valley.[3] After turning into a side valley, we encountered a large grave marked with colored flags. The grave was much longer than an ordinary human. "I think something must be buried here," my companion remarked, "unless someone has already dug it up, or turned it into a checkpoint. Because nobody is buried here. You know that, right?" We spent the afternoon exploring the caves, and on our way back, we paused at a crossroad where a bridge led over a stream to a nearby village. On the roadside lay a small clay dome (*gumbad*), with a modest grave inside, suggesting a shrine or an ancestral burial site. My companion paused in front of it and remarked, "Most of these domes were placed here by English people." He recounted the familiar narrative: that the English hid antiquities beneath fake shrines, knowing that Afghans revered them and would not disturb them. "These things are meaningless," he said. "I don't believe in them at all."

Visiting shrines is an important social and religious practice in Afghanistan. Local shrines often consist of a small dome over a simple grave or mound of earth, and they are distinguished from ordinary graves by poplar sticks with colored flags. Some shrines have an inscription telling visitors who is buried there, but many others do not. They are places of *baraka* (divine blessing), which is transmitted from the saint's body to the material objects and substances that surround it: the dust that collects in the grave's niches, the strips of cloth tied around the shrine's poles, and trees that grow in the shrine garden. God performs miracles (*karāmāt*), like healing illnesses, through the medium of these

Figure 2. An ancestral dome in Bamiyan, 2017. Photograph by Shamim Homayun.

baraka-infused objects. Part of the reason "Afghans do not touch martyrdom shrines," as the legend goes, is because inauspicious things happen when blessed soil is disturbed. This is evidenced by the many bulldozers said to have broken down while constructing roads around shrines (Baldauf 2017, 309).

As a kind of saint, the "martyr" (*shahīd*) is often encountered while walking through Afghanistan. Over a million people have been killed since the war began in 1978. Each person who died in the war might be considered a martyr, and consequently, thousands of new shrines emerged over the past forty years. Depending on the circumstances of the martyr's death, they might have been given a simple and informal burial with a mound of earth and a green flag. People killed in the course of a journey might have a small cairn of stones, with a raised flag, to mark the spot where their body lay or where their blood touched the soil. Rocks are placed on top of a grave to distinguish one from another. These graves are often unmarked and can quickly erode, making it difficult to associate them with specific individuals and leading to social forgetting. Over time, and with population movements, the shrine's origin may be forgotten. Because the martyr is a pervasive symbol in Afghan landscapes, it is often used to explain any grave-like structure that people cannot otherwise identify.

New shrines also regularly emerge under doubtful circumstances in Afghanistan. Lost graves are often "discovered" through local dreams that a saint is buried in a place (Green 2003). In Mazar-i Sharif, the grave of 'Ali b. Abi

Talib was allegedly unearthed through a dream and subsequently became one of Central Asia's most important pilgrimage sites (Lee 1998). Whether 'Ali's body is genuinely buried there remains an everyday topic of speculation among shrine visitors. The shrine of the medieval Persian poet Rabia Balkhi, whose grave was allegedly discovered in the 1960s, offers a modern example of this motif (Homayun 2023). The poet appeared to the provincial governor in a dream and informed him that her body was buried in the center of Balkh's town park. After the site was dug up, fragments of turquoise tiles were found, which were taken as evidence of her lost grave. A new "grave" was built over the site, and shortly after, the newly constructed shrine became a pilgrimage site.

When shrines appear under suspicious circumstances, they can quickly become sites of dispute. The chaos of war created much uncertainty around martyrdom burials. Sometimes, bodies were moved and buried in secret, and a tombstone was placed long after the violence ended. This made people question whether a martyr was truly buried at the location at all. In Bamiyan, for example, my informants took me to the small shrine of Sayyid Lamlam near the Great Buddhas. Lamlam was a mujahideen commander killed in 1979, during the early days of the Soviet occupation. After his death, his body was reportedly tied to the back of a Russian Jeep and driven around Bamiyan's market and villages, then given an undignified burial in the soft soil at the feet of the Great Buddhas. Today, his small grave is a site of pilgrimage for devout locals. Yet it is also a place of conflicting stories. Some residents believe his body is truly buried there, while others told me that "his body is not here" and "nobody knows where he is buried."

It can be difficult to draw a clear line between belief and disbelief in these landscapes of doubt. People commonly engage in multiple modes of belief, sometimes only "half believing" a story, asserting belief in contradictory things, shifting between doubt and credulity, and sharing a narrative without believing in its veracity (Delouvée 2015; Piette 2015). On the one hand, the many robbed graves and personal experience narratives suggest that the legend of fake shrines is widely believed. On the other hand, the fact that many people tell the story without intending to dig up the graves suggests they may instead be sharing it as an urban legend that is "too good to be true" (Brunvand 2001).

What interests me are the geographical spaces where the boundaries between belief and disbelief become fluid. Many shrines are located on the margins of social space: the edges of town, a path between fields, the entrance to a valley, old ruins on a hilltop. These spaces are akin to what the folklorist Michael Foster (2015, 88–89), in his research on Japanese *yōkai*, describes as "zones of

uncertainty"—bridges, crossroads, and twilight hours. In Afghanistan, too, incidents of haunting do not usually occur at the center of social space. They appear on its edges: on stairways into basements, walking between two villages, or visiting old ruins as night falls. Interstitial geographies often constitute sites of interstitial experience: wonder, curiosity, dream, and speculation. They make for sites of storytelling and other acts of cultural creativity in which the symbols of everyday life become scrambled and recombined "in startling, grotesque, and contradictory ways" (Rosaldo, Lavie, and Narayan 1993, 3–5).

DECEPTIVE SANCTITY

Marginal spaces are also fertile sites for trickster activity. Scholars have long observed that tricksters thrive in the in-between spaces of paradox, ambiguity, and category confusion (Babcock-Abrahams 1975, 160). Larry Ellis (1993, 56) describes the trickster as the "shaman of the liminal" who "personifies marginality," straddling the marginal space between two worlds. I suggest the foreigner can also adopt a trickster role in the legend of fake shrines, a quality shared with other marginal figures such as mullahs and mendicant dervishes (*malang*).

This is evident in jokes and stories about Mullah Nasruddin. According to one story, Nasruddin's father was a respected shrine caretaker who looked after the burial site of a great saint. Although Nasruddin was meant to inherit his position at the shrine, he left home and decided to travel instead. So, he saddled his donkey and set off to explore the world. During the long journey, his donkey collapsed and died. Nasruddin, heartbroken at losing his companion, raised a mound of earth over the donkey's grave and sat down to mourn. In time, travelers passing by assumed he was mourning at the grave of a pious man. As news spread, a wealthy man built a dome over the grave. Others planted crops around the dome, and soon, it became a famous shrine. News of the shrine spread far, until it reached Nasruddin's father. Once his father heard of the new shrine, he set off on a pilgrimage, but when he got there, he was surprised to see his son as the shrine's caretaker. After hearing the explanation, his father was amazed. "My son," he said, "you should know that the shrine where you were raised came about in the same way, through a similar chain of events, when my own donkey died thirty years ago."[4]

Mullah Nasruddin, as a kind of trickster, features in many jokes about gullible piety across the Muslim world. David Graeber (2011, 192), who drew on Nasruddin stories in his analysis of pre-industrial economics, observes that jokes are "one of the best ways to get a sense of what are considered everyday dilemmas." Part of the reason these jokes are popular in Afghanistan is that they

resonate with people's daily experiences. People watch money change hands as their compatriots venerate graves and seek healing through mullahs, shrine caretakers (*mujāwir*), and *malang*. As shrines are often perceived as lucrative spaces for underhanded economic activity, they offer fertile ground for storytelling around tricksters who feign sanctity to deceive the pious. With Mullah Nasruddin, however, the joke lies in the fact that the "trickery" is more often due to coincidence and misunderstanding.

The venerated donkey is a recurring motif in Afghan storytelling. Following Margaret Mills (1991, 224), I use the terms "deceptive sanctity" and "gullible folk piety" to describe the themes this motif speaks to. We might use deceptive sanctity to describe any phenomenon that appears sacred or blessed (*tabāruk*), thus tricking "gullible" people into veneration, only for the sacred object to be revealed as profane. But why would people tell stories like this about themselves? Alan Dundes (2007, 59) writes that folktales, besides reinforcing a community's values, also offer "a sanctioned form of escape from these very same values." While the actual veneration of a donkey's grave would make for an absurd scandal, as a trickster story, it offers a humorous way for insiders to critique sacred aspects of their culture. Afghan stories about deceptive sanctity often feature an "intelligent" (*hūshiyār*) outsider who uses trickery for financial gain. Locals, by contrast, are stereotyped as "simple" (*sāda*) folk duped out of their wealth due to rustic ignorance or unquestioning piety.

Stereotypes around pious gullibility are shaped by class and gender. Since people from different backgrounds gather at shrines, visitors often encounter other pilgrims with conflicting beliefs who they see as participating in strange and unorthodox rituals. These include hammering nails into trees to cure toothaches, wrapping threads around graves and tying knots, collecting dust from a saint's tomb to heal wounds, or paying *malang*s to pray for childbirth. These informal shrine rituals are usually associated with women and rural communities who tend to have less formal education and are more likely to practice local traditions outside of "orthodox" Sunni or Shi'i Islam. Those who engage in these practices tell me that if one has belief (*'aqīda*) and visits the shrine with proper intention (*niyat*), the saint will intercede with God on their behalf. They have also shared personal experiences of miracles. However, many other shrine visitors view these practices with curiosity or disdain, dismissing them as "superstitions" (*khurāfāt*) meant to exploit the gullible.

Khurāfāt are often the subject of jokes that play on ethnic stereotypes. For example, storytellers from Herat shared stories mocking the rural Mongol community for their "rustic foolishness" and "veneration of local saints" (Mills 1991,

53). This pattern exists throughout Afghanistan, as urban residents satirize rural folk they see as less sophisticated.[5] People also tell these stories about themselves. Self-stereotyping jokes, in which people satirize their own affinity for superstitions, are commonly shared among community insiders at their own expense. For instance, despite the close relationship between the Sayyid and Hazara communities in Bamiyan, tensions have arisen around the power imbalance.[6] Sayyids are considered descendants of the Prophet Muhammad, and as such, they are locally respected for their religious knowledge and given special treatment. Many shrines are dedicated to important Sayyids, which Hazara locals visit to seek cures for illnesses, donating money to the shrine and paying Sayyids for religious services. Some Hazaras told me this formed part of a broader pattern in which "intelligent" Sayyids exploited Hazaras' piety and simplicity. Some even joked that Sayyid Yakhsuz and Mir Hashim, the largest shrines in central Bamiyan, were fabricated through "Sayyid tricks" and that "our people are so superstitious" that they venerate empty graves.

The conflict between supposed intelligence and simplicity can also play out over the theft of a sacred object. The people of Badakhshan, in northeast Afghanistan, tell a story about the theft of the Prophet Muhammad's blessed cloak.[7] According to this legend, the cloak was initially brought to Badakhshan on the back of a camel. When the camel arrived at the town of Faizabad, it knelt beside the Kokcha River. Locals built a shrine over that spot and called it the "Shrine of the Blessed Cloak" (*ziyārat-i khirqa-i mubārak*). The cloak was enshrined there for many years. When government officials from Kandahar visited the shrine and asked for the cloak, the locals refused to hand it over. Two weeks later, the officials returned to the shrine and claimed they had only come to make pilgrimage. To reassure the locals that they would not steal the cloak, they pointed to a nearby stone and promised the cloak would not go beyond it. The locals accepted this and trusted them. However, one night, the officials secretly loaded the cloak onto the back of one camel and placed the stone onto another. They kept their "promise": the stone traveled ahead of the cloak until it reached Kandahar, where it remains enshrined today. The Shrine of the Blessed Cloak in Badakhshan still exists, but it is now empty, although some locals believe that a few strands of the Prophet's hair remain there.

In these examples, the motifs of "simple local" and "intelligent outsider" are a comment on the unequal power dynamics between ethnic groups. However, in the legends of fake shrines, the setting shifts from local politics to geopolitics. Consequently, we also observe a shift in the identities of local and outsider. Although my non-Pashtun informants did not usually identify as "Afghan" in the

ethnic sense, they did use the term *Afghan* to denote a national identity when emphasizing shared traits and experiences with other ethnic groups. Afghans—as a national rather than an ethnic identity—may be contrasted with Americans, Russians, Germans, and the English. As an expression of "cultural intimacy," the legend positions Afghans as an imagined community connected through a self-stereotype of national simplicity (Herzfeld 2016, 7). It speaks to narratives of geopolitical deception that are shared among people of all ethnic and socioeconomic backgrounds across the country.

THE GEOPOLITICS OF GRAVE ROBBERY

In 2004, a friend of mine, an English-born scholar, was staying at a guesthouse in Pul-i Khumri in northern Afghanistan. Late one night, locals witnessed an SUV pull up at a local shrine and unknown men step out with flashlights and equipment. The thieves allegedly dug up the soil around the shrine, unearthed statues and other antiquities, then fled into the night. Locals who witnessed this event reported it to the authorities. The next day, the police approached my English friend to ask if he was involved in the theft. It is unclear why they singled him out, specifically. However, their assumption of his involvement echoes broader suspicions around foreigners' motives in Afghanistan.

Figure 3. Mounds and graves along the old city wall of Balkh, 2017. Photograph by Shamim Homayun.

This is reflected in geopolitical narratives that became widespread during the war. Several of my informants, for instance, shared a narrative about Russia and the United States competing to control Afghanistan's natural resources. According to them, the Russians had attempted to dominate Afghanistan but ultimately failed. The Americans recognized this failure and, in an act of "political astuteness" (*hūshiyārī-i siyāsī*), decided to pay the Taliban and the Afghan state to fight each other. This infighting created an opportunity for the Americans to intervene, and using various techniques and technologies, they began to acquire Afghanistan's resources. Narratives of geopolitical deception center on the idea that foreigners manipulate and control local actors, possess secret knowledge and advanced technology, and utilize this technology to extract and profit from the country's resources. The link between natural resources and buried treasure has also been noted in Greece, where locals sometimes believe that foreign archaeologists and oil companies possess superior knowledge to extract underground wealth (Sutton 2018, 92–93).

These conspiracies draw on a mystique around what lies "beneath the earth" (*zīr-i zamīn*). Many Afghans, from farmers to taxi drivers, told me that Afghanistan was rich in underground resources found in the mountains and wilderness. This wealth included coal, copper, rubies, emeralds, and natural gas. Locals believed this wealth could transform Afghanistan into a developed and self-sufficient nation. However, this did not happen. The development economy made some Afghans incredibly wealthy, including powerful commanders and members of an elite "Kabul Bubble," which included Afghans who had returned from overseas with Western educations and English skills. This created a sharp class divide between those perceived as benefiting from the development economy and the majority who remained in poverty. These perceptions were influenced by folk distinctions between different forms of intelligence. Foreigners and foreign-educated Afghans were sometimes called *hūshiyār*, while locals navigating this economy were considered "cunning" (*chālāk*).

The *hūshiyār* person might be conceived as intellectual. They are literate, know multiple languages, have a good education, and hold specialist or technical knowledge (cf. Marsden 2005, 94). The *hūshiyār* person can have special standing in semi-literate environments. Sometimes, when I asked Afghans about local history, they would preface their comments by saying they were "illiterate" and would refer me to educated people who possessed "correct knowledge." However, book knowledge can also be threatening in such environments—especially when perceived as a tool to exert political or economic power. Literacy has thus

been a source of tension between the Afghan state and everyday people throughout the twentieth century. An example of this is the compulsory literacy classes instituted by the communist state (1978–1992) as a tool to promote cultural change in rural communities (Crews 2015, 251). This intrusion into local worlds fueled resentment and encouraged resistance.

The idea of administrators using writing to exploit the simplicity of non-literate folk and steal their resources is a common theme in state expansion and colonization (Scott 2009, 222). Writing and literacy can also take on a mystique in non-literate and semi-literate societies. For the people of Sierra Leone, for instance, the mystique of literacy manifested in an "impossible gulf between their dreams and their reality" and "anxieties of powerlessness and marginalization" (Jackson 2004, 148–49). Similarly, in Afghanistan, illiteracy has become a potent symbol that many people draw on to explain why the country languishes in violence and poverty. The "map" or "book" that foreigners use to locate buried antiquities offers an expression of the mystique of literacy.

Between 2001 and 2021, suspicion around foreign forces was also enhanced by the social and geographical distance between them and ordinary Afghans (Coburn 2016, 154). Foreign actors moved in closed-off worlds, often around archaeological landscapes that had become militarized during the war. Mystery surrounded their intentions and capabilities. In Kandahar, one rumor circulated about a laser ray that NATO was testing that could kill people if they picked up their phones (Zaeef 2010, xi). During my fieldwork, I heard local suspicions about the United States military aerostats that perpetually hovered over Afghan towns and cities. Afghans' biggest concern around these spy balloons was that they could see into people's courtyards, watching them even as they slept on their roofs in the summer. Some thought they could see through walls into people's houses.

Foreigners' motivations were also obscured by overlapping sovereignties, where the line between different foreign actors remained unclear to everyday Afghans (Monsutti 2013). Non-government organizations (NGOs), international organizations, cultural heritage groups, and foreign militaries operated in ways that blurred these boundaries, engaging in activities ranging from vaccinations to construction, journalism, mining, and warfare. This created a confusing environment of ambiguous politics, with actors waving multiple flags and seeming to move through the landscape with conflicting intentions. Foreign journalists embedded with military patrols were often difficult to distinguish from NGO workers, mining camps, and academic researchers. Between 2001 and 2021, the

political landscape proved especially complex as foreign forces interacted with competing local powers in a constantly shifting web of loyalties and alliances (Coburn 2011, 6). There was also a perceived gap between what foreigners claimed and what they actually did, as the actions of foreign militaries often conflicted with official narratives. This fueled rumors and speculation about what was "really" happening, with foreigners' actions perceived as part of a broader scheme (Martin 2014).

This opacity offered a fertile environment for ostension, the enactment of folklore in everyday life (Dégh and Vászonyi 1983; Fivecoate and Kitta 2025). The accusation that my English friend was responsible for looting the shrine in Pul-i Khumri is one example of how the legend is made real. Such accusations appear to have been common. The anthropologist Noah Coburn, who conducted fieldwork in Istalif, also describes an incident in which French troops were removing the fuselage of an unexploded rocket from a hilltop. When the townspeople saw the fuselage sitting on a military vehicle, "rumors spread that the troops had dug up several historical artifacts and stolen them" (Coburn 2011, 137–38). Locals thus drew on narratives of geopolitical deception to make sense of obscure events they personally witnessed. They saw old graves dug up during the night in search of treasure, and rumors spread of wondrous antiquities that had been unearthed and sold to foreign buyers. Obscure events were turned into stories, which were then drawn on to explain similar events elsewhere. Ostension constantly gave the legend new life, and can help us understand how it spread widely across the country.

People around Afghanistan also told stories of foreigners closing off archaeological sites so that locals could not approach them as they dug them up. This occurred at Nuh Gunbad, or the Nine-Domed Mosque, in Balkh. These eighth-century ruins may be remnants of an early mosque in Afghanistan, and the small shrine of Hajj-i Piyada is also located around these ruins. When I first visited the site in 2008, its pillars and arches were open to the sky, the area around it was barren and dusty, and shepherds freely led their flocks through it. When I returned for fieldwork in 2017, the site had been fenced off and a corrugated iron roof erected over the remnants. A garden had also been planted around it. As I walked around the garden with a local Tajik man, he told me he had witnessed foreigners dig up the site and carry away antiquities. "There was a large fortress here," he said as he pointed to one of Nuh Gunbad's pillars. "The Germans dug here for seven days and found things beneath that pillar. They did not let a single person come close. There were ancient things under the earth, and the Germans took them away." What I believe he may have witnessed, ironically, was an effort

Figure 4. The looted archaeological landscape of Teppa-i Zargaran, Balkh, 2017. Photograph by Shamim Homayun.

by the Aga Khan Trust for Culture (AKTC) and the University of Florence to restore and protect the archaeological remnants.[8]

Anxieties around foreign looting sometimes motivated local efforts to protect shrines. I learned of one village in Badakhshan where locals volunteered to guard a shrine throughout the night to protect it from being looted by German forces. This was not thought to be a fake shrine, but they nonetheless feared it would be dug up. The people of nearby villages praised these volunteer guards for defending their property against an external threat. Recent anthropological work on conspiracy thinking encourages us to focus less on the truth value of a narrative and more on how it works as a productive social practice (Saglam 2024). With this in mind, whether the threat of German looting was genuine or not is beside the point. What is important is how a community that felt powerless in the face of a geopolitical threat became political actors themselves.

BEING CUNNING TO SURVIVE

One morning in 2017, I walked with a farmer through his fields in the Bamiyan Valley, where his potato crops edged on the ruins of a medieval fortress. Beneath the fortress was a mound of earth with a colored flag attached to a poplar stick. I asked him who was buried there. "This is not a shrine," he replied, "but I can tell you its story because this is my land." One night, he said,

he had been tending to a nearby tree. He saw a grave robber approach the mound and dig it up, unearthing some buried objects. A guard who had been standing at the fortress shot at the robber, but the man escaped and ran up a nearby hill. "The guard fired a bullet and struck this rock," the farmer said, showing me a large boulder. After the commotion had ended, the farmer climbed up the hill to where the grave robber had escaped. There, he noticed a rock out of place, and from beneath the rock, he pulled out "diamonds" (*almās*) that had been hidden. "Do you understand what I'm saying?" the farmer asked me. "In past times, intelligent people would leave their things there. They created a grave, put a flag on top, and said, 'This is a shrine.' Now they have a book, and from [reading] the book they come and take the [antiquities]."

The farmer's unusual story is what initially sparked my interest in this legend. His claim that he followed the thief's trail and recovered a bag of diamonds offers an example of proto-ostension: recalling a legend as part of a personal experience narrative. It is impossible to say whether this incident truly occurred as the farmer described it or if he actually retrieved objects hidden by the fleeing robber. However, I follow folklorist Andrea Kitta (2012, 83) in suggesting that we approach such stories with a "hermeneutic of generosity." This encourages us to set aside a narrative's credibility and assume that our interlocutors tell us stories for a good reason. By suspending judgment on the story's veracity, we also allow a new set of questions to arise: Why do people draw on old legends to explain personal experiences, and what contemporary problems do these stories speak to?

One answer to this question centers on the two forms of knowledge discussed earlier: being "intellectual" (*hūshiyār*) and "cunning" (*chālāk*). By pointing out that martyrs' graves are fabricated sites of geopolitical deception, the skeptical shrine visitor positions themselves as "in the know." They possess insight into trickster ways and are savvy to the guiles of the intelligent outsider. In a way, they also adopt the outsider's perspective: momentarily stepping outside Afghan culture and examining it through the eyes of a foreigner. One role of such narratives, I suggest, is to foster cohesion among an imagined community of savvy insiders who do not subscribe to superstitions and share a common bond in poking fun at their own people's supposed simplicity. The community is split between the "cunning" insiders who are aware of the foreigners' ruse, and the "simple" majority who are blissfully deceived. The storyteller and their audience are, of course, among the cunning insiders. The paradox is that all Afghans I spoke with know the legend, even those who enjoy visiting shrines. This "secret" knowledge of empty shrines is not really a secret at all.

Another role of such narratives is to convey messages about community ideals or how "our people ought to be." This is not the same for all people in Afghanistan. For the villagers in rural Badakhshan, standing guard at night exemplifies norms around honor (*nāmūs*), in which the integrity of family and property must be defended through zeal and courage (*ghayrat*). This helps explain why neighboring villagers praised them for it. For Hazara youth in Bamiyan, by contrast, the message echoes development narratives that illiteracy leads to exploitation, and that the community can only progress by abandoning superstition and becoming educated. For others, perhaps, the message is that one must respond to specialist knowledge and superior technology with cunning, pitting the outsider's "book smarts" against the local's "street smarts."

The message of cunning intelligence can be traced back to the Kalila wa Dimna tradition. These fables traveled from ancient Sanskrit to modern Persian through various translations and retellings. The *Anwar-i Suhayli*, a sixteenth-century version of these fables by Husayn Wa'iz Kashifi (d. 1504), has proved particularly influential on Afghan storytelling (Mills 1991). One of Kashifi's stories describes a pious man tricked out of a fat sheep by a group of thieves. Unable to steal the sheep openly, the thieves devised a "fox-like stratagem" to deceive the pious man into believing it was a dog. As the thieves walked past the man, they took turns asking where he was taking his dog, whether he planned to go hunting with his dog, and how much he had paid for it. They then passed him again, each commenting on how inappropriate it was for a pious devotee to dirty his hands with a dog. Eventually, the pious man released his sheep, convinced it was a dog, and the thieves seized it. Kashifi attributes the pious man's gullibility to "excessive simplicity" and makes the story's message explicit: "I have brought forward this story to show that we should also employ schemes, since it is only by deceit and trickery that we can outwit them" (Kashifi 1880, 318–24).

The Afghan notion of *chālāk* is to be tactical, clever, deceptive, quick-witted, vigilant, and opportunistic to survive. It is a quality of the underdogs who lack power, access to textual knowledge and superior technology, and have gained an intuitive skill to survive through years of experience. It stands in contrast to the intelligent outsider's schemes and book smarts. This contrast is evident in Afghan jokes that play on regional stereotypes. Kabul, the capital city, is the seat of administrative and economic power. Rural communities around the capital have acquired stereotyped reputations about how they relate to this power. The people of Wardak, to the west of the capital, are proverbial for being simple and easily fooled. The people of Laghman, to the east, are proverbial for being cunning and deceptive, using clever tactics to "find a path forward" in any tricky scenario.[9]

We might understand the Laghmanis' use of cunning intelligence as a weapon of the weak: those forms of everyday resistance that powerless groups engage in vis-à-vis a stronger opponent. These include feigned ignorance, false compliance, and concealed feelings (Scott 1985, xvi). Folktales, especially trickster tales, offer a common means of expressing this everyday resistance (Scott 1990, 162). These include stories around Brer Rabbit, in the African American oral tradition, who uses guile and deception to outwit a stronger opponent and find "a way out of no way." This is also illustrated by the "women's tricks" (*makr-i zan*) of Perso-Islamic folklore, in which female tricksters employ deception as a survival strategy in patriarchal environments that restrict their everyday movements. Trickster tales also speak to real-life dilemmas. Thus, the Afghan women Margaret Mills (2018, 54) interviewed "discussed as necessary, and with a sense of accomplishment, everyday deceptions they and their friends practiced to navigate the insecure social landscape of warfare and its uncertain outcomes."

I observed this during my own fieldwork in Afghanistan, too. My informants sometimes felt they had to engage in everyday acts of deception as a means of navigating their violent, chaotic, and unpredictable environments. They felt compelled to conceal their intentions and behave duplicitously to survive, as being too honest could harm their well-being in an environment where those around them used intellect and cunning to profit. The farmers and shopkeepers I spoke to expressed powerlessness against foreigners and local elites who became wealthy through extortion, theft, corruption, and exploitation. "In Afghanistan, the problem is not between the wolf and the sheep," one shopkeeper told me; "the problem is between the wolf and other wolves." I frequently heard statements like, "There is no trust among people here"; "There is no friendship anymore"; and "One cannot progress without lying." To survive in this morally ambiguous environment, my informants sometimes cultivated deceptive appearances, modes of dress, and ways of speaking—even treating these forms of deception as an art form (cf. Scheper-Hughes 2008).

However, seeing cunning as an art presents a new dilemma around one's social commitments and moral obligations, The moral dilemma lies in the fact that most people I met in Afghanistan value honesty and openness, and desire to live in a peaceful environment where they can be unguarded with one another. They hold trustworthiness in high regard, both in themselves and others. Nevertheless, the moral code can be remarkably fluid depending on one's environment and relation to political authority. "Lawfulness has its time and place," one informant told me. In politically and economically secure environments one has the luxury of being trustworthy. In chaotic and insecure contexts, the opposite can become virtuous. People navigate these conflicting moralities as they move between secure and insecure spaces.

A PHILOSOPHY OF EVERYDAY LIFE

In the public imagination, folktales are sometimes seen as curious relics of pre-literate societies, timeless artifacts of a culture that must be recorded before they disappear. It is easy to overlook that legends, in particular, are often tied to specific times and places, called on at the right moment to convey a message or illustrate a point. The task of folklorists and anthropologists is to illuminate these times and places, giving ethnographic texture to the stories and the contexts in which people share them. As Erika Friedl (2014, 5) observes, a close reading of folktales in their ethnographic context can offer more than a mere sketch of local worldviews; it can reveal people's "philosophy of everyday life."

To understand how legends are woven into daily social life, we need to bring them out of literary collections and put them back into local place-worlds. Interstitial geographies constitute spaces of creative storytelling, where cultural symbols are reimagined and important social values are both reinforced and contested. The agents of cultural creativity frequently take the form of trickster figures who inhabit zones of uncertainty and moral ambiguity. In this article, I suggest that foreigners sometimes manifest as tricksters, adopting the role of intelligent outsiders to make a point about local society. One message these stories convey concerns different kinds of knowledge. The outsider is "intelligent" (*hūshiyār*) because they have access to superior knowledge and technology. Local people, by contrast, are positioned as "simple" (*sāda*) or "cunning" (*chālāk*). The simple are vulnerable to exploitation, while the cunning are savvy to trickster knowledge and can thus prosper. Yet this does not imply that the legend of fake shrines should always be interpreted as a trickster story. Through ostension, the legend can become real, leading to suspicion and resentment, and the foreigner can quickly shift from trickster to conspirator.

Policy discussions about Afghanistan often dismiss local perspectives on foreigners and their geopolitical games as mere "conspiracy theories." However, as Marsden (2021, 45) observes, what often gets overlooked in such discussions are the "forms of agency and experience that people living in the midst of competing geopolitical projects themselves regard as being important." Anthropologists have long challenged the common idea of conspiracy theories as irrational. Instead, they encourage scholars to focus on the storytelling performance and to see these narratives as a form of creative knowledge used by the powerless in response to political exclusion (Anderson 1996). By examining legends within their ethnographic context, anthropologists might better understand how people interpret obscure events and navigate morally ambiguous environments.

ABSTRACT

This article explores a widely circulated legend in Afghanistan in which foreigners are believed to create shrines to conceal buried antiquities. It represents one of several narratives in which locals express mistrust of foreign motivations and geopolitical deception. Building on recent scholarship on speculative undergrounds and conspiracy theories, this article examines how Afghans use folktales to explain obscure events and convey anxieties about literacy, knowledge, and exploitation. Narratives of deception flourish in marginal spaces, such as unknown shrines, which often become sites of doubt, uncertainty, and storytelling. In this legend, foreigners sometimes assume the role of a trickster, reflecting the "intelligent outsider" motif common in Afghan stories that speak to local simplicity and cunning intelligence. This article argues for increased scholarly attention to folktales within the context of conspiracy theories and lived geopolitics, as these stories offer valuable insights into the everyday values, fears, and experiences of people living in unstable environments. [Afghanistan; shrines; folklore; tricksters; conspiracy theories; conflict; archaeology]

چکیده

این مقاله به یکی از افسانه‌های رایج در افغانستان می‌پردازد؛ افسانه‌ای که بر اساس آن، باور عمومی بر این است که خارجی‌ها برای پنهان کردن اشیای عتیقه و آثار باستانی، زیارتگاه‌ها یا مقبره‌هایی می‌سازند. این یکی از روایت‌های متعددی است که مردم محل بی‌اعتمادی خود را نسبت به انگیزه‌های خارجی‌ها و فریب‌کاری‌های ژئوپولیتیکی بیان می‌کنند. با تکیه بر پژوهش‌های اخیر دربارهٔ زیرزمین‌های حدسی و تئوری‌های توطئه، این مقاله نشان می‌دهد که چگونه افغان‌ها از قصه‌ها و افسانه‌های عامیانه برای توضیح رویدادهای مبهم و انتقال نگرانی‌های خود دربارهٔ سواد، دانش و استثمار استفاده می‌کنند. روایت‌هایی دربارهٔ فریب‌کاری معمولاً پیرامون فضاهای حاشیه‌ای، مانند زیارتگاه‌های ناشناخته، رشد می‌کنند؛ فضاهایی که اغلب به مکان‌هایی برای بیان شک، تردید و قصه‌گویی بدل می‌شوند. در این افسانه، خارجی‌ها گاه نقش شخصیت‌های «حیله‌گر» را به خود می‌گیرند؛ نقشی که بازتاب‌دهندهٔ موتیف «بیگانهٔ زرنگ» در داستان‌های افغانی است—داستان‌هایی که بر سادگی مردم محل و زیرکی بیگانگان تأکید دارند. این مقاله بر ضرورت توجه بیشتر پژوهشگران به قصه‌ها و افسانه‌های عامیانه در بستر تئوری‌های توطئه و ژئوپولیتیکِ زیسته تأکید می‌کند، زیرا این روایت‌ها اطلاعات ارزشمندی دربارهٔ ارزش‌ها، ترس‌ها و تجربیات روزمرهٔ مردمانی ارائه می‌کنند که در محیط‌های بی‌ثبات زندگی می‌کنند

افغانستان؛ زیارتگاه‌ها؛ فولکلور؛ حیله‌گران؛ نظریه‌های توطئه؛ جنگ؛ باستان‌شناسی

NOTES

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1. The term *Afghan* has become increasingly contested over the past decade. As the term is closely associated with the Pashtun ethnic group, some critics argue that its usage excludes Hazaras, Uzbeks, and Tajiks. However, as my research participants (including Tajiks and Hazaras) generally used "Afghan" to describe their national identity, I also use the term to refer to all citizens of Afghanistan while discussing ethnic identity where relevant.
2. I thank the anonymous reviewer who mentioned this legend while commenting on an earlier draft.
3. The Fuladi Valley lies to the southwest of the Bamiyan Valley, and it contains many caves that were once part of the region's vast Buddhist landscape. Buddhism flourished in the region between the first and eighth centuries, and it likely declined following the conquest of Ya'qub b. al-Layth al-Saffar (d. 879).
4. I have adapted this story from Idries Shah's (1968, 121–22) *Caravan of Dreams*. I have not found it in other compendiums of Mullah Nasruddin tales. However, I have heard the narrative recounted in different ways by Afghans, and it was likely in oral circulation more widely. Shah ascribes this story to the Bektashi Sufi order, but this take should be viewed with caution, as Shah was not always transparent with his sources.
5. Margaret Mills (personal communication, 2025) clarified that the categories of "rural" and "urban" are regularly blurred, as storyteller and audience often come together from different social and class backgrounds and perform "cleverness" in complex ways vis-à-vis each other.
6. Despite these perceptions, there is often a high degree of intermarriage and kinship relations between Hazara and Sayyid communities. See Canfield 1973 for an account of the complexity of Bamiyan's sectarian landscape.
7. Fatima Airan, from the town of Faizabad in Badakhshan, shared both the story about the theft of the Prophet's cloak and the story of the villagers who protected their local shrine from looting. She also provided useful comments on an early draft of this article, especially on the distinction between intellectual and cunning knowledge.
8. This is usually identified in the literature as an eighth-century mosque, although it may have been a pre-Islamic structure. For an account of its recent renovation, see Boostani et al. 2020.
9. The people of Laghman may have also acquired this reputation vis-à-vis the people of Jalalabad or Peshawar, both nearby metropolises.

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