The Imperial Sociology of the ‘Tribe’ in Afghanistan

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Abstract
The ‘tribe’ is a notion intimately related to the study of Afghanistan, used as a generic signifier for all things Afghan, it is through this notion that the co-constitution of coloniser and colonised is crystallised and foregrounded in Afghanistan. By tracing the way in which the term ‘tribe’ has been deployed in the Afghan context, the article performs two kinds of intellectual labour. First, by following the evolution of a concept from its use in the early 19th century to the literature on Afghanistan in the 21st century, wherein the ‘tribes’ seem to have acquired a newfound importance, it undertakes a genealogy or intellectual history of the term. The Afghan ‘tribes’ as an object of study, follow an interesting trajectory: initially likened to Scottish clans, they were soon seen as brave and loyal men but fundamentally different from their British interlocutors, to a ‘problem’ that needed to be managed and finally, as indispensable to a long-term ‘Afghan strategy’. And second, it endeavours to describe how that intellectual history is intimately connected to the exigencies of imperialism and the colonial politics of knowledge production.

Keywords
tribes, empire, Afghanistan

Extrait
La notion de « tribu » est intimement liée à l’étude de l’Afghanistan, entendu comme signifiant générique de tout ce qui est afghan: c’est à travers elle que se cristallisent et s’établissent les constitutions conjointes du colonisateur et du colonisé en Afghanistan. Par l’étude des emplois du terme « tribu » dans le contexte afghan, cet article remplit deux tâches intellectuelles. D’abord, en examinant l’évolution du concept depuis son usage au début du XIXe siècle jusque dans la littérature sur l’Afghanistan du XXIe siècle, où les « tribus » semblent avoir retrouvé de l’importance, il présente une généalogie, ou histoire intellectuelle, du terme. En tant qu’objets d’étude, les « tribus » afghanes ont un parcours intéressant: au départ

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comparées aux clans écossais, elles ont ensuite été perçues comme des groupes d’hommes courageux et loyaux, mais fondamentalement différents de leurs interlocuteurs britanniques, avant d’être vues comme un « problème » à gérer, et enfin, comme indispensables à la « stratégie afghane » à long terme. Cet article s’attache également à décrire les liens ténus qui relient cette histoire intellectuelle aux exigences de l’impérialisme et aux politiques coloniales de production du savoir.

Mots-clés
tribus, empire, Afghanistan

Resumen
La noción de tribu se encuentra íntimamente relacionada con el estudio de Afganistán, utilizándose como un significante genérico que designa todo aquello asociado con lo afgano. Por medio de esta noción, la contraposición entre colonizador y colonizado se cristaliza y ocupa un lugar prominente en dicho país. Al examinar el modo en que el término tribu se ha utilizado en el contexto afgano, este artículo realiza dos tipos de operaciones teóricas. Por un lado, se sigue la evolución del concepto desde su uso a principios del siglo XIX hasta la literatura afgana del siglo XXI, donde las tribus parecen haber adquirido una nueva importancia, con el fin construir una genealogía o historia intelectual del término. Como objeto de estudio, las tribus afganas trazan una trayectoria interesante: en un principio se asociaron a los clans escoceses, percibiéndose enseguida como un grupo de hombres valientes y fieles si bien fundamentalmente diferentes de sus interlocutores británicos, para luego convertirse en un «problema» que debía ser resuelto y, por último, en algo indispensable en la «estrategia afgana» a largo plazo. Por otro lado, se intenta describir el modo en que dicha historia intelectual se encuentra íntimamente relacionada con las exigencias del imperialismo y las políticas coloniales de la producción del conocimiento.

Palabras clave
tribus, imperio, Afganistán

In common parlance, the term ‘tribe’ is used loosely to suggest affiliation with one’s community – as in ‘tribal loyalties’ to intimate affinity with a close-knit group – or more specifically to refer to a non-acephalous community of people in a delimited territory contrasted with central/state organisation. However, there appears to be no accepted definition of ‘tribe’. The term has been largely forsaken by anthropologists or used in very specific instances to delineate particular modes of social organisation and political
formation, and never to refer to an entire nation’s social structure.¹ Often used to signal anachronistic hordes of people seemingly resistant to centralised governance, even the New Oxford Dictionary contends that:

‘[i]n historical contexts the word tribe is broadly accepted (the area was inhabited by Slavic tribes), but in contemporary contexts it is problematic when used to refer to a community living within a traditional society. It is strongly associated with past attitudes of white colonialists towards so-called primitive or uncivilized peoples living in remote undeveloped places. For this reason it is generally preferable to use alternative terms such as community or people’.²

Yet, the ‘tribe’ is a notion that is intimately connected to the study and knowledge of the people of Afghanistan. It is a concept with which we (in the ‘West’) make sense of Afghan social organisation, given that we are routinely confronted with images, popular accounts and media reports that depict Afghans (and also oftentimes Libyans and Yemenis) as fundamentally ‘tribal’. The ‘tribe’ in Afghanistan is alternately constructed as a security problem, a political threat and as something that needs ‘engaging with’. Often, in support of ‘nation-building’ projects, tribes have been understood as the ‘other’ against which the nation-state – still the prime unit of analysis for political scientists and international relations scholars – is posited.

This article undertakes a genealogy of the tribe to interrogate the reasons for the concept’s omnipresence in writings on Afghanistan and to question why exactly this problematic concept has become shorthand for all Afghan society. It considers the implications for the study of Afghanistan (a country which now has the privilege of being labelled the United States’ longest ever war) in particular, but of ‘other’ Places deemed ‘alien’ more generally. It contends that this notion of ‘tribe’ can be added not only to the indefinite number of terms that are (essentially) contested and contentious,³ but also to the list of terms that have been specifically mined for dubious political purposes. The article engages conceptual history and world politics in conversation by showing how ‘notions’ and ‘ideas’ can have direct and profound consequences for political praxis. And finally, in line with some of the most exciting developments in critical international relations, this article is a first-step towards decolonising⁴ the concept of the tribe, by showing its implicated origins and continued use in the service, and at the behest, of empire and imperialism.

1. See for instance, Morton H. Fried’s The Notion of the Tribe (Menlo Park: Cumings Publishing Company, 1975), 10–12. Fried was a preeminent anthropologist who argued as early as the 1970s that most anthropologists had abandoned the notion of the tribe, and so should everybody else, because the idea that the ‘tribe’ had a particular social organisation that stood apart from or in opposition to the state was misleading. His seminal study of the American Indian tribes suggested that these ‘tribes’ did not possess a common ideology and our understanding of tribal ways of being was reductive and best discarded completely.
2. Oxford University, New Oxford American Dictionary, 2nd edition (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005).
3. For more on ‘essentially contested’ concepts, see Walter Gallie, ‘Essentially Contested Concepts’, Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society 1955–56, 56: 167–68.
4. I am aware that the use of ‘decolonising’ as a metaphor is contentious, but my intention is to continue to use it to signal a political project that is explicitly anti-colonial both literally and figuratively.
The contemporary manifestations of colonial knowledge and the ways in which the discursive framing of certain peoples, states, and conflicts invites, enables and inhibits international responses has recently been tackled by IR scholars working in places as diverse as the Congo, Somalia and Libya. The construal of Afghanistan as a ‘tribal society’ can be seen as an iteration and continuation of the colonial impulse to simplify, classify and taxonomise and then to tailor responses based on those erroneous or at least impressionistic classifications.

We can see this at play in the blithe remark made in 2010 that ‘[t]o be a Taliban today means little more than to be a Pashtun tribesman who believes that his fundamental beliefs and customary way of life, including the right to bear arms or defend the tribal homeland and protect its women, are threatened by foreign invaders’. Over-simplifications like these end up over-determining the politics of the country by (re) presenting Afghanistan as a certain type of ‘intervenable object’, almost necessitating invasive restructuring through foreign intervention. It is through recourse to a discourse of tribalism that Afghanistan has become ‘fair game’ for intervention, invasion and nation-building.

By undertaking a short genealogy of the term, the article shows how, what was initially a particular (ill-defined and fluid) construct, which the early East India Company administrators used to make sense of the unfamiliar people they were encountering, ‘the tribes’ went on to become the irrefutable marker of Afghan society, polity, and culture. The ‘tribe’, as a generic signifier for most relations and identities in Afghanistan appears to have displaced the need for a deep theoretical engagement with the changing political and social configurations in the country. The concept, initially used in the British Empire to capture a specific network of relations at a given historical juncture, has become increasingly de-historicised, losing any analytical purchase and clarity it may once have had. The trope has instead been reincarnated to provide momentum to counterinsurgency doctrine and practice in the face of concerns about the legitimacy of foreign intervention.

5. On the way in which ‘peacebuilding’ as a discourse has dictated policies towards the Congo see Severine Autesserre, ‘Hobbes and the Congo: Frames, Local Violence and International Intervention’, *International Organization* 63, no. 2 (2009): 249–80; Branwen Gruffyd-Jones on ‘failed states’ and international responses to perceived state failure in ‘Good Governance and State Failure: the pseudo-science of statesmen in our times’ in *Race and Racism in International Relations: Confronting the Global Colour Line*, eds. Alex Anievas, Nivi Manchanda and Robbie Shilliam (London: Routledge, 2015); and Keith Stanski on how the discourse on ‘warlords’ constructs Afghan others as violent and dictates engagement with them in ‘So these Folks are Aggressive: an Orientalist Reading of “Afghan Warlords”’, *Security Dialogue* 40, no. 1 (2009): 73–94.

6. Scott Atran, *Talking to the Enemy: Violent Extremism, Sacred Values and What it Means to be Human* (London: Penguin, 2011), 262.

7. This ‘history of the present’ is opposed to what George Lawson has called ‘scripture’ or ‘the mining of the past in order to support suppositions about the present’, which is both how the literature on tribes in Afghanistan is used and is the standard practice in IR. See George Lawson, ‘The Promise of Historical Sociology in International Relations’, *International Studies Review* 8, no. 3 (2006): 404.
I map the way in which the term has been employed in popular writings on Afghanistan, not only to problematise the notion of ‘tribe’ but also to show how a monolithic and unreflective body of work has become the norm in reference to Afghan social organisation. The article proceeds chronologically, following the evolution of the concept from its use in the early 19th century by the influential Mountstuart Elphinstone, and on to his most significant successors writing in the late colonial period. The article traces the conceptual hardening and reification of the term during the 20th century and its particular – and re-energised – deployment in the literature on Afghanistan in the 21st century. Drawing on scholarly literature on Afghanistan, the article argues that the ‘tribe’ has become a familiar and accessible idiom – another reductionist oversimplification in the argot of imperial expediency – used to make sense of Afghanistan’s diverse and complex social structure, but that in the process the term has veered far from the manner in which it was originally conceived and utilised. The term has not only become more thoroughly racialised; it now amounts to a conceptually vapid word that has paradoxically been credited with ever more importance in ‘understanding Afghanistan’. Through the articulation of this concept over time we can see old colonial logics reproduced. In this sense, the tribe belongs to a family of concepts used to make sense of the Other, to render him/her legible with important political consequences. What is exceptional is the manner in which this particular concept has become fossilised, and the complete erasure of the colonial legacy that has led to this fossilisation.

**Mountstuart Elphinstone and the ‘Discovery’ of the Afghan Tribe**

Mountstuart Elphinstone (1779–1859) is the first known scholar of Afghanistan, and his work was to be so pivotal that it would not be a stretch to call him the ‘founding father’ of modern Afghan studies. In 1808 Elphinstone was appointed as the first British envoy to the court of Kabul under Shah Shuja by Indian governor-general Lord Minto. Elphinstone’s mission was the inceptive British diplomatic mission to what was to become Afghanistan. Although Elphinstone failed to secure a friendly alliance with...
Shuja, his mission generated a wealth of material that he turned into a detailed report. This text, Elphinstone’s enormously influential *Account of the Kingdom of Caubul and its Dependencies*, was first published in 1815. It was his report of the first modern British contacts with the Afghan country, a voluminous exposé of all that he encountered and observed in the country. Elphinstone’s work was vastly influential in other 19th century literature on Afghanistan. From Sir Alexander Burnes11 to the last governor, Olaf Caroe, Elphinstone’s thought has had a perceptible impact on the work of an entire legion of Anglophone Afghan specialists.12 In Jon Anderson’s words, Elphinstone’s *Account* provided ‘the most synoptic and […] integrated account of Afghanistan and Pakhtun society, history, geography, tribal organization, government, and more briefly, economic life’.13

What then are the major hallmarks of Elphinstone’s work? First, Elphinstone himself based his understanding of ‘the tribe’ on his own personal experience as a Scotsman. The notion of tribe for him was analogous to that of the Scottish notion of clan, and he argues that the Afghan kingdom was remarkably similar to Ancient Scotland in its social and political organisation:

[...] the situation of the Afgaun country appears to me to bear a strong resemblance to that of Scotland in ancient times; the direct power of the King over the towns and the country immediately around; the precarious submission of the nearest clans, and the independence of the remote ones; the inordinate power and faction of the nobility most connected with the court; and the relations borne by all the great lords to the crown, resemble each other so closely in the two states that it will throw light on the character of the Douraunee government to keep the parallel in view.14

Elphinstone’s training in land survey practices – focused on the village – and his Scottish background gave form to his ‘republican’ interpretation of Afghan social organisation. Indeed, Elphinstone’s intellectual universe was delineated by the Scottish Enlightenment:

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11. Burnes (1805–41) was an explorer and political officer in India who also travelled extensively in Afghanistan. Burnes’ memoir *Cabool: Being a Personal Narrative of a Journey to, and Residence in that City in the Years 1836–38*, which was published posthumously in 1842, draws heavily on Elphinstone’s work and continues to be cited in contemporary work on Afghanistan. From Sir Alexander Burnes11 to the last governor, Olaf Caroe, Elphinstone’s thought has had a perceptible impact on the work of an entire legion of Anglophone Afghan specialists.12 In Jon Anderson’s words, Elphinstone’s *Account* provided ‘the most synoptic and […] integrated account of Afghanistan and Pakhtun society, history, geography, tribal organization, government, and more briefly, economic life’.13

12. See for example Thomas Colebrook, *The Life of Honourable Mountstuart Elphinstone* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011); Olaf Caroe, *The Pathans 550 BC–AD 1957* (London: MacMillan; St Martin’s Press, 1958).

13. Jon W. Anderson, ‘Poetics and Politics in Ethnographic Texts: A View from the Colonial Ethnography of Afghanistan’, in *Writing the Social Text: Poetics and Politics in Social Science Discourse*, ed. Richard Harvey Brown (New York: Aldine Transaction, 1992), 96.

14. Mountstuart Elphinstone, *Account of the Kingdom of Caubul, and Its Dependencies in Persia, Tartary, and India: Comprising a View of the Afgaun Nation, and a History of the Dooraunee Monarchy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 173–4.
‘both his conceptualization and understanding of Afghan society were mediated by that universe’; and the first British contacts with Afghanistan were a largely Scottish enterprise.

Scholars have since pointed out that Elphinstone was quite mistaken in the connections that he was making – the Scottish clan system was markedly different from the Afghan tribal code or pashtunwali. As has now been verified by historians and ethnographers, the differences Elphinstone discerned between what he called ‘republican’ tribes and ‘monarchial’ ones were based on an amalgamation of hearsay evidence, his involvement not only with the Edinburgh Enlightenment but with ‘a Scotland of clearances’ in which clan leaders regularly exchanged kinship for proprietorship, and an affinity for the tribes who were resisting the Afghan monarchy at the court to which he was the company’s envoy.

Second, the work is characterised by an uneasy tension between nuance and sophistication on the one hand and a lack of rigour on the other. Much of what was written by Elphinstone was based on rumour and an ‘intuitive understanding’ of the ‘Afghan culture’. Large parts of the Account are anecdotal: in effect the musings of one person’s situated experience that has only retrospectively been seen as the intellectual bedrock on which Afghanistan would be interpreted, known, and acted upon for many years to come. Elphinstone’s ‘inductive’ approach to learning about Afghanistan is manifest throughout his writings. For instance, it was through his conversation with a local tribesman on the latter’s opinion on strong government that Elphinstone based his generalisation about the tribes’ innate vehemence towards central authority. The Pathan allegedly said: ‘[w]e are content with discord, we are content with alarms, we are content with blood but we will never be content with a master’, and in response, Elphinstone perfunctorily asserted that there is a ‘reason to fear that the societies into which the nation is divided, possess within themselves a principle of revulsion and disunion, too strong to be overcome, except by such a force as, while it united the

15. Ibid., 14. See also Jane Rendall, ‘Scottish Orientalism: From Robertson to James Mill’, The Historical Journal 25, no. 1 (1982).
16. Anderson, ‘Poetics and Politics in Ethnographic Texts’, 102.
17. Ben Hopkins, The Making of Modern Afghanistan (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008); Rendall, ‘Scottish Orientalism’; and Martha McLaren, British India and British Scotland, 1780–1830: Career Building, Empire Building, and a Scottish School of Thought on Indian Governance (Akron: University of Akron Press, 2001).
18. Ibid., 102; cf. Bakshi, ‘Elphinstone’s Mission to Cabul’.
19. In Hopkins’s words: ‘For its European audience, including company officials it [the Account] set the bounds of what could be known about the Afghans’, see The Making of Modern Afghanistan, 13.
20. Stephen Tanner has called this propensity for warfare Afghanistan’s ‘enduring problem’, see his ‘Afghanistan: A Military History from Alexander the Great to the Taliban’, Journal of Slavic Military Studies 21, no 2 (481–89): The Examiner, in an article titled ‘U.S. should focus on Afghanistan’s tribal balance’, also cites the Elphinstone quote, advocating a ‘focus on developing the Afghan tribal balance and let[ting] history run its course’, http://www.examiner.com/article/u-s-should-focus-on-afghan-tribal-balance. Last accessed February 9, 2014.
whole into one solid body, would crush and obliterate the features of every one of the parts.\textsuperscript{21}

Nonetheless, Elphinstone had the political perspicacity to locate this innate republicanism in some of the particular tribes he encountered and in their equally particular history and geography – those on the South East of Afghanistan, along the ‘scientific frontier’ bordering India. Elphinstone was circumspect about the scope of his own work; his tome, nonetheless, has been understood as the key to apprehending all of Afghanistan.\textsuperscript{22} Moreover, his arguments were more often than not explicitly contextualised and anchored to his particular frame of reference. For instance, he observed that the Pashtun tribes most directly under the rule of the Afghan king were likely to have a hierarchical structure and hereditary leaders.\textsuperscript{23} The minutiae of his rich work have been largely lost in the 200 years since.

Finally, Elphinstone’s work developed the notion of ‘clan’ or ‘tribe’ in a manner which was vastly different to the ways in which it was picked up and comprehended by future generations of East India Company and colonial administrators. Account lacked any explicit racialisation of ‘tribe’, setting apart Elphinstone’s work from that of his successors. Writing at a time before the ‘white man’s burden’ was fully formulated and internalised by European travellers in distant lands, Elphinstone’s account of the Afghan tribes displayed a fresh intellectual curiosity, drew upon notions of similarity (to an ancient Scottish past) as much as it did upon notions of difference.\textsuperscript{24} Although stadial theory was central to the Scottish Enlightenment,\textsuperscript{25} and Elphinstone’s text is a ‘conjectural history’ built upon ideas of sociocultural evolution, the ‘stagist’ notion of progress that underpins his work is based more on the mode of production or subsistence of the society in question than on the colour of the skin of its inhabitants.\textsuperscript{26} Although the image of ‘tribal disorder and corruption’ featured in his work, it remained relatively unburdened by the dramatic shift in British and French ideas about empire and civilisation that took place from the end of the 18th to the mid-19th centuries, where theories of

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\item \textsuperscript{21}Cited in the article above.
\item \textsuperscript{22}Hopkins, \textit{The Making of Modern Afghanistan}, 19, argues: ‘[b]asing their larger generalizations about Afghan society on the limited knowledge of these peripheral tribes, Company servants mediated their understanding of Afghanistan through them’ (emphasis added).
\item \textsuperscript{23}Elphinstone, \textit{An Account of the Kingdom of Caubul}, 163.
\item \textsuperscript{24}It could be claimed that Elphinstone’s account was an ‘orientalist’ one but not an explicitly racist one. Or alternatively, that the category of tribe was reified but not essentialised in his writing. The strategy of Othering through notions of temporality, where the Other always exists in both a different space and a different time from us, is best expounded by Johannes Fabian in his \textit{Time and the Other: How Anthropology Makes its Object} (New York: Columbia, 2002).
\item \textsuperscript{25}Indeed, arguably, stadial theory was the main and the single most important theoretical contribution made by the Scottish Enlightenment. See Silvia Sebastiani’s \textit{The Scottish Enlightenment: Race, Gender and the Limits of Progress} (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), 55–7.
\item \textsuperscript{26}Rendall, ‘Scottish Orientalism’.
\end{itemize}
human progress became increasingly triumphalist, less nuanced and less accepting of cultural difference.  

Elphinstone’s work – although it should be noted that his embassy only reached as far as Peshawar, from where he dispatched a number of researchers (some European; some co-opted South Asian elites/collaborators) – still provides the touchstone for much of the academic work done on Afghanistan. Louis Dupree, the foremost scholar of Afghanistan of the Cold War era, said as recently as 1982 that anything articulated in reference to Afghan ‘peoples’ and ‘cultures’ since Elphinstone is merely a ‘footnote’. In 2001, *Account* was described as ‘arguably the best book on Afghanistan today’; in 2012, his understanding was said to be ‘intact and unassailable’. In sum, therefore, we are to have an entire intellectual edifice constructed upon one man’s (mammoth) study of the land, people, flora and fauna he encountered in the early 19th century. Our present-day understanding of Afghanistan as a predominantly tribal society can be traced back to him. Elphinstone’s ‘high spirited republics […] ready to defend their country against a tyrant’ have since become widely acknowledged as the basis of Afghan ‘tribal culture’. Meanwhile, the socio-political context of Elphinstone’s writing has been largely forgotten; instead we are presented with a timeless image of Afghanistan as a country of tribal disorder and corruption.

The Colonial Era and its Stereotypes

In the period after Elphinstone, knowledge of the Afghans became increasingly instrumentalised by semi-official colonial administrators wrestling with the problem of how to

27. See Jennifer Pitts, *A Turn to Empire: The Rise of Imperial Liberalism in Britain and France* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009); Uday Singh Mehta, *Liberalism and Empire: A Study in Nineteenth-Century British Liberal Thought* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999); and Sankar Muthu, *Enlightenment Against Empire* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009).

28. Louis Dupree, ‘AFGHANISTAN iv. Ethnography’, *Encyclopaedia Iranica*, Online Edition, 1982. Available at: http://www.iranicaonline.org/articles/afghanistan-iv-ethnography. Last accessed November 1, 2017.

29. Hopkins, *The Making of Modern Afghanistan*, 20.

30. Nigel Allan, ‘Defining Place and People in Afghanistan’. *Post-Soviet Geography and Economics* 42, no. 8 (2001): 545–60.

31. Hanifi, ‘Quandaries of the Afghan Nation’, in *Under the Drones: Modern Lives in the Afghanistan-Pakistan Borderlands*, eds. Shahzad Bazir and Robert Crews (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2012).

32. See also Charles Lindholm, ‘Images of the Pathan: the Usefulness of Colonial Ethnography’, *European Journal of Sociology* 21, no. 2 (1980); Edward Ingram, *In Defence of British India: Great Britain in the Middle East 1775–1842* (London: Routledge, 2013); Nabi Misdag, Afghanistan: Political Frailty and External Influence (London: Routledge, 2006); and Richard Tapper, ed., *The Conflict of Tribe and State in Iran and Afghanistan* (London: Croon Helm, 1983).

33. Elphinstone, *An Account of the Kingdom of Caubul*.
work with and/or control the Afghan population. These contingencies resulted in the development of stereotypes which were each aligned with two opposing courses of action. The first aspect of the colonial literature was therefore the concomitant development of two different stereotypes, each with its attendant policy, as personified in the opinions and work of two high profile British authors: administrator Sir George Campbell, and his contemporary, the political agent and prominent Afghan expert, Sir (Dr) Henry Walter Bellew. A second aspect of the colonial literature, seen particularly clearly in Campbell, was a further exacerbation of Elphinstone’s tendency to attribute differing and even contradictory character traits to different Afghan ‘tribes’. Below, I examine these different trends and their associated stereotypes.

Sir George Campbell (1824–92) was the lieutenant-governor of Bengal and a leading figure in the energetic ‘Punjab School’ of British Indian administrators who saw themselves as ‘looking to the happiness and welfare of the masses’. He said of himself that he was ‘in heart almost a Panjaubee’ and was criticised for being of a ‘revolutionary kind’ by his British peers in India. He published widely on ethnological subjects.34 Campbell acknowledged a significant intellectual debt to Elphinstone.35 But he nonetheless warned of the dangers of applying Elphinstone’s Scottish analogy to the Afghans, especially in a military context: ‘I have heard Afghanistan compared to our Scotch Highlands. I have heard it said, “You put down those troublesome Highlanders and turned their hills into delightful recreation and shooting grounds – why should not you put down the Afghan tribes in the way?”’.36 Instead, Campbell argued that the problem of Afghanistan was of an entirely different scale: that the country was bigger, the mountains higher, and the people less acquiescent when faced with authority. Highly critical of the British equivocation with regard to taking a decision about Afghanistan, he believed that Britain ‘must either go back or go forward’. 37 However, he asserted on more than one occasion that to ‘go back’ – that a ‘close’ policy – was the best option, in order to avoid a veritable hornet’s nest:

[m]y experience is, that if you have to deal with hornets only two courses are possible – one, not to stir them up or aggravate them, the other to smoke them out and take the nest. To stir them up, put your hand into the nest and keep it there is not what a wise man would do; yet that is what I am afraid of, if our present position is maintained.38

34. G. le G. Norgate, ‘Campbell, Sir George(1824–1892)’, rev. David Steele, Oxford Dictionary of National Biography (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004). Available at: http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/4499. Last accessed November 1, 2017.
35. George Campbell, Afghan Frontier: the Substance of a Speech not Delivered (1879), see Digitised Afghanistan Materials in English from the Arthur Paul Afghanistan Collection, University of Nebraska-Lincoln, 2010, 20, 22, 2. Available at: http://digitalcommons.unl.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1247&context=afghanenglish. Last accessed November 6, 2017.
36. Ibid., 57.
37. Ibid., 80.
38. Ibid., 6. This metaphor is reminiscent of the one Sir William Kaye used when he referred to the Afghans as ‘wild horses’ that could not be reined in by ‘silken braids’. In spite of this, Campbell on the whole was more positive about the tribes and also more cautious in dealing with them.
In keeping with his advocacy of a cautious policy towards the frontier, Campbell emphasised the ‘ungovernable’ nature of the Afghan tribes, borrowing selectively from sources available to him. For instance, he offered what has now become a banality:

[W]e know by painful experience that the Afghans are a people of a totally different character – turbulent – bred from infancy to the use of arms – and with a passion for independence in which they are exceeded by no people in this world. This love of independence is such as to make them intolerant, not only of foreign rule, but almost of any national, tribal or family rule. They are a people among whom every man would be a law unto himself.39

‘These traits’, he wrote, ‘are not of a passing kind; the Afghans are not to be tamed by subjection and peace; nothing induces them to surrender that love of independence which seems to be the essence of their nature [and the][…] character of the people occupying so difficult and inaccessible a country’.40 Ironically enough, the conclusion he draws from these conenate Afghan characteristics is that Afghans are inherently ‘democratic’ and that ‘indigenous self-governing institutions’ form the ‘ancient law of the Afghan race’.41 For Campbell Afghans are not easily manipulated and are astute political actors rather than religious fanatics: ‘their religion sits very lightly on them. They are more governed by their own customary laws than by the Mahommedan Code, and seem just as ready to sell their swords to an unbeliever as to any one else, even though it is to fight against believers’.42

The writings of Campbell can be instructively read in opposition to those of Henry Walter Bellew (1834–92). Bellew was an army medical officer born in Nusserabad, India. As a civil surgeon in Peshawar he became ‘well-known among the Frontier peoples, whose language he spoke and with whose manners and feelings he was familiar’. Bellew allegedly belonged to ‘the school of dedicated Anglo-Indian officials who helped to build up and consolidate the British Empire in India by acquiring a thorough knowledge of indigenous customs and modes of thought’. 43 H.W. Bellew was considered to be

39. Ibid., 12.
40. Ibid., 2, emphasis added.
41. Ibid., 69–70. This does not prevent him from dwelling upon his naïve, even faintly ludicrous idea of establishing a ‘porter’s lodge’ at the foothills of the Khyber which would grant admittance on the basis of British diktat. In Campbell’s own memorable words: ‘I threw out for consideration that possibly we might establish an easily-garrisoned hill fort at the mouth of the Khyber – a sort of “Porter’s Lodge”, as I described it – where would be kept the key of the gate, and admittance given or refused as we should desire’ (Ibid., 40–41).
42. Ibid., 25.
43. Henry Walter Bellew published widely and his works include the Journal of a Political Mission to Afghanistan in 1857 (London: Smith Elder and Co., 1862); A Dictionary of the Pukhto or Pukshto Language (New Delhi: Asian Educational Services, India 2005); Afghanistan and the Afghans: Being a Brief Review of the History of the Country, and Account of Its People, with a Special Reference to the Present Crisis and War with the Amir Sher Ali Khan (London: S. Low, Marston, Searle, & Rivington, 1879); ‘The Races of Afghanistan: Being a Brief Account of the Principal Nations Inhabiting that Country
a leading expert on Afghanistan, his work extolled as some of the finest on the region. His famous *Races of Afghanistan*, first published in 1880, has been called the first real ethnography of the country and he is said to have been intimately familiar with the language, culture and politics of Afghanistan at a time when Afghanistan was still the land of mystery for most British officials. Bellew himself wrote in 1867 that ‘[t]he officials with the British force who could claim any acquaintance with the Afghan languages were to be counted on the digits’. To rectify this inadequacy, he went on to write the *Pushto Instructor*, which became the primary linguistic guide for British officers in Afghanistan.

Bellew was more sanguine than Campbell about the prospect of taming the wild Afghan tribes, insisting that everything could be ‘put right’ by rectifying the frontier. He writes:

> But what does the reconstruction of the frontier imply? By reconstruction of the frontier is implied the subjection of the border tribes[...]. We must now change our policy entirely; we must now alter our tactics altogether. Instead of, as heretofore, settling our border quarrels by expeditions against the offending tribes, we must now, and for the future, take advantage of them to settle our border line. We must, in future, wage war with each offending tribe. We must annex their hills, disarm the people, and reduce the clans to subjection. We must tell them that they are bad neighbours, not fit to be free; that we have tried them for twenty years, and found them habitually abusing their independence; that they are no longer tolerable as neighbours; and that we now come to take their country under our rule, and to reduce them to subjection.

Bellew was explicit in his desire not merely to hold the passes but to occupy and control the entire country. He therefore constructed the Afghans as unruly but not ungovernable, arguing that once civilised they would be grateful to be ruled by a legitimate authority. Bellew’s conviction about the urgent need to bring the frontier under British rule and the relative ease with which this could be achieved was not all that set him apart from Campbell. He also ascribed prime importance to the religiosity of the Afghan tribes.
Bellew said of the Pathans in *Races of Afghanistan*, that ‘[t]he only common bond of union among them is that of religion, and to this their devotion is of a fanatic kind, owing to the blindness of their ignorance and the general barbarism of their social condition’.  

The contrast between Campbell and Bellew illuminates Paul Titus’ argument about how the British vacillated between two competing policies in Afghanistan – a ‘close border’ and a ‘forward policy’. Those administrators who experienced frequent confrontations with tribal groups whilst enforcing the more antagonistic ‘forward policy’ developed a negative opinion of the tribes. In contrast, the administrators following the ‘close border’ policies granted the tribes more autonomy and had friendlier relations and therefore a better perception of them. Bellew’s and Campbell’s both encapsulate one of the two main strategies formulated to grapple with the frontier peoples. One stressed the Afghans’ love of independence and democracy as evidence in favour of a less ambitious policy towards the tribes, the other belaboured the urgent need to bring civilisation to an intractable but not unmanageable people.

As Anderson argues, the British were equally guided, and divided, by ‘taken-for-granted, literally common-sense ideas’ that defined the racialised worldviews of high Victorian imperialists. Even as they arrived at opposing conclusions, Campbell and Bellew’s descriptions of the Afghans drew upon a familiar stock of stereotypes mostly inherited from their Scottish predecessors and reworked to align with Victorian preoccupations with ‘character’ and ‘human nature’.

The literature on the Afghan tribes in the post-Elphinstone 19th century era saw an increasing reification and stereotyping of the Pashtuns especially in relation to Baluch tribes, the other dominant inhabitants of the Kingdom of Kabul. Elphinstone was the first to draw a distinction between the Pakhtun (or ‘Afghan’) tribes and their Baluch compatriates. Later 19th century work further ossified the Baluch/Pathan distinction and was quicker to attribute distinctions between these groups in terms of inherent character. Campbell himself notes: ‘I may say of the Belooches generally, that it is well-known to our political officers that they are in their character materially different from the Afghans, being much less rabidly independent […] and more amenable to be dealt with through their chiefs’. He also added ‘and though not free from predatory habits, the Belooches are much more tractable and easy to manage than the Afghans. In fact, we have already both by treaty and by occupation complete access to the Belooch country’.

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48. Bellew, *Races of Afghanistan*, 12.
49. Paul Titus, ‘Honor the Baloch, Buy the Pashtun: Stereotypes, Social Organization and History in Western Pakistan’, *Modern Asian Studies* 32, no. 3 (1998).
50. Anderson, ‘Poetics and Politics in Ethnographic Texts’, 105.
51. For the Victorian preoccupation with character, see Stefan Collini, ‘The Idea of “Character” in Victorian Political Thought’, *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society* 35: 29–50 (1985); and Peter Mandler, *The English National Character: From Edmund Burke to Tony Blair* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007).
52. Campbell, *Afghan Frontier*, 30–1.
53. Ibid., 61.
The contrasting stereotypes of the Baluch and the Pashtun resulted from differences in the social organisation of the two peoples, differences which predated the colonial era but were crystallised and internalised thereafter.\textsuperscript{54} The British preferred to interact with the Baluch over the Pathan, because the former were thought of as honourable men with a ‘tribal organisation’, and the latter as ‘shrewd and unethical’ – stereotypes commonly associated with ‘stranger communities and middlemen minorities’.\textsuperscript{55} Homi Bhabha’s understanding of the stereotype as a ‘form of knowledge and identification that vacillates between what is always “in place”, already known, and something that must be anxiously repeated’, can be seen at work in the British interaction with, and management of, the Pashtun and Baluch people.\textsuperscript{56} The repetitious assertion that the Pashtuns are basically ‘ungovernable’ can be attributed to this colonial anxiety.

A key development in political use of the ‘tribe’ during this period can be seen in the ‘pacification’ and control of the frontier and its population. The operationalisation of ‘tribe’ by frontier officers reflects the impact that colonial administration had on the genealogy of tribe, of which the reification of the Baluch/Pashtun distinction is one example. However, there was still a tendency at this time to account for differences between tribes and the political, economic and social backdrops against which these tribes operated. In an instructive passage on Pathan tribes, Campbell claimed that ‘[t]hey have the character of being avaricious, mercenary, treacherous, and predatory’. He, nonetheless goes on to explain in considerable detail how each of these characteristics developed – as a result of ‘nature’, ‘necessity’ and ‘situation’.\textsuperscript{57} Moreover, even as, over time and with enough anxious repetition, British assessments of the people of the frontier began to harden, on the whole, the tribes were not written off as beyond the pale of civilisation. The British in the colonial era still operated with the assumption that ‘their [the tribes’] faults were caused by their institutions and could be alleviated by humanitarian reforms’.\textsuperscript{58}

The 20th Century: the Increasing Essentialisation of the Tribe

Campbell and Bellew represent a kind of intermediate step between a fairly fluid conception of tribes under Elphinstone and an essentialising discourse on the tribe that matured in the 20th century. In the late 19th and early 20th century, these significant differences between how the British dealt with the Southern and the Northern tribes, and between the Pashtun and the Baluch, while periodically registered by 19th century observers,
gradually stopped playing a role in explaining why these tribes were so different from
each other. Over this period, the theme of cyclical or countervailing manifestations,
one frequently analysed by anthropologists, gave way to increasingly ‘innatist’ under-
standings of character. Whilst ‘character’ was a prominent leitmotif of many mid to late
19th century texts, even including Elphinstone, and not exclusively a 20th century shift,
the mutation of the discourse into a water-tight classification of the Afghan people is
evident by the early 20th century. This is best exemplified in Thomas Holdich’s’ account
of his 20 year career as a surveyor and military officer on India’s Western frontier.

Holdich distinguishes between the Baluch and the Pathan on the basis of their way of
fighting, their organisation and their ‘character’. The Pashtuns are portrayed as entrepre-
neurial, religious and treacherous even towards their relatives, while the Baluch are por-
trayed as forthright, honest and especially concerned with honour. Holdich echoes the
observations of many other colonial officials, missionaries and journalists before him,
albeit in an ever more essentialist fashion:

[T]he Baluch is easier to deal with and to control than the Pathan, owing to his tribal organization,
and his freedom from bigoted fanaticism or blind allegiance to his priest. He respects and
honours the chief of his clan, who possesses far greater authority in the tribal councils than is
the case with the Pathan. The Pathan is a republican of the worst type. He is a law unto himself,
and although he is very much under the influence of the Mullah, he has always an eye to
business even in his most fanatical outbursts.

While he keeps this distinction between the Baluch and the Pashtun alive, Holdich’s
statements lack the subtlety that characterised Elphinstone’s work and are even less
measured than Campbell’s. He continues: ‘[t]he Pathan will make use of any stratagem
or subterfuge that suits his purpose. He will shoot his own relations just as soon as his
enemy, possibly sooner – and he will shoot them from behind’.

If Holdich represents the culmination of the shift in colonial writing by focusing on the
inherent ‘character’ of the Afghan people with its ‘natural’ locus in tribalism, then Olaf Caroe’s
The Pathans, written in 1957, represents its apogee. The last British governor of the North-
West Frontier, Caroe’s exemplary text, part memoir, part cultural historiography, ostensibly
covers the period from 550 BC to AD 1957 and claims to document the life and times of the
Pashtun people through the ages. His descriptions are in no way wholly negative, but they

59. Akbar S. Ahmed, ‘The Colonial Encounter on the North-West Frontier Province: Myth and
Mystification’, Economic and Political Weekly 14, nos. 51–52 (1979); Thomas Holdich, The
Indian Borderland 1880–1900 (London: Methuen & Co., 1909), 186; Caroe, The Pathans,
276.
60. Titus, ‘Honor the Baloch, Buy the Pashtun’. See also Anderson, ‘Poetics and Politics in
Ethnographic Texts’.
61. Holdich, The Indian Borderland.
62. Cited in Titus, ‘Honor the Baloch, Buy the Pashtun’, 663.
63. See for instance, Elphinstone, An Account of the Kingdom of Caubul, 162–3 and 247–53.
64. Holdich, The Indian Borderland, 185.
65. This is equally true of the work of those cited above. Elphinstone, Bellew, Campbell and
Caroe all speak of the racial superiority of the Afghan in comparison to Indians, for instance.
typify the uniformity with which the Afghans, and the Pathans in particular, came to be viewed by their British overlords. Caroe’s extended metaphorical references to the tribesmen as wild predatory creatures have been instrumental in carrying forward and cementing the allegorical construction of Afghanistan as the land of beasts that either need taming or are unsalvageable. Not unsurprisingly, the period also saw the development of the political use of ‘tribe’ in the ‘pacification’ and control of the frontier and its population. The operationalisation of ‘tribe’ by frontier officers shows the ways in which colonial knowledge impacted on the genealogy of the term and its subsequent use.

After the three Anglo-Afghan wars and with the dismemberment of the British Empire in the mid-20th century, strategic and military interest in Afghanistan petered out and it came to be viewed as a useful, if largely unimportant, laboratory for experiments with ‘modernization’ theory. To most observers in the West, from the time of the British withdrawal to the early 21st century, Afghanistan was largely considered a blip on the world map, except for the brief interlude that was the Soviet intervention. This second burst of Pashtuns onto the world scene as freedom fighters battling imperialism and communism in the guise of the Soviet Union was preserved in popular memory through films such as the 1988 blockbuster Rambo III. Although much of the fighting was conducted by non-Pashtuns in Afghanistan, including Tajiks, Uzbeks and Hazaras, and the Pashtuns who were most vocal in opposition to the occupation were in fact in Pakistan, the image of the Pathan as ferocious defender of the homeland endured. Not only does this one-dimensional image mistakenly conflate all Afghan identity with Pathan identity, it also completely bypasses an entire strand of non-violent Pashtun tradition embodied by the Khudai Khidmatgar, or the Red Shirts. As Mukulika Banerjee explains:

A telling example is an old British Army field manual which states: ‘The Afghan character is a strange blend of virtue and vice’, and peremptorily concludes that ‘[t]he race in short is a mass of contradictions which are accentuated by the strong individuality of the people’. See General Staff of India, General Staff of India, Handbook of Kandahar Province (Simla: Government of India, 1993), 7.

66. Olaf Caroe, The Pathans, 393; see also Evelyn Berkeley Howell, Mizh: A Monograph on the Government’s Relations with the Mahsud Tribe (Karachi: Oxford University Press, 1979), 89.

67. See Nick Cullather, ‘Damming Afghanistan: Modernization in a Buffer State’, The Journal of American History 89, no. 2 (2002); Timothy Nunan, Humanitarian Intervention: Global Development in Cold War Afghanistan (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016); Arnold J. Toynbee, Between Oxus and Jumna (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1961).

68. Recent historiography has challenged this notion and shown just how invasive and restructuring this period was and the ways in which the Americans ‘modernised’ the South and the Soviets the north had a profound impact on how Afghanistan was imagined as a postcolonial nation. For more on this, see Nunan, Humanitarian Intervention.

69. Richard Tapper, ‘Studying Pashtuns in Barth’s Shadow’, in Hopkins and Marsden, Beyond Swat.

70. The historical discussion below, however, uses ‘Afghan’ interchangeably with ‘Pashtun’ or ‘Pathan’ in order to remain consistent with the historical archive in which it is located. This may appear confusing, but the Persian word ‘Afghan’ was first employed to refer to the Pashtun tribes, which predates the creation of the Afghan state.
between 1930 and 1947 the Pathans, quite against their wild and martial reputation, had employed not rifles and guerrilla tactics but rather the method of disciplined non-violent civil disobedience against the British. Moreover, belying their reputation for feuding and factionalism, they had remained united for almost two decades.\footnote{Mukulika Banerjee, *The Pathan Unarmed: Opposition & Memory in the North West Frontier* (Santa Fe: School of American Research Press, 2000), 3.}

The latter half of the 20th century found the tribes placed, if momentarily, on a pedestal, lionised as holy warriors in the United States, in accordance with the logics of the Cold War. The Soviet Union was vilified, and Afghan ‘freedom fighters’ became romanticised in Anglophone public discourse. Thus, on what was celebrated as the second ‘Afghanistan Observance Day’, 21 March 1983, Ronald Reagan, then President of the United States, could remark ‘[T]o watch the courageous Afghan freedom fighters battle modern arsenals with simple hand-held weapons is an inspiration to those who love freedom. Their courage teaches us a great lesson – that there are things in this world worth defending’\footnote{University of Texas archives. Available at: http://www.reagan.utexas.edu/archives/speeches/1983/32183e.htm}.

Whilst the collapse of the USSR saw Western interest in Afghanistan dissipate, the events of 11 September 2001 brought the country firmly back on the ‘map’. This led to a resuscitation of the dualisms and stereotypes discussed above, albeit buttressed by a new grammar of difference and enunciated by more insidious vocabularies of power.

‘Tribal’ Afghanistan in the War Against Terror

In a post 9/11 world, writings that focused on the ‘difficult’ or obdurate nature of the Afghan ‘tribes’ came to be favoured because they helped to devise a cogent plan of action vis-à-vis the abiding ‘problem of the tribes’. We can see the burgeoning of literature that focuses on tribal structure as the key to understanding Afghanistan’s social, political and economic organisation that borrows from but also caricatures the experience of the British administrators. In the 21st century, Afghanistan is still an object of inquiry about which definitive claims are made by political administrators in need of a ‘quick-fix’ to whatever mess they find themselves in. The problem is compounded by the fact that the work of these modern-day administrators relies heavily on the scholarship of their predecessors, which was either written close to two centuries previously or is presented in the form of travelogues and personal memoirs.\footnote{For example, Martin Ewans, *Afghanistan: A New History* (London: Routledge, 2002); Ahmed Rashid, *Taliban: The Story of the Afghan Warlords* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2001); Tanner, *Afghanistan*.}

This is especially the case with the literature on the tribes in Afghanistan, but eventually influences the way in which all aspects of the country are studied, contributing to what M. Jamil Hanifi, with regard to work on Afghanistan, has called the metaphorical black hole or ‘Bermuda Triangle’ that absorbs much and produces little.\footnote{M. Jamil Hanifi, ‘An Alternative Approach to Afghanistan’, *Zero Anthropology*, 2011. Available at: https://zeroanthropology.net/2011/01/29/an-alternative-approach-to-afghanistan/. Last accessed November 2, 2017.}
Exemplifying this trend in 2009, Major Jim Gant asserted that: ‘the central cultural fact about Afghanistan is that it is constituted of tribes. Not individuals, not Western-style citizens – but tribes and tribesmen’, and that ‘the answer to the problems that face the Afghan people, as well as other future threats to US security in the region, will be found in understanding […] the tribal system of Afghanistan’.75 The fact that these words have been written by a US Army Major who wields significant influence in the country is not incidental. Gant’s paper, titled ‘A Strategy for Success in Afghanistan: One Tribe at a Time’, has been circulated widely within the US military, the Pentagon and Congress, and, in the words of The Washington Post, ‘lays out a strategy focused on empowering Afghanistan’s ancient tribal system’. Although Gant is not an uncontroversial figure, he has been described as none other than the ‘Lawrence of Afghanistan’.76

Gant had been assigned to deploy in Iraq, but with senior military and civilian leaders, including Defense Secretary Robert M. Gates, General Stanley McChrystal (the top US commander in Afghanistan at the time) and General David Petraeus (the head of the US Central Command) expressly endorsing Gant’s views, he was instead sent back to Afghanistan in 2010 to ‘work on tribal issues’.77 McChrystal distributed a copy of ‘One Tribe at a Time’ to all the commanders in Afghanistan, while Petraeus similarly claimed ‘Major Jim Gant’s paper is very impressive – so impressive, in fact, that I shared it widely’.78 We are told that ‘[i]ntellectually, Gant is driven by a belief that Special Forces soldiers should immerse themselves in the culture of foreign fighters’, and that in Afghanistan’s case this ‘culture’ is overwhelmingly, even exclusively, ‘tribal’.79

In a similar vein, Dr Mike Martin, former British Army Officer, whose self-proclaimed intention was to write a ‘non-Orientalist’ account of the war in Helmand, can write without a trace of irony: ‘[t]he early adoption of Islam has generated an exceptional degree of interwovenness between religion and culture that is an enduring theme of Pushtun politics and identity. This feeds into the sense of superiority felt by the Pushtun, particularly those who inhabit the south-west of Afghanistan’.80 Equally unselfconsciously, Thomas Johnson, director of the Culture and Conflict Studies programme at the Naval Postgraduate School in Monterey, California, and ‘a leading expert on the Pashtun tribal areas’, declares: ‘[t]he problem of course is finding people willing to negotiate.

75. Major Jim Gant, A Strategy for Success in Afghanistan: One Tribe at a Time’. Available at: http://www.globalsecurity.org/military/library/report/2009/2009_one_tribe_at_a_time.pdf. Last accessed November 2, 2017; see also Dan Green, ‘Going Tribal: Enlisting Afghanistan’s Tribes’, Small Wars Journal. Available at: http://www.smallwarsjournal.com. Last accessed November 2, 2017.
76. Ann Scott Tyson, ‘Jim Gant, the Green Beret who could win the War in Afghanistan’, The Washington Post, 17 January 2010. Note that, as a Green Beret, Gant is part of a long tradition of unconventional warfare.
77. Ibid.
78. Ibid.
79. Ibid.
80. Mike Martin, A Brief History of Helmand (n.p.: Afghan Coin Centre, 2011), 14. Martin was instrumental in designing and implementing the UK’s Culture and Human Terrain Capability and is also author of An Intimate War (London: Hurst, 2014).
Pashtuns generally will not negotiate when they sense they are winning. Hence, you see that the ‘Taliban are “willing” to negotiate, but only after international forces leave the country’.81 These ideas have been most notoriously mobilised in Counter-insurgency doctrine, especially in the shape of the US Department of Defense’s Human Terrain System (HTS).

The HTS is a United States Army, Training and Doctrine Command (TRADOC) support programme employing personnel from the social sciences – disciplines such as anthropology, sociology, political science, regional studies and linguistics – to provide military commanders and staff with a particular and instrumentalised understanding of the local population (i.e., the ‘human terrain’) in the regions in which they are deployed. The Human Terrain Teams (HTTs) have come under intense criticism because they have deployed anthropological knowledge for dubious (neocolonial) violent ends. This ‘weaponisation of knowledge’ whilst certainly not new, is crucial to understanding how information and knowledge has been used to control, influence and depict certain peoples as ‘alien others’. This has led to a highly racialised and asymmetrical postcolonial world order that is reproduced through our subconscious biases and ingrained prejudices. The HTS undergirded by ‘social science’s’ purportedly ‘authentic’ claims about Afghan society and culture, reaf-

81. Cited in The Mail and The Globe, ‘Graeme Smith: Portrait of the Enemy’, 22 March 2008; see especially Ehsaan Entezaar, Afghanistan 101: Understanding Afghan Culture (Bloomington: Xlibris, 2007), a widely disseminated text that at its core functions as a long list of stereotypes about Afghanistan couched in academic jargon.
82. Benjamin Hopkins and Magnus Marsden, Fragments of the Afghan Frontier (London: Hurst & Co., 2011), 7.
83. As stated on his faculty webpage: http://www.american.edu/sis/faculty/akbar.cfm. Last accessed November 2, 2017.
84. His recent book, The Thistle and the Drone: How America’s War on Terror Became a Global War on Tribal Islam (Washington: Brookings Institute, 2013), is the single best example of this argument.
or a Muslim tribesman, this manner of combat was not only dishonorable but also smacked of sacrilege. By appropriating the powers of God through the drone, in its capacity to see and not be seen and deliver death without warning, trial, or judgment, Americans were by definition blasphemous.85

More problematically, Ahmed’s writings consciously and perhaps subconsciously draw on the imperial literature which this article has catalogued. He cites British colonial administrators including H.W. Bellew and Olaf Caroe on multiple occasions to make a case for ‘the Pathan’s’ fine appearance and indomitable spirit.86 Ahmed makes a distinction between nang (honour) and qalang (rent, taxation) Pashtuns, which is strongly reminiscent of Elphinstone’s report of hearsay to the effect that remoter tribes were more ‘republican’ than those he had encountered directly.87 Moreover, Ahmed’s reification of the Pakhtun into these two types is strangely based on an old Pashtun proverb: ‘Honor (nang) ate up the mountains, taxes (qalang) ate up the plains’, which in his own words ‘sums up the historical divide well’.88 Ahmed maintains that nang Pashtuns represent tribal purity and that the qalang are examples of the inevitable corruption of idyllic tribal lifestyle by the rapacious modern state.89 He postulates: ‘[M]ore than anything, the nang prize their freedom. Even under British rule, the authority’s jurisdiction rarely exceeded more than 100 yards on either side of the main roads. In the most profound sense, the nang people were probably among the freest in the world’.90 Ahmed, then, unwittingly contributes to the buoying up of an ill-fitting anthropological term, one that is employed and harnessed by Western militaries to placate the Afghan populace in counterinsurgency operations.91

Ahmed also invokes the popular trope of Pashtun people as inherently revenge-seeking. On Ahmed’s account, the United States is perceived as being on ‘the warpath against Islam’, and therefore has activated ‘the code of revenge’ against itself. As

85. Ibid., 2.
86. See for instance, ibid., 16; and also Akbar S. Ahmed, ‘Colonial Encounter on the North-West Frontier Province: Myth and Mystification’, Economic and Political Weekly 14, no. 51–52 (1979): 2093, 2096.
87. Akbar S. Ahmed, ‘Tribes and States in Waziristan’, in Tapper, Conflict of Tribe and State in Iran and Afghanistan; Akbar S. Ahmed, ‘The Code of the Hills’, Foreign Policy, 6 May 2011. This distinction also finds echoes in Frederick Barth’s work, where he contrasts bar (upper, remote) and kuz (lower, toward the government centre) Pashtuns. Other observers have made similar distinctions: for example, Peter Mayne’s essentialist and rather confusing one between the Pathan as ‘settled’ and Pakhtun as ‘independent’. See Peter Mayne, Journey to the Pathan (New York: Doubleday, 1955). Also Anderson, ‘Khan and Khel: Dialectics of Pakhtun Tribalism’, in Tapper, Conflict of Tribe and State in Iran and Afghanistan, 128.
88. Ahmed, ‘The Code of the Hills’.
89. Ahmed, ‘Tribes and States in Waziristan’. See also Tapper, ‘Introduction’, and Anderson, ‘Khan and Khel: Dialectics of Pakhtun Tribalism’, in the same volume.
90. This is evocative of James Scott’s argument about the Malay peasantry in his Weapons of the Weak: Everyday Forms of Peasant Resistance (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1987).
91. David Price, Weaponizing Anthropology (London: Counterpunch, 2011) explores the mobilisation of anthropological knowledge for the spurious purposes of war and intervention eloquently.
evidence adduced to support this argument, Ahmed makes recourse to an old Pashtun saying: ‘I took revenge after 100 years, and I took it too soon’. Ahmed, the good-willed defender of the Pashtun people, ends up essentialising them by reducing them to tribal, unassuming, god-fearing, simple men. In romanticising the lifeways of these ‘tribal’ peoples, he merely reproduces the fissure between ‘us’ and ‘them’, even while claiming to be on ‘their’ side. As is the norm in traditional ‘Orientalist’ narratives, ‘their’ worlds are accessed through antiquated traditions and their thoughts deciphered through anachronistic proverbs and dubious aphorisms.

There are other ‘sympathisers’ whose writing on Afghanistan is equally problematic. In his Wars of Afghanistan, historian Peter Tomsen describes Afghanistan’s political community as a ‘tribal incubator’, uncritically regurgitating the vocabulary that was devised to make Afghanistan’s diverse social structures legible in the colonial era. In his diplomatic history, Tomsen posits that violence was ‘an accepted and expected option in Afghan tribal politics when consensus was out of reach’, claims that the country is ‘the land of the blood feud’, frequently invokes references to Afghanistan’s ‘tribal fighters’ and goes as far as to argue that ‘fragmented, tribal Afghanistan’ exists in a ‘Hobbesian state of chaos’. Stephen Tanner, who similarly identifies the ‘tribes’ as the major obstacle to Afghan nationhood, argues: ‘In the early 1800s the tribes fell away from the concept of Afghan nationhood that had once seemed so promising under Ahmad Shah Durrani. At the beginning of the nineteenth century, the people actually devolved back into local tribal government, blissfully unaware of how the rest of the world was evolving’. For him the ‘tribes’ – and how to manage them – remains Afghanistan’s ‘enduring problem’.

While the British ex-Foreign Secretary David Miliband can hardly be said to command the authority and expertise of the authors cited above, he nevertheless advances an argument strongly redolent of colonial scholarship in his 2010 article for The New York Review of Books. Citing lessons from Britain’s experience in the 19th century and the Soviet Union’s in the 20th, he dwells on the vital importance of ‘working with the tribes’. As I have sought to show here, this has increasingly become the standard story: ‘working with the tribes’, ‘engaging the tribes’ and ‘understanding tribal matters’ are the sine qua non of a ‘successful Afghan strategy’. This has fed into visual representations of Afghanistan as a country divided along tribal or ethnic lines. ‘Ethnic maps’ now proliferate and figure prominently in country reports published by the World Bank and the

92. Ahmed, ‘The Code of the Hills’.
93. Peter Tomsen, The Wars of Afghanistan; incidentally, a book review in Foreign Policy claims that ‘the tribal situation in Afghanistan is clearly defined’ in the text. See http://www.foreignpolicyjournal.com/2012/11/30/book-review-the-wars-of-afghanistan. Last accessed November 2, 2017.
94. Tomsen, The Wars of Afghanistan, 5.
95. Ibid., 214.
96. Ibid., 127.
97. Tanner, Afghanistan, 326.
98. David Miliband, ‘How to End the War in Afghanistan’, The New York Review of Books, April 29 2010.
United States Agency for International Development (USAID), among other organisations. The Naval Postgraduate School, operated by the United States Navy, in its programme on ‘Culture and Conflict Studies’ uses many of these maps – with homogenous colour to ‘locate’ tribal peoples – to help its students navigate social difference in its courses on Afghanistan. Not only are these maps unavoidably arbitrary political acts, but, in an effort to render Afghanistan legible, they also serve to reify difference on the basis of categories that may have little resonance on the ground. And while (neo)colonial practices of cartography are problematic for a number of reasons, and continue to be the subject of critique, given the lack of sustained surveys and data in Afghanistan, even the nominal accuracy of these ‘tribal’ maps is disputable.

Conclusions and Wider Implications

Through the particular articulation of the concept of ‘tribe’, this article has shown that the discourse on Afghanistan is both typical and atypical of imperial modes of thought. It is typical in that the notion of ‘tribe’, not unlike those of ‘race’, ‘caste’ and ‘ethnicity’ found elsewhere in the colonies, has been mined and instrumentalised in the service of empire. This has far-reaching implications for the study of imperialism in IR and for knowledge production in global politics more generally which resonates with important work done on colonial concepts, framing and imaginings. Tracing the genealogy of ‘tribe’ in Afghanistan, however, also reveals the ways in which Afghanistan as a discursive regime is exceptional. It is distinctive in the way it has been carved out in accordance with the cadences of colonial interest in the region. Unlike colonial India, imperial interest in Afghanistan ebbed and flowed, alternating between long periods of apathy and short concentrated bouts of intense concern and involvement. As such, this has led to a sort of ‘emergency episteme’ of the Afghan tribe, a familiar convocation of alterity at the behest of empire, but without the intellectual, economic and emotional energies that were expended in the construction of other idioms of difference such as race, caste and ethno-nationalism. Moreover, the colonial genealogy of this concept has been largely elided.

99. See for instance, Nancy Lindisfarne, ‘Exceptional Pashtuns’, in Hopkins and Marsden, Beyond Swat, 123.
100. John Pickles, A History of Spaces: Cartographic Reason, Mapping and the Geo-coded World (New York: Routledge, 2004).
101. Nicholas B. Dirks, Castes of Mind: Colonialism and the Making of Modern India (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2011) is an excellent example of a work similarly dedicated to the evolution of a concept: that of caste in British India. He demonstrates that caste, in the way it is presently conceived, was the product of a concrete historical encounter between the colonisers and the colonised. Although literature on the inadequacy of the concept of caste as a ‘guide’ to Indian culture continues to proliferate, there is no equivalent work on the notion of tribe. But see Charles Tripp, A History of Iraq (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), for an account of how the British handled and literally ‘made up’ tribal difference with their Mandate in Iraq, based on their experience in Afghanistan, and often implemented policies to align with their notion of ‘indigenous tribal authority’.
There has been a distinct paucity of resources devoted to studying the region and therefore only limited local knowledge, a lack (until recently) of any profound academic engagement with the country, and most importantly, a disconnect between practitioners, scholars and local populations. Even at the height of imperial involvement in Afghanistan, there were no monographic studies of tribes, few or no income and production surveys, and no colonial ethnography on religious leadership and other networks of the kind that were vital in mobilising armed resistance to the British.\(^{102}\) Consequently, the imperative to churn out massive amounts of ‘knowledge’ and be acquainted with the ‘facts’ about Afghanistan – in a compressed period of time, for immediate political purposes – has become an enduring feature of the scholarship on Afghanistan. As Anderson has indicated, nearly all the colonial ethnography that emerged on the Northwest Frontier of British India, and Afghanistan more generally, was gathered, sifted and culled for political intelligence. In his own words: ‘in direct service of imperial design, it [the ethnography of the frontier] was a genuine handmaiden of imperialism by comparison to the camp follower of anthropological ethnography’.\(^{103}\) Anderson characterises the change in the literature from a state of multiplicity to one of conformity.\(^{104}\)

Over time and with repetition, any nuanced appreciations of social relations, intuitive and incomplete as they may have been, gave way to a generalised and abstracted understanding of tribal or Afghan ‘character’ that in effect was ‘a list of traits that only restated the problem’.\(^{105}\) The abstracted conception of Afghan character came to figure prominently in the official colonial institutional memory, and by the time the British Empire collapsed, all understanding of Afghanistan came to rely heavily on this trope, as a ‘common-sense’ crutch for the necessary articulation of difference.\(^{106}\) As Bhabha reminds us, the processes of subjectification that these tropes and stereotypes unleash always affect both colonial subjects – coloniser and colonised.\(^{107}\) But while the practices of citation, reusing and rehashing old material, have led to a less subtle, more slipshod understanding of Afghan social relations, they have also unwittingly compounded a problem that has plagued the study of Afghanistan from the outset: that of

\(^{102}\) Anderson, ‘Poetics and Politics in Ethnographic Texts’, 103.

\(^{103}\) Ibid., 89.

\(^{104}\) Ibid., 106–7. Unfortunately, most contemporary students of Afghanistan have failed entirely to engage with his work, especially in the discipline of IR.

\(^{105}\) Ibid., 92; and indeed, the people of Afghanistan are hardly passive receptors of foreign intervention.

\(^{106}\) Charles Lindholm explores the prominence of this trope and its increasing control over British institutional memory, and also shows how these stereotypes reflected British concerns and anxieties (if not quite in these words) in his ‘Images of the Pathan: The Usefulness of Colonial Ethnography’, *European Journal of Sociology* 21, no. 2 (1980). Recently, S.M. Hanifi has argued that Afghan elites have ‘uncritically absorbed and reproduced colonial frameworks of reckoning’ about themselves and their homelands, see Shah Mahmoud Hanifi, ‘The Pashtun Counter-Narrative’. *Middle East Critique* 25, no. 4 (2016): 385–400; while in *The Making of Modern Afghanistan*, Hopkins contends that the colonial state only partially penetrated the Afghan (self) imaginary, and that even this only happened many decades after ‘Afghanistan’ was thought up by the British.

\(^{107}\) Bhabha, ‘The Other Question’, 18–20.
limited data and weak scholarly engagement. We now inhabit an intellectual world in which ‘Afghan tribes’ are studied and acted upon unproblematically – paying no heed to the fact that both those terms have contestable and profoundly complex histories.\footnote{The Tribal Engagement Workshop, sponsored by Small Wars Foundation, the US Joint Forces Command Joint Irregular Warfare Center, the US Marine Corps Center for Irregular Warfare, the US Army/US Marine Corps Counterinsurgency Center, and Noetic Group, conducted 24–5 March 2010, which assessed the value of a ‘tribal engagement approach to Afghanistan’, is one particularly egregious example.}\footnote{Eric Hobsbawm and Terrence Ranger, eds., The Invention of Tradition (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992).} Counterinsurgency doctrines are contemporary manifestations of colonial knowledge and current practices in the arsenal of (neo)imperial power that have reinvigorated these forms of knowledge.

It should thus come as no surprise that, in a context of social distance that marks the current intervention, hastily-applied and decontextualised notions of ‘tribal character’ have continued to obscure more than they reveal. Based on an outdated paradigm, they dangerously masquerade as a guide to practice. Against the politically charged backdrop of war and an invasion in which foreign forces are committed to an avid restructuring of the Afghan polity, in a way that is sensitive to prevailing cultural mores and customs, any new account of Afghanistan that overlooks the shaky architectures of colonial power/knowledge – built around personal memoirs, travelogues and hearsay – that have given shape to the claims about Afghan ‘tribalism’, constitutes a lapse that is bound to have a mighty material fallout.

The upshot of this tortured historical and contemporary understanding of the ‘tribe’ in Afghanistan – and its use as the dominant optic with which to make sense of the country – extends much beyond Afghanistan itself. The ‘tribe’ as a concept emerged as a legacy of colonial knowledge but now functions as part of the wider grammar of neo-colonial power. Contemporary imperial practices have reinvigorated these forms of knowledge, something we can see in racialised dynamics and demands of the bolstered ‘far right’ in Western Europe and North America. The tribe as an ‘invented tradition’\footnote{For the myriad ways in which colonial knowledge about Afghanistan affects both intervention underway in the country today and also the discipline of IR more broadly, see Bayly, Taming the Imperial Imagination, especially the conclusion.} is a political project, one which has profound implications for the USA’s longest war.\footnote{Benedict Anderson, Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origins and Spread of Nationalism (London: Verso, 1983).} Whilst these ‘imagined communities’\footnote{The ways in which locals over the years have resisted and creatively interacted with both the ‘tribe’ as a concept and intervention in general is beyond the scope of the present article but would make for a worthy future intellectual pursuit.} may indeed have salience on the ground, the manner in which ‘tribes’ are denied a synchronicity – they are ‘unchanging’ and ‘different’ to us – contributes to a distancing and reification that does a disservice both to the Afghan peoples and to more fine-grained understandings of ‘tribe’ as a term. In order to overcome these provincial colonial knowledges and the violence they perform in the Global South, we must question what constitutes legitimate ‘knowledge’ and
‘authority’ and be aware of, and agitate against the multiple and layered prejudices, 
viole nces, and erasures that structure the lives on the ‘wrong’ side of the colonial equa-
tion. This attempt to dethrone the concept of the tribe in Afghanistan is but a small step 
in that direction.

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