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To cite this article: Jonathan Goodhand & Adam Pain (2022) Entangled lives: drug assemblages in Afghanistan's Badakhshan, *Third World Quarterly*, 43:11, 2654-2673, DOI: [10.1080/01436597.2021.2002139](https://doi.org/10.1080/01436597.2021.2002139)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/01436597.2021.2002139>



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Published online: 29 Nov 2021.



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Entangled lives: drug assemblages in Afghanistan's Badakhshan

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ABSTRACT

This article, focussing on Badakhshan province in north-east Afghanistan, explores the lifeworld of drugs and their entangled connections with people, places and things. It follows the journeys of drugs from the farmers' fields, through their various stages of transportation, storage and transformation, until they arrive at the border with Tajikistan. The paper draws upon the notion of a 'drugs assemblage' – the interweaving of plants, institutions, actors, processes and resources through which drug journeys are managed and facilitated. Drugs are embedded in a web of social relations that connect farmers, labourers, shopkeepers, smugglers, brokers and border guards. Opium is central to the production of a Braudelian geography, fragmented yet connected, of trading routes, enclaves, choke points and border crossings. Drugs have played a role in transforming the 'disturbed' landscape of this remote borderland region, into a centre of innovation and improvisation, in which alienation and precarity co-exist alongside accumulation and the pursuit of 'freedom'.

ARTICLE HISTORY

Received 24 February 2021
Accepted 29 October 2021

KEYWORDS

Afghanistan
borderlands
drug assemblages
entanglements
lifeworld

Introduction

Civilization is a stream with banks. The stream is sometimes filled with blood from people killing, stealing, shouting and doing things historians usually record; while on the banks, unnoticed, people build homes, make love, raise children, sing songs, write poetry and even whittle statues. The story of civilization is the story of what happened on the banks. (Will and Ariel Durant)¹

We begin this article in north-east Afghanistan on the banks of the Panj River as it snakes northwards through the Pamir Mountains, before flowing west, converging with the Amu Darya River and ending in the Aral Sea. The Panj delineates Afghanistan's northern border with Tajikistan. In some respects, the river's history is 'filled with blood – from the border's origins in the violence of the 'Great Game', to its role in the Cold War as a heavily policed and

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impermeable barrier, to the opening of the border as a result of civil wars on both sides of the Panj. The river has been a site of ongoing violence, a place where the 'big politics' of states, armies and empires converge and collide.

But our paper is less about the story of the 'stream' – of geopolitics, 'big men' and major events, notwithstanding their role in shaping Badakhshan's political economy – than about the 'little politics', the everyday lives, routines and battles for existence of those who inhabit the banks, flood plains, side valleys and hinterlands of a seemingly remote, mountainous border region.

We focus on a particular crop, substance and commodity that is deeply embedded in, and has profoundly shaped and transformed, the everyday lives, livelihoods and welfare of 'bank dwellers' – the opium poppy. This is a story about 'drug journeys'; of movement, flows, transgression, rupture and transformation. Poppy itself undergoes processes of material transformation in its journey, from the farmers' fields to drug bazaars and laboratories, over remote mountain roads traversing high pastures, and down into the green valleys and flood plains of the Panj River, where it crosses the border. Rather than telling a story of disembodied flows, we are interested in the dialectical relationship between drugs and their social, political and economic landscapes – how each co-produces and shapes the other.

Central to our approach is the notion of 'drug assemblages', by which we mean the interweaving of disparate elements – plants, institutions, actors, processes and resources – through which drug journeys take place. Assemblages involve complex compositions and entanglements of social, material and affective resources. Drugs act as a binding agent. They bring together diverse networks that manage complex tasks involving the distribution of land, labour, finance, coercion, information and risk, across different groups and over different spaces, temporalities and scales.

Researching 'drug assemblages' is difficult in any environment, but in Afghanistan's borderlands, where data is patchy and access difficult, it presents a significant empirical and methodological challenge. We cannot claim in this article to provide a systematic mapping of these assemblages – much remains to be done in this respect. Instead, our aim is to reveal some of the complexity of the whole, by capturing fragments of the parts, over space and time, drawing as much as possible on the testimonies and voices of people from the borderlands – including farmers, labourers, shop owners, traders and border guards. We draw upon ideas from 'non representational ethnography' (Vanini 2015), which, rather than adopting a 'know and tell' approach, characteristic of traditional qualitative research, aims to tell a more relational story that captures an 'analysis of events, practices, assemblages, affective atmospheres and the backgrounds of everyday life against which relations unfold' (Vanini, 2015, 318).

After first elaborating on our theoretical departure points, the journey starts in farmers' fields and production, then moves on to trade, processing and border crossing, and we conclude with a set of reflections on the journey as a whole. Our aim is to provide, simultaneously, a 'micro-', 'wide-angle' and moving optic so as to capture the different meanings and material effects of poppy, opium and heroin at different points in its journey to the border and its multifarious roles in the 'disturbed' landscapes of Badakhshan.

Departure points: assemblages of the 'illicit'

Introducing drug assemblages

Assemblages, at their most basic, are compositions that bring together heterogeneous elements. Assemblages are about encounters, interactions and relational practices, involving different forces and actors (Deleuze and Guatarri 1987; Duff 2016; Latour 1999; Rhodes et al. 2021). Interactions amongst assemblages in turn lead to the formation of larger assemblages that constitute a meshwork or 'rhizome' of assemblages, each exhibiting emergent properties and capacities (Wiertz 2020, 6).

Our approach to drug assemblages is in part inspired by Tsing's (2015) book *The Mushroom at the End of the World*, which describes and analyses the globalised commodity chains of matsutake mushrooms. Opium and matsutake are very different things, and the borderlands of Afghanistan (see Figure 1) are not immediately comparable to the frontiers of the Pacific Northwest, where matsutake erupts in symbiosis with pine trees, following the devastation caused by clear cutting. However, there are parallels that provide a source of inspiration and some theoretical departure points for our article.

First, both contexts are what Tsing describes as 'disturbed landscapes', produced by various shocks to an ecosystem that have both destructive and constructive effects. In Badakhshan, repeated and interconnected shocks linked to new rounds of conflict, environmental degradation, migration and external interventions have had destructive and transformatory effects; the opium economy, somewhat like matsutake, emerges and prospers in these 'disturbed landscapes'. Landscapes are always in formation, shaped by human and more-than-human agency, constantly affected by the currents and eddies (large and small) of disturbance, that create new openings for action (ibid, 161). Second, both opium and matsutake have transnational lives as commodities transported through complex webs of buyers and sellers. Here, unlike Tsing, we focus only on the bottom rung of the commodity chain – yet both defy the logic of simple commodities, neither being the product of industrial agriculture; one is scavenged by pickers and another cultivated by small farmers, both working outside capitalist labour relations, on the precarious edges of global markets. Third, thinking with and through mushrooms (and drugs) helps move beyond simplistic notions of commodity chains, towards an analysis of assemblages, which involves unpicking the complex entanglements of human and non-human relations. Everyday life is brought forth through entanglements or assemblages of entwined discursive and material practices (Duff 2016). Drugs, like matsutake, have a social life of their own and are embedded in a web of relations, many of them underground or rhizomic. These are strikingly similar to the world of fungi that Sheldrake (2020) writes about in *Entangled Life*, which he characterises as a dynamic, self-organising assemblage involving intricate connections, circulation of information, memory, symbiotic exchange, adjustment, complex signalling and trade-offs. Similarly, Tsing (2015) argues that 'polyphonic' mushroom assemblages involve human and non-human activity, patterns of unintentional coordination, and changing populations of people, organisms, things, substances and processes.

Assemblage theory brings into focus notions of 'the everyday' and the 'lifeworlds' of drugs, core concerns of this special issue. Landscapes are complex and heterogeneous, infused with stories, and they provide an enduring record and testimony of the lives and works of current and past generations (Ingold 1993). Such perspectives destabilise the idea of drug

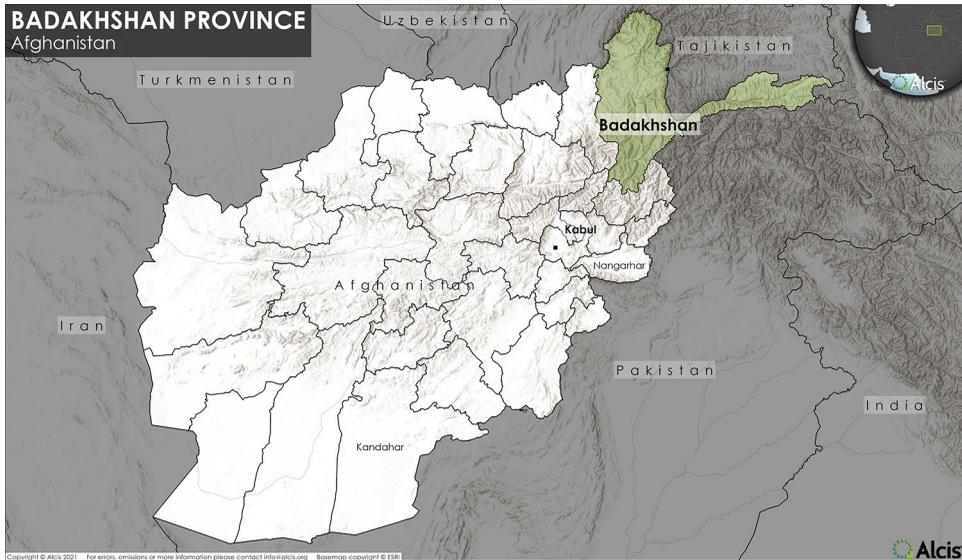


Figure 1. Badakhshan Province (source: Alcis).

economies as totalising, coherent and unified systems. Instead, in the borderlands of Badakhshan we aim to show a more decentred, relational and situated account, in which drug assemblages are constantly adapting to instability, precarity and moments of rupture or disturbance. Actors' identities and qualities within drug assemblages are not innate but relational, forged in encounters and 'contaminated' by diversity (Tsing 2015). Classic social theory denies the entangled nature of everyday material life, whereas assemblage theory dissolves nature–culture, subject–object, agency–structure dualisms, emphasising non-human agency. Power within assemblages, rather than operating through clearly defined hierarchies with 'centres' and 'peripheries', is dispersed, fluid, contingent and contested.

Geographies of assemblages: frontiers and borderlands

Tsing (2015) and Cons and Eilenberg (2018) apply assemblage thinking to a particular kind of space: frontier and borderland regions.² In their analysis, frontiers are viewed not simply as backdrops for historical action, but as spaces with agentic potential, that are always in the making (Rhodes et al. 2021).

Frontiers wax and wane, emerge and disappear; they are resurrected in new forms, built on top of the ruins and accumulated rubble of previous rounds of 'disturbance', conflict and accumulation (Ballve 2020; Murray Li 2014; Hopkins 2020; Marsden and Hopkins 2012; Korf and Raeymaekers 2013; Rasmussen and Lund 2018; Scott 2009; Tsing 2015). They are dynamic spaces, zones of creative destruction and transformation: 'Disturbance realigns possibilities for transformative encounter' (Tsing 2015, 152). They are also places of 'freedom', spaces of social experimentation, innovation and hybridity, where new political subjectivities are shaped, new governance structures tested, and opportunities for rapid accumulation present themselves (Goodhand 2021).

Precarity is a defining feature of these landscapes. Drug economies emerge and grow in environments of illegibility, conflict and risk. But risk is unevenly distributed; for farmers and

scavengers involved in the creation of capitalist value from non-capitalist value regimes, the 'everyday' reality is a hybrid of alienation and emancipation (Tsing 2015). Survival may depend upon Faustian bargains, in which long-term development is traded for short-term survival (Wood 2003). However, frontier dwellers are not without agency, and there remain 'avenues of ingenuity and opportunity through which people retain their ability to manipulate and exploit the frontiers imposed upon them' (McDougal 2012, 88).

Frontier assemblages collapse simple binaries between 'inside' and 'outside', 'local' and 'global'. Frontiers and borderlands are places where regional connections, trade routes and circuits, that preceded state building, live on after border delineation. Writing about the Western Sahara, Scheele and McDougal (2012, 13) describe the ways in which 'ecological micro regions coalesce internally and cohere with one another across distance. Places of production, habitation and exchange are made and maintained by regional interactions'. This fractured but connected cartography mirrors Braudel's portrayal of the Mediterranean world that has been described as 'a zone of intense topographical fragmentation, overlaid by a kaleidoscope of human micro-ecologies, which are in turn densely interconnected' (Horden 2012, 28).

Illicit assemblages, flows and journeys

This Braudelian geography resonates with Deborah Cowen's late capitalist world of securitised ports and trading corridors written about so compellingly in *The Deadly Life of Logistics* (Cowen 2014). The movement of capital and commodities is linked to complex assemblages of logistics, trading corridors and security; 'stuff' is moved along restrained pipelines – an archipelago of militarily secured corridors and maritime chains – that mobilises stuff and immobilises people.

Tsing's 'mushroom assemblages' are found, to some extent, in the shadows of Cowen's trading corridors and logistics assemblages. Tsing's 'patches of livelihoods' that are cobbled together and come into being through assemblages are quite different from the securitised flows captured in Cowen's book, but they still involve complex logistical coordination to facilitate the movement or journeys of 'stuff'. Assemblages facilitate circulation, not just one-directional flows; the drug assemblage in Badakhshan funnels drugs outwards from the poppy fields to the border (see Figure 2), but it also involves the contra-flows of capital, people, commodities and ideas. The frontiers and borderlands are both transit zones and hubs, exerting a gravitational pull on things and people.

Action or agency within assemblages is generated in encounters, and these encounters occur at boundaries and points of 'friction' – the 'awkward, unequal, unstable, creative qualities of interconnection across difference' (Tsing 2004, 4). Friction is not just about slowing things down; it is required to keep global power in motion (ibid). Brokers are the connective tissue or lubricant, as well as the grit, within assemblages. They both allow and filter movement, guarding key synapses, translating, managing access and generating gatekeeper incomes – as we see later in the case of the border guards and drug dealers who (dis)allow the movement of drugs across the Panj River. They are not merely go-betweens, but also assemblers – actants within the wider system – who forge new connections, and mediate social, ideational and political forces within assemblages (Koster and van Leynseele 2018). Opium is itself an 'assembler', drawing and fastening together complex entanglements of actors, institutions and processes.



Figure 2. Drug journeys (source: Alcis).

Drugs undergo processes of material transformation during the course of their journey. Ghiabi (2021) describes the ‘ontological journeys’ of drugs as they cross different legal, territorial and moral boundaries on the Iranian–Afghan frontier; as he notes, substances become ontologically different when participating in differing webs of relations, as they undergo ‘fluid movement from the plant cultivation, the border checkpoints, the distributional networks, to the regulatory regimes, consumers’ practice and health services, all of which co-constitute the lifeworld of drugs’ (*ibid*, 2). Drawing on Zigon (2018), he calls for an ‘assemblage ethnography’ approach in order to study the drugs lifeworld. Inspired by this ‘call to arms’ but not entirely being able to live up to it, we turn now to the borderlands of Badakhshan.

Badakhshan, a drug-intensified borderland

There is a sense of permanence in the Badakhshan landscape with its snow-covered mountains, crystal-clear rivers and settled valley landscapes with tree economies of fruit and nuts interspersed with annual cropping and moving livestock herds. But opium journeys have precedence, and past inflection points have left their traces.

Opium poppy has long been central to Badakhshan’s impoverished rural economy, as well as an optic through which to examine the province’s internal political dynamics and relations with the Afghan state (Bradford 2019). The fragmented geographical and political landscape of the province and a 1344 km long porous border with neighbouring Tajikistan, Pakistan and China have given it a comparative advantage as a drug trafficking route. Its geography of river plains and valleys has created corridors of movement, internal patterns of social and economic differentiation, local centres of power and illegibility. It has a history of regional connections, migration and trade. The border was sealed in the 1950s as a result of the Cold War, but after the Soviet invasion of 1979 and during the Tajik civil war of the early 1990s, Badakhshan again became an open frontier region, crisscrossed by movements of people, commodities, weapons and drugs.

Before 1958 when the Afghan government imposed a ban on opium poppy cultivation in Badakhshan (Bradford 2019), opium had been the province's core cash crop and source of on-farm employment. The ban had devastating effects on food security, and opium poppy cultivation rebounded in 1959.

A second inflection point was the 1970–1971 drought and subsequent severe winter. The province's livestock population, a linchpin of its economy, was decimated. Herd sizes never recovered, and the onset of conflict in 1979, war and the emergence of a commander economy rendered livestock a risky asset given the ease with which it could be looted, whilst access to Shewa's summer pastures was lost to local powerholders (Patterson 2004).

A series of events followed the Saur revolution of 1978: the Soviet invasion and resulting war, the political instability of the 1990s after Russia left and the emergence of Badakhshan as a centre of resistance to the Taliban. Then a severe drought in the late 1990s brought the marginal Badakhshan economy to its knees. It led to displacement and outmigration to Iran and Pakistan, building on long-standing regional circuits of trade. But the opening of the northern border in the early 1990s was to be a crucial factor in securing external revenues through trade to support the war economy, and opium came to play a key role in this (Goodhand 2012; Goodhand, de Danieli, and Mansfield 2015).

In the 1990s there were about 3000 ha of opium poppy (UNODC and the AMCN, 2018), and the opium market was a relatively fragmented cottage industry, involving many players and a capillary flow of small amounts of raw opium paste to the border. But in the 2000–2001 season an estimated 6342 ha was grown, starting the boom period that lasted until 2006. In 2004, 15,607 ha was cultivated, but by 2007 the area had fallen back to 3642 ha, after which cultivation crept back up in remoter districts (UNODC and the AMCN, 2018).

This expansion, fuelled by a volatile three- to seven-fold increase in prices from the 1999 price of about USD 50 per kg of opium (UNODC 2018, 7), led to the opium market becoming more vertically integrated and regulated. Shipments, now in the form of heroin, moved to the border in a funnel action over key crossing points (Goodhand 2012). Government actors were increasingly involved in its regulation and flow, as President Karzai extended his influence through informal and parallel power structures in the province. This consolidated control over key sources of rent, including the trade in lapis and opium. More recently, political divisions and instability increased, and a growing Taliban insurgency took control of key districts (Goodhand, de Danieli, and Mansfield 2015). As a result, the market has fractured and new roads to the border have opened it up to more players (*ibid*). While the province has been a hub for inter-provincial opium journeys, the cross-border trade dominates market flows (UNODC 2020).

Production

A seasonal sea of opium poppy flowers has ebbed and flowed across the Badakhshan landscape, pushed and pulled by various pressures. The boom grew on existing land ownership patterns, driven by markets and prices and households seeking to recover from years of conflict and food insecurity. But non-market institutions have persisted even as the opium market expanded. Before 2000 labour was largely paid in kind, and opium and exchange relations between producers and traders were often based on barter (Pain 2008). The boom did not diminish these arrangements, and opium forged and lubricated relations between producers, petty opium traders and shopkeepers. The meanings and materialities of opium

poppy differ between producers and shopkeepers and other actors along the journey, and these are entangled within the micro-histories, landscapes and webs of social relations of this 'disturbed' frontier region.

Everyday lives, living with incertitude

Our journey starts in six sites of opium production in Jurm valley where the legacies of these disturbances have played themselves out in particular ways. Here poppy undergoes its metamorphosis from seed into flowers and opium pods. The history and role of opium poppy in the lives of the informants in the six study villages (Pain 2008) from which we draw these accounts varies by location, village histories and social structures. Two of the villages (Samati and Hezari) are ecologically marginal and located above the main Jurm irrigated valley. Their livestock economies collapsed in 1971/1972 and never recovered, but they had traditionally grown opium poppy as part of the crop rotation. A third upland village, Madaba in Jurm in a side valley, has irrigation and major inequalities in landholdings and did not grow opium poppy before 2001.

The other three villages, Gunbaz and Jatah in Baharak and QalaZafar in Jurm, are all located in the main irrigated valley floor and did not grow opium poppy before 2001. Gunbaz was settled in the 1940s, by Pashtuns from Logar with land grants from King Zahir Shah. There are a few large landowners, some of whom are absentee, and numerous landless sharecroppers. Jatah and QalaZafar are both peri-urban villages, located close to Baharak and Jurm towns, respectively, and the richer households derive the major part of their income from shopkeeping and trading.

Prior to 1978, landed households in the upland villages who had livestock were self-sufficient but had little slack. There was a certain moral economy where commodities, including opium, were part of the ritual of exchange and currencies of reserve. For those with little or no land, life was precarious, fraught with incertitude arising from dependent patron–client relations and struggles to survive. Zainullah's father was a shepherd. His landless family was one of the poorest in Samite, locked into dependency on wealthier households, in-kind payments and informal credit for consumption needs:

A flock keeper's family would be given food items and household needs or paid a certain amount at the end of nine months, along with one pair of clothes, one pair shoes and one turban. Giving a sheep or goat was included in the agreement.

For those with a few *jerib* of rainfed land, production fed the family for two to three months. They worked as sharecroppers on opium poppy, generating sufficient income in kind to support the household for 12 months, borrowing when needed from the landowner. Opium poppy occupied an estimated 25–30% of the crop area and although a key source of revenue, this was largely realised through payment in kind and barter relations with shopkeepers in Jurm bazaar, according to Agha Karim, from Samati. It also provided household edible oil needs.

For those with land in the irrigated grain-surplus plains, life was more secure. In Gunbaz village, Haji Mohammad was a landlord. His father had moved from Logar with an initial land settlement grant of three *jerib* (0.6 ha). By the mid-1970s, he had acquired more irrigated land through giving mortgages and then foreclosing on them, increasing his land holdings to 30–40 *jerib* (6–8 ha).

From the 1990s, with declining government presence, conditions deteriorated and commanders looted the local economy. According to Attaullah from Jatah, livestock owners lost access to pastures and gave up keeping animals. The difficulties of this period of instability were compounded from 1997 by a long drought. Debts, a normal feature of daily life, increased. Jamaluddin from Gunbaz noted that some 10–15 people in his village who had been small landowners lost their mortgaged land.

The years of conflict and drought were overlaid on a precarious economy that had lost its livestock pillar. This caused acute food insecurity and a rising demand for credit, leading many into adverse relationships and asset loss. There was a general rise in interest rates, induced not by opium (Pain 2008) but by instability and economic uncertainty. It was against this backdrop that the opium poppy economy took off in 2000, fuelled by a dramatic rise in opium price.

Transformations and the festival years

While beneath the surface the conduits of opium trade were shifting in size, direction and role, the sudden eruption of opium cultivation in Badakhshan in 2001³ appeared almost like magic. The gatherings of the strands of the opium economy assemblage, fuelled by price rises, suddenly became ‘a happening’ (Tsing 2015), a rupture that upended the routine. Opium poppy was in the thick of it, orchestrating actions and consequences, shaping labour regimes and markets, animated by the logic of capital. Opium poppy became imbued with a set of narratives and memories related to specific freedoms, festivals and moments of liberation as well as a route to accumulation. The meanings of opium poppy shifted from being a lifeline for survival to something more, and the exuberance of those years should not be underestimated. The period between 2001 and 2006 was consistently described as the ‘opium revolution’ or ‘opium festival years’. The opium poppy crop boom provided for many recovery and freedom from debt and food insecurity, opportunities to marry, expanded networks of social relations, and for some an appreciation of the socially liberating effects of economic independence. Drawing on Ghiabi (this volume), it appeared, briefly, to be an emancipatory moment.

Abdul Wali from Madaba village summarised what the opium revolution meant:

To me, 2000–2005 was an economic revolution; it was a rescue era for all of us, where people experienced freedom from stress and headaches for the first time in their lives. I would say it was the time of self-sufficiency of pockets regardless of age, gender and occupation. I did not hear the loan or credit word between 2000 and 2005 in our village.

The upland villages that had traditionally cultivated opium achieved unprecedented income levels. Zainullah from Samati commented how people became happy, how everyone was talking of income and assets and how his life had improved as his livestock owners liberally provided for him. Labour wage rates doubled or even tripled for opium harvest labour, and as the crop spread from upland valleys to the plains the rhythms of the harvest period extended, reflecting opium poppy’s sensitivity to temperature in relation to time to maturity and providing work over a longer period. The demand for labour mobilised all household resources including women and children (Pain 2008).

Villages in the valley floor experienced similar benefits from the boom. As the opium poppy crop boomed, district economies flourished creating more employment. Habibullah,

a shepherd from Hezari village who had struggled to survive in 1999, moved to Baharak and, as he put it, 'I found myself fully occupied: working at the central bazaar for loading and offloading; good wages for construction work'.

Households repaid debts and increased consumption. A key expenditure that many made was on marriage, reflecting the significance of maintaining joint households and securing social relations in a distributional economy (Pain and Huot 2018). An informant from Khosh described the years 2001 to 2005 as the years of weddings and noted that in one year alone there were 65 wedding parties in his village.

The ending of the festival and its consequences ... living without opium

And then, for the producers the 'happening' (Tsing 2014) came to an end: the visible part of the opium assemblage disappeared from Jurm and its surrounding districts. In 2008 the opium poppy area fell to 200 ha in Badakhshan, although by 2017 it had returned to 2002 levels (UNODC 2018, 28). The reasons for the fall are complex and spatially specific, but the fall in opium prices from its peak in 2002 of USD 375 per kg to under USD 150 per kg (UNODC 2018, 7) was a factor. Regulatory elements of the assemblage threatening and implementing eradication also came into play. Further, the relative price of opium in relation to wheat straw (for livestock) and other potential cash crops (e.g. potato) shifted (Mansfield 2007). This had numerous ripple effects on rural households; for example, the number of weddings declined, though people were left with memories and stories (as recounted above) of the good times.

The initial effect was a decline in income and employment, as Abdul Wali made clear. But he also revealed a shift in aspirations and a resistance to reverting to the status quo and prior social relations.

The decline in opium cultivation gradually affected vulnerable families who were sharecroppers, daily labourers and poor families. Within the last three to four months, 30–40 men married and unmarried who have gone to military service in Kabul to at least prevent themselves from borrowing from rich men within the village or Jurm.

When asked what he meant by 'avoiding borrowing' he explained:

The opium economy left them with high expectations of a reliable income that would allow them to supply their household, have more fun and work for a higher wage. They had pride and said, 'Why should we stay here and accept working for others in the village and elsewhere only for 150 Afs a day?'

Nasrudin from Madaba had been cautious and had kept reserves of opium as a hedge against price changes – 'I managed to keep some reserves. My guess was that there would not always be a hot market for opium – the reserve stopped me from falling into debt'. Others had gambled on the good times continuing and fell into debt. Shafiqullah from Gunbaz, who had consumption loans and was hit by expenses for medical treatment for his wife, was in danger of having to sell off land.

I anticipated a good harvest of opium this year but there was none. Then I had an unexpected expense, which was medication for my wife last spring. This has left me with a huge shortfall. I already mortgaged my two *jeribs* of land to two people in Baharak and I'm certain that I'll not be able to repay the mortgage. My intention is to sell half of the land this autumn to repay the mortgage.

Shopkeepers reported that they had become indebted to farmers who had given them opium as deposits against future consumption because the price of opium fell. Akbar from Qala Zafar pointed to a closed shop whose owner had disappeared two months ago. He had collected more than 30 kg of opium from different villagers; it had not been sold by his partner who sent a message that until he got a good price, he would not return to Jurm. So the owner shut his shop because villagers were coming to collect commodities as repayment against their opium deposit. By 2008 many households were worse off than they were prior to 2001 (Pain 2010), and the sharp rise in the price of wheat in 2008–2009 forced many into food consumption rationing (Pain 2015).

Trade

District drugs bazaars and trading networks

We now travel with the opium, as it moves in three stages from processing and transformation, involving different handlers, across various 'way stations' and internal boundaries, until it arrives in Shughnan district at the border with GBAO⁴ and travels out of the country. Through 'fragments' of these journeys we aim to tell a story of relational geographies and interconnected, everyday histories.

In the first stage, from farmers' fields, the opium resin is taken by either a farmer or a petty trader to a Baharak shopkeeper. Baharak bazaar has always been strategically important, but it grew exponentially as an economic and trading hub during the festival years. A baker from Baharak portrayed a bustling, well-connected bazaar, animated by the drug boom:

In 2001 and onwards there were many people were coming from Eastern parts of the country and Peshawar with mini trucks loaded with cloths and other cosmetic goods and they were sitting in a narrow line in Baharak to sell things to local customers. They were very happy to receive the opium instead of money from the customer. We noticed big trucks with TV, video and other luxury items that were sold just in front of the truck and they received a certain amount of opium for each item they had in their truck.

A labourer from Baharak conjured up a picture of the bazaar as a 'trading space' for brokers and hawaldars:

There were customers and buyers from Kunduz, Taloqan, Mazar, Kabul and most districts of Badakhshan province. You may have heard that Baharak plays this role as a cross way for many districts of Badakhshan, where the poppy is being cultivated Most deals were on credit, once a Jalalabadi middleman was getting to know the Baharaki shopkeeper and depositing the money right after return to Baharak from the East, then trustworthy relations were built up between them and for next deals he was just picking up consignments for two to four weeks and bringing the money or sending the money through Hawala. That's why you can see a number of money dealers and Hawala offices in a district like Baharak.

District-level drug bazaars, like Baharak, are ubiquitous in Afghanistan's poppy-growing areas. They tend to be the first place in the 'drugs journey', where opium becomes monetised. They are a magnet for small-scale hawala dealers, often with partners in provincial centres, as well as inter-provincial traders. The reference to Jalalabad and Peshawar speaks to long-standing links between Badakhshan, Nangarhar and Peshawar, showing how market connections can flourish across cultural and political divides.

When poppy production more or less ceased in Badakhshan in 2005/2006, *qachakbaran* (smuggler) networks and the drugs trade continued to flourish. Whilst farmers in Jurm were devastated, many traders were able to adapt, as drugs were stockpiled and drugs produced elsewhere transited through Badakhshan, along the 'northern route' (UNODC 2012).

Processing and the journey to the border

Evidence on the drug journey between Baharak and the border is fragmentary and largely anecdotal because of the rhizomic character of the trading and processing assemblages. Here the metamorphosis of opium resin to morphine paste and then heroin takes place, moving from the shops in the bazaar to outlying storage locations, to the secret and increasingly mobile labs.

Most of Afghanistan's opium is processed into heroin, before being trafficked across international borders. There were estimated to be some 40–50 labs in northern Afghanistan in 2012, the majority in Badakhshan, each producing an average of one ton annually of high-quality, high morphine content heroin (UNODC 2012). They are reportedly supplied with acetic anhydride coming from the east. Once processed, heroin is usually measured into 1 kg units, wrapped in paper or put into cloth bags and stamped with an identifying logo (UNODC 2018). These labs tend to be mobile, so as to evade counter-narcotics efforts or the attention of competitors. Jurm and Baharak are believed to be sites of a number of these labs. Labs are managed by bigger economic and political players who have forged close ties with powerful state and non-state actors. UNODC (2020) found that only the medium to large drug trafficking organisations (DTOs) owned or controlled labs, although in common with Afghanistan's licit markets (Minoia, Mumtaz, and Pain 2015) these DTOs were primarily family or kinship based, highlighting the salience of trust relations.

Trafficking is a high-risk business, operating in an environment of multiple 'specialists in violence' and a myriad of friction points where taxes and rents are extracted – in contrast to matsutake journeys, which are frictionless, following picking and sorting, as mushrooms are transformed into inventory in shipping crates in the belly of a plane (Tsing 2015, 128). Small-scale couriers or transporters are most immediately exposed to the risks of interdiction and arrest, whilst large-scale traders insulate themselves through layers of brokerage and high-level protection at provincial and national levels. These risks are factored into the inventory management of such traders (UNODC 2020).

Jangul, a small-scale drug trader interviewed in Nangarhar province, recounted how he had been instructed by his business partner in Kandahar to get 'Beest'⁵ heroin:

So, he sent us to Darayem district [bordering Jurm] in Badakhshan ... when we arrived there we saw the production process with our own eyes, and it truly was the best product, because they processed seven kilogrammes of heroin to get the purest one kilogramme. My partner and I stayed in Badakhshan for three months to do business....and we managed to source 120 kilogrammes of the best heroin in the world. Transporting that amount to Kandahar meant we needed to make two trips.

From the labs, heroin can be transported, concealed with other cargo, in pickups and trucks or on motorbikes along a variety of routes to the Tajik border. From Baharak, the road forks northwards to Shughnan, or continues eastward to Ishkashem. The Shewa plateau is an important choke point that is difficult to circumvent in the journey to Shughnan. The

road is a lifeline for those living in Bashur, the district bazaar of Shughnan and the border villages strung along the banks of the Panj. Armed actors, who can set up a roadblock on the Shewar road and charge ‘crossing fees’ – or deny access – command a great deal of political and economic leverage.

Border crossing: Shughnan

Gaining a foothold at the border

The journey from Faizabad to Shughnan involves a bumpy half-day up into the mountains, past the stunning Lake Shewa, over the Shewa plateau and down through scattered settlements, orchards and fields to Shughnan on the Panj River. Shughnan district has a 185 km border with Tajikistan. Bashur is located on the banks of the Panj, across from Khorog the capital of GBAO. It is linked by the Friendship Bridge, one of six bridges built by the Aga Khan Development Network (AKDN) to increase connectivity between Ismaili⁶ communities who live on either side of the river.

In GBAO Ismailis are the largest and most powerful group, whereas in Badakhshan they are a minority. Although the trade in Badakhshan is dominated by Tajiks, with the Ismailis acting as second-order players, across the border powerful Ismaili ‘warlords’ control the key trading networks and manage the onward journey of heroin to Osh, Tashkent and Moscow (Goodhand 2012; Goodhand, de Danieli, and Mansfield 2015, UNODC 2012). As one Ismaili interviewee complained in relation to the drugs trade and its effects on his village in Shughnan: ‘If it’s not controlled by the Faizabad government, then nothing can happen...if you can’t stop the water upstream, there’s nothing you can do about it downstream’.

On the Afghan side of the Panj, the border regions were historically neglected. But with the growth of the drugs economy, particularly from the early 1990s, the border became a zone of opportunity, exerting a gravitational pull on Tajik commanders who fought to gain a foothold on the border by exploiting intra-Ismaili divisions. These regions became a mosaic of competing fiefdoms, each attempting to monopolise gatekeeper incomes linked to control of a section of the border.

Interviewees described the different ways that outsiders had, over the years, gained access to the border in order to build their trafficking operations. Dealers would distribute drugs in border villages, encouraging ‘addiction’, which in turn would lead to indebtedness. Or they would identify small-scale traders and couriers who had lost their consignment when crossing the river. In either case, vulnerability created an opportunity to exert pressure to pay off debts, leading to the distress sale of assets and in some cases offering a daughter or female relative for marriage. By acquiring a house and/or some land in a border village, traders then had a base for stockpiling and trafficking drugs and privileged access to the border. As one former teacher in Shughnan recounted: ‘before people used opium and now it’s heroin ... Shughni people are involved in smuggling and they have lost land and houses and some have been killed ... government people seek positions here only because of the smuggling’.

The presence of the border has attracted others involved in licit as well as illicit trade. Interviews with traders in Shughnan and Ishkashim bazaars revealed that many originated from outside the region and that their businesses drew on a dense network of translocal and transnational connections; one trader from Takhar had a brother in London who sent

him remittances, and a second trader had bought land in Faizabad, whilst a third had purchased land in Pakistan. Each was managing a diverse portfolio of goods, buying, selling and investing in different geographical spaces.

Another example of a translocal life enmeshed in the 'drugs assemblage' is that of a man who we call 'Aziz'. He pitched up in Shughnan in the mid-1990s and became by 2006 the main drug dealer in Bashur. He was a Pashtun from Sarobi in Nangarhar – again demonstrating the close market linkages and relationships between the two borderlands. He had been in the air force during the Najibullah regime, then became a refugee in Pakistan, where he developed relationships with a number of the Mujahideen groups who were based in Peshawar. He subsequently appears to have leveraged these networks in order to gain access to Shughnan in the mid-1990s.

Like many drugs traders he spanned ethnic, linguistic and political divisions – opium, it seems, is a lubricant that smooths over frictions generated by boundaries. After gaining a foothold in Shughnan, he married a Tajik woman (the daughter of his Pamiri business partner) and relocated to the other side of the border, moving up the value chain. He increasingly engaged in other forms of licit and semi-licit trade, including the ruby business. His networks extended to Pakistan, India and Dubai (Goodhand 2012). By 2013 he had moved away from the border to a wealthy district of Kabul. The following quote from Arif, a civil society leader interviewed by one of the authors in Shughnan in 2006, provides an insight into Aziz's life and networks at, and across, the border:

I was in Khorog yesterday and I saw Aziz, a major drug dealer in Shughnan, sitting with Mr X [a senior Afghan representative]. They both seemed to be very happy together and walked around. Aziz was also helping a couple of people with their passports. We were invited to a party with big officials from the Afghan side and Aziz also appeared with two or three of his own people. He's a tall dark guy

Aziz's career illustrates several things. First, he was a market broker, who moved to where the added value could be captured. Second, his ability to play this role depended both on his financial acumen and his social and political networks – not just anyone can pitch up in the borderlands. Third, his career involved a process of graduation – he got rich from the drug trade but graduated into licit or at least semi-licit businesses. And, finally, his move to Kabul shows that whilst money is made in the borderlands, it is often invested elsewhere.

Checkpoint politics and border games

The border is a zone of opportunity, because of price differentials and changes in regulatory arrangements at the border. Official crossing points are both gateways and portals – the bridges represent sanctioned points of exit and entry, where state officials exercise regulatory mandates, often with flexible application. But there are also multiple crossing points where the Panj can be crossed in small boats or rubber tubes at night-time behind the backs of, or in connivance with, state officials.

Drugs and cigarettes flow from Afghanistan to Tajikistan. US dollars, four-wheel drives, vodka, precious stones and food staples flow in the other direction. The mark-up on opiates makes them more profitable than cigarettes, but the border game is not a level playing field. The EU's Border Management Program in Central Asia (BOMCA) invested in border infrastructure, policing and law enforcement, driven in part by concerns about drugs and terrorism. But

there is very uneven enforcement capacity on each side of the border.⁷ The district commander of the border police bemoaned the fact that 'I have 85 border police and 185 km of border to patrol. Smugglers have mobiles, arms and connections across the river who are linked to the government'. Only one of his six vehicles was working. The regulation and porosity of the border, as well as being uneven, has shifted over time, and perversely, investment in border management and securitisation through BOMCA and other programmes has increased the risk premium or 'mark-up' – and therefore rewards – for crossing the border. The effects of such interventions are to consolidate state control over drug flows, rather than reduce them. For those with high-level connections, 'the game' is played out in plain sight, as revealed by this quote from an agricultural extension worker interviewed on the Afghan side of the border in 2006: 'I saw some ten cars pass on the [Friendship] bridge a couple of days ago. They had Afghani number plates and whilst on the bridge they changed them to Tajiki ones!'

Drug smuggling assemblages appear to be strikingly heterogeneous and eclectic, from religious, socio-professional, ethnic, national, ideological and politico-military perspectives (Goodhand 2012). They can involve members of the Shughni elite who were former military commanders, Tajiks in Baharak and Faizabad from different northern alliance factions, and Pashtun Ministry of Defence (MoD) generals in Kunduz and/or Kabul (Munch 2013). The Taliban presence appears to have further diversified the routes and networks involved. On the Tajik side, government Committee for State Security (KGB) and border control operatives, work collaboratively alongside Ismaili strongmen.

Although the international border is the main 'prize', intra-provincial boundaries are also significant, and crossing fees have to be negotiated and paid. The journey we have followed involves an assemblage that ties together, in a triangular relationship, politico-military networks in Khorog, Bashur and Baharak. Only a small number of Afghans, like Aziz, appear to have been able to migrate across the river to Khorog, and up the value chain.

A new road along the Panj River between Shughnan and Ishashkem in 2013 appeared to have opened up opportunities for small-scale smuggling, making it a year-round activity and lowering the barriers to entry. This coincided with the growing presence of the Taliban in Badakhshan, which to some extent placed constraints on the state's engagement in smuggling. The fragmentation of politics in Badakhshan and the 'democratisation' of the drug economy opened up a space for Ismailis to strengthen their position at the border, and from the mid-2010s more were appointed to key district-level government positions.

Conclusions: drug lifeworlds and assemblages

In this article we have travelled the riverbanks, floodplains, hinterlands, mountain passes and side valleys of Badakhshan, in a relational account of the lifeworld of drugs and their entangled connections with people, places and things. This is a story of the 'everyday' that is both quotidian and epic at the same time (Ghiabi, [this volume](#)). The journey started with a flower – a bright multi-coloured poppy, grown in the fields of Jurm – and ended at the border as a small and concealed bag of white powder.

In telling a story of opium in motion – following its path as it moved through different geographies and regulatory spaces and across multiple borders and points of friction – we

aspire to provide the beginnings of an ethnography of the drug assemblage through sketching out, albeit in fragments, the lifeworld of drugs. The path is complex and multi-faceted; it involves precarity, risk, movement, encounters, rupture and transformation.

In paying attention to the particular – and, specifically, the margins or the edges – we reveal something important about the character of the whole. Assemblage thinking provides a lens that collapses simple binaries between inside and outside, micro and macro, and helps us understand how precarious frontier livelihoods are connected to a wider regional, and indeed global, drug assemblage. Those living on the border – where the global, national and local collide – are continually jumping scales, to make connections and forge new pathways. Efforts to counter drugs – the eradication programmes, the hardening of the border and interdiction efforts – should be understood not as an external destabiliser or deterrent, but an inherent part of this drugs assemblage.

In employing an assemblage framework, we have hinted at the agency of opium. Rather than seeing it as purely a resource that is shaped by wider political economy forces, opium is itself an actant and assembler, forging new connections and encounters, deepening entanglements, enabling flows, empowering individuals and groups and transforming landscapes.

In the disturbed landscapes of Badakhshan, opium plays many roles; acting as a social lubricant, a medicine, a source of credit, a currency, a form of recreation and escape, an instrument of barter, a political bargaining chip. It transforms people's lives, changing material circumstances as well as social norms, hopes and expectations about the future. The 'festival years' are emblematic of the transformations wrought by opium.

Drug assemblages also make and transform territory. Opium is central to the production of a Braudelian geography, fragmented yet connected, of trading routes, enclaves, choke points and border crossings. Drugs exert a gravitational pull on outside actors and agents – capital, precursor chemicals, traders, men of violence, state officials. This centripetal force is part of longer term historical process, in which – according to Ballve (2020) – drug-intensified frontiers contribute to 'everyday state formation'.

Thus, frontiers are not merely backdrops to drugs journeys; they are agentic spaces of creative destruction (Goodhand 2021), involving processes of accumulation and dis-possession, boom and bust cycles, manifest in the changing circumstances of farmers in Jurm, shopkeepers in Baharak or smugglers in Shughnan. In a context of risk and precarity, drugs assemblages have developed in a self-organising fashion, diverse inter-regional connections, technological and logistical innovation and rapid adaptations to shocks.

As we have shown, the connections, entanglements and power relations within assemblages are prone to flux and moments of rupture. At particular inflection points, for the Ismaili population in Shughan opium has been a medium of conflict and repression, and at other moments it has been a source of opportunity and empowerment. And these shifts manifest themselves differently on either side of the river.

Finally, this perspective highlights the limitations, analytically and empirically, of 'dealing' with drug economies by focussing only on drugs as a commodity to be prohibited, removed or replaced. An assemblage framework shows how deeply borderland histories, lives, livelihoods and lifeworlds are entangled with drugs. Any attempts to deal with the 'drug problem' need to start from this reality.

Acknowledgements

We thank the two anonymous reviews. We also thank Maziyar Ghiabi, editor of the special issue, for giving valuable feedback on this article. In addition, thanks go to Kjell Hansen and Klara Fischer, who gave comments on earlier drafts. Many of the ideas behind this paper were also shaped by and benefited from discussions with other researchers within the Drugs and (dis)order project research team. Finally, acknowledgements are also due to Filippo de Danielli who conducted fieldwork with the first author in 2013 and OSDR who, supported by David Mansfield, conducted research on traders in Faizabad, Ishkasham and Shugnan in 2014 funded by the EU. Village sites were selected to provide contrasts of opium history and landscape position, and interviews were held with a range of informants to capture contrasts of household wealth.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

Funding

The fieldwork on opium production, undertaken by the second author, draws on informant interviews conducted in 2008 undertaken through the Afghanistan Research and Evaluation Unit (AREU) in a study on opium poppy and informal credit systems. The study was funded by the Department of International Development, UK and was part of a longer-term research project on livelihood trajectories in the province. The sections on the drugs trade and in particular the border regions are based on field visits conducted by the first author in 2007 and 2013. These visits were funded by ESRC (Transformation of War Economies), EU and SOAS. Research was also supported by ESRC, Drugs and (dis)order: Building sustainable peacetime economies in the aftermath of war, UKRI award no. ES/P011543/1, 2017–2021, as part of the Global Challenges Research Fund.

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Notes

1. <https://www.goodreads.com/quotes/7196351-civilization-is-a-stream-with-banks-the-stream-is-sometimes>
2. Frontiers are understood as moving zones of transition between different centres of power and regulation, whilst borderlands are interconnected zones that span an international border. Each is associated with its own vocabulary and literature (cf Korf and Raeymaekers 2013). In

this article we use both terms in relation to Badakhshan, which over its history has at different times exhibited both frontier and borderland characteristics.

3. The cultivated opium area in 2000 was 2458 ha; in 2001 it more than doubled to 6342 ha, and by 2004 it had risen to 15,607 ha (UNODC 2018, 28).
4. Gorno-Badakhshan Autonomous Oblast (GBAO) in Eastern Tajikistan.
5. This is a trademark name for a high quality morphine paste originating from Badakhshan.
6. Ismailis belong to a branch or sub-sect of Shia Islam that is led by the 49th Imam, His Highness the Aga Khan.
7. Other border management programmes include the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE's) Border Management Staff College; the United Nations' International Organization for Migration (IOM) border projects; and bilateral, mainly US, security aid and training which are estimated to have cost USD 83 million between 2005 and 2013 (ICG 2016).

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