

# Chapter 6

## Being Afghani, French and not Soviet Along the Border Between Tajikistan and Afghanistan



Mélanie Sadozai 

**Abstract** How can being a French woman of Afghan origin be an asset and an obstacle in conducting research along the borderlands of Badakhshan between Tajikistan and Afghanistan? This essay draws on field anecdotes which fostered critical thinking about my positionality as a French-Afghani woman. While my French passport symbolized my foreign identity, having personal ties with Badakhshan made me not “just a foreigner” due to my Afghan heritage. I argue that having a plural identity is just as helpful in conducting ethnographic research as it can be difficult to maintain the necessary distance from the object of study and to keep my collaborators safe.

**Keywords** Border · Foreigner · Local · Danger · Family ties · Fieldwork

### Introduction

Far from simply a research tool, fieldwork involves not only a displacement, a mode of investigation, but also a social relationship (Allès et al., 2016). The expression “doing fieldwork” is synonymous with trying to reduce, if not abolish, distances, whether they be metric, cultural, linguistic, or cognitive in order to create a “direct contact” between the researcher, their field, and the object of study (Steck, 2012, 77). This triangulation inevitably raises the issue of how the researcher’s position influences the field process and the knowledge production thereof.

Located at the margins of the former Soviet space, the border between Tajikistan and Afghanistan, marked by the Pyanj River, lies at the core of my academic research. The cross-border region of Badakhshan and the interactions between Tajikistanis and Afghans taking place there was my primary focus and my personal relation to the region made the question of positionality crucial for my research.

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M. Sadozai (✉)

The George Washington University, Washington, DC, USA

e-mail: [melanie.sadozai@inalco.fr](mailto:melanie.sadozai@inalco.fr)

INALCO/Sorbonne Paris Cité, Paris, France

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My interest in this border stemmed from my Afghan origins and personal background. My father had escaped Afghanistan the day before the Soviet troops entered Kabul in 1979 and had started a new life in France where he married my mother, a French woman of Breton heritage. Just like millions of Afghans (Sadozai, 2021a), the war in Afghanistan had wrecked my father's ambition to live and work in his native country. In 2014, when I first traveled to the border between Tajikistan and Afghanistan, I was struck by the symbolic aspect of the Pyanj River: It was along this waterway that war "ended." Four years later, I decided to challenge this thought theoretically, drawing on my academic education in International Relations. I wanted to engage in a PhD project in which I could use my personal affinity to this border, as well as my local heritage.

Since the beginning of my research, I have understood that ethnographic methodology undertaken in these particular borderlands would necessitate reflective analysis and positionality in order for me to create the necessary distance from the object of study while being immersed in my research (Groulx, 1999). The matter of positionality has been tackled through the question *how* we are perceived, but not so much by *who* perceives us. I argue that my French-Afghani identity surely influenced the way I was seen in the field, but that it also depended highly on the categories of interlocutors I was dealing with.

Conducting fieldwork along a border with a country that has seen decades of war is highly symbolic. Along the border with Afghanistan, danger is often based on stereotypes, validating official narratives considering this border as a place subject to violence and drug trafficking (Sadozai, 2021b). Like Sluka (1990, 124), I consider that the dangers are often exaggerated, based on stereotypes, media images, or inadequate information, and that "in most cases they are not insurmountable—as long as one takes them seriously and approaches them as an essential methodological concern." Questioning the notion of danger associated with the Northern border of Afghanistan, I show that, during my field trips, I faced "methodological risks" pertaining to my position as both a foreigner and a perceived local more than dangers to my own security.

This chapter draws on my stories of researching the border between Tajikistan and Afghanistan in Badakhshan between 2014 and 2022. First, I highlight how my French citizenship labeled me as a foreigner for the Tajikistani authorities. Then, I show how my Afghan heritage gave me unique access to this border and its borderland communities. Finally, I explore the emotional bias I faced and the strategy I found to overcome it.

## The Foreign Passport as an Identity Marker

In Tajikistan, accessing the Afghan border requires overcoming administrative obstacles which are difficult to bypass for foreign passport holders, who must secure the special permit for the Autonomous Mountainous Province of Badakhshan—in Tajik, Viloīati Mukhtori Kūhīstoni Badakhshon (VMKB)—along which runs more

than half of the border with Afghanistan. The issuance of this document is not guaranteed: as foreigners, we have to cope with arbitrary decisions made by the local authorities, which represent important constraints to conducting fieldwork there. The border between Tajikistan and Afghanistan is even more unique as, during the Soviet times, it was highly monitored and was subject to a specific border regime. Thus, the perception of the border as unsafe, stemming from more than seventy years of suspicion toward Afghanistan, remains entrenched today in the minds of the Tajikistani authorities.

In this context, any stranger going to the Afghan border may be interrogated. On several occasions, I was stopped by police officers in Ishkashim outside of the official checkpoints. When I asked about the purpose of these identity checks, I was told, “We are at the Afghan border,” without further explanation. These interactions were always cordial, certainly because I was often accompanied by locals from Ishkashim who inspired a form of trust for the local police. My friends who lived there explained to me that the police had to register the foreigners at the police station, but that it was also “routine” because the agents were terribly bored. The border with Afghanistan, in association with my French passport, was a pretext to break away from boredom and to perform authority.

The border is also a place where illegal practices take place, often conducted by those who are supposed to prevent them (De Danieli, 2011). Researchers and foreigners, in this particular border environment, can be categorized as belonging to one political movement or another, or be identified by the national intelligence services. In other cases, they may serve as a conduit to promote demands, make claims, or convey certain ideas abroad (Manos, 2010). For the border authorities, it was clear I was not from Tajikistan, and therefore my presence was suspicious, while anywhere else in Tajikistan, the police did not even pay attention to me.

In 2022, when traversing the border between Uzbekistan and Tajikistan by train with a friend who held a Russian passport at the time, my origins and gender revealed a very clear perception of “non-Soviet” people by the Tajikistani border control officer who had the power to give or deny us access to Tajikistan. To avoid any uncomfortable conversation that we may have faced, we pretended to be married. The officer argued that we had entered Tajikistan without filling out what he called a “mandatory” form. The only way out was for us to either go back to the border crossing point near Buston—a six-hour drive from Dushanbe—where we had our passports stamped or to “decide” and “suggest a solution” (in Tajik: *vaʼi kardan*; in Russian: *vybiraĭte/predlagaĭte*). As the officer answered a phone call, we understood that we had to “decide” to bribe him. I handed out a 20-euro bill. “*Malo!*” he yelled in Russian, “it’s not enough!” My “husband” then explained that it was all we had. “I don’t expect you to pay,” the officer told him in Russian, thinking I would not understand. “You are Russian, you are from the former Soviet Union, like me. But your wife, she is French. She has to pay.” Even when my “husband” replied that being married to him meant I was also Russian, the officer did not take it as an answer. After more bargaining, he eventually left with the 20 euros. I refused to shake his hand when he offered. He insisted in Tajik: “the doors of Tajikistan will always be open to you!”.

In these two instances, the risk lay in the arbitrary decisions authorities along the borders could make regarding my presence in the country due to my foreign passport. This type of risk has been clearly identified in the literature on field research in former Soviet countries where suspicion towards foreigners is tied to authoritarianism (Hervouet, 2019).

Authoritarianism raises another important risk pertaining to our collaborators' safety. As outlined by Thibault (2023), many scholars researching in former Soviet countries have faced situations of being denied a visa, deportation, or becoming *persona non grata*. While Tajikistan has developed a more welcoming policy for foreign tourists, namely, by implementing a visa-free policy for 52 countries in January 2022, tension has grown toward foreigners since protests took place in VMKB in November 2021. Cases of Tajikistani citizens being imprisoned because of their suspected relations with foreigners have become a reality, as shown by the example of Ulfatkhonim Mamadshoeva (Sultanalieva, 2022). In a state-led television broadcast, this human rights activist was accused of fomenting riots in VMKB after receiving funding and instructions from an unnamed "Western" embassy (in Tajik: *gharbī*).<sup>1</sup> It is important to underline that our positionality as foreigners can not only prevent us from accessing the field, but more importantly, put locals, who do not hold a foreign passport, in high danger. In authoritarian regimes like Tajikistan, positionality does not only refer to *our* position, but to how our position as a foreigner can have a negative impact on our interlocutors. Ethical issues and protection of collaborators, as underlined by Shih (2015), must prevail over research goals. However, in the eyes of Tajikistani citizens in Badakhshan, my French passport never mattered; I was rather seen through my ancestral roots from the region.

## Not 'Just a Foreigner'

A type of danger that I often hear of when talking about my fieldwork is that of being a lone woman. While I acknowledge that this is not true for all ethnographers of Central Asia (Dall'Agnola *in this volume*; Thibault, 2021), and even if I encountered uncomfortable situations—like a polite marriage proposal with a man thirty years older than me—my gender never hindered my research. I often argue that the reason is that I have never been alone in the field. I purposely traveled in shared vehicles, knowing that it would be the only way to observe and practice mobility along the border, while trusting my drivers. I would stay with families where sometimes three generations were living under the same roof. Because of this immersion, I always knew I had someone to rely on should any problem arise. Additionally, my personal perception of the field in Badakhshan was that of a peaceful place for foreign women.

This feeling of security also pertains to the fact that, in Badakhshan, I would sometimes pass as being *pomiri*, the term used to refer to the Ismaili inhabitants of VMKB in Tajikistan, and as an "Afghan" for Afghans. Afghans would hear me

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<sup>1</sup> See the video on Youtube at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZmPwDqoa1Mc>.

speak Dari, and Tajikistanis knew I did not speak standard Tajik and assumed I had a Pamiri accent. “Are you Pamiri?” I was asked on many occasions. I would answer in Shughni, one of the Pamiri languages, but my command of it being limited, I would then admit to being French and Afghani. While some people believed me, others thought I was trying to hide that I was Pamiri. “You look like you are Pamiri” was then the argument they would hold on to. In fact, my father, whose own father was Pashtun, always knew he had relatives from the region of Sheghnan in Afghanistan on his mother’s side. My grandmother’s ancestors had traveled all over the region, from Badakhshan, to Kashmir and then Kabul. However, my father only recalled visits from his Sheghnan relatives in Kabul as a young boy in the 1960s and never got to trace back his lineage.

The identity of the researcher is valued differently by the individuals to whom they present themselves and depends on the situation they are in. They may be seen as outsider or insider, but also as “inbetweeners,” a notion which goes against the dichotomy of being either outside or inside and focuses rather on shifted positions (Milligan, 2016, 248). In her doctoral dissertation, Remtilla provides insights on her own shifted position from her fieldwork in Ishkashim, Tajikistan. Remtilla (2012, 28), an Ismaili woman from Canada, found that mentioning her religion to drivers or in the markets made her “an Ismaili sister” and no longer “just a foreigner.” Akin to Remtilla’s experience, referring to my origins from the region triggered sympathy from my Pamiri interlocutors. They often referred to me as “*Dukhtari Sheghnan*” (Dari/Tajik for “the daughter of Sheghnan”), in reference to a famous Afghan song praising the Sheghnani roots of a young girl. My family’s ancestral ties to the region, even if obscure, marked me out as local, despite my French citizenship. For my interlocutors, it represented a legitimate reason to go back to what they considered my ancestral homeland in search of my roots in Badakhshan. This shifted my position from foreigner to a local in the eyes of the actual locals and made me, to quote Remtilla (2012, 28), not “just a foreigner.”

Sharing ancestral ties and familiarity with the field facilitated my access to and interactions with people. While I presented myself as French, I did not hide that my father was born and raised in Afghanistan. On the other hand, I was careful not to reveal it until after the interviews to avoid influencing the answers and encouraging self-censorship. My background also allowed me to interact with the Afghans I met along the border, especially in cross-border markets, and gave me the opportunity to be easily integrated into the Afghan circles. Akin to the experience of Osman (2020, 9), who describes the perception of her Afghan origins by her interlocutors during her fieldwork in Afghanistan, the questions I was asked about my parents, a binational couple and therefore a “mixed” couple (in Tajik and Dari: *omekhta, aralash*), were mostly out of curiosity or a way of starting an exchange.

In Badakhshan, I explained that my paternal family had relatives who probably still lived in Sheghnan, Afghanistan, although this connection was unclear to us. It was assumed that these personal ties to the territory, although vague, explained my interest in the region. My host families, or even the people I briefly spoke to, were content with this brief introduction because they felt they knew enough about me. Additionally, after a few visits in the region, when asked where I had traveled in

the Pamirs, I would list the different places I had traveled to, sometimes the precise villages, and would receive positive reactions. Just like in other understudied former Soviet places, interest for the people and the region we are visiting abolishes social distance and creates familiarity with the field (Hervouet, 2019). At the same time, it triggers emotions which can prevent us from reaching a form of objectivity.

## **Emotional Bias and “Empathic Neutrality”**

Being seen as “not just a foreigner” resulted in both a risk of emotional bias and an opportunity for reflection on the topic. One of the questions I explored in my research pertained to Tajikistanis’ perceptions of the border with Afghanistan. My own understanding of cross-border dynamics could have been biased by my Afghan origins and the proximity I felt with Afghans. It was crucial not to let my personal trajectory create this emotional bias. Establishing distance between the content of the responses regarding the perceptions of Afghans and my own perception of a group with whom I share common origins was necessary to prevent the analysis from being tainted by emotions.

Adopting an ethnographic method in a field that is not completely removed from the researcher’s personal background involves asking questions of emotions, more particularly of empathy for the subjects. Paillé and Mucchielli (2016, 148) define empathy as an “alterocentric sensitivity, social sensitivity, receptivity to others’ reactions.” From a methodological perspective, the researcher’s subjectivity forces them to carry out reflexive work in order to distance themselves from their object of study and their fieldwork, while at the same time being immersed in the research. I considered this emotional aspect of my research as a challenge to neutrality, while seeing it also as a way to engage in reflexivity. Like many researchers before me (Holmes, 2013; Patton, 1990; Thajib et al., 2019), I considered empathy as a descriptive method that allows me to relive the thoughts and experiences of local protagonists.

In their seminal work on grounded research, Glaser and Strauss (1967, 226) offer a strategy by calling for an “informed detachment.” This method consists of finding the right balance between the necessary distance from the field and the subjects, and an indispensable proximity with them, so as not to neglect either of the two. Along with a number of qualitative methodologists, I have used this dual approach. Patton (1990, 111) has conceptualized it under the expression of “empathic neutrality,” a notion which “offers a middle ground between becoming too involved, which can cloud judgment, and remaining too distant, which can reduce understanding.” This method allowed me to engage with my own position as a French woman of Afghan heritage, perceived as a somewhat local, in order to avoid the emotional bias mentioned previously. For example, I was not aiming to have my Tajikistani respondents share positive opinions about Afghans just because of my Afghan heritage. I would frame the question in a way which gave them enough latitude to elaborate on any perception they held, whether negative or positive. Being neutral meant that I had “no axe to grind, no theory to prove (to test but not to prove), and no predetermined

results to support” (Patton, 1990, 113), while being empathetic meant combining “cognitive understanding with affective connection” (Patton, 1990, 114).

Drawing on my own fieldwork experience, I encourage other scholars of local origins to apply Patton’s concept of “empathic neutrality” to avoid falling into an excess of empathy for their respondents. The constant effort to be detached permitted me to integrate all types of perceptions shared by my respondents, to enrich my analysis of them, and to come to the conclusion that my initial assumption—that Afghans are negatively perceived by people in Tajikistan—is not necessarily true, and that the reality is more nuanced.

## Conclusion

My academic research has surely been influenced by both my Afghan background and my French citizenship. Empirical scholars who have personal ties with their field can be biased, too compassionate, and lack objectivity in their analysis. Additionally, being French also proved that I was not seen as a local, particularly by border authorities in Tajikistan, as I lacked a Soviet identity. Positionality was thus a matter of being either a foreigner, or not “just a foreigner” who expressed empathy for her respondents.

At an early stage of my research, I sought to make the most of having local roots and a particular attachment to the field, while questioning the methodological considerations that this would imply. The emotional component of ethnographic research entails a risk of providing limited results. Rather than an obstacle, my proximity to the field due to my local origins proved to be an asset, turning difficulty into opportunity.

It is my hope that this chapter will be useful to early-career researchers and students considering fieldwork research in similar contexts, whether they are native to a place, have local origins, or no connection at all. It is important to underline that the comments and anecdotes I shared here should not serve as a general guideline for field research. Instead, I hope that my field experiences will encourage other scholars to reflect on their own positionality when interacting with their interviewees, collaborators, participants, or interlocutors in the field. More broadly, my reflections should serve as a reminder for us that we as scholars should always question the notion of danger to avoid causing harm in the field.

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**Mélanie Sadozai** is a post-doctoral fellow at the Institute for European, Russian, and Eurasian Studies (IERES) of the George Washington University (2022–2023). She received her Ph.D. in Political Science and International Relations from the National Institute of Oriental Languages and Civilizations (INALCO/Sorbonne Paris Cité) in Paris, France. Her work, based on ethnographic methods and extensive fieldwork since 2014, focuses on cross-border relations in the remote areas of Afghanistan and Tajikistan in the Pamirs. She has published academic pieces in the *Journal of Borderlands Studies*, the *Journal of Power Institutions in Post-Soviet Societies* and *Problems of Post-Communism*.

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