
The Peoples of Afghanistan

Throughout history many ethnic groups have settled in Afghanistan. They came from the west, from the east, from the south and especially from the steppes and deserts of Central Asia to the north. In a recent study of the ethnic groups of Afghanistan, some 55 ethnic names are listed.¹ On the basis of their language these peoples can be roughly divided into Iranian (especially the Baluch, Pashtuns and Tajiks), Turkic (mainly the Türkmén and Özbeks) and others. It should be realized, however, that language is not always a clear-cut ethnic marker. The Hazaras from Central Afghanistan, for instance, nowadays speak (Iranian) Persian (*Fârsi* or Dari), but are in the main clearly of Turco-Mongolian origin.

The Pashtuns

In general terms, the mountains of Central and Northeast Afghanistan separate the Pashtun-dominated south of the country from the non-Pashtun groups in the north. The Pashtuns have traditionally been the Afghans *par excellence*, all the other ethnic groups of Afghanistan carrying another name. They also form the largest part of the population, some 40 to 50 per cent. Thus, as late as the nineteenth century, the name of Afghanistan was still being used only to describe the habitat of the Pashtuns, along both sides of the Durand line, while the west and north of modern Afghanistan were generally known as Khurasan and (Lesser) Turkestan respectively.²

The Pashtuns, in India and Pakistan generally known as the Pathans, constitute a distinct ethnic group that by the year 2000

1 See Orywal 1986.

2 For the use of the name of Afghan, Afghanistan etc., compare Mousavi 1998:1ff.

numbered some 20 million people.³ They now live in approximately equal numbers along both sides of the Afghanistan/Pakistan border. The Pashtun lands cover a roughly triangular area that stretches in a straight west-east line from Southwest Afghanistan to the Middle Indus Valley, and up north along the Indus river to the Swat valley in modern Pakistan. The Hindu Kush mountains constitute the north-western border. Peshawar in North Pakistan and Qandahar in South Afghanistan are traditionally the main urban centres of the Pashtuns.

The Pashtuns speak Pashto, or Pakhto, which is an Iranian language and thus related to Persian (*Fârsi*), Kurdish, Baluchi and so forth.⁴ Together with Persian, which is called *Dari* in Afghanistan, it is one of the two official languages of the country. The origin of the name of the Pashtuns, and of their language, is a moot point.⁵ It is only securely known from the late medieval period onwards, although the name has been tentatively linked to that of the *Pasianoï* mentioned in Classical sources.⁶ According to the texts this group formed part of a huge wave of mainly Iranian Scythian invaders that infiltrated from the north onto the eastern parts of the Iranian Plateau in the late second century BC. However, this identification cannot as yet be substantiated.

The origin of the name of the Afghans is equally problematic. It is not of Pashto origin.⁷ It is therefore more than likely that outsiders used this name to describe some of the peoples of the Indo-Iranian borderlands, who may or may not have been Pashtuns. The name perhaps occurs in Varaha Mihira's *Bṛhat-Saṃhitâ*, a Sanskrit work from the Indian subcontinent of the early sixth century, under the ethnic appellation of the *Avagânâs*.⁸ The identification of this name, however, is still disputed, and so is that of the *Abojian* which is found in the travelogue of the Chinese pilgrim Xuanzang from the early seventh century.⁹

The first reliable reference to the name of the Afghans dates to the tenth century. In the *Hudud al-Âlam*, an anonymous Persian work from the late tenth century, reference is made to 'Saul, a pleasant

3 For a bibliography of the Pashtuns, see Orywal 1986:20-1.

4 The two names Pashto and Pakhto reflect the two main dialects of the language. Pashto (the 'soft' dialect) is spoken in the south, while Pakhto (the 'hard' dialect) is found in the north. Peshawar in modern Pakistan is, correspondingly, locally known as Pekhawar. Compare Caroe 1958:xvi-xvii.

5 Compare Morgenstierne 1940 and 1979:29 and Brandenstein and Mayrhofer 1964:138.

6 Bailey 1993:10.

7 Morgenstierne 1979:28.

8 *Bṛhat-Saṃhitâ* XI 61 and XVI 38.

9 A district with this name was apparently located somewhere in the borderlands between Afghanistan and Pakistan (*The Life of Hiuen-Tsiang*, trans. Beal 1911:193).

village on a mountain. In it live Afghans.¹⁰ This village was, according to the text, probably located near Gardiz, east of Ghazni. The book also tells about a village near modern Jalalabad where the local king used to have many Hindu, Muslim and Afghan wives. From the time of Mahmud of Ghazni, at the end of the tenth century AD, references to Afghans become more frequent. The Afghans of his day are generally located in the borderlands between Iran and the Indian subcontinent. The most explicit mentioning of the Afghans is found in al-Biruni's *Ta'rikh al-Hind* (eleventh century AD).¹¹ Here it is said that various tribes of Afghans lived in the mountains in the west of India. Al-Biruni adds that they were savage people and he describes them as Hindus.

Ibn Battuta, the thirteenth-century traveller from Morocco whom I referred to before in connection with the Hindu Kush, writes about the 'Persians called Afghans' who lived between Ghazni and the Indus plains.¹² He adds that their principal mountain is called the 'Kuh Sulayman', thus recalling an old tradition among the Pashtuns that their original habitat is located near the Kuh-i Sulayman mountains, east of Qandahar.¹³

Looking for the origin of the Pashtuns and the Afghans is something like exploring the source of the Amazon. Is there one specific beginning? And are the Pashtuns originally identical with the Afghans? Although the Pashtuns nowadays constitute a clear ethnic group with their own language and culture, there is no evidence whatsoever that all modern Pashtuns share the same ethnic origins. In fact it is highly unlikely.¹⁴ There are still pockets of non-Pashtun groups in lands otherwise completely dominated by Pashtuns and the Pashtuns are slowly engulfing these people, culturally and linguistically. This process must have been going on for centuries. Ethnicity is not a static phenomenon and many people in the borderlands at some stage in their history may have accepted 'Pashtunhood' and adopted Pashto as their language. The opposite development also took place, whereby Pashtun groups lost their 'Pashtunhood'. A modern example of 'fusion' may be the southern groups of the (non-Pashtun) Taymani and Maliki Aymaq in West Afghanistan, who feel affiliated to the Pashtuns and have adopted Qandahari Pashtun culture and language.¹⁵ On the other hand, 'fission' may be indicated by the Persian

10 *Hudud al-'Alam*, trans. Minorsky 1937:91.

11 Trans. Sachau 1888; 1910: I,1,208.

12 Ibn Battuta, trans. Routledge 1929:180.

13 Elphinstone (1815:151) tells about the Pashtuns that the 'Arabs call them Solimaunee'.

14 Compare Janata 1987:212 and Spain 1985:39.

15 They are known for their typical black tents that resemble that of the Pashtuns (Szabo and Barfield 1991:48-50).

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speaking (Pashtun) Nurzay Durrans in Southwest Afghanistan, who feel more related to non-Pashtun groups.¹⁶ In nineteenth-century literature there are, within the same context, frequent references to the non-Pashtun background of certain 'Pashtun' tribes. Mountstuart Elphinstone tells of the Nasir Ghaljis, a tribe of wandering *Kuchis* or Powindahs who live along the Afghanistan/Pakistan border. According to him: 'The Hotukees [Hotaki Ghaljis] say that the Naussers have been their Humsauyahs [clients], but not their kindred: some even represent them as sprung from the Beloches [Baluchis]; and though they speak Pushtoo, and strenuously maintain their descent from the Afghauns, their features and appearance certainly indicate a race distinct from that nation.'¹⁷

Pashto

An important aspect of Pashtunhood is the language. Pashto/Pakhto belongs to the family of Iranian languages. These were introduced to the Iranian Plateau by people from South Central Asia from the second millennium BC onwards. Pashto is not the only Iranian language, and probably also not the first, to be spoken south of the mountains. We know this, because in the midst of Pashtun land there are, apart from the ubiquitous Persian speaking Tajiks, still small pockets of people who speak other Iranian languages. These can be found in the Logar valley south of Kabul (at least up to 1978) and near Kaniguram (Waziristan) in Pakistan. These people speak Ormuri. They call themselves Barakis, and this name also occurs in the early sixteenth-century biography of Babur, the founder of the Mughal dynasty of India, who spent much time in the borderlands in preparation of his invasion of the subcontinent.¹⁸ In addition, north of Kabul, there are people speaking Paraci.¹⁹ Paraci and Ormuri are two related Iranian languages, which in the past were spoken by far more people in a much larger area. They were pushed aside and driven away to isolated valleys by those who spoke another language, including the Pashtuns.

16 See Roy 1990:111 for the affiliation of Persian speaking Nurzay with the (mainly Tajik) *Jam'iyyat-i Islâmi* resistance organization in the war against the Soviet Union. Their Pashto speaking kinsmen sided with another (Pashtun) organization.

17 Elphinstone 1815:461. See also Janata 1987 for the apparently non-Pashtun background of the Jajis and Turis.

18 *Bâburnâma*, trans. Beveridge 1922:207; 220 and Elphinstone 1815:315. See also Orywal 1986:63-4. Their total number in the Logar valley in 1980 was estimated at 2,000 to 5,000 (Ethnologue Data Base). Caroe 1958:191 refers to three villages southeast of Peshawar called Upper, Middle and Nether Urmur.

19 See Orywal 1986:61-2. Paraci is listed by Babur as one of the eleven (!) languages of the Kabul area (trans. Beveridge 1922:207).

body of the wearer, including her face. The garment includes a rectangular piece of netting over the eyes to allow the wearer to see. Underneath she wears trousers and a long-sleeved dress. Pashtun men are also easily recognized by their costume, which usually consists of loose, baggy trousers, a long shirt and a waistcoat. They also like to wear open sandals. Many Pashtuns still wear a turban (*lungi*), with one end characteristically hanging loose across the shoulder. The turban is nowadays especially worn in Taliban-controlled areas, where the men often wear a turban of black cloth with thin white stripes. Elsewhere, the Chitrali cap (*pawkul*) is becoming more and more popular.

The Pashtuns of Afghanistan

The Pashtuns of Afghanistan are nowadays concentrated in the southeast, east and southwest of the country. The two main groups in the country are the tribal confederacies of the Durrani and the Ghaljis. Both of them are predominantly sedentary.

The first, formerly known as the Abdalis, live in the south and southwest, with Qandahar as their main centre. They are subdivided into several tribes. Some of these, namely the putative descendants of someone called Zirak, are the Popalzay, 'Alikozay, Barakzay and Achakzay.³⁵ Another group of tribes is that of the alleged descendants of Panjpao, namely the Nurzay, 'Alizay and Ishaqzay.³⁶ The Popalzay and Barakzay are traditionally the most important of the Abdalis/Durrani. One of the Popalzay clans, the Sadozay, provided Afghanistan with its royal dynasty from the mid-eighteenth to the beginning of the eighteenth century. The Barakzay succeeded the Popalzay as king-makers, and their leaders ruled Afghanistan until 1978.

Kinsmen of the Abdalis/Durrani are the Spin Tarins and Tor Tarins, who both live east of Qandahar, in modern Pakistan, and the Sherani, who live close to the Tarins, in the Sulayman mountains. The distribution of these groups again illustrates the probability that the Abdalis/Durrani, and perhaps all Pashtuns, originate in the same area, close to the Sulayman mountains in modern Pakistan.

The Ghaljis live in the east of the country, with the town of Ghazni as their focal point. According to Ni'mat Allah they are closely related to a number of Pashtun tribes that now live further to the east, as far

35 The Achakzay were separated from the Barakzay in the mid-eighteenth century by Ahmad Shah Durrani (Noelle 1997:226, 230).

36 The Achakzay, Nurzay and Ishaqzay are, or were at least until very recent times, for the greater part nomadic.

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