

# “Afghan” in Afghanistan: Idols in the Land of Idols

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## ABSTRACT

*A perennial anomaly in the academic, political, and popular discourse about “Afghan” and “Afghanistan” is the chronic absence of an informed and systematic engagement with the epistemology and semantic construction of the Persian identity label “Afghan” and its derivative use in the cultural, political, social, and spatial configuration of “Afghanistan.” This article offers a brief overview of, and a corrective to, this cultural and linguistic disposition. The essay examines the widespread use, the cultural and historical roots, and linguistic seeds of the ethnonym “Afghan” and its derivative toponymal “Afghanistan.” The essay excavates the Buddhist stance and the epistemological cradle of the Persian morpheme from which the term “Afghan” is derived. This exercise in the ethnology of Afghanistan locates the country and its people in historical “deep time” and in the context of several cultural layers and processes rather than a cultural construct in isolation. It aims to serve as a springboard for a corrective etymological awareness for the production of academic and political texts and discourse dealing with Afghanistan and its people.*

**KEYWORDS:** Ethnic identity, autonym, exonym, Buddhism, idols, Islam, Afghanophilia, Pashtunophobia

A common academic, political, and popular orientation portrays “Afghan” and “Afghanistan” as an insulated endogamous cultural, social, and political island where there has been no external cultural traffic, and where all local cultural features are home grown and self-constructed. In this static alignment, Afghanistan and its cultural features are viewed as a centripetal socio-cultural phenomenon unattached to and uninformed by surrounding temporal and spatial regional or global cultural formations and processes.<sup>1</sup> This widespread view in most academic and popular writings dealing with ethnicity, history, politics and religion in Central and South

<sup>1</sup> In Euro-American texts dealing with the morphemes “Afghan” and “Afghanistan” the glottal medial phoneme [gh غ] after the phoneme [f ف] is rendered as a non-aspirated palatal phoneme [g گ]. This phonemic modification with significant morphemic and

Asia, especially in the space which later became “Afghanistan,” has encouraged the entrenched assumption that the pre-Islamic era housed successive static, isolated, unattached and discontinuous layers of pre-historic (Paleolithic and Neolithic) and historic—Graeco-Roman, Hellenistic, Hindu and Buddhist—cultural features that were forcefully suppressed or driven out by Islam on the shoulders of and with the swords of Arab armies and the Arabic language starting in the late seventh century AD and continuing through the tenth century. During the following centuries, the consciousness about and the encounter between the invading and/or locally converted Muslims and the followers of non-Muslim religions, especially Buddhism and its material inheritance in Afghanistan and the surrounding area, have been punctuated with tension and hostility. *Bot-shekani* (“idol-breaking” in Persian) and the destruction of stupas and monasteries became a taken-for-granted popular Islamic attitude toward Buddhism. The late nineteenth-century destructive invasion of polytheistic Kafiristan, in the foothills of the Hindukush mountains in northeast Afghanistan, by the armed forces of the Muslim amir of Kabul is an extension of this inbred Islamic hostility toward non-Muslim societies.

The earliest known mention of the identity label “Afghan” is available in the tenth c. AD Persian geographic document *Hudud al-‘Alam*: “NINHAR, a place of which the king makes show of Islam (*musalmāni numayadh*), and has many wives, (namely) over thirty Muslim, Afghan, and Hindu (wives). The rest (*va digar mardum*) of the people are idolaters. In (Ninhar) there are three large idols.”<sup>2</sup> “NINHAR” stands for present day Nangarhar in northeastern Afghanistan. An early mention of “Afghans” is available in the English translation of the Persian *Kitab-i Yamini* by Al-‘Utbi.<sup>3</sup> It also appears in the 1325–1334 AD travel writings of Ibn Battuta: “Kabul, formerly a vast town, the site of which is now occupied by a village inhabited by a tribe of Persians called Afghans.”<sup>4</sup> Frequent references are made to “Afghan” and “Afghans,” standing for Pashtun and Pashtuns, in the thirteenth-century *Tabaqat-e Nasiri* by Minhaj ud-Din.<sup>5</sup> Early references to “Afghan,” “Awghan,” and “Awghanan” standing for “Pashtun” also appear in numerous popular Persian chronicle histories including the *Tarikh-e Guzida* (1320–1321 AD [1453]), *Zafarnama* (1425 AD), and *Rawzat al-Safa* (1891–1894 AD).<sup>6</sup> The earliest reference to “Afghanistan” emerges in the *Tarikhnama-ye Herat* by Sayf Ibn Mohammad Herawi (1282 AD).<sup>7</sup>

In its early post-fifteenth-century historical and genealogical usages, the label “Afghan” was explicitly assigned to Pashtun (Patan, Pathan) but not conflated with

semantic implications requires systematic linguistic and cultural analysis beyond the scope of this essay.

<sup>2</sup> Hudud al-‘Alam, *The Regions of the World*, 91. Parentheses and italics in the original.

<sup>3</sup> Al-Utbi Al-‘Utbi, *Kitab-e Yamini*, 390, 467.

<sup>4</sup> Gibb, ed., *The Travels of Ibn Battuta*.

<sup>5</sup> *Tabaqat-e Nasiri* was translated into English and extensively annotated by Henry G. Raverty in 1881. Several of Raverty’s annotations convincingly reject the “Afghan” (Pashtun) and “Patan” identity of the Persian Ghori and Suri ruling dynasties of India. See Raverty, ed. and tr., *Ṭabaqāt-i-nāsiri*.

<sup>6</sup> *Tarikh-e Guzida; Zafarnama; Rawzat al-Safa*.

<sup>7</sup> Herawi, *Tarikhnama-ye Herat*.

other identity markers. In later centuries, the label "Afghan" became increasingly interchanged with other labels. Significantly, these and other early references to "Afghan" and "Afghanistan" did not explore the origin, epistemology, or meaning of the linguistic morphemes "Afghan" and "Afghanistan".

The casual, strategic, and dissimulating conflation of various ethnic identity labels (especially "Pashtun") with the ethnonym "Afghan" (and vice versa) emerged with the rise of the non-Pashtun, Persian-dominated ruling dynasties—the Delhi Sultanate, Ghoris, Suris, Mughals—in northern India during the thirteenth–nineteenth centuries. The post-mid-eighteenth-century non-Pashtun Abdali, Sadozai and Barakzai rulers of Afghanistan tactfully and strategically conflated, disguised, and manipulated their true non-Pashtun identity by adopting the label "Pashtun" through "Afghan" and/or, depending on their audience, taking on other identity umbrellas.

The conflation of "Afghan" with "Pashtun" identity resulted in the Pashtunization of the non-Pashtun rulers and Persianate ruling elites in Kabul for more than two centuries between 1747 and 1978. This tradition of manipulative conflation has implanted the cosmology in Kabul-based elites and their colonial and imperial retainers that one must be a Pashtun and Afghan (or vice versa) in order to be a ruler of Kabul. In this convention of conflation and invention, a person whose identity was culturally, historically, genealogically or tactfully not legible as "Pashtun" could not become the ruler of Kabul and Afghanistan.

The Persian-constructed identity label "Afghan," especially for those who claimed Pashtun identity, became the general preferred ethnic shelter for the emergent multi-cultural communities in northern India, especially those in or aspiring for locations of political and economic power. The conflation of the identity label "Afghan" with "Pashtun" or its Indian versions "Patan" or "Pathan" and strategies for dissimulation and the invention of ethnic identities evolved from the increasing migrations of diverse ethnic communities and the diffusion of cultures of Persia, Central Asia, and strains of Islam and Arabic language, to northern India during the post-Islamic centuries. These essentially unidirectional (west-to-east) human migrations resulted in the emergence of a hybridized "Indo-Afghan" ruling polity in which Persian had become the dominant literary and political language, especially among the political, literary and religious elites, all located in the upper tiers of the ruling apparatus and other structures of domination.<sup>8</sup> These complex multi-cultural adaptive tactics and strategies for domination stimulated individual and collaborative literary initiatives and tactics for the construction of fictive and imaginary genealogies.

During the early eighteenth century a group of Persian and/or Persianized Central Asian Turkish elites in the Persianate Mughal court produced texts in which they portrayed themselves as Afghans (cum Pashtuns) from "Roh," the mystic, fictive and imaginary homeland of Afghans (Pashtuns) in the southeastern foothills of the Hindukush mountains, roughly corresponding to the northwest frontier region of colonial India. In academic, political, and popular texts, it is commonly stated that "Roh" is the Pashtu word for the mountain area in

<sup>8</sup> Gommans, *The Rise of the Indo-Afghan Empire*.

northwest India. Yet I have not seen a single instance in these writings where the correct Pashtu word for mountain “*ghar*” is mentioned. Nor have I seen reference in these texts to the Arabic, Persian, and Pashtu morpheme “*Rooḥ*” standing for “spirit” or “soul.” This exercise in “the invention of tradition” and the “tyranny of labels” provides the framework in these writings for the mythical “Roh” as a manipulative phonetic and literary alternative for “Koh,” the Farsi morpheme for mountain.<sup>9</sup>

In this project of inventing identity, the Persian phoneme [K] is exchanged with the phoneme [R]. It is remarkable that the courtly Persian texts that used “Roh” for “mountain” are not informed by the linguistic reality of the Persian toponym *Kohdaman* (“skirt” or “foothill of mountain”) and *Kohestan* (land of mountains)—topographical spaces north of Kabul.

These identity-seeking Indo-Afghans labeled their invented collective community “*Rohilla*” (Persian, “spiritual” or “of spirit”) and their residential space as “*Rohilkand*,” similar to the Turkic linguistic structure of “*Samarkand*” and “*Tashkent*,” urban spaces in Turkic Central Asia. Thus, “*Roh*, *Rohilla*, *Rohilkand*” became the imaginary and mythical master triangle for the cultural, historical and spatial identity cradle of Indo-Afghans—interchangeable with Pashtun, Patan, Pathan, and other ethnic identities in northern India.<sup>10</sup>

To my knowledge no one has yet critically engaged this disposition of Afghan/Pashtun genealogies and the ethnology and history of the socio-cultural configuration of *Roh-Rohilla-Rohilkand* as an imaginary and mythical triangle of identity for migrants, mostly from Persia and Turkish Central Asia, who tried to reinvent themselves as domesticated or “civilized” relatives or descendants of the stereotypical tall, light skinned, brave, wild, plundering, unruly, warrior, highway-men living in tribal communities in the highlands where the cultural and political frontiers of Persia, Central and South Asia converged.

The earliest, most influential, widely circulated and cited of these genealogical texts about the origin and identity of Afghans (cum Pashtuns) was produced in 1613 AD in the court of the Mughal emperor Jahangir (r. 1605–1627 AD). This was a Persian-language history of the “Afghans” written by Ne’matullah Herawi, a Persian historiographer (*waq̄e’-a-nawees*) from Herat.<sup>11</sup> This two-part genealogical history was commissioned by a Rohilla leader, Khan Jahan Lodi, and titled *Tarikh-e Khan Jahan Lodi wa Makhzan-e Afghani*.<sup>12</sup> Ne’matullah Herawi located the origin of “Afghan” in Biblical Judea and associated the meaning of the label “Afghan” with the Persian verb “*feghan*” (“lamentation”).<sup>13</sup>

<sup>9</sup> Hobsbawm and Ranger, eds., *The Invention of Tradition*; Thapar, “The Tyranny of Labels,” 3–23.

<sup>10</sup> For a late eighteenth-century account of the *Rohillas*, see Hamilton, *An Historical Relation*.

<sup>11</sup> Ne’matullah Herawi, *Tarikh-e Khan Jahan Lodi wa Makhzan-e Afghani*.

<sup>12</sup> In Persian, *History of Khan Jahan Lodi and the Afghan Treasury* [granary, repository, keeper of secrets or storehouse]. Herawi’s mythical genealogy of Afghans was translated into English by Bernard Dorn and published in 1829–1836.

<sup>13</sup> Dorn, *History of the Afghans*. A 1965 edition of the translation provides a list of Persian language manuscripts dealing with the ethnology and history of Afghans (pp. xi–xv).

Ne'matullah's text focuses on a personal history of Khan Jahan, locating the origin of Afghans (Pashtuns) in a Semitic ancestry localized in Ghor during the early days of the arrival of Islam. Politically and socially, it links Qays (in Arabic, "judge," "gauge," "measure"), the mythical ancestor of the Afghans with the Prophet Muhammad in Medina. It claims that Qays and his companions from Ghor (in northern Afghanistan) went to Arabia in order to help the Prophet in his military campaign for the capture of Mecca. In exchange, the Prophet bestowed the title "Abd al-Rashid" (Arabic, servant or subject of the rightly guided) on Qays and publicly stated that Qays and the Muslim community he would create in Ghor would be "*Patan*"—a rudder of a boat—for Islam and Muslims. An academic linguistic project could excavate the framework of how and why the Arabic-speaking Prophet Muhammad produced in his rhetoric two phonemes, one with an aspirated frontal labial [p] and another, an aspirated palatal [t], units of sound that do not exist in the phonology of Arabic language.

From the earliest phases of its circulation, Ne'matullah's Semitized genealogy of the Afghans (Pashtuns) has become the bible of Western writings about their ethnology, history, and, especially, their origin. The biblical Jewish origin of the "Afghans" entered into several sources, including Henry Vansittart's 1784 essay in *Asiatic Researches*.<sup>14</sup> The 1836 English translation of Ne'matullah's genealogy of the Afghans by Bernhard Dorn made it a benchmark source for Western, especially British, writers during the past two centuries. Most texts dealing with the ethnology and history of Afghans and Afghanistan explicitly or implicitly cite Ne'matullah's genealogy of the Afghans (Pashtuns, Patans, Pathans), especially its Semitic roots. Ne'matullah's genealogy has become a prominent feature of the Euro-American writings about "Afghans."<sup>15</sup>

Two of these sources, without specifically citing Ne'matullah's genealogy, mention the association of "Afghan" with lamentation. John Malcolm is one of the earliest European writers who (perhaps tacitly following Ne'matullah) associated "*Afghan*" with lamentation.<sup>16</sup> However, Malcolm did not specifically cite the Persian noun "*fegh*" (lamentation) from which the label Afghan is supposedly derived. Another writer who cited a semantic relationship between Afghan and lamentation was G. B. Malleson. In his *History of Afghanistan* (1879), Malleson quoted Thomas Patrick Hughes, a member of the Christian Church Missionary Society to the Afghans at Peshawar, who speculated that "[T]he national appellation of the people of Afghanistan is either *Afghan*, *Pathan*, or *Pukhtun*. The word *Afghan* is said to be derived from *Afghanah*, the supposed ancestor of the Afghan people, although according to Akhund Darweza, a celebrated local authority, it is from the Persian *fighan*, a complaint, or lamentation, as indicating the turbulent character of the people. It may, however, be derived from *fighan* (pl. of *fugh*) idols, i. e. idolaters." To my knowledge, Hughes made the first attempt, albeit with a speculative and uncertain tenor, to associate the label *Afghan* with idols and idolatry (perhaps Buddhism). However, Hughes did not

<sup>14</sup> Vansittart, "The Descent of the Afghans," 69–76.

<sup>15</sup> For an analysis of genealogies, see Irvine, "When is Genealogy History?"

<sup>16</sup> Malcolm, *The History of Persia*.

provide the proper cultural and linguistic analysis for relating “*fghan*” to “idols” and incorrectly cited “*fugh*” as the singular of the Persian verb “*feghan*,” “a complaint, or lamentation.”<sup>17</sup>

In the modern era, the nearly universal academic and literary conflation of Afghan with Pashtun and its use for the invention of ethnic identity is clearly planted in the titles and texts of H. G. Raverty’s popular books dealing with the Pashtu language.<sup>18</sup> These books are saturated with the conflation of “Afghan” with “Pashtun” and other ethnic identity labels. Bernhard Dorn’s *Chrestomathy of the Pushtu or Afghan Language* (1847) also vividly reproduced this perspective.<sup>19</sup>

In 1867 the Indian Muhamad Hayat Khan wrote *Hayat-i-Afghan* (Persian, *Afghan Life*). This is a blend of random mythical genealogies and stories about the origin and distribution of Afghans (Pashtuns). The book was translated into English by Henry Priestly and published during 1874 under the title of “Afghanistan and its Inhabitants.” Another Persian language text that deals with the biblical origin, diversity and distribution of Afghans (Pashtuns, Patans, Pathans) is the 1894 *Tawarikh-e Khorshayd-e Jahan* (Persian, *Histories of the Global Sun*) by Shayr Mohammad Khan Gandapour.<sup>20</sup> This popular Persian genealogical source suggests that Armia, an ancient ancestor of Afghans (Patans, Pathans) had a son named “*Afghena*” which in Persian, according to the author, means “dragon.”<sup>21</sup> I cannot find an entry for “*Afghena*” in the available Persian language discourse and dictionaries. The common word for “dragon” in Farsi is *azhdaha*. So far as I know, no nineteenth-century and later European language texts about Afghan and Afghanistan are informed by Ne’matullah’s notion of the relationship of the noun “Afghan” with the Persian word for lamentation or Gandapour’s claim of “*Afghena*” standing for dragon.<sup>22</sup> Nor is such an awareness available in the twentieth century and current Euro-American and local texts dealing with Afghan and Afghanistan.

Starting with Ne’matullah Herawi’s genealogy, the origin of “Afghan” and its random and tactful conflation (flipside effect noted above) with labels of ethnic and political identities (especially, Pashtun) are obsessive features in Western and local writings dealing with Afghan and Afghanistan. The conflation of “Afghan” with “Pashtun” is a universal feature of Western scholarship. Other than the one speculative and uncertain association of the meaning of “Afghan” with something other than lamentation by Hughes, I am unaware of another such attempt or a systematic and critical excavation for the meaning of “Afghan” and “Afghanistan.”

<sup>17</sup> Malleon, *History of Afghanistan*, 455. Italics and parenthesis in the original.

<sup>18</sup> Raverty, *A Grammar*.

<sup>19</sup> Dorn, *History of the Afghans*.

<sup>20</sup> Gandapour. *Tawarikh-e Khorshayd-e Jahan*.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

<sup>22</sup> See Elphinstone, *An Account of the Kingdom of Caubul*; Ferrier, *History of the Afghans*; Masson, *Narratives of Various Journeys in Balochistan, Afghanistan and the Panjab*; Bellew, *The Races of Afghanistan*; *ibid. An Inquiry into the Ethnography of Afghanistan*; Rose, *The Afghans, the Ten Tribes and the Kings of the East*.

Recent scholarly engagement with the origin of the label "Afghan" has not examined its epistemology and meaning.<sup>23</sup>

The flip-flopping of "Afghan" with "Pashtun" addiction is also prevalent in the writings of prominent Euro-American and local scholars of Central and South Asia dealing with the ethnology and history of Afghans/Pashtuns/Pathans and Afghanistan.<sup>24</sup> The routine, intended or unintended, obsessive, distorting and manipulative conflation of "Afghan" with "Pashtun" and other ethnic groups continues in virtually every corner of academic, political and popular writings dealing with Afghans and Afghanistan. The pre-modern, modern, and postmodern ethnological and historiographic literature dealing with Afghans and Afghanistan and the surrounding regions is saturated with the viral pathological conflation of the label "Afghan" with labels for other ethnic groups, especially Pashtun (Patan, Pathan). This tradition of the interchangeable use of the critically and systematically unexcavated label "Afghan" has served as an academic and political agency with which ethnic identity and diversity in Afghanistan has been misunderstood, distorted, exaggerated or strategically homogenized. This tradition has misunderstood, misrepresented and, in some cases, exacerbated inter-ethnic tensions. As such, it has served as a manipulative tool in the hands of those in locations of academic and political power inside and outside Afghanistan.

The popular Persianate culture in Afghanistan contained demeaning and vulgar characterizations of Pashtun as "Afghan." This and other such sayings could serve as the subjects for an academic folklore project. The following Farsi vulgar phrase was popular in Kabuli discourse during my enculturation in the mid-twentieth century: *Awghan tabarghan chamcha kos-e roghandan* (Farsi, Afghan, bare back horse [rider], the spoon of/for an oily bowl/cup/vagina). The 1845 article by R. Leech about Afghans (Pashtuns) in the Ghazni area includes the following rude Persian language stereotype about Afghans, i. e. Pashtuns: "*Oughan i khar, Tobra ba sar; Bakalee ba khar Dingla ba zan*" ("Afghan donkey with bag on the head, purchase beans and dance like a fool").<sup>25</sup>

Currently and historically Patan (Pathan) is the most common identity label for Pashtuns in South Asia. The imaginary mythical supremacy of this popular label and its obsessive conflation with Afghan continues to produce the symbolic power of the stereotypical tall and fair-skinned Patans (Pathans, Pashtuns cum Afghans) in South Asia. A popular example of this interchanging habit is available in the advertisement for the "Afghan Snow," a "skin food" cosmetic for "Charm and Allure" and "beautiful complexion" for women produced by the "Perfumes &

<sup>23</sup> See Cheung, "On the Origin;" Dalalian, "The Earliest Attestation;" Imamuddin, "The Origin of Afghans."

<sup>24</sup> Allen, "Defining Place and People;" Barth, *Political Leadership*; idem., *Ethnic Groups and Boundaries*; Caroe, *The Pathans*; Dupree, *Afghanistan*; Ghobar, "Nom-e Afghanistan;" idem., *Afghanistan dar Maseer-e Tarikh*; idem., *Ahmad Shah Baba-ye Afghan*; Gregorian, *The Emergence of Modern Afghanistan*; Fayz Mohammad Kateb Hazara, *Nezhadnama-ye Afghan*; Farhang, *Afghanistan dar Panj Qarn-e Akhir*; 'Abd al-Hai Habibi, "Nam-e Afghan wa Afghanistan;" Kohzad, *Afghanistan wa Iran*.

<sup>25</sup> Leech, "An Account of the early Ghiljaees," 306–328.

Cosmetics” company “Patanwala” in India.<sup>26</sup> The suffix “*wal*” in popular Pashtu means “from” or “vendor.” Its derivative “*wala*” in the Urdu “Patanwala” means “doer”, “keeper” and/or “inhabitant.” This makes the pronoun “Patanwala” the performer (actor), vendor or possessor of “Patan” identity. In Kabuli Farsi, Pashtu and Urdu discourse numerous other occupations are labeled with words that include the suffix “*wala*” (*andiwal, dagarwal, watanwal, gharwal, qawal, kotwal, choriwala, bangriwala, kotwalay*, etc.). In this framework the “*Pashtunwali*” (having, doing, vending, speaking Pashtu) code, the core component of Pashtun identity, becomes an occupation for vending Pashtunness.

The manipulative use of the identity label “Afghan” as a flipside of “Pashtun” (or Pathan, Patan) for political advantage is illustrated in the identity construction of the famous nineteenth-century Iranian Shi’a Muslim reformer Sayid Jamaluddin Afghani (born, 1839, in Asadabad, near Hamadan, Iran; died, 1897 in Turkey). Jamaluddin visited Kabul during the late 1860s and started presenting himself as “Jamaluddin al-Afghani” in order to be associated with the Sunni Kabuli “Afghan” (“Pashtun”) Mohammadzai ruling dynasty and to subsequently market himself with the label Afghan/Pashtun in India.

During the mid-1940s the Turkish government built a modern building in Istanbul on the site of the cemetery in which Sayid Jamaluddin Afghani was buried. Before the graves in the cemetery were dug out, the ambassador of Afghanistan in Turkey offered to move the contents of Afghani’s grave to Kabul. Afghani’s remains were brought to Afghanistan by Kabuli rulers with elaborate government welcoming rituals during 1944 and buried in a wide open space on Kabul University campus. The largest and most elaborate modernistic mausoleum in Kabul was built over S. J. Afghani’s grave.<sup>27</sup> During Fall 1955, as a student at Kabul University, I met Gamal Nassar, president of Egypt, when he was visiting Afghani’s tomb on Kabul University campus.

In the early 1930s, influenced by the modernizing presence of Turkish scientists and educators in Kabul and the bestowal of the title “*Ataturk*” (Turkish, father of Turks) on Mostafa Kamal, a leading Kabuli literary figure, Mir Gholam Mohammad Ghobar, officially changed the identity of the non-Pashtun Ahmad Shah Abdali (Arabic and Farsi, “of the substitute saintly order”) or Ahmad Shah Durani (Farsi, “of pearls”) to Ahmad Shah “Baba” (Farsi and Pashtu, Ahmad Shah “the Father”).<sup>28</sup> In this context and in using the interchangeability of “Afghan” with “Pashtun” and other ethnic groups in Afghanistan, Ghobar reinvented the identity of Ahmad Shah Durani. Ghobar’s Farsi language book titled *Ahmad Shah Baba-ye Afghan* was officially published by the government of Kabul.<sup>29</sup> This is one of the most influential twentieth-century Kabuli elite texts grounded in the tactful conversion of the mystic Abdali or Durani identity of a non-Pashtun ruler of Afghanistan to “Afghan” as an ancestor of Afghans. The designation “Baba” has

<sup>26</sup> *Illustrated Weekly of India*, January 16, 1949 April 17, 1949, July 17, 1949, and November 6, 1949.

<sup>27</sup> For the true Iranian identity of *Afghani* see Keddie, *Sayyid Jamal ad-Din “al-Afghani.”*

<sup>28</sup> Ghobar, *Ahmad Shah Baba-ye Afghan.*

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*



Sufi connotations. It stands for "the leader of a group of dervishes (Sufis) or of a tribe."<sup>30</sup> Based on historical record, Ahmad was born in Moltan in a mythical non-Pashtun Abdali Sufi sect and, as a teenager, became a favorite page-boy of the Persian Emperor Nader Shah Afshar before becoming, with the help of a Persian Kabuli Sufi, the *Durani* (Persian, "of pearls") ruler of the territory stretching from northern India to modern southwest Afghanistan.

Ghobar's invention of Ahmad's identity as "*Baba-ye Afghan*" with a mystical Sufi tenor is a prominent example of the Kabuli ruling machinery using Pashtunization through Afghanization (and vice versa) for political and literary advantage in the Persianate ruling apparatus of Afghanistan. The interchangeable use of Afghan with Pashtun by the non-Pashtun Sadozai and Barakzai rulers of Kabul for more than two centuries is a glaring illustration of the historical dominance of this conflating virus in the structure and operations of the ruling machineries of Afghanistan. In their literary texts about the identity label "Afghan," the Kabuli elite, like the Euro-American writers, have been preoccupied with its historical literary origin, not its meaning.<sup>31</sup> The increasing frequency of the conflation of Afghan with Pashtun even motivated the Persianate rulers of Afghanistan to change the name of its currency from the Indian *Rupia* to "*Afghani*" in early 1930s.

Based on substantial archaeological, cultural, historical and linguistic evidence the epistemological cradle of the identity label "Afghan" is situated in the (pre-Islamic) presence of Buddhism and Persian culture in Afghanistan and the surrounding regions.<sup>32</sup> During the mid-nineteenth century, in the context of British colonial presence in South Asia, English travelers published their encounters with some pre-Islamic Buddhist material cultural remains in Bamiyan and Bagram.<sup>33</sup> These writings include descriptions of the material remnants of Buddhism including the statues of Buddha, and other pre-Islamic traditions. Starting in the early twentieth century Euro-American, Russian, and Japanese archaeologists with the assistance of local Kabuli interpreters undertook archaeological excavations of numerous historic and pre-historic sites.<sup>34</sup> Informed and inspired by the findings of these archaeological excavations and related publications a number of Kabuli literary elite published brief accounts of the ancient history of Afghanistan, including Buddhism, in several local publications.<sup>35</sup> Based on Western sources, the 1973 Farsi article in *Aryana* by S. B. Majruh provides a summary history of

<sup>30</sup> Babayan, *Mystics, Monarchs, and Messiahs*.

<sup>31</sup> Habibi, "Nam-e Afghan wa Afghanistan;" idem., "Afghan wa Afghanistan"; Ghobar, "Nom-e Afghanistan;" idem., *Afghanistan dar Maseer-e Tarikh*.

<sup>32</sup> Buddhism has also impacted the rise and development of Christianity in west Asia. See Gwynne, *Buddha, Jesus and Muhammad*.

<sup>33</sup> Masson, *Narratives of Various Journeys*.

<sup>34</sup> See Green, "The Afghan Discovery of Buddha."

<sup>35</sup> The finding of these excavations are available in numerous publications including Allchin, ed., *South Asian Archaeology*; Allchin and Hammond, eds., *The Archaeology; Archaeological Survey of India*; Baker and Allchin, *Shahr-i Zohak*; Foucher, *L'art Greco-Bouddhique*; Geoffroy-Schneiter, *Gandhara*; Klimburg-Salter, *The Kingdom of Bamiyan*; Krieken-Pieters, *Art and Archaeology*; Rowland, *Ancient Art*; and in several issues of the *Afghanistan Journal* 1974–1982; *Salnama* (Kabul Annual), 1932–1945;

Buddhism and sayings of Buddha. However, in none of these Kabuli publications is the epistemology and etymology of the identity morpheme “Afghan” systematically addressed.

The discovery and increasing availability of information about the widespread remains of Buddhism and the image of Buddha in Afghanistan inspired the Kabul government to insert an image of the Bamiyan Buddha in one of the paper currencies (*Afghani*) of Afghanistan (two *Afghani* bill [1939]) and on a 1985 postal stamp. The substantial amount of evidence excavated by archaeologists at numerous Buddhist stupas, monasteries, and caves throughout Afghanistan and the surrounding area are rich treasures of information for repairing the deficiencies and for bridging the gaps in the existing ethnological and historical knowledge about Afghanistan and layers of its multi-cultural past.

From the earliest recorded time the area labeled Afghanistan has served as a cross-roads and a multi-directional roundabout space, with an eastward slope and intensity, for the traffic of humans, human communities, human cultural features, commodities and animals from Persia, Central Asia, South Asia, and West Asia. The Silk Road was a major component of this roundabout for connecting the Eastern Mediterranean, Central and East Asian cultural and religious traffic.<sup>36</sup> A substantial part of the interactive traffic on the Silk Road consisted of various religions—Buddhism, Zoroastrianism, Hinduism, and Islam.<sup>37</sup> The domination of Aryan tribes in this region stretched to northern India during 2000–1500 BCE. The Persian Akhaminid dynasty led by Darius spread into Afghanistan during 522–480 BCE. Alexander the Great invaded the region during 329–326 BCE and introduced Greek rule and culture. During 170 BCE–160 Greeks ruled northern Afghanistan (Bactria [Balkh]) and portions of northwest South Asia.

In the course of the cultural and historical roundabout starting in the 4<sup>th</sup> century BC, this space began receiving intensive Persian and Greco-Buddhist cultural effects. During this transformational process, Buddhism moved westward from South Asia and spread to Afghanistan, Persia and Central Asia, and probably beyond. During the following centuries these interacting cultural and religious traditions continued to spread in the region and produced various hybridized versions of culture and religion that are vividly present in their archaeological, cultural and literary remains. During the following two centuries, under the general political umbrella of Greek and Koshan Kingdoms, Buddhism interacted intensely with Persian culture in Persia and Central Asia, including Afghanistan. From the earliest days in this process *both* (Farsi, “image” or “idol”) became used in Persian literary and popular discourse “as the symbol for ideal beauty, which in turn has been derived from the Buddha and his image.”<sup>38</sup> In addition to the emergence of the

*Kabul* (in English); *Aryana* (quarterly publication of Kabul Historical Society), 1963–1964.

<sup>36</sup> Klimburg-Salter, ed. *The Silk Route and the Diamond Path*.

<sup>37</sup> Foltz, *Religions of the Silk Road*; idem., *Religions of Iran*; Scott, “Buddhism and Islam;” Liu, “A Silk Road Legacy.” See also Gaulier, et al., *Buddhism in Afghanistan*.

<sup>38</sup> For the presence of Buddhism in Persia before the arrival of Islam see Foltz, *Religions of the Silk Road*; idem., *Religions of Iran*; idem., *Spirituality*; Barzegar, “Relations Between Islam and Buddhism.”

image of Buddha as the symbol of beauty in Persian and regional literary and popular culture, a number of other socio-cultural features in Persianate Afghanistan and the surrounding region are an important inheritance of Buddhism.<sup>39</sup> Buddhism preceded Islam and created the cradle for Sufism in Persia, Central and South Asia.<sup>40</sup> The small and large statues of Buddha in Bamiyan—the largest statues of Buddha in the world—were constructed during 570 AD and 652 AD respectively. It may be appropriate to conceptualize Afghanistan as the “Kingdom of Buddha” if only for the symbolic and historical effect of the size of the statues of Buddha in Bamiyan.

Sufism, as a legacy of Buddhism, occupies prominent locations of power in the civil and political apparatus of Afghanistan and the surrounding area. The numerous sacred shrines for Sufi bodies and Sufi relics in Afghanistan and the surrounding region are the cultural and symbolic remnants of Buddhist stupas. In addition to the substantial archaeological material remains there is a great corpus of academic literature in support of these historical processes.<sup>41</sup>

During the 6<sup>th</sup> century AD, Buddhism and Persian culture were the dominant features in Afghanistan and the surrounding region. Persian culture stabilized its domination in what is now called Afghanistan during 650 AD. Persian culture, Buddhism, and Islam packaged in Arabic language, have constituted the major waves of the diffusion of socio-cultural features around which the territorial borders of Afghanistan were carved up centuries later. An informed and critical academic lens will clearly discern the hybridized historical inheritance of this roundabout in the material and non-material socio-cultural make-up of modern day Afghanistan and the surrounding regions.

Islam arrived in this space in its Arabized formation, not in opposition to Buddhism but as an alternative to several other monotheistic religions in West Asia.<sup>42</sup> Overall, during its first ten centuries of expansion, albeit in its Arabized formation and imperialist orientation, Islam interacted non-violently with pre-Islamic religious and socio-cultural formations.<sup>43</sup> The subsequent diverse styles of interaction between Islam and pre-Islamic cultural and religious formations and dynamics in Afghanistan and the surrounding regions shaped the historical and contemporary relations between Islam and various aspects of the pre-Islamic past of Afghanistan. In addition to tensions with Buddhism, Muslim Arab conquerors and their local cultural, religious and political successors have always been uncomfortable with the deep-seated presence of Persian culture in general, especially Persian language, in this space. The continuous independent and interchangeable circulation of the Persian identity morpheme “Afghan” in the local, regional and global academic, political, and popular discourse is a prominent

<sup>39</sup> Emmerick, “Buddhism;” Scott, “The Iranian Face of Buddhism.”

<sup>40</sup> Frembgen, *Journey to God*; Nasr, *Sufi Essays*; Nicholson, *The Mystics of Islam*.

<sup>41</sup> Barzegar, “Relations Between Islam and Buddhism;” Berzin, “History of Buddhism in Afghanistan;” idem., “The Relation Between Buddhism and Sufism;” Nicholson, *The Mystics of Islam*; Lewisohn, ed., *The Legacy of Medieval Persian Sufism*; Nasr, *Sufi Essays*.

<sup>42</sup> Hawting, *The Idea of Idolatry*.

<sup>43</sup> Elverskog, “Islam and Buddhism,” *Encyclopedia of Buddhism* I: 380–382.

inheritance of the historical presence of the fusion of Buddhism and Persian culture, particularly Persian language, in virtually all aspects, notably the political power apparatus, of the socio-cultural and political configuration of Persianate Afghanistan and the surrounding culture areas.

With the emergence of Wahhabism during the late eighteenth century in the Arabian Peninsula, the non-coercive disposition of Islam shifted into coercive opposition and intolerance toward Buddhism, reverence for saints, shrines, Sufism, and polytheism. Starting in the early decades of its emergence Wahhabism started to penetrate various Muslim communities in Central and South Asia including Pashtun tribes along the Durand Line.<sup>44</sup> Arab Wahhabi Muslims and their local cultural, religious and political followers have been especially uncomfortable with the deep-seated and prominent presence of Buddhism, Sufism, Persian culture, including the Persian language, in the space from which Afghanistan was carved up centuries later. Although not universal, Wahhabi coercive opposition has played a major role in the recent political dynamics of Afghanistan and the global system. The destruction of the statues of Buddha in Bamiyan (March 2, 2001) and the New York city towers (September 11, 2001) are dramatic examples of Wahhabi rage toward hallowed objects. However, despite Wahhabi anger and insolence, some socio-cultural and religious features, such as Sufism and some Sufi rituals, have survived.

The continuous interchangeable circulation of the Persian identity morpheme “*Afghan*” with various ethnic identities in the local, regional and global academic, political, and popular discourse is in itself a powerful inheritance of the historical prominence of Buddhism and Persian culture, especially Persian language, in virtually all layers—especially the political power apparatus—of the socio-cultural and political configuration of Persianate Afghanistan and the surrounding regions.<sup>45</sup>

From the beginning of the arrival of Islam, especially with the emergence of Wahhabism, in Central Asia these and other statues of Buddha in Afghanistan and elsewhere have been the targets of destructive assaults by anti-idol Muslims. During the Islamic centuries, especially during the spread of Wahhabism, iconoclasm has continuously inflicted injuries all over the bodies (face, arms, legs) of the idols of Bamiyan and Buddha’s statues elsewhere in Afghanistan. To my knowledge the clearly visible injuries inflicted on the Buddhas of Bamiyan and elsewhere have yet to be critically studied and situated in their historical, political and religious contexts.<sup>46</sup>

Sultan Mahmoud Ghaznawi (r. 999–1030 CE), the famous Turkish Muslim emperor of the Persianate Ghaznawid empire has been titled “*Bot-Shekan*” (Farsi,

<sup>44</sup> Algar, *Wahhabism*; Burki, “The Creeping Wahhabization;” Commins; *The Wahhabi Mission*; Crews and Tarzi, eds., *The Taleban*.

<sup>45</sup> For the importance of labels in the construction of ethnic identity, see Thapar, “The Tyranny of Labels.” For the historical prominence of Persian culture in Central and South Asia, see Frye, *The Golden Age of Persia*.

<sup>46</sup> I have personally seen these injuries during summer 1954 when my twelfth-grade high school class was taken to Bamiyan to visit the statues of Buddha and the nearby historic sites of Shahr-e Gholghola, Shahr-e Zohak, and Band-e Amir.

"Idol-Breaker") for his numerous military forays into India for the destruction of idols and idol temples.<sup>47</sup> During 870 AD Yaqub bin Layth, a convert to Islam and the founder of the Saffarid dynasty of Sistan, plundered a Buddhist monastery in Bamiyan.<sup>48</sup> The 2001 destruction of the statues of Buddha in Bamiyan by the Wahhabi-inspired Muslim Taleban fundamentalists is the continuation of Wahhabi Islamic hostility toward and overt rejection of idols and idolatry. Besides destroying the images of Buddha in Bamiyan, they damaged similar objects in numerous other locations including those archived in the Kabul Museum.<sup>49</sup> The present-day Talebs qualify for the title of *Bot-Shekan*.

The Talebs have continued the early Wahhabi preference for unidentifiable human graves. During summer 1998 I was at the Khaibar pass in Pakistan watching the truck traffic coming to Pakistan from Afghanistan. Our Pakistani government host informed me that the large trucks coming to Pakistan were full of human bones excavated by the Taleban from cemeteries in and around Kabul. These bones were going to be floured and used in Pakistani factories for making tea pots, cups, plates, bowls, etc. A Taleb I spoke with in Peshawar stated that the Taleban were erasing marked graves and removing their contents in Afghanistan by the request of the Wahhabi government of Saudi Arabia—co-founder (with the United States) and subsidizer of the Taleban movement.

However, the continuous irreverent assaults on the images of Buddha and symbols of Buddhism, including the 2001 destruction of the statues of Buddha in Bamiyan, have not and will not remove the real and symbolic cultural and religious heritage of Buddhism in Afghanistan, the surrounding regions and beyond. The massive constructed physical spaces for the statues of Buddha, other representations of Buddha, and Buddhist artifacts and artistic paintings in Bamiyan and many other sites, including numerous museums, have survived the Taleban and earlier Wahhabi Islamic discomfort with Buddhism.

More importantly, the inheritance of Buddhism in the cultural and spatial configuration of Persianate Afghanistan and the surrounding region, in various material and non-material cultural formats, linguistic styles, religious and ideological formats, remains intact. In the wider historical and theological context of Islam, the destruction of the statues of Buddha in Bamiyan could be inspired by Wahhabism as well as by the invocation of, and adherence to, the Prophet Muhammad's alleged and selective personal opposition to idolatry—religious or symbolic reverence of constructed objects—and orders to his supporters for the destruction of idols inside the pre-Islamic Ka'aba (also called *Baytallah* ["house of Allah"], the black-dressed and decorated cubic shrine in Mecca).<sup>50</sup>

Nonetheless, the history of the pre-Islamic Ka'aba and its treatment by the Prophet and his supporters during the rise of Islam shed light on the presence of

<sup>47</sup> Bosworth, "Notes on the Pre-Ghaznavid History;" idem., "The Development of Persian Culture;" Jackson, ed., *History of India*.

<sup>48</sup> Frye, *The Golden Age of Persia*.

<sup>49</sup> Hiebert and Gambon, eds. *Afghanistan*.

<sup>50</sup> Guillaume, *Islam*, 8.

traditions resembling Buddhism, or derivations from it, in the space where Islam emerged.<sup>51</sup> The symbolic ritual of reverence for the constructed *Hajar al-Aswad* (Arabic, “Black Stone”) inside the eastern corner of the Ka’aba by some Muslims during the performance of the *Haj* rituals in Mecca symbolically, structurally, and functionally is one illustration of continuity. The ritual of *Tawaf* (Arabic, circumambulation, counter-clockwise encirclement) around the constructed Ka’aba during the Haj is another. Also, the ritual of facing Ka’aba (Qebla [osculation]) by Muslims during prayers and turning the face of the corpse in grave toward Ka’aba bears structural resemblance to older practices. Remnants of Buddhist iconography are visibly available in numerous styles and formations throughout West, Central and South Asia. Locating the hair and garments of the Prophet Mohammad in sacred shrines may also be related.<sup>52</sup>

Shrines for the sacred hair (Persian, *moy-e mobarak*) of the Prophet are located throughout Iran, Central and South Asia. Two such shrines are located in Kabul and Qandahar. A shrine for the alleged sacred garment (Persian, *Kherqa-ye Mobarak*) of the Prophet is located in Qandahar. A shrine for the mythical grave of the body of Caliph ‘Ali, Prophet Mohammad’s cousin and son-in-law, is located in the city of Mazar-i Sharif. Based on historical evidence ‘Ali is actually buried in Najaf, Iraq. The concept and material configuration of sacred graves (Arabic, *Ziarat*) and other material effects are widespread in the Muslim world except in Wahhabi-dominated Saudi Arabia.<sup>53</sup>

It is important to note that the cosmology of the symbolic effect of marked graves and shrines including the material features attributed to the Prophet Muhammad and other important Muslim figures have diffused from Buddhism to Islam. The veneration of constructed objects, human bodies and body parts is also present in Christianity and Judaism.

The Wahhabi-inspired destruction of the statues of Buddha in Bamiyan stimulated a new cycle of informed and critical academic consciousness about the presence of material and nonmaterial cultural inheritance of the pre-Islamic (Greek, Hellenistic, Hindu, Buddhist) traditions in Afghanistan. It energized academic and political awareness about and interest in Buddhism throughout Afghanistan and the surrounding region before, during and after the arrival of Islam, especially Wahhabi Islam. The Buddhist-inspired mystical traditions of Sufism and the veneration of sacred shrines, including sacred shrines for the hair and garments of the Prophet Mohammad, shrines for the remains of some Sufis, and other sacred objects have survived Wahhabi opposition. Wahabism has not been and will not be able to erase

<sup>51</sup> Ibid.

<sup>52</sup> For the sanctity of the Prophet’s hair, see Wheeler, “Gift of the Body.”

<sup>53</sup> For the presence of some major sacred shrines in Afghanistan see Azad, *Sacred Landscape*; McChesney, *Four Central Asian Shrines*; Saljoqi, *Resala-ye Mazarat-e Herat*. For detailed information about shrines and other notable or sacred graves in Kabul, Qandahar, and Herat see Khalil, *Mazarat-e Shahr-e Kabul*; Zalmay, *Kandahar*. On cultural and religious interfaces among Buddhism, Islam, Persian culture, Hinduism and other traditions see Frye, *The Heritage of Persia*; idem., *The Golden Age of Persia*; idem., *The History of Ancient Iran*; idem., “Buddhism;” and Berzin, “The Relation Between Buddhism and Sufism.”

the lasting cultural and religious legacy of the convergence of Buddhism, Persian culture, and Islam in general, in Persia and Persian-dominated Afghanistan and the surrounding Central and northern South Asia. Sufism, as a component of this inheritance, has and continues to use varieties of Buddhist symbols, rituals, and schemes throughout the Muslim world.

An example of the Buddhist-inspired Sufi ritual heritage is available in the whirling dervish dances by men among the Bektashi Sufis and other Sufi networks throughout Asia and North Africa.<sup>54</sup> A variation of this Sufi ritual was introduced into the Sufi networks in South Asia, including some Pashtun tribal communities (notably the Waziris), in the Northwest Frontier of India. The well-known and popular Pashtun folk dance called *Attan* is similar, in structure and performance, to the Turkish Bektashi Sufi whirling dervish dance.<sup>55</sup> The *Attan* and its mystic poetic lyrics were probably introduced into the Pashtun tribal territories by an Iraqi Qadiriya Sufi group (descendants of the Sufi 'Abd al'Qader Jaylani) during the late nineteenth century. The Qadiriya Sufis in Afghanistan tactfully fabricated an "Afghan" and therefore "Pashtun" identity for themselves with mythical origin among Pashtuns on both sides of the Durand Line. During the rule of Ahmad Shah Abdali a group of Ahmadiya (Mojadiddi) Naqshbandi Sufis migrated from India first to Qandahar and later moved to Kabul and other locations in Afghanistan. Ever since their arrival, these two Sufi sects have played a prominent and influential role in the Kabuli ruling political apparatus of Afghanistan.

In addition to the structure of the *Attan* dance, the presence of the Sufi saintly title *Qalandar*—a wandering, wine drinking itinerant self-proclaimed saint—in the popular Pashtu lyrics of the *Attan* ("*Mast Qanaladara—Shah Masta Qalandar...*"—"intoxicated wandering dervish—royally intoxicated dervish") is a clear illustration of Sufi origins of the Pashtun *Attan*.<sup>56</sup> Starting in 1929, the *Attan* was injected into the Kabuli Persianate political culture by the Waziri tribal militia sponsored by the British colonial government of India in support of Muhammad Nadir, the British selected "king" of Kabul. Subsequently, the *Attan* by tribal Pashtuns became a regular ritual in the annual celebrations of independence (*Jashn-e Esteqlal*) in Kabul. From then on the *Attan* was officially upgraded by the Kabul government to *Attan-e Meli* (Farsi, "National Dance") of Afghanistan. Prior to 1929, there was no *Attan* or *Attan-e Meli* in Afghanistan. The Wahhabi-controlled Taleban rulers of Kabul have abolished the *Attan*, music, music from radio, and television from the public sphere of Afghanistan.

As mentioned above, the label "*Afghan*" is commonly used as the flipside of virtually all, especially "Pashtun" (Patan, Pathan), identity markers in Afghanistan and the surrounding region. The common uncritical and interchangeable use of the exonym "Afghan" for the various autonyms for ethnic groups in Afghanistan and northern India, especially the "Pashtun" ("Paxtun," "Pakhtun," "Patan," "Pathan") has produced and continues to produce distorting, fallacious, fictitious and cloudy

<sup>54</sup> Birge, *The Bektashi Order*.

<sup>55</sup> Ibid.

<sup>56</sup> Babayan, *Mystics, Monarchs, and Messiahs*; Karamustafa, *God's Unruly Friends*; Kugle, *Sufis and Saints' Bodies*.

ethnic identity effects in the academic, political, and popular discourse about the country and its surrounding areas. It is assumed that every Muslim individual and ethnic group that resides, and/or claims to have resided in Afghanistan, is an “Afghan.” For non-Pashtuns all Pashtuns, on both sides of the Durand Line, qualify for “Afghan” identity. Thus, everyone, anywhere who is/can or maybe identified as “Afghan” is/may/must or can be a Pashtun and is/can/must or maybe from or related to Afghanistan.

A major force in the production of this Afghanophilia—the widespread obsession with and free for all, and occasionally tactful, Afghanization of cultural and social identity labels in Afghanistan and surrounding Central Asia and northern South Asia—is Pashtunophobia—the complex agency of admiration, fear, rejection, avoidance, mystification or invention of the Pashtuns and Pashtun-specific culture, history, language, literary and political discourse. By-in-large and, without a known exception, virtually all local and Euro-American writings about the cultures and peoples of Afghanistan are sprinkled with various styles and blends of Afghanophilia and/or Pashtunophobia driven by uninformed, indifferent, and confused intellectual orientation and, in some cases, the manipulative academic and political objectives of those who reside in the upper tiers of the structures and operations of the production of knowledge about Afghan, Pashtun and other ethnic groups in Afghanistan and the surrounding area. In general, Afghanophilia and Pashtunophobia are the cradle and flipsides of the cloudy academic, political, and popular identity coin(s) dealing with Afghan and Afghanistan.

The Afghanophilic conflation of the Persian exonym “Afghan” with identity labels for various ethnic groups (Tajik, Uzbek, Pashtun, Turkman, Hazara, Baluch, Aymaq, etc.) and spatial communities (Andarabi, Nuristani, Herati, Laghmani, Kabuli, Qandahari, Laghmani, Kohdamani, Panjshayri, Logari, Badakhshi, etc.) residing in Afghanistan, and the surrounding region, has produced academic and political “black boles” of ambiguities, distortions, misrepresentations, widespread cultural and political confusion and tensions throughout the country, especially in the structure and operations of its ruling machineries. The 2018 attempt by the Kabul government to issue electronic identification cards (*tazkiras*) to the citizens of Afghanistan in which the label “Afghan” was to be universalized provoked widespread confusion, opposition and inter-ethnic tensions.<sup>57</sup> This commonly confused and cloudy understanding of the identity label “Afghan” is also available in the writings of Kabuli intellectual migrants in Euro-America.<sup>58</sup>

The geopolitical entity called “Afghanistan” is a colonially constructed strategic political storage space for a multitude of ethnic groups, including the Pashtuns, who overtly reject its borders and the imposed exonymic identity umbrella of Afghan. The cultural and historical identity strains under this umbrella are the arena for “situational ethnicity” housing “increased concern with subjective and perceptual notions of ethnicity in terms of an actor’s understandings and

<sup>57</sup> Pondelikova, “The Afghan Identity,” 1–6. Raofi, “National Identity Crisis;” Shalizi, “Who is an Afghan?”

<sup>58</sup> Najimi, “Nokatay,” 10, 11.



explanations of social behavior."<sup>59</sup> As such, these mercurial subjectivities about self and the other have infested the academic, political, and popular texts and general discourse dealing with the ethnography, ethnology, history, and politics of Afghanistan. The rampant ambivalent, uninformed, intentional or unintentional, and interchangeable use of the exonym "Afghan" is the agency with which manipulative myths, fictions, fallacies, distortions, and essentialisms about the cultural, historical, political, and social realities and collective identity of various polities and their ruling machineries are regularly produced and reproduced in Afghanistan.

The common patterns of this conflating tradition are the Pashtunization of non-Pashtuns and the Afghanization of various ethnic groups through the conflation of "Afghan" with Pashtun or glossing an ethnic identity first with "Afghan" and then rolling it over to the Pashtun identity shelter. A non-Pashtun can tactfully become a Pashtun through being an "Afghan". Aimaq, Hazara, Turkman, or Uzbek identity can be glossed with "Afghan" through basic competence in Persian language or other dissimulating tactics and strategies. Prominent historical and political examples of these conflating or dissimulating strategies include the Pashtunization of the mythical "Rohillas" and "Abdalis" through the track of "Afghan" identity. The Pashtunization of the non-Pashtun Durani (Sadozai and Barakzai) rulers of Afghanistan is discretely produced through Afghanization. The routine and discreet Afghanization of the non-Pashtun Ghoris, Ludis and Suris rulers of northern India has enabled many writers to assign them Pashtun ethnic identity and fictive genealogical and cultural origins in Afghanistan. Driven by the force of Afghanophilia and Pashtunophobia, this socio-political disposition of Afghanistan and its ethnic communities is the major agency for the absence of solidarity and integration. The continuous political instability and the prospects for the fast approaching fragmentation and disintegration of the country as a geo-political space is cradled in the lethal academic, political and popular infection of Afghanophilia and Pashtunophobia.

Numerous captions and cultural, social, and historical subjects are heavily tinted with the viral smog of Afghanophilia and Pashtunophobia and will benefit from exposure to the corrective vaccine this essay provides. Some of these clouded categories include "Anglo-Afghan War," "America's Longest War," "Roh," "Rohilla," "Rohilkand," "Pathan," "Patan," "Pashtunwalai," "Pashtunkhwa," "Pashtunistan," "Jerga," "Loya Jerga." The curative vaccine offered here will also remedy the common distortive viral attribution of the stereotypical Persian language triumvirate "*Zan, Zar, Zameen*" ("woman, gold, land") to Pashtuns by many Western historians and social scientists. These linguistic categories are explicitly or implicitly, strategically and manipulatively associated with the mythical "Pashtun" identity and its conflation with "Afghan" and their association with the toponym "Afghanistan." This corrective also offers semantic light for some popular Afghan-connected material cultural categories in Euro-America such as the "Afghan Hound" (originally *tazi* from southwest Afghanistan), "Afghan knit," "Afghan Crochet," "Afghan Artistry," and "Afghan Mode."

<sup>59</sup> Okamura, "Situational Ethnicity."

The routine interchangeable use of the label “Afghan” with Pashtun and other ethnic groups has promoted inter-ethnic strains in Afghanistan and the surrounding region. The addictive persistent presence of the Afghanophilia and Pashtunophobia viruses in the ethnological, historical, political, and popular discourse about Afghan, Afghans and Afghanistan urgently calls for an informed and critical corrective academic vaccine. Addressing the historical cradle and cultural ingredients for producing this vaccine requires an informed engagement with the historical presence of Buddhism and the prominence of Persian culture, especially Persian language, in Afghanistan and the surrounding regions.

As mentioned above the excavation of numerous archaeological sites in Afghanistan has produced substantial evidence for the centuries-long presence of Buddhism and its intense and prolonged interaction with Persian culture in the space called Afghanistan. The encounter between Buddhism and Persian culture and their reciprocal influence on each other provide the cradle for contextualizing the cultural configuration and the meaning of the morphemes “Afghan” and “Afghanistan.”<sup>60</sup>

The geo-cultural space around which the borders of Afghanistan have been drawn is the necropolis for the material and non-material remains of several prehistoric and historic cultural traditions. In a way, Afghanistan is a *Kharabestan* (Farsi, “land of ruins”). Ann Stoler’s concepts of “imperial debris” and “ruins and ruination” appropriately apply to the cultural and political history and dynamics of Afghanistan.<sup>61</sup> As mentioned above, there is abundant archaeological and historical evidence for the presence of Buddhism and Persian culture in Afghanistan and the surrounding region prior to and after the arrival of Islam. In addition to the majestic statues of Buddha in Bamiyan numerous other archaeological sites (e. g. Balkh [Naw Bahar], Fundaqqistan, Tapa-e Sardar, Kapisa, Hadda, Mes-‘Aynak, Nangarhar) have produced substantial evidence for the layers of Greek, Greco-Buddhist, and Buddhist cultural remains in Afghanistan and the surrounding areas.<sup>62</sup>

The Persian linguistic construct “Afghan,” as a free standing morpheme, a prefix, and interchangeable master identity label, is an ever present and perennially invoked feature of academic and popular discourse about Afghanistan and the surrounding region. This widely interchangeable ethnic identity tool is present in practically all ethnographic, historical, political, and popular writings dealing with Afghanistan and its current and historical surrounding culture areas. Of course, its

<sup>60</sup> For the historical and ethnological prominence of Persian culture in Afghanistan and the surrounding region see Green, ed., *The Persianate World*.

<sup>61</sup> Stoler, ed., *Imperial Debris*.

<sup>62</sup> An informed overview of these archaeological projects is provided by Boris Litvinsky, “Buddhist Sites in Afghanistan and Central Asia,” *Encyclopaedia Iranica*; and N. H. Dupree, “Afghanistan viii, Archaeology,” *Encyclopaedia Iranica*. The archaeological remains and the historical presence of Buddhism in Afghanistan and the surrounding region are discussed in several academic texts including Bosworth, “Notes on the Pre-Ghaznavid History;” Bulliet, “Naw Bahar;” Emmerick, “Buddhism Among Iranian Peoples;” Gaulier, et al., *Buddhism in Afghanistan*; Hartmann, “Buddhism’s Forgotten Country.”

most frequent and explicit use, as an integrated prefix, is in the Persian spatial configuration "Afghanistan" (colloquial, *Awghanistan*)—land of the Afghan. The routine and ongoing interchangeable use of the subject and/or object "Afghan" is available in nearly all colonial and post-colonial, modern and postmodern, European and local (Persian, Pashtu, Urdu) academic and popular writings dealing with Afghanistan and the surrounding regions.

An organically blended inheritance of Buddhism and Persian culture is present in the construction of the identity label "Afghan" and its toponymic application "Afghanistan." The label "Afghan" is a Persian linguistic construct derived from the morpheme *fagh*, idol. Here are the English translations for the noun *fagh* in several Farsi dictionaries: "*Fagh*-idol, its plural *Faghan* and *faghestan* meaning house of idol[s], and the palace of kings....sometimes it refers to the loved one."<sup>63</sup> "*Fagh*-with the insertion of the vowel [a], it means idol....and *faghestan* (Afghanistan) would be the residence of idol....the residence for royal women is metaphorically called *faghestan* [home of beauties], handsome young men are symbolically addressed with this name."<sup>64</sup> "*Fagh-an* idol, a lover, a mistress, a handsome man or woman."<sup>65</sup> "*Faghestan*-an idol temple ...the haram of a prince, handsome persons of either sex....the favorite wife or mistress of a king,"<sup>66</sup> "*fagh*-idol,"<sup>67</sup> "*fagh*-in the language of Central Asia....*bot* [idol]...in Arabic *sanam* [idol],"<sup>68</sup> "*fagh*-loved one, friend, handsome young man or woman, idol,"<sup>69</sup> "*fagh*-idol, *sanam* in Arabic."<sup>70</sup>

In Farsi there are three general styles of pluralizing nouns and verbs. In one format a noun is pluralized by adding the suffix "an." This style of pluralizing nouns can be found in many instances including *khwahar* (sister)-*khwaharan* (sisters); *beradar* (brother)-*beradaran* (brothers); *zan* (woman)-*zanan* (women); *Tork* (Turk)-*Torkan* (Turks); *Tajek* (Tajek)-*Tajekan* (Tajeks), etc. In this format, the plural of *fagh* (idol) is *faghan* (idols). Plural of *Afghan* will be *Afghanan* (e. g. Deh-Afghanan, a residential and commercial district in Kabul adjacent to the northern bank of Kabul river). Another style of pluralizing in Farsi is by adding the suffix [ha]. Examples of this model include *Bagh* (garden)-*Baghha* (gardens); singular *Pashtun* will be pluralized as *Pashtunha*. In this model, the plural of the singular *Afghan* will be *Afghanha* (Afghans).

Another model for pluralizing nouns and verbs in (Arabized) Farsi is by inserting the vowel [a] as a prefix and after the second or third phoneme. Examples include *waqt* (time)-*awqat* (times); *jad* (ancestor)-*ajdad* (ancestors); *maraz* (disease)-*amraz* (diseases, maladies); *hokom* (order)-*ahkam* (orders); *fe'al* (action, activity, verb)-*af'aal* (actions, activities, verbs), etc. In this pluralizing style—the insertion of [a] as the initial vowel and the addition of the suffix [an]—the plural of

<sup>63</sup> *Farhang-e Rashidi* II (1958), 1049.

<sup>64</sup> *Farhang-e Jahangiri* I (1972), 1441.

<sup>65</sup> *A Comparative Persian-English Dictionary* (1975), 984.

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>67</sup> *Farhang-e Jam-e-'ye Farsi-Englisi* II (1960), 487.

<sup>68</sup> *Farhang-e Annandraj* IV (1956), 3165.

<sup>69</sup> *Farhang-e Nafisi* IV (1938), 2575.

<sup>70</sup> *Ghiyas al-Loghat* (1984), 648.

*fagh* (idol) will be *Afghan* (idols). Thus, as stated by Steingass and *Farhang-e Jahangiri*, the semantic cradle of the Farsi plural noun “*Afghan*” (idols) is the singular noun “*fagh*” (idol, “symbol for ideal beauty”).<sup>71</sup>

In Farsi the suffix “[e]stan” stands for place, physical space, land, territory or a spatial realm. Throughout the Persianate cultural domain in West, Central and South Asia numerous ethnic groups are spatialized or territorial realms are identified with an ethnic community. Examples include *Kurd-estan* (“land of Kurds”), *Golestan* (“land of flowers”), and *Qabr-estan* (“land of graves” or “cemetery”). In this Persian linguistic tradition *Afghan-estan* stands for the land of Afghan—the land of idols. Based on its cultural, historical, religious, and linguistic context and configuration, Afghanistan is the land (house, domain, territory) or space of idols.

In most academic and political texts, Afghanistan has been treated as “Buddha’s Forgotten Country.”<sup>72</sup> This academic and political oversight is common in spite of the vast amount of ethnographic and historical evidence in support of the country as a *Botkhana* (Farsi, house, abode, residence of idols). As such, the space called Afghanistan, is the home of and a lasting inheritance of Buddha and Buddhism. The material and non-material inheritance of Buddha and Buddhism are located in dozens of archaeological sites in and cultural landscapes of Afghanistan referred to in this essay. As mentioned above, numerous material and non-material features of Islam tinted by Buddhism have been implanted in Afghanistan and the surrounding regions during and after the 7<sup>th</sup> century AD. As mentioned above prominent examples of these implants include rituals dealing with the Ka’aba, Hajar al-Aswad, sacred shrines for the hair of Prophet Mohammad, *Zamzam* sacred water, Sufism and sacred Sufi shrines. Destroying the statues of Buddha in Bamiyan and sidelining other remains of Buddhism in Afghanistan, the surrounding regions and elsewhere does not alter the Buddhist and Persian cultural and religious continuities in Afghanistan.

The most prominent and irremovable Buddhist cultural inheritance in Afghanistan is the master identity label of the people called “*Afghan*”—idols (“symbol[s] for ideal beauty”) and their domicile “Afghanistan”—land of idols.<sup>73</sup> The destruction of the statues of Buddha and other vestiges of Buddhism in Afghanistan and elsewhere will not erase the deeply embedded cosmology and socio-cultural inheritance of Buddhism in the *Afghan* (idols) cultural identity label and its homeland *Afghanistan*—land of idols. Nor will the strategic and political erasure of the labels “Afghan” and “Afghanistan” from the historical and current academic, political and popular texts and discourse remove the ingrained presence of Buddhism in Afghan identity and their homeland Afghanistan. The genesis of the identity label “Afghan” is Buddha, Buddhism and Buddhist idols enshrined all over Afghanistan—the land of idols—and the surrounding regions. The space called Afghanistan was, is, and will remain a *Botkhana*—the abode of idols—irrespective of the prospects of forthcoming political and religious transformations.

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<sup>71</sup> Barzegar, *Relations Between Islam and Buddhism*.

<sup>72</sup> Hartmann, “Buddhism’s Forgotten Country.”

<sup>73</sup> *Ibid.*; and Barzegar, “Relations Between Islam and Buddhism.”

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