

Recalling the Past to Assert Ethnic Rights in the Present: The Case of the Gawars in Afghanistan

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Summary

This paper studies the production of historical knowledge in modern Afghanistan. It is argued that after the civil war and following the adoption of the new constitution in 2004, where for the first time in Afghan history the ethnic composition of the country was codified by enumerating the main ethnic groups, an ethnically dominated view on current politics and on the past became prevalent in society. Representatives of various different ethnic groups have organized cultural associations and started to publish books and brochures in which they attempt to make their group known and to assert its right to exist among the ethnic groups of Afghanistan. This seems to date to have been a much easier pursuit for the bigger such groups, who are mentioned in the text of the constitution and who have influential representatives at the central political level. This paper deals with the question of how smaller ethnic groups, who in the text of the constitution figure only among the “others” and have no representatives at the central political level, try to find their place in the ethnically dominated political life of Afghanistan today. For this, the case of the Gawars has been chosen. These people speak a Dardic language, and live in remote mountainous areas of Kunar Province in eastern Afghanistan. The paper is based on an analysis of publications that were released by the cultural association of the Gawars, as well as on interviews with the head of this organization. The analysis discusses which elements of the Gawar past have been chosen for self-representation today, by which factors this selection can be explained, and what lines of argumentation are followed in historical narrations so as to generate stories about the past that are meaningful for the present. It is also shown that written historiography often follows well-known models of oral narration.

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Introduction: The “ethnicification”¹ of historiography

Ethnically oriented historiography is in vogue in Afghanistan today. This is a rather new and quite remarkable phenomenon. Premodern Afghan historiography primarily consisted of dynastic chronicles written by court officials. The principle of territoriality, constitutive of the unity of the Afghan nation, has been promoted in the

1 “Ethnicification” is understood as the process of turning social and political phenomena into ethnic ones, or the reducing of them to the ethnic factor.

writing of history since the second half of the 20th century.² In scholarly writing, the ethnic diversity of the country was best reflected in the short publications pursuing a folkloristic approach that appeared in journals on history, literature, and folklore such as *Āryānā* or *Kābol*.³ In historiography, the ethnic factor gained importance only in the 1980s after the Saur Revolution, when a nationalities policy based on the model of the Soviet Union would be introduced. This declared Afghanistan to be a multinational country and aimed to guarantee the equal rights and the welfare of all ethnic groups.

Following the Soviet model, primary importance in policy was given to language. Hence, those tongues of some larger minorities (Balochi, Nuristani, Pamiri, Pashai, Turkman, and Uzbek) attained the rank of so-called “national languages.”⁴ The word “national” (*millī*) in this context referred to the corresponding ethnic groups (each of them being a *milliyat*, “nationality”) rather than to the entire Afghan nation (*millat*). For the Afghan nation as a whole, Dari and Pashto maintained their status of being the two official languages. In the 1980s, the new approach to smaller ethnic groups was linguistically dominated but was not, however, limited only to language. Men of letters from various ethnic groups were very active in producing historical studies on their respective communities as well. In 1988 a bimonthly journal named *Gharjistān* appeared, which had a special focus on aspects of Hazara history, economics, and culture.⁵ Also in the 1980s, the Ministry of Tribal and Frontier Affairs published a periodical called *Fraternal Nationalities (melliyyathā-ye barādar)* with publications in Dari and Pashto on various ethnic minorities, which included historical topics. Sometimes publications in one of the five “national languages” were also printed in this journal.

Quite typical of the zeitgeist of those years is a small book named *Balōch kai ant?* (*Who are the Baloch?*) (Pahwāl 1981/82). The title makes clear what the metamesage of this and similar publications was: an ethnic group was to be introduced, often by saying no more than “We also belong to this country and this is who we are.” Since the aforementioned book was published in the Balochi language, it is safe to assume that its main objective was self-discovery. Publications of this kind presented a mix of some general information on history, language, literature, and customs. Usually that information was based on oral tradition, on the author’s personal knowledge and experience, and on some written sources — including both local and Western historiography. Another typical example is a book the title of

2 An excellent account of historiography in Afghanistan up to the end of the 20th century was given by Noelle-Karimi (2004).

3 *Āryānā* appeared in 1942 as the *Bulletin of the Historical Society of Afghanistan* and was published monthly until 1973, and as a quarterly after that. The monthly *Kābol* has been published since 1937, and covers a wide range of themes from language and literature to history and folklore.

4 For more details, see Grünberg (1992) and Pstrusinska (1990).

5 For the development of historical consciousness and historical writing among the Hazaras, see Bindemann (1987) and Mousavi (1998).

which means *A View on the History of the Qizilbash in Afghanistan* (Pazhūhish 2000/01) with information on the origin and history of migrations of the Qizilbash of Afghanistan, on their role in the administrative system of the state, on population figures and places of settlement, and on religion and customs. The importance and innovative character of these ethnically oriented historical publications becomes clear against the backdrop of the policy in the preceding, so-called “republican era” under Muhammad Daud (1973–1978) — when ethnic differences were completely denied and Afghanistan was to follow a Jacobin way to national unity.

These scientific activities came to an almost complete halt during the years of the civil war and the reign of the Taliban in the 1990s. Some publications on ethnic matters still appeared in exile though. Among these, publications of the Hazara community in Quetta must be mentioned first and foremost. During the civil war, frontiers often followed ethnic lines; as a result, the ethnic factor gained in importance to such an extent that after the fall of the Taliban the ethnic composition of the country was — for the first time in Afghan history — codified, in the text of the constitution passed in 2004, by enumerating the main ethnic groups.⁶ Language planning activities were revived for some minor languages. Representatives of various ethnic groups founded cultural associations so as to protect their rights and contribute to a more harmonious society. In fact the word *insijām* — which means “harmony,” “stability,” and “concinnity” — is a compulsory lexical element of the various different statutes and programs, and even of the names of some of these associations.⁷ Cultural gatherings, poetry readings, scientific conferences, and publishing activities form the main arenas of activity for these associations. Some of them have also founded cultural centers, which aim to represent and further the claim for ethnic rights. Furthermore, these centers provide a forum for gatherings and include libraries, space for public use, classrooms for language and computer courses, and sometimes also offer literacy courses in the respective “national language.” Obtaining accreditation for such a cultural association takes much time and effort, but the current development shows that this is by no means an impossible feat. It seems that in today’s Afghanistan the ideal of a civil society with voluntary civic and social organizations has in no other field been realized as successfully as it has been in the field of culture and language.

Afghanistan is also currently experiencing a high tide of ethnically oriented history writing and policymaking. Among these activities, the most conspicuous and promising ones are those carried out on behalf of the larger minorities — that is, those

6 Chapter 1, Article 4, Paragraph 3 of the new Constitution states: “The nation of Afghanistan is comprised of the following ethnic groups: Pashtun, Tajik, Hazara, Uzbek, Turkman, Balouch, Pashai, Nuristani, Aymaq, Arab, Qirghiz, Qizilbash, Gujur, Brahui and others.” English translation quoted from International Constitutional Law Project Information: http://servat.unibe.ch/icl/af00000_.html (accessed: 2013-05-29).

7 For more information on the relevance of the concept of *insijām* for cultural associations in modern Afghanistan, see Rzehak (2012: 150).

that were mentioned in the constitution. The final selection of which ethnic groups to enumerate in the constitution, which would create in the process a kind of ethnic nomenclature, should not be underestimated.⁸ However, exclusion from, or inclusion in, that nomenclature is not the only relevant factor for being recognized in the political life, since aspects of power may also come into play. Today in Afghanistan a commonplace argument goes that a group that has no major representative(s) — be it minister, secretary of state, member of parliament, or high-ranking army officer — will find hardly any recognition in political life, at least at the countrywide level. Quantitative factors are also important. The Sayyids⁹ for example, who are not mentioned in the constitution, are together with the Arabs, who for their part are included herein, started aggregating into a larger group so as to more successfully defend their cultural rights. The two groups together have founded a cultural association named the Council for the Harmony of the Arabs of Afghanistan.¹⁰ The Sayyids usually proclaim that they do not belong to any of the country's ethnic groups, but it seems that in the new political context of ethnically oriented political diversification they cannot avoid allying with a fellow minority, one which does actually belong to the chosen ethnic nomenclature.

It goes without saying that the list of ethnic groups in the constitution does not reflect the full ethnic or linguistic diversity of Afghanistan. Quite a few small groups figure only among the category of "others." How, then, do these groups position themselves in the ethnically oriented political landscape of contemporary Afghanistan? The case of the Sayyids shows that allying with a larger minority can be one way of gaining political recognition. However, this option is not acceptable to all groups. Evidence shows that some smaller ones have also tried to assert themselves as one ethnic group among others by producing an ethnically oriented historiography of their own and by organizing cultural associations, although this represents a much greater challenge for them due to small numbers of group members and a lack of capable men of letters. It is a truism that the past is always remembered in a selective way and that preferencing follows criteria derived from present-day needs and expectations. At the same time, the political discourse is always dominated by topics of a particular nature and by preferred lines of argumentation.¹¹

8 A critical discussion of this selection is given by Rzehak (2012: 137–139).

9 Sayyids claim to be the descendants of the Prophet Muhammad. In Afghanistan, they can be found among almost all ethnic groups and usually speak the language of the respective group as their first one. Thus, in Afghanistan Sayyids can be found who speak Dari, Pashto, Uzbek, Balochi, or some other language.

10 The Dari name of the organization is *shōrā-yi insijām-i arabhā-yi afghānistān* (information provided by Sayyid Mahāuddīn Gauharī, the local leader of the Sayyids in Mazar-i Sharif, during an interview held on April 3, 2010 in that city).

11 For comparison the study of Andrew Shryock (1997) is worthy of mention; herein he shows, through the example of tribal Jordan, how orally transmitted narratives produce group identities and how the urgency of participation in contemporary politics has led to attempts to write and publish these

In this paper, the case of a group named the Gawar will be explored. The Gawars are an ethnic and linguistic group in eastern Afghanistan who amount to hardly more than ten thousand people today.¹² I take my material used here from interviews with Muhammad Nawaz Haqiqat, a man in his fifties who acts as the informal representative of the Gawars in Kabul. Officially, he holds a position in the Ministry of Interior that comes with the rank of colonel (*dēgarwāl*). I met him several times in Kabul in October 2012, and we conversed with each other in Pashto. Muhammad Nawaz Haqiqat is the chief of the cultural association of the Gawars and has authored several books on their history and culture, which he published in Pashto under the pen name Sānīn (2011/12, 2012/13). Given his personal background, Muhammad Nawaz Haqiqat can be regarded as a distinguished and knowledgeable representative of the Gawar ethnic group.

The Gawars

People known as Gawar (*gawār*) live in the upper parts of Kunar Valley on both sides of the Afghan–Pakistani border.¹³ The majority of them are located in Afghanistan in the Nari and Ghaziabad districts of Kunar Province.¹⁴ The main villages with a Gawar population are Markazi Nari (the administrative center of Nari District), Barikot, Dokalam, and Neshagam.¹⁵ In Pakistan, Gawars live in Arandu in the Chitral district of Khyber-Pakhtunkhwa Province and — in lesser numbers — in the Dir and Swat districts of that same province.

The Gawars speak a language of their own, which in Western literature is usually mentioned as *Gawārbāī*.¹⁶ Actually, *bāī* means “language” in the vernacular of the Gawars and *Gawārbāī* means “Gawar language.” The speakers themselves call it simply *Gawar*. If Gawars mention their language in Pashto or Dari, they use the derivate ending of *-ī*: *gawāī*. In this paper, the nomenclature “Gawari” will be used to denote the language. Gawari is a Dardic language with historical affinities to Pashai and Dir-Swat Kuhistani, and also to Kati (a Nuristani language) as well.

histories — and, furthermore, how the act of writing makes a material difference in the history that emerges.

- 12 No exact data on their population number is available for Afghanistan today. Bashir (2007: 830) states that, before the recent war, 6,500–8,500 persons were speaking the language of the Gawars in Afghanistan.
- 13 On the Gawars and their places of settlement, see Morgenstierne (1974: 3) and Orywal (1986: 63).
- 14 Ghaziabad District was created only recently. It corresponds to the northern part of the former Bar Kunar District.
- 15 Sānīn (1391: 11–12) lists altogether 24 villages with a Gawar population in Afghanistan: Nārei Markaz, De Nārei Bar Kelai (= the upper village of Nārei), De Nārei Lar Kelai (= the lower village of Nārei), Faqīrābād, Qādir Mēna, La’l Mēna, Samad Mēna, Afzal Mēna, Nēsha Gām, Dōkalām Sind Ghāra, Dōkalām Bāzār, Arnawī, Swār Dam, Sāw, Sāw Dam, Barīkōt Bar Kelai (= the upper village of Barīkōt), Barīkōt Lar Kelai (= the lower village of Barīkōt), Shām Dam, Qāzī Mēna, Rahmān Mēna, Khayātābād, Wazīr Mēna, and De Qāriyāno Mēna.
- 16 See Bashir (2007: 830), Kieffer (1985: 513), and Morgenstierne (1950). In Orywal’s study (1986: 63), *Gawārbāī* was mistakenly given as the group name.

Along with this, the word “Kuhistani” (*kūhistānī*, literally “highlander,” “mountain-”) is today also applied to denote the Gawar people and their language (Sānīn 2011/12: 25), although in former studies on the Gawars Kuhistani was never used in this way.¹⁷ Thus, Gawar, Gawari, and Kuhistani are today synonyms in the ethnic and linguistic context of eastern Afghanistan. The term Kuhistani, when applied in this sense, must not be confused with those languages that are grouped together as Kuhistani and that are spoken in the Kuhistan, Dir, and Swat districts of Khyber-Pakhtunkhwa Province in Pakistan.¹⁸ However, Gawari and the other “Kuhistani” languages are quite close to each other. It is safe to assume that some people are pursuing a political agenda in applying the name Kuhistani to the Gawars of Afghanistan today. As mentioned, considerations about group size are relevant when people harbor hopes of political recognition in Afghanistan today. Similar to the Sayyids, who have allied with the Arabs for reasons of politics, the Gawars are presenting themselves as part of a larger group by factually allying with the Kuhistani people of Pakistan, or at least by appropriating the name of those people for themselves as well. The drive to associate with the Kuhistani people of Pakistan on ethnic and linguistic grounds probably gained momentum during the civil war of the 1990s, when large numbers of Afghan Gawar migrated to Pakistan, where many of them lived among Kuhistani people (more details on this will be given below). This idea of ethnic and linguistic unity can also explain why Muhammad Nawaz Haqiqat chose the title *Gawār kūhistānī afghānān* (*Gawar — the Kuhistani Afghans*) for one of his books (Sānīn 2011/12).

In Afghanistan, most Gawars are bilingual — with Gawari as their first and Pashto as their second language. Since Gawari has no written standard, Pashto is used as the language of education and administration. According to my informant, Pashto is the language of instruction in public schools and madrassas,¹⁹ mullahs deliver their Friday sermons in Pashto, wedding and funeral rituals are held in Pashto, and Pashto is the language of local administration. Pashtuns are the most important neighbors of the Gawars in Afghanistan. Their places of settlement are located to the south of the Gawar villages. Among other neighbors, Kati-speaking Nuristanis to the northwest and the above-named Kuhistani people of Pakistan to the northeast must be mentioned.

Local economy used to be limited to agriculture and stock farming for the Gawars in Afghanistan. Only over the last decade have more and more people from this group been seeking new sources of income as traders, car drivers, and construction workers. Some young men also went to Jalalabad for higher education.

17 See Kieffer (1985: 513), Morgenstierne (1950), and Morgenstierne (1926: 5).

18 For the Kuhistani languages in Pakistan, see Bashir (2007: 857–873) and Morgenstierne (1974: 3). Since Kuhistani literally means “highlander” this term also could be and is applied to many other groups in occasional linguistic usage, so as to characterize them as mountain inhabitants.

19 In former times instruction in Islamic schools was given in Dari.

The claim for historical depth

The territory of modern Afghanistan has been a crossroads of different cultures since ancient times. Hence, it comes as no surprise that people try to present themselves as the genuine inhabitants of a given area and that, in order to substantiate this claim, they relate their pasts to ancient cultures. Historical depth and grandeur in the past is thus believed to warrant glory in the present. The Gawars form no exception in this respect.

Thus, the adjective “genuine” (*sūcha*) is the preferred attribute when the language and culture of the Gawars are described. Gawari is praised by language activists as a “genuine Indo-Aryan language” (*sūcha āriyāyī zheba*) that is allegedly very close to Sanskrit. The “despotic regimes that used Persian (Dari) and to a lesser degree Pashto in their offices” are blamed for the sad fact that “no publications exist in this old, sweet, and soft language” (Sānīn 2012/13: 14). The authenticity of the Gawari language is supported by the assertion that the very word *gawār* itself means “genuine, clean, and pure” (*sūcha, pākīza au khālis*) (Sānīn 2011/12: 51). The claim for historical depth is not only related to the language but also to the Gawars’ places of settlement in Afghanistan. The name of the province Kunar (*kūnar*) is identified as a genuine Gawari word, with *kū* meaning “blood” and *nar* being derived from the Gawari word *nār* (“homeland”). The name of the Nari (*nārēi*) District is also attributed with having a Gawari etymology by tracing it back to the “genuine Gawari word” *na’r* (“basis,” “fundament”) (Sānīn 2011/12: 50–51).²⁰ By rooting local toponymy in their own language, Gawar intellectuals claim for their group a place among the senior inhabitants of this region in the northeastern part of Kunar Province.

Here is not the appropriate place to go into the minute details of etymology. The strength of belief does not anyway depend on the veracity of what people believe in. On scholarly grounds there is some cause to assume that today’s Gawars are descendants of comparatively recent immigrants from Bajaur and Swat. This assumption is based upon a historical narrative that the Norwegian scholar Georg Morgenstierne was told by an informant from Arandu village more than 80 years ago:

According to this tradition, Sultan *Azhdar Ali Gabar* reigned in Gabar in Bajaur 16 generations ago. He had four sons. They were expelled by the invading Pathans, and one of them came to Arandu, drove away the Kafir inhabitants and settled there [...] There can hardly be any doubt that the prince mentioned in these traditions is Sultan Haidar Ali Bajauri, who, according to Babur, reigned at the time of the Pathan conquest of Swat and Bajaur in the 15th century. Allowing 30 years to each generation, 16 generations would carry us back to A.D. 1450 (Morgenstierne 1950: 6).

20 Nari is the Pashto form of the original Gawari name Nārsāt. Before it became the district name, this had been the collective designation for an entity composed of the villages of Arandu, Barikot, and Dokalam — in other words, for the heartland of the Gawars on both sides of today’s Afghan–Pakistani border (see Morgenstierne 1950: 5).

It is quite remarkable that this tradition is not mentioned at all in the modern historiography of the Gawars. Whether true or not, it could hardly be taken as a solid evidence of their claim to be among the most ancient inhabitants of the region.

Contemporary historical narratives remember three more or less mythical kingdoms related to the history of the Gawars: the Alina kingdom, that is the realm of the kings of the ancient Nuristanis, which was located in the northwest; the Mogul kingdom of the ancestors of the Chitralis, located in the northeast; and, the kingdom of the Gawars themselves, which is identified with the ancient realm of Kuhistan (Sānīn 2011/12: 68). The fact that the term “Mogul” (*mangūl*) is used to denote the ruling dynasty of Chitral does not necessarily imply a connection to the Mogul Empire. Many more ancient kingdoms are reckoned on here, as is the case with the Alina rulers of Nuristan as well.²¹ Authors claim that many stories about these kingdoms and their rule over the southern Hindu Kush have been transmitted from generation to generation, but no specific information about these traditions is given in historical writing. The details about when and how these kingdoms disappeared are said to be unknown (Sānīn 2011/12: 68). Thus the only message actually delivered by this fragmentary information is the reference to an ancient past and a claim to historical depth for one’s group.

With relation to more recent periods of history, authors report that during the reign of Amir Amanullah Khan — in other words, in the 1920s — the region of Nari was an independent district, and in unspecified ways subordinate to the rulers of Kunar. Further, the local king — whose name is never given — had a big palace in Nari village. The walls of the former king’s palace, however, are said to have been destroyed during the civil war of the 1990s (Sānīn 2011/12: 385).

The war of independence

Afghanistan has never come under the direct rule of a European colonial power, a fact that gives rise to much pride in the collective memory of the Afghan people. The achievement of complete independence in 1919, when Afghanistan rejected the British Empire’s last attempts at hegemony, is one of the events in modern history whose importance can hardly be overstated — and one which is not free of mystification: “The Afghans maintained and still maintain that they won their complete independence on the field of battle” states Fletcher (1965: 195), in his study on the various wars of conquest in Afghanistan. This testimony points to the fact that in the strive for independence the field of diplomacy was no less important than the field of battle. Soon after his enthronization, Amir Amanullah Khan declared the complete independence of Afghanistan and shortly thereafter his government began to establish a foreign policy of its own, which included the establishment of diplomatic

21 Alina (*alīnā*) is the name of an ancient Indo-Aryan tribe mentioned in the Rigveda, to whom modern Nuristanis are related.

relations with Soviet Russia. At the same time Amir Amanullah proclaimed jihad against the British, in order to give emphasis to his demand for independence. It is a matter of historical fact that some military action between Afghan and British-Indian forces did indeed take place in 1919, prior to the United Kingdom finally recognizing Afghanistan's independence in the Treaty of Rawalpindi (August 8, 1919). However, in terms of scope and brutality, those skirmishes do not compare to the two British-Afghan wars of the 19th century.²² Nevertheless, the short war of independence is still firmly anchored in the collective Afghan historical memory, and its fighters — with Amir Amanullah at the helm — have since been granted the honorary title of *ghazis* (“victorious religious fighters”).

The Gawars at the time lived in the border areas between Afghanistan and what was then British India, and therefore it is no surprise that much attention is paid to the war of independence in their historiography as well. There should accordingly be no doubt that, irrespective of how small a group they are, they also contributed to the achievement of Afghan independence. Gawars are thus presented as heroic mujahidin who under the leadership of Malik Muhammad Yusuf fought, alongside Pashtun mujahidin, as part of the Fourth Independent Front. This front was commanded by a Pashtun leader named Mir Zaman Khan from Chaghasarai, which is located to the south of today's Asadabad District of Kunar Province (Sānīn 2011/12: 547).

The historical narrations of the Gawars do not give much information about their actual military activities with the Fourth Independence Front — but they do render copious accounts of how the Gawar fighters' contribution to the war effort was honored by Amir Amanullah Khan. It seems that, for the metamessage of the historical tradition, the appreciation of their efforts by the Afghan amir is even more important than the actual efforts themselves were.

In the books of Sānīn, material is presented without any systematic order and, correspondingly, no chronology is followed in the narration of historical events either. Surprisingly, the war of independence is first mentioned in a report on a noble lady called Bibi Gulzar Abei. She belonged to an influential local family and was highly educated. Besides Gawari, she also knew Pashto, Dari, and Arabic and had a good knowledge of Islamic culture. For this reason, Bibi Gulzar Abei was elected chief local elder when her father died. After the declaration of independence, the story goes that Bibi Gulzar Abei sent a congratulatory letter to the amir and was in response invited to Kabul by him. Moreover, the amir commanded his troops in the eastern zone to put two officers and three soldiers in charge of her safety during the journey. On her way to Kabul, Bibi Gulzar Abei was accompanied by four local elders whose names are all mentioned in the reports. During her reception at court, she offered her congratulations once more and relayed details of the difficult

22 For further details, see Fletcher (1965: 185–196).

economic circumstances of the Gawar people. In response, the amir issued an order to the administration of Kunar saying that the people of Nari should be exempt from taxes for five years. Queen Soraya is said to have presented Bibi Gulzar Abei with a luxurious dress with gold embroidery, and the noblemen who had accompanied Bibi Gulzar Abei were awarded prized swords (Sānīn 2011/12: 78–81). Later, the commander of the Fourth Independence Front, Ghazi Mir Zaman Khan, was allegedly summoned to the amir's court in Kabul, and the former invited Ghazi Malik Muhammad Yusuf and other local elders from Nari to accompany him there. The parting ceremony in Kunar is described in great detail: thousands (sic!) of mujahedin came to bid them farewell. The delegation was supplied with 24 horses, and silken scarves were bestowed upon each of its members. According to the reports, the representatives of the Fourth Independence Front stayed at the amir's court for several days. Amir Amanullah Khan presented Malik Muhammad Yusuf with a valuable sword, a decoration of bravery, and a medal made of red gold. The reports include a list of all 41 mujahedin who took part in that journey and who assisted in the reception at the amir's court (Sānīn 2011/12: 555–557, 565).

These reports are suited for the removal of any doubts about the glorious role that the Gawars played in the war of independence. Appreciation by the amir, tax exemption, and the gifts presented to the Gawar mujahedin as tributes are narrated in full detail, a feature that makes this mode of recounting history quite special and appears to legitimize the Gawars' own respect for their ancestors' deeds. Should there be any lingering doubt, the names of numerous honest and respectable men who bear witness to the appreciation that was expressed by the amir are cited. For Bibi Gulzar Abei's journey, as well as for Malik Muhammad Yusuf's, all fellow travelers are mentioned by name in the historical narrations. This is done not only for the sake of presenting a full factual account, but moreover so as to bring in eye-witnesses whose repute is beyond question.

The special attention given to the amir's appreciation is particularly striking in light of the fact that only one single military engagement of the Gawars is actually mentioned in their historical reports. The direct opponents of the Fourth Independent Front were the ruler and state forces of Chitral, who supported the British. The combat in which some Gawars participated took place in the region of Lam Burtat to the northwest of the Gawar villages of Barikot, Dukalam, and Pashingar, where British and Chitral forces were stationed so as to prevent attacks. During the fighting eight British soldiers were killed, two British canons were captured by the Fourth Independent Front, and the troops of the ruler of Chitral were forced to pull back (Sānīn 2011/12: 555–557).

Afghanistan ultimately won its independence in the field of diplomacy rather than on the battlefield. Much the same can also be said about the activities of the Gawars during that war. Sānīn relates that the ruler of Chitral tried to forge alliances against the Fourth Independence Front in eastern Nuristan. Since Nuristan had only been

conquered, and its inhabitants converted to Islam, by the Afghan amir Abdurrahman Khan as recently as 1896, the ruler of Chitral obviously set hope in some animosity existing among the Nuristanis toward the Kabul government during the British–Afghan war. The ruler of Chitral is said to have sent money to eastern Nuristan in order to retrieve insider information about the activities of the Fourth Independence Front and to, hopefully, stir the Nuristanis up for combat. Mir Zaman Khan did not, however, go in for military confrontation with the Nuristanis. Instead, he sent a delegation of honorable men to Nuristan for negotiations. The elder of the Gawars, Malik Muhammad Yusuf, was a member of that delegation. Numerous tribal assemblies of local elders (*jirga*) were held in different parts of Nuristan. Finally, the delegation was assured that the inhabitants of Nuristan would not side with the British or the ruler of Chitral. The places where the Jirgas were held are again described in full detail, and so are the gifts that were exchanged so as to seal the deal. The local elders were presented with lanterns by the delegation, while Mir Zaman Khan received a typical Nuristani-style wooden chair in return (Sānīn 2011/12: 569–575).

The war of independence seems to lend itself in an ideal manner to the support of the claim that the Gawars, however small in number, are dignified inhabitants of Afghanistan who had made their own contribution to the independence effort and who were honored for that on the highest imaginable level. The narration furthermore includes reports of their bravery in the field, and of their negotiating skills. Both a bellicose spirit and readiness for peaceful consultation are important elements of the traditional local value system; narrations about members of one particular ethnic group abounding with these qualities are therefore most appropriate when it comes to asserting the equal rank of that group among the ethnic factions of Afghanistan.

Civil war and migration

In 1978 a political coup brought to power in the country a leftist party and in December 1979 Soviet troops were sent to Afghanistan to support the new government. Many Afghans regarded the Soviet troops as invaders and military resistance instantly emerged. In these circumstances, millions of Afghans would migrate to neighboring countries. Soon after the withdrawal of Soviet troops from Afghanistan, the resistance groups started to fight among each other and the country became lost in a bloody and enduring civil war. The reign of the Taliban in the 1990s for a while brought security to some regions, but no freedom. Today the years of the civil war are remembered in an ambivalent way. The resistance against the Soviet occupation had revived the tradition of jihad and its fighters were again glorified as brave, fearless, and invincible mujahedin. However, mujahedin quickly lost its glory as term when those fighters started to turn against each other and cause great harm to their fellow countrymen. I remember that in southern Afghanistan in 2002,

“mujahedin” was applied to the roaming bandits who were attacking innocent travelers in remote areas.

In terms of length and detail, in the historical narrations of the Gawars the years of civil war figure among the most prominent topics, second only to the aftermath of the war of independence. The narrative emphasizes that the Gawars took a tough stance against the leftist Kabul government from the very beginning of its rule. The government’s representatives in Kunar are described as illiterate persons who wanted nothing but to extract personal gain from the situation. The term that is applied to them is *ibn-ul-waqt* (“turncoat”) (Sānīn 2011/12: 402).²³ The narrations contain detailed descriptions of the acts of cruelty that were committed in Nari District in order to break the resistance movement that had been organized in the neighboring parts of eastern Nuristan. Many Gawars left their villages together with their families as early as June 1981 and moved to Pakistan, where they were granted refuge in *Sōba Sarhad*, as the border areas on the Pakistani side are commonly called.²⁴ Most of them stayed in Chitral and other places where they encountered an ethnically and linguistically close Kuhistani population. Thus for most Gawars, the civil war years were ultimately ones of exile.

The ambivalent attitude harbored toward the mujahedin during the civil war period is obvious from the historiography of the Gawars. The narrative has it that the Gawars engaged in jihad from the very beginning, but almost nothing is reported about concrete armed encounters or other resistance activities. Instead, the narrations emphasize that the Gawars did not ally with any of the *tanzīmāt*, a generic term later employed to denote the rival mujahedin groups. This allegedly helped them to survive as an ethnic group (*qaum*). In metaphorical language, the Gawars “did not become the snake in anybody’s sleeve nor did they have a snake in their own sleeve” (Sānīn 2011/12: 280). The metaphor of the snake in the sleeve goes back to a famous story about the Prophet Muhammad; it alludes to the danger of being misused or damaged while offering help to somebody. The message to be transmitted here is that the Gawars stayed out of the country’s internal conflicts, events which caused so much harm to the people of Afghanistan. The Gawars are generally represented as a peace-loving people. However, the information given in the historic accounts is rife with contradictions. On the very page where an inherent peacefulness of nature is alleged, many Gawars are also mentioned as having served as commanders in several different *tanzīmāt* during the jihad (Sānīn 2011/12: 280). This inconsistency can most probably again be explained by the coexistence of those seemingly contradictory social values referred to above: a bellicose spirit and readiness for peaceful consultation.

23 Literally, *ibn-ul-waqt* means “son of the [actual] period.”

24 *Sōba Sarhad* is the colloquial name of the former Northwest Frontier Province and today’s Khyber Pakhtunkhwa Province.

Similarly, for the Gawars migration and jihad are not mutually exclusive options but rather complementary types of behavior. Migration and exile is just one way of conducting jihad. The word for “migration” in the reports is not *muhājirat*, as one might expect, but rather *hijrat*. Both terms can be used for migration, but *hijrat* has a stronger religious connotation since it denotes the flight of the Prophet Muhammad and his followers from Mecca to Medina in A.D. 622, the episode that would mark the beginning of the Islamic era. In applying that term to their own migration, the Gawars thus infuse it with a strong religious meaning. The reports say that the Gawars could not stay in their villages any longer because they were surrounded by governmental armed forces. Since they had no way to openly leave, they contacted some resistance fighters and asked them for assistance. They explained to the mujahidin that they wanted to boycott the government and “go for *hijrat* with the objective of jihad” (Sānīn 2011/12: 99). The wording makes clear that going into exile was seen as a way of conducting jihad, which makes *hijrat* the appropriate term for denoting their action (rather than the neutral term *muhājirat*).²⁵

The historical narrations about *hijrat* display yet another feature that is analogous to aspects of the above-cited narrations of the independence war: a simple mentioning of historical events is not, according to the understanding of narrators, sufficient proof of the veracity of a given account. It appears necessary to also invoke the authority of persons of repute. In the case of their migration to Pakistan, the Gawars hence make reference to Gulbuddin Hekmatyar, leader of the Hezb-i Islami party. According to narration, Hekmatyar visited a refugee camp of the Gawars in Chitral in 1982. The Gawars had arrived at that camp less than one year before, but they had already built there a mosque. Inside it, Hekmatyar offered a prayer and delivered a speech. He allegedly “congratulated the Gawars on their *hijrat* and appealed to the court of God Almighty to support them on their way of jihad” (Sānīn 2011/12: 502). If anybody were to interpret the migration of the Gawars as flight and cowardly escape, the fact that Hekmatyar appreciated their *hijrat* and legitimized it as jihad would ensure that any suspicions of that kind were averted. Hekmatyar is also quoted as saying:

When I saw that you have built a mosque here I learned that you are attentive and brave people. It is not true what some people recount about you. I say bravo and I wish you success. Many people have gone for exile but they have not yet started to build a mosque. (Sānīn 2011/12: 502)

Hekmatyar alludes here to an often-heard rumor about the Gawars being allegedly less pious than other peoples in Afghanistan. This opinion is probably related to the fact that among the Gawars some rules concerning the modesty of women are not as strict as they are among most Pashtuns of eastern and southern Afghanistan. The Gawars, for example, take no bride-price when marrying off their daughters.

²⁵ For the religious connotations of exile being depicted as *hijrat* during the Afghan civil war, see also Shahrani (1995: 189–191).

The historical narrative provided here is designed to make clear that, contrary to any circulating suspicions, the Gawars are by no means less pious than other groups are. With Hekmatyar as their source, they are on this point able to bring in a referee who is beyond reproach.

The historical narrations of the Gawars, as presented in the books of Sānīn, contain numerous reports about the hardships encountered during migration and exile. Some people were attacked in a barbaric manner when they left the safe shelter of their villages. It is reported that they had the military support of a mujahedin commander from the Safi-Pashtuns of Pechdara in Kunar Province, who also lost his life in that incident. On a similar occasion, a commander from Nuristan came to help Gawar people who were attacked on their way into exile (Sānīn 2011/12: 96, 104). The reports contain not only the names of those who are referred to as sources of information, but their testimony is rendered in the style of full-text quotes. Descriptions of this kind demonstrate and underline the kind of amicable relations that the Gawars wish to have with neighboring groups in their places of settlement. Chronicles of some neighboring groups having appropriated houses and landed property from the Gawars after they had left their villages for exile are supplied with narrations about a final peaceful settling of all conflicts that arose from such acts. One conflict about land is reported as having being solved during a trial held at an Islamic school in Algora, in the environs of Peshawar; another one as being settled through the mediation of Pashtun elders in the traditional way of that group, in other words by the holding of tribal assemblies of elders (*jirga*) on the subject (Sānīn 2011/12: 83, 519–525). These narrations once again highlight and emphasize the Gawars' readiness for peaceful means of conflict resolution.

Conclusion

The books by Sānīn do not follow any systematic order. A chapter on an event that occurred during the war of independence is followed by one that introduces a local religious leader who lived at a totally different point in time. After this, the position of women in Gawar society is explained in a rather folkloristic mode, followed by the description of a raid during the civil war years on the basis of eyewitness reports — and so forth. Being structured in this way from beginning to the end, Sānīn's books will barely meet the expectations of a reader who has been trained in formal academic or traditional history writing methods. Moreover, the two books have no "Table of Contents" although they consist of more than 600 and 200 pages respectively. Indeed, the books have hardly anything in common with models of scholarly historiography — whether local or foreign.

The way in which the material is presented in the books is rather more reminiscent of the kind of conversations that might be conducted at gatherings in a teahouse somewhere in the mountains of Afghanistan, where men sit together while a wise

man is asked to tell something of his people.²⁶ He would start to share whatever first comes to his mind, and then jump from one subject to another as the conversation goes on — at times responding to questions, at times filling in gaps between seemingly unconnected pieces of information out of the fear of missing something important. Among the guests, there might be other Gawars who would probably be interested in learning more detail about things they had previously heard from their fathers and grandfathers.

If we imagine that among the guests might be members of other ethnic groups as well, they might be curious to learn something about a group called the Gawar about whom they had almost no prior information due to their small numbers and their remote places of settlement. The narrator for his part would do his best to meet the expectations of all those present. In addition he would, most likely, try to show that the Gawars can justly assert their standing among the ethnic groups of Afghanistan because they share similar values and experiences to them. As part of this, he would try to illuminate how the Gawars belong to the most ancient inhabitants of Afghanistan, that like other groups they bravely fought as jihadists during the war of independence and the Soviet occupation, and that they are nonetheless at the same time a peace-loving people. In addition, he will, in all probability, back his argument by quoting the statements of eyewitnesses and honorable persons. He will recall history in a way suited to invoke the shared rights of the Gawar in the multiethnic society of Afghanistan. However, he and his audience will, almost certainly, think that the best way to defend the rights of the Gawar as an ethnic group would still ultimately be for one of them to acquire a high-ranking position in the political or military spheres.

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26 Performative aspects of Afghan storytelling of a very similar kind are studied by Mills (1991). As presented in historical narrations, the ways in which meaningful stories are generated, as well as their narrative structures, are further described and analyzed by Rzehak (2004: xviii–xxv).

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