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From Khorasan to “Afghanistan”: History, Politics, and Identity Construction

Abstract

This study examines the evolution of the official name “Afghanistan” and the mechanisms of national identity formation in modern Afghan history. Numismatic evidence from the reign of Ahmad Shah Durrani (1747–1772 CE) indicates that the term “Afghanistan” was not officially used during this period. The name emerged in the nineteenth century amid British-Russian geopolitical rivalry and local elite strategies. Later, cultural institutions and official historiography projects—including the Puta Khazana manuscript and the educational policies under King Mohammad Zahir Shah (reigned 1933–1973)—played a pivotal role in consolidating this designation and promoting a monoethnic identity. These developments marginalized non-Pashtun communities and contributed to enduring ethnic and historical inequalities.

Introduction

The central objective of this research is to analyse the historical evolution of the official name “Afghanistan” and the processes through which national identity was constructed. It posits that the term has neither an ancient origin nor appears in premodern official records. Rather, its formal adoption

resulted from political-diplomatic processes and organized historiography involving foreign powers and local elites during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

Historical Names and Geographic Context

During the medieval and early modern periods, territories east of Iran and west of the Indian subcontinent were commonly referred to as “Khorasan,” “Kabul,” “Ghazni,” or occasionally “Turan” in historical sources (Dupree, 1980; Gregorian, 1969). The term “Afghan” appears in some Persian and Hindi texts as equivalent to “Pashtun,” but no evidence exists of a political entity called “Afghanistan” before the nineteenth century.

Numismatic evidence from Ahmad Shah Durrani’s reign shows coins minted with titles such as “Dar al-Saltana Kabul” or “Khorasan” (Numista/Wikimedia Commons, n.d.). For example, a silver one-rupee coin minted in Kabul in 1167 AH (1754 CE) bears the inscription “Dar al-Saltana Kabul,” as does a similar coin from 1174 AH (1760 CE).

Colonial Policy and the Emergence of “Afghanistan”

In the nineteenth century, Afghanistan became a strategic buffer between British India and Russian Central Asia. The British employed the term “Afghanistan” to consolidate influence over the frontier region (Dalrymple, 2013). This constructed name was deliberately propagated through politically motivated documents, which continue to be debated. In practice, Afghanistan functioned as a surrogate state between British India and Tsarist Russia.

The title “Amir,” applied to Afghan rulers such as Sher Ali, Abdur Rahman, and Habibullah, indicated a local leader whose legitimacy depended on endorsement from regional powers, including Iran, British India, or Russia (Kakar, 1979). The U.S.-backed Taliban regime followed a comparable model, adopting the term “Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan,” with its leader, Haibatullah, designated as “Amir.”

Official Historiography and Cultural Interventions under Zahir Shah

The reign of Zahir Shah (1933–1973) marked a critical juncture in Afghanistan’s identity policies. In 1936, a royal decree declared Pashto as the official language, and the Pashto Tolana was established to produce

educational and scientific texts in Pashto. Educational policies mandated instruction in Pashto even in non-Pashtun regions, resulting in academic disadvantages for these populations (Gregorian, 1969).

During the earlier reign of Amanullah Khan (1919–1929), significant reforms and cultural initiatives were carried out under the guidance of his father-in-law, Mahmoud Tarzi, to enhance the role of Pashto and diminish the influence of Persian. However, Amanullah Khan and his successors, up to Daoud Khan, were not fully proficient in Pashto. Their administrative styles and reform strategies differed substantially from those of Amir Abdur Rahman Khan and King Nadir Khan (Ewans, 2001).

Textbooks and curricula were designed to depict Afghanistan as having a millennium-long history while minimizing references to Khorasan or “Eastern Iran.” These narratives were contested by scholars and often employed as instruments of historical falsification (Dupree, 1980).

Nation-Building and Ethnic Marginalization

These policies reflect a monoethnic nation-building agenda that marginalized non-Pashtun communities. Ethnic divisions were exacerbated, and the inclusive legal unification of all nationalities in Afghanistan was hindered. Population displacement, property expropriation, and social marginalization across different historical periods serve as evidence of the continuity of this process (Gregorian, 1969; Kakar, 1979).

The Puta Khazana Manuscript and Historical Falsification

The so-called Puta Khazana, published by Abdul Hai Habibi in 1944, claimed that Pashto poetry had been documented as early as the eighth century CE. Domestic and foreign scholars protested, questioning its authenticity (Habibi, 1944). David McKenzie demonstrated that the script used was standardized only after the 1936 Pashto alphabet reforms. Afghan critics further argued that the poetic style did not correspond with the claimed historical period. The original manuscript has never been available for palaeographic study, as no authentic original existed (Mackenzie, 1970).

Conclusion

The evidence indicates that the name “Afghanistan” is fundamentally a political-colonial construct rather than an ancient historical designation.

Britain and local elites played a key role in its formal adoption. Cultural institutions and official historiography projects, including the Puta Khazana and the educational policies under Zahir Shah, served as instruments to consolidate this process. This monoethnic identity construction, rather than fostering national cohesion, intensified ethnic and linguistic divisions and hindered the gradual formation of a stable nation-state.

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