

# Ethnicity, order and meaning in the anthropology of Iran and Afghanistan

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## Introduction

I take as a starting point some passages in the 'problematique generale' offered by the organizers of our colloquium :

1. « Les 'ethnies' dont *se compose* [la population de l'Iran et de l'Afghanistan] sont parfois *les mêmes et appartiennent* en tout cas aux mêmes familles linguistiques... Ces deux pays *comportent* chacun une 'ethnie' dominante... » (my emphasis). It seems to me that the phrasing of these statements begs the important questions about 'ethnicity'. How useful is the conception, implied here, of populations comprising defined, bounded ethnic groups ? Should we, or can we talk of ethnic groups or identities as 'belonging' to linguistic families ? Does anything necessarily follow from the 'sameness' of an ethnonym found in two different countries ?

2. The situation of populations dominated by a single ethnic group in each country « a conduit, en Iran et en Afghanistan plus peut-être que sur d'autres terrains, les chercheurs en sciences de l'homme et de la société a s'orienter vers des analyses en termes d'ethnicité', de contacts ou de conflits ethniques. » Surely, researchers on these two countries have become interested in ethnicity somewhat *later* than elsewhere, and for understandable reasons. During the 1950's and 1960's, when anthropologists elsewhere *were* developing ideas concerning ethnicity and ethnic units, our research on Iran and Afghanistan continued to focus on 'tribal' and to a lesser extent on 'peasant' and 'urban' societies and situations, using just these circumscribing concepts. It is only with, or rather following, a general shift in interest, fashion, focus and problematic among social and political scientists, that we have come to frame our investigations in terms of 'ethnicity', a shift in our case impeded, I feel, rather than accelerated, by the complex nature of social and cultural identities in Afghanistan and Iran.

3. I would agree, however, with the proposal that the time is ripe for an assessment of the relevance of notions of ethnicity and ethnic group for our understanding and interpretation of society and change in these countries. But I think we need to examine how far we *are* dealing with change in society and how far with changing political rhetoric, or with changing discourse and fashion among social analysts.

Not only has there been a shift in the problematic in the direction of ethnicity, but there has also been a shift in the conceptions of and approaches to ethnicity itself, from the concern (implied, to me, in the statements criticized above) with ethnic groups as objectively apprehended divisions of the population, to a more subjective, cultural approach to ethnicity as a discourse on identity. The essence of ethnonyms and of conceptions of ethnicity is that they cannot be pinned down 'scientifically' by maps, by lists of traits and attributes, but that they are essentially ambiguous and shifting materials for the construction and manipulation of identity, by actors, by others, by administrators, and by social researchers.

In other words, 'ethnicity', like 'tribe', is a cultural category. 'Ethnic' boundaries are cultural not territorial constructions. The ascription of an 'ethnic' identity to a group or individual varies with the speaker, his audience, and the context. Any ascription of 'ethnic' identities is a political statement which defines the speaker and his relation to his audience as much as it defines the groups or individuals so identified. 'Ethnic' identities are constructed in relations between competitors, between local communities and the state, between classes, and between representatives of different states, including anthropologists and their informants. The description, classification, enumeration and mapping of 'ethnic groups' are political acts that create order and facilitate control, whether for academic or for governmental purposes, by privileging only one out of many schemes of identity and only one out of many constructions of a social environment. An adequate academic analysis of 'ethnicity' in a given geographical area must relate it to other local schemes of identity construction, including for example kinship, gender, tribe, occupation, class, language, religion ... and must take account of different local and state-level constructions of the constitution, ranking and relevance of 'ethnic' identities, and of the degree to which context or policy determine these schemes and constructions.

### **Approaches to ethnicity : from order to meaning**

The dominant approach until recently was one that regarded an ethnic group as being or approximating a biologically self-perpetuating population, sharing elements of common culture and identifying itself and being identified by others as a separate category (see Barth 1969a : 10). This fundamentally objectivist approach, in which ethnicity is virtually identified with its cognate 'race', is basic to the 'cultunit' classifications of Naroll (1964, 1968), a refinement of the older but still established tradition associated with Murdock and others, in which 'cultures' are treated as coterminous with 'societies', 'peoples', 'tribes'. It also characterizes recent Soviet 'ethnos' theory (*cf.* Bromley 1980, Dragadze 1980), and has many other current adherents, not least among those sympathetic to the new science of sociobiology (*e.g.* Van den Berghe 1981, see Smith 1983). Even if advocates of this approach to ethnicity do not take the biological assumptions too literally, there is still a strong tendency to conceive of populations as divided into formally bounded, clear-cut, even 'concrete' ethnic groups, with every person belonging to one. The main perspective of this approach is cross-cultural, and the aims are comparative, the method being a rigorous classification of types.

Underlying assumptions about the nature of society in this approach were criticized by, among others. Leach (1954, 1964), Moerman (1965, 1968), Barth (1969a) (and see Southall 1976). More recent critics polarize, as so often, into culturologists who find the approach too objectivist, and materialists for whom it is not objective enough. Difficulties with the approach have been summarized by R. Cohen (1978) as the unit problem (whether the categories used to identify ethnic groups have any meaning for the members), and the context problem (relations *between* groups in a variety of settings being increasingly seen as the major element in group organization). Interest in ethnicity among anthropologists has indeed burgeoned, as Cohen points out, with the general shift in the discipline away from 'tribal' towards urban and multi-cultural studies, and a shift in theoretical interests from group to network, from status to transaction, from structure to process, and, one might add, more recently from function to meaning (Crick 1976).

Comprehensive expositions of an alternative to this objectivist approach to ethnicity came in 1969, independently, from two anthropologists familiar with the Middle East. Though differing in terms and emphases, Barth and A. Cohen agreed substantially on the subjective, ideological and cultural nature of ethnic identity and the irrelevance of objective or biological factors. For Barth, whose approach owed much to his field experiences among Pathan, Kurdish, Basseri and Baluch tribal peoples in and near the two countries we are concerned with, ethnic groups are

“categories of ascription and identification by the actors themselves, and thus have the characteristic of organizing interaction between people... A categorical ascription is an ethnic ascription when it classifies a person in terms of his basic, most general identity, presumptively determined by his origin and background. To the extent that actors use ethnic identities to categorize themselves and

others for the purposes of interaction, they form ethnic groups in this organizational sense” (1969a : 10, 13-14).

Analytic attention should focus on boundaries, as embodying the continuities in a situation, and on the interaction which allows for the persistence of cultural differences (1969a : 14-15).

In his pioneering study of the Hausa community in Ibadan, Nigeria, and undoubtedly also influenced by his earlier experience on the highly volatile ethnic frontier of Arabs in Israel, Abner Cohen defined an ethnic group as

“an informal interest group whose members are distinct from the members of other groups within the same society in that they share a measure of what Smith calls ‘compulsory institutions’ like kinship and religion, and can communicate among themselves relatively easily. The term ethnicity refers to strife between such ethnic groups, in the course of which people stress their identity and exclusiveness ... but it is only when, within the formal framework of a national state or of any formal organization, an ethnic group informally organizes itself for political action, that we can say that we are dealing with ethnicity” (1969 : 4, 200).

Where Barth focuses on the maintenance of ethnic boundaries, especially through processes of accommodation and the occupation of ‘niches’, Cohen is interested in the conditions under which ethnic differences are politicized and conflictual, in the organization of groups, and in the process of ‘retribalization’ in modern states.

The works of Barth and Cohen inspired a generation of anthropological research on ethnic problems. With few exceptions, however, they were rather slow to take effect in research on the Middle East, where thinking among social and political scientists, as well as ethnographers, continued until recently to accept Coon’s classic (1958), essentially objectivist, ‘mosaic’ model of a ‘diversity of peoples and cultures’. A major research aim in ethnography has been historical and geographic in nature : to establish the ‘real’ identity of ethnic groups by mapping their territorial distribution, tracing their origins and movements in time, and listing their ‘fundamental characteristics’. Techniques and materials for these endeavours include those of archaeology, philology, historical documentation, genetics and the analysis of material culture.

Noting that questions of the history, identity and distinctiveness of tribal groups in Iran were neither a genetic nor even a genealogical matter, I had occasion to quote Nikitine’s warnings :

« Les notions d’unité ethnique et d’organisme politique ne sont plus les mêmes dès qu’on pénètre sur le terrain d’ethnologie asiatique. A un certain moment on y constate en effet des molécules qui tantôt se réunissent sous une forme de vague confédération, tantôt, avec la même facilité, se désagrègent. Les noms mêmes n’offrent aucune constance ni certitude... Ce sera le nom du chef de la période de prospérité auquel pourra avec le temps se substituer un autre. Ajoutons à ceci des scissions et des regroupements constants à travers l’histoire et nous nous apercevrons de tout ce qu’il y a de délicat dans la tâche du chercheur » (1929 : 122-3, quoted in Tapper 1974 : 323).

Anderson criticized research on Afghanistan based on the ‘mosaic’ model as follows :

“The explanatory attention embedded in these descriptions and reconstructions tended to focus on ethnogenesis and a kind of cultural inventory analysis as sufficiently accounting for the diversity itself... Given its classificatory emphasis this approach tends to take diversity itself for granted, explaining it by reference to something else, rather than asking what sort of social ‘fact’ it is. It tends to accept rather than to explore, except in historical terms, the self-identification of local groups or, as is frequently the case, how their neighbours identify them” (1978 : 1).

‘Ethnic group’ maps cannot depict “realities on the ground”;

“The true complexities of population distribution are obscured rather than revealed by such representations. The simple fact that boundaries are not all of a piece, that they vary according to the situation, is all the more glossed over the more detailed such maps become” (1978 : 3).

Similar points were made by Pierre Centlivres in a series of articles following his research (with Micheline Centlivres-Demont) in Northern Afghanistan. To paraphrase his various arguments : groups commonly called ‘ethnic’, and depicted in ‘ethnographic maps’, are not comparable, since they share no common defining criterion – in one case it may be language, in another religion, or political or historical identity; maps simplify reality; the use of ethnonyms and ethnic identities is situational and strategic;

essentially, ethnicity must be viewed as an idiom, a discourse of ‘popular anthropology’, whether ‘theirs’ or ‘ours’ (1976a, 1976b, 1979, 1980).<sup>1</sup>

In a recent review of works on ethnicity in the Middle East, Eickelman applauds Barth’s contribution as a useful corrective to earlier ‘biological’ and ‘mosaic’ views of ethnic groups, but finds it limited in a number of ways. For example, “by confining his discussion to ‘traditional’ Pathans, and to social groups distinguished by their exploitation of particular ecological ‘niches’, some of the most significant tests of the precise ramifications of ethnicity in contemporary and complex settings are ignored” (1981 : 159). Though he does not mention it, Eickelman would no doubt find A. Cohen’s approach more congenial. Quoting at length from Rassam’s study of a complex ethnic situation in northern Iraq, he insists that a “sociological comprehension of ethnicity necessitates a historical understanding of how ethnic identities articulate and are manipulated” (1981 : 161); “such identities must be analysed in the specific historical contexts in which they are maintained, transformed, and reproduced, and not as blocklike units in an ahistorical mosaic” (1981 : 173). Secondly, using Rosen’s studies of Berber, Arab and Jewish ethnicity in Morocco, he shows that ethnic identities are not necessarily basic or all-pervasive, but can be fluid and negotiable. “Ethnic identities, like linguistic, sectarian, national, family, and other forms of social definition can be comprehended only in the context of more general cultural assumptions made in a given society concerning the nature of the social world and social relationships” (*ibid.*). We need to consider the total spectrum of modes of categorization, and which of them are emphasized in any given culture or context.

Anderson and his fellow-contributors would agree with this; they put ethnic identities within the wider context of “processes framing intergroup relations” (1978 : 3). One of them, Canfield, has suggested that in Afghan contexts sectarian distinctions are more important than ethnic distinctions. Other writers on Afghanistan would differ; Centlivres, for example, maintains that ethnicity is the most salient aspect of identity, social relations and conflict (1980 : 31). It is still true, however, as Anderson says, that we know little of Afghan cultural categories of identity and intergroup relations; and the same could be said of our knowledge of Iran.

Like most countries of the world, the populations of Iran and Afghanistan are heterogeneous according to various relatively objective criteria : language, religion and sect, local or tribal affiliation, productive activity, wealth and so on. The size and distribution of groups based on such criteria can be, and has been, depicted in tables and maps. But the meaning for people so classified of these criteria and groups based on them, and especially whether any such groups might be termed ‘ethnic’, is not so easily established. Rarely do analysts using supposed ‘ethnonyms’ probe their actual usage. It is too easily assumed, for example, that Baluch, Kurd, Pathan, are comparable identities, that each one keeps the same meaning wherever it is used, and that each represents a ‘real’ unity of origins and culture.

Data used for categorizing the population are based ultimately on indigenous statements and usages. Here we must distinguish between categories that are used officially by agents of the state for administrative purposes, and those that are part of popular discourse.

### **Official discourses of identity**

Official categorizations of the population are very different in Iran and Afghanistan, as indeed are their physical and cultural geography, the contrasts in which must be outlined. The dominant physical feature of Afghanistan is its mountainous backbone, inhabited by several religious, linguistic and tribal minorities, including the Imami and Ismaili Shiites and the formerly pagan peoples of Nuristan. The Sunni majority, including the politically dominant Pathans/Pashtuns and the Uzbek and Tajik minorities, inhabit towns and villages in the surrounding steppes, plateaux and hills. All the major groups straddle the national frontiers, with fellow-members in Iran, Pakistan or the Soviet Union; this includes the ‘land-locked’ Hazaras, who as Shiites often look to co-religionists in Iran.

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<sup>1</sup> See also the lengthy critique of the ‘mosaic’ model in Turner (1978)

The centre of Iran, on the other hand, is a vast plateau surrounded by mountain ranges and steppes, the main areas of settlement being in or on the fringes of the plateau where the urban, peasant and tribal populations belong to the majority Shiite sect or to the non-Muslim minorities. The remoter mountains and steppes are chiefly occupied by linguistic minorities, often tribally organized and of the Sunni sect, and mostly, again, straddling the frontiers.

Persian is the language most understood in both countries, though the major tribal groups and the ruling dynasties (before the Pahlavis in Iran, up to 1978 in Afghanistan) were not originally Persian-speaking. Most cities have long been centres of Persian language and civilization, which has often proved stronger in the long run than invading tribal cultures. Iran, however, has always been more a city-oriented society, Afghanistan more a confederation of tribal groups. The dominant cleavage in Iranian society until recently, between Turk (militarily dominant but 'uncouth' tribes, usually nomads) and Tat or Tajik (subordinated but 'civilized' townspeople and peasants), is to some extent paralleled in Afghanistan by a cleavage, not between tribe and non-tribe, nor between nomad and settled, but between Pathans/Afghans and the rest, whether urban, peasant or tribal.

In Afghanistan the official conception seems to be of a 'country' (*watan, heywad, mamlakat*) populated by a 'nation' (*mellat, wolus*) divided into 'peoples' (*qaum, tayfa*), each of which usually implies a distinct linguistic and religious identity, often region of origin or residence, though not occupation or class. The main *qaum* (not the Tajiks) are tribally subdivided, but discussion of 'tribes' (*qaum, tayfa, qabila*), as traditional support or opposition to the ruling Durrani Pashtun elite, tends to denote Pashtun tribal divisions.

The official conception in Iran is of a 'country' (*keshvar, vatan, meyhan*), inhabited by a 'people' (*mellat, mardom, qaum*). Divisions of the people are less clearly distinguished. Until recently, the only groups referred to by the term *aqaliyyat* ('minority') were the non-Muslims (Christians, Jews, Zoroastrians), who have played a more significant role than in Afghanistan. Other terms used for variously defined groups are *tabaqeh, goruh, jama'at* (loosely, 'class', 'group', 'community'). *Tabaqeh* ('class' in a very broad sense) in particular has an established usage among urban populations, while suffixes like *-neshin* (as in *shahr-, deh-, tat-, chador-, kuch-*) and *-zaban* are used to classify the population at large by mode of residence and language. *Qaum* or *tayfeh* may be used of major linguistic or tribal groups, but far less frequently than in Afghanistan.<sup>2</sup> A major category of the population is *ilat va 'ashayer* ('the tribes'), which often appears to subsume non-tribal linguistic and regional minorities. In its long history as an official category, with the connotations that 'tribes' are organized under chiefs, have a kinship ideology and a pastoral way of life, *ilat* has influenced not only the perceptions of such groups by non-tribal peoples but the self-perceptions of tribespeople themselves.

One plausible theoretical approach maintains that concepts of minority, tribe and indeed ethnic group are functions of the state. Perhaps the distinction should be drawn here (see Tapper 1983) between state and empire in their relation to minorities. Strictly speaking, a state does not recognise the existence or operation of any semi-independent or autonomous polities within its territory, while an empire by definition does, being interested less in political control than in economic security and income. In practice, central government policies, depending on their ideology (legitimacy from the people or from God) and strength, range from compulsory integration within the dominant culture, to liberal tolerance of cultural self-expression through the media, to divide-and-rule and a variety of 'imperial' policies of 'encapsulation' such as 'indirect rule' or the representation of minorities in central government. Centralized authority is perhaps the major manipulator of identities, having both the motive (maintenance of order) and the means (control of force, the media, education and the bureaucracy).

During the twentieth century, the rulers of both Iran and Afghanistan have been concerned with the 'national integration' of their heterogeneous populations, hoping, as have other newer nations, that economic and political development would bring the withering of cultural, regional and tribal distinctions. Governments in both countries have pursued discriminatory policies against linguistic and cultural minorities, for example allowing teaching and publication only in official languages. The Pahlavis attempted to Persify the population of Iran; the Musahibans, particularly Daud, tried to

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<sup>2</sup> Is the modern term *goruh-e bumi* (lit. 'local group') a translation of 'ethnic group'?

Pashtunize Afghanistan. Minority religious groups have also suffered intermittent oppression in both countries. The most vigorous policies were those of Reza Shah in Iran : perceiving the nomad tribes as a major political threat, he acted particularly harshly against them, disarming them, imprisoning their chiefs, and later forcibly settling them. Such policies have sometimes back-fired, inspiring previously non-existent or dormant separatist movements, or leading to the emergence of opposition based on other criteria such as class.

In more recent decades, new trends have emerged. Governments in both countries, abandoning cruder policies of 'national integration', have openly recognised cultural pluralism; this now has the effect, if not the aim, of allowing a degree of 'retribalization' among the national minorities, while partially defusing the threat to government and local elites posed by the emergence of sectarian or class-based opposition. In Iran by the 1970's, after decades of political and economic oppression and neglect of tribal and regional minorities, their threat to the state was officially held to have disappeared, and their cultures were 'discovered' particularly by Empress Farah, as respectable objects of academic and touristic interest. However, the growth of opposition to the regime, though largely urban, found strong echoes among some linguistic and tribal minorities, especially Sunni groups straddling the frontiers. Whatever the political colour of the various movements, they demonstrated increasing resentment of political discrimination at both local and national levels and of the imposition of outsiders in positions of authority, and articulated aspirations for some regional autonomy and the right to cultural self-expression. Under Khomeyni, this process has apparently continued, though Higgins (1984) argues that discrimination is now more directed against religious than linguistic minorities.

In Afghanistan too, during the 1970's there was a brief recognition of the rights of minorities such as Uzbeks and Baluches to cultural self-expression, for example radio-time. Since 1978, governments have further promoted a Soviet-style 'nationalities policy', designed apparently both to undermine unity of opposition to the regime and to prepare the way for eventual assimilation of non-Pashtun groups of the north with the nationalities of Soviet Central Asia. The nature of the regimes and their policies, however, has served to foster the religious identity of the linguistically and tribally varied resistance groups.

One reason why researchers on Iran and Afghanistan became interested in the analysis of ethnicity rather later than elsewhere may well be that official discourses of identity in the two countries did not include terms that could translate directly into 'ethnic group' or 'ethnicity'. The most widely used terms in Iran, such as *tabaqeh* or *ilat*, are much narrower in reference; while in Afghanistan, even though *qaum* is often translated 'ethnic group', its connotations are far broader and less precise.<sup>3</sup>

### Popular discourses of identity

Popular discourses are distinct from but both influenced by and influencing official discourses. Here we must make a further distinction, between terms that denote bases of identity, and those labels and names (including 'ethnonyms') that constitute identities.<sup>4</sup>

Available sources indicate that Afghan popular discourse uses three main terms for bases of identity : *qaum*, *watan*, and *mazhab*. All three are ambiguous, or rather polysemic, but to varying degrees. Most definitive is *mazhab* ('sect'), whose main ambiguity is a question of scope or level : for example, Muslim, Shii, Ismaili ... Canfield has suggested that *mazhab* is the prior basis of identity in Afghanistan (1973, 1978, 1984). This may be so, but it is surely part of regular discourse only in certain regions and contexts of confrontation between Sunni and Shii and between Imami and Ismaili. It is germane that Shiis speak Persian like most of their Sunni neighbours. Elsewhere, competing political and economic interests divide Sunni groups which are also distinguished by language, culture or tribe, and both sides may accuse the other of 'irreligiosity', while one is often allied with the local Shii groups (Tapper 1984a,

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<sup>3</sup> I have had to be brief about official discourses, and to amalgamate for example administrative and religious, modern and pre-modern discourses. See the more searching analyses in the papers of Richard, Sana, Vercellin and Yavari.

<sup>4</sup> For detailed discussion of popular discourses of identity, see the papers of Bromberger, Stöber, Centlivres, Najmabadi and Canfield.

1984b). One might suggest *din* (religion) as even more fundamental, not only in external confrontations with non-Muslims, but as a basis for the evaluation of the conduct of fellow-Muslims.

*Watan* ('homeland'), and also simply *ja* ('place'), are ambiguous as to both scope (village, valley, district, province, region, nation...) and time (place of origin, or place of residence). Identity based on *watan* is very strong for most people. Even nomads identify themselves with their *watan* (usually winter quarters) and the varied population there, as against fellow-tribespeople or nomads from other regions.

*Qaum*, finally, is perhaps the term most widely used among Afghans (and researchers) for social groups and identity. It implies common origins and basic cultural unity and identity; the most used markers of *qaum*-membership are stereotypes of language, dress, food customs, comportment and somatology (cf. Centlivres 1980 : 36). Among its connotations are 'ethnic group' and 'tribe', but it can be both broader and narrower than these : not merely 'nation' but also descent groups and their subdivisions down to the family, and linguistic, regional and occupational groups, sects, castes (Barth 1962) ... Perhaps most often it implies linguistic and/or tribal identity. It is a highly ambiguous and flexible concept, allowing scope for strategic manipulations of identity.<sup>5</sup>

There are no common terms that cover all categories of 'occupation' or 'class' as bases for identity (unless perhaps *kisb* and *kar*), but various categories of occupations and status are regularly ranked hierarchically. In some urban contexts, especially where there is a form of guild organization, trade, crafts and other occupations may be the major basis of identity, overriding if not implying others (cf. Centlivres 1972). Otherwise, at least until the late 1970's, 'objective' class positions (based on occupation or relation to the means of production) did not command loyalties stronger than those to *qaum*, *watan* or *mazhab*.

In Iran, *din* and *mazhab* are as fundamental to identity as in Afghanistan; again they are potentially the stuff of discourse only in the limited areas of contact. Non-Muslim minorities (including Bahai and Ahl-i Haqq as well as Christians, Jews and Zoroastrians) are mainly Persian-speakers and resident in urban contexts, where they often concentrate (or are reputed to) in particular economic activities, and are subject to consequent prejudice. Between Sunni and Shii on the other hand, relations are complicated by the fact that the Sunni groups (Baluch, Turkmen, most Kurds, some Arabs and others) are also geographically peripheral, tribal and (unlike the Shiis in Afghanistan) linguistic minorities.

Among the Shiite majority, bases of distinction and identity appear to be implicit in the names and labels used, terms like *qaum* and *vatan* having rather narrower and less common usage than in Afghanistan. *Vatan* and *mellat* are more current for the country and people of Iran. *Qaum* may be used for a major linguistic group, but more often in a strict family/descent-group sense.<sup>6</sup> In an interaction between strangers, language, region, town or urban quarter of origin and/or residence, as well as way of life, occupation and class, can normally be ascertained from manner of speaking, appearance, and answers to the standard question, *ahl-e koja'i* ? ('where are you from ?'). Character stereotypes abound for each such name or label.

Actual identities (names and labels) tend to be used dichotomously, marking 'we/they' distinctions. Muslim is opposed to Kafir, Shii to Sunni, Imami to Ismaili. In Afghanistan, in different contexts Kabuli is opposed to Turkistani, Kandahari, Herati, etc.; Afghan/Pashtun is opposed to Tajik, Uzbek, Hazara, Parsiwan. Nomads and settled are opposed in terms such as *maldar/mulldar*. In the north, if not elsewhere, local political cleavages are expressed by tacking the suffix *-iyya* to the major *qaum* names involved (e.g. Afghaniyya/Uzbekiyya).<sup>7</sup> In Iran, common dichotomies are Fars/Turk, *malik/rayat*, *rustai/shahri*, *ilat/dehat*, *ashayer/rayat*, *badi/khaki*, *sahib/kargar*...<sup>8</sup>

Actual names and labels, furthermore, tend to be highly ambiguous and flexible in meaning, though this ambiguity takes a different form in the two countries. First we should recall the factor which is

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<sup>5</sup> For detailed discussions of *qaum*, see N. and R. Tapper (1982: 160-163); Centlivres (1979: 35-36; 1980: 33-34); Anderson (1983); Beattie (1982). Cf. Geertz, Geertz & Rosen (1979), esp. on the similar term *nisba*; in this rich, seminal work there are far more lessons for the study of ethnicity in Iran and Afghanistan than can possibly be drawn on in this short paper.

<sup>6</sup> Among the Shahsevan, *qaum* (*qohum*) is used mainly for affinal and matrilineal kinship.

<sup>7</sup> Terms for bases of identity and classification may also be dichotomized, as with *qaumi/rasmi* (tribal or popular, versus the official way of doing things); *qaum/gund* (tribal versus factional support for a leader, see Anderson 1983).

<sup>8</sup> Cf. early analyses of 'dominant cleavages' in southern Africa by Gluckman (1940) and Mitchell (1956).

essential to, if not determinative of this ambiguity. Given the history of spontaneous and forced population movements into and around the area, none of the main tribal or linguistic groups in these two countries are racially or historically homogeneous (see above). Genealogies are often well-known to be inventions. The best example is perhaps the largest tribal group of all, the Pathans, all of whom are supposedly descended from Qais 'Abd al-Rashid, forming a huge segmentary lineage system (*cf.* Caroe 1958). At every level of Pathan organization there are disputes about descent claims. Major Pathan groups are thought to be of Turkish or Persian origins (for example in one version Ghilzai are descended from the Turkish Khalaj tribe).<sup>9</sup> For Durrani Pashtuns, identity is supposedly dependant on patrilineal descent within a recognized Durrani tribe; however, a major section of the Ishaqzai Durrani tribe has its own tradition of Sayyid origins on the paternal side (N. and R. Tapper 1982); other Ishaqzai sub-tribes are considered by some to be of non-Pashtun origins, while the sub-tribe Nancy Tapper and I studied was itself of quite heterogeneous composition. The ideal of segmentary order is an indigenous fiction which covers a fluid reality, shifting with the movements, dispersals and regroupings of communities throughout the area. Order for Durrani is constantly recreated through a combination of marriage practices and economic and political expediency. When two Durrani groups meet, and there is doubt about the identity of one, the other will acknowledge them, if expediency dictates, by an exchange marriage. That is, among Durrani, marriage authenticates male descent claims and thereby language and religious affiliations, which on their own are regarded as unreliable indicators of identity.

Some tribal groups have no such shared genealogy, but rather refer to a historical event by which they were formed. In the case of the Shahsevan tribes in Iran, former (historically plausible) legends of disparate origins have been replaced by an 'invented tradition' of common origin in a historical event.<sup>10</sup> Yet other groups, like the Shahsevan formerly, do not even pretend to common origins or any such basic 'ethnic' assumption, though maintaining an 'ethnic' identity of cultural-political separateness. Anyone who has close knowledge of the culture, social organization, legends and recorded history of *any* of the supposedly homogeneous groups in these countries will know that its origins are in fact heterogeneous and that any notions of common descent are mythical. Most groups do have either genealogies or stories of common origin; but these represent not a pure line of descent from the origin or the founders of the group, but a disputed and changing ideological charter for present-day social and cultural relations among members of the group and a basis for claims as against other groups. Cultural identity, common and distinctive language, religion, customs, are the product not of generations of isolation from others, but of processes of (often recent) assimilation, negotiation, accommodation and social construction in a context of power relations with the state and with competing groups. Essential to these processes is the ambiguity of the names and labels concerned.

In Afghanistan the greatest ambiguity is not so much between *mazhab*, *watan* and *qaum*, but between the different *qaum*-names, that is labels with primarily language or tribal-descent reference. Among *mazhab*, only Shii is subject to any ambiguity: common discourse among Sunnis tends to use the label Shii interchangeably with the *qaum*-name Hazara, even though many Shiis would not accept this identity. Most other *qaum*-names connote only very broad categories of *watan* or occupation, to specify which a composite identity must be named, for example Kandahari Pashtun, Panjsheri Tajik, Arab *maldar*, Uzbek *jallab*. *Qaum*-names that are also language names are the most ambiguous in usage. One of the best known is 'Pashtun', used by most Pashtuns and by analysts as the standard label for all Pashto-speakers, but rarely so used by members of other groups, who call Pashtuns 'Afghans' as do many Pashtuns themselves, at least in the north. For most Pashtuns, however, the defining criteria, as we have seen, are not language or religion, both of which can be faked, but traceable descent from the ancestor and the practice of endogamy. 'Uzbek', generally denoting speakers of Uzbeki, is also a label used loosely by some Pashtuns in the north for all non-Pashtuns. 'Tajik' is (in most of the country) a residual category of Persian-speakers who are not tribally organized and are mostly Sunni Muslims (Centlivres 1980: 34,

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<sup>9</sup> See the paper of L. Bazin.

<sup>10</sup> Evidence indicates that the present Shahsevan tribes descend from a collection of Turkish, Kurdish, Arab and other elements formed into a confederation in the mid-eighteenth century. The official version of Shahsevan origins is that given in Malcolm's History of Persia (1815), where he related that Shah Abbas I around 1600 formed a special tribe of that name ... This story, a fiction based on a misreading and confusion of a variety of earlier sources, has been adopted by later historians, Persian and other, and hence has become accepted by the Shahsevan themselves (Tapper 1974).



Tapper 1984a : 234). ‘Farsiban’/‘Parsiwan’ (lit. ‘Persian-speakers’) is an identity ascribed in different contexts to a large variety of entirely different categories of peoples, few of whom use it of themselves (Tapper 1984a : 241). In the Saripul region, for example, Turki-speakers use it loosely for all non-Turki-speakers, including Pashtuns; Pashtuns use it similarly for all non-Pashto-speakers, including Turki-speakers; Durrani Pashtuns use it more precisely for non-Durrani Pashto-speakers, especially those who like themselves come from Kandahar. It is reported that several hundred thousand ‘Farsiwans’ live near Herat, but it is unclear to me whose label this is. For several other meanings elsewhere in the country, see Centlivres (1980 : 33-34). Other groups (Baluch, Moghol, Arab) call themselves by names indicating languages they no longer speak. Baluches in Saripul region, for example, are virtually identical, culturally and linguistically, to their neighbouring Durrani Pashtuns, by whom they are classed as Parsiwan; while another group of Baluches in Takhar are Tajik in almost all but name (Centlivres 1979 : 27-28). Most major *qaum* names, such as Pashtun or Baluch, include the widest conceivable variations in actual language, culture, political affiliations (*cf.* Barth 1969b).

In Iran the ambiguities are rather different. Far more frequently than in Afghanistan, names of tribal and/or linguistic groups are also the names of regions. Inhabitants of Azarbayjan, Baluchistan, Kurdistan, Luristan, Arabistan (Khuzistan), speak the languages to which those names also refer. Bakhtiari, Mamasani, Boir Ahmad, Qaradagh and others, are regions whose residents may or may not belong to the tribal groups bearing the same names. Other names apparently denoting linguistic or tribal identity are commonly used in a different sense to indicate ‘tented nomads’, with no ethnic connotation : Kurd, Lur, Shahsevan, Arab, Baluch (Tapper 1983 : 46). When I was asked by Shahsevan nomads whether there were Shahsevan in Britain, they meant nomads, not remote genealogical cousins of theirs. Other apparent linguistic labels in practice denote political allegiance : in Fars, all members of the Qashqai confederation, many of whom speak Luri for example, are referred to as ‘Turk’, while their neighbours and rivals, the Khamseh, who are mostly Turkish or Persian-speakers, are termed ‘Arab’ (Barth 1959 : 130-133).

Cultural identities, whether ‘ethnic’ or otherwise, make sense only in social contexts, and they are essentially negotiable subjects of strategic manipulations. Individuals claim status, present their selves, in different ways in different contexts. How they do so depends particularly on power relations, on the policies of the state and on local hierarchies. Numerous cases of permanent changes of ‘ethnic’ identity by groups or individuals have been recorded (see Balland’s paper) : for example, in different parts of Azarbayjan, from ‘Turk’ to ‘Kurd’ and vice versa, and from ‘Shahsevan’ to ‘Tat’ and vice versa (Tapper 1979 : 35-37); or from ‘Pashtun’ to ‘Baluch’ in western Pakistan (Barth 1969b) but the reverse in northern Afghanistan. Other minority groups (Moghol, Arab) adapt culturally to a variety of different neighbours without losing their identity. In many areas it is common for individuals to claim a variety of identities that would be mutually exclusive in other contexts. In other cases, individuals claim a particular identity and insist on its exclusivity : it goes without saying that those who insist loudest on ethnic purity are likely to be either those with something to defend (a wolf at the door) or those with something to hide (a skeleton in the cupboard). I have neither the intention nor the space here to go further into the important questions of how and why ‘ethnic’ identities are changed, beyond suggesting that crucial dimensions are whether the boundary is dyadic or more complex, and whether the context is urban or rural. Finally, very few writings on ethnicity in the Middle East even mention the question of women’s ethnic identity, beyond the occasional reference to how far maternal ties affect an essentially patrilineal descent system. In Iran and Afghanistan, to my knowledge it is generally the case that a woman married to a man of different ethnic identity retains (in her own and others’ eyes) her natal identity, even though she may adopt the language, dress and other customs of her marital group; and her children’s own identity will on occasion be qualified by hers (*cf.* N. Tapper 1983 and N. and R. Tapper 1982).

With all this ambiguity, flexibility and heterogeneity, is there any continuity, any order ? Certainly not at the level of ‘ethnic groups’ as they are usually determined. Barth sought continuity in the boundaries between identities, but it seems clear from our discussion that these too are essentially changeable.<sup>11</sup> If such categorizations of the population as ethnic groups, tribes and classes are ultimately

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<sup>11</sup> As I have attempted to demonstrate elsewhere (1974, 1979b), there does appear to be some stability of group names at a certain demographic level of organization in tribal groups : a few hundred families with a strong tendency to endogamy, and some territorial and cultural identity — but these are not groups usually recognized as ‘ethnic’.

creations of the state, as some have maintained, then order and continuity in local identity classifications should perhaps be sought in government conceptions and policies as these influence popular discourse.

Iran and Afghanistan, like other countries, have experienced the general trend of the present century, particularly as encouraged by government policies, marked by a shift away from linguistic, descent, tribal and generally ascribed identities, towards more achieved identities based on territorial, economic and political categories. For example, various authors have noted a move from kinship-based to class-based identities in Afghanistan (Anderson 1978, Barfield 1978, Tapper 1984b). In Iran, I have suggested that the Shahsevan, once self-defined as a tribal group (both settled and nomad), now see themselves as 'tented pastoral nomads' (1979a : 36). As elsewhere, again, such an 'evolutionary' process of 'detrribalization' is not universal or irreversible : 'devolution' and 'retribalization', or 'political ethnicity', are often very modern responses to government policies (Tapper 1983 : 61, *cf.* Cohen 1969). It remains unclear whether the most recent shift in Iran and Afghanistan towards primarily religious identities (Canfield 1984, Higgins 1984) can be taken as an example of this sort of response.

### **Ethnographic discourse : maps and tables**

The growth of government recognition in Iran and Afghanistan of 'ethnic minorities' more or less coincided with the shift of interest among researchers. Until the 1960's, field studies by ethnographers (foreign or indigenous) amounted to a few scattered accounts of tribal groups and villages, mostly treating them as isolated communities and underplaying relations with surrounding communities and the state. As 'coverage' of the populations of both countries increased in the 1960's and 1970's, so also researchers began to focus on these external relations and on more complex urban situations.

Ethnographers, historians and political scientists play a crucial and largely unrecognized role as creators and manipulators of identities (*cf.* Ovesen 1983). Our supposedly objective findings and analyses are used by policy makers to create order, both classificatory and political. Those of us who, in traditional fashion, sought out and 'appropriated' some exotic tribal, nomadic or minority group, justified our choice by asserting both the representativeness of our particular study for that group and the cultural uniqueness of the group. This enabled the generalists to summarize the group : this many people, occupying this territory, practising this way of life. Our findings are conveniently summarized in maps and tables showing numbers, distribution and fundamental characteristics of different named groups.

Meanwhile, ethnic group maps such as Bruk's (1955) and compilations such as *Narodi Peredney Azii* (Kislyakov and Pershits 1957) showed the distribution of 'peoples', variously tribal, linguistic and religious. In all this classificatory zeal, few of us seem to have been aware of the very relevant difficulties being discussed in the wake of Naroll's 'cultunit' programme (1964, and see Helm 1968). Since the publication of Bruk's map of Afghanistan, a whole series of derivative and revised versions have appeared (e.g. Schurmann 1962, Snoy 1972, Dupree 1973), though his map of Iran has received less attention from subsequent synthesists, who have on the whole been content to give simplified and generally inaccurate maps indicating the locations of major tribal or linguistic groups. During the last two decades highly systematic and detailed work has been undertaken and published in Germany by the Tübinger Atlas des vorderen Orients, and in France by the Programme d'Etablissement de Cartes Ethnographiques de l'Iran.

Ethnic group maps of Afghanistan have been strongly criticized, most effectively by Pierre Centlivres (1980) (see also Anderson's remarks quoted above) on grounds such as following. The identities mapped are not comparable, but are based on very varied criteria and different levels. The often highly disparate sources for the names of the identities mapped are not specified; many names would not be acknowledged in the areas indicated. The multiple local meanings of the identities, the multiple identities of individuals, and differences of identity between men and women, are not and cannot be mapped. Identity boundaries are cultural and conceptual not territorial. Lines and hatching cannot depict the character of boundaries (conflict, or adaptive niche). Maps privilege the spatial dimension and cannot allow for temporal and contextual variation and flexibility. Maps cannot depict the essential features of

identities, which are that they make no sense except in differing contexts of social relations, and that they are frequently used dichotomously. It may be that highly specialised, detailed ethnographic maps, based on a single criterion such as language or religion, or the distribution of single traits, serve some purpose (*cf.* Bromberger and Digard 1975), but they too create order by ignoring context and semantics. The most useful and valid maps for ethnographers would be ‘cognitive maps’, whether of territories or of ethnic or other identity distribution, drawn by informants (*cf.* Brody 1983). Tables are subject to similar criticisms.

The data put into ethnic group maps and tables seem to escape the sort of critical attention usually devoted by historians to their sources. Ethnic group maps and tables are no more objectively ‘accurate’ than many an official history. Just as all history is history for a purpose, so are ethnic group maps and tables (and ethnographic monographs, for that matter) projections of order which may be used for certain purposes. Maps and tables are not ends in themselves : they are used by scholars to frame research problems, by policy-makers to help make and carry out decisions, and by members of groups depicted to formulate political and territorial claims.

## Conclusions

This paper has been negative and critical of ‘ethnicity’, with the object of provoking discussion. I have tried to avoid using the terms ‘ethnic group’ and ‘ethnicity’ when discussing specific discourses of identity in Iran and Afghanistan; if I have succeeded, it is because these terms are not necessary, but serve rather to obscure than to illuminate the cultural complexity we are concerned to describe and interpret. What has particularly worried me is that, as these terms have come into fashion, their usage by scholars including anthropologists (and including myself) has served to reify them. Ethnic group, a term brought in from western sociological discourse, is a poor translation of indigenous categories in Iran, Afghanistan and elsewhere, and hinders the analysis of their subtleties and ambiguities. Worse, its usage betrays a scientific and bureaucratic urge to impose order on an essentially fluid and negotiable reality. Ethnicity constitutes a theory of social organization, comparable to ‘segmentary lineage theory’, but no more valid as a representation or explanation of human behaviour. In other words, I urge that ‘ethnic groups’ be not allowed the concrete character that has already been rejected for ‘lineages’ and ‘tribes’ (Tapper 1983; *cf.* Helm 1968, Godelier 1973, Kuper 1982).

On a more positive note : ‘ethnicity’ is a legitimate object of study, as an aspect of the identity of persons and groups of people, if we bear in mind caveats such as the following, based on our knowledge of Iran and Afghanistan. (a) ‘Ethnic’ aspects of identity must be studied in relation to non-ethnic aspects. (b) ‘Ethnic’ identities cannot be studied in isolation but as they are used in dichotomies, sets or hierarchies. (c) ‘Ethnic’ identities have different bases and different connotations; language is often no guide. (d) An individual may claim different ‘ethnic’ identities, and more than one, at different times and in different contexts. (e) Husbands and wives may not share the same ‘ethnic’ identities. (f) A single ‘ethnic’ or other identity often signifies widely different characteristics in different contexts.

Anthropologists used to claim a pre-emptive authority in the study of ‘tribes’. We do not have such a priority in the study of ‘ethnic groups’, which have for long been subject to attention by sociologists, political scientists and others. However, political scientists, politicians and to a lesser degree sociologists, writing about countries like Iran and Afghanistan, make the sort of category assumptions about ‘ethnic groups’ and maps that I have suggested we strongly reject. As anthropologists, we do have a perspective from which we can make a crucial and decisive contribution to this field.

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