

The Social Wandering of the Afghan Kuchis

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‘Long before there was a nation state called Afghanistan, there were Kuchis, traveling a vast land that is hospitable only part of the time. The rhythms and traditions of nomadic culture have been so prevalent that they have crept into the habits and thoughts of even the most urbane corners of Kabul. Most Afghans of Pashtun heritage and many Afghans from ethnic minorities can trace their lineage to nomadic ancestors.’ (Christian Science Monitor, February 2004).

‘Apart from legal issues and civil rights, the existence of wandering nomads in a country, which is talking about democracy and human rights, is disgraceful for it’ (Hasht-e Sobh, May 2010).

These two paragraphs, although portraying distinctively different viewpoints on Afghan nomads, originate from a common idea, that of nomadism as an ancient lifestyle. Be it considered then primordial and fascinating, or instead primitive and embarrassing, depends a lot on who is talking and what his purposes are. Indeed, in the memory of even keen observers and scholars of the pre-war Afghanistan, a most recurrent, fascinated reminiscence is that of the black goat-hair Kuchi tents sprawling at the bottom of the hills, or of the endless caravans of nomads on the move. Conversely, many an Afghan would nowadays pass negative comments on the nomads and their lifestyle.

It would be unfair, however, to take the two extracts as exemplifying the hiatus between the romanticized vision of the nomads that foreigners entertain, and the pragmatic position expounded by Afghan ‘modernizers’. In fact, many Afghan urbanites would have, in better times, prided themselves of the existence of their nomadic fellow citizens. At the same time, under the caption ‘stereotyped image of Afghanistan’, nomad caravans have since long given way to the Taleb with his AK-47 and the burqa-clad woman.

Nowadays, Afghan nomads have arguably to fight their way among dozens of dramatic or picturesque topics to ‘make news’ within both a national and international public. They feel, and in many respects

are, a forsaken group of Afghan citizens. The problems they face at the economic, cultural and political levels are coupled with a degrading social standing and a lack of clear options as to their ultimate becoming in the next future.

But the situation of nomads in Afghanistan is more complex than an ordinary story of poverty and marginality shared by other communities in Afghanistan. Kuchi people, as the overwhelmingly Pashtun nomad communities are universally referred to in Afghanistan, are one of the country's most striking paradoxes, in both political and socio-economic terms. They bear the stigma of an impoverished, marginalized and backward social group, they exploit and are exploited in a set of patron-client relations with a well-connected political and economic leadership, and represent a special parliamentary constituency under a separate electoral system which has few, if any, parallels in the world.

Past Kuchis

Kuchi would claim that they are indeed the real Afghans, as the first inhabitants of Afghanistan were nomadic in ancient time, and thus it is to be considered that all of Afghanistan once belonged to the Kuchi. Indeed, they would have it that actually the whole world belongs to them, as all of humanity was once made of nomads!¹

However provocative and extreme the position put in the mouth of the nomads above, the notion that nomadism was more widespread in the past – and thus has been irrevocably reducing in the course of time – does show a somewhat limited view of themselves by the same nomads. Actually, the existence of nomads and sedentary communities, and their co-existence in the area that encompasses the modern boundaries of Afghanistan, has been a more dynamic and variable one during the course of history than a simple transition from nomadism to sedentary life. Nomadism has been enhanced by particular events and hindered by others. Nor is it readily ascribable to some exclusive ethnic groups, and history abounds in examples of peoples famous for being nomads in one century happily settled the century after, their place taken by others.

¹ An inhabitant of Kabul.

The fluidity between nomads and sedentary people have survived to this day, although the trend is increasingly unilateral, that is, nomads tend to settle down. However, the Kuchi identity presents observers with a particular phenomenon. It is in fact fixing itself – at least in popular and political discourse – at the same moment in which the nomadic credentials of its members are losing strength and their lifestyle and means of production become increasingly blurred with those of the other Afghans.

Traditionally, which in an Afghan context means largely ‘before the Soviet Invasion’, ‘Kuchi’ was just one of the possible way to refer to the country sizeable population of nomadic and semi-nomadic pastoralists and traders, which for practical purposes are usually termed nomads. In terms of ethnic background, the majority of nomads in Afghanistan are Pashtuns, with the rest being mainly Baluch, Arabs, Turkmen and Gujjars.

The term Kuchi has by now gained a wide predominance as it is employed by the government and the other national and international actors in dealing with nomads, but it does carry only a very generic connotation in itself. Its etymology points in fact to people who migrate (‘kuch kardan’, also ‘to move’ in Farsi/Dari), and it is not describing of a community with clear ethno-linguistic or geographic boundaries. As it is, in Afghanistan it is now used to indicate all former transhumant pastoralists, once identified with a wider range of regional terms which it has now superseded at a national level.

In the north pastoralists nomads were - and still are - often called Maldar (which also is ethnically neutral, meaning only ‘owner of flocks’, and it can be referred to and Pashtun-Baluch nomads), in the south (Kandahar, Zabol, Paktika) they are sometimes still referred as Powindah. The last term was used extensively by British colonial sources concerning nomads crossing into India during the winter, leaving flocks and families – plus a certain amount of men – in camps in the Panjab, and moving on to carry out trade in the whole of Northern and Central India .

In parts of the North-East, the difference between Maldar and Kuchi is sometimes expressed in terms of inhabitation strategy: while the Maldar have built huts or brick houses in both their qishloq and ailq locations, the Kuchi employ tents (jaima) at least when residing on the summer pastures. This entails another difference, as the Maldar do not

need camels to transport the tents, and thus possess very few or none of them. Another reported difference is in the 'clothing style', as Kuchi tend to wear clothes distinctive for type and colour, make extensive use of turbans and, generally speaking, their garb resemble in some ways that of people from the South (but they are also described as often half-ragged and scruffy in addition). This is not generally connected to the ethnicity of those group.

How the problems of Kuchi identity relates to both the ethnic belonging and the type of lifestyle pursued will be explored in the further sections.

Returning to their claims of historical precedence, we can fairly accept nomads' ancient roots in the region, but more significantly, it should be noted that in relatively recent times they have played an important role in the development of the Afghan state.

Scholars of nomadism in Afghanistan attest an expansion – a veritable boom in economic terms for the nomads – during the first decades of the XX century. This was closely linked to some political developments dating to the last decade of the previous century, during the reign of Abdur-Rahman (1880-1901). The first of these had been the relocation of thousands of Pashtun households from Farah, Helmand and Kandahar provinces to the North-West of the country. Many of the settlers, whom the government hoped to entrust with the defence of the frontier, were livestock breeders, and re-adjusted their transhumance routes from their new winter areas in the lowlands of nowadays Badghis, Fariab and Sar-e Pul (cf. Tapper, 1973). The second event was the Hazara War of 1891-1893 (cf. Mousavi, 1997: 131-138). The nature of the conflict, in which the nomads had taken part together with other tribal lashkars on the side of the government, and the resulting status of 'conquered people' that befell on the Hazaras, informed the development of the nomads presence in Hazarajat for decades.

A major result of the subjugation of the Hazaras was the opening of the central highlands for the nomads from the South and East of Afghanistan both in terms of pastures and of market. The nomads obtained by royal decree access to a new, extensive grazing areas, and in the

meantime developed significant trade relations with the Hazara villages below.

The Hazaras villagers were no doubt poor but still in need of some basic items like salt, sugar and tea, and their isolation guaranteed the nomads - who had another reason, grazing their flocks, to make the otherwise unprofitable trip to Hazarajat - a monopoly on the trade. The nomads would also increasingly act as money-lenders – as the only providers of cash in the highlands. While initially bartering against carpets, cereals and village livestock, they increasingly took over the land of insolvent debtors, usually leasing it to the former owners who worked now as tenants or labourers in exchange of a share of the yield. Some prominent families among the nomads became thus large landowners in a short span of time. Nomad superiority was not only couched in economic terms, as during the first decades after the conquest – and indeed for most of the XX century preceding the conflict, Pashtun-dominated state institutions viewed the nomads as potential allies in some ethnically diverse areas. As Pedersen put it, well-armed ‘nomads had thus a government-sanctioned political and military predominance which made the exploitation of the Hazara in trade relations even easier’ (Pedersen, 1995: 135).

In the meantime, the policy of ‘Pashtunisation’ pursued at times by the government, had meant that other Pashtuns, among whom many Kuchi, had been encouraged or forced to settle in northern Afghanistan. In contrast to the exploitative set of relationships which predominated in Hazarajat, the nature of the nomad/sedentary contact in other areas depended on the political clout of the communities involved. The quasi-equal standing between Ishaqzai Pashtun nomads and Firozkohi Aimaq in Ghor – reportedly including bilateral intermarriage - has been documented as originating from their balanced power relation (Rosman and Rubel, 1976: 560-561). The fact that the semi-sedentary Firozkohi also moved to the pastures in summer and camped together with the nomads apparently contributed to inter-communitarian bonds and did not lead to competition.

Altogether, it is evident that Afghan nomads played a role in the economic and political development of the country in such spheres as the integration and consolidation of the Afghan state – a major task in a

country without a modern communication network for the best part of the XX century - through their trading activities in marginal areas. In particular, the annual movement of the Kuchi presented the isolated communities of mountainous areas with the closest they could get to a market for their products, which, in the absence of exceedingly unbalanced power relations of the type encountered in Hazarajat, constituted the only occasion for mountain-dwellers to obtain some cash to spend in the rare occasion of a visit to the nearest town or to keep as savings for bad years. Nomads were, in economic terms, less subsistence oriented and thus 'primitive' than most of the farmers communities they dealt with. Depending on the grains they purchased from the farmers and the items they got from the town-artisans, they were well-integrated in the economic market, and usually the ones to dispose of cash and engage in trade.

This last activity constituted a major aspect of Afghan nomadism until the decades immediately preceding the Soviet Invasion, and was carried out by both specialized big merchants who had gradually abandoned the breeding of livestock, and by pastoralists who carried on petty trade along the transhumance routes.

The other terminal of nomad trade was usually the Indus plain, where the nomads travelled to their winter camps and sold their surplus livestock, wool and dairy plus other commodities like horses, fur, fruit or carpets in exchange for salt, tea, sugar, second-hand clothes, cheap iron-ware and kerosene. This external trade was rarely subjected to an effective system of taxation by the Afghan government, and although since Abdur-Rahman Khan it was understood that the unregulated export of livestock and import of Indian goods was more damaging to the state than the benefits of nomad cooperation in Hazarajat, the Afghan government did not take serious measures to control it until the 1960s (Ferdinand, 2006: 198).

The government of British India had struggled to increasingly control the entry of Afghan nomads into its territory, and even taxed them with some success. It had not, however, sought to stop it altogether and, on the contrary, had favoured the movement of Afghan nomad traders further into India through its improved communication network and public transport system. With 1947 and the creation of Pakistan, however, things

began to change. The Pakistani market, already an impoverished one compared to the pre-Partition period, was definitely closed to nomads when, between 1961-63, the Afghan-Pakistani border was sealed due to the political confrontation over the 'Pashtunistan' issue (cf. Balland, 1991: 222-223). Even after trade relations between the two countries restarted in 1963, nomad trade – and winter grazing in Pakistan - never regained the former importance and virtually vanished.

The age of the lorry had in the meantime opened up markets for town-based merchants even in the highlands of central Afghanistan. This competition, plus the government's restrictions on nomad seasonal bazaars in the highlands – some were closed, others transferred in areas under government control and taxed – brought to an overall decline in nomad trade from the middle of the 1960s (Pedersen, 1995: 144-145).

It was not necessarily a concatenation of catastrophes, like those who caused massive loss of livestock and trade opportunities to the Kuchi who moved from Panjab to Hazarajat, that spurred the nomads to sedentarise. For example in the same years, it was an opposite process – a sudden increase in profits from livestock – that brought to an augmented sedentarisation of the Arab and Pashtun nomads in the north-east of Afghanistan. The region between Baghlan and Kunduz, already a focus for the limited industrial planning managed by the Afghan state, experienced an economic boom after the opening of the Salang Tunnel in 1964 transformed its transport and trade relation with the capital. The direct connection to the huge market for livestock in Kabul – and further markets beyond it – doubled the value of the flocks and induced many households to switch from a transhumant lifestyle involving the whole family and relying much on the coral work of it, to a commercial enterprise which entailed the hiring of professional shepherds through cash wages (Barfield, 1981: 110-112).

A diagram developed by Ferdinand and his fellow Danish researchers in the 1970s shows how the two major chances of a nomads Namely, he will turn into a casual labourer, when nomad economy (livestock breeding, itinerant trade) is retreating, and eventually settle down if he is not able to sustain his livestock; when on the contrary this economy experiences an excessive expansion favoured by political or

social circumstances, he may become a settled trader, opening a shop in the bazaar or investing his profits in landownership (cf. Pedersen, 1995: 30). As not only sedentary life, but also nomadism is usually an adaptive livelihood strategy and not something inherent to the nature of a human group, so possibilities to switch in either sense may be open at particular moments. Glatzer showed that 'nomadisation' and 'sedentarisation' were common features in southwestern Afghanistan: in the context of economic expansion in an area with limited potential for growth in agricultural and pastoral sectors households were easily forced to change their livelihood strategy (Glatzer, 1983).

So, even accounting for the terrible drought that hit Afghanistan in 1971-72, and which brought to further, huge losses in livestock, the presence of nomads in Afghanistan was well established up to the Soviet Invasion.

According to an unpublished Afghan Nomad Survey for 1978, only 37 out of 325 administrative units in Afghanistan did not report nomadic populations - permanent or temporary. In other words, at least some nomads were present on 92% of the country.

As for their number, estimates from the 1970s vary greatly. Figures between 1 million (Janata 1975) and 2.5 million (UN statistics of 1979) vary depending on the criteria used to establish who were 'nomads', and these are not always clear or acceptable. Usually around 2 millions is agreed.

The nomads experienced the worst of the conflict situation triggered by the Communist takeover in 1978, the mujaheddin insurgency and the subsequent Soviet Invasion. Not only their transhumance routes were cut by frontlines and they and their flocks were victims of airstrikes and landmines, but the massive arming of the rural population made them a prey to local commanders' greed or need. By the middle of the 1980s most of Afghanistan's nomads had left the country, mostly relocating to Pakistan. The majority of them would not return to the country until after 2001.

Kuchis' Statistics and Perspectives

‘...with the poor prospects for a reestablishment of real nomadism, it is not inconceivable that the poor households will be forced more and more into unskilled labour as a partly or completely settled land proletariat’ (Pedersen, 1995: 221).

In the multitude of post 2001 research and reports about Afghanistan, Kuchi do not figure prominently. A few excellent studies have been carried out though, mainly focussed on the livelihoods of Kuchi, the conflicts on pastures and land issues that oppose them to sedentary dwellers, and perspectives for the improvement of their conditions as a group.

The lack of information about Kuchi is best shown by the difficulties even in assessing their overall number, and the percentage of those still performing a seasonal migration. In the absence of a national census in Afghanistan, the biggest effort at determining the number of Kuchi was that done by the National Multi Sectoral Assessment on Kuchi (NMAK) in early 2004.

The total number of Kuchi was then reported as being 2,426,304 individuals (2,588,719 if counting Kuchi that had crossed the border into Pakistan at the time) for 239,859 households (16.056 in Pakistan at the time). The NMAK survey also provides a subdivision of these Kuchi along three main categories: those who are long-range migratory (accounting to 52% of the total), short-range migratory (33%) and settled (15%).

These categories, however, must be explained. Both ‘migratory’ groups include even those Kuchi who used to migrate but whose migratory pattern is now disrupted, that is, they either move to a destination other than the originary one or they do not move at all. And then, as admitted by the author of the survey, the criteria applied for the identification of Kuchi do not account for some communities or households who may still see themselves as Kuchi. The NMAK definition of nomads to be included in the survey was that ‘A Kuchi is either migratory, or has settled recently due to the loss of livestock during the last drought’ (De Weijer, 2005: 4).

The choice of the NMAK is perfectly justified in terms of studying and assessing the problematics surrounding pastoralists, and ways to help them improving their impoverished living conditions.

‘However in reality, many Kuchi may have settled decades ago, own land or large transportation companies, and still refer themselves as “Kuchi” (De Weijer, 2005: 3). This somewhat reductive criteria in identifying Kuchi, choosing to focus only on people who are still migrating or who settled during the drought of 1998-2001, in fact shape the portrait that emerges from the survey and explain the high percentage of still migratory Kuchi it reports. Many households who became settled since the beginning of conflict in Afghanistan, either through the loss of their livestock or by choice, and some who settled even before that, do indeed still see themselves as Kuchi.

So, the total of 967,210 Kuchi individuals that do not migrate given by the report (40% of the Kuchi population recognised by NMAK, including both the settled ones and those portions of the migratory households which stay back), does probably fail to give a correct idea of the number of sedentarised Kuchi in Afghanistan.

As the focus here will be ultimately more on the political aspects of the Kuchi identity, including a primary analysis of electoral data, the criteria employed by the NMAK are not completely adequate. In fact, an analysis of the background of the Kuchi political elite who sits in the Parliament and represents the interest of all Kuchi would largely put them in the category such excluded by the NMAK. However, different criteria, as the voter registration under the separate category for Kuchi, would be even more fraught with ambiguities and inconsistency, as will be seen later. And, as the data gathered by NMAK is to this day unrivalled, it will provide some more elements of analysis.

The name of ‘Kuchi’, among the those referring to pastoralists or traders who migrate seasonally the one connoting more specifically their mobility, has gained undisputed prominence at a time when this mobility is waning. This, to a certain extent, is merely a product of the preserving of one community identity as a mean of guaranteeing its cohesiveness and its social functioning. Already in the late 1970s, anthropologists noted that different social and age groups among settled or sedentarising nomads had different views on their being Kuchi (something that, however, was claimed universally): ‘lorry-drivers, landowners practising pleasure nomadism in summer to the reaches of the Salang from their estates in

Dahana-e Ghorī, poor households permanently settled in winter camps near Jalalabad think of themselves as nomads who are forced out of their vocation' (Pedersen, 1995: 221). Today, this process of self-identification with a lifestyle that has further rarefied is being affected by other, different mechanisms.

Taken in a broader sense, the people referring to themselves as Kuchi are not consistently nomads anymore, or, at least, many of them are not. The old pattern of their movement from the peripheral lowlands (winter quarters) to the central highlands (summer pastures) of Afghanistan has been significantly abandoned. Many Kuchi are now residing for most of the year in a fixed abode, with some provinces hosting a significantly high percentage of them (Khost, Nangrahar and, increasingly, Kabul). This change can be explained by the disappearance of the very reasons that drove their transhumance, the need to graze their livestock. In fact, among the reasons given by respondents to the NMAK as to their failure to migrate to the summer pastures, the loss of livestock features as the most common answer (79%) (De Weijer, 2005). Kuchi interviewed by the author put the critical moment in the process of losing livestock during the years – for many of them decades – of Pakistani exile. Apparently, the impossibility to move from the refugee camps to summer pastures or cooler climates brought to the death – or to a deterioration of the health, entailing quick sale - of the major part of their flocks.² In other cases, Kuchi who had managed to keep their flocks were targeted by armed groups and had their beasts confiscated or killed when they returned to Afghanistan. This seems to be still a problem for isolated Kuchi households trying to carry on livestock breeding in areas with factional infighting and where they lack strong political patrons.³ Disease and drought, in particular the prolonged one of 1998-2001, also destroyed the pastoral potential of many communities.

Nonetheless, one of the characteristics more closely associated with the Kuchi, in fact one recurring in their alternative attribute of Maldar, is that of owning animals. Notwithstanding the loss of livestock

² Interview with representatives of the Amarkhel and Mullakhel Ahmadzai, Kabul 2011

³ Interview with Kuchi shepherds from Paghman, Kabul, 2011.

reported above, a strikingly high percentage (97.5%) of all the Kuchi surveyed by the NMAK, both migratory and settled, still possess some livestock (De Weijer, 2005: 24-25). This seems to be true even in the public's perception of the Kuchi (something easily explained by the fact that parading flocks through the trafficked streets of Kabul and other Afghan cities is a very good way to attain visibility).

However, the national average of sheep and goats per Kuchi household recorded by NMAK amounts to around 50 animals, only half of the minimum of 100 required for an household to be able to sustain itself economically on livestock breeding. When one adds the presence of a serious regional unbalance, with some provinces of the North-East featuring much higher numbers of livestock per household and sensibly raising the national average, this paucity suggests that nowadays livestock breeding can be considered the principal livelihood for Kuchi only in some provinces and among some communities who have been particularly successful in retaining or to restocking their flocks.

So what do Kuchi do to survive? The availability of another income is given by them as the second main reason for sedentarising. If countrywide this amounts to a modest 9% of the answers, in the East it rises to a significant 18%. In fact, the provinces of Nangrahar and Laghman account for a significant portion of the Kuchi population, who reside there either year-round or at least in winter, and move to Kabul and its rural hinterland (Parwan, Logar) in search of labour in the city or in the countryside. If usually this was limited to those periods of the year connoted by low pastoral activity, or to those households with a surplus of labour, in recent years Kuchi have increasingly become dependent on non-pastoral economy for their subsistence.

Many groups who still carry on seasonal migration appear to be increasingly orienting their activities towards Kabul. During the last ten years, among Kuchi communities with their traditional winter quarters in the Eastern Region (Nangrahar, Laghman) and summer pasture in central areas (Hazarajat, Panjshir), an increasing number of households chose to camp from spring to fall in Deh Sabz at the outskirts of Kabul. Previously only a stage during the Kuchi transhumance, Deh Sabz, and parts of neighbouring Pul-e Charki and Bagrami, has become permanently

inhabited by Kuchi families. While this sort of three-tempoed migration was not unknown before the war, only few individuals would have stopped at this middle stage to engage in labour in the city then, while most of the Kuchi would proceed to the higher pastures. The balance has now been overturned, as it is evident by the description of a Kuchi group originally migrating between Laghman and Panjshir:

The Khomarikhel kuchi still perceive themselves as nomad pastoralists. However, as a group they now find themselves increasingly divided between a minority of families who still own economically viable flocks of sheep and move through the full cycle of seasonal grazing camps, and those poorer families – in the majority – who no longer own viable flocks. They have effectively ceased to be true pastoralists, becoming satellites of the settled urban and peri-urban populations on whom they are dependent for a precarious livelihood. Even families who still possess sizeable flocks send young men, surplus to herding and camp duties, away to earn a living from unskilled work (Fitzherbert, 2007: 20).

Thus, in this and other cases, the families who remain camped near to the city or to opportunities for agricultural labour now outnumber the minority of pastoralist nomads. Kuchi may have lost the virtual monopoly on the meat and dairy trade they enjoyed in the decades previous to the war, and also the amount of livestock necessary to subsist essentially on its breeding, but they can still engage in dairy, meat and wool trade with the animals left, and the most profitable way to do so is to settle close to the big markets provided by cities. However still existing, trade of livestock products is by no means the major economic asset for those Kuchi who settle near urban centres.

Harvesting, along with other menial farm duties, has traditionally been one of the possible additional sources of income for Kuchi. NMAK figures put the percentage of Kuchi communities involved in it at over 50% (De Weijer, 2005: 28). Inside cities too, all types of unskilled work are sought after by Kuchi labourer, in particular construction, as they have the advantage of being available year-round, and suit best Kuchi who are themselves free from the seasonal subdivision of pastoral duties.

In fact, Kuchi labour activities are changing in scope and type. They are losing the occasional character they had before the war, or, if

they are indeed occasional, that is due to unavailability of job opportunities. On the other hand, they are less connected with aspects of Kuchi life like the ownership of beasts and the seasonality of their location and employment.

The loss of specific areas of activities linked to livestock breeding or long distance trade not only brought Kuchi closer to the cities, but for the first time put them in direct competition with other disadvantaged strata of the Afghan population for access to jobs and resources.

The majority of Kuchi who settle close to cities do that in less than ideal conditions. Except from a few rich businessman, Kuchi do not have access to valuable, serviced residential areas, and they either acquire land plots at the fringes of town, settle down in unproductive areas and try to occupy the land, or lodge in refugee camps turned permanent. The high number of Kuchi IDPs (Internally Displaced Person), contributed to create Kuchi refugee camps close to several Afghan cities, most notably near Kandahar, where IDPs fleeing from the last great drought, particularly severe in the South, and from the violence that targeted the Kuchi in northern provinces like Badghis and Fariab in 2002-2003, took shelter.

In any case, the living conditions of Kuchi near cities are more often than not precarious and shabby, lacking most services like electricity or water, and well below basic hygienic standards. Their joining the urban population from a very low economic rung did not contribute to improve their social standing. Nomads were already considered wahshi (savage) and underdeveloped by educated people and members of the urban middle-class before the war, but their physical distance and their relative affluence left some room for romanticizing them. They were also somehow credited with impressing and awing foreign visitors, and thus held by the elites as a 'national pride'.

Here is two example of perception change about the Kuchi, as recalled by two individuals of different background, both Pashtun however and from provinces with high an incidence of Kuchi:

'Before, city-dwellers did not use to see much of the Kuchi: they came to town only to trade, and they were even renowned for they beauty and honesty. Now they see only the worst sides of being nomad, the

poverty, the lack of hygiene... They are not ready to accept this inside their cities.’

‘People see them as backward. When I was a kid, people in my village would say “The Kuchi have arrived!” and there would be a caravan and people would stop by to gaze at the nomads passing. But now things have changed and people see them as ne’er do well.’

Indeed, the current social indicators for Kuchi as a community are far from exhilarating. Just to give an example, they rank at the bottom of the list in terms of literacy, which amounts to only 2.0% for males and 0.05% for females; while attendance to school is likewise appallingly low (6.6% for boys, 1.8% for girls – against a national average of 30% and 15% respectively). These data are based on the NMAK criteria which leave out some of the settled Kuchi, who are probably slightly better off in terms of literacy and access to school compared to those still pursuing a migrating lifestyle. But more than a settled/nomadic divide, it is likely that the economic situation plays a significant role in determining literacy and schooling among Kuchi. In fact, the previous indicators are higher for those provinces (Balkh, Baghlan, Sar-e Pul and Logar) where at least part of the Kuchi are well-off, having settled and purchased large landholdings many decades ago (but often still breeding livestock and having thus been included in the NMAK, unlike others who had completely stopped being pastoralists once settled). Education levels need not necessarily be much higher among those Kuchi who settled in precarious conditions or as IDPs when compared to those who are still nomadic.

Similar doubts could be expressed regarding improvements in the sanitary conditions of Kuchi households after they have settled down. Research indeed shows that Kuchi who settle in highly populated or cultivated areas, as many of them are trying to do looking for job opportunities, see the quality of their access to potable water decrease. Furthermore, this leads to competition with already present groups, who inevitably see the arrival of the new neighbours.

The failure to fill their former complementary role in the productive chain, and the competition for basic resources are not the only issues that have contributed to shape the Kuchi’s as a highly conflictual identity. Disputes over land are very commonly involving Kuchi on one or

even both sides, and in some cases this have become huge, highly politicized and seemingly unending stand-off between whole communities.

Kuchis and the Land

‘Before, the kuchis used to live with us in winter, they were our hamsayas (neighbours, also implying a dependent position as tenants), now they have become our landlords.’ Afghan MJ member referring to a land dispute with a Kuchi businessman in Nangarhar province.⁴

A common definition of nomad, that of somebody who does not have a fixed abode, would not summon the idea of land property or land conflict. Afghan Kuchi do not only own land, but are consistently involved in disputes involving the ownership of it, for agricultural or residential purposes, and for the rights of usage or propriety of pastures.

Kuchi, even when moving seasonally from one place to another often located several hundred kilometres away, they can develop a ‘sense of belonging’ to one of the two places, usually their winter quarters. Frederiksen describes the feelings of the Hazarbusz Kuchi for their ‘homeland’ in Kuz Baru, a village in Mohmand Dara of Nangrahar province: ‘there exist no official document, but among the Hazarbusz there is a consciousness that the territory belongs to them (Frederiksen, 1996:64-67, 71, 266-267); and this is by no means limited to one’s tribe region of origin. The Hazarbusz Mohmand, now mostly sedentary, eventually settled not only in ancestral Kuz Baru, but in Kabul and Mazar-e Sharif likewise. In many parts of Afghanistan, before the war, the more prosperous Kuchi households had already started purchasing land in both winter areas and summer pastures, initially as a way to secure profit made by trade, but increasingly to settle down, giving up first pastoral duties but keeping on trade longer, if profitable.

This process has increased today. Kuchi possess land all across the country, but especially in some provinces like the already mentioned Balkh (56% of the Kuchi households residing there in winter), Sar-e Pul (52%) and Logar (51%).

In the two northern provinces Kuchi own large tracts of land (the highest average per household belongs to Jawzjan and Sar-e Pul (De

⁴ Interview with the author, Jalalabad, 2010.

Weijer, 2005: 21), often as a result of the fact that when the government re-located them there between the end of the XIX century and the early half of the XX it endowed them with lands.

Nomads do actually possess more land pro-capita than the sedentary people, if only those Kuchi who do own some land are taken into account. Landed Kuchi do not only grow cash crops on their lands, but also possess more flocks on average than landless nomads. The apparent success of this strategy of mixed economy gives credit to Pedersen consideration that 'to be a landowner is seen as the conclusion of a successful nomad's existence' (De Weijer, 2005: 23; Pedersen, 1995: 220).

In some cases, the process may be an age-old one, which kept going on at different paces depending on the economic and political situation. In Logar, where almost all the land owned by Kuchi belongs to settled ones, Ahmadzai nomads who used to cross the province during the golden age of summer grazing and trade in Hazarajat, invested their profits and bought valuable agricultural land, as reported by field researchers in the 1970s:

'Their migration route goes through the Logar Valley, which has become a permanent staging area for the Ahmadzai, as well as a place where they own farming land exploited by tenants. They spend from forty to fifty days there during the spring migration coincident with the period of lambing. Some men leave one or more of their wives and children and sometimes their brothers in houses in the valley all year round, creating a variation in exploitation pattern in which a predominantly nomadic group is also involved in agriculture' (Rosman and Rubel, 1979: 558).

In more recent times, the political clout gained by a local Kuchi leader, under the Taleban regime, allowed his extended family and allies to increase the amount of their property by encroaching on state land with the consent of the authorities.⁵

But this is an ideal settlement pattern, as in many cases historical conjunctures forced the nomads into hasty and unfavourable sedentarising. As related, after the two-years blockade of the Pakistani border in 1961-63, many nomads had incurred such livestock or economic losses that they

⁵ Interview with residents from Logar, Kabul, 2011.

had to settle down in the areas, were they had temporarily re-located, that is Nangrahar and Khost, where the mildest winter climate is to be found.

Likewise, in the last years the majority of the Kuchis did not have chances for a favourable settling down ready at hand, and it was inevitable that conflicts with local villagers would arise. Even when Kuchis try and settle on lands which they have been using for decades as temporary winter abode, they face the condition of being landless in 'their place of origin'. Most of these conflicts involve in fact communal or state land, or other types for which it is difficult to ascertain property. Sedentary villagers would object to the occupation of state land by Kuchi, representing that they would need government land distribution scheme as much as the nomads (GTZ/TLO 2008: 8-9).⁶ Kuchi that own private agricultural land are quite sure in their possession, except in some areas in the North where they have been targeted by communitarian violence in the first years after the fall of the Taleban; more problematic are usually claim to 'traditional' grazing area, both in view of settling down or to be used as pastures.

In fact, the type of property document held by the Kuchis, if any at all is still existing, is usually a qawalla (a legal title deed issued by a state court – or in temp of war, by mujaheddin authorities) for a private property, in particular agricultural land. As for the pastures, in many areas nomads would traditionally have gained access to them through royal farman (decrees), often dating back to the early XX century.

Access to many of the summer pastures previously used by the Kuchis has now in fact been blocked for three decades. If hostile 'attitude of resident people' ranks only third among the reasons given by Kuchis for not migrating to their former pastures, and this problem was highlighted mainly by respondents in the North (De Weijer, 2005: 17), it is the Hazarajat pastures which have become the most famous and disputed issue revolving around the Kuchis.

The pastures, mainly located in Panjab and Waras district of Bamian province, are presently utilised by local villagers for grazing their own livestock, or have been converted to non-irrigated farmland, developments engendered by both the demographic expansion of the

⁶ Interview with Nangarhar locals, Jalalabad 2011.

population in the central highlands and the increased political assertiveness enjoyed by the Hazara community during the 1980s and after the fall of the Taleban.

Kuchi also own agricultural land near to summer pasture areas of Hazarajat, but in 2005 access was reduced (85% of the household with land in Wardak could not, 97% of Ghazni, 100% Bamian).

Hazaras however largely say they would recognize the rights of Kuchi over the land they rightfully acquired. In general, Hazaras make a political point by differentiating between the land legally purchased by Kuchi, which is guaranteed by qawalla, and the pastures, as they do not recognise the rightfulness of the farman issued by Abdur-Rahman, as proceeding from a genocide-like campaign of internal conquest, and motivated by the political will to enlist the nomads as auxiliary troops to break the resistance of the Hazara.⁷

In fact, technical difficulties behind a solution to the dispute are not the first obstacle to be met. The last accession of the nomads to Hazarajat, in 1998-99, has contributed to raise the political significance of the dispute. Led by Naim Khan, an influential Kuchi leader and Taleban official, armed nomads then entered Hazarajat wielding political and military power for the first time since 1979. Acting as auxiliary troops to the Taleban, they rampaged through the region, collecting arrears in the payment from their former tenants, and targeting particularly wealthy families to extort cash, livestock and forcing more land signed to them by their debtors. Finally, they were recalled by Mullah Omar after delegations of complainants had protested with the Taleban leadership.

After 2001, the issue of nomad access to Hazarajat has become one of the more relevant drivers of ethnic tension and political propaganda in Afghanistan, especially during its yearly climax around the month of May, when nomads would approach the higher pastures. Tension has often broken into open conflicts since 2007, as the Kuchis have started pushing on the borders of Hazarajat in an increasingly aggressive and militarised way.

Notwithstanding the location of the main objective of the Kuchis' claims lay well inside Hazarajat, the confrontation usually take place in the

⁷ Interviews with Hazara elders, political activists, intellectuals.

first Hazara-inhabited districts the Kuchis encounter in their migration, Daimirdad and Behsud (the latter has given its name to the conflict in the press). In the spring of 2010, for example, armed nomads massively attacked Hazara settlements in these districts, triggering a large exodus of the settled population.

Events of this kind have obviously a great resonance in the country's public debate, causing scuffles inside the parliament and widespread protests by the Hazara sections of the population of Kabul, in other big cities and even abroad. Also, the occasion has been often exploited by the two main (rival) Hazara political leaders to compete for popular support by staging rallies or delivering promises. Kuchis have become a veritable bogeyman, symbolizing the past oppression and the new challenges in the eyes of many Hazaras. Demonising of the opponent in this case ranges from the consideration that nowadays Kuchis are not really interested in transhumant livestock breeding, but mainly act thus to loot the villagers and blackmail the government into bribing them, to plain accusations of being hired by the Taleban to cause disorder and bully a pro-government community like the Hazaras, or even of comprising a majority of Taleban in their ranks.⁸

The Afghan government has not played the pro-active role that both parts in the conflict apparently require from it. In fact, the single major intervention on the part of it has been to pay an unspecified sum of money to the Kuchi leaders in 2009, the year of the presidential election, to prevent the nomads to migrate towards Hazarajat and avoid violent escalations like those of the previous two years. This was part of an electoral deal between Hamid Karzai and Mohammed Mohaqqueq, a prominent Hazara leader, in exchange for Hazara support for the former's bid at re-election. Such a dealing of the issue backfired the following year, when Kuchi leaders, who, according to some Kuchis, had kept most of the money for themselves, were possibly expecting to receive the same subsidy.

Alternative solutions may be of course opposed by elements inside both camps. This year, before the Kuchis' massive arrival in Daimirdad and Behsud, the elders of the two communities had signed a

⁸ Interview with Daimirdad and Behsud residents, Kabul 2010-2011.

deal, agreeing to let the Kuchis pass through their territory provided they kept out of villages and cultivated fields. The deal was however opposed by other Hazaras, a political faction prominent in the higher pasture area at the centre of the dispute; while at the same time Kuchi violence hit neighbouring, but relatively quieter, Nawor district of Ghazni province (cf. Foschini, 2011).

The spring movement of Kuchis towards Hazarajat seems to be partly a half-organised push by their own leaders and partly a spontaneous urge of several communities. Groups of Kuchis left without flocks see it as an opportunity to get some prize; others are really in desperate need of boosting their livestock breeding by gaining access to rich pastures.

It is known that some Kuchi communities that traditionally did not move into Hazarajat have joined the annual Kuchi attempt at access, hoping to derive some benefit from it (Fitzherbert, 2007: 20). Indeed, local Hazaras would claim that today's Kuchis have no relation whatsoever with the nomads who used to travel through their areas before the war. In 2011, they reported about heavily armed 'black-clad Kuchis', clearly identifying them as Taleban, coming from Kandahar area.

The level of symbolic significance attained by the Behsud conflict is unparalleled by other land disputes involving the Kuchis, which are, nonetheless, often just as violent.

In fact, Kuchi are sometimes on different ends of these disputes. They may be trying to occupy state land they claim as their own, or they just state they are in need of, and subsequently face violent repression and re-location by the security forces. They can find themselves the victims of stronger groups, who thanks to their political connections or armed power, usurp land which they had traditionally used, or extract money from them to allow usage of what was previously free. Finally they can also be the landowners speculating on high-value real estates, and facing opposition by landless sedentary people.

As a long term solution to most of these conflicts, the government has been occasionally promising to distribute land to the Kuchis. Article 14 of the Afghan Constitution hints at 'improving...the settlement and living conditions of nomads', something which many directly interpret as a commitment on the part of the state to settle them down. Those who

oppose or resent the idea of a separate Kuchi identity at all also point to a basic inconsistency, maintaining that nomads are ‘termed by law those who do not possess any land’, and they assume that an allotment of land must eventually transform them in normal citizens.⁹

The Kuchis themselves are not at all opposed to the idea of being given land to settle down:

‘Everybody seems to agree that land must be given to us, the Kuchis agree, the villagers agree, the government agrees, who is the fool who would not agree? For those Kuchi who have still flocks the opening of the Hazarajat pastures is the priority, for all the others land allotments are more important...in terms of economic opportunities, first comes land, then flocks, and as for the rest, there is nothing else in Afghanistan’.¹⁰

But as to giving up their specific identity, things are less clear. However the Kuchi may really understand the ‘cultural’ specificities that separates them from sedentary people, being Kuchis is often one of the few cards they have to raise their voice and try to be listened.

Kuchis and Politics

‘Kuchis don’t have their own media, they don’t have any provincial council member or governor, nor ministers or lobby inside the government. People in power remember us only when there are votes in the Parliament, otherwise (they say): Kuchis (go) to the tombs of their fathers!’ Parwin Durrani, parliamentarian, Head of the Kuchi Commission.¹¹

As regulated by the electoral law of 2005, and reiterated by that of 2010, in the Lower House of Afghan parliament ten seats are reserved for Kuchi representatives. Instead of guaranteeing such a presence by means of quotas in each province, as it is done for women, Kuchis were created wholesale into a separate constituency, with their own candidates and polling centres.

⁹ Author’s interviews with Afghan Analysts and Social Workers, Kabul, 2011.

¹⁰ Interview with Mullahkhel Malik, Kabul, 2011.

¹¹ Author Interview, Kabul 2011.

The first time this system was implemented was of course for the first parliamentary election in 2005. In the presidential election of the previous year, although Kuchis could already register as such in the distribution of voter cards, their casting of the vote did not differ from other Afghan citizens.

During the so-called 'New Democracy', as the liberal 1964-1973 period under king Zaher Shah is sometimes called, Kuchis used to have five representatives in the elected *Wolesi Jirga* (Lower House) (Dupree, 1975: 406). The new arrangement was done in the attempt to guarantee a fair representation to a transitory community whose candidate could face problems in fixing their constituency to a determinate province. Many however, critical of the choice and of its outcomes, consider it as ruse by which the government was been able to create a basin of votes managed by loyal political allies.

Some further point at the fact that the ten seats for Kuchis end up being actually reserved for Pashtuns, in an effort to offset the Parliament's ethnic balance and increase control over it by the current government.¹²

In 2005, electoral procedures allowed voters to self-identify as Kuchi during the registration process, and indeed more than 500,000 individuals registered as such (different figures, 534,105 or 532,726, are given). However, reports of abuses allegedly committed by electoral officers in this respect emerged. For example, a number of residents of Kunduz province, ethnically Turkmen, were inscribed in the Kuchi constituency against their will.

Predictably, all ten elected Kuchi MPs have been Pashtuns, both in 2005 and 2010. However, more than the ethnic question, what draws criticism against them is a reputation of being staunch pro-Karzai loyalists, and to have supported the government at critical votes inside the *Wolesi Jirga*. Karzai has in the past courted some prominent Kuchi leaders, like Naim Khan Kuchi, whom he greeted on his release from Guantanamo Jail in 2004. Another prominent Kuchi leader, Mullah Tarakhel, elected for both terms, has even been accused of hijacking thousands of votes for the re-election of Karzai in 2009.

¹² Author interview with WJ members, Kabul, 2011.

It is certain that Kuchi voted massively for Karzai during the 2009 elections. A survey of Kabul's Kuchi polling centres shows a generally very low amount of votes for Ashraf Ghani Ahmadzai, who, being himself from a prominent Ahmadzai Kuchi family (his brother Hashmat is chairman of a non-governmental Kuchi Grand Council), was somehow expected to receive a fair share of the Kuchi vote. Most of the vote went instead to Karzai, and this was true in particular for those polling centres located in and Butkhak and Pol-e Charki, Mullah Tarakhel's strongholds. There, percentages of vote for Karzai easily reached 80%, or were anyway much higher than the provincial average of 48.8% that Karzai obtained. In many polling stations, relatively low amount of votes showed the same trend, making it more likely than a massive vote for Karzai on the part of the Kuchi electorate was not imputable to irregularities only, but to very strong vote indications by Kuchi leaders like Tarakhel.

No provincial breakdown of Kuchi vote has been given for the 2005 election, but each of the 67 candidates was indeed affiliated to a certain province where he or she could expect more support. The majority of Kuchi candidates came then from Kabul (10), Ghazni (6), Nangrahar (Logar (5), Paktika (4), Helmand (4) and Kandahar (4). The winners' background however showed a different distribution of voters. Three Kuchis from Kabul got elected, along with Haidar Jan Naimzoy (the son of Naim Khan) from Logar, two from Nangrahar, both of the candidates originating from Khost and one from Paktika. The only Kuchi elected from the North hailed from Badghis. Karzai later chose one of the two Kuchi senators in the Upper House (presidentially appointed) from northern Balkh.

An analysis of the vote cast in the 2010 consultations confirms the importance of the eastern suburbs of Kabul as the principal concentration of Kuchi vote countrywide. Most of the 86 Kuchi polling stations of the capital urban districts were located there, and to these can be added the 20 Kuchi polling stations located in adjacent Deh Sabz district (on a district's total of 57 polling station). Out of a total of 105, 220 Kuchi votes cast in the election, 26,481 come from Kabul city, a figure that rises to 27,783 if the votes of Dehsabz are added. As noted, the

area is compactly aligned with Mullah Tarakhel, who in fact got here most of his record vote, 26,491 (which makes him by far the most popularly elected MP in Afghanistan).

Another remarkable area for Kuchi votes is tiny Kapisa province to the north-east of Kabul, where 6371 votes were cast, mainly for the local Kuchi candidate, Habib Afghan. The latter cannot compete with the overall amount of votes gathered by Mullah Tarakhel, but share with the latter a characteristic: though nomads with a countrywide constituency, they banked most of their votes in very circumscribed areas. 4421 of Habib Afghan's votes come indeed from a single district of Kapisa, the provincial centre of Mahmud-e Raqi, where he facilitated the settlement of a big number of Kuchis in residential projects he manages.

The same tool of political mobilization is very evidently behind the popularity of Tarakhel. He is the main force behind the huge 'Kuchi belt' which is developing on the eastern border of Kabul, from De Sabz to Bagrami, and this gives him a huge patronising power over thousands of Kuchi households desperately seeking access to settlement and to Kabul's job opportunities and security. Butkhak, until a few years ago a tiny village at the outskirts of Kabul, almost forgotten since it was bypassed by the new road to Jalalabad through Mahipar, has now become the centre of a huge residential project which should have the capacity to accommodate more than 80,000 families. A high school and a clinic have already been built, but the area has still the appearance of a shantytown, continuously expanding further away from the city.

On the other hand, Kuchi social structure is not necessarily surviving the economic stresses unscathed. A still common authority figure among Kuchi communities seem to be that of the malik.

Chosen by the community, and sometimes even paid a salary by it, the maliks usually oversaw practical administrative affairs, paperwork and relations with state authorities (Frederiksen, 1996: 47).

Today, maliks keep representing their communities in front of the state, but it is more from powerful powerbroker like Mullah Tarakhel and Habib Afghan that they can hope to obtain economic help and political support.

For example, according to many interviewees, Tarakhel divided the land in Butkhak in plots and distributed or conveniently sold them to a first row of relatives, allies and perspective clients, some of whom were maliks from Kuchi communities other than his own. These in turn could decide what to do with the valuable piece of land near the capital, to settle there themselves, give it to some family relation, or to sell it in turn for a sensibly higher price.

The maliks can thus be co-opted by the new Kuchi elite of businessmen-politicians for support at the time of elections or to legitimate their claim of speaking on behalf of the Kuchis at a national level. This would explain the strange vote pattern in some regions (like the Koh-Daman districts, but even in far away Kunar) where Kabul-based Kuchi managed to get chunks of votes only in some areas, in front of locally strong candidates. This apparently random distribution of their support base could be explained by them having patronized certain maliks through allotments in their 'land projects' in exchange for the votes of their communities.

According to Dupree, the situation in the 1960s, when the Kuchi MPs 'represented the larger nomadic tribal units and all came from semisedentary groups' was not completely dissimilar (Dupree, 1975: 406). Now, however, differences between the politico-economic elite and their constituency appear much more significant, and the poorest Kuchis either completely detached from the political and economic life of the country, or totally dependent on their leaders.

Among these, land speculations and construction activities of entrepreneurs from the Eastern and Central region appear to have a more dynamic political potential than the historically rooted tendency at latifundism displayed by the most affluent of the northern Kuchi. The former can probably offer poor Kuchis more job opportunities, land and protection, and are more strategically situated to successfully lobby with the institutional powers. Kuchis in the north may be rich, but are, with few exceptions, politically isolated.

With a separate political identity and an elite in process of formation, how much are Kuchis likely to develop into a new qawm inside Afghanistan? One could argue that, in the original sense of the term qawm

– usually something oscillating between kinship group and solidarity group – they are already one.

But in the more relevant political sense that *aqwam* assumed in Afghanistan during the last decades, how far have the Kuchis travelled? It seems that more than the constituency itself, it is the Kuchi leadership who has benefitted from the special institutions created by the government for the Kuchis. The mass of the Kuchis has been occasionally able to mobilise in a cohesive way, but this seems to have happened through means halfway between the old kinship and transhumance networks and a new militant attitude – in the sense of an armed, and often anti-state activity. The political acting of the Kuchis, altogether, seems still quite primitive when compared to the mobilisation patterns of other groups. The obvious comparison with their perceived ‘natural’ opponents, the Hazaras, shows how this other *qawm*, starting from conditions which were far inferior to those of the Kuchis in economic terms, and as isolated and backward in social and educational terms, has been able during the decades of war to completely change its social standing through education and political activism. Of course, this change could not have happened without the individual itinerary of thousands of individuals, spurred more by the awareness of their backward social position than by an organic indoctrination by strong political parties. Addressing the educational shortages of the Kuchi youth, and improving their participation to the broader Afghan society, seems indeed the priority for any attempt at emancipating the Kuchis.

Lack of education and political sophistication are not the only obstacles in the way of creating a lasting and cohesive Kuchi community. Ethnic belongings are possibly more fluid than often believed, but Afghanistan is not, at the moment, devoid of strong identities, and any identity, to assert itself, needs room of manoeuvre. Kuchi identity will likely fade in front of already established ones, to resurrect whenever needed or useful. Until now its utility consisted mainly in being a vehicle of mobilisation or a rallying point for lobbying in the occasion of disputes. If this ‘confrontational’ identity is not supported by some sort of intellectual conceptualization and by an educated class of individuals who adhere to it, it is not likely to gain a firm foothold in Afghan society.

Nothing will prevent single Kuchi households or communities to gradually re-integrate in more comprehensive identities (Pashtun, other ethnic or regional ones) as soon as their socio-economic integration is achieved.

Until now, Kuchi political identity does not display trends towards a unified leadership or a transcendent political objective. Even at the time of their most visible episodes of collective mobilisation, like the yearly push to gain entrance into Hazarajat, Kuchis lack a political credibility and realistic approach, and seem able to assert their cohesiveness only in the most disruptive way.

The severe social and economic problems affecting the Kuchis revert more around the issue of their settlement than that of the Hazara pastures.

The mentioned diagram by which a Kuchi settles landless or settles as a shopkeeper or landowner marks the difference between the potential for integration and that of alienation. Nowadays, the trend is to have a very small elite of 'Kuchi' businessmen-cum-politician (or at least with good political connections), settled since long ago, that partially do facilitate the settlement of other Kuchis. These are impoverished masses left without sufficient and adequate economic means of production in the pastoral field, and disadvantaged culturally and socially in accessing other job markets. They either settle landless, and face other, stronger groups' and state opposition, or they play the card of their leadership, when available. Thus they cling to their newfound Kuchi identity to get at least a small patch of land. The Kuchi political elite at the same time derives its political relevance, and the connections that help its business activities flourish, from the troublesome potential of the poorest strata of Kuchi society.

Problems connected to residual nomadism are thus mixing up with landlessness and social tensions triggered by poverty, and, notwithstanding the creation of the Independent Directorate for Kuchi Affairs, the Afghan state is failing to address these issues specifically. Relying on the patronising system developed by a an elite of Kuchi businessmen-turned-politicians has also not been helpful in finding long-term solutions to the increasingly numerous instances of conflict.

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