

Who are the Kuchi? Nomad self-identities in Afghanistan

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'Kuchi', an Afghan Persian word meaning 'those who go on migrations', is the common generic term, used by both Afghans and foreigners, for the nomads of Afghanistan, as it has been for many decades. Most if not all the nomads, and indeed many long-settled former nomads, now acknowledge this name, yet in the 1960s and 1970s few of those so labelled used the term for themselves. This article examines the usage of both 'Kuchi' and 'nomad', and locates them in the wider contexts of ethnic labelling practices in Afghanistan, anthropological debates about pastoral nomadism, and government-nomad relations in both Afghanistan and neighbouring Iran.

In September 2004, David Turton sent me an email from Afghanistan:

While in Kabul recently I had a meeting with a number of members of the Kuchi National Shura, organized for my benefit by the Ministry of Frontier and Tribal Affairs, and I've collected various reports done by NGOs and the UN on the environmental and many other problems facing the Kuchi at the moment ... But I'm still very confused about 'who' the Kuchi are, how best to characterize their subsistence systems and what would be the feasible 'development' scenarios for the population usually referred to by this name. The Ministry of Tribal Affairs seems to have a vested interest in both bumping up the overall number of Kuchi (they say they make up over 16 per cent of the total population of Afghanistan) and in championing strongly their 'return' to a 'nomadic' way of life.

Who are the Kuchi? The term is Persian for one who migrates, from *kuch*, meaning migration. Currently, Afghan government officials, foreign journalists, and development workers call all the pastoral nomads of Afghanistan 'Kuchi' (Kochi, Koochi), in both Afghan Persian and English. The term (the plural *kuchian*, translated as nomads) is enshrined in the new Constitution:

Article 14: The state ... shall design and implement effective programs to develop agriculture and animal husbandry, improve economic, social and living conditions of farmers, herders and settlers as well as the nomads' livelihood.

Article 44: The state shall devise and implement effective programs to create and foster balanced education for women, improve education of nomads ...

Article 84: Members of the House of Elders shall be elected and appointed as follows: ... the President [shall appoint] from amongst experts and experienced personalities, including two members from amongst the impaired and handicapped, as well as two from nomads.¹

In the September 2005 elections to the lower house and the regional assemblies, the international media reported at length on the special provisions being made for the Kuchis:² ten of the 249 parliamentary seats were reserved for them, including three for Kuchi women. Some reports write of the Kuchi as a distinct tribe or ethnic group,³ even quoting 'Kuchi elders' as referring to themselves as such. A Wikipedia entry on 'Kuchis' claims that they number 6 million of Afghanistan's 25 million population, and that their 'ethnic leader' is Hashmat Ghani Ahmadzai.⁴

So what is the problem?

Turton was right to be perplexed. Kuchi has been the standard term used by foreigners in Afghanistan for all the nomads for many decades, but in the 1960s and 1970s, when Nancy Tapper (now Lindisfarne) and I did fieldwork there,⁵ as far as we could ascertain, few nomads called themselves Kuchi. The late Klaus Ferdinand, a major authority on Afghan nomads, pointed out that the terms that nomads used for themselves in most parts of the country made no clear distinction between nomad and villager. Those living in the south, west, and north of the country called themselves *maldar* (pastoralist, herd-owner), a term that could also be used of fully settled pastoralists. More specific to nomads was *powinda*, a term used in the south, but this too referred to pastoral activities rather than to movement (Ferdinand 1962; 1969). The nomads did not, by any criteria, form a single ethnic group or tribe: most self-identified as Pashtuns (Pashto-speakers, see below) from a variety of tribes, especially from the two great confederations of the Durrani and Ghilji, but the vast majority of Pashtuns were not nomads. Most tribes included nomadic and settled elements, and individuals and families often alternated between nomadic and settled pursuits. The Durrani Pashtuns we lived with in the north, both nomads and villagers, called themselves *maldar*; if asked about Kuchis, they said they thought they were over in the east, near Kabul. Among Afghans generally at the time, Kuchi was a derogatory label, rather like 'gypsy' in the UK, originating, it seems, among urban, educated Pashtuns, who thereby distanced themselves from their 'uncouth' nomad cousins. Significantly, Louis Dupree, the most experienced anthropologist of Afghanistan at the time, does not even mention the term 'Kuchi' in his account of the nomads (1980 [1973]: 164-80).

Glatzer and Casimir, writing of nomads in the west among whom they worked in the mid-1970s, noted that 'Pashtun nomads in general ... do not consider themselves as a distinct social group. They are aware of belonging to the Pashtun majority of Afghanistan, which is mainly agricultural and sedentary. For the nomads, pastoralism is an occupational specialization that implies no social distinction from the rest of the society'. The Western Afghan nomads distinguished *watani maldar* (homeland herd-owner), who have strong ties to winter pastures (their *watan*, homeland) and local villages, from the *kuchi maldar* (migrating herd-owner), who have no such ties (1983: 310-11). Among these nomads, too, clearly *maldar* was the main self-identity, the term *kuchi* being merely a qualifier.

In other words, in the 1960s and 1970s the nomads identified themselves most clearly by either ethno-linguistic or economic criteria, without reference to nomad mobility. What do Afghan nomads call themselves now? For much of the intervening thirty years they have suffered not just bombardment, invasion, and occupation by two

superpowers, with a legacy of land-mines on the pastures and migration trails, but a series of apparently unprecedented droughts and associated famines, and in many cases loss of access to pasture. Many have been refugees in Pakistan. Has something in these experiences persuaded them all to accept as an autonomy what was previously, for most, only an exonym? Who now calls whom Kuchi, and why? Is nomadism – mobile pastoralism – a defining feature of the people (self-)named Kuchi? Have the nomads come together in some fashion to create a shared ‘ethnic’ identity? If so, how did this come about, and what are the implications? Are there pay-offs associated with the name and identity? Or is the current assumption that all nomads share an identity, and that they call themselves Kuchi, simply wrong?

In this article I pursue the question of Kuchi identity in some wider contexts: debates about ethnicity and pastoral nomadism, ethnic labelling practices in Afghanistan, and government-nomad relations in both Afghanistan and Iran – where nomad identities have undergone radical reconstitution since the 1979 revolution.

Not being there

Being unable to return to Afghanistan to do further field research, I scanned NGO and official reports and consulted a number of experts, researchers, and journalists who were or had been recently in the country. Apart from David Turton, few appear to have questioned the authenticity of Kuchi as an autonomy. But a number of indicators have emerged.

It was easy to establish that the Wikipedia entry was inaccurate, on three counts. First, however nomads are defined, the figure of 6 million is an exaggeration by a factor of at least two, as is the 16 per cent Turton was told by the Ministry. Secondly, to term the nomads of Afghanistan an ethnic group or ‘tribe’ either displays ignorance of Afghan history and ethnography, or is a creative fiction. Thirdly, Afghan nomads have never acknowledged an overall leader, ethnic or otherwise. Hashmat Ghani (brother of Ashraf Ghani the anthropologist who is Rector of Kabul University) is from the Ahmadzai, a tribe of Ghilji Pashtuns; in 2005 he was among the candidates for the seven seats in the Afghan parliament reserved for Kuchi men, but he was not elected.⁶ Another Ashraf Ahmadzai became head of a national Kuchi Shura or Council the same year.

Part of the answer is clear: Ahmadzai nomads live and move in the vicinity of Kabul, and thus are not only close, physically and politically, to government, but also accessible to journalists and other investigators: several recent reports on the plight of the Kuchis are based on visits to Ahmadzai near Kabul.⁷ Moreover, Ahmadzai nomads do call themselves Kuchi. Gorm Pedersen, in his excellent ethnography of the Zala Khan Khel Ahmadzai nomads, among whom he worked both in 1975-6 and when they were refugees in Pakistan in 1986, discussed at some length the meaning of *kuchey*, the Pashto equivalent of the Persian *kuchi*, as part of Zala Khan Khel identity (1994: 219-21). Kuchi/Kuci figures in the title and prominently throughout the earlier, rather wayward account of Castelli Gattinara (1970), which is mainly based on a stay in 1963 among Ahmadzai and other Pakhtuns of eastern Afghanistan.

Tom Barfield, an anthropologist who did fieldwork among Arab nomads in northern Afghanistan in the 1970s (Barfield 1981), introduces his recent report on ‘Nomadic pastoralists of Afghanistan’ with the following explanation of who the Kuchi are.

Animal husbandry conducted by nomads (*kuchis*) has always played a very large role in Afghanistan’s national economy ... Although a large majority of nomads are Pashtun, most Pashtuns are not

nomadic and nomadic pastoralists are also found among the Aimaq, Baluch, Arabs, Kirghiz, Turkmen and Uzbeks ... Afghanistan has a substantial number of nomadic people, often estimated at 10 percent of the country's total population ... They *are* commonly *known* as *kuchi*, a term derived from the Persian *kuch*, to move or migrate. In eastern Afghanistan *kuchi* *is applied to* all nomads who live in black goat hair tents (*ghizhdi*) and *are seen* as having a distinct culture, habitation and economy that sets them apart from the sedentary villagers whose lands they pass through ... Approaching Kandahar in the south *kuchis are also called powindahs* (literally grazers). In western and northern Afghanistan the term *maldar* (herdowner) replaces *kuchi* and *is applied to* any group that makes its living through flock keeping (Barfield 2004: 1, bold emphasis added).

These qualifications accord with my own observations from thirty years before. Oddly, though, Barfield makes no reference to self-identity: all the terms he discusses are 'applied' to others; he presents them as exonyms. In the rest of his report, however, he confines himself to the term 'nomad'.

In her recent investigations of the nomads in different parts of the country, Frauke de Weijer (2002; 2004; 2005a; 2005b) was indeed interested in the meaning of the term 'Kuchi' for those so designated:

Kuchi is a term that is generally used to describe the transhumant or nomadic pastoralists of Afghanistan. In fact it is a term that can cause confusion, since it refers to both a lifestyle (migratory), a production mode (livestock dependent), and a cultural identity. The more appropriate term to use for this group of people is 'pastoralists', which refers to the livestock production mode ... However in reality, many 'Kuchi' may have settled decades ago, own land or large transportation companies, and still refer to themselves as 'Kuchi'. Also those that have lost their livestock during the years of war or the recent drought and have been forced to settle (temporarily?) still refer to themselves as Kuchi, and have as yet not been able to establish an alternative livelihood (2004: 3).

For the purposes of her extensive reports, however, de Weijer's main concern is the exonymic classification of types of nomad, and she confines her use of the term 'Kuchi' to those who are migratory or recently settled because of the drought. Other recent fieldwork-based reports attest to different naming practices around the country. For example, 'in northeastern Afghanistan the term *kuchi* is used *both by kuchis themselves and others* to refer to all *kuchis* irrespective of their ethnic affiliation' (Patterson 2004: 4, emphasis added).

I infer, then, that the current situation is not very different from the 1970s: Kuchi is the general exonym for nomads, but probably still only widely used as an autonym in eastern parts of the country. At the same time it may well be the case that other nomads accept the exonym as part of their politics of identity, in circumstances that are very different today.

Identity issues

Ethnicity became established in the repertoire of social anthropology in the 1960s as a topic and an analytical concept. Not long after, it entered general discourse, a move that commonly leads to both essentialization and imprecision. The related term 'identity' has undergone much the same process. Both terms remain useful in anthropology, in my view, only as approximations of concepts that we study empirically.

Let me make my own position clear.⁸ Whether in Afghanistan or the UK or elsewhere, the seemingly simple question 'who are you?' – or 'where are you from?' or, more specifically, 'what is your family, your tribe, your group?' – *may receive different answers from the same person, varying according to who is asking the question*, for

what purpose, in what situation, and who is listening to the answer. This applies not just to group names, but also to categories of identity, such as the Afghan term *qawm*: family, tribe, descent group, people like us. In any context, identities, ethnic and other, are flexible, negotiable, multiple, and always situational. There are 'primary, though not primordial' (Jenkins 1997: 47) identities: most people will claim or admit to at least one primary identity, but not necessarily in all situations.

I would maintain that this position is common sense; it reflects most anthropologists' experience – yet it is not widely accepted outside anthropology, and I have crossed swords with a number of people over it. One occasion was the 1985 Paris conference on 'Le fait ethnique en Iran et en Afghanistan' (Digard 1987), where the geographer Daniel Balland, reporting on the 1977 Afghan census that he had helped to direct, asserted that every Afghan knew which single *qawm* he/she belonged to and would give the same answer to any questioner. My field research in Afghanistan – like that of Pierre Centlivres, Jon Anderson, and others – clearly documented that this assertion was invalid.⁹ Elsewhere Balland writes of nomads and semi-nomads named Bakhtiari in northern Afghanistan, 'the real ethnic status and origin of these people can only be conjectured', and produces examples of the different affinities some of them give themselves (Balland 1989a: 563; see R. Tapper 1998). But what exactly is 'real ethnic status', and how might it be determined? The very notion that such a thing might exist presumes, first, a knowledge of genetic links that is not usually available, and, secondly, that a reading of documentary sources is more real than personal/subjective convictions. Unfortunately, the expectation of some academics and administrators that every human being should have a single, fixed, unchanging, objectively determinable ethnic identity will always be frustrated by those cursed creatures, human beings themselves.

Behind such expectations and presumptions seems to be a conviction that we, the scholars, know better than our subjects who they really are, and that we can establish a superior truth by documentary – 'scientific' – research. I do not mean to deny the value of such research – I have spent much of my academic life involved in it! But I would argue that no identity is real or objective; if there is a reality to identity, ethnic or otherwise, then the first say in what it is must be that of the subjects themselves. We outsiders can trace their origins from documents – or genetic analysis – but we cannot force them to accept this evidence in preference to their own self-knowledge. If a people's 'ethnic identity is indeterminate' – as Balland (1989b: 742) writes of another named group – it is probably the case that there is a lively argument among them on the issue, based on current social and political practices, while their future may well be affected by the arguments of scholarly outsiders.

Ethnicity, as understood by socio-cultural anthropologists, is not a genetic, but a cultural and political matter; it is one of a number of discourses on identity. Ethnic labels and conceptions of ethnicity are ambiguous and shifting materials for the construction and manipulation of identity, by the subjects, by their neighbours – friends or enemies – by administrators, and by academics. Ethnic and other identities – religion, language, kinship, tribe, gender, occupation, region, class, nationality – are negotiable, changing, multiple, and flexible. It is futile to lay down a general definition of what constitutes, for example, a Kurd – or a Kuchi. It depends who is asking the question, in what circumstances – time, place, audience – and for what perceived purposes. Bilingualism, and multiple and disputed identities, mean that boundaries between ethnic groups are neither precise nor territorial, but contextual and shifting.

Any ascription of ethnic identity is in effect a political statement that defines the speaker and their relation to their audience as much as it defines the group or individuals so defined. The description, classification, enumeration, and mapping of ethnic groups are political acts that create order and facilitate control, whether for academic or administrative purposes. Governments manipulate such identities, whether in the interests of national political integration, or for scapegoating purposes, or to attract tourists. As for numbers and territories, there are no true figures or boundaries. A search for accuracy reflects an academic and administrative desire for order, with the danger that if it is found, this order will be taken as real and authoritative, that a group so identified and located will become fixed, and that members will be expected to conform, and be subjected to categorical policies. Such a danger should not need to be spelled out today (see Chandhoke 2005).

Exonyms and autonoms

The second half of the twentieth century witnessed many changes in the names or labels given to populations, ethnic groups, languages, countries, and nationalities. On the one hand, many countries and their nationalities are known in other languages by a variety of exonyms. Exonyms for most European peoples, for example, evolved a long time ago, in a more or less egalitarian pre-/non-colonial history. In Africa and Asia, on the other hand, colonial powers created and named nation-states, most of which continued to exist after independence, with the same borders but frequently with changed names. With autonomy comes autonomy: part of the post-colonial process of readjustment. It has become PC – both post-colonial and politically correct – to adopt such autonoms, especially for third-world, that is, ex-colonial, countries, their cities, languages, peoples, and cultures, because of the colonial and often derogatory, if not actually mistaken, connotations of the former exonyms.¹⁰

One of the first instances of change is the country now known generally as Iran. Many Western journalists today write loosely that Persia changed its name in the 1930s to Iran. Not so: the country that was known to Europeans as Persia (Perse, Persien ...) has always been Iran to its inhabitants. The change was that Reza Shah Pahlavi (reg. 1925-41), as part of his modernization programme, asked foreigners to call his country by its autonym.

After the 1978-9 revolution many Iranians in the diaspora, when using English, resumed calling their country Persia and their identity Persian, both in order to avoid the political opprobrium poured constantly on Iran by government and media in their host country, and as a way of reviving respect for their ancient (pre-Islamic) Persian/Iranian heritage. But the connotations of the differences between Iran and Persia, and the identities Iranian and Persian, are complex.

Like traditions and cultures, ethnic identities are frequently invented, not just by motivated insiders, but by outsiders: travellers, journalists, academics, and government officials. Officials and academics – anthropologists, historians, political scientists, and geographers – expect populations to fit into ordered – localized, bounded, mappable – categories. As argued earlier, such outsiders operate as though each person or people has one basic (real) identity, often claiming to know what it is better than they do themselves. They summarize and fix such classifications in ethnic maps, lists of traits, tables of percentages, and so forth. Outsiders have invented not only names and identities, but sometimes whole tribes and ethnic groups. Cases known to me include

the Khamseh (Barth 1961) and Shahsevan (R. Tapper 1988) of Iran and the **Nuristani and Pasha'i of Afghanistan** (Ovesen 1983). Are the Kuchi nomads another such case?

Not surprisingly, local groups, like nation-states, often reject exonyms and insist on being known by autonyms. Well-known instances – all standard anthropology student-fodder – where autonyms have become the PC (both senses again) exonyms include Inuit (formerly Eskimo), Roma (Gypsies), and Native Americans (Red Indians). In June 2005, the *Washington Post* published an article, 'A culture vanishes in Kalahari dust: Bushmen elders resist relocation in Botswana', that was followed a few days later by a letter from some anthropology students, quoting Lee (1979) to the effect that 'Bushmen' is no longer accepted in the anthropological community: '[T]he term Bushmen has both racist and sexist connotations ... The Kalahari is inhabited by many different peoples', they wrote, 'and they should be called by whatever name they give themselves'. But this is of course no straightforward matter. **Exonyms are often unreliable and uncomplimentary indicators of self-identity; but it is no simple task to find and establish an appropriate autonym, and to ascertain whether all those so designated accept it.**

Let us look more closely at Afghan schemes of exonymy and autonomy. People use various labels to identify others, in a relative and situational way, as part of an unarticulated classification scheme, and not in any definite and mappable sense. Outside the few cities – and even there – religious and linguistic labels have long been the primary elements of social identity; after age and gender, but before occupation, class, and locality.

Afghan governments since the early twentieth century have promoted Afghan as the proper name for a national of Afghanistan, land of the Afghans,¹¹ but for most people Afghan (*awghan*), as both autonym and exonym, still signifies Pashtun (Sunni, Pashto-speaking) and is often disowned by non-Pashtuns. Pashtuns have long dominated Afghanistan politically and demographically. The main minorities are Tajiks (Sunni, Persian-speakers), Uzbeks (Sunni, Turkic-speakers), and Hazaras (Shii, Persian-speakers). The **dominant political and ethnic cleavage is between Pashtuns, mainly in the south, and Tajiks and Uzbeks in the north. Although the sectarian cleavage between Shii and Sunni is fundamental, it is not always politically determinant: **Hazaras allied with Pashtuns against Uzbeks and Tajiks in the Saqawi events of 1929.**¹² At several points in the tragic history of the last three decades, however, conflicts have followed both major cleavages, not least in the confrontations between the (mainly Pashtun) Taliban and the (mainly Tajik) Northern Alliance, and in the mutual massacres of Taliban and Hazaras.**

All these identities have strong links across Afghanistan's frontiers, but none of them is well-defined or clear-cut, as their local usage reveals. Thus, in the early 1970s in northern Afghanistan, Durrani Pashtuns often claimed Afghan as an autonym for themselves, denying it for other Pashtuns. Tajik was a residual exonym for all non-tribal, Persian-speaking, Sunni Muslims, and only recently, perhaps echoing its use elsewhere in Afghanistan and across the frontier in Tajikistan, had it come to be a more specific autonym for certain Sunni Persian-speakers; others continued to identify themselves as Aymaq, or by the name of their local district. Uzbek was a more specific autonym for speakers of Uzbeki (a Turkic language), who included both local long-term settlers and more recent immigrants from across the northern frontier.

Exonyms were particularly complex. Notable among them was the term '**Parsiwan**'¹³ (literally, 'Persian-speaking'), used differently by virtually every group, and

acknowledged as an autonym by none, at least in the north. Durrani Pashtuns, for example, referred to non-Durrani Pashtuns – though they were not consistent as to who was included – as Parsiwan, with the implication that those so labelled spoke Persian secretly at home and thus were not real Pashtuns. They would also talk more loosely of all Sunni non-Pashtuns as Parsiwan, but sometimes as Uzbek, an exonym that thus included Persian-speakers (Tajiks and Aymaqs) as well as all Turkic-speakers (Uzbeks, Turkmens, Kazakhs, etc.), but not the Shii Hazaras. Self-designated Uzbeks similarly used Parsiwan for everybody else, including not only Persian-speaking Tajiks, Aymaqs, and Hazaras, but also all Pashtuns. People of all groups would refer to the major political-ethnic cleavage locally as Afghaniyya versus Uzbekiyya: the Pashtuns (whose ancestors had arrived in the region around 1900 and who dominated largely through their tribal ties with the rulers in Kabul) versus the Uzbeks (usually allied with other local Turkic- and Persian-speakers).

After 1978 – during the years of revolution, invasion, occupation, resistance, and civil war – both Afghan governments and foreign political analysts insisted that ethnic identity was no longer the key factor in determining political behaviour; rather, we should look to ideologies and programmes.¹⁴ Since the late 1990s, ethnic analysis has returned to fashion. The strong identification of the Taliban with Pashtun (especially Durrani) ethnicity, the frequent occurrence of apparent ‘ethnic’ massacres by and of the Taliban, and bitter conflicts between Uzbeks and Pashtuns persuaded analysts to dust off the old maps and once again to discuss ethnicity as a fixed – primordial – determinant of political loyalties and conflicts. Since the US-led invasion in late 2001, ethnic identity has become an important tool for both journalistic political analysis and government and NGO reconstruction efforts.

It seems clear that ethnic identities have regained a political salience lost in the 1980s.¹⁵ If so, it is also undoubtedly the case that their importance is at least in part due, as before, to the expectations of observers and authorities. I know of no evidence that practices of ethnic labelling and identification are any less complex today than they were thirty-five years ago, yet recent reports indicate a general acceptance of the easy solution: maps and diagrams that fix boundaries and identities and say little or nothing about situation, meaning, and change.

But there are exceptions. The complex politics of identity in contemporary Afghanistan are suggested by a recent account: Muhammad Tahir’s report from northern Afghanistan for the Institute for War and Peace Reporting (IWPR) is worth quoting at some length – not least because it returns us to the problem of Kuchi identity.

Kuchis in Kunduz, 2006

Turkmen community leaders in Afghanistan say they are being deprived of recognition as a separate ethnic group for political reasons ... Ethnic identity is a contentious subject in Afghanistan. Belonging to a particular group could decide whose side you fought on in the past, and who you are now aligned with politically. Numbers are important, too, since the more there are of a particular group, the more likely they are to be able to press for cultural recognition and rights. For example, the classification ‘Kuchi’ – a generic term for Afghan nomads – became important last year when the group was made a nationwide ‘constituency’ in its own right for the September parliamentary election. This was done in recognition of the problems of pinning down a transitory population to the province-based constituencies used for the rest of the population. As a result, the Kuchis had ten elected seats earmarked for them in the lower house of parliament, three of them for women. Sayed Shah, who stood as a candidate for the provincial council in Kunduz and hoped to win support among his fellow

ethnic Turkmen, who make up the majority of the population in his home Chardere district, found that many of his potential voters had been spirited away at the stroke of a pen. Election officers registered thousands of Turkmen in the district of Chardere as Kuchi even though they do not regard themselves as such. That meant they were unable to vote for Sayed Shah, or anyone else in fact, in the provincial ballot. According to Sayed Shah, there are no nomads among the Turkmen community in his district. Historically, many of the Turkmen of northern Afghanistan were nomadic, but they are now settled and in any case are culturally quite distinct from the Pashtun nomads who constitute the majority of Kuchi. **The special status accorded to nomads in the election was clearly aimed at promoting the political representation of Pashtun Kuchi, many of whom live in great poverty, and the list of winning candidates reflects that intention ...**

Challenged about the re-classification by IWPR, some officials in Chardere district refused to respond; those who tried were at a loss to come up with an explanation. In this instance, the reason for the apparent manipulation seems to be about manipulating voter numbers for local political reasons, rather than an effort to disenfranchise Turkmen or indeed favour Pashtun nomads. But as people here begin to realize the future consequences of being shifted to a new category, the move has gone down badly among a community who feel disenfranchised as it is ...

Another practice that appears to be going unchallenged is the classification of ethnic Turkmen as 'Afghans' when ID documents are being issued. The practice has been reported in the Aq-Depa, Chardere and other districts of Kunduz. All citizens of the country, whatever their origin, are correctly known as Afghans. But apart from this definition of nationality and citizenship, ID papers also have a section indicating ethnic origin, where the bearer is marked down as a Pashtun, Tajik or any of a dozen or more peoples who make up this diverse nation (Tahir 2006, used with permission).

Such manipulations, if repeated in other provinces, may have led to considerable overestimates of the numbers of Kuchi nomads, on the one hand, and underestimates of the Turkmen, on the other, and to the disenfranchisement of many of the former and the deprivation of the 'cultural recognition and rights' of the latter.

It is not just ethnic labels and classifications that are situational, changing, and open to manipulation. The distinction between exonyms and autonyms echoes an older one in anthropology, between etic and emic analytical categories, which forces attention onto similar problems. As the Kunduz case illustrates, the category 'nomad' deserves this attention too. When, and why, do people labelled nomads regard themselves as such?

Nomad as analytical category

An observer seeing people who herd livestock, dwell in tents in the steppes and mountains, and migrate with pack animals might not hesitate to categorize them as nomads. But how do nomads label themselves and locate themselves in the world? What determines their self-identity? Does it depend, as with ethnic identity, on who is asking the question – election officer, tax-collector, census-taker, customer, ethnographer, traveler, journalist? Does it reflect interaction with others – with settled society, another cultural-linguistic group, the state, or government? Has government imposed an identity on them, according to a general administrative scheme of classification?

I did field research among Shahsevan nomads in Iranian Azarbaijan between 1963 and 1968, and Durrani Pashtun nomads in northern Afghanistan between 1968 and 1972. When comparing Shahsevan and Durrani, a puzzle that I confronted early on was the difference in their self-identities. They were tent-dwelling pastoralists who went on long spring and autumn migrations between winter and summer quarters, but while **Shahsevan self-identified as *ashayer* (mobile tent-dwellers, nomads – see below), the Durrani called themselves *maldar* (stock-keepers, pastoralists)**. The Shahsevan, like most pastoral nomads in Iran, shared little with the Persian-speaking city-dwellers who

had dominated Iranian politics and culture since the 1920s. But they shared the Turkic identity of their settled village and urban neighbours, from whom they were distinct mainly by virtue of their nomadic migrations and their *alaçiq* tents, both of which were of great symbolic value to them. The Durrani, by contrast, strongly valued their membership of the nationally dominant ethnic group in Afghanistan. In the north, a combination of their Durrani identity, Pashto language, and Sunni religion set them apart as a powerful minority from their Uzbek, Turkmen, Tajik, Aymaq, Arab, and Hazara neighbours – some of whom also lived in tents and went on migrations. Not surprisingly, then, the Durrani put little value on nomadism, which was for them merely an uncomfortable means for pursuing a production system that differentiated them from their powerful cousins in Kabul.

Issues of definition and labelling have long plagued anthropology. Students of pastoral nomadism have argued over the classification of types of nomadism (by location, pattern, length, and direction of movements, and extent of settlement) and pastoralism (camel, ovine, bovine, and so forth). Of course, **the English term ‘nomad’ etymologically connotes pastoralism; but it has come to imply mobility without the pastoralism, and includes a wide range of mobile ways of life, from gypsies and hunter-gatherers to contemporary transnational lifestyles.** In recent years, academic discussions (in English) have dropped the term ‘nomad’ in favour of ‘pastoralist’, or sometimes more specifically ‘nomadic/mobile pastoralist’.¹⁶ But these definitional, labelling, and typological exercises were conducted on the basis of academic analytical categories, and did not take account of the autonymic self-identities or classifications of the people so labelled. Moreover, they often started from the same kinds of essentializing presumption as ethnic mapping, counting, and labelling: that each person or group belongs to one type, and stays there.¹⁷

Meanwhile, another process has contributed significantly to the exonymous fixing of nomads: the proliferation of international congresses to discuss ‘pastoral peoples’, notably – but paradoxically – more recent meetings at which some at least of the participants have been nomadic pastoralists themselves, or from that background.

World congresses of pastoralists

What theoretical issues have specialists on nomadism and mobile pastoralism considered it important to discuss? Initially – in the first modernization period, running from the nineteenth to the mid-twentieth century – discussions of pastoral nomadism focused on political aspects: nomads’ mobility and their military potential to challenge governments, combined with their failure to settle down and be good citizens of a modern state. Little attention was paid to their economy: pastoralism was poorly understood, either as a way of life or as part of national or international systems of production and exchange. **Nomadism was a political problem, for which the solution was settlement.**

Following disastrous government attempts at compulsory settlement, such as that of Reza Shah in Iran in the 1930s, and with the growing evidence of environmental problems in the arid zone, researchers started to investigate pastoral production systems and ecologies. A polarization developed between those who, often in furtherance of a political and ideological agenda, declared pastoral nomads to be culturally backward, economically wasteful, and ecologically destructive, and those who recognized their role in both production and conservation.

International conferences on pastoralism and nomadism date from the period of post-war internationalism. Expert geographers, anthropologists, economists, and others gathered to pool their knowledge and discuss common issues and differences, for example between the deserts and savannahs of Africa and the Near and Middle East, and the mountain rangelands of Western Asia; later, they were joined by experts on South America and South, Central, and Inner Asia.

When I began my own studies of nomads in the early 1960s, the proceedings of two UNESCO meetings on nomadism in the arid zone had just been published.¹⁸ A few anthropologists such as Fredrik Barth participated; issues discussed included ecology and land use. In a multi-disciplinary symposium convened at the 1961 meeting of the American Association for the Advancement of Science, a major theme was human-animal-land relations (Leeds & Vayda 1965), as it was at the first such gathering of anthropologists, the 1964 Burg Wartenstein Symposium on Pastoral Nomadism (never published). In the later 1960s, at meetings in Budapest (Földes 1969) and Bochum (Kraus 1969), development issues were the focus.

Anthropologists who had worked in nomad societies started to come together regularly, for example in panels at the 1969 and 1970 American Anthropological Association meetings (Irons & Dyson-Hudson 1972; Salzman 1971) and at the 1973 International Union of Anthropological and Ethnological Sciences (IUAES) meeting (Weissleder 1978), where issues of definition and comparison came to the fore. The Paris research team on Ecology and Anthropology of Pastoral Societies convened a major conference in 1975, resulting in the book *Pastoral production and society* (Équipe 1979) and a journal of the same name that ran for twenty issues (1977-87). The Marxist approach then fashionable – particularly in the Paris team – focused attention on questions such as whether there was a pastoral or a nomadic mode of production, and whether pastoral nomad society was characteristically egalitarian.

In 1978 the IUAES founded the Commission on Nomadic Peoples, chaired by Philip Salzman, who also for many years edited the journal *Nomadic Peoples*.¹⁹ Meetings of the Commission have resulted in a series of important edited volumes. International congresses on pastoralists multiplied, focusing on development issues, including land tenure and conservation, sustainable grazing, and stock-raising practices. The focus and frequency of these meetings was largely a function of the need to interest international organizations, governments and NGOs, and to obtain funding, publicity, and support for research on peoples who were increasingly recognized as vulnerable victims of a series of terrible droughts in East Africa and the Sahel.

A significant role in attracting Western public and media interest in nomads and pastoralists was played by a number of documentary films in the 1970s and 1980s, notably several for Granada TV's *Disappearing World* and BBC's *Under the Sun* series. Most of these were located in East Africa, including studies of the Masai, the Mursi, and the Hamar.²⁰ David and Judith MacDougall's outstanding trilogies on the Jie and the Turkana had considerable impact in the worlds of anthropology and documentary film, but were rarely shown on television.²¹ The image of African pastoralists painted in all these films countered, to a considerable extent, the wider publicity being given to them as passive victims. Among their important and innovative features was the way in which the main characters – women and men – spoke articulately and persuasively about their lives, their predicaments, their philosophies, and their democratic modes of decision-making.

As with development discourses and practices generally, it became important in the 1980s for pastoralism congresses to be participatory, to be located in the territories of

pastoralist groups, and to involve pastoralists themselves, both voicing their own local concerns and learning about wider perspectives and comparative issues. The last such meeting I attended was the 1992 Conference on Nomadism and Development held at Shahr-e Kord in Iran, in the territory of the Bakhtiari nomads, who played the role of hosts, though strictly on government terms. The four hundred-odd local participants included representatives of many Iranian nomad groups; the fifty-odd foreign 'experts', from all continents, also included people with pastoral backgrounds. At the most recent international congress I know of – in Ethiopia in January 2005 – the official delegates were entirely pastoralists, with NGO experts – usually Euro-Americans – in the background, apparently as mere facilitators.²²

Over the half-century history of pastoral congresses, several processes can be identified. First, not surprisingly, theoretical academic issues have been subordinated to practical, developmental concerns, notably land tenure and indigenous rights, environment and conservation, the organization of domestic economy, gender roles and relations, relations with governments, sedentarization, education, new technologies. Broadly, there is a marked division between those who focus on political and cultural aspects of nomadism as movement, and those who examine pastoralism as economy and ecology.

Secondly, with the gathering of pastoralists from different regions, perhaps the most important role of the non-pastoralist organizers and facilitators, whether academics or UN employees or international NGOs, is that they, initially at least, determined the shared identity of the participants. Further, reports of these meetings suggest a process of re-examining identity on all sides, with a focus on both difference and similarity: what do we have in common, how are we different, are the differences or the similarities more important, and for what purposes and in what circumstances? To an extent the similarities are pre-given, as both the rationale for the meetings and the motive for producing a common statement of shared concerns, even policies. Differences, meanwhile, feed into the cultural richness of the meeting, but tend to be suppressed in the interests of identifying and highlighting common problems and fostering unity as an international pressure group. Many representatives – men and women – have learned how to formulate and articulate their own concerns and priorities so as to bring wider attention and a greater input of resources. The constitution of pastoral nomad self-identities is clearly under review.

Governments and nomads

Sometimes the **state attempts to determine pastoral nomad identities.** In the case most familiar to me, Iran, before the 1979 revolution official and popular discourses equated and merged 'nomads' and 'tribes' in the standardized phrase *ilat-o-'ashayer*; this conjoined the arabized plural of the Turkish *il/el* – people, (nomad) tribe – with the plural of the Arabic *'ashira* – tribe, tribal section; all tribally organized groups were assumed to be nomads, and all nomads to be tribally organized under powerful chiefs. Indeed, for centuries, ruling dynasties in Iran had been of nomad tribal origins or came to power with tribal military support, and some tribal chiefs had recently played important roles at the state level. However, several nomad groups were not tribally organized, and many tribes were not nomads.

Fredrik Barth's 1958 fieldwork among the Basseri was the first systematic study of one of the nomad tribes of Iran. In his 1961 monograph, Barth analysed Basseri local camp communities as functions of the pastoral nomad economy and way of life, and

the higher-level tribe and its sections as products of the nomads' political relations with government, through their powerful tribal chief – an analysis that turned out to be valid for other major tribal groups of Iran. In 1956 the government formally deposed the hereditary chiefs of all the tribes. By the 1970s the tribes and their chiefs were considered to have ceased to exist as political elements in society, while the remaining pastoral nomads (their numbers much reduced by unfavourable economic conditions) were marginalized to the extent that they could be regarded as colourful, folkloric relics from the past: a tourist attraction. Government facilitated the access of foreign researchers to tribal areas, and urban Iranians would drive out to the mountains to spend a day as uninvited guests of once-turbulent nomads (Beck 1982). The Pahlavi regime celebrated the defeat of the tribes in the 1977 Isfahan Festival of Popular Traditions: artefacts, dress, music, dance, and other cultural products were taken out of their social and especially political contexts and displayed in public as museum pieces – a 'culture bazaar', as one Iranian anthropologist described it (Shahshahani 1986: 75-6).

The 1978-9 revolution brought a revival in the fortunes of the nomad tribes. Ayatollah Khomeini declared them to be one of two sectors of the population particularly oppressed by the previous regime – the other being the mullahs. Through the newly formed Organization for Nomad Affairs (Sazman-e Omur-e 'Ashayer),²³ the new government made efforts to foster the social, economic, and cultural life of the nomads, and to bring them the same services and facilities as the rest of the population; it also continued the process of depoliticizing the nomad tribes started under the Pahlavi regime, not least by formally redefining them. The standard term became '*ashayer*, with the primary meaning of pastoral nomad, sometimes with the addition of 'migrating' (*kuchandeh*). The 1987 census of '*ashayer-e kuchandeh* defined them as people who have a tribal (*qabile'i*) social organization, make their living from pastoralism, and go on migrations. Nomads belong to *tayfeh*, which are usually clans or descent groups; the *tayfeh* form confederacies (*ilat*) usually on the basis of common descent, locality, and culture (Islamic Republic of Iran 1991: 6-7). There is no mention of chiefs or political leadership. These official definitions in effect recognized changed political realities: the chiefs no longer exist. But they also fix current reality in a way that facilitates government control (see R. Tapper 1994; 2002).

A parallel process has been the naturalization of the nomad tribes as part of the environment. For example, the following were two adjacent news items posted by the Islamic Republic News Agency (IRNA) on 18 October 1998:

'Lorestan tribes start autumn migration' Khoramabad, Lorestan – 'over 17,000 tribal families with 1.5 million livestock have started their autumn migration in this southwestern province'. [There follow extended details of the tribes' economic productivity and the government provisions for supporting them.]

'Gray cranes arriving in central province' Arak, Central province – 'the first group of migratory birds, mainly gray cranes, have arrived in Central Province from the frigid planes of Siberia'. [There follow again statistics, details of their movements, numbers, and mention of their being a protected species.]

The nomad tribes have not only been depoliticized and naturalized, they have also been feminized or emasculated. Photographs of nomads taken up to the mid-twentieth century were usually of armed men, on horseback. In recent years, pictures of women have become far more common, doubtless in part because nomad women's dress is usually more colourful than men's. In summer 2005, the picture album on the official

website of the Organization for Nomadic Affairs contained twenty-four pictures, twenty-two with people in them, all female: not a man or boy in sight!²⁴

Since the early 1990s, nomads and nomad cultures have returned to the tourist brochures as part of Iran's – sometimes reluctant – commercial self-image. A dozen or more Iran-based companies offer 'nomad tours', visiting camps of various nomad tribes. On 16 July 2005, a Google search for nomad+tours+Iran produced 23,000 hits. On 4 September 2006 the result was 151,000 hits. A few days later, the Cultural Heritage and Tourism Organization of Iran announced the launch of a new 'Tribal tourism project' (CHTO 2006).

Back to the Kuchis: ethnic label or ethnic libel?

Three decades of conflict and catastrophe in Afghanistan have kept the tourists away and ensured that delegates to international pastoral congresses have not (so far as I am aware) included Afghan nomads, who have consequently not participated in the global processes of identity review I suggested above. Yet even after such tragic events, in the new world order of identity politics and 'rights and culture as emergent global discourses',²⁵ they too must surely be making the most of names and identities as resources.

After the US-led invasion of 2001, nomads in much of Afghanistan found their movements severely restricted. Settled peoples, particularly Hazaras in the central mountains, accused Pashtun nomads of siding with their co-ethnic Taliban, and denied them access to their former pastures, often violently. In the north too, Uzbek and Tajik warlords reportedly took over nomads' pastures for opium poppy cultivation.²⁶

The nomads' plight has attracted the attention of numerous organizations, if not the funding necessary to remedy it. There has been strong Western media interest, partly for romantic reasons, but also the **invasion was justified as bringing modernity for all Afghans, especially the oppressed and deprived: women and nomads.**

The Afghan government has taken some positive steps, for example by ensuring **nomad political participation,** both in elections and through representation in parliament and local councils – though, as illustrated in the report from Kunduz quoted above, the electoral registration process proved open to local political manipulation. Nomad affairs are the explicit responsibility of the **Ministry of Frontier and Tribal Affairs,** but they also concern several other departments, such as the Ministry of Agriculture.

Government has commissioned surveys of nomad socio-economic conditions, and taken steps to alleviate the results of the drought, but apparently little more. Investigations of, or concerning, the Kuchis culminated in November 2005 in a USAID-sponsored 'Conference on Pastoralists (Kuchi)'. Reporting on the conference, in which she was the prime mover, de Weijer (2005a; 2005b) gives a fascinating account of the participation and priorities of Kuchi representatives, and of the conference discourse. Interestingly, as I suggested happened in earlier international congresses, the development of consensus among the Kuchi participants appears to have forged a shared identity; yet the list of participants indicates that the vast majority were from the east and the vicinity of Kabul – the territory of the Ahmadzai and other self-identified Kuchis, who clearly continue to dominate discourses and practices of representation. The central debate in the conference seems to have been the classic polarization between supporters of nomadism as a cultural and economic asset, and opponents who consider nomads to be an anachronism in a modern state.²⁷ This time it was phrased as

a choice between two alternative policies: (1) strengthening the 'pastoralist way of life' (favoured by the Ministry of Tribal Affairs, as Turton's e-mail makes clear); and (2) 'facilitating alternative livelihood support' (i.e. settlement – as promised in the Persian version of the Constitution²⁸).

Both policies beg the question: do the nomads want to continue as nomads or to settle? One extreme view is that Kuchi are essentially nomads and hence cannot thrive in settled conditions. Dupree, for example, declared:

Show me a nomad who wants to settle down, and I'll show you a man who is psychologically ill ... Many Afghan officials believe that nomads genuinely desire to settle down if given the opportunity. Nomads, however, look on themselves as superior beings ... Any nomad desiring to settle down would be considered psychopathic by his peers ... The nomad continues to look on the farmer with contempt. Even after he becomes semi-nomadic, semi-sedentary and eventually fully sedentary, his pride of nomadic ancestry makes him feel superior to his agelong farmer neighbors (Dupree 1980 [1973]: 168, 179).

Some nomads do put such a high value on nomadism: in Iran, for example, in 1941, following a relaxation of the government-enforced settlement, Basseri and Shahsevan nomads, among others, resumed migrating even though they had no livestock to herd (Barth 1961: 149; R. Tapper 1997: 294-5). Contemporary journalists have reported the same for Afghanistan: for example, in winter 2003-4 Scott Baldauf met some Kuchis 'midway on their 250-mile trek from the Hazarajat highlands to Laghman Province [near Kabul], where they graze their flocks during the winter months'. Sajad Mohammad, a Kuchi elder, told him, 'At the beginning of time we were Kuchis, and we will die Kuchis ... We don't know any other life' (Baldauf 2004). But Dupree's generalizations are unfounded for nomads in most other parts of the country, who are happy to settle in favourable conditions: with land and water for farming, or secure employment. The Durrani *maldar* I knew had no romantic sentiments about seasonal nomadic migrations, and would not have conducted them unless they had to, that is, when their animals needed pasture and there was pasture to be had by migrating (R. Tapper 1991). Baldauf indeed quotes another Kuchi elder:

If I had land, I would be like you. I could go to school, read something in a book. All that we have is dust. We have cold at night. And if it rains, we all sleep in the same tent, including the animals ... But if we gave up this life, what would you do? If we don't graze our animals, who is going to provide meat in the cities? ... You need us.

I suspect that most Afghan nomads are more pragmatic than some of their advocates in their estimate of 'the nomad way of life', and have similar views regarding the name 'Kuchi'. Sajad Mohammad's affirmation of Kuchi identity implies both nomadism and membership of a separate ethnic group: Pashtuns, but different from their settled, educated, powerful cousins in nearby Kabul. In the current situation, more than in the early 1970s, acknowledging the name 'Kuchi' may bring access to resources offered by government and NGOs. But in relations with settled non-Pashtun neighbours, nomads in much of the country might be expected to avoid suspicions of Taliban associations by continuing to cultivate an identity such as *maldar*, which plays down both mobility and Pashtun tribal allegiance and stresses pastoralism. The near-universal use of the term 'Kuchi' as an exonym will doubtless persist, at least until a benevolent central government and the rule of law are established for the people of this desperately poor, war-ridden country.

NOTES

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¹ From the official English version of the Constitution ratified in January 2004 (<http://president.gov.af/english/constitution.mspx>). The Persian version of Article 14 is rather different, and translates as follows: '... improve economic, social and living conditions of farmers and herders (*maldaran*), and settlement (*eskan*) and improvement of the livelihood of the nomads (*kuchian*)' (<http://www.president.gov.af/pashto-dari/constitution.mspx>).

² For example, Amani (2005), Biswas (2005), Coghlan & Freeman (2005), Gall (2005), Huggler (2005).

³ For example Constable (2000), Longstreath (2002), Refugees International (2003; 2004), Winter (2004). In a later report on nomads near Nangrahar in the east, however, Constable (2004) makes no mention of Kuchi.

⁴ <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kuchi>, accessed June 2005 and again July 2007.

⁵ SSRC Project HR 1141/1 on 'The role of nomads in a region of Northern Afghanistan'; see N. Tapper (1991).

⁶ See Birch (2004) for a report on nomads who did not accept the government-sanctioned leadership of Ghani, an 'Afghan-American ... businessman with a transport company in Pakistan and a home in Virginia.'

⁷ For example Amani (2004), Baldauf (2004), Ghafari (2005).

⁸ The genealogy of my position should be obvious: through Barth (1969) and Leach (1954) to Weber; see R. Tapper (1987).

⁹ See R. Tapper (1987), and Centlivres (1979) and Anderson (1978), cited there. In the paper he published in the Paris conference proceedings, Balland (1987) concedes the complexity of the question, and that ambiguities, situational variations, and changes do occur.

¹⁰ I use the term '(ex/post)-colonial', though neither Iran nor Afghanistan, the main focuses of discussion, were colonized in modern times.

¹¹ 'Afghani' is a common exonym for inhabitants of Afghanistan, probably from South Asian or Iranian usage. In Afghanistan, Afghani is the official unit of currency, popularly known as *rupya*; it is also the local term for the Pashto language.

¹² The brief interregnum when the Tajik Habibullah Ghazi, also known as Bacha-i Saqaw ('son of the water-carrier'), ruled in Kabul (see Dupree 1980 [1973]: 453ff.; McClesney 1999).

¹³ Other versions are Parsiban, Farsiwan, Farsiban, Farsi-zaban.

¹⁴ In R. Tapper (1984) I suggested that already in 1972 the class dimension was replacing the ethnic dimension in local politics in the north.

¹⁵ See Glatzer (1998); Giustozzi (2005).

¹⁶ See de Weijer, quoted earlier; and Humphrey & Sneath (1999), who reject the term 'nomadism' because of its romantic connotations. For earlier discussions see Salzman (1980), commenting on Dyson-Hudson (1972) and Dahl & Hjort (1980).

¹⁷ See my response to Schuyler Jones's recent argument for a categorical distinction between transhumance and pastoral nomadism (Jones 2005; R. Tapper 2005).

¹⁸ UNESCO (1959; 1962). As far as I know, these were the first meetings to discuss nomadism on an inter-regional basis; there had been earlier local, national, and regional conferences, for example a series started in 1953 in Sudan, and others devoted to Africa, or East Africa alone.

¹⁹ See <http://users.ox.ac.uk/~cnp/c>.

²⁰ Curling & Llewellyn-Davies (1974; 1976); Head & Lydall (1990-2); Llewellyn-Davies (1984a; 1984b); Woodhead & Turton (1974-85). Several non-African pastoralist groups also featured in the two TV series.

²¹ MacDougall (1970-4); MacDougall & MacDougall (1977-81).

²² For an ethnographic account of the meeting by one of the organizers, see <http://www.danadeclaration.org/daoudtarireport.pdf>.

²³ Also translated as Organization for the Nomadic Peoples of Iran.

²⁴ <http://www.ashayer.gov.ir/AlbumAks.htm>. By September 2006, the Organization for Nomadic Affairs had a new site: <http://www.ashayer.ir>; in the new picture section, women and girls still predominate heavily, but there are a few images of men and boys, even one of a man fully armed (= 'clothing'). On the same new website, definitions of 'nomad tribes' now include a political element.

²⁵ From a vast recent literature, see, for example, Cowan, Dembour & Wilson (2001).

²⁶ See Favre (2003); Karokhel (2003); McGeough (2005); Wily (2004a; 2004b). Nomads were also excluded from Hazarajat summer pastures during the 1980s (Mousavi 1998: 187).

²⁷ See R. Tapper (1974: 135ff.) for early 1970s Afghanistan, and (1994: 196) for the same debate in the 1992 Isfahan conference.

²⁸ See note 1, above.

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Qui sont les Kuchi ? Identité de soi parmi les nomades d'Afghanistan

Résumé

« Kuchi », un mot farsi d'Afghanistan désignant « ceux qui migrent », est le nom générique donné depuis des dizaines d'années par les Afghans, aussi bien que par les étrangers, aux nomades d'Afghanistan. Alors qu'aujourd'hui, la plupart de ces nomades, sinon tous, ainsi d'ailleurs que beaucoup d'anciens nomades sédentarisés depuis longtemps, se réclament de ce nom, ils étaient peu nombreux à se désigner ainsi dans les années 1960 et 1970. L'auteur examine ici l'usage des mots « Kuchi » et « nomades » et les resitue dans le contexte plus large des pratiques de dénomination ethniques en Afghanistan, des débats anthropologiques sur le nomadisme pastoral et des relations entre gouvernement et nomades en Afghanistan et dans l'Iran voisin.

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