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THE ROLE OF LANGUAGE IN DEFINING AFGHAN NATIONALISM

FARID ZAREIE

Introduction

In an attempt to explicate the social construction of an Afghan national identity in the twentieth century, one cannot disregard the decisive role of *language*. However, the difficulty to define language, *per se*, is as difficult as separately delineating Afghanistan's historical passages as well as defining nationalism according to scholarly practices of contextualization. The context of this study, due to its scope, is the modern geopolitical boundaries of the Afghan nation-state during the reign of two Durrani rulers: Habibullah (1901-1919) and Amanullah (1919-1929). This particular context is used advisedly, yet should be approached with great caution, primarily because the process of subjective or collective identification is not always the same in every context. The interest is therefore, partially, to empirically theorize types of imagined communities and identities beyond the scope of nationalism theories. That includes subnational, transnational, cosmopolitan, and ethnic identities across spatio-temporal contexts. That is, people are consciously, and perhaps routinely switching between different registers of Afghan subjectivity in order to instrumentalize relationships.¹ All of the aforementioned concepts assume fixed forms of identities that are interpellated rather than creating avenues to explore the process of identity construction. Only an investigation drawing on ethnographic and psychoanalytical prisms would remedy such a problematic. Yet, that is beyond reach of an inquiry of the past. However, similar to Shah Mahmoud Hanifi's discussion around markets and states in nineteenth century Afghanistan, we can at least say that there is a range of possible relationships between identities and states

¹ Magnus Marsden, "Muslim Cosmopolitanism? Transnational Life in northern Pakistan," *Journal of Asian Studies* 67, 1 (2008): 220.

“in time and space that oscillate between complementary and oppositional polarities.”² Essentially, the nature of this idea alludes to non-complimentary paradigms in our broader understanding of people’s experiences or self-understanding as Afghans. Thus, we must approach the role of language in identity making with significant critical humility.

To alleviate a syndrome that would lead any or similar cultural investigations as purely theoretical or descriptive, this study focuses on two horizons. First, a *linguistic anthropological* point of view, which investigates questions surrounding the construction of Afghan-ness and Afghan identity, linguistically. Secondly, from an *ethnolinguistic* view, which is a framework that attempts to clarify how culture and life-worlds informs language. For our purposes, the design of this study deals with *printed* language in twentieth century Afghanistan. Given the limited amount of data, two publications will furnish the larger thesis of this study: a newspaper by the name of *Seraj al-Akhbar-e Afghaniyah* (1911-1918), and the printed version of codified legal regulations and procedures called *Nezam Namas* (1919-1923). Through a close reading of these texts, this review will investigate to what extent social implications around printing as a systematized centripetal movement towards an apex that is Afghan national identity, recognize the presence of multiple inter/intra-subjective realities – ‘national’ and otherwise.

In mere theoretical terms, printing is a mode of objectifying language, used by the twentieth century Afghan elites as a means to objectify subjects into a national identity. The politics around printing in Afghanistan maintains that the linguistic practice of printing and the powers surrounding it is essentially an elite practice aimed to produce a ‘coherent peoples’. The nationalist project is therefore essentially a separate social context from that of the non-elite – or those not directly or indirectly engaged in the practice of printing – in the country. This does not bare a dualistic form of contextualism. Rather, the ‘archeology’, in the

² Shah Mahmoud Hanifi, *Connecting Histories in Afghanistan: Market Relations and State Formation on a Colonial Frontier* (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 2008).

Foucauldian tradition, of Afghan unification is tied to other social currents that can be seen through the lens of what Arjun Appadurai call *scapes* that would shed light on the various global and cultural flows causing a constant disjuncture, and with it, the nationalist project in Afghanistan. Put simply, as Antonio Gramsci argues in his *Prison Notebooks*, language is not parthenogenetic; it is constituted and constitutes other sociocultural elements. However, we can constrain ourselves only to the scope of printed language in relation to other linguistic practices.

The second aim of this study is to debunk the fixed analytical parameters surrounding nationalism theory in its discussion around language. Following Peter Wogan's review of Benedict Anderson's *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and the Spread of Nationalism*, western ideologies of language presumes that written language has an inherent permanence, preserves memory, has a certain fixity, and allows its readers to "think differently – to change their conception of time, visualize a different community."³ Print language in Anderson's account and in western ideology, is associated with cognition, imagining the nation, universalism, monolingualism, and permanence. Orality on the other hand, is associated with emotions, love of the nation rather than the intellectual imagining of the nation, particularism, multilingualism, and transience. The majority production and producers in the early twentieth century Afghanistan, are anchored in the very same western notions of print-oral dichotomy, thus representing a relationship between 'high' and 'low' languages. In effect, *Seraj al-Akhbar* and the *Nezam Namas* are considerably spearheading a 'Bourgeois Public Sphere', according to Jürgen Habermas, in which a small local elite was able to reflect upon its own existence and role in the Afghan community.⁴ Habermas defines the Bourgeois Public Sphere as "the sphere of private individuals assembled into a public

³ Peter Wogan, "Imagined Communities reconsidered: Is print-capitalism what we think it is?," *Anthropological Theory* 1, no. 4 (2001): 411.

⁴ Jürgen Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1991).

body, which almost immediately laid claim to the officially regulated ‘intellectual newspapers’ for use against the public authority itself.”⁵ The public authority according to Habermas is the state, but the invocation of Habermas’ concept in the context of twentieth century Afghanistan entails a redefinition in order to reckon with the fluid yet, contested space that it was. More importantly, the aim is to illustrate how and to what extent native or local intelligentsia, a minority in Afghanistan, attempts to advance its ideology and social class through various channels of communication, i.e. printed texts. In that sense, it will be argued that both the practice and the analysis of printed language in articulating Afghan nationalism, disregards what Mikhail Bakhtin calls *heteroglossia* and *dialogism*.⁶

According to Bakhtin, context has a primacy over text and meanings are constantly interacting and conditioning each other, even within a unitary national language. In essence, and perhaps adding to erroneous nature of nationalism theories, there is *polyglossia*, in which there is a simultaneous presence of multiple “national languages interacting within a single cultural system.”⁷ Therefore, language cannot be stripped of its heteroglot context and reified into an, ‘external authoritative discourse’ without the presence of ‘internally-persuasive discourse’, enabling subjective re-accentuation of privileged language. Essentially, people with diverse linguistic registers must play an active role in what is really a notional, national identity in order to transform literacy into a common sphere of influence and participation. With that in mind, this study will locate the place of language in the making of ‘Afghans’.

⁵ Jürgen Habermas, Sara Lennox, Frank Lennox, “The Public Sphere: An Encyclopedia Article (1964)”, *New German Critique*, No. 3, Autumn, 1974, 52.

⁶ M. M. Bakhtin, *The Dialogical Imagination*, ed. Michael Holquist, trans. Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981).

⁷ M. M. Bakhtin, *The Dialogical Imagination*, 431.

Mahmud Tarzi & Seraj al-Akhbar

Vartan Gregorian writes that *Seraj al-Akhbar-e Afghaniyah* (Torch of the news of Afghans) was the “first successful news medium in modern Afghan history” and it “helped formulate the basic tenets of Afghan nationalism and modernism.”⁸ This periodical was not the first published source of national and international news available in the country, but as a bi-monthly newspaper, *Seraj al-Akhbar* coincided with the development of print-capitalism as a mass-commodity in Afghanistan. According to Benedict Anderson, print-capitalism as a mass-commodity has the potential to lay the foundation for national consciousness in four ways. First, by creating unified fields of communication. Second, it presents a ‘fixity to language’. Third, it renders an ability to transform images of antiquity, centralized into the essence of the nation, and finally, it creates ‘languages-of-power.’⁹ This section will address each of these in relation to *Seraj al-Akhbar* and Afghanistan in the early twentieth-century.

Written solely in Persian, with significant number of Arabic words as well as grammatical inconsistencies, one can derive the newspaper’s socio-cultural imperative from Tarzi’s first volume of the newspaper:

“News reporting is a mirror of the world sitting in ones house, introducing the person to the world and keeping him informed. Even conditions within ones own home and motherland is better depicted and more beautifully received.”¹⁰

⁸ Vartan Gregorian, “Mahmud Tarzi and Saraj-ol-Akhbar: Ideology of Nationalism and Modernization in Afghanistan” *The Middle East Journal* 21, no. 3 (1967): 345.

⁹ Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the origin and spread of nationalism* (London and New York: Verso, 2006), 44

¹⁰ Mahmud Tarzi, “Eftetah-e Kalam: Commencement Speech” *Seraj al-Akhbar*, 1, no. 1, 1290 H.S: 1911 A.D., 1.

Penetrating the interior of one's home, Tarzi merges the inner and outer dimensions of social life within a national and international framework. The motivational grounds for the periodical, is demonstratively related to his personal background as a pan-Islamist and his 'nationalist' agendas,¹¹ inspired from earlier visits in the Ottoman Empire where he was exposed to Ottoman nationalist-revivalist movements in Damascus and Constantinople. His attempt to redefine, according Gregorian, the term "Afghan" "on a geographic and religious, rather than merely ethnic, basis," is made obvious in the first volume of *Seraj al-Akhbar* where he writes: "In this century [20th], news functions as a language for nations and its inhabitants."¹² In the second paragraph he goes on to say:

"At this time, in this century, other than the savage, primitive states and tribes, where there is any existing nation under state governance, there will be strong evidence for national knowledge of writing and reading."¹³

Adding to that, Tarzi writes, "Ignorance is the opposite to akhbar (news)." In the fourth paragraph of the same volume, he lists several reasons for the benefits of news reporting:

"[News] is like a sharp knife that cuts evil thoughts produced by evil people. It is a shame that there is no medium that can distinguish right from wrong in what people say."¹⁴

Tarzi continues add to his linguistic and nationalist ideology, saying:

¹¹ Ursula Sims-Williams, "The Afghan Newspaper *Siraj al-Akhbar*," *British Society for Middle Eastern Studies* 7, no. 2 (1980): 119.

¹² Tarzi, "Eftetah-e Kalam: Commencement Speech" *Seraj al-Akhbar*, 1, no. 1, 1290 H.S: 1911 A.D., 1

¹³ Ibid

¹⁴ Ibid

“As a medium [akhbar], is language, which defends the right against the false, and language has an instrumental ability to distinguish true gold from fraudulent gold.”¹⁵

As an instrument of socio-cultural interpretation and meaning, Tarzi positions himself within the nuclei of twentieth century Afghan nationalism projects by personally authorizing not only what passes as literacy and illiteracy, but also authoritatively distinguishes valid from invalid forms of knowledge. As Gregorian argues, Tarzi assumes a privileged position to dutifully interpret the “true” meaning of Islam, the Quran, and the hadiths. In doing so, Gregorian believes that for the first time, “educated Afghan laymen *publicly* interpreted the Quran, in strong opposition to the traditional elements” (emphasis added).¹⁶ However, one must ask why Gregorian assumes that printed forms of knowledge and interpretation of Islam suddenly enables an unprecedented intellectual exploration of ones world. Does reflection and interpretation not exist prior to print? And is oral dialogue not a legitimate forum of public exchange of meaning? The redefinition of meaning here echoes Bakhtin’s heteroglossia.¹⁷ Furthermore, Tarzi’s notion that Pashto is the Afghan national language and should therefore be “learned by all the ethnically non-Afghan groups” illustrates how historiography in the hands of Tarzi himself plays a great role in the evaluation of what is inclusive and what is not, Afghan.¹⁸ In fact, as Antonio Gramsci argues in his *Prison Notebooks*, the attempted imposition of a national language, raised by a small elite, cannot engage the “very different social, class, and geographic conditions” of its people.¹⁹ Thus, it is not the language, *eo ipso*, which is problematic for our purposes, but rather the ideology

¹⁵ Tarzi, “Eftetah-e Kalam: Commencement Speech” *Seraj al-Akhbar*, 1, no. 1, 1290 H.S: 1911 A.D., 2

¹⁶ Gregorian, *Mahmud Tarzi and Saraj-ol-Akhbar*, 353.

¹⁷ Bakhtin’s definition of heteroglossia is that in all utterances, context is primary to text.

¹⁸ Gregorian, *Mahmud Tarzi and Saraj-ol-Akhbar*, 362.

¹⁹ Peter Ives, *Language & Hegemony in Gramsci* (London and Ann Arbor, MI: Pluto Press; Winnipeg, Manitoba: Fernwood Publishing, 2004): 57.

furnishing it as a universal language in which its formation neglects peoples experiences, feelings and participation in creating meaning.²⁰ Language and vernacular variations produce different meanings to historical events and ideas.²¹ Like cultural hegemony itself, language is a process of complex human activity constantly negotiated through simultaneity of coercion and consent.²²

In this redefinition of what an Afghan is; three major pillars support Tarzi's general ideology. First, Islam, modernism, and secularism are in fact compatible. Second, Tarzi argues that the social disunity among the country's inhabitants along ethnic and tribal lines produces "negative concept of freedom which equated freedom with the absence of restraint and the lack of governmental authority."²³ Instead, advocating for "true freedom," he exclaims it as "cohesive and constructive social force" for the advancement of civilization. Finally, that knowledge in any form, including linguistic, should support the country's well being and modernizing efforts. For example, writing on the benefits and effects of literature, Tarzi emphasizes the role of unifying fields of communication as well as a fixity of national language:

"The objective of the science of literature – *adab* –the conjugation, formulation, innovation, and presentation of words in writing and utterance corrects the language of man. That is when he/she can speak correctly, read correctly, and write correctly."²⁴

In several volumes of *Seraj al-Akhbar*, Tarzi attempts to reconcile modernity and religious identity by comparatively presenting European nation-states as inherently

²⁰ Ives, *Language and Hegemony in Gramsci*, 59.

²¹ Peter Ives, *Gramsci's Politics of language: Engaging the Bakhtin Circle & the Frankfurt School* (Canada: University of Toronto Press, 2006), 18.

²² Ives, *Gramsci's Politics of language*, 23.

²³ Gregorian, *Mahmud Tarzi and Saraj-ol-Akhbar*, 351.

²⁴ Mahmud Tarzi, "Adabiat: Literature" *Seraj al-Akhbar*, 2, no. 1 (1290 H.S: 1911 A.D), 8.

‘Christian’.²⁵ With this parallel depiction of European nationalisms, Tarzi attempts to legitimize his nationalist agendas through the prisms of modernity and religious ideology, thus excluding communities outside of the perceived Afghan ethno-religious community and citizenry. One must wonder however, did Tarzi represent the voices of his proclaimed ‘people’? Was there a demand for these elitist proclamations within general Afghan communities? More importantly, did *Seraj al-Akhbar* provide an avenue as a public forum around national interests? And did it reflect the cultural and political developments in the country or simply reflect Tarzi’s own subjective idea of an Afghan?

Aside from larger linguistic implications, the printing of *Seraj al-Akhbar* did not account for what Talal Asad describes as the process of ethnographic translation that is not simply bounded by nomenclature, but by translating implicit cultural meanings from one sociocultural context to another.²⁶ Here, Bakhtin’s emphasis on *double-voicedness* guides us to greater insights. Double-voicedness entails that the author of a text takes someone else’s discourse and making it one’s own. In the case of *Seraj al-Akhbar*, Tarzi’s attempt to single-handedly introduce cultural concepts foreign to the general Afghan society creates a significant division between the masses and the state elites; particularly at the time of British colonial expansion in Afghanistan and the cooptation of Afghan elites into the British colonial machinery. As Gregorian argues, the “numerous articles on abstract and unfamiliar” topics as well as foreign idioms, excluded mass participation in the construction of a familiar Afghan ethos.²⁷ *Seraj al-Akhbar* was also limited to small Persian literati, thus preventing a wide circulation of the paper. The high cost of its annual subscription within a monetary environment varying between local and foreign currencies limited its social reach. The periodical was heavily funded by the state apparatus, which sets the parameter for its

²⁵ Tarzi, *Seraj al-Akhbar*, 1, no. 1 (1290 H.S: 1911 A.D), 6.

²⁶ Talal Asad, “The Concept of Cultural Translation in British Social Anthropology” in *Writing Culture: The Poetics and Politics of Ethnography*, eds. James Clifford and George E. Marcus (London: University of California Press, 1986).

²⁷ Gregorian, *Mahmud Tarzi & Saraj-ol-Akhbar*, 365.

circulatory networks within the country.

The aforementioned factors are not to suggest the success or failure of the print. However, these limiting factors assume a consumption of print that is silent, individualistic, and privately acting upon people's consciousness. Such postulations ignore Afghanistan's rich history of performed oral transmission of poetry, news, debt, and other forms of knowledge.²⁸ In fact, James Caron writes in his Ph.D. dissertation that Salih Muhammad was among the first to publish a Pashto poem in *Seraj al-Akhbar* in 1917. Modeled on a Persian poem, Salih Muhammad uses coded imagery to argue for Afghan political independence from the British Empire, and it gained its wide attention through oral recitation.²⁹ What is of particular interest to our examination is that while the Persian poem "brought down a royal threat of retribution upon its author" as Caron explains, "Salih Muhammad was spared such treatment."³⁰ He goes on to say that the reaction, or lack thereof, was either because the royal family had no facility in Pashto or that Salih Muhammad's family was in an influential position. Either way, this scenario points to the disjuncture between social contexts between the active producers and the silent readers of *Seraj al-Akhbar* on the one hand, and the consumers who engage in oral readings. Furthermore, out of the 1600 copies of *Seraj al-Akhbar*, only a few of them were distributed free of charge to unknown individuals and the rest were given to the wealthiest Afghan civil servants who paid a mandatory fee, deduced from their wages.³¹ However, the nationalism project of Tarzi, particularly the role in which *Seraj al-Akhbar* plays in the twentieth century cannot be dismissed solely because of its small

²⁸ For a discussion around the oral transmission of poetry in Afghanistan see James Caron's Ph.D. dissertation "*Cultural Histories of Pashtun Nationalism: Public Participation and Social Inequality in Monarchic Afghanistan, 1905-1960*," and a discussion around orality and print, see Peter Wogan, "*Imagined Communities reconsidered*," and around oral traditions in the economy, see Shah Mahmoud Hanifi, "*Connecting Histories in Afghanistan*."

²⁹ Caron, "Cultural Histories of Pashtun Nationalism", 44.

³⁰ Ibid

³¹ Schinasi, May, "Seraj al-Akbar-e Afghaniya: "Torch of the news of Afghanistan," bi-monthly Persian language newspaper published in Kabul during the second decade of the reign of Amir Habib-Allah (r. 1901-19), <http://www.iranicaonline.org/articles/seraj-al-akbar-e-afganiya>.

readership. Yet, Afghanistan's polyglot, ethnically diverse and mobile population generates a significant *problématique* to its linguistic identity or identities.

The printing of language in Afghan communities corresponds to larger sets of trajectories, which are in no way limited to mere chronological descriptions of events. Rather, as Shah Mahmoud Hanifi argues, "dictionaries represent boundaries and bridges between languages, and grammars represent boundaries and bridges between vernacular and classical expressions of language." Hanifi's understanding of boundary-making is fruitful as a theoretical departure away from a teleology of language and moving into a *techne*, which describes intentionality rather than disinterested understanding of the role of language in the construction of an Afghan national(ism). Furthermore, the word national-ism is used carefully in order to mark the distinction between 'voluntary' and 'involuntary' belonging. First, learning one's mother tongue as an infant is essentially an involuntary act that engenders, at least stimulates, a child's belonging in a larger community. Second, whatever linguistic practice with which one voluntarily engages (speaking, writing, printing, publishing) it neither sufficiently defines one's belonging nor one's identity. It may be a necessary element for a sense of belonging, but not a sufficient one. In fact, while Fredrick Barth argues in his *Ethnic Groups and Boundaries* that simply speaking Pashto but not doing Pashto testifies to an emic disparity in one's Pashtun identity, we must reckon that language and 'doing' an identity are also learned qualities that can be attained by various subjects.

Drawing from James C. Scott's study of Southeast Asian communities, people are not confused and are very well capable of knowing who they are and who they are not; while still being able to capitulate to exclusive categories of identity as a political resource in their daily lives.³² Insofar as that is true, one does not simply become part of a collective identity without an empathy and direct relationship to the broader context and circumstances that

³² James C. Scott, *The Art of Not Being Governed: An Anarchist History of Upland Southeast Asia* (New Haven & London: Yale University Press, 2009), 254-255.

bring the language and doing of culture, into existence. For future research, one needs to look at Afghanistan's linguistic past as a cosmopolitan reality, which informs yet, does not bound people in a homogenizing and one-dimensional model of Afghan-ness.³³ Consequently, the neo-liberal notion that Afghans were never able to fully participate or create a cohesive understanding of themselves, should be dismissed for its arrogance and racializing origins.

Furthermore, an all-encompassing evaluation of literacy must move away from what print-language simply 'causes' and its intentions in society, to what people 'do with it' and how they negotiate literacy, if at all.³⁴ The institutionalization of vernaculars may play a role in socialization processes as it allows people "to see themselves as agents in their own lives rather than passively accepting the roles assigned to them by others,"³⁵ a process that Seraj al-Akhbar failed to inaugurate. In short, writing does not cultivate knowledge of a national identity that is inevitably internalized and normalized by its readers.

The Nezam Namas

As Arjun Appadurai writes, "One man's imagined community is another man's political prison,"³⁶ likewise Afghanistan in the twentieth century was too, a contested space of multiple imagined communities. The Nezam Namas during the reign of Amanullah Khan, the Amir of Afghanistan, reflects that very social reality. So far, the Nezam Namas have had very little attention in Afghanistan studies. Falling within larger reformist and modernizing projects, the Nezam Namas were an attempt at codifying the legal structures of the country within the Hanafi school of Islam. Its inauguration did not only introduce unified legal codes

³³ Marsden, "Muslim Cosmopolitanism? Transnational Life in northern Pakistan," *Journal of Asian Studies* 67, 1 (2008): 213-248.

³⁴ David R Olson and Nancy Torrance, *The Making of Literate Societies*, 4.

³⁵ Olson, David R. and Nancy Torrance, *The Making of Literate Societies*, 7.

³⁶ Arjun Appadurai, *Modernity at Large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalization* (London and Minnesota: Public Worlds, University of Minnesota Press, 1996), 32.

under state control, but close readings of them reveal a significant shift in the linguistic milieu of the country. Of the remaining *Nezam Namas* available in various archives, very few of them are in Persian; the majority is written in Pashto. Immediately, the simultaneous production of Pashto and Persian *Nezam Namas*, raises several questions to be explored, one of them being the question of whether or not all legal regulations were printed in both languages or if they were tailored public policy targeted towards each linguistic audience? Such questions require significant research in archives that are beyond the scope of this paper, but we can ascertain that the mere existence of the two printed languages illustrate state recognition of cultural and linguistic variation within the national structure. In short, legal texts proclaiming political and economic authority in two languages suggests linguistic and social heterogeneity. Yet, knowing that subjective self-referencing is situationally and contextually fluid, yielding to particular legal parameters within a polyvocal and nomadic society is not as unchanging as one might assume. The significance of this particular point will be revisited after exploring the substance and contexts of a number of *Nezam Namas*.

In one of the Persian language *Nezam Namas*, regarding the regulations surrounding the press, the following is stated:

“As stated in paragraph (11) [Constitution], the principle of *Nezam Namas* states that the publication of news (*akhbar*) can only be conducted by an Afghan national.”³⁷

In paragraph three of the same decree, it states that the supervisor or editor of any publication must also be an Afghan national.³⁸ Paragraph four gives a detailed description of the specific bureaucratic aspects concerning the press and publications in Afghanistan, and

³⁷ *Nezam Nama-Shirkat-i Rafi'q*, “*Matbo'at: Press*,” *Nezam Nama*, (1303 H.S: 1924)

³⁸ *Ibid*

the conditions that must be met by an individual wishing to establish a publishing press:

“To publish a newspaper one needs official permission [from the state]. One who wishes to open a publication must send his application to the ministry of interior and the highest jurist with the following details: 1. Name of the newspaper or publication; 2. Where it will be published; 3. The content of the publication; 4. Time of day it will be written and published; 5. Name, Surname, age, residency, and documentation of citizenship; 6. Name, Surname, age, residency, and documentation of citizenship of the supervisor or editor; 7. The language in which it will be published.

The aforementioned *Nezam Nama* expresses a significant leap in the state definition of Afghan identity. To explore this change in definition, Senzil Nawid’s account of the reactionary forces among the countries clerical and tribal establishments toward the social changes occurring at the time of one particular publication successfully illustrates this development.

The Identity Card Act – *Nezam Nama-e tazkira-e nofus* – according to Nawid, was the most unpopular of reforms in 1923,³⁹ forcing individuals to register and obtain national identity cards – *tazkira*. Not only are they the only proof of identity accepted in state courts of law, but the registration and use of the *tazkira* forces citizens to accept governmental interference and penetration into their private lives. Every *tazkira* has a unique number assigned to each individual or citizen and even marriages are to be registered with the proper number.

Nawid argues that such legal developments in Afghanistan faced social uprisings and protests amongst the country’s ‘lower ranked Ulama’ who were tied to the interest of rural zones. Aside from her unreserved and unprovoked hierarchization of “higher” and “lower”

³⁹ Senzil Nawid, “The Khost Rebellion: The Reaction of Afghan Clerical and Tribal Forces to Social Change” Review of the Department of Asian Studies and the Department of Studies and Research on Africa and Arab Countries, 1996 (56 (3)). pp. 311-319. [http://opar.unior.it/1317/1/Annali_1996_56_\(f3\)_S.Nawid.pdf](http://opar.unior.it/1317/1/Annali_1996_56_(f3)_S.Nawid.pdf)

ranked Ulama, the negative reactions towards the tazkira and the laws regarding the printing press indulges our understanding of the multidimensional place of printed language in the construction of Afghan nationalism. First of all, only two languages are recognized by the state: Pashto and Persian. Secondly, while the term “Afghan” is uttered in both languages and their vernaculars, the utterance of the term “Afghan” is subjectively and collectively varying in meaning, regardless of its spoken language. That is, the regulatory and state definition of an “Afghan” is informed by a particular discursive formation and is different from other forms of social and cultural discourses.

Nawid distinguishes these discourses amongst two opposing poles, the ‘lower’ clerical and tribal groups versus the modernizing and progressive forces in Kabul. Her analysis, grounded in urban/rural, center/periphery dichotomy, is indeed an oversimplification of any sort of social dynamic, including this one. However, the *Nezam Namas* vividly defines what an Afghan is within state discourse and ideas of citizenship, while others debate “belonging” or Afghan-ness outside of state discourse. Applying Habermas’ definition of the Bourgeois Public Sphere, Afghan elites propagate their group interests in exclusion of other social realms and interests, thus feeding the polarization of ethnolinguistic communities.

The conclusion that nationalism was indeed a powerless force in the twentieth century is a persuasive one, but not indubitable. Rather, the printed forms of channeling nationalist interests tell us that the Afghan political map includes multiple registers of self-representations. Although the large social repertoire enables performed identities to form, state attempts to unify its people by communicating authority in printed textual form is a mode of objectifying subjects through multiple means of discursive practices, including the politics of printing, its circulation, and consumption. More importantly, the social uprisings against textual practices associated with hegemonic claims, argues that nationalist discourse

was a pertinent issue, which changed the social map of languages in the country. Not because of the languages per se, but because of the social contexts surrounding them.

Conclusion

Our gaze on the presence of *Seraj al-Akhbar* and the *Nezam Namas* illustrate two very distinguishable, yet intersecting processes of nationalist ideology in the twentieth century Afghanistan. It hinges on an intersection between *political techniques* and *technologies of the self*. What is ascertained through these gatekeeping forms of analysis in the study of these texts, is that the subjectification of the individual falls within a fundamental change of arrangement in the knowledge of self. First, the idea of nationalism in twentieth century Afghanistan comprises a group of individuals who believe that print-language is a necessary function of nationalism. That is, *Seraj al-Akhbar* and the *Nezam Namas* are both political techniques in which the state objectifies its subjects. Secondly, the subjectification of an Afghan national identity is a process – in relation to state techniques – in which an individual actively engages in the process of self-formation.

However, neither one of these publications were able to nourish the entire complexity of the Afghan social continuum. Afghan identification is multidimensional in everyday life, not bounded by printed articulations of Afghan national identity by a small circle of people within the bourgeois public sphere. Yet, such social discontinuity does not simply result in forms of complicity or ignorance to nationalism projects. Rather, what *Seraj al-Akhbar* and the *Nezam Namas* do, is to present another index of what it means to be Afghan and therefore enable the instrumentalization of their contents to further the interest of its reading public(s). They exist in a dialogical imagination of what it means to be Afghan.

This essay does not only contest the extraordinary over-emphasis in western

scholarship suggesting that print-capitalism creates the imagined community of the nation, but more importantly, it argues for a revision of Afghan historiography. Moving beyond structuralist oversimplifications, language in Afghanistan is not simply a product of its environment, but rather a multifaceted set of ideas and meanings that are contested, appropriated, and re-circulated through various forms of printing and oral traditions. This study reflects how twentieth century Afghanistan under Tarzi's nationalist agenda failed to produce an all-inclusive textual forum in which linguistic literacy and social literacy merge. More importantly, the failure to incorporate a larger social ethos within nationalist projects, such as printed language; Afghanistan's ethnolinguistic mosaic experienced further social stratification.

Benedict Anderson argues that print language is what invents nationalism, not a language per se."⁴⁰ At least in the case of twentieth century Afghanistan, this thesis falls short to reality. Nationalism is not a unilinear process that emerges from printed forms of communication. Even if printed language were to play a major role in the construction of an Afghan national identity, it will not be an all-encompassing social reality. This is not to reverberate the common polemics perpetuating modernizing and anti-modernizing forces in the country; or nationalists and anti-nationalists. Instead, it is to emphasize the multiple contexts and catalogues in which Afghan-ness is formulated. To remedy such troubles, one should instead examine and observe what cultures *do*, rather than what they are.⁴¹ The task is therefore to study folk understandings of language and nationalism. Only through a semiotic phenomenology of these printed texts can we ascertain the real internalization of Afghan identity as a potential result of print-capitalism. The channeling of nationalist discourse in the twentieth century through printed text was not influential simply by production of printed forms of language. Rather the consumption and the social contexts surrounding them was at

⁴⁰ Anderson, *Imagined Communities*, 134

⁴¹ Ernest Gellner, *Nations & Nationalism* (New York: Cornell University Press, 1983), 7.

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