

EDITORIAL

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Identities in Afghanistan – Afghan Identities

The attacks of September 11 catapulted Afghanistan into the centre of international awareness. The international intervention and the collapse of the Taliban regime opened for the first time since decades the chance for peace building and a reconstruction of the country. Since 2001 thousands of soldiers, aid workers, consultants and politicians rushed into the country to establish stability and to initiate development. Along with them, hundreds of journalists and other observers have, with varying degrees of seriousness and insight, collected and broadcast information about current political and martial developments. Along with this high tide of attention whose thematic agenda is set by practical goals, the "relatively peaceful" situation of the country has also encouraged scholars to do research in Afghanistan. While over the last 25 years only very few researchers had trodden Afghan ground – so that work stagnated in most fields, or had to be confined to materials acquired before wartime or outside the country –, researchers of the pre-war generation now revived their activities and, which is most encouraging, many young scholars made Afghanistan the area of their interest. At the same time topics that do not necessitate research at place, but pertain to the past and present of Afghanistan and the Afghan diaspora, are attracting more and more attention on this part of young researchers.

Five years after this new wave of research on Afghanistan had begun to rise, time seemed to have come for a first stocktaking. The Department of Central Asian Studies of Humboldt University, the Arbeitsgemeinschaft Afghanistan (AGA) and the Deutsch-Afghanische Universitätsgesellschaft (DAUG) co-organized the conference *Current Research on Afghanistan*, which took place in Berlin from 11 to 13 January, 2007. The main goal of this conference was to provide a forum for the presentation of current research on Afghanistan from different strands of sciences. While most of the participants (with and without Afghan background) came from Germany, also researchers from Afghanistan, Switzerland, Austria, Denmark, the Netherlands, England and Russia participated in this conference. Most of the papers were related to the cultural and social sciences. However, natural scientists, agrarian scientists and lawyers presented papers, too.

In our view this conference had two main outcomes. Firstly, it has turned out that much research of today is not primarily inspired by the agendas of interest set by quick media, or instigated by an immediate demand on the side of policy-makers or developmental agencies. Hardly any of the conference papers discussed the drug economy, the Taliban or recent political changes. In discussions in- and outside the conference program participants and guests underlined that scholarly contributions to the debate on current affairs are indispensable, but the research agenda must not be confined to issues that surface today. There is a big need for fundamental research, for a fresh basic knowledge about virtually everything related to Afghanistan, given the gap of decades of only very limited access.

Secondly, a centre of gravity emerged during the conference, although there had been no preselection of themes or topics: Many papers revolved around the theme of identity, most of them implicitly and perhaps even without particular intention on the part of their authors. This reflects the enormous role that diverging as well as shared identities play in Afghan daily life, in societal structures and developments, and in political matters. This is why we decided to edit a collection of articles dealing with aspects of "Identities in Afghanistan – Afghan Identities", which ASIEN accepted for a guest-edited volume. The theme of "identity" is located at the interface of various academic disciplines. So this volume brings together perspectives from anthropology, history, geography, social and political science and law. The articles present reflections on identities in Afghanistan which are taken from varying points of view, which are situated in different contexts, and which are focusing on a range of questions: Some authors are concentrating on regional and local identities. While Andreas Wilde applies the model of mental mapping on the city of Herat, Max Klimburg asks if the culture of Parun in today's Nuristan can be understood as an 'enclaved culture'. Christine Issa and Sardar Kohistani are discussing the sedimentation of identities in the organization of space in Kabul. Ingeborg Baldauf shows on the example of the Dayi how blurred and dynamic local identities often are. Other authors are discussing the 'outside perspective' of an Afghan identity. Marcus Schadl inquires in the changing British perceptions of Afghans in the 19th century. Marije Braakman and Angela Schlenkhoff deal with the way how Afghans in the Europe diaspora today define their belonging to Afghanistan. Another strand of research focuses on the role of identities in political processes. Benjamin Buchholz discusses to what extent the concept of myth applies to the *loya jirga*, while Irene Schneider concentrates on diverging understandings of Afghan family law among Afghan lawyers. Katja Mielke and Conrad Schetter show how 'villages' are invented by development agencies in the Kunduz province.

The volume does not attempt to give a comprehensive picture of what "identities" are in the context of Afghanistan. What this volume can point out is, however, that identities there, as everywhere, are fluid and dynamic, entangled and multiple, and can be understood only with regard to individual intention and agency, and the condition and evolution of society.